



Christmas Leads Us Home A Novel Adapted from the stage play by Fred Passmore. Copyright 2013 Sheep Laughs Studios

Chapter 1: Waiting

The snow fell softly outside the window of Room 112 at Shady Acres Nursing Home, blanketing the world in a hush that felt both peaceful and lonely. It was Christmas Eve, and Trudy McCloud slowly and painfully walked into her room holding onto her walker, moving over to sit in her favorite armchair, a faded shawl draped over her shoulders against the perpetual chill that had settled into her bones years ago. A small artificial tree stood on the table beside her, its tiny lights blinking colorfully in the dim lamplight. A handful of wrapped packages rested beneath it—gifts from the home's Christmas party earlier that day.

Trudy's hands, twisted slightly by the same progressive condition that had stolen her mother's mobility, and eventually her life, rested in her lap. She glanced at the clock on the wall for what felt like the hundredth time.

She'll come, Trudy told herself. Cassie promised.

Through the open door, her younger sister Gladys stepped in, still bundled in her coat from the cold outside. Gladys had always been the sturdier one—healthier, more energetic, the one who could still drive and host the big family gatherings. Behind her came Joe, Gladys's husband, carrying a shopping bag filled with small, brightly wrapped boxes.

"There you are," Gladys said warmly, helping Trudy settle more comfortably into the chair after her trip to the hairdresser. "You look lovely. That perm turned out real nice."

Trudy managed a smile. "Thank you for taking me. I know it's a lot of trouble."

"No trouble at all," Gladys replied, though her eyes carried that familiar mix of affection and worry. She glanced at the walker parked beside the chair. "You really should have let us take the wheelchair today. All that walking—"

"I can still walk," Trudy said quietly but firmly. "While I still can, I'm going to."

Joe set the bag of gifts on the table and gave Trudy a kind nod. "Brought these in for you. The folks at the party thought you hung the moon."

After a few more minutes of gentle conversation, Joe cleared his throat and checked his watch. "Gladys, honey, we'd better head on if we're gonna make it back in time for everybody."

Gladys hesitated, her hand resting on Trudy's shoulder. "Trudy... why don't you come home with us tonight? The kids and grandkids will all be there. It'll be noisy and chaotic and wonderful. You could stay through Christmas Day. Cassie could come there too—we'd make her welcome."

Trudy looked up at her sister, gratitude softening the lines of pain etched on her face. For a moment she imagined it: the warm living room filled with laughter, the smell of ham and cookies, the chaos of little voices. Part of her longed to say yes.

But she shook her head.

"I appreciate it more than you know," she said. "But I need to be here when Cassie comes. It's been a whole year, Gladys. A whole year since I've seen my girl."

Gladys exchanged a quick, doubtful glance with Joe. They both knew the history. Cassie's troubles. The rehab stay. The distance that had grown between her and the rest of the family.

"She's welcome at our house," Gladys offered again, gently. "You both are."

“I know,” Trudy replied. “But Cassie... she’s not comfortable around everybody yet. Not since everything that happened. Christmas is about the only time I can count on her showing up. I have to be here.”

Gladys sighed, but she didn’t argue. She leaned down and wrapped her arms around her older sister, holding her a little longer than usual. Joe did the same, his big frame careful around Trudy’s fragile one.

“Merry Christmas, Trudy,” he said gruffly. “Call us if you change your mind. Or if you need anything at all.”

“I will. Merry Christmas to you both. Give the kids and grandbabies a hug for me.”

When the door clicked shut behind them, the room felt suddenly larger and quieter. The little radio on the table played a soft instrumental version of “Silent Night.” Trudy leaned her head back against the chair, her eyes drifting to the tiny lights on the Christmas tree.

Alone again.

She closed her eyes, and the years began to slip away like snow melting on warm glass. Twenty years, nearly. Back when her body still obeyed her. Back when the house was full of noise and life and hope... and when she had waited for someone else who never quite came home when expected.

Because Christmas had always been about waiting for the One who would make all things right. About a Father who gave the greatest Gift so that wayward children could find their way home.

And if God could bring His Son into a broken world to redeem it, surely He could bring her daughter back to her.

Trudy whispered the words like a prayer into the softly lit room, words that she truly believed: “Christmas leads us home.”

