

DOES THE CLANGING OF THE BELL
MEAN THE END OF CANDLEWICK LODGE?

Clare Revell

*Unchained
Melody*

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

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www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410
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Publishing History
First White Rose Edition, 2025
Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0509-5
Published in the United States of America

CHAPTER 1

Raven Faulkner groaned as she found yet another tangle in the string of fairy lights. She could think of better ways to spend a Sunday afternoon in the middle of March. She eyed her three sisters with suspicion. "Who put these away?"

"Grampa," Wren said immediately. "I'd have done it properly."

"No, I think it was you," Lark said, raising an eyebrow. "You did take them down, Wren."

Caillie shook her head. "Why do we need lights on an Easter egg anyway? If we tie it to the wall on the main road, it'll show up just fine. And save having to have trailing cables, even if we can plug it in safely that far away."

Raven dropped the lights like a hot potato. "Good point. There might even be some fluorescent paint outside in the workshop. I don't have the inclination, time, or strength to untangle seven hundred lights and a thousand meters of cable today. We'll worry about them at Christmas. I know Violet likes her community events, especially after the snowman hunt was such a success, but I don't want a lit-up egg. We'll just fasten the one we made to the sign on the main road."

"Sounds a much better plan. However..." Lark

snatched up the lights. "I'll untangle them now. Then I'll wrap them neatly around this piece of cardboard here and..." She broke off, obviously having a light bulb moment if the grin on her face was anything to go by. "How about after I've untangled these, we put them up on the roof and leave them up all year long. Save going up and down that rickety ladder several times. Especially with Zebedee around."

To prove her point, their crazy four-month-old collie-cross-huntaway puppy skidded through reception, knocking over the potted tree in the corner.

"Dog!" Raven complained. "Ask Derek to put them up. We can make him dinner or something for doing it." She snatched up the phone as it rang. It may be a Sunday, but the main phone was always answered. "Candlewick Lodge, Raven speaking. How can I help you?"

"Good afternoon. I was wondering if you have a room available from tomorrow?" The deep, smooth male voice was familiar, but Raven had no idea where from. Maybe he was a returning guest.

She grabbed the mouse and navigated to the correct file on the computer. Not that she needed to look as she already they had more empty rooms than guests at the moment. "We do. How long are you wanting it for?"

"Six weeks if possible. I know it's Easter next weekend, so I'm probably asking for the moon."

Raven's heart pounded. Six whole weeks. That would solve a whole lot of issues all at the same time. Somehow, she managed to keep her voice level and

professional. "That won't be a problem. Can I take a name?"

"Isaiah Beringer. That's I-s-a-i-a-h B-e-r-i-n-g-e-r. I'd like the biggest room you have available, please. The price isn't an object. En suite, if possible."

"All our rooms are en suite." Hardly able to contain her joy at that, Raven glanced down at the empty booking screen and typed his name into the nicest one they had. "We do full board, half board or just bed and breakfast. The full board is either a cooked meal here at one o'clock, or a packed lunch to take out."

"Full board, please. Do I pay now or on arrival? Or will a deposit do for the time being?"

"There's a deposit of fifty pounds per week, and the rest is payable on arrival. I'll email you an invoice. If you could pay the deposit by bank transfer today, that would be good. I know it's Sunday, but it'll secure your booking. If you quote the reference number on your payment, then we'll know it's from you. You're booked in from March eighteenth to April twenty-ninth."

"That's wonderful. Thank you so much." He gave her his email address. "I'll send the payment as soon as I get the email. See you tomorrow."

The call ended, and Raven filled in the invoice and sent it off. "There, done."

Wren put her hands on her hips and eyed her. "And what's that grin on your face in aid of?"

"Someone just booked a room, full board, for six weeks, including Easter. He didn't even ask how much

it would be. He wanted the biggest one we have, so he's all booked in to 109 from tomorrow until the end of April."

Caillie pursed her lips, narrowing her eyebrows. "Grampa said something about Robert Duvall arriving tomorrow when he rang earlier. Mr. Duvall requested the best room we have with a view. He's here for a week for work. It's in the book."

Raven checked and heaved a sigh. "Yes, but it's not on the computer. Do you know if we sent him an invoice?"

"Nope. He didn't send a deposit, instead he said he'd pay up front on arrival. And you need to use the book. It's tradition."

