

The background is a warm, golden-brown bokeh with soft, out-of-focus lights. On the left, there are green pine branches with gold and silver ornaments. In the bottom right, a white cup of coffee sits on a saucer with a star anise and a cinnamon stick. The overall mood is cozy and holiday-themed.

Kirsten
Clark

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Cup of Joe

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A Christmas Cup of Joe
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Dedication

To my mom, who has always been my biggest fan.

I love you.

1

Simon Jenkins shivered with cold. After years of living on the streets of Bunker Hill, he knew all the best spots in the park, and the bench where he currently sat was one of them. Sure, the bench did nothing to improve where the mercury hung in the thermometer, but it was surrounded by trees to cut the wind and was tucked away behind the pond—away from onlookers aside from the odd dog-walker and that had to count for something. And that something was solitude, which Simon preferred as it helped him avoid three types of people: one, the upstanding citizens who loved to fix him with judgmental stares when he took a slug of vodka; two, the winter do-gooders who handed out gloves and scarves and loved to cast long looks of pity his way; and three, the folks leading busy, important lives that loved to look either away, or right through him, as they hurried by.

Simon didn't know which was worse, but he hated them all. But when he glanced up to see a woman very clearly approaching his bench, her mocha-colored skin glowing in the cold, her red lips glistening like rubies in the crisp winter sunlight, a bright blue beanie pulled down low over her ears, Simon's first thought was, *she's beautiful*, followed by his second thought, *go away*.

Simon huddled deeper into the tattered sleeping

bag wrapped around his shoulders, and put on his best leave me alone face.

“Hi there,” she said with a funny little wave.

Simon’s eyebrows drew together. Couldn’t she read social cues? Or was his expression not sufficiently frigid? He scowled, rearranging his features in a bid to appear more menacing.

Clearly undeterred by his attempt at hostility, she continued her approach, moving purposefully in his direction.

“How are you doing today?” she asked. A small, misty cloud of breath hung in the air where her words had been a moment before.

“I’m col—” Simon began, but the woman didn’t give him time to speak, instead she thrust an overfull plastic freezer bag into his unsuspecting arms.

“Here,” she said a bit sheepishly. “This...it’s for you.”

The bag bulged at the seams, and Simon carefully turned it over in his mittened hands, examining the contents. His eyes widened. Inside was a stick of full-sized deodorant, chocolate covered almonds, a pack of gum, a toothbrush and paste, hand warmers, band aids, and a veritable treasure trove of other items.

Simon’s initial instinct was to thrust the bag back into the woman’s arms, to tell her to sod off, to go, preferably to somewhere far away. Yet he paused, took a breath, tried to focus on the words that swirled around him.

This.

It’s for you.

Despite his current state, his parents had raised him with Christian morals, and they'd also been sticklers for proper manners. Simon glanced up at the woman's face.

She flashed him a smile, and he found himself staring at her ruby-red lips. While he disliked the intrusion, he had to admit that this woman was beautiful, and it wasn't every day, or any day for that matter, that a beautiful woman sought him out, smiled at him, and thrust a bag of gifts into his arms.

His voice was crackly from the cold, his mouth unused to forming kind words, but he managed to pull himself together enough to say, "Well, thank you very much. And what is this for?"

"It's a blessing bag. For Christmas." She flashed yet another of those dazzling smiles at Simon. It's OK, the smile seemed to say, I don't judge.

"What's a blessing bag?" It had been years since Simon had thought about blessings, or celebrated Christmas. He'd been raised in the church, his mama and his daddy taking him and his brothers and sister by the hands and walking them the four blocks from their little townhouse to their church to attend the 10AM service every Sunday, but that had been a lifetime ago. It had been a simpler, more innocent time when he still believed in the grace of God. For a long time now, life had shown him the ugly truth about faith: it was meaningless. Simon knew that God and blessings weren't real. Because if they were, he wouldn't live with such pain.

The lady with the mocha skin and the blue beanie

pulled down low over her ears waved her hand impatiently in front of his face, bringing him back to the present.

“Hello? Did you hear me? It’s...you know, a blessing bag.”

