

HER NAME IS *Pandora*...
SHE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN BETTER.

The Box

ROMANTIC SUSPENSE FROM THE AUTHOR
OF THE SAY A PRAYER SERIES

Clare Revell

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Dedication

Thanks to the following people for suggestions for the contents of the box. I didn't use all of them, as that would involve a stacking crate not a shoe box, but figured you all deserved a mention anyway. And you're all in alphabetical order...

Helen Barnett

Michelle Chani

Sharon Dean

Paul Moore

Renate Pennington

Helen Rachel

Lorri Smith

Louise Watson

Martin Watson

Daniel Williams

What People are Saying

Down in Yon Forest – She writes books like Alfred Hitchcock and M Night Shyamalan direct and produce engrossing and captivating movies. A hint of an answer here, a red herring there, light here, dark there—*Down in Yon Forest* shines a bright light on her skills as a storyteller. – Marianne Evans

Clare Revell has written a wonderful Christian mystery in *After the Fire*. From the beginning, I found myself drawn into the story. The descriptions brought the story to life, and the vibrant characters felt like they could step off the page. EA West.

Fairytale of Headley Cross – I love being swept away through Revell's writing. She expertly sucks you in and allows you to fall in love with each character as God's love and grace shine brightly. –TSuckoo

1

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. Matthew 10:29-31

Wednesday.

"Are you sure it's up here?" Dora Ogden peered down through the attic hatch. Her pastel pink hair fell over her face, and she tucked it behind her ears. She probably should have tied it back, but that was just effort. She'd dyed her hair pink for a fancy dress party when she turned eighteen and liked it, so she had kept it pink ever since. Even if it did involve a three-hour, rather expensive trip to the hairdressers every two months.

She grinned as Mum rolled her eyes at her. "What? At least my hair isn't orange or ginger."

"True. And yes, I'm sure the box is up there. It should be over on the left. It's a rectangular box with green flowers on it. There should be a label marked photos on the side. I want to show the boys when they get here. I also need you to get down the box of Easter

decorations.”

“OK. This may take some time.” Dora pulled back and surveyed the loft space. It was normally reasonably organised with boxes stacked and labelled. But today it was a disaster. She didn’t stand a chance of finding this elusive box of photos before everyone else arrived. The entire family was coming to stay from today for the weekend. It may only be Wednesday, two days before Good Friday, but as far as Mum was concerned Easter started now.

On the other hand, it wouldn’t hurt for her four older brothers to get up here and help look for once, rather than turning up when all the hard work was done. They’d put everything away after Christmas at the beginning of January, and obviously just trashed the entire place while they were up here. And they’d only done it because she’d been working the late shift at the café.

Carefully, she made her way back over to the left. There was just enough room to stand upright if she stayed in the centre, and most of the floor was boarded, so she wasn’t in any danger of falling through the ceiling.

This time.

She had vivid memories of doing that a couple of years ago. Her foot had missed the edge of the board and gone through her bedroom ceiling.

“Should be behind the Christmas stuff,” Mum called helpfully.

Turning back, she moved the folded wooden pasting table.

Nestled behind it there was a large box marked Easter.

She smiled. Her parents were the only people she knew who had Easter decorations. She shoved it towards the hatch. She'd bring that one down once she'd found the other box. That way it was one trip and not several.

Slowly Dora searched the loft, stacking the boxes properly. This wasn't what she'd planned for her afternoon off. She'd only popped home to get her umbrella as it was pouring with rain. She'd been planning a solo trip to the cinema, but that would have to wait.

At least she hadn't already bought the ticket as she sometimes did. Good thing too, as she didn't have the money to waste.

It took another twenty minutes of searching and tidying, before she found the other box her mother wanted. She tugged it free only to knock over a pile of boxes she'd already stacked.

Dora clucked in frustration. Great. Now she had to start all over again. She wished fervently her brothers hadn't been up here at Christmas. Or that Dad would do it himself for once, rather than delegating.

She shoved the pasting table to the far side and slid into the gap between the now fallen boxes. Perhaps if she put them over to the edge, then they wouldn't fall again. Each box was clearly labelled as to the contents. PLATES. BOOKS. KIDS' BOOKS.

Dora opened that one. It was full of the books she'd read as a child. Nothing had been thrown away.

She set her three favourites to one side, intending to take them downstairs and read them again.

What was that one she used to love? Something about a treehouse and a daisy. She searched again, but there was nothing in the box that even resembled a title to that effect. Maybe she'd imagined it.

