

Chapter 1

Hard Times

A small group of men huddled around a 55-gallon drum containing a weak, struggling fire. They held their hands over the small blaze or crammed them deep into their pockets, dancing from foot to foot, in an attempt to create warmth. They glanced in the direction of the small office building on the side of the New York City dock, hoping that work would be available today. Unloading ships or a train, it didn't matter. Just as long as there was some sort of work so as to feed themselves and their families for one more day.

There would be three to twelve men gathered around the drum on any given day. The most regular group, however, included five that bonded through the cold days. There was Robert Blair who had become the one in the group depended on as a leader; Jake Fishel, the always despondent one; Bob Julian, who was the oldest at age fifty-two; Fred Barton rarely spoke but his presence comforted the others; and Joe Meechim, the youngest at seventeen and the most withdrawn. He and Jake had formed an alliance that was almost like father and son, and they were seldom apart. The two shared a room at the local night shelter. No one, including Jake, knew much about Joe except that he was from Ohio somewhere.

They became a brotherhood of sorts, partners in the poverty of late 1930 and had gradually shared their stories. It seemed to help knowing that they were not alone in their agony, so a certain camaraderie developed.

"I think what I miss most is my family," Jake declared one day.

"Where are they?" inquired Robert.

"They're in Kentucky. I came up here hoping to find work so I could send for 'em but it was for naught. I'm able to send 'em a few dollars each week but with four young'uns, that don't go very far, I'm certain. If I could find a place to live, I'd bring 'em on anyhow, but I can't 'spect them to live in the homeless shelter with me, even if it was allowed. That's jus' for men."

"Where they staying now?" asked Bob Julian. He had a constant cough and was finding it very difficult to cope with this lifestyle. He felt blessed, however, to have his family with him. His wife of thirty years and their oldest son as well as his only grandson waited for him in a tiny room at an old hotel several blocks from the docks. His son was in a wheelchair, the result of an accident at the mill where he had worked before the depression had started. After he became disabled, his young wife left him and their son, unable to handle the burden of caring for a baby and a man in a wheelchair.

"They're with her ma and pa. They live in a valley near the Stones Throw coalmine. Her pa worked there for most of his life but he's got black lung now and can't do nothing but sit and cough. They can't afford no doctor so he's on his own. Sure wish I could be there, especially with Christmas coming on. I miss my kids and my woman."

"What would happen if you did go back, Jake?" Robert wondered.

"We'd all most likely starve, I reckon."

Several of the group nodded their heads in understanding, making no comments but all aware of the predicament in which Jake found himself. The times had torn families apart, frequently destroying them completely. Their moods became decidedly gloomy as

they related and compared their own situations to Jake's. They were helpless to control any part of their destinies, feeling as though they had failed their families. It was a bitter blow to their self-esteem and manhood.

"Tell you what!" Bob Julian stated cheerfully, changing the subject in an effort to lighten the mood. Everyone turned their attention to the storyteller among them who kept them entertained with delightful tales.

"I remember one time when I was a boy back in Illinois. We lived on a farm with my grandpa and grandma. Grandma had a flock of chickens and one old, mean rooster. That old rooster used to jump on me every time I went through the barnyard. And to add insult to injury, he woke me up every morning at the bust of dawn with that loud crowing of his.

"On my seventh birthday, my pa gave me a brown and white hound dog puppy and I named him Tick. That's 'cause he had two ticks on him when I got him. There was one on each ear. Looked like earbobs. I started to name him Sissy but Pa wouldn't let me."

The men chuckled at the pictures in their minds of this small boy and a hound dog wearing moving earrings.

"Anyhow, I was thrilled with that dog. The first time I took him outside, wouldn't you know that old rooster jumped on him. Sent him yelping all the way across the yard, that rooster riding his back, and Tick scooted up under the house, scraping that rooster off on the edge of the wall as he went under. Took me more'n an hour to get him out from under the house, and that old rooster jumped up on the fence and crowed real proud like.

"Every time we went outside, that rooster would jump Tick. I got to carrying a stick to help knock him away. But everyday, Tick was getting bigger and that old rooster was getting bolder and cockier. He was the cock of the roost for certain.

"Tick stayed in my room at night and one morning 'fore dawn, he punched me with his paws, wantin' to get out. I opened the window and let him out. I was a little worried, thinking he might be sick. Well, I could barely make him out as he slunk along the ground in the dark real quiet like. I couldn't figure out what had got into him but I kept watching.

"Just then I saw that old rooster jump up on the fence near the barn, flap his wings and stretch up his head to let out one of his finest crows. All of a sudden, Tick made a flying leap at that rooster and knocked him clean off that fence. Feathers went flying everywhere and you never heard such squealing and squawking in your life as that rooster did. I like to fell out the window laughing. That old rooster got away and plumb forgot about crowing that morning. In a little bit, Tick came running back to my bedroom window and jumped in. He looked up at me pantin' and waggin' his tail to beat the band. I swear that dog was laughin', he was so proud. And I was laughin' and proud too! You know, that old rooster never did bother Tick again. Nor me neither!"

The men laughed heartily at Bob's story.

"Yeah," Jake interjected as the laughter subsided, "I remember taking my girls fishing one time. They was just little tikes but couldn't wait to catch all those fish down in the pond behind the house. They weren't allowed to go down there by themselves 'cause my wife was scared they'd fall in. Anyhow, we went down there one Saturday morning. They skipped and danced and hollered all the way across that field. I spoke to 'em kinda firm 'bout not making no noise when we got to the pond so as to scare off the

fish. Seems like they forgot those directions when we got down there, they were so caught up in the excitement.

“The littlest one, Maybelle, was nigh onto five years old and she insisted on baiting her own hook. She was easing that worm on real slow like and I told her, ‘Put him on there, Maybelle. What’s the matter?’

“ ‘I don’t want to hurt the poor little thing, Pa,’ she said. Well, I knew right there we weren’t gonna get much fishing done.”

The men all chuckled at the compassion of the little girl attempting to bait her hook without hurting the worm.

“Well, it wasn’t but just a few minutes ’til Maybelle and Lorraine was both bored with the poles just settin’ in the water, and they commenced to running up and down that bank, hootin’ and hollerin’ to beat the band. And when Lorraine started to throwin’ rocks in the pond, I figured wasn’t no point in sticking around there any longer. They’d done scared off every fish in the pond. So we packed up our fishing poles and headed back to the house. Of course, the girls were tickled pink. They’d been fishin’ with Daddy and they were as happy as if we’d caught a whole mess of fish. When in actuality, we didn’t catch nothing.”

Jake’s words caught in his throat and his eyes were red-rimmed as he finished.

“That’s a nice story, Jake,” Robert stated kindly. “Thanks for sharing it with us.”

The men were silent for a few minutes, and then Jake said, “Well, guess I’ll get on back to my room. Don’t look like no more work today.”

They had all worked for two hours earlier in the day when Josh Bennett, a benevolent supervisor for Bakersville Coal Company had called them over to Dock #4 to unload a barge of large, oak barrels. There were five men working that day, and it didn’t take long but Josh split the work equally among every man who was present. He gave them each \$1.00, which was much more than he should have paid, but he felt great compassion for them. He also felt a little guilty about his having a job when so many others didn’t. He would pay them off in quarters as often as possible so that it seemed like more money, and at least, the men would have something in their pockets to jingle.

He paid them differently each day, depending on how much the owners of supplies being unloaded paid his company. Even though they were a coal company, they sub-contracted with every company shipping goods to the dock. This meant the companies did not have to hire anyone, and consequently, got the wares unloaded more cheaply.

As Jake and Joe moved away from the small group, Robert watched sadly. Jake’s shoulders were stooped and his feet shuffled as he retreated, testimony to his great sadness and hopelessness.

“He ought to go home to Kentucky,” Bob observed.

“Yeah.” The others agreed.

