

Snowflake Stories 2



By Rusty Fischer

Snowflake Stories 2:

*Four **MORE FREE** Holiday Tales from the
Town of Snowflake*

By Rusty Fischer, author of *A Town Called Snowflake*

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Author's Note:

The following is a “sneak preview” of a work in progress; any editing errors, typos or grammatical mistakes are all the fault of the author and will be cleaned-up prior to publication.

Enjoy!

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Introduction:

Welcome (Back) to Snowflake!

Merry Christmas!

And welcome to Snowflake.

Snowflake, South Carolina that is.

No matter what time of year it is in your neck of the woods, it's always Christmas in Snowflake!

That's because Snowflake is the fictional town I cooked up for my first contemporary holiday romance, *A Town Called Snowflake* (**Musa Publishing**, 2011).

It's a kind of Hallmark town, with gingerbread inspired cottages and a Norman Rockwell Main Street where stores like Snowflake Sweets and Treats, the Books 'N Beans and Simply Snowflake feature prominently.

This book contains four short stories, all very different, all taking place in Snowflake.

First up is *Santas & Snowflakes*, in which a woman with a real “Santa-Phobia” gets over her fears on behalf of some very deserving kids.

In *Now Showing in Snowflake*, a Christmas Eve shift at the Snowflake Cinemas turns into a real blockbuster for one lonely movie theater usher.

In *Snooping Around in Snowflake*, a nosy private eye gets more than she bargained for when a suspicious wife suspects her husband of foul play.

Finally, in *Something Borrowed, Something Snowflake*, a surprise Christmas Eve wedding turns the Snowflake Senior Center into Romance Central.

I hope you enjoy these stories, and not just because they’re all FREE!

Merry Christmas wherever you live, and whatever time of year it is.

And remember, it’s always Christmas in Snowflake!

Chapter 1:

Santas & Snowflakes

I'm reaching for my elf costume when Mr. Bridges, my manager, clears his throat within striking distance.

I say "striking distance" because every time he creeps up on me like that, I want to jab my elbow into his Adam's apple, hear it crunch and then watch him writhe in agony on the floor!

(Wow, Lily; where did *that* come from all of a sudden?!?)

I know, I know, it's supposed to be the "most wonderful time of the year" but, dangit, every time Mr. Bridges skulks around it's always to deliver bad news.

"Lily?" he asks in his extra super dignified managerial voice he uses when there are others in the Snowflake Galleria employee locker room.

“Mr. Bridges?” I reply. “Something I can help you with. I was just going to squeeze into my size small green elf tights so, unless you want an eyeful and perhaps get snapped when they finally burst at the seams, I suggest you—”

“Yes, well, about that...” he interrupts, using that honey slow, southern voice he always adopts when trying to deliver bad news in a positive way. “It appears Blake is running a little late tonight so, he asked if you wouldn’t mind stepping in for him.”

“Oh no,” I snap, fear turning my insides into pretzels of worry and self-doubt. “Mr. Bridges, please, *please* don’t ask me to do that!”

How could Blake do this to me?

He knows I get stage fright, he knows I hate sitting in “the big chair,” knows I’m afraid I’m going to say the wrong thing at the wrong time and destroy some little kid’s Christmas.

Blake knows, in short, I have... drum roll, please... Santa Phobia!

Mr. Bridges isn’t very patient or understanding.

“Lily, when you signed on as one of Santa’s Helpers, you understood that at some point you might have to fill in for the big guy himself, now if you’ll just—”

“But I don’t know *how* to play Santa, Mr. Bridges,” I whine, trying to keep the panic out of my voice.

“Of course you do, Lily; you’ve watched Blake do so six nights a week since the day after Thanksgiving! In fact, come to think of it, I can’t think of anyone better suited for the roll.”

I look around the half-empty break room at the six pairs of eyes currently shifting in their chairs to avoid the getting louder and louder holiday confrontation.

“Mr. Bridges, there are five guys in this room who are all better suited to play a man named Kris Kringle than little old me!”

Mr. Bridges quickly surveys the sampling of janitors, custodians and electricians all currently hustling to finish their sack lunches and beat a hasty retreat before they’re called into the big red suit.

“None of these men are even close to being as prepared as you are, Lily,” Mr. Bridges leans in and whispers conspiratorially, as if giving me a backhanded compliment will suddenly convince me to conquer my Santa Phobia.

Mr. Bridges is tall and lean and sharp, and his breath smells like the opposite of candy canes.

“But I’m a girl,” I hiss back, playing my trump card.

Because if it’s one thing Mr. Bridges is, he’s a traditionalist; men are always Santa, women are always elves.

Period, end of story, and it’s been that way ever since I’ve been coming to the Snowflake Galleria since I was a little girl.

Bridges frowns, like he’s just now considering that fact, then looks me up and down.

“Yes, dear, but with a little padding and that big, white beard, only a few of the kids will ever notice.”

We argue for a little while longer, but the minute I hear the words “early termination for obstinate insubordination” exit his mouth, I meekly comply and trade in the green tights for the red velvet pants.

Now, Blake is about 6-feet-tall and they’ve been tailored specifically for him, so it takes some doing to not only slide them on but roll them up enough at the top so I don’t fall fake beard over Santa cap the first time I try to take two steps.

I’d just roll them up at the bottom if these were Blake’s jeans – and don’t I wish – but since there is a fluffy white cuff at the bottom of each pants leg, only the top will do.

The suspenders that keep them up take tightening, too, and Mr. Bridges isn't just a graceless manager but also a graceless technician; he tugs and pulls and yanks and knots until at last I can breathe again.

Of course, that's *before* I don the faded pink undershirt, the three pillows it takes to fill out the front of the pants and the giant red Santa jacket featuring six brass buttons it takes me, Mr. Bridges and two electricians to finally secure.

"I feel like a Macy's balloon in this thing," I mutter somewhere about the third button.

"Only around the middle," says one of the electricians helpfully. "And the rear."

His nametag says "Ralph" and that's appropriate, because after five straight weeks of dieting to fit into my New Year's Eve cocktail dress, that's what his ill-timed comment makes me want to do!

At last we're ready for the finishing touches.

As I fiddle with the plain glass bifocals with the cheap gold finish, Mr. Bridges and his team of deputy electricians struggle to clasp the big black belt with the shiny brass buckle around my distended belly.

When at last it's in place and the electricians have scuttled away, giggling like schoolgirls and eager to spread the word about the "new Santa in town," Mr. Bridges unceremoniously shoves me down onto the wooden locker room bench behind me.

Thankfully Santa's red satin pants come lined with extra shocks in back for long hours of seasonal sitting, or I'd be picking splinters out of my offended tailbone as we speak.

"Hey!" I protest, nearly losing my fake glasses; Mr. Bridges merely holds up a pair of giant, gleaming black boots in reply.

He slides them on but I can feel my toes rattling around about halfway up the giant boot fronts.

He takes them back off and stuffs a few balls of newspaper from the cluttered break room table in the goes until I can walk without tripping over my own feet.

After that, well, there's nothing left but a grand exit through the long tunnel leading toward Santa's Snowflake Village, aka the rickety gingerbread house front and fake snow monstrosity that dominates the Snowflake Galleria food court from just after Thanksgiving through New Year's Day every year.

The boots squeak on the clean tiles of the hallways and I get a taste of celebrity as every cute female cashier, assistant manager and sales clerk I pass gives me bedroom eyes.

“Is it always like this?” I ask Mr. Bridges, fake bearded cheeks flushing with jealousy.

“Oh indeed,” he says cluelessly. “Blake has quite the following. I dare say he’s the most popular Santa we’ve had in years. You’ve got quite the boots to fill, Lily; figuratively speaking *and* literally.”

Yes, Mr. Bridges is one of those people; specifically, one of those people who uses the term “figuratively speaking *and* literally” every two sentences.

No wonder Blake always gets so cocky this time of year, strutting around tiny little Snowflake, South Carolina like the cock of the walk, grinning from ear to ear.

Of course, it’s not like he’s any kind of slouch outside of the Santa suit, either.

It’s just that something about seeing Santa and knowing there’s a big, strapping hunk sitting underneath all that red satin and fake hair is a turn-on.

For some women, that is; not me, of course.

After all, I'm merely one of Santa's (humble) Helpers!

It's strictly forbidden for the elves to toss and turn every night, dreaming of what's under Santa's deliciously difficult brass buttons.

I can hear the canned Christmas carols as we approach the final barrier between the back of the mall and the front, and I unconsciously begin to slow down.

"Lily," Mr. Bridges says furiously. "We're already late to Santa's Snowflake Village. Now, quit dragging Blake's boots!"

Something... happens... to Mr. Bridges before we burst through the double doors leading to Santa's Snowflake Village.

For all his talk of being late, he takes a pause, then a deep breath, then mutters some kind of mantra, like actors do while staring into their dressing room mirrors, then he stands two inches taller, puts one hand on each of the doors and swings them open dramatically.

Fixing a leaden smile to his rubber face, Bridges leads me forth into the maddening throngs.

My breathing is already heavy as the crowd begins to notice the giant red figure with the bugling belly and clomping boots whose suddenly stumbled into their midst.

“Hey,” I hear one kid scream. “It’s Santa!”

Then another bursts, “SANTA CLAUS!!!”

They make a mad dash for us, sneakers on waxed linoleum, as Bridges runs interference, muttering over his shoulder the whole while, “Keep that smile going, Lily; this may be the only Santa these kids get to see this year.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” I murmur, earning myself a quick reproach from Bridges.

“Silence,” he snaps. “Santa only speaks when spoken to!”

Children start tugging and pulling, despite my own personal bodyguard’s best efforts.

I smile through the nausea I’m feeling, and blink behind the suddenly foggy eyeglasses.

I wave on instinct, hands muggy in their floppy white gloves as I try not to step on any of the children’s eager, dancing feet.

Santa's Snowflake Village looms a few yards away, a purposeful oasis of calm (for now, anyway) just outside the already bustling food court.

It has little gingerbread storefronts that are empty in back, and a giant electric train called the Snowflake Express that runs all around the village.

Fake snow mounds abound, piled high with shimmering red and green foil-wrapped packages as even faker snowmen wave dusty, plastic stick arms.

The Christmas music is doubly loud here because it sits equidistant between four of the mall's biggest speakers, all trained directly at our faces every night!

(So help me if I hear the barking dogs' version of "12 Days of Christmas" one more time I might just switch careers from Santa's Helper to animal control!)

There is a purple velvet rope and my stand-in for the night, Roberta Johnson from House wares (looking fab in a slapped together elf costume), greets me with a demure smile as she unclasps it for Mr. Bridges and me.

“Break a leg,” she whispers, refastening the rope and sliding her arm into the handle of the red and green basket she’ll use to hand out miniature candy canes all night.

“If only that would get me out of this,” I murmur weakly.

Roberta gives me a sympathetic smile that is heavy with relief that it’s her out there and me in here.

The giant, red velvet throne sits empty and waiting.

