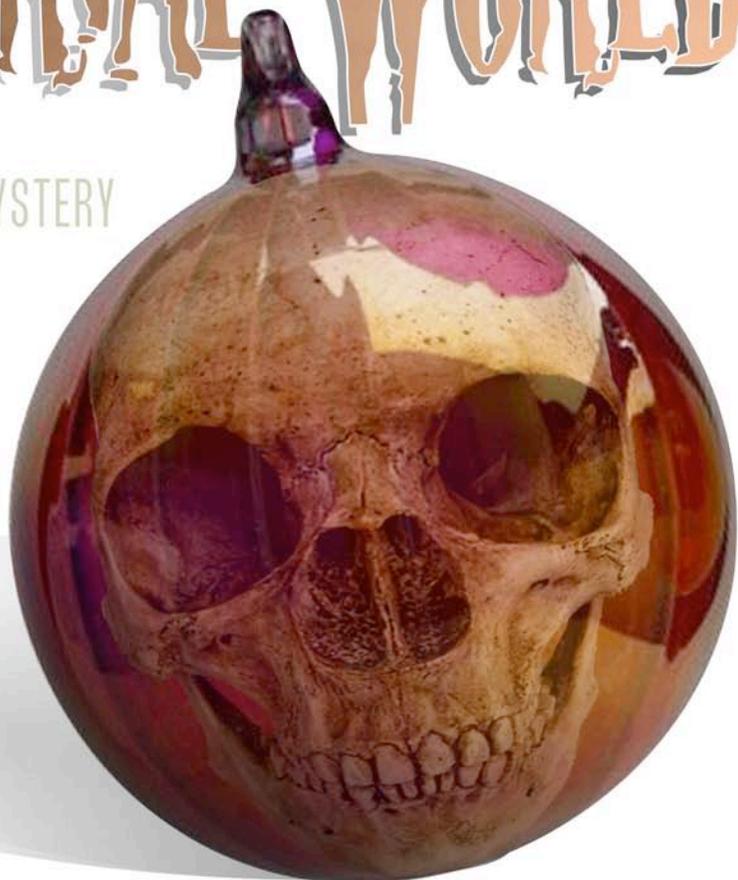


SPIRITS IN A MATERIAL WORLD

A CHRISTMAS MYSTERY



COLIN QUASHIE

SPIRITS IN A MATERIAL WORLD

Beginning with the mysterious disappearance of an able scientist from an airplane in mid-flight, and followed by the questionable death of a successful businessman; 'Spirits In A Material World' begins anew when 6-year-old Austen Fisher writes a letter to Santa Claus questioning his existence. Her doubt places her and her family at the center of a heinous plot to kill Santa Claus, hijack Christmas and exploit mankind's growing focus on corporate greed, material consumption and over commercialization during the holiday season. The Ghost of Christmas Present becomes aware of the plot and in a race against time on Christmas Eve must rescue the family, unravel the wicked scheme and save Santa before Christmas is destroyed forever. Along the way, the story delivers a biting commentary on today's greed is good holiday economy and champions a powerful message of love, charity and faith in everything Christmas is supposed to represent.

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Edited by: Christene Casteneda

For my wife, Cathy
*In all the years I've dared to dream;
Never once did you try to wake me.*

THE PAST

“...and what was light one instant, at another time was dark, so the figure fluctuated in its distinctness: being now a thing with one arm, now a pair of legs without a head, now a head without a body: of which dissolving parts, no outline would be visible in the dense gloom wherein they melted away. And in the very wonder of this, it would be itself again, distinct and clear as ever.”

- A Christmas Carol, Charles Dickens

CHAPTER 1

4 years earlier

Dr. Charles Hamilton loathed flying. The queasiness in the pit of his stomach threatened to erupt with each step he took down the winding tunnel ramp toward the cabin door where flight attendants sorted the slow moving line of passengers by seat assignments.

Disquieted by the growing nausea, he misplaced his boarding pass and upon request could do little more than stare stupidly ahead.

“I’m, I’m sorry,” he stuttered.

Anxious to find his pass, he dropped his carry-on and apologized yet again as he knelt to gather the spilled contents.

