

**Eternal Payment**  
**Christmas Special 2019**

***"Confidence In A Red Coat"***

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*A Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays to everyone,  
but especially to my amazing children and their  
boundless enthusiasm*

## ***CONFIDENCE IN A RED COAT***

“Well, this is certainly a surprise,” I said, looking up from my stack of paperwork.

“You’re such a drama queen, Jonathan,” Patterson said as she walked up and set a sack down on my desk. “Thought you could use some company.”

“Didn’t the brass give you the night off?” I replied and leaned back in my squeaky chair. Working for the Angel Corps in heaven came with some perks. Firstly, the workplace accommodations were whatever you wanted them to be. You could conjure up whatever you wanted to make your job easier or, in my case, more fun. My squeaking chair never ceased to make everyone else in earshot cringe like dragging their nails down a chalkboard, everyone except Patterson, that is. She had either decided to ignore my pranks or else didn’t care. It was infuriating in both cases. Worse now, because we were the only ones in the office right now, so I couldn’t enjoy anyone else’s reactions either.

“Come on. We both know I don’t know what to do with a night off.”

“You haven’t gotten a Christmas away from work in a hundred years and now you’re bored?” I asked and

raised my eyebrows in a stunned expression.

“I didn’t have anything better to do with my time,” Patterson replied. She then picked up the sack and upended its contents in the middle of my desk, sending all my papers flying. It added just a little more chaos to my little slice of paradise, which suited me fine.

I smirked at the brown paper-wrapped box on my desk. “What’s this?”

“That,” she said, pointing at the box, “is work. There’s a little girl down on earth who really needs this returned to her.”

“We’re a delivery service now?”

Patterson smacked me on the back of my head. “Don’t be a dolt. You know just as well as I do there’s more to the Corps than smiting evil,” Patterson said. It sounded like she was scolding me, but I had worked with her long enough to know that she was looking for an opportunity to get under my skin as I did to practically everyone else.

“Alright, I give. What’s in it?” I asked, letting her taunt slip past.

“Her confidence,” she replied and flicked an errant paperclip at me. It bounced off my forehead. Patterson was a perfect shot, whether it be with paperclips or a musket.

“Confidence?” I said and raised an eyebrow. “How in the world can we deliver confidence? On top of that, how did you put confidence in a box?”

Patterson picked the parcel up off my desk and turned it over in her hands for a moment before locking eyes with me, and through a devious smile, she said, “with panache.” Then she hopped up on top of my desk and kicked the remaining papers onto the

ground.

“What’d you do that for?” I said, throwing my hands up in the air and pushing my chair back away from her kick.

“A little Christmas cheer for you. I know how much you love to torment the more formal and obnoxious angels in the department.”

I smirked and stood up. “You are the best partner ever. You are also much more subtle than you let on since I’m going to get blamed for the mess you just made.”

“I know. Isn’t it great? You’ll have to work Christmas Eve for the next two hundred years just because you ticked everyone off,” Patterson replied and then dropped down off my desk. “Come on. Let’s get going.”

“Well, Merry Christmas to us,” I muttered happily and followed her out the door.

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1804 was a cold year, and I mean freakishly cold. The wind bit down hard on the tips of people’s noses and burned my cheeks red. Overall, it made me look like I was either entirely too embarrassed or else completely sloshed. We came down just outside of the town of Poughkeepsie in New York. Patterson made quite a graceful landing. I somehow misguided my position and bounced off a tree. I ripped the sleeve on my coat and lost my hat on the drop. Grumbling, I got back up and looked around for my hat.

There were at least three feet of snow on the

ground, and it was getting dark. Grumbling, I gave up after five minutes of fruitless searching. Patterson had been absolutely no help, merely sitting on a fence post thirty yards away, pinching her mouth shut to prevent her from giggling at me. “You have been making trips down from Heaven for a millennium and more, but somehow you still don’t know how to land properly in snow.”

“It was a tree. There’s nothing to do with the snow,” I replied and glared at her.

“Sure. Blame it on the tree. You know they don’t move, right? They can’t just get up and hop into your path.”

“The snow was in my eyes. It’s like a blizzard up there,” I replied hotly and pointed up. “Did you happen to know how close we landed? The sooner we get this ridiculous delivery run done, the better.” I trudged my way out of the trees and passed under one of the logs on the fence row to stand in a snowbank next to the road.

“Why so, grumpy? You were all gung-ho an hour ago,” Patterson asked, dropping from the fence post and taking up a pace next to me on the road.

“That was before I ended up in a tree,” I said.

“Fine,” Patterson replied, holding a hand up in mock surrender. The other held the package. “This is for a little girl named Sophie. She lives near the city. We aren’t far.”

