

Coal in My Stocking

A Slim & Anci Holiday

by

Jason Miller

When I arrived in Mud Creek that night, Jeep Mabry, dressed as Santa, was under arrest for beating the horse piss out of a meth dealer with a posthole digger.

“A posthole digger?” I said. Jeep was sitting in the backseat of Sheriff Ben Wince’s prowl car, his legs sticking out the open door. He was holding a rag to his head. There was some blood on the rag, but otherwise Jeep seemed not much the worse for wear. “That don’t sound too good.”

Sheriff Wince shook his head. He had cropped gray hair and a wide, friendly face that you hated to see frowning. He was frowning now. He was wearing a sweater with a snowman on it. A grinning snowman. He’d pinned his star on the snowman’s black top hat. Appearance-wise, it was a mess of mixed signals.

He said, “It don’t look good, either. From a legal standpoint, I mean. Me being in on the legal end of things and all.”

“I bet it didn’t feel great, either.”

“I hit him gently,” Jeep said. “Really just more of a tap. Like you’d tap a puppy with a newspaper.”

Sheriff Wince said, “Mabry, shut the fuck up.”

“Yes, sir.”

I said, “Where’s the dude he hit?”

“See that’s the other thing,” Wince said. “Seems Santa here and this guy—Keith Rogers is his name—got into it on account of Rogers was trying to break into Jeep’s truck. He’s got a history of that kind of thing. Sneaking around parking lots, breaking into people’s vehicles looking for spare change and whatnot. Kinda pathetic, you ask me, but I guess it gets him his fix.”

“Well, he picked the wrong vehicle this time.”

“I’ll say he did.”

“So what’s the problem? This sounds like justification to me. Legally, I mean.”

Wince nodded. “Might have been, too, it’d been left at that. Problem is, when Rogers spotted a seven-foot-tall redneck rabble-rouser dressed like Saint Nicholas bearing down on him, he panicked and made a break for it.”

“You can hardly blame him.”

“I don’t blame him,” Wince said. “Did you hear me say I blamed him? Anyway, our problem is that Santa here grabbed that posthole digger out of the back of his truck and ran Rogers down, eventually knocking him asshole-over-teakettle and right into a shit pond.”

“You’re joking.”

“Nope. Right over the fence there yonder, other side of the hill. Property owner’s named Wilkins. Shit pond belongs to him. Anyway, that starts to look a little less like protecting your property, more like plain old assault.”

Jeep said, “I didn’t know he was going to land in the lagoon. That part was an accident. Really just dumb luck. That count for anything?”

“I’ll be sure to mention it at your sentencing. Smooth things over some between you and the judge.”

“Thanks.”

I said, “Okay, so he went into the shit pond. Where is he now?”

“Still in there,” Wince said. “He’s refusing to come out and nobody wants to go in after him. So we’ve got a stalemate.”

“You’re the sheriff,” I said. “Can’t you just order one of your deputies to go in?”

“It’s Christmas Eve, Slim. I ain’t gonna order one of those guys to pull a meth junkie out of a shit pond on Christmas Eve. It ain’t right. Besides, I figure he’ll eventually get cold enough, come out on his own.”

He probably would, surrounded by frozen turds the way he must have been. It was cold that night, cracking cold, a clear winter’s eve in Little Egypt with just the faintest traces of snow in the air.

Jeep said, “I could go in. Bring him out. Seems fair, seeing as how I put him in there in the first place, even if it was an accident.”

“Mabry, shut the fuck up.”

“What happened to being nice on Christmas Eve?”

“You used up all my nice for the year,” Wince said. “Several months ago, in fact. July, thereabouts. I start being nice to you now, I got to dip into next year’s stores.”

I said, “So what now? Jeep goes to jail?”

Wince sighed. He shook his head some more. He said, “Probably not. I had any sense at all, I’d lock him up and throw the key into a tornado. But probably not. Rogers really was breaking into his truck. And, as you can see, he did get a shot or two in on old Santa here. Busted up his head a little. That’ll cloudy the waters enough that the DA probably won’t want to waste his time on it. And, hell, it is Christmas. I’ll take him home tonight, leave him with Opal, and we can take it up again in a couple of days. I doubt shit pond over there is going to press charges, and even if he makes noises about it, I think we can convince him to rethink his decision.”

