

# Emma, the Christmas Tree Ship, And Captain Santa

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Emma, the Christmas Tree Ship and Captain Santa

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Yip Yap! Spotty jumped up and down at Emma's feet, dancing like the snowflakes in the air. Splat!! The November snowball that Emma aimed at her brother John hit his elbow with a satisfying smack. Emma watched John bend down and grab a handful of snow. She admired the flash of his red mittens as he molded the snow into a return snowball and she ducked as he threw it at her. It landed on top of a pile of evergreen trees stacked high on the wooden dock walking into Lake Michigan. A three masted schooner with a nameplate that said the *Rouse Simmons* was tied up next to the pile of Christmas trees. John and Emma stood at the edge of the dock, staring at the pile of Christmas trees. She imagined a wooden star like the one on their Christmas tree at home rested in one of the trees, making a five point outline against the sky. "The Christmas star, a symbol of hope," Emma said, patting Spotty.

John stuck out his tongue at her. "The star's at home in our tree. There's nothing in the air but snow!"

Spotty barked again, chasing the snowflakes whirling through the air. Emma blinked. There was no star, but the pile of evergreen trees hadn't been there yesterday. "The Christmas tree ship! John, Captain Santa's here! Maybe he heard something from Papa!" Emma shouted.

Emma and John came down to the Thompson dock every day looking for Papa's ship, the Ruby which had disappeared on Lake Michigan nearly a year ago. After a while Mama had stopped coming to the dock, especially during the winter blizzards, but Emma and John came down to the dock every day. This Michigan November blizzard had frosted the dock like Mama's white sugar frosting on her chocolate cakes and piled up drifts along the wooden boardwalks in Thompson.



Thwack!! This time John's snowball hit Emma, smacking her arm so hard that it hurt. John's blue eyes blazed at her and his red hair stuck up like the needles of a Christmas tree. "Shut up, Emma! You know Papa's never coming back. The Ruby disappeared, remember?"

Emma rubbed her arm and stuck out her tongue at John. Spotty licked her sore arm. "I know. But Mama says not to give up hope and I'm not giving up hope. We put the wooden star we painted on our Christmas tree, remember? We painted it blue and red and white and yellow so everyone will see it and feel hope, remember?"

John punched Emma in her snowball arm. “You might as well face the truth, Emma. Papa’s not coming home. We have to be realistic.”

“Who told you that, John?”

“Nobody told me. I figured it out. Lake Michigan is big and deep and when it swallows a ship the ship stays swallowed.”

Emma gulped and her heart sank. “What happens to the people on ship?”

“Paul says they stay on the bottom with the ship until the waves grab them and push them home.”

Emma scowled. “I don’t care what Paul says and I don’t care how many Christmas trees he cuts! He’s not our Papa and he never will be!”

“He wants to marry Mama,” Paul said. “He asked me if he could marry her and I said yes.”

“I say no! Mama can’t marry him. She’s waiting for Papa to come back,” Emma shouted.

“I told you, he’s not coming back!” John kicked at the snow so hard that a square of it hit the pile of Christmas trees. The Christmas tree on top toppled off and hit the water with a splash, but instead of sinking, the Lake Michigan waves snatched it and it rode the waves in flashes of green.

“Paul says it won’t happen. He says Papa is gone for good.”

“Papa will be like the Christmas tree, and the wooden star that you and Papa made together. Don’t you remember making the star?” Emma said. “If we have hope and faith, Papa will ride the waves and come home to us.”

“You’re just being a stupid girl!” John threw another snowball at Emma and she threw one at him, hitting him in the back. Then she started to run away with John following her, another snowball in his hand, Spotty dashing along behind them.





Suddenly, thud, whack! Emma ran into a soft surface with hard edges. Captain Santa had buttoned up his navy pea coat with brass buttons over his trousers and shirt to keep out the chill November winds sweeping up and down Lake Michigan and swirling around the dock.

Emma hugged Captain Santa's pea coat. She hugged Captain Santa's hard metal buttons. Emma hugged Captain Santa. Captain Santa bent over to hug Emma and she felt the tickle of his soft brown moustache. "Captain Santa, you're back! Did you find Papa?"