“Great. Let’s go find the little gremlin and get this over with,” I replied in a surly tone. We trudged off through the snow-clogged street toward the lights and fires down the hill to the north. Did I mention how stupidly cold it was? Here I was, walking down a road

in the dark with a ripped coat and no hat. Sure, I may be an immortal angel, but that doesn't mean I don't get uncomfortable. I wrapped my arms around myself and stuffed my hands under my armpits, face glowering.

We made it into the town a short while later. "If we weren't angelic, then even that short hike would have most likely frozen us into solid blocks of ice," I commented as we made it to the edge of town.

"Well, it was downhill. If we were blocks of ice, we could have just slid into town. Bet that would have raised a few eyebrows." That comment drew me out of my gloomy temper, but only slightly.

I looked around and only saw a few people out wandering the streets. There were plenty of carriages set up in front of a large two-story building. It was early in the evening, only five or six, but this late in the year, it was well dark. The gas lamps were our only source of light on the street, and they created little golden halos with the snow as it fell. We walked up to a front window on the building and peeked in. Patterson took her sleeve and rubbed it in small circles to clear the frost enough to get a clear image.

Dozens of families packed the space inside. They were all clumped up at big tables, chattering and laughing. "Strange. Don't most people around here celebrate Christmas at home with their own families?" I asked Patterson.

"Here in Poughkeepsie, we have a tight sense of community," said a man's voice from behind us. "Why are you poking your noses up to the glass? You ought to come inside, friends."

Patterson and I wheeled around. We hadn't heard him come up behind us, most likely due to the soft

snow hiding the sounds of his footfalls. Patterson recovered from her shock faster than I did. “If it isn’t too presumptuous of us, we would very much like to get out of the cold.”

“Sure thing. After you,” the man said and held open the door for us. “The name’s Henry, by the way.”

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The interior of the building was much brighter, the atmosphere was friendly and welcoming, and most importantly, it was warm. There was a massive fire set on stone hearths on both ends of a large middle room. It looked as though someone had taken a house, gutted out all the inside walls, and left the beams keeping the roof up. There was still a large staircase leading to the second floor, which dominated the middle of the building, but there were no walls around it. Instead, the entire floor space was jam-packed with round wooden tables straining under the weight of a thousand pounds of food. Looking out the back windows of the building, I spotted a small frozen pond with a dozen children skating around on it and laughing.

“Make yourselves at home,” Henry said and hung up his coat on a hook by the front door. “What’re your names?”

“My name is Patterson,” my partner said and thumped me on the chest. “This is Jonathan.”

“Well, nice to meet you both. Feel free to take any empty seat. We are welcoming of every American here, not just Poughkeepsian’s,” he said, grinning from ear to ear. Then he clapped his hands together, “Now I



must be off. I have got a whole town of guests to entertain.”

“Weird young man,” Patterson noted after Henry left.

“Young? He’s practically middle-aged,” I replied.

She scoffed. “Young to us, I mean. You seem to be in a little better mood.”

I nodded. The warmth helped, and as odd as Henry was, he seemed genuinely excited for the festivities. His enthusiasm, even if only for a brief moment, had been infectious. Even still, I ignored Patterson’s observation. I couldn’t very well admit she was right, or she’d remind me of it all night. Probably for most of the next week as well. “If most of the neighborhood is here, and you think this is the place where we’ll find Sophie, then this shouldn’t take long,” I said instead.

We split up. Patterson wandered amongst the people and chatted, looking for information. I made my way over to the back windows and took a better look outside. I was standing there for maybe five minutes, watching the children run in the snow, skate on the ice, and throw snowballs at both groups when Henry walked back over to me. “Ah, I remember when I had the legs to run in the snow like that. Now, I can do it, but I end up winded in no time. Nothing is better than to be a child at Christmas time, what do you think?”

I shrugged. “I don’t remember. It wasn’t really a big holiday when I was a child,” I replied. “It kind of shared the light with a few other things that tended to come up around the same time,” I said, knowing the answer was a bit too cryptic. I inwardly cringed, knowing it would prompt a follow-up question.

Sure enough, after a moment's pause in which Henry grabbed two glasses from a passing waiter, he asked, "Where's home then?"

He passed a glass of water for me. I took a sip and thought how best to answer. "Rome," I said, deciding finally to tell the truth. I wasn't about to tell him it was ancient Rome, but he could take my answer or leave it.

"You are a well-traveled man then. I bet it isn't near as cold in Rome during the holidays," Henry said, trying to keep up the conversation. I figured he was trying to make me feel welcomed. It was odd, but not overly so.

I changed the subject. "I've never been ice skating. It's not really a thing where I'm from," I said.

"Oh, you must try it. Although I should warn you, you will fall. You will fall often, and it may hurt more than your ego," Henry said. "But you cannot go out in that snow with those excitable children with half a coat on and nothing to protect your head. Let me let you borrow something. I'll be right back."

