

A romantic couple is shown in a snowy winter setting. The man, on the left, is wearing a dark jacket, a grey beanie, and orange gloves, and is kissing the woman on the cheek. The woman, on the right, is wearing a dark jacket, a pink beanie, and a red scarf. They are standing in the snow, with several red telephone booths visible in the background. The scene is decorated with a large red ribbon and a gold bell ornament hanging from the bottom. The title "AMID THE COLD OF WINTER" is written in a green, serif font at the top of the image.

AMID THE
COLD
OF WINTER

CLARE
REVELL

AN
ELLERY & YORK
CHRISTMAS
NOVELLA

Amid the Cold of Winter

Clare Revell

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Amid the Cold of Winter
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Dedication

In loving memory of Auntie Mo. Going to Scotland without a visit to you anywhere just isn't the same. I finally put you in a book.

1

The dark night wakes, the glory breaks, and
Christmas comes once more. ~ Charles Wesley.

Kate Dahlbeck paused in polishing the brass altar rail of St. Agnes Cathedral in the Scottish Highland town of Tannoch and rubbed her aching back instead. At least she was almost done. And although she no longer attended services anywhere, it was so peaceful here in the old Episcopal church building that the cleaning didn't feel like work.

The Provost, the Very Reverend Hamish Scott, hadn't judged her as everyone else had. He'd listened to her as she talked. He'd hired her when she needed a job. He even said she should call Zander or Zander with a Zed, the undercover detective she'd met and fallen in love with so quickly back in April, eight months ago. Reverend Scott said if Zander was half the man she claimed he was, he'd at least hear her out, if not back her all the way.

But things weren't that easy, not now. Maybe if she'd gone to him months ago with her suspicions perhaps things would be different. But now that wasn't so simple. Did her silence make her part of it and

complicit in every detail? Perhaps it was time to take the evidence she'd hidden and go to the police. But not here. There was no one she could trust.

She packed away the cloth and returned the cleaning equipment to the cupboard. She took the USB from its small hiding place in the back of the spare lectern and slid it into her handbag, tucking it in the zipped pocket right at the back. It was Monday, December the twelfth. Christmas was only a couple of weeks away, and the cathedral had to be better than usual for the extra services.

She slid her arms into her coat and tugged her bag over her head, wearing it across her body. The bag was heavier than normal. Once her bills had been paid, she'd taken out the remainder of the money in cash, as she did every month. That way she was never overdrawn. If she didn't have enough cash for something, she went without.

What little sunlight that had been streaming through the stained-glass window above the altar when she started work had long since vanished. Kate peeked through the open door to her left. Twilight had come early, due to the thick storm clouds overhead. They had forecast snow, but it was nowhere near cold enough for that, so it would most likely to fall as rain. Although a white Christmas would be nice. She'd never seen one before and half hoped this would be the year.

Loud voices drew her attention to two men halfway down the nave. One was Reverend Scott. She recognised the profile of the second man along with his

voice but couldn't for the life of her think of his name now. As she drew closer, the second man raised his arm, bringing it down hard and fast, and Reverend Scott dropped to the ground.

The man stood over him and raised the iron bar again.

Kate muffled her scream, hoping no one heard. She hid behind one of the pillars and grabbed her phone from her bag. She dialed 999.

"Operator, which service do you require?"

"Police," Kate whispered. "Reverend Scott's been attacked."

An explosion rocked the tiled floor beneath her feet.

Flames surged upwards towards the roof. Smoke and debris rushed towards her.

Another explosion sent her to the floor in a heap. Agonizing pain ripped into her shoulder. The phone fell from her hand, the operator's voice still coming from it. The call dropped, and Kate lay biting her lip to remain silent and motionless. She had to play dead for a few minutes.

Footsteps echoed on the tiles heading in her direction towards the exit.

"Leave her!" Another voice called and footsteps clattered past her prone figure, the sound almost lost in the roaring of the flames. Car doors slammed. A revving engine and squealing tires indicated a vehicle drove away.

