

A CHRISTMAS ANGEL BLESSING

by David Cirillo

The case of Tina Combs came before the Angel Gabriel, and he unrolled the scroll set before him. Tina's story was a sad one.

She met Lawrence when both were nineteen, and it was love at first sight. Six months of euphoric bliss followed, and before reaching the age of twenty, they married; sixteen months later Tina gave birth to Jonathon. All who knew them believed they were a happy family, and even Tina had that impression. This was the life *they* wanted, how could they not be happy?

It was four months later when it all unraveled.

As it turned out, Lawrence had just started to realize some things about himself and his existence, such as this current life was unrewarding and a destiny greater than family awaited him. For some, being a dutiful husband and father filled the cup, but for him it did not.

"I'm on the wrong path, Tina," he said to her. "I'm sorry, but I can't do this; I can't live a life I wasn't meant to live."

"You're a selfish pig," she said, then never saw him again.

Thankfully, Tina had a good job at a travel agency and was able to support her and her son. Through Jonathon, she found joy and love and purpose, but abandonment had stung deep. She never really got past the sadness and loneliness caused by her ex-husband, and even as she

pressed into her thirties, she never once looked for or hoped for love's flame.

Gabriel set down the scroll. He already knew who would want this case: the wild and lovely Aria and the stoic Baron. Gabriel, though, wasn't sure he would give them the case, after all, as angels went the duo had a checkered past.

In their previous positions, Aria and Baron struggled. Each had a flare for the dramatic, but that proved a troublesome trait for Guardian Angels. Far too many of their assignments encountered accidents, like Bob who suffered multiple fractures from a skiing escapade and Leila who got rabies petting the "cute, fuzzy-tailed squirrel." Guardian Angels needed to be steady, calming influences, not banshees screaming, "Throw caution to the wind!"

Gabriel knew they championed no ill will; simply put, they were enthusiastic. Still, Gabriel removed Aria and Baron as Guardian Angels and assigned them as Christmas Angels, a much better fit. Christmas was a time for inspiration, and reckless abandon often fit in well.

As of yet, though, the new Christmas Angels hadn't proven themselves. Two years ago they tried to steer Pedro to a reunion with his estranged family, and it led to Christmas Eve drunkenness and violence and fire. The next year was Marsha from Detroit. It's safe to say, her kale-laced Christmas cookies didn't raise enough money to save the community center.

Possessed of pure intentions and a vigorous spirit,

they'd done their best, but Christmas Angels needed more than wild abandon: they needed patience.

As Gabriel contemplated whether to call upon Aria and Baron, the two appeared in the Appointment Chamber unannounced. They fluttered in, eyes aglow as they approached Gabriel.

"We found our Christmas case," Aria said. She was the charmer of the two, Baron the blunt object. "It's calling to us. It *needs* us."

"We must have the case," Baron said. "Without a doubt."

"Tina Combs, right?" Gabriel asked. Both showed surprise. Gabriel always knew more than they expected.

"Yes," they said in tandem. "Tina Combs."

"Why do you want it?"

"She's perfect for us," Aria answered. "A woman wrapped in sadness, struggling to escape her rut. If nothing else, our past has proven we can help people out of their ruts."

"Yes, and into ambulances," Gabriel reminded.

"We already have a plan," Baron said with confidence. "A nudge here, a nudge there, and in the blink of an eye, a Christmas miracle is in the books."

"Let's review her case before I decide," Gabriel said.

He read through the scroll, but of course, they were already familiar with her situation. Gabriel said, "This seems like a simple case, but it is not. Tina Combs is still hurting, and the pain runs deep. Baron, you mentioned a nudge. Is that how you both see it? A mere nudge and Tina Combs will be well?"

Baron shook his head.

“Maybe a few gentle nudges,” Aria suggested, “but yes. We’ve discussed her situation and believe she’s on the cusp of healing.”

“Tell me your plan,” Gabriel said.

After they told him, Gabriel admitted, it held promise. He could see they’d thought about it, discussed it, tailored it to Tina.

“I like your energy,” Gabriel said. “It won’t work, but it’s a good plan.”

“We think it will work,” Aria pleaded. “Give us a chance. We adore Tina Combs. She just needs the right spark.”

“And we’re the matches,” Baron said.

“Very well,” Gabriel said. “The case is yours. I’ll check in soon, but I warn you, be wary of nonchalance. Tina is more fragile than you know.”

“We’ll be gentle,” Aria said.

Tina Combs ran the Beaumont Travel Agency. When her husband left, she needed to survive, and the Beaumonts, entrepreneurs and friends, gave her full reign of their business. Thirteen years ago, Tina took a struggling investment and made it a success; other than Jonathon, it was her life.