“I was just wondering, fellas.” Robert reflected. “How about if we try and help Jake get back home. Christmas is just a week away and if we could find a way to get him there, he should make it by then.”

“Sounds like a good idea in theory,” stated Fred, “but how we gonna accomplish it?”

The others nodded in agreement, shaking their heads in helpless bewilderment.

Robert thought for a minute, looked up and caught sight of Josh moving equipment around the dock. He looked at the men, they smiled encouragement as they realized that Robert had an idea, and the group moved toward Josh.

Robert explained about Jake's problem and how they'd like to help him get back home before Christmas.

"Do you have any thoughts about what can be done, Josh? And, uh, you know how close Jake and young Joe are. One doesn't go anywhere without the other."

"Well, let me think." Josh rubbed his hand across his jaw, frowning in deep thought. He looked out over the dock, his eye stopping at the railway which ended at the beginning of the docks. The train arrived almost daily with its meager load of goods to be transferred onto waiting barges and ships for transport to other cities. He knew that the train would be here tomorrow for sure but, according to the engineer, wouldn't be back again until after Christmas. The railway company had decided to shut down for a week as a cost cutting move and wouldn't be running again until December 27.

He saw the look of terror in the eyes of the group when he delivered this bit of news, and hastened to reassure them. "Oh, but there'll still be ships in here to be unloaded just like always but just not the trains." He was touched by the looks and audible sighs of relief escaping from the men.

"I know the men who work on that railway pretty good and they're a great bunch of guys. When they leave here, they head back to West Virginia and they're real close to the West Virginia/Kentucky border. I've heard several of them speak of living in Kentucky so maybe they'd be willing to give Jake and Joe a ride. It's against policy but since it's so close to Christmas, maybe they'll make just this one exception. I'd be more than glad to ask them."

The men smiled broadly, thanking Josh, shaking his hand and slapping him on the back.

"Hold on, fellas, I said I'd try but I can't make any promises. It won't hurt to ask and I'm certainly willing to do that."

"Oh, that's okay, Josh, we all understand but just to have a ray of hope seems a blessing. We know it's a long shot but we'd sure like to get Jake back to his family." Robert spoke with gratitude and respect to their friend on the dock.

"What about getting them back here after Christmas?" Fred reminded them.

"You're right, Fred," Robert stated. "We don't want to abandon them with no hope of work."

They looked at each other, not sure what to do

"If the train takes them out, I'm sure they won't mind bringing them back," Josh assured them. "I'll be certain to ask. We don't want to send them to a situation more desperate than this one. Just don't say anything to them until we know for sure if this is going to work."

"No, we wouldn't do that. They might need a bit of money though, just in case."

"Yeah, can't never tell what they might run into, especially after they leave the train."

"They can have two of my quarters from today's pay," Bob offered.

A hat was passed and the total collected was \$2.42. It seemed like a great deal of money to all of them so they felt confident this would get Jake and Joe to Kentucky and Jake's family. It should be enough to get them back to the New York docks as well.



Robert shivered at the traffic light in the cold, damp evening a week before Christmas 1930, waiting for the light to turn red so he could cross the street. Ellen and little Stephen were waiting for him at their cold water flat in one of the many poor neighborhoods of New York City. His jacket, a leftover from more prosperous times, hung loosely over his now gaunt frame. He thrust his red, rough hands into the pockets in an attempt to ease the pain caused by cold weather chapping and manual labor.

He was 26 years old but felt much older. The worry of not being able to care for his young family, the guilt of not having steady work and the burden of responsibility weighed heavy on his countenance.



Robert Blair had never been afraid of hard work and had gone to work in the steel mills of Pennsylvania when he was a lad of fourteen, after the death of his father. He worked each day after school until he graduated high school, and then took fulltime employment. He worked on the massive machinery, repairing the new gasoline motors. The labor was hot, noisy and intense, but the pay was good. After marrying Ellen Sims five years later, he decided to move his young wife to New York where he found work loading and unloading cargo ships on the docks. He enjoyed working outside, even in the cold, much more than working in the sweltering steel mill.

They lived in a tiny apartment belonging to Everlasting Warehouse Company, his employer. It was snug and comfortable with an inside bathroom and hot running water. A year later when little Stephen was born, they slipped a tiny crib into their cozy bedroom, and felt that they were settled for life. For three years, they were happy and content. Then something called the Stock Market crashed and so did the tiny family's world. Ellen had saved a small amount of money in a large mayonnaise jar, but they knew little about such matters. Robert had a stable job, they had a nice place to live, were secure and had no reason to foresee the calamity which struck. Nothing in their experiences or history had prepared them for the dark days ahead.

Within a period of several weeks, Robert lost his job and the family lost their home. They were no longer able to pay the \$35 a month rent, even if the company had not closed the housing unit. A company representative moved door to door in an attempt to do anything possible to help the families relocate.

The Blairs, however, had no place to go. They had no automobile in which to transport their possessions, no families to return to. Robert's adoptive parents were both gone and he had been on his own since age sixteen, after the death of his beloved mother. He had never known his biological parents.

Ellen's family had no room or resources to assist them. Her father had likewise lost his job in the Pennsylvania steel mill, as had both of her brothers. The brothers, their wives and a total of four children lived with the elder Sims in their two bedroom bungalow.

The Everlasting Warehouse representative gave them the address of the flat where they moved. It was twenty blocks away from the docks, and the streets were dirty and cluttered with garbage and destitute men, longing for work and begging for food. The red brick building was ancient and crumbling, and the family settled in on the fourth floor in a two room flat at the top of the stairs. The walls were streaked with dirt and dampness, the plaster cracked and peeling. There was one naked light bulb hanging from the center

of the ceiling in each room but the bathroom was a community facility at the end of the hall. There was no one to officially clean it so the residents had to take the responsibility. It seemed that each time the Blairs visited the bath, it was necessary to clean it both before and after their use. The one redeeming grace of the facility was that it had hot water, a true blessing at bath time.

The kitchen was a small corner carved into the front room, containing dilapidated cabinets with no doors and broken shelves; a small countertop made of plywood, buckled and separating from water damage; a substantial sink with most of the porcelain worn away; and a single cold water faucet which dripped water constantly. The sink contained a large green stain from the persistent dripping. A small gas cook stove was no longer operational, but the oven served as a storage area for food and dishes and helped protect against the ever present roaches. There was an icebox but the windowsill in winter served them very well in storing perishable food. If it became too cold, large stalactite icicles attached to the eaves outside would be broken off and stuffed into the icebox. This prevented the food from being frozen and destroyed by the bitter, cold air. During hot weather, it was necessary to eat from cans and plan their meals carefully so as to have few leftovers. Lugging heavy blocks of ice up four flights of stairs was quite difficult and sometimes impossible as Robert frequently arrived home after the icehouse two blocks away had closed for the day.

The one source of heat in the apartment was a small, nearly ineffective coal heater huddled in the corner of the front room. The ancient radiators lining the decrepit walls had long ago ceased to operate when the coal fired steam central heating system in the basement of the building had given up the ghost. The landlord refused to replace the beyond-repair system, and had left the tenants to fend for themselves. Fortunately for the Blairs, the former tenants had failed to remove this small but precious appliance.

Their apartment was on the top floor of the building, which meant they were not disturbed by people overhead, but the ceiling was sagging dangerously due to the leaky roof. Robert brought scrap pieces of lumber home from the docks and nailed them to what was left of the ceiling joists so as to help ensure that the ceiling would not cave in on them. Most of the existing joists were nearly rotted through by water leakage, and two months after moving in, the wiring in the bedroom ceased to work entirely. Robert worried constantly about fire. Fortunately, he and Ellen were both light sleepers and kept a vigilant watch.

“Just be grateful we’re on the top floor, dear,” Ellen comforted, “At least it keeps us safe from most of the rats.”

