

## The Christmas Ghost Consultant

by Robert Ford

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Chantal entered her apartment and quickly popped the gun out of the secret compartment in the wall. She shot the intruder twice in the chest. He was sitting in her favourite chair.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Nice shootin', girl!”

*Did he just paraphrase Ghostbusters?*

“Ouch,” he said, “I didn't even get a chance to say, ‘sorry for barging in like this’.”

He stood up and approached her.

Chantal blinked in shock and disbelief. She also could not move. She could not apply pressure to her feet, but at the same time did not feel any pressure that would be holding her in place.

“Let's see,” he said. “We'll have to clean up this mess.”

He slowly rotated his hands around each other in a counterclockwise direction. In slow motion, the bullets emerged from his chest and floated back into the gun Chantal was holding. She could not feel, but only see, the gun drifting back into the secret compartment.

“There. That outta do it. You good to talk? No more grabbing firearms and going all blam blam?”

“Sure,” she said. Realizing she could now move, she switched on a light to allow for a better look at the intruder. He was white, about five foot ten, and sported a lightweight goatee. His hair was dark, but it looked artificially dark. He was well dressed in simple dress pants and shoes. He wore a Christmas themed vest under a black blazer.

“Who the hell are you? What are you?”

“Ah, yes. I'm Luc.”

She gestured; *go on*.

“I am a Christmas spirit.”

“It's December 23.”

“It's Christmas Eve in Europe.”

Chantal frowned.

“OK,” Luc said, “I'll admit it. Christmas Eve is reserved for the truly top shelf spirits.”

“Sure,” she said, “Are you the Marley equivalent or one of the past, present, future guys?”

“I'm more of a cursed entity, one fated for eternity to solve a mystery.”

“Which is ... ?” she asked.

“Given your vocation, it pains me to admit that I am cursed to discover why most men are assholes.”

“Wow. Really? Sisyphus had nothing on you.”

“I know, right?”

“So, what do you want with me? You aren't going to take me back through my life or anything are you?”

“Good heavens no. You don't need to relive *that* sort of trauma. I'm here to ask for your help. At the risk of sounding stupid, I just want to confirm: you *are* Chantal Harris, lawyer, women's rights activist, domestic violence survivor, and general all-round smarty pants?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Excellent. I thought I should just double check I landed in the right gun slinging female person’s apartment.”

“Why were you cursed?”

“What?”

“You said you were cursed to search for the answer to a mystery I’ve been working on most of my life. What happened to you?”

“Well, I’ve lived a human life many times and each time I was ... awful.”

“Awful how?”

“Let’s say, just for example – in leadership roles – I invented the term ‘medieval practices’ well before the Middle Ages.”

“And how – so far – is your quest going to determine why men are assholes?”

“Terrible, which is why I’ve come to you. Every year I have a chance to help three men who are at risk of harming women. It’s gone poorly because the guys don’t understand what I’m saying and therefore do not change or I ... injure them.”

“After all this time, you must have a working theory on why men are awful,” she said.

“Well,” Luc said, “men are pretty stupid. This, of course, is not much of a theory because there are smart men who are awful and there are stupid men who aren’t awful.”

“What three guys are you planning on haunting this evening?”

“One fellow from each of the categories of Stalkers (your fave), Perpetrators of Domestic Violence, and Bosses Who Misuse Power.”

“What about Incels?”

“Incels? You must be kidding. Those morons? They are bottom feeders amongst misogynists. They’re the ones I based my men-are-stupid theory on. How they take themselves seriously – let alone expect anyone else to take them seriously – is beyond me. However, when you run over a bunch of strangers with a van, you can be taken seriously. But that’s insane, which is an insult to people whose brains have been half carved out with poisonous sticks. I assume you know that the term involuntary celibacy was coined by a bisexual woman?”

“Yes, I did. In the 1990s. Alana’s Involuntary Celibacy Project. Boy, was she unhappy to have unintentionally coined that term.”

“It’s *such* an annoying term. *Involuntary servitude* is something truly involuntary. Celibacy can be fixed with a few hundred bucks and the correct type of service provider. *Unintentional celibacy* might make more sense. Maybe I’ll start calling them *Uncels* just to bug them.”

“OK. Moving on,” said Chantal. “What am I supposed to be doing?”

“You are an expert on harassment. Working on a PhD. You have TikTok. You can help me, and I can give you safe access to subjects. Insight you can’t obtain through traditional methods.”

