

BOO HUMBUG

CHRISTMAS IS SCARIER
THAN YOU THINK



A NOVEL

RENE GUTTERIDGE

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TO ALL THOSE WHO LOVE SKARY, INDIANA,
AS MUCH AS I DO.



CHAPTER 1

“What’s Christmas time to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, but not an hour richer; a time for balancing your books and having every item in ’em through a round dozen of months presented dead against you? If I could work my will,” said Scrooge indignantly, “every idiot who goes about with ‘Merry Christmas’ on his lips, should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart.”

“THINK OUTSIDE the box,” Mr. Watson implored as his gaze fell over his students, all clustered together on the stage floor, their backs erect with enthusiasm. Lois Stepaphanopolis was the only one not sitting on the floor. She’d tried it once, but her hips hurt for a solid seven days afterward, so now she used a chair and a comfortable slump. She watched Mr. Watson gesture toward an imaginary audience. “Give them something they’re not expecting!”

His voice held an authoritative nobility, and he looked down his nose at his students. Lois was the oldest by at least thirty years. The rest were barely out of high school, had somehow missed out on

college for one reason or another, and now bet their dreams on one community college class.

Lois wasn't that naive. She didn't dream of going to New York and starring on Broadway. She was too old for that kind of grand self-deception. But she did have her little theater company, and they'd had quite a nice summer producing one-acts.

Yet something was tugging at her creative conscience. She couldn't really identify it, but it kept her awake at night, dreaming of bigger and better. She knew she had it in her to do more—to rise higher—but with what? Which story needed to be told?

Mr. Watson's sparkling blue eyes studied each face with great dramatic pause, just like he'd taught them. "Don't be afraid of silence on the stage. Embrace it. Use it to its full benefit. Sometimes silence is more powerful than words. Don't let it linger too long. But if you use it just right, it can be the perfect punctuation to a piece of dialogue that was meant to change the world."

Lois smiled at the thought. Never had she imagined theater could change the world, but the more she did it, the more she understood how much people craved entertainment and the enlightenment that often came from it.

Lois's hand popped up right as Mr. Watson started to describe the finest moment in his stage career. He blinked a couple of times, as if a bright light were aimed at him. "Yes, Ms. Stepaphanolopolis? What is it?"

"I'm going to do it!"

"Do what?" Mr. Watson asked.

"Conceive! Outside the box!"

Mr. Watson glanced around at all the students, then back at Lois. "I'm assuming we're not talking about *in vitro* fertilization here?"

Lois laughed. Mr. Watson was terribly witty. “That’s what you’ve been telling us all week. Don’t do it like everyone else does it. Bring something new to the table, right?”

“You’ve been listening,” Mr. Watson said, with a mild smile. “Good for you.”

“Not just listening, Mr. Watson. Obeying! I can hardly sleep at night. I think I have an idea. A really great idea. An idea that no one in the history of the world has ever thought of.”

“Hmm.” Mr. Watson looked skeptical but amused. “Lois, I’m thankful you’re implementing what I’ve been teaching you. I encourage every student to think outside the box. It’s what makes great characters. When you’re tackling a role, remember to bring your own version to the table and—”

“Bigger!” Lois spread her arms wide. “Not just the characters, but the *story*.” She closed her eyes, her face turned up toward the stage lights. “I’m going to do something that’s never been done before.”

A few people snickered. Lois dropped her arms and looked at them. *Jealous*. The youngsters didn’t have the experience she had. They couldn’t go to the places she could.

Mr. Watson cleared his throat. “That’s terrific, Lois.”

Lois stood and gathered her things. “I have to go now.”

“Class isn’t over,” Mr. Watson said.

“I know, but I have a lot of work to do. You, of all people, Mr. Watson, understand that once...maybe twice...in a lifetime, brilliance strikes in such a way that everything must come to a stop until the vision has been fulfilled.”

Mr. Watson raised an eyebrow.

“Oh, all right,” Lois said, smiling demurely. “If you must know.”

“Must know what?”

“I’m doing Dickens.” She paused, letting the silence do the talking. When it’d had its effect, she cut it off and said, “*A Christmas Carol.*”

Mr. Watson hushed the sudden flurry of snickering.

“What?” Lois asked with a frown.

A bobble-headed blonde, otherwise known as Staci, said, “You’re kidding, right? I mean, if there’s ever been a Christmas play that’s overdone, it’s that. It’s been done thirteen billion times as a play, and at least a million times as a movie. It’s been done on television, on radio, in the park, off Broadway, on Broadway—”

“Every way possible,” another student interrupted.

Lois folded her arms together and narrowed her eyes. Poor Mr. Watson. No wonder he appeared so aggravated all the time. At first, it seemed like he didn’t want to be teaching at a community college, but upon further observation, surely the cause was the narrow-mindedness of today’s young people. She gave Mr. Watson a knowing glance. “They have a lot to learn, don’t they, Mr. Watson?”

She threw her scarf around her neck. “I bid you farewell and lots of luck in your future careers as waiters and waitresses.”

Staci smirked. “Please. You really think you can do theater better than the rest of us? Give me a break. No offense, lady, but you’re from a small town, and you’re way over the hill—and in over your head. You’re the one person here who never seems to know what’s going on.”

