

HAVE CHRISTMAS CARD WILL TRAVE

By Susanne Marie Knight

A Partridge In A Pear Tree?

Christmas magic. Meredith Wyatt didn't believe in it. The Christmas season was just like any other time of year, except for the frenetic shopping mania that wouldn't end until December 25... to be resumed on the twenty-sixth for after-holiday sales.

Christmas. Shopping. Presents. Bah! Humbug.

What really bothered her was that she had no family to celebrate Christmas with. No parents, no husband, no pitter-patter of little feet. Only Meredith, alone in an apartment on the tenth floor of a thirty-story building. One tenant times eighteen per floor, times thirty floors, times five buildings per block, times who knew how many blocks in this big city? Millions of people here, and yet no one to exchange yuletide greetings with.

She had to be fair, though. It wasn't the millions of people who were at fault. It was her. She suffered from 'poor-little-ol'-me' syndrome. A trickle of a tear coursed down her cheek.

The tentative knock at the door startled her. Who could that be? Quickly checking her image in a mirror to make sure her long hair was presentable and her mascara hadn't run, she dashed to the door and opened it.

"Sorry to bother you." Her neighbor from three doors down--she called him Mr. Hunk: manly, mouthwatering,... and married--stood in the hallway with a white envelope in his hand. "Mailman got your mail mixed in with ours."

"Thank you." When Meredith took the envelope, their fingers touched and a quiver of pleasure jolted through her.

He gave her an impersonal smile, then walked down the hall.

Sighing, Meredith closed the door. She shuffled her feet into the living room, slumped down on the couch, then turned her attention to the white envelope. Other than a typed label with her address and the first class stamp, there was nothing to identify the person.

She opened the envelope. It was a Christmas card. On the front was a picture of a pear tree. Perched on one of the branches was a grey and brown bird--obviously a partridge to illustrate the Christmas song. Inside the card was a generic message addressed to no one in particular. Nor was there any indication of who the sender was. It was a mystery--an anonymous greeting from an anonymous person.

How weird. Maybe the mailman had noticed apartment dweller 1017's usually empty box, and taken pity on apartment dweller 1017 by slipping in a card so she wouldn't feel lonely.

If he had, he'd put it in the wrong mailbox. And if the mailman really was responsible for the card, he needn't have bothered. She still felt lonely.

She placed the card atop her standard size TV, which then made it the only Christmas ornamentation in the room. She sighed again.

Tonight, two weeks before Christmas, Meredith prepared for bed the same as any other night. She laid out her clothes for work tomorrow, put on a long flannel nightgown, brushed her teeth, and turned out the light.

She did one thing that was different, however. She walked into the living room, picked up the card, and put it next to her bed on the nightstand.

"Merry Christmas," the front of the card read.

Sure. Right. Meredith pulled the covers up by her head and went to sleep.



Meredith woke up to an atrocious racket; a high-pitched, screeching, scratching noise assaulted her ears. Then came the realization that stabbed at her body. Holy geez, she was half-frozen!

“What in the world?” She sat up and found she was no longer in her bed. Not only that, she was no longer in her room, or even inside a building.

Surrounding her were barren trees denuded by winter. It was dark, so dark that she couldn't see beyond the tree barrier. She'd only lived in Boston a few months, but even she knew there was always a beacon of light shining somewhere. A person couldn't escape the light... unless there was a blackout.

Just where in the world *was* she? She huddled her arms and knees close to her chest, under the ankle-length flannel nightgown, desperately trying to conserve heat.

Tears, always an eye blink away, spilled down onto her cheeks. “It's not fair.” She wiped her face on the sleeve of her nightgown. “It's just not fair! Everyone I'd ever loved is gone, stolen from me, and now my apartment's gone, too?”

The screeching came again. There, perched on a tree branch, was a grey and brown bird, very similar to the one on her lone Christmas card. Its shape was silhouetted against the night sky.

Meredith's teeth chattered as she laughed a bit hysterically. “You and I obviously don't belong here, little friend. I hate to break the news to you, but that sure doesn't look like a pear tree to me.”

The bird--maybe it really was a partridge--cocked its head at her. Then it ruffled its rounded wings and flew off into the darkness.

And now she really was alone. She cupped her hands to her mouth and blew into them, trying to warm herself. It didn't matter if she was hallucinating, or if she'd gone over the edge. If she didn't get out of the cold soon, she would freeze up completely.

When she heard a cry of “Tallyho,” she resigned herself to the inevitable. Maybe she was already dead.

“I assure you, I shot it, Jeffrey.” An excited male voice was carried on the wind. “’Tis fallen in the woods beyond this hill. Tallyho!”

