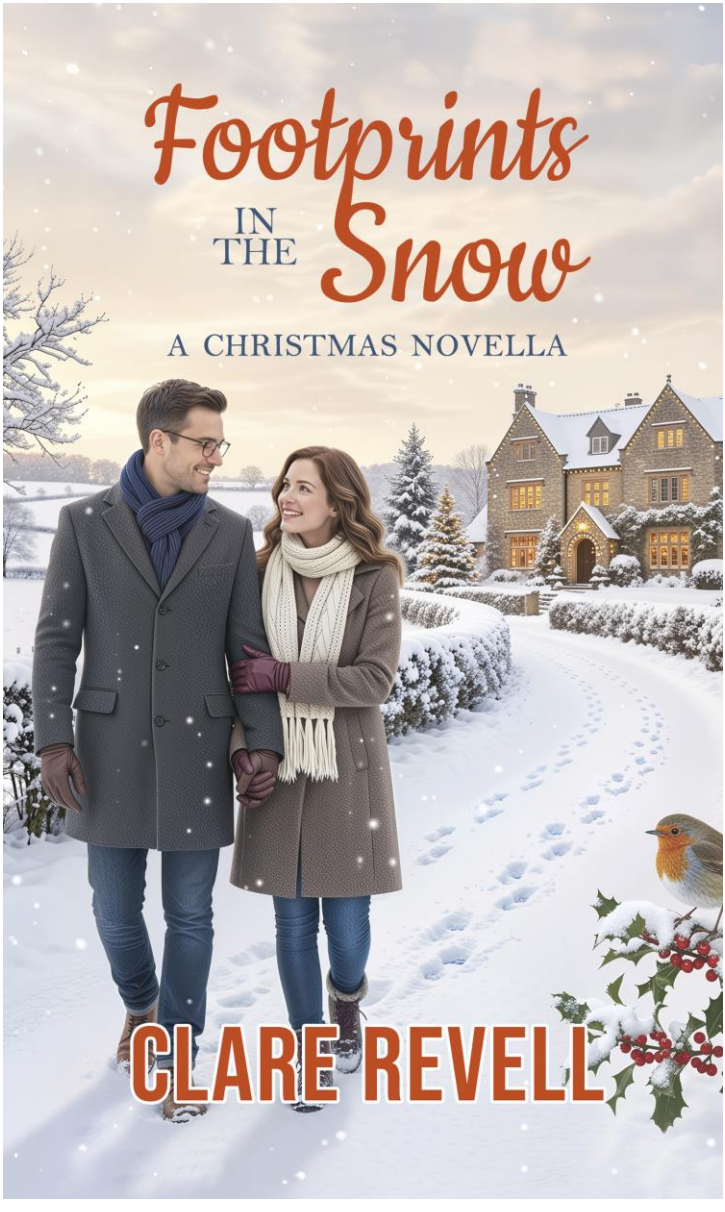

Footprints
IN THE Snow
A CHRISTMAS NOVELLA
CLARE REVELL

Footprints in the Snow

Clare Revell

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Chapter 1

Monday 2nd December.

Ezra Lowe trundled his case to the reception desk of the Rowan Hotel. Christmas music piped from the speakers hidden somewhere. A large, decorated tree festooned with lights and baubles stood in one corner. Tinsel decorated the edge of the desk and the paintings on the walls. The drive to the small Yorkshire town of Ilkley had taken just over four hours. All he wanted was a nap and a coffee, as he'd done the drive in one hit.

The receptionist, dressed in a smart navy-blue suit, smiled at him, whilst her name badge proclaimed to the world that her name was Pippa. "Good evening. Checking in?" Pippa said much too brightly.

"Yes. Ezra Lowe, here for the conference. I have the paperwork here somewhere." He patted his pockets but had no idea where he'd tucked the sheets of paper. Probably in the suitcase or in the suit bag draped over his arm. Somewhere so safe he'd forgotten. Even though Ilkley was a small place, he wondered why the hotel hadn't walked into the twenty-first century. Most hotels would have had computerized reservations, and he wouldn't have lost his outdated paper confirmation.

"No worries, sir. I have you right here. Do you have a car?"

"I do." He draped the suit bag over the suitcase handle and took the pen from his pocket. It took less than a minute to scrawl his signature and car registration number on the sheet Pippa gave him. Tucking his pen back from whence it came, he returned the paper across the desk.

Did Pippa's face ache from having to smile all day at people?

