The Five Stages of Christmas

A larp for ten people, lasting about four hours. Original idea by Anne Marchadier and Gaspard Breny. Designed by Anne Marchadier and Mo Holkar. Thanks to Karolina Soltys for some great feedback on the script!

Introduction

Every year, in Littleton, USA, the Ritchie family hold their grand Christmas charity fundraiser gala party. It's the hottest ticket in town, as the foundation has done so much good here – and this year's event is extra special, because it will include the engagement announcement of the heir to the Ritchie fortune!

But this larp is not about the gala party – it's about what might happen beforehand, during the setup. Five potential couples are present – each will, one way or another, find their happy ending. But, in the true tradition of a Christmas romcom movie, there will be misunderstandings, breakups, revelations, and general miscellaneous shenanigans along the way!

We will play through five different ways that the movie could go. In each version, a different couple are the heroes of the romcom – the other eight roles are supporting, more like NPCs, there to aid / thwart / interfere / disapprove / etc. The intended playstyle is romcom: high emotion, high drama, leaning into plotlines that don't really make sense, steering towards an eventual happy ending.

You will laugh, you will cry, you will kiss in the (artificial) snow – as you come to understand the true meaning of charity, of Christmas, and of love.

What you need for this larp

The Five Stages of Christmas is for exactly ten participants, and one or more facilitators. If you're a person short, then one of the ten participants can facilitate, rather than having someone separate: but we don't really recommend that, as there's a lot to keep track of.

It plays in one big room. If your room includes a kitchen area, dining table and chairs, and a seating area available, then that's ideal: but otherwise you can just work with what you have.

It takes about 4 hours in total. There are plenty of breaks for bathroom etc.

You will need props for the five activities that are to be carried out during the larp. This is what we use for each of them: but do adapt it according to what's going to be possible for you.

1. A Christmas tree, and decorations for it
2. Pens and paper
3. Two sheets of readymade pastry, Christmas-themed cookie cutters, and coloured icing to pipe over the cut shapes
4. Printouts of Christmas-themed paintings found on the web, a mixture of sentimental traditional scenes and kids' drawings
5. Placemats, cutlery, decorative napkins, candles, a table runner, and other miscellanea for laying the table

You will need sticky labels (or masking tape) and marker pens, so that people can write their name badges.

You will need a device for playing music. And the 25-minute soundtrack in MP3 format https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/82qgmqfpalo5ipkh5bz37/Five_Stages_montage.mp3?rlkey=0g418van0s0mmdx3rpncrgue8&st=bib325op&dl=0 (or, put your own soundtrack together, if you prefer. And either a handbell, or a recording of a peal of church bells.

Briefing and workshop

Safety

Tell the participants that **'The Door is Open'** – they can leave the larp whenever they wish, they don't need to stay if they aren't enjoying it, aren't comfortable, etc.

Say that they should use the word **'Offgame'** to pause or stop the larp, if for any reason they need to. When someone says 'Offgame', play should stop at once, and whatever the person needs should be attended to.

This is not a very physical larp. If fighting is required, use stage punch, slap, kick techniques. There should be no intimacy beyond kissing, involving at most one other person – you will have the chance to agree with them how you want to represent that.

The larp

Start by explaining the basic structure of the larp to the participants, as follows:

- In this larp, you will be playing out five Christmas romcom movies in succession.
    - The same ten characters feature in all five movies, and each of you will always be playing the same character.
    - In one of the movies, your character will be one of the two romantic leads.
    - In the other four movies, your character will be in more of a supporting role.
    - All five movies have the same basic setting – the preparation of the Ritchie family's Christmas charity fundraiser party.
    - But they might have quite different storylines, depending on how you together play them out.

(Check if people are familiar with Christmas romcom movies. If not, explain how they work.)

- Each of the ten characters has a core backstory that is always true for them, and then a separate briefing for what they are personally doing in each of the five movies.

Get people to each choose one of the ten characters, based on reading the character backgrounds (pages 7–11). Each character has been given an initial and a set of a few possible forenames of different genders, suitable for the US romcom setting: and also it says which one of the other characters they are romantically paired with. Explain that they can each choose what gender and what romantic/sexual orientation their character is – but they have to be romantically compatible as a couple, so they should agree that together with the person who has chosen the character that's paired with theirs.

People should choose names for their characters that have the appropriate initial, and write them and their pronouns on sticky labels / masking tape. They should also write their role (the Heir, etc), so people can easily see who is who.

Go around the group, with each person saying who their character is and what their pronouns are, so that it has a chance to start sticking in people's minds.

Explain the structure of the larp in more detail:

- Each of the five movies will last about 25 minutes of play, although that represents several hours of actual time passing within the fiction.
    - These 25 minutes are divided into five stages – the same five stages for each movie – which trace out a narrative arc that your characters will follow.
    - Each movie has the same soundtrack of background music – a sequence of five songs of around five minutes each.
    - The transitions between the five stages of the movie is signalled by the changes of song.
    - Give each of them a printout of the explanation of the five stages (on pages 38–39), and some time to read it. Say that they can also refer back to this during the larp, they don't need to memorize it – they should just aim for now to understand the idea of how the story will progress.
- Each movie is themed around an activity that's part of preparing for the Ritchie family's upcoming charity gala party.
    - It is expected that, in each movie, the core couple – the ones who are getting together in this movie – will lead the activity.
    - But, this does not mean they will do it all themselves – they can delegate, others can offer to help, others can get in the way, etc.
    - The main thing is that it is the core couple who are taking the decisions.
    - But, although it's 'about' the core couple, all the other characters should also be doing stuff and existing and behaving according to their own storylines – they are supporting roles, not spectators. The exception is that they do spectate the couple's initial 'meet-cute', which happens as the introduction to the first stage of each movie.
- The game reality resets, and time rewinds, between each movie – they are not sequential to each other. They are five alternate versions of the same day.
    - There are two exceptions to this resetting/rewinding. One is that, for practical reasons, the decorating of the house, etc, that they will be doing during each movie, persists and accumulates over the five movies – they don't need to undo it each time. So, for example, the Christmas tree is decorated during the first movie: and it then starts each subsequent movie as being already decorated.

