

## Prologue

THERE WERE CLOUDS ALL AROUND, and beams of golden sunlight shone through them. In the middle, five men sat around a table playing poker. The little dark haired man cackled as he laid his cards on the table; two kings, two sixes and an ace. “*J’ai deux paires*” he exclaimed. “Two pairs. I win!”

“No you don’t,” said the slight man at his right. He laid his hand down upon the short man’s hand and gestured with his other hand at his own hand on the table. “My three of a kind beats your two pairs.”

The little man leapt to his feet, but this only made him marginally taller than he was when seated. “*Ce n’est pas vrai!* That is not right! My hand is best! My hand is always best!”

“Oh knock it off, you always think you’ve won,” the player to his left interrupted. “You have such a Napoleon Complex.”

The little man sunk back into his chair and stuffed his hand into his vest. The other man swept his winnings into his toga and straightened the laurel wreath that circled his wrinkled brow. “Now, what have we learned?” he asked.

“Why do you always do that?” asked the white haired man across the table. “Can’t we just play cards without learning something? We all know how to play cards.”

“Ah yes,” replied the skinny old man. “But how do you know that?”

“Oh quit your jabbering, you three” said the big man with the thick lips. He was wearing an old fashioned suit with pin stripes, big shoulder pads and a fedora. He gathered the cards as he chewed on his cigar. He quickly shuffled the deck and started dealing. “This hand will be Chicago Stud,” he chuckled. “Just like me.” The other players groaned and collected their cards.

“All right you rubes, ante up,” said the dealer. All of the players except the white haired man placed a single chip in the center of the table. The white haired man pushed a stack of four quarters onto the pile.

“*Santa Maria*, George, what is it with the quarters?” asked the last man. He had the bearing of a sea captain, which was perhaps understandable because there was a time when he had been one. Now he just played cards all day. Sometimes he wondered if he would be playing cards for all of eternity.

The white haired man just shrugged and said, “I like quarters.”

“Yeah, we know that, George,” said the man in the fedora. “You like the quarters. But you know what? To the rest of us, all of your quarters are just useless bits of change.”

The white haired man frowned and threw a dozen more quarters into the pile. “I’ll raise,” he said.

The play moved quickly around the table, and chips and quarters piled up in the center. In the end, the sea captain took the hand, but not without a protest from the little dark haired man. As the old sailor collected his winnings, a portly man wearing a black suit and dark glasses walked up to the table. “You guys got room for another player?” he asked.

“But of course,” replied the big man in the fedora. “We always welcome fresh meat ... pardon me, fresh faces at our table.” He chuckled and his cigar bobbed up and down, spilling ash on the tablecloth. He reached out a thick hand to the stranger, “you can call me Al.”

“Have a seat,” said the old man in the toga. “But before you can play, you have to tell us your story.”

“My story?” asked the man in the black suit.

“Yeah, your story,” replied George.

“How you got here,” explained the sea captain. “Everyone who joins our game has a story about what brought him here.”

“Ah,” said the newcomer. “Well, that is an interesting story all right.” He paused and appeared to be lost in thought. Then he began, “it had a lot to do with Big Ron Walman and three elves in a red snowmobile ...”

## Big Ron Walman

NOT MANY PEOPLE KNEW WHY BIG RON WALMAN was called “Big.” He was not a tall man and he was not a fat man. In terms of size he would be much more accurately named “average Ron,” “medium build Ron” or “non-descript Ron.” It was true that Big Ron owned a big house and he drove a big car and had a really, really big bank account, but none of these were the reason that he was called “Big Ron” either. The reason he was called “Big” was because that was what his mother had named him, the day he was born in a in a tiny hospital in the tiny town of New Bedlam almost 50 years before.

Mother Walman had wanted her little boy to grow up and do big things, and to do that she felt that he needed a big name. So instead of calling him Sebastian or Methuselah or Johann-Bartholomew-Ignatio-Reginald, she just called him Big, because that was the biggest name she could imagine.

Big Ron Walman had lived up to his name and then some. He enjoyed all of the trappings of wealth. He drove an SUV without worrying about the price of gas. He owned homes on the beach in Malibu, on a ski hill in Austria and a golf course in Spain. He was married to a 22-year-old Swedish supermodel named Baköm (his fourth wife and third supermodel). He not only had a private jet, he also had a private train that ran on its own private railway line. Most tellingly, he wore the tasteless, ugly clothes and the terrible toupee that are reserved for only the incredibly rich.

Big Ron began accumulating his vast fortune when he was seven and received a crystal radio for Christmas from his grandmother. He did not really care for his grandmother, and he cared for her gift even less, so he took it to his school and sold it to a friend. His first profit in the sales game was a tidy ten dollars, which he re-invested by buying a bunch of other toys he did not want and then selling those. By the time he was 15, he was running a very successful toy business out of his garage and had made enough money to buy his own car, a new 1970 Ford Mustang. Of all the thousands of toys he had bought and sold in his young life, it was the first one that he actually kept.

He opened his first toy store in downtown New Bedlam when he was 22 and his second in the neighbouring town of Krappesburg six months later. Over the next quarter century, through his own hard work, perseverance and not a little insider trading, he became the sole owner

and chief executive officer of TOYSAURUS™, a chain of toy stores with over 3,000 enormous locations on every continent and with new stores opening daily. At the same time, he became one of the wealthiest men on the planet peddling forgettable “must-have” toys to demanding children and their weary parents.

Just like his name, every TOYSAURUS™ location Big Ron Walman owned was big. Customers meandered through wide aisles with thousands of toys arrayed on hundreds of shelves that rose over thirty feet in the air. But the biggest store by far was the one he built in his hometown of New Bedlam. It contained nearly 450,000 square feet of retail space. It took the services of almost ten thousand child labourers in 16 different countries to maintain the inventory of over 10 million different toys. The parking lot surrounding the store was so big and so brightly lit it could be seen from space. Indeed, aerial photographs of the store taken from the space shuttle appeared on T-shirts, hats and mugs available in the gift shop near the main entrance. Even so, as Christmas approached each year, it became nearly impossible to find a parking space.

In order to fill his enormous stores with customers, and keep them coming back weekend after weekend, Big Ron Walman advertised with abandon. Newspaper and television advertisements relentlessly promoted huge discounts of 50% or more on toys, which, the advertisements failed to mention, had been marked up 70% the previous week. Most of his promotions featured the colourful dinosaur mascot of the TOYSAURUS™ chain, Tyrone the Toysaurus.™ Tyrone appeared in all of Big Ron’s advertisements and on many of the toys, baby clothes and sporting goods found in every Toysaurus™ store.

Customers who stepped through the wide glass doors of any of Big Ron’s giant stores from New York to Nunavut and from Paris to Peru, were greeted by Tyrone, a gangly and gregarious 8-foot tall velvet and vinyl dinosaur. Of course, Tyrone was typically a high school student wearing a costume that weighed over 60 pounds and earning minimum wage. But, as Big Ron Walman explained in his corporate training videos, Tyrone the Toysaurus™ was more famous and widely recognized than any human being on Earth, so those teenagers who developed a painful rash from the costume’s goat wool and asbestos lining rarely complained.<sup>1</sup>

Christmas was coming and Big Ron Walman paced at the centre of his capacious office on the second floor of his New Bedlam store. He knew

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<sup>1</sup> Teenagers everywhere are generally a pretty gullible lot.

that he needed something big to bring in the customers this year. While his annual sales remained astronomical and the chain's revenue and his own income exceeded the gross domestic product of many small nations, Big Ron had watched in horror as his quarterly profit declined for the first time in TOYSAURUS™ history.

In recent years, many people were trying to make Christmas simpler or less commercial. Big Ron Walman did not understand the idea of a simple Christmas, with small practical, or even worse, handmade, gifts. The only kind of Christmas that made any sense to him was one with a Christmas tree surrounded by a waist high moat of presents purchased from one of his stores and gaily wrapped in festive Tyrone the Toysaurus™ paper. But he could sense that times were changing and with only a few more days until Christmas, he needed something new and drastic to keep his Christmas shoppers coming to his stores.

The idea came to Big Ron as he lined up a thirty-foot putt in the west wing of his office.<sup>2</sup> It was a bigger idea than Tyrone the Toysaurus™; in fact it was bigger than a hundred Tyrones.

As his official Tyrone the Toysaurus™ golf ball dropped into his official Tyrone the Toysaurus™ putting cup he realised exactly what would fill his store with customers and send his Christmas profits to new heights. In his excitement, he dropped his putter and hopped from one foot to the other. He yelled at his secretary, Marrietta, to bring him a bourbon and to get the Rowdy Boys on the phone.

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<sup>2</sup> Many visitors to Big Ron's office remarked that it was like a football field. This was true in more ways than one. Like a football field, distances in Big Ron's office were measured in yards, not feet. More strikingly, instead of a carpet, the floor of Big Ron's office was covered in grass, which was neatly mowed and landscaped each evening after Big Ron left for the day.

## The Rowdy Boys

HANK “THE ANCHOVY” ANCOVA ANSWERED the car phone on the second ring. “Ancova,” he said. He listened for a few moments then added, “okay, we’re on our way,” and hung up.

Hank was in a black sedan, riding shotgun. He wore a black suit and dark sunglasses. His crisply pressed white shirt was bisected by a thin black tie. He turned in his black Corinthian leather seat to look at the driver, Floyd “Bumpy” Burton and said, “that was Marrietta. Big Ron needs us right away.”

Floyd nodded and signalled a left turn. Like Hank, he was dressed in a black suit, with a crisply pressed white shirt, narrow black tie and dark sunglasses. Three other men were packed shoulder to shoulder in the back seat. They were all dressed in black suits and wore dark sunglasses. On the driver’s side sat Buck “Chip” Simmons. In the middle, sipping on a diet coke was Cal “Extra Bacon” MacKenzie and beside him, “Donut Mickey” Horton. These were the Rowdy Boys.