Raven groaned internally, not about to have the same old argument about which system worked best. "Well, Mr. Duvall can have the second best, which also has a view. He won't know any different. Besides, I can't resend the invoice to Mr. Beringer with a different room number on it. That isn't professional." She tapped on the computer, adding Robert Duvall to the booking system.

Next, she added Isaiah Beringer to the book, making sure to change the room numbers. Fortunately, Mr. Duvall had only been pencilled in as he was paying on arrival, rather than paying the deposit up front. "Right, that's two rooms to finish making up with fresh towels. I'll do that while the rest of you finish that egg and put it out the front."

Lark twisted the string of lights around a piece of board. "I'll speak to Derek later about putting these up.

No doubt he and Violet will be in church this evening. He, Avon, Hope, and Violet are spending the day together." She paused. "It's nice Hope still lives here, even if it is only 'til after the wedding."

"And she'll carry on working here afterwards, so we'll still see her." Caillie glanced up as the grandfather clock in the hall struck two. The full Westminster chimes echoed. "Better go and make a start on dinner. What time are the Wilkinsons checking out?"

"About six or so, after the evening meal. I'll stay here this evening while you three go to church." Raven grabbed a handful of tea and coffee sachets from under the desk. "That way I'll be here when they leave. I can always stream the service."

She headed across reception, sidestepping the boxes and almost falling over the dog before she reached the winding staircase to the upper floors. It wouldn't take long to freshen and air the two rooms to make them ready for the guests. She could simply take the lift, but where was the fun in that?

CHAPTER 2

Isaiah Beringer paid the invoice and then closed the banking app on his phone. Now he needed to pack. He honestly hadn't expected that enquiry to work, never mind get a room for the whole six weeks. Maybe he could have tried for longer—like three months. Still, he could always ask when he checked in tomorrow. Even if it meant having to switch rooms.

He pulled the suitcase off the top of the wardrobe. It was old and battered, but then it had been around the world several times. It didn't take him long to pack, he'd had enough practice. Hopefully the place he was staying would have a laundry service or know of a launderette nearby.

He glanced at the guitar case leaning against the wall in the corner of the room. Did he take it? Did he leave it? It wasn't as if he needed it—he hadn't so much as picked it up in weeks.

He shook his head and closed the suitcase. His gaze fell on the rejection letter on the bed. Screaming in frustration he scrunched it into a ball and hurled it across the room at the bin. It landed on the floor, beside the bin, mocking him. Figured. As if he needed another indication of how useless he was.

He'd given up his music career—his prolific, fame

making music career to be precise—along with all the money and the gold and platinum records, that went with it because it clashed with his faith. He loved music. He loved God. But it seemed the two things weren't compatible.

He'd made a name for himself, with numerous world tours, more number one hits and albums that he could remember off the top of his head, yet he'd set it all aside for a new career with gospel music. Only for that to fall flat, bringing him down with it. Apparently, it was too big a leap from rock star to gospel singer, and the fans hadn't liked it. The album he'd poured his heart and soul into writing had bombed and made a huge loss. Nothing had gone right since.

He'd been so sure God wanted him on the mission field. Yet, it didn't look that way anymore.

Every single mission society in the country had rejected him outright.

Therefore, he was running away. Hiding. For as long as it took to lick his wounds in private, while he attempted to figure out what to do next. Or forever. That worked just as well.

The doorbell rang. Isaiah groaned. That would be his brothers, probably all three of them. He could pretend he wasn't in. Although with the car on the drive, he'd fool no one. The bell rang again.

He picked up the case, rucksack, and guitar, and trotted down the stairs. He dropped them by his feet. Maybe they'd assume he was leaving now and go away.

Isaiah opened the front door.

As he'd correctly guessed, his three younger brothers, Valentine, Xavier, and Yale stood there.

"Are you ready?" Xavier's smile faded as he saw the luggage. "You're leaving? Have you forgotten? It's two-fifteen. Mum's aiming dinner for three. You promised you'd come."

No, he hadn't forgotten at all. He just didn't want another fight or conversation about getting a "proper" job. He shook his head. "Something's come up. I'm leaving town until the end of April. Maybe longer. Sorry."

Valentine angled his head. "Hmmm, you don't look sorry. Were you even going to tell us or just text when you arrived?"

Isaiah didn't meet his brother's piercing gaze. He hadn't intended to take his phone, but that was best left unsaid.

"Is it a gig, a job, or are you just running away?" Valentine persisted.

Isaiah's cheeks heated.

