

The Christmas Child

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LOVE INSPIRED
INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Chapter One



In twenty years of Dumpster diving, Popbottle Jones had found his share of surprises in other people's trash. But nothing prepared him for what he discovered one chilly November dawn.

Agile as a monkey at seventy-two, Popbottle hopped over the side of the giant bin located downwind of Redemption's municipal building and dropped lightly onto a mound of battered cardboard boxes. The usual garbage and old-food smells rose to greet him, odors he'd trained his nose to ignore in pursuit of more profitable treasures. After all, he and his business partner, GI Jack, were in the recycling business.

From one corner of the dimly lit bin came a scratching sound. His heart sank. Rats or kit-

tens, he suspected. Rats he shooed. The kittens, though, troubled him. He'd never leave domestic creatures to be scooped into a compactor and bulldozed at a landfill.

Gingerly picking his way through the mess, Popbottle directed his steps and his miner's lamp toward the sound. His stomach plummeted. Not rats. Not kittens, though two eyes stared out. Blue eyes. Frightened eyes. The eyes of a child.

Taking a bullet would have been easier, cleaner, quicker. Dying slowly wasted a lot of time.

Kade McKendrick dropped one hand to the golden retriever sitting patiently beside him along the riverbank and tried to relax.

Even now, when he'd been shipped off to Redemption, Oklahoma, for R & R, he wielded a fishing rod like a weapon, fingers tight on the reel's trigger. He'd become too paranoid to go anywhere unarmed.

Memories swamped him. Faces swam up from the muddy red river to accuse. Kade shifted his gaze to the far bank where straggling pale brown weeds poked up from the early winter landscape, hopeless sprouts with nothing in their future but more of the same.

Feathery frost tipped the dead grass, shiny in the breaking dawn.

“Might as well give it up, Sheba.” Kade reeled in the ten-pound test line, mocking his ambitious tackle. The clerk at the bait and tackle warned him that fish weren’t biting this time of year.

He slammed the metal tackle box, startling the dog and a red-tailed hawk still napping on a nearby branch. The bird took flight, wings flapping like billows over the calm, cold waters. Sheba looked on, quivering with intense longing. Together, man and dog watched the hawk soar with lazy grace toward the rising sun. Other than a rare car passing on the bridge, all was quiet and peaceful here on the predawn river. The place drew him like a two-ton magnet in those dark hours when sleep, the vicious tease, evaded him.

Kade sniffed. His nose was cold, but the morning air, with crisp, clean sharpness, invigorated more than chilled. He picked up the scent of someone’s fireplace, a cozy home, he surmised, with two-point-five kids, a Betty Crocker mom and a dad who rose early to feed the fire with fragrant hickory wood.

His lip curled, cynic that he was. Happy ever after was a Hallmark movie.

He, too, had risen early, but not for a cozy fire and a loving family. Although gritty-eyed with fatigue, he hadn't slept a full eight hours in months. But the shrink said he was making progress.

Kade huffed, breath a gray cloud. The shrink probably didn't wake up when his dog barked.

Gathering his gear, Kade started toward his car, a red Mazda Miata parked at an angle near the edge of the Redemption River Bridge. Sheba padded softly at his side, a loyal, undemanding companion who never complained about the nocturnal ramblings.

His great-aunt, on the other hand...

Ida June rose early and she'd be waiting for his return, spouting sluggard quotes, her favorite being, "The field of the sluggard is overtaken by weeds." There were no weeds in Aunt Ida June's fields. One positive aspect of visiting his feisty great-aunt was that she kept him too busy all day to think. Days were all right. Nights were killing him.

Sophie Bartholomew bebopped out the door of the *Redemption Register*, a happy tune on her lips and an order for six dozen cookies on her notepad. She stopped on the

sidewalk and danced a little boogie to celebrate the sale. Her students would be pumped, too.

Sophie loved mornings, especially this time of year with Christmas right around the corner. Already, Redemption geared up for the monthlong celebration.

This crisp morning when the town was just awakening, the scent of fresh doughnuts tantalized the streets in front of the Sugar Shack bakery and café. Sophie headed there next to round up more orders for the annual fifth-grade charity cookie sale. Miriam, owner of the Sugar Shack, never minded, even though the sales cut into her business.

