

Twas the Night Before

By Jane Jensen

*[Intro: Between Gabriel Knight #1 and #2, I wrote a short fictional piece for Sierra's magazine called **Pause** that gave players an idea of what the characters were doing between the time frame of the two games. While thinking of a worthy December blog entry, the idea came to mind to write a short story about the characters but I dismissed it at first. Too much work, not enough time. But the idea wouldn't go away. So here it is. This is the Christmas 'before' and Dread Hill House and David lie somewhere ahead in Sam's future.]*

The Spanish Steps, Rome, 2008

The dark-haired girl with the pale face and black lipstick performed a graceful flourish of her hands. A spray of doves flew into the air. They beat their white wings above the Spanish Steps, *some things* which had appeared from nothing and no place. There was a spattering of amazed applause from the few passers by who had caught the movement. But only a couple of coins clinked into the hat.

The crowds that clogged the Spanish Steps and streamed around the fashionable Spagna district in Rome had other things on their minds today. The elegantly-dressed Italians outnumbered the tourists ten-to-one, a rare occurrence, and not a happy one for business. It was still a tradition in Rome for Christmas to come at, well, Christmas time. The city heaved and contracted in a frenzied glut of gift-buying, bough-choosing and the selection of delicacies for the Christmas table, as if it had only just dawned on people that tomorrow was December 25th. It was no wonder that people couldn't spare a moment to watch a little street art.

Sam winked at a dark-haired boy, maybe 7. He had the face of an angel but not the nature of one. He complained loudly to his mother that he wanted to stop and watch her show, but his pretty mama tugged him along. She shot Sam an appraising look as if wondering, already, about her son's taste in women. Sam gave it up and glanced at Scarpelli's hat. She'd be lucky if her take was 10 Euro today.

"Christmas Eve is always bad." Scarpelli was quick to read her thoughts. "Everyone wants to get home."

"I know." Sam blew on her hands. Her fingers were long and thin and it was hard to keep them deft in these temperatures.

"And it's cold," Scarpelli added. "Too cold for delicate American girls to be outside all day."

"Ha!" Sam snorted. This was his joke, calling her 'delicate'. He had started it the day he'd invited her to work with him. As in most European cities, the primo tourist spots were defended to the death by those with prior claims. When she'd arrived in Rome four months ago, she'd begun at the bottom of the Spanish Steps. She was shoved further and further back by the local artists, solicitors and homeless until she was practically in the street. Unwanted. Unwelcome. Then one day, Scarpelli had paused to watch

her. He was ancient, at least 70. He had offered her a deal that was as old as time itself between those approaching the grave and those leaving the cradle. She would come work with him at his prime spot near the top of the Steps. Her talent would draw the crowds and they would split the take.

The Great Scarpelli must have been very good in his day. But he was now as well-used and slightly dingy as his long black coat. His hands were gnarled with arthritis and, during the twenty minute show that he performed four times a day, he relied on patter and a charming personality to cover the rough edges on his magic. But he was a fixture here, even mentioned in several tourist books, and he still brought in money. With Sam working the crowds for him, he brought in a lot more.

It was a win-win, as they say, but it was also a life lesson. Sam looked at The Great Scarpelli and *knew* that she herself would not be where he was at 70. She was good, she was *really, really good*, and she was going to make it. Not in a small way, either, but in a TV-specials-and-limousines kind of way. And when she had money, she would sock it away. She would be Sally the freaking Squirrel. She'd have a home of her own in which to grow old.

She knew this would happen, she just hadn't quite figured out how yet.

Scarpelli looked at his watch. "We'll stop at 3 today. No sense, what do you say? Beating on a dead horse." He laughed. "Or maybe a dead reindeer."

"Okay." Sam scanned the crowd for likely prospects.

"What, no protest? I can't get you to give up until this place is quieter than a tomb, usually. You have plans? What am I saying, a pretty girl like you!" Despite his words, he appraised her a little too knowingly.

Sam stuck out her chin. "As it a matter of fact, I do."

