

AWAY IN A MANGER by Billie Milholland

All morning Grace tried to find a reason not to have coffee with Tania. This close to Christmas she didn't want to see or talk to anybody, but by ten o'clock she knew she didn't have the heart to disappoint her friend. Tuesday had been their coffee day for over two years. They met at *Ginter's Penny University*, no matter what kind of hell ran rampant on the streets of Hope. These days, *Ginter's* was one of few coffee places still open to the public.

So there she sat, in a small corner booth far away from the windows. That was the other reason she couldn't use an excuse. Mr. Ginter always saved that stupid booth for them on Tuesdays. He could charge extra for the safer seats and on other days she knew he charged a lot extra for that corner booth. Not only was it out of direct range from anything lobbed through the front windows, it was near the back-alley door for a quick escape.

Tania, late as usual, slid into the seat across from her. She unwound two knitted scarves from around her neck and handed one to Grace.

"Twinsies!"

Grace stared at it.

"Come on. Don't go snotty on me. This isn't a present. This is me having nothing to do in the evening. This is me using the yarn the old lady across the hall was going to throw out."

"Fine." Grace hung the scarf of many colors around her neck.

"Gracie, I worry about you."

"Well, don't."

"I know how you get at Christmas. I'm scared you might piss-off something you can't chase away with a blast of obscenities."

"Don't be crazy."

Tania gave her the look that said – 'I'm not the one who's crazy'. "Why don't you stay with me over Christmas? I got nobody in the spare room since Nessa went to jail. I'm going to rent it out in the New Year, but until then I could use some company."

"I like living alone."

"Well, I don't. It would make me feel better if you'd come."

"How about I promise not to look at the manger?"

"As if."

"What if I promise to shut the blinds? Move my TV into the bedroom."

"Gracie, you're so oppositional." Tania grinned and lifted her coffee cup. "Don't you *dare* stay with me over Christmas." She took a long, slow sip. "Or maybe, I should say, 'I dare you to stay with me. Double dare.'"

Grace added more sugar to her coffee. "Stop it. Tee. Please." She wrapped her hands around her cooling mug. "You need a distraction. Find a man. It's not as if there aren't a dozen sniffing around."

Tania grinned and waggled her head. "I told you, I'm done with men. In fact I was done with men, two boyfriends ago."

Grace shrugged.

"Okay. You staying with me is probably a dumb idea. I talk too much. I watch the sappy movies you don't like and the dance competitions and the game shows. I know you hate the game shows."

"Why do you put up with me? Sounds like I hate everything."

"You didn't used to hate everything, Gracie. Just since... since." Tania leaned across the table and gripped Grace's hand. "Crap! I'm so sorry, sweetie. I promised not to talk about it."

Grace didn't jerk her hand away like she wanted to.

"It's okay." She tried to smile at Tania.

It wasn't okay. They couldn't get a good, gossip session going after that. Grace managed to stay long enough for the free refill and to share the giant cinnamon bun Mr. Ginter set in the middle of their table.

He was in a festive mood. "Merry Christmas to two of my most loyal customers."

Tania smiled up at him. She grabbed his hand with both of hers. "Chad, you're the best."

Mr. Ginter grinned at her and winked at Grace. "I know."

As he turned away the door opened, blowing in a skiff of snow and two guys in long coats. He flipped up the big key that always dangled from his waist and led the men into his locked back room. As usual not a word passed between Mr. Ginter and the men.

Grace and Tania had seen hundreds of silent men follow Chadwick Ginter into that back room. They'd never stayed long enough to see them come back out, and they knew enough not to ask what went on in there. It had to be something illegal. Not that it was any of Grace's business and not that she cared. Most of what went on in Hope these days was tinged with 'illegal'. Even Grace's morning job.

From six a.m. till nine a.m. she cleaned toilets in the office tower behind city hall. She made better money than she should for a job like that, because she was paid to keep her mouth shut about the packages and envelopes she carried from one floor to another.

No skin off her nose. That three hour job and her five hour job in the warehouse at Walmart kept her off welfare. Kept her mug off the 'persons of interest' lists.

Most of the time.

She hadn't had a run-in with the law in over a year and she intended to keep it that way. Cops weren't just cops anymore. They were vigilantes. They were judge and jury. In bed with the money boys.

When Grace got home at seven that evening the old guys across the street were setting up the baby-Jesus-in-the-manger display in front of the old stone church. At least five of them, all bundled up, dragging plywood cut-outs out of the basement and propping them up on the

straw-covered flower bed.

