

# CHRISTMAS EVE IN CREEKWOOD

*A Marnie Reilly Mysteries Short Story*



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*By*

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***Dedication***

For Izzy and Emma

***Note to the reader:***

This short story falls nowhere in the timeline of the Marnie Reilly Mysteries Series.



## *Marnie Reilly Mysteries Main Characters*

### **Marnie Reilly**

Marnie Reilly is compassionate, ethical, quirky and loyal—qualities that actually irk some people. She is a force of nature for sure. Tall and athletically built, Marnie’s style is casual—she opts for jeans and boots over skirts and heels. Her job calls for skirts and heels—her home life the former. Her straight blonde hair, with hints of strawberry shining through the long layers, falls just below her shoulders. She normally wears it in a ponytail, but Detective Danny Gregg loves it when she lets it fall loose around her shoulders.

Marnie is fiercely independent and guarded. People who know her well attribute this to the tragic and untimely death of her mother and, just a few years later, her father. She believes she can take care of herself. Asking for help doesn’t come easily to her, and she doesn’t let people in easily, but when she does, she expects them to be kind, loyal, and honest. Terrible romantic relationships are Marnie’s forte. The absolute worst had been Ken Wilder; he was a cruel and abusive cheater with a penchant for gaslighting her.

The first thing most people notice about Marnie are her eyes—aquamarine and haunted. ‘Haunted’ is her gift of clairvoyance revealing itself. The second thing people notice about her is her undying devotion to her Border Collies Tater and Dickens. They’re a package deal.

Marnie dedicates her life to fixing things—mainly people and stray dogs. She’s a psychologist, but she refers to herself most often as a counselor. Marnie is often so busy fixing things for others that she forgets to take care of herself. Does she really forget, or is there just so much to fix that she focuses on other things? Danny Gregg isn’t sure, but he plans to stick around to find out.

### **Detective (Lieutenant) Daniel Gregg**

Danny is an oddly handsome man with a dimpled smile that doesn’t quite go with his rugged face. His thick, sandy brown hair is often slightly messy from running his fingers through it when he is thinking or stressed. He is a tall man, solidly built, and is fiercely protective of those he loves. His sharp wit and astute sixth sense make him a great cop.

A steely blue gaze is the second thing that most people notice about Danny. The first is his badge; he wears his gold shield with great pride.

Danny is a widower. He lost his late wife Sarah several years back to suicide, and adding to feelings of remorse, he lost his mother Carol to depression and suicide, too.

Danny met Marnie while investigating the murder of her abusive ex-lover, Ken Wilder. On first meeting her, he found her to be the most irritating woman he had ever met, although her kindness, independent nature, wisdom, sassiness and beauty won him over.

### **Detective Tom Keller**

Tom is Marnie’s best friend, and has been since they were five-years-old. He is also Danny’s partner at the Creekwood Police Department. Tom is a tall and handsome man with short black, wavy hair, chiseled features and eyes that are so blue, they are almost violet.

Marnie calls Tom a scaredy cat because it is a well-known fact that Tom is afraid of things that go bump in the night. He is especially squeamish when Marnie chats with spirits.

### **Tater and Dickens**

Marnie Reilly’s black and white rough-coat Border Collies are intuitive, energetic, and highly intelligent.

Tater is well-trained and has a stable of tricks he can perform on command. Like all Border Collies, he needs a job, and his primary profession is that of his mistress’s protector.

Dicken is a work in progress. He’s still a puppy, but he’s learning every day.

## *Christmas Eve*

Wild wind wailed and huge, fluffy flakes of snow drifted to the ground outside of a log cabin tucked neatly into a tall stand of pines just off Lake Road in Creekwood, New York. Snow-covered hickory, hemlock, and maple trees swayed with the northerly gusting through the valley. The granite stone chimney billowed white smoke into the evening air.

A man and woman, dressed in clothes entirely wrong for a cold winter's night, stood on the veranda peering through the frosty windows. Detective Daniel Gregg, Marnie Reilly, and Detective Tom Keller chatted and laughed as they drank from steaming mugs. A fire danced brightly in the fieldstone fireplace—the large hearth adorned with two snoring Border Collies—both laying on their backs, front paws curled into their white chests. Tiny colored lights gleamed through the pine boughs blanketing the mantle, and a grand and twinkling Christmas tree filled the side windows overlooking the lake. Pine garland draped the hand-hewn beams of the vaulted ceiling, and a pinecone and mistletoe ball hung from the center beam.

Marnie glanced toward the window—one eyebrow raised, head tipped to the side. She narrowed her aquamarine eyes and then turned back when Tom poked her arm playfully. Nodding toward the window, Marnie said something that had Danny and Tom crossing the room. The man and woman drifted away into the shadows.



Tom cupped his hands against the glass and peeked out into the darkness. “Marn, I don’t see anything out there—just snow, Christmas lights, and the porch.”

“You sure you saw someone?” Danny turned away from the window and studied Marnie.

Marnie twisted her mouth to one side and shrugged. “Pretty sure. I don’t know—maybe I just sensed something.”

Tom shivered. “Ah geez! Marn, don’t start with that spooky shit! Not tonight! It’s Christmas Eve!”

Marnie giggled. “Afraid of a little Christmas spirit, Tom?”

“I’ve got all the Christmas spirit I need right here in this hot buttered rum,” he replied, picking up his mug.

They all jumped as an alert squawked on Danny’s phones. The Border Collies quickly sat up, ears at attention. Danny pulled his phone from his back pocket and sighed.

“Well, they’ve just closed the highway. A logging truck lost its load, and the truck following slammed on its brake, jackknifed and tipped.” Danny ran a hand through his thick, sandy brown hair. His blue eyes focused on the windows.

Marnie crinkled her forehead with concern. “Is everyone okay?”

Tom pulled his phone from his jacket pocket, which was hanging on the coatrack near the front door. He quickly thumbed through his phone. “Yeah. It says the drivers escaped injury—no one else was involved.”

Danny frowned. “Why didn’t your alert go off?” he asked Tom.

Tom glanced up and shrugged. “I’m not as important as you are, Lieutenant.”

Danny rolled his eyes and scoffed. “You should receive the same alerts that I do.”

