

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL

DEATH AT THE NORTH POLE

Chris Mystery

Chris Mystery's the name. And sleuthing's my game. Tracking down blackmailers, molesters and thieves. But murderers are my top-notch priority. And I bet you smart fellers out there were sharp enough to catch on right away that Chris Mystery's not my real name. It's a moniker I use – kind of a professional mask for my actual identity – reserved for special cases and unusual circumstances. And the events I'm going to report here are some of the most peculiar you're ever going to hear. So special and unusual measures are definitely in order, or my name isn't Chris Mystery. But everything I've got to say is the honest truth, and it all happened to me personally. Just make sure you don't let the rat out of the bag about what I confide in you. You hear? Loose lips sink ships. And trust me. The stakes in this case are as high as they can get. If word ever got around about any of this, the world would never be the same again. So pay attention...

It seems like it all happened yesterday. In fact - yeah, it was just yesterday. Time flies and never lies. It started the afternoon of Christmas Eve, which I had spent in a seedy saloon on the surly side of town with my two best buddies of the season. Johnnie Walker, and some bartender I'd never laid eyes on before. Being the kind of guy you'd call a loner, I try to avoid everything to do with Christmas. You'd probably picked up on that already. So I always drown my Yuletide sorrows before it starts, and spend the whole day by myself in my third floor walk-up room, sealed off from the holiday cheer of the rest of the world.

When I left the bar and staggered out onto the street it was already dark. But there was a full moon rising over the empty pavement and deserted warehouses. It took a minute to get my bearings, and I'd only wandered about half a block, when what to my wondering eyes did appear - but a couple of huge flying reindeer, carrying a bunch of elves on their backs. And they were heading straight for me! I remember thinking that I must be more pickled than I'd realized. But before I could blink or think of hightailing it, they had landed beside me. Those midget elves were tough cookies. In a flash they'd grabbed me and were dragging me up onto the bigger of the two beasts. I was too outnumbered to fight them off – and I've never been into elf-abuse anyway. The little imps tied me down with ropes so I couldn't escape. And then they scrambled onto the other deer, and we all leaped back into the sky, with me clinging onto that reindeer's antlers for dear life. Yeeee-ha and fa la la la la. All this happened in less than a minute. It was so sudden, I was up and flying before the fact that I should be scared out of my incredulous wits had time to sink in. I had no idea where we were headed. But I knew wherever it was, getting back wasn't going to be easy.

I swear we were only in the air about ten seconds before we touched back onto the ground. But we seemed to have covered thousands of miles. Whoosh! Those reindeer had flown faster than the wind. More like the speed of a comet... Once we'd landed, the elves swarmed around to cut my cords and get me onto my feet. Then they scurried away without a word, and their flying critter pals bolted with them. Thanks a heap guys - for abducting me without an explanation and then leaving me abandoned out in the cold. Doggoned goblins. So there I stood, wondering where I was and what to do next.

Santa Claus

Geez, what a difference ten seconds can make. One moment you're in the big city, and the next you're in the deep freeze, stranded halfway between the moon and nowhere. In the semi-darkness, I could see I was surrounded by a humungous field of ice. Silver-blue and spooky. But when I turned my head, in front of me was a scene that looked like it came from a fairy tale picture. I took a deep breath of frigid air to test whether I was still three sheets to the wind. But I seemed sober enough. And after giving my noodle a few shakes and squinting my eyes, I was pretty sure that what I was looking at was the real deal. Which left me wishing for another shot of scotch.

I was standing at the border of a funky village that might have been designed by Mother Goose. The edges of the town were lined with rows of too-perfect houses and shops, that appeared to be made from gingerbread and decorated with jelly beans, with glittering ice hanging from their roofs. Or who knows? Maybe they were actually covered with sugar frosting, considering how everything else here seemed to be honey-glazed. In the centre of these buildings was a large square, with an enormous pinnacle that looked like an icicle pointing toward the sky. I didn't want to jump to conclusions, but after being captured by elves and carried by a flying reindeer to a winter wonderland in the blink of an eye, the only thing that made sense was that the giant icicle must be the North Pole. I'm a detective with a totally rational mind. So what else could I think? Then things began to get really scary. Once I allowed myself to believe the unbelievable, it all started to fit together in a weird way. Next to the ice tower was a huge statue of a snowman, with a silk top hat, a corncob pipe and a button nose, and two eyes made out of coal. Frosty the Snowman for sure. And all the more evidence to confirm my suspicions about the location. But it was the gigantic sleigh at the base of the North Pole that convinced me of my whereabouts most of all. It was piled with sacks and packages, and there was a fat figure dressed in red propped on top of the load. From where I stood, I couldn't see his face clearly, but right then if I could've placed a wager, I'd have laid down ten to one that the guy was Santa Claus. But in this town, I don't think anyone would have taken my bet.

However, as I stared at the sleigh some more, something appeared to be wrong. Old Saint Nick wasn't budging. He was just lying there - like he was asleep, or... No, that was impossible... Even someone with a cynical brain like mine couldn't think something like that... And then, as the town hall clock struck six, little figures began to crawl out of the shadows and fill the square. At first one and two at a time, and then in larger groups. They kept on coming and coming until there were thousands of them. Tiny elves carrying candles that lit up the night sky, singing the same tune over and over. Soft and sad. They kinda gave me the creeps.

*Silent night, violent night,
Santa's dead, in his sled.
He was slaughtered on this night of dread
By a star that crashed down on his head
Weep, for Santa's deceased
Weep, for Santa's deceased.*

Now I don't know about you, but there's only so much of this melancholy vigil stuff that I can take. When the elves had sung their funeral chorus for the umpteenth time, I decided that somebody needed to take control of the situation. I'm sure Santa Claus would normally have managed things. But as he was the person they were mourning, someone else was going to have to take charge. I also reckoned from their morbid melody that poor Santa might have been the victim of foul play, and maybe the elves had brought me into the picture to sort out the cause of his demise. And as I had come all this way, I wasn't going to sit on the sidelines when there was forensic work to be

done. It was a dirty job for sure, but somebody had to do it. And that somebody was me. Or my name wasn't Chris Mystery.

I didn't have much of a plan in mind, except to put a stop to the horrible music which was dragging on and driving me nuts. And as no one else was stepping forward to face the crowd and quell the lament, I began to make my move through the throng toward the sleigh. After stepping on more than a few elf-toes on my way across the square, I finally reached the North Pole looming at the centre and climbed up beside dead Saint Nick. As soon as I took my stand on the sleigh, the singing stopped, and there was complete silence. So far so good. I glanced around and wondered if the crowd was with me or against me - whether they considered me an imposing stranger or their supposed saviour. They were so quiet, I couldn't guess their mood. But I figured as far as I was concerned it didn't matter what they thought. I was just an ordinary sort of guy. With a small head, sloping shoulders, an ample caboose and spindly legs. No great shapes. If they didn't like my looks or what I had to say they could send me home as fast as they had brought me here. Then this crazy episode would be all over for me, and in another few seconds I could be swallowing a soothing swig of Johnnie Walker.

With nothing to lose, I cupped my hands around my mouth and shouted as loud as I could over the sea of flickering candles. "Can you hear me out there?" When all I received back was silence, I chose to take the response as an attentive 'yes'. So I continued yelling. "First of all, I want to say I'm really sorry that Santa Claus is dead. I know how much you and the whole world will miss him. And it's true that Christmas will never be the same again. But don't worry. I'm a private detective, and for Santa's sake I promise to get to the bottom of what happened here today. Or my name isn't Chris Mystery." I hoped those little gnomes had found some consolation in my words. But I was keen to start my investigation, so I had to find a closing line to shoo them away. Something polite that didn't sound like the bum's rush. "But for now everyone, go home and nestle all snug in your beds. And remember, if anybody knows anything they think I should hear about, you can find me hanging around. 'Cause I'm not going anywhere till this case is closed."

