

Jean's Tree



Merry Christmas 2010





Chapter 1

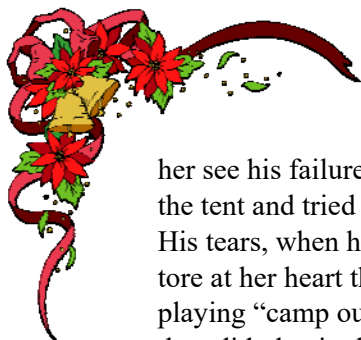
The water jug was half full and sat firmly on the battered wooden box. An old plastic milk jug that was fetched out of a garbage bin washed out in the nearest public restroom and filled with the water from the tap. June stared at the bottle like it was some after-noon soap opera and rocked back and forth in her tattered coat as she tried to stay warm. Her face was pale



from the cold and her eyes were sunken and red. June's gaze strayed from the bottle and turned for the umpteenth time to her surroundings. A small piece of land under a couple of pine trees complete with a rope holding up a blanket that doubled as her tent.

Anger and pain filled her heart. Two years ago she had her own house around her, Christmas tree in the corner, her four and five year old eagerly waiting for Santa Claus. Last year she was with her husband as foreclosure loomed and jobs just wouldn't come. This year they were living in a clearing, in the woods, behind an old abandoned strip mall. She had become the homeless and she just didn't understand how. They had done everything right. They paid their bills, kept some savings and worked two jobs. But the work ended, the unemployment went out and the savings were gone. There she sat, hope without hope. She was embarrassed, hurt and scared. Jean cried most days when she wasn't walking somewhere to get handouts to feed her and the kids.

Her husband was out looking for work and handouts. Jean thought he just couldn't bear to have



her see his failure. She held him when he came back to the tent and tried to let him know she still loved him. His tears, when he thought she didn't see, were what tore at her heart the most. The kids tired long ago of playing "camp out" and knew they were poor. Still they did play in the woods, sticks and trees doubling for the latest video game. She was glad children were so resilient, that they could grow up. Jean hoped this memory would fade for them.

Jean heard a sob. She checked to see if it was her. She had cried so much she just assumed another had escaped her lips with no notice. She heard it again. It wasn't her. Jean began to look around. The sobbing continued and Jean followed the sound with her eyes to a hedge just a few yards away. Her children were just off to the right so Jean knew they weren't the cause of this sadness. Jean wondered who had uttered such a sorrow. She stood up, made sure her children were alright and cautiously made her way to peer over the hedge.



The sight didn't startle her, in other times it may have. But it was just a part of her life now. A woman, her junior by the looks of it, was sitting on the hard ground. Her hands wrapped around a baby and her head buried in its chest to provide them both warmth. No one else was around.

"Lost?" Jean asked, her voice cracking slightly from the strain of her own tears.





The woman looked up startled. Fear held her in place. Sorrow told her story.

"I didn't know..." The woman's voice trailed off, mercy and hope replaced courage.

Jean thought about the woman in front of her. She saw herself, much younger, but there she was.



"I don't need any more problems. Should just run her off. Why should I do for her? Nobody has been doing for me." Were the thoughts running through Jean's mind.

The baby cried. It was so soft as to be a prayer. But the baby cried. The woman brought it to her chest even more.

"I don't mean you any harm. You have anything for the little one?" Jean asked.

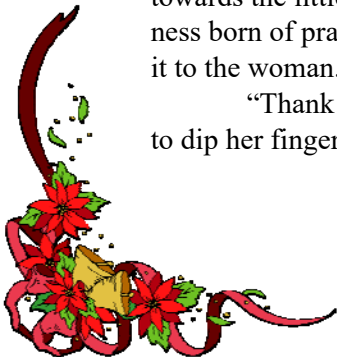
The woman shook her head no and a few more tears fell from her eyes.

