

Holiday Bonus



by Nick Andreychuk

“Sometimes I really hate this job,” Earl Stack muttered to the empty washroom, as he replaced the lid on the toilet tank.

Checking the toilet had been a last ditch idea, so he left the stall feeling irritated. On his way out of the warehouse’s men’s room, he grabbed the cart of cleaning supplies from where it propped the door open. He grumbled to himself all the way down the hall and into the mop room, where he deposited the cart, pulled out his cellphone and called his client—a.k.a. his boss in his current undercover position. “This case is a bust,” he said in greeting.

“Hello to you, too,” Jonathon Dumont said from the comfort of his home. “Look, I don’t care how long it takes you, you’re not leaving there until you find my money!”

“I’m telling you the place is clean.” Literally. Stack’s own home had never received as much cleaning attention. Dumont had made it crystal clear that he didn’t want anyone second-guessing Stack’s janitorial status, so he’d had to play the part to a T. Dumont had even gone so far as to tell Stack not to wear a fedora, as if only private investigators wore stylishly comfortable hats. In compliance, Stack had opted for an old mesh baseball cap while he’d mopped the floors and searched high and low for stashed loot.

“Look,” Dumont said. “I wouldn’t have hired you if I didn’t have good reason to suspect that the guys at the loading bays were fudging the inventory records and selling off goods under the table.”

“They must’ve snuck the cash out already.”

“We’ve been over this. I overheard one of the guys tell another guy that he’d split up the cash and they’d have it on Friday—tomorrow. And tomorrow’s the last workday before the holidays. My Christmas bonus is going to be low this year because of those thieves. Thanks to their scamming, my division’s not as profitable as it should have been, and therefore my percentage bonus will reflect that.”

“So what kind of percentage do janitors get?”

“Very funny. Only upper management gets a monetary bonus. You—like the rest of the employees—will be getting a nice big turkey... *if* you don’t blow your cover and you come back to work tomorrow night.”

“Some bonus. I can see why those guys, with all that back-breaking labor, would be tempted to increase their take-home pay.”

“Hey! Those turkeys aren’t cheap, and we’re giving out ones that are already cleaned and stuffed. Besides, those guys are still breaking the law.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t see you calling the cops.”

“And you’d better not either. I need that cash now. I’m not waiting for it to go through all of head-office’s bureaucracy before it’s worked into my division’s profit-loss statements, and a tiny bit of it *eventually* trickles down to me by bonus time next year.”

As they talked, Stack wandered through the large, box-filled warehouse to the cafeteria in search of a place to sit. He sank into an orange vinyl chair, and rested his legs on the adjacent seat. He barely listened to Dumont. Where hadn’t he looked? His eyes fell on the kitchen. He’d checked all the cupboards, tins, and cans, but....

“Everyone’s getting their bonuses tomorrow, right?” Stack asked, cutting off something Dumont was saying about firing the loaders.

“What? Right. So what?”

Stack stood and weaved his way through the tables to the swinging kitchen door. “Stuffing,” Stack said as he pushed open the door. “I have a hunch some of the turkeys have *green* stuffing.” He entered the walk-in freezer, after propping its door open with a stepladder. “Damn, it’s cold in here.”

“What an astute observation. Now, what about them turkeys?”

“There’re a lot of ’em, but they all have stickers with names on ’em. Whose should I check first?”

“Try Smitty’s—if his has bread crumbs, then they all do.”

“Okay. Let’s see. Sikes. Slavan. Yep, they’re alphabetical. And here’s a bird for Mr. Stanley Smith.” Stack turned the turkey around on the shelf. “Hmm. There’s definitely some regular stuffing in here, but let’s see if that’s *all* there is.” He pulled a small folding knife from his pocket, and sliced open the cellophane. He jabbed the knife into the frozen stuffing and...pulled. A small chunk came out a little too easily.

Stack grinned. “*Bonus.*”

“Is it there?” Dumont sounded as excited as a dog in a hydrant factory.

“Unless the grocery’s offering some weird instant rebate on their turkeys, I’d say that I’ve found your kickbacks.”

“Clever, clever bastards. If they’d have gotten caught, they’d just claim they thought the cash was part of their holiday bonus. Okay, here’s what you’re

going to do. Check all the turkeys. Take the cash out, replace it with some pink memo paper from the supply room -- that ought to send a loud-and-clear message -- and make a list of all the thieves.”

Stack rolled his eyes at the phone. *Should I add your name to the list?* “Is that all, boss?”

“Yes, and make sure to reseal the turkeys. Then bring me my money!”

Stack ended the call without further comment. More than a hundred turkeys awaited his inspection.

He carted the stuffed birds to the warm kitchen in small batches, and placed them on the counter next to an industrial-sized roll of all-purpose food film. As he went through them, he ignored the names on the turkeys with regular stuffing, and confirmed that a bird had his name on it. He loved hot turkey sandwiches.

* * *

Stack waved goodbye to the night watchman on his way out of the building. Fortunately, the security guard, a retired cop with a bum leg, rarely left his seat at the front desk. Still, Stack could understand why Dumont hadn't tried to find and remove the loot himself. It would have been awkward trying to explain the contents of the garbage bag slung over his shoulder.

Stack breathed easier once outside. Being close to dawn, there was only one car besides his own in the parking lot. He hurried towards it, striding carefully on the icy asphalt.

Just as he was about to open the driver-side door, a woman jumped up from in front of his car.

“Hi!” she yelled, startling Stack and causing him to slip. He fell flat on his behind and lost his grip on the bag.

A young woman with hot-pink lipstick smiled at Stack as she reached down to help him up. Embarrassed and annoyed, he shooed her hand away.

