

# PEWTER ANGELS



"PEWTER ANGELS"

HARRIPLINGER/2009



THE ANGELIC LETTERS SERIES

*Book One*



PEWTER ANGELS

1956-1957

HENRY K. RIPPLINGER

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*I dedicate this book to my wife, Joan,  
my first and only love.*



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

WRITING A SERIES OF NOVELS, I have learned, requires a lengthy commitment, a withdrawal from the usual routines of daily living, a time to be alone, to reflect, to write. My wife Joan has given me this gift of freedom to realize what was in my heart, to put down on paper what was only a dream for so many, many years. I thank my lovely wife for this time, her understanding and patience. For reading and re-reading the story at each stage of development, being a sounding board and her assistance in editing.

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The goal for any author is to see their manuscript shape into the best it can be. I am very fortunate to have gathered together an editing team that have not only strengthened, tightened and clarified the language and the story, but for each bringing their own special skills and judicious input. To the editors: Darlene Oakley, Jody Ripplinger and Heather Nickel, my heartfelt thanks for realizing my goal and your commitment to this huge undertaking.

I am grateful to the numerous writers of books I have read

over the years that have shaped my life and thinking. The most influential and everlasting of course is the Bible. I thank the Lord for all the trials, joys and life's experiences that have helped me grasp some of the wisdom and truths of His Word and their application to my life and writing.



## PREFACE

IT IS SAID THAT WITHIN EACH of us is a story to tell. For years, I must admit, it has been my heart's desire to write a novel. For the longest time I thought it was just wishful thinking, an illusion or fantasy I was nurturing. Over the years, I started several stories that never went anywhere except into my drawer and then fizzled away in the recesses of my mind. And yet, I have long known that if one has a dream, a burning passion in his heart, that someday it will come to pass. Never would I have envisioned, however, the wonderfully creative way it would come about. How, one day, an unbelievable occurrence would eventually transform a fantasy into reality.

The "occurrence" tugged away at me for days, months and then years, begging my attention. Seeking understanding, I spoke of it to family and friends but I was so focused on the event itself that I missed the underlying significance of it all. It wasn't until I found myself in the sunroom of our farmhouse one sleepless morning in June 2005, watching the sun near the edge of the earth, that the deeper meaning of the occurrence came to me. As the rising sun brightened the room in which I sat, it also seemed to illuminate my mind. Insight, previously

obscured in the shadows of my psyche, bloomed and intensified as dawn spread out across the prairie sky. As I traced the occurrence back to its beginning, I finally realized how it was a testament to the enduring miracle of love. Immediately, an overwhelming, almost feverish rush to write my story welled up inside me, and I began.

Without any outline or any knowledge of how to write a novel, I picked up a pen and scribbler on the end table and simply began to write. For two weeks, I wrote almost non-stop until my wrist and hand gave out. Then I purchased a laptop computer—the best investment of my life—and continued to write as fast as my fingers could type. Corrections could be made in an instant. Paragraphs moved here and there with incredible ease. The thoughts began to flow. It was as if during all the years I had been thinking about the occurrence, ideas had been incubating in my mind, stored, packed, imprisoned inside, until the writing process released them like a gusher, exploding and spilling onto the pages.

Sentence followed after sentence almost effortlessly as the scenes unfolded in my mind's eye. I relied not so much on my intellect as I wrote but rather on my imagination, ablaze as it was with imagery and thoughts. I began to write an outline, a list of chapters that would take me from beginning to end. It was like going on a journey, and I was tracing out the map where I wanted and needed to go to reach my destination.

Characters came alive and I followed them and their lives; we talked and laughed and cried together. They took me in directions I never would have thought of on my own ... they led and I followed. This resulted in more chapters. My map expanded as twists and turns in the road came from nowhere and everywhere and from deep within. As the weeks of writing progressed, the vision before me became clearer and richer. It was like watching a movie. All I had to do was write down what I saw before me on the screen of my mind.