Another voice, deeper, more resigned, followed. “We are not on a fox hunt, William. Indeed, it grows much too late. Let us return--”

“I promised Mater a bird for dinner, and I shan’t disappoint her.”

She heard rustling noises, or then again, maybe not. She shivered so hard her eardrums vibrated.

“Yes! I see a feather. And another. It must be just behind this tree.... Hello! What do we have here?”

Meredith sensed someone kneeling beside her. She could barely open her eyes to look at him. One part of her was naturally curious, but the other part couldn’t give a hoot. Consciousness slipped away at an alarming rate.

This person shook her by the shoulder. “Do wake up, dear girl. Wake up. What the deuce are you doing out in the woods?”

She managed to open her eyes. A young man with wide blue eyes was staring at her. But she couldn’t answer; she could only yawn.

“The devil!” The second voice came closer, but she didn’t bother to open her eyes. “This baggage is near frozen.”

She felt her hands being rubbed, and then her feet. Something was thrown over her shoulders, and her arms were threaded through the sleeves. When the man picked her up, her head lolled against him. She didn’t mind, nor did she care. Why should she? He was warm and he would take her someplace safe. The sensation of his heart beating under her ear further soothed her. She smiled.

“I say, old man, she is a beauty! I found her. Let me carry her.” The first man, William, protested.

The other one, Jeffrey, sighed. She even felt his breath rush past her cheek, then she was removed from the comfort of his chest and held out in the air. “If you

wish.”

There was a moment of hesitation. “No, no. You go ahead. My shoulder is acting up today.”

A moment later, she rested back in her cozy spot, held by Jeffrey’s strong arms.

He walked a short distance, then held her closer as he got atop something. From the snorts and the high-pitched whinny, she knew she was being carried on horseback.

The man arranged her next to him, tucking in the loose material of her nightgown. “Blast! This woman is colder than a corpse.” He wrapped something warm and soft around her feet. “I finally have a good use for Lady Goodstone’s scarf.”

Another horse trotted alongside the one she was on. “The lady won’t like it that you used her gift on another woman’s feet.”

“Lady Goodstone will never know. Come, William. We will deposit our unwanted visitor with the housekeeper, then change for dinner. Mrs. Potters can set the woman up with one of the maids.”

The rumble of horses’ hooves pounding the dirt was a pleasant way to fall asleep, even if Meredith could hardly feel a thing other than the rocking sensation from the horse’s speedy gait. Before she completely passed out, she heard one last comment.

“Not in the servants’ quarters, Jeffrey, but in a guest room. You mustn’t forget this mystery girl is mine, and I do plan to keep her. I daresay once she is warm, she will be very grateful. Very grateful, indeed.”



Meredith woke up in a big room, in a big bed, with a deliciously warm, heavy comforter blanketing her entire body. She knew exactly where she wasn't--her own apartment. But where she was, other than in a guest room in a house that contained a housekeeper, and two men named Jeffrey and William, remained a mystery.

"Mystery girl"--that was what William, the blue-eyed man had called her.

Ha. There was nothing mysterious about her, except of course, the fact that she inexplicably found herself in the middle of a bizarre figment of her imagination.

Meredith got out of bed and examined her toes, now tinged a pale shade of blue. The man called William had gotten one thing right: she *was* grateful to him. Grateful to be out of the cold.

What woman could keep from exploring strange, lavish surroundings? Certainly not her. She spent the next few minutes looking through glamorous gowns stashed inside a mahogany wardrobe. She pulled out a lovely, long sleeved gown and held it up against her.

There's something to be said for being out of your mind. At least in this delusion, I'll be well turned-out.

She couldn't resist; she took off her flannel nightgown, and put on the light blue gown. The neckline was low, cut to reveal the swell of her breasts, while the waistline started high, right under her bosom. Rummaging through drawers, she found white slippers and a Paisley shawl edged with satin ribbon. She raided a jewelry box for a double strand of pearls. The necklace's huge showcase pearl now nestled in her cleavage.

Meredith posed in front of a full-length mirror and approved of her image. Ho! Dressing up for Christmas parties had never been like this! Too bad she had nothing on underneath the fine satin gown. But since this was only...what, a dream created by a troubled mind? A fantasy generated by holiday depression? In any case, going *au natural* didn't matter.

Quickly pinning her long hair up to complete the elegant look, she hurried out into the hallway to search for her reluctant rescuers. Who knew, her adventure might end up to be like Cinderella's--having a time limit.

