

Santa's Helper

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Santa's Helper

by [EnthusiasticFish](#)

Summary

A two-shot set in season 4. On Christmas Eve, a girl goes missing without a trace, and there are no clues until Tim sees child who is more than she seems.

Notes

This is an idea that actually germinated in my brain last Christmas but I didn't have the time or the oomph to do it. I haven't quite finished the second chapter but I will and get it posted tomorrow night! Merry Christmas!

Chapter 1

Santa's Helper

by Enthusiastic Fish

Chapter 1

Set in season 4...

Tim was not in a holiday mood as he headed into work. In fact, he wasn't in the mood for a lot of things. This whole year had gone from amazing to horrible and he didn't see that changing much in the next few weeks. Not only was he working on Christmas this year, he still was feeling a bit of a chill from his coworkers because of his book.

Why did Sarah have to mention it? he thought to himself for a millionth time. Given the circumstances, he didn't have the heart to berate her for it, but still...

None of them would have read it. None of them would have known. *Deep Six* was popular but not in a J. K. Rowling, take-the-world-by-storm way. It was simply a book that sold well in its genre. He could have enjoyed it, reaped the rewards and all without anyone knowing about it.

Before all of that, he had thought about asking one of his teammates to switch with him for Christmas. He was off on New Year's and he had intended to offer to take New Year's this year. He really just wanted to have a nice quiet Christmas with his family after everything that had happened. Sarah had wanted that, too, and she had been disappointed when he had told her that she'd be heading home for the holidays without him. She'd actually been a little clingy since that whole thing. He didn't blame her and he'd always had a soft spot for his little sister. He wanted to be there for her.

Alas. There was no way he'd ask for that now. He could just imagine what Tony would say.

As he reached the building, he saw a young girl, dressed in a wool coat in a deep, rich red color. She skipped past him.

"Merry Christmas!" she said brightly.

"Uh...merry Christmas," Tim said back and looked around. He didn't see any adults and she was way too young to be here by herself early in the morning. "Should you be..."

He stopped.

The little girl was nowhere to be seen. He turned away from NCIS and started looking around. Where could she have gone?

He walked around the building, over to Willard Park, and he even started over to the *Barry*, but there was no sign of her.

Strange.

"Probie! You're going to be late and not even best-selling authors are allowed to be late," Tony shouted at him.

Tim looked back toward the building. Sure enough, there was Tony about to go inside. Tim looked around once more. Maybe her parent had just been out of sight and so he'd missed it. It wasn't like there were many people around first thing in the morning here. Just people going to work.

"McGee! Come on!"

Tim convinced himself that it was fine. Since he couldn't see her in any place that would be dangerous and quite frankly couldn't see her at all, it was probably fine. Still...

"Probie!"

Tim grimaced and jogged over to the building.

"Man, Tony, you're not my mother. What's with treating me like a kid late for school?"

Tony raised an eyebrow. "You can't afford to get out of Gibbs' good graces, McAuthor," he said. "He might take that Messianic complex thing personally...especially if he gets reminded of it too often.

Tim rolled his eyes and didn't dignify that with a response.

"What were you doing over there anyway?"

"A little girl walked by and then, I didn't see her and I didn't see an adult with her either. I was just making sure that nothing had happened." Tim paused. "Did *you* see anyone as you were coming in?"

"Nope, but I wasn't looking for anyone but you, McGee," Tony said dramatically and reached for him.

Tim rolled his eyes again and shoved Tony away.

"Knock it off."

"Someone's in a crabby mood. I would think that with all the money you made off of mocking your colleagues, you'd be happier."

Tim was so tired of hearing that. It wasn't as constant now, but it was still bad enough. Thankfully, Ziva was off on vacation right now and so that was one less person mad at him. He strode ahead of Tony and reached Henry first to go through security.

"Morning, Agent McGee," the old security guard said.

"Hey, Henry," Tim said. "Did you see a little girl outside when you came in?"

"Nope, but I'm in pretty early, you know. Gotta beat you younguns somehow. Why?"

"I just saw a girl and I was wondering what she was doing here so early."

"Well, I know Janice over in the Navy museum has a daughter. Never met her or anything, but she's mentioned it before."

"Oh, that's probably it," Tim said, relieved that he could come up with a genuine reason why he had seen the girl. She had probably gone into the museum with her mother and, because it wasn't open yet, Tim hadn't thought to look there.

He skipped the elevator and took the stairs to avoid more snide comments from Tony. When he got up to the bullpen, the usual Christmas tree was up with the box for donated toys. Tim made a mental note to get something to donate. He'd always liked this tradition.

"McGee! You're not being paid to look at the Christmas lights," Gibbs said, sounding annoyed.

"Right, Boss," Tim said and hurried to his desk. He sat down quickly before Tony was off the elevator. No more fodder for the Tony cannon.

"Don't get comfortable. Where's Tony?"

"Just coming," Tim said. "He was right behind me."

"Good."

There was a ding and Tony got off the elevator.

"Hey, Probie. What's with not waiting for me?"

