

## Chapter 2

“Good morning, Mr. Cratchit!”

As Robert entered through the door, he couldn't help but feel somewhat peculiar hearing Scrooge's enthusiastic greeting, even knowing of his recent turnaround. Immediately, however, he noticed how warm and inviting the room felt, partly from the extra coal on the fire, but more so, he surmised, from Scrooge's cheerful demeanor.

“Good morning, Mr. Scrooge, sir.”

After Robert hung up his coat and hat, he took his place at his writing table and opened the ledger that had remained closed since Christmas Eve.

Watching from his office, Scrooge interrupted Robert's work, even before he could uncover his inkwell. “Mr. Cratchit? A moment of your time, please?”

Robert hurried to his usual spot in front of Scrooge's desk. “Relax, Bob. I just wanted to know why my business partner is sitting at the *clerk's* station and not sitting here at my *partner's* desk?” Scrooge gestured at the desk to his right.

“Me, sir? Partner?”

“Did you not see the sign outside? You *are* Bob Cratchit, are you not?” Scrooge chuckled.

“Why, yes sir, I am indeed. But Mr. Scrooge, this was Mr. Marley's desk.”

“This is the desk of one of the partners in the counting-house of Scrooge and Cratchit. Besides, I have it on good faith that Jacob would be honored if you took your place at his desk.”

“Yes, sir. If you don’t think I’m being disrespectful, *I* would be the one who is honored to take a seat at your side.”

*He’s quite sincere*, Robert thought, as he gathered his work and belongings from the clerk’s writing table and settled into the desk next to his former employer—now, partner.

As Robert began working, Scrooge once again interrupted him before the ink started to flow, “Bob, tell me about your son.”

“Peter?”

Scrooge shook his head.

“Richard?”

Again, he shook his head.

“Tim, sir? Tiny Tim?”

Scrooge smiled and nodded. “Yes, Tiny Tim. How is he?”

“Oh, quite well, sir,” Robert answered slowly, trying to remember when he had mentioned Tim, or anyone from his family for that matter, in Scrooge’s presence.

“Quite well, eh? Good, that’s good, yes.” Scrooge suddenly adopted a serious tone and asked again, “Now, Bob, tell me the truth. How is Tiny Tim?”

Robert paused to consider Scrooge’s question. “Well, sir, Tim has suffered poor health since birth. His right leg has not developed properly, so he walks with a crutch. He cannot hold much food in his stomach, so we give him small portions throughout the day, yet his body seems weaker with each passing year.”

“Thank you, Bob. I needed to hear that. Now, I want you to hear this. You and I are going to do *whatever* it takes to spare that boy’s life. No matter what the cost, Tim will live. Are we in agreement, sir?”

“My goodness, Mr. Scrooge. Yes, thank you! And indeed, we *are* in agreement.” Robert stood to shake Scrooge’s hand. “Bless you, sir. God bless you!”

“Good. Then with your permission, I would like to arrange a meeting with a doctor I know from the London Exchange.”

“By all means, sir.”

“Now, our next course of business, Bob, is we appear to have a vacancy where my clerk used to sit.”

“Oh, no worries, Mr. Scrooge. I will continue to fulfill my clerk duties as well. I dare say it is the least I can do, considering everything you have done for my situation.”

“Nonsense, Bob, you and I have a business to run. I will make it my personal goal to have an apprentice clerk within a fortnight. After all, I think I made an excellent choice with the last clerk I hired,” Scrooge concluded with a wink.

As the two men continued talking, a timid gentleman entered the office with his hat in hand. “Pardon me for interrupting.”

Rising to greet the man, Scrooge extended him a friendly handshake. “Come in, sir, please come in. How may we serve you?”

“Jeremiah Adkins, sir. I’m here to see if I could possibly get an extension on this month’s rent, sir. I humble myself to your good will, Mr. Scrooge, and I promise to make amends and be on time next month.”

Scrooge walked around his desk to retake his seat, before exerting the effort to appear disturbed. “My good sir, did I ask you for more time to provide your accommodations?”

“No, sir, you didn’t.”

“Then, I have no recourse but to turn your request over to my partner,” Scrooge replied, struggling to hold back his laughter.

“Sir?” Mr. Adkins replied, knowing full well Scrooge’s partner had died seven years earlier.

“Yes, Mr. Cratchit will show you how the firm of Scrooge and Cratchit deals with people who are unable to pay their debts.” Looking at Robert with a wink, Scrooge passed the responsibility. “Go ahead, Mr. Cratchit. Explain to Mr. Adkins how we handle late payments.”

Robert smiled at his partner and turned to address the man, who was now feeling even less comfortable than when he walked in. “Mr. Adkins, please relax, sir. Everyone has trouble now and then. Do you know when you will be able to make good on your debt?”

“I need only a week, kind sir. Ten days at the most, but I will be able to satisfy half of the debt in just a few days’ time.”

Robert smiled as he responded, “Your solution is perfectly acceptable. There will be no penalty assessed with your account if you are able to fulfill your commitment.” Opening the ledger that was already on his desk, he made a note and said, “I have registered our agreement, Mr. Adkins. You are in good standing.”

“Oh, thank you, Mr. Cratchit. Thank you, Mr. Scrooge.” After nodding to each man, Mr. Adkins turned to make his way out, only to find himself being followed to the front door.

Before the man could exit, Scrooge shook his hand again and wished him a good day. After their client left, Scrooge turned to Robert and asked, “Tell me, Bob, why did we excuse the late payment, instead of forgiving the entirety of the month’s rent?”

Astounded that Scrooge was seeking his advice, Robert thought for a moment before responding, “Mr. Adkins did not come here to seek our charity. He is a proud man and a good provider for his family. All he asked for was our patience, so that is how we responded. Besides, sir, had we forgiven the debt, we would have been swarmed by half of London within the hour, all of them looking for the same sort of charity.”

Scrooge dropped back into his chair behind his desk with a heavy sigh. “Whew, Bob. I never imagined being happy could be so exhausting.”

The two men laughed heartily.

Suddenly, Scrooge looked concerned. “So little time,” he declared.

“Time, Mr. Scrooge? Time for what?”

Scrooge took a deep breath before answering, “I’m not a young man, Bob. Not that I’m afraid of dying, mind you. But I *am* afraid of dying before I’ve made amends for my former self. You see, the dear friend who I told you about showed me what you have known all these past years. I now realize that the way we treat our fellow man follows us through our days. There’s so much I can do. So much I *will* do, I *must* do. I dare say I have barely slept a wink these past few nights, just considering the possibilities.”