

The

Santa Shop

A NOVEL OF HOPE

TIM GREATON

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*This is a work of fiction. The names and the characters are
all fictional. Any resemblance to living or dead individuals is
purely coincidental.*

Occasionally, just occasionally, something wonderful happens to someone who doesn't deserve it. In my case, there were four somethings: All my love and thanks to Joan, my wife, and to my three children, Kayla, Brandon and Zachary, whom I have had the pleasure to watch become the amazing young people that they are. A prouder and more thankful husband and dad does not likely exist.

Chapter One

A Holiday of Peace

"Why are you dressed like that?" Karen asked. "It's Christmas not Halloween, you know."

I smiled at her petite reflection in the large oval dressing mirror. She was barely a step behind me. I finished buttoning the black robe that I had pulled over my normal jeans and flannel shirt. "Saint Nick's in the heart, not the clothes." I turned and drew her to me. "Do you know how much I love you?"

"Yes, but tell me again."

"A whole lot," I said as I gently brushed a lock of brown hair from her forehead and kissed her lips—lips just as sweet and soft as they had been that first time. It was hard to believe that a year and a half had already passed.

When we finally parted, I surveyed the bedroom. The deed to the house and the toyshop were both lying neatly on top of the dresser. Both Karen and I had properly signed and laid them out for David to find when he began moving in the next day. He'd be surprised at the Christmas gift. Though he was expecting to move in, he didn't know we were giving him both the house and the shop.

Five suitcases were lined neatly alongside the recently-made bed. Other than the two, medium-sized boxes in the living room, four of those suitcases represented everything we were taking with us. Karen had already removed our pictures from the wall. I knew she would have taken special care to pack the photos of Tabitha and Derek safely. Both she and I had been vacuuming and cleaning all day and the place looked easily as good as the day we had taken it over.

I glanced outside. The sky was dark and the street lights of the little Vermont town were shining through our windows. This Christmas Eve other families were likely huddled around their holiday meals, while we, however, were on our way to begin a new life. We were going to miss this wonderful place.

The melody of *Jingle Bells* drifted in from the living room. For weeks now, Karen had been playing Christmas music and even in these, our last few hours in this house, she was appreciating the magic of the season.

"I should be going," I told her.

"I know," she said. "I'll finish things up around here."

"Shouldn't I put the luggage in the car?"

"What, and waste these bulging muscles?" She did an imitation of a body builder's

pose.

"I can handle it. Just do what you need to do. I'll pick you up the way we planned."

"You're the most incredible woman." "And you are the luckiest man."

"Such modesty," I said, grinning.

"I love you, too. Now go. The sooner you get done, the sooner we can be together. I don't intend to spend my whole Christmas Eve alone."

I kissed her again, grabbed the smallest suitcase from the bed and let her lead me into the living room. I dared one more kiss then stepped out into the cold December night.

Tiny flakes of snow drifted lazily downward around me. Though I had shoveled our walk earlier, my feet crunched in the light coating that had fallen since. As I reached the sidewalk, I was overcome with the beauty of the place. Quaint little houses lined the three streets that made up the entire town. Simple candles and strings of colorful Christmas lights adorn nearly every home. The aroma of burning wood filled the air. The snowfall of the last couple of days was just in time to complete the traditional Christmas picture. The town was like a scene from a snow globe and could easily have been the model for the first.

I turned onto the sidewalk and strolled west toward River Road. I felt a sense of peace and completeness as I continued on to the end of town. My head was filled with happy thoughts and a deep thankfulness. It was hard to believe that just two years earlier my life had been about to end...

Chapter Two

The Chapel

I woke with a sharp pain in my thigh. The cardboard I had earlier pulled over me for protection against the wind was gone and the frigid wind stabbed easily through my ragged clothes. The policeman kicked me again, in the stomach this time.

"Move on, buddy. You can't stay here." His voice was callous and cracked with age.

I didn't argue, didn't even look up, just staggered to my feet and made my way out of the small alcove of the brick apartment building, back into the dark street. I knew I had to go at least a dozen blocks to be out of his beat. With luck, the next policeman would be younger and not so street-hardened. I longed to settle down and sleep in one spot for more than a few hours. How long had it been since I'd slept peacefully? A lifetime — no — two lifetimes... the lifetimes of my wife and little boy.

I gritted my teeth and trudged on, thankful there was no snow yet. Christmas lights glared at me from many of the apartment windows I passed. I didn't know for certain, but it seemed to me the dreaded holiday was only a week or so away. Just the thought of it gave me a sinking feeling inside.

I fought against it, but the memories of my last Christmas flooded my mind. I remembered the way Tabitha had laughed and joked until I broke the news. I remembered the way she had cuddled Derek as I left the apartment that night. The accusation in her eyes had stayed with me every day since.

How could I have known? How could anyone have known that Santa Claus would be a jacked-up teen with an addiction in the apartment below ours? And who could have guessed that the kid would attempt to light a cigarette with his gas stove and instead catch his hair on fire? Like a campfire to kindling, the flames had spread rapidly through the dried wood of the old building. In just moments, all four stories had erupted into flames.

I rounded a corner and made my way east, my mind still toiling through the memories. I should have been there. I had desperately needed to be there. But once again my work had taken priority. "Another few months," I remembered telling her, "and we'll have all the time in the world. Another few months and we can move out of this apartment and get someplace nice for Derek."

"But we need you now," she countered. "It's Christmas Eve."

