

The Greatest Gift

By Grace Dvorachek

“This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.”

IT was turning out to be another, ordinary Christmas for Earl Desmond. As night approached outside his small house, sank into a chair next to his fireplace, putting his feet on the ottoman with a sigh. “Well, Oliver, here we are again.”

An aging tabby cat looked up from his perch on the windowsill and gave the old man a knowing look.

“Look at us.” Earl shook his head. “Two crotchety old gents, alone on Christmas Eve for the fifth year in a row.”

His breath caught slightly. “Five years. Seems like it was only yesterday.”

Earl’s gaze was drawn to the dark, snowy night beyond the window, his hazel eyes holding a faraway look.

Oliver gave a soft meow and Earl shook himself. “Oh, I know you’re right, Oliver. There’s no reason to be gloomy when it’s the Lord’s birthday we’re celebrating.

He lifted a large, leather-bound book from the side table, and opened it with a reverent air. Perching a pair of wire-rimmed glasses on his nose, he began to read aloud, his voice slow and methodical.

“And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee...”

All at once, the shrill ring of the doorbell pierced through the still night, followed by a hurried knock.

Startled, Earl glanced up from the Bible, a frown gathering on his face. “Who in their right mind would be out in this weather?”

He glanced out the window through the falling snow, but no cars were in the driveway. Now thoroughly mystified, he set his glasses and Bible aside and rose to his feet. Oliver leaped to the floor, trailing behind Earl down the hall to the front door.

Switching on the porch light, Earl unlocked the door and prepared himself for a gust of bone-chilling wind.

But upon swinging open the door, all thoughts of icy breezes were erased from Earl’s mind.

“Weston?” He hardly dared to utter the name. “Weston, is that you?”

Of course, it was Weston. There was no mistaking the shape of that strong jaw, nor the distinct hue of those brown eyes.

The young man on the doorstep shifted the backpack on his shoulder, not quite meeting Earl’s eyes. “Hey, Earl.”

“What— what on earth are you doing here?” Earl stammered, as confused as ever.

“It’s a long story.” Weston paused. “Can we just come inside?”

“Of— of course!” Earl started to push the screen door open, then stopped short. “We?”

“Well... yeah.” Weston moved aside to reveal someone else behind him. “We.”

The “someone else” was a little girl, not more than five years old. Most of her dirty blonde hair was hidden underneath her thick, woolen hat, but her eyes—a deep green—appeared to be studying Earl intently.

After a moment, a smile brightened the girl’s face. “Are you Grandpa Earl?”

“That’s right, sweetie,” Weston said. He placed an arm around the girl’s shoulders. “Earl, this is Bobbi.”

“You’re kidding!” Earl shook his head in disbelief. “She was just a little baby the last time I saw her.” He looked her over again. “Well, she’s got Annalie’s eyes, that’s for sure.

All at once, Weston stiffened, his face becoming hard and emotionless. “Can you just let us in already?”

“Oh, right.” Suddenly feeling a bit clumsy, Earl fumbled with the screen door before holding it open

Weston and Bobbi stepped inside into the warm air, letting out shivering breaths.

“See, Daddy?” Bobbi tilted her chin matter-of-factly. “*Much* better than the car.”

“The car?” Earl let the door slam shut and turned to look inquiringly at Weston.

“Yeah. It broke down on the corner of Juniper and High Street. Bobbi and I walked the rest of the way here.”

“Look, Daddy, a kitty!” Bobbi exclaimed, catching sight of Oliver. She knelt down, and the cat sniffed her hand curiously. Soon, she was running her hands down the soft fur, no longer paying attention to the others.

Earl turned back to the other man. “Have you two eaten yet?”

“Yeah, we stopped for supper a few hours ago.”

They stood there in silence for a moment, Earl trying to sort his gathered thoughts. He had so many questions, but he wasn’t sure how Weston would respond.

“Weston,” he finally began. “I– I have to wonder... what are you doing here?”

Instead of replying, Weston turned sharply and suddenly, ignoring the question altogether. “I need to bring the bags upstairs.” He grabbed Bobbi’s backpack, which she had dropped just inside the front door. “Is the guest bedroom still in the same spot?”

“Oh... yes,” Earl replied, confused by the change of subject. “And Bobbi can have Annalie’s room.”

Without another word, Weston nodded and sauntered off down the hall and up the stairs.