"I searched Chicago for him, but I cannot say for sure that I have found him. I will keep hoping and searching," Captain Santa said.

"Did you ask your daughters Elsie and Pearl to help you look?" Emma asked him.

"Ahhh, my daughters Elsie and Pearl," Captain Santa said proudly. "Elsie is pretty as a Lake Michigan sunset and faith as a Christmas star. Pearl has as much energy as a buzz saw and she is pretty as a Christmas tree. They went down to the dock with me for weeks and we checked the crew of every ship that arrived. Your Papa has not come into port yet, but he might arrive tomorrow or even today."

“Will you tell your daughters I said thank you? And I thank you, too.” Emma hugged Captain Santa again, so hard that his cap fell off his head, landing in a snowbank.

Laughing, the Captain picked up his hat, brushing the snow off of it. “Emma, run home to your Mama and tell her I have something in my Christmas tree ship for her to see. Tell your Mama to come quickly down to the dock!”

Emma jumped up. “I’ll tell Mama you are bringing us more hope.”

Captain Santa smiled. “I might be bringing you more than hope. Now hurry and get your Mama.”



Captain Santa plowed his way through the snow making his way over to the pile of Christmas trees and Emma saw three men come from the Christmas tree ship and start loading the Christmas trees onboard the Christmas tree ship. One of the men had brown hair, a brown beard and a long nose that pointed down up at the end. Emma blinked. The man’s hair and nose looked like Papa’s hair and nose.

Emma picked up her skirts, shook the snow off of them. “Come on Spotty, it’s time to go home and tell Mama I saw a sailor that looks like Papa.”

John shoved Emma and ran ahead of her. “Papa’s not coming back. I’ll tell Mama it’s time to marry Paul.”

Emma scrambled up and picked up Spotty and put him inside her coat. She ran after John. “No, you won’t and no she won’t!”



Emma and John ran through Thompson, hurrying toward their cottage on the outskirts of town. They ran past the general store with the wooden barrels of flour in the window. They ran past the Catholic Church, the barber shop, and down and then off the boardwalks in front of two saloons. As they reached the edge of town they ran past the Thompson house where E.L. Thompson, president of the Delta Lumber Company, lived with his family.

“Run faster so Mr. Thompson doesn’t see us,” John panted.

Emma stopped running. “Why don’t you want him to see us?” she puffed.

“He owns our house, remember? Mama said she wasn’t sure she could pay the rent this month.”

“Why not? You helped cut enough Christmas trees to sell to Captain Santa. You made enough for rent money didn’t you?”

“I don’t think I did, Emma. He only pays me ten cents apiece for them.”

“He only charges 25 cents to 50 cents for them when he sells them,” Emma said.



“He charges his wealthy customers more. I’ve seen him charge them as much as \$2.00 for a Christmas tree,” John said.

“We don’t have many wealthy customers in Thompson,” Emma said.

“Mr. Thompson is wealthy,” John said. “That’s why he owns the lumber company.”

“But we aren’t wealthy. We have to pay Mr. Thompson rent,” Emma said. “That’s why Mama takes in washing and does sewing for rich ladies.”

“She doesn’t make enough to pay the rent every month. She needs somebody to help her.”

“I’ll help her,” Emma said. “I’ll do washing in the harbor for rich ladies. I’ll sell Christmas trees all year around. Spotty will help me. I’ll do what it takes to help Mama pay the rent.”

“She can marry, Paul. He will help pay the rent.”

Emma stopped running right in front of John. John bumped into her, nearly knocking her over. She stood with her right hand on her right hip, her left hand holding Spotty close to her heart. “Do you really want Mama to marry Paul to pay the rent?” she demanded.

John sighed, shaking his head. “I just don’t want to live in the woods. Mr. Thompson built some shacks for his Christmas tree cutters. I stayed in a shack with Papa before he sailed on the Ruby for the last time. Remember that weekend Papa and I spent in the woods?”

“I remember that Mama and I cleaned the entire house while you two were gone and I helped her make chicken and dumplings for dinner. That’s Papa’s favorite.”

