

The Book
of
Santa

Stan Ginsel

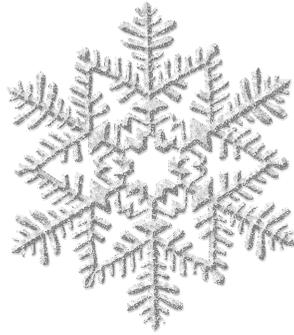




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Chapter One The Dollhouse

A small red coupe makes its way down a snowy, congested city street filled with holiday shoppers. It soon reaches the outskirts of town where the traffic lights become fewer and farther apart. The city lights begin to fade and soon only an occasional street light and the twinkling stars illuminate a highway lined with snow-covered pines. It's indeed a beautiful night.

Jill, a vivacious redhead in her early thirties, is enveloped in the holiday spirit, mouthing the lyrics to Christmas music blaring on the radio. Stacked neatly on the seat behind her are numerous boxes, all wrapped with bright holiday wrapping. The phone rings and the name 'Steve' appears on the screen. Turning down the music, she answers.

"Hi darling! Jill says in the cheeriest of voices. "Sorry I'm running late! I've got it right here! She's going to love it!"

She glances over at a beautiful dollhouse in the seat beside her.

Steve stands in front of a bare Christmas tree with boxes of decorations strewn about the floor. "Don't rush, honey. We've just started trimming the tree."

Jill, focused more on the dollhouse than the conversation, continues. "It's so pretty! It's just like the one I got for Christmas when I was her age. It seemed to take forever but so worth the wait."

"I can't believe you talked the old man into building it for you," Steve laughs. "What a quirky guy."

"Oh stop!" said Jill, laughing, then a concerned look crosses her face.

“The roads are getting icy,” said Jill. “I meant to be home before dark but time got away from me.”

Steve, Jill’s husband of six years, stands in front of a bare tree. On the floor are several boxes overflowing with ornaments. “Be careful,” said Steve as he bends down to pick up a string of popcorn, “How long before you’re home?”

“I should be home in an hour,” said Jill. “I don’t want Natalie to see the dollhouse — I’ll drop it off at the neighbor’s. Oh Steve, I can’t wait until she sees it! It’s going to be a special Christmas this year.”

Jill carefully approaches a quiet four-lane highway intersection at the base of a hill. The light turns from yellow to red and her car comes to a stop.

As Jill and Steve continue to talk, a large white delivery truck tops the hill. As it makes its way down, the truck begins to slide, its wheels unable to get traction on the icy road. Heading directly toward the car, the truck’s horn begins to blow.

Jill snaps her head up toward her rearview mirror and realizes what’s about to happen. A terrified look is captured on her face. “Oh my God!” she screams.

Powerless to control his vehicle, the truck driver frantically attempts to turn his steering wheel while slamming on the brakes. Smoke boils from the tires as the truck smashes into the back of the coup, popping it into the air and sending it side-over-side toward a ravine. It rolls down the steep hill, coming to rest hard against a pine tree which drops snow onto the car as it is struck. The tree prevents the car’s descent further into the abyss.

The truck driver, horrified but remarkably unscathed, comes to a stop. He jumps out of the truck and runs toward the ravine, trying his best not to fall on the icy road. He slips and catches himself, then heads down the ravine toward Jill’s car. It is dark with a single traffic light illuminating the road.

Jill lay motionless behind the steering wheel airbag which has deployed. The gifts are scattered about the inside of the car. The dollhouse is now in the passenger floorboard, shattered. Steve’s voice can be heard over the Christmas music still playing joyfully in the background.

Steve drops a string of lights as he screams, “Jill! What’s happened? Jill, can you hear me? JILL!”



Next to the monitor, Jill lies in a hospital bed, her eyes closed, her arms at her side with multiple wires and tubes attached to each. Her head is wrapped with a bandage. The room is adorned with flowers and cards. A small, lit Christmas tree sits on Jill’s nightstand.

Steve enters the room with a bouquet of flowers, but this time he is carrying a white card. He looks haggard from another restless night. He looks over the card in his hand, then looks up at Jill. Although his eyes are puffy and he looks exhausted, he forces a smile at his wife's expressionless face.

"Can you believe it? Straight A's in every class. Seems as though we've raised a genius," he says as steps closer. "And, she won first place with that costume your sister made for her. She was so cute. A little Mrs. Santa Claus." He leans over the bed and gently strokes his wife's cheek. I taped it so you won't miss a thing after you come out of this. I'm so proud of her...you will be, too." Tears well up in his eyes.

"Oh, honey, she misses you so much...I miss you so much. It's our first Christmas without you... I still can't believe it," he says, breaking down.

Steve's face is in his hands when he hears a soft tap on the door. He quickly composes himself and wipes the tears from his eyes. Turning toward the door he clears his throat and in a low voice said, "Jenny? Come in."

An older woman in a nurse's uniform slowly steps in. She speaks softly and with respect. "Hello, Mr. Steve, it's about that time," she said quietly as she went about checking Jill's monitor. Then she pulls the blanket to Jill's shoulders.

"I know, I know," Steve mutters as he gathers his coat and gloves. He picks up his daughter's report card from the floor. He leans over and kisses his wife's cheek.

Then he returns to the chair and gathers his things.

"Now don't you worry," Jenny assured Steve. "I'll take good care of her tonight."

Steve forces a smile through his bloodshot eyes. "As you do every night, Jenny." He stares at Jill's face, seemingly willing her to open her eyes. Jenny steps over and gently rubs his arm.

"You know I'll call the minute anything changes," she said. Steve looks back down at Jill, then at Jenny. He pats her hand.

"Thank you. You've been so supportive. I don't know how I could've made it without you."

Jenny smiles and steps back over to the monitors to check them once again. "You're welcome, Mr. Steve," she said without looking his way. "Now you run on home and take care of that little darlin'. I'm sure Santa still has some work to do tonight."

"Yes, he does, as a matter of fact," Steve replied, as if he had forgotten it was Christmas Eve.

Jenny presses buttons on the monitor. "What did she ask Santa for this year?" she asks.

“You know Jill got her that dollhouse but...,” he mumbles, his voice cracking. “I asked her and she told me she had ‘already taken care of it.’ So I had to take my best guess.”

Jenny chuckles. “They do grow up fast. You don’t think she’s stopped believing in Santa, do you?”

“I don’t think so,” replied Steve, “But with all that’s happened in the last month, I’ve thought about telling her the truth after Christmas...”

Jenny almost winces at Steve’s words. She stops looking at the monitor and turns to face Steve. “Oh dear, I wouldn’t do that,” she said. Santa is hope to that little darlin’. Please don’t take that away from her. Not now, right here at Christmas.” She gives Steve a pleading look and waits for his response. It’s an extended wait as Steve appears to be mulling over her words.

Steve shakes his head sadly. “It’s not fair to give her false hope. If these fine doctors can’t bring her back to me, how can believing in Santa Claus make a difference? He’s not real.”

Now Jenny is defiant. “Belief *is* real, Mr. Steve. That’s what Santa is all about — belief in someone good, loving, compassionate, generous, who always watches over us and takes care of us. ...Sound familiar?

“You mean God?” Steve asks. “I’m trying. But I have to be realistic.”

Jenny explains, “You see, God gives you the choice to either believe or not. He won’t force it on you. But he can’t work his miracles *unless* you believe. So as crazy as it sounds, the first step to receiving is believing.”

Steve gazes longingly at his wife. Jenny joins him. A moment passes then she speaks. “I believe she’s going to recover. We just need to be patient,” she said.

“Thank you for your faith, Jenny.”

Jenny smiles. “Merry Christmas, Mr. Steve. Now you go on home to that little one. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Steve bends over and kisses Jill’s cheek again. He lowers his voice to almost a whisper, “Merry Christmas, my love,” then walks through the door and disappears into the hallway.



Chapter Two

Natalie

A garage door opens as a car slowly pulls in the snow-cleared driveway. The car creeps into a dark garage.

A flickering fireplace spreads its light across a well-appointed living room. Beside it, a beautifully decorated Christmas tree.

Christi sits on a loveseat next to a very large bookcase. Her legs are curled underneath her as she reads a book. Across from the love eat, Steve's six-year-old daughter, Natalie, wearing her special Christmas pajamas, snuggles beneath a blanket on the sofa. Her crystal blue eyes dart between the flames and the tree.

Natalie hears the kitchen door open and throws back the blanket and springs to her feet. Christi places a marker in the book, lays it on the loveseat and stands. As Steve steps into the living room Natalie runs to him.

"Daddy!" she exclaims as she wraps her arms around his legs.

Steve bends down and picks up his daughter. Steve puts on a happy face as he hugs her and kisses her cheek. "Hey little girl. What are you doing down here?" He glances at his watch, then, feigning annoyance, looks to Christi for an answer.

Christi smiles in relief Steve isn't angry at Natalie being awake past her bedtime. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Crawford, but she wanted to sleep on the sofa until you got home," she said.

Natalie speaks with an adult demeanor, very matter-of-fact. "I had to make sure you put out the fire before Santa gets here." Steve and Christi chuckle. With her hands on her hips and in a serious tone Natalie exclaims, "I don't want him to get burned!"

"Don't worry, Pumpkin, I'll put out the fire. Now, let me take care of Christi so she can go home and wait for Santa too."

Natalie smiles. "Okay. Bye, Christi." Christi reaches over and kisses Natalie on the cheek.

"Bye, Natalie. Merry Christmas. Merry Christmas to you, too, Mr. Crawford," she said as she dons her coat and gloves.

Steve sits Natalie down. Immediately she scrambles back to the sofa. Steve reaches in his pocket as he escorts Christi to the door. He hands Christi a one-hundred-dollar bill. She looks at it with amazement, then hands it back to him. “Mr. Crawford, this is too much...”

Steve smiles and gently pushes Christi’s hand back toward her. “Please take it. I wish it were more. You’ve been watching over Natalie for weeks. You don’t know what a relief it’s been knowing you’re here, taking great care of her.”

Christi gives Steve a quick hug while pushing the bill into her pocket. “Thank you, Mr. Crawford,” she said as she opens the door and steps out into the night.

“Goodnight, Christi,” Steve replies. “Tell your folks I said ‘hello.’”

Steve closes the door and heads for the sofa. Natalie scoots over to one end as her father takes the cushion beside her.

Natalie looks at her father and asks quietly, “Is mommy still sleeping?”

“Yes, mommy’s still sleeping,” Steve replies.

“That’s okay, she’ll be home tomorrow,” said Natalie as she reaches for her well-worn teddy bear.

Steve looks perplexed. “What makes you say that?” he asks.

“I don’t know. It’s just...what I believe,” said Natalie as she holds onto her teddy with both arms as if for reassurance.

Steve pulls Natalie closer. “Natalie, remember we talked about the chance that mommy might not wake up — that she might go live with God?”

“I remember, Daddy,” Natalie replies, clearly not finding the conversation to her liking. She looks down at her teddy.

“Well, must be prepared for that to happen any day,” said Steve, “Maybe even tomorrow.”

With Steve’s words Natalie becomes defiant. “I know that’s what you say, Daddy, but it won’t happen,” she said, shaking her head no. “She’s not ready to go to live with God yet.”

“How do you know?” asks Steve.

Now it’s Natalie who looks perplexed. She addresses her father with a wrinkled brow and with an authoritative tone, answers, “Because God told me. I asked him if mommy could stay with us and he said ‘yes.’ And God always keeps his word. Right, Daddy?”

A painful look comes across Steve’s face. He leans back in the cushion, gazes at the fireplace.

Not knowing what else to say, Steve replied, "Of course he does." A moment passes as Steve becomes lost in thought.

Natalie sits up, scoots over to him. "Daddy, did God make everybody?" she asks.

"Well, yes, he made Adam and Eve," replied Steve. So, I suppose you could say God made everybody."

Natalie doesn't miss a beat with her next questions. "If God made everybody, did he make Santa, too?"

Steve smiles at his daughter's question. Perhaps it is time for a talk. After all, she needs to be prepared for what might come. "Natalie, there's something I've been meaning to tell you. Santa isn't real..." He stares into her wide, innocent eyes, ready to absorb his every word. An instant later he glances off to a nearby bookcase and picks up his sentence as if he'd never stopped talking.

"...really much different than us," continued Steve. "He was born, just like you and me, but a long time ago. And Santa was such a generous fellow that after he grew up, God gave him special powers."

"Like Jesus?" asks Natalie.

Steve cracks a smile. "Sort of. They were good friends."

Natalie is now transfixed on her father's face.

"Tell me more, Daddy," said Natalie, as she sat back, holding teddy firmly in her arms and pulling the nearby blanket over her legs.

"If I tell you the story, will you go to bed?" asks Steve.

"But Daddy, I have to make sure you put out the fire... and... I want to see Santa," said Natalie, trying her best to fight a yawn.

"Natalie, Santa is shy; he doesn't like people watching him. And I promise I'll put out the fire," said Steve in a reassuring voice.

Natalie looks off as if considering her father's words. Then, looks back and smiles. "Okay Daddy, if you'll tell me the story I'll go to bed," said Natalie.

"It's a deal," said Steve, glancing toward the bookcase. He stands and walks to it, looking closely at the books. "Now, let's see," he said, "The whole story is in a book somewhere in this bookcase." He selects an old weathered hardbound book titled *Encyclopedia Britannica*. "Ah... Here it is, *The Book of Santa*," he said as he returns to the sofa. He opens the book and turns the pages as Natalie snuggles under her blanket.



Chapter Three

Santos and His Son Nicholas

“You see, Santa was born just a few years before Jesus,” Steve began. “He was even raised in the same town. That’s how they became friends.” He flips through about a third of the pages and gazes at the book. “Here we are.”

A close up of the encyclopedia shows he’s turned to a page about wildlife in South America. Steve begins, “In the year Jesus Christ was born, there lived a man, Santos, who had a son named Nickolas.”

Steve’s voice continues as the picture fades into a hand holding a small rectangular piece of wood between the thumb and forefinger.

Santos was a maker of toys and amusements for an evil king. A tyrant named Herod...



In Herodium, east of Bethlehem, a hand twirls the tiny block wood, with three raised circles on the top and three circular indentions on the bottom.

Studying the block is Herod, an older man in his late 60s with a long, white beard. He’s dressed as a king and standing in a room with lavish furnishings. He looks up and wrinkles his brow, and in a gruff voice, asks, “And this is for...*what?*”

Across the room Santos, a handsome man in his 30s, stands beside a table with the wooden blocks stacked in the shape of a horse. He grabs a couple of them and demonstrates.

“Well, your Excellency,” he says with some trepidation in his voice, “Each block can be interlocked with another, creating endless possibilities of shapes and forms.” Santos continues to lock blocks together as Herod steps to the wooden horse sculpture and examines it.

“Using these blocks to create different forms will not only be educational for the young ones, but fun as well...,” continues Santos.

Herod makes a fist and backhands the statue sending the tiny wooden blocks flying about the room. His face fills with anger. “No self-respecting child would play with these absurd blocks of wood! What you have brought me is no better than common rocks!” he screams.

Santos begins to collect the scattered pieces of what was once the horse. “I beg your forgiveness, your Excellency, said Santos, not daring to look up, “I just thought the young ones would enjoy building models of your great works.

He lays the gathered pieces on the table and looks around the room, then spreads his arms and faces Herod. “This magnificent palace, the Temple Mount. Perhaps even a statue of yourself,” he continues.

Herod’s face instantly softens. His eyes roll to one side as he ponders, folding his hands below his chin, then asks, “Every child building a statue of *me*?”

“I could shape different pieces in your likeness that when put together, would form...a statue. Yes, a statue in the likeness of a great king!” said Santos.

“You believe children would find these ‘blocks’ enjoyable?” asks Herod.

“Absolutely, your Excellency!” Santos exclaimed. “I will wager it will take a league of craftsmen just to keep up with the demand.”

Herod thinks for a moment then looks at Santos, flipping his hand toward him. “Very well toymaker, build your blocks. You may use the statue in the foyer as a guide.”