“I turned my sound off when I was at church. Forgot to turn it back up, that’s all,” Tom replied sheepishly.

Before an argument could ensue, Marnie jumped in to save Tom. “Let’s all be thankful everyone is fine. We should start thinking about dinner. There’s no way they’ll deliver our food with the road closed.”

Danny nodded. “Yeah, that’s the problem with one road in and one road out. I’ll call the restaurant and cancel the order.”

“I’ll go see what I can pull together,” Marnie replied as she headed toward the kitchen with the Tater and Dickens the Border Collies trotting closely behind.

“We’re stocked up,” he called after her. “You never know when a storm will hit this time of the year,” he mumbled to himself. As soon as his words left his lips, pinpricks trickled down his spine. He glanced toward the windows and inwardly shivered. The wind had picked up, and it was snowing harder. He could see the flakes swirling around the Christmas lights on the trees in front of the cabin. He also saw two shadowy figures cross the veranda.



Tater and Dickens sat at the sliding glass doors in the kitchen—their noses pressed to the glass. The kitchen overlooked a deer run in the woods behind the cabin. The dogs loved to sit and watch deer, raccoons, birds, squirrels, chipmunks, foxes and sometimes Percy, the black bear who lived in a cave near the cabin. Tater’s scruff stood on end and Dickens whimpered as the motion sensor lights switched on and lit up the woods.

Marnie glanced toward the doors. *Hmm... what now?* “Shush! There isn’t anything out there other than a few forest creatures. C’mon on over here, you two.”

Tater and Dickens turned and acknowledged their mistress, but they didn’t leave their post. Marnie crossed to the doors and peered outside.



Out of Marnie’s view, two women watched from the woods. They appraised her—tall with long, straight, strawberry blonde hair. Her athletic frame was obvious in her jeans and long-sleeved, Christmas green Henley shirt. Her eyes were bright in the lights of the kitchen.

“She’s the one,” one woman said to the other.

“Yes, she is,” the other woman responded. “Shh! We don’t want her to see us.”

“Do you think she can?”

The woman nodded tightly in reply.



“Hey, Marn!” Tom shouted as he entered the kitchen.

Marnie spun around quickly. “Geez! Tom! Why do you have to yell? You scared me half to death,” she scolded with a frown.

“Ha-ha. You can get mad at me when I scare you fully to death. Where’s the hot buttered rum stuff?” he asked, holding up two mugs. “Danny and I are ready for another steamy beverage.” Tom’s violet eyes twinkled with mischief. Marnie noticed that his black, wavy hair needed a cut. It was

much longer than usual, and it was curling as it had when they were kids. The two had been friends since they were five years old—they could read one another like a book—which Tom did at that moment.

“What’s up with you?” Motioning with a nod to the back doors, he asked, “You’ve been acting all spooky. Have we got visitors I can’t see?”

With a half shrug, Marnie turned back to the doors. “Hmm. I’m not sure—but I think someone is messing around out in the woods.”

“Great! That always ends well for us.” Tom replied sarcastically with an exaggerated exhale.

“What ends well for us?” Danny asked as he walked into the kitchen. He crossed to the fireplace, tossed a few pinecones from a basket into the fire, and turned to observe a glance between Marnie and Tom. Leaning his brawny six-foot five-inch frame against the stone fireplace, he studied the two friends.

Tom dropped into a chair, stretched out his lanky legs out in front of him, and waved a hand in Marnie’s direction. “Madame Séance over there thinks we’ve got visitors!”

Danny smirked—his dimples deepening as a grin spread across his oddly attractive face. “What’s a matter, Tom? Are you afraid that your Scrooge-ish behavior of late will have you entertaining the ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future? Ha-ha!”

Tom threw a defiant look Danny’s way. “I’m not a Scrooge! It’s just that everyone makes a big fuss out of shopping for gifts, spending a huge amount of money, and that’s not what Christmas is about!”

Marnie snickered. “I didn’t spend much on your present, Tom. It’s just a little something that I thought you would appreciate. I also have a bag of homemade cookies, fudge, and tarts for you. I made Christmas treats for everyone.”

Tom quickly sat up and smiled. “Where’s the bag? I’m hungry!”

Marnie rolled her eyes. “You’re always hungry. You can have the bag later. If you could please feed our four-legged friends, I will worry about feeding the two-legged variety. Now, what do the two-legged critters want for dinner?” She turned to the fridge and pulled open the door.



Having lost sight of the detectives and Marnie, the man and woman traveled to the back of the cabin. Neither paid much attention to the cold gusts of wind or the falling snow. They had a mission, and they were determined to see it through. Out in the woods behind an old hemlock tree, they spotted the two women—they were on the back deck peering through the window.

“Who are you?” the man demanded.

One woman turned and placed a finger to her lips. “Shh! We’re here for the same reasons you are.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” replied the man.

“And how do you know why we’re here?” the woman with the man asked.

“Shh! We have been expecting you. There was a message that you would come too. We all have the same goal. Perhaps we can work together.” The two women glided silently down the deer run and stood in front of the man and woman. “We must be careful. We think that they’ve seen us.”

The man nodded, and the woman at his side grimaced. “I was afraid of that,” she said. “We’ll stay in the shadows until the coast is clear.”

All nodded in agreement.



Marnie wiped her hands on the tea towel she tucked into the front of her jeans as an apron. “There,” she said, pushing a loose tendril of hair from her face, “Dinner should be ready in about 90 minutes. I hope you two are extra hungry.” She laughed and joined them at the table.

Danny filled a glass with wine and nudged it across the table to her. Tom stood and went to the fireplace. Picking up the poker, he stoked the fire and placed a log onto the glowing embers.

Marnie nudged Tom with her toe. “Maybe we should add another log in the living room, too. I have a funny feeling about tonight.” Just as Marnie finished her sentence, Danny and Tom’s phones both squawked an alert. Both men read the screens.

Tom glanced up from his phone and stared at Marnie. Danny did the same.

With mild amusement, Danny asked, “Are your Spidey senses working overtime, Ms. Reilly?”

Taking a sip of her wine, she nodded. “Yup. Ever since I turned on to Lake Road—I don’t know. My hackles have been up. So have Tater’s. Look at him over watching the woods. He hasn’t barked, but he is alert and his scruff is up.”

