

Christmas Believe™



Chapter 1



Stinz and Sammy trudged homeward through the deepening, slushy snow, twilight wrapping the day's end with a bluish glow. Both boys were bootless. Both were clearly from the poor side of town. Stinz was the oldest by nearly five years at 15. But even so young he had an old man's eerily wizened look in his eyes and a knocked about heart beating in his boyish chest. Most people who happened to have an encounter with Stinz took him to be older by several years. Stinz liked that.

Stinz wasn't his real name but just one of those accidental nicknames that stuck. His given name was Steven and his nickname came courtesy of his little brother. When Sammy was first beginning to talk, he couldn't say Steven for some reason. What came out sounded to everyone like *Stinz* and that's what everyone started calling him. Stinz actually liked it since it sounded tough.

His baby brother, Sammy, was about a foot shorter than Stinz. Somehow, the same hard knocks Stinz had been bruised by had so far not dampened Sammy's innocence, curiosity, and nascent faith. Sammy believed in just about anything and everything, at least that's how it seemed to Stinz who believed in

virtually nothing at all. Especially something he could neither see nor touch, or failed his expectations.

Sammy looked up at Stinz and asked, “Is it Christmas Believe yet?”

“What’s that?” Stinz responded absently.

“You don’t know what *Christmas Believe* is?”

“Never heard of it.”

“It’s the last day before Christmas when you have to decide if you believe in Christmas or not. If you don’t, then Christmas don’t come for you. You have to decide to believe by Christmas Believe night if you want Christmas to come to you. Do *you* believe Stinz?” Sammy declared excitedly all in one breath.

“Believe in what?” Stinz teased.

“*Christmas*, you dope face!” Sammy retorted with exasperation.

“Watch it kid! Don’t be calling me names if you know what’s good for you. Christmas is just a fancy name for one of the colder days of the year. There’s nothin’ particular special about it as far as I’m concerned.” Stinz was only half teasing.

“But look around at all the decorations, Stinz!” little Sammy protested. “What d’ya mean you don’t think Christmas is special! It’s not about the weather! It’s about, well, it’s about ... you know ... *Christmas!* You know! Santa Claus, presents, singing, joy, the baby Jesus layin’ down in the manger thing, all that kinda stuff! It’s almost ... well, magical, you could say!”

Sammy's eyes glowed with passion as his defense of the season poured out of his heart.

"Whatza matter with you? Ya nuts or what?" retorted Stinz defiantly. "There's no such thing as magic, or Christmas being special. It's just another day. Santa and Jesus are both lies. I've never seen neither one o' those jokers." As soon as he said it, Stinz regretted his comment about Jesus. He knew that was harsh for Sammy to hear.

"But there's a Santa right over there," Sammy pointed. "And you *have* to believe in Jesus if you don't want to go to hell!" Sammy looked at his brother as if he were going to cry. Stinz laughed a small laugh, poked Sammy playfully in the shoulder, and lightened his tone considerably.

"That's no real Santa, silly. That's just Peg Calloway's uncle Stumpy dressed up like Santa. He does that every year in front of Garniffey's Department Store so he can make a bit of cash to pay for his booze habit. He's a pathetic excuse for a Santa if you ask me!" Stinz snorted. He avoided any further references to Jesus not being real. He knew better.

"That's not true!" Sammy protested. "He's one of Santa's helpers. I know he's not the one and onliest Santa. Santa hires lots of helpers aroun' this time of year to cover all the streets in all the towns in all the world. It's how the real Santa knows about you 'n' me and whether we're bein' good enough or not."

"You're whacked, Sammy. Your head is all full up of scrambled eggs and snot for brains if you believe that huck," Stinz said as he playfully swatted Sammy's shoulder again. "Besides, it's not Christmas *Believe*,

dummy. The day before Christmas is called Christmas *Eve* – no buh or lee – just Eve. Like that Adam ‘n’ Eve couple in the Bible they told us about in Sunday school. Now shut up about all that stuff. It’s too cold to be talkin’ and blowin’ smoke. We need to get ourselves home before dark.”

The boys both pulled their thin coats tighter around their chilled torsos and set their attention toward home. Both knew that Christmas for them would more than likely be just another dreary day filled with a lot of cold and a fair amount of hunger.

They lived with their mother in a tiny rundown shack on the backside of town. The shack was actually an old garage that had been barely modified to be a one-room home. There was no indoor plumbing. They got water from a spigot just inside the back porch of the house behind which their shack sat where their landlord lived, and their toilet was a very smelly outhouse not far enough away in warmer weather from the back of the garage, and not close enough in winter.