Down the block a city worker dangled from a bucket truck to lace white lights along the front of the town's historic bank building. Sophie gave a little wave. Christmas was unofficially here, and no one was happier about that than Sophie.

She loved everything about Christmas, from the celebrations and festivities to church and decorated cookies and gaily wrapped gifts. Even the commercialism didn't bother her. Christmas, she'd long ago decided, meant joy and love and Jesus, in whatever form it was celebrated.

Across the street on the town square, Ida June Click, octogenarian handywoman, pounded on a half-erected stable while a lean, dark man unloaded lumber from a truck, his navy plaid shirt open over a white T-shirt. Sophia recognized him as Kade McKendrick, Ida June's nephew, although Sophie didn't know him well. He was new in town, but her single friends and several not-so-singles noticed his comings and goings. He mostly stayed to himself. His quiet aloofness made everyone wonder, including her. But he was a looker, as her close friend Jilly Fairmont said. A mysterious looker. What could be more intriguing to a female? Not that Sophie thought all that much about her single status. She was too busy teaching kids and loving the life the Lord had given her.

She had one hand on the glass door of the Sugar Shack when she heard a shout. Over on the curb by the buff-brick municipal building, GI Jack, the eccentric old Dumpster diver who ran a recycling business and created junk art, waved his arms and yelled for help.

"Ida June," he called to the twig of woman in bright red overalls and a man's work jacket. "Get over here quick."

“Here” was a spot right next to an industrial-size trash bin.

“Not another cat. My cup runneth over already.” But the feisty eightysomething woman hustled toward him just the same.

So did Sophie. GI Jack was not an alarmist, and one quick glance told her Popbottle Jones, the other eccentric Dumpster diver, was nowhere to be seen.

Traffic was slow this time of day, and Sophie darted across the street with barely a glance. Had something happened to Popbottle Jones?

“What can we do? Shall we call for an ambulance? I have my cell phone.” Ida June, still a little breathless from the jog, whipped a modern smartphone from the bib of her overalls. “We must get him out of that Dumpster ASAP. He who hesitates is lost.”

Confusion clouded GI Jack’s face. “Well, yes, ma’am, I reckon so, but we don’t need no ambulance.”

“If Popbottle is hurt—”

The funny old man blinked. “Popbottle ain’t hurt.”

“My friend is correct. I’ve suffered no ill effect.” Ulysses E. “Popbottle” Jones grasped the top of the heavy metal trash bin

and peered over the edge, his red miner's hat tipped to one eye. "But we do require assistance."

Curiosity got the better of Sophie and she tiptoed up for a look. The sight she beheld chipped off a piece of her teacher's heart. Cowering against the side of the bin and surrounded by trash, a young boy, maybe eight or nine, clutched a book against his chest and stared out with round blue eyes. Poorly dressed for the cold day, his shaggy blond hair hung limp and dirty around a pale, thin face smeared with something yellow, probably mustard from the piece of old hamburger gripped in his other hand.

"The small fellow won't allow me near him," Popbottle said with some chagrin as he hopped to the street. "Must be my unusual attire or perhaps the miner's lamp. I thought one of you ladies would fare better."

"Probably thought you were an alien from Jupiter," Ida June grumbled. Barely tall enough to see inside, she chinned herself like a gymnast, peered in, then slithered back to earth, muttering. "My nephew will know what to do." Whirling toward the town square she barked loud enough to be heard over the

din of a city truck rattling past. “Kade, on the double! We need help.”

Sophie, too concerned with the child to wait, said, “GI, boost me up.”

The gentle old man, still strong as the soldier he’d been, patted his bent knee. “Foot here.”

She grabbed the top of the trash bin and vaulted up and in to slide unceremoniously onto a pile of damp newspapers. She rested there for a few seconds to study the little boy and gauge his reaction to her presence. Dampness soaked through the back of her sweater. She’d need a trip home before schooltime. Not that her clothes mattered at the moment.

When the little boy didn’t scramble away, she slowly moved toward him, picking her way across the junk, careful not to turn an ankle in the heeled boots.

“Hello, there,” she said in her kindest voice. “My name is Sophie. What’s your name?”

The question was met with a silent stare.

Sophie went into a crouch, inches from the child, but careful not to touch until he was ready. Holding back was hard. She was a toucher, a hugger, believing children needed physical connection. “I’m a nice person, honey. You can talk to me and I’ll help you.”