Rushing to his aide was Beverley Tynes, a comely young flight attendant in her late twenties with a flawless smile and a patient demeanor.

“It’s ok, sir, take your time,” she responded to his clumsiness.

“I had it here just a second ago,” mumbled the Doctor as he

continued to pat himself down. Looking around, he suddenly became aware of the condescending smiles on the waiting passengers faces, which reinforced the general notion that he was every bit the stereotypically disheveled, senile 75 year old scientist he appeared to be. The rising chorus of impatience caused by the bottleneck echoed in the tunnel and replaced whatever fear he was experiencing with acute embarrassment.

Sensing the growing irritation, and knowing they had a full compliment of passengers to seat, Beverley noticed the corner of the boarding pass peeking out from behind his shirts pocket protector and retrieved it.

“Seat 6a, Dr. Hamilton, that’s First Class berthing. It’s the window seat straight ahead on your left. Here,” she said standing, “Let me help you with your bag. Welcome aboard.”

Beverley led him to his seat, stowed his carry-on and hung his overcoat in the forward closet, and then returned to make sure he had settled in.

“My name is Beverley Tynes and I’ll be your flight attendant,” she informed him with a smile. “May I get you something to drink, Dr. Hamilton?”

This was the first time he had flown First Class and, therefore, he wasn’t familiar with the benefits afforded the upper echelon.

“Uh, Coke, with very little ice...please.”

“I’ll be back in a moment.”

Dr. Hamilton immediately set about trying to decipher the novel controls of his spacious seat, but after a maddening minute, he gave up. With the agonizing boarding experience still fresh in his mind, he was reluctant to seek any more assistance and resigned himself to the fact that were he to fall asleep, he would do so in the upright position.

The answer to his dilemma soon arrived in the form of another passenger taking the aisle seat next to his. The gentleman quickly nestled in and after introducing himself, navigated the controls with a dexterity that amazed Dr. Hamilton. Appreciative of the unsolicited assistance, he mimicked 6B's actions, reclined and breathed a sigh of relief just as Beverley returned with his drink.

"Here you are, Dr. Hamilton, Coke, very little ice."

"Thank you."

DR. HAMILTON STARED OUT THE WINDOW AS THE AIRPLANE backed away from its berth and began its long trek toward the runway. He listened with little interest to the flight attendant's instructions that coincided with the safety video and instead focused his attention on the letter he held in his hands. Received a month earlier, he had read it every day since, and by now had committed its text to memory. Nonetheless, he unfolded and read it again.

Dr. Hamilton: It is the Nobel Prize Committee's distinct privilege to inform you that you have been selected as this year's recipient of the Nobel Prize in Medicine. Your pioneering research in the area of brain chemistry and its effect on behavior modification has resulted in fundamental change, not only in the understanding of brain chemistry, but also in the prognosis of behavioral anomalies. Your achievements have benefited mankind and set new standards in the field of medicine. We invite you to join us on this historic occasion to be lauded by your peers.

It was a dream realized. The culmination of a labor of love he had enjoyed for nearly fifty years. He never imagined his research would receive the interest it did, but now that it had, he was humbled

and pleased.

He refolded the letter, sipped his soft drink and closed his eyes in satisfaction as the plane taxied into position for take off. Moments later, the thrust of the engine's huge jets opened full throttle, sending the plane speeding down the runway and lifting it effortlessly into the evening sky.

As a scientist, he fully understood the physics behind flight, but he continued to be amazed by its wonder. Looking out the port side window, he watched the carpet of city lights tilt from side to side beneath them and grow smaller as the plane executed a series of banking maneuvers before settling on a course taking it toward the coastline. As they gained altitude, the layer of lights ended sharply, intersected jaggedly by the dark plateau he knew to be the ocean but could no longer verify by whitecaps dotting the surface. Only a few small boats and what he assumed was a cruise ship blemished the inky monotony.

Pointed due east across the Atlantic, the plane continued to climb toward its cruising altitude. The fading western light behind them granted access to the brightest stars and silhouetted the massive wing of the jumbo jet knifing through the cold, thin air.