    - The other exception is that couples who get together in movies that are earlier in the larp have the option of being together in the movies that come later, if they wish – rather than going back to being separate. This is because it might feel a bit weird otherwise. The exception to the exception is The Intended and The Caterer – they have to go back to being separate each time, so that the storyline of the impending wedding remains relevant.
- Before each movie starts, there will be time for you to check what your character is doing in it, and to calibrate their relationships together the other participants.

The five movies and their lead roles

Show the participants 'The five movies' (page 37), and talk them through it if they need help understanding. Tell them that again they don't need to remember any of this, it will be on display throughout the larp. But this will give them an early view of when their character's focus movie is going to happen.

Calibration session

Before each movie (including the first) you should go through these steps together.

Give each participant their individual briefing for this movie (pages 12–36). Give them a minute to read them. (You might want to print the briefings for the five movies on five different colours of paper, so people can easily tell them apart.)

Explain what the activity for this movie is going to be, and make available the supplies for it (tree decorations, etc).

Ask if the couples from each of the previous movies want to be together in this one, or to start from being apart again. (Except The Intended and The Caterer – they have to be apart again.)

Starting with the focus couple, get each of them to tell the others what their role is in this movie. (They should just summarize it in a sentence, not read out the whole thing.)

Then give everyone some time to discuss their key relationships in this movie with each other: who they are to each other, and how it might play out. The focus couple should to calibrate how they want to physically

represent their romance, including a kissing technique if required: and should plan out their meet-cute.

Explain the meet-cute to them like this. Each movie starts with just the two core characters, having their initial encounter – while this happens, the other eight participants are waiting elsewhere and watching. They can meet in the regular location of the setting (the Ritchie mansion), perhaps when one of them arrives to set up the party and the other answers the door to them, etc: or, if they want the meeting to take place somewhere else (eg. a nearby coffeeshop earlier that day) then they can represent it in imagination like a black box in one corner of the space. And then after the meet-cute, they join the other characters, to move on with the rest of the first stage. They should make sure that the meet-cute only lasts a couple of minutes at the most, so it doesn't take up too much of the time for the first stage.

When they're ready, you can start.

Running the larp

Start the movie by playing the soundtrack.

During play, the musical transitions should be enough to prompt shifting between the five stages – but depending on your audio setup, people might not always hear, and you might need to call out 'Stage 4, the big betrayal!' etc as appropriate. Or you could clap a clapperboard, or simulate one, perhaps. (You might also need to remind the core couple to wrap up their meet-cute and join the others, if it's going on more than a couple of minutes.)

You should also have, as a printed prompt on the wall somewhere, the 'Summary of the five stages' (page 40).

Licence



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. This means that you can share it and adapt it as you wish, without charge and without needing to ask permission. But, you may not use it in commercial work; you must apply this same licence to anything that you create with it; and you must credit Anne Marchadier and Mo Holkar as the authors.

A_____, The P.I.

Paired with C_____, the Ex

Suggested names: Andrea, Anthony, Allan, Astrid, Acinth, etc

You work as a private investigator, mostly in the big city, but occasionally you've had cases out here in Littleton. It's a charming place, and maybe you'd like to settle here one day. You are quite cynical – you've learnt, through your work, that even the most respected and admired people can have dark secrets. Perhaps this is what has prevented you from finding true love (so far!)

C_____, The Ex

Paired with A_____, The P.I.

Suggested names: Christina, Charles, Carver, Carrie, Conway, etc

You were in a relationship with **S_____, The Intended,** when you were both a bit younger – but it didn't work out. S_____ is from a long-established wealthy family, while your own family are poorer. You always felt awkward, and not accepted by them. Perhaps S_____ is better off with **T_____, The Heir,** who is from a similar background. But even so, you are quite hurt and resentful about the whole thing. You work as a supervisor in the kindergarten that is funded by the Ritchie family charity, which will be benefiting from the gala – and you are planning to start up a pet grooming salon, to work at alongside that.

D_____, The Old Flame

Paired with O_____, The Pastrychef

Suggested names: Dennis, Dorothy, Delia, Darwin, Darcy, etc

You came to Littleton as a young adult, when you qualified as a vet, to work at healing the town's animals. Straight away **T_____, The Heir** fell for you – and you were quite receptive to their attention. But, it was clear that the Ritchie family wanted their heir to marry **S_____, The Intended.** So you didn't really give very serious consideration to a relationship with T_____. In fact, in general, you've not been good at making plans for your own happiness – you've just drifted from situation to situation, making the best of circumstances. Maybe now is the time to try to take control of your life, and get something for yourself?

E_____, The Old Retainer

Paired with V_____, The Head of the Family

Suggested names: Edward, Elisabeth, Edmund, Enora, Eric, etc

You have been working for the Ritchie family all your adult life. Their interests are your interests, and their trust has made you quite a formidable individual in town, wielding a power nobody born in your condition could dream of. Now that **T_____, The Heir**, is about to get engaged, what will that mean for you and your future? Is there a you that would not be a Ritchie?

