

Embers of Love
The Christmas Log

By

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Jacksonville, FL

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International Standard Book Number 13: 978-1-60452-009-5
International Standard Book Number 10: 1-60452-009-4

Library of Congress Control Number: 2007939572

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2220 CR 210 W Ste 108 #132
Jacksonville, FL 32559
<http://bluewaterpress.com>

This book may be purchased online at <http://bluewaterpress.com>

CHAPTER 1

Joe Wilson stared at the fire and wondered what dying would be like. Asphyxiation wasn't the worst way to go, he decided, not like shooting yourself or slashing your wrists anyway. Coward that he was, he couldn't bring himself to use either of those methods, so had settled on doing it an easier way by simply closing the damper on the fireplace, leaving the house to fill with smoke. Ending your life like that couldn't be too awfully bad, he told himself, yet his heart raced as he knelt before the hearth in the darkened room. Well, sure he was scared! Who wouldn't be? But he had to go through with it. Because he didn't deserve to live anymore. Not after what he'd done to Annie.

Outside in the wintry night, snow was falling in fat, round flakes, the heavy wet kind that pile up quickly and weigh a ton on your shovel. Come morning, the city would open its eyes to a white Christmas for sure, but Joe wouldn't. No, Joe Wilson would be gone from this earth, lost somewhere in merciful oblivion.

He wiped a trickle of sweat from his brow while pondering that and found it almost comforting to imagine the nothingness of death. No more pain, no regret. It was really quite reassuring. Maybe I'll just fall into a big black hole, thought Joe. And keep falling... and falling.

Somewhere in the distance, sweet voices floated on the air, singing "*Silent Night, Holy Night...*" He turned his head at the sound

and glanced toward the window as if hoping to see the carolers, but instead only saw the dark shadow of a Christmas tree there, sprawled in a heap on the floor, its once carefully placed decorations now in disarray. One broken glass ornament nestled within its branches reflected an eerie, shimmering glow, and Joe turned his eyes away to look again at the fire in the hearth, a small hell burning before him. Its flickering light cast dancing shadows about the room, while the orange and blue flames licked the air like thirsty tongues, crackling and spitting bits of wood here and there. Lucky for him it was still burning, thought Joe, although why it hadn't gone out by now, he couldn't understand. It was just one of those cheap paper-wrapped logs from the store, the kind that burn for two or three hours, then fall apart to nothing. Only this one had to be defective or something, that's all he could figure. Either that or all his years of boozing had finally pickled his brain and brought on a bad case of the DT's. He had read about them once - some clinical definition in a medical book - but all it basically meant was that if you got drunk often enough, you could wind up seeing things that weren't really there. And that's what was happening to him now, Joe supposed, although admitting to it was far from easy.

But how else to explain this crazy business with the log? he wondered, still mystified by what he'd observed. Because by all rights, it should have been nothing but a cold pile of ash by now, after burning on and off like it had done for the past seven days.

Burning on and off!? Now that was really absurd, Joe realized, and then couldn't help but laugh, the pitiful sound echoing in the room, expanding its emptiness. Now he knew it was worse than the DT's. Things had finally come to this... he had lost his mind, all right. There was just no other answer for it.

But then he really didn't need one at this point, did he? Not since he'd finally decided to kill himself. After all, what did he care if he died without knowing how an ordinary log could burn day after day without ever being consumed by its flames? Why should it matter one bit that he couldn't explain how this log could so mysteriously ignite time and time again with no match being held to it? The world was full of mysteries, wasn't it? So why wrestle with one more at this late date? He'd had quite enough of racking his brain anyway, was sick to death of trying to find some purpose for his miserable existence.

"Who gives a damn anyhow?" Joe muttered, feeling bone-tired and wishing he could rest. But his mind wouldn't let him as it began turning back the days like pages of some ghastly picture book. He closed his eyes against the images and curled up on the floor, drawing his knees in to his chest. "Oh, God," he moaned, "what have I done?" Tears rolled down his cheeks, and the firelight illuminated the anguish on his face. "Annie... sweet Annie," Joe whispered, "I'm so very, very sorry." And his thoughts drifted back unwittingly...

"Honey, we need to go buy a tree," she had said. "There's only ten more days till Christmas."

Annie waited for a reply, but Joe's eyes were glued to the television. She tried again, forcing a smile. "Joe, did you hear me?"

"Yeah, all right!" he snapped. "Just wait till half-time, will ya?" Raising a bottle to his lips, he took a swig of beer and pushed himself deeper into the couch, grumbling under his breath. "First chance I get to watch football in a month, and she's gotta start naggin' me."

If he thought she hadn't heard him, Joe was very much mistaken, but truth was, he really didn't care. Five bottles of beer, not counting the one in his hand, did a great job of drowning any concerns he might have had about upsetting his wife. And he wasn't going to feel guilty about it either. After all, didn't he work his tail off at that lousy factory just trying to make ends meet? And for all his slaving at a job he hated, he and Annie were no further ahead today than when they'd first gotten married.

"Why do we need a tree anyway?" Joe asked, still staring at the television. "It's just a waste of money."

Annie's smile dissolved, and she bit her lower lip. Where was that sweet, shy man who three years earlier had gotten down on one knee in their favorite restaurant to propose to her? "Will you marry me, darling?" he had asked that night, his love for her written on his hopeful, upturned face. "I adore you, Annie, and I'll try my best to make you happy."

Oh, what she wouldn't give to have him back in her life once again, that soft-spoken, sensitive man who seemed to have now all but disappeared. It's just the drinking, she told herself sadly for the hundredth time. If only he wouldn't drink so much.

"Joe, ... honey, you can't really mean that," she said. "You really don't want a tree?"

"That's right!" he shot back. Getting up from the couch, he spun around to glare at her, and Annie flinched at the anger on his face. He began strutting around the room on rubbery legs, voice rising, words slurred. "And for your information, I really don't wanna go to work tomorrow either, back to my crummy job where they don't pay me spit to cover the bills! And I really don't wanna live in this rented dump of a house in this lousy city with a wife who does nothin' but nag me!"

