

## Charity Begins at Christmas

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Billy is going to pay for this, if it's the last thing I do. After all these years of playing Bob Cratchit to my Ebenezer Scrooge, you would think he'd realize that nothing will ever get me to change my mind about holidays in general and Christmas in particular. But no, he keeps hoping that somehow he'll find a way to get me to reform.

He's never made a secret of his disapproval of my lack of holiday cheer, but honestly, this is a bit much. And yes, I was more than a bit sarcastic during the staff meeting when he was discussing plans for the upcoming office Christmas party. But doesn't this qualify as cruel and unusual punishment? And that joke about Mrs. Claus, the travelling toy salesman and the North Pole was pretty funny if I do say so myself.

A solid week of Kris Kringle duty. How on earth did Billy get that approved for an agent with as much experience as I have? What qualifications does it take to stand on a street corner swinging a damn bell and watching people drop money into a bucket? Well, he can make me stand out here all he wants, but it's not going to change the way I feel.

I can't believe how many people are out shopping tonight. It's only the first week of December; surely they've got better things to do than fighting through the crowds, buying meaningless presents that will be forgotten the day after Christmas. Or maybe they don't. What a sad commentary on the state of their lives.

What these people need is some perspective. I have no plans to start my shopping until a few days before Christmas. And with a little luck I'll break last year's record and finish it all in less than an hour. Thank goodness for scarves. One size fits all, everyone needs one, and the store provides the gift-wrapping. Who says that Christmas has to be a stressful time of year? If you keep the whole thing in perspective and do a little planning, the holidays hardly interrupt your life at all.

Just how much longer do I have to stand out here, anyway? My feet are killing me and it's getting colder. Damn. A quick glance at my watch shows there's still an hour to go before Jenkins relieves me. At least there's a pickup scheduled a few minutes from now. That should help break the monotony.

Right on time a van pulls up to the curb, its side panel emblazoned with the logo of the charity I'm ostensibly collecting for. Of course it's Francine who gets out. All week long she's taken advantage of every opportunity to tease me about the costume my cover requires. Why should tonight be any different? Her lips are twitching in amusement as she walks up and replaces my full contribution bucket with an empty one.

For a moment, I think she's simply going to complete the exchange and leave, but of course that's not going to happen. There's a definite smirk on her face as she glances at me. Quietly enough so the surrounding shoppers can't overhear, she asks, "So, Santa, is that a lump of coal in your stocking or are you just glad to see me?"

"Let's just say I'm not having any problems figuring out on which side of the naughty-nice list you fit, Desmond," I tell her. Nodding towards the container in her hands, I add, "We had a couple of good donations this afternoon."

I have to admit, a Christmas charity box is the perfect way to pass information during the holiday season. An informant simply folds a note into some paper money, makes a casual donation while out Christmas shopping, then goes on his way with no one else the wiser.

Francine's not about to get distracted by shoptalk though. She takes a step back and looks me over appraisingly. "You know, I always wondered what you'd look like in a beard. Maybe this could be a whole new look for you."

I open my mouth, intending to offer up a suitable retort, but am interrupted by a blonde and pink missile on a collision course with my legs. Looking down, I see a little girl, her face aglow with childish enthusiasm, clutching at my pant legs hard enough for me to wonder if my suspenders are up to their job.

"Santa, Santa, Santa!!" she chirps, jumping up and down in excitement. She's been eating some sort of candy; her fingers are leaving sticky marks all over my costume. I finally manage to shake loose her death grip on my legs, only to have her start tugging on my coat. Trying in vain to calm her down, I bend down to be on her level. The next thing I know, her candy cane is firmly enmeshed within my beard. Great. Just great.

I can hear Francine laughing as I try to extricate the child's treat from my beard. Not that she's bothering to offer any help. "See you back at the North Pole," she calls over her shoulder as she heads back to the van, leaving me to deal with the overly enthusiastic child, who is now rapidly firing question after question about the reindeer and elves.

To my relief, the girl's mother finally makes an appearance. "Megan, I told you not to let go of my hand," she scolds her daughter. "And look what you've done to Santa." She apologetically digs through her purse for some coins, drops them into the collection bucket, then takes her daughter by the hand and leads her away.

