

A Tooth For A Tooth

It started like any other Christmas, then it all went wrong, and of course they called me in to clean up the mess. Which was how I found myself hanging on for dear life by my fingertips, sweat trickling into my eyes, and the hands on the church clock continuing their steady, ruthless march towards the twelve.

I let out an exasperated groan. Where the hell *was* she?

I must have been mad. Who else would be stupid enough to have signed up as corporate troubleshooter to a bunch of shiny-faced over-achievers like The Directors? They threw buzzwords around like confetti and made all the proper, concerned noises about their Investment In People, but I'd lost count of the times they'd driven out the best qualified person and replaced them with one of their own inside contractors.

This case was a prime example: Tania Featherfly – even her initials suited the job – had been the best tooth fairy in the business, but, like so many other small franchises she'd had to increase her prices to maintain those high standards. I remembered the board meeting and hearing the words: 'Economic Downturn,' and 'Credit Crunch' bandied about, but all it really boiled down to was: "My Lot Are Cheaper, You're Fired." And bingo – tooth fairying was farmed out to a pool of corporate suits with as much sense of tradition as a brick.

Tania had, quite rightly, been somewhat annoyed at being laid off so close to Christmas – a lucrative time for the collection of enamel – so she'd decided to do something about it. But did she go to the administrators and offer to work at lower cost? No. Not her style. She thought it would be *far* more entertaining to follow the

new contractor on his rounds, and start removing perfectly healthy teeth while they were still in the mouth.

And there was certainly no money being left in return for these filched fangs.

That was when I got the call. Luckily, the only person to wake during one of Tania's dubious 'extractions' had been the chairman of the board who'd fired her, and only then because she'd really gone to town on him; quite the revenge-seeker is our little Tania.

I still remember him trying to talk through a mouth with only one tooth left in it. "Joe, it's vital you get every single one of those teeth back where they belong, before midnight."

I took a moment to decipher what he was saying, then asked, "Why midnight?"

"Come on, you *know* this is a special night."

"Christmas Eve, what difference does that make?"

The chairman sighed. "Midnight GMT, Christmas Eve? Think about it," he said with exaggerated patience. "If there is mischief abroad in The Netherworld at that time, all magic will cease to have effect." When I didn't answer, he growled, "The guy in the red suit?"

"Ah."

"Yes, 'Ah.' The Human World will be thrown into turmoil, there will be no belief in *anything* anymore. And that means?"

"Err, no teeth left out for collection?"

"The penny drops. Now get onto it. And, Joe?"

"Yeah?"

"I hardly need remind you which teeth are top priority."

So I'd collected a copy of the evening's itinerary, and set out. First I had to find Tania and talk her into coming with me, which might be difficult. Not the finding her part, that was easy; I just started at the end of list and worked backwards through the as yet unvisited kids, all sleeping happily with sugar plums dancing on their heads ... or whatever.

Eventually I ran into the new operative. I didn't think there was any point telling him what was going on, he didn't look the type to cope well under pressure, so I just nodded as he sidled past on the window sill. He gave me a nervous look, obviously aware of my position within the company.

I smiled. "Nothing to worry about, Brian, you're doing a great job," I assured him, and kept smiling while he slipped off into the night, looking over his shoulder, suspicion still furrowing his brow.

I glanced at my list – how far behind was Tania? Was it worth trying to beat her to the previous house or should I just wait here til she arrived? I didn't have to ponder long; she'd followed so closely on Brian's heels it was a miracle he hadn't seen her. Actually no, it wasn't: Tania was *good*.

I stepped into her path as she alighted on the sill. "Hey, Tania. Thinking of pitching for the Santa franchise next year?"

She gave a helpless little squeal, then glared at me, dropping the pretence. "Oh, it's you."

"Nice to see you too. Look, you have to stop what you're doing." I tried to sound understanding, but Tania's glare intensified, and she held up her pliers.

"Get out of my way, Joe, I'm busy."

"You have to help me put this right," I pleaded.

“After what they did to me? They can kiss my fairy ass! Now move, I’ve got a lot to do tonight.”

“Look, it won’t work. You’ll just end up destroying us all!” I said, my voice rising in frustration. “Please, Tania, we’ll sort this and then go to the board together. Try to work something out.”

I gestured at room beyond the window. A red and green woollen stocking lay draped across the foot of the bed, and the boy’s face reflected that curious mixture of utter peace, yet enormous potential for mischief, that only a sleeping child can convey.

“Don’t mess it up for them,” I said, and I knew I’d succeeded in chipping through her layer of betrayed fury. She hadn’t become the best tooth fairy in history by accident; she genuinely liked her customers – under normal circumstances.

“We don’t have time,” she said, and I was relieved to note a touch of regret in her voice.

