

Clare Revell

JUST ANOTHER
WINTER'S TALE



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Dedication

This one would never have been finished without help.
So many thanks to Dean for typing up part of it and to
Jan for beta reading the entire thing in a few days.

What People are Saying

Christmastime in London Town - A warm, wonderful holiday read and the best way to experience an authentic London Christmas if you can't travel there. The developing relationships between the main characters as well as with each other's children were handled beautifully. I dare you to not shed a tear at the sweet happy ending! Erin S

1

Vere Idowu sat on the sofa and gazed at the photo of his little sister, Zahara, and at the bouquet of flowers beside it. Her smiling face gazed at him—a moment frozen in time. Today was her birthday. She would have been thirty-four and making the most of being the same age as him for a few weeks, adamant he could no longer call her little or baby sis.

Her death still seemed surreal. Swift and unexpected, she left him all too soon. He needed to check on his mum and dad. A parent should never have to bury a child, no matter how old that child may be. However, Zahara wouldn't approve of their mourning. He raised his steaming mug of coffee in a half salute. "Happy birthday. Miss you."

Outside in the cold December air, the birds were singing. Something he'd missed when he lived in London, but here in the country the dawn chorus woke him every day. Or was that the cockerel who lived a few doors down? Even on a dark, cold, frosty morning like today, the birds sang to welcome the beginning of a new day.

His phone rang, still using the jaunty tune Zahara had changed it to that final morning. He didn't have the heart to replace it with the original one. "Hello."

“Morning, boss.”

He glanced over at the clock on the wall. He’d bought it for Zahara for Christmas a couple of years ago as a joke. A backwards clock where all the numbers were reversed, and he always had to look at it twice. It still hung in its place above the TV. He dragged his attention back to the phone. Sarah would have been in an hour by now. Had something happened? “Morning, Is everything OK?”

His assistant had the same sense of humour his sister had. “I haven’t burned the shop down or destroyed it during the open if that’s what you mean. At least not yet.”

“Glad to hear it. It’s only nine o’clock.” It was Sarah’s first time to open on her own despite the fact she’d worked there over a year, but he’d needed to make sure he had time to lay flowers on his sister’s grave. “What can I do for you?”

“First off, I know it’s Zahara’s birthday and wanted to see if you’re OK. Second, we started a conversation yesterday that we didn’t get to finish. You mentioned something about your sister’s last words, and then old man Elliott interrupted when he literally upset the applecart, fruit and veg rolling everywhere. I’ve been thinking about you all night. Would you like to talk now?”

Vere caught his breath. Zahara had come to London to visit him in May and broken the news that she had stage four pancreatic cancer and only a few months left to live. Was he ready to talk about it? Yes, with Sarah anyway. He took a swallow of coffee. “I can

do that. I think it helps to remember. She said 'don't wallow, Vee. You can cry, scream, throw things, do whatever you need to let the emotion out. Then pull on your grownup knickers, chin up, and carry on. Find one smile a day. Just one. Because I love you and God loves you. He'll take care of you. And no matter what, God's got this.' I know He does, but it's still hard. Especially today."

"I know. But I also know that she's totally right on that score. Second, I know you feel responsible, but don't blame yourself for her death. She loved walking and always refused a lift to the station. The fact she died the way she did was probably a blessing as it was quick."

Aside from immediate family, Sarah was the only one who knew how Zahara had died. "Thank you."

"Welcome. And yes, today will be hard if not downright impossible. I know when Gran died, her birthday was so painful, I cried all day long. But there are good things to remember too. For example, Zahara's ridiculous jokes that weren't funny but we laughed at anyway, like how do you get two whales in a car?"

"Down the M4 and over the Severn bridge." Vere smiled through tear filled eyes. Zahara had loved jokes that played on words—whales and Wales. "And you get two rhinos in a fridge by taking the elephants out."

"Exactly. Your dad retired knowing the shop would be in safe hands with you. And you can see your parents so much easier now there is no commute from London. You wouldn't want to do anything else

as you've said time and again. You hated banking and keep telling me that I'm to lock you in a cupboard and throw away the key if you ever suggested doing it again. Plus, best of all, you're back here in the village, where you belong, surrounded by amazing people you love. Like me. Oh, and Phil. He loves you too. Going out with him was one of the best choices I ever made. Other than working here, that is."

Sarah was right, even if she never stopped talking. He loved being home again, seeing his parents daily and he loved this job. A fourth-generation greengrocer, he treasured the sweet smell of fresh fruit and veg and the interaction of the customers. Still, he needed to clear his throat as his emotions threatened to take over again. "I was thinking of bringing back the idea of the mobile shop and taking the produce to the customer as my grandfather used to do. What do you think?"