With Christmas on the way, Tina had a new project to drum up business for the agency: A karaoke contest. The winners would get a 3-day getaway for two in the continental U.S. Folks need only submit an online

Christmas karaoke video featuring Beaumont Travel kitsch, and they'd have a chance to win. Tina would choose the top ten videos and post them on social media, an online vote determining the winners. There was one catch: Anyone who booked a trip with Beaumont between November 1st and the Friday before Thanksgiving would get free votes, one vote per \$100 spent.

Tina made a flyer and distributed it wherever she could. She handed it out at church, at local restaurants and stores, at her child's school. One day as Tina walked from business to business handing out flyers, by chance a gust of wind blew, and one of the flyers peeled off the top. She reached for it, but it went higher and higher, flitting into the air like a kite. Before she knew it, the flyer was brushing the tops of trees.

"Well that's odd," she said, watching it dance around as if it had legs of its own.

Meanwhile, the outlaw brochure lifted up and over a building and glided and swerved through streets and subdivisions before it fluttered downward and landed on the windshield of a gray Rav4. The landing occurred just as the car owner, Ted Lansing, was headed to lunch. He saw the flyer land, grabbed it, and gave it a look.

Karaoke contest. Hmmm.

He liked to sing. He liked to travel. He had a daughter, and she was begging to go to spring training in Florida to see her beloved Cardinals! A free trip might be the motivation Ted needed to make it happen.

He folded up the flyer and put it in his pocket. He'd

think about it.

Ted brought home pizza and salad for dinner. His daughter, Marcy, sat at the kitchen table doing homework and yelled, "Hi, Dad!" when he walked in.

"Hi, sweetheart," he said.

"Did you remember the pizza?"

"Of course. Who forgets pizza?"

"Did you get double pepperoni?" she asked.

Ted put the food on the counter and kissed her on the forehead. Then he acted panicked, "Wait a second? I thought your said double mushrooms!"

She turned to him, eyes bulging. "Dad! Please say you're joking!"

"Of course I am. Only a rabbit would order mushrooms on pizza."

She glared at him, then smiled and said, "Don't joke about pizza, Dad."

"I should know better. I'm a million times sorry."

"You should be!"

As Ted went to change out of his work clothes, Marcy got to it. She shuffled her school papers into a pile and moved them to the family room floor, then grabbed plates, napkins, parm, and red pepper and set the table. She knew the routine. Loved it. Depended on it. She barely remembered her mom anymore, she passed away four years ago, but some things stuck. She remembered she and Mom would set the table for dinner as they awaited Dad. It

was a comforting memory, and one she wouldn't let die. She set the table nightly, as though it were part of her religion.

"I found this flyer on my car," Dad said, having changed into jeans and a gray hoodie. "If we win a karaoke contest, we might be able to take a little vacation this spring."

"To where?" Marcy asked.

Ted grabbed a slice of pizza, but Marcy stopped him. "We should pray first, Dad."

"Of course," he said.

They said grace, then her dad told her. "If we win the contest, I think we should go to Jupiter, Florida."

"Cardinals spring training?" she asked. "Are you for real, Dad?"

"I am, but we have to win the contest first. I think we should sing a duet."

"Yes!" she said. "I can't believe it! Spring training!"

"Not so fast," he cautioned. "If we don't win, we can't go."

She didn't seem to hear him. "What should we sing? A Christmas song, right! It's a Christmas contest."

They ate dinner and discussed it, and by the end of the night, they picked their song: "Angels We Have Heard on High."

"We're going to win, I know it!" Marcy said.

"Just stay calm," Ted said. He knew how his daughter got. "Don't start counting your chickens before they hatch."

"I'm counting cardinals, not chickens!" she said.

Tina left work and headed straight to the soccer field to pick up Jonathon from practice, but that night she would grab dinner from McDonalds. Normally, Tina cooked and they shared mother-son bonding over supper, but tonight she would leave Jonathon to homework and TV—she had karaoke videos to review.

Many entries had come in, and even though there was still one day left to submit, Tina figured it best to line up the current top ten, then make tweaks the next evening after the 6 p.m. deadline.

So far the contest had generated some good business. Many regulars booked early to give themselves a better chance to win (the free votes), but at least a dozen new customers also booked trips, meaning Tina would probably get a nice bonus. Tuition was due soon for Spring semester, and even though the archdiocese helped with a nice stipend, Tina still had to pay a chunk.

