

*A Christmas Miracle Story*

# ONE HOLY NIGHT

By

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## Prologue

*November 19, 1966*

Mike McRae dropped his battered duffle bag on the concrete floor and glanced through the bank of windows to where the wide-bodied army transport sat waiting on the snow-dusted tarmac. Waiting to take him and his buddies halfway around the world to war.

Viet Nam.

The name hung between him and his family as they gathered in the spare, unadorned military terminal, trying to pretend that this trip was nothing out of the ordinary. But it seemed to Mike almost as if he were gone already, that he had moved beyond the point where he could reach out to touch them. Their faces, loved and familiar, blurred before his eyes as though he looked at them through a mist.

His father cleared his throat before shoving a dog-eared, plain, tan paperback book into Mike's hands. "Thought you might be able to use this sometime," he said, his voice hoarse. "You and Julie used to like to sing some of these old songs when you were kids. Remember?"

Mike looked down at the book he held. It was his father's old service hymnbook that he'd gotten as a young Marine at Sunday worship aboard a ship headed out to the South Pacific during World War II. Frank McRae wasn't much of one to attend church, and the gift surprised Mike. Maybe spiritual things meant more to his father than he had thought.

It evidently surprised his mother too. "Oh, Frank, I didn't think you paid any attention. Julie taught you those songs when you were just a toddler," she added, lightly touching Mike's shoulder. "The two of you sounded like little angels—" She stopped, her voice choking.

Mike could feel the heat rising to his face. To cover his embarrassment, he flipped open the worn cover and stared down at the inscription on the title page. No date, just the owner's name: Frank McRae.

It was Mike's turn to clear his throat. There was suddenly a lump in it despite his skepticism about anything that had to do with faith or religion.

"Well . . . cool. Thanks."

Blinking back an unexpected prickle of tears, he glanced over at his mother, Maggie, who was thin and wan from surgery and chemotherapy for ovarian cancer. His sister, Julie, hovered near her, still in her white nurse's uniform after coming straight to the airport from the hospital where she worked. Behind her stood her husband, Dan, holding their daughter, Amy.

"I know you've got a lot to carry already, but—"

Mike waved his father's words away. "It isn't heavy, Dad, and who knows. You lugged it through all those battlefields, and you made it home. Maybe it'll bring me good luck too." On impulse, he pulled a pen out of the breast pocket of his fatigues, clicked it open and added his name below his father's, added the date too. Squatting down, he zipped open his bag and squeezed the hymnal in among his clothing.

When he straightened, his mother stepped forward to give him a fierce hug. "When you get there let us know you're okay and what unit you're assigned to. Write as often as you can."

"I will, Mom." He struggled to keep his voice from choking up. "Love you."

"Love you too."

"You get well, okay?" he whispered in her ear.

"I will. I'm going to beat this cancer, God willing."

Inwardly Mike sighed, though for her sake he managed not to grimace. He and his mom had always been close, but he got awfully tired of all this God talk. On the other hand, if there really was a benign force somewhere out there in the universe, he supposed prayers couldn't hurt.

Julie crowded in to put her arms around him as well. "I'm sure going to miss you, little brother." She was crying openly, not making any attempt to brush away her tears.

"Aw, you're going to be too busy with this little princess to think about me," Mike returned awkwardly, reaching over to tickle three-year-old Amy under the chin.

She leaned out from her father's arms, reaching for him. Dan surrendered the child, and she wound her arms around Mike's neck, nestled her golden head against his shoulder, giggling, as he tugged on her braid.

Mike was relieved to see that Amy, at least, seemed not to comprehend the dangers he was heading toward or the length of the separation that lay before them. He turned to clasp Dan's hand in a handshake he hoped would say everything he couldn't.

Dan pushed his hand away and embraced him without speaking, pounding him on the back at the same time. Only Frank held back, frowning, as he stared through the windows at the plane.

Outside Mike could hear the engines revving up, signaling that it was time to board. The last of his buddies were heading outside. Hastily handing Amy back to Dan, Mike kissed his sister and mother, shook his father's hand, then zipped up his parka and grabbed his duffle bag.

"Thirteen months," he said, forcing a grin. "See you all back here next Christmas."