Incredibly, three years to the date I started writing, when all was said and done, a huge book of over 1000 pages was in my

hands. Once the editing process began, even more pages were added, strengthening the story and dividing it into five parts and timeframes. The result is a chronicle of love and adventure in the lives of two people, whose story shows us how angels and the heavens are intricately involved in our lives and that miracles happen when we follow our hearts.

As I look back on this experience, I am still amazed by the effortlessness with which the story emerged, as if the chapters, their order and all the key elements were guided, predetermined—or perhaps more accurately—inspired.

The writing of this book also answered another prayer long held in my heart. As a teacher and then a high school guidance counsellor, it was always my aspiration to write a self-development book. From an early age, insights and understanding of human behaviour came naturally to me, and my study of psychology and counselling in university further added to my empathetic abilities.

Writing this novel utilized those aptitudes. Through the lives of the characters, I could infuse values and principles to live by and show how the choices we make determine our happiness. I wanted to demonstrate the importance of living our lives in the now so as to carry out our life mission to love and serve our Lord and others. These teaching and counselling skills were indirectly at work while I also re-examined my own life and the direction I was going. Ultimately, I realized that lessons are more effectively absorbed intellectually and emotionally when revealed through a story; my novel had simultaneously become my self-development book.

The story begins in Regina, Saskatchewan in the 1950s—the place and time of my own coming of age—though I have taken liberties with the details of its places and events. But though this book is a work of fiction, the occurrence that motivated it was something I experienced personally. My initial intention was to simply write about the occurrence; what resulted was a work of fiction that took on a life of its own. As I'm sure must be the case for many writers, my own life experiences provided the

ideal backdrop for the story and moulded the development of the main character to the extent that it was inextricably woven into the fictional narrative.

I firmly believe that God has a plan for each one of us. The desire to write was planted in my heart long before the Lord had me experience the occurrence. Fortunately, I finally listened to His calling to do so, to carry out His plan. I think the Lord knew that as I began to realize the underlying love associated with that event, the power of that love would draw me into the wonderful world of writing and give witness to love's beauty and ever-enduring wonder. And, just like the warm prairie summer sun eventually ripens a crop of golden wheat for the harvest, so too, as the seed of this story took root, warmed and nourished by the timeless love of two people, "The Angelic Letters" series grew and blossomed. You and I are its reapers.

*Henry K. Ripplinger*  
*December 2009*

“He hath given his angels charge over thee; to keep thee in all  
thy ways . . . in their hands they shall bear thee up:  
lest thou dash thy foot against a stone.”

PSALM 91:11-12



## PROLOGUE



**A** THOUGHTFUL MAN ONCE SAID *that in between our thoughts or in between sounds there is a silence in which we can reach our Creator. I believe this to be true: often in my own meditations I have enjoyed moments of pure joy and love. I have also experienced this bliss and delight in everyday life, overwhelmed by the beauty of God's creation and the love that resides in the core of each one of us. You see, Heaven is right here—not only in the silence but in between the spaces of everything in the universe. The Kingdom is within us, in the flowers, the sky, the rocks and mountains ... it was all made by Him out of nothing, and so He is in all things seen and unseen.*

*It is the unseen that has always intrigued me—I hope to spend eternity in the presence of my God. It is my final destination and I know that what I do in the time between when I was born until I leave this earth determines the heavenly mansion prepared by the Lord in which I shall reside.*

*The Lord desires me and all mankind to be close to Him. So, to help us on our journey to Him, He has, from the beginning, created a legion of angels. At the moment I was conceived, a guardian angel flew to my side. For nearly a hundred years he has watched*

*over me, protected me, answered my prayers, and entreated the Lord to have mercy on me when I strode off on my own, fighting fervently to set my feet on the true path each time. I can say with love and conviction that my guardian angel is my closest friend and ally—my unseen link to God.*