Tom scrunched up his nose. “Do you suppose Percy is moseying around?”

Danny shook his head. “Nah! He’s tucked up in his cave. We won’t see him again until spring. I haven’t seen him since Thanksgiving.”

“What did the alert say? The one that just came through?” Marnie asked.

“Ah! Roads are closed. Looks like we are all here for the night. Who wants to help me haul some wood inside?” Danny pushed his chair back and stood.

Marnie leapt from her seat. “I’ll help. C’mon, Tom. If we all go, we can get enough wood inside so that we don’t have to venture out again tonight.”

Tom threw up his hands and got to his feet. “Why not! Safety in numbers is also a good reason. Besides, the knuckleheads should go out.”

“Maybe we should put them on their leads—just in case. We don’t need to be chasing two rambunctious Border Collies through the woods tonight.” Marnie walked through to the living room, pulled on her boots, scarf, and jacket, and called out to Tater and Dickens. “C’mon, knuckleheads! Let’s go out to pee before we get snowed in.”

Tater and Dickens raced into the living room and both skidded to a halt in front of their mistress. Marnie clipped their leads onto their harnesses, picked up a canvas wood tote, and waited for the men to get on their coats and boots.

Danny reached out a hand. “Let me take Dickens. We don’t need him pulling you off the porch.”

Marnie laughed and gladly handed the lead to Danny. “Yes. I need to work with him on his lead skills. He’s getting better, but he’s still fairly wild.”

Danny pulled open the big door, and a gust of wind whooshed into the cabin. He stepped out on the veranda with Dickens, Marnie, and Tater followed, with Tom close behind. They stood, taking in the winter wonderland surrounding them.

Danny whistled. “Wow! That alert wasn’t kidding. The wind *is* gusting. Geez! Look at those drifts!” He pointed to a snowdrift that was attempting to swallow up Marnie’s car. Tom’s truck was in danger too, but the hood of Marnie’s car was barely visible under the blanket of white.

“You’ve got some shoveling to do in the morning, Marn,” Tom teased with a laugh.

Marnie punched his arm lightly and nodded toward the garage. “I think that the three of us will be out here shoveling at dawn. The garage doors are disappearing, too. Danny won’t be able to get his Jeep out to plow the road.”

They all walked off the step and into the snow. Tater and Dickens, ears tight to their heads, braced against the wind.

Marnie handed Tom the tote. “Here, we’ll walk Tater and Dickens if you can load this up, please.”

He took the tote and turned to Danny. “Don’t you have two of these?”

Danny nodded in response. “Yup. There’s another one under the tarp. Let’s fill them up and then come back out for more. I don’t want to run out if the power goes off. My big generator blew a gasket, and I haven’t picked up a new one yet. I forgot when I was in town this morning. The small generator is in the garage, but it isn’t much good at keeping the furnace going.”

“Have you got candles?” Marnie asked.

“Yes. I’ve got hurricane lamps in the cellar and a couple of LED lanterns down there, too.”

“Quit yacking and let’s get the wood and get back inside. It’s freakin’ cold out here!” Tom stomped off toward the woodpile.

Tater and Dickens nosed around the snow and finally found their favorite spots. Danny handed Dickens’s lead to Marnie, and she took the dogs back into the cabin, then went back out to help gather wood for the fire as Danny and Tom pushed through the door with two full totes.

“Hang on, Marnie. We’ll go with you,” Danny said. “I think we should all stick together. Our past adventures make me agree with Tom—safety in numbers.”

She leaned against the big door, waiting for them to unload the totes. Tom took his tote to the kitchen and Danny stayed in the living room, stacking the logs neatly as he removed each from the tote. Marnie grinned. The detective was a bit of a neat freak—something she found endearing and mildly annoying at the same time. She could hear Tom dumping the tote on the kitchen floor, knowing he would go back and stack the logs later, but his approach differed from Danny’s.

Tom strode into the living room with the empty tote. “C’mon. Let’s get the rest and get back inside. That weather is not fit for polar bears.”

Satisfied that the logs were stacked neatly, Danny grabbed up his tote and headed for the door with a scowl directed at his partner. “You just dumped the logs in the kitchen, didn’t you?”

“Yes, sir, I did. I’ll stack them when we come back in,” he replied with a shrug.

“It’s not worth an argument, guys. C’mon!” Marnie pulled open the door and stepped out onto the veranda. She startled and grabbed Danny’s arm. “Did you see that?” she whispered loudly.

“See what?” Danny asked, looking in the direction where Marnie pointed.

“Swear to God, someone just ran around the corner of the cabin. Over there! By the woodpile!”

Danny clenched his jaw. “I didn’t see anyone. Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I’m sure. I know I saw someone—and it was a person.”

Tom scoffed nervously. “Living or dead?”

Marnie glared at him. “You know damn well that I can’t always tell the difference between a living person and a spirit. I know we’re being watched. That I am sure of!”

“Sorry, Marn. You know I joke about things that make me uncomfortable. Have you got a loony client that may keep tabs on you? You know, stalking you?”

Marnie’s face reddened with anger, and she rolled her hands into fists. “Thomas Keller! My clients aren’t loony!”

Holding his hands in front of him as a sign of surrender, Tom backed away. He didn’t want to be within striking distance if she threw something at him.

Danny gently placed a hand on her shoulder. “Okay. Let’s *all* try to stay calm. Marnie, you know that you have some... uh... challenging clients. You’re a psychologist—of course you are dealing with mentally ill people who may...” She cut him off mid-sentence.

“Why does it have to be one of my clients? Have either of you recently had one of your loonies get out on parole? Or escape? You are cops! Who did *you* piss off?”

Danny frowned and shook his head at Tom before he could say something to make things worse. “Let’s just get the wood and get back inside. Okay?”

Marnie nodded tightly and then screwed her face up at Tom before stomping off to gather the wood. As she approached the woodpile, a loud squawk echoed from the branches of the tree above. She glanced up just as a large crow fluttered its wings, dusting her face with snow before taking flight. She burst into giggles and turned to face her friends. The two men could not help but break into laughter.

“Oh! My! Goodness!” Marnie exclaimed with a fit of giggles. “That crow scared the bejesus out of me and I think I scared the bejesus out of him.” She continued to giggle as the snow melted down her face.