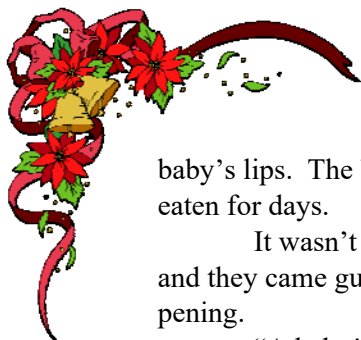
Jean went around the hedge and extended a hand to the woman.

"Let's see if we can scrounge up anything." Jean said.

The woman took her hand and stood up. Jean held onto her tight and took her back to the camp. Jean had her sit on the stump she used for a chair and wandered over to the tent. Just inside was a battered old plastic ice chest. Jean opened it up and found the last of the milk. She poured it into a glass and moved it towards the little fire that always burned. With a deftness born of practice Jean warmed the milk and handed it to the woman.

"Thank you." The woman said and proceeded to dip her finger in the warm milk and place it on the





baby's lips. The baby suckled hungrily as if it hadn't eaten for days.

It wasn't long before the kids saw the strangers and they came guardedly forward to see what was happening.

"A baby!" Her daughter shrieked, obviously delighted with the new developments.

Her little boy just wagged his head in disgust. It was not a new toy or someone to play with so he went back to the new fort he was digging.

Jean returned to the ice chest and dug out two old pieces of bread and put some bargain basement jam on them.

"Couldn't really call it grape. I don't have any idea what this is." Jean sighed to herself.

Jean walked over to the woman and grabbed the water jug and a cracked cup Bill used. Pouring a small amount of water in the cup, Jean handed it and the sandwich to the woman. The kindness seemed to shatter what remained of her resolve.



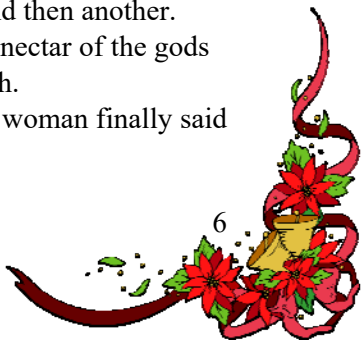
"I can't. It's all you have." The woman sobbed and pushed Jean's offering away.

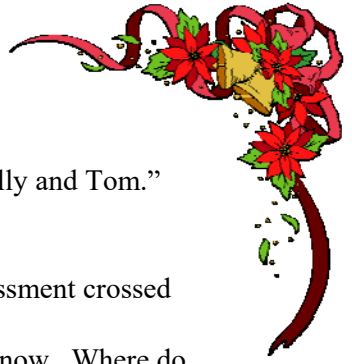
Jean just moved a little closer.

"Been hungry for a while. We can be hungry a little longer." Jean said and placed the sandwich in the woman's hands.

The woman took one bite and then another. She drank the water as if it were the nectar of the gods and took another bite of the sandwich.

"Terry. Terry Ulrich." The woman finally said after a few bites.





"I'm Jean and these two are Sally and Tom."

Jean replied.

"You live here?" Terry asked.

Jean nodded a look of embarrassment crossed her face.

"Been here about five months now. Where do you live?"

"Streets mostly. James, my husband, left us about two weeks back. Went to look for work and never came back. Guess he couldn't handle it anymore."

"Not one to judge. Really don't have the right anymore. Bill is still with me and the kids. Left this morning to look for work. Hope he will be back before it gets dark." Jean sighed.

Terry looked up from feeding the baby.

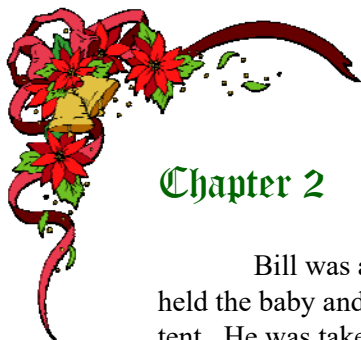
"Can I stay here tonight?" Terry asked.

