

The
Unfinished
Gift

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One

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When the black sedan stopped at the traffic light, Patrick rose quietly to his knees in the backseat and peeked out the side window. He flattened his palms against the glass, cold as ice, but he didn't pull back. His eyes were drawn to a large picture window on a house at a nearby corner. Set deep within the night shadows, the window gave the appearance of a painting suspended in midair. Patrick would've given anything to be a part of what he saw inside.

A plump Christmas tree glowed through the curtains. Two stockings dangled from a fireplace mantel. Flames shimmered against the glass ornaments on the tree. A real family, a whole family—mom and dad, two kids, and a dog—sat in a semi-circle around a radio. Probably listening to Christmas music, Patrick thought. Maybe even “Silent Night,” his favorite. The mom put her arm around one of the children, a boy about his own age, and tenderly patted him on the shoulder. Tears welled up in Patrick's eyes, escaping down his cheeks. He wiped them away and looked toward the front seat at

the rearview mirror, to see if the government lady had been watching.

He had cried more in the last few days than in all his seven short years combined.

He placed his hand on one of the two suitcases beside him. One contained his clothes and a framed picture of his parents hugging, taken before he was born. The other held all the toys he had ever owned and a few picture books. The government lady said he might not be coming back to the apartment for a while. It had something to do with how long it took to find his dad in a place called Europe and whether the army would let his father come home now that his mom had . . .

He couldn't even let the words form in his head.

Instead he thought about his father. He had been gone for a long time, but Patrick still remembered what he looked like. He had studied the picture every night before bed, trying to remember the sound of his voice. It was deep and strong, like the voice of the Shadow. And he was tall with dark wavy hair. He was a pilot on a B-17, dropping bombs on Hitler and all the bad people in Germany so the world could be free. That's what his mother had said. But right now, Patrick didn't care if the world was free. Or if his dad flew bombers or drove a milk truck.

He just wanted him home.

The car started moving again. At the next corner they drove past a Santa Claus ringing a bell beneath a street-light. Next to him, a red kettle. A couple bundled in overcoats walked by. The man dropped a few coins in the kettle and kept going. The Santa yelled "Merry Christmas" in a happy but high-pitched voice. Not a proper Santa voice at all, Patrick thought. "We're almost there now, Patrick," the government lady said. "Isn't it pretty outside with all the lights and decorations?"

“Uh . . . yes,” Patrick answered. He knew he should feel that way. He wished he did.

“Do you like Christmastime? It’s my favorite time of year.”

He could tell she was trying to cheer him up, but it was hard to be in a Christmas mood when your mom suddenly dies in a car crash, leaving you all alone. Patrick noticed her eyes in the rearview mirror. She was looking back. He thought he saw a tear forming, but she quickly turned away. Almost there now, she had said.

Almost where?

He didn’t recognize any of these streets or buildings. His grandfather couldn’t be a very nice man, he thought. He didn’t live very far away. Why had they never visited him? And the way his parents had talked about his grandfather also worried him; they always lowered their voices or changed the subject when Patrick walked into the room.

As the car drove on, Patrick looked at the Christmas lights outlining some of the homes and streetlights. Still, it didn’t feel like Christmas inside. Not even the presence of snow lifted his spirits, and Patrick loved the snow.

Almost there, she said.

Patrick felt so lost. They had always lived in that same apartment on Clark Street. This place didn’t even resemble his old neighborhood. Everyone here had little yards and driveways with garages. Patrick wasn’t even sure they were in Philadelphia anymore. He tried thinking about something happy, starting with the toys he wanted for Christmas. Then he wondered, with everything that happened, would he still get any?

Suddenly a wave of guilt swept over him. He sank low in his seat. Here he was worrying about getting his share of toys, and here his mother was . . . gone. He would never



get to spend another Christmas with her. They would never decorate another tree. Sing another Christmas carol. He'd gladly give every toy he ever owned or would ever own again to have her back instead. Even for a day. The tears started coming again.

This time he couldn't make them stop.

Two

The old man's joints creaked in unison with the cellar stairs he ascended. He had just added a shovelful of coal to the furnace. Once upstairs, he glanced at the mantel clock. The boy would be arriving any moment. *The boy*. Just the thought was enough to stir emotions he felt sure had long ago dried out and crusted over. How had it all suddenly become his responsibility? Ida had been gone for many years now, and he'd come to rely on the silence and steadiness of his routines to maintain his fragile peace of mind. What would a little boy mean to all that?

Ian Collins slid his coffee cup under the pot and refilled it to the brim. As he sat at the dining room table, he glanced once around the downstairs of his moderate two-story home. Everything in its place, all as it should be. Even down to the ivory-colored doilies pinned to the armchairs. As neat as if Ida herself were still looking after things. He could just imagine the disheveled state of affairs once the boy got settled in.

Bing Crosby sang "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" in the living room. Nothing but Christmas music on again tonight. The radio carried the only trace of Christmas in the house. No tree. No lights or decorations. That was all Ida's doing.

No reason to keep it up. Collins let out a prolonged sigh. There'd certainly be some pressure applied on him to change that for the boy's sake, him having just experienced such a tragedy. That nosey government woman had already implied as much on the phone, her voice all fake and sweet.

Where is that box of Christmas whatnots, anyway? he wondered. He was sure he hadn't thrown it out. He could still see in his mind a picture of Ida in that last year, two weeks after Christmas, her long gray hair woven tightly in a bun, sitting on the living room floor like a child. She wrapped every item carefully in newspaper and placed them in a big cardboard box, except for the ornaments, which she placed in the exact spots they had occupied in the store cartons.

After her death, when the Salvation Army had stopped by to clear out her things, he had half a mind to let them take the big box along. But he didn't, couldn't. At the time, the feeling came in the form of a posthumous lecture, the worst kind Ida could deliver—eyes only, boring deep within his soul. She would have wanted him to reconcile with their son, Shawn, maybe pass the decorations on to him, like some kind of family heirloom.

No, the box was still in the attic. Had to be. Buried no doubt under a ton of debris, a backache in the making. Well, it could just sit there, he decided. No sense in fussing over it now. If the boy felt the need strong enough, he could sift through it himself in a few days, give him something to do. But Collins would draw the line at a tree. Just no point in it.

He ran his fingers through his thin silver hair and scratched the back of his scalp, then thought he heard the low bass notes of a car engine rumbling out front, then coming to a stop. A moment later, a car door, then another. Had to be them at this hour. He'd better get up before they rang the bell. He had hated the sound of that thing every one of the

nineteen years he'd lived there. He lifted his unlit cigar out of the saucer dish and wedged it in between the spaces formerly occupied by his front teeth. Probably shouldn't light it with company almost here, he thought.

He shuffled across the oval rug covering the living room floor. Why'd the boy's mom have to up and die like that? It wasn't a mournful thought, for he truly blamed her for destroying what little relationship existed between him and his son, Shawn. But to leave him alone with the boy like this, even if just for a few weeks. Whatever would they talk about? He'd never said two words to his grandson before, couldn't tell him apart from any number of children playing stickball in the street. And what had Shawn and his wife told the boy about him? About why they had never spent any time together? Probably had made the rift out to be all his doing. That's what they were good at: turning things around so that everything was his fault.

The doorbell rang. He reached down and turned the door-knob, wondering what the purpose of his trip to the cellar had been.

It was still as cold as ice in here.