*And I am grateful. I have been one of the fortunate few to know of my protector and thus cooperate with him. For many, this gift from God might as well be a secret, their angel so taken for granted they are oblivious to the tremendous help and support available to them in their daily lives. As a result they forfeit a thousand blessings and fall victim to a thousand misfortunes that might have otherwise been avoided.*

*Whenever I can, I speak of my protector and encourage others to do so as well.*

*“Have you never had a feeling you should visit someone, help another or lift in prayer a long lost friend?” I ask. “These are not just idle thoughts or whispers in our dreams, they are born of our celestial patron or the promptings of another angel seeking help for his charge.”*

*Great indeed is our debt of gratitude to the angels for their tender care, protection and untiring solitudes on our behalf. We owe our angels profound respect for their presence, their love and their power to watch over us daily, and humble thanks for the care they bestow upon us.*

*Not until we enter eternity shall we know the number of benefits our guardian angel has nurtured from the first moment of our existence. There are rare times, however, when just such a thing happens. Less than a year ago, I had cause to meet Zachariah, my personal protector. The medical community attributed my stint on the other side to “a near death experience,” but I know it to have been a miracle—and there was purpose in my return.*

*For the one who has been granted a second chance in life, memory of their visit to the other side is often almost absent, or so foggy and distant that their retelling of the experience lacks coherence. For me, the memory is perfectly clear, as if it happened yesterday.*



*What I learned from my protector during those minutes when time stood still was more than three lifetimes of learning, the knowing of the ages absorbed in a single thought. Tears of gratitude flowed from my eyes as I saw how he had guided, protected and assisted me in every endeavour of my life to help keep me in harmony with God's will.*

*But perhaps Zachariah's greatest sharing was the involvement of the guardian angels assigned to lives close to my own. Now, there is a love story if there ever was one ....*

*When I returned to the land of the living, I knew what I should do. "Yes," I whispered to the unseen, "It is the perfect way for others to see, as I do, the presence of God's heavenly angels in their lives."*



## CHAPTER ONE

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HENRY LUNGED FORWARD and pressed his nose against the storm door glass as the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen passed by. She captivated him and held him spellbound, his attention drawn to her like a straight pin to a magnet.

She must have felt his gaze on her; she stopped and looked towards his door. Her initial quizzical look relaxed and softened into an engaging smile before she turned and strolled away, her hips swaying gently under the warm summer sun.

Henry's nose slid along the windowpane as he followed her, a thin layer of fog forming on the glass from his breath. He pushed up on his tiptoes to rise above it. As he gazed at her, something powerful stirred deep inside him, turning the boredom he'd felt all morning into an unexplainable excitement.

He followed as far as he could until his head bumped into the door frame. When she was out of view, Henry lowered himself and took a few deep breaths to slow his racing heart before opening the front door and peeking out.

At that precise moment, she stopped and glanced back, her eyes meeting his. Henry gasped then jumped out of her sight behind the storm door. The momentary embarrassment was

more than worth the peek at that winsome creature.

Still in a daze, he relived the thirty seconds or so it had taken her to pass his house. She had come and gone so quickly that he couldn't describe anything more specific than her wheat-coloured hair. He needed to know the shape of her lips, the colour of her eyes, the complexion of her skin. Did she have any dimples? How did her mouth curl when she spoke? He could only imagine she would be perfect in every way.

Henry closed his eyes, pressing his mind to recall more. Her maroon sweater had curved over small breasts and her black skirt hung just below her knees. Spotless white bobby socks sprung from black and white saddle shoes. And she had carried something in her hand. A piece of paper, perhaps a grocery list. If it was a list, she was probably headed for the corner grocery a little over a block away.

His plan to go for a bike ride to kill time while waiting for Timmy Linder to get out of summer school suddenly changed.

He just had to get a closer look at this intriguing girl.

Henry dashed out the door and scooted between his house and the neighbours'. His shiny red bike—a present for his fifteenth birthday two days before—waited for him. He knelt beside it, fumbling with the lock.