She slammed the door hard behind her and yanked the heavy drapes across the one window that faced the street. She took a full wine bottle out of the long pocket she had sewn into her coat lining. She was supposed to throw out any booze left lying around in those offices and leave the empty bottles on the desk of the big boss in the penthouse. She did that like clockwork, but only after she poured the best wine or whiskey into the empty bottle she kept in her coat.

Today it was whiskey. Not her favourite, but she'd cook with it; make stuff smell sophisticated. She poured two fingers in a chipped espresso cup and sipped it in her small living room while she stared at the closed drapes. She wouldn't open them tonight.

When her phone rang, she didn't answer it. It'd be Tania, checking up on her, but Grace was talked out. She told herself she'd phone Tee tomorrow, but she knew she wouldn't. Once a week was enough talking.

She'd never been a talker, not like her little sister, Amber. She used to love listening to Amber. The kid had been smart, too smart as it turned out. Amber'd wanted to go to university. She had the marks for it; she could have gone. Grace even gave her money for the first semester, but that ass-wipe boyfriend of hers put it all up his nose.

Amber made every kind of excuse for him, but after the third time her tuition didn't get paid, Grace told her there was no more money until she quit seeing him. Amber refused. Grace never gave her another dime. Not even when she banged on Grace's door Christmas Eve, loud, obnoxious and high. Grace let her in and offered her the couch. But Amber didn't want a place to sleep. She wanted money for another hit. Grace wouldn't give her money, so she left, slamming the door so hard it cracked the glass in the little window. That was the last time Grace saw her alive.

Sometime early Christmas morning Amber ODeed in the manger scene across the street while Grace slept sound and safe in her bed. The cops drove Grace downtown to identify her sister, but her poor face was so messed up, if it hadn't been for the ankle bracelet Grace had given her for Christmas (a worthless thing, made out of junk beads – nothing that could be pawned) she would never have been sure it was Amber.

Grace stood up and hurled her cup at the door. The shards sprayed the room. She left them where they landed.

She turned off all the lights, and then crawled into bed with her clothes on.

It was still dark in the morning when Grace left for work, but no lights shone on Baby Jesus. By the time she got home that evening a sickly, blue glow outlined the manger. Solar lights. The faux log shed behind the crèche had a misshapen wire star sticking up with one, lonely light on top. With continual brown-outs and electricity expensive she was surprised they even had one bulb lit. She didn't see any movement around the display, so she went inside her apartment.

She turned the sound up on the TV and ate the pizza somebody had left unguarded in the Walmart lunchroom. It would have tasted better if she'd heated it, but she didn't have the jam to do it. She was stupidly tired and fell asleep on the couch in the middle of NCIS.

Grace managed to ignore the crèche until Sunday. She didn't have a Walmart shift on Sunday. She nearly went buggy stuck in her apartment all day. When the phone rang about seven thirty that night, she answered it.

"Hey Gracie!"

Grace shut her eyes. She was ashamed to admit how good Tania's voice sounded to her. She tried to keep enthusiasm out of her response. "Hey."

"I've been crazy busy this week. Got an extra shift at the Bargain Barn. You?"

"Same old."

"Any new additions to your liquor cabinet?"

"I closed the drapes Tuesday and I haven't looked out." Why the Hell did she have to say that? Blurted it right out.

"Shut up! That's fantastic! It's just a week till Christmas. And only one more day till coffee."

"Yeah."

"Honey. You okay?"

"I'm fine. Yeah. Really. Fine."

Grace didn't try to escape the Tuesday coffee date this time. She'd scored a box of high-class chocolates that morning and her pockets bulged with mixed nuts she scooped off boardroom tables on every floor. There'd been Christmas party mess everywhere. The janitor's night squad hadn't shown up, so scrounging their turf was fair game.

Grace shared the chocolates with Tania and Mr. Ginter. She let him choose first and made him take two. He took nut clusters. Tania popped a nougat into her mouth whole. With her front teeth, Grace poked a hole in a cherry centre and sucked the sticky juice over her tongue.

They lingered longer over coffee than usual and Grace ran all the way to Walmart to make her shift.

Four days until Christmas.

After work, Wednesday, there was a freak pacing back and forth in front of the crèche with a tray around his neck. She couldn't help it. She had to go over and investigate.

"Hey, lady. You want Holy Water?"

"What would I do with Holy Water?"