He was close to her now, and Joe flung his arm out suddenly, sending beer spewing from the bottle in his hand onto the front of Annie's blouse. It was a favorite of hers that she'd saved up for months to buy and probably the nicest thing in her wardrobe. With a gasp, she brought her hands to her chest as if to stop the foamy liquid from soaking in, and Joe stared at her stupidly, trying to make sense out of what had just happened. But when she raised her eyes, and he saw the pain in them, a kind of raw torment washed over him in a blurred instant of regret. Why did she have to look so fragile? Why so small and wounded, like a trapped helpless rabbit in a snare? Why the hell was everything crashing in on him in this rotten life where nothing ever went the way he'd planned? He wanted to say he was sorry, but the words stuck in his throat, and then because he couldn't bare to look at her any longer without ripping out his hair, Joe turned and staggered to the couch, falling onto it.

Annie left him there and went into the bedroom, locking the door behind her. After changing out of her blouse, she filled the bathroom sink with water and placed the garment in it to soak overnight. Then she sat down and dialed her sister's number on the bedside phone with a trembling hand. Relax, she told herself, taking a deep breath. Mustn't sound upset or else Julie would rush over like usual, only making it that much worse. Joe would just have to sleep it off like all the other times, and things would be fine again tomorrow.

"Hi, sis," Annie said when Julie answered. "I was just wondering if you could do me a favor. Um, ... Joe's really exhausted. You know, working all that overtime lately. And he just doesn't feel up to going out to buy a tree." She swallowed hard and fought back tears. "So could you... do you think you could come over and take me to get one? I mean it's just ten more days until Christmas, and we usually always have one by now. I think there's a place not too far from here."

Julie was silent as they walked through the tree lot beneath strung colored lights, their booted feet crunching on the snow. The night was cold and clear with countless stars glistening above, and a huge silver moon cast looming shadows down the rows of pine trees. "For the life of me," she finally remarked, "I don't know why on earth you stay with him." She stared at Annie who was busy inspecting a six-foot Norwegian pine, and when there was no response, continued. "I've already told you - you could come live with us until you get on your feet. Frank wouldn't mind."

Annie walked around the tree, examining it closely. "How's this one?" she asked. "I can't find any bare spots. Can you?" Backing up a bit, she gave it the once-over, then glanced down at the hand Julie had placed on her forearm.

"You're wrong, Annie," her sister said. "There's a bare spot all right. A huge bare spot in your life! But you simply refuse to see it. How long are you going to go on like this, putting up with Joe's drinking?"

Annie tried to smile and patted Julie's hand. "Oh, it's not that bad. Really it isn't. It's just once in a while that he... overdoes it. I know he loves me, and things are going to get better. Especially after I have -" She suddenly stopped short, a stricken look on her face.

Julie stared at her. "After you have... what? What is it?" She took Annie by the shoulders and while their eyes held for a few seconds, understanding came quickly. "Oh, no," she cried, "please don't say it! Please don't tell me you're pregnant!"

With a sob, Annie slumped into her sister's arms and wept. Holding her close, Julie couldn't help but wish that Joe Wilson would somehow disappear from the earth. In Heaven's name, she wondered, what good would the birth of a baby do for a miserable drunk like him?

She raised her eyes toward the starlit sky, but her troubled heart could find no answer. "Don't cry, Annie," she said then. "Come on, let's take the tree and go home." After paying for it and getting the salesman to secure it into Julie's Ford hatchback with a bit of rope, they made the short drive to Annie's house and together unloaded it from the car.

"Sshhh, he's asleep," Annie whispered as she and Julie lugged the tree into the house. The smell of balsam quickly filled the place like a heady perfume, and she smiled with the pleasure of it. But Julie wasn't

smiling as she observed Joe lying on the couch, one arm hanging down on the floor, a dripping beer bottle clutched in his hand.

"Asleep my foot! He's drunk and passed out," she said disgustedly. "Just look at him, will you? Talk about good for nothing!"

They leaned the tree against the wall in the corner of the room, and Annie removed her gloves and coat and laid them on a chair. "Please don't say that," she said quietly. "He does his best. He works very hard at his job, and he's under a lot of stress."

"And what about the stress you're under?" Julie demanded. "How can you defend him like that after how he treats you? I know what kind of tempers drunks have, Annie. And I'm telling you, someday it won't be just shouting. Someday he'll haul off and hit you."

Annie frowned. "Please keep your voice down," she said in hushed tones as Joe stirred from his stupor momentarily to roll over on the couch. Both women froze until he settled down again, then she quietly continued. "You're wrong, Julie. Joe would never hit me. He's not capable of that."

Her sister let go a sigh. "Well, I hope you're right. Really I do." But unconvinced, Julie paced around the room, arms folded. "And what did he say, may I ask, when you announced that you were pregnant?"

Annie dropped her head. "Well, ... actually I haven't told him yet. I've been meaning to, but haven't found the right time."

"Good grief, you can't be serious!" cried Julie. "How far along are you, anyway?" She stared at Annie's waistline as if trying to determine for herself. "You're flat as a pancake. So... what? A month? Six weeks?"

Their eyes met briefly before Annie's quiet reply. "Four months. That's all. Just barely four months." She turned and went over to the pine tree in the corner and stood with her back to Julie while stroking its silky needles. "Don't worry, though. I'll tell him soon. I promise."

"I can't believe this" Julie muttered, slowly shaking her head. "Four months. That's incredible. Don't you realize you can't keep something like this a secret? You have to tell him right away!"

Annie spun around, chin jutting towards the couch where Joe lay snoring. "Fine, Julie! You're absolutely right! How about I tell him right now? Do you really think the news would sink in?" Trembling with anger, she glared at her sister.

A silent moment stretched out between them before Julie spoke. "Annie, I'm sorry," she said. "Honest I am." She started towards the

door, then looked back, her measured words poorly masking her concern. "But promise me something, okay? If you need anything, ... anything at all, I want you to call me. Will you at least do that? Day or night, I don't care what time it is." She paused, eyes soft. "You know I love you, sis, and I'll always be here for you."

Annie nodded and managed a small smile, then Julie walked out the door.

"Honey, what do you want for Christmas?" Seated on the couch, untangling a string of miniature lights, Annie glanced at Joe, who was lying on the floor beneath the tree, securing it into a metal stand.

"Nothing," he replied. "Not a thing."