My final words seemed to do the trick. Slowly the wavering flames began to drift off and disperse into the night. Sleep tight little leprechauns! As the elves left with their candles and darkness again descended, it struck me that I'd need something brighter than moonglow to work by, so I started rummaging through the loot on Santa's sleigh for a flashlight. While groping around, I felt a tug on the cuff of my trousers. Gazing down, I saw a wide-eyed elf boy gawking at me with an urgent expression. "Mr. Mystery," he chirped nervously, "Frosty has the answer." Then he took off and evaporated into the retreating crowd.

As he slipped out of view, I called out, "Don't bet on the reindeers, kid!" I figured one wacky tip deserved another. For just a moment, I regarded the massive tribute to the long-since-defrosted snowman, and speculated on what it might know, and how I'd ever get it to tell. Then I returned to the task at hand. When I finally found a suitable lantern, I used it to search the scene for the death weapon. According to the elves' song, Santa had received a fatal blow to the head from a falling star. But as far as I could see, there were quite a few footprints in the snow, but no unusual artifacts in the vicinity of the North Pole. And I reckoned a killer star would be hard to miss. Where could it have gone?

With no lethal object in sight, I decided to check out the once jolly fellow himself. Santa had a nasty gouge right between the eyes, which could have resulted from a collision with an astral projectile. Anything's possible. His furry red suit appeared in perfect condition, so his head injury was the only obvious cause of death. He carried no identification documents anywhere on his

person. Not even a pilot's licence for a flying sleigh. But I did pull out a small slip of paper from an inner pocket, along with a couple of tobacco-covered peppermints. I recall muttering, "This clue had better be good, Santa. I'm counting on you!" Thumpety-thump-thump. I felt my heart pounding as I aimed the flashlight and read:

NORTH POLE NAUGHTY LIST

1. B-F
2. Kitchen Witch
3. L.J.S.
4. Peg
5. R-Skin

Finally. My first big break. I had a list of suspects – in alphabetical order. Thanks old man. But this register of reprobates set me thinking. Santa Claus must have disapproved of these people. And at least one of them could be his mortal enemy. I'd never thought of Saint Nick having enemies. So who were all these North Pole characters? And where did they come from? In fact, what did Santa Claus and the rest of his cronies do before they came to the North Pole? And how did they end up here? Were they escaping from the real world? And why should I get myself involved in this mess, digging into their smutty secrets? And where was Johnnie Walker when I really needed him?

Brooding over these worries and queries, I stared down, tracing the footprint patterns in the snow around me with my flashlight. Suddenly I noticed what looked like the tracks of naked human feet. Only they were twice as large as normal. Yikes! A monster with paws that size could devour an elf whole. That's when I decided I'd loitered under the North Pole long enough, and it was time to start hunting down the people on Santa's blacklist. Having no clues as to where to find my suspects, I crossed from the sleigh where Santa's corpse was lying in state and headed to the closest building. It seemed as good as any place to begin looking. On the roof there was a sign that said 'Dolly Shop'. I knocked and waited while the clock in the village square rang seven times. Then I opened the door and went inside.

N. Rumpkiss Little

The shop floor was deserted, except for one near-sighted elderly elf clad in lederhosen, sitting at an old-fashioned machine that looked sort of like a spinning wheel. On his shirt was a flashy button that said 'Seasons Greetings - My Name Is N. Rumpkiss Little'. I assumed everyone in Santa's labour force had to wear a name badge. I got the feeling the elf didn't want to be interrupted, as he didn't look up when I entered. So while he ignored me I watched him work. Into one end of his gismo he put little pieces of yellow plastic drinking straws that he had cut up himself. And when he turned a crank, through the other end came long strands of pretty blond hair, which he attached to the heads of a batch of identical pink baby dolls that lay in a heap beside him. The grizzled geezer seemed obsessively absorbed in his task, hunching over each doll and moving in close for the fine details. At one point I'm sure I saw him drool.

Eventually I decided it was time to end our silent stand-off, whether Mr. Little liked it or not. "You do good work, sir." I tried to make my comment sound encouraging.

"What do you want?" N. Rumpkiss Little snapped back.

“My name’s Chris Mystery, and…” I tried to reply.

“I know who you are. I saw you up there bragging over Santa’s dead body.” N. Rumpkiss didn’t appear to be a cooperative witness.

“How did Santa Claus die?” It seemed advisable to get my important questions in while the truculent troll was still talking.

“The North Star fell off the North Pole onto his head and killed him. That’s all there was to it.” N. Rumpkiss Little kept on compulsively adorning the scalps of his girlie toys.

“How long had the North Star sat on top of the North Pole?” I asked.

Rumpkiss the elf took his eyes off his work long enough to give me a ‘You must be a moron’ look. I presumed that meant the star had been there forever. “So why do you think it fell off today?” I pressed. “When Santa was under it… Couldn’t someone have made it fall?”

“Who sent you here?” N. Rumpkiss Little suddenly roared. “It was Jack Frost, wasn’t it? You should be asking him who killed Santa Claus, not me.”

When you have a profession like mine, you can’t be too proud to stick to the truth all the time. So now I’d got Little Rumpkiss riled up and sounding like he was ready to spill the beans all over himself, I decided to risk a lie. “Jack Frost told me to ask you who killed Santa Claus,” I said.

“He’s always been jealous of me!” N. Rumpkiss Little began to rant. “Jack Frost may be able to make the world look like silver with his ice and snow. But I can change anything I want into real gold! And gold is always better than second-rate silver. Jack Frost knows that better than anybody.” Rumpkiss slammed his fist on his workbench. “When I first met Santa Claus thousands of years ago he was the great King Midas. Everything he touched turned to gold, and he passed along his secret to me. He never granted that privilege to anyone else. Especially Jack Frost. I’m the only one who has the Midas touch.”

I pulled out my scrap of paper that showed Santa’s enemies and looked down the list. Number Five. R-Skin. From everything the ornery dwarf had demonstrated, it was clear who he had to be. Moreover, his hokey anagram alias spelled out his disguised ex-self in capital letters. “You’re Rumplestiltskin, aren’t you?” I challenged.

“My name is N. Rumpkiss Little! I haven’t been Rumplestiltskin in over a hundred years!” protested the elf, his beady eyes blazing.

“Jack Frost told me you were still Rumplestiltskin,” I teased.

“Do you believe everything that pirate says?” demanded I’m-not-Rumplestiltskin. By now he was standing on top of his stool and prancing up and down, seething with anger.

It’s at these moments when I love my job the most. “I don’t have to count on Jack Frost for my information,” I said scornfully, waving my hand at the spinning apparatus and pile of dolls. “I can see for myself that you’re still turning straws into fool’s gold, and you haven’t lost your infatuation for *kleine Kinder* either. Just like the Rumplestiltskin I’ve always heard about.”

“How dare you insult me! I tell you. I have the Midas Touch!” bellowed Rumplestiltskin.

“Then why are you wasting your time in this popsicle town making fake dolly wigs?” I asked. “If you were the straight goods, you could afford to buy Bermuda and live happily ever after.”

“If you must know, Santa Claus only lets me use my golden gift once a year,” snarled the elf. “On my birthday.”

“And when is that?” I inquired.

“It was so long ago I’ve lost track,” he confessed. “But it doesn’t mean my powers are gone. I’ve been asking Santa Claus for centuries to help me find them again.”

“Did you ever threaten him?” I asked.

Finally, the cantankerous Rumplestiltskin became strangely quiet. Silence is golden, as they say, and old Rump’skin’s silence was the most golden – and revealing - thing about him. Now I knew why Saint Nick had proclaimed him persona non grata.

“Who can blame Santa for not helping you?” I jeered. “If you got your old gold knack back, you’d become a greedy baby snatcher again before anyone could say Rumplestiltskin!”

My taunt had the inflammatory effect I was looking for. Rumplestiltskin leaped down from his stool and started stamping on the ground in his rage. “I hate you! I Hate You! I HATE YOU!” he yelled.