"I stood there in the window for another minute, and Henry was back. "Here are some skates. They aren't the best ones I have, but they should strap onto your boots fine. Here's a coat and a hat too," he said and passed me a large red and white coat. I didn't know who the original owner was, but they must have weighed the same as a horse. "I'm sorry about the color. The chap who owned these was a bit eccentric. Don't know where he went, but he left them here last Christmas. I can't wear it around since it looks too much like a British military uniform from a distance. Crazy old man went by the name Nicholas."

I sighed and looked skyward. "Of course it was," I

said and rolled my eyes. Then I thanked Henry for the coat, hat, and skates and awkwardly put together my ensemble.

Patterson walked over just before I pulled the back door open. “What on earth are you wearing?”

“I didn’t see any other options, Pattie. There aren’t any coats sitting around, and I don’t own skates,” I replied.

“You’re going ice skating?” she asked with a profoundly skeptical look in her eye.

“Yeah, so?” I asked, suddenly defensive.

“Jonathan, you’ve never been ice skating. This should be fun to watch.”

I opened the door, and a small flurry of snow whistled in with the biting wind. I pulled the bright red hat with its fluffy white tip down tight around my head. “Well, I figure the best way to find Sophie is to go out there where all the children are and do what children do.”

Patterson opened her mouth, waited for a second, closed it, and then repeated the maneuver. “That actually isn’t a terrible idea, Jonathan,” she said finally.

“Yeah, well, ask me again after I’ve busted my tail a few dozen times, and I’ll tell you for sure,” I said and stepped out into the winter snow.

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As it turned out, I was a horrific ice skater. I mean that in the full sense of the word, and since there were two bright gas lamps near the pond, all of the children

got the chance to witness my poor balance. It was a horrible experience, especially at the beginning. Being laughed at by two dozen kids ranging in age from six to twelve was quite a disconcerting experience. It didn't help that the large red coat was so big that I tripped over it twice. It also didn't help that the straps came loose on my skates at several points, and I would find myself flat on the icy pond with the blade skittering away across the surface.

It wasn't all bad, however. Being out there, learning to skate allowed me to listen in on the conversations around me. In my severely limited experience with small humans, I noticed that children sometimes censored their real thoughts around adults. I wasn't sure if it was because they felt that their ideas were not important enough, or that the adults who they respected would make fun of them, or if they were just shy in general. The second I fell on the ice the first time, big red coat and all, the children relaxed. One of them even mentioned how much like a little kid I was when I skated.

I would like to say I did it to disarm them and retrieve the information, but in all honesty, I was just a terrible skater. Someone had the good sense to have made a large wooden bench on the edge of the pond. Once I felt my knees and elbows had taken enough abuse, I made my way over to the bench and collapsed. A snowball fight was raging behind me, and I got powder all over me after only a few minutes. No one paid me any mind at all. It was a small miracle the big tall adult in the bright red coat isn't even noticed by a sea of children playing in the snow on Christmas Eve.

I looked across the pond to the side closer to the

darkness and away from the building behind me. There was a second bench on that side of the ice with a young girl sitting by herself; hands folded neatly in her lap and feet kicking in the air a mere inch from being able to touch the ground. She looked on as the other kids skated around the pond. Her expression seemed to be a mixture of sadness and trepidation. I made my way over to sit next to her.

“Hello,” I said and tried my best to put on a big smile. I don’t understand kids. I don’t care what anyone says. They are not just small people. They are a different species, and in all my years, I have never figured out what makes them tick.

“Hi,” she replied in a small voice. She didn’t look at me. The girl just kept her hands folded and eyes on the children playing on the ice.

Undaunted, I tried again. “What’s your name?”

“Sophie,” she replied and pushed a strand of hair out of her face. Her hands were red from the cold. She wasn’t wearing any mittens like the other children. I didn’t have any either, but that was my fault for not grabbing a pair on my way out of the office.

“You like ice skating, Sophie?” I asked. She nodded and then wiped at her nose. “Why aren’t you out there skating with the other children?”

“They don’t like me,” she said, finally tearing her eyes away from the pond. She looked at me, and it seemed like she realized I wasn’t a child for the first time.

“Ha, tell me about it. That’s the story of my life,” I replied. She looked down at her feet which she kicked back and forth, her face drooping. I winced. *Great job Jonathan. Good opening. You really connected there.*

I tried again, this time thinking before I opened my big mouth. “What’s not to like,” I said. “You seem like a very bright young woman.”

“They don’t like me because I’m not American.”

“Really,” I said. “Where are you from then?”

“My family came to New York this year. We are from Holland.” She shrugged and slumped deeper into the bench.