"We'll be handing out dinner menu's shortly. Would you like another drink, Dr. Hamilton," asked Beverley.

"If you don't mind. The same thing, Coke. . ."

"With very little ice," she said. After taking his glass, Dr. Hamilton followed Beverley with his eyes and hoped that someone as pleasant and beautiful as she had someone special in her life.

His gaze soon returned to the window. In the darkening distance, he could barely make out the edges of a large cloud bank erratically illuminated by flashes of lightning. He squinted while watching closely for the one burst long and bright enough to reveal

the natural structures true dimensions.

As a child, he and his sister would lie in open fields and make a game of staring at the rapidly forming cumulonimbus clouds prevalent at the height of the summer season. One point was awarded for every shape matched with known objects or people. He especially enjoyed watching them slowly morph into other shapes, then trying to guess what they would briefly become before continuing to shape shift. You got two points for that. As he continued to stare at the cloud bank, he wondered how many points his sister would have awarded him for seeing a shape in an intermittently lit cloud at night.

As the lightning intensified, he believed he could make out the face of a woman. He anxiously bobbed between two windows for a better view of the next burst to prove himself correct.

The weather appeared to be moving closer, and he anticipated the Captain maneuvering the plane to steer clear of the cloud bank. Going through it was not an option. Formations of that magnitude were nature's way of cooling the earth and generated high winds caused by the warm updrafts from the heated ocean below. It was certainly no place for an airplane to be.

His fear was realized when he felt the first rumble of turbulence, quickly followed by the return of nausea. A few seconds later, the plane lurched again and the warning pong along with the overhead lights flashed preceding the Captain's voice over the loudspeakers.

"This is your Captain speaking. It appears we've hit a little patch of turbulence. For those of you up and about, please return to your assigned seat and fasten your seat belts. We should be out of this soon and you will be able to get back to sleeping. Sorry if I woke you up. Thank you." His attempted levity at the end of the broadcast was meant to dispel any fear, but it did little to reassure anybody.

Dr. Hamilton pulled at the loose end of his seat belt until it was snug against his lap. He did so just in time. The airplane was lifted violently, then dipped and tipped reluctantly in a series of spastic maneuvers. Whatever drinks, magazines and electronic gear left unattended abruptly deposited themselves into laps and aisles.

As the turbulence intensified, the cabin lights were extinguished. Dr. Hamilton looked out the window to see if they had foolishly ventured into the approaching storm, and immediately fixed his eyes on the portion of the cloud bank, now closer than ever, that looked like a woman's face. A large burst of lightning danced among the features of a surly-looking, chubby-faced woman staring directly back at him before vanishing with the extinguished lightning.

Unable to get to her seat before the turbulence began, Beverley used her feet as a brace against the pantry sink and pinned herself securely against the cabinet door that held the dishes used to serve dinner to First Class passengers. As the plane shuddered and rolled, she didn't dare move and held on until the plane steadied moments later and calm was restored.

She relaxed her grip and then quickly checked to see what had been displaced. Nothing major. A quick nod and a gesture of ok from Penny, the other First Class attendant, reassured her that everything in that section of berthing was being taken care of. Beverley poured Dr. Hamilton's drink, reached for a handful of dinner menus, and headed into the cabin to serve the passengers.

When she reached Dr. Hamilton's seat, she noticed he was gone. She pulled out his tray table and placed his drink along with a dinner menu on it.

"Excuse me," said passenger 6B, "I didn't order a drink."

"That's for Dr. Hamilton," explained Beverley.

"Who?"

“Dr. Hamilton, the gentleman in the window seat,” she clarified.

The passenger curiously glanced at the empty seat then back at Beverley.

“But there’s no one sitting there,” he argued.

“He’s probably in the bathroom,” countered Beverley with a smile.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but that seat has been empty since we lifted off. There’s no one seated there.”

It was rude to say the least to argue with a passenger. As her training and experience had taught her, she thought it best to just signal agreement with a courteous smile and move on. She continued handing out the menus and headed back to the galley. On the way, she glanced at the bathroom and saw that it was unoccupied, but pushed open the door slightly to verify its vacancy.