“Baby snatcher! Baby Snatcher! BABY SNATCHER!” I hurled back, which made him clump so heavily the building began to rattle. I hadn’t had so much fun in years. “Is that how hard you had to jump on the ground to jolt the North Star down onto Santa’s head?” I had my fingers crossed for an all-out guilty confession from the cranky codger. But then, uttering a squeal of surprise Rumplestiltskin disappeared from view. Moving behind the counter to see where he’d vanished, I saw that he had accidentally kicked his way through the boards of a trap door in the floor and had fallen through. Now he was spread-eagled on a huge hoard of blonde-haired dolls that lay in the compartment beneath.

I was going to leave him there to romp in his harem playpen, when something else below caught my eye. Up till then I had only seen stars in the sky. But take my word for it. If you ever come across a genuine star up close, you’ll know it immediately for what it is. Actually, it was just the single point of a star that was lying beside Rumplestiltskin. But it shimmered like a prism with an inner glow, and its authenticity was unmistakable. It looked so - awesome. I reached down into the shallow cavity to take out the star segment. “No!” Rumplestiltskin cried, and he grasped for the star too, so I had to wrestle it from his clutches.

I grabbed the front of the midget’s tunic and pinned him to the ground. “Where’d you get this, Buster?” I made my demand sound as gangster-tough as I could.

“I picked it up out of the snow after it fell,” he admitted.

“Where’s the rest of it?” I asked. “The other four points of the star.”

“It was dark, especially without the light of the North Star from the sky,” he said. “That’s the only piece I found. Please. Did you hear? I said PLEASE. Give it back and let me go.”

“Too bad Rump’skin,” I said. “I’m taking it as evidence. This is part of the object that killed Santa Claus.”

“No! No! You can’t...” A.k.a. N. Rumpkiss Little sounded like he was going to cry. “That star’s my only hope. I need it. For a magic wand - to turn ice crystals into diamonds. Then all my troubles would finally be over.”

“And you could go back to your baby snatching business as usual - for fun and profit.” I leaned over into his secret cubbyhole and sneered in his face. “Not if I can stop you, you skanky dog. And I’ll never quit trying, or my name isn’t Chris Mystery.” He tried to scratch my eyes, but I held him down at arm’s length, and my arms were longer than his. “OK Rump-boy, I have one more question, and then I’ll leave you to rock and roll with your dolly friends. Where can I find Jack Frost? I think he and I should have a chat.”

“You mean... you haven’t met him?” A range of emotions from dismay to horror to fury flashed over Rumpelstiltskin’s face. “Liar!” he screamed. “I should never have said a word to you!” Then his expression changed again, and he became sly. “Let me tell you something. When you find Jack Frost, ask him why he was blowing so hard at the North Star just before it fell. I’ve never felt the North Wind so strong than at that moment.”

I quickly let go of his shirt, pulled the star to my chest, and headed for the door of the dolly shop. As soon as he was set free, the irascible elf began throwing his beloved dolls at me with vengeful force. “May the Snow Devil find you and eat you alive!” I heard his parting curse as I ran out into the night, and wondered what kind of snow-creature I needed to be so afraid of.

Jack Frost

For safekeeping, I stashed the star fragment in a snowdrift behind the monument to Frosty. The shadow of the venerable snowman was the most secure spot I could come up with. And I hoped Rumpelstiltskin’s sinister Snow Devil would never tread on such sacred ground. I’d just finished covering it up, when I heard a whistling sound behind me. Quickly, I looked around to make sure no one had seen my hiding place. I seemed to be alone. But the noise steadily grew louder and a freezing breeze started to nip at my ears and nose. Then out of nowhere, a strange figure emerged. At first I thought I was looking at the ghost of Santa Claus. Not that I believe in ghosts. The man was dressed all in red, but I soon realized it was a scarlet suit of woolly long underwear. He also had a slight limp, from an obviously artificial leg that ended in a point, and he was too thin to be Saint Nick. There was even an earring dangling beside his cheek, and a parrot perched on his shoulder. This was no Santa Claus coming at me through the cold.

“Shiver me timbers, Mr. Mystery,” he greeted me, as the clock tower rang eight bells. “’Tis a nasty night to be braving the elements in Christmas Square.”

“And who do have I the pleasure?” I asked, although I had my suspicions.

“Jack Frost, at your service,” he replied. “And my trusty mate, Captain Clinch.”

“Pleased Sir, to meet!” Pleased Sir, to meet!” hailed the parrot.

“Salutations to you - both.” I remained on my guard, remembering that Rumpelstiltskin had called the man a pirate. “You know why I’m here, Mr. Frost. And my time is valuable. So would you mind telling me what you were doing when Santa Claus was killed?”

“I would welcome a conversation,” said Jack Frost. “And call me Jack. But let’s retire to my quarters, out of the weather.” With some misgivings, I allowed myself to accompany the pirate and his bird. While we walked through Christmas Square, Jack Frost often let out an eerie whistle. It was amazing. His breath was powerful enough to stir up the snow and form icy patterns on the windows. I wouldn’t be surprised if he was the North Wind personified. What was I getting myself into? A couple of times he broke out into song. He had the voice of a sailor, and I don’t mean that as a compliment. When he sang, Captain Clinch rocked back and forth on his shoulder from one leg to the other and joined in the chorus.

*Fifteen men on the dead man’s chest,
Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum...*

While they were engrossed in their sea shanty I checked Santa’s Naughty List, as I was sure Jack Frost must be on it. But so far I couldn’t put my finger on how his name was encrypted there. Peg for peg-leg? That was almost too obvious. When we reached his house, it didn’t seem much warmer inside than out, and I was hoping Jack Frost would take the words of his tune to heart and produce a bottle of rum. When he didn’t, my opinion of him slid further, and I decided to be extra cautious. “You seem to be a seafaring man, Jack.” I thought that was a safe way to break the ice, so to speak.

“Aye, but my days on the briny are finished now,” he sighed.

“Why did you choose to give it up?” I asked.

“It was a case of do or die,” said Jack Frost. “In the midst of a skirmish at sea, I’d fallen into the depths and was descending toward Davy Jones’ Locker and certain death. At the time, Santa Claus was none other than the formidable Davy Jones himself, and he prevented me from drowning.”

“Saint Nick has always been known for his acts of charity,” I commented, hoping to draw him out further.

“Arrrgh! But there was a price to be paid for his life-saving mercy,” Jack Frost moaned through gnashed teeth. “To ensure I could never drown again, Davy Jones cast a spell so that any water I ever touched or even breathed upon would immediately freeze. From that sad day forth I’ve had ice in my veins. And I’ve never been warm since.”

“Prisoner of Fate! Prisoner of Fate!” Captain Clinch squawkily summed up Jack Frost’s plight.

That’s when the puzzle pieces floating around in my mind began to click into place. I’d found it far-fetched to fancy that this ex-sailor would have been called Jack Frost during his heyday on the ocean blue. No able bodied seaman worth his salt had ever had a snow-flake name like that. In fact, another handle I was pondering seemed much more plausible. Jack was interchangeable with John. And Frost and Silver were equivalent colours. And maybe it was no coincidence that he was dressed in long johns! Two similar pseudonyms. One singular identity. So doubloons to

doughnuts, Jack Frost was also the infamous Long John Silver! The most notorious pirate of all time. Codeword 'L.J.S.'. Number three on Santa's black sheep file, or my name wasn't Chris Mystery! Sometimes I can't help but be impressed by my own brilliance, although the realization terrified me. I could wind up dead! But as a professional sleuth, I had no option but to continue my interrogation. Call me a hero - I could use the encouragement.

"Jack, have you ever speculated that if Santa Claus was no longer alive, your frozen condition might thaw out?" I tried to make my question sound theoretical, so as not to stir up Long John Silver's buccaneer temper.

"The dreaded thought has crossed my mind once or twice, Chris," reflected L.J.S. "But Santa Claus was my benefactor, and he generously employed me as his arctic weatherman. So I've never wished him anything but health and happiness."

Spoken like a true pirate. "Any idea who might have wished ill on Saint Nick?"