"Just wanted to get to work, Tony," Tim said. "You're the one who was rushing me."

Thwack!

Tim was surprised to get a Gibbs slap so early in the day. Tony's expression was one of surprise as well.

"What's up, Boss?" he asked.

"Daughter of an admiral has gone missing. They think she was kidnapped," Gibbs snapped. "You ready to work or bicker with each other?"

That was *not* a question that needed a response. They both grabbed their bags and followed as Gibbs stalked toward the elevator.

"On your six, Boss," Tony said.

For the moment, joking and teasing were set aside. Gibbs had a thing about kids and one going missing was going to make it doubly bad.

X.X.X.X.X.X

Tony stepped closer to Tim as they were investigating the girl's room. Her name was stenciled on the wall in capital letters: SARAH. There were curly-cues all around the letters. Tim was surprised to see that the girl had the same name as his sister. What were the odds of that? Overall, the room looked like that of a typical tweener. A little bit messy but there was no real sign of a disturbance of any kind so far. If the kidnapper had actually taken Sarah from the bedroom, it had been done very quickly without much in the way of resistance.

"When does Ziva get back?" Tony asked in a low voice, lest Gibbs was in earshot.

"Not in time to be here and act as an extra buffer," Tim murmured.

"Yeah. Well, I'll keep going in here. You want to go out to the backyard and see if the admiral is right that they got in through her window?"

"Yeah, sure," Tim said.

That wasn't true. Going downstairs meant that he'd have to risk walking near Gibbs and to risk the possibility that he wouldn't still be talking to the admiral and could focus on whoever was present, demanding instant results that everyone knew were impossible to achieve but would still be expected anyway.

Still, they did need to check out the backyard and he could definitely say he had a specific goal in mind.

A deep breath and Tim went down the stairs, and a dog started barking at him. He paused only for a moment and then out into the backyard. Gibbs was still talking to Admiral Erikson and his wife so Tim moved quickly and then took a moment to look at the setting. The yard was fully fenced, but the fence wasn't so high that it was insurmountable by an agile adult.

However, that being said, he didn't see any footprints. Granted, there wasn't a lot of snow on the ground yet this year, but still, someone coming into the yard, grabbing a little girl and then carrying her out with him or her should leave some kind of impression in the ground. It wasn't frozen and that should mean that there was something from the shoes of the kidnapper. He started documenting the *lack* of evidence of an intruder. Then, he took photos of the window. Unlike the fence, this window would be hard to access from the outside.

How would he have gotten in and then out with Sarah? Tim asked himself.

"You'd better have something, McGee," Gibbs said as he walked outside, shutting the door firmly behind him. As he did, the dog started barking inside again.

"It's more what I *don't* have, Boss," Tim said.

Gibbs raised a demanding eyebrow and Tim hurried to explain.

"There's no sign of anyone coming into the backyard. There's no sign of an intruder in the bedroom. I was trying to figure out how someone would have got into her room, kidnapped her and got back to the yard with a little girl in his arms."

"What are you saying?"

"Are we sure it's an abduction?" Tim asked.

Tim watched as Gibbs looked around the yard and back into the house.

"I'm sure they searched the house, but kids have run away before. And..." Tim stopped, not sure if he should mention another possibility.

"And *what*, McGee?" Gibbs asked.

"Well..." Tim lowered his voice. He didn't even *like* that he'd thought of this. "Tony always says to suspect the wife. ...should we maybe suspect the parents?"

Gibbs' eyebrow went up again.

"I know that's not the most likely possibility, but right now, I don't see any sign of an abduction, at least not the way they said it happened, and they have a dog. Wouldn't the dog have noticed someone coming in the ground floor? He barked at me and he just barked as you came out."

"Keep working," Gibbs said and then went back into the house.

The dog started barking again.

Tim took a breath. Honestly, he was starting to think that it was most likely that Sarah had run away on her own rather than being kidnapped. Why would the parents assume kidnapping right off anyway? Was it just because the admiral was an important person? Maybe.

After spending a couple of hours searching around the house, Gibbs sent Tim back to NCIS to start processing while he and Tony canvassed the neighborhood. As Tim was loading everything in the truck, Tony came up behind him.

"Did you really suggest that it might have been the parents, McGee?" Tony asked as Tim was packing the evidence bags away.

"Yeah."

"You really said that? To Gibbs?"

Tim turned around to face Tony and his brow furrowed.

"It's not like I was saying that they're definitely guilty or anything. But I don't think an abduction makes any sense with what we're seeing right now. ...do you?"

"No, but you know Gibbs and kids."

"Yeah, I do. I think it would be better to remove the possibility first if we can, rather than pretending it's not an option."

"You're the author," Tony said, shrugging.

Tim rolled his eyes again at the renewed mention. He had hoped that work would keep it from coming up yet again. Instead of responding, he got in the truck and drove back to NCIS. Then, he took everything down to Abby so that she could start running prints and processing all the evidence.

"Looks like we'll be working over Christmas if we don't find her," Abby said.

"I would be anyway. But Maybe we'll find her really fast. If she left on her own, she could just be lost and we can get her home."