Bobbi gave a loud sigh, drawing Earl’s attention back to the girl. She was shaking her head sagely at her father’s retreating back. “I *told* Daddy not to be so cranky, but he’s never polite to anyone!” She looked thoughtful as she unzipped her jacket and let it fall to the floor. “Maybe that’s why we keep moving away.”

“So you move around a lot?”

“Yeah, every few months.” Bobbi’s eyes met Earl’s, and he was surprised to find that her gaze was filled with sadness. “It’s not easy for Daddy, you know... taking care of me alone.”

Earl nodded, his voice softening. “I know.”

All at once, Bobbi rose from the floor and went to stand in the doorway of the sitting room. “Hey, what’s this room?”

“This is my sitting room,” Earl said, following her into the room. “I read here, mostly.”

“I can read, too,” Bobbi replied, plopping herself down on the couch. “Daddy taught me how. He says I’m really smart for my age.”

As the little girl plopped herself onto the couch, Earl felt a dull ache in his heart. Seeing his granddaughter here, in his own house, made him remember the many happy evenings of years long gone. Sitting by the fireplace, watching Annalie play with Oliver as a kitten, listening to her musical laughter.

Weston had been there, too, of course. Weston was always around back then.

“What do you like to read?” Bobbi asked.

“Well, the Bible, mostly. I was just reading the story of Jesus’ birth.”

“Jesus?” Bobbi’s forehead puckered. “Daddy says Jesus is a fairy tale.”

“Oh, no, Bobbi... Jesus is very real. He’s God’s Son, you know.”

“Well, in that case, I guess you’d better read it to me,” she replied decidedly. “Daddy doesn’t like God very much, but I think He must be awful nice.”

Earl suppressed another smile. “Why do you say that?”

“Well, He’s sure been putting up with us for a long time, don’t you think, Grandpa?”

The way the term slid off of the girl’s lips—as well as her truthful words—brought warmth to Earl’s heart. “I certainly agree.” He retrieved his glasses from the table and seated himself in his chair, opening his Bible again. Oliver hopped up onto the right chair arm, settling down contentedly.

“And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee...”

As Earl continued to read, Bobbi moved over to stand next to the chair, then climbed onto his lap. He paused, glancing down at her in surprise.

“Keep reading, Grandpa,” Bobbi said, snuggling against him. “I like this story.”

Earl nodded and went on. All the while, Bobbi intently studied the words on the page.

At last, Earl finished the story and shut the book. “Well, what do you think, Bobbi?”

The little girl gave no reply, and he glanced at her. Her face was sober as she stared up at a picture frame on the fireplace mantle. Two people were in the photograph, Weston and a young woman whose deep green eyes were as dancing and vivacious as though she were alive.

“Grandpa... you have a picture of Mommy.”

“Yes.” His eyes rested lovingly on the framed photo. “She was my daughter.”

“Oh.” Bobbi’s voice was very quiet. “Isn’t she pretty?”

“She sure is,” he agreed, his own voice becoming husky. “That picture was taken only a year before she... before she passed away.”

“You mean she died.” Bobbi nodded solemnly. “I know what passed ‘way means, ‘cause Daddy told me.” She sighed. “Daddy never talks about her much.”

Earl nodded, but he didn’t take his eyes off the picture. His mind was traveling back decades, rehearsing every memory. Annalie’s excitement when she and Weston won the school science fair. Her tears when she broke her arm building a treehouse with Weston. Her dread while she and Weston waited for their college acceptance letters. And her overwhelming happiness on the day she and Weston were married.

Finally, Bobbi’s voice broke into his thoughts as she put a small hand on his arm. “What was she like?”

“She was... she was like you, Bobbi. Young and lively and playful.”

“And smart,” she added matter-of-factly. “Daddy always says I’m very smart for my age.”

“Yes, so you’ve told me,” Earl said with a small smile.

Bobbi stood, moving to study the picture more closely. “Daddy misses her a lot, you know.”

He swallowed against the lump in his throat. “Me too.”

They sat in silence for a moment before Bobbi spoke again softly. “Grandpa, why did Mommy die?”

Earl sighed. “Because she had to, Bobbi. Everyone’s going to die someday.”

“Even me?”

He hesitated. “Well... yes. Even you.”

“I met a nice lady in the last town who talked about a place called Heaven,” she said thoughtfully. “Is that where Mommy is?”

“Yes, I believe so.”

“Then I want to go there, too.”

Earl shook his head. “Now, Bobbi, it’s not as simple as that. There’s another place where people can go. It’s called Hell.”

“Is– is that where God sends all the bad people?” She asked in a small voice.

“Yes, that’s where they go.