"I think it's a fantastic idea." Her voice was bright and upbeat. "It would be such a help and a blessing for a lot of people. You could do it on Saturday afternoons. I'm happy to staff the shop then, plus we have Bill and Karen on a Saturday as well."

Putting his phone on speaker, he carried the device with his dishes to the kitchen to quickly wash up. He went to the closet and grabbed his warmest coat, scarf, hat, and gloves. The day had promised to be chilly. "Then we'll brainstorm when I get in. I'm coming via the cemetery, don't forget."

"I hadn't. However, there was a message on the answerphone when I got in. Which is another reason I rang."

"Who was it and what did they want?" Vere used one of his sister's responses without realizing as he headed outside and locked the door. His breath hung in the air, and he groaned at the ice encrusted windshield. How could he have forgotten to cover the car? He'd even checked the weather before he went to bed last night.

"The bloke is coming out to fix the alarm today at ten, and he'll need you here to sign all the paperwork."

"I'll be there by then, no worries. Where's the deicer gone?" Vere tugged his hat further down over his ears. "I forgot to cover the car last night."

"I have no idea where your deicer is. Try the boot. Or the passenger door. That's where I keep mine, right along with the scraper."

He knew that tone of hers. "That was rhetorical. OK, once I've de-iced the car and delivered the flowers, I will be there. See you in a few."

As he searched, a van with Jackson Removals pulled up in front of the cottage at the top of the lane. Was someone finally moving into the Denton place? It had been up for sale for a long time.

Josh Sanders, the local postie, handed him a pile of letters. The bloke was always cheerful, no matter what the weather was like, and always wore shorts. Even today. "Morning, Vere. About time someone moved in up there. Must be a year since the old bloke had to move out now. I miss seeing his crotchety face from time to time. Even miss him yelling 'keep off the grass' at me now and then. Do you still do the welcome baskets?"

Vere put the mail on the front seat of the car. "We certainly do. Great-grandad began the tradition of giving each new arrival a basket of seasonal fruit and veg, and I don't intend to stop."

"My wife still uses that wicker basket every day. I bet there's a story behind it."

"There is." Finally, Vere found the can of deicer and grabbed it from under the seat. He wouldn't stay long at the cemetery. "There is. It sure wasn't easy when he moved here from Jamacia and married the greengrocer's daughter. But someone left a basket of fruit on his doorstep with a handwritten note welcoming him. He was so thrilled, he promised to do the same thing for every new person who moved to the village."

"Lovely story. Well, I'd best get on. The post won't deliver itself. Have a good day." Josh gave a wave and trudged farther down the icy lane.

After a quick spray to the windows and windshield, Vere tucked the can into the passenger door and grabbed the scraper. Five minutes later, he climbed into the car and whacked the heating on high, aiming it at the windshield to clear the inside which had once again misted up. Windscreen finally clear, he pulled off the drive.

He drove up the lane as a car parked outside the Denton place. He waved and pulled up alongside, winding down his window.

A youngish bloke with blond hair opened his window. Beside him sat a pretty redhead with eyes like emeralds. "Morning."

Vere grinned wide in greeting. "Good morning. Moving in?"

The woman leaned forward as she nodded, hair moving freely around her face. "I am. I'm Robyn."

"Vere. Welcome to Wychwood Cross."

"Thank you. Seems like a charming village."

"We like to think so. Well, must dash. Have a good day." Vere closed the window and pulled away still envisioning those lovely eyes. He glanced at the bouquet in his passenger seat and headed toward the cemetery.

~*~

The cemetery was empty, but then it would be at this time of the morning. Vere's footsteps crunched on the ice-covered path as he wound his way through the graves to where his sister's marker lay at the far side. Bare trees, branches tipped with white frost, lined the wall along the back of the cemetery. A cobweb glistened between the branches of a rosebush. In the summer the plants and trees gave the appearance of life, but in reality, there was nothing here but death and decay.

He stood in front of the black marble memorial.

Zahara Esther Idowu. Thirty-three years old. I lived every moment for Christ. Smile once a day for you are loved beyond measure by our Saviour.

His gloved fingers ran along the top of the stone. "This wasn't how I imagined celebrating your birthday, sis. But your celebration in heaven will be

nothing that I can imagine. You're with Jesus. And that is far better."

