



Season for
MIRACLES

CLARE REVELL

Kyle's voice came from a long way off, and Holly had to concentrate to hear it. "I'm sorry, Holly. He's normally pretty well behaved, but he's never seen snow before and is a little over-excited. Plus he was on his own all day yesterday. Are you all right?"

Holly nodded. The headache upped a notch. *That was a stupid thing to do.*

"Can you stand?"

She moved her head a little as Kyle helped her to her feet. She brushed the snow from her coat and tried to focus on the man. His hat, pulled down over his ears, hid his hair. Her head pounded, stars danced in front of her eyes, and it was all she could do to stand upright.

I want to sit down. Please, let me sit down. The words echoed in her mind, but she wasn't sure she'd said them aloud. He didn't respond.

His deep voice reverberated as he pulled off his glove. "Are you sure you're all right?"

Holly nodded for a third time. She had a huge lump in her throat and she struggled to breathe. Her legs didn't want to hold up, but she didn't want a fuss. Fingers tingled inside her glove where he held her hand. His grip kept her upright.

Kyle's other hand cradled the back of her head. Holly winced as he found and examined the lump. His touch increased the pain by a magnitude of five. Kyle checked his fingers and relief crossed his face at the lack of blood. "Holly? Please, say something. Otherwise I'll have to assume Orion ate your tongue."

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by

Clare Revell

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Season for Miracles

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White Rose Publishing,
a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.whiterosepublishing.com
PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

Publishing History
First White Rose Edition, 2010

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

Thanks to Lynne for answering my medical questions, Pastor James for his advice and patience in answering my many emails, Steph for her encouragement, and Dean for believing in me, letting me write and ignore the cleaning.

You discern my going out and my lying down; You are familiar with all my ways.

~Psalm 139:3

1

Half way across the junction, the clutch snapped with an audible pop. Holly's foot hit the floorboard with no resistance, swiftly followed by the pit of her stomach. "Not now. I don't have time for this."

Hoping she had enough forward momentum to make it to the other side of the junction, she groaned and swallowed hard as her stomach churned. The car crawled at an ever decreasing speed. Holly could only imagine how much it would annoy the driver behind her. The lights were amber when she'd gone through them, so it was a fair guess he'd gone through on red.

She yanked up the handbrake as the car slid to a halt under a street light. This was all she needed. At least she had her tools in the boot, along with a spare part or two. Clutch cables being one of them. *And to think they mocked me for that.*

Holly flipped on the hazard lights and tossed her ski jacket onto the passenger seat. Despite the glacial English weather, she'd rather freeze than ruin her new jacket. There was one good thing about this, Holly told herself. Breaking down on a main road, not to mention one of the busiest in Headley Cross, should mean she'd be safe.

Should being the operative word. Safety was something she no longer took for granted.

Keep me safe out here. Guide my hands as I fix the car. If anyone stops to ask if I need help, don't let me panic. Help me to refuse politely. Unless it's a passing breakdown truck, in which case they can tow me to work and I can fix it there. The prayer was a reflex. An old habit which died hard. The incident five months previously had shaken her faith to the core, and although she had a few doubts, she clung to what faith she had left. Albeit, by her fingertips.

Holly clipped her phone to one side of her belt. She pulled the rape alarm out of her bag, allowing a slight smile. Drew, her brother, had bought it a couple of years ago. She wore it as a joke at first. Now she owed her life to it and never left the house without it. She clipped it to the other side of her belt, making sure both it and the phone were within easy reach. Taking a deep breath, she got out of the car. It was cold without the jacket, and goose bumps rose as she moved around to the bonnet. She pulled it open to make sure nothing else was going on. Knowing her luck, not that she did luck, there was bound to be something else as well.

Relief filled her as she realized it was just the clutch cable. Easy to break and just as easy to fix. She pushed up her sleeves, goose bumps getting goose bumps as she did so. The sooner she did this, the sooner she could get back into the safety of the car and to the church. Going around to the passenger door, she opened it and pulled out her scarf. She wrapped it around her mouth and nose and over her head, before fastening it securely so it wouldn't catch on something under the car.

