

CHRISTMAS ANGELS
DON'T ALWAYS HAVE WINGS

It was the day before Christmas and the Adams' household was buzzing with activity. Suzy and Danny were putting the finishing touches on the Christmas Tree. Had Suzy been working alone, she would have finished over an hour ago, but Danny insisted on helping with the ornaments and he took his job very seriously. Every ornament had to be hung in just the right spot. Trying to move things along, Suzy attempted to hang one of Danny's ornaments on the backside of the tree. Faster than you could say Daniel James Adams, her brother came racing around the tree with panic written on his face.

"Hey, that's one of mine! You can't hang that there. It's all wrong. The angels go on the front-side of the tree," he said, as he reached up and removed the ornament. Danny went to the front of the tree and picked out a spot toward the top of the tree. Being a little on the small side for an eight-year-old, he used a stepladder to reach the spot. With the ornament in place, he made his way down and took a couple of steps backward to admire his work. He smiled as he held his hands out in front of him, thumbs extended, forming a frame the way directors do on television. "Perfect!" he said proudly.

Suzy, who would turn 11 next month, walked over and ruffled his mop of brown hair. Any other day, she would have brained him. His incessant need for perfection drove her crazy, but it was the day before Christmas and nothing could dampen her good mood.

As the kids worked on the tree, Sarah, Ted's wife, was busy in the kitchen baking Christmas cookies. The air was filled with the aroma of peanut butter and melting chocolate chips. In the background, "The Twelve Days of Christmas" was playing and every time the song reached the chorus, Sarah and the kids would sing out, '*Five Golden Rings, Ba-da, Bum, Bum*'.

Sadly, amongst all the mirth and frivolity, there was one voice missing. On most occasions Ted was the life of the party, but when the Christmas season came around he would become a little more sullen and spend more and more time alone in his den. This afternoon was no different. As the family laughed and sang, he sat alone reading the paper.

Humming "Away in the Manger," Sarah poked her head into the den and waved a freshly baked chocolate chip cookie in the air. "Ted... Why don't you come and join in the fun. I could always use an extra pair of hands in the kitchen."

Ted lowered the paper, tilting his head so he could look over the top of his reading glasses. He saw Sarah standing in the doorway with a devilish smile on her face. *I'm a very lucky*

man, he thought. They had married 20 years ago, and that ‘come hither’ look she was giving him still quickened his heart. The fact was, he loved everything about her. He loved the way her brown hair cascaded to her shoulders in soft curls, and the glint she got in her bright green eyes whenever she had something more on her mind than say... baking cookies. And, though she may have put on a bit of weight over the years, he wasn’t going to complain. Especially when those few ‘extra’ pounds settled in all his favorite places. Truth be told, he hadn’t fit into a pair of size 38 jeans since he was in his thirties and what little hair he had left was quickly becoming streaked with gray. “You’re still as beautiful as the day we met,” he said with a smile.

Sarah stepped into the room and waved the cookie. “Flattery will get you everywhere big boy.”

Ted raised an eyebrow, “So how may I be of service, my lady?”

Sarah walked over and pushed the paper out of the way. Then she settled down on his lap and placed her arms around his neck. “You’ve been hiding in here all morning. Why don’t you come out and spend some time with the family? If you don’t feel up to kitchen duty, the kids could use some help with the decorations,” she said hopefully.

Ted took a bite of the cookie and leaned over the arm of the chair so he could see out the door. “Looks like they’re doing a great job all by themselves.”

Sarah would not be deterred. “I’m sure they would appreciate the help and it might get you into the Christmas spirit as well.”

Ted’s smile slowly faded. The spark generated a moment ago was gone. “Honey, let’s not go down that road again. Please.”

“Alright, I won’t push. I was just hoping that maybe this year could be different.”

Ted could no longer meet his wife’s gaze, and lowered his eyes. “I know, Hun. I’m trying.”

Sarah’s face softened as she leaned forward and softly kissed his cheek. Then she whispered into his ear, “I love you.”

They both stood and Ted wrapped his arms around her. At moments like that, he loved her so much his heart actually seemed to ache.

“Why don’t you come and help,” she repeated.

“Alright. Give me a minute and I’ll be in,” he said softly, as he watched his wife leave the room and then sat down with a sigh. *Some memories never seem to fade*, he thought as he

closed his eyes. He had loved Christmas once. But, that was before his Dad died and everything went to hell...