"I know, Tabby, but the partners are expecting me. We can still get a sitter if you want to go to the party with me."

"No!"

She hadn't been about to leave the baby alone on Christmas Eve. I might have been a heartless parent, but she wasn't. Ultimately, I had gone alone to the firm's Christmas party without her. I had left my family alone, instead choosing to be with a bunch of lawyers who neither thought about nor cared a single iota for me or for my family.

For those people and for my own warped sense of priorities, I had left my family alone to die.

In all, twelve tenants had been pulled from the building and laid with sheets over their bodies. Most, like my wife and son, had suffocated in the thick smoke. The police said Tabitha made it all the way to Derek's room, but there she collapsed. They found her beside the crib, her hand still grasping the lower rail. Neither she nor Derek had survived.

I was near the Holy Trinity Church when I finally shook the flashback. The biting wind didn't matter any more. I could never endure enough pain to wash my wife and son's blood from my hands. Even if I had been able to get a job and put my life back together, it just wouldn't be right. How could I continue in comfort in this world when the two most important people in my life now lay dead in their coffins?

I had been toying with the idea for months, and once again, thoughts of suicide ran through my head. Why should I enjoy the breaths that they could no longer take?

I wondered what had ever happened to the crack-head. Yes, he had survived the fire. Other than some singed hair he'd been fine. At first, I had hated him. I had even searched for him in a couple of halfway houses in the two months that followed the funerals. He wasn't at either place. The police told me they didn't know where he'd gone, but I suspected they really just didn't want me to know. It was my guess that the strung-out teen had followed his drug habit into the back seat of some drifter's van. He was probably lighting cigarettes with a gas stove hundreds of miles away.

It no longer mattered to me where he was. I ultimately knew who was to blame for the death of my family. And only a mirror could show me his guilt-ridden face.

As I approached the church, I once again wondered how I could manage to shoot myself. I didn't have a gun or the means to buy one. Money didn't come easy to the homeless, even those who were self-made.

Of course, I could have always called my father in Virginia and asked to borrow the money. I could have said I needed to buy a suit for job interviews. The fact that the old buzzard hadn't known or cared where I'd been in the last twenty years presented a bit of a problem. My last memory of him was his fist hitting the side of my forehead just before he threw me out his front door. No, asking him hadn't been an option, and even if it had, I would never have communicated with the monster. A wife-beater and a card shark were the kindest terms I could think of.

Though my mother had died when I was only six, I remembered her to be a wonderful and

loving woman. But I also remembered her as a woman with bruises and lots of tears. After her death, my father had systematically beaten his next two wives who had both ultimately divorced him. He'd been pounding on a live-in girlfriend when, at fourteen years old, I had finally had enough. I stepped between him and the mousy woman and took one swing.

I've often wondered if I could have done more with my youthful anger, but I'd been so surprised by my solid jab to his eye that I hadn't thought in time to block his return punch. I had still been in shock as he launched me backward through the door, my hind-end slamming solidly onto the covered front porch of our house. I could still see the hatred on his face as the door slammed shut, and I remembered smiling at that last glimpse of his rapidly swelling eye. My single punch had been a good one.

I didn't have any other family, and I couldn't think of anyone else who would have helped with money. The twenty years since being thrown from my father's house had been filled with lots of hard work and schooling. Though I never borrowed a penny to pay for my six years of college, my round-the-clock work and school schedules hadn't left much time for socializing.

My only friends had been those I'd met at the law firm. And just how close we were became evident shortly after the double funeral. The first week brought me a large stack of cards and heaps of voiced sympathy, but by the second and third weeks I was struggling to stay ahead of the office innuendo that began to swirl all around me. I was making too many mistakes, missing large references in my legal briefs, not conversing well with clients and so on. Though some of the comments were partly true, most were just nonsense, voiced only to push me down and to make way for others to climb past me during my personal crisis. The way I saw it, the youngest lawyers, my 'closest' friends, all had begun to vie and scheme for my slightly larger office and my upcoming partnership position.

I didn't know if all the whispering and manipulation had any effect on my position at the firm or if it had been just a standard inquiry that brought me to the partners' notice. Whichever it was, just five weeks after the fire, I found myself sitting before all six of the senior partners, four men and two women. Not one of them offered a single condolence or even pretended to care about the loss of my family. The only issues discussed that day were the drop in the hours I'd billed out to clients in the last few weeks, and the problems I 'seemed' to be having with my written arguments. I remembered stuttering some vague excuses and assuring them that I would pull things together. I'd be back on track again soon.

I was on track, all right. Two days later, I quit. What was the use? I just couldn't bring myself to continue working with the hatefulness and deceit of the people around me. Besides, who really cared why one person was suing another? Did it really matter that someone's basketball had left black marks on their neighbors' fence, or that one woman's shed was built six inches too close to her back setback line?

I'd been relieved to get away from the entire pile of foolishness. But, there in front of the church, I knew those bridges had been burned. Whether by choice or happenstance, they just weren't there anymore. I had used up all my friends and close acquaintances with one

simple tragedy—a tragedy that I had brought upon myself.

I tried to let the bitter memories go as I settled down into that sunken archway surrounding the church's main entrance. It seemed colder there than it had been at the apartment building, but by pushing back against the weathered bricks at the corner of the door I did manage to foil the worst of the wind. I had even imagined that a tiny bit of the heat from inside was seeping out through the edges of the door.