Danny crossed the short distance and used his scarf to wipe the snow from her hair and face. Tom bent and gathered up a handful of snow and expertly made a snowball. Marnie alerted Danny, “Incoming!” as she dove for cover. Danny turned abruptly and took the full force of the snowball to his chest. Marnie returned fire and hit Tom in the forehead. Dazed by the blow, he didn’t see the next white missile fired at him by Danny.

He threw up his arms in surrender. “Hey! Two against one isn’t fair!” In reply to his objection, two snowballs hit him simultaneously: one hitting him in the chest, the other in the head.

“It’s true, you know. Maybe you should sit this one out, Ms. Reilly. Let me sort him out,” Danny teased as a snowball spun past him and hit Marnie in the arm.

Eye-brow raised, she replied, “It appears Detective Keller isn’t interested in a fair fight. He just surrendered—and yet, he has returned fire.”

“We should take him out then, shouldn’t we?” Danny replied with a laugh.

“Take him out!” Marnie whooped, bending to scoop up another handful of snow.

“C’mon! That’s it! This time I really do surrender! I’ve got snow meltin’ down my shirt and into jeans. I am out!” Tom held up his hands.

“Ha-ha! We beat you!” Danny proclaimed.

“Let’s get the firewood and get back inside. I’m cold and hungry,” Tom griped.

Marnie held her right hand up to her forehead—her thumb pointing straight to the right, and her index finger extended up.

“Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I’m a loser,” Tom conceded—his face flushed. He shivered and picked up the canvas tote and stomped to the woodpile.

Danny clapped him on the back. “Next time, mano a mano.”

Tom grudgingly nodded in agreement. Marnie rolled her eyes and filled the second tote. Danny reached for it, but she brushed him away.

“Fill up your arms, Detective. We don’t want to come back out here tonight.” She visibly shivered—not an “I’m cold” shiver—a spooked shiver. Her eyes surveyed the lake, and Danny understood as he witnessed two shadowy figures ducked out of sight behind a pine tree.



“Do you think they saw us?” the man asked the woman.

“Most likely,” she replied with a frown.

“What about Tom? Do you think he saw us?” he asked.

The woman laughed. “No! He was too busy worrying about his ego. Silly man,” she replied with a titter.

The man joined her in laughter. “We should go back up onto the veranda to see what they are doing. The others have the back covered. Once they have all fallen asleep, we can make our move.”

She nodded in agreement and then pondered her response. “What about the dogs? Won’t they alert them?”

“I’ll take care of the dogs. They won’t be a problem,” the man replied with a stiff nod.



Marnie opened the oven door and breathed in the aroma of beef stew. She pulled on a pair of oven mitts and removed a cast iron Dutch oven. Placing the stew on the table, she called out, “Who’s hungry?”

Tater and Dickens kept watch over the forest while Danny, Tom, and Marnie ate a chunky stew of beef, carrots, mushrooms, and baby potatoes with generous sides of steamed broccoli and sourdough rolls slathered with butter. The chatter over dinner was easy—comfortable—but the three friends did glance to the glass doors each time Tater or Dickens grumbled.

Tom’s eyes were bigger than his belly when pushed his chair away from the table. “Marn, that was fantastic! I couldn’t eat another forkful! What’s for dessert?”

Danny pushed his chair back in unison with Marnie. “How could you possibly eat dessert now?”

Marnie puffed out her cheeks. “I am stuffed!”

“He’s a bottomless pit. I’ve watched him eat three bear claws in one sitting. Makes me want to vomit!” Danny stood, stretched, and went to the back door. “What do you think, Tater?” He leaned down and scratched dog’s ears. The Border Collie glanced up and then leaned against Danny’s leg. “What’s the matter, pal?”

Tater whimpered and pressed his nose against the glass. Dickens let out a tiny woof and bounced forward. Putting a paw on the window, Tater let out a long, hushed “a-rooh”, and then sat—ears perked up, tail wagging.

Marnie pulled a face and then joined Danny and the dogs at the doors. “That was a weird noise, Tater. What’s wrong, buddy?”

He glanced up at his mistress—his mouth closed tight—no smile, which is quite unusual for Tater.

“Who do you think it is, Danny?” Marnie leaned her shoulder into his. She followed his steely blue gaze to a large hickory tree. “Did you see something?”

He shook his head. “You know, on a night like tonight with the snow and wind—and the clouds moving so fast, our eyes are probably just playing tricks on us. Stormy nights can do that.” He shrugged and turned away from the window.

As they left the kitchen, a loud *boom* echoed through the cabin—and then the power flickered—once, twice, three times, and then darkness surrounded them. Turning back to the windows, her breath caught. Two shadowy figures quickly passed by the glass and disappeared down the steps. Tail tidily tucked between his back legs, Dickens yelped and ran under the table, overturning a bar stool as he raced past the island. The trees swayed violently in the winter wind, and Marnie jumped back as a gust of wind hurled a tree branch into the windows with a deafening *thunk*. Danny and Tom raced to her side. Tater’s ears flattened against his head and his low growl crescendoed into a snarling, ferocious bark.

Marnie wheeled around to face the detectives. Her face drained of color and her hauntingly beautiful eyes grew wide; she sank to the floor, wrapped her arms around Tater, and mumbled into his neck, “Here comes the storm.”

Tom shuddered. “Ah! Geez, Marn! Don’t say that! Every time you say that, something bad happens.”

Danny knelt down next to her and gently pulled her away from Tater. “Marnie, everything is okay. It was just a tree branch. The wind is giving us all a case of the willies.”

She shook her head. “It’s not just the wind and you know it.”

He gave her a hug. “C’mon! Our minds are playing tricks on us—and we’re shell-shocked from unpleasant goings on out in those woods in the past. We’ll get some candles and lanterns, and then we’ll sit by the fire.” He turned to Tom. “Let’s grab a flashlight and go to the cellar. I won’t bother with the portable generator. I don’t think the power will be out for long.” Danny rose to his feet and held out his hand for Marnie. “Let’s get you and the pups in by the fire.”

Marnie nodded a bit grudgingly, reached out her hand, and got to her feet. Tater and Dickens trotted past them and raced for their favorite spots on the hearth. Tom stood impatiently by the cellar door, Maglite in hand.