Another box was labelled toys. Dora opened it. All her dolls were there, along with their changes of clothes. Her teddy bear lay at the bottom. She grabbed him and hugged him tightly. She'd had him as long as she could remember. Along with the knitted rabbit with the yellow dress. She put them with the books she wanted to take downstairs. They could resume sitting on her bed as they had done for years. They had the very inventive names of Bear and Rabbit.

Her doggy nightie case was also there. She'd called him Ping for some reason. He joined Bear and Rabbit on the growing pile of things to take downstairs.

Dora closed the boxes and tried to push them into the corner, but they refused to move. Something was in the way. Peering over the top she could see another box, wedged into the gap. It took a few minutes of finagling before she could reach it and move it to the right. Only when she'd got the boxes stacked the way she wanted them, labels facing outwards, did she pick up the smaller box to put it back.

It wasn't particularly small. It was a large square shoe box, the type that walking boots would come in.

The box had her name written on the lid.

Dora straightened. Was it hers? She didn't

recognize it, and it wasn't her writing on the lid.

"Did you find it?" Mum called up. "The others are here and dinner's ready."

"Yeah. I'll be right down." She grabbed the box Mum wanted and lowered it down through the hatch. "Just give me a few to tidy up a little, and I'll be there."

She went back into the loft and grabbed the box and other bits. She carefully carried them down the ladder and put them in her room. Then she turned off the loft light and put the ladder away, closing the hatch.

"Come on, Dora." Her eldest brother Roger appeared halfway up the stairs. "Dinner will be cold."

She snorted. "It's curry. You know as well as I do that Mum's curry couldn't be cold if it tried. Can you please carry that box down for me?" She pointed to the box of Easter decs and followed him down the stairs. "What I want to know is who hid the Christmas decorations behind the pasting table?"

"That would be me. Done to prevent premature Christmas decorating."

She laughed. "Yeah, well it's never me. The weekend before Christmas is plenty early enough. As much as I love that time of year, there is far too much clutter for my liking."

The lounge was full of her brothers, their wives and children. She hugged them all and then followed them into the dining room. They rarely used the table now, usually ate off trays in front of the TV, doing what they referred to as 'slumming it.'

Sunday was the exception to that.

As she'd predicted, the curry was hot. So hot her mouth was aflame, and several glasses of water didn't even start to help. Despite the chatter and laughter, the food lay uneasy, and the box upstairs weighed on her mind.

As soon as she could get away with it, the instant the clock in the hall struck nine, she pleaded tiredness and an early start. She bade everyone goodnight, promising a proper catch up tomorrow, and headed up to her room. Via the kitchen for a glass of milk on the off chance that would settle her stomach.

Dora sat on her bed and eyed the box. Just a normal shoe box, bound with an old elastic band. It looked like the type of shoebox the church did each year for the Christmas appeal, only without the paper.

The label on the side showed a pair of adult boots in a size nine. She knew they weren't hers as her feet were only a four. Maybe it was a box she'd kept and stored treasures in and totally forgotten about.

Her hands shook in anticipation as she removed what she could of the dry rotted elastic band and lifted the lid. A layer of tissue paper lay over the contents. She laid that on the lid. There was a photo of a child in a pink outfit sitting under the Christmas tree, a teddy by her side. That had to be her. She recognized Bear. His knitted outfit looked much newer and cleaner there.

She removed the items one by one, laying them on the bed. A knitted bonnet with white ribbon, knitted socks that matched, along with a knitted jacket with green rabbit buttons. A white dress with a couple of

green embroidered leaves on the collar. A lock of blonde hair. A gold baby bracelet. A rose gold locket. A crochet granny square baby blanket. A yellow muslin.

Right at the bottom was a folded piece of newspaper. She grinned. Had they kept the paper from the day she was born?

She picked up the newspaper. A photo of a child in a pushchair filled the front right. She peered at the picture. Wasn't that her? The child looked like her. She compared it to the photo she'd pulled from the box first. Yes, it was the same child.

Her stomach pitted. Why would she be in the paper?

Unable to keep her hands from trembling, Dora unfolded the faded paper. The headline screamed 'Child Kidnapped in Headley Cross.'

Her heart pounded loud in her chest. She felt sick. Who would do that? Obviously she'd been found and returned and presumably Mum just kept this up in the loft as a reminder. But why hadn't she been told?

Dora flattened out the paper and read.

Hope Duffy, age three, was kidnapped from her pushchair outside Coppice Road Post Office in Headley Cross yesterday. Her mother, Elizabeth Duffy, had left Hope outside the post office for five minutes whilst she went inside to collect the family allowance.

Dora sat Bear straighter on the bed. He'd fallen onto the photograph. It wasn't her then as the name was different. But the picture was the same child. She didn't understand as that was definitely the same Christmas tree they used every single year, only the

familiar green and silver tinsel didn't look quite so dim and faded.

