

Author's Disclaimer:

As the author of this work it would seem a contradiction for me to discourage you from reading it, so I won't. However, I do want to discourage you from believing it. It's all fiction. It's not based on a true story or even a part of a true story. Basically, it's all a lie; I made it all up. It's not real, so don't believe a word of it! Enjoy it as a work of pure fiction and don't let it persuade your thinking in any way. The question at hand would seem to be "does Santa Clause exist?" However, I have no interest in persuading you to believe in Santa Clause. Whether or not you believe in Santa Clause means nothing. There is only one person I want you to consider believing in – the only person in the universe who matters (sorry, if that deflates your ego) – and that is the person of our Lord Jesus Christ... But this story is about Santa Clause, so this story doesn't matter. Never-the-less I present to you...

The Secret Society of the Santi Clause

Legends often are based on a truth, but the truth in a legend is rarely what it appears. It gets exaggerated and twisted as the imagination fills in the gaps. Take for instance the legend of Santa Clause and his elves and reindeer. Oh, you don't believe in Santa Clause any more? You're too old for that? Well, you just might want to reconsider...

Chapter 1

It all started a few days before Thanksgiving. Well, that's not exactly true. It actually started a real, real long time ago, but then it stopped. It stopped suddenly and without any warning; the end of an era! We thought it had stopped forever, but hundreds of years later things changed. So, as I said, it all started a few days before Thanksgiving. Tim woke up late that morning; very late. It was nearly ten o'clock when he crawled out of bed. He was school teacher and, as such, usually was up very early. However, the school was closed that week for the Thanksgiving Day holiday. Tim didn't like holidays, at least not any more. Holidays were lonely and one holiday in particular was a cruel reminder of the wonderful, amazing life he used to live. Not that he didn't enjoy being a teacher and shaping the minds and character of future generations, but it just didn't compare to his last job; not at all. He knelt down and said a quick morning prayer, thanking the Almighty God for another day and accepting that things could have been way worse than they are now. Actually, he loved teaching, but this year there was a new principal and he had very different ideas on education and behavior management. Tim found himself at odds with him on a daily basis... Realizing that his praying had turned into whining, he asked God for forgiveness and patience and set about making breakfast. As he began preparing his meal, Tim dropped an egg and it went splat on the floor making a gooey, icky mess. He grumbled something under his breath while he got the mop set about cleaning it up. After his pitiful breakfast he set himself to making a list of groceries to buy for his one man Thanksgiving Day dinner. Oh, don't be fooled, his neighbors and fellow teachers were very kind and generous. Several of them had invited him to have dinner with their families. Tim turned them all down. There were secrets to be kept and getting too close to people made secrets harder to keep. Although he rarely said much more than "hi" or spoke only of work related items to the other teachers, Tim was not antisocial by nature, but he had become so in order to protect those secrets and the dear people behind those secrets. These were very serious secrets that he kept deep in his heart. He'd kept them for so long that they were now poisoning his soul with depression and loathing. Though he was probably unaware of it, he was slowly sinking into madness.

That day as he trudged across the ground making his way to the grocery store he was completely unaware that events were unfolding far away that would impact his life in amazing ways. Not far from

the North Pole a small Cessna prop plane had taken flight from a polar research station. It was piloted by Dr. Steven Frostly. His daughter Susy had been visiting him at the station and now they were on their way home for a Thanksgiving Dinner with their family in the United States. Unfortunately, things were not going smoothly.

“Dad!” yelled a very concerned little girl from the copilot's seat.

“We're going to be okay, Susy!” her father replied, trying to comfort her even though he knew that what he said was a lie. They were not going to be okay!

“That storm just came out of nowhere!” exclaimed Suzy. They were yelling because the noise of the propeller amplified against the noise of the wind and the snow rushing by the plane was deafening their ears!

“I know. We need to find somewhere to set down!” her dad responded, trying to keep his voice sounding calm, but failing to do so.

Susy searched frantically on a small computer connected to the plane. “There's no landing strips around for hundreds of miles!”

They had taken off on a cold, but bright polar day. The sun had been glistening off the icy landscape, making for a bright and cheerful, but cold morning. Then suddenly, without warning, the sun had vanished and dark clouds had engulfed their plane. There had been no storms on radar, and none in the forecasts. The storm had literally formed around them. Snow and ice now pounded against their small plane while the wind rocked it back and forth. The engine sputtered and then fought its way back, but then sputtered again.

“We have to find a place to land!” yelled out Dr. Steven

“We could turn back and return to the research lab, but it's a long ways behind us.”

The engine sputtered again and then stopped for a second, causing the plane to rattle and shake violently before it stabilized. A couple pieces of metal ripped off the right wing!

“We're not going to make it!” cried out Susy. “Are we dad?”

“Be brave!” Steve yelled back to his daughter.

The engine stalled again and the plane began to drop, being blown around wildly in the storm's winds. Frantically Steve fiddled with the controls and the engine came back to life, but the plane was out of control and he could now barely keep it in the air. One thing was clear to him; eventually the engine was going to die and he wasn't going to be able to get it back. He grabbed the radio transmitter.

“May day! May day! This is Cessna 53245 out of the Polar Research Laboratory. We are in distress! Our engine is failing; we are going down! Our current position is directly above the North Pole. Please send a rescue team as soon as possible... Is there anyone out there?”

There was no answer.

“This is it, isn't it,” cried Susy.

“I love you, Susy,” was all that Steve could think to say.

“I love you too, dad!” Susy said through her tears.

“BEEP!” The computer suddenly made a repeating beeping noise.

“What was that?” asked Steve.

Susy looked at the computer screen in disbelief. “It's a landing beacon! It's a landing beacon!”

“What? I thought there was nothing here?”

“I don't know,” replied Lucy, “but it's definitely a landing beacon! Turn thirty degrees north and make a descent of...”

A bright light flashed at them ahead. Steve turned the battered plane towards the beacon, struggling to maintain control of the aircraft. Suddenly there was a loud popping noise and smoke poured out of the engine!

“That can't be good!” yelled Susy as the propellers stopped turning for good.

“We can still make it!” Steve held the controls tightly and fought to keep the plane in the air long enough to reach the source of the flashing light.

The dark, grayish white of the ground began to grow alarming close to them! Several metal plates tore from the outer body of the airplane! The landing gear buckled in the rushing wind and then separated from the plane with a loud crash and disappeared in a puff of snow on the ground.

“Brace yourself!” screamed Steve as the small plane's underbelly came in contact with the rough icy ground. The plane rocked and jolted and debris washed across the cabin as the plane bounced up and down on the ghastly ground. Finally its weight set in and it dug a trench through the snow!

Chapter 2

Oblivious to the drama that was unfolding at the North Pole, Tim made his way to the local grocery store to pick up supplies for his one-man Thanksgiving dinner. The community was very small and had only one grocery store, which was also the hardware store, which was also the general store and the toy store. There were no mega-stores here, just one small shop packed full of everything people in the small town could possibly need. It was called O'reily's Food, Supplies, and More. On that particular day it seemed that every single person in the town must have been at O'reily's! Tim walked in and was shocked at all the customers lined up at the only two registers in the store. Over in the corner he saw Steve frantically trying to keep order. Steve was Steve O'reily, the owner of the store. Tim made his way towards him.

“Steve!” Tim yelled over the commotion that filled the store.

“Hey Tim,” Steve replied. “Things are a little crazy right now!”

“What's going on?”

“Oh Tim,” began Steve, “it's a nightmare. This morning Hilly Valley Farms recalled all the turkeys they sold over the past two weeks. Apparently they have some sort of infection; not safe to eat. Well, all my turkey products came from Hilly Valley Farms, so everyone in town is bringing their turkey back to try and save their Thanksgiving dinner! Hilly Valley sent a truck load of 'clean' turkeys but I don't have the resources to manage this big of a product exchange.”

“When am I going to get my turkey!” yelled an old lady to the poor kid running the cash register.

“Jenny will be up here with it in just a minute,” replied the cashier. “Be patient.”

“I've been patient for forty minutes!” screamed the old lady.

Jennifer rushed from the back of the store with a frozen turkey in her arms. Jennifer was a sixteen year old brunette with long, shiny hair. She was a student in one of Tim's classes at the school. Right now, though, she was exhausted from running back and forth from the delivery truck to the registers up front.

Steve shook his head, “it's just a total disaster, Tim.”

Tim smiled. Steve looked at him with confusion.

“You just need some really good organizational management,” replied Tim. “I got this.”

“Really?”

“Okay Steve,” continued Tim, “where is the truck with the turkeys?”

“It's parked out back at the unloading deck.”

“Alright. You need to realize that you don't actually need to account for the turkeys in your computer register right now. They can be counted later after all the returns have been filed.”

“Okay?” replied Steve.

“Get me the store microphone,” requested Tim.

Steve left for a second, made his way through the crowd, and came back with a small wireless microphone. He handed to Tim, still unsure of what was going on.

“Attention shoppers!” Tim announced through the microphone. It echoed across speakers in the ceiling that were spread throughout the store. “If I could have your attention please.”

The noise level dropped and the customers started listening.

“I know you're all eager to get your turkey problem resolved and get home. So listen up. In order

to facilitate your turkey trade in, all turkey returns and exchanges will be handled at the employee only door at the back of the store next to the fishing supplies. The front register will no longer be used for turkey exchanges. If you wish to exchange a turkey and buy other products, please exchange your turkey first and then bring your other products to the checkout. In a minute Steve will give you a piece of paper. Please write your name and the product code listed on your turkey on that paper. There will be a trash bin to throw your old turkey in. Please dispose of the turkey and hand the paper with your name and the turkey's product code on it back to Steve and you will be given your new turkey."

In a matter of minutes Tim had the customers in a single file line. They wrote their names and product codes on a piece of paper, deposited their turkey in the trash bin, and received their new turkey from Steve. Jenna continued to pull the turkeys out of the refrigerated truck, but now she only had to go about twenty feet to deliver them. Tim continually gave orders to both the store staff and the customers. The line flowed quickly and people stopped complaining. Within twenty minutes every customer had been taken care of! Tim stayed and helped Steve enter the returns in the register's computer with the help of the product codes that were written on the papers from the customers.

"Amazing!" Steve exclaimed.

"I've never seen anybody organize a crowd like that!" exclaimed Jennifer.

"Tim," continued Steve, "I thought you were a school teacher?"

Tim sighed. "Well, I wasn't always a school teacher. I used to be a big player in organizing and managing extremely large, time-sensitive deliveries."

"Really?" replied Steve.

"I'd believe it," said Jennifer. "You seemed like you were really enjoying yourself today. Why did you leave the delivery business."

"Well," Tim's demeanor sank a little, "basically demand for our services dropped off and we were forced to shut down the operation... So, I became a teacher."