In the living room, Danny peeked out the window and then pulled the curtains closed. “Let’s conserve heat. I doubt that there’s a draft—but just to be sure.”

Marnie raised an eyebrow. “Draft? Humph!”

While the detectives gathered candles and lamps, Marnie busied herself stoking the fire and fluffing the pillows on the couch next to the fireplace.

“What do you two think?” Marnie cocked her head at her dogs, who had settled onto the warm hearth. Dickens mumbled an unintelligible Border Collie offering, but Tater stared into her eyes. His unblinking and steady gaze told her he had seen what she had. “I’ve never known a person *or* a spirit to duck into the shadows if they mean no harm. Have you, Tater?” Tater dropped his chin onto his front paws and sighed—his eyes never leaving contact with Marnie’s. “Are you just upset because I’m upset, or do you think I should be upset? Sorry if my energy is upsetting you, Tater.”

Tater lifted his head, glanced over her shoulder and smiled. Marnie furrowed her brow and spun around. There was no one there—living or dead. She turned back to Tater. “What does that mean, Tater? Why are you smiling?”

“Maybe he heard Santa’s sleigh bells,” Tom suggested with a smirk, as he walked into the living room carrying a box of church candles - a lantern balancing atop the box. Behind him, Danny carried two hurricane lamps—which he gently set on the coffee table. He dug into his shirt pocket and produced two boxes of safety matches.

Tossing one box to Marnie, he said, “If you could light this one, I’ll take the other into the kitchen.”

Marnie removed the glass chimney from the lamp and set it aside. She struck a match and smiled. “Oh, how I love the smell of sulfur in the evening!”

She lit the hurricane lamp, adjusted the wick and replaced the chimney. The lamplight produced shadows throughout the great room. Marnie shivered and then found her favorite seat by the fireplace—a big, buttery leather overstuffed chair with a red plaid stadium blanket draped off the back. She sat, tucking her feet under her, and pulled the blanket around her shoulders and did her best to relax. Tom settled in on the couch opposite her and stretched his long legs out on top of the coffee table. Marnie leaned forward and stuck her finger into a hole in the bottom of one of his socks.

“You better hope Santa brings new socks,” she said with a giggle.

“I haven’t gotten socks for Christmas since I was a teenager. I have to buy my own, hence, the condition of the ones I’m wearing,” Tom said with a laugh.

“Does anyone want a drink? Coffee, tea, hot toddy?” Danny called from the kitchen.

“Irish coffee!” Marnie called back.

“Make that two!” Tom chimed in.

“Ha-ha! We’ll make it three!” Danny called back. He returned a few minutes later with a tray of steaming Irish coffees.

“Hey, Marn, where are those cookies you mentioned earlier?” Tom glanced around the room, searching for said cookies.

“The cookies are in a picnic basket in the kitchen.”

Tom was off the couch and headed for the kitchen before Marnie could finish her sentence. He returned a moment later with a peanut butter cookie in one hand and the basket in the other. He handed the basket to Danny, who, after careful consideration, selected a molasses cookie before handing the basket to Marnie, who she set it on the coffee table.

“I don’t know how you two can still eat after that dinner. I am full!”

Tom patted his stomach and shrugged. “Growing boys.”

Danny stood by the front windows, peering through the curtains. “We’ll work off the dinner and cookies shoveling snow in the morning. It’s piling up fast!”

“In that case, give me that basket! There’s some peanut butter fudge calling my name.” Tom reached for the basket and glanced up at Marnie. “Do you remember when your mother would make us taffy on snow?”

Her eyes lit up. “Oh, my gosh! Yes! I love taffy on snow! We should make it.”

Danny plopped down on the couch next to Tom and picked up an Irish coffee. He took a large sip and smacked his lips. “Oh, that’s good! What’s taffy on snow?”

“Mom would boil maple syrup down and then pour it over a pot of fresh snow. The syrup would get all gooey and cold. We would sit there with forks and devour it!”

“She usually made it on snow days from school or after we’d been ice skating on the pond,” Tom added.

“And Dad would tell us not to get the yellow snow when we’d go out to fill the pot,” Marnie replied with a laugh.

“It sounds like your folks were great parents,” Danny commented.

Marnie nodded—her eyes tearing up. “I am so very lucky that they gave me such wonderful memories. I think of them and miss them every day, but my Christmas memories of them are so special.”

Tom nodded and turned to Danny. “Did Marnie ever tell you about her father getting on the roof on Christmas Eve?”

Danny made a half frown, half smirk face and shook his head. “No. I can’t say that I’ve heard about that.”

Marnie sat up quickly. Talking about her parents and Christmas was one of her favorite things.

“Well. One year, I refused to go to bed. I told my parents that I was going to stay up so that I could have cookies and milk with Santa, *and* that I was going to feed carrots to the reindeers. My parents told me that Santa wouldn’t visit us if I was still awake, but I insisted. Anyway, Dad snuck away and called Mr. Keller, who called Dad right back with some made up emergency so that he could get out of the house. Dad went out to the garage, found my grandfather’s old sleigh bells, and then he went up the roof, stomped around and shook the bells so that I would go to bed.” She giggled. “Gosh! I haven’t thought about that night in years!”

“You were a wicked little girl, Marnie Reilly!” Danny laughed. “So, did you go to bed?”

“My brother told me that Santa wouldn’t bring me a new sled if I was naughty.” Marnie took a deep breath. “Wow! Do you know I still have that sled?”

Danny laughed. “So you *did* go to bed.”

“I did!” she replied with a laugh.

Danny and Tom both loved to watch Marnie when she spoke about her parents. While always animated, she was more so when reminiscing about her family.

“What I remember most about that Christmas, though, was the beautiful, carved wooden carousel that Santa left for me. Of course, I found out years later that my father had made it. It was so beautiful. Tom, do you remember that?” Marnie asked, turning to him.

“I remember it. It was a music box, right? I don’t remember what song it played, though.”

“Yup. It played Galway Bay. My Papa Jack sang it to me when he tucked me in at night. Dad and Mom searched everywhere for the movement for the music box. Mr. O’Malley from the jewelry store found it for them three days before Christmas. I have pictures of it somewhere.” She rested her chin in her hand, sadness etching her forehead and eyes.

