

A KREMER CHRISTMAS MIRACLE



By KEVIN KREMER ILLUSTRATED by Dave ELY

A KREMER CHRiSTMAS MIRACLE

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A KREMER CHRISTMAS MIRACLE

by Kevin Kremer

ILLUSTRATED by Dave Ely



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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

This book is dedicated to:



George and Virginia Marback from the
WORLD'S BEST bakery – George's Bakery



Al Zachmeier – Mandan's Santa Claus!

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The Kremer Family

Mom

Dad

Mike is 30 years old and a principal in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He has two daughters: Holly is 10 years old and Carrie is five.

Pat is 29 and he's a principal at Fisher Elementary School in Marshalltown, Iowa. He's married to Nancy. They have

one son, Nate, who is four years old and a daughter, Abby, who's two.

Kevin is a 28-year-old teacher at Dorothy Moses Elementary School in Bismarck, North Dakota.

Keith is 24 and he's in the United States Navy, stationed in Charleston, South Carolina. Keith is married to Cindy. Their son, Jonathan, is two and their daughter, Kristin, is one.

Robin is 20 years old and is in her sophomore year at Moorhead State University in Moorhead, Minnesota.

Karol is 16 and a sophomore at Mandan High School in Mandan, North Dakota.

Jenny, also called Jen, is 13 and is an eighth grader at Mandan Junior High School.

Kelly, also called Kel, is 10 years old and a fifth grader at Central Elementary School in Mandan. He is telling this story.



PROlogue

Seven years before I was born, a friend of my dad's, Jamie Martinson, wanted to give our family a sheltie collie pup. My dad's first reaction was, "No way! Our house is too crowded already."

Jamie didn't give up. He talked my parents into keeping the sheltie pup for one weekend before they made their final decision.

Well, my parents, brothers, and sisters instantly fell in love with the puppy. Jamie didn't act too surprised when, at the end of the weekend, my dad told him our family wanted to keep the beautiful puppy.

The Kremer family kids, who at the time included Mike, Pat, Kevin, Keith, and Robin, decided to name the sheltie collie Jamie, in honor of Dad's friend.

It didn't take long for Jamie to become a cherished member of our family. I mean, after awhile, I don't think anyone in our family even thought of Jamie as a family pet. He was a member of the family and so much more. He was a loving and caring friend to each of us.

As I grew up, Jamie and I developed a most special relationship. He really was my best friend. As much as I loved him, though, he seemed to love me even more.





Jen, Karol, Robin, and I sat with our legs crossed, forming a large circle in the middle of our living room floor.

Holding a piece of our dog's favorite treat in her hand, Robin shouted, "Jamie! I've got a Good Boy chocolate drop!"

Within seconds, Jamie came tearing out of my dad's bedroom. Barking with happy anticipation, Jamie sprinted over to Robin. He quickly snatched the chocolate drop from her hand and swallowed it without chewing even once.



“Get it!” I exclaimed, holding a small, soft, Minnesota Vikings football in my right hand above my head.

Jamie quickly turned his attention toward me. He spotted the purple football and knew he was about to play *keep away* with four of his good pals who didn’t have a chance of winning.

Barking excitedly with his tail wagging nonstop and his ears standing straight up, Jamie aggressively charged at me while eyeing the football I held in one hand above my head. When Jamie was only a few feet from me, I whipped the football to Karol. With agility that was incredible for a 17 year-old dog, Jamie moved away from me and darted toward Karol so quickly that he was in her lap at the same time the ball arrived.

Karol was barely able to slap the ball in Jen’s direction. She screamed when it



bounced in front of her, and Jamie had it in his mouth before Jen could grab it.

As if to say, “You guys have gotta practice a lot if you’re gonna give me a challenge,” Jamie moved toward the middle of the carpet with the football firmly clenched between his teeth. After a few moments, Jamie walked over to me. He acted as if he were going to drop the ball in front of me—but he was just teasing. He walked slowly over to Robin and dropped the ball in front of *her*. This marked the beginning of another round of our game.

During all the times we played *keep away* with Jamie, we never made more than 12 throws of the football before Jamie had the ball firmly between his teeth. That particular day, the best we could manage was eight throws before the phone rang and Karol ran to the kitchen to answer it.

In the meantime, Jamie came over to



me and started scratching lightly on my shoes with his right front paw, a sure sign he wanted to go outside. As I'd done thousands of times before, I opened the front door and let Jamie out. I watched him through the large picture window in our living room.

Usually Jamie would walk around our front yard for a few minutes, sniff the grass, do his business, and return to the front steps. Jamie had been trained to stay within the boundaries of our yard and off the street.

That day was different. You see, if there was one thing that made Jamie go absolutely BONKERS, it was the sight of a cat getting close to *his* territory. When *two* cats were involved, Jamie lost *all* control.

That day, two cats ran across our front lawn only 20 feet from Jamie and then ran into the street in front of our house.



Within a fraction of a second, Jamie was in hot pursuit, intending to give the cats notice that they were never to invade his turf again.

As I watched from our picture window, I suddenly spotted a blue pickup truck entering my field of vision from the left. A feeling of horror overtook me and suddenly everything seemed to go into slow motion.

I turned my head slightly to the left and saw the truck and Jamie on a collision course. My brain told me to run toward the front door as fast as I could to try to help my dog, but all I could do was *run* in slow motion.

Frustrated, trying to speed up but unable to do so, I kept moving until I got to the front door. I opened it and tried to scream, “**Jamie!**”, but no sound would come out of my mouth. By this time,



Karol had dropped the phone and was running, also in slow motion, toward me and the door. Robin and Jen were right behind her.

At that point, everything returned to normal speed, and there was a loud squealing of tires as we all ran out the door, down the steps, and out into the street. I prayed that, somehow, Jamie had avoided being hit by the truck.

The man driving the pickup quickly got out. My sisters followed me to the front of the vehicle where Jamie lay.

As I knelt on the street and put my hand gently on Jamie's head, I could tell that he was hurt really bad. In the last few moments of Jamie's life, he picked his head off the pavement, looked into my eyes, and then into the eyes of my sisters.



“Kelly. Wake up. Let’s go for a run.”

As I started coming out of a deep sleep, I found myself looking, not into Jamie’s eyes, but into my brother Kevin’s eyes. He was standing beside my bed.

“Are you all right, Kel?” Kevin asked in a concerned voice when he saw the tears in my eyes.

“Yeah,” I half-whispered, realizing my pajamas were almost soaked with sweat.

“You had that dream about Jamie again,



didn't you?" Kevin asked, already knowing the answer to the question.

"Uh huh," I replied as I sat up in my bed. "I can't believe how real it seemed. It was just like when he died a month ago."

Kevin looked at me, understanding exactly how I was feeling. "Look, Kel. I know we've all had Jamie on our minds since he died. He was such a special friend to all of us for so long. It's going to hurt for awhile."

"I know. I just wish he was still around. I miss him a bunch."

"Me too, Kel," Kevin said. Then, changing the subject, he said, "Hey, it's unbelievable outside. How about we run five miles this morning?"

"Sounds good," I replied.

Almost every Saturday morning during the school year, at about six o'clock in the morning, Kevin drove over from Bismarck



and picked me up to go running. We'd ride someplace close by and run between three to six miles, depending on how much energy my brother had at the time. That particular morning he must have had quite a bit.

"Put on a couple of layers this morning," Kevin said. "There's no wind, but it's only about 15 degrees."

As Kevin began doing some stretching exercises next to my bed, I hurriedly dressed in layers of clothes. Eventually, I put a black Mandan Braves hooded sweatshirt on over another sweatshirt I was already wearing. Finally, I put on my Pittsburgh Steelers stocking cap and grabbed my black mittens.

After that, Kevin and I quietly walked upstairs, not wanting to wake anyone up. At the top of the stairs, we grabbed our running shoes by the front door, sat



down on the living room carpet, and put them on.

When we got out the front door, I could see why my brother was so fired up about running that morning. During the night, a quarter of an inch of snow had blanketed everything. Although it should have been totally dark that early on a December day, the reflection of light from the moon off the snow made it unbelievably bright.

The texture of the snow was just perfect. As we walked through the snow, it made a distinctive crunching sound that would make our run more fun than ever.

“Don’t you love the crunching sound?” Kevin said as we walked toward his truck which was parked in the driveway.

“No doubt,” I replied. “It’s going to be a *great* run this morning. Where are we going?”

“How about the river-bridge-bridge run



this morning?” Kevin suggested.

“Sounds good,” I said as we got into the truck.

The river-bridge-bridge run meant that we’d run a large circular route. During our run we could look forward to crossing two large bridges over the Missouri River.

We’d start at Pioneer Park in Bismarck. That’s where Jamie was buried in a pet cemetery, right next to the Missouri River. I figured Kevin thought visiting Jamie’s grave before we ran might do me some good. I also knew that Kevin went there at least once a week, just like my parents, Karol, Jenny, and me.

After a 15 minute ride to the park, Kevin parked the truck. We got out and slowly jogged a quarter of a mile through a real winter wonderland. Every twig of every tree was covered with a magnificent coat of fresh snow.



Jamie's grave was always easy to find because of the small white fence we'd put around it. When we got there, we both bent down and brushed the newly fallen snow off the small concrete grave marker.

We stood up and looked to the west toward the frozen Missouri River. The lights running the length of the Memorial Bridge, along with the moonlight being reflected off the snow, helped create a breathtaking scene.

"Amazing!" my brother said.

After a long moment of silence, I had to ask Kevin a question that had been on my mind a lot since Jamie died. "Kevin, do you think we'll ever see Jamie again?"

Without hesitating, Kevin answered, "There's no doubt in my mind, Kelly. I think our whole family will be together in heaven someday. That includes Jamie, our grandparents, great grandparents, and friends."

Jamie
"Our Beloved
Best Friend"



“I sure hope so,” I said, fighting back the tears. “I really miss Jamie a lot. This Christmas isn’t going to be quite the same without him around.”

“That’s for sure,” Kevin said quietly.

“Remember how excited he used to get at Christmas time?” I said. “He always knew which presents were his. Even with a huge pile of presents under the tree, he could sniff out the ones we’d gotten for him.”

“Yeah,” said Kevin. “I remember the time Mom and Dad got Jamie those little booties so he wouldn’t freeze his paws when he went outside in the winter. The first time we let him go outside with those booties on, he somehow got them off and buried them behind the shed in the backyard.”

I giggled. “We’d didn’t even find them until the next spring.”



Kevin and I were both quiet for several seconds. Finally, I said, “You know, I’ll bet everybody is going to miss Jamie when they come home for Christmas.”

“No doubt about it,” said Kevin. “Just think, Kel. By tomorrow night the whole bunch will be here.”

“I can’t wait!” I said. “It’s hard to believe, the day after tomorrow is Christmas Eve!”

“It sure is,” Kevin said. “Well, let’s start running, huh?”

“OK,” I said.

“Bye, Jamie,” Kevin said, his voice cracking a little.

“Bye, Jamie,” I added as we began walking the short distance to where the paved jogging trail began.



We jogged on the paved bike trail that ran along the east bank of the Missouri River. After about half a mile, the trail connected to a sidewalk that ran the entire length of the Memorial Bridge.

The jog on the narrow sidewalk on the bridge was always exciting, and for me, a little bit scary. Despite the four-foot metal fence separating us from a long fall to the ice below, a look down always sent a chill up and down my spine. I often wished the fence was a few feet higher.



On that particular morning, the view from the bridge was nothing short of spectacular. As Kevin led us single file along the narrow sidewalk, we often glanced over to observe the fabulous scenery.

The often mighty Missouri River was now a huge ice field. A mile or so to our left was the Lewis and Clark Bridge, whose lights looked like they had been strung especially for Christmas. Many of the houses that lined the western bank of the river, the side that we were running toward, were decorated with multicolored strings of Christmas lights.

Once we got to the other side of the half-mile long bridge, the sidewalk sloped downward. This made it easy going all the way to the point where the sidewalk joined a paved road that led to the Lewis and Clark Bridge.