"Don't forget to tell Terry hello from all of us. Remind him Angie and the kids want him to stay safe and to hurry home. Give him a kiss from Angie," Julie added with a wicked grin.

"Yeah, right!" Mike chuckled in spite of himself, then hefted his bag. "It sure will be good to see a friendly face when I get there. With luck, I'll end up in Terry's platoon."

"It'll be more than luck," his mother said. "I'm going to pray about it. And we'll be praying every minute until you're home safe with us again."

Mike gave her a crooked smile, then with a quick wave to all of them, turned and strode out the door and across the tarmac. By sheer willpower he kept his stride steady, refusing to let himself turn to look back at them. He knew that if he did, he'd never make it to the plane.

Every step of the way he could sense their eyes following him, and their love. When he reached the stairs, he ran up them, not letting himself think about what he was leaving behind or what lay before him.

Hurriedly he moved through the open door into the plane's dim interior, feeling, like the severing of an embrace, the moment when he disappeared from their sight.

## Chapter 1

“Mom?” Closing the front door behind her, Julie Christensen stamped the snow from her boots onto the welcome mat in the foyer. “Hello—it’s me!”

“Come on in, honey,” her mother called from the kitchen. “I’m just putting a hotdish in the oven. I’ll be right out. Are the streets still bad?”

Jiggling awkwardly from one foot to the other, Julie pulled her boots off one at a time with her free hand and dropped them onto the mat to drain. “The plows have cleared all the main streets now, but they’re still icy in places. I barely got through to the hospital this morning, though. That was quite a blizzard.”

She could hear the oven door open and close. “Your father got to the office late,” her mother responded. “He called to say there were a lot of fender-benders.”

Julie went into the living room on white-stockinged feet. “I brought in the mail. There’s a letter from Mike.”

Maggie pushed through the swinging kitchen door, wiping her hands on a dishtowel. “Well, it’s about time. It’s been three weeks since the last one came, and he had hardly anything to say then.”

When Julie held out the letter, her mother dropped the dishtowel on the arm of the easy chair and reached eagerly for it. She frowned as she studied the handwriting on the outside.

“He’s still okay.”

Noting the tightness in her voice, Julie reassured her hastily, “Of course he’s okay. We’d hear right away if he wasn’t.”

Maggie looked up. “He’s only written three times in the past three months.”

Julie dropped the rest of the mail onto the coffee table. “Don’t forget the letter he sent Dan and me last month.”

“All right, four then.”

“They’ve been involved in several operations.”

“That’s about all he’s told us.” Maggie sighed. “I want to know how he’s doing—really. What it’s like over there. How his health is.”

“Mom, he’s a guy. Guys don’t talk much about stuff like that.”

Maggie gave a short laugh. “I know. Your father’s the same way. How was work today? Is Diane Henderson doing any better?”

Julie hesitated. Diane had been fighting breast cancer for more than a year, and Julie was tempted to gloss over their friend’s condition. But when her own mother had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer the previous fall, Julie had promised she would always tell her the truth and not conceal anything, no matter how unpleasant it was.

She shook her head. “Not good. I’m afraid she isn’t going to make it through the night. Steve and the girls are with her, and their parents are on the way. I said goodbye to her before my shift ended, but I don’t know if she could hear me.”

Her movements unsteady, Maggie went to the fireplace, grabbed the poker and prodded the sizzling logs, releasing a shower of sparks that swirled upward and out of sight. Squatting down, she laid another log on the fire, jerking back from the heat as the flames licked at the dry bark. The wood began to hiss and pop, the sound loud in the quiet room.

When she finally stood up and turned around again, Julie could read nothing in her face. As usual since she had lost her abundant chestnut curls to chemotherapy, her mother had tied a bright scarf around her head. The loss of her hair bothered her more than the terrible bouts of nausea she suffered during treatment, Julie thought. Even now that an inch-long, silky growth of new hair covered her scalp, she still kept her head covered even at home.

Pulling off gloves and muffler and unzipping the parka she wore over her starched, white nurse’s uniform, Julie threw them onto the sofa, then went to give her mother a quick hug. “How’ve you been today? Are you feeling all right?”

“I’m fine.”

“You look tired. You haven’t been overdoing it, have you? Are you sleeping okay?”