"There is one character here at the North Pole who seems to have a built-in mean streak," he replied. I expected him to launch into a tiresome tirade accusing his nemesis Rumpelstiltskin. But as usual, Long John Silver was full of surprises. "Sometimes at night when I'm relaxing with my artificial leg off, Rudolph swoops into my cabin and seizes it, without a word of explanation. Often he doesn't return my limb until the next day, so I'm a virtual hostage to his spite, with no recourse but to take to my bed until he comes back. I believe anyone who would treat an unfortunate handicapped person with such contempt would also be capable of far greater cruelties and crimes."

"That would be Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer?" I clarified.

"The very same," confirmed Long John Silver. "And tonight, just before the star fell, I saw him flying right by it. One kick with his hoof, and he could have pushed it off its North Pole moorings."

And according to Rumpelstiltskin, you could have blown it down with a gust of your breath at the same time, I thought to myself. This wasn't going to be an easy case to crack. And there were still suspects I knew nothing about. "Isn't there another strange creature around here too? Some kind of Snow Devil..."

Long John Silver made the sign of the evil eye, and Captain Clinch huddled in close to his ear. "Shiver me timbers, but that's a demon-beast you'd never want to encounter." The pirate lowered his voice to a whisper. "They say he lurks in these parts, and only comes out of hiding to satisfy his ravenous appetite. And the mainstay of his diet is baby elf flesh. The few who have seen him and lived, describe him as twice the height of a man, but with the powerful body of a gorilla. I pray that you never meet him face to face, Chris. But if you do, I'll pray that your soul rests in peace, even if your body is in pieces." I recalled the giant footprints I'd seen beside the sleigh, and a spasm of terror crept down my spine. But I couldn't help wondering if any nice folks inhabited the North Pole. From my experience so far, there were only anonymous elf and reindeer kidnappers, a baby-snatching dwarf, a ruthless pirate, an allegedly insensitive reindeer, a dead leader with a checkered past that everyone wanted to kill, and a monster they were all scared of. So much for the lollipop image of the land of Santa Claus.

"But I'm afraid I need my rest now," said Jack Frost, motioning me toward the door. "The weather bureau is calling for a mighty blizzard in the next few days, and I don't want to disappoint."

Then with an unexpected outburst, Captain Clinch began to flap his wings and hop from foot to foot, screeching at the top of his voice. "Peek at the peg! Peek at the peg! Peek at the Peg!" I wouldn't normally follow up on a suggestion from a bird, but I figured the circumstances at hand called for an exception. I know you'd have done the same in my shoes.

"Mind showing me your prosthesis, Jack?" I made the request sound as light-hearted and cheery as I could. Long John's long johns entirely covered his artificial leg right down to the tip, so I hadn't seen any part of it up till now.

"Sorry, Mr. Mystery, but I don't expose my leg to anyone," he answered.

"Peek at the peg! Peek at the peg!" Captain Clinch continued his excited cry.

"Could you bend your rule for Santa's sake, Jack... errrr..." My voice trailed off, as I suddenly found myself looking down the barrel of a pirate's pistol that was pointed at my forehead.

"I apologize for Captain Clinch's rude behaviour. But his fit of passion has no doubt alerted you to my most treasured possession." Long John Silver cocked the gun's hammer. "So I'll have to kill you."

"Just like you murdered Santa Claus? Now I know why you were on his Naughty List, Long John Silver!" I thought I'd attempt a defiant accusation, to get him to make a pre-gunshot admission of guilt – like in the movies - as I had nothing to lose but my life, and the longer it took to lose that, the better. And if my impudence merely got him mad, at least his anger might throw off his point-blank aim. But instead of a confession from the scurvy seadog, things took an even better turn. I hadn't realized my guardian angel had been there in the room all along, looking out for me and standing poised to fly to my rescue. But glory hallelujah! With a shrieking swoop, Captain Clinch dived into Long John Silver's face, pecking and clawing, until he dropped the firearm to fend off his berserk pet. The parrot continued his assault, while I retrieved the ancient weapon and tore away the pirate's long underwear, revealing his artificial limb. As I suspected from the gimpy mariner's refusal to bare his taboo appendage, it wasn't an ordinary prosthesis, but a second piece of the North Star, identical to the one I'd taken from Rumpelstiltskin.

While I was unbuckling the stellar clue from Long John Silver's stump, he started to wail. "Please Mr. Mystery, the star was just beginning to make me feel warm again... I beg you!"

"Shove your sob story up your Jolly Roger, Long John," I answered, "Pity's not my strong suit." Leaving the cold-blooded buccaneer naked, legless and grovelling, I ran from his house with the precious star and his gun.

Behind me I heard Captain Clinch's farewell message, "Peace 'n love, mate! Peace 'n love, mate!" And realized I'd finally found a friend among this North Pole gang of candy cane cutthroats.

Rudolph

I raced back to my snowdrift cache, confident that Long John Silver couldn't follow me there on just one leg. The coast seemed clear, so I hid my newly acquired section of the North Star beside its twin and buried the blunderbuss deep in the snow close by, hoping it would never again see the light of day. With my evidence secure, I again crossed Christmas Square, frequently checking behind me with my flashlight for indications of the man-eating Snow Devil, which thankfully didn't

materialize. As I sauntered toward a building displaying the sign 'Reindeer Stables', I heard nine chimes toll through the still of the night.

Rudolph was quite easy to find. The barn building was dark, but in the far corner there was a red glow that had to be emanating from the reindeer's famous nose. By its light I made my way past the stalls of the other deer, who seemed settled down for the night. Rudolph was standing in his enclosure, as if he was waiting for me. He was a remarkable animal - taller than his stablemates by a half, and pure white. A rather unusual shade from my notion of reindeer colouring, which was a nondescript grayish-brown. His antlers were impressive, and about his shining schnozz no more needs to be said. But his most astonishing feature was his wings. I'd never realized Rudolph had wings. The reindeer I'd flown to the North Pole on didn't have those. In fact, Rudolph was built more along the lines of a horse than a reindeer. But a horse with antlers and a snazzy pair of wings. Not to mention the red nose that I don't need to mention...

"Hello Rudolph," I said, feeling pretty silly talking to an animal. "...umm... do you speak English by any chance?" Was I really trying to engage a reindeer in conversation? But it was worth a shot. Here in Jingle Bell World the normal standards often didn't apply.

"I speak one hundred and thirty seven languages," replied the reindeer. "Several of which have been extinct for thousands of years." He gave me a haughty look. "How many languages do you speak, Chris Mystery?"

"I'm still trying to master English," I quipped back. "You must have been around a long while to have picked up so much lingo."

I like to believe I've learned a few things in my time," Rudolph asserted.

I could tell he was a cool customer, and too smart to give a straight answer to a hard-ball question. "How do you find life here at the North Pole, Rudolph?" I inquired, fishing for the best approach to unzip his lips. "And what do you do all day long? All year long, for that matter..."

"On Christmas Eve, until today, I led Santa Claus' sleigh," he replied. "And every other day of the year I flew him to Christmas Island. For a tropical interlude."

"There are plenty of warm places," I said. "Who's in Christmas Island to prompt a daily visit?"

"Santa Claus would spend his afternoon with the Sugar Plum Fairy," Rudolph answered. "And I would take the waters."

No wonder old Saint Nick was so merry! "What did Mrs. Claus have to say about that?" I asked.

"I never discussed it with her." The reindeer gave a toss of his head. "You'll have to ask the lady yourself."

"Don't worry, I will," I promised.

"And you might also ask her why she was pointing her broomstick at the star tonight, just before it toppled." Rudolph added coyly.

This cunning red-nosed character had just pinned a murderous motive of jealousy on the bereft Mrs. Claus, without giving anything away about himself. Somehow I was going to have to take him down a peg to get him to open up. Hmm... Down a peg. Let's see. A reindeer that looked like a horse. Older than Latin. With wings. Could he be 'Peg' on Santa's roster of infamy? I decided to act on a hunch.

"It's a long way from Mount Olympus to this frozen wasteland," I stated.

"That's true," agreed the reindeer. "But no one believes in the Olympians anymore. Fortunately, they still have faith in us here at the North Pole."