"Jonah strikes again. That really is a most appropriate middle name if ever I heard one." Xavier's tone hit that slight edge between teasing and frustrated. "Why are you really going?"

"I need to get away," Isaiah said quietly. He heaved a sigh. "I got another rejection. It seems no mission society wants to touch me with a bargepole. My image is wrong. I need some quiet time to get my head around what to do next. I've packed a bag, booked a room in a remote hotel somewhere, and I will simply spend time walking and praying." He paused.

"Yeah, OK, and hiding."

"God has a plan," Valentine told him. "You just haven't seen it yet. He'll show you when the time is right. At least come for dinner before you leave."

He hesitated. "I don't want another conversation about a job or lack of one. It's not as if I need to work, I have enough saved from the record sales to last a while yet."

"How about we deflect the conversation?" Yale suggested. "You can't miss one of Mum's roasts, especially if you're going away. Tell Mum you're off on a trip for a few weeks. She's used to you gadding about for weeks on end so won't think anything of it. Just send her the odd message to show her you're still alive."

Isaiah tilted his head slowly. He could do that. And it'd be a lot easier than hurting his parents by just vanishing without a trace. Because knowing Mum, she'd report him missing, sparking a totally unnecessary manhunt. "OK."

"Right, you come with us, and we'll drop you back home after church tonight. Then you can take yourself off to wherever you're going."

"OK." He stacked his things in the hallway and tucked his phone inside the rucksack. It wasn't as if he'd need it the rest of the day. And it was actually quite liberating being without it and not being tied down to each beep or alert that came from it. He'd leave early tomorrow morning. Check in by lunch or just before and have time to explore before it got dark.

Question was, when he met the woman he spoke

with at the hotel, would she match the mental image he'd come up with? Her soothing tone had intrigued him.

He shrugged into his jacket and grabbed his keys.
"OK. Let's go."

CHAPTER 3

The old bell attached to the archway rang.

Suddenly.

Loudly.

Clanging three times in the stillness of the night.

Raven lay facing the window in that weird half-awake half-asleep state, not sure if she'd heard the bell ring. She'd been dreaming about church bells, so that was probably it. She tugged the covers tight and closed her eyes.

Rain rattled against the windows. Thunder rippled through the room.

Great.

The bell rang again.

She pulled the covers over her head, turning onto her other side. It was March eighteenth. They weren't supposed to get thunderstorms this early in the year and there definitely hadn't been one forecast. Rain pounded against the window. Must be a cloudburst—you got a single thunderclap with those.

Even with her eyes closed and face buried in the duvet, she could see the flashes as the storm grew closer. Not simply a cloudburst then.

She peeked a glance at the glowing red numbers on the clock. 04:30.

The bedroom door burst open. Lark, Wren, and Caillie ran into the room and jumped on her bed.

"Go away. It's too early." Raven groaned and tugged the duvet closer. All of them were in their twenties, but these three were still kids at heart.

"Don't be a grumpy moo." Caillie giggled as she knelt on the bed. "Looks like it might be a half decent storm for a change."

Raven couldn't care less how great the storm was shaping up to be. She was tired. "It's half four in the morning. I'm entitled to be grumpy."

"Sleepover. Remember when we were kids, and we'd camp out in one room during a storm and give the lightning marks out of ten for technical merit and artistic impression?"

Raven put the pillow over her head. "We're not having a sleepover and you're not six anymore. Go away and let me sleep. Where's Zebedee?"

Wren pulled the pillow away. "Fast sleep in my room in his crate. He's fine. Did you hear the bell ring?"

"It's the wind, nothing more. It's not the end of life as we know it. I don't care what any of the old wives say about the bell."

Thunder crashed closer this time and the rain turned torrential. Raven groaned. "That was only three seconds after the lightning. Someone ought to go and turn off the computer before the storm gets any closer." She eyed her sisters. "You lot are up."

"It's your computer." Lark poked her tongue out. "The view's no good from here. Let's try Wren's

room.”

“And check on Zebedee while you’re there.” As her sisters ran into the hallway, Raven tossed back the covers, flicked on the bedside light, and swung her feet over the edge of the bed, easing them into her slippers. This would be Zebedee’s first thunderstorm so who knew how the four-month-old puppy would respond. He was crazy enough on a good day when the sun shone, even nuttier when it rained. Add thunder to the mix and anything could and probably would happen.

Lightning flashed. This time Raven got to two before the thunder answered. The bell above the front porch chimed a third time.

