

2014

A  
Christmas Crisis







# A Christmas Crisis

*by*

Lady Gwendolyn



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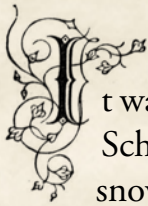
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Dear Readers, this is Lady Gwendolyn. I would like to introduce *A Christmas Crisis*. It is the first tale that I've had the honor of creating on my own. All the previous stories I have told have been true stories. While *A Christmas Crisis* is technically a work of fiction, the people and events that are portrayed are very real. It is particularly appropriate for this time of year as it is a very special tale of Christmas. May the Holy Family bless you all!

-Lady Gwendolyn

# CHAPTER 1

## CHRISTMAS IS COMING



It was the week before Christmas. A blanket of snow covered the playground of Liberty Elementary School. Its immaculate color had not yet been ruined, for no child had played in it. An unexpected snowfall the previous night had caused the school systems to be delayed. Now, near the end of this short school day, Liberty Elementary School was filled with children eagerly awaiting the bell which would send them to their snow-filled yards.

Down the long hallway of classrooms, huddled away, was Miss Lisa Nicole's fifth grade class. Her students were quiet and every head was filled with complicated, tricky division problems. The mundane hum of busy pencils was interrupted only with the sound of the teacher's fingers. Her eyes were fixed on her desk, though her mind was miles away. Every now and then she scanned her classroom without looking at what she was seeing. She lowered her eyebrows one last time and firmly ended the dispute going on her head.

"Children, put your math books away." She spoke quickly and then began looking through her desk.

"Is math class over?," a little voice asked.

"Yes, Timmy," the teacher opened another drawer. "It is for today."

"*Mrs.* Niiiiicole (the "i" was obnoxiously dragged like a squealing tire), it isn't 2:45 yet!"

"Thank you, Theodore," she responded without looking up, "But I have a watch."

"Maybe you should use it," he muttered after his math book. Book after book was slid into each desk. When the last sounds of the thudding books had faded away and the teacher had risen from her chair, all the children sat up with attention. They were quite curious. What were they going to do for the next forty-five minutes of school. Would they go outside, play a game, or did Miss Nicole have a "pop" test. Hundreds of possibilities ran through the young minds while indecision reigned in the teacher's.

"Okay," she looked slowly around the classroom. Her eyes caught the mess in the back.

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“Whose juice box is that on the floor? Why is that coat on the table back there? Who left their string in that corner?” A muddle of children’s voices were heard and several seats became empty as the guilty items were cleared away.

“Nicholas, please pick up your Santa Claus lunch box.” Miss Nicole, having thought a second, added “Why did you even bring it in anyway, today was a half day.”

“No, we had lunch.” A few of the children reminded her.

“Oh, yeah” the teacher rubbed her forehead. “I guess we did.”

“Um,” she looked at her watch, “why don’t you guys take five minutes to clean up around your desks a bit.” She sat down and noticed that they were slow to obey her command.

“I mean it, you guys. Go on!” There was temporary chaos in the classroom. As her students whizzed around their desks, Miss Nicole sat deep in thought. She had five minutes to make up her mind.

*It’s not that serious, she said to herself. No one is going to care. It’ll be fine.*

Shortly, everyone was back in their seats and awaiting Miss Nicole’s decision.

“Okay you guys,” she faced their inquisitive gaze. “I’m going to spend the next forty-five minutes, *approximately*”, she glanced at Theodore Baker, “talking to you all about Christmas.”

Their surprised expressions were not unexpected. It was a subject that all spoke of without talking about it. But she did not let their reaction intimidate her. She had already done half the damage by suggesting the topic. Although she knew, as well as they, that the damage lay in what direction she would take the subject. She sat down and with a resolute smile began her conversation.

“As you all know, this next Sunday is Christmas. It is a day celebrated nearly all over the world. As many of you also know, its origins are Catholic, dating back to the first Christmas, about 2,000 years ago. And even though many people don’t even believe in it, they will still, for societal reasons, celebrate this day the way society dictates.”

“Although most of you are Catholic or Protestant, I know that some of you are neither. In the past, you children have learned about a number of different religions as part of your cultural studies. Since more than one out of every five persons in the whole world is Catholic, and there are Catholics in every race and nation, the topic of Christmas is most certainly *at least* as valid to study for cultural reasons as religions that are limited to specific geographical areas or much smaller numbers!” The logic of her words rang through with such an obvious truth, how could anyone even attempt to deny it? The strength of that truth gave her the courage to continue. There was no turning back now ...

Miss Nicole then, for those who were unfamiliar with the story, retold and described the first Christmas. She told them briefly about the Annunciation, when the Archangel Gabriel appeared to Mary of Nazareth and asked if she would be the Mother of God. Several of the kids were shocked at the extraordinary question and then the awesome title bestowed upon Mary.

“And rightfully so,” Miss Nicole said. No other creature ever had or will receive such a well-earned



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honor or live such an incredible and yet sorrowful life as Mary did.

Miss Nicole went on to explain about the census that took place after Mary had married St. Joseph. What few people think about is the timing of the census. It was, for Joseph and Mary, really bad. The difficult journey that lay ahead of them to Bethlehem was even harder because Mary was pregnant and due to give birth.

“If I told you a story,” Miss Nicole said, “about a baseball game that got rained out, so the pitcher wound up going out to eat... somewhere,” she gestured with a wave of her hand, “and there, he met the woman that he would grow to love and then marry, you probably wouldn’t think about how disappointed the pitcher initially was about the baseball game being rained out. That’s because you’re getting the story backwards. The pitcher didn’t know about the rain, until he had looked forward to, prepared and planned for the ball game. Now of course, the rain was wonderful, because it was the instrument God used to lead him to his future wife. But, like most of God’s blessings, he didn’t recognize or appreciate it at the time. And I should think, neither would you. Now he could have and maybe he did, maybe you would. God didn’t let him know about the rain, until after he was excited about the game, so that the pitcher could be rewarded for not complaining. If he didn’t care because he already knew, then he wouldn’t get a reward.” Her little morality lesson wasn’t going over too well or getting that far with the kids. She turned back to her original point.

“It’s kind of the same thing when we view the story of Christmas. We don’t care about the hard inconvenience and disappointment it was for Mary and Joseph to have their Child born away from home. We don’t care, because we already know the end of the story.

So, they started this journey, all the while trusting in God, without a word of complaint for the trouble in store for them. I mean,” the teacher began to reminisce, “I remember when my mom was nine months pregnant with my younger brother Johnny. She would gently walk around, and good luck getting her to ride an animal. Not like the thought occurred to us. She was so delicate, especially near the birthdate. She had to walk slowly and the slightest movement against her had its impact. And Joseph and Mary’s troubles weren’t limited to Mary being jostled about by a donkey’s clumsy footing while she was pregnant.

“Let me give you another analogy,” Miss Nicole hoisted herself onto her desk.

“What’s an analogy?” some kid asked.

“An analogy is a type of story which is similar to what is trying to be explained. But it is told in a way that is more simple and familiar, to help you better understand the original point. For instance, Jesus told parables to explain His sermons, because He knew that it would be easier for most people to relate to, and understand, them. So, since you kids probably don’t know what it’s like to live in Israel 2,000 years ago, I will try to use an analogy that is similar enough to give you the point, but modern enough, so that you’ll understand it, as if you’d experienced it yourself.

Because, in reality Mary wasn’t that much older than you guys. For example,” the teacher pointed towards one of her students, “Miss Williams, how old are you?”

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“Eleven,” was the shy response.

“See,” the speaker explained, “Mary was only four years older than Jenny is. Maggie, don’t you have an older sister in eighth grade?”

“Yeah.”

“Mary was about your sister’s age when all this happened to her.”

“Whoa!” Maggie was impressed.

“Okay,” she continued, “the point I was going to make was about how Mary and Joseph didn’t know where they were going to stay. Pretend that, without warning, the government sent you a notice that you had to travel to the town where your father was born and grew up. And you had to get there within a week and your mother was nine months pregnant and ready to give birth at any time. Now, you have to travel there without a car and without phoning ahead to make reservations. They couldn’t because, 2,000 years ago, there was no electricity.

Imagine you were in their place, traveling slowly because your mother couldn’t push herself too hard or else she would have her baby along the way. All the while, your family is hoping you can find a place to spend the night when you get there. And then, after that, you don’t. If you wanted to go to a small town, where many people were gathering for some big sports event, but you didn’t reserve a hotel room ahead of time, you can see how you probably wouldn’t be able to get one. Bethlehem was a very small town, more like a village and many other people were traveling there because of the government-ordered census. Most other people were able to travel faster than the Holy Family because their situation was less delicate, and many of them probably lived closer so they didn’t have as far to travel.

So Joseph and Mary get there very late, it’s cold and Joseph can’t find a place for them to stay. They don’t just need to sleep, but Mary has to have a baby. The fact that Mary was pregnant, was an extra requirement that most of the inns probably did not want to deal with. So they’re left alone in the dark, and as you all know, their only refuge was a stable, which was really mostly just a cave used to keep animals.”

At this point, most of the children started to pick up and recognize certain parts of the story. The cold, dark stable, the animals, the shepherds, were almost familiar to many of them. Miss Nicole explained to them how anticipated this birth was. A star appeared in the sky to announce it.

“I know the stars look like a mess up there,” she smiled, “but in those days, people studied them and knew almost every single one.” She explained how the stars were so well known, that three kings actually left their kingdoms to follow this new star, which was, they discovered, the fulfillment of a prophecy. We also know that the Star was miraculous. It could be seen by day as well as by night, and it moved as it led The Three Kings to the place where the Great King was about to be born.” Miss Nicole’s students also found out that it wasn’t on Christmas day either, when the three kings arrived to adore the Infant King of all Kings. It was on the day celebrated as the Epiphany when Jesus received His expensive gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh from His royal visitors.

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When the young teacher finished discussing the basic details of the first Christmas, she started to explain its significance. That day, the greatest in the entire history of world, had been prophesied thousands of years before, and generation after generation had anticipated, watched and longed for that long-awaited birth. Holy Angels came and announced it's arrival to poor shepherds. The heavens had a miraculous, fiery visitor, and three great, powerful pagan kings, joined together to be among the first to pay homage to a Babe much greater than themselves.

"They knew that, and they were kings." Miss Nicole went on, "We're not royalty and we don't get it." Her point was not quite understood.

"Well, I mean if great important kings could endure the time, expense and hardship it took to be able to adore a newborn Infant, they must have believed that this Baby was pretty special. It wasn't just another king being born. Princes were born all the time, and yet no star heralded their birth, much less led anyone to their birthplace. How many other stories are there of kings traveling across many lands to pay homage to a new-born king? King Herod, if you kids remember, was none-too-thrilled with this new King. He was, in his eyes, a threat to his throne. Kings don't go to the trouble those three went to for another king, that is just their equal and no better than them.

"So, if kings knew that the meaning of the birth of this Baby was more important than themselves, then how can we, who are not kings, think that it is less than ourselves?"

The kids then understood what she was saying. But not all of them agreed. They protested that they didn't think Christmas wasn't important.

"But," Miss Nicole objected, "**what** makes it so important to you?"

The children listened as their teacher began to describe all the different ways that people have forgotten, disregarded and thought less of Christ and His birth.

"How many people do you think even give a moment's thought as to the real meaning of Christmas? Do you think they meditate on His birth when they're shopping in the stores, opening their gifts, or partying with their friends? Hardly any gifts given at Christmas have anything to do with Christ. Why should people even want to remember Him? Christmas has become, at its best, a universal party where everyone tries to be nice and get enough things for everyone. And, at its worst, a self-centered opportunity to get as much stuff as you possibly can."

"But," one of her students interrupted, "I have some friends who only get presents to the degree that they've been good, so isn't that a good motivation to behave themselves and therefore a good thing?"

"Besides, what's wrong with being nice to other people?" another one chimed in.

The young teacher hopped off her desk and began walking back to her chair. "There's nothing wrong with being nice to people. But, then again," she turned towards the girl who had asked, "aren't you supposed to be nice to people all year round? Why single it out to once a year around Christmas? And as far as a good motivation to behave yourself, John," she sat down in her chair, "I think another word for that is bribing. You're supposed to do.... what you're supposed to do, and you shouldn't need

a treat to get you to do it.”

She tried to explain to them that as wonderful as being nice and generous at Christmastime was, we should do that all the time, and at Christmas, think about Jesus who “invented” generosity. And most people, if they’re honest, will admit that the part of Christmas they look forward to is the getting, not the giving. Instead of focusing on what Christmas is about, people have come up with all sorts of substitute figures to be the center of Christmas and in the meantime, forcefully shove the Infant Jesus out of the picture. Miss Nicole went to name a few of the obvious, like: Father Christmas, Frosty the snowman, and Santa Claus.

