

A CHRISTMAS CAROL



JIM THOMPSON

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by

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CHAPTER ONE

SCROOGE

I looked out the office window and saw big soft flakes of snow drifting down. It tightened a knot in my belly. Slippery roads meant the vans would be moving slower -- and because it was Christmas tomorrow they wouldn't be runnin' again 'til Thursday.

Goddam, I thought as I poured myself a stiff one, at this rate we'll be falling behind on a couple of contracts.

Even if I could get a few guys to work tomorrow, it wouldn't do any good. This Christmas crap ... there'd be no one to take delivery. How the hell was a guy supposed to keep his business on the rails anyway? You worked your butt to the bone and they just stuck obstacles in your way at every turn.

A whole day going to waste tomorrow and everyone -- the drivers, the warehousemen, even Cratchitt here in the office -- all of 'em expectin' to leave early today. It's Christmas Eve, they'd whine, we want to get home to our families.

Hell, I thought bitterly as I took a drink, it's just another Wednesday and I've got contracts to fill. All of 'em lookin' for some kind of bonus, but do you see a one of 'em offering to help me out? Givin' me a hand? Bah ... I tossed off the rest of the drink and poured another.

The phone rang and I looked at the clock on the wall. Three. One of the drivers, I guessed, conveniently "stuck" in the snow ... out near some roadhouse, no doubt. It made me sick. All of 'em out to squeeze me for an easy buck.

A man could work hard to build something up and the leeches just took hold and fed on his lifeblood, catchin' an easy ride on the gravy train.

The phone kept on ringing. I glanced out the door. No sign of Cratchitt. He must've been down on the warehouse floor. Best man on the payroll – for what it was worth. Loyal to the company for years. At least he'd always put in a full day's work. Most days, that was. But of course, today was Christmas Eve....

I lifted the handset.

"Yeah?" I snapped irritably.

"Mr Scrooge?" The voice was kind of silky and hesitant. It made me think of the soft flesh that must be holding the phone at the other end of the line.

"Yeah," I said. "What's on your mind?"

"You don't know me, Mr Scrooge," the babe said. She sounded like she was a blonde, all smooth curves and lightly tanned skin, and she was gaining confidence as she talked.

"Maybe we can fix that," I said, thinking there might be a way to get my mind off this Christmas business.

"I was hoping you'd see it that way," she said, her voice low and husky. "I think we can do a little business together."

"Oh yeah?" I said. "What kind of business you got in mind?"

I tossed back my drink and reached for the bottle.

"Something profitable for both of us," she said, and I started to get annoyed. She was being too cute. I always want the other guy to lay it on the line, play it straight just like I do.

"Spit it out, doll," I said. "What's your pitch?"

"Insurance," she said and she laughed, a sound that tightened the skin all down my back. I felt chilled, like there was suddenly a crack in the window and the snow-cold air was leaking in. "Life insurance, you might say," she said.

I didn't like the sound of her anymore – babes always meant trouble and I made it

a point to shy away from them -- but somehow I couldn't hang up the phone.

"You got somethin' to say," I said, "just say it. I'm a very busy man." And I hated the way my voice sounded weak. I poured a stiff one and tossed it back.

"Just two things," she said. "Number one: Jake Marley."

The temperature dropped a few degrees.

"And number two: ten thousand dollars."

The line was quiet awhile. I could hear some voices out in the warehouse, someone laughing. Just then Cratchitt stepped into the office. He looked at me and stopped there in the doorway, kind of uneasy.

"Mr Scrooge," he said, ducking his head the way he does -- he's soft, that Cratchitt, weak to the core -- just the way I like the people who work for me to be. "Is something wrong?"

I waved him away and he faded right out again.

I needed time to think, but how could I when I could hear her breathing there in the emptiness down the line?

Marley. I hadn't heard that name in a long time, not since that little difficulty last Christmas.

Marley. Strange his name would come up again today -- today of all days....