Still only that bleak stare.

“I’m a teacher here in Redemption. Fifth grade. What grade are you in?”

Nothing.

Outside the trash bin voices rose and fell—Ida June’s spit and vinegar, and a chorus of males. By now, someone had likely called the police station, and Sophie worried the sight of an officer might frighten the boy even more. He was like a wary, wild thing, cornered and ready to bolt at the first opportunity.

Metal scraped against the outer bin. Someone else was scrambling up the side. The boy’s gaze shifted to a spot behind Sophie just as that someone dropped to the surface with catlike quiet.

Sophie glanced over one shoulder to see the trim, lithe, dark-as-a-shadow nephew of Ida June Click. His eyes, the same espresso brown as his hair, met hers in a narrow squint. There was something lethal about Kade McKendrick, and she remembered the rumor that he’d been a big-city cop or in the DEA or some such. He looked more like a man who’d been on the wrong side of the law than a police officer.

“The cookie lady,” he said with an unsmiling nod.

Sophie offered a cheeky grin. “You’ll order some yet. It’s a great cause.” Every year she and her fifth graders baked and sold Christmas cookies and contributed the proceeds to charity.

He went to his heels beside her and hitched his chin toward the child. In the bin, large as it was, three was a crowd. “Who’s your friend?”

She tilted her face toward his, noticed the tense lines around his eyes and mouth. “One frightened boy.”

Kade turned a quiet look on the child. “Hey, buddy, what’s your name?”

Sophie waited, but when the child’s response was more silence, she said, “He’s not said a word to me, either.”

“What’s that he’s holding?” Kade gestured, stirring the scent of warm, working male and clean cotton shirt, a welcome respite from the stink of trash.

“A book.”

“Good work, Sherlock,” he said, lightly enough that Sophie would have laughed if she hadn’t been so concerned for the child. “What kind of book and why is he gripping it like a lifeline?”

Sophie wondered the same thing.

To the boy, she said, “I’m a teacher, honey. I love books. What kind of story are you reading?”

He shifted slightly, his gaze flickering to the oversize book.

“Will you show it to me? Maybe we can read it together over breakfast? Are you hungry?” She extended an upturned palm and waited. She was surprisingly aware of Kade squatted in the trash next to her. She knew little about him, other than rumors and that he was good-looking in a black panther kind of way. An interesting energy simmered, in this of all places, as his arm brushed hers.

She ignored the sensation and smiled encouragement at the little boy, all the while praying for guidance and a way to connect.

Slowly, with stark hope and a dose of anxiety, the towheaded boy relinquished the picture book. Sophie shifted nearer, relaxing some and moving easily into teacher mode. She knew books, knew kids, knew how to relate.

“This is beautiful.” She touched the brightly colored cover. “Is it your favorite?”

For the first time, the boy responded. His head bobbed up and down. He scooted closer and opened the cover of the popular Christ-

mas tale. Sophie shot a glance at Kade, who offered a quick, approving hitch of his chin. For some reason, his encouragement pleased her. Not that she wanted to impress Ida June's great-nephew, but they *were* in this crowded Dumpster together. The thought made her giggle. The males gave her identical, bewildered looks.

"Look what we have here," Sophie said, her finger on the flyleaf inscription. "*To Davey. Happy Birthday. Love, Mama.* You must be Davey."

Eagerly, the child nodded, his face lighting up.

Someone rapped sharply on the side of the trash bin. The sound echoed like a metallic gong. Davey jumped, then shrank back into himself.

"Are you two taking up residence in there?"

Sophie glanced up. Three pairs of eyes peered back from above the edge, watching the scene below.

"Ida June has the patience of a housefly," Kade muttered, but rose and offered a hand to the little boy. "Come on, Davey, I'm hungry. Let's get some pancakes."

Davey hesitated only a moment before putting his small hand in Kade's much larger one.

Then, with eyes wide and unsure, he reached for Sophie on the other side. Body tense, his fingers trembled. Over his head, Kade and Sophie exchanged glances. She wasn't sure what she expected from Kade McKendrick, but anger burned from eyes dark with a devastation she couldn't understand.

In that one look, Sophie received a stunning message. Davey was lost and alone. So was Kade McKendrick.