2

Ted was 10 years old and filled with the excitement all children feel as the days grew short before the 'Big' day. Christmas was only one week away and he and his father were driving back from the tree lot, a beautiful evergreen tied to the top of their car. His father even stopped to buy him hot chocolate.

They were having fun laughing and singing Christmas songs when his father hit a pothole. The sudden jolt caused Ted to lose his grip on his hot chocolate. It jarred loose and ended up in his father's lap, distracting him from the road.

Later, Ted would agonize over his decision to leave his mittens on. Had he taken them off as his father suggested, he might not have lost his grip.

His father only looked down for a second or two, but in that brief moment of time, he didn't see the light change or the other car. The big Buick Roadmaster hit their car on his father's side.

After his father's funeral, everything changed between Ted and his mother. He begged her forgiveness with tear filled eyes more than once, but he never felt as though she forgave him.

That Christmas, she refused to buy another tree and spent most of Christmas day lying on her bed crying. When he tried to comfort her, she accused him of not only ruining Christmas, but ruining their lives as well.

As the years past, Ted grew used to living with a mother who no longer appeared to love him and in a home devoid of happiness, especially at the holidays. For Ted, Christmas only held painful memories and was a reminder of his guilt.

By the time he had reached his teens, he was a sullen loner, who found little joy in life. But, all that changed when he met Sarah. Somehow she saw something in him that most others did not. She drew him out of his shell and countered his bad moods with boundless love.

The only thing that could put her in a bad mood was his resistance to celebrating Christmas. She loved everything about it. Thankfully for Ted the holiday only came around once a year.

Finally, she put her foot down. She told him that she loved him and would accept his proposal of marriage, but only if he promised to work on his refusal to participate in anything related to her favorite holiday. Her love had changed his life. She loved Christmas and he loved her. So, for her sake, he did his best to bury his feelings and get into the spirit of the season.

As the years passed and their family grew, Sarah's unfailing love and persistence continued to work its magic. Ted no longer needed to pretend he was enjoying the Christmas season. He loved the way Sarah got that sparkle in her eyes when it was time to start decorating the house and he wanted to share in her joy. And, after the children were born, nothing warmed his heart more than seeing the joy it brought them.

Sadly, Ted's path to healing was neither easy nor free of obstacles. Sometimes he would hit a bump in the road and with some effort, he would manage to get back on course. But, the events that occurred the Christmas Danny turned three was no mere '*bump*' in the road, it was a sink hole that threatened to swallow Ted whole.

It was the day before Christmas and Ted had driven out to his mother's house hoping that she would accept his invitation to spend Christmas morning with his family. He was not surprised when she declined. And, as usual they got into an argument.

"Mom, Sarah and I have been married for 15 years. When are you going to accept that?" he asked, sounding a little angrier than he had intended.

"Teddy, I have know idea what you are talking about." She saw the look on his face and added, "Don't give me that look. Everything was fine between us until you met that girl..."

"Her name is Sarah, Mom. She is the mother of your grandchildren for God sakes. When are you going to forgive me for getting married and leaving the house?"

"You didn't leave the house, you left me! And, don't bring the grandchildren into this. That woman refuses to bring them by anyway." She paused for a moment to wipe the tears from her eyes. "It's *your* fault that I'm alone. If only you hadn't been so careless..."

Ted had heard enough. Until he had met Sarah, his life had been one long guilt trip. His mother had always known how to wield it. She was like a surgeon with a finely sharpened scalpel. The last thing he said to her as he stormed out the door was, "I pity you!"

Christmas morning, Ted and his family were gathered around the tree. Piles of shredded wrapping paper surrounded Danny and Suzy. He and Sarah were sitting on the couch watching the children unwrap their gifts, enjoying their shouts of glee as they uncovered each new gift.

As Danny and Suzy finished opening their presents, the phone rang. It was the hospital. Sometime during the early morning his mother had called 911 with chest pains. By the time the ambulance arrived it was already too late.

When Ted finally got a chance to speak with a doctor, she said that they tried to resuscitate his mother, but too much time had elapsed. Apparently his mother gave the 911 operator the wrong address, which delayed the ambulance. She assured him that they did everything they could to save his mother.

Later that day, when Ted got home from the hospital, Sarah did her best to comfort him, but nothing she could say or do could lessen his pain. His angry words the night before haunted him and reopened a wound he thought was finally healed. Now, he could add, causing his mother's heart attack, to his bag of guilt.

