



The *Ghost* of Christmas *Pastel*

Cybil Lawson Mystery 1



Originally Published October 2024

Sarah Ickes

Cozy Mystery | Light-Hearted Traditional | Woman Sleuth

All rights reserved by the author.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, without the author's written permission. This includes, but is not limited to,
any Artificial Intelligence usage.

The use of brief quotes is allowed.

Paperback ISBN-13: 979-8-9860137-8-7
Ebook ISBN-13: 979-8-9860137-9-4

The characters in this cozy/traditional mystery novel are
fictional and any resemblance to real people
is coincidental.

Illustrations are by the author's own hand.
www.SarahIckesArt.com

Copyright information is provided on the
author's website.

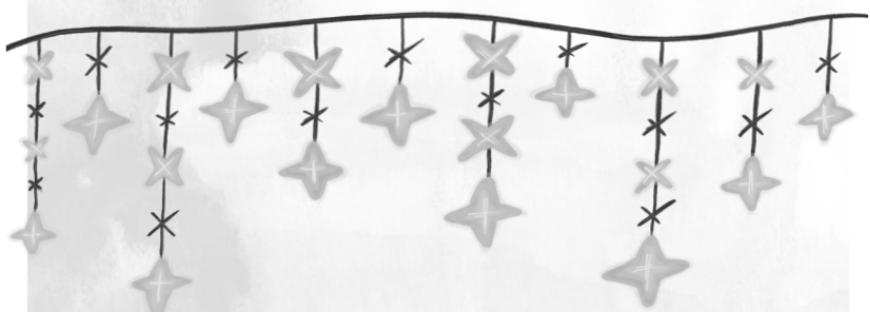
“Their faces were a mixture of hurt and betrayal, with a healthy side of revenge ready to seep out.”



Thank you!

to Sherry, for reading this when time was short
and of the essence.

And to Val, who helped with the timing of a
certain clue.



For G, who makes all things possible.

CHARACTERS

Cybil Lawson..... works at Mark's Crafts and Art Supplies

Yasmin "Yas" Manahan..... Cybil's roommate, best friend

David Lawson..... Cybil's father

Cynthia Lawson..... Cybil's mother

Uncle Wiley..... Cybil's uncle, Cynthia's brother

Detective Phoenix Lawson..... Cybil's uncle, David's brother

Officer Tyrone Noel..... new cop on the force

Marjorie Stonewell..... choir director, church secretary

Marta Stonewell..... middle sister, owns hair salon

Melody Dayton (Stonewell).... Oldest sister, Christine's step-mother

Christine Hieghner..... Melody's step-daughter, owner of local art gallery

Raven Hieghner..... Christine's daughter, Marjorie's great-niece

CHARACTERS *continued...*

Rex Hieghner..... Christine's son, Raven's brother

Ralph owner of the dry bar

Mr. Jeffrey..... owner of the garden center

Mrs. Norman..... Westley's mother

Sylvia Johnson..... Cybil's and Yasmin's landlord

Rodger Freedmon..... handyman, Tara's brother

Tara Newston..... after Marjorie's job

Cybil's Co-Workers

Matt..... store manager

Brandi..... assistant store manager

Betsy..... framing manager

Westley..... sales floor worker

John..... sales floor worker, owns reindeer

Shadow Man..... who remains a mystery until you read the book!

Grab a cup of hot cocoa and dive into a wintry world of murder and mayhem...

READ YOUR WAY



If you are looking for a more interactive way to ride along with Cybil in her first investigation, feel free to make copies of her notes and the character list to take down your own observations. See if you can deduce who the killer is before she does.

Interested in just reading the story?

That's perfectly fine as well. Enjoy this Chrismas-themed mystery any way you want.

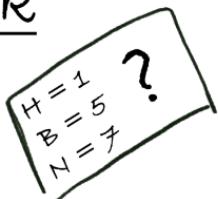
If you really liked this story, please share it with your friends and post book reviews on any platforms you use. Tag my accounts on social media to share!

