

The background of the entire cover is a romantic winter scene. A man and a woman are shown from the waist up, embracing and looking at each other. They are wearing dark winter coats. The scene is set at night in a snowy landscape. In the background, there is a small house with warm lights glowing from its windows. A large, glowing cross is visible in the distance, partially obscured by trees. Snow is falling, creating a soft, dreamy atmosphere. The overall color palette is cool, with blues and greys, contrasted by the warm yellow and orange lights from the house and the cross.

LOVE
Not
REQUIRED

CLARE REVELL

A
CHRISTMAS
ROMANCE

Love Not Required

Clare Revell

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Dedication

To Lisa, who gave me the initial idea and then I ran
with it.

1

Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness.

~Isaiah 43:18-19

Monday 24 November.

It was cold tonight. Far colder than he'd realised when he left work. Liam Page stepped out of the car into the freezing darkness of the November evening. He locked and covered his vehicle with an old sheet, not wanting to deal with the hassle of de-icing again. Once after work was enough for one day. He blew on his hands before rubbing them together as he trod carefully across the community centre car park that already glistened with frost. He'd forgotten his gloves again.

Maybe he should take his twin sister's advice and keep a pair in the car. Niamh had been telling him to do that for years. Mainly because she was tired of her hands suddenly getting cold because his were. The twin thing they had was rather annoying at times. And he was more than a little tired of feeling sick every time she did. Which seemed to be all the time at the

moment. She'd brushed off his concern and questions more than once to the point where he'd stopped asking.

He pushed open the main door. A welcome blast of warmth hit him as he trotted down the corridor to the meeting room. He undid his coat and took the offered paper cup of coffee. "Thanks, Steve. How are you doing?"

"Busy, but coping, just about," came the reply. "Work is full on right now, but then it would be in the run up to Christmas. How are you?"

That was a stupid question, but Liam supposed he ought to be polite and answer. "One day at a time. Your car is already iced up. I've covered mine."

"It's not meant to get above freezing all night. It's seasonal though."

He resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "It's still November and only autumn. Way too early to be this cold."

"True. We ought to sit and get this meeting started."

Liam slid into a chair, almost glad of the ear worm. His phone beeped. He checked the message quickly. A photo of his sleepy daughter, wearing her favourite onesie filled the screen, with the text.

*Night, night Daddy. Luv
you.*

He tapped out a quick response.

*Luv you too, Wombat. Be
good for Nanna and Grandad.*

See you after work tomorrow. |

The phone went onto silent, and back in his pocket.

He stayed glued to his seat, as the eight others in the group spoke. He kept his legs tucked underneath the chair, his hands clung to the coffee cup containing the untouched, now cold, liquid.

"Anyone else?" Steve's gaze took in the entire circle before resting on Liam.

Liam could feel the gaze almost burning into him, yet he didn't move, simply shifted his own gaze to the floor. He was here because he'd promised his mother that he'd go to AA meetings regularly. For Olive's sake. No one else's. He wasn't going to get up, spill how he felt or didn't feel. That wasn't part of the deal and wouldn't happen. He was here, he was sober, and that was enough.

The meeting ended, and he quickly exited the hall before anyone could talk to him. He headed straight to the pub. The irony wasn't lost on him. He found a seat at the bar. "Evening, Al."

The barman wiped a glass on a tea towel. "Good to see you, Liam. What can I get you?"

"Usual." Liam pulled a twenty from his wallet. Then he pulled the sobriety coin from his pocket and laid it on the bar. His reminder not to do anything stupid. Like drink the alcohol he'd just bought.

Al took the money and exchanged it for a half pint of orange juice, a single whisky and a packet of salt and vinegar crisps. He slid the small amount of change back across the bar.

Liam dropped the change into the tip jar, drained the orange juice, and opened the crisps. He ate them all before gripping the glass of whisky in shaking hands. One sip, that's all he needed, just the one.