No one around the company ever talked about him, not with me around anyway. The sudden loss of a business partner was a touchy subject -- people shied away from it; kind of like talkin' about death around a fresh widow. Specially when the loss occurred under such questionable circumstances.

I coughed to clear my throat, but my first words came out in a kind of stumble.

"Y-you know w-where he i-is?" I said, my brain working fast. Just who was this babe and what did she really know -- or think she knew?

She laughed, a smooth liquid kind of sound.

"I guess I do," she said. And she laughed again. "What's left of him, that is."

The chill was getting worse.

"Okay, doll," I said.

"Call me Carol," she said.

"Okay," I said and I felt my strength starting to come back. They were always lookin' for new obstacles to throw up in front of you, tryin' to trip a guy. But I'd dealt with 'em in the past. I could deal with 'em again. Sure, it seemed like an uphill fight and maybe you'd never get to the top -- maybe there was no top -- but I still had a lot of wind in me yet. It would take more than one babe with a smooth way of talkin' to beat me down.

"Okay," I said, "you name the place and you name the time."

She did.

I had seven hours to work it out, to gain the edge I needed. Hell, that was plenty of time. And tomorrow was a holiday.

I tossed back another drink and began to relax.

Outside, the show was falling thicker.

Like a shroud tastefully concealing a battered corpse.

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CHAPTER TWO

CRATCHITT

Bob Cratchitt sat back from his desk and rubbed his eyes. At his left hand was a thick pile of invoices; in front of him, a heavy ledger. The afternoon was growing late and he hadn't finished bringing the accounts up to date. But he smiled to himself.

That phone call had made the boss edgy. And whatever discomfited Eb Scrooge served only to please Bob Cratchitt.

How many years had he worked for Midwest Wholesalers? he asked himself as he pushed his chair back and went to get his coat. Ten? Fifteen? Somehow he had lost track as the days ground him down.

It hadn't mattered at first, not much. There was his wife Mary to take care of, and then the children, one after the other -- Belinda, Peter, the twins, Tim, little Tim -- a new one every year it seemed, and the weight of responsibility had nailed him more firmly into his position at Midwest.

But he really hadn't minded, not back then when it started, nor in the years that followed. It had all seemed to be worth it and old Jake Marley was a good boss, a decent man who treated you fair and passed on rewards when they were due.

Cratchitt had gone from driver to warehousemen to dispatcher -- all the way up to chief clerk, keeper of the books. A position of great responsibility.

He locked the door behind him and pulled his collar up against the snow-bearing wind. It was going to be a bitter night; you could taste it in the air. He started the walk back across town -- his car had been up on blocks for six months now; there just wasn't enough money to get the broken axle fixed, not with little Tim's doctor bills to pay.

But he didn't mind. The walk would clear his head, freshen him up.

From his position perched over the books, he saw everything that happened to Midwest reflected in the columns that unfolded before him in the big ledgers. He could see when a lean time was coming and when things were getting fat. And he could see when things weren't quite right, skewing off center.

It sometimes troubled him, all that knowledge. What should he do with it? Who could he reveal those little secrets to? Old Jake Marley -- when he had still been around? Eb Scrooge? Certainly not Eb Scrooge. Cratchitt had never warmed to the junior partner. But how could he ever be really sure of things? And if he wasn't certain of the source of the trouble, how could he trust anyone?

He had finally told Mary and she counselled silence. He mustn't risk a good position, get himself canned -- for what? A question of principle. Think of the kids, she had said, think of me. Think of little Tim with his twisted hips and his shrivelled leg. If Bob lost his job, they'd all be out on the street.

And that would surely be the end of little Tim.

So he had kept silent and then Jake Marley had disappeared, along with a heap of cash. It was a shattering blow and it left Bob with a great bitterness at the back of his throat. It broke the back of his faith and left him with a sense of pointlessness. What the hell was he working for? A man like Marley, an honest and upstanding man, a pillar of the community -- skimming the company's funds for a year before slithering away with a sackful of dough.