"Merry Christmas," I manage to choke out, tossing the now fuzzy candy cane into a nearby trashcan and looking at my sticky gloves. Children. Maybe my uncle was right and there should be a mandatory leash law, at least until they're old enough to behave themselves.

I swear, I'm going to put in for hazard pay for this assignment. Closing my eyes, I try to think of something more pleasant. Home. In just over an hour I'll be back in my apartment. I picture myself there, sitting on the couch, glass of Scotch in hand, dinner warming up in the oven, waiting for Lisa to arrive. Of course, if our last date was any indication, we won't be thinking about food until much later in the evening.

The roughness of the fake beard and moustache tickle my face as I start to smile. Monday evening I had arrived at Lisa's apartment, anticipating an evening out at my favourite club. But as soon as I'd entered the front door, she'd flung her arms around me, her lips finding mine in an enthusiastic kiss. As we broke apart, she'd pointed upwards, indicating a sprig of mistletoe dangling overhead. I couldn't help but chuckle as I saw that she'd carefully suspended half a dozen bunches marking a path to her bedroom.

Going out to a club was suddenly the last thing I wanted to do. Following the trail of mistletoe, we'd kissed our way across the room. Once at the door to her

bedroom, Lisa had turned me around so I could see the largest bunch of all suspended over her bed.

"It's going to take a while to do that justice," I'd murmured, brushing my lips against hers again and inhaling the intoxicating scent of her perfume.

"I've got faith in you," she'd purred, pressing herself against me again. "Besides, it's not like you need an excuse."

"Excuse me...excuse me, Santa? Sir?" My eyes fly open as I'm jolted out of my reverie by the sound of someone trying to get my attention.

I look down to see a boy around seven or eight years old staring at me curiously and I wonder just how long he's been standing there. And why he looks so familiar.

"Ho, ho, ho," I say rather weakly. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas," he answers back. "Could I ask you a favour, please? Can I just stand here with you for a few minutes? My mom's going to pick up a few presents over there." He blushes as he indicates a nearby store, its windows displaying various articles of women's clothing, including some rather intriguing lingerie. "She said I could stay out here, if that was okay with you."

As I glance over at the woman waiting a few yards away, I realize why the boy seems so familiar. Amanda King is standing there, several shopping bags in hand. I might have known.

I turn back to Jamie - at least I think it's Jamie, Phillip's the older one, right? - and nod my head. "Umm, sure, that would be okay."

Jamie waves at his mother, who smiles, waves back and disappears into the store.

I don't believe this. Has to be a coincidence. Billy hasn't managed to find a reason to call Amanda into the Agency for the last two weeks, so there's no way she'd have known I'd be here tonight. Or maybe I did something in a past life and am fated to have Amanda King stalk me for the rest of this one. But what could I possibly have done to deserve this?

Shaking my head, I turn back to Jamie. Now what? Nothing in my Agency training seems to be of any help at the moment. If I was suddenly confronted by a Prime Minister, or an ambassador, or even a double agent, this would be a piece of cake. But what am I supposed to say to this kid?

Before I can think of anything we're interrupted by the arrival of a pair of little girls and their mother. Thankfully they don't seem to be armed with candy canes.

"Merry Christmas, girls," I say. Great. Now I'm outnumbered by children. Could this get any worse?

"Santa, I've been a good girl this year," the first one says proudly.

"I've been better," her sister interrupts.

"No, I have!"

"I'm sure you've both been very good." I try to cut the argument short.

"I want you to bring me a Cabbage Patch Doll - but one with brown hair and braids, not one with pigtails."

"I want one with blonde hair and a pink party dress."

"And I want a Cabbage Patch Carriage so I can take my doll for a walk."

"Well, I want a My Little Pony and a stable for him to live in."

"I want a Rainbow Brite like my friend Teresa has."

"I want two Rainbow Brites."

It's like watching a tennis match. Except that instead of a ball, they're lobbing greed back and forth. As soon as one pauses for breath the other one starts up. I swear they don't let up for five solid minutes. And their mother just stands there as if expecting all these toys is the most natural thing in the world. I bet she buys them the whole lot, too.