Interested in making the craft Cybil does for her project at work? Check out my website for the instructions and a picture of what her's would have looked like.

Discussion questions, and media packets, for this novel are also available on my website.

Cybíl's Notebook

Murder victim: Marjorie Stonewell



Cause of Death: ~~Being Ran Over?~~

Motive: the cookie contest? missing recipe card?

Suspects...



and don't miss out on all the action!

Murial Robertson Mysteries

The Serpent's Star
Angled for Revenge
A Counterfeit of Death
An Ancient Poison (2025)

Vectra Tillerman Adventures

Written Wings
The Fall of Time (coming soon)

Vectra and Murial Cross-Over

The Nation's Grief (coming soon)

A Family's Masterpiece Series

A Family's Masterpiece (2025)

Cybil Lawson Mysteries

The Ghost of Christmas Pastel
In Plein Air Sight (coming soon)

Twisted Short Tales

A Year 4 Twisted Short Tales (2025)

DECEMBER 14TH

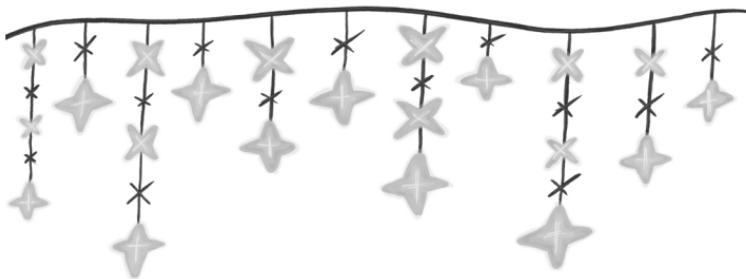
(around 9:00 pm)

There she was. Just lying in the snow. It was as though she had planned on making a snow angel on her stomach, instead of on her back. But the pain riddled on her face erased that possibility right out the window. Besides, who would want to play in the middle of a darkened street anyway?

Underneath a few inches of kicked up white fluff, her purple coat was as plain as day. Draped upon her very still body was the red dress she had worn to the dinner earlier in the evening, and while the black boots were disproportionately large on her feet, they were undeniably hers with the initials M.S. on the bottom of their soles. Her hair, which was dyed to eliminate the graying, was messy and in need of some decent brushing. However, that was something she no longer had to worry about.

Yasmin stood beside her friend, horrified at the discovery she had just made. Her hand clinched tighter around Cybil's arm, studying the marks running up the deceased's back, and leaned to the side in order to whisper in her ear. "Are those..."

"Yep. Grandma got ran over by a reindeer."



CHAPTER 1



Fourteen Days Ago...

Cybil Lawson gazed up at the night sky just as a bright, white line, pierced the dark, before vanishing completely. Quickly shutting her eyes closed, she made a silent wish and slowly peeked down at her phone. With a single tap of her finger, the digital clock showed it to be striking midnight and the date magically changed from November 30th to the first of December. A joyous smile spread across her face, and reflected the same contentment in her eyes, once they fully reopened. *I am determined to make this Christmas better than the last three years.*

She sat atop the window seat, in the make-shift living room, and returned her gaze upon the peaceful stars high above Robbyr's Cove. Things were finally coming together, after many weeks of worrying about how she was going to pay off her car's recent accident. Though it was not a major fix, the money it required could only be paid by an empty checking account. As a result, Cybil relied on the use of her roommate's vehicle for transport to and from work. But, with her new promotion to part-time manager at Mark's Crafts and Art Supplies, she was looking forward to receiving a higher wage, and longer holiday hours, to increase her

weekly paycheck. “This Christmas is going to be different.”

“What was that?” Inquired a curly-haired woman, in green pants and a red sweater. Her hair bounced as she danced in the kitchen to a song about a red-nosed reindeer, and nearly struck a potted plant off the counter as she spun around. Cybil shook her head as she watched her best friend happily stick a candy cane into two mugs, piping hot with fresh cocoa. The young woman then proceeded to cautiously scoop them up in her hands, before heading over to join Cybil by the frosted window.