Big Ron Walman had put together the Rowdy Boys the previous year as an experiment in creative problem solving. Big Ron felt that he needed a group of big and dangerous men who could resolve difficult situations, which might otherwise require Big Ron to spend money in unpleasant ways, such as on legal fees. Rather than use a polite phone call or a strongly worded letter, Big Ron liked to solve problems with swift and brutal force. So, if Big Ron was having difficulties with a supplier or a landlord, he would call in the Rowdy Boys to fracture whatever kneecaps or thumbs needed to be fractured in order to deal with things to Big Ron’s ultimate satisfaction.

That was the idea anyway. The reality was that, because the pay was so low, the Rowdy Boys were more hired fat than hired muscle. They were really just a group of under-qualified night watchmen with an average age of 52 and an average IQ of just a little more than that. They were also a poor form of bionic men, with two replaced hips, a pacemaker and three artificial knees among them. But what they lacked in strength and guile they more than made up for with witless enthusiasm.

Floyd pulled up to an intersection and cautiously pressed the brake, even though he had the green light. He squinted to make out the colour of the light through his sunglasses and the tinted windshield of the big car. A

car honked behind him. Satisfied that it was safe to proceed, Floyd eased cautiously through the intersection and accelerated.

“Stop here,” barked Hank. Floyd jammed on the brakes and the sedan skidded to a stop in front of Romeo’s Fitness and Discount Liquor. “Marrietta also needs us to pick up some bourbon.”

Eager to please, Buck and Donut Mickey both jumped out of the car and raced toward the entrance. As they reached the door, Buck stumbled over his own shoelaces and fell to the ground. Donut Mickey, who was only good at running in straight lines, was unable to manoeuvre around Buck’s sprawled body as it slid across the pavement. His foot stuck into Buck’s groin and Donut Mickey flipped into the air. He would have crashed into the door, if not for a young woman carrying a gym bag who opened it at that precise moment. Donut Mickey flew right into her and together they tumbled through the doorway and into the entrance of the store.<sup>3</sup>

Hank took one look at Buck and Donut Mickey tangled together and sighed. “If you want something done right,” he muttered to himself and stepped out of the car. His mind turned, as it often did, to his two granddaughters who lived on the north side of town. He had not seen them in almost two years. He wondered what they would think if they knew what their old granddad did for a living. “I’m getting too old for this,” he thought as he carefully stepped around the scrambled mass of twisted arms and legs. He pulled a big bottle of bourbon from the shelf and took it to the cash register. He completed the purchase and returned to the car before Buck and Donut Mickey were able to gather themselves up and limp out of the store.

“Has everyone got their seatbelts on?” Floyd called after Buck and Donut Mickey had returned to the car. There was a considerable amount of shuffling and groaning before both men answered “yes” and Floyd carefully guided the car into traffic, straining to see any sign of oncoming cars through his sunglasses.

It took the Rowdy Boys 45 minutes to drive the six miles to Big Ron’s office, stopping for every green light and right hand turn along the way. Big Ron was walking up and down the lawn surrounding his desk when Marrietta showed them in.

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<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, the young woman suffered a broken kneecap in the incident. Ironically, it was the first kneecap that the Rowdy Boys had successfully shattered in 14 attempts. She has since made a full recovery and collected a generous settlement from Big Ron’s general liability insurer.

“About time you got here,” barked Big Ron.

“Sorry Big Ron,” explained Floyd. “We got caught in traffic.”

Big Ron turned and looked at the clock on his wall, which read 2:15 PM. He grunted and turned back to the Rowdy Boys. “Bourbon,” he demanded. Hank passed the bottle to Big Ron. He placed a large tumbler on his desk, then cracked the seal on the bottle and filled it. He screwed the cap back on the bottle and settled into his chair. He took a long pull from the glass and then gestured to the Rowdy Boys to sit down. They looked around and sat down in the closest chairs, which were 30 feet from the desk.

“Boys, I have a job for you,” began Big Ron. Cal rubbed his hands together in anticipation. “Now this is a big job. I’m trusting you with whole future of the TOYSAURUS™ Corporation. I need my best men to be at their best and you boys,” Big Ron sighed, and took another drink, “are the best I’ve got.”

The Rowdy Boys nodded and traded high fives among themselves. “You can count on us, boss,” said Cal.

“We’ll give a hundred and ten percent,” added Buck.

Big Ron nodded and continued. “Okay, listen up. This is important. I need a big splashy promotion to get people into the store. Now what more than anything do people want to see when they come into a toy store?”

The Rowdy Boys looked around at each other nervously. “Um, low prices?” ventured Donut Mickey.

“No! No! No!” snapped Big Ron. “Not low prices. Never low prices. Not ever. Do you think I could afford to own my own mountain if I charged low prices?”

The room grew unnaturally quiet for a moment. “Good customer service?” suggested Floyd.

“Ha!” Big Ron laughed so loudly that Cal spilled his Diet Coke all over the front of his crisply pressed shirt. “No, not that. If customers want to be treated nicely, they can go to the spa. Now come on.”

The room grew so quiet that the Rowdy Boys could hear Big Ron blinking. At last he drained the bourbon from his tumbler, slammed it down on the desk and shouted, “celebrity appearances!”

There was a long pause and then the Rowdy Boys said in unison, “oh, of course.” They had each learned in their own way that it did not pay to disagree with Big Ron. It did not pay that great to agree with Big Ron, but it was certainly better than the alternative.

“And at Christmas time, who is the biggest, most famous person in the entire world?”

Again, the room turned quiet before Hank suggested, “Jennifer Lopez?” and then he ducked as Big Ron threw the tumbler at his head.

“No!” shouted Big Ron. He pulled another tumbler from his drawer and topped it up. He swirled it in his hand and stared out the window. “Not Jennifer Lopez. And not Brad or Justin or Britney. I’m talking the big man himself. The biggest Christmas celebrity there is. Santa Claus. Right here in this store.”

Floyd laughed. “Aw c’mon boss. Lots of stores have Santas. What’s the big deal?” Then he ducked as Big Ron wound up to throw a second tumbler. Big Ron paused only because this one was still three quarters full of bourbon.

“I’m not talking about some retired guy in a red suit with a fake beard. I mean the genuine article. The one and only real Santa Claus. Handing out candy canes and ho ho ho-ing in my store. Can you imagine the smiling faces on all those children? Can you imagine the crowds?” Big Ron’s voice deepened to a growl. “Can you imagine the *profits?* ”

Donut Mickey nodded exuberantly. “That would be pretty cool,” he said. “But how are you gonna do that? Santa Claus is way too busy this time of year to visit toy stores.”

Big Ron drained his tumbler and slammed it down on the desk. “This is why I pay you the big bucks,”<sup>4</sup> said Big Ron. “Because Santa Claus isn’t coming to visit, he’s coming to stay. And tonight you five, my Rowdy Boys, are going to the North Pole to get him.

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<sup>4</sup> This was not strictly true. A good portion of the salary Big Ron paid to all of his employees, including the Rowdy Boys, was comprised of store coupons.

## Santa Claus

“IT WAS NOT ALWAYS THIS WAY,” thought Santa Claus as he sat in front of his computer, reviewing his naughty and nice list. Occasionally, he paused to check the live webcast of the Flames game,<sup>5</sup> and then he flipped back to review the list a little bit more.

Santa Claus used to maintain the list in his neat handwriting in a big leather-bound book, but that had given way to technology and now the list was displayed in a giant spreadsheet on the 19-inch flat screen monitor on his desk. With the click of a mouse he could flip through thousands of names, study trends of naughtiness or niceness and make instant updates and corrections. The data on the list in turn was fed into the workshop, where hundreds of elves received computerized directions on pending toy requirements. It was not always that way, but with millions of children in the world, it had become the only way. Still, despite his computer, the stack of papers piled on Santa’s wide desk seemed to be as tall as it had ever been.

Santa Claus’ office was in the corner of the 24<sup>th</sup> floor of an office tower situated exactly on the North Pole. Once upon a time the North Pole was dotted with quaint little cottages and a small toy factory. Now it was the head office of Santa Claus Incorporated, the most sophisticated child surveillance and toy distribution corporation in the world. Near the gleaming silver office tower was the large low modern building where the toys were made. This was the heart of Santa’s empire. Sure, there were still some quaint little buildings like the Christmas Candy Mill® and the Yummy Gummy Gumdrop Factory®, but these were really just relics from an earlier and simpler age.

Santa Claus looked up for a moment and saw the little black airplane with the tinted windows touch down on the airstrip beside his toy factory. With Christmas only three days away, there were dozens of flights in and out of the North Pole every day shuttling in toy-making supplies, so Santa Claus did not give this airplane a second’s thought and turned back to his work. So, even though their black suits stood out sharply against the bleak white snow covering the North Pole, Santa Claus never saw the five men who clambered out of the airplane.

But he would see them soon enough.

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<sup>5</sup> Like all good people, Santa Claus cheers for the Calgary Flames. It is no coincidence that he wears red.

The Rowdy Boys scrambled across the runway and through the snow that led up to the office tower. They were still dressed in matching black business suits, dark glasses and shiny black loafers.

You will find, if you care to look it up, that most experts do not recommend this sort of attire for creeping stealthily across a snowy street at the North Pole in December. There are three very good reasons for this. First, even the finest worsted wool suits offer precious little warmth against temperatures and wind chill that are colder than a mother-in-law's heart. Second, because the sun does not rise at the North Pole at anytime during the month of December, dark glasses substantially reduce the ability of the wearer to see even short distances. Third, and perhaps most important, loafers, particularly those polished to a luminous sheen, provide insufficient traction to safely cross over deep snow and ice.

Cal cursed as his newly polished loafers sunk into snow, which was so cold he immediately lost all feeling below his knees. Floyd cursed as he slipped on some ice and fell face first into a snow bank. Buck cursed when he tripped over Floyd and collided with Donut Mickey, who in turn cursed and toppled into Hank. Soon all five Rowdy Boys were cursing and flailing in the snow.

Several minutes later, their suits wrinkled and covered in snow, the Rowdy Boys stepped through the doors into the lobby of the big office tower. The instant they entered the building, their dark glasses fogged up. Unable to see, they slowly walked across the polished marble floor with their arms extended in front of them. As they made their way to the elevators, the snow that clung to their pant cuffs began to melt. Buck was the first to fall, bringing down Hank, who knocked over Donut Mickey who rolled into Floyd and Cal. More cursing and flailing followed.