Everything in Jean's body told her to send the woman on her way, protect her children. Jean knew she didn't need Terry's troubles; she and Bill had enough of her own. Bill would be furious; she would already have to explain the lack of milk and bread. Jean grew strong and furrowed her eyes. Yes she would tell her to move on. Jean looked down at the small woman and baby and opened her mouth to speak. Her heart spoke instead.



"If I can hold the baby for awhile." Jean smiled.





Chapter 2

Bill was as good as gold. He kissed Jean as she held the baby and watched Terry as she slept under the tent. He was taken aback at the new addition, but he didn't curse or complain. Jean actually saw him smile as she rocked back and forth with the child.

"Need another blanket and bags. Need to get some milk." Bill said as he reached around for a worn thin wallet in his back pocket. Bill pulled out a ten dollar bill.

"Bill, where did you get that?" Jean asked.

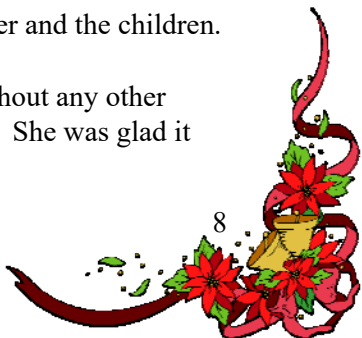
"Asked for it." Bill said and looked away.

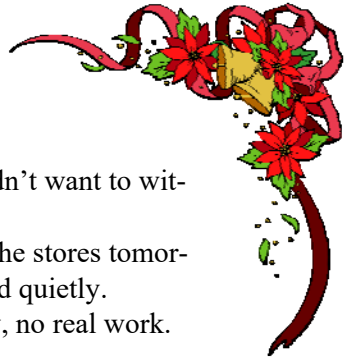
Another layer of dignity was stripped from her beloved husband. He had actually begged strangers for



help. A part of Jean's soul crushed at the knowledge. But her love for Bill grew so much more. He had and was giving so much of himself for her and the children. He loved them so.

Jean took the ten dollars without any other word while a tear fell from her eyes. She was glad it





was dark and Bill couldn't see. She didn't want to witness his shame.

"I'll take the kids and walk to the stores tomorrow. Maybe Terry will help." Jean said quietly.

"I'll keep the kids. It's Sunday, no real work. I could use the rest." Bill said.

Sunday thought Jean. She did not really know anymore. One day ran into the next.

"OK. It'll be nice to get away even for a few minutes."

"Don't go hooking up with your boyfriend." Bill teased.

Jean laughed. It had been awhile since they both smiled together.

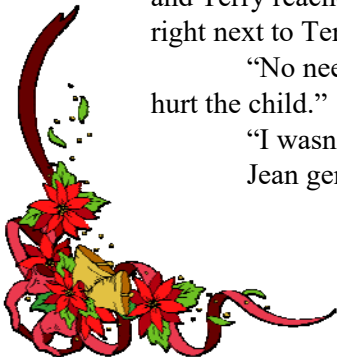
Jean tugged on Terry's sleeve. It was early and the children were still asleep. Bill was off taking care of what little business nature required. He would be back shortly. Bill didn't sleep much at night. He was too worried about strangers and what could happen to his family in this remote forest. Occasionally Jean would stay awake to let Bill get some real sleep. Since Jean was shopping today Bill had pulled another late night. When she got back she would make sure Bill slept for the rest of the day.

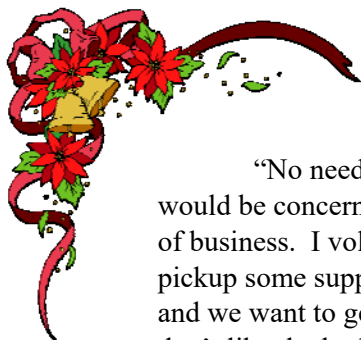
Terry rolled over and looked at Jean. Bewilderment crossed her face as Terry tried to remember where she was. Recognition brought her to her senses and Terry reached for her baby. The baby laid quietly right next to Terry. A soft relief filled Terry's senses.