“That’s assuming they even call it ‘Christmas’ anymore.” The teacher shrugged her shoulders. “How many people send out ‘Christmas cards’ and that don’t even say ‘Merry Christmas’, much less have anything to do with it. Most people nowadays will greet you with a ‘Happy Holidays’ or ‘Season’s greetings.’ They’re so afraid of offending everyone except, of course, Jesus Christ!”

“You, Jenny,” she nodded towards her student, “Did anyone ever wish you a “Happy Holidays!” at Thanksgiving, or Columbus Day?” The little girl shook her head.

“Joe, did you get a “Season’s greetings” card last summer?” A few of the children giggled at the idea. Their teacher smiled too.

“I’m serious, though.” She defended herself, “aren’t those holidays and isn’t summer a legitimate season?”

Several of the kids nodded in affirmation.

The young woman continued. “Why degrade a Christmas greeting to something as trivial and common as a holiday or season? Why not call it what it is and recognize what it’s about? Why work so hard to fill the event with characters, objectives and images that have nothing to do with it? Most every song that is played during the Christmas season has little or nothing to do with Christmas - especially most songs that are considered Christmas ‘carols’! In fact the most popular ‘carol’ in the United States is called ‘White Christmas’ and has absolutely nothing at all to do with Christmas. If you don’t believe me, find the lyrics and read them. Those lyrics never mention Jesus or the true meaning and purpose of Christmas. It could be about a pagan winter holiday, or pretty much anything else you want to apply it to. But the widespread popularity of this song shows you the success that ‘secularizing’ Christmas has had.”

“What does ‘secularizing’ mean?”

“To remove every religious and spiritual meaning from something, so that all that remains is ‘secular’ - worldly.”

“Okay, let me give you another analogy.” The young teacher sat up straight and thoughtfully cocked her head to the side. Her dark eyes rolled about the classroom, deep in thought, until they fell upon a scrawny lad in the front row.

“Patrick,” she asked the young boy, “don’t you have a birthday in a week?”

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“Yeah,” he said proudly, “I’m gonna be twelve on December 30th. Uhhh, next Friday.”

“Okay,” Miss Nicole continued, “Imagine that you have invited all your best friends to your birthday party next week. Now they show up and they’ve brought a lot of gifts and they’ve brought a clown, no on second a thought, a magician. They’ve brought along a magician. ‘So?’, you might think, ‘What’s wrong with a magician? They’re nice and they’re a lot of fun.’ But next thing you know, the magician is playing around with your friends and giving them treats through his “magic”. They’re all excited about him **and** the treats, so much so, that now they’re not paying any attention to you. And the gifts they’d brought for you, they start giving to each other. They sing lots of songs but none of them have anything to do with you or your birthday. Then they all leave your house, without speaking to you at all, but instead are crowding around the magician, thanking him and making arrangements for your birthday party next year.”

Her point had been made, and many of the students were thinking about her comparison. A few, however, were determined to find logical contradictions.

“So,” Theodore asked, “instead of giving a remote-controlled jeep to my little brother, I should give it to Jesus instead?” His tone and his question caused a few of his classmates to chuckle at the thought.

“Mr. Baker,” the teacher said impassively, “If your friends went to your birthday party, ignored you and instead, exchanged pretty baby dolls with each other, would you demand one for your birthday?” The acclamation her question received came in peals laughter from almost every student in the classroom. Mr. Baker was silent, but not subdued.

“There is nothing wrong with exchanging *some* gifts with one another but the Christmas season lasts from Christmas Day until the Epiphany, about 12 days later. Why not open gifts on the Epiphany? That’s when Jesus received His. People have done that. Or at least spread it out over the 12 days of the Season. People have also done this in the past. The trouble is that, for most people, Christmas is merely an opportunity to get a paid holiday from work, give and receive too many presents, listen to songs and watch shows on tv that have nothing to do with Christmas and instead *destroy* its profound, True Meaning....” Lisa let the depth of her points settle slowly into the children - at least the few that were still listening.

“... and just because Jesus doesn’t receive any physical gifts from us,” she told the children, “doesn’t mean He does not want, or *deserve*, to be the center of attention and the main recipient of the love and joy that Christmas inspires in almost everyone. It is, after all, **His** Birthday, not Father Christmas’, Frosty the Snowman’s or Santa Claus’!”

Miss Nicole returned to her point: “Certain people have, over the last couple hundred years, worked hard to change the way folks prepare for, and celebrate, Christmas because they don’t want anyone to think about Jesus. So they have put a lot of secular stuff into it to encourage people to think of themselves, having fun, and getting and giving presents at Christmas instead of thinking of Jesus Christ -Who He is and why He was born! In order to achieve this goal, they made the bold and arrogant move of shoving Christ out of Christmas!”

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Suddenly, the bell sounded and an electronically muffled voice came booming over the intercom announcing the end of school.

“Okay,” the young teacher glanced at her watch. “I guess our time is up for today. I wanted to give you all something though, before you had to leave.” She snatched up a little box on her desk; the item which had, before her talk, been the object of her search.

“Jenny, would you please help me with these.” A braided head came bobbing up the aisle towards the teacher’s desk. Miss Nicole opened the box and took out all the holycards and gave them to the little girl to pass around the classroom.

“What Jenny is giving each of you,” the woman explained, “is a holycard of what we’ve been talking about. It’s an artistic rendition of the first Christmas. If any of you do not want it that is fine.”

“What’s this on the back,” Nicholas asked, after surveying the gift.

“It’s a ‘note from you to Jesus,’” the teacher explained. “It’s kind of like a ‘birthday gift’ to Him on His birthday.”

Some of the children sat reading the back, while others, after seeing it, tucked it away and began packing up their schoolbooks. As the students got ready to leave for the day, the teacher reminded them of the things they needed to bring home and the assignments that were due.

Miss Nicole sat back down and started collecting her own things. She tidied up her desk, sticking most of the papers into her left hand drawers. She turned back to the right to grab her purse on the floor. Leaning over quickly, she discovered by her purse a pair of dress shoes which peaked out beneath a long jean skirt. Miss Nicole looked up into the owner’s dark brown eyes.

“Yes, Jenny?,” she asked her student.

“Um, I didn’t get a holycard,” was the quiet response.

“You didn’t?” The teacher sat back in dismay. “I was sure I got enough for everyone. Gee, that’s odd. Here,” She reached into her purse and pulled out an old black prayer book. As she did, a light card slipped from between the yellow-tainted pages and onto the floor. Miss Nicole reached down, grabbed it and reverently kissed it for the fall.

“God must want you to have this one.” She handed the holycard to Jenny. The little girl was visibly grateful and readily took the card. She looked at it and saw that it was not like the others her fellow students had received. Theirs had the Madonna and Child sitting before a group of shepherds, kneeling in adoration. Hers on the other hand had the Holy Family before anyone had arrived. In the foreground a grown man held the newborn infant in his strong arms. The child was asleep, sheltered from the bitter cold, beneath his father’s cloak. The smile on His Divine face showed the sweet serenity He felt, protected from every danger in the world. Behind them, Our Lady sat on her legs watching them tenderly.

“Saint Joseph?” Jenny asked.

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“Yeah. That’s one of my favorite pictures of him.” When Jenny turned the card over, her teacher explained to her that that prayer to St. Joseph was over 1900 years old.

“*It’s never been known to fail*?” Jenny read on the bottom.

“Anything good for us, asked for with Faith, has never been known to fail,” Miss Nicole explained.

“Oh,” Jenny sighed and a veil was briefly lifted to reveal an agitated young soul. Before Miss Nicole could venture to inquire about the sudden change, it vanished as quickly as it had come. Jenny beamed back at her teacher.

“Thank you, Miss Nicole.” She stuck the holycard into her skirt pocket. “I think it’s nicer than the others’.”

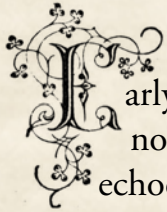
“So do I,” Miss Nicole smiled. She was glad it all worked out the way it did.

“Hey.” She lifted her box of papers. “Could you help me carry my stuff out to my car?”

“Sure. I’ll go get my back pack.” Jenny rushed back to her desk. Soon, the teacher and student were walking side by side down the long hallway. After seeing Jenny get onto her bus, Miss Nicole shut her car door and put the car in gear. As she pulled out of the snow-cleared parking lot, she noticed a white dusting of snow was just beginning to cover the school grounds.

# CHAPTER 2

## CONSEQUENCES



Early the next morning, Liberty Elementary School was comparatively quiet, as the students had not yet arrived. The teachers were about, though, preparing for the day ahead. The empty hallways echoed with their quick footsteps. In the fifth grade classroom, Miss Lisa Nicole sat at her desk, grading last week's math tests. Her silent solitude was interrupted by an abrupt rap on her door.

"Hey, Lisa," the third grade teacher poked her brunette head into Lisa's classroom.

"Oh hi, Stacy." She looked up briefly and recognized her friend.

"Have a moment to spare?" Stacy asked.

"Sure, I can chat while I'm grading." She paused, looking at a test. "You know James always puts his name on the wrong line!" She smiled wearily and corrected his frequent mistake.

"Yeah, you're lucky if you can read my kids' names." There was what seemed to be a long silence, when finally Stacy spoke.

"Heard about what happened."

Lisa mistook the statement for a question.

"What happened?," she said lightly.

"Oh come on, Lisa," Stacy thought she was kidding. "It's all over the school."

"What is?" the young teacher looked up from her work.

"Oh man," Stacy rolled her blue eyes. "At least when most people goof, they're smart enough to know it."

"Stacy, come on, stop playing with me. I'm serious, what happened!" The words came out hurriedly and they whispered of anxiety, but not of guilt.

Stacy looked right in her face. "Your little 'Christmas talk' didn't go over too well."

"Oh that." Lisa headed back to work. She didn't care what people thought.

"*Oh that.*?" Stacy exclaimed. "Girl, we're not talking about some kid spreading his moody stories. You trashed every rule in the book! What were you thinking?"

"This Sunday happens to be Christmas, so I talked about it. What's so evil about that?" She 'X'ed out another erroneous answer.

"You weren't just talking about it. First of all, you were condemning Christmas."



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"I was not!" Lisa stopped writing. "Who in the world told you that?"

"It's all over the place, Lisa. Everyone's talking about it. You blasted Rudolph, 'Jingle Bells', and little elves!" Stacy was overwhelmed by the last one. "What is your problem, Lisa? I don't understand how anyone can be so cruel and crabby enough to.. to.." She threw her hands in the air in search for a word. "..To take someone glorious, heroic, and wonderful in a child's eye and trash him up to be something unrecognizable."

"I agree," Lisa nodded. "But that's exactly what Catholics have permitted the world to do to Jesus on His birthday."

Stacy tried to object, but Lisa raised her hand as if holding it off.

"No! Do you want to know what is *really* horrible, cruel and abusive to children? You talk about unrecognizable! I'll tell you what's unrecognizable. Do you have any idea what the first Christmas was?"

"Lisa," Stacy began in reprimanding tone.

"No, Stacy, I mean it. You never would have guessed from the way people celebrate it nowadays that Christmas is the day we honor for being the birthdate of God-made-man!" Her emphasized tone showed the passion within her.

The third grade teacher simply placed her hands on her hips. She had reluctantly listened to her friend carry on. She looked her squarely in the eyes and acted as though she hadn't heard a word.

"Stacy, you know that I am right. And how many Catholics care? You don't, and you are a Roman Catholic, too!"

Stacy quickly looked over her shoulder fearfully to see if anyone had heard her. "Keep your voice down! The reason why I came to talk to you in the first place was to warn you. But - ..." she looked again to see if anyone might have heard Lisa.

"Warn me?" Lisa skeptically raised a brow. "About what?"

Stacy sighed and leaned back - ready to give a long and prepared speech.

"Well," she said, "I don't know how anyone as sensible as you could think that something as atrocious as your behavior yesterday would go by unnoticed. Almost everyone I've talked to said-"

"Stacy," Lisa interrupted sharply. Her voice betrayed her anxiety. "What warning?"

"I'm shocked that you don't know, or at least have an idea." A look from Lisa cut her introduction short. With a grim face, she let loose the merciless words.

"You're going to be fired."

Lisa's face fell. So did her heart. She felt as though large cruel chains were twisting themselves around her soul and dragging her relentlessly down with them. Her eyes glazed over and she turned

towards her desk.

“They’re saying Friday is your last day,” she heard Stacy’s cold voice say. It echoed through her mind mechanically. Lisa grasped her head with her trembling hands. She hadn’t expected the reaction to be this severe. Hundreds of thoughts came rushing into her mind. She had just purchased a used car and signed the lease for her apartment. So many other things depended on this job. A sick feeling came into her stomach as she realized she wouldn’t be able to pay for all of them. And with it came a cold fear which swept through all her veins. She looked ahead towards her future, and it loomed ominously in the dark distance like a foreboding cliff; off of which, she felt she was being dragged.