This place is impressive. She nodded in appreciation as she walked past richly colored oil canvases depicting people and places of long ago. Paintings by grand masters like Gainsborough, Fragonard, Vermeer, and many more she couldn't identify lined the walls. She glided by golden doors too numerous to count and a majestic, marble staircase. Wherever she was, real or imagined, was infinitely better than her empty apartment. Empty of family, friends, and love.

She heard music trickling out from overlarge double doors on the main floor. A lively, old-fashioned sort of piano tune beckoned to her and challenged her to crash the party. With her hand on the doorknob, she hesitated.

Oh, why not? What do I have to lose? After all, it's not like whoever's inside will kick me out into the cold. Been there, done that.

She opened the door, stepped inside, and heard a sour chord.

"Dear me!" The young woman at the harpsichord raised her hands to her face and stared at Meredith.

At the exclamation, everyone else in the room turned to avidly gape at the intruder. Meredith counted twelve partygoers, ranging in age from about twenty to sixty, or so. Dressed in *Pride and Prejudice*-type costumes, six men and five women either sat on couches or danced in the middle of the enormous room.

Meredith took particular note of the younger men. Who was William and who was Jeffrey? She had no idea so she inhaled deeply, then walked toward the dancers.

"Please forgive my intrusion." She halted equidistant from all three younger men. "I need to thank William and Jeffrey for rescuing me from the cold. I'm very grateful."

"Dash it all, here is the very lady Jeffrey and I were gabbing about. The mystery lady we found out in the north woods." A slender man with a profusion of

blonde curls and dancing blue eyes approached her and took her hand. “By Jupiter, dear girl. We did not expect to see you until morning. I am delighted you could join us.”

So this was William, the one with the injured shoulder. She glanced at the other men to figure out who had the comfortable chest but neither of the younger men could boast of an outstanding breadth of shoulders nor powerful biceps.

She shook William's hand, but then was unable to free herself from his grasp.

“I shall introduce you around, my dear girl.” With a proprietary air, he patted her hand. “I may not have brought home a partridge, but by gad, you have fine feathers, indeed.”

He introduced her to the dancers, lords and ladies all. The odd thing was, he didn't seem to catch on that introductions worked both ways. As soon as she opened her mouth to set the record straight about her name, he escorted her to the older group situated on the couches.

“This is Lord and Lady Amhurst.” William gave Meredith a wink. “They much prefer my older brother, Jeffrey Larson. And I am William Larson, the prodigal son, don't you know.”

A regally dressed woman with pure silver hair tut-tutted, then swatted William with a fan. “Nonsense, William. Utter nonsense. Amhurst and I dote on you, indeed we do, don't we, Amhurst?”

“Yes, yes, of course we do. Splendid chap.” Lord Amhurst tottered over to the sidebar, picked up a bottle, and tottered back to refill everyone's glasses. By the time he got to his own, the bottle was empty. “Devil take it, where is Tillsbury? Is he not aware that the brandy is gone? Am I to die of thirst? Did the blasted butler travel to France for another bottle, hey?”

While his guests laughed at the joke, Meredith shook her head. What a decidedly mad tea party!

Fortunately, the butler arrived with more refreshments, putting Lord Amhurst

in a better frame of mind. “You young folks dance. Dance, I say. Nothing like watching the pitter-patter of little feet.”

Didn't the pitter-patter of little feet refer to babies? She shrugged. Maybe the man got his metaphors mixed up.

William nodded to the musician, Cousin Kitty, to start up the music. He placed his arm around Meredith's waist. “Come, dear girl. Let us make merry. Wouldn't want to disappoint the old boy, now would we?”

Since the dance turned out to be a waltz--something she knew how to do--Meredith went along with him. She smiled up at her partner and, even though this couldn't possibly be real, she felt content for the first time in months.

“You don't know my name,” she gently scolded.

“I beg to differ. I most certainly do,” he rejoined as he moved in time with the music. “It is Wood Nymph, is it not? A delicious dryad presiding over the forests at Amhurst Hall. I have known you all my life, dear girl. Your sweet fragrance caresses me every time I wander about the woods.”

She laughed. He *did* speak utter nonsense. “Close. I'm Meredith Wyatt.”

“Meredith.” He leaned into her ear, and whispered, “I do like your name. Merry Meredith--a diamond of the first water. You feel like heaven in my arms!”

Wow, this guy could lay it on thick. But maybe that was what she needed, to be wined and dined and flattered as if she were the queen of the prom.

Enjoying the moves of the waltz as they swayed, she sighed. She could get used to being the center of the universe.

Someone tapped William on the shoulder. “May I cut in?”

Meredith glanced up at the newcomer and gulped down hard. What a dreamboat! Tall, broad shoulders, deep brown eyes to die for, and dark, disheveled hair. This man had to have been Jeffrey, the one who carried her.