She carried on reading the article.

When Mrs. Duffy returned to the pushchair, it was still there but Hope had gone, along with her teddy bear and handmade baby blanket. The child was dressed in a white knitted jacket, with green rabbit buttons, hat, and socks over a white dress with green embroidered flowers on the collar.

Dora blinked. That description matched the clothes on her bed perfectly. What was going on?

She peered closer at the photo in the paper. The bear was identical to hers. Right down to the knitted sailor outfit.

Hope wore a gold baby bracelet with her initials on. Also taken was a locket belonging to her mother. The antique pendant contained a photo of Mrs. Duffy's grandmother holding Mrs. Duffy as a child and the initial J on the other side. Hope also has a brown birthmark on her left wrist and two dimples on the base of her back. If you have any information, please contact Headley Cross Police.

With trembling hands, Dora picked up the locket and opened it. She gasped, a hand covering her mouth. Inside was a photo of a baby and a much older woman she didn't recognize and the initial J. She rubbed the bracelet, the brown birthmark on her left wrist taunting her. Finally, she uncovered the letter H.

Was she the stolen child? She carefully repacked the box and covered it with the tissue paper. Taped to the underside of the lid was an envelope with her name on.

Slowly she peeled the envelope free and slid out

the folded sheet of paper. Written in her mother's handwriting it contained a single word. Sorry.

A muted sob worked up and out. Her whole life was a lie. She didn't belong here.

From downstairs came the sound of laughter as they went through the box of pictures she'd found.

Dora rose and pulled her overnight bag from the top of the wardrobe. She shoved the books she'd found into it, along with the bear and shoe box. She added a few clothes and her Bible. Toiletries followed. Anything else she needed she'd buy when she got to wherever she ended up.

She grabbed the bag and headed downstairs. She slid into her coat.

Roger opened the lounge door. "Thought you might change your mind." He frowned as he saw the bag. "Where you going, sis?"

"Out."

He raised an eyebrow. "Staying overnight? Anyone I know?"

She blinked hard, eyes stinging. "No."

He caught hold of her arm. "What's wrong?"

"Ask Mum," she said.

Mum appeared, silence filling the lounge. "Ask me what?"

Dora stared at her. "Who am I?"

"That's a silly question, Dora Alicia Ogden."

"Then who is Hope Duffy, and why is there a box of her things in the attic with my photo in a news report and my name on the lid? Along with a note in your handwriting saying sorry."

Her mother paled. "I..."

Dora waited, counting slowly to fifty in her head before she got any kind of response.

Her mother shook her head. "It's nothing to do with you."

The short, dry comment floored her. Her emotions flared. "It has everything to do with me."

"I'm not discussing it. The only thing that matters is you put that box back where it belongs and stop interfering."

"It has my name on it. It's my box. If you won't tell me, then I shall go and find out myself." Dora shook her head. "Bye." She grabbed her handbag and car keys and let the front door slam behind her. She had no idea what to do now.

She drew in a deep breath. The newspaper said the child was taken from Headley Cross. So why not start there? Maybe the local police could tell her something. And one of the first things she'd do was return her hair to its natural blonde. Pink belonged in the past.

She set the car's sat nav and drove away, leaving a cloud of exhaust and tire rubber on the drive behind her.

2

Maundy Thursday

Avon Xenon pushed his favourite resident, Betsy, into the main lounge of Oak Tree Villa, the care home he'd worked in for several years. "There you go. Where do you want to sit today?"

Betsy shrugged, clutching the doll tightly on her lap. "Doesn't matter. It'll be the wrong chair anyway. And who are all these strangers in my house?"

He grinned. "You only sat in the 'wrong chair' once and that was several weeks ago. Hasn't Philip forgotten yet?"

"No. And he won't. He's a grumpy old so and so."

"Just set in his ways, Betsy, that's all. A little bit like all of us." Avon pushed her to the window. "How about you sit here today? You can watch all the traffic go by on the main road."

Betsy looked at him, a flash of something in her eyes. "Is she coming today?"

Avon helped her into the armchair. "Is who coming?"

"My daughter. She was kidnapped you know."

He did know. She mentioned it several times a day, every day. But no matter how often Betsy or the

others repeated themselves, he always listened to them as if it were the first time he'd heard the story. He tucked the blanket around her. "Maybe. Did you want your crochet?"

"Please. I'm making her another blanket. She'll need a bigger one now. The baby one was stolen along with her and her bear." Betsy's hand rose to her neck. "And my necklace. The one my grandmother gave me and her grandmother gave to her. I'll sit here and wait for her. She might come today."

