

I'll Be Gnome For Christmas

A WHIMSICAL INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

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BAGANZ



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Dedication

To Marvin and Joyce, our real-life gnome friends whom we adore and appreciate. Still honeymooners after 30 years!

1

Gigget handed off the bag to her latest customer at the Farmer's Market. "Thank you," she said. Weariness weighed her down. It was September but unseasonably warm. She tucked an errant hair behind her ear and spied an unfamiliar man at her table.

"Do you can your tomatoes too?" he asked as he held up a large round specimen.

"Yes. I cannot sell them here at the market though."

He nodded. He was probably only an inch or two taller than her own short stature. His brown hair was thick and straight, and he wore a full beard. Viewing it made her even warmer in the heat.

He collected a few vegetables. "I'll take these. I bet you make the best spaghetti sauce and salsa with the bounty from your garden."

"It's good enough my kids don't complain," she replied. "The total is five dollars."

"That's it? For all of this?" He handed her a ten-dollar bill. "Keep the change."

As she took the money his fingers brushed against her hand and a current of deliciousness traveled up her arm and all the way to her toes. She blinked rapidly. Had he experienced it too? His cheeks were rosy, but it

was unseasonably hot.

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate it." She tucked the money into the waist pack that held her cash. Maybe not the most flattering fashion statement but being fashionable wouldn't change the opinions of others when the whole town was aware of her husband's shenanigans. She loathed the pitying glances. She'd thought after a year that everything would be in the past. Dead and buried.

Just like her husband.

Uncharitable thoughts got her nowhere and the man was still at the table, speaking.

"Oh, I'm sorry. This heat has made it hard for me to concentrate. You were saying?" she asked.

"I'd be interested in purchasing some of your canned goods too if you have any to spare."

"I might be able to sacrifice a few."

"Will you be here on Wednesday?" He took the bag she handed him with his purchase in it.

Gigget nodded.

A big smile emerged from under all that hair. "Awesome sauce. I'm Bingle Twinkle but you can call me Bing if you wish. I'll definitely be here."

"Thank you."

"This is where you tell me your name." He tilted his head a bit and that grin became a little cheekier.

Was he flirting with her?

She bit her lip before responding. "I'm Gigget."

"Oh, like a celebrity? Just the one name?"

A chuckle escaped her mouth and she put up a hand as if she could shove it back in. "Nothing of the

sort. Gigget Wicket."

"Gigget Wicket. Well, it was a pleasure to meet you Gigget. You have a great rest of your day, and I look forward to seeing you on Wednesday. As many as you can spare without sacrificing your own pantry needs."

"I'll see what I can do. There are more tomatoes yet to be harvested. It was a good year for them."

"Wonderful."

With a quick pivot he sauntered away from her. The man might be vertically challenged but he was solid, and his jeans and suspenders spoke of someone who didn't mind working hard. Even in this heat he wore work boots. Yet with all that, he didn't seem to break a sweat.

She recalled his smile and the twinkle of his grey eyes.

"Mom!" Amorette called. "Djoni isn't playing fair."

"I was too!" Djoni retorted. He was older than his sister by one year but both were about the same height and were often mistaken for twins.

"Behave!" she admonished. Another customer was headed her way, and she wanted to groan. Not this man again. She noticed that the previous man, Bing, was only two tables down at another booth buying some cheese. Why hadn't she kept him talking longer?

"Hey, short stuff, whatcha got cooking today?" the annoying man said.

"Fresh vegetables from the garden as usual, Mr. Ponderosa."

“Come on, call me Fez. I’ve been begging you all summer.”

He’d been begging her for a lot of stuff, none of which she ever intended to provide. There was something about the man that creeped her out.

“What can I get you today?” She gave him a tepid smile. The portly man had nasty body odor and his crooked, yellowish-brown teeth looked as if they’d not seen a toothbrush in decades. She’d mistaken him for being homeless the first time he showed up, but surprise, surprise, he’d told her he was gainfully employed at a local factory. He always had cash to flash in front of her, as if he were dangling a worm and she was the fish.

This fish wasn’t going to bite.

“I don’t need nothing, darlin’, looking at you is enough to fill me. How about I swing by tonight and take you out on the town?”

She wasn’t an “out on the town,” kind of gal. “Thank you for your generous offer but I’m not interested.” The market would close soon, so she grabbed a bin from below the table to start packing some of the unsold food items. When she stood back up Mr. Ponderosa was leaning fully over the table, knocking tomatoes, onions, and zucchini onto the pavement.

He leered at her. “I refuse to take no for an answer.”

“That’s all you’ll get from me. Please pay me the seven dollars for the ruined produce and leave me alone.”