“Okay,” I said. “That’s it then. All’s well that ends well.”

They both looked at me.

“It ain’t exactly ended yet.”

“I was worried about that.”

“See...”

“Here it comes.”

Wince said, “You ain’t just a little curious why Jeep here’s dressed up as the jolly old elf?”

“Frankly, I was afraid to ask.”

“I was going to deliver a present, slick,” Jeep said.

“A present?”

"A bicycle. For a little girl."

"What little girl?"

"Her grandma asked me to deliver it to her, asked me if I'd do it as Santa."

"This a job?"

Jeep almost looked hurt.

"Santa don't take no money, Slim."

I was starting to catch on.

"And now you want me to do it for you. Deliver the bike. You being indisposed and all."

Jeep nodded.

"Something like that."

"Who's the little girl?"

"You know Hoot Gibson?"

"Oh, hell."

"It's his kid."

"Double hell."

Wince said, "Slim, will you do it? It's getting late. I still got to haul Rogers out of the shit pond and get Mabry here home so he can't do any more damage tonight."

"Hoot's nuts."

"Girl's a cutie, though. Stacy is her name."

"Why doesn't the grandma just deliver the damn thing?"

Jeep shook his head.

“Can’t. She and Hoot had a falling out a few years back. See, her daughter used to be married to Hoot, but she died in a car accident. Hoot fell out with the rest of the family and now they ain’t allowed on his property. Says he’ll shoot them they even try.”

“You’re not exactly sweetening the pot here.”

“C’mon, man,” Jeep said. “It’s Christmas.”

It was Christmas. That was a fact. A guy couldn’t argue with it. I thought about it some and finally sighed and said, “Oh, fuck it, I’ll do it. Ho ho ho. One thing, though, I ain’t wearing that damn Santa suit.”

Jeep and Wince just stared at me.

It took Anci forty minutes to get me into the damn Santa suit. The dang thing was enormous and it fit like a circus tent. We ended up using bits of jute we found around the house to lash the pant legs to my ankles and the sleeves of the enormous furry red coat to my trunk and arms.

“This is ridiculous,” I said.

“I told you we could just run to the Wal-Mart, get you your own Santa suit.”

“I ain’t doing that,” I said. “I ain’t spending any more time on this foolishness than absolutely necessary, and I sure as hell ain’t spending any of my money on it.”

“Ho ho ho.”

“That’s what I said.”

Anci shook her head. She stood back and took it all in, appraisal in her face.

“Well?” I said.

“You look insane,” she said. “Hoot’d be right to shoot you.”

“The hat don’t fit either.”

“We’ll stuff it with plastic shopping bags, fill up some of that empty space.”

“You’re kidding?”

She wasn’t kidding. She stuffed the hat and pulled it down on my head. It was still too big, but at least it went on without slipping down over my eyes, blind me. Pretty soon I was fully kitted up and ready to roll out on my sleigh. I’d have taken the Triumph, but like I said it was cold that night and even snowing a little, so I opted for the warmth and relative safety of my truck.

“Stay put,” I told Anci.

“I want to come.”

“I know you do,” I said. “You always want to come. Way this works is, I say I got to go somewhere, you say you want to tag along. It’s like predicting the sunrise.”

Anci grumped at me a little, but I promised to run my errand, get home as soon as possible. We had holiday plans that night, too. Peggy was coming over, and later we’d see Jeep and Opal, Jeep’s head was in good enough fettle after his encounter with the meth junkie.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” Anci said.

“Forgetting something? I don’t think so.”

“The bike, dummy.”

I’d forgotten the bike. I went to get it. It was a kid’s bike, obviously, very small and light, and it had been wrapped carefully in candy cane holiday paper with green

ribbons. I retrieved the bike and loaded it in the truck and set off. Anci wasn't anywhere in sight. Sulking about over my decision to leave her behind, I figured.

