

Here's a little Christmas present that I hope entertains everyone: The story of two police officers, a snowstorm, and a surprise. The main characters are from my novel Storm Chaser and its short story collection follow-up, and also appear in the sequel, The Notorious Ian Grant. There's also one more character, who will be pretty much familiar to everybody. Happy Holidays!

ANOTHER FAMILY

Two cops peered through the windshield, trying to see past swirls of blowing snow as the squad car inched forward.

"They're out there." Trooper Chance Hamlin worked to keep the car's tires in two paths of more or less bare pavement on Highway 9. He depended on his partner to keep her head on a swivel, searching for their adversaries.

"Yeah." Detective Fran Vargas shivered, despite the car's heater. "Waiting. How many, I wonder? Waiting to damage property, hurt people ..."

"We should be allowed to just shoot them from the car." He meant it, kind of, but mostly just wanted to draw Fran out of the funk she'd been in lately.

"Chance!"

"No, really. That would keep them off the highways, wouldn't it?"

"I don't think the public would react well at all." Fran smiled despite herself. "Slow down, we're getting close to the state park."

"I'm already doing forty." Thank goodness it was a Sunday, and drivers seemed to have listened to the dire warnings of the weather forecasters. He had the headlights on, but the twin beams just reflected back in the mid-afternoon snow squall they'd driven into. "I need to get the tree up tonight. Have you started decorating?"

"Oh, I don't decorate for Christmas." Fran looked away for a moment, then shook herself and turned back to her search.

"You don't? I thought you said your family was big into Christmas."

"Yeah, but they're down in Texas. Doesn't seem much point in stringing lights up in my little apartment."

He glanced over at her, noticing the melancholy expression. So, that was it. "Why didn't you tell me you get lonely during the holidays? I could fix you up with someone."

Fran rolled her eyes. "A date isn't the same as family, you big blond dummy. Besides, mostly I just get cold. Whoever thought living in this ice box would be a good thing?"

For a moment Chance said nothing, as he glanced toward passing trees for any sign of the bad guys. “After my father dies, I hated the holidays.”

“I’ll bet your mom and sister dragged you out of that, didn’t they?”

“Mostly my sister. Nothing gets Beth down for long.” He smiled, thinking of homemade decorations, careful stringing of lights, picking out just the right tree ... then his gaze went to Fran again. He’d known her for ten years, and even though she visited his family often, he’d never been inside her home.

Or maybe it wasn’t a home.

Fran jerked to attention. “There’s one!”

Chance slammed on the brakes, making the car fishtailed wildly. A figure standing in the road ahead turned toward them.

Chance held his breath until the tires grabbed pavement and his patrol car jerked to a stop, just a few feet from impact.

“It’s like they want to get hit,” Fran breathed.

Leaning forward, Chance studied the animal. It gazed back at him, unconcerned. “That’s not a deer.”

“What?” Now Fran looked more closely. “It is ... isn’t it? Bigger than any I’ve seen up here, but still ...”

“No, it’s ... different. Look at those antlers, and that tuft of hair under its neck. I’ve never seen a deer like that.” The answer came to him in a flash and he sat back, feeling gut-punched. “Fran, that’s a caribou – a reindeer.”

“Are you freaking kidding me?”

A blast of frigid air and snow met him as Chance opened his door. “It must have escaped from Black Pine Animal Park. Look, it’s got a collar on it.”

“You are not going out there with that animal.” Despite her words, Fran also stepped out. They stood by the car, engaging in a staring contest with the reindeer, until Fran shivered and pulled on her overcoat’s hood. “Hello ... boy.”

The reindeer gave a little snorting noise.

“You established a rapport with the suspect.” Trying not to smile, Chance gestured her forward. “Go make friends with it.”

She turned toward him. He could just make out her incredulous expression inside the hood. “You go. I’ll fill out the animal bite paperwork.”

Chance glanced back to make sure no traffic was coming, then shuffled forward. It looked tame— this sure wasn’t the normal range for reindeer – but scared animals could panic and hurt people. The wind buffeted him, but the animal stood solid as a statue. Maybe it was a statue? Weird prank.

The reindeer turned its head to watch him approach.

An animatronic statue?

“Hello, boy. Girl reindeer don’t have antlers, do they? So you’re a buck.” He stopped within an arm’s reach of the animal. “Can I call you Buck?”

The reindeer turned away, exposing a red leather collar that loosely circled its neck. Chance carefully reached out to pet the animal’s flank, while reading the fancy scroll on the leather collar. Then he read it again. “Um ... Fran? Come look at this.”

“No. You relay.”

“This collar says his name is Donner.”

“You lie like a melted snowman.” Fran stepped forward – slowly – and leaned in to read the collar. “Huh.”