Chantal hesitated.

“I can always go ask Reynolds-Assiz,” said Luc.

“She’s no good. Too academic and this, coming from me, an *academic*.”

“So, you’re in?”

Chantal wished her father was alive and here. She could hear him say, *Sweetie, how do you manage to attract **all** the Froot Loops?*

“Yes,” she said with a sigh. Chantal was in the mental state whereby she could be convinced that she’d been slipped LSD and was on some sort of freaky trip.

“Before we go,” Luc said, “we absolutely *must* decorate. I can tell you haven’t had much time to make your apartment festive.”

“Seriously?”

“This won’t take long. Imagine your boxes of decorations. Visualize how you’d like them displayed.”

“OK.”

Luc gently rotated his hands clockwise and they watched as lights, decorations and mementoes left boxes and closets and appeared on shelves and walls.

“That’s incredible,” Chantal said.

“It’s the least I can do. Considering what happens next. The way I travel is by taking two points in spacetime and connecting them as if they’re an elastic band. May I hold your hand?”

“OK.”

“This might feel weird.”



They appeared beside a hedge in an upscale Vancouver neighbourhood. Chantal threw up. “Yes, that *does* happen,” said Luc. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a very nice linen serviette.

“Sorry. Here you go.”

“Is this normal?” Chantal sounded raspy.

“Yeah.”

“Great.”

He held out his hand and took the serviette back. When he opened his jacket, Chantal could see sparkling lights. Into the lights went the soiled linen.

“What the hell?”

“You didn’t think I was going to litter? This is my Chaos Jacket. It has access to all kinds of fun things including a restaurant’s linen – clean and dirty.”

“We are standing beside a huge hedge.” She sounded both nauseous and skeptical.

“Yeah. About that. Hang on a sec.”

Chantal watched in confusion as Luc climbed effortlessly into the dense cedar hedge, which must have been at least 10 feet tall. A minute later, a man fell to the sidewalk. The fall looked painful. Luc emerged from the hedge and brushed off loose greenery.

“Hi Karl. I’m Luc. This is Chantal. She’s better than you.”

Luc put his foot on Karl’s chest as he tried to rise.

“So, what do you make of his outfit?” Luc asked.

Karl had camouflage gear, protective wear, hooks to climb the hedge, and – on his head – an expensive night scope.

“This is our stalker?” asked Chantal.

“Yes, Karl here is the proud holder of two restraining orders for his relentless and obsessive pursuit of Nikki Thomas.”

“The journalist?”

“Yep.”

“So,” Chantal asked, “what do you normally do at this point?”

“Why?” asked Luc. “What would *you* do?”

“I’d call the cops.”

“As often frustrating and unproductive as that is?” Luc asked.

“You have to work with what you’ve got.”

“Well, I have *much* more to work with. Here’s what I do.” Luc crouched down closer to Karl.

“Karl, why are you stalking Nikki?”

“I’m not stalking her. We’re in love.”

“Uh huh. So, when did you two love birds first meet *in person*?”

Silence from Karl.

“How do you know she’s in love with you?”

“All she has to do is get to know me.”

“Uh huh. What do the two restraining orders mean to you?”

“They are trying to keep us apart.”

“Who’s *they*?”

Karl looked at both Chantal and Luc with Karl’s face showing zero signs of comprehension of the question.

Luc turned to Chantal. “It’s at this point I usually become somewhat ... violent.”

“I can understand your frustration,” said Chantal. “In my research, guys like this have brains that are broken by obsession or delusion. Regardless, calling the police is normal. This is a crime despite the lack of seriousness that the judicial system places on the offence. What I wonder is why guys like this – when they are in the early stages of obsession-heading-to-stalking – think that stalking is an option?”

“I know, right?” said Luc. “I can’t imagine even this groin pull of an idiot had a mother that said to him, ‘Now honey, when girls reject you – which they will – make sure to follow them and make them love you until you are in so much trouble with the law that you go to jail.’”

Luc’s falsetto made Chantal laugh. One of those *I-really-should-not-laugh-at-that* laughs.

“There’s something I want to try,” said Luc. “Let me know what you think.”

Chantal stopped laughing and started feeling nervous.

While putting his knee on Karl’s chest, Luc pressed his thumbs into Karl’s temples. He whispered “you can’t even think about her” into Karl’s ear. Luc stood and Karl writhed on the ground. He was in agony; he vomited.