Chapter 2: A House Full of Christmas

Nearly twenty years earlier, the McCloud family home glowed with warmth and tradition. The living room was a wonderland of Christmas cheer. A towering evergreen stood proudly in the corner, its branches heavy with handmade ornaments, shimmering tinsel, and strings of colorful lights. The scent of pine mingled with cinnamon, vanilla, and the savory promise of dinner still cooking in the kitchen.

Younger Trudy McCloud moved through the room with purpose, carrying a tray loaded with Christmas treats—thumbprint cookies, pecan sandies, and fudge brownies. She set it on the coffee table with a satisfied smile. Her husband Jack followed close behind, his cheeks still rosy from shoveling snow off the driveway. Right behind him came her father—Granddaddy to the

grandchildren—his arms loaded with shopping bags brimming with wrapped presents. He and Jack began arranging them beneath the tree, laughing and joking as they worked.

The front door burst open, letting in a rush of cold air and a wave of noise. Trudy's brother Clyde arrived with his wife and their three energetic children, who sounded like a small army. The kids immediately swarmed Trudy, Jack, and Granddaddy with enthusiastic hugs and rapid-fire chatter before racing to the tree to search for gifts with their names on them.

From the kitchen spilled Trudy's sister Gladys's four children, faces sticky from licking cake batter bowls, squealing with delight as they reunited with their cousins. The room quickly filled with the beautiful chaos only a large family can create.

Last to enter was Cassie.

At sixteen, Trudy's daughter moved with reluctant steps, offering tight, obligatory smiles and quick hugs to her relatives. She found a spot on the edge of the couch and sat with her arms loosely crossed, her expression carefully arranged into one of practiced boredom. While the rest of the family buzzed with excitement, Cassie looked as though she were enduring a dull obligation rather than celebrating Christmas Eve with the people who loved her most.

Trudy watched her daughter from across the room, a quiet ache settling in her chest even as she smiled and chatted with everyone. Her mind kept drifting to the empty chair that should have belonged to their son, Trent. He was overseas with the Army this Christmas, and though he had promised to call, the disappointment of his absence lingered like a shadow behind the twinkling lights.

Granddaddy's voice rose above the chatter. "Well, since everyone who can be here is here, I reckon it's time we get started with our Christmas traditions!"

The family settled quickly—adults claiming seats on the sofas and chairs, children plopping down on the floor. Granddaddy remained in his favorite recliner, the heart of every gathering. He bowed his head, and the room grew reverent.

"Dear Heavenly Father," he began, his voice warm and steady with years of faith, "how we love You and thank You for this time together. For another year You have given us, and all the health and happiness it contained... for Your provision and help over the rough spots. We thank You for each person here, and for everything they bring to this family. We love them, each and every one. We thank You for another opportunity to come together at this most blessed time of the year, to celebrate the coming into the world of Your wonderful Son, Jesus. Grace us with Your presence, and bless us all. In the name of Jesus we pray... Amen."

A peaceful stillness lingered for a moment after the "Amen." Hymnbooks were passed around, and soon the room filled with the sound of familiar carols sung in slightly off-key but heartfelt voices. Trudy sang along, stealing glances at Cassie. Her daughter mouthed the words half-heartedly, her eyes distant.

When the last note of the final carol faded, the hymnbooks were collected. Laughter and conversation resumed. Granddaddy reached for the large, well-worn family Bible on the coffee table. As soon as the children saw him open its pages, they scooted closer, gathering eagerly at his feet.

Trudy's heart swelled at the sight, even as worry tugged at her. Cassie had joined in the singing only marginally, and now she sat apart again, examining her nails with exaggerated disinterest.

Granddaddy turned to the Gospel of Luke and began to read, his voice rich and solemn. The family listened quietly. When he reached the part about Mary giving birth to her firstborn son and laying Him in a manger, the oldest grandchild reverently carried a large doll wrapped in swaddling clothes and placed it gently in the empty manger beside the tree.

Trudy watched the sacred little moment with misty eyes. Most of the family listened with solemn reverence. Cassie, however, seemed to catch herself actually enjoying the story. She quickly looked away, adopting an expression of cool detachment once more.

As Granddaddy finished reading, the children clapped enthusiastically. One of the smallest girls raised her hand high.