There was a faint cough and the Rowdy Boys looked up. An official looking elf in a doorman's uniform stood beside them. He coughed again. "May I help you gentlemen?" he inquired.

The Rowdy Boys climbed awkwardly to their feet. Floyd stepped forward. "Um ... we're uh, ..." he stammered.

"Furnace inspectors," interrupted Hank. "We're here to inspect the furnace. Is the owner available?"

"Yes, that's it," agreed Floyd. "We need to discuss the furnace. With the owner."

“If he’s available,” added Hank.

“Sure,” said the official looking elf. “Twenty-fourth floor. The elevators are right through there. You can’t miss it.”

Hank turned in the direction he believed the elf had pointed and strained to look through his frosted glasses. “Great, thanks a lot,” he said. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a few frozen coins and tried to stuff them into the elf’s hand. He gave up when they stuck stubbornly to his own fingers and blindly led the Rowdy Boys into the elevator.

Cal whistled nervously as the elevator rose to the twenty fourth floor. The other Rowdy Boys glared at him, but he couldn’t see them through his dark fogged glasses and just kept on whistling.

Finally, the elevator reached the top floor and the doors opened. The Rowdy Boys stepped out and walked down the hall to a large set of wooden double doors marked with a brass name plate that read:

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>S. Claus</b> Chief Executive Officer</p>
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“Okay boys, this is it,” whispered Hank. “We’re going in on three and we’re going in heavy. But remember, Big Ron wants the fat man alive and unbruised.”

The other Rowdy Boys nodded. Cal set his jaw grimly as Hank counted “one ... two ...”

On “three,” Cal and Donut Mickey kicked the door. It shook but did not open. Hank shook his head and counted to three again. The door shuddered again under another heavy kick. One end of the nameplate came loose and tilted down, but the door remained shut. Cal raised his leg for a third kick but stopped as Hank raised his hand.

“Come in,” said a voice from the other side of the door.

Cal kicked the door again with a reverberating thud.

“I said come in,” repeated the voice. “It’s open.”

Hank reached slowly down to the doorknob and turned it. The big door swung open. Cal nodded his head proudly and led the Rowdy Boys into the room.

It was a big office, not Big Ron Walman big, but a big office nonetheless. Santa Claus stood up from behind an enormous desk covered with an enormous stack of paper. “Ho ho ho,” he laughed. He walked over and shook each of the Rowdy Boys’ hands. “I must say, you fellows are the oddest group of furnace inspectors I’ve ever seen. Ho ho ho.”

The Rowdy Boys glanced at each other uncomfortably. “How did you know we were here to inspect the furnace?” Floyd asked guardedly.

Santa Claus looked down at the telephone on his desk. “Well, you might say a little birdie told me,” he laughed again. “Ho ho ho.”

Donut Mickey whispered harshly to Hank. “I didn’t see any birds, did you?”

Before Hank could reply, Santa Claus walked up to him. “Honestly fellows,” he said. “I don’t know who called you, but I think the furnace is working fine. After all, the weather outside is frightful, but in here it’s quite delightful. Ho ho ho.”

“Now,” Hank grunted to the Rowdy Boys, “let’s get him.”

Buck moved first, leaping at Santa Claus. Buck had played professional football and knew a lot about tackling. Unfortunately, most of Buck’s knowledge of the art of tackling had come from being tackled himself. He flew right past Santa and landed heavily on the ground behind him.

It occurred to Santa that these gentlemen were possibly not the furnace inspectors they claimed to be. In fact, as Donut Mickey and Cal charged at him, he became almost certain of this. For a big man, Santa Claus is surprisingly lively and quick. He stepped back and the two Rowdy Boys collided heavily with one another.

Now Floyd reached into his pocket and removed a small cudgel. He slapped it in his palm and approached Santa warily. Santa’s eyes twinkled as he took in Floyd. Floyd swung his weapon and Santa stutter stepped to the left. The club whickered harmlessly to his right. As he reached the end of his swing, Floyd lost his balance for a moment. This was all Santa needed as he gave Floyd a quick push, sending him sprawling across the floor.

Santa spun to face Hank, who approached him more carefully. The old elf took a wary step backwards. Unfortunately for Santa, as he stepped backwards, he stumbled over Buck’s prone form and fell back against

the desk. One of the enormous stacks of paper on the desk wobbled and then fell down on him, knocking him out cold.

With some difficulty, Buck climbed up from under Santa Claus and shouted, "We did it!" He threw his hand up to accept Hank's high five. Hank just punched him in the nose. He looked at the other Rowdy Boys as they slowly pulled themselves to their feet and said, "Come on, let's pick him up and get out of here."

Iggy

**I**GGY SET DOWN HIS WRENCH. He was looking out the window of the toy factory, and what he saw gave him a bad feeling in his stomach. Iggy almost never had bad feelings. He was ordinarily such an optimist that even his bad feelings felt good to him. But something was different about this. There was trouble at the North Pole. He was certain of it.

Iggy was tall for an elf, with a long face, long arms and long nimble fingers. Of course, this is all relative. Most people would not think of Iggy as tall. For example, he would not be considered tall by giraffe standards. By giraffe standards, he was quite tiny. Not really a fair comparison, one might suppose, but Iggy was not tall by elephant or ostrich standards, either. Nor was he tall by most other reasonable standards you could conceive. He would probably be the shortest person in a grade five classroom. So, although he was tall, for an elf, you should understand that to mean that Iggy was still pretty short, all things considered.

He poked the rotund, curly-haired elf sitting beside him with the end of his wrench. "Sam, something's wrong," he said.

Sam was fat, for an elf. Some people might describe him as "generously proportioned", but those people are just being kind. He had a puffy face, a few puffy chins and chubby little fingers that looked like sausages. Sam was also fat by any other standard you might have in mind. If he were a giraffe, he would be considered portly. He would be a plump elephant or a stout ostrich. For an elf, he was just fat.

Sam turned to Iggy. "Don't remind me. I'm 30 race cars behind this morning. I'm going to have to work through lunch." Sam hated missing lunch. He also hated missing breakfast or dinner or any of his several midday snacks.

“I mean it Sam,” Iggy replied. “Something doesn’t feel right. Look at that.” He pointed with his wrench out the window. A group of five men in business suits were struggling to carry a large object across the airstrip.

Sam squinted. “Looks like furnace inspectors to me,” he said.

Iggy was silent for a moment. “I’m not so sure. Yugo, what do you make of those guys?”

Another elf seated across the workbench looked up. He had dark hair and a bushy black moustache. He was assembling a very complicated looking device. Once completed, it would be a new kind of bicycle helmet that was so comfortable and so cool that it would make the actual bicycle unnecessary. Yugo set it down and looked out the window. “Those don’t look like furnace inspectors to me,” he said.

“What are they carrying?” asked Iggy.

“It’s heavy, whatever it is,” answered Yugo. Sam was no longer listening. He was attaching wheels to race cars as quickly as possible, in the hope that he might still be able to salvage part of his lunch break.

The Rowdy Boys had found a very large red sack behind Santa’s desk and had stuffed him inside it. Now they laboured to carry Santa’s bulk across the icy tarmac. It was difficult and slippery work and Cal was surprised to find that he was actually sweating, in spite of the Arctic chill. They reached their little airplane and opened the passenger door.

“You know,” said Iggy from inside the workshop. “That looks a lot like Santa’s sack.”

Sam set aside a shoddily completed race car and picked up another set of wheels. “What would furnace inspectors want with Santa’s sack?” he asked.

“Let’s see what they’ve got,” said Yugo. He pulled a pair of binoculars from his tool belt. He focussed on the five men as they pushed the big bag into the back of the airplane. He flipped the binoculars through zoom mode, infra-red mode to x-ray mode. He face went white and he passed the binoculars to Iggy. “Those aren’t furnace inspectors,” he said.

Iggy focussed the binoculars on the sack. He only caught a glimpse of it and what was inside the sack before the airplane doors closed. “They’ve

got Santa!” he exclaimed. Iggy and Yugo rushed to the window and pressed their faces against it. The airplane taxied down the runway.

“We have to do something!” Iggy shouted.

“Let’s go!” Yugo replied. He ran towards the door of the workshop. “Come on Sam!” he called.

Sam set his face down in his hands. There was no way he was going to get lunch now. He slowly rose from the workbench and followed Iggy and Yugo out of the factory.

The three elves crossed the airstrip and headed to a hangar at the south end. The little black airplane took off from the other south end and turned south.<sup>6</sup> “Hurry up Yugo, they’re getting away,” panted Iggy.

“Not to worry,” said Yugo, lifting the hangar door and leading the other two inside. He pulled a grey tarpaulin from the object in the middle of the hangar, revealing a stylized red snowmobile. Unlike most snowmobiles, this one had an enclosed passenger cabin with heated seats, surround sound and rocket engines. Yugo had built the snowmobile years before to enable him to get around the North Pole more easily. But as time passed he had added more and more little modifications until it looked like almost every sort of vehicle except a snowmobile. It had large wheels that could travel through snow or virtually any other terrain. It had stubby wings extending from each side which supported it in flight. Yugo had taken the snowmobile across continents, into the ocean and even through time.

“Get inside fellas, we have a plane to catch,” invited Yugo. Iggy leapt into his seat and quickly did up his seatbelt. Sam grudgingly climbed into his usual spot in the back compartment. He pulled on his helmet and made sure there was a fresh airsick bag in the pouch on the seat back in front of him. Yugo slipped in behind the wheel and pressed a red button. The engines of the snowmobile whirred to life.

The little black airplane was out of sight as Yugo guided the snowmobile out onto the tarmac. “They have a head start and they could be anywhere. How are we going to find them?” asked Iggy.

“Not a problem,” answered Yugo. He pulled back on a brown lever and the snowmobile accelerated down the runway, and then slowly rose into

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<sup>6</sup> From the North Pole, every direction is south. Because the airstrip is located in close proximity to the North Pole, it is the only runway in the world that runs south-south.

the air. He turned a yellow dial and a small green monitor flipped open on the dashboard. A flashing green light appeared on the upper left corner of the monitor with a series of numbers beside it: 112-32-56:83-14-05.

“What is that?” asked Iggy.

