

This story introduces many of the characters in *The Death of an Ambitious Woman*. It was originally published in *Riptide: Crime Stories* by New England Writers published by Level Best Books [www.levelbestbooks.com](http://www.levelbestbooks.com) Enjoy!

## **NEW DERBY, NEW YEAR'S EVE**

**by**

**Barbara Ross**

Young Officer Cable drove slowly down Route 9, alert for any motorist who might have skidded in the rapidly accumulating snow. Despite the holiday, at 8:30 in the evening traffic was light, as if New Derby's citizens had taken stock of the weather and sensibly got where they were going, or even more wisely, stayed home.

Cable glanced out his passenger window as he passed the bright lights of Hunan Palace. Its parking lot was mobbed with cars, snow piling on their roof tops. At the front door, a woman in a fur coat laughed with her escort. Her coat fell open as she moved, revealing a tantalizing glimpse of something short, red and sequined.

Half a mile before the edge of town, Cable pulled his car into a parking lot. It was his favorite lay-by, the perfect place to sit and watch for speeders, or, on this night above all others, for tell-tale signs the driver had had one too many. The lot surrounded a little

plaza housing three businesses; a sub shop, dry-cleaners and laundromat. The sub shop and dry-cleaners were shut tight, but lights blazed from the laundromat windows.

Cable made a wide arc with his patrol car, driving carefully in the snow, until the car was perpendicular to the road, face forward, in case he had to pull out and give chase. The laundromat was behind him, clearly visible through his rear window, which was just beginning to collect a fine coat of wet snow.

Cable turned and saw a solitary figure sitting in one of the plastic molded chairs along the side wall of the laundromat. The man sat, profile to him, turning the pages of the *Boston Herald* while his laundry tumbled in the big stainless steel dryer by the front door. As Cable watched, something pink streaked by the dryer's window— once, twice, three times.

By shifting in his seat, Cable could see the man's car, parked toward the back of the tiny lot. Snow was piled up on the roof and hood, but Cable recognized the lines of an old bomber station wagon, the kind his parents once had for transporting six children on vacation. Not many like it on the road these days.

Cable sat and watched the road, turning every so often to glance at the solitary man. The poor guy. He looked to be in his late twenties, about Cable's own age, and he sat alone, doing his laundry, on the one night of the year when everyone should be with friends. That's where Cable planned to be as soon as he got off shift at midnight, with his old pals and new girlfriend.

Cable turned the key in the ignition. He couldn't stand the way the man made him feel. He'd find another place to lie and wait, perhaps his second-favorite hidey-hole, closer to the Center on the other side of Route 9. Any place would do, really, just some place where the lonely creature in the laundromat wouldn't haunt him.

\* \* \*

Ruth Murphy's legs ached from standing and it wasn't yet nine o'clock. The older generation had cocktail party calves, the ability to stand and chat for hours. Like the related ability to stand with a drink in one hand, a plate of food in the other, and somehow eat the food, it was a generation-skipping thing that had leapt up over Ruth's forty-something cohort.

"You're looking pensive." The hostess, Anna Abbot, materialized beside Ruth. At eighty-two, Mrs. Abbott looked like she could stand all night and do a rumba on the ceiling to close out the evening,

"Pensive? Do I?" Ruth laughed.

"Don't deny, don't deny. And I know what you're pensive about." Mrs. Abbott leaned forward confidentially. "It's the first New Year's Eve since your confirmation as Police Chief, and the first snow storm of the winter to boot. You think you should be at headquarters commanding your troops."

Ruth smiled. Not only was she thinking about work, she was *at* work. Her promotion to Chief made attendance at Mrs. Abbott's annual New Year's Eve gathering of New Derby's movers and shakers mandatory. Much as she adored the old lady, Ruth would much rather have been home, warm by the fireplace, playing Scrabble with the kids.

The thought of the kids and the demise of the family New Year's Eve gave Ruth a pang. The ever-popular Sarah was fine, off with friends at a sleepover. But James, at fifteen, was too old to be sent to a cousin's, too young to drive off to his own amusements. The picture of James sitting alone in the old Victorian, its facade dotted with dark windows, made Ruth's heart ache.

"Shame on you." Mrs. Abbott admonished.

"Huh?"

"Don't think about your job. If your force is as good as you think it is, everything will be just fine. Now, go off and have some fun, like your charming husband."

Ruth followed Anna Abbott's gaze to a corner of the huge living room where Marty Murphy, deep in conversation with two women, was, indeed, pouring on the Boston-Irish-lawyer charm.

Ruth glanced at her glass of ginger-ale with distaste. She was the designated driver, and New Derby's Police Chief had to practice zero tolerance. Ah well, nothing to do but mix and mingle.