"Uh, sure," added Jennifer, "that makes sense..."

Tim shrugged his shoulders. There were just things about his past that he couldn't reveal. All in all, though, this had turned out to be a pretty good first day of break.

Chapter 3

The winds howled in sustained low moans across the frozen wasteland, echoing the sound of a lonely pack of wolves. The snow battered down like pellets from a machine gun leaving little holes in the banks where they hit. This was the North Pole, and it was facing one of the worst blizzards that had ever been witnessed! The storm had crept up out of nowhere and violently reshaped the frozen land, destroying everything in its path.

A long deep canyon cut through the snow banks, littered with debris and soot. The storm worked quickly to cover it but still had a lot to do before it would be gone. A glossy, wooden propeller stood up out of the snow next to the trench, leaving a clue as to what had happened here. The trail through the snow went on for nearly a mile, pieces of a plane littered the entire the length. Then, after a mile or so, the canyon stopped suddenly as if the plane had just disappeared. The snow beyond that point showed no signs of the scars that cut the snow before it.

The remains of the plane had come to rest partially dug into a very large snow bank, but in a place where there was no storm. In fact, here, the sky was unusually still. Ten year old Suzy picked herself up from the floor of the plane. Her dark brown hair was a tangled mess and there was blood running down her leg. She looked her injured leg over and decided that it didn't seem all that bad. She fought against the pain and stood up. Her dad and she were on their way home from an arctic research station where her dad was a scientist. The storm had taken them by surprise.

"Dad!" she called out.

"I'm here, Sweetie!" he answered from under a pile of debris that used to be a seat. She limped over to him and helped him out of the rubble. They both stood there, dripping in blood.

"What are we going to do?" cried Suzy.

"It's going to be okay," he said to reassure her, but he knew the odds were that they would freeze to death.

He opened the plane's hatch and was taken back by the warmth of the air. It didn't make sense. He looked around. There was definitely snow on the ground. How could that be? It was something like seventy degrees (f) outside! Suzy and He dragged their injured bodies out of the plane and set their feet into the snow. It wasn't cold. It looked like snow, but it wasn't snow. Blood ran down their legs and stained the fake snow with an eerie red smudge. Slowly they turned and looked around. As they took in their surroundings, they could see the horrible storm raging in the distance, as if they were looking at it through some sort of a window.

"Where are we?" exclaimed Suzy's father, Dr. Frostly.

Suzy paused and thought for a moment. Could it be? "Dad, I think we must be at Santa's workshop."

"What?" Her dad looked at her with one of those looks.

"Well, you got any better ideas?" exclaimed Suzy.

"But there are no buildings."

"Maybe they're hidden," suggested Suzy.

As if to justify her statements, the snow in front of them suddenly parted and a tunnel entrance appeared. Suzy's dad grabbed some flashlights from the plane wreckage and they made their way down into an underground structure. A few lights popped on here and there as they climbed down the passageway, but mostly the building seemed to be lacking power. They struggled to light the darkness, the lights showing only vague shadows of the amazing secret they had stumbled upon. In those shadows they could barely make out the appearance of some sort of massive operations center.

"What is this place?" said Suzy's dad, exasperated.

"It's Santa's Workshop!" exclaimed Suzy. "It's got to be!"

Chapter 4

Far away from Suzy and her father's discovery, the town of Carrie Falls was just waking up. The bright colors of the fall season had nearly faded away and the trees were mostly bare and lifeless. Gradually over the past month the chill of winter had begun to set in. It was now late November as Mr. Tim Snowadin made his daily walk through the scenic small town to his classroom. He thought about how the gradual onset of winter seemed to mimic the pitifulness that was now his life. He had spent Thanksgiving alone, just as he had spent every holiday alone for who knows how long. Thanksgiving break had just ended and now the feeling of dread was overcoming him as he returned once again to face those students.

He turned a corner and came face to face with the school building that had become his home for the past decade. It used to be his favorite place; he used to love teaching there, but something changed this year. Tim opened the main door and walked inside. The rowdy noise of students talking and opening and closing lockers filled the hallway.

"Hi Mr. Snowadin," said a fellow teacher as she walked by.

"Did you have a good Thanksgiving, Miss Sarah?" he responded.

"The best!" she exclaimed as she continued down the hall.

Miss Sarah was fresh out of college and full of energy and drive. She was new here. Most of the teachers were; a symptom of a problem. Everybody from last year had left; everybody except Tim, that is. Tim couldn't leave. He couldn't explain to anybody why he couldn't leave. He just couldn't. It was too complicated, and frankly, it was classified. As he entered his classroom and sat down at his desk he

thought about how he still had ten more years before he would be reassigned. He sighed.

A loud ruckus made its way into the classroom as the students took their seats. They were rowdy. They were noisy. They were rude. A young girl named Lexi threw an apple at Tim's head, barely missing. It clanged against the metal blackboard behind him.

"Lexi," said Tim sternly.

"Yes, Mr. Snowadin," she replied mockingly.

He handed her a stack of work to do. "Sit out in the hallway and stay there until you finish."

Just then the principal walked by. Under normal circumstances that might have been a good thing, but this school had a disease and that disease stopped at the classroom door and called Mr. Tim's name.

"Mr. Snowadin," he called out. "Please send Ms. Lexi back to her seat."

"Sir, she's being punished for unruly behavior."

"Mr. Snowadin," he said, speaking his name in a condescending way, "what have I told you about discipline?"

"If your students aren't behaving then there's something wrong with your teaching," recited Tim as the students laughed.

"Right. So, Mr. Snowadin, fix your teaching." With that said, the disease went down the hallway to pick on another teacher.

"Mr. Snowadin, you better fix your teaching," mocked Lexi as she sat back in her seat.

"Shut up Lexi!" yelled Jessica, a rare student who really want to learn.

Principal Stophan was the new principal. He had started at the beginning of this school year but had wasted no time in enforcing his new age beliefs onto the teachers. By the end of the second week of school ninety eight percent of the old teachers had left. Mr. Stophan didn't care. He expected it. He had a "fleet" of new teachers standing by to take their place. The new teachers were inexperienced and naive and would do and believe anything he told them. In the meantime he had created a class room environment where any wrong a student did was the teacher's fault. If a student misbehaved, the teacher was to blame. If a student got a bad grade, the teacher was to blame. Oh and don't think the students didn't catch on to this. It didn't take long for them to realize what was going on and make the most of it. And so Tim's classroom became an unmanageable nightmare. Anytime he would try to enforce any amount of discipline the principal would interfere.

Tim felt so lost. He could barely remember anymore the years gone by; great and wonderful years. He was once part of something big; something special; something amazing! Oh how he longed for those days.

"Okay class," said Tim as he attempted to teach, "open your books to page 23. Today we are going to begin discussing the American Civil War. What were some of the circumstances that led up to..."

There were two loud bangs as two text books smashed against the teacher's metal desk and fell to the ground. "Chris and Stephen, please pick up your books and return to your desks."

"Make me!" they both yelled.

"You can't; can you!" added Stephen. "If you try to discipline me in any way, Principal... what are you doing?"

"I'm calling your mom," answered Tim.

"You can't! I'll tell Principal Stophan!"

"I... DON'T... CARE!" replied Tim. Then the call was answered, "Hello, Ms. Devon. I'm sorry to have to bother you at work. I'm afraid I've had some serious behavior issues with Stephen..."

For the rest of the day the class was better. They knew that the principal would have a talk with their teacher after school, but until then, there was a real threat that their teacher would call their parents. So Tim was able to teach and just maybe the students even learned something. However, at the end of the day came the inevitable call to the principal's office.

Principal Stophan was pissed. "We do not call parents to discipline students! You know this! You've been told again and again not to do it!" He paused to take a breath. "I don't know what to do

with you. You won't follow the rules. One more infraction and I'm going to have to put you on suspension; maybe fire you. I've told you again and again, if you have behavior issues then there is something wrong with your teaching."

"Mr. Stophan," replied Tim sternly. "You are the worst principal I have ever had the horror of knowing. Good day!" And he left. But don't be misled. He didn't quit. He can't quit. Mr. Stophan can't fire him. He was stuck there for ten more years!

The next day the class stared at him, trying to decide if he would risk angering the principal again by calling one of their parents. Stephen walked into the classroom and straight over to Mr. Snowadin.

"I'm really sorry for the way I behaved, Mr. Snowadin," Stephen said sheepishly, "It won't happen again." Stephen had gotten in big trouble for his behavior. His parents took away his video game machines and grounded him until Christmas break.

So Tim again was able to teach. He and his classes had a lively discussion about the causes and results of the Civil War and its implications on the present. It was one of Tim's better days in these recent years. He enjoyed teaching; he enjoyed being part of something that was bigger than himself. It reminded him of his glory days so long ago.

At the end of the school day he was again summoned to the principal's office. He ignored the summons and walked home. That evening Principal Stophan tried to fire him. Tried.

Chapter 5

When Tim entered the school the next morning everything was different, or rather, it was back to the way it had been before; as if it had all just been a bad dream.

"Good to see you Tim," said Melissa, who was one of the teachers who had quit. "It's good to be back."

"What's going on?" asked Tim.

"Oh, you haven't heard?" replied Melissa. "The school board fired Principal Stophan yesterday evening and replaced him with someone better. They called all of us and asked us if we would come back. I didn't hesitate. There aren't many good jobs in a small town like this. I've been working at a fast food restaurant! I'm so glad to be back in the classroom. Listen, the principal will want to see you. You should go to her now."

"Oh, okay. Thanks."

Tim made his way to the principal's office, unsure of what to expect. This was all so bizarre. Overnight everything had changed suddenly. Was this even possible? Maybe he was dreaming.

"Ah, Mr Snowadin!" said the new Principal as she walked in. "I've heard a lot about yo.."

She stopped speaking and stared at him. Her jaw dropped down. He stared back... There was something familiar...

"It's not possible," he said and they stared some more.

"I know you," she spoke softly and uncertainly.

"It's not possible," Tim said again. They continued to stare.

"I know you!" she said again with more confidence.

"It's not possible! How could it be possible?"

"It's you! It's really you!"

"Alice?" asked Tim.

"No," replied the principal with a slight laugh. "Alice was my great, great, great grandmother, but we all know the story. You saved her life. She never forgot."

"You look just like her."

The principal pulled a picture frame out of her bag. There was a paper in it that was old; very old. The paper was protected in the frame, but it had turned yellow and was trying to dissolve. On it was a picture. She lifted it up and showed it to him. "She drew that the day you rescued her." It was a

drawing of him.

“Wow!” replied Tim. “She drew that!” The drawing was detailed and skillful. It looked just like him. “She was only seven!”

“She went on to become a great artist.”

“I know. I kept tabs on her; made sure she had the supplies she needed; got into the schools she wanted...”

“She knew that... she knew that you took care of her. You're a hero to our family.”

