

CLARE REVELL

Time's
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Dedication

For my hero. He may not be an Earl
or be rolling in money, but I love him as much
now as I did nineteen years ago.

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

1

The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you. He will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid, do not be discouraged. ~ Deuteronomy 31:8

It was a dark and stormy night. The wind howled as the masked man stalked towards the near-empty mansion...

Jonni tossed the book to one side as the phone beeped. It was bad enough listening to the wind rattling the windows of the huge manor house, without reading about it, too.

In six weeks when Dawn, and her new husband Gabriel, returned from their honeymoon, Jonni would tell them to buy some new books for their library. With a whole room of floor-to-ceiling shelves, they should have something other than just classics and gothic horror.

Gabriel, being an author, not to mention an earl, should know better.

Jonni shook her head at the thought of her friend being the mistress of this huge house. Dawn was the last person Jonni'd imagine married to an earl—after herself. That only happened in fairy tales.

She picked up the phone as it beeped again. House sitting for them was all well and good, but once Christmas and New Year's were out of the way, she had to find a new job—working for her ex-boyfriend

and ex-boss wasn't an option.

She looked at the screen. This would make it twelve texts, and it wasn't even lunchtime. Jonni let out a deep sigh and shook her head. "Which part of no don't you understand, Bryan? Is it the 'n' or the 'o' or the combining of the two letters you don't quite comprehend?"

Jonni. I'm sorry. I love you. Forgive me. B xxx

"No, you don't. You just can't run that office without me. Love doesn't mean cheating because I refuse to sleep with you."

She started to tap out a reply, then stopped and closed her eyes. *Lord, help me here. Give me the words to get the message across to him this time.* Jonni cancelled the text and rang Bryan's office. If he was in a meeting, his new secretary could take a message.

The call picked up on the second ring. "Mr. Rains's secretary. How may I help you?"

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Rains, please. It's Miss Peterson."

"One moment, I'll put you through."

Almost immediately, Bryan's voice echoed in her ear.

"Jonni, baby. Thanks for calling back. You must be having a busy vacation. I've left a dozen messages today."

The low, husky tone that oozed sensuality now twisted her stomach, as much as it had once made it do cartwheels. Along with his charm and good looks, and—*no*. She stopped herself short. He was a liar and she was best out of it. She could see the smirk on his face as he spoke. He thought he'd won because she called.

"Mr. Rains. I didn't resign so you could bug me by

text and phone. Any relationship you and I had is over. I shall consider any further communication from you as harassment and treat it accordingly. Goodbye.”

As if a huge weight had been lifted from her, Jonni hung up and deleted his name and number. Something she should have done days ago. She took a deep breath, the warm yeasty smell of baking...the bread.

Jumping up, she hurried to the kitchen, not wanting it to burn. She grabbed the oven gloves and took the baking tray out. She tapped the loaf, smiling at the hollow sound, before placing it onto a cooling rack.

Now all she had to do was run into the village for some cheese and butter, and tea was done. Maybe the walk would encourage her non-existent appetite to return.

Heading upstairs past the huge Christmas tree that dominated the hall, Jonni ran her fingers along the exquisitely carved oak banisters. She pushed open her bedroom door and crossed the room, clicking in exasperation as she tripped over the loose floorboard.

One of these days someone was going to fall over properly and hurt themselves. Knowing her luck, it'd be her. *Something else to leave in the note for Gabriel.* She pulled on her coat and headed back downstairs.

She'd hoped for snow for Christmas, but frost was fine. No matter what the weather, it always showcased God's creation to the full. She wrapped a scarf around her neck and pulled a hat over her ears.

Humming *Silent Night*, Jonni stepped into the bitter cold and shut the front door, catching a last glimpse of the high-ceilinged hallway, magnificent wooden staircase, and checkered floor. She ran down the stone steps and turned to look at Southby—the

ancestral home of the Earl of Elton. It was breathtaking. The sloping roof, long wings around the central courtyard and huge shuttered windows—even in five days, she'd not explored a fraction of it, yet.