"You're in room 307. The lifts are over there."

"Thank you. Where do I get the conference pack?"

Pippa pointed in the opposite direction. No doubt she'd been asked that at least a hundred times today. "The convention centre is through those doors to your left. The restaurant is just behind me. Dinner is served from five until nine, breakfast is seven until ten, and lunch is twelve until two." As she spoke, Pippa's stiffened hands pointed in all directions like a flight attendant giving emergency exit instructions. "The bar in the lounge closes at eleven-thirty. The fully inclusive rate you've paid covers everything apart from the mini-bar in your room."

Ezra hadn't intended to touch that anyway. He didn't drink. Never had and didn't intend to start now. He'd seen the damage it caused firsthand. He slid the keycard into his jacket pocket. "Thank you."

"Piece of advice, sir. Don't put the room key anywhere near your phone. It'll wipe the magnetic stripe on the card. I've had to redo several keys today already."

"Thanks for the tip." Ezra swapped the room key to his other pocket. Draping his suit bag over his arm, he tugged the suitcase to the convention centre. Just beyond the door was the signup desk with an assistant sitting there staring into space. Catching the gentleman's eye, Ezra managed a smile. "Good evening. Ezra Lowe, checking in for the conference."

The bloke ran a pen down the sheet. "Cutting it fine, Dr. Lowe. But you're not the last one to arrive."

Not that he owed the bloke an explanation, Ezra nonetheless gave one. "We had a work crisis this morning. I didn't manage to get away until gone two."

Mr. Disapproving held out a folder and photo ID on a clip. "You need to always wear this badge, Dr. Lowe. It will allow you drinks in the bar as well as your meals in the restaurant. There is a black-tie dinner in the conference room at half-past seven. Don't be late. The timetable for the rest of the week is in your welcome pack."

"Thanks." Ezra clipped the ID to his pocket, tucked the pack under his arm, gathered the rest of his luggage and strode across the stone floor to the lifts. The clock on the wall chimed seven. So much for a nap. He'd barely have time to shower and change at this rate.

Room 307 was part way down the corridor on the left-hand side as he exited the lift. He flicked on the light and wheeled his case inside. The room was huge, and it was all he could do to contain his amazement. Two doors led off to one side. One contained an ensuite bathroom with bath and separate shower.

Behind the second door, hid an elaborate sitting room with a table, chairs, and a sofa. He turned his attention to the bed.

Again, it was a large king size, with crisp white linens and plump pillows. Both rooms contained ample sockets. This whole suite was bigger than his flat in Wokingham. Way too big just for him.

He tossed the case onto the bed and opened it. His digital clock/phone charger needed plugging in before he forgot. Once that was done, he sank onto the bed, hands on either side of his legs. The duvet was thick and comforting, and the mattress had just enough give to avoid backache whilst still feeling firm enough for a good night's sleep.

His phone beeped with an incoming text.

Josie: Got news for you. Charlie proposed last night. I said yes.

Joy filled him. He had two cousins. Bernice had been married for five years, almost as long as his other cousin, Josie, had been dating Charlie.

The phone chimed again with a photo of the engagement ring. He squinted at the solitaire diamond. It looked expensive.

Ezra: That's wonderful. Huge congrats. And a very nice ring. When's the wedding?

He laid the phone on the bed and undid the suit carrier.

Josie: Not hanging around so Easter. I assume you'll be here.

Ezra: Silly question. Wild horses couldn't keep me away.

Josie: Good. What are you doing?

Ezra: As you well know, I'm in Ilkley at the conference until Friday. About to shower and change into a penguin for the black-tie dinner although why it's on the first night and not the last I have no idea.

He sent photos of the rooms.

Josie: Oh wow. A suite all for your ownsome. See rank doth have its privileges. Pays to be the boss now.

Ezra chuckled as he finished putting away his clothes.

Pays to be the keynote speaker more likely. Normally I get a tiny room with a single bed. What are you doing to celebrate tonight?

Josie: We're on the way to see

> *the grandparents in York so we can tell them in person. We're there for the week. Mum and Dad will be there as well for dinner tonight. Got to go. Have fun. Make friends. Don't fluff the speech.*

Shaking his head, Ezra headed into the bathroom and turned on the shower. Twenty minutes later, showered, changed, and not necessarily in his right mind, he took the lift to the ground floor. He followed the crowd to the convention centre door and waited his turn to study the seating plan.