At the barrage of questions, Maggie raised her hands. “Now who’s the mother here? I’m supposed to be asking you that. You’ve got a three-year-old at home, a husband who’s a pastor, and you work all day on a cancer ward. With that much stress, it’s a wonder you’re not sick—”

“Mom, you’re always doing that.” At her questioning look, Julie burst out, “You always change the subject if it’s about you! You always think you have to take care of other people, and you act as if *you* aren’t important at all!”

Maggie raised her eyebrows, but before she could protest, they heard a car pull into the driveway. At the same instant the mantel clock tolled four o’clock. Julie went over to the window.

“It’s Dad. What’s he doing home so early?”

“I hope there’s nothing wrong. He hardly ever makes it home before six-thirty.”

The engineering firm owned by Frank McRae and his high school buddy, Larry Bringeland, had landed a major contract with the State of Minnesota that had been taking most of his attention for the past eight months. He usually worked late on the job site or at his office in Minneapolis, thirty miles southeast of their home in the small bedroom community of Shepherdsville.

*He’s more worried about Mom’s appointment tomorrow than he’ll admit.*

Julie bit her lip to keep from blurting out what she was thinking. Her mother was already nervous enough about the appointment at university hospital the next morning, where she was scheduled to receive the results of tests to determine whether she was finally cancer-free. She didn’t need any more anxiety.

After a moment Julie heard her father come into the kitchen, banging the back door behind him. When he appeared in the doorway, he first glanced at Maggie, then apparently reassured, grinned at Julie.

“Thought I’d find you here. You girls have a good day?”

Maggie went to give him a kiss and help him to slip out of his overcoat. “You’re home awfully early. We ought to celebrate.”

He chuckled. “Sounds like we’re on the same wavelength. We finished our last meeting early, so I decided to take you out to dinner.”

“But I just put your favorite hotdish into the oven.”

“Stick it in the fridge. It’ll keep till tomorrow.”

Seeing the look he gave her mother before he crossed the room to warm himself in front of the fire, Julie smiled. After almost twenty-five years of marriage, they still acted like young lovers.

“We’re not going anywhere until we read Mike’s letter,” Maggie insisted. She handed Julie the letter and sat down on the sofa. “Why don’t you read it so we can all hear it together.”

Eagerly Julie tore open the thin air-mail envelope. Pulling out several creased, humidity-stained sheets of paper, she unfolded them and stared down at the pages thickly scribbled with Mike's free-flowing handwriting.

*February 19, 1967*

*Nha Trang, South Viet Nam*

*Dear Mom and Dad,*

*When you arrive in the Nam, the first thing you notice is the intense heat, followed by the stench of sweat and fuel and refuse that permeates everything. Next is the sound—a vibration that raises the hair on the back of your neck—the roar of helicopters and jet fighters taking off and landing, and the occasional whump of artillery fire. Gritty red dirt coats everything, from your boots and fatigues to your food. You chew it with every bite you eat, breathe it in with every lungful of air.*

*It's a strange feeling—as if you've dropped into an alternate reality, a parallel universe that revolves along its own separate course on a totally different plane from life in the real world. Ten months, and I'll be home. That thought is the only thing that makes life here bearable.*

*Sorry I haven't had much to tell you up till now. It's taken a while to get oriented and figure out what what's going on. I have some great news to share, though! I got that transfer to the medic unit I asked for. Instead of running sweeps through the jungle and setting up ambushes, my job will be to accompany the medics during our operations, get them in to the wounded, then get them and the casualties back out to safety.*

“Thank God!” Maggie said, relief flooding through her. “At least he'll be a little bit safer with the medics.”

She saw Frank open his mouth as if he were going to say something, but he abruptly closed it again without speaking. Tilting her head, Maggie gave him a questioning look.

“I still can't get over Mike's joining the army instead of taking a student deferment,” Julie broke in. “I never thought my little brother was cut out to be a soldier.”

Wondering at Julie's quick change of subject, Maggie said thoughtfully, “Mike has taken his share of detours, but he's always been a good boy at heart.”

“He's too easily influenced by the wrong crowd,” Frank said, frowning.