Heat rose as the fire intensified. For a moment, Kate considered simply lying there and letting the

flames end it all. She breathed in; the resulting coughing fit ended that thought quickly.

Kate sat up, pain filling her. Holding her shoulder, she gingerly probed. It didn't seem broken. Her fingers came away bloodied, but the injury wasn't critical. She had to leave here, run. She had finally realized who the assailant was, and he knew her. He'd come looking for her once he knew she was still alive. She had no choice but to run, and run now. Perhaps he'd assumed she'd died here and that would give her a head start.

She glanced towards where Reverend Scott lay but there was just a mass of flaming debris there. Even if she made it to him, he'd be dead. Her heart grieved for the man.

Flames advanced rapidly across the ceiling. Pieces of burning wood and stone carvings fell to the floor around her. She threw her phone into the flames, the small movement caused pain to shoot across her shoulder and down her back. She staggered towards the door and managed to exit just as a beam landed behind her.

The cold air took her breath away. Thinking fast, she used her scarf as a sling. She couldn't seek treatment. A doctor or hospital would only ask questions and get the police involved and she didn't have time for that. It wasn't safe. He had to think she was dead.

Sirens echoed. Above her, smoke and orange flames leapt high into the sky.

A glimmer of an idea formed in her mind. She'd go to Headley Cross. The only person who could help,

the only man she could trust, would be Zander.

Turning her back on the huge orange glow in the sky, Kate headed to the train station. Luckily, her dark coat would hide any marks, so she wouldn't draw attention. She'd need to clothes shop at some point, but that could wait until she was in Inverness...no Berwick-upon-Tweed. It was farther away and right on the Scottish-English border. She might be able to find a room there overnight.

Then she could flee south. To Zander and her only hope.

2

Despite the fact it was December the fourteenth and Christmas was a mere two weeks away, DS Zander Ellery and his partner DC Isabel York were working flat out. Three active cases, one more in court, and a brand new one dumped on them the previous afternoon had resulted in two very overworked, overtired, and stressed-out detectives.

Add to the mix Isabel's wedding planning, and that meant very little downtime. At least Zander wasn't doing the planning. That fell to Isabel and her fiancé, DCI Boaz Matthias. Zander just had to listen to it every single evening, as Isabel was still lodging with him.

They'd decided there was no point in her moving out until the wedding, currently planned for June. The completion on the sale of Boaz's house in Buckingham and of the one they were buying in Headley Cross should be today. They'd agreed that even with separate bedrooms, they wouldn't share the house. Boaz would live there and they'd spend the next few months decorating. At least Isabel's furniture and few bits and pieces would finally be out of Zander's garage where they'd been stored. He might even be able to park the car in there for a change.

DI Holmes, Zander's boss, stuck his head around his office door. "Zander, do you have that file for me?"

"Almost, Guv. Just give me five minutes."

"You have three. The CPS wants it by eleven at the latest, and it's nine-thirty now. I want to check it over before we deliver it to them. We can't afford any mistakes on this one."

"I apologize for that." Zander rubbed his forehead. "All the stuff was there when it left my desk. I don't understand how it wasn't there when it reached the CPS. But as per their request, I have numbered every single page and document. I even have a seal to put on the envelope before it leaves here." He held up the packet of seals he'd picked up especially.

The phone rang, and Isabel grabbed it. "MIU and Major Crimes, DC York speaking. One moment." She held the handset across the desk. "It's for you, Sarge. At least I assume so. Lady wishes to speak with a Zander with a Zed."

Zander sank back into his chair, the wind taken from his sails. There was only one woman on the entire planet who'd call him that.

Kate.

The one woman he'd not been able to put out of his mind for eight months now. He'd tried hard to turn his back on the events of Jack's House—the undercover operation on the reality TV show he'd been involved in back in April. The rest of the squad still teased him about the kiss, caught on camera with a woman he'd only met the previous day. And it hadn't been a mere peck on the cheek either.

