

# **A Priceless Christmas**



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by

Kelvin Bueckert

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## Regarding A Priceless Christmas.

Welcome to Gladstone.

Where is Gladstone? Well, that is where this author picks up the valuable advertisements and sweepstakes offers that travel tirelessly through the mail system to infect his mind.

Now, let's be clear I don't actually live there. So don't try and hunt me down if you actually do find your way to the humble streets of Gladstone.

Why this rambling about Gladstone you ask? Well, I just wanted to make it plain that while the town in this story is modeled after a real town, the people and events are not necessarily intended to represent real people or events. Make sense?

Plain language version. These stories are not intended to portray any people or events that have taken place in Gladstone or may take place there at any time in the future.

With that said, if you ever find yourself in Gladstone, you may find yourself recognizing certain parts of town. If you can't make it to Gladstone, why not go to the official website?

[www.town.gladstone.mb.ca](http://www.town.gladstone.mb.ca)

What came into my mind to write such a story?

Good question.

I wrote the first edition of the Christmas section during two weeks of madness. I needed a Christmas gift and time was running out. To use the ancient cliché of making a long story short, a little project got bigger than I had originally planned.

My original plan was not to release the story to the public. Due to the hurried circumstances of its creation, it was to be a Christmas gift only. However, decisions were made in haste, events began to spiral, and the story went public after all. Funny how things work, isn't it?

I must humbly ask your forgiveness for any errors that may have been committed in the heat of Christmas passion. Yes indeed, this was born in a flame. What else can I say?

Not much apparently. Well, that is enough rambling about the book, now I'll get out of the way and allow you to actually read the thing.

Thank you for taking the time out of your life to read

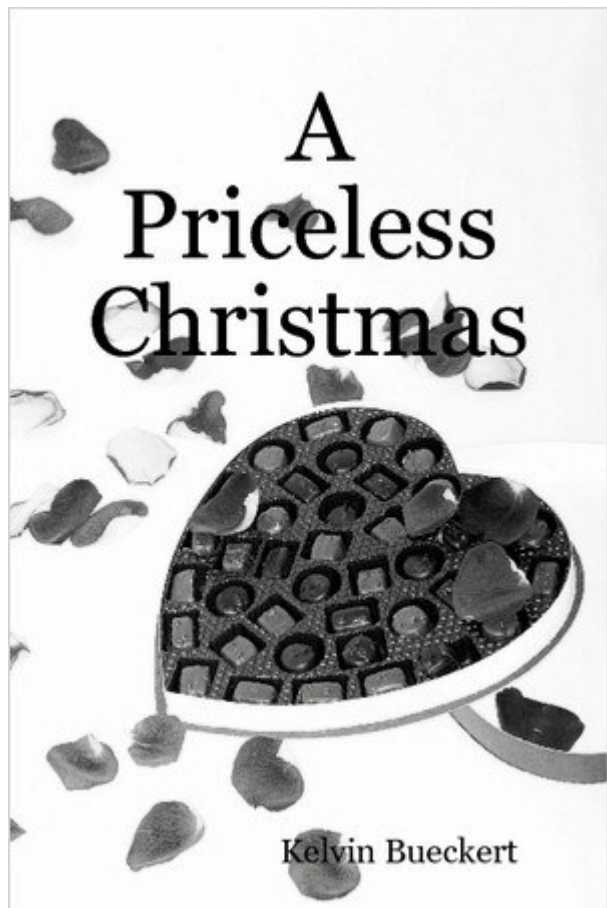
someone else's Christmas present. Oh, the thought has just occurred to me that you may have received this book as a Christmas present yourself...In that case, you may consider it your very own Christmas present.

Merry Christmas, or summer, whatever fits your season....

Kelvin

*Dedicated to everyone who has ever advised me to be more romantic. I listened to your advice, but only in this book! Merry Christmas....*

# A Priceless Christmas



Kelvin Bueckert

# 1.

It looked innocent. So innocent of the change that it would bring upon the life it touched. Slender fingers grabbed the envelope and pulled it from the metal mailbox.

“Hmm. No return address? I wonder who this is from.”

Candace turned the plain white envelope around as she examined it carefully. The only clue was a postmark on the Christmas tree stamp. It was a location in the province of Saskatchewan, in a town that she had never heard of.

“Let me see that!” Harvey grabbed the letter from Candace and glared at it.

“This better not be one of those missions that send out all that junk mail around Christmas.” Harvey twisted his voice to imitate a television advertisement. “For only twenty-nine ninety-five you can help a poor orphan buy a pair of socks. Act now and we’ll throw in a pair of kitchen knives.”

Candace pulled the letter back as a look of annoyance flashed across her smooth, almost European looking face.

“I’ll take care of that, thank you very much. We aren’t married yet, so I can still read my own mail.”

Harvey stared at his grease-covered hands as a blush of red filled his pudgy face. “I’m sorry, I guess I wasn’t thinking.” He muttered.

Candace adjusted her gold-rimmed glasses as she stared playfully at her boyfriend. “Well, I suppose I can forgive you this time. Just don’t let it happen again!” She stuck the letter into the pocket of her blue, fur-lined parka. “I’ll look at it in the car. You wanted to get to the party didn’t you?”

Harvey shrugged his pudgy shoulders, and then stepped around the short figure of Candace as he walked toward the glass door.

Candace glanced around at the wall filled with grey steel mail boxes. She knew she needed to be at the party, but she wasn’t that thrilled about it. If it wasn’t for Harvey she wouldn’t go

at all, but she couldn't tell him that. Some people couldn't take criticism well, and Harvey was one of them.

Oh, sure he looked cute enough with his slightly pudgy face, his almost bulky form, and his smile that filled his freckle filled face with boyish charm.

The truth was that the smile was only skin deep when his wishes weren't granted. Candace was finding this out more and more as time went on. She still held out hope for change, that perhaps once he was married he would learn to deal with things constructively.

"So are we gonna go yet?" Harvey smiled thinly as he held open the door in an open invitation.

Candace pulled herself out of her reverie and stepped through the door into the chill darkness of winter.

"Oh I'm sorry, I just got lost in thought for a moment. You know how it is with women. I hope I haven't made you too late."

Harvey chuckled with his rich baritone voice. "Well, I think we'll be okay time wise. Otherwise I wouldn't be wise at all!"

Harvey paused for a moment to laugh at his own wit. Then, as he saw that Candace didn't find it amusing, he faded his chortle into silence.

Harvey let the glass door slam shut as he hurried down the concrete steps after Candace.

"Have no fear Candace my love, I'll get us there in plenty of time. I have a glove compartment full of speeding tickets to prove that I don't waste time getting where I'm going."

"I've heard." Candace said dryly, waiting for Harvey to open the door of his glistening new Toyota Avalon.

Harvey opened the door to allow Candace to enter, closed it, and then hurried around the front of the car to the driver's side.

Candace smelled the exotic scent of old spice cologne as Harvey slid into his seat.

"Speaking of getting where I'm going! Tonight is the big night, I can feel it! The boss will be there, and if I can just get up to him and outline my proposal I'm sure he'll love it! Then, promotion here I come! I've heard people saying that the boss is impressed with my track record so far. He likes a man who can get things done."

Candace shifted her legs as the car purred to life and a

blast of cold air hit her knees.

Harvey shifted the car into gear and then began to back out into the almost deserted street.

“Don't worry; the heat will come on soon. It's just the first minute or two that feel cold. But like I was saying, the boss likes a man who gets things accomplished and I think I have done that. Sure, some of the methods might bother some people, but it's a dog eat rat world. I'd rather be the top dog than the rat on the bottom of the social ladder. Besides, I know that you appreciate a man who can bring home a nice present once and a while! Like that ring eh? It still looks beautiful on your finger.”

Candace stared down at the glittering gold and diamonds that graced her ring finger. It was a symbol of the verbal contract she had agreed to. The contract to marry Harvey, she hoped she hadn't made a mistake. They had only known each other for three weeks after all.

“It's beautiful...” She whispered softly, almost inaudibly.

Harvey glanced at her and grinned, showing off his perfectly formed teeth.

“What's that honey?”

“It's beautiful!” Candace repeated, louder this time.

Harvey nodded approvingly. “Yeah it is. Only the best for a woman of mine. I told the jeweler that! I said, I need only the best, no matter what it costs, and I think they succeeded. I still like the look on your face when I gave it to you! I bet you thought I'd never ask, didn't you?”

Candace laughed softly. “Well Harvey, it has only been three weeks, what was I supposed to think?”

“Yeah I know I was slow, but I got around to it! You can give me that much at least! I thought this time of year, with Christmas coming up next week and all...well I thought it was a good time to give you a good gift!”

Candace fingered the envelope in her pocket. She was curious. Who was it from?

Harvey noticed her actions as he reached for the stereo volume button.

“Go ahead, open it! Maybe it's a cheque or something. Money is always good!”

Candace slid her finger beneath the flap and tore open the

envelope. A single plain white sheet of paper fell into her lap.

The closing strains of "*Joy to the World*" as played by a brass band blared boldly from the radio. An obviously Negro preacher began to preach.

"Thank you to the Salvation Army band for that special number! Yes, my brothers and sisters, every act of love that leads to God is like a chocolate in his gift box to the world. And that all started with the gift of Jesus Christ to this fallen world! A reason for Joy indeed! Rejoice my brothers and sisters, rise up and..." Harvey burst out laughing as he pushed the volume down to a more manageable sound level.

"Thanks for the dramatic music! I must say I didn't expect that!"

"Oh don't mention it! It's just one more service from Harvey, your all purpose fiancée!" Harvey paused to flick on the overhead light. "There, it should be easier to read with a little light on the subject. Are, you, I mean, are you going to look at it?"

"Curious aren't you? This isn't the first piece of mail that I've ever gotten you know. Occasionally people send me valuable pieces of paper, sweepstakes offers, credit card bills..." Candace stopped abruptly as her hands began to tremble.

"What is it?" Harvey veered to avoid the pile of snow that had been created down the middle of the street. "Sorry, I guess I have to stay on my side of the road. Otherwise wham bam; we'd be stuck in the muck! Or snow in this case."

Candace wrinkled her nose, pushing her glasses higher on her face. It would be nice if Harvey was a poet, she had always fantasized about dating a handsome poet.

Harvey let the car coast to a stop on the side of the street.

To the right was a glowing red sign proclaiming that the building beside them was Jarvis Meats. Red and green lights raced around the edges of the two large windows that graced the front of the structure.

"I thought I better pull aside before I run my car into the snow and get stuck! How embarrassing would that be? And all because of..." Harvey's voice carried a distinct hint as it trailed off.

Candace sighed heavily. "Okay I'll read it. Start driving, or else, we'll never get to the party and your raise. Just pay attention to the road! Otherwise you'll have plenty time to look at this letter!"

The ditch is famous for helping curious people relax. “

The car hummed as it reentered the roadway. An empty street splashed with the festive colors of Christmas decorations and shaded with the gentle yellow pastels of streetlight.

“I'm listening...” Harvey prompted.

His Michael J Fox type face looked back to the future as revealed in the rearview mirror.

Candace took a deep breath. “Okay here it goes. Dear Candace, happy twenty-seventh birthday! I hope you had a good day. I just wrote this note to tell you that you could have an even better birthday and Christmas if you follow these simple directions. There is one million dollars cash hidden...”

The car veered sharply to the right, almost skidding out of control on the slightly slippery road.

Candace glared at Harvey. “I'd rather you pull over if you can't concentrate on two things at once.”

Harvey nodded grimly and turned his eyes back to the events unfolding before him. “Go on...”

Candace cleared her throat dramatically. “There is one million dollars cash hidden inside the ceiling of the Gladstone Christian Fellowship Church. If you follow this simple map, it should be easy to find. “Candace paused, studying the crudely drawn diagram that passed as a map.

“What else does it say?”

“Well there isn't much else here. There is the map, and underneath it there is a little bit more.”

“I'm listening.”

“I hope this is still accurate after all these years. But you would have heard if the money was found. So search for it, I'm sure it's still there. I can only hope that this goes some way in healing the pain that being an orphan has brought you. Signed, a friend who cares.”

The atmosphere in the car grew thick as the meaning of the last sentence dawned on Harvey. He turned right suddenly, drove forward for about two minutes, then guided his car to a stop on the side of the road.

“So you were an orphan?” Harvey asked abruptly.

“Yes...I was. I...am.”

Harvey turned off the car. “You never said anything!”

“Well, it’s just something that is a bit painful for me to discuss. I’m sorry; I wanted to tell you, but...”

Harvey hung his head. “I guess I shouldn’t have said that about orphans back at the post office. I’m sorry, I didn’t know...I just....”

“Don’t worry about it. You know now, so let’s move on shall we!” Candace felt herself tensing as this subject grated on her nerves.

“Yes that would be best. Forget that I ever opened my mouth and jammed my big feet into it.”

Harvey pushed open the door of the car and stepped out onto the pavement.

The echo of a slamming door began to ricochet through the frigid air. Candace followed his example and they were soon walking hand in hand toward the warm yellow lights that blazed from the window of the lavishly decorated house before them.

“Do you think the letter was a joke?”

Candace shrugged her slim shoulders. “I don’t know. Whoever it was knew it was my birthday today. They knew I was an orphan. If it is a joke I think it’s a pretty cruel one.”

“It makes you think doesn’t it?”

“I suppose. I wonder...”

Harvey pressed the door bell with a red gloved hand and then turned to Candace.

“What does it make you wonder?”

“I don’t know. I wonder who sent it. Why? Why now?”

Harvey smirked. “I don’t know about you, but it almost makes me want to attend church! You never know, it’s crazy enough to be true!”

The door swung open, spilling the rowdy sounds of a party well in progress out into the snow covered night. A bald headed man stood in the doorway.

“Harvey! My favorite employee! Come in! And this is the beautiful fiancée I’ve heard so much about...what was your name again?”

“Candace, Candace Polanski.”

“Well Candace, welcome here. Any friend of Harvey is a friend of mine... Hey, come on in before you freeze. You won’t get any warmer standing out there! Well, knowing Harvey, maybe you

could. Heh Harvey, what do you think?”

There was a burst of ribald laughter as the black suited, bald headed man ushered them into the warmth of the porch. During a brief moment when he fell silent, Candace gestured meaningfully to the letter as she slid it into the pocket of her leather purse.

“We will talk about this more later.” She whispered.

Harvey nodded silently as he began removing his brown leather jacket.

“As soon as you get out of those coats we'll go say hello to everyone. I'm sure you'll have a good time tonight. If you don't, then be sure to see me. I'll make sure you get the drink you want. If Harvey can't warm you up, I've got the drink to do it. ”

Candace cringed inwardly. Harvey blushed and avoided her eyes. The boss urged them forward with a commanding tone.

The swirling madness of the party was about to begin.

Candace felt her thoughts drift toward the letter even as she waded into the whirlpool of chattering humanity.

## 2.

“One million dollars! Yeah right. One million dollars hidden inside the ceiling of Gladstone Christian Fellowship Church. Humph. I can't believe it. I mean, somebody is playing a prank on you! How would that amount of money get into the ceiling of the Gladstone Christian Fellowship church? It's outrageous to even think of it!”

Jason held up his hand like a policeman directing traffic.

“I think this would be just the sort of joke that your pal Brent Gunner would pull! I mean just look at....”

Jason waved his hands like a flagman landing a jet on an aircraft carrier. “If you'll let me speak I might have something to say!”

Hilda's sparkling green eyes grew wide for a moment, and then they re-entered their sockets as her mouth slowed to a standstill.

“I just got the letter tonight. I haven't had time to ponder what it means and you freaking out isn't going to help the situation! I'm sorry to be blunt, but sometimes things have to be said.”

Hilda's red curls flopped around her shoulders as her chin dropped to her chest. “I just wanted to figure it out. It's not everyday that you get a letter about one million dollars. Naturally, I thought it was a joke! There's no need to levitate off the floor right away. You hurt me if you talk like that!”

Jason ran his fingers through his short blonde hair as he struggled to find a sensible response.

“Look I think we both started to levitate, now let's calm down a little bit and think. Who would send me this? Don't say Brent, he wouldn't know that I was adopted at three years old. I haven't told anyone. I don't think Mom and Dad have told anyone either. In fact, I'd be surprised if they did. We agreed that it should remain a family secret.”

“One of your other friends could have found out and

decided to play with your mind a bit.”

Jason's youthful face looked doubtful.

“Think about it, they could have!”