Her breath hung in the chill winter air and Holly

shuddered as a car pulled in behind her. One hand went to the alarm, her finger resting lightly on the button.

A car door thudded shut. Heavy footsteps approached. Glancing up, Holly caught her breath. A tall man stood outlined against the street light. The same height and build as the man she saw so often in her nightmares.

He took a step closer and pulled his collar up against the cold, his face hidden in the shadows. "Are you all right, love?"

Holly's whole body stiffened at the unwanted term of endearment. Why did men think they could call every woman they met "love" or "hon" or "dear"? Didn't they know how patronising it was? Never mind standing close enough to invade your personal space. The hairs on the back of her neck rose as he took a step closer, and it was all she could do not to back away.

I won't show fear. I won't show fear.

The normally busy road fell silent, and the only sounds were his footsteps as he came closer. She tried not to flinch. "Yes, thank you. I'm fine."

The deep silky smooth voice spoke again. "Do you need a hand?"

His cologne, hauntingly familiar, brought back unwelcome memories. Terror knotted Holly's insides, and for a moment she was afraid she would throw up or pass out. She tried to make out his face, but the shadows prevented it.

Don't let it be him. Please, don't let it be him.

"Really, I'm fine, thank you. I've got it." She tried to keep the panic from her voice and her hands from shaking. He was too close. OK, not really close, but close enough to cause the panic to swell.

“Can I call someone for you? A tow truck or your boyfriend? The streets aren’t safe after dark.”

Shaking her head, Holly pulled the phone from her belt and held it up. “I’ve got a phone. I don’t need any help. Thank you, anyway.”

He stood there for another moment, jerked his head, then turned and went back to his car, muttering “Women!” under his breath. Slamming the door, he started the car and drove away, tyres screeching on the tarmac. As he drove past, she took a long look at his car in order to commit the plate to memory. RY1 KJS. The number one indicated it was personalized, therefore easy to remember.

Holly’s hands covered her face and she fought for breath. *Get a grip, Holly. He’s gone. You’re fine and nothing happened. Now, pull yourself together, fix this car and get to the church on time. You’re chief bridesmaid. Stacey needs you.*

Taking a deep calming breath, she grabbed the tools she needed from the boot, and went around to the front of the car. She strapped on the flashlight headband and slid under the car. Her mechanic’s eye took in the damage. *Good, clean break, won’t take long to fix.* She grabbed the wrench and hummed *Amazing Grace* as she worked, trying to get the stranger out of her mind.

Kyle drove down the road a lot faster than he normally would. He shook his head in exasperation at the attitude of the woman motorist. Why wouldn’t she accept his help? The streets weren’t safe for a woman to be out alone after dark. He didn’t think he looked as though he’d be dangerous and had done his best not to appear at all threatening. He’d learnt the hard way not

to let a woman walk home alone. He'd put work first and paid a price that cost him everything that mattered.

Well almost everything. Nothing would bring Jayne back, he knew that. His breath caught at the thought of his girlfriend. It had been five months, and still every day seemed an eternity without her. Phil continued to push him to move on, but it was obvious he wasn't ready for someone else. Grief was easier. *Maybe one day. Just not yet.* The last thing he wanted was to get involved with someone else, despite his friend's attempts to match-make. What would this chief bridesmaid be like? Was she dark or blonde or a redhead like Jayne had been? His breath hitched again. No, he definitely wasn't ready for someone else.

He learned forward and flicked on the CD, Handel's *Messiah* filling the car. The music started to fill him, slowly calming his mind. A stressed-out best man would not be a good idea.

He pulled into the church car park and locked his car. He hurried around the corner and headed inside the church, his footsteps echoing as he walked down the aisle to where the bridal party stood waiting. He hugged Stacey and shook Phil's hand. "Sorry I'm late."

"It's fine. We're still waiting on Holly."

He glanced around. "Isn't she here yet?"

Stacey shook her head. "No. I'll try ringing her in a minute or so. Thing is, we can't hang on forever. Dad has to be home by eight."

Phil nodded. "That's fine, love. We can always do it without her. She's done this chief bridesmaid thing what, five times already?"

Stacey nodded. "Yeah."

"There you go. She could do it with her eyes shut.