O_____, The Pastrychef

Paired with D_____, The Old Flame

Suggested names: Oliver, Olivia, Ophelia, Oscar, Ornella etc

Behind your friendly smile, there is a steely perfectionism. **S_____ The Intended** is your best friend, and that is why you got the most prestigious gig in town, but that is also why you simply cannot – and will not – fail. Tonight is their engagement, and your future. Maybe it will also be an opportunity to demonstrate to **V_____ The Head of the Family**, who treated you like one of their own when you were younger, that you have grown and are no longer a lost teenager, and that you can repay your debt to them.

P_____, The Photographer

Paired with S_____, The Intended

Suggested names: Percy, Pam, Paul, Priscilla, etc

You are from a ruined branch of the Ritchie family who live in a different part of town, and a cousin of **T_____, The Heir**. This is how they thought of you to photograph this year's gala, though you do not know about their upcoming engagement. You are a manic pixie dream person, creative and fun, but your family name is a burden and your financial situation makes it difficult to be an equal in this crowd. But tonight you want to become one of them, and show them you are a true artist.

R_____, The Caterer

Paired with T_____, The Heir

Suggested names: Richard, Rowena, Riva, Russell, Randy, etc

You are from the big city, where you grew up in a tough environment. Your friend **S_____, The Intended,** was always talking about how nice their home town Littleton was, and so you decided to come here and set up a catering business. So far, it's been disastrous. A few wealthy families control the whole social scene, and unless you have some way of getting in with them, you have no chance of finding valuable catering contracts. You are considering giving it all up, and moving back to the city in disgrace.

S_____, The Intended

Paired with P_____, The Photographer

Suggested names: Selina, Simon, Suzanne, Sawyer, Sorrel, etc

You are from a long-established family who live in the neighbourhood, who are old friends (and sometimes rivals) of the Ritchie family. It is generally believed that your family are also wealthy – but actually, they are in considerable financial difficulty. It is expected by everyone that tonight you will be formally engaged to marry **T_____, The Heir** – you have been marked out for each other since childhood, and have been dating in a low-key way for the last year or so. (You did interrupt this plan, to have a relationship with **C_____, The Ex.** But it didn't work out, because your family needed you to complete the plan of marrying into the wealthy Ritchies – and now you and C_____ are not on good terms with each other.)

T_____, The Heir

Paired with R_____, The Caterer

Suggested names: Teresa, Thomas, Travis, Tawny, Taylor, etc

You are the heir to the Ritchie family, the wealthiest and most generous in the district – it's a big responsibility, that you don't really feel ready for. Hopefully **V_____, The Head of the Family,** will carry on running things for a long time yet! But you know that you need to at least start helping out with the administration of the family charity. You also need to marry **S_____, The Intended** – that has been the plan of your and their families since a long time back. It's for that reason that you could never get together with **D_____, The Old Flame** – although you very much wanted to.

V_____, The Head of the Family

Paired with E_____, The Old Retainer

Suggested names: Victor, Veronica, Vivian, Valentino, Vanessa, etc

You are the head of the Ritchie family, and have been holding these Christmas charity auctions for over 25 years now, to help poorer children through college and to fund a local kindergarten. Since you lost your partner, 12 years ago, it is also an opportunity to expose your art – although you never admitted to being the painter to anyone. Only **E_____ The Old Retainer** knows about this. They have been kindly trying to distract you from a life of duty to the family, the estate and your children. What if, this Christmas, you could think of yourself for a change?

A_____, The P.I.

Movie 1 – Deck the Halls for Christmas

You are actually in town this weekend to catch up with **P_____, The Photographer,** who owes you a load of money for an investigation you carried out into the ruin of their family's finances. During the course of this movie they will get together with **S_____, The Intended.** But maybe you should make sure to get your money from P_____ before that happens – threatening to expose them to S_____ as being financially unreliable could be good leverage.

C_____, The Ex

Movie 1 – Deck the Halls for Christmas

During this movie, S_____ is supposed to be getting engaged to T_____, but will instead be forming a new relationship with **P_____, The Photographer.** You feel a personal enmity towards S_____, which might manifest at first as trying to thwart their happiness with T_____, and then switch to trying to thwart their happiness with P_____ when you learn about that – although, by the end of the movie, you will have to lay aside your bad feelings, of course.

D_____, The Old Flame

Movie 1 – Deck the Halls for Christmas

During the course of this movie, **S_____, The Intended** will break up with T_____, and will instead start a relationship with **P_____, The Photographer.** You are very much against this, and want the new romance to fail. It was because of S_____ that you couldn't be with T_____ yourself – so that sacrifice would be for nothing, if S_____ is now going to walk away from their obligation. (Although, of course, by the end of the movie you will have come to accept that true love must prevail.)

E_____, The Old Retainer

Movie 1 – Deck the Halls for Christmas

During the course of this movie, **S_____ The Intended** will break up with **T_____, The Heir** and will instead start a relationship with **P_____, The Photographer.** Although this ruins a perfectly-laid plan for the alliance of the two families, you find solace in being happy for T_____ to have a chance at true happiness with someone who actually wants them. However, you are concerned for P_____, a cousin from a poor branch of the Ritchie family who you've known all their life. You care about P_____, and you fear that the (evidently) flighty and unreliable S_____ will go on to hurt and disappoint them.

O_____, The Pastrychef

Movie 1 – Deck the Halls for Christmas

You are the best friend of **S_____, The Intended** – they share all their thoughts, hopes, and fears with you. They will be experiencing a rollercoaster evening from acknowledging that T_____, The Heir is not their true love, and falling for **P_____ The Photographer**, instead. You will be there to support them, despite your strong belief that P_____ is the one responsible for the breakup between S_____ and C____. But that was a long time ago.

P_____, The Photographer

YOUR FOCUS MOVIE – Movie 1 – Deck the Halls for Christmas

During the course of it, you will fall for **S_____, The Intended**, realising only too late they are engaged to your cousin, **T_____, The Heir.** Can you ever be together with S_____? (Yes.)