“I don't think so...my friends may be pranksters but they don't have that much ambition. I can't see them spending hours on research just to play a joke on me. There was a little bit of newspaper coverage when they found me, but they never said my name. I don't think anyone would be able to connect the story to me. That was a long time ago; you'd have to sift through the archives for hours to find that story.”

“Come on! You never told me about this... Where were you found?”

“Well it...was...” Jason's faced twisted into a vision of something incomprehensible. “It was a Sunday morning and they found me in the sanctuary of the Gladstone Christian Fellowship.”

In the corner of the room a pin rolled off a sewing table and fell to the floor. It wasn't heard.

Hilda straightened her skintight green dress around her slim figure. A strange thoughtfulness seemed to wash over her well tanned face.

“You expect me to believe that your parents found you in the sanctuary of the Gladstone Christian Fellowship.” Her dull voice brightened. “This is one of the dirty jokes, isn't it?”

Jason furrowed his brow. The ways Hilda's mind worried him sometimes. “No, this is not a joke. My parents took me in on that Sunday and eventually they made it official by adopting me. I've been attending that Church ever since.”

Hilda stared at Jason for a moment. She ran her discerning eye over his slightly bulky figure. His muscular arms filled out his red and black plaid shirt with ease. His short blonde hair might have made him look like a soldier, but the softness of his boyish face thwarted that effort. She loved every inch of his rugged build.

“Are you sizing me up for a strait jacket? I hope not, everything I told you can be verified by a visit to my parents.”

Hilda paced back and forth along the purple rug of her living room. “Okay, I believe you. I just don't know why you didn't tell me until now! This is our third date after all! We should've started to trust each other long ago.”

Jason took a step backward and sank down into the soft leather love seat. He was confused about the letter and annoyed at Hilda's attitude. This was supposed to be Christmas eve, wasn't it? Life should be better...."

Hilda whirled to face him. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Jason straightened in his seat. "I wanted to. It's just something that is sensitive to me. You know how hard it is to admit that my parents, whoever they were, abandoned me in a small town church and went their merry way! You can't imagine it! It's a devastating feeling! Why didn't they want me? Wasn't I good enough? What would people think if they knew?"

Hilda sat beside Jason and wrapped a slender arm around his shoulders. Her lips seemed to be hinting at something for intimate, but Jason paid no attention, so Hilda began to speak.

"If you were found in church, then people would have known. I would have known if I had been living here at the time. Now Jason my love, what is the real reason for keeping things quiet? Were you a naughty boy?"

Hilda's sweaty closeness was beginning to make Jason nervous. He was tempted to break away from her touch, but decided against it.

"I told you the real reason. I was found in church, but nobody knew about it. The Pastor and a few close friends knew. The police knew, because they had to investigate where I belonged. I wasn't common gossip, at least as far as I know. My parents got to church early that day and found me before too many other people arrived. Eventually Child and Family Services let my parents adopt me. Even once the word got out it wasn't a big deal. Everyone knew my parents were thinking of adoption. It wasn't a surprise. They didn't make that big a deal about it and we all moved on! I am one of the family! That is the way I like it. As far as I know, none of my friends have heard the truth about me. I wonder about my past sometimes, but I would rather keep it quiet."

"And I am not considered a friend?"

Hilda's lips were hinting again.

"Well, of course you are. It's just...well, I wanted to tell you...but...." Jason slid away from Hilda.

"I know I know, it was difficult. I just hope you don't have

any other secrets you need to tell me. I want our relationship to be an honest one. My mother says a man can't have secrets in a marriage. It interferes with intimacy."

Hilda slid along the love seat and placed her arm around Jason's shoulders once again. Her perfume was making Jason's head spin in lazy circles. The only way he could escape was to leave the couch entirely. He would leave that as a last resort.

"Don't worry, that's the only secret that I know of."

"It had better be." Hilda's slender red lips twisted into a sly smile. "And now somebody wants to bring up the secret past by sending you a mysterious letter. A letter that knows things about you that no one else does. Even more interesting is the mention of one million dollars, do you think that is real?"

Jason forced a laugh. "No, I don't believe it. I think somebody was trying to get me excited. I wouldn't be surprised at all if there was somebody at church right now, just waiting for me to show up. It doesn't make sense otherwise." Jason laughed again, more sincerely this time. "Yeah, it was probably somebody who volunteered to clean the church for Christmas and they thought they'd have a little fun along the way. That would be something that Brent would do."

Jason stuffed the letter carelessly into the right pocket in his blue jeans. "Now that the secrets are out, can we get on with our own secret plan for the evening?"

Hilda removed her arm from Jason's shoulders and then clapped her hands together. The sound activated lights to blink out instantly.

The room basked in the colorful beauty of the Christmas tree lights, each one a tiny strobe of red twinkling in the semi-darkness. Four carefully wrapped presents lay beneath the tree, waiting for loving hands to tear the wrapping paper into shreds.

"Jason, why don't you give me my presents first. Then I'll give you yours. I'd like it that way."

Jason glanced at the three dark silhouettes around the room. At the south end was a large lime green, leather couch. At the north was a solid black love seat, and at the left side of it was a sewing machine with a wooden table like cabinet. The tree and its presents were in the center of the room and the main object of affection.

“Go ahead, don't be shy!”

Jason heaved himself out of his trance. He was thankful for the opportunity to escape. He stumbled slowly toward the tree. The longer he took with the gifts, the longer he could delay his return to the loveseat.

“Well, I don't think I'll be able to top what you already have, but here we go.” Jason picked up the two silver wrapped boxes and placed them into Hilda's outstretched hands.

“I hope you like them; I worked hard to get it right.”

Hilda stared at the presents for a moment, and then began to destroy the fragile paper. After a brief moment, she stopped abruptly and placed the unopened boxes onto the purple rug.

“Jason, I was just thinking about that letter. I mean, what if it was true that there was one million dollars at church. Wouldn't we be silly sitting here and letting it slip through our fingers?”

Jason felt a vague disappointment as he watched Hilda place the presents carelessly onto the floor. He had worked hard to pick those gifts out, but one million dollars obviously held a certain attraction.

“What are you getting at?”

“Well, the church is right across the street. I was thinking, what would it hurt for us to go over there and take a quick look? The map seemed pretty clear, so it wouldn't take that long to find out if it was true or not.”

Jason reached into his left pocket for the letter. Instead, he fingered a copy of the romantic poem he had written that morning. He wished he could read it to Hilda, but it would fly right over her head.

Where was the letter? Oh, yes, in the right pocket. It was still where he had put it.

One slip of paper, one million dollars, or would he be one stupid person for falling for a preposterous stunt. There were so many options....

“So now you're a believer?” Jason's voice was slightly mocking. “A few minutes ago you didn't believe it.”

Hilda stood up. “I just think it would be prudent to investigate. I believe that prudence in practice is an important virtue in relationships.”

“Okay....” Jason paused. “I guess it wouldn't hurt to walk

over. We might not get in...Ahh shucks, let's just go and get it over with. It won't take long. The sooner we leave the sooner we can get back."

Hilda's luscious red lips creased into a pair of cheerful dimples. "Good idea, I'll just get my purse and we can get going."

Hilda clapped her hands and the lights flickered on.

Jason stood and walked through the room toward the exit.

He stopped briefly as a thought occurred to him.

"What if I wasn't the only one to get this letter?"

The thought followed Hilda into her bedroom as she retrieved her purse. "We better hurry." She said as an anxious flutter crept into her tone.

### 3.

“This party is really starting to drag. What do you say we make our apologies and get out of here?”

Candace stared at Harvey for a moment. She reached out and felt his forehead.

“You aren't sick, but why else would you want to leave a party you've been waiting for all month? What happened to the big promotion, the schmoozing, the metaphorical baby kissing!”

Harvey blushed. “Well to be honest, I was thinking about that letter in your purse.”

“The letter in my purse? What about it? Don't tell me you think it's real! Is that why you dragged me into this foul smelling bathroom? I thought you might have something more romantic in mind. I was looking forward to letting you down.”

“It was a thought. But honestly, Candace, the church is only a few minutes away, we can make our apologies, step out for a minute and then come back to the party one million dollars richer. How is that for a Christmas present?”

“I doubt that it would be that easy. Besides I'd rather stay here and turn down your romantic advances. Or maybe I won't, you never know what I'll do...crazy chick that I am.”

“Come on, it's only a short drive. We can easily wrap it up before anyone finds out that we're gone.”

“Where's your sense of humor?”

“At church with the money...we need to go and get it.”

“Well, why not. If you don't want romance anyway, we might as well leave. Honestly, I was really starting to get bored.”

Harvey stared at Candace in the semi darkness. “I was kind of hoping that we could sneak away without making a scene. You heard how my boss is, I don't want to give him ideas. It's not that far, we don't need our jackets for such a short distance.”

“Okay, let's do it. Check to see if the pass is clear and we'll mosey our posse on out.”

Harvey glanced at Candace and wrinkled his brow into a

furrow of worry.

“You been drinking?”

“No, you know I don't drink. I just get a bit silly when I'm bored. I'm sorry if I offended you.”

“Don't be sorry, it's just that there are some things we need to be serious about. Like money for instance.”

Harvey pushed open the door of the bathroom and stepped out to a barrage of catcalls and high-spirited whistles.

“Woah Harvey! You're the man!” The rest of the comments were more of the same.

“Busted!” Harvey whispered with a barely audible growl.

Candace mentally blocked out the teasing that was hurled in their direction. This crowd had lost its mind to alcohol; they had nothing to say that was worth hearing.

What if the person who wrote the letter knew the secret of her past? The reason she had been abandoned as a newborn baby in the sanctuary of the Gladstone Christian Fellowship?

Candace felt her heart grow hot with the flame of hope.

The sleeves of Harvey's festive red and green dress shirt waved wildly as his hands moved in time with his mouth. He paused in the middle of his elaborate explanation and turned back to Candace.

“We'll be out of here soon!” He mouthed.

“Hooray.” Candace mouthed back, driven by contempt for her surroundings.

Harvey had his faults, but thankfully he wasn't as filthy minded as his friends. Candace would compliment him on that when they were alone.

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“Hello, Mom, Dad. What brings you here?” Hilda's voice sounded strained as vapor burst from her mouth in steady puffs.

“Well, we were just driving by and thought we would drop in and see how you were doing. I hope we weren't interrupting anything.”

Hilda smiled a beautiful smile that Jason knew from painful experience meant irritation, not pleasure. Her parents had stopped by on all three of their dates so far. The surprise had now

officially faded.

“Oh I'm sorry, we were just leaving. Perhaps you could come by at another time. Nothing personal, we just had plans already. We really hate to break them.”

The red tower of hair perched on the head of Hilda's mother, Gwen, began to tilt as she leaned against their black Hummer.

“Really? That is too bad. Are you going to be doing some Christmas shopping by any chance?”

Hilda paused for moment, then put her green gloved hand to her chin. “Well, in a sense you might say that. We won't be buying anything, but we will be looking.” Her hand fell to her side as her mouth twitched.

“Oh that is wonderful! I see Jason is coming along to help. I think that it shows character when a man volunteers to help a woman shop for things. Now your Father here, he doesn't say much but he helps me and I appreciate that so much more than words can say.”

The middle aged Dan nodded his silver-flecked head as a smile broke slowly over the horizon of his lips. He had the distinguished features of Stephen Harper, the Prime Minister of Canada. Although it was clear that Dan was not the Prime Minister of his own household.

“So what would be open in a small town like this? We just came down main street and it didn't look like much was happening. I hope you aren't lying to us.”

Hilda glanced at Jason for support. Jason shrugged slightly, he wasn't going to lie about it. He wasn't terribly anxious to have his future family tag along either. He decided to remain silent. If Hilda wanted to let her mother know whenever they had a date, she could deal with the consequences.

The silhouette of a cargo van hummed past on the road, headed north toward town center.

Hilda wrinkled her nose into an expression of barely restrained distaste. Perhaps it was finally starting to sink in that telling her parents about date night was not the best idea.

“Well, Clarke's is open until nine. So that means we have fifteen minutes before it closes. I'd like to stay and chat, but we need to get going if we're going to get there before closing time!

Tomorrow is Christmas, so we have to act today!"

"I'm sure your mother would love to come along, wouldn't you Gwen?" Dan looked harried as he glanced at his wife.

"I would love it. Isn't that the store that claims to be Manitoba's largest gift shop?"

"As a matter of fact it is." Jason muttered as a feeling of resignation swept through him. He was proud of Hilda for not lying directly, but this delay wasn't welcome either. He kicked at the hard packed snow beneath his feet.

The money wasn't the biggest draw. It was the fact that it might be connected in some way to his past that drew him.

If the money had been real, what was the chance that it was still there? Someone had probably found it long ago.

"Let's get going shall we! Are you coming with us, or will you take that...thing you call a truck." Gwen's icy green eyes drilled into Jason's.

"Oh yeah, let's go." Jason said without emotion. He turned toward the rusted out hulk that served as his transportation. His half-ton truck had been new twenty-two years ago, and it was really starting to show its age. He hoped that it would start.

Jason took three large steps and crossed Hilda's narrow driveway. He shrugged helplessly as he met Hilda's eyes across the top of the hood. He opened the door and then slid into the chilly interior of the truck.

"I hope somebody else doesn't get there before we do." Hilda's voice rang with tension as she slid in beside Jason.

Jason pushed his key into the ignition and breathed out a silent prayer as he turned. Success! The truck rumbled to life with a noisy rhythm.

"Well, if the money has been there all these years I'm sure fifteen minutes won't change much. Think of a way to distract your parents and we'll go to the church as soon as Clarke's closes."

Hilda stroked her chin slowly. "How do you know the money was hidden so long ago?"

"It must have been. Why else would the letter mention those details from my past? The money must have something to do with my origins." Jason glanced back and curled his mouth into an expression of annoyance.

"I hope your parents got their fancy new Hummer out of

the way, because I need to back up and I can't see anything. I don't want your mother to scream when I hit them with my old wreck."

"Just go...They'll move."

The truck moved backward carefully, turned to the right, and then approached the roadway.

"I guess I was lucky this time."

Hilda nodded as if she could care less. "Yes you are. Well, knowing the speed that they drive, my parents are probably already at the store waiting for us."

A truck light signaled red, and then veered north.

"I hope that isn't somebody else who got a letter like mine!"

Jason pointed to the twin beams of light that swung left off the road and onto the large almost deserted parking lot of the Gladstone Christian Fellowship. "Hmm. A new Toyota Avalon, I wonder who drives that. I haven't seen that car at church before."

"To think we could have walked over there and my parents chose today of all days to come over." Hilda stared out the window as frustration marred her pretty face. "I guess I should never have told Mother about our plans for today."

The light of wisdom was beginning to burn inside of Hilda's head. Jason hoped that was a sign of parent free dates to come.

Jason stared north at the row of glowing row streetlights and Christmas decorations that he drove toward. His eyebrows wiggled as a thought came to him.

"Come to think of it, there was somebody else..."

Hilda jerked away from the window. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that I think somebody else was found with me. I don't know who, or what the name was. Hmmm. What if..." Jason scratched his head. "I don't know what's going on. How did this letter find our way to me anyway? Who in Saskatchewan knows my address? I don't know of anybody."

"What if they are at the Church right now?"

"Maybe, I'm tempted to turn around and find out!"

"My Mother would explode if we ditched them."

"Well, think of something to distract them. We can't bring them along to something like this! It would be asking for trouble! We'll be at Clarke's in about two minutes, so think fast!"

## 4.

Harvey's eyes were wide. They swivled in their sockets, searching for life in the large snow covered parking lot. The only sign of life outside of his car were the fading red taillights of an old truck puttering north toward town center.

"I guess we've got this all to ourselves! Let's get it shall we? The party can live without us for a while, but not for long."

"Do we even need to go back?"

"Well, it is my boss and I don't want to look like I don't appreciate the things he does. It would be bad for my future if I did. I need the money."

"So it's better if we get mocked and laughed at by your drunken friends? Who knows what they think we're doing now! Whatever they're thinking, I'd probably slap you if you tried it! You and your money! There's more to life than money!"

"Whoa! What's with the attitude all of a sudden? First you tell me how glad you are that I'm not like my friends, and then you lecture me. Are you sure you haven't been drinking?"

"I'm sorry Harvey. It's just, well, I think that letter must have put me on edge. What if it was written by some stalker or something. What if they are waiting for us inside? What if they want to kill us?"