"You don't do anything with it. You keep it. For good luck." He held up a small vial full of yellowish liquid.

She snatched it.

"Hey, you got to pay for that."

"I'm just checking it." She twisted off the cap. "Smells like piss."

"You don't know nothing." He snatched it back. "It's supposed to smell like piss. It passed right through the Pope. Can't get more holy than that."

"I bet you never been out of Hope. Where'd you see the Pope?"

"Okay, it's not directly from the Pope. You know that guy, Stumpy? Hangs out over to City Hall?"

Grace did know Stumpy. Crafty old street guy. He could talk you out of your coat buttons if you let him near. She nodded.

"Yeah, well, when Stumpy was a kid, he went to Rome, you know. With Sisters of Charity. The Pope blessed him. Touched him right on the head. It's his piss, but it's still Holy Water. I'll swear on a stack of Bibles about that."

"Where'll you find a stack of Bibles in Hope?"

The guy frowned. "You want one or not? Just a buck. A friggin' buck."

Grace tossed him a couple of dollar coins. "I'll take two. Now move your bony butt out of here."

"Why? I'm selling Holy Water beside a church. God likes that."

"Really."

Grace frowned, but couldn't work up any decent anger. She tried to picture her sister laying there in a heap in the stable. That usually worked. A cold sweat prickled her face and neck. Shit. Maybe she was over it. But she couldn't be. She'd bloody slept through her sister's flippin' murder. She'd ignored drug deals going down in the stable. She didn't lift an eyebrow at hookers lounging beside Baby Jesus. She turned her back when she saw them lead men behind the stable. Her sister died because she hadn't given a shit about what went on over there.

She shoved the two vials into her coat pocket and went home.

On Thursday, Grace agreed to go to Tania's on Christmas Eve. Maybe even in time for supper.

"Don't shit me with no *maybe*, Gracie. Your skinny ass better be at my table for supper on Saturday or I'm over there to haul you out and you'll pay for the cab."

Grace surprised herself and Tania by laughing. "Okay. Okay. I'll be there."

Grace picked up a janitor shift Saturday morning. Nobody wanted to work Christmas Eve day. By the end of it she had a big bag of loot. Every single item from the garbage cans. Perfectly good wrapping paper, ribbon, a pair of women's gloves with the price tag still on, a guy's sweatshirt with Maui Wauai embroidered across the front and more candy, crackers and miniature jars of jam than she could eat in a month. The crowded bus broke down six blocks from her place, so her arms were aching by the time she got home.

There were a couple of kids sitting on the manger across the street, smoking and dangling their feet over the white, plastic-bag sheep. She dumped her load on the floor inside

her door and went out to chase the kids away. She started yelling and swearing before she hit the sidewalk. The kids gave her the finger and sauntered away.

She packed two shopping bags. One with her overnight stuff and the other with booze, candy and crackers. She called a cab to pick her up at five. That was a splurge, but it would be dark by then and who knew what buses would be running. She pulled the drapes away from her window and sat in her chair watching the Holy Water guy across the street do a good business from early church goers. Only a few walked past without acknowledging him. She wanted to go to the door and holler at them to stop a friggin' minute.

She put on her coat and boots. She set her shopping bags beside the door. She looked at her watch. It was an hour and a half before it was time to leave. The Holy Water guy wandered off and was swallowed by deepening shadows. People entered the church in pairs and clusters. Seemed like nobody went to Christmas Eve church alone. The star above the stable pulsed and went out. Four, dim, outside lights on the church entrance lit up the steps. After several minutes ticked by without more people entering the church, Grace left her apartment and walked across the street.

She stood beside the manger. Somebody had stolen Baby Jesus, there was a wad of gum pressed into Mary's forehead and the paint on Joseph's face was so faded she couldn't distinguish his features. Why hadn't they repainted him before they put him out? She peeled the gum off Mary and dropped the stiff wad into her pocket. She felt the sting of warm tears rolling down her cheeks. She didn't try to stop them.

Nobody cared about anything. The Christmas Eve her sister was murdered, right here in this manger scene, people went to church that night too, and they came out of the church. There was midnight church that night. So many people going in and coming out and not one person noticed anything wrong in the manger scene. Not one person.

Grace turned and stared at her ground floor apartment. The light was on in the living room. Maybe if she'd left a light on in her living room that night, her sister would have come over. Knocked on her door.

The worst of it? Grace knew, even if her sister had knocked and she had answered, she might not have let her in.

