

“*A Christmas Carol. Again.* Because God knows nobody’s seen *that* one enough.”

“*Dita.*” Coco stopped pacing around and whacked me on the head with a rolled-up copy of the latest Shop-A-Rama weekly—not a lethal weapon in late October, even with the coupon sheet insert. “*Don’t* dis the Dickens. It’s Christmas but it’s secular, barely a mention of Jesus or Christianity. It’s all about the *spirit* of the holiday, which is something *everyone* can relate to—Jews, Muslims, Hindus, pagans—”

“Yeah. Because here in Happy Valley, there are so many Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and pagans who feel left out during the Christmas season.” The town’s name wasn’t really Happy Valley, it was just what we called every place we played.

Another whack with the Shop-A-Rama. “How do you know there aren’t? Jews and pagans, anyway.”

I took the Shop-A-Rama away from her and unrolled it on the desk as if I were going to read it. “Okay, Jews. I’ll give you that. Any pagans’ll probably be adolescents trying to shock their parents. But Muslims and Hindus—I don’t know if you’ve noticed, sis, but there isn’t even any Indian food closer than Boston.”

“But there *is* Chinese food,” Coco said. “Served by actual Chinese people, I might add.”

“Well, of *course* there is,” I said, looking at the Shop-A-Rama front-page headline: *Rotary Club Welcomes Trebor Sisters Pop-Up Multimedia Theater As Holiday Preparations Begin.* There were two tiny photos of me and Coco along with an account of how we had taken up residence in a furnished condo provided by Dorian Realty and would shortly be announcing auditions for the Christmas play. “Otherwise, where would the Jews go out to eat on Christmas?”

Coco had found another Shop-A-Rama to whack me with. “Quit it,” I said, taking that one away from her, too. “They don’t even train dogs like that anymore. Why don’t you go sit in the Jacuzzi for a while? Let it bubble away all that aggression.”

My sister stopped in her tracks. “You know what? That’s a *great* idea. Hold my calls.” She disappeared into the fancy bathroom.

“Just don’t fall asleep in there and drown, okay?” I called after her. “I’ve got enough to do without raising your ghost, too.”

The only answer was the sound of running water. I was safe from assault for at least an hour and a half. I unrolled the second Shop-A-Rama and saw it was an issue from a couple of weeks earlier. The big story on the front page was how the Rotary Club’s holiday committee had Quote. Decided to hire us for the Annual Holiday Fete. Unquote.

*Fete.* The word looked so strange; so old-fashioned. Most of the places Coco and I popped up in used the word *festival*, occasionally *celebration*, and, once in a while, *extravaganza*. Coco and I try to avoid *extravaganzas*. Those tend to be chaotic affairs put in motion by self-styled big thinkers who can talk a good game but have no organized plan. They get cooperation from the people around them by making promises they can’t possibly keep—*Why, yes, every child who visits Santa will get a present! Why, yes, we’ll have a petting zoo with real reindeer! Why, yes, the surprise celebrity guest coming to turn on the Christmas lights will stay on for a special dinner you’re invited to!* And then, when it all goes pear-shaped, we get the blame: *The Trebor Sisters ate up the entire budget with their demands, we couldn’t afford the presents/reindeer/celebrity/anything else.*

Well, to be fair, that only happened twice. We research prospective jobs more thoroughly now, and while that doesn’t guarantee that everything will work out perfectly, I know we’ve dodged a bullet here and there.

But not this time.

Whenever people ask how Coco and I got into itinerant theater—what we call pop-up theater—we tell them we decided to combine our love of live theater with our love of travel. Then we start talking about all the wonderful experiences we’ve had and all the great people we’ve met and how a live performance on stage gives so much to everyone involved: the actors, the crew, and the audience. We go on and on, telling one anecdote after another, and eventually whoever’s asking will figure we’re like a couple of crazy cat ladies, except instead of taking in cats, we put on plays.

We've got a website, but people always ask anyway. Coco says it's because no one really *reads* anything, they just look at the photos. I suggested paring down the text and putting up more photos. Coco said no—without a detailed *About Us* page, people wouldn't hire us because they couldn't find out enough about us. But they didn't read it in the first place, I said. Coco told me I just had to trust her because she's younger and more acclimated to Internet culture. In fact, that amounts to all of five minutes. She conveniently forgets who gave her her first laptop (me), who taught her HTML (also me), and who explained hexadecimal (me and nobody else but me).

But I've become resigned to telling people things they should already know. And in the case of people like the young junior college intern Shop-A-Rama sent to interview us for the big front page item Coco kept whacking me with, I've learned to be more charitable. Her editor expected her to get the story from us, not cut-and-paste it from the website. As Coco rightly pointed out, we wouldn't have been too happy about it if she had.

That poor kid was so nervous. We had to pretend we didn't notice her hands were shaking while she set up her iPad to record us. "My boss wants some video for our website," she said, sliding release forms across the table to us and trembling like an aspen. She did manage to calm down after a bit, I guess when she realized we weren't going to bite her.

Of course, the devil in me couldn't help wondering what she'd do if I suddenly said, *Hey, we've been bullshitting you. The real reason we do this is that we're working off a debt—or, to be more precise, a curse.*

She probably would have freaked out and stayed freaked even after Coco assured her that her wacky big sis was kidding, such a crazy sense of humor. Then we'd have had to cover with anecdotes about theater superstitions, like always saying *Break a leg* instead of *Good luck*, never whistling backstage, and calling a particular work of Shakespeare *The Scottish Play*.

And after she left, still slightly a-quiver in her black pumps, Coco would have brained me with several issues of Shop-A-Rama rolled up together, or maybe even the slender yet stiff volume

that was the local phone book. Opening my big mouth even in jest would have added another hundred years to our sentence.

It didn't matter that neither Nervous Nellie nor anyone else would have believed it. There are plenty of things people don't believe in and even more they don't know about, and they all work just fine.

Most of our jobs come in warm weather. We book a lot of state fairs, Independence Day celebrations, founders' days ("108 years of happy living in Our Town Thrillsville!"), even shopping mall events. Besides plays, we also do variety shows or talent contests with the locals, which isn't as excruciating as you might think—there's a surprising amount of hidden talent out there in the small-town wilderness.

A Christmas play, however, could pay off quite a lot of our debt. Even just one can count for as much as an entire season of state fairs, Independence Day celebrations, founders' day festivals, and Harvest Homecomings, depending. But don't ask me depending on what. Maybe the mood of the spirit doing the bookkeeping; or maybe on whether the god invoked is drunk enough to be touched by the smallest tribute (and not so hungover that even hours of open adoration would bounce off unfelt); or maybe on some random factor I haven't thought of . . . or a factor that isn't random at all but is too far above my pay grade to be visible to the naked third eye.

I guess we're like a lot of business people in that respect—we work hard all year but most of the profit comes in during the holidays.

Naturally, this gave us extra incentive to be careful, and we've learned how to increase the odds of a favorable outcome. Our website specifies certain conditions that are non-negotiable: i.e., we have to have enough notice—you can't call us the week before Christmas and ask us to put on *The Nutcracker Suite* with dancers from the local ballet school. (We don't do ballets anyway. We tried it once. Just once.) Also, if you expect us to use local talent, you have to bring us in far enough

ahead of time to allow for auditions and a certain number of rehearsals. And we'll need accommodations for the duration. They don't have to be lavish but they have to be indoors; no matter how great the weather is, we don't do camping.