"Granddaddy, what about the Wise Men?" she asked. "They're in our nativity set, but you didn't read about them!"

Granddaddy chuckled and patted her head. "That's a very good question, sweetheart. And you're about to find out the answer."

Gladys began herding the excited children toward the kitchen to help them into their simple robes for the annual Wise Men reenactment. Cassie rose reluctantly, knowing she had been assigned the role of Mary. She dragged her feet as she followed.

Just then, Trudy's mother hurried out of the kitchen, holding the telephone high with a beaming smile.

"It's Trent!" she announced excitedly. "He's calling from overseas!"

Trudy's heart leaped. She took the phone with trembling hands. "Hello?"

The sound of her son's voice, crackly but warm across thousands of miles, brought tears to her eyes. She spoke with him for several minutes while the family continued chatting and laughing around her, giving her space but staying close. At one point, she held the receiver up so everyone could shout, "Merry Christmas, Trent! We love you!"

Trent sent his love back and asked about the traditions. Trudy told him they had sung carols and just heard the Nativity story. The kids were getting ready to act out the Wise Men scene. She mentioned that Cassie was playing Mary and that Uncle Clyde would soon appear as Santa. Trent laughed heartily at the memory of the year he had yanked off his uncle's beard as a boy.

Before they said goodbye, Trent asked about his little sister. Trudy glanced at Cassie and answered honestly that she had been withdrawing since he left. Trent reassured her that Cassie was just being a typical teenager and would come around.

The call ended too soon. Trudy hung up, a cold shiver running through her despite the warmth of the room. For a brief moment, fear gripped her heart—that this might be the last time she heard her son’s voice. She pushed the thought away, reminding herself that she had prayed and had to trust God with Trent’s safety.

Her gaze returned to Cassie, who now sat with her head propped on her hand, making a dramatic show of boredom.

Trudy walked over and sat beside her daughter. “You don’t seem to be enjoying yourself tonight, sweetheart.”

Cassie shrugged. “My friends are having a real Christmas party. They invited me. This…” She waved a hand vaguely at the room. “This is just the same old stories we’ve heard a million times. It’s boring hanging around relatives we barely see except at Christmas.”

Trudy kept her voice gentle. “Family is important, Cassie. Friends come and go, but family is forever. These memories last a lot longer than one night with friends.”

Cassie rolled her eyes. “You never had friends, so you don’t understand. Your idea of fun is just… religious stuff. It’s such a downer. It just makes me feel bad.”

Trudy opened her mouth to respond, but before she could, Gladys called out from the kitchen, “We’re out of flour for the pies!”

Clyde jumped up immediately. “I’ll run to the store and grab some!”

Trudy knew the familiar ruse well—it was Clyde’s cue to slip away and change into his Santa suit. The children, however, never seemed to catch on.

Granddaddy checked the clock. “It’s just about time for the Wise Men skit. Better get those costumes on!”

The children hurried off noisily. Cassie stood with a heavy sigh and followed, clearly dreading her role as Mary.

Trudy watched her go, a deep sadness settling over her. She could see now, looking back, how the seeds of rebellion had already taken root in her daughter’s heart that night—small at first, but destined to grow into something twisted and bitter that would one day poison her relationships, her health, and her peace.

The memory faded.

Chapter 3: A Daughter's Visit

The afternoon light outside the nursing home window had begun to fade into the soft gray of Christmas Eve evening. In her small room at Shady Acres, Trudy McCloud remained in her armchair, the Santa hat Miss Jolene had playfully placed on her head now slightly askew. Faint sounds of Christmas carols and laughter drifted down the hallway from the activity room where the residents were celebrating. Trudy's heart longed to join them, but she stayed put, afraid that if she left even for a moment, she might miss Cassie.

The door opened.

Trudy's face brightened with hope, only to soften with gentle disappointment when she saw it was her friend Miss Jolene instead. The older woman wore a bright red Santa hat and carried the cheerful energy of someone determined to spread holiday spirit.

"Merry Christmas, Trudy!" Miss Jolene said brightly. She crossed the room and adjusted the Santa hat on Trudy's head with a flourish. "Why in the world are you sitting in here all by yourself when the party's going on down the hall? You're missing all the fun!"