Annie's heart sank at the answer, aching for him. So many of his dreams for the two of them had not come true, and she knew he was frustrated and feeling like he'd let her down. But his mood this morning had seemed okay, and after his usual two-aspirin hangover remedy, he had gone off to work, promising to help her decorate the tree after dinner. No mention was made about the previous night, although it would have been nice, she thought sadly, if he had at least apologized for the spilled beer incident. But she'd grown not to expect that anymore. He always tried, it seemed to Annie, to be somehow more obliging and soft-spoken with her after his binges, which of course prompted her forgiveness. Just the sight of his downcast head and furrowed brow on the morning after was enough for her to be able to go on with renewed hope. One day it would end, she assured herself. He would give up the drinking and be her sweet Joe again.

"Oh, Joe, come on. There's got to be something you'd like," she said, wishing she could give him the world. How she hoped the news of their baby growing inside her would make her husband happy.

"We can't afford gifts," Joe stated from beneath the tree. "Doesn't even make sense putting this thing up when we can't buy nothin' to put under it."

Annie tried to ignore the edge in his voice and forced a bit of cheer into her own. "But it's going to get better. You're in line for that promotion, and I'm sure they'll give it to you. You said yourself that the pay would be higher. You just need to have more confidence."

"Yeah, it's a nice dream," said Joe, "but we can't live on dreams. I'm one guy out of twenty who wants that job, and they're all better qualified than me." He slid out from under the tree then and stood hands-on-hips to inspect it from the center of the room. "Well, how does it look? Is it straight or not?"

Annie jumped up from the couch and joined him, hooking her arm through his. "It's perfect," she said, turning to kiss his cheek. "Honey, don't let yourself think those other guys are better than you. You deserve that job, and I've been praying that God will give it to you, not anyone else. We've just got to have faith, darling. We've got to believe."

"Sure," Joe said with a sigh, his brown eyes dull. "Sure we do. Look, I'm really beat, you know? I'm gonna hit the sack. I'll help you some more tomorrow, okay?" And with a quick hug, he told her good night.

Annie stayed up till past midnight, decorating the tree with their meager collection of ornaments and last year's garland, wanting it finished by morning in hopes that the festive sight might lift Joe's spirits. And when the last ornament had been hung in the perfect spot, she unpacked a small Nativity set from its box, carefully removing the tissue paper from each figurine. The set was neither ornate nor expensive, but Annie loved its simple beauty, and kneeling down, she placed the stable at the foot of the tree, then arranged the painted statues inside of it with loving care exactly as she did every year, with Mary on the left of the Infant, Joseph on the right, and the wise men and shepherds in humble homage before them. Here was the true meaning of Christmas, she thought, the dawn of hope and light into the world.

Even for Joe, Annie thought then as she rose from her knees. Poor, sweet Joe. If only she knew what demons drove him to drink. It couldn't be only money worries, she reasoned as she stored away the decorations in the closet. It had to go deeper than that. For some time, she'd sensed a growing turmoil within him, a restlessness of spirit. It was like he was always grasping at thin air, searching for something and never finding it. And in the last year, especially when he'd drunk too much, he often ranted that life had no meaning, once even saying that he thought it was "just one big joke" that God (if he existed) enjoyed playing on everyone.

It upset her to hear him talk like that, for her own faith was central to Annie's existence.

Their opposing beliefs had been cause for several heated debates before they married, but Annie's love for him had won out over their theological differences. He was a good man underneath it all. She knew that in her heart – a heart completely devoted to him. And didn't love conquer all? Why, of course it did, Annie assured herself as she plugged the extension cord into the wall outlet, then stood back to admire the finished tree. Twinkling and shimmering in the corner of the room, the sight of it filled her with the same pleasure it always had since her childhood. She could picture that peaceful night in Bethlehem centuries ago, the shining star over the manger where the Holy Child lay, and Annie's heart leapt with joy. Christmas was coming with all its glorious promise, and a new life was growing within her. God would not forsake her and Joe. She couldn't be any more sure of it!

"Did you sleep well, hon?" Annie asked the next morning when Joe walked into the kitchen. She was standing at the stove cooking breakfast and smiled over her shoulder at him.

"Yeah, I guess so," he said, running a hand through his uncombed hair. Still dressed in his flannel pajamas, he blinked bleary eyes, mouth opening wide in a yawn as he sat down at the table. "So what time did you come to bed? I see you finished the tree."

"Oh, around one-thirty or so," Annie said. "I wanted to surprise you." She slid two sunny-side-up eggs out of a fry pan onto his plate. "So how does it look? Did I do a good job?"

Joe sighed. "It's fine. But it could use more lights. And some new ornaments instead of all those old crummy ones. And that sad lookin' garland."

Annie took a plate of pork sausage from the microwave and brought it over to the table where she joined him. "Maybe so," she said evenly, determined not to let his bleak mood upset her. "But I still think it's pretty. And I love how it smells, don't you? I'd really miss the scent of pine with one of those artificial ones."

Joe chomped on a slice of toast and merely grunted, his dark brows meeting in a frown. "What'd you pay for it anyway?"

She wished he hadn't asked. Although it was a bargain in her opinion, Annie suspected he wouldn't think so. "Not much," she said after a moment. "Only thirty dollars."

Joe said nothing, just slowly nodded his head. Then looking down at his plate, he viciously stabbed the yolk of one egg with his fork. An orange gooey rivulet flowed over the dish, and Annie watched it in silence, wishing she had fibbed about the price of the tree. Because whatever it was he was thinking just then, she knew it was nothing good.

"How are your eggs?" she asked nervously. "Would you have ...rather had scrambled?" Although she'd planned to make her baby announcement this morning, now a cold apprehension slowed her words. "What's ... the matter, Joe? Don't you like the sausage? Should I have made bacon instead?"

"Sausage," Joe repeated without looking up. "Eggs and pork sausage." He seemed to be mulling this over for a moment, then he suddenly stabbed the remaining yolk, releasing a new sticky puddle onto his plate. "Some fancy breakfast, I must say, instead of our usual cold cereal." He paused, never lifting his head, then in a nasty tone continued. "But can I trouble you to know just what is the momentous occasion?"

Her heart was pounding so hard, Annie could hear the 'whoosh' of blood pumping in her ears, could sense the impending storm about to strike. Something about Joe's voice, his downcast head and hunched shoulders sent an icy chill through her that nearly chattered her teeth. Forcing a smile, she took a breath, trying to steady her voice. "Well, it actually is sort of a special occasion," she began. "I have something to tell you that I hope will make you very happy."