“Sorry,” she said, as she reached for the bag instead. “I didn’t mean to *scare* you.”

Stack scowled. “You didn’t scare me, but I wasn’t expecting someone to jump out at me in the middle of the night in an empty parking lot.”

“Sorry,” she repeated. “Hey, so like can you give me a lift?”

Stack looked her up and down and realized she was holding his bag. Just as he was about to snatch it back, she turned and walked to the passenger side door. “I don’t live very far and I like need to get home before my parents murder me, okay? Please? Pretty please?” She’d adopted a puppy dog expression which Stack couldn’t help but grin at.

“All right. Get in.”

“Thanks,” she said as she wriggled herself into the seat. “Hey, what’s in here?” she asked. She pulled at the ends of the garbage bag.

Stack reached across the seat and grabbed the bag before she could get a good look at its contents. “Nothing,” he said. He stuffed the bag under his seat, sat down, and closed the door on the chill air.

“My name’s Candice Dumont, by the way, but everyone calls me Candie, so call me Candie okay, because I hate it when people call me Candice, like my parents, even though I keep telling them that it’s Candie, not Candice.”

Stack felt out of breath just listening to her. “Wait, are you related to Jon Dumont?” he interrupted.

Her eyes lit up. “Hey, do you know him? Yeah, I guess you do ’cuz I just saw you come out of his work. Duh—how stupid can I be? Yeah, he’s my lame-o dad, oh, but you’re not going to tell him that I said that right ’cuz you know, he’s not so bad.”

“Actually,” Stack interrupted again, “it just so happens that I’m on my way to pay your papa a visit.”

Candie’s eyes lit up. “Really? How come?”

“Oh, uh, just work stuff. But never mind that. What are you doing out at this time of night?”

“Okay, I was like at this party, and it got late and now I have to get home and get ready for school before like my parents notice I’m not home, and—”

“I get the point.”

Candie smelled of pot, but what did he care? She wasn’t his daughter. Besides, her eyes were focused, so maybe the smell came from her teased-out hair.

Stack started the car and defrosted the windshield.

As the air in the car warmed up, Candie opened her winter jacket. Stack noticed that her body had matured quicker than her verbal skills.

Soon they were on their way.

“Hey, I just realized you never told me your name. And, like, are you gonna tell me what’s in the bag?”

“It’s Earl Stack and I told you before, it’s nothing. Just something I picked up for your papa.”

“Oh pooh—it’s probably just some boring paperwork. And you’re just some boring old janitor.”

Stack had nothing against janitors, but being a private eye carried a gritty coolness to it that many women found exciting. And though he had no intentions of laying a hand on the jailbait sitting next to him, he nonetheless couldn't resist the urge to impress her. "Actually," he said, "I'm a private eye."

"Ooh, that sounds *dangerous*, are you like investigating a murder? No! I bet you're like undercover to spy on the workers to see if anyone suspects that my dad had Sanders whacked."

"Who's Sanders?"

"Okay, he's like this guy who..."

"Forget I asked. Your dad didn't kill anyone—at least not that I know of—and there haven't been any murders at the warehouse."

"Oh, oh, I bet someone's stealing from the company."

Stack imagined Candie in a classroom, squirming in her seat, waving her raised hand at the teacher. For some reason, he pictured her in a short-skirted, midriff-baring cheerleader's uniform.

"A-ha, so I'm right," Candie said, taking Stack's silence as affirmation. "So do you like carry a gun? Oh, and, and have you killed anyone? With your bare hands? Do you know a lot of gangsters?"

And on it went—a constant stream of questions, with barely any room for Stack to say "yes" or "no" or "none of your sweet-assed business."

Because of—or in spite of—Candie's constant yammering, time passed quickly. Stack drove into a residential area with large, two-story brick homes that were more imposing than impressive. The outside lights were on at Dumont's house, making it easy to read the number by the two-car garage.

“Okay, so I’m gonna sneak around back,” Candie said as they pulled in the driveway. “I’ll be able to like get up to my room while you distract my father. Puh-lease don’t tell him, okay?”

“No skin off my back,” Stack said. He turned off the ignition, reached under the seat for the garbage bag, and stepped carefully out of the car, mindful of more black ice.

Candie slipped out of the car and around the house before Stack reached the front door.

Dumont answered the door and invited Stack inside.

Stack stepped in far enough to close the door, but didn’t remove his shoes or enter further into the warm house. “Here’s your dirty money,” he said as he shoved the bag at Dumont.

Dumont grabbed it greedily, and looked inside. “Thank you for your services,” he said. “Your check will be in the mail.”

“It’d better be, or else I’ll have a few choice words with—”

“—the police?” The female voice came from behind Dumont.

Stack’s mouth dropped open.

Dumont spun around. “Who are you?”

The woman Stack knew as Candie—looking older with her hair pulled back and her lips wiped clean—flashed her badge in response.

Dumont’s face paled considerably.

“How...how... how’d you know?”

“We caught some guys selling merchandise out the back of a truck. They didn’t reveal their source, but the boxes originated from your warehouse. You have a lot of explaining to do.” She

smirked at Stack. He fully expected her to say, “Fooled you, didn’t I? Some private eye you are.” Instead, she said, “You’re free to go, Mr. Stack.”

Stack tipped his hat to her, shrugged his shoulders at Stack, and called it a night.

* * *

The next evening, Earl Stack went in to work at the warehouse as scheduled, but he left an official note of resignation on Jonathon Dumont’s desk. The pile of phone messages and unopened mail indicated that the manager hadn’t been in that day.

Stack had a strong feeling he wouldn’t be paid for his P.I. services any time soon. At least he’d get paid for his janitorial services—including his nice big turkey with special green stuffing.