When we got on the road, we ran side by side. “What did you get me for Christmas this year?” I asked, knowing full well Kevin would never answer that question. If there was anyone in our family who bought the most unexpected Christmas presents and always kept them a secret, it was Kevin.

Kevin giggled. “I could give you a thousand guesses and you would *never* guess what I got you this year, Kel. It’s a one of a kind gift.”

Now he *really* had me thinking.

Although I knew I wouldn’t get much more information out of him, I kept prodding him anyway. “I’ll tell you what I got *you*—if you tell me what you got for *me*,” I said as we approached Ricker’s Marina.

Kevin looked at me with a mischievous sparkle in his eyes. “Kel,” he said, “the



only way I'll tell you what I got you for Christmas is if you give me your Terry Bradshaw football jersey."

Kevin knew the jersey was my most prized possession. I'd won it in a drawing when the former Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback was in Bismarck three years earlier.

"Uh, I think I'll pass on that *generous* offer," I said with false sincerity.

As we got closer to the Lewis and Clark Bridge, we saw four deer ambling through the woods. One of the deer stopped and looked at us, his eyes glowing in the dark.

When we got on the Lewis and Clark Bridge, the sidewalk that ran the length of the bridge was wide enough so we could continue to run side by side. As we began to cross the Missouri River again, Kevin seemed to be breathing a little heavier.



“Are you getting tired yet, Kel?” he asked me.

“I’ve got a little ache in my shoulder but otherwise I feel great,” I replied. “This has been fun. I just love the crunching sound we make running through the snow.”

On the other side of the bridge we got on another paved bike path that led north, back to Pioneer Park. On our way we ran right past the Dakota Zoo, where two buffalo stood next to the fence and watched us as we ran by.

“Merry Christmas,” I said as we passed by them.

When we were within sight of his truck, Kevin asked, “Are we going to run on Christmas Eve night this year again, Kel?”

“Right after church, if you want,” I answered without hesitation. “Maybe we can get Pat to run with us this year.”





“You bet. I think he’ll be up for it,” said Kevin.

As we approached the truck, Kevin asked me, “Where are we going for breakfast this morning, Kel?”

“Need you ask?” I replied. “Let’s head for George’s Bakery for donuts and take them home.”

“Sounds good to me,” Kevin replied.



Trips to George's Bakery were such a Saturday morning tradition in our family that we called Saturday *Donut Day*. When I was little, my older brothers and sisters used to explain the passage of time to me in terms of Donut Days. It was something I could really understand.

If I asked someone in my family how much longer it was until Christmas, for example, they might say, "Only four more Donut Days, Kel."



Kevin used to explain shorter time periods to me in terms of donuts. Twenty minutes might have been explained to me as the time it takes to eat three donuts. I guess you could say I was raised on *donut time*.

Anyway, my mouth watered as we drove down Mandan's Main Street toward George's Bakery. Even though it was 20 minutes before George officially opened, we pulled into the alley behind the bakery as I had done hundreds of times before with my dad.

Before we even got out of the truck, the heavenly smell coming from the bakery greeted our noses. We got out of the truck and knocked on the back door.

Within a few seconds George opened the door and greeted us with his usual smile. "It's the Kremers!" he said with a big smile on his face.



“Hi George!” I said enthusiastically.

“Good morning, George,” Kevin added as George let us in and we started walking through the back room of the bakery, past all the freshly baked goods.

“Where’s your dad this morning?” George asked as we approached the front of the bakery.

“Oh, he’s at home,” I answered. “Kev and I thought we’d pick up the donuts this week. We’re on our way home from our run over the two bridges.”

As we got to the front of the bakery, we were greeted by George’s wife, Virginia. Like George, she was one of the friendliest people in the world. At this time of the year, Virginia always dressed up like Mrs. Claus. I always thought that the real Mrs. Claus couldn’t possibly look any better than Virginia did.

“Well, I’ll let Virginia take care of you



two Kremers,” George said. “Say hi to your mom and dad,” he said as he returned to the back room to continue his baking.

“It must be Donut Day!” Virginia said with a big smile as she picked up a large donut box from behind the counter and patiently waited for us to pick out our usual dozen donuts.

“You do the choosing, Kel,” Kevin insisted.

“Let’s see,” I said, looking at all the fantastic fresh donuts in the glass display cases in front of me, “we’d better get a glazed one for Dad.” I paused as Virginia reached down into one of the display cases, picked up a glazed donut, and put it into the box.

“Two Bismarcks, one for Robin and one for Karol,” I continued, as Virginia put them into the box. “And the rest chocolate iced.”





Virginia finished filling up the box, closed it up, and slid it toward me. Then she picked up her fancy tape dispenser with a cool little lever on the side and handed it to me. She knew how much I liked to push the lever on the machine, release some tape, and put it on the end of the donut box to hold it closed.

“What’s your family got planned for the day?” Virginia asked as she figured out the cost of our donuts on her old-fashioned cash register, and Kevin handed her a ten dollar bill.

“It looks like we’re going to be baking cookies, watching some NFL football, and getting the house ready for the whole family,” Kevin answered.

“Yeah, the rest of the family will be coming home the next couple of days, so we’ve got to get everything ready,” I added. “We’re even going to put lights



on the big evergreen in the front of our house for the first time.”

“Wow!” exclaimed Virginia. “How are you going to get lights strung on that huge tree?”

“Al Zachmeier’s going to bring his bucket truck to our house this morning,” I replied.

“Well,” she said, “I hope your whole family comes in here on Christmas Eve for free punch and cookies. I don’t think I’ve seen some of your brothers for years. Tell everyone that we’ll be open until four that day.”

Kevin paid for the donuts and Virginia handed me the change.

“Merry Christmas!” she said to both of us.

As Kevin and I made our way toward the back room, we both wished Virginia a Merry Christmas.



Before we went out the back door, I said, “See ya, George. Merry Christmas!”

“Have a great Christmas, George,” Kevin added.

George turned around from the front of one of his ovens, looked toward us, and said, “Merry Christmas to all you Kremers!”



As Kevin and I rode up Sixth Avenue toward our house on Division Street, we both knew our parents would already be up and working on last minute Christmas things. Like Kevin, they both enjoyed getting an early start on the day.

When we got home, we weren't disappointed. I opened the front door, put the donuts on the ledge close by, and noticed Dad was finishing the job of



untangling about 15 strings of colored lights that he had laid out on the living room carpet. They were just about untangled and almost ready to be put on the huge evergreen in our front yard.

I heard the sound of Mom's mixer coming from the kitchen. I knew she was working on mixing some dough for one of the many types of Christmas cookies she made each year.

Kevin and I took off our running shoes and put them on a rug by the front door.

"How was the run this morning?" Dad asked.

"Fabulous!" Kevin replied.

"Great!" I added. "We saw deer and buffalo. The snow was crunchy and there were beautiful lights by the river. We got a chance to visit Jamie's grave, too."

Since Jamie's death, my dad had to hold back tears every time our dog's

name was mentioned. Now, I could tell Dad's eyes were beginning to water.

"How do things look there?" Dad asked, his voice cracking a little.

By this time, Mom had turned off her mixer and had walked to the other end of the kitchen so she could join in the conversation.

"Everything looks fine," Kevin answered. "We brushed the new snow off his grave marker, but otherwise it looks great there."

"It's going to be tough not having Jamie around this Christmas," Mom said softly.

"Kevin and I were just talking about that, Mom," I said. "I think Jamie liked Christmas as much as the rest of us."

"That's for sure," Dad said, his voice still showing emotion, "Jamie loved Christmas."



Mom said, “Sometime in the next couple of days, we’re going to have to go out to the pet cemetery as a family. Karol and Jen are working on a special ceramic Christmas tree to put up there.”

“Yup, and I’m going to rig it so it lights up really nice,” Dad said.

“That sounds great,” Kevin said approvingly. “Maybe we can stop there tomorrow night before we ride around looking at all the Christmas lights.”

“That might be a good time to do it,” Mom said. “We’ll have to see what everyone thinks when they all get here.”

“Speaking of that,” said Dad, “we’ve got to get some beds and sleeping bags ready today. We’ll be a full house by tomorrow night.”

“When do you think everyone will be arriving?” I wanted to know.

“Mike’s and Pat’s families should be



here sometime tomorrow afternoon,” Mom said.

“And Keith and Cindy and the little ones come in on the 11:30 flight tomorrow morning,” Dad added.

“How many will we have in the house when everyone’s here?” I asked.

“Eighteen, if I counted correctly,” Mom answered.

I asked, “Kevin, are you sleeping here during Christmas?”

“You bet,” Kevin replied without hesitation. “I wouldn’t miss one minute of it. I don’t want to miss any of the action. Besides, who knows when everyone will make it home for Christmas again? It’s been at least five years since the last time we were all together for the holidays, hasn’t it?”

“That’s right,” Dad replied. “And with more grandchildren around now, this



Christmas should be a lot of fun.”

Mom looked at me and said, “Well, I’m going to start rolling out the dough for the cutouts, Kelly. Are you going to help again this year?”

“You bet,” I answered eagerly. I picked up the box of donuts and walked toward the kitchen table.

“We’d better get the girls up now,” Dad said. “They’ve got quite a few things to do today.”

“Hey, Dad,” said Kevin. “When’s Al Zachmeier coming with his bucket truck?”

“He should be here in about an hour,” Dad replied. “I told him to come before the donuts were all gone.”



Our home got really Christmassy that morning. Dad started playing his favorite Christmas cassette tape. The tape featured his favorite song, *I Saw Momma Kissing Santa Claus*.

Even though it was already light outside, I plugged in the lights on our Christmas tree anyway. Then I went to the kitchen to start frosting some reindeer cutouts.

Soon, Jen, Karol, and Robin came upstairs, half asleep, but with wide-eyed



looks of Christmas excitement on their faces. The three of them walked over to the Christmas tree, sat down, and started squeezing and shaking some of the presents under the tree, trying to guess what was concealed under the wrapping paper.

Dad and Kevin started taking the sets of Christmas lights out to the front porch, ready for when Al Zachmeier would show up with his bucket truck. Mom started mixing another batch of cutout dough in the kitchen.

Hearing the commotion created by my sisters in the living room, Mom and I joined the girls by the Christmas tree. I picked up a gift wrapped in red paper that was shaped like an oversized softball and threw it over to Karol.

“I tell you what, Karol,” I said with a big smile. “I’ll give you a million dollars if



you can tell me what's in this."

Because my sisters worked so hard at trying to figure out what was inside their Christmas presents, the rest of the family always wrapped them as cleverly as possible. Often, many layers of wrapping paper hid the true identity of the gift. In the case of the gift I'd thrown to Karol, I had also included loose change, paper clips, and some plastic army men within the layers of the wrapping paper to confuse her a little.

As she continued to shake and squeeze the present, she giggled. "I'll bet it's not the Mickey Mouse watch I want," she said.

"Hey, Robin," I said. "When are you going to make your famous cookies?" Robin made a seven layer M&M cookie that was my favorite.

"You can use the mixer after I've



finished this batch of cutouts,” Mom told Robin.

“Sounds good,” said Robin.

Just then we heard Al Zachmeier’s big truck pull into the driveway. Al got out of his truck and was immediately greeted by Kevin and Dad who now had all 15 sets of lights on the front porch connected in one long string. In addition, they had arranged the long string of lights in a convenient roll.

Al had been a good friend of my dad’s for years. He was a big man, well over six feet tall and as big as any pro football lineman. Yet, he was as gentle and friendly as anyone in the world.

I ran to the front door to let Al, Dad, and Kevin inside.

“Hi, Al,” I said, giving Al a big hug.

Karol, Jen, and Robin came over by the door and gave Al a big hug, too.

“Where are those donuts I was promised?” Al asked.

“I managed to save two for you, Al,” Mom said as we all moved to the kitchen. Al sat down and enjoyed a cup of fresh coffee and two chocolate donuts.