Mr. Bridges leads me to it, milking his moment in the spotlight for every last second as kids begin lining up in throngs on the other side of Roberta’s VIP line.

I can hear them whispering, gurgling and suddenly I feel like retching.

For as long as I can remember, I’ve been afraid of Santa.

Not just going to see him, which has always been terrifying in its own right, but... just... anything having to do with him.

The decorations in my house are all snowmen and angels and candy canes and snowflakes, never Santa.

I've even gone so far as to toss out the Santa cookie cutter that comes in the set of six I inevitably have to buy each season because I've lost one or two throughout the year.

I don't give my friends Santa gift bags and they know not to send me Santa greeting cards.

Blake knows it, too; he's always ribbing me about it on our frequent breaks by the pretzel stand where the perky blond coed behind the counter always gives him a free frozen lemonade because "he's doing so much for the kids."

Yeah, right; if the kids only knew how their precious "Santa Blake" curses their names every time one of them steps on his toes, bites his finger or tinkles on his lap, he might not get so many adoring stares – OR frozen lemonades.

Who am I kidding?

Blake is charming in or out of the Santa suit.

Me?

Not so much.

I'm about to crash and burn, live and in person, which actually might not be such a bad thing.

At least after that, no one will ever ask me to play Santa again.

The throne beckons, at last; there's no avoiding it any longer.

The kids are squirming, Roberta's giving me "get on with it" death glares from the sidelines and Mr. Bridges is doing everything but literally shoving me down into the plush red seat – and don't think he wouldn't if there weren't about 400 impressionable witnesses watching carefully, either.

I take the seat only after bending my trembling knees to literally force myself to sit down, hands quivering as I grip the wide armrests tightly.

"Remember the drill, Lily," Mr. Bridges reminds me one last time before deserting me until my first break – in an ungodly 2 ½ hours! "One brief 'Ho, Ho, Ho' when they sit, ask their name, nod like you're listening, ask what they want, nod again like you're listening, one more 'Ho, Ho, Ho' as they leave and... lather, rinse, repeat, got it?"

I nod nauseously, looking up with pained eyes he promptly ignores.

He walks briskly away as I readjust myself to get comfortable and try to shove down the pillow-padding covering my lap enough so that it feels more natural.

I watch as he shares a conspiratorial laugh with Roberta, no doubt at my expense, before giving her the signal to unleash my first visitor of the night.

I swallow, wishing I'd brought along a bottled water like Blake always does.

My mouth is dry and stale as a little girl of about eight strides up confidently, looking adorable in a gingham jacket with a bright red scarf.

“Ho, Ho, Ho,” I say in my normal voice, suddenly realizing: I'm a girl!

I quickly bellow, louder this time and deeper, much, much deeper, “Ho, Ho, Ho.”

It sounds tight and strained and a little... scary.

She says, as if we've known each other all our lives, “You sound funny, Santa.”

“Sorry, little girl,” I grumble, giving my best Santa Blake impersonation. “What's your name?”

“Sylvia Collins,” she says, still skeptical as I pat my knee in the universal Santa gesture for “plant your bottom here, oh nosy one.”

“You still sound funny,” she says inquisitively, looking up into my green eyes. “Almost like... a girl!”

I shake my head and grumble, “That’s silly; everyone knows Santa’s a boy!”

She looks at me funny and says, almost hopefully, “But he *could* be a girl, right?”

I cock my head and smile. “It’s Santa we’re talking about here, Sylvia, remember? Anything’s possible!”

That seems to put her mind at ease, at which point I kind of wish I’d left her feeling uncomfortable because now she feels free to list every toy she’s ever wanted, since birth, in alphabetical order.

“Which toy do you want *most*?” I ask, remembering this little trick from listening to Blake six nights a week for the last month.

“More than any other toy,” I add before Sylvia can debate any longer.

“The Molly Madison Organic Bread Bakery!” Sylvia practically shouts, giving me the segue I need to gently nudge her off my knee and onto the red velvet lined step in front of me.

“Sounds fun,” I say. “Ho, Ho, Ho!”

Sylvia looks disappointed until I finally wink at her; then she winks back – it takes a little effort – and runs off to join her Mom waiting on the other side of Santa’s Snowflake Village.

I watch as Sylvia stretches high on her polished black dress shoes – “*Did she dress up to come see Santa?*” I wonder idly – and whisper something in her mother’s ear.

Mom looks at me with a slightly quizzical expression, then... smiles... nodding in confirmation of something, to Sylvia’s obvious relief.

Her eyes are warm and almost... grateful.

Word spreads quickly along the kiddy grapevine, to the point where before I’ve even uttered my second “Ho” the kids are curious to find out if Santa really IS a girl.

The boys are skeptical, doubtful, almost... resentful.

That is, until I growl and tickle them and then they don’t care anymore; they just want their toys.

The girls, though, are taking this very, very seriously.

They want to know how this works; I tell them Santa’s an equal opportunity saint.

They want to know if the reindeer respect me; I tell them all except for that “Dancer jerk.”

They want to know why I’m wearing a suit, not a dress; I tell them I spilled hot chocolate on my dress.

It doesn’t take much to convince them; half the time they’ve spent so long grilling me that when Roberta shoots me her “that kid’s been on your lap too long” death glare of hers and I gently shoo them off, they disappear without even asking for anything.

There are so many kids; more, it seems, than usual – and a former Santa’s Helper like me should know!

The time for the first break comes and goes but the line is so long I know I’ll never get to all of them before the night is over if I stop now.

Mr. Bridges approaches and I hold him off with a hand; “I’m fine, Phil,” I say, forgetting my place.

His eyes get big, and then he smiles, nods and hands a bottle of water from his pocket to the next little girl in line.

She brings it to me gently, offering it up almost... reverently.

I say, “Thank you, little girl. What’s your name?”

“April,” she says, looking at the water bottle in my oversized white glove. “I feel bad.”

“Why honey?”

“Because in all these years I’ve been coming to see you, I’ve never thought to bring you anything!”

The gifts start coming shortly after.

One little girl brings a candy bar, another a gingerbread cookie – still warm – from the food court, one boy brings one of those giant, round all-day suckers!

I make a big show out of biting into everything they give me, if only to spit it out into the bottom layers of my beard and remove it between visitors.

(Hey, if I didn’t, I wouldn’t need padding next year!)

And still the kids come, and come and come and come.

Usually by our second break, which is fast approaching, the crowds die down, even this close to Christmas.

But from the look on Roberta’s frazzled face as the line continues stretching toward the food court and beyond, the crowd seems to be growing rather than thinning.

So is the pile of gifts by my side.

Soon it's teetering over and threatening to topple, a giant mass of bubble gum packs and girl-sized barrettes and tiny Christmas ornaments and fuzzy white snowmen socks.

At one point I look up to see a tiny girl bringing me a Mrs. Santa Barbie doll!

I go to flick my eyes at Roberta, to give her a little girl-to-girl "Wtf" face, but instead I see a giant looming in front of the velvet ropes; Blake!

He looks positively, but adorably, ridiculous in an elf costume, possibly even Roberta's old costume, since she's suddenly nowhere to be seen; the green tights hugging his long, hairy legs, the shade darker green shorts too short, the green jacket too tight, the pointy green hat with the jaunty red feather resting high atop his fluffy blonde curls.

I snort and the little boy on my lap thinks it's about something he's said, which is fine because he's been reeling off all these complicated monster movie toys for the last three minutes and I have NO idea what he's talking about.

I give him the old, "But which super monster alien invader toy would you want the most?" line and he's still debating it when I gently

shoo him off to his mother and Blake saunters over, limping slightly while little jingle bells jingle at the tips of his pointy red toes.

“Blake,” I gush, never so happy to see him in my life. “You made it. What happened to your leg?”

“I sprained my ankle playing softball,” he says in that southern twang of his I love so much. “Darndest thing. I’ll be fine tomorrow, but tonight... hey, Lily, I really appreciate you stepping in for me. I know how much you hate all this.”

He has a knowing grin as I stammer, “N-n-no, I never said I hate all this, it was just a little... uncomfortable... at first.”

“Uncomfortable, huh?” he asks, nodding. “But you’re okay to finish out the shift?”

I have to force myself to temper my enthusiasm and say, softly, “If I have to.”

“No, no,” he assures me, already limping away. “I’ll just go tell the kids the first-ever female Santa Claus to come to Snowflake is bailing and we can switch outfits and...”

I look at the smiling faces milling about anxiously on the other side of the velvet rope, each eagerly clutching gifts, smiling, antsy on shuffling feet.

“I’m already in it,” I bluff. “Besides, why rob myself of the chance to see you squeezed into those tights for the rest of the night?”

Blake winks and my heart grows another size too big.

“Where’d Roberta go?” I wonder out loud.

He shrugs and says, “She bolted the minute I showed up. I’m kinda glad, though; this way I get you all to myself!”

While I’m busy trying to see through my suddenly foggy glasses – compliments from hunky man elves do that to me – Blake Elf unleashes the next little girl, who’s so eager to see me that she trips and stumbles on the steps at my feet.

I stand, breaking about three dozen protocol for Santa, and help her up.

She smiles gratefully, offering up a tiny snowflake lapel pin from the dollar store on the other side of the food court.

It’s bent now and she looks sad but I hoist her onto my knee and tell her, “This way I’ll always remember who gave it to me.”

She smiles and tells me her name, and that she wants to be Santa when she grows up, too!

It's a long, but also a quick night after that.

The lines swell to bursting just around dinner time, then swell once more an hour before closing.

I'm fed and watered all night, and only leave for five minutes to use the nearest restroom, Blake Elf and Mr. Bridges running interference while a smattering of girls try to follow me in.

After that it's a mad dash to closing time, with announcements running every five minutes.

There are still dozens of little girls in line, and Mr. Bridges confers with mall security – aided by the loud, shrilling voices of dozens of those little girls' mothers – to remain open until they've all been seen.

Finally the line is down to one more little girl, who wanders up in mismatched socks and a stuffed bunny under her arm.

She looks about seven years old, and sleepy.

I say, "Ho, Ho, Ho" in my best Santa voice and she frowns.

I wink and say it again, this time in my real voice.

"I'm Pearl," she says when I ask her name.

“What can I bring you this year, Pearl?”

“I knew it,” she gushes, ignoring me and climbing onto my lap without any assistance. “When my Mom came home and said there was a lady Santa at the mall, I couldn’t believe it. She even agreed to drive me here, even though it’s way past my bedtime.”

“I’m glad she did, Pearl. Now, what can Santa bring you?”

She looks at me and says, “Oh, I already told the man Santa last week. I just wanted to come and say ‘hi’ to the girl Santa!”

I grin and snuffle and help her off my knee.

Her mother is wearing a trench coat over a robe over pajama bottoms, conferring with Blake Elf as I stand to escort Pearl over to the other side of the velvet ropes personally.

“She just had to come and see you,” says Pearl’s mother, turning around and smiling from a familiar face.

“Roberta?” I gush, reaching out and hugging my former Santa’s Helper.

(So *that’s* where she went!)