"Henry?" Mrs. Goronic called from her garden when she heard him unlock his bike. "Can you carry away the weeds for me?"

*Oh, not now!* Henry enjoyed helping his neighbour, but not even the promise of being paid a nickel for the job could distract him from his mission.

"Sorry, I have to go to the grocery store, Mrs. Goronic," he answered, desperate to be away. "I'll help you when I get back."

Henry flipped the bike around and pushed it to the street. He grabbed the handlebars, stepped on the left pedal and threw his leg over the seat. His right foot hit the other pedal—and slipped off; the bar of the metal bike frame slammed into his groin.

A fiery rocket of pain surged through his body as he fell, knocking the breath out of him. Henry crouched over, unable to straighten up. Embarrassed, he glanced around to see if any-

one had witnessed his accident. Thankfully, it didn't appear so. But every moment he spent recovering was a moment that kept him from meeting her. Consciously he inhaled through his nose and out through his mouth to control his breathing, straightening as the pain subsided. He gingerly remounted the leather seat, planted his foot on the pedal and propelled himself down the street, weaving from side to side to ease the sting he felt each time his right leg rose on the pedal's upstroke. Hopefully, no one watching would think he was drunk.

As he made his way to the grocery (much more slowly than he would have liked), Henry marveled at his bold and impulsive behaviour: chasing after a girl! He'd had crushes on girls before, but until that morning he'd always lost his gumption when it came to matters of romance. It wasn't that Henry was particularly shy or uncouth—he had plenty of friends and was generally well-mannered and well-spoken—he just always seemed to lose his cool and ability to speak coherently around pretty girls. But today, something felt different. He didn't know what had gotten into him this morning, but Henry was not only smitten with his new neighbour, he was bound and determined to meet her as soon as possible. And, with that thought, despite his aching groin, Henry's feet began to pedal faster and faster, his bike propelling him forward through space so quickly it almost felt like he had wings.

Henry had hoped to beat her to the store and meet her at the front door—assuming that was where she was going. But a good ten minutes had elapsed since his little accident. By the time he arrived at Engelmann's Grocery, she was nowhere to be seen. Maybe she was already inside. Or maybe she had taken the trolley that had just pulled away. Or maybe she had gone to Victoria Pharmacy, two blocks down the other way.

Still, he was here now. Better check the grocery first.

He set his bike on the walk in front of the stairs, even though he knew Mr. Engelmann would holler at him for blocking the entrance. He wouldn't be long.

He pulled open the heavy wooden door and was greeted by

the pleasant odour of fresh ground coffee. Dust motes hung in the sunlit square of the doorway before it clapped shut behind him. Mr. Engelmann was at the counter serving a customer; over the years his regular place by the till had worn a slight groove into the wood. The store only had two aisles, so Henry walked over to the one nearest him and glanced down it. No one. The wooden floor boards squeaked and creaked as Henry stepped to the other side. It too was empty.

“Henry!”

He jumped.

“Are you looking for the young lady who came in here a few minutes ago?”

Henry’s face burned. He swung around to face Mr. Engelmann and as he did so, his arm caught the edge of a huge pyramid of salmon tins, sending them rolling and skittering everywhere. Henry wanted to dive through one of the open knotholes in the floor to escape the tide of red surging up from his collar to the top of his head. It was bad enough to have an accident in Old Man Engelmann’s store, but for the girl of his dreams to see his clumsiness was another thing entirely. He only hoped that she’d already left and hadn’t witnessed his accident.

“Sorry, Mr. Engelmann,” Henry said in a low voice. He knelt down and began gathering the tins. Crawling on all fours, he reached for one on the other side of the aisle and there she was, squatting in front of him.

She picked it up and handed it to him. “Here, can I help you?”

Henry looked up. *My God, she is beautiful*, he thought. The morning sunlight was beaming in the front window behind her, and its glow on her blond hair gave her a soft halo. It reminded Henry of the painting of the Virgin Mary hanging in his parents’ bedroom.

