

# A NEWFANGLED CHRISTMAS

By Betsy Haynes  
Smashwords Edition  
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**Poor Santa, while making toys for his Christmas Eve deliveries, he encounters problems from start to finish. How can he and his elves learn to cope with the problems ever advancing problems is causing? How can they develop toys that today's children will enjoy?**

## Chapter 1

### AN OLD FASHIONED KIND OF GUY

I talk to The Missus until my tongue collapses from exhaustion. I explain every way I can that I'm just an old fashioned kind of guy. And what does it get me? A computer? I tell her that I'm not into tockniligy or takquoligy or whatever it is.

"It's technology," she informs me. "And you should be because kids certainly are." Then she stamps her foot and gives me THE LOOK.

We'd been going round and round like that for three weeks. That's when she brought that blasted thing home and set it on my desk. I ignored it the whole first week. Pretended it wasn't there. Didn't even exist. I thought maybe she would take the hint.

Huh! I should have known it would have the opposite effect. The more I ignored it, the more determined she was that I'd fire it up. "I'll fire it up," I grumped under my breath. "In the fireplace." But I didn't say it loud enough for her to hear.

The next week she started in on me again. “Just think of all the e-mails from good boys and girls all over the world that are in your computer waiting to be read,” she would say. Then she would dab a tear away as if she felt terrible. “Aren’t you ashamed? They’re telling you all the things they want--things they deserve for being so good--and you’re not even listening.”

I couldn’t look her in the eye after she said that. To tell you the truth, I am a little ashamed that I’m not mechanical. Can’t even operate a can opener. I’ve always been good with my hands, though. I love to make toys and things. And I won’t kid you that I’m the best magician around. How many magicians do you know who could load all those toys into one little sleigh at sundown and get them delivered all over the world before the sun comes up the next morning. That’s not good enough for her. No, Siree! She’s a modern woman! Up with the times! Or so she says.

But this week she’s really getting to me. She’s on a hunger strike. Oh, she doesn’t call it that. She says she’s just too sad thinking about all those poor children to eat a bite. And, of course, according to her, if she’s too sad to eat, she certainly is too sad to cook. Do you have any idea what that means to a big guy like me? Starvation.

Well, I’ll have to admit, I was stumped this time. I couldn’t last a single day without a meal. I started thinking about her golden crispy fried chicken. Her tender juicy roast beef. Her flaky mouth-watering cherry pies. Then I started thinking about turning on the computer. When she wasn’t looking. Maybe it wouldn’t be as hard as it looked.

I stood in the middle of my comfortable old office and looked around. Its desk was overflowing with papers. Its leather chair was deep and soft. Model toys crowded the mantle above the fireplace. Then I looked at the one thing in the whole room that was out of place. The shiny metal monster sitting among the familiar clutter on my desk. The computer.

I couldn't help but shiver. The screen stared back at me like a big accusing eye. If I didn't turn it on pretty soon, The Missus would kill me. She was already pointing to the calendar. I know it's October already, and if I don't find out what boys and girls want for Christmas pretty soon, I won't have time to get all the toys made.

The coast was clear. The Missus was out in the yard with the elves making snow angels. The reindeer were in the pasture practicing take-offs and landings. It was now or never.

I tiptoed over to my desk, sort of like I was sneaking up on that metal monster. I dropped slowly into my big old leather chair. Then I scooped around on the seat until it felt right. I wanted everything to be as near to perfect as it could be.

"Probably won't even be able to turn it on," I muttered hopefully.

Then I spied the button right above the keyboard. Beside it were the words POWER on/off. So much for not being able to turn it on.

I poked the button and right away the screen lit up a bright blue. It came on so fast it startled me. From somewhere inside came soft music. And then a bunch of little pictures (I soon found out that they were called icons) popped up all over my screen. I shook my head with wonder. It was hard to imagine that kids all over the world did this sort of thing every day.

"Now what do I do?" I wondered aloud. All the little pictures had settled down. The computer seemed to be waiting for me to make the next move.

"You get on the Internet, is what you do." The Missus' voice came from behind me. Boy, I wish you could have heard the sound of triumph in her tone. I wondered how long she'd been standing there.

But I had more important things to worry about. I knew that she knew what my next question would have to be. I closed my eyes and wrinkled up my face. I had to do it. “And just how do I do that?” I finally asked.

“Oh, Santa! I can’t believe my ears,” The Missus cried and threw her arms around me. You’d have thought I had just promised her a Caribbean cruise. The next thing I knew she had snuggled into the chair next to me and was giving me a great big kiss.

Then she started tapping like crazy on the computer keys. I couldn’t believe my eyes. In just about half a second the Missus had not only gotten on the Internet, she had downloaded all my backed up e-mail. All nine million, seven-hundred fifty-three thousand, eight-hundred ninety-one messages!

