

CHRISTMAS WRAPPING

by Paul Watson

Starring Sophie

Sophie finds herself in the corridor outside the school hall, tinsel draped around the windows, a Santa hat flopping down over her ear. "How do I let myself get talked into these things?" she mutters, shifting in nervous excitement from foot to foot although if you dared suggest any such thing you'd best be prepared to be corrected. Out front, the headmaster is introducing the special guest to excited cheers from the children who well remember his previous visit. The more knowing look around to see if any teachers are missing, heads swivelling like owls on a sugar rush.

Sophie takes another look, not recognising the squat box on casters, a long flat table about half-way up where there's a bright orange stripe with oddly placed shadows across the whole thing.

"...and I'm very pleased to have an experienced assistant to help me again." the magician's saying, dressed in red with a white fur trim like a thinner, less hairy Santa Claus, "Please give a big round of applause for Miss Jones." he gestures at the door in front of her. Sophie puts on a false smile and steps into the wall of noise. "So glad you decided to volunteer."

Sophie just smiles, although her eyes hold murder ready.

"Doesn't she look festive?" he runs his hand around the fur trim of the hat and before Sophie knows what's happening she finds herself staring at the hall through a thin red haze as the hat stretches down to her shoulders.

"Hey!"

"Play along. It's for the children."

Sophie doesn't reply, not trusting herself on either volume or content. "Just get this off me."

"Of course." the smile in his voice is just enough clue that something is up before he pulls the hat up and the children squeal at the utter lack of a head where there should definitely be one. "Oh my! Where did Miss Jones' head disappear to?"

There's a deafening chorus, while Sophie's hands comically feel across her shoulders for her missing head. Lacking any sign, they settle for folding across her chest, her toe tapping in the universally recognised symbol of annoyance.

"Oh, you think she's hiding in her hat?" he turns the festive hat inside out. "Nope. Not here." he puts his hands on Sophie's shoulder, turning her around to show that the errant head has not merely slipped down her back. "Well, we only have a limited amount of time, so we'll need to crack on." His professional assistants push the device further out, turning it to reveal the orange stripe is in fact a pair of comically coloured rollers. "Now, kids, what's the best thing about Christmas?"

A mixture of responses comes back. Food, family, holidays, but most of all...

"Presents. And we know all presents need to be wrapped up properly, don't we?"

Much enthusiastic agreement.

"And I have a present here." he holds up a small, plain cardboard box, maybe a foot on each side. More cheering.

"But, sadly, I ran out of wrapping paper before I got here. So Miss Jones is going to help me wrap this anyway."

Miss Jones, meanwhile, is busy fighting her instincts having been plunged into silence and darkness, letting the assistants help her down onto the table, which is surprisingly comfortably padded. She feels her shoes being slipped off, scrunching her feet to ward off any attempts at dangerous tickling. Instead she feels the magician's hands around her ankles, putting her toes against something round and hard. Feels like thick rubber, quite stiff but not as hard as plastic. She's still trying to puzzle out what's going to happen when the machine starts, making far too much noise, chugging and clanking. She feels the roller under her soles turning, then the one above it meeting the tips of her toes. She has time to stiffen and think about why this is a truly terrible idea that she should have squashed long before she found herself lying here at the magician's questionable mercy but then the chance to pull her feet back is lost as the rollers grip her tight. It feels surprisingly...nice. A firm massage, working the kinks out of her muscles, and everything else.

The pressure rolls smoothly along her legs, her feet feeling constrained on all sides as they work their way through the innards of the machine, bending in unnatural ways as more and more rollers run over them.

To those outside, it looks like Miss Jones is lying there calmly as she's pulled between rollers that she shouldn't be able to fit a finger between. Nat bites her lip, the other adults trying to figure out how it's done while the children watch, accepting the impossibility without question.

Sophie is rather more questioning, trying to figure out exactly what's happening to her as the rollers move over her knees and she feels the constraints around her toes easing. She tries to wriggle them but they're unsurprisingly unresponsive. *Because someone loves me being helpless. No, it's not me! Stop it! You're my brain! You're supposed to be on my side.* More of her pulls between the rollers. She tries to bite her non-existent lips as the rollers reach her hips. Her body shudders, kept in place by half of her being stuck in the machine. The clanging and chuddering stops as the magician opens the machine, showing the confusing mass of gears and rollers inside and the paper-thin line that traces from the middle of the rollers all the way through its winding journey to the slot at the other side where her feet dangle, pressed into the fibres of the sheet of paper, all to show that the only way Miss Jones can possibly be there is if she is the paper. Sophie feels the slight shudder of the door closing again and the machine resumes its dastardly, wonderful work reducing her to a flattened two-dimensional image.

