

"Thanks again, Mr. McIntosh."

"Not a problem, Billy." Wally McIntosh says as he gives the boy an autographed baseball.

The boy looks up at his father and the father reading his son's mind, nods in agreement. The son drops his head and puts the toes of his feet together, slowly grinding the right one into the snow.

"Mr. McIntosh, being Christmas Eve and all, and your all alone here on the sidewalk in front of the train station, I was wondering if you would like to come over for dinner. My mom is having a special Christmas Eve turkey."

Wally looked at the father and the father gave the same nod that it was okay with him as he had given his son. Wally bent down to one knee to look directly into the little boy's eyes.

"I thank you very much for the invitation but I am, in fact, waiting for a friend of mine to pick me up." Wally looked up at the father to sense if he had let the boy down easy. The father was not upset but Billy was visibly disappointed. Wally knew how to cheer him up.

"I'll tell you what, pick a target and I will hit it with a snowball, first with my right-hand then with my left-hand. How about that?"

Billy looks around the parking lot and finding nothing suitable, looks across the street.

"The eaves trough of the library."

Wally studies the library as he makes a snowball. His eyes never leave the target as he says, "Sure, kid" and winds up and delivers a strike. Billy looks up at his dad who is also in amazement. They have heard the legendary stories about his accuracy but no one truly believes it until they witness the great Walter P. McIntosh in action.

Wally studies the snowball implanted in the side of the eaves trough like an artist examines its painting. He looks at Billy and smiles.

"Now left handed, huh" as he packs another snowball. He goes into his windup and delivers another strike. However unlike the last throw, three things were different. One - he never kept his eyes of Billy when he throw the snowball. He did not look at the eaves trough until he heard the thud of the second snowball hitting it. Second - the force of the

second snowball de-hinged the end of the eaves trough and it flung down at a forty-five degree angle releasing all the built-up snow in it to the ground. And third, a person was cutting through the library courtyard when the eaves trough dumped its snow. The snow in turned dumped onto the man who, incidentally, was wearing a Santa suit. Wally looks at Billy and his father and winks.

"Maybe that's why I should be looking at the target before I throw the ball."

Wally drops down to one knee again and shakes the boy's hand.

"It was a pleasure to meet you Billy. Have a Merry Christmas." He stands up and tips his cap to the father.

"Why do you have to go?"

"Because the Santa who got covered in snow is my friend. He is the one I've been waiting for."

With that, Wally runs across the street to his childhood friend, Lawrence who is still brushing the snow off himself.

"Let me help you with that Hippo." Wally begins to pat the back of his friend's coat.

"Another fan request, Walnut?" The sarcasm that they used as a form of slang has began.

"Yep, another satisfied customer. Say, where did you park your car?"

"I walked. We don't live too far from here so I walk to work. Besides it gives us a chance to catch-up before Lucy finally meets her Uncle Walnut."

Wally isn't smiling.

"What's wrong? The professional athlete can handle a stroll? Don't want the professional athlete to get put on the disabled list because of a simply stroll on Christmas Eve."

The smile appears on Wally's face."

"I'll be fine. Just let me go back to the train station to get my luggage. I stuffed it into a locker while I waited for you."

"The train station is closed, Walnut. It closed fifteen minutes ago. Didn't you see the employees leave the station?"

Wally turns around to the train station. Sure enough all the lights are off inside and the giant VIA sign next to the road has been turned off.

"She saw me put my stuff in the locker. Why didn't she see anything and how did I not see her leave?"

"I don't know, maybe she is being visited by three ghosts or something."

"But my Christmas presents to your family are in my suitcase. This sucks."

Wally makes a snowball and throws it at the train station. THUD - the snowball hits the door of the station.

The old friends start walking to Hippo's home.

"So what's with the Santa suit?"

"I thought I'd surprise Lucy. She is still too young to recognise me in a Santa suit. She'll think it's the real Santa."

"You'll need a beard won't you? Even a three year old knows Santa has a beard."

Hippo pats his left pocket. "I have a beard in here and Lucy is five, not three."

"Right, I knew she was five. I'm just joking with you." Wally quickly changes the subject. "So how's Amber?"

"Good. She making duck for supper tonight." His face lights up. "It's the only time we have duck all year." They reach Hippo's highly decorated home. Santa applies his beard to his face.

"Nice decorations. How long did it take you to put that Santa on the roof?"

"Amber did it."

"Oh."

"I've been busy at the firm. You know with Christmas and all."

"What do you mean?"

"Christmas time is when ex-husbands and ex-wives do the nastiest things to each other. It seems to hurt twice as much during any holiday and five fold at Christmas. Right now, I'm doing two custody hearings and one restraining order. It's sad, really, but I try to leave it all at the office."

They walk into the house.

"Ho, Ho, Ho, Merry Christmas Thompson family!" Hippo bellows.

No one runs to the door. No one even acknowledges Santa is in the house. There are Christmas Carols playing but the house seems empty. Hippo checks upstairs while Wally

looks in the kitchen. No one is around and no duck is cooking in the oven. Wally walks into the living room.

"Nice tree Hippo. Did Amber do this one too?" Wally yells upstairs.

He looks closer at the tree and sees a letter in it. It's addressed "Lawrence". Wally picks the letter out of the tree and begins to read it.

"I'm going to check to see if the car is in the garage." Hippo yells.

Words from the letter jumped out at Wally's eyes. "Hate you", "Coward", "You drove me", "taking the only thing you love with me" and finally "garage". Wally drops the letter and runs to the garage. Too late! Hippo is screaming. Lucy and Amber are in the car sleeping. They have been sleeping long enough that the car has run out of gas. Hippo runs back into the house to get the spare set of car keys. Wally opens the garage door to let fresh air in. The sarcasm slang leaves the garage along with the carbon monoxide.

"I can't find the spare keys, Wally." They look inside the car. The spare set is on Amber's lap. As Wally runs to the kitchen to call 9-1-1, Hippo runs into the basement to get a bat. Hippo smashes out the back window with four quick swings, climbs into the car and unlocks the doors. The two old friends carry Hippo's family to the front yard. They sit in the snowbank and look at the two lifeless bodies on the driveway.

"Why Wally? Why would she do this? I loved her."

He puts his arm around his boyhood friend who is shivering. Wally can't tell if it's from the cold or from Hippo's nerves.

"There was a note in the Christmas tree."

"But why, why?"

Wally looks at the little girl in curls dressed in her best outfit. He takes his jacket off and covers, not her face, but her lifeless body as if to keep her warm. Even though he had never met Lucy he knew her well. Little Lucy - whose artwork covers his apartment. Little Lucy - who he had talked to on the phone earlier in the week and countless times before in her short lifetime. Why didn't he take the time to meet her before this? What was more important to him than his friends and family? Just as Wally is about to have a full blown epiphany on the driveway, he looks away from Lucy and to his friend who has put his Santa jacket over Amber's body just Wally had done to his daughter.

The shock wears off on Hippo with the police sirens approaching and seeing his family dead on the driveway. He begins to cry. Wally looks down at the two dead bodies and wipes away the tears from his eyes. He closes his eyes and can faintly hear the Christmas Carols playing from inside the house. He blocks the surrounding environment out of his thoughts, like he would when he is pitching, to hear the Carol. It's "I saw Mommy kissing Santa Clause". He looks at Hippo who is now crying unstoppably and pats him on the back.

"I don't know Lawrence. I don't know."