Bob Cratchitt ducked in through a door. A small bell rang out sharply like a memory of betrayal. He nodded to the butcher and gratefully received the brown paper package which was passed across the counter.

There were still a few decent things left in life, he guessed. You did a guy a little favour, speeded up a delivery for him, and he'd maybe give you a little something in

return. But he knew now that such acts were the exception. The rule was written all too plain....

Eb Scrooge had played it well on the surface, shrugging it all off with a little laugh to hide the pain people thought he must be feeling. But Bob knew him well. He could see that there was no pain beneath the surface, just a gloating satisfaction that Jake Marley's name was now mud.

Eb Scrooge had always fallen short of Marley, the less popular man, the less trusted man.

But look who's laughing now, Bob thought.

Sure, Eb, you can laugh. You can laugh your goddam face off. -

It didn't mean a thing any more, not to Bob Cratchitt. Honesty. Decency. They were just empty words. Now he just did his job, tried to regularize the increasing confusion in the accounts. He took the blows that hammered him into his place -- the cut in pay because of the fall-off in profits in the last quarter (despite an increase in stock turnover), the longer hours he had to work ... he took it all and he took it in silence because what else was there to do? He had his responsibilities....

Eb Scrooge had left the office early this afternoon, soon after getting that phone call. Bob smiled to himself as he pushed on through the snow. He recalled Scrooge's agitation.

Well, let him stew, he thought. He'll have all of tomorrow to think it over while everyone else was home with their family, celebrating the holiday.

He opened the door and stepped into the warmth of his own family and his smile widened as the kids all crowded round. He passed the parcel to Peter who eagerly hurried the turkey away into the kitchen.

And then, washing all thoughts of Eb Scrooge out of his mind, Bob Cratchitt knelt down to embrace the small figure who hobbled up to him on his crutches. Little Tim

grinned up at him.

"It's Christmas Eve, pa!" he laughed, "Christmas Eve!"

"It sure is, Tim," he said, feeling the familiar catch at the back of his throat.

"Maybe this year, pa," little Tim rushed on, "maybe this year, pa, I been prayin' and maybe this year we'll get that miracle!"

Bob Cratchitt hugged the little boy to him and looked up to see tears on Mary's face. They were answered by ones of his own, blurring his vision.

Yes, he thought. Maybe this year we'll get that miracle.

And for once it didn't feel like a monstrous lie.

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CHAPTER THREE

SCROOGE

I left early, telling Cratchitt to lock up when he was done. I had to move quickly, I decided. I couldn't afford to take any chances. What if this babe really had something on me? I'd have to pay her off. Sure, I'd give her the money if I had to. But one way or another, I'd pay her more than she bargained for. When she tried to put the squeeze on Eb Scrooge she wrote her own ticket to the next world.

I drove over to the bank first and took the ten thousand out of my safe deposit box. There was plenty left over if she managed to slip away from me. But I wasn't about to let that happen. You can't let a blackmailer get away with it -- that just encourages them to come back for more.

I stopped off at the liquor store and bought a couple of quarts -- a little something to stave off the cold of the coming night.

As I drove out of town I pulled the cork on the first bottle and tipped it back. The warmth of the whisky bathed my throat and lit a fire deep in my belly. I was starting to feel pretty good.

The car's headlights punched ragged holes in the swirling snow and I rolled on through the dark. I hadn't felt this good in a long time. A man needs a challenge to keep his edge. For a year now -- ever since Jake disappeared -- I'd had nothing worse to deal with than a few sullen looks from Cratchitt. Maybe I was even gettin' a little soft -- the call had really thrown me for a few minutes.

But now I had a grip on things again. I was back in control.