In that moment of despair and heartache, he lost what little faith he had in a loving God and any desire to celebrate the Christmas season.

3

"Dad, are you coming or what?"

The sound of his son's voice calling to him from the other room mercifully brought an end to his guilt-ridden trip to his past. He sat up straight and opened his eyes. *Some memories are best kept tucked away in the dark*, he thought as he got up and set his newspaper on the chair. He took a deep breath and tried his best to sound cheery. "I'll be right there kiddo!"

Ted paused in the kitchen doorway on his way to the living room and enjoyed the aroma of the freshly baked cookies. He smiled, as he quietly stood there watching his wife. *You really are a beautiful woman*. Sarah had her hair pulled back in a ponytail and her cheeks were lightly dusted with flour. "Hey, Beautiful! Those peanut butter cookies sure smell tasty. Think you can spare one?"

Sarah jumped and put a hand over her heart. “*Ted!* You nearly scared the life out of me.” She wagged her finger at him in mock anger. “You should know better than to sneak up on people!”

“Sorry... I didn’t mean to surprise you. I was just enjoying the view. So, how bout’ that cookie?”

“How about you break with tradition and go to church with us tonight?”

“I don’t think so, Hun.”

Sarah smiled. “Well, I had to try.”

“Can I still have a cookie?”

“How about a trade? One kiss, one cookie,” she offered.

Ted swept into the kitchen and encircled his wife in his arms. “Thanks for understanding, Honey.” He pulled her tight and kissed her lips softly. “I love you so much.”

“Oh... Take the cookie and get out of here,” she said with a smile. “We can continue to discuss full payment for that cookie later.”

Ted walked in to the living room, munching on his cookie and took a seat in the large oak rocker. “You two are doing a great job. The tree looks terrific!”

Danny beamed with pride. “Thanks, Dad!”

Ted got up and walked over to his daughter. “So, how can I help?”

Suzy tapped her finger lightly against the side of her face. “Well, the lights and ornaments are all set, so that leaves the tinsel and the manger.”

“Okay, why don’t Danny and I hang the tinsel, and you can set up the manger on the mantle,” he suggested.

Suzy nodded with a smile, made the ‘Okay’ symbol with her thumb and first finger, and then picked up the box of ceramic figurines. She turned and made her way around the empty containers that were scattered across the floor on her way to the fireplace.

Ted and Danny watched for a moment and then turned their attention back to the job at hand. As the two men of the house began placing strands of silver tinsel on the tree, ‘Silent Night’ played softly in the background.

“I really love that song,” Danny said. “You should hear the church choir sings it. Mom thinks they sounds like angels.”

Ted tried to change the subject. "I bet they do, Buddy-boy. How about handing me some more tinsel. I'm all out."

"Dad... Can I ask you something?"

"Sure pal, anything. Fire away!"

Danny stared at the tree and nervously shifted his weight from foot to foot. "How come you won't come with us to Christmas Eve mass?"

Ted walked over to the couch and sat down. "Come take a seat, Danny." He smiled at his son and patted the cushion next to him. Danny sat down and stared at the strands of tinsel clutched in his hand. Ted reached out and placed a finger under his son's chin and raised it so he could look into his eyes. "You know I love you and Suzy and your mom don't you?"

Danny's eyes looked big and sad, as he nodded his head. "I know you do. It just makes me sad that you won't come to church with us. It's not the same without you."

"That's a fair question." Ted paused for a moment as he tried to gather his thoughts. "I've had to deal with some difficult things in my life, and some of those things have made me sad."

"Like when Grandma died?" Danny offered.

"Yep, that and when my father died. I wasn't much older than you are now. That was a very difficult time for me. The sad thing is, all of those memories are connected to Christmas, and I'm having a really hard time letting go of the bad memories. Do you understand?"

"I think so," Danny said, as he got up off the couch and put his arms around his father's neck. "I love you, Dad," he whispered. "I'll say a prayer for you at church tonight. Maybe God can send you a Christmas angel to take away all those bad feelings."

Danny's loving words made his eyes fill with tears. "Thanks, Pal. You're an amazing little boy!" Ted wiped his eyes and kissed his son's forehead. "Why don't you go over and see if you can give your sister a hand with the manger."

With a heavy heart, Ted watched his son walk over to the other side of the room and let out a deep sigh as he got up from the couch. He walked over to the picture window that looked out into their backyard.