During this movie, the following characters have these relationships with you:

- **A_____, The PI** wants you to pay them the money that you owe them for investigating into the ruin of your family's finances – you don't have the money, and you see no easy way of getting it
- **E_____, The Old Retainer** doesn't want you to be hurt by the (evidently) flighty and unreliable S_____
- **O_____, The Pastrychef** believes that you were responsible for breaking up S_____ and C_____, and so mistrusts you
- **T_____, The Heir** is your beloved cousin – and a good friend – but really doesn't understand you

R_____, The Caterer

Movie 1 – Deck the Halls for Christmas

During the course of this movie, your friend **S_____, The Intended,** will break off their planned engagement to T_____, The Heir, and will instead start a relationship with **P_____, The Photographer.** You love S_____ and want them to be happy, and you're grateful that they persuaded the Ritchies to hire you for this event – but you have a horrible feeling that your clumsiness and your general bad luck will somehow mess things up, for you and for S_____.

S_____, The Intended

YOUR FOCUS MOVIE – Movie 1 – Deck the Halls for Christmas

During the course of this movie, you will break up with T_____, and will instead start a new and true relationship with **P_____, The Photographer.**

During this movie, the following characters have these relationships with you:

- **C_____, The Ex** is your personal enemy, resentful that you split up with them
- **D_____, The Old Flame** wants your new romance to fail – as they had to let go of T_____ so that you could marry them, they don't want to see you now weasel out of doing so
- **R_____, The Caterer** is your hapless best friend – it's because of you that they came to Littleton and set up their catering business, but it's been a disaster. You've had them hired for today's event, which would be their first big contract with one of the wealthy Littleton families – but you fear it's somehow going to go wrong
- **V_____, The Head of the Family** wants your new romance to succeed

T_____, The Heir

Movie 1 – Deck the Halls for Christmas

Your poorer cousin **P_____, The Photographer** has been going through a tough time recently, so you hired them to photograph the charity gala. You will be completely surprised and dumbfounded when they start up a romance with **S_____, The Intended** – you thought they had no interest in such things. And it seems particularly unlike them, considering that S_____ is supposed to be getting engaged to you. Perhaps they are on drugs, or sick in the brain, or something? They are still your cousin, despite everything, though.

V_____, The Head of the Family

Movie 1 – Deck the Halls for Christmas

Over the course of this movie, you will come to understand that **T_____, The Heir**, and **S_____, The Intended**, are victims, just as you have always been, of family expectations. If/when you see S_____'s relationship with **P_____, The Photographer** (who is from a poorer, junior branch of your family) develop, you will support them – as we all deserve a chance at happiness, even your useless offspring T_____ !

A_____, The P.I.

YOUR FOCUS MOVIE – Movie 2 – A Christmas Carol with You

In this movie you will be forming a relationship with **C_____, The Ex** (who used to date **S_____, The Intended).** They hired you to find out if there's some sort of scandal that might prevent the marriage of S_____ and **T_____, The Heir.** But what starts as a client relationship becomes something rather different.

During this movie, the following characters have these relationships with you:

- **D_____, The Old Flame** is your friend, but thinks that you are immune to love – they believe that you must be here on a case, and that you're just posing as C_____'s lover in order to pursue the investigation
- **E_____, The Old Retainer** detests you because you have been digging into the affairs of the Ritchie family
- **R_____, The Caterer** is an alarming presence, because back in the city you once found out that they are active in organized crime – what are they doing in Littleton? Are they maybe planning to rub you out?
- **S_____, The Intended** has doubts about the relationship – partly because C_____ is their ex – but also because you once did some investigative work for S_____'s family, so they know how sneaky and devious you can be

C_____, The Ex

YOUR FOCUS MOVIE – Movie 2 – A Christmas Carol with You

During the course of this movie, you will form a romance with **A_____, The P.I.** You have hired them to find out if there's some sort of scandal that might prevent the marriage of S_____ and T_____. But what starts as a client relationship becomes something rather different.

During this movie, the following characters have these relationships with you:

- **O_____, The Pastrychef** is your best friend from college, when you were always up to no good together – it was they who introduced you to S_____ – but they are terribly klutzy and unfortunate
- **P_____, The Photographer** is, for their own mysterious reasons, keen to encourage your relationship with A_____
- **T_____, The Heir** is planning to make a big investment in your pet grooming salon. That will be jeopardized – and your finances potentially ruined – if you somehow mess things up and antagonize T_____.
- **V_____, The Head of the Family** feels that A_____ is wrong for you and you'll end up being hurt

D_____, The Old Flame

Movie 2 – A Christmas Carol with You

You are a friend of **A_____, The P.I.,** and were surprised to see them here in Littleton – they must be pursuing some kind of investigation. They are so dedicated – they work hard, and have no time for any kind of love life, or interest in such a thing. During this movie, A_____ will be forming a relationship with **C_____, The Ex** – but it's obvious to you that it's not for real – they are just faking it for the sake of gaining trust and gathering clues, or something like that. You will be happy to help with their investigation, although it does seem a bit mean to be misleading C_____ like this.

E_____, The Old Retainer

Movie 2 – A Christmas Carol with You

You know that **A_____, The P.I.** has been digging into the Ritchies' affairs to find some dirt, and although you have not confronted them about it, you will never forgive them for that. Now they have breezed back into town, and will be forming a relationship with **C_____, The Ex**. So long as they stay well away…

O_____, The Pastrychef

Movie 2 – A Christmas Carol with You

C_____, The Ex is your best friend and has been so since college, when you were up to no good together. You were the one who introduced them and S_____ originally. You've always blamed P____ for their breakup, but you managed to stay good friends with both of them. If/when you see them falling for **A_____, The PI**, you will want to support them. And because you are rather hapless, you will keep interfering and accidentally messing things up for them, or getting into trouble/embarrassments that they need to rescue you from.

