



## WORD OF HONOR

By Terri Blackstock

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The small, hot post office smelled of mold and dust and hummed with the sound of several air conditioning units placed in windows around the building. Cliff Bertrand, the Newpointe postmaster, held his hand in front of one of the vents, and realized it was blowing hot air. No wonder the building was so warm. He gave the side of it a bang with the heel of his hand, as if that would shock it into spitting out cold air. But he knew it wouldn't work.

Sue Ellen will be whining all day, he thought. He looked over his shoulder at Sue Ellen Hanover, his postal clerk, who stood at the counter fanning herself as she waited on a customer. With a fake fingernail, she punched out the amount of postage that Mary Hampton's packages would need.

"You wouldn't know it was July," she commented as she applied the sticky metered strips to the boxes. "You'd think it was Christmas, what with all these packages."

"Just some of Mama's stuff," Mary said. "She went to live with my brother over in Waco, so I'm shippin' her some of her things."

"You two couldn't get along?" Sue Ellen asked sweetly.

Mary looked offended.

Cliff knew it did little good to scold her, but he gave it a shot, anyway. "Sue Ellen, that was rude. Everybody knows her mama just went to help with her new grandbaby."

Sue Ellen shot him a look that said his intrusion wasn't appreciated. "Cliff, you really need to fix that air conditioner. It's hot as blazes in here." She fanned herself with a manila envelope and turned back to Mary. "Yep, them babies always do outshine the older grandkids. Where's your youngun, anyways?"

"Out there." Mary nodded through the glass doors at the child playing on the floor with a toy fire truck.

"Scrawny little thing," Sue Ellen said, taking Mary's check. "Can I see some ID, please?"

Cliff shook his head at the absurdity of the request, since Sue Ellen knew Mary well enough to wag her tongue all over town every time the single mother stepped outside her house. He heard Sue Ellen tapping her fake fingernails on the counter, as if she had a million better things to do than wait for Mary to dig her driver's license out of her purse.

Disgusted, he grabbed his keys and the refills for the stamp machine, and headed out to reload it. As he pushed through the door into the outer room, he saw Mary's sandy-haired five-year-old crawling along the wall, running his fire truck as fast as he could. He smiled, but the boy hardly noticed him.

Cliff jangled his keys and opened the machine.

Instantly, the boy was on his feet, peering into the machine as if glimpsing something sacred. "Hey, there," Cliff said.

"Hey." The boy watched, fascinated, as he stacked the packages of stamps in the appropriate places. "Can I do one?"

Cliff grinned and handed him a stack. "Put those right here."

Pete's eyes rounded, and he slid them carefully into their slot.

"Good job. What's your name, son?"

Pete looked up at him. "Peter Jacob Hampton."

Cliff held out his hand. "Nice to meet you, Peter Jacob Hampton. I'm Clifford Wayne Bertrand. How do you do?"

The little boy shook. "D'you do this everyday?"

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