Trudy managed a tired smile. "I went for a little while earlier, but I didn't want to stay too long. I'm waiting on Cassie. She said she'd come today."

Miss Jolene's expression softened with understanding. She pulled up a chair and sat close, taking Trudy's frail hand in hers. Both women had walked with the Lord for many years, and their friendship had been strengthened through countless prayers.

"Let's pray, honey," Miss Jolene said quietly. "The Lord promised to be with us when two or three gather in His name."

She bowed her head and prayed with quiet authority, claiming Cassie's soul for the Kingdom of God, asking the Lord to draw her daughter back to Him, and binding the forces that had kept her bound for so long. As they said "Amen," a soft knock sounded at the door.

Trudy held her breath.

The door opened slowly, and Cassie gingerly stepped inside.

The years had not been kind. The once-bright teenager was now a worn woman in her late thirties. Her face carried deep lines of hardship, and her eyes held a guarded weariness. She removed her coat, set down a small bag, and approached her mother with obvious hesitation.

Trudy's face lit up with pure joy despite everything. She stretched out her arms wide. "Cassie! Oh, my sweet girl... you came."

Cassie gave her mother an awkward, stiff hug, then pulled a chair closer and sat down, clearly uncomfortable. Trudy proudly introduced her to Miss Jolene.

“This is my daughter, Cassie. Cassie, this is my dear friend Miss Jolene.”

Miss Jolene greeted her warmly. Trudy opened the tin of homemade cookies Cassie had brought and passed them around. The buttery scent filled the small room. Miss Jolene made a big fuss over how wonderful they smelled and happily accepted one. For a few minutes they made small talk, but the conversation felt strained. Cassie answered questions with short, vague replies and kept glancing around the room uneasily. She had never hidden her dislike of nursing homes.

After a while, Miss Jolene stood up graciously. “I’ll let you two have some time alone. I should get back to the party anyway.”

Trudy held out the tin. “Take these with you, Jolene. Share them with the other residents. Most of them don’t get treats from family.”

Miss Jolene thanked her and left with the cookies, telling Cassie how nice it was to finally meet her and how often Trudy spoke of her. The moment the door closed, Cassie’s face darkened.

“You gave them away?” she snapped. “I spent hours baking those cookies for *you*, and you just hand them off to strangers?”

Trudy kept her voice kind and patient. “Sweetheart, a lot of the folks here don’t have family who visit. Christmas is about giving. Sharing what we have is a way of showing God’s love.”

Cassie’s expression hardened instantly. The mention of God was like striking a match near gasoline.

“Why do you always have to bring religion into everything?” she burst out, rising from her chair. “Why can’t you just love me without trying to shove your beliefs down my throat? Every single time I come here, it’s the same thing—Jesus this, sin that. It makes me feel guilty just being around you!”

Trudy looked at her daughter with deep compassion. “Cassie, sharing something good isn’t forcing anything on anyone. It’s offering a gift. The love of God is the best gift I could ever give you.”

Cassie shook her head sharply, pacing the small room with agitated gestures. “You don’t get it. Just sitting here with you makes me feel like I’m not good enough. I didn’t come so you could try to change me or fix me. I’m leaving.”

She grabbed her coat and headed for the door.

“Cassie, wait—please don’t go,” Trudy called after her, her voice breaking. She gripped the arms of her chair and pushed herself up with great effort. Pain shot through her legs and back as she took shaky, determined steps toward her daughter. “Cassie!”

Her weakened body betrayed her. Her knees buckled.

Miss Jolene, who had returned at the sound of raised voices, rushed in just in time. She caught Trudy around the waist, keeping her from collapsing completely. Trudy sank to her knees, tears streaming down her face as the emotional weight of the moment overwhelmed her.

Miss Jolene knelt beside her, holding her close and murmuring words of comfort. After a few moments, she helped Trudy back to her feet and guided her gently into the armchair.

“I’m getting the nurse,” Miss Jolene said, starting toward the door.

“No, no,” Trudy insisted, wiping her eyes. “I’m not hurt,” she said. “Not physically, anyway. The pain I’m feeling right now... a nurse can’t fix that.” She managed a small, grateful smile. “Thank you for catching me. I’m glad you came back when you did. I’ll be alright now. Go on back to the party and enjoy yourself. I promise I won’t try to get up again by myself.”