"But how did you change from being Pegasus the winged horse, to Rudolph, the flying red-nosed reindeer?" I asked. Talk about a nose dive from the sublime to the ridiculous!

"When Zeus was winding things down on Olympus and stepping into his role as Santa Claus, he asked me to come with him," Pegasus stated. "We both were forced to move on with the times and take what was available. The North Pole was our most viable option."

"But what's with the horns and clown nose?" I pressed. "Couldn't Zeus - or Saint Nick have let you remain a straight-up horse with wings?"

"He thought the antlers would help me fit in better with his team of reindeer," responded Pegasus. "And he needed a head-light for foggy Christmas Eve flights. So he said the appropriate words of wizardry, and redesigned me to fulfill his requirements."

"But is that what you wanted?" I hoped I sounded sympathetic, though schmaltz has never come to me naturally. "Your pride must have taken quite a blow."

"I had actually asked him to change me into a unicorn, so I could stand apart and ahead of the others." Tears of disappointment began flowing down Pegasus' face and dripping from his ruby nose. "I had always wished to be a flying unicorn, even when we were on Mount Olympus. But Santa Claus denied my appeals and did things his way."

That explained why Rudolph kept absconding with Long John Silver's peg leg. He was using it as an accessory to explore his inner unicorn! Maintaining that thought, I moved into Pegasus' stall, and started rubbing his mane in a gesture of understanding and commiseration. But while I was putting on my sensitive act, I was also standing on one foot and searching around with the other under the hay on the floor. As I expected, my toe soon encountered something long and hard, and I stopped stroking the magically-altered reindeer-horse to bend down and pick it up. It came as no surprise to discover I was holding section number three of the North Star.

As soon as Pegasus saw me with the cherished object he'd been concealing, he reared up on his back legs and spread his wings in rage. Aside from his silly red nose, he was a very frightening sight. "Put it back!" he commanded. "Now!"

"But Pegasus, this could be a piece of a murder weapon," I reasoned. "It must be used for evidence."

"Drop it or die!" he roared, frothing at the mouth. That was when I remembered from my haphazard knowledge of mythology that Pegasus had once thrown his rider off, sending him crashing to his

death while flying to Mount Olympus. And he'd done the deed on purpose. So this creature who was kicking and flapping in my face had deep-seated killer instincts. Which meant that despite his absurdly glowing nose, I should be taking him dead-seriously. But I also wanted to hear his murder confession, and Pegasus' emotions were now so frazzled, at any moment he could lose his self-control and reveal his evil-doing. Oh, the perils of the job!

Risking imminent death by trampling, I put the astral fragment up to my forehead, where it stuck out like a horn. "Is this what you wanted the star for?" I demanded. "To transform yourself into the winged unicorn you've always craved to be? Because now Santa Claus is dead, there's nothing standing in your way any more. You're free to saw off your antlers and get a nose job and a horn implant. Unicorn vanity. That's the reason you flew up to the North Star and kicked it down on Santa Claus, isn't it? Which is exactly what you did. Right? Or my name isn't Chris Mystery!" Suddenly, with a great snort, Pegasus shot his hoof out and thrust me to the ground. As he towered over me, with the pressure of his mighty leg holding me down, I covered my face and cried, "Kill me too, and prove everything I've said is true!" Under the circumstances, it was a pretty bold challenge, if I say so myself.

Lying for what seemed like an eternity, with my eyes shut and fearing the worst, all I could think of was how nice a triple shot of Johnnie Walker would go down right then. I heard the huffs and snuffs increasing over me, and assumed Pegasus was working himself into a frenzy to deliver my death stomp. But eventually I felt the weight of his hoof gradually lift from my chest. So I uncovered my eyes and looked around to find the two of us surrounded by eight more reindeer. Real reindeer. Who were lowering their antlered heads and scraping the ground in an extremely menacing way. For a moment I was afraid my enemies had increased eightfold, until I realized their threats were directed at Pegasus, not me.

"Thanks Dasher. Thanks Dancer. Thanks Prancer. Thanks Vixen." I said, rising and picking up my stellar prize from the straw. "Thanks Comet. Thanks Cupid. Thanks Donner and Blitzen." As I departed the stables I called back, "And you too, Rudy!" No need to burn any red-nosed bridges.

Mrs. Claus

Having got the drill down pretty well by now, I quickly stowed the third point of the North Star away in the snow bank with the two other matching fragments. Three down, two to go. That ratio applied to both the suspects in my investigation and the pieces of the star. With its typical astuteness, my clever mind had deduced a definite pattern evolving. Smart as a whippersnapper. That's me.

My interest had been aroused by Pegasus' innuendos of broom handle antics and sugar plum rendezvous. So I felt it was time to search out the grieving widow to discover if she was possibly 'Kitchen Witch' or 'B-F' on Santa's most-unwanted list. Although my gumshoe's instincts were already telling me 'which' she might be. Having no other clues where to find her, I cast the beam of my flashlight around Christmas Square and picked out the largest house with the tallest spire on the roof. It was also the most elegantly adorned, with a licorice and lozenge décor. That seemed the most likely place to find the wife of the formerly most important man in town. So after ensuring the hulking, skulking Snow Devil was nowhere visible, I set off in the designated domicile's direction, to the tune of ten rings of the clock tower bell.

My knock on the door was answered by a little old lady, who I instantly knew had to be Mrs. Claus. She was somewhat on the rotund side like her husband. With a pleasant manner and vivacious

movements, though sure enough, she was holding a broom handle staff for support. Her smile was warm and welcoming, and her cheeks were rosy. In mourning for her dearly departed better half, she was dressed in widow's weeds. But her black cape and long dress were nicely styled and well suited to her matronly figure. And her tastefully coiffed silver hair was covered by a dark scarf. Quite the dapper duds for the world's most eligible dowager!

"Good evening, Madam," I said. "I was looking for Mrs. Claus..."

"Come in, come in," she replied, pulling at my sleeve with a plump hand. "I've been expecting you!" She seated me in a chair, and then went to the woodstove where a large pot was bubbling and steaming. "I was just making some cocoa," she said, giving the mixture a stir. Then she filled two mugs, one for each of us. "Call me Cookie," she cooed.

"Call me Chris," I replied. I waited until she had taken a sip of her drink before I tasted mine. You can never be too careful. Zowie! It was the most delicious hot chocolate I'd ever had. Thick and creamy and bitter-sweet. Maybe even the next best thing to Johnnie Walker. "I'd like to offer my condolences on the loss of your husband." I said.

"Thank you Chris, dear. Do you suppose it was murder?" she inquired.

"I'm still looking into it," I answered. "What do you think, Cookie?"

"Well, the Snow Devil is ferocious. And he's always had a dislike for my husband," she admitted. "But I never thought he'd go as far as homicide."

"You're blaming the Snow Devil?" I asked.

"He's been tormenting us here at the North Pole from the very first," affirmed Mrs. Claus. "He's even eaten chunks of my gingerbread roof from time to time. But I'd always thought his bark was worse than his bite. Not that he barks, that I know of. Have you seen him, Chris?"

"No, thank goodness," I replied with a shudder, picturing those oversized footprints that wouldn't stray from my memory.

"We're not sure exactly where he lives. But he was out in Christmas Square early this evening," Cookie confided. "When I saw him I shook my cane to scare him away from the sleigh. He ducked behind the North Pole, and maybe he climbed to the top. Who knows? He can scoot up practically anything like a monkey. But I really can't say where he went after he disappeared into the shadows. Except a little while later, the North Star took its tumble and everything went dark." Her shoulders began to shake with grief. "What will become of us now?" she sobbed, holding her palm to her face. "And the children around the globe are waiting for their presents... How could the Snow Devil have done this? On Christmas Eve!"

With some difficulty, I had to remind myself that this sweet and gentle lady, despite being Santa's spouse, was potentially one of his least favourite people. So I obviously had to delve deeper under the surface of Cookie Claus with my investigation. "How did you and Santa Claus meet?" I asked.