The only other redemption for the apartment was that the rent was just \$8.00 a month. The coins and bills in the mayonnaise jar had totaled \$118.32 when they first moved here, which seemed like a great fortune to the family in their present circumstances, so they guarded it carefully and passionately.

Robert blessed the cold weather because he didn’t have to carry the heavy blocks of ice upstairs but worried about his small family being in the cold all day. He brought scrap wood home whenever he could find it but it was very scarce since the men burned it in the barrels on the dock to keep warm while waiting for work. And also, others had families to care for so they too coveted the tiny scraps. Coal was a luxury beyond their means so they did the best they could with wood and even cardboard or scrap newspapers picked up off the streets.

The few perishable groceries the family had in the winter were kept locked in a small wooden crate, chained to the fire escape outside the window. Meager meals were cooked on a rusty and bent electric hotplate or on the small heater when there was enough fire.

Each morning, Robert would rise at 5:00 AM and coax a tiny, cold flame from the heater in the next room. He would wash up at the small basin Ellen kept filled on the stovetop while she would find some sustenance for him before he started his day on the docks. It might be a cold potato, leftover biscuit or even a dried out piece of cake purchased for a penny from the day old store at the bakery down the street. She would pinch off any mold beginning to appear and attempt to heat whatever she had so as to make it more palatable.

By 5:30 AM, he left the flat and walked the twenty blocks to the docks, hoping to find work. Most days he found very little, but occasionally, there was someone who needed help for a whole day. He would stay there all day, waiting, hoping, huddled over large drums filled with burning scrap lumber, talking to the other men there for the same purpose. The day would really drag as the men began to drift away around mid-morning, but he enjoyed talking to them while they waited for work. Robert stayed most days until at least 4:00 PM, hoping for employment, no matter how meager or demeaning.



Robert's heart was light but anxious as he waited to cross the street to his home. He was full of excitement about the possibility of sending Jake and Joe home to Kentucky. He just prayed that it would work out. It would be a wonderful Christmas present for them all, to be able to help their brothers in such a way. Life was hard enough but he couldn't imagine being without Ellen and little Stephen.

His steps lightened as he crossed the street and moved quickly to the stairs of the apartment building where his family waited.

Chapter 2

Jake and Joe

Little Stephen heard his father's whistling as he mounted the stairs. The lock on the apartment door was broken, and while Stephen and Ellen were home alone, one of the two ladder back chairs the family owned was wedged beneath the door knob for security. Robert had installed a hasp with a padlock on the outside, and on the rare occasions the family left the apartment together or Ellen and Stephen left while Robert worked, the padlock was placed in the hasp and securely clicked. Robert realized it wouldn't take much effort to force the hasp off the thin door but they all felt better knowing that what little they had was somewhat protected.

Also, when they did leave, their money was taken with them. Neither Ellen nor Robert had ever known such fear and doubt before, and they disliked intensely the feelings of distrust in their hearts, but these were desperate times. Many of their neighbors had been mercilessly robbed of what little they had, and the young couple had helped several families within their building as much as they possibly could after they had fallen victim to robberies. At least one family in the building was forced onto the streets as a result of their rent money being stolen. The landlord demanded the \$8.00 rent on the first day of each month, before sundown, or the tenants were forced to leave immediately. The renters were not even allowed to stay until daybreak the next day.

Robert began whistling on the third floor so that Ellen and Stephen would know he was coming. Stephen stood by the door in glad expectation, waiting eagerly for his father's knock and voice. Only then could the chair be removed to allow Robert's entry.

No matter how cold or tired, Robert would scoop Stephen up, toss him into the air, and greet him with laughter and joy. Stephen squealed with delight, hugging his father hungrily. Ellen would smile, happily and proudly watching her son and her husband. She moved toward them and Robert kissed his wife warmly, so very glad for the comfort afforded by his small family.



After supper, Robert told Stephen the story of Bob Julian's dog, Tick. They all laughed, and Stephen jumped up on the chair, pretending to crow like a rooster. Robert reached out, and with a deep growl, grabbed Stephen and tossed him to Ellen. The small room was warmed by their laughter.

Soon it was Stephen's bedtime so Ellen and Robert tucked him into their bed in the next room. They no longer had bedroom furniture as it had all been sold except for the mattress. The mattress rested on the floor and the few clothes they possessed were crammed into cardboard boxes lining the wall. They left him in their bed until they

retired for the night and then moved him onto his small cot, which they set up near the stove in the front room.

Stephen dropped to his knees on the mattress, folded his tiny hands under his chin, closed his eyes, and said his prayers. His parents sat by his side, holding hands and listening to their son's words.

"Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. And thank you for my parents and my bed and my supper. And thank you, God, for Mr. Bob's dog, Tick and for letting him get away from that old rooster. Bless us all and please help Daddy find work tomorrow. Amen."

The couple tenderly kissed their son good night, grateful for the darkness of the room so that he could not see their worry-filled eyes.



One of the chairs was slipped under the doorknob. Ellen sat in the remaining chair and Robert pulled a wooden crate near her as they huddled around the stove.

Ellen waited, not wanting to ask the anxious question in her heart for fear of hurting her husband.

As if he heard it anyway, he declared, "I found a little work today but I just brought home fifty cents."

He seemed uncomfortable and somewhat guilty as he explained further.

"You see, Jake Fishel – he's the man from Kentucky who looks after young Joe Meechim – is really homesick. So much so that we – uh, me and the other men, that is – decided to try and help him get back to his family before Christmas. We spoke to Josh – you remember me telling you how good he is to all of us at the docks – anyway, we asked him if he had any ideas about maybe getting Jake and young Joe down to Kentucky. He promised us he'd talk to the men on the railway down there and see if maybe the two of them could hitch a ride on the train or maybe even work their way down and back on the train. So, we kind of figured that maybe they might need a little money along the way for some emergency, so just in case it works out, we took up a collection and I gave half of what I earned today." Robert dropped his eyes uneasily. "I hope you don't mind."

"Mind? Oh, my dearest, how could I mind, and I do love you so! There has never been anyone anywhere who is kinder and more compassionate and more unselfish than you. I'm so proud! I would have been disappointed if you had done anything else. No, I certainly do not mind! When do you think you'll know if it'll work out for them to take the train?"

"If it works out, it'll have to be tomorrow because the train won't be back until after Christmas. But, I'll probably still have work," he hastened to add, "as the ships are going to continue to come in daily except for Christmas Day."

Ellen moved quickly to the kitchen area in search of some morsel of food to send with the two men on their journey. She took their last two sweet potatoes and tucked them under the edge of the stove to bake during the night.

"I have almost a half loaf of bread and several pieces of cheese which aren't too dried out so I'll pack them each a sandwich. And there'll still be enough for you to have one."

She busily began to pinch off tiny pieces of mold forming around the edges of the bread.

"What about you and Stephen?" he inquired.

“Oh, there’s still enough for us. I even have a little bit of macaroni noodles and can boil those on the stove and put the cheese in there. Stephen loves macaroni and cheese!”

Robert smiled tenderly as he held his wife close.

“There seems to be an epidemic of unselfish in this house,” he murmured gently.



He arrived even earlier than usual at the docks the next morning, eager to learn if it would work out for Jake and Joe to go to Kentucky. He clutched the package of cheese sandwiches and roasted sweet potatoes under his arm. The sandwiches and potatoes were wrapped in brown paper from a bag that had been torn apart, and the whole treasure was wrapped in a piece of newspaper.

He spotted the train at the dock a full block before he arrived and he broke into a run, eager to get there but fearful of disappointment at the same time. He slowed to a walk as he approached the gathering barrel where the men waited each day, straining to see through the early morning darkness, struggling to spy Josh.

He could see nothing, but a few minutes later, he caught sight of Josh stepping between two of the rail cars with another man. They were talking and laughing, and Josh reached out, shook the man’s hand, then turned to leave. He caught sight of Robert standing by the barrel, smiled broadly and waved his hand, nodding his head vigorously in the affirmative.