Try as he might, Zander had been unable to forget Kate. Her long dark hair, dark eyes, along with her soft voice, had seared themselves onto his heart. She'd promised to keep in touch, but hadn't. She'd fled town to her brother's place, having lost her home and job when her criminal record came to light as a result of Jack's House. Despite the fact she'd been underage at the time of her arrest and trial, and the record sealed by the courts, her employer had taken a dim view of her actions and fired her.

Isabel coughed and waved the phone at him. "Don't keep the lady waiting. It sounds like a pay phone on a train station."

Zander took the phone. He held the file and seals out to the Guv. It would have to do. Hopefully, the Guv would be able to cross any *t*'s that he'd missed or dot the *i*'s. Which he was pretty sure he hadn't. One thing he was meticulous about was paperwork going to the CPS. No point putting the work in if the case then got thrown out due to a clerical error on his part. "DS Ellery."

"Hi, Zander. It's Kate."

Her voice thrilled and shocked him at the same time. It was really her.

He ran his finger over the advent tree on the desk, honestly surprised Isabel was using it again after last year when the ornaments had mimicked a murder case they'd been working. His voice failed him for a moment. "H...hello. How are you?"

"OK." The response was cagy. "I'll, um, be in town for a few days and wondered if we could meet up

somewhere today and talk. I don't have long now, didn't have much change for the phone."

Zander glanced over the desk at Isabel who had that annoying 'I was right' look on her face. Why was Kate on a payphone? Surely she had a mobile like everyone else did. "OK. Where and when?"

"Same café as before. About half twelve?"

Zander glanced at the clock. That would be lunch time and therefore fit in perfectly with his ridiculously heavy workload. "Sounds good. See you—" The pips went, cutting him off.

He put the phone down. "The Three Sixteen at half twelve," he said. He exchanged a long glance with his partner. "Yes, it was her." And with that he leaned back in his chair, his mind whirling back to the undercover operation in April, when they'd met.

~*~

Kate dashed onto the train seconds before the guard blew his whistle, and the train pulled out of Waterloo. She made her way down the swaying carriage and picked the window seat in the middle of the carriage deliberately—not that the train was particularly busy. She just figured that way if something did happen, or someone made a move, she'd be noticed by the few other people in the carriage, and someone would either come to her aid or call the British Transport Police on their dedicated text helpline. With her left arm still in a sling and with very little movement in it, she wouldn't be able to defend

herself much.

The arm ached. She hadn't been able to get comfortable enough to sleep lying down, so dozed upright in a chair. It had taken two days to get this far. She'd stayed overnight in Berwick, bought two new outfits, a rucksack, and restyled her hair. Shoving her right hand through her now short locks, she was taken aback once more at the change in length. What had been very long and dark, was now extremely short and dyed frosted lilac. A total change, plus the green contact lenses, should keep her safe for now. Not even she recognised herself in the mirror anymore.

She pulled her book from the rucksack on her lap and opened it. She'd picked up something totally different from what she normally read. There was enough thrilling drama in her life without reading it as well.

An hour later, the train pulled into a station. She glanced out of the window. Little Easington. Two stops away from where she wanted to be. A direct train would have been faster than one that stopped everywhere, but that was too obvious if anyone had worked out where she was headed. She couldn't risk that. Hopefully by now her phone had confirmed her 'death' in the fire.

Now she was pinning her hope and life totally on Zander-with-a-Zed. The undercover police officer whom she'd fallen for, kissed, made a fool of herself over, lied to, and made a promise to that she hadn't kept. He owed her nothing, and if he refused to even speak to her, she couldn't blame him.

She was in so deep in so many ways, she wasn't sure even God wanted her now. Her prayers went unanswered.

Why had she ever left Headley Cross in the first place? She could have found another job there, cleaning maybe. But she chose to run and hide, and that had led to more problems than she'd ever imagined possible.