Humiliated, he couldn’t answer right away. He felt another flush of heat on his cheeks and ducked his head.

“Yes, yes, please help him,” Mr. Engelmann called from across the store. “Looks like he could use another pair of hands.”

That broke the tension and a wave of relief washed over Henry.

Trying to be cool, he looked up at the girl again and this time he smiled. She did not avert her gaze and he was inordinately pleased. Her sky blue eyes looked on him with compassion and her lips curled just enough to let him know she was not laughing at him, though they conveyed a lightheartedness, nonetheless. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear as she leaned towards him to pick up another tin and Henry smelled lilacs.

“Yeah, I could use the help,” Henry finally replied with a semblance of composure. He took another can from her hand. “I’m a bit clumsy this morning.”

Her smile broadened and she handed him more tins.

*So far, so good*, thought Henry. Although he had already made a complete fool out of himself, he had actually managed to smile and speak to a pretty girl. And she had smiled back! He certainly wasn’t out of the woods yet, he could still easily blow it like he usually did. But for some reason, today felt different; Henry felt different. He was overcome with a sense of assurance that he was doing exactly what he was meant to do.

As they crouched, gathering up the tins in silence, Henry studied her covertly, hoping she wouldn’t notice. The sunlight continued to dapple and tint her honey-coloured hair, and now he noticed that it fell just below her ears. As she reached for a wayward tin, her hair swung forward, hiding most of her facial features except for the tip of her slightly upturned nose. Her neck was long and slender, reminding Henry of Egyptian ladies he had seen in the encyclopedia.

Suddenly, she turned to Henry as if to speak, catching him off guard. He didn’t have time to pretend he wasn’t staring. He’d been caught. Their eyes met now for a second time and although he felt his face warming again with a blush, this time he couldn’t turn away. Her gaze locked with his and his with hers. They rose from their knees simultaneously, as if lifted, and were at once standing, facing each other. Nothing existed except this moment and this place...

A charged, earthly attraction united their hearts while a spiritual energy traveled the length of the gaze they shared, drawing

their souls from their bodies and joining them at the halfway point. The aura around them brightened, enclosing both in the surrounding glow of their celestial connection.

Time stood still...

Mr. Engelmann looked up. "How are you two doing over there?" The sound of his voice pierced the rapture of the moment.

Henry caught his breath. His soul slammed back into his chest. "O-okay," he answered, though he wasn't sure what the question had been. Heat returned to his cheeks. What in the world was he doing, staring at her like that? She would think he was a nut. He blinked several times as though something were in his eyes.

She tilted her head and moved back, then bent down to retrieve the remaining tin cans at their feet.

Henry looked at Mr. Engelmann, saw him nod in their direction and wink to the customer he was serving. The pink staining Henry's cheeks deepened to red, his composure crumbling. Whatever confidence he had felt a few moments ago was quickly diminishing. Looking away, Henry placed the last of the collected tins onto the stack.

"Guess I should watch where I'm going, huh?"

"We all have accidents." Her voice held a gentle humour, erasing his lingering embarrassment.

"Thanks for your help. Did you find what you came for?"

"No, not everything. I better go ask for help and get back home before they send a search party."

As the only other customer in the store gathered up his bag and left, she approached Mr. Engelmann.

"Hi. Could you please show me where the sugar is?"

Henry stole another look at her. She sure didn't need any sweetening.

"It's just down this aisle," Mr. Engelmann pointed, "at the end on the second shelf."

"And the baking soda? Where might that be?"

"Also with the baking supplies but on the first shelf."

Henry continued straightening the stack of tins, propelled



by a yearning he could not suppress. He felt ridiculous. On the one hand, he just wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible, but on the other, he was rooted to the spot and seemed to have no control over his actions. It was obvious he was stalling now, but the girl seemed to be stalling, too—or so he hoped. By the time she'd found her items and paid for them, Henry's mountain of salmon tins was perfectly stacked. As she strolled towards the door, taking her time and looking at everything along the way, Henry sprinted to the front.

