

## Angel's Dust



The dark and dismal atmosphere of the sorting room mimicked the pain Jeff Marlow felt in his heart. He worked alone amid the mind-numbing clatter of the lumbering machine. The others had gone home hours ago. That was as it should be. After all, they had families. A husband or wife would be waiting with a welcome hug and kiss. Children anticipating the morning would be dancing around the tree strung with brightly colored lights.

Perhaps their parents would give in, as he once had, and let their little boy or girl choose one present to open on Christmas Eve. Closing his eyes, he could almost hear their squeals of delight.

Jeff dumped another bag of mail in the sorter. As the machine digested it, he let his mind wander. After giving him a good-bye kiss, Barbie had smiled as she watched their little Joy kiss her daddy. Barbie handed him a lace handkerchief to wipe the smear of peanut butter and jelly from his chin. How he wished he could only hold that lace hankie now. He had searched the ruins, finding nothing but ashes.

"I love you, Daddy," she said, hugging him close.

Whispering in her ear, he said, "I love you, too, Joy Princess."

"It'll be Christmas when you get home, won't it?"

"Yes, my sweet." The last words he said to his wonderful little daughter echoed in his mind.

One more kiss from each of them and he was gone. His last glimpse of his wife and daughter on earth was through his rearview mirror. He saw them standing on the porch waving goodbye as they clutched their coats around their shivering bodies.

As he turned the corner, they disappeared from his life forever. Five blocks away, stuck in the late afternoon traffic, he heard the explosion. The line jerry rigged by a couple of gas company workers rushing to get home for Christmas erupted at 5:49 PM. The blast blew out windows as far as Kiddle Street. The fireball rose 250 feet in the air, taking with it all of Jeff's hopes and dreams. He abandoned the car in the snarled traffic and ran the five blocks, praying with every step.

"Please God, don't let it be them, don't let it be them." But he knew with eerie certainty it was. The house where he lived and loved was a smoking pile of rubble. The explosion gouged a 10-foot hole in the ground. Their remains were never found. Jeff's only consolation was his belief that the Lord took them before the house blew apart. He died that night. Oh, his body lived, or more accurately, existed. But living held no happiness, no joy for him.

He thought he was through with tears. Still they came. His heart felt as dry as a desert, yet tears spilled down his cheeks. Forty-five. Why had he lived so long? Six years, long years. Six years that seemed like an eternity.

In the men's room, he splashed cold water on his face and stared at himself in the mirror. His face was too long to be considered handsome. His eyes were too squinty, his mouth too wide. The constant lifting of packages and mailbags kept him slim. He was not attracted to women. He simply had no interest, which suited him just fine. The only woman he wanted was Barbie and she was six years dead. He dried his face, blinking back the tears that threatened to start again. He sighed. When would it ever be over? When would he ever stop hurting?

At the dock, he lugged in the last five mailbags. He moaned. Thinking of returning to his empty third floor apartment slowed him down. Every Christmas morning since, he took out the gifts he had hidden in the car so long ago: a diamond necklace for Barbie and a doll for Joy. He laid them on the table and ran his hands over them. In his mind, he presented them to his beloved wife and daughter. He imagined the excitement on their faces. He felt Barb's kiss on his face. He heard Joy's laughter. Then he dried his tears and put the gifts away for another year.

The second year after Barbie's death, friends began inviting him to their homes. He always refused, knowing their intentions. There would be a single woman invited to pair up with the lonely mailman. Some came right out and told him he needed to forget about Barbie. They had the perfect woman for him: a sister, a friend, someone they met in the supermarket line. Eventually, even the diehards stopped trying.

With each passing year, Jeff became more and more withdrawn. At last, he was alone. He didn't mind, he liked it that way. His only companion was the pain wrapped around his heart. Some of his mail route patrons complained that he was unfriendly. His supervisor transferred him to the sorting room. His coworkers tried to engage him in conversation. They soon learned Jeff didn't want to be bothered and took the hint to leave him alone. That was how he wanted it. He became so antisocial he was finally reassigned to the second shift. There was a rumor that if Jeff didn't change he might be declared unfit for duty and let go.

Jeff worked steadily for the next hour. As he loaded the last bag in the sorter, he made a decision: Before the night was over, he would join his wife and daughter.