Robert was ecstatic! He could hardly contain his relief and happiness, and fairly danced around the barrel. He could hear Josh’s laughter at the spectacle, but wasn’t the least bit embarrassed. His joy was too complete to hold inside.

The other men began arriving shortly afterward, and Robert ran to meet them, breathlessly giving them the wonderful news. It looked like Jake and Joe were going to Kentucky!

Soon Josh and the railroad man he had been talking to approached the small group. Jake and Joe hadn’t arrived yet so the group anxiously awaited the news from the two approaching men.

“Fellas, this is Henry Bailey with the railroad. I spoke to him about your proposition and he has some good news for you.”

“Morning, gents. Josh explained the situation to me and I’d be proud to help you out. The men can ride in the caboose with me where it’s warm and they can help us with the uncoupling and shifting of cars when we stop at various stations. There’ll be a little unloading and loading too but it won’t be too much. We can’t pay them but they’ll get to ride for free. The train goes as far as Huntington in West Virginia. I live in Globe, Kentucky, and can take them as far as there with me in the car. Do you know where they’re headed?”

“As I recollect,” Fred Barton pondered, “he’s from a little town called Poplar Plains. I remember it because my home’s in Poplar Bluff, Oregon.” The men looked around in surprise, as this was the most any of them had heard Fred speak at one time.

“Well, now, that’s good news,” Henry replied excitedly. “That’s only about five miles from Globe. They should be able to get there okay. If nothing else, my boy can take them over. Sure don’t want them walking if the weather’s bad and it most likely will be

this time of year. But you realize that the train leaves today at 4:00. And we won't be back for at least a week. It'll be after New Year's. We don't have a definite date yet."

The men missed the doubt and concern in Henry's voice in their excitement over his news.

"We're most grateful to you, Mr. Bailey," Robert declared, smiling and shaking his hand warmly. The other men gathered around, thanking and enthusiastically slapping Henry Bailey's back in appreciation.

"What's going on?" Jake asked as he and Joe approached the happy meeting.

"You're going home, Buddy," Robert announced, "and Joe's going with you."

Shock and bewilderment covered Jake's face, and he stood, momentarily stunned by the news.

"Whatya mean?" His voice cracked, his words disbelieving.

The men surrounded the two and quickly explained the plan, but it took several minutes for the significance of their explanations to sink in. Jake stuttered in confused amazement and even Joe looked shocked.

"Wow! For real?" Joe asked.

"For real, Joe, for real!" Robert assured him.



The men worked quickly that morning, their spirits lifted by the wonderful news for their friends. They had the train unloaded by noon, and Jake and Joe hurried back to their room to gather their few worldly possessions for the trip home. They were back at 2:00, and the men gathered around the barrel to say their goodbyes.

Robert presented them with the food Ellen had prepared for them; Bob Fishel gave them their collection of \$2.42; and Fred Barton handed them each a pair of wool socks.

"They ain't new but they got no holes," he explained. "I thought maybe you might have to do some walkin' and it gets mighty cold this time of year."

"I don't know what to say, fellas," Jake murmured. "This here's the nicest thing anybody's ever done for me. I don't know how I could ever repay you."

Joe made no comment but his eyes were glistening with tears. He quickly dropped his gaze, kicking at a dirt clod lying near the barrel. He cleared his throat and wiped his sleeve across his eyes.

"No need to thank us or even think of repaying us, Jake and Joe," Robert stated. "This is the greatest Christmas present for us too. With any luck, you'll be home no later than Christmas Eve and just remember us to your family. We're certain the two of you will be fine, and it looks like work is going to get harder to find here so you're probably leaving at a good time. Just be happy with your wife and kids."

"I'll do that, for certain! And thanks for including Joe in this. He'll be a big help to us back home." He glanced fondly at Joe, reaching over and patting his back.

The men shuffled uncomfortably and soon changed the topic of conversation to more superficial subjects. They had no work but all wanted to see the two men off.

"The train will bring you back after Christmas and you can tell us all about it," Robert assured them.



Robert arrived home that night, eager to tell Ellen and Stephen the good news. Stephen jumped into his arms as he entered their door. His mother had told him about Jake and Joe having a chance to go home for Christmas.

“Did they leave? Did the train take them?”

“Yes, they sure did. And that was two very happy men! Actually, we were all happy. It was a wonderful present for us all, and Henry Bailey from the railroad will telegraph Josh when they get there and let us know that they made it safely.”

“Yayyyy!” shouted little Stephen.

“Thank God!” whispered Ellen as she wiped away her tears. She hugged her husband tightly.



The moods of the men were decidedly lighter for the rest of the week. Even the cold seemed less harsh as they talked about Jake and Joe and their trip home. The part they played in the drama brought them great pride and self-satisfaction.

As they prepared to leave after work on Christmas Eve, Josh approached them, waving a telegram.

“They made it!” he shouted.

The men laughed and congratulated each other eagerly as they received this welcomed news.

“Read the telegram to us!”

“It says: ‘Arrived safely last PM. Stop. Delivered cargo to Poplar Plains. Stop. Welcomed warmly. Stop. Will report more January 3. Stop. Henry’”

It was going to be a great Christmas for them all as they rejoiced in the good fortune of their brothers. However, none of them missed the date of January 3 as a return date for the train.



They left the docks, their hearts still warmed and their faces filled with smiles, after receiving the telegram, to return to their homes and families. It was going to be a grand Christmas after all.

As they said their goodbyes and parted, Robert noticed a long, black limousine parked a block away.

Strange, he thought. Wonder who that could be?

He was deep in thought as he walked the twenty blocks to his family. He was very happy for Jake and Joe but despondent that he had no gift for Ellen and Stephen, especially Stephen. He was four years old now and Christmas could be very special for him under more pleasing circumstances. His hand closed around the four quarters in his pocket. They had enough in the mayonnaise jar to pay the next two months’ rent but not much else. They were planning to go to the soup kitchen for Christmas lunch. Maybe there would be a small gift there for Stephen. He raised his eyes and sent forth a silent prayer that his son would receive a small gift on this blessed holiday.

He approached the last block to his apartment building, and he spied Mona Dorsett set up on her corner. She was an elderly lady who so far as anyone knew had no home except the street. She was a fixture in the neighborhood, selling flowers and vegetables in the summer; nuts, holly, mistletoe and various other articles in the winter.

She bothered no one but her salty philosophy and harmless sarcasm endeared her to all. She was apparently homeless but she wasn't helpless.

Robert's heart lifted as he saw her.

Maybe I can find something there. An orange or a few nuts. Anything, he thought.

"Evening, Miss Mona, how are you?"

"Very well, Robert, very well. Merry Christmas to you!"

"Thank you, ma'am. I need a little gift for Stephen. What do you recommend?"

"Got just the thing here. And they're on special."

He smiled at her standard response.

"Just look at these lovely birdhouses! Ain't they beauties? Not a rag in the lot!"

She peered around to make certain no one could overhear, leaning forward, as if to divulge some secret information to Robert. "And they're handmade by Christmas angels!"

He smiled kindly at this information.

"They really are lovely, Miss Mona. But I'm afraid I can't afford one of them. They're much too exquisite for my budget."

"I told you they're on special!" she snapped, "And just \$1.00."

She noticed his hesitation as he slipped his hand into his pocket. She heard the coins jingling and realized that he probably only had \$1.00.

"But since it's Christmas Eve and I likely won't have no more sales tonight, I'm cutting the price by half. And I'm throwing in a surprise bag as a gift." She leaned behind her cardboard box stand, pulling out a small lunch bag with the top neatly folded over.

"What's in it?" Robert inquired.

"It's a gift!" she retorted.

Once again, Robert was caught off guard by this sassy and outspoken lady and he laughed with delight. He reached into his pocket and pulled out two quarters. "Okay, Miss Mona, you've made a sale."