"Don't be silly. I'll protect you. I've gotta return you to the party after all."

"Lets not and say we didn't."

Harvey opened the door and then leapt out. "Hey, look! If the money isn't there, I'll still need to work. I'll have to work regardless...sure one million dollars is a lot, but without a steady income it would dry up pretty fast."

"Assuming that I decided to share it with you." Candace said thoughtfully as she slid out of the car.

"Of course. I just assumed that if we were husband and wife sharing would be a given." Harvey stared at the church. "This is actually a big church! I wonder why they need all that room."

Have you ever been inside?"

Candace closed the door on her side of the car, and then joined Harvey.

"No, I can't say that I have. I haven't been living here that long. I've been going to the Anglican Church downtown. I've always wanted to try this church; I just haven't got around to it yet. I suppose that today is the day. Isn't it amazing what the promise of a little money can do?"

Harvey remembered that he had left his own car door open. He slammed it shut.

Candace ran her eyes over the structure before her. It was a large building. Somebody in town said that it looked like a shed, but that was a bit exaggerated. The building was big and had four walls like a shed, but the resemblance stopped there. The walls were a tasteful brownish yellow. On the front was there was an understated arrangement of sand colored bricks. A cement car ramp ran up to a covered pad before the main doors.

"We could have driven right up to the front door." Candace mused. "A regular drive through treasure chest this is...."

Harvey charged forward, filled with driven purpose. "Then everybody could have seen us! It's better down here in the dark. There's not as much chance that we'll be noticed."

"Whatever, it's not like we're doing anything illegal."

"Well we don't know where the money came from, do we? Maybe it is illegal. I'm guessing it is, otherwise it would have been found and put to use by now."

Candace frowned as Harvey's thought slapped her.

Harvey stopped beneath open walled roof that covered the east entrance. "I wonder what those wooden boxes are for."

He scratched his clean shaven chin as he strode briskly south along a snow covered concrete sidewalk.

"Gladstone Treasure Chest." He read aloud. "What is the Gladstone Treasure Chest?"

"I think it's the new thrift store downtown. I haven't been in it yet, but I've seen the sign over the door."

"Oh really? Where is that?"

"I heard somebody say it was in the old Sears building. Does that make sense? I haven't lived here long enough to know if it's true."

“Yeah that makes sense...I wonder what they've got in here anyway. It won't be a sin to take a quick peek, will it?”

Candace glanced at the two large wooden boxes. One was painted white, one was left to slumber in its natural wooden splendor. “Garbage,” read the black letters on the lid.

Harvey heaved on the lid of the white box. Snow crinkled, crackled, and then fell away as the lid opened.

“Humph, a bunch of thrift store kind of junk! What else could you expect. I guess the money wouldn't be in that obvious of a hiding place!”

“The letter said that it was hidden in the ceiling of the Gladstone Christian Fellowship, not outside in the wooden donation bin with treasure chest painted on top!”

“Good point!” Harvey walked briskly to the metal colored entrance door and then pulled it open. “After you.”

Candace stepped through the door and felt the welcome blast of warm air caress her face. The door slammed shut as Harvey stepped in beside her.

“So they leave the door unlocked...I guess they don't know about the money that's hidden inside. Excellent.”

Candace stared into the semi-darkness. Straight ahead, there was a small flight of stairs that led upward into a foyer area. Faint outlines of coat racks could be seen at the other end of the church. To the left was a longer flight of stairs leading into the darkness of the basement.

“Which way?” She asked loudly, almost hoping that someone would hear them and interrupt the search that was about to begin. She didn't know if she could trust Harvey with one million dollars.

Harvey glanced to the left, then bounded straight ahead and up. “Why not the main floor, or even better, upstairs. Yeah, we can start on top and work our way down. Just like everything else in life....”

Candace reached into her purse and pulled out the letter. Her lips sawed back and forth erratically. “According to this, it looks like it was hidden behind a ceiling tile. Where would they use ceiling tiles? Wouldn't that be the basement?”

“Yeah I guess it would probably be the basement. I'm not a builder. I don't know where they would use that kind of thing. My

Aunt Gertrude has ceiling tile upstairs, but she also has twenty cats carousing throughout her house.”

Candace wrinkled her dainty nose. “Twenty cats? I don't know if her judgment would be reliable. I say we try the basement, the diagram seems to show a row of tiles ending at one end of the ceiling. It all looks like a basement to me.”

Harvey stepped down the short flight of stairs and then turned right. “So we start at the bottom and work our way up? Suits me fine. The money will be the same.”

“Our tile is eight spaces off the end. And from all appearances, it is the eighth tile from the east side.”

“Sounds easy enough! We'll be in and out quicker than you can say Merry Christmas! Thank God it's warm in here....”

“Merry Christmas yourself!” Boomed a friendly voice.

Harvey and Candace turned away from the stairway leading to the basement. They stared at the figure rounding the corner of a coat rack.

“Hey, let's have a little light in here. No need to be creeping around like a bunch of criminals. This is the house of the Lord after all!” Brent reached over to push a button on the wall near the door.

Light flickered, then lit up the entrance way in refreshing color. The carpet was revealed to be a mass of solid grey. The walls were painted white. The most drastic change was the emotion visible in the faces of Candace and Harvey as they struggled to deal with their surprise.

“Hi, my name is Brent Gunner. I don't think I've seen you in church before. Let me be the first to welcome you to the Gladstone Christian Fellowship.”

Harvey took the offered hand and shook it mechanically.

“Hello Brent.”

Candace shook the hand with more confidence. She wasn't doing anything wrong was she? She was looking for a link to her past. What could be wrong with that?

Brent smiled broadly, revealing a set of perfectly formed teeth. He wore a red and black checkered jacket, a grey fur hat, and about a weeks growth of black stubble on his chin.

“I'm sorry for the beard and the clothes. Me and my Dad just came back this morning from a week in the bush. I had a lot

of work waiting for me when I got home. Then I remembered that I needed to do a little cleaning before tomorrow's Christmas service! Anyway, I managed to get it done! I was just going to leave when I heard you come in, and here we are." Brent cocked his head. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

"I didn't notice any vehicle outside," Harvey blurted.

Brent laughed with a tiredness born from a good days work. "Oh I walked over; we only live twenty minutes away. I would have brought my bike, but I thought a walk would be nice on a night like this. Maybe it's my tough Cree blood, I don't know. I just like winter! The colder the better!"

"Cree? I didn't know we had any Cree out here." Candace said, stroking her chin with an air of curious thoughtfulness. Brent was a mystery to be solved.

Brent made a show of checking his watch. "Well, I'd tell you the story that got me here. It's pretty long though, and I'm a bit tired. So maybe another time. Is there anything I can help you folks with?"

Harvey coughed into his hand. "Well, we just thought...Cough! Cough! I thought it was in the Christmas season and all, why not head over to the church. Yeah, because it's a bit of a stressful time of year you know, and what better place to relax than at a church?"

Candace shook her head slightly. Harvey could really make a clown of himself when he opened his mouth. The three glasses of wine he had managed to put away probably didn't help the situation.

Brent stared hard at Candace, then Harvey. His face grew serious. "Are you Christians?"

"Yes, I am." Candace said truthfully. A feeling of guilt ran through her. If she was really a Christian, why had she agreed to marry a person like Harvey?

"How about you?"

Harvey looked like a squirrel caught in the gaze of an overactive boy with a pellet gun. "Well, I think...well I haven't really thought about it much. I guess I am. We're all Christians, aren't we? Yeah, we're all part of the family of God."

Brent sighed heavily as he sank down to sit on the steps.

"I think we need to talk. Why don't you sit down. Go on! I

won't bite. Sit right here on the step. Good. Now I introduced myself, why don't you introduce yourselves.”

“Candace, Candace Polanski.”

“Harvey Martins.”

Brent took his fur hat from his head and then placed it beside him. “Now, tell me the truth. You came here tonight for a reason didn't you? You left whatever you were doing and came to Church when nothing was happening. Why? Because you were searching for something!”

Harvey shook for moment, and then struggled to compose himself. He twisted his head as if stretching his neck.

Brent nodded with understanding. “Have you ever felt like you were searching for something Harvey?”

Harvey thought of the letter in Candace's hand and then nodded slowly. Where this was going we had no idea, but he had a feeling that he had better play along for the moment.

Brent fell silent for a moment, and then began to speak.

“Well, seeing that it is Christmas Eve, I'll tell you about the true meaning of Christmas. During the Christmas season, we rush here, run there, searching for that special gift. But in this rush, we realize there is a hole in our own heart has yet to be filled! There comes a time when God puts his hand into a person's life and changes their path. In John chapter three verse sixteen....”

Harvey looked perplexed; he stared at Candace, searching for understanding.

Candace smiled. She knew what was coming, but she vowed to remain silent. It wouldn't hurt Harvey to hear a little preaching. Besides, the longer they stayed here the less time they had to spend at the party.

The money would wait. Wouldn't it?

## 5.

“We made it!” Jason exclaimed as his old truck fishtailed left, right, then straight into the church parking lot.

“Whoever it was is still here.” Hilda pointed to the car parked near the east entrance.

“I guess then we’ll have a little showdown won’t we.” Jason’s laughter trailed off. “I hope not. This is Christmas Eve; this is no time for showdowns and such. Besides, it’s probably only somebody from church who got a new car. Nothing to worry about!”

“We better hope they don’t want to talk for too long. My parents will be looking for us in about fifteen minutes.”

“Yeah I know! By then we should be long out of here. The map isn’t that hard. The basement is where it is. That’s the only place in church where we have tiles that can be removed. It’s pretty easy, just push ‘em up and there’s a nice hole on the other side. A perfect place for hiding money.”

Hilda looked impressed. “So it is possible?”

Jason laughed. “It’s possible, but not probable. Just watch, the first thing we’ll see when we walk through that door will be Brent Gunner smiling at us! He and his Dad were going up north fishing for a few days, but they’ll be back by now. I wouldn’t be surprised at all if he set this up.”

“Well, if you’ll ever turn the truck off, we can go and see!”

“Yeah, that might be smart, wouldn’t it.” Jason turned the key and the truck died. The couple exited, and then walked toward the church hand in hand under the pale light of the moon.

Jason noticed that one donation bin had been opened recently. Who would open the donation bin this late in the evening on Christmas Eve?

“You wanna do the honors or should I?” Jason smiled at Hilda as his hand rested on the metal door handle.

“Go ahead.”

“Okay, just don’t say I didn’t warn you!” Jason pulled the

door open and then stepped forward.

“Hilda, this is Brent Gunner.” He said casually, gesturing to the young Native-American man sitting on the top step between two strangers.

Brent looked up to face the new visitors. “Well, Jason and Hilda...what a surprise! Oh my goodness! I didn't expect to see you here tonight!”

Jason examined Brent's face carefully, but he found no sign of a joke. “Are you serious...? You didn't expect me?”

“Why would I expect you? You know something I don't? I just came by to do a little Church cleaning that I should have done before we went fishing. I was going to leave, but you people just keep streaming in!”

Hilda met Jason's eye and raised her pencil thin eyebrows.

“Who are these people?”

Brent smiled enthusiastically. “Well, this is Harvey and this is Candace. They just got here. I was telling them about the pursuit of riches and how it contrasts to the perfect gift of love that God gave the world at Christmas. They need to know that Jesus is the reason for the season! Not presents.”

Jason restrained a smile as he caught a glimpse of Harvey rolling his eyes. Harvey struck him as someone dishonest. Jason eyed him for a moment, and then turned his attention back to his friend.

“Well Brent, just be careful!”

“Why?”

“If you keep this up people might get the idea that you're a Preacher!”

“Oh my goodness, don't start that again!”

“Come on, you've got the zeal for it! You have the words and a genuine love for the Lord. What more do you need?”

Brent ran his hand through his mop of black hair. “Well, I think I'll stick with being a teacher's aide for now. I hope that's all right with you.”

Jason smiled as he bent down to remove his snow covered shoes. “Hey don't worry man...I wasn't serious. You do have a gift though, don't get me wrong. If people say you're too intense, don't listen. We need more intense people!”

Brent yawned. “Well, I wasn't very worried. I am tired

though, I think I should head home. I need to clean up a bit before tomorrow. I think this beard is a bit fierce looking for church, don't you?"

"Come to think of it, you do look a bit fierce. Did you have a good ice fishing trip?"

"Yeah it was good. We caught a good haul, I think we might have a fish fry instead of a turkey bake tomorrow. "

"That's good, that's good..." Jason trailed off as he took in two pairs of eyes boring into him with thinly disguised hostility. He glared at Hilda and then at Harvey.

Candace met his eye, blushed slightly, and then turned away. Jason felt blood rush to his cheeks and then fade. Why hadn't he seen this woman in town before?

Jason put his shoes to one side, and then straightened.

"Well...Harvey, is that your name?"

"Yeah."

"Is there something I can help you with?"

"Not really, we just saw the church and thought we'd look around a bit. No harm in that is there?"

Jason met Candace's eyes, this time she didn't look away.

A wave of tender emotion tickled at Jason's soul, and then receded into the sea of annoyance building against Harvey.

"They wanted some peace and quiet away from the Christmas rush!" Brent piped up.

"Peace and quiet eh?" Jason suppressed a chuckle. "Well there is plenty of peace and quiet here most times. Not tonight apparently. Odd, isn't it?" As he said these words, Jason watched Brent's face for a tell tale smirk.

There was nothing to be seen.

Hilda tugged at Jason's sleeve. "I think it's getting late. We should get what we came for and move on, shouldn't we?" Her voice was sweet but her eyes were demanding.

Jason glanced at his watch. Yes, it was getting late. If they weren't careful, Hilda's parents would descend and banish peace and quiet to the four strong winds.

"Yeah, well I guess we should get going." Jason smiled at Brent. "I'll see you in church tomorrow morning."

Brent stood, and then walked toward the door. "Yeah, I'll see you tomorrow. Are you doing anything for lunch?"

“No, my parents are planning a gathering for next weekend. We'll just do one big feast this year. “

“Well, you're welcome to come over if you want.” Brent turned to face the rest of the audience. “You can all come! I'd like the chance to talk to you a bit more if I could.”

Harvey looked violent, or uncomfortable, it was hard to tell which. “Well, I have plans for tomorrow...sorry. Thanks for the talk and all...it was...it was...it was...very...um...interesting. Religion isn't quite my thing though.”

Candace looked like she was about to voice her opinion, but changed her mind.

“Jason...” Hilda's soft voice carried menace before it trailed off into passiveness.

“Okay, let's go. See ya Brent, nice meeting you Harvey, and Candace...” Candace...that was a nice name....

Jason forced the thought from his mind. This was not the time to think about someone else's girlfriend. He spun to the left and headed down the flight of stairs into the basement.

An exit door slammed above.

A burgundy colored door loomed ahead.

Jason reached out, grasped the silver metal handle and pulled. The door swung open silently, allowing him and Hilda to walk through.

Click. The door swung shut behind them.

It was as black as the coal in a snowman's eyes.

Jason walked right, and then ran his hands along the wall. After a few moments, the distinctive protrusions of a row of switches appeared under his fingertips.

Flick. Flick. Flick. Lights flickered on in sequence, splashing welcome illumination on the canvas of darkness.

The basement was large enough for about two hundred and fifty people. Now there were only two.

Along the west side, fold out walls had created Sunday School rooms that could easily be disassembled if the occasion demanded. In the middle, only the glint off the well-polished linoleum held sway. Most important was that fact that the ceiling was made up of row upon row of white foam tiles.

Jason pointed to the door just right of where he stood.

“There's the kitchen if you want to make yourself a cup of

coffee or something.”

Hilda rolled her eyes. “Yeah right. I think we have something else to think about. Where did you leave your map?”

Jason reached into his pocket and pulled out his letter. “I was just making a little joke. No need to get all grouchy right away.” Jason ran his eye along the paper. “Now, it looks like it was the eighth row from the east wall.”

Hilda counted off the rows and moved into position under the correct one. “Got it. What’s next?”

“It looks like...humm...its hard to make out. I think it looks like the eighth tile from the other end.”

Footsteps clacked along the floor.

Slight echoes rebounded throughout the empty space.

Jason stopped abruptly and then stared up at the tile in question. “So here it is. The moment of painful truth. Is this a joke or a million dollars...Hmmm....? I can see why someone would pick this as a hiding spot. There are no bulbs around, so no reason to go near it.”

