

*Life* is slow in the small town of Snowy Rock Village, Colorado, especially in December. The reason being, even if you enjoyed so called “snow days” there was such a grand amount of the pesky stuff that your door would not budge in the slightest. So everyone made due with the time together that Mother Nature graciously bestowed upon them. On Christmas morning the town magnificently shimmered with lights and love while the residents curled up in hand knit blankets, enjoying steaming cups of hot cocoa and gleefully tearing through present, after present. But if you asked anyone what holiday event they enjoyed the most, each and everyone would answer. “The Christmas tree lighting.” Oh how majestic that Douglas Fur looked coated with a fine layer of dew capturing the very essence, life, and meaning of Christmas. Yes, life is simple in Snowy Rock. But you see, there was one family, well one-half of a family, the Radke’s, who couldn’t enjoy the pleasures of a warm house or new toys. Jane Radke was a single mom who put both heart and soul into her work at the post office, (which she had taken up after the separation) but was recently laid off due to “budget cuts.” Now without the scarce, but steady income from her job, her apartment was given to, what the manager stated, “A person with the integrity to keep a *very* stable bond of trust (money) with his, or her better.”

In result, while her neighbors were pleasantly enjoying their Christmas by a roaring fire, *she* had to make due in an old wooden shack that Mrs. and Mr. Pennywagon had “graciously” spared, and nurse her two-year-old son. Kai was an unexpected birth, and with no job, no house, and no money, Jane was worried that Child Welfare would come knocking at her door anytime soon (hopefully though, when they knocked, the door didn’t fall off it’s hinges all together). But she was sure that they would not arrive until after New Years. For now her only worry was staying alive and keeping Kai fed and warm. She had just set him down for a nap swaddled in an old towel (which was the only warmth they possessed) but the poor child was still shivering ferociously. She walked over to his “cradle” made from an old UHAUL box and duck tape, kissed his cheek and whispered.

“Everything’s going to be ok.”

Kai fluttered open his piercing green eyes, blinked, and again drifted back to “Hushabye Mountain”. Jane waited by his side for a few moments, and after sneaking out the door being careful not to wake the sleeping toddler, asked Mary (Mrs. Pennywagon) to watch him while she went to buy dinner. She felt weird leaving Kai alone on Christmas, but it was either fetch dinner, or starve. Because even though Paul and Mary Pennywagons grace stretched farther than their neighbors, they refused to share food with anyone other than immediate family. Jane didn’t understand why, and when she addressed the situation, they both just mumbled something under their breath that faintly sounded like. “Would *you* want to eat with people that smelled like...?” She never could make out the last of it.

Feeling offended Jane rarely asked for a favor from them again, and if she could, avoided their presence in a whole. Especially after last week, when she made the fatal mistake of attending a white elephant party with Kai, who shattered their good china and almost incinerated the house while playing with wrapping paper by the fire. Luckily Kai wasn’t harmed, but the Pennywagons didn’t share the same concern, and have since then, despised the poor two-year-old. Which is why Jane was surprised that Mary had agreed to watch him. I guess you could call it a Christmas miracle. Anyway, while Jane walked to Safeway, Paul and Mary sat by their fire completely unaware of the loud sobs escaping from the shed.

“Mary.” Paul said in his normal/stern tone. “I have been meaning to talk to you about Jane and her demon son.”

“Yes dear.” Mary replied with a queer smirk slapped onto her already unattractive figure.

“As you know we have been harboring them for about a month and a-half now.”

“And?” She said nudging him along.

“Umm, well I’ve been thinking about it, and I have decided that it would be best if we give Jane until New Years to move out, or start paying rent. We have put up with them for *too* long. They have broken our property, almost cooked us alive in our own house, and not to mention that baby, oh that baby keeps me awake every night with it’s unbearable cries!” he said with his temper rising. “Yes! I say that we will not! I say not! Put up with those, those miscreants formuch longer!” (He was now standing on the table. Well, attempting to stand on the table. You

see Paul Pennywagon was not a very skinny man, so it was more of one pudgy foot heaved onto the

poor table) “If I could have my way I would throw them out right at this instant!