“What did you do?”

“If he thinks about Nikki, he will be ill.”

“But,” said Chantal, “that’s probably *all* he thinks about.”

“Karl!” shouted Luc, “Try thinking about clouds or sports scores.”

“That’s a bit punitive, don’t you think?” asked Chantal.

“Punitive is good by me.”

“But what stops him from switching obsessions? You’ve done a Clockwork Orange on him; it doesn’t address the underlying misogyny. Conditioning him to not be bad to one person is not the same as getting through to him that good feelings can come from good deeds.”

“Now *there’s* a film reference. You took a 20<sup>th</sup> century film course?”

“Yeah. There was a boy,” she said.

Chantal looked at Luc. He suddenly reminded her of The Grinch in the old cartoon when he had his epiphany.

“Combo package!” said Luc.

He crouched down to Karl and pinned him down again and placed his thumbs at his temples. He whispered, “Think of Nikki; get a migraine. Help people, be kind; you will feel a surge of dopamine and serotonin. Get to work.”

Karl's discomfort visibly reduced.

"Pity I don't have the capacity to do this to about 4 billion people. Let's get out of here."

"You're going to leave him here?"

"Yeah. He's still a jackass." Luc took Chantal's hand.



"Wow. Cool. I didn't puke," said Chantal, who was shaking off some dizziness. "Where are we?"

"At a residence in the hamlet of Balsam, Ontario."

"Never heard of it."

"You hadn't heard of Harrow, Ontario until last summer, right?"

Chantal frowned.

"So, what are your first impressions?" asked Luc.

Chantal looked around the poorly lit basement. The renovation was in the theme of a sports bar.

"I'm in the worst man cave/basement renovation ever," she said.

"I know, right? Just the sheer number of finishing nails on the bar blows my mind," said Luc.

"And he seemed to have tried to mount the wide screen TV on the wall at least three times," said Chantal.

"Well," said Luc, "let me pour you a drink."

Chantal carefully chose the bar stool that was the least wobbly and least dirty looking.

Luc pulled out two shot glasses, took a fresh paper towel, and shined them up. He then started taking many open bottles of hard liquor from the bar fridge and under the counter.

Chantal took stock and saw the signs of a home with an alcoholic. Booze didn't guarantee the occurrence of domestic violence, but alcohol never helped.

"What's your poison?" asked Luc.

The choices were not top shelf; Chantal chose the rye whiskey.

"This guy's not going to mind us drinking his booze?" she asked.

"Not yet."

"Luc, if you've been alive as frequently as you say, you must have a *real* theory about how the gap between the treatment of men and women evolved.

"Here's what I imagine," said Luc. "Possibly thousands of years before I was ever born, two guys named Nolnn and Baekin were talking. They were among the first *post* hunter gatherers. They knew where their great-great-great-grandfather's cave was, and their family group had developed some subsistence farming and animal husbandry. They may have been the first people with a few minutes of downtime. They were talking, and one of them brought up the fact that when they were raising sheep, they did not need as many male sheep as female sheep. (They ate half the male sheep.) They realized the same goes for humans. Without women there **is** no species. A much smaller number of guys were needed because the girls were generally smarter, faster, and much less idiotic-looking. Perhaps that was the human race's first experience with existential horror. Biologically, men are not as important as women. Nolnn and Baekin spread the word to other guys and the mission commenced: make sure the women were put in a place that made them less important so that things might even out. This would be what you call 'lowering the bar.' The dumbfuckery of this can be seen that for every breakthrough human – Pythagoras, Galileo, Newton, Einstein, etc. – there was probably an equal number of genius *women* who never saw the light of day. Their contributions are utterly lost."

"Jesus," she said, "Pour me another one."

Luc filled her glass. “Even if my little story symbolizes the truth, people like you are dealing with a rather baked-in societal mistake. Prehistoric tales don’t help in the here and now. And, also, what I wonder is why women didn’t push back. ‘No more bunga bunga parties for you assholes until you figure it out.’”

“It was probably a slow process,” said Chantal.

“Speaking of the here and now, you’ve likely figured out this is the site of the person at risk of domestic violence in the form of murder-suicide. What indicators do you see? Sadly, I don’t think we can include bad carpentry and home renovation work on the list.”

“The alcohol is certainly concerning,” said Chantal.