“Are you serious?” was all Lisa could say.

“Where do you think we are? This is a **public school!** You know about separation of Church and state! I’m shocked that you can even ask!” Stacy folded her arms in disgust.

“So am I,” Lisa said dully. She sighed heavily and then looked towards her ‘friend’.

“I talked about Christmas,” she said slowly, “and they’re firing me. I said Whose birthday it was. How do you think the school would feel if on George Washington’s birthday I talked about William Shakespeare? How do you think I’d feel,” her voice began to rise, “if on Columbus Day I talked about Christopher Columbus, and then soon afterwards was promptly and thoroughly fired? Do you see the contradiction here? What makes talking about Christ so evil? Or the Blessed Virgin Mary? Or the Saints, like Saint Joseph? They are true heroes, worthy of study, admiration and imitation. Why can we talk about almost anything, anyone and any religion and get a standing ovation, but then as soon as Catholicism becomes the topic, you’re thrown out of the system? We teach these kids about every other religion, in one way or another, all under the guise of ‘multiculturalism’. And the more pagan the religion, the more we are encouraged to explain it in detail.”

“Okay, girl, I’m sorry about your job.” Stacy said with little emotion. “I know it meant a lot to you.”

Lisa sighed and said softly, “You don’t know the half of it.”

“I don’t make the rules, I just have sense enough to live by them.” Stacy defended herself.

“You can choose the rules you live by, Stacy. And you’ll become whatever they are.” She put her elbows on her desk and added, “I think my points are good ones. This system is filled with hypocrisy and lies ...” Lisa’s voice trailed off as she glanced at her papers trying to distract herself from the full, brutal reality that she was enduring because she wanted to give a little equal time to the one man Who ever lived that had the right to be worshipped as God. Examining the papers, she suddenly smiled, “Lucy drew her parrot again.”

“Enjoy yourself,” Stacy said sincerely. “They’re the last tests you’ll be grading.” With that, she left the forlorn teacher to herself. Lisa heard Stacy mutter as she left, “You’ve failed your own.”

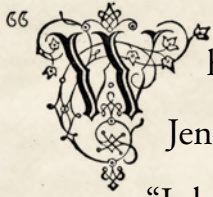
The door slammed shut and Lisa shook involuntarily. She looked at the rows and rows of empty desks, all facing her own.

## CHAPTER 2

“They’re firing me!” she told them. Her voice was dead. The fire in her heart had been smothered and the passion was gone. “They’re firing me ...” The voice was not her own and its dead tones echoed through the solitary classroom, swallowing her up.....

# CHAPTER 3

## PREPARING FOR “THE DAY”



hat do you want for Christmas, Jenny?” Mrs. Williams sat near the edge of the queen-sized bed.

Jenny didn't answer. She lay staring at the ceiling, thinking.

“I don't know.” she said finally.

Her mother smiled. “Christmas is only 3 days away,” she reminded gently.

“I know.” Jenny turned toward her window. *It's starting to snow*, she thought. As if somehow the snow was making Christmas come all the sooner. Everything was pressuring her to decide.

Her mom scooted closer to Jenny. “You gotta let Santa know, so he can get it in time for Christmas,” she said in a coaxing way. “He's getting really busy, you know. The closer it gets to Christmas, the harder it is to fill out requests.” Jenny sighed audibly and pulled the blanket over her head.

“Mark's decided.” Mrs. Williams said. “But he doesn't want me to ‘tell anyone except Santa.’”

That didn't get a response and the ignored mother sat staring at the back of her girl's dark head. Inside it, Jenny was running through all of the possible gifts that her 7 year old brother could want.

“Do you have anything in mind?” she rubbed Jenny's arm. Jenny rolled over and looked back at her.

“Kind of...” she said slowly, “But I haven't decided yet.”

“Okay.” The mother sensed she wasn't getting anywhere and decided to quietly change the subject.

“How was school today?”, she asked casually. Not casual enough, though, for Jenny noticed, but ignored, the change of tactics.

“Fine, I guess.” Jenny said without thinking. Then, her mind started going backwards through the day just to see if that was true.

“Did you do your schoolwork?” Mrs. Williams naturally asked.

“Uh huh,” was the equally habitual response. There was an awkward silence. Awkward only for those who noticed it. Jenny didn't. Her mind had come to the part when Miss Nicole had given her talk on Christmas.

“Hey.” A gentle hand whacked her out of her thoughts. “Dad just set up the tree. Do you want to help decorate it? Grandma Sophie gave us some of the ornaments she had when I was a girl.”

“Really?” Jenny's interest was aroused.

### CHAPTER 3

“Yeah.” The woman tossed back her short hair, thinking through the memories. “There’s a Christmas tree skirt and some snowflake window clings that I used to hang up in my room. There’s a bunch of neat stuff.” She gave Jenny an inviting smile. “You could help me look for all her boxes in the attic.” Jenny’s eyes lit up. “They’re probably buried. She gave them to us a few years ago, but I keep forgetting about them.” There was another silence, where it seemed like both were waiting for the other one to speak or do something.

“So....” Mrs. Williams slapped her knees into a standing position. Turning back towards her daughter, she asked: “What do you say we open them up this year? Are you done with your catnap?”

Jenny groaned and twisted in her blanket.

“What time is it?” she asked.

“Uh, let’s see. It’s....” Her mother’s eyes went searching for a clock.

“On the dresser,” said Jenny, reading her thoughts. Mrs. Williams then saw, hidden behind a vegetable-looking lamp, its matching tomato-shaped clock.

“4:50” she read. Her eyes went from the viney hands to a foreign object nearby. Jenny threw her head back on her pillow.

“It’s been about 20 minutes.” she sighed, “I guess that’s a long enough nap.” Jenny looked up at her mom. She had noticed the holycard by the clock and was looking it over.

“Where did you get this?” Jenny was asked.

“Miss Nicole gave it to me.” She sat up in bed.

“Your teacher?” Mrs. Williams assumed.

“Yeah. She handed them out to the class. Well, actually I did,” Jenny pushed herself to the edge of the bed. “But she was one short, so she gave me one of her own.”

“Oh, that was nice of her.” She turned over the card to read the back. “This says, *‘It’s never been known to fail’*. Is that true?”

“Yeah, when you ask for anything that is good ...,” she struggled to remember the rest of what Miss Nicole had explained about praying to Saint Joseph, “... and you ask for it with **Faith** - then, that prayer has never been known to fail”

The mother gently put the small gift back on the dresser. It was sweet but she didn’t want to dwell on it.

“Hey, daydreamer!” Jenny was staring at the falling snow. At her mother’s call, she turned around.

“Did you wanna play outside, or are you going to help me with the tree?”

“No.” Jenny sighed. “I’m going with you.” She hopped off the bed and headed for the door. Her angel tapped her shoulder and Jenny turned to see her hand-made sweater lying on a chair. She smiled

and grabbed her first crochet project.

“The attic’s not going to be warm.” She smiled at her waiting mother.

Mrs. Williams agreed and shut the door behind her daughter.

Together, Jenny and her mom searched the dusty attic. They poked here and there, digging out old boxes of odd things. Her mother expected they were close, when they found a box of her father’s phonograph records. Mrs. Williams started getting sidetracked, sifting through her favorite disks. Jenny shortly became bored and wandered off to a different part of the attic. With her little flashlight, she scanned the worn-out labels of the boxes before her. Jenny was attracted to one in particular, with the words *family photos* scribbled hastily on the side. She knelt down beside it and gently removed the lid. Bundles of photographs lay before her, and Jenny eagerly lifted one and took a few out. Neither of the women were aware of how much time passed as each became more and more absorbed in their discoveries. Jenny was the first to break the silence.

“Hey, Mom!” she called out, holding up a photo. “There’s a picture of you and dad right after you’d gotten married.” She looked at it again and sighed. How pretty her mother looked in her long white gown and elaborate veil. Her collar was high, and the sleeves hung down, nearly to the floor, like that of a medieval princess. They both looked so happy. What set the picture off was the background. Rows of candles lit the high altar and the two statues which framed it. One was Our Lady of Grace with her head and eyes inclining towards Jenny’s parents. On the left, the Baby Jesus’ hand was raised in blessing over them, from the arms of St. Joseph.

“Where did you guys get married?” Jenny asked.

“Some Holy Family something.” Her mother kept looking at the records and didn’t give much thought to her answer. She was obviously interested in them. Jenny looked back at the photo and then at her mother.

“Can I have it?” she said.

“Have what?”, her mother looked up and squinted through the dimly lit room.

“This.” Jenny held up the picture and aimed her flashlight at it.

“Uh no,” she sounded impatient. “Why don’t you put it back.” So saying, Mrs. Williams began to put the records back in the box. “I still have to label and organize all those photographs.”

Jenny was genuinely disappointed, but obediently slid the picture back in its bag and placed it with the others. She stuck the lid back on and turned off her flashlight.

“Hey, Jenny!” her mom’s triumphant voice came from the opposite end of the attic. “I found them!”

Shortly, Jenny and her mom were carrying the Christmas boxes down the rickety stairway. Once they’d set their boxes in the living room, Mrs. Williams unexpectedly headed back for the attic.

### CHAPTER 3

"I'll be right back," she called out over her shoulder. Jenny looked up at her father, who was balancing on a ladder.

"Hi, Dad!" Jenny smiled. She couldn't see his face behind the tall tree.

"Hello, honey. I'll be right there," She heard him say. The tree started moving, as he brushed past its thick branches. She went to meet him and had hugged him before he had completely reached the floor.

"How was your catnap?" He asked, and took a ring of Christmas lights off from around his neck.

"All right." Feline noises came from beneath the tree, as Jenny's little brother, Mark, crawled around, inspired from the previous question.

"Meow. Meow," he screeched and hurried out into the room on all fours.

"Hey, Mark, get off the floor." It was Mom, who'd just come back from the attic with a familiar box.

"What's that?," her husband asked.

"Records," she heaved, setting them down with a thud.

"Whose are they, Kathy?"

"My dad's." She took a few out. "I've got a record player in my room. You want to listen to some Christmas music, while we decorate the tree?" Her question was aimed more at Mark, than at Fred, her husband.

"Yeah!" the seven year old said enthusiastically.

"Okay," she smiled. "I'll go get the phonograph."

Soon, the music was playing and everyone set to work. Fred was back on the ladder with a neck full of colorful lights. Mark was initially curious in Gramma Sophie's boxes, but before long, was sorting through delicate Christmas balls choosing which ones were "his."

Jenny helped her mother unpack the different boxes. It only took the first box for her mother to launch into all sorts of memories and short stories/histories of past Christmases. The items, familiar only to Kathy, ranged from ornaments to house decorations to old memorable 'holiday' keepsakes. Suddenly, an unexpected burst from the youngest amongst them interrupted everyone's work.

"Can I put *my* ornaments on now!" Mark asked impatiently. He was standing by the tall tree, with his colored balls in hand. Before his mother could answer, Fred responded to the young boy's question.

"No."

"Why not?" Kathy asked quickly. Jenny looked up.

“Because,” he said dryly, “I’m not done with the lights yet.”

“Come on, Mark,” Jenny said defensively. “You know that the decorations go on after the lights.” Mark huffed himself onto the floor.

“Well,” Mrs. Williams started to sound impatient herself, “How much more is there?”

“Not much,” Fred answered. “I’m almost done.”

Mrs. Williams turned towards her ornery child and reached out a hand towards him.

“Why don’t you come help me and go through Gramma’s boxes?”

Mark ignored the invitation and scooted himself away from his mother. He continued playing with his ornaments.

It wasn’t long though before Mr. Williams was finishing up the bottom of the tree with lights. Jenny and her mom were almost done too. There was one more box left to explore. Jenny opened it and a burst of old packing peanuts came flying into her face.

“Look, Mom,” she cried instinctively.

Mrs. Williams bent over to gather the fallen peanuts. “Yeah, Jenny, the ornaments in that box are pretty fragile.” She reached inside the box and pulled out a colored icicle. “See, and there’s lots more. But why don’t you take what we’ve already emptied and start sorting it out. You know, what we’ll probably use and what we can’t. I’ll keep looking through this box. It’s easy to miss something, because there’s so many packing peanuts.” So while Jenny sifted through the decorations, Kathy pulled out the delicate, but pretty, ornaments. Even Mark came over, looking through all the neat things Jenny was organizing. But when Mr. Williams was finished putting the lights around the Christmas tree, Mark demanded the decorating begin.

And so they did. Between what Gramma Sophie had given them and their own Christmas boxes, the Williams’ living room was filled with decorations. Garlands draped over their rose-colored furniture, which was stuffed with bags of tinsel and stringed candy. Their carpeted floor was cluttered with boxes of ornaments which, if a fire alarm had sounded, would have trapped the hapless family to their doom. But no alarm did, in the hour they spent decorating the tree.