“I would have never let her stay up this late,” Roberta explains, patting little Pearl’s head. “But... this is history in the making, right?”

“Mommy?” Pearl asks as they begin sauntering away. “How does Girl Santa know your name?”

And I hear Roberta whisper, “Because Girl Santas listen better than Boy Santas!”

I wave them goodbye and turn, seeing the waiting pen at Santa’s Snowflake Village empty for the first time all night.

Blake limps up behind me, curled toes still jingling as his crooked smile puts the Christmas lights surrounding us to shame.

“Bravo, Mrs. Santa,” he says, touching my shoulder gently.

I flinch with intense pleasure and say, “Yeah, well, just don’t ever do that again!”

He turns me around to face him and says, “Really? Never again? *Ever?*”

I snicker and say, “Okay, well, maybe I’ll do a repeat performance *next* year. But we’ve got to advertise better. I’d like all the little girls in Snowflake to be able to come next time, not just...”

Blake smiles and slings an arm around me as we walk toward the employee entrance that will take us to our lockers.

Halfway down the hall, listening as Blake hums his favorite Christmas song, I notice something.

“Your limp seems to come and go,” I mention knowingly. “And it’s plainly come and gone!”

I slug him in the non-padded stomach, feeling the familiar curves of his six-pack abs.

“Hey,” he grins, finally doffing his ridiculous elf cap and giving me his famous smile. “Someone had to get you over this ridiculous Santa Phobia of yours, Lily. Who better than... your husband?”

“For now,” I say, patting his firm rear as we change into our civilian duds. “Try that trick again, and I might just be ‘Miss Claus’ by next year!”

Chapter 2:

Now Showing in Snowflake

“I warned you this was a bad idea,” frowns Mr. Kerns, rubbing his long, pale hand nervously over his scruffy bald head. “I even showed you the numbers from the last *three* Christmas Eves, remember? No one comes out to see movies on Christmas Eve, Sasha; no one!”

He’s pacing, too, back and forth between the ticket window and the cheesy game room. That is, if you call Galaga, Centipede and air hockey a “game room.”

“People *will* come, Mr. Kerns,” I insist stridently, as I’ve been doing for the last two hours straight. “At least the kids will... I think.”

“I don’t know why you keep saying that,” he says, pointing broadly to the empty parking lot and wide, even emptier sidewalk in front of the

Snowflake Cinema's double doors. "Despite all the evidence to the contrary!"

Mr. Kerns is short and, well... plump.

He wears baggy gray slacks, every night.

That and a snug red dress shirt with a gray tie, every night.

He wears a gray sweater vest over the red shirt and gray tie, every night.

His shoes are black sneakers with the heels worn down on the right sides and he's wearing them down even more tonight as he paces, to and fro, back and forth, on and on.

"Here's how it works, Mr. Kerns," I say, again, for like the 100th time. "Everybody eats dinner, trims the tree, has a glass of champagne or makes hot cocoa, whatever. Then, around 8 or 9, all the kids in town wonder what they're going to do for the rest of the night, where they're going to go to meet up. Should they sit around with the family playing Yahtzee? I don't think so. So, what do they do? Come out and see a movie! It's the perfect Christmas Eve solution!"

Mr. Kerns turns to me, eyes wide with distress and whines, “But why did I let you convince me to switch out all the top-run movies with... with...”

It’s like he can’t bring himself to say the words or something!

“With... Christmas movies?!?!”

Yeah, see; *that’s* where I screwed up.

Big.

Time.

Everything was going so well.

It was all going to plan.

A couple cars full of kids have actually pulled up, stepped out, squinted up at the marquee, read titles like *Patches the Christmas Elf* or *Silent Fright Night 3*, shook their heads, shot me dirty looks as I lingered, hopefully, by the ticket stand and then gotten back in the car and peeled off toward parts unknown.

The Snowflake Sweet Shop, probably; that’s the only other place open at this godforsaken hour on Christmas Eve.

“Let’s just pack it up,” sighs Mr. Kerns, actually loosening his tie before clocking out for the night.

(What is it, Christmas Eve or something?!?!)

“But... but... look,” I say, spotting a familiar red sports car sliding into a (handicapped) space out front. “Here comes someone now.”

“Someone?” he asks, barely looking back toward the front door.

“Listen, you’re an assistant manager now, Sasha. Though I might be demoting you after looking at tonight’s receipts tomorrow morning. You can handle one customer and, when he finishes watching the last 40-minutes of *Randolph the Gassy Reindeer*, well, you can give him a complimentary candy cane and shoo him out on your own, can’t you?”

“Are you s-s-sure?” I ask, a little worried about the “demotion” comment, although I’m 90% certain – make that 80% certain, okay more like 75% – Kerns was joking.

“You do it all the time, Sasha,” he sighs, grabbing his blue blazer from just inside the employee break room door and walking back toward me on his wobbly sneakers. “Why should tonight be any different?”

“Well, what if I’m right and we get swamped, Mr. Kerns?”

“It’s nearly 11,” he points out, eyeing one of my classmates as he saunters toward the front doors on those crooked sneakers of his. “How

busy do you think it's going to get? Besides, it's Christmas Eve; I've got a family waiting on me at home and, well..."

He lets his voice trail off, but I can finish his sentence for him:

"And, well... you don't. Not really..."

"Merry Christmas," I murmur as he rushes out into the night, barely holding the door open for none other than Dart McKee, star swimmer for Snowflake High School.

"Bah humbug," murmurs Dart to Mr. Kerns' back.

I chuckle, but I'm so nervous it comes out as a snort.

Dart barely looks up as he steps toward the old-timey ticket widow, the kind with the hole in the glass and the little dip underneath where you're supposed to slide the money.

But then, everything at the Snowflake Cinema is old-timey; from the ticket window to the old-fashioned popcorn popper to the outdated candy to the rickety seats and the giant burgundy curtains used to "sound" proof the side walls in each of our six "spacious" theaters.

"Welcome to Snowflake Cinemas," I coo as Dart finally looks up.

"How can I help you?"

Dart's brown eyes narrow, then grow soft with recognition.

Then he avoids my eyes completely and says, “Oh, uh, thanks.”

Sheesh, I know we don’t exactly hang with the same crowds, you know (not that I *have* a crowd or anything), but... it’s Christmas!

Couldn’t he at least fake like he thinks I’m human?

“Can I help you with something?” I ask, still using my fake Snowflake Cinemas voice, as if Mr. Kerns was still around and dock my pay for sounding like an actual teenager.

He’s got his wallet half out of his back pocket, half in and I watch as he shoves it back down and begins to turn.

“Naw,” he says quietly, gently. “I... I... changed my mind.”

“What?” I squawk, before I can stop myself. “But... you came all this way. Don’t back out now!”

He’s half turning, all 6’ 2” of his fine self, 160-pounds of swimmer muscle poured into hot chocolate colored chords, tan leather sneakers with a swish down each side and an off-white fisherman’s sweater with a collar that covers half his throat and keeps scratching the dirty blonde Christmas break stubble that covers his dimpled chin.

His crooked smile only curves halfway up his hollow cheeks as he arches one dark, inquisitive eyebrow.

“But... I’ve never come to the movies alone before.”

“You’re... alone?” I mock gasp.

He nods his head all serious like, turning away all over again.

“I’m kidding. I mean, it’s not a crime, you know? People do it all the time.”

“No, I know they do,” he says quickly, as if he thinks I’m making fun of him because he didn’t get my joke – or maybe just because he’s alone. “It’s just, kind of... sad... you know?”

“Sad? I’ll give you sad; try working at the movies alone. On Christmas Eve. Choking on stale popcorn fumes. Now *that’s* sad.”

“You’re... alone?” he asks, finally taking his eyes off his buttery leather shoes and peering inside the deserted lobby.

“That was my manager who almost ran you over just now,” I explain, leaning forward on the ticket counter until my face is closest to the little air-hole window thingy.

“Well, yeah, but... you’re getting *paid* to be here alone,” he points out, finally looking back at me with his dark chocolate eyes. “That’s the opposite of sad.”

“Really?” I ask, getting back up and spreading my eyes wide to reveal the marvel, the wonder, the splendor that is... the Snowflake Cinemas! “*Really?*”

He kind of chuckles, but there’s a lot of work left to do if I’m ever going to lure him all the way inside.

After all, he’s still as close to his car as he is to the ticket window.

That means I’ve got about a 50-50 chance of this being the night of my dreams... or just another sad shift at Snowflake Cinemas.

“*Think!*” I say to myself. “*Here is your chance to spend Christmas Eve with Dart McKee; THE Dart McKee! Don’t! Blow! It!*”

“Popcorn’s free after 11!” I shout, suddenly inspired. “All you can eat!”

“Really?” he asks, inching one step closer to me.

“And soda’s... soda’s... half-price all Christmas Eve!”

He smirks, looks down at his shoes, fiddles with his feet, looks left, sees nobody, looks right, sees even more of nobody, and finally... shrugs.

“Deal!” he says, nearly tripping over his feet to get back to the ticket window and snatch up all these last-minute deals. “I’ll grab one for... hmmm... well, let’s see. How’s *Satan’s Snow Day?*”

“Only all kinds of awesome,” I grin, printing him up a ticket before he can back out and choose something lame like *Mrs. Claus Goes On Holiday!*

I rip it in half as he hands over the six bucks admission fee, and follow him around to stand behind the concession counter.

I can't beat him there if I go all the way through the side door and walk through, so I do what we all do when no customers are around: slide over the counter on our fannies.

“Nice,” he smirks, fumbling the last few bills out of his wallet. “I’m sure the Health Department *loves* that move.”

“Why, are you working undercover or something?”

He smiles quietly, brown eyes still a little sad.

“What can I get you?” I ask, eager to keep the conversation flowing.

Dart’s so lively in school, always bounding down the halls in his tight letterman’s sweater and even tighter jeans, sneakers always squeaking on the hallway tiles as he shoves his pals around from locker to locker with one arm always, always around his main squeeze: Tonia Lockhart.

He says, “Well, that popcorn to start, and a soda of course, and... holy smokes, are those... Doo Dads? Seriously... and... Slow Pokes? Gheez, I haven’t had those since my Dad used to take me here as a kid...”

“Coming right up,” I smile, easing two packs of each out of the tray under the smudged (smudged from my butt, that is!) concession stand glass.

“But... I only have enough for the...” he stammers, too shamed to finish his sentence as he shoves them back across the counter instead.

His fingers look wrinkly, like maybe he’s spent half of Christmas Eve swimming in the inside pool at school.

“Relax,” I say, sliding them back over his way. “Merry Christmas!”

“Really?”

“Yeah, sure. Why not?”

I put the cap on his soda and slide it across as well, then bag up a super-extra-double-large popcorn, just because I can.

“Wow!” he says, eyes wide enough to practically touch those dark brown curls of his. “All that’s FREE?”

“Well,” I mock, twirling a lock of my long, red hair nervously around one finger as I lean in conspiratorially, “don’t feel too special. I just have to throw the extra away at the end of the night, anyway.”