The power went off, leaving her in complete darkness. “That should settle the old wives’ issue,” she called.

“Nope, that’s just one. We need three,” Wren called back.

“Don’t tempt the old wives. They’ll be listening.” Raven shook her head and switched on the torch on her phone. She ran down the hallway to the main staircase. On reflection she probably should have used the back stairs as they were closer to where the computer was, but it was too late now.

She reached reception just as lightning flashed and filled the room with light so bright it dazzled her. Loud thunder roared at the same time.

A large crash made the nineteenth century building shake.

Raven jumped.

What was that?

Upstairs the dog began barking.

Raven ran behind the desk. She unplugged the modem and yanked all the cables from the wall sockets. Better safe than sorry, even if the power was off. She glanced at her watch. 04:35. Now, to see what the loud crash had been.

The bell rang again. *Clang. Clang. Clang.*

Shivers ran down her spine as the legend of the bell ran through her mind. It rang to warn of disaster and death.

Common sense told her the chiming was caused by the storm, and nothing more sinister. Yet the worry lingered as Raven shone her torch around reception. The whatnot her cousin Derek had made, lay on the floor in several pieces, shattered ornaments around it. The potted tree that stood against the far wall lay beside it.

OK. That made three things. They should be all right now. She shook her head at idiotic superstitious beliefs. God took care of them, not some old wives' tale about things happening in threes.

The rain stopped.

The sudden silence was almost as loud and frightening as the storm itself. Raven shone her torch outside and groaned. One of the tall oak trees surrounding the lodge had toppled—probably struck by lightning. At least it wasn't on fire. It might have missed the building, but the darkness made it hard to tell for sure. She'd have to make a proper assessment in the morning, along with clearing up the disaster in reception.

At least they had no guests. Otherwise, she'd have to check properly and maybe evacuate guests to who knows where. Other than the local pub, the lodge was the only place to stay in the village.

Wren appeared at the bottom of the stairs with another torch. "What was that crash? Are you OK?"

"One of the trees fell. I'm fine. I'll clear up in the morning. Careful if you come in. The what-not shelf also fell over. The floor is covered with broken glass. I'm not even attempting to clear it up in the dark. Where are the others? Are they OK?"

"Yeah. That crash woke Hope, not sure how she slept through the storm though. They're with the dog."

The clouds began to part, allowing the moonlight to peek through the window. Raven took a step outside. Perhaps she could see the building now, find out if the tree missed.

"I'll put the kettle on, shall I?" Wren called from behind her.

"Terribly British of you." Raven glanced back over her shoulder. "But there's no electricity so it won't boil."

"Then I will put a saucepan of water on the gas stove."

Raven turned around. She gasped. "No...Wren!"

The tree hadn't missed the building after all.

Horror and dismay speared her as she took in the tall tree lying on the ground against the side of the lodge, a large branch sticking through one of her bedroom windows. That was one of the few stained-glass windows in the building and her favourite of all

of them. Hence the reason she'd insisted on having the room for her own.

Wren appeared by her side. "Oooohh. Knickers."

"That's one word for it."

"Call Uncle Will. He did say to give him a shout if something untoward happened. And a tree through the building certainly counts as that."

Raven snorted. "Bit mean waking him now. Not like he can do anything."

Lord, it's not that I don't like a challenge. But the bell rang...

Her gut twisted. It was an old-wives tale, but what if it were true? The bell had rung. They'd all heard it. Her who-knows-how-many-greats-grandfather had heard it ring the night the Titanic went down, taking his elder brother with it. It had rung the night of both devastating fires that had hit the lodge, including the one that killed her parents.

She glanced down at the mobile in her hand. "I'll text him. He'll get the message when he wakes." She glanced sideways at Wren, thinking quickly. "Least we hadn't put the lights up around the roof yet. We'll need to transfer the new guests to the Eyrie. Just to be on the safe side until we know what the damage is."

The Eyrie was built on what had once been the stables. Raven had called it Eyrie, the name for a falcon's nest. Seemed appropriate for the Faulkners. Even if the name was spelled different.

"The guests don't arrive until ten." Wren studied her. "Why move them at all?"

"Because who knows when we'll have the roof

fixed if it's damaged. No, I'm not taking the chance of invalidating our insurance or breaking any health and safety rules. We'll move our stuff to the first-floor guest rooms and the guests can sleep in the Eyrie."