Hoot's compound—and let me tell you, that's what it was—was just east of a tiny village called Bush near the looping banks of the Big Muddy and not far from the eponymously named correctional facility, where many of us believed Hoot would one day live out the remainder of his years. Hoot's place was up the slopes of Cottonwood Hill, under the dark of the canopy, and ranged back into the woods maybe three or four hundred acres, most of it surrounded by electrified fence. He wasn't in a holiday mood, I didn't know what I'd do. Climb down a dang chimney, maybe.

I was a few miles outside Bush when my back window lit up red and blue. I pulled over and, sure enough, a squad car pulled in behind me. A cop got out and walked up to the driver's side window with his flashlight held on his shoulder the way they do. Bill Collins, a cop I knew from way back.

"Hey, Bill," I said. "Anything wrong?"

"Nope. Nothing wrong. Just wanted to tell you that the bridge up yonder is froze up pretty good right now. Watch yourself you go over it. We've had folks sliding all over the place on it all night. Hate for you to end up in the Big Muddy, this of all nights."

"Thanks. I appreciate the warning."

"No problem. Hey, that you, Slim?"

"Yeah. Hey, Bill."

“What’s with the getup? You undercover or something?”

“I’m dressed as Santa.”

“Is it for a case?”

“I’m dressed as Santa.”

“It ain’t for a case and you’re undercover?”

“I really need to get moving on here, Bill.”

“Awright,” he looked disappointed a moment then smiled. “Merry Christmas, Slim.”

“You, too, Bill. Thanks.”

“Like I said, watch that bridge. You two be safe.”

He waved and walked back to his car. I waved and started to pull away.

Stopped again. *You two be safe.* There was a nervous jingle behind me. I looked into the backseat.

“First of all,” I said, “you’re punished. Second of all, more of that first of all.”

“You can’t punish me,” said Anci. “It’s Christmas.”

“Not yet. You’re a few hours too early.”

“It’s Christmas Eve, and in my book that’s Christmas.”

She was dressed in warm clothes and a red overcoat with a green hat with some bells on it, an elf to my Kris Kringle. Lord a’mercy.

“I really ought to take you home,” I said.

“I thought you didn’t want to spend more time on this foolishness than necessary,” she said. “Running me back to Indian Vale will take all night. Might even

be too snowy by then to get back up here. That bridge the cop mentioned. Besides, with me along, nothing will go wrong.”

“Oh, is that so? How do you know something was going to go wrong?”

“Because with you along it’s inevitable.”

“That tears it. I’m giving your presents to an orphan. A mean orphan who spits when he talks and eats his peas with a knife.”

“Will not.”

“Will so.”

We went on like that until we passed through Bush and made our way up onto Cottonwood Hill, which was when the snow really started coming down.

Somehow, we made it up the hill to Hoot’s compound. You couldn’t see your own eyelashes, but we made it. There was a flat mile of high fence and barbwire and a house in the dark and lots of Confederate flags and signs bearing paranoid ravings of a type common to our divided and angry political times. Hoot was a survivalist and an oddball, a notorious gun-humper whose primary motivation in life appeared to be keeping an imaginary tyrannical government from seizing his weapons. Losing his wife hadn’t made things easier or better for him.

“Stay put,” I said to Anci.

“Okay.”

“I mean it this time.”

“Okay.”

“Pinkie swear me.”

She didn't want to do it, but I insisted, and the unbreakable pact was made.

I left the engine running and the headlights on. I got down out of the truck and collected the bicycle and crunched through the accumulating snow and up to the front gate, meaning simply to leave the bike there, leaning in its festive green ribbons and candy cane colors, but just then the gate gave a cry and a squeak and drew itself open, spitting laces of snow and ice from its tangled metal lattice . A figure stepped through, hands in its pockets as though digging for car keys, then stopped and looked up and saw me standing there.

"What the fuck is this?" it asked.

It was Hoot. He was dressed up as Santa.

"I said what the fuck is this?" he said again.

"I'm Santa Claus, Hoot," I said. I held up the bicycle. "I'm here to drop off a present."

"Fuck that. I'm Santa Claus," Hoot said. "And I say no you ain't."

"It's for Stacy, Hoot. It's for your daughter."

