

Sugar Plum Fairies by Lesley L. Smith

I hadn't been sleeping well so I went into work early. I thought I could distract myself from thinking about Clara with work. I got distracted all right, but not in a good way. All the executives were ensconced in the conference room at 7:30. Who knew they even knew how to get up so early? As I stowed my purse in my desk and woke up my computer, I couldn't help thinking this was not a good sign. There'd been rumors there were going to be layoffs. If I was going to be one of them, I needed to know ASAP. My system couldn't take any more shocks, especially with the anniversary of Clara's... I had to stop thinking about that.

I snuck outside the conference room and listened.

Mr. Dumas, the CEO, said, "So, we're decided. We're letting go of 50% of the administrative assistants and 25% of engineers and sales. And we'll use performance evaluation numbers as the metric."

I gasped. How horrible! And right before the holidays!

The leather chairs creaked as everyone turned to the door.

"Who's there?" Mr. Hoffmann, the CFO, asked.

Reluctantly, I decided I probably couldn't run past all the cubicles and out the door before someone saw me--maybe back when I was in my twenties--but not now. I stepped into the partially open doorway. "It's just me, Marie," I said. "Good morning Mr. Dumas, Mr. Hoffmann, everyone." I nodded and smiled.

Mr. Dumas said, "What are you doing here so early?" At 7:30, he did look the worse for wear. He'd missed a small patch of white whiskers and his shirt was buttoned wrong.

"Uh, I saw the meeting on your calendar and thought I'd come in and see if you all needed anything. Can I help you in some way? Make coffee?"

At the thought of coffee they all perked up.

"I like your initiative, Marie," Mr. Hoffmann said. "Yes, please do make us some coffee." He looked impeccable as usual with his purple shirt and pink-striped tie. He was too old to be one of those metro-sexuals if you asked me.

"I don't have to tell you not to repeat what you've just heard, do I, Marie?" Mr. Dumas asked, rolling back in his chair. "Your job is safe, by the way."

"Of course I wouldn't repeat anything, sir." I scooted off to the kitchenette like a good little administrative assistant before I said something I'd regret, but my mind was reeling: so many friends being let go. They were going to have even worse holidays than I--and that was saying something.

As I filled up the coffee maker with water, my eyes filled too at the thought of my first Christmas without Clara. How would I survive Christmas without my little sister? I flashed back to when we were in grade school and I my ballet class was doing The Nutcracker. I was only playing one of the snowflakes, but Clara thought I was a goddess. She begged our mom to make her a snowflake costume, too, and mom--bless her

heart--did. Mom never could resist Clara's mischevious grin. We two snowflakes danced around the house all Christmas vacation that year. But those days were long gone. I didn't have any family left and now my work family was going to be split up, too. It wasn't fair. They didn't deserve this.

By the time the coffee was finished, I'd pulled myself together enough to go back into the conference room. As I poured the coffee I couldn't help thinking the salaries of the six managers in here would probably more than make up for the twenty-odd people they were going to lay off.

Ms. Petipa, head of human resources, said, "Are we sure we want to have such a big holiday party in these financial times? A thirty thousand dollar party might offend some people this year."

I dropped the paper cup I was holding. They had thirty grand to spend on a party and they were still laying off so many people? "Uh, I agree with Ms. Petipa. That seems like a lot to spend on a party. Couldn't you use the money in severance packages for the folks being laid off?"

Mr. Hoffmann scowled at me. "You wouldn't understand, but the money comes from a different pile."

He was right; I didn't understand partying in this situation. What was there to celebrate? But I didn't appreciate being treated like a child by someone who was the same age as me. "No one here will be in the mood to party--"

"The party is a business function, Marie," Mr. Dumas said. "We have to thank our customers for their continued business. They expect a party."

Mr. Hoffmann said, "And people will be in a fine mood. We're not announcing the layoffs until after

the first of the year. No one will know anything unless you wreck their holiday."

Me, wreck it? What about when they're let go with huge credit card bills? "If you insist, I won't say anything, sir, but," I said, "I really think you need to tell--"

"Maybe you should go back to your cubicle, Marie," Mr. Hoffmann said.

"I suppose I'm in charge of the festivities again this year," Ms. Petipa said. She didn't look happy about it. Her expression was almost as gray as her hair. "It scheduled for less than two weeks away? We really should have dealt with this before."

"I'll do it!" I blurted out. I could throw a nice party for way less than thirty grand and save the rest of the money for severance packages.

"You have been asking for more responsibility," Mr. Duman said, rubbing the patch of whiskers. "But this is a big project. Are you sure you're ready for something of this magnitude?"

"Yes, sir." I smiled. "You know me, I like to keep busy."

"All right," Mr. Dumas said.

"I'll bring the info from last year's party to your cubicle later," Ms. Petipa said. "We do have a standing venue reservation as I recall. But nothing else has been done."

After lunch, I was looking over the budgets, menus, and venues of

holiday parties past when my phone rang. It was Milli over at the Boulder Philharmonic. "Marie," she said, "I couldn't help noticing you hadn't ordered your usual Nutcracker seats this year. Did you forget?"