Funny how it doesn't take long to figure some people out. I've only seen Amanda with her boys a few times, but I'm sure she'd never let them end up like these two spoiled little brats.

"I'll uh, see what I can do," I eventually manage to break in. "But remember, Santa's only got one sleigh."

Finally they leave - without making a donation, I notice - and I'm actually relieved to only have Jamie to deal with.

"So," I say rather awkwardly, "umm... what do you want for Christmas?"

Immediately I realize this was a mistake.

There's more than a touch of scorn in his voice as he informs me, "I don't buy that Santa stuff. My brother says it's just for babies and girls."

I should have known. Jamie's what? Eight? Of course he doesn't believe in Santa Claus anymore. I was long past that sort of thing when I was his age. Actually, by then I was living with my uncle and quite frankly was long past believing in almost anything.

"You can still tell me what you want for Christmas," I say. "Doesn't mean you believe Santa's going to bring it to you."

"Okay, I guess," he answers a bit doubtfully. He pauses for a few moments then says, "I'd like a new skateboard. My grandma's boyfriend stepped on mine a few weeks ago and broke it. Dean tried to fix it again but it's just not the same."

"Who's Dean? The brother who doesn't believe in Santa?" I ask, unable to stop myself.

He shakes his head. "My mom's boyfriend."

"He sounds pretty nice - fixing your skateboard and all."

Jamie shrugs. "He's okay. I guess."

"So do you have any other brothers and sisters? Besides the one who told you that Santa isn't real?"

He shakes his head. "Just Phillip."

"And what does he want for Christmas?"

"A Captain Galaxy action figure. But since he doesn't believe in you, maybe he shouldn't get it until his birthday." He grins up at me.

"What about the rest of your family? Does your mother need anything?"

"I heard Grandma talking on the phone the other day. She thinks Dean is going to give Mom an engagement ring for Christmas."

"Really?" I can't help but ask. An engagement ring? I honestly didn't think things were that serious between Amanda and good-old-what's-his-name. I've tailed them on a few outings - hey, background checks are standard procedure for new recruits. Sure, I wasn't the agent assigned to do Amanda's, but I'm just looking out for myself - and quite honestly I don't see the two of them together. There just aren't any... sparks, I guess. Then again, it's Amanda's life. If she wants to marry the weatherman and die of boredom in the suburbs, that's her business. So why are the next words out of my mouth, "So, uh, do you think she'll accept?"

Jamie looks at me a bit oddly then shrugs his shoulders. "I dunno. She doesn't seem to get too excited when he comes over to see her. Maybe Santa should bring her a new boyfriend."

"Jamie!"

I look up to see the subject of our conversation heading towards us.

"Thanks so much for taking care of Jamie," she says, fishing a few bills out of her purse to drop into the collection bucket.

"You're welcome. Merry Christmas!" I mumble as I duck my head so Amanda can't see my face. It's dark, and with the beard and moustache, she probably wouldn't recognize me anyway, but still I don't want to take any chances.

I watch as the two of them head down the sidewalk. Amanda's now carrying several bags from the clothing store. My eyes wander back to the lingerie display, and I'm startled to find myself picturing her modelling some of the more enticing garments.

Where the hell did that image come from? Must be because I've got a date tonight. Besides, I'm sure Amanda was simply buying presents for other people. Or maybe something flannel and discreet for herself. But that cream coloured negligee really is stunning. I bet Amanda... Lisa, I mean Lisa, would look great in that.

Luckily Jenkins arrives before my imagination gets too far out of hand. Free at last! I happily hand off that ridiculous bell to him and head down the block to my car. As I pass a toy store, I'm struck with the sudden impulse to go in and buy a skateboard and a Captain Galaxy figure. I stop myself after one step, shaking my

head. Lisa will be at my apartment soon - I need to go home, shower and change. I do not need to buy Jamie and Phillip King Christmas presents. Besides if I did that, I'd have to get Amanda a new boyfriend too. And where exactly would I find one of those?

**The End**