Relief envelopes Santos. He moves toward Herod. “Oh, thank you your Excellency, thank you so much...!”

Herod quickly turns and claps his hands twice. Two young, beautiful women step in. Each take Herod by an arm. The trio strolls toward an arched opening. “I will want to see sketches by the end of the week,” said Herod as the women lead him toward the exit.

“Certainly, your Excellency. Thank you again!” said Santos, watching as Herod and his entourage disappear through the archway. Instantly his smile dissolves as he looks about the room. He shakes his head and begins to gather the blocks.



Santos walks along a road just outside the village carrying a lantern. Over his shoulder he totes a red bag bulging with square protrusions, obviously the wooden blocks.

As he passes a field of sheep, he notices they are all standing perfectly still and looking toward the same spot in the sky. He stops and follows their gaze. In the night sky, a star pulsating with light, becomes ever more brilliant and growing larger by the second. Not far from Santos a group of shepherds catches his attention. They too are gawking at the bright spectacle. He makes his way toward them.

As he approaches the group, a small glowing orb emerges from the star and rockets toward them. Only a few feet above the frightened shepherds, it stops and hovers. The shepherds cover their faces and kneel to the ground, but Santos quickens his pace toward it, curiously staring at the glowing object as he moves to within feet of it.

Suddenly, the orb morphs into a beautiful female angel. Santos stops, drops his belongings and stares in disbelief. The angel speaks with a soft but reverberant voice, "Fear not! For behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people."

One-by-one the shepherds slowly look up. "For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you. You shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."

Many orbs emerge from the star and rocket toward Earth. Almost instantly the sky is filled with brilliant orbs, hovering just feet above the landscape.

The orbs morph into angels, some male and some female. Their glow illuminates the countryside and they begin to sing in a beautiful choir of voices, "Glory to God in the highest. And on earth, peace, good will toward men."

Santos steps back and gazes at the sky. His face fills with wonderment as his eyes follow the singing angels darting across the sky.

The first female angel swoops down to Santos' eye level, hovers and smiles. Then, she and all the others bolt skyward. Within seconds, they all merge with the star which shrinks and vanishes into the night sky. The shepherds begin to stand and look at each other, dumbfounded. One of them steps forward and speaks. "Let us go to Bethlehem," he says.

The other shepherd agrees. "Yes, let us see this thing which has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." The shepherds collectively agree and hurry off toward lights on the horizon. Santos picks up his bag and lantern and tags along.

The door opens. Santos steps inside and sits down his red bag. His wife, Elizabeth turns and smiles. The drumming stops and a second later, Nicholas runs into the room.

"I have seen the son of God almighty. Our Savior, the Messiah we have been waiting for," Santos told them, his eyes filled with excitement.

His wife, Elizabeth, clasps her hands together in joy, then turns to Nicholas.

“The prophets have predicted this,” she said.

“And it has happened,” said Santos. “I saw the Angels of God with my own eyes and have seen the child. He lies in a manger in a stable in Bethlehem.”

“A manger?” she asks curiously.

Nicholas hops off his father’s lap. “Can we go see him, Father?” he said in a pleading voice.

“Well, yes, I would think so,” said Santos. “But we have no gifts to take him...”

Nicholas runs into the other room and returns with the small drum. He drapes a rope over his shoulder that holds the instrument at waist level. He speaks with authority. “I can play a song for the new king.”

“Nicholas, son,” said Santos. “A song is not a gift. I do not think tonight is the appropriate time...”

Elizabeth leans over and touches Santos’ hand. “Why not my husband? Your son plays well. You are a good teacher, and he has been practicing diligently. Nicholas will not embarrass you.”

Santos squirms a bit. “Of course, it is not embarrassment...”

“Then let him play, said Elizabeth. “You *did* make the drum for him. Did you not?”

“Well...yes...,” Santos admits.

“And who is to say a song is not a gift? A song is a wonderful gift,” said Elizabeth.

The father looks down at his son. “Very well, Nicholas,” he said. “But only one song.”

With a large grin spreading across Nicholas’ face, he exclaimed, “Thank you, Father!”



A very excited Nicholas runs ahead of Santos and Elizabeth as they make their way toward the city.

Santos cries out to his son, “Nicholas!”

“Let him be, my husband,” said Elizabeth. “He knows his way.”

Behind them three men perched on camels approach.

They are dressed in fine clothing, much as kings, and each has two large sacks hanging from their saddle. Santos and Elizabeth stop as one of the men steps ahead and the others. He smiles and holds up his hand.

“Greetings. May the glory of God be with you on this marvelous night,” he said.

Santos returns the greeting. “And with you also, sir.”

“We are from the East and have followed the star to this place. Do you know where we might find the newborn king? We have brought gifts and wish to worship him,” said the man.

“We are on our way now to worship him as well. It is not far. Would you care to follow us?” said Santos, extending his hand.

The man bowed his head in appreciation. “That would be most generous of you, sir,” he said.

Santos and Elizabeth continue on their journey. The men follow, slowly, on their camels toward the city of Bethlehem.

With his drum at his side, the five-year-old wiggles his way through the crowd that has begun to gather at the stable’s entrance. He pops out on the other side directly in front of the baby Jesus, now lying in a wooden manger. Mary and Joseph sit by his side.

Nicholas looks down at the manger, then at Mary and Joseph, bows his head, then speaks.

“I am Nicholas. I have come to play a song...,” he said. A man steps from the crowd with an angry scowl.

“Have you brought a gift for our new king?” he asks. Nicholas looks saddened.

“I am but a poor boy, sir,” he said. “I have no gift fit for a king.”

“Then take that noise maker out of here!” he shouts. A rejected Nicholas turns and steps away. As he does so, Joseph stands.

“Wait!” he says to the boy. Nicholas stops. “Come back here, drummer boy.”

The young drummer slowly turns and looks up at Joseph who asks, “You have a song prepared?”

“Yes, sir! Shall I play for you, sir?” asks Nicholas. Joseph glances around the crowd.

“Yes. I for one would like to hear it,” he says. Mary leans forward and smiles.

“Please Nicholas, play for my son,” she said.

The man steps back into the crowd. Joseph reseats himself. Nicholas adjusts the drum to his waist and pulls two sticks from his pocket. He nervously starts a soft cadence. As Nicholas plays, music from the song “Little Drummer Boy” fades in and matches his beat. Mary and Joseph, as well as the crowd, smile as the small musician plays from the heart.

Nicholas’ eyes focus only on Jesus as he continues to tap out the rhapsody. The newborn king turns and looks back at the boy drummer and begins to coo.

Santos and Elizabeth push through the crowd. They look pleased and proud of their son as they watch him tap out a second verse. The scene fades out as Steve’s voice fades in.



“And from that moment on, Jesus and Nicholas were destined to become great friends,” said Steve.

Natalie sits on the edge of the sofa and looks at her father. Her voice is totally sincere. “Did they go to Bethlehem school together?” she asks.

Steve cracks a smile. “No, not exactly. You see, Mary and Joseph actually lived in a town called Nazareth. Not long after Jesus was born, Nicholas’ father quit working for King Herod and moved his family there. As a matter of fact, they moved into a house next door to Jesus.

“They were neighbors?” asks Natalie, trying to absorb this new information.

“That’s right. Nicholas’ father opened up his own toy shop, right behind Jesus’ home,” said Steve.

“A toy shop? Did Jesus and Nicholas work there too?” she asks.

Steve explains, “Nicholas did. His father taught him everything he knew about toy making. And Jesus learned woodworking from his own father who was a carpenter. When they were growing up, Jesus would work at the toy shop cutting and carving the wood that Nicholas would turn into toys. That’s how they became such good friends.”

“But...where is Santa, Daddy?”

Steve squirms a bit, finding it difficult to keep up with Natalie’s probing questions. “Uh...,” said Steve as he grabs the encyclopedia and begins to “read” its pages.



Chapter Four

A True and Lasting Friendship

“When Jesus was but 12 years old, Mary and Joseph traveled with him to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover feast. But when they returned to Nazareth, they discovered Jesus had somehow been left behind,” said Steve. His voice continues as the picture fades into masculine hands carving a wooden horse.

Nicholas, now handsome at seventeen years of age, sits on a short stool, carving the finishing touches to the head of what appears to be a rocking horse. He grabs a wad of rope and attaches it to the neck of the horse, creating a mane. With one finger he pushes it. The horse starts to rock.

The young man sits back, gazes at the sculpture and smiles with satisfaction as the rope mane swings back and forth.

The door bursts open. Mary, Jesus’ mother, steps in with a frantic look. She’s obviously upset.

“Nicholas!” she cries. The young man bolts to his feet as Mary quickly glances around the shop.

“What is it?” he asks.

“Jesus is missing. I was hoping he was here with you.” she tells him.

“Missing? For how long?” he asks.

“He was supposed to return from Jerusalem with my cousin, but he never arrived at her house. He is not with any of our family or friends,” explains Mary as she begins to look more frantic.

“Nicholas, you must help me find him!” she cries as she brings her hands to her face.

“Do not worry,” Nicholas says in a reassuring tone. “I will travel immediately to Jerusalem and will begin searching. I will find him and bring him home.”

Mary embraces Nicholas for he is like a son to her. “Thank you, Nicholas. You are such a precious friend.”

“I must go now for it is a long journey. Please tell my parents where I’ve gone,” said Nicholas as he gathers his belongings.

He exits the room, leaving Mary to kneel in prayer.



A young Jesus walks straight and steady through the main thoroughfare of Jerusalem with a look of determination on his face. Nicholas appears from behind and trots toward him.

“Jesus!” he shouts.

Jesus stops and turns. Nicholas manages to catch up with him. “Jesus,” said Nicholas, “Your parents have been searching for you for three days. They are worried.”

“I am sorry, Nicholas,” said Jesus. “I meant them no worry. But I must be about my Father’s work.”

“Where have you been?” asked Nicholas.

Jesus looks puzzled at the question. “Why, in the Temple, of course,” he replies.

“Please stay here while I go fetch your mother,” Nicholas urges. “She is...”

Jesus steps back. “I cannot stay here,” he said. “I must go to the Temple. Now.”

“Then I will accompany you...,” said Nicholas.

“No!” said Jesus in a stern voice, one that Nicholas had never heard. Jesus reaches out and touches Nicholas’ arm. He speaks gently.

“Nicholas, you are my closest friend. But this is something I must do without you,” said Jesus.

Nicholas looks off with a bit of anguish.

“I hope you will understand,” Jesus said. “Please tell my mother where I am.”

Nicholas looks back and studies Jesus for a moment. “I suppose the time has come for you to begin fulfilling your destiny,” he said.

Jesus smiles and replies, “The time has come for both of us to begin fulfilling our destinies, my friend.”

Nicholas reacts bewildered as Jesus turns and trots down the busy street. Steve’s voice fades in.

Although Nicholas and Jesus remained the best of friends, from that day on, Jesus spent most of his time at the Temple.

Nicholas eventually took over his father's shop and spent much of his time inventing new toys; however, Jesus and Nicholas always made it a point to get together every now and then, staying up into the wee hours of the morning laughing and recounting stories about their young life.

Then, one day...



The door opens. Nicholas, now in his early thirties, steps in and walks over to what looks like a little red wagon with wooden spoke wheels. He notices a letter in its bed. He picks up the letter and gazes at it. His eyes scan to the bottom. The letter is signed 'Jesus.' He can hear his friend's voice as he starts to read.

Nicholas, The time has come for me to travel the country and spread the Good News of God's word. You have been like a brother to me and I will forever treasure our friendship. But I must fulfill my destiny, as you must continue to fulfill yours. We will only see each other one more time before I depart this life. Until then, I bid you farewell. Your eternal friend, Jesus

Nicholas slowly lowers the letter and stares off into space. Steve's voice fades in.

As the months passed, Nicholas missed his friend more and more. He spent much of his time alone, in the toy shop, focusing all of his efforts on improving his skills. Soon, he became well known in the land as a fine craftsman and generous man.

Nicholas kept up with his friend Jesus through the many stories that swept the land, tales of his great wisdom and of the miracles he performed.

But still, Nicholas missed his friend. It had been over three years since he'd seen him. Over three years since he'd found that letter. Then one evening...



Chapter Five

The Passover

Nicholas hears a knock at the door. He opens the door to find Jesus' mother, Mary. She is now an old woman.

"Nicholas, I must speak with you. It is about Jesus." Nicholas immediately smiles. His voice is full of excitement.

"Is he coming home?" he asks in anticipation.

Mary, visibly frightened, grasps his hands and whispers. "Jesus is in danger. Nicholas, you must go to him."



Jesus strolls down the crowded street alone.

"Jesus!" Nicholas calls out, trotting up to him. Jesus seems genuinely surprised.

"Nicholas, my old friend! What are you doing in Jerusalem?" he asks.

"Where are you going?" asks Nicholas, trying to keep pace with his friend.

Jesus smiles as he answers, "I'm going to meet my disciples. We are to dine on the Passover meal."

Nicholas, still doing his best to keep up with Jesus' quick pace, shouts to him, "No! You must come with me. Now!"

Jesus is no longer smiling. In a solemn voice he tells Nicholas, "I am sorry, but I can do no such thing."

"But Jesus, your life is in danger," Nicholas pleads. "As we speak there are those who conspire against you and are waiting for the right moment to turn you over to the Romans." As he pleads, Jesus listens but is not moved by Nicholas' words.

"I know my friend," said Jesus. "And it is as it should be."

"Please, Jesus," Nicholas begs. "Your parents and I urge you to return to Nazareth where it is safe!"

Jesus takes Nicholas by the arm and leads him to a rock ledge next to the road. They sit.

"Nicholas," began Jesus, "Do you remember I said you would see me in the flesh only one more time?" Nicholas nods his head. "This is that time. Tomorrow I will fulfill my destiny and will be with our Father in Heaven."

"You mean, you are going to let them take your life? I will not let that happen! I will accompany your every step," Nicholas says, standing.

"No! Nicholas. Where I go tomorrow, you cannot follow," explained Jesus. "You must return to Nazareth and continue down your destiny's path, as I must continue down mine."

"But you will die!" said Nicholas, hanging his head in grief.

"Sit down, my friend," said Jesus. As Nicholas sits, he continues, "I will not die. In three days, I will rise and live in spirit among the people. You must spend your remaining years on this Earth perfecting your craft, as our Father has for you a great mission that will honor us both."

Nicholas is accepting of Jesus' words. "I will do anything to honor your memory," he said.

Jesus places his hand on his friend's shoulder before he speaks. "How about promising an old friend that you will do as he asks?" Nicholas looks away as a tear makes its way down his cheek.

"I promise," said Nicholas. They stand.

"But now you must hurry back to Nazareth," said Jesus. "You must not be in Jerusalem after dark."

"Can I not spend your last remaining hours with you?" asks Nicholas.

Jesus shakes his head no. "I am sorry, Nicholas. I wish there were another way, but your heart cannot be tainted by what you would see. For now, our paths must part." Nicholas stands and embraces Jesus, then takes a step backward. Tears stream down his cheek.

In a cheerful voice, Jesus tells Nicholas, "Please do not grieve. It is not the end, but a glorious new beginning!" He pats Nicholas' shoulders. "Now go, and do not look back. I promise, we will speak again soon."

Jesus turns and walks away. Nicholas watches his friend disappear into the crowd.

Just as Jesus had asked, Nicholas did go back to Nazareth that evening.

“He continued honing his skill,” said Steve. The art of toy making, giving away everything he made to the children of Nazareth. Nicholas lived a modest life and never moved the toy store away from that small shop his father built behind their house. Even after his parents passed away, he left the toy shop in his father’s name.

True to his word, Jesus did speak to Nicholas many times as the years passed, but only through visions and knowledge placed in his heart by the Holy Spirit.



Chapter Six

An Offer

Steve continues the story. “As with all men, Nicholas grew old. One day he heard a knock at the door.”

“One moment,” said Nicholas as he slowly stands with difficulty. He takes a cane, steadies himself, then turns toward the door. Not feeling he can make it to the door in a reasonable time, he utters, “Come in, please.”