Joe raised his head and smiled back, but his grin was strangely unpleasant. "Happy? Nope. I wouldn't count on it." Then with a curse, he suddenly bolted up from his chair, overturning it with a clatter. "You just don't get it, Annie, do you?" he yelled, face ugly with rage. A swipe of his hand sent plates flying off the table to shatter on the floor. "Just what do you think I'm working for anyway? My health? We're scraping along just to make ends meet, but you still gotta have your stupid Christmas tree and your eggs and sausage for breakfast, and God only knows what else! I swear you must think I'm made of money," he shouted, "but I've got a great big news flash for you! You're livin' in a dream world, Annie, and you just better wake the hell up!"

"Oh, Joe, I... I'm sorry," she said softly. At the sight of her husband standing there full of such awful fury, Annie thought sadly, I don't know you anymore. You're like a stranger to me.

Then from somewhere deep inside, she found the courage to go on. "I just wanted today to be a little special, that's all, because I have something I want to tell you. If you'll just let me -."

"And there's something I wanna tell you!" Joe yelled, cutting her off. "I'm going back to that damn factory all right, but I just might tell 'em what they can do with their lousy job before the day is over!"

Like a crazy man, he was stomping around the kitchen, eyes flashing as he repeatedly punched his fist into the palm of his other hand. She had never seen him like this before, and Julie's words echoed in Annie's brain. - "I'm telling you... someday he'll haul off and hit you!"

"Joe, please," she said, her heart aching. "Honey, try to calm down. I know things will get better for us." She got up from her chair and went to him, but when she placed her hand on his arm, he threw it off with a savage jerk.

"Yeah, right!" he snarled. "And just how is that gonna happen? Oh, I know! Don't tell me. We'll just wake up one of these mornings, and everything will be different. I'll have a great job, and we'll have tons of money in the bank. Hell, we'll probably even go sailing on our yacht every weekend!" Joe threw back his head and let go an ugly laugh. "Talk about simpleminded!"

You must really believe in miracles!"

At the look on Annie's face then, his own expression suddenly changed, as though a new thought had just occurred to him. "But then, you do believe, don't you?" he said slowly. "Sure, that's right. I almost forgot. You have such great faith. Well, maybe we should just get down on our knees right now then, and pray to your God for a miracle." And grabbing her shoulders, he began pushing her down to the floor until they were both kneeling on the cold linoleum.

"Well, come on!" he yelled. "What's the matter?" Annie's eyes pleaded with him, but Joe's ranting was not to be stopped as he stared up at the ceiling as though in a mystic trance. "Come on," he repeated. "Sure, this should do it! Let's just pray our little hearts out right now for one of His oh-so-mighty miracles!"

Annie burst into tears then, sobs heaving her shoulders. A moment passed before Joe dropped his arms to his sides and finally stood up, his breathing ragged.

"Damn it," he said in a tortured voice, "you just don't... understand... anything!" Then he turned and walked out of the room, leaving Annie on her knees on the floor.

She stayed there for a while, hands clasped together, head bowed. She heard Joe moving about in the bedroom, then a short time later the sound of the front door slamming as he left for work. A shaft of morning sunlight streaming through the kitchen window fell on her like a theater spotlight illuminating a lone figure on a stage. Her sobs quieted, then stopped, and Annie began a heartfelt prayer.

“Heavenly Father, please help my husband. He doesn’t mean to be cruel. He’s so very lost and troubled and needs You so much. I know You won’t desert him. Please show Yourself to Joe... please.”

She paused to find more words, then the sweet fragrance of pine came to her nose, sending her thoughts slipping easily to Christmas. “As we celebrate the birth of our Savior,” she prayed, “I thank You for this precious baby growing within me. May our child’s birth, like that of the Holy Infant so long ago, bless us and bring us peace and joy.”

Annie didn’t know what else to say, short of asking point-blank for a miracle. But though unaware of it, that’s exactly what she had already done with her faith and humble sincerity. Slowly she rose to her feet, whispering, “Thank You, Father,” then set about cleaning up the kitchen.

Later she took the bus to the mall where she bought Joe one special Christmas gift, not caring if she got anything from him in return. With frugal care, she’d managed to save a few dollars over the months from the grocery budget, so the money wouldn’t be missed, and chose a brown leather wallet on sale to replace his tattered vinyl one. Returning home, she wrote a short note on a small square of paper and slipped it into the wallet so he would easily find it, then wrapped the gift in shiny silver paper. A red bow and ribbon were the finishing festive touch, and Annie smiled as she placed the gift beneath the tree.

“But darn, it looks so lonely down there all by itself,” she thought then, wishing she had dozens of presents to give him. But there was something more she could offer her husband, Annie remembered, ... the greatest gift of all – the child they were going to have and her unconditional love. Even after this morning’s unpleasantness, her heart was filled with compassion for him, knowing as she did that he was suffering from some unknown distress. A romantic evening would let him know she still loved him, Annie decided. She would surprise him with a special night of soft music and candlelight, and sweet tender lovemaking. And afterwards while they lay quietly in each other’s arms, she would tell Joe about the baby. And he would

smile and kiss her, and say how happy he was. And he would be her sweet loving Joe again... Annie knew it.

Her heart buoyed by the idea, she threw on her coat and hurried down to the nearby Quik-Shop convenience store where she regularly did some of her shopping. As she walked in, a friendly "hello" greeted her, and Annie looked up to see a tall blond man standing behind the counter. She had thought she knew all the clerks working at the store, but this one was unfamiliar, so she guessed he was a new hire.

"Hi," she said, returning his smile, and in that moment, all thought flew out of her head. He looked so... out of place there in the little store that she... well, Annie couldn't quite put her finger on it, but there was just something about him that struck her so odd that all she could do was just stand there and stare.

"Need some help?" he asked pleasantly then.

"What? Oh! Uh, yes," she stammered. "I'm ... I'm planning a little... well, sort of a special celebration for my husband and myself for tonight, and -" She didn't get a chance to finish.

"I see," said the young man. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, then his eyes grew bright. "You know, I think I have something you just may want to try." Motioning for her to follow, he left his place behind the counter, and she trotted after him down the center aisle towards the back of the store.