“How about this?” From under the bar, Luc pulled out a shotgun. It was camouflage patterned.

“That’s *really* concerning,” said Chantal. “Is it loaded?”

Luc carefully removed 8 shells from the Mossberg.

“Firearms in a dwelling need to be disabled and kept separate from ammunition.”

“Regulations you know well,” said Luc patting his chest.

“Ha ha,” said Chantal. “In this case, what was this guy thinking? How many kids does he have?”

“Two. 8 and 5,” said Luc.

Chantal stood from the bar stool and looked more closely around the basement. There was a locked door. She walked toward it. It was always a bad sign when men had locked rooms that the rest of the family could not enter.

Luc walked up to the padlock and rotated his hands slightly and the lock changed to unlocked. They entered and switched on a light. The room was rectangular with signature bad drywall work. At one end were three long guns, all stored equally illegally close to unsecured ammunition. At the other end was a target for hatchet throwing. In the middle was a work bench with various tools.

They left the room.

“Well,” said Chantal, “that doesn’t make a person feel safer.”

Luc found the remote to the wide screen TV and turned it on. He changed to a news channel and started rotating his hands clockwise. The news started to change and dates were moving forward to January 5<sup>th</sup>.

“Ah, here we are.”

The newscaster said, “There was a disturbing incident of gunfire on Highway 400 early this morning. Police were attempting to pull over a pickup truck wanted in connection with a domestic violence call in the small town of Balsam. According to eyewitness reports, the driver of the truck, once stopped, opened fire on officers. They returned fire, killing the driver.”

Luc turned off the TV.

“How do you know this broadcast will be the same on January 5? That the future you’ve shown me will hold.”

“I’m fairly confident that, if we leave right now and take no action, that broadcast will be virtually the same on that date.”

“Who the hell are you?” said a voice from behind them.

“Ah,” said Luc. “The man of the house. Stephen, I am Luc. This is Chantal. Don’t worry, we do not represent Mike Holmes in any way; we’re not here to comment about the reno.”

Stephen saw his shotgun on the bar. He moved quickly and picked it up, but then immediately dropped it back on the bar.

“What happened?” asked Chantal.

“I rigged it so that when he touched the gun, it would appear to turn into a coral snake.”

Luc walked to the bar and picked up the shotgun.

Chantal assessed Stephen. Late 30s. Had been fit in the past, but the drinking and whatever was haunting him had taken a lot from him. Probably was considered handsome in his 20s.

“Please have a seat,” said Luc. “We have some questions. And by we, I mean her.”

“Who are you guys?”

“I’m a Christmas Ghost and Chantal here is a lawyer and an expert on intimate partner violence and criminal harassment. In other words, she’s much smarter than you.”

“How’d you get in my house?”

“Long story. First, this shotgun is a bit distracting,” said Luc. “I’ll put it away.” Luc stared at the firearm for a moment and it turned to small metal, wood and plastic pellets.

“Hey. That cost me 400 bucks.”

“Bill me.”

Next, Luc tapped Stephen lightly on the forehead.

“To avoid physical pain, you must answer Chantal’s questions truthfully.”

Luc looked at Chantal, gesturing, *go on*.

Chantal was wondering where to start.

“Why do you have so many guns?”

“I like them.”

“That’s true, but hardly complete,” said Luc, frowning.

“Have you ever had fantasies about or have imagined harming your family?” she asked.

Stephen hesitated; he kept his mouth shut.

“Failing to answer is as painful as lying,” said Luc.

“Yes,” gasped Stephen.

“Why?” asked Chantal.

“I seriously don’t know. When I’m stressed it just happens.”

“You are aware,” said Luc, “that men are supposed to *protect* their families?”

“I know! But I get so angry.”

“Have you hit your wife and children in the past?” asked Chantal.

“Yes.” Gritted teeth.

“Did they deserve it?”

“What?” asked Stephen.

“Did any of them,” she elaborated, “really deserve a punishment of any type, let alone violence?”

“Not really,” Stephen said.

“Do you hate them?”

“No!”

“But I bet you haven’t bought Christmas gifts for any of them yet,” said Luc.

“Not yet,” said Stephen.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake it’s the 23<sup>rd</sup>,” said Luc.

Chantal interrupted. “Would you describe a man who has problems controlling his anger as a healthy person?”

“Hey,” said Luc. “Was that a jibe?”

“That question was for you, Stephen,” said Chantal.