“What does that have to do with the money?” Hilda sounded cross, but then she often did. She took after her mother in that way. Jason hoped that she would grow out of that habit as time went on.

Jason sighed. “I mean...Well, put it this way. If there is a light, then it will burn out. So when it does, guess what happens? Somebody has to crawl up there with a stepladder and change the bulb. If they do that, there is a chance they would find the money. But over here there is no reason to climb up.” Jason’s brow furrowed with frustration. “Well silly me, I should have known that we’d need to climb. Wait here, I’ll get a ladder from the storage room. Handy thing that it’s right here. It’ll just be a minute....”

“Jason, I think....”

Jason walked forward a few paces and then turned left to face a wooden door. The storage room. He opened the door and walked in.

“I think someone is coming downstairs....”

Yes there it was. A sturdy steel stepladder leaned against the wall on the opposite end of the narrow room. Jason crossed the space with a few strong strides, and then reached for the ladder with both hands.

Ladder in hand, he began to backtrack.

He paused as he heard a sudden flurry of footsteps scampering across the floor. Hilda's sudden cry of alarm sent him charging forward. The door swung shut just as he was about to reach it.

Jason muttered to himself as he placed the ladder against the wall. He reached for the doorknob and twisted. It was locked!

"Hey! I'm in here with the ladder! Let me out!" Jason hollered with more than a trace of annoyance in his voice.

Hilda was beautiful, but sometimes her sense of fun could get on his nerves. This would be her kind of childish prank. Jason was beginning to think that she might be a bit young for him.

No response.

"Hey! I have the ladder, come on." Jason banged his fist on the wood for emphasis. Hilda's immaturity was really starting to get annoying. Jason felt the old doubts surfacing. Hilda was beautiful, but all too often lacked common sense.

"Come on!" Jason pounded louder.

Nothing.

Jason pressed his ear to the wood.

The sound of an intense argument graced his ears. Hilda was saying something, and then there was silence.

"Open up! I'm in here!" Jason yelled as loud as he could as his fists beat violently on the door.

The door swung open suddenly, knocking him to the concrete floor. Someone was shoved inside, and then the door swung shut with a bang.

"What happened?" Jason muttered angrily as he heaved himself up to a standing position. "Oh, you're not Hilda! What are you doing in here?"

Candace wiped a tear from her eye. "I guess I'm learning that getting engaged after only three weeks is a very bad idea."

Jason grabbed at the door again, twisting the knob as hard as he could.

"Don't bother! Harvey has the key and he made sure to lock it. You won't get out that way."

Jason stepped back and shook his head. "What is going on here? What happened to Hilda? How did you get in here?"

"Hilda decided to take a share in the money."

“The money?”

“Yes.” Candace chuckled. “Assuming that there is any money there at all. Harvey is convinced that there is....”

“What!” Jason leaned against the wall as an expression of defeat crossed his face. “Why?”

Candace glided slowly to the other end of the room. “Why do bad things happen to good people? That is the age-old question. The answer is the same as it always was. Because God allows people to face the consequences of their own sin.”

“We didn't do anything!”

“No, but they did. Or they are going to. Greed does funny things to people. Just look at the people in the mall these days. Everybody wants what they want and they'll do what it takes to get it! It's the same here. The difference is that we're being betrayed by people we know, or thought we knew....” Candace's voice carried a fatal strain of fatalism. As if she had seen this betrayal in life many times before and was resigned to it.

Jason tested the doorknob once again. “Well, I guess we are stuck here. Now why don't you tell me exactly what went on in those twenty seconds I left to get the ladder. I'm confused.”

“You saw Harvey upstairs didn't you? After Brent left and you went downstairs, we wandered around a bit. Harvey found a key ring and thought it might be useful. After that he and I came downstairs to look for the money. Harvey saw you walk in here, so he charged over here and locked you in. It took a few tries before he found the right key, but he did it eventually. I tried to talk him out of it. I told him that the money wasn't worth the risk, but I don't know what came over him. It was frightening to watch.”

“And Hilda?”

“Well, Harvey couldn't get you both. And...I think that after a minute or two he realized that what he had done wasn't the best idea in the world, so he left her alone. At least he did while I was out there. Hilda offered some sort of deal and he agreed to it. I don't know what he is doing now...Probably getting a ladder from somewhere.”

“How did you get in here?”

Candace smiled shyly. “Well, quite frankly, I insisted on it! I couldn't be a part of any scheme that involved locking people in dark rooms. I told Harvey in no uncertain terms to let you go. He

wouldn't listen, so I said if he wasn't going to let you go he should lock me away with you because I wasn't going to stand for it!"

Candace lowered her voice. "I guess he took me literally."

"You could have ran off and called the cops."

"Well I suppose I could have, it all happened so fast that I didn't think of that. Silly me."

"And Hilda is still out there..." Jason mused thoughtfully.

"Well, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. She had a charm about her. I used to believe it, until I started going out with her."

Silence fell, trembling nervously in the awkwardness of the situation.

Candace took in the sight of the room. On the east end there were wooden shelves, packed with boxes and bags of various items. Along the wall stood a vacuum cleaner, or at least something that looked like one. At the far end, to the right, the sleeve of a robe could be seen.

"What's that?" Candace blurted suddenly.

Jason stared uncomprehendingly. "What?"

"That coat sleeve, or robe, or whatever it is."

"Oh, the church stores costumes and such in here. I guess that would be one of them. Don't worry about it."

Another few moments of awkward silence crept like worms of betrayal through the room.

"How did you know about the money?" Jason asked almost inaudibly.

"I got a letter today."

"You got a letter! Well, so did I. Isn't that a coincidence."

Candace's eyes met Jason's. There was a strange connection. Something that two strangers wouldn't normally share on their first meeting.

"Have I seen you before?"

Candace looked puzzled. "No, I don't think so. I just moved here a couple of months ago. "

Jason shook his head as he sunk the floor. He leaned against the wall. "It's just, well, it seems like I should know you somehow."

"I don't know how you would."

"Well, forget that I ever said it. It was just a thought that crossed my mind. Let's try to get to the bottom of this; you said

you got a letter? What did it say?"

Candace recited the details as best as she could remember them.

"That is almost exactly the same as the letter I received! The details in the map anyway! Do you have any idea who sent it? Where it came from?"

"No, I can't think of anything."

Candace pulled the envelope from her purse and stared at it. "I don't know. The postmark is in Saskatchewan, that's the only thing clue I can find. Was this all some cruel joke?"

"No, I don't think so. Nobody could predict how Harvey and Hilda would act. They probably didn't even know! Somebody who knows us both, sent us here. Who could that be?"

"It's ridiculous. There can't be anyone! I wasn't even in the area until a little while ago. Who would know that my Birthday is today?"

"Family?"

"I have no family. I was, I mean, I am an orphan."

"An orphan...hmmm. That is one thing we have in common."

"You're an orphan?" Candace's face showed surprise.

Jason hung his head. "Well, to be honest I wasn't always an orphan. I was adopted when I was three. They found me in this church actually. I guess my parents thought they would practice what is preached upstairs and take me in."

Realization dawned like a cresting wave.

"You are the one they found with me!" Jason exclaimed.

"What?"

"I'm serious. They found me with a newborn baby. How old are you?"

"Twenty seven."

"And I'm thirty. You just turned twenty seven, didn't you?"

"I told you, my birthday is today. Isn't this a fine place to celebrate?"

Jason stood suddenly and knocked the ladder over, it fell and crashed against the door. "You are the one! The baby they found with me had just been born." Jason scraped his memory for almost forgotten details. "Yes, there was a note with you, all it said was Candace. I guess they named you after that note."

The impact of the words echoed in the minds of the emotionally bruised couple.

Candace gasped and sank to her knees. "I can't believe this! Who are we? Who is playing us?"

Jason picked up the ladder from where it had fallen and then carried it back to its place against the wall on the other end of the room.

"It's crazy isn't it? It's like some soap opera. I don't know who we are really. I don't know what God is trying to tell us, but we have to find out!"

"Whoever sent us those letters knows." Candace delivered the statement with total conviction. "They have to know. The question is, why would they bother us after all these years?"

Jason glared at the door. "We have to get out of here!"

"How did they find us? What do they want with us?"

Jason rummaged through the wooden shelving, taking things out of the boxes and examining them. "I don't know the answers to this, but we are getting out of here and we will find out!"

Candace rose to her feet, her face filled with determination. "What are you looking for?"

"A screwdriver, a hammer, whatever. The idea is to find something to pry the hinges from their sockets. If I can do that we should be able to take the door off the hinges and get out of here."

"You sound like you've done this before."

Jason laughed, a deep genuine laugh for the first time that evening. "No, I just watch a lot of TV! I hope this actually works!"

Candace watched Jason's muscles ripple like powerful machines as they moved back and forth rapidly. If she was going to be stuck with someone, the thought occurred to her that Jason would be the person she would prefer to be stuck with.

"Aha!" Jason pulled a thick metal crowbar from a box of miscellaneous tools. "I don't know why they would need this in church, but I'm glad they have it! Now let's see what we can do!"

"I guess they'll have taken off with the money by now."

Jason took the flat end of the crowbar and began to wiggle it under the flat head of the top pin in the hinge. "Who cares about the money? I found you!" Jason stopped abruptly. "I'm sorry, that

came out rather suddenly. I wasn't thinking.”

Candace smiled in the darkness. “Don't be sorry, I was thinking the same thing...Whoever you are.”

“Whoever we are.” Jason muttered, as he went back to work on the stubborn hinge.

## 6.

“Have you seen Jason around?” Tracie, a twenty-five year old young woman had said this. She brushed nervously at her short black hair as she waited for an answer.

Brent glanced around the milling crowd that filled the foyer of the church. “I don't see him. I talked to him last night and he said he'd see me tomorrow. Today is the day!”

Tracie adjusted her black framed glasses and then scanned the crowd yet again. “So, anything interesting happening in your life?” She asked casually, searching for some discussion to fill the gaps of waiting time.

Brent smiled. “Well, last night I was able to witness to two visitors to this church.”

“Really? Who were they?”

“Harvey and Candace they said their names were.” Brent chuckled at the memory. “I think I overdid the preaching a bit. I was quite tired from that fishing trip we took. Well, I said the truth anyway, if they listen or not...well I guess that is up to the Lord.”

“You can only do the telling! If people don't want to listen, that is up to them.”

“That's right, and I told them. That was all I could do.”

Tracie craned her neck to peer over the crowd once again. Her face lit up. “Oh, Karl made it from work! He must have gotten off early because of Christmas!”

“He has to work on Christmas day?”

Tracie nodded as her full red lips twisted into a grin. “Yep, pigs don't take no stinkin' holidays!”

Brent laughed and began to turn away. “Well, you had better join your husband. Maybe I'll talk to you later. “

“Okay! I hope you find Jason soon.” Tracie bunched up her light brown knit sweater as she waded into the crowd.

Brent paced to the three small slit windows that looked out onto the parking lot. The lot was full of vehicles, unlike the night before.

Jason's ancient truck wasn't anywhere to be seen. Oh wait! There it was, parked exactly where it had been the night before. Where was Jason?

"How is the fierce preacher today?" Jason's voice drifted into Brent's ear, prompting him to do an abrupt about face.

"Good morning! I was looking for you." Brent took in the sight of Jason's tired and bloodshot eyes staring back at him. "A long night?"

Jason yawned, putting a fist to his mouth. "Yeah, it was a long night full of surprises. I'll tell you about it after the service. I think the thing is about to start, so we better go in and sit down."

"Where is Hilda?"

"Well...that is part of the long story I'll tell you about later. I do have Candace with me."

Brent looked puzzled, but pleased as he took in the short figure of Candace.

She was dressed casually, a festive red and green sweater with a jet-black pair of jeans.

"I'm glad to see you back in Church!" Brent flashed a handsome smile. "I'm glad my preaching didn't scare you off!"

"I'm glad to be back!" Candace said in weak attempt at brightness.

"So you got the beard shaved I see? Good deal!"

Brent turned his attention back to Jason. "Yeah I did it right after I got home last night. It feels a lot better now. I usually wouldn't come to church dressed like I did last night, but I figured that nobody would be here so I wouldn't bother anybody."

"It didn't bother me."

Conversation fell away as they pushed through the crowd, toward the two large doors that led into the sanctuary.

Jason changed course suddenly and strode to the glass window that provided part of the barrier between the sanctuary and the foyer.

He peered over the gathering congregation for a moment, then rejoined the flow into the sanctuary.

"We'll go to the south side, in the back. I might nod off during the service, but I don't want to be obvious about it."

Brent stared at his friend with concern. What had happened last night? Jason never slept in church!

It took a moment to find a pew and settle in.

The plain white shirt of Jason sat between the red and green sweater of Candace and the black shirt of Brent.

Soft mellow tones of the organ floated over the congregation and began to form the melody of, "Silent Night."

Jason leaned over to whisper into Brent's ear.

"Your parents have lived here all their lives haven't they?"

"No, they moved out to Gladstone about twenty seven years ago. I was a bouncy three year old at the time. Why?"

Jason nodded thoughtfully. "I'll need to talk to them later."

The stage began to fill with the smiling faces and black robes of choir members. The Christmas day program was about to begin.

Jason and Brent leaned back in their seats and began to soak up the beautiful melodies. After four wonderful numbers, the choir filed back to their pews to make way for the preacher.

Michael Fehr was a slim, fit looking preacher. He had slightly tanned skin, jet-black hair, a classy black suit, and an unvarnished message to preach. He walked up to the small metal music stand that would serve as his pulpit for the morning, placed his papers upon it, and then opened his mouth.

"Good morning everyone! I'm glad you could make it for our special Christmas service. I'm sure the children are anxious to get home to the presents, so I'll try and keep it short and sweet this morning."

Michael paused to allow a slight murmur to sweep over the audience.

"Watch out next Sunday though!"

The murmur morphed into a full-fledged laugh.

A moment passed as the crowd slowly fell silent.

Michael looked down at his notes, cleared his throat, and then began in earnest.

"The biggest gift of Christmas is love! God sent his only son to earth in the greatest act of love that the world has ever seen! That will be my message for today, but before we begin, let us pray."

## 7.

“There you have it! The story of Jason and Candace's big escape!” Candace finished with a flourish.

Jason's face was void of emotion as he nodded. “Yes and now all I have to do is fix the door that I broke down to do it!”

Brent shook his head as he reached for another large helping of Moose steak.

“Oh my goodness, oh my goodness. I would have never thought something like that would happen in a small town like this.”

“I don't think anybody planned for it. It just happened. By now I'm sure Harvey is wondering what came over him.”

“And Hilda, where is she?”

“I don't know, I haven't spoken to her since last night. I could see light in her house when we finally left the church last night. I haven't got up the nerve to call her and ask what went wrong.” Jason paused, searching for words. “It's just so sudden. I don't know what to make of it. I think that the Lord was trying to tell me something.”

Brent looked over the table, searching for a saltshaker. When he found it, he handed it to Candace. She nodded her thanks and then began salting the heap of mashed potatoes piled in her plate.

“And the money, they took the money. At least Harvey did...He must have. The tile was lying on the floor when I broke the door down.”

“Don't forget the dollar that was stuck into your shoe!” Candace piped up.

“Yeah, there was a dollar stuck into each shoe. I guess that was my reward for keeping the carpet clean. “

“I thought there was only one dollar.” Candace pointed out.

Jason smiled at her, and then laughed. “I thought there was one, but when I got home I found another one wedged in beside my toe . That reminds me, I guess I owe you one, don't I?”

Candace cringed. "I will ignore that. Well, we had an experience. I guess that was better than nothing."

Brent took a deep breath, furrowed his brow and then began to speak hesitantly. "We can be thankful that the real meaning of Christmas is so much more. Can't we?"

Jason met Candace's shy smile and then nodded. "Yes, we can be thankful."

Brent scratched his head. "You know Jason...." He paused, and then continued. "You mentioned something about the Lord talking to you...." Brent held up his hand. "Now don't get me wrong, I'm going to say this as a friend. Don't get angry at me."

"Okay, I'm listening."

"I didn't want to say anything. I thought to myself, Brent, let the Lord do the talking! The truth is, I thought that Hilda was never the right one for you. She didn't come to church, did she?"

Jason felt a blush of nervousness run through his face.

"No she didn't. She said she would come with me one day, but she never got around to it."

Brent smiled as if he knew all along what the answer would be. "There you see, the Lord was protecting you from making a very serious mistake!"