“Nonsense,” replied Tim. “It was really the big guy himself who insisted we stop and rescue her off the boat. It was technically against the rules, but we made an exception.”

“It must have been hard for you to leave that life behind. You ran the whole operation and answered only to the big man himself... and now you're just a teacher.”

“Well, a teacher is a very important person,” replied Tim. “It may not be the same, but I'm still helping the children... You never told me your name.”

“Oh, sorry. Stephanie Sterling, and don't worry; your secret is safe with me.”

“I know.”

From that point on Tim's days seem to get better and better. With order and reasonable discipline restored to the school he was able to teach and engage his students properly. The memories of his past endeavor occasionally tugged at his mind but were mostly buried away. Stephanie and he became good friends and, for now... perhaps for the next ten years... he could be happy. And maybe, since she already knows; well, maybe in ten years she could go with him when he's reassigned. Maybe.

On Thursday of that week, Tim was walking to the office to have lunch with Principal Sterling when a young girl with fiery black hair walked by him. He stopped in his tracks. His mind raced in confusion! There was no way it could be her! It couldn't be! It was against the rules for two of them to be at the same school; even in the same city! The girl apparently sensed the stare of his eyes. She stopped and turned around. Now she began staring back at him with the same shock of confusion.

“Lucy?” Tim asked.

“Tim?”

“Oh my!” Time exclaimed. “It is you!” He paused and his eyes teared.

She ran to him and put her little arms around him and cried.

“It's been so long! I missed you!” she cried and cried and he held her and remembered. He'd been like a father to her. She had been the youngest of her kind who was working at the operation. Her parents had been killed in a terrible accident. He'd taken her in and raised her as his own. Of course, when they all left they had to be separated. It was too dangerous for any two of them to be seen together.

“I thought you two might enjoy seeing each other again,” spoke Principal Sterling as she walked towards them.

“But how?” asked Tim.

“Let's just say, my family owed you one. Consider this a 'thank you' from my great, great, great grandmother Alice.”

Chapter 6

The sun's warmth cut through the cold chill of that December morning. It was December the first and it was Richard's first day at a new school... again. Richard changed schools frequently. It was a necessity for his kind. As he approached the principal's office he thought about how long he could stay here. He was tired of the constant moving. Maybe, just maybe, he could stay the full four years of high school this time.

“Come in.” The principal was a strong, but thin lady in her early forties. “Welcome to Cosgrove High School. I'm Principal Sterling.... uhm, where are your parents?”

"I'm sorry Principal Sterling, my parents couldn't be here this morning." Richard immediately noticed the concern on the principal's face. "Don't worry, they already filled out all the paper work. I have it right here." He handed her a pack of papers.

Ms. Sterling looked through the stack for a few minutes. "Well, everything does seem to be in order, however, I would very much like to meet your parents as soon as they can come by."

"Of course, ma'am." Richard cringed inside at the lie he just told. His parents would never be coming by because he didn't have parents, at least not anywhere nearby.

"Here's your schedule." The principal handed him a sheet of paper. "Looks like you have Mrs. Lawson for homeroom... I think you'll like her."

Just then a young girl, another student, walked into the office. Her hair was long and shiny. It was black as night but with the slightest hints of red. She was petite but sturdy... and very familiar.

"This is Lucy." The principal gestured her hand towards her. "She has been assigned to help you get settled in. She will show you where your classes are and how things operate. I would like you to check in with me before you leave at the end of the day just to see how things went."

"Yes ma'am," Richard choked out. He was in shock. How long had it been since he'd seen any of his old friends. Yet there was Lucy! This school year was going to be different! He had never had one of them with him since they all had left so long ago. He looked at Lucy. She smiled softly. Did she recognize him? He wasn't sure.

"Uh, Richard," spoke Principal Sterling. "You two need to get going or you're going to miss first bell."

"Sorry."

"This way," motioned Lucy. She didn't say anything else to him as they walked down the school hallways.

"Maybe she doesn't recognize me?" he thought to himself and then laughed a little. His appearance hadn't changed one bit... and neither had hers.

"I'm sorry I'm so quiet Richard." Lucy finally spoke to him. "I... I just don't know what to say. It's been so long."

"I was afraid maybe you had forgotten me. How long has it been? I've kind of lost track."

Just then the bell rang.

"We better get into the classroom!" exclaimed Lucy.

The next several days flew by very quickly and Richard and Lucy rarely talked after the first day. It was just hard... they were a reminder to each other of the wonderful past they were once a part of. A past that fell apart a long, long... very long time ago.

Chapter 7

Two weeks passed by. Richard was loved by his teachers but hadn't really made any friends. He just didn't fit in with the other kids... he just knew too much. He'd spent so much time trying to protect the secret that it had devoured him. He wished he could just forget about it... forget about everything that happened in the past and just be a kid, but he wasn't a kid. He only looked liked one.

Tim made a point of avoiding Richard. It was dangerous for two of them to be in the same place; their secret could be exposed, and now there were three of them here! He thought it best that Richard didn't know that he was here so he asked Lucy not to say anything to him either. They once had been very close. Together they had run the whole operation, overseeing every detail of every delivery. They had been an unstoppable team and it had been awesome! But those days were gone now.

On a warm December the 7th, Lucy stopped into Tim's classroom at the end of the school day to deliver some unusual news.

"Dad," she started to speak... That word "dad," it brought such warmth to his heart every time she said it. He had missed that word.

"Are you listening dad?"

"Sorry sweetie," replied Tim. "Go ahead."

"I thought you should know. Three other of my kind have enrolled at the school this week."

"What? That can't be. Who?"

"James, John, and Paula. Principal Sterling had me show them around this morning."

"Something's up. We best be alert."

"Is something bad going to happen?" asked Lucy.

"Something is going to happen," replied Tim, "but I don't know if it will be something bad or something good..."

Then came December 14th, and this particular December the 14th was particularly cold! So cold that school had been delayed for two hours so the kids wouldn't be standing at the bus stop until it warmed up a little, but it actually hadn't warmed up at all! The heater at the school pounded away with all its might, trying to keep the building from being overtaken by the bitter ice. It was lunch time and Richard sat alone at a table in the corner, just like he always did. Well, except when Daniel would sit with him. Daniel was a special kid; he had a big heart. No, not a medical condition! He just cared about people; he cared about people a lot... some would even say that he cared too much. Well, every now and then, Daniel would sit at the table with Richard and try to be friends with him. He was certain that Richard would eventually talk to him, but so far he was the only one doing any talking. But today Daniel was sitting with little Gabby. She had been having a rough morning and Daniel was intent on cheering her up. So Richard sat alone at his table, intent on not being cheered up.

Tim watched him from a distance. Richard didn't seem to be doing well and Tim was very concerned about him but afraid to interfere himself, so he encouraged Lucy to go talk with him. Richard was quite surprised when Lucy walked up and sat with him.

"Lucy?"

"Hi Richard." Lucy looked at him with sadness. She knew that he bore the burden of the secret more than any of them. "Here we are. In the same school. As far as I know, this is the first time two of us have ever run into each other. Are we just going to pretend like we don't know each other?"

"Sorry Lucy," he replied. "I think I'm going to move somewhere else."

"Listen," Lucy frowned. "If you want to be alone, I'll go eat at another table."

Richard sighed and his eyes teared. "You misunderstand. I mean move out of this town."

"Richard!" Now Lucy was upset. "Why!"

"It's too dangerous," Richard replied very sadly. "With two of us here the risk of the secret being exposed goes up exponentially. As the one in charge, I can't risk it."

Lucy sighed. He was right. She knew he was, but it wasn't that simple.

"Listen Richard." She sighed again mustering up the courage to tell him.

"What is it, Lucy?"

"You're leaving won't fix the problem..."

"Sure it will." Richard was confused. Why was she being like this. "If there is only one of us here the secret will be much safer."

"That's just it," replied Lucy. "We're not the only ones of our kind here."

"What!" Richard was exasperated. "Impossible!"

"Over the last week three others have arrived here."

"You must be mistaken!" insisted Richard. "Who?"

"James, John, and Paula." Lucy paused. "I've seen the new student rosters... Principal Sterling always has me show the new students around... Danielle, Amanda, Peter, and Katie are arriving later this week."

"I don't understand." Richard pondered. "How can it be... after all these years... we all end up in the same school? It's just not possible..."

"Unless it was planned," added Lucy.

“Planned?” Richard became very worried. “By who?”

“I don't know,” replied Lucy. “But maybe, well... maybe it means something. Maybe we are all being drawn here for a reason. Maybe it's time for the Secret Society of the Santi Clause to reconvene.”

“How can there be a secret Society of the Santi Clause without Santi Clause?” Richard starred at Lucy. She looked excited, even hopeful. He didn't want to ruin it.

“Maybe he's coming back!” She exclaimed.

Chapter 8

Somewhere under the North Pole, Suzy and her dad camped out in the dim lights for yet another night, marooned in an abandoned wonderland. At least they had food! They had found a large kitchen full of cookies and cakes and meats; all somehow perserved perfectly over the years.

“We have to get a message to mom,” said Suzy. “She's got to be so worried!”

“We have to get someone to rescue us,” replied her dad, “but if we leave this hidden area we'll freeze to death.”

“There must be a phone or something here,” suggested Suzy.

The next day they spent hours searching the cavern for a phone. They saw many wonderful looking contraptions in the shadows of the dim lights. There were what appeared to be shelves and shelves of toys and games and other fun things! There were all sorts of machines and tools for building. There were conveyor belts, work desks, computer stations, loading docks, and assembly areas. After five hours of searching they finally found what could be a phone. Suzy picked it up. There was a dial tone!

“There's no number pad,” she whined, “how do I call?”

Suddenly a voice came through it, “hello?”

“Hello!” Suzy shouted excitedly. “Who is this?”

“This is Kevin, The Gatherer,” replied the voice. “Who are you?”

“My name is Suzy. My dad and I were in a plane crash just outside the workshop.”

“Workshop?” asked Kevin.

“I know this is Santa's workshop!” Suzy exclaimed.

“You believe?” It seemed Kevin was shocked by this realization.

“Of course I believe!” Suzy was excited.

“You believe... You believe! Do you have any idea how awesome that is!?” (pause) “That's why there was enough power for the phone to work... Do you know what this means?”

“Uh... no,” replied Suzy, “not really, but we need help!”

“Right!” exclaimed Kevin. “Sit tight. Help is on the way.”

Chapter 9

The next day Lucy again joined Richard for lunch again. The morning had been uneventful and both of them had become quite bored with school. After all, they had been in school for an extremely long time. It was necessary to maintain their cover.

“Hey Luce.” Richard hadn't called her that for almost two hundred years.

“Hi Richard.” Lucy glowed a little. She was excited, certain that everything was going to get better now.