"No need to worry. Bill wouldn't let anyone hurt the child." Jean spoke.

"I wasn't..." Terry began.

Jean gently wagged a finger at Terry.





“No need to say anything. If it was my child I would be concerned too. Have to get up and take care of business. I volunteered us to go to the store and pickup some supplies. It is an hour’s walk to the stores and we want to get there before the regular crowd. I don’t like the looks I get from the regulars.”

“You’ll let me stay?” Terry asked hopefully.

“You got better plans?” Jean asked with a smile.

“No. Let me get ready.” Terry smiled.

It wasn’t too long before they were walking down the road. Jean had kissed her kids and Bill before she set out. Terry had the baby safe in her arms. The walk was long but not difficult once they were out of the woods. Terry and Jean talked as if they hadn’t spoken in years. Trivial stuff, serious stuff, their recent history and how they found themselves on the outskirts of society. It was a moment of joy and respite in a long tiring string of emotional lows.



The conversation lifted their spirits and made the time fly. Soon they were turning the corner to the strip mall where the big box store sat. Jean looked ahead at the store and slowed her

stride. Finally she stopped.

“What’s the matter Jean?” Terry asked.

“Now I know why Bill kept the children.

Christmas. He didn’t want them to see Christmas trees and lights. He didn’t want them worrying about Santa.” Jean replied as she looked at all the decorations at the strip mall.

“Christmas, I almost forgot. It was going to be the baby’s first Christmas this year.” Terry said sadly.





Jean gripped Terry's free arm tightly and started walking toward the store.

"You know I lost the Christmas decorations also? Christmas decorations, who ever thought anyone would need them but me? All my memories in there. No good to anyone but me. But all they're all gone. All except one." Jean said with a conspiratorial tone.

"One?" Terry asked.

"Just one. I love Christmas and Christmas trees. Bill bought me a tiny star our first Christmas. No bigger than a child's hand. But it was silver and glittered and it was mine. When we left the house I took it. Had it with me ever since. Plan on putting it on our next tree." Jean replied

With the revelation Jean unbuttoned her coat and pulled it open for Terry to see the inside thread bare lining. Attached just inside where it would sit next to her heart was a small silver star. Jean looked at Terry proudly. Terry looked back and a tear fell from her eye.

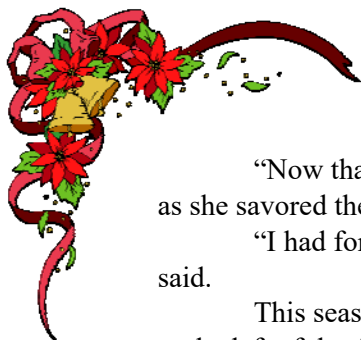
"You still have hope? You still believe in Christmas after all of this?" Terry asked.



"I never stop believing in Christmas and I never stop believing in my Bill. We will get through this. It will just take time." Jean said as they arrived at the automatic doors.

The doors opened and beckoned them in. Jean spied the complimentary coffee bar and pulled Terry towards it. She poured them both a big cup and then moved aside to drink it up.





“Now that was worth the walk.” Jean smiled as she savored the small pleasure.

“I had forgotten what coffee was like.” Terry said.

This season’s Christmas decorations were just to the left of the door and Jean walked over to look.

“Doesn’t cost to look and dream.” Jean giggled.

The baby had woken up as they entered the warm store and Terry had placed the baby in a cart. When they went past all the pretty lights Terry picked up the baby so the child could see the colors.

“Look. The baby’s smiling.” Jean said as she glowed in a moment of sanity.