Stephen hadn’t thought of anger as being connected to health. “Uh, no. But it’s kind of normal, isn’t it?”

“Did you know you could ask for help?”

“With what?” Stephen asked.

“Oh my God,” said Luc. “What the fuck you do *think?* You have DFD – Dumb Fucker Disease. It’s not right, healthy or normal to want to injure anyone, let alone family members.”

“Is there any paper around?” asked Chantal.

Luc pulled three lined notepads and a pen from his sparkling Chaos Jacket.

“Connection to a Staples in there?” asked Chantal.

“An Amazon warehouse,” said Luc. “They’re faster.”

On the first notepad, Chantal wrote down instructions for Stephen on who to call and what to say to find help for his anger and violence problems.

“You know,” said Luc, “there’s another way we could dramatically reduce the risk of him harming his family. Accidents happen, right?”

“No,” said Chantal.

“Oh well,” said Luc. “Risk mitigation it is. Stephen ... your house is now dry.” The bottles on the bar all changed into a large variety of Italian soft drinks.

“What, no Diet Coke?” asked Chantal.

“Meh. Where’s the fun in that?” replied Luc.

Stephen was breathing shallowly.

“Plus, your guns in the other room are all powder,” said Luc. “And the other thing is decorations. This is the season of the coming of the light.” Luc rotated his hands and the basement was abruptly decorated with Christmas lights.

“Now, Stephen, we must go annoy another prize ass this evening. But, before we go, I’m going to assign some homework.” Luc tapped Stephen’s head.

Stephen took the first notepad, the pen, and started writing.

*I will lay down my life to protect my family.*

*Even if it's me that's the danger.*

*I am worthy enough to ask for help.*

“Once the pads are full, you can stop.”

Chantal looked at what Stephen was writing. “Huh. Not bad.”

“I have my moments. Let’s go. Oh, and Stephen, for God’s sake take a carpentry course and redo the basement.”



They were suddenly standing inside some corporate offices.

“Do you think Stephen and his family will be OK?”

“Probably. His imminent and severe case of tendonitis should keep him occupied.”

“Where are we?”

“We are in the executive offices of HealthFit Brands. The CEO and founder is Paul Brown. He owns various gyms, equipment sales locations, and vitamin/juice bars.”

Luc switched on some lights. “Take a look around. It’s a little more subtle than the basement reno.”

Chantal looked at Luc. He appeared unwell. “You OK?” she asked.

“I’m starting to run out of gas,” said Luc.



The desk was large, wood laminate, and intimidating. Flat screens were suspended from the ceiling. They were switched off. Chantal presumed they monitored the markets. Awards to Paul Brown and his various companies were on shelves. Mostly contributing to community health events.

Hanging on the walls were well framed larger-than-life images of fitness models promoting the various brands and product lines. The women – and all the pictures were women – displayed lovely teeth and chiselled abs, which were made visible by sports bras and cropped tank tops. Chantal did an assessment. Despite the ethnic diversity, there was a consistency across the models.

“He has a type, eh?” said Luc.

“It's hard to judge height, but I bet these women are all five-five or six. They are all relatively top heavy. Or they simply don't have a corresponding bottom to go with the top.”

Further inspection of the office uncovered subtly hidden folding doors that would section off part of the office.

Luc walked over and found the hidden button for the Murphy bed. The bed lowered quietly to the floor.

“I'm sure it's in case he wants a nap.”

“Sure,” said Chantal. “I wonder where his drawer of sex toys is.”

Luc walked to a hidden pop out drawer and opened it.

“I was kidding,” said Chantal.

“Before our subjects arrive, we need to look at his computer,” said Luc.

They went to his desk where Luc performed some of his magic to put the computer into an active and logged in state.

He reached into his Chaos Jacket and pulled out a new, still in its package, USB flash drive stick. He unwrapped it and shoved the packaging back into his jacket.

“Amazon again?”

“Nope. Best Buy,” said Luc. “These guys always have a hidden folder for their videos. Pretty much each one of the women in the posters has unwittingly performed for the hidden cameras that point at the Murphy bed.”

The computer started copying files.

“Um,” said Chantal, “one of your hands is turning ... uh ... *skeletal*.”

“Oh yeah.” Luc shook his hand as if flicking off water. It returned to a normal state.

“We'll have to make short work of this guy as I'm on the clock.”