“Al, can we ride in the bucket after you get done putting the lights on the tree?” Jen asked as Al was eating his donuts.

“I’ll give anyone a ride that wants one,” Al replied. Looking at my dad and Kevin, Al said, “Should we go out and start getting those lights on that big tree of yours?”

“Let’s do it,” my dad said.

Al, Dad, and Kevin climbed into the large bucket attached to a huge metal arm that rested on the back of Al’s truck. Al turned a key to start the engine that raised the bucket all the way to the top of the tree which was more than two times as tall as our house.



In Kevin's hands was the huge roll of lights. Dad held some small plastic ties and a roll of black tape. Both would be used to attach the strings of lights to the branches of the tree. Al needed both of his hands free to handle the levers that would maneuver the bucket around the tree.

Reminding me of a carnival ride, the three were soon riding the bucket to the top of the evergreen tree. That's when Al gave our whole family a fantastic Christmas surprise.

From the space beneath his controls, he pulled out a large plastic bag. From that bag he pulled out a large star that he handed to my dad to place at the top of the tree. The beautiful silver star, approximately two feet high, had a chord attached to it so it could be plugged into the end of the tree lights.

Mom, Robin, Karol, and Jen were





watching from the picture window.

“That Al is something else,” Mom said.

“Cool,” said Karol.

“Can you imagine how beautiful that’s going to look at night!” Robin added.

“Almost everyone in Mandan will be able to see it!” Jen exclaimed.

It wasn’t long before a small crowd of neighbors had gathered nearby to take a look at our newly-decorated tree.

From across the street, our neighbor Jake Cook appeared on the sidewalk in front of our house. He looked up in the air at the three men in the bucket and yelled, “When’s the official tree lighting ceremony gonna take place?”

“How about eight o’clock tonight?” my dad hollered down to Jake.

“Sounds good,” Jake called back. “I’ll spread the word!”



Our neighborhood on Division Street seemed to turn every event into a major celebration. That evening was no exception.

At around 7:30, Jake Cook knocked on our door and came in with his wife and five kids. The Cooks brought some Styrofoam cups and a large iron kettle filled with the makings for hot chocolate.

A few minutes later our neighbors to the west, the Ericksons, arrived with a



tray of delicious little sandwiches. The Ericksons also had five kids.

Just before 8:00, the Paul's, a family with three kids who lived one house to the west of the Ericksons, brought a pan filled with some tasty meatballs. They were Mrs. Paul's specialty.

The Kruse's, a family with only two kids who lived next door to us on the east side, brought a large tray of Christmas cookies.

By the time Al Zachmeier, his wife, and their two kids pulled into our driveway a few minutes after eight, there were over 30 of our neighbors in our house. A smorgasbord of food lay on our kitchen table. The levels of noise and excitement in our house were both very high.

As Al Zachmeier came in the front door, all eyes turned toward him because he was dressed up in his Santa Claus suit.



Looking at Al, I thought to myself that no one, other than the real Santa, could fill a Santa Claus suit better than Al.

“Ho! Ho! Ho! Merry Christmas!”

Al boomed.

During the next few minutes, Al sat on a chair in the living room with each of the little children taking turns sitting on his lap and telling him what they wanted for Christmas. The rest of us watched and listened as my mom took pictures. When Al was done talking to each of the little children, he gently lifted them down and gave them a lollipop.

After all the little kids were done, many of the older kids, including me, also sat on Al's lap to tell him our wishes for Christmas.

“Hey!” my dad called from where he was standing near the kitchen. “Let’s have Santa light our big Christmas tree now!”



Everyone filed outside and gathered around the base of our huge evergreen. Al walked over to the switch that Dad had mounted near our front door.

As Al placed his index finger on the switch, someone started a countdown, “Ten … nine … eight …”

Everyone joined in the countdown. “Seven … six … five … four … three … TWO … ONE …”

At the count of **ZERO**, Al flipped the switch! We all looked up. A huge sigh of wonder and amazement rose from the crowd.

Over 20,000 multicolored lights had turned our tree into a Christmas miracle. The huge, silver star at the top shined like a beautiful Christmas beacon in the night.

Ron Ladd, one of our neighbors who just loved to sing, started singing *Silent*



Night. Everyone who was old enough to sing joined in singing the beautiful song.

While I sang the words to that song and looked up at the star at the top of our tree, a big lump formed in my throat. The real meaning of Christmas surged through every nerve in my body. An intense tingle ran up and down my spine.

When we'd finished singing *Silent Night*, another musically talented neighbor, Duane Roth, started singing *We Three Kings*, my favorite Christmas song. As we sang the first verse, I wished this special moment would last forever.



When I woke up at 5:15 the next morning, I almost jumped out of my bed. The excitement of Christmas was getting stronger every minute. I also realized, with relief, that I didn't have that dream about Jamie during the night.

I quickly tiptoed upstairs, not wanting to wake anyone up, but I soon realized I was not the only Kremer too excited to sleep. Jen and Karol had turned on the indoor Christmas tree lights. They were sitting next to each other underneath



the tree, their backs toward me. When they saw me, they quickly hid something beneath some packages.

“Kel, go into the kitchen,” Karol whispered. “You can’t see this until tonight.”

“OK,” I whispered back. “Just tell me when I can come into the living room.”

I went into the kitchen, turned on the lights, and made myself a bowl of Cocoa Puffs. As I was eating my cereal, Jen and Karol came into the kitchen and sat down at the table with me.

“The coast is clear,” Jen whispered. “You can go into the living room now.”

“What were you doing?” I asked.
“Wrapping another gift for me?”

“Nope,” Karol whispered. “We just had one more thing to add to Jamie’s tree.”

“When are you going to show it to me?” I asked quietly.



“Tonight, before we go for our ride,” Jen answered. “You’re going to love the tree, Kel. So will Jamie.”

“Do you really think Jamie knows what’s going on here at Christmas?” I asked Jen and Karol.

Karol looked me straight in the eyes and said, “I’m sure Jamie knows what we’re doing this Christmas.”

“Yeah,” Jen continued, “he’s in heaven looking down at us and sharing everything with us. I’ll bet he really loves the big tree in our front yard.”

Karol said, “I’ll bet his tail wagged like crazy when he saw that big silver star light up last night.”

“No kidding,” I said.

“Kel,” Jen said with a serious look on her face, “sometimes I wake up at night and I’m sure I can hear Jamie barking.”

“Me too, Jen,” I said.



Karol said, “I don’t hear barking, but sometimes I feel like Jamie’s lying near my feet just like he used to.”

“Do you think his spirit could still be with us?” I asked, as we all continued to whisper.

“No doubt,” Karol answered. “I’m sure of it.”

“I think so, too,” Jen added.

“Thanks, Karol and Jen,” I said.

“For what?” they both asked.

“For caring so much,” I said with tears coming to my eyes.

A few minutes later, the three of us were sitting by the Christmas tree together, looking at the Christmas toy catalog.

It wasn’t long before Robin came upstairs from her bedroom and joined us by the tree. “You guys were too excited to sleep, huh?” Robin whispered.

“Look who’s talking,” Karol replied with a smile.



“I can’t wait to see Kristin and Jonathan and Nate and Abby and Holly and Carrie and everyone else,” Jen said, her face lighting up with anticipation.

“It’s gonna be a blast!” Robin said. “Dad said we’ll probably take up two pews at the Candlelight Service this year.”

“Do you mean even the little ones are going to church on Christmas Eve?” Jen asked.

“Yup,” Robin answered. “Mom said the Candlelight Service is mostly music anyway, and it’s usually so short that everyone should be all right.”

“We can always take them down to the nursery if we have to,” Karol said.

“Yeah,” Jen agreed.

At this time Mom and Dad came out of their bedroom and walked over to where we were sitting by the Christmas tree.

“Well, it looks like nothing ever



really changes in the Kremer family,” Mom said.

“What do you mean, Mom?” I asked.

Mom said, “As long as I can remember, the Kremer kids have been sneaking upstairs to turn on the Christmas tree lights and look at the toy catalogs. The only thing different is your older brothers were a lot noisier than you are.”

Robin said, “Mom and Dad, this should be a Christmas to remember, with everyone coming home. This is so exciting, I can hardly stand it.”

“No doubt,” said Dad. “Before it’s all over, this surely will rank as one of the greatest Christmases we’ve ever had.”

“Dad,” Jen said, “tell us about one of your best Christmas memories.”

Mom and Dad both sat down next to us by the tree.

Dad started talking. “I guess I’ll never



forget the year I spent Christmas Eve in Hurdsfield, a small town about 80 miles northeast of here. The snowdrifts were over six feet high, no cars could make it anywhere, and I couldn't even call home because the lines were down.”

“What were you doing in Hurdsfield on Christmas Eve?” Karol wanted to know.

“Well, a large telephone cable was cut and I was there helping fix it. We were finished fixing the cable on Christmas Eve morning, when the blizzard hit. We were stranded in Hurdsfield in a small hotel.”

“Did you get home for Christmas?” I asked.

“Uh huh,” Dad replied. “On Christmas morning the weather cleared up. I drove my telephone truck right behind a snowplow most of the way back to Mandan.”



Jen asked, “How old were Mike, Pat, and Kevin then?”

Mom replied, “I think Mike was three, Pat was two, and Kevin was one.”

Robin said, “You certainly didn’t have to worry about a white Christmas that year.”

“You’re not kidding,” Dad said with a smile. “We had enough snow for ten Christmases.”

“How about you, Mom?” said Jen. “What’s one of your favorite Christmases?”

“I guess I’ll never forget the Christmas I spent in the Mandan Hospital, when Keith was born, exactly 24 years ago today.”

“That’s right!” Robin exclaimed. “It’s Keith’s birthday today. We’re going to have to celebrate when we meet him at the airport.”

“Yes, we are,” Mom said. “Anyway, the year Keith was born we had a small



Christmas celebration at the hospital and another when we brought Keith home a few days after Christmas. Keith was a special Christmas gift for our whole family.”

“That’s great,” Karol said. “I have a feeling this Christmas is going to be *my* favorite Christmas ever.”

“You know,” Dad said. “So do I.”



At 8:00 a.m., Kevin drove over from Bismarck in his truck. When he came in the front door, he was carrying a large suitcase and a duffel bag. Kevin was ready to move in for the holidays.

After he took his stuff downstairs, he was anxious to help the rest of us with some last minute errands.

“Here’s the plan everyone,” my dad said as we all stood in the living room ready to get moving. “The men will run all



the errands except for buying groceries at Bill's Super Valu. Mom and Robin will make that trip, and Karol and Jen want to stay home and add one more thing to the holiday decorations."

"Aye, aye, Captain!" Mom said, making fun of the military tone in Dad's voice.

"Let's boogie," Kevin said as we made the move toward the front door.

Dad, Kevin, and I rode down to Circle Foods on Main Street. When we entered the small store, we immediately walked to the meat counter, located in the back of the store.

Standing behind the counter, greeting us with friendly smiles, were Mr. Cermak and his son, Butch.

Mr. Cermak said, "It must be time for the Kremers to pick up their meat and cheeses for Christmas Eve."

Butch picked up a large tray from a



table behind the counter and handed it to me. “How about some samples while you’re thinking about your selection, Kelly?” he offered.

The tray was loaded with small square pieces of a variety of meats and cheeses. Each sample was bite sized with a toothpick stuck in it. Also on the tray was some tiger meat—raw hamburger that Mr. Cermak and Butch seasoned so it tasted great.

“Everybody’s talking about your big tree this morning,” Mr. Cermak said. “I’ve heard you’ve got lights all over the thing.”

“It really looks awesome!” I said.

“It is spectacular,” Kevin added. “We never could have decorated it without the help of Al Zachmeier and his bucket truck. Wait until you see the star on top!”

Mr. Cermak said, “Well, our whole family is going to drive over to your house during the holidays to get a close look.”



“Stop in for some punch and cookies when you do,” Dad said. “Our whole family will be home and I know they’ll love to see all the Cermaks.”

