

THE GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PAST

By Michael Hebler

*(Excerpt One from Stave I: Sara and the Spirit)*

Sara did not need to speak a single word. The Spirit knew much with just a touch of her hand; things even she was not aware of about herself. It understood every moment of her past from an aspiration to be an attorney of law to her failure to become one, though her most notable regret was the brother she had allowed to be taken away from her when they were just children.

The details of Sara's past were as clear to the Spirit as her face when it looked towards her puzzled expression while

ascending above the city. She was not frightened but bewildered by her current situation, contemplating whether she was dead, dreaming, or insane. And the Spirit knew which she prayed to be true. It knew all it needed to begin her journey of retrospect and rekindling—as the Spirit had done with so many souls before hers. But first, they needed to reach their destination, which had just come into view.

Sara's grip tightened. Her confusion had transitioned into anxiety by seeing the familiar front door. They approached the brownstone swiftly then soared through the door as though it were made of air. Then the Spirit, being a human-like candle in appearance, illuminated the darkened hallway with its radiant glow.

Only once it was safe to do so, Sara pulled her hand away upon landing, but not before the Spirit perceived her intention to curse it for bringing her back to this abandoned beast. However, Sara said nothing, but instead gawked at each part of herself that she could view. Her legs, feet, hands, fingers... all were solid and still covered with flesh.

"I ain't dead?" she asked, disappointedly.

"No," replied the Spirit, in a soft voice that echoed as though coming from across a large empty room, and yet its countenance was clearly at Sara's side.

"Who are you?"

"I am what was; the visions from days long forgotten, and the spirit of humanity during the season of joy. I am the Spirit of Christmas' Past."

Sara gaped at the Spirit for a moment.

"Spirit, huh? Are you a boy spirit, or girl spirit? I can't tell."

"Gender has no bearing in the afterlife."

"I thought you said I wasn't dead?"

"It is only *I* who am a spirit."

"You saved my life then?" She challenged, as noted by the inflection of resentment in her inquiry.

"It was not your time."

"What makes you think you know when it's my time?"

"Time is what I know."

Sara paused, as though struggling to make sense of her situation. Failure to find it ended her silence. "Christmas past, right? My past?"

It nodded.

"Did we just fly through a door?"

It mimicked its previous nod.

Sara touched the Spirit's flame. Her reach was slow and hypnotic. The Spirit could sense her pleasure with the treasures its fire offered.

"It ain't hot."

"The light I bestow reveals the memories kept in shadow. To keep your reflections in darkness, you need but to thrust this cap upon my head and extinguish me."

Sara's eyes flipped to the nightcap. The Spirit listened to her mind consider putting an end to this situation. It slipped the nightcap out of her reach.

She peered at the Spirit's young face and the eyes that revealed its endless age and wisdom. Then, turning to her surroundings, Sara saw that the Spirit's light had been replaced by light coming from the hallway's fixtures, having returned to their purpose. The long forgotten grimy and battered corridor had been refreshed. A coat of lacquer glistened on its wood-paneled frame, accompanied by the pleasant sounds of Bing Crosby's White Christmas from the next room, and the aroma of turkey, pumpkin, and a hodgepodge of spices that seeped in from

a kitchen. Sara recognized the time as being thirty-eight years ago... to the very night.

"This was your home."

"It was my prison," she corrected instantly.

"These walls hold the memories of a past, which you have long forgotten."

"Forgotten?!" She roared. "I didn't forget nothing."

Sara caught her breath then jumped out of the path of a young girl who darted from the parlor to the kitchen. The five-year-old was no stranger to Sara. She was Lydia Clark; at least, that was her surname before being adopted.

"They cannot see us. These are but reflections of a past, which cannot be altered."

Then, with only the warning of thundering footsteps, a troop of seven more children, raced, giggling as they ran.

A knock came from the front door. Like the call of the school bell for the children, a woman, much like a spirit herself, pivoted from the corner.

Sara froze like ice. Miss Darnall, the thin woman with graying hair wound tightly into a bun was a horrific sight to see.

"There is to be no running!" She ordered.

Sara shivered.

Instinctively, she stepped sideways to avoid the marching woman as her low heels clocked towards the door.

Outside, a rookie police officer held a two-year-old boy in his arms. At his side stood a woman in her twenties, holding onto the hand of a frightened little girl. Sara recognized her five-year-old self instantly, as well as her baby brother, Danny.

Miss Darnell stepped to the side--a less than enthusiastic invitation for the pair to enter with the children.

"Good evening. Are you Agatha Darnell?" The chipper lady asked before stepping inside.

"I am," Miss Darnell confirmed coldly, the perfect opposition to the other's sunny disposition.

"I'm Amy Valentine from Child Protective Services. We spoke on the phone."

"I know," she affirmed while glaring at the two children. "And this is Sara and Daniel Bello."

"Danny," corrected young Sara.

Miss Darnell's intense attention focused on the little girl. "His name is Daniel, and that is what I will call him, and so will you while in my house."

The glare between young Sara and Miss Darnell could not be cut through with a saw if tried. The stares put a halt to any further discussion or movement.

While not as much as a breath was inhaled, Sara considered that perhaps the Spirit had halted this memory, but within seconds, Miss Darnell broke the silence by addressing Amy Valentine sternly, "I cannot guarantee they will be kept together. Most new parents cannot accommodate two children, and two-year-old boys are in higher demand than five-year-old girls."

Sara recalled those venomous words as though they had been uttered to her in the last hour. Their harshness put Amy into a near catatonic state.

The rookie cop came to their defense. "You always talk like that in front of kids?"

"Officer, these children are orphans now. They are in for a much harder life than most. The more they know now, the better they can defend themselves in the future. Sugar coating will only cause more hardship later in life. Is that what you want for these children?"

The brutal truth rendered the Officer speechless.

"Just go easy. They lost a lot, and at Christmas, too."

But Miss Darnell held her confidence in her occupation. She would not be without the final word on the matter.

"Car accident, am I right?" Knowing already that she was, Miss Darnell did not wait for a response. "Some of these children lost their parents to a drug addict in a dark alley. Maybe I should shield them from the streets? Lock them in a room where they can live without fear? Your business is to serve and protect, and so is mine. I suggest you allow me to do my job without your judgment." Miss Darnell reached out her thin bone hands manicured by age. "I'll take the children now."