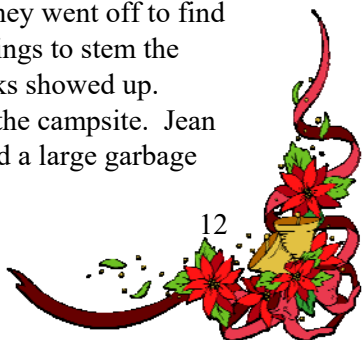
They turned a corner and Jean slowed her pace. Terry followed and looked to where Jean was gazing. Two rows of decorated trees stretched before them. Jean looked over each and every one of them. Terry watched Jean’s eyes glow through the moisture that welled up inside them. She felt so close to Jean just then. She wanted so much for her to have her tree.

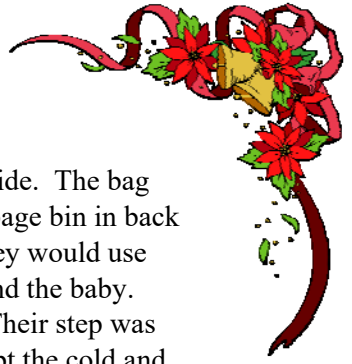
“Soon Jean. Soon you will have your tree. It will be the prettiest one on the block. On the very top will be your star. And you will have to have me come and see it.” Terry said.

“It will be wonderful and there will be presents for you and the baby.” Jean said.

Terry gave Jean a hug and they went off to find some powder milk mix and a few things to stem the tide of hunger before the regular folks showed up.

They were walking back to the campsite. Jean had two plastic bags in her hands and a large garbage

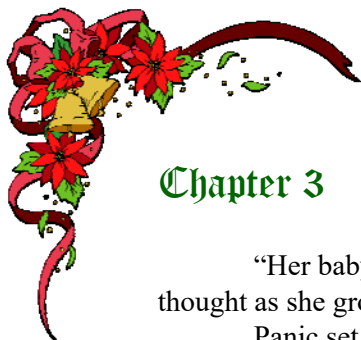




bag with cardboard boxes squashed inside. The bag and the boxes were taken from the garbage bin in back of one of the stores. Jean told Terry they would use them to build her a better bed for her and the baby. Terry held the baby and another bag. Their step was once again light as the conversation kept the cold and distance at bay.

They were only a few minutes from entering the woods when Terry heard the screeching tires and the revving engine. Jean screamed at Terry and she felt her hard push. Terry fell and tumbled down a deep ditch. The baby flew from her arms and a Terry opened her mouth to cry out when everything went black.





Chapter 3

“Her baby. Where was her baby?” Terry thought as she groggily regained her senses.

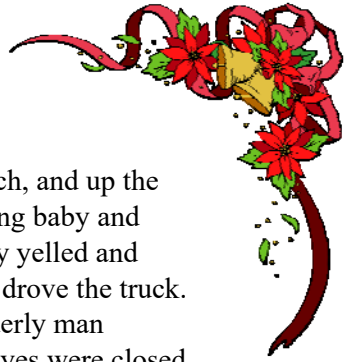
Panic set in quickly and Terry began searching for her child. She screamed and looked around her. Suddenly she could hear a baby crying. Crying! Terry was so relieved. But she had to find her baby. She stood still to gage where the crying came from and knew it was on the top of the ditch she had fallen. Terry clawed and climbed her way up the muddy side of the ditch and saw her lovely child in a patch of soft mud.

Terry ran to pick the baby up. She looked it all over and saw no marks. But blood seemed to spackle the blanket. Terry put her hand to her own head to wipe away the moisture on her face and suddenly discovered she was bleeding. She turned toward the road to find Jean. Jean could help.

When Terry turned she saw unimaginable horror. A large pickup truck was perched on the side of the ditch. One wheel dangling over the edge. Smoke rose from under the hood and underneath trapped by the weight of the truck was Jean. Jean was bleeding and her eyes rolled in her head. She was laid on her back. A shift in the truck in the wrong direction could cause it to fall in the ditch and take Jean with it, crushing her to death. Terry screamed.

