

## Small Town Santa

Jimmy Stevens examined his freshly trimmed white beard in the tack room mirror. He could hear Ezra Hyde outside talking to the two dappled-grey Percherons he was harnessing to the big red sleigh. Adjusting his pillowed belly, Jimmy took one last look, turning first left then right. Satisfied, he donned his Santa cap and stepped into the frigid evening.

“Watch where yer steppin’,” Hyde warned. “Socks couldn’t contain hisself.”

Jimmy hopped over the steaming pile, and surveyed the cargo area behind the ornate seat. It bulged with two large cloth sacks, one red and one white. “Which one’s the girls’ again?”

Hyde clipped the last trace to the doubletree and straightened, pressing his hands against the small of his back. “White’un. Dora says jes r’member little girls is pure as snow.”

Crossing in front of the team, Jimmy stopped to stroke Boots and Socks on their soft noses. “Ezra, why’d you harness both these fellas? Either one of them could pull the whole stable into town.”

“Ayup, but they’s so purty t’gether, ‘n they like the kiddies.” Hyde sorted the reins in his gnarled fingers while Jimmy climbed up and sat, gasping when his butt hit the cold seat. Ezra snorted, “Hell, Jimmy ye’ bin at this nigh twenty year ‘n you ain’t figured t’ wear long johns?”

“You’d think,” Jimmy replied with a shrug. He pulled on his white gloves and accepted the reins from the old farmer. Flicking them lightly on the two huge rumps, he released the brake and

eased down the snow-packed dirt road. He dragged the heavy blanket across his lap then urged the team into a trot.

Counting back, he reckoned it was actually twenty-two years since he took over from his father as town Santa. Now, at sixty, he owned a tractor sales business, a bad knee from an exploding tire, and his Santa suit. He sighed and shook his head.



Soon, the canopied darkness of Hyde’s woodlot opened onto broad snowy meadows with uncountable stars stretching across the sky. “Kinda pretty, isn’t it fellas?” Socks tossed his head, which Jimmy took as a “yes.” A quarter mile on he turned onto the narrow road through the cemetery.

At the far end Jimmy tugged the reins. “Whoa,” he whispered. Both horses bobbed their heads and snorted. “Quiet guys.” His gaze drifted up the hill to the Stevens plot before he added, “It’s not time yet.” Soon Margaret Reed’s beautiful contralto wafted up the hill with his cue – *Here Comes Santa Claus*.

When other voices joined in, he flicked the reins, moving the team out at a smart trot, shiny brass harness bells jingling, down the long gentle slope of the old carriage road that opened onto the flat behind the Presbyterian Church. Jimmy guided them around the building, grinning at the applause and squeals that grew as he became visible to the town square. He called out “Ho Ho Ho,” and waved.

At the center of the decorated square he halted and locked the brake. He stepped out and slung the two bags over his shoulder. Jimmy “Ho ho’ed” his way toward the unpadded stone bench while parents and children formed a ragged line behind Willard Evans, in an ill-fitting elf costume. Sucking in his breath to prepare for the cold seat, he took his place then nodded toward Willard. The procession began.

In a bit more than an hour every child had a gift from Santa, courtesy of the volunteer fire department. Families began leaving, some to hustle the kids to bed so Santa could make his Christmas eve rounds, others to an evening of opening gifts that Santa had left while they were at the pageant. Jimmy stood by the sleigh, “Ho ho’ing” and waving until only remnants of the choir, and a few volunteer firemen on cleanup detail, remained.

“Great job, Santa,” Margaret called as she handed songbooks to Pastor Ellis.

Jimmy smiled. “Thanks. Guess I’d better get my reindeer home.” He fiddled with the traces, checking each element of the harness, talking softly to the big horses while he worked, taking more time than he needed to.

“I thought you were leaving.” He looked up to see Margaret standing beside Boots’ giant head, stroking the soft nose.

He grinned. “Pre-flight check.”

She laughed, then let out a soft sigh. “I love this night. You know, it’s been thirty-four years!” She nuzzled Boots with her cheek. “I started singing here the same year I began teaching.” She closed her eyes. “The only year I missed was when Harvey died.” She shook her head, her hair sweeping Boots nose, and laughed

again. “I was big as this horse with Ginger in 1974, and I still sang. Your Dad was Santa back then.”

Her silver hair, longer than Jimmy remembered, lay soft against the horse’s jaw. He nodded. “Your hair, it’s the same color as Boots,” he said, flushing a bit, then added, “I kinda miss hearing you sing.” He hooked his arm under Socks’ head, resting his hand on the horse’s nose. “About all I hear now is *Here Comes Santa Claus*.”

“I still sing in church every Sunday,” she offered, smiling.

“I don’t get there much.” He stroked the horse’s soft muzzle, returning her smile, until the silence got uncomfortable. “Guess I’d best be going before Ezra thinks I stole his babies.”

Margaret gave Boots one last pat, took a few steps toward the church then turned back, tilting her head. “Want company?”

Jimmy hesitated. “It’s pretty cold.”