"Maybe you're going to the Christmas Eve mass at St. Peter? Your first year in Rome, you don't want to miss it."

"Nope."

"A young man?" Scarpelli mused. "I know! The family is coming to visit! Who wouldn't visit a daughter in Rome for the holidays?"

Sam's nose wrinkled in annoyance. They had never really gotten personal, she and Scarpelli, so she couldn't blame him for the gaff. For all he knew, she had a corn-fed family of 30 somewhere in Iowa.

"I'm spending Christmas with an Italian family. They own a vineyard and have a big old farm house. It's a few hours north in the country."

She surprised herself, telling him. And was more surprised at the pleasure and pride in her voice. She almost sounded... giddy. Silly git.

"Ah!" his eyes sparkled. "But this is so wonderful! You will have a real Christmas! *Fantastico!*"

“Well, it’s not a big deal,” Sam insisted.

Scarpelli studied her face. “You’re nervous perhaps? Meeting this family? This house of strangers?”

“Who me?” Sam shrugged. “I meet a hundred people a day.”

“Ah!” He wasn’t convinced. “Well, I have something for you, something to give you confidence.”

Scarpelli brought out a box from inside his battered old magic case. It was wrapped in newspaper and had a beautiful bow, a real bow, the kind you had to tie.

“Oh, no!” Sam moaned. “But I didn’t get you anything!”

“This is strictly business. Open!”

She pulled the bow, unwrapping the gift in seconds. She gingerly held up a purple satin blouse, ruffles running up and down the button placard and puffing around the cuffs. The slightly musty smell and the worn feel of the satin under her fingers told her it was authentically vintage. Her eyes grew wide.

“Oh my god!” She turned to Scarpelli and hugged the old man.

“I saw it in a window, and I said ‘that blouse is Lady Byron, if anything on this Earth ever was’. See how the purple will attract the crowds?”

“It’s perfect!” she whispered. “It’s exactly right.” She turned her back, as if to study the shirt in the light, but really to keep him from seeing how much the gift had touched her. *Pathetic git.*

Damn, but maybe this Christmas would not suck after all.

3:30 at the hostel

She shared a room with four other girls but none of them were in evidence now. The place felt deserted. She wasn’t surprised. This was her fourth year in hostels at Christmas and it was always the same. The only people left would be a handful of blissfully happy lovebirds, having a romantic holiday somewhere far from home. The regular assortment of vagabonds all made their way back to the nest or had someplace better to be. She hated Christmas, that sense of being the one pathetic loser left behind. But that wasn’t her fate this year. Cue the Hallelujah chorus.

She took a shower, enjoying the plentiful hot water. She took care dressing; the new purple blouse and black jeans. She only had her black leather jacket and it was too cold to go without. It was pretty biker chick, but at least it would cover her tats. Mostly. She arranged her black spikey hair in the mirror, going for a slightly softened look. She thought about removing the stud in her lip but decided against it. The hole would still be obvious and, anyway, she was who she was. There was no getting around it. And surely this quaint Italian family, these grape-growers, would be non-judgmental, salt-of-the earth people. Right?

“It will be fine,” she told her reflection. “They’ll love you. Or at least smile politely. And that will do.”

7:00 at the fountain

She was supposed to meet Antonio at seven o'clock at the Via del Progresso fountain. She hurried over there. It was getting seriously, teeth-chattered cold now, but her excitement and nerves kept her warm as she walked.

She had pictures in her mind, stuck there since Antonio suggested this a few weeks ago. They'd only gone out on three dates, but he'd been a gentleman and he was a nice guy, slightly plump, a bit scholarly, with a cherubic face. He was talkative and generous like all Italians, and when he'd realized she had no place to go for Christmas he had, without hesitation, insisted that she spend it with his family.

We have a villa in the country, been in the family for a hundred years. It's surrounded by acres of grapevines, the prettiest stone house you ever saw. And the sunsets! But I warn you, it's a madhouse. Both sets of grandparents will be there, aunts, uncles, cousins, about a million little kids. So much food, you will gain 10 pounds. We'll go for a long walk before dinner to build an appetite, so that you have enough room for it all. And the tree! We have the biggest tree in the world, right in front of a window that faces the driveway...