“The wind blew through that shack like smoke blowing from the train engine when it comes through Thompson.

We had fish for breakfast, midday meal, and supper. The only way we kept warm was making a wooden star for the Christmas tree. I was so glad when Papa decided to come home that I ran most of the way. I was so cold that I shivered most of the way.” John shivered. “I’m cold now. Let’s hurry home.”



Emma shivered too. “How did Papa keep warm?”



“Papa told me he has a warm heart, that’s how he keeps warm. Hurry up, Emma. It’s cold out here.”

John started running again, and this time Emma kept up with him. They reached the red front door of the small cottage perched at the edge of the pine forest. A square of evergreen trees filled up most of the backyard. As she sped by, Emma saw the tired, thin cornstalks and the wilted tomato vines left over from last summer’s garden and then she noticed that the square of evergreen trees behind the garden had been cut in half.

“What happened to the Christmas trees?” Emma asked.

The red door opened and Mama stood there shaking in the cold. “The men cut them while you were at school. Hurry inside and close the door, children. It’s cold out here.”

Mama pulled her yellow wool shawl more snugly around her shoulders and patted her black hair more snugly around her ears. I told Captain Santa he could have these special trees in honor of Papa and the men cut them and took them down to the dock yesterday.”

“But Mama, I put the special star on the biggest tree!” John said.

Mama patted his shoulder. “What special star, John?”

“The special star that Papa and I made at the lumber camp. We made it out of wood before he went away.”

“The star is still there,” Mama said. “It will help Captain Santa find your Papa.”

“Captain Santa!” Emma said. She remembered the urgency in Captain Santa’s voice “Tell your Mama to come quickly down to the dock.”

“Captain Santa said to hurry down to the dock right now,” Emma told Mama.

“Captain Santa said to come as fast as you can,” John said.



Mama threw off her yellow wool shawl and pulled on her red wool cloak. She drew the hood over her head and pulled on a pair of black rubber boots that Emma knew belonged to Paul. Emma scowled at the black rubber boots and made it a point to step on the toe of the right black boot.

“Ouch!” Mama said. “Please watch your step, Emma.”

“Why are you wearing Paul’s black rubber boots, Mama?”

“He left them here the other day. I’m just using them to keep my feet warm and dry. John can take the boots back to him tomorrow. Let’s get to the dock!”

Mama slammed the front door behind them and she and John hurried back through Thompson toward the dock. Emma saw that Mama ran slowly because the boots were too big for her and kept falling off her feet. Mama had to stop and pull them back on several times.

Just a few paces ahead of them, Emma raced to the Christmas tree ship. “Captain Santa, Captain Santa, we hurried back as fast as we could hurry. Here we are!”

Captain Santa appeared on the deck of the Christmas tree ship, his moustache waving back and forth in the wind.

“It’s Michigan blizzard cold out here,” he said. “Come aboard and we’ll sit in front of the heating stove and talk. Mama and John hurried aboard and disappeared below deck with Captain Santa. Emma lagged behind them on deck. She had to find their Christmas trees and the wooden star ornament. She stared at the stacks of Christmas trees. “Where should I start looking?” she asked Spotty, who worked his way out of her jacket and landed on the deck with a thud.

Spotty didn’t answer. He just ran over to the nearest pile of Christmas trees and started to travel through them. Emma watched his spots making a colorful pattern against the backdrop of green trees.



“Find the star, Spotty. Fetch the star,” Emma said. Up until now, Spotty had never been a fetching dog and he had never shown any signs of hunting for anything except Beef Treats, but Emma hoped so hard that she would find the star that she was willing to trust Spotty to help.



Spotty helped. At first he wove in and out of the tree branches barking, and then he disappeared. Then Emma spotted his tail wagging from the top of one of the trees and suddenly he stood in front of her with the wooden star in his mouth, his tail thumping in time to her heart.

“Give me the star, Spotty. Give it here.” Emma reached out and took the star. She picked up Spotty and put him back inside of her coat. She went to the nearest doorway and shouted, “Captain Santa, where are you? I brought you something!”