"She might." Avon nodded to the old doll in her arms. "You look after that baby of yours." He put the bag of crochet on Betsy's lap and pushed the empty wheelchair back into the main corridor.

He glanced over his shoulder. Betsy was rocking the doll, singing to her.

His boss, Jennie, glanced at him. "Does she seem worse to you today?"

Avon shook his head. "No worse than usual. She always lives in the past."

"Dream land more like. Did she tell you she had tea with Queen Victoria again yesterday? Apparently, they discussed the cost-of-living crisis, the war in the Falklands, and the snowman who's decided to take up residence on the front porch. Snow at Easter? That'll be the day."

"Wouldn't be the first white Easter in Britain." Avon tucked the wheelchair away. "Have to feel sorry for Betsy though. She's only fifty-nine, so much younger than all the others. Dementia is a cruel disease." He checked his watch. "Anyway, time to be

off. That's the nice thing about the early shift—being out of here by three. They're all settled in the lounge, ready for a riveting game of bingo."

Jennie smiled. "Thank you, and thanks for covering for Ben tomorrow afternoon, even though you're meant to be off duty. See you at twelve."

Avon nodded. "You will. I will even leave the Good Friday service a little early so I won't be late." He headed into the staff room and pulled his coat on over his uniform. He wrapped his scarf around his neck and tugged his beanie over his head. Usually, he changed out of his uniform before leaving, but couldn't be bothered today. He was doing a couple of hours at the church café as counsellor should anyone need to talk.

It was a way to help out, plus the limitless free coffee and snacks never went amiss. Especially if Lia was baking those famous cinnamon swirl buns of hers. Although, as it was Easter, she might have made hot cross buns instead.

If he didn't love his job in the care home quite so much, he might just up and quit and go and work in the Three Sixteen Café. He'd also have to take up running on top of his usual workout to avoid piling on the weight.

He waved to Betsy as he left the building and grinned as she blew him a kiss. She was by far his favourite resident. He knew he shouldn't have favourites, but Betsy was just so chatty and always happy. Easy to please, and a constant talker. Even if she did repeat the same stories several times a day and invent visits from Queen Victoria. At least the doll he'd

found in the attic brought her some comfort. She wouldn't let her out of her sight in case she was stolen like her baby was.

He unlocked the car and tossed his rucksack onto the backseat. Her stories may vary a lot, but the one about the kidnapped baby never did. That one was the same every single time.

Could there be any truth in it? Perhaps he should look it up online, see if it really happened. Or he could ask his mate who was a cop to check the cold cases for him.

Ten minutes later, Avon parked in the town centre. He made his way to the Three Sixteen Café and crossed to the corner table right at the back. He hung his coat over the chair facing the door.

Lia came over to him. "Hello. You drew the short straw this afternoon then?"

He grinned. "I did. Made the mistake of saying I had a rare Thursday afternoon off. Although my brothers and I have tickets for the match tonight, so hopefully I'll make it. It's a local derby as we're at home to Wokingham."

She chuckled. "You know we'll lose, right? We always do."

Avon nodded. "Yup, but I live in a perpetual state of hope." He sat down. "What's the special today?"

"Chicken curry or beef stew and dumplings. And cake wise I have made cinnamon swirls and carrot cake minus the walnuts."

He groaned. "All four of my favourites at the same time. How am I meant to choose?"

“You don’t. You have two now and take the other two home with you for later.”

He snorted. “I would, but I’m not that much of a piggy. Besides it’s football and I’ll be home far too late to eat tonight. I’ll have the beef with extra dumplings and the cinnamon swirl, please. And a coconut gingerbread flat white.”

Lia scrunched up her nose. “You just make that up?”

He winked and settled into the chair, shoving a hand through his short black hair. No doubt the beanie had played havoc with it again. But it was just too cold not to need one. “Hoping it’ll be as nice as the oat milk hot chocolate.”

His phone beeped. He tugged it free and checked it. His youngest brother.

Derek: *Just a reminder about the match. We will meet you in the stadium car park in the usual spot at 6.15 as it’s a 7PM kick off. Don’t be late.*

Avon: *As if. It’ll be Brent who’s late. You and Calvin had best pick him up this time. That one would be late to his own funeral.*

Derek: *<crying with laughter emojis>. I will do that. See you later.*

The four of them were really close, even ignoring the fact they were quadruplets and had done everything together as kids. Now they were grown and all left home, but they kept in touch several times a day. Every weekend, work permitting, they went to every home football match and had Sunday roast with their parents. Along with the midweek games.