“It’s looking pretty good,” Mr. Williams said, stepping back as he eyed the tree with satisfaction.

“I don’t know,” Jenny smiled. “I can still see the tree.” Her family always seemed to push their Christmas trees to the absolute maxim capacity they had. Jenny, herself, always wondered



### CHAPTER 3

at trees which had like.. only candy canes on the branches, with maybe a little star at the top. *And nothing else?* She thought *That was all!*

“What do you think, Mom?” Jenny asked. But her mother’s attention was already taken by her younger brother. Most everyone had, for the past hour, been singing and humming to the loud tunes coming from the stereo-player. Mark was now dancing about the room while he sang, “♪*He sees you when you’re sleeping! And he knows when you’re awake...*♪”

Mrs. Williams was concerned that his frolicking might send him crashing to the floor... taking the Christmas tree with him!

“I think it’s looking nice,” she said, grabbing Mark’s hand which put his spinning to an end.

“I think it could use a few more icicles up towards the top, don’t you think?” Mr. Williams grabbed a couple more. “Then I think we’re ready for the tinsel. Right, Jenny?” Jenny smiled and watched her father reach towards the tree’s top. Everybody knew that the tinsel was her favorite part. She found it so peaceful and pretty. Mrs. Williams slipped on one last ornament when, suddenly, a loud and dangerously sounding clanking was heard from the corner of the room. All of them turned towards the record player, from whence they thought the sound to be coming. The songs had just switched, and Mark was dancing to an energetic rendition of *Jingle Bells*. But what caught their attention, and what was causing the strange noise to begin with, were the little glass balls which Mark was using to recreate the ‘bells’ on the horses’ sleigh. In horror, his mother dashed across the room and snatched the broken glass from his foolish hands. She handed them to Mr. Williams, who had joined her side, while she carefully examined her son for any cuts. In two minutes, what was a minor emergency was discovered to have caused no physical damage to anyone but the glass balls. Mark’s hands were washed, and Mr. Williams told Jenny to put the rest of the breakable ornaments away.

The whole incident kind of took the decorating spirit out of everyone. The new focus seemed to be putting things away.

Jenny carefully put the few glass ornaments left, back into the peanuts box. She helped her parents put the other decorations away, when she was finished. That was one of the advantages of stuffing your tree, there wasn’t quite as much to put away. Jenny was shuddering at the thought of taking the tree down, when she saw a star ornament peaking out from beneath the couch.

“I guess I wasn’t done,” she said to herself, opening up the fragile box again. She pushed the star deep into a peanuts-filled corner and then pulled her hand out. As she did so, she instinctively grabbed at her right wrist. Something had caught in one of the large holes in

her crocheted sweater. She looked down, and saw a shepherd-shaped statue hanging on to her sleeve with his little brown staff. Jenny unhooked it gently. Looking at it from the front, she recognized who it was. St. Joseph. Jenny smiled. She wouldn't have caught him, if she hadn't worn her sweater. She stood there holding it for a while, then she thought to show her parents.

"Hey, Mom! Dad!" She held the little statue up. "Look what I found!"

"What is it?" her father asked.

Jenny's mother answered him, "That's a piece of an old nativity set we had."

"Can we set it up," asked Jenny eagerly.

"No, because I don't think we have all the pieces. They've been lost for years. Most of them, anyway. I know the stable got busted." She closed the lid to a box of Christmas lights.

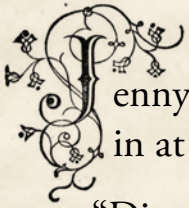
Jenny stuck her hand into the peanuts again, in search of the rest of the pieces. She smiled suddenly, as she recognized the feel of another statue. When the peanuts fell from the kneeling figure, Jenny found herself looking into a beautiful face. It was the Blessed Virgin Mary, with her head tilted towards her newborn child. Jenny ran her finger along the statue's hands which were strangely extended. Jenny reached down again and found the Infant Jesus in his crib of straw. She fished around some more, hoping her mother had been mistaken and was thinking of a different nativity scene. But Mrs. Williams was right, and those pieces were the only ones Jenny could find. She ventured to look in the other boxes, but both her parents assured her that neither of them had seen anything like them when packing the boxes. Jenny's heart sank when she realized that they were right. She'd helped unpack all but the peanuts box herself and she hadn't seen anything.

"Can I have these in my room, then?" Her face lightened momentarily at the thought.

"Yeah, sure," her mother answered. She hoped that it would console her daughter somewhat for the apparent loss there was in the orphaned statues. Her generosity was gratified at the sight of Jenny taking off, out of the living room. Mr. Williams, standing in the entranceway, was passed quickly by Jenny, as she rushed by him and the front door. He watched her take a left, heading up the stairs and then another, going down the upper hallway leading to her room. He was glad to see her shake off what little disappointment she had in the missing crèche. Both parents continued cleaning up the decorations.

# CHAPTER 4

## THE DISCOVERY



Jenny wasn't alone in her room for very long, though. Her little brother came bursting in at a high rate of speed and appeared to be considerably excited.

"Dinnertime?" Jenny asked. She was almost teasing him, knowing that that wouldn't cause him such exuberance.

"No," Mark cried, oblivious to the fact that she already knew that answer. "Dad and I are going out to eat at the mall! You wanna come! He's taking me to see Santa Claus!" The poor boy's heart was racing faster than a humming bird's wings.

"No thanks," she seemed disappointed. Mark was shocked that she didn't immediately share his enthusiasm, as she had in the past.

"Are you sure?" He was asking more for her sake than for his. He didn't care.

"Yeah," she brushed her bangs back. "Thanks anyway."

Mark was stunned for a second, but only one. The next second, he was shrugging his shoulders in pity at his 'poor' sister as he ran out of the room.

Jenny didn't do anything for a moment or two, but just kind of stared down at the floor. Slowly, she began straightening up her room. She cleared away a place on her dresser for the Holy Family. As she placed the Infant Jesus between His parents, she heard her father's car start, and drive out of the driveway. Jenny held back the lace curtain as she watched it's red rear-lights disappear around the corner.

She walked back around her bed and sat down on the edge. She didn't do anything, just sat and thought. Not really about anything in particular, though, for her mind was wandering into all sorts of subjects. The day had been full of unusual events. She stared at her statues and thought about Gramma's boxes and the fun it was to look through them. Then her mind trailed off to the Christmas tree decorating and the abrupt ending caused by her brother.

Her brother. Jenny hadn't gone with Mark to the mall, like she would have in the past.

Why? Jenny wasn't so sure herself. Was there a reason?

*I don't know,* she said to herself. *I just didn't want to, I guess.* Not wanting to confront what she couldn't answer, Jenny sought to change the subject.

“What time is it?” She said out loud. She glanced at the clock. 6:50 pm.

“Wow, that was two hours.” Jenny stared at the clock in disbelief. Her eyes trailed off of it and came upon the holycard which leaned against it. With the single look she gave it, a flood of memories came back about her teacher, Miss Nicole. Particularly her talk. Jenny sighed and thudded off the bed. She walked to her dresser and picked up the little gift. All the questions swirling through her mind came rushing to the front, demanding an answer. They would not be put off any longer. Jenny shook her head, trying to throw them out, while she looked at the holycard. She suddenly grew frustrated, and glared down at it, acting as if it should answer everything, even the questions she wasn’t aware of yet. A sharp rap at the door did a sudden, but more thorough, job of clearing Jenny’s mind.

“Come in,” she said. The door opened and a familiar pair of eyes met hers.

“Are you hungry?,” her mother asked. “Dinner’s ready.”

“Okay, sure.” Jenny stuck the holycard in her pocket.

“I’m coming,” she called to her mother, who had already left.

The meal was simple, but enjoyable, for they let the Christmas tree supply most of their lighting. The conversation went in and out of all sorts of topics, but mostly around Christmas. Mrs. Williams gently pushed about what Jenny wanted for Christmas, but, when met with a resolute silence on her daughter’s part, once again, changed the subject. At that point, most of the talking was done by Jenny’s mother who told stories of her childhood Christmases. Most of them revolved around the decorations Gramma Sophie had given.

“They look nice, don’t they?” Mrs. Williams commented, turning around to look at the tree.

“Yeah.” Jenny agreed, but as she stared at them, she noticed something was wrong.

“Hey,” she sat up straight. “We never put the tinsel on! Remember, everybody stopped after Mark broke the Christmas balls.”

“That’s right, we never did. Hey,” her mom smiled, “Why don’t you and I do it and surprise the guys? They’ll be back in about a half hour.” This proposition received neither refusal nor silence from the young girl, who responded by eagerly finishing what remained on her plate.

After dinner, Mrs. Williams cleared the table, and then joined Jenny, who was sorting out the tinsel. Their feminine decorative skills were put to good use, as they artistically arranged the thin strips of silver and gold across the evergreen branches. In what seemed like no time

## CHAPTER 4

at all, the Christmas tree was shining and glittering from head to toe. They'd emptied five of the seven boxes, leaving one of each color, when the front door opened and a whirlwind of snow blew in.

"It's snowing outside!" Mark yelled to Jenny, as he came bursting in with their dad.

"How are the roads?" Kathy asked her husband.

"They're okay," he puffed through his thick scarf then, noticing the tree, added, "You guys got the tinsel up!"

"Yes." Jenny ran up to him. "How do you like it?"

"It looks nice." He smiled.

"Pretty!" Mark said briefly, but with a professional air.

Then, he insisted upon showing his mother and sister the candy he'd gotten. Mr. Williams walked off quietly with a few bags to put away. After eyeing her brother's colorful array of sweets, Jenny cleaned up what was left of the Christmas tinsel. Mother had Mark put his coat and things away and she started busying herself in the kitchen. It looked like nothing else was going to happen, so when Jenny was done, she went up to her room.

After some time, Mark ran back into the dining room and, through it, to the 'sofa' room.

He immediately turned on the TV and plopped himself down on a couch. It seemed an odd thing to the seven-year-old boy, but as soon as the loud cartoon voices came booming through the speakers, his father looked at his watch.

"It's 8:30," Mr. Williams told Mark. "Time to go to bed." Mark groaned, and leaving the television on, ran back through dining room, past his father and headed in the direction of the front door, which was across from the stairs. His little feet made tremendous thuds, as they pounded up the stairs.

"Mark!" his mother called from entrance to the dining room. "Mark!"

His head appeared above her and he leaned over the railing.

"Here," she held out a small piece of paper, "Jenny left this on the table." Mark ran to the top few stairs and reached his hand through the bars to grab the holycard from his mother.

"And tell Jenny that she has to be in bed in a half hour." Without responding to this last request, Mark took off down the hallway to his room.

Mrs. Williams listened to him thudding over her head and when she was sure he had gone, she stepped forward and locked the front door. Then she went around the main floor, turning off the unnecessary lights. She fiddled for about twenty five minutes in the kitchen, watching a football game

## *A CHRISTMAS CRISIS*

over her husband's shoulder. When it was over, he left the living room and grabbed a snack from the kitchen. When she was done, Kathy joined her husband in the dining room with a cup of tea. She asked about his trip to the mall, and what gifts he had dealt with. Later, in turn, he asked if Jenny had decided on her big Christmas gift yet.

"No," Kathy slowly stirred her sugar. "I've asked her a few times, but she hasn't decided yet." Fred rubbed his chin, thinking about his little girl. He thought he might have a better chance at getting an answer from her.

"There isn't much time left," he said.

"I know." Her tone was far from humble.

"The mall was mobbed and we spent half the time waiting in line for Santa." Mr. Williams hadn't enjoyed the trip very much. His wife sighed in agreement. She started thinking about her plans for this Sunday.

"Is your brother coming?" she asked Fred.

"No. I don't think he'll be able to make it this year. He's down in Florida for the holidays." Kathy nodded. A whistle of wind caused her to hold her warm cup more tightly. "Cousin Cornelia is coming, isn't she?"

"I don't know," he said roughly. "She's your cousin."

"Well, I thought she talked to you." Kathy snapped back. "It's not like any of your relatives are coming over."

"Why would they?" he asked. "They didn't know I was going to be here." Fred leaned back in his chair and looked up at his wife. "I'm assuming cousin Cornelia knows not to say anything."

Mrs. Williams rolled her eyes. "Of course she does. I know how to deal with my own family." She pushed herself away from the table and walked into the kitchen.

"Is there a window open?" she stopped in front of the cabinets with a puzzled look on her face. Mr. Williams either ignored or didn't hear her, because he looked back towards the television, which was still running.

"I just wanted to make sure that you told her to be careful, after all the trouble you've gone through." There wasn't anything interesting on, and he turned back to the table.

"I don't know why we are going through this anyway." He said.