Captain Santa stood at the head of the stairs leading below. “Come aboard, come aboard,” he boomed.

“I brought you something, Captain Santa.”

“I didn’t ask you to bring me anything. I told you I might have something for you,” he said.

“I brought something for your daughters Elsie and Pearl,” Emma said. She held out the star to Captain Santa.

Captain Santa took the star and put it in the pocket of his pea coat. I’ll call your Mama and brother to come and join us. And where is that noisy dog of yours?

Emma reached inside of her coat for Spotty. She held him out for Captain Santa to see.

“Good! I want all of you here to see if I got the right gift.”

Captain Santa turned and shouted, “Ahoy down there. Come up for a talk.

Emma watched the doorway and soon John and Mama pant their way onto the deck and stand next to Captain Santa. Captain Santa smiled at them all. Then he turned and shouted down the hatch, “Come on up now!”

Spotty wriggled in Emma’s arms and barked furiously.

A man appeared in the hatchway of the Christmas tree ship. Emma saw that it was the same man she had seen earlier on deck, the man who had brown hair, a brown beard and a nose that pointed down up at the ends like Papa’s nose. Spotty jumped from Emma’s arms, ran over to the man, and jumped in his arms. Spotty gave the man a face washing with his tongue.

“I remember you. You’re Spotty,” the man said.



Emma couldn't believe her eyes, but her heart told her the truth. The man with the brown hair and curled up nose pulled a huge red bandana handkerchief from his pocket to wipe Spotty's kisses away. Mama threw her arms around his neck and the man wiped away her tears with his handkerchief. John threw his arms around the man's legs. Spotty jumped out of the man's arms and ran back to Emma. He tugged at her coat, pulling her toward the man.

Emma couldn't move. She stood in her spot on the deck like she had grown roots as deep as a Christmas tree. She forced a question around the huge lump in her throat. "How did you find him?" she asked Captain Santa.

"He found us at Spider Point Lighthouse. He asked if he could work his passage back to Thompson and I was glad to have an extra hand to help with the Christmas trees."

Emma frowned. "Didn't you know he was our Papa?" she demanded.

Captain Santa pulled out three deck chairs, one for Mama and one for Papa and one for Emma. "Sit down and we'll have the story," he said. "John, you can find you a chair. Emma, you don't look like you want to move yet and Spotty, you must be very tired. Why don't you sit on Emma's lap when she sits down?"

“I want to know why you didn’t know our Papa. Captain Santa knows everything.” Emma persisted.

“My heart knew, but my head had to be sure. He told me that the Ruby sank near Beaver Island and he washed ashore, nearly dead. The waves smacked him against the rocks and cut his head bad. The inside of his head was hurt too because he couldn’t remember who he was for a long time. “ Captain Santa pulled his moustache. “He remembered that he had a wife and two children and that he lived in Thompson, Michigan, but other details were still hazy.”

“I remember Spotty,” the man said. “Pesky dog.” He smiled. “I remember my family, too.”

“Where have you been all of this time, Papa?” John asked.

“At the lighthouse,” Papa stammered. The keeper and his wife helped me.”

Mama put her arms around Papa. “I don’t care how you got here, Albert. You’re here. That’s all that matters!”

John hugged Papa’s legs so hard that Papa gasped, “Take it easy, Johnny.”

Emily walked slowly over to Papa. “Welcome back, Papa,” she said, closing her eyes as she hugged him tightly so he couldn’t get away a second time. “The Christmas star is a symbol of hope,” she whispered against Papa’s shoulder as Spotty danced around their feet.

Later that day, Captain Santa and his Christmas tree ship set sail from Thompson’s dock bound for Chicago with a load of Christmas trees. Emma, John, Mama, Papa and Spotty stood together on the dock. Emma watched the tall pine on the very top of the load of Christmas trees. She saw the wooden star on top wobbling back and forth with the movement of the Christmas tree ship, the sunlight glinting on its red, white, blue, and yellow colors that she and John had painted with hope. She waved until the Christmas tree ship disappeared over the Lake Michigan horizon.





