

# Cold Snap

By: R.L. Perry



Dedication:

To Ty

One must have a mind of winter

—Wallace Stevens, “The Snow Man”

# Vitae

None of my friends call me Mary Christmas, although that's the name you'll find on my business card. I'm a third generation mortician, but also the solitary Christmas now carrying on the family name since my father died more than a year ago. But just in case you're not familiar with my work, or the oath of the funeral director, I deal in death.

The truth is—I enjoy my work. It is work that, among the many occupations and callings, simply isn't appealing to most people. Look at the statistics. Nursing and computer programming rank high. Few have a problem with advertising, marketing, or business. Some people enjoy retail or flipping burgers. But the average person would rather not deal in the business of managing corpses and corpuscles. Few people want to deal with it, to touch it, to call it what it is. But morticians call it what it is. *Death*. It has a name.

So, you wonder how I cope?

Love helps. That's why I'm in love with Lance Freeman, I suppose, an Indianapolis cop with broad shoulders and the bluest eyes, a man who can appreciate and handle a blonde bombshell like me—a funeral director and county coroner who always seems to find herself at the center of a murder investigation.

Not that I'm looking for mayhem; death just seems to find me.

That's why I write these reports. I want to make sure that somebody knows the truth, that no stone goes unturned, and that sometimes it's not the investigators and detectives who break a

case, but the people like me who actually work most closely with death. I know people after all—and I’ve found that it’s always the living who have secrets.

If you want to know who I am, read this report. I hope you’ll discover that a woman like me isn’t afraid to be passionate on many fronts. I’m passionate about my work, my friends, and I’m passionate *for* Lance. But then, ladies, if you had a man like mine, you wouldn’t be afraid to step into the fire. Dying is the least of my worries—I know what it is. I see it every day. I’m not afraid to touch it.

I’m far more fearful of *not living*—of not giving my best, my all, to the people who matter most to me. When it’s truth you’re after, you’ll discover that fear and danger are minor hurdles. I’ve learned that I can use my position, my knowledge, and my passion to get to the bottom of things. And I’m not beyond using my physical assets to get what I need, either.

I’m too far into this report to turn back now. You can call it fiction if you like—but all of it is my truth, my life, and as Lance will tell you, I can wrap my mind and my legs around a multitude of puzzles—often at the same time. Still, what is life if not a puzzle? What is death if not an invitation to fully live?

Yes, I’m a mortician, a coroner, an undertaker, a funeral director, a friend, and a lover. But none of these define me completely. Not in and of themselves.

I’m first and foremost, *me*! I’m Mary Christmas.

So welcome to my world and to my report. I’ll give you the truth, maybe even a sneak peek into my love life. But don’t expect to have yourself a merry little Christmas. Not on my watch.

If you want cozy fires and ringing bells and angels getting their wings, go watch *It's a Wonderful Life*. If you have to have traditions and false temerity, go decorate your tree. But if you want to know how a woman like me finds more than dalliance after death, read on.

I dare you.

# Chapter One

Lance and I awoke late on Christmas morning—or, rather, we may have lost track of time, two love birds unaware of when the night ended and the new day began. But the fact is, although we were both exhausted, we slept very little through Christmas Eve night, having given each other several unexpected gifts in bed. When the first light of Christmas morning peeked through the blinds, we had not yet checked the time, and neither of us seemed eager to emerge from the comfort of our spooning under the warm covers. I was still groggy, but deeply satisfied in the moment, when I felt Lance edge his lips close to my ear and whisper, “I’ve been thinking about us.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. You’re not the only one with secrets,” he said. I did not stir from my position, all of me nestled against the full length of his body, his arm wrapped around me. I may have held my breath, even, as Lance momentarily countered. He rose quickly from the bed and told me, “Stay right there. Don’t move.”

Naturally, I asked, “Where are you going?” But I heard Lance bound down the stairs. I could tell from the subsequent shuffling and crumpling that he was wrapping a gift. His last-minute heroics reminded me of my own delinquency, and yet I could not bring myself to move from the warm afterglow of his body.

But curiosity nudged me at last from the covers and I sat up, wrapping a sheet around me. I was about to rise from the bed



when, buzzing in the first light of Christmas, my cell phone jolted to life and wrested me away from the moment. Instinctively, I answered.

“Mary Christmas,” I said.

There was a hesitation before I heard the voice of a male EMT on the other end. “Yes, well, Merry Christmas. Is this the coroner’s office?”

“This is Mary Christmas,” I said. “I’m the coroner.”

“Sorry,” he said, “I wanted to make sure. This is Jones. I’m calling to let you know that an ambulance was called out this morning. I’m here at the home now, a Philip Carrington, his wife was unresponsive when we arrived. He’s asked for you to handle the arrangements, but I think you’ll want to get down here as soon as possible. Wear your coroner’s hat.”

I wrote down the address, told Jones that I was on my way, my eyes pooling with tears as I thought about the tragedy and another lost Christmas morning with Lance. I was on the verge of screaming, ready to dart into the shower, when I happened to look up and notice that Lance was standing, still naked, in the bedroom doorway.