Jonni walked along the half mile driveway to the main road. She'd give her right arm to see this house in its heyday. It must have been amazing with its servants, and lord and lady in their fantastic clothes, holding parties and living in a way she couldn't even imagine. Especially at Christmas, singing carols around the piano and the tree alight with candles in the background.

She paused as she reached the oaks standing tall and proud by the entrance to the estate. The bark was rough and gnarly under her hands as she touched it. If this tree could talk, what stories it could tell. Jonni ran her fingers over the carved symbol on the tree trunk. The wood felt old under her fingers, yet love emanated from the carving. A heart encircling two sets of initials, ST and JP. She wondered who they were and whether JP, whose initials matched her own, had done the engraving, or stood and watched while ST did them.

She headed left onto the main road, praying as she walked.

Show me what You want me to do, Lord. Right now, things are confused and I hurt. Why did Bryan treat me like that? Is it because I didn't give him what he wanted? Or is it my fault for dating my boss? Lord, above everything else, I am Yours, and I know You have a reason for this. I trust in what it says in Romans eight, twenty-eight. Right now, I can't see the good in this, but I know You can. Give me the patience to wait until You make things clear to me.

Reaching the pedestrian crossing, Jonni pressed the button to change the lights. She glanced down at

the ancient milestone, standing next to the lamp post. It looked as though it had been there at least two hundred years. *What had Headley Cross looked like, then?*

The lights changed and the traffic stopped. As the neon-green walking man came on to indicate she could safely cross the road, Jonni rested her hand on the top of the milestone. *Bet you could tell a tale or two if you could talk.*

Jonni stepped off the pavement and onto the road.

From out of nowhere, came a shout and a rush of hooves. Something hit her hard and she cried out. She raised a hand to her head, stumbling forward for an instant, before an invisible force slammed her to the ground. She tried to shield herself from the four hooves dancing around her. Voices echoed. A pair of boots entered her field of vision before her eyes closed and blackness surrounded her.

The carriage swerved violently, tossing two of its four occupants to the floor. Then it shook and stopped. The horses neighed and stomped. Lord Sebastian Tyler, third Earl of Elton, helped to right his mother and sister. "Are you hurt?"

His sister, Lady Louisa, shook her head. "We're fine."

Sebastian stuck his head out the carriage window, and directed the full force of his irritation in the direction of his driver. "What is the trouble this time, Tarrant? Haven't you wasted enough time as it is?"

Not getting a response, he glanced at Hattie, his sister's maidservant. "Go and see what the problem is."

"Aye, Sir." Hattie jumped down and shut the door behind her.

Keeping a close eye on her, Sebastian expected her to check and come straight back. When she did not, he sighed. *If you want something done, do it yourself, Sebastian.* He turned to his sister and mother, and pulled on his top hat. "I'll be right back."

His mother, Countess Dowager Maud Tyler, sighed in annoyance. "This is the fifth delay since leaving town, Sebastian. We will never get home at this rate, and there is plenty to do to organize the Christmas feast. Especially with guests coming."

"We have plenty of time." Sebastian jumped out of the carriage, and moved swiftly to the group of servants standing by the horses. "What is the hold-up this time? Has one of them thrown a shoe?"

"No, Sir. There's been an accident." His valet, John moved out of the way.

Sebastian caught sight of the bloodied and battered figure on the ground. Hiding his shock and dismay, he knelt beside the girl. She had no shoes and wore precious little in the way of clothes under her...was that a frock coat over men's clothing?

Who is she, Lord? How did she end up under my carriage? The road is clearly visible in both directions. Is this a deliberate attempt to take her life?

He looked up. "What happened?"

Tarrant's voice shook. "She just appeared under the front horses, Sir. I couldn't stop. By the time I did, it was too late."