Miss Jolene studied her friend for a long moment, then nodded reluctantly. “I’ll check on you again before bedtime,” she said softly before slipping out the door.

Once she was alone, Trudy pressed a hand to her mouth and choked back fresh tears. *People often get angry when they’re under conviction*, she reminded herself. The outburst from Cassie was not new. It stirred memories of another Christmas Eve, years earlier, when the same spirit of resistance had first begun to take root in her daughter.

Her mind drifted back once more...

Chapter 4: The Wise Men and the Surprise

The living room was alive with anticipation. The adults, including Trudy’s mother and sister who had come in from the kitchen, found their seats while the younger children wiggled with excitement. Grandpa raised his hands and patted the air, calling for quiet.

“Alright now, settle down, everybody. The children are ready to present the story of the Wise Men.”

When the room grew still, Grandpa opened the large family Bible on his lap and turned to the marked page. He smiled affectionately at his youngest granddaughter, the one who had asked the question earlier.

“A little while ago, someone very special asked a good question: Where were the Wise Men when the shepherds found Baby Jesus in the manger?” He nodded at the proud little girl. “Well, it may surprise some of you to learn that, despite what many Christmas cards show, the Wise

Men didn't arrive that same night. Their journey took much longer. Here's how the Scripture tells it..."

As Grandpa began to read from Matthew chapter 2, the older children made their entrance. The boy playing King Herod strode in first, followed by several others dressed as priests. A moment later, the three Wise Men entered in colorful robes, their spokesman asking loudly, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."

Herod grew troubled. He conferred secretly with the priests, who consulted a scroll and declared that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. With a false smile and sweeping gestures, Herod sent the Wise Men on their way, instructing them to return and tell him when they found the Child so he too could "worship" Him. The moment the Wise Men turned their backs, Herod's face twisted into anger and he stormed off.

The Wise Men pointed joyfully toward an imaginary star and followed it across the room. Then Mary—played by a reluctant Cassie—walked in holding the hand of a toddler representing the young Child. The Wise Men bowed low in worship and presented their ornate gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

When the short play ended, the room erupted in applause. The children took their bows and hurried off to change, except for Cassie, who tossed her robe aside with obvious relief.

The adults resumed their conversations. Trudy was deep in discussion with one of her relatives when Cassie approached, tugging impatiently at her sleeve. Trudy lifted a hand, signaling her to wait just a moment, but Cassie persisted in asking if she could go outside. Finally, Trudy half-turned and nodded absently. "Go on, then."

With a quick, devious grin, Cassie spun on her heel, grabbed her coat, and slipped out the door.

Trudy had little time to think about it. Grandpa announced that before their special visitor arrived, the children would sing a Christmas song. The kids gathered eagerly and sang with bright, sweet voices while the adults listened with proud smiles.

As soon as the song ended, the children sat down again, buzzing with excitement. A booming "Ho, ho, ho!" echoed from the hallway. The younger ones shrieked with delight as Santa—complete with red suit, white beard, and a large sack over his shoulder—entered the room. The children swarmed him, jumping and talking all at once.

Santa calmed them with a cheerful wave and had them form a circle on the floor. One by one, he reached into his sack, read the names on the packages, and handed out the gifts. The children raised their hands excitedly and thanked him, clutching their presents in their laps.

While the gifts were being distributed, Trudy glanced around and realized Cassie still had not returned. Concerned, she rose quietly and stepped outside to look for her. She scanned the snowy porch and driveway but saw only a car speeding away in the distance—one she recognized as

belonging to Cassie's friends. Trudy sighed. Cassie had deftly maneuvered her into giving distracted permission to go outside, but had stretched it to mean she had permission to leave with her friends.

With another heavy sigh, Trudy returned inside just as the last presents were opened. The children proudly showed their gifts to the adults. Santa picked up his near-empty sack, then paused, weighing it in his hands.

"Well now," he said in a deep, jolly voice, "it looks like this bag isn't quite empty after all!"

The children looked at each other in wonder. Santa reached in and pulled out one last flat, beautifully wrapped package.

"This one is for Trudy," he announced.

Trudy blinked in surprise as she took it. "For me? But the gifts from Santa are always for the children."

"Go on and open it!" the family urged, their curiosity piqued.