November 1913

One November later, Emma, Mama, and Spotty stood on the Thompson Dock watching John, Papa, and several other men loading Christmas trees into a three -masted wooden ship.

“Her name is *Fearless*,” and her Captain and crew are fearless to match,” Mama said. “Mrs. Captain Santa is the captain and her daughters Elsie and Pearl are among the crew.”

Emma danced up and down, partially with excitement and partially to keep the wind’s sharp teeth from biting through her coat. “I can hardly wait to see them. Wait right here, Mrs. Captain Santa. I have to run home and get something for you.”

Emma slipped and slid back to the house. Without taking off her coat, she rushed into the kitchen, snatched a wooden cookie cutter star from a cupboard drawer, and ran out of the door and down the hill again. Emma turned onto Mill Street, passed the North shore boarding house and the lumber mill and got to the dock just in time to find Mama and Mrs. Captain Santa deep in conversation.



She wriggled her hands deep into the pocket of her wool coat. “I have something to give to Mrs. Captain Santa.”

“There you are Mrs. Kingston. You and Emma must come aboard.” Emma saw a pretty lady with upswept brown hair wearing a blue wool coat and a blue and white checked scarf standing in the hatch door of the Fearless.

Barking loudly, Spotty ran to the pretty lady who backed away from him. Emma peered behind her.. “Where are Elsie and Pearl?” she asked Mrs. Captain Santa.”

A girl who Emma thought must be at least 15 stepped from behind a Christmas tree. She wore black braids wound around her head like a crown, and a long black coat. “I’m Elsie and you must be Emma.”

“Captain Santa talked to me about you,” Emma said. “He said you were pretty and smart.”



Another girl stepped from behind another Christmas tree, a girl about Emma’s size and with the same brown hair as Emma. “I’m Pearl and I’m here to help my mother and sister. Did my father talk about me, too?

Emma hugged her. Yes, he did. He said you were smart and pretty as a Christmas tree.”

Mama put her hand on Mrs. Captain Santa’s arm. “You and your daughters are brave and determined.”

Spotty barked and tugged Emma's jacket. "Mama, you are brave and determined too when Papa's ship went missing!"

Mama grabbed a Christmas tree. "I'll help you load the Christmas trees for the people in Chicago."

"I'm glad we have Christmas trees for the children in Chicago," Emma told Pearl.

"Lots of children in Chicago count on us for Christmas trees," Pearl said.

"They can count on us, Mrs. Captain Santa said. "We'll load the trees on the ship and tie up at the old dock where our customers know where to find us. Captain Santa's Christmas Tree ship may be missing, but we aren't. We are here and we will bring Christmas trees to Chicago.

Emma slipped something into Pearl's hand. "From Captain Santa," she said.