"Maybe," Abby said, but she looked doubtful.

Tim was as well, really. If Sarah had simply left and was fine, then she probably would have been found already. She was just old enough to get herself into trouble but probably not old enough to get herself *out* of trouble.

"Well, we can at least get started," Tim said. "I'll go and see what I can find from her background while you're running prints and stuff."

"Stuff?" Abby repeated with a grin. "That's not your usual eloquence, Mr. Gemcity."

"Can everyone just drop that already?" Tim asked.

"Hey, I liked it. When's the sequel coming out?"

"Maybe never at the rate I'm going. Anyway, it's Christmas. I'm distracted," Tim said, forcing a smile. Then, he went back upstairs and sat down at his desk to start the process of finding whatever he could about the family.

As Tim sat down, he was silently grateful that he didn't have to stay and coordinate with Metro. He still worried about working with them even more than a year later. The times they'd actually interacted, Tim usually tried to find a way to be conveniently elsewhere. Gibbs had probably noticed but he hadn't said anything about it. Tim actually had wondered on occasion if Gibbs had deliberately allowed him to avoid the Metro police.

I'll have to get over it eventually, he said to himself. And it was true, but not yet.

He refocused on his task. It was more important to find a missing girl than anything else. He started building a history of the admiral's family to see if there was anything that would indicate someone wishing ill on the family. At first glance there was nothing.

At second glance there was nothing.

Then, on a third glance, Tim saw something that stopped him cold. Sarah was a tail-ender in her family. She was the youngest by almost 10 years, but Admiral Erikson had three other children. The first two were both boys from a previous marriage. One was married and the other just starting college. Then, there was a daughter named Marla, the first child of Admiral Erikson's second marriage. She had died at about six years old on a family vacation when she

had wandered away from the family and fallen into a river. There was a picture included in the obituary.

It was the same little girl in a red coat that he had seen that morning. Tim would swear to it. Quickly, he jumped up and ran down to the front doors.

"Where are you off to in such a hurry, Agent McGee?" Henry asked.

"The museum," Tim said. "I'll be back in a few minutes if Gibbs and Tony get back and ask."

Then, he ran to the museum and stepped inside.

"Hello?" he called. He knew Janice very slightly but it was a formal acquaintance. He knew this was going to be a very odd conversation.

"Hello!" came a voice in response and Janice came out from the back. "Hello, Agent McGee, isn't it?"

"Yes," Tim said. "I have a question I need to ask you and I know it will sound weird but it's part of a case I'm working on."

"Okay. What is it?"

"You have a daughter, right?"

"Yes."

"Is she here today?"

Janice's brow furrowed. "No, she's home, making up some schoolwork that she pretended she didn't have. She wanted to come with me to work but I wouldn't let her. High school is too important."

"High school?"

"Yes. She's a senior."

"Oh. Thanks."

"That was for a case?" Janice asked. "What does your case have to do with my daughter?"

"Nothing. I knew it would sound weird. That's all I needed. Thank you."

Janice was definitely giving him an odd look that Tim knew he deserved. "Um... you're welcome. Merry Christmas."

"You, too," Tim said and then left the museum, feeling a sense of disquiet.

As he walked back toward the building, he started looking around as if he would see the little girl who had been there that morning. What was going on? Instead of going back inside, he started to look around the Navy Yard again. He walked toward the N Street entrance and

there was a flash of red just going behind the wall. Tim lengthened his stride and went off the Yard. There was a little girl walking down the sidewalk all by herself. She looked to be only about six years old.

Feeling stupid, he called out, but there was no acknowledgment. Finally, he tried the name he had read.

"Marla?"

The little girl stopped walking and turned around with a big smile.

"You know my name!" she said happily.

"Yes, I do," Tim said.

"Thank you. What's your name?"

"My name is Tim. What are you doing here?"

"Looking for someone to help me."

"Help you what?"

"Come on! We have to do it before Christmas!" Marla started skipping down the sidewalk, away from the Yard.

"Do what?" Tim asked. He paused and looked back down the sidewalk. No one around. He should go back and tell Gibbs and Tony what was going on.

Yeah, right. I can hear them already. Tony especially. This whole thing makes no sense. I shouldn't do this.

But no matter what, could he really just leave this little girl... who may or may not be a ghost... alone on the street? He made the decision to go along with her. He'd probably regret it later, but oh, well. He ran after Marla and caught up with her.

"Do what, Marla?" he asked again.

"Help. I'm Santa's helper and you can be, too! Mom and Dad made a wish for Christmas and I get to help them!"

"What's their wish?" Tim asked. "And why do you need me?"

"Sarah needs to get home. I can't be home, but she can if someone finds her."

"Where is she?"

"I don't know."

"Then, where are you going?" Tim asked.

"Where she is," Marla said patiently.

"How can you, if you don't know where she is?"

"Because you're with me! Together we'll find her! Then, you can take her home."

Finally, Tim couldn't resist. He reached out and tried to touch Marla's arm. His hand went right through her. Marla giggled at his actions.