Their home was situated on a large wooded lot with a fishing pond set off to the right of the house. Tall pines bordered their property as well as the long stone drive that led from their house to the road.

As he gazed out the window, small flakes of snow gently drifted down, adding to the glistening white blanket that covered the ground.

“*Danny...* GIVE...ME...THE BABY JESUS,” Suzy said in a hushed angry tone.

Ted turned away from the window just in time to see the two fighting over a small porcelain figurine. He could tell what was about to happen and began to call out to his children, as he hurried toward the fireplace. Unfortunately, he was too late. Just as his warning was leaving his lips, he saw the figurine fall.

Suzy had managed to pry it out of Danny’s clenched fist, but in doing so she lost her grip as well. The baby Jesus tumbled to the floor, hitting the edge of the hearth on its way. There was a small sound of breaking glass and then silence.

Ted watched the look of horror on his children’s faces transform into one of denial.

“It’s not *my* fault,” they both said.

He raised a single finger to his lips to hush them as he crossed the room. “Don’t say another word... either of you,” he angrily whispered. “Your mother will be heart broken if she sees this,” he said, as he bent over to pick up the figurine, which lay in three pieces.

Thankfully the breaks were clean and there were no discernable chips. Ted carefully arranged the pieces in the cradle and hoped Sarah wouldn’t notice... At least until he had an opportunity to glue them back together.

When he turned back to the kids, Danny was shaking his head and pointing to his sister. Suzy, on the other hand, looked like she was about to burst into tears.

“Look, there is no sense in getting all worked up. What’s done is done. Hopefully your mom won’t notice.” He paused for a moment and looked at his watch. “It’s getting late. Why don’t you two go get ready for church.”

As Ted watched his children leave the room, Danny seemed to have already put the incident behind him, but Suzy clearly had not. She walked with her shoulders slumped and her head down.

“Hey, what’s going on out there? Why is it so quiet?” Sarah asked from the Kitchen.

“I just sent the kids to get dressed. Shouldn’t you be doing the same?” Ted asked, trying not to sound guilty. He knew that Sarah could read him like a book. If she had been standing in front of him, she would only need one look at the expression on his face to know something was up. Luckily, she was too busy with her baking to have noticed the commotion.

“Okay, Hun,” she replied brightly. “I’ll just put this last batch of cookies on the counter to cool and then I’ll go get changed. You want another cookie?”

Ted breathed a sigh of relief as he walked over to the kitchen. “No thanks. I’m fine.”

He kept his wife company until she finished tidying up and she gave him a kiss on the cheek as she passed by on her way to their bedroom to get dressed for Christmas Eve Mass. He watched her walk down the hall and when she walked into their room, he turned and headed back to the living room window.

Watching the snow as it gently fell always seemed to sooth his frazzled nerves. He loved the way it blanketed the branches of the old maple tree that stood just to the left of the fishing pond.

He thought of that tree as a physical testament to his family. Its trunk was thick and gnarled with the nubs of limbs that had been pruned back over the years and if you looked closely, you could see the heart he and Sarah had carved into it the year that they built the house. Inside the heart, Ted carved his and his wife’s initials, and as the children were born, he added theirs as well. On the right side of the tree, a rope swing hung from a large branch that reached out over the pond.

Ted stood solemnly looking out the window and hating the way he was feeling. Every year the kids would look forward to Santa’s arrival and Sarah enjoyed decorating the house, baking Christmas cookies and attending Christmas Eve Mass. And, although he enjoyed watching the kids as they opened their gifts Christmas morning, he struggled with his own Christmas memories.

He turned away from the window with a sigh, and walked over to the fireplace. He grabbed the poker and prodded the logs. He enjoyed watching the endless patterns the flames made, like wisps of copper colored hair fluttering in the wind. He replaced the poker and shifted his attention to the nativity scene on the mantle. The set had originally belonged to Sarah’s great grandmother and had been passed down from one generation to the next. He reached over and picked up the little cradle that held the broken figurine of the baby Jesus. He would try to glue the broken pieces after Sarah and the kids left for mass. He gently set the cradle back in its place. As he did, he realized that there was a part of him that was just like the figurine... broken.

“You okay, Honey?” Sarah asked, the concern showing in her voice.

Ted turned to see his wife and children all bundled and ready to head out the door. “Yeah... I’m fine, just gathering wool.” He cleared his throat. “Well... You guys drive safe,” he said as he walked to the front door to kiss them goodbye.”