"Mommy, will Santa be here soon?" Julie asked, pulling the covers up to her chin. Carol Bennett paused in the doorway, her finger on the light switch. Julie's round face, blonde hair and blue eyes gave the eight-year-old a cherub-like appearance.

Carol's heart sagged with sorrow. "Like I said, sweetheart, sometimes Santa gets lost." The lie wasn't a good one. It left a bad taste in her mouth.

Julie was undeterred by her mother's apparent lack of faith. "Oh no, Mommy. I asked God to have the angels guide Santa to our house. I even put angel's dust on the letter!"

"Go to sleep, honey."

"Merry almost Christmas, Mommy," Julie murmured.

"Merry almost Christmas," Carol said, barely able to hold back the tears. At the kitchen table, she sat staring at the balance in her checkbook. It hadn't changed in the last hour. If only the factory had kept her on until after the holidays. Tomorrow morning other little girls would delight to open gift after gift, but all she had was a second-hand doll she bought at Goodwill. "Oh well, Julie will be happy with it."

But Carol wasn't. They couldn't even afford a real Christmas tree, just one they fashioned from construction paper and taped to the living room wall. Turning the temperature down a few more degrees, she pulled her robe tighter. Yet it wasn't the cold house that made her shiver.

Outside, the snow fogged as it had the night David's car flipped on the interstate. That night she had put the turkey back in the oven to keep it warm. David was over an hour late. It wasn't like him not to call. A worm of worry tugged at her mind. She quieted it. She smiled when she heard the hesitant knock on the door. He liked to surprise them with a last-minute gift. The sight of the two police officers standing on her front step nearly caused Carol to faint. She knew before they said a word. She collapsed to the floor as her world crumbled.

"At least he didn't suffer," became the catchphrase at David's funeral. The words brought more pain than comfort, and Carol closed her ears to them. Now, for the first time in the three years since her husband's death, Carol gave up. Burying her face in her hands, she quietly sobbed.

The letter lay on the floor beside the sorter. Jeff switched off the machine. The silence filled his head like cotton batting. Picking up the letter, he groaned. Scribbled across the envelope in black crayon were the words, *Santa Claus, North Pole*.

The practice of giving letters addressed to Santa Claus to volunteers began years ago. Those wonderful people took it upon themselves to grant the wishes of needy children. However, the last letter was given out days ago. It was too late to fulfill this child's wish.

Jeff stared at the letter for a long time. He slid his fingers carefully under the flap. It opened easily. As he pulled out the sheet of paper, a bit of gold glitter fell into his palm. He brushed it back into the envelope. Unfolding the letter, he read,

*Dear Mr. Santa Claus,*

*Hi, my name is Julie. I'm eight years old. I live in Indianapolis, Indiana. But you know that. Mommy says sometimes you get lost, so I asked God to send his angels to show you where we live. I don't want any presents. My daddy went to heaven three years ago. I cried for a long time. I'm better now, but Mommy is so sad. I was wondering, since you go all over the world, could you bring me another daddy? He doesn't have to be handsome or rich. Just as long as he loves me and Mommy. I promise I'll love him forever. I put some angel's dust on the bottom of my letter.*

*Thank you, Santa  
Julie*

*P.S. Please wake me up when you bring him.*

Underneath the writing was a thumb print stamped in gold glitter. Jeff ran his thumb over it and quickly regretted the action as some of the glitter flaked off and scattered to the floor. He read the letter again. An incredible thought formed in the back of his mind. He shook his head. What a crazy idea! No doubt it would get him locked up in a mental institution or jail. Crazy or not, he pictured himself knocking on Julie's mother's door.

"Hi, I'm Jeff. You don't know me, but I read your little girl's letter to Santa. I've come to be your new husband and Julie's father." He would be lucky if the woman didn't call the police. The least she would do is slam the door in his face.

No. Becoming a father took more than a letter to Santa. He couldn't be her daddy anyway. The only little girl he wanted to be daddy to was his Joy, and Barbie was the only woman he

would ever love. But maybe he could do something. For the first time in two years, he thought of the people on his old route. Alex Pierce owned a wonderful toy store. The IGA always had several turkeys left over, and it was open late on Christmas Eve.

His mind wandered back to Joy's last Christmas. She had run down the stairs bubbling with laughter. Her face lit up with excitement as she pulled her gifts from under the tree and tore off the wrappings. Jeff felt sorry for Barbie. It had taken a lot of time to wrap those presents and she labored to make each one special. He said something about it to her, but she just laughed, glad for the happiness in her child's face. Later that night as they cuddled on the couch, Jeff thought his heart would burst with love.