Simon crossed his arms, but his mouth turned up at the edges despite his best effort to remain surly. This woman truly didn’t believe that he didn’t know what a silly blessing bag was.

She planted her hands on her hips and cocked her head to the side, eyebrows raised comically. “You’ve truly never received one of these before?”

“Never,” he said, his voice suddenly serious.

“They’re a gift to remind you that God loves you,” she said, her tone matching his. “That you are worthy of blessings.”

He did not answer right away, but when he did, he kept his eyes downcast, focused on his mittened hands. “Thanks for the bag,” Simon said gruffly, “but I ain’t blessed, and I sure ain’t worthy. At least not anymore.” Simon could admit to needing the items in the bag—that they would be awfully useful in helping him through the current cold snap—but admitting that he was worthy of blessings? He let out a brittle laugh. Now that was a joke.

“Well sure you are,” the lady said ignoring his outburst, her mouth puckering in protest. “Blessed, I mean. We’re all blessed, actually. That’s the amazing thing. God loves each and every one of us. And not just at Christmas time.”

Simon looked up at her with pity. She was

beautiful and kind, but she sure didn't understand the ways of the world. She sure didn't understand the suffering and misfortunes that seemed to befall some people. People like him.

The woman stuck out a mittened hand. "My name's Sandra. Sandra Williams."

Simon reached out and they shook. Despite their skin being separated by multiple layers of wool, the presence of her palm against his own sent a jolt of heat up his arm, tingling first in his fingers, then spreading quickly all the way into his chest and towards his heart.

Simon felt his head shake; it was as if he no longer had control of his own body. Even in the freezing temperatures, this woman's presence inextricably warmed him. Although vodka (his drink of choice) did feel warm as it slid down his throat, the feeling was fleeting, and always led to the eventual numbness he depended on. Situations like this were exactly why he liked to stay away from the upstanding citizens and the do-gooders and the busy, important types, and any other kind of people, actually.

Humans meant contact.

Contact meant the possibility of connection.

And connection meant heartache.

But Sandra wasn't like the upstanding citizens or the do-gooders, or the busy-important types; there was no pity in her eyes when she looked at him. She was clearly different.

"It's nice to meet you, Sandra. The name's Simon B. Jenkins," he said finally.

She nodded, and then cocked her head to the side. "Just B? Not Brian or Benjamin or perhaps Benedict?"

Her tone was playful, and it took Simon aback. So she was beautiful and kind and funny.

"Maybe Bradbury or Brent or Beau?"

"Just plain old B," he chuckled. It felt good to laugh in a joyful way. It'd been a long time since he'd done that.

"Would it be all right if I sat with you for a while Simon just-plain-old-B Jenkins?"

It was his turn to nod.

Sandra sat beside Simon on the wooden bench in companionable silence, simply braving the chill of the winter day with him. It felt nice, Simon thought in surprise, not to have to brave the cold alone. It felt nice to sit beside someone without feeling the need to fill up the silence with chatter. It felt nice to be together. With her.

"You know," she said after a while, "I didn't always think I was blessed either." This made Simon's ears perk up.

"You didn't? Usually, the people I see out and about in the city parks are privileged. That is, they've led safe, cushy lives, Miss Williams."

He glanced sideways to see if she was still listening. It was a mystery to him why she was willingly sitting outside in the cold, let alone wanting to hear what he had to say. Generally, no one wanted to even acknowledge his presence. Easier to ignore problems when you can't see them and all of that.

She patted his leg. "I'm listening. And please, call

me Sandra.”

The jolt of heat he’d felt from her handshake returned, this time tingling up his leg, then spreading skyward through his torso and towards his heart.

Odd that, but it was enough for Simon to continue. “All right, Sandra. The do-gooders, they want to help some down and out people—people like me—so they can get back in their fancy cars and drive back to their giant homes with three-car garages and twelve-foot Christmas trees and security systems and congratulate themselves for their charity over a steak dinner washed down with expensive bourbon.”

Her face hardened. “Not me. That’s not why I’m out here today.”

“Then why are you out here, Sandra?”