Anxious to prove ‘6B’ wrong, she proceeded to Business Class to see if the Doctor was standing somewhere in the aisle. He was nowhere to be seen.

Her curiosity peaked, she embarked on a pilgrimage through the entire length of Coach in search of her missing passenger. There was no sign of Dr. Hamilton there either.

She returned to First Class and feigned stowage of a blanket to check the overhead bin where she had personally stowed his carry on and found it empty. She walked forward and checked the closet for his overcoat. It too was gone. With the mystery deepening, Beverley decided to check the definitive source for an answer.

Just inside the galley curtain hung the clipboard containing the passenger manifest. She quickly scanned the seating assignments and was surprised to see that Passenger 6B was momentarily correct. According to the log, seat 6a was empty. She quickly thumbed

through the alphabetized list of passenger names, then the amended page of passengers from the stand-by list, and found no one by the name of Hamilton on board the flight. She rechecked the list using his first name, Charles, just in case there was some error. That, too, yielded nothing.

According to the manifest, there were 235 passengers on board the flight. Once again, Beverley walked the length of the plane, slowly down the port aisle taking a mental count of the passengers while scanning each face, and swung around to make her way forward up the starboard side aisle to First Class. 235 passengers.

Confused and slightly disoriented, she closed her eyes and sighed, trying to come to grips with an incredibly disturbing thought.

Dr. Charles Hamilton, seated in seat 6a on Sky Trans flight 8510 to Stockholm, Sweden, had been nothing more than a figment of her imagination.

CHAPTER 2

Three weeks before Christmas

He had earned his reputation as a humorless man. Even so, the notion there existed people who thought that Thomas Chippendale was an exotic dancer made him howl with laughter so riotous it brought tears to eyes more proficient at spotting prey.

Ernest Anthony Belle III was an aristocratic snob. A blue blood of the deepest indigo, he was born and carefully bred on one of the American South's oldest, and, questionably, largest plantations.

His care was entrusted to the family's underpaid and overworked maid. Before she could dress him neatly for parlor presentation, plans had already been made to safeguard the family trust against any wasted life after the cradle. This foresight insured that whatever oak shrouded lane Ernest Anthony Belle III chose to wander on his way to the grave, it would be evenly paved with gold.

His upbringing was severe. The rigid discipline of military

boarding schools reinforced by proxy his father's desire that he be well educated and indoctrinated with the tacit understanding that life by nature was cruel. He believed that in order to thrive, not just survive, one had to adopt and practice a ruthless economic ethos that over time would become the deciding factor in separating rich from poor. The bible promised the meek would inherit the earth, but if he owned a large portion of it they would have to lease from him.

After his father's passing, Ernest embraced fully the capitalistic gospel and preached its sermon worldwide. He had expanded the family business beyond his father's expectations and in so doing had amassed a vast and diversified fortune.

Tonight however, from his opulent penthouse suite, he was occupied with the singular thing that had consumed his very existence, money. Only this time, instead of being on the receiving end, he was giving it away . . . all of it . . . every dollar, yen, euro, pound, and peso.

Cases of rare coins and jewels sat alongside stacks of ledgers, yearly reports, deeds, and various and sundry financial paperwork, towering in mountainous piles on the massive oak desk. So cloistered by his bounty was Ernest, that he was nearly obscured from view as he furiously punched the keys of an adding machine like an auditor charged with finding embezzled funds. The unbroken stream of tape inching from the machine cascaded over the edge of the desk, collecting in a foot high pool of curled summation on the floor, its length confirming his wealth.

Finally, the whirl of the machine stopped. He examined the total, stood up and ripped the tape with a flourish.

"Eight hundred twenty-three million, seven hundred forty-two thousand, five hundred and twenty-two dollars and fifty-nine cents!" he declared. "And that's just what I have on hand!"

Suddenly, like a deranged thief, he ransacked the pile of holdings, tossing them aside haphazardly until he found his checkbook. Using his arm as a broom, he swept the remaining items from the desk in one swift motion and began to make out a check for the aforementioned total.