“Nothing, Yas.” She gave her roommate a perplexed look at the striped Christmas candy she was not fond of. “Yasmin, you know I like the *look* of peppermint, but not the *taste* of it.”

“I just wanted you to try it.” Her friend countered her sceptic stare with a toothy grin of her own. “You might be surprised, and find that you actually *do* like it.”

“I highly doubt *that*.” Cybil’s hand wrapped around the handle of the reindeer head-shaped mug, and looked directly into its painted black eyes. *Well, it never hurts to try something new, right?* A gulp of hesitation could be loudly heard in her throat, as she failed to see the chocolate drink through the whipped cream. Crushed pieces of candy canes were sprinkled atop the fluffy white goodness, adding to her fears about the taste. “And you added crushed pieces as well.”

“Had to be festive!” Yasmin lifted her mug to her mouth, and drank in the warm deliciousness that filled the senses. When she pulled the happy elf head away, she could feel the presence of cream on her chin. “I think I could use a napkin. Is it just on my chin?”

“Where *isn’t* it, would be more like it.” Cybil chuckled at the almost complete Santa Claus beard on Yas’s face. While

her friend dashed back to retrieve a towel from the kitchen, the perfectly twirled cream in her own mug, was begging to be played with as she waited for the drink to cool down. “Is this what you plan on making for the Annual church Christmas dinner?”

“Marjorie placed me in charge of drinks this year.” Yas called from the sink, her mouth in mid-wipe under a dampened paper towel. “She said that after my disastrous job at bringing the salad last time, she was going to try to give me something ‘simpler’ to manage.”

“Well...” Cybil didn’t want to admit to her friend that she was terrible at making a salad, but since everyone in town now knew, there was no use in trying to keep it a secret any longer. “A Caesar salad is fine to have as a precursor to the main entrée, but at least that comes with parmesan cheese at certain places.”

“Laugh it up, Cybil Lawson, laugh it up.” Yas strode over quickly in her long legs, and jokingly slapped her friend in the shoulder. “But three different types of lettuce constitutes as a salad in my book.”

“And where did the non-existent dressing fit in?” She was, of course, referring to the fact that Yas had forgotten to bring the *one* bottle of ranch she purchased to accompany the dismal mixture of lettuce. “Who did you blame it on again?” Cybil thought to herself for a brief moment, “ah, that’s right. You blamed the pastor for making you leave the dressing on our counter.”

“He startled me.” She defended. “Driving by our porch, and seeing me put the light on for when you got off of work. Asking me if I wanted a ride, because you had my car and all. I believe it was in the garage for an oil change that day.”

“Oh, yes. How horrible for a pastor to offer one of his flock a ride to the Annual Christmas Dinner.” A smirk

replaced her cynical look at the peppermint-tinted cocoa. “I must remember to ask him not to startle you again with such a kind gesture this year.” She chuckled as Yasmin smacked her again.

“You will not. I was just nervous, tis all. I’m not as outgoing as you are. ‘Shy’ should have been my middle name instead of ‘Holly.’” Yasmin returned to her elf mug, enjoying the soothing warmth against her tongue whilst her fingers toyed with a necklace, dangling just above the lip of her cable-knit sweater. In its beautiful rose gold metal, her middle name picked up on the small amount of light from above, a family memento she had come to cherish. “By the way, Marjorie assigned you to be in charge of cookie donations.”

“WHAT?” Cybil’s jaw almost dropped into the pile of cream now dissolving in her drink. “I don’t recall volunteering this year.” Her right eye squinted at the sudden tilt of her roommate’s head. “*Yasmin?*”

“Huh?”

“Did you sign me up at your choir practice last night?”

“Perhaps...” Yasmin held the elf’s cheerful face in front of her own. “Okay, I did.”

“YASMIN MANAHAN! I have more hours at work this year, and I specifically told you that I was going to take a step back from volunteering this time.”

“Yeah, you did say that. But...” Her voice faded off until Cybil demanded that she speak louder. “It is the easiest position to take on. You create a paper sign-up sheet, hang it up on the corkboard in the church’s lobby, and wait for the signatures to faithfully appear. Everyone else is doing most of the work, you just have to organize the dessert table and ensure the cookies arrive on time.”