He blushes, a little, or maybe my glasses are fogging up from being so close to him, as he looks past me to the overflowing 1962 popcorn fryer.

“Expecting a big crowd tonight?”

“Bigger than this,” I say and, when he frowns, I quickly add, “I mean, not that I’m, I mean... we’re... not glad you didn’t show up! It’s just, well, I kind of convinced my boss that there would be this mad rush of people coming out to see movies after being cooped up with their families all day and...”

“But... all you’re showing is Christmas movies,” he complains.

“Yeah, well, that was my idea, too!”

“But they’re, like, really lame Christmas movies.”

I blush and confess, “Well, I didn’t think kids would be actually watching the movies, you know?”

“You’re not very good at this, are you?” he asks.

“I guess not. Why, what’d you come here to see anyway?”

“The new *Space Shots* movie.”

I want to groan, but don't; I thought Dart had better taste than that.

“Too bad my boss already left,” I say. “I could put it back on for you.”

“Naw,” he says, looking down at his ticket. “*Satan's Snow Day* sounds... cool?”

“It is,” I say, having never seen it, but with a title like that, how can you miss?

He kind of lingers by the concession stand, his soda, popcorn and snacks still littering the counter I really should be cleaning.

“I feel kind of bad your idea didn't work out,” he says, and all the while he's staring at me with those puppy dog brown eyes I'm thinking, “*Is one of his jock friends filming this or something?*”

“You and me both,” I say just because, hey, I've always wanted to.

“I should call all my friends,” he says, still leaning against the customer side of the counter. “That would impress your boss, huh?”

“It would,” I say, wondering why I'm not more excited about his bright idea of his.

“But... it's kinda late,” he hems.

“Real late,” I say, the idea of having Dart to myself for the rest of the evening suddenly a billion times more important than, you know, my actual job.

“Plus, I mean... you’re not really showing anything good and they’d all hate me if I got them out of the house for nothing.”

Now it’s my turn to look all offended.

“Just kidding, Sasha,” he says, avoiding my eyes again. “I thought you could take a joke.”

I’d come back with something snappy but I’m too busy being flabbergasted by the fact that.

Dart.

McKee.

Knows.

My.

Frickin’.

Name!

“You probably don’t have all that many friends anyway,” I crack, if only to prove to myself I can still speak.

“Oh yeah,” he snorts, reaching for the cell phone outlined in the front pocket of his dark chocolate pants. “Sorry if I’m not head of the ‘Official I’m Too Cool for Friends Club’ like you!”

“I have *friends*,” I argue, secretly happy when he gives up on digging the phone out of his blissfully snug pocket.

“Yeah, name one,” he challenges, in no hurry to rush and see the opening credits of *Satan’s Snow Day*. “Sorry, wait; name one who isn’t a teacher, counselor, principal or PE Coach!”

Crap!

“I hang out with that one girl in Home Ec class,” I argue.

“That One Girl?” he chuckles. “Really, Sasha? Is that what it says on her birth certificate?”

“Or how about that new kid from Wisconsin? I hung out with him for a whole day last week!”

“Yeah, because Counselor Wiggum asked you to show him around the school on his FIRST DAY.”

“Okay, so, if you’re rolling in friends, where’s your *girlfriend* Tonia tonight?”

He shrugs and says, “We kind of broke up.”

“What?” I say, perking up a smidge. “When? Why?”

He cocks his head and looks at me funny.

“What? You didn’t hear?”

“Hear what?”

“Or read about it? In the paper or anything?”

“Read about what?” I ask.

“Quit pulling my leg,” he frowns.

“Dart, I’ve been working nonstop since Christmas break started last week. This is usually our busy time, and until my Mom gets home from rehab, well, I’ve got to handle all the bills myself, so…”

I pause, hardly believing I’ve let *that* much slide.

He looks up, at least, past the giant tub of popcorn and matching, gurgling giant soda and says, “I’m sorry, Sasha; I didn’t know.”

“Why would you?” I kind of snap, not intending to; he flinches, a little, but not too much. “I mean, I kind of can’t even believe I said all that right now. Out loud. Too… you… of all people.”

He waits me out while I tell the sordid tale; at least, the edited version.

When I'm done, he says, "I never knew all that was going on at home, Sasha. You just always have it so together."

"Yeah, well, looks can be deceiving. You think I'd be working in a dump like this if I didn't have to pay the frickin' rent on a double-wide at the Snowflake Motor Court?"

He winces; I guess I am a little shriek-y suddenly.

"Sorry," I grumble. "I didn't mean to hijack *your* big news."

"Well, you're about the only person who hasn't heard it, so I suppose it still is news."

"What's news, Dart?"

He blinks, looks down, then up, and says, "We had practice, you know... first weekend of Christmas break? Coach was punishing us for losing that big meet last month. Anyway, I guess over Christmas break the janitors clean out whatever's left in the lockers. Well, when I got to practice, coach was waiting for me outside; Coach and a couple cops!"

"What?"

"Yeah, I guess the custodian found half a dime bag or something in my gym shorts, called the cops, then called Coach. He was steamed."

"Did they arrest you?"

“I can’t believe you didn’t see the mug shot, Sasha; it was on the front of the sports page! I mean, not to brag or anything. Hell *yeah*, they arrested me; cost my Dad like three grand just to bail me out, on top of he lost his job before Halloween and we haven’t made a house payment since Thanksgiving. He’s freaking out!”

“So, what’s gonna happen?”

“Nothing much,” he says, voice leaden with irony. “Only... I have to do about 6,000 hours of community service and am on probation for, like, ever. I can’t even associate with anyone on the swim team, or extracurricular activities. When Tonia found out, she flipped. Said she couldn’t have me ruining her chances of getting into State.”

“Ouch,” I say.

“Yeah, ouch is right. Three years we’ve been dating, and the first time I’m not 100% Mr. America she bails. She’s already dating Brash Masters.”

“Brash?” I say, eyes rolling. “Doesn’t he have, like, an IQ of 38 or something?”

“Yeah, well, he’s all-state in four sports and counting, so... they

kind of grade him on a curve, if you know what I mean. Tonia calls him a 'real asset' to her 'well-rounded collegiate lifestyle,' whatever *that* means."

"Cold," I say, suddenly realizing I've been sipping on his soda and munching on his popcorn for the last 10 minutes. "Oh. My. God!"

I gasp and quickly pour him another bucket full of his own, plus a new soda.

"Dart, I had no idea, I'm so sorry. So, what, you figured a little movie time might clear your head?"

His eyes get big, his cheeks flushed. "Clear my head? My Dad kicked me out tonight. Right after my grandparents left, he took me out to the garage. He packed my bags and handed me a few twenty dollar bills. Said he'd booked me a room at the Snowflake Chalet through New Year's. Wants me to clear my head and think about where I'd like to live once school starts up again."

"Because you got busted for some weed?" I ask.

"It's more the newspaper thing. That mug shot really shook him up. He's in real estate, you know, needs to keep his image up. I think he's just kind of distancing himself from me, you know?"

“Not really,” I murmur. (I mean, how do you “distance yourself” from your son, am I right?) “No.”

“Yeah, me either.”

“So, what are you going to do? I mean, once the hotel room runs out.”

“Sasha, I have no idea. I can’t live with any of the guys on the team, Tonia’s cut me loose, I have no other family in Snowflake, I mean...”

His voice trails off, his shoe squeaking on the tile floor of the lobby.

“My mom still has 76 days left in rehab,” I say. “That is, if she sticks with it this time. Her room is free, or the couch, or whatever...”

“I couldn’t, Sasha,” he says, face full-on crimson now. “Seriously, that’s... way over the line. I mean, you hardly know me.”

“*Know you?*” I want to say, but don’t; for obvious reasons. “*I’ve been silently stalking you since you transferred here halfway through freshman year, you doof! I know everything **about** you! Except, you know, for the fact that you’re a total pothead!!!*”

“I’m not proposing, dude,” I snort, slugging him playfully on the arm. “Get over yourself.”

“I don’t mean it like that,” he says, eyes so desperate I already know his answer before he does.

“Where are you going to go, Dart? It’s a big place; bigger than it looks on the outside. I keep it clean. You... you... can get a job here, help pay some of the bills.”

“Yeah?” he asks, the fact that his head’s not spinning around a pretty good indicator that his not completely disgusted by the idea; by either idea.

“Mr. Kerns made me assistant manager last week and hasn’t hired my replacement, so... I could put in a good word.”

“You’d... do that for me?”

“Yeah, Dart; I would.”

“But... we’ve never said 10 words to each other at school.”

“Yeah?”

“So, I mean, don’t you hate me?”

“Uh, no. I mean, I may think you have rotten taste in chicks and really bad drug hiding skills but, other than that, I actually think you’re kind of... cool.”

“Me too,” he blurts.

“Yeah, most jocks *do* think they’re cool.”

“No, I mean... I think you’re cool, too.”

“Yeah, well, free popcorn and a warm bed will do that to a guy.”

He blushes again, and looks toward his theater.

“Hey, you wanna... watch the movie with me?”

“I can’t,” I say, too quickly, if only to hide the fact that I’ve been daring him to ask me for the last 15 minutes. “I’ve got to bag the popcorn, clean the soda machine nozzles, spray down the mats...”

“I can help you with that,” he offers, smiling for the first time all night. “After the movie’s over, I mean. Come on, Sasha. I don’t want to watch a movie alone and... and... it’s Christmas.”

“But what if somebody else shows up?” I ask lamely, looking out into the deserted parking lot.

“Hand me your keys,” he says.

I do, not even reluctantly.

He strides toward the front door on long, athletic legs, find the right key after about eight tries, locks the front door with finality and even turns the “Open” sign over to “Closed” in the ticket window.

“There,” he says, handing the keys back. “Now you have no more excuses!”

He's right; I don't.

I follow him, both our arms loaded down with movie snacks.

The theater is big and empty and I wait to see where he'll sit; dead center, last row – my kind of scary movie watcher!

The movie is just about to start, but he kind of lazes his way back there.

He lets me sit first, and I'm waiting for him to do the whole extra seat between us deal like every other guy I've ever dated, but he plops himself right down next to me and even offers me his extra box of Slow Pokes!

He waits until we're settled to ask, "Are you really serious, I mean, about... the couch?"

I practically choke on a popcorn kernel and say, "Are you really serious about helping me clean out the popcorn machine?"

"Yes."

"Then... yes."

"I don't know what to say, Sasha."

"How about not saying anything," I joke. "You know, this *is* a movie theater."

“But I don’t want to watch the movie anymore,” he says.

“Seriously?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he says, turning toward me.

“So... what do you want to do then?”

“Well, I just... if we get a jump on the cleanup, maybe I can swing by the Snowflake Chalet and get my deposit back, since I never actually stayed there, and I can give you the money for a start on my rent, and...”

Figures; I finally lure a guy over to my house, and he turns out to be a bigger prude than... than... Santa Claus!!!

Chapter 3:

Snooping Around in Snowflake

She shows up the Monday after Thanksgiving, 9:01 a.m., clutching moist tissues and dabbing dry eyes.

