

There's magic when it snows

Mr. Piccione
9:40 am

The door's bell tinkles with the sound of sleigh bells, the smell of new snow, the cold of ice on eyelashes. It is a tease. There's no winter here, just the overheated air of August in South Florida. It blows in through the open door beneath the bell like the breath of hell. Danni can't stand it. South Florida. Whoever invented it should be shot.

The old man pushes the door close behind him, giving the office air-conditioning a fighting chance. A lot of the old men just leave it hang open. They don't notice the heat. How it melts the snow.

The old man steps toward her. The sunlight that pours through the plate glass window behind him makes her head pound harder. She takes out her sunglasses from the desk's top drawer.

He's tall and thin with a big head topped with a straw hat, no glasses, light-colored eyes. His navy blazer is buttoned with one gold button. He holds one hand in its right pocket, his elbow bent. His left hand reaches for the straw hat, circled with blue ribbon. His blazer fits well and is sharply pressed. A small white scarf with golden trim is tied around his neck. He does not sweat.

Danni puts on the sunglasses. "Good morning," she says. Her tone suggests a pleasure she does not feel. It's force of habit. Like getting dressed. Like coming into the office every morning. Like doing anything. As if it matters at all.

The old man stands in front of her desk and half bows, his hat held over his heart, his head bald but for the strings of hair swept back above his ears. "A pleasure to meet you, Miss Delaney." He holds out his free hand to shake hers.

She ignores it. Instead, she picks up her purse from the floor and sits it on her lap. It peeks open. Her hand drops inside it to rest against the cool of the gun's stainless steel. It's comforting. "Am I supposed to know you?"

His eyes crinkle. "I think not, my dear." He looks up at the huge picture of Dunny on his sailboat, hung on the wall above her. The setting sun shines through the windblown sail. Dunny stands at the wheel looking directly at the camera. Light reflects from the sail onto his handsome face. "Mr. Jake Dunn, I presume." The old man nods at the picture and gestures with his hand at the storefront window where the sun shines on Jake Dunn, Proprietor, lettered backwards in a golden arc above the similarly backwards Insurance & Investments.

"It is," she says.

"An impressive boat. A more impressive photo. Difficult to compose under the conditions. The lighting on Mr. Dunn's face, the shadows across the boat. The life brought forth. All superb. Your photo?"

No one before had seen anything in the picture but Dunny and the boat. She can't help but be pleased even through the pain in her head. "Yes."

"Yes, of course." His teeth gleam with a freshness unseemly in an old man's mouth. "Please allow me to introduce myself, Miss Delaney. My name is Harry Piccione. Of Casa Napoli. The pink house on the bay. You must know it." He holds out his hand again. It is bony with long fingers. She snaps the purse close, sets it beneath the desk, and takes his hand. It is warm and strong, nothing like it looks. He does not let her hand go. "I rarely walk through town, Miss Delaney. I am not social. But I was compelled today." He kisses the back of her hand. His lips are warm. It's not disgusting. "You are even lovelier than I believed. The short hair though surprises me."

Danni pulls her hand from his and touches the hair she'd cut at the beginning of summer. Not that it had helped. Her braids had kept--. "What do you mean, even lovelier than you believed?"

"It has been my fortune to have seen you before, from afar. On the beach. On Mr. Dunn's boat. My house has expansive views." He nods at the picture.

Danni looks carefully at him. It's sometimes hard to tell old men apart but she's sure he hasn't been in the office before. He's different than the others who come in pretending to be interested in life insurance in order to pass a few minutes of their remaining time on earth with a young woman. There's something different, perhaps even dangerous, about him. She thinks of the gun. "I'm sorry Mr. Piccione, but Mr. Dunn is meeting with a client right now, out of the office. Would you care to make an appointment?" With one hand, she slides Dunny's calendar toward her and flips it open, with the other she reaches under the desk for her purse again.