"You've probably heard a version of my unfortunate past before," said Cookie with a frown. "But from a different perspective than mine. Historians generally haven't been kind to me," she added grimly.

"I'd like to know what you have to say," I replied.

"Once upon a time, I was living alone in a beautiful cottage made of gingerbread in the middle of a lush forest. My life was simple and happy. I spent my days baking and making candy, with which I decorated my home. Then one day, a boy and girl named Hansel and Gretel found my house in the woods, and began to eat it. They didn't even say hello or ask permission first. If they had, I would have provided them with something fresh and warm that I had just made. When I caught them with their mouths full, eating me out of house and home, I still took them in and gave them shelter, because they were lost. I also fed them well while they stayed with me. In return for this hospitality, I asked Gretel to help with the chores, and she always resented me for that. One morning, when I had lit a fire in the stove to bake us some bread, the two children pushed me into the flames, hoping I would be changed into gingerbread, which was simply foolish. Then they robbed me and ran away." Mrs. Claus peered over her glasses. "Have you ever heard this tale, Chris?"

"Sort of," I said. "But the details were different."

"To my great good fortune," she continued, "The illustrious Prince Nicholas happened to be riding by on his steed. He heard my cries for help and extracted me from the oven. And in the habit of charming princes of the age of chivalry who rescued damsels in distress, he requested my hand in marriage. That's how I met and wed my husband. Eventually, as the aristocracy fell out of fashion, we retired here to the North Pole and became philanthropists to the children of the world."

"Your biographers have seemingly been cruel, Cookie" I coaxed.

"I fear I'll go down in history as a wicked witch no matter what," she fretted. "None of the good I've accomplished at the North Pole has ever counted in my favour. And people like to believe the worst. But I couldn't possibly be a real witch, Chris. You see, I've never had any supernatural powers."

"Did you have children?" I hadn't heard of any. Yet...

Cookie Claus gave a wry smile. "I would have liked to, but Nicholas, being more charming than faithful, was more intent on seeking new conquests."

"The Sugar Plum Fairy?" I probed.

"Merely one more dalliance in a long line of ladyloves," shrugged Mrs. Claus.

"You seem resigned," I observed.

"It's over," she said.

"True," I agreed. But my interrogation wasn't finished. I still had one more test. Without warning I snatched the walking stick from her hand. "I need to borrow this." Quickly I ran out the door before she could stop me.

From behind I heard a piercing scream. Then a pleading command. "Bring back my broomstick!" Mrs. Claus' voice suddenly sounded hoarse and shaky. Using her cane, I knocked down the spire

from the top of the house. Chipping off some of it's coating of glistening sugary meringue, I verified that another fragment of the North Star was underneath. Returning inside, with the staff in one hand and the star in the other, I couldn't believe what I saw. Mrs. Claus had essentially been transformed into another being - and the change wasn't for the better. She had become scrawny and hunched over, so she was nearly bent double. Her features poking out from under her kerchief were sharply defined and surrounded by stringy wisps of grey hair. Her nose was long and pointed. With warts. She also had bad teeth. Her black widow's weeds now hung off her emaciated body, appearing wrinkled and worn and ugly. To make a long story short, I had found Santa's Kitchen Witch.

As soon as I entered the room she made a lunge for her stick, but I lifted it out of reach.

"No supernatural powers, huh?" I taunted, enjoying myself as usual at these times. "You know, Killer-Claws, you almost had me fooled."

"Give it to me!" she said, making another grab for her broomstick. Her voice was weak and raspy.

"And perhaps your biographers weren't so misguided after all," I added. "You lured Hansel and Gretel into your clutches with your gumdrop house. And you were fattening up the poor babes in the woods to make yourself a lunch-time snack, weren't you?" I was on a roll, loving my shame-on-you shtick. "And I'll bet Saint Nick didn't know he was getting hitched to a witch! You conniving hag. No wonder he turned to other women for affection - and dedicated his life to bringing joy to everyone else's kids."

"Do you think I liked being his bakery slave, with no break for hundreds of years?" the sorceress demanded, her words becoming ever more feeble. "Nicholas threatened to expose me as a witch if I ever disobeyed him. And he never showed me any appreciation. He was too busy flying half way round the world every day to the real loves of his life." She regarded me with a look of disdain. "I'm glad he's dead. There, I've said it. I - am - glad!"

I waved the walking stick in front of the witch's face. "Just tell me you used this magic wand tonight to bring the North Star down and murder your husband. If you do, I'll give it back to you. If you don't, I'll throw it into the fire, or my name isn't Chris Mystery." I opened the door of the woodstove and pointed the staff toward the red-hot embers.

"Burn the broom. And me..." As this last defiant dare faded from her lips, the witch collapsed onto the floor. That's the way that Cookie crumpled. But I had to admire the old broad for maintaining her go-to-blazes attitude to the end. For a moment I considered calling her bluff, burning both the stick and her along with it. To see if she would actually bake into gingerbread. Yum! Yum! But I reckoned one untimely death in the Claus household for the day was enough. So I wrapped her talon-like fingers around her life-giving broomstick. As I left the Kitchen Witch and headed out, nibbling the meringue off my star, the colour was beginning to return to Cookie Claus' sunken cheeks.

Foxy

Strolling across Christmas Square, it occurred to me that B-F was the only suspect left to account for, though I had no idea who B-F was, or where to look for him - or her. Perhaps somehow B-F and the Snow Devil were one and the same. Cookie Claus had accused the Snow Devil of hating Santa Claus and being his murderer, so he supposedly should be included in my investigation regardless. But I had already put my life on the line twice that night with Jack Frost and Rudolph.

And my strung-out constitution could only endure so much. So I had no desire to cast myself into triple jeopardy, by forcing a showdown with a savage giant whom everyone else seemed anxious to avoid at all costs. Cut me some slack! Because when the chips were down, Saint Nick's death wasn't even my problem.

On the way back to my snowdrift storage site, the hour was striking eleven as I passed by the monument to Frosty. Looking up at the jaunty snowman, with his formal top hat and spiffy black buttons, I wished he really could supply the answers I needed, as that urchin elf had claimed. But under the winter moon the snowman remained as silent as the Sphinx. So while Frosty presided over his solitude, I prepared to dig. In order to bury the fourth piece of the star with the others, I had to excavate deeper than before. With the job complete, I was leaning over the snow bank to tidy it back to a pristine untouched appearance, when I felt the frozen layer below me shift under my weight, and the solid footing beneath my boots give way. Scrambling in vain to regain my balance, my frantic feet smashed through the flimsy crust of snow on which I'd been standing. Then kicking helplessly into thin air, I plunged down a gaping hole, landing with a thud. Whew! Luckily, both myself and my flashlight survived the fall intact. Its glow revealed a large subterranean chamber carved from ice, with a passageway at one end leading even farther down. I determined immediately to exit back up through the opening I'd come in by, and not to delve into the cavern's interior recesses. Who knew what or whom I might find down there? This place was absolutely the most likely candidate for a Snow Devil den I'd ever seen.

While I was peering intently toward the ceiling, searching with my electric torch for a gap into the blackness above, I felt a tap on my shoulder. Eeeek! Leaping about three feet into the air in fright, I turned and came face to face with a huge hairy monster. It looked exactly like the description of the horrible North Pole Snow Devil I'd been told about earlier that night. A ten foot tall wild man. As I fell back to the ground, I resorted to some basic survival instinct I never knew I had and curled up into a ball. And I'm not proud to admit it, but I started to cry.

"Boo." From my fetal position, I heard the word softly spoken into my ear. I stopped bawling, but still didn't move.

"Boo again." Was this how this demented killer toyed with his victims before he ate them? Or was he not the brute he was reputed to be after all? I decided to sit up.

"Welcome," said my Snow Devil host.

"A-a-are you going to eat me?" I inquired.

"No," he replied. "Are you going to eat me?"

"No," I said.

"Then can we be friends?" he asked.

"Do you have any scotch?" I was hoping for you-know-what – but didn't dare sound too choosy.