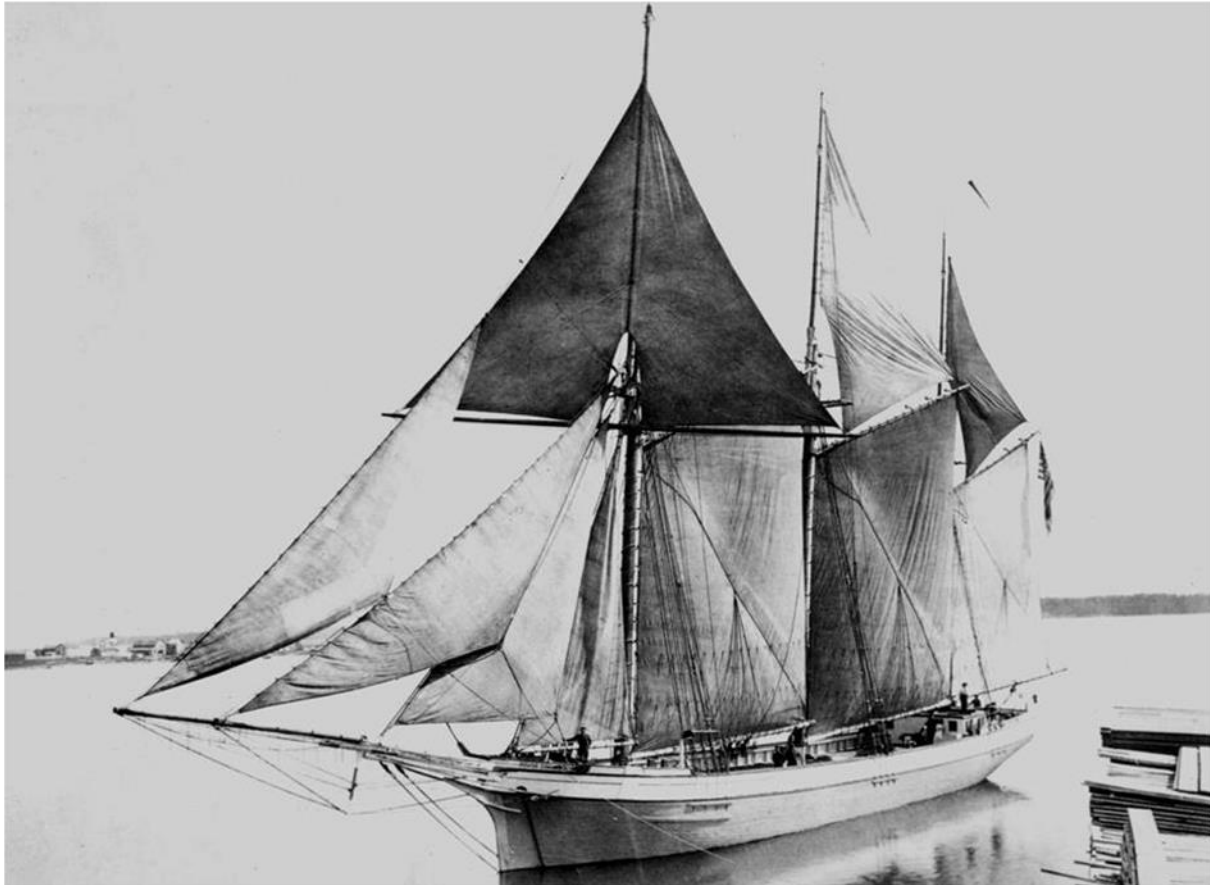
Emma and Pearl helped the crew load Christmas trees onto the Fearless. They loaded the last tree on deck and Mrs. Captain Santa and Elsie and Pearl stood at the rail and waved goodbye as the Fearless sailed out of the harbor. A wooden star like the one on their Christmas tree at home rested in one of the trees, making a five point outline against the sky.

"The Christmas star is a symbol of hope," Emma said as she waved goodbye to Pearl, Elsie, and Mrs. Captain Santa. Spotty barked two short barks that sounded like Merry Christmas!





## End Note



Although this story is fiction, it is based on a real ship and a real family.

Captain Herman Schuenemann was the real Captain Santa who disappeared with his crew and ship, the Rouse Simmons, during a Lake Michigan storm on November 23, 1912. Captain Schuenemann and his brother August before him carried loads of Christmas trees from the woods of northern Michigan to Chicago for over 25 years before the Rouse Simmons sank.

The Rouse Simmons left Thompson, Michigan, a small Lake Michigan port, on November 22, 1912, bound for Chicago's Clark Street dock to sell the load of Christmas trees piled in its hold and high on its deck. It never reached Chicago.

A year after the Rouse Simmons sank, workers loaded another ship, the Fearless, in Thompson, Michigan. Captain Schuenemann's wife Barbara and his daughters continued the Christmas tree ship tradition and carried Christmas trees to the Clark Street Dock in Chicago after Captain

Schuenemann went down with the Rouse Simmons. In a newspaper interview, Barbara Schuenemann said, "We'll load the trees on the ship and tie up at the old dock, and our customers will come to us as they have in former years. They know where to find us. The rouse is gone, her captain is gone, and her crew is gone, but Christmas will find the survivors still on deck and Chicago will have her Christmas trees, as long as the Schuenemann's last."

Although schooners carried the final shipment of Christmas trees in 1920, Barbara Schuenemann and her daughters continued shipping Christmas trees from Northern Michigan and Wisconsin by rail and selling them to eager Chicago buyers until her death in 1933.