The door opens. Jesus steps in, looking as youthful as when they had last seen each other. Nicholas drops the cane and has to grab onto the nearby chair to keep from falling. Jesus quickly steps over to help him.

“I am sorry I startled you, my old friend,” he laughs.

“Old is right,” agrees Nicholas as Jesus helps him into a chair. “Is it really you?”

“Yes, Nicholas,” said Jesus, giving Nicholas time to realize it is indeed his friend standing before him.

“But how can this be? You are in the flesh!” said Nicholas.

“Our Father has bestowed it,” said Jesus as he pulls up a chair and sits beside Nicholas. “I am here to make you an offer.”

“An offer?” asks Nicholas.

“You once said you would do anything to honor my memory,” continues Jesus. “Do you still feel the same?”

“More so than ever!” said Nicholas. “You need only ask, and I will gladly do your bidding.”

“As I said, this is an offer,” said Jesus. “Something you may choose to do — or not to do.”

“How can I refuse an offer from God delivered by his only son?” said Nicholas. “I need not hear it to say yes.”

Jesus reaches out and touches Nicholas’ arm. “You will become immortal, a spirit in human form much the same way I am appearing to you now, living on Earth at the top of the world.”

“And one night each year, you will perform an enormous task, one that will take an entire year for which to prepare. Are you sure you want to blindly accept this offer?” asks Jesus.

Nicholas looks Jesus in the eyes. “Tell me what to do and I shall do it.”

Jesus smiles. He stands, walks behind Nicholas and places his hands on his shoulder and speaks. “Sleep, my old friend. Sleep.” Nicholas’ body slowly relaxes. His arms drop into his lap. “Before you take on this great task, you must live another human life, but in a distant time from now. Your first life was to perfect your craft, which you have done admirably. God is well pleased.”

The cane falls from Nicholas’ hand. “Your next life will be a test of your faith and spirit, for your heart must be strong with God to carry out his glorious plan,” he continues. Nicholas’ eyes slowly close. Jesus kneels beside him. But I already know your heart is pure, my dear friend. My faith in you is unmoving.”

Jesus steps to the front of an old, unconscious Nicholas and gently places his hand on his friend’s forehead. “Sleep Nicholas, as a new life awaits you.”



“Nicholas. Nicholas?”

“Nicholas, now a much younger man, stares forward with a blank look on his face. Seated across the table is a man, well dressed for the era, who leans in toward him.

“Nicholas? Are you alright?” asks his attorney, still leaning over from his stately desk. He’s clearly concerned about the man sitting in the chair before him. Nicholas blinks, as if just waking up.

“Yes, I’m fine,” Nicholas replies, but it is obvious he is befuddled. He’s not even sure where he is.

“Please, indulge me. What year is this?”

The man looks confused. “The year? It is the first year of the fourth century, three hundred and one. Why do you ask?”

A flood of memories go through Nicholas mind. But only a moment passes before he recomposes himself. “Please, forgive me, Sir. I must have been lost in a daydream. You were saying?”

The man picks up a scroll from his desk and hands it to Nicholas. He speaks politely. “I said, it appears a new life awaits you. Nicholas reacts slightly, still trying to make sense of things, but now recalling his new life of just twenty years.

“This is title to the remaining portion of the inheritance.” The man hands the scroll to Nicholas.

“Nicholas, I am sorry for your loss. But you are fortunate to have had such generous parents.” said the attorney.

“I thank God each and every day for how he has blessed me,” Nicholas replied, rolling up the scroll and tucking it into a red bag without looking at it. “I assure you the money will be put toward the needy.”

“I am quite sure of that. You have been a generous man to the people of Patara,” the man said.

Nicholas stands and extends his hand. The man follows and they shake. “It has been an honor to have been of service and a pleasure to know you. You are leaving Patara?”

“Yes,” said Nicholas. “I will be moving to Myra within the month, as soon as I finish closing out my business dealings here.

“May I wish you all the best. The city of Patara will miss you, Nicholas.”

“I will miss it here as well,” said Nicholas as he reaches over to pat the man’s shoulder. “Thank you for your wisdom through the years.” He drapes the strap of the red bag over his shoulder and heads for the door.



Chapter Seven

Elijah's Good Fortune

Nicholas steps into a home which is modestly decorated for the time. He pulls the bag's strap from his shoulder and tosses it on the floor. He walks over to a nearby work bench and gazes at the half-finished wooden projects scattered about the top of it. He shakes his head then steps back to the red bag.

He removes one of the scrolls and takes a seat. He unrolls it and begins to read. Seth, a young man, opens the door and steps in.

"I am sorry I am late Mister Nicholas. My humble apology," said the young man.

"And how many times have you been late, my young apprentice?" asks Nicholas.

Seth thinks a moment. "None that I remember, sir."

"Then your apology is accepted but certainly not required. Is all well?" asked Nicholas, concerned.

The apprentice makes his way to the woodworking area. Nicholas lays the scroll down.

"I am afraid not, sir," said Seth as he takes his seat at the work table.

"How so?" asked Nicholas.

Seth continues. "Do you remember my Uncle Elijah, the merchant?"

"Yes," replied Nicholas. "We have spoken on a few occasions."

"Last night men raided his home," said Seth. "They held his family at bay with knives while they took everything of value."

"What a terrible tragedy!" said Seth, alarmed. "Was anyone injured?"

"No," replied Seth. "My uncle was not home and I suppose the robbers found no honor in harming three helpless women."

"Glory be to God. At least all that was lost can be replaced," said a relieved Nicholas.

"It will not be that easy," said the young man as he looked down in sadness.

“They looted his daughters’ dowries of gold,” said Seth. “Without dowries, no man will want to marry my cousins.”

“Rest assured, a man of fine stature will come along.” Nicholas reassures him.

“I do not believe so,” said Seth. “Their hearts are broken.”

He suddenly realizes he has shared too much of the family business and picks up a tool.

As he begins carving away on a piece of wood, a contrite Seth said, “I am sorry, Sir. Please forgive me. I should not spread our misery like some local gossip.”

Nicholas steps closer to his apprentice and speaks as a friend, “Seth, your burden is my burden. You are like family to me.” Seth stops carving and looks at Nicholas.

“My poor uncle, only a year ago he lost my aunt to illness and now he has been stricken penniless,” said Seth, overcome with despair.

“Tell your uncle to pray and not worry. God will replenish the dowries,” Nicholas said in a soothing voice, but Seth remains burdened. He stands, facing the window.

“I am afraid my uncle has lost his faith. I heard him cursing God for what happened,” the sad young man told Nicholas.

“That is the worst news of all!” said Nicholas. “A man’s worth should not be judged by how much gold he has. Perhaps I should speak to your uncle?” With that said, Seth spins around to face Nicholas.

“No, please, Sir, say nothing to him,” he pleads. “He is a proud man and would be angry with me if he knew I had spoken of his ill fate to anyone.”

Nicholas turns away from Seth’s gaze and ponders. After a moment he turns back toward his apprentice. “Do not fret my young friend, all will be as it should. Tell your uncle to believe God will provide.”

Seth returns to his carving. “I will, sir.”

Nicholas joins Seth at the table. His tone has changed to more instructional than sympathetic.

“Now, let us begin. There is still much to teach you and my time here is running short. But before I leave Patara, I must instruct you on the art of polishing,” he said, picking up a cloth.

“The choice of cloth is crucial for the desired finish.” The mentor continues his demonstration while the apprentice watches carefully.



Nicholas hides in the shadows behind a building, gawking at the lighted window in the tiny cottage across the street. He holds a full, palm-sized coin bag. He glances around, then quickly crosses the street. He approaches the home with stealth, then assumes a normal pace as he walks toward the lit window.

Without looking at his target, Nicholas casually tosses the coin bag through the window's opening as he strolls past. After a few more steps, he breaks into a sprint and vanishes into the shadows.

The next morning Nicholas is at his work table when Seth steps in. His assistant is smiling ear to ear. "Good morning, Mister Nicholas!" he says with joy in his voice.

"Good morning, Seth. How are you this morning?" Nicholas asks without looking up.

"I could not be better," said Seth, "But my jubilation pales in comparison to my uncle's!" he laughs. Nicholas lays down his tools.

"Jubilation?" said Nicholas rather innocently. "I assumed your uncle was still suffering from his loss?"

"A miracle has happened. For the past two mornings my uncle has found a coin purse filled with gold in the strangest of places!" said Seth.

A slight smile crosses Nicholas' face. His tone is slightly coy. He looks up from his work. "Indeed?"

"It appears as if someone tossed the bag through the window. My uncle has questioned our family and friends but no one has yet claimed to be the generous donor," said Seth as he began laying out his tools.

"How peculiar," said Nicholas as he continues working.

"At first, my uncle thought it might be fool's gold and that someone was playing an evil trick. But today he has learned it is real gold!" continued Seth.

"How very fortunate," said Nicholas, feigning disinterest.

Seth steps to an apron hanging on the wall and begins to slip it over his head.

"You were right, sir. We can find no other explanation. The gold must be a blessing from God."

Nicholas turns his back to Seth trying to hide his smile. "Yes, a blessing from God," he said.

The next night, Nicholas again hides the shadows, his eyes fixed on the flickering firelight coming from the window across the street. He holds another full, palm-sized coin bag. He trots toward the home then slows to a normal pace.

Looking around, he tosses the bag from one hand to the other as he approaches his target. Nicholas strolls beside the window and cocks his arm. A door behind him opens. He wheels around, still holding the bag of gold in the air.

Facing him is Elijah, Seth's uncle, a handsome man in his forties. He looks at Nicholas with total surprise.

"Nicholas? Is that you" he said.

With his eyes fixed on Elijah, Nicholas tosses the bag through the window.

Near the window several stockings hang from the mantel of a lighted fireplace. The bag of gold arcs through the window and lands directly into one of the stockings, making it equally full as the two stockings beside it.

Nicholas smiles and shrugs his shoulders. He wheels around and sprints away. Elijah takes off after him.

"Nicholas, I know it is you. Please, stop!" shouts Elijah.

Nicholas slows then stops. Elijah catches up to him. He's a bit out of breath. "You make it difficult for an old man to thank you. Why do you grace me with such a blessing?" he asks.

"Because you are faithful to God and your family was in need," said Nicholas.

"But why did you hide and not let us know that it was you giving so graciously?" Elijah asks, clearly confused.

"Because it is better to give and have only God be aware of it," said Nicholas.

Elijah cocks his head and looks at him, puzzled, then Nicholas asks a favor. "Please, I beg you. Promise you will tell no one of this until I leave Patara."

"You need not beg me. I give you my word," said Elijah before taking hold of his arm. "God bless you for this wonderful gift, Nicholas. You are a Saint among men."

Nicholas smiles. "Good night, Elijah."

He steps into the darkness. Elijah stands watching Nicholas' departure and speaks under his breath. "Good night, Nicholas."

Nicholas strolls down the street toward the harbor. With both hands, he holds the end of a large, red sack. It's draped over his shoulder and resting against his back. Seth, trots up from behind him holding a coin bag exactly like the ones Nicholas tossed through Elijah's window.

"Mister Nicholas! Mister Nicholas!" shouts Seth.

Nicholas stops and turns around. He drops his bag to the ground as Seth jogs up. "Why, hello, Seth."

Seth holds out the bag. "Sir," he said, "You left this on the workbench. I was afraid thieves may..."

"I left it for you, Seth. I left it all for you. My home, my tools, whatever is left behind, I give to you," said Nicholas.

"But Mister Nicholas, why?" he asks.

Nicholas pats Seth on the shoulder and smiles as he speaks. "Because it is time for me to leave and time for you to become the outstanding craftsman I know you to be."

"Sir, I cannot accept your generous offer, I am undeserving..."

"You are very deserving, Seth. Please, I want you to have them," said Nicholas as he picks up his bag and turns back toward the harbor.

Seth quickly steps around his mentor and blocks his path. "Sir, I know it was you that threw the gold bags into my uncle's window," he said.

Nicholas stops in mid-stride and sits the bag back down. "Is this what your uncle told you?" he asks.

"No, my uncle still claims it was a miracle from God," said Seth, looking at the bag in his hand. "But I cannot overlook the fact that the bags he received and the bag you gave me, are identical."

Nicholas smiles. "Ah! You see? Your eye for detail is truly remarkable. I knew you would make an outstanding craftsman, he jokes. Always remember it *was* a gift from God. I merely delivered it."

"Thank you," said Seth in appreciation. "You, sir, are the kindest, most generous man I have ever known. I will miss you."

"I will miss you too, Seth, patting him on the back as he heaves the bag over his other shoulder and walks away. The apprentice watches as his mentor continues on his journey toward the harbor.



Chapter Eight

Nicholas Saves a Life

Illuminated by the flashes of lightning in the pouring rain, a sailboat sways violently against the choppy sea. Huge waves pound its side. The captain hangs onto the ship's wheel trying to keep from being pushed overboard by the massive waves. Several crewmen on the deck below are wrangling a sail.

The first officer fights the wind and surf as he makes his way up a flight of stairs to the bridge of the ship. The captain has to yell to be heard over the noise of the storm.

"We must get the sails down!" shouts the captain.

"Captain, the main is hung on the rigging!" shouts the first officer.

"We must get it down now or she'll tear apart!" the captain shouts back at the first officer who is fighting his way against the wind to reach the stairs below.

In turn, the first officer shouts at several of the crewmen. "Hold tight to that yardarm, men!"

The crew grabs ahold of a pole attached to the sail's mast while the first officer climbs the tall structure. He reaches the top and begins to saw the sail with a knife. A door swings open. Nicholas steps on deck. He hangs on as a giant wave pushes the boat to its side.

Atop the mast, a gust of wind pushes the first officer away from the sail, causing the rope that ties him to the mast to fray against a piece of metal. Nicholas notices.

The first officer pulls himself back to the sail. The rope securing him again pulls against the piece of metal and frays, then breaks in two. The officer begins to fall.

From Nicholas' point of view, the entire world goes into slow motion. The drops of rain, the crew, everything seems suspended in time including the falling first officer. He sprints toward the officer, pushing his way through the crewmen who now resemble statues. He carefully positions himself under the falling man.

A moment later the first officer hovers only feet above the deck. Nicholas grabs him, turns him upright and guides his feet to a safe landing. Time resumes.

The first officer finds himself next to Nicholas with a look of shock on his face.

“You caught me!” he manages to say, still not quite believing what he experienced.

“I only broke your fall,” said Nicholas.

Now the first officer has regained his composure. “No! You caught me!” he shouts in amazement. “How can you accomplish such a feat?” Nicholas doesn’t answer. Instead he shrugs and helps the man to his feet.



The sailboat approaches the harbor at the Port of Myra. Nicholas stands on the bow gazing ahead at the city beyond. The captain steps up beside him. “We will be in the Port of Myra in a few minutes. I will have your things sent to the inn.” he said.

“Thank you, sir,” Nicholas said, still gazing ahead.

“Nicholas, I am in debt to you for saving my officer,” said the captain. “He is still praising your name.”

“I only broke his fall...” Nicholas insists.

“Nicholas, I do not know how, but I too saw what you did. In an instant, you caught him like one catches a bag of flour,” said the captain.

“It was simply a trick of light, caused by the lightening. I merely guided him down,” Nicholas said.

“The captain pulls out a pipe and chuckles, “I know a trick of the eye when I see it.” The old sailor clenches the pipe between his teeth.

“No. The story of your miraculous deed will spread among sailors like wildfire,” said the captain as he taps his pipe on the ledge.

“I would rather it not. I did nothing,” Nicholas said, turning to the captain.

The captain smiles and pats Nicholas on the arm. “I am afraid it is too late. The die is already cast.”



Chapter Nine

Nicholas Becomes a Bishop

It is sunset as Nicholas navigates through the many carts littering Myra's busy street. He stops and chats with some of the vendors as he makes his way toward an inn.

A bell rings as Nicholas steps into a modest boarding house. He sits his red bag down on the floor as an elderly lady walks in from another room.

"Be needing a room?" asks the old woman.