He sighed. All of that was gone now. Six years ago, his heart died. Tonight his body would. He started to put the letter in the lost letter box, but he couldn't let it go. Somewhere out there was a little girl so lonely she asked Santa for a daddy. He laid the letter on the table by the sorter. He couldn't help her. Maybe someone else could.

As he opened the sorting room door, a cold breeze hit him in the face. Snowflakes sifted through the air. The world was clean, bright and beautiful. But for Jeff, it was just lonely. The tinkling of bells sounded behind him. He wheeled around. Someone was in the room. He saw a shadow. Jeff let out a dry, humorless snicker. It was his own shadow. The tinkling bells were some tiny ones Marge Shotts had hung from the ceiling.

In the glow of the street lamps, the glitter on his palm sparkled. Angel's dust, he reminded himself. He stepped out into the cold, snowy night and started to close the door. Wait. What if it were his daughter? What if he had been the one to die? He couldn't stand the thought of this unknown little girl being heartbroken. He went back inside and picked up the envelope. It felt warm to the touch.

In the parking lot, he started his car and let it warm up. He read the letter again. "This is really silly," he said out loud. "You don't even know where this little girl lives." Christmas morning was tomorrow. If only he had more time, he would hire a detective to find her. With the \$10 million settlement from the gas company, he could easily afford the best. By now it could be up to \$11 or \$12 million. He didn't know or care. If only he could have his Barbie and Joy, he would gladly give it all back.

Suddenly an idea struck him. Of course! Why didn't he think of it before? When Joy was three, Barbie took her to the mall. The police were videotaping and fingerprinting young children. He hated to even think of the possibility of his little girl being kidnapped, but agreed with Barbie that it was a good idea.

Drying her eyes, Carol stood up. "There's no use in crying about it," she told herself, brushing her auburn hair from her eyes. "I'll give her the doll. She'll be happy with it."

Donning her coat, hat and gloves, she went out into the freezing night. A gust of wind pulled at the thin coat. Her rusted Escort sat at the curb. As she walked toward it, she saw that something was wrong. Broken glass lay on the street. With her heart racing, she ran to the small car. What she saw next took her breath away. Gone, everything was gone. The doll, the dress even the broken radio was torn from the dash. The glove compartment lay open. They had even taken the quarter pound of chocolate stars for Julie. The glass shards crunched under Carol's feet. Putting her hands on the roof of the car, she let the tears flow. She had failed as a mother.

"I was wondering if you could help me?" Jeff said, twisting his gloves in his hands.

Looking up from reading the *Indianapolis Star*, the desk sergeant smiled. "Happy to if I can," he said in a thick Irish brogue.

Surprised by the friendly response, Jeff hurried to explain. "I work at the post office on Randolph Street." He opened his jacket so the sergeant could see his uniform. The man nodded. "I found this letter tonight lying on the floor by the sorter. We have volunteers who answer Santa's letters, but this one was too late." He handed the envelope to the sergeant, who removed the sheet of paper. A tiny bit of gold glitter fell on the desk.

"Angel's dust," Jeff said.

"Pardon?"

"She calls it angel's dust."

The man nodded again and quickly read the letter. "And what would you like us to do, Mr. ...?"

"Marlow. Jeff Marlow. I know it's a long shot, but I thought maybe you could find her for me. You may have her thumb print on file."

The officer frowned dubiously, his eyes still scanning the sheet of paper. "I'm not a child molester, or anything," Jeff said, feeling his face flush and his palms begin to sweat. "I just thought I could give her a happy Chr..." His voice trailed off. The sergeant was staring at him. Suddenly, a big grin spread across his face. "Sure and I know you!" he exclaimed as he rose to his feet. Jeff stepped back, thinking he was about to be arrested. "You're the millionaire postman," the officer said, sticking out his hand. "You gave my dear sainted mother, God rest her soul, ten thousand dollars to pay off her mortgage."

Jeff took his hand. The sergeant shook it vigorously. With his free hand, he snatched up the phone. Cradling it in the crook of his neck, he punched in the number 436. "Murphy, get down here and bring everyone with you." Continuing to pump Jeff's hand, he slammed down the phone.

Rumbling shook the stairs. Seconds later, a stocky man with his tie twisted came charging down the hall. Three police officers followed him with their guns drawn.