“Why do you think I’m here?” She tossed his question back at him.

“I can see—can tell—that you’re different from the rest, but, well, I’m a bit puzzled.”

“Do you think, Simon, that maybe I’m out here because I haven’t always been in such a good place myself?” Her question could have been biting, but her tone was kind, gentle.

“So, you’re telling me that you’ve been through tough times but you still have your faith?”

Sandra’s brown eyes twinkled with delight that he’d understood. “That’s right!”

Who was this woman? And what did she have in her life to have such twinkly eyes about? Simon wasn’t sure, but he did know one thing: he wanted to make her eyes light up like that again. It had been a long

time since he'd let anyone get close enough to make real contact, to make him feel the warmth of human kindness. The warmth of vodka was fleeting, but this, this was a warmth that was lasting—and the woman that brought it had marched right up and into his heart.

Into his heart? Where in the world did that come from? And what was happening to him?

"God's love for us certainly isn't reserved for the good times," she continued, with Simon hanging from her every word. For the first time in a long time, something had sparked in him. Whatever she knew about God, it made her eyes sparkle, and he wanted to know it too.

"I'll tell you what," she said, suddenly standing and stomping her feet to get the blood flowing. "How about we head over to the coffee shop that's a block to the east. Holy Grounds, it's called. We can warm up, get something to drink, and I'll tell you my story?"

Simon's cheeks darkened. "My treat," Sandra said quickly.

"Your treat," Simon echoed. He'd follow Sandra anywhere if she'd tell him the secret behind the light in her eyes. "You know," he heard himself saying as he stood, "a cup of joe does sound nice."

2

Sandra Williams stood in line at Holy Grounds, surveying the menu board with mock interest. She came to the little shop often enough to know exactly what she wanted—a London Fog, extra hot, made with almond milk— but she needed something concrete and familiar to stare at in a bid to slow her rapidly beating heart.

She hadn't meant to go for coffee this morning. She hadn't even meant to leave the warm comfort of her little apartment on her Friday off, but the tug in her heart to take a blessing bag and go to the park had been intense.

At first, she'd tried to ignore it, rolling over and pulling the fluffy feather duvet over her head. That didn't work.

She'd tried to focus on reading a book. That didn't work either.

Finally, she'd tried to busy herself with making pancakes, but the tug in her heart demanded so much of her attention that the pancakes ended up burnt and in the bottom of the trashcan, much to the chagrin of her roommates, and her cat.

OK, God, message received, she'd finally thought, I'll go to the park.

Trudging through the ankle-deep snow with a blessing bag in hand a few minutes later, Sandra had grinned. God obviously had a plan. And whoever it was that needed the physical gifts in the bag would also receive an even greater gift: the message of God's love.

What she hadn't understood, or would have ever imagined in a thousand years, was that she'd encounter a man whose looks made her giddy: the square chin, the broad shoulders, the dark eyes holding a maelstrom of pain. Dressed in a crisp plaid jacket and dark blue jeans, Simon smelled of fresh air and spicy soap. He didn't look like any kind of addict she'd ever seen. He may have been frosty at first—not to mention sporting that old plaid sleeping bag wrapped around his shoulders—but his raw honesty had captivated her, and the touch of his mittened hand against hers made her heart race like a cheetah running freely on the African savannah. She wanted to know his story. No, scratch that. She needed to know his story.

Rolling her eyes heavenward, she suppressed a giggle. *OK, God. You've got me. What exactly are You planning here?*

"Sandra, my favorite customer!" the barista chirped, beckoning Sandra toward the counter with a crooked finger and a jingle of her festive necklace.

"Hi Bridgette." The barista may have greeted every regular the same way, but her enthusiasm always made Sandra feel extra special, and Sandra would often stop by on the way to work or seek

Bridgette out at church and Bible study for a quick chat as a result.

“What can I get started for you today? And perhaps more importantly,” she said, jabbing her chin in Simon’s direction, “What can I get started for him? And who is he? Spill.”

Sandra glanced over her shoulder to where her new acquaintance sat, his chin resting in his palm as he gazed out the window, the blessing bag at his elbow.