“We’ll do that,” Mr. Cermak said.

After that, I helped Kevin and Dad pick out a variety of meats and cheeses. I made sure there was plenty of two of my favorites—olive loaf and Swiss cheese.

After leaving Circle Foods, our next stop was Marv’s Hardware, located a few blocks to the west of Circle Foods. With the young kids soon invading our house, my mom and dad decided to get a wooden gate to put across our stairway to the basement to guard against accidents.

When we entered the hardware store, Marv greeted us and guided us in the direction of a small table that had cookies and hot chocolate on it. After enjoying our treat, we picked up a wooden gate,



paid for it, and then quickly wandered through the toy department before we left the store.

Our next stop was George's Bakery. To save time, I ran in and picked up six dozen fresh party buns.

Virginia wouldn't let me out of the store without a free mini-loaf of Christmas bread, beautifully decorated with red and green frosting. Virginia walked over to the bakery window and waved to Dad and Kevin as I left the bakery.

As we drove toward our next stop, which was Uncle Wally and Aunt Eileen's house, Kevin said, "Have you ever been on a traveling smorgasbord before? We've made three stops and we've gotten three free snacks."

Dad replied, "These Mandan businesses really get in the Christmas spirit, don't they?"



“No doubt,” I said. “Maybe we should stop a few more places.”

Dad chuckled and said, “I wish we had the time. We’d better stop at Wally and Eileen’s for the rollaway bed and get home. I want to be at the airport before eleven o’clock.”

Wally and Eileen were not home when we arrived, but they had left the bed inside the back door for us. Kevin and Dad put it in the back of the truck.

When we got home, the car was gone so we knew Mom and Robin were still buying groceries. I got out of Kevin’s truck, ran to the front door, and held it open for Kevin and Dad as they carried the rollaway bed into the house and down the stairs. Then Kevin and I ran out to the truck to get the rest of the stuff.

When we got back inside, Karol and Jen were standing in the living room by



the Christmas tree. I could tell they'd been busy while we were gone. Nineteen Christmas stockings now hung neatly along the ledge by the stairs. Large felt letters sewn on the top of each stocking clearly spelled out who each stocking belonged to.

Grandma Hunke had started the tradition of making Christmas stockings when Mike, Pat, and Kevin were little, and Mom had continued the tradition after Grandma died several years ago.

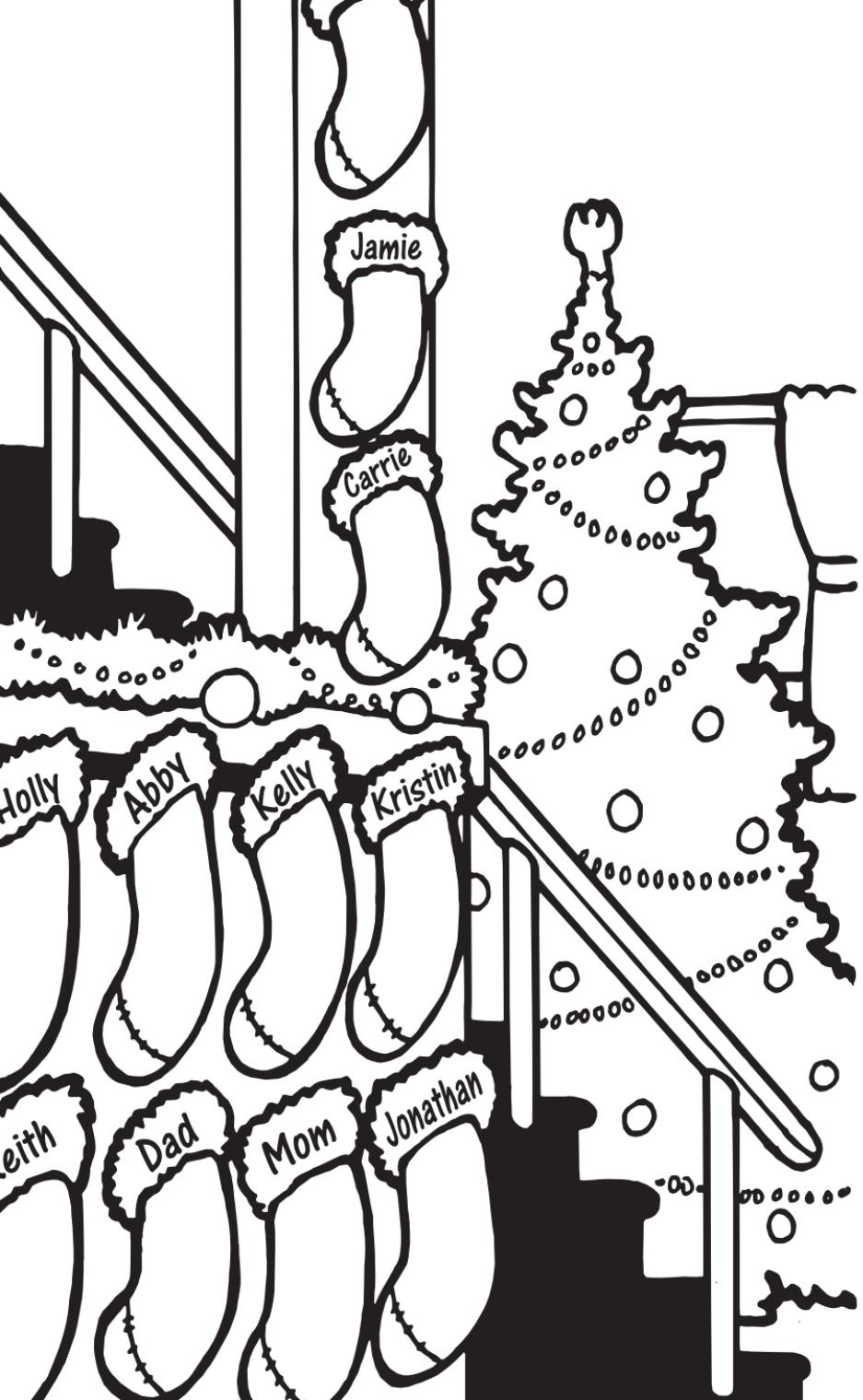
"What do you think?" Karol asked as we all stood admiring the stockings.

"You did a super job!" Kevin said.

"It looks great!" Dad added.

At that moment I spotted something I hadn't noticed before. In the midst of all those stockings, I saw the one with Jamie's name on it.

"I'm sure glad you put up Jamie's



Holly

Abby

Kelly

Kristin

Jamie

Carrie

Keith

Dad

Mom

Jonathan



stocking. He'll like that," I said, trying to hold back the tears.

"He'll always be a special member of the family," Dad added.

At that moment, a car drove into the driveway, and I ran to the picture window to see if it was Mom and Robin. Seeing that it was, I said, "I'll bet they have tons of groceries. Let's go out and help them carry them in."

Even though it was only about 15 degrees above zero outside, none of us bothered to put on coats as we all ran out to the car. By the time we got there, Mom had the trunk opened. It was filled with bags of groceries.

"There are more in the back seat," Robin said.

That morning we may have set a Kremer record for the number of bags of groceries brought into the house at one



time. I counted 24! In addition, there was one small box filled with four liters of ginger ale.

As we were helping unload the groceries, Mom said, “Would you believe we filled four carts with this stuff?”

“Do we have everything now?” Dad asked.

“Robin and I make no guarantees,” Mom said, “except that one of *you guys* will have to make the next trip to the grocery store.”



It wasn't long after we'd put the groceries away that everyone was anxious to go to the airport. Even though the plane wasn't scheduled to arrive for two hours, Mom said that we had one stop to make in Mandan on the way to the Bismarck Airport and we could leave any time.

When she said that, we all put our coats on in a matter of seconds. You could tell everybody was extremely anxious to start welcoming the rest of the family home for Christmas.



Jen, Karol, and I decided to ride with Kevin to the airport, while Robin said she'd ride with Mom and Dad in their car.

Before we went out the door, Mom asked, "Kevin, could you grab a roll of masking tape? Robin made a sign on the computer that we'll put up at the airport."

"I've got a roll in my truck, Mom," Kevin said. Then, he asked. "Where are we stopping on the way to the airport anyway?"

"Mandan Drug," Mom replied. "I want to pick up some of Keith's favorite jelly beans."

Those of us in the truck followed my parents' car downtown to Mandan Drug. As we were driving, Karol, who was sitting in the back seat of the truck, said, "I'm more excited than I am on my own birthday!"



Sitting right next to Karol, Jen said, “Yeah, I’m more excited than when we have a blizzard and we get to miss school and play outside all day.”

Kevin thought for a few more seconds. “I think I’m even more excited than the time I saw Larry Bird in the Minneapolis Airport and got his autograph.”

I didn’t have to think too much to add to this conversation. “I’ll tell you how excited I am. I’m just as excited as when I met Terry Bradshaw and won his football jersey!”

Kevin glanced over at me in the front passenger seat and gave me a look of total amazement. “Kel, I didn’t think you would *ever* get that excited again!”

That brought a big laugh from everyone.

When we got to Mandan Drug, we walked into the store and immediately



spotted Debbie putting candy in large jars near the center of the store.

Debbie was the lady who was responsible for turning Mandan Drug into a candy-lover's dream. Except for a small area near the back where you could get your prescriptions and other typical drugstore stuff, Mandan Drug was packed with jelly beans of every imaginable flavor. There were also homemade chocolates in numerous shapes and sizes, along with large jars full of just about every type of candy ever made.

Off to one side of the store was an old-fashioned soda fountain that made the best malts anywhere. The chairs by the soda fountain were the kind you could sit on and spin around in circles. Debbie encouraged all her customers, even the adults, to spin around as much as they wanted.



“Merry Christmas, Kremers!” Debbie said as we walked over to where she was working. “What can I do for all of you this fine morning?”

“Debbie,” my dad said, “we need some of Keith’s favorite jelly beans. It’s his birthday and we’re picking him up at the airport this morning.”

“That’s great!” Debbie said.

By this time, Debbie knew our whole family well enough that she was aware of all of our candy preferences. For that reason, it didn’t surprise me at all when she walked over to the blueberry jelly beans and said, “What do you want to put the jelly beans in?”

Mom replied, “How about putting them in the back of one of your toy trucks. Keith always liked to play with cars and trucks when he was little.”

Debbie carefully put a scoop full of



jelly beans in a small, clear, plastic bag. Then she put the bag in the back of a blue toy truck.

“Anything else?” Debbie asked as she handed the truck to Robin.

Mom answered, “We’d better get two of your Santa suckers for Keith’s kids, and a chocolate-covered cherry for Cindy.”

Karol asked, “Should we get a few birthday balloons for Keith?”

“That’s a good idea,” Dad replied. “In fact, let’s get one for everyone.”

After Debbie had finished getting everything for us, she looked at us and said, “I’ve got something for you to eat on the way to the airport. I’ll be right back.”

When Debbie returned, she handed a small chocolate Santa wrapped in foil to each of us. “These were just made yesterday,” she said. “They’re cinnamon-chocolate flavored. I hope you like them.”



“Debbie, you’re so sweet,” Mom said.

“Just like my candy,” Debbie answered with a big friendly smile.





We were in a singing mood on the way to the airport. During the 20 minute drive, Karol, Jen, Kevin, and I filled the truck with the sound of such Christmas songs as *Away in the Manger*, *Jingle Bells*—and, of course, *We Three Kings*, my favorite. Even though we didn't sound anything like our church choir, I didn't think we sounded half bad either.

When we got to the Bismarck Airport, we parked in the short term parking area



right next to Mom and Dad's car. With each of us holding a balloon in hand, we entered the terminal building and approached the stairs and escalator that led to the second floor where the arrival and departure gates were located.

While Mom and Dad chose to take the escalator, the rest of us took the stairs, mostly two at a time. We easily beat Mom and Dad to the top.

