

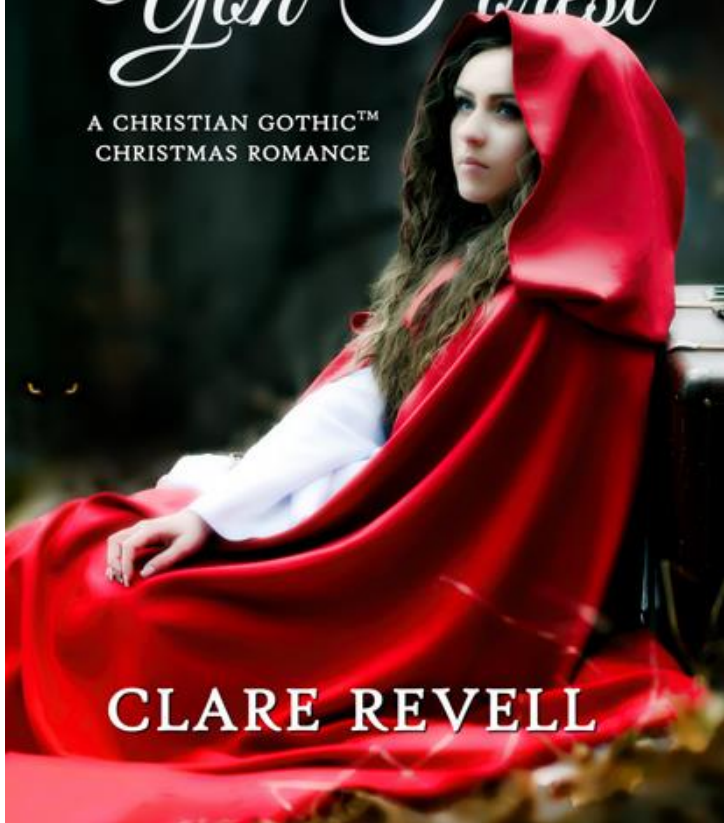
THERE'S SOMETHING WICKED IN THE WOODS.
CHRISTMAS MAY NEVER COME AGAIN.

*Down in
Yon Forest*



A CHRISTIAN GOTHIC™
CHRISTMAS ROMANCE

CLARE REVELL



Down in Yon
Forest

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.

Down in Yon Forest

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

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Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2016

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-963-8

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

For everyone who believes in the power of love and
because no one is ever too old for a good old fashioned
fairytale.

What People are Saying

A Mummy for Christmas ~ Once again, Clare Revell has managed to tie up a Christmas romance with tinsel, silver and gold glitter, and a big, red bow! I love her writing, and *A Mummy for Christmas* does not disappoint. This charming novella perfectly demonstrates that God uses every circumstance, every joy, every laugh--and every heartache--to work for His good. I'm delighted to give this read an enthusiastic two thumbs up!! ~Marianne Evans

Christmas Eva ~ Do you want a good cry? Do you want a happily ever after ending? Do you want a story that makes you feel that true love is worth fighting for and that the best love between a man and a woman honors God, too? Then you need to add this wonderful story to your Christmas preparations. Then, maybe, just maybe the spirit of it will keep you smiling through all of the busyness and chaos of the season! ~ SAJL

1

"Are you sure you want me to go in your place, Grannie?" Meredith Stranraer sat on the couch in her grandparent's front room and fastened her boots, making sure the laces were double tied. The winding forest paths were uneven at the best of times and last thing she wanted was the laces coming undone on her way home. "I mean, you've gone every year since the Christmas Ball was first held and—"

"That's why, dear. Besides, between Gramp's rheumatism and my arthritis, I think our dancing days are over." Grannie laid a cool hand on Meredith's arm. "Did I ever tell you that's where we met?"

Meredith glanced up from her laces in amazement. "No, you didn't."

Grannie nodded. "The annual Paradise Christmas Ball is where I laid eyes on your grandfather for the very first time. Since then we've had fifty-three long and happy years together."

"Emphasis on the long," Gramps, the town constable, interjected.