“You know lunch isn't the only time we can hang out,” Richard laughed. “Where do you go after school?”

“Oh,” replied Lucy. “Well, I have a family I sort of... hang out with... that lives a couple miles from here.”

"A Family!" Richard was a little concerned. "What about the secret!"

"Don't worry, Richard. I would never compromise the secret, but I can't go on living like this. You can't go on living like this! Look at you. You stay to yourself. You pout at this table and when someone does try to be friends with you you ignore them. This is destroying you. Besides, the family already knew the secret..."

"What!"

"There are lots of humans who know about Santa's helpers." Lucy stated matter-of-fact with no signs of concern. "They are part of a group called The Society of the Secret. After two hundred years somebody was bound to notice us. I'm no longer alone."

"I don't know, Luce." Richard was very concerned. "It's just too dangerous."

"You're wrong, Richard." Lucy had never contradicted his authority before. "These are good humans and they have vowed to help us keep the secret. It's time to let some people into our lives!"

"Okay Lucy," Richard's tone softened. "I trust you. If you believe these humans can be trusted then you may continue to stay with them."

"What about you?"

"I don't know," replied Richard. "It's been too long since I've let anyone into my life."

"Well, maybe you could start now." Lucy stood up and left the table suddenly.

Richard watched in surprise as she walked away. Almost immediately after she left Daniel sat down.

"Hi Richard," said Daniel.

"Hello Daniel," Richard said back... for the first time ever.

Daniel was shocked. Richard had never said a word to him in all the times he'd sat and talked with him – well more like, talked at him.

"What's wrong?" asked Richard. Daniel had been quiet for several minutes.

"Sorry. I just didn't expect a reply."

"Listen, Daniel," Richard could feel his heart softening. It had been hardened over so many, many years. Suddenly he felt like, just maybe, he could let someone in... just a little bit. "I'm terribly sorry for the way I've treated you..."

"Well you haven't really treated me bad... or good... or at all."

"Day after day I have ignored you and yet you still come and try to talk with me."

"I know it must be hard for you." What an odd thing for Daniel to say.

"What do you mean?" asked Richard.

"Richard, I know."

"You know what, Daniel?"

"I know the secret."

Richard froze for a minute. How could he know? Lucy wouldn't have told him; she couldn't have! Could he be part of the society Lucy spoke of. He decided to play it safe. "What secret?"

"The Secret of the Santi Clause." He whispered so nobody would hear him.

"Are you part of the Society of the Secret?" Richard asked him.

"No." Daniel paused. "I know the secret because I'm part of it."

"What?"

"I'm partially related to Santi Clause."

"What!" Richard couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"My mom is the great, great granddaughter of a Santi and my dad is a regular human."

"No way!" Richard didn't know what to say. "I had no idea there were other Santi here."

Just then the bell rang and it was time to go back to class.

"I'll talk to you later, Daniel." Richard wanted to learn more but they had to be back in class within two minutes.

"Okay. Maybe you can come over after school. I'm sure my parents won't mind."

"I'd like that. Thanks."

Chapter 10

During fifth period Richard was sitting through a lecture on the fall of the Roman Empire. It was a lecture he'd heard a thousand times. After two hundred years of school he knew everything there was about the Roman Empire. Frankly, he was bored, so he was rather relieved when the intercom burst to life and he was called down to the principal's office. It was odd; he never got into trouble. His grades were straight A's – after all he'd had two hundred years to learn the material! Never-the-less, it was a change of pace and he looked forward to it.

"Come in." Principal Sterling motioned him forward.

"Yes, Principal. How may I help you?"

"Listen Richard," she began, "something is going on and I think you might know something about it."

Curious, thought Richard. "Just what are you referring to?"

"I have received transfer requests for some two hundred students. The school can't handle that many, and I think you know why they want to come here."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because they all are like you, Richard."

"Like me?"

"Yes; they all have no parents, are incredibly good students, and never stay anywhere for more than a few years."

Richard paused and considered her statement. "You're part of the Society of the Secret, aren't you?"

"Richard, I started the Society."

"Why?" Richard was rather demanding in the way he asked.

"Don't get upset. It was necessary – for your and your kind's sake."

"For my sake?" replied Richard. "The best thing for my kind is for nobody to know we exist."

"That may be, Richard, but after two hundred years people start to notice. Twenty five years ago, when I first started teaching, I had Lilly in my class. Like all of you, she was a very good student; left a strong impression. Ten years ago I moved and took the Vice Principal job here. My second year here Lilly showed up. At first I thought it was just an amazing coincidence, but over time I began to see that she not only looked the same as the girl from ten years ago but she also acted like her and had the same character as her. Then rumors started floating around from teachers all over the nation who were talking about the kids who never aged. So I called Lilly into my office and asked her about it. She was horrified that her secret seemed to be getting out, but I told her if she would confide in me I could help her keep the secret. She was hesitant but she told me..."

"She told you what?" interrupted Richard.

"It's okay Richard." Tim walked from around the corner.

"Tim! What are you doing here?"

"Actually, Richard. I'm the only one who was originally supposed to be here. I was assigned here ten years ago. I met Stephanie... I mean Principal Sterling... a short while ago, but her family and I go way back. Her great, great, great grandmother was the little girl that Santi Clause and I rescued from the pirate attack so long ago. Continue your story, Stephanie."

"Lilly told me that she and the others were Santa's helpers, that Santa disappeared when people stopped believing and never returned, and that now they were just trying to blend in. However, since they don't age they have to change schools and areas every few years. I told her I would help make sure that they stayed a secret, but I would have to tell others. I promised her that they all would be sworn to secrecy. I contacted every teacher who claimed to have seen a child who didn't age and the

Society of the Secret was born. We have sworn to uphold the secret of Santa Clause and his helpers... but it is really hard to keep that secret when hundreds of them are swarming on my school. I was surprised when you came here... because of Lucy. I've never known two of you to be in the same place."

"I didn't know Lucy was here. Kevin recommended this school to me."

"Ah, yes, I know Kevin well," replied Principal Sterling. "I asked him to send Lucy here so she and Tim could be reunited. Kevin knew she was here so why did he send you here as well?"

"I don't know," replied Richard, "and I don't know why all the others are coming here but I promise you I will find out."

"Be sure you do. People are going to get suspicious fast." Principal Sterling hesitated and turned to Tim. "Tim, tell me, what happened to Santa Clause?"

"Not Santa Clause, Stephanie. Santi Clause."

"Santi Clause?"

"That is correct," continued Tim, "Santi and his descendants aren't like you... or even me. There are, or was, at the North Pole, a completely different species of humanoid called the Santi."

"Different?"

"The Santi are an unusual, somewhat immortal race of people who only exist as long as somebody believe in them. The stronger the belief the more magical they become!"

"Wait!" exclaimed Principal Sterling. "Are you telling me Santi Clause isn't human?"

"In the early 300's, A.D. of course, Clause was just another Santi existing because there were people who believed they existed..."

"Wait a minute, Tim. Are you saying the Santi Clause is two thousand years old!"

"By all known accounts he is nearly three thousand years old..." answered Richard. "Hey, I'm two thousand and seventy. The Santi are an ancient race with an incredibly long lifespan; as long as someone believes in them. Tim is also a Santi. I am not. My race is even more ancient, going back to the days of the biblical book of Genesis. We also have a very long lifespan. My kind ages extremely slowly, having the appearance of a child for most of our life, but the Santi age fifty years and then stop aging for five thousand years. There are very few of them, though. Only about five Santi have ever existed at one time..."

"You're a Santi?" Stephanie asked Tim. "Just like Santi Clause?"

"Well I wouldn't say, 'just like Santi Clause,' but yes, I am a Santi. That's why I look like an adult while all the others look like children. When belief was strong I had great magical abilities... but not these days..."

"Now where was I?" continued Tim, "oh right... So nobody quite understands how the Santi came to exist or anyone came to believe they existed. What is known is that one night an angel appeared to the Santi whose name is Clause and told him that Santi would serve mankind in secret, spreading joy and cheer to the children of the world. The angel told Santi Clause about the Elves..."

"Elves?"

"Yes, Ms. Sterling, Elves." replied Tim.

"I am an Elf." added Richard. "We elves lived in a place called Elfician, deep in the icebergs of the North Pole. My ancestors fled the chaos that followed the fall of the daystar and came to earth right around the time God created man. At that time elves were forbidden to interfere or even interact with men so my ancestors settled deep in the North Pole where no humans would dare go. Then one day, thousands of years later, Santi Clause showed up and ever since we have served the royal family with honor..."

"Royal family?"

"You sure interrupt a lot!" exclaimed Tim jokingly.

"Sorry Tim, I'm just very curious. Please continue."

"Santi Clause became the ruler of the Kingdom of the Santi. He set out to fulfill his mission given

to him by the angel and so, eventually, he built a headquarters at the North Pole to organize a whole gift giving operation. At the time, nobody would ever have found us. Eventually we moved it underground as the humans began to explore more. The more people there were who believed in Santi Clause the more magical we all became. With the magic the Elves began making gifts for all the children of the world that Santi Clause would deliver once a year.

“For about fifteen hundred years he did this using magic, technology, and reindeer. These were joyful times for the Santi and the Elves! But then people stopped believing and the magic began to fade until there wasn't enough of it left. The last time we saw Santi Clause he had left to deliver his toys, but their wasn't enough belief and the magic ran out. He wasn't able to finish his deliveries nor was he able to return to the North Pole. Nobody really knows what happened to him. Some of the elves think he may have faded completely out of existence.”

Chapter 11

Tim was teaching his class early that week and noticed that Lexi had been crying. Throughout class she'd clearly been trying to hold back her tears, but was failing. Her face was stained with them and she was having trouble focusing and was clearly upset about something. He kept an eye on her during class to make sure she was okay, and then when class was over he asked her to stay behind.

“Are you okay, Lexi? He inquired.

“It's nothing, Mr. Snowadin,” she replied through her tears.

“It's clearly not nothing,” responded Tim. “Come on; it will help to talk about it.”

“Okay,” replied Lexi through her trying to choke back the moisture dripping from her eyes. “It's my dog, Shepherd. He was hit by the bus this morning!” her voice cracked. “He's dead! I loved that dog! I didn't know he'd gotten out the door when I left! He followed me and ran out into the street right in front of the bus! It was horrible!” She broke down and collapsed against him in anguish.

“Oh Lexi,” Tim cautiously put his arm on her to comfort her, being very careful to maintain professional boundaries. “I know it hurts now, but...”

Just then something happened that shouldn't have happened. There are things that happen that are normal and then there are things that just don't happen. This was one of those things. It was unexplainable! All of a sudden there was a flash of light and Lexi's dog Shepherd was standing in front of them, alive and well!