“Oh God. Oh God.” Terry thought as she scrambled down the side of the ditch and up to the other side. Terry crawled and clawed her





way down, through the muck of the ditch, and up the other side. She hung tightly to her crying baby and made her way over to the pickup. Terry yelled and screamed at the stupid, stupid man that drove the truck. She flung open the door and saw an elderly man slumped over the steering wheel. His eyes were closed and his mouth hung open.

“Damn drunk. You God damned drunk.” Terry yelled as she pulled and pulled on his coat to wake him up.

He didn’t stir. Terry leaned in to get a better grip and realized the man was sick, he hadn’t been drinking.

“A heart attack? Oh God what now. What am I supposed to do?” Terry looked around.

It was a remote area, no one was coming. She was feeling weak and Jean was in trapped and could die. Her baby and this stranger needed her help also. She couldn’t get the man out of the truck. He was just too heavy and wedged too tightly behind the wheel. Terry walked over to see how Jean was doing and she sank to her knees as her friend grabbed her hand. Tears welled into Terry’s eyes.

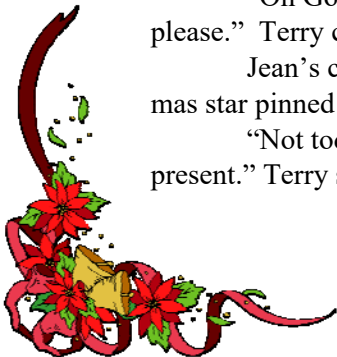
“Tell Bill and the kids I love them. Tell Bill he was a good man. It wasn’t his fault.” Jean said and closed her eyes. Terry screamed.

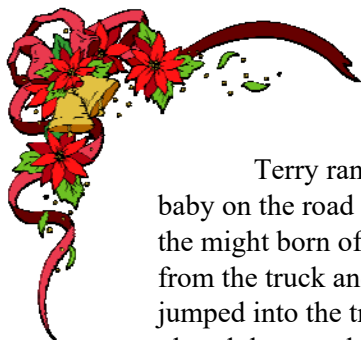


“Oh God, I need your help, any help. Oh God, please.” Terry cried.

Jean’s coat fell open and Terry saw the Christmas star pinned to Jean’s coat.

“Not today, Jean. You owe me and the baby a present.” Terry said.





Terry ran to the side of the truck and placed the baby on the road next to her. With all her might, and the might born of Christmas prayer, she pulled the man from the truck and onto the road next to the baby. She jumped into the truck and put her foot on the brake and placed the gearshift in reverse. She prayed quietly and slowly let up on the brake. The truck moved backward. Terry's heart leapt for hope. Slowly the truck moved until its wheel was on the shoulder of the road. Terry jumped out, scooped up her child and ran to Jean.

Jean's head was still perched above the ditch so Terry slowly, very slowly pulled Jean onto the bank. Jean drew a deep breath and cried out in pain. Terry was grabbed her hand.

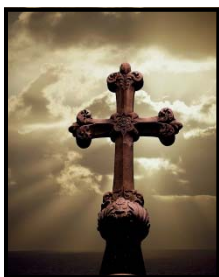
"Not yet Jean. Not yet. You have to hang in there. You got kids. You got Bill. Hang in there Jean." Terry yelled at her friend.

Jean opened her eyes. Determination filled them as tears of pain jockeyed for position.

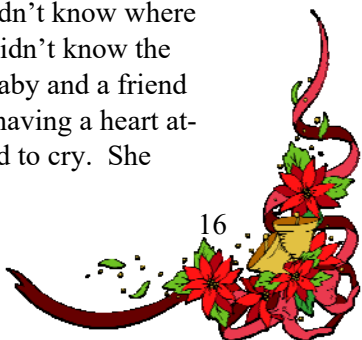
Terry placed the baby next to Jean and ran over to inspect the old man.

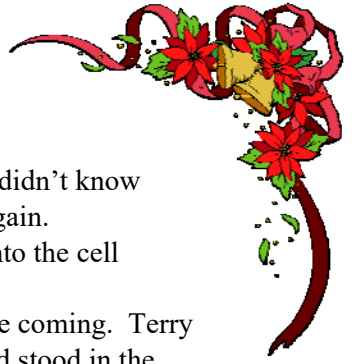
"Probably dead. It took so long to get to him." Terry thought.