I almost ran past the turn to the old quarry road. It was hard to make out where I

was in the snow. I swung off the highway and the wheels bounced over the frozen gravel, cutting paths through the white shroud. I drove slowly, picking my way by memory.

Memory....

I really hadn't thought about Jake Marley for a long time.

Hell, I could hardly remember what the pious old bastard looked like. That greasy smile, that white hair standing out from the sides of his head in ragged tufts. I had grown to hate his small-time thinking those last few years. I had plans, I was an ideas man -- I came up with ways to make Midwest pay and pay better than it ever did before. But Marley always hung back, always whined about loyalty -- loyalty to our clients and our suppliers and our employees....

He made me sick, sounding like an old maid tryin' to run a tea party.

But he wasn't in the way any more and no one seemed to remember the good name he'd always carried around with him like a boy scout merit badge. All they remembered now was that he was an old hypocrite, an embezzler, a thief who had vanished into the night -- a night just like this -- Christmas Eve....

And that suited me just fine.

I got a little sympathy out of it and -- more important -- I was left with a free hand to run the company the way I wanted to.

And, boy, had I prospered!

Things had never been better for Eb Scrooge and I intended to see that they'd stay that way.

I pulled over by the leafless trees at the top of the quarry and tipped back the bottle again.

Pulling my collar up, I stepped out of the car and took a look around. This was one of the loneliest places on this godless earth -- a bad mistake on her part, picking a

spot like this. On a night like this.

But I guess I knew why she'd done it. To prove she knew something. Not a lot, maybe. Maybe nothing too important. But something. Enough to bring me out here on a night like this.

It had been cold that other night too. Not this cold, sure, and there hadn't been so much snow on the ground. Just a biting wind and a knife-edge of moon that glinted off the black water in the quarry. Bottomless water, that's what everyone called it. If you went under down there, you'd just keep on going down and maybe never come up again.

I tilted the bottle and gulped a hot mouthful of whisky.

I coughed and the cough turned into a laugh. A private little joke, that.

Yeah, I guess old Jake Marley had proved that one all right.

Still laughing, I went back to the car and settled down to wait.

I smiled at the snowy darkness.

I had whisky and my memories to keep me warm until the babe showed.

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CHAPTER FOUR

CAROL

She could feel their gaze on her, all of them staring like their eyes were starving dogs looking at a thick, juicy t-bone. But she was used to that. They always stared, wherever she went. Even when she was dressed to conceal the compact body that swelled richly at her hips and chest.

She sat in a booth at the back of the bar, leaning forward so her long red hair fell on either side of her face. She didn't want them to see her face. They would remember the body, but only as something they might dream about. It didn't matter. What was important was that they wouldn't see and remember her face, the wide depthless green eyes that sucked a guy in like Charybdis dragging down a helpless sailor.

She hunched over her drink and waited for the time to pass. Not too much longer and she would be gone. Only two of them had dared to risk an approach and both had turned back at the first touch of her frosty voice. Carol was a long-time expert at fending them off -- it was as easy for her to get rid of them as it was for her to suck them in.

She sipped her drink and smiled to herself. She felt a pleasant wave of anticipation like the thrill that comes with the touch of a talented lover.

She finished the drink and drew her coat around her, turning up the collar and tying her scarf over her hair and around her chin.

Their eyes followed her as she moved smoothly, almost floating across the stained, cigarette-littered floor, and slipped out the door into the darkness of the snow-choked night. She knew they would already be cracking jokes about her and that within a week each and every one of them would have conjured up an encounter in his

mind in which she submitted to his triumphant assault. But she didn't care. Their weakness was her strength.

Carol moved quickly around the corner from the bar and slipped behind the wheel of the sedan she had parked earlier on a side street. It was cold and the engine was reluctant to start. She sat for several minutes in the darkness, thinking over what was going to happen this evening. It was somehow comforting to be there inside the car that Jake had given her -- almost as if he was watching over her, guiding her. She was doing this as much for him -- for his memory -- as she was for herself.