Jason stared at the wooden carving of a Moose that was the centerpiece of the table. "Yeah, you are probably right. I should have known better. Well, let's be honest, I did know better! Hilda was just like her mother; the relationship would never have worked. She was beautiful though...She is beautiful...."

"I think it was the same with me." Candace said quietly, her eyes fixed firmly on the table. "I just moved here, I wanted friends. I wanted to have somebody in my life to love, so I said yes to the first person who seemed slightly reasonable. Harvey isn't a bad person, he just isn't the person for me. Silly isn't it? That it would take something so drastic for us to admit this to ourselves."

Brent reached over to pat her hand comfortingly. "Well, we can sure see that the Lord works in mysterious ways. It almost reminds me of Balaam and his donkey..." Brent fell silent as his mother cleared her throat.

Brent's father stood from his seat at the end of the table.

"It appears that there were many gifts this Christmas season. Some were difficult ones...yet let us take a moment to

remember the greatest gift of all on this Christmas day. The gift of love that God sent into the world through his son.”

The family and friends gathered around the table bowed their heads as Brent's father prayed a heartfelt prayer of thanksgiving for the Christmas dinner.

The outer corners of the dining room were simply but tastefully furnished with shelves of wooden animal carvings interspersed with potted plants that reached for the ceiling. The center held the handmade, well-varnished, wooden table. At the north end, one open arch led into the well-furnished kitchen. A fireplace crackled colorfully and quietly from the south wall. The east and west walls were the site of two large bay windows that provided a beautiful view of the snow-covered outdoors.

An outdoor world that was slowly becoming more snow-covered as candy like flakes slowly drifted down from the slightly overcast sky.

“Amen.” The prayer finished, Brent's father sat. His eye rested on the moose carving at the center of the table.

“Yes, we have plenty to be thankful for.” He repeated slowly. “The Moose we are about to eat, the company of friends and family...” The words drifted into a meditative silence.

Jason felt Candace's eyes on his face. He looked up and smiled. A gentle scent of wood smoke wafted around them, seemingly drawing them closer together.

“Let's eat.” Brent's father said the words carefully and then sat back to watch the feasting. He smiled in a quiet way, and then turned his gaze to his own plate.

He struck Jason as being a very polite man. Maybe a bit like John Wayne in appearance, but not totally. Black hair, a native skin tone, and a graying head of hair added shades to his appearance.

Brent's mother was on his left, she was a smaller woman. Petite might be the word applied, in a way she reminded Jason of Candace. They both seemed to hold a quiet wisdom permanently locked into their expression.

“So what are you going to do now?” Brent asked suddenly as his fork stabbed into a stack of potatoes. “Where are you going to go from here might be a better way to put it.”

Jason glanced at Candace as he raised an eyebrow.

“Well, if Candace agrees, I think we'll try to find out the truth about our past. Maybe we'll find out who set us up. After that, I don't know.”

Brent shifted in his seat. “I suppose I could have stayed at church last night. I just thought, well, I thought you had things under control...I guess it all turned out for the best anyway. Even if it didn't go according to plan.”

Jason reached for a slice of Moose steak. “Speaking of plans. I thought you said last night that you might have fish! What happened?”

Brent looked at his mother, and then smiled with an air of mischief. “I guess my Mother knew that Moose tasted better than fish! That's what happened. She is a wise woman!”

“I think I'll have to come over sometime and watch how you cook steak. It's delicious!” Candace said, looking toward Brent's mother with obvious enthusiasm.

The conversation quickly swirled into kindhearted banter, laughter, and all the things that Christmas memories are made of.

Jason stared outside for moment during a lull in conversation. The beauty of nature struck him with its simplicity. One million dollars could never create a scene so fragile, so natural and elegant.

God had indeed saved them from foolish relationships. From love that could only lead to pain. Would he grant them the gift of forgiveness to remove the sting of betrayal?

Jason exhaled slowly as he watched Candace from the corner of his eye. He hoped that the upcoming journey into the past would bear fruit for the future.

## 8.

“What other options are there? We can't look through the archives until the library opens again in January. We can't talk to people until they come back from holidays. The internet is....”

“The internet is the only option we have left.” Candace finished.

“I should have thought of that myself.”

Candace smiled playfully and then took another bite of the sticky cinnamon bun that tantalized her so seductively. She chewed for a moment, and then swallowed.

“You should have thought of it, but it is given to man to overlook the obvious. You couldn't help yourself! I on the other hand, am a woman.”

Jason laughed loudly, drawing the attention of the only other customer in the Gladstone bakery.

The customer in question was an old man wearing an old blue knit sweater, dark blue jeans, and a red hat on pushed carelessly back on his head. An expression of distaste wrinkled his thin lips. He stared for a moment, shook his head slowly, and then turned back to his cup of coffee.

“Well woman, let's go and find ourselves an internet connection.”

“Normally I wouldn't let you get away with calling me woman in that tone of voice, but since I started it, I guess I get what I deserve.”

“Don't mention it. All I decree for your punishment is allowing me to pay for your breakfast.”

“I don't know if a cinnamon bun and coffee qualify as breakfast, but....”

“Sure it does!” Jason pulled a thick black wallet from his jeans and walked to the cash register. “The rules are that if it is eaten in the morning, it qualifies as breakfast.”

Candace took a few steps south and then bent to examine the baking lurking behind the glass display case. “So if I hear you

right, even those donuts could qualify as breakfast?"

Jason pulled a twenty-dollar bill from his wallet and then placed it on the counter. "Why don't we find out?" Jason smiled handsomely at the young girl behind the till. "I'd like to add a box of donuts to the bill please."

"Sure, what kind would you like?"

"My usual dozen of double chocolate would be fine."

"Alright, here you go." A plain white box was pushed toward Jason's waiting hand. He grabbed it and turned to leave.

"Wait, your change sir."

Jason turned back. "Oh I'm sorry. Thanks for reminding me!"

"No problem. Here you are. Have a nice day!"

Jason pocketed the coins and then aimed his gaze toward the exit.

"Okay Candace, let's go to the car and find out who we are." Jason chuckled. "I'll have to watch my mouth, that wasn't a very good poem, was it?"

"You're into poetry?" Candace asked with undisguised interest.

Jason shrugged. "Well, I try. I don't know if it's worth much, but I try. I haven't published any of it or anything like that."

"You'll have to let me read one of your poems sometime."

"Yeah, maybe...Not on the first date though." Jason trailed off wistfully, and then smiled. "Not that this would be considered a date. We barely know each other."

"No, no, of course not." Candace's words said no, but her tone said that she wouldn't mind at all of it was.

The old man slowly turned, stared for a long moment, then shook his grey haired head. For a moment, he looked as if he would leap up from his seat. Instead, he returned to his cup of coffee as if it were the only sane object left on the face of planet earth.

Jason held the door open for Candace and then walked through after her.

"Wow, you held the door open. I'm impressed."

"Don't be, I find that it's easier to get outside if the door is open. Don't forget, I bought breakfast for you. How's that for impressive?" Jason handed the box of doughnuts over to their

new master.

“Thank you. I don't know what to say.”

“I don't either, so I'll just bask in the glow of your appreciation.”

Candace burst out laughing as she swatted Jason with the box. “Oh you! Let's get out of here before we ruin that old man's lack of Christmas spirit.”

“What old man?”

“That one in the bakery there. Didn't you see him glaring at us?”

“No, I didn't. Well I guess it is boxing day, maybe he's depressed now that Christmas is over. “Jason walked to the large window on the east side of the bakery and peered through it.

“Was that the one?”

“He was the only other customer in there, so he must be.”

“Hmm...I haven't seen him before. I wish I could cheer him up somehow. This is happy rock after all.”

“Happy rock?” Candace brushed at her short hair with an air of casualness.

“Glad stone, happy rock. Get it?”

Candace groaned. “Yeah yeah I get it. I guess the smiling stone statue near your church should be a giveaway, shouldn't it? Color me a clueless newbie. If I live here for ten years maybe I'll get this town.”

“Ah well, it could be worse. You could be rich.” Jason paused, pulled his wallet from his jeans and then reached inside for another twenty-dollar bill.

“You know what I'm going to do?”

“I'm scared to think.”

“Don't be! I'm just going to go in there and buy that guy a box of doughnuts! He needs something to cheer him up. Donuts aren't much, but they are something. The double chocolate donuts in this place should be enough to cheer anybody up.”

“You can give him these.” Candace held out her box.

Jason stared at her for a moment, and then shook his head.

“No, those are yours! I'll just go and buy him a new box. Wait here, I'll be right back.”

“Jason, wait!”

Jason turned, his hand resting on the door handle.

“What?”

“Take these. I know you don't have that much money, you don't need to buy another box. Take these! I can survive without doughnuts for one day.”

“Oh...Okay...thanks. I'll be right back.”

Candace watched the door swing shut behind Jason. He really was growing on her. He was nothing like Harvey. Harvey would never have thought about giving a box of doughnuts to a miserable old man. And Jason was a poet...interesting....

She smiled to herself. Jason didn't have much money. Instead, he had heart and imagination. That was worth more than money. She pushed open the door and felt the saliva inducing haze of fresh baked bread waft over her nose.

Her eyes traveled across the floor filled with round, metal edged tables and rested on the silhouette of Jason and the old man.

As she neared them, her heart began to pound. Had she heard correctly?

“Don't patronize me sonny. I know who you are. I could tell you things about your parents that would curl your hair. Yep, I said your parents. Your real parents! That tingles doesn't it? You didn't know that anybody else knew did you?” The old man stared at Jason with a look of triumph on his face. “Yep, poor little Jason abandoned by his parents in the sanctuary of the Gladstone Christian Fellowship. Strange thing it was...and you weren't alone! No sir...” The old man's piercing blue eyes swiveled suddenly, focusing like a laser on Candace's approaching form.

“Yeah, there she is. Come on over here, I've got somethin' to tell ya both. A little somethin', to ruin your Christmas I expect. Yeah, come on in nice and close. Don't be shy. Are you ready?”

“Yeah, yeah, what is it?”

The old man smirked as if he held a secret of great importance.

“Just a minute...Okay here it goes.”

The old man made a show of staring at his watch.

“Jason, meet your sister.” He paused for a moment to allow this nugget of information to settle, and then stood.

“Thanks for the donuts, they'll be tasty I'm sure.” The old

man walked a few steps, then stopped and turned. "Ruined a perfectly fine romance didn't I? Well, Merry Christmas anyway."

Jason strode forward and placed a powerful hand on the old man's skinny shoulder. "Wait just a minute, you can't say something like that and then just walk out of here!"

"Oh I can't? What if I told you that I have to go home and examine my Christmas presents, would you let me go then?"

The old man had an attitude that made even a mild mannered person like Jason consider violence. He took a deep breath as he struggled to calm himself.

"How do we know you're telling us the truth?"

The old man shrugged indifferently. "You don't. Maybe I'm lying, maybe I just wanted to ruin a perfectly fine romance. Maybe I'm just that kind of guy. You don't know, do you?" He tittered in his irritatingly shrill tone.

Candace felt numb as she watched the unfolding scene. Was Jason really her brother? He didn't look the same, did he? He had blonde hair, but many people had blonde hair. His face was different, but then, some siblings had radically different features.

"Okay, okay...if you want to be like that, I'll tell ya. You did buy me that box of doughnuts after all. That's worth a little story at least. Sit down here and I'll tell you 'bout your parents. You won't like it, but I'll tell ya if that's what you really want. Go on, sit down and get comfy...."

Jason stared at the wrinkled face. It reminded him of Gollum from Lord of the Rings...or was that only his overloaded mind imagining things?

"Well are you gonna sit, or are you gonna stand there all morning like a fish with your mouth flapping open?"

Jason sat heavily, staring at Candace as she glided in across from him. Was she really his sister?

"Okay, we're sitting. Why don't you start by telling us who you are?"

The old man hollered for another cup of coffee, received it, and then began.

"My name is Phillips. Elijah Phillips. Kind of like the Mister Phillips in Anne of Green Gables, cept I'm a real Phillips. I ain't got a Prissy Andrews hanging around neither...I'd run her off if she

was. Romance is for men who don't have a brain. No offense Jason, but sometimes truth has to be said."

Jason rolled his eyes with disgust. "Hey! Why don't you just tell us about our parents and then we can all move on."

"Good idea! Mebbe you got a little brain left after all...But just a little one...."

Jason glared wrathfully at the Gollum who withheld the precious information from his thirsty ears.

Elijah winked as a smirk toyed around the edges of his cruel mouth.

"Okay I get you. I'll tell you what you wanna hear and then I'll be outta here. Christmas isn't the same without something to spoil it...Well; I suppose the first thing you wanna know is how I knew your parents...don't ya? Well there's no easy way to say this, but I was the accomplice in the robbery."

"Robbery?"

"Yeah it was a robbery. Now be quiet and let me talk! The truth is, it wasn't really a robbery. It was more of a sneakery!"

Elijah laughed at the confusion on the faces of his listeners. He sipped at his coffee for a moment before continuing.

"Your parents embezzled about a million dollars cash from Hasseloff and Phillips Incorporated. Yep, I was the Phillips part of that fine company. I guess accomplice wouldn't be the right word would it? No sir, I was a victim of their tricks! I hired them both. I wanted accountants to keep everything straight you see. I ran an honest business and I wanted to keep it that way! Next thing I knew one million dollars had vanished. How they got it in cash I don't know. But they were accountants, so if anybody would know how to play the system it would've been them. After they had the cash they took off to the wilds of Manitoba!" Elijah's voice took on a decidedly sarcastic tone. "Apparently they had fallen in love...And since Marge was pregnant and unmarried...."

Silence.

"Where are they now?" Jason's dull question shattered the tension.

"Where they belong. They are spending a happy Christmas in a prison in Ontario. Oh wait, that isn't right! They would have been released about ten years ago, where they are now I don't know. I hope it's somewhere cold and miserable."

“Why did you come here?” Candace asked, feeling the numbness of shock spread from her soul to her voice.

Elijah cackled. “Well to be honest, I needed a little hobby in my retirement. I made a lot of money in my life. Oh, I may not look like it, but I did well. People always thought I was a jerk, but they trusted me. I ran an honest business and people like that. Anyway, I retired a while back, and I thought...why don't I find that million we lost all those years ago? Yep, so I moved to Gladstone to find it. Your Mommy and Daddy were caught just down the road from this fair town. They didn't have the money on 'em. So I figured they must have hidden it somewhere in town before they were busted! They knew the jig was up, so they dropped the kids at the church before they took off. Logically, the money must also have been hidden close by.” Elijah eyed Jason slyly as a knowing grin crossed his face. “I'm right, aren't I?”

“What do you mean?”

“The money was in the church with you, wasn't it?”

“Why don't you go and find out?”

Elijah twisted his neck back and forth casually. “I never held much for church attendin'. Besides, I got the two kids right here! You know where it went and can save me a lot of time, can't you? It would be such a hassle for me to tear up the church. Why not just tell me where the money went and save me some time. Or did you two spend it already?”

“You planned this meeting didn't you?” Jason blurted as realization dawned.

“You never noticed me, but I noticed that you come in here every day. It wasn't so hard to plan. I just thought today might be the day and I was right! I didn't expect the donuts though, they were an extra bonus. In business I've found that planning ahead brings unexpected rewards...Thanks!”

“Why didn't you just come up to us and ask?”

“Oh I was going to follow you home first, but you came up to me with them donuts...and then I thought why not provoke them a little bit? Why not make them anxious to hear the story? Yep, and now we had a nice little sit down and coffee. What more could a man ask for besides a million dollars? Speakin' of the money, whatever happened to that stash I was tellin' you about?”

Jason glanced at Candace who seemed to have shriveled

into herself. He wished he could put his arm around her and comfort her.

Jason turned face the accusing eyes of Elijah. "I don't know where the money is now, but I know who took it."

"So you two didn't take it?"

"No." Candace's voice rang like a gong beating on a hollow drum.

"Actually I just met Candace two days ago. You didn't send us any letters by chance?" Jason felt his head spin. Was it only two days ago? It seemed like a lifetime.

"Bah, letters are for people who don't know how to use the internet! I haven't got time for that. Just two days ago eh? Well, what better time for a family reunion than at Christmas time. I don't hold much for reunions myself, but there are many who do. But now, tell me, who got the money in the end? I'm dyin' to know."

"Harvey Martins I presume. We didn't actually see it being taken...but it was taken."

"From that church I suppose? When was that?"

"Christmas Eve."

