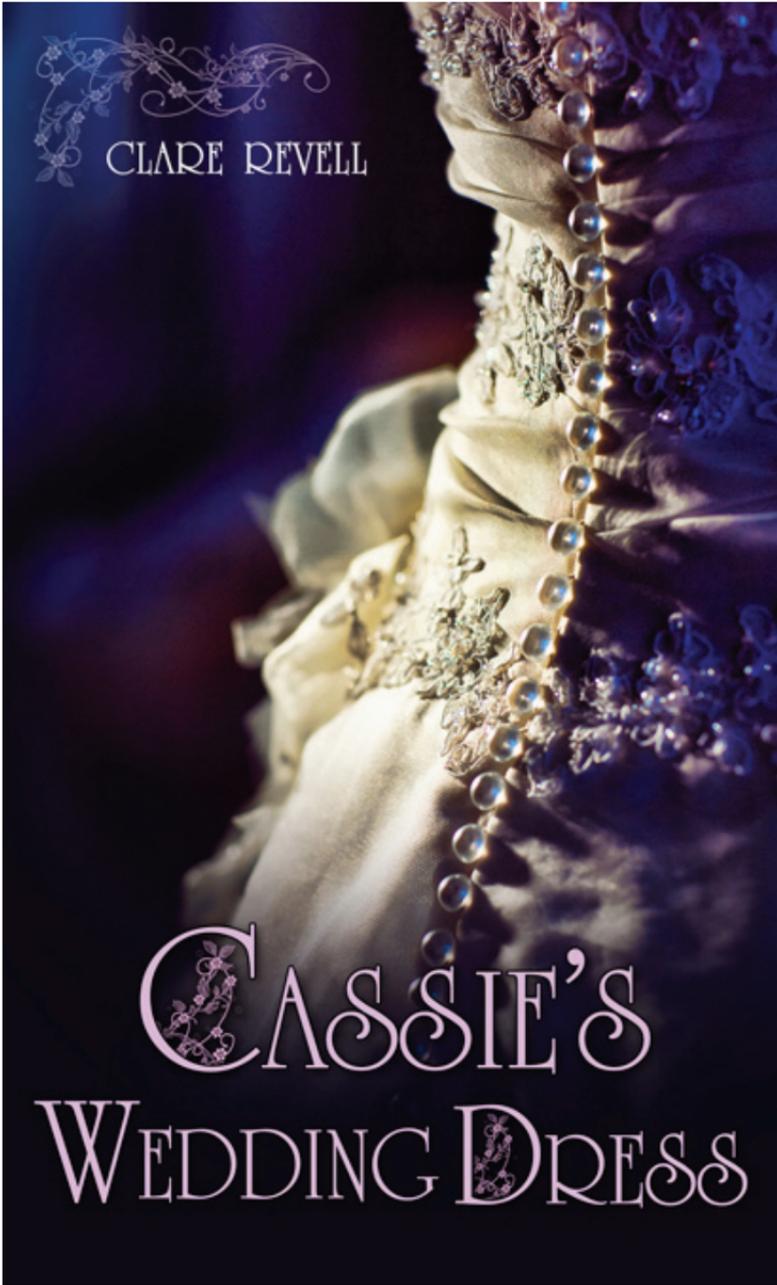




CLARE REVELL

A close-up photograph of a wedding dress, focusing on the bodice and waist area. The dress is light-colored, possibly cream or pale yellow, and is heavily embellished with intricate lace and a long, vertical strand of pearls. The lighting is dramatic, with a strong purple and blue hue, highlighting the textures and details of the fabric and jewelry.

CASSIE'S
WEDDING DRESS

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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.