But she tilted his head back and felt his pulse. He was alive. Barely alive, but he had a heartbeat. Could she do this? Could she save them all? Terry felt around for a cell phone and found one in his coat pocket. She dialed 911.



No she didn't know where she was. No she didn't know the man. She had a baby and a friend and the man was having a heart attack. Terry started to cry. She





couldn't tell them where she was. She didn't know herself. It was all going to fall apart again.

"I hear a siren!" Terry yelled into the cell phone.

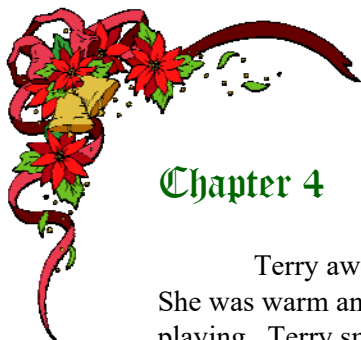
They had found her. They were coming. Terry saw the truck coming and stood in the middle of the road and waved and waved. She cried and waved and cried some more. They finally got there and Terry fell to the ground.



Terry refused to get in the ambulance until the police found Bill and the kids. They about dragged her to get her to go, but she was adamant. Finally Bill and the kids poured from a path into the woods, an exasperated, but happy police officer behind them.

Terry laid down on the gurney and held the baby in her arms as the doors closed on the ambulance. They sped to the hospital and Terry closed her eyes to sleep, the drugs finally working their magic and giving her some rest.





Chapter 4

Terry awoke to the sound of Christmas music. She was warm and in a bed and Christmas music was playing. Terry smiled. It had been so long. Terry sluggishly gained her senses and then remembered. She sat up in bed and looked around. Next to her was her baby. Wrapped in hospital blankets and slumbering in one of those plastic bassinets they use. A Christmas bow was tied to the bed and baby looked completely fed.

"Merry Christmas." A nurse said as she walked into the room.

"Is it Christmas?" Terry asked.

"Will be tomorrow. You'll be out by then." She replied with a smile as she began to take care of Terry's injuries.

"What happened to Jean?" Terry had to ask, but was afraid to ask all at the same time.

"The woman that came in with you?" The nurse asked.

"Yes." Terry replied.

"She is in intensive care. Only family I'm afraid. But she looks like she will make it." The nurse replied.

Terry breathed a sigh of relief.

"Mr. Bevins made it as well." The nurse said.

"Who?" Terry asked.

"Mr. Bevins, the man that came in with both of you." She replied.

"Oh, I didn't know his name." Terry replied.





“Ran into him that day?” The nurse asked.

“More like he ran into us.” Terry smiled back and lay down to get some more sleep.

Terry woke up once again to the sound of children and babies laughing. She opened her eyes and Bill was cooing at baby and Sally and Tom were giggling at their father. Bill looked up and Terry smiled at him.

“Thank you for saving my wife. If there is anything I can do.” Bill said.

“She saved me first. You and she owed me nothing. I was desperate and in spite of your poverty you held out your hand. I needed food for me and the baby and even though you had none to give you gave me yours. You gave me friendship and hope. I saved her body. You saved my soul. Merry Christmas, Bill.”



Terry said and began to cry all

over again.

“Merry Christmas, Terry.” Bill replied and tears began to fall from his eyes before he turned his head. Terry left him to his moment.

Terry left on Christmas. Jean, Bill and the kids were going to be a bit longer. Jean was still in intensive care so Terry wasn't allowed to see her. Terry and baby waved to Bill and the kids as she walked out of the hospital. A social worker had arranged for her to get some temporary help at a social center. She had even signed her and the baby up for food stamps and other support. Terry was feeling a little better each day.