Usually we end up in motels. Occasionally, a local will put us up in a spare room. The condo was a first, and much cushier than we'd expected. Three bedrooms, two baths, one with a Jacuzzi! I was afraid we'd get spoiled. The realtor who gave us the keys, a short, middle-aged woman named Roberta-call-me-Bobbie Maxwell, told us it was the model for the building. "This is what we show prospective buyers." She made a graceful, game-show-hostess-style gesture with one hand. "To let them see the possibilities. So we hope you'll, you know, treat the place gently. Under the terms of your contract, the cost of any damages will be deducted from your final payment." Her dark brown face turned apologetic. "I'm sorry to be so tacky, but my boss made a point of telling me I had to say that."

"Not at all," Coco replied. "Tell your boss we promise to be very careful."

I felt like saying if her boss was so concerned, we could have stayed at the motel just off the interstate. Instead, I nodded and smiled. "We're not much for the rock 'n' roll lifestyle these days. I can't remember the last time I threw a television out a window."

Roberta-call-me-Bobbie Maxwell tittered nervously; Coco didn't.

"Well, I can't," I added, smiling defiantly into my sister's death-ray glare.

"Must be losing my touch," she said after the woman left. "The way I was concentrating, your head should have exploded."

I chuckled. "Damages, remember? They'd charge you so much to clean up the yuck, you'd leave here owing them money. Plus then you'd be carrying the whole curse alone without me to help with the heavy lifting."

"Heavy lifting? When *was* the last time you threw a TV out a window?"

While my sister was bubbling away her tensions, I went into the master bedroom, where we had set up our workstation, and looked up productions of *A Christmas Carol*, onstage and on film. If we were going to use people from the local community, I thought, we probably shouldn't try to go for big laughs. But we couldn't get too gory with Jacob Marley because there would be children in the audience. Not that it would bother them—the bloodthirsty little savages loved that stuff. Their parents, however, could be squeamish about the images they saw their little darlings being exposed to (mostly because they've never sat next to them while they were playing video games). But what the hell, we weren't here to rock anybody's child-rearing boat. We were just trying to pay off this stupid curse.

The Ghost of Christmas Present pulled back his robe to reveal two dirty, starving children clinging to his legs. He was telling Ebenezer Scrooge that the boy was Ignorance and the girl was Want when my sister walked in front of them in a fluffy white bathrobe, her hair wrapped in an equally fluffy towel.

“Jeez, Coco,” I said. “Spoil the moment much?”

She turned to look at the Spirit of Christmas Present, who was throwing Scrooge's earlier words (*Are there no prisons? Are there no workhouses?*) back at him.

“Ah, the Alastair Sim, from 1951,” she chuckled, sitting down on the sofa. “Got caught up in it, huh?”

I ducked my head noncommittally. Truth to tell, I was more relieved than annoyed. I'd forgotten how scary this version of the story was. When Christmas Present had uncovered the children, I'd almost jumped out of my skin, even though I'd known it was coming. Some versions, particularly the comedies, present Scrooge as a cold-hearted man who warms up when he is reminded of how good people can be. But this was a *Carol* in a minor key; Scrooge isn't so much defrosted as he is scared straight, and the audience with him.

“I’m glad to see we’re on the same page,” my sister was saying as she towed her auburn curls. She was letting her hair grow again. I suppose I was, too, except I was just pinning it up and ignoring it.

“What do you mean?” I asked, hitting pause.

“This is what I had in mind. Scary Christmas ghosts. Woo-woo.”

“You’re just saying that because it’s Halloween this week. Let’s talk again after All Soul’s Day.”

My sister wagged her head from side to side slowly and emphatically. “A Christmas Scare-ol is the way to go. The scarier the better.”

“We’ll get ridden out of town on a rail.”

“Not if we use a local Scrooge.”

“We’re going to do that anyway,” I said, frowning.

“And that’s why it’ll work! These people will go nuts for it. In a good way,” she added quickly. “Not like that one time.”

“I should hope not,” I said. “We don’t need another place we can’t go back to.”

“But you said you never wanted to go back to Columbia, Missouri, anyway.”

“True. But I’d rather it was *my* choice.”

She sighed. “Fine. So do you want to keep playing the Ghost of Mistakes Past all day or do you want to get to work?”

We held auditions at the local high school after classes let out, with the drama club and their beaming teacher looking on from the back of the auditorium and taking notes on “how a professional theater troupe does things.” (I thought the poor kids would be bored out of their minds, but they actually looked interested. “You don’t know, sis, you were never a drama club geek,” Coco said, although in fact, she never was one, either.) Besides Scrooge, we were casting Bob Cratchit

and family, Scrooge's nephew Fred, his wife, party guests, the charity collectors, and the boy who tells Scrooge it's Christmas Day after his transformation. The rest would be SFX—special effects.

Well, that was the term we used in public. When people asked us how it worked, we'd always just say, *Sorry, trade secret—the union's very strict about that*. That discourages pretty much everyone except the more persistent kids, particularly the budding engineers. Them we distract by giving them little jobs, having them run errands, things like that. But there's always one or two whose unrelenting curiosity can't be satisfied by a non-answer. With those kids, we'd go to Plan B—the truth: *Magic. Don't tell, we'll get in trouble*. Then we make them take a sacred oath—I swear by all the spirits who watch and ward the world of real things that I shall never divulge the secrets I am privileged to share, or somesuch.

The oath itself does nothing—it's what comes after that keeps them quiet: Coco or I kiss the tip of the kid's index finger and press it to that little space just under the nose, on the upper lip (it's called the *philtrum*). As spells go, it's one of the simplest but also one of the most powerful. You can only Hush someone for a limited period of time, which varies from person to person. But when you use the person's own Hushing finger, that's for life. They'll forget before they'll tell.

Yeah, it's kind of a dirty trick, and we only get away with it because they're kids. But as many before me have said, Needs must. And it's not like it stunts their growth or anything.

Within a week, we had the whole cast with one exception: Scrooge.

You'd think that would have been the easiest role to fill—just find some uncured ham who can learn his lines and leave no piece of scenery un-chewed. Small towns are lousy with guys like that, and they aren't always the life of the party or the class clown. Some of them are salesman of the year at the local car dealership; others are teachers or aldermen or even ministers. Our best candidates included a retired high school football coach, an ex-Marine (also retired), a policeman, an insurance salesman, and the owner/editor-in-chief of Shop-A-Rama. The cop and the insurance salesman were under forty but could play older. The ex-Marine was the dark horse—he looked like

he still followed a rigorous physical fitness program but when he read, he *sounded* like Scrooge. Coco liked the Shop-A-Rama guy—he was the oldest, or at least the oldest-looking, and he'd read Dickens' complete *oeuvre*. But the cop and the salesman both had good stage presence and the coach could project so well you could hear him outside the building.

We called them all back twice and they were pretty nice about it, although after the second time, the cop and the coach looked like they were getting a little tired of the whole thing. I hoped they'd drop out; if they did, maybe one or two of the others would go with them and we'd get a Scrooge by default. The ex-Marine was my definite favorite, while Coco stuck by Mr. Shop-A-Rama. But it wasn't just a matter of who did the best reading—it was also who could work with the special effects. Or to be more precise, vice versa.

