



CHRISTMAS
— IN —
MAPLEWRIGHT

A PAGE TURNERS
CHRISTMAS TALE

KEVIN T. JOHNS

CHRISTMAS IN MAPLEWRIGHT

A Page Turners Christmas Tale for Catherine Brunelle

Kevin T. Johns



THIS STORY TAKES
PLACE SHORTLY AFTER
THE EVENTS
CHRONICLED IN
THE PAGE TURNERS:
ECONOMY OF FEAR

PART

1

The Darkness and the Angel

Danny Fitch's mother gently placed the angel in his waiting hands.

The fabric of the ornament's dress was worn thin in places, and one of its wings had been hastily repaired with scotch tape after Danny accidentally dropped it a few years back. Yet the regal beauty of the topper had not diminished in the least with time. The further Danny moved into his teen years (he was now in his 14th) the more he appreciated the angel's annual and familiar charm.

He approached the tree, reached up above his head, and then positioned the angel upon the topmost branch. Behind him, the living room erupted with a celebratory cheer. He turned to see his mother, father, and 12-year-old sister smiling at him.

"Better watch out, big brother," said Diana. "One of these days I'm going to hit a growth spurt and then your days as 'official Fitch family tree topper' will be numbered."

A plate covered in sugar cookies rested on the coffee table next to her. She reached down, grabbed one, and took a bite.

“Not if you keep eating like that you won’t,” said Danny with eyebrows raised.

“Whatever. You’re just jealous of my kick butt metabolism.” Diana stuck her tongue out at Danny and then dropped down onto the sofa next to her father.

“Everyone ready?” said Mrs. Fitch, positioned at the foot of the tree with the electrical cord in hand.

“Ready,” said Danny. He moved to the wall and flicked the light switch off.

The room went dark, save for the warm orange glow of the flames emanating from the small fire burning in the fireplace off to the side of the room.

Mrs. Fitch pressed the cord into the wall socket and the tree lit up in a dazzling display of colour.

“Another gorgeous Christmas tree!” declared Mr. Fitch with a resounding clap.

Accompanying the twinkling and multicoloured lights were a random assortment of decorations that had been pieced together by the family over the last two decades. Lone survivor bulbs from various collections, still somehow in one piece even after all its brother and sister bulbs had shattered, hung throughout the evergreen’s branches. Mixed in amongst the bulbs were everything from expensive ornaments given as gifts on past Christmas mornings to handmade crafts of various shape and size. It was a ragtag assortment to be sure, and no one portion of the tree looked like any other, but it was theirs, and Diana loved it.

“Another gorgeous tree,” she agreed, but even as she said it, her smile faded and her eyes drifted to the window.

The day had come to an end and outside, beyond the frosted pane, darkness had fallen. Diana knew all too well that in her hometown of Maplewright darkness brought with it death.

“Well, are you going to sing, Diana?” asked Mrs. Fitch.

“Huh?” Diana’s attention was drawn back to the warm living room. “Sing? Oh... no. Not this year.”

“But it’s a tradition,” said Danny. “It’s not Christmas unless you sing ‘God Rest Ye Merry Gentleman’ after we light the tree.”

“I don’t feel like singing, alright?” said Diana. It came out louder than intended.

“It’s alright, honey. There’s still plenty of time,” soothed her mother. “Maybe closer to Christmas Eve you’ll be more in the Yuletide spirit.”

“Maybe,” said Diana.

“I’m putting these away before I eat the entire plate,” said Mr. Fitch. He scooped up the plate of cookies as he got to his feet. “Did those dishes do themselves yet?”

“I’m afraid not,” responded his wife.

Mr. Fitch sighed. “I guess I’ll go ahead and do them. As my reward, I’ll have to eat three or four more of these cookies.”

“Oh, no you won’t,” said Mrs. Fitch, snatching the plate from his hands.

“Hey, get back here!” he cried as he chased her into the kitchen.

