

A little "Wonderful Life" meets
"Gift of the Magi"

*Everything
Noel*



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1

"I don't know, sir." Shelly Colter-Winston slumped in her office chair and whirled away from her too-clean desk to face the six inches of snow scoured into fearsome sculptures on the outside of her picture window. With the wireless communications receiver clipped to her ear, tangling cords were a bother of the past.

Everything else in her life, however, was presently bothersome.

Especially her husband of almost a year. "Danny is so adamant about no more major parts," she told the man on the other end of her call.

She lifted her way-too-expensive frou-frou heels to the desktop and leaned against the cuddly pale, chamois chair back. Working at home in Wisconsin, on the farm, was no excuse not to dress like a rising production mogul. "I understand...James. Yes, yes...after that fiasco on the set of *All Blue to You*, he nearly walked out. It's not that. They weren't professional in how they approached him to change his contract."

Shelly took a deep breath while she listened to her godfather, legendary movie director James Pettibone, list the case for her new husband's command performance in his next picture. She still had trouble reconciling James and his late wife Glory's role in her life, how her father had orchestrated a rift that kept

them at arm's length instead of a close and loving relationship they'd once been.

Addressing James as "sir" came more readily. "You can pick them, yes. It was a fluke, finding Danny at the last second for *Everything*...it *wasn't* a fluke; it was the Holy Spirit. OK, but...yes, he did turn down James Bond."

Shelly put her feet on the carpet, kicked off the ridiculous pointy-toed spikes, and wiggled her piggies in the carpet of her home office. Surely, the Holy Spirit had seen her feet before, but invoking His presence made her casual posture seem irreverent.

She stood and took a deep breath. Five-foot-two *could* command authority in Hollywood when applied with steel. One didn't need to be tall and svelte...well, maybe svelte. She unclipped the earpiece and rubbed her ear, while listening to the dear old man wax eloquent over Danny's undeniable talent. Three small roles were all he'd agreed to after his award-winning surprise debut two years ago in *Everything About You*. Each small role involved minimal dialog and less than a month's time away from their Wisconsin fish farm. His award-winning character, dedicated heartthrob rancher Lane Thompson, had spun off into half a dozen script pitches. Mr. Pettibone had optioned to direct his favorite if Danny would agree to reprise his role and Shelly would promote it. Finding the financing was a piece of cake. Getting the male star to agree would be a bear.

"Shelly, my girl," Pettibone's tinny voice came through the earpiece she held.

Shelly quickly switched to her desktop speaker phone.

"...retire with my reputation intact."

Her knees went wobbly at “retire.” “I’m sorry...the connection is a little fuzzy. You said ‘retire’? What? From...not from Jovian Pictures?”

“It’s time, my dear. Maybe past time. Not everyone wants pictures like mine anymore.”

Shelly swallowed hard. “But look how well *Everything About You* did. That means something, that there *is* an audience for epics with good people trying to defend dignity and better the world.”

“Fewer and further between, but thank you.”

His quick inhalation on the other side of the phone line was a bow to James Pettibone’s ability to share painful truths in a way that made the listener jump to fix the trouble.

He said, “The truth is, Shelly, Danny’s refusal to accept another great offer, and his growing status as someone difficult to work with is trickling down even to writers who can’t sell a script with a character as good as Lane Thompson. His attitude is affecting all of our reputations—those of us who vouch for him.”

Shelly pursed her lips and stared out the side corner window back toward one of the huge sheds housing Liberty Ridge Fish and Danny’s business office suite. Four inches of new snow fell yesterday to herald the month of December. A howling wind from Canada whirled the frost into circles of blue-white around the windowpanes. She shivered, more from the ominous picture her godfather was painting than the cold.

“He’s so dedicated to making the fish farm work.” Shelly took a breath and counted to five while searching for answers. “I don’t think he realizes what’s at stake on our side of the fence. I’m really sorry about all of this. No one could have predicted the outcome of

that first movie.”

“It could have easily been a flop,” Mr. Pettibone agreed.

Shelly hugged herself. “Isn’t this really more like five-minute news? I mean, movie stars are a dime a dozen, aren’t they?” Even her attempt to minimize the situation sounded small in her ears. “Surely your lifetime achievement in directing awards testifies to your good name, sir.”

“I wish that were true, dear girl. I truly do. Times like these, I miss Glory more than anything. She would have either given me the wise words how to handle the script, or a wise word to Danny about how to handle Hollywood.”