Oh and I booked a table for the four of us at the pizza place in the mall afterwards."

Kyle rolled his eyes at the blatant attempt at match-making. "Why?"

Phil grinned. "Dinner. We'll be hungry after this."

"Speak for yourself. Some of us might not be. I, for one, ate before I left home."

"You would have. Look, I'm not saying you have to ask her out, or even see her again. This is just dinner with the four of us, to celebrate my last night of freedom."

"Oy." Stacey playfully thwapped his arm.

"See, she's beating me up already. Save me."

"Uh huh. You got yourself in that hole. You can dig yourself out."

"Some best man you are." Phil pretended to pout for a minute and then grinned. "So will you come, please?"

Kyle took a deep breath. "OK. If you insist."

"I do."

Kyle's laugh echoed in the quiet church. "It's Stacey you have to say that to, mate, not me."

Stacey looked at her watch. "Maybe something happened or she forgot."

Phil looked at her. "Ring her. If need be, Kyle can go and pick her up."

Kyle shook his head. "You don't give up, do you?"

Phil winked at Stacey as she dialed the phone. "Nope, never, else I wouldn't be standing here right now. Jayne wouldn't want you to become a monk either. She'd want you to be happy."

Kyle took a deep breath. "It's not that I don't appreciate it, because I do, but I'm not ready to find someone new yet. And when I do, I'd rather find her

myself." He shoved his hands into his pockets.

Phil put a hand on Kyle's arm. "It's OK, mate. I understand, and I'm sorry. I'll back off."

"Thanks. I appreciate it."

Stacey looked up. "She's not answering the phone."

"Maybe she's driving. Try again in a minute or two."

Halfway through attaching the new cable, Holly ignored her ringing phone. Two minutes later, it rang again. She slid out from under the car, stood up and pulled the phone from her belt. Twisting a little, so she could see both pavement and road, she took a deep breath. She wasn't about to make a stupid mistake like that again. She'd been there, done that and had the mental and physical scars to prove it.

She raised the phone and answered the call. "Hello..." The phone cut off. Checking the received call list, she redialed and waited for Stacey to pick up. Holly hoped she still had the phone in her hand and hadn't buried it in her purse. Stacey answered the phone on the first ring.

"Hi Stacey, its Holly. You rang?"

Concern and relief filled Stacey's voice. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Why? What's up?"

"The rehearsal should've started fifteen minutes ago. You're not here, and you didn't ring or answer your phone, and I was worried. Did you have an accident? Did someone hurt—?"

Holly cut her off. "No, no, nothing like that. I'm sorry, Stace. I didn't mean to worry you. The clutch snapped, and I was under the car fixing it when you

rang. I hadn't realized the time."

"But you're all right?"

"I'm fine. Don't be such a worry-wart."

"I can't help it. After everything you've—"

"I'm fine." Holly took a deep breath. The less said about that the better.

"Good. It's just we can't wait much longer. Dad has this conference call to the States in half an hour. We need to be done in half that time. I can send Phil to come and get you. Or Kyle can. Where are you?"

Holly glanced at her watch. "I'm sorry, Stacey. There's no way I'll make it in the next twenty minutes. Just go ahead without me. All I have to do is straighten your train, follow you and your Dad up the aisle without getting my heels stuck in the grating, and hold your flowers all at the same time. That'll be a cinch." She paused. "Who's Kyle?"

Stacey's voice got quieter. "You know. I told you about him. Phil's best mate and best man. He's got the wow factor. You'll like him. I know he's dying to meet you."

"He's standing right there, isn't he?"

"Yeah. So who shall I send?"

Typical Stacey. Her answer to everything was finding a man.

Footsteps sounded on the path behind her, and Holly shot a nervous glance over her shoulder. Her heart thudded. She moved around the car and got in, locking the doors. "Don't bother them. And honestly, I'm not worth dying over."

"You could call the breakdown people and get the truck towed to the garage."

"And then be without the car over the weekend until I can fix it on Monday." A couple with a dog

walked past, and Holly fought to keep her voice level. "I don't need a breakdown man, I can fix it myself. I'm almost done; it'll just take longer than the twenty minutes you have left."