Tears pricked his eyes. "But I miss you. I miss your awful jokes, the way you'd prank me all the time, the silly postcards you'd send every week. I'd give anything to hear your voice one more time." He tugged the card from his pocket. "I got you a birthday card. It's got a fort on the front with the numbers one to ten coming out of it. Inside it says it's the fort that counts."

Despite his grief Vere chuckled. He and Zahara had never, ever, sent each other sensible cards. "I had to find a really bad joke for you—can't mess with tradition. And I got you flowers. Roses, chrysanthemums, and gypsophila. Red, yellow, and white." He knelt and tugged the dead flowers from the pot, before arranging the new ones. "I said I'd send Mum and Dad a photo. They'll be along later with more flowers anyway, but they wanted a picture none the less. The bloke is finally coming to fix the alarm system this morning. I'm just hoping he does a better job than the last time."

He laid a hand on the gravestone. "So, you have ten minutes before I need to leave. Fancy hearing about my week? No? That's tough, because I'm telling you anyway."

~*~

Reaching the shop just after half past ten, Vere parked out the back and hurried inside. "Did I miss

him?"

Sarah pointed to the back office. "Nope. He's working on it. And I left you notes as you asked. Those signs we did on Saturday for the Christmas hampers are under the counter. Wasn't sure where you'd want them."

"Thanks. Can you make sure the dates are on there? Orders taken from the second to the fourteenth. Any later and we won't have enough stock."

"Sure thing." Sarah reached under the counter and grabbed the sheets of paper. She laid them on the counter and picked up a pen. "Of course, we could just print them off again if you want."

"No need. Just make sure your writing is legible."

"When isn't it?" Sarah paused as she wrote carefully on each sheet. "Don't answer that. Last week, wasn't it?"

Vere stifled a smile as he headed into the back office, unzipping his jacket as he walked. He greeted the alarm repair man. "Morning. How's it going?"

"Simple fix. Shouldn't take more than another twenty minutes. Then I'll be out of your hair."

"That's great. Thanks." He hung up his coat, shoving his hat and gloves into the pockets. He snatched up the green apron and hung it around his neck. He smoothed the fabric down, tying the strings behind his back as he strode back into the shop. He took a deep breath, the scent of fruit and veg grounding him. This was home.

Mrs. Jones entered the shop, bring a blast of freezing air with her. She was bundled up against the

cold, dragging her wheeled trolley behind her. "It's cold out, this morning." As always, she stated the obvious fact about the weather. It was without fail too cold or too hot or too wet.

Vere put on his best proprietary smile, the one he saved for customers. It was also tradition to greet each customer personally with a smile and by name, just good manners. It made them feel valued, which of course they were. "Good morning, Mrs. Jones."

"Good morning, Mr. Idowu." The old lady was always formal when she was in the store. In church on a Sunday, she called him by his first name. "I'd like my usual order please. And could you tell me more about these hampers you have posters for in the window? It would make an ideal present for my daughter and her family."

Vere beamed on the inside as he pulled over the photographs of the sample hampers he'd assembled. "Of course. To begin with, let me show you what we have available in the way of baskets."

2

Robyn Yardley had arrived at her new cottage a full forty-five minutes after the removal van. Not the greatest start to moving day or her new life in Wychwood Cross. She was half expecting the van to have gone and all her furniture and boxes to be left on the pavement, roadside, and scattered across the front garden. She was however pleasantly surprised and eternally grateful to learn that was not the case. They were still there, waiting, not the least bit perturbed. She was also buoyed by the fact one of the neighbours had stopped to say hello. Especially as he was probably running late for work.

She glanced sideways at her brother, Darren, who'd taken the day off work to help her move. "That bloke seemed nice. And thanks again for this. You took the day off and everything."

Darren yanked the keys from the ignition. Four years her senior, he was almost too protective at times and had refused to let her move alone. "Anytime. Besides, it's not as if you could have walked or gone in the back of the van with the furniture. And a train and a taxi would have taken too long and cost the earth. You really do need to learn to drive."

"And as I keep telling you, I don't need to drive.

London had a perfectly good public transport system, and this is a small village where everything is within walking distance." Behind her, Ty, her four-year-old West Highland Terrier, barked and demanded to be set free. "Oh, no. I said the W word."

"Pipe down, Ty. In a few minutes." Darren unfastened his seatbelt. "I still think you're crazy for buying this place sight unseen."

"There were plenty of photos on the website. Including a video tour of the place. Besides, it was cheap compared to what I sold my flat for." Robyn opened her door, taking in a deep breath of the chilly, country air. So much nicer than the smog-filled city air she was used to. "And as you said, it's a long way from London. I need a change of scene, or this book will never be finished. They've already extended the deadline once. I can't expect them to do it again."