## Chapter 2

### THE METAL MONSTER

I was flabbergasted. It was only October. More than two months until Christmas. Suddenly I realized how many more e-mails I might get. I don’t mind telling you, I started to sweat!

“I’d better start reading NOW,” I mumbled.

“Great,” said The Missus. She clasped her hands together in happy anticipation. “I’ll help.”

“You don’t to need bother,” I said with a sniff. She was carrying things a tad too far. “I’ve got the hang of this contraption now,” I added, before she could argue.

The Missus went off to fix dinner (Thank Goodness!), and I began reading the first letter.

*Dear Santa Claus:*

*My name is Micah Mason and I have been a very good boy this year.*

I chuckled. They always say that. Even if they haven't. But I have ways to check up on them. I read the rest of Micah Mason's letter.

*Don't believe what my sister Ashley tells Mom. She's a liar! Anyway, I only want two things for Christmas this year. One is my very own pizza restaurant. That way I can have pizza anytime I want it and I won't have to share with Ashley. The second thing is an Electronic Spy Night Scope so that I can spy on Ashley in the dark. Thanks. Have a good trip on Christmas Eve. Love, Micah.*

I sighed so deeply that I could feel it all the way down to my toes. A pizza restaurant was bad enough. But what in blue blazes was an Electronic Spy Night Scope? Spy in the dark? I'd never heard of such a thing. I could tell right now, it was going to be an interesting year. I knew I'd better not waste any more time.

I got up to fetch my giant ledger. That's the book where every single boy and girl has a page of their own. On that page I keep track of where they live and every toy they've ever received at Christmas. Also whether they've been naughty or nice. I couldn't wait to see Micah's page.

I keep my giant ledger on top of the book shelves across the room from my desk. The shelves are filled with story books that the kids ask for every year. I scooted my step-stool over to the shelves, reminding myself that I should find some place lower to keep that book. I'm not a spring chicken anymore, you know.

The first step wasn't so bad. The second one made me feel a little bit wobbly. Only one more to go and I'd have the ledger. I made it to the top and grabbed the book. As I swung it out I remembered why I had meant to start a new ledger this year. This old one weighed a TON.

Suddenly my head was over the ledger instead of my feet. And my bottom was sticking out the other direction. All this while I was on the tippy top of the stool.

I jerked up and tried to reverse things. Now the ledger was sitting on my stomach, which was being pushed forward from the back. My knees were starting to shake. How was I ever going to get off that stool in one piece?

I thought about calling to The Missus for help. But I knew I couldn't do that. I've always been a take charge sort of guy. I'd just have to figure out how to get off that stool by myself.

Ever so slowly I pushed my right foot toward the edge of the top step. If I could just step down one little step, I'd be almost on the floor. I could feel my toes waving in space. Now if I could get my heel that far without losing my balance, maybe I'd make it.

Finally my heel was off the step. My whole foot was stuck out in the air. Now what was I going to do? How was I going to get it down to the next step without falling over?

"What on earth are you up to?" The Missus shouted at me so hard it blew me right off that step-stool. I landed with a THUD on my bottom with the ledger open in my lap.

"Well, I know what YOU'RE up to. You're tryin' to get me killed!" I shouted back. I was mighty riled. How dare she sneak up on me and scare me off the top of a ladder!

Then I saw the look on her face. And the tears in her eyes.

"Oh, Santa," she said in a trembly voice. "I'm so sorry." She knelt beside me and put her arms around me. "Are you okay?"

My heart melted like it always does. “Course,” I said. “What’s a little tumble to a guy like me?”

After a few grunts I made it to my feet. The Missus wiped her tears, blew her nose and went back to the kitchen.

Finally I was ready to enter Michael Moss’ Christmas wish into the ledger. Or had his name been Mitchell Moses. Hmph! I’m getting forgetful these days.

I leaned over my desk to check my e-mail in the computer and jumped back in surprise. Miles Martin’s e-mail had disappeared. There weren’t ANY e-mails on the screen! Even those little pictures that The Missus called icons weren’t there, either. But there was something else there that was just plain weird, and I don’t mind saying so. It was sort of like a video of eight or ten snowmen having a big time sledding down a hill. Every time one of them got to the bottom, he’d pull his sled up to the top, and go down again. What was that video doing where my e-mail was supposed to be?

I looked desperately at the key pad. Most of the keys had letters and numbers printed on them, but some had words. There was SHIFT and END and HOME. There were also words I didn’t understand, like BK SP and DEL. But I couldn’t see anything even close to VIDEO.

I swallowed hard. A terrible thought was rising up in my brain like flood water in a basement. My e-mails were gone. Eaten up by this horrible machine. All nine million, seven-hundred fifty-three thousand, eight-hundred ninety-one of them. I wouldn’t forget that number for the rest of my life, because that meant that there would be nine-million, seven-hundred fifty-three thousand, eight-hundred ninety-one children who wouldn’t get toys from Santa Claus this Christmas. I would disappoint every single one of them.