"Quite a selection, isn't there?" he asked when they'd stopped at some shelves lined with bottles. "As you can see, we have a very fine stock of spirits of all types..."

Annie quickly shook her head. "But I can't -"

"... and then the perfect choice for you," the clerk finished, grabbing a bottle and holding it up to view. "Holiday Sparkling Cider. Non-alcoholic and really quite delicious." He smiled wide and handed it to her.

Annie stared at him, mouth hanging open. Why on earth had this man suggested such a thing? He couldn't possibly know about Joe's drinking problem, that was certain. She searched his face but found only the captivating smile.

"Well, ... thank.... you... so much," she managed, taking the bottle from him, still puzzled but genuinely grateful. "This will be absolutely perfect, as a matter of fact."

"Glad to help," said the clerk as they walked to the front of the store. "Need anything else?"

"Oh, yes, I nearly forgot," she replied. "I was thinking of scented candles."

"We have some right here," he said, gesturing towards a nearby display she hadn't noticed as she'd walked in. Annie stepped over and looked through the selection for a few moments, then let go a sigh. "Yes, they are what I had in mind, but I'm afraid they're way too expensive." She had planned to buy several, placing them all around the apartment to set the mood, but after Joe's outburst over her spending habits, she wasn't about to pay the price.

"Perfect night for a cozy fire, don't you think?" said the clerk at that moment, and Annie saw that he was straightening a display of yule logs before him. "These are on sale for just three-ninety-five," he added as she picked one up, examining its festive red and green holiday wrap. And somewhere in the back of her mind then, a sweet memory stirred.

"You know, ... you couldn't be more right," she told him, a grin spreading over her face. Firelight, not candlelight, would create the perfect evening! She and Joe would make love before a beautiful crackling fire in the hearth, like they'd done years ago as newlyweds. Annie could barely contain her excitement. "I can't thank you enough for your help," she told the young man. "You're an absolute angel!"

She could have sworn his blue eyes twinkled as he rang up her purchase on the register. "And you, miss, are more than welcome," he said. "Hope you and your husband enjoy it. And have a very merry Christmas."

When she got home, Annie spent the better part of the day tidying up the house and preparing Joe's favorite casserole, then finally indulged herself with a long relaxing bubble bath. By five o'clock, dinner was on the table, the Sparkling Cider was chilled, and Johnny Mathis was singing "Silver Bells" on the radio. Outside on the streets, shoppers bundled in heavy coats scurried about under a thick downfall of lacy snowflakes. Annie's log burned brightly in the fireplace, its warmth a cozy comfort against the winter's cold, and as she stood at the window peering out at the holiday sights, her heart swelled with anticipation. What would Joe's face look like when she told him about the baby? With a small prayer on her lips, she left the window and snuggled down on the couch to wait impatiently for her husband.

CHAPTER 2

Helen Tanner looked in the mirror and nearly started to cry. The makeup wasn't helping at all today, no matter how carefully she applied it.

It's a losing battle. You might as well give up, she told herself. You could layer it on with a putty knife, and it still wouldn't do any good.

Closing her eyes, she dropped her head, trying to remember what she had looked like before the accident, but the attempt only made things worse. No sense wallowing in self-pity over the fact that she was now horribly disfigured. She couldn't turn back the clock. She would never see that smooth, clear face peering back at her again, and she'd better get good and used to it.

Helen slowly raised her head, but her eyes were still squeezed shut. It took time to prepare for it, ... the cruel reality of her own reflection. A certain mind-set was what she needed, a bit of quiet resignation... or something. As if coming out of a deep sleep, she let her eyes open slowly, just a slit at first, until she was standing there in her brightly-lit bathroom, once again struggling to confront it.

The scar was an angry pink welt that began at the bridge of her nose, then ran diagonally down her right cheek all the way to the soft under-curve of her chin. She brought her hand up and traced its jagged line with the tip of one finger, forcing herself to see its ugliness, accept its alien presence on her face.

You have to admit it could be worse, she told herself then as she had so many times before. So what if your looks are gone? At least you're still here. With a heavy sigh, she fought to keep her composure. You could have been killed, you know. ... Just like Dennis.

But speaking that name was all it took, and Helen broke down and wept. Now that her thoughts had turned to him, it was no use trying to be brave anymore. Losing him was too much to bear, too heavy and terrible a burden.

That her face was scarred was a misfortune the world could see and for which it might offer compassion, but the invisible scar on her heart was just as real and held a pain more keen and piercing than anyone could ever know. All her dreams had died with Dennis on that wintry night when fate had snatched him away. They were to have been married just seven days before Christmas, exactly a year ago today. Now she would never be his bride, would never see her sweetheart again.

With a despairing sob, she threw the makeup bottle she'd been holding into the sink, and it shattered into pieces, the sound of its destruction venting some of her rage and pain. Beige droplets dotted the white porcelain bowl among splinters of glass, and for a moment Helen stared at them, her mind completely drained. Then slowly she put out her hand, thinking she would just scoop up a handful and crush them into her face, grind them into the hideous scar that so mercilessly and constantly reminded her of Dennis and what might have been. What difference would it make anyway, if she were even uglier? No man would ever want her again. Not looking the way she did.

Her ears picked up a sound then, and Helen realized she had left the television on in the living room. A choir was singing a Christmas hymn, and her attention was drawn to the familiar words and music. But she found no pleasure in it, no joy, no comfort. God had played a cruel trick on her, and she had turned her back on Him.

"Christmas!" she exclaimed disgustedly, the word like a curse on her lips, and whirling around, Helen ran into the front room and turned off the TV. "I don't want to hear it," she yelled at the darkened screen. "It's all a myth! A foolish... children's fairy tale for simpleminded people, and I don't want to hear it!"

Fuming with anger, she paced around the room, ranting out loud at the Almighty Power that had robbed her of any happiness. If there was a God, she told herself bitterly, He was supposed to

be good and merciful. That's what she had always been taught. He wouldn't have taken Dennis away from her, leaving her so hopelessly lonely and looking like some grotesque monster! With a choking sob, Helen flung herself onto the couch, burying her face in its cushions. What was left for her now in this empty cold world, except misery and despair?