Even so, things were looking up financially. If her budget told the truth, after she paid tuition she might have enough to get Jonathon a new iPad for Christmas. She wanted to do that for him. He'd been using a hand-me-down model for years and never complained once. He was good like that, inherently understanding her difficult role as single mother, always doing house chores and yard work, never having to be asked twice even on those weeks when she didn't have enough to pay his allowance. She really hoped she could afford the new iPad; he deserved it.

Jonathon headed to bed at 9 p.m., and Tina had nearly finished ranking the videos, but as all the singers and songs started to melt together, she decided to take a break. She headed to the basement to inventory the Christmas decorations. With Thanksgiving being just a few days away, she'd be decorating soon.

It was a bittersweet time for her, Christmas. She loved the season with all the lights, presents, decorations, joy, baking, and music. Even more, she loved Christmas choirs and church services and school pageants. All of that helped glorify an already glorious season—this was the sweet part for her.

The bitter came from loneliness. It wasn't a stinging thing, not anymore, but in her younger years, she always figured Christmas would be a grand family event. She, her husband, their four or five kids (that's how many she wanted). They'd bake and sing, wrap presents and decorate. A hectic, lovely, joyous time she'd enjoy like no other.

Things didn't turn out that way, did they?

She pawed through the boxes, all labeled. Lights. Nativity scene. Christmas village. Tree. She pulled the boxes near the basement stairs. It would be a nice Christmas this year, just like the past 13 Christmases. It would be a little lonely, too, also like the past 13 Christmases.

Tina went back upstairs and finished judging the karaoke videos. A few were really good; most were average; a few were terrible. She ranked the top ten. One

day left, but a few lucky winners would be getting a nice Christmas gift from the Beaumont Travel Agency.

“Everyone can use a special gift now and again,” she said to herself.

Tina got five new videos on the last day. She liked one and added it to the top ten, and at 12:01 a.m., she posted the videos for viewing and voting.

At 9:00 a.m. the next morning she got a late entry from a man and his daughter. The girl, about thirteen, played the piano, clearly still taking lessons but doing a good job. Both wore golden, glittery halos as they sung “Angels We Have Heard on High.” The father held up a piece of paper that said, “Beaumont Travel Agency.” Father and daughter took turns singing verses; they sang the chorus in tandem.

“So adorable,” she said to herself. “Both of them.”

She watched the video again. The man, Ted, was handsome. Plus she loved the interaction between dad and daughter. Funny head bobs, rolling shoulder moves, loving smiles.

She said it again: “Adorable.”

Then Tina shook her head, slapped herself gently in the face.

“Of course he’s married,” she said. “He has a daughter. Anyway. As if you’d go on a date.”

Her own thoughts caught her off guard. Was she wanting to date someone? Was her mind open to that possibility after all these years?

“What a shame,” she said. “They’re good, but the entry is late.”

Rules were rules; they wouldn’t be entered in the contest. There was nothing she could do.

“Too bad he didn’t come in and book a trip,” she sighed.

“You tried, and it didn’t work,” Gabriel said.

“You saw what we did with the flyer, right?” Aria asked excitedly. “Did you see how that small manipulation of ours got the ball rolling?”

“Yes. Well played.”

Baron said, “The timing was so remarkable. We floated it across town, and it dropped on Ted’s car just as he arrived.”

“And,” Aria added, “you saw Tina’s attraction. When she saw Ted in the video, she was ready to date. We paired them well, right?”

“But the plan didn’t work,” Gabriel said. “The miracle meter is near zero for Tina.”

“It’s not over yet,” Aria said. “We still have several weeks till Christmas.”

“You’re not taking us off the case, are you?” Baron asked.

“I’m considering it.”

Aria said, “Gabriel. Give us a little leeway. Let us do a deeper intervention.”

“You know the rules,” he said sternly.

She did; so did Baron. Angels could create circumstances. Have a flyer float through the air and land

on a car. That was fine. But especially if love might be involved, they had to step back. Occurrences had to be happenstance; no angelic appearances, no forcing extreme events that could frame a false feeling of love.

Gabriel reminded, "No overt signs that might cause two people to believe they are destined to be together. Love is commitment and sacrifice. Deep interventions cloud that."

Aria asked, "What if we toed the line but didn't cross it? We could have Ted save Jonathon from getting hit by a car. That would bring the two together for sure."

"Are you kidding me?" Gabriel asked. "You just presented a scenario from the don't-do training video."

"Okay, okay," Aria said. "I get it."

"We can do this, even without deep interventions," Baron said. "Tina knows about Ted. The gasoline is already poured; all we have to do is drop the match. Come on, Gabriel. We've already made inroads."