“Welcome to Snooping Around Snowflake,” I say, greeting her at my office door before showing her to the seat across from my cluttered desk. “What can I do for you, Mrs. Fletcher?”

She smiles, edging crow’s feet from around both of her sad, blue eyes and says, “Please, call my Myrna.”

Her voice is gentle and kind; like her eyes.

She looks like she’s been up since Thanksgiving Eve, pondering whether or not to show up here today.

I slide down into my ergonomic desk chair and feel that extra tug at my heart that always means I'm getting ready to tackle a tough case.

Not tough for me to crack, mind you.

Just... tough for me to forget.

"Well," she begins, voice cracking as she stares past me to the wall of movie posters behind me. "Wait... are those of... you?"

I blush and nod; many people think it's vain of me to put those posters in such a high place of prominence but, for me, they're one big ice breaker.

This is one time when they've really done their job.

"Guilty as charged," I say in a practiced, mock-humble voice.

"I had no idea," she marvels, inching up closer to my desk to get a better look. "I loved *Murder Most Manhattan*," she gushes. "And *Murder Most Melbourne*; ooh, and *Murder Most Manchester*, too. Look how young you were!"

She looks at me then, almost startled at what she's just said.

Before she can apologize I say, as I have 100 times before from this very desk chair, "Seems like a million years ago."

“But... how did you end up here? I mean, if you don't mind me asking?”

I smile and say, “We were filming my last installment of the *Murder Most... installment here. You might have seen it? Murder Most Myrtle Beach?* Anyway, I was tired of the Hollywood scene, my husband – who was also my producer – was having an affair with his assistant, it all seemed so cliché. I wanted somewhere the opposite of cliché. After the last day of shooting I packed a bag, rented a car and drove until it ran out of gas. I landed here, in Snowflake and, well... I've been here ever since.”

She sits back in her chair, done stargazing and says, “What an absolutely marvelous story.”

I nod and try to reel her back in. “You're not here today to hear my story, Myrna; I'm here to hear yours.”

She nods, like a scolded schoolgirl, and takes a deep breath. “I think my husband is cheating on me.”

I nod and ask calmly, “Why is that, Myrna?”

Myrna frowns and says, “I knew you were going to ask that.”

She's wearing black slacks in about a size 16; I know, because that's my size, too.

She has on a black blouse underneath a seasonably red jacket, a bright holly pin affixed to its left lapel.

She is in her early 50s, with vibrant red hair pulled back in a ponytail.

Small, diamond pendant earrings are her only jewelry.

She doesn't even wear a watch.

"I just... do I have to have proof?" she asks, catching me off guard.

"No," I chuckle, crossing my legs. "That's my job. I'm just interested in hearing *why* you suspect your husband is having an affair."

She shuts down, afraid to give voice to the concerns she's no doubt been living with for weeks, maybe even months.

If not years.

I try a different strategy.

"How long have you been married?"

"Pierce and I have been married 32 years," she says. "And I never, ever thought I'd be someplace like... this. I didn't even know places like this existed."

"Most people don't, Myrna. That is, until they do."

She nods, wearily, and as the morning sunlight filters in through my office window it spotlights the dark bags beneath her restless eyes.

“In all that time,” she goes on, “I’ve never had a reason to distrust him.”

I nod as she looks away, not at my wall of framed movie posters but... past... them.

“What does Pierce do, Myrna?”

“He’s in real estate,” she harrumphs. “So he’s got all the time in the world to run all over town and I’d never suspect anything.”

“But you *do* suspect something. Right, Myrna?”

“I just, well, he’s been having these late night ‘meetings.’ Or so he says...”

As she begins her tale, Myrna’s normally placid, pale face comes to life.

Her skin blushes, her eyes widen, her lips scowl.

“And getting calls all time of day and night...”

I nod because, well, that’s real estate kicked in the pants.

But I don’t say anything because a smart woman like Myrna already knows that.

There must be something else or she wouldn't have gone to the trouble to look me up or set the appointment, nonetheless keep it.

“Then,” she says, reaching into her small black purse and retrieving a well-worn piece of crinkly white paper, “there’s this.”

She slides it over, face down, like she’s offering me a quote on some pricy objects d’art.

I pick it up and scan its contents.

It’s a receipt; for a bed.

A queen-size bed, to be exact.

And sheets, and pillows, a comforter and bed skirt, even a mattress pad, totaling nearly \$800 at the local department store.

“It’s the holidays,” I rationalize diplomatically. “Maybe it’s a . . . gift?”

Myrna shakes her head and says, almost apologetically, “We haven’t slept in a queen-size bed since we first got married. Even our guest rooms have king-size beds. Unless he’s turning the basement into a bachelor pad, there’s only one reason I know for my husband to buy a queen-size bed AND new sheets.”

“And why’s that?”

“Clearly, he’s dating someone with very low expectations...”

* * * * *

I begin tailing Pierce Fletcher the next afternoon, waiting outside his real estate office on Fiske Street and Elm, one of those cozy Victorians they converted into office space early last year.

Despite the holiday season it’s still open window weather this far south, and he and a male assistant have rolled up their sleeves and spent two hours just after lunch stringing Christmas lights over the door and around the giant picture window in the reception suite.

I eat a granola bar around three in the afternoon, hitting the “seek” button on my radio dial continuously trying to find something, anything, other than the 24-hour, 7-days-a-week Christmas music stations that have suddenly taken over the dial.

I finally find one on the local jazz station that plays mostly instrumental and listen as Pierce starts up his sporty red convertible and races off toward downtown Snowflake, South Carolina.

It's not very far from one place to anywhere else in Snowflake, and harder still to follow someone in sparse midday traffic, but that's why I drive a generic, tan sedan.

No bumper stickers, clean windows, quiet engine – the “invisible machine,” I call it.

And for good reason – no one ever remembers it.

Sometimes even I forget I'm driving it!

He stops at the Snowflake Suds and Salts, a bath shop on Main Street and walks out, 10-minutes later, with several gift bags full of assorted bath salts, soaps and other bath time paraphernalia.

Pierce is tall, reasonably fit, losing his wispy blond hair in the back and fond of whistling.

I can hear him from across the street as he slides into his car and peels away from downtown, whistling something that sounds vaguely like “Winter Wonderland.”

I follow Pierce to the hardware store, the wallpaper store, to several stores, one after the other, until his backseat and trunk are literally coming apart at the seams with holiday goodies stacked as high – and as wide – as they will go without tumbling into the street.

He looks happy, content, excited; the exact opposite of his lovely and nearly grieving wife, Myrna.

I shake my head as he finally pulls into the local Burger Barn, grabbing a sack full of burgers and fries so heavy and greasy it must be for two.

I shake my head again, wishing I had time to grab a burger and fries – maybe even a gingerbread shake – for myself!

Just then Myrna Fletcher rings, my cell phone vibrating on the dashboard.

The tan sedan cruises to the light on 5th Street; just then Pierce guns it through the yellow.

“Hello?” I ask, understandably a bit short.

“Holly?” she asks. “Holly Hunter?”

“Yes, Myrna, it’s me. What did I say about calling me while I was on the job?”

“Well, you said not to do it but... what am I supposed to do, sitting here alone all day?”

I’m tempted to snap, “*Uh, how about get a job you Real Housewife of Snowflake?*”

But I don't; for obvious reasons.

Besides, it's not Myrna's fault her husband has a lead foot!

"What can I do for you, Myrna?" I sigh.

"Tell me who my husband's cheating on me with," Myrna blurts, half-frustrated, half-anguished – all blunt.

"I know, honey," I sigh back, easing away from the stoplight as it finally turns green and trying to catch up to Pierce.

I can tell by the way the empty road stretches in front of me, turnoffs in every direction, that it's a lost cause.

"I know you're upset, and I know you're anxious and it's not fun sitting on pins and needles waiting for some private eye to do her job, but it's only the first day, Myrna. You've *got* to give me some time."

There is a frustrated groan on the other end; the kind that usually dissolves in tears.

I let her do her thing while I drive, from one end of the town back to the other, with no luck.

Finally I get inspired and ask, "Myra, honey? Did Pierce say whether or not he's coming home for dinner tonight?"

“He called a little while ago, Holly, and said he had to take a client out to dinner. At that new country club in Pine Hills? He told me not to wait up. This must happen, I dunno, three times a week lately...”

Her voice trails off and I think of the bulging Burger Barn bag.

He may not be cheating with anyone who likes queen size beds, bath salts and onion rings, but Pierce Fletcher is definitely lying to his wife.

I give her my pat line – “Tomorrow is another day, doll” – and hang up, knowing there’s nothing I can tell her to ease her mind tonight.

Then I pull into the Burger Barn myself, ordering enough for two and driving back to my lonely little condo for one.

Sure, it overlooks the ocean and has six rooms, but when you’re eating greasy burgers all alone at sunset, what’s the point?

* * * * *

Pierce Fletcher is dating a comely blond leasing agent.

I think.

As I snap the 400th picture of her this week, I imagine what Myrna is going to think, watching her husband schmooze this nubile 20-something as she escorts him to their third apartment this week.

It's December 9th, and I've been tailing Pierce for over a week.

In that time he's eaten more Burger Barn burgers than most football teams after a post-game binge, bought more household products than most newlyweds setting up house and visited the Snowflake Saplings apartment complex six times in seven days.

Most days he's accompanied by "Madison," or so says the nametag on the comely lass's forest green Snowflake Saplings golf shirt.

Madison is fond of snug khaki shorts that stop mid-thigh, and matching green and gold running shoes that add an extra inch or two to her already considerable 6-feet of young, nubile curves.

She laughs often and heartily at Pierce's jokes, and if only my zoom lens had a microphone I'd love to be a fly on the wall for their almost daily conversations.

I take careful notes on what apartment they're in now – B-6 – what time they go in – 4:17 PM – and how long they stay – 27 minutes, exactly.

Afterward, Pierce follows Madison to the rental office, where he stays another 42-minutes, emerging with a manila envelope bursting with what looks like an entire ream of freshly-signed documents and a smile that could choke a horse.

Afterward, rather than race home to Myrna – he hasn't gotten home before 10 p.m. all week, and don't think my aching eyeballs aren't cursing him every minute after 5 p.m. – he races down to the Snowflake Hardware Store and buys three giant boxes of... Christmas lights???

That's just the beginning; for the next week straight Pierce Fletcher spends less and less time at his real estate office – to say nothing of his once happy home – and more and more time inside Apartment B-6 of the Snowflake Saplings.

Occasionally his comely sidekick Madison will pop up the stairs in her snug cargo khakis and peppy running shoes, blond ponytail bouncing as she knocks on the door and, without waiting for an answer, lets herself in.

I snap photos of her entering, then leaving, making sure the time stamp will be clearly visible when I print them for Myrna later in the month as I prepare my final report.

The days, then the weeks, drag on.

Although I have more than enough evidence to convince Myrna that her husband is having an affair with Madison while he's supposed to be wining and dining real estate clients from here to Myrtle Beach, I stay on his trail.