"What is it, Penny? What's going on?" The man in front eyed Jeff suspiciously.

"Men," the desk sergeant said, finally letting go of Jeff's hand. "This is none other than Jeff Marlow, the millionaire postman."

Over the years, Jeff had given away several hundred thousand dollars. He had succeeded in keeping his identity a secret until two years ago when somehow the media found out. In a human-interest story, the reporter dubbed him "The Millionaire Postman" and ran an old picture of him. Jeff called in sick for three days.

Holstering their pistols, the men gathered around Jeff, shaking his hand. "How can we help you, sir?" Murphy asked.

Before he could answer, Penny spoke up. "He found this letter in the post office sorting room." He handed it to the detective. Murphy studied the paper, the writing and the gold thumb print.

Jeff was still hoping for an answer. "Can we find out where it came from?"

"Why do you want to know?" the detective queried, his eyes pinning Jeff to the wall.

"I just thought maybe I could help the—"

"Have you ever been arrested, Marlow?"

Jeff's heart caught as though gripped by a fist. He stammered, taking some time to get his tongue to work. "No..., er, ah, no."

"We can check, you know."

"Aw, Murphy, he just wants to help," Penny said. Murphy silenced him with a look.

"I can tell when someone is lying, Mr. Marlow. It's a gift." For the next 15 seconds he glared at Jeff. Scenes of every prison movie he'd ever seen flashed before Jeff's eyes. After what seemed like an eternity, Murphy said, "Follow me." The detective led Jeff through a maze of hallways. At last, he stopped before a half-open door. Painted on the glass in fading gold letters were the words Crime Lab. Murphy introduced Jeff to a small, owlish woman who appeared to be in her mid-30s. He explained the situation to her. Turning to Jeff, he said, "If anybody can find her, Mattie Burgess can."

Mattie examined the print with a magnifying glass. She questioned Jeff intently. Where did he find the letter? How did he open it? How long had it lain on the floor? Jeff answered as best he could. Excusing herself, she left him standing alone at her desk. Jeff's thoughts turned to Barbie. The gentle touch of her hand. The softness of her lips. The brightness of her smile. Jeff didn't realize he was dreaming until Mattie's voice shook him awake.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Marlow," she said somberly. "The glitter preserved the print but it also distorts it."

Jeff nodded, suddenly feeling very tired. "Thank you for trying." He shook Mattie's hand as she gave him back the letter. Outside, Jeff got in his car and sat hunched over the steering wheel. He had failed the only mission that might have redeemed him.

Debating on whether to call 911, Carol settled on the non-emergency number. "Indianapolis Police Department. Sergeant Penny. May I help you?"

"Yes, hello, I'm not sure I'm calling the right place."

"What is it you be a-needin', ma'am?"

"I want to report a robbery."

"I can transfer you to Robbery. Hold on."

"Well, it's just a doll I bought at Goodwill and a quarter pound of chocolates for my little girl."

"Doesn't make any difference what the value of the property is, ma'am."

"There's no way to get the doll back by morning, is there?"

Penny could hear the tears in the mother's voice. "I'm sorry, ma'am."

"It's just... It's..." Carol drew a breath. "It's just that my daughter Julie wrote a letter to Santa Claus asking for something special. She wouldn't let me read it."

Penny's feet came off the desk with a thump. "Julie? Did you say Julie?"

"Yes, she was sure Santa would get her letter because she put angel's dust in the envelope."

"Angel's dust?" Penny fairly shouted, jumping to his feet.

"Well, it was just gold glitter, but—"

"Ma'am, hold the line." Sergeant Penny ran out the front door. Jeff was pulling away from the curb. Shouting, Penny descended the steps, but Jeff didn't stop. Grabbing his seldom-used radio, he pressed the button. "Dispatch! This is Sergeant Penny. I need a car stopped on Post Road."

"Car two-eleven is in that vicinity."

"Great, patch them through to me. I'll give them the details."

"Ten-four, Sarge."

With each turn of the wheels, Jeff's heart sank lower. He returned to his earlier resolve. Death held a dark, morose attraction for him. He contemplated various methods of suicide, determined to make it final. Flashing red and blue lights in the rearview mirror startled him. He pulled into the parking lot of a 7-Eleven.

The young officer bent over and looked in the window. "Mr. Marlow, Sergeant Penny would like to see you back at the station. Please follow me."