Hattie looked up. "She's no' dead, bur she's 'urt bad."

Sebastian knew he had to get the woman seen by a doctor. He wasn't going to be responsible for her death

and the December air made it too cold to tarry on the road.

"John, put her in the carriage and then run into the village for the doctor." He paused, averting his gaze from the girl's scantily clad figure. "Find something to wrap her in, first. Hattie, when we get home I want you to put her to bed in the guest chamber. Find her a nightgown of Mary's from the box in the West Wing storeroom."

"Aye, Sir."

John pulled down the blanket from the driver's seat and wrapped the young woman in it, then carried her around the horses to the carriage door.

Sebastian followed. "Lay her carefully, John. We don't want to hurt her any more than she already is."

Countess Maud raised an eyebrow. "Sebastian, what is the meaning of this?"

"She fell under the horses. John is going for the doctor."

"We can't just take her back to Southby with us. You don't know what diseases she might have. Think of the expense." His mother's tone became even more indignant than usual. He hadn't thought that possible.

Sebastian didn't need this, not today, but apparently, God didn't agree. "We can't just leave her to die, either, Ma'am. It was my team that hurt her. It's my responsibility to make sure she is all right."

Ignoring his mother's sigh, Sebastian climbed back into the carriage and they resumed their journey. It wasn't long before his mother recommenced her favorite topic.

"You really should think about remarrying, Sebastian."

He tuned her out, knowing what she was going to

say. She spent every spare minute either lecturing him, or setting him up with yet another girl from a titled family.

Lord, if only she knew how weary I am of the whole charade, never mind the effort of having to be polite to yet another girl who is only interested in playing the piano, going shopping, and flirting outrageously with every man she sees, in the hope of gaining a husband. Preferably, a rich husband who will give her a high position in society, and thereby the freedom to do whatsoever she pleases with her time.

Sebastian pushed a hand through his hair. He looked out the window, watching the fields go by. *I've been through one arranged marriage, Lord. You know how that worked out. Even though she was neither sweet-tempered nor pretty, she was my wife and I honored her as I ought to, Lord, but I can't do it again.*

His thoughts turned to his daughter. Although he had no son to inherit the earldom, Alexandrina had, indeed, made all the heartache in his marriage worthwhile.

Perhaps Mother is right. I need to marry and produce a male heir and as soon as I find someone suitable, I will. However, another flighty, hypocritical cold wife is not on the agenda any time soon. This time, Lord, we chose her together, and please, a woman of strong constitution. I could not endure another miscarriage.

Of the five pregnancies in his eight-year marriage, four had not survived until birth.

His gaze fell on the young woman lying motionless across the seat. The blanket had fallen open, exposing far more flesh through her torn clothing than was decent. He hadn't even seen that much of his wife in all their years of marriage. In fact, he couldn't

remember seeing Mary unclothed, at all.

He leaned over and pulled the blanket closed. *Who are you and what are you doing under my carriage?*

Lord, restore this situation fast. With quarter day and the Christmas feast coming up, I don't have the time to deal with...Sebastian averted his gaze...with a woman as distracting as she.

2

No sooner had the carriage pulled up outside the manor, Sebastian leapt out. He gently lifted the young stranger into his arms and strode up the stone steps two at a time into the hall, vaguely aware of his mother and sister following behind. His boots clattered on the checkered marble floor. He glanced at the butler. "Hudson, I want to be informed the instant the doctor arrives and send Tarrant to the library when he's finished with the horses. Hattie will see to changing this young lady." He appealed to his younger sister as an afterthought. "You don't mind me borrowing your maid?"

Louisa shook her head. She pulled off her gloves and dropped them on the tray along with her poke bonnet. "Of course not, Sebastian, although if you hadn't insisted on dismissing Fanny, you would have maids a-plenty."

"I don't need a lady's maid. And before you say anything, I won't have need for one any time soon."