It may as well have been in Greek. The tiny print was hard to read on a good day, but with tired eyes and less than perfect eyesight, even with the glasses, it was nigh on impossible. Each of the twelve tables had eight or ten names next to it. Finally, he found his name on table one.

"Really?" he asked aloud. "Table one?"

"You are the keynote speaker." An amused, familiar voice spoke from over his shoulder. "What did you expect?"

"Table twelve, right at the back in the corner. Same as always." Ezra turned, to find the amused voice matched the twinkling eyes and wry smile on his former tutor's face. "Dr. Pratt?"

Dr. Wilbur Pratt's smile widened to a full-blown grin, left hand in his pocket, right hand gripping Ezra's tightly. "As I live and breathe, if it's not Ezra Lowe, my

best student. You didn't think I'd miss this did you?"

The handshake was just as firm as Ezra remembered, and as always, lingered just that smidge longer than necessary. "And I owe it all to you."

"Poppycock. You far excelled your teacher. I hear congratulations are in order, *Doctor* Lowe."

As his cheeks warmed, Ezra cringed at the reference to his relatively new PhD. "Still not used to the title, if I'm honest."

"It's well deserved. I read your paper. Fascinating work if I may say so. I'd better go and find my seat. We'll catch up properly at some point."

Ezra followed him into the main room. Normally this would be set out in rows, but tonight it was like a banqueting hall. Twelve circular tables spaced around the room, each with chairs covered in red fabric tied with white sashes. Crystal glasses and silver cutlery sparkled on the white damask tablecloths. Red flowers and green candles stood as centrepieces. For all intents and purposes, it looked like a wedding reception.

Table one was at the top of the room. Ezra swiftly found his chair and sat. His table filled, but he didn't know anyone apart from the conference director. The chair next to his was empty, and he glanced at the name card. W. IRELAND.

Ezra did a double take. He knew the name. A shiver ran down his spine and settled in the pit of his stomach. It couldn't be the same person, surely? He ran a finger along the inside of his shirt collar. His tux was trying to kill him, and it was a toss-up between strangulation and death by constriction. He wasn't

sure which would succeed first, the bowtie or the cummerbund. Next time he attended one of these shindigs he'd hire a larger sized suit.

Next time? Who was he kidding? He wasn't planning on a next time.

The phone in his pocket beeped, and he groaned. He should have put it on silent. Tugging the handset free, he adjusted the volume before glancing at the screen.

Fritz work:

All calm here now. Will call tomorrow with update.

Relief filled him. That situation could so easily have gone the other way. He tapped out a quick reply.

Glad to hear it. Please keep me apprised of any changes, no matter what the time. Happy to leave whenever and come back if needed.

"Everything all right, Dr. Lowe?"

He glanced up into the concerned face of conference director, Dr. Michael Caird, and nodded.

"Just work checking in," Ezra said. "There was a crisis this morning, hence me only just making dinner by the skin of my teeth." In the Biblical sense if he wanted to be pedantic—not that it was his life in danger, but rather one of the over six hundred inmates in his care.

He slid his phone back into his pocket. His

grandmother had drummed into him that phones at the dinner table were the height of bad manners. "It looks like everything's sorted now, though. I will give them a call first thing tomorrow just to make sure."

"Good, good." Dr. Caird rose and tapped his spoon against the glass. Silence fell. "Good evening, everyone and welcome to the PsyCol conference. Or as my wife charmingly put it before I left home this morning, the psycho convention." He paused for laughter. "We've a busy, hopefully insightful few days ahead of us with lots of lectures as well as other activities planned. Our keynote speaker is Dr. Ezra Lowe whom some of you may know. Ezra is a criminal forensic psychologist, and his latest paper is well worth a read. We're indebted to him for standing in at the last minute."

Ezra's cheeks scorched as everyone clapped. He raised a hand quickly, wishing he hadn't shaved off the beard this morning, as that would have hidden the worst of the blushes.

"The other speakers are Wynter Ireland, who appears to be running late…"

Ezra dropped his gaze, tuning out the man as he finished the welcome and sat once again. Wynter Ireland. It had to be the same person, unless by some miracle there were two psychologists with the exact same name. The one woman he'd never been able to forget. The woman he'd loved, proposed to, and lost. The one he'd spent the past six years trying to get over, and failing miserably. The one who'd chosen work over a lifetime with him. She'd gone overseas and

taken the pieces of his shattered heart with her.