"Half a bottle of Johnnie Walker," he answered. Music to my ears! Like I'd died and gone to Edinburgh.

"My name's Chris Mystery," I said.

“Call me anything you like,” he replied. “I don’t actually have a name.” He helped me to my feet, and I followed him down the tunnel to the inner sanctum of the cave. As we traded the bottle of Johnnie Walker back and forth and shared his corn cob pipe, the smoke rose up and out by way of a hole in the roof. Apparently we were sitting directly under the sculpture of Frosty the Snowman. My new buddy had made a vent hole that passed right through the statue and out his silk hat.

“Who are you really?” I asked. “The locals say you’re the Snow Devil. I suppose you know.”

“People have many labels for me,” he responded. “Sasquatch, Yeti, Bigfoot...” That was it! ‘B-F’ stood for Bigfoot.

“I christen you Ferocity the Abominable Snowman!” I blurted out. And all of a sudden I was laughing hysterically. “But you can be Foxy for short,” I gasped through my guffaws. “It’s snappier. And less intimidating.”

Lucky for me, Foxy seemed to have a sense of humour. “Take a couple of bows for that one, Chris Mystery,” he replied. When I actually took a bow, he remarked, “I guess I tell abominable jokes.”

“Why is everyone here afraid of you?” I asked. “You’re not mean and despicable like they say.”

“I was living at the North Pole before anyone else,” said Foxy. “But when Santa Claus arrived with his entourage of helpers I was outnumbered and they took over the territory. So I became a stranger in my own home. Because I wasn’t like them, and especially because I was bigger and more powerful, they made up rumours about how I wanted to destroy them. And eventually they believed their own stories, and I became a monster in their eyes.”

I could relate to this guy. He knew how it was to live on the edge of a society he could never be part of. We had a bond – I could tell. “But why didn’t Santa Claus like you, Foxy? He was intelligent enough to know better, wasn’t he?”

“I think he resented me, because he couldn’t keep me under his thumb the way he controlled everyone else,” the abominable snowman replied. “So when I wouldn’t give in and go away, I became a thorn in his side.”

“Did you really take a bite out of his house?” I asked.

“Jack Frost has done more harm to roofs than I ever did,” shrugged Foxy. My kind of answer!

“Then what do you eat if you don’t chow down on gingerbread or elf babies?” I was curious.

“I only eat poultry,” he stated. “And actually, just whooping cranes.”

“But Foxy, that’s evil!” I was stunned. “Excluding yourself, they’re about the most endangered creatures on the planet.” Blast! The minute I’d begun to trust him, he’d turned naughty like all the rest.

Foxy the Abominable Snowman smiled. "I've set up a sanctuary nearby that no one in the world knows about. There are thousands and thousands of whooping cranes. They're my friends. So I only eat the ones that die of old age." His smile widened. "And do they taste good!"

"Will you take me there?" I asked.

"Some time," he said.

"Earlier tonight, did you notice anything unusual when Santa Claus was killed?" I figured Foxy's perspective might be different from the other accounts I'd heard.

"There were quite a few people behaving oddly around Christmas Square when the star fell," he replied. "Little Kiss'n'rump was ranting and stamping on the ground beneath the North Star. Jack Frost was blowing at it with a mighty wind. Mrs. Claus was shaking her stick in its direction and hollering away, and Rudolph was flying by it within striking distance."

"Did any one of them make it fall?" I inquired. "Or might it have been a combined effort?"

"Come with me," said Foxy. He led me back through the cavern and out a hidden entrance, until we were standing in front of the statue of Frosty the Snowman. Reaching up, he picked off a chunk of rock that seemingly served as one of the snowman's buttons and gave it to me. It was about the size of his fist, and very heavy. I needed both of my hands to hold it. "That's a meteorite, made of iron," he said. "I saw it drop out of the sky tonight. As it fell, it was pulled with an overwhelming attraction toward the magnetic North Pole. He indicated with his paw toward the great pinnacle beside us. That tower is the most powerful magnet on earth. So as the meteor descended, the North Pole's magnetic field accelerated its speed, causing it to become super-energized. Unfortunately, on impact the flying meteor made a direct hit with the North Star. The extreme force of the collision knocked the star from its North Pole pedestal, and as we know, it fell killing Santa Claus before it shattered into pieces. As for the meteorite, after hitting the North Star and wreaking its havoc, it deflected this way and came to rest here on Frosty, looking like just another of his buttons."

The explanation made a lot of sense. The North Star was an extra-terrestrial object. It stood to reason that it could only be moved by an extra-terrestrial force. And it now seemed safe to say that the pesky pipsqueak pixie who'd told me that 'Frosty had the answer', hadn't been pulling my pant-leg after all. He must have seen the meteorite land on the statue too. "It's amazing that such a cataclysmic event went almost unnoticed," I remarked.

"I suppose everyone else in Christmas Square was too busy carrying on and worrying about what the others were up to," he said. "And then when Santa Claus died at the same moment as the shooting star crashed down, all attention focused on him."

I handed the celestial stone back to Foxy, and he returned it to the snowman sculpture. "Let's keep this our secret," I suggested, and he nodded. "So Santa Claus wasn't murdered..." I was kind of thinking out loud.

"That's a fair assessment, Chris," concurred Foxy, "Though not for lack of anyone trying."

"Did you happen to come across a piece of the star after it broke apart, by any chance?" I asked.

My abominable snowman pal clambered up the Frosty monument to its head. With a flourish he pulled the last section of the North Star out of its tall silk hat. Presto! It was like watching a magician! Good old Frosty – and ‘Ferocity’ – really did have all the answers! “I was going to keep it as a club,” he chuckled, “In case I had to fend off Jack Frost on a cold and stormy night.”

“Look what I’ve got!” I yelled with glee. Yeah - that’s right, glee. I ran over to my snow bank, and dug out the other four fragments. While I told Foxy about my Herculean labours to wrest them from a dwarf, a pirate, a flying horse and a witch, we laid down all five points facing outwards, forming them into their original star shape. Then in front of our eyes, by some unfathomable stellar force the pieces fused themselves together to become a single entity. The North Star was reborn! If only you could have been there. The star was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen, sparkling with a radiance that outshone the most exquisite diamond. In the aura of such an out-of-this-world spectacle, I was rewarded for my evening of trials and tribulations a hundred times over.

“I’ve heard you can climb,” I said to my big-footed friend. Grinning, he picked up the star, crossed to the North Pole, and started to ascend. Up and up he mounted the icy column until he disappeared into the darkness at the top. I was holding my breath, not sure what to expect. Then magically, as the town hall clock began to strike twelve, the North Star appeared like a beaming beacon, glowing in the North Pole’s electro-magnetic field until Christmas Square was illuminated as bright as mid-day. I gave a thumbs-up sign to Foxy and called out ‘Merry Christmas’, though I knew he was too high up to take notice. His attention was absorbed in positioning one of the star’s points on the tip of the pole, so its magnetic force could lock the heavenly body into place. Altogether a pretty tricky balancing act.

Then out of the corner of my eye, in the great sleigh parked under the North Pole, I detected something weird and wonderful – and inconceivable! Santa Claus had moved! I crept closer to get a better view, and found him sitting up, basking in the light of the North Star and looking the picture of health. The wound on his forehead had completely disappeared! If I wasn’t witnessing a miracle, then Saint Nick coming back to life would have to do until the real thing came along. “Ho! Ho! Ho!” His jolly laugh reverberated around Christmas Square, which had suddenly filled with all the inhabitants of Santa’s village. Mrs. Claus was hugging her resurrected husband and serving everyone cocoa from a cauldron that never seemed to run dry. Jack Frost and Captain Clinch were whistling a duet together. N. Rumpkiss Little was winking and doling out dollies to all the brownie babes. And Rudolph was herding the reindeer into their ranks in front of the sleigh, so the elves could harness them up for take-off.

All at once, somebody spied Foxy on top of the North Pole and a deafening cheer erupted throughout Christmas Square. Everyone was pointing and waving and shouting “Bigfoot”, and elf mothers were holding their babies up, as if for him to kiss them. Spontaneously the multitude united in song, glorifying the North Star, Foxy and Santa Claus together.