For one, the holidays are a remarkably slow time at my private detective agency, Snooping Around in Snowflake.

For another, I feel really, really badly for Myrna and want to find something, anything, to prove me wrong.

But every night, it just gets worse and worse.

Sometimes Madison comes over right after she closes the rental office at seven; other times not until later, bearing a pizza box or to-go bags or cardboard trays full of green smoothies from the health food store down the block.

Meanwhile, the tiny apartment begins to literally glow with Christmas spirit.

Tiny white lights circle around every window, around every slat on the balcony made for two, where Pierce and Madison often share a quiet moment while she smokes a hasty cigarette before they return inside to

carry on their torrid affair, breaking only to hang a new decoration as the apartment turns into some hot and heavy holiday hideaway.

I finally call it quits when Pierce leaves work early on December 22nd to race over to the Snowflake Saplings and meet the delivery men who climb the stairs to Apartment B-6 holding a 5-foot Christmas tree and half-a-dozen crates marked “decorations.”

I drive back to the office, grumbling, grinding my teeth, and order up coffee and donuts from the deli downstairs before printing and collating and binding my final report well into the night.

* * * * *

“I want to confront him,” Myrna says, face red, mascara drying on her swollen cheeks the next night when I finally lay it all out for her; the clandestine meetings, the hottie known only as Madison, the lies, the Burger Barn takeout instead of client meetings, the whole ball of wax.

“Will you help me?”

I shake my head.

“Myrna, that’s a bad idea.”

“I can’t let him get away with this,” she fumes, standing up from the pictures, records, receipts and other assorted data I’ve managed to accumulate in the last month or so, spread helpfully across my gargantuan oak desk.

“You don’t let him get away with it, Myrna,” I offer. “You just… walk away.”

“Come on,” she says, turning in the doorway. “You can’t actually expect me to just walk away.”

Tonight Myrna is dressed casually in crisp khaki slacks, maroon pumps and a matching sweater jacket with a crisp, upturned collar that accentuates her long, almost porcelain neck and even longer red hair.

“No, I don’t Myrna but… at least wait until New Year’s Eve when you’ve had a chance to process the information.”

“What do you suggest I do until then, Holly?” she asks, sitting back down even though I know she’ll be right back up in a few – yep, there she goes, pacing again!

“Hire a good attorney,” I say. “Give him what I’ve just given you. Let him talk you down for a week!”

We share a good laugh, then she sits down again.

Her eyes are moist, but I've a feeling the sadness is gone from them for awhile.

She inches closer, literally pulling the chair closer to my desk as she says, "Come on, Holly. It's got to be tonight."

"Why tonight?" I ask.

"Because it's the night of his annual Christmas Eve bash at the office, at least, according to him. But I ran into his assistant today—"

"*Ran* into him, Myrna?"

"Okay, stalked him is more like it, but... he told me that they canceled the party and Pierce just gave everyone bonuses instead."

"That still doesn't explain—"

"Don't you see, Holly?" she interrupts. "As of one hour ago he called me saying he was running around trying to hem his new dress slacks for the party. It's Christmas Eve and he's going to lie right up to the holiday. You've got to come with me, Holly. I'll pay you extra, whatever you need, I just... can't do this alone."

We take my car, just in case Pierce looks out the window of Apartment B-6 and sees Myrna's telltale black Jaguar.

“Don’t you normally go to these parties at the office, Myrna?” I ask on the short drive to the Snowflake Saplings apartment complex.

“God no! Six hours of drunken realtors out bragging each other about this year’s inflated sales figures? I’d rather dine on an entire pine tree! No, I usually stay home and trim the tree.”

“Alone?”

Myrna’s eyes grow soft in the passenger seat as we cruise past downtown Snowflake, its twinkling Christmas lights and flickering street lamps reflecting in her watery eyes.

“It wasn’t always this way, Holly. When we first got married, we used to do everything together. I suppose we had to; we had the tiniest apartment in Richmond, this little walk-up flat but it had the most beautiful sunroom for my painting...”

“You’re a painter?” I ask, slowing down just a smidge so I’ll have time to hear Myra’s story before the “big showdown,” as she keeps calling it.

“Once upon a time,” she says, wistfully, as if it happened in another lifetime. “I was an Art major in college; then I met Pierce and gave it all up to be a stay-at-home wife. He didn’t want me to. Not really. I just had

waited so long for the right man, when I finally found him, I didn't want to be away from him, you know? I had the sunroom, and I set up my paints and palette out there and would while away the days painting while Pierce was off at work. He used to hang them up during his open houses; sometimes clients would buy them and we'd splurge on a big dinner.

“It didn't happen often; not near enough, anyway. We were so broke that first Christmas we got married, we had to wait until Christmas Eve and haunt the local tree lot until the guy finally agreed to give us one for three dollars! We used whatever we had left on cheap decorations and raced home and decorated it. We swore it would always be a tradition...”

“Then what happened?” I ask, the sign for Snowflake Saplings still a few blocks up.

“Pierce's career took off. He got bigger and bigger, better and better. We left the tiny apartment behind and moved up in the world, I suppose. A better address every year, it seemed. I helped out in the office all day, and gradually I quit painting altogether. By the time Pierce hired office help and didn't need me anymore, I guess I forgot I was a painter...”

She sighs, dries her eyes and concludes, “We moved here a few years ago, into one of the big houses in Crestmoor and, well, decorating,

settling in, I just made it my full-time job. And Pierce was so busy building the new branch, or so I thought...”

Her voice trails off, the glittery wonderland that is Apartment B-6 shining like a beacon as I pull into the space next to Pierce’s sporty red convertible.

“This is where he’s been spending his nights?” she asks, looking around at the lived-in complex and the modest compact cars littering the parking lot. “It’s so... so...”

“Retro?” I finish for her.

“That’s classing it up a bit,” Myrna sighs, standing from the car. “But why not be charitable, right Holly? It’s Christmas Eve, after all.”

We stand on either side of the car for a minute until I ask, “Aren’t you nervous?”

“Sure,” she blurts, stepping forward on her soft, maroon flats. “But I’m more nervous about the not knowing, you know?”

“I do know,” I confess. “I know how it was for me, Myrna, and I know how it’s been for hundreds of my clients over the years. You’re not alone, remember?”

“I sure feel alone,” she says, taking the steps two at a time.

I touch her arm just as she reaches to knock on the wreath-covered door. “Well, you’re *not*,” I whisper.

Then she knocks.

Pierce opens the door.

“Myrna?” he asks as I inch to the side, trying to stay out of his line of vision. “What... what are you doing here?”

“I suppose I should ask you the same,” she huffs, barging past as he stares at me, blinking.

We wait, Pierce and I – the cheating louse of a husband and the ethically-challenged private investigator who found him out – while Myrna stomps through the apartment screaming, “Where is she, Pierce? Where is she you lying sack of...?”

And then... and then... laughter.

Impossible, insatiable laughter!

And a shout of... joy?

And this: “Holly, Holly, come quick; you’ll never believe this!”

Her voice sounds almost... giddy!

I inch past Pierce, who seems surprisingly... at peace... for a cheating scoundrel who's just been outed as a, you know, cheating scoundrel!

Inside the apartment, I see why Pierce has been up here so often the last few weeks: he has recreated... something.

It's not just a winter wonderland, it's an antique showpiece.

From the flower and mushroom designs on the retro wallpaper to the dark brown drop-leaf table in the kitchen to the dried flowers in old ceramic vases, it's like we haven't just stepped into Christmas – we've stepped back in time.

“It's my drawing room,” Myrna cries, hugging me, tightly, as we survey the tiny but well-appointed space.

There is a huge plate-glass window you can't see from the parking lot, overlooking a tiny pond where fat, white geese travel back and forth on the frigid black water below.

There is a painter's easel and a fresh, blank canvas.

Well, not entirely blank I suppose: it's covered in a big, red bow!

On a battered blond wood high-top table are scattered paints, dozens of tubes of them.

Christmas lights hang overhead as Myrna dries her tears from a box of tissues on another end table.

“It’s perfect,” she whispers. “Down to the paints, and the window, even the stool is almost exactly the same; and look, he’s carved a heart around our initials!”

I peer closely and see “MF + PH Forever” in a crudely drawn heart.

“It’s just like the stool I had in that first little apartment, 32 years ago!”

We wander around the place, Pierce lingering by the kitchen counter, Myrna giving out little gasps of pleasure as she reaches out to touch faded bamboo wallpaper, goofy butterfly bedspreads and woven macramé plant-hangers dangling from the walls.

“How did you *do* all this?” she asks, staggering out to Pierce and stopping just shy of hugging him.

He opens a large scrapbook on the counter and reveals pictures of an old apartment that looks almost exactly like this one.

Just then the doorbell rings and in walks Madison, looking sedate and almost studious with a gingerbread house in one hand, a bottle of champagne in the other.

“Oh no!” she gasps, looking at Myrna.

“We were almost ready for you!”

“We?” Myrna asks suspiciously.

“Madison is a design student at the college, Myrna,” Pierce explains, taking the gingerbread house from her and setting it, just so, on an otherwise empty coffee table in front of an old orange Naugahyde couch. “Who do you think helped me find these old wallpaper designs, this old couch, the antique furniture?”

“Madison?” I ask, shaking my head. “All this time, you and Madison have been plotting this... this... what IS this, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“It’s Christmas,” Pierce says, to me, but looking at her; at Myrna, the love – the obvious love – of his life. “It’s our first Christmas, honey, remember? Before the world got too big, and success went to my head.”

“But why now, Pierce?” Myrna asks. “Why this year?”

He shrugs. “You’ve been so sad lately, honey; so... distant. And I know it’s my fault, always working, always chasing that next big deal, that bigger paycheck. So I put my energy into something special... for us.”

“It’s yours,” Madison says, popping the champagne. “He rented it for a whole year, with an option to buy if you really like it.”

“I-I-I don’t understand, Pierce?”

“It’s your new studio, dear,” he explains, walking over. “I want you to come here, as often as you like; paint to your heart’s content. It’s been too long, Myrna; I can’t wait to see what you paint first!”

Chapter 4:

Something Borrowed, Something Snowflake

“Are you sure about this?” he asks as we stand from the front porch swing the minute we see my mother’s emerald green sedan careen into the Snowflake Senior Center parking lot.

Mom’s face is almost as red as her flaming ginger hair, making me whimper, “At the moment, not so much.”

He chuckles and squeezes my hand tighter.

“Are you two out of your mind?” Mom bellows, stomping up the sidewalk in her chunky heels. “We’ve been planning this for six months and, all of a sudden, you decided to throw a shotgun wedding, at the senior center, on... Christmas Eve?”

“Mrs. Madigan,” Chuck says softly, evenly, in that quiet voice of his. “If you’ll just let us explain, you know, like we tried to do on the phone before you hung up on us—”

Mom rolls her big brown eyes and says, dramatically, “Would you expect anything less from a distraught future mother-in-law?”

“Distraught?” I sigh, easing Mom down into the porch swing as she seems to be having some kind of cardiac incident right here in front of the Snowflake Senior Center.