Slowly, Bobbi’s face puckered up, and tears gathered in her eyes. “But *I’m* a bad people, Grandpa! I stuck my tongue out at a mean boy once, and I lie to Daddy sometimes, and– and I don’t *want* to go there!”

Earl rose to his feet, alarmed by the girl’s sudden outburst. “Shh, Bobbi, it’s okay.”

She pushed away his comforting arm. “It’s *not* okay, Grandpa! I don’t want to go to Hell!”

He hesitated, then gave a sigh. “You’re right... it’s *not* okay. I deserve to go to Hell, too. We all do.”

Bobbi stepped back, frowning through her tears in confusion. “But– but how do I *not* go there? How do I go to Heaven?”

“You can’t go there. Not on your own, anyway.”

The girl’s furrowed brow deepened. “Then how did Mommy get there?”

“Because God still loves us, even when we do bad things. That’s why He sent Jesus to earth... not just to be born, but to die.”

“So Jesus passed ‘way, too, Grandpa?”

He smiled. “Yes. And you know what, Bobbi? He did it for us. His death paid for the bad things we do.”

Her face began to brighten with hope. “And then I can go to Heaven?”

“Well, first, you need to trust Jesus to save you, and turn from the bad things you’ve done.”

“And after I do that, I don’t have to go to Hell anymore?”

“Yes, Bobbi. Even better, you become God’s child.”

“Are *you* God’s child, Grandpa?”

Earl smiled. “I sure am.”

Bobbi's expression again turned thoughtful. "Maybe... maybe you can tell me more about Jesus sometime, Grandpa. And you can tell Daddy, too."

Earl's smile faded "Oh... Bobbi. I- I don't think your daddy would like that very much."

She shrugged. "But he still needs to hear it, doesn't he?"

Earl opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again. "Well, yes... I guess he does."

"Good." She beamed at him. "And you can read us another Bible story, too."

He nodded, though rather distractedly. There had been a time when Weston was a faithful member of the Christian community... when he had thrown his time and energy into serving God. But that had been the old Weston, and *he* was long gone.

"Grandpa?" Bobbi asked after a long moment.

He turned his attention back to her. "Yes, Bobbi?"

Her face had once again sobered, and her eyes were full of concern. "What happened with you and Daddy?"

"I... I think that's for him to tell you." He turned again to stare out the window, his eyes wandering aimlessly from flake to falling flake.

"He's not always like this, you know," Bobbi said softly. "He's really nice, once you get to know him. He's just got a temper, that's all."

He smiled sadly at her. "I know, Bobbi. I know."

"Bobbi." A stern voice came from the direction of the doorway.

Startled, Earl turned to see his son-in-law standing there with folded arms.

Bobbi ran towards him and tugged at his hand. "Come on, Daddy! Grandpa's reading from the Bible!"

"No thanks, sweetie." Weston touseled his daughter's hair, but his eyes looked pointedly at Earl. "I don't really care for silly stories."

"Oh, but it's not silly," she hastened to explain. "Jesus is God's Son, so I think He's pretty special. Don't you?"

“No, I *don't*,” Weston replied, his tone harsh and biting.

The little girl didn't seem to notice the growing anger in her father's eyes. Earl took a step towards them but stopped as he realized there was nothing he could do.

“Just come and listen, Daddy,” Bobbi persisted. “I bet you'll like it.”

Weston gave a controlled sigh and bent to meet his daughter's gaze. “Listen, Bobbi... I don't want you listening to any more talk about God, okay?” He glanced away, and only Earl caught sight of the bitterness embedded in his expression. “You don't know him like I do.”

“What do you mean?” Bobbi frowned, looking confused. “I think He's nice.”

Something inside Weston seemed to snap, and his eyes blazed with fire. “He's *not* nice!” His hands had grabbed Bobbi's shoulders in a tight grip. “He doesn't care about us, so why should we care about Him?”

Weston's words hung in the air, seeming to echo in the stiff silence that followed. Oliver had retreated underneath the couch, and Earl almost wished that he could do the same.

At last, the young man straightened. “Go on upstairs, Bobbi. It's past your bedtime.”

Bobbi's eyes had filled with tears at her father's outburst, and her lower lip was trembling. “Yes, Daddy.” She turned away. “Good night.”

Weston's unflinching gaze followed her as she left the room. “Good night.”

The two men watched tensely as Bobbi headed down the hall and up the stairs. It was only after she had disappeared from sight that Earl spoke. “Weston, I really don't think—”

The cold glare landed on Earl's face, silencing him. “Why did you do that?”