"I need to know your plan," Gabriel said. "I warned you your first idea would fail, and it did. So what's next?"

"We have a perfect follow-up," Aria said, her voice tentative. "It will take a little doing."

"Go on."

"Both of them go to the same church. He sings in the choir at the 5:00 p.m. Saturday Mass. Tina hasn't attended that service for years."

"So what are you thinking?"

Baron answered, "A series of ridiculous yet plausible circumstances."

"Like the flyer?" Gabriel asked.

“Similar,” Aria said.

“We just want to put them in the same room and see what happens,” Baron explained.

The angels laid out the whole plan; Gabriel liked it.

“You two have flare, I’ll give you that,” Gabriel said.

“So it’s a go?” Aria asked. “We got permission?”

“You do,” he said.

“You won’t regret it,” Baron said.

Gabriel answered, “But *you* might if your plan doesn’t work. Next stop for you two is janitorial service.”

Aria laughed, “Angels don’t need janitors.”

“Nonetheless, I’m happy to create new positions,” Gabriel said.

“We won’t let you down,” Aria answered.

Two weeks before Christmas, Tina’s schedule hit a few bumps.

Jonathon had a soccer game cancelled earlier in the year because of rain and it got rescheduled for Sunday at 11 a.m., meaning he had two games that day, the first at 8 a.m. Then out of the blue, Tina’s dad called. He and Mom had a wine testing in the area—they won free tickets while grocery shopping. They wanted to stop in for dinner at 5 p.m. on Sunday.

“There goes Sunday,” Tina said to herself as she checked her calendar. “Looks like it’ll be church on Saturday night.”

Saturday Mass was the same as other Masses with a steady mix of kneeling, praying, singing, Bible readings, and preaching. One difference: a full choir sang each week. It had been so long since Tina attended, she'd forgotten about how much she liked them. The choir had a professional air about it. Good voices, a strong piano, accompanying guitar, a sound mellow and reverent. She preferred Sunday mornings but wondered why it had been so long since she went to Saturday services. The music wrapped her up, bringing her calm and peace. She made a mental note: *Go to Saturday Mass once a month.*

Everything went as church normally went, but Communion brought a twist. The choir finished its first song, and the director interrupted to make an announcement. They had a special duet planned, a Christmas surprise. A man and a young lady would sing "What Child is This?" The church lights dimmed just a little, the pianist played softly, and the two sang.

Tina couldn't help but be moved. There was a sweetness to the rendition, a comfort and closeness between the singers who were clearly father and daughter.

So cute, Tina thought. They're so adorable.

Somehow the voices sounded familiar to Tina, but she couldn't place it. Where had she seen this duo? She looked over at them from across the church. Familiar but why?

As verse two began, it hit her.

The father, daughter karaoke duo. The ones who submitted their entry late and she disqualified. She even remembered their names, Ted and Marcy.

Both are still adorable, she thought.

After Mass, she hung around in the gathering space and waited for the choir to leave. She told Jonathon they needed to say hi because she kinda knew the duet singers.

As they exited, Tina stopped them and introduced herself and explained how she recognized them.

"I'm so sorry," Tina said. "The entry was late, so I couldn't accept it. But I would have voted for you."

"I'm Ted," the man said. "This is my daughter, Marcy."

"This is my son, Jonathon," Tina said.

Marcy wore a glum face.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?" Tina asked, knowing the glum face was directed at her.

"Don't mind Marcy," Ted said. "She really wanted to win the contest, that's all."

"Dad was going to take me to Jupiter to watch the Cardinals in spring training."

"The free trip would have made it possible," Dad explained.

"I really am sorry," Tina said, speaking to Marcy.

"It's okay," she said, forcing a smile. "We shouldn't have turned it in late."

"Very mature of you," Tina said. She then turned to Dad. Handsome, kindly. *He's married! Behave yourself!* "I have some leeway on prices. Wiggle room. Why don't you come in next week? Maybe I can get you to Jupiter this spring with a nice discount. No promises, but I'll try."

"I don't know," Ted said. "I appreciate your offer, but..."

"Please, Dad!" Marcy said.

"It can't hurt to come see me," Tina said. She smiled at Marcy and shrugged. "I can start working things up on Monday morning. Trip for three to Juniper, Florida. I'm guessing in March, maybe early to mid?"

"Three?" Ted asked. "Why three?"

"Oh, you might have other kids; I shouldn't assume Marcy is the only one. That's okay. So you, the missus, and how many kids? Two, three, a hundred? Whatever. I got you covered!"