“What are you going to do while were gone, Dad?” Danny asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. I’m sure I will find something to do,” he said, winking at Suzy. He was relieved to see that his little joke brought a smile to her face. “You know, that fire looks pretty inviting. Maybe I’ll grab a book and read for a bit,” he said, as he put his arms around Suzy and Danny, pulling them close.

Danny looked up. “I’ll say that prayer. Okay, Dad?”

“You do that, pal. And I’ll keep a lookout for that Christmas Angel,” he said, exchanging a smile with his wife. “Well, you guys better get going if you want to get a good seat.”

Everyone exchanged hugs and kisses and then Ted walked his family out the door. He stood on the snow-covered porch and watched them get into the car and drive off. He waived until they were out of sight and then walked back inside. He closed the door, stomped his feet on the hall rug to clear the snow from his slippers, and then walked over to the bookcase. He ran his finger over the bindings, perusing the titles and stopped on a mystery. He removed the book from it’s spot on the shelf, walked over to the rocker and pulled it closer to the fire. He settled in, kicked off his slippers and opened the book.

The fire warmed his feet and the gentle glow relaxed him as he slowly rocked back and forth and began to read.

Between the warmth of the fire and the rocking, Ted drifted off to sleep...

4

Ted heard a faint knocking sound and opened his eyes. He wondered how long he had been sleeping and looked down at his watch. The dial looked blurry and no matter how hard he strained, he couldn’t quite make out the numbers. *I guess it’s time to look into a stronger pair of glasses*, he mused, until another knock at the door distracted him. “Who could be at the door at this hour,” he wondered aloud. He got up and arched backward, stretching his lower back, and started toward the door. Halfway there, another knock came, much louder this time. “Okay, okay... Hold your horses. I’m coming,” he grumbled. He opened the door. “How can I help....”

He didn't finish the sentence because no one was standing there. He stepped further out onto the porch and looked to his right and then his left. "Hmm... that's odd. I must be hearing things..." he said to himself.

He walked back into the house and closed the door behind him. As he walked into the living room, he noticed a bright white light coming from the backyard. As he walked over to the window, he closed his eyes and rubbed them, wondering if he was seeing things. When he opened them again, the light was gone. Then he noticed the black silhouette of someone standing in the shadow of the Maple tree. "*What the...*" he fumed and immediately headed for the door.

He was a man on a mission. He didn't stop to think if the person standing in the shadows could be trouble. All he knew was that they woke him from his nap, and they were playing games with him. *Whoever it is, they better have a damn good reason for being on my property,* he thought darkly.

In the next moment, Ted was outside marching toward the maple tree. If he had neighbors, they would have wondered why he was outside in the middle of the night with the snow falling, in his stocking feet and wearing no hat or coat.

As he approached the mysterious shadow person, he held out his arm and pointed, "Hey! This is private property and you *don't* have permission to be here." He thought he sounded pretty menacing, but the shadow figure stood its ground. *Well*, Ted thought, *In for an ounce, in for a pound*. He closed on the stranger and clenched his fists, prepared for a fight. The stranger took a single step forward into the moonlight. Ted stopped dead in his tracks, his mouth hanging open in surprise. "Dad?" *Now it all makes sense. I'm dreaming*, he assured himself. He had dreams like that before. At the time, they seemed very real, but there was always a part of his subconscious mind that knew he was dreaming. But, he couldn't quite remember a dream feeling so real.

In the time it took for those thoughts to run through his mind, the man who looked so much like his father had closed the gap between them and was now standing toe to toe with him.

"Hi, Teddy!" the man said, as he opened his arms inviting Ted to hug him.

Ted stood his ground for a moment in stunned disbelief. "Oh my God...I can't believe it's you."

"It's me."

“I’ve missed you so much,” he said, as he put his arms around his father and hugged him. He breathed in deeply, taking in the faint smell of his father’s aftershave lotion and smiled. “Still wearing Old Spice I see,” he said with a smile.

His father took a step backward. “Let me get a good look at you... You look good, Son. I’ve missed you too.”

Ted didn’t know what to think. Was he dreaming? He wasn’t sure. All he knew was that his father was standing in front of him and he didn’t want to do or say anything that would cause the encounter to end.

Ted took a small step back to get a better look at his father. The way the moonlight was reflecting off the newly fallen snow, it made it look as though there was a soft white glow surrounding his father. Ted smiled as he realized that his father looked no different from the last time he saw him. The day they drove home together from the tree farm.