Actors can be difficult. Some of them can be outrageous prima donnas. But I swear, none of them can hold a candle to *dead* actors. That old saying, about don't work with animals or children? I would add ghosts to that. You haven't seen a diva—or divo—until you've seen a ghost.

The hell of it is, it's not totally their fault—not all the time, anyway. Being a ghost is harder than you'd think. Where your average actor has concerns like weight gain, the right clothes, the right agents, the right parts, and the right publicity, ghosts are affected by things no one else can even feel—vibrations, emanations, auras, non-specific psychic turbulence, prophecies, and the occasional spontaneous eruption of Random. There isn't much anyone can do about that last—shit happens. Always has, always will. But the rest of it can have an adverse effect on ghosts, anything from a minor irritation to debilitating interference. It depends on a number of factors, including the ghost. Some of them are more sensitive than others.

Our problem was, not all of our ghosts could agree on an acceptable Scrooge. The Ghost of Christmas Past liked the cop. The Ghosts of Christmas Present and Christmas Yet to Come insisted his aura was unacceptable; Present wanted Mr. Shop-A-Rama, Yet to Come wanted the ex-Marine. Jacob Marley said he found them all equally intolerable but as he spent the least amount of time in direct contact with Scrooge, we didn't count his vote as much.

The ghosts portraying Scrooge's past—Fezziwig, young Ebenezer and his sister, and others—only had to share visible space with the live actor, but they had surprisingly strong feelings. None of them wanted the football coach or the insurance salesman but there was no clear majority among them for any of the other three. The discussion deteriorated into an argument so intense it blew out the lights, even though we didn't have any on at the time (sparks flew; we had to buy new lightbulbs). It took us forever to find the circuit breaker. Just try to find anything in the dark with a houseful of ghosts all revved up to the point of hysteria by a sudden power surge—they're like kids on a sugar buzz, only less manageable. They know we need them more than they need us and they seldom miss an opportunity to point it out. But even leaving that aside, what could we threaten them with? They're dead.

After the charge dissipated and they were calmer, we called a vote, or tried to—Marley broke out in a case of democratic activism and objected because it couldn't be a secret ballot (well, it could have been but that would have taken hours, raising them all up separately and then sending them back). It spread to some of the others—did I mention ghosts are easily led?—and we might have had an all-out mutiny if Past, Present, and Yet to Come hadn't ganged up on him and told him he was being a complete dick.

Still, that didn't make the actual voting any easier, even after we eliminated the cop and the coach. Finally, at three in the morning, the ex-Marine—Steve Rock—somehow edged out Mr. Shop-A-Rama, Dan Cuthbert. Don't ask me how; I think there was a coin toss involved (besides being easily led, ghosts are also inveterate gamblers, because what have they got to lose?). I was so groggy by then I just curled up where I was and passed out. The next morning I found myself under the bed with no memory of how I'd gotten there. It was a pretty tight fit; I suspect my unconscious was hiding from Marley, whose last words had been, *I'd rather have the other guy*. (He'd have said the same thing if it *had* been the other guy.)

You're probably wondering how we rehearse with ghosts and live people without letting on we're using real ghosts. Most people would never believe it—they'd think it was a trick, and drive us crazy wanting to know how we did it. The few who did believe would also drive us crazy wanting to know all about the supernatural and magic, bugging us to raise this or that deceased relative or, worse, some dead celebrity, not understanding it wasn't that simple and refusing to take no for an answer.

So we have some "equipment"—a few PC housings with fancy lights that can be concealed in the set. The ghosts are supposed to remain within a limited area around them, so it seems like they're projections, while we tell the live people to maintain a certain distance so they won't "create interference" or "break the line of projection." We even do a little demonstration with Marley, where he blurs out of focus or flickers when they get too close (Marley has exceptional image control—he can even do static).

We explained much of this to the cast at the first read-through. We sat them in folding chairs in a semi-circle on the stage and positioned the "equipment" to look as if it were projecting onto a plain backdrop. Then Coco and I took turns with the video camera, recording the whole reading. The first read-through is the trickiest because the ghosts have to behave like they're pre-recorded CGIs. All the ghosts hate this part; they find it unbearably stifling. But they can't interact with the cast at that point, except to deliver their lines on cue while Coco and I pretend to use an iPad to adjust them. Later, when we block everyone's movements, they have a little more wiggle room because we can say they're programmed to respond to stimuli. Sometimes people get very curious about that; we tell them it's adapted from gaming software, which neither of us really understands and it's a trade secret anyway, sorry.

It used to be easier to convince—ahem, fool—the very old and the very young because they have a greater number of things in their lives that they don't understand. Back when the personal computer and its less-than-wholesome companion, the Internet, were more novel and less ubiquitous, we could get away with buzz word non-explanations. These days, however, even the

least technologically savvy people know enough to be inconvenient, and they don't even know how much they actually know. Fortunately, we have an app to help with that. Okay, a spell. But really, six of one, half dozen of the other, right?

Our first read-through went surprisingly well. Everyone oohed and aahed at the preliminary “projections” (although it was a miracle no one caught Marley rolling his eyes after every line). Except for the ex-Marine, that is; when he wasn't reading his lines, he was positively stoic. I didn't like that.

“You picked a fine time to have second thoughts,” Coco said when I told her afterward, back at the condo. We put the video on the big flat-screen TV—I swear, that thing was larger than the windows in my first apartment—and the resolution was practically lifelike. *If it weren't for that stupid curse, I could have one of those*, I fumed to myself.

“Well?” My sister elbowed me. She had paused the video with the ex-Marine's face in close-up. *His name is Steve*, I reminded myself. “Except for the fact that he's built like a refrigerator and we'll have to glamour him so he won't totally dwarf everyone else onstage and the ghosts'll have to manifest at 150% actual size—except for Present, he'll have to be 200%, maybe more—and he looks more like he could scare a ghost rather than vice versa . . . except for all that, what is it you think is wrong with him?”

“It's not that there's anything wrong, exactly—” I grimaced. “I'm having trouble getting a read on him.”

“Do tell,” Coco said. “What is it about that chiseled stone face you feel isn't forthcoming?”

“He's shy,” said the Ghost of Christmas Past helpfully from the iPad.

“You think so?” I propped the tablet up on the coffee table to let her see the screen.

“Absolutely,” she said. “I've seen this a million times. A *billion*. Big, strong, and bashful. It's an archetype.”

“Bullshit,” Coco said, turning the iPad toward herself. “He's so shy he tried out for the Christmas play that the whole town is going to see?”

“Maybe he lost a bet,” Past suggested. “Or made a promise. Or he suddenly decided to do something wild and crazy. Wild and crazy for *him*,” she added in response to Coco’s incredulous look. “Could be a bucket list thing. Bucket lists are trending like mad, you know. A lifetime of regrets on a sheet of paper. Or two. Or three. Hey, I know what I’m talking about, Coco, so don’t be giving me the stink-eye. Your face might freeze that way.”

“Bitch, please,” said my sister. “Who do you think you’re talking to, a country mark?”