“That’s Simon.” The sound of his name on her tongue sent a delicious little shiver up her spine. Simon. Homeless Simon. Could-be-a-wife-beater Simon. Really, she knew nothing about him. Maybe he would follow her home and murder her... *No*. God led her to this man. She wasn’t afraid of him.

Simon, Simon, Simon. She was acting no better than a schoolgirl doodling the name of a crush in a notebook. It felt as if his name had always been on her lips.

It just felt, well, right. No, she didn’t fear him, she was totally crushing on him.

Bridgette gave her a knowing look, arching one perfectly penciled brow. “And who is this handsome Simon?”

“It’s a long story, but I felt called this morning, and when I let God lead the way, I found him sitting in Dickensfield Park. Cold. And alone.”

“Oh, Sandra. He needs you. But,” Bridgette said with a wink, “you might just need him, too.” She tapped one impeccably polished nail on the counter with each word she spoke, and then turned, snapping

her gum. "I mean, I'm sure he's nice but he looks homeless." Bridget leaned forward. "I usually don't encourage my friends to go trawling in the park for men." She shook her head as if to clear it. "No, this is a God thing. Who am I to judge a man based on appearance alone? Now, what would the two of you like to drink?"

~*~

"Cream or sugar?" Sandra asked, slipping into the chair across from Simon.

"I take my coffee black." He grunted appreciatively.

"You bet. You seem like a take-your-coffee-black kind of guy." She slid a steaming mug and one of Holy Grounds's famous cranberry gingerbread muffins across the table, offering him a smile.

"Always have been," he replied with a wink that made her stomach do a funny little flip.

Simon lifted the mug, holding it reverently under his nose to inhale the smoky scent before taking a sip.

Sandra thought back to their meeting in the park—how he'd assessed her carefully with his big, dark eyes, like a timid puppy dog just learning to trust people. And while he'd been frosty at first, he'd warmed significantly when she'd begun to speak from the heart. *You were right, God. I mean, You always are, but I'm glad I went down to the park. This man needs to know Your love.*

"Ahh, that warms the soul," he said. "Now, I

believe you, Sandra, promised to tell me your secret.”

“Ahh, but there’s no secret, Simon. Just a story.”

“OK, then tell me your story.”

“Right now, I’m happy and comfortable,” she began, wrapping her hands around her mug, readying herself to share memories that she often shuttered away. “But I didn’t always have much. You could say that life hasn’t ever been easy for me. Growing up, my grandmother was my only family anywhere near Bunker Hill. Every day I thank the good Lord for putting her in my life. She raised me up right, took me to church, dutifully sent me to school...”

Sandra stopped, shoulders sagging, and sipped her London Fog. Even today, so many years later, her heart still ached at the loss of her Gran, especially around Christmas. She glanced up, searching for Simon’s eyes, remembering the pain she’d seen there earlier.

His gaze locked onto hers. And, although it made her seem awfully bold, she held his gaze. In his eyes she saw a kindred spirit with pain that matched her own, but she saw something else too. Something that flickered around the edges.

Was he attracted to her, too? Sandra felt her cheeks flush and looked away. The table. It would be safer to look at the table.

Admittedly, Sandra had never paid particular attention to the tables at Holy Grounds before, but she couldn’t help but notice the wooden surface was darkened with use and scratched full of graffiti hearts filled with lovers’ initials.

"I was nineteen when my Gran died," she continued, gamely plowing onward. "Once she was gone, I had to sell the house, the car, the electronics, anything and everything we had to pay the medical bills from her cancer treatment and the lawyer bills from the lawsuit. It was the hardest..."

It was then that Sandra faltered, the beginnings of tears pooling in her eyes.

Simon reached across the table and placed his large hand over hers. This time, his touch was not encumbered by wool mittens, and the intensity of his skin against hers took her breath away. Literally. Sandra gasped, and then her tummy did that funny little flip again, spinning like the high setting on the clothes dryer in her apartment. What a strange feeling, she thought, this mixture of sorrow and attraction all at once.

"Lawsuit?" he asked.