She carefully unwrapped the package and found a framed photograph of her son Trent in his Army uniform—a new picture she had never seen. Her face lit up with pride as she held it up for everyone to see. But as she gazed at her son's smiling face, emotion overwhelmed her.

"It's a wonderful gift," she said softly, her voice catching, "but oh, how I wish he were here in person."

At those words, Santa stepped closer to Trudy as she cradled the photo, facing away from him. He removed his hat, then slowly pulled off the white beard.

The family gasped, seeing something surprising to them behind her. With the hairs on the back of her neck standing, she turned to look, and it was her turn to gasp.

It was Trent.

For a moment she could only stare in shock. Then her son stepped forward and wrapped her in a tight embrace. A cry of pure joy escaped her lips as happy tears streamed down her face. The whole room erupted in surprised laughter and cheers.

Uncle Clyde stepped in from the hallway with a wide grin, clearly proud of his part in the successful surprise.

Trent finally pulled back, removed the heavy red coat, and revealed the Army fatigues underneath. He fanned himself with a hymnbook, laughing about how hot the Santa suit had been. As the family surrounded him with hugs and questions, he looked around.

“Where’s Cassie?” he asked.

Trudy’s joy dimmed slightly. “She slipped out earlier to be with her friends. She doesn’t know you’re here.”

Trent nodded, disappointed but understanding. “I’ll see her when she gets back. I’m home through Christmas Day.”

Just then, Gladys called from the kitchen, “Dinner’s ready!”

A cheer went up as everyone lined up to head into the dining room for the traditional Christmas feast. Trudy walked beside her son, her heart full. God had answered one of her deepest prayers tonight. Surely, He could answer the others in His perfect time.

She whispered a simple prayer into the stillness:

“Lord... bring her home.”

Chapter 5: Homecoming

Trudy sat motionless in her armchair, her gaze fixed on the tiny blinking lights of the little Christmas tree. The memories of that long-ago Christmas Eve—Trent’s surprise return, the laughter, the warmth of family—still lingered like a gentle embrace. Yet the sting of Cassie’s angry departure earlier that evening remained sharp.

Outside in the hallway, Cassie paced restlessly. She shook her head, arguing with herself in silence. Part of her wanted to leave and join her friends at their loud Christmas party. Another part—the part that had regretted missing her brother’s surprise homecoming all those years ago—hesitated. She turned to leave, but then spotted Miss Jolene coming down the hall.

Cassie tried to slip away, but Miss Jolene hurried to intercept her.

“Cassie, wait... please. Could we talk for just a moment?” Miss Jolene motioned toward a small bench along the wall. Cassie resisted at first, but the older woman’s kind persistence won out. Reluctantly, she sat down.

Miss Jolene didn’t waste time. “Your mother tries to be strong when you’re here, but I need you to know the truth. She’s growing weaker every day. The disease is progressing faster now. She has more and more trouble walking, even with the walker. If you’re thinking of not coming back until next Christmas... she may not be here.”

The words hit Cassie like a quiet blow. Her eyes widened with sudden concern, and for the first time that evening, she truly listened.

Miss Jolene continued gently, “If you leave things the way they are tonight, you might never get another chance to make them right. And I know you’d never forgive yourself.”

Cassie stood slowly, wrapping her arms tightly around herself. Her voice was barely above a whisper. “Forgiving myself... that’s always been the hardest part.”

Miss Jolene rose and placed a compassionate hand on Cassie’s shoulder. “None of us can truly forgive ourselves until we first receive forgiveness from the Lord Jesus. He removes the sin and the guilt. Then He gives us the power to let it go.” She squeezed Cassie’s arm kindly. “Go back in there, honey. Make things right while you still can.”

With that, Miss Jolene walked away, leaving Cassie alone with her thoughts.

Cassie stood motionless for a long moment, staring at nothing. Miss Jolene’s words—spoken not in the heat of defense, but from quiet concern—had pierced deeper than her mother’s pleas ever could. She thought of the dead-end roads her rebellion had taken her down, the years of misery, the emptiness. What did she really have to lose by turning the other way?

Taking a deep breath, Cassie turned and walked back into her mother’s room.

Trudy was gazing out the window, lost in thought. Cassie approached quietly from behind and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. Trudy turned, surprise lighting up her face, quickly replaced by a broad, joyful smile.