“When the stocks, bonds, t-bills and trusts are liquidated, I should clear somewhere between twenty-five and thirty billion!” he proclaimed loudly as Handel’s “Messiah” filled the lavish suite with the only reminder of Christmas.

Standing abruptly, he ripped the check from the ledger, slammed it down on the table and bellowed, “Easy come, easier gone!”

Satisfied with his only act of charity, he began to soft shoe around the penthouse.

“I can’t believe how wonderful it feels to be poor. My father was right. ‘Poverty of purpose is worse than poverty of purse!’ All these years I’ve been miserable, consumed with the thought of making more money than I could possibly spend in a hundred lifetimes. Now, I feel like a child again!”

Perhaps it was the euphoria of a new challenge or the physical exertion brought on by the nostalgic giddiness of a child immune to an illness others less fortunate referred to as life’s hardship. One could not tell, but something was making him sweat profusely and grow light-headed.

“Is it just me or is it hot in here?” he wondered.

The question, panted through thin lips between mops of his forehead with a silk kerchief, remained unanswered by the stoic marble busts and impassive portraits of Confederate heroes.

“I must be coming down with something. Either that or the heat,” he surmised with a glance at the roaring fireplace.

“I better open the doors and cool this place down.”

Using the corner of the desk for support, he steadied then stumbled toward the French doors leading to the veranda. With shaking, liver-spotted hands, he pulled back the tapestry serving as a curtain and reached for the gold plated handles. Once opened, he took in a deep breath of the cool, crisp night air scented with the odor of salt and the surrounding marshland.

The cool breeze embraced him and quickly accomplished its mission on both fronts. It cooled the suite and reinvigorated his senses.

“I can’t wait until the morning! If a picture is worth a thousand words, the look on my accountant’s face will be a priceless first edition when he hears that I’m giving all my money away!”

Capitalizing on the feeling, he stepped onto the veranda, taking stock of the clear night sky and the view of the harbor where a container ship was snaking its way up the winding Cooper River.

He took in a deep breath and held it before exhaling loudly. Soon afterwards, he felt faint and fell against the wrought iron railing. His breathing was becoming shallow as his body beaded with sweat.

“It...it must be twenty...twenty odd degrees out here,” he wheezed between rattling heaves, “Yet I’m sweating...sweating like a race horse. I...I can’t seem to cool down.”

In an attempt to regain his equilibrium, he shook his head furiously and stretched wide his scrawny arms to take in more air in a weak attempt to clear his head. In his growing delirium, the lights of the historic skyline began to blur. Stinging sweat rolled into and clouded his eyes, further complicating his view. He wiped his face with his sleeve, and then began disrobing to cool off further.

Though a victim of circumstance, his sensitive breeding had not completely abandoned him. He neatly folded each piece of clothing

before placing them on the wrought iron table.

Stripped down to his silk boxers, but still unbalanced by the heat emanating from every pore of his body, he gripped the railing and looked down at the blue street level awning, which in his hallucinatory state appeared as, “A pool! I bet that feels cool on a hot humid night like tonight.”

The sight of the water returned him to his imagined youth. He nimbly climbed onto the railing, laughing like a happy child unburdened by the cares of the world. Looking behind, he called out to imaginary friends who were obviously waiting for their garrulous leader to test the waters temperature and depth.

“C’mon, let’s jump in!” he urged.

The marble busts and static subjects in the paintings looked on with indifference, as if daring him to jump.

“Y’all are a bunch of chickens!” he taunted. “Last one in is a rotten egg!”

After pinching his nose, he stepped off the balcony and pulled his knees into his chest like a fat child doing a cannonball dive. He was plummeting to his sure death, all the while giddy with fatal remembrance.

Thirteen stories below, the canvas awning was never designed to handle this new threat to its proud strength and durability. Without apology or fanfare, it immediately collapsed under the weight of the laughing meteor.

In a final show of respect to his standing in the community, the edges of the canopy folded inward and completely covered Ernest like a warm blanket against the cold.

The only audience to the late night drama had an accessory point of view. A pair of red leather pumps stuffed with large feet wearing matching red stockings, stood on the edge of the veranda.