Lexi squealed and wrapped her arms tightly around the dog, kissing it affectionately. She was so full of joy she didn't even question how her dog suddenly came back. She just looked at Tim, said, “Thank you,” and went home.

Tim, on the other hand, stood there in utter shock. What just happened? It couldn't be! He looked down at his hands. Suddenly he could feel it. There was magic there! He decided to test it. He gave a flick of his wrist, imagining a nice glass of water. There was a flash of light and suddenly a glass of crystal clear water appeared in his hand. He glanced towards the door to make sure no one saw him. He probably should have done that before doing the magic, but thankfully no one was there.

“I don't believe it!” he exclaimed to himself. “Everything is changing! The magic is coming back!”

Chapter 12

At the end of the school day Richard caught up with Lucy as she was leaving the school grounds. Lucy was still excited about the possibilities that the future might now hold.

“Luce!” Richard yelled out to her as she was walking well ahead of him.

“What is it Richard?”

“Lucy, The Greeter...”

“I haven't been called that in two hundred years!”

“Kevin, The Gatherer, isn't here so I need you to get everyone together.”

“Everyone?” Lucy was a little surprised.

“The Secret Society of the Santi Clause will be having an emergency meeting at midnight tonight. Ms. Sterling has arranged for us to use the school auditorium. Can you do that for me?”

Lucy smiled. “Yes Richard, The Leader. I will serve as The Gatherer.”

“Thank you, Lucy. I'm having dinner with Daniel's family this evening. Did you know he was part Santi?”

“Yes, I did... and I'm glad you're finally reaching out to people.”

“I'll see you tonight.”

“See you tonight.”

They went their separate ways. Lucy had a lot to do before midnight. Richard met up with Daniel and they went to his parents' house for dinner. The delicious smell of Teriyaki Chicken and Rice filled the house. The dining room table was sort of round with indentations in it, odd by human standards, but perfectly normal to them. Each indentation was at the spot where someone was to sit. They all sat down around the feast: Daniel, Richard, Daniel's sister, and Daniel's parents. They bowed their heads and Daniel's father said a prayer of thanks to the Almighty God. Then the food was served.

“Thanks so much for having me over.” Richard took a bite out of the chicken.

“No problem at all,” replied Daniel's Mother Rebecca, technically, Santi Rebecca. “It's been a very long time since I've had contact with an elf. Tell me, how are the Elves doing?”

“Well, it's been lonely, but we've managed,” replied Richard. “I think most of them miss working on the toys and the excitement of getting ready for the big day when the toys would be delivered by Santi Clause.”

“Did you ever consider delivering the toys yourself,” asked Daniel's father.

“Of course we did! The first year he was gone we tried to do it ourselves, but without magic it just wasn't possible.

“And Santis have magic?” Apparently this was news to Daniels father.

“We did,” replied Daniel's mother, “but only when people believed in us.”

“Mom, the magic is returning,” added Daniel. “I can feel it.”

“If the magic comes back, then perhaps another Santi can drive the sleigh,” suggested his mom.

“What an interesting idea.” Richard was rather intrigued by this. “Listen, all the Elves are gathering at midnight tonight for a meeting of the Secret Society of the Santi Clause. You guys should come.”

“We'd be honored.” Daniel's mom was truly elated to have been invited.

The rest of the evening they talked about the past two hundred years and all the things that they had experienced. Daniel's parents had worked as advisers to the King of Spain for several years before coming to America. Richard told them about the time he lived among a tribe of Aborigines in Australia. The evening faded and the night grew late. It was time to head to the school for the meeting.

The night was exceptionally dark as storm clouds gathered overhead. A few snowflakes fluttered down as if to warn of the impending winter weather. At the school, one hundred and forty nine Elves gathered in the auditorium. They were all very excited, even jittery. It had been over one hundred years since the Secret Society of the Santi Clause had all met together under one roof!

Chapter 13

At midnight the school looked abandoned except for all the footprints in the new fallen snow. For safety each Elf had walked to the school so that there would be no vehicles there to raise suspicions. However, shortly after the auditorium door had been closed, a suspicious white van with government

plates drove by. After passing the school and heading down the road the van turned around and passed by again. In total, the strange white van made five passes by the school before disappearing into the darkness of the night. The snowfall quickly covered the evidence of its tire tracks.

Inside, the auditorium was bustling with activity and noise. Most of the Elves had not seen each other in at least a hundred and fifty years. They were ecstatic with getting reacquainted. Then a certain Elf, an Elf whose job it was to start the meeting, walked out onto the stage and the audience fell silent. As excited as they were to meet up with all their old friends, they were even more intrigued to find out why they had been gathered together after all these years.

"Welcome Elves," began Peter the Introducer. "This meeting of the Secret Society of the Santi Clause is hereby brought to order. Let us begin by first giving thanks to the Almighty. So please welcome to the stage John the Priest."

The Elves gave a robust round of applause as John the Priest took the stage. Richard was standing just off the stage waiting for his turn to address the audience. Lucy was in the back, doing her job as greeter by manning the door. It was also her job to make sure nobody but those of the society came in.

"I know it has been a long, long... very long time since we all were gathered together, and it can seem like we have little to be thankful for. However, we all need to realize how much we actually do have." John the Priest's voice echoed over the auditorium through the sound system. "For starters, we still have everyone with us. Nobody has been captured, killed, or injured. That is truly something to feel blest about. Let us all bow our heads and thank the Almighty God for the safety of our people through this long winter of separation and beseech Him for a bright future as we move forward to new possibilities." The auditorium came alive as one by one each Elf said a short prayer of thanks and adoration to the Almighty. Then Peter came back to the microphone. "Now, it is my honor to re-introduce you to the Elves who have guided us through it all. Please welcome Richard, the Leader and Santi Tim"

The audience burst forth with clapping and hooting and hollering as Richard and Tim walked up to the mic. As soon as they reached it the Elves fell silent.

"Thank you friends!" began Richard. "It is indeed wonderful to have all of you back together again! Calvin the Counter has confirmed that there are one hundred and forty nine of us here. The one Elf who is missing is the one who has led each one of us to this town, Kevin the Gatherer. Unfortunately none of us actually knows why."

Richard paused. An air of disappointment could be felt in the auditorium at that moment.

Tim took over, "We can only assume that Kevin the Gatherer will send word to us soon. In the meantime, we need to recognize that it is very dangerous for all of us to be in one place so from this point on the use of Elf technology is prohibited. We need to realize that this isn't the 4th century. While the humans of that time welcomed us with kindness and joy, the governments of today are paranoid and obsessed with anything that is different from them. If they knew our secret they would capture us, torture us, and run tests on us for the rest of our lives. Those of you who are in school are to act like normal students. That is, once in awhile you need to miss a question and get an answer wrong. More than ever we need to make every effort to blend in with the humans and not do anything to draw attention to ourselves. The school cannot possibly enroll all of you, so those of you who are not in school will need to lie low during the school day..."

Tim stopped as he saw Lucy open the door to let someone in. It was Kevin!

"Elves," announced Richard, "I present to you the Elf who has brought us all here. Please welcome Kevin the Gatherer!"

Cheers broke forth as the one who had all the answers approached the stage. Richard and Tim welcomed Kevin with a hug as he took the stage.

"My fellow Elves," began Kevin. "I received a call from the workshop." There were gasps. "There are two stranded humans there; a little girl and her father... And they believe! Their belief has reactivated the workshop's belief energy collectors. The magic is returning!"

None of the earlier cheers and applause could even come close to describing the elation and joy that rang through the auditorium. It was exactly what they had waited two hundred years to hear! The sheer noise of their elation continued for at least five minutes. Finally they settled down.

"I have arranged a private jet piloted by a member of the Society of the Secret to return us to the North Pole. We leave in two days."

Richard joined him at the microphone. "I know this is the news we have longed to hear for two centuries, but until we leave we must contain our joy. We cannot let our guard down. Now I also realize some of you have recently joined with human families from the Society of the Secret. I do not wish to tear you from your new families, and no one really knows what's going to happen. Even with the power returning, there's still the question of Santi Clause. So, I am hereby proclaiming the return to the North Pole is completely voluntary. Anyone who wishes to stay behind may do so."

"In two days," added Kevin, "everyone who is coming should meet at terminal six of the local airport."

"There is a lot to do in two days," continued Richard.

"We're going home!" exclaimed Tim. He paused while the Elves cheered. "I thank you for coming and officially declare this meeting adjourned. God be with us!"

As the Elves made their way back to their homes they were unaware of the two white vans sitting on the side of the street with their lights off. The men inside them watched the Elves like they were at a zoo exhibit. When the last of the Elves were out of sight, the vans engines started up and they once again drove off into the darkness.

Chapter 14

As Tim approached the school the next morning, he noticed seven unmarked white vans suspiciously parked in the bus loading zone. His stomach sunk. He had a really bad feeling about them. The snow storm had blown through during the night and now the sun glistened on the sparkling snow. Tim ran through the knee deep snow drifts, fighting against the resistance of the ice, and charged into the school. He headed straight for the principal's office. The closer he got the more anxious he became. Something was wrong! He was sure of it. He stopped just short of the principal's door where Richard was standing with his ear against it so that he could overhear the conversation from inside.

"Ms. Sterling," spoke one of the men inside. He was dressed in a snazzy black suit and was wearing dark sunglasses, even though he was inside. "You understand this is a very serious situation."

"Sir, you are talking crazy," replied Principal Sterling. "I mean, aliens! You have to be kidding?"

"I assure you ma'am," spoke another one of the men, "we at Sector Seven do not kid."

"You claim to know nothing about these reports of kids who don't age," continued the other agent.

"That's correct." Ms. Sterling was getting very nervous.

"And yet every lead we have followed leads right here to you! How do you explain that?" The agent was raising his voice.

"I don't know, Sir." Principal Sterling knew she wasn't going to get out of this.

"We are talking about national security here!" yelled one of the men. "You could be the hero who saves us from an alien invasion."

She said nothing.

"Ma'am," added another agent, "if you won't talk we will have to take you into custody."

"I'm pretty sure you were going to do that anyways," replied Ms. Sterling.

"We know they are here! Just tell us where!" They certainly were insistent.

"I can tell you only this," Ms. Sterling was scared but holding herself together, "they are not aliens. They're not invaders. They are simply friends. Just leave them alone!"

"Take her!" insisted the man who was clearly in charge.

Two of the agents grabbed her and handcuffed her hands behind her back.

"You can't do this without a warrant!" She knew that wouldn't do any good but she had to say it anyways."

"We're Sector Seven. We can do whatever we want." He stuffed a gag into her mouth and led her to the door that led out of her office. They had every intention of embarrassing her in front of her students.

Tim saw Lucy and grabbed her.

"Lucy! You have to get word to all the Elves. Ms. Sterling is in trouble and we have to help her. We need a plan, quick!"