"I did not come here to see Mr. Dunn, Miss Delaney." He waves again at the air while his eyes roam over the other pictures on the wall, all taken since she came to this god-forsaken country. There's another of Dunny. He's waving at her from his convertible. There's dolphins in the bay, children building a sandcastle, the marina at night, the only light a gas lamp by which a bearded man reads a paperback on the deck of his boat. Her favorite though, he can't see, on her desk a 5x7 of a little girl in curls eating a dripping ice cream cone. His gleaming teeth return when his eyes come back to her. "I came to see you, Miss Delaney. As I said. And your work." He nods at the pictures and steps closer to the desk.

"You didn't say you came to see me." The headache pulses worse on the left side of her head. "Or my work." He's still smiling. "Don't come any closer." She unlatches the purse in her

lap. It feels like someone is stepping on the side of her head. "I'm not interested in you, Mr. Piccione. Not in your money. Not in your body. Not anything at all."

"My dear, you kill me!" His laugh is full of teeth. "You are perfect. Simply perfect!" She looks at him over her sunglasses. Tears leak out of his clear blue eyes. He starts to cough. It sounds like he's choking. She hopes she won't have to call another ambulance.

She pushes her sunglasses up her nose, stands up, and sits the purse down on the desk. "Are you all right?"

He wipes away the dribble from his mouth and the tears on his cheeks. "I'm fine." He waves weakly at her. "I'm fine. Really." He stands straighter. "But are you?"

Danni squints. His question stabs at the heart of her. She isn't all right, but she's going to fix that, once and for all. Her hand goes without thought to the locket that lies above the scooped neck of her blouse. "What do you mean?"

"Well, my dear, you are lovely but sad. And so the gun troubles me." He tilts his head toward the gun that has spilled out of her tipped purse onto the desk.

She picks the gun up. "It's for protection."

"No doubt, my dear, but even so, it would make me rest better if you had the safety on."

Perhaps it's a trick, but the habit of wanting to please overrules the thought. She sets the safety. "Better?"

"Much," he says, "thank you. As for your lack of interest in my body, Miss Delaney, I understand that all too well. However, I likewise have no interest in yours. At least not in the way you might believe. If I were 82 again, well, that might be an entirely different story." He laughs again, a short laugh with fewer teeth. "I never would have believed it possible," he says,

"but I have lost all interest in sex. There's a certain freedom in that." His lips fall away from their smile. "And a great loss."

The freedom she can believe but a loss? It would have to be embarrassing to poke around someone else's bones at his age. "Well, I apologize then, Mr. Piccione, for my presumption. A lot of men--"

"It's Harry, my dear. Please call me Harry."

Her headache pounds harder, if that's possible, now at both temples. She sits down.

"Though I have no carnal desires, Miss Delaney. May I call you Danielle?" She must nod. "Thank you, Danielle. I must confess I do have An interest in you." She refocuses. His lightness is gone. "I would like you to visit me at Casa Napoli. This afternoon would be ideal. There are no thunderstorms on the horizon and the shadows will be ideal. You're puzzled. Yes, of course. I neglected to tell you. I am an artist. I have made a painting of you but I am afraid it does not do you justice. I would like to do better."

"You did a painting of me? Why? How?" She's used to old men creeping around the office, but not a stalker. She keeps the gun in her hand, aware of the safety she'd set at his request.

"An artist takes his subjects where he finds them, as do you," he says gesturing with his hat at her photos. "Until this afternoon, then?"

No. "I'm working this afternoon, Mr. ... Harry. I can't." She isn't going to be anywhere this afternoon except dead in the park, no one admiring her eyes but the scavenging birds and a stray dog or two. That's what she promised herself. What she promised Emily. She grasps the locket. She doesn't deserve to live.

"Indeed," he says. "That is unfortunate." He makes a show of looking at his watch. Its steely sleekness is faintly obscene next to his thin, spotted skin. He looks up. "Ah, I am late for an appointment, and a phone call." He holds his hand up as if he would take hold of her hand, the one that still grasps the locket. "Time to go." He drops his hand and half bows to her again. "Until this afternoon then. Danielle."

