

Angel's Dust



The darkness of the Sorting Room echoed the pain Jeff Marlow felt in his heart. He worked alone, the clatter of the machine bouncing off the walls. The rest had gone home hours ago. It was as it should be; after all, they had families. A husband or wife would be waiting with a welcome hug and kiss. Children anticipating the morning would be dancing around a tree strung with brightly colored lights.

Perhaps their parents would give in as he did so many years ago. Each little boy or girl could select one present of their choice to open on Christmas Eve. He closed his eyes; he could almost hear their squeals of delight.

Jeff dumped another bag of mail in the sorter. As the machine ran, he let his mind wander. After giving him a good-bye kiss, Barbie smiled as she watched their little Joy kiss her daddy. Barbie handed him a lace handkerchief to wipe off the smear of peanut butter and jelly. How he wished for that lace hankie now. He had searched the ruins only finding ashes.

"I love you, daddy," she said, hugging him close.

Whispering in her ear, he said, "I love you, too, Joy Princess."

"It'll be Christmas when you get home, won't it?"

"Yes, my sweet." They echoed in his mind the last words he said to his wonderful little daughter.

One more kiss from each and he was gone. His last glance of his wife and daughter on earth were from his rearview mirror. He saw them standing on the porch waving goodbye with their coats wrapped around their shivering bodies.

As he turned the corner, they disappeared from his life forever. Five blocks away, stopped in the late afternoon traffic, he heard the explosion. The gas line jerry rigged by a couple of employees rushing to get home for Christmas erupted at 5:49 p.m. The blast blew out windows as far as Kiddle St. The fireball rose 250 feet in the air, taking with it all of Jeff's hopes and dreams. He abandoned his car in the snarled traffic, running the five blocks, praying with every step he took.

"Please God, don't let it be them, don't let it be them." But he knew with an uncanny certainty. The house where he lived and loved was just a smoking pile of rubble. The explosion

dug a hole ten feet into the ground. They never found their bodies. Jeff liked to believe the Lord took them before the house blew apart.

He died that night. Oh, his body lived, or better, existed. However, life held no happiness, no joy for him.

He thought he was through with tears. Still they came. His heart felt as dry as a desert yet tears ran down his cheeks. Forty-five. Why had he lived so long? Six years, long years. Six years that seemed like an eternity.

In the restroom, he splashed cold water on his face and stared at himself in the mirror. His face was too long to be considered handsome. His eyes too squinted, his mouth too wide. The constant lifting of packages and mailbags kept him slim. He was not attracted to women. He saw nothing in them he would be interested in. That suited him just fine. The only woman he wanted was Barbie and she was six years dead. He dried his face, blinking back the tears that threatened to start again. He sighed. When would it ever be over? When would he ever stop hurting?

At the dock, he lugged in the last five mailbags. He moaned. Thinking of returning to his empty third floor apartment slowed him down. Each Christmas morning he took out the gifts he had hidden in the car, a diamond necklace for Barbie, and a doll for Joy. He laid them on the table running his hands over them. In his mind, he presented them to his beloved wife and daughter. He saw the excitement on their faces. He felt Barb's kiss on his face. He heard Joy's laughter. Afterward, he dried his tears and put the gifts away for another year.

The second year after Barbie's death, friends began inviting him to their homes. He always refused, knowing their intentions. Inevitably, there would be a single woman invited to pair up with the lonely mailman. Some came right out and told him he needed to forget about Barbie. They knew the perfect woman; a sister, a friend, or someone they had met in the supermarket. Finally, even the diehards quit trying. With each passing year, Jeff became more and more withdrawn. At last, he was alone. He didn't mind, he liked it that way. Those on his mail route began complaining. His only comfort was the pain wrapped around his heart. Finally his supervisor took him off the route and transferred him to the Sorting Room. His fellow workers tried to engage him in conversation. They soon learned Jeff didn't want to be bothered and left him alone. Just the way he liked it. He became so antisocial he was reassigned to the second shift. There was a rumor that if Jeff didn't change he would be let go.