"Well, I should hope so! You won't find no better deal anywhere and that's for certain! Now which one do you want?"

He looked carefully at the array of tiny structures, lined up neatly across the top of the cardboard box. One had a miniature front porch, another had a stone chimney, yet another was two stories high. There was one tucked way at the back, much smaller and cruder than the others. It was constructed of strips of bark, held together with tiny nails and twigs used as support beams. A bent twig curled gently around the opening so as to form a perch for a feathered occupant. It reached out to him, inviting him to pick it up, and, after all, it seemed selfish to take advantage of Miss Mona's generosity by picking the most elegant of the bunch. His hand closed around it and he felt instantly that this was the right choice.

"Ah, wonderful choice!" Miss Mona agreed. "And here. Here's the gift I promised you. Merry Christmas!"

"Thank you, Miss Mona. And Merry Christmas to you too."

Chapter 3

The Gift of Bob Julian

Robert approached the corner with his Christmas package tucked safely under his arm. As he prepared to cross the street to his apartment building, a truck roared around the corner from behind him. He stepped back, startled by its sudden appearance. The load on the truck shifted from the sudden turn, and two bundles crashed to the street, right at Robert's feet.

"Hey!" he yelled in an attempt to catch the attention of the driver, but the truck was gone.

Robert stood there helplessly, not knowing what to do about the two bundles lying in the street. He approached them and discovered that it was two bundles of small limbs tied neatly with twine.

Firewood! Blessed, blessed firewood!

He gathered them up and bounded up the steps as quickly as his load would permit, eager to reach his wife and son with this bounty. He began shouting to them on the third floor, and they both came to the door, anxious to learn what all the fuss was about.

He ran up the last few steps, laughing and shouting happily. "Merry Christmas, my two loves! Merry Christmas!"

They began to laugh as his excitement electrified them, and the door across the hall opened a crack with two small faces peering out curiously before the door was pushed shut by someone behind them.

He eagerly gave Stephen the birdhouse, hiding the small bag under his coat for tomorrow, and shared the story of the firewood, which seemed to fall from the heavens. His fervor was contagious, and they all were excited, with Robert tossing Stephen into the air and hugging Ellen.

He stopped suddenly, a look of inspiration crossing his face.

"Do you mind if I go down and see if Miss Mona can have supper with us, Ellen? That is, if she isn't gone yet."

"Well." Ellen hesitated only briefly. "We don't have much but you know she's more than welcome if she doesn't mind sharing what we have."

He hugged her quickly.

“I’ll be right back!” he promised as he dashed down the steps, hoping to catch Miss Mona before she left her spot.

He observed her packing up her remaining birdhouses and shouted to catch her attention as he ran toward her.

She turned and waited as she recognized who was calling.



Soon Miss Mona sat in the small room with the Blair family, sharing their meager meal. Her cardboard box rested beside the door, and they talked as if they had known each other for years.

“Where do you live, Miss Mona?” Stephen asked with childlike innocence. His parents glanced at each other uneasily, embarrassed by their son’s unintentional boldness.

“Oh, here and there, Sonny, here and there. Old Mona makes out just fine, don’t you worry none. However, I almost lived with a police officer once.” She chuckled as the others prepared to hear what they perceived to be a story.

“You know Officer Dan, don’t you? He’s the policeman that patrols this neighborhood. He’s a nice enough young man but when he first started back eight or nine years ago, he was stiff with starch, that one was. Was going to single-handedly stamp out crime in this area.”

They all knew Officer Dan and were interested in hearing Miss Mona’s story. He had always been very kind to them all, and the children particularly liked him. He would let them hold his nightstick, and he gave them all small replicas of his badge, which they pinned on their shirts as they played on the sidewalks in front of their buildings or in the small park across the street.

“Well, don’t you know,” Miss Mona continued, “I was set up down there at my spot on the street, selling the first flowers of spring. They was lovely things, too. Tulips and jonquils and yellow bells. Just lovely! This young police officer approached and I greeted him. Thought I was going to make a sale.

“Anyway, he said, ‘Where’s your peddler’s permit, ma’am?’

“‘My what?’ says I. I thought he was kiddin’. But I soon learned he wasn’t kiddin’. No, sir, not that one!

“Well, we argued back and forth for a few minutes and he told me in no uncertain terms that he was shuttin’ me down until I got a peddler’s permit. I told him he couldn’t do that and he told me he could.

“So I shut down everything and just sat there, waiting for him to get off work. When he left, I followed him. He lived only about four blocks from here and I was grateful for that since I was carrying my cardboard box with me. And it still had flowers in it, too.

“I think he got a little nervous as I followed him but he didn’t say nothing. When we got to his building, he went in and so did I. He stood there a little confused like and then he pushed the bell on 208. His wife came on the speaker and he told her he was home. And I chimed in and said, ‘And he brought home company.’

“Well, he like to fainted. He told me I couldn’t go up with him and I told him I could. By then, his wife came downstairs to see what was going on and I explained to her that he shut down my business and I had no money to buy food nor to pay for a place to stay so I was going to stay with them.

“She was a pretty little thing, very kind and flustered too. She really didn’t know what to do. Others had started gathering outside to see what was going on and I was quick to explain to them. Officer Dan was red as a beet. Stood there just kind of sputtering and twitching around, real nervous like. Finally, his wife invited me up. Officer Dan told me I could eat supper with them but then I’d have to leave.

“I told him, ‘I ain’t going no where. This here’s home now. You done destroyed my livelihood. You wouldn’t put an old lady out on the street, now would you?’ I’m certain he could have probably choked me.

“Anyhow, I spent the night on their couch that night. Took a bath in the bathroom. I could tell his wife was real uneasy ’cause in all truthfulness, it’d been awhile since I’d had a full bath. I thought I might as well do it, wouldn’t hurt nothing, so she drew me a good, hot bath in the tub. Even gave me some shampoo so I let my hair down and washed it too. It was a warm evening so I sat by the window and let it dry. She and I talked and she was a real nice lady. But she was still confused as to what to do with this old trespasser.

“I had breakfast and left around 7:00. I said ‘Thanks ever so much, I’ll see you tonight.’ And I left. I can just imagine the conversation between those two after I went downstairs.” She chuckled at the memory.

Little Stephen was delighted and eager to learn what happened next.

“Well, I sat on the steps and waited for Officer Dan to come down on his way to work. He stopped when he reached the steps and said, ‘Why are you still here?’

“Got no place to go,’ says I. ‘I’m out of business.’

“He sort of stammered around for a bit and then said, ‘Well, I guess there’s no harm in your selling flowers but just don’t make a scene.’ I agreed. ‘And will you go back to your own home tonight?’ He glanced up toward his apartment so I knew he’d caught what for from his wife. ‘I’ll be going back to my own place tonight, thank you very much. You can be certain of that. And I appreciate your hospitality last night. You and your Mrs.’

“Needless to say, I wasn’t ever told I’d have to have a peddler’s license again!”

They all laughed gleefully at Miss Mona’s story, the adults shaking their head in amazed disbelief.

“Well, I got to go before it gets any later.”

“Stay the night,” little Stephen pleaded. And his parents eagerly agreed.

“Oh, no, that’s mighty kind of you but I got to go. Tomorrow’s Christmas and I got plans.”

“You’re not going alone. I’ll walk with you,” Robert insisted.

“It ain’t far. Just on the other side of the park.”

“I’ll walk you, Miss Mona.”



Ellen and Stephen stood in the hall saying their goodbyes to Miss Mona and inviting her to come back again soon. Robert held her cardboard box, and as they prepared to descend the stairs, the door across the hall opened once again and the two small faces peered out.

“Hello,” Miss Mona called. “Merry Christmas.”

They made no reply and closed the door. She reached inside the cardboard box, pulled out two lunch bags and moved to their door. She knocked boldly. There was no

answer. She knocked again, louder this time, announcing, "I know you're in there so you might just as well open up. I ain't leavin' 'til you do!"