Maggie gave him a reproachful look. “Oh, Frank, he's just idealistic. All the kids are nowadays—you know that. They think political action will solve the world's evils. And Mike has always acted as if he could change the world on his own.”



When Frank only shrugged in response, she motioned to Julie to continue, irritated at his stubbornness.

*I'll never get used to killing another human being, but at least now I'll be helping to save lives. I know you faced the same thing in the South Pacific, Dad, and I keep wondering how you got through it. But at least back then you knew who the enemy was. Here in the Nam you never really know for sure who's a friend and who's an enemy. You can't afford to trust anybody outside the guys in your platoon, otherwise you could end up dead real quick.*

Frank's gut clenched. Leaving the fireplace to move restlessly around the room, he passed his hand over his face, wishing he could as easily wipe away the stark images that haunted his thoughts at unguarded moments.

“All those years I spent chasing Japs through the jungles of the South Pacific, thinking we were going to fix it so no son of mine would ever have to go through what my buddies and I did. Or die like Bobby did.” He gritted his teeth. “And now Mike's a grunt in Viet Nam, and those people over there are no different from those lousy, stinking—”

His gaze met Maggie's, and the pain that shadowed her face silenced him.

“You know I don't like hearing you talk like that,” she said, her voice muffled.

He rarely brought up his wartime experiences. He knew how his hatred for the enemy he had faced during World War II shocked his wife and daughter whenever it boiled briefly to the surface, like now. The truth was, at times the violence of his anger shocked him as well.

Maybe that was the problem, he thought now. If he was ever going to lay the demons of the past to rest, he had to confront them.

But even after all those years, the emotions were so raw that just the thought of intentionally unleashing them made him feel sick to his stomach, as if he teetered on a precipice. Plunging over the edge would surely destroy him. And so as always before he pushed the jumbled feelings and images down deep, out of sight and feeling.

Cocking his head, he winked at Maggie. “Honey, the last thing I want to do is to make you unhappy.”

He kept his tone light, but he meant what he said. Since he had first known that he was going to marry Maggie Clayton, he had worn his love for her on his sleeve. Her recent illness and the possibility that he might lose her had only intensified his feelings.

His breath shortened at the thought that Maggie might lose her cruel struggle, but he resolutely pushed that fear away as well. It was a month since she had completed her second course of chemotherapy, following surgery the previous September. Her oncologist had assured them she

had an excellent prognosis with this new drug, and Frank refused to entertain any doubts about her recovery.

“Go ahead and read the rest of the letter, Julie,” he prompted gruffly.

*I'm getting along okay. I have to admit I miss Terry already. Seems like he's been gone a couple of weeks instead of only a couple of days. It's going to take some time to get used to the new platoon and especially to my new squad leader. He's okay, but he hasn't been with the platoon much longer than me. After two tours of duty, Terry knew his way around. He looked out for me, showed me the ropes and how to survive in the jungle. I hate to admit that base camp feels pretty empty without him, but when you see him, don't tell him I said so! Don't want him to get a swelled head.*

*One thing that's helped is that I've grown kind of attached to a little orphan kid who works off and on at the base as a translator. Well, she's not a kid, I guess. Her name is Thi Nhuong, and she's seventeen, but she's so small and delicate, kind of cute, with eyes that are always smiling. Everyone else calls her Merry, but I always call her by her real name. I know she likes that.*

*Anyway, she's great fun to be with. She lost her whole family in the war when she was only nine years old, and she was raised—if you can call it that—by a cousin. She was on her own by the time she was thirteen, and from what she's told me, she had it pretty rough. But in spite of all she's been through, she seems so joyful at heart.*

“I sure hope Mike doesn't get it into his head that he's in love with that girl!” Julie's father exploded. “I'm not going to stand for my son getting mixed up with some . . . some gook! She's probably a prostitute—”

Before Julie could blurt out an angry remark, her mother cut him off with quiet vehemence. “How can you say such a thing? You don't know this girl. If Mike cares for her, I'm sure she's exactly what he says she is.”

“You'll notice he's giving us very few details.”

“Maybe there's nothing to tell. World War II has been over for twenty-two years, Frank, and the Japanese are our allies now. It's time you let go of your anger. Besides, the Vietnamese are a completely different people.”