I put my head in my hands and sobbed. What was I going to do?

## Chapter 3

### THE MISSUS SAVES THE DAY

I must have stared at that computer screen for an hour. Sad little faces paraded through my mind. I could see all those boys and girls standing in front of their Christmas trees and finding no presents from Santa. Some of them started to cry. A few got mad. All of them were sadder than they had ever been in their lives.

Was there any way I could contact them before Christmas? I wondered. I would have to explain that I had lost their e-mails. And tell them how sorry I am. Then I would have to ask them to write me a regular letter and send it through the mail. Snail mail, The Missus called it.

Maybe I could notify the newspapers. Nah, I thought. Kids don't read newspapers. And I couldn't expect parents to see the notice and tell their children.

Radio? Maybe, but it still didn't feel right. Then the answer smacked me right in the face.

Television! All kids watch TV. I'd go to a TV station and ask if I could be on the news. Then I could talk directly to the boys and girls.

I thought about The Missus again and cringed. I'd have to admit to her what I had done. She'd probably never let me hear the end of it. Still, I couldn't stand to disappoint even one child on Christmas, much less nine-million, seven-hundred fifty-three thousand, eight-hundred ninety-one. And there was no way I could keep a thing this big a secret from her. Maybe I would take her along. She might even like the trip. She doesn't get out much.

I played with the idea for a while. I could see it all. The reindeer could take us to town. When we got to the television station I'd find the station manager and explain my problem. Surely he'd



understand.

Just then The Missus stepped through the door. “Dinner’s ready, dear,” she said in her soft little voice.

I turned around and saw her smile melt into a look of puzzlement. Oh, oh, I thought. It’s too late now. She’s looking at the computer screen.

Then she put her hands on her hips and said in a saucy voice, “I thought you were hard at work in here, reading your e-mails. And here I find you staring at your screen-saver. Shame on you!”

Screen-saver? I wanted to act as if I knew what a screen-saver was. But I knew better than to try to pull anything on her. I squinched up my face and squeezed out the words, “What’s a screen-saver?”

She didn’t answer. She just marched right over to my desk, picked up the mouse and wiggled it. As if by magic those sledding snowmen disappeared and Monte Miller’s e-mail was right there in front of me. Right where it had been before. Except I saw his name was Micah Mason.

Then she explained what a screen-saver was, and I felt as embarrassed as a puppy who’d just been caught peeing on the rug.

## Chapter 4

### AN ALMOST CONFERENCE WITH THE ELVES

For the next few days I read e-mail messages until my eyes crossed. They came from children all over the world. I also noticed that even though I was making progress, more and more e-mails were stacking up in my in-box. By the time I had entered two-thousand, one-hundred

seventy-nine wishes in my ledger, my unread e-mail was up to twelve million, nine-hundred sixty-two thousand, four-hundred eighty-three.

But now I had another problem. The kids were asking for toys I'd never heard of. Baby dolls that grow from infant to crawler to toddler before your very eyes! Animals that move and make sounds without batteries! Action figures that did what you told them to do. Walking, talking robots! I have to tell you, it was scrambling poor old Santa's brains. Almost every child wanted toys that were electronic! Do you know what that means to an old fashioned kind of guy like me?

Stuffed Teddy Bear requests were down seventy-two percent. Raggedy Anne doll requests were down fifty-nine percent. Of course there were seven giant stuffed E.T. orders so far. And I did get a few orders for squishy Sponge Bob dolls. I could handle that. But how were the Elves going to make electronic spiders?

Suddenly I knew I had to call a conference with the Elves. And do it soon. Like immediately.

I hot-footed it as fast as I could to the workshop. I zipped right by The Missus in the parlor without telling her where I was going. I didn't have time to stop and explain. THIS WAS AN EMERGENCY!

I stomped out the door and headed down the back steps. I ran down the hill so fast that snow melted under my feet. Scurrying past the reindeer barn, past the take-off and landing strip for the sleigh, I made a bee-line for the workshop in the field by the woods. I stopped for a moment to catch my breath. Then I flung open the door and hurried inside.

The workshop looked the same as it always had. At first, that made me feel good. I leaned against a stack of boxes and looked around. Near the door, half a dozen Elves sat around a table, each painting the face of a Barbie doll. I smiled. We always needed lots of Barbie dolls. I

already had more than fifty orders.

Farther back was a skate board assembly-line. One Elf sanded the wood. The next Elf put on the wheels. The next one painted on a design. And on and on until the skate board was ready to be delivered on Christmas Eve.