Taylor's Tavern was dimly lit, and for that, Helen was grateful. It made her job a little easier to know that she looked quite normal while serving patrons their drinks under its subtle lighting.

But tonight, fate stepped through the door along with one rowdy, drunken customer whose cruel remarks would threaten to shatter her world.

Helen was leaning over his table, wiping up a spill, when just then he pulled out a lighter. It was one of those big silver metal ones with a flip top on it, and when the wick caught flame beneath the tip of his cigarette, he might as well have been holding the Olympic torch.

"Hey, honey, what the hell is that on your face?" he asked, loud enough for all to hear.

And she stood there rooted to the spot as the men at the table gawked at her. "Good grief," the guy bellowed, not bothering to extinguish the lighter, "look at this girl, will ya? She musta got mauled by a tiger or somethin'!"

Helen felt the heat of the flame on her face, then straightened up and clamped her hands to her ears, trying to drown out the raucous laughter. But the hateful sound sent her fleeing to the restroom where she stayed for half an hour, vowing to quit her job before her boss had the chance to fire her. Ben Taylor, however, had been very understanding when she finally ventured out expecting his angry reproach.

"Don't let those jerks get to you," he told her. "You'll never see them in here again."

Helen glanced around the bar while dabbing her eyes with a tissue. "You kicked them out?"

"They're lucky I didn't use my foot, at that," he chuckled, but then grew serious. "I don't need their business, and you certainly don't need to put up with their idiotic remarks." He smiled and gently nudged her chin up with his knuckle. "You're a beautiful

girl, Helen, and don't forget it. Now hold your head up high, and go take care of the customers."

Helen thanked him and went back to work, grateful for the kind words, even if they had been offered out of pity. Ben was the nicest man she'd ever met, always quick to help others and generous with praise, and she felt fortunate to know him. He was the sort of man she might be looking to share her life with, if in fact she were looking at all anymore. But Helen was wise enough to know that her dreams of love were in the past now, dead and buried like Dennis. Ben was a handsome, charming man who could have his pick of any woman he wanted, and many attractive girls frequented his bar every night. So whenever she felt those small heart flutters he provoked with his broad smile or deep, rich laugh, or that warm glow she foolishly imagined she sometimes saw simmering in his eyes when he spoke to her, Helen always reminded herself not to harbor any hopes. At least once a day, she gave herself a wake-up lecture - Don't be a fool. You're no beauty anymore. Just look in the mirror!

So she was more than a little surprised when Ben invited her over to his place that evening to watch *It's A Wonderful Life*, a popular Christmas movie.

"I've got it on DVD," he informed her. "We'll pop some corn and put our feet up and get lost in Bedford Falls together. How about it?"

She gazed into his eyes, warm brown pools, and felt her heart do a flip-flop. Why was he asking? Because he felt sorry for her? Sure, that was it. She'd had her feelings hurt today by a nasty customer, and Ben felt somehow responsible, was trying to make it up to her in his own sweet way. She admired him for that, but although she appreciated his concern, Helen couldn't bare the idea of his pity.

"Thanks, Mr. Taylor," --

"Aren't you ever going to call me Ben?" he cut in.

She swallowed hard under his gaze and bowed her head, hoping to find some merciful shadow that might obscure the scar on her face.

"Thanks, Ben, but I... I have plans for tonight. I'm sorry."

His eyes seemed to look right through her for a silent moment. "Well, that's a real shame," he said finally. "Maybe some other time then."

She nodded, wondering why she felt on the verge of bawling, then admitted to herself that more than anything in the world, she suddenly wanted to be close to him. But she'd let him off the hook, feeling certain that it was what he really hoped she would do.

"But you'd be wise not to pass up this chance," he teased. "Jimmy Stewart came to me in a dream last night and said you and I are soul mates."

Helen tried to smile, thinking how very sweet he was. "Good night, Ben," she managed, and then hoping he wouldn't see her misty eyes, she turned and headed for the door.

Impulsively, he reached out to stop her, but then fought off the urge, dropping his hand to his side. "Good night, Helen. See you tomorrow."

An hour later as she dozed on the couch, Helen's phone rang. It was Ben, apologetic yet insistent.

"Sorry, but I won't take no for an answer," he said. "I just spoke with Jimmy again, and he's willing to give us a rain check for tomorrow night. So bring some fuzzy slippers to work with you, and I'll set up the DVD player and make room for our feet on my coffee table. We'll close the bar a little early so we'll have most of the evening, okay?"

There was silence on the other end of the line.

"Say yes, Helen. Did you hear me? Say yes."

But she couldn't say yes. Couldn't say anything because her mind was racing so frantically. Did she dare hope Ben was really interested in her? Helen touched her cheek and felt the raised trail of the hateful scar, her fingers sliding over it. Yet something in his tone made it almost disappear beneath her touch, and for a fleeting moment, her skin seemed smooth as glass. "Yes," she said softly, a tremor in her voice. "All right, Ben. See you soon." And she hung up the receiver.

For a while, she just sat quietly wondering why she had given in to him. Something had come over her, some crazy impulse she guessed, but she regretted it now, suddenly filled with fresh fear. Ben had never seen her in any kind of light other than the dimness of the bar, and when she imagined his reaction at finally seeing her disfigurement clearly, Helen's heart sank.

She couldn't stand it if he turned away, eyes filled with revulsion. What will I do? she thought now, racking her brain for an answer. After all he had done for her, she couldn't back out now, couldn't hurt his feelings.

Then it came to her, an idea that might work. Instead of going to his place where she might have to risk bright lights, she'd invite Ben to her place, where she could better control the situation. Yes, that was it! Easy enough to replace all the bulbs in the house with low wattage ones, and she'd apply just a little more makeup too. The plan was perfect, Helen decided, recalling happily that she had seen some 25-watt colored 'party' bulbs at the nearby Quik-Shop convenience store. She'd stop in early tomorrow morning to buy some, along with a new makeup with more coverage to hide her scar. Everything would be fine, she told herself. She'd simply keep her distance from Ben while they watched the movie, and she'd get through the evening somehow. Then she would let him know that he needn't feel obligated to her in the future for the bad behavior of his customers. It really wasn't his fault, after all, that life had dealt her such a lousy hand.

"You'd be wasting your money."