Danny sat down next to Diana on the sofa and admired the tree.

“That angel really does cap the whole thing off perfectly, doesn’t it?” he said, a mocking jingle in his voice. “It adds that distinct element of Christmas charm.”

Diana let out a sigh. “This is stupid.”

“Fine, I’ll let you put the angel on top next year, alright?” said Danny. “Don’t get all snooty about it.”

She turned to her brother, her face too serious for her years. “Who says there’s going to *be* a next year?”

She got to her feet, walked to the window, then turned back to face her brother. The cold air leaked in from around the window frame and bit at the back of her neck. “We’re acting like nothing’s wrong. Like it’s just another Christmas. We’re eating sugar cookies and decorating the tree. Meanwhile, outside... the world is ending.”

Danny stood. “The world isn’t ending.”

“No?” responded Diana. “Vampires are walking the streets at night. Every single time the sun sets, someone in this town dies. Everything is falling apart out there.”

“Welcome to real life, little sister.”

“Vampires? Aliens? Magic spells?” scoffed Diana. “You call *this* real life?”

“If it weren't vampires, it would be something else. Disease. Famine. A massive earthquake, or a stock market crash. This isn’t the end of the world, Diana. This just another day in the life.”

Diana stepped away from the window. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Danny approached the Christmas tree, reached out and touched a handmade craft. It had been pieced together from white glue, Popsicle sticks, and cardboard. The paper was now so old it had gone brittle and cracked. Some pre-school teacher had written Diana’s name on the back a decade earlier.

“You keep telling everyone that you’re not a kid anymore.” Danny let go of the crafted ornament. “If that’s the case, it’s time to

you realized something about life: the only thing you can always count on in this world is entropy.”

“What the hell does ‘entropy’ mean?” said Diana with a scowl.

“It means everything falls apart,” said Danny. “It means everything dies.”

Diana stared into the fireplace and watched the flames slowly eat away at the stack of logs her father had piled within.

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe it all falls apart in the end,” she turned her back to the flames and approached her brother. “But that doesn’t mean we need to stand around and watch it happen. There are some of us who are going to do everything possible to hold it all together just a little while longer.”

She reached out and touched Danny’s arm.

“Are you still with me, big brother?”

He looked down at her.

“You know I am,” he said. “Until the end.”

Diana smiled. “Good. Then I’ll see you tonight.”

She headed into the kitchen, and Danny was left alone in the living room with the darkness, the fire, the tree, and the angel.

PART

2

The Blood and the Snow

Danny stood in the darkness holding a sharpened wooden stake in his hand. His fingers tightened around the stake, loosened, and then tightened again.

He watched as the snow outside his bedroom window fell from the dark sky. A thick blanket of white covered all of Winchester Road in front of his home. Not a single car would pass by now that dark had fallen... at least no car driven by a human.

“I thought telling Mom and Dad about the vampires would mean we wouldn’t have to sneak around like this anymore,” said Diana, quietly entering the dark room without turning on the lights. She joined her brother at the frosty window.

“Yeah, right.” Danny shoved the stake into the interior pocket of his coat. “If they didn’t want us sneaking out after dark *before* they knew there were killer monsters prowling the streets, what made you think they would let us out *after* they knew?”

“My relentless optimism?” offered Diana. Like her brother, she wore a winter coat, hat, gloves, and boots. Her bow, along with a

quiver filled with arrows, rested on her shoulder.

“Hold on tight to that optimism,” said Danny. “You’re gonna to need it. It’s cold out there tonight.”

“I’m ready,” said Diana.

He undid the latch and pushed open his bedroom window. Frigid air immediately rushed into the room. Ignoring the cold, the siblings slid out onto the roof.

“It’s slippery,” said Danny, testing the snow covered shingles. “Be careful.”