Thoughts of suicide had continued to churn through my head. I tried to remember every self-murder I'd ever heard about or seen on TV. For the longest time I concentrated on the problem. Finally, I decided that that throwing myself from the top of a building or in front of a truck would be the only options for me. God knew Albany offered many opportunities for both. I had come to this same conclusion many times before. Was it possible that I was finally ready to act on the thoughts?

I fell asleep for a time and failed to dream. When I woke, it was to a gentle hand on my shoulder.

"Come inside, my son." The priest's soft voice was accompanied by a warm smile that seemed to prove the sincerity of the offer. "You are cold and it's warm inside. Please come in."

He was a tall and good-looking man with gray hair and glasses. Though likely in his sixties or early seventies, his grip was strong as he helped me inside the building. As we walked through the main chapel, I couldn't take my eyes off the huge crucifix that hung over the dais. A separate light illuminated it nicely, though the rest of the lights in the large chamber were dim. Christ hung there, a crown of thorns surrounding his head, painted-on blood trickling down from the pricks in his forehead and the nails that went through his hands and feet. As large as he was, probably a little over six feet, and with all the detail of the sculpture, he looked convincingly real.

I might soon be sacrificed just like Him.

I immediately felt the sacrilege of the thought. There were no parallels here. Christ had died for something, in defense of the people he loved. I would be dying for no noble reason. I would be dying for my crimes, for my failure to protect my family, for my failure to shoulder the guilt and move on.

Again, as always, visions of Tabitha and little Derek came to my mind. Why couldn't it have been a pleasant picture of them full of happiness and life that haunted me? No, it was always the same, always the same image of them lying cold in their coffins.

"This way," the Priest said, drawing me from my reverie. We were at the base of the dais, and I realized I had been craning my neck to see Christ hanging some twenty feet above us. The blood was so real I imagined it would drip on me at any moment.

"He's still with us, you know."

I turned my attention to the kindly old priest. I nodded. "I suppose he is with you."

"With you, too," the priest said as he gently took my elbow and led me toward the small

rooms that were his living quarters.

We entered into a medium-sized room, a combination kitchen-living area. There was a sink, a small refrigerator, a stove and some dark, wooden cabinets off to our right. A well-used couch and a wooden rocking chair backed up against the wall to our left. In the center of the room sat a chrome-edged table surrounded by three chrome and red chairs. There was no fourth chair, left out likely to allow more room to move around.

The doorway beside the refrigerator likely led into a bathroom and the other arch, behind the kindly priest's rocking chair, was no doubt a bedroom entrance. There were a few prints of Jesus on the cream-colored walls, and one small, brass crucifix hung above the bedroom door, but otherwise the place was unadorned to the point of austere. I imagined that many priests probably lived with reasonable luxury. However, if those rooms were any indication, this one man's values were exactly where I suspected God wanted them to be; strictly and solely in the Lord.

Everything was immaculately cleaned, and I couldn't say exactly why, but I guessed the priest took care of that on his own. I suspected he would have been as comfortable scrubbing floors as giving sermons.

He patted my shoulder, and I didn't shy away as I would have with most people. "Family around here?"

"Not anymore," I answered. "My wife and son died."

"I'm sorry. The Lord sometimes can be a difficult master." He looked into my eyes and there was a genuine sympathy in his own.

"I don't blame him, God, I mean. I'm pretty sure he didn't have much to do with the dope-head who started the fire."

The priest nodded as he offered me one of the padded chrome chairs. He moved across the room and rummaged in a cabinet, pulling out a couple of mismatched cups. "Coffee?"

"Sure."

"You been on your own long?"

"If you mean homeless, not too long I guess. Only a few months, maybe six."

"You like it?"

"It's all I deserve. More than I deserve, really."

He scooped a teaspoon of instant coffee into both cups and poured water from an already warm pot into each. "You think it was your fault... them dying?"

"Why me, Father?"

"It's hard to know why God tests one and not the other."

"No, I mean why take me in like this? There must be dozens of homeless people all over the block."

He smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners, the right side of his lips turning up

slightly more than the left, a kindly expression, somehow filled with wisdom and sympathy and understanding all at once. "You were the only one at the door tonight."

I couldn't help but laugh. I nodded. "You take people in every night?"

"No, most have learned to ignore my door. They don't come this way often."

"You torture the homeless?"

Again the slightly lopsided smile. He slid the black coffee across to me. "In a manner of speaking. Sometimes the right questions can be torture. Do you miss them?"

"No." I shook my head. Tears had somehow already formed in the corners of my eyes. Droplets began to course downward. "No, 'miss them' doesn't begin to describe it. Crave them. Need them so much my soul can barely stand the memory. That's more like it."

"And the guilt?"

"Nearly every minute of every day." I wiped my cheeks. "If I'd been there, I could have done something. I could have saved them."

"How do you know?"

"I don't. But by not being there I didn't even give them the chance."

"So it's all your fault?"

I shrugged. "From where I sit there just isn't anyone else to blame. I left my family alone on Christmas Eve, and now I don't have a family."

"Sugar? Cream?"

"No. Black is fine." I took a sip. It was bitter and warm.

"What next?"

"There is no next. I'm living better than I deserve, and I can't allow even that to go on much longer."

"You leaving us?"

"You know what I mean. I don't deserve anything."

The priest nodded, sipped at his own coffee, eyes half-closed, probably thanking God for the nourishment. He was the picture of contentment. I envied him. He looked at me then, really looked. His dark eyes, magnified by his glasses, were pools of both understanding and forgiveness. His was a gaze that children would long for and adults would seek. "What you don't deserve is the guilt. It wasn't your fault. There are invisible battle lines drawn all across our world. How could you have known your family was standing on one of them?"