“GPS” replied Yugo.

“Global Positioning System?”

“Close,” explained Yugo. “I call it the Global Position of Santa. This device monitors the location of Santa Claus anywhere in the world. You see those numbers?” The numbers on the screen changed to 111-59-03:81-26-21. “That is the longitude and latitude of Santa right now. They seem to be heading south.<sup>7</sup> I wonder where they are going?”

Yugo punched a few commands into his dashboard computer, setting a course that followed the little black airplane. The elves shifted in their seats, watching the sun rise as they crested the North American continent and waiting to see where the airplane landed.

Several hours passed before Yugo shook Iggy awake. “They’re landing,” he said.

Iggy rubbed his eyes and looked out his window. The little black airplane was descending into an airport outside a small city. On one side of town was the biggest building with the biggest parking lot, which Iggy had ever seen.

The airplane came to a stop at one end of the runway. The Rowdy Boys unloaded the big sack out of the back. The sack was squirming now and had become even more difficult to handle. Buck and Donut Mickey struggled to lower it to the ground, then it slipped from their hands and they dropped it onto the runway. The sack bounced slightly, and the squirming stopped.

“Careful!” shouted Hank. “Remember, Big Ron doesn’t want any bruises on the package!” Floyd and Donut Mickey hurried down to pick up the sack.

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<sup>7</sup> This will not surprise anyone who bothered to read the last footnote since those readers already know that the only direction anyone can travel from the North Pole is south.

The snowmobile swooped in from above and landed a short distance away. Yugo flipped a purple switch and a small flashing dome light rose from a hatch on the roof. He touched a green button and a siren wailed. He pulled down a microphone from the ceiling and spoke into it.

“Everybody freeze!” he shouted and the words boomed out over the tarmac from 11 hidden speakers as the snowmobile raced towards the crumpled sack on the runway.

“Oh crap,” said Buck, “it’s the heat.”

“If it’s the heat, why do they want us to freeze?” asked Cal.

Hank stared at the big man in the black suit and shook his head. “I don’t think it’s the heat,” he muttered. “It’s something else. Chip, you and Extra Bacon deal with it while we get the package into the car.”

“You got it,” answered Buck. He waved his arm at Cal. They both reached into their jackets, extracted large pistols and ran towards the snowmobile.

“What are they doing?” Iggy shouted as a bullet bounced off the windshield.

“They’re shooting at us!” cried Sam, and climbed under his seat.

Another bullet rattled off the side of the snowmobile. Yugo swerved to avoid the gunfire.

Hank had opened the trunk of the black sedan, which he had parked on the tarmac. Floyd and Donut Mickey dragged the sack with Santa in it to the rear bumper.

“Yugo!” Iggy shouted. “They’re taking Santa to that car!”

Yugo took a wide turn and looped the snowmobile back towards the sedan. Cal and Buck ran towards the snowmobile from the left, shooting wildly. One bullet tore a chunk out of Yugo’s window.

“Watch out!” shouted Sam, who had assumed the foetal position beneath the back seat. Yugo pulled on the hand brake and executed a hard left turn. The snowmobile was headed straight for the sedan.

At that moment, Cal leapt right in front of the snowmobile and squeezed off two more rounds.

“Watch out!” shouted Iggy. “You’re going to hit him!”

Yugo slammed on the brakes, but nothing happened. He pulled the wheel to the right, but nothing happened. “I can’t steer!” he cried. “The bullets must have damaged the -- ”

Yugo couldn’t be heard over the loud thump that followed. Or the meaty squishing noise which followed that. Or the grinding noise which followed that and carried on for nearly another minute until the front wheels jammed. The snowmobile ground to a stop behind the little black airplane.

Buck took one look at the carnage that used to be Cal on the front of the snowmobile and then ran to the black sedan. One of the back doors popped open and he jumped inside. The car spun around and the elves watched helplessly as the black sedan with the tinted windows sped away.

Yugo pressed the ignition switch but the engine would not start. Sam peered up from under his seat. “Why have we stopped?” he whimpered.

“Something is stuck under the front skis,” Yugo stammered.

“Not something,” Iggy said weakly. “Someone.”

## Extra Bacon

CAL “EXTRA BACON” MACKENZIE SHUFFLED the cards and dealt another hand. “So that’s the story about how I got here,” he finished. The other players nodded quietly.

“That’s quite a story,” said Al.

“It’s a lot better than my story,” said the man in the toga.

“Si,” laughed the sea captain. “Hemlock poisoning is not a valiant death. Much better to be run over by a snowmobile.”

The man in the toga snorted and picked up his cards. George threw two more quarters into the pot. The little dark haired man laughed gleefully as he looked at his hand, “*je gagne encore!* I win again!” he exclaimed.

“Lemme look at those cards,” demanded Al.

The little man laid out his hand, two queens and three sixes, “behold, *un maison pleine*, a full house.”

“Your full house doesn’t beat my straight,” said the sea captain.

“He’s right,” said George. “Chris wins again.”

The little man flung himself on the ground and threw a tantrum.

“Does he always behave like this?” asked Cal.

“He hates to lose,” replied Chris. “Ever since Waterloo.”

“You know what I hate?” asked Cal.

“What is that?” asked George.

“Elves,” sneered Cal. “I really, really hate elves.”

“Me too,” added a new voice. The players looked up from their cards. Another man in a black suit with dark glasses had joined them. He pulled up a chair and sat down beside Cal. “Let me tell you how much I hate elves ...”

## Petty Constable Fred Sparks

PETTY CONSTABLE FRED SPARKS TOOK one more stiff walk around the snowmobile. “Tsk, tsk, tsk,” he tsked and scribbled another line in his notepad. He looked under the snowmobile at what remains still remained and tsked again.

The three elves stood near the snowmobile, moving awkwardly from one foot to the other. After the accident, Iggy and Yugo each insisted on calling the police. They argued that they had done nothing wrong and that once they told their story, the police could help them track down the kidnappers and rescue Santa Claus. Sam had not wanted to call the police. He felt that the elves were already in enough trouble and that their story might be just a little too bizarre for any investigating officer to appreciate. It was certainly proving to be too bizarre for Petty Constable Fred Sparks.

Petty Constable Sparks was a petty constable. That is to say, he was both a man who was a constable and a man who was petty. In this fashion, his job title provided both a description of his office as well as his character. He had joined the New Bedford Police Department, the fabled NBPD, not because of any sort of devotion to public service, but out of a devotion to hitting people with sticks. He found that the NBPD provided both ample opportunity and ample sticks, which suited Petty Constable Sparks to perfection.

In many ways, the NBPD had been good to Fred Sparks. They provided him with clean shirts, taught him how to walk stiff and straight and, since joining the force, he rarely wet the bed anymore. But whether Fred Sparks had been good for the police was a different question entirely. True, he wrote a lot of tickets. Because of this, his sergeant had recommended him for promotion, describing him to the police chief as a “good little earner.” But other officers in his division did not share the sergeant’s enthusiasm. Some remarked that the number of people he arrested with broken arms far exceeded the number of people he arrested for actually breaking arms. Others complained that not every jaywalker needed jail time. And the supply officer had such a hard time keeping pepper spray in stock he had taken to ordering it by the keg.

Why was Petty Constable Sparks so petty? No one really knew for sure. It was doubtful that his head was screwed on wrong or his shoes were too tight or his heart two sizes too small, though those were certainly possibilities. From a young age, Fred Sparks had been pushy, obnoxious and small-minded. He grew up to be a pushy, obnoxious and small-minded teenager and eventually a pushy, obnoxious and small-minded adult. He was a bully with a badge. And on a brisk evening in December, he found himself with three elves, an unlicensed form of vehicular conveyance and a very badly mashed corpse. In other words, Petty Constable Sparks was in heaven.

Petty Constable Sparks strode stiffly up to Iggy, Yugo and Sam. “Let’s just see what we have here,” he barked. He looked down at his notebook. “We have one unlicensed, unregistered and uninsured motor vehicle.” He pointed with his billy club at the snowmobile. “That is a very serious offence.”

“It’s a snowmobile,” volunteered Iggy. Petty Constable Sparks glared at him. He flipped to the next page and pointed his billy club at the elves. “We have three children in novelty apparel, without any proper identification or any fixed address. That is a very serious crime.”

“We explained that already,” said Yugo. “We live at the North Pole. We came here to rescue Santa Claus.”

Petty Constable Sparks turned and fixed his glare on Yugo. “Yes, I remember that. Five men in dark suits and sunglasses kidnapped Santa Claus and brought him here in an airplane and you flew after them. It’s all here in my notes.” Petty Constable Sparks snorted. “You can tell that one to the judge.”

“But it’s true,” shouted Sam. Petty Constable Sparks ignored him and flipped to the next page in his notepad.

“And we have one rather badly damaged murder victim,” Petty Constable Sparks pointed at poor Cal with his billy club. “Of course, I noticed he was wearing a dark business suit. He is therefore obviously not a kidnapper. A man in a fine dark suit like that is, or was, one of the leading citizens of this town.”

“But a nice suit doesn’t mean anything,” Iggy blurted out. “Anybody can wear a business suit.”

Petty Constable Sparks swung his billy club around and pointed it at Iggy’s face. “You do have a right to remain silent, you know,” he said. “You might want to consider that.” Then he pointed the billy club back at the snowmobile.

“But this is the most heinous crime of the lot,” he said. He pointed at the dome light on top of the snowmobile, which was still flashing. “Impersonating police officers. That is a very serious crime.”

“More serious than murder?” questioned Yugo.

“In fact these are all very serious crimes,” continued Petty Constable Sparks. “I think you three boys are going to be a lot taller<sup>8</sup> by the time you get out of prison. That is, if you *ever* get out of prison.”

“Prison?” whined Sam. “I can’t go to prison. Oh no, I’m not like other people. I just can’t go to prison. People like me don’t do very well in prison.”

“Well, you better learn to do well there, because you are going to be there a long, long time,” Petty Constable Sparks sneered. He turned to

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<sup>8</sup> Of course, no matter how long a sentence they served, none of the elves would ever be considered tall by giraffe, elephant, ostrich or even grade five standards.

three other officers who were standing beside a police van and commanded, "Take them away!"