Helen couldn't believe her ears, and she spun around from the cosmetics display to stare knives at the young clerk. How could he say such a thing? Her nerves were already frazzled by the prospect of spending time with Ben tonight, and now this young man's callous remark sent her slipping right over the edge. She'd had all she could take of people's insensitivity, and Helen stormed over to him, ready for battle.

"Maybe I should just report you to the management for harassing a customer!" she exclaimed, eyes flashing. "Is that what you want? It's not bad enough that you've been watching me like a hawk ever since I came into this store, ... like you thought I'd walk off with your entire stock of face powder or something! But then you have to go and say something cruel like that!" She thrust her hand out suddenly and set a bottle of makeup down so sharply on the counter that for a moment, she thought it had broken. But it was still intact and taking a deep breath, she pointed her finger at it. "You might think I'm a fool for buying this, and you're certainly entitled to your opinion. But you can keep your smart remarks to yourself, if you don't mind, and let me "waste" my money any way I want! Now why don't you just do your job, please, and get busy and ring it up!"

All the while she spoke, the clerk stood motionless, eyes wide. "I'm sorry," he said then, his face reddening. "I didn't mean it the way it sounded, honest. You see, I'm sort of new at this, and... well, I really apologize if I offended you. All I meant was that you shouldn't keep trying to hide it."

He glanced down at the bottle of makeup, and Helen stared at his head. Maybe her agitation was merely to blame, but for a fleeting moment, she thought she might be seeing things. Then she realized that it was just the overhead fluorescent light shining on the young man's blond hair that made it look like there was a sort of glowing aura all around it.

His last words nudging her brain, Helen asked, "What do you mean?... 'shouldn't keep trying to hide it'?"

He peered up at her, his gaze warm and steady. "The scar," he replied, smiling. "It's not nearly as bad as you think, you know, and you really are quite lovely."

Her mouth dropped open. Now what was he up to? Flirtation? But the pale blue eyes that held hers reflected no hint of any such thing, only a tender knowing light. He looks at me as though he knows me, she thought, feeling bewildered yet oddly comforted.

She let go a sigh. "Lovely, huh? Well, thanks, but most people don't think so."

"Those who think they see are often truly blind," the clerk remarked. At Helen's perplexed expression, he grinned and shook his head. "Inner beauty is much desired by the wise."

She still stared at him dumbly, finally making him laugh, a rich warm sound that filled the little store. "I'm sorry," he told her. "I sometimes wax poetic. Then how about this? Some men want more than a pretty face."

"All men want a pretty face," she said quickly, snapping out of her strange frame of mind to frown at him. "And you've just reminded me, I'll need some 25-watt light bulbs too, besides the makeup."

The young man cocked his head to one side and frowned back at her. "But... they don't give off very much light."

"That's exactly the idea," Helen said. "Dim but flattering."

"Hey, wait a minute!" he exclaimed excitedly. "If flattering light is what you want, then there's something ten times better. You don't want bulbs at all. No, here's what you want." And drawing Helen's attention to a display of paper-wrapped logs directly in front of

her, he smiled broadly. "Firelight, as everyone knows, is not only extremely flattering, but also very romantic."

Suddenly she thought of Ben, and her heart raced as she pictured herself sitting next to him before a crackling fire. The image was instantaneous, but then Helen shook her head as if to dispel it. "And what does romance have to do with anything?" she asked, more than a little annoyed.

The young man shrugged his shoulders. "Well, that depends. Just thought when you said 'flattering' that maybe you had a special someone in mind. And it's only natural for a woman to want to look her best."

He had ESP! Helen was sure of it! Sure, he appeared normal enough, but she sensed something odd was going on here as he smiled at her with that strange, knowing grin. Those blue eyes of his were speaking louder than words, but she couldn't quite grasp the message. And yet for some absurd reason, Helen felt suddenly compelled to buy a fireplace log, as he suggested, instead of light bulbs and makeup.

"All right," she said, "I'll take one," thinking at the same time that she was probably losing her mind. Then with a shrug and little laugh, she added, "But I swear you're hypnotizing me or something."

The clerk laughed too. "Heavens, no," he said, his face beaming. "It's just Christmas, you know. Such an enchanting, wonderful season!"

Shortly after she arrived at work, Helen asked Ben if he'd mind getting together at her place instead of his that evening, offering the vague explanation that she'd "just feel more comfortable." He seemed agreeable to her suggestion, but then asked, "Do you have a DVD player so we can watch *It's A Wonderful Life*?"

"Sure I do," said Helen, "but you might like to choose one of my movies instead. I have quite an extensive collection."

Ben's eyebrows shot up. "You mean you don't want to watch *George and Clarence*? But it's a holiday classic!"

Helen knew the old film's reputation probably better than anyone, for it had once been her all-time favorite. But it wasn't anymore, not since her heart had turned to stone, and Christmas had lost its

meaning. She could stomach some light seasonal entertainment if she had to, but wanted no part of any schmaltzy inspirational messages.

"You'll love it," Ben told her. "I promise you."

"I've seen it," said Helen, peering down at the floor.

"And you didn't like it?" Incredulous, he shook his head.

She was quiet for a moment, then raised her eyes to his. "Actually, I used to watch it three or four times every year. That's how much I loved it. It was a more important part of my Christmas tradition than a tree or gifts or anything else."

He stared at her, digesting her words. "So you just got tired of it or what?"

Helen's laugh was quick, but tinged with pain. "Not quite, but it's a long story." She shrugged then and smiled, deciding to give in to him. "But if your heart's set on it, I guess watching it one more time won't kill me."

"You're sure?" Ben asked, eyeing her carefully.

She nodded. "Yes, it's fine, really."

At half past eight that evening, Helen answered his knock on her door. She was glad he had let her off work early, as it gave her time to prepare everything. The only light in the apartment came from the flickering fire burning in the hearth and from the kitchen, where luckily, the chandelier over the table could be adjusted with a dimmer switch. The living room where they would watch the holiday film was bathed in golden shadows as Helen wished it to be, and fragrant with the sweet aroma of Bayberry from an old candle she'd found in the cupboard. There wasn't much more she could do to make the place any cozier, (or safer for her purposes).

She found herself hoping Ben wouldn't be disappointed when he saw that she hadn't decorated her home for the holidays, and as she went to answer the door, Helen couldn't help but wish the evening was already over. Because she didn't want to have to explain herself to anyone, especially him, perhaps for fear that her reasons would make no sense whatsoever.