"Come on! We'll find her!"

This wasn't making any sense and it was getting dark and cold but now that he'd started, Tim didn't feel like he could stop. So he followed Marla as she skipped along, looking completely confident as only a child could.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

"Where's McGee?" Gibbs asked as he stepped into the empty bullpen.

Tony walked over to Tim's desk and looked around.

"His stuff is here and his computer is still on. He must be down with Abby."

Gibbs grumbled and headed down to the lab. There was loud Christmas music playing, but Abby looked up as he walked in.

"Hey, Gibbs," she said over the music. "Your timing is off. I'm not done yet, but so far, no fingerprints from anyone out of the family."

"Is McGee in here?"

"Nope. He dropped everything off and said he was going to be working on the family history stuff. Isn't he up there?"

"No," Gibbs said. "Keep working."

Abby glanced at Tony and then nodded. She knew better than to complain when a child was missing. It didn't matter that tomorrow was Christmas and she was supposed to be off. Gibbs left and Tony followed, but he surreptitiously pulled out his phone and dialed Tim's number. It went straight to voice mail.

Uh oh.

"Well?" Gibbs asked.

Tony looked at him in surprise. Gibbs raised an impatient eyebrow. Not surreptitious enough.

"No answer."

They went back up to the bullpen and Henry was standing by Gibbs' desk.

"What's up, Henry? A visitor?" Tony asked.

"No. I forgot to tell you that Agent McGee went out a couple of hours ago and said he was going over to the museum. He said it would only be a couple of minutes but he hasn't been back yet and he had said to tell you where he was going."

Gibbs' eyebrow went up again.

"Why there?" Tony asked.

"Don't know. He didn't say. Seemed in a hurry, though."

Gibbs strode back to his desk and sat down.

"Go get him, DiNozzo," he said. "Get him back to his job."

"Sure thing, Boss."

Tony got on the elevator with Henry.

"Gibbs is in a mood, isn't he," Henry said.

"Yeah. Kid is missing."

"Ah. I got it. Don't know why Agent McGee wouldn't have come right back. Everyone knows how Gibbs is about this stuff."

"He'd better have a good reason. Or Gibbs will kill him."

Henry smiled at that. "Good luck. To both of you."

"Thanks."

Tony hurried over to the museum. Janice was just leaving.

"Hey, Janice. Is Agent McGee in there?"

"No, he isn't. No one is in there. The museum is closed."

"Did he come by?"

Janice nodded and seemed a little bemused. "Yes. A couple of hours ago. He asked me about my daughter, said it was for a case but then said it had nothing to do with her."

"What?" Tony asked, his brow furrowing.

"He said it would sound strange."

"He's right."

Janice nodded, looking relieved that Tony's reaction was the same as her own.

"I thought it was really weird, but he didn't stay after that. He left."

"Thanks. I won't keep you."

Janice nodded and walked away. Tony looked around. No sign of Tim anywhere. What was going on? What did Janice's daughter have to do with the case?

x.x.x.x.x.x.x

"That's where she is," Marla said, pointing to a rundown building. "And there are some bad people with her."

"Bad people?" Tim repeated. He could believe it. He was not at all happy about walking around in Anacostia after dark. This neighborhood was not safe.

"Yeah. They pretended to be friends, but they weren't."

"Oh."

"They're leaving tonight and then Sarah won't be home for Christmas."

Or anytime, Tim thought to himself. If Marla was right, this sounded like Sarah had been tricked into meeting with people who were probably either going to ransom her or else sell her. Either way, this was the time to get someone over here to help. He could tell Gibbs that he had found where Sarah was and think of a story not involving a ghost to explain it later. He pulled out his phone and then grimaced. It was dead. How had he missed charging it up? He never did that. Great. Now there were only two options: go back and get Gibbs or do something on his own.

"You have to help, Tim," Marla said. "Mom and Dad need to get their Christmas wish this year."

Tim took a breath. He had already chosen to follow Marla here. He had to keep going, especially if they were ready to move out right now. He crept forward and into the building. He looked around and Marla was gone. He swallowed. As tempting as it was to just decide he was crazy and leave, he couldn't do that.

He walked up to the second floor and was about to start looking around when he heard a voice.

"Psst! Up here, Tim!"

He looked up and sure enough, there was Marla again, her red coat standing out against the drab surroundings.

"She's up here!"

Tim went up to the third floor and Marla was suddenly down by a door.

"In here!"

Tim walked to the door Marla had indicated and listened. He could hear muffled raised voices. He couldn't understand the words, though.

He looked around. Marla was still there, looking at him expectantly. She didn't look like a ghost but she was. Could he ask a ghost to help him? Could other people see her? What were the rules here? He didn't know. Nothing to do but try.

"Marla, could you tell me if there is anyone in this room?" he asked, pointing to the room beside the one where Sarah supposedly was.

"Sure!" Marla skipped through the door and then came back a few seconds later. "Nope!"