He was holding a small package, deftly wrapped, poised in the center of his open hand—a gift, I surmised, that was no larger than a ring box. We looked at one another, crestfallen and heartbroken, and then suddenly Lance hid the package behind his back, his gaze betraying his disappointment, as if pretending I had never seen it.

“Lance,” I said, rising from the bed and dropping the sheet, “I’m so sorry.”

“Go,” he said. “Just go.”

## Chapter Two

Lance was nowhere to be found as I bolted out of the shower and called his name. I dressed with deliberation and no makeup, slipped on a pair of boots, and hastened down the stairs, continuing to impart my voice in the hope of a response. Darting to the front window, I checked the driveway and noted that the patrol car was gone. My heart fell further away from me as I trembled at the thought of Lance leaving on Christmas morning, our future before us, but now tattered once again by the grim nature of my work. I wanted to stand by the Christmas tree and weep, hopeful in the idea that I could still redeem the day from death or see our heat rise again as I stirred at the cold embers in the fireplace.

I was about to scurry for the hearse—still parked in the driveway where I had left it—when I heard the faint gurgling of the coffee maker in the kitchen. Lance gave me that much before leaving—a cup of brew—and, as I poured the aroma into a travel mug, I gathered myself in the thought that our relationship was not completely broken, but might still be revived, or even picked up where we had left it, when Lance and I both returned to our senses.

I checked the time, noted the fractions ticking away, and clipped out of the house as I gathered my overcoat about me. Fortunately, the hearse started right off, and as there was no frost on the windshield, I was able to feel the first stirrings of heat from the vents before I reached the end of the street.

Driving toward the address, I realized that I didn't need a GPS to find my way around the city. My mind was a map of jumbled roads and alleys, landmarks and landings that I had memorized over the course of years and recollections. I was grateful to have an intricate knowledge of the streets, not all of them pleasant or inviting—and I knew that my destination was going to land me in good stead, a workaday neighborhood that was quite similar to my own.

My hands steadied at the wheel, I considered calling Rose Edgewater, my new secretary, but thought better of it. There would be time to bring her into the mix, but not on Christmas morning, not when I had promised her the day. And then, knowing her as I did, I realized that she would jump to assist me if she suspected any need. I smiled at the thought, grateful for her arrival, thankful that we had found each other and already become friends.

Rose was right about one thing. There was a cold snap coming on—and I didn't have to check the weather forecast to know that the mercury had fallen overnight by several notches. My cheeks ached, and I could feel the cold running along the margins of my bones as I switched the heater on high and anticipated a new flush of warm air.

Still, I did love the stillness of the morning, the way that Christmas, and the anticipation of it, lay hard and frozen on the horizon, the children, by now, already deep into their presents, their eyes wide with joy even as their parents faded into the warm interiors of recliners and the scent of cinnamon rolls. The absence of traffic on the streets hinted at the tranquility of the day and the afternoon naps that were yet to come. Every man, woman, and child, it seemed, were content in their respective homes, each one forsaking the old animosities in exchange for the promise of family and faith.

As I drove on, only a few lonely souls stirred at their mailboxes, some in bathrobes, as they looked toward the curb to avail themselves to some secret appreciation of winter, as if frostbite was the first order of business they hoped to experience in the New Year. Even the blackbirds were huddled together—long rows of them, Hitchcock-style, amassed along the dips of the electrical wires.

I checked the time again and rolled up to the address a full eleven minutes after I had left the house. Not a record, exactly, but impressive for a cold call during a holiday.

The EMT van was backed up in the driveway of the Carington's house and I could tell from the small enclaves of eyes staring at me from the other homes in the neighborhood that curiosity had gotten the best of everyone, especially the children. All eyes were upon me as I skirted up the street and then backed into the driveway beside the EMT van.

As I walked up the front sidewalk, the concrete meticulously cleared with shovel and salt, a lady across the street waved at me from her front porch—a fearful greeting of sorts that I had come to recognize, just as celebrities quickly learn the false manifestations of friendliness in backwater, U.S.A. Her wave, a kind of talisman, was meant to ward off the impending doom that had invaded her quiet little neighborhood.

I mounted the front steps quickly and rang the bell. When one of the EMTs answered the door and introduced himself as Smith, I smiled, wondering how Smith and Jones could have ended up on the same emergency run.

“Come on in,” he said—inviting me into a home that was not his. An unusually tall and shy man, Smith ran counter to Jones,

who was stout and confident, and it was the latter who greeted me in the kitchen and gave me the lay of the land.

“Mrs. Carrington was in bed when we arrived,” Jones said. “But her husband called in, said she was experiencing vertigo and vomiting and couldn’t be moved. By the time we arrived, she was already gone.”

“Did her husband tell you anything else?”

“He’s been morose,” Smith interjected.

“Hasn’t said much,” Jones added.

I pulled a notepad out of my coat pocket and started taking notes.

“We’ve just been sitting tight until you could get here,” Jones said.

I stepped out of the kitchen and studied the living room for a few seconds. The place was quiet, except for the distant sound of retching from another room. “Where is Mr. Carrington now?” I asked.

Jones leaned over the kitchen sink and began washing his hands. “He’s in the bathroom, I think. Throwing up.”