"Henry," Mr. Engelmann called. "What did you come in for? Were you supposed to pick something up?"

Henry froze. *Of course!* The girl was probably wondering the same thing! He didn't want to let on his real reason for being there. Silently, he begged the girl to wait for him. He turned and spotted several loaves of wrapped bread, lined up neatly on the paint-chipped shelf. He snatched one up.

"Please put it on our account," Henry said as he dashed to join the girl lingering by the door.

"Don't you want a bag?"

"No, no. This is fine. I'm really sorry for being so clumsy."

"It's okay, Henry." Mr. Engelmann leaned forward to rest his hands on the counter. "I think I stacked the tins out too far in the aisle. Not to worry."

Henry nodded towards Mr. Engelmann and at once turned back to the girl. She seemed to be holding back a chuckle, which then turned into a wide warm smile.

He dashed past her, opened the heavy door and held it for her. She cast him a furtive glance then looked down, her cheeks faintly tinged with pink.

Henry's heart skipped a beat. Together they walked down the two steps to the pavement. The bike Henry had dreamed of and hoped for and had been so happy to get only two days before blocked the path. Henry did the unthinkable. He stepped over his longed-for birthday gift as if it were a discarded candy wrapper and walked on, in step with the girl.

Just then, she turned to him, her crystal blue eyes sparkling,

and made Henry's day. "By the way, I'm Jenny Sarsky. We just moved into the neighbourhood a few days ago."

Thrilled that she had freely offered her name and relieved that she didn't think he was a complete moron (he hoped), he blurted, "I know. I live just three doors down from you. I watched the movers unload your stuff." As soon as the words tumbled out, Henry wished he had them back. *Geez, there I go again.* Now she would know he'd been spying on her.

But Jenny didn't seem to notice, "This is our third move in four years. I hope we stay longer than the last time."

Henry silently echoed that sentiment.

"We were just settling into our house in Vancouver when someone got sick and they called my dad to move here to Regina to take his place. He said we had to go, it was such a great opportunity." Her eyes turned toward Henry and they stepped off the curb in unison. "So, here we are." After a brief pause, she added, "I'm sure you're not interested in this."

"Oh, yes," Henry responded. He would have been interested in hearing her recite the phone book. But Henry couldn't believe that this gorgeous girl could possibly be interested in *him*.

Just when his heart began filling with doubt and despair, Jenny jumped as a passing car honked its horn. Neither of them had been paying very close attention, and they had just about stepped directly onto Victoria Avenue without even noticing the traffic. Henry caught her eye and they shared a startled chuckle.

Crossing Victoria Avenue was always dangerous. Cars zipped by in a steady stream in both directions. As they waited for the opportunity to cross, Henry noted the sky was clear, not a cloud in sight. Somewhere between the zenith and the horizon was a shade of blue that matched the colour of Jenny's eyes. He smiled and stole another look at her. The wind gently lifted her hair, exposing the silver stud in her ear, the light glinting off the silver chain she wore around her neck.

Standing next to Jenny on that perfect summer morning, Henry quickly forgot the anguish he had felt just a moment ago and was suddenly flooded with hopeful anticipation.

Finally, a break in traffic allowed them to dart into the street. “Quickly, hold my hand,” Jenny blurted.

He didn’t know if she’d asked because the traffic frightened her or if she just wanted to hold his hand. It didn’t matter. He thrust his hand out and grabbed hers and ... all heaven broke loose. An electrifying thrill charged through him. Warm and soft, her hand fit perfectly into his. The sound of traffic faded into the distance; the sun shone like it never had before. The world marched on without them.

Oblivious to cars and traffic, Henry glided blindly across the avenue, unsure if his feet even touched the pavement. The curb arrived a second or two sooner than he expected. Henry stumbled, tearing their hands apart and snapping him out of his reverie. He struggled to regain his balance and composure.

“You really are having a rough time today,” Jenny ribbed him good-naturedly.