She tucks her hair behind her ear and shrugs. "I'm sorry, Mr. ... Harry, but like I said I won't be there." A mother who abandons her baby daughter, no matter the circumstances, should not be making plans, should not be able to make plans.

"The sickle slices when it wills, dear girl. When it wills." It feels like a threat. "Arrivederci." He puts on his hat and tips it to her as he turns and walks out the door.

Dunny
Same day, 3:55 pm

Dunny throws the file folder down on her desk with a flourish. "You need to send the premium notice and set up another meeting with Jackson for next week. Don't think your last two weeks here are going to be the sun and a breeze. There's a lot of work to be done and I intend to see you do it. Did you call that employment agency yet? I need someone in here pronto and you need to train her. It really would be better if you stayed three weeks, four. Two weeks' notice isn't enough. It's not fair."

Danni's headache had ebbed and flowed, mostly flowed, all day. It presses hard now, making her nauseous again. She'd thrown up when she went out at lunch to go to the park. The heat had been too much for her. She stayed in the office, ate lunch, and stayed alive. The punishment for her inability to follow through on her resolution is having to listen to Dunny whine.

She puts down her pen and closes her notebook over it. She picks up Jackson's file and puts it on the top of a stack of other files. Jackson is immensely rich and seemingly intelligent. It amazes her how many otherwise bright people do business with Dunny. "The employment agency's sending someone over tomorrow. She'll be fine without training. There's really not much to learn."

"You're smart, de Looney." Dunny had thought Danni too much like his own name so he had fashioned Delaney into de Looney. He thought it clever. "I've never had an assistant as good as you. Well," he squints at her, "I mean for getting work done. Let's go." He walks to the front door. Perhaps, she should shoot him instead. It would be easy enough to put him out of his misery. "Come on, de Looney," he says, "we're going to be late." Problem is, he doesn't know he's miserable.

"Where?"

"I told you. We have a meeting with Piccione."

"We do not."

"He called while I was in with Mrs. Bates. You didn't answer so I did your job for you. Said he wanted to hear what I could do for him. Said I should bring you. You know these old farts. They like to see some leg, some cleavage. Makes them dream of better days. More important, it opens their pocketbooks. Bring a bikini. The smaller, the better."

Dunny's a pig but she finds she can't be angry with him. He doesn't matter. Her hand moves to her locket. Her baby Emily's the only thing that matters and she can't have her. She drops her hand to her lap and thinks of the cold feel of the gun. It's the only solution to her problems, but, perhaps, she's made it needlessly complicated. She doesn't need to kill herself in the park, away from everyone. It would serve Dunny right if he had to watch her brains splatter

against his picture, to have to clean up her flesh and blood from the floor. "Dunny, you don't need me, or my bikini. Anyway, I've got to get this trust out for Mrs. Bates' signature." She pulls a random piece of paper toward her. "No trust, no premium. No premium, no commission." Her lips curl. It's a killer argument. She feels better.

"I know that! I'm the boss. Remember? And I still pay your fucking salary and I don't need you smiling at me like some fucking witch." Danni stiffens. Though Dunny's deficiencies are many, screaming and cursing are not among them. He wipes his face. "What I mean is I need you to come with me. Piccione said don't bother to come without you. OK? This case could make my year. He makes Jackson look like a pauper. Though I'm afraid Piccione may have waited too long to get life insurance." Dunny's moment of reality lasts only the moment. His face brightens. "We saw his house from the boat. Remember? The huge pink one. Looks like a girl's birthday cake." He holds the door open. The hot air blows in in waves. "You coming?"

She's sweating like a boxer. The AC in the office sucks and Dunny has the world's coldest AC in his convertible. Besides, she's curious about Mr. Piccione. He's the first thing that's interested her in a long time. "Do you have the top up?"

"Sure. Anything you want, de Looney. Come on."

She bends down for her purse and stands. "You have to bring the car around."