“We will if we work together,” I said. “Come on, we’ll go back the way you came.”

And so we’d started back along the path of destruction Tania had laid. In each room I prised open the child’s mouth, while Tania consulted her own list then selected the proper tooth from her gilt-embroidered bag.

Some of the kids were awkward little sods. They’d turned over onto their fronts, making it nigh on impossible to get a good grip on their jaw, and one or two opened sleepy eyes and blinked a few times while Tania and I stood dead still, so tense we could hear each other’s heartbeats.

In the fourth house we re-visited, I was holding open a little girl’s lips while Tania shoved the tooth back into the socket, when the girl spoke in her sleep; “Don’t want

no coal ...”

I gave a yell and jumped out of the way just as the girl’s hand flopped out of the covers to brush at her mouth. Her finger caught the back of my head and sent me tumbling onto the pillow, where I floundered in a mass of blonde curls.

“Well that’s one kid with a new wobbly tooth tomorrow,” Tania said. “I’m not going back up there to glue that one in place.”

“At least you can fly,” I grumbled.

We worked well together, in fact, and even managed to sort out the chairman’s revolting teeth and replace them in pretty good time. All purloined premolars were soon firmly back in their rightful mouths. When we got to the second-to-last house, I thought Tania looked a bit troubled.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Nothing, come on, let’s get this one done,” she said, and caught at my arm to lift me into the room. The boy lay flat on his back, and his mouth was obligingly wide open. I grinned at Tania, celebrating our luck, but she still didn’t look pleased.

I chose not to say anything, and a glance at the bedside clock told me we’d better hurry to get the last house done in time. A sense of great achievement filled me; I’d done it again! Troubleshooter Extraordinaire saves the day! I might even get a pay rise out of this one.

We landed on the last window sill and I turned to Tania, rubbing my hands. “Come on then,” I said. “We’ve got a few minutes spare but let’s not take it down to the wire.”

“Joe, there’s a problem.”

“Problem?”

“There are no more teeth left in the bag.”

“What?” A cold feeling wormed its way through me and I could feel my grin dropping away like a shed skin. All my happy thoughts sank into my feet and started seeping out of my boots.

“I thought so at the last house, and now I’m sure; that was the last one.”

“But it can’t be!” I grabbed the bag – it was one of those bizarre ones that has endless depths when it’s full, but when it’s empty, it’s empty. “There’s nothing there,” I said dully, turning it inside out.

Tania bit her lip. “No, there isn’t.” Then her face lit up. “Oh! I know where it is!”

Relief banished the ice from my blood, but only until she spoke again. “I threw it in the pond.”

“What?” I stared at her, incredulous. “Tania, you –”

“I was angry, Joe! This was the first house I’d done, and I just threw it away when I came out of the room. I saw it land in the pond.”

“And this helps us *how*?” I snarled.

“I can get it back. There are water nymphs in that pond.” And without another word she jumped into the air and was gone – leaving me stranded on the windowsill of a fourth floor room, the church clock slowly ticking towards the destruction of everything.

I sat down. There was little point in wearing a path in the wood by pacing up and down, and at least if I kept my back to the night I wouldn’t have to look at those mercilessly marching hands as midnight crept ever closer.

A sound made me look up hopefully. Tania back already? But it wasn’t her. Instead there was a rushing of air and I closed my eyes against the dust and bits of leaves that blew into my face. When I opened them again I was just in time to see the current

Santa Claus franchise holder leaping back into his sleigh. That guy was fast! I was lost in admiration for a moment, but as the sleigh took off again the downdraught hit and, suddenly numb with fright, I found myself sliding towards the edge of the window sill.

There was enough breath left for me to whimper as my feet lost contact with the solid surface, and somehow I twisted and caught at the edge of the sill. And that's how you found me. Hanging on, blinking sweat out of my eyes and almost able to hear that church clock ticking away my last hope.

"Tania!" I yelled. "Hurry up!" My hands were slipping, and my heart pounded harder than it ever had before - it occurred to me I could actually die here. I felt sick and my arms started trembling with the effort of holding on, my fingertips burning against the rough wood.

Finally, blessedly, I heard her land on the sill.

"Got it!" she beamed, holding up the missing tooth. Then she gave me an impatient look. "Well, come on, what are you waiting for?"

Thinking it over, safe and warm in my bed on Christmas morning, I decided I'd been quite the action hero, and I allowed myself a smile of satisfaction. Tania would have some explaining to do, but we'd work something out - at least she'd helped put it right and I could relax again, knowing I'd saved the Netherworld from a terrible fate.

The phone rang. I picked up, still smiling. "Merry Christmas!"

"Joe? We have a problem: we just had to fire Santa and he's not happy ..."