"But it was my job to recognize there was a war, that there was danger. You can't just leave your family when there's danger."

The priest nodded. "I'm sorry, my son. It saddens me that you have been drawn into the horrible clutches of this guilt. I will pray for you."

"Thank you, Father—I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name?"

"Father Johnston, or Brian if you prefer."

"Thank you, Father Johnston. It was good to have been seen tonight." Not many people understood what it was like to be homeless. It was as close to invisibility as you could get. I really did enjoy being noticed. "I can let myself out." I took another sip and stood.

He immediately got to his feet and was somehow taller this time. "You will sit and finish your coffee," he said firmly. There was no menace in his voice, but the tone was demanding, akin to the firmness of a parent to a teen-aged child. "We can have toast and eggs tonight, or in the morning when we wake. Either way, you will be sleeping in the warmth of the chapel this night."

I nodded.

"Now that you have been 'seen', there is no escaping my notice."

I could tell that this man understood the plight of the homeless. He was one of the very few who did. I slumped back into my seat and took another sip of the warm bitter beverage.

"If you'd like to take a shower, you're welcome to the bed." He pointed toward the doorway behind the rocker. "Or, if you prefer, the couch is fine just as you are."

Thoughts of Tabitha and Derek in their caskets came, as they often did, to my mind just then. "I don't feel like being clean right now, Father, if that's alright with you. The couch is fine."

He smiled again, warmth radiating from him as surely as from a flame-filled hearth. It was just unfortunate that I didn't deserve a reprieve from the cold.

I sipped again. The coffee was good.

Chapter Three

The Vagrant

The aroma of fresh-cooked eggs and toast greeted me as I woke. I lifted my head from the pillow and noted that a soft blue blanket had been placed over me sometime during the night. I almost hated getting up. The softness of the couch was a luxury I hadn't enjoyed in months. Father Johnston stood beside the table, that same kindly, skewed smile on his face. He was a doting man, and I couldn't imagine anyone not liking him. Had I intended to spend more time in this world, I would certainly have joined his Sunday flock. There was a cup in his hand.

"I'll leave this juice on the table. Your food is ready, but you'll want to get to it before it's cold." I stretched and sat up.

"I've duties to attend, but make yourself at home. Instant coffee's in the cupboard and the kettle should be warm for a while yet."

"Aren't you afraid I'll steal something and run?"

He humored me with one of those crooked smiles. "Everything here belongs to God, and you are a child of God. He happily shares with his children. Take anything you feel you need."

He placed the cup on the table and went out into the main chapel. As the door closed, I thought, *God has chosen his servant well in that man.*

I felt more rested than I had in days. It was the spiritual warmth of the place, I knew, that felt so comforting. How was it this environment had helped me make a decision that seemed the antithesis of warmth? The night before, I had finally made my mind up. I wouldn't go on living without my family. Not only did I miss them too much to breathe most of the time, I also knew I deserved no less than death. Today I would make final plans.

The eggs were scrambled just right and the toast was crisp with light butter, in short, perfect. Maybe it was because my own guilt had lifted somewhat, but the morning seemed brighter, cheerful almost. Finally I was going to take responsibility for my own actions. I was going to pay the price for what I had done. It felt right to know that my family would finally be avenged.

Even if the priest had been right in that my presence would not have saved Tabitha or Derek that Christmas Eve, I would at least be returning the score to zero. If I hadn't been able to save them, I too would have died in that fire. How could it be wrong to simply follow the plan God had originally laid out for me? I should have died that night, and only my greed and desire to get ahead in this world had saved me from that fate.

Maybe this visit had been just what I needed. Though it would likely have horrified him to know, I believe meeting Father Johnston had actually sealed my decision. I needed to kill myself. It just felt like the right thing to do. For the first time in nearly a year, I would be taking control and doing something right. I would not live through another Christmas without my family.

I finished up the meal and carefully brought my plate and cup over to the small sink. There was no sign of the priest's dirty dishes and I felt as though I should wash mine and put them away. I would have required a shower just to be clean enough to wash dishes. With a twinge of guilt I left them in the sink.

I made my way out into the chapel proper. Father Johnston was beside the tall, wooden dais. He was talking with another indigent-looking fellow. The bedraggled man was nearly as tall as the priest, in his forties, I would have guessed by his face, though his dirty gray hair suggested he might be older. His hair hung in long curls well below his shoulders. I couldn't say why exactly, but his long tangles looked unnatural. I imagined that he might have tried to braid his own hair and had the whole project go sour. His tan trench coat was rumpled and covered with dark and light spots that had long-since rendered the original color a moot point. What little bit of his plaid pants I could see spoke of 1960s polyester, a thrift shop special not unlike my own, though my style sense had kept me in solid blue.

The hobo brushed a snarl of hair from his forehead and smiled over at me. I smiled back, consciously trying to remember if I had ever seen him in the shelters or kitchens. I felt certain that I hadn't.

"Thanks, for the meal and everything," I said to Father Johnston. "I really appreciate it."

"Is there anything else I can do for you, my son?"

"No, you've been wonderful and have helped more than you'll ever know."

"Come back anytime you like. You are always welcome under God's roof."

"Will do, Father."

I left then as the priest returned his attention to the other man. Strangely, the hobo watched me for a few seconds too long before turning back to the elderly patriarch. I wondered at his interest but couldn't quite place why it struck me as odd.