The computer finished copying and Luc handed the drive to Chantal. “Keep this safe in a pocket.” Chantal didn't have a pocket so she shoved it in her bra.

“Or that,” said Luc. “One more thing. I don't want them ever identifying you.” He touched her cheek very lightly. “Take a look.”

She looked at her reflection in the computer. “Crap. I look like Jennifer Lawrence crossed with Kathy Bates.”

“It won't last.”

In the doors came Paul Brown and a young woman. Chantal had a general rule that men should not date women who fit the category of “young enough to be your daughter born when you were 20.” This lady was on the cusp.

“Why are the lights on?” asked Paul.

“Good evening,” said Luc. “I'm your Christmas Ghost. This is Chantal, an expert.”

“How did you get in here?” Paul demanded.

Luc ignored him. “Hi,” said Luc, “What’s your name?”

“Jannine,” she whispered.

“I asked you a question,” said Paul.

“And I said I was a ghost; how the fuck do you *think* I got here?” Luc let his face appear skeletal for a couple of seconds. Paul and Jannine recoiled. The doors behind them closed seemingly on their own.

“It’s OK,” said Chantal. “He’s had a long night. We’re not here to hurt you. Right, Luc?”

“Of course,” said Luc. “Now, this Christmas haunting procedure is quite simple. You two folks sit here at this small conference table. That’s good. And Chantal and I will join you. We will have a brief Q&A and then be on our way. Our assumption is that Paul was going to try to take advantage of the Murphy bed and other amenities this evening.”

Paul sat still but kept his fists clenched at his sides.

Chantal noted that Jannine was 5 foot 5 and met the appearance standards. Except the Christmas sweater hid her abs. Chantal assumed they were awesome.

Once they were all seated, Luc tapped them both gently on the head. “You will find that not answering simply and truthfully will result in a headache. This saves time. Chantal, care to kick us off?”

“Paul, let me start with you,” said Chantal. “You are aware that the company’s policies are against you having intimate relationships with employees.”

“Yes,” he said.

“So, do the HR policies do not apply to you?”

“Technically yes, but practically no. I *am* the owner.”

“Why is this OK?”

“It’s always been this way. Successful people have fringe benefits that others do not. The standard laws and policies exist to give a semblance of fairness and to keep managers who are not actually owners of the company in check.”

“You are a living meme for ‘Rules for Thee but Not for Me’” said Chantal. She turned to Jannine.

“Would it surprise you to find that Paul has slept with most of the women you see pictured on the wall?”

“No,” Jannine replied. “Um, is his arm supposed to be doing that?”

Luc’s arm had turned skeletal and was smoking lightly, as if it were going to burst into flames. “Oh, sorry! I get steamed up.”

“He’s a challenging character,” said Chantal. “My next question is, were you aware of Paul’s sexual intentions when he invited you to his office?”

“I had a fairly good idea. It was an informal Christmas party on the last day before the holiday break. He was hitting on me fairly obviously – as he has done in the past.”

“Had we not interrupted, would you have consented to sex, assuming he asked?”

Paul was fuming and wanting to speak, but Luc pointed a skeletal hand at him and wagged his finger.

“Would I have consented?” asked Jannine. “Probably. I’m this far, aren’t I? It’s not like I didn’t hear the rumours.”

She continued in a girlish voice. “Oh gosh, Jannine, be careful. He has *favourites*! The notion of consent is strange when the outcomes of the decision are basically a Kobayashi Maru in the sexual harassment how-to manual.”

Luc frowned.

"It's the Star Trek no win scenario test," said Chantal. "Go on."

"Right!" said Luc, "*Star Trek II Wrath of Khan.*"

Chantal rolled her eyes.

"If you rebuff the CEO's interest in you," said Jannine, "you are going to be labelled 'difficult to work with' or 'not a team player.' If you sleep with him, your career is limited to how long his interest holds, and how long you can handle having compromised your own integrity for purposes of furthering your career. Basically, you are screwed the *second* he takes interest in you. And me, I'm just a kid from the Prairies who's the only one in the family to scrape through high school and university. Is this my punishment for daring to get ahead?"

Luc raised his skeletal arm and said, "Oh, oh. Pick me! I have a question."

Chantal sighed.

Luc turned to Paul, and asked, "Why do you diddle the staff?"

"The pleasure. The beauty," he said.

"Incomplete!" said Luc. "It's because of the power." His left pinky finger burst into flames that produced no heat. He shook his hand and it went out.