“Or a glamour might get stuck so it just looks like your face froze that way to everyone else,” Past went on serenely.

“And don’t call people marks,” I couldn’t help adding. “The Muses don’t like it.”

“Okay, gang up on me, why don’t you? *I’m* not the one who got my way on casting and then started having second thoughts.”

“I’m *not* having second thoughts,” I said. “I’m just concerned. I still think he did the best reading. But even if it is just the first read-through, I thought he’d open up more. It’s like he’s still holding himself apart from the rest of the cast.”

“I told you, he’s shy,” Past insisted. “What do you know about him?”

Coco picked up the iPad. “Excuse me,” she said, pressing the home button. Past disappeared as my sister called up her notes. “Retired ex-Marine, lives . . .” her eyebrows went up. “Here. In this complex, I mean. He’s got a one-bedroom with garden—” she stood up and turned slowly until she was facing the kitchen. “Somewhere over that way.” Coco’s gift for direction is better than GPS (we have one in the bus anyway, for cover). “Maybe you should go talk to him,” she said to me brightly as she sat down and handed me the iPad. “Bring him out of his shell.”

“Maybe we should both go,” I said evenly. “It’s not like I’m working alone.”

“Girls, *girls*,” said Past, coming back on the iPad in the middle of Coco’s notes. “No bickering! You know we can’t stand the vibe.”

*The vibe.* That made both me and my sister smile in spite of ourselves. Past is three hundred and forty years old. It took months of vocal practice before she was understandable, and almost as

long to update her vocabulary and syntax, so we still get a kick out of it when something like *the vibe* rolls off her spectral tongue with such casual ease.

“I’m not saying I want to change Scrooges,” I said. “I still think he’s right for the part. But I think we’re going to have to help him be *in* the cast and not just in the same place. If you see what I mean.”

“Well, if he really *is* shy, we’ll have to be careful not to come on too strong,” Coco said. “We have to entice him out of his shell while letting him believe it’s his idea.” She tried to smile and only looked pained. “I’m sorry, I’m just going to say this one last thing: we probably wouldn’t have this problem with the Shop-A-Rama guy. Or the salesman, whose job is relating to people.”

“That’s *two* last things,” I said. “But that’s okay, I’ll give you the extra. Maybe you’re right. But if we can get this guy into the zone, we’ll have a production ten times better than with any of the others. And that counts for a lot.”

Coco nodded. “True. But it looks like we’re gonna work awful hard for the payoff. I just hope it turns out to be worth it.”

“Hey, I’m behind you,” Past said.

“The past usually is,” said Coco. “Now get out of my notes before you set off a typo bomb.”

We spent the month of November rehearsing six days out of seven. Not with the whole cast—we’d do every other day with different cast members, sometimes with me or Coco standing in for Scrooge. We were trying not to overdo it with him, although we’d have liked to have him there every night. After the first two weeks, though, he came to us and asked if it would be all right if he came to every rehearsal, even if we didn’t want him to take part. He felt he needed to watch. “You know, for the character,” he said, as if he were asking a favor. “To see how the character is in the story.”

With his increased participation, we found we could take the rehearsals down to five days out of seven, and some of those were Scrooge alone with a ghost. Past said she could see he was

getting used to the part, almost like he was breaking in a pair of shoes. To me, it seemed more like a strange place was becoming familiar to him. But although he wasn't as closed off, he still had some opening up to do.

Past came up with the bright idea of taking him away from the stage and rehearsing in a completely different environment—viz., while Christmas shopping in the nearby mall (nearby being thirty miles away on the interstate). I wasn't sure that making him do his lines strolling past the Gap or in the middle of a food court would help him overcome his shyness. But the drama club kids were working on the set (for extra credit) and Coco was supervising them (with their teacher) and I figured what the hell, it probably wouldn't be any easier to concentrate onstage.

As it turned out, I was the one who was too shy to run lines with him while strolling past the Gap, and he knew it. He might have been relieved—I couldn't tell. But I could definitely see that he was amused.

“I should just let you go home,” I told him, embarrassed. “I really didn't mean to bring you all the way out here for nothing.”

“It doesn't have to be for nothing,” he said in a kindly voice.

“Well, maybe if you start—”

“I don't mean that.” He paused in an open area between a small, glittery double-decker carousel and a Santa's Village with smiling plastic reindeer, a couple of snowmen (or snow-people: Mr. and Mrs. Frosty, holding twig hands), a train for little kids to ride on, currently not in service—a sign said the engineer was out to lunch, would return in one hour—and a little house where Santa would be receiving visitors starting at 3:00 p.m. (another sign). “Why don't we do a little Christmas shopping? Since we're here anyway.”

“Christmas shopping?” I said, startled.

He laughed at the expression on my face. “Come on, you musta heard of it. See, you go out and buy gifts for friends and relatives. And then you take them home and you wrap them, or you can pay somebody to do that for you.” He pointed at a stand offering gift-wrapping services.

“Or not pay,” I said, pointing. “The sign says it’s free.” I frowned. “That’s awful generous, even for the season of giving.”

“Yes,” he said, “it is.”

I’d been about to ask him to pardon my cynicism but his tone stopped me—his voice was soft and thoughtful but there was an undertone that made me uneasy. He gazed at the stand for a few moments longer and then suddenly walked over to it. I was so surprised, I could only stare after him; he seemed to have forgotten all about me.

The woman behind the counter was just handing two large boxes, perfectly-wrapped parcels to a man and giving him a thousand-watt happy-holidays smile. But as soon as she turned toward Scrooge, the smile was replaced by something like horror . . . or terror. Scrooge caught the man by the sleeve of his coat, took the packages out of his arms, set them on the counter, and tapped them hard with two fingers.

The woman backed away slightly; Scrooge shrugged and tore the wrapping off the smaller package. This shocked me enough that I finally snapped out of my statue impersonation and hurried over. I had no idea what was going on—ex-Marine PTSD triggered by free gift-wrap service? If so, what the hell did I think I could do about it?

I got to the stand just as Scrooge opened the box and showed the man what was inside. Which, as far as I could tell, was a tangle of old rags.

“Hey!” the man said indignantly. “What happened to the sweater I bought my wife?”

“I’m so sorry, obviously there’s been a terrible mix-up, I’ll just go find that for you right now—” the woman babbled, and slipped behind a screen decorated with snowflakes and cartwheeling elves. Scrooge looked around and beckoned to someone—a security guard. He was joined almost immediately by three more who seemed to materialize out of thin air. As soon as they appeared, Scrooge took my arm and steered me away, toward the food court. I was so flabbergasted I couldn’t say a word.

“How did you know?” I asked as we sat at a garish orange plastic table with cups of hot chocolate.

“It’s actually a pretty old scam,” he said. “Go to a busy mall, bring in a table and a few decorations, and find a place where you can hide what you’re really doing. Swap the merchandise out with some crap weighs the same—pretty girl up front, one or two accomplices to stash the loot and carry it out when it starts to pile up. If someone catches you, you just say you’re on your way to the storeroom because you ran outta tape or paper or ribbon, or there’s so much to wrap you gotta get help.”

“But doesn’t the mall management know they don’t belong there?”