Ted's eyes popped open, "A hundred kids? That's a bit much, even for Catholics."

"It's just me and Dad," Marcy explained, almost chipper. "My mom died a long time ago, but that's why we always come to Saturday Mass. It was her favorite because of the choir, and Dad says she's here with us every Saturday."

"Oh, honey," Tina said, "your dad is right. I'm sure she's with you."

"Me, too."

Tina turned to Ted. "Sorry. I didn't mean to bring up a sore subject."

"It's okay. It's been seven years. It's not scary or taboo anymore."

"So happy to hear that," Tina said. Then she added, "So I'll see you Monday?"

She reached into her purse for her business card, wrote something on the back, and gave it to Ted.

"My cell number's on the back in case you have an emergency travel situation. Call anytime, day or night. I'm your twenty-four, seven travel gal." She winked at him.

What has happened to you, Tina? Get a grip!

“An emergency travel situation, huh?” Ted asked, looking at the back of the card. “Between tonight and tomorrow?”

“It could happen.” She laughed way too loudly. “When Jamaica calls, you can’t keep her waiting.”

“Okay then,” Ted said, not able to hold back a chuckle. “I guess you’re right. Better safe than sorry.”

“Exactly.”

Ted thanked her, and he and Marcy left.

“You were acting weird,” Jonathon said when they got to the car.

“You pipe down,” she said. “Let’s get Arby’s. I don’t feel like cooking.”

“Yay!” Jonathan said. “I mean, not that I don’t love your cooking, Mom.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

She headed to Arby’s with one thought in mind: *I sure hope Ted stops in on Monday.*

Tina couldn’t believe when Ted walked through the door. Most days, the agency closed at 6 p.m.; he swung by at 5:30.

She smiled, welcomed him, then started to treat him like a customer. That’s what he was, right? Plus, being all business might stop her from acting like a giddy teenage girl.

“I worked up a few plans,” she said. “Dates determine

discounts. If you leave on Tuesday and return Friday, it's better than Sunday to Thursday. If you stay three days, four days, a hundred days—there I go again with that number hundred—it will also affect price and discount. I gave you 25% off, then another 5%, cutting into my commission, but Marcy seemed so excited, I figured why not."

Ted thanked her. Tina presented the different packages, and she read his face easily: all of them too expensive, even with the discount.

"Thank you so much," he said when they'd gone through all options. "I appreciate what you've done, but things are tight. Time, money. I don't think I'll be able to swing it."

Tina thanked him; Ted told her he'd be back if he ever planned a vacation. He opened the door to leave just as a huge gust of wind kicked up, and a pile of leaves and dirt blew into the building. Ted pushed the door closed.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "There wasn't a lick of wind a second ago. Let me help you clean up."

"No, no, I got this. You go ahead and go."

But Ted insisted. Tina got broom, dust pan, and vacuum, and they cleaned up quickly. When they finished, Ted said, "I wish I could take that vacation. I haven't had one in seven years."

Tina remembered. "Since your wife died."

"Yes."

"I only get vacations because my bosses sympathize with me," Tina said. "Each year, they basically give me and

Jonathon a free trip. The Beaumonts are good people.”

“That’s so nice,” Ted said. “Are they close friends or family? Or just generous?”

“I think they feel sorry for me,” she said, followed by an uncomfortable laugh. She hadn’t meant to say that.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh nothing. My husband left me when Jonathon was a few weeks old. The Beaumonts were there for me and still are now. It’s like I said, they’re good people.”

“Sure sounds like it,” Ted said. “Seems like the world needs more people like them.”

“It does.”

“Well thanks again for putting together those vacations, and sorry if I wasted your time. But hey, if I know of anyone thinking of taking a trip, I’ll send them straight here.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that.”

Ted started to leave again, but Tina stopped him. “You should go to spring training,” she said. “What if I give you 50% off? I’ll talk to the Beaumonts. I’ll tell them about Marcy and that you’ve agreed to send a river of referrals. They’ll approve it.”

It might cut into my bonus, but that’s okay. I guess the iPad for Jonathon will have to wait.

“No,” Ted said. “That’s an amazing offer, but no. But also thank you.”

“Why not?”

“It’s too much to ask, and even with all that, I’m still not sure I have the time or money.”

"I'm sorry for being so pushy," Tina said, blushing.

"No, you're not being pushy. And believe me, I would love to have that trip." He paused, his eyes suddenly intent on watching the floor. "But you know what I'd rather have?"

"Peace on earth, good will towards men?"

He smiled, looking up, "Well, yes, I'd like that. But I'd also like to take you to dinner."