The door slowly opened, she leaned down, and stuck the two bags through the small crack.

"Here!" she greeted. "God bless you. Are there anymore young'uns in there?"

The tallest child, who was a small boy, shook his head.

"Well, then, take this and enjoy!"

The two smiled shyly, looked across the hall to Stephen who smiled and waved, and then they closed the door. It opened again almost immediately, and a man and woman stood there.

"Thank you. We're beholden to you," the man spoke gratefully.

"Yes, thank you, and God bless you," the woman echoed.



"Exactly where do you live, Miss Mona?" Robert wondered.

"Just over there in that building." She casually motioned with her hand.

I thought that building was empty, he thought. But he wisely kept his thoughts to himself and made no comment. He walked her to the steps.

"I'll go in with you," he offered.

"Oh, no, I'll be fine. I know you think the building is empty but things ain't always the way they appear on the surface, young man. I appreciate your concern and your worryin' but I assure you, I'm fine. The Lord has always taken care of me."

He smiled, humbled by her words. "Of course, you're right, Miss Mona. Good night."

Just the same, he stood outside for a few minutes after she entered to make certain she didn't slip back outside into the cold.

As Robert returned to his building after walking Miss Mona home, he noticed what appeared to be the same black limousine he had seen at the dock earlier. It was parked on the street on the far side of the park. He stopped, looked in that direction and wondered at its presence. As he watched, the car moved slowly away.

Strange, he thought.



Christmas morning dawned bright and clear. The sun sparkled off the icicles hanging from the roof and the frost stars bunched on the windowpanes. A light snow had fallen during the night and nestled against the window frame, adding to Stephen's delight and joy. Ellen had taken three pieces of their precious newspaper, rolled it together and torn it down about a foot into strips, then pulled it up like a telescope to fashion a Christmas tree. Stephen was enchanted.

"It's the best Christmas tree I've ever had in my *whole* life!" he declared.

His parents' surprise at this statement of wisdom and purported age from their four year old filled their tiny room with happiness and pride.

The small lunch bag set under the newspaper tree, waiting to be opened by Stephen. As he eagerly poured out the contents, a big red apple, an orange, several nuts and seven shiny marbles rolled out. The young boy squealed in ecstasy. The marbles were blue and green and red and there was even one coveted tiger's eye! It was a treasure beyond his wildest expectations.

The room was enveloped with warmth, from love as well as the wood burning brightly in their stove. The morning sped quickly by, and soon it was time to go to lunch at the local soup kitchen. Stephen skipped eagerly about, the air filled with expectant hope and faith. He was certain their good fortune was only just beginning.

“Oh, to have the faith of a child,” Robert mused.



As they entered the hall to walk to their Christmas meal, the door across the hall opened and the two small children from the night before emerged with their parents. The boy appeared to be about six years old, and the girl could have been no more than three. The parents were young but had the haunted look of age created by poverty, hardship and worry. They hesitated as the Blairs entered the hall, and took a step back as if to retreat into their room.

“Hello,” Robert greeted joyfully. “Merry Christmas! It’s good to see you again.”

Ellen and Stephen moved forward, smiling, greeting them warmly.

The small family relaxed somewhat, responding to the obvious acceptance by the Blairs. The man introduced himself as Cletus Danton, his wife Birdie, son Carson and daughter Julie.

“Hey, your name is Birdie!” Stephen exclaimed excitedly. “Maybe you can live in my birdhouse!”

He clutched the small frame firmly, refusing to leave it behind as they left. The adults all laughed and Ellen scolded Stephen gently.

“Stephen, this is Mrs. Danton, we don’t call adults by their first name. Mind your manners.”

The Dantons were on their way to the soup kitchen as well. “Mind if we tag along, Mr. Danton?” asked Robert.

“Glad for the company. And, please, call us Cletus and Birdie.”

The two families chatted cordially, the children eagerly showing the treasures retrieved from the lunch bags given by Miss Mona the night before. Julie had a set of jacks and a small red comb. Carson had received a whistle and a candy cane. Both had oranges and large red apples, just as Stephen had received. Carson blew the whistle, playing one-noted Christmas songs as they walked through the fresh, Christmas snow to their lunch. Stephen and Julie skipped and danced, singing Jingle Bells to the tune of the whistle.

“We may all be sorry he received that whistle in a day or two,” lamented Birdie.

The adults agreed, saying nothing to stop the exuberance of the children. Socializing was rare for the two families lately and they reveled in the comfort of it.

The Salvation Army served a hot, hearty meal of cornbread, pinto beans, Stephen’s favorite macaroni and cheese, and Cole slaw. The children were given chocolate milk and the adults had delicious cups of rich, black coffee. None of them had enjoyed this treat for many months. A piece of peppermint candy topped off the feast and offered a welcomed dessert.

The small Salvation Army band played Christmas carols and the children, especially Stephen, sat in awestruck wonder at the beautiful, although sometimes off key, notes and golden ringing escaping from the trumpets and tambourines. Stephen had never experienced such amazing sounds and he was enchanted.

The workers at the center organized games for the children, and they all shouted with delight as they played musical chairs, drop the handkerchief, and Red Rover. Too soon, it became time to leave as the long winter evening quickly approached. Amid complaints of not wanting the festivities to end, all the new friends bade each other Merry Christmas and good night as they prepared to leave the warm center to return to their mostly cold homes. The spirit of the celebration, however, kept them warm and comforted and filled with hope for better tomorrows.

The group gathered in a circle, hand in hand, and sang Christmas carols as a grand finale. With the notes of "Silent Night" echoing in the large hall, the group reluctantly moved to the exit. A smiling and gentle lady stood by the door, tucking a small but bright red apple into the hand of each person.

"Merry Christmas and God bless!" she beamed to every person.

The Blairs and Dantons relived each moment of the magical afternoon on the short trip home, the children not quite as energetic as on the walk to the center several hours earlier. Also, the pangs of hunger had been chased away by the ample meal, and they felt very comfortable. They would all sleep well tonight.

"This has been the best Christmas ever," Carson declared.

"Yeah!" Stephen and Julie agreed.

"And we got these great gifts too," Stephen explained.

"The gifts are wonderful, Stephen, I agree," Birdie spoke warmly to the child, "but I think the most wondrous gift of all is the gift of new friends."

"Amen." The other adults quickly concurred.



"Please come in and stay for awhile," Ellen invited their new friends. "It's been so good to share fellowship with someone again. We've been so caught up in our problems that we've forgotten how comforting others can be."

The Dantons exchanged a quick glance.

"Well, for just a little while," they hesitated. "But we know you have to go to work in the morning and we don't want to be a bother."

"Ohhhh, it feels so good and warm in your house," little Julie exclaimed as they entered the Blairs' home. "It's not cold like ours."

"Shush, child," Birdie admonished. "You'll have to excuse her, she's still our baby," she explained with embarrassment.

"Don't you have a stove?" Stephen questioned. "If you do, you can have some of our wood. We got plenty. Some fell off a truck last night when Daddy was coming home."

After an awkward few seconds, Cletus explained that they used their hotplate to heat the room.

Soon the children were playing and the uncomfortable moment was forgotten in the joy of romping, laughing and talking together.

While conversing, it was revealed that Cletus was not working and Robert was certain their situation was probably critical.

"Cletus, I can't promise you anything but would you like to walk down to the docks with me tomorrow to see if there is work available? We lost two men the other day when they left to go home to Kentucky so it's probable there's something you might like

to do. That is, if you're interested." Robert felt somewhat uneasy in making the offer, hoping he wasn't intruding in their business or hurting his new friend's pride.

Cletus' face brightened and he straightened his back in grateful anticipation. "Oh, yes, that would be great and I'd be most appreciative. I know you can't make any promises and I won't hold any hard feelings toward you, but I'd be beholden to you for the chance."

Relief also flooded Birdie's face, and the Blairs were touched by their gratitude.