Earl was taken aback. “Do what?”

“You know I don't like religion,” Weston replied scathingly. “I've had too much of it in my life already.”

Earl opened his mouth to argue but stopped himself. Underneath Weston's anger, he could see the pain and guilt that had been mounting for five long years.

“Just look at yourself, Weston.” He shook his head. “You used to be so faithful... not one of us ever doubted that you were a Christian. What happened to you?”

Weston focused his glare out the window at the steadily falling snow. “You know very well what happened.”

There was a long pause, and Earl couldn't help but glance at the picture on the mantle. He smiled sadly, his eyes and voice full of remembrance. “I always knew you two were meant for each other. When you were together, Annalie's smile was a hundred times brighter.” He chuckled. “You guys were always on some crazy adventure, and they only got crazier as you grew up.”

Earl stopped short, emotion welling up in his throat. “Weston... I- I miss her, too.”

His son-in-law gave a slight tremor, but his voice was composed and cool as he spoke. “You don't miss her. If you did, you'd see how ridiculous this is.”

Earl frowned. “I don't understand.”

The corners of Weston's lips drew upwards in a bitter smile. “Neither do I.” He turned, his gaze full of defiance. “How can you still worship the God who killed Annalie? How can you still love Him?”

“You mean, how can He still love us?”

Weston's anger faded and he drew back, looking confused.

“We're all sinners,” Earl said firmly. “And it's an incredible thought, that a holy, righteous God would rescue us from eternal condemnation. Not only that, He did it by sacrificing His own Son! How can I *not* worship a God like that?”

“Earl, please.” Weston held up a hand. “I didn't come here for you to preach to me.”

Earl was silent for a long moment. “Then... then why *did* you come here?”

“That's none of your business.”

“Look, showed up unannounced at my doorstep, Weston,” Earl replied evenly. “And on Christmas Eve, of all times.”

“Well, we didn't come for Christmas, I can tell you that.” Weston's voice was full of irritation. “I didn't even want to come at all, but my car broke down, and we didn't have anywhere else to go.”

“Yes, but why were you here in the first place?” Earl persisted. “You can’t expect me to believe that you were just passing through.”

Anger passed across Weston’s face, but it was gone in another moment. He glanced back out the window, his voice lowering. “I– I came to see her.”

Earl paused. “Her?”

“Her grave, I mean.” The young man shook his head. “We were in the area, and... well, I don’t know. I guess I thought it wouldn’t hurt.”

“It wouldn’t have hurt you to have gone to her funeral, either.”

“Yeah, well, it’s a little late for that.” Weston’s jaw tightened. “Besides, I... didn’t go into the cemetery.”

“What do you mean?”

“I got as far as the gates but...” He shrugged. “Then I saw the church. And I’ve had enough of *that* in my life, that’s for sure. Besides, it’s not like visiting her grave is gonna do anything for her, anyway”

“Maybe not, but it might do something for you.”

“Oh, don’t start lecturing me!” Weston snapped “He took away my wife, and, if you ask me, that’s not the kind of God I want to believe in.”

“It doesn’t matter if you *want* to believe in Him or not,” Earl retorted. “That doesn’t change the fact that He exists.”

Weston’s face darkened. “Well, as long as I’m on my own two feet, He’s not getting *anything* from me.”

Earl fell silent, troubled by the wild look in Weston’s eyes. Losing Annalie had hurt him deeply, and it was clear that the past five years had only worsened the pain.

“Earl.” When Weston finally spoke, his voice was a dead calm. “I think you should know that Bobbi and I are leaving tomorrow morning.”

“Leaving?” Earl echoed with a frown. “Where will you go?”

“I don’t know. Somewhere else, I guess.” He paused. “I just think it’s best for all of us if we leave.”

“But that’s not why you’re leaving, is it?” Earl asked solidly.

Weston flinched, averting his gaze.

Earl took a step forward. “What’s the real reason?”

Weston hesitated, then his voice came out hoarse and low. “I– I just can’t stay here any longer. This house... the church... the graveyard. There’s too many memories here.” He looked back at Earl, his eyes haunting. “I’ve got to leave, Earl, or it’ll drive me crazy.”

“Weston...” Earl sighed. “You can’t run from God, no matter how hard you try. If you don’t face your past now, you’ll be running for the rest of your life.”

“No.” Weston shook his head. “We have to leave. *I* have to leave.” He turned away. “Good night, Earl.”