"Yes, ma'am," said Nicholas. She asks for how long. Nicholas isn't sure. "I will search for more permanent housing in Myra soon."

"Got a nice room upstairs I could rent for a week," she tells Nicholas.

"That will be acceptable," said Nicholas as he picks up his bag.

"Follow me," said the woman, stepping to the nearby stairway. Nicholas grabs his red bag, slings it over his shoulder and follows.

Nicholas steps out of the inn and glances down the street. It's early morning and a beautiful day. Few people are about except the vendors who are busy setting up their carts.

Nicholas looks at the giant cathedral taking a prominent position at the end of the street. He walks toward it. Upon reaching the massive building he steps into a large room, kneels at the door and performs the sign of the cross, then stands and heads toward the single aisle separating the many rows of benches.

He walks up to the bench closest to the pulpit and kneels in front of it. He interlaces his fingers, bows his head and prays.

From a side entrance, a nun, Roselia, a young, graceful woman, walks in with more candles. She gazes at Nicholas while quietly replacing the spent candles.

Nicholas finishes his prayer and looks up at the array of candles decorating the pulpit. Through the light, he notices the nun and smiles. She returns the smile. "Good morning, sir," she says quietly.

"Good morning, sister," said Nicholas respectfully.

“Welcome to our place of worship. I am Sister Roselia,” said the woman.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance. I am Nicholas.”

Roselia drops a candle. A surprised look covers her face as she takes a couple of steps backward. “Nicholas! You are Nicholas?” she gasps.

“Yes, Nicholas of Patara. Does my name cause you discomfort?”

Roselia recomposes herself and steps from behind the candles. “No. You are the fulfillment of God’s promise. You are the answer to our prayers.”

“I do not understand,” said Nicholas as a priest, a older, balding man steps into the room. He walks rather hurriedly toward Roselia.

“Sister, I heard a noise,” said the priest. “Are you alright?”

“Yes, Father,” replied Sister Roselia as the priest turns to look at Nicholas. Roselia motions toward him. “Father,” said Sister Roselia, “This is Nicholas!”

The priest smiles and gazes at Nicholas as he walks toward him with an extended hand. “Why, hello. I am Father Jeremiah.”

“Nicholas of Patara.”

The priest motions to one of the benches. “Please, let us get off our feet,” said Father Jeremiah.

The men take a seat as Roselia quietly leaves the room. Father Jeremiah, clearly overjoyed, looks in silence at Nicholas for a few moments as if carefully selecting his next words.

“I can think of no other way of saying this, Nicholas,” said Father Jeremiah. “You *must* become Bishop of Myra.”

Nicholas looks truly shocked. “Bishop? But I am not worthy to become a Bishop! I am but a toy maker!” he exclaimed.

“You are a man of God, are you not?” asks Father Jeremiah.

Nicholas nods his head furiously. “Yes!” said Nicholas. “I am.”

“Then, Nicholas, you shall be Bishop of Myra!” said Father Jeremiah as he dances about the room. “The former bishop passed away last spring. We have been praying many months for someone to replace him. Over the past weeks several other bishops and I have had the same dream. A vision that Myra’s next Bishop would appear here, this very morning. And his name would be Nicholas!”

Nicholas, unsure, looks hard at Father Jeremiah. “Father, I have no doubt you and others have had this dream. But are you sure it is God’s will?” he asks.

“Nicholas, I have been a man of faith my entire life,” said the priest with a broad smile. “I know when it is God speaking to me.”

The priest pauses a moment and shifts position. He then looks at Nicholas. “Tell me, what brought you to Myra?”

Nicholas’ expression changes to thoughtful confusion. “I am not sure. I awoke one morning to the notion of moving here.”

The priest gives Nicholas an “I told you so look” and grins knowingly.

“But, Father, the Church will never allow someone as young and inexperienced as I to become Bishop, said Nicholas.

“Normally that would be true,” said the priest, “But the Church is aware of our shared visions and have granted us the right to choose our own Bishop — which I hope will be you.”

Jeremiah stands. Nicholas follows. “Nicholas, I know God has led you to us, but the choice is still yours. He will not force it upon you, he is simply making you an offer,” said the priest.

Nicholas glances off as if recalling hearing similar words. “An offer?” asks Nicholas. “I will pray about it, Father Jeremiah. I must ask God for guidance.”

“That’s all we can ask,” said Father Jeremiah.



Lightning and thunder fill the sky. A man runs through the rain down a watery street. He trots up to the door of the cottage which stands next to the cathedral. He knocks. It’s Nicholas. He stands back and waits. No one responds. This time he pounds the door with his fist. Again, he steps back and waits.

A moment later commotion is heard from the other side. The door opens and Father Jeremiah gazes at Nicholas with sleepy eyes. “Nicholas?”

“Father. I have decided. I will accept the offer to become Bishop of Myra,” said Nicholas.

Father Jeremiah smiles and invites Nicholas inside. The men disappear into the cottage.



A group of people stand around Nicholas at a candle lit pulpit inside the cathedral. A man steps forward to drape a bright red robe with white trim over his shoulders.

“The very next day, the people of Myra named Nicholas as their new bishop,” said Steve.

A crowd gathered around Nicholas. One by one, men step into the crowd carrying bags of grain. They cheer while Nicholas quietly walks away. And it wasn't long before Nicholas became known in the region as a holy man, a man of compassion, always seeing to the needs of the people. Never once did Nicholas ask for anything in return.



Several children sit on the floor in a circle. A much older Nicholas kneels in the center, handing out gifts he retrieves from a small, red bag.

Nicholas' generosity to the children that became known throughout the land. Often, Nicholas of Myra would spend days traveling the country, giving away toys or candy to the children.

His kindness touched their hearts and taught them what a wonderful blessing it is to give.

For nearly 80 years he faithfully served his people and had become the most beloved bishop the world had ever known. He had devoted his entire life to God and the teachings of Christ, but never recalling Jesus had once been his childhood friend.

Nicholas slowly closes his eyes. And as with his first mortal life, Nicholas grew old. Then, one night, while in his sleep, the angels came.



Chapter Ten

Welcome to the Light

Nicholas quickly opens his eyes with a slight head jerk and a gasp of air. “Where am I?” he wonders. He looks around, seeing only a white, dense fog brightly illuminated above and below. It’s as if he’s standing in a cloud with a huge shaft of light piercing through it. The fog dissipates in the area immediately around Nicholas. In the distant clearing, a human form appears, walking toward him. The form gets closer and becomes recognizable. It’s Jesus! He holds out his arms and smiles as he approaches.

“Hello, Nicholas! Welcome to the Light, old friend,” said Jesus.

“Old is right,” laughed Nicholas, happy to see his friend. He tugs the hair on his chin expecting to see his long white beard, but instead finds it coal black. He looks at the back of his hands expecting to see the wrinkled hands of an old man, but instead finds them to be the hands of a young man. He looks for his cane but then realizes he needs no cane for he can stand easily.

“Jesus?” Nicholas takes a step toward Jesus, then stops. He touches his temple and smiles. Images of his life as the first Nicholas, the little drummer boy, flash through his mind.

“Ah! I... remember... I remember it all... God’s offer!” said Nicholas.

Jesus steps up and takes Nicholas by the shoulders. “Yes, my old friend, and you have been remarkable. Our Father could not be more pleased,” said Jesus.

Nicholas glances around. “This is Heaven?”

Jesus chuckles and takes a step back. “No, this is the Light, the roadway from Earth to Heaven. But we are not going to Heaven. Not yet!” Jesus waves his arms and the fog completely clears. “Today, we will use it to travel from one place on Earth to another.”

The men are floating high above the Earth yet seem to be standing on solid ground. They are encapsulated in a giant shaft of light that extends from the Earth’s surface into the infinity of space.

“Today,” explained Jesus, “You begin fulfilling your destiny!”

Nicholas looks down. He can see the shaft of light moving across the Black Sea and away from his Turkish home on the Mediterranean. “Today, you will take charge of a kingdom our Father has created for you at the top of the world. A kingdom few others will ever see,” continued Jesus.

The shaft of light is now moving over Finland and headed toward the Arctic. “There, for the next thousand years, you will teach many generations of apprentices the art of toy making, until they, too, become master craftsmen — master toy makers.”

“Generations? But you said only one other human would ever see this kingdom,” said Nicholas.

“My friend, since the dawn of mankind, our Father has enjoyed dedicated help among the living on Earth. Although their existence has remained hidden to most, through them, God has performed countless miracles,” said Jesus.

“You mean angels?” asked Nicholas.

“Not exactly,” said Jesus. “They are known as elves. Living spirits endowed with special abilities, much the way you are now.”

Nicholas is astounded. “You mean, elves are real?”

Jesus smiles. “Quite real, my friend. The chosen ones are already gathered at your kingdom and await your arrival.”

The shaft of light is now directly over the North Pole.

“The elves are quite intelligent, but they lack creativity. They need guidance and leadership to bring out their best,” continued Jesus. Jesus steps directly in front of Nicholas and locks eyes with him. “I know you will teach them well, Nicholas, for someday soon you will begin the great task for which you have been destined since the first time you played your drum for me.”

Nicholas looks curious as the men begin to descend toward the icy polar cap.

“Great task?” asked Nicholas.

“One night each year, you will gather all the toys the elves make and deliver them to every worthy child on Earth who celebrates my birth,” said Jesus.

“Worthy? How am I to judge if they are worthy?”

“Throughout the year you will keep a list of all the world’s children. You will be able to see them when they are sleeping. You will know when they are awake. And you will know if they have been bad or good.”

“I will go mad, for goodness sake!” exclaimed Nicholas.

Jesus chuckles. No, you will not, my old friend. Just remember, no toys to the children who are naughty, only to the ones who are nice.

The shaft of light gently eases the men to the snow-covered surface then moves away. Nicholas looks up into a crystal clear, night sky filled with brilliant stars.

"I have never seen the sky so magnificent!" exclaimed Nicholas, holding his hands toward the sky.

"And you will see many more like it, my friend," said Jesus as he led Nicholas across the freezing tundra. Nicholas notices they're not sinking into the snow. They're walking on top of it and leaving no footprints at all.

"Around the world in one night? Jesus, how will I ever accomplish such a feat?" he asks.

"You will be able to transcend human time, this I know. But our Father has not yet revealed the method you will use," said Jesus. "Still, there is much the elves need to learn before we concern ourselves with the delivery method. God will provide when the time comes.

"For now, you must focus on the task at hand, teaching the elves. For someday you will become a symbol to those who cannot yet fully understand the significance of my life — the young children. Your yearly visits will show them the virtue of giving. Even after they have grown older, you will always remain dear to their hearts." Jesus pats Nicholas on the shoulder.

"From this moment on, our destinies will forever be linked that one night a year, Nicholas. For many who know you will be reminded of me."

Jesus and Nicholas reach a massive door. Jesus rings the chime and the door opens. They step into a large room adorned with all types of eclectic art. A number of tiny sofas and chairs are neatly arranged. The domed ceiling stretches all the way back to the surface of the ice. Nicholas looks up at the cluster of bright stars shining through the glass ceiling high above him.

"Welcome to your new home, Nicholas," said Jesus extending his arm.

Nicholas slowly looks around. "This is where I now live?"

This is only the entrance. We will take a tour of this vast kingdom later. But, first, it is time to meet your apprentices. Are you ready?

"Yes, and I promise, I will not let you down."

A balcony protrudes below the peak of the vaulted ceiling at one end of an enormous room. A door opens on the balcony and Jesus steps out. He walks to the railing and looks out.

Several feet below are workstations, each operated by a small, childlike, human-looking being with pointed ears. They're Elves and are totally absorbed in their work.

Jesus leans over the rail and speaks loudly.

“Spirits of Elf, here me!” shouts Jesus.

Simultaneously all the elves stop what they’re doing and look toward Jesus. The room quiets.

“Your mentor has arrived! Today you will begin the work God planned even before time itself was created. The selfless labor of you and your generations to follow will bring joy to the people of Earth and to our Father in Heaven. Blessed Spirits of Elf, I now give you the man who will guide you through this marvelous journey. Your teacher, Nicholas.”

Nicholas bashfully steps out onto the balcony wearing his bishop hat and robe. The elves begin to clap and cheer. Nicholas waves.

Little by little a chanting grows louder among the elves’ claps and cheers. “Santa Claus! Santa Claus!” gets louder and louder until all the elves are chanting.

Nicholas steps to Jesus. He shouts to be heard over the chanting. “What are they saying?”

“They are saying ‘Saint Nicholas’ in their native tongue,” said Jesus.

Nicholas looks aghast. “Tell them to stop! I am no Saint!”

Jesus pats Nicholas on the shoulder and smiles. “You will be.”



Chapter Eleven

He Can Fly

Hidden away under the North Pole, Nicholas never aged, yet his hair and beard grew as white as snow. He spent every day for the next thousand years teaching the elves all he knew about toy making.

During this time, stories of Bishop Nicholas' good deeds and wonderful generosity began to spread throughout Europe. Soon churches were being named after him and, sure enough, just as Jesus had predicted, the Church officially recognized him as a true Saint.

Although he was honored by the title, Saint Nicholas never really thought of himself as a 'Saint.' He remained a selfless and tireless mentor, passing on lifetimes of experience as a craftsman to the Elves. He thought of them as his family and loved each one. And the elves loved Nicholas, always listening and learning from their teacher.

Before long, the elves had become excellent craftsmen and Nicholas realized he had a warehouse full of toys.



A chime rings. All heads turn and Jesus appears. Everyone stands and Nicholas steps to his visitor.

"Jesus! How good to see you!" said Nicholas.

"Nicholas, my old friend!" said Jesus. The men embrace with pats on the back.

"Old is right! It has been what, a hundred or so years since your last visit?" said Nicholas as he extends his hand toward a comfortable chair.

"As always, it has been too long," said Jesus. "But on this day my visit brings with it a very special meaning."

Jesus gazes at Nicholas as if expecting an answer. "Do you not remember the importance of this day?"

Nicholas looks puzzled. "Tuesday?"

Jesus joins the elves in laughter. “Yes, I believe it is Tuesday. But it is also the last day of your thousand-year training.”

A look of instant recognition covers Nicholas’s face. The elves clap and cheer. “You are right!” said Nicholas. “Tomorrow, we make preparations to deliver the toys.”

“In one night!” adds Jesus.

“In one night?” asks Nicholas. “Has God yet devised a method?”

Jesus gives Nicholas a coy smile. He goes to the door and points. As Nicholas looks outside, a large number of elves circle a beautiful, white stallion. It is the most spectacular animal Nicholas has ever seen. He strolls around the animal, scrutinizing and examining it.

“What a beautiful steed!” said Nicholas in admiration.

“His name is Amerigo,” said Jesus. “He too is a living spirit with special abilities.”

One of the elves steps out of the circle and up to Nicholas. “He can fly,” he said and quickly steps back into the circle. Nicholas continues his examination as Jesus walks beside him.

“This is how you will deliver the gifts in one night,” said Jesus.

Nicholas stops his examination and gazes at Jesus. “But I do not understand. Even with the gift of flight, I still do not see how I will deliver ALL the gifts in one night!”

Jesus places his hand on Nicholas’ shoulder. “Nicholas, on that night, once you have left this kingdom, you will alter the flow of time. After each delivery, time will reset itself to the moment of your arrival. Although no one will realize it has happened, not one second will pass on Earth until the last gift is delivered.” The stallion whinnies and shakes his head as if to agree.

“To the world, your work will be accomplished in the blink of an eye. But to you and your capable assistants, it will seem as if only the night has passed.

“Nicholas is amazed. He looks at the elves, then at Amerigo. “I am in awe of God’s design.”

“Each year your deliveries will begin with the good Dutch children of the Netherlands,” said Jesus.

“This is how you will deliver the gifts in one night,” said Jesus. “Amerigo will help you.”

Nicholas stops his examination and gazes at Jesus.

“But I do not understand, Jesus,” said Nicholas who begins to wring his hands. “Even with the gift of flight, I still do not see how I will deliver all the gifts in one night!”