"Okay." Tim carefully picked the lock and went into the room. It was dingy at best, but he didn't care about that. It was a studio layout. Just one big room and it was logical to assume that the room next to it was similar. He walked to the back of the room and then looked out the back window. There was a narrow ledge but it was wide enough that he could walk on it.

...then, he made the mistake of looking down and his stomach started churning. Too high. He pulled himself back into the room and sat down with a thump on the floor, running his hands through his hair.

"Are you going to help, Tim?"

"It's so high, Marla," he said, softly.

Marla looked solemn for a moment.

"Yeah, I fell. Mom and Dad were so sad. I miss them."

Tim wished he could hug Marla.

"I'm sorry, Marla."

"I don't want you to fall, too, Tim. Your family would be sad, too."

Tim looked at the window. Short of a frontal assault, he couldn't think of anything else to do by himself. And a frontal assault would probably lead to shots fired and he might end up killing Sarah in the process. It wasn't worth the risk. He stood up, gathered all the courage he could muster and walked back to the window. Before he could talk himself out of it, he climbed onto the ledge and edged his way to the next window.

"You can do it, Tim! You can do it!" Marla chanted.

Tim smiled at that, but he did hope that no one else could hear her. When he got to the window, he peeked in. A girl was sitting curled up on the floor, crying. It was Sarah. Whatever had brought her here, she clearly didn't want to be there now. He waved at her, trying to get her attention without making any noise. Finally, she looked up and was obviously shocked to see him outside the window. He didn't blame her one bit. He held a finger up to his lips. She nodded. He edged forward a little more and could see the two men he had heard before. They seemed to be arguing with each other. Then, there was a loud pounding on the door. The two men seemed very surprised. Together, they walked to the door and opened it. Suddenly, one of them started to run while the other was standing there, shouting after him.

No one was paying attention to Sarah. Tim quickly gestured to Sarah to open the window. She hesitated and looked over at the other man who was still standing in the doorway

shouting. There were other people also shouting now, adding to the distraction. Good. Then, Sarah opened the window.

"Come on," Tim said very quietly. "Let's get you home."

"Who are you?" she asked.

"I'm Tim. Santa's helper," Tim said and smiled. "Your parents asked for you to be home for Christmas." He held out his hand.

Sarah smiled at him and then gulped as she climbed out onto the ledge.

"Don't look down," Tim whispered. "Neither of us. Just go slowly and stay quiet."

She nodded and began to edge along with him. He was now going backwards and he really hoped he didn't fall, but he didn't dare look down. He just had to keep moving. They got to the other window and there was a noise. A shout.

"She's gone out the window!"

Sarah looked terrified. Tim forced himself to keep smiling. He nearly fell backwards into the room and then pulled her in behind him. Then, Tim grabbed her hand.

"Now, we're going to run. If I tell you to run ahead of me, you're going to run without looking back and you're going to ask the first person you see to take you to the police."

"What about you?"

"I'm going to stay with you unless I can't. Got it?"

Sarah nodded.

"Good. Let's go."

They went to the door and for a moment, Tim really hated that this was happening on Christmas Eve. Of all the things he didn't want to have to be doing, running for his life was high on the list. He took a breath and Tim pulled the door open and ran for the emergency exit, pulling Sarah along with him.

I need to get in better shape, Tim thought to himself. My New Year's resolution...if I live that long.

There was another shout behind them just as they got to the stairwell. Sarah started to slow down.

"No, Sarah. Keep going," Tim said, no longer whispering.

He pushed her into the stairwell ahead of him and they ran down the stairs and then out of the building. Even though they weren't in the best part of town, they could still make it to a safe

place as long as they kept on running. They headed down the street, but there was a gunshot behind them.

Sarah screamed and ducked her head.

"Keep running, Sarah! Don't look back. Just keep running," Tim said. "Get to the police!"

She looked at him once.

"Don't look back! Just keep running," Tim said again.

Then, he stopped, pulled his gun and fired back at the men pursuing them. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Sarah still running. Good.

But that moment of inattention cost him dearly. The next shot hit him. His chest was on fire and he staggered and then fell to the ground.

The two men ran past him without stopping. Tim lay there in the slush, hoping that Sarah made it.

What a terrible Christmas, he thought.

Then, everything went black.

x.x.x.x.x.x.x

"Tim, you have to wake up!"

The voice penetrated the black, but Tim couldn't see anything.

"Please, Tim. You need to wake up now."

A flash of red.

"Marla?" Tim whispered.

A flash of light.

"Yay! Good job, Tim!"

Another flash of light and there was noise all around him although he couldn't see anything or make any sense of it.

"Thank you, Tim. Mom and Dad are getting what they want for Christmas! Thank you so much for helping me!"

"Marla?"

"I have to go home now, but I'm so excited that I got to help Santa. Bye, Tim!"

Another flash of red, followed quickly by another flash of light.

Tim opened his eyes slightly.

"He's back! Pulse is weak but holding. Agent McGee, it's good to see your eyes open."

"Marla?" he mumbled, although his voice was muffled for some reason.

"He's stabilizing. How's his respiration?"

"His lung is maintaining pressure so far."