Lucy took off running down the hallway looking for the other Elves. They spread the word quickly.

Richard went over to a locker on the other side of the hallway and pretended to be opening it as the agents escorted Ms. Sterling, in handcuffs and a gag, down that hallway in front of her students. Tim followed a inconspicuous distance behind.

"What are you doing to her?" cried out one of the girls in the hallway.

"None of your business, pipsqueak!" yelled one of the men at her.

Carefully, Richard and Tim followed them as they made their way to the van. Then Lucy came running up to him.

"Okay, we have a plan!" She yelled. "We're going to hijack the van she's in so it's very important that we know which one it is."

"I'm on it!" announced Richard. He took off down the hallway to catch up to the men and Ms. Sterling.

The agents led Ms. Sterling to the second van parked at the school and forced her inside. The engines on the vans started up and the first two vans drove off. The other five vans stalled and their tires suddenly blew out. The work of clever Elves! The two vans, including the one that the principal was in, drove out of the sight past the school. Then suddenly, the first van stopped, causing the second van to crash into it! Immediately a ton of Elves poured out of the back of the first van and surrounded second. They ripped the doors of the van with their Elf technology and surrounded the agents inside. One of the Elves untied Principal Sterling and led her out of the vehicle. The other Elves quickly tied up the agents and left them in the van.

"Ms Sterling," said the Elf named Lilly. "We were going to return to the North Pole in three days, but now we have to leave immediately and I think for your own safety you should come with us."

"Agreed." Principal Sterling had no family here to worry about her.

"Okay, good," continued Lilly. "Kevin has a plane ready for us at the airport; we just need to get all the Elves there as quickly as possible."

"Use the school buses!" suggested Principal Sterling.

They took the van they had commandeered and returned to the school. Several other Elves had tied up the other agents and fully disabled their vans, but they all knew that it would only be a matter of time before reinforcements arrived.

All of the Elves piled onto the school buses. Principal Sterling found a couple bus drivers who were willing to transport them to the airport. Lucy arrived at one of the buses with her family following behind.

"They want to come with us," she explained to Tim.

"Well, I guess they are in danger too. They are welcome to join us."

"Thank you."

One Hundred and Fifty Elves plus three human families, Santi Tim, Daniel's family and Ms. Sterling packed full several school buses which sped out of the school heading for the airport. As they left the school, an armada of white vans invaded the school grounds. Government agents swarmed the building, checking every nook and cranny. Finding nothing, they grouped together to discuss their strategy. Then one of the agents dragged a school bus driver over to their leader.

"She knows something," he announced.

Chapter 15

The three buses pulled up to terminal six at the airport. One hundred and fifty plus people filed off the buses and were rushed to a large private jet that sat on the tarmac.

Kevin stopped to talk to the pilot. "Thank you, Jim. I'm so sorry to have to move our departure up so suddenly."

"It's okay. It was an emergency. Let's just get you guys to the North Pole!"

"Richard!" Lucy yelled out urgently.

"What is it?"

Lucy pointed towards the road. Richard glanced over and saw a long convoy of unmarked white vans descending upon the airport.

The last of the Elves filed in to the plane.

"We have to go now!" yelled Richard as he closed the hatch.

"Attention all aircraft," came an announcement over the plane's intercom, "per government orders all flights are to remain on the tarmac until further notice. All flights away from the tarmac are to return immediately. Again, all aircraft are grounded until further notice."

"We've got a problem!" exclaimed Jim (the pilot).

Like a massive tidal wave the government agents flooded into the airport. A wash of people in black suits and sunglasses fanned out across the land. They began searching every plane and terminal.

"Forget the control tower!" yelled Tim. "We have to go now!"

"Once I start the engines, they'll know it's us!" Jim was getting quite concerned. He was in way over his head.

"Understood," replied Tim. "Just get us airborne as quickly as you can."

The propellers on the wings of the plane roared to life and the plane began to move away from the loading area. As it was the only plane in motion, it immediately caught the attention of all the agents. They began running towards it. Some of the vans drove out on the tarmac. Gradually the plane sped up as it quickly taxied onto the runway.

"Flight 4035," came a voice through the intercom, "you are NOT clear for take off. Return to the tarmac immediately."

The agents who were on foot gave up, realizing they would never be able to overtake the plane, which was taxiing way too fast. Five vans rushed down the runaway in pursuit of the rogue aircraft. At each turn the plane dipped its wings and nearly toppled over.

"We need to slow down for the turns!" yelled Jim.

"We have to keep it moving!" replied Tim.

On the next turn the wing hit the ground, just slightly, but enough to cause sparks and damage to the wing tip. White government vans were now descending upon the runway in huge numbers.

"One more turn!" Jim said.

Jim slowed the plane just a little bit for the last turn. The wing came down but missed hitting the runway by less than a centimeter. The government vans were everywhere: in front of them, behind them, and on every side of them! The plane finished the turn and now had the straight of the runway stretched out before it.

Jim throttled the engine. "Here we go!"

The plane shook and rattled as it picked up speed much faster than it was ever intended too! The engine roared with ferocity as it turned the propellers faster and faster! The government vans swerved, crashing into each other, trying to avoid being hit by the plane. Some of the agents fired shots, but the plane was already too far down the runway for them to actually hit it. The wheels left the ground and the giant metal bird soared into the air!

"Tim," said Jim nervously, "you know they are going to send jets to intercept us!"

"Not a problem," replied Richard. "Now that we're in the air I can use a little Elf technology to

help us out.”

He pulled out a small metal box and placed it on the plane's control panel and then pressed a button on it. In an instant the airplane vanished from sight and radar as if it had never been there. Moments later two fighter jets soared by, circled and came back, and then circled again.

“Command Alpha,” spoke one of the jet pilots, “this is Eagle Two we have negative contact with the bogey. It seems to have disappeared.”

Inside the airplane everybody relaxed just a little as their craft soared through sky, heading north. As the hours went by several of the Elves fell asleep and peacefully dreamed about what lay ahead. Below them the scenery gradually changed from greens, blues, yellow, and browns to almost exclusively white. The heaters turned on as the cabin temperature began to drop; not that the Elves minded the cold. They were used to it... Well, they used to be used it. Of course that was two hundred years ago!

...Santi Tim found himself standing in front of a control station adjusting for time variations during the delivery process. Elves were running around the large room performing various tasks. One of the elves rushed up to him.

“Santi Tim!” the elf exclaimed. “We have problem.”

“What is, Jessica?” replied Tim.

“Tracking has lost contact with Santi Clause, sir! We can't find him!”

“Richard!” yelled out Tim. “Come here!”

They both stood around a computer console and tried to establish communications.

“Tim... (static) ...I can... barely hear you!” came through the communications system. “(static) I am (static) ...power issues... (static) ...reindeer can't fly... (static)”

“Santi Clause,” replied Tim. “What is your location?”

“(static) Repeat! (static) ...not hear well...” (static)

“What is your current position?” yelled Richard.

“I am ne... (static) ...Australia....”

Suddenly everything went dark in the control room and communications went dead.

“Report!” yelled Tim frantically.

A back up light turned on and dimly lit the room.

“There seems to be no power, sir,” replied one of the Elves. “The Faith Collectors are empty!”

“Without them,” added another elf sadly, “Santi Clause won't be able to return!”

Tim and Richard stood there helplessly. With the power off, the cold began to invade the building, leading to the inevitable and dreaded decision. There was no choice!

“Tim,” said Richard painfully. “I'm afraid we have no options. It's going to get really cold in here really quick! We have no choice; we have to evacuate.”

“What about Santi Clause?” exclaimed one of the elves.

“There's nothing we can do for him,” replied Tim sadly. “It's over. We have to leave. Now.”

Suddenly Santi Clause's face flashed in front of Tim yelling, “Don't leave me here! Tim! Why did you leave me here? You ruined Christmas!...”

Tim awoke with a startle. He was panting and disoriented. He looked around and saw that he was still on the plane. It was just a dream. Well, sort of. Except for the last part, it had all actually happened!

Chapter 16

The old metal bird, with its propellers spinning in dizzingly fast circles, began to lose altitude. From underneath its steel body the wheels lowered down and took their position as the cold wind

rushed across them.

“Over there,” pointed Richard. “See that landing strip.”

“I don't see anything!” exclaimed Jim. “It all looks like ice.”

Richard pushed a button on a phone-like device and suddenly a paved runway appeared in front of them.

“Now I see it!” Jim moved the plane into position with the runway.

The nose of the plane lifted as it glided on to the surprisingly dry runway. The cabin bounced a little as the rear wheels made contact with the pavement. Slowly the nose dropped and the front wheels slammed to the ground. The propellers reversed and the brakes activated, slowing the momentum of the big steel structure. Ahead of them there were marking on the pavement that clearly indicated a parking spot, complete with a stairway for unloading the plane. Gradually the vessel came to a stop and the propellers slowed their spin until they finally rested from a job well done.

“We're home!” shouted Richard.

The Elves responded with cheers. While they had lived the past two hundred years away, they had spent most of their life here in the North Pole. As far as they were concerned, this was their home.

The hatch was unsealed and four Elves used rope to climb down from the plane. This was their job. They went over to the stairs and began pushing them towards the plane. Under normal conditions the stairs would move on their own power, but right now there was very little power. Slowly the Elves positioned the stairway in front of the metal bird. Once it was secured the passengers began climbing out of the plane.

Richard and Kevin were the last two, other than the pilot, to remain onboard.

“Thank you so much, Jim,” said Kevin almost tearfully. “You've been a great friend. I hope our paths will cross again someday.”

“I'm sure they will Kevin,” replied the pilot. “I'm sure they will. You take care of yourself.”

They said their goodbyes and Kevin departed the plane.

“Good work, Jim,” said Richard. “Once we get the power fully on, the Fueling Elves will refuel your plane, and the Strategic Forces Elves will hack into the government computers and change all your flight information so that Sector Seven won't be looking for you. We will make it so that they're chasing ghost they can never find.”

“Thank you, Richard. Tell me, what is Sector Seven?”

Richard paused. “They're the Men in Black. Alien hunters.”

“But you're not aliens.”

“Try telling them that!”

“Oh, I see.”

“Now Jim, you are more than welcome to join us inside.”

“Thank you, but I need to get back as soon as I can. Once the plane is refueled I have to go.”

“Very well,” replied Richard. “It has been an honor working with you.”

“The honor has been all mine.”

“May the Almighty guide you and be with you.”

“God be with you as well.”

Richard departed the plane and the Transportation Elves moved the stairs away from the door. Jim closed the hatch and put his head back to rest while he waited for his plane to be refueled. The Elves were all gathered on the runway, which steamed as the snowflakes melted upon it. It was the only thing right now that had any power; the only thing that had it's own power source separate from the main power generator, and it generated enough heat to keep the snow and ice off of its pavement.