Diana nodded and followed her brother across the angled surface of the roof. They made their way over to the old Maple in front of the house. Danny was a veteran at descending the tree, but Diana was still getting used to the process. She didn’t have her brother’s height, but with his help she was able to make it safely down to the front yard.

The sibling’s feet crunched through fresh snow as they stepped out into the deserted street in front of their home.

“You know the drill,” said Diana.

Danny nodded. “Just give me the signal when you’re in position.”

He stood still and watched as his sister made her way down Winchester Road, a trail footprints lingering in the snow behind her.

Old man Carter’s house sat near the corner of Bextor Court and Winchester Road. No one had seen him in weeks, but the bushes in his yard served as a perfect cover. Danny worried the footprints would give away his sister’s position, but she had obviously had the same thought because she wound her way back behind a neighbor’s house and then approach old man Carter’s bushes from the back.

She let out the whistle, signaling she was in position, and Danny began to walk. This is how it worked: Diana the hunter and Danny the bait. They had staked enough vampires using this routine that word, it seemed, had gotten out amongst the monsters. The vampires now stayed clear of the Winchester Road. It was a small victory for the siblings – they had taken back a single street – but a victory none-the-less.

And just because the older vampires knew to stay clear of Winchester didn't mean the occasional newborn wasn't drawn their way by Danny and Diana's sent carried on the night air. Danny suspected the winter wind combined with the snow cover likely made their smell all the more noticeable.

He trudged up and down the street for the next hour. Whenever he drew near his sister, they would share nods, then he would turn and work his way back towards the house. His toes grew numb and he had to continually wiggle his fingers within his mittens to keep the blood flowing. It was tedious work, but Danny liked it when the patrol was boring. Nobody dies when things are boring.

He had just decided they should call it a night when he spotted the vampire at the far end of the street.

At first, he and Diana had been extra cautious to ensure it was indeed a vampire they were dealing with when someone appeared on the road like this. Danny would engage them in conversation before Diana did anything. Once conversation began, it rarely took long to learn what they were dealing with. Your average Maplewright citizen out for a winter walk in the dead of night rarely had opening salutations like, "I'm going to rip out your esophagus and eat it."

But getting close enough to talk with the vampires was dangerous. They were fast and unpredictable, so Diana and Danny learned to spot vampires by other means. Tonight, for example, while breath visibly churned through the air before his nose and mouth every time Danny exhaled, this vampire had no such breath. There was also the way the vampires sometimes walked, almost like a dog sniffing its way towards an especially interesting meal. This vampire had that walk to him now.

Upon seeing Danny, it quickly increased its pace. It didn't break out into an all-out run, but it was definitely headed right for him.

That was good.

It meant he'd taken the bait.

Danny's biggest concern had always been that Diana would be spotted before he had time to catch the vampire's attention. Diana was confident she would still have time to get off her shot, but Danny wasn't so sure. Not with this cold.

The vampire drew closer. He was short. Definitely not an adult... a recently deceased teenager, then, reborn with an unquenchable thirst for human blood that had driven him out into the cold winter streets of Maplewright. The young monster had no idea what was about to happen to him. Any second now, Diana would take him down with one of her arrows, and then Danny would introduce the vampire's heart to his favourite wooden stake.

The monster drew closer.

Danny stood his ground.

He kept waiting for the arrow to arrive, but it didn't come.

Peering past the monster to get a view of Diana risked giving away her position, but it was a risk he had to take.

At the other end of the street, his sister had risen from behind her place of hiding. Her bow was raised and she seemed to have an arrow knocked, but for some unfathomable reason, she hadn't taken the shot.

The vampire was only a driveway's distance away from him now.

Danny pulled open his jacket and hastily yanked forth the stake from within.

"Hello," he said, dropping his mitten to the snow and gripping the stake tight in his bare palm.

"Hi," said the vampire, its voice quiet and shy. The light breeze blew snowflakes into his already white face. "I'm having a bit of a bad night, I think."