P_____, The Photographer

Movie 2 – A Christmas Carol with You

You know that **S_____, The Intended** used to be with **C_____, The Ex**. You want C_____ to find someone new, and would be happy if they could distract **A_____, the PI** from chasing the money that you owe them. Come to think of it, they would be rather lovely together… Could a few pictures of them together make them understand that?

R_____, The Caterer

Movie 2 – A Christmas Carol with You

You are concerned to see **A_____, The P.I.** here in Littleton – who, during this movie, will be forming a relationship with **C_____, The Ex.** Back in the city a few years ago, there was a terrible mixup where you were mistaken for someone of the same name who was involved in organized crime. A_____ was part of that investigation, and you think that they still have this false impression of you.

S_____, The Intended

Movie 2 – A Christmas Carol with You

You have an old acquaintance with **A_____, The P.I.** – they once did some investigative work for your family, and you got to know each other. Now they have breezed back into town, and will be forming a relationship with **C_____, The Ex.** You doubt if this is a real connection – it may be that C_____ is just doing this to get back at you somehow. While perhaps A_____ is playing some sort of mind game – that would be just like them. Or even pretending the relationship altogether, as part of an investigation into some kind of shenanigans!

T_____, The Heir

Movie 2 – A Christmas Carol with You

C_____, The Ex (they briefly dated S_____) is from one of the poorer families around town, but they are honest and hard-working, as far as you know. They are starting up a pet grooming salon, and you agreed to make an investment – even though it seems rather a risky proposition. During this movie, C_____ will form a relationship with **A_____, The P.I.** – you will want to make sure that this doesn't jeopardize the venture. If it seems like C_____ is getting distracted from the pet-salon plans, you might need to withdraw your offer of investment – which would probably cause the project to fail.

V_____, The Head of the Family

Movie 2 – A Christmas Carol with You

You have always been close to **C_____, The Ex**, sharing a taste in arts (they like your paintings, even though they don't know it's you), and admiring their work at the kindergarten. You distrust **A_____, The P.I.** and their motives, and you want to spare your friend the inevitable hurt and disappointment. If you can thwart their blooming romance, you will not hesitate.

A_____, The P.I.

Movie 3 – The Sweetest Christmas

You have been friends with **D_____, The Old Flame** for a while – during this movie they will be getting together with. **O_____, The Pastrychef.** You believe, though, that D_____ is actually secretly already married, to **T_____, The Heir** (this is because you misunderstood something that D_____ once said). Rather than embarrass your friend by talking about it openly, you will need to come up with a way to resolve the situation subtly.

C_____, The Ex

Movie 3 – The Sweetest Christmas

During this movie, **D_____, The Old Flame** (a former love interest of T_____'s) will be forming a new romance with **O_____, The Pastrychef.** You are in favour of this – you like O_____, and you think that D_____ also deserves happiness, as it's been such a while since the sad end of their relationship with T_____. You will do what you can to help this relationship succeed.

D_____, The Old Flame

YOUR FOCUS MOVIE – Movie 3 – The Sweetest Christmas

During the course of this movie, you will be meeting and getting together with **O_____, The Pastrychef,** who has a small and not very successful business in Littleton, and who is providing patisserie for the Ritchie charity gala.

During this movie, the following characters have these relationships with you:

- **A_____, The P.I.** unknown to you believes, because of misunderstanding something that you once said, that you are actually already secretly married to T_____
- **E_____, The Old Retainer** once offered you a large sum of money to drop your interest in T_____, for the sake of the Ritchie family – you refused, of course, partly because it felt insulting, but partly also because you weren't sure if you were really serious about T_____ anyway so it might have felt dishonest to accept
- **P_____, The Photographer** was at high school with you, they were a nerdy and unpopular kid – clearly they haven't changed much, as they seem to be holding some sort of ridiculous grudge against you
- **R_____, The Caterer,** who you have hired for business in the past, thinks that O_____ is only after you for your money and contacts, and that they don't really love you at all

O_____, The Pastrychef

YOUR FOCUS MOVIE – Movie 3 – The Sweetest Christmas

During the course of this movie, you will meet and fall in love with **D_____, The Old Flame**. Meanwhile, **T_____ The Heir,** is not ready for D_____ to move on, and will do whatever they can to thwart your blooming love, whereas **C_____ The Ex** will support and encourage your romance. But can you allow love to get in the way of your most important night?

During this movie, the following characters have these relationships with you:

- **S_____, The Intended** is your hapless best friend, who will try to help but probably will end up creating chaos as usual
- **C_____, The Ex** wants your relationship to succeed
- **V_____, The Head of the Family** is almost like a parent to you, but really doesn't understand what would be best for you and how to help
- **T_____, The Heir** wants your new relationship to fail

R_____, The Caterer

Movie 3 – The Sweetest Christmas

One of the few people in LIttleton who has actually given you catering business is **D_____, The Old Flame** – who during this movie will be getting together with **O_____, The Pastrychef.** You are suspicious, though – you think that O_____ is only after D_____ for their money and contacts, to get more business for their patisserie. You would never stoop to such disgraceful deception! You don't have any evidence, but you will be on the lookout for it, and won't hesitate to present to D_____ anything that casts O_____ in a bad light.