“Pay me the seven dollars for the ruined produce.” He sneered and shoved another tomato onto the pavement. “I’m not paying you anything until you go out with me.” He folded his arms and grinned as if he’d already won.

She shook her head and raised her voice, hoping someone would witness the exchange. “I said, no!”

~*~

Bing spied Fez Ponderosa at Gigget’s booth, and the grim expression on her face set off alarm bells. He made his way back to her. He stepped over the vegetables Fez had scattered onto the concrete. Bing sidled up to the table right next to the much taller bully. “Hey, Fez.” He patted the man on the back with a healthy slap. “Long time, no see. What happened to you on the line?”

The man turned his head and glared down on Bing with a scowl. “I got demoted to another area. It’s hot, and I hate it. What’s it to you?”

Shrugging, Bing waited a moment, deciding what he should do next.

“Oh, Bing, I’m so glad you returned. I would love to take you up on your offer to help us pack up for home now that the market is over,” Gigget said.

He nodded. “But of course; why else would I have returned?” He winked at her.

Fez bristled at this. “Why didn’t you ask me? I’d have helped. What can this little man do that I can’t?”

“Treat a woman with the respect and honor she

deserves," Bing whispered.

"Huh?" Fez asked.

Gigget's cheeks grew rosy as she turned away her face. She'd heard him just fine.

"Oh, nothing that would make any sense to you, Fez. It's time for you to get going. We need to pack up before they reclaim the street for cars."

Fez turned to face Bing. "Are you insulting me? I don't get you. So tiny and yet you carry yourself as if you could actually take me on. I'd really like to see you try."

Bing raised his eyebrows as he faced the much taller and bigger man. "I don't think you want to do that."

"Ha! Why not?"

"Because it is not proper to fight in front of a lady." Bing wanted to spare the sensibilities of the cute woman and the children he assumed were hers.

"There's no lady here." The man shot a fist at Bing's shoulder, but Bing was quicker and dodged it, knocking the taller man off balance. An uneven spot in the concrete finished the task and Fez collapsed to the ground.

Bing stepped away, grabbed a box by the curb and brought it to the front table. He loaded some of the food.

Fez struggled to his feet, growling. "I'll show you," he said as he lunged toward Bing who again dodged to the side. The momentum from Fez's rush sent him on a collision course with a large garbage can on the edge of the sidewalk. This time he didn't fall

down, but he stood there for a moment with two little kids, a boy and a girl, gaping at him.

"What do you want?" Fez yelled at the kids.

The children took a few steps away from the man.

Fez side-stepped the trashcans and headed down the sidewalk as fast as his now-limping body could take him.

Bing continued loading the box and stifled a chuckle.

"You really don't need to stay to help," Gigget said. "I appreciate you returning and getting me out of a tough spot."

"It's no trouble, and since I'm here I'd be a cad not to pitch in. Would you also be so kind as to introduce me to these two little ones?"

The children came to stand beside Gigget. The tow-headed youngster grabbed her hand. His tilted head and twinkling blue eyes indicated that the child didn't miss much. The young girl, a tad shorter with blonde braids, clung to her mother's pants. Perhaps a little more bashful than her brother but wide blue eyes indicated her curiosity.

"These are my little gnomes, Djoni and Amoretta. Djoni is in second grade and Amoretta is in first. Children this is Mr. Twinkle."

"Hi." Amoretta gave a shy little wave and sweet smile.

Djoni crossed his arms. "How did you manage to fight that man without touching him?"

Bing leaned forward. "Being alert and quick on my feet," he whispered.

"He said mean things to you and was mean to Mommy," Amoretta said.

"He's an unhappy man. Sometimes unhappy people don't want others to be happy either," Bing said.

"So, he's trying to spread it around like a cold?" the young man asked, his arms now at his side.

Bing nodded, "That is definitely one way to look at it." He resumed packing things up.

"You spread something else." The little girl stepped closer although the table was still between them.

"Perhaps I do, but can you tell me what it is?" Bing asked with a smile.

The little girl shook her head.

Gigget grinned. "I'd say he is spreading a helpful spirit right now. Can you two catch it?"

"Yes!" The kids grinned, ran to grab boxes, and loaded up other leftover vegetables.

"Thank you again for your help," Gigget said as she began to fill her own bin with vegetables.

"It's not a problem. I'm not afraid of working. I'm sorry to say that Fez is probably walking away with a wounded ego and might return at some point to harass you again."

She nodded. "He's faithful to do that. He can't understand the word, 'no.'" She paused. "I am impressed as well that you didn't need to fight him. Cleverly done."

Bing shrugged. "I could have if I needed to. I didn't think it would be necessary."

"I'm glad you didn't need to get hurt. He could retaliate against you as well in the future."

Bing picked up his box, headed to the hand-truck on the sidewalk, and then set down the box.