Jesus places his hand on Nicholas’ shoulder. “Nicholas, on that night, once you leave this kingdom, you will alter the flow of time. After each delivery, time will reset itself to the moment of your arrival. Although no one will realize it has happened, not one moment will pass on Earth until the last gift is delivered.

The stallion whinnies and shakes his head as if to agree.

“To the world, your work will be accomplished in the blink of an eye. But to you and to your assistants, it will seem as if only the night has passed,” he continued.

“I am in awe of God’s design,” said Nicholas.

“Each year, your deliveries will begin with the good Dutch children of the Netherlands.”



Chapter Twelve

The Legend of Sinterklass

Nicholas stands on the bow gazing toward the shore of The Netherlands. He holds a golden staff and is wearing his traditional red bishop robe and hat. “You will arrive by boat before mounting your steed, Amerigo, and making your deliveries, which will forever become a tradition in their country,” he hears Jesus’ voice say.

Beside Nicholas, a boat captain takes a puff from his pipe. Behind him, Amerigo is tied to the deck. The stallion snorts and whinnies.

“Your horse is nervous,” said the captain, still puffing on his pipe. Nicholas, not noticing the captain had walked up to him, is startled.

“Amerigo is not nervous, just anxious to begin his mission,” said Nicholas, defending his steed.

The captain takes another draw from his pipe then turns to Nicholas and narrows his eyes.

“And what mission might that be, sir?” asks the captain.

Forgetting a possible need to be careful with his words, Nicholas happily tells the captain, “We are delivering gifts to all the children of the world who celebrate Christmas!”

The captain appears to think he is speaking with someone who may have lost his mind, but decides to play along. “Why might ye be doing that?”

“Why, to honor the birth of Jesus, of course!” said Nicholas.

The captain points with his pipe toward the huge red bag near the stallion. “You tell me all them gifts are in that sack?” he asks.

“Amazing, is it not? All the gifts fit into this bag. And I will deliver them all in one night!” said Nicholas with excitement.

“And how might you do that?” asks the captain, growing ever more incredulous.

“Amerigo can fly and I have the ability to...” begins Nicholas. Pete the Elf walks up to Nicholas as he stands with the captain.

Nicholas immediately turns his attention to him.

“Everything is ready, sir,” Pete tells Nicholas.

“Excellent. Good work, Pete!” said Nicholas, clearly pleased. The captain takes a draw from his pipe as he narrows his eyes and looks first at Pete the Elf, dressed so strangely in his eyes, and then at Nicholas.

“What be your name again?” asked the captain.

“I am Nicholas,” came the reply.

“Saint Nicholas?!” said the captain, chuckling. “Sinterklass!” he said, laughing in disbelief.

A bewildered Nicholas looks down at Pete, who responds with a quick, authoritative tone. “That means ‘Saint Nicholas’ in the Dutch language.”

Nicholas shakes his head in recognition. The captain continues to laugh. “You mean the patron saint of sailors? You cannot be Sinterklass. He is myth and legend. You are just an average man. Flesh and bone.”

“But...I AM Nicholas. I was once Bishop of Myra,” Nicholas said, a little annoyed. “Now I am on a mission from God.”

The captain bends down to Pete’s eye level. “If he is Sinterklass, who might you be?” he asked.

“I am Pete, the head Elf. I make sure the chimneys are safe for Santa,” said Pete, trying his best to look like a brave authority figure.

“A chimneysweep eh? Then we should start calling ye ‘Zwarte Pieten!’” The captain laughs.

He taps his pipe on the side of the boat, knocking the ashes out. He continues, “Lot of soot in those chimneys.” He looks down at Pete, curious to hear more.

“Tell me,” he asks, “Why might ye be cleaning the chimneys if you are only leaving gifts?”

“Pete explains patiently, “Because that is how the Santa will make his deliveries — he goes down the chimney.”

The captain blows through his empty pipe. “So Sinterklass here goes down the chimneys with a bag full of gifts, eh? Where might ye get them?”

“We make them,” said Pete, “At Santa’s workshop, under the North Pole.

Nicholas smiles and nods his head in innocent agreement. The captain looks at them for a moment then bursts into laughter.

“Under the North Pole! What a story!” the captain laughs.

“I would be an idiot to believe such nonsense. Although it is a good story, one worth retelling.”

After the captain’s laughter subsides, he narrows his eyes and gazes at Nicholas. “Ah! I know who you really are. I have heard of you before. You be them actors from Spain. From the Catholic church.

Nicholas rolls his eyes, “You may choose to believe whatever you wish. But we have told you the truth.”

“And you are very good actors, just as I have heard. Especially the little one. Had me going!” said the captain, still chuckling.

“Please do not tell the children we are actors,” said Nicholas. “It would spoil the ceremony.”

“Mum to the children it is, Sinterklass! You have my word on it. Now, get your things together. We will unload within the hour!” he said as he walked away, still laughing and shaking his head. “Sinterklass,...yep, had me going.”

After the Captain is out of earshot, Pete gazes up at Nicholas. “Why did we not try to convince him of our real purpose, sir?” Pete asked.

“We spoke the truth, Pete. And I felt his disbelief may actually be for the greater good.”

“How so?” asked Pete.

“It may be best not to reveal our frigid location, lest someone might perish trying to find it,” said Nicholas.

“But Spain? What if someone searches for the workshop in Spain?” Pete asked, still not convinced.

Nicholas laughed. “At least it would be warmer!”



Sailors tie off the boat with large ropes while others lower a ramp in the ship’s hull to the dock.

In the cargo hold, Nicholas sits atop Amerigo on a leather saddle. The red toy bag hangs across the stallion’s rump.

The ramp makes contact with the dock.

Immediately Amerigo trots toward it with Nicholas barely hanging on. Sailors jump aside as the stallion leaps from the boat. Amerigo slowly floats across the ramp and hovers several feet above the dock. Nicholas repositions himself, grabs the reins and gives them a tug.

“Amerigo, down,” said Nicholas.

The sailors stop what they’re doing and watch in awe as the stallion slowly descends. On the bow, the Captain also gawks in disbelief as he steps forward for a better view.

He removes his hat and scratches his head. “Sinterklass?”

Nicholas guides Amerigo to a gentle landing some distance from the boat. Pete rides up on a gray donkey. “Are you alright, sir?” he asks.

“Yes,” said Nicholas, still a bit frazzled. “But it appears I have yet to master riding a flying horse!”

Pete looks over his shoulder and sees the sailors still staring. “I think we should get going, if you want to keep them believing we are actors from Spain.”

Nicholas and Pete ride off toward the town.



After a thousand years of preparation,” Steve continues, turning the page, “Nicholas finally began the journey for which he had spent two lifetimes preparing. With each passing year word spreads further of the Saint’s annual appearance. And before long, every country in the world had its own tale about Nicholas and his helpers.

In Germany, he became known as Kris Kringle or Belsnickle, meaning “Nicholas in Furs.” In England he’s known as “Father Christmas.”

In France, children know him as “Pere Noel,” leaving drinks and desserts for the busy traveler to snack on. Other children would place their shoes next to the fireplace, filling them with carrots and hay for Amerigo and Pete’s gray donkey, Mistletoe.

Over the next five hundred years almost every culture in the world had written a song or story about the generosity of Saint Nicholas. And then, one night...



Chapter Thirteen

Clara and the Reindeer

Nicholas and Pete are riding their equine side by side, flying just above the treetops through the occasional low cloud. Nicholas looks at Pete and smiles. "Good job as usual, Pete."

"Thanks boss," said Pete.

"Another successful delivery. Not a house left unvisited, not a toy left behind," said Nicholas, quite satisfied with their good work. Pete glances at the small, square protrusion sticking out of the red bag.

"Uh, sir. I think there's still one gift in the bag," said Pete.

Nicholas reaches down and fingers the outside of the bag's protrusion. He wrinkles his brow.

"You are right, but I am sure we have visited every child on the list," Nicholas said, then ponders a moment. "Could it be possible the wrapping department miscounted?"

Pete, clearly deflated, looks away with embarrassment. "Again."

Nicholas smiles. "Do not fret about it, my faithful assistant. Let us enjoy the beauty of the night. Perhaps take the scenic route over the lovely shores of Finnmark!"

"Sir, I was hoping to go home soon. Mistletoe and I are a bit fatigued," he said, looking down at his brown donkey who clearly looks tired. The brown donkey snorts and slowly shakes his head.

"Of course, Pete," said Nicholas, turning his gaze to Mistletoe. "I am sorry you are feeling poorly, Mistletoe. Again, Mistletoe snorts. Nicholas looks at Amerigo. "How about you, Amerigo?"

The stallion, full of energy, whinnies. Nicholas is relieved. "Ah, good!" he said, turning his attention back to Pete. "Please, take the quickest route home. Amerigo and I will not be far behind.

"Are you sure, sir?" asked Pete. Nicholas pulls Amerigo's reins and begins a banking turn away from Pete.

"Yes, indeed, we will see you soon, my friend. Do enjoy your rest," said Nicholas, raising his hand over his shoulder as he and Amerigo disappear into the clouds.



Nicholas and his stallion fly only a few feet above a dense forest of snow-covered treetops. The sun peeps over the horizon and illuminates Nicholas' handsome, smiling face. "What a beautiful sight to behold," he exclaims. "How could anyone not marvel at God's creation?"

Nicholas passes over several clearings in the forest revealing reindeer and other animals grazing in a small area spared by the snowfall. He pulls the reins. Amerigo banks, turning the sunshine to their broadside. The stallion whinnies as he straightens his turn. Nicholas shrugs his shoulders.

"I do not know," Nicholas said, as if answering Amerigo's question. "I simply felt drawn to go this way." Amerigo whinnies again. "I know, I do not want Pete to worry either," he said.

A surprised look comes over Nicholas' face as he surveys the ground.

"Look Amerigo, there *IS* a house we did not visit!"

The saint and stallion fly over a small cottage with smoke billowing from the chimney. A stable is close by. "This must be why we have a gift remaining!" he said with delight. He pats his stallion on the neck. "Alright my friend, take us down!"

A cabin door opens. A beautiful young woman steps out and makes her way carefully through the snow toward the stable. Nicholas' jaw drops slightly. He stares at her as if in a trance and cranes his head to keep her in view as Amerigo circles the cabin's rooftop.

Unaware of the flying stallion overhead, the woman disappears into the stable. Amerigo and his rider descend to the cabin's roof and make a soft landing. Nicholas dismounts and reaches into the bag. The stable door opens. The woman steps out. The Saint peeks over the saddle and again, then locks his eyes on her image.

Still unaware of her new rooftop house guest, the woman closes the stable door and retraces her steps to the cabin. Nicholas, frozen in a trance watching the woman's every move, absentmindedly takes a step backward. He loses his footing and begins to slide down the roof. With his hand still in the bag and it still attached to Amerigo, Nicholas drags the stallion down with him.

The woman stops, looks up toward the noise but sees nothing as Nicholas and Amerigo are nearly to the ground on the other side of the cabin.

Nicholas falls in a large snowbank. A second later, Amerigo lands a few feet away.

The woman hears the thud of falling bodies and rushes to the other side of the cabin to find Nicholas sprawled out and Amerigo laying on his side.

Nicholas sits up and crawls toward his stallion. Amerigo is struggling but unable to get on his feet. "Amerigo! Amerigo, are you hurt?" Nicholas cries out.

Amerigo raises his head, snorts and drags his front leg slowly toward Nicholas. He's obviously hurt. Nicholas repositions himself, hurries to the stallion and gently lifts the trembling appendage. "Have mercy," he cries out to the heavens.

The woman rounds the corner and comes to an abrupt stop. She looks up and sees the skid marks in the snow-covered roof leading directly to the fallen strangers. She gazes at the handsome stranger who is busy tending to his injured steed.

"It appears your leg is broken, my friend," Nicholas told Amerigo, trying his best to stay calm.

Nicholas is still examining his stallion's leg as the young woman scurries toward him through the snow-covered tundra. Nicholas hears her, turns and watches her approach. In awe of her beauty, Nicholas steadies himself as she kneels down beside him.

"Sir, did you just fall off the roof?" asks Clara.

"I am terribly sorry. This is all my fault," admitted Nicholas as he holds Amerigo's leg in his hands. "I am afraid my steed's leg is broken due to my clumsiness."

"Broken? Here, let me look," said Clara in a sweet, caring voice. Nicholas moves out of the way as she repositions herself for a better look at Amerigo's injury. She pulls the scarf from her neck and wraps it around the stallion's leg.

"I am no healer," said Nicholas, unsure of what Clara is doing, "I do not think a scarf will work to set a broken leg."

Undaunted by Nicholas' words and seemingly lack of faith in her effort, she focuses on Amerigo's trembling leg. "What is your horse's name?" she asks.

"His name is Amerigo," said Nicholas. "And my name is Nicholas."

"Very nice to meet you," said Clara. She grasps the leg over the scarf with both hands. She leans toward the stallion's head. "And nice to meet you, Amerigo. I can help if you'll allow me to do so." Amerigo snorts and whinnies in the affirmative. "Good. Now hold on, this may hurt a bit."

Clara closes her eyes and says a silent prayer. The stallion stiffens but remains silent. Nicholas' eyes widen as he watches her hands, the scarf and, finally, the leg, begin to glow.

Nicholas, amazed, asks, "How are you doing this?"

Clara remains focused, then speaks in a soft voice. "Amerigo, stay calm."

A moment passes. The glowing subsides and Amerigo takes a deep breath. Clara releases her hands. The scarf remains in place, almost as if molded to the stallion's leg. She sits back on her knees and takes a deep breath. Then she opens her eyes, turns to Nicholas and smiles.

"His leg should be healed by morning," said Clara.

Nicholas' eyes fill with joy. He holds out his hand. "Morning? Thank you, Clara," he said, taking her hand.

Clara's smiles turns serious. "We need to get Amerigo to the stable." She leans over and looks at the stallion. "Do you think you can stand?" she asks Amerigo.

Amerigo whinnies as if to say 'yes' to her question. "Alright," said Clara. "Here we go."

Clara and Nicholas move to the other side of the fallen stallion. The Saint, taking a position near the saddle, Clara near the neck. Both kneel and grab on. "Don't put too much pressure on it at first. Ready? On three. One...two...three."

Amerigo thrashes, then hobbles to his feet. He swaggers a moment before regaining his balance.

"Good. Gently, now," said Clara as, together, they lead the limping stallion slowly toward the barn, helping him to maintain his balance along the way. Night is about to set in and it begins to snow. Nicholas opens the door. Clara leads Amerigo to just inside the large structure and hands the reins to Nicholas.

"We need the lantern," said Clara as he heads toward a nearby tack room. "It should still be warm; I was just in here."

"Yes, I know, said Nicholas, sheepishly. Clara pauses for a moment to gaze at Nicholas before she disappears into the tack room.

Her disembodied voice is heard. "So, you were watching me?" She emerges from the tack room with the lantern. She gazes at Nicholas with a perplexed look on her face.

Not wishing to alarm Clara, Nicholas quickly fashions an excuse.

"I just happened to see a lantern light go out just before Amerigo and I fell from your roof," he said before thinking.

"Wait, wait, wait. You both fell? From the roof?"

Nicholas appears uncomfortable again, as if he is trying to formulate a reason he would be on her roof, yet cannot come up with one. Forever a truth teller, he comes clean.

"Why...yes," said Nicholas, studying Clara's lovely face.

“Would you mind telling me how you and your stallion ended up on my roof?” Clara asks, not quite believing the question she is asking.

“God has given my trusted steed the gift of flight,” explained Nicholas. “Unfortunately, he did not bestow on me the ability to ride him,” he laughs.

Clara stares at Nicholas for a moment and responds with an accepting, yet curious tone. “The gift of flight?” Nicholas follows Clara back to where Amerigo has been patiently standing. She kneels with the lantern and examines the stallion’s injured leg. “Why did you and Amerigo decided to land on *my* roof?”

“To deliver to you a gift,” said Nicholas, slipping his hand into the bag that had been hanging from Amerigo’s side. He retrieves a small box wrapped with red and green paper.