"You're a brat," he says, but he doesn't hesitate. He runs out – the bell above the door is a harsh jangle – and brings the car around. "Move it, de Looney," yells Dunny. The convertible's top lurches up and over his handsome head. "You're going to make us late."

Casa Napoli
4:35 pm

Just past a pretty, white church, Dunny turns onto a pink cobblestone drive. The two halves of a large gate swing open as they approach. The arch above the gate spells out Casa Napoli in a cursively wrought iron. The drive winds through the shade of palms and bananas and other plants with southern names she will never know. It ends at an open plaza where the glare of the sun even through sunglasses prods her headache to stunning life. Dunny stops the car. She opens the door and leans out to throw up.

Dunny comes around to her door and buttons his jacket. "You're going to have to clean that up."

She rolls her eyes -- even that hurts -- as she grabs her purse and steps out of the car, careful not to step in the mess. The house is faced with coral stucco. Two massive wings jut out at shallow angles to the smaller central section of the house. The walls are thick, the windows set back so far she can't be sure there's glass in them.

"It's something, huh?" Dunny's impressed by outsized houses. He so wants one of his own.

Dunny takes her arm and she doesn't pull away. Pink concrete steps lead up to the front portico. It's shaded and provides relief from the sun. The entrance into the house is through two heavy, wooden doors. On either side of them are fan palms in large ceramic pots. She moves away from Dunny. His hand had gone to the small of her back and begun to wander down from there.

Dunny looks at her as he presses the doorbell. A gong echoes deep inside the house. After a time, a woman in a black blouse, black skirt, and black stockings opens the door. Her hair is blond, half gone to gray. It's wrapped tightly in a bun. She has a squashed nose and is

almost as big as Dunny. "You are late, Mr. Dunn." Her voice is deep, with a clipped, Germanic accent. The woman steps aside to let him in. Danni follows. The woman draws in a sharp breath when she sees Danni. The woman slams the entry door close behind them. "You will wait," she says to Danni, her nose scrunched. She walks around them toward a long hall.

Danni takes off her sunglasses. The entry hall is all white, marble floors and marble stairs that curve up. The walls are covered in a soft material, silk Emily realizes with surprise. The air is blessedly cool, almost cold, and sparkles with a dim white light that comes from nowhere and everywhere, like a snowy day.

A painting sits on an easel next to the staircase. She steps toward it. A young woman looks back at her, round eyes peering over sunglasses. She's seated, legs crossed, red polka-dot skirt lying loose just above bare knees, arms are folded across a white blouse and red cotton sweater. Danni's sunglasses, Danni's skirt, Danni's sweater.

The young woman has a wide forehead and equally wide cheeks, which narrow quickly to a sharp chin. She wears two long, metallic red braids, one behind her, the other over her shoulder and breast. Her look suggests the exotic with hypnotic eyes. Danni's face, Danni's hair, almost Danni's eyes.

Dunny is standing beside her. "Kind of looks like you, de Looney," he says. "Other than she's gorgeous and you're not. No offense."

Dunny's right. The young woman can't be her. She is too beautiful and, funny to think, too alive. For no reason, tears begin to slide down either side of Danni's nose. She wipes her eyes on the back of her wrist.

Dunny looks at his watch. "Where'd that maid go?" He takes Danni's arm. "Let's go." He pulls her away from the painting toward the hall the maid went down. On the walls of the hall,

there are more paintings of the young woman. The one that catches Danni's eye is of the young woman on the beach, squatting in front of a child eating an ice cream cone.

"Told you Piccione wanted to see you in a bikini," Dunny says.

Danni's eyes flick to the young woman's bare skin. There *is* too much of it. The child is a pretty 3-year-old girl with golden brown ringlets. Danni remembers the day she spoke with the girl and took her picture. The ice cream was all over her face and dress. Danni still had braids, and had worn a bikini that day, the red one in the painting. Her camera had hung between her breasts as it hung in the picture. Mr. Piccione has been stalking her. She feels faint.