He closed his eyes. *Lord, I can't do this alone. Each day, each step I've felt You beside me. My grip on You may be faint, fainter than it should be, but I know deep down Your grip on me is as strong as it ever was. Help me now. Give me the strength to put this down and walk away.*

As he opened his eyes, someone leaned an arm onto the bar beside him. "Half a pint of orange juice, please." The voice was one he knew all too well.

Liam didn't bother to look up as he exhaled. *This wasn't quite what I had in mind, Lord, but thank You anyway.* "I don't need a lecture, Adam. I'm not in the mood."

"Good." His best friend, Adam West, perched on the stool beside him. "Because, I'm not in the mood to give one. I'm simply here for a quick orange juice before going home. It's been a shockingly busy day."

Liam glanced at Adam's feet before he twisted his wrist and raised an eyebrow at his watch. "It's half past nine at night. You're not working late. I know this because one, you're not in a suit, and two, you're wearing trainers and not those shiny court shoes of yours. Just be honest and admit you're checking up on me."

Adam held up his hands and had the decency to appear mildly apologetic. "OK, I admit it. I'm checking up on you. I wouldn't be much of a friend if I didn't. Sam noticed you weren't home and sent me to see if A,

you were in here, and B, that you were all right."

"We're fine, thank you." Liam waved the whisky. Sometimes living opposite Adam and his wife Sam, was a good thing. And sometimes it wasn't.

"How many days?" Adam pushed the sobriety coin towards Liam.

"Two thousand and seven."

"That's a long time."

Liam tapped the coin with his index finger. "Five and a half years in layman's terms. Or if you prefer it's 2,890,080 minutes."

"You sure you don't teach maths?"

"Quite sure." He turned his attention back to the glass in his hand. He wanted it. He couldn't put into words how much he wanted a drink, needed a drink, tonight more than ever. Simply to take that one mouthful and slide off the wagon, to tumble and vanish into the alcoholic haze of oblivion. He raised the glass and leaned it against his forehead.

"Where's Olive tonight?" Adam was still there.

For half a moment, Liam wished his friend would leave him to wallow in self-pity and drown his sorrows, his guilt, his anger. Drown in everything that was consuming him. But Adam took his mentor duties extremely seriously. Besides, he'd prayed for help and God had sent Adam. He glanced up, put the glass down, and pushed it away with the tip of his finger.

No. He wouldn't fall or even leap down that particular rabbit hole again. And not just because he had company. He was always being watched, his faith taught him that much. How did that kids song go

they'd sung the other week? Whatever you're doing He will know or something like that.

Adam leaned against the bar next to him, orange juice in hand, eyeing him over the top of the glass.

What had he asked? Oh, yes. Olive. His daughter. His beautiful ten-month-old daughter, all he had left of his wife. Grief hit him hard again, taking away his breath and leaving him with an almost physical pain as his heart broke afresh. He returned his gaze to the whisky. His hands clenched and unclenched, the urge almost overwhelming.

"She—she's with my parents. I have a staff meeting at quarter to eight tomorrow morning, so she's sleeping over tonight." He ran his tongue over his lips wishing his voice wouldn't keep wobbling every single time he thought of how messed up his life was now. "How's Sam doing? Haven't seen her around for a couple of days."

"She's OK. She's busy making lists and checking things twice." Adam set his glass down and slid the coin back to Liam. "Not sure why Christmas needs this much planning. It's not for another month yet."

"Jacqui was the same. Especially last year, trying to be organised in case the baby came early."

In the end she hadn't, instead she'd been two weeks late. Olive Peta Jacquelyn Page would be one on January sixth. He remembered it like it was yesterday. A midnight dash to the hospital and not making it. A blown tyre meant he'd had to pull over. As he was dialling the emergency services, a passing police car stopped. One officer called over his radio for an

ambulance and then changed the tyre, while the other delivered the baby on the roadside. They'd named her Olive after Oliver who'd delivered her, Peta after Peter who'd changed the tyre, and Jacquelyn after her mother.