The wind whipped at my bare face and neck as I crossed the short paved yard at the front of the chapel. I had some window shopping to do. Forming a plan shouldn't take long, but first I needed to be certain I knew all my options.

The rest of the day went quickly as I pushed my way through the throngs of last-minute holiday shoppers. I went from street to street, looking in the windows of nearly every pawnshop within walking distance. I even went into a couple of stores and managed to not be thrown out. I was almost ashamed at how pleasant the world suddenly seemed. It wasn't that I thought of Tabitha and Derek any less, it was just that I knew I would soon be paying

for my crime. The guilt seemed to have subsided in anticipation of my upcoming punishment. Probably my new sense of purpose also helped, even if it was only to plan my own death.

I had already known firearms were likely out of the question, but while I was window-shopping anyway I confirmed what I already knew. Guns were expensive, even used ones. And now there were waiting periods when you bought one, not a viable option for me.

Stabbing myself didn't seem to be a good choice either. Though, admittedly, getting hold of a knife wouldn't have been too difficult. There were likely dozens of long and sharp ones at any of the three soup kitchens I frequented. As understaffed as they were, stealing a knife would have been a snap.

Unfortunately, I didn't think I could actually push a piece of steel into my own chest. And even if I could, the complications from missing a vital organ would be too great. I'd just wind up in an emergency room and then on to a psychiatric ward from there.

No, stabbing was definitely out.

I stopped in front of a pharmacy window. Crutches, Ace bandages and various other medical paraphernalia were displayed along with a three-foot plastic Santa and twelve plastic reindeer. There had been a time that Christmas brought a smile to my lips, but now the sight of the portly fellow in red just brought the grief back.

"Poison," I said through the window to the Santa as he reached plastic hands into his bag overflowing with plastic imaginary toys.

I needed to think this through. Would poison work? It might be simple. I could swallow a few well-chosen pills and that would be it. I especially liked the idea that I wouldn't be a shock to the poor innocent passerby who found me. To him or her, I would look only like a sleeping man down on his luck. Even upon discovering I was dead, they would have no horrible vision of death to carry around with them.

Unfortunately, self-poison involved the problems of both a lack of money and the possibility of the aforementioned emergency room journey.

No that was out, too.

Jumping in front of moving vehicles was next on the list. I leaned against the bricks of the pharmacy and stared into the busy street. I could easily have counted a thousand cars or trucks in just a few minutes. They sped this way and that, looking like hoards of colorful beetles intent on various insect missions.

I'd have to jump in front of something large and fast, like a bus, a truck or even a train. But what would happen to the driver who hit me? I'd leave her or him with employment and legal issues, and maybe even a lifetime of guilt. Maybe I could leave a note in my pocket stating I had done it on purpose and that the driver had only the misfortune to have been there when it happened. But I imagined the horrific sight I'd have the bystanders remembering for years to come.

No, I'd never be able to do it. Cross another option off my mental chart.

I began walking the sidewalk again, moving silently though the shoppers who pushed by me, though all the while pretending not to notice me. Some days I would have gone out of my way to be noticed, to force them to see me, but today I was content to remain invisible and unnoticed in my lugubrious thoughts.

So what was I left with?

Maybe my commitment to suicide wasn't quite as strong as I'd thought. Was it possible that I was just making up excuses in order to shirk my responsibility? No more! Two wonderful people had died because of me. Was I forgetting my own implication in that tragedy?

Tabby's accusing glance from that Christmas Eve came back to me then. "You're really leaving us?" her eyes had said. 'Leaving us to die,' my mind finished for her.

No more excuses. I'd made the commitment to rid the world of my useless self, and I fully intended to follow through on it. My last option was to jump from someplace high. That was the way it would be. I would throw myself from a building or a bridge.

Of course, I immediately thought how horrible it would be for the people who found me. But there was obviously a downside to any method I chose. At least this was one I could afford and one that wouldn't leave anyone else feeling responsible. It was the best way, the only way really.

"Hey Buddy!" someone screamed. Suddenly, my collar was yanked backwards. Simultaneously, an explosion of sound and air erupted a mere foot from my face.

The train rocketed by like... well, like a train. I had been so deep in thought I'd nearly stepped right into its path. The thought brought a chuckle to my lips even as I fell backward into the shoulder of my savior.

My chuckle had become a raucous laugh by the time the man was able to pull me another few feet to complete safety. I stumbled and finally caught my own balance, but my laughter continued as the train rocketed past just three feet before me. There I had been, pondering suicide so deeply that I'd almost accomplished it by accident.

I was still laughing when the last car soared by and the world had quieted somewhat. I wiped the tears from my cheeks and turned to thank my protector, but all I saw were strangers. He was already gone. I hadn't gotten a good look at his face, but I knew it anyway. The plaid pants had been a dead giveaway. Apparently, the hobo from the chapel had been following me.

It took nearly an hour of darting up and down nearby streets to find him. The mottled stains of his trench coat finally came into view just three streets from the chapel. Was he reporting back to the priest about me? What had I done that morning of any interest to anyone? Nothing, I hadn't even done anything of interest to me.

"Hey you," I called out. A red Volkswagon bug, one of the new ones, swerved around a corner and sent me scurrying back up onto the sidewalk. "Hey!"

He stopped and slowly turned toward me, brushing the snarls of his gray hair away from his face.