All over the workshop my faithful little Elves were busily assembling toys. The old fashioned way. Nowhere was there a Heather Hoola swinging a hoola hoop around her waist. Or an electronic Whack-A-Mole game that frantically beat moles over the head with a bat. Or electronic puppies barking to be petted. Or a Superhero waging war against the enemies of Earth. Everything was quiet. Too quiet, I suddenly realized. I shook my head in sadness.

How could I break the terrible news to the Elves? I wondered. I couldn't. Not now at least. They wouldn't understand. Even worse, they'd think I'd gone wacko. No, I'd have to come up with a plan, I thought, as I silently backed out the door and headed up the hill toward the house again.

My heart was heavy as I trudged along. I love all the boys and girls in the world and want them to have the merriest Christmas ever. It will break my heart if they don't. I'm also an old fashioned kind of guy with a bunch of old fashioned Elves who don't know any more about tockniligy or takquoligy than I do. How could I possibly make this Christmas have a happy ending? What on earth was I going to do?

## Chapter 5

### A TECHIE TO THE RESCUE

Of course The Missus knew what to do.

“Hire a techie,” she piped up as soon as I’d gotten the explanation of the disaster out of my mouth.

There she goes again, I thought. Using words I don’t understand.

I just stood there for what seemed like an hour, but it was probably only a couple of seconds. Then I sighed.

“Okay. I give up. What in tarnation is a techie?” I snorted.

She gave me a smug look. “A techie,” she began in her best school teacher voice, “is a person who understands technology.”

“Can he make toys? That’s what I need, someone who can make those dadblasted electronic toys that grow up right in front of your eyes and bark to be petted and twirl hoola hoops around their middles.” I grumped. “Can your techie do that?”

“He can do better than that,” she said. “He can teach the Elves to do it.”

“Hmpf,” was all I answered, but I was thinking it over. It might be worth a try. If he really could teach the Elves the way she said he could. I walked over to the fireplace and warmed my hands over the fire. I just couldn’t imagine MY Elves turning out such far-fetched toys. But, of course, I couldn’t disappoint all those boys and girls. They were depending on me.

“So where could we get one of these...these techies?” I asked.

The Missus patted my cheek and handed me a mug of hot tea. “You just let me handle it, dear,” she said with a reassuring smile.

I smiled back. I can't tell you how good it felt to have someone else solve that particular problem. I had been afraid I couldn't. And then, what would I have done?

Of course, there aren't many problems that I can't handle, I reminded myself and sipped my tea.

The next morning when I got down to breakfast a young man was sitting at the table with The Missus.

She brightened when she saw me come into the room. "Santa, dear, this is Nerdy, our techie. He can't wait to meet the Elves."

"Er...um...well, hello, Mr. Nerdy," I said as I looked him up and down. He was tall and as skinny as a buggy whip. He had four or five earrings in each ear lobe and a brown pony tail hanging down his back. He wore blue jeans and a scraggly sweat shirt.

"It's a pleasure, SC," he said. "I've heard a lot about you."

So this is what a techie looks like, I thought in amazement. He didn't look much over twelve, if he looked a day. I could probably still find his name in my ledger. Must have been only a couple of years since I delivered his toys.

The Missus was beaming. "Nerdy is not only my computer teacher, but he knows all there is to know about electronic toy making. Why, he's a graduate of The National Academy of Robotery and the Wizard's Electronic Institute, just to mention a couple of the schools he's attended. Isn't that right, Nerdy?"

"That's right, Ma'am. And I'm also a member of MESS," the techie said proudly.

"MESS?" I sputtered. "What the dag nab does that mean?"

“Why, that’s Masters of Electronic Structural Success. It’s a very important technology organization. There are over two-hundred thousand members worldwide. It’s an honor to be one of them.”

My mind was spinning. I felt as if there was a tornado loose in my brain. A twelve-year old boy who belonged to MESS!

Suddenly the idea struck me funny. I felt a big guffaw of a laugh building up in the back of my throat. It was threatening to explode out my mouth any instant. I swallowed it down the best I could and high-tailed it for the back door.

“I’ll go tell the Elves you’re here,” I called back over my shoulder as I disappeared through the door.

My laughter didn’t last long, though. As I tramped through the snow toward the workshop, a sobering question was flashing in my mind like a neon sign. How was I going to convince the Elves to let Nerdy teach them how to build newfangled toys? They’re like me, old fashioned kind of guys. A couple of them are over four-hundred years old! They’re not going to let some whipper-snapper like this Nerdy fellow teach them new tricks.

It never fails, I thought with a sigh. Just when I think things are finally working out, I’ve got a whole new predicament to deal with.

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## Chapter 6

### THE PLAN

When I got to the workshop, I stopped outside the door. I was trying to get up my nerve to go inside. I tried to figure out what I would say to the Elves. How could I explain about Mr. Nerdy in a way they'd understand? After all, no one had EVER told them how to make toys before.