“And that’s supposed to be easy? Yas, if my memory is

right, Mrs. Tudball held that honor for the last ten years before passing away. And she offered to pick everyone's orders up from their houses, AND filled in with her own cookies when needed."

"So?"

"We're sharing your car until I have enough money to pay the garage for the work they did. And that is not going to happen until after Christmas. HOW IS THIS GOING TO WORK?!"

"We will figure something out. You worry too much." Yas leaned her head against the cold window, as her hazel eyes stared back at her in the glass. While outside, the street lamp flickered on and off, in desperate need to be changed by the township.

"You're right. The solution is simple. Quite simple, in fact. Just go back to Marjorie and explain to her that it was all a big mistake. That I can't do the job justice and..."

"Kind of too late for that."

Cybil did not care for the raised octave in her friend's voice, which usually occurred when the other shoe was about to drop. "I'm almost afraid to ask. What did you mean by that?"

"Marjorie was so delighted to have the volunteer list done, that she already handed the list to Pastor Lawrence so he can announce it in the morning, before the sermon." Cybil opened her mouth, about to speak out in another protest, but Yas beat her to it. "I know, I know. Can you blame me though? Tara Newston was going to put her hand in the air for the spot, and I could not let her get it. And Marjorie was NOT going to give it to me, under any circumstances, after the way she came down on my poor salad."

"Yas, I have a lot of training to do for my new position. With Christmas around the corner, and my mom gushing

over the fact that her brother will be joining us for dinner this year, I'm under enough stress as it is. Adding onto the fact that I will *now* be handling the most important part of the Christmas dinner, for the church, my volcano is about to erupt on overload."

"Sorry, Cybil. Truly I am. But I also took note of how long your face got at the idea of not being able to help out at the dinner this year."

"That's because I'm not going to be able to attend. I'm the bottom manager on the ladder, and with everyone else having their vacation and holiday plans already approved, there is a slim chance of me getting off that night." Cybil balanced the untouched mug atop her knee, watching the crushed peppermint fall into the cocoa, the cream mostly consumed by the hot drink. Sadness lingered between the two friends, making the chilly outdoor air seem warmer, and more inviting, as it seeped through the single-pane window.

Living in a converted railroad station held an undeniably unique charm to it; however, it was also a bit problematic when it came to certain financial basics, such as the electric bill. The brick station's history, since 1908, was filled with tales of robbers and gangs jumping off a few miles down the track, in order to hide out in the town. Everyone's families could be traced back to criminals in varying degree, including that of murder in the first. Whether their ancestors actually did the deeds they were accused of was often a mystery in itself; due to the lack of records from the illiterate bandits. Even their town's own name of Robbyr's Cove, was a self-evident example in their lack of written education. A misspelled word, and the absence of a cove in the land-locked area, did not speak highly of their founders.

Still, the fun stories whispered about at children's bed-

times, maintained a level of fascination for the old place among the residents. Kids dared one another to creep up to the lonely lantern, hanging high over the back door, around Halloween night. Cybil enjoyed watching through a peep-hole they had installed to amuse herself by their yearly antics. The story told of a supposed ghostly spirit, of a mail thief, who was told to be trapped in the broken light, rusted into the base of the railroad lantern. And when the creak of the old metal could be heard, it was warned he was trying to break free from his tiny prison. Yasmin had offered to have someone fix the noisy light before, but, Cybil did not wish to ruin the laughs she got every October.

Not only did the tales of their outlaw in-laws spark imaginations of buried treasure hidden around the valley, the real-life story of the seven brothers also lived on in the local historical society's museum. Erwin, Quin, Stephen, Brian, Ned, Calvin, and John were not blood-brothers, but they were all connected through a major jewelry heist committed in 1902. The oldest of the crew, Erwin, had not only been the mastermind of the successful operation, but he also happened to be Cybil's great-great grandfather. And while their story went down into legend, the jewels had never been found. *I wonder why my uncle is coming home for a visit?*

“Do you think that the jewelry heist origins of our town are true?” Cybil asked, breaking the mutual silence on the window bench, and snapping her thoughts back to the present.