Had Tina been sitting on a chair, she would have fallen off.

"Dinner?"

"Yes. You and me. A date."

Without thinking, Tina said, "I don't date."

"Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to impose."

"What I mean," she said, "is I don't know how to date."

His confusion remained. "I don't understand."

"What I mean is I haven't been on a date for so long, and I probably shouldn't. I have a son."

"I've met him," Ted laughed. "And look, believe it or not, I totally understand what you're saying. I don't date either. Usually. But I figured it was worth a chance" He paused, smiled, then said, "Thank you for the vacation offer. Really. So generous."

For the third time, he started to leave. Tina said, "Why?"

He turned, "Why what?"

Ted smiled, his hand on the door, something hopeful in his eyes, and for a few seconds, Tina felt like she couldn't breathe. She'd been bottled up for so many years, and right there in that moment, the pressure of the past pushed

straight into her lungs. For thirteen years, she'd barely done anything but survive. She loved her boy so much, and not for a second did she regret anything she'd done for him, but in her heart of hearts, she believed God meant for life to be more than simple survival. Since her husband left, she'd survived, but now, in a sudden and wild rush, she wanted more.

She let out her breath, unable to take her eyes from Ted. So handsome and kind looking with that dark hair and those light, greenish eyes.

"What I meant to say," she said, brushing hair from her eyes, "was not why but yes."

Ted still had his hand on the door. "Yes?"

"I'll go out with you. On a date. You and me."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"That's great," he said. "I kind of have to run now, but can I call you and set it up?"

"Of course. You got the number still, on my business card?"

"I do."

Ted would call her the next day and they would have that date.

"So far, so good," Gabriel said.

The two Christmas angels thanked him, said things were going as planned.

"Still no slam dunk," Gabriel warned. "These are

delicate matters. These aren't giddy, hormone-filled teens. They're adults with responsibilities, busy lives, with people other than themselves to consider."

Baron said, "The joy of Christmas will overcome."

"That was our plan the whole time," Aria said. "Let coincidence bring them together. Then let the joyful promises of Christmas overwhelm."

"Well I hope it works," Gabriel said. "For your sakes."

"But more for theirs, right?" Aria asked.

"Of course," Gabriel said.

They'd been on two dates. They talked and texted. They even went to Mass together on Saturday, with Tina and Jonathon sitting behind the choir.

Things were well. They liked each other, shared things in common, including faith, pain, parenting. Each had spoken to their kid, and neither had worries about them dating.

"It's about time," Jonathon said.

"I like her," Marcy said.

The romance had only begun, but both felt so easy and relaxed with the other, it felt they'd known each other half their lives.

Christmas was closing in, and Ted decided to take a chance. He knew it was risky, suspected he shouldn't do it, but then he did it anyway.

"Tina," he said, stopping by the agency after work on Monday. They didn't have a date that night, so his appearance was unexpected. "I was wondering."

“Yes?”

“Do you think maybe we could spend Christmas together? Not the whole day, just part of it.”

He knew immediately he shouldn’t have asked. Her eyes shot open in shock—or was it horror?—and her mouth turned to a frown.

“I don’t know,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Too soon, my bad. Spending holidays together is serious. I was thinking...but no. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have mentioned it.”

“It feels soon,” she said. She was short of breath, much like she was a week ago when he asked her out, but this was suffocating more than exhilarating. But why? She liked him, knew him to be a good man, yet her anxiety went off the charts the moment he asked about Christmas.

“It’s okay,” Ted said. “I need to get going, but okay. Again, I’m sorry.”

He left. Tina locked the door behind him; it was time to close.

“What’s wrong with you?” she asked, staring out the window as Ted drove off. “What could you possibly be afraid of?”

Gabriel called in Aria and Baron.

“It’s over,” he said. “She rejected him. Pushed him away. It’s too late to salvage it before Christmas.”

Aria laughed, “Are you kidding?”

“No,” he said.

Baron chimed in, "You're right, Gabriel, it is a done deal."

"Just in the other direction," Aria finished.

"What are you saying?" Gabriel asked. "You saw what happened. I'm considering sending in another angel; maybe we can make this right."

Aria couldn't wipe away the smile, "Gabriel, this is going exactly as planned. Can't you see it? We got one more little trick up our sleeve, but if there hadn't been some indecisive moment, we would be much less confident."

"You'll see," Baron said. "Out last coincidence will seal the deal. We had it planned all along."

Gabriel smiled, "Very well. I've said all along, this wouldn't be a smooth sail. I'm willing to trust you."

"You won't be sorry," Aria said.