Mary looked at him, and calmly asked. “Honey, did you take your blood pressure medicine?” and returned to knitting. But Paul was in such a fit of rage that he didn’t even process that his wife was speaking.

“Tonight! Yes, tonight! When she gets back from the store I’ll tell her to get lost, or pay!”

“Paul!” Mary yelled to get his attention.

He looked at her with a crazed look in his eyes.

“Paul Xavier Pennywagon! You listen to me this instant! I agree that they have caused us much stress, but it’s Christmas. We can’t kick Jane out on Christmas. It just wouldn’t be Christian, or humane in that sense. At least give her till January to either move somewhere else or start paying rent. I agree that she needs some kind of foundation or she will keep going down this twisted path. But yelling won’t solve our problems. So dear, step off the table and please calm down.”

You see, Mary Pennywagon was not normally so nice, but she felt an almost parental responsibility over Jane and Kai. She didn’t like them, she actually despised them, but it was Christmas, and she thought whatever yelling and bickering they were doing now, could wait for tomorrow.”

“I guess you’re right Mary.” Paul said in a defeated tone. “But you do understand that I will not put up with them much longer.”

“Yes dear.”

Jane was steaming with anger after she finally left the supermarket. The last hour of her life was spent fighting with the store manager about how it “looked” like she was *trying* to steal two turkey sandwiches by concealing them under her jacket and pretending to be six months pregnant. But after assuring him that she was only testing the store’s security, he let her off with a warning. Jane always had an amazing talent with words; when she was young, the child could

get herself out of anything from detention to run-ins with the police, and now she could just about talk herself out, or in, to anything she wished. That's how she managed to score the Pennywagons shack. Even though she was aiming for one of their rooms, but at least there was a roof over her head (even if the roof had holes in it). Speaking of the roof, by now it was at least 8:00 and she was growing worried about Kai in the rain. Jane was pretty sure the Pennywagons wouldn't just keep him outside during the storm while she was gone, but not being positive, her pace quickened in case they were in a one of their, "*moods*". It wasn't until Jane turned on to Holly St. that she realized someone was following her. Stopping and pretending to tie her shoe, she scanned her surroundings for the pursuer. Nothing. There was no one else on the dimly lit street. She stood up and kept walking. All of the sudden the street lamps overhead started to flicker on and off then died out altogether. She heard footsteps behind her, but shoved it aside trying to convince herself that it was just one her many neighbors. The footsteps started to quicken as she drew nearer to the Pennywagons street and in fear she broke into a sprint. Sweat appeared on her brow and her breath quickened, but whoever, or whatever was chasing her, possessed unworldly speed and with every passing second, drew closer. She forgot about the uneven pavements in between the houses 632 and 636, and caught the tip of her sneaker on the cement protruding from the ground. She flew to the ground and her ankle snapped, the bone broke through the pale skin and blood gushed from the wound. She tried to get up, but fell again as the immense pain that shot up her leg. The pursuer had slowed, and she yelled into the night.

"Please don't hurt me!" She tried to sound intimidating, but her voice was shaking uncontrollably and full breath would not inflate her lungs.

There was no response. Instead, the street lamp above her unexpectedly lit up and revealed who was chasing her. It was a dog, nothing more then a stray Siberian husky. She called it over and started to scratch it behind the ears.

"Oh you scared me honey." She said

But instead of the dog barking in response, a gravelly voice spoke from behind her.

"Where's the boy?" These words seemed to freeze the air, and Jane's body went rigid with fright. She tried to scream for help, but with no success.

“I am only going to ask one more time, where... is... the boy?”

She tried to jump up but an invisible force pinned her down and she burst into sobs.

“DON’T HURT HIM!” She screamed.

“Wrong answer.”

A cloaked figure stepped into the light and threw off its hood, revealing a sickly pale face with bright yellow cat’s eyes. It hissed and flicked out a snakes tongue as to smell the air, then slowly advanced on Jane. A curved dagger appeared out of thin air next to him and floated down, placing itself in his hand. Thunder struck behind the ghastly horror as he raised the item that was to take her life.

“No! Please, please don’t do this! PLEASE!”

“Sleep well, *honey*.”

At the last word he laughed giddily and plunged the dagger deep into her heaving chest. “Now, for the boy.”