Her hand rested on her stomach, sighing as the train pulled away. What if Zander couldn't help her? Or wouldn't help? Where would she go then? She only had her brother and he could no longer protect her. And even if he could, he wouldn't. His connection to all this went deeper than hers.

She was nothing but trouble, in a whole world of trouble.

Trouble with a capital T.

Destined to a life on the run. What kind of a life would that be for anyone?

Her vision blurred as the words of a carol filled her mind. It had never felt less like Christmas than it did right now. Forget peace on Earth, goodwill to all men. Dark streets and no silent night would be more appropriate for her.

The train accelerated, taking her into the unknown, where she would either sink or swim. If Zander was unable to help, she'd drown, pulling the innocent along in her wake.

3

Zander was still thinking about Kate when Isabel waved the phone at him again. He took it. "DS Ellery."

"This is Sister Todd from the ICU at Headley General. I thought you'd like to know that Andrew Curtiss is awake."

"Brilliant. Can we come and talk to him?"

"For a few minutes, yes."

"Great, we'll be right there." He dropped the phone back onto the base and stood. He reached for his coat. "Andrew Curtiss regained consciousness. Let's go."

DI Holmes appeared from his office. "Where are you going?"

"Hospital. The witness to yesterday's double murder is conscious. From there we're going to lunch. I also want to talk to the parents of the murder victim. Just to make sure uniform didn't miss anything, so we'll probably be out most of the day."

Zander slid his hands into his coat pockets to make sure his keys were there. He frowned. That wasn't a key. He gripped the item tightly and withdrew his hand. A green plastic ring lay in his palm.

Isabel laughed. "You kept it?"

He'd got it at the Christmas party a couple of nights ago. "Yes. Figured I'd let one of the nieces have it." He put it back in his pocket and headed to the door. "Are you coming, Is?"

She scurried to catch him up, shoving her arms into coat sleeves. "Yes." The door shut behind them. "So, Kate..."

Zander glanced at Isabel. "What about her?"

"You all right with her just turning up out of the blue?"

"She said she'd keep in touch, and now she has. She's in town for a couple of days." He held open the staircase door for her. "We'll catch up and then probably not see each other for another few months."

"Or maybe she wants to pick up from where you left off. I mean, you're still single, she might be single."

Zander snorted. "According to my mother, if you're still single at my age, you're on the shelf for life."

Isabel mimed playing a violin. "Not true. Look at Boaz."

Zander sighed. "Poor bloke got saddled with you. Still the wedding isn't for another six months. He has time to call it off and find someone better."

Isabel playfully hit him. "You, Sarge, are a brat, and I don't like you. For that you can buy me lunch. If you behave from now on, I won't even sit at the same table as you and Kate."

~*~

Kate climbed the steps of Tigh-Na-Murin. Situated in a quiet back street of Headley Cross alongside the river, the small guest house was out of the way, and she hoped had an empty room. The reception area was large, airy, and blue, dominated by a huge stained-glass window that looked like peacock feathers. As the winter sun hit the window, shards of coloured light danced off the blue carpet.

A large Christmas tree stood at the foot of the stairs, decorated with blue lights and silver ornaments. So much had happened the past two days, she'd almost forgotten what time of year it was.

Kate rang the bell on the oversized, bevelled oak desk.

Within a few seconds a lady with short grey hair and glasses appeared, a large smile on her face. She wore a jumper, plaid skirt, and a pretty scarf around her neck. "Hello, and welcome to Tigh-Na-Murin guesthouse. My name is Maureen Cudby."

Kate returned the smile. "Hi, I'm Kate. I was hoping you had a room available for the next week or so. I know it's a long shot, being Christmas and all, but no harm in asking."

"Actually, I had someone cancel a booking this morning, so I do have the one room available. It's ensuite. Breakfast is included in the charge. If you'd like the evening meal as well, it'll be more." She listed the prices.

Kate did the maths quickly in her head. That might be cheaper than eating out each night but would tie her down. "Just bed and breakfast are fine, thank

you. I can pay you in cash for the week now.”