"Because it's Christmas." Her tone hinted at the anger she was trying to subdue. "It means a lot to a kid. It's a magical time of year for them and nothing should ruin that. Not even

reality, if possible.”

“But they’re going to find out the next day.” Mr. Williams protested. He didn’t see how lying to children, in order to make them happy, by ‘protecting’ them from reality, helped. It would only leave a bigger hole when what they thought and believed to be good and real was ripped from the fantasy they had been taught to live.

“It doesn’t matter,” her voice rose with annoyance. “Keep the magic alive, for the entire day. They wake up, find the presents that Santa left, open them, play in the snow, listen to carols, eat the turkey dinner, and forever after they’ll remember that as a memorable and happy Christmas. That’s the important thing” she added quietly as she poured some juice into the empty cup. There was a brief silence as she slowly sipped her drink. With a sigh, she placed it on the countertop, and looked at Fred.

“I don’t want their Christmas to be ruined by knowing that their parents are getting divorced.”

Just then, the tree started to shake as a blast of icy wind swept into the house. Mr. Williams quickly walked into the living room and found the open window.

“Brrr...,” Mrs. Williams shuddered “It’s cold outside.” She thought she’d felt a window open. The cold air seemed to fly through the house, carrying some snow with it. The mighty wind outside caused the windows to shake; and within, through the dark rooms, a breeze of snow swirled its way up the empty stairway. The few flakes which made it to the top melted on a forlorn cheek. Jenny pulled tightly on her sweater as the cold air swept through her long gown. She shuddered too, but not from the cold.

“Well, I hope that we’re not going to get any surprises.” Jenny heard her father’s voice walking into the kitchen. “I assume that everything’s going as we both planned?”

“Yes,” Mrs. Williams answered with a sort of relieved confidence. “You’re leaving on Monday, the day after Christmas. Just-”

“I know, I know,” Fred interrupted. “*Just let them have Christmas.*”

“No,” Kathy responded with equal rudeness. “Don’t say, act, or hint anything, do you understand! If we’re going to do this, we’re going to do it **my** way.” She shook her teaspoon at him at each point.

“I understand. Hey! You saw me take Mark to see Santa Claus, didn’t you?” Mr. Williams sat down.

“Yes, that was good. He seemed to enjoy himself. And Jenny had fun putting the tinsel on.

That's what's important!" Mrs. Williams grew quiet for a moment and Jenny leaned against the banister to hear them better.

"I don't want them to find out!" her mother said slowly, thinking. When she thought of what she just said, she realized the inevitable reality she was fighting against. Mrs. Williams quickly added, "At least not until after Christmas. And they won't," she said confidently, "If you are careful."

"I don't know." Mr. Williams reached for a newspaper. "They're pretty smart."

Jenny smiled dryly. She heard her mother's voice say how they weren't that smart. After all, they were just children.

"Everything's going to be fine," Kathy said out loud to herself. "I don't know why I'm worried. There's no need to be."

There was an uncomfortable silence and Mr. Williams muttered something about putting the car in the garage. After he left through the side door, its slam, amplified when contrasted with the nightly silence, echoed through the quiet house. It was silent for a while, until Jenny heard her mom get up to wash the cups she'd used. Amidst the clanking dishes and running water, the woman's dispassionate voice could be heard, speaking in tones of great assurance.

"The children won't know this Christmas to be any different from the others."

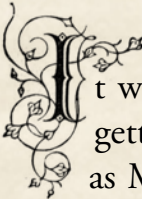
Her voice was distant, prideful and almost unfamiliar. It sent a chill to Jenny's heart.

"No," the girl said softly. "They'll know better." And the first, but sorely needed and long withheld, tear came streaming down her pale face.



# CHAPTER 5

## A CRISIS FOR CHRISTMAS

t was Friday afternoon and Liberty Elementary school was teeming with activity. Everyone was getting ready to go home for their Christmas vacation. The fifth graders felt especially delighted, as Miss Nicole, in honor of the holy feast, had given them very little schoolwork to do. As they bustled out of the room, several children shouted their good-byes back at their teacher. All of them wished her nothing less than a “Merry Christmas”.

Soon the classroom was empty and Miss Nicole surveyed the vacant desks with a sigh. She started to feel how much she was going to miss them and the children who occupied them. She hadn't heard any news directly yet.

“Waiting for the ax to fall seems so much worse,” she said heavily, “than if it had already fallen.” She gave the room one last look through the half opened door and then slowly, with great reluctance, she closed it softly.

Outside, the yellow train of buses was being filled with the schoolchildren. Although it wasn't snowing, it was bitterly cold, and Lisa could see her breath coming out like clouds of smoke. The young woman made her way to her car, which wasn't parked in its usual place. For no reason in particular, except for the fact that the parking around her usual spot was filled, Miss Nicole had parked in a smaller lot, out of view and some ways from the school's main entrance. As she unlocked her car though, Lisa could still see the buses as they made their way out of the parking lot's exit. She stood there for a while, staring at them carrying away the children. She had witnessed and imagined their “holiday” excitement, as they called it. The desolate teacher couldn't help but wonder if anything she'd said had made a difference. Something deep inside her made Lisa shudder as she questioned whether or not *anything* she would or *could* say or do would affect any of them. She'd talked about a feastday that everyone celebrates and which is based on a historical event. Yet, she got fired. Or as good as fired anyway.

“They'll probably send me a cute little letter during the break.” She said to herself. She looked back up at the buses and began to lose hope; hope that any of those children, now so dear to her, would ever have a chance. For speaking against something so obvious and universal, she was going to be removed from their educational system.

*How will they ever be told or taught something true and real and ...* her mind trailed off, as she stared off into the distance. Suddenly, Lisa became aware of heavy, but young, breathing coming from behind her. She turned around and saw one of her students standing in front of her.

“Hello, Jenny!” Lisa said cheerfully, but the greeting sounded more like a question.

“Hello,” was the soft response. Lisa waited for her to say more, but she didn't.

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“Has your school bus not left yet?” The teacher asked.

“No, it has,” Jenny said. But, seeing the initial reaction from her teacher, the little girl quickly added, “But my mom’s getting off early from work today, so she’s going to pick me up.”

“Where’s Mark?” Miss Nicole asked.

“He’s inside with his teacher. Mrs. Locksley doesn’t want him out in the cold.” As it was, Jenny’s face was starting to get a little colored from the frosty air.

“Oh,” Lisa said simply. There was a brief silence, as the older woman waited for the younger to speak.

“I heard,” Jenny said at last, “that you weren’t coming back after break.” Lisa sighed. So that was it.

“Well,” she began slowly. “It doesn’t look like I am.” Jenny’s eyes dropped and she just stared towards the ground. Lisa’s mouth opened and then hesitated. It was obvious that her student wanted to ask her why, but couldn’t, since she already knew the reason.

“Is there any chance...?” Jenny spoke slowly, without certainty. Lisa groaned.

“It would take a miracle,” she laughed. She had meant it to be a sort of joke, but the bitterness she felt from the truth, leaked out into her tone. Her student seemed to see through her laughter. “There’s nothing official yet,” Miss Nicole added in a hopeful tone, more for Jenny’s sake than her own. That last comment, however, appeared to do more harm than good. Without any warning, Jenny burst into tears.

“Hey,” Lisa said softly and she bent low towards the young girl’s face. The sobs were from deep within and numerous tears were streaming down Jenny’s face. Lisa’s face looked worried. She instinctively felt sympathetic and yet, at the same time, horribly guilty that the child should grieve over Lisa’s situation.

“I’m sorry,” Jenny choked. Lisa smiled and knelt down beside her.

“There’s no need to apologize,” the teacher reassured her. She gestured gently and Jenny rushed into Lisa’s comforting arms.

“No,” Lisa whispered, when she heard the sobs were being stifled. “It’s okay, you can cry.”

Jenny pulled back, but continued wiping her tears.

“No,” the girl explained, “I don’t want anyone to see I’ve been crying.” Lisa stood up and placed her hand on her student’s shoulder.

“Jenny-” she began. The girl caught herself and looked up briefly at her teacher.

“It isn’t just that,” she explained.

“What is it then?” Lisa asked with her eyes. The young girl sighed and remained silent, reluctant

## CHAPTER 5

to say anything. Then, with her eyes fixed on the ground, Jenny said quickly: "My parents are getting divorced. Dad's leaving on Monday."

Lisa's arm fell from Jenny's shoulder. She stood there, dumbfounded. The woman opened her mouth to speak, but couldn't find the words. What do you say? How can you comfort a child whose parents are being taken from her? What eloquent words will ease their sorrow? Words which will eventually only grow quiet, and give way to the loud and hard reality. Lisa wanted to say something that could give so much more, but, none came to her mind.

"I'm so sorry," she said after a long silence. Jenny had gotten control of her tears and slowly looked up into her teacher's eyes.

"There's no need to apologize," the girl echoed her teacher's words. "It's not like it's your fault or anything." Tears started swelling up again. "I don't know, maybe it's mine."

"Oh no," Miss Nicole said quickly.

"Well than why are they doing this?" Tones of bitterness rang through the generally soft spoken voice. Lisa shrugged her shoulders, unable to concretely answer the question.

"It's probably like most," Lisa guessed, "The initial romantic interest is long since gone and life is beginning to press down hard on them. And they're figuring it's not worth it." She looked down at Jenny, "Are you sure it won't pass?"

"You know, at this point-," Jenny stopped herself. The bitterness was creeping back. She forced a smile. "It would take a miracle," she said, making a friendly imitation of her teacher's voice.

"They have been fighting about money recently," Jenny remembered and then shook her head. "I don't know why I'm so surprised, I guess. I've seen this coming for a while. They haven't been happy. There's been arguing and fighting. They tried to keep the fighting to after our bedtime, but couldn't always control themselves, I guess. They tried to hide it from us..." Jenny's mind started to link things together. "Just like they are now." Her face grew hard. "Just like they've done for so many different things." She looked at Miss Nicole's ignorant face.

"I heard them talking last night," the girl explained. "They don't want Dad to leave or us to know until after Christmas. Well, at least Mom doesn't want us to. Dad doesn't... question her about anything anymore. He's stopped caring and she's lost interest in ... him, I guess. I don't know. I wonder if I ever will. Some things seem so obvious, you wonder 'how can they miss it?' But they do, and they cause you pain too. The misery of mistakes isn't limited to just the people who make them. But some things aren't that hard to figure out!"

"Why, Miss Nicole?" Jenny asked her teacher. "Why do they think that if they don't tell us the truth somehow we'll never know it, or maybe it won't ever exist? Why..." Jenny choked to keep the tears back. "How can they possibly think that lying to us won't cause us any pain?"

"Perhaps, to them, the pain only comes from knowing the truth and so without it, you'll be happier."

## *A CHRISTMAS CRISIS*

Jenny groaned. "Then they're lying to themselves."

"I guess, following their philosophy, they're just trying to make themselves happier, by denying the truth. But don't get me wrong," Lisa added quickly, "I don't agree with surrounding children with tons of lies geared at trying to keep them living in a magical sort of falsity. I mean - fantasy." She smiled, thinking how her own predicament was the fruit of such a mentality. People who aren't interested in telling the truth, are equally disinterested in hearing it.

Jenny gave her teacher a sincere smile. "I hope you don't get fired." Lisa almost laughed. Jenny's situation was far worse.

"I'll pray for you." Lisa said.

"Thanks," Jenny didn't know what to say to that. Suddenly, her smile faded and her hands went towards her face.

"What?" Lisa asked.

"My mom's here." She brushed away her bangs. "She'll probably pick up Mark first." She spoke quickly and then faced Miss Nicole.

"Does it look like I've been crying?" She asked. Lisa smiled with a sigh.

"No, it doesn't."

"Thanks." Jenny swung her backpack onto her shoulder. "I really hope that you can stay. I- " the words came out slowly, "really appreciate the talk you gave and the help you've been."

"I'm sorry things had to turn out this way, for both of us." Lisa said. The sound of a car motor came around the building's corner and Mrs. Williams' car was in sight.

"Will I see you again?" Jenny turned quickly towards her teacher. Lisa's eyes were on the mother.

"I don't know." Then looking down at Jenny, "I hope so."

The car pulled up.

The girl hesitated. There was just one small thing. "I'll pray for you, Miss Nicole." The sincerity in her eyes spoke louder than her words.

Lisa pulled Jenny to her. She placed her cold cheek atop the dark head and whispered a barely audible "Thank you."

The window on the car started to roll down and Jenny took that as the signal to go. As she shut the door to the car, Lisa heard her mother call out goodbye. Lisa walked over and leaned down to the window.

"Goodbye, Mrs. Williams!" Lisa looked in the back seat. "Merry Christmas, Mark!"

"Merry Christmas, Miss Nicole!", the little boy waved. Lisa stood up.

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“Merry Christmas, Jenny.” Her student just smiled.