Danny frowned. “You don’t still have it?”

Marnie shook her head. “Nope. It was on my bedside table for a long time. I wound it up every night and fell asleep listening to it. One day it was there—then it wasn’t. We looked everywhere, but we couldn’t find it.”

Tom sat up and took a drink from his mug. “I remember joining the search party. We look for an entire day—inside, outside, the garage—even the treehouse.”

Marnie shrunk back in her chair. “Anyway, Papa Jack told me that if it was truly meant for me, it would find its way back to me someday.”

Danny nodded knowingly. “My grandmother told me that when some things went missing after my wife Sara died. That first Christmas without her was horrible. Gram encouraged me to put up a Christmas tree. She said that Sara would have wanted me to celebrate the season. I thought it couldn’t make my mood any worse than it already was, so I went to my storage unit to get our decorations. I

had sold the house and was building this cabin when the holidays rolled around. It was just one big room with a fireplace back then. So anyway, I went to the storage unit, but the decorations weren't there. I couldn't figure it out. Some of my mother's ornaments were missing, too. I always thought the Christmas things got misplaced when I moved out of the house. I thought that maybe I had taken boxes to Gram's—but I hadn't, and I still don't know what happened to those boxes." Danny waved a hand at the tree. "None of these ornaments have sentimental meaning to me. The others—my mother's and Sara's and mine—those had a story. I miss the star at the top of the tree the most. That's why I don't have a topper on my tree. Nothing could replace the star that my mother gave me."

Danny gazed into the fire—wondering what could have possibly happened to his treasured mementos.

"What about you, Tom? Any Christmas memories to share?" Marnie asked. "Now that Danny and I are all bummed out, maybe you have a good story." Marnie half smiled.

Tom shook his head.

"Afraid not. I had an idyllic childhood—until my sister Annie died. That wasn't so good. That was awful. I remember that first Christmas without her. Mom and Dad tried to make it special, but without Annie, it was weird. Lonely, you know?" Tom rested his head against the back of the couch and stared up at the ceiling. "I sometimes wonder if she knew how much I loved her." He sat up, glanced at the fire, and then toward Marnie. "I put my teddy bear in her casket so that she wouldn't be alone. Did you know that?"

Marnie nodded sympathetically, sat forward, and gently rubbed his knee. "You told me."

"I didn't know that you had a sister?" Danny remarked with a touch of shock and hurt in his voice.

Tom simply nodded and got up to add a log to the fire.

"Well, aren't we a sad, sad bunch," Marnie commented grimly. She slapped the arm of her chair and stood.

"Danny, have you got a radio? We could listen to the Christmas channel and fill this room with cheerful music," Marnie suggested.

"Uh. Yeah. I have one in my den. It's for emergencies, and I believe this *is* an emergency."

Marnie nodded. "It's a Christmas spirit emergency! We need a little Christmas! Now!"

Danny went in search of his radio while Marnie and Tom made more Irish coffees.



"Here they come!" the man said to the women. "Get back! Don't let them see you! I was hoping they would have fallen asleep by now."

"What are we going to do about Tom?" the man asked the woman with whom he had traveled.

"I don't know. We'll think of something," she replied, rubbing her forehead.

"How much longer do you think they will be awake? This is dragging on far too long!" one of the other women asked.

"Do you have somewhere else to be?" the man asked, cocking his head. "No? Well, be patient." His tone was gruff, but he, too, wanted to finish what they had come here to do. Patience was important in these types of situations. You have to wait for the right moment. If you move in too soon, the entire operation could be in jeopardy.

The woman bristled and then peeked into the kitchen to see where Danny, Marnie, and Tom were. She saw the latter two making coffee. She darted away from the glass when Danny returned to the kitchen, walking right past the doors. He turned for a moment—perhaps he had seen her—then he continued to the table where Marnie and Tom stood making drinks.



“Do you know which station has Christmas music, Marnie?” Danny asked, handing her the radio.

“Hmm... Yes.” She fiddled with the stations and finally tuned into the correct channel. “There we go!” She smiled as “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” melodiously flowed through the tiny radio.

They returned to the living room to find Tater and Dickens poking their heads through the curtains at the front of the cabin. The fur stood up on Tater’s back and Dickens simply whimpered. Danny raced to the window and looked out. “Ha-ha! There’s a possum on the porch helping himself to the suet feeder. I filled the feeder earlier today.” He reached down and smoothed out Tater’s coat. “It’s okay, buddy. The possum can eat the suet. He probably needs a bit of fuel to keep warm tonight.” Danny gave Tater’s ears a scratch, patted Dickens on the backside, and then returned to the fire. Sitting on the couch, he yawned and glanced at the clock on the mantle. “It’s nearly midnight and I’m fading fast. Are we camping out down here by the fire? Or are we going upstairs?”

Tom and Marnie glanced at one another.

“Let’s camp out down here where it’s warm,” Marnie replied.

“There is safety in numbers! Think about every scary movie you’ve ever been to see. They die when they separate,” Tom added with an uncomfortable chuckle.

Danny grumbled something inaudible under his breath, nodded, and pushed himself up off the couch. “Okay. For the scaredy cats in the group, I’ll go upstairs and get some pillows and blankets.”

Glancing at one another again, Marnie and Tom jumped up from their seats. In unison, they yelled, “We’ll come with you!”

Flashlight in hand, Danny led the way up the open staircase to the second floor of the cabin—Marnie and Tom followed closely behind, with Dickens and Tater taking up the rear. Danny stopped, turned around. Marnie ran into him as she was following so closely.

“Oops,” she said, grinning sheepishly up at him.

Danny grinned and shook his head. “I get Tom being all jittery, but you, Marnie, you’re not afraid of *anything*.”

Marnie shrugged. “I’m remembering a night not so long ago when someone tried to get into the cabin. It was a night a lot like this—snow, wind...” She shivered. “You haven’t forgotten the skylight incident, have you?”

Danny continued ascending the stairs. “No. I haven’t forgotten. I was trying to forget—but thanks for placing that image firmly back in my head.”



“Look! We can see in here now! The dogs moved the curtain just enough that we can see in!” said one woman excitedly.