Miss Cudby raised an eyebrow. “Cash?”

“I prefer cash for day-to-day expenses as it means all the bills get paid and don’t bounce,” she explained.

“That sounds like a really good idea. Cash is fine. If you could fill this in for me. Do you have a car?”

“No, and just the one bag. I prefer to travel light. Improves the spontaneity of things.” Kate took the pen and filled in the form, giving her first name, her mother’s maiden name and a random address in York.

Miss Cudby took a set of keys from the hooks behind her. “Breakfast is at eight, Miss Kingsley. I lock up at ten at night, but there’s a front door key on here should you need it. You’re in room seven. That’s on the second floor on the right. It overlooks the river.”

“Thank you.”

“If you need anything, just ring the bell.” Miss Cudby vanished into the back room again.

Kate grabbed her bag, and trotted up the magnificent staircase to the second floor. The room was larger than she’d imagined. There was a double bed, with a green floral duvet set, a small bathroom, tea and coffee, kettle, wardrobe, chest of drawers, a hairdryer, desk and chair. Writing paper on the desk had the guest house logo on it.

Not that she could write a letter. It was too dangerous. She couldn’t even risk writing to her one friend in Tannoch—Sara.

She glanced into the bathroom...she could do with a shower and hair wash before she went to meet Zander. Swallowing several pain killers, she turned on

the hot water. The thrill of being clean and having clean clothes tempered the amount of pain she knew it would cause. Her shoulder had stiffened so much over the past couple of days. Perhaps once she was safe, she'd go to the doctor and get it checked.

~*~

Zander and Isabel arrived at Headley General Hospital and headed to ICU. A uniformed police officer stood guard outside the main door and let them in. Zander headed to the nurses' station and flashed his ID to a woman in scrubs. Her name badge identified her as Sister Todd, the nurse he'd spoken to earlier. "DS Ellery and DC York. We need a word with Andrew Curtiss."

"You can have a few minutes." She led the way to a small ward containing four beds. Each bed was surrounded with equipment and had a nurse sat monitoring. "The bed by the window on the left."

"Thank you." Isabel glanced around. "No one on the door," she murmured.

"There should be. That will change as soon as I can use my phone." Zander headed over to the indicated bed. "Mr. Curtiss? I'm DS Ellery. This is my partner DC York. How are you feeling?"

The blond man in the bed eyed him. One arm was in a sling. "Like I got shot and left to die. Doc says I'm fortunate to be alive. Don't think they expected me to wake up so soon, if at all."

"Can you tell us what happened?"

“Dan and I were in the shop picking up the suits. Bespoke ones, cost a fortune, but totally worth it as we’re buying not hiring. This bloke comes in and starts yelling, and then opened fire.”

“Can you remember what he said?”

“If I can’t have her no one can.”

Zander caught sight of Isabel taking notes out of the corner of his eye. “Was he aiming at you?”

“Doubt it. I’m the best man. My mate, Dan, is the groom. Where is he? Is he OK?”

Isabel glanced up from the notebook. “Daniel Eastman?”

“Yes,” Mr. Curtiss replied. “He gets married on the weekend.”

“I’m sorry,” Zander broke the news. “He died at the scene, along with the tailor, Malcom Sargent.”

Mr. Curtiss closed his eyes and groaned. “No.”

“What do you think the shooter meant?”

“I don’t know. I’ve only met Val once. She’s a cop, works over at Fleet Street according to Dan. He was besotted with her. They met a year ago, bit of a whirlwind. Dan and I grew up together. He was my best mate.” His voice broke, and he took a deep breath.

“Did you get a good look at the shooter? Eye colour? Hair colour and style?”

“Umm...” He worked to compose himself. “Jeans, hoodie, baseball cap. He had a scar on his cheek. Red trainers. Dark eyes.”

“That’s a great help.” Zander smiled. “Do you think you could work with a sketch artist? It’s easier to work with pictures than a simple description. Other