A wry smile crossed Louisa's face as she plucked the hat from his head. "I have no doubt of that, brother dearest, but never say never. The Lord may surprise you with a wife, yet. I will help Hattie."

"Thank you." He headed up the stairs, pausing as his mother's voice floated after him.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Sebastian.

She could be carrying all manner of diseases. You can tell from her clothes, or lack of them, she is lower-class. She will only be after one thing. Most women of her station are."

I heard you the first time. And what station would that be?

"She will not be getting it here, of that, I can assure you." He nodded and headed up the stairs, towards the guest chambers. He laid the woman on the bed as the maid and Louisa entered, and then retreated to the hallway.

Leaning against the wall, he could hear the rustle of fabric as the two women changed the unconscious girl. He smiled as they commented on her lack of underwear and the strange fastenings. All fastenings on women's undergarments were strange and far too complex, in his opinion—hence the need for a lady's maid.

"There's a name on her cross, Lady Louisa. Does thee suppose it's 'ers?"

"Perhaps, although I don't know how to pronounce it. These trousers look like something my brother would wear."

Sebastian shook his head, tired of the speculation. He headed below-stairs and made his way across the checkered marble floor to the library. He moved to the decanter and poured a drink, then leaned against the sideboard, gazing at the book-lined walls. There were so many empty spaces despite the huge collection. Something he needed to rectify as soon as he could. A knock at the door dragged his thoughts back to the present. "Enter."

Tarrant came in, his cap in his hand. "You wanted to see me, Sir?"

Sebastian nodded. He sat down and stretched his long legs out in front of him. "I need to know exactly what happened on the road. Why didn't you see the woman?"

"She just...appeared."

"Out of thin air?" He stared at Tarrant in sheer disbelief.

"Yes, Sir. As crazed as it sounds, one minute the road was clear. I could see in both directions and there was no one there. The next she was stepping off the road right in front of the carriage."

"Hmmm. Were you drinking whilst we were in town?"

"No, Sir. I haven't touched a drop since the incident three weeks ago."

Sebastian shook his head. Tarrant had almost killed them while driving when he was intoxicated, and he could refer to it as just an 'incident'? He was lucky he still had a position here. "Very well. You may go."

"Sir."

Sebastian followed the coachman into the hallway, just as the doctor arrived. Sebastian spoke to him briefly, and then went back into the library and sat at his desk. Pulling his journal across he started to write an account of the accident. He wasn't going to be caught out by lawyers if it could be avoided.

Journal entry done, Sebastian got up and paced. The longer the doctor took, the more the visit would cost him. His blood pressure rose as he paced.

Finally, Hudson escorted the doctor into the library.

Sebastian clenched his hands behind his back. "Well, doctor?"

"The young woman appears to have no broken bones, just cuts and bruises. Her ankle is rather swollen and she took a bang to the head, which would most likely be the reason she hasn't woken. She was lucky. I left instructions with Lady Louisa and will be back in the morning, at some point. If you need me before then, do not hesitate to send for me."

"Of course." *Of course...but at what rate for during the night?* He escorted the doctor to the door. "Thank you for coming."

"My pleasure, Lord Tyler." The doctor nodded and put his hat on as he made his way down the steps.

Sebastian shut the door. "Hudson, I want one of the female servants to remain with the woman at all times. I am to be told the instant she is awake. As is Lady Louisa. Day, or night, is that understood?"

Hudson nodded. "Yes, Sir."

"Good. Now I am going over to the estate office while there is still some daylight left. I have lost enough time today, as it is."

Jonni opened her eyes, just as the light of the setting sun peeped through the edge of the curtains. Her head throbbed and she raised a hand, rubbing gently. She winced at the size of the substantial lump her fingertips found. She glanced upwards, taking in the wad of heavy curtains suspended about seven feet above the bed.

Where am I?

She glanced down and saw plain white sheets and thick heavy blankets covering her and closed her eyes again. *This isn't my bed...at least I don't think so.* She