I crept over to the window and looked in. There they were, all seven-hundred twenty-two of them, working away. There were Elves at assembly lines making bicycles and scooters and red wagons. There were long tables filled with sewing machines where Elves sewed clothes for Barbie and blankets for baby dolls. In the upstairs loft, I could see Elves stuffing cuddly bears and attaching riding sticks to horses' heads. It broke my heart to see how happy they all looked.

Am I making a mistake bringing in a techie? I wondered. But in my heart I knew I wasn't. If the Elves couldn't make the toys that kids wanted, the days of Santa Claus would be over. The reindeer would have to be turned out to pasture. The Elves would have to be laid off. And The Missus and I would have to retire!

I took a deep breath and headed for the door. It opened with a loud squeak, but the Elves were too busy with their work to notice. Some bent over their toys, concentrating on getting them just right. Others scurried around the room carrying arm loads of puppets and buckets full of rubber snakes. I took a deep breath. Sawdust and paint smells were in the air, the same as always. I listened to the familiar pounding of hammers and buzzing of saws and wondered how different the workshop would become when the Elves started making electronic toys.

I cleared my throat and then did it a second time, more loudly. Not a single Elf looked up. Talk about dedication to the job, I thought. There was nothing to do but ring the bright red dinner bell that I had hung by the front door years ago to get their attention.

BONG! BONG!

Instantly hammers stopped pounding. Saws stopped buzzing. Sewing machines stopped

whirring. And faces popped up all over the workshop and looked at me. Then they broke out in smiles.

I waved and said warmly, “Hey there, everybody. Sorry to interrupt, but I’ve got something important to talk to you about.”

Each Elf left his work station and crowded to the front of the shop. There were Elves of every size and shape. There were some that were tall and thin. Some that were short and fat. Then there were tall and fat ones. And short and thin ones. Some had long beards. Some had goatees. Some had mustaches and mutton chops. Some were clean shaven. But they all had one thing in common: they were master toy makers.

When they had all assembled, I cleared my throat to speak. The trouble was, I still didn’t know exactly what to say. They had such happy faces and eager eyes. What I was going to tell them would change their lives forever.

There is nothing to do but begin, I told myself. They would just have to understand. To adapt. To get up to speed with the times. Yes, siree!

I opened my mouth. Nothing came out.

“What is it, Santa,” asked Edgar. He was four-hundred seventeen years old and the spokesman for the group. “Is something wrong?”

The smiles on all of the Elves faces had turned to quizzical expressions. Some even looked worried.

“Oh, no,” I said, hurriedly shaking my head. “It’s just that..” I still couldn’t find the words.

Suddenly the door burst open and Nerdy rushed inside.

“I couldn’t wait any longer to meet the workers,” the techie said to me in a half apologetic voice. Then turning to the Elves, he went on excitedly, “I’m Nerdy, your techie, and I’m going to teach you to make electronic toys.”

The Elves mouths dropped open so far that their chins bumped against the floor all at the same time. I knew that there was no turning back now.

## Chapter 7

### ELVES ON STRIKE

Just then I spotted the large briefcase that Nerdy was carrying. He whipped it onto a table and flipped it open. He didn’t seem to notice that all the Elves were milling around and grumbling among themselves. But, I noticed. It filled me with dread.

The next thing you know, the techie was taping big sheets of paper all over the walls. They were covered with charts and graphs and diagrams. Then he pulled out electronic toys of all kinds and set them in motion. The robots marched around the room. The baby dolls cried out loud. The super heroes attacked the champions of evil.

Nerdy still wasn’t paying any attention to the Elves, who by now had gone into a huddle. Their voices were getting louder. And angrier.

I couldn’t understand what they were saying because they were all talking at once. All I knew was, they were plenty hot under the collar. I started pacing back and forth. What was I going to do?

Finally Nerdy was ready to speak. “Excuse me, Elves. May I have your attention, please,” the techie shouted. He had an eager grin on his face as if he couldn’t wait to get started.

The Elves ignored him. They stayed locked in their huddle, ranting and raving to each other. Fists rose in the air. Heads shook in anger. Now and then an Elf would look up from the huddle and frowned straight at me. Then he would bury his head in the huddle again and continue to rant.

“Excuse me! Excuse me!” Nerdy shouted a little louder. He looked less optimistic than he had a moment ago. I couldn’t blame him. I couldn’t figure out what was going on, either.

Not one of the Elves looked up.

I swallowed hard. This wasn’t like them. They were the greatest bunch of guys I’d ever known. I mean, I understood where they were coming from. Starting to use my computer hadn’t been all that easy. But why couldn’t they just be polite and listen to what Nerdy was going to say?