"Sorry, I'm late," Ben apologized as soon as he walked in. "But I wanted to stop off and get you this." He held a poinsettia plant in a green foil pot tied with a velvet ribbon to match its scarlet leaves. "A little holiday gift in celebration of the season."

Helen took it from him, pleased at the thoughtful gesture. "Thank you, Ben. That was sweet of you." She set the plant down on the coffee table, then offered to take his coat, which he gave to her after retrieving the DVD from one of its pockets.

"Really cold outside, isn't it?" she said while hanging the garment in the closet.

"Sure is," Ben agreed, looking around the room. "But that's a great fire you've got going there."

Helen joined him on the couch then, sitting a couple of feet away. God, she wished she wasn't so nervous, but she hadn't expected the little log to burn quite so brightly, illuminating the entire room like it was doing.

"Well, I just thought it might add a little warmth," she lied, hoping the distance between them would help hide the scar that seemed just now to burn on her face.

Ben nodded and gazed at her profile, golden from the firelight. She stared straight ahead, feeling his eyes on her, then suddenly jumped up from the couch. "Would you like some wine or a beer?" she offered, heading for the kitchen.

"What? No eggnog?" Ben joked. "That simply won't do. Just where is your Christmas spirit?" And in the lengthy silence that followed, he glanced over his shoulder to find her looking strangely troubled. Quickly he went to her, concern on his face. "What is it, Helen? Have I done something to upset you?"

"Of course not," she replied, turning away. The soft light in the little kitchen seemed suddenly much too bright, and Helen brought a hand to her cheek to hide the scar beneath it. "It's nothing," she mumbled. "Really. Why don't you put the movie in now, and I'll pour you a glass of milk? That's pretty close to eggnog, isn't it?" And as soon as she'd said it, she realized how stupid it sounded and promptly burst into tears.

Ben didn't say a word, just took her in his arms and gently held her. What on earth had he done to make her fall apart like this? "I'm sorry," he murmured against her silky hair. "Please, Helen, won't you tell me what's wrong?" She shuddered briefly against him, and his heart beat fast at the wonderful feel and scent of her. He had dreamed so often of this moment, imagining her in his arms, but not in an embrace born of sorrow. He couldn't say just when it had happened, but long ago he had fallen in love with her and wanted

so much to confess it. But she was always so cool and businesslike around him that Ben was convinced she didn't share his feelings.

"You haven't ... oh, don't mind me," Helen said with a sniff, pulling back to step out of his arms. "I'm fine, really. It's nothing you've done. Come on, let's watch the movie."

He followed her back to the living room, then studied her from the couch as she put the DVD into the player. Such an unpredictable, sensitive girl, Ben thought, still puzzled by the incident. Maybe he was just a fool for hoping that he might have a chance with her, for even now as she slowly approached the couch, Helen seemed hesitant to come near him.

"Well, come on," he coaxed with a cheerful smile, patting the sofa cushion at his side. "Sit down and get comfortable." He slipped off his loafers and propped his feet up on the coffee table, then eyed Helen curiously as she settled down at the far end of the couch. "For Pete's sake, I won't bite you," is what he wanted to say, but Ben kept his mouth shut instead, puzzled by how ill at ease she appeared. His thoughts darkening, he turned away with a frown, folding his arms on his chest. Maybe this whole thing was just a colossally bad idea. Maybe he should just get up, say good night and get the heck out of there.

"Listen, Helen," he began, "if you'd rather I wasn't here..." But she cut him off in mid-sentence with a quick shake of her head.

"Oh, no! No, really. I'm sorry if I gave you that impression. I guess... well, the holidays just make me a little blue. I apologize."

"Make you blue! But why? It's a wonderful time of year."

Wonderful! She was at a loss for words, could never explain it to him, not in a hundred years. How could she make anyone understand that Christmas for her was just a time to remember shattered dreams that had died in a car crash? And that she didn't care to recognize a God who had marked her face and heart with a cruel, tormenting reminder? How could she tell him that she didn't want, didn't need, his or anyone else's pity?

"Yes, I suppose it is," Helen mumbled, aware that Ben was staring at her. The fire in the hearth seemed suddenly so bright that she wished she'd never lit it, afraid now that its yellow glow made the scar on her face even more apparent than ever. "Oh, where's that remote?" she said, glancing around until she found it. "I'm sorry, Ben. I've made you miss the beginning. I'll start it over again."

And so they watched the movie from start to finish, each lost in their own thoughts and only making small talk occasionally. During the emotional final scene, where George Bailey's friends and family gather around him in joyous song, Helen quickly brushed a tear from her cheek, hoping Ben wouldn't notice. But although he did, he pretended he hadn't seen and made no attempt to comfort her. Better to leave her alone, he decided, convinced that she preferred him to keep his distance. He had gotten her message loud and clear tonight and would not hold out any hope that she might someday belong to him. Just boss and employee from now on, he told himself as they said good night, although he still wished they could be so much more.

Ben tried his best to put Helen out of his mind that evening, yet tossed for hours in his bed. If anything, he loved her more now than ever, wanted so much to see her happy. What did she mean about the holidays always making her blue? It was all very perplexing. She hadn't even decorated her apartment, didn't have even a small tree or wreath or anything. Why wouldn't she open up and let him get close to her? Oh, not physically intimate, not this soon, Ben told himself, although truth was, his heart ached with desire whenever she was near. He'd known a lot of attractive women, but even with that little scar on her face, Helen was the loveliest, the sweetest, the dearest. No, what he wanted was for her to share her thoughts and feelings, instead of shutting him out as she did. Clearly she was troubled and needed someone to talk to, and Ben suddenly wondered if she had any family or friends in town. Then it dawned on him that he'd never asked. Well, there'd never been much time, he reasoned, for casual chitchat since the bar was always so busy. But he would correct that omission starting tomorrow, he told himself with a yawn. She seemed so lost and alone and in need of someone. There had to be some way to reach her.

Ben drifted off to sleep and began to dream that Helen was in his arms, warm, happy and willing. "I love you," he whispered, kissing her face, lips tenderly tracing the scar.... The scar that she despised so much, was so ashamed of, and thought so very ugly.

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