E_____, The Old Retainer

Movie 3 – The Sweetest Christmas

You have known **D_____, The Old Flame** for a long time, ever since they started frying to get into T_____'s pants and were regular visitors to the family home. You always thought they were very poorly suited to T_____, and that S_____ was a much better match -and also, you like S_____ a lot! At some point, you even offered D_____ a large sum of money to go away, which they refused. During this movie, D_____ will be getting together with **O_____, The Pastrychef.**

P_____, The Photographer

Movie 3 – The Sweetest Christmas

D_____, The Old Flame, had such a superior attitude in high school, and really looked down on you – it was miserable times for you. If you catch wind of their growing interest for **O_____, The Pastrychef**, maybe it would be a good time to serve a dish best served cold. What if they have changed, is that really your problem? They have never apologised. You will expose them for the brute they are and ruin their chance at happiness.

S_____, The Intended

Movie 3 – The Sweetest Christmas

O_____, The Pastrychef, is your best friend – you share all your thoughts, hopes, and fears together. (It was you who insisted that they were hired to provide the patisserie for this gala party.) They will be experiencing a rollercoaster romance with **D_____, The Old Flame** (a former partner of T_____'s). You will be there to support them throughout this journey – but because you are rather hapless, you will keep interfering and accidentally messing things up for them, or getting into trouble / embarrassments that they need to rescue you from.

T_____, The Heir

Movie 3 – The Sweetest Christmas

In this movie, **D_____, The Old Flame** will be getting together with **O_____, The Pastrychef.** You find this prospect unbearable – you still have a crush on D_____, 'the one that got away'. And even though you can't be with them yourself, you don't want someone else to be enjoying them instead! It's shamefully selfish, but you can't help it – it's human nature, after all. You really want this relationship to fail, and will do what you can to make it so (although, of course, by the end of the movie you will have to have come around to the idea).

V_____, The Head of the Family

Movie 3 – The Sweetest Christmas

O_____, The Pastrychef, has always been like one of your own children, even if they were on the more challenging side of the experience. And you have a very clear picture of who they are, what they like, and what will be right for them (or not). However much you love them, starting this business was a bit of a folly, and you feel guilty for encouraging them in lending them the money to do so. Well, you will be here when they inevitably fail, poor them. During the course of this movie, they will form a relationship with **D_____, The Old Flame**.

A_____, The P.I.

Movie 4 – A Picture of Christmas

You know that **E_____, The Old Retainer,** has a low opinion of you – and it's mutual. They give themselves such airs, when after all they are only a servant really – no better than you, who is at least a skilled professional. You hope that their romance with **V_____, The Head of the Family** fails, and will do what you can to thwart it. (Although, of course, you will have to come round to accept and enjoy the happy ending, by the end of the movie.)

C_____, The Ex

Movie 4 – A Picture of Christmas

You have known **V_____, The Head of the (Ritchie) Family,** all your life, as a do-er of good works around the town. Since becoming an adult and now working together with V_____ at the kindergarten that they fund, you have been genuinely good friends – despite the difference in your families' status. You would love to see them get together with **E_____, The Old Retainer.** But you can be such a klutz at times – you will no doubt make some terrible error, or do something clumsy or embarrassing, that means that V_____ has to rescue you somehow.

D_____, The Old Flame

Movie 4 – A Picture of Christmas

You've been wondering about the large sum of money that **E_____, The Old Retainer,** offered you, back when you were considering romance with T_____. They are just a servant really – where could they get such a sum from? You've realized that they must have embezzled it from their employers, the Ritchie family. And probably not the only such defalcation – because now they are conducting a romance with **V_____, The Head of the Family,** which must be so as to more easily cover up the holes in the accounts!

E_____, The Old Retainer

YOUR FOCUS MOVIE – Movie 4 – A Picture of Christmas

You have known **V_____, The Head of the Family,** all your adult life. First as a mere servant, then, particularly since the death of their partner, as a friend and confidant. You admire them for so many reasons, from their dedication to keeping the family together and thriving on their own, to their secret artistic talent!

- **R_____, The Caterer,** is a kind soul who will support you in understanding your feelings for V_____ .
- **A_____, The P.I.** wants your relationship to fail, because they detest your gracious manner
- **D_____, The Old Flame** thinks that you are only getting together with V_____ in order to cover up financial irregularities
- **S_____, The Intended** is well-intentioned and fond of you, but they think you want to retire and get some rest: they really don't understand you, or what you want and need

O_____, The Pastrychef

Movie 4 – A Picture of Christmas

You have known **V_____, The Head of the Family,** as long as you can remember – they have just always been around for you, treating you like one of their own, despite your constant trouble. Tonight is the opportunity to prove that they were right to believe in you, and to lend you the money with which you started your business. Will you be able to accept that they move on from being a caretaker to having a life of their own, and a chance of happiness with **E_____ The Old Retainer**?

P_____, The Photographer

Movie 4 – A Picture of Christmas

V_____, The Head of the Family, is responsible for your parents' disgrace. They could have helped, but they didn't: which ended up with your parents losing everything, and you now having to fit so uncomfortably in this world where you should really just belong. It would take a proper confrontation with them to understand that, maybe, the blame wasn't all on them, and that perhaps they even tried to help as much as they could. During this movie they will get together with **E_____, The Old Retainer.**

R_____, The Caterer

Movie 4 – A Picture of Christmas

E_____, The Old Retainer, is the one associate of the Ritchie family with whom you have truly bonded – they are from the city originally too, and came out to Littleton long ago. They've spent their life working for the family, and it would be so nice if they could get together with **V_____, The Head of the Family.** It's clear that they have feelings in that direction, but perhaps it needs your help to get them to understand, acknowledge, and express them?

S_____, The Intended

Movie 4 – A Picture of Christmas

You have known **E_____, The Old Retainer,** as long as you've been alive – they have just always been around. And you have a very clear picture of who they are, what they like, and what will be right for them. Unfortunately, it is mostly inaccurate – you think they want to retire and get some rest at last. You will advise and help them as to what is best for them in their romance with **V_____, The Head of the Family,** but your lack of understanding will do more harm than good.

