The Gift of the Magi

B Alan Bourgeois · Opening excerpt · 1 of 2

The scent of melted beeswax and crushed pine needles clung to the air like a gentle whisper, comforting and familiar. Max Moore stood behind the wooden counter of his candle shop, Rugged Flame, wiping his hands on a linen towel, golden wax clinging stubbornly to his knuckles. Outside, a cold rain was falling over the quiet town of San Marcos—a place in south central Texas that was a mix of German heritage with Mexican influence. Once a small quite town that has grown as the bigger cities of Austin to the North and San Antonio to the south continued to stretch their city limits.

Max exhaled slowly, surveying the shop.

Shelves lined with handcrafted candles stood like a quiet choir along the walls, each one carefully labeled in Max’s looping handwriting. There was Winter Ember—a mix of cedar and clove. Vanilla Solstice, creamy and sweet with a hint of cardamom. And the popular Silent Pine, which sold out every year by mid-December. But this year, Max had something new in mind—something special.

Reading sample — continued

He walked toward the back of the shop, where the kitchen-slash-lab doubled as his creative haven. Mason jars of essential oils, dried herbs, chunks of resin, and flakes of shimmering mica were scattered across the workbench. A worn leather-bound journal lay open, notes scribbled in black ink and smudged with wax fingerprints.

He glanced at the title at the top of the page: “The Gift of the Magi – Special Blend.”

Max had always been fascinated by the story of the three wise men and their strange but sacred offerings: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. As a child, the nativity scene in his grandmother’s home captivated him—particularly the glittering gold fabric she draped around the figurines, and the faint scent of frankincense she’d burn on Christmas Eve while whispering a prayer in Spanish.

This year, he wanted to capture that feeling—not just the memory, but the longing it held. The longing for something ancient and mystical. The longing for love.

Max was no stranger to solitude. Thirty-two years old, fiercely independent, but quietly aching. He'd had his fair share of flings and a couple of earnest attempts at love, but somehow, none of them stuck. In a town like San Marcos, the queer dating pool was less a pool and more a trickle—especially for someone more interested in candlelight dinners than club lights.