"Really!" Elijah laughed. "My my, what happy times we're havin' here in Happy Rock. Meetin' long lost family, long lost treasures...What happened? Did he jump ya?"

"In a manner of speaking...it was a surprise. It's a long story. I'm sure the money is with Harvey Martins. If he doesn't have it he'll know where it is."

"This Harvey lives here in town?"

Candace straightened in her seat. "Yes, actually I even have his phone number. I can write it down for you...."

Elijah pushed his coffee cup away, and then stood. "No need, I'd prefer to pay a personal call. The personal touch is so much more rewarding, don't you think? You wouldn't have his street address on hand by any chance?"

Candace hesitated.

"Don't worry; I'm not violent. I'm just a frail old man curious about the past. I'm not gonna be like one of them gangsters on TV. I ain't lookin' to hurt anybody..." Elijah's voice was drenched in sincerity.

Candace hesitated, and then rummaged through her

purse. After a moment, she pulled out a notepad and a pen. Her hand twitched erratically as she wrote. Finished, she pushed the paper across the table.

“Here you go. Good luck.”

Elijah raised one thin eyebrow. “Mebbe you'd like to come along and watch me. At least you could catch a glimpse of the money before it disappears again.”

“No thanks. We don't want revenge, just justice. If the money is yours, you should have it.”

“No revenge eh? What are you, some sort of Christian pacifists?”

“Yes.” Jason and Candace said in unison.

Elijah turned strangely thoughtful. “Well, I don't believe in it myself. All that Christmas type stuff makes me sick, but if religion keeps you honest, I'm glad for you. There are too many liars in the world today.”

“I'm not perfect...but I try. It's all I can do.” Jason admitted.

Elijah slapped Jason's shoulder with enough force to make him choke. “Good man! That's what I like to hear. If I were still workin' my company, I'd hire ya on the spot. I hate them pompous types who think they have it all together and can't admit mistakes. But right now I gotta move on, I got some visitin' to do. Some collections to make....”

“Did you tell us the truth about us?” Candace asked in a voice drained of enthusiasm.

Elijah cocked his head quizzically. “As best as I knew it, I told it! Go on, ask around. People may say that I'm a miserable old fool, but they won't say I'm a lying old fool. Ask anybody.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a business card.

“Here's a souvenir for ya.” The white card fluttered to the table and landed face up. It was obviously a high quality card. The silver logo of Phillips and Hasselhoff was prominently displayed in the middle. Jason stared at it for a moment.

“Aren't you afraid that we lied to you like our parents did?”

Elijah laughed mockingly. “No sir, you two ain't the lyin' type. I can see it in your innocent little eyes. You didn't inherit the family genes. Besides, you're Christians, if you lied to me you are going to have to answer to the God you believe in.” Elijah coughed into his hand discreetly. “From what I understand he's

supposed to be stronger than I am, so you might not want to go against what he says.”

“Well, thanks for telling us this.” Jason glanced at his watch. “Now we just gotta figure out where to go from here.”

Elijah picked his box of doughnuts off the table and then strode to the till. He continued to speak without facing them.

“I know where I need to go. And I'm headed there right now. I thank you for tellin' me the truth! It strikes me that I might have been a little too harsh on ya in the beginning...” He cleared his throat abruptly. “I'm sorry about what I said earlier.”

Silence fell over the bakery. What more could be said?

Jason gestured to Candace and the couple began to walk to the exit. Both of them much more subdued than they had been only half an hour before.

Elijah brushed past them and marched through the door as if he was headed to battle. “Thanks again for the donuts! I'll eat 'em to celebrate gettin' my money!” He called over his shoulder as he vanished into the frozen outdoors.

“I guess we should be thankful that this wasn't a date.”

Jason muttered awkwardly as they stepped out into the bitter cold.

Candace stared at the post office across the street to the southeast. It was a dark yellow-bricked building with a concrete ramp running along the front to the middle; there it met a short set of steps to form a pad. It was the place where life had started to change.

“I'm thankful that I have a brother.” She said slowly. “I've been an orphan all my life, it's good to have someone else in the world.” She smiled at Jason; it was a pretty smile but lacked the sparkle that had been there earlier in the morning. “Now we need to find our parents.”

Jason ran his eye over the old stone building directly east.

A blue and white sign on it proclaimed that it was the home of, “*Broadfoot and Fraser Insurance Agency.*”

“How did they find us?” Candace asked suddenly.

“What do you mean?”

“The letters. How did they find us in the first place? Who sent them?”

The yellow ball of the sun hung like a drop of paint on a blue canvas. A small white cotton cloud struggled to obscure it,

but failed.

“Our parents sent them. They must have.”

“Why didn't they contact us during the years...? Why not contact us directly?”

Jason ran his arm around Candace's shoulder. “I don't know, maybe they were ashamed of what they did. Maybe they thought we were better off not knowing who they were.”

“Then why send the letters now?”

“Maybe they only found us now. Maybe they wanted to try and buy forgiveness. Maybe they heard that Elijah was in town and they wanted us to get to the money before he did. I don't know.”

Candace trembled under Jason's touch. “We have to find them, we have to ask why. Why they did this to us.”

Jason nodded. “Yeah. We'll find them. Somebody has to know where they are. We could call the jail and find out where they went after they were released.”

“Or we could look at the envelope.”

“There was no return address on it.”

“Ahh, but there was a postmark.”

Candace rummaged through the pocket of her blue and white parka. She held up an envelope triumphantly. “See, there isn't a return address. But there is a postmark. What does it say?”

Jason squinted. “War? No that can't be right. Warman? Yes, I think there is a town called Warman in Saskatchewan. Maybe that's it.”

“I guess we'll need the internet after all.”

Jason started toward Candace's small blue Honda hatchback that was parked at the post office.

“Brent, here we come!” He exclaimed. “Oh! How do we know who to look for?”

“Marge Polanski.” Candace smiled thoughtfully. “I kept my own last name, and Elijah mentioned Marge was one of the thieves. It's obvious when you put two and two together. “

“Well then, what are we waiting for? Let's go!”

## 9.

“I wonder what happened to Hilda? How she and Harvey are getting along. I can't imagine that they are. They're too much alike. They'll set each other off.”

The highway expanded before Jason's tired eyes. It was like watching an unfolding scroll with prairie landscapes, small farms, and a vast emptiness that seemed to mirror the space in his heart.

Candace placed an empty coffee cup on the floor. “I'm wondering what happened to Harvey after Elijah popped by on his visit.” Candace leaned against the window and stared aimlessly at the scenery that looked increasingly the same.

“I think Harvey would have soon been persuaded to hand over the money. Elijah might have to prove that it was his, but Harvey would know enough to hand it over once that was done.”

“You don't even know Harvey!”

Jason laughed. “No I don't. I'm just a general judge of human character I guess. I have to do something to keep me awake on this road. Why not play Doctor Phil?”

“I told you I could drive. It is my car after all.”

“I know what you said. It won't be much longer though, I'll make it. It doesn't make sense to stop now! We're so close!”

“Okay, have it your way doctor.”

The body of the hatchback shivered as a tire fell into a hole on the highway and bounced out. “This highway isn't the best either.” Jason muttered angrily, veering to dodge yet another hole in the pavement.

“What about your in-laws to be...Gwen and Dan, how did they react to the news?”

Jason scratched his chin, feeling the stubble beneath his fingertips. “Well I went back to the bakery last night, after we were done with Brent's computer. Harvey was there with Hilda and her parents. It was awkward...for a few minutes they didn't even look at me. Harvey had his arm around Hilda, but it looked like they

had been arguing before I got there. It was a bad scene. After a while, Gwen trotted up and started to tell me what a cad I was for abandoning her fragile daughter...“Jason grimaced as a memory struck him. “Gwen was winding up for a real blow out, but then Tracie and her husband showed up.”

“Karl?”

“Yeah Karl, anyway...Gwen was talking like she always does. One hand on her hip, one wagging her index finger like a piston in a car engine. She was about to really lay into me when Karl walked up. He smiled, and then started nodding his shaved head in time with Gwen's finger. I could see that he was bothering her, but she carried on. Tracie was the one that really set things off. She walked up, smiled sweetly, and then asked Gwen to quiet down so that they could hear the sweet sound of the ceiling fans. Imagine that!”

“I think I'm too scared to imagine it. I don't even know Gwen and I'm scared.”

Jason ground his teeth. “Don't imagine it. It wasn't that good of a scene.”

Jason shook his head as laughter bubbled from his throat.

“Karl and Tracie are quite the couple I tell you. I don't think I'd have the nerve to go up to somebody and do what they did. It wasn't mean stuff; it was more designed to provoke thought.”

“They sure sound like an interesting pair. I'm sure I'll meet them when I start attending Gladstone Christian Fellowship.”

“Yeah, I'm sure you'll get to know them. They are pretty easy to get along with. You just need a sense of humor if you want to hang around with them.”

Jason shook his head as a smirk played across his lips.

“Poor Harvey. He didn't know what he was getting himself into when he ditched you for Hilda and a million dollars. He sold himself far too cheaply.”

“Well thanks Jason!” Candace smiled affectionately. “It's always nice to feel valuable.”

“Don't mention it...That's what big brothers are for...”

“Well, I wouldn't know...” Candace stared at the approaching edge of civilization. It was a moderate sized town with one street heading straight into the bowels of it.

Jason began to let off on the accelerator.

“Harvey and Hilda traded love for money and I’m guessing that they will end up with neither. Poetic, isn’t it?”

“You never did show me one of your poems.” Candace mused almost inaudibly.

A shopping mall flashed by the driver’s side window. The parking lot was packed with vehicles.

“It’s just like those people who spend the Christmas season shopping instead of with family. Look, Christmas is barely over and those people are already back at the mall.”

“You don’t know that Harvey and Hilda won’t find love.” Candace said, louder this time.

“No I suppose I don’t. The appearances don’t look promising though. We’ll have to go and see them when we get back. They can’t be very happy these days.”

“They need the gift of God.” Candace observed, slightly surprised to be thinking this way. When she was with Harvey, she had a hard time thinking of spiritual things...now with Jason it seemed her mind had been set free. Love had led her to God, just like that Negro preacher had said on Christmas Eve.

“Yes, they need Christ for sure.”

Jason braked to a stop in front of a red light. He glanced at Candace as emotion tugged at his heart.

“You’re a better gift than all the overpriced junk in that mall over there. I’m glad God brought us together.” Jason struggled to find the words. “It’s, it’s priceless. Finding family is priceless, especially the way it turned out. I always wondered about my past. Now I know. I know more than I did anyway. I hope that didn’t sound too corny....Identity is important.”

The light turned green. Jason pushed the accelerator and the car leapt forward.

“It was a priceless Christmas....” Candace said as she pulled a map from the glove compartment. “Now we just need to track down the rest of our family.” She spread open the map and placed her finger on the route she had marked out in red ink.

“It shouldn’t be hard. There was only one Marge Polanski listed in the phonebook.”

“Hopefully she is the right one.”

Jason felt a wave of apprehension wash over him. “I guess we’ll find out soon.”

Candace nodded, fear plain on her face. Her hands trembled as she followed their progress through town.

The car swam through traffic, twisted streets, and finally into the calm pool of a quiet neighborhood.

Trees towered at even intervals along the sidewalk.

Medium price range houses flashed by in various colors.

Snow fell hesitantly from a grey sky.

“Fifty six, fifty seven, fifty eight!” Jason stopped counting and pulled the car to the side of the street. “We’re here!”

Number fifty-eight read the faded gold letters on the small house. The house had been painted light green with a tasteful white border running along the edges. A flight of black metal steps ran up to the front door. A curious face could be seen through the sole window facing the street.

Jason breathed in and then exhaled slowly. “Welcome to the moment of truth. Shall we face it?”

“We came all this way; it’d be a shame if we were too scared to go out there.”

Jason opened the door and then stepped out into a chilly breeze. “Let’s do it then. Rebuild our identity...By the way, have you ever seen that movie?”

“Identity?”

“No.”

“You’re not missing much.”

A moment passed while the nervous couple trudged through the snow packed path to the front door. Jason reached out and pushed the doorbell.

After a second, the door opened. A thin, frazzled looking, woman stood in the doorway. She wore a white blouse and a blue skirt that reached to her knees. Her European looking face held two curious blue eyes that swiveled back and forth. She brushed at her long blonde hair nervously.

Candace thrust her hands into the pockets of her faded blue jeans.

Jason stared silently at the woman before him.

“Yes, what is it?” She said without emotion.

Jason fought against the fear stabbing into his heart as he opened his mouth. “Are you Marge Polanski?”

“Yes, who are you?”

“We’re your children.” Candace said in a voice breaking with emotion. She pulled the envelope from her pocket and held it up so that Marge could see it.

A siren wailed somewhere in the distance.

A car hummed as it drove by.

Marge took the envelope and stared at it with blank eyes. Finally, she handed it back. “I guess I forgot about the postmark,” she said quietly as tears welled up in her eyes.

Jason shifted as he turned his gaze to his feet. The wind was cold against his legs. His jeans were too thin for this kind of weather.

“I guess God forgave me, didn’t he? He gave me back the child I abandoned.” Marge spoke haltingly as she dabbed at her eyes. “I can’t believe it. You are Candace I presume....”

Candace embraced her mother with a powerful band of emotion. They stood silently reveling in simple touch after years of separation.

“What about me? Am I not your son?” Jason said as the impact of Marge’s words penetrated his mind.

“Whatever gave you that idea?”

Marge pulled herself away from Candace and took Jason’s hand in hers.

“So you are Jason.” She said thoughtfully. “You’re much bigger than when I last saw you.”

“We talked to Elijah Phillips, he said...” Jason felt like his tongue was wrapped around his tonsils.

“Elijah Phillips? He’s still alive? I thought he would’ve died of misery long ago.” Marge paused. “Well, that is a bit harsh. I admit we did our part to make him miserable.” Marge blinked. “So, he said that. That you were my son?”

“Actually he said Jason, meet your sister.”

Marge placed her hands on her hips. “Well, I suppose he would think that. That is what we told everybody at the time. We took you in, we treated you as our own...but your real parents were...I don’t know if I should say this. It’s not that nice to think about.”

“Go ahead, I can take it.”

“Well, I suppose you deserve to know. Your parents were our neighbors. We were living in Ontario at the time, and they

lived right across the street. Yes, that's how it was....”

The cold wind toyed with Jason's nose, drawing mucus to dribble down to his lip. He attempted to digest what he'd been told. “How...why...I mean...”

“It is confusing isn't it? Why would we take the neighbor kid and run off with him? The truth is that we couldn't stand to see you beaten every night. We were scared they were going to finish you off. We called Child and Family Services; they took you from your parents and then gave you to us. In the meantime your parents got busted for peddling drugs. We were going to adopt you, so we told everybody that you were our son. But before we could get the adoption papers through, we ran for it. Your parents managed to get out on bail and they were coming back for you. They weren't the most pleasant people, so we panicked and took off. We needed money, so we took some from Elijah's company. Well let's be honest, we were greedy and stupid. We just got carried away with greed and were busted for our efforts. Serves us right I suppose. Did you have a decent childhood at least?”

Jason thought of his parents. “Yes, I did. I was adopted by a couple in Gladstone, where you left me. Where you left us...”

Candace hung her head. How could she tell her mother about the horror of her life, about being shuffled from foster home to foster home? Still, the pain of the past needed to be faced. Candace would tell the truth when the time came.

“I'm glad some good came out of that. Child and Family services must have decided to give you to a decent family far away from the mess you came from.”

Marge smiled without emotion. “We hated to leave you two there, all alone in that church. We only stopped in because of my baby...because Candace needed to come into the world. They were watching the hospital because they knew I was pregnant. They had really started closing in, and we thought you would have a better life without us. We knew we were headed to prison....” Marge was obviously sincere, but Jason noticed that she didn't seem overly affected by the revelations.

Jason stared at Candace; she had taken on a soft glow of beauty in his eyes. She returned his gaze without flinching.

“So we're not brother and sister?” He breathed out slowly.

Marge laughed suddenly. “No you're not. And I bet you're

glad to hear it!"

Jason blushed as Candace's eyes glistened.

"Well, it is getting a bit chilly out here don't you think? Why don't we go inside where it's warmer. I'm sure you have a lot of questions to ask me, and I have some for you."

"What happened to my Father?"

"How did you know where to send the letters? Why?"

Jason and Candace's questions burst out simultaneously.