On the day before New Year's, a man came to see her and offered her a job at his information technology company. He was a friend of Mr. Bevins and wanted to thank her for what she did. Terry was pleased to have any job and readily accepted. She wasn't able to keep track of Jean because the job was in the next town, and well, it took her six months to be able to buy a cheap car. When she did she rode over to the woods to see if Jean and Bill were still there. She would bring them back if they were.



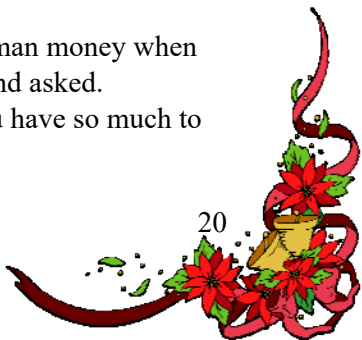
Thankfully they weren't there. The grass had overgrown the area but Terry was able to find the old tent and the water jug. Terry took the water jug and wished she knew where her friends had gone.

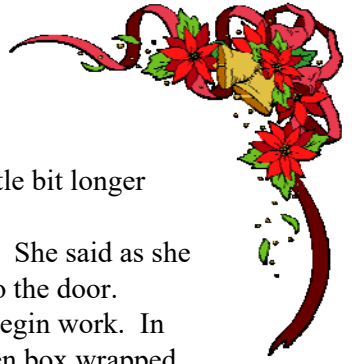
Summer came and went. Fall followed quickly. It was soon Christmas time again. Terry had a nice apartment. Baby was growing big and strong and becoming quite a handful. The old water jug sat next to Terry's night stand. It reminded her of hope, friendship and so much more. She had become good at her job, but she still worried.

While walking with a friend to work after lunch one day they passed a woman that looked very much as Terry had a year ago. Terry stopped and spoke with the woman and gave her ten dollars. Her friend looked on.

"How can you give that woman money when you have so little to give?" Her friend asked.

"How can you not when you have so much to give?" Terry replied.





Her friend looked at Terry a little bit longer and saw no malice.

“You are a special one, Terry.” She said as she grabbed her arm and walked with her to the door.

Terry sat down to her desk to begin work. In the middle of her desk was a small green box wrapped neatly and with a beautiful red Christmas bow. The word “Terry” was written on the card attached to the box. Terry looked around. No one seemed to be claiming the gift so Terry picked it up and opened it.

There inside, wrapped in tissue paper, was a small silver star. Beneath it was an address. Terry smiled and her heart lifted. Terry rose from her desk, went to her car and drove to the day care to get baby. She then went to a single house on a small street in a neighborhood in a nearby town. She pulled in the driveway and a woman walked haltingly out the front door.

Terry took baby and ran to her friend. Jean hugged and cried and hugged some more. Bill followed after a few moments with Sally and Tom.

“Aunt Terry.” Both kids yelled.

Bill held baby while Jean led Terry into the house.

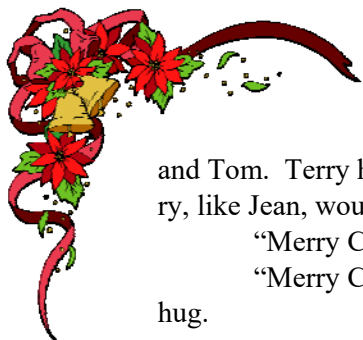


Inside a small Christmas tree stood. It was the most beautiful Christmas tree ever. Terry took the small box and opened it. She took the small silver star and Jean’s hand and placed it on the tree.

“Perfect.” Terry and Jean said in unison.

They both began laughing. Then Jean pulled packages from under the tree, one for Terry and one for baby. Terry teared up and looked at Bill, Jean, Sally





and Tom. Terry had her family and they had her. Terry, like Jean, would forever believe in Christmas.

“Merry Christmas, Jean.” Terry said.

“Merry Christmas, Terry.” Jean replied with a hug.







Merry Christmas
and
Happy New Year