“Rot,” William complained. “Do you have to?”

“Yes, I do.” Jeffrey turned his stern gaze on her as if asking her permission.

She nodded, and willed her heart to slow its beating. Goodness, she hadn't

turned into liquid goo at the sight of a man since her fiancé. But then again, look how that had turned out.

“Well then, if you must.” William released her to his brother, then gave her another wink. “After this dance, Merry is mine, old man.”

Jeffrey took her in his arms. To her surprise, she almost melted against him. His masculine scent tormented her in a thousand different ways. Everything peaked, in a manner of speaking. Not daring to look up into his face, she studied the jeweled pin in his white cravat.

“Merry? Is that your name?” He expertly maneuvered her about the parquet floor.

She unstuck her tongue from the roof of her mouth. “No, I’m Meredith. Meredith Wyatt. And you are Jeffrey...?”

“Lord Burnett,” was his ungracious reply. “So how did you arrive on our lands, dressed in your night clothes, Miss Wyatt? If my brother had not found you, you surely would have expired due to exposure.”

He was being very nosy for a hallucination, not to mention haughty. Peering over his shoulder, she stared out at the other occupants of the room. “It’s a mystery, Lord Burnett. I have no idea. But I’m very grateful to you and...your brother.”

“How grateful are you, Miss Wyatt?” He executed a turn that caused her to bump into him.

Hot fire poured into her veins, and her breasts tingled even more. But dream or not, she had to ignore her feelings. This man was insinuating that she wasn’t a lady. After all, he had wanted to deposit her in the servants’ quarters.

She stiffened and gave him a tight little smile. “Very grateful, Lord Burnett. You and your brother are such gentlemen.”

Hopefully that remark would remind him to behave accordingly.

When the waltz ended, she took a step away from him. Then she noticed another new arrival, a woman a little older than the other young ladies. The

woman had more poise, more polish. And she glared daggers of hate at Meredith. Meredith shivered.

“Are you cold, Miss Wyatt?”

“No, Lord Burnett. Why do you ask?”

The smile on his handsome face could only be described as a smirk. He dropped his gaze to her chest. “Because it looks as if you might be cold.”

She glanced down... and died. Her nipples had hardened and the soft satin material of her gown showed every revealing curve.

Thank goodness she'd decided to wear a shawl. She quickly arranged the wrap over her traitorous breasts. “I'm fine. Thank you for your concern.”

The music started up again, giving her a perfect out. “If you'll excuse me, Lord Burnett. I'm sure you want to dance with your wife.”

She tried to leave, but he grabbed her by the upper arm, effectively stopping her. “You are in error, Miss Wyatt. I do not have a wife.”

“No? Then I wonder why that woman with the purple gown is glowering at me.” She tried to escape his grip, but he was far too strong.

“Lady Goodstone?” He looked over at the woman, who then reddened and returned her attention to her dance partner. “Lady Goodstone is a recent widow. Her somber appearance must be due to her unhappy circumstances, Miss Wyatt. Nothing more.”

Right. And if Jeffrey believed that, he was a deluded fool.

With two goblets in hand, William approached, wearing an admiring smile. “There you are, my Merry Wood Nymph. Where have you been all my life? Let us leave this dull old dog to languish with these other beauties. Come, enjoy a glass of champagne with me.”

“Certainly.” Meredith returned William's bright smile and followed him over to an arrangement of chairs near one of the draped windows.

She took the goblet, sat in the chair, and listened to William's amusing gibberish. Either the champagne was more potent than what she was used to, or

she was more tired than she realized, for after a while, her eyelids drooped. Despite her urging, there was no way she could keep them open.

Conversations droned around her. One in particular seemed really close by. She struggled to catch the words.

“Dashed good trade for the partridge, don’t you think?” one voice asked.

“A chubby bird for a ladybird? This is a disgrace. It will not do,” said the other in disapproving tones.

She couldn’t fight sleep any longer. She lost consciousness.

The next thing she knew, she was snuggled between warm sheets. As usual, the material of her flannel nightgown bunched together around her hips. She stretched and looked around the room. She was in her own bed. The beginnings of a new day crept through the bottom of her familiar draperies. From outside, the squeal of brakes from early morning traffic told her that her life was once again on track. When she rolled onto her side, she saw the Christmas card decorating her nightstand.

She scratched her head. *I’m back? That really was just a dream?*

Her alarm clock buzzed as it was supposed to at six thirty in the morning.

Guess that’s my answer. Meredith sighed, but oddly enough, she didn’t feel as down as she had last night. She also experienced an added bonus. As she readied for work, a certain pair of very expressive eyes dominated her thoughts.