A huge lump stuck in Liam's throat. The grief was always lurking in the forefront, as large and black and overwhelming as it was the day Jacqui died, seven months ago. He kept it tightly locked away, not allowing himself even a moment to cry. He inhaled the sickly, sweet scent of the whisky. He could almost taste it.

"That's me done." Adam's voice jarred him. He'd forgotten the man was there. "Do you want a lift home?"

"I have the car, but thanks for the offer."

His friend raised an eyebrow. "Is driving a good idea, Liam?"

Liam pushed the whisky towards the barman before he succumbed to the temptation. Despite the heavenly help, he was only human. "I come here once a week, buy a drink and don't touch it. I'm stone cold sober. Ask Al if you don't believe me."

Al picked up the glass and threw the contents away. "He's right. Hasn't touched a drop in all the time he's been coming here."

"Glad to hear it, but honestly mate, this isn't a good idea. Find somewhere else to sit once a week. Come over to us and have coffee. You can even bring Olive." Adam rose and rested a hand on Liam's shoulder. "We just care about you, mate."

Liam stood. "I know, buddy. See you next week,

Al. I'm assuming you drove here, Adam, as you offered me a lift?"

"I did. Sam needs me to pick up packed lunch stuff on my way home."

"Have fun with that. Don't they both like different things?"

"Hah, yes. Whatever one twin likes, the other decides they don't. Your turn will come soon enough, mate. See you later."

Liam drove home and parked on the drive. Across the road at Adam's and Sam's, the Christmas lights were up, ready to be switched on come December first. Unlike Carlyle's place next door to Adam, which shone brightly from the rooftop down to the end of the front garden, despite the fact it was only November twenty-sixth.

He didn't see the point in decorating the house this year. Not even a tree. It wasn't as if Olive would know it was Christmas. At ten months all she needed was to be fed and warm, not know what day of the week it was. She didn't mind that he shared that care with his parents. But her smile, when she saw him was the one bright spot in his lonely world. He was her person, even if she did scream for hours at times.

Sam waved from her front window as he locked the car.

He raised a hand in response and then headed inside the dark, unwelcoming house. He locked up and flipped on a sidelight in the lounge. Flopping into a chair, he gazed at the photo of Jacqui on the sideboard. It had been taken in the garden she'd designed and

built at the school where he still worked. She beamed at him, her long dark hair blowing in the wind, her perfect figure swathed in her favourite black skirt and red jumper. The same ones he'd buried her in. Along with her slippers, which she'd always joked she wanted to wear in heaven.

The phone rang. The screen said Mum. His stomach dropped. Had something happened to Olive? "Hello."

"Hi, Liam." Mum sounded tired. "Just to let you know that Olive went down fine."

"Thanks for having her tonight." Relief flooded his system, and he leaned back in the chair. He wasn't sure he could cope if anything happened to her.

"Anytime, you know that."

"I know, but you have her all day while I work. I don't like to impose any further."

Mum's laugh echoed down the phone. "She's my granddaughter, not an imposition. Besides, we decided to make it a complete granddaughter sleepover tonight. Niamh dropped Siobhan and Rachel over before dinner, and Abbie came straight from school. It was chaos for a few hours but totally worth it for the fun they all had. They are now all crashing in the same room upstairs." There was a momentary silence. "Patrick called."

Liam's blood ran cold at the mention of his older brother's name. He closed his eyes. He hadn't seen or spoken to him since April, seven months, and that was the way it would stay if he had anything to do with it.

"He asked after you. I told him you were doing

OK." Mum paused again. "I wish you'd talk to him."

"Hah!" Liam snorted, struggling to keep the burst of anger in check. "If I never speak to him again it'll be too soon."

"Liam—"

"Mum, please." He cut her off. He'd talk to Mum about most things, but not Patrick. She shouldn't have to take sides, and he wished she'd just keep out of it. It was their problem, no one else's. "I'd better go. I have homework to mark. I'll see you when I pick Olive up tomorrow at the usual time. Love you. Night." He ended the call and turned his phone off. His hands clenched into fists, the need for a drink growing.

