

Santa's Pickup

An Alberta Christmas tale.



It was early December. Santa and his elves had gathered for the last planning meeting of the year. Things had been going well until the head logistics elf broke the news she'd saved for last.

"Alberta is going to be a problem this year," she said. "On the one hand, we'll need 10 per cent more presents because it seems like everyone in Canada, and a lot of temporary foreign workers, are moving there to try and cash in. But on the other hand we can't get a fresh team there like in the past."

"Fresh team?"

"You know. Fresh reindeer to pull the sleigh. Of course, Alberta's never had any reindeer, so we've always used caribou. Almost the same thing."

Santa tried not to roll his eyes. Still, he couldn't help saying, "I know that. I kind of hold the reins every year."

The logistics elf had the grace to look embarrassed. "The thing is," she continued, "the Alberta government is wiping out their caribou. We're not sure why."

"Wiping them out? You mean letting hunters shoot them?"

"No, there's no hunting of caribou allowed in Alberta. They're protected. The government declared them a threatened species."

"You're not making sense. If they're protected, how can the government be wiping them out?"

"Indirectly. They've got logging companies cutting down the old forests that caribou need for survival, and energy companies putting roads and gas wells everywhere so that wolves find it easier to hunt caribou. Poachers do too. And then there's all the mess in the oil sands region..."

Santa stared at her, puzzled. "So they've classified caribou as protected but won't leave them anywhere decent to live?"

The elf nodded.

"Well, what about Christmas future? Surely they plan to keep some around? Other than on coins, I mean."

The elf brightened and leaned forward. "Actually, in the Little Smoky River area they're spreading strychnine poison baits to kill the wolves. If wolves can't kill them, then some caribou might survive until the forest habitat recovers."

"So they're sadists too," Santa said slowly, scratching his head. "Well, then, how long until the forest recovers?"

The elf sat back again, looking depressed. "Actually, they're still logging it and selling new oil and gas leases. The countryside's getting more chopped up every year."

"Then why poison wolves?"

The elf paused. "Not sure. And, truth is, it's not just wolves. That poison kills wolverines, chickadees, foxes and ravens too. The Little Smoky's actually kind of a mess."

Santa was silent for a while, frowning as he nursed his eggnog. The elves glanced at one another uneasily.

"Well," the less-jolly-than-usual old elf said at length, "I suppose they need the jobs. It's a have-not province, right?"

"Uh, no," the logistics elf said. "Alberta's economy is actually superheated. Everyone's rich but in debt, contractors charge whatever they want, the schools are crammed, cities bulge at the seams... they're kind of a have-too-much province these days. Boom times."

Santa thumped the table. Everyone jumped. "Then why in blazes can't they afford to leave some intact forests for caribou?"

"They can. They just don't. They seem to be in an awful hurry to cash in. On everything. Right away."

"They expect more presents, but they're too greedy to leave the caribou anything?"

The logistics elf shrugged helplessly.

"So how do I pull a sleigh without caribou?"

The logistics elf looked like she desperately wished she'd called in sick for the meeting. "Well, one possibility had occurred to us..."

Santa cocked an eye. "Well, go ahead. What?"

"A pickup truck. There are fewer caribou every year, but lots more pickups. Trucks are sort of the opposite of endangered."

"Those big gas-guzzling..."

The elf nodded, avoiding Santa's eyes. "It's an Alberta thing." Santa's rosy cheeks looked redder than usual. He patted his pockets until he found a candy cane and sucked on it for a few moments. Finally he leaned back.

"Okay," he said. "We'll use a pickup."

The logistics elf heaved a sigh of relief. "I'll get one lined up right away. Easy. We can lease. And we'll have the big sled waiting for you too."

"No big sled."

"No big sled?"

"The little sled will do. It's lumps of coal for Alberta this year. Presents are for people who care for more than just themselves."

He stood to leave. "This is why I prefer children," he muttered. "Grown-ups can be such utter dolts." ■

"We need fresh reindeer to pull the sleigh," the logistics elf said. "Of course, Alberta's never had any reindeer, so we've always used caribou."

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