I hadn't forgotten. I couldn't decide if I should get them or not. That was my tradition with Clara; we'd been going for forty years. She always said with our names it was our destiny to go. Even last year, when she was in so much pain, she insisted we go. I probably kept my eyes on her more than on the Nutcracker or the Mouse King, or even the Sugar Plum Fairy. At the show, my sister was clearly in pain, but her eyes danced as she followed the ballerinas across the stage.

"Marie?" Milli asked. "Are you there? The orchestra depends on loyal customers like you. Can we count on you?"

I cleared my throat. "Sure," I finally croaked out.

"Your usual seats?"

"Sure." I didn't know if I would be able to bring myself to go, but I wanted other folks to be able to enjoy Tchaikovsky's wonderful music.

My friend and fellow admin, Ginger, stopped by my cubicle at that point. "Are you all right, honey?" she asked. "You don't look so good." She'd been sporting Christmas sweatshirts and sweaters since early November. Today's was a rather tame red and green plaid sweatshirt with ribbons sewed on it.

I wiped the corner of my eye. "How do you do it, Ginger?" I asked her. "I mean, didn't you lose your husband Riccardo this time of year?"

She sat down in my cubicle. "Well, first of all, it's been four years now since his heart attack. And second of all, he was the one who loved Christmas. I do all this," she pointed at her sweatshirt, "to honor his memory. I do it because I loved, I love, him."

With all her holiday paraphernalia I thought Ginger loved Christmas. "Riccardo was the Christmas fan? Not you? I find that hard to believe."

She nodded. "I was sort raised Jewish; I mean we never went to temple, but we didn't celebrate Christmas when I was a kid. Riccardo was raised Catholic. Christmas was important to his whole family."

"I didn't know that," I said. "He was Catholic? So how did that work? A Jew and a Catholic? Menorahs and Masses?"

She chuckled. "We compromised and both converted to Unitarian."

I smiled. "Interesting! I can't believe I've known you for ten years and never knew that about you."

"Yup. So every year I try to enjoy Christmas as much as he did. I try to focus on the good times we had and not dwell on the fact that there won't be any more. I admit it's not easy. Especially now that our boys are all grown up with families of their own and I don't see as much of them." The corners of her mouth turned down.

Yikes. My bad mood was contagious. I tried to lighten things up. "So who are you going to visit this year for Christmas? Alex or Marius?"

Now, her eyes misted up. "I'm not sure. It might not work out. You know Alex was deployed again, right? His wife and kids are going to try to meet him in Germany. And Marius says his wife is really pressuring him to visit her folks."

This was not going so well. "Oh dear." I patted her hand. My eyes

skittered back to the party papers on my desk. "Hey, we have some holiday decorations around here, don't we?"

Ginger nodded.

"What do you say we honor Riccardo some and put them up? This place needs some sprucing up."

"You are right." She stood up. "I think that'll cheer everyone up."

Ginger and I spent the rest of the day putting up fake green garland and a large artificial tree, all of which were blanketed with white twinkle lights. We decided to go with a winter theme like the end of Act I of The Nutcracker. Several of the other admins got in the act, cutting out snowflakes and hanging them from the drop ceiling and pasting them on the walls and everywhere else. By the end of the day, the place looked like a winter wonderland and I do think everyone was feeling better. What is it about twinkle lights that are so cheerful?

As we were gathering our things to go, Ginger said, "So is the rumor true?"

Oh my God. She knew about the layoffs! "Uh, where did you hear it?"

"Is it a secret?" she asked. "I heard Mr. Dumas tell several people you were in charge of the big party."

"Oh, the party," I said.

"Yeah." She raised her eyebrows. "What did you think I was talking about?"

"The party." I hoped that sounded convincing. "I've been thinking about mixing it up this year. The ballroom is so boring." To implement my plan I needed to find a really cheap venue. Cheap, meaning free.

She shrugged. "I guess."

Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw some of the twinkle lights moving. We must not have affixed them to the tree securely; I'd have to fix that tomorrow. "You wouldn't happen to know of any good venues that might be available?" I pointed at her. "Hey, what about a synagogue?"

"Somehow I don't think the rabbis would go for that." She grinned. "But, I have an idea if you want to change it up... What about the warehouse out back? Since we consolidated, it's been sitting empty."

"It sounds excellent," I said. "What's it like inside?"

Ginger stepped over to her cubicle and opened her top desk drawer. "You know one of my duties is 'Space Manager', right?" She picked up a keyring and jingled it.

The next day I pulled the trigger and canceled the reservation at the ballroom. Over the next week, I worked the phone trying to get businesses to make donations for our holiday party, so I wouldn't have to use any of the budget. It was tough going. Everyone was feeling the pinch of the bad economy.

As I sat at my desk, I kept seeing lights falling in my peripheral vision, but when I got up to try and fix them, I could never find them. Apparently, I was feeling a lot of holiday pressures. I also really missed Clara. In the past, Clara and I had always decorated the house and baked Christmas cookies together. Doing those things alone felt like a chore.