## Michaelangelo Fromaggio

**M**IKE FROMAGGIO WAS NOT A REAL DINOSAUR, but most of the kids who came to the gigantic TOYSAURUS™ store in downtown New Bedlam thought he was. Mike had greeted customers arriving at the store in his 60-pound Tyrone the Toysaurus™ costume for over 17 years. He had never had another job. He was the first person who had ever worn a Tyrone costume and in the eyes of many people, particularly his own, he was the best. Everyone recognized Tyrone from seeing him on television, billboards and his own line of children's wear, so even though nobody knew who Mike Fromaggio was, Mike considered himself as a real celebrity, perhaps the most famous person in all of New Bedlam. Now Mike was sitting in Big Ron Walman's office and he was not happy.

"Fore!" a voice shouted in the distance. A few seconds later, a golf ball bounced past Mike's shoe. Big Ron was making Mike wait while he practised his drives. Mike watched as four men in wrinkled black suits, dirty white shirts and sunglasses came into the room carrying a big red sack. Big Ron passed his driver to a caddy and jogged over to them.

He bent over and untied the white rope at the top of the sack. "Take a look at this Mike," he chuckled, "you are going to love this."

He pulled down the top of the sack and a groggy Santa Claus blinked and looked around the room. His hair and beard were tangled and a large purple bruise was swelling around his left eye. Big Ron frowned at Hank. "I thought I told you no bruises."

Hank looked at his shabby loafers. "There was a bit of trouble," he explained.

"What kind of trouble?" Big Ron was always troubled when there was trouble.

"Elves," interjected Floyd. "In a snowmobile." Santa's eyes brightened at the mention of the words 'elves' and 'snowmobile'.

"They got Cal," Buck added.

Big Ron looked around and noticed for the first time that he was short one Rowdy Boy. He nodded and clapped Hank on the arm. "Well, all in all, he seems to be all right. Good work."

He picked up a small Dictaphone from his desk and muttered into it, "memo: hire new Rowdy Boy." He turned back to Mike. "Do you realize who this is?"

Mike shook his head. "Looks like an old man in a bag to me," he said. "Are we selling Grampas in the store now?"

Big Ron laughed. "Oh that's a good one." He picked up the Dictaphone again and mumbled into it, "memo: consider selling old people."

"My friend, this 'old man' is none other than the original, one and only true blue Santa Claus." He helped Santa out of the sack and onto his feet. "And starting tomorrow, you two will be working together."

"Now see here, Big Ron Walman" Santa Claus said indignantly. "I most certainly do not work for you. And I most certainly do not work with that young man. You are both very naughty boys."

"The old man's right," Mike added. "I work alone."

"You'll both do as I say," snapped Big Ron. "And I say you're working together. Why this very minute we're building an entire village with a castle in the middle of the store where all the little kids can come and get their picture taken with the real Santa Claus and get a candy cane from his favourite Christmas helper, Tyrone the Toysaurus™. This is going to be the biggest thing ever. I'll probably have to sell tickets. I bet they'll even throw a parade in my honour." Big Ron laughed, walked around to the back of his desk and poured himself a drink.

Santa pointed his finger at Big Ron. "You will never get away with this."

Big Ron took a gulp from his glass and replied, "I already have. Boys, show Mr. Claus to his new home."

And so it was that when the store opened the next morning, Santa Claus found himself seated in a colourful wood and plaster castle surrounded by robot rabbits and chickens Big Ron also used in his Easter displays. Parents and children were lined up all of the way out of the store and around the parking lot, though not one of them noticed the hidden steel cuffs around his ankles that chained Santa Claus to his chair. A surly Mike Fromaggio, dressed in his Tyrone costume with a red Santa hat

perched on his head, greeted each child who approached the castle. As they walked in, Tyrone passed them all a candy cane and took a picture, which doting parents could purchase for \$22.95 each (plus tax).

For his part, Santa Claus was making the best of a bad situation. Although he was chained to his seat and the bruise on his eye hurt a lot, he could not help but smile as each child stepped up to see him. He called them all by name and talked to them about their friends and teachers and what they wanted for Christmas. Every child left with a grin. Most of them walked right past Mike without even looking up.

“He smells like Christmas cookies, Mom,” one little boy with no front teeth said to his mother, who was purchasing over 200 dollars worth of photographs.

But Mike Fromaggio did not share Santa’s enthusiasm. Sweat dripping in his eyes, Mike muttered to himself. “I deserve better than this. Seventeen years and now I’m reduced to being Santa’s dinosaur elf. I should be the star of this show, not some old man.” He passed out another candy cane, secretly breaking it first with his big Tyrone claw.

“And I’d be the star too, if Santa Claus was out of the picture.” As he muttered the words, Mike realized that the answer to his dilemma was seated right in front of him. All he had to do was get rid of Santa Claus and he would be the star again.

Yugo

**Y**UGO LOOKED THROUGH THE BARS OF HIS CELL. His snowmobile was being towed into an impound lot just outside the wall, scarcely thirty yards away. Suddenly, and for the first time since they were arrested, Yugo had hope.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam had spent the night in a bare concrete room with bars on the only window. For a few hours they had been joined by two wildly drunk men, but they had since sobered up and been released. But there was no morning reprieve for the elves. They were awaiting trial on the 47 separate charges written up by Petty Constable Sparks, which ranged from accessory after the fact to having a broken headlight (a result of the collision with Cal) to murder in the first degree (also a result of the collision with Cal). At around 7 in the morning, Petty Constable Sparks had come around with three plain cheese sandwiches for

breakfast. At around noon, he brought three more plain cheese sandwiches.

Yugo turned to Iggy and Sam. "We have to get out of here," he said.

"But it's almost time for dinner," Sam replied.

Iggy shook his head. "I don't think I can eat another cheese sandwich," he said.

"Can I have yours then?" asked Sam.

"There's no need for anymore cheese sandwiches," Yugo said. "I have a plan to get us out of here."

Iggy's face brightened up. "That's great Yugo, but don't you think we should stay? I am sure the judge would understand and let us go."

Sam rolled his eyes and said, "I'm in. Let's get out of here. What have you got up your sleeve, Yugo? Dynamite? Hidden ray guns? A laser saw?" He rubbed his hands together gleefully. "This is going to be great," he cackled.

Yugo laughed. "No, nothing like that I'm afraid. Just the good old snowmobile."

Sam stopped rubbing his hands. "Uh Yugo," he said, "in case you haven't noticed, we're locked up in here and the snowmobile is out there somewhere. And anyway, it's broken."

"You just watch," said Yugo. He returned to the window. He placed two fingers in his mouth and whistled shrilly.

Sam covered his ears. "I wish you wouldn't do that," he complained.

Outside in the impound lot, the snowmobile's headlights illuminated. Yugo whistled twice more. The snowmobile's engine growled to life.

Iggy hurried over to the window. "I thought the snowmobile was ruined?" he asked.

Yugo smiled, "I've made a few modifications. I installed a fungible rettostatic diagnostic and self-repair module. That module has been running since the snowmobile was damaged."

"What does it do?" Iggy asked.

“It actually recognizes and repairs any damage the snowmobile has sustained automatically. As long as the module is unharmed, the snowmobile can actually fix itself. By now, all the damage caused by the bullets and the collision should have been mended.”

“Did you really have to whistle, though?” Sam grumbled.

“I also installed voice activated controls in the snowmobile, Yugo explained. “The whistle turns it on. Now the snowmobile will respond to my commands, even though it is out there ...”

“ ... And we are in here.” finished Iggy.

“Exactly.” Yugo pressed his face up to the bars. He called out, “rotate left.” The snowmobile turned to face the cell window. “Stop,” said Yugo. The snowmobile stopped turning. “Deploy laser cannons. Target cell wall. Lock on target.” On Yugo’s commands, two gleaming black laser cannons had extended from both front fenders of the snowmobile. Each stood poised to fire at Yugo’s next word. Yugo looked over at Iggy and Sam. “I’d suggest seeking cover now.”

“What?” cried Sam. “There isn’t any cover in this cell. The only thing we have is that steel toilet!”

“Then we’d better get behind it,” said Yugo. The three elves huddled behind the toilet and Yugo yelled, “Fire at will!”

Twin beams of electric death burst out of the front of the snowmobile and into the cell wall. The wall exploded at the point of impact and bricks and dust rained down inside the room. One laser beam struck the steel toilet and it glowed red. Water began bubbling over the rim and steam rose from the bowl.

“Cease fire!” Yugo shouted. The two laser cannons shut down and rolled back into the side of the snowmobile. The three elves climbed out from behind the toilet and surveyed what was left of the cell. The outside wall was scattered all over the inside of the cell and the impound lot.

“We’d better get out of here,” said Yugo. “That explosion is sure to attract some attention.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice,” said Sam, and the three elves scrambled over the wreckage and into the night.

“Doors open,” called Yugo. The doors of the snowmobile slid open on their hydraulic hinges and the elves climbed inside. “Close doors,” Yugo commanded, then shouted, “go go go!” The snowmobile roared and sped forward, smashing down the gate of the impound lot and rolling out into the street.

“Let’s find Santa and get back home!” Iggy shouted.

Yugo turned a familiar yellow dial and the Global Position of Santa device popped out of the dashboard. A green light flashed near the center of the screen. “He’s not far,” said Yugo. He looked out his front window. “I’m guessing that he’s somewhere in that big building over there.” He turned down a street and headed towards the big TOYSAURUS™ store on Main Street.

The store was closed for the night when the elves pulled into the parking lot. They stopped near a black sedan with tinted windows and stepped out of the snowmobile. In their haste, they did not notice the two men in black suits and sunglasses guarding the front door.

“It’s them!” shouted one of the men.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam froze on the spot. Two more men came out of the store. Sam was already halfway back to the snowmobile before Iggy could whisper, “I think we’d better get back.” Iggy and Yugo turned and ran after him.

The four men chased after them. “Doors open!” Yugo shouted and the elves dove into the snowmobile. Yugo pulled the door closed just as the Rowdy Boys drew their weapons and fired. With bullets whistling past his window, Yugo put the snowmobile in reverse and backed up.