“All those slanty-eyed people are alike—sneaky and cruel. Look, the war was barely over before the Chinese went Commie. Then so did Korea, and we ended up in a war with them.”

“North Korea,” Julie interjected.

He ignored her. “Now we've gotten dragged into this war with Viet Nam—”

“*North* Viet Nam. And Congress has never officially declared war.”

He rounded on Julie. “Then what are we doing over there, blowing up the place and getting our men slaughtered? Most of the South Vietnamese support Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Cong, and those who don’t are in it for all of the money and power they can get from us. We’re playing right into their hands.

“Mike was right the first time, and he needs to take his own advice. You can’t trust any of those people ever—period! They’ll knife you in the back as soon as look at you.”

“Dad—!”

“*Please*, the two of you!” Maggie cried. “Enough! You’re not going to settle this, so leave it alone.”

Julie bit back her angry reply and stared at her father. From her grandparents she had learned that he had idolized his older brother, Bobby, who had died in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp after enduring the brutalities of the Bataan death march. Now she wondered how much he knew about the horrific experiences his only sibling must have been subjected to. He’d never opened up about the subject, a sure indication that it must be unbearably painful to him.

“You’ve never shown the least prejudice against Terry and his family—or any of the black engineers you employ,” she pointed out, keeping her voice neutral. “Why do you hate the Japanese so much?”

Frank folded his arms across his chest. “Black people have fought and died to preserve our freedoms in every war we’ve ever been involved in. Jordan Williams served honorably as a pilot over Europe during World War II, and Terry’s served two tours of duty in Viet Nam. They’re decent, honest men.

“The Japs—excuse me, the Japanese,” he amended sarcastically, “are different. They have nothing in common with us. You didn’t see what I saw during the war, but if you had, you’d find it pretty hard to forgive too.”

“You’re right—we didn’t experience what you did. But Mom’s right too. At some point you have to forgive or your bitterness will eat you alive.”

He turned his back and moved to the window to stare outside, his hands clenched in his pockets. Julie glanced from his rigid form to her parents’ wedding picture on the mantle. In spite of the white strands that now lightly streaked the hair at his temples, he was almost as youthful in appearance as he had been when the photograph was taken, following a spur-of-the-moment ceremony in San Francisco just before he shipped out for the South Pacific a few months after Pearl Harbor.

He had been all of nineteen, a year younger than Mike was now, wearing the neatly pressed uniform of the Marines. Under his rakishly canted hat, his curly red-gold hair gleamed in the

muted, sepia tints of the yellowing photograph as he smiled proudly down at his new wife, his clear blue eyes sparkling, dimples deepening at each side of his mouth.

At forty-five he was still as handsome, though he carried a few more pounds than the lean youth in the picture. Julie had been completely in love with him from the age of not-quite-three, when he had stepped off the airplane that had brought her back the flesh-and-blood daddy she had never met to replace the photos that couldn't quite satisfy the longings of her young heart for a father of her own.

It was the one memory from her early childhood that stood out with vivid clarity, and one she would always cherish. No matter how much she disagreed with her father on some issues, no matter how annoyed she became with some of his attitudes, she knew she would always adore him.

Her gaze shifted to the picture on the opposite end of the mantel, next to the one of her taken in white cap and uniform after her graduation from the University of Minnesota Nursing School. It showed another young man, this one in army uniform but with the same disarming grin, blue eyes, and dimples as the one in the wedding picture. The only difference was that Mike had inherited their mother's rich chestnut curls, closely cropped in this picture. It had been taken after her brother finished basic training and just a few days before he left for Viet Nam.

"Let's hear the rest of Mike's letter," her mother said, her voice ragged.

Guilt stabbed through Julie. *Dad and I have to stop this. These arguments are taking too much out of Mom. She needs to focus every ounce of energy she has on getting well.*

She frowned down at the pages in her hand.