Clara slowly turns her attention toward Nicholas who extends his hand with the colorful box. She stands, happily accepts the gift like a joyful child and carefully removes the wrapping.

The last bit of wrapping falls to reveal a music box. Clara smiles as she glances at Nicholas and lifts the lid. Inside is a miniature representation of Clara’s cabin. The song “Jingle Bells” plays. Nicholas waits anxiously for Clara’s reaction.

“Merry Christmas,” said Nichols.

Clara’s eyes widen with disbelief. She stares in wonderment as the music plays on.

“I do hope you like it,” said Nicholas with a shy smile.

“How...where?” said Clara, dumbfounded.

“It was made specifically for you in my workshop,” said Nicholas, still not remembering putting the order in for the object. For a moment, Clara gazes with admiration at the music box. Then closes the lid and locks eyes with Nicholas.

“Who...who are you?” she asks.

“I am Nicholas. Some may call me Saint Nicholas.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Said Clara. “You’re saying you’re Saint Nicholas, Kris Kringle...Sinterklass?”

“Yes,” said Nicholas. “I am also known by those names.”

Clara gazes at Nicholas and is smitten. She realizes she’s in the presence of a great man. “Thank you, Nicholas. It is beautiful.”

Nicholas returns the smile.

Clara carefully sits the music box down on a nearby ledge and again bends forward. She gently lifts Amerigo's injured leg with her fingertips.

"Feeling better?" she asks him. Amerigo whinnies. "Try putting a little pressure on your foot."

The stallion slowly extends his hoof to the ground. He applies pressure and whinnies as if to say he feels no pain.

"Oh good!" Clara says, standing. She hangs the lantern on the post above the ledge. The light now illuminates a good portion of the stable's interior. A wide aisle runs down the building's length with a brightly colored sleigh parked at the end. The aisle is flanked with eight individual stalls, four on each side.

Clara looks toward what looks to be empty stalls and calls out. "Everyone! Your attention please!" In near perfect unison, eight horned reindeer heads bashfully peek over their stalls. "We have an injured guest and I need your help!"

Nicholas gazes at them in awe. "Nicholas and Amerigo, I would like you to meet my friends," said Clara, extending her arm toward the stalls, calling out each reindeer individually. As she calls out each name, a reindeer steps away from the protection of the stall. As each reindeer steps forward, others step forward with seemingly more courage. "This is Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, and Vixen. Over here is Comet, Cupid, Donder and Blitzen."

She addresses the group. "Dear ones, this is Nicholas and his steed, Amerigo, who, as you can see, is injured. We need a volunteer to offer a stall so that he may rest."

Before Clara can finish her sentence, the reindeers jump and cheerfully nudge their stall doors open in unison to welcome the injured animal. Clara smiles. "You are all very gracious, but I only need one." She turns to the closest stall, Dasher's.

"Thank you, Dasher," Clara said as she leads Amerigo into the stall while Dasher looks on with concern for the horse. "Amerigo, I promise, your leg will soon feel strong again." She turns to Nicholas and points to a bag of oats in the corner. "Nicholas, would you mind fetching a scoop of oats?"

"Certainly!" said Nicholas. Dasher follows the Saint, curiously watching his every move. Nicholas kneels down and pulls out a scoop full of oats from the bag. He smiles warmly at the reindeer.

"It is very kind of you to share your quarters, my new friend," said Nicholas. Dasher looks down shyly. Nicholas stands, carries the oats to the stall and passes the scoop to Clara.

She pours the oats into a hanging feeder and turns to Amerigo. "Here is food if you grow hungry. And there is fresh water in the trough," she said. Amerigo whinnies in appreciation. "Sleep well, Amerigo. I will return in the morning."



Pete stands on the balcony overlooking the workshop. Below, a crowd of elves are gathered, all gawking and discussing the paperwork each has in their hands.

“Listen up everyone!” shouts Pete. The room begins to quiet. All that is heard are the muffled whispers among the curious elves. “Do all of you have your grid map?” The crowd collectively nod their heads. “Red Squadron, you will begin searching in Santa’s last known position, located in Alpha Sector. Upon arrival, you will execute the maneuver, a crisscross pattern covering precisely ten square miles. Upon completion of said maneuver you will return to base.”

Several elves standing close are all wearing red uniforms. They collectively acknowledge receipt of Pete’s orders.

“White Squadron. You are to pick up where Red Squadron left off in Alpha Sector, then move into Beta Sector as per your sealed orders. Blue Squadron, your orders are to...”

A voice from behind Pete whispers his name. He turns around and sees Jesus, just out of the crowd’s view, motioning to him from across the room. Pete turns back to the crowd. “Blue Squadron. Please open your sealed orders now. I will return in a moment.”

Below, a group of elves tear open envelopes sealed with an ornate wax seal emblem that reads, “Santa Clause, North Pole.” Pete turns and heads toward Jesus as he speaks. “Sir, with all due respect, I am really busy here. Santa is overdue. I must conclude he is missing and possibly injured!”

Jesus smiles a knowing smile, “He is fine, Pete.”

“Begging your pardon, sir,” said Pete.

“Pete, trust me,” said Jesus. “He is well. He will return tomorrow in good health — and possibly a bit happier than when you last saw him,” he adds with a grin.

“Oh. Yes, of course,” Pete said. He takes a deep breath. “Whew! What a relief. I thought we had lost him.”

Jesus kneels down to Pete’s eye level and smiles. “No Pete, there is no loss tonight. Only gain. As a matter of fact, Nicholas is doing quite well.”



Chapter Fourteen

Escape from Odin

Nicholas and Clara are sitting at a wooden dining table, a steaming bowl of stew in front of each. Nicholas lowers a spoon from his mouth, looks at Clara and smiles. “Absolutely delicious.” Clara sits her spoon down and gazes at the music box on a nearby table.

“So, tell me, how did this exquisite music box come to be?” she asks.

“The music box was made in my workshop by my assistants, the elves,” answers Nicholas.

“And you are actually Saint Nicholas? I always assumed he was nothing more than a myth, a legend, a story you tell little children,” said Clara, shaking her head in awe.

“But, here I am. I am not a myth, a legend or a story. I am telling you the truth. Your faith will allow you to believe just as your faith has allowed you to heal my injured steed.”

Clara smiles warmly, no longer questioning Nicholas’ identity. Her eyes go to the music box. “Thank you again for the truly special gift. This is my first present from Saint Nicholas.”

“But you said you had heard of me as a child?” said Nicholas.

“I learned of Saint Nicholas from my childhood friends. I never believed in such tales — until this moment. You see, I was raised in a strict orphanage. The children were not allowed to celebrate Christmas. But I grew to believe in God and felt Jesus was with me during my darkest times.”

Nicholas makes a mental note to thank his friend for looking after Clara when she was a child. “Did your parents pass away?”

Clara looks down in profuse sadness. “I don't know anything about my parents and I thought it wise not to ask.”

An awkward silence fills the room a moment before Nicholas leans in and speaks softly.

“Clara, why do you live here, in this desolate area, alone?”

“I am hiding,” said Clara.

“From who?” said Nicholas, curious.

“His name is Odin and he is a very dangerous man,” said Clara. She gazes at Nicholas for a moment and takes a breath and continues. “I learned to sew while growing up at the orphanage. I left at an early age and moved to a nearby village and became seamstress to support myself. One beautiful day I ventured away from the village to take a walk. On my way home I saw a man who had been mauled in the street by a bucking horse. I ran over to him and, without thinking, laid my hands on his wounds. Within minutes he was healed enough to stand. He was very grateful and at that very moment I realized I had the power to heal.

“As I walked away, I noticed an angry old man had been watching me. He was a somewhat ghastly looking gray-bearded fellow with a staff, a tattered wide-brim hat and a dusty traveling coat. He stepped in front of me and blocked my path.”

Nicholas seems pained by Clara’s story. He places his hand on Clara’s and is silent as he listens.

“He looked at me with one eye and said ‘I am Odin. Come with me.’ I told him I would do no such thing and walked quickly away from his reach,” said Clara. “He followed me. He said if I would demonstrate to someone he called ‘Valkyries’ how to heal his soldiers, he would win the ‘Battle of Ragnarök.’ I told him to leave me alone, that my healing powers were a gift from God and could not be taught or shared. Luckily, a carriage came by and I was able to escape. As I was being whisked away, he glared at me and said when the time was right, he would find me.”

Nicholas looks aghast upon hearing Clara tell of her experience. Clara continues. “I thought he was just insane, a maniac. But then I started seeing him everywhere — outside my home, in the village — wherever I went, there he was, always watching, at times glaring at me.”

“Did you tell the authorities?” asked Nicholas with obvious concern. He would disappear before they arrived, but each time this occurred I would see ravens flying in circles above. “Ravens?” said Nicholas.

“Yes, charcoal black ravens. Before long, his constant appearance scared me into moving again and again. But no matter where I lived Odin would show up and tell me running was pointless. When he needed me, he would come to take me away.”

Nicholas recoils upon hearing Clara speak and is visibly shaken. “Mercy!”

“I was running from Odin when I came across an elderly couple who lived in this cabin. They were both very ill so I stayed to care for them. Despite my ability to heal, they both soon died, leaving me alone to care for their pets. I grieved for their loss, but knew it was their time,” she said sadly.

“I assume this ‘Odin’ fellow has yet to discover your location?” asked Nicholas.

“So far, no. Since I’ve been here I’ve felt safe, as if Jesus is with me. But the day before you arrived I saw ravens circling about,” said Clara. “I fear he has found me.”

Nicholas as he repositions himself. The light of the fireplace shines off his eyes.

“Clara, I know a place where Odin would *never* find you.”

Clara looks intrigued. “Where?”

“My workshop, at the North Pole.”

“The North Pole?” At the very top of the world?” Clara asks.

“It is well hidden under the ice,” said Nicholas. “Best of all, it is too cold for Odin to look for you there. At my workshop, you would be forever safe from Odin.”

Clara looks thoughtful, as if considering the offer from Nicholas. “Of course, you would have your own private accommodations and could stay as long as you wish,” continued Nicholas. “We could use a good seamstress. And your reindeer are welcome as well.”

Nicholas gazes into Clara’s eyes for a moment before his face returns to a more serious expression. “I’m just not sure how we will transport all those reindeer. We certainly can’t leave them behind,” said Nicholas.

“That is true! I could never leave them behind! After the couple passed away, they became my only companions and are dear to me. I know they would protect me from Odin if they could as I would do my best to protect them,” answered Clara.

Nicholas ponders for a moment, then speaks. “It does pose a challenge. Regardless, I am sure God will show us the way.” He said as he stands. “I should let you turn in.” Clara also stands. Nicholas smiles and gazes into her eyes. “Thank you for such a pleasant evening. I do enjoy your company, Clara. And thank you for the delicious stew.”

Clara returns the smile. “You are most welcome, Nicholas. Good night.”

Nicholas grabs a lit lantern and heads for the door. “I am off to your stable to check on Amerigo and to get some rest.”

“Oh, wait!” shouts Clara as she grabs a nearby blanket off a chair. I made this. It will keep you warm tonight.”

“Thank you, Clara, “I am well used to the cold,” laughs Nicholas, but he takes the blanket anyway.



The shadow of a woman is cast in the bright morning sunlight that pierces the stable’s open doors.

Clara steps in and makes her way toward Nicholas who is brushing down Amerigo. "Sleep well?" she asks.

"Very well, thank you! Your bunk room was quite comfortable," answered Nicholas.

Clara strokes the stallion's neck. "How are you doing, Amerigo?" she asks. Amerigo shakes his head vigorously and whinnies. Clara kneels down for a better view of his leg. "His leg is healed. He is well."

Nicholas gazes at Clara. "I thank you — we thank you."

Clara smiles and begins removing his bandage as Nicholas' eyes wonder to the sleigh. He gives Amerigo another good neck rub and steps toward it.

"Did this sleigh also come with the place?" he asks, curious.

"Yes, it did. It looks like the reindeer pulled it at one time. I asked the couple about the reindeer and the sleigh and all they would tell me is they were delivered by angels just days before I found them sitting in despair in front of this cabin, too weak to care for themselves."

"Angels with gifts of a sleigh and reindeer?" said Nicholas, "How peculiar!"

"They told me the reindeer were a gift from God and could fly. Silly nonsense, but I went along as I wanted to be respectful." Clara continues talking as she examines Amerigo's leg. "Oh, now I remember something else they told me," she said, looking up. "They said to make the reindeer fly, shout the word 'on' before speaking each of their names. Again, they were quite ill — I'm sure their minds were going."

"Very, very strange," said Nicholas. "Have you ever used this 'incantation?'"

Clara giggles as she stands. "Of course not!" She walks over to Amerigo and while rubbing his neck whispers into his ear. Amerigo does not hesitate. He quickly stands dances about the stable. "Good as new, Amerigo!" said Clara.

The stallion whinnies and shakes his head. Clara regains her gaze on Nicholas. "But you know, I have always wanted to hook them up and take a ride..." Clara's eyes widen and her voice fills with enthusiasm. "It is a beautiful morning and there is new snow on the ground. I believe we would all enjoy an adventure on this lovely day."

She gazes around the stable at the reindeer. "My darling reindeer, would you like an adventure?" The reindeer all snort and shake their head excitedly in the affirmative. Clara disappears into the tack room.

She returns with an arm full of leather harnesses and grins shyly at Nicholas. "Will you help me?"



Nicholas helps Clara hook up the reindeer to the sleigh which stands poised near the open stable doors. Nicholas bends down to make adjustments, then stands and gazes longingly at Clara, who is securing the reins to the sleigh's bench seat.

"I must say, the morning sun only accentuates your beauty, Clara." said Nicholas. Realizing what he has just said, he looks down.

Clara, flattered by Nicholas' remarks, turns and slowly strolls toward Nicholas, smiling sweetly. "Thank you, Nicholas. And I must say, I see a quite handsome face underneath that beard."

Nicholas blushes, happily realizing the attraction is mutual. Clara steps up to Nicholas and gazes into his eyes. She reaches out and gently strokes his face. "Still, it is not a man's face that matters, what is in his heart is all that counts and you have a wonderful, giving heart."

Clara's eyes widen as they are drawn over Nicholas' shoulder through the open barn doors and into the sky beyond. In the distance, two large black ravens fly across her view. "Oh no!" she screams.

Nicholas appears rattled as Clara's eyes become filled with fear. "What is it, Clara?" He looks over his shoulder. On the horizon, headed toward the stable, are two ravens circling a horse and rider.

"We've got to get out of here — now!" shouts Clara as she locks eyes with Nicholas. "Saddle up Amerigo! We must hurry!"

Clara runs back to the sleigh and frantically makes adjustments while Nicholas throws a saddle onto Amerigo's back and fits it to him. He then makes his way to Clara and stands next to the sleigh. "Maybe I can reason with this fellow," said Nicholas.

She stops and snaps her head toward him. "Nicholas! He is here for one reason. To take me with him. So, if you really meant what you said then please, WE MUST GO NOW!"

Clara lightly snaps the reins. The straps tighten and the sleigh moves forward a bit, positioning Clara directly beneath a rafter. "Nicholas, could you make sure the straps in the front are..."

Just as Nicholas reaches for the straps, Clara quickly stands and accidentally knocks her head against the rafter. She slumps back down to the sleigh's bench seat.

"Clara!" shouts Nicholas. He climbs into the sleigh and leans over an unconscious Clara. He adjusts her to a more comfortable position and strokes the side of her face. "Clara, can you hear me? Clara, it is Nicholas!"

Nicholas peeks through the open stable doors and sees the two black ravens closing in, followed closely by a white, eight-legged stallion and rider. "We must go! Amerigo, are you able to fly? Amerigo whinnies and shakes his head vigorously. "Then let us make haste!"

Nicholas sees the intruder nearly upon them. He grabs the reins and gives them a snap.