Cassie dropped to her knees in front of her mother, taking Trudy’s frail hands in her own. Tears welled up immediately.

“Mama... I’m so sorry,” she whispered, her voice breaking. “I’m sorry for all the years I rebelled. For pushing you away every time you tried to show me love. For the way I’ve lived... I knew it hurt you, but I kept running anyway.” She lowered her head onto her mother’s knees and began to weep. “I’m tired of it all. I want to change, but I don’t know if I have the strength.”

Trudy leaned forward, resting her head tenderly against Cassie’s as both women cried together. After a moment, Trudy spoke with deep gentleness.

“Sweetheart, when we come to the Lord, He doesn’t just forgive us—He gives us His power to overcome. Hand me my Bible, honey.”

Cassie wiped her eyes, retrieved the well-worn Bible from the nightstand, and pulled a chair close. She sat beside her mother as Trudy opened the pages and began to explain the way of salvation. They spoke back and forth quietly. Cassie asked questions; Trudy turned to different verses, reading them with quiet confidence and pointing out the promises of a new heart and a new life.

As the truth settled deeper into Cassie’s heart, something shifted inside her. When she finally nodded, her eyes clear with decision, she slipped from the chair and knelt again at her mother’s feet, holding tightly to Trudy’s hands.

Together they prayed. Trudy spoke a sentence at a time, guiding her daughter. Cassie repeated each line with deep feeling and sincerity, tears streaming down her face as she surrendered her life to Jesus.

When the prayer ended, Cassie lifted her head. Mother and daughter looked at each other through tears, then embraced tightly. Trudy gently wiped the tears from Cassie's cheeks. Slowly, their tears gave way to soft laughter.

"I did it," Cassie said, almost in wonder. "Mama... I really did it."

They talked happily for a long while—the first genuine, open conversation they had shared in many years. Eventually, Trudy picked up her Bible and held it out to her daughter.

"I want you to have this."

Cassie hesitated. "Mama, no... this is yours. It means everything to you."

Trudy smiled tenderly. "I'm having more and more trouble reading the small print these days. I want you to have it as my Christmas present to you. Take it, honey. Read it. Grow in grace. All my underlined verses and notes... many of them were prayers for you."

Cassie accepted the Bible at last, holding it close to her chest like the precious gift it was.

After a while, she stood reluctantly. "I should go... visiting hours are almost over. But I'll come back soon. I promise—every weekend if I can." She paused. "And tell Miss Jolene thank you for me."

They shared one final, lingering hug. Cassie walked out of the room and moved slowly down the hallway with a peace she had never known before. Her steps were lighter, her expression calm and hopeful.

Trudy remained in her chair, her heart full. This Christmas Eve had become something far more beautiful than she had dared to hope. Her prodigal daughter had finally come home—not just to her, but to the Savior whose birth they celebrated.

Miss Jolene, who had been waiting nearby, watched Cassie leave with a quiet smile. Then she turned and headed toward Trudy's room to check on her friend.

Chapter 6: Home for Christmas

Trudy watched Cassie leave the room with a peace she hadn't seen on her daughter's face in many long years. When the door clicked shut, Trudy bowed her head, clasped her hands gently under her chin, and whispered a prayer of thanksgiving.

“Thank You, Lord... Thank You for bringing my girl home to You. This is the best Christmas gift I could have ever received.”

She remained in that posture for several minutes, her heart overflowing with gratitude. The emotion of the day had drained her, and as she sat worshipping quietly, her head bowed a little further toward her lap. Her eyes grew heavy. In the quiet of the room, she thought she could hear faint, familiar voices—her mother’s gentle laugh, her father’s warm storytelling tone, and Jack’s steady, loving words. She hoped that when sleep finally came, she might dream of Trent again. More than anything, she longed to know that she would see him one day in heaven.

That question had haunted her for years. She had never known for sure whether Trent had opened his heart to the Lord after she had given him the pocket New Testament and tracts. Only months after that last joyful Christmas, he had been taken suddenly in a roadside explosion while serving overseas. The uncertainty of his eternal home had been the one unanswered prayer in her life. In the end, she had simply trusted God with her son, just as she had trusted Him with Cassie.