“I was paying so much attention to the traffic I didn’t see the curb,” Henry grasped for a reasonable excuse.

“They should have traffic lights or a crosswalk at this corner.” Jenny observed.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

As they walked towards home, Henry shifted the loaf of bread from the hand nearest hers to the other. He wanted to touch her again so badly, he brushed his free hand against hers. Inching his way towards her, his hand finally hit its mark; a warm sensation shot through him as their fingers met.

Jenny stepped away.

“Sorry,” Henry lied as he moved over a bit to give her a little more space, pretending it was an accident.

They were nearing home and Henry wondered if he should walk her to her door or if that would be awkward. Without thinking but immediately wishing he hadn’t, he blurted, “Do you want me to walk you home?”

“I think I can find the way,” she laughed.

Henry loved her laugh. It was natural and easy, and the way her eyes lit up ....

She glanced over at him, “I just wondered ... your name is Henry, right? I overheard the man at the grocery store call you that.”

How could he have forgotten to introduce himself to the girl of his dreams? Realizing he had another opportunity to touch her hand, he quickly held his out for a handshake. “Yes, it’s Henry Pederson. Pleased to meet you, Jenny.”

She stared at him and his outstretched hand, then chuckled. Her hand came towards his. He could see it coming, soft and smooth-skinned. No rings, just a small, elegant hand coming closer and closer. He couldn’t wait any longer. He thrust his hand into hers.

Jenny stepped back a bit, startled, but Henry wouldn’t let go. That incredible warm feeling of her hand inside his blitzed through his body again and he wanted it to last forever.

“I really must get these baking supplies home,” said Jenny, juggling the bag in her free arm. She looked at the hand that held hers captive, then at Henry’s eyes. As she began to understand the underlying motive for the handshake, a rosy hue bloomed on her cheeks and she smiled as she gently tugged her hand free.

“Nice meeting you, Henry.” She looked up at the house on the corner. “Is that where you live?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh.” Jenny’s eyes widened in surprise. She blushed again.

Henry looked at her sheepishly, fearing that she now knew he was the one she’d seen spying on her earlier—and that he’d followed her to the store. Henry cringed inwardly. He had done one klutzy thing after another; would she ever want to see him again? But if Jenny had any reservations about Henry, she didn’t let on.

“If you’re not busy this afternoon,” she said, her smile covering her words, “could you show me how to get to Balfour High School? I’ll be registering there next week for the fall semester.”

Trying to conceal his utter joy and keep the grin from splitting his face, Henry said, “Sure, Jenny! See ya later.”

He lifted a hand in farewell and nearly floated into his yard and up the three stairs leading to the front door. Not even his

buddy Timmy Linder getting out of summer school could keep him from being with Jenny. He glanced over to Jenny's place. She was just walking through her gate. He waited for a brief moment to make sure she wasn't looking, then jumped over the banister and slipped between the houses to where he usually kept his bike. He half jogged to the alley behind his house then burst into a run.

Mrs. Goronic was still weeding in her backyard and she called out to him as he darted by. He pretended not to hear her. He had to get his bike.

His bike. *Oh, man.* What if it had been stolen or Old Man Engelmann had taken a sledgehammer to it for cluttering the entryway? Henry's heart pounded as he ran faster and faster. Sweat trickled down his sides. The traffic on Victoria Avenue was as heavy as it had been earlier. Between cars, he glanced across the street to Engelmann's store. Was his bike still there? One big truck after another blocked his view. Finally, a break in traffic allowed him a peek. It was gone!

He waited for another break and looked again. It really was gone. He couldn't believe his eyes. His elation over meeting Jenny plummeted into his shoes along with his stomach. He heaved a sigh and his breathing eased a bit, but he ached from head to toe. The exhaustion of emotional overload hung heavy on his limbs and the pain from his earlier mishap on the bike made itself known again. Queasiness gnawed at his gut.

The traffic finally abated and Henry jogged across the street, the spring gone from his step.

