

750,000 of Your Friends Like This

(First Appeared in Voice From the Past anthology)

When Jefferson Marine got a unicorn tattoo after Christmas, people didn't laugh. You didn't laugh at Jefferson Marine, not over anything. Not at his scooter, not at his diminutive stature, and not as his momma, who, rumor had it, was only twelve years older than he was.

Jefferson Marine was visiting his momma (who was *fifteen* years older than he was, thank you very much) for Christmas, like a dutiful son, when he heard the familiar words come over the radio. "*A Christmas Carol*, read in its entirety by Orlando Bloom, brought to you by BookFace Tech...Marley was alive, to begin with."

Jefferson was reading a text from Half Pint, his second in command (the poor bastard was spending the holidays with his parole officer) looked up and frowned at the radio. Was that right? Marley alive? Jefferson wasn't much of a reader, but his mother was such a fan of *A Christmas Carol* that he had been subjected to the tale in video and audio form, multiple times every Christmas.

He perked up and listened closely, probably for the first time in a decade, to the words. The story unfolded about a man named Scrooge, and his powerful control of the city and those weaker around him, the sniveling poor, and then how his dead partner came to visit him.

Only, he wasn't dead. And in this version, Scrooge was less of a money counter and more of a street thug. And Marley wasn't his long dead partner, but his best friend from juvie who came back to tell him of three mythical creatures who would tell him where he had gone wrong.

The first was a fairy, but not the faggot kind. The second was a manticore. Jefferson didn't know what a manticore was, but he got the sense it was a pretty scary bastard. The third was a black unicorn, silent as a corpse - something Jefferson Marine knew quite a bit about. The bodies Scrooge had created, the widows he had left, the lives ended and ruined. The unicorn pointed to a grave where Scrooge's mother lay, dying a pariah for the shame of her son's crimes.

When the story was over, Jefferson Marine was left with tears running down his face. Three things were on his mind; apologize to his mother. Call Half Pint. Then make an appointment with his tattoo artist.

He had a place on his forearm he'd been saving for a swastika. He decided to replace it with a black unicorn's head.

Half Pint Jones was also listening to the radio, trying to figure out how to get free of his parole officer. She was a tough bitch by the name of Harkness Lily White, which Half Pint thought was funny because she was the Negroiest Negro he'd ever met. He'd heard she had requested him because of his hate crimes, and her holier-than-whitey attitude just made him hate her kind more. As he had no family, she'd demanded he spend Christmas Eve with her in her piece of shit apartment. She had left to go get cranberries, and he expected she was testing him, seeing if he'd ransack the place or break out. It would be his last strike; piss her off and he'd be back in jail for good.

He was just about ready to prove the old negress right and start rifling through her sock drawer for her stash of gigolo money when the radio switched to the reading of *A Christmas Carol*. It was the same station as Jefferson Marine was listening to.

“And now we bring you, uninterrupted, *A Christmas Carol*, by Charles Dickens, read by Whopie Goldberg and brought to you by Bookface Tech. Marley was dead to begin with...”

Half Pint Jones ignored most of it, arm deep in underwear, when he heard the words, ““You will be haunted,” resumed the Ghost, "by five Spirits."

He paused. Five spirits? He wasn't a Christmas literature scholar by any stretch of the imagination, but he had been in jail last Christmas and the warden had thought it would be funny to have every version of the Christmas Carol piped in to the television. There was no watching the MMA bouts, there was watching Kermit the Frog be a sad Cratchitt, then Scrooge McDuck a repentant Scrooge, then Bill Murray a greedy TV exec, then Alasdair Sim a dancing Scrooge, then Tori Spelling a smirking Scrooge (that had caused a prison riot.) Perhaps the warden had wanted to teach them something. But all he'd learned was a deep seated desire to shoplift any Charles Dickens book he came across and burn those pieces of shit that people called literature.

Seeing as how Half Pint didn't go to many bookstores, he'd only done this once. And then he realized he'd burned one of those horror literary mashups, *A Christmas Poltergeist*.

But five spirits, that made him pause. No matter what bastardization people did to the story, the thing was supposed to have three spirits. Past, present, and future, right? So he listened.

Ebenezer Scrooge encountered the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Yet to Come, but he also discovered the ghosts of Christmas Home and Christmas Far Away. When Half Pint heard how Scrooge saw his family before he was born, his radiant mother, his laughing father, and realized he had been the catalyst to souring his father and breaking up their marriage, tears filled his eyes. Then he downright sobbed as Scrooge discovered the Christmas of soldiers in foreign lands, including his friend from his apprenticeship, who wasn't named Dick, but had the same name as Half Pint's brother (which was odd, since he didn't think Moose was a common English name in the 1800s).

Half Pint found himself, instead of looking through Harkness Lilly's sock drawer, looking through her kitchen. He suddenly wanted to surprise her with a pie.

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Harkness Lilly White sat outside in her car, listening to the radio. *A Christmas Carol* had just come on and she listened to it, loving the familiar cadence. She got lost in the story, not realizing the minutes going by. It was, word for word, exactly as she remembered it.

“Did you enjoy the Bookface Tech presentation of *A Christmas Carol*, read by Katherine Hepburn? If you don't feel as if you enjoyed it enough, that is likely because you are not signed up to Bookface Tech, the premier social networking site that collates your information and modifies your content to suit your needs! With over three billion members, Bookface is the place to be. Sign up now, for free!”

Harkness Lilly White frowned. Her computer had broken two years ago, she did email at the station's computers, and she'd just never seen fit to replace it. She shrugged. “Stories modified to suit my needs. Sounds

horrible.”

She got out of her car and headed up the stairs to her apartment, humming “I’ll Be Home for Christmas.”

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In Seattle, WA, production manager Jennifer Ford leaned back and sighed. Seventy-four thousand different readings of *A Christmas Carol*, especially designated for the reader’s life and preferences, all of their steps online tracked, monitored, and run through a specific algorithm to choose which reading was best. It had cost millions. But if it paid off, it would be worth billions.

She’d probably get a new office.

She smiled. *The Christmas Carol* had been a nice, feel-good test. They had changes scheduled for several classics, some designed for behavior modification, some designed just to entertain. But Jennifer Ford had an ace up her sleeve.

The executive team in BookFace Inc. was cuthroat, always looking for a way to get ahead of each other. Jennifer knew her coworkers had it out for her; she was the head of the biggest project BookFace had ever produced. She had held onto several thousand dollars of her *A Christmas Carol* budget for her job security.

If something went awry, she was planning on sending out the five thousand different versions of *A Clockwork Orange*.