“This time of year, the right hand doesn’t know what the left hand is doing. If mall staff even bother to ask, they say they’re working courtesy of this or that social group—the Elks, the Rotary Club, the Better Business Bureau, the Auto Club. Nobody calls to check.”

“I had no idea,” I said, still pretty taken aback.

“You never saw something like that before, huh?”

I shook my head.

“But you thought it was kinda strange, someone giving something away this time of year,” he said with a chuckle. “Then, what—you just figured, aw, isn’t that nice, the mall’s doing something nice for the people who shop there. Right?”

I nodded sheepishly.

“On top of Santa’s Village and the carousel.”

I laughed. “Okay, when I stop to think about it . . .”

“Which most people are too busy to do.”

I was about to make some innocuous reply when my gaze met his. For the first time, I noticed that he had light-colored eyes; hazel, I supposed, but with flecks of green and black. They were beautiful; unique, even. Some people, men and women, would have killed for eyes like that.

Abruptly, I realized I'd been staring and took another sip of hot chocolate. Or I would have, except my cup was empty. "I need another," I said. "How about you?"

"I'm good," he said, not quite chuckling.

"All right, so what do *you* think it means?" Coco said when I told her about it that evening over Chinese food.

"I was hoping you'd help me figure that out," I told her.

"I don't suppose you caught everything on video."

"What? No, of course not."

"Then I don't know what you expect me to do. I wasn't there; I didn't see it."

I looked at the time, then grabbed the remote and pointed it at the TV. The news had already started but they were still in the national/international segment.

"You think you made the news?"

I shrugged. We waited as the reports segued from national to state, and then to regional, followed by the weather, then sports. Coco groaned and told me to shut it off, she was allergic to hockey. I shook my head; something told me to wait.

"And finally, tonight, a sharp-eyed Good Samaritan at the "Oak River mall" saved Christmas for a number of area families," said a beautiful blonde news reader with utter conviction. "The unknown man spotted a scam that was operating right under the noses of mall security. Three con artists brazenly set up a 'free gift-wrapping station' in the middle of the mall. The catch? The wrapped packages they gave back to customers were filled with trash: old rags, shredded paper, even bubble-wrapped bricks. They removed the real merchandise to sell themselves later on eBay or Amazon."

The scene switched to a police officer, who explained the same thing in more detail.

I smiled at Coco. "Scrooge came out of his shell today."

"God bless us, everyone." She toasted the TV with a cup of tea.

*“Semper fi,”* I corrected her.

The next day, I had planned to tell the entire cast about how Scrooge saved Christmas, but before I could even open my mouth, he gave me a look and a quick head shake and that was it—I couldn’t say a word about it. I tried to get Coco to do it but she refused on the grounds that she hadn’t been there.

“Besides,” she went on, talking over me when I tried to argue, “if we want him to open up, disrespecting his feelings isn’t the way to go about it, is it?” I grudgingly admitted she was right.

I intended to pull him aside and ask him about it but the opportunity never presented itself—we got busier and busier as Christmas approached. The show was scheduled for 6:00 p.m. on Christmas Eve as the closing event of the fete. We were invited to spend Christmas Day with the Rotary Club, who were hosting an all-afternoon party at a local restaurant, with food, drink, and football. Larger than most family get-togethers but small enough to be sociable, Roberta-call-me-Bobbie Maxwell told us; a thank you to everyone who worked on the fete. Coco and I gave her a definite maybe. Christmas was one of our few days off. Watching parades on TV in our pjs without any ghosts was gift enough. But we figured if the play went even passingly well, we could show our faces for an hour or so when the worst of the football was over; if it was an unmitigated disaster, we’d just pack as quickly as possible to be on the road by nightfall.

I didn’t think it would be an unmitigated disaster. In fact, I thought parts would be quite good—our original Bob Cratchit broke his leg skiing and was replaced by the cop, who, Coco and I agreed, should have been in the part all along. Maybe it was because his real wife was Mrs. Cratchit. Christmas Present said their relationship was invigorating, and then got so invigorated at one point, he made a psychic connection with them. Fortunately, the Cratchits thought what they were feeling was just the magic of the theater. They were probably going to start doing am-dram regularly after we left. I just hoped regular theater wouldn’t be too much of a letdown.

“If you were going to connect with anyone, it should have been Scrooge,” I told Present afterward. “You’re playing the scene with him—the two of you are only watching the Cratchits.”

“I know.” Present’s face on the iPad screen was contrite. “He’s such a lone wolf, though. I’m afraid that even just a fleeting touch might be too much. And he won’t think it’s just the holiday spirit mixed with the magic of the theater, roar of the greasepaint, smell of the mistletoe, all that. He’ll know something *different* happened and I don’t know how he’ll take it. Sometimes his aura looks kind of . . . unstable.”

“Like *he*’s unstable?”

“No, just his aura. He’s . . .” Present paused for so long I wondered if the iPad had frozen. “He’s laying low,” he said finally.

“He’s laying low by being in a Christmas play?” Coco said, coming in from the kitchen with an enormous bowl of popcorn. She plopped down next to me on the couch, pointed the remote at the TV, and began scrolling through the listings. “On what plane of existence does that make sense?”

“On yours,” Present said evenly. “He’s blending in. Like camouflage or encryption?” Present is five hundred years old; he was a house haunt at the original Globe Theatre, and always loves to show off how *au courant* he is. I’ve seen images of him from the 1980s—three letters: MTV.

Nonetheless, I said, “Okay, I can see that. He’s conforming so he won’t look odd to the natives. Still, playing the lead in the Christmas play is more attention-getting than low-laying.”

“Attention-getting in a good way,” Present insisted.

Several inches of long gray hair floated out of the screen as Yet to Come crowded in next to Present. I fanned the air to blow them back in before they could stick to everything (ectoplasm can be worse than gum). “He’s right,” Yet to Come said. Without the Grim Reaper-style hooded robe, she looked very un-gaunt and non-dead. In her case, clothes made the spirit, a description kinder

and gentler than *fashion victim*. She was the youngster of the bunch, under a hundred, and had experience working in silent films, although she never talked about it.

Which reminded me there was something *I* wasn't talking about. Although, strangely, I had no problem telling Present and YTC how Scrooge had managed to silence me with only a tiny shake of his head, sans any physical contact.

"Sounds a lot like the power of suggestion to me, Dita," Present said in his *I-know-things* voice. "You people seriously underestimate the force of POS, and you really shouldn't. You're all in a trance for most of your waking hours anyway, with all that staring into a light-source. Like you're doing at this very moment. Her, too—" he pointed at Coco, who was still scrolling through the program guide in the hope that somehow five hundred channels with nothing on might cough up something worth watching, or at least re-watching. "If you tell her to go jump off a cliff right now, you'd never be able to stop her."

"This town doesn't have any cliffs," Coco said tonelessly, never looking away from the TV.

"Then you'd be in for a long walk in the cold," Present said.

"Not *that* cold," Coco said, still scrolling. "Global warming."

"Tell her to bring you a glass of wine, or run a bath for you," Present said. "She won't even blink."

I turned to look at Coco, still clicking the remote and gazing fixedly at the TV. "Don't be ridiculous," she said. "I'd blink."

"Only if we told you to," Present retorted.

My sister put down the remote and looked over at the iPad. "Seriously? Are you forgetting who physically wears the tangible big girl pants around here?"