“Elves, will you please turn around and listen up!” he screeched. By now he had completely lost his cool. His eyes bulged out, and he was chewing on a strand of his pony tail. He threw me a frantic glance. “SC? What am I going to do?”

“Maybe I can get them to listen,” I said.

“Hey, guys! Buddies! Yoo-hoo!” I called. “Listen up, would you?”

I might as well have been spitting into a blizzard for all the good that did. I’d never seen the Elves so riled, and I don’t mind telling you it made me feel uneasy. I needed these guys. These good buddies of mine. Without them, not a single boy or girl would get a present from Santa this year. Christmas would be ruined!

I raced to the red dinner bell hanging by the front door. It always got their attention. Surely it would now. I rang it as loudly as I could.

BONG! BONG!

This time all the Elves got quiet. One by one they stood up straight, twisted around and looked at me.

I couldn't help noticing how angry their expressions were. That sent a prickly feeling racing up my back bone.

"Thanks," I said, grinning and nodding at the same time. I hoped they wouldn't notice how nervous I was. "I'd like to introduce Nerdy. He teaches The Missus all about computers. And that's not all. He's been to a lot of technology schools and he belong to MESS."

For a second, I thought the Elves would break out laughing. Their faces looked startled. Their eyes opened wide. Eyebrows flew up. Then I realized what I had said.

"Wait a minute," I said hurriedly. "You don't understand. MESS is a very important organization. It means...um...Monsters of..."

Thank goodness Nerdy came to my rescue. "It stands for Masters of Electronic Structural Success!" he blurted. "And it means I know how to make robots, among other things."

The Elves looked at Nerdy with their faces stern again. Then they looked at me the same way.

Finally, Edgar, their four-hundred seventeen year old leader, stepped forward. He took a deep breath and said, "Santa, the Elves and I have talked this over and have only one thing to say."

“Okay, Edgar. Have your say,” I said, not knowing what would come next.

Edgar blinked a couple of times and looked around for reassurance. The other Elves all nodded.

“All right, then,” Edgar said. “Santa, we’re going on strike!”

And they did.

## Chapter 8

### WHATCHAMADOODLES AND DOODAWHITCHIES

With that, the Elves turned toward the door. They walked out of the workshop in single file. They didn’t look at Nerdy. They didn’t look at me. They just looked straight ahead.

I stared after them, but I couldn’t believe my eyes. My Elves--all seven-hundred twenty-two of them--were refusing to make toys. And Christmas was only two months away.

I looked around the empty workshop at all the half-made toys. There were bicycles without wheels. There were dolls without hair or dresses. There were puzzles without boxes. And no one had even started making electronic toys!

What was I going to do? How could I save Christmas?

The techie was pulling the diagrams and graphs and charts off the walls and packing them in his briefcase. Next he gathered up all the electronic toys and stuffed them in, too. I suppose he was thinking his services wouldn’t be needed now.

I thought about all the e-mail messages waiting in my computer. And all the snail-mail letters that I'd be getting soon. I couldn't disappoint all those boys and girls, no matter what I had to do!

"Nerdy! Don't pack everything up!" I shouted. "We have work to do!"

I flew into action. I put The Missus in charge of reading the e-mails and entering all the wishes in my ledger. Then I started learning all about making electronic toys.

Nerdy couldn't have been happier. He launched into a whirlwind lecture on circuit boards and terminals. On diodes and electronic chips. On whatchamadoodles and doodawhitchies. My head was spinning. My eyes were crossing at all that information.

"Hold your reindeer!" I shouted. "Don't you know you're talking to an old-fashion kind of guy?"

Nerdy looked sheepish. "Sorry," he said. "I guess I just got carried away."

This time he started more slowly. First, he pulled an aardvark out of his briefcase. "This isn't just any aardvark," he explained patiently. "It's a ROBOT aardvark." Then he took it apart, starting with the long nose, to show me how it had been put together. Next he demonstrated how the electronics were wired. Then he assembled it again, tossed a handful of plastic ants on the workshop floor and clapped his hands.

The aardvark took a few halting steps forward. Then it swept its long nose back and forth on the floor, sucking up the ants.

"That's all there is to it!" the techie shouted triumphantly.



I gave him a weak smile.

“Think you can do it?” asked Nerdy.

“Sure,” I murmured. I hoped he couldn’t see how hard I was trembling. The truth was, I didn’t have a clue how to make a dad blasted robot aardvark. Maybe he would show me how to make something else.

Then I remembered the very first e-mail I had gotten. The one from Micah Mason, who wanted an Electronic Spy Night Scope so he could spy on his sister in the dark.

I shook my head sadly. An Electronic Spy Night Scope would probably be harder to make than an aardvark! Maybe there was something else I could start with that would be easier.

