

Chapter One

Trying to avoid bumping his head on the steering wheel, Jimmy Hood stretched his arms and grunted. “Shit.” He carefully repositioned himself, which allowed him to pull the loops tight, ending the lacing of his military style boots. He took a breath and whispered, “Whoa, that was tougher than I thought.”

Known for his minor mishaps, Jimmy often wondered where the majority of his bruises came from. Consequently, he took efforts to evade unnecessary contact with foreign objects—whenever possible.

Having completed his mission, Jimmy looked in the mirror of his 90’s model, Toyota, Celica, hatchback. He moved his head from side-to-side carefully inspecting his hair. “Hair spiked,” he whispered. “Check. Earrings—check. Eyeliner—check.”

Jimmy clicked the car stereo’s forward button. He smiled while he blankly glanced out the windshield. Jimmy sang along to Burl Ives’s rendition of “Little Drummer Boy,” as he briefly viewed, but paid no attention to, the droves of holiday shoppers jockeying for parking spots.

Jimmy gave one more look in the mirror and smiled. Feeling pumped, he turned down the music, and barked, “Let’s do this thing.” He quickly turned off the ignition and, to the interior of the vehicle, whispered, “Merry Christmas.”

With more effort than he wanted, Jimmy carefully opened his door. The blustery wind howled through the space between the door and jamb. Trying to maintain control, he held the door tight while he stepped out of the car. Stopping suddenly, Jimmy ducked and narrowly missed a discarded, flying coffee cup. “Whoa that was close.” When he cleared the door, Jimmy loosened his grip and the wind whipped the door shut. He took a breath of the cold wind, and sighed. “It’s going to be that kind of a day, is it?”

Using the driver-side window as a mirror, he inspected his hair, making sure the wind hadn’t done too much damage. His glance, again, moved left-to-right and back. “Good enough,”

he whispered. Jimmy then examined his slightly-abused, personally designed T-shirt of the rock band, The Screaming Blue Messiahs. “Glad I made two,” he joked. “One for fun, and one for concerts.” Still looking in the window, Jimmy did a visual inspection of his jeans and, again, smiled. “All right here we go. Part one of research project, ‘Good Neighbor,’ about to commence.”

Jimmy walked around the car. Again, with much effort, he opened the passenger-side door. He flipped the seat forward and leaned inside. Placing his right forearm against the seat’s leather back, Jimmy used his right leg to keep the door from slamming into him. “Cane, cane,” he sang. “Where are you candy cane? Oh shit! I need my cane.” Not seeing his cane, he quickly backed out of the car. In his haste, Jimmy hit his head on the door’s jamb. “Ah shit!” he yelled and jumped around in pain.

The door slammed shut.

Right arm behind his head, Jimmy reached with his hand. He bent and grasped at the throbbing. “Shit, shit, shit, shit...”

When the pain began to subside, Jimmy moved to the hatch. Still holding his aching head, he first used his fingers to check for blood. Not seeing any, he used his fingertips to size-up the bump on the back of his head, then checked for blood one more time, before opening the hatch. Not wanting the hatch to slam closed on him, Jimmy used an old broomstick to keep it propped open. When he looked down, the cane sat in plain sight, next to several wrapped presents.

“Great! All this pain for what? I guess haste does make waste. Or, in this case, it makes a throbbing head and stiff neck.”

Jimmy used his left hand to round up the presents, or at least they looked like presents. Inside each wrapped box was mostly tissue and air. Accompanying the wrapped gifts were

shopping bags from various stores within the Ontario Mills mall. Within the bags were smaller boxes with similar contents. They were nothing more than props for Jimmy's research project; the one that would lead to a Bachelor's degree in psychology.

In phase one, he would dress like a *rocker* and carry presents around the bustling mall, filled with Christmas shoppers. The caveat was that he planned to lose control, and then drop the packages in front of groups of people. Jimmy would see how many of them assisted him in picking up his fake gifts. As close as possible, he intended to identify the age, race, and gender of the helpers, if, indeed, there were any. He would then document his observations. After one or two drops, he would find a private place to sit and write down the results, thus collecting the needed data.

"Maybe I'll meet a little cutie," Jimmy whispered with a smirk. "Who wants to take me home and fix me up. I can be her Christmas present, or, better yet, she can be mine." He removed the packages and laid them next to car's exhaust. He shut the hatch extra hard, and puffed. "Yeah, like that's going to happen."

Suddenly the packages started to fly away with the perpetually gusting winds. Some got stuck under cars within the mall's parking lot. Others braced up against unsuspecting vehicles. Two of the smaller props became airborne and flew away with the driving Santa Ana winds.

"Oh no!" Jimmy yelled, while he watched the package melee. He shook his head. "Yep, it's that kind of day." After several moments, he was able to locate and gather most of the fake gifts. He secured them as best he could and headed for the mall.

While he made his way toward the mall's entrance, Jimmy finished his thoughts about meeting an attractive girl. "Nope," he concluded. "This is going to be another lonely Christmas and New Year's, I'm afraid."

It had been a couple of years since Jimmy had a real relationship. Now at twenty-four, he was thinking he might not find another love. His last real relationship, with Janet Garcia, nearly broke his heart for good, leaving him a “broken Joe,” as he called it, referring to his childhood, plastic GI Joe’s, after they were destroyed in play—arms and legs pulled from their torsos.

After nine months of brokenhearted bachelorhood, Jimmy decided to give dating a shot. Each attempt, however, was a complete struggle. Every young lady he met was automatically compared to Janet, and, unfortunately, none could measure up. He never found that magic again. The longest relationship since then was about two weeks or so, and though they ended cordially, they were no more than brief distractions that generally ended as fast as they started. In Jimmy’s mind, most of them ended before they even got started. School helped in some ways, mostly by keeping him busy. But in other ways, it just left Jimmy feeling worse. This was particularly true when he ran across couples in the college courtyard, or at parties, looking and acting very much in love. And the more public display of affection, the worse he felt.