Mr. Engelmann emerged from the store as Henry approached.

"Don't worry, I have your bike," he said. "Come on."

Henry didn't know whether to laugh or cry. The roller-coaster morning had taken a toll on his nerves.

"When I saw you walk away with that young lady I knew your mind wasn't on your bicycle, so I decided to look after it for you."

Henry stared at him, speechless. He'd fully expected a scolding from Mr. Engelmann for leaving the bike on the doorstep

and obstructing the entry to the store. This was turning into the best and most unusual day of his life.

“You must be quite taken by that young lady, eh? Leaving your new bike behind just to walk her home. But sometimes other things in a man’s life can become more important, no?” With a wink and twinkle in his eye, Mr. Engelmann added, “I was young once, too, Henry. I may be an old man now but I still understand such things.”

Henry met the store owner’s knowing gaze head on. “Thanks a lot, sir.” And to show his appreciation—and attempt to act more mature than he felt—he put out his hand.

Mr. Engelmann studied him for a moment and his eyes seemed to get a little watery. “You’re a good boy, Henry.” He took Henry’s hand and shook it. Where Jenny’s had been warm and soft, Mr. Engelmann’s hand was dry and coarse and marked with age, but that handshake sealed their friendship.

Mr. Engelmann took Henry around the back of the store. He opened the door to a large shed, and there among the many boxes was Henry’s shiny red bike. Henry took hold of the handlebars and backed the bike out of the crowded storage shed.

“Thanks again, Mr. Engelmann,” he said, then jumped on his bike, careful not to slip and re-injure himself.

Mr. Engelmann waved off his thanks.

Secure on the seat, Henry picked up speed and headed down the street as fast as his legs could pedal. The breeze felt so good. His T-shirt, which had stuck wetly to his back minutes ago, quickly dried as the wind surged beneath and through it. It swelled out behind him like a parachute as he raced down the road passing, 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Avenues in a flash, taking the long way home.

Jenny filled his thoughts once more. How beautiful she was, and how wonderful it had been to hold her hand and look into her eyes. He just couldn’t believe that despite his mishaps and complete lack of flair, she still seemed to like him. It wasn’t just his imagination; they had clicked. Elation soared through him. He felt like he was in a hot air balloon instead of on his bike,

coasting over the streets and intersections, fueled by the torch in his heart. This must be what it felt like to be in love!

Gradually Henry's pent-up energy was expended. Relaxed, cooled off and coming to his senses, he slowed down. But as he neared his home his spirits shot up again. His breath caught. There she was on the front steps of her house, reading a book!

She looked up as his bike *kathumped* over the spaces in the wooden sidewalk, sunlight brightening her face.

*An angel.* She looked like an angel with her blond hair glistening gold in the bright sun and her smooth skin shimmering in the warm light.

Looking into the sun, she squinted to make out who was in front of her. A lone cloud sailing tranquilly in the vast expanse of the prairie summer sky cast a soothing shadow across Jenny's face, which relaxed into a welcoming grin.

"Oh, hi, Henry, I didn't expect to see you again so soon. Just out for a bike ride?"

"Yeah, something to do," he replied, trying to be casual. "Oh, yeah. When do you want me to show you where Balfour is?"

"Maybe after lunch, say around 1:30 or so. Is that okay?"

"Sure," Henry replied, his brain whirling for something else to say to keep the conversation going. "What are you reading?"

"*Catcher in the Rye*. My mom just finished it and said it's such a good book. So far it's kind of boring." Her eyes rested on the bike. "Say, isn't that the same red bike that was lying in front of Mr. Engelmann's grocery store this morning?"

Fire rolled up Henry's neck and consumed his face. Should he tell her the truth? Should he let her know he'd left his prized possession behind just so he could walk her home and be with her a little while longer? He swallowed hard.

"Yes," he croaked, offering no further explanation.

Jenny's eyes brightened and a knowing smile played on her lips.

His secret was out.