Keep speaking. You can do it.

"Yeah. Did you know that the talc in baby powder causes cancer? It's proven, but the company tried to sweep it all under the rug." Sandra shuddered inwardly. Knowing she was losing her gran had been hard enough, but the lawsuit layered on top of the grief had been almost too much to bear.

"But baby powder?"

"My gran—Sally—she used it every day. She always said it kept her fresh. But it turns out all those little particles of talc built up in her ovaries."

Simon blinked. "Oh Sandra, I'm so sorry."

"The world is full of bad people who often do bad

things," she said carefully. "But it isn't a bad world. God makes sure of that."

Simon nodded, and Sandra couldn't help but notice a change in his eyes. The pain was there, and the fire still flickered around the edges, but there was a new lightness there too.

She took a deep breath. "I moved into assisted housing at a project near the college, and waitressed at two different jobs to pay my way through school. It was six long, challenging years to get my diploma—I had to work so many hours to pay the bills that I couldn't take a full course load. But I did it. I'm a practical nurse, and every day I go to a job that I love." She giggled and Simon shot her a funny look.

"What? I know I sound corny, but it's all true. I work in a nursing home where I make a real difference."

At that, Simon sat up a little straighter in his chair, a gesture she interpreted as deference.

"In fact," she continued, picking up speed, "some of those seniors are my very best friends. And I come home to a clean, safe apartment with two roommates who have become more like family."

Simon gave her hand a squeeze, and Sandra smiled before gently pulling it away and wrapping it back around her cup. If she was going to finish her story, and this last part was very important, she had to have her faculties about her.

"I wouldn't have made it through without my faith, Simon. Even on the hardest days I felt blessed. Blessed with God's love and so thankful for the

strength he gave me to keep going when I thought I couldn't bear another single moment of struggle."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"How can you believe in God's love when such horrible things have happened to you?"

Sandra nodded, impressed by his candor. "Simon, believing in God's love doesn't mean you have the perfect life. In fact, it's when we're at our worst that we need his love the most. Trust me, I've lived it. I know."

"I've lived it too," he said softly, taking off his hat and shaking his head. "But I don't know."

Sandra's heart broke a little, and to Simon's obvious relief, she didn't pry.

Instead, she fixed her brown eyes on his and waited. His pain flowed palpably across the table, not in a bid to distract from her own, but in solidarity. Simon's heart seemed to say, I'm also a member of this horrible club. I see your pain because I carry it too.

Good grief, Sandra thought. He's so handsome. Sure, Simon was rough around the edges, but she could see that his soul was good and kind. Those brown eyes—the same color of the dark coffee in his cup—showed her everything she needed to know.

Simon sighed, and then the silence stretched on. And on. It was entirely different than the companionable silence on the park bench. This silence was full of questions, crackling with hope and possibility.

"I didn't used to be this way, you know," Simon said finally, pulling his hat back over his ears.

Sandra regarded him with a serious expression. "Life isn't always fair, and it isn't always fun. But I know that God loves each and every one of us," she said with conviction.

"I can't help but think that God loves some people more than others," Simon replied flatly.

Sandra had the distinct impression that he was referring to the do-gooders he'd talked about earlier.

"Oh, Simon! When I woke up this morning, I felt God speak to me. I felt called to take a blessing bag and come to the very bench in Dickensfield Park where I found you."

He looked at her incredulously, pushing his chair back from the table. The legs grated against the tile floor. "I think I'd better head back to the park."

"But it's true!" she exclaimed passionately.

He reached towards her, lifting the back of her hand to his lips like they were some sort of courting regency couple. Then he picked up the blessing bag, tucked the festive muffin in his pocket, and was gone.

Sandra remained, sitting alone in the middle of the coffee shop. She pressed one hand to her chest, felt her heart pounding like the beat of a thousand bass drums. It was full of empathy for his pain, and of excitement for the future. These feelings were complicated, yes, but it was more than she'd felt in a long time. I feel alive, she realized with a start. Sandra turned her face towards the roof.

Thank You, Lord, for sending me to Simon. Or did You send Simon to me?

Either way, thank You.