Danny looked the vampire up and down. It was one of the youngest he'd seen for some time, and looked to be about Diana's age. It wore a black suit caked with dirt. Fresh blood dripped from raw fingers, leaving a trail of black dots in the snow alongside his footprints.

"I bet you have," said Danny, certain now that it was a newborn they were dealing with. Probably fresh from the grave given the look of those finger. That was a stroke of luck. The new ones were often dazed, and unsure of themselves as they learned to grapple with their new craving for blood. It might buy Danny some time... but not much.

"What are you going to do with that?" The vampire nodded towards the sharpened stake.

"I'm going to smash it into your heart," said Danny.

The vampire shook his head, slowly at first but then with

burgeoning confidence. “No, I don’t think so. I think I’ll take it from you.”

Danny tightened his grip on the stake. “You can certainly try.”

They were nearly face to face now.

Where the hell was Diana? What was she doing?

Something had gone horribly wrong. Maybe her bow had frozen up in the cold, or the arrows stuck in the quiver.

“How are your fingers?” asked the vampire.

“Cold,” said Danny. “Why do you ask?”

The vampire’s lips pulled back, revealing the smile Danny had become regrettably familiar with. “Because I’m going to eat them.”

Each vampire was different. Some retained more of their human personality after their death and rebirth, others less. Some were more cunning, others acted like starving beasts in the wild. They were diverse in personality and behavior, but the commonality between all of them was that abhorrent smile and the razor sharp fangs it always revealed.

The vampire lunged at Danny. As it did so, its foot, still clad in the dress shoes his parents had buried him in, slipped on the icy street. He wobbled atop the ice, nearly fell, and then steadied himself.

There was a whistle, and then the vampire’s throat exploded and Danny felt an excruciating thump against his shoulder. The intensity of the blow knocked him back off his feet, and he landed hard on his back in the snow.

His body was numb from the cold and the air had been driven from his lungs, but a new and troubling warmth began to spread across the right side of Danny’s upper body.

He tried to sit up, but a bolt of pain tore through him and he collapsed back into the snow.

He lay there for a moment, waiting for the onslaught to subside. He watched the snow dance its way down out of the sky and onto his face. Then he took a deep breath, readied himself, and sat up again. From the sitting position, he could see the arrow embedded in his right shoulder.

“Oh, crap,” said Diana, leaning down next him, her breath coming out in smoke bursts after the sprint down the road from her hiding spot.

“Yeah...” gasped Danny through the pain. “Oh, crap is right.”

Diana dropped her bow into the snow, and checked his back. “It didn’t go all the way through,” she said.

Danny responded with a moan.

“I’m going to take the arrow out,” said Diana. “As soon as I do, make sure you put pressure on the wound. We can get you bandaged up back at home.”

“Uh, huh,” said Danny with an aching nod.

She put both hands on the arrow. “When it comes out, it’s probably going to hurt a lot,” she warned him.

“It already hurts,” said Danny through gritted teeth.

Diana pulled hard, and the arrow came free, followed by a spurt of crimson blood that sprinkled down onto the snow before them.

Danny groaned as he pushed his left mitt into the wound. The mitten went wet immediately.

“It’s going to smell the blood,” said Danny, remembering the vampire as Diana helped him to his feet.

The monster lay before them twitching and kicking. Both hands

were pressed to a throat that had been shredded by the arrow. It appeared as though the spinal cord was the only thing still keeping the head on. A black pool of blood spread through snow beneath him.

“What the hell happened?” gasped Danny, watching the vampire flail about.

“The arrow went right through his neck and hit you,” replied Diana.

“Oh, you *think*?” said Danny, nodding towards the blood covered arrow still held in his sister’s grip.

The vampire released one hand from its throat and made a desperate grab for her ankle.

She took a step back out of his reach.

“What happened to *you*?” said Danny. “Why did it take you so long to shoot?”

“I saw him under the street light,” said Diana, looking down at the vampire still gnashing his teeth at her. “I saw his face. I... know him.”