“Where are they?” asked one of the other woman.

“Upstairs. They’ve all gone upstairs,” came the reply.

“Finally!” said the man. “I’ll be right back. I have to see what the boss has to report.”

“The boss?” asked one woman.

The man frowned slightly. “You know. *The* boss—the *one* who sent us here.”

“Oh!” all three women replied in unison.



They marched down the stairs carrying blankets and pillows. Tater and Dickens followed—each carrying one of Danny’s slippers.

Danny stopped short. Marnie ran into him—and Tom into her. “Did you hear that?” Danny asked, shining the flashlight up at the vaulted ceiling.

Marnie glanced up and then looked at Tom—who was staring straight up—his Adam’s apple bobbing.

“Shh! It sounds like someone is on the roof,” Danny said just as Tater and Dickens dropped the slippers and ran back up the stairs.

Tater stood at the top, ears up, head cocked to one side. Dickens raced up and down the hall, grumbling and whining.

“Dickens, settle!” Marnie called out. Dickens stopped running, sat and waited for instruction.

“Maybe it was ice sliding off the roof,” Danny suggested.

“It’s too cold,” Tom replied.

“I have electric tape up there to thaw the ice,” Danny responded with a shrug.

“Well, there is no electricity. The power’s out,” Tom said with a hint of uneasiness edging into his voice.

“Good point.” Danny ran his fingers through his thick hair. He offered Marnie the pillows and blankets he was carrying in the crook of his arm. “Can you take these downstairs? I’m going to check the skylight.”

“No way! We’re all going together!” Marnie argued.

“Yeah. Safety in numbers,” he mumbled.

They dropped the pillows and blankets, and all ran to the attic door.

“What in the hell are we doing? If the skylight wasn’t locked, someone could be in the attic,” Tom said—an edge of fear in his voice. “Two police detectives, and not a gun between us. Mine’s downstairs on the mantle. Where’s your gun, Danny?”

“Locked in the strongbox in my den,” he replied, fingers finding their place in his wavy hair once again.

“There’s no one in the attic,” Marnie said quietly—her eyes closed.

“Who are you talkin’ to?” Tom asked, nudging her.

She opened her eyes and raised an eyebrow at him. “I was just calling in a bit of help—that’s all.”

“Hmm... the psychic psychologist to the rescue,” Tom taunted.

“Hmm... my psychism has saved your ass a few times, Tom Keller!” she retorted.

“C’mon, you two. Knock it off! Marnie, you think it’s okay to go in? The coast is clear?” Danny asked.

Marnie gave a curt nod.

Danny eased the door open, peeked in, and then directed the beam of the flashlight up at the skylight. “It’s locked. I can see the latch from here.” He turned to Marnie. “No faces peering in at us like last time.” He glanced up again.

The brightest light any of them had ever seen shot through the snow-filled clouds and seemed to land on the roof of the cabin.

“Holy crap!” Tom shouted as he jumped back a step.

“What was that?” Marnie asked, mouth agape and aquamarine eyes wide.

Danny shook his head. “Wow! I haven’t got a clue! I’ve seen shooting stars, flares, you name it, but that... that... I have no idea what *that* was.”

“You gettin’ any *divine guidance* on this one, Marn? Anyone up there talkin’ to you?” Tom teased as he pointed up and nudged her with his elbow.

“No. No one is telling me anything.” She closed her eyes—focused, opened her eyes, and then held up her hands in surrender. “I’ve got nothin’.”

Danny put a hand gently on the middle of Marnie’s back. “C’mon. Let’s go downstairs. I’ll see if I have phone service and find out what that was.”



The man returned to the veranda with a large duffel bag and another woman, who stood meekly behind him. “We’re ready to go as soon as they are asleep. Are they still awake?”

The woman he had traveled with nodded. “Yes. They went upstairs and then came back down with pillows and blankets. We’ll have to wait a bit longer. This project has to be completed this tonight. It is too important. They have all deserved this for a long time.”

“Hmm... We can wait,” the man replied, then nodded his head to the newest member of the group. “The boss sent help. Between the five of us, it shouldn’t take long.”

“We’ll wait,” said the other two women, nodding in agreement.



Danny checked his phone for information about the flash of light, but he had no service. Tom and Marnie checked their phones with the same result.

Danny placed two more logs on the fire and then helped Tom move the coffee table so that they could set up camp. Tater and Dickens took up their usual posts on the hearth. Both were snoring in no time.

Marnie spread out a large quilt on the floor in front of the fireplace. She tossed a wool blanket and a pillow onto the couch.

“Tom, you’re taking the couch, right?”

“Yeah. I’ll leave the little love nest to you two.” He waved a hand at the cozy quilt, pillows, and blankets spread out on the floor.

“Are you sure you don’t want to snuggle with me?” Danny teased.

“No. Spooning with you isn’t high on my list.” Tom glowered at him.

“What about me?” Marnie asked with a smirk. “You don’t want to snuggle with me, either?”

“No! We slept in your tree house enough when we were kids for me to know that you kick in your sleep!” Tom rolled his eyes and sat on the couch to take off his shoes.

Danny hugged Marnie. “You don’t kick me. You snore a little, but you’ve never kicked me.”

“Ha! Daniel Gregg! I do not snore!”

“Yes, you do!” both men replied in unison.

“Oh! Go to sleep!”

Marnie threw a pillow at Tom and then sat down on the floor. She pulled off her boots and tossed them behind her.

“Should we turn off the radio?” Danny asked.

Marnie shook her head. “No. I’d like to fall asleep to the music. You have more batteries, right?”

“Yeah. I have more batteries.” He kissed the top of Marnie’s head and then settled back onto the quilt and a pillow.

Marnie scooted closer and rested her head on Danny’s chest. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas,” he replied.

“No funny business down there,” Tom said as his head hit his pillow.  
“Shut up, Tom!” Danny and Marnie replied in unison.



The man and three women watched through the window as the detectives and Marnie drifted off to sleep. The dogs rested comfortably on the hearth—the little one on his back with his legs in the air—the big one with his head resting on his mistress’s foot.

“Let’s go. They’re asleep,” said the man.

“What about the dogs?” asked one of the woman.

“They’ll be fine. I’ll make sure of it,” replied the man.