“I miss her too,” she whispered. “I wish she could have been at the wedding.”

“She would have loved it.” Mr. Pettibone’s soft tone changed abruptly. “See what you can do, dear. Remember, Jovian, your father’s company, and yours, too, are all impacted. And try to remember my name. Call me ‘James,’ not ‘sir.’ You talk with Danny and call me later with good news, I hope. Good bye now.”

The click from half a country away, sunny California, echoed like a gunshot. Nerveless, Shelly dropped into her chair and swiped her sweaty forehead with a trembling hand. Her father’s production company? And her very own public relations firm potentially ruined by silly rumors that Danny was difficult? Why, Jessamyn Waldorf demanded all organically-grown food supplied by her farm in Texas, flown in daily. Timofea Jergenkranz needed a special-size bed with a brand new expensive mattress and real Egyptian cotton sheets *from Egypt*, on every set.

Danny had fewer riders in his contracts than most of Hollywood's elite. Being flown back to Wisconsin every couple of weeks was nothing compared to lobster and watercress du jour.

Shelly raised her cheek. How could one actor's wish to keep a low profile tarnish the reputation of the movie industry's leading visionaries like James, her father, and now, if she could be so bold, her own promotion company, Colter-Winston Public Relations? James commanded great respect in the back-biting world of film making, but his was only one view. If anyone would know the inside story, it was Uncle Fred. He'd know all the gossip. She stabbed at speed dial, muttering, "If anything, all the little wanna-be hotshots should be thrilled Danny's out of the market. Less competition for them."

"Fred? Uncle Fred? I can hardly hear you. Where are you? Ocean World? What? Oh, setting up the cameras on film location...no, that's all right. I just wanted...louder? Sure." Shelly cleared her throat and raised her voice. "I just wanted to know if you heard anything on the grapevine, um, bad, about Danny." She winced at putting it like that. Poor Danny. At least he was in his office away from the house. Though the Midwestern lunch hour was approaching. All the early-to-bed, early-to-eat circadian cycles had taken her West Coast-girl some time to accept, but her stomach was growling already at 11:30. She paced away from the window and down the hall to the kitchen while she listened to her uncle, a highly demanded camera operator.

"That walk-out he did on *Days of Balloons and Glory* left some bad vibes," Fred shouted back, as if she was the one who couldn't hear. Shelly held the clip away

from her ear and listened to children squealing, water splashing, and dolphin barks in the background.

"It was their fault," Shelly hollered. "They changed the contract without consulting us. He always has a no-nudity clause. Everyone understands that."

"They were using substitute buns!"

Shelly folded her palm around the receiver and coughed in laughter. She bit her lips. "The point was, he only had eighteen lines and three scenes, and they cut the lines from one the scenes."

"Hence the visual," Fred replied.

"They should have asked him or talked to me first. We were able to strike a deal with *All Blue*."

"And here's the part where the agent would come in handy. Here. Is that better? I found a quieter corner."

"Yes, thanks." Shelly retrieved her tea from the microwave and returned to her office. "And I can handle the agent responsibilities for Danny. I know what to watch for."

"Yes, sweetheart, you are one tough cookie. Say, I heard about the Bond role. That's a tough one to give up. No one respects a person who thinks he's too good for Bond. I'm sorry, Shell. You know that too."

"Is that what they're saying?" The squeak at the end of her question made Shelly cringe. "Who's saying that?" She sat up straight. "That's not true at all. He just doesn't want to get stuck with a franchise character."

"He'd never had to worry about another thing if he'd agreed. Most Bonds are only a trifecta with the character."

"I understand. I wish he hadn't been so good that first time," she said and immediately back-pedaled.

"No, I take that back. He is too good in so many ways. Think of all the kind things he does for the others on the set. He always listens and does what he's told to do, even if he doesn't agree."

"After letting people know he doesn't agree."

"Well, he's a man of principles. If that first silly director of *Balloons* hadn't insisted on adding that skinny-dipping scene in a period piece, he'd still be in the director's chair. Danny wasn't the only one to walk."

"Shelly, we know Danny's the good guy here."

"He's been stressed with the farm." She dropped her voice. "And I think he's trying to do something special for our first Christmas and anniversary." She sat in her chair and faced the rime-laced window as she pictured Fred sweating under his trademark black beret beneath sunny southern Florida skies.

"Yeah, that's coming up, if I recall," Fred said in his wry voice. "Wedding of the year."