Donut Mickey was closest to the snowmobile when the guns started going off. So, most of the other bullets hit him before they reached the snowmobile. By the time the other Rowdy Boys lowered their weapons to reload, Donut Mickey was already cooling off on the parking lot pavement.

## Donut Mickey

“THAT’S WHY I HATE ELVES,” FINISHED “DONUT” Mickey Horton as he anted up for the next hand. The other card players nodded sympathetically.

George tossed four quarters into the pot and said, “I cannot tell a lie, that is one of the worst stories I have ever heard.”

“I don’t know what it is about stories like that, filled with shooting and bullets and blood, but they always make me think of Valentine’s Day,” said Al. He threw a chip into the pot and raised two more.

“In my day we used muskets. You were more likely to shoot your own head off with one of those than the thing you were aiming at. I’d rather sail off the end of the world than use a musket,” said Chris as he cut the cards.

“Sweet Josephine,” said the little dark haired man. “Can’t we just play some cards? Who’s dealing?”

“I’ll deal,” said a man in a black suit. He sat down at the table and put a dollar in the pot. “What are we playing?”

Cal and Donut Mickey looked at the newcomer in shock. “What are you doing here?” stammered Cal.

The stranger loosened his dirty black tie and undid his top button. “Well, I guess you already know most of the story,” he began.

“Did you get back at those elves?” asked the old man in the toga.

The newcomer’s face darkened. “Elves,” he spat. “I know one thing for sure. After what happened to me, those elves are as good as dead.”

WHEN PETTY CONSTABLE FRED SPARKS arrived at work that night, he was shocked to discover the elves had escaped and even more astonished at the damage done to the cell wall and the impound lot gate. In his mind he was already drafting a new set of charges to lay against the elves. “Escape from custody, that’s a very serious crime,” he muttered. “And so is vandalism and destruction of public property. These are all very serious crimes.”

Still muttering, he walked stiffly down to the munitions locker and pulled a shotgun down from the shelf. He tested its weight in his hands. Satisfied, he opened a cabinet and dug around the bottom. He was looking for the special bullets the police force had acquired after an elephant had escaped from the New Bedlam zoo. His hand fell upon one and he drew the thick bullet up to the light. It was designed to punch holes in tanks and Petty Constable Sparks was fairly certain it could punch a hole in a flashy, unlicensed, recklessly driven snowmobile as well.

He dropped the giant shell into the shotgun. Then he pulled a second gun from the rack and loaded it too. When chasing dangerous multiple offenders, Petty Constable Fred Sparks felt it was important to arrive heavily armed. Petty Constable Sparks intended to be very heavily armed indeed when he finally apprehended these suspects.

\* \* \*

IT HAD BEEN THE WORST DAY OF MIKE Fromaggio’s life. Serving as Santa’s helper was more than he could take. All day long, passing out candy canes and taking pictures. It was just not right. He was Tyrone the Toysaurus™. He was a star. People should be getting their pictures taken with him and not a big oaf in a red suit.

Now, with the store closed for the evening, Mike had a plan. Things would be different tomorrow. Mike crept through the aisles of the TOYSAURUS™ store. Even though his shift had been over for several hours, Mike was still wearing his Tyrone costume. He often wore the bulky dinosaur suit after work. Sometimes he even slept in it. It was

like a second skin to him. A heavy, sweaty, scaly skin, but a second skin nonetheless.

Santa Claus was still chained to his chair when they shut down Santa's village for the night. Mike had checked on him a few minutes before and the old man was sleeping. He wondered whether visions of sugarplums danced in Santa's head when he slept. "I suppose I'll never know," Mike mumbled to himself.

He reached the aisle he was seeking. A bright red sign above the aisle bore a small picture of Tyrone the Toysaurus™ pointing to the happy letters that read **War Toys and Other Violent Playthings.**

Many parents disapproved of their children playing with various forms of toy weaponry, but the kids all seemed to love the stuff. Toy guns, knives, bombs and other plastic ordnance were always big sellers. One of the most popular new toys of recent years was the Mark VII Annihilator. It was a big plastic bazooka that was designed to launch rubber shells at toy targets. Of course, children used it to launch rubber shells and anything else they could stuff down the barrel at each other. Over forty children had been seriously injured playing with the Mark VII Annihilator and it had been banned in many civilized countries. This only increased the popularity of the toy, to the point where the manufacturer had recently released the Mark VIII Eliminator, an even bigger bazooka that launched even bigger shells that exploded on impact. If it had not been a toy, it would have been illegal.

Mike wrapped one of Tyrone's scaly paws around a Mark VIII Eliminator and pulled it down from the shelf. The box showed a picture of two laughing boys shooting the Mark VIII Eliminator at each other. Beneath the picture, the following caption was written in bold type:

**Not to be used by children under the age of 7. Do not aim or discharge the Mark VIII Eliminator at people, pets or any other living thing. The Mark VIII Eliminator can cause serious disfigurement, injury or even death. Use with extreme caution.**

**Ammunition sold separately.**

"Perfect," Mike cooed. He pulled the Mark VIII Eliminator from its box, raised it to his shoulder and looked down the sight at Santa's village. "Yes," he thought, "at close range, the Mark VIII Eliminator should solve my Santa problem for good."

Mike crept back to the front of the store and approached the plaster castle where Santa Claus was sleeping. He eased up to the wall and poked the barrel of the Mark VIII Eliminator through the window. He trained the telescopic sight at Santa's chair and felt for the trigger.

But as the chair sharpened into focus, Mike discovered that it was empty. He lowered the Mark VIII Eliminator and barged into the castle. He looked all around and even under the chair. The ankle cuffs were still locked shut, but Santa Claus was no longer in them. He had escaped.

Mike lifted the Mark VIII Eliminator onto his shoulder and stalked out into the bicycle aisle. Santa Claus was old and fat and dressed in a bright red suit. He could not have gone far. He would be easy to find, and, Mike patted the Mark VIII Eliminator, easy to eliminate.

Sam

**S**AM WAS NOT A MORNING PERSON. He was not much of an afternoon person, either and in the evenings he could be downright unpleasant. But mornings were when he was at his worst. And this morning was worse than many others. As the sun rose over the sleeping city of New Bedlam on Christmas Eve, Sam climbed back into his seat and tried to get comfortable.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam had spent the night in the snowmobile, on the run from the Rowdy Boys. As soon as the smoke had cleared after the gunfight, the three men in dark suits had jumped into their black sedan and raced after the snowmobile. Yugo managed to lose them at a green light and then parked the snowmobile behind some trees so that they could get some rest before returning to the toy store to look for Santa Claus.

"Look, the sun's coming up," said Iggy, climbing down from his bunk bed.

Yugo flipped a red switch and the bunk beds retracted into the wall of the snowmobile. He turned the ignition switch and the snowmobile hummed. "I guess we had better get back at it," he said. "Hopefully the coast will be clear by now. He pulled the snowmobile out from behind its cover and turned toward TOYSAURUS™. They drove down side streets, keeping away from traffic as much as possible.

Despite their best efforts, a brilliant red winged snowmobile driving down a quiet city street was bound to attract some attention. The elves had scarcely traveled two blocks before they passed the home of Mrs. Owen Murphy, concerned citizen and local busybody. Mrs. Murphy immediately contacted KLF 104 FM.<sup>9</sup> Mrs. Murphy phoned KLF 104 FM almost every morning in a vain effort to get herself on the air. Until that morning, she had never been successful. A few minutes later, she was on *Biff and Billy in the Morning!* telling her story about the three elves who drove past her house in a red snowmobile. Biff and Billy were two of the most obnoxious and least funny disc jockeys working in radio and therefore were two of the most popular. All over New Bedlam, listeners who were tuned in to *Biff and Billy in the Morning!* heard the story of the red snowmobile.

One of those radios was in a police van driven by Petty Constable Fred Sparks. As soon as Petty Constable Sparks heard the radio story, he turned on his lights and siren and sped towards Mrs. Murphy's street. He caught up with the elves six blocks away. He fell in behind the snowmobile and radioed for backup.

Hank Ancova hated *Biff and Billy in the Morning!* and would not let the other Rowdy Boys listen to it when they were driving. They were listening to a police scanner instead when they heard Petty Constable Sparks radio for back-up. Floyd immediately spun the black sedan around and raced after them.

"I think we're being followed," Iggy hollered over the noise of the police siren.

Yugo swerved the snowmobile into the right lane to get away from the police car. Petty Constable Sparks followed them, cutting off a blue Dodge Durango in the process. He slowly lowered one of his shotguns out of the window.

In the left lane, the black sedan with tinted windows moved up through traffic until it was alongside the police van. "Oh great," said Sam, looking out the back window. "Now they're both after us."

There was a loud boom and a bullet the size of a large zucchini buzzed past the snowmobile. "Yugo, get us out of here!" Sam shouted.

Yugo turned sharply onto Lefreek Street and sped north. Petty Constable Sparks had to slow down and stow his shotgun for a moment in order to

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<sup>9</sup> Home of New Bedlam's New Lite Classic Rock Hitz.

make the turn. The Rowdy Boys swerved around the police van and closed in on the snowmobile.

“Take the wheel,” said Floyd. He drew out his pistol and pulled back the tinted sunroof. He stepped on the steering wheel and climbed up onto the roof. Hank leaned over and grabbed the wheel, while Buck clambered over the seat to take Floyd’s place.

Floyd wobbled unsteadily on the car’s roof and squeezed off two shots. Both whistled wide of the snowmobile. Yugo accelerated to 80 miles an hour, but the black car, with Floyd on the roof shooting wildly stayed right behind.

“Look out!” Iggy shouted. He pointed ahead where the road ended in front of a brick warehouse. Yugo turned the wheel hard and the snowmobile darted to the right.

“Steady,” Floyd mumbled to himself from the rooftop of the sedan. He placed both hands on the pistol and aimed again. His finger pulled gently back on the trigger. Underneath him, Buck followed Yugo’s lead and made a hard right turn.

## Sir Isaac Newton

**S**IR ISAAC NEWTON WAS A FAMOUS SCIENTIST who lived in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He had a lot of bright ideas, like gravity and some that were not so good, like calculus. One of his most famous ideas was what have come to be known as Newton’s three laws of motion. An understanding of Sir Isaac Newton’s laws of motion is essential to understanding just what happened next.

