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## **Christmas Guest**

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*Christmas  
Guest*



Jennifer Fowler

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## ~ One ~

**December 24, 1962**

*He felt the slight moistness on his cheek as his grandmother leaned over and kissed him goodnight. Scott was tucked into her oversized, puffy guest bed. A warm, hand-stitched quilt with star patterns was pulled up to his chin. His grandmother, warm and puffy herself, gathered up the empty milk glass and the plate sprinkled with snowball cookie crumbs.*

“Pleasant dreams, sugar,” she said. “No getting out of bed tonight, or Santa will pass right by this house, you hear?”

Scott nodded. A thrill of excitement shivered over him. His grandmother reached out her hand to switch off the light. As Scott’s eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, she gently shut the door.

There was a large window at the base of his bed; it seemed to be suspended just over his feet where they poked up under the quilt in little bumps. Through the smooth, dark glass he saw tall, stately trees shrouded in snow, like black beings with white coats glistening in the moonlight.

His lungs were still full of the crisp mountain air from walking through the snow to and from this year’s Christmas Eve program in the barn. As always, the family had seated themselves on bales of hay, sipping cocoa and singing carols.

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Then the young children had acted out the manger scene. It had fallen to Scott to be Joseph. The pillowcase and his father's tie that he had worn on his head for the part were still on the rocking chair in the corner where he had left them.

The clock on the bedside table seemed to tick loudly in the dark. With a slow, laborious movement, the second hand worked its way around the luminous face. Tick, tick, tick. He tried to shut his eyes. When would morning ever get here?

His eyes opened again. Twenty-five seconds. How could twenty-five seconds last so long? He strained his ears. Was that the jingling of bells he heard in the distance? He couldn't be sure. He turned his pillow over so that the cool side touched his face and closed his eyes once more.

\* \* \*

There was a pale glow just over the mountains when Christmas music wafted up from the stereo downstairs. Scott sat straight up in bed, tingling all over. Within moments, he heard footsteps on the stairs. Someone was shaking jingle bells, and his grandfather's voice boomed out a jovial "Ho, ho, ho!" His mother opened his bedroom door. As he leaped lightly to the floor, he heard the opening of other doors in the hall and the pitter patter of his sisters and cousins running from their rooms.

The stairs were overflowing with people as the large family made its way down to the living room. The Christmas tree lights were the only illumination, the scent of pine filled the air, and the adults watched the children's faces intently. Small mouths formed round "O's" of delight as bright eyes danced. There were squeals of rapture, and the children raced into the room and joyfully caught up their new toys.

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Scott's eyes captured and held the sight of a Flexible Flyer sled, tied up with a big red bow. The tag was addressed to him, and he went to it and slowly ran his hand over the smooth wood. When he pulled his hand away, there was a sprinkle of glittering gold-colored dust on his fingers.

He looked up into his parents' faces with excitement. "Mom, Dad, did you see my sled!"

His parents wore slightly puzzled expressions on their faces. They exchanged questioning glances, then turned to look at Grandmother and Grandfather.

"Goodness, it seems Santa slipped in a surprise here," said Scott's dad. Scott's mother pointed under the tree. "Scott, did you see the train-set with your name on it?" Scott hurried to the train and track.

"Wow!" he shouted.

Scott's dad pulled his own father aside. "Dad, really, you shouldn't have."

"What do you mean?"

"The sled."

"The sled? What are you talking about?"

"You mean you didn't?" Scott's father frowned. "Well then where...?"

Scott's grandfather gave a deep laugh. "Looks like a little Christmas magic."

\* \* \*

Christmas paper littered the floor, and the smell of bacon, eggs, and pancakes filled the farmhouse. The musical sound of women's voices drifted out of the kitchen, while the heavy feel of men and toddlers napping blanketed the living room and spare rooms. Aunt Jane was feeding little Cousin Patrick in the dining room, and there were mashed potatoes

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in his hair and on the floor. Patrick and Scott were the only boys among the twelve grandchildren.

Scott ruffled a clean spot of Patrick's hair as he walked past. At the front door he pulled on his boots and scarf.

"Mom," he yelled. "I'm going outside to try out my new sled."

"Yes dear," he heard his mother reply. "Be careful. And hurry, breakfast is nearly ready."