She could picture it all, right down to the scarf on Grandma's head, the babies faces surrounded by dark curls and the groaning old farm table full of steaming pasta. It wouldn't be like she imagined, but that was OK. It would still be cool. And it wasn't *her* family, she knew that, but that was OK, too. It was *a* family, a real and overflowing one, and it would be fun just to be around it for a little while. Just a few days of somebody else's life....

At the square where she was to meet Antonio, it was dark. There were a few old-fashioned street lamps hung with wreaths. Green lights were strung up around the fountain in the middle of the square. People rushed by, on their way to warm hearths and hot meals, but fewer now than at the Spanish Steps. These were the late mice, the last of the crowd. And she was one of them, waiting for her ride to someplace warm and shining.

She hoped there was a good heater in the car. She'd never seen Antonio's car, but knew he didn't have much money. Not that it mattered if there was heat. God, she was nervous. She didn't sit on the fountain lip, didn't want to get her fanny wet with the bit of snow lingering there, didn't want to ruin the leather in the car. If there was leather. Not that it mattered.

Seven o'clock came. Seven o'clock went. Then seven ten. Then seven fifteen.

She didn't have a cell phone number to call. Then again, she didn't have a cell phone to call with. Seven twenty.

By seven thirty, she was starting to get seriously worried. Then lights appeared a block down and came on fast. The car screeched up, pulling onto the cobblestones around the fountain, rubber screaming to a stop. She recognized Antonio as he opened a back door. Her face lit up with a welcoming smile.

Thank god.

“Ciao Bellissima!” He came towards her, holding his arms out and enfolding her in a hug. But the look on his face before it disappeared over her shoulder was... guilty.

“It’s so crazy trying to get out of town on a holiday,” Sam said, letting him know she wasn’t upset that he was late. And then her eyes went to the small Fiat that gracelessly straddled the center island. Five faces looked back at her – a girl and long-legged boy hunched over in the backseat and two girls crammed into the small front seat with the male driver. All of them were young, nicely dressed in sweaters and wool coats. None of them were the tattoo types.

Sam smiled at them, but felt her face turn red and nerves strike her gut with a stab. It seemed her body understood before her mind did.

“Bellissima, I’m so sorry!” Anthony was saying. His boyish face was contrite. “Look, my brother, he brings his girlfriend and she brings her roommate and then my sister and her boyfriend, their car has a problem, so they must come with us, too.”

Her smile didn’t waver.

“I’m so sorry, Samantha. There’s no more room!”

“Oh. That’s OK,” Sam said, shaking her head.

“No, it’s unforgivable! I invite you and then...! But you have something else you can do tonight? You said you might go to mass?”

She *had* said that, when he’d first asked about her plans. And he had acted like going to St Peter’s mass alone was the most horrible fate that could befall one on Christmas eve. Only now he seemed to find it a fine idea.

“Anthony!” the driver, called. “It’s cold!”

“It’s fine, go ahead,” Sam said, shaking her head again.

“Do you want I should stay with you? We can go to dinner.” He was now genuinely distraught. “Maybe tomorrow I can catch a train home.”

“On Christmas Day? Don’t be silly. Go ahead! Actually, this works out fine because I have a friend at the hostel that didn’t have plans and I felt bad. I’ll go get her and we’ll do the mass. It’ll be great.”

Relief washed over his face. He kissed her on both cheeks. “So wonderful! I’ll come by the Steps after I get back and take you to dinner. Bye, Bellissima! Ciao! *Buon Natale!*”

And he was gone.

8:00 at the church

Sam sat down on the fountain. It started to snow -- thick, cotton ball flakes that left wet smears on her black leather jacket. After some untold blank minutes, she looked at her watch. 8 o'clock. Christmas eve. The square was now deserted. All the good little mice were tucked away behind lit windows and solidly shut doors. All the good, deserving little mice.