“I’m prepared,” she said, opening her choir robe to reveal a snowsuit and boots.

He laughed. “Lot’s better than I am.” He helped her up to the seat then followed. She spread the blanket across their laps while Jimmy released the brake. He flicked the reins lightly, keeping the team at a gentle trot back to the carriage road.



Margaret moved closer. “Why do you have both horses?” She tucked the blanket around them.

“Ezra says they’re pretty together.”

“That’s surely true, and they have great rhythm with the bells.” She hummed a little Jingle Bells in time to their rhythm, leaning her head on his shoulder. They climbed the hill easily, and kept the same pace back through the cemetery. After a few minutes silence Jimmy thought she had dozed, but suddenly she straightened. “May I ask you a personal question?”

He glanced at her. “Long as I can refuse to answer.”

“Why didn’t you ever marry?” He chuckled, shaking his head. “What?” she added.

“I wonder why women always ask that.” He slowed the team to a walk as they entered the woodlot. “I proposed once, remember Lucy Boris? It was just after college. We both worked at dad’s shop.” He shrugged. “She turned me down.”

“Did she say why?”

“Said she needed more.” He sighed and tugged a little on the reins, slowing the team to walk. “She never said more what.”

“But that was so many years ago.”

“Thirty-seven to be exact.”

“Didn’t anyone else come along?”

He stopped the sleigh and turned toward her. “I guess I got involved in the shop, and time just kind of slipped by. Now I’m playing Santa for other people’s kids.”

“That’s sad.”

“Not so much. I’ve had a pretty good life.” He flicked the reins urging the team into a trot. “I’ve just been alone a lot of it. But there’s a kind of freedom in that.”

Ezra was waiting at the stable door when they arrived. Jimmy tossed him the reins, hopped down, and reached a hand out to Margaret.

When they were clear, the farmer walked his team around the corner of the building.

Jimmy headed into the stable. “I’m gonna change.” Glancing back, he said. “You want to wait in the truck? It warms up pretty quick.”

She stepped up beside him. “I’ll be okay.”

He stopped at the tack room door, pointing. “My clothes are in there.”

“I guessed that,” she smiled. “Go ahead, I’ll wait out here.”

Jimmy changed then slung the bag containing his costume over his shoulder. “Santa’s gone for another year,” he said as he opened the door. “Let’s head back to town.” At the far end of the stable, Hyde was busy removing the harness from the team. “Until next year, Ezra,” he called. The farmer waved.

Jimmy tossed the sack in the truck and hopped in. He started the engine while Margaret settled in the passenger’s seat.

They were silent until they turned onto Vine Street, half a block from her place. “Are you warmed up yet?” Margaret asked.

“Gettin’ close.” He stopped in front of her house.

“I have some buttered rum makings simmering, just waiting for the rum. Interested?”

Jimmy nodded, “That might just do it.” He opened his door and stepped into the snow. He helped Margaret over the snowbank the plows had built, caught her when she slipped, and kept his arm around her waist while they negotiated the snow-dusted front steps.



Inside, she hung the choir robe on an empty wall peg. Nodding toward the dark hall, she said “Take off your coat and wait in the kitchen.” Jimmy shrugged out of his jacket and hung it on the next peg. Margaret kicked out of her boots. “I’ll be right down.” She padded up stairs in her red wool socks and snowsuit. He kicked off his own boots then followed the scent of the buttery brew to the kitchen. He flicked the light switch and sat at the small white table. He folded his arms, left over right, right over left, a couple of times then straightened his legs, crossing them at the ankles to ease his knee pain. Ten minutes or so later, as Jimmy was flexing his bad knee, the door to the back stairs opened. Margaret appeared in an ankle-length wool skirt that matched his checked flannel shirt, a red sweater, and red socks.

At the foot of the stairs, she opened a cabinet and drew out a bottle of dark rum. “Do you like your drinks weak or strong?”

“Middlin’ to strong, I guess.”

Pulling two dark blue mugs from pegs above the white sink, she poured generous dollops of rum then opened the lid on the cast-iron pot and ladled each full. “We’ll forego the whipped cream.” She sprinkled nutmeg on top then handed Jimmy one and sat facing him. “Merry Christmas,” they said in unison and tapped mugs. Jimmy sipped the steaming brew, feeling the warmth slide down his throat. They warmed their hands on the drinks and laughed at how silly Willard looked stuffed into Mary’s homemade elf costume.

“What a perfect snow that was,” Margaret said, “drifting down in huge fluffy flakes.” She chuckled, shaking her head. “Did you see Jake and Nora’s boy trying to catch one on his tongue?”

Jimmy nodded. “I think he did, too.” He took another swallow.

Margaret finished her drink. “Jimmy?”

He drained his. “This another personal question?”

She rose to replenish their drinks. “Who’ll be Santa when you’re gone?”

He grew pensive. “One of the other firemen, I suppose.”

“I didn’t mean to imply ...”

“No, it’s a reasonable question. I’ll be at it a while longer, I hope.”

“Me, too,” she said. Returning with the steaming concoctions, she put his in front of him. “What would you like me to sing?”