There was so much he wanted to ask him, so much he wanted to tell him. “Don’t get me wrong, Dad, I am thrilled you’re here, but why now after all these years?”

His Dad smiled broadly and clapped him on the shoulder. “You can thank Danny for that.”

There was a pause and then both men said, “Christmas Angels” and laughed.

“So, where are your wings, Dad?”

His father chuckled. “Didn’t you know, Son... Not *all* angels have wings.” The two men, father and son, laughed heartily.

“God... I miss your sense of humor.” Ted paused for a moment and then asked again. “Seriously... Why are you here?”

“Actually, Son, I’m here because I’ve been worried about you for quite some time. You’re a good man. So, it breaks my heart knowing that you are carrying around so much guilt and pain.”

Ted knew what his father was referring to and looked away from him. “I do carry a lot of guilt, Dad. It’s *my* fault you died. If I hadn’t...”

“Look at me, Teddy, and hear what I’m saying,” his father said sternly. “The accident was *not* your fault. It’s wasn’t anyone’s fault.”

Ted was ready to argue the point, but his father cut in before he could speak. “It’s such a beautiful night, son. Let’s not argue.”

“Alright, Dad...If we are going to be out here for a while, maybe I should get a coat.”

“Why do you feel cold?” his father asked.

“No, not really.”

“Good! Let’s take a stroll around the pond, shall we?”

It was a magical night. The sky was clear and the moon shined brightly giving the illusion of daylight as the two men walked around the pond.

There were so many times over his life that Ted had wished for the chance to talk to his father, but he never thought it was possible. He had dreamt about him many times, but in those dreams, they never spoke. He looked over at his father. “I still can’t believe you’re here...”

His father leaned into him and nudged him with his shoulder. “Yeah, it’s not something that happens often.” His father paused long enough to pick up some snow and started to mold it into a ball. “You know, Teddy... people always seem to judge events that take place in their lives as either *good* or *bad*. When it’s bad, they usually look for someone or something to blame. And, if they can’t blame it on a person they blame it on God. God didn’t put the pothole in the road and He didn’t make me drive over it.”

“But, if God knows everything that is going to happen, then he had to know what would happen if you hit that pothole. And, he let it happen anyway.”

“What if he did?”

“Well...” Ted stammered. “What kind of God would stand idly by and let such a terrible thing happen?”

“What do you mean, *terrible*?” his father asked.

Ted was incredulous. “What do I mean? You DIED!”

“That’s not exactly true, Son. My body died, but I didn’t. That is the miracle of God’s love for us. That which we really are, continues on.” His father reached over and gently squeezed the back of Ted’s neck. “There really isn’t any endings, Son, only beginnings.” His father let his arm drop back to his side and the two walked silently for a few moments.

“I still don’t see how you can say God is loving? He took you away from *me*. He took you away from us. Do you realize what that did to mom?”

His father didn't answer right away. Just as Ted started to ask the question again, his father turned and threw the snowball he had been carrying. It whizzed across the frozen pond and struck an old cardboard box that had partially frozen in the ice. The box was a good twenty yards out but the snowball hit the side clearly in the middle with a loud 'thunk'. "Damn I'm good," his father said with a broad smile. He looked at his son. Ted wasn't smiling. "Look, Teddy, I'm sorry about what my death did to your mother and more so, what it did to you. As an adult, she was responsible for her actions. But, you... You were only a child."

"Exactly... I *was* only a child and it really screwed me up."

"If you were so screwed up, how do you explain Sarah?"

"I can't. I'll never understand what she saw in me. I'm just grateful she did."

"*You* can't explain it, *but I can*...God. You wanted an example of his love for you...He brought Sarah into your life. And, don't forget Suzy and Danny. They are signs of his love too."

Ted was dumbfounded. His father was right. He had been so focused on a past filled with painful memories that he forgot to consider the love and happiness his wife and children brought in the present. "Thank you for helping me to realize how blessed I truly am, but was too blind to see."

His father laughed. "The Lord made the lame walk and the blind see..."

Ted hugged his father. "Thank you for this gift."

Ted and his father finished walking around the pond in silence, but it was a good silence. When they finally arrived back at the tree, Ted had gotten up the nerve to ask one more question. "Dad... Is mom there?"

"Yep. But maybe not in the way you're thinking. I mean, it's not like we can take a walk together. But, I feel her presence, just as I feel your presence."