Lois looked at Mr. Watson, whose understanding expression tried to compensate for Bobblehead’s attitude. “Lois, I’m glad you’re trying to think outside the box. It’s a huge improvement. Wasn’t it just last week that you walked out of the improv lesson because you thought it was a waste of time, since actors always use scripts?”

“Thank you for your confidence, Mr. Watson,” Lois said. “And I can assure you, *A Christmas Carol* has never been done like this.” She addressed the students. “Wait and see. It will be unforgettable.” She slid her arms through her coat sleeves, buttoned the front, and walked off the stage, her heels clicking loudly until she reached the carpet of the center aisle, where she marched forward. And with each step, one thought built onto another, forming a tower of brilliance. She stopped at the front doors of the auditorium and smiled to herself. Everything came together inside her head. She knew exactly what she wanted to do and how she would do it.



Alfred Tennyson strolled along the leafy path that wound through the woods just north of his rental house. It was actually the only house in Skary, Indiana, to rent. People either lived and died here or didn't come at all. And he wasn't sure why he always felt the need to return. Since crashing and burning in publishing, first as Wolfe Boone's editor and later as his agent, Alfred's career had improved slowly but steadily.

Now he worked as a freelance editor, pulling in enough to afford a modest apartment in Manhattan. Sometimes, for no reason he could identify, he came back to Skary and stayed for indefinite periods of time.

He'd started morning walks a while back when he was trying to get a grasp on the string of life that was quickly unwinding around him. Then he added one after lunch. Now he walked in the evenings too. It made him feel kind of old. Back in New York, he used to feel almost repelled by the sight of old people walking the sidewalks and

the parks. He wondered if it was the most exciting part of their day and the only time that they were near other human beings before returning home to eat their dinner at four and turn in at seven.

He also would've never guessed he'd be ambling through a forest at night. In New York, it could be risky even walking in a well-lit park during the day. But the woods seemed to be the only place in town where Christmas lights couldn't be seen. The town had them strung up the flagpoles and down the light poles, around every government building, through the town hall, and over the roof of any building with access to electricity. They popped up overnight the day after Thanksgiving and would stay up until after the new year. It was no lie—on a moonless night in mid-December, if you walked down Main Street, you might think it was noon.

But it wasn't just the Christmas lights. If that were all he had to consider, maybe on some level, he might be able to tolerate it. However, Christmas cheer wasn't confined to decorations. It was the attitude of the entire town, as if life weren't fully lived until you wore a Santa sweater and joined a Christmas carol touring group. If you had no desire to gush about pumpkin pie and Aunt Betsy's turkey, it was hard to find common ground.

Even Wolfe, his longtime friend, seemed to have converted. Back in the normal days, when Wolfe was a famous horror novelist nicknamed Boo, Alfred was successful and wealthy by association. Christmas was a party, not a religious event, and there seemed to be little to worry about. Alfred recalled that even before Wolfe was struck down by religion, he wasn't that into the festivities. But it didn't much matter—Alfred carried on the festivities without him. There were corporate cocktail parties, VIP dinners, shopping for people he wanted to impress, and receiving gifts from people who

were in desperate need of him in one form or another. Champagne and caviar, limos and fancy suits, mingling, laughing, toasting success and successes to come.

But now he couldn't remember the last time he'd been to a party in New York. And the only people he received gifts from were Wolfe and his wife, Ainsley. Champagne, the kind he *would* be caught dead drinking, was too expensive. And those friends who used to toast him were inaccessible until he regained his former status.

Now he was in Skary, walking along a dirt path and trying his best to maintain his subgrade life in a manner that kept him from staying in bed all day long. He returned cheery greetings the best he could and tried to conduct himself in a way that didn't raise suspicions about his dislike for a yearly holiday that seemed more like a global event.

He came to a clearing where he had a nice view of the town below. The wind snapped through the trees and chilled his skin. There sat Skary in all its glory, encircled by a halo of light. Cars crept by like there was not a single important place to be. People greeted the cold like it was a warm friend, skating on the ponds, laughing on the street corners, window-shopping with barely a dollar to their names.

Alfred put his hands deep inside the pockets of his coat and tried to remember what the town was like a few years ago, when tourists drove for miles to see the house on the hill at the opposite end of town. From where Alfred stood, he could see yellow light glowing from every window of that old house, the one that looked fit to regurgitate every terrible and horrifying tale that came from an imagination that never ended.

Until one day it did. At least in a monetary sort of way. Wolfe

Boone, horror novelist extraordinaire and the one success Alfred could take complete credit for, decided he needed more meaning in his life. At first, Alfred chalked it up to writer's block, but he soon made the dreadful discovery that Wolfe had met Jesus. Suddenly the *New York Times* Best Seller List ceased to be important to Wolfe.

But it never did cease to be important to Alfred.

Sighing, Alfred pulled the collar up around his neck and turned back toward the rental house, plodding along, kicking dead leaves to either side of the path. December was a long month, and he would be glad when it ended. Except then a new year would begin, and he couldn't help but wonder what part of his life he would lose next in another turn of bad luck.