She became aware of a terrible feeling inside, like her guts were making their way through some old-fashioned clothes wringer, the kind where the fabric was fed between two cylinders and a crank turned the wheels, crushing the shit out of the cloth. It was an awful pain. She had time to wonder if she was getting sick and then a sob broke from her chest and she knew what the pain was -- tears.

They came from her with such force that she had no choice but to release them. How long had it been since she last cried? Ten years? Fifteen? She'd given it up years ago. Nevertheless, tears wracked her body for a long while. And then they stopped, abruptly and completely.

Stupid git! He didn't owe you anything, no one owes you anything. And anyway, so what! It would have been awkward and uncomfortable. You didn't know anyone there. You're lucky it didn't work out. And here you are in Rome for Christmas -- Rome! And you're bawling like a baby. Boo hoo, poor me, stuck in the Eternal City!

She was annoyed with herself. She was living her life's dream, to travel abroad. So what if it was sometimes hard and she was sometimes lonely? She was doing it, wasn't she? If she wasn't willing to face a little hardship, she should have stayed back in the slums of Washington D.C. working at Walmart.

But I was going to be part of a real family at Christmas. Just one stupid Christmas. Is that so much to ask?

She shook her head, sending the self-pitying thought fleeing, and started walking. It was so freaking cold. But she was here. She *would* make the best of it. She'd take the subway to St. Peter's Square and look around at the sights, maybe spend a little money on some hot chocolate. She wouldn't try to get in to see the mass. She didn't have it in her to fight the crowds, and anyway, those precious seats belonged to true believers. She was just a lookie-loo when it came to the religious thing.

She was about to head into the underground when she noticed a small church across the street. It wasn't a grand affair, no cathedral. It was small and squat and its stones were stained dark, probably from a long ago fire. Its upkeep was neglected, but there was a pretty little steeple and warm light coming from the windows. Maybe she'd pop inside and warm up. Maybe there would be a Christmas choir.

The church inside was pretty, but more from effort than in fact. Its plain, smoke-darkened nave had taken on a special grace this night with candles lit all around the altar and clusters of them in every one of the weather-beaten window frames. There were two rows of pews on either side but no one was there. She slipped into the back row.

She didn't have to wait long. The front doors opened with a blast of arctic air and a mass trooped into the foyer. They were children, a group as rag tag as the little church itself. Sam could see them through

the open nave doors. They were several dozen of them, quiet, subdued by the solemnity of the occasion. But their faces were lit up... some of their faces. Some of those eyes would maybe never light up again. Two nuns in wool coats were with them, older women in white wimples clucking after coats and mittens.

Sam felt her heart sink. She knew who this group of children were – or rather, *what* they were. They reeked of it. Damn.

An abundantly fat priest in a dark suit and collar came out from behind the altar to greet the new arrivals. He shook hands with each of the children, wishing them a *Buon Natale*. He had an open, pleasant face and a boisterous voice.

Sam wanted to leave, but she didn't have it in her to push through the group in the foyer. So she watched the children file up to the front rows and take seats. As they went past, a little girl, maybe six, looked over at Sam. Her long black hair was bunched and puckered in a way that no doubt drove the nuns crazy. Her face was too thin and there were large dark circles under her eyes. She stared, her hand trailing along the pews as she passed. She stared until it became uncomfortable to turn her head any more. And once she had reached her spot on a pew, she turned to stare at Sam again, her eyes barely clearing the back of her seat.

Double damn. This was not one what Sam needed in her mental state right now. It was a little too close to home, too depressing. She'd slip out.

But she didn't. As soon as the kids were seated a boy's choir came out in robes and she hesitated. Then the service began and she stopped thinking so much about getting away. The choir sang a dozen songs in Italian. The sound filled the small church beautifully. If she closed her eyes, it was almost unearthly. After the choir the priest told the Christmas story. Even though Sam couldn't understand most of his words, he was so animated in his delivery, and the story so familiar, that she could follow along. He was very sweet, this priest, good with the kids. Yes, a very nice man.