Djoni brought his box and stacked it. "Will you have to fight him?" Djoni asked.

"I hope not. It would only make things worse I think."

"Why?" Amoretta asked.

He was now behind the table, so he dropped to one knee to be closer to the kids. "If I fight him and win, he'll only be angrier and want to try again. If I lose, he'll continue to try to show me how strong he is. Fighting will only ever lead to more fighting."

"I thought losers gave up," Djoni said.

"Some do, but I believe Fez is more angry that I got in the way of him harassing your mom. Since I would always want to protect her from harm, I would always be in his way."

"Maybe I need to fight him. I am the man of the house." The little boy flexed his bicep.

"I'm sure you are, and your mom appreciates your help." Bing stood and grabbed another box. "Maybe we should get back to work?"

Soon the produce was loaded, and the tables collapsed. Bing hauled them to Gigget's truck and helped her load them.

"I was capable of doing all that," Gigget said. "But thank you anyway."

"Not a problem. I'm sure you are more than capable. Just because a woman can do something

doesn't mean a man shouldn't help when he is able and available to do so. I should get going. It was a pleasure meeting you and your children."

"Thank you for not encouraging Djoni to fight."

"Raising a son on your own can't be easy. At some point he may need to fight for what's important, but I agree that fighting for the sake of fighting is not a good habit for a young man to engage in. Have a good afternoon." He'd noticed she wore no ring, and had hazarded a guess she was single.

"You too, Bing," she said as he walked away.

She'd not refuted his comment. Was there hint of wistfulness in her voice? He hoped so because more than anything he wanted to see Gigget Wicket again.

2

That Sunday, Gigget shepherded her two little ones into church and down to their Sunday school classrooms. She walked back to the sanctuary and picked a seat toward the back. If she could have found a spot where no one would see her, she'd have preferred that.

"Good morning, Gigget," her friend Lulu Fizzlebang said. Lulu's husband, Tink had gone a few rows ahead and found seats before realizing his wife had stopped to chat.

"Good morning, Lulu."

Lulu leaned forward. "I heard there was a bit of a dust up at the Farmer's Market yesterday, and you were rescued by a knight in shining armor," she whispered.

"I don't want to discuss that now."

Lulu stood back up and gave a nod before joining her husband.

Why, oh why, did people need to gossip? She was aware of the rumors that had circled for months about her husband's affairs, and she'd been mortified by the pitying side-eyed glances she got on many a Sunday. Of course, she'd always been alone at church since her husband never would have been such a hypocrite as to

walk into these hallowed halls. She doubted he ever realized she had uncovered the truth a year before he passed away. And now this? Who had seen her being rescued but had not come to help when she needed it? Scripture said that orphans and widows should be cared for—not slandered and abandoned.

Yet that was exactly how she felt. Abandoned by her husband. Abandoned by some of her church family who gossiped about an affair rather than asking if she was OK.

But the Almighty hadn't abandoned her.

Her thoughts traveled to the man who helped her yesterday. Never before had she experienced such a magnetic attraction to someone. A mere touch, and she was all aflutter inside. Dreams of a man actually liking her and gazing at her with sweet grey eyes, were not appropriate. She should be cautious, gun-shy, even. His slightly gruff but soft tone of voice had soothed her. He wasn't necessarily a polished kind of guy, but he was a hard worker. His hands were calloused, but they weren't scratchy.

The music began, and the congregation stood to worship. Time to set away foolish thoughts and focus on the One who truly loved her—no matter what—because she belonged to Jesus first. Any man who might become a part of her life would need to be pursuing the Lord as well.

Her mouth sang the words, but her mind was more focused on the man who entered the church a few minutes late and found a seat on the far side of the sanctuary. Bing? Here? How long had he been coming?

Why had she never noticed him before?

Stop! You're not here to moon over a man but to worship the Lord. How she wished she could have someone splash her with a bucket of cold water. She was in church and shouldn't be thinking of how someone made her insides quiver. *Lord, help me!*

When they all sat down, she couldn't see Bing. That was probably for the best. Even her children had repeatedly recounted how the kind man had come to help them out from Fez's harassment. Thankfully, they had missed the underlying subtext for Fez's pursuit of her. He probably thought that if her husband had loose morals, perhaps she did too. The man had worked side-by-side with her husband at one point, but she didn't think they were ever friends.

She tried to pay attention to the pastor's message, but her thoughts kept straying. She was frustrated with herself.

Soon the service was over, and Lulu met up with her in the lobby.

"Did you do well at the market yesterday?" Lulu asked.

Did her curious friend know about what happened there? "Well enough. Still have plenty of food to process for winter though. Between work and the kids, it's been a challenge to keep up with everything. The weeds are taking over my garden." She didn't want to talk more about it all or explain the sweet man who had rescued her. She couldn't stop thinking about him and his kindness but wasn't ready to share that with anyone.