But that's not the worst. The next picture makes the hairs on her neck stand straight up. It's a portrait of another 3-year old girl. She looks as Emily must now look, long red hair with a fiery look on a face that's as pale as white silk.

Piccione's seen Emily. "Where is he?" Danni looks down the hall. She runs toward French doors at its end, fumbling to get her sunglasses on. She flings open one of the doors. The heat of the day floods over her. Her heart is in her ears. The maid is walking toward her by the side of a long blue pool. Over the woman's shoulder, Mr. Piccione stands at a low wall, past the end of the pool, binoculars pointed toward the blue haze of the bay. He wears his straw hat and white scarf. Danni runs around the woman. Piccione, she wants to call but his name gets stuck in her throat.

Her heels are too awkward to run in. She stops to kick them off. "What's wrong?" Dunny is beside her, not breathing hard.

She runs again. Piccione lowers the binoculars and turns. He starts to smile but stops. He walks toward her. They reach the end of the pool at the same time. "You've seen my daughter? Where is she? Is she in Durham?"

"Slow down, my dear. Your d--"

"You've been stalking me. Have you been stalking her, too?"

"Have you been stalking her?" Dunny says. He moves closer to Piccione, his overabundance of muscles tight against the buttoned formality of his jacket.

Piccione waves his hands at both of them. "I do not stalk. I saw Danielle on the beach. She was there often during the winter and spring. She is lovely, as anyone can see. For that alone, I would paint her. But she is more than lovely. She is a great lover. The love she gives to her subjects, to the world, is ... well, something to preserve. I--"

"My daughter, Mr. Piccione. There's a painting of her on your wall." Danni points back at the house.

"You never told me you had a daughter," Dunny says.

"The picture in there, the little red-headed girl. That is my daughter."

"That was not painted from a little girl," Piccione's forehead creases with more wrinkles. "That is you. I imagined you as a little girl. It was something I'd not done before, to paint a woman as the child she once had been."

Piccione is telling the truth. Danni sees it as clearly as she sees she will never again see Emily. Danni reaches for her purse. She presses open its warm, metal latch. Inside, the gun is cool and sleek. It knows its purpose. It is exactly right. Not like her. She raises the gun to her temple and pulls the trigger.

"What the fuck, Danni!" Dunny says. Piccione steps closer. The gun hadn't fired. The safety. She reaches for it. Dunny grabs hold of her arm. Piccione goes for the gun. She releases the safety amidst the fumbling. She moves her arm up. The young woman of the painting watches Danni over her sunglasses in disapproval. A shot rings out. Danni falls, out of the grasp

of Dunny and Piccione. Her breath is a gulp of watery blue, and then another and another. She is soon crushed by a welcome suffocation.

Waking
A few minutes later

Danni wakes with Dunny pinching her nose shut and his mouth over hers. She splutters and spits into his mouth. "Thank God," he says, wiping his mouth and sitting up. "You had me going." Dunny's dripping wet but grinning like he'd just won the lottery. "I never had anyone die on me. I do good mouth-to-mouth."

Danni feels ill. She can't believe she's not dead. "Was I hit?"

"No, you're fine." Dunny's grin fades. "But Piccione doesn't look too good. He really should have come to me sooner." Danni tries to sit up. Can't. Turns on her side and throws up again: water, water, everywhere. Dunny scoots away. "Maybe you shouldn't get up," he says. Danni sits up, woozy, but with no nausea. She tries to stand but she can't get her balance. Dunny stands and offers her his hand. She takes it. When she gets to her feet, she needs to lean against Dunny. He puts his soggy shirt sleeve across her shoulders.

Mr. Piccione's ten feet away, flat on his back. The maid kneels beside him pressing a bloody towel against his stomach. She looks as bad as Mr. Piccione.

With Dunny's arm steadying her, Danni steps toward them. Her clothes too are soaked through and with a breeze off the bay, the heat is no longer oppressive. She drops to her knees with a jarring thump, beside Mr. Piccione. The maid does not look up.