As we all entered the waiting area for arrivals and departures, the clock on the wall indicated there were still 45 minutes left until the plane landed. Mom said she would hold the balloons so the girls could wander through the gift shop. Kev and I volunteered to put up the birthday banner.

As the next 45 minutes passed, it was easy to tell that this was not a typical day at the airport. Obviously, almost everyone



at the airport was waiting for people they loved to come home for Christmas.

With ten minutes to go until the scheduled arrival, the happiness and excitement of the crowd reached a fever pitch. All of us Kremers huddled close to the large windows facing the runway, watching closely for the plane.

Robin was the first to spot it. “There it is!” she yelled.

She pointed up into the sky at a jet plane approaching from the northwest. Soon, all of us spotted it. A large crowd joined us by the windows, watching as the plane slowly got larger as it approached us. Soon, the plane landed on the runway, then taxied toward us.

We walked as close as we could to the door that all the passengers would come through. I could feel the excitement and anticipation of everyone around us. I felt



a zip of electricity run up my spine and into my head.

The first person through the door was a man who worked for Northwest Airlines. Keith was second, holding Kristin in his arms.

Karol and Jen let out a scream when they spotted Keith and Kristin. They screamed again when Cindy and Jonathan walked through the door next, hand-in-hand.

Kristin and Jonathan were dressed in the cutest outfits I'd ever seen. Keith was wearing a red stocking cap on his head, ready for the cold weather in North Dakota. Cindy was wearing a sweatshirt with the words *North Dakota—Land of the Freeze* printed on it, right next to the picture of an igloo.

Keith almost immediately spotted us with our balloons as we stood near the



banner that read *Happy 24th Birthday, Keith*. In a matter of seconds everyone was hugging and kissing. Mom and Dad were even crying a little.

“How was the flight?” Dad asked Keith and Cindy. Dad was holding Jonathan in his arms.

“Great!” Cindy said. “The kids slept almost all the way here, and our flight was on time.”

Keith said, “They even showed my favorite movie, *A Christmas Story*, on our flight from Charleston to Minneapolis.”

Mom took the truck with the jelly beans in it from her purse and handed it to Keith. With tears in her eyes, she said, “Happy Birthday, Keith! It’s so nice to have your family and you here for Christmas and for your birthday!”

“Thanks, Mom,” Keith said. “It’s so good to be home. Do you realize I haven’t



been home for Christmas since I joined the Navy five years ago.”

“It’s been *way* too long,” Dad said.

Robin asked, “Cindy, did you make those outfits Kristin and Jonathan are wearing?”

“Yes,” Cindy replied.

“They’re so cute,” Robin said.

“Thanks,” Cindy replied.

Kristin was being handed carefully but quickly from Karol’s arms to Jenny’s arms like they were playing a game of hot potato. Kristin was giggling the whole time, having a blast.

“I can tell Kristin’s already enjoying her aunts,” Keith said.

Dad said, “Maybe we should head for the baggage claim area. Your luggage should be off the plane by now.”

“I just hope it all made it here,” said Keith.



“Don’t worry, Keith,” said Karol. “No airline would lose your luggage on your birthday.”

Karol held Kristin in her arms, and I held Jonathan’s hand as we went through the revolving door that led to the exit from the waiting area. The rest of the family followed.

We walked down a set of stairs that led to a long hallway that would take us to the baggage claim area. About halfway there, we stopped to listen to some carolers singing in the hall.

“Mom, they chose the right song to sing,” Keith said with a warm smile on his face.

The carolers were singing *I'll Be Home for Christmas*.



As we were riding home from the airport, Karol suddenly got the idea to take Kristin and Jonathan tobogganing when we got home. Kevin thought that was a good idea. While we were tobogganing, Keith and Cindy could get a chance to get settled. Kevin also figured the rest of us could burn off some energy before Mike's and Pat's families arrived.

When we got home, we got out of Kevin's truck and waited for a few minutes



before Mom and Dad's car pulled into the driveway with Keith, Cindy, Robin, Jonathan, Kristin, Mom, and Dad.

Karol barely allowed everyone out of the car before she told them all about the tobogganing idea. Everyone liked the suggestion, so we unloaded the trunk of the car and took the luggage downstairs to the bedroom where Keith's family would be staying.

Robin, Karol, and Jen stayed downstairs. They helped Cindy find Kristin's and Jonathan's snowsuits in the suitcases and then helped dress them both for tobogganing.

While the girls were doing that, Kevin and I went into the shed in the backyard to get our big toboggan. It was big enough to hold six people if they were all sitting down.

We set the toboggan in the front yard,



ready to go. Then Kevin and I went into the house and waited for everyone else.

In about ten minutes, Robin came up the stairs carrying Kristin. Kristin looked so cute wearing a red snowsuit, matching mittens, stocking cap, and snow boots.

“Togargan!” Kristin cried.

Right behind Robin and Kristin, Karol held Jonathan’s hand as she helped him get up the stairs. Was I ever surprised to see that Jonathan was wearing a black snowsuit with the Pittsburgh Steelers logo on it!

“Jonathan, you’re a Pittsburgh Steelers fan, too?” I asked him when he had gotten to the top of the stairs.

I picked Jonathan up in my arms. “The Steelers are tough, Uncle Kelly!” Jonathan exclaimed.

As Keith was standing at the top of the steps with Cindy, he said, “Jonathan, what



else can you tell Uncle Kelly about the Pittsburgh Steelers?"

"They're going to win another Super Bowl this year!" Jonathan cried without hesitation.

Kevin laughed and asked, "How long did it take for you to make Jonathan a Steelers fan?"

"Not long," Keith replied with a big grin.

Cindy smiled. "When I brought Jonathan home from the hospital after he was born, there was a small squeezable Steelers football waiting for him in his crib. Above his crib, on the ceiling, was a picture of Mean Joe Greene, Keith's favorite Pittsburgh Steeler. Half of Jonathan's baby clothes had the Steelers logo on them. Poor Jonathan didn't have a chance."

"Way to go, Jonathan!" I said.



Mom came out of her bedroom with a camera in her hands and handed it to Kevin.

"I want some pictures of Jonathan and Kristin on their first toboggan ride," Mom said to Kevin.

Dad was out in the kitchen starting to grind up some minced ham and some cheese for his hot sandwich mix.

He called from the kitchen. "It's a quarter to two right now. We'll make hot sandwiches in about an hour. I have a feeling Mike and Pat will be driving in about that time."

We never questioned Dad's intuition about when his two oldest sons would arrive at our house after making a long drive. Dad was usually good at predicting their arrival times within half an hour or so.

We only had to cross the street to get to



toboggan and sled paradise. There, in the huge vacant lot behind the First Lutheran Church, were plenty of hills for kids of all ages. There were small hills for the little kids and larger hills for the older kids.

Everyone using the area was careful not to go down on their toboggans or sleds until everything was clear at the bottom of the trails.

While Kevin stood ready to take pictures, Robin, Karol, and Jenny picked out one of the smaller hills. Placing the toboggan on top of the slope, Karol sat down in front of the toboggan, and Robin sat behind Karol with Kristin in her arms. Jenny sat behind Robin, holding Jonathan. I volunteered to give the toboggan the first push on its way.

Before I pushed, I said, “Ready, everyone?”

“Ready!” everyone called back.



“One! Two! **Three!**” I said. At the count of *three*, I gave the toboggan a big push.

The toboggan began sliding down the slope as everyone on board screamed with delight. It skimmed over the trail quickly and easily, making a unique *swooshing* sound. Staying on the path that the other toboggans had made earlier in the day, it was soon at the bottom of the slope where it came to a stop in the church parking lot.

Kevin and I both waited to see what Jonathan and Kristin thought about their first toboggan ride. It only took a few seconds for us to find out.

“Do that ‘gain!’” Kristin said as Jonathan and the girls started walking up the slope toward Kevin and me.

“That was fun, Uncle Kelly!” Jonathan added with a giggle.

For the next 20 minutes, we all took



turns taking Jonathan and Kristin down on the toboggan. Although everyone's faces were getting rosy red from the cold air, we kept warm from all the walking we were doing after each toboggan run.

Then, Rod and Ronald Erickson, twin 12 year-old brothers who lived next door to us, came over with their sled and joined in the fun.

After meeting Kristin and Jonathan, Ronald suggested, "Let's race the toboggan against the sled."

That's exactly what we did. Rod and Ronald both lay down on their big sled at the top of the slope. About six feet to their left, the rest of us, except Kevin, sat on the toboggan, ready to go down the slope.

To make things fair, it was agreed that Kevin could give our toboggan a push to get started. However, Rod and Ronald would have to start their sled with their



arms and legs as they were lying down on their sled.

Kevin yelled, “One! Two! **Three!**” At the count of *three*, he pushed the toboggan, and the race was on.

We got a head start on the Erickson twins because of Kevin’s good push. Before the sled had left the top of the slope, we were already ten feet down the hill. But soon the Ericksons got their sled going and Robin screamed as she looked back and saw them gaining on us.

With the bottom of the hill only a few feet away, the twins had almost pulled up next to us, and now everyone was yelling or screaming to try to help win the race. With inches to go, we all tried to help will the toboggan to go just a little faster. It must have worked! The toboggan hit the church parking lot just a foot ahead of the sled.





“We won!” Jonathan cheered.

“We won!” Kristin yelled. “Can we do that ‘gain?”

After that, we took turns racing either on the sled or the toboggan. Even Kevin insisted on getting his turn down the slopes. In fact, once he started racing, it was obvious that he enjoyed it more than any of us.

Suddenly, Robin spotted Pat’s car pulling into the driveway in front of our house, with Mike’s van right behind.



I'm sure we set a world speed record getting across the street to welcome home Pat's and Mike's families. By the time we got to the driveway in front of our house, Mom, Dad, Keith, and Cindy were already hugging and kissing the new arrivals.

As the rest of us joined the happy group, I was almost overwhelmed with the joy of having my whole family together at last. Tears started coming to my eyes, and I could tell that I wasn't the



only softhearted one either. I guess we Kremers are a bunch of softies.

“Holly, it’s *so* good to see you!” I exclaimed, as Holly and I hugged each other at the end of the driveway.

“*Uncle Kelly!*” she said, with special emphasis on the *uncle* part. Although Holly is my niece, I’m only six months older than she is. Holly and I always like to make fun of that fact.

A few seconds later Nate had jumped into my arms. “Hi, Nate! How was the ride from Iowa?” I asked.

“Too long, Uncle Kelly,” Nate replied.

Then, without pausing for more than a second, Nate asked, “Holly and Uncle Kelly, do you want to play catch with my football later?”

“You bet, Nate! Right after we eat,” I answered.

“Sounds good to me too, Nate,” Holly said.



Dad suggested we move inside where we could continue visiting and eat some hot sandwiches and drink some hot chocolate.

We kept chatting as we helped unload Mike's van and Pat's car and carried all the luggage and other things toward the front door of the house. Before we went in, however, Nancy insisted that we pose for a quick photograph on the front porch. We really had to squeeze together to get everyone in the picture.

Pat put his camera on a tripod and looked through the view finder to make sure everyone was in the photo. Then he set the timer on his camera and ran over to the porch to join us so he could also be included. The camera clicked in about ten seconds.

The next 15 minutes were filled with more spirited visiting, luggage being



taken to bedrooms, bathrooms being used, and snowsuits and coats being removed and hung in closets. Dad started to bring hot sandwiches and hot chocolate into the family room for those who were ready to eat. Our small house was never so busy!

Several years ago, Mom and Dad had converted our garage into a family room. Dad and Kevin had moved three large rectangular tables into the room so all 18 of us could eat together during the holidays.

As I entered the family room, Holly, Karol, Jen, and Carrie were already there. Each of them had a hot sandwich in front of them, along with a paper cup nearly filled with hot chocolate.

Carrie said, “Grandpa makes good sandwiches.”

Dad *did* make good hot sandwiches. His special mix included ground up



minced ham, ground up cheese, mustard, sweet pickles, and Miracle Whip, all mixed together and spread on hot dog buns. After 20 seconds in the microwave, you had a sandwich that was hard to beat.