“God Bless you all!” Lisa bent over and called out one last time. She heard different responses from each of them, as the window began to slowly close. With a friendly honk, the car pulled away and Lisa watched it drive off, out of the school’s parking lot.

# CHAPTER 6

## DECEMBER 24<sup>TH</sup>



he next day, Christmas Eve, although lasting the usual length days do, seemed like ages to poor Mark, who believed that, this year, Christmas would only last for four hours, on account of Christmas Eve lasting for forty-four.

“Mark, relax.” Jenny said. “Christmas will come and last for as long as it did last year.” Her voice was not convincing though for, to her, the days were zooming by. She knew why, too. In her heart she was dreading Christmas, because it was the last day she would have with her whole family.

Mark didn't believe her anyway. He went back in front of the television, hoping that time would go faster that way. The phone was ringing constantly, and was usually filled with female voices planning the festivities of the following day. Jenny spent most of the day in her room. She wasn't looking forward to all the company they were going to be having after Mass, tomorrow. Throughout the day, though cautiously spaced, Mr. and Mrs. Williams asked Jenny, some times more directly than others, what it was that she wanted for Christmas. Her persistence equaled theirs, though, and no answer was given.

As she sat in her room, Jenny wondered why she wasn't answering them. She quickly came to the conclusion that it was because she hadn't decided on what she wanted yet. Or did she even know?

After dinner, Mark, being bored with the television, came waltzing into Jenny's room. She was sitting on her bed, reading. The young man's attention was immediately drawn to an oddly-shaped sheet in the corner of the room. He walked towards it. His outstretched hand got an immediate reaction from his quiet sister.

“No, Mark!” she yelled.

“What is it?” he persisted.

“Nothing,” she said casually, lifting the book up again.

“Then I can look at it.” His hand went up again.

“No!” she shouted. His mischievous smile, delighted with the result of his teasing, annoyed his older sister greatly. She thudded off the bed and began to walk towards him. He immediately walked away from the object and headed for the door.

Unfortunately for Mark, halfway between him and the door was a deceptively sturdy chair. Faced with the ‘wrath’ of his older sister, the little boy desperately sought a path of escape.

“What's that?” He pointed towards the floor behind her. Jenny's dark eyes smiled.

“What's ‘what?’” She said without turning her head.

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“This,” the boy reached down and picked the misplaced card off the floor. Jenny quickly snatched it from his hands.

“That’s mine,” she said.

“What is it?” Mark asked.

“My bookmark,” his sister answered.

“Can I see it?” Jenny immediately handed it to him and walked back to her bed. Mark looked down at the card he was holding.

“Who is this?” The little boy asked.

“Mark!” Jenny swung around in shock. “You tell me.”

“Jesus,” Mark said.

“Which one?”, the girl asked. Mark lowered his eyebrows. There was a brief, but intense pause.

“The baby.” He guessed. Jenny smiled and hoisted herself onto her bed.

“Whose the man, then?” she asked.

“St. Joseph?” His voice lacked confidence.

“Yes” Jenny opened up her book.

“Where did you get it?” Mark walked towards his sister.

“Miss Nicole gave it to me.”

“Yesterday?” Her brother asked.

“No, the day before the day before yesterday.” Jenny looked up from her book and smiled, “Three days ago.”

“Oh, Thursday.” Mark put the holycard on the dresser.

“No, that would be two days ago.” Jenny corrected him.

“Not if you count today!” The boy’s voice grew louder.

“You only count the days that are whole,” she reasoned. “You can’t count today, because it’s not done yet!”

“Yes you can!” Mark insisted.

“If you counted today,” she spoke quickly and drew closer to his face with every word, “today would be over and it would be Christmas!” She thrust her face playfully into his.

Mark’s face instantly lit up. His mind totally dropped the argument he was losing and all of his

thoughts began to spin wildly around the approaching day. His Christmas countdown had dwindled down, suddenly and unexpectedly to less than the four hours!

“Oh boy.” The little boy shook with excitement. “I can hardly wait! Tomorrow I’m gonna get - *mmph!*” He slapped his hand over his mouth. He’d nearly given away his big secret present. He glanced anxiously at Jenny to see if she’d noticed. He was partially disappointed, when he saw, that not only had she missed it, but she appeared totally disinterested. She just sat there, looking in her book. Mark slowly leaned down on the bed.

“What are you getting for your big present?”, he asked. Jenny’s eyes met his and then returned to the book.

“I’m not telling,” she said simply.

“Oh come on,” her little brother wined, “I won’t tell anyone.”

“Then what good will it do you to know?”, the girl asked, lowering her book.

“I’ll tell you mine,” Mark said, completely ignoring her question.

“No good.” Jenny smiled and then, hiding her face behind the book, “I’m going to find out tomorrow.”

Mark had been leaning on the bed, but with that, he shoved himself back with a loud grunt.

“Fine then,” he said with an air. “I’ll find out yours tomorrow, too!” He marched out of the room and closed the door with a slam.

Jenny sighed. She leaned over on her dresser and grabbed the holycard to stick in her book. She glanced at it briefly, hesitating. After a short pause, she reached out for her pen which was lying at the head of the bed. She pressed the cap against her chin in thought.

“No,” she said at last. “I don’t think I’ll tape it in my journal. I think it’ll make a good bookmark.” She laid the card aside with a smile and then added thoughtfully, “One with a lot of meaning for me, this Christmas.” The young girl scribbled a few words on the page. Each year, among other things, Jenny made sure to write something about the Christmas that year. She always included her big present she received.

“A sewing box,” she read from last years memo. “I remember that.” Jenny’s smile faded away as she contemplated what to write for this years’. She’d never had so much trouble before. Around this time, she heard her father’s grandfather clock chiming off a quarter to nine. She listened and soon heard what she expected. A pair of young feet sounded in the distance and came rushing past her room.

“Mark’s never been so eager to go to bed,” commented his older sister. She shut her diary and placed it on the dresser. By the time Mrs. Williams checked on her children, Mark had dived into bed and Jenny was folding up her jumper. As Jenny crawled into her bed, she heard her mother’s voice coming from her brother’s bedroom.



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“Okay, Mark, now you have to go to sleep. Santa won’t come until your fast asleep. And don’t think he can’t tell.”

“Yeah,” the seven year old spoke with great sincerity, “he can see me when I’m sleeping and he knows when I’m awake.”

“Yes he can,” Jenny heard her mother kiss his forehead. The young girl rolled towards her window, her back to the door. Soon, a small creaking filled the quiet room, and a woman’s silhouette appeared over Jenny’s head, on the window. The clicking sound of high heels drew nearer Jenny’s bed and she heard a soft whisper. “Jenny, are you asleep?”

“No.” The girl didn’t move. A gentle hand stroked the back of Jenny’s head.

“Well, try to fall asleep soon, okay?” Mrs. Williams kissed her daughter. “Santa won’t bring you any presents until you’re fast asleep. So, don’t you try to stay up listening for the sleigh bells.” She laughed and tiptoed out of the room, quietly closing the door behind her.

If Mrs. Williams had stayed, she would have seen why her little girl’s head was facing the window. As the mother’s distinct footsteps were heard descending the flight of stairs, Jenny turned towards the door.

“Some things seem so obvious,” she smiled through her tears. She sat up and reached out for her journal. With its embossed covers lying in her lap, Jenny thought within herself one thing. What did she want for Christmas? She picked up her pen.

*This Christmas, I really want,* the pen hesitated and then quickly slashed through the last word. *...really want n*. A tear fell onto the page. Jenny sniffed, but made no attempt to wipe the book. She just sat there and watched it slowly warp the paper that it touched. The girl’s dark eyes looked up from her book and over towards the corner of her room. Placing the journal aside, Jenny slid herself off the bed. Slowly, she approached the sheeted object which had so captivated young Mark’s curiosity, and gently lifted the cloth which covered it. The girl flicked a switch, and a small lamp flooded the concealed item with light.

It glittered with tinsel. Jenny had made use of the two leftover boxes to create a stable which sheltered the little statues of the Holy Family. Silver strands were stretched across a triangle-shaped cardboard lid, which served as a roof. Several hung down on the edges, like icicles dripping from the silvery snow. Several items made up the interior of the stable but, mainly, only the Holy Family was inside. And even at that, there were only the two statues for Mary and Joseph. The manger which awaited His birth, was overflowing with the gold tinsel which was also strewn across the rude floor and randomly clumped in clusters like bales of hay.

As Jenny looked at the home she had created for the wandering family, she pulled Mary forward a little, since one of the walls was casting a shadow on her graceful smile. The sheet had moved St. Joseph when she had pulled it off, and now he was facing the wrong way. The little girl ran her finger down his long staff. Then a thought occurred to her and she went back to get her book. She placed it on the same table the nativity scene was on, to view it in the light. She stroked the pages and came upon her

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bookmarker. She knelt down in front of the statue and held the holycard in her hand. Jenny angled it into the light and started to read the words. The beautiful prayer came from her lips gradually, each word slower than the last. Finally, with a burst of emotion, she let the card fall on the table and grabbed at the holy man's statue.

“Oh, St. Joseph,” she cried, pressing him to her heart, “I’ve given you a place where you can protect your family from the bitter cold. I’ve nowhere to warm my heart, frozen with despair. At least- “ the words came out slowly and broken. Jenny gasped for air and she felt like her throat was choking. “At least you have a family!”

This exclamation was like the breaking of the barrier she had built to hold back her tears. They flowed freely now, streaming down her face like rain. But even now, she tried to limit the volume of her weeping and bent her head down into the statue.

Although the sobbing was muffled, her trembling body betrayed the depths of her sobs. It was clearly not a lack of sorrow, which caused her weeping to be so silent. She sat there for a while, quiet and apparently alone. When her heaving had returned to its regular breathing pace, her body became very still.

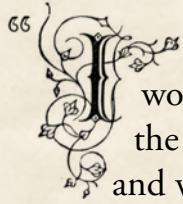
Jenny finally raised her head. For the first time in a long while, there was a ray of hope in the look she gave the little statue. Suddenly, and without a word, she snatched up the book and its pen. She scribbled hastily, as if trying to get it out, before she changed her mind. Only her heartbeats, accompanied by the scraping pen, broke the silence.

The little girl, when she'd finished writing, slowly lifted her pen from the page and placed it, along with the book, back on the table. Her eyes turned back towards her lap. Slowly, almost reverently, she lifted the statue. She lowered her head, placing it near his, as if to whisper in his ear. Then, very softly, she told St. Joseph:

“I know what I want for Christmas.”

# CHAPTER 7

## A DECISION TO MAKE



won't be making this turn anymore," Lisa commented, shifting gears and cautiously pulling into the icy parking lot. At seven o'clock in the morning, Liberty Elementary school was quite empty and very quiet.

After making a brief stop, at what formerly was her classroom, Lisa headed down the long wide hallway. She was staring at the floor, not watching where she was going, for she knew the way well. Upon entering the strip of offices, Lisa's strides grew smaller. Her heartbeat quickened, when she recognized the large gray door. Raising her head, the teacher noticed that she was the only one in the hallway. With her courage shrinking, she turned back and read the shiny brass letters nailed to the door: *Ms. Frieda Mason - Principal*

"It's going to be pretty bad if Frieda wants to ream me out in person," Lisa thought. She raised her hand to open the door and then stopped. For a moment or two her hand just froze there, suspended in midair, half an inch from the doorknob. Somehow it seemed that all of her troubles were behind that closed door and if she opened it.....

Lisa inaudibly sighed. Her eyes closed and a silent prayer rose from the depths of her soul. There was no one in the hallway to see her standing there; a grown woman, motionless and hesitating to enter the principal's office.

Suddenly, Lisa was filled with a quiet strength, which in no way diminished her fears, but instead gave her the means to face them. Although consciously unaware of this answer to her prayers, the young woman found the courage to grasp the golden handle. The door swung open swiftly and silently to reveal an orderly office. Although all was prim and neat, the room lacked a certain cheer. The only source possible was the window behind the large desk which lay centered in the room. There was an austere atmosphere which surrounded everything about and within this office. It was something that could not be seen, but was easily felt.

All of these thoughts and more entered Lisa's mind, before her eyes met those of Mrs. Mason. Although her entrance had been silent, the older woman had sensed her presence. She stood before one of her bookcases and turned towards the newcomer. Her tiny eyes slowly surveyed the woman standing in her doorway. At length, she removed her glasses and gestured towards one of her dark leather chairs.

"Have a seat," the principal said, closing the book she held. "This won't take long." She placed it with its companions. Without a word, Lisa seated herself in the chair directly in front of the desk. Shortly, the principal took her place and faced the waiting teacher.