"Good. Agent McGee, if you can understand me, blink twice."

Tim blinked his barely open eyes.

"Good. Just relax. We've got you stabilized but I don't want you to try to do anything beyond breathing for now. Got it?"

Tim blinked again. He didn't *want* to do anything, and he didn't think he *could*, but he wanted to know about Sarah. If they had found him, had they found her?

"Sarah," he whispered.

"Don't talk right now."

"Sarah."

"I'll find out. Just relax."

Tim blinked twice again. And then let his eyes stay closed. He wanted to know but he would wait if necessary.

After a while of kind of floating on a tide of cotton, he felt a little more aware and opened his eyes again, wondering how much time had passed.

"Awake again, Agent McGee?"

An unfamiliar face loomed over him.

"Sarah," he whispered again.

"She's fine. She's with her family."

"Christmas?"

The face looked away and then back at him.

"Technically, yes, it's Christmas. Only barely but yes."

She'd got home for Christmas. Good. That was the most important thing.

"Good," he said softly.

"Just relax. We'll get you moved into a room."

Tim let himself fall back into the cotton and more time passed without his really being aware of it.

x.x.x.x.x.x.x

"Timmy, are you awake?"

That voice was familiar. Tim tried to wake up.

"Abigail, you needn't wake him. I'm sure he could use more rest, not less."

That voice was familiar as well. Neither one was his family, unfortunately.

"I was just asking."

"Yeah, at the top of your lungs. If he wasn't awake before, he is now."

Another familiar voice. Just how many people were in this room at the moment?

Tim decided he had better try to figure it out. He struggled to get his eyes open.

"Timmy, you *are* awake!"

Tim saw Abby and was momentarily terrified that she was going to smother him, but then, Ducky came into his field of vision and stopped her.

"No hugging at the moment, I think."

"Thank you," Tim whispered. "Later, Abby."

Abby smiled. "Okay. I can accept that. How are you feeling?"

"Awful. Is it still Christmas?"

"Yes, although it's getting late," Ducky said. "Your family is coming. They were shocked to hear of what happened and they should arrive either later tonight or tomorrow morning."

"What *did* happen?" Tony asked. "Last anyone saw of you was when you went to talk to Janice and weirded her out. The next thing we know, Metro is calling us to say that a girl was telling them about being kidnapped and how Santa's helper saved her. And you'd been found in Arlington with a gunshot wound to the chest."

Tim tried to take a deep breath but it hurt so he didn't.

"Sounds about right," he whispered.

"Yeah? What about the time in between those two events?"

Tim turned his head slightly and was a little surprised to see that Tony seemed completely serious. No joking or teasing. But how could he possibly explain it and have anyone believe him?

Thankfully, Ducky saved him.

"Perhaps now is not the time to have Timothy do a lot of speaking. Questions will wait until later."

"Sarah is all right?" Tim asked.

"Yeah," Tony said. "Her parents said it was the best Christmas present they could have got. Turns out those guys were posing as a teenage boy on some app and got her to agree to sneak out and meet them. I think there will be some discussions about trusting people online after they have the chance to think about it a little more. For now, they're just happy."

"Good."

Tim let his eyes close. He was really tired and not really feeling the greatest. It wasn't a wonderful Christmas.

Then, he felt Abby kiss him on the forehead. ...at least, he *hoped* it was Abby and not Ducky or Tony. That would just be weird.

"Don't worry, Tim. I'll make sure you get a good Christmas gift later when you're feeling better," Abby said.

Tim didn't know if that was a promise or a threat. Either way, he didn't feel like it required a response. He kept his eyes closed and started to relax again.

"Would you like to sleep, Timothy?"

"Yeah."

"Then, we'll let you."

"Thanks."

Tim didn't open his eyes. He just let himself sleep.

x.x.x.x.x.x

Tim woke up with a beam of light hitting him right in the eye. It was most unpleasant. He tried to move his head.

"You awake, McGee?"

That was *not* Abby. Tim forced himself to open his eyes and started to sit up, but changed his mind very quickly.

"Boss," he said and felt more alert than he had in any of his previous awakenings.

"What were you thinking?"

Gibbs didn't look very impressed with the fact that he'd saved a girl from human trafficking. Tim knew that there was no way he could tell Gibbs that a ghost had guided him to where Sarah was being held. He knew he had to lie even though he hated to...but really, Gibbs hadn't asked him for details. He could answer that question without lying...directly.

"I was thinking that a girl's life was on the line and I had to act quick. I was going to call you, but my phone was dead. I didn't think I had time to run and get someone. So I did my best."

"Could have killed you."

"Yeah. Not really the best Christmas I've had," Tim said. "But she was an innocent girl. I had to do something. Boss... wouldn't you?"

Then, Tim had to stop talking because it was hard and it hurt.

There was a long silence, and Tim knew that at least part of it was because Gibbs wouldn't have been any different... beyond that he probably wouldn't have even attempted to contact anyone else. Tony could make fun of him all he wanted, but Tim knew that Gibbs was always going off on his own.

"What now, Boss?" Tim asked.