“To hell with those miscreants!” I exclaimed. Then, realizing I was spouting things off before my brain connected the dots, softer I added, “there isn’t anything wrong with Holland. You know I’m not American, either.” I said and winked at her. I couldn’t help feeling sorry for Sophie. Here she was sitting alone on a bench on Christmas Eve watching other kids play. Suddenly, Patterson’s parcel made sense. This little girl needed help, and if there were no one else around to do it, I would.

“Really?” she asked, perking up and intrigued.

“Really,” I confirmed. “I’m Roman.”

Sophie sniffed. “Italian, you mean?”

“No, I mean Roman,” I said.

Sophie then uncrossed her arms and counted silently on her half-frozen fingers. After a moment of quiet contemplation, she turned back to me. “But that would make you at least fifty years old!” she exclaimed.

I laughed. It just kind of snuck out. “Yeah. Fifty would be nice,” I replied. I saw she had frowned when I laughed. I looked back at her keeping my features as apologetic as I could and said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to laugh.”

“I’m good at math,” she said in a tense staccato.

“My father works the books for the ships traveling down the Hudson River.”

I held my hands up in mock surrender. “My point is, kid, that I’m not from around here either, but I’m out there skating.”

“Yeah, but you’re full grown. They won’t say anything to *you*,” Sophie replied.

I sighed and put my hand on her shoulder. This is probably where I should offer some angelic wisdom, but the only things popping in my head were rude gestures to make at the other kids for making Sophie feel like crap. I took a second to suss out an alternative to that and finally said, “They may not say anything to my face, but they’ll be talking behind my back. The thing is, I’ve spent my whole existence getting under other people’s skin. When you do that, they talk about you. I just don’t have to care what they say and you shouldn’t either.”

“Yeah, that’s easier said than done,” Sophie replied. “It’s just that I’m the little Dutch girl who can’t skate because her blades don’t fit.”

I brightened up at her words. Finally, there was something I could do to fix this. I blew a hot breath on my hands, pretending to warm them. In reality, I mumbled a quick summons to Patterson, asking for the package. It appeared under the bench a half-second later. I silently said thanks to Patterson and heard a snarky, yet angelic, your welcome emanate from the house. I picked up the package and handed it to Sophie. “Here. I just happened to have some skates that I think will fit you perfectly,” I said.

She opened the box, and her expression softened immediately. She pulled a pair of skates out, which

clipped onto boots, were just the right size for her. “Oh, I think there’s something else we can do to complete the look,” I said as Sophie scrambled to fit her feet through the straps. I pulled the red coat off and yanked my own sleeve the rest of the way free from its stitchings. Biting the end, I pulled it taut and ripped open the seam on the sleeve. I handed it to her, “It’s a lot colder out there on the ice. You can use this as a scarf,” I said.

Sophie took the torn coat sleeve like it was a gold brick and quickly tied it around her neck, stuffing the extra down her jacket to secure the ends. She took her first wobbling steps out onto the pond’s ice testing the size and feel of the skates. They were just the right size, and after only a few minutes, she was skating around like she had been doing it all her life. Finally, she came back to the edge, where I still sat on the bench, watching her. “This is amazing,” she said. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” I said, smiling. Patterson walked up behind me and sat down on the bench.

“What’s your name?” Sophie asked.

Patterson opened her mouth to answer for me, but I held up a hand. “My name’s Nicholas,” I said.

“Thank you, Nicholas,” Sophie said, “and have a merry Christmas.” She skated away into the center of the ice.

Patterson turned to me, “Why not tell her your real name?” she asked.

“Are you kidding me?” I answered. “I swear you to silence on this, but I was just a nice person for a few minutes.”

Pattie laughed. “I know. I was watching from the



window. Are you ill?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know, but I can’t have a single freak accident ruining my villainous reputation.”

“So, you’re hiding the fact that you’re just so saintly on the inside?” Patterson said, then scoffed again. “Saint Nicholas. Wasn’t he an old Turkish guy who got up to some trouble a couple of hundred years ago giving some presents away?”

I leaned back against the bench. “Yeah, but they didn’t particularly like that back then. I was assigned to help him relocate,” I replied. “Besides, the Henry fellow said the previous owner of this coat’s name was Nicholas.”

Patterson stood up and faced me. “Where did you stick him, inside Mount Vesuvius or something equally sinister?” She seemed quite tickled at the thought of the man trying to find his way out of the inside of a volcano without melting.

“Nah,” I replied and let out a small chuckle. “I stuck him on the north pole.”

Patterson returned the laugh and started walking back to the house. “Come on. Let’s get back up to heaven, but you are returning that ridiculous coat first.”

I stopped and looked over at Patterson, who paused once she noticed. “Merry Christmas, Pattie,” I said.

“Merry Christmas, Jonathan,” she replied, and together we flew home.