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Dedication

For Mum, Dad, and Auntie Mo

Praise for Clare Revell

Season For Miracles

Kyle and Holly came to life in this book with so much ease they hardly sounded fictional and so real. The pain and fear that Holly goes through is heartbreaking but I loved that with Kyle anything is possible. This is definitely a book worth reading for it has everything just right for the season: God and hope.
Lena - Happily Ever After Reviews

If you enjoy romantic suspense, you'll love this fast-paced read. Suspense elements kept me turning pages and the well drawn characters touched my heart. I read *Season For Miracles* in one sitting, snow bound and cozy. Delicious. I recommend this book to anybody who enjoys a well written and balanced, inspirational romantic suspense. I can't resist a story that celebrates God's love and its miraculous power.
KM Daughters - author

Saving Christmas

Clare Revell does it again with this beautiful story of hope and redemption. *SAVING CHRISTMAS* packs a lot of story into a limited number of pages, and draws the reader in from the very first line. It's a wonderful respite from the hectic holiday to-do list.
Mary Manners - author

1

As a young man marries a young woman, so will your Builder marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you. ~ Isaiah 62:5

Aintree Race Course, Liverpool

Riding into the gate, Cassie Hinton prayed as she always did at the start of a race. She prayed for courage, for speed, the ability to do her best, but most of all, to bring glory to God through doing so. Her bright yellow jacket sparkled in the warm spring sunlight, the purple satin on her riding hat completing the colors of Tanner's Stables. She leaned forwards and patted the horse's neck. "Just do your best," she told him. "Forget this is the Grand National, and the most important race of our career."

The gate clanged shut behind them, the noise causing Jeremiah's Fancy to buck, threatening to unseat her. "Hey, hey," she said adjusting herself in the saddle. "It's just the start gate. We've done it lots of times."

"Are you okay, Miss Hinton?"

Cassie smiled at the gate handler. "I'm fine. He's just skittish. He'll be fine once we get going."

"All right, miss." He nodded and headed down the line checking the other horses.

She reached down, petting the white blaze that ran from the white star, down the length of the horse's dark nose. "You're fine. Just take it easy, big fella."

Cassie took a deep composing breath in a vain attempt to soothe the usual pre-race butterflies filling her stomach. As the gate opened, butterflies vanished, replaced by exhilaration and adrenaline as Jeremiah's Fancy flew from the gate like a bullet from a gun. Cassie rose in her saddle, leaning over the horse's neck, whispering encouragement.

They leapt the first fence, landing hard but safe on the wet ground. In her peripheral vision she saw someone to her right fall. At the second fence, the horse in front of her fell. She had seconds to react. Pulling up sharply on the reins, she managed to jump both fallen horse and rider, landing safely.

The rest of the fences passed without incident until they reached the big one—the Chair. Other than Becher's Brook, this one fence worried her the most. A prayer of thanks rose from her lips as she landed safely and set off around the course for the second and final time. Seeing the creek approach, Cassie tightened the reins, and pulled into the lead.

Jeremiah's Fancy took off perfectly, but his left back leg clipped the fence, throwing off his timing and he misjudged the landing. He tumbled back down the ditch into the water. Cassie didn't have time to scream or react as she flew sideways, falling with the horse. Pain exploded as she landed face down in the water, the full weight of the horse on her leg and side.

The horse scrambled to his feet, jerking her head from the water as he stood on her leg. Cassie screamed, dimly aware of horses landing above her. It seemed like an eternity before a hand gently cradled her face

and someone else led the frightened horse away.

"My name's Dean. I'm a paramedic. Can you tell me your name?"

"Cassie."

"OK, Cassie. Just keep still for me." Gentle hands moved over her. "Do you know where you are?"

"Yes...In a ditch at Becher's Brook. It hurts..."

"You'll be all right. I'm going to give you something for the pain. We'll have you out of here in a few minutes," Dean told her. Hands fastened a collar around her neck before slowly lifting her onto a board.

"Is Jeremiah's Fancy all right?" she asked, trying to raise her head.

"I need you to lie still for me. The horse is fine. The vet will check him over, but he's up and moving about. Let's just worry about you."

Cassie nodded, closing her eyes. She'd be fixable, horses weren't.