"For now, you let Admiral Erikson come in and thank you."

"Right now?"

"He insisted unless you weren't up to having visitors."

Tim wasn't sure how to feel about this. On the one hand, it wouldn't be terrible to have someone thanking him instead of questioning him, but on the other hand, he felt like he had somehow cheated in the heroism thing since he'd had a six-year-old ghost helping him. And he still didn't feel all that great. He actually didn't even know how he was doing. He hadn't seen his doctor since...whenever he'd seen him.

"Okay," Tim said, for lack of anything else to say.

Gibbs' eyebrow went up, showing his suspicion, but then, he stood and left the room. Tim wasn't sure what to expect, but he hoped that Admiral Erikson didn't expect much from him. He didn't want to talk and he wasn't sure he was up to much enthusiasm of any kind.

But the door opened and in came Admiral Erikson.

"Hello, Admiral," Tim said softly.

"Hello, Agent McGee." Admiral Erikson walked over to the bed. "Thank you for saving my daughter."

"It's my job."

Admiral Erikson smiled a little. "As an agent or Santa's helper?"

Tim smiled in return. "Not sure why I said that. But I guess both." He took a short breath. "I was reading your family background and... I saw that..."

His expression became one of understanding. "You saw that we lost Marla."

"Yes."

He took a deep breath and nodded. "I don't know if we could have tolerated losing Sarah, too. And especially not on Christmas."

"I'm glad you didn't have to, sir."

"Sarah would like to thank you as well."

Tim really just wanted to sleep some more, but maybe if he got them all through the motions of gratitude, he could be done. He nodded.

Admiral Erikson strode back to the door and walked out. Tim let his head drop back onto the bed and then he rubbed his chest. It was a miracle he hadn't been killed.

Then, the door opened again and Admiral Erikson returned.

And his wife.

And Sarah.

They all approached the bed and then Sarah looked back at her parents who nodded. She looked back at him.

"Thank you, Agent McGee. I'm sorry that you almost died just to save me. I was stupid."

Tim smiled and took a short breath. "You're welcome. It's my job. We were looking for you and I just was the one who found you." Another breath. "Anyone would have done the same. I'm glad you could be home for Christmas."

"Me, too."

Sarah stepped aside and her mother stepped forward and took hold of Tim's hand.

"I can see that you need rest more than anything, Agent McGee, but thank you for what you did for us. If you ever need anything, we will be happy to help if we can to return what you did."

"Thank you, ma'am," he said. "But just enjoy your holiday. That's all."

She smiled in understanding and let his hand go. Then, they all left. Tim was glad. He'd reached his meager limits and was ready to sleep. He closed his eyes and started to relax

again.

Then, the door opened one more time. Tim almost groaned, but that would take too much energy to manage. He tried not to move. No one was going to be needing to talk to him now, right? He could just rest after getting shot, right? Come to think of it, what day was it? He had no idea.

"Agent McGee, I'm here to do a checkup. All right?"

Tim opened his eyes. "Then, can I sleep?"

The nurse smiled. "Yes. That's a good idea."

Tim let the nurse check his vital signs and he was surprised to note that he had a chest tube. He hadn't noticed it before.

"You're looking good, Agent McGee. For someone who got shot a couple of days ago, you're doing quite well."

"Thanks. I don't feel well."

"I'm sure you don't which is why you'll be staying here for a couple days more, but we'll be able to remove the chest tube and release soon enough."

"Sounds great."

"Now, I give you permission to sleep."

Tim smiled. "Sounds even better."

He closed his eyes as the nurse left and drifted off to sleep.

X.X.X.X.X.X

Over the next few days, things went basically as the nurse had said. They removed the chest tube and his lung seemed to be functioning. Tim still didn't feel great but he was better than he had been. His family descended and smothered him with familiar care and attention. The NCIS people stopped by on occasion to check on him but he didn't have to answer any questions. He knew it would probably be coming but he figured that he had come up with a convincing lie. ...if he could just say it with a straight face.

At a time when his family had stepped out, the door opened.

And it was Gibbs. He looked pretty official this time and Tim knew he was going to have to succeed in lying.

Something he didn't think he'd *ever* managed to do well.

Especially not to Gibbs.

"Hey, Boss," Tim said...and then tried for some bravado. "Shouldn't you be at work?"

"I am," Gibbs said.

"Oh."

So much for bravado.

"Why were you in Arlington?"

Tim took a breath and winced a little but then prepared to lie. And Gibbs' eyebrow went way up.

"You'd better not lie to me, McGee."

Tim swallowed.

"There is no explanation for you being there. There's no explanation for you talking to Janice at the museum. There's nothing that explains how you knew where she was. No calls on your phone. No tips came in. Why were you in Arlington?"

The lie withered and died.

"You won't believe it, Boss. No one will believe it and I'll be locked up as a nut if I say."

"You might lose your job if you lie."

"I don't want to lose my job, but better that than being seen as crazy."

The eyebrow descended slightly.