"I wanted to speak to you in person over this matter," Mrs. Mason folded her hands on her desk, "due to the seriousness of your conduct." Lisa sat and listened as the older woman went to briefly

summarize the nature of her offense. The teacher was informed that her “religious narration and discussion” about Christmas was a violation of “Separation of Church and State”. And not only were her views controversial, but her criticism of modern festivities and universal traditions, was offensive to many of her students. The principal had risen from her desk and was now striding before her window as she spoke. Lisa remained silent, crushed by the drastic results of her seemingly trivial talk.

“On account of your severe inexperience and ignorance in such matters,” the sharp voice continued with lofty tones, “the school board has unanimously agreed to pardon your offense.”

Lisa’s head sort of jerked, when the ax she was waiting for did not fall from the executioner’s hands. She raised her doubtful eyes at the short woman standing before her.

“What?” she looked skeptically at Mrs. Mason, expecting the worst, distrusting her words for an ill-humored joke.

“You will keep your position as teacher,” the widow’s voice assumed a tone of great benevolence, before which Miss Nicole should fall, groveling in gratitude. The equally patronizing face grew stern. “You are being given a severe warning. If you are wise...”

Mrs. Mason began to walk around the room again and continue her speech. Lisa didn’t hear her. Her mind was somewhere else entirely. For nearly two weeks, she had been in a state of increasing fear and dread. Her vacation had been far from relaxing and instead, with every day, her fears got more of a grip on her. The entire break had been spent in a tense state of mind. Try as she might to calm and distract herself, Lisa couldn’t control the nervous tone with which she answered the phone. Neither did it seem like she could steady her hands when she looked through her mail. Everywhere she turned, she expected to hear or see the pronouncements of her doom. All her worries, all her cares and planning for her needs and responsibilities, were now for nothing. In less than an instant, all the hours she’d spent in hopeless dread turned her vacation into a complete waste of time. Then again, she’d rather that those days have been useless, than filled with legitimate concerns. But then... Lisa thought back. Not all of her time had been wasted. How many times had she turned to Our Lord and Our Lady in prayer? Often did she drive to a chapel and sit in her bedroom and cast all of her worries and fears upon God. *They’re His troubles now*, she would say through her tears. *He must take care of them*. And He did.

Lisa smiled and raised her eyes towards Heaven. Then, closing them softly, she breathed a hearty “Thank God!”

The monotone vocals in the background came to a halt and an ignored voice said sternly, “Now that is what we can’t have anymore of.”

Lisa, remembering where she was, opened her eyes. “What?”, she asked.

“That,” the principal shook her hand for want of a better word, “religious expression and similar outbursts will not be tolerated in the classroom. Or anywhere on school grounds for that matter,” she started to get control over that unexpected and embarrassing situation. “This is a public institution,” she went on to explain. Her explanation was not sinking in for Lisa. There was still confusion written

on the young teacher's face.

"Any more behavior like that," Mrs. Mason pointed towards her seated listener, "will result in your being fired."

The only response she received was a blank stare. Lisa just sat there as her mind began to try and grasp what that threat implied. There was an uncomfortable silence for the principal, who was annoyed at Miss Nicole's delay. Either speak or leave. She was a busy woman. As much as the widow exuded her impatience, the young teacher made no attempt to do either. She was thinking. Thinking hard. She hadn't *really* understood everything that this conversation meant. Slowly and yet suddenly, Lisa began to realize the situation she was in and the choice she was about to make.

"So," Lisa looked up at her irritated face, "what you're saying is that if I remain a teacher in this school, I can no longer be a Catholic."

The principal was slightly embarrassed at the bluntness of her awkward question. "You cannot practice your religion on public property, especially as an employee of the state. You see, you don't have the right to force your opinions on someone else who may not share them."

Before being able to address the answer to her question, Lisa was momentarily distracted with Mrs. Mason's last point. "But someone's opinions are being forced on all of us. The very fact that we must have no "religious preferences" is an opinion all to itself - different from those who think otherwise. Surely you understand that? Someone's morals and preferences, even if it is to have none, are being imposed on other people."

"Democracy invokes the wish of the majority which, long ago, dictated its express desire to have there be separation of Church and State." The widow's voice sounded firm, unmoved by the logic of this young woman.

"Even if you were true to the mentality of obeying the wants of the majority, you must take into consideration that roughly three out of every five people are Catholic." The teacher responded.

"Catholicism is a religion. Public institutions and laws which serve people of all religions must remain completely unbiased from such things." The principal seated herself down in front of this audacious young lady. "Hence, we have the wise rule which states that there must be separation of Church and State."

Lisa sighed. She didn't notice, though, that her initial fear was beginning to melt away. It was more her becoming so involved in this discussion, that she was distracted from being afraid.

"Separation of Church and State is so idiotic," Lisa said matter-of-factly, unaware of the danger she was in. "You just can't separate God from...life! Doing so forces people to live two different lives and have a split personality and habits, changing according to their location. You can't do that. You either believe what you believe in and live it or you don't believe in anything and live that. But to take God out of the schooling we receive and the laws we live by, will and can only result in His complete removal from our lives. Someday, you try and tell your faculty to never again mention or permit

discussion of the existence of the sun. See how far you get. It's there and there's nothing that you can really do about. You may never speak of it, but you cannot remove it or the effects that it inevitably has on your life. Forbidding focus on God does not prevent His involvement and authority in our lives, no more than ignoring the sun would cause its light and heat to vanish from our universe."

"Because there are many different valid religions, it is impossible to please all of them. Therefore the only solution is to restrict all of them to being practiced in the privacy of the persons' lives. No one religion should be imposed on everyone."

"First of all, I would like to remind you that we are not free from someone's opinions. Acting like there is no such thing as God, pretty much forces us to live like atheists, which is considered to be and practiced as a valid religion. And if I may add, the only religion that I have seen have to live up to the letter of the "separation of Church and State" law is Catholicism."

"Is it because you're the only ones who challenge the authority over you?" The principal looked disdainfully at the teacher.

"A few weeks ago," Lisa leaned back in the chair, "a girl from the sixth grade brought in a chart and explanation for all of the predictions and attributes the Chinese associate with each child born during different years. From what I remember, there was a big discussion about the symbols for each year, and all the children were encouraged to find which animal's description fit them the best or to which they belonged. She also distributed a few "harmless" amulets whose purpose, derived from the "blessing" imparted on them, was to bring "good luck" to its wearers and drive away the evil spirits for the upcoming years. Now you're telling me there's no religious aspects or views in that at all? No one attempted to rebuke her violation of separation of Church and State."

"That's culture, Ms. Nicole," the widow argued.

"So this afternoon, I can give a talk about Medieval Europe?" Lisa smiled, pretending to be delighted at this sudden tolerance for legitimate cultures. "Maybe I'll give some credit to the monks who preserved countless ancient books by copying them all by hand. Or maybe my students will find it interesting to note that it was the Catholic Church that strove to have the ignorant laity of the medieval times taught to read and write. The boys particularly will like to know how the Knighthood began as a religious order for laymen to uphold the civil and moral teachings of the Church. We could even talk about this country. How many children know that Christopher Columbus was a Third Order Franciscan and that Isabella was a Catholic queen?"

"You've clearly extracted what little you could find in these subjects," Mrs. Mason said impassively, "and integrated the rest, in hopes to impress upon the students your own religious beliefs, by connecting them with these fundamental subjects for history and culture."

"And the Chinese girl didn't? Nothing in her cultural presentation was influenced by her religious beliefs?" Lisa stopped for a moment and waited. She wasn't looking to make a scene or outtalk the principal. She was willing to listen to every point that Mrs. Mason wanted to make, as long as Lisa was given the opportunity to respond. All she wanted was to give truth a fair fight in a calm and logical

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debate. Too often was it compromised. She waited, giving Mrs. Mason the option to speak. But the widow just stood there rigidly, her eyes fixed on the young teacher. The hardened look on the proud face remained unmoved by the points made, and ignorant of the honesty shown by her companion. Lisa attempted to look into the dark deep eyes, but was met with such coldness, that Lisa did not do so again.

“Perhaps,” Lisa suggested, “where societies have existed long enough to have traditions and lived enough life to have some sense, they have come to the realization and accepted the wisdom of having their religion matter enough to integrate it with the state.”

There was a silence; one that strengthened Lisa. Mrs. Mason had lowered her head and Lisa struggled to hope that something inside of the principal was changing. Slowly, the bowed head rose, until it made eye contact.

“I had no idea the problem ran this deep,” she said calmly. Her chilling gaze penetrated right through Lisa’s soul, attempting to fill her with the dread she should duly feel. A mask was beginning to peel away from the widow’s face. By these words, she was acknowledging that Lisa ranked as a far greater opponent than Mrs. Mason had first supposed. But Lisa would pay the cost for her folly. She would experience the apprehension resulting from locking horns with this proud, but powerful widow.

Lisa’s mind was beginning to understand this. When struck with the woman’s penetrating gaze, Lisa attempted to block it with her defenses. Yet through all her valiant efforts, Lisa’s soul was being infiltrated with fear; a fear of something much more powerful and dangerous than the woman before her. She felt like one who had inadvertently discovered the secrets and schemes of a society which lay hidden, but lived active in the world around her. All at once, an overwhelming urge to apologize came over Lisa. Her mind tried to gain control over her emotions. But the harder she tried to think, the harder this fear squeezed out what little hope she had. With the last bit of her mind, over which she still exercised some control, Lisa made an urgent prayer.

*“I want to do what’s right,”* Lisa said inside her head, *“Please, God, give me the grace to do that. Oh, I need to know it first.”* She received then the control to think things through one last time.

Mrs. Mason shook her head and repeated out loud to her self, “I just had no idea that the problem ran this deep.”

Lisa looked up into those relentless eyes. “Neither did I,” she said at last.

The dominating look became puzzled, as Mrs. Mason was caught completely off guard by this unexpected response.

“Consider the future,” the widow slowly began.

“I wish I had in the first place.” Lisa said quietly, but quite audibly. “I wish I knew what I was getting myself into but, in a way, I’m glad I was able to experience all of this. I don’t think I ever would have believed the hypocrisy, unless I experienced it myself.”

The principal began to object, when Lisa rose from her chair.

“Thank you for your time,” she said, getting up. “But you can save your pink slip. You need not fire me. I quit.” So saying, she turned for the door.

“You are making a serious mistake.” Somehow, Lisa’s leaving was more of a defeat to Mrs. Mason than if she’d been able to fire the teacher against her will. Lisa sensed the desperate tone in the woman’s voice. She stopped and turned around.

“To stay in this system would be a mistake,” Lisa told her. “Now that I know where your priorities lie, I can no longer participate in the hypocritical evil that public schools are.”

“Think carefully of what you are saying,” her tone was threatening now.

“Innocent parents are sending their children to be educated by people who have an agenda.”

“How dare- !” The principal’s face grew white with rage.

“How else would you describe a body of people who are knowledgeable of the truth and not only deceitfully withhold it from the children, but persecute those who try to defend it? You obviously don’t want anyone to have the slightest inclination as to what the truth of the matter is, or you wouldn’t work so hard to suppress it. And who is ever going to know? Unless they’ve been caught in your cross-hairs, they’ll never know the depth of your hypocrisy and lies. You’ll always appear like a family-friendly institution that is just concerned about a good education. You tell the children anything they want to hear, or more importantly, anything you want them to believe. And they’d better not question it, or else! And what you’re teaching them!” Lisa began to shudder at the memory. “Sure there’s simple basic things like math and geography, but you can’t even be honest with your science. Evolution? You present it as pure fact, instead of the idiotic lie that it is. The history is atrocious. Rare, if ever, is the occasion where the students are taught what really happened. No one dares to question the historical figures which you’ve raised up on ivory pillars for us to worship. There is no religion! Except...” Lisa looked at the furious principal. “Would you care to explain to me why they are allowing Wicca to be taught in the schools now?”

“It isn’t being taught!”, she cried.

“Ah, but you don’t deny it being permitted in this unbiased and public institution. They’re putting it in public school libraries. Do you think that they’d let me put an *Imitation of Christ* in the library for a minute! I can’t do that, it’s separation of Church and State! But Wicca books are now available for young ignorant children to go stumbling across, if you don’t go sending them after it for a book report first! Wicca is the worship of satan. Since when is that honoring the sacred law of separation of Church and State?” Her voice was rising, but then she stopped and grew quiet. “No,” Lisa said slowly, “by your very hypocrisies you have proven the truth. You do desire and work to keep the Church separated from the State.” The principal stood unmoved.

“Because,” the teacher continued, “the only true Faith that can authentically be called a “church”, is the Catholic Church. And that is the one religion that you will not tolerate to be influential in the state. Anything else that you condemn, you only do so because it bears a few tiny threads of the Truth held in Catholicism, which you hate, and yet fear, so strongly that even its shadow cannot be allowed



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publicity.” Lisa turned and opened the office door.