Heat came from a small wood stove in the middle of the garage house that their mom sometimes cooked on in the winter time. Otherwise, she used an old two-burner hot plate. A limited amount of wood was included with the rent, and if they used more they had to pay extra. The floor was cracked and oil-stained cement with a few beat up old rugs scattered around to brighten it up and provide warm places to stand in the morning as they dressed.

There were no interior walls. Moth gnawed blankets hanging from a simple network of ropes strung along the rafters served to divide sleeping and eating areas.

Those were about the only two activities that took place here. They all awoke early in the morning, had breakfast together, then the mother went to a job as a cleaning woman and part time waitress and the boys went to whatever odd jobs they could find before and after school. They all came home late, ate a meager dinner, chatted a bit unless they were all too tired, then went to bed. In the winter, the warmest place was under their threadbare covers. Stinz and Sammy huddled close together on the coldest nights.

The stove was usually stoked only at night to conserve wood. Even at its hottest it was often no match for the lack of insulation and gusty wind seeping through the cracks in the walls. Stinz and Sammy would sit close to the stove as their mom cooked dinner or made a rare treat of weak tea. If they were really lucky, on Christmas they would have hot chocolate.

But Stinz didn't believe in luck and never got his hopes up much about anything. That's how he avoided disappointment. To him, hope was a foolish thing. He wasn't sure if it was a way of thinking or a feeling or what. He just knew it was foolhardy to hope. Before he knew better, his hopes had been shattered relentlessly over and over. Now, he expects the worse if he expects anything at all. It's a way of dealing with life that seems to make sense. If the worse does come, he's ready for it. If it doesn't then he can take a small bit of pleasure in something that's not too bad. But, for Stinz, nothing is ever good. Except his mother.

Stinz and Sammy love their mother dearly. To them, she is an angel and more. No matter how hard she's worked or how tired she is in the evening, she always manages to fix a little dinner for them and then asks

them about their day. Somehow, just when they are in desperate need of it, a new shirt, or a pair of socks, pants, or shoes somehow manages to show up. The clothes may be secondhand, but they're always clean and they always fit. The boys may appear a bit raggedy, but they are always washed and neat. They are in no way neglected.

To Sammy and Stinz she's just mom. To others she's Mrs. Purling or Margaret. One man once called her Maggie. Her husband Joe. No one has called her Maggie since Joe took off when Sammy was just a few months old, which was one of Stinz's biggest hardening knocks. Neither of the boys had any recollection of him; Sammy because he was too young, and Stinz because he'd made himself forget what hurts too much to remember.

Margaret wishes sometimes she could forget him as well. He left without a word of explanation and she hasn't heard from him in ten years. She never remarried mostly because she had no time for it, no one asked her to, and she'd have to go through the trouble and expense of a legal divorce. She's coped by simply pouring her life into her sons.

Margaret, despite being in her late 30s and having such a difficult life, did not bear the usual markings of time and pain as most might. She still looked as fresh and bright as she did the day she graduated from college. She had long red hair that had always been a small source of pride, and that Joe had loved. It was the first thing about her that caught his eye.

Just before she and Joe were married, she'd gotten a job at a magazine right out of college and was making decent money. She met Joe at a party one of her

friends had invited her to. A few months later, they were married. In hindsight she could see how impulsive her decision had been. But at the time, she was totally taken by Joe.

She had followed Joe to Bampton Bay and given up her career to support him in his dream to run a remodeling and restoration business. Bampton Bay was full of old, historic homes and was becoming a thriving bedroom community for larger cities nearby. A lot of the old homes were being bought up by well off business executives. Joe reasoned this was a prime location to launch his business. What he didn't count on was an economic downturn that hit Bampton hard right after Joe had fully invested in his business.

Stinz came along the first year they were married. Sammy was born just before Joe left. In between, before things got really bad, Margaret had done a bit of freelance writing with some success. But soon the duties of motherhood and the pressures of dealing with Joe's sometimes erratic behavior consumed all her time and energy.

For the first four years or so, Joe was more or less fine to get along with. Most of the time he was loving and caring toward both her and Stinz. But he had a bit of a drinking problem that Margaret didn't fully become aware of for the first three years of their marriage. She just thought Joe was a bit moody and knew that the job was hard on him. It wasn't until they had a guest speaker at church one Sunday evening from Alcoholics Anonymous that Margaret was able to put it together. That was also the last time Joe went to church with her.