"Is she okay?" Ted asked, afraid to raise the real question that was troubling him.

His father smiled. "Teddy... Your mom loves you. She always has and she always will. She doesn't blame you or hold anything that might have been said against you. Although, she is troubled by many of the hurtful things she has done and said. She needs your forgiveness to move on... To be free of the pain she has taken with her. Do you think you can do that, Son...Forgive her?"

Ted's eyes filled with tears. He had carried so much guilt and anger in his heart for so many years, and become so accustomed to its weight, he didn't realize until that moment just how monumental it was.

His father took a step closer and pulled Ted into his arms. "That's it, Son. Let it all go, once and for all."

Ted held his father tight as he cried tears that had been building up over the last thirty years. And, when he could cry no more, what was left behind was a lightness that he had not felt in a very long time. He let go of his father and took a step back. There were still tears in his eyes but they were tears of happiness. "Thank you. I don't know what else to say... Other than, I love you. And mom too. Please let her know that I love her."

His father looked up into the night sky and smiled. "She knows, Son, she knows. Well, Teddy... It's time for me to go."

"So soon? There is so much more I would like to ask you. Will we be able to meet like this again?" he asked hopefully.

"I can't say for sure. But remember, I am always connected to you in here," he said, pointing to his heart. "If you look inside yourself, you'll find me there."

Ted watched as his father turned and started to walk toward the woods. He hadn't taken more than a couple of steps when he stopped and turned back. He had a huge grin on his face. "Heck, I almost forgot. Looks like Danny had *his* prayer answered. So that leaves Suzy," he said as he tossed a small object to Ted. "It's amazing how love can repair something that's broken... Yes indeed."

Ted missed the catch and heard his father laugh as he bent over to pick up the object. It was partially buried in the snow, but the moment Ted's finger touched it, he knew exactly what it was.

When he righted himself, he looked for his father, but he was gone. Ted held the small figurine to his mouth and gently blew away the snow that was sticking to it. Even in the moonlight he could see the pristine condition of the Baby Jesus. As he turned it over in his hands, the world around him grew dark, as if someone had turned down the lights. The harder he tried to see, the darker it became. In a matter of moments he found himself in total darkness. Then, off in the distance he heard what sounded like a car coming up the road.

“We’re home,” a voice called out. Then there was the sound of pounding feet freeing snow from shoes and boots. Ted opened his eyes. He was slouched in the rocking chair. The book he had taken from the shelf was resting on his stomach. As his vision slowly came back into focus, he saw that the fire had burned itself out. All that remained were the glowing embers. He got up and stretched. “So, how was church?”

“Great!” Danny said, as he hung his coat on a wall hook.

Sarah gave him one of her devilish grins. “Get much reading done?”

Ted walked over and gave her a kiss. “Nope. Not much at all, but I did have an amazing dream.”

Sarah laughed. “I hope you weren’t sleep walking.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Have a look outside. There are fresh foot prints in the snow heading toward the pond.”

“What?”

“Have a look for yourself if you don’t believe me.”

Ted and his family walked over to the living room window and looked out. Sure enough, there were footprints.

“That is so weird. I was having this dream...” Ted didn’t finish the sentence. As he was speaking, he absentmindedly slid his hand into his pants pocket and was shocked to feel a small figurine. He pulled his hand out and looked down. “Well I’ll be...”

“What is it, Honey?” Sarah asked.

Ted smiled and turned to Suzy. “I have a special gift for you.” He handed her the figurine. “Could you put this in the cradle, Hun?” He smiled as his daughter face turned bright red. He knew she was afraid her mother might ask to see the figurine and discover what had happened to it.

Sarah raised an eyebrow. “What’s going on you two?”

“N-nothing, Mom.” Suzy said, as she tried to hide her hand behind her back.

“What are you trying to hide?”

Suzy’s face turned an even brighter shade of red.

“Go ahead, Honey... Show your mom.”

Suzy reluctantly handed her mother the figurine. “Thanks, Dad,” she said morosely.

Sarah inspected the baby Jesus. “Okay... I don’t get it...” she said, as she handed it back to her daughter.

Suzy scrunched up her brow as she turned it over and over in her hands and looked up at her father. “Dad?”

Ted laughed. “It looks to me like some prayers were answered tonight.”

A huge smile appeared on Danny’s face. “Daddy... Did the Christmas Angel come?”

Ted smiled. “He sure did, Son. He sure did!”