Marge backed into the house. "Well, your Father and I got married after we were let out of prison. Obviously, nobody would hire him as an accountant, so he decided to take up long distance trucking. He's on a trip right now, but he'll be back next week."

Marge turned to Jason and smiled. "I knew where to send the letters for the same reason that I knew you were coming today. I think you might know somebody in Gladstone named Brent Gunner...."

"Brent! So I was right!"

Marge smiled in a motherly way.

"He was under strict orders not to say anything. I hope he didn't betray that trust."

Jason allowed Candace to enter the house, and then walked in himself.

"No, he never said a word. If I may ask, how did you know Brent?"

Marge closed the door firmly. "Brent's family used to live in a little town in northern Ontario called Moose Factory. Before we were thrown in jail, we used to take fishing trips up there. We met his family that way, and we've kept in touch ever since. When I told him to put the letters in the mail for Christmas Eve, he almost leapt at the chance. He said that God had told him to do it."

Jason shook his head in disbelief. "These last few days have been incredible. It's...it's...." His voice fell away.

Marge nodded. "They have been. I never thought I would see you two again. I didn't know if you would want to see us, that's why I sent the letters. Brent called me one day and said that he was sure that Candace had moved into town. I started thinking about how to bring you together, and then I thought of the money. I thought that maybe it could still be used for something useful after all these years. I thought maybe you two could at least have

something, have each other. I didn't expect you to use the letters to find your way back here. I guess it helped that I didn't change my name when I married your Father..." Marge paused.

"By the way, did you get the money?"

"Elijah got the money." Candace said as she knelt to removed her shoes.

"I suppose it was his money anyway. So that's the way it should be. I just thought..." Marge shrugged. "Who cares what I thought. You two found each other, you found me. That's the best Christmas gift I could ask for. God has been good to us despite what we've done."

"God's Christmas gift to the world was love in the form of a baby. That gift keeps on giving." Jason quoted from Pastor Michael's Christmas day message. He met Candace's gaze and colored. The future was there, behind her tender smile.

After the shock treatment of these past few days he felt numb. Like he had just ridden a fast rollercoaster and had been desensitized by it. As he watched Candace, he could see she was feeling the same.

"Why didn't you go back for the money yourself? I'm surprised that there wasn't a huge treasure hunt for that amount of money!" Candace blurted suddenly, seemingly to avoid facing the fact of Jason's obvious affection.

Jason's legs felt numb as he bent over. A small piece of snow fell from his shoe and landed on the brown carpet. He ignored it as he reached for his shoe laces.

"Elijah hated publicity. He would rather leave the million hidden than have the press find out. He must have sharpened his claws and told the media to shut up. He had his ways of making things like that happen." Marge shrugged. "We didn't go back for the money because once we managed to get out of jail we just wanted to stay out. We didn't want to revisit the scene of our foolish mistakes...it would have been too painful."

Painful childhood memories flashed through Candace's mind as she hung her jacket in the closet, beside Jason's.

Marge smiled indulgently.

"Come into the living room, don't be shy. We have a lot to talk about it and I'm looking forward to it. Can I get you anything? Tea? Coffee?"

“Coffee for me please.”

“I’ll take tea!”

Jason and Candace said in unison as they walked toward the arch that led into the well-carpeted living room.

Marge chuckled happily. “You two just sit yourselves on the love seat and I’ll be right there with the drinks. Then we can begin.”

Candace fell into step beside her mother as Jason took a seat.

Marge ran an arm casually around Candace’s tense shoulders. “So how was your life?” She asked glibly.

Jason pulled a thread from his grey sweater, and then looked up with curiosity plain in his eyes. Candace would have to face this herself. There was nothing he could do.

Candace thought for a moment. “I hope it gets better.” She said wistfully. She took a deep breath; it was time to face the past.

Even her short sleeved white shirt was too hot. Candace flushed as tension threatened to overwhelm her.

Marge was staring at her with concern. “Oh dear, was it bad? I didn’t...Er.I...I’m...sorry...I just...”

Candace felt the hand of God rest on her troubled spirit. Her thoughts softened. “Things were bad, but with God’s help they can only get better.”

## Epilogue.

*December 26th, one year later.*

“That wedding was beautiful! It went better than I ever expected.” Candace said with a tone of contentment. “What did you think?”

Jason sank into the plush leather seat of the limousine carrying them to the airport. He searched for words, and then began.

“I enjoyed it more than I thought I would. I'm usually nervous in front of crowds, but yesterday was fine. A Christmas day wedding was a good idea! I really appreciated how Brent helped keep things relaxing. I'll have to send him an extra big thank you card.”

“Yes, he did very well for his first wedding. This time things went according to plan.”

“What? Oh, you're talking about that Christmas eve. Yeah, he was expecting us that night. He sure was surprised that Harvey and Hilda showed up with us, but I guess his plan worked out anyway. Brent is quite the character....”

Jason watched the familiar sight of Winnipeg airport approach through his window. “He just got ordained last week, but you'd never guess. He preached like he had been preaching for years!” A vision of Brent witnessing at the local basketball court flashed through Jason's mind, prompting him to pause for a moment. “I suppose he has, but still. I mean, probably half the weddings performed in churches probably have some sort of message on Corinthians 13. But he managed to make it sound fresh! He definitely has a gift from God!”

Jason pulled an envelope from the pocket of his jeans.

“Speaking of gifts. I have some mail for you.”

Candace took the envelope and stared at it. “Hmm... That's funny... There is no return address. Who is it from?”

“Open it and find out!”

Candace tore open the envelope and watched a single sheet of paper fall onto her lap. She smiled, then picked it up and

then began to read.

Jason watched her face. Candace looked so young, but there was wisdom in her eyes. Dimples appeared in her cheeks as she began to smile.

*As our love became formless  
succumbing to the remembrance  
evanescence through the spell  
or perhaps an Iliad of our existence  
regardless, it bound itself to the atmosphere surrounding  
formulated from the vapor of our lips in motion  
spilling promises into the winter's day  
audio into this cathedral like hall  
from our mouths, the desire for divine  
connection  
visible in the contracted covenant  
time now has become our ocean  
a destiny beyond you or I  
as our two hands warm their grasp  
stepping forward into the past  
or what will be  
breath from us into we  
unison bursting into a single flame  
within marriage, a couple inhales emotion  
desire from the air  
as our love became formless*

Jason watched Candace finish reading, and then smiled with mischief. "You always wanted to read one of my poems. I wrote that while I was waiting for you to change out of your wedding dress. Were you disappointed?"

Candace felt light headed, Jason was speaking to her. He was the poet she had wished for.

"Come here, I'll show you what I think." She heard herself saying somewhere in the distance. Her lips met Jason's in a rush of desire.

He gasped as he pulled away. "Wow! Talk about a

priceless Christmas!”

Candace blushed as she straightened her soft blue jacket. Jason seemed about to kiss her again, and then halted.

The cultured voice of the chauffeur drifted into the back seat.

“I’m so sorry to interrupt, but we have arrived. I believe you need to check in about five minutes from now if you want to catch your flight.”

Jason slid over to his side of the car reluctantly. His fingers toyed with a thread hanging from his grey parka.

“Well, I guess we better get going. Elijah paid for the trip, so we don’t want to waste a minute of it.”

“I still can’t believe that he offered to pay for it.”

Jason smirked. “He said it was a reward for telling the truth. I think he’s just an old romantic at heart!”

“Maybe so. I still wouldn’t want to spend much time with him. That sounds terrible since paid for our trip, but that is the truth.” Candace folded the poem carefully and then put it into the pocket of her jeans. She would read it again later.

“It’s amazing how all this worked together! How everyone was in the right place at the right time to get us to this point. If you would have told me on December twenty-third of last year that I would be married a year later I would never have believed it.” Jason shook his head. “Amazing.”

“God is amazing!” Candace said sincerely. “Now I think we better go before we miss our flight. Hawaii is pretty decent in winter from what I’ve heard.”

The happy couple reached for the doors, pushed against them, and then entered the frozen outdoors. Jason felt Candace’s thumb inside his hand, then her warm fingers wrapped around his. Two identities had intertwined, becoming one. As the cold reached them, they broke into a jog, running hand in hand toward the warmth of the airport.

A Piece of Christmas Chocolate  
(Bonus story 1)

The printer chattered. It was hard at work, churning out the final reports for the day. Waiting, Kathy drummed her fingers impatiently on the expensive black desk that she called her own.

Year-end was always the time when she was forced to justify the income she earned. This year was no different. If anything, it was a little worse since her trusted assistant, Candace, had left.

Candace was always talking about the gift of love. In fact, she had the audacity to compare every act of love to a chocolate in God's gift box to humanity! Or something along those lines. Kathy was a Christian, but those metaphors seemed to be more a product of Candace's love addled mind than of reality.

Marriage, who needed it? Kathy had managed quite well, until Candace had decided to get married. Now how would the work get done before New Year's day?

New Year's Day was the deadline that the boss had set. Why? Who knew. It was the reason that she needed to work on Boxing Day.

The thought rankled enough that Kathy tore the paper from the printer harder than she intended, ripping an edge and ruining its professional appearance. She glared at the evil machine for a moment, then making up her mind to be professional, seized her briefcase with one hand and marched out of the gilded cage that her office had become.

The day she went on a date would be the day God told a sea gull to stay up north in winter.

She walked briskly across the hall and into the elevator. Her arthritic fingers painfully pressed the down button even before she reached a halt. Arthritis had infested her fingers ever since she was young. Over the years, she had learned to live with it, but it was a burden. The elevator doors closed and soon she was on her way toward the main floor. If she ran, she could still catch her ride.

Kathy hummed her favorite Christmas carol, Joy to the World, under her breath. Finally, the elevator doors opened and she was moving across the freshly washed, stone colored linoleum floor. On ordinary days, the reflective beauty of it would occupy her mind, but now Kathy was intent on catching her ride. So intent that she failed to notice the person stepping forth into her path until it was too late.

She stumbled as she made contact, dropping the briefcase to the floor. It made a thud as it landed, a thud followed quickly by a pop as the poorly fastened case fell open, spilling its contents over the slick linoleum.

Kathy knelt to gather the papers, noting the reflection of her face in the reflective floor surface. Lines on her face reflected her age of fifty years old, but it was a young fifty. Her brown hair bore streaks of gray and her blue eyes were weary of a long tiresome day. Despite circumstances, she still looked beautiful.

If only she could get out of the plain grey dress that was the required uniform for her job.

Another face appeared on the floor beside her, a man's face. Kathy looked up, flustered at the suddenness of his approach.

"Allow me to assist you," came a deep voice as the black suited figure knelt beside her and began to gather papers. His elderly, kindly face appeared apologetic. A distinguished, fifty year old looking body was attached below the face.

A twin in age and attitude to Kathy.

"I'm fine really," Kathy protested. "Just a few minutes and I'll have it all cleaned up. I should've been watching where I was going. It's my fault really."

"I insist. I should've watched where I was going. I was thinking and walking, never a good combination. I'll take at least some of the responsibility, if you let me that is?" His smile was warm as he said this, disconcertingly warm.

"Well thank you, it was my fault really, but," her eyes flickered toward the large window. Through it, Kathy could see her ride, a shiny black Jetta, pulling away from the sidewalk.

Her benefactor followed her gaze. "Miss your ride?" He asked with concern filling his voice.

"Yes, I suppose," she answered reluctantly, angry at

herself for delaying her departure until the last moment. Alvin had offered a ride, but he was perversely punctual. Five o'clock meant five o'clock. It was impossible for him to wait.

"I can give you a ride if you like," he offered, holding the last of the papers out to her.

"No, I couldn't, I." Kathy took the papers and then shoved them into her case.

"Nonsense, I'm sure it's on my way." He held out his hand.

"I'm Peter Granich; I work as a loan manager for the local Credit Union."

"Kathy Elias," she heard herself responding as they walked through the revolving glass doors into the warm sunshine of a cold winter day. Propelled toward the Cadillac that Peter had summoned with a short call on his cell phone.

"I'm the head accountant for Dobson and Hull."

Peter halted on the sidewalk, his hand on the door of the Cadillac. "Dobson and Hull? Dobson and Hull! Why would you need to beg a ride with their salary?" He coughed suddenly. Obviously embarrassed at his outburst.

"Forgive me, it was a foolish question and I have a busy mouth that likes foolish questions. I shouldn't have said that."

Kathy smirked; she would let him squirm for a moment at least. She waited, and then began to speak in a formal tone.

"It's a valid question and I don't mind answering it. It's the environment; I don't need a car, so I don't have one! I only carpool! Silly of me I know, but it's something I believe in."

"Then I suppose you think I'm an environmental hazard with this beast?" Peter gestured toward the fancy black Cadillac before them.

Kathy shrugged her slim shoulders. "No, I have nothing against other people who do what they believe. I know what I believe and I do it. Simple as that."

Peter pulled open the door of the car. "Well I admire your honesty," he said hesitantly. "If you still want a ride?" He gestured meaningfully.

"I need the car for my work, it gets pretty hectic sometimes, otherwise I'd do what you do." Peter said as Kathy complied with his open invitation and slid into the back seat of the vehicle.

"I guess I'll need your address." He said as they both arrived inside the vehicles tinted interior.

Kathy breathed in. The car smelled like...was that cinnamon? Yes, it smelled like cinnamon. That struck her as odd, but she shoved it from her mind.

"Two twelve Vermillion bay, it's in Koko Platz," Kathy offered in reply, taking in the absence of jewelry on his ring finger with absentminded interest. She chided herself for the foolishness of the effort. She didn't need a love that wasn't from God.

Peter slammed the open door shut.

"Go ahead driver, he ordered briskly. It took only a moment before they were on their way, speeding through traffic and falling snow flakes that sprinkled the remnants of Christmas over the town.

"So why does Dobson and Hull need to have an accountant working on Boxing Day?"

Kathy felt her guard go up. "Why does a loan manager for the Credit Union need a chauffeured Cadillac?"

Peter grimaced. "Sorry, bad start. Let me reboot this conversation. Kathy Elias...A nice name."

"Yes, I happen to enjoy it myself. I use it all the time. "

"A name nice enough to invite for supper perhaps...what do you say?"

A sudden flapping motion caught Kathy's eye. She glanced up at the white and black specked sea gull flying above the car.

Kathy's mind stammered a moment, flustered by the suddenness of the offer. Men were so foolish; they thought women only lived for the day when they could go out with a man. But who was she to resist such a clear sign from God?

"Of course," she heard herself replying.

Of course she thought to herself, after all it wasn't marriage, just a friendly supper. They'd talk business and get to know each other, that was all.

"I'm glad you said that," Peter replied, smiling handsomely.

"I think we'll find much to talk about. Presumptuous of me I know, but." He rambled on happily along this line as, "*Joy to the World,*" began to play in Kathy's mind.

Was Peter a chocolate in God's gift box?

This thought, small and fragile, germinated in the back of Kathy's mind as the Cadillac continued forward into the snow packed streets of Portage la Prairie.

Peter slapped his knee suddenly. "You know what, I left my jacket back at the office."

Kathy blushed. "You know what...I did the same thing. I guess it was just one of those days."

The couple collapsed into a burst of gentle laughter.

The gull flapped violently, climbing ever higher toward a cloud and the sun behind it.

Glimmer of Hope  
(Bonus story 2)

December 26th would be her last evening at this house, tomorrow was moving day.

How would she survive without money?

Dark curly hair fell in cascading tresses over the sleek European lines in her face and body. She was beautifully slim, twenty-seven years old, and a brooding bombshell of emotion.

Claire sat on the porch swing, alone. She wiped a tear from her eye. It seemed like only yesterday David had bounded up to this same front porch, his boyish face beaming with pride. He had just enlisted in the army and was so excited, so eager to take on the enemy.

They had both enlisted together, David and his twin brother Dennis. They had looked so handsome together posing for that final photograph; their brand new uniforms had fairly glistened with newness and optimism for the future. Claire had feared for him even then.

She had tried to share her fears that night before they left but David had just laughed carelessly in the way he always did at something serious.

“Dennis,” he had said. “Why don’t you go out on the town enjoy yourself for a change. Claire has been worried about me, so I’ll stay here and comfort her in private.” Dennis, always considerate, had quietly gathered his things and took his leave. Claire and David had been left alone together. They had sat on this very same swing.

The stars had been beautiful that night. They looked so beautiful, clothed in black majesty, twinkling a musical message of hope for the future. Yet, on earth, the gravity of reality had weighed on Claire’s mind.