Four lanes of busy traffic divided us. I pressed the crosswalk button, but knew it could take as many as five minutes before it was safe to cross.

"Wait up! I want to talk!"

His head nodded, and I couldn't help but feel that this was exactly the way he had planned it. Had he wanted me to follow him? Was anyone really smart enough to plan something like this in advance?

Oh sure, I thought to myself, and he probably made me nearly walk into that moving train, too.

It seemed an awfully long time before the green hand flashed. Finally, I was able to cross.

He was more handsome than I would have thought from the brief glance I'd gotten earlier. My guess at his age had likely been right, though, somewhere in his late-forties. As I got within a few feet of him, the mystery of his too symmetrical snarls became apparent. It wasn't really hair. He was wearing a wig that looked similar in quality to costumes I'd seen kids wearing on Halloween.

He must have caught the direction of my gaze, because he laughed and pulled the faux-hair from his head. Beneath was a neatly cut, full white crop of hair. He was looking less-and-less the part of a vagabond.

"Thanks for the help back there," I said.

His face broke into a smile filled with good white teeth, and it seemed to be genuine. Much like Father Johnston, this man was immediately likeable to me, but in his case I couldn't say why exactly. It was just a feeling I got.

"How come you were— "

He never let me finish the sentence. "I followed you."

"Why?" I was truly perplexed. A need for caution crept into my mind. Kind or not, this fellow's actions seemed increasingly bizarre.

He stared down at his feet. My eyes followed. His brown leather dress shoes were older but in fairly good condition with a decent sheen. They were quite different from the torn sneakers that I now wore, tape holding the sole of the toe onto the right one. I'd have to re-tape it soon as it looked as though all my walking today had nearly worn through the bottom of the duct tape strap. In truth I hadn't really been homeless long enough to have worn a pair of shoes through like this, but I had been broke enough to sell my own shoes a few months back. These sneakers I'd picked up at a shelter the same day.

He was staring at me when I looked into his face again. "I'm new at this...this homeless thing," he said. "You seemed like someone who might be willing to help."

"Help you what, be homeless? Not much to it really. Live outside, sleep outside, get

ignored a lot. That pretty much covers it." I consciously smiled so he'd know I wasn't making light of him.

He gave me his big-teeth smile again, and this one was filled with full-fledged cheer. What followed was a bear-deep and infectious laugh. I couldn't help myself and broke into a cheerful fit of my own, a laugh that Tabby used to say was akin to the squawk of a goose. For several moments we stomped feet and continued caterwauling, likely looking to the rest of the world like a couple of drunks or psychotics or both.

I hadn't felt this buoyed in a very long time, and it definitely was the man beside me that elicited the response. My joke hadn't been all that funny. I knew I could easily have been friends with this man had times been different.

As our laughter subsided there on the sidewalk, he held his stomach as if too physically stop his rumbling. The sight gave me a clue to something that had been nagging at me since first seeing him at the chapel. It was like Santa's laugh, minus sixty or eighty pounds.

"It's a Santa wig," I said pointing at the poor excuse for dreadlocks he held in his hand.

He nodded. "Found it. I mixed in a lot of dirt to get the color. Thought I'd fit in better than with a new haircut out here." He waved toward the city in general.

"So eyes have been following you with the fancy shoes and nice hair?"

"Exactly."

"Sorry, but I'm not going to be of much help. I'm tied up at the moment."

"Busy day walking into trains and such?"

The statement didn't sound quite sarcastic. Had he guessed at my plans for the future, or more specifically my lack of a future? Could the priest have said something to him? Didn't seem likely.

"Thanks for the help back there. I'd have been a mess without it."

"No problem. We all need help sometimes." He pointed at himself and gestured toward his clothing in general. "Case in point." He put the ridiculous wig back on.

I had to admit he did look less of a mark with it in place. I nodded my approval. He might not get a date, but it would keep the muggers away. "You need help finding the shelters, food-kitchens? What exactly?"

"I'm hoping you can tell me how to survive? How do you manage from day to day? Don't the homeless just pop up dead everywhere?"

I tried to determine if there was a hidden message in his last statement, but there was none I could discern. "You just keep on plugging everyday. Don't trust anybody, and don't sleep anyplace where it's too comfortable."

"Too comfortable?"

"Yeah. Ever notice how the police are constantly shooing our kind from one doorway to

the next, from one alleyway to another? There are dozens, hundreds of places you could sleep where there would never be a policeman: under the bridges, down some of the abandoned subways, inside vacant buildings and so on. We don't go there, though, not those of us who still claim any value in our lives."

"Why not?"

"Only two kinds of people can survive in those warrens."

"Two?"

"Yeah, the gangsters and the goners."

"Goners?"

"Those are the people who don't care if they live or die. Some of them might even prefer the latter."

He grinned wide again. "Did you just say `the latter'? Never thought I'd hear a word like that coming out of a homeless mouth."

"Sorry. I was a lawyer once. Though I've learned to tone it down, the useless words crop back up every once in a while."

"So if I don't care if I survive I'm safe in those other places?"

"No, it's just that if a goner dies it's no big deal, not to them, not to anyone. They might live a day, a week, a month or even a long lifetime in one of those forgotten holes, but when their number comes up, they're gone. It's a risk that most of us just aren't willing to take."

And, I thought, it not guaranteed so doesn't work into my suicide plan.

"Any other words of wisdom?"

"Yeah, don't be homeless. Go back to your life."