“Well, what would you call it, Haley, when your daughter calls you at noon on her wedding day?!?!”

“Okay, okay, I get it Mom, sure, but... why didn’t you tell us Chuck’s grandfather was so ill?”

Mom avoids our eyes, bites her ruby-painted lips and says, “I didn’t want to upset you guys. Besides, his nurse was hoping he’d be able to travel by spring...”

Her voice trails off, giving proof to her little white lie.

Chuck sits down next to her and, amazingly, grabs her hand.

“It’s okay, Mrs. Madigan. I understand.”

“You do?” she asks, looking up into Chuck’s soulful green eyes guiltily.

“It’s not easy to deal with, when a family member gets so sick; so fast. And you’re here every day, dealing with him, it’s hard to see something as it progresses like that. But I haven’t seen him since Valentine’s Day, and his decline is... pretty obvious.”

“Mom,” I cut in, pacing nervously in front of her as the old guy in the motorized wheelchair on the sun porch eyes me suspiciously. “We just don’t think Chuck’s grandpa is going to be able to fly down to Miami and be in the wedding this June.”

“But I just kept hoping he’d get better, you guys,” Mom says, still avoiding my eyes. “I guess I just wanted the perfect wedding for you two, not some rushed affair like... like... your father and I had, Haley.”

“I know, Mom,” I sigh, sliding down next to her on the porch swing. “But, we just feel it wouldn’t be right for Chuck to get married without Grandpa Logan in attendance.”

Mom nods, resolutely, clutching a tissue that’s seen better days.

“But... wouldn’t you two rather wait until, say, New Year’s Eve? That would give us a whole other week to prepare something nice, something... special?”

I give a secret wink to Chuck and say, “Mom, really, it just feels... right... to do it today, you know?”

She shakes her head.

“It’s taking every ounce of willpower I have in my body to not have Sheriff Buster lock you up for temporary insanity, but I have to trust you two and, after all, it *is* your wedding...”

She sounds rather disappointed about that fact; not that I can blame her.

Ever since Chuck proposed on Valentine’s Day, it’s been nonstop wedding planning.

With Chuck busy trying to get his graphics design company off the ground in the crowded Miami market, it’s been mostly Mom and I; texting, emailing, phone calls late into the night, Facebook recommendations, Twitter links, the works.

I often joke that Mom and I should go into the wedding planning business.

For the record, she always takes that joke *way* too seriously!

And now, in an instant, 10 months of planning have gone straight down the tubes.

“But all those deposits,” she says, shaking her head.

Chuck stands, smiles his crooked smile and says, “Sure, we’ll lose some money, Mrs. Madigan, but it’s already gone and paid for. Just think of the money we’ll be saving by not having to pay the balance.”

“But the flowers,” Mom groans, literally putting her open palm to her forehead as if she’s a future mother-in-law straight out of central casting. “The DJ, that oceanfront hotel, the cruise to the Bahamas, you’ll lose thousands on the deposits alone.”

“Better to lose thousands now than pay tens of thousands later, right Mrs. M?”

She looks at me as if to imply that my future husband is crazy (and, sometimes, I have to wonder myself). “If you say so, Chuck.”

She offers him her hand so that he can hoist Mom’s considerable, if firm, girth out of the claustrophobic porch swing.

She stands dramatically, a sight to behold in her navy Capri pants and matching sailor's top with white flats, sighs and says, "Well, if we're doing this, and it's clear we are, I'm going to have to make peace with it."

With that pronouncement, she closes her eyes and moves her lips, reciting some New Age mantra she no doubt read about in one of her women's magazines.

Chuck and I exchange amused, maybe bemused is the better word for it, glances until her eyes pop open, she smiles, inserts a breath mint from a little tin in her pocket and says, "Let's begin, shall we?"

"Where should we start?" Chuck asks uncertainly, running a long, pale finger through his curly blond hair.

"With the guest of honor, of course!" she announces.

When we look back at her uncertainly, she sighs, rolls her eyes, takes each of us by one arm and leads us into the entrance of the Snowflake Senior Center. "Grandpa Logan, of course!"

Grandpa Logan's room is down a quiet hall.

Well, come to think of it, the halls are all pretty quiet at the Snowflake Senior Center.

The walls are lined with plaid wallpaper and pictures of ducks, and horses, and hunters.

It looks more like a golf course clubhouse than a nursing home but then, I guess, that's the point.

Mom knows the way to his room; and why not?

Other than the nursing staff at the Senior Center, she's been his primary caregiver ever since he moved in.

Sure, Chuck and I flew back from Miami when he had his stroke two years ago, but... what could we do in one week that Mom hasn't done since?

She knocks on the door with a familiar "1, 2, 3" rap before letting herself in.

Grandpa Logan looks up from his crossword and beams the same crooked smile I see on Chuck's face when I wake up every morning.

"Gloria," he says, speech only slightly slurred after years of speech therapy. "How nice to see you again."

He starts to rise, clutching large, thin, veiny hands to the sides of his walker but Mom moves surprisingly quickly to his side and says,

“Nonsense, Cliff; you sit right there. I want you to be sitting when you hear the news these kids are about to spring on you.”

Grandpa Logan looks from me to Chuck and says, “Kids? What’s Gloria going on about? You know I’m an old man and can’t take much more mystery in my life.”

Here he gives Mom a spry wink that belies his frail frame and gray, almost yellowish skin.

“Well, Grandpa,” Chuck says, getting that little tickle in his throat like he does when he’s nervous. “Haley and I, that is, well... we’re getting married.”

Grandpa Logan smiles, chuckles and says, “I’m not *that* old, kids. I do remember something about you two being engaged some while back, and of course I have your invitation around here somewhere...”

“No, Grandpa,” Chuck says, more quietly, leaning down until he’s face to face with the man who raised him after his parents were lost in that terrible car crash when he was just five years old. “Today; we’re getting married... today.”

“No,” says Grandpa Logan, blinking rapidly. “But... but... I thought I had more time. To get better, to travel again...”

Even as he says it, the croak in his throat, the trembling in his limbs, tells the old man all he needs to know.

“No, no,” he says, shaking his head gravely and turning his attention toward Mom. “Please, Gloria, tell these kids not to do this. They’ve worked so hard, dear, and for so long. Why, every week when you bring my laundry and those lovely cinnamon buns from the Snowflake Sweet Shop, I can’t wait to hear what these two are up to next. Don’t rush this for... for... me, you guys...”

That’s it; that’s the moment Mom suddenly realizes: it’s worth it.

It’s worth it to lose the money on the deposits, to give up the cruise and the sunshine and the flowers and the hot, kickin’ South Beach DJ because, well, if Grandpa Logan can’t be there to enjoy it, then... what’s the point?

“I tried to drill some sense into their heads,” she croaks, acting all brave for the old guy. “But you know kids these days, Cliff; stubborn as the day is long. And listen, truth be told, they actually *wanted* a Christmas wedding all along...”

Still, Grandpa Logan shakes his head and scowls at Chuck the way only two grown men can scowl.

Chuck keeps his game face on, though, and flits about the room trying to keep everyone's minds off what the next few hours might hold.

“You haven't turned on your tree yet, Grandpa,” Chuck scolds playfully, plugging in the big 6-footer and reveling in the blinking colored lights that fill the room with sudden, if forced, gaiety.

“And how about some music? You always were partial to Nat ‘King’ Cole as I recall...”

Chuck slips a CD into a silver boom box and instantly smooth, suave Christmas carols fill the room.

Grandpa Logan is still shaking his head, but seems to be resolved to the fact that this is happening; one way or the other.

As if we're being too loud, or perhaps even having too much fun, a crisply dressed nurse with a stern face to match her starched white uniform knocks at the door bearing a hospital tray.

“Lunchtime, Mr. Logan,” she says, sliding across a few Christmas cards on his lonely table for two and setting the tray atop a snowman placemat that has Mom's name all over it.

“Morning, Lydia,” Grandpa Logan flirts as she slides the table over to his well-worn but clean easy chair. “I’ve got big news. Have you met my grandson Chuck and his lovely fiancée Haley?”

“Don’t think I have,” she says efficiently, offering a frosty hand.

We take it in turn and murmur a subdued round of “Nice to meet you’s.”

Then Grandpa Logan says, “They’re getting married today!”

“Congratulations,” she says, quickly turning toward the door to attend to the rest of her rounds.

Before she can beat a hasty retreat, Grandpa Logan winks at us and says, “I was thinking, Lydia, how nice it would be if they could use the common room. It’s already decorated for the holidays, you see, and neither of them have much family in town, so…”

“Out of the question,” she snorts. “The common room is for residents only, Cliff; you know that…”

Mom holds up a finger as Chuck’s face falls.

“I think that’s a *great* idea, Cliff,” she hisses to Grandpa Logan before following the nurse out of the room and slamming the door behind them.

We hear muted voices out in the hall, then not so muted voices, then Mom's stern voice issuing a rather harsh, particularly non-cheery directive; after that, it goes back to muted silence.

When Mom marches triumphantly back into the room, Chuck and I instinctively reach out for each other's hands – her smile tells us that Grandpa's idea hit pay dirt!

I leave Chuck with his grandfather and spend the rest of the afternoon trying to keep up with Mom.

For a big lady, she moves fast, hard and with plenty of purpose.

It's impressive to see her resourcefulness in the face of what, to her, must surely feel like tragedy.

And yet, despite her meager circumstances and our limited budget, she manages to scrounge up a winter wedding to be proud of in three hours flat.

I can't wait to rush back and tell Chuck, but Mom's not having any of it.

“Oh no,” she tells me, dropping me off at home where the smell of fresh gingerbread and cinnamon tell me she's left the oven on; again! “You may be going about this whole wedding thing all backward, but there's one

tradition you're not going to break! Chuck is *not* to see you until you walk down the aisle, or shuffleboard court, or whatever Grandpa Logan's finagled for us in the Snowflake Senior Center common room – and you can take that to the bank.”

As I step onto the porch and use my house key to let myself in, she eases past in the driveway and reminds, “My dress is in the attic; sewing machine's in the guest room. Now, you remember how to sew, don't you Haley?”

“And if I don't,” I chuckle, imagining how my bloody digits might look against her white wedding gown.

“Then you better learn, and fast! I'll be back to pick you up once I've made sure the caterer and florists know what they're doing, okay?”

Without waiting for an answer, she drives away, tailpipe of her giant green sedan steaming in the mid-afternoon chill.

* * * * *

It's a much different scene two hours later when Mom pulls up in the huge sedan, hair freshly done and, from the looks of her pudgy toenails in the salon's giveaway purple flip-flops, a mani-pedi in her recent history as well.

"Are you... crying?" I ask as she storms into the living room to find me polishing a pair of white shoes I found in the back of her closet.

"I just... it's been..." she stammers, blubbering and resisting the temptation to hug me and pour mascara down the front of her old wedding dress. "I've forgotten what it looked like, Haley. You look so beautiful! It fits perfectly."