Helplessly, Earl watched his son-in-law stride down the hall and out of sight. He sank into his armchair exhaustedly, and Oliver crept out from under the couch to sit in his lap. Earl’s hands moved to stroke the soft fur as he stared numbly into the fireplace.

“Grandpa?” A small voice came from the doorway.

He turned to find Bobbi standing there in a nightgown, her chin trembling. Slowly, he rose to his feet. Oliver jumped down and stood on the floor between the two. “Yes, Bobbi?”

“Are– are we really going to leave?”

He stifled a sigh. “Yes.”

Bobbi’s eyes filled with tears. “I don’t want to go, Grandpa.”

Earl took a deep breath, steadying his voice. “I know, but you have to.”

“Can’t I stay here with you?” Bobbi’s face was pleading. “I’m tired of moving around all the time.”

“No, Bobbi.” Earl choked back a sudden rush of tears. “You– you have to go with your daddy. He needs your help.”

She shook her head. “But I can’t help him, Grandpa. I’ve tried, but it’s no use. I think... I think he needs God to help him.”

The two stood there in silence, Bobbi leaning against the doorway, and Earl resting a hand on the back of a chair. Suddenly, she ran towards him and wrapped her arms around him in a fierce hug. “I love you, Grandpa.”

A few tears trickled unheeded down Earl’s cheeks as he bent to return the embrace. “I– I love you, too, Bobbi.”

At last, Earl pulled himself away and knelt to look into Bobbi’s eyes. “You be a good girl and take care of your daddy, okay?”

Bobbi sniffed, nodding bravely. “Okay.”

He stood to his feet. “Now, go off to bed and get some sleep.”

She padded off down the hallway, her bare feet barely making a noise on the carpet.

When she had left, Earl sank slowly to his knees, his head raised to look at the ceiling. God, I know you’re not obligated to give me anything. But I’m asking you... please don’t let them leave.

He suddenly remembered another desperate prayer—one he’d sent up five years ago. That was the night of Annalie’s accident, the night that had changed his life. He’d begged God then, but he hadn’t gotten the answer he’d wanted. Would it be the same with this prayer?

Okay, Lord. Earl took a deep breath. Whatever your answer is... help me to trust You.

* * *

Warm sunlight shone in through the living room window, falling onto Earl’s face. Slowly, his eyes flickered, then opened, focusing on the photograph on the mantle. His eyebrows tugged downward in confusion as he took in the cold fireplace, then the chair where he sat.

All at once, everything came rushing back. Weston... Bobbi... the argument. Earl turned to look hurriedly around the room, then stopped short.

Bobbi—still in her nightgown—sat silently on the couch, watching him with unblinking eyes. Oliver was snuggled in her lap, purring contentedly.

“Oh...” Earl cleared his throat. “Good morning, Bobbi.”

“Daddy’s gone,” Bobbi announced.

“What?” He frowned. “What do you mean?”

She shrugged. “Well, he’s not in his room.”

Earl stood to his feet, an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, and he left this note for you,” Bobbi replied. She held out a piece of paper.

Earl took it, unfolding it with both eagerness and apprehensiveness.

Earl,

I’m sorry about last night. I knew coming back here was a mistake, so I’m leaving as soon as I can. I don’t know what I’m going to do, but I can’t stay here anymore.

About Bobbi... take good care of her for me. I heard you guys talking last night, and I don’t think it’s fair for her to grow up the way I’ve raised her. She’s probably better off without me, anyway.

I appreciate you trying to help me, Earl. I just don’t think I can be helped. I guess running away didn’t help, either, but here I am... running again. Please don’t try to find me.

Weston

“Where did he go, Grandpa?” Bobbi asked, breaking the silence.

Earl looked up. “You don’t think—” He stopped short. He wouldn’t say it—especially to Bobbi. It was too horrible to even think about.

He tossed the note aside, striding into the hallway and taking his jacket down from the coat tree. “I’m going to look for him.”

“I want to come with you,” Bobbi declared, coming to the doorway of the sitting room.

He paused, studying her for a moment, and then sighed. “Alright, get your coat on. But hurry.”

Earl waited impatiently for her to pull on her jacket, hat, and boots, then they stepped out onto the front porch.

“Grandpa, look!” Bobbi pointed down at the unshoveled sidewalk. “Are those Daddy’s footprints?”

Earl's heart nearly stopped as his eyes followed the footprints down the street... in the direction of the corner of Juniper Center and High Street.

"Grandpa?" Bobbi's hand slid into his.

He looked down at her upturned face, giving her hand a squeeze. "Come on, Bobbi. We'd... we'd better hurry."