"Okay, Coco, maybe *you're* not quite that . . . ah, *tractable*," Present said. "But Dita, you might be less resistant to this guy since you're trying to connect with him. It's like barter. Or a contract. Like, your subconscious thinks if it keeps you quiet, he'll come across with what *you* want."

“Or maybe he’s a low-level sorcerer.” The words were out of my mouth before I even knew I was going to say anything.

Coco burst out laughing. “Yeah, right! The mystical Marine!” She went back to searching the TV listings.

“Career soldiers have a mystical aspect,” Present said. “It’s a closed brotherhood. Like thespians. You’re not in it unless you already are and even when you leave it, you’re not really out. And Marines don’t just *follow* orders—once they get stripes, they *give* them. This guy must have been at least an NCO when he retired. That’s a sergeant,” he added to YTC.

“I *know* what an NCO is,” she said, barely not snapping at him.

Present laughed. “That would have made him Sergeant Rock. I bet he took some ribbing about that.”

“Or not,” I said, picturing his face at the shopping mall that day. “I wouldn’t tease him.”

“I would.” Present had the nerve to sound smug.

“Sure you would—*now*,” I replied. “You’re dead, you have no instinct for self-preservation. I don’t think you’d be so quick to smart off if anyone could actually hurt you.”

Instead of giving me an argument like I expected, he said, “Touché. I keep forgetting. Even after all this time, I sometimes think I’m about to move my hand or my arm, or I think I feel the wind stir my hair—”

“Phantom limb syndrome,” YTC said. “Except it’s your whole body.”

Present looked at her incredulously. “Are you utterly mad?”

“It’s a real thing. People feel it all the time.”

“Because they have a *corporeal brain*—”

“Lights out,” I said and the screen went dark.

“If you hadn’t, I would’ve,” my sister said. Now she was scrolling through the movie channels, one by one. “Sometimes I think we spend entirely too much time talking to the dead.” She highlighted *The Sixth Sense*.

“You *do* know that nobody loves a smartass,” I said. “Right?”

“Sometimes the irony is so thick no subtlety is possible.” She paused. “He’s not a sorcerer. He’s just a guy.”

I should have paid closer attention. Maybe Present was right about TV putting us in a trance.

You’re probably wondering about the set and costumes. Basically, everything was scrounged, which meant not all of it was exactly in period. We had a crew from the high school drama club for scene changes, rearranging the furniture so Scrooge’s sitting room could become the Cratchit place, then Fred’s. A particularly handy girl rigged Scrooge’s bed to fold up out of the way Murphy-style, with retractable posts. Coco was genuinely in awe.

The lighting was all under our control—i.e., the ghosts did the illumination. Doing it normally was out of the question—even low electric light can interfere with manifestations and make them spotty. It’s something to do with wavelengths. Candles or kerosene lanterns are no problem but even if it hadn’t been against fire regulations, we wouldn’t have risked an open flame (there’s tempting fate and then there’s daring it to bite your head off). We let the drama club handle the auditorium itself but we told them we had programmed the lights through our projection system. It kept them out of our hair and away from the “projectors.”

The costumes came out of cellars and attics and Goodwill, which meant some of the coats zipped up rather than buttoned. Another handy high schooler came up with the idea of sewing buttons on them and using long scarves to camouflage the zippers. Of course, the scarves were really no less anachronistic, but it was the thought that counted—literally, if you’ll pardon the expression. Every bit of extra effort the kids or their parents put in was credit for us. (It counted as something good for them, too, of course, but none of them had a curse to worry about.)

The eve of Christmas Eve rehearsal went so well, I should have been suspicious. Instead, I was just relieved—nobody had caught the flu, everybody remembered their lines, and the ghosts

were all right on cue. And Scrooge—well, he wasn't as closed off as he had been in the beginning and he definitely had acting talent. But there was still a sense of his being slightly removed from everyone else. Maybe we should have socialized more, I thought; if we'd taken them all bowling or Christmas shopping. Or even just had a few snowball fights.

"You know, sis, sometimes the hit of adrenaline everyone gets in front of an audience can take a show from almost there to on the money," Coco said as we walked back to the condo together. "We've both seen it happen before." It had snowed on and off all day, the good stuff you could make snowballs with. The holiday ambience was thicker than the irony had been.

"Does everything look a little *too* charming to you?" I asked Coco.

"We're in New England," my sister said. "It gets like this a lot."

"You sure about that?"

"Trust me. The whole world isn't like Dongola, Illinois."

"Right. I forgot you're so much more well-traveled than I am."

This precipitated a snowball fight, which ended with both of us having snow stuffed down our shirts. We'd left the main street by then and there was no one else around to witness our sudden fit of silliness, or join in. The thought was a tiny pang of melancholy at the back of my mind—we *should* have had taken the cast out to play in the snow for bonding—soon eclipsed by having to take care not to track slush into the condo.

Christmas Eve started early and taut. Coco put on a calm, collected front but I knew she was as tense and anxious as I was because she never once told me to relax. We were ready to go by noon and perhaps if we had put the play on then—but there's no point in second-guessing. Besides, there's something indecent about the idea of a noontime performance of a play that's set in the middle of the night. The ghosts probably would have mutinied.

We had told everyone to be at the school no later than 4:00 to get into costume and makeup. I didn't really expect anyone to be early; if I had, it wouldn't have been Scrooge. But he appeared in the dressing room at 3:30, looking a little nervous but very bright-eyed.

I asked him if he needed any help with his makeup; he shook his head, mumbling something about how Coco and I probably had plenty to do without worrying about him. Mainly what we had to do was run around triple- and quadruple- and quintuple-checking the set, the fake projection boxes, and the *bonne chance* charms and talismans positioned over every entrance and exit to the stage (sometimes a little good luck is all it takes to prevent a major disaster). We'd had to rethink a couple that had been knocked down between scenes when the kids shifted the furniture a bit too vigorously.

The rest of the cast showed up and the dressing room took on a party atmosphere.

"That's a good sign, right? When it's like a party, that means everything will be okay, doesn't it?" I whispered to Coco as we watched, occasionally helping someone with their costume or makeup. The room was partitioned into male and female areas by several mismatched room dividers. It wasn't what you'd call watertight; I imagined a lot of drama geeks got their first glimpse of what they'd been missing here. Anyone overly concerned with preserving their modesty retreated to either the men's or ladies' room.

The ladies' was right off the dressing room but the men's was a little ways down the hall, which was how we failed to notice that Scrooge was missing until we called everyone together for a show circle.

"I'll get him," Coco said and disappeared.

"Maybe *I* should go—" Bob Cratchit said, looking uncomfortable.

"It's okay, we're theater people," I said.

Coco was back before I had to try to explain that one. "Scrooge is working on something important," she said. "He apologizes and says not to wait for him. He's here in spirit."

Before I could object, she did a quick invocation and sent everyone off to their positions for the opening. We had put in a brief sequence set on the street outside Scrooge's house, with Mrs. Cratchit and the kids waving through the window at Bob, and Fred supposedly showing his wife and some friends his uncle's building, using gestures to describe Scrooge's character.

"We should have waited!" I said as soon as Coco and I were alone. "No one should be left out of the circle!"