"I leave here by 5:30. It's twenty blocks down there and it gets pretty cold but there's usually a fire in a drum when we get there so we have time to warm up before the work starts. And Josh is a good friend of all the men who go there everyday so he'll treat you fairly. He's the supervisor at the docks and is the one who builds the fire for us each day. If there's any work, he'll see that we all get a chance. Is leaving at 5:30 okay with you?"

"Oh, yeah, that's just fine!" Cletus exclaimed. "I'll be ready, you can count on me."

He turned to Birdie. "We'd best be going, Birdie. We all need our rest so we can get up early in the morning."

"Yes," Ellen agreed, "we've all had a busy day. We've been especially blessed to find such good friends, and just right across the hall! You've been a special Christmas gift to us. And, Birdie, please bring the children over tomorrow to play. Stephen and I get pretty lonely here all day alone."

Birdie hesitated briefly but upon seeing the look of eager anticipation on her children's faces, she relented. All the children danced happily around the room, anxious for the next day to arrive.

No one objected as they were soon tucked into bed, the warmth and joy of this special Christmas comforting them, giving hope for better times to come.



Robert exited his door a few minutes before 5:30 the next morning, prepared to knock on the door across the hall to retrieve his friend. He was only mildly surprised to find Cletus sitting on the top step of the stairway, waiting for Robert to appear. He jumped to his feet, his face glowing with excitement and anticipation. It touched Robert and he raised a silent prayer that this good man would find work and sustenance for his family.

"Good morning," he beamed as he jumped to his feet. "Good to see you! I'm ready to go." He grasped a small bundle wrapped in newspaper, which Robert recognized as his lunch.

Soon the men were on the street and headed for the docks. Conversation came easily and comfortably between the two, with no self-consciousness or awkwardness, just a mutual acceptance of, and respect for, the other.

The twenty blocks quickly melted away under the footsteps of companionship, and they arrived at the docks, the friendly metal drum blazing and sparking a warm glow of welcome, true to Robert's prediction.

"That was quick!" Cletus seemed to echo Robert's thoughts. "Guess it's because you're such good company."

"Same to you," Robert concurred.

They were the first to arrive but were soon joined by the others. Cletus was the only new one and after introductions, they shared their Christmas experiences and recalled their joys at the good fortune of Jake and Joe. Cletus listened with interest and delight as they shared stories about their two friends in Kentucky. He was struck by the genuine concern and care demonstrated by this group of men. It was testimony to their strong characters that their personal hardships in no way prevented their humanity in assisting their companions. They derived strength and courage from each other rather than becoming caught up in their own personal worlds of tragedy and discomfort. There was no room for self-pity and bitterness among these men.

Bob's cough was worse this morning and the men glanced uneasily his way as he struggled to maintain control and participate in the conversation. He was also having a difficult time standing.

Josh soon arrived, greeting each man individually and warmly welcoming Cletus. They were all soon busy unloading a barge loaded with bags of potatoes, onions and garlic, and the heavy bags helped them stay warm. Within an hour, Bob was coughing so violently, he could not stand upright. Robert hurried to his side and was alarmed to see blood trickling from one corner of his mouth.

"Bob, you need to go home, buddy, and go to bed. You're really sick."

"Nah, I'm okay. Gotta work. We need to eat whether I'm sick or not."

Josh approached the men, likewise concerned about Bob. He had noticed his distress and the others' worry and witnessed the attack which brought blood from Bob's mouth.

"Bob, I'm going to send you home. You're too sick to be here and you need to be home in the bed. We don't have much work today and with Cletus, we have an extra hand so you just go on home and take care of yourself."

He waved away Bob's objections. "No, this isn't an option, we're all worried about you. You just go on home and get some rest. Maybe you'll feel better in the morning and can come on back. Here's your wages for today so you just go on."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a dollar bill, pressing it into Bob's hand.

"Do you need someone to walk home with you or can you make it on your own?"

"I'll be okay," he muttered, still disappointed that he had to leave. "I only live about two blocks from here. I don't want to take anybody else away from their work."

"I'll walk you home," Robert insisted, "It'll only take a few minutes."

The two moved slowly toward the Julian home, having to stop frequently as Bob was seized over and over by a violent attack of coughing. Robert supported his friend's weight as they climbed the six steps to his building, pushing the door open for Bob to enter ahead of him.

They were soon knocking on the door to his room. A voice behind the door inquired, "Who is it?"

"It's Bob and a friend, Robert Blair, Mrs. Julian. I've brought him home."

The door immediately swung open and a heavy woman reached out for her husband. Her gray hair was pulled back into a bun at the nape of her neck, and her faded dress was clean but much too thin for the coldness. A dark sweater with tattered sleeves and a hole in one elbow covered the thin, worn material.

“Oh, my, oh, my,” Mazie Julian cried. “I was so afraid he was too sick to go to work today but he insisted. Please bring him on in and put him on the bed. I thank you so much, Mr. Blair, for bringing him home. It was most kind of you.”

There was a weak fire in a fireplace across the room and their son’s wheelchair was pulled close to it. Their grandson sat on his father’s lap in the chair, snuggled together for warmth. Robert made a mental note to drop off some wood to the family after work today.

“Do you have a doctor, Mrs. Julian?”

“Mercy, no, we don’t have no doctor but the Salvation Army helps us out some. I’ll run down to their office and see if they have some cough syrup for him. And I’ll keep him wrapped up real good. I have some soup too so that’ll be mighty good for him.”

“I’ll stop by after work and bring some wood for you. We have some at the dock and I’m certain they won’t mind if I bring a little by here. Is there anything else that I can bring or do before I go back to work?” He was reluctant to leave the small family.

“Oh, no, sir, that’s mighty kind of you and we’ll certainly appreciate the wood, but there ain’t much else anybody can do right now. I’ll just go on down to the Salvation Army right away, and I thank you again for your kindness in bringing him home. He’s a good man but a bit stubborn. Of course, he’s worried to distraction about his family. These are trying times, Mr. Blair, these are trying times.”

Robert nodded his agreement as he turned to his friend, touching his arm. “I’ll see you later this afternoon, Bob. You rest and do what your wife says.”

“Thanks, Robert. I’m much obliged,” he gasped as he was seized by another storm of coughing.

Robert slowly left the room, his heart heavy with worry and concern for his friend.



The day passed quickly as the men labored with the heavy cargo, the heaviness a blessing that warmed them against the December coldness. Soon the work was completed and it was time to leave. Josh paid them each \$2.50, which seemed like a fortune, and gave them all bundles of firewood to take home. He gave Robert an extra bundle for Bob.

“Many thanks, Josh, they’ll really appreciate it.”

He also gave each man potatoes and onions from bags which broke open in the cargo bins. Not wanting to forget Bob, he gave extra ones to Robert for delivery to the Julians. Robert was anxious to leave, not lingering as he normally did, hoping for more work. As he and Cletus left, Cletus offered, “They can have my firewood, Robert, unless you and Ellen need it. I don’t have no use for it since we don’t have a stove.”

“That’s very generous, Cletus, and please, just give it to Bob and his family. The Lord blessed us on Christmas Eve with the two bundles that fell off that truck, and with this bundle, we’ll be fine for several more days.”

Mrs. Julian opened the door to their knock and invited them in, grateful for the gift of firewood.

“How’s Bob?” asked Robert.

“Not much better, I’m afraid. The Salvation Army lady gave me some cough syrup. She’s a nurse and she’s coming by in a little while to check him out. She’s going to bring us some food too so we’ve been blessed this day after all. I think we’ll be fine, but please just pray that Bob’s gonna be okay. And we appreciate again all your kindness

and worry. He has some wonderful friends.” She began to weep, overwhelmed and overcome by the emotions of worry, hopelessness, helplessness and fear.