"You're stubborn."

"So you keep telling me."

Stacey paused. "You sure you didn't do this deliberately? You know, six times the bridesmaid and never the bride?"

Holly sighed. "Oh hon, you know I'd never do that to you."

"I know, I'm teasing. I'm really glad you're OK. I'll manage without you holding my hand. I'll hold Phil's instead."

"Good, that's how it should be."

"Are you sure you're OK?"

"Yes, for the tenth time, I'm fine."

"You know if you had a boyfriend..."

Holly cut her off. "Stace, I've done without a man for twenty-eight years. I don't need one now."

"Every girl needs a nice bloke to drive them around, hold their hand and rescue them when the car breaks down. You should ask Santa for one. I'm sure he'd oblige."

Holly snorted and rolled her eyes. A man was the last thing she either wanted or needed. "I can see it now. 'Dear Santa. All I want for Christmas is a nice bloke to drive me around, hold my hand and rescue me when the car breaks down. Hugs and kisses, from Holly, age twenty-eight, Headley Cross, England. P.S. sorry it's late.' Yeah, right. I don't think so somehow."

"Add it to your list anyway. You never know."

"He'd tell me to fix my own car. Besides, Christmas is less than a week away. I think Santa is a

little busy for daft additions, right now. Not that I believe in Santa anymore. I grew out of that years ago, right along with the tooth fairy, the Easter bunny, the fairy who lives at the bottom of the garden and happily ever after."

There was a shocked gasp. "You mean the tooth fairy doesn't exist? Now what will I do when the dentist pulls a tooth out?" Stacey laughed. "Seriously Hols, you never know. Add it and see."

Holly scoffed, taking comfort in the fact that God, like Pastor Jack had said in his sermon a couple of weeks back, would give her the strength she needed to remain single. She had a business to run, and men were nowhere on her list of priorities. She could fix cars, replace fuses and wire plugs. She could mow the lawn and do the gardening, plus paint and wallpaper. What did she need a man for? "Stace, if God wanted me married, He'd find me a man."

"Oh? It has nothing to do with you at all, then? Sitting at home on your own won't produce a man, you know. I swear, Hols, you don't have a romantic bone in your body."

"See, now there's your problem, right there. Roman-tic. I reckon Phil turned your head with his manly charms and boyish good looks. Or maybe it's just the bright red truck he drives. You always were a sucker for a man in uniform."

Stacey's silver laughter echoed down the phone. "What you need is to fall head over heels with someone."

"Hmm, why do they call it *falling* in love anyway?"

"No idea, it just is. And you should hit it off with Kyle tomorrow. You guys have a lot in common. He

has the most amazing car with a personalized plate. He calls it his baby. And he's a Christian."

That doesn't make him my new best friend. It makes him a man who goes to church.

Holly rolled her necklace between her fingers. "Yeah well, anyway. Have a great night and I'll see you in the morning. And I'm sorry, again. Love you."

Hanging up, Holly got out of the semi-warm car into the frigid night air. She glared at the vehicle. Of all the times to break down, it had to pick tonight. She put the phone back on her belt and checked the street before sliding back under the car. Kyle must be a fireman like Phil. Right now she didn't need a fireman or rescuing. She just needed to fix the car, then go home and clean this grease off her clothes.

The last thing I need in my life is a man. All I want for Christmas is a nice bloke? Don't think so. All I want for Christmas is not to be afraid anymore. But that would take a miracle, and miracles just don't happen in the twenty-first century.

Kyle let himself into the quiet house as the clock in the hall struck nine. The rehearsal had been fun, despite the chief bridesmaid not turning up. Dinner had also been good, although he left early to allow the others some privacy on their last night. Phil had kept his word and dropped the subject of women. For which Kyle was eternally grateful.

Locking the front door, he headed into the kitchen. A huge black Irish wolfhound almost bowled him over as soon as he stepped through the door. He dropped to his knees, petting the dog. "Hey, Orion. Did you miss me?"

Orion barked, licking Kyle's face.

"Silly thing, aren't you?" Kyle sat there playing with the dog's ears. "You didn't miss much. This woman Phil's been raving about was a total no show." He laughed as Orion started to lick his fingers. "Yes, we had pizza. You can smell it, huh. Are you hungry?"