“Again, Welcome Home Elves!” shouted Richard. He paused while the Elves cheered again. “As you know the Central Power Core has been shut down for two hundred years. Except for the two refugees from a plane crash, nobody has entered this facility in all that time. It will be dusty and it will be dark.”

As if that were a cue, all the Elves pulled out their little phone-like devices and typed something on the screen. The devices then became bright flashlights glowing in front of them. “

Richard continued. “We will be entering by way of the main launch bay. This way.”

Tim took the lead and led Richard and the other Elves to a sheer cliff of ice that rose up before them. However, as they got close to it, it began to look more like metal, metal that had been painted with a wintery scene of ice. Tim and Richard put their phone-like devices, called ToolKits, on the metal. They stuck to it, flashed, and then a single red light lit up on the metal above him. Then Kevin came up and stuck his ToolKit onto the steel structure. The light turned orange. Lucy joined them at the front of the group and placed her ToolKit next to Richard's on the metal. The light turned green and a series of loud clicking and latching noises thundered around them. Their ToolKits had worked as batteries providing the power to unlock the landing bay doors, but they could not provide enough power to open them. Richard, Kevin, and Lucy reached out and grabbed their ToolKits off of the door.

Even though it had been two centuries since they had performed them, every single Elf still knew what their job was. Tim, Richard, Kevin, and Lucy stepped back while several Elves rushed up to the door. Hidden under the snow they found two large steel poles. It took twenty Elves per pole to be able to lift them. The Door Keeper Elves hoisted the poles up and drove them into two separate holes on either side of the metal door. They locked into place with a thump. Then the twenty elves on each side lined up with the pole and began pushing. They grunted and groaned with all their might and gradually the metal doors started to split apart and open. The door screamed and screamed as it moved across the frozen ground. After all, it hadn't been opened in a very long time. It took ten minutes but, finally, the hanger bay doors were open. A pitch black tunnel stretched out before them, leading deep into the ground. Using their ToolKits as flashlights the Elves trekked into the tunnel. As usual Richard and Tim took the lead; it was their job to take the lead. They hiked for what seemed like miles deep into the underground facility. The light of the surface faded in the distance behind them and had it not been for their ToolKit lights they would have been immersed in total darkness. The tunnel was huge and the ceiling hung way above them. The metal of the walls around them was old, very old, and bore a patchwork of stains where the metal had oxidized. For the humans who were with them, who had never been here before, the sheer grandeur of the whole thing was overwhelming!

Chapter 17

The large tunnel opened up into an enormous room where the walls and the ceiling could not be seen under the current lighting of the ToolKits. Stretching into the tunnel walkway appeared to be some sort of runway system that disappeared into the darkness from which they had emerged. In front of them stood a large fancy sled with the name “The Sleigh 2” engraved on it. It was huge, standing at nearly ten feet tall, but in reality, it was the small backup sled that was only used when the main sleigh was out of service. The main sleigh was not there as it was lost with Santi Clause.

Tim, Richard, and Kevin made their way past the sled and into the main part of the compound. Through the darkness they could just make out to figures hiding behind some equipment on the other side of the room. The two whispered to each other about the situation but tried to stay hidden.

“Suzy!” called out Kevin. “It's okay. I am Kevin the Gatherer. These are my friends.”

“Kevin?” replied Suzy as her dad and her stood up.

“It's okay,” yelled out Tim. “We're here to rescue you.”

Suzy and her father carefully made their way through the dark room over to where Kevin, Tim, and Richard and the elves were standing.

“Hi Suzy,” spoke Kevin.

She giggled slightly and replied, “Hi Kevin. Thank you for coming to rescue us. You're really an elf?”

"Yes I am." Kevin replied with a smile.

"Where's Santa Clause?" Suzy asked with the innocent voice of a child.

"Santa Clause is very busy," replied Kevin. He wouldn't dare tell her the truth, that Santi Clause was missing. "I'm afraid he's not here. Perhaps you'll get to meet him another time."

"Okay," she responded sheepishly.

"Let's get you guys home!" Kevin took her hand and guided her and her father across the room to another, smaller landing bay.

"Caitlin the Navigator and Lilly the pilot," commanded Santi Tim, "take Suzy and her dad home in the mini jet and then come straight back here."

"Yes sir!" answered the two elves.

Suzy, her father, and the two elves disappeared into the small hanger and a few minutes later the roar of an engine filled the room and then faded in the distance.

The other elves all circled around Richard and Tim awaiting orders.

"Welcome home! Our first priority is to get the Central Power Core running," announced Richard.

"Then the Counting Elves need to take an inventory of what gifts are already made," added Santi Tim, "and the Maker Elves need to start making new gifts. We had enough gifts made for the population of the world two centuries ago; we will need a lot more now."

Richard continuing with the orders. "Cleaning Elves and anyone who is available will need to get this place cleaned up and ready for Operation Christmas. There is two hundred years of dust to be dealt with!"

"Maintenance Elves," added Santi Tim, "the 'Sleigh' needs to be checked over top to bottom, and Transportation Elves need to refuel Jim's jet so he can be on his way. Okay, everybody to their assignments. Power Elves, you're with me!"

"One question!" yelled one of the elves. "Who's going to deliver the presents in the sleigh?"

"Just do your assignments, and know that we're working on it," replied Tim.

Working by the light of their ToolKit the Elves went about preparing for their tasks. The Power Elves followed Tim and Richard down the corridor and to the Central Power Room. Richard placed his ToolKit on the door and it unlocked and slid open. Inside was a large crystallized structure that stood about twenty feet tall. Several wires came forth from it and spread like a net across the compound. In front of it was a large computer with multiple interfaces. Tim walked up to the computer terminal in the center while each of the Power Elves manned the other interfaces. They each set their ToolKits in a designated slot on the computer tower and then typed a code word into their ToolKit. The computer monitors lit up and a series of ones and zeros flashed across the screen for a couple seconds. Then the screens became white with large black text on it that said, "Please enter security authorization codes in priority order." Tim typed his code into the computer interface. The computer beeped and the text on the screens changed: "Authorization Alpha 1 accepted; Awaiting Authorization Beta." Next, Richard typed his code: "Authorization Beta accepted." One of the Power Elves then typed in his code, then another typed in his code, and then another, until each of the Power Elves had interfaced with the computer. "Authorization Accepted," flashed across the computer screens, "Faith collectors are at eighty nine percent... Standby for Fusion Reactor Boot Sequence... " The base of the giant crystal began to glow with a bright, blinding white light. Tim and the elves quickly put on special sunglasses. The computer monitors shut off and the computer's audio interface activated, "Fusion power up, phase 1 complete. Diagnostics show that Glacier Crystals are undamaged and ready to receive nuclear reactions."

"Begin phase 2," Tim commanded the computer.

"Initiating fusion power up, phase 2," replied the computer's voice.

The bottom portion of the crystal grew even brighter and began to spin. Tim and the elves stood there with their sunglasses on and watched as the light show intensified. Then the light began to crawl its way up the crystallized structure until the entire thing glowed with bright white light. The light

refracted off into a glorious spread of rainbow colors! The top of the crystal remained stationary, pulsing with light, while the bottom of the crystal spun rapidly. There was a low humming noise that grew with intensity as each second past. The pitch gradually went up, getting louder and louder, and then faded into the background. The lights on the crystal faded into a warm glow and everyone took off their sunglasses.

Throughout the compounds lights flickered on, one by one until the whole place was bright and glowing. The air ducts sprung to life, blowing warm air throughout the frozen building. Computers and machines whirled to action and Christmas music began to play over the loud speaker. Even from within the Central Power Room, Richard could hear the Elves cheering.

“Central Power Core is fully active,” announced the computer.

“Very good,” replied Richard. He and the Power Elves picked up their ToolKits and headed back down the corridor and into the workshop.

The place bustled with activity. Elves were rushing back and forth. There was so much to be done and so little time left before Christmas. The humans were helping the Cleaning Elves with the enormous task of cleaning up two hundred years of neglect, while the Maker Elves were hard at work making new toys. The kitchen had also come to life as the Kitchen Elves heated up the twenty ovens that would be used to feed this army of workers. Up on the surface the Transportation Elves finished refueling the jet they had arrived on and Jim took off and headed back to warmer climates. Now the Transportation Elves were heading back into the compound to focus on preparing the backup sleigh for travel. They intended to deliver the Christmas presents this year. They just weren't sure who would be doing it.

Kevin walked up to Richard, who was overseeing the operations. “It's good to be back, Richard. Isn't it?”

“Yes, it is.” He paused to take it all in and sighed a pleasant sigh. Just then an alarm went off. “Report.”

“Yes sir,” replied Kevin. “The tracking grid has detected a vessel approaching the north pole.”

“Can we get a visual?”

“No” reported Kevin. “The old cameras are iced over.”

“Okay,” replied Richard, “keep an eye on it. We may have to rig for silent running.”

“Uh, sir,” Kevin hesitated and typed something into the computer. “This is very odd, sir. The approaching vessel is transmitting a security clearance code.”

“Is the code valid?”

“Yes. It checks out.”

“Okay then,” Richard pauses. “Tim! Come here!”

“Yes Richard?”

“Tim, we have an incoming vessel that is transmitting a valid security clearance code. Please advise.”

“Your sure the code is valid?”

“Yes. It checks out.”

“Okay. Direct it to Landing Bay four and send security elves there.”

“Yes sir.”

“Wait a minute,” added Kevin. “I'm getting a visual from camera five.”

The three gathered around the computer screen to see the camera's image. The image was fuzzy and full of static, afterall the cameras were sitting in ice for two hundred years! Then they saw it; an incredible sight! Eight reindeer; not tiny reindeer; that was a mistake in “The Night Before Christmas.” There was nothing tiny about these reindeer. They were huge muscular beasts full of power, nobility, and strength. With their massive might they pulled the main sleigh rapidly across the polar sky. It was a monstrous sleigh standing twelve feet high and twenty feet long.

“It's Santi Clause!” screamed Kevin in excitement.

“Okay,” replied Tim. “Reroute him to the main hanger bay. Alert the Reindeer Elves to be prepared to feed and care for eight reindeer as soon as they land. Get maintenance ready as well. The main sleigh should be checked over and made ready to launch again.”

“Yes sir.”

The elves gathered around the main landing bay and cheered with joy as the eight large, muscular reindeer touched down and dragged the sleigh down the main launch tunnel into the landing area. Sitting on the sleigh, as jolly as ever, was Santi Clause! If there was anything that was right on spot with the Legend of Santa Clause, it was his description. The man was the epitome of every recent depiction of Santa Clause. He was a tall, thick man with a large belly who was muscular and strong with a face that carried a large white beard and eyes that sparkled with kindness. He even wore the red suit with white, fuzzy trim, and he even laughed out a deep and jolly, “Ho, ho, ho!” He looked older; much older, but still was jolly and merry.