The snow outside was deep and soft. The air surrounding him was silent. A single track of deer prints trailed across the snow from the forest, under and around the apple trees and down to the pond. The sound of snow slumping to the ground from the over-laden branches of a fir tree momentarily interrupted the quiet. Scott's breath came out in warm, misty clouds. He gripped the rope of his sled in a red-mittened hand and waded through the powder up the nearby pasture hill. The snow on the hillside had been packed firm when he and his cousins had tried out Grandpa's old wooden skis yesterday. It would be perfect for sledding.

When he reached the treeline, Scott stopped, positioned the sled for take-off, and climbed aboard. His feet dug into the hillside, holding him suspended, anticipation running through him. The sled beneath him seemed to give off a golden shimmer. With a loud whoop, he lifted his feet, and the sled shot forward. The runners hissed through the snow. One runner skimmed over a small rock and sparks flew. The wind burned his cheeks and stung his eyes. He raced down, down, fast as lightning. He steered around a small pine as he neared the bottom of the hill. The sled reached the flat but still raced on through the field. The snow began to gather in front of him, slowing him down, until he came to an easy stop.

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He rolled off, laughing. Snowflakes were starting to fall, and he lay on his back, staring up into the flurry. Suddenly a face blocked his view of the sky. He rolled over, stood up, and looked at the boy in front of him. The new boy seemed to be dressed in unusual attire. He was looking curiously at Scott.

“Where did you come from? What are you doing here?” He noticed the sled, and his face lit up. “Oh, wow!” he said.

“Who are you?” Scott asked the boy in return. “I haven’t seen you around here before.”

“I live here,” said the boy in surprise. Then his face fell, “Leastways, I been livin’ here and do until tomorrow.”

“Live here where?” asked Scott.

The boy pointed back toward the farmhouse belonging to Scott’s grandparents.

“Right there,” he said.

The house was half hidden from sight by the falling curtain of snow, but Scott shaded his eyes and stared. The giant cedar trees lining the driveway had mysteriously shrunk to young saplings. The Chevy’s and Fords that had been parked bumper to bumper in front of the house had been replaced by strange vehicles. Some looked like sleighs he had seen on Christmas cards, and a few resembled the “horseless carriage” his grandmother had shown him in a picture of herself standing beside one when she was a girl. Scott rubbed his eyes, but nothing changed.

“What is going on!” he demanded.

“What do you mean?” asked the puzzled boy.

“That’s my grandpa’s farm, but someone has been changing things outside.”

“Your grandpa’s farm?” the boy exclaimed. “That’s Henry Morgan’s house, and he and his wife don’t have any children, let alone grandchildren. Oh, but the way Mrs. Morgan can cook and sing and everything, she should have



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children.” His eyes were wistful. “They’re having a Christmas party right now. I just come out here to get some more wood for the fire, and saw you comin’ down the hill.”

“You’re crazy!” said Scott angrily. He grabbed the rope to his sled and started marching toward the house. “Either you’re crazy or I am,” he added over his shoulder. “I’m going home.”

The boy followed him.

“Hey, before you go, how about a ride on that sled?”

“Maybe I hit my head,” muttered Scott, still marching.

“That’s some sled,” the boy persisted.

Scott stopped in his tracks. He had just spotted the barn. When he had passed it not fifteen minutes ago there had been a fresh coat of red paint, brushed on by his grandfather’s own meticulous hand just this summer, but now, though the wood itself looked newer, the coat of paint was cracked and peeling.

“What the...?”

“I’ve never ridden a sled like that before.” The boy gave it one more try.

“Well, you aren’t going to now, either,” shouted Scott. “Get out of here, you’re messing with my head.” He turned and started to run back up the hill he had sledded down. He heard the boy following him.

“I’m sorry,” said the boy. “I didn’t mean nothin’.”

Scott kept running. His sled made a shooshing noise behind him. Near the top he turned back.

The boy was gone.

The hill below him was bare except for the small pine he had dodged earlier. He looked back at the farmhouse. Tall, stately cedars lined the drive, and Chevy and Ford cars were parked in front.

He looked at the barn. A new layer of red paint cheerfully covered its walls.

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All was silent and still. An empty, whistling wind picked up some snow where the boy had stood and swirled it around. Then all was quiet once more.

Scott stood as if rooted in place.

“Weird,” he said.

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