“Carrie, you have the most beautiful hair,” Jen said as she gently touched it with her fingers.

“No doubt,” said Karol. Carrie and Holly both had the lightest blonde hair in the Kremer family. Almost all the kids in the family had darker blonde hair. Something all of the Kremer kids had in common, though, were the natural curls we inherited from my dad.

Holly sipped her hot chocolate. “It’s really different not having Jamie around the house,” she said.

Karol looked across the table at us. “It sure didn’t take long for someone to mention Jamie’s name, did it?” she said.



“Can you imagine how excited he would be right now?”

“Yeah,” said Jen, “he would be running from room to room, welcoming everyone and wagging his tail like crazy.”

I added, “And his ears would be standing up and pointing to the back a little like they always did when he was really happy.”

“Jamie’s in heaven, isn’t he?” Carrie asked with a very serious look on her face and one little tear forming in her right eye.

“That’s right, Carrie,” I replied. “I’ll bet he’s looking down and barking with excitement, knowing everyone’s finally home for Christmas.”

It wasn’t long before everyone was sitting in the family room together. As I looked around the room at all the smiling faces and listened to the happy



conversation, a big lump started to form in my throat again. Then, Mike got up from his seat and waited for a few seconds before he started to speak.

“It’s so good to be home for Christmas!” he said. “Holly and Carrie and I have been looking forward to this day for over a year. We feel blessed to be part of such a terrific family as ours, and I can’t wait to add this year’s Christmas memories to many Christmas memories I already have.

“As we were driving home from Wisconsin the past couple of days, I’ve been telling Holly and Carrie about some of my childhood memories about Christmas. I told them about the Christmas we spent in Linton with Great-grandpa and Great-grandma Kremer.

“That year, Pat, Kevin, and I were determined to see Santa Claus and his reindeer. We waited until everyone was

asleep, and then we snuck out of our bedroom and walked into the large porch where we could see all the action taking place outside.

“As hard as we tried to stay awake, in about an hour or so we had all fallen asleep on a couch in the porch. Suddenly, in the middle of my dreams, I was awakened by the sound of bells coming from the top of the roof of the house. I quickly woke Pat and Kevin so they could be witnesses to what I was hearing.

“Just as they awakened, we heard some more noise on the roof as if something was sliding quickly across it. Then, as we looked out the windows of the porch, a large rainbow of light—all green and red in color, streaked in front of us and into the night sky!

“When we walked into Great-grandpa’s living room, there were three big toy



trucks that Pat and Kevin and I asked Santa to bring us. Also, there was a note from Santa that read: *I hope you like the trucks. All of the reindeer appreciated the hay that you left them on the roof. MERRY CHRISTMAS!*" The note was signed by Santa himself."

Mike paused for a few seconds. "I know this Christmas is also going to be filled with fun and surprises."

Mike sat down as everyone clapped and clapped.

Pat got up from his chair next. "I've got to share with you how much this Christmas means to Nate and Abby," he began. "All of you know how bad the weather can get between here and Iowa this time of the year. There have been some Christmases that we haven't been able to come home because the roads were too slippery or were blocked by snow.

“Well, Nate and Abby didn’t want that to happen this year. Christmas at Grandma and Grandpa’s was much too important to them. Would you believe Nate and Abby came to Nancy and me right after Thanksgiving and insisted we all pray together every night and ask God for good weather to get home for Christmas? I want you to know our prayers were answered. Not only that, we even met Mike and his family at McDonald’s in Jamestown—something we didn’t even plan. So, we’ve already experienced some Christmas blessings from God. It’s really good to be home for Christmas.”

Pat sat down. Again, everyone clapped, even one year-old Kristin.

Next, Kevin stood up. “All of us know that an important member of our family died about a month ago.” Kevin’s voice started to crack a little with emotion.



“Jamie meant so much to all of us. This would have been Jamie’s seventeenth Christmas with us. To help honor his memory this Christmas, Jen and Karol have made something to place on Jamie’s grave at the pet cemetery by the river.”

Jen and Karol walked to one of the small closets in the family room. Karol opened the door and carefully picked up what I knew was a ceramic Christmas tree. It was covered with a large red towel.

Karol slowly placed the covered tree at the head of one of the tables where Dad was sitting so everyone could see it. Then Kevin said, “Please take the cover off, Jen.”

Jenny very slowly removed the red towel from the tree.

“OOOOOOOOOOOH!”

“It’s beautiful!”

“You girls did such a wonderful job!”





Mom exclaimed with tears in her eyes.

Jen and Karol had made a most magnificent white ceramic Christmas tree about two feet high. They had decorated it with beautiful ornaments painted in many colors. On top of the tree was a cute little Christmas mouse, and other Christmas mice were hiding all around the tree.

“Light it up, girls,” Dad said.

Jen reached down and turned a little light switch. Pat ran over to turn off the lights in the family room.

All of us stared at the amazing, fully lit Christmas tree.

“Pretty *Kissmas* tree!” Kristin said as she pointed at the tree. Her eyes were wide with wonder.

“Wow!” was all I could say as I stared at the tree.

“You girls did a great job!” Nancy said.

“When are we taking the tree out to

the cemetery?” Nate asked.

“Just as soon as we’re finished eating and clearing the dishes,” Dad answered.



As we were getting ready to leave, Uncle Wally and Aunt Eileen rode into the driveway in their car. Ever since I could remember, they joined us on December 23 when we rode around looking at the Christmas lights. This year was no different.

Uncle Wally and Aunt Eileen were two extra special people in my life. They showed up at many of my swim meets. In fact, they took an interest in a lot of my brothers' and sisters' activities, too.

I loved talking about sports with Wally. We usually agreed on most topics, except he really didn't like my team, the Pittsburgh Steelers, and I couldn't stand his favorite team, the Green Bay Packers.

As Dad opened the front door to let Eileen and Wally in, you should have seen the look in their eyes as 18 Kremers greeted them.

"Uncle Wally! Aunt Eileen!" you could hear coming from everyone.

Wally and Eileen walked around the room, greeting everyone.

Wally announced, "Hey, we can get five more people in our car!"

As we started for the door, Wally asked, "Are we stopping at the pet cemetery before or after we look at Christmas lights?"

"We're going to the pet cemetery first," Mom replied.



"We should be able to get everyone in Wally's car, my van, and Dad's car," Mike announced.

"Let's load up!" Dad said.

The three vehicles followed each other, with Dad's car in the lead, Mike's van next, and Uncle Wally's car last. I rode with Uncle Wally.

Dad turned left at First Street in Mandan and I immediately knew where he was headed. He couldn't resist driving by one beautifully decorated home on the way to the cemetery.

At the corner of Sixth Avenue and First Street was the home owned by a friend of Dad's, Chad Renner. Chad's birthday was on Christmas Eve and Dad said Chad seemed to have more Christmas spirit than almost anyone alive.

As we approached the house, Wally opened up the automatic windows in the

car so we could better experience the lights and the sounds coming from the house. Our ears were greeted with the sounds of the Christmas carol, *The First Noel*. A huge Santa's sleigh, complete with reindeer, was on top of the two-story home. A lifelike Santa was standing up in the sleigh waving to all of us.

Wally said, "Looks like your dad had to drive by one decorated house on the way. He picked a good one, didn't he?"

All three cars stopped in front of the house and I tried to absorb all the tremendous sights and sounds coming from in front of me.

"The newspaper said they have more than 200,000 lights," Eileen said. "They have to start decorating on Labor Day!"

"It's amazing!" I said. "Those elves in Santa's workshop look almost alive."

"He must have added those this year,"



Eileen said. "I don't remember them from last year."

Dad started moving his car forward and the rest of us followed. We turned onto Main Street, and then we took Interstate 94 to Pioneer Park in Bismarck, about six miles away.

After we parked in the lot, we walked the remaining quarter mile through the woods with flashlights. The trees were still as beautiful as yesterday. Although it should have been pitch dark by this time, the moonlight reflecting off the snow made it easy to see where we were going.

When we got to Jamie's grave, we all gathered around it. As Jenny and Karol stood next to Dad, he placed the ceramic Christmas tree inside the little white fence. Then Karol bent down and turned the switch to light the tree.

The tree looked even more beautiful

than it had in our family room. “It’s so awesome!” was all Nate said.

“You’re absolutely right, Nate!” Cindy said.

Then Pat asked us to bow our heads in prayer. “Dear Lord,” he said. “Thank you for bringing our dear friend, Jamie, into our lives. We miss him very much, but we find comfort knowing he’s with you in heaven. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

“Amen,” everyone said in unison.



After we left the cemetery, we continued our little parade around Bismarck. Once again, Dad led the procession, with Mike's van second, and Wally's car in the third position.

As we rode past one beautifully decorated house after another, it seemed like Dad had planned his route so that each house we came to was a little more fantastic than the previous one. As much as we enjoyed each and every one of the

houses we saw, all of us knew what the grand finale would be.

We drove north on Washington Street. As we approached the YMCA, the bumper-to-bumper traffic gave us a big hint we were not the only ones anxious to see Bismarck's favorite Christmas attraction.

We turned right onto a street that had been appropriately renamed Christmas Wonderland. The street consisted of eight houses, four on each side of the street. Every single house was decorated with thousands of lights, and each house captured a different Christmas theme.

We moved down the street at a snail's pace in a huge line of cars. Wally opened up all the electric windows in the car so we could hear, as well as see, the fantastic sights and sounds. Eileen pointed her camcorder out the window.

The first house on our right had a



Christmas on the Road theme. The house was decorated and lit up so that it looked just like a huge semi truck. The wheels of the truck were made up of lights in motion, and they appeared to be actually rotating. The driver of the semi was singing Christmas carols in the country western music style.

The next house on the right was a celebration of the Christmas tree. On the side of the house was a Christmas tree created entirely out of multicolored lights, but that was just the beginning. All around the front yard were at least 40 different *real* Christmas trees, each one decorated a little differently. My favorite tree was a huge spruce tree decorated in all blue lights.

Next in line was a house with the theme *Good Ole St. Nick*. Dominating the whole front yard of this home was a huge 20

foot Santa Claus sitting in a rocking chair, slowly rocking back and forth. I couldn't believe how lifelike Santa appeared. He was singing Christmas carols, too.

Eileen's favorite house was the last house on our right. This one, called *Santa's Resort*, looked like a miniature North Pole ski resort. One at a time, each elf skier skied down a path on the sloped roof of the house and down a well-lit, winding trail that ended on the ground in front of the house. After that, the elf skier would automatically rise to the top of the house on a chair lift, then ski down the slope again.

At this point, we followed cars in front of us as we all made a U-turn so we could get a close look at the four houses on the other side of the street. The first one on the other side of the street was called *Take the Christmas Train*. The owner of this



house had built a real train that moved on colorful tracks in the front yard. Each of the ten cars in the train was just the right size for a young child. In fact, kids were now riding in half of the train's cars. The engine was occupied by a real live Mr. and Mrs. Claus.

Wally yelled, "Hey, Mike!"

The driver of the train called back, "Hi, Wally! Merry Christmas!"

Next in line was a house called *Santa's Workshop*. All over the yard were little mechanical elves working on various gifts for Christmas.

The second-to-last house featured a *Christmas Stars* theme. Eileen said there were over 300 stars of various shapes and sizes displayed all over the house and yard.

The last house on our tour of Christmas Wonderland was my favorite.

I guess that's probably because it made me think about the true meaning of Christmas. The people who owned this house had created one of the most fantastic live nativity scenes imaginable. All of the people and animals were real. Every year my eyes watered a little when we passed this house. This year, for some reason, the tears started flowing in a steady stream.

I looked at Robin and Holly who were sitting on either side of me, and they were in about the same condition as I was.

I said, "I wonder why I'm turning into such a crybaby all of a sudden."

Holly replied, "Kelly, that's what I like about being in this family. We let our feelings show."

"But I'm not even sure why I'm crying," I said.