She saw two brothers in a picture straight off an army recruiting poster. Both were blond, their hair cut to the military length and their faces rugged and clean shaven. Both had the same towering height that seemed to have been passed down

from generation to generation in their family. Even their smiles had been alike, broad and easy going at the same time. The difference was on the inside, David was the live wire, the man everyone loved to have around. Dennis was the direct opposite, preferring to stay in the shadows; behind emotional barriers, he seemed to have built for himself.

It was a humid summer night when they had shared their first tender kiss. Claire smiled bitterly as she remembered how nervous David had been, how she had laughed at him.

The swing swayed gently as Claire pulled a crumpled and tear-stained letter from her pocket, "*the Defense department regrets to inform you,*" she read again. Who knew those few words could cause so much pain, "*killed in action,*" was the official wording. Their plans, which had been so grand, now burned to ash in the flames of war.

Claire crumpled the paper in her tiny fist. It was too late to go back now; the future was calling her name. Tomorrow she would have to move, David had paid the rent here and now...And now, with no money coming in....

The eviction notice had been clear.

Claire pushed the thoughts from her mind; it was too late to think of that now. It would be a long day tomorrow.

Somehow the money would be there, somehow she would survive. Just as she always had.

A gust of frozen wind tickled the snowdrifts strewn carelessly around the yard before her. The warm lights of the city seemed to be messages of hope from a galaxy far away from reality.

Claire stood and shook her head violently. How silly she was to sit out on a swing in the dead of winter. That wouldn't bring David back.

A melodramatic soap opera seemed to have crept out of its cesspool prison inside the television and into Claire's life. Claire hated soaps.

The chill of winter crept through her tattered brown parka. It was time to return to her room.

Claire stepped inside the warm house. A beautiful house, she would be sad to leave it. She loved every inch of the place, the old English country manor styling. Every part of the house

reeked of class, the expensive oak flooring, the red velvet curtains that hung from every window and even the crystal chandeliers that beamed light from the ceiling. This house was unique to Portage.

The maid met Claire in a dimly lit hallway, interrupting her thoughts of gloom with fragile words.

“Sorry about,” The maid lowered her misty blue eyes.” You know, David being killed an` all. I know it's especially hard at Christmas.”

Claire smiled, good old Ethel. “I’ll miss you,” Claire whispered. She stepped forward, intent on escaping before emotion overwhelmed her.

Ethel placed her wrinkled hand on Claire’s shoulder. “I hear old Phillips is planning to put you out,” she said in an age weathered voice.” I’m sorry it had to come to this. It never used to be like that around here, I remember when this was a happy house. “A bitter edge crept into Ethel's tone.” I suppose Elijah thinks that a little happiness will spoil his misery. Don't let him win! There’s always someone else out there, and when you least expect it God will send him into your life to sweep you off your feet.”

Claire wiped a tear from her eye.

Ethel wasn't the most photogenic person in the world. In fact, she bore a strange resemblance to Ethel from the Archie comics. However, her heart was tender and without the bitter steel of cynicism.

Ethel stared at her with a tired sadness. “I know you don't feel optimistic now, but keep your hopes up. Life is always better with a smile. You don't want to end up like old Elijah, do you?” Ethel snorted with contempt. “A fine thing, you find a million dollars that you lost years ago and what is the first thing you do? You toddle off to the nearest city, buy a mansion and kick everybody out of it. Don't be the same way!”

Claire furrowed her brow. She hadn't heard that part of Elijah's story. “When was that?” She asked curiously.

“Oh it was last year about this time. Elijah was puttering around Gladstone if I remember right...What the details were, I don't know. I just remember being surprised that the media didn't make a bigger deal out of it.”

Ethel patted Claire on the shoulder comfortingly. “I’ve got

to move along now and do some work. You take care out there young lady, don't let life get you down. It makes one old to think of the dark times too much, just look what happened to me! My silly parents named me after a character in a comic strip." Ethel nodded as she chuckled to herself. She seemed to be about to say something more, but instead she began to step forward.

Claire forced a smile as she watched Ethel move slowly along the long, portrait-lined hallway. She was a quaint old woman, dressed as prim as the day she started to be a maid. Her hair was grey now, but Ethel's bun was still in the same position as it always had been.

Ethel stopped and turned. "God bless you child." The words echoed for a moment as she continued along the hall toward her work.

Claire walked toward the red carpeted staircase, and then headed up the steps.

She would miss Ethel, but not Ethel's new employer.

The mighty Elijah Phillips! Claire snorted with a hate that she knew she should subdue. Sure, he had bought the house at a fair price. Elijah had every right to evict the tenants who had been using the mansion as an apartment. The problem was that the eviction notice it had come right after the Department of Defense notice.

The combination had been almost too much to bear.

Thank God that Elijah had smiled on Ethel and allowed her to keep her job.

Claire trudged up the last flight of stairs toward her small attic room, it wasn't much but it was a place to live. Richer tenants had lived on the lower floors, but even they had succumbed to Elijah's demands and left for happier housing.

It had been a good place to live. Too bad that the scriptwriter of her soap opera life had to change the story line.

Claire's heart was bitter as she entered her small room slowly, her eyes immediately wandering to the dress hanging sloppily over the end of a chair.

The blue calico one, the one she had worn that night on the swing, just before David had shipped out.

Claire had refused to commit to marriage then. "The war you know," she heard herself saying. David had been

disappointed, she could still see it in his eyes, the luminescent blue eyes, but he tried not to show it. They had carried on that evening but it seemed as if a pall had been cast over them.

She slid out of the tattered brown parka and then threw it over the dress.

Claire collapsed onto the bed, her emotions drained. She couldn't find the strength to slip out of her blue jeans and black sweater. They would wait until morning.

Claire breathed a silent prayer for the strength to overcome her bitterness and self-pity. It was a cry for peace, for help, both for herself and for the troops still overseas. As she prayed, her mind drifted into slumber.

It was a peaceful sleep. The next morning was dreary, snow had started sometime during the night and now the outdoors was a blizzard of swirling white.

Claire strengthened her will, steeled her expression into a mask of normalcy, and then charged into the day.

She still wore the same clothes as the day before. They had been rumpled by sleep, but who would care?

The forlorn wail of the wind seemed to reflect the condition of Claire's mind. She packed her bags quickly to distract herself. The time had come to rely on the power of God to defeat the gloom that nagged at her soul.

Her footsteps rang hollow on the stairs as Claire dragged her suitcases down, one by one. Not that she would keep them long; most likely, she would have to sell them and their contents to pay the rent.

Outside, the taxi arrived, slowly feeling its way along the barely visible street. The driver honked the horn impatiently. A sound that was barely audible above the storm.

Claire grabbed two bags and then stumbled through the door.

The claws of the wind sunk into her parka, ripping at it with fierce determination. Claire didn't seem to notice or care; she simply hauled the bags to the van as quickly as possible. "*What a perfect day for this,*" she thought as she loaded the last bag into the back seat.

The taxi driver looked impatient, "Get in lady," he barked roughly. "I wanna get you where you're going before they close

the roads. To do that we gotta move!”

Claire squeezed into her seat. She shivered, feeling the cold wind infiltrating around the edges of the door.

Claire wished David were here beside her, wrapping his strong arms around her, comforting her. However, only the cold reality of her new life awaited, a new home, a new job? She could only hope that something more profitable would be available.

She had tried to buy a house, but her loan had been rejected by Peter Granich. He had been polite, but firm in his refusal. The Credit Union didn't think that she earned enough as a waitress to be a good risk.

The driver was peering at her with impatience plain on his fat face. “I said where do you wanna go? I can't take ya there if I don't know where you wanna go,” he rasped.

Claire handed over the smudged envelope she had scribbled the address on.

The driver's angry face softened. “You sure lady?” He asked, concern softening the rough edges of his voice, “I hear it's a mighty dangerous place to live.” The driver paused, awaiting her response. Claire waved him onward with a flick of her wrist.

They van inched forward. Spinning as it hit a drift, swerving when the road was too slick.

The driver, to his credit, briefly tried to engage Claire in conversation but finding her unwilling, gave up. The condition of the road required his full attention.

After about half an hour of careful maneuvering, the van arrived at another apartment house, a much dirtier house with boards nailed over the windows.

“Here you are Miss, last chance to change your mind.”

Claire nodded absentmindedly. “I'll get out here,” she said as her voice hardened with determination. Then her voice lightened. “Thanks for getting me here despite the conditions. I must say it was great driving on your part.”

“Your choice lady. I was just doin' my job.” Came the mumbled, almost guilty reply.

Claire began to unload her cargo, dumping the bags on the sidewalk. Once her task was complete, Claire paid the taxi driver.

After a moment the van began to inch along the snow-

covered street and was soon lost from sight.

Claire stood alone on the sidewalk, looking at the house. This was her new home. It was an ugly looking building, what paint was left on the house was chipping and the rest was bare. *“Obviously the landlord doesn’t believe in repairs, perhaps I can....”*

There was someone was calling her name. She turned around slowly, “David?” She said softly. Her pulse quickened as a figure came slowly into view. “David!” She cried, hoping against hope.

“Sorry I’m not David.”

The wind began to subside as if God had pushed an off button somewhere in the heavens.

Dennis walked toward her from a bright red jeep that was parked alongside the sidewalk. “Ethel talked to me, so I came out here. I thought I’d intercept you before you went in there. It looks like I just made it! Nice day for a drive, don’t you think?”

Claire smiled slowly. Dennis had always been a little eccentric, a loner really. However, he was David’s twin brother so she had tolerated him. “I know I’m not David,” he said awkwardly.

Claire felt the pain returning. “Yes,” she said simply.

Dennis stared at her for a long moment, then turned away.

“I loved him too you know, he was my brother after all.” Dennis’s strong shoulders shook under the burden of restrained grief. “But I have no regrets,” Dennis cleared his throat abruptly. “He lived a good life. It’s just sad that it had to end so close to Christmas.”

There was silence as they both remembered David, the silence broken only by the dull howl of the faltering wind.

Dennis’s eyes wandered to the bags being snowed under on the sidewalk. “You don’t actually plan on taking those in there, do you?”

Claire picked up two bags and then began to walk to her new home. “Unless you have a better solution, that’s where I have to live.”

Dennis looked hurt. “I didn’t mean to speak out of turn. I just wanted...”

“I know you didn’t!” Claire interrupted. “I’m sorry, now, it’s been nice meeting you again but I have to go.”

Dennis approached her hesitantly. "Claire, I...." He stopped. "I would like to..." Claire looked at him impatiently.

"Well? What is it?"

Dennis hung his head. "Well, it's like this... I noticed you with David and since David..." He paused. "Remember that trip around the world we did with the church mission? That was the year before David asked you out. I wrote something about you on that trip, I'd like you to read it."

Dennis rummaged absentmindedly through the pockets of his long black coat. Finally, he found the paper he was looking for and handed over. Claire took it and put it into her pocket without looking at it.

"I'll read it when I get inside. Now it's been nice talking to you, but I really need to go." Claire stepped forward.

"It's just what was going through my mind at the time...it's nothing much...just a little poem, I just thought..." Dennis stiffened as he watched Claire's back walking away from him.

"Stop!" He yelled, startling Claire enough that she dropped her bags. She turned. Dennis stood on the sidewalk, looking as forlorn as a lost puppy. He ran forward.

"Claire, what I'm trying to say is that I'd just like the opportunity to help you, to get to know you." Dennis hung his head, embarrassed. "I suppose that is a bit strange, but it's the way I feel."

Claire stood still for a moment, conflicted.

Dennis kept his eyes downcast, fidgeting nervously, waiting for her response. Claire watched him, he was a good man, but...Claire thought back to Ethel. "*Remember there's always someone else...*" Could it be? Claire looked up at Dennis. "I'd be pleased to accept your offer," she said hesitantly. Claire smiled to herself. "You're an answer to prayer...I'm sorry I was so slow to see it."

She felt his arms around her, a warm embrace. An embrace between friends. Claire looked up at the storm-ravaged sky. The sun seemed to be struggling to break through the cloud.

Dennis grabbed hold of the two bags that Claire had dropped. "I suppose we should get you to a new apartment. My cousin was looking for a roommate....I think you'll get together quite well. Would that be all right? It's not the best, but it should

work. She has a nice big apartment, and she won't charge too much. Not only that, Winnipeg has more opportunity for jobs....”

Claire smiled, suddenly feeling very tired. Why had she doubted God? He obviously had heard her desperate prayer the night before and granted her mercy. He had drawn her to himself through the actions of Dennis.

“Almost anything would be better than this!”

Dennis heaved the bags up and then strode confidently toward his waiting jeep. “Well then, let's get going shall we? I've only got two weeks leave, and I need to make use of it!”

Looking over Dennis's shoulder Claire could see the unmistakable gleam of sunlight struggling its way through the clouds. A glimmer of snow soaked hope for the future.

Claire grabbed the remaining bags and then headed toward the Jeep. Later she would read the poem Dennis had written about her, but for now, she would be happy just to get out of the cold.

*For Claire.*

*A Wordsmith pounds clichés  
every clank sounding on the anvil ringing empty  
without love  
or even a touch of you  
alone, I can still remember the moments  
sitting in Bombay, waiting for a cab  
drinking deep of the ocean rippling  
onto the smooth yellow waves before me  
with you upon the sand silhouetted under the breaking sun  
even then they were only words and clichés  
I spoke to you  
with out love, or meaning  
I could feel the salt sting as you turned away  
but still times rotated us together  
I can see Madrid and remember  
running through the streets  
wild and afraid, your hand in mine  
until the rain soaked us dry  
was it just the sun seeping through the clouds above you?  
or was it someone else you had to run to that day  
regardless, I faced your rotation once again  
without meaning and without love  
I now look down at the ticket in my hand  
realizing I'll see you before the clock strikes three  
here in Morocco, the wind swept land  
I heave on my wordsmith and join the quay  
there's the taxi I need to fetch the ocean  
before a break in this cloudy day*

## **A Priceless Christmas**

*“Dear Reader. One Christmas Eve, two mysterious letters arrived in Gladstone. They both gave directions to one million dollars in cash. Why were the letters sent? Who sent them? These were some of the questions that would be answered once the truth was finally revealed. In the end, two strangers were to discover the true gift of Christmas. But at what cost?”*

\*\*\*

## **A Summer of Secrets**

*An old enemy had returned.*

Early morning is never the best time to find a corpse beside the highway. Well, to be honest, finding a corpse is never convenient. Luckily, the question Candace had to face was simple. How had the body arrived beside the road already reeking of decay?

*Vengeance was in the air.*

When you have a day off, the last thing you want to do is search for stolen sleeping pills. Especially when your wife is missing. As if that wasn't enough, Jason was about to meet Mabel, an eccentric old woman with a secret.

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# Beauty in a Scorched Land

3

Stories

2

Continents

1

Message

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# Love from the Crucible

## What is love?

Mary Dyck, a lonely young woman, was oppressed by the burden of her imagination. Her friend Susan was about to be engaged. Jason, the neighbor boy, had found a semblance of love in alcohol. Her father, a preacher, had numbed all feeling in order to fulfill his love for his church.

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That question haunted her even as storm clouds formed, raindrops fell, and hope seemed to fade. The more she searched, the more it seemed as if everything she had believed in was an empty lie. Her soul was parched for truth.

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Sudden death arrived like a lightning bolt flashing in the tempest. A new flowering hope appeared in Abe, a handsome young man with romance on his mind. He seemed perfect. Yet, lurking within his soul was a deeply personal secret. The tragedy of the past began to unfold even as new love was born in the life of Mary, and in the heart of her niece, Lyla. Still, the problem of Jason, the simmering cauldron of family turmoil, and the constant specter of despair threatened to overwhelm her soul.

## Could Mary hold onto her newfound faith?

Love from the Crucible

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Travis raises his eyes to search the street.

There is no one.

There must be someone out there...but where?

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*\*Honorable Mention in the, "Unscrambled Eggs Poetry contest.*



### About the Author.

Kelvin currently lives and writes from the prairie clad plains of Manitoba, Canada. He has been published in, The Pedestal Magazine. com, Plumb Magazine, The Pen Point View, and many others. Acting, music, and strangely enough, farming are all part of Kelvin's adventures outside of the literary world. Awards include, winner of the compo10 song contest, 4th place in the Spinetinglers writing contest, among others. As you may have suspected, you can always read more at, [www.kelvinbueckert.com](http://www.kelvinbueckert.com)