“Why ask me? As Larry likes to continually point out while I’m working on Thursday evenings, I am not from ‘round this here parts.” Yasmin did her best to mimic the town’s retired police chief, who frequented Ralph’s Dry Bar and Grill every week, on the same day, for a game of pool.

“But that’s the reason I’m asking you. For an outsider’s opinion.” Cybil playfully smiled at her friend. “In all seriousness though, do you think it could be real?”

“I don’t know what to think. Sounds too much like a movie or an outlandish book plot to me. But, the classic saying is that you can’t make up real life. So maybe the far-fetched stories are true.” Yasmin took another sip from her cooling drink. “What brought this on all of a sudden? Your mom said you used to pretend to find the treasure as a kid, but I haven’t seen you pick up the midnight flashlight and gravedigger’s shovel lately.”

“Well, my mom is *super* excited that her brother is coming home for Christmas this year. I mean...she is even making a double batch of every cookie recipe she normally bakes.”

“Wow! The town won’t be big enough to handle that load.”

“I know, right? She made sure to tell me not to talk about anything to do with Robbyr’s Cove’s history. ‘Not a peep’ about it around my uncle when he arrives next week.”

“Wait, is this the uncle who is a treasure hunter or something like that?”

“I think ‘wannabe treasure-hunter’ is a more appropriate title. As far as I know, he works as a janitor at a college, and does some research work for one of the professors on the side. He loves to read, so I would assume that having access to the library on a daily basis is a plus for him.” Cybil brushed back a few strands of loose hair about to fall into the melted mush in her cup. “Apparently, he can get easily carried away when it comes to talking about the stolen jewels. It’s just...”

“What?”

“I haven’t seen him since he left town when I was twelve,

and all I can recall is his ‘laboratory’ that was literally the spare bedroom turned into a treasure seeker’s workplace. It was filled with images, corkboards, clues, and blown-up scans of locations in town. Even had the classic red strings leading from one pin to another.”

“You did tell me that he was a bit of a recluse. Maybe he should have gotten a hobby like model trains or miniature bookshelf scenes. I saw that they’re becoming very popular in my online book club.”

“Searching for the treasure was his hobby, and I had no issue with that, nor with the root beer soda dispenser he created in the closet.”

“Man, did I miss out or what?”

“That machine did make the best root beers in town.” For a brief moment, the nostalgic memory brought up a bittersweet smile for Cybil. Until she remembered what she heard earlier in the day, and it faded from her lips soon after. “I must admit, that I was also really looking forward to seeing him again. And one of the things I wanted to talk to him about was the jewels. Guess I can’t resist my curious imagination when it comes to buried treasure. But when I was at the grocery store today, I overheard Bethany Quaker tell her daughter that the ‘Crazy Custodian’ was coming back to town.”

“Mrs. Quaker is one to talk; with the amount of gossip going around about what she is growing in that *fancy* new greenhouse she put up at the end of summer. Besides, what does it matter what other people think?”

“Well, it got me thinking about the movies and tv shows we have seen where the crazy guy usually ends up being right. What if the treasures are buried within elaborate clues that the original gang set up to protect their bounty?”

“Are you sure you are talking about the same found-

ers of the town who could not spell the word ‘robber’ correctly?” Yasmin studied her friend’s sparkling eyes. “Don’t tell me that you are thinking about quitting your day job in the hopes that some *phantom jewels* are going to pay off your garage bill.”

“Fat chance at that happening.” Cybil joked the matter off and decidedly changed the subject. “How are the questions going for the upcoming trivia night at Ralph’s?” Yasmin rambled on about her concerns on whether the topics she had in mind would be too difficult, or too easy, but her friend’s thoughts were not on the state flower of Montana. Instead, it was up in the clear night sky and her childhood fantasies of going on adventures like *Indiana Jones*.