"Just think about it, Kel," Robin said. "Christmas is such a great time in our



family, and this year may be the greatest *ever*. But Jamie's going to be on our minds during all of those great moments. We're all going to be doing a little crying."

"Yeah, Kel," Holly added, "didn't you used to take Jamie along with you when you drove around to look at lights every year?"

"Yes," I replied, "Jamie's tail always seemed to wag the most when we got to this nativity scene."

"Kel," Holly said as we looked at each other in the back seat, "we'll all help each other make it through the sad moments."



It was getting late by the time we got back that night. While Kristin, Jonathan, and Abby were tucked into bed, Kevin was busy in the kitchen making his famous punch as the rest of us prepared to celebrate Keith's birthday.

While Jenny opened all the cans of frozen concentrated juices of various kinds, Kevin put the contents into the large family punch bowl, mixed them with just the right amount of water, and added two

liters of ginger ale. Although the punch tasted a little different each time Jenny and Kevin made it, it was always fantastic.

When Kevin was done mixing the punch, we all went out to the family room, and Robin and Jenny served a cup of punch to everyone. Instead of a birthday cake, Keith had requested an assortment of his favorite cookies. They were placed on a large tray at one of the tables.

After everyone had some punch and ate a cookie or two, Mom started singing *Happy Birthday*, and we all enthusiastically joined in.

Then Dad went over to one of the closets in the family room, opened the door, and picked up a large gift wrapped in beautiful blue paper. As he set it down in front of Keith, he said, “Keith, the whole family pitched in to get you this gift. We think this will bring back a few great memories.”



Keith stood up and quickly tore off the wrapping paper. When he was done, he held up a large box with a huge race car pictured on it.

With a big smile on his face, Keith said, “This looks a lot like the race car set I got for my tenth birthday. That was my favorite gift of all time! Thanks everyone!”

There was a lot of clapping and cheering.

When it was quiet again, Keith said, “I’ll bet Kristin and Jonathan will have some fun with this, too!”

For the next hour or so, the family room was filled with lively talk and laughter. It felt so good to be around the people I loved so much.

At one point, Kevin got up and yelled, “Hey, everyone! Can I have your attention for just a second?”

When he had everyone’s attention,

Kevin continued, “Don’t forget that tomorrow morning at eight you’ve all got to be ready to go to Bismarck to help my fifth graders and me fill food baskets for Open Your Heart.”

“Yeah,” Mom said, “with this large crew, we’ll have to start taking showers at about midnight.”

Everyone laughed as the room became noisy with talking again.

Later, Pat came over to where I was sitting, stood by me and asked, “So, Kelly, are we running after the Candlelight Service tomorrow night?”

“You bet,” I replied. “Kevin and I are really looking forward to it.”

“I hope I’m in good enough shape to keep up with you two guys,” Pat said.

“You won’t have any trouble,” I said. “Kevin and I like to run at a conversational pace.”



“Sounds good to me,” said Pat.

Then Pat sat down next to me and said, “Kelly, Mom told me you’ve had kind of a rough time since Jamie died. Can I help in any way?”

“It’s getting better, Pat,” I said. “I just keep having the same old dream about Jamie getting hit by the truck. It will go away some time.”

“Well, Kel,” Pat said, “I just want you to know I’ll always be there for you if you want to talk. Jamie meant a heck of a lot to all of us.”

“I know,” I replied. “Thanks, Pat.”



That night, I slept better than I had in weeks. If I had any dreams at all, I didn't remember them.

When I woke up, I had a wonderful feeling all over. It was Christmas Eve! The whole family was home. But something else was making me feel so unbelievably good.

Somehow, for the first time since Jamie had died, I knew he was with me in spirit and he was OK. I could feel his presence.



My Grandma Hunke used to tell me that she always knew Grandpa's spirit was with her, helping her get through each day. I always wondered how she was so sure, considering she never saw a ghost of Grandpa or anything. Now I knew what she must have felt.

When I got out of bed, I found our household was already a bustle of activity. People were taking showers or eating or getting dressed, getting ready to go help Kevin and his fifth graders fill food baskets for Open Your Heart.

Kevin told me that his fifth graders had come up with the idea to help fill food baskets on Christmas Eve. I guess one day in school Kevin and his students somehow got into a discussion about how kids could help make the Bismarck-Mandan community a better place to live. They brainstormed and wrote down all of

their ideas on the board. One of Kevin's students named Mark came up with the idea of helping some of the poor people in the community have a better holiday by getting involved in the Open Your Heart Campaign.

Kevin said that every one of his students was going to be at the Bismarck Civic Center to help fill the food baskets. He said his fifth graders were one of the most caring, loving groups of kids in the world.

Well, when we all got over to the Civic Center, most of Kevin's fifth graders were already in the hall waiting for him to arrive. You could tell they were surprised to see such a huge family along with their teacher.

Matt, one of Kevin's students, said, "Dr. Kremer, your family's bigger than most of the towns in North Dakota."



Everyone laughed.

Jenny, another one of Kevin's students, said, "Dr. Kremer, why is everyone in your family so much cuter than you?"

That remark brought even more laughter. Kevin smiled and said, "Hey, before some of you say something that gets you in big trouble, let's get to work."

As we walked into the Civic Center arena, we saw huge stacks of boxes loaded with cans of food. In addition, several grocery carts were lined up, each one full of hams.

One of the guys who must have been in charge of Open Your Heart came over to Kevin and directed all of us to the area where we would work. For the next two hours, all of us helped fill over 200 food baskets as we stood in a long line along a conveyor belt. As the food baskets rolled by us on the huge belt, we all helped fill

them by placing certain food items in each. Even Kristin, Jonathan, and Abby got in the act by putting a small jar of olives in each basket.

After we had finished, Janell, another one of Kevin's students who was standing next to me said, "I never knew work could be so much fun."

Dusty, who was standing next to Janell, said, "Yeah, I'm glad we decided to do this."

After that, we were all treated to hot chocolate and Christmas cookies in a room outside the Civic Center arena. When they were finished eating, the kids from Kevin's class joined Holly and me as we played with Kristin, Abby, Carrie, Jonathan, and Nate. You could tell the youngest Kremer kids loved all the attention they were getting.

When it was almost time to leave, Kevin yelled, "Hey everyone!"



After a few seconds it was quiet and Kevin continued, “I’m so proud of all of you for giving up part of your Christmas Eve for such a worthwhile cause. And to my family, thanks so much for helping out!”

“Dr. Kremer, let’s do this again next year,” said Becky, another one of Kevin’s students.

I think everyone in the room felt the same way.



Christmas Eve afternoon was a blast! I got to play catch with my football outside with Nate, Pat, Holly, and Kevin. After that, Mom suggested the whole family needed to go for a ride and make two quick stops.

First, we went to George's Bakery to see George and Virginia. Then we drove further west down Main Street of Mandan to Ohm's Cafe.

Ohm's was our family's favorite eating



place. The owners were all members of the Schafer family—Alex, the father; Sharon, the daughter; and Tim, the son. They made the best hamburgers in the world, but my favorite thing to eat at Ohm's was an ice cream treat called a baby buffalo. This consisted of a tasty combination of ice cream topped with marshmallow, peanuts, and chocolate syrup.

When we entered Ohm's, the small cafe was already crowded. When Alex spotted us by the door, he immediately worked his way over to us. "I'm glad the whole Kremer clan could make it. Why don't you follow me to the back room where there's a little more space."

It took us awhile to get to the back room because my dad seemed to know everyone in the place, and he insisted on introducing his whole family to each of them. I could tell how proud he was of all of us.

When we finally got to the back room, we were treated to free baby buffaloes and mini hamburgers. As she had done so many times before when our family went to Ohm's, Sharon Schafer came over to me with a quarter in her hand and said, "Heads or tails, Kelly?"

I said, "Tails, Sharon."

Sharon flipped the coin into the air, caught it with her right hand, and then showed it to me. It was tails. She handed the quarter to me. "You win again, Kelly! Merry Christmas to you," she said.

"Merry Christmas to you, Sharon!" I said. Then Sharon spent some time greeting the other members of our family.

When we got back home, I helped Keith and Mike set up Keith's race car set and we raced for an hour or so. While we were doing that, some of the family went outside to build a snow fort in the backyard.



At about four o'clock, Mom, Robin, and Cindy went out to the kitchen and started to prepare our traditional lunch before church on Christmas Eve. Robin sliced the party buns while Mom and Cindy cut the slices of meat and cheese so they were about the size of the buns. Then Robin and Cindy brought the meat, cheeses, and party buns out to the family room on trays, along with some other food. It included a large assortment of cookies and some great coleslaw made using Grandma Kremer's famous recipe.

Kevin and Jenny made another batch of punch. Holly and Karol helped Jenny take glasses of punch out to the family room after Kevin had filled them with punch.

Mom, who was standing in the family room called, "Come and get it!" Everyone filed into the room to enjoy a meal that never changed much from Christmas

Eve to Christmas Eve as long as I could remember. It was another one of my favorite family traditions.

As we all filled up on some of the greatest food anywhere, the family room almost shook from all the laughter and talking. Everyone seemed to be just as excited as I was.

As many of us continued eating and talking, Dad convinced Keith's family to use the bathrooms and get ready for church first. Gradually, the rest of us followed until the whole crew was ready at six o'clock. Even though the Candlelight Service didn't start for another hour, Mom knew that if we didn't leave by six, we probably wouldn't get our favorite pew in the balcony of our church.

We rode to our church, the First Presbyterian Church in Mandan. As we walked up the steps to the balcony, we



noticed we were the first ones to arrive, so we were able to sit in the two pews right in front. I had to giggle a little because we had to squeeze together just a bit to get everyone in those two pews.

I always loved the Candlelight Service at our church on Christmas Eve. All the lights were off, and candles placed around the church lit up the huge sanctuary.

Before the service started, we listened to four people playing Christmas carols on their French horns. The music was terrific.

A big tingle went up my spine as I looked around the church at all the candles, and then looked at all of my family sitting near me. At that moment I also felt the presence of Jamie's spirit, even stronger than I'd felt it before. I can't tell you how happy this made me feel.

I looked around. The church was full,

so full that folding chairs had to be set in the aisles so everyone got a place to sit.

The service always began with the choir walking from the back of the church to the front, singing *Joy to the World*. As the choir did this, everyone else stood up and joined in the singing.

The church service only lasted about 40 minutes. During the service, a high school student, Mark Goldmann, and our minister, Reverend Dove, took turns reading short scripture passages which told the Christmas story. The choir and the congregation sang several songs.

The service traditionally ended with everyone singing *We Three Kings*, my favorite Christmas song. Then the congregation gathered on the steps for one minute to pray for peace.

The weather was great that evening so none of us were cold as we stood on the



steps praying silently. When the minute was over, Reverend Dove said, “Merry Christmas, everyone!”

The air was suddenly filled with many more *Merry Christmases*, as friends and family exchanged holiday greetings before we went home.



When we got home from church, Dad immediately turned on the Christmas tree lights, both on the huge evergreen outside and on our much smaller Christmas tree inside. Immediately, traffic passing by our house slowed down to observe the awesome sight.

Kevin, Pat, and I got ready for our run. I can't tell you how excited I was to be running with my two brothers in the dark on Christmas Eve. At the time, though, I



never dreamed what would happen during our run!

As Pat, Kevin, and I got into Kevin's truck, Pat asked, "Where are we running, guys?"

Kevin replied, "I thought we'd park the truck at Solheim School, run the bike trail through the woods, then past the golf course, and then go on Washington Street south back to Solheim School."

"How many miles is that?" Pat asked.

"About four and a half," Kevin answered. "Can you handle that, Pat?"

Pat answered, "No problem, as long as you guys really keep the slow pace Kelly told me you would."

"We will," I told Pat.

"Hey, Kel," Pat began, with a concerned tone to his voice, "did you have that dream about Jamie last night?"

"No," I replied. "In fact, I slept like a log."