Mr. Piccione opens his eyes. "Do not cry," he says to Danni. "This way is best."

She hadn't noticed the tears running down her cheeks. "It was an accident," she says.

"Of course, my dear." He coughs.

"Did anyone call an ambulance?" Danni whips her head around too fast. She almost tips over.

"She did," Dunny nods at the maid, her hands covered in Mr. Piccione's blood. "I was busy." He looks down at his wet clothes.

"Thanks," Danni says. It's what he expects of her. At the least. There's a siren in the distance.

Mr. Piccione lifts a skeletal hand a couple of inches from the concrete. "I do not have much time," he says. "I called my nephew. He will help you."

"What?"

"Talk to him. Take your paintings, I've left them to you."

"To me?"

"I hadn't painted in years. I thought I was finished but when I saw you, I wanted to paint again. I needed to." He coughs. His breathing is labored. "It was an unexpected gift."

Danni squints at him. Her sunglasses must be in the pool. "Why?" she says, unsure of what she's asking.

"A painter paints." He tries to smile. "Or he is nothing. For a little while, I was something. Again. Thank you."

She doesn't know what to say.

"Leave this place. Sell the paintings. My work still gets decent prices. They will give you something to live on. Find your daughter. My nephew will help. Promise me you will do that."

She shakes her head. She can't.

"It is a dying man's last wish."

"You are not going to die." She wishes it with all her heart.

"Promise me."

He is going to die. "What do you want me to do?"

"Find your daughter. Take her and hold her close to you. Tell her you will never let her go."

"I promise." She can do nothing else.

Piccione turns to the maid and smiles. He closes his eyes, and stops breathing. Just like that. As if it were his decision. "No!" Danni yells at him, knowing even as she cries out, she has lost him, too.

"I can't believe my bad luck," Dunny says to Danni as he helps her up. The paramedics arrive a minute later. "You're too late, too," says Dunny.

Behind the paramedics is a big man in a dark suit, his jacket pushed out by his belly like one of Dunny's sails in a bay wind. He holds his hand out to her. "John Salvatore Anthony Sénza but everyone calls me Big Johnny. You are Danielle, of course." His smile makes the day around them seem dark. Her hand goes up to meet his without willing it. His hand is as big as a bear's paw.

He turns to Dunny. "Mr. Dunn," he squeezes Dunny's shoulder, "it is never too late, not as long as you live. My Uncle worked all this day, though he knew it was his last, to make the world a better place." He lets Dunny go and nods at Danni.

"He's gone," says one of the paramedics.

"He was a great man," Big Johnny nods at his uncle's body. The paramedics remove the binoculars from around his neck and put him on a stretcher. The maid stands, her bloody hands

limp at her sides. "Helga," Big Johnny goes to her, "Do not be sad. Harry was ready." He hugs her before he leads her back to the house, one arm held protectively around her shoulders.

Danni picks up the straw hat and places it on his chest. She touches his arm. *It was a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Harry.* She realizes with surprise she intends to keep her promise. Danni turns to look for Big Johnny. He and Helga are half way back to the house. "Mr. Sénza," she calls. He looks over his shoulder. "Harry said you would help me find my daughter."

He stops. "I promised him I would help you in any way I could," he says.

"Are you kidding me, de Looney?" A church bell rings in the distance. "I just saved your life and you're asking a stranger for help?" Snow begins to fall on Dunny. "Anyway, you can't leave now. It wouldn't be fair."

"It is not a question of fair," she says. The snow looks like dandruff on his water-darkened shirt.

"What is it a question of?"

"Love." She touches the locket at her neck.

"What are you talking about?" Dunny says.

"And magic," she says, smiling at the snow melting in his hair.

"You really are de Looney." He picks up his jacket, which lay neatly folded on the ground.

She's going to find Emily. That's all that matters. "Are you going back to the office?" The church bell has stopped ringing but the snow continues to fall. "I want to leave everything in order for the new girl."