Orion barked and ran over to the cupboard his food lived in. Kyle pushed himself up and laughed. "I take it that's a yes." He fed the dog, and then washed his hands. He pulled down a glass and moved to the fridge. He poured a large glass of juice, letting the fridge door swing shut on its own. Carrying it to the table, he sat down and pulled open the paper.

Stifling a yawn, he read the headlines. The postal strike was over after talks with the union succeeded in brokering a pay deal. The M25 had reopened after major resurfacing work. The rain in Cumbria had caused severe flooding. There were pictures of the RAF airlifting people to safety from a pub. He flicked through the paper twice, his eyes scanning for one article in particular.

There was nothing about it at all. No news wasn't good news in this case. Why hadn't the police caught him yet?

Kyle's mind strayed back to the woman motorist he stopped to help. Why had she refused? Surely she didn't think *he* was the killer stalking the streets of Headley Cross? He wanted him caught, locked up and the key thrown away as much as the rest of the town. Getting up, he stretched and walked over to the dresser, picking up the photo of Jayne. He ran his fingers over the glass. *Why did he have to take you? I should have cancelled the client and driven you home myself, not let you go out alone.*

Guilt flooded him again and two tears tracked

slowly down his cheeks, before he brushed them away with the back of his hand.

He knew it wasn't his fault, but it didn't stop the feeling he could have done something, anything. He had chosen work over the woman he loved, and the killer had taken Jayne, beaten and murdered her, leaving her torn and battered body on the side of the road as if it were a piece of rubbish dropped by a careless child and blown about by the wind.

Reaching for the phone, he dialed the number he knew off by heart. It was a multiple murder investigation. Someone manned the phones around the clock. The phone answered, and he took a deep breath. "Hello, my name is Kyle Stevens. I was just wondering if there was any development on the murders, yet."

He broke off at the tone of resignation in the officer's voice. "No, Mr. Stevens. There is no news. As soon as there is a development, we'll tell you."

"OK, thank you." Kyle hung up, pulled open the drawer, and took out a bulging file full of news clippings. He carried it to the table and spread it open. His father said his fascination with the case was unhealthy. But he was involved. Personally involved, and it didn't matter what anyone said. Seven photos of women stared up at him. The six who were murdered and the one who got away.

Holly Carmichael.

She had the same first name as the no-show chief bridesmaid.

He ran his finger over Jayne's picture before looking at the photo of this man's first victim. She'd carried an alarm which she'd managed to set off, thus scaring off the attacker, summoning help, and escaping with her life. Badly injured according to the news

article, but she was alive.

Why her? Why her and not Jayne?

The thought sprang into being before he could stop it, followed by more guilt. *Forgive me, I should not wish the way I feel on another family. No doubt she feels guilty for surviving when so many others have not. Be with her, help her recovery. And, Lord, please let the police catch this bloke before he hurts anyone else. No other family should have to go through this.*

He got up and put the file away. "Come on, Orion. Time for walkies. Just around the block tonight, I have an early start in the morning." Tomorrow was going to be a very long and very hard day.

2

The wedding was due to start at midday. By twenty past twelve and no sign of the bride, frayed nerves were beginning to show. Kyle sat with Phil at the top of the aisle, faintly amused at the way his friend kept glancing over his shoulder and shifted in his seat. He gave him a wry smile as Phil asked the same question for the umpteenth time. "She'll be here soon, mate. Maybe the traffic's bad. It's the last Saturday before Christmas. The shoppers will be out in force."

"Or she changed her mind."

"She'll be here."

"Have you got the rings?"

Tempted to pat down all of his pockets and pretend he hadn't, Kyle took pity on his panicking best friend and nodded. "Yes, I have them."

"Good." Phil turned and looked at the door. "Why isn't she here?"

"Because its tradition for the bride to be late. And we both know how that woman of yours loves tradition. Maybe it's payback for seeing her the night before the wedding?"

"Yeah, well, there's tradition, and there's late." Phil looked at his watch, shaking it. "Maybe my watch stopped."

"She'll be here." Kyle smiled. "Want me to go