He turned off the light, sitting in the dark. His world had gone dark the day Jacqui died. As it had when his first wife, Sally, died.

Married twice. Widowed twice. Murdered wife twice.

Never again would he give his heart or his life to anyone. Loving someone was dangerous.

Three deep breaths later, he flipped the light back on and reached for his Bible. He needed to read and pray, or he really would be falling off the wagon tonight. The only thing keeping him sober was his faith. He was hanging on by his fingertips, but hanging on nonetheless.

Something from Sunday's sermon flickered through his mind.

"If you're hanging on by your fingertips, make sure you're clinging to the hem of Christ's garment." Pastor Carson's voice was as loud in his mind as if he

were in the same room.

Liam opened his Bible to tonight's reading. Isaiah 41. *For I am the LORD your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, do not fear; I will help you.*

2

Tuesday 25 November.

Lynsi Torres groaned as a whirlwind blew into the living room and jumped onto the sofa bed. "The alarm hasn't gone off yet, kiddo." She reached for her glasses and put them on. Now the energetic nine-year-old wasn't a blur.

"I'm your alarm clock, Aunty Lynsi," Stella announced. She crawled under the duvet, cold feet and all, and snuggled up against her aunt. "I was thinking."

"Nope. Way too early for thinking, kiddo." Lynsi tweaked Stella's nose. "And too early for hot chocolate, before you ask. That has to wait for breakfast."

Stella scrunched up her face. "I even turned on the kettle for you."

Lynsi raised an eyebrow. "Did you now?"

"I climbed on the chair and stretched like this." She demonstrated. "I was careful, though, so don't worry."

"Very clever. So, what were you thinking?"

Stella's face took on the familiar haunted, sad look. "Will Father Christmas know where I am? Mummy always got me to write a letter and then Daddy would

post it on his way to work. Only they're not here, and I'm living with you now. And he might not know that I've moved."

Lynsi hugged her, thinking quickly. She needed to know what her niece wanted for Christmas, and despite being asked, the scamp had refused to write a list. Maybe this would be the way to find out. "How about you go and write a letter while I shower? Then we can mail it on the way to school. There's a stamp in my purse. Let me read it before you seal the envelope. Do I need to write that?"

"Nope. I know where he lives. It's Father Christmas, North Pole, Lapland."

Ten minutes later, showered, dressed, and possibly in her right mind, Lynsi put a plate of toast and jam, along with a cup of hot chocolate in front of Stella. She refused to buy the chocolate cereal the child asked for, compromising with chocolate milk. "Finished?"

"Yis." Stella held out the letter, not looking up.

"Don't forget you have after school club tonight."

"I won't because I always do."

"Sorry." She looked down at the tear-stained paper in her hand. An all too familiar lump stuck in her throat as she read. For once she wouldn't correct the spelling mistakes. Stella was good at spelling, but at times spelled how the word was pronounced if she wasn't sure or concentrating.

Dear Farther Christmas,

A lots happened since I wrote you last year. Mummy and Daddy died in a boat crash in May. I live with Aunty

Lynsi now. My adress is 167 Radcliffe Drive in Headley Cross. I don't want presents for Christmas. I just want Mummy and Daddy bak. And the baby brother that Mummy promised was coming for Christmas.

Love Stella Torres. Age nine and three quarters.

Lynsi tightened her grip on the paper as her hands trembled. A sinking feeling swept over her as the pain and grief, so close to the surface, threatened to spill over into another ugly crying session. Her small niece had encompassed it beautifully. They'd both faced the same loss, the same pain, the same unimaginable torment since the untimely death of her parents, Lynsi's brother and his wife, yet Stella seemed to be able to word things so much better. The little girl was nothing short of a hero.

Stella picked up the toast immediately dripping jam over the plate, table, and her fingers. How could one small person make so much mess? "I miss them."

"I miss them too." Lynsi put the box of tissues on the table and turned to make coffee, not wanting Stella to see the tears in her eyes.