*I hope both of you are getting along okay. Mom, I have my fingers crossed that the chemotherapy is doing the job and that you're not having any more bad side effects from it. What's the latest report from the doctor? Good news, I hope! I'll keep thinking positive thoughts on your behalf.*

*Dad, I know how tough this must be for you, but remember to take care of yourself too. You know how much Mom depends on you. We've always leaned on each other, and we'll stick together through this till Mom's well again.*

*Gotta go. Gonzales is bugging me about the lamp keeping him awake, and I need to get some sleep too. Tell Jules to give that niece of mine a big smooch and tell her I'll bring her a pretty silk dress from the Nam when I get back to the world (in time for Christmas, I hope!). And Dad, punch that big lug Dan for me just for general principles and to keep him in line. Tell him he'd better take good care of my best sister and my little Amy until I get there.*

*Don't forget to say hey to Terry from me. I bet he'll be home before you get this letter. And give Angie, Terrance, and Shawna hugs and kisses from me, too.*

*As they say, keep those cards and letters coming! Seriously—your letters make me feel like I still have some connection to the world. I'll write again as soon as I can.*

*Love you all,*

*Mike*

Julie folded the letter and put it back into the envelope, fighting back the aching sense of loss that overwhelmed her every time she thought about her little brother in an environment so alien and so far from home and family. Suddenly she felt too weary to deal with any more emotion.

“I’d better go. Dan promised to have dinner ready by the time I got home, and he and Amy will be wondering where I am.”

“Have you heard whether the weather’s cleared in Juneau enough for Terry’s plane to take off?” Maggie asked. “After that long flight, he must be crazy to finally get home.”

Julie laid the letter on the coffee table with the rest of the mail. “I’m hoping Angie got some news today. If Dan has heard anything, I’ll let you know.”

She kissed her mother goodbye and grabbed her parka, muffler, and gloves. Frank walked her to the door and waited while she pulled on her boots.

“Are you sure you don’t mind driving your mother into Minneapolis to the hospital tomorrow? Larry can ride herd by himself for a day if he has to.”

“You really need to be there with that big project going on.” Julie zipped up her insulated parka and wound the muffler around her neck. “Tomorrow is my day off anyway, and Amy will be at nursery school. Besides, I have a whole list of questions I want to ask Dr. Radnor.”

He tugged a stray red-gold curl that had escaped from the pins that held her hair back. “It sure helps to have a nurse in the family,” he teased.

He accompanied her outside onto the sidewalk in front of the expansive, white frame, Dutch Colonial-style house. It was growing dark, and the air was already so icy it burned her lungs with every breath.

Directly across the street a white, wrought-iron archway defined the entrance to Shepherdsville’s town park. Beyond it Julie could make out the sprawling native stone pavilion and the playground that were the park’s main attractions. Fifty yards from the pavilion’s far end, the graceful stone arch of a footbridge spanned icy Shepherd’s Creek, which bisected the park.

She turned abruptly to face her father. “You didn’t seem all that sure that Mike’s transfer to the medics is a good thing.”

His face settled into hard lines. “I didn’t want to say anything in front of your mother, but medics have to go right into the worst of the fighting to take care of the wounded and get them out. I saw plenty of them gunned down. It seemed like the Japs deliberately aimed for them.”

Julie shivered in the sharp wind. When she pulled open the door of her battered, bright orange ’62 Beetle convertible, it gave a protesting creak.

Frank lightly kicked the VW’s rear tire. Nodding at the faded, mud-splattered sticker on its back bumper that prominently featured a peace symbol and the words “Give peace a chance,” he growled, “Why don’t you scrape that thing off? Since Dan’s so gung-ho for non-violence, I’d think he wouldn’t want to be associated with the tactics of those student demonstrators who are leading all the riots.”

Julie slid behind the wheel. “Now, Daddy, you know you hate this war as much as Dan and I do.”

“I don’t believe this country has any compelling interests in Southeast Asia that justify our getting involved in their civil war. That doesn’t mean I agree with being disloyal to our government and giving aid and comfort to our enemies.”

She engaged the clutch and twisted the key in the ignition. The engine reluctantly coughed to life.

“If anyone actually advocates giving aid and comfort to our enemies, it’s a very small minority. Please, Dad, let’s not argue about this right now. I need to get home.”

To her surprise, he leaned down and gave her a light peck on the cheek. “Love you anyway,” he said with that disarming smile she could never resist.

She grinned back at him. “Love you too, you old galoot. Take care of Mom, and I’ll see you in the morning.”

Waving goodbye, she put the car in gear.