the GIVER: Chapter 1

Romans 11:29, 'For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.'

The holidays were always the hardest. Maybe not to the people who were decking their halls and checking their lists, it wasn't. But to the men he taught on the inside, behind bars, all wearing the exact same colored uniform with a faded tag bearing a lengthy number on every left chest, it was. Even the bars clanked closed more resoundingly with more finality in the closure of metal doors at the end of each shift. He knew if he felt it in his spirit and heard it in his soul, then the men held here certainly did. They stopped showing up as religiously for their tutoring sessions, and no robust discussions took place in the GED class; every mood somber and silent. No matter how long Frank had been offering craft courses and extracurricular projects, often at his own expense and time, year upon year, it was met with a lack of interest and deep despondency at Christmas.

The men filed in one by one, signing in, taking a seat, heads hanging like newborns. Frank gathered the writing assignments he had given them for extra credit and briefly they discussed today's study. No one even argued with him about the length of the reading and that was a rarity. Not one guy got up to wander the classroom in an effort to kill time and make excuses. Christmas was only a few days from now and perhaps soon the easy banter would return once the season disappeared. While each man settled in to their studies, Frank glanced through the papers. He had asked any who wanted to participate to write about the best Christmas gift each had ever received. John had gotten a BB gun and Mark recalled a video game he'd been 'dying' for. Rob talked about the time his family went on a Christmas ski vacation and Thomas described his Lego sets. Chris loved books which he always received plenty as gifts. Michael didn't have one remembrance of any Christmas gifts and Joseph wrote one line: 'None; we didn't celebrate Christmas. I'm Jewish.' But the story that stuck out the most was Sammy's. He wrote about the priceless gift of his son. "I was so awed by the swaddled package I held in my arms, I almost passed out. I couldn't breathe, and I couldn't look upon my son because of the tears in my eyes. I memorized every feature on his body, even the birthmark like a kiss on his face, and I wondered if God had felt the same way about His son as I did about mine, both swaddled in cloths and born on Christmas Day. I swore I would never forget what God had done for me. And I never have. Even though I haven't seen my son in too many years to count now because of my stupidity." Frank could see where water marks leaked on the page, blemishing the ink, and a certain sadness filled him.

It's why he was here, teaching a GED class and helping men get diplomas. He could be anywhere, but he chose to teach here. So when they were released, they had a chance at a new life with a piece of paper in their hand that said they applied themselves and had earned a reward that might offer a better future. But Frank hadn't envisioned the many times his career would take him back. Back to his childhood, back to the little boy he'd been, back to the cold, empty home devoid of parents because his dad was in prison and his mom worked three jobs to provide for her kids, back to the silent Christmases and the dashed hopes every year.

Except that one Christmas! That was the year which determined Frank's future for him! *That* Christmas, he knew. He and his siblings had awakened to a glistening tree with merry lights and gifts all aglow in shiny paper of all colors and pretty bows. Rumor had it, a man who retired from his job with the Department of Corrections had adopted an Angel Tree project to help provide gifts for boys and girls of incarcerated parents. He decided then that no matter who he became as an adult, he'd make sure other boys and girls with daddies in prison had the very same Christmas experience he'd been given.

A dusting of snow and twinkling lights greeted Frank as he drove cautiously away from the prison at the end of his shift. Both were strict reminders Christmas was but days away, and he still had so much to do. There were boys and girls who needed some magic in their lives and a few who needed miracles. Frank had a final tutoring session with Teddy, the little kid he had recently been hired to tutor, and upon completion, he would devote the entirety of his weekend to this year's Angel Tree. He grinned to no one but himself. This would be the best Christmas yet. He could feel it in his bones.

To be continued....