Next to them, a red wool, floor length cape better suited for the elements hovered alongside.

By the time startled screams floated upward, both figures had retreated into the warmth of the abandoned penthouse.

A hand wearing red-laced gloves silently scooped up the first, last, and only act of charity by Ernest Anthony Belle III and deposited the check into a purse for safekeeping.

Moments later, a stiff breeze filled the penthouse, scattering the remaining papers and leaving the staring eyes of the marble busts and heroic portraits to contemplate whom their new owners would be after the coming battle in probate court.

CHAPTER 3

Two weeks before Christmas



ne look at Austen Fisher's bedroom revealed that she was not a typical six-year old girl. For one, she was disturbingly neat. The room was void of decor standard for a child her age. There was no chest filled with broken or unused toys, nor was there any trace of the latest video games. The soft pastel-colored walls were devoid of the latest pop stars and were adorned with her creative endeavors spaced and hung evenly. Crayon portraits gleaned from an active imagination fueled a budding desire to one day become an artist. Any remaining space was filled with pictures of foreign places and people she found interesting.

Her bed looked like it was made under the supervision of a Marine Drill Sergeant. At the foot of it lay a neatly folded baby quilt appliquéd with her name in colorful fabrics, a different one for each letter. Opposite the bed stood an armoire containing a small television set on top of a DVD player. The shelves beneath held framed pictures,

educational discs and children's versions of classic tales.

Considering the fact that she alone was responsible for her room's daily housekeeping and did so without any prodding from her father, spoke to a personality that any child psychologist would have easily diagnosed as juvenile compulsion caused by the latent onset of trauma. To her, it simply made whatever things she was looking for easier to find.

On this particular afternoon, the reigning monarch of the realm sat patiently scanning the contents of her latest letter to Santa Claus. After correcting whatever grammatical and typographical checks she could, she began reading aloud the text:

"Dear Mr. Santa Claus, My name is Austen Fisher. I am six years old now. I still live in Charleston, South Carolina at fifty-one Carolina Place. It is the duplex with the oak tree in the yard. I am writing you again because you keep forgetting to bring me what I want for Christmas. My daddy say you don't anser letters because you are not really real like the easter bunny and the toot fairy. He said only pollar bears and snowmen live in the North Pole because it is cold. He said people would freeze like Popsickles if they lived there. My mommy said you were real, but since you never anser my letters, maybe daddy is right. You are just make beleve. This is the last time I will write you. If you are really real, please bring me what I want for Christmas. It is the same as last year and the year before that, Austen Fisher"

Satisfied with her prose, she folded the letter neatly, placed it in an envelope, licked it closed and addressed it:

Mr. Santa Claus, The North Pole, USA

She stuck two stamps on it and turned it over in her hands to inspect it again. After a few moments, she realized something was missing - her return address.

A. Fisher, 51 Carolina Place, Charleston, SC 29403

She wanted no excuses. If he existed, she wanted Santa to get her letter so he would know exactly how she felt and where he needed to be at midnight sharp on December 25th. With two weeks to go, it should get there in plenty of time for him to read.

Though she didn't state exactly what she wanted for Christmas, she had done so last year and the year before that. It hadn't changed. If Santa could remember the name of every boy and girl and whether they had been naughty or nice, he would know who she was and what she wanted. If he were really Santa Claus, he or someone on his staff, his staff? Hmmm. Maybe that's what happened. Someone on his staff had read the letter and forgotten to tell Santa. Just in case, she added for clarity's sake,

For Mr. Santa Claus himself only!

to both sides of the envelope in red crayon, underlining in black for added emphasis.

Pleased with her efforts, she ran outside and placed the letter carefully in the mailbox, address side up, then raised the postal flag and checked to see if the mail carrier was at hand before returning inside. From the safety of her room, she sat in her rocking chair and watched for the mailman from her window overlooking the street.

SHE WAS ABOUT TO DOZE OFF WHEN THE FAMILIAR BARK OF Ms. Margaret's Schnauzer, "Hank", hailed the arrival of Tim, the mailman. He was Hank's favorite carrier because he cared enough to carry a pocketful of dog treats. Spoiled by the daily snack routine, "Hank" kept a steady vigil and wailed with impatience at the first sight of the carrier.