Lulu shook her head. "Tsk, tsk, tsk. I'd have thought you'd have been better provided for by your late husband so you wouldn't need to work or scrounge for food. It's not right that you have the weight of the world on your shoulders like you do."

Gigget straightened her spine. "It's not that bad. Sure, things are tight but we're making it and my children have decent clothes to wear, shoes that fit, coats, a comfortable home, and all they needed for the start of school. We will have heat for the winter and food to eat."

"It's not a shameful thing to go on public assistance," her friend whispered.

Sighing, Gigget suspected her friend had good intentions but the pity was hard to swallow. "I need to get the kids." She took off down the hall toward the classrooms and waited in line.

No one spoke with her, although people gave her kindly nods. She wasn't an outcast but even after a year of widowhood, it seemed no one could figure out what to do with her. It wasn't as if she had a contagious disease. As a young widow she didn't fit into any of the normal social groups. She was a mom but not a wife, and she was too young to connect well with the older widows in the church. She wasn't a good fit for a singles' group either. The grief class had been helpful, but everyone was grieving someone different: a beloved child's death, the loss of a parent, or a beloved spouse. She wasn't grieving the loss of a person. She grieved the dream that had been trampled on by the person now gone. Unlike the other people in

the grief class, she wasn't sad at all but had hoped to find a way to express the turmoil inside, and since she couldn't openly explain or admit that to anyone else, attending the grief class had only added to her turmoil.

At last, she reached the classroom. She pasted a smile on and greeted her kids. Her trials were hers alone to bear. They'd suffered enough as it was.

"Mom, look at what I drew." Djoni proudly presented his drawing with a Scripture verse on it.

"That's good. You're so much better at coloring inside the lines than you were before. Why does this man have grey eyes?"

"He's the Good Samaritan, Mom. I thought I'd make him like Mr. Twinkle who helped us yesterday. He treated us like a neighbor, didn't he?" Her boy's earnest expression warmed her heart. "Yes, son, he did."

They headed out to the parking lot.

"Here's mine," Amoretta said as she handed her mother the drawing. This was a different image from the story of the Good Samaritan. The part where someone proud walks away from the injured man.

"You gave this man an interesting haircut and facial hair, sweetheart," Gigget said.

"He's Mr. Ponderosa—stirring up trouble."

Taken aback, Gigget paused before unlocking her old sedan. "How else has he stirred up trouble?" Had her children been aware of the previous occurrences of him pestering her?

The kids didn't answer the question but climbed into the car.

Gigget made sure they buckled, put the key in the ignition and turned it. The car didn't start. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the headrest.

"Mom? Is something wrong?" Djoni asked.

Gigget tried again, the engine made a feeble attempt but refused to turn over. Great. Now what would she do? She didn't have extra money to repair a vehicle or rent something in the meantime. The truck for the farmer's market was old and not something she liked driving either. It had been her husband's. Their home was farther away from town, and while the kids could catch the bus to school, the truck was less reliable than this car. September weather could be fickle. Rain and cold were more likely than the hot sunny day they had yesterday. Fall was coming far too quickly.

She pulled the switch to pop the hood and exited the car. She stared down at the engine, clueless about what could be wrong.

"Car trouble?" The voice from yesterday got her attention.

"Yeah, won't start. I understand very little about cars other than putting the gas in, and getting oil changes regularly," she confessed.

Bing leaned over and touched a few things and checked some fluids. He frowned. "Try it again," he said.

She got behind the wheel, leaving the door open so she could hear him if he were to give her further instructions, and turned the key. Nothing.

"I think your battery is dead. I'll bring my truck over and give you a jump. After that we can head over to the store to get a new battery, and I'll put it in for you."

"Oh, but—," she doubted he heard her as he moved away too quickly.

"Yay! Mr. Twinkle is helping us out again. See, Mommy, he really is the Good Samaritan," Djoni said.

"I prayed he would come help us again and God answered my prayer. Isn't that good, Momma?" Amoretta asked.

"Yes, you are both correct." Gigget glanced at her two kids in the back seat to see them beaming with joy over their new hero. The upside was that they got to witness a man treating a person well and being helpful.

~*~

Bing positioned his truck so the cables wouldn't need to stretch too far. The parking lot had thinned out considerably. Departing vehicles would be able to get around him. He grabbed the cables, lifted his own hood, and fastened the clips to the battery terminals. "Try to start it," he said.

The car stuttered a bit, and then started.

The kids in the back seat cheered.

Bing smiled.

Gigget stepped out of the vehicle. "I don't know how to thank you enough."

"We're not done yet. We'll let it run for a little bit. You can follow me to the store so we can get you a new