When I admitted my situation to the techie, he nodded excitedly and chirped, “Not a problem.” He reached into his briefcase again and pulled out a cuddly brown teddy bear. I did a double take. It didn’t look like it was electronic. In fact it looked just like the ones the Elves make every Christmas.

“Meet Hug-A-Bear,” said Nerdy, thrusting the bear into my hands. “He’s a one function robot. All he does is hug.”

As if on cue, Hug-A-Bear spread out his arms and wrapped them around my neck. Then he gave me a gentle hug. I couldn’t help but smile. My heart was smiling, too, because I knew that I could learn to make a lot of these bears. And a lot was just exactly what I would need.

The techie patiently explained how to make the bear. I said good-night to Nerdy and set to work. My big old clumsy hands got comfortable making soft teddy bears right away. I hummed a little tune as I wired the robot mechanism for each chubby bear and stuffed it inside. Then I would

sew the final seam and put the bear up to my neck to test his hug.

I was feeling pretty proud when I hung up my apron at the end of the day. I counted the bears I'd made. Six Hug-A-Bears were sitting in a row.

Then my gaze shot to the calendar. Tomorrow was November 1<sup>st</sup>. That meant there were only fifty-four days left until Christmas Eve. Fifty-four days times six Hug-A-Bears was--I counted on my fingers--three-hundred twenty-four.

Three-hundred twenty-four toys for millions of girls and boys! Maybe I hadn't saved Christmas after all!

## Chapter 9

### BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD

I couldn't sleep a wink all night. I tossed and turned. I stared at the ceiling. I pounded on my pillow. But nothing helped. Christmas was coming faster than an avalanche, and I wouldn't be ready.

What would I do on Christmas Eve with no where to go? What would I tell the reindeer? Worst of all, what would I tell the children?

When the sun finally came up I dragged myself into the kitchen and poured myself a cup of coffee. The Missus was sitting at the table, frowning into space as if I wasn't even there. Suddenly she looked at me out of the corner of her eye.

"You have to talk to the Elves right now," she snapped. "You'll have to go straight to their village," she went on before I could say a word. "Explain to them that what today's kids want

most of all are electronic toys,” she went on before I could say a word. “Tell them to shape up! Get with the program!”

I shook my head sadly. “I don’t think it will work. You should have seen how upset they were yesterday when that techie tried to tell them how to make newfangled toys.”

“Then beg them to come back to the workshop,” she said. “Get down on your hands and knees, if you have to. Do what ever it takes.”

I couldn’t argue with The Missus. I knew she was right. I hustled out the door as fast as I could. Didn’t even finish my coffee.

I raced past the workshop and into the woods where the Elves village was. No one was in the streets when I got there. All the houses were quiet. Smoke curling from the chimneys was the only sign of life.

Stepping up to the first house, I knocked on the door. This was where Edgar lived with his three-hundred seventy-five year old wife Sue. The Missus and I had been friends with Edgar and Sue for as long as I could remember.

No one came to the door.

I knocked again. Louder. Still no one answered. I sighed and went to the next house. No one answered my knock there, either. The more I trudged through the snow, knocking on doors that didn’t open, the more discouraged I got.

Why were the Elves being so stubborn? I must have asked myself that question a hundred times. After a while I was too discouraged to knock on any more doors. I headed back to the workshop and all those Hug-A-Bears waiting to be made.

I unlocked the door and went inside. The six Hug-A-Bears I'd made yesterday were exactly where I'd left them. I put on my apron and got right to work. First I laid the pattern on the soft, wooly fabric and cut out the shape of a bear. Then I stitched on the face and put most of the stuffing inside. The next thing was the really important part. Attaching the electronics that made the little bear hug.

All of a sudden I had the feeling that someone was watching me. Had The Missus come down from the house? I looked around the workshop. There was no one there.

I sewed the last seam. The bear was finished. I put him up to my neck and felt his gentle hug. I chuckled to think of how happy he would make some child and then I hugged him back.

I worked as fast as I could. I made four Hug-A-Bears before lunchtime. Every so often I'd have that feeling again. The one where it seemed that someone was watching me.

When The Missus brought my lunch down from the house, I asked her.

“Have you been checking up on me this morning?” I wondered silently if she thought I was falling down on the job.

She looked startled. “Me? Spying on you?” she asked. “That’s the craziest thing I’ve ever heard.”

I shrugged and took a bite of my peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Then she proceeded to tell me about all the e-mail messages she had read that morning and all the wishes she had entered in my ledger.

By the end of the day I had made eight electronic bears. That was two more than yesterday. But

now there were only fifty-three days left until Christmas Eve. Eight times fifty-three was--I counted on my fingers again--four-hundred twenty-four bears.

That was a hundred more bears than yesterday. But there was no way that it would ever be enough!