T_____, The Heir

Movie 4 – A Picture of Christmas

You have come to really resent **V_____, The Head of the Family,** since they made it clear that you are next in line. It's been a painful and toxic mix of suddenly pushing unexpected responsibility onto you, while denying you the authority to make meaningful decisions. Of course, family duty is family duty, and you have to do what you have to do. But you still would like to make them suffer a bit, if the opportunity came up. During this movie they will be getting together with **E_____, The Old Retainer** (who has worked for your family for decades) – perhaps that might provide a way to hurt V_____, and to make them understand how badly they are treating you.

V_____, The Head of the Family

YOUR FOCUS MOVIE – Movie 4 – A Picture of Christmas

You have known **E_____, The Old Retainer,** forever. In good and bad days, at marriages and funerals, they have always stood by your side. Now that **T_____, The Heir,** is about to get engaged, it is time to retire from the life of duty that you have lived, and who knows, maybe devote more time to your art?

During this movie, the following characters have these relationships with you:

- **P_____, The Photographer** feels that you are responsible for the ruin of their family
- **C_____, The Ex** is your friend who wishes you well, but they are rather hapless
- **O_____, The Pastrychef** owes you money, and you think that their business is doomed to failure
- **T_____, The Heir** is the living incarnation of your failure

A_____, The P.I.

Movie 5 – A Christmas Arrangement

You have had plenty of time to observe **T_____, The Heir,** while here in Littleton, and to form an opinion of their character – and to get to like them, and wish them well. So you are pretty sure that their romance with **R_____, The Caterer,** which will happen during this movie, is not a solid one. T_____ is clearly just flailing around with nerves about their impending and long-planned nuptials with S_____, and hopping into another relationship seems likely to be disastrous for all parties. You need to help them away from this wrong path. (Although, by the end of the movie, you will of course accept that true love must prevail.)

C_____, The Ex

Movie 5 – A Christmas Arrangement

R_____, The Caterer, is a friend of S_____'s from the city originally, but has become a friend of yours too since they moved to Littleton. They've got the catering contract today as their first job for one of the old wealthy families of the area – but you know this is not really what they want. They despise wealth and power, and want to be working for ordinary people and helping them to make their lives better. They are probably planning to mess up this contract, to make sure that they never get another one – and you can help with that! During the course of this movie they will get together with **T_____, The Heir** – unless your well-intentioned but inept machinations ruin this prospective romance. (Spoiler: it will not be ruined.)

D_____, The Old Flame

Movie 5 – A Christmas Arrangement

T_____, The Heir will by the end of this movie have dropped their plan to marry S_____, and instead get together with **R_____, The Caterer.** This will be a shock to you, and will need some adjustment – but in the end, R_____ is a good person who you're happy to support, and you like T_____ despite what happened between you, so you will encourage this relationship to succeed.

E_____, The Old Retainer

Movie 5 – A Christmas Arrangement

T_____, The Heir will by the end of this movie break up with S_____ and get together with **R_____, The Caterer.** You were always very fond of T_____, who has had to deal with so much pressure all their life! This is their chance at happiness and maybe at finally making a decision for themselves. You believe they deserve happiness. You are, however, quite hopeless in supporting them, and in trying to do so, will get in their way and create more misunderstanding than not.

O_____, The Pastrychef

Movie 5 – A Christmas Arrangement

T_____, The Heir has always been quite selfish and was already jealous of the attention that V_____, The Head of the Family, gave you when you were younger. When you see them falling for **R_____, The Caterer**, will you be strong enough to be happy for them, or will you try and take your revenge?

P_____, The Photographer

Movie 5 – A Christmas Arrangement

T_____, The Heir is your wealthier cousin, and always had it easy**.** They may have hired you, but to hell with their charitable intentions! You are as much a Ritchie as they are, and you will not let them disgrace the family name by romancing **R_____,** a mere **Caterer.** If you find out about that relationship, you will try to break it before any more damage is done.

R_____, The Caterer

YOUR FOCUS MOVIE – Movie 5 – A Christmas Arrangement

During the course of this movie, **T_____, The Heir** will break off their plans to marry S_____, The Intended, and instead will get together with you. It's so romantic and unexpected!

During this movie, the following characters have these relationships with you:

- **C_____, The Ex** is a friend who unfortunately has the impression that you hate working for wealthy people, and that you would rather be catering just for normal folk
- **D_____, The Old Flame** used to be involved with T_____, but now is glad to see them find happiness with you
- **P_____, The Photographer** thinks that you are unsuitable to join the Ritchie family, because of your lowly birth
- **V_____, The Head of the Family** believes, because of a misunderstanding, that you are undertaking this catering gig for the benefit of the exposure – but actually you really need to be paid for it

S_____, The Intended

Movie 5 – A Christmas Arrangement

T_____, The Heir who you have been dating, will by the end of this movie drop their interest in you and instead get together with **R_____, The Caterer.** This might be a disappointment to you, or secretly a relief, who knows. But it will certainly be a blow to your family, who are depending on your marriage into the Ritchie family to rescue their fortunes. You want T_____ to stay with you, to honour that financial commitment – otherwise, you will need to find another way to bail out your family from their gigantic debts.