Earl set off at an even pace, but his steps became faster and faster as his heart began to fill with fear. He hardly noticed when Bobbi's hand broke away from his as she fell behind—his eyes were glued on those footprints.

At last, a parked, brown minivan came into view. It had been plowed in and was surrounded by little walls of snow. Earl broke into a run, praying that Weston was inside the van. The snow sucked at his shoes—which he'd forgotten to exchange for boots—and an icy wind whipped around his ears. But he didn't feel any coldness... only fear.

He reached the van, and pressed his face to the glass, peering inside. After a moment, his shoulders sagged.

It was empty.

Bobbi ran up, panting, and came to a stop at Earl's side. Silently, she glanced from the van to Earl's face, her own expression sober. "Where's Daddy?"

Earl's eyes scanned inside the van again, in the vain hope that Weston would somehow appear. "I- I don't know, Bobbi."

Deep inside, he felt as though he did know.

Weston had been in a bad state of mind the night before, and his note had indicated the same. There was no telling where he'd gone, or what he'd done.

Earl silently breathed a prayer, putting all of his fear into a few words. He just wanted to know that Weston was safe. Safe from danger and harm.

Safe from himself.

"Grandpa!" Bobbi tugged at his hand, her voice hushed and solemn. "Grandpa, look."

Earl turned to follow her pointing finger, and his eyes fell upon the property just down the street. A wrought, iron fence surrounded the premises, and a few hundred granite tombstones sat in somber rows inside, half-buried by the snow.

In the midst of those lifeless hunks of rock, a lone figure knelt with a bowed head before one particular headstone. Earl didn't need to be able to read the title to know whose grave it was.

His breath caught in his throat, and he hardly knew that he was slowly walking toward the cemetery. He didn't dare call out to the figure... after all, what if it wasn't Weston?

And even if it was, Weston had said not to find him. What would he do when he found out that Earl had searched for him anyways?

The iron gate squeaked a little as Earl opened it, and his shoes made crunching sounds on the snow as he approached the figure.

The man stood, turning around, and Earl stopped short. It was, indeed, Weston.

"Earl," the young man said in a low, ragged voice.

"I- I'm sorry," Earl replied after a moment. "I know you didn't want me to find you."

"It's okay." He hesitated. "I... needed to be found."

Earl caught the tone of Weston's voice, but he didn't trust himself to interpret the words. He could hardly speak for fear that his voice would betray a spark of hope.

"I was going to leave forever, you know," Weston continued. "Maybe even-" He stopped short. "Maybe even try something desperate."

"But you didn't."

"No. God saw to that."

Earl gave a start, now thoroughly confused and hopeful. Was this really his son-in-law standing there, speaking these words?

"I got as far as the van, but seeing this cemetery stopped me in my tracks." Weston paused. "I... I remember when Annalie and I were kids, and she dared me to come here in the middle of the night. I was too scared to do it... I was afraid of what I might find."

“I guess that’s what kept me from coming here last night... I knew that I would have to face my past. I lied to Annalie—and to myself—about being a Christian. And when she died, I ran away to avoid the truth.”

Something about Weston’s face seemed altered, but Earl didn’t quite know what it was. There was one thing he knew, though. This wasn’t the old Weston, nor was it the young man who had shown up on his doorstep the night before. This was someone new... someone Earl had never seen before.

“As long as this cemetery was there, I knew I couldn’t leave. So I finally gave up and came in.” He glanced down at the tombstone behind him. “I finally saw just how wrong I was... about everything. And I knew I had to get right with God.” He took a deep breath, his eyes meeting Earl’s. “I— I owe you an apology, Earl. You were right.

“Weston...” Earl swallowed, tears rushing to his eyes as he stepped forward to embrace his son-in-law. “You’ve already been forgiven.”

“See, Daddy?” Both men turned at the sound of Bobbi’s voice. She was standing in the middle of the cemetery, her hands on her hips, and a huge smile on her face. “I told you God was nice, didn’t I?”

Weston smiled. “Yes, you did, sweetie.”

“Well, what are we standing here for?” Bobbi asked. “We have to go get ready for Christmas! After all, it’s Jesus’ birthday, you know.”

Earl smiled. “Lead the way, Bobbi!”

As they strode through the gates together, Earl looked toward the sky, his heart brimming with gratefulness. God had given him his son-in-law and granddaughter back, a gift he would never forget. But even then, he knew that Weston had received a far greater gift that Christmas... the gift of eternal life.