She pulled away from the curb and headed out of town.

By the time she was out on the highway her sense of anger had begun to take over. There was no uneasiness now, no sign of nerves, just a cold determination to see this thing through, to see that Scrooge got what was coming to him.

It had been a long time since she'd been out this way -- a long time since she was in this town. She drove slowly.

Don't want to lose your way, now, girl, she thought to herself.

She had lost her way in the past, gone down wrong tracks and ended up in bad places. It had taken a bit of luck -- luck in the form of Jake Marley -- to set her back on the right road.

Keeping him in mind now would help her through this night -- and tomorrow ... well, tomorrow she would be starting all over again.

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CHAPTER FIVE

SCROOGE

I was half way through the second quart when the lights raked across the back window. I was feeling pretty good, warm from the inside. The night was slipping far away and I didn't feel the cold any more.

The car stopped behind mine and I waited.

The wind cut the air and I heard the slam of a door like a distant gunshot. The snow blew in ragged spirals through the beams of her lights.

I waited.

The cold air rushed in and snow settled in cold pinpoints on my skin. She slipped in the passenger door and I was wrapped in a cloud of perfume.

I turned slowly and took her in -- all of her -- smiling, almost tolerant, like I might do her a favour.

Her eyes were cold and deep -- like the water down there in the darkness of the quarry.

I raised the bottle and offered it to her.

She pushed it aside.

"Let's get down to business," she said, her voice all frost.

"Suit yourself," I said, tipping back the bottle. "Me, I sometimes like to mix a little pleasure with my business."

I let my eyes roam across her again. Even inside that fur coat you could make out the shape, the combination of curves that seemed just right -- just right to whet a man's appetite.

"What's your game, babe?" I asked.

"No game," she said, icy calm. "I'm here for Jake Marley."

"Marley!" I spat. "That old bastard's d---" I covered the slip with a quick cough.

She smiled slowly and it looked like she was sliding a shiv out into the light.

"Did he send you?" I snapped, getting kind of uneasy.

"Knock it off, Scrooge," she said. "We both know the score. You killed Jake. And you took the money."

I tipped back the bottle and took a gulp. I laughed, but it didn't sound natural, even to me.

"That's a hell of a thing to say," I said. "Another man might not take it so well, an accusation like that. But me -- hell, I'm pretty easy-going."

"You're a cold-blooded killer, Scrooge," she said, "and a low-down thief."

I pulled myself up in the seat. I didn't care for her tone, not one little bit.

"N-now look, b-babe," I began.

"No," she snapped and the word was like the flick of a blade against the skin of my throat, "you listen. Jake and I were close -- real close. He did a lot for me. He picked me up -- I'm not ashamed to admit it -- he lifted me out of the gutter and he set me straight. I loved Jake. It just about killed me when he disappeared -- we were planning to spend Christmas together and then he was just gone. It hit me hard and I cut out. I headed back east. It took a few months, but Jake's lawyer -- you know Kossmeyer, I guess; he's pretty damned persistent -- well, he tracked me down and he gave me a letter from Jake."

I took another pull at the bottle. This wasn't going the way it should. She was too much in control. I was being pushed, and I'm a man doesn't like to be pushed.

"He was on to you, Scrooge," she pushed on, "but Jake was a good man and he just couldn't bring himself to believe there was that much bad in another man. He

couldn't believe you were really stealing from the company, that you were making deals with criminals, taking in stolen goods and raking off the profits. That's why he had to confront you face to face. That's why he arranged to meet you last Christmas Eve. But he wasn't stupid. And that's why he wrote me a letter before he went to meet you – to meet you right here at the quarry."

"It's a mighty pretty story," I said and my throat was dry. "But no one'll believe it. They all know he took off with the money. They'll just think he tried to lay a false trail by writin' a letter like that. And anyway, who'd take the word of a bimbo?"