Who was she fooling? She didn't care about shit either. She hadn't then and she didn't now. She was a poser. She was no better than any of them in there, singing songs that were old before they were born. Saying Merry Christmas to a baby that had probably been lifted from that manger, days before. Blessing his mother who stared out into the street with some ass-hole's gum smeared on her head. And Joseph standing there, a warped and weathered piece of plywood without a face.

What the Hell was wrong with all of them?

She looked at her watch. Fifteen minutes and she was out of there. She swiped her face with her gloved hand, smearing the wet across her cheeks. She walked back across the street.

On her steps she turned to look at the church. Damned religion. A lot of love-your-neighbour crap that didn't mean a damned thing.

The taxi showed up five minutes early and Grace was out the door and on the side walk before the guy had stopped completely.

It was just after the cabbie popped the trunk for her bags that Grace thought she saw something over by the manger scene. A shadow moving slowly behind it.

She poked the cabbie. "Do you see that?"

"What? A church?"

"No. Something's over there. By the stable."

"Why should I give a shit?" He slammed the trunk.

Grace folded her arms. "You just should."

He yawned. "Are you fuckin' nuts? Don't nobody pay you to give a shit."

The guy was right. She could have done some good the night when Amber was curled up dying over there in the stable. But she didn't do a fucking thing. Nothing could change that, now. Nothing.

The cabbie opened the door and she got in. Then she got back out. Something was rooting around in the stable. Grace ran across the street. The cabbie yelled after her. "Hey lady! You got to pay for wait time."

She hollered back at him. "I'll pay."

The church doors opened and people spilled out like ants onto the sidewalk, some going one way and some going the other, most of them heading behind the church to the parking lot. She stood by the manger. Nothing moved except a strip of white plastic somebody tore off a sheep. It was caught on the cross bars that held up the manger and flapped in the wind that had sprung up. People scurried past. She stepped toward the stable. Somebody was in there. She stopped. Held her breath. She heard something. A low moan. She took another step.

"Amber?"

Grace slapped her palm across her mouth. She couldn't believe she'd said that. Maybe she was fucking nuts.

Another noise, a whimper. "Who's in there?" She couldn't see anything. Probably a hurt dog. She turned away. There was nothing she could do for a dog. She could hear the cabbie yelling.

"Please." The voice came from the stable. It was no dog.

"Who's there?"

"Please help. This kid needs help."

A wail this time. A girl in pain.

Grace waved at the cabbie and then stepped into the stable. Light from a passing car revealed a bent-over form. Somebody small, rocking back and forth. The Holy Water guy. She

saw a movement at his feet. Somebody lying there. Not moving.

Grace's throat tightened. That little bastard. If he... "What the fuck are you doing?"

The little guy stood up and leaned toward her. "If you're not going to help, for god's sake go get somebody who will."

A girl's voice from the shadows. "Baby. *Gasp*. Coming. *Gasp*. It's not time."

Holy shit! Some kid was having a baby.

"It's okay. I have a cab. I'll get you to a hospital."

"No!" A shriek of agony. "I can't go there. No money."

"There's the free clinic."

"Nooo!"

The Holy Water guy grabbed Grace's arm. "No staff on tonight. I already took her there. Doors locked."

"Oh, for fuck's sake. She can't have a baby here."

The guy held up something. "I have a blanket."

"Where's her people? She must have people?"

"Nobody willin' to take her in tonight."

Grace pulled her cell phone out of her pocket and then draped her coat over the girl. She yelled at the cabbie. "Get your ass over here. Now."

She jabbed her finger on Tania's number.

Tania didn't even say hello. She just started in. "Hey, if you're phoning to cancel, you're out of luck."

"Tania. Listen to me. I have a cab right here. And a real live person who's having a real baby. There's nobody to help her. We've got to help."

"Sure, honey. Of course we'll help. You coming over right now?"

"Yeah. Be about twenty-minutes. You still got that dolly for moving stuff."

"Yeah."

"Bring it down the elevator. She might not be able to walk when we get there."

Grace hung up. She knew Tania didn't believe her. Hell, she wouldn't have believed her if she was Tania, but Tania was Tania. She'd be there, on the sidewalk with the dolly. She gave a shit. Tania always gave a shit.

And this time. *Maybe*. Grace gave a shit, too. As she and the Holy Water guy gently lifted the girl to her feet, she heard Tania's voice in the back of her mind.

"Don't shit me with no *maybe*, Gracie."