“We brought a few potatoes and onions also. Josh gave them to us at the docks today and wanted to be certain you and your family received some,” Robert explained. “We thought maybe Bob might feel better with some of this. My mother always used to call potatoes and onions food that strengthened the body and soothed the soul. She said it was simple fare from God that nourishes all mankind better than any fancy food.”

Mazie was extremely grateful for their gift and thanked them profusely.

“No need for thanks, ma’am,” Cletus smiled. “It’s the least we can do, and we just pray it makes him feel better.”

“It’ll make us all feel better, sir,” she whispered gratefully.

They spoke briefly to Bob as he lay in his bed, and he rallied somewhat at their presence. He thanked them for coming and for their kindness in bringing food and firewood. They both felt inadequate and helpless as they peered down at their stricken friend. Life was hard enough without having a serious illness to make bad matters even worse.

Robert reached out to gently touch the young grandson standing shyly behind his grandmother. He looked to be about five or six, and his eyes bore the same haunted look of poverty as his grandmother’s. Robert thought, I wonder if that’s how the eyes of my family look.

The child stared glumly at the two, making no attempt to respond to their gestures of kindness.

“We’ll pray for you, Buddy,” Robert called to Bob.

“Thank you, fellas, thank you so much. I appreciate it. Hope you can accept that until I can do better. I’m gonna try to be at work tomorrow for certain.”

They left the room, doubt for his ability to return to work tomorrow heavy on their hearts.



Robert whistled as they reached the fourth floor of their building, and he heard shouting from within his apartment as Stephen recognized his father’s signal. The door burst open and Stephen, Carson and Julie all tumbled out to greet their fathers. Birdie and Ellen stood behind the children, smiling at their enthusiasm.

“Hey, hey, what have we here?” Cletus laughed. “Has my family left me?”

“No, Daddy,” his children giggled. “We’ve been playing over here ’cause it’s warmer than our house.”

“Well, not for long if we don’t all get out of this cold hall,” Ellen warned.

Soon both families were snuggled into the small Blair apartment, laughing and talking.

Stephen, Carson and Julie played with the birdhouse. Each had a small bird made of folded newspaper and they would stand them on the roof or the perch on the front. They ran around the room, swooping and gliding their birds, lifting the birdhouse to shake them out after they slipped the birds inside.

As the afternoon waned, the two families decided to have supper together. The potatoes and onions were a treasure, and with the bread, cheese and cake they put together, it felt like a feast. Good company and laughter allowed the evening to speed along, and all too soon, it was time to say good night. The warmth of kindness shared

soothed all of them into a deep and restful sleep soon after retiring for the evening. Neither family, however, forgot to mention Bob Julian in their prayers.



“Do you mind if we stop by to check on Bob on our way to the docks this morning, Cletus?”

“No, no, not at all. I was hoping you’d want to do that. I’m worried to distraction about Bob and his family. You think you have problems ’til you see somebody else. It sorta puts things in their proper order.”

“You’re right, I’m afraid, Cletus.”



The two men stopped by the Julian apartment, and the door was opened by a stranger. Bob’s son sat leaned over in his wheelchair, his face buried in his hands, his shoulders stooped. Mazie was on the sofa, her grandson in her lap and her eyes red and swollen from weeping. She regained her composure somewhat as she recognized the two friends standing there.

“Come in, come in, please,” she requested.

“We’re so sorry, Mrs. Julian,” Robert attempted to comfort her. “We truly are. What happened?”

“God bless you both, you’ve been so kind. He died right before midnight. His heart just gave out, he had coughed so much. This here is the Salvation Army nurse, Miss Katie Brock. She has been an angel of mercy. She came over last evening right after you two left and was so worried about Bob that she brought a doctor back. The doctor said he had pneumonia and there wasn’t nothing he could do for us. He wanted to send Bob to the hospital but we didn’t want that. Bob said he wanted to be with us. Miss Brock stayed with us until the end and she got a funeral home to take him away for us.” She paused as a new wave of grief overwhelmed her. The two men stood awkwardly by, waiting to listen to her account of their friend’s last hours.

“He was able to eat some of those potatoes and onions you brought us yesterday, and he commented about how delicious they were. They was a fitting last meal, and we thank you for it. Wasn’t much nobody could do. He was just too sick.

“Miss Brock got here a bit ago. She’s tryin’ to help us, but I just want to go back home. This city’s just too harsh and now it’s killed my man. I just want to take him back to my home in Oklahoma. I don’t want him buried here.”

She broke down into bitter sobs as Robert and Cletus stood helplessly by. Miss Brock hastened to her side, slipping an arm around her shoulders.

“I’m going back down to the center and see what kind of arrangements I can make to help you out, Mazie. Exactly where in Oklahoma are you from?”

“It’s a little town called Fellows. Not close to nothing, really. The railroad runs to Oklahoma City which is about fifty miles away. But it’s the prettiest, friendliest little town you would ever want to see. Folks care about one another and look out for one another. ’Course, so do Bob’s friends at the dock,” she was quick to add as her eyes fell on the two men standing there. “But in Fellows, we’re all family and that’s where I want to be. I want my son to be home with me and we’ll raise my grandson. We won’t be cold no more and hopefully, we won’t be hungry no more.”

“We’ll do everything we can for you at the center, Mazie. I’ll be back directly, I promise. Will you be okay until I get back?”

“Oh, yes ma’am, we’ll be fine.”

“Is there anything we can do, Mrs. Julian?” Robert inquired.

“No, you two just go on to work. You got families to care for and there ain’t nothing that can be done here. Just thank everybody at the docks for all their kindnesses and prayers for Bob. He was real fond of every one of you. Spoke kindly of the men down there quite often and really loved the stories you all shared.”

“Yes, and we all greatly enjoyed his story about his dog named Tick. My family was delighted when I shared it with them. He gave us a very special memory to remind us of joy we shared. That’s a beautiful legacy for anyone to leave.”



It was a gloomy day for all of them that day. They couldn’t think very much about their own problems for grieving over Bob and worrying about his family. Each one spent the majority of the day deep in silent prayer for the small family. They were down to three now, counting Cletus, and they still completed emptying the barge of fertilizer by 1:00. Josh gave them each a stack of wood rescued from the pallets under the fertilizer along with \$1.00 for their work that day.

Fred and Josh moved along silently with Robert and Cletus as they all stopped by the Julian apartment on their way home. They felt drawn to it, with the remote hope that there may be something they could do for them.

Mazie let them in and seemed in better spirits than early in the morning. She was still crying but there seemed to be less stoop to her shoulders, and the lines on her face appeared less deep than this morning.

“Thank you, men, for coming by again. This is mighty thoughtful of you. Miss Brock from the Salvation Army came back this morning and they’ve made all the arrangements for us. We’re going home to Oklahoma! All of us! They’re taking Bob on the 8:00 passenger train tonight, and we’re going to all get to go along. And we’re not coming back! Isn’t that wonderful? We’ll give Bob a proper Christian burial at our church back home, and then we’ll manage somehow. I’m just so happy to have our son and grandson with me and that we’re all going back home. I’m just sorry Bob had to die to get it to happen, but he’d be pleased to know that we’ve been given this chance.”

“Do you need any money, ma’am?” Josh asked.

“No, no, we’ll be fine, really we will. The Salvation Army is paying for our tickets. It’ll take us three days to get there and we’ll eat food the Salvation Army gave us for the train. We’ll have to sleep in our seats since our tickets don’t pay for a sleeper but that’ll be just fine. At least we’ll be warm on the train. And they’ve arranged for a car from the funeral home in Fellows to pick us up and carry us home from Oklahoma City. I just want to get my man back home. He was a good man and I’m going to miss him so.” Her tears started anew as Robert slipped his arm around her shoulders.

“We’re mighty grateful to have known him, ma’am,” Fred stated softly. “We’ll miss him too.”

“Yes,” Robert agreed, “he was a good friend and brought us much happiness. A man can do no better in this life than to bring happiness to others.”