One Year Later – Headley Cross

The spring breeze lifted Cassie's short dark hair and blew it into her eyes as she limped outside her brother's fabric and craft store into the warm sunshine. The bunting flapped in the wind above her as the council workmen hung it from lamp post to lamp post. The whole town—the whole country, was going all out to celebrate the Royal Wedding of Prince Edwin to Lady Rebekah, with every shop front being decorated. She'd promised her brother, Danny, the best store window wedding display in Headley Cross.

She slid a hand through errant curls and tucked them behind her ear. Taking a deep breath, she stuck hands in the pockets of her full, ankle length skirt and cast a critical eye over the window display. She tilted her head and screwed up her nose. *It looks tacky—and the same as all the others. Two hours' work down the drain. Scrap it and start over. Second time's the charm...or is it the third?*

"A penny for your thoughts, Miss Hinton."

Cassie turned, recognizing the voice instantly. Pastor Jack from church. The scrawny ginger kid she'd grown up with had become a fit, attractive man, with broad shoulders and narrow hips—if one could think of pastors in those terms.

Her heart pounded, and a huge lump formed in her throat, threatening to cut off her oxygen supply. "Hello, Pastor. You used to call me Cassie. Miss Hinton makes me sound like my ninety-year-old aunt."

He smiled, his gray-green eyes sparkling, and his now auburn hair framing his face. "And you used to call me Jack, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember." *But that was years ago when we were kids. You were Danny's best mate, and I hung around with you because I had a massive crush on you. A crush she was far from over if her reaction every time she saw him was anything to go by. And now you're my pastor.*

"So how about I call you Cassie and you call me Jack, or Pastor Jack if you'd find that easier. How are you?"

"I'm fine. How are you?"

"I'm doing well. I've finally lost the plaster cast, although I had to promise not to go skiing again."

Cassie smiled. "It must be nice to be able to type sermons two-handed again. Not to mention coping

with an active seven-year-old."

Jack's face lit up at the mention of Lara. "It's been hard, but the Lord gave me the strength I needed to deal with it." He lowered his voice. "Although, according to some sources, I'm rubbish at doing one-handed ponytails."

"So am I."

"I'm glad I'm not the only one. What's the frown for?"

"I'm not happy with the display, but I'm not sure what's wrong with it." Cassie turned her attention to the window, heat rising in her cheeks. "Everyone else has photos of the royal couple and ribbons, silver bells, hearts and balloons. I wanted something more sophisticated but this," —she gestured at the window— "isn't it."

"Maybe tie it in with what Danny sells. After all, the bakers did a wedding cake and the printers did invitations. He owns a haberdashery so fabric or something, perhaps."

Cassie nodded, her mind whirling. "Yeah...thank you."

Jack glanced at his watch. "I'd best be off and get Lara from school. She complains if I'm late. I hope you find a solution to your problem."

"Thank you. Bye." Cassie smiled and turned back to her display, watching Jack's reflection in the glass as he walked away. He'd always been a Godly man, even as a teenager, and despite everything that happened he kept his faith—unlike her. Her life and her faith lay in ruins.

She used to hope he'd ask her out one day, but it never happened. And now it never would. She was down and out before anything even got started.

He was a pastor, and she was his parishioner. A fallen-without-hope-of-redemption parishioner, at that. Strike one.

He was a widower with a small daughter. Strike two.

Her leg—her disability. No man would ever want a one-legged ex-jockey. Strike three.

Not that any of that stopped the huge smile on her face and her heart pounding because he stopped to speak to her. As he disappeared from view she looked at the window. His words echoed in her mind. *Maybe tie it in with what Danny sells...that's it. The chance I've been waiting for.*

Cassie headed back inside, a huge grin stuck on her face.

Danny grinned back at her. "I saw you talking to him, sis. I've never known anyone who could put a smile on your face like Jack can. Even when we were kids, if you were down he'd get you to smile long before I did."

Cassie screwed her nose up and playfully thumped him. "I am so over my schoolgirl crush."

"Are you now?" Danny winked at her. "That's why you're a lovely shade of pink."

"It's a reflection of my shirt," she protested. "All right, I'm not over him. It's not like anything is ever going to happen, is it? He's my pastor and off limits."