“We should search for a wrecked sleigh.” He looked around. “We could be the cops who saved Christmas. I want Brad Pitt to play me.”

“You do realize that anyone who has a pet reindeer is likely to choose just one of eight names. Nine, if you include Rudolph, but some are more unlikely than others.” Despite herself, Fran stroked the animal’s side. “People aren’t likely to name their pet caribou Cupid or Blitzen.”

Donner turned to look at her, and made a noise that sounded much like a chuckle.

“Well, there’s a tag here, hanging from the collar. Let’s see.” He turned the tag toward them, and even in this dull light they could make out the words:

Merry Christmas!

If found, return to S. Claus, North Pole

Or sing a happy Christmas tune.

Wow. Chance took a step back, to look the animal up and down. “Well, there you have it. Too bad there’s not a phone number attached.”

“Do they even have service up there?” Fran shook her head. “What am I saying? We need to find this fella’s owner before a car comes along. We’re on a state highway.”

But there was no sign of headlights, no approaching engine noise. Everything was muffled, and except for the occasional wind gust quiet, as if they were inside a just-shaken snow globe. “We found the owner.” Chance didn’t really believe that, of course ... but he liked the idea.

“So, what? We’re supposed to sing a happy Christmas tune?”

“Yeah. No Grinch, no grandmas getting run over – something upbeat.”

She stared at him. “I’ve never even heard you sing.”

He never did sing, except in the shower. “Well, let’s see if we can lead poor Donner off the road, at least.” He took hold of the collar and gentle pulled. Nothing happened. He pulled harder.

Donner huffed out a breath, but made no attempt to move.

“The kids will be very disappointed.” Chance glanced at Fran, who looked perplexed.

“Let’s call in to dispatch and have them contact the animal park.” Fran fumbled with her coat pocket, then sighed. “My phone’s in an inside pocket.”

“Well, don’t expose your delicate self.” He’d already gripped his cell phone, but now Chance glanced at Fran again. He cleared his throat.

“Well, the weather outside is frightful, and your smile is so delightful –“

“That is not a Christmas song, Trooper Hamlin! That is a winter song, and winter stinks.”

Donner nodded.

“I suppose you could do better?” He gave her a challenging stare. She seemed oddly unwilling to comment on the ridiculousness of singing Christmas Carols in the middle of a normally busy highway during a snowstorm.

“Um ... You’d better not shout, you’d better not cry, you’d better not pout, I’m telling you why ...”

Fran had a nice voice. Had he never heard her sing, in ten years? “Santa Claus is coming to town ...” Man, his own voice was rusty.

Donner stamped a foot.

“He wants us to step up the tempo. Together, now:”

“He’s making a list, he’s checking it twice; gonna find out who’s naughty or nice. Santa Claus is coming to town.”

Today was the first time Chance remembered seeing Fran smile since before Thanksgiving, and she usually smiled often. It wasn’t Christmas she didn’t like – it was the way she’d been spending it. Just like that he knew what to do, especially when she looked at him with a big grin.

“He sees you when you’re sleeping, he knows when you’re awake, he knows when you’ve been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake!”

“This is so ridiculous!” Fran reached out to punch Chance on the arm. “Come on, a snow plow or some moron in an SUV will come along soon. Let’s get Mr. Donner –“ She turned back toward the reindeer and stopped short.

Donner was gone.

“I guess our singing scared him away,” Fran murmured.

Together they walked forward. “He jumped into the trees along the park border,” Chance guessed.

Together, they looked down. There were exactly four footprints, no more ... none walking toward the pavement, none walking away.

The squall passed, leaving flakes of snow falling gently over a brightening landscape. Chance looked once more toward both sides of the road, then patted Fran on the shoulder. "Well ... we've got decorations to put up."

They settled into the car and he pulled forward, heading toward home. For a long moment they were silent, as Chance tried to figure the most diplomatic thing to say. "So, you come and spend Christmas with us." Okay, not diplomatic.

She looked at him. "I always come over for Christmas dinner."

"No, I mean the whole thing: the Christmas Eve service, then spend the night and unwrap presents in the morning, then dinner. You can stay in the spare bedroom. Also, I'd appreciate it if you could help put up the decorations, maybe help Beth wrap presents ... after all, only one of your families is in Texas."

He was watching the road again, and didn't see her expression. But after a moment she straightened up, took a tissue from her pocket, and blew her nose. "So ..." Fran cleared her throat. "What song shall we sing next? I'm thinking Rudolph."

"Singing in my squad car?"

"Sure, and you can turn on the blue and reds. Very festive."

"No one else must ever know." But Chance laughed.

"Deal."