In a couple of minutes that seem so much longer inside the device, the machine has done its work. She can't move, feeling wonderfully relaxed and loose. The magician's hands grip her shoulders as he holds up the, still headless, picture of her to the clapping audience.

"Now, this is a very nice picture of Miss Jones, but it can hardly be used for wrapping paper."

Sophie feels the fold across her waist, then another and another, losing track as the magician folds her up. In one hand he holds her as his assistant shows an empty red envelope of the sort used for Christmas cards, holding it open so people can see it's really empty. The magician placed the folded Miss Jones inside, the envelope rubbing distractingly against her flattened form. He closes the envelope flap, gives it a shake or two and opens it to pull out what appears to be the same folded piece of paper. But as he opens it up, instead of Miss Jones, it reveals a shiny green, dotted with miniature images of the teaching assistant in diagonal rows alternating with silver snowmen and red and white candy canes. Her work clothes have been replaced by a festive red jacket edged in white fur that extends just far enough down her thighs and open just low enough on her chest to be appropriate for a school-aged audience. One hand runs through her hair as she smiles, leaning back like a World War II fighter plane decoration. As the children squeal, the magician takes the paper, showing no sign of its many foldings and wraps up the square box, placing it under the tree with a name tag.

Sophie feels the brush of paper against her, the itch tickle and tingle of the magic with no clue what's happening to her and then the pressure inside her as she's pressed tight against the cardboard box.

Meanwhile, the magician gets Shawna out of the audience, having her carefully and assiduously follow where he puts a bright red sponge ball that jumps unseen from under whichever cup he places it under, and which Shawna seriously asserts it's under, to another one and, even, as the climax to the trick, behind her ear, where he reduces her to helpless giggles as he pulls it out.

"That was very good, Shawna. And I think you deserve a present for being such a good little helper." he lifts up the newly wrapped box, handing it over to her eager hands, "And, because you were such a good helper, you can even open it now."

Shawna looks around for confirmation from a trusted adult that this isn't a gross violation of Christmas etiquette and on getting it, she tears into the paper that had been Miss Jones moments prior with a vigour that makes Nat wince in the audience. She opens the box and lifts up a Barbie doll in a short Christmas red jacket. She looks at it carefully.

"It looks like Miss Jones."

"Does it really?" he asks, looming over the doll as Sophie struggles to figure out how she ended up so small and in such sticky hands. "Well, how about we put Miss Jones into a dolls house where she

belongs?"

Shawna looks reluctantly down at the doll but eventually hands it over with only a slight tremble of the lip. The magician keeps her on stage to make sure he doesn't cheat as he places the doll inside a festive dolls house and replaces the tinsel-covered roof.

"Ok, Shawna, why don't you and everyone else call for Miss Jones so she'll stop being a doll and come back."

The children shout. The magician looks over at the doll's house but nothing happens. He looks confused but lifts up the lid, taking a larger, plush version of the doll out. Sophie feels his hand on her textured skin, her body floppy now rather than hard plastic but equally unable to move. "Oh, I see the problem. You didn't shout loud enough." he places the doll back and returns the lid. "Now, remember, I said you have to shout. Miss Jones could be all the way back at the North Pole with Santa, so you need to be really loud for her to hear you. Ok? Really loud this time!"

This time the whole audience shouts, exhausting their breath so much that they can't even scream as the lid falls backwards and Sophie stands up, trying to tug the jacket down a little lower without exposing herself.

"Welcome back, Miss Jones." the magician says as he takes her hand to help her off the pedestal.

"And for my excellent little helper..." he reaches into Sophie's Santa hat, pulling out a copy of the plush doll. Shawna hugs it wide-eyed as she returns to her seat, the other children clustering around to question her.

"And as I've clearly lost the audience, that's where our show closes. Have a merry Christmas!" he waves as he and Sophie leave the hall.

"Ok, you, where are my clothes?"

"Aren't you wearing them?"

"My real clothes. The ones that fit and don't give anyone ideas."

"Oh, you always give me plenty of ideas."

"Cute. So, what little 'surprise' have you hidden for me? Am I going to turn into a mini-me at midnight or something?"

"You wound me."

"I'm certainly considering it." she warns, "What do I have..."

"No tricks this time." he leans down to kiss her hand. She almost pulls it away but is too slow, or at least, so she tells herself. "After all, it's Christmas." he places the Santa hat back on her head, which would have been a suspiciously sweet gesture, if not for the abundance of fake snow that emptied out of it and piled over her head and shoulders. By the time she's finished spluttering and reached her decision on how to maim him, the magician is, wisely, nowhere to be seen.