"And you've enjoyed every moment of it, same as I have." Grannie shot him a look that was meant to make Gramps refrain from any additional comments. "Just like you, I didn't even want to go to the ball. I had better things to do with my time in those days than fritter away an entire evening at a charity fundraiser

set around blind dates. In those days it was quite scandalous." She patted Meredith on the shoulder. "You look worried. It's all in good fun. You'll have a wonderful time. I just know it."

"I don't know..." Truth be told, she'd rather go to the dentist and that was saying something. She'd come here to regain her footing after parting ways with the orchestra. Well, maybe not so much regain her footing as to hide, and Grannie was having none of that.

"Anyway, my mother persuaded me to go—" Grannie continued, and Meredith was sure most, if not all, of her grandmother's enthusiasm was for her benefit. "—and it was nowhere near as bad as I had feared. There was music, carols, a tree, lots of decorations, and mistletoe over the doorway. The conversation around the table was enjoyable, even entertaining. It turned out that my dinner date for the evening was none other than your grandfather."

"Was it love at first sight?"

A hint of color touched Grannie's cheeks. "It most certainly was not."

Gramps roared with laughter. "Despite the fact I did get a kiss under the mistletoe, she thought I was coarse, rude, arrogant, and...Oh, what was it, dear?"

"Too darn handsome for your own good." Grannie pursed her lips. "It took him a long time to persuade me otherwise."

Meredith's interest piqued. She couldn't imagine her grandmother at her own age. "Oh?"

"After that, I kept asking her to dinner until she agreed, just to shut me up." Gramps winked. "Her exact words, if I recall the conversation correctly. But once she got to know who I was, then I simply bowled her over with my charm, and sense of humor. Not to

mention my car."

"Your *car*?" Had she misheard?

Gramps nodded. "None of her friends' boyfriends owned a car. I always was a master at one-upmanship."

"That makes me sound superficial." Grannie huffed.

Gramps kissed her. "And I love you regardless."

"Tell me again how it works?" Meredith asked quietly as her grandparents snuggled.

"Everyone picks a number from a bowl. The person with the same number is your dinner date for the evening. There are several dances after the meal, nothing fancy, so you don't need to worry about not knowing how to tango. Or even waltz, come to that, and then you go home. If you really don't like the bloke you're paired with, you never have to see him again." Grannie paused. "Unless he's as stubborn and persistent as your grandfather is."

Meredith managed not to sigh in relief. She might be able to manage that. Crowds and strangers weren't her strong point. But it was only one evening and a Christmas party to boot.

"Anyway, it's all arranged. Caitlyn will pick you up at half-past six. She's staying with her parents over in Turningdale. I know you and she were friends at school, so I thought it'd be fun for you to go with someone you know."

More like acquaintances now. She and Caitlyn been best mates at boarding school, but had hardly seen each other since. A few e-mails now and again, along with birthday and Christmas cards, weren't exactly conducive to a deep and meaningful friendship, but at least there would be one person at the ball she'd know,

even if this random seating idea meant the chances of them sitting together were impossibly small. Perhaps the two of them could sneak off early and catch a film or something instead.

Yes, if the dates were boring, they could do the time honored trick of sneaking out to the bathroom one at a time and not coming back. The same way they'd done on numerous occasions at school functions they'd found boorish.

Meredith stood and slid her bag diagonally over her body before reaching for her new red cloak. It had been an early Christmas present from her grandparents. They always gave her the same thing, but she found cloaks far more comfortable than any coat or jacket she'd ever owned. This one was knee length and more practical than the full length one she'd had previously. Her fingers ran over the embroidered daisy chain that lay over her heart.

Gramps rose. "I'll drive you home, Meredith."

She shook her head. "Thank you, but there's no need. It's a lovely crisp winter's afternoon out there, and I love walking in the forest. The main road is a fifteen-minute walk from here and then just twenty minutes home."

"The woods aren't safe—" Grannie began.

"There is no monster lurking around the trees to eat people, Grannie. That only happens in fairytales. I'll be home well before dark. You worry far too much." She leaned over and kissed her grandmother's cheek. "Stay in the warm."