"My sister, the famous author." Pride shone in his voice. "Your fans eagerly await the next instalment."

Robyn shook her head and groaned as she closed the car door. "By fans, you mean you."

"Of course." He angled his head towards the cottage. "It's really pretty."

"Yes, it is. I've always wanted a thatched cottage with an English country garden."

Her brother sang a couple of lines from the song, then adlibbed one about spiders in the roof.

"Only if the horrid critters pay rent, otherwise Ty can eat them. Or you can rescue me."

"A six-hour round trip from my house to evict one spider? I don't think so. And speaking of Ty, you'd

better let him out before he destroys my back seats."

Robyn turned her attention to the dog. He was barking loudly and bouncing up and down. She had no idea where the dog got his energy as he didn't stop from dawn 'til dusk. Another reason for the move. At least here she had a garden for him to play in whilst she was working. Well, trying to work. She'd had writer's block for six straight months and was increasingly frustrated and discouraged with her lack of progress. "OK, Ty, one sec. I need to let the men in first so they can start unloading the van. Come with me. See our new home, then you can be shut in the garden to explore."

She opened the rear car door, unclipped Ty's seatbelt, and locked his lead in its place. "Come on, then." Her footsteps crunched in the thick layer of frost that lined the path to the house. Ty stopped at every single bush and blade of grass to sniff.

Darren held out a hand. "Let me take him. Or it'll be Christmas before you get to the front door."

Her laughter hung on the still air as she handed over the lead. "Twenty-three days to go. And yes, the tree is going up tonight, hopefully. No point putting it or the decorations up in the loft." She shot the soon-to-be hard-working men her best apologetic smile. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting. There was a hold up with the keys. It's all sorted now, though."

Robyn unlocked the door, sucked in a deep breath, and stepped over the threshold into her new home. The hallway smelled musty. She'd need to open every single window, despite the frigid temperatures, and

hope that helped air the place. The carpet looked tired and could do with a good cleaning. Flinging open the doors on either side of the hallway revealed a dining room to the right, which would double as her office, and a lounge to the left. Which meant the kitchen was straight ahead.

Darren appeared at her side, sniffing. "Tad musty in here. Needs a good scrub."

"Yup. Which is more than a tad gutting after I spent the whole of yesterday scrubbing my old place spotless. Is the Hoover get-at-able?"

"Yes. In my car along with the box of kitchen essentials—kettle, cups, coffee, milk, and sugar. I'll put Ty out back, then give this place a quick Hoover while you check out your new nest." He paused and then pulled a face when he didn't get the reaction he was obviously hoping for. "Robyn's Nest. Get it?"

She somehow managed to keep her face straight, although she was cracking up on the inside. "Oh, I got it the first time you came up with that appalling joke when you were thirteen and I was nine. It's still a good one though."

Darren perked up a little. "Maybe we should put the boxes all in the garage for now and then the men can just bring in the furniture. It'll be easier to clean around that. I can help shift boxes this afternoon."

"No hurry. I can move boxes over the next week or so. All I really need are the kitchen boxes, and the bedroom boxes labeled as 'Number One', and the furniture put in place." Robyn turned to the blokes in the hallway. "We'll need ten minutes to Hoover before

the furniture comes in. Every box not marked kitchen, lounge, or 'Number One' can go in the garage. Feel free to unload the kettle and make yourselves a brew. Is that OK?"

The men nodded.

Robyn headed upstairs, taking care to tread on each one. None of them creaked which surprised her in a good way. There were two bedrooms and a bathroom. She picked the largest room overlooking the back garden for herself and tugged the packet of sticky notes from her pocket. She attached labels to the door frames and headed back downstairs. "OK. I have labelled all the rooms. Hopefully that will make everyone's life a little easier. Where's Ty?"

"Back garden," Darren replied. "I made you coffee as well. Once your bed is upstairs, I'll reassemble it for you."

"Thank you."

Darren gave her his trademark one-armed hug. "It's what brothers do. And as soon as Ty's crate is unpacked, I'll put it up and he can go in there."

"Good idea. It's too cold to keep him outside for long and not safe in here with the front door open all the time. The last thing I need is for him to run off and get lost." She sipped the coffee and glanced out of the kitchen window, just in time to see Ty duck under a broken piece of fencing and make a dash for freedom. Had the mutt heard her? "No. Dog, you monster."

Robyn slammed the coffee down and dashed outside. She managed to catch Ty up and grab his collar. "Inside. Now. I don't want you to get lost. We'll