“I hope you can keep your next job better than you held this one.” A cold voice came from behind her. Mrs. Mason knew this was Lisa’s only source of income. Lisa smiled.

“It’s never too late to leave, Mrs. Mason,” Lisa began earnestly.

“‘Ms. Mason,’” The woman’s icy eyes flashed like fire. Lisa sighed in pity and quietly ignored the interruption.

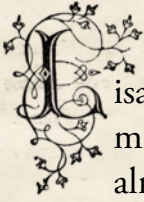
“No one is forcing you to stay,” Miss Nicole continued. “The decision is yours. I’m thankful that I’ve made mine.” She smiled again, but received nothing. Not a single muscle moved on the widow’s face, nor a sound from her throat.

Staring into the principal’s unresponsive eyes, Lisa blurted out, “I’ll pray for you.” Her offer was spontaneous and sincere, although perhaps not desired or appreciated. She walked out of the office and pulled the door from behind her.

“Merry Christmas!” Lisa yelled back, before the door clicked shut. She looked down the hallway. She had been here a half hour ago. She was still the only one there.

# CHAPTER 8

## THE BEGINNING



Lisa sighed. It was a refreshing sigh, though. She felt free, much happier than she'd been just thirty minutes ago. When she entered her classroom again, she noticed that many of the children had already begun to arrive. She grabbed her stuff to leave, when something simple caught her eye. An empty desk, like many of the others. But it reminded her of a young woman who was in a far worse position than herself.

"Jenny Williams," she sighed. "What a vacation she must have spent. And here I am all worried about myself," she said quietly as she walked out of the classroom. When the teacher reached her car, she opened the trunk to put a few oddball items in. Out of nowhere, she heard a familiar voice.

"Miss Nicole!"

Lisa turned around.

"Jenny!" There she was, walking from the parking lot with her mother. The young girl ran ahead and embraced her teacher.

"Merry Christmas, Jenny!" Lisa said warmly. "Good Morning, Mrs. Williams."

"Mom," Jenny looked up at her mother, "may I stay here with Miss Nicole for a little while."

"Sure, honey," Mrs. Williams rubbed her daughter's head, "I won't be long."

Lisa stood there with Jenny, as they watched her head back towards the building.

"What's she doing?" Lisa asked, looking after the mother.

"Oh she's going to talk to the principal." Jenny said without turning her head. It was quiet for a moment, and then a sudden thought struck the girl. "Hey," she turned towards Miss Nicole, "I didn't think you were going to be here today. What are you doing?"

"Oh, yeah," Lisa grinned. "Well, I wasn't, but then I was, and now I'm not." Jenny's faced looked genuinely confused.

"What?" She smiled.

"The principal wrote to me during break," Lisa explained, "telling me that she wanted to speak with me in person about the situation. So I came in this morning to hear her tell me that they decided not to fire me."

"Well, then what are you doing?" Jenny looked at the open trunk.

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"I'm leaving." Jenny's smile began to fade. "Oh, Jenny," Lisa said apologetically, "your prayers worked, believe me, they did. I wasn't fired," she gave the girl a friendly smile.

"Yeah, but you're not staying." The student's voice was asking a question.

"Further proof of even a greater answer to your prayers," Lisa assured her. "Honestly, the past week, I've been nearly dying with the worry of how I was going to survive. Then, when Mrs. Mason told me I could stay, I don't think I ever would have risked coming that close to such a disaster again, no matter what the cost. But then, one little thing after another, and primarily the grace from Our Lady and Saint Joseph, obtained through so many prayers," the former teacher shot a glance at her young listener, "got me to really start thinking about what I was about to do."

"What?", Jenny asked. "I mean what's so wrong about keeping your job?"

"Oh, Jenny," Lisa said gently. "I was about to jeopardize my salvation. You can't serve two masters. So much of what they're teaching is deadly for these children's minds and souls."

"But you wouldn't teach anything that was really bad," the girl objected.

"But if I'm silent, then I'm participating in allowing the evil to go on. And if I tried to speak out against them, I'd be lucky if I could get away with it by just being fired. I mean, you heard the talk I gave about Christmas. I tried to rebuke some of the minor issues that society has, and tried to mostly promote some solid and historical traditions, and I nearly got fired. Only prayers got me out of that."

"But then," Jenny ventured to ask, "why do you think that God answered our prayers if you weren't supposed to work there?"

"Because," Lisa explained, beginning just now to understand the answer herself, "if I had been fired, then it would have been against my will and I could very easily become sorely tempted to put all the blame on God. This way, I made the choice myself, willing to give up all, for His sake. I could never have left for the right reason, if I ever got fired. See?" Jenny did understand although she was still trying to grasp all that was happening.

"Speaking of leaving?" Lisa's look grew solemn. "What about the other thing?"

"What other thing?" Jenny asked. After staring for a little while into Lisa's eyes, Jenny suddenly remembered.

"Oh yeah, that." She glanced cautiously around and then turned towards Miss Nicole. "They're not getting divorced."

"You're kidding," Lisa was dumfounded. "How do you know?" She spoke quickly. "When did you find out?"

"Christmas Day," the young girl smiled. "I'm not sure exactly when it happened. But I'd been watching them all day and had noticed a few things. Towards the evening, after Mark had gone to bed,

## *A CHRISTMAS CRISIS*

I came down to say goodnight to Mom and Dad. My first surprise was that I found them together. Rarely do I travel to one room to kiss them both goodnight. Anyway, after I was done, Dad told me that they wanted to let me in on a little secret. Oh, Miss Nicole,” Jenny slightly lowered her head to whisper a small confession. “I was so scared,” she admitted, “I didn’t know what I would do when they’d tell me that Dad was leaving. Like, should I let them know that I knew or act stupid? I couldn’t decide. But I didn’t have to.” Jenny thought back on that eventful night. She could still see her father gently place his hand on her mom’s, as they prepared to reveal some immediate, universal changes for the family. “Mom began by telling me that Mark and I are going to be home schooled!”

“Home schooled?” It was Lisa’s turn to be surprised.

“Yep,” Jenny nodded excitedly. “And that isn’t all. They also talked about how they’ve been relying too much on their incomes. All of their trust has been in the money, so when it didn’t serve them well, everything suffered from it. They came around to decide that their unreliable dependence flowed from their lack of Faith in God. And that’s the result of not practicing their Catholic Faith, which, they acknowledged, they haven’t been following. God’s way just didn’t seem very practical, so they’ve been pouring all their energy into finding worldly ways of solving their problems; the biggest one being money. At least that’s what I observed,” Jenny commented. “They both are feeling very strongly that it’s important for us to learn and practice our Faith. That means that we have to get away from the Anti-God public school systems and start living like Catholics, together as a family. They really want it to mean more than it has in the past. To them, God just wasn’t important enough to obey, much less trust or love. He got Sunday morning only, and then the rest of the week was theirs to give to the world. But things are going to be different. God’s going to get a chance to provide where money failed. Mom’s going to quit her job and Dad’s going to spend more time at home, and help us out with the schooling.” Jenny stopped, as she herself was becoming more aware of the incredible changes that were taking place in her life.

“Oh I’m so happy for you.” Lisa sighed. “God is good.”

“He certainly is,” Jenny said thoughtfully. “I didn’t forget to thank Him and Our Lady either. Or St. Joseph. You know he’s the one I prayed to. I gave him a house and he gave me a family. And he didn’t just give me back the old family which wasn’t Catholic, either. It was rather generous on his part.” She raised her head up at Miss Nicole.

“They’re very generous that way,” Lisa admitted and then looking down, added, “when people have faith. And a good will.”

It was quiet for a little bit and then Jenny grabbed some paper from her pocket and handed it to Miss Lisa.

“What’s this?”, the woman asked.

“From my church bulletin,” said Jenny. “It’s from last Sunday.” Lisa looked up at her for an explanation. “Look right there,” the girl pointed to a corner of the page.

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“It says that Mrs. Hunter had her baby on Christmas day,” Jenny explained while Lisa read the paper, “...and can no longer teach *Mary, Queen of Heaven’s* fourth-grade class. Understandably, this is sudden and unexpected, but if there is at least a temporary volunteer to hold this place until a more permanent replacement can be found, it would be greatly appreciated. The fourth grade, however, is praying that it will take until the end of the school year.” Lisa looked up with a smile in her eyes.

“Okay,” Jenny had a mischievous twinkle in hers, “I kind of added that last part and there’s a little bit more to the article. But basically that’s the gist of it.” The young girl became quiet and listened for her friend. It was silent for a while, until finally, Miss Nicole spoke.

“I can’t believe it,” she said slowly.

“I know, neither can I,” Jenny beamed enthusiastically. “It’s like a present straight from God to you. And on Christmas too! Talk about an answer to prayer.”

“I don’t deserve it,” Lisa said at last.

“Yeah, but He’s merciful,” Jenny pointed out. “Besides who does? The best thing to do is be grateful, and live out your ‘thank you’. You’ve already started by quitting your job. See how quickly He works?”

“He knew it before I even decided,” Lisa turned and put her free arm around Jenny, “I am grateful.” Then, looking down at her paper said, “Thank you so much, Jenny.”

“Thank you!”, said Jenny. “In my opinion, I’ve reaped a far greater gift than you have. But then again, I’m not twenty-two and looking for a job to pay my debts with.”

“I’d rather be an unemployed woman than a fatherless child.” Lisa said.

“Well, God saved us both from being either.” Jenny commented and then, noticing that Lisa was quiet, drew closer to her.

“Thanks for praying for me,” the girl said.

“You too,” Lisa hugged her affectionately. After a little while, Lisa asked, “Did Mark ever find out?”

“Oh no,” Jenny said, stepping back. The thought of her oblivious little brother brought a smile to her face. “He was way too absorbed in his presents, particularly the puppy that he got.”

“You guys got a puppy?” Lisa laughed softly in disbelief.

“Yeah, it was Mark’s big present,” Jenny shrugged her shoulders. “Mom wasn’t too keen on it. Dad found out that he’d chosen a puppy for his big gift, before Mom could get Mark to change his mind though.”

“Oh, isn’t that funny?” Lisa smiled.

## A CHRISTMAS CRISIS

“Yeah,” Jenny’s eyes became thoughtful, “I’m glad I chose the big present I did. And I asked the right people too.” She nodded upwards. Miss Nicole understood and heartily agreed. All of sudden, Mrs. Williams could be seen driving around the corner of the building.

“So that’s what your mother was doing,” Lisa realized when she saw the woman coming back.

“Yeah, she told Mrs. Mason that she’s pulling us from school.” Lisa sighed with a smile. *Poor Frieda is not having a very good morning.*

“So,” Jenny turned towards her friend, “can I leave this paper with you?” She indicated the clip from the bulletin.

“Yes,” Lisa said looking down, “and thank you.”

“I didn’t think I’d see you again,” the girl admitted.

“Nor I, you” Lisa said as the car pulled up. “I’m very thankful.”

“So am I,” Jenny squeezed her gloved hand and headed towards the car.

Lisa walked up behind to say goodbye to the mother.

“So we’ll be seeing you again, soon?” Mrs. Williams called out, referring to the Church’s ad.

“Yes, I certainly hope so.” Lisa answered with a grin. Jenny shut the door and began to roll up the window.

“I know so,” the girl smiled as the window shut. Lisa smiled back. With a happiness and peace she’d never experienced, the young teacher waved goodbye as her little friend rode out of the parking lot. Shortly afterwards, Lisa’s car followed and, like the Williams’, never would return.

Shortly after they had driven away, Mrs. Williams began talking to her daughter in the back seat.

“So did you have a nice visit with Miss Nicole?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Jenny leaned back.

“I didn’t think we’d see her there today.” Mrs. Williams admitted. Jenny sighed.

“I wasn’t expecting it either.” There was another silence, while Jenny just stared listlessly out of the window.

“Oh,” Mrs. Williams interrupted the silence. “Merry 10th day of Christmas,” She said, looking at Jenny through the rearview mirror. “Here,” she handed back something wrapped.

“Thanks, Mom,” Jenny said, taking it from her hands. She looked at it curiously. She wasn’t expecting a present. Mrs. Williams was pleased.

“Surprised you, didn’t I? Go ahead, open. Merry Christmas.”

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Jenny tore apart the wrapping paper and then dropped them to the floor in disbelief. A smile spread across her face, as she examined the object in her hands. It was that wedding photograph, that Jenny had found in the attic while searching with her mother for decorations. A tear began to well up in her eyes, as the image had a whole new meaning now. As her gaze followed the beaming faces of the married couple, she detected a little bit of paper, trapped inside an inner corner of the frame. She turned the picture slightly to the left to read the handwritten message stuck in front of the glass. The tear she was holding back slipped from her dark eyes, and warped the paper she was reading.

*To our sweetest daughter Jenny - we both love you so much.*

*Merry Christmas! - Mom and Dad*

*The End*

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