"If I worry it's only because I love you. Ring me when you get home. And have fun at the ball tonight. Find some mistletoe."

"Of course." *Not* she finished silently. Kissing

some strange, random bloke wasn't something she planned on doing any time soon. "Thanks for lunch." Meredith fastened her cloak and pulled up the fleece lined hood. She opened the door, and breathed deep of the cold, wood-scented air. "Look, it's snowing."

"It won't last, you'll see. It'll turn to rain again before long." Gramps frowned. "You're sure I can't give you a lift?"

Meredith nodded. "Quite sure."

"You've got your ticket for tonight?" Grannie called. "I don't want you not going because you lost it."

"Yes. I have it quite safe." Meredith bit her lip. For a moment she'd actually considered misplacing it. Sometimes Grannie knew her a little too well.

Gramps patted her shoulder, obviously noticing. "It will be good for you to go out, and don't stress too much over it, Meredith. It'll be fine, you'll see. Let us know how you get on."

"I'll see you tomorrow and fill you in on all the details." She kissed him and headed up the path to the front gate.

The lack of Christmas decorations in her grandparents' house was a shame, but nothing new. Meredith loved Christmas, the lights, trees, carols, going to church, celebrating her Savior's birth, but Grannie just didn't see the point of frivolity. And it was so nearly Christmas now. Just a few more days—the app on her phone had been counting down for months and was finally in single figures.

Once in the woods, she slowed her pace, despite the cold and falling snow covering the leaf strewn path. Her grandparents were overprotective as usual. It was as if they thought this town was a death trap.

Meredith admired the snow covered path. How could anything so pretty be fraught with as much danger as her grandparents seemed to think? Really, the outdoors was one huge cathedral. The trees were pillars, the snow a carpet, and the needles of the evergreens a canopy covering them. All of creation sang the Creator's praises, from the tiniest seed to the tallest tree. So what if her grandparents didn't decorate, no store bought decoration could ever look more festive than snow-dusted holly.

Meredith hummed a carol to herself as she walked and tried to decide what she could possibly wear tonight. Did she have anything suitable? How formal was this evening going to be? Would a church dress do, or did it need to be full length? Sleeves or no sleeves?

She shook her head. She should call Caitlyn and ask her. She reached into the bag under her cloak and pulled out her phone. On second thoughts, she decided to simply wear the new gown her sister, Annabelle, had made for her and sent to Brussels. The one Meredith had never gotten around to wearing to the concert hall.

She wondered if there would there be an orchestra tonight. Most likely there would be. She hadn't played since the incident, leaving the once loved violin untouched in the case in the corner of her room. And there it would stay for a long time to come if she had anything to do about it. The fear it evoked was still too palpable.

As the snow fell harder, Meredith's breath caught as something moved in the woods ahead of her. She gripped the phone tighter as a man with long black hair emerged from the tree line and blocked her path.

He stood there for a moment, before stepping to one side.

“Afternoon.” His dark gaze lingered on her.

The hair on the back of her neck rose.

He seemed vaguely familiar. Did she know him? Despite her unease, she nodded politely as she hurried by. She sped up, hearing footfalls behind her, muffled on the snowy path. In her haste, she missed her footing. Her feet slid, and unable to regain her balance, she fell. Arms outstretched, her phone flew forwards. She landed on the cold ground with a thud.

Meredith cried out, pain shooting through her palms as the snow-covered rocks bit into them.

Running footsteps headed her way and a pair of muddy black boots stopped in front of her. “Are you all right?”

“I think so.”

The owner of the voice wasn’t the dark haired man she’d seen. She took the outstretched hand and let the stranger help her. She gazed up into concerned brown eyes. A lock of brown hair fell over his brow under the peaked cloth cap. High cheek bones, a faint smile, and a firm grip, all took her breath away far more effectively than the actual fall did.

Wow. He was definitely not the first bloke she’d seen.

She felt bereft as he released her hand. “I missed my footing, clumsy, really.”

“It’s easily done. Especially in this weather.” He held out her phone, warmth shooting through her as her fingers grazed his. “The screen isn’t broken.”