"Now it does," I croak, neck sore from hunching over her antiquated sewing machine all afternoon. "Did you forget you're about two inches taller than me – and several more inches *bustier!*"

She fusses and tugs until the dress is just right, then urges me to lean – not sit – against the kitchen wall until she can find something suitable to wear.

She does so in record time, emerging in a crisp, subdued linen suit.

It's off white and flatters her warm, sensitive face and flowing red hair.

“Come on, come on,” she urges, helping me down the stairs in the snug, form-fitting dress.

I try to squeeze in the passenger seat, but it’s pretty clear after try number four that it ain’t happening.

I eventually just spread myself out across the backseat and squeeze Mom’s shoes against the door after she slams it shut.

She takes to the street on two wheels, but even at her speedy pace I can see the twinkling lights of downtown Snowflake as its quaint and picturesque little gingerbread house looking stores begin closing in advance of Christmas Eve.

Their lights twinkle, their shop windows beckon as the owners lock the front doors and wish each other “Merry Christmas” before heading home.

Once more, I’m convinced we’ve made the right decision after all.

The Snowflake Senior Center has been transformed.

Glowing white Christmas lights are now entwined around the visitor drop off arch, twinkling in the night as I step from the car – with Mom’s help, of course.

The once empty parking lot is now full, and as the lobby doors hiss open to announce my approach, I can hear the strains of wedding music playing on a nearby organ.

I resist the temptation to cry, eager to see how Chuck is holding up.

Grandpa Logan sits in a wingback chair in the lobby, eyes closed amid the happy flurry of a hundred or so guests sitting patiently a few feet away in the common room.

Mom and I walk over, looking at each other uncertainly, until Grandpa Logan winks and, with much effort – and help from both of us on either side – takes to his walker.

“You look beautiful, Haley,” he says, voice thick with emotion, eyes moist with tears.

He teeters above the walker, his veiny hands gripping the metal edges tightly.

Even now, I wonder if he’ll be able to walk me down the aisle as we’d planned over lunch earlier that afternoon.

“Thank you, Grandpa Logan; you look very dapper as well.”

And does he ever, cloaked in a borrowed tux two sizes too big, but clean-shaven and his wild gray mane slicked back with what looks like a tube and a half of hair gel.

“So,” he winks at Mom. “Does she have them?”

“Have what, Cliff?”

“All four of the necessary elements for a long and happy marriage.”

“Oh God!” Mom and I say at the same time.

In all the hubbub, we’ve totally forgotten.

In the end, it’s Grandpa Logan who calms us down, and not the other way around.

“I believe the wedding bands Chuck picked up today are new, right?” he chuckles, putting our minds at ease. “And lord knows I’m old! Now that gown, if I recall correctly, is your mother’s, right dear? So you’ve got your something borrowed. But heaven’s alive, I don’t see anything blue...”

And, with trembling hands and stick thin arms, Grandpa Logan holds out a thin, silver chain at the end of which rests a tiny sapphire pendant.

Mom and I gasp at the same time.

“It was Chuck’s grandmother’s,” Grandpa Joe explains as I lift my veil and Mom clasps it around my formerly bare throat. “I wanted to bury her with it, but she insisted I save it for just such an occasion. It looks beautiful on you, dear.”

It feels cool yet warm against my skin, and I think once more how small our family is, yet how loyal and loving as well.

To think we might have gone through with our old wedding plans, elaborate and expensive as they were, and missed such magical moments with Grandpa Logan.

Mom inches behind us as I wind my arm through Grandpa’s and wait for him to inch toward the white French doors that lead into the spacious common room.

Inside I see two rows of chairs on either side of a hastily-made aisle.

Scattered occupants fill the rows, with plenty of seats leftover.

I look for familiar faces – Mom’s friends, my friends, Chuck’s friends – and see none.

Mom watches me and, over Grandpa Logan’s shoulder whispers, “Honey, at the last minute, and on Christmas Eve no less, what can you expect?”

I shake it off and look closely at the gray hair, bald heads, even blue hair of what look to be the Snowflake Senior Center's finest residents.

"Don't worry, Haley," croaks Grandpa Logan with a watery-eyed wink. "None of my friends were too busy to show up. Now, keeping them awake, that's another story..."

Just then a rail thin organist launches into an off-key rendition of the bridal march that couldn't sound sweeter if Jim Brickman was playing it himself.

Some of the residents stand, most assisted by the nursing staff who seem more than happy about spending Christmas Eve at a wedding instead of dishing up sauerkraut and dinner rolls in the dining room like usual.

As the song continues, through first one verse then two, then three and four, I inch patiently along at Grandpa Logan's side.

I can tell he's struggling, but persistent; he wouldn't stop and sit now if bodyguards manhandled him into one of the folding chairs on either side of the aisle.

Along the way I take in the Christmas trees in the front of the room, sparkling merrily, the giant silver ornaments dangling from the ceiling on

thick gold thread and, of course, the back of Chuck's trim physique in his newly-rented tux.

Make that, his newly rented powder blue tux.

"The country club has this annual Christmas Eve ball," Mom whispers from behind, breath minty fresh on the nape of my neck. "Apparently it's formal so all the black tuxes were taken by this afternoon. Still, doesn't Chuck look dreamy?"

I have to admit, he does.

Even more so when, at last, Grandpa Logan and I reach the "altar," or pretty much the space between the two towering Christmas trees where Chuck stands silently with a middle-aged man in black.

"Psstt," Grandpa Logan whispers to Chuck's back.

And then Chuck turns, sees him, sees me, and breaks into a smile brighter than 10,000 Christmas bulbs strung together.

He reaches instantly for my hand as I clasp his, his palms warm and moist.

Or, wait... are those mine?

None of it matters as Chuck leans over me and, with his free hand, hugs Grandpa Logan so tightly I'm afraid we'll have to spend our honeymoon in intensive care!

He hugs Mom, too.

That is, before Mom gently leads Grandpa Logan to a seat a few steps away, where he lands with a contented sigh.

I don't think he'll be doing too much walking anytime soon.

At least until the New Year!

The ceremony is brief.

The man in black is no priest, but a justice of the peace whose parents happen to live in the Snowflake Senior Center!

"I know this is well past their dinnertime," he tells us in confidence before the ceremony begins, "so I hope you don't mind if I give you the abbreviated version!"

After the day we've both had, Chuck and I nod happily; we'd probably do this over the internet by now if we could!

Ten minutes later it's official; Chuck slips a simple gold band – "Lucky Value Mart was still open," he whispers as he slides it over one knuckle – over my trembling finger.

I return the favor and the justice of the Peace says, “I now pronounce you Mr. and Mrs. Logan.”

As we kiss, chastely because, please, look at the audience, Chuck sighs and says, “Thanks for suggesting this, Haley. I owe you one!”

He notices his grandmother’s pendant on the way to the “reception,” which is being held in the dining hall and features whatever the local caterer, Simply Snowflake, could whip up on two hours notice; we could care less.

The residents figure it’s better than creamed hash and ginger ale and Chuck and I are too ecstatic to worry much about filling our bellies.

“Grandpa Logan gave it to me for ‘something blue’,” I confess as Chuck handles the pendant gingerly, as if perhaps it has a life of its own.

“It’s beautiful,” he says, almost as if viewing it for the first time. “I’ve only seen it in pictures before, on Grandpa Logan’s dresser. You must mean a lot to him to part with this, Haley.”

As we watch Mom bring a heaping plate of pate and brie to his table, I lean into Chuck and whisper, “I hope one day we can show him how much he means to us.”

Chuck stretches out his arms, his big, robin's egg blue arms and says, "I think we just did, *Mrs.* Logan!"

"Come on," I say, dragging him to the table where Mom and Grandpa Logan are sitting. "Let's get something to eat. I'm starved, *Mr.* Logan!"

"Congratulations," says Mom as Chuck grabs us each a plate from the sumptuous smelling buffet.

She pours us each a glass of champagne, even Grandpa Logan, even though it's not on his list of "approved beverages."

He waits until Chuck is back to offer a toast: "To the nicest couple I know. I hope you're as happy as your grandmother and I were, Chuck. And Haley, I'm glad to call you a Logan!"

Mom winks at Grandpa and slides over an off white envelope.

"Here's your present," she says, winking. "It's the best Cliff and I could do on such short notice."

"Uh, how about the wedding was our present, Mrs. Madigan?"

"Uh, how about you call me 'Mom' from now on, Chuck?" Mom laughs. "And the wedding is only part of it. Every couple needs at least *one* wedding present."

I open the envelope to reveal the brochure for the Snowflake Sophisticate, a hot new resort in the heart of downtown Snowflake.

The picture on the brochure shows floor to ceiling windows, a loft-type second floor and wooded grounds with an indoor swimming pool and racquetball court.

“I don’t get it,” I stammer.

“Cliff and I here pooled our funds and got you an all-expenses paid week at the Sophisticate, including their annual New Year’s Eve ball!”

“What?” Chuck chuckles. “But we loved sleeping on your futon couch, Mom!”

We laugh and Grandpa Logan looks proud to have played his part.

Chuck and I share a look and sigh.

“Here’s our present to you guys,” Chuck says, bowtie dangling from either side of his broad, athletic neck. “We were able to exit the lease on our condo in Miami early and, ever since we got into town last week, we’ve been quietly scouting places. As of January 3rd, we’ll be moving to Snowflake full time!”

Scattered applause greets the announcement, but Mom immediately leans in to ask, “But what about your graphics design company, Chuck? You can’t give that up.”

“He’s not, Mom,” I say, patting the sleeve of her off-white suit jacket. “Chuck can work from anywhere, and most of his staff is freelance anyway; they can work from home, too. Trust us, it wasn’t a decision we made lightly. But, with Grandpa Logan here and you being his primary caregiver, we just didn’t feel it was right to flit back to Miami after Christmas and wash our hands of family anymore. We want to be here, Mom; we want to help.”

Mom smiles and nods, then whispers to me, “But what about you, Haley? You were just starting to enjoy the Miami lifestyle, with all your volunteer work and making new friends. What are you going to do here in little Snowflake, South Carolina?”

I smirk and lean toward Mom as Chuck gets busy cutting Grandpa Logan’s prime rib.

“Well, I wanted to talk to you about that, Mom. Now that we’re downsizing and Chuck will be focused on growing the business, I was thinking maybe you and I should do something, you know... together.”

“Us? Together? Like what, Haley?”

“Like what?” I say, spreading my arms to take in the majesty of what Mom and I have been able to whip up in less than 12 hours; heck, in less than eight hours! “Like... wedding planning, Mom! Duh!”

At last Mom’s soft brown eyes fill with tears as she rushes to embrace me, the crush of her massive arms welcoming me back home, once and for all.

About the Author:

Rusty Fischer

A full-time freelance writer, Rusty Fischer is the author of several supernatural romance novels for young adults, including *Zombies Don't Cry* and *Vamplayers*, both from **Medallion Press**.

His first contemporary romance for adults, *A Town Called Snowflake*, comes out from **Musa Publishing** (<http://www.musapublishing.com/>) just in time for Christmas.