For two days, they avoided each other. Phone calls, texts. Nothing.

But why? Why did it bother me that Ted wanted us to spend Christmas together?

Tina's mind zipped through the list. Things moving too fast. Christmas indicated a bigger commitment. She wasn't ready. She hadn't processed how all this would change her life. Was she ready for such a change?

Then more things: Kid. Job. Christmas was so busy anyway.

All those things might be parts of what scared her, but

she knew the biggest reason, the deeper reason.

Though it happened thirteen years ago, it still felt fresh, present. The way her husband left, no good explanation, no logical reason. Just stood up and left. The end.

Who's to say Ted wouldn't do that?

Clearly I don't trust him. Scratch. Clearly I don't trust men, and maybe I never will. Maybe there's no hope for me, Tina Combs, spinster in training.

On the other side of town, Ted asked himself what happened. So Tina withdrew a little, so what? Neither had dated for a long time, both had responsibilities, both had smart reasons to take it slow. So why no contact? Why did they suddenly go radio silent? What happened that they went from blossoming romance to no texts, no phone calls, no nothing?

Ted couldn't be sure why Tina withdrew, but he knew why he'd kept his distance. Marcy.

She lost her mom seven years ago but had recovered so well, and Ted could see that she'd already taken a liking to Tina. What if Ted pushed, what if Tina more fully entered their lives, and Marcy became even more attached? Then after that, what if Tina flaked out and left? He had to be careful about who he let in, and Tina's sudden withdrawal made him nervous. He had to protect Marcy first and foremost.

Even so, he couldn't stop thinking of Tina.

It was only a few days till Christmas. Ted was leaving

work, heading to his car, his mind on Tina, still unsure what had happened. They might be the first pair in history who thoroughly enjoyed each other through two dates only to break up for no reason.

It made no sense. How could they like each other so much and it just be over?

As he arrived at his car, a strong wind kicked up, swirling and kicking dirt and leaves all around him and his car. When it slowed, he noticed something in the sky flittering towards him. Like a baby in a cradle, the object rocked back and forth, moving in a slow descent till it landed on the windshield of his car. He grabbed it and looked.

A brochure about a Christmas contest sponsored by Beaumont Travel Agency.

He laughed. "Well lightning can strike the same place twice."

He looked left and right, expecting to find some reasonable explanation. A ghost, an elf, a stray blue jay. But nothing. Even the wind died down.

On his drive home, the brochure clasped in his hand, he said to himself, "You know what, I don't care. I'm not letting this go so easily."

A few minutes later he burst through the front door of the Beaumont Travel Agency. Tina looked up from her desk shocked. She said nothing.

"I don't care," he said. "You know what, you don't want to spend Christmas with me, great. It's too soon for you, I understand."

He then slammed the brochure on her desk.

“This,” he said. “I’m walking to my car tonight, and this falls from the sky, as though dropped there by an angel, and when I saw it, I realized I didn’t care. You need more time, I’ll wait. You want to reconsider us, I’ll wait. You need a day or week or month or six months to think. Take it. Because I don’t care. I know you’re worth it. So when you realize we’re great together, that we need to give this a real shot, I’ll be there. Okay? So yeah, that brochure convinced me, and I’ve never been more sure about a thing in my life. We should give us a shot.”

He smiled and said in a happy, calm voice, “I’ve said my piece. Merry Christmas.” Then he left.

Tina sat there, eyes wide, heart pounding, pulse racing, glad she didn’t have to stand because her knees shook.

“Well that was unexpected,” she said.

December 23rd. A light snow fell with evening. Lights lit up the neighborhood homes, and Tina and Jonathon worked in the kitchen, putting the last batch of cookies in the oven. The tree flickered with red and green and white lights, and Christmas music piped through the speakers. They’d be starting *Elf* soon, once the cookies baked and cooled.

Tina was bouncing around at high energy because Ted and Marcy were on their way over. She invited them for cookies and the movie and hinted that the two adults might find a few minutes to slip away and talk.

She heard the car pull into the drive, the footsteps

moving up the walk. Then the doorbell.

Jonathon and Tina greeted them at the door, but Tina quickly led Marcy and Jonathon to the kitchen. “Keep an eye on the cookies. When the buzzer sounds, put on oven mitts and put the cookies on the rack. When they cool, you can have one. Only one!”

Tina put on her coat and asked Ted if he would join her on the front porch. He hadn’t yet taken off his coat, and they quickly shuffled outside.

“I love the lights,” Ted said. Tina used big, multi-colored bulbs that framed the house and porch and covered the bushes and dogwood tree.