They slipped through the front door of the cabin with ease and quietly set about their business.

One woman stood over Marnie, watching her sleep.

The man waved to the woman—he placed a finger to his lips and did a shoo motion. She nodded grimly and slid away.

When they finished the job that they came to do, they quietly slipped back out again.



### ***Christmas Morning***

Marnie rolled onto her back and stretched. Tater stood next to her, staring into her face. Danny stirred a moment later—he stretched, yawned and saw Dickens standing next to him, staring into his face.

He rolled on his side to face Marnie. “Why do they do that? It’s creepy.”

She shrugged and giggled. “I don’t know. They’ve both always done that.” She propped herself up on her elbow and threw a pillow at Tom.

The pillow jerked him awake. “What? What?” He sat up, rubbed his eyes and threw the pillow back, hitting Marnie in the face. “Merry Christmas!” he mumbled.

“Merry Christmas,” Marnie replied with a giggle as she kicked the blankets away and got to her feet. She glanced around the living room. “What in the holy hell?”

Danny quickly sat up. “What’s wrong?” He got to his feet. Mouth agog, he scanned the living room. He reached down and nudged Tom. “You gotta see this!”

Sitting atop the coffee table were a carved wooden carousel, a book, a card, and a teddy bear.

Danny turned to the Christmas tree, which was adorned with ornaments that had not been on the tree last night. His eyes traveled up the tree to the bright, shining star at the top of the tree.

“The ornaments! My missing ornaments!” Danny stood, pointing at the tree. “And the star! That’s the star my mother gave me!”

Marnie kneeled down next to the coffee table. She picked up the carousel, wound up the key, and set it back on the table. The horses moved up and down to the sweet tune of Galway Bay. She blinked back tears and looked up at Danny.

“What’s going on?”

Tom reached for the teddy bear. “This can’t be!” he mumbled. He turned the bear over to look for the tag—but there wasn’t one. There was, however, a name on the bear. Embroidered on the bear’s backside was the name “Annie” in red stitching. He turned the bear’s backside toward Marnie. “Look at the name of the bear!”

She leaned in and inspected the bear’s bottom. Raising an eyebrow, she took a step back. “What is going on?” Turning back to the table, she picked up the book. She stared at the cover. Holding it up so that Danny and Tom could read the title, she commented, “Well, we know that this can’t end well. Anytime a book by Robert Frost is left for me, something terrible happens.”

“Marn, look at that. There’s a bookmark,” Tom said, pointing to the bookmark.

She stared down at the book as if it would bite and then opened the book to the marked page. She read aloud,

#### **Dust of Snow by Robert Frost**

The way a crow  
Shook down on me  
The dust of snow  
From a hemlock tree  
Has given my heart  
A change of mood  
And saved some part  
Of a day I had rued.

Danny frowned. “That happened to you last night. That very thing happened last night!”

Marnie nodded, and then quickly set the book on the table. “I’m confused. How could someone come into the cabin while we were sleeping, not disrupt Tater and Dickens, and not wake one of us? How is that possible?”

She turned to her dogs, who were wagging their tails happily. Each had a new tennis ball and a box of fish-flavored dog biscuits sitting beside them.

“This isn’t happening!” Tom shouted. “How could this be happening?” He waved his hands in the air, and then he spotted the card on the table. He snatched it up and opened it. “You will not believe this!” He handed the card to Marnie.

Danny stood over her shoulder as she read the card.

“Five ghosts of Christmases past have visited you. Remember that you are all loved and that precious mementos always find their way home. We hope and pray that the spirit of Christmas will stay with you always and forever.”

Marnie glanced up from the card—her face devoid of color. She held out the card to Tom.

“This is my mother’s handwriting. Look at it!”

Tom took the card and inspected the writing. “It can’t be.”

“Where’s my bag?” Marnie turned in a circle, searching the room for her handbag.

“It’s on the pool table,” Danny replied. He raced across the room, snatched it up, and handed it to her.

She rummaged through her bag, pulled out her wallet, and searched through the compartments.

“Here! Look at this! It’s the card she and Dad gave me when I graduated from high school. Look at it!” She waggled the envelope in front of the detectives.

Danny opened the card, inspected each card carefully, and frowned. “It looks like the same handwriting, that’s for sure.”

“My mother was here last night! How could I have not known she was here?”

“Maybe you weren’t supposed to know!” Danny said.

She picked up the book. “Look at this book! This is a book that my father had on his boat when it sunk. He always had this book with him in the galley. I gave it to him for his birthday. It’s the same book!”

“No, it’s not.” Tom snatched away the book and opened it.

Danny peered over his shoulder, and Marnie held onto his arm as they read the flyleaf.

“Happy birthday, Dad. I love you to the moon and back x 10.”

Beneath the inscription was another note.

“Merry Christmas, Marnie. I love you to heaven and back x 1000.”

Danny ran his fingers through his hair. “Five ghosts. Marnie’s mother. Marnie’s father...” He held up his hand and counted off on his fingers. “Tom’s sister...”

Marnie put a finger to Danny’s ring finger and then his thumb. “Your wife and your mother.”

“But they didn’t leave me a note. Why wouldn’t they leave me a note?” he asked sadly.

Tom took Danny by the shoulders and turned him toward the Christmas tree. “Uh... They kinda did.”

“Yeah. They kinda did, huh?” Danny stared up at the tree. “That light we saw last night. I wonder if it was the star?”

“I think that’s pushin’ it a bit, don’t you?” Tom scoffed.

“No. I don’t think it’s pushing it. If Marnie’s parents can write her messages, why can’t that light have been my star?” Danny glowered.

“I think it was,” Marnie chimed in. “I think that light was definitely Danny’s star.” She patted Danny’s arm, leaned up, and kissed his cheek.

“Let’s make coffee—and get something to eat. I’m starving!” Tom grumbled.

“You two go ahead. I want to take Tater and Dickens out first,” Marnie replied.

She pulled on her boots and coat, clipped Tater and Dickens’s leads onto their collars, and then stepped out onto the veranda. She paused at the sight of heavy *boot* prints tracking from the lake up onto the veranda. Tipping her head to one side, she raised an eyebrow.

*Hmm... Spirits don’t leave footprints.*

-The End?-





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