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Frank Maloney stood at his post by the gaping doorway that separated Target from the rest of the mall. It was deserted as far as the eye could see. The combination of the holiday and snow had discouraged even the hardiest of shoppers. Stupid, really to be open late on New Year's Eve.

Without anyone to watch, the time dragged. If not for the people-watching, the job would've bored him stiff. No use complaining, though. It got him out of the house in his retirement. With Irene dead and gone, he'd have gone mental staring at the four walls.

Frank raised a hand and returned the wave of the lone checker standing in the great rows of check-out counters. "Boring night, huh, Frank?" she called. She was Hispanic, so it sounded like, "Boreen nightte, uh, Frink?" Lovely sounding, really. She was a cute little thing. One of the things he enjoyed about the job was the chance to be around so many young people.

Frank thought about Damon Platen, the boy he was filling in for tonight. In exchange for the chance to party New Year's Eve and sleep it off all New Year's Day, Damon had taken five shifts for Frank, including Christmas Eve, so Frank could travel to Atlanta to meet his first grandchild.

A movement by the doorway caught Frank's eye. A little girl, barely walking, toddled out of the store into the mall. She was wearing a too big Christmas dress, bright red velvet with a white crinoline pinafore sewed to it. The Target price tag was still hanging down the back. The child had no shoes on. Frank shuddered to think about her bare feet on the cold stone floor, though she did look as if walking bare foot was enough of a struggle for her. Shoes would have sunk her, surely.

Frank was preparing to give chase, when he saw the mother following. She stepped out into the mall with an exaggerated casualness, coat folded in her arms, her shoulders hunched forward, eyes trained at the ground. She was painfully thin-bodied and limp-haired, with dark circles under her eyes and almost translucent skin. If she was any more than sixteen, he'd eat his shirt.

As Frank watched, the pair made their way into the mall, the toddler in the red dress walking like a drunken sailor, the mother close behind, looking for all the world like she needed a good meal. When they turned the corner, moving up the wheel-chair ramp into the main part of the mall with no sign of coming back or paying for the dress, Frank left his post and followed.

\* \* \*

Officer Cable was relieved when he finally got to his second-favorite lay-by. It had taken much longer than he'd expected. When he'd come up to the light at the legal U-turn on Route 9, he'd seen a car attempting the same maneuver just ahead of him slide into a snow bank on the other side of the road. Cable had come around and parked behind it, his blue bubble light flashing. He tried to help the poor guy out. When he couldn't, he called a tow truck, and waited, directing traffic until it came and went.

By the time he left the scene, Cable was chilled to the bone. The wet snow had wicked down the back of this neck and up his pants legs, despite the heavy orange

raincoat, boots and cap. He'd gone to Dunkin' Donuts to get a hot chocolate and a bagel, and finally driven to his spot, where he sat with the heater blasting.

He'd just settled in when a car with all its lights off sped by, going way too fast for the conditions. Cable cursed, activated his lights and siren and started to give chase, but the car was far ahead barreling toward Derby Center.

With a start, Cable remembered where he'd last seen that car.

He radioed the description ahead, so someone else could get him, then made a U-turn and went the other way. Something told him he'd better get back to the laundromat.

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James Murphy was in a state of panic. He didn't know how things had gotten so out of hand. As soon as Mom and Dad left, the guys had arrived, as pre-arranged, for a parentless night of poker. It had seemed like a great idea at the time. But then, Marco Fernandez, the total idiot, had told Felicity Feldman about the party. Felicity had four friends sleeping over, and wouldn't that be perfect? Five boys and five girls. James had protested, but the others over-ruled him. What could go wrong? These were the same girl-buddies they'd known since grade school.

So Felicity and her overnight guests had sneaked down her back stairs and out the kitchen door, while her parents entertained guests in the living room. The college students who did the serving for the caterer would never tell.

All of this would have been fine, but one of the girls in Felicity's group was in love with a guy on the football team. She called him as soon as she got to James' house, saying the coast was clear, to come over at once and bring his friends.

Since then, the news had spread all over town, and groups of kids, some whom James had never even seen before, were arriving every minute. Someone had brought a few cases of beer, but they were long gone, as was the warm Sam Adams Dad kept in the

butler's pantry. Now the kids had started on the big bottles of whiskey and rye kept in the cabinet over the stove for when his grandparents and great aunts and uncles dropped in. James prayed they wouldn't find his father's wine hidden in the cellar.

The house was a disaster. Dad's expensive sound system was blaring. James looked out at his driveway, clogged with cars, and into the street beyond, where all manner of vehicles lined the roadway, in spite of the snow emergency parking ban. Luckily, the neighbors all seemed to be out at parties of their own.

Still, James was very, very worried.