The first law says that if an object is in motion, and is untouched by a force of any kind, it will continue to move along in a perfectly straight line at a constant velocity. So, for instance, if a man were standing on the roof of a speeding automobile and that automobile were to suddenly change direction, the man would leave the roof of the automobile and continue moving through the air in the same direction and at the same speed as he was previously.

Newton’s second law of motion provides that the acceleration of an object is directly proportional to the magnitude of the force on that object, in the same direction as the force, and inversely proportional to the mass of

the object. You might see a demonstration of this if, for example, a man stood on the roof of an automobile and it accelerated up to, say, 80 miles per hour. The force on the man caused by the acceleration of the automobile will cause the man on the roof to travel at 80 miles per hour.

The third and final law states that for every force there is an equal and opposite force. One illustration of this law would be that of a man, formerly standing on the roof of a speeding automobile and now travelling through the air at 80 miles an hour. If that man were to strike, say, a brick wall, the wall would push back on him with the same force.

So you can see, if someone were to stand on the roof of a speeding automobile, Newton's three laws dictate that eventually somebody else need a spatula and a power washer to clean the walls of any brick warehouses that might be in the general area.

Bumpy

“I GUESS I SHOULDN'T HAVE SKIPPED PHYSICS class in high school,” said Floyd “Bumpy” Burton. “I never really appreciated Newton's three laws of motion until just now.” He tossed a chip into the pot.

George offered Chris some nachos and he passed the bowl down to Cal and Donut Mickey.

“I remember Isaac,” said the skinny man in the toga. “He was a good card player. Always calculating probabilities in his head. I lost a lot of drachmas to Isaac.”

“Card counter, eh?” said Al. “I'd have rubbed him out and stuck him in my vault.”

The little dark haired man asked, “but what became of the elves?” He was beginning to like those elves. But then, he always took the side of the little guy. “And where did Santa Claus go?”

“Maybe I can explain that,” said a man in a black suit. He hung his jacket on the back of a chair and sat down. The other players set aside their cards while the newcomer spoke.

SANTA CLAUS LIFTED THE LID OF THE garbage bin and looked out. There was nobody there. He breathed a sigh of relief, and then he climbed out and fell heavily on the ground. That crazy man in the dinosaur suit had been stalking him since he had escaped from Santa's village. He shook his head. Did they really think that chains would hold him? He was Santa Claus after all. He was used to getting in and out of tight spaces. What was a locked door or a locked ankle cuff to Santa Claus?

He was in a storage room in the back of TOYSAURUS™. He crept up to the door and opened it slowly. Tyrone the Toysaurus™ with the big plastic bazooka was nowhere to be seen. Santa eased out of the storage room and moved stealthily along the back wall of the store. He stopped when he came into sight of the Santa's village display. Tyrone was walking slowly around the perimeter of the village. He raised the Mark VIII Eliminator and shot a group of little plastic bunnies, which were huddled together in the synthetic snow. There was a loud explosion and fragments of the little bunnies sprayed across the entrance of the village. Tyrone chuckled and dropped another shell into the Mark VIII Eliminator.

Santa Claus stepped carefully backwards into the Lego aisle. At the end of that aisle stood a large green and blue life sized statue of Tyrone the Toysaurus™, made entirely of Lego and with a big toothy grin. Santa Claus shuddered as he crept past the big plastic dinosaur. Although he was a big man, he could move almost invisibly when he wanted to, a result of decades of practice in living rooms around the world. He worked his way cautiously to the front door of the store. He tested it carefully. It was locked and connected to an alarm.

Santa was good with locked doors and alarms, but he did not want to take any chances with an armed dinosaur so close by. He cast about for another exit. There was a carpeted stairway nearby that led to the second floor. Santa scurried toward it. He was more comfortable coming and going through the tops of buildings than the front door.

Santa Claus rounded a large cardboard display of gangsta rapper action figures. In his haste, he knocked one of the figures from its cardboard shelf. It bounced off of the floor and began shouting rhyming obscenities.

Mike twirled and ran towards the cursing noises. Because he spent so much time in the big dinosaur suit, he was able to move quickly. Well, more quickly than you might expect. And certainly more quickly than an obese old man in a red fur coat.

He chased Santa Claus down the remote controlled car aisle. Santa huffed ahead, but he could sense the big dinosaur closing in on him. In desperation, he began pulling things from the shelves to the floor behind him. Mike easily dodged these and raised the Mark VIII Eliminator without breaking stride. Santa Claus reached the end of the aisle and turned left. As he did so, he pulled down the big Lego model of Tyrone the Toysaurus™. It shattered into thousands of little blue, green and yellow blocks.

It is well known and certainly any parent can tell you that there is nothing in the whole entire world more painful to step upon than the sharp corners of a square piece of yellow Lego.<sup>10</sup> Mike winced when he stepped on a yellow block, which he could feel even through his heavy dinosaur paw. He was forced to slow down and thread his way carefully through the piles of scattered Lego.

Santa Claus ran up the stairs and into a large office on the second floor. It was covered with the most interesting green shag carpet, but Santa did not pause to investigate further. He tiptoed across the carpet to the window. In the distance, across the parking lot, he could see Main Street. He laughed to himself when he say what was heading down Main Street, “Ho ho ho. That’s where I’ll go. He’ll never be able to find me in there. Ho ho ho.” Santa carefully opened the window and dropped down the side of the building. He hurried across the parking lot towards Main Street.

Inside TOYSAURUS™, Mike Fromaggio finally made his way through the Lego and stepped out to the front of the store. He glanced through the store window and spotted a big man in a red coat running across the parking lot. “Now I’ve got you old man,” he sneered. He pulled back the safety on the Mark VIII Eliminator and headed for the door.

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<sup>10</sup> Especially at around three o’clock in the morning, when the small person who left the building block in the hall is crying for a glass of water.

“**A**RE THEY STILL FOLLOWING US?” ASKED YUGO.

Sam turned to look behind and then quickly looked ahead. He would be seeing Floyd’s final moments in his nightmares for years to come. “Well, most of them are following us,” he said. “One of them seems to be stuck.”

“Stuck?” asked Iggy. “Stuck to what?”

“You don’t want to know,” answered Sam.

“Sure, I do,” replied Iggy. “What is he stuck to?” Sam shrugged and told him. “Oh,” said Iggy. “You were right. I didn’t want to know.”

Yugo pulled around a black Honda, then weaved around a silver Mustang convertible and a red CRV before speeding along the waterfront. Yugo. The black sedan was still in close pursuit and the police van, with lights flashing and siren blaring, was not much farther behind.

“We can’t get Santa while we’re being chased,” said Iggy.

“You have to lose them, Yugo,” cried Sam.

“I’m doing my best,” Yugo grunted. He turned left and passed a little red Lotus like it was standing still. The sedan and police van drew closer. “Hang on,” called Yugo. He yanked on a black lever. There was a grinding noise as two silver wings extended from either side of the snowmobile. Yugo pulled back the steering wheel and the snowmobile slowly rose into the air.

“Woo hoo!” shouted Iggy.

“That should do it,” said Yugo. He wiped an arm across his brow then banked the snowmobile back towards the center of the city. “Now let’s see about finding Santa Claus,” he said. He turned the yellow dial and the GPS popped up. He studied the monitor, which displayed a green flashing dot on the upper left side. “I’ve found him,” he said. “He’s not too far away.”

Down on the ground, Petty Constable Sparks looked up at the snowmobile and swore in frustration. He grabbed his radio handset and barked into it, “This is Sparks. I’m chasing three dangerous felons who have taken to the air in a flying snowmobile.” He paused and then barked, “no, I am not making it up. I need air support. Right now!” He

threw the handset back onto its holder and swore again. The black sedan ahead of him turned left, but Petty Constable Sparks did not notice. His gaze was fixed on the snowmobile twenty stories above him and the three elves inside.

The driver of the black sedan, Buck “Chip” Simmons turned to Hank and said, “I think I’ve lost them.”

Hank slumped down in his seat and sighed. He reached into the glove box and pulled out a tin of Ol’ Shuddershanks Ale®. He cracked open the can, passed it to Buck and then pulled out another for himself. “You know what,” he said, sipping on his beer, “I’ve had enough of chasing elves for one day. Let’s go watch the parade.”

Buck slurped on his beer, looked back at Hank and smiled. “I love a parade,” he said. He turned the black sedan toward Main Street.

Yugo reached Main Street and looked at the GPS. “He’s right below us,” he said and started to descend.

Iggy looked out the window. “What’s going on down there?” he asked. “It looks like some sort of a parade.”

It looked like some sort of a parade because it was some sort of a parade. In honour of Santa Claus’ arrival at TOYSAURUS™, the mayor of New Bedlam, the right honourable Myles Munroe, had declared it “Santa Claus Day” and decreed that a parade be held in his honour. So, at that moment, a phalanx of floats, clowns, marching bands and local celebrities marched, drove and skipped down Main Street. Pulling up the rear, an honour guard of 200 men dressed up as Santa Claus strode in formation.

Yugo glided the snowmobile to a landing behind the crowds gathered alongside the road. “He’s in there,” he said, pointing to the mass of red suited marchers.

Sam stared at the goose-stepping Santas in dismay. “Which one is he?”

Yugo frowned. “I’m afraid the GPS is not precise enough to pick Santa out of a crowd like that. We’ll have to go in ourselves and find him.” He stopped the snowmobile in the TOYSAURUS™ parking lot and opened the door.

“We’ll never find him in there,” said Sam.

“Sure we will,” said Iggy, hopping out of the snowmobile. “Everyone knows Santa Claus smells like Christmas cookies. We’ll just mix with the crowd and sniff him out.”

Sam rolled his eyes. He followed Iggy and Yugo into the crowd and began smelling the Santas. Iggy was right, there was only one Santa in the mob that smelled like Christmas cookies. The others, a group of overweight men dressed in heavy red fur coats, smelled like dirty gym socks and too much cologne. The elves coughed and gagged and sniffed as they weaved among the Santas. Then Iggy’s eyes brightened. There was no mistaking the smell of Christmas cookies or the twinkle in the eyes he saw when he looked up.