Lost in the bitterness of thought, he was surprised when a bowl of prawns covered in sauce, resting on a bed of lettuce suddenly appeared in front of him.

At the same moment, the door opened and a woman in a long, blue evening gown began to wend her way amongst the tables. Her hair may be longer than he remembered, and done in one of those posh updo's that his cousin informed him was a chignon, but he'd know her anywhere. How could he not?

He couldn't breathe. His stomach roiled, and his palms became slick. It *was* her.

Apparently flustered, cheeks glowing, the woman slid into the seat next to him, embarrassment oozing from her. "I'm so sorry, Dr. Caird." Her soft, silky voice hadn't changed one iota. "My car broke down, and the road assistance people insisted on towing me home rather than to the conference. My housemate drove me here, and the traffic was awful. As if that all wasn't bad enough, the hotel messed up my booking, and I'm still not sure I have a room. The manager said he'd sort it, so I'm living in hope."

Dr. Caird's smile was sympathetic. "At least you made it. If they haven't found you a room by the end of dinner, I will see to it personally." He glanced around the table as he picked up his fork to eat his starter. "Everyone this is Wynter Ireland. She'll be speaking about trauma counselling in children and adolescents. Wynter, let me introduce Tony Phelps, Josh Patterson, Elizabeth Prince, Matt Carlyle, and Ezra Lowe our keynote speaker."

The beaming smile she gave everyone froze on her features as she twisted to face him. The only consolation to the turmoil currently coursing through Ezra's body, was the fact that she looked equally as shocked as he felt.

CHAPTER 2

A sudden chill seeped into Wynter's every part, stealing in one fell swoop, her breath, her warmth, and every spark of joy and enthusiasm she'd mustered for the entire week.

She'd been nervous about speaking and presenting her ideas to a room full of strangers. Now, she sat rooted to the chair, unable to move or even form focused thoughts. She was really busy at work. Christmas seemed to make the children's problems so much more acute. She'd hesitated leaving work to attend the conference in the first place; now she deeply regretted not reading the list of speakers a tad more closely. Although she could have sworn Ezra wasn't on it. She wouldn't have come if he was.

She nodded a silent greeting to everyone while she struggled to find her tongue. "Ezra and I know each other," she managed to say. If only her voice didn't sound quite so uneven maybe she could pass this off without anyone knowing how much he still affected her.

Dr. Caird raised a brow. "Really?"

"University. Many years ago." Ezra swallowed. He looked as uncomfortable as she felt, which, in her opinion, was a good thing.

"Good, good. Gives you young folks someone to talk to this week."

In dismay, Wynter eyed the prawn cocktail starter. Since they hadn't booked her in, they didn't have her menu choices. She pushed the dish to one side.

"Not hungry?" Dr. Caird asked.

How did she phrase this without being whiny?

Ezra spoke quickly. "She's allergic to shellfish. I imagine with the mix up with her room, her list of allergies would have been lost as well." He raised a hand and signalled the waiter. "Hi, can we have two of the alternate starters please? Ms. Ireland is allergic to shellfish, and I don't want her to feel uncomfortable eating something else alone. There was an issue with her booking, so if you could let the chef know to amend her food preferences for the week, please, we'd be grateful. I'm sure she has her EpiPen with her, but I'd rather her not need it at all."

"Of course, sir." The waiter picked up the two offending dishes and vanished towards the kitchens.

Stunned, Wynter stared at Ezra. She hadn't expected him to remember all that, plus his chivalry astounded her—although the way he had always protected and respected her had been one of the things she'd loved about him. "You remembered." The words escaped her lips on a wisp of a breath that almost swallowed them.

A sideways glance, a wry smile, seared her through. "I remember everything, Wyn."

Even her nickname so it seemed. Not sure how she felt about that, or him using it, she covered her crystal

glass with her left hand as the wine waiter appeared. Ezra didn't drink, so she wouldn't either. One good turn deserved another. He'd skipped the prawns for her, so she'd skip the wine for him. "Just juice please."

Ezra copied her movement. "Juice as well, please." He cast a surreptitious glance at her ringless fingers. "In fact, can you make it two grapefruit and bitter lemons, please?"

Again, he'd remembered their poison of choice. If he kept this up, the week would become even harder to bear. Instinctively, she glanced at his left hand in kind and was surprised to see no wedding ring. He must not wear one.

Across the table, Matt Carlyle chuckled. "So, just out of interest, which one of you doesn't drink?"