He smiled again, and this time I sensed a secret hiding in his dark, glimmering eyes. But the unspoken mystery disappeared as his eyes lowered and his cheeks drooped. "I had a life, a pretty good one," he said, "but I made some really stupid decisions and well, it's all gone now."

"You don't have a pension, money to live on?"

There was no smile this time. His eyes had gone from brown to a lighter shade of hazel. His words were slow and seemed to be chosen carefully. "I have no option but to be here right now."

I accepted that, knowing full well there were chapters unspoken. I had apparently touched on a sore point. Everyone had secrets and sins of some kind. What did it matter to me? I'd be gone soon.

"Were you heading back to the church?"

"I thought the Father would know where I could eat."

"I doubt he'd tell you. He'll more likely feed you right there, his own lunch if that's all he

has."

The filthy Santa wig bounced in agreement. "He is a good one. You can see it in his eyes."

I nodded. I wanted to say something more but realized I didn't even know this man's name. It's funny, because as a homeless person you learn never to give out your name and to never ask each other about them. Names made it too easy for family to track you and too hard to avoid the constant street crime investigations. Detectives roamed the rough neighborhoods almost as often as those of us who lived there. The only names we usually used were handles and nicknames that tended to be changed often and at whim.

"I'm Skip," I said, revealing my real name for the first time in at least a couple of months. I wasn't sure why, but it seemed important to me that this man knew it. Maybe I was subconsciously trying to be remembered by someone, if only by another poor soul like myself. "Why don't we get something to eat? Martha Big's is only a few blocks this way." I pointed north, toward the industrial park.

"That a restaurant?"

I laughed. "In a manner of speaking, I suppose it is. Let's go."

The afternoon on Albany streets can be deceiving. The buildings were just high enough that the sun, which had really not yet begun to set, looked lower in the sky than it really was. It was only two o'clock as we strolled north toward the food kitchen, but the shadows along the sides of the busy highway were long and growing dark. As we passed from busy street to busy street, the shadows became islands of darkness, spaced in exact rhythm to the height of the buildings on our left. Along the way, I learned his name was Barwood Stone, and that not even he knew how such an odd name had been chosen for him. He'd apparently grown up in an orphanage and never had the chance to ask his parents about his decidedly offbeat moniker. His life had been spent scheduling freight shipments on the northern leg of the Boston and Maine Railroad. The job had ended a number of years before, just phased out, much the way railroads in general had been disappearing for years. He had no children, and though he hinted at having been married he never actually came out and said it.

Our discussion had grown silent for the last half-block or so. It was my turn to share some personal history, and I was surprised at how difficult it was to begin that verbal journey. Strangely, it wasn't the tragedy of the fire that was so difficult to talk about, it was more that I couldn't seem to mentally get through it to the lifetime I'd had before. I was both perplexed and shocked. I couldn't believe I hadn't realized this sooner, but it had been months since I'd recollected anything about Tabby or Derek from before that Christmas Eve. It was almost as if their deaths had erected a barrier, separating the homeless Skip of today from the working-two-jobs law school student and budding lawyer Skip of my earlier life. The revelation was like a wash of ice cold water down my back. I shivered

with realization.

We now stood before Martha Big's kitchen. Thankful for the excuse, I opened the sagging green door for Barwood and waited a full thirty seconds until I followed him in. It was funny how life was. I couldn't bring myself to talk about my pre-fire past, and now I suddenly knew why. I was afraid that if I remembered any of the good things I might lose the courage to pay for my crime. It was easy to think about the loss of my family, the loss of my job, and even the loss of my self-respect as I joined the street world, because those thoughts fueled my personal disgust and sealed my desire to be done with this life. Those other memories, though, those good things that had happened were much too dangerous to recall.

Was I really such a coward that I couldn't face life and leave it at the same time? I didn't give myself time to consider the answer because I was already following dirty Santa locks into the dim, basement-level kitchen that we all knew as Martha Big's.

She wasn't especially tall but was about as large a woman as I'd ever encountered, likely topping four hundred pounds. Her weight, though, most of the homeless soon discovered, didn't slow her down even the slightest. She moved back and forth through the throngs of indigent people and directed her dozen volunteers like a general on a battlefield. One minute she'd be cleaning up a dropped tray at one end of the large, low-ceilinged room, and the next she'd be directing a young girl on how to scoop a fair portion of food into every plate. Every few minutes, she'd disappear into the cooking areas that were off-limits to us, and I had no doubt she was just as busy back there directing volunteers on matters of cooking importance. No, her size was very secondary to her energy and to her heart.

We got our food and found seats near one wall that afforded a pretty good view of the entryway and most of the dining hall. We might have seen the entire room from here if it hadn't been for the spindly Christmas tree that had been erected about two-thirds of the way down our wall. One of the long tables had been placed at an angle to make room for it. The lighted star was only an inch or so from the low, open-beam ceiling.

"That's Martha," I said, pointing subtly at the force of nature that moved about the ragtag groups of seated men and women. Almost as if she had sensed our attention, she looked our way and smiled. It was only the briefest of glances before she continued about her business.

To his credit, Barwood never said a word about her size. Instead he said, "She works hard, doesn't she."

"Like a whirlwind. The old-timers say she used to be homeless herself, but somehow pulled herself out of the streets. A few years later she was back, but this time to help."

"You sound like you admire her."

"Who wouldn't? I don't think I'd have the character to do what she does—obviously don't because I'm here not there."

"You could be running this place," Barwood said.

