



In the Recycle Bin

MIN RANDALL SAT ON THE BENCH next to the Royal Bank parking lot and wondered how much longer Enid Bangs, her foster mother, would spend in the bank.

“Don’t you move a muscle until I get back,” she had said as she bustled away.

But Min was cold. She hugged herself and wondered why old Enid had not let her come inside as she usually did. Trying to distract herself, she looked around the square. New snow was floating down in great, cottony flakes, just right for a December afternoon. A breeze set some of them spinning in a momentary dance and she began to smile. Then a cold finger of wind slid deep inside her coat collar and touched her neck. It made her shiver and blew out her smile. She huddled deeper into her jacket, but it was too thin to help.

The snowflakes were blowing onto the happy-family

statue that rose up from the middle of the fountain across the street. The water had been turned off for the winter, but the statue still stood in its place.

As usual, the stone father supported the mother and she, in turn, held the baby high above her. All three were stark naked. Min, who was growing colder by the minute, felt sorry for them.

Maybe nude statues looked fine in Italy where Michelangelo's *David* stood. The Art teacher had shown them a photo of him and he looked fine. Tall, bare and beautiful. But here in mid-winter in Ontario, Min felt, even a stone family needed some protection from the biting wind.

In her mind, she dressed the grown-ups in ski outfits and put a snug snowsuit on the baby. They looked much less miserable.

But that was not all that was wrong. The mother had the child perched high up on her hands but was not holding onto him properly. If he were made of flesh and blood, he would have given one wriggle and hurtled head over bare heels into the fountain beneath. Even if he sensed his danger and stayed absolutely still, a blast of wind would surely have toppled him to his death.

"Get a grip, lady," Min whispered to the mother. Then she grinned, catching the double meaning in her own words.

If the three of them were alive, Min knew the Children's Aid would have rescued that poor little kid and placed him in foster care. She should know. In her

own years as a ward of the Children's Aid, she'd met plenty of babies taken from parents who hadn't looked after them properly.

The stone parents never abandoned their baby, though. There were always the three of them, sticking together, belonging. Even though the little guy didn't have a stitch on, he'd probably fight to stay with his mum and dad regardless of the gusts that buffeted his small body.

Despite her winter clothing, Min felt frozen to the bone by now.

She glanced over at the bank, wishing Enid Bangs would move it. At this rate, Min would be an ice sculpture before the woman reappeared.

Then a piercing shriek ripped through the quiet of the winter afternoon.

"Catch her, Tobias!" she heard a woman's voice shout.

Min jerked around just in time to see a small girl in a scarlet snowsuit pelting past her down the sidewalk. She was heading straight for the busy street that cut across the square at the end of the block. Then the traffic light facing the oncoming cars turned green. People bent on last-minute shopping were driving bumper to bumper — searching for parking spaces, not watching out for run-away children. This one was so short that her head might not show above the hood of a car.

The little girl looked back over her shoulder. Then she gave a triumphant laugh and sped on, straight for the street.

Min sprang up, dashed forward and caught hold of the child by one arm.

"No!" the small girl bellowed at her. "Let GO!"

Instead, Min tightened her grip. The child squirmed and fought like a tiger to free herself, but Min's hold did not loosen, despite the painful kicks aimed at her legs.

"Cut that out, brat," a boy's voice roared.

Then he was there, catching hold of the child by her other arm and the flying hood of her coat.

"Thanks a million," he panted. "Grace has no sense at all. You probably saved her life. She thinks she's Superbaby, don't you, Grace?"

At that, the girl looked past Min, switched off her glare, stopped kicking and smiled sweetly at a woman who came panting up to them. She was towing another little girl by the hand. Even if her clothes had not exactly matched Grace's, Min would have known, at once, that they were identical twins.

"Hi, Mummy," Grace said, innocent as an angel.

"Sweetheart, you could have been killed if Tobias hadn't caught you," the mother wailed, reaching her spare arm to give her daughter a shake, which became a hug.

"I'm not the hero. She is," growled the boy, pointing at Min. "She snatched your Gracie out of the jaws of death and even managed to hang onto her until I got there."

"Thank you so much," the woman said, turning her wide blue eyes to gaze at Min.

Min opened her mouth to say it was nothing, and then changed her mind. She might really have saved the child. It made her shiver just thinking of that happy little girl dashing into the street and being squashed flat by one of the city buses now pulling in around the square.

"You should be careful, Grace," she heard herself scolding like a prissy grown-up.

"Tell Maggot too," the child ordered.

"She means Margaret — the other twin," Tobias explained, doing his best to hide a grin. "Margaret wasn't trying to get herself run over, Grace. Only you."

Despite her own urge to smile, Min too kept her face straight. She said solemnly, "Of course Margaret should be careful too."

"But I *am* careful." Margaret spoke up for the first time. "I am, aren't I, Mummy? Toby let go of Grace and she ran away, but I didn't, did I, Mummy?"

She sounded so smug that Min decided she liked Grace much better in spite of her wickedness.

"That'll do, Margaret," the woman said. Then, to Min, "Thanks again, dear. I don't think I caught your name."

She studied Min with eyes that had lost some of their earlier warmth. Min guessed this lady did not like her darling Grace being scolded by a stranger.

"I'm Min," she said.

"Well, Min, we are very grateful. But I think Grace has held centre stage long enough. We must go. Come, children." The woman spoke crisply, cutting short any further conversation.