By now she was warm and amazingly, yes amazingly, happy. She was not so road-beaten that she couldn't appreciate how special this was, to be in a little Italian church on Christmas Eve, witnessing such a simple but lovely ceremony. This was a very unique experience indeed, and maybe it made up for not going to the country. Or at least made it not so bad.

The Christmas story ended and one of the nuns got the children to make a circle in front of the altar, holding hands. She began a prayer.

Sam stood up. If she could just sneak out before the service ended, well, it would have been a pretty decent Christmas Eve after all. She eased from the back pew and headed for the doors. Out in the foyer the priest and the other nun were having a tense conversation over a furry red suit. The nun had a sack of presents – brightly wrapped gifts in a burlap bag. And the suit... they were expecting a visit from Santa Claus, or, rather, Babbo Natale. But there seemed to be some holiday logistics at issue.

"Excuse me," Sam said politely, wanting to pass.

“Buona sera,” the priest bobbed, *“Buon Natale* and Merry Christmas. Welcome to St Albans.”

“Buon Natale,” Sam said. “And thank you. I really enjoyed the service.”

“Tell me, Miss,” the priest said, “We need an expert opinion. This coat. What do you think?”

He draped the furry red jacket, half his size, over his chest.

Was Babbo Natale supposed to be skinny? Sam shook her head definitively, “That ain’t happening.”

“There you see?” he said to the nun and rattled off again in Italian.

The nun responded, distraught the way only Italians can be. She pointed to the sack of gifts and then towards the children. She seemed to be taking this very personally.

Sam’s hands were on the door handle, ready to heave ho, but she didn’t. She paused. A terrible idea had entered her head. A stupid idea. They wouldn’t go for it. Who was she? People had this thing about kids and strangers. Not a good idea. *Anyway, what’s it to you, Samatha Everett? Stupid git! Move along!*

But there were the eyes of the dark-haired little girl. There were those. Sam wanted to kick herself. She could be such a pathetic sap.

She turned around and went back to the nun. She examined the gifts in the sack and picked a likely one. It was small, round and painfully wrapped, exactly the size and weight of a baseball. The tag said “Roberto”. The nun and priest looked at her quizzically. Sam sighed and held up the gift, showing it to them and allowing her sleeves to fall back. With a fluid motion she waved long white fingers in front of the ball and it vanished. The nun gasped. Sam looked around – at the ceiling, the floor, at the priest’s back, then she peered into a dark corner in the stonework and frowned. She went over and looked in, apparently saw nothing and walked back. The wrapped ball rolled out to follow behind her back like a shy puppy. When Sam ‘noticed’ it and held out her hand, it sprang up to greet her palm. Sam put the ball back in the sack.

The priest clapped joyfully. “But this is magnificent! Wonderful! I’ve never seen such a thing in my life!”

The nun grasped Sam’s hand almost painfully, her eyes burning. She spoke in an excited rush.

“She says,” interpreted the priest, “that the children would be so delighted. What a wonderful Christmas surprise. Would you, please, pass out the gifts? I know it’s a lot to ask, Miss. And if you have someplace you must be...?” The priest waited hopefully.

For the second time that night, Sam hurt inside. Christ, what was *up* with her hormones? It had to be a full moon. Or maybe it was a holiday allergic reaction thing. Or maybe she’d just been on the road too damn long. So what that they would allow her to perform, why wouldn’t they? She was a pro, wasn’t she? And she hadn’t even asked for money; they should be so lucky!

She shrugged. "I have time." She pointed to the suit. "But *that's* a deal-breaker."

The nun looked at the suit and at Sam's goth clothes, then back again. With a hopeful expression she held out the hat.

Sam had to laugh at the look on her face, like she was offering a pacifier to a rattlesnake, and so earnestly, too. "Okay. I can deal with the hat."

Sam put the dorky, red and white, pom-pomed thing on her head -- what the hell; it was Christmas Eve -
- and went out to entertain the children.