“Iggy, it’s you!” Santa said, smiling widely. “I can’t believe it’s you!”

Meanwhile, an angry eight foot tall dinosaur paced alongside the parading Santas. He had trailed the real Santa across the TOYSAURUS™ parking lot, but had lost him when he slipped into the crowd of marching Santas. Mike held the Mark VIII Eliminator over one shoulder as he walked beside the Santas, looking every bit like one of the dozens of other costumed characters marching in the parade. He knew that eventually the parade would reach the end of its route and that the real Santa Claus would have to reveal himself.

It happened before he was expecting it. He had watched bemused as the three children dressed as Santa’s helpers danced around the parading Santas. Then the skinny kid with the messy hair shouted, “I found him!” He pulled one of the Santas towards the far side of the parade. Mike dropped a cartridge into the Mark VIII Eliminator. “Lock and load,” he growled and he waded into the sea of Santas.

Yugo and Sam ran over to Iggy and helped him guide Santa out of the crowd. “You are all here,” Santa chuckled. “I should have known you three would come to my rescue. Ho ho ho!”

“Come on Santa Claus,” said Yugo. “Let’s get you to the snowmobile and get out of here.”

Sam’s eyes were still watering from smelling Santas. “Can’t be soon enough for me,” he said. “I don’t think anybody in this town ever bathes.”

They reached the edge of the crowd and walked straight into Hank and Buck, who were standing on the side of the road, enjoying the parade

along with their third can of Ol' Shuddershanks Ale®. Buck's eyes grew wide. "It's them!" he shouted.

"And they've got the package," said Hank.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam spun around and pulled Santa Claus the other way. The crowd parted slightly as a tall dinosaur stepped in front of them. "I've got you now!" he grimaced and raised the Mark VIII Eliminator.

"Duck!" shouted Iggy. The three elves and Santa each hit the pavement as Mike pulled the trigger.

You have probably heard your mother use the expression "be careful or you'll put someone's eye out" anytime you were playing with a toy, which was even remotely dangerous. Of course, nobody in the world has ever put out an eye playing with a toy, but that does not stop mothers everywhere from spouting this particular piece of maternal wisdom at every opportunity.

Nobody in the world had ever lost an eye to a toy, even one as dangerous as the Mark VIII Eliminator, until Mike's shot flew over Santa and struck poor Buck right in the face. Then the shell exploded. And it put out more than just Buck's eye.

Chip

"SO I LEARNED THAT SUNGLASSES ARE really inadequate as protective eyewear," remarked Buck "Chip" Simmons as he collected his cards for another hand.

Al nodded and said, "I'll raise ten dollars."

George and Chris each matched Al's bet. Cal folded. Donut Mickey stared thoughtfully at his cards. "Do you suppose Hank finally got those elves?" he asked.

"Oh, there's no doubt about that," said Floyd. "Hank was always the crafty one. I'm sure he's finished them off by now." He threw ten chips into the pot.

"Don't be so sure about that." A new player stepped up to the table. "Deal me in," he said.

## The Anchovy

HANK “THE ANCHOVY” ANCOVA LOOKED DOWN in shock at what was left of Buck. He looked up, but before he could say anything, people in the crowd started screaming. Behind him, a siren wailed. It seemed to be getting closer.

Iggy, Yugo, Sam and Santa Claus picked themselves up off the road. “What is it?” asked Iggy. “What’s happening?”

A police van came up behind the marching Santas, lights flashing and siren blaring. The ground shook and marching bands, clowns and jugglers all dove for cover as the two hundred Santas ran away from the speeding van. One bassoonist fell and was trampled by a Santa, his horn spitting out one last mournful squeal as it was crushed under a shiny black boot. The crowd scattered and tore down Main Street, scared for their lives, Santas chugging along in frantic pursuit.

As the dust cleared, Iggy, Yugo and Sam found themselves alone with Santa Claus in the middle of the street. “Let’s get out of here,” Iggy whispered urgently and they made their way quickly to the snowmobile.

Hank Ancova and the dinosaur were still in the middle of the street staring at each other when the police van shot past them. They dove towards the TOYSAURUS™ parking lot to get out of the way. As he got up, Hank saw the elves running to their snowmobile and he ran after them. Mike Fromaggio picked up his Mark VIII Eliminator. He pulled out another shell and reloaded. He still had a chance to get Santa Claus before he got away. He threw the Mark VIII Eliminator over his shoulder and ran after the elves.

Petty Constable Sparks turned his police van into the TOYSAURUS™ parking lot and drove straight at the snowmobile. “Doors open!” called Yugo and the three elves and Santa jumped inside. Yugo slammed the snowmobile into gear and backed up just as the police van reached them. He swung the snowmobile across the parking lot in reverse.

The police van pulled right up to the front of the reversing snowmobile. Yugo could see the yellow eyes of Petty Constable Sparks through the windshield. Gobs of spit had formed in the corners of the police officer’s mouth. He waved the big elephant gun wildly as he drove. Yugo accelerated, even though with Santa Claus and Sam stuffed together in the back seat he could not see what was behind him.

There was a tremendous crash and the snowmobile burst through the front window of TOYSAURUS™. It wound down an aisle filled with overpriced handheld video games then careened into the castle in the middle of Santa's village. Plaster bricks rained down around the snowmobile as it shuddered to a stop.

The police van pulled up to the wreckage in the middle of the store and stopped. Petty Constable Sparks stepped out of the van and trained his elephant gun on the snowmobile. "Get out with your hands up!" he bellowed. "You're all under arrest!"

Iggy, Yugo, Sam and Santa Claus glumly climbed out of the snowmobile and walked through the dust towards the police van with their hands up. Petty Constable Sparks grinned proudly. He was going to get a medal for this. Outside, a police helicopter landed and police officers poured into the store.

Hank arrived at the destroyed castle a moment after Mike got there. He saw the man in the dinosaur suit raise the Mark VIII Eliminator to his shoulder and take aim at Santa. "Look out!" he shouted.

Petty Constable Fred Sparks spun around. He was face to face with an 8-foot tall dinosaur wielding a bazooka. He felt something warm run down his legs. He had never been trained in dealing with heavily armed extinct reptiles. He just reacted on instinct and shot it with the elephant gun.

The impact of the giant bullet knocked the dinosaur suit to pieces. It also knocked Mike Fromaggio into a lot of pieces, some of which were not found until the TOYSAURUS™ *Big Spring Clean Up Sale* three months later.

Four police officers ran over to Petty Constable Sparks. One of them gathered the big shotgun from his shaking hands.

"Looks like you're under arrest," said Hank.

Tyrone

**M**IKE FROMAGGIO THREW HIS CARDS on the table. “I fold,” he said. Floyd gave a whoop and collected his chips. He tossed one to Buck, who had dealt the last hand.

“Anybody want to play another?” asked Donut Mickey. Cal gathered up the cards and shuffled them. He passed the deck to George who started dealing.

“But what happened after that?” asked the little dark haired man. “Did the elves get away?”

Chris looked up to the horizon as if he was expecting someone to join them, but there was nobody there. The old man in the toga picked up his cards. “I expect that this story ends in the usual way,” he said philosophically.

“What’s that?” asked Al.

“Why the elves save Christmas, of course.”

Iggy, Yugo and Sam

**I**GGY, YUGO AND SAM BRUSHED THE DUST off their tunics and slowly backed up. Iggy grabbed Santa’s jacket and pulled him along to the snowmobile. More police officers were pouring into the store. One was unspooling a roll of yellow crime tape across the entrance.

Big Ron Walman came running down the stairs. “What’s going on here?” he bellowed.

Hank walked over to him. He reached up and took off his sunglasses. He passed them to Big Ron. “I quit,” he said.

Big Ron looked down at the sunglasses in his hand. “What do you mean you quit? You can’t quit!”

“Sure I can,” said Hank. “This job has gotten a little too rowdy for this old boy. I’m going home. I’m going to have a quiet Christmas with my grandkids.”

“You can’t leave me like this!” Big Ron shouted. “Look at this mess! Who’s responsible for this?”

Hank pointed to a red snowmobile that was quietly gliding under the yellow crime tape and out of the store. “They are,” he said.

The snowmobile sped up. Big Ron ran after it yelling, “come back here! I mean it, you come back here! I’m Big Ron Walman and I demand that you come back here!”

Inside the snowmobile, Yugo pulled on a black lever. Two silver wings extended out the sides of the snowmobile. He pulled back on the steering wheel and the snowmobile climbed into the air.

Iggy looked down and saw Big Ron Walman waving his arms at them from the big parking lot. Iggy waved back.

Santa Claus leaned back in his seat. “Let’s get home boys,” he said. “We can still get back in time for Christmas.”

## Epilogue

SANTA CLAUS' appearance at TOYSAURUS™ was so successful that even after settling all of the resulting lawsuits and paying his lawyers, BIG RON WALMAN turned a tidy profit in the fourth quarter. Photographs, videotapes and T-shirts depicting the real Santa Claus sitting in a plaster castle are available in the gift shop of TOYSAURUS™ locations worldwide.

The good people of NEW BEDLAM now celebrate Christmas every year with a traditional 'Running of the Santas'. People from around the world come to risk their lives running down Main Street ahead of a charging pack of two hundred big men dressed as Santa Claus. Injuries are common. Photographs, videotapes and T-shirts depicting the 'Running of the Santas' are available in the gift shop of TOYSAURUS™ locations worldwide.

Proving that no publicity is bad publicity, the extensive news coverage of the mayhem at TOYSAURUS™ made the MARK VIII ELIMINATOR one of the biggest selling toys in history.

HANK ANCOVA celebrated a simple Christmas with his two grandchildren. Neither one of them received a Mark VIII Eliminator for Christmas.

PETTY CONSTABLE FRED SPARKS is presently awaiting trial on several charges ranging from dangerous use of an elephant gun (which is a very serious charge) through to dinocide.

IGGY, YUGO AND SAM got SANTA CLAUS back to the North Pole in time to save Christmas.

Somewhere, THE ROWDY BOYS are playing cards. Floyd usually wins.

No actual dinosaurs were harmed in the writing of this story.