"I'm not kidding, Boss. I know no one will believe it. I wouldn't even blame them for that. I wouldn't believe it myself if it hadn't happened to me. So...it's either lie and maybe lose my job or tell the truth and definitely lose my job."

The eyebrow went back to resting position. Gibbs stood up and walked to the door, opened it and walked out. Tim wasn't sure how to take that, but since what he'd said was true, he didn't see how else he could approach this.

Then, Gibbs walked back in, deliberately shut the door and walked back to the bed and sat down.

"What's the lie?"

Tim swallowed.

"Tell me the lie, McGee."

"A person came up to me and told me that if I followed him, he'd show me where Sarah was being held, but I couldn't ask how he knew or get him involved. I was going to call you, but my phone was dead and I didn't have any other choice. I had to find out if it was legitimate

and so I followed him. They were getting ready to move out and so I didn't think I had time to go and bring people back to take them down. So I did my best."

"That's the lie?"

"Yeah."

"Any truth in it?"

"Yeah."

"Like what?"

"That I wanted to call for backup but they were getting ready to leave and I was afraid that we'd lose her if I didn't try something right then."

Gibbs nodded and was silent for a few seconds.

"Okay, then, what's the truth?"

"I told you, Boss, that..."

"I don't care. Tell me the truth."

Tim could see that Gibbs wasn't going to let him get around this. He took a breath, winced, sighed and winced again.

"The ghost of Marla Erikson came to me on the Yard and asked me to help her grant her parents' Christmas wish that Sarah would be home for Christmas. She led me to the building in Arlington where Sarah was being held and helped me find her in the building."

Gibbs' expression showed absolutely nothing even though Tim was sure that he couldn't possibly have anticipated this answer. How could he? It was crazy.

"And that's the truth."

"Yes."

"Okay."

There was silence again. Then, Gibbs got up and walked back to the door.

"Boss?" Tim asked.

Gibbs turned around and the eyebrow went back up.

"You might have to face a reprimand for going off on your own, but since you saved the girl, it won't be a problem."

Tim felt his brow furrow in confusion.

"What?"

"You shouldn't have left on your own. It was a bad choice, but it ended up well. Don't do it again."

"Uh...yes, Boss."

Then, Gibbs left and Tim leaned back in the bed again. What had just happened? It seemed like Gibbs was letting him get away with lying. Why would he do that?

Tim lay there puzzling over this change of events until his family returned. Then, he tried to set it aside until he could think about it again.

It didn't make any sense.

X.X.X.X.X.X.X

Two weeks later...

Tim sat at his desk. He was only back part time on desk duty, but that was better than going stir crazy in his apartment. He had to move carefully and he was still doing deep breathing exercises to help his lung heal. One positive from all this was that he hadn't dealt with any cracks about his writing since his injury. Maybe this would be the final hurdle that got things back to normal on that front.

He could hope.

But he still worried about why it was that Gibbs hadn't said anything about how his agent was clearly out of his mind. His lie was the official account. There was a reprimand for leaving without backup but that was all. Except for the physical injury, he was getting out of this unscathed.

When his day was over, he left NCIS and walked over to Willard Park. He sat down on a bench and wondered, as he had multiple times, why Marla had picked him. What was it that made him the right choice? He really didn't know.

He sat on a bench and rubbed his chest. He could at least be honest about the fact that he'd wanted to have backup. He hadn't *wanted* to do it alone.

"Should be heading home, McGee."

Tim was startled and looked up. There was Gibbs.

"Just thinking."

Gibbs sat down without responding. Tim didn't know what to say. He felt really awkward... like he *should* say something, but he didn't know what the script was. It was his line, but he didn't know it.

"Why did you let me stay here, Boss?" Tim asked.

"Did you want to get fired?"

"No, but I know you don't believe me. You couldn't. You let me keep my job and there's no way I would have if you hadn't let my lie be the official account. Why?"

The eyebrow went up again and Gibbs actually seemed almost amused.

"You got the job done, no matter how."

"Do you believe me?"

"I believe the parts I know you didn't lie about."

"What parts?"

"The parts that are the same. The rest doesn't matter. Just don't do it alone next time."

"I didn't want to do it alone the first time."

"I know. That's why you're not fired."

Then, Gibbs got up and held out his hand. Tim let Gibbs pull him to his feet.

"Go home, McGee. If you do too much too soon, you'll just take longer getting back."

"Yeah, Boss. Thanks."

Gibbs just walked away. Tim watched him leave and then went home. He sat down at his typewriter for a moment and a book on his shelf caught his eye. He took it down and stared at it for a long time.

A Christmas Carol.

Ebenezer Scrooge had been visited by four ghosts in a night. They had led him to change his life, yes, but that change had led to his helping those around him. Why him? Tim still didn't know, but then he smiled as he thought of Marla. Maybe that part didn't matter. He'd been changed by a little girl's love for her family and her desire to make them happy on Christmas.

He put the book back on the shelf and then went into his bedroom to rest. As he did, he smiled to himself again.

There were worse things than being Santa's helper.

"Merry Christmas, Marla," he whispered.

FINIS!

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