The harnesses tighten. The reindeer look determined, moving in unison, pulling the sleigh toward the open doors of the stable. Odin, a thin, gray-bearded old man with one eye, rides up just as the reindeer bolt through the open doors at a gallop. Snow sprays the air as the sleigh turns away from the stable, with Amerigo following close behind.

Odin's leathery face is mostly hidden by a huge, broad-brimmed hat. He wears a dirty, pale-blue, leather trench coat. He watches as the sleigh turns toward a clearing in the trees and vanishes over the horizon. He smiles, snaps his reins and gives chase.

The reindeer pull the sleigh briskly up and down the hills of the mountain path. Nicholas sees Clara regaining consciousness. "Clara!" he shouts as she slowly sits up.

"Where are we?" she grabbing the side of the sleigh. Looking around she asks, "Where's Odin?"

Nicholas glances over his shoulder and catches a glimpse of Odin. He is far behind but approaching quickly. Nicholas gives the reins a snap and yells, "Faster, faster!"

The reindeer work to quicken their pace, but Odin's eight-legged stallion manages to close the gap. Amerigo, galloping directly behind the sleigh, leaps up and takes to the sky. Clara watches slacked-jawed as the stallion glides over and in front of the sleigh. "He really can fly!" she shouts in amazement.

Amerigo flies ahead, putting more distance between him and the sleigh with each gallop. Nicholas looks forward as Amerigo disappears into the sky. "He must sense danger ahead," he said.

"Nicholas," screams Clara as she realizes the direction they are heading. "One way leads down the mountain, the other leads to the edge of the mountain and a cliff!"

Odin is now only a few hundred feet behind them. Ahead, Amerigo turns to fly back toward the sleigh. The stallion hovers over the racing reindeer and faces Nicholas. He begins to whinny and shake his head furiously. Clara realizes they are in real jeopardy. "Oh dear, we must be headed toward the cliff!"

Clara looks behind her and sees Odin has nearly caught up with the sleigh. She gazes forward as she speaks, overcome with fear. "We will either fall off a cliff or be captured by Odin!"

Nicholas gawks at the pursuer, toward the cliff which now only a few hundred feet away, then at Amerigo. He turns back to Clara and smiles. "I believe it will be neither. God will protect us."

Nicholas faces forward, snaps the reins and shouts to the reindeer, “On Dancer! On Dasher! On Prancer! On Vixen!” One by one the reindeer start snorting as their name is called. Each sparkle with a golden aura of light. Clara looks horrified as they near the cliff. “On Comet! On Cupid! On Dunder! On Blitzen!”

The reindeers react with fits and snorts as their names are called. A golden aura of sparkling light now surrounds the entire team.

The sleigh reaches the mountain cliff. Two by two the reindeer leap off the edge and fly into the air, pulling the sleigh behind them with ease. Nicholas and Clara look behind them and see Odin’s eight legged-stallion skidding to a halt at the edge of the gorge. Odin glares at them in anger as he gets smaller and smaller.

Amerigo flies beside the sleigh, keeping pace with his new friends as they disappear into the clouds.



Chapter Fifteen

Clara and Nicholas Marry

“As always, true to his word, Nicholas and his elves built comfortable living quarters for Clara and stables for her reindeer,” said Steve. “She began helping the elves in the workshop, sewing clothes for all the dolls and making new outfits for the elves to wear on Sunday.”

Clara, with her long red hair pulled up in a bun and her shirt sleeves rolled up, sews curtains for her new home. The elves come running in. As she stands to greet them, they tug at her apron.

“Soon she came to love the Elves as a mother would her children, healing them when they were sick and seeing to their every need,” continues Steve.

Nicholas steps in and smiles longingly at her as she fusses over an elf with a cold.

As the months passed into years, Clara and Nicholas fell deeply in love. She knew Nicholas wanted to marry her and she wanted to marry him. But, for whatever reason, Clara felt unworthy to be Nicholas’ wife.

She knew he would never age as she grew older. Someday she would be with God in Heaven, leaving Nicholas behind on Earth, alone and without her. Clara just couldn’t bear the pain of ever leaving someone she loved so dearly. When Nicholas would hint at marriage, she would laugh and change the subject of the conversation.

She stands in the reindeer’s stable standing by a Blitzen’s stall. She looks lost in thought as she strokes the reindeer’s head poking over the stall’s half-door. Then one night...

As Clara sits in a rocking chair next to a crackling fireplace. A roll of yarn lays in her lap. The clanking of needles is heard as she knits a sweater for one of the elves. Then, a knock at the door. Clara stops knitting and leans forward.

“Come in,” said Clara. The door opens and Jesus steps in. Clara does not recognize him. He does not look familiar. “May...I...be of assistance?” she asks.

Jesus steps up to her, smiles and extends both hands, taking her hands in his. “Hello Clara. I am Jesus, a friend of Nicholas.”

In shock, Clara drops the sweater and needles, lifts herself from the rocking chair, then falls to the floor to kneel before him.

"I am so very pleased to meet you," said Jesus, taking Clara's hand and helping her up from the floor.

"You are Jesus...Jesus Christ?" she asks shyly.

"Yes, I am Jesus Christ," the man tells her. Clara nervously glances about the room at the cluttered surroundings. "Oh...I am...so sorry. I was not expecting you."

"No one ever does," laughed Jesus. "Do not worry, Clara. All is well. Please know just as I am a friend of Nicholas, I am also your friend. And there is something I must tell you."

Clara gazes into Jesus' eyes. "Clara, it appears you are hesitant to accepted Nicholas' proposal for matrimony." Upon hearing Jesus speak about marriage to Nicholas, she appears overwhelmed with sadness, tears welling in her eyes. "You need not worry about mortality," he continues.

"But it is not fair to Nicholas! He would have to watch his wife grow old and die. He is immortal."

"So are you," said Jesus, smiling. Clara locks her eyes with Jesus as he speaks. "Clara, God is very pleased you have used your gift of healing to help others through the years, including your parents who sent you to the orphanage to save you from Odin for they were aware you possessed the gift of healing the sick. They knew he wouldn't look for you there.

Clara's eyes grow large and her mouth drops open as she realizes the couple she cared for and had grown to love were not strangers after all.

"They never spoke of you, their daughter, for fear Odin would find you. They prayed to see you again and felt in their hearts I sent you to be with them in their final days. It was their fear for your safety that kept them from telling you when you came upon them for Odin was always a threat. They sensed angels had delivered the sleigh and reindeer for a special purpose, although the purpose was unknown to them. Still, not knowing they were your parents, you loved and cared for them while I gave them peace through their faith in me."

Giving Clara time to collect her thoughts, he continues, "It is God's plan for you to become the wife of Nicholas and to stand by his side for eternity, if that is what you wish."

In closing, Jesus gestured toward the music box Nicholas had given Clara. It was sitting on the table in prominent view, retrieved by Nicholas and Amerigo sometime after she was settled in her new home. Then he said something Clara had heard before, "God works in mysterious ways." Then, chuckling, he added, "And sometimes so do I."

Like a child, Clara gazes into Jesus eyes in amazement, her sadness gone.

"Simply believe in me — believe in your gift. But, of course, it is your choice," said Jesus. Clara absorbs Jesus' words, then smiles. Jesus steps back as Clara closes her eyes. At that moment the same glow that had illuminated Amerigo's injured leg forms a ring above Clara's head. The glow begins to spread toward her feet, finally engulfing her entire body.

A moment later, the glow fades. Clara takes a deep breath and opens her eyes. Jesus smiles. "You and Nicholas are meant to be together. In marriage you will become one," he said.

Without hesitation, Clara leaps toward Jesus and embraces him. "Thank you! Thank you, Jesus! And please, thank God for answering my prayer!"

That night Clara told Nicholas about Jesus' visit. Nicholas saw that her heart was filled with joy and much love. He knew it was the right time to ask for her hand in marriage. Nicholas gets down on one knee, fishes around in his pocket and retrieves a sparkling gold ring.



Jesus stands in front of Nicholas, Clara on one side, Pete on the other. Behind them, a huge crowd of elves look on. Some are crying, but they are indeed happy tears, tears of joy for all the elves loved Nicholas and Clara.

"Clara and Nicholas were married by Jesus himself, receiving his blessing, with Pete serving as the best man," said Steve. Their love for each other only grew stronger and stronger each day as the years passed.



Chapter Sixteen

A Visit from St. Nicholas

“Clara took charge of sorting through the many letters Nicholas receives from children all over the world each year,” said Steve. “And Nicholas continued to design toys and improve his skills, always trying to outdo whatever he had done the previous season.

Nicholas steps into a workshop filled to the brim with toys. Pete walks up to him and shrugs his shoulders. “And the workshop kept growing and growing,” said Steve.

“To keep up with the demand, Nicholas devised a system where he and Amerigo, along with Pete and Mistletoe, would deliver the toys to some countries on the sixth of December each year. On December 24th, Christmas Eve, he would use the reindeer and sleigh to deliver toys to the rest of the world.”

Continued Steve, “On that night, Nicholas would deliver his gifts in the same way as he did the bags of gold to the merchant’s daughters, without being seen. For years he managed to keep his true identity a mystery, until one night...”



An unseen clock ticks. The view slowly pans across its face which reads ten o’clock precisely. The view zooms in on a calendar noting the day as December 24th. Standing beside the calendar is a small, gray mouse standing perfectly still.

The view continues to pan across the room to a fireplace crackling with activity. Several stockings are hung on the mantle. The view moves to two children, fast asleep.

In the corner of the room, a young man, Clement Clark Moore, sits at a table with a quill pen in hand. A candle illuminates a single piece of paper that reads, “A Visit from Saint Nicholas.”

Moore stares at the paper a moment, sits the pen down on the table and rubs his eyes. He grabs a sleeping cap, puts it on and blows out the candle. He steps over to the children, bends down and gently kisses each on the forehead.

Then pulls back the cover of a nearby bed and slides in next to his sleeping wife. The crackling of the fireplace is all that can be heard.

Then came a loud BANG. Moore throws back the cover and springs to his feet. His wife, with handkerchief wrapped around her head, sits up. "Good grief! What was that noise?"

"I don't know!" said Moore as he sprang from his bed and rushed to the window. He parts the curtains, throws open the shutters and peers outside. The full moon brightly illuminates the white snow, making visibility easy.

From his second-floor window, Moore can see the sleigh and reindeer on a rooftop several houses down. He watches in amazement as Nicholas pops up from a chimney.

The man turns to his wife. "You won't believe this," he tells the groggy woman who pulls the covers over her head. "Unless it's Saint Nicholas himself, I'm not interested."

"I think it is!" said Moore.

"Good night, dear," said his wife a bit sarcastically from underneath the covers.

Moore sits on the edge of the window. He leans his head outside and hears Nicholas calling out the reindeers' names in the distance.

He watches as the reindeer and sleigh take to the sky with Nicholas at the reins. They fly directly over him and disappear above his roof. Moore sticks his head further out the window, trying to keep Nicholas in his view. Suddenly, he hears a clattering sound from inside. His wife and children continue to sleep.

Moore quickly pulls his head inside, stands and wheels around. He sees the fireplace as a much chubbier Nicholas, wearing his traditional red suit, drops down. He gathers himself, dusting the soot off his pants. He spots Moore, places his finger on his lips to quiet him, while pointing to the children.

A dumbfounded Moore begins to understand what is taking place and quietly watches. Nicholas slings the huge red bag from his back to the floor. As he kneels down, a lit pipe appears, clenched between his teeth. The smoke doesn't dissipate into the room. Instead, it gathers and circles just above the red cap Nicholas wears.

He reaches into the bag and pulls out a wrapped gift. He gazes at it. Then with a huge ear-to-ear grin, winks at Moore, then turns back to his work.

Nicholas chuckles to himself as he reaches into the bag and pulls out three more gifts. He stands and places one in each stocking. After the last stocking is carefully stuffed, Nicholas faces Moore. His now, quite-round belly jiggles from the laughter.

Moore too begins to laugh but catches himself and quickly slaps his hand against his mouth. He glances to his wife and kids. They remain fast asleep.

Nicholas waves goodbye, grabs his bag and slings it over his shoulder. He takes a couple of puffs from his pipe as he steps backward into the fireplace. He glances up the chimney then places his index finger beside his nose. He looks at Moore, nods, then disappears up the chimney and the crackling of the logs return.

Moore turns toward the window but, in an instant, finds himself again sitting at his table with a quill pen in hand.

The clock ticks. Moore snaps his head and gawks at the time. It still reads ten o'clock.

He wrinkles his brow shakes his head slightly, as if trying to remember something. Suddenly his eyes widen. He jumps up from the table and runs toward the door, onto the landing and dashes down the stairs. He runs several feet away from the house and looks up.

On the roof, he can see Nicholas step up into the sleigh, placing the bag behind the seat. Nicholas snaps the reins and shouts, "On Dancer! On Dasher! On Prancer! On Vixen! Then, after a pause, "On Comet! On Cupid! On Donder! On Blitzen!"

To Moore's amazement, the sleigh launches. In the distance he hears, "That's it for this season! Good job! Ho! Ho! Ho!"

Nicholas notices Moore is still watching him and pulls the reins. The sleigh flies directly over the wide-eyed observer. Santa leans out and shouts. "Merry Christmas!"

The sleigh bolts down the center of the street. Nicholas seems intoxicated with joy as he looks both ways and shouts toward the houses below.

"Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas to all. And to all, a good night!"

Lights can be seen illuminating some of the windows. With sleeping gowns and frayed hair, many of the residents poke their head out with candles in hand, gawking at the sky.

When the sleigh reaches the end of the street, it takes off in an instant. Soon the bright moonlight silhouettes the image of Santa and his sleigh against a starlit sky.



Chapter Seventeen

Spread the Word

A flickering lantern sits on the corner of a drafting table. A handsome young man leans over and brushes the finishing touches to a very detailed illustration. An inscription below the illustration reads: By Thomas Nast.

Nast dips the pen into the inkwell and slowly moves his hand toward the paper. Then, a loud knock at the door startles him. He drops the pen. Ink smears the drawing.

Another knock. Nast grimaces. Another knock, this time louder. He cranes his head and shouts toward the door. "Go away! You have ruined three weeks of my work!"

A second later, yet another loud knock. Nast stands and marches to the door. He grabs the knob and throws it open. Standing just outside is a very portly Nicholas. Pete stands beside him wearing new clothes, thanks to Clara, and holding what appears to be a file, topped with a bow.

"Is this a joke? Old man, you just ruined..." said Nast.

"Nothing! Your work is as it was before my arrival. I am indeed sorry if I startled you, Thomas," said a sincere Nicholas.

"How do you know my name?" said Nast.

Nicholas and Pete look at each other and begin to chuckle.

"What is so humorous?" asked Nast, growing annoyed.

"We've been delivering gifts to you since you were a baby. This is my assistant, Pete, and I am Nicholas of Myra."

"As in SAINT Nicholas," Pete adds.

"Among many other monikers," said Nicholas, slightly embarrassed by Pete's rudeness.

"THE Saint Nicholas? That is preposterous!" insists Nast.

Pete removes the bow from the file, flips through a few pages.

He scans the page, than asks Nast, “Do you remember that new box of crayons and drawing paper you received for Christmas when you were eight years old?”

Nast looks startled and he casts a guarded look at Pete, then Nicholas. “How did you know about that? No one knew where they came from!” he said.

“I gave them to you to nurture your artistic abilities,” said Nicholas.

Nast is stunned. “How could you...?” Then he realizes no one could have known about that gift, one that changed his life. With hast, he invites his two visitors to enter.

“Why did you choose tonight to pay me a visit?” asks Nast, still taking in what is transpiring in his living room.

“Listen, Thomas, I have an assignment for you. I feel it is time for the world to know the truth about me and I want you to tell them!” said Nicholas.

Nicholas glances at Pete, who hands Nast the file. Pete details its contents, “In this dossier are some basic facts about the operation at the North Pole — a description of the workforce, current toy distribution, children demographics from the letters we receive and the general area of the workshop at the North Pole. I regret to inform you we cannot confirm nor deny the workshop’s exact location.” Pete smiles, then adds. “You will also find some illustrations the elves have drawn for you, a ‘behind the scenes’ look at our operation.”