"Even pastors are allowed a private life and a family. He did once, you know."

Cassie eased herself onto the chair behind the counter and rubbed her knee. The prosthesis chaffed more than usual. "I know. But it's been seven years since his wife died. Maybe he's decided to stay single."

"Perhaps the right woman never came along. After

all, whoever he marries is going to become Lara's mother, right? So, what did he think of the display?"

"He didn't say much, but then, I don't like it. It's just like all the other displays out there. I want yours to be different and special. He suggested tying it into the theme of the shop and that got me thinking. Do you have any crushed white velvet in stock?"

"Crushed white velvet? No, I don't. Why?"

"I need six meters for your window display." She pulled her sketch pad from under the counter and started outlining a bride and groom.

"If I go to the wholesalers now, can you have whatever you're planning done by Monday? Or closing time on Tuesday at the absolute latest. I don't want to be the only shop in town not decorated before the royal visit in two weeks' time."

"You won't be. Get me the fabric, and it'll be done."

"Will you tell me what you need it for?" He tried to peek at her drawing.

Cassie shook her head, and closed the sketch pad. "No. You'll have to wait and see."

Danny grabbed his keys. "And if it goes horribly wrong, I'm blaming Jack for giving you the idea in the first place."

Cassie looked innocently at him. "I don't know what you mean. Now scoot to the wholesalers and let me work." The door closed. She re-opened the pad and looked down at her work. The groom in the sketch was Jack and the bride was her.

Jack stood in the playground as the children

streamed out of the red brick building. The school hadn't changed since the dark ages when he, Danny, and Cassie attended. Amidst the laughter and chatter of three hundred children, one small redhead with hair all over the place sought him out and flung her arms around him.

"Daddy." Her high pitched scream of delight rang in his ears as he swung her into his arms and hugged her. "You're on time."

"Hello, princess. Of course I'm on time." Jack kissed her. He'd been late precisely once in the last two years, and she'd never let him forget it. "How was your day?"

"It was good." Lara slid her small hand into his larger one as he set her down. "You lost your cast. Does this mean your awm's all better, now?"

"Yes it does."

"Yay—you can do my hair pwoperly now. What's for dinner?"

Jack smiled at her as they began walking home. "Toad in the hole."

"Yummy. Can we have nonion gwavy, cawwots and bwocowi?"

"Sure." He peeked behind her ears and she giggled. "Nope, no green splodges yet."

"Gwandma says I won't turn into bwocowi, Daddy. She says you're silly."

"Does she? Well, at least I won't have to eat you...I like broccoli."

Lara giggled. "Can we have chips?"

"Chips are for Fridays. You can have baked potato or mash."

"Emma's mummy does chips ewewy day."

Jack let that slide as they reached the fabric store.

"What about cheesy mash with a red sauce smiley face on the top instead?"

Lara nodded. She pressed her nose against the window. "Look at the wabbits. Aren't they pwetty?" She pointed to the knitted rabbits in the corner of the display.

"Yes, they are." Jack looked beyond the display at Cassie. She sat behind the counter serving a customer. She glanced his way and smiled, raising a hand in greeting. The smile lit her hazel eyes, color tinting her cheeks. Did she know she blushed every time she saw him?

"Can I have one?"

"Not today, Lara. I have to get tea on and then finish my sermon, before going to the prayer meeting tonight. I'll pick one up tomorrow while you're at school. How does that sound?"

Lara grumbled. "But the lady isn't busy."

"I know, but Daddy is. I'll get one tomorrow."

"All wight." She waved to Cassie and then looked at Jack. "Do they sell mummies in there, too?"

Jack did a double take. "Sell mummies?"

Lara nodded as they started walking again. "Eweveryone in my class has a mummy 'cept me. Emma has two. If you buy me one, then I won't be the odd one out anymowe."

Jack's heart broke again. "You have a mummy."

"She lives in heaven with Jesus, and I never knew her. I want one that lives with us. What about the lady in the shop?"

"You can't buy people, princess. And even if you could, there are rules pastors have to follow."

