



Prologue

It happened every year, late at night, long after darkness had settled over the small town of Pine River. No one knew who it was that got up in the icy midnight hours to erect the towering evergreen, its branches thick and full. But each year it would appear in the town square, the green pine and the strings of glowing lights a lone splash of color against the slate gray of the Town Hall and the powdery snow. The first person to see the tree was always Harold Dobbs, the village trash collector, who began his day before the rays of the frosty sunrise spread across the blanket of snow covering the town. The sight of the tree would warm him against the biting cold of the Pine River winter and he would linger, watching the first of the

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town workers arrive, happiness blooming across each of their faces as they witnessed what for them was nothing short of a miracle: the Angel Tree.

The instructions were simple, and by now the townsfolk knew them by heart. People in need should tie their wishes to the tree and those able to help should take those wishes and make them come true. A boy needing new basketball sneakers for the championship game would write down his request on a piece of paper, size and favorite colors included. Then he would carefully attach it to one of the springy branches of the tree. Those first few hours the boughs would remain empty. But then it would begin, the scraps of paper slowly cloaking the tree as though a swarm of white butterflies had stopped for a rest. Then over the next few days and weeks the scraps would dwindle down as helpers came and took off wishes, beginning the work of making them come true. Each year the Angel Tree brought great joy to the little town, felt by those who received much-needed help and those who could experience the singular pleasure of giving that help. Even those who merely witnessed the lives of their neighbors improve felt touched by the magic of the Angel Tree. It was a tradition the town looked forward to every year, holding its breath just the

THE ANGEL TREE

tiniest bit until that morning when the tree appeared, its presence as mysterious and wonderful as Christmas itself.

There were always those who boasted of plans to stake out the town square and discover who was behind the tree, of course. But in the end no one ever followed through. Even the most curious children knew that whoever was behind the Angel Tree wanted to keep their role a secret. And so it was that each year the Angel Tree appeared, wishes were made and granted, and the town of Pine River had just a little bit more to celebrate when Christmas arrived.

Until the year when everything changed.