Nicholas reaches out and touches Pete’s arm and nods. They take a step back. Santa looks at Pete, then back to Nast. He touches the side of his nose and smiles. “Spread the word, Thomas. See you at Christmas!”

And with that, Nicholas and Pete disappear before his eyes. In shock, Nast bolts through the door. He trots down the gaslit street gazing upward. He stops and watches the sleigh vanish behind tall buildings then into the night sky. He shakes his head in disbelief.

Nast walks home, steps inside his house and closes the door. He walks over to the drafting table and sits. He pulls the bow off the file, tossing it to the floor. He looks at the table, stunned. The pen he’d dropped was now neatly tucked into the inkwell. He gazes at the illustration. The ink smudge is gone.

Nast quickly opens the file, filled with childlike illustrations, and begins reading:

As the years passed, the image of the Santa Claus we know today became firmly established in the hearts of everyone. His sleigh and eight reindeer were soon recognized by all. Before long, his yearly visits became the biggest event of the year. Children would spend weeks getting ready for Santa’s magical visit. In any weather, under any conditions, Santa Claus always delivered his gifts on Christmas Eve – without fail.



Chapter Eighteen

Rudolph

Nast continues to read: But one Christmas Eve, in the mid-1930s, there came a blizzard like the world had never seen. That night...

Nicholas sits at a console of old-style computer monitors. He leans forward, presses a button and gazes at a screen. He presses more buttons and gawks at another monitor. It depicts the black and white video image of blizzards billowing through various cities. Snowbanks are enormous.

Clara, as beautiful as she was when she and Nicholas first met, walks up as Nicholas studies the images. She looks concerned.

“Still bad, Honey?” she asks.

“No. It’s worse. The visibility is so poor, I’m afraid we’ll run into something,” said Santa. How are the reindeer taking it?”

“They’re raring to go, especially Rudolph,” said Clara.

“Rudolph needs more training. Maybe next year, when he’s older and stronger,” said Nicholas, pointing to the monitors. “He’s certainly not ready for this.”

“Nicholas, we found Rudolph nearly three years ago and you still haven’t completed his training. Why?” she asks.

“Clara, he’s not like the rest. He’s special,” said Santa.

“Nicholas, you’re overprotecting him,” said Clara. “He wants to feel normal, not special. Did you know none of the other reindeer will let him play their games?”

Nicholas looks surprised and a bit angry. “No, I didn’t! I’ll have to speak to them about that!”

“I agree, dear. But that’s not the point. You don’t need to protect him; you need to encourage him by completing his training. Once you do, he’ll earn the respect of the other reindeer and you won’t need to give them a speech.

Nicholas ponders a moment. “You’re right, my love. Perhaps my protection of him has been a bit smothering. I promise we’ll finish his training, but not this year — not in this weather.”

Clara kneels down and grabs Nicholas' hand. *This year, Nicholas. Trust me. You need him.*"

Nicholas glances back at the monitors. "Unfortunately, I don't see how one more reindeer guiding the sleigh will make a difference."

Clara stands and kisses his forehead. "You'll think of a way to deliver those gifts," Clara said as she heads toward the door. "Dinner is still waiting, dear."

"Would you save it for me?" he asks, turning his attention back to the monitors.

Clara rewraps the blanket around her shoulders and closes the door as she exits. Nicholas stands, glances at the monitors and walks toward his observation deck. Nicholas steps out into a large room with walls of glass and glances up. Through the panes, it appears the blizzard has subsided, although a huge, dark cloud grows on the horizon. The structure is several feet off the snowy landscape with an excellent view of the surrounding tundra.

Nicholas steps to one of the glass panes and gazes out through a large telescope. His reflection reveals the concern on his face as he watches the distant clouds grow ever larger.

"Lord, how am I ever going to make it through that?" he asks, shaking his head with worry. At that moment Jesus' voice is heard from across the room.

"Clara is right. You will think of something," Jesus assures him. Jesus steps up to Nicholas. They both look hard at the billowing clouds.

"I've never faced anything like this before. Do you think God could help us out here? Maybe work a little atmospheric miracle?"

"Nicholas, I have an idea!" said Jesus, pointing to a window in the opposite direction of the clouds. "But you had better hurry!"

Nicholas trots over to the window and looks out. Not far away, trudging through the snow, alone, is a reindeer, rather small for his age. A close-up view of the reindeer reveals the creature is sad and appears lonely. He hears a noise and, frightened, scampers away.

Nicholas pushes his way through the snow, quickly closing the gap between himself and the small reindeer in front of him. He stops and cups his hands around his mouth. "Rudolph!" Rudolph!" he calls out.

Rudolph stops. He turns and gazes toward Nicholas. What appears to be a sock covers the end of his nose. There is utter despair in his eyes. He thought he heard his name. "Did someone call me?" he asks himself.

"No, it couldn't be. No one calls for me, especially not Santa." He looks down, then forward again and continues his trek.

“Rudolph! Rudolph!” Nicholas calls out again, but his weight gets the better of him and he can’t quite reach the top of the hill before having to rest.

Rudolph stops again. He lifts his head and thinks to himself, “Was that Santa? Did Santa call for me? No, Santa has never called for me. He has forgotten me.” As he takes a step he sees Nicholas’ head popping over the snowbank. “It WAS Santa calling for me. Oh no, am I in trouble?” I must be in trouble...” he worries.

As Rudolph starts with some trepidation to walk toward Nicholas, Nicholas pushes forward with even more vigor and catches up to the reindeer. The clouds are starting to roll in fast and the snow begins to increase.

“Where are you going, my friend?” said Santa.

Rudolph looks at Nicholas with sad eyes as if to say “nowhere.” A teardrop falls down his hairy cheek and collects with others that have frozen to his fur. Nicholas sees his sad face, then falls to his knees. He brushes away the tears from the tiny reindeer’s face.

“Please, forgive me Rudolph. In my zeal to protect you, I have failed you instead. I am so sorry,” said Nicholas. The wind picks up speed as the blizzard blows in. “Jesus has sent me to fetch you. We must hurry for the storm is growing worse by the moment,” Nicholas tells Rudolph.

“Jesus sent for me?” Rudolph thinks to himself. “Then we must go.”

As they make their way toward the observation deck Rudolph stumbles, losing the sock from his nose. In humiliation for what has happened, he quickly looks away. Nicholas, blinded by the bright red light pulsating from the reindeer’s nose, holds out his hand to protect his eyes.

In an instant the snow and wind stop. Nicholas slowly opens his shielded eyes and looks around. His face fills with wonder. The red light has created a bubble of energy that surrounds them. Just outside the bubble, the blizzard rages on. But inside, all is calm. Nicholas looks up.

Above them, the red light has parted the clouds and snow, offering a crystal clear view of the twinkling stars in the night sky. The small deer closes his eyes and grits his teeth. The illumination from the red light suddenly morphs into a spotlight. The tundra ahead is visible as far as the eye can see. Nicholas is elated.

“Rudolph, with your nose so bright, would you please guide my sleigh tonight?” he asks. (Hey, that rhymes, he laughs to himself.) Upon hearing Nicholas’ request, Rudolph’s sad look is replaced with pure joy.

“At last!” he thinks to himself. Then he looks up at Nicholas and nods as if to say, “Oh yes! Yes, I will!” Nicholas laughs and dances in the snow, for a moment forgetting the impending storm. Then the two of them trot off together as snow begins to fall.



The elves are buzzing around the sleigh, which now looks like a fancier version of the original. Behind the bench seat rests Nicholas' old red bag, tied with a new red sash Clara has made.

Nicholas and Clara walk in, arm in arm. Pete meets them at the sleigh.

"We're ready, sir," Pete tells Nicholas. Clara sighs, then smiles at Nicholas.

"Wonderful, Pete! We still have plenty of time to make our deliveries," said Nicholas as he makes his way toward the sleigh. Pete follows.

"Please, sir, be careful. It always worries me when you go out alone."

"Don't worry, we will be fine. And I am not alone, for Jesus is with me." Nicholas kneels down to Pete's eye level.

"Thank you, Pete," said Nicholas. "You are indeed a fantastic assistant and a great friend. I do promise to be careful."

Pete nods and steps back. Nicholas stands and faces Clara. They embrace. "I love you, Clara, my darling wife," he tells her.

"And I love you, Nicholas," said Clara. "Always and forever. Now be careful and come home to me tomorrow." After a quick kiss Clara steps back as Santa climbs aboard the sleigh. Jesus steps forward and pats Nicholas on his boot.

"God speed, my friend," said Jesus.

Nicholas smiles. Jesus steps back from the sleigh as the elves gather. Nicholas gazes across the crowd. The room quiets. "I want to thank you all from the bottom of my heart. Year after year, your tireless efforts bring joy to the children of the world," he said. He focuses on Jesus and smiles. "And hopefully, remind some why we celebrate this holiest of nights." Then returns his gaze to the crowd and speaks.

"Without this night and without you, I would have nothing to deliver. I'm privileged to be a part of such a marvelous team."

The crowd applauds. Nicholas waits a moment before continuing. "Tonight marks a very special occasion. We have a new member of the reindeer team who will guide us through this terrible storm," said Nicholas.

“Thanks to him, even a blizzard won’t stop us! Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Rudolph!”

The crowd begins to clap and cheer. From a side door, two elves wearing very dark sunglasses lead Rudolph to the front of the team and harness him at “point position.” The other deer bow in respect to their new leader.

Rudolph is wearing a small, black knitted cap Clara made for him on his nose. Appearing as a well-trained soldier, he tries his best to hide his infinite joy. The elves finish their harnessing and step back.

Nicholas takes his seat and grabs the reins. Again, he glances about the room. A giant smile covers his face as he looks forward and snaps the reins. Rudolph’s shakes off the black cap from his nose, revealing his bright red nose for the first time for all to see. The crowd “oohs” and “aahs” in shock and amazement. Despite his small stature, Rudolph exudes confidence. He then takes a serious look. He knows he has a job to do.

“On Dancer, on Dasher, on Prancer, on Vixen! On Comet, on Cupid, on Donder, on Blitzen!” shouts Nicholas. The reindeer react, stomping their feet and snorting, as their name is called.

“...and on, Rudolph!”

Nicholas reaches into his pocket, pulls out a pair of stylish sunglasses and puts them on. He snaps the reins again. “Let’s fly!”

The crowd steps back. The sleigh moves forward and starts gaining speed. The elves gather around and watch the sleigh vanish into the night sky.

A faint red glow on the horizon begins to intensify. As the glow gets brighter, a bubble of energy emerges with it, forcing the inclement weather away from the Nicholas’ sleigh. He takes off his sunglasses and gazes ahead. On either side the blizzard rages on, but in front of him, the view is perfectly clear. He mutters to himself in amazement. “This will work. Yes, indeed, this will work well!” he says with delight.

Then gives the reins another snap. The sleigh makes a banking turn and heads for the horizon with Rudolph leading the way. As the sleigh shrinks in the distance, along with the glowing red spotlight, Nicholas’ voice is heard. He sounds very jolly as he laughs.

“Ho, ho, ho! It’s going to be a Merry Christmas after all! A Merry Christmas indeed. A good night to all...and to all, a good night!”



Chapter Nineteen

I Am Here

Steve lays the book on his lap and looks at his daughter on the sofa. Natalie is fast asleep. Only a small flame on a pile of ashes remains in the fireplace.

He stands, stretches, then steps to the bookshelf to return the encyclopedia to the open slot between the other books. He walks to the sofa, gathers Natalie's blanket and gently picks her up. She moans a bit but stays asleep.

With child in his arms, Steve turns and stares at the Christmas tree. The small flicker of firelight shines against its tinsel and ornaments. He closes his eyes and mouths a silent prayer. A moment later, the flame in the fireplace dies. A small nightlight kicks on behind him. Steve turns and heads for the stairs, Natalie in tow.

As Steve walks away, the view closes in under the sofa, where the small nightlight now illuminates a crumpled piece of paper lying on the floor. As the view closes in, the childlike scrawl on the paper comes into focus. It reads:

Dear Santa, I don't need any toys for Christmas, but can you fix my mommy? Please stop by for milk and cookies," Love, Natalie

As Steve tucks a sleeping Natalie into bed, he hears a muffled noise coming from downstairs. He leaves her bedside to investigate.

As he reaches the bottom of the stairs, he stops. There, beneath the twinkling Christmas tree, is a beautiful dollhouse.



A nurse walks down a long hall lined with open doors to the patients' rooms. She casually glances into each room as she makes her way toward a station at the end of the hall. The nurse passes Jill Crawford's room and looks in, then abruptly stops. She takes a step backward and looks again.

Standing beside the bed, with his back toward the door, is someone who looked a lot like Santa Claus, leaning over Jill with his hand on her forehead. The man whispers softly, "Clara, I could sure use your power to heal the sick right about now. Please, Jesus, heal this woman."

"Excuse me, Sir. Visiting hours are over," said the nurse. The man doesn't respond.

"Hey, 'Santa Claus.' This is ICU. You're not supposed to be here," she says sternly.

The man still doesn't respond. The nurse looks down the hall to another nurse standing at the station.

Jesus appears by the man's side. "I am here, my friend," he says quietly. "I am always with you."

The nurse shouts to a woman manning a desk at the end of the hallway. "Better call security!"

When she looks back into the room, Jill is still in bed but the man is gone and the window is open. The nurse snaps her head back toward the station. "Now!"

She runs into the room and begins examining Jill. A moment later, a second nurse enters followed by the security guard, who immediately goes to the window. Both nurses attend to Jill as the guard examines the window. Something outside catches his attention. He leans through the frame and looks toward the sky.

The reindeer and sleigh hover just feet away. Nicholas is taking his seat when he notices the guard staring at him with his mouth open wide.

Nicholas winks at the guard and gives him a military salute. He grabs the reins and gives them a snap. In an instant the sleigh shrinks into the night sky.

The first nurse steps up to the guard. "Do you see something?" she asks.

He looks at her, absolutely and totally dumbfounded, then hears movement behind him and looks at Jill. Her eyes open and she begins to stir. The attending nurse gasps. "She's awake!"

The first nurse quickly steps back to the bed. Jill is trying to sit up. Both nurses assist her.

"Take it slow, Mrs. Crawford," said one of the nurses as Jenny steps into the room. Jenny gazes at the open window, at Jill, then smiles knowingly. She closes the window then steps to the bed as the nurses work to reposition the patient.

"How do you feel?" asks Jenny.

Jill blinks her eyes as if waking up, "I... I feel fine. Actually, I feel quite refreshed." She looks about the room. "What happened? Where am I?" She looks at each nurse with a bewildered look and wrinkles her brow. Did...did I just see Santa Claus?"

From across the room, the guard, still in an almost catatonic state, mutters. “Yes, yes, you did.”

“Oh dear, it must be Christmas! I must go home!” she exclaims. Still wearing the bandage around her head, she slides her feet off the bed and into slippers on the floor.

Everyone in the room looks quite perplexed except Jenny. She simply smiles and bows her head in silent prayer.



Nicholas, with Jesus sitting comfortably beside him, guides the reindeer around tall buildings. “Another great job well done!” With a snap of the reins, the reindeer pull upward toward the stars in a clear sky filled with bright, twinkling stars.

They lean back in the bench seat and prop their feet up on the front of the sleigh. Nicholas gazes at Jesus with sincerity. “Thank you so much for that. I just had to do something when I read Natalie’s note. It was the best gift I have ever delivered!”

“Ah, don’t mention it,” said Jesus, waving his hand. “I knew Jill was going to make a full recovery eventually. It is not her time.”

He smiles at Nicholas then cast his gaze forward at the clear, gorgeous night sky.

“By the way, happy birthday,” said Nicholas. “You’re what, ‘two thousand something this year?’” Jesus snaps his head toward Nicholas and acts indignant. “Younger than you, my friend! You are the one who is old!”

“Old is right,” laughs Nicholas. The sleigh turns and silhouettes against the moon. Both men burst into laughter as the sleigh vanishes into the beautiful night sky.

The End