Things had changed so much for them both in the last year. She'd moved from her native Chicago, five years ago after a messy breakup with her boyfriend, to live close to her only family, her brother Bobby and sister-in-law, Alison. Since then, she'd worked and watched Stella grow up, content to teach Home Economics and be an aunt. And give men as wide a berth as possible.

Until six months ago when everything changed in an instant. Bobby and Alison were attending a party on

a yacht on the Thames for Bobby's work, when the yacht was struck by a much larger vessel. Nine people had been killed, including Bobby and Alison. As Stella's only living relative, Lynsi stepped up to the plate and was now raising Stella as her own.

The one bedroom, second floor apartment which was perfect for just her, was no longer big enough. There was no yard to play in and nowhere near enough room for the toys and paraphernalia which came with a nine-year-old. Stella had taken over the only bedroom and Lynsi was sleeping on the sofa bed in the living room.

She would simply have moved into Bobby's house, but since the house came with his job, that had returned to the company, making Stella not only an orphan but homeless. And as for anything else, the whole legal side of things left her adrift. The insurance was still pending, as was the compensation payout from the shipping company responsible for the accident, and it had taken most of her savings just to get Bobby and Alison buried.

Lynsi swigged the coffee and turned her attention to Stella's hair. She'd become an expert in recent weeks at French plaits, braids, or a high ponytail. Occasionally the child demanded what she called bunches, which seemed to be two ponytails, one on each side of her head. Basically, an unbraided pigtail. Everything else was a learning curve of the steep variety.

The will had requested that Lynsi become Stella's guardian, eventually adopting her and that's what she

was in the process of trying to do. The hearing was set for just before Christmas, but there had been a hiccough which her lawyer was trying to fix.

She glanced at the clock. "We need to go or we'll both be late."

"I can walk myself."

"Not this morning. It's foggy." Coming from the US the thought of a child walking alone to school pricked at her American sensibilities, or perhaps she'd just seen too many crime dramas. Stella alone in the fog caused fear to race along her spine, even if she was a very mature nine-and-three-quarters-year-old.

Stella tugged on her bright yellow coat. "I could do breakfast club as well. Then no one would be late. Maddie says they have chocolate cereal there."

"That would be a very long day for you. Which wouldn't be fair to you to have to spend so much time there. And that's a big no to the chocolate cereal."

The child shrugged as she zipped up her coat. "You do long days. 'Sides, Maddie gets dropped off at half-past seven and isn't picked up until six. That's not fair. No point in having children if you never spend time with them. You always pick me up at five, give me dinner, and make sure you spend every minute with me before bed. And we do fun stuff on the weekends which she never gets to do."

Lynsi appreciated the backhanded compliment. At least she was getting one thing right. It hadn't been easy becoming an instant parent. She followed Stella outside. Shivering at the chill, as she stood on the stoop and locked the door of her brick façade flat. She

glanced down at the once lovely, now brown and shrivelled geranium on her porch. She needed a new plant, something living. Something green that would survive the cold of winter and bloom again come the spring. "Sometimes I even cook what you call a proper dinner and not just something straight from the freezer."

Stella laughed. "It could be worse. You could burn it."

"Hey, culinary arts teacher here! Me? Burn dinner?" She made her eyes wide and gasped.

Stella giggled. "You burnt pancakes last week."

"Very true, and that, I'll have you know, takes a lot of skill. Maybe Maddie could come home with you one night and have dinner here." Lynsi unlocked the car. "In you go."

"Morning." The mailman coming up the drive handed her a pile of letters.

"Thank you." She shoved them into her bag. Probably bills, but she'd check once she got to work. Right now she had to hustle or they'd both be late.

The staff room of Headley Cross Secondary was buzzing by the time she got there, shortly before the bell rang. The mail would have to wait. She tossed her bag onto a chair and went to find the cup bearing her name. She filled it with coffee and fastened the lid. Then as was her habit, she grabbed another, filled it with coffee, cream, and two sugars before popping on that lid.

"Morning, Lynsi. How are you this morning?"

She turned and offered her friend, Carole, a smile.