*Star of wonder, star of light,
Star of northern beauty bright,
Bigfoot placed you back in space to
Guide great Santa’s sleigh tonight.*

After a few choruses of the tune, Santa and his reindeer whisked into the sky and out of sight. Right on schedule for his midnight Christmas rounds. I don’t blame him for getting away so fast. He probably couldn’t stand the elves’ singing either.

Seeing Foxy high above the crowd, I shed a tear to think that my abominable snowman buddy, who had always been the outcast of the North Pole, had become its celebrity hero. Call me sentimental or what? As I continued to observe him in action, I saw that the star by now was securely fixed, and my pal had released his hold on it, in preparation for his descent. From that point everything is a blur, and I'll never know exactly what happened or how. Perhaps Foxy became bedazzled and disoriented by the blinding light of the North Star. Or he could have been zapped by an ultra-high-voltage shock. Or maybe his claws simply lost their grip on the slippery surface of the icy tower. For whatever unknown reason, suddenly Foxy's arms and legs were flailing, and he was falling through the air. For a second, I stood paralyzed, unable to take my eyes off his plummeting form. Then I began to run across Christmas Square toward the North Pole as fast as I could go. I got there just as he landed at the column's base, in the precise spot where Santa Claus' sleigh had stood. He was lying face up, and his eyes were open. I bent over the figure of the only friend I'd ever loved more than Johnnie Walker, even though our friendship had only lasted one hour.

"Boo," I whispered into his ear.

"Feed me to my whooping cranes," he murmured.

"I promise, or my name isn't..." I couldn't complete the phrase because a lump the size of a meteorite had risen in my throat. But I know he heard my unfinished pledge before he died, because he smiled into my eyes. And I'm not ashamed to admit that I stayed with Foxy, holding his broken body and weeping all through the night.

Scotty Pine

Now that it's Christmas morning and Santa Claus has returned from his nocturnal expedition, we've just had a heart-to-heart talk. I elected to play down the gory details of yesterday's meteoric catastrophe and my hard-fought recovery of the North Star. Although I did drop a few hints to warn Saint Nick that several members of his inner circle had tried to mash him into mincemeat by making the star fall. But mostly I explained how Foxy and I had pieced the star back together and replaced it on the North Pole. Santa declared his un-dying gratitude at having his life restored, and also his eternal sorrow over my Bigfoot pal's tragic death. I thanked him for his thoughtfulness, and then I handed over his Naughty List, expressing the dubious hope that the characters on it would one day be redeemed before they did irreversible damage.

With his typical Ho-Ho optimism, Santa Claus asserted his belief that every individual possesses the ability to reinvent himself. Using his own past as an example, Saint Nick made the startling disclosure that back in the days when men were men and aspens were trembling, he was the legendary logger Paul Bunyan. Wow! The former wood chopper's news nearly knocked me off my stumps. I've always had a nervous fascination for lumberjacks. Those guys love the forest, but they love destroying trees too. So for as long as Johnnie Walker's been my true-blue drinking companion, I've also idolized Paul Bunyan as my anti-hero role model, or my name isn't Chris Mystery.

Near the end of our interview, Santa asked me to hang around the North Pole for a while. He said he needed me for his personal policeman, to keep a lookout in Christmas Square in case any of his would-be assassins decided to attack again. And nobody knows better than I do how dead-right he is about that. Santa Claus even insisted that I couldn't leave his village yet, because I'd sworn to solve his murder case, and so far I hadn't put my finger on a killer – either from his North Pole

Naughty List or anywhere else. I could have filled Santa in completely on how the four remaining rascals from his Naughty List had just taken a collective crack at exterminating him. But though their vindictive motives persisted, as none of their execution attempts had proven successful, I felt it was wiser to clam up and avoid incriminating accusations. Like some bartender once said - discretion is the bitter part of valour. So I simply countered his argument by stating that because he'd come back to life, the investigation had dis-solved itself, rendering 'whodunit' irrelevant. And therefore I should be free to go if I chose. But you've got to agree that it's an over-the-moon honour to be requested by the big guy to serve as his security officer. And what a heavyweight job! To become Santa Claus' private bodyguard would give my life a noble purpose like I've never had or even dreamed of. Imagine! Me. Chris Mystery – Sentinel to the Saint! The mind boggles.

Saint Nick wound up our chat by offering a whole sleigh-load of goodies to convince me to stay for the duration. So he must be serious. He's remodelling Foxy's underground igloo to create a sequestered hideout, where I could live and experience the abominable snowman's environment, just the way Foxy did. And in memory of my Bigfoot buddy, Santa's going to erect a larger-than-life-size statue on a pedestal beside the North Pole, so his fatal self-sacrifice will never be forgotten. He's also promised to put up a Christmas tree ice sculpture in my honour next to it. How cool is that? And to top it off, Santa Claus gave me a gold star for Christmas. And whether your name's Chris Mystery or not, that counts huge. Rumpkiss told me it isn't real gold, but he may have some ulterior motives, so I'm going to get a second unbiased opinion.

As of yet, I haven't given Santa Claus an answer - yes or no - about lingering long term. What do you think? Should I stay and switch my addictions - from scotch on Saturdays to butterscotch sundaes? While I sort of yearn for my solitary city existence, and particularly the solace of Johnnie Walker, I know I'd miss the folks here if I left. Especially the reindeer and elves who are being so helpful and kind. And deep down, I'd even miss the scoundrels who keep me on my toes. Surveying Christmas Square from my snowdrift vantage point, I can see Mrs. Claus with a batch of her chocolate brew, crossing to where Santa is having a snowball fight with Rumpkiss Little and his dolly shop elves. Those cups of cocoa are bitter-sweet pleasures to-die-for, I say. But watch out for the old lump-of-coal-in-the-snowball trick too, Santa baby. And cavorting high above in the sky, Rudolph is flaunting his identity issues, performing unicorn manoeuvres with an icicle sticking out of his forehead. Crazy mixed up goof. Would you trust him? Meanwhile, beside me Jack Frost is innocently whistling away, blowing a shower of snowflakes to make everything glisten and gleam – rehearsing for the perfect storm. Just don't use that pretty star up there for target practice, Kiddo! But truthfully, I kinda wonder if I'd be capable of protecting Santa Claus and saving his bacon all on my own. It's such a tall order. There's no predicting what plots these candy-coated culprits could be hatching, or when they might strike next. Confound them, every one!

However, dodgy as the North Pole scene may be, by the light of the North Star it's still the most beautiful sight in the entire world, or my name isn't Chris Mystery. So I'm not going to leave right away. And besides, I have some unfinished business to keep me around for a while longer. I've just sent Captain Clinch on an undercover recognizance mission to seek out Foxy's flock of whooping cranes. 'Species of crane' is what I told my cockatoo confidant to search for. When we find their nesting grounds, I'll have to keep my promise and carry out my best friend's dying wish. And in the future, for Foxy's sake I want to ensure that the birds there remain undiscovered and never come to harm. So who knows? Maybe it's time to put my Johnnie Walker past behind me and make a deal for my destiny with Paul Bunyan. So I just might accept Santa's invitation and sign on till my final bows. Oh! I get it... Chris Mystery. Christmas Tree. Boughs! Yuk. And one more yuk. I finally got Foxy's joke. It was abominable. Gosh, I miss him.

Anyhow - Merry Christmas from the North Pole. And remember – you'd better be good, and you'd better not die – 'cause you've got Chris Mystery watching you! And even more important, don't ever discuss any of these facts with anyone. Or things could get dangerous. Very dangerous. And by the way, my real name's Scott Pine. No kidding - Scott's honour. But most people call me Scotty. Don't mention it to Santa, but my nickname used to be Knotty Pine. I was going to let my pal Foxy know my proper name, but I didn't have a chance to come clean with him. So I figured I'd do it here instead. No special reason. Except to show that my name isn't Chris Mystery.

THANKS FOR READING DEATH AT THE NORTH POLE.

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