Now, with her prodigal daughter safely in the arms of the Savior, it was enough.

Miss Jolene entered the room a few minutes later, eager to hear what had happened with Cassie. She saw Trudy still sitting with her head bowed in prayer and hesitated, not wanting to interrupt. After a moment, she knocked lightly on the doorframe. When there was no response, she knocked again, a little louder.

“Trudy?”

Still nothing.

Concerned, Miss Jolene stepped inside and crossed the room. She reached out and touched her friend’s shoulder gently.

At her touch, Trudy’s head slumped softly to the side, and her hands fell limply into her lap.

Miss Jolene gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. She rushed out of the room, calling urgently for help.

As she hurried down the hallway, she passed three figures without even seeing them—figures dressed in the same clothes they had worn on that long-ago Christmas Eve. Trudy’s mother. Her father. And her beloved husband, Jack. They walked quietly into the room and gathered tenderly around Trudy’s chair.

Jack reached out and touched her shoulder.

Trudy stirred. She lifted her head and blinked in wonder at the three beloved faces smiling down at her.

“Jack...? Mama...? Daddy?” she whispered, a radiant smile breaking across her face. She thought she must be dreaming. One by one, she greeted them with joyful hugs, her eyes shining with happy tears.

Her father took her hands. “We’ve come to take you home, Trudy.”

She shook her head, still smiling. “I’m not strong enough to go anywhere right now.”

Her father’s eyes twinkled with gentle humor. “Oh, my dear girl... you’ve never been better than you are right now.”

He helped her rise from the chair. At first, Trudy moved in expectation of the familiar struggle and pain, but as she took one hesitant step while holding his hand, something miraculous happened. She realized that she was no longer weak and hurting. She straightened, took another step more confidently, then another. She let go of his hand.

With each step, her movements grew freer. A smile of pure delight spread across her face. She jumped lightly, then higher, and spun in a graceful circle as if dancing for the first time in decades. Laughter bubbled up from deep within her. Her family watched with broad, joyful smiles, their eyes glistening, as she blossomed with the glow of youth, her age slipping away like a half-forgotten dream.

Trudy started toward the door, eager to tell Miss Jolene the good news, but her mother stopped her gently.

“You can’t go back that way, sweetheart. We’re no longer in the nursing home.”

Her mother turned her around to face forward. The walls of the small room seemed to fade away, dissolving into a breathtaking heavenly vista. Rolling hills covered in vibrant flowers stretched endlessly under a sky more brilliant and alive than any she had ever seen. Golden light bathed everything in warmth and peace. In the far distance, a magnificent city of light shimmered like a jewel.

Then she saw him. Trudy’s breath caught.

A solitary figure walking toward her along a flower-lined path. Even from a distance, she knew that stride, that posture.

“Trent...?” she whispered.

Forgetting every limitation her body had known for years, Trudy began to run—freely, joyfully—down the path to meet her son. Trent broke into a run as well. They met halfway, colliding in a fierce, desperate embrace. Mother and son clung to each other, sobbing with overwhelming joy and relief.

“Oh, my boy... my boy,” Trudy wept, holding him as tightly as she could. “I’ve missed you so much.”

“I’m here, Mama,” Trent whispered as he wiped her tears from her face. “I’m here because of your prayers.”

The others—Jack, her mother, and Granddaddy—joined them, surrounding the pair in a warm, loving circle of embraces. The air itself seemed to pulse with love, healing, and the unmistakable presence of the Savior who had made this reunion possible.

After a long moment, Trent lifted his hand and pointed toward the shining city in the distance. He offered his mother his arm with a radiant smile.

“Ready to go see the Lord? He’s waiting for you, too.”

Trudy slipped her arm through his, her heart overflowing. As they began walking together down the path, she looked at her family with joyful realization.

“We’re going home for Christmas... aren’t we?”

They all nodded, smiling.

“Yes, darling,” her mother said softly. “We’re going home for Christmas.”

The golden city grew brighter as they walked, its light welcoming them with promises of eternal joy, reunion, and the perfect presence of the One whose birth had started it all.

Trudy McCloud was finally home, indeed—whole, strong, and surrounded by those she loved most. And she found greater joy in knowing that somewhere, not far behind, her daughter Cassie now walked the same path of faith that would one day lead her there too.

The End

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