Danny realized he’d been correct when he had guessed the boy was about his sister’s age. “School?” he asked.

She nodded her head. “His name is Michael.”

“He was in your class?”

“No.”

“But he was your friend?”

“Yeah... I mean, I don’t know.” Diana shrugged. “I don’t know how he felt about me.”

Danny observed the way his sister stared down at the monster before them and suddenly knew exactly why she had delayed so

long. “But you knew how you felt about him,” he said.

Diana said nothing.

The wind had picked up, and its banshee shriek filled the air around them.

“I’m so sorry,” said Danny.

“Me too,” said Diana.

It was cold out. Too cold. They needed to get inside. There was too much blood in the snow. How much of was his own? Danny didn’t know, but the throbbing in his shoulder told him it was enough.

“You know we have to stake him,” he said.

“Of course,” said Diana. “He’s a vampire.”

“I can’t do it with my right arm,” said Danny. “I could try with my left.”

“No,” breathed Diana, her voice thin like the wind. “You need to keep pressure on the wound. I’ll do it.”

She searched around the blood splattered snow and found the stake close by. She picked up the stake, and then approached the vampire.

“Diana,” said Danny.

“Yeah?”

“It’s going to hurt,” he said.

“It already hurts,” said Diana.

She knelt down next to the vampire and drove the stake into his heart.

Blackness took hold of the thing that had once been a young boy named Michael. The first sign of sun the next morning would do away with the rest.

CHRISTMAS IN MAPLEWRIGHT

Diana turned her back on the black thing in the snow and went to her brother. “Let’s get you home,” she said.

PART

3

The Pain and the Joy

Diana dusted the snow from the top of the rock in her mother's garden and retrieved the hidden key from underneath.

There was no way Danny was going to be able to climb the tree with his injured shoulder, so the siblings entered the house through the front door. If they woke their parents in the process, so be it. Their parents would have to be told what happened in the morning anyway.

The usually dark living room was alive with colour. Despite the rush to deal with Danny's wound, they couldn't help but take a moment to stare at the sight of their family tree fully trimmed, decorated, and alive with light despite the night.

"I know that wasn't easy for you out there tonight," said Danny.

"It's never easy," said Diana.

"No, it's not," said Danny. "It's difficult, and it's painful. The center doesn't hold. Everything falls apart."

He shimmied out of his blood-soaked coat, grimacing in pain and letting it drop to the floor.

“But that’s why we decorate the tree,” he continued. “That’s why we eat sugar cookies and hang stockings by the fire. Diana, we could live another 70 years, or we could all be gone tomorrow. We got lucky out there tonight. It could have gone the other way. Tonight it was him, but it could have been us. That’s why we celebrate life, and family, and friendship, and love. That’s why no matter what’s happening in our lives or outside our windows, we celebrate Christmas. It’s not stupid. It’s the most important thing in the world.”

Diana smiled.

“What?” said Danny.

“Lecture over?” asked his sister.

Danny returned the smile. “Yeah, lecture over.”

“Because if you want to just keep on going until you bleed out, that works too. I mean, Mom and Dad will be pissed, but—”

“Alright, alright. Get me some damn bandages already,” said Danny.

Diana led her brother up the stairs and into his bedroom.

She retrieved the fully stocked medical kit they kept under Danny’s bed next to his stakes and began cleaning her brother’s shoulder. As she wiped away the blood with a wet cloth and disinfected the wound, she started to sing: “‘Fear not then,’ said the Angel, ‘Let nothing you affright. This day is born a saviour of a pure virgin bright. To free all those who trust in Him, from Satan’s power and might.’”

Danny smiled through the pain. “*Now* it’s Christmas,” he said.

“Tidings of comfort and joy, big brother,” said Diana, taping

KEVIN T. JOHNS

gauze down over the wound. “Tidings of comfort and joy.”

The End