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Billy Bliss realized his mistake and turned on his headlights just after the cop peeled off in the other direction. He was grateful the cop was gone, yet sorry at the same time. During the brief chase, his heart pounded and his palms sweat in a very satisfying way.

Billy had about died when the squad car had pulled into the laundromat parking lot and stayed, and stayed. He'd already finished hacking his way through the laundromat wall into the dry-cleaners and made several careful trips into the shop, crawling on his belly to avoid the motion detectors, opening the big fur storage boxes and crawling out with one plush coat at a time. There were seven coats in all, not bad for a time of year when most people had their furs at home. Billy imagined the owners, down in Florida or off on cruises. He imagined how angry they would be when they came back and found their coats gone. Their anger made him happy.

When the cop had arrived, Billy, thinking quickly, picked up a *Boston Herald* someone had left behind, threw a rag into one of the big dryers where the cop could see it whirling, and waited. Sure enough, the cop took off. Billy finished the job, loading the

furs into the station wagon, placing them carefully in the way-back and in the back seat around the baby seat. He knew just where to fence those furs.

Billy had to get rid of the car. The old wagon had a distinct look about it and cop must have called in his plates. He pulled off Route 9 and meandered through the side streets. Up ahead was a big house, lights blazing in every window. The driveway and street were choked with cars, a wild party going on. Billy smiled. Perfect. He pulled the wagon to the side of the road where it would soon be covered in snow and headed up to the house.

All and all, a good night's work. Perhaps it hadn't been necessary to toss the lighted match into the cart full of shirts at the dry-cleaners, but he'd done that for his own pleasure.

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Frank Maloney stirred cream into his coffee. They were sitting in Friendly's, the girl and her sweet child across from him. The girl was crying. "Mister, I was going to bring the dress back. I swear I was."

Frank had followed them to the very center of the mall, where mother and daughter had disappeared into the one dollar photo booth. He heard the girl cooing, "Smile, Holly, smile." The light had flashed four times.

When they stepped out, he grabbed them. "What do you think you're doing?"

The girl looked at him, looked at his security badge and burst into noisy sobs. He steered her into Friendly's and sat her and the child in a booth. Crying all the while, she resisted his offer to pay for a meal. So he'd ordered two cups of coffee, two slices of pie and a dish of vanilla ice cream for the baby. And what a beautiful child. Blonde like her mother with curly locks and wide blue eyes. The red velvet dress brought out the roses in her cheeks.

“I would have brought the dress back,” the mom was still sobbing. “I just wanted a picture. To remember. It’s her first Christmas, She was born on New Year’s Day last year. I wanted a picture with Santa. I put the dress on layaway and paid a little at a time on it since Halloween. But then,” she hesitated, “the money got used for something else. It didn’t matter, anyway. Pictures with Santa cost \$12.50 and where was I going to get that kind of money?” She looked up at Frank to make sure he understood. “So, I thought if I came after Christmas, when the dress was back on the rack, I could take it and get a picture of Holly in it. And when she’s older, she can look at it and know her Mommy loved her enough to put her in a pretty Christmas dress and get her picture taken.”

The girl began to cry again and while Frank watched, Holly reached over and patted her mother gently on the back.

Frank thought about his new grandson in Atlanta, just three months old, laying in his mother’s lap in his green velvet Christmas romper. Frank thought about the gifts for the baby piled under the Christmas tree, from all his aunts and uncles, Frank’s own children and their spouses. Never had a child been more wanted or loved.

The Santa’s Village set up was still in the middle of the mall, waiting for the workmen to dismantle it next week.

“Let’s go,” Frank said.

The girl looked panic-stricken. “Where?”

“Back to the store.”

At Target, Frank picked out a camera, the same kind he had at home. He’d return it tomorrow. They got a Santa suit from Seasonal, black boots from Outdoors and a pillow from Bedding. Frank felt no guilt about leaving his post. There was no one around.

The girl, who was named Penny, got into the spirit of it, laughing as he held the pillows to his chest. The baby sat in the shopping cart and giggled.

“To Santa’s Village,” Frank said, leading the way. “If we’re going to do this, let’s do it properly.”

\* \* \*

Ruth hung up the phone. She’d checked in at headquarters despite Mrs. Abbott’s blandishments. Lieutenant Lawry assured her everything was fine. There’d been a burglary and a bit of a fire at the dry-cleaners on the city line. Could have been quite a conflagration, but due to some quick thinking by Officer Cable, the building had been saved.

“What did they take?” Ruth asked.

“Fur coats.”

“Some kind of animal rights thing?”

“Nah, a punk. Cable has a great description. We’ll get him.”

Other than that, Public Works was doing a good job with the snow. All the roads were passable. Most people would stay wherever they were until after midnight, anyway. She should stay at the party and have fun, Lawry said.