Hoot shook his head. His Santa suit was clean and fit him nicely, unlike mine. He wasn't tall but he was round and heavy. I didn't think the bulge beneath his Santa coat was padding.

"This is that old woman's doing, ain't it?" he said. "Stacy's grandmother. I told her, and now I'm gonna have to tell you, whoever you are."

I tugged down my beard some, smiled at him.

"It's me, Slim."

“Oh, hey, Slim.”

“Where you off to in that getup?”

“Elks. I’m giving out presents tonight.”

“That’s nice of you.”

He shrugged. “It’s Christmas. Slim, I’m sorry, but I got to kick your ass now.”

He lunged at me through the snow, lunged like a wildcat. I threw the bike at him. He caught it with two hands and tossed it aside into a snow pile. Anci laid on the horn and kept laying on it. We fought, our black boots sliding around underneath us, Santa on Santa, there in the cone of the bright headlights.

Hoot tried to come over the top, leap high, punch down on me, but I slipped under his right arm and twisted around behind him and hit him a good one in the kidney. It didn’t stop him. He was full of anger and Christmas magic. I punched him in the back of the head, but he ducked low and spun from the waist and hit me with his elbow, breaking my nose with a crack like a sudden spring thaw. I fell, slid backward, and he was on me. Almost anyway. He leapt. My hands found Stacy’s bike and I hit him a good one with it, knocking him over sideways and into the dark. He came in again, and I hit him again, twice, harder this time. The little bell on the handlebars chimed. He gave it up, turned away suddenly, grabbed something out of the dark. An axe, I realized, an axe from a nearby woodpile. He raised it, growling through his beard. I wielded Stacy’s present, ready to strike. Just then a shot tore the air.

A little girl was watching us, shotgun in hand. Standing in the open gate. Not Anci. A redhead, maybe eight. Stacy, I figured.

“That’s enough of that,” was what she said.

“Darling, I...”

“I said that’s enough,” she said, and in that instant I could tell that, like Anci—surrounded by foolish adults and bad choices and loss—she’d grown up fast, too. “Can’t have two Santas out here trying to kill each other, one of them with an axe. Can’t have it on a summer day, much less Christmas.”

“Thank you,” I said.

She pointed the shotgun my way.

“I don’t know you. Shut up.”

“Okay.”

“What’s that your holding there?”

“It’s a present,” I said. “A present for you.”

Anci had come down out of the truck, and she approached from behind me now, took the bicycle from me and gave it to Stacy.

“Merry Christmas,” she said.

“Thank you.”

“It’s a bicycle,” Anci said.

“No fucking shit.”

Hoot said, “It’s from your grandma. You know I don’t want nothing to do with...”

“That’s enough,” she said, her voice loud. “That’s enough of that and a half. I’m tired of you being sad and blaming grandma for it, when what you’re really sad

about is mom. You know it, and I know. The dog knows it. And I'm done with it. You keep on grieving if you want. Hell, I will, too. But I want my family back."

"I..." Hoot said then stopped. He looked away suddenly, blinking away tears.

Stacy approached him, more gently now. She touched his arm. He leaned down and kissed her on the head, and took the shotgun from her.

"C'mon, Santa," she said, her voice soft. "They're waiting for us at the Elks."

We drove home, first stopping by the emergency room to get my nose splinted up. I couldn't breathe through it, and there was some blood and pain, and it put me in just about the worst damn mood ever. The roads were slick and dangerous, so the going was more treacherous than before, but the moon was out and in its frosted light the whipping snow was nearly hypnotic. At last, we arrived at Shake-a-Rag Road. The house at Indian Vale was lit up and warm looking, and you could see the lights of the Christmas tree through the living room window. Anci and I walked up and in.

Peggy was there. And Jeep and Opal. And Ben Wince and his wife, and Susan and even old Lilac. I told them our story, and Peggy kissed me carefully on the cheek.

"You did good, Santa," was what she said.

We drank eggnog and laughed and sang and told jokes. The night was fierce but we were warm and happy. Mostly, though, we were together. Another year, another holiday, another Christmas.

We'd muddled through somehow.