After a few moments of silence, I added, “Pat and Kev, I’ve got to tell you something, but I hope you don’t think I’m weird or anything.”

“Kel, I’ll never think anything but good things about you. You know that,” Kevin said.

“Yeah, Kel,” Pat added. “What did you want to tell us?”

“Well,” I began, “this morning when I got up, I had this amazing feeling and I knew Jamie’s spirit was right in the bedroom with me. I can’t explain exactly how I knew it, but I just did. Then, during church tonight, I felt his presence even more, almost like I could reach out and touch him. Do you think that’s silly?”

“No way, Kel,” Pat replied. “I’ll bet God knows how important Jamie was to you, and he wants you to know that Jamie’s still with us.”



“That’s right,” Kevin agreed.

Then, with some hesitation, Kevin continued, “I have never told either of you this before, but I’ve had a similar experience, only not with Jamie.”

“Tell us,” I said.

“Well,” Kevin began, “when Grandma Hunke died, I missed her so much, especially when I needed her advice about something. Anyway, a week before my college graduation, I was back in Mandan trying to write a speech I had to make at Jamestown College’s graduation ceremony. I got into a real bind, where I couldn’t come up with exactly what I wanted to say. If Grandma Hunke would have been alive, I would have shared my problem with her, and she would have been able to tell me exactly what to write. But without her around, I became really frustrated so I decided to go to the YMCA

and ride the stationary bike to work out my frustration. After about 20 minutes on the bike, I suddenly felt a warm presence around me, and then I heard what I'm sure was Grandma's voice say, *Write your speech from the heart, Kevin* ... I looked around and no one was even close to me."

"That's amazing," said Kel.

"Anyway," Kevin continued, "at that moment, I knew Grandma was right there with me, just as she had been so many times before when I needed her most. Later, I went home and I wrote my graduation speech *from the heart*, just like Grandma had said. The words seemed to flow from my pen onto the paper. There was no frustration like I'd experienced earlier."

"Did you ever hear Grandma's voice after that?" Kelly wanted to know.

"No," Kevin replied. "I haven't heard



her voice since then. But several times, especially when I need some advice, I can feel her presence, and everything seems so much easier.”

“Wow!” Pat said. “That’s incredible! Why didn’t you tell us this before?”

“I’m not sure,” Kevin replied.

When we got to Solheim School, Kevin parked the truck. We walked the short distance to where the paved bike trail began. Then we started jogging toward the woods.

As we started jogging into the woods, I noticed something really strange. My steps were effortless, a feeling I had never experienced before.

I glanced over at Pat and Kevin who were jogging on either side of me and told them about this. Pat said, “You know, I feel the same way.”

“Me, too,” said Kevin. “I know we’re in pretty good shape, but this is unreal.”

Then the most amazing thing that we could ever have imagined happened!

Suddenly the trees on both sides of us began to glow, giving off a beautiful bluish-white light. This should have startled me, but instead, I felt nothing but a feeling of peace, and we kept running as the trees on both sides of us continued to give off the bluish-white glow.

As we approached the point on the bike trail where the archery range should have been on our right, the light on both sides of the trail intensified to the point that it was impossible to see what lay beyond.

Then I had the sensation that I was totally weightless, and I wanted to ask Pat and Kevin what they were experiencing. Before I could, though, the glow of light stopped.

As Kevin, Pat, and I looked around, we exchanged looks of amazement as we soon realized we were no longer on the bike



trail, but in a beautiful place we somehow knew could only be heaven.

The three of us tried to take in as much as we could of the breathtaking beauty of the place that we now found ourselves. In front of us was a huge, crystal clear lake with water that was the most beautiful color of blue I had ever seen. The surface of the lake was as smooth as glass. On the horizon were mountains that seemed to be painted in thousands of different colors.

We looked into the blue sky. White, fluffy clouds, like we would see on a perfect summer day in North Dakota, slowly floated along. Our surroundings were filled with beautiful music and song. The music was so unbelievably fantastic that it could only have been created by angels.

Along the edge of the lake there were

the prettiest trees I'd ever seen with leaves of various shades of red, yellow, green, and brown.

Suddenly, from behind us, we heard a familiar friendly bark and we quickly turned around. There was Jamie, our dear sheltie collie friend! His ears were standing up and his tail was wagging like crazy!

Pat, Kevin, and I got down on our knees, and all of us hugged Jamie as tears came to my eyes. Not a word was spoken during what seemed like the next fifteen minutes. Yet, we could communicate all of our thoughts to each other more easily than if we'd actually spoken. I knew then that, in heaven, anything was possible.

Jamie told us he would be with us in spirit until the time God decided we should join him in heaven. He told us that heaven was so enormous that the portion we were



seeing was much less than one drop of water in the ocean.

We walked along the edge of the lake for a mile or so. Every step we took as we walked was so effortless that we seemed to be floating.

I thanked God for giving me a chance to walk with Jamie, something Jamie and I had enjoyed so many times before he died. Then we all stopped, somehow knowing it was time to say good-bye. After hugging Jamie, we suddenly found ourselves back on the trail, running at normal speed, the bluish-white glow no longer present. As we looked to our right, we could see the archery range.



As we continued running along, Pat was the first to speak, "Would you mind if we stop?" he asked.

All three of us stopped running, and we walked slowly side-by-side.

"It's hard for me to believe what we've just experienced," Pat said. "I've never even had a dream that came close to it!"

"Me either," I said. "I always thought there was a heaven, but I never thought I'd see it so soon."



After thinking for a few seconds, I asked, “Kevin and Pat, I wonder why God let us see Jamie in heaven.”

It was quiet for several seconds before Pat answered. “I guess I always thought if you have enough faith, *anything* is possible. Now I know that’s true.”

I asked Pat and Kevin, “What are we going to tell the family when we get home?”

“I think we should tell them exactly what happened,” Kevin answered.

And that’s exactly what we did. When we got home, we asked everyone to gather in the family room, and we shared our experience with them. Even the youngest Kremers seemed to realize what a wonderful Christmas gift we’d received.

When we’d finished, Nate said, “I think we got the best Christmas present in the world from God.”

Dad was the first to hear some vehicles pull into our driveway. He looked out the window and saw two vans and a car parked there, filled with people.

“I wonder who this could be so late on Christmas Eve,” Dad said.

With a big smile on her face and tears in her eyes, Mom said, “I think we’re in store for *another* Christmas miracle.”

The whole family rushed out of the family room, out our front door, and onto our porch to see who our visitors were.

“Hey! It’s Kevin’s fifth grade class!” Karol yelled as she recognized some of the kids she had met earlier in the day.

“What’s going on here?” Kevin asked as the whole group started coming toward us.

That’s when I noticed that one of Kevin’s students named Lindsey was leading the group toward the porch, and



she was holding something in her arms. As she and the rest of the kids walked by our huge, well-lit evergreen, I could tell what she was holding. It was a beautiful sheltie collie puppy!

“I don’t believe this!” Kevin said as he walked down the steps to greet all of his students.

Jeremy, another one of Kevin’s students, spoke up as Lindsey handed the cute puppy to Kevin.

“Dr. Kremer, we all loved Jamie almost as much as you and your family. We all decided to pitch together and get you this puppy. We hope you like him.”

Kevin, who now had all his fifth graders huddled around him, tried to speak, but his voice cracked with emotion. He hugged the puppy as it wiggled and barked a cute little bark.

“I don’t know what to say,” Kevin finally

managed to say.

Tears started flowing from my eyes. Mom called, “Come on in, everyone! I’ve got cookies and punch for everyone.”

Everyone moved into the living room and kitchen. Mom, Robin, Jenny, Karol, Holly, and I served cookies and punch. Meanwhile, the sheltie pup provided great entertainment as it ran around the crowded living room and barked playfully at each person he encountered.

The room became quiet as Kevin spoke to his class. “I can’t believe you all kept this a secret like this.”

Bethany said, “Jenny and I collected all the money during recesses when you weren’t on duty. You *almost* saw us last week when you came outside to play basketball with Caleb.”

Beth Johnson said, “Dr. Kremer, we called your mom to find out if it was all



right to get you and your family a dog. She said it was OK, and she told us she wouldn't tell anyone else about our surprise."

"You're really amazing!" Kevin said to his class.

"You're pretty amazing yourself," said Rachael, one of Kevin's most outspoken students.

Holly spoke up. "Uncle Kevin, I think you should tell all your fifth graders what else happened tonight."

And he did, with the help of the rest of our family.

So it was that during the time when the whole world was celebrating the miracle of Jesus' birth, our family was celebrating some miracles of our own. It was something I knew we would all do each day for the rest of our lives.



About the Artist

Dave Ely was once a student in author Kevin Kremer's sixth grade class in Bismarck, North Dakota. Now, Dave is Kremer's favorite artist.

Dave is a self-taught artist with many talents. Besides illustrating books, he does custom wood carvings, bone sculptures, and paintings. Many of his works depict a Western or wildlife theme.

Ely has done a life-sized bear carving and an eagle carving for the movie *Wooly Boys*. Among many other projects, Dave is presently working on a life-sized carving of a mountain lion. He recently accepted a job at the Dakota Zoo in Bismarck, North Dakota.

Dave loves to get away from it all by camping and fishing. Red Lodge, Montana, is his favorite spot.

To view some of Dave's work or to contact him, go to: www.elywoodcarving.com.



About the Author

As a fifth and sixth grade teacher, Kevin Kremer loved writing an annual Christmas story for his students. After the Kremer family's sheltie collie, Jamie, died, Kevin decided to write his first book, a Christmas story, with Jamie as the main character. The rest of the Kremer family and some of Kevin's students were also characters in the book. That book, *A Kremer Christmas Miracle*, was published in 1995. For several years, Kremer has wanted to do a second edition of that book and add several illustrations. Finally, with the help of his artist Dave Ely, they got the job done.



Dr. Kremer has started a writing/publishing company to help people with writing projects of any kind including publishing and distributing books and E-books world-wide. To contact him regarding writing or publishing projects, school author visits, or to purchase books, go to:

Web site: **www.snowinsarasota.com**

E-mail: **snowinsarasota@aol.com**

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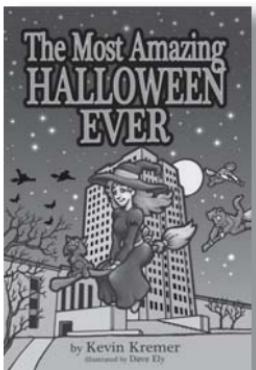
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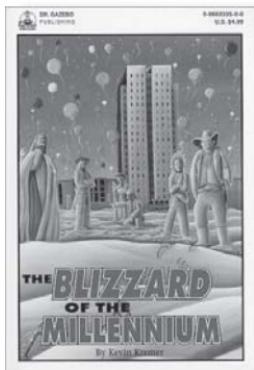
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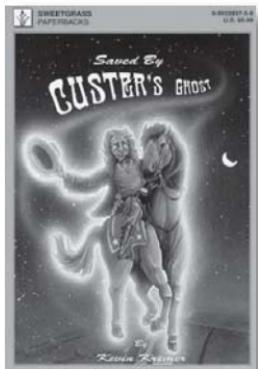
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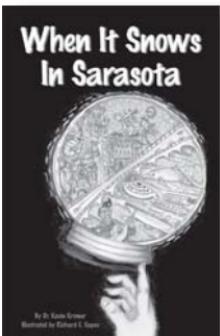
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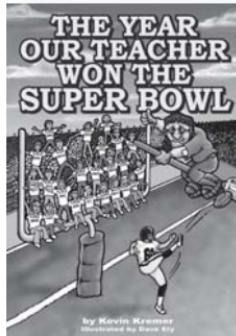
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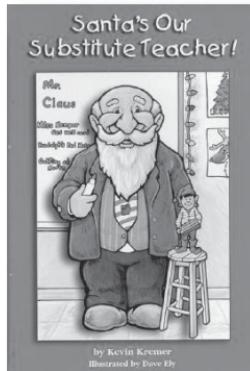
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