“That’s good. Thank you.” She slid it back into the safety of her bag.

“Do you have far to go?”

Meredith shook her head. "No. Up to the main road and a few minutes' walk from there."

He nodded. "Try not to fall again, miss."

She flushed. "Can't make any promises, but I'll try. Thank you." She turned, heading down the path to the road, her mind now full of the tall, dark handsome stranger who hadn't offered his name or asked hers in return. Meredith glanced over her shoulder, wondering if he were still watching her.

He stood just inside the tree line.

You should ask his name.

No, chances are I'll never see him again.

But if you do, you'll look pretty silly calling him Mr. Man-from-the-forest.

She stopped arguing with herself as she reached the main road and branched off to the right. Her hands stung, not just with the small grazes, but with the aftermath of his touch. She'd have to find out who he was. Somehow. Perhaps Grannie would know. After all, she seemed to know everyone in Paradise, by sight if not by name.

Jeremiah Mantle watched the young woman walk to the main road, then turn and vanish. He knew all too well who she was, hence not needing to ask her name. He'd been watching her for a while, tasked with protecting her, albeit from a distance.

He turned and headed back into the trees. He should have talked more to her, but he hadn't expected the sudden rush of attraction he'd felt. He looked up at the sky; he didn't have time for might-have-beens. He had work to do and plenty of it. The weather made no

difference to the amount of tending the forest needed. Rather it made it more pressing to trim out any dead wood or clear any low hanging branches away from power lines. He reached the tree he'd just cut down and continued sawing the pieces of branch.

"Jem!" The voice was easily recognizable, even if the owner hadn't been in Paradise for a good eighteen months.

"Ty." Jeremiah turned, his smile widening as his cousin strode towards him. "I thought you'd never get here. You've been promising to visit for ages."

"You know how work can get. I could never get away long enough. Guess what I have? Two tickets to the Christmas Ball and this year, you my friend, are coming with me."

"Really? *That's* why you're here? I thought you'd come to see me." He paused. "Thanks, but no thanks. I don't have time. Never mind the fact I can't dance."

"You don't have to ballroom dance, Jeremiah," Ty teased. "It's rhythmic movement to music. Anyone can do it. Besides, you get partnered with a girl for the evening and then you go your separate ways. You don't have to do anything other than eat and be polite to her. It's for charity."

"Really? You've already bought the tickets, so it's not like—" He shook his head. "Is this payback for setting you up with Emma at the harvest supper year before last?" He lifted the chain saw and turning it on once more, brought it down against the wood.

Ty dropped a hand on Jeremiah's shoulder. "Of course it is, and you owe me," he quipped, raising his voice over the sound of the chainsaw. "Now leave that. We have to go and pick up a tux, and then somehow get you smartened up." He tilted his head. "Maybe get

you a haircut or something.”

Jeremiah turned off the chainsaw. He really didn't have time for this. “*Tux?* Are you expecting royalty to be there?”

Ty grinned. “Actually, yes I am. The Duke of Northumberland will be in attendance, as he always is.”

“That's the Queen's cousin?”

“Grandson,” Ty corrected. “Along with his new wife. So yes, you need a shower and a tux for tonight.”

Jeremiah put the saw back in its case. “Fine, but tomorrow you help me clear this. The timber we can take to the lumber mill, while the branches will make good firewood once it's dried out. And you can help me carry this lot back to the ranger station and put it away.” Jeremiah indicated a pole pruner.

Three hours later, Jeremiah pulled at his collar. He was far more comfortable in his ranger clothes, than dressed in stiff formal clothing. He shuffled his feet, the shiny new shoes uncomfortable. “Are you sure about this?”

“You'll be fine. Just pick a number, eat, drink and dance. It isn't rocket science.”

It sounded easy enough, but there was bound to be a catch.

Maybe rocket science *would* be easier.

Jeremiah raised an eyebrow. “If you say so. You've done this kind of thing before, I haven't.”