"Maybe no one will believe me," she said and it scared me how calm she sounded, like maybe there was an ace up her sleeve. "But," she went on, "they'll believe Bob Cratchitt when he shows them what's been going on in the company books."

"Cratchitt?" I gulped and tossed back another shot. So that little rat was in on this deal. The one guy who could really blow the lid off. Unless I could scare him back to what he should have stayed all along -- the creeping little clerk he'd always been for Jake Marley.

I smashed the bottle down over her head and she slumped into the corner of the seat.

She seemed awful heavy for such a compact babe -- as heavy as old Jake Marley himself had been -- as I dragged her out of the car and through the fresh, crisp snow to the edge of the quarry. I tipped her over the side into the darkness.

"Say hi to Jake for me," I said as I turned back to the car.

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I was feeling pretty pleased with myself as I drove back to town. I'd saved the ten thousand and I knew there'd be no new hitches. Cratchitt wouldn't say a word, not when

the babe didn't show with the dough. The scam could only work if the two of them showed up together to flash their evidence.

Yeah, I felt pretty good about the deal.

I parked at the side of my house, took the thick packet of bills out of the glove box and stepped out into the snow.

I didn't even see the blow coming, didn't hear any warning. Just something smashing into the back of my head, something hard enough to crush the bone.

I saw the money fly away and bury itself in the snow beneath some bushes.

I was dead before I hit the ground so I never felt the killer's hands going through my pockets.

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CHAPTER SIX

CRATCHITT

He slept uneasily, but it wasn't for the same reasons the kids were restless. It wasn't anticipation of Christmas that made Bob Cratchitt toss back and forth in his bed that night.

It was fear and uncertainty. He had never been this close to so much money before. It was being held out there, just beyond his reach, and he didn't know if it was ever going to come within his grasp.

What if Marley's girlfriend split with the whole pile? What if she got caught? What if Eb Scrooge refused to pay up? Could they push it any farther?

He tossed and turned and drifted in and out of uneasy dreams. It *had* to go the way they'd planned it. He had to get that money. It would be enough -- he'd checked that out -- there was a surgeon in New York who could do the job, straighten out little Tim's hip and replace that withered little leg with an artificial one that would have the boy up and around and playing just like the other kids. All he needed was his share of the blackmail money.

Bob was jerked out of a confused half-waking dream by a sound from downstairs -- the front door thudded shut as he stared into the darkness. His heart quickened its pace and his mouth went dry.

He eased off the bed and slipped out into the hall.

Silence.

Had she come here? That wasn't in the deal. They were supposed to meet in the morning to make the split. He should never have trusted her. Should never have left so

much of the deal in her hands.

But it was too late now.

He moved down the stairs, breathing hard.

Maybe it was Scrooge down there. Maybe the whole deal had gone sour.

Cratchitt had been an honest man all his life. He should have known better than to try to get mixed up in anything crooked. Hell, they were a happy enough family, weren't they? Even little Tim himself, always cheerful, always hiding his pain and smiling and smiling. Why risk all of that on a crazy chance like this?

He stopped at the bottom of the stairs and he could hear someone breathing. Rough, grabbing breaths. His hand fumbled for the switch on the wall and the hall was suddenly flooded with a thin yellow light.

He stared down in horror.

Unable to move for a moment.

He tried to take it all in, but his mind only hooked at fragments of what he saw.

The wet hair plastered across the little head.

The heaving of the small, narrow chest.

The too-small leg twisted awkwardly under the body.

The glistening red smeared over the handle of the little crutch.

He knelt down and lifted little Tim up to his chest, clutching the cold, shivering body close to him.

His tears dripped down on the white skin and Tim's eyes flickered open and tried to find purchase on his Pa's features.

"The miracle, pa," the boy whispered hoarsely. "You got to make it happen yourself...."

And he offered up a small, cold hand, clutching the four dollars and sixty-seven cents he had taken from Eb Scrooge's pockets.

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