"Hank" wasn't the only one interested. Austen bolted from her rocking chair, ran out to the street and stood alongside the mailbox.

She watched as Tim followed his familiar path taking him down the other side of the street before turning and heading her way. She removed the letter from the mailbox and inspected it again as he arrived.

“Hey, Austen, how are you today?” he greeted as he handed her a folded stack of circulars and letters.

“I’m fine, Mr. Tim. Here,” she said while handing him her precious cargo in return.

“Wow, pretty important stuff,” he remarked after looking at the address. “I’ll have to make sure this goes out this afternoon so Santa has it in time for Christmas.”

“Thank you,” said Austin smiling.

“You’re welcome.”

She remained at the gate following him with her eyes as he finished delivering to the rest of the houses on the street then got into his van. It wasn’t that she didn’t believe him, she just wanted to see her mission through and waved as he drove by. She kept watch until he turned the corner before heading inside to give her father the mail.

INSIDE THE MAIL FACILITY, TIM SCOOPED OUT THE HANDFUL of letters to Santa from his mailbag and began the heartbreaking task of shredding them. How many letters to Santa had he shredded in the seventeen years he’d worked at the post office? Too many to count. In that time he had never been able to reconcile the contradiction between his sworn oath to deliver the mail and his willingness to destroy their letters, violating the trust they placed in him.

Before inserting them into the whirring steel blades, he spent a moment staring at each letter, as though begging forgiveness for the sin he was about to commit. Considering the amount of hope, prayers, dreams, fantasy, and desperation contained on the pages within, he

owed them that much.

He knew all the children on his route by name and marveled how closely their penmanship matched their personalities. Little Maggie Davis' tiny letters and crisp thin lines illustrated her shyness, while Owen Quinn's large, bold font preference mirrored the confidence of a gregarious prankster. Austen's underscored text demanded delivery in no uncertain terms. The tone illustrated her seriousness at such a young age and reminded him how fleeting youth's innocence could be. This would be her last letter. Somewhere between now and next year she would realize who and what Santa Claus was. Just as baby teeth gave way to permanent ones, her literal belief in Santa would yield to a figurative interpretation of the spirit of giving, and like everyone else she'd accept Santa Claus for what he really was - a necessary lie parents tell children out of love and a need to teach them the importance of giving.

Staring at Austen's letter dredged up memories. He used to help his daughter write her letters to Santa and followed it with a promise to make sure Santa received it, not because he was her father, but because he had taken a sacred oath to deliver the mail rain or shine. He used to assure her that the oath also covered the sleet and snow of the North Pole, so there was no need to worry, Santa would get her letter and she would get her presents.

He hoped that Austen's father, Arthur, knew the contents of her letter and that out of love for her, he would assume the responsibility the post office was forced to abdicate. Sadly, he dropped the letter into the teeth of the insatiable metal beast and watched as it was cross cut into a million pieces. Then he unceremoniously upended the container into a clear plastic bag labeled 'recycle'.

His shift over, he made the slightest of detours on his way to the parking lot, and tossed the bag of shredded letters into the recycle

dumpster.



THE DUMPSTERS WERE EMPTIED ONCE A WEEK, BUT DURING the busy holiday season, service was increased to twice a week. Garbage trucks usually came during the morning hours, so it was highly unusual for one to arrive shortly before midnight.

The guard staffing the booth first noticed it on his array of monitors, and then moments later, spotted it when it turned into the driveway. He zipped his jacket, angled a nightstick into its waist holster, grabbed a walkie-talkie and flashlight, and exited the guard shack in anticipation of the unexpected arrival.

Positioned behind the gate arm, he checked the log and saw no pick-ups or deliveries were scheduled. The only note was a Post-It from the previous guard reminding him to buy a lottery ticket when he got off work. The jackpot had reached 230 million dollars. The thought of winning that kind of money two weeks before Christmas made him sigh.

Looking up from the log, he let out a hiccup of surprise and recoiled at