Ty grinned and handed over his coat at the cloakroom window, pocketing the receipt. He dipped his hand into the offered silver bowl and plucked out a

ticket. "Your turn, Jeremiah."

Taking a deep breath, Jeremiah unbuttoned his coat. He felt like he was going to an execution, rather than a Christmas ball, though he somehow doubted executions were accompanied by an orchestra playing Christmas carols.

Meredith shook the snow from the hem of her dress as she entered the great hall of the sprawling manor house. She'd often passed the place, but never been inside.

A huge tree covered in lights, tinsel, and baubles stood at the foot of the staircase. It was easily twelve foot tall if not higher. Decorations hung everywhere and carols filled the air. Joy and the wonder of the season filled her, tamping down her nerves for a moment.

Her mind sang the words to the carol the orchestra played. *Joy to the world, the Lord is come.* "Wow," she whispered, turning around on the spot. "It puts my efforts to shame."

Caitlyn smiled. "Wait 'til you have a place of your own. Knowing you, you'll have those Christmas decorations up twenty-four-seven, three hundred and sixty-five days a year." She nudged Meredith. "See the mistletoe over the doorway?"

Meredith shook her head. She glanced at Caitlyn. "Then you go out the front, I'll sneak out the back and meet you by the car." She winked. "What if the duke wants to talk to me? What if I get drawn to spend the evening with him?"

"I don't think that's likely to happen. Like your

grannie and grandad know full well, once people are a couple they come to the ball as a couple. But if he comes over or you get presented to him and the Duchess, just curtsy, smile and call him 'Your Grace.' Oh, and don't forget it's mar'm as in farm, not ma'am as in ham. Should you need it, but you won't." Caitlyn shed her coat and handed it over to the cloakroom attendant. She tucked the receipt in her purse and reached into the gold bowl. Then she sighed. "Twenty-seven."

Meredith handed over the full length black coat Annabelle had made to go with the dress, and closed her eyes as she reached into the bowl. She reached to the bottom, swirling the pieces of paper before she picked one. "Five."

Caitlyn giggled. "At least you won't be the last one paired up."

"True. Oh, thank you." She accepted the gold tinsel corsage and rather than pinning it onto her dress, tucked it into her hair instead. "Mine's prettier than yours," she teased.

Caitlyn laughed and followed suit. She linked her arm through Meredith's. "Now the point of this is to have fun, no matter who you sit with." She made a beeline for one of the waiters. "Hi, could you make sure that my friend and I sit at the same table, please? It's her first time and she's a little nervous. It's five and twenty-seven."

The waiter nodded. "I'll see what I can do, ma'am."

Meredith raised an eyebrow, stifling a giggle at the thought of anyone calling Caitlyn, or herself, ma'am. "And do you honestly think that will work?"

Caitlyn shrugged. "No harm in trying. Like my

mother always says 'them that don't ask don't get.'"

Meredith giggled. "And them that don't ask don't want."

"You know my mother too well, girl." Caitlyn took two drinks from the tray and shoved one into Meredith's hands. "Here."

Filled with nerves, Meredith raised the glass to her lips, swallowing half of the contents. Despite her concern, she and Caitlyn had simply picked up where they'd left off at school. Best mates. She smoothed down her dress. "Do I look all right? It's not over the top, is it?"

"You look fine. That shade of red suits you and complements your skin tone. As your sister knew all too well when she made it for you. You're probably the only woman here tonight in a bespoke dress." Caitlyn elbowed Meredith. "Don't look now, but we're being watched."

"Where?" Meredith looked around. As if she didn't have enough worries tonight with royalty being present, she had someone watching her as well?

Caitlyn sighed. "I said, don't look. Study them like this if you must." She held the glass to her mouth and spoke quietly. "They're standing against the far wall under the coat of arms."

Meredith glanced over the top of the glass and then looked away, her cheeks burning as recognition rushed through her. "I know him."

"Really? Which one?" Caitlyn sounded more than interested. "The blond one or the hunky one?"

She turned her back on the two men whose interest in them was obvious. "They're both hunky, but the one on the right with the dark hair."

"The *really* hunky one. Where did you meet him?"