## Chapter 10

### THIEVES IN THE WORKSHOP

I got up an hour early the next morning and skedaddled down to the workshop to get an early start. The sun was just climbing into the sky. I worked as hard as I could until almost midnight. This time I made sixteen bears.

The next day I made twenty. I was so tired by the end of the day that I could barely crawl back up the hill to the house. But I didn't care. Christmas was getting closer and closer.

Day after day I worked almost around the clock. I still had the feeling that someone was watching me, but I didn't have time to wonder who it was.

One morning when I came down the hill from the house things seemed different. The first thing I noticed were footprints in the snow. Dozens of them. All around the front door to the workshop. There were so many that it looked like there had been a dance on that very spot.

I looked in every direction. Nobody was near the reindeer's barn. Or out by their take-off and landing strip. The woods were quiet, too. I glanced at The Slippery Slope, where the Elves test ride sleds and toboggans. Nobody there, either.

"Don't have time to stand out here all morning just gawking," I muttered in the frosty air. I went

inside the workshop and got busy making bears.

When I got the first one finished, I took it over to put it on the stack of bears I'd already made. Even though I'd lost count of how many I had put together, I was proud of everyone of them. I was beginning to feel like a first class techie myself.

But when I got to the spot where the bears should have been, they were all gone! Missing! Not one single Hug-A-Bear was there!

"A thief hit the workshop!" I gasped. Panic was setting in. "Who would do such a terrible thing?" My scalp started to tingle. It felt like spiders were dancing in my hair. My legs got wobbly.

I peered around the shadowy workshop. With the Elves away, I hadn't turned on all the lights. Could the thief be lurking in a dark corner? I wondered.

I tiptoed around the workshop. I peered into dusky corners. I looked under the skate board assembly-line. Behind Barbie's Dream House and behind her Grand Hotel. Over the rows of bikes waiting for their wheels. I looked everywhere, but I didn't find the thief.

Finally I sat down beside a sewing machine and sobbed. Who would do a thing like this? Who could possibly ruin Christmas for all the boys and girls? I didn't have a clue.

Or did I?

I remembered the footprints around the workshop door. Dozens of them. Did they belong to the thieves who stole all the Hug-A-Bears?

Slowly I got to my feet. I'd follow those footprints and catch the thieves, by golly. I'd get those

low down, dad blasted criminals if it was the last thing I ever did. They were not going to spoil Christmas. Not if I had anything to say about it.

I threw open the door and started to step outside. But instead, I stopped stone cold in my tracks.

There stood the Elves--all seven-hundred twenty-two of them--with huge grins on their faces. But that's not all.

They were holding seven-hundred twenty-two Hug-A-Bears in their arms.

## Chapter 11

### MERRY CHRISTMAS TO ALL!

"Santa, we're so sorry we went on strike," Edgar began. "But you see, in all the years that we've been making toys, no one ever told us we couldn't make toys that children wanted. It really hurt our feelings...at first." He paused.

I could see tears in his eyes. But I kept quiet. I knew he had more to say.

"Please forgive us," he went on. "We want to come back to work!"

The Elves were crowding closer. Each one held up a bear.

"We've been watching you make these cuddly bears that give hugs all by themselves, and we think they're cool," added Elvis, one of the younger Elves.

"We decided making electronic toys didn't look as hard as we had thought," said Rufus.

"Or as scary," said Climo.

“So last night each one of us borrowed a bear and took it home,” chimed in Charlie Chin, the only Elf who had no hair.

By now all the Elves were trying to talk above each other. I held up my hand for silence.

“Edgar, will you please tell me what’s going on?” I asked when they had gotten quiet. “Why did you...er...borrow the bears?”

“To take them apart and see if we could put them back together so that they worked again. And we could!” Edgar said excitedly.

Then every single one of those Elves put the Hug-A-Bear he was holding up to his neck. And right before my eyes every single one of those bears gave a big old hug.

“And now we know we can make any kind of toys,” said Clayton. His face was beaming. “Even newfangled ones like these.”

“Please ask the techie to come back and teach us how to make more toys,” said Elmo. “Ask him to come today. We’ve got to get started right away to get all of them made in time for Christmas.”

“I want to make robot crocodiles,” shouted someone in the back of the crowd.

“Heather Hoolas!” yelled another Elf.

The Missus had heard all the commotion and had come out to see what was going on. We stood there hand in hand, listening to the Elves call out the names of the electronic toys they each wanted to learn to make.



The Missus stood on her tippy-toes and planted a kiss on my cheek. Then she snuggled close. “You did it, Santa. You saved Christmas,” she said softly.

My heart was swelling with joy. So what if I’d had to learn to use a computer? I thought. It hadn’t been so hard. And who cares that I’d had to become a techie to make electronic toys? It had all been worth it. Every dad blasted bit of it.

Because girls and boys everywhere would have a merry Christmas this year, after all!

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