I seriously debated between spending the money and sticking to my

plan even if it meant there was a good chance I would be fired. I decided the Christmas thing to do was save the money for the employees who'd have to go. A thousand or fifteen hundred dollars could make a lot of difference when you had to feed your family and pay the rent.

Every time Ms. Petipa or Mr. Dumas asked me about the party I said it was going fine and they bought it. I kept trying to make it go fine, even up until the night before. I stayed late at work, calling folks, trying to get something together. Finally, having given up, I decided to go out to the warehouse to give it one last look.

In the warehouse, as I turned on the lights, I heard the scampering of tiny feet. Sure enough, the dust on the floor was criss-crossed with mouse tracks. Ugh. And then I thought I saw something bigger move in the far corner. Oh, jeez; not rats, too.

I tried to run out the door, but somehow couldn't. A scrap of green in the middle of the floor that I'd thought was an old leaf started getting bigger and bigger until it was a twenty-foot pine tree. At the same time, the floor changed from cracked concrete to white tile. White chairs and tables and couches appeared out of a fuzzy mist.

When the mice the size of men appeared, I realized I'd finally lost it. Clearly, the pressures of the holidays had been too much for me.

But if I had to be delusional, at least these delusions were pleasant. I sat down on one of the white couches, sinking into soft sheepskin, and waited eagerly for the dancing snowflakes, the Dew Drop Fairy, and all the rest--especially the Sugar Plum Fairy.

What came next was not ballerinas, however, but what looked like flying twinkle lights. As I looked more closely, I saw miniature glowing people with wings. I could only conclude they were fairies.

Real. Live. Fairies.

Their melodious giggles reminded me of Tchaikovsky's Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy and made me wonder about his inspiration.

One diminutive beauty flew right up to my nose and hovered there. She was perfectly formed, with long hair and some kind of sparkly stuff on her skin--or maybe her skin itself was sparkly. I could swear she winked at me. Something about her impish smile reminded me of Clara. I looked closer: the tiny woman looked remarkably like Clara from her big eyes to her long hair to her slightly-pointy nose.

It couldn't actually be her, could it? "Clara?"

She winked again and flew away.

As the fairies fluttered around the room, white lights appeared on the tree and on the now-pristine-white walls. Realistic-looking silver and white snowflakes and icicles appeared on the giant tree and then all around the room when they flew by. They flitted over the tables and heaping platters of food and drink appeared. Among other things, every kind of Christmas cookie Clara and I had ever made must have been there. It felt like Clara was celebrating Christmas with me one more time.

It was wonderful.

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"Marie, Marie!" Ginger was shaking me. "We've been looking for you

everywhere."

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. What time was it? Where was I?

"I can't believe you pulled it off," she said. "It's gorgeous in here. I've never seen anything like it. All the snow and everything looks so real." She plopped down on the couch next to me. "I guess they must have given you a big budget to work with."

As I focused on my surroundings, I couldn't believe it. It looked like it looked last night. I hadn't imagined or dreamed it. It was real. It was a winter wonderland.

It was magic, Christmas magic. Nutcracker magic.

Ms. Petipa burst into the room and stopped, mouth falling open. "This is amazing." She looked at me. "I hope you didn't go over budget." She stalked around the room, checking everything out.

"Marie!" Ms. Petipa bellowed.

What was wrong now?

Ms. Petipa came out from behind a rather large snow drift. "What's this equipment doing here?" She pointed behind the drift.

"I don't remember any equipment," Ginger whispered to me.

I shrugged. We got up and discovered several pallets of high-end computers behind the snow drifts.

"Uh," I said. "This stuff must have been here before. I didn't put it there."

Ms. Petipa finished checking out the equipment and started for the door, whipping out her phone. "Dumas, you won't believe it. I think there's several hundred thousand dollars worth of stock in the warehouse. We may not have to go through with it."

Ginger poked me. "What's going on? There was no equipment in here when we came last week."

"I don't keep track of deliveries and what not," I said, pinching myself. Yes, I was awake.

She pointed up. "Hey, are those lights flying?"

I glanced up and saw a few straggler fairies, and couldn't help smiling. "Course not," I said, turning to Ginger. "That wouldn't make sense, would it?"

The party was delightful, and was made even more so when Mr. Dumas said they'd been considering layoffs and decided against them. Everyone enjoyed all the hords d'oeuvres and wine and Christmas cookies and the magical decorations and most of all, the good company.

I confessed to Ms. Petipa, while she was in a good mood, that I didn't use the party budget. She was happy to hear it and said the company would use the money for Christmas bonuses. As I surveyed my work family laughing and talking together, I couldn't help thinking it was the best Christmas party I'd ever been to.

A few nights later found Ginger and I sitting front and center as the curtain went up in Macky Auditorium and the first strains of the Miniature Overture began.

She grabbed my hand. "I'm so glad you invited me," she whispered.

I thought back over forty years of memories in these seats, from when

Clara and I were CU students all the way to last year when she was bound and determined to live long enough to see The Nutcracker one more time. I would treasure those memories forever, but it was time to make some new memories. That's what Clara would want.

"I'm glad, too," I whispered back.

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