"What did you want me to do, drag the man off the toilet? I knocked on the door, then poked my head in. He was in one of the stalls and it sounded . . . intense."

"Then we should have delayed the start of the show," I said. "Five minutes, ten minutes, big deal."

We waited a few seconds. When he still didn't show up, I turned to her and said, "What do you mean, it sounded 'intense'? What was he doing?"

Coco gave me a Look. "He was in a *stall*. What do you think he was doing?"

"Was he throwing up from stage fright?"

"No, I saw his feet. He was sitting."

We waited a little bit longer, then we both went down the hall to the men's room. I opened the door a little without knocking and called, "Scrooge? Everything okay in here?"

Silence. That was never good.

"Scrooge?" I said again, walking in. Coco followed. "Steve?" I gave a small, nervous laugh. "Sergeant Rock?"

Coco bent down to look under the door. "He's still sitting there."

We went into the stall next to his, climbed up on the toilet, and looked over the top of the wall. Then we just stared for some unmeasured period of time.

Finally, Coco cleared her throat. "Well, Scrooge *was* dead to begin with."

And not merely dead but, like the Munchkin coroner so aptly put it, really most sincerely dead (you don't want to know).

“What the *fuck* do we do now?” I said. *Understudy? We don't need no steenkin' understudy!* Because it was one performance. Just one. Why tease some poor schmuck with the remote possibility that the lead might have a coronary two seconds before he was due onstage?

“Dita, you get into costume, fast,” Coco said, jumping down off the toilet. “I'll go up and tell them to play for time by singing some carols—”

I was following her out of the stall when she stopped short and gasped. I bumped into her. She was rooted to the spot and barely felt it; I almost fell down.

“What do you mean, ‘Dita, you get into costume’?” Scrooge said, flickering slightly under the fluorescents. He was still dressed for the part and looking surprised and a little hurt. “I'm ready. Let's do this. Let's get 'er done.” He wafted through the men's room door. A second later, he was back. “Well? What are you waiting for?”

Coco's voice was very small. “But you're . . .”

“Dead, yeah, yeah, I know,” Scrooge said impatiently. “So what? I'm a stiff, not an amnesiac. I still know all my lines.”

Coco and I looked at each other. Then we were racing up to the stage.

Ghosts can be a major pain in the ass to work with, but there are certain situations where they're lifesavers.

They all knew the moment Scrooge died. Fezziwig and Co. immediately organized themselves into a choral group and performed a selection of in-period holiday songs, mostly a cappella, jingling bells to keep time. They were still at it when Scrooge got himself into position on the set. I'd have thought the audience would have been getting restless but Fezziwig and Co. had outdone themselves in the heavenly choir department. English folk songs are not my favorite kind

of music but even I felt a little sorry when their image faded away and the lights came up on Scrooge's office.

I was also a little worried. Well, more than a little. We hadn't raised Scrooge's ghost; he was there apparently by sheer strength of will. As long as his strength held out—which is to say, as long as he stayed psyched about what he was doing—he'd be fine. But it's like if you decided to try juggling and somehow just *did* it—three objects, four objects, even five. You're all jazzed for a while at discovering this brilliant skill. But you're not used to it and you start to feel the strain in your arms and shoulders. Then you realize that you went into it without knowing how to pace yourself, how to slow down, or how to keep your muscles from cramping. When it finally dawns on you that you have no idea what you're doing, you drop everything. And then later, you try to do it again but you can't figure out how because you just *did* it the first time without thinking—you get the idea.

Fortunately, Scrooge wasn't juggling without a net, to mix a metaphor. Even a prima donna like Marley would share the spotlight with him, yielding focus if necessary. Because once the curtain goes up, the show must go on.

Marley pulled out all the stops on his entrance. He was so ghastly-looking, the whole audience gasped as soon as he appeared. The chains were thicker and noisier, the moans were louder and more painful, and his voice was so sepulchral, I was afraid the kids in the audience might start crying. All his emoting out-shined Scrooge sometimes to the point of near-invisibility (although I must admit that when he said, "Mankind was my business!" the hairs on the back of my neck stood up). But he didn't overwhelm Scrooge completely—he let Scrooge affect him. It was all much more dramatic than it had been in rehearsal and I wondered what the rest of the live cast would make of this.

*The rest of the live cast.* Some of whom might want to go the men's room, where we had left Scrooge. I ran back downstairs, although I really had no idea what I was going to do.

The sign on the men's room door said 'OUT OF ORDER, USE LADIES' in Coco's unmistakable hand. I went in; no legs were visible under the still-closed stall door so I took a look over the top from next door again. Scrooge was now seated in a full lotus. I winced; I've never been able to manage a full lotus and I was pretty sure Scrooge couldn't have, either. But I couldn't argue with Coco's solution—it was practical for keeping him hidden and for a little boost on the mystic plane. I just hoped none of the cast got too nosy.

I managed to get back upstairs in time to see Scrooge and Christmas Past flying in a slow circle over the stage before floating gently down together.

*Oh my God*, I thought, feeling what Coco refers to as a great rush of shit to the heart. It was how I felt when we found out about the curse. Except for the ghosts, there had been no flying by any of the living cast. How the blue blazing seven hells were we going to explain that to anyone? There was a ringing in my ears as I started to black out.

The next thing I knew I was sitting on the floor with Coco propping me up. "You almost fell face first onto the stage!" she whispered. "What's wrong with you?"

"Scrooge was flying," I said weakly.

"So he was flying! Get a grip!"

"But how do we explain—"

"Who cares? Pull yourself together or that'll be the least of our worries!" She dragged me to my feet and pushed me back in the wings so that I wouldn't upstage anyone with an unscheduled entrance if I did faint.

I tried as hard as I could to pull myself together, but every time I thought I might be steady, Scrooge would do something else only a ghost could do—he'd float in mid-air or walk through a solid object onstage—and I'd nearly wet myself. It was all very well for Coco to throw caution to the winds, I thought, being so intoxicated with the production and Scrooge in particular, who had achieved in his afterlife what had eluded him in real life—i.e., real connection with the rest of the cast, living and otherwise. But I couldn't take any pleasure in it. Tonight's triumph would last only

until the curtain call. There was a dead body in the men's room and it couldn't stay hidden behind an OUT OF ORDER sign forever. And once everyone knew, it would sap all the enjoyment out of what had been a happy evening for everyone.

By the time Scrooge awoke reformed on Christmas morning, I had gone from terrified to numb. Then I discovered I had one last burst of panic in me, when Scrooge was supposed to lift Tiny Tim up in his arms so the boy could deliver the last line of the show: *God bless us, everyone!*

Ghosts can do a lot of things but manipulating inanimate objects in the material world is dicey—sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. And they can't touch living people at all. It's impossible.

I held my breath, wondering what Scrooge was going to do—

—then let it out in a rush when I saw him pick up Tiny Tim and perch him on his shoulder.

Tiny Tim smiled beatifically and said, "God bless us, everyone!", and there wasn't a dry eye in the house. Even the living cast believed that was what they had just seen onstage.

"Glamour," Coco said as we watched everyone take their bows. "Come on, illusion-casting is Spells and Whistles 101."

"That was some pretty major illusion," I said. "You even fooled Tiny Tim."

"I got by with a little ghostly help from our friends."