Once the sleigh came to a stop, the Reindeer Elves unhooked the reindeer and led them to the stables for feeding and grooming. Santi Tim walked up to the sled and held his hand out to Santi Clause to help him down.

“Welcome home Santi Clause! It is wonderful to see you after all these years!”

“Ho, ho, ho! It is great to be back.” replied the old Santi.

That evening they all sat together at a long, stretched out wooden table in a gigantic dining room and feasted. The food in the kitchen had been left in a suspended animation field two hundred years ago, so it was all perfectly good and fresh. They ate and drank and enjoyed each other's company. They were, once again, a family and the future looked promising, and it seemed that, once again, Santa Clause would be coming to town!

Chapter 18

The next morning all of the packages were shrunk by the Elves' TookKit and placed in the Sleigh and the Sleigh was moved into launch position. With the help of their Elf technology millions of gifts had been made, and two hundred years of dust had been removed within the course of one day. The workshop sparkled with cleanliness and bright colors. The Transportation Elves were busy plotting Santi Clause's flight path and the Time Elves were deeply involved with preparing to safely manipulate time and space so that the journey could be done in one night. The reindeer Elves groomed the animals and put them through their warm up routines, but all the other Elves were pretty much done and so they all gathered again in the dining room for a robust breakfast. The table still brewed with the excitement of their operation as the Elves discussed their work and the problems they encountered and how they solved them. They were just about to clean up the breakfast dishes when an announcement came over the intercom.

“Attention all Elves,” it was Tim's voice coming through the speakers, “please report to Landing Bay One for a special announcement from Santi Clause.”

Oh the excitement! Santi Clause hadn't just been their King or even just their boss, he was a father to them. They were overfilled with joy just at the thought of hearing an announcement. They all rushed down the halls and converged upon Landing Bay One..

Santi Clause made his way onto the sleigh, standing above everyone as the Elves rejoiced and cheered. Then he waved his hand and silence fell over the Landing Bay.

“My friends,” he announced, “Santi Clause is coming to town!”

The Elves went crazy with celebration. The cheering filled the compound with a massive joyful noise. It was everything they had hoped for; everything they had dreamed of for the past two hundred years! As Santi Clause moved off the ramp the Elves became silent and bowed in honor of their king.

“Again, thank you my friends,” spoke Santi Clause in a deep, but welcoming voice, “but I would

prefer that you not bow to me, but rather bow only before the Almighty.”

The Elves shook their head in agreement and stood back to their feet.

“Richard,” cried out Mr. Clause.

Richard walked up to him and gave a report, “Sir, the Sleigh is loaded and ready with one gift for every child. Lucy has prepared a special welcome back message that is included in each package. Time distortions are almost rea...”

“Relax Richard,” replied Mr. Clause. “I know you have everything under control. Come; you too Santi Tim, there is much that we must discuss in private.”

Santi Clause, Richard, and Tim left Landing Bay One and headed for Mr. Clause's office. The other Elves filed out behind them and returned to their work. Inside Santi Clause's office, Mr. Clause sat at his large desk and motioned for Richard and Tim to sit down at the chairs in front of him.

“Before we get down to business, my friends,” began Santi Clause, “let me first express my utmost gratitude for your leadership during my absence. I know it wasn't easy; I never intended to be gone this long.”

“Where did you end up, sir?” inquired Richard.

“Australia; the Outback. Interesting place. A good place to hide eight flying reindeer, except for the heat!”

“So are you ready for your first Christmas flight in two hundred years?” asked Tim.

“That is actually what I have called you in here to talk about.” His demeanor dropped and the jolliness left his face. He became very serious.

“What is it, Santi Clause?” Tim started to feel a lump in his throat. He had never seen Mr. Clause be this serious before.

“Richard, Tim, you two have been my foremost advisers and best friends for as long as I can remember, which is why I must tell you the truth. I'm old; much, much older than any of your realize. My time is nearly up. This will be my farewell run on the Sleigh... as it is not likely I will live to see next Christmas. It is time for me to join the Lord in Paradise. After tonight Santa Clause will have to go back to just being a legend.”

“Not necessarily,” spoke Richard hesitantly.

“What do you mean?”

“Have you ever considered passing the reigns to somebody else?” continued Tim.

“But who?” replied Mr. Clause. “The Sleigh cannot be operated without telepathy, which the Elves do not possess... and though Tim is a Santi...”

“...my telepathy is too weak.” interrupted Tim.

“True, but you are not the only Santi who has strong telepathic ability,” added Richard.

“My great, great, granddaughter?” replied Santi Clause. “She never wanted to be part of this.”

“She is here,” informed Richard, “but actually I was referring to her son, the kindest person I ever met; present company excluded.”

“She has a child?”

“He's half human, but he does have strong Santi telepathic abilities. His abilities will need to be trained and refined, but I'm confident he could do it.”

“Is he willing?”

“Well, let's ask him!”

Santi Clause, Richard and Tim left the office and strolled into the workshop. Tim saw Lucy and called out to her.

“Lucy! Can you come here for a minute.”

“Yes father,” she hurried over and then looked at Mr. Clause, “Sir.”

“It's good to see you, Lucy,” replied Mr. Clause with a smile.

“Thank you, sir.” Lucy was kind of nervous in his presence.

“Lucy,” continued Richard, “I need you to find Santi Rebecca and her son Daniel and bring them

to us immediately.”

“Yes sir!” exclaimed Lucy as she took off to search the compound. Moments later she returned with Rebecca, her husband, and her son Daniel.

“Great, great granddaughter!!” exclaimed Santi Clause as Rebecca approached. He held out his arms and she rushed into them for a long overdue hug.

“Grandfather,” said Rebecca not seeing any point to listing all the “greats.” “This is my husband, John Sithson, and our son Daniel.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you,” said Mr. Clause as he held out his hand. John and Daniel shook his hand in a firm grip. “Now Daniel, we have a very unique request to ask you.”

“What is it?” Daniel replied rather sheepishly.

Santi Clause laughed a jolly and full laugh. “Daniel, how would you feel about being the new Santa Clause.”

“New Santa Clause?”

“You see, Daniel, I'm old; more than anyone realizes. My days are at an end. I would like you take my place and keep the gift alive. I will, of course, train you tonight and the Elves will always be there to help you.”

Daniel paused. He looked over at his mom and found reassurance in her eyes. He looked over at his dad and his dad smiled a smile that said “I'd be proud to call you Santa Clause.”

“I'll do it!” exclaimed Daniel. Santi Clause shook with a jolly laugh.

“Then it's settled,” announced Mr. Clause. “From now on you will be know as Santa Clause.”

That night the new Santa Clause and the old Santi Clause climbed into the Sleigh, and sat side by side. The reindeer jumped and pranced in excitement, waiting for the launch signal. The control room elves took their positions and final checks began!

“Flight plan is finalized and the sleigh's wireless has connected to the navigation computer. General Navigation is go,” announced the elf in charge of navigation.

“Weather data is in and has been synced with the sleigh's weather tracker. There is a severe snow storm in central Canada, but it won't be a problem. Weather Station is go!” reported the Weather elf.

“House to house deliveries have been mapped and synced with General Navigation. Specific Navigation is go!” spoke the Specific Navigation elf.

One by one each department reported their readiness.

“Sleigh computer is active and sending and receiving signals. Sleigh transmitters read one hundred percent. Santa's Sleigh is ready for go!”

“All presents are loaded in the 'Mary Poppins' hole aboard the sleigh. Present management elves are in position. Presents are ready for go!”

“Reindeer check out as healthy. All harnesses have been checked and double checked. Reindeer are ready for go! Awaiting pixie flight dusting.”

“Pixie flight dusting is commencing.” A sparkling dust dropped down from above and wash over the reindeer. “Pixie dusting is go!”

“Main cloaking is at full operation!” reported another elf.

“Open main launch doors!” ordered Santi Tim.

A loud mechanical sound filled the air and then stopped.

“Launch bay doors are ready for go,” reported an elf.

Richard pressed a button on his control panel and the main lights went to a dim mode. At the same time, bright overhead lights turned on, lighting the sleigh and the launch tunnel ahead.

“All operations report ready to go!” announced Tim. “Jingle Bells! Jingle Bells!”

“Jingle Bells” was the code word for beginning launch. Clamps that had held the sleigh securely in place released, allowing the sleigh to move under the anxious reindeer. The reindeer were ready to run with the sleigh, but they couldn't go yet. They needed the final launch code.

“Jingle all the way!” yelled out Santi Clause.

With that, the reindeer lurched forward, pulling the sleigh down into the launch tube, getting faster and faster. Their feet soon left the ground as the pixie dust took effect, and they shot out of the launch tube and into the polar night sky! The elves cheered and celebrated, but only for a moment. There was still work to be done. This was not a one man operation. On the computers in the control room, the elves monitored the sleigh speed, position, and height, the conditions of the weather, the vital signs of the reindeer, and updated navigation as they went along.

After visiting thousands of houses, eventually the sleigh came to rest on the roof of one Dr. Frostly and his daughter Suzy. Suzy's mom had been so relieved when Suzy and her dad finally came home. She thought she had lost them forever. Since there was no chimney, a special Elf Device had to be used to "fabricate" one through the edges of reality (don't worry about it; only elves really understand what that means). The old Santi Clause and the new Santa Clause (Santi Daniel) appeared inside the house. The presents were placed around the Christmas Tree. There was more than one present for the members of this household. Although it may have happened by accident, Suzy and her dad were responsible for setting in motion the chain of events that brought back Santi Clause! Before going up the "chimney," Santi Clause did something he had never done before. He went upstairs and he woke the occupants of the house, Suzy and her family, from their slumber.

"Santa Clause?" asked Suzy through her sleepy daze.

"Hello Suzy," replied the old Santi Clause. "It seems you left the North Pole before I arrived. I would like to thank you for what you have done."

"Thank me?"

"Yes Suzy," replied Santi Clause. "I'm here because you believed."

"There are two of you?" said Suzy.

"Oh yes," responded the old Santi Clause. "I'm retiring. This here..." pointing to Daniel, "is my replacement; the new Santa Clause."

"Hi new Santa Clause!" exclaimed Suzy.

"Hello Suzy," replied the new Santa Clause. "We have to go now; much work to do."

"Of course," said Suzy.

"And Suzy..."

"Yes, new Santa?"

"Never, never, ever stop believing!"

The smile on Suzy's face stretched from one end all the way to the other. "Yes sir!" she exclaimed.

Suzy and her parents returned to their beds while the two Santi Clauses made their way to the roof and climbed back aboard the sleigh. The reindeer galloped forward and the sleigh once again shot into the night sky... "and they heard him exclaim as he drove out of sight, 'Merry Christmas to all and to all a good night!'"

THE END