"Whoops. Anyway," Luc continued, "the pleasure comes from knowing these women are compromised. You could afford to pay for an escort that met your particular standards. But there's no fun in that! Where's the chase? How does your inner predator feel the thrill? You want to be holding it over the women *and* the people who would object if they weren't afraid of what you could do to them."

"It's always been this way," said Paul.

"That's actually not true and the whole world would be better off if you found a different way to get your jollies," said Chantal.

"Can I hit him now?" asked Luc.

"No," said Chantal.

"Minor disfigurement?"

"No."

"Well," said Luc, "It's best we wrap this up. Jannine, if you could go anywhere other than here, where would you go?"

"I want to see my Mom." Jannine started crying.

"Piece of cake," said Luc. He used his good arm to hold her hand and they disappeared. Chantal found it fascinating to watch this form of travel from a viewer's perspective. The two of them seemed to crumple into a single point and vanish.

She hoped Luc wasn't going to leave her here with this Paul Brown creep. But, as she finished the thought, he returned.

Luc was looking even more gruesome. He turned to Paul and said, "Merry Christmas you dipshit. Good luck."

Luc took Chantal's hand and they disappeared, leaving Paul alone in his office.



Back at Chantal's apartment, Luc heaved himself painfully into her chair. "Please don't shoot me," he said.

Chantal looked in a mirror to confirm that her face was back to normal.

"Where did you take Jannine?"

"Saskatchewan."

"Good lord. How will she get back?"

"Paul had \$5000 in cash hidden in his desk. I gave it to her."

“That was very thoughtful of you.”

“I have my moments.”

“You didn’t do anything to Paul Brown; why was that?”

“The other two were clearly mentally broken in singular ways. Paul is a dirtbag top-to-bottom. My quick fixes would likely not last. However, *you* have the information needed to exert real pressure on him. You *do* have the USB key in your undergarments, right?”

“Oh yes. Of course.”

“Something you should know about that drive. I rolled the computer back two days and initialized the external drive to have a root directory showing a create date of December 21. Even if he figures out that it was you, it would not make sense because the files were copied two days ago.”

“Hmm,” said Chantal. “That’s helpful. I suppose when asked how I got these files ...”

Luc interrupted. “Dropped off at your door anonymously. Whistle-blower protections wouldn’t mean much at that company. It would make sense that, had a real person found these files, they would have felt unsafe using company channels to report the abuse.”

Chantal extracted the drive from her bra and placed it in a drawer in her desk. “I’ll need to think about how to best use this.”

“I wanted to thank you,” said Luc.

“For what?”

“I never did one of these hauntings with a consultant before. Much better results in my view. It seems I can learn. Slowly. You, however, adapt and how! Most people would have not been able to cope with this, let alone roll with it.” He pointed at his increasingly skeletal appearance.

“Who were you, really?” ask Chantal.

“I flat out refuse to answer because I don’t want to be defined by my past. Sorry.”

“I get it,” said Chantal. “Will you find peace?”

Luc shrugged. Then he started to turn into what momentarily looked like snowflakes, which rapidly turned to liquid, and then to steam. Chantal was alone. She looked around. The Christmas lights were blinking in her apartment – the lights she had not put up. Returning her attention to the desk, she opened the drawer and saw the USB drive resting where she put it. Not a hallucination.

She picked up her phone and dialled her brother.

“Guillaume? Comment vas-tu?”

Her brother said he was good.

“Bon. Puis-je venir chez toi pour Noël?”

“Bien sûr!”

“D’accord. À demain!”

After tonight, Chantal felt certain that being home alone for Christmas would be a bad idea.

## Resources and References

- *ENTITLED How Male Privilege Hurts Women* – 2020 – Kate Manne
- Julie S. Lalonde – internationally recognized women’s rights advocate and public educator.

<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thenextchapter/full-episode-june-6-2020-1.5598995/julie-s-lalonde-s-resilience-is-futile-is-more-than-just-a-story-about-being-stalked-1.5599043>

- Katrina Chen – former BC MLA  
<https://www.katrinachen.org/>  
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- Jody Vance – Broadcaster – <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/bc-jody-vance-harassment-1.6792456>
- How to find help  
<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/health-promotion/stop-family-violence/services.html>
- For men  
<https://menandfamilies.org/>  
<https://cmha.ca/find-info/mental-health/general-info/>