As Jeff got out of his car, Penny ran down the steps waving his notebook. "I got it, I got it!" he hollered. "The angels are a-workin' overtime tonight. Stein here is going to help you," he said, indicating the young officer who had stopped Jeff.

The next hour was a whirlwind. Stein had a friend who owned a toy store. The officer insisted his prices were the lowest in town. He woke the man up and pleaded with him to open the store. He complied, grumbling until he saw the number of toys Jeff piled on the counter. Next stop was an all-night Kroger's. Jeff loaded two shopping carts with two turkeys, three hams, and enough fruits, vegetables and dairy products to feed an army. At the checkout counter, Jeff paid the three hundred-dollar tab with cash. Stein's eyes almost bugged out of his head. The back of Jeff's car was overflowing when they pulled into Carol's driveway. The night had turned clear, with the sun just peeking over the horizon.

Seeing the two cars from the kitchen window, Carol hurried outside. Hopefully, she asked Stein, "Did you find my little girl's doll?"

"No, ma'am, I'm sorry," Stein said. "But something else happened that was even better. A wealthy gentleman heard about the doll being stolen. He asked us to help him deliver some things to you and your daughter."

Shyness ran through Jeff as he stepped out of the car. He hadn't felt this way since high school. Carol was more than attractive. Her long, flowing, auburn hair framed a lovely oval face with delicate features. Her large, beautiful eyes looked into his. Jeff's heart, withered and dead for so long, began to come alive.

After helping carry in the toys and food, Stein wished them a Merry Christmas and headed back to the station.

"Would you like a cup of coffee, Mr. Marlow?" Carol asked, her hazel eyes sparkling.

Jeff's pulse quickened. She looked so much like Barbie, yet different. "I should be going."

"Of course, your wife will be expecting you."

"Yes, I suppose she will," Jeff said, thinking of his plan.

"Are you my new daddy?" Jeff turned in the direction of the voice. A little girl in lavender flannel pajamas with purple Barney's printed on them stood just inside the kitchen door. She looked like her mother in miniature. Carol's cheeks reddened.

"Oh, honey, of course not. He's a postman delivering some gifts from Santa."

"That's right," Jeff said, his heart falling. "He knew you and your mommy were good girls this year. He asked me to bring you some toys."

Big tears rolled down Julie's cheeks. Going to her daughter, Carol knelt down in front of her, putting her hands on her shoulders. "What's wrong, honey?"

"I... I asked Santa for a new daddy," the little girl sobbed. "One who would love us like daddy did."

"Oh, sweetheart," Carol said, hugging Julie to her.

"I even put angel's dust in my letter to Santa," Julie sniffled, rubbing the sleeve of her pajamas across her nose. "Couldn't you be my daddy?" she said, her eyes fastened on Jeff's face. "I promise to be real good."

"Mr. Marlow already has a family," Carol said, rising to her feet. "God may give you a new daddy someday."

"When?" Julie asked, raising her tear-filled eyes to her mother, then to Jeff. "Do you really have a family?"

"Yes, but they're in heaven."

"Just like my daddy. Did you have a little girl?"

"Yes," Jeff answered, tears stinging his eyes. "She was beautiful, just like you."

"Then you could be my daddy," Julie said with a smile peeking through. "My daddy in heaven wouldn't mind."

Seeing he needed rescuing, Carol asked, "How about that cup of coffee, Mr. Marlow?"

"Jeff," he said, smiling.

"Jeff," Carol repeated, smiling back.

"Can he have Christmas dinner with us, please?" Julie asked, twirling around the room.

"Yes, please do," Carol said with a wave of her hand at the loaded table.

"Please?" Julie begged as they both looked expectantly at Jeff. His heart melted and he felt new life rushing through his veins. "What time?"

"Is one o'clock okay?" Carol asked, her face radiant.

"Perfect," Jeff smiled.

"Yay!" Julie shouted, jumping up and down.

Jeff shifted nervously from one foot to the other. Was he doing the right thing? He had made a vow. Was he breaking it? He glanced up as the music started. The guests rose to their feet. Julie could barely hold back from skipping down the aisle in her flouncy flower girl dress. Carol was a vision of loveliness in her wedding gown as she fairly floated to him like a brilliant cloud. Her smile extinguished all doubts in his mind and heart. With every step, Julie spread angel's dust before her mother.