What Ruth really wanted was to go home. She’d done all her duty chats. Her legs ached. Her face ached from smiling and she was stone cold sober. But it would be unaccountably rude to leave before the midnight toast.

She wished she could call James. The thought of him all alone broke her heart. But he’d really hate her checking up. She’d wait and call him after midnight, using Happy New Year wishes as her excuse.

\* \* \*

Billy Bliss was beside himself. The guests were younger than he'd expected. High schoolers, he figured, the same age as his woman. It was hard for him at twenty-nine to blend into the woodwork.

And, there wasn't a drop to drink in the house, though there must have been at one time, judging by the state of the downstairs lavatory. Food was in short supply, too. The refrigerator door hung open, its interior denuded except for a few odd jars of mustard and salad dressing.

From the living room came the sounds of an escalating altercation. Evidently, someone wanted to drive home and someone else thought he was too drunk. Others joined in with opinions and there were shoving sounds followed by the crash of furniture and the tinkle of breaking glass.

Billy heard the sound of sirens in the distance. He wanted to leave, but his car was too hot. He settled in to wait it out.

\* \* \*

Cable smiled to himself as he drove back to headquarters. He felt stupid for having missed the burglary in the first place, but happy he'd gotten back to the dry-cleaners in time to prevent a worse fire. Without accelerant, it had taken awhile for the shirts to get really going, but the Fire Chief had said if they'd arrived later, the whole place would have gone up.

More than anything, Cable was feeling grateful to Lieutenant Lawry who had relieved him at the fire scene in plenty of time to get his report written and be out to party with his girl at midnight. Lawry had a soft spot for the uniforms who worked the holidays.

Cable was almost to headquarters when his radio squawked. Change of plan. Some kind of wild party and altercation at a house in Derby Center. There were two cars

already there, but they were requesting back up. Lawry himself was going over for some reason.

Cable radioed he was in the area and requested the address. “What?” he said, not trusting his ears. “Can you give that to me again?”

\* \* \*

Ruth’s reaction was the same as any parent’s if they’d approached their house and seen the street blocked by four patrol cars with their blue lights blazing. Sheer terror.

She and Marty abandoned their car a block away and ran the rest of the way to the house. Lieutenant Lawry met them on the porch. “Everyone’s fine,” were the first words out of this mouth. Instantaneously, Ruth’s terror turned to rage.

“What the hell is going on here?” she demanded.

“Just a little party that got out of hand,” Lawry reassured. “We’re calling parents now. Anyone whose parents can’t be reached will get a ride home in a squad car. We’ll tow any vehicle that isn’t driven away to the municipal lot. Everything is fine. It’ll take a little time to sort it out, though.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant.” Ruth felt enormously grateful. She stood on her porch at a loss for further words, looking off into the distance. Her neighbors’ windows were dark, no cars in the driveways. “Who called it in, anyway?” she asked.

“I did.” A doleful James stepped out from behind Lawry. “I didn’t know what else to do.”

Ruth stared at James. “You’ve got an awful lot of explaining to do.”

“Hey! You! Stop right there!”

Ruth turned to see Cable take off across the snowy lawn, chasing someone who’d just run out the side door of her house.

“Stop’em! Stop’em! Stop’em,” Cable yelled. “Its my laundromat guy!”

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Frank Maloney helped the night manager close up. They turned off the lights, locked the doors and set the alarms. Frank walked the perimeter, inside, outside and mallside. His car, covered with snow, was the last one left in the employee parking lot.

When he drove around to the front of the building, they were still there— Penny, and the baby named Holly for the season of her birth. The snow had stopped and the temperature was falling rapidly. Little Holly didn't even have a snowsuit. Penny had wrapped her in a blanket and zipped her in her own parka like a papoose.

Frank slowed his car and rolled down the window.

“He was supposed to come for me.” Penny was clearly worried. “He was supposed to meet me right here. I was a little late, you know, because of the photo. Maybe he got pissed and drove away.”

“C'mon,” Frank said. “I'll give you a ride home.”

Penny shook her head. “If he's mad, I don't want to go home.”

Frank thought about his Cape Cod house on the dead end street with the two big bedrooms on the second floor in addition to his own room on the first. He and Irene had bought it specifically because it was so great for children. There were no children in it now, and no Irene. Sometimes he thought the sound of his own pattering would drive him crazy.

“Get in,” he said. And then, when she looked uncertain, more gently, “I won't hurt you. I have an idea.”

\* \* \*

Penny stepped off the curb and got into the car. Holly was asleep against her chest and they drove in silence through the snowy streets past the big houses twinkling with Christmas lights and party guests in the windows and all the snowed in cars.

If Penny noticed, when they passed a certain house, the familiar silhouette of an old station wagon being pulled out of the snow by a police department wrecker, she never mentioned it to Frank.