Jeff worked steadily for the next hour. As he loaded the last bag in the sorter, he made a decision: before the night was done, he would join his wife and daughter.

"Mommy, will Santa be here soon?" Julie asked, pulling the covers up to her chin. Carol Bennett stopped, her finger on the light switch. Julie's round face, blonde hair, and blue eyes gave the eight-year-old a cherub-like appearance. Carol's heart sagged with sorrow.

"Like I said, sweetheart, sometimes Santa gets lost."

The lie wasn't a good one. It left a bad taste in her mouth. Julie was unmoved by her mother's denial.

"Oh no, mommy, I asked God to have the angels guide Santa to our house. I even put angel's dust on the letter!"

"Go to sleep, honey."

"Merry almost Christmas, mommy," Julie murmured sleepily.

"Merry almost Christmas," Carol said, barely able to keep back the tears.

At the kitchen table, she sat staring at the balance in her checkbook. It hadn't changed in the last hour. If only the factory had kept her on until after the holidays. Tomorrow morning other little girls would open numerous gifts but all she had was a second-hand doll she bought at Goodwill.

"Oh well, Julie will be happy with it."

But Carol wasn't. They couldn't even afford a real Christmas tree, just one made from construction paper taped to the living room wall. Turning the temperature down a few more degrees, she pulled her robe tighter. Yet it wasn't the cold house that made her shiver.

Outside the snow fogged as it had the night David's car had flipped on the interstate. That night she had put the turkey back in the oven to keep it warm. David was over an hour late. A worm of worry tugged at her mind. She quieted it. It wasn't like him not to call. She smiled when she heard the hesitant knock on the door. He liked to surprise them with a last minute gift. The sight of the two police officers standing on her front step caused her to almost faint. She knew before they said a word. Her world crumbled.

'At least he didn't suffer,' became the byword at his funeral. Carol soon became sick of hearing those comforting words.

For the first time in the three years since her husband's death, Carol gave up. Burying her face in her hands, she sobbed quietly.

The letter lay on the floor beside the sorter. Jeff switched off the machine. The silence was deafening. Picking it up, he groaned; scribbled across the front in black crayon were the words. 'Santa Claus North Pole,'

The practice of giving letters addressed to Santa Claus to volunteers began years ago. These wonderful people took it upon themselves to fulfill the wishes of needy children. However, the last one was given out days ago. It was too late to fulfill this child's wish.

Jeff stared at the letter for a long time. Carefully he slid his fingers under the flap,

It opened easily. As he pulled out the single sheet of paper, a tiny bit of gold glitter fell into his palm. He brushed it back into the envelope. Then unfolding the letter, he read,

Dear Mr. Santa Claus,

Hi, my name is Julie. I'm 8 years old. I live in Indianapolis, Indiana. But you know that. Mommy says sometimes you get lost, so I asked God to send his angels to show you where we live. I don't want any presents. My daddy went to heaven 3 years ago. I cried for a long time. I'm better now, but mommy is so sad. I was wondering since you go all over the world, could you bring me another daddy? He doesn't have to be handsome or rich. Just as long as he loves me and mommy. I promise I'll love him forever. I've put some angel's dust on the bottom of the letter.

Thank you, Santa

Julie

P.S. Please wake me up when you bring him.

There followed a thumbprint stamped in gold glitter. Jeff ran his thumb over the print. He quickly regretted the action, some of the glitter rubbed off and fell to the gray tile floor. He read again. An incredulous thought formed in the back of his mind. He shook his head. What a crazy idea! One that would get him locked away in a mental institution or jail. He could picture himself knocking at Julie's mother's door.

"Hi. You don't know me, but I found your little girl's letter to Santa. I've come to be your new husband and Julie's father." He would be fortunate if the woman didn't call the police. The least she would do is slam the door in his face.