

A HARMONY STORY

THE Christmas Scrapbook



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By Philip Gulley

Chapter 1

Suspicious Minds

Barbara Gardner had been suspicious of her husband, Sam, for some time. Her doubts had begun in September, when he'd been absent from their home on Wednesday evenings, purportedly to attend a men's group over in Cartersburg.

"What kind of men's group?" she'd asked him when he'd told her his plans.

"Oh, you know, a men's group. Hey, it's not all that easy being a man these days," Sam said, a note of defensiveness creeping into his voice.

Sam Gardner has never been a good liar, a serious detriment for a minister, who must often fudge things a bit in order to keep people happy.

"So what does one do in a men's group?" Barbara asked.

"Uh, well, we talk."

"About what?"

"Oh, you know, plumbing and garages and power tools mostly."

In fact, Sam Gardner was enrolled in a scrapbooking class, making a picture scrapbook for Barbara for Christmas.

In early August, he'd read an advertisement in the Harmony Herald about a scrapbooking class at the community college in Cartersburg and the next day, determined to redeem a dreadful history of gift giving, had enrolled in the class.

Unschooling in the methods of trickery and deceit, he hadn't crafted a reasonable excuse until it was too late. When, on the first night of class, Barbara had asked him to explain his absence, the first thought that came to mind was the men's group. He wished now he'd told her it was a Bible study, then suggested she attend also, which would have nipped her curiosity in the bud.

It hadn't taken Sam long to realize he'd made a serious mistake. He was the only man in a class of twenty. His teacher, a Mrs. Hilda Gruber, had been a drill sergeant in her previous life (Sam reckoned for the Nazis), and the other students avoided him like the plague, lest by taint of association they incur Mrs. Gruber's wrath.

In early October, she'd asked Sam to stay after class.

"It pains me to tell you this," she said in a grim voice, pronouncing each word with Teutonic precision, "but you are in grave danger of failing this class."

"Failing? How can I fail? I thought this class was just for fun."

"It that so? Well, perhaps that explains your problem. Scrapbooking is a serious artistic endeavor, not to be undertaken lightly." She opened Sam's scrapbook. "Just look at this. Your glue work is atrocious, and your scissor performance is simply deplorable."

"I never was very good with glue," Sam admitted. "When I was in the fourth grade, I accidentally glued my hand to my head. They had to take to me the hospital to get me unstuck." He pointed to a faint white scar on his forehead. "See that?"

Mrs. Gruber clucked her tongue in disgust. "If I don't see an improvement in the next several weeks, I'll have to give you an F."

"Perhaps I could do some extra credit?" Sam suggested.

"Mr. Gardner, your scrapbooking deficiencies are such that no amount of extra credit could improve your standing. Your only hope is to discard," she paused, searching for the right word to properly convey her revulsion, "this abomination and start anew."

"Throw it away? You want me to throw it away?"

"It would be the Christian thing to do, so as not to inflict it on anyone else."

Sam hung his head. "I was making it for my wife for Christmas," he said dejectedly.

Mrs. Gruber sighed.

"Last year I got her a ceramic pelican," Sam volunteered.

"Whatever for?"

"To set on the windowsill over the kitchen sink. It holds a dishwashing sponge in its bill."

"That poor, poor woman." She closed the offending scrapbook, then pointed her finger squarely at Sam. "Mr. Gardner, I want you to arrive an hour early next week and plan to stay an hour after. I'll see if I can't salvage this scrapbook. But do not get your hopes up. One person can do only so much, after all."

Sam drove home, despondent over this turn of events. He'd been deeply pleased with himself for securing a gift for his wife so far in advance. His usual custom had been to stew for the months preceding Christmas, then, still clueless, descend on Kivett's Five and Dime on December 24, where he would paw over the dregs no one else had wanted. But this year had been different. He'd stayed up late, after Barbara had gone to bed, rummaging through the shoe boxes where they kept their photographs, picking the cream of the crop for the scrapbook. He'd had duplicate copies made at a one-hour photo shop in Cartersburg so she wouldn't be the wiser.

Weeks of scheming, lying, gluing, and cutting down the drain.

Barbara was seated at the kitchen table working a crossword puzzle when he walked in the kitchen door. "Hi, honey," she said. "How was your men's group?"

"Fine, just fine."

"So what did you talk about tonight?"

"Uh, riding mowers."

"You spent two hours talking about lawn mowers?"

"Well, not just that. We had to take attendance too. And pay our dues. And . . ." He paused to consider what else might conceivably happen at a men's meeting. "And we talked about football some too."

Barbara frowned.

"That sounds odd. I was talking with Deena Morrison about it and she said men's groups talk about their feelings and have book discussions."

"My group doesn't do much of that."

"She also said they play drums and run naked in the woods. You haven't been running naked in the woods, have you, Sam?"

"Don't be silly."

"So how long will these men's meetings last?"

Sam thought for a moment. "I think it runs until Christmas, but it might go a bit longer. It all depends on whether or not we're finished. We still have cars and baseball and hunting to talk about."

She studied him warily.

He stretched and yawned. "Well, I think I'll head . . ."

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