"Like the no hugging one?"

"Just like the no hugging one. If God wants you to

have a new mummy and me to have a new wife, then He'll bring the right lady along."

Is this You telling me it's time to move on, Lord? If so then please lead me to the right woman. A Godly woman, with a solid relationship with You. One who'll help me in my ministry here, complement me, and love me—but one who will also accept and love Lara, even though she won't be her child.

2

"Cassie, we're going to be late. Hurry up."

Cassie sighed as her mother yelled up the stairs. "Should have stayed at work," she told herself, even though she knew there wasn't room in the store to lay the fabric out, never mind anything else. Pushing upright, she limped to the top of the stairs, pins and needles rippling through her thigh, making her leg even more painful than usual. But that was her fault for kneeling on the floor to cut out the fabric. Her physiotherapist would have a blue fit and go up in smoke if he knew.

A few more pieces to cut out and then she could sit at the table and sew it together. *If only I were making this for me. Yeah, right...like that's ever going to happen. Still at least half my dream will come true by actually making it.*

"Cassie!"

"Yeah, I'm coming." She'd hoped to keep the pain from her face as she limped down the stairs, but could see from the creases on her mother's face that she hadn't.

"What's wrong?" Dorrie asked, a frown crossing her sculptured features. Even at sixty-seven, she had kept the stunning looks of her youth, something Cassie was incredibly jealous over.

"I'm just sore, Mum. I'll take the pain meds before

we go." She wasn't going to take the easy option and use the crutches or the wheelchair. She'd had enough of the pitying looks and being ignored that came with the chair.

"Be sure you do. We'll wait in the car. You've got two minutes."

Feeling as if she were twelve again, Cassie went into the kitchen and took down the box of meds. As tempting as it was to stay home and rest—make that finish cutting the fabric—she had promised to go tonight. Pastor Jack was leading the prayer meeting. She looked at the really strong pain killers and lifted her hand, then shook her head, instead picking up the other bottle. *I've got to ease off them. I don't want to get addicted. Best stick to the over the counter stuff.*

Not wanting to keep her parents waiting, she swallowed the pills quickly with a mouthful of water and headed to the door. The drive to church didn't take long. As always her father pulled up outside the church to drop her off. "Thanks, Dad."

Philip Hinton smiled. "Not a problem, sweetheart."

Cassie got out of the car and took a minute to get her balance before heading into the church hall. Only half full, she still took a seat right at the back, on the end of the row. That way if she needed to leave for whatever reason, she could do so quickly and without a fuss. She glanced up.

Pastor Jack sat there deep in conversation with Pastor Bruce.

Her heart rate increased a little.

Stop it, Cassie. You're not a school-girl and you are not crushing on him. You're a grown woman, he's a grown man—a very handsome grown man, all man—but he

wouldn't look twice at you. He's a widower with a small child. But more than that, he's a pastor. And he couldn't marry you if you and he were the last two people on the face of the planet.

Cassie tried hard to concentrate as the prayer meeting started. The first part, led by Pastor Jack was a continuation of the study on one Peter chapter five. They had reached verses six and seven. *Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's almighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you.*

Her mind immediately went to the picture that still hung above her bed—the one she'd had since a small child. Of a little girl in a red nightgown on her knees, a dog curled up next to her. *He careth for you it read. Yeah right, the voice inside her muttered. If God really cared, He would have healed me and not left me a cripple.*

Cassie pushed upright for the hymn, holding onto the chair in front of her for support. She sang from memory. Easing back down she tried to concentrate as the floor opened for whoever wanted to pray. Pastor Bruce led in prayer, and as she listened phantom pain started in her ankle, twisting through her non-existent calf muscles and slowly rising to stab at her knee.

The pain grew steadily worse, bringing the usual stomach churning nausea with it, until she pushed upright and quietly left the hall. She limped around the mingling area for a few minutes, trying to do what the physiotherapist told her and walk it off. Nothing worked. Tears sprang and she made her way to the stairs, sitting there quietly, her head buried in her hands.

The doctors told her this would stop after a while.