T_____, The Heir

YOUR FOCUS MOVIE – Movie 5 – A Christmas Arrangement

By the end of this movie you will have dropped your plans to get engaged to S_____, and instead you will have a new romance with **R_____, The Caterer.**

During this movie, the following characters have these relationships with you:

- **A_____, The P.I.** is friendly with you but thinks that this is much too soon to be starting a new relationship, which you will probably soon regret
- **E_____, The Old Retainer** has always been fond of you and will try to help with your happiness, but may end up doing more harm than good
- **O_____, The Pastrychef** was kind of semi-adopted into your family when you were both young, and has always been envious and resentful of your advantages
- **S_____, The Intended** is dependent on marrying you, to rescue their family's fortunes, so will try to thwart your new match

V_____, The Head of the Family

Movie 5 – A Christmas Arrangement

R_____, The Caterer, is a brave young thing who deserves a bit of help, so you have agreed to let them cater this gala – obviously at no cost, this is a charitable event – and you know that the exposure will be great for their business. When you find out that **T_____, The Heir** is falling for R_____, will that make you proud that they could break the mould that has kept you from living a fulfilling life? Or will that be yet another disappointment?

The five movies

The five stages of setup and their movie titles, with the couple that are the focus for that movie, are in this sequence:

1. *Deck the Halls for Christmas*
   (Christmas tree and decorations)
   S_____ The Intended – from another wealthy family, soon to be married to The Heir
   P_____ The Photographer – black-sheep cousin, hired as a snapper but with their own agenda
2. *A Christmas Carol with You*
   (Choosing and arranging the playlist)
   C_____ The Ex – used to be with The Intended. Why did they break up?
   A_____ The PI – here to investigate – something is not as it should be
3. *The Sweetest Christmas*
   (Patisserie – making biscuits, etc)
   O_____ The Pastrychef – an obsessive perfectionist
   D_____ The Old Flame – was madly in love with The Heir, but nothing ever came of it
4. *A Picture of Christmas*
   (Art arrangement)
   V_____ The Head of the Family – revered older person, keen to hand over the responsibility
   E_____ The Old Retainer – has been with the family for decades
5. *A Christmas Arrangement*
   (Laying the tables and doing the flowers etc)
   R_____ The Caterer – new in business, keen to make a good impression
   T_____ The Heir – a gilded youth for whom everything has gone well (so far)

Explanation of the five stages

And the song that soundtracks each of them

The meet-cute – The Ronettes, *Sleigh Ride*

The movie starts with the two characters who are going to end up together (although neither of them suspects this yet) meeting, in a random kind of way, perhaps by bumping into one another and dropping things, or both reaching for the same item on a shelf at a store, etc. They may find each other annoying, at this stage, but the (notional) audience can tell that there is an unacknowledged chemistry between them.

This can be done as a flashback, or as a blackbox scene, etc, if that makes more sense. It should take no more than a couple of minutes. Once it's done, they should join the other characters for the remainder of this stage.

Also during this stage, the other characters should make themselves known and explain their relationship to one or the other of the main characters, and what their general role is – using clunky expository dialogue ("So, as your best friend, I…"), ideally.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DkXIJe8CaIc

The rough patch – Mud, *Lonely this Christmas*

During this stage, the general storyline of the movie is developed. The two lead characters may be warned off each other, by third parties – or they may learn something about the other that is offputting – etc.

But it should also be revealed that they are each unhappy in their current default state. Each of the two leads should have talked with at least one of their connected supporting characters, about the other lead, eg. about how interfering and/or annoying they are.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJ6kJ7GWtv0

The epiphany – Mariah Carey, *All I Want for Christmas is You*

The lead characters are driven to realize that actually they love each other, and should be together. They can have a romantic scene at this point. But, it's still apparent that there are many obstacles in their path.

Some of the supporting characters may be actively helping or hindering the formation of the relationship by this point, while some may still be unaware of it.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXQViqx6GMY

The big betrayal – Wham, *Last Christmas*

A terrible misunderstanding means that one of the lead characters believes that the other has betrayed them in some important way – romantically, or by keeping an important secret from them, or by pretending to be someone who they are actually not – etc.

By the end of this stage, the supporting characters by now should all have learnt of the relationship, and they should have made their view of it apparent to the lead character who they are connected with.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8gmARGvPlI

The kiss in the snow – Bing Crosby, *White Christmas*

All misunderstandings are resolved, and the lovers kiss in the (artificial) snow. All obstacles to them being together are somehow removed, and they can announce their love publicly. The supporting characters get to celebrate – those who were opposed, have now come around to accept the idea – and have small happy endings of their own.

Note that the kiss in the snow can happen at whatever time feels appropriate, during this stage. You probably shouldn't keep it until right at the end, so as to allow time for all of the self-congratulatory wrapping-up of storylines afterwards.

If it seems like after the kiss then there's no need to carry on much further, then it's fine to finish this stage early, without waiting until the end of the music.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v5ryZdpEHqM

Otherwise, the end of the movie as a whole, once the five stages are completed and the music has finished, is signalled by the ringing of bells.

Summary of the five stages

The meet-cute – *Sleigh Ride*

- The two lead characters meet.
- The supporting characters are introduced.

The rough patch – *Lonely this Christmas*

- The two lead characters may be warned off each other, by third parties – or they learn something about the other that is offputting – etc.
- Reveal that they are each unhappy as they currently are.
- Each talk with at least one of their connected supporting characters about the other lead.

The epiphany – *All I Want for Christmas is You*

- The lead characters realize that they love each other.
- They can have a romantic scene at this point.
- There are many obstacles in their path.
- Some of the supporting characters help, some hinder, some are unaware.

The big betrayal – *Last Christmas*

- A terrible misunderstanding.
- One believes that the other has betrayed them in some important way.
- The supporting characters all know of the relationship, and have made their view of it apparent.

The kiss in the snow – *White Christmas*

- All misunderstandings are resolved.
- The lovers kiss in the (artificial) snow.
- All obstacles are somehow removed.
- They announce their love publicly.
- The supporting characters celebrate, and have small happy endings of their own.