"How about the dead body in the men's room?" I asked. "You got a glamour for that, too?"

"No," she said. "Tact."

We kept the cast out of the men's room by saying one of the toilets had overflowed, and sent them all off to the after-show party in the cafeteria. Then my sister found the fire marshal on duty and had a word with him. After that, it was ridiculously easy.

It shouldn't have been.

Everyone at the party wanted to know where he was—we put them off, saying he was on the phone with a relative. Finally, the fire marshal said Scrooge had been called away on a family emergency.

Bob Cratchit twigged first, but then, he was a cop, after all. Fortunately, he had the good sense not to spill the beans. I did my best to dodge him; he could talk to Coco, I thought, she was Explanation Woman. I was just going to smile and nod, eat snickerdoodles and gingerbread cookies, drink watery fruit punch out of waxy paper cups (no booze on school property), and wait for the night to be over.

As if. Bob Cratchit ambushed me as I came out of the ladies' room off the cafeteria.

“You’ve got to relax or you’re gonna give the whole thing away.”

“The *whole* thing?” *Oh my God*, I thought, *what does he know?*

He moved so that he was blocking my view of the cafeteria. “See, that’s what I’m talking about. You just went *white*, like you’d seen a ghost.”

The power of speech deserted me. I could only stare up at him with my mouth hanging open.

“You *gotta* pull it together or everyone’s going to know there’s something wrong,” he told me. And then, unbelievably, he put his arm around my shoulders and walked me back into the ladies’. “Look, I know it’s a shock to find a body, especially when it’s someone you know, but you guys did the absolute right thing.”

“We did?”

“You kept anyone else from finding out what happened to Steve. We can maintain the cover story till after Christmas—”

“We can?” I could hear how stupid I sounded.

“*We* can,” he said. “After Christmas, we’ll tell everyone he passed away peacefully in his sleep.”

“Who did?” I seemed to be getting stupider by the moment.

“Steve,” Cratchit said patiently. “Scrooge?” He took me by the shoulders and looked into my eyes. “You’re in a state of shock. Maybe you should just go home and lie down.”

“Maybe I should,” I said.

“Yeah, I think that’s best,” he said. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have gotten after you like that. You and your sister worked miracles with this play. And I gotta say, Steve gave the performance of a lifetime.”

“He sure did, didn’t he?” Now I felt myself perking up.

“Yeah, he was really something. All that stuff he did with the ghosts, I was blown away just watching from the wings. It must have knocked the audience dead. Damn, bad choice of words,” he added quickly.

“No, it’s okay,” I said, smiling as energy flowed back into me. “And I’m glad you talked to me. I was feeling kinda shell-shocked.”

“Hey, I’d’ve felt the same,” he said. “I can’t tell you how much I admire you two, not only for putting on probably the best Christmas show this town has ever seen, but also for making sure what happened to Steve didn’t take the shine off it. If it weren’t for your quick thinking, the only thing anyone would remember about this would be how Steve died on the toilet. He deserves better than that.”

“You all do,” I said. “So let’s go back out there and celebrate.”

“Are you sure?” he asked. “Because I could run you home—”

I shook my head. “Steve deserves better than that.”

We stayed till the custodial staff called a halt and threw everyone out. The Cratchits invited us over for post-party drinks but we begged off, saying we were exhausted. Mrs. Cratchit looked even more exhausted than we felt, and she was obviously relieved when we said no.

We were too tired even to remove the “projectors” and toss them in the back of the bus. “Tomorrow’s Christmas,” I reminded Coco as we let ourselves into the condo. “Which means we probably won’t be able to get them till the day after.”

“So we’ll stay for Christmas,” she said. “I think I’d rather spend it here rather than on the interstate.”

I went into the living room and found CNN playing to the empty sofa. “Jeez, sis, you gotta be more careful. We don’t want them deducting for the electricity bill,” I said.

“I didn’t leave the TV on,” she said.

“Neither did I.”

We looked at each other, then sat down on the couch while she used the remote. We went through a dozen channels that were off the air. I was about to tell her to give up when suddenly Scrooge’s face was beaming at us, several times larger than life.

“Hey, sorry to leave you a canned message,” he said. “I wanted to say goodbye live and in person—well, in person. Or personally. Or, well, you know what I mean. Anyway, this was *some* experience. I had my suspicions about you two and your ‘projections’”—his image made air quotes. “I didn’t think they could possibly be that good. I thought there was some kind of trick and I was afraid you guys were gonna take off with the town’s money and maybe a bunch of stuff that wasn’t nailed down and when the curtain went up for the play, we’d all just be standing on stage like dummies, wondering what to do.

“Well, I was right—it *was* a trick. I just didn’t know what kind. I gotta thank you for saving my dignity. I know it was quite a shock for you. But not any more than it was for me, let me tell ya. I was just minding my own business—doing some business—and all of a sudden, *blam!* It was like a grenade went off in my chest.

“But as soon as it did, I knew everything—about the ghosts, I mean, that they were real ghosts. And I thought, man, if I can just stay connected to the play and the other actors, including the ghosts, then I won’t let anyone down. And it worked.

“Of course, I had some help. I owe Marley and the Christmases for helping me stay focused. And you two for giving me a chance. I always wanted to be in a Christmas play. Sounds kinda silly, I guess, a big ol’ jarhead wanting to be in a Christmas play like a little kid. It’s just one of those things I always wanted to do but I was too shy. And Christmas is for children of all ages, right?”

“Anyway, I’d love to do it again for you, like Marley and the others, but I can’t. I’m supposed to . . .” he hesitated, looking pained. “I can’t tell you. Just that this is goodbye. Merry Christmas, ladies, and thanks again. Oh, and hey—really sorry about that curse of yours. I don’t think it’s right that you should have to answer for something your great-grandfather did. That really sucks the big green turnip.”

The screen went blank.

““The big green turnip’?” I said. “That’s not nearly obscene enough for a Marine.””

“Yeah, but it’s Christmas,” Coco replied. And she was right; it was.

A few hours before sunrise, a surprise blizzard hit and we were snowed in for two days. Despite that, we managed to be gone by the time the news about Steve broke. The Shop-A-Rama website did a big article about him, as well as the play and us (complete with some video the trembling intern had taken). The article, presumably by Mr. Shop-A-Rama, compared Steve Rock to George Bailey in *It’s A Wonderful Life*, which I thought was *way* off. I mean, it was *A Christmas Carol*, for God’s sake—there were easier parallels. But strained or not, the piece was a tear-jerker and both Coco and I were glad we hadn’t had to experience its effects firsthand.

In a perfect world—or plane of existence—that would have put paid to at least half of our curse. I mean, jeez, even the guy who died went away happy. Instead, it put us exactly 17.45% to the good, according to the email from the Powers-That-Are (if people only knew how much cloud there is in cloud computing). Well, I have yet to hear about any realm where the scales always balance the way they should. I’ve never known a ghost who wasn’t full of complaints, ours in

particular. The way they groan and moan (especially moan), you'd think they were the only ones who ever had to labor under a curse. Like being alive is all just beer and skittles.

Not that I don't want to be alive, of course. But at least *they* know exactly why they've been cursed. Coco and I won't find out till we pay it off.

Now is that fair? I ask you!



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