I wanted to say something smart, like 'yeah, you're one to talk,' but I knew where he was coming from. For the first month or two on the streets it was hard to get used to your own failure. It was almost as if you were the only guy on the streets with a clue. And you felt the need to tell others how they could better themselves. Soon, though, Barwood would come to realize that he needed to worry about himself and getting his own life together. Besides, for me it didn't much matter. My life had reached its pinnacle long ago. Things had been heading downhill for quite some time, and I had nowhere but further down to go.

We finished the meal of fried-potatoes, hotdogs and peas mixed with onions. It was all reasonably good. I was ready to leave but detected that Barwood wanted a few more minutes to talk. I'd spent this much time with the guy, so what were a few more minutes? My plans could wait that long. I had decided, however, that any discussion of my own past was off limits. Now that I knew why I had avoided the subject earlier, I knew there was no sense in making what I had to do any harder. I would pay for the crime, but I wouldn't beat myself with memories beforehand.

We made our way though the busy cafeteria and refilled our coffee mugs before returning to the table. I saw Martha glance our way. Normally, she asked that diners move back out into the street when they were done with their meal. I knew she didn't mind us being there, it was just that there were only a hundred or so seats, and with several hundred people to feed each meal she had to keep the turnover steady. She must have realized that Barwood was new and that he needed some time, because she nodded silently at me as he and I settled back down in our seats.

"I was going to kill myself," Barwood said.

Here it comes I thought. *Father Johnston did set me up.*

"Why didn't you?" I responded halfheartedly. The second this turned into a lecture, I was prepared to leave.

He shrugged. "Things came up."

I waited but he added nothing to the statement, no long discussions about the value of life or pleadings for me to not do this. Barwood just sat there, a muted sad droop to his face.

He apparently really hadn't known, because if he had, it was the oddest lecture I'd ever received. I decided to wait him out in silence, make sure I'd seen all the cards before getting any deeper into the discussion.

"I left Maine to do it," he continued after some time. "Took a bus to Vermont."

"Why Vermont?"

"Heard a rumor about a place called Christmas Leap where lots of people killed themselves. I figured with no I.D. on me, they'd never know who I was and my ex-wife would never find out."

"Where is your ex-wife?"

"In a hospital in Portland—Maine, not Oregon. She's in the psyche ward. Tried to kill me...almost did. I have a pretty good sense of taste and could tell she'd mixed something in the brandy. I pretended to drink it but really dumped it in the sink. I didn't realize she had spiked her own, too. She downed two full glasses before I figured it out. I called for an ambulance. She's been at the hospital ever since."

"Why'd she do it?"

"Women and gambling, mostly."

"Yours, I assume."

That brought his great and wonderful laugh back. He nodded in the midst of the guffaw. "Yeah, the women were mine. And I don't think she ever gambled more than a dollar at a time."

"How long ago?"

His cheerfulness ended abruptly. I'd touched on a sore point again. Finally, his face calm and voice measured, he said, "Doesn't matter much."

"How'd you get from Vermont to Albany?"

"A friend."

I knew for certain there was something unspoken in his story, some large block of logic that I was missing. I was equally certain that he intended it that way. There was more to this white-haired man than plaid pants and a dirty Santa wig, but as I had determined earlier it made little difference to me. I had a course to follow that had nothing to do with Barwood or his Swiss-hole past.

"So what's this Christmas Leap thing about?"

He looked at me then. There was a depth to his stare that was a little spooky. "There's a town called Gray, up to the north of Vermont, near the Canadian border. It's just a bitty place, few houses, couple of stores, and a fast river that runs past. The river comes out of the mountains so fast that it has cut a gorge at least a hundred feet deep. A bridge crosses over it right near town. The locals call it Christmas Leap."

"So people commit suicide there?"

He nodded. "River's fast and deep. The locals say one goes over every year, like clockwork."

"On Christmas?"

"Christmas Eve, actually."

"Obviously, you didn't."

"Like I said, things came up but the attraction was there. It seemed a clean way to go, and I imagined if you had to do it, why not be part of a tradition."

"Doesn't the town keep police there?"

"Town doesn't have any police. They're so far up that it sometimes takes an hour just

to get one of the sheriffs out their way."

"Sounds horrible," I said, but I was fascinated. It could be the plan I'd been looking for. Barwood stared at me, that faint smile still playing on his lips.

He no doubt expected my story then, the story that I had determined was not going to be told. I guzzled the rest of my coffee. It was just hot enough to burn as it went down. "You might want to go back to the chapel," I said to him as I got abruptly to my feet. "I'm sure Father Johnston will let you sleep there tonight. And tomorrow you should go back to Maine. Go back to your life. Trust me, the homeless outdoors thing just ain't much fun."

He stood, his face a neutral mask. I sensed there were oceans of unspoken secrets in his eyes. I didn't care to know any of them. There was a little town in Vermont waiting for me, and his secrets wouldn't make one bit of difference to what I had to do.

"Thanks again, Barwood. It was nice meeting you. And good luck."

He extended a hand. It was clean and soft, not at all like the coarse palm one expected to find out on the streets. This man did not belong, and I hoped he would heed my advice and go back home.

"Good luck to you, Skip."

"And you," I said as I turned and left. I could feel his secretive eyes boring into me as I wove my way through the crowds to the door. I followed a smelly, young woman out into the open air. It made me sad to think I would never eat there again.

"Good luck to you, Barwood," I whispered as I pulled my collar tight around my neck and went in search of a calendar and a map.

END OF SAMPLE