"He's got his dreams, too, Uncle Fred. It's just not fair that the only thing Danny really cared about got wrecked because of me."

"I think it's past time you stopped blaming yourself for that one. La-la-la. Are you over it yet?"

A smile forced Shelly's reluctant lips into a bow at Fred's antics. "Yeah, OK."

"Insurance put it back together, if I recall..."

"It's not going so well."

Fred put on full dramatics in his response. "It's *winter*. In the *north*. I shudder. How you people *deal* with that, I have no idea. Who buys fish in the winter?"

A faraway voice intruded from the Florida side. "Fred! Break's up in five!"

Shelly pursed her lips, annoyed at herself for

taking so much of his time. "You know about Wisconsin's Friday fish fry, right? You've been out with us. But it's not the weather, it's the competition."

"He wouldn't have anything to worry about," Fred said, "if he'd agree to a few more pictures. Then he would be better situated to say no. Hey, before I go I need to tell you something." He lowered his voice. "I heard there were a number of disgruntled backroom dealers. Good money on the table for your fella. Even your dad's caught up in it." His voice dropped another notch. "Don't say I told you, but he's backing that new flick, *Moon Ash*. On the hush, hush our newest bad boy Troy Helmund pulled out over directorial differences. My dear brother-in-law, your papa Lou, leaked a rumor that he should be able to get our Danny in." Fred whistled. "You can hear the coins rolling and the applause, babe, can't you?"

"He wouldn't!" Despair stung the back of Shelly's eyes. Her dad wouldn't betray them like that, would he? He knew Danny wouldn't ever do a film set in an apocalyptic future with nonstop violence, questionable morality, and drug use.

"Then there's your godfather James's pet project, a sequel to his blockbuster *Everything About You*. Look, Shell, James wants to retire. And he's earned it, y'know? Do him a favor. You've always been like a daughter to him, since he and Glory never had their own kids. Show him the respect he deserves. Let him have this baby. Only you can get Danny to agree."

Shelly sighed. "That was such a perfect role for him. And James was great with him, not letting Danny get in over his head."

Fred chuckled. "Or get too big of a head. I wish our golden boy hadn't kept turning down roles. He

doesn't give himself enough credit for being able to stay out of the nasty side of the business. If he doesn't come through on one of these roles, he's pretty much done. And, to be honest, it'll be that much harder for you to get backing for future PR projects."

Just what Shelly didn't want to hear. She bent her face over her desk and pinched the bridge of her nose. "I don't know, Fred," she said in a low voice. "He's been pretty adamant about his terms for taking on a role."

"Not even for James's baby?"

Shelly forced out a sober ha-ha. "Why does everyone insist on calling them 'babies'? But, I can't see him doing that."

A childish shriek and splash sounded from Fred's end. Then his voice. "Isn't he still pretty tight with Lydia Danes?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Shelly, c'mon. This role was written specifically for him. We haven't advertised it. The backing is there. If he doesn't do this there will be bad vibes in the future for her, too. Lydia wants this. She likes the role, James, and Danny.

"Think about it, kid. It's you, Lydia, and Danny. His sister, your godfather. Your dad's name will come up and his production company could be boycotted. And what will people think? If you can't get your own husband to do something, how are they going to trust that you can make anyone believe you can have any influence anywhere? Promote them or their product? Gotta go, love. Come down for the holiday. I got a nice place here through New Year's."

They said farewell and clicked off.

Shelly shuddered at the logic, the tragedy. Word

of mouth ran Hollywood. Her ire grew. Danny had no right to withhold his God-given talents and ruin so many lives out of selfishness.

She closed her eyes and dialed James, rushing right into her questions before answering his hello. "It's a one-off, right? Not a series, potential for a series, or anything else written in the contract anywhere anytime about the character?"

"It's my last film," James said. "I picture it more like Marshal Sam Gerard from *The Fugitive*. You know, the way Tommy Lee Jones played the Sam was so popular they made another role and movie just for him and called it, duh, US Marshals? I mean, they could have made a dozen but Jones didn't want to do any more."

Shelly sputtered. "Plus, the film got really mixed reviews."

"Plus, it deserved them," James said. "Mine won't."

"So, we're not asking Danny to do a risky project."

"Everything has a risk. But this could be at least as big as the first."

She heaved the chair into another spin. "See! That's what I mean! He can't even sniff the probability he might get roped into more. I can't even bring up the subject if there's a hint he has to be available for future films playing Lane Thompson."