“I love them, too, thank you! Me and Jonathan love Christmas lights. We actually drove through subdivisions yesterday looking at them. It’s probably our favorite Christmas thing to do.”

“Marcy and I did that last week. So much fun.”

A moment of uncomfortable silence followed. Light snow trickled down. Both could hear muffled Christmas music from inside.

“I don’t know if I’ll ever trust again,” Tina blurted out. “That’s why I said no to a Christmas get together. It seemed like such a big step, trusting you or anyone, and I got scared.”

She knew they had to have a quick conversation—cookies and movie were imminent. No sense beating around the bush.

“Well,” Ted said, “if we’re confessing things, I’ve been a little unsure about my visit. I’m nervous Marcy will get

more and more attached to you. Because of her mom, if this fizzles, that wouldn't be fair to her. Don't misread me. I meant everything I said, and I want to give this a shot, but when I think about how this could hurt Marcy, I'm much less confident."

"I know," Tina said. "I can't blame you for that."

Both turned towards the street, the light snow falling against a cloudy sky. The reflecting Christmas lights were beautiful, peaceful.

"So why did you invite us tonight?" Ted asked, defensively. "Is this our official goodbye?"

She said, "When you stopped by my work yesterday, I was floored. Somehow I thought I'd never see you again, and in my head, I started to move on. But I kept asking myself, 'Why? Why after two great dates would it be over?' I mean, every minute I've spent with you has been amazing."

"For me, too," Ted interjected.

"It was your face," she said. "That's why I thought it was over."

"My face?"

"When I told you I didn't want to spend Christmas together, you were angry and confused, I saw it. And then the quick exit. I've hardly dated in my life, not since high school, so I figured I was high maintenance and you didn't want to deal."

Ted explained, "When I ran out, I wasn't mad. I was embarrassed. I thought I misread you. I liked you—I like you a lot. It seemed you had written me off, and the

rejection stung. That's why I left so fast. I felt like a fool."

Tina nodded; she understood why he might think that. She continued, "Then all of a sudden, boom, I think we're over and then there you are standing in my office, smiling, apologizing, saying the sweetest things in all the world."

"I meant it all."

"I had no idea what to think, so I closed the store, got in my car, and turned on the radio. My mind was moving a million miles a second, and I just looked to the sky and said, 'Dear God, just tell me what to do.' On cue, a song started to play on the radio. Guess what song?"

"No idea."

"'Angels We Have Heard on High.' It was the song you and Marcy sang for the travel contest. As soon as I heard it, an odd thought occurred to me. Angels come into our lives in so many different ways. Sometimes it's Gabriel with glad tidings or Michael with fury against evil. Sometimes, though, they come in the form of people."

Ted smiled, "Like an adorable father and daughter singing together for a karaoke contest?"

Tina laughed, "Yes, exactly like that. I've been trying to dismiss the thought that my life could be blessed by angels, but maybe it is."

"Is that why you invited me over tonight? To see if I'm an angel?"

"No, not at all," she said.

Ted frowned.

"It's because I know you are."

They turned to each other, Ted reached out, and she took

his hands.

“Who am I to say no when an angel comes into my store?”

Ted smiled, and then he and Tina swung around as the front door opened. Two smiling kids were yelling about cookies and *Elf*.

Tina said, “Give us one more minute!”

Jonathon said, “I’ll put the DVD in, so it’s ready to go when you get inside.”

The kids ran back inside, and Tina turned to Ted. “I want joyous strains again in my life. You said you’d wait for me no matter how long it took, but I’ve waited all that I can. I’m ready for this.”

“It’s been one day,” Ted laughed.

“Yes, but I miss this.” She squeezed his hands. “Romance. Holding hands. I miss it so much, and I want it again.”

“Me, too,” Ted said, and they went inside for cookies, movies, and hot chocolate.

Two days later, Ted and Marcy would join Tina’s family for Christmas dinner.

Watching from above were Aria, Baron, and Gabriel.

Aria said to Gabriel, “I told you we had this.”

Gabriel answered, “I never doubted it for a second.”

Aria and Baron rolled their eyes.

“You both did good,” Gabriel said. “You fluttered lightly

as good angels do and helped bring about a Christmas miracle.”

“So do we get the job?” Baron asked.

“You do,” Gabriel said. “You brought the joy of Christmas to a troubled soul, and hardly is there a higher calling. So yes, you made the grade, you are officially Christmas Angels.”

“Oh thank you, thank you!” Aria said, and she and Baron flew off, singing to the heavens, “*Gloria in excelsis Deo.*”