"I don't." Ezra's tongue flicked over his lips, instantly uneasy. He hated having to explain his reasons every single time. "My mother was an alcoholic. She died when I was ten, so I don't touch it."

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear that." Mr. Carlyle zeroed in, his elbow on the table, his chin in his hand. His leering gaze settled on Wynter, making her uncomfortable and longing for an escape.

Just at that moment, a pretty melon boat was placed in front of her, complete with an orange slice sail. A matching boat appeared in front of Ezra.

Grateful for the distraction, she smiled at the waiter. "This looks lovely. Thank you." She picked up her fork and attacked the starter with gusto. Lunch had been so very long ago, and she did love melon, going as far as always having a bowl of diced fruit in the

fridge.

Mr. Carlyle waved a sauce-covered fork from her to Ezra and back. "Were you two university sweethearts or something?"

"Friends." Ezra's reply was short, sharp, and he changed the subject. "This melon is excellent."

As Wynter ate, her emotions and mind churned in turmoil. Ezra seemed so cold and quick to deny their former relationship, yet here he was, leaping to her defence. In the flesh no less, and what gorgeous flesh it was. She'd forgotten just how handsome he was. How his hair stood at odd angles, no matter how much he combed it, his moustache and glasses making him look wildly intelligent, which of course he was. He'd been accepted into university on his own merit—with stellar grades. She'd needed a scholarship.

"Does anyone know how Dr. Harrison is?" Ezra asked.

"Doing well." Dr. Caird put down his fork. "He should make a full recovery. He's gutted he can't be here. We can't thank you enough for stepping in at the last minute."

"Only happy to help as I was attending anyway."

That explained Ezra's name not being on the sheet she'd seen. "What happened to Dr. Harrison?"

"He was in a car accident three weeks ago. Ezra here agreed to give a talk on his latest work instead, when it became obvious Timothy wasn't going to be able to attend."

Ezra looked increasingly uncomfortable as he ran his index finger around the rim of his glass. "Most of

my work is classified, but I should be able to keep everyone entertained for about five minutes."

An awkward silence fell. Wynter guessed no one else at the table had a sense of humour, or they simply didn't understand Ezra's. It was her turn to bail him out. "By five minutes, he means at least four hours. This bloke would win gold in the talking Olympics."

The awkward silence was replaced with half-hearted chuckles and stiff, closed-mouth smiles. Tough crowd. She sipped her water while the others sipped wine. Maybe that was it. Maybe she and Ezra were the only sober people at the table.

A waiter appeared by her shoulder. "Reception would like a word, Miss Ireland."

Wynter put her serviette next to her plate, remembering to fold it to show the servers she would return. "Excuse me. I'll be right back."

The men at the table rose as she did, and she hurried from the room, wishing she'd been stuck on the table by the door. She hated being late almost as much as she hated being the centre of attention. Although, to be honest, they were probably both the same thing.

A tall man, whose name badge read MR. SMITHERS, MANAGER, smiled at her. "Miss Ireland. I am so sorry about the mix up earlier. I'm not sure why it wasn't on the system, but I have checked with the conference people, and the oversight on our part has been corrected. We've upgraded your booking to a suite, free of charge, by means of an apology. I'll have all your bags sent up right away and your allergy list sent

to the kitchen. Here's your keycard. It's room 308."

"Thank you." Wynter took the key, put it into her bag, and then returned to her seat as invisibly as possible.

"Is everything all right?" Ezra asked.

She put her serviette back on her lap, leaning back as the waiters began to clear the table of the starter dishes. "They finally sorted out my room."

"That's good. I still can't believe the breakdown company towed your car home rather than here."

"Nor could Josie. Still, since she was going to her grandparents tonight and they live in York, this was technically on her way. She dropped me off."

Ezra's juice must have gone down the wrong way as he began to choke, face going purple.

She pounded him on the back. "You good or do I need an ambulance?"

He waved a hand and managed to wheeze an "I'm fine…" as he continued to cough.

"Have a drink." Someone suggested.

Wynter resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "That's what caused this in the first place. Drinking and breathing at the same time are not usually recommended."

It took another minute or two before Ezra recovered sufficiently to speak. "Josie?"

"Josie Fenway, my housemate."

She held Ezra's gaze, confusion in his deep brown eyes, his glasses sliding down his nose.

"Do you know her?" she asked.

He shoved them up again, taking another drink,