Silence on the other end went on an unsettling twelve seconds.

"If he knows how much is at stake, Shelly..."

Her heart melted at the tenuousness sound of James's plea.

"You understand the business, Shelly. This film would remind people of all that's good in life, and help

me...help all of us. Remember, you're the only daughter I'll ever think of as mine, and I'm counting on you and Danny to provide me with some grandchildren to spoil."

Shelly was in mid-gulp of her cold tea. She gasped and coughed. "Excuse me! Grandchildren! Oh, my. We've only been married a year. What is it with baby talk today?"

James laughed good-naturedly. "You've got the world by the tail, young lady. You are capable of so much. You and Danny. Tell him that, won't you? Remind him that sometimes the hard things are in place not to force us to do things we don't want to do, but to strengthen our characters and help others. And pray, dear one. It feels good to be able to tell you that. I've been doing this work long enough. I'm seventy-seven years old and I need to step away and give others a chance."

"I understand, I do, truly." Shelly watched the mail car stop at their box by the driveway, glad she wasn't out on the snowy roads today. "And I'm sure he'll be happy to hear the news. I just don't know how I'm going to tell him."

In her peripheral vision Shelly caught a shadow outside her office door. "I'll call you later, OK?"

2

Danny stood out of sight around the corner from the door of his wife's home office, lavishly carved out of the former parlor and side porch of his family's old farmhouse. She was talking to someone, obviously, he could hear since the door was ajar.

Walking inside that room was like visiting another realm shouting of exotic glamour that thumbed its nose at rural Wisconsin. Piled blue and gold carpet, flocked wallpaper with swans and egrets flying in formations, lamps with beaded shades and always some smell in the background that tickled his nose. He wouldn't be surprised if she added a cobra and flute player.

He put his hands on his hips and took a deep, chastising breath. Just because he felt like he'd never deserved the limelight Shelly had engineered for him, or the praise for his ability to pretend to be someone else and look good on camera, didn't mean Hollywood laughed on farm life. It wasn't personal. Hollywood thought anything that wasn't Hollywood was unworthy of notice.

Which was precisely why he couldn't stomach the thought of continuing to pretend to be other people, some of whom he despised, and collect blood money that should have been spent helping others. Five times he'd endured being handled like a slab of beef,

decorated like a store dummy, laughed at, clawed at, and told both that he was brilliant and an idiot. For what?

Shelly reminded him that his paychecks were helping...

Wait a minute!

Danny cocked his head and peeked around the corner at the open office door. Shelly. Amid all that glitter, Shelly's words finally filtered through his hick brain. Grandchildren! Had she been speaking to her father? About giving him...

But that meant...no...why not? But wouldn't she...? Maybe she was waiting for the right time to tell him the news. Maybe she had just found out. But why was she telling her dad and her uncle first? Why wouldn't she have mentioned she suspected...

Wha-what if...?

Hollywood morals. She hadn't turned to the faith that long ago, but surely...

Danny gulped and heaved in a breath. She was his wife.

He straightened his shoulders. She'd promised to love and honor and cherish him the same way he'd promised her. He puffed his chest. Fatherhood meant a whole new set of responsibilities. He was plenty man enough to bring home the bacon.

Yes, siree...his shoulders started a slow decline. He was a man with a dwindling bank account, a service contract for Bartell's Restaurant that was going to be difficult to fill since the heater conked out in the big perch tank last night, and the worst news about new competition for the fish farm since an arsonist tried to burn it down.

What could he do? Ha! Thoughts of a partner, a

silent partner, for the fish farm had whirled in his mind earlier that morning. He didn't know why he hadn't thought of it before and was in the throes of making notes when Lou Colter's call came in. His father-in-law had phoned him again, early in general for California; spectacularly early for Hollywood moguls, he was that desperate to talk about—no, beg him—to take a part in a film that lost its big name draw. Something about the future, and hope for a better world. Maybe he could consider it. Hop on a plane on Lou's dime, take Pop for a long weekend to see his other grandkids...*other! Yee-haw!* Shelly always had someone to see. She'd come, too, tell him about their upcoming new addition, a little cousin to his sister Jen's kids. He went toward the door again and grabbed the handle. Before he could knock, it swung all the way open from inside.

Danny moved forward to slide his hands along the soft wool shoulders of his wife's suit jacket. He smiled at her need to do these little things for herself, dress like a powerful exec, as much putting on a role as any movie star. The thought of a perfect Christmas gift and a first anniversary gift she deserved had been pushed aside with the fish tank heater problem, but nonetheless had his nerves in knots. He tenderly slid a golden curl across her temple and followed it with a kiss. "Hi. Rough morning?"

Shelly stared back. "Sort of."

Danny saw the uncertainty in her expression. He put his arms all the way around her slender shoulders for a hug. "Come on. I'll fix lunch and you can tell me all about it."

She took his hand to swing on the way to the kitchen. "I'll tell you mine if you tell me yours."

His heart took up a staccato rhythm. By this time,

he could just play the recording of all his woes about the fish farm, the rising expense, the competition, the way Seth Taylor, the star who'd lost the Lane Thompson role in *Everything About You* in the first place, had done irreparable damage to the fish farm in revenge. The worry that he couldn't seem to completely unload on God because it didn't seem right, letting someone else, no matter the Someone, fix his problems.

Totally ridiculous.

"Toasted cheese?" he asked Shelly, knowing she'd say yes. She'd become a real Wisconsin cheese-lover over the last year, and enjoyed visiting the various stores and out-of-the-way factory shops with him to try new varieties.

"Sure." Shelly divested herself of the beige suit jacket and hung it carefully over a chair at the kitchen table. She had practically redone the old place, besides the office, since she moved in and Dad went to live in town in the new condo complex. Shelly had nearly commanded that Dad stay with them, but Dad was just as stubborn. Watching the two of them toe-to-toe had been humorous to a point; Shelly was on the verge of winning until Danny had whispered that stress was not good for him. Sure, he'd been somewhat taken aback by the way Shelly went ahead and had some new project underway or done every time he'd come home from shooting. The upstairs bathroom was nice even though she refused to talk about the cost when he'd asked to see the bills.

While Danny got out a loaf of the seven-grain bread they bought at their neighbor's bakery, butter, and cheese, and a locally produced spice blend that jazzed up the taste, he glanced at her over his shoulder.

She filled mugs with hot water and let fresh teabags steep. Quieter than usual.

"You feeling OK?" he asked to test the waters, get the ball rollin', hoping she'd learned to trust him enough to share her news. One look in those soggy blue eyes of hers, and he knew it didn't matter if anyone else had taken advantage of her, he'd stand with her no matter what. But she was too tough to let anyone mess around with her. Unless she'd been attacked one time and didn't say anything? He'd read about women who felt ashamed...but counting back, there'd never been a time he could point to that made him believe something like that could have happened that he wouldn't know about.

Why else would she be reluctant to tell him about the baby? Unless she didn't want a baby. But, surely she'd be happy no matter what? Unless there was something else physically wrong? He scanned her stomach. She didn't look even a hint pregnant. Would he know anything about that? How could there be something wrong right from the start?

"Ow!" He sucked the tangy drop of blood on his finger where the knife slipped and sliced through skin instead of cheese. All this speculating was making him crazy. He needed to just ask her.

"Let me see." Shelly picked up his big mitt with her delicate hands.

Danny pulled back not wanting to let any blood drip on her pretty white blouse.

"Hey, mister." She looked up at him with those long-lashed eyes. "Does it hurt? Do you think you need stitches?"

He continued to stare, mesmerized by the flecks of indigo and brown and green in her irises. What would

their child look like?

“Danny? Let me see? Is it still bleeding?”

He looked down at his hand. “No. Just a scratch. Shell—”

“That’s good. Let’s wash it off, and I’ll get you a bandage. I can finish chopping.”

The moment of asking about a possible pregnancy passed. Danny hung his head while she tenderly covered the cut.

“Tell me what’s going on,” Shelly commanded from the chair next to his.

He substituted one worry for another. “It’s the Lopers—from down in Missouri, the fellas with the big fish outfit?”

“Yes?”

“They’re planning to set up shop down at the Wegner farm. That’s why they bought all that land. Pop just called me with the news. Their Wisconsin license with the Department of Ag, Trade, and Consumer Protection came through. They’ve gotten permission from the town board to run a business and even put in a small airstrip so they can ship their produce direct.”

“Oh, Danny. That’s why they bought so much land?”

“Yeah. Pop said the nearest neighbors complained about the noise from an airport, but then turned around and sold out to the Lopers.”

“That must have been the town board meeting we missed last summer.”

“When I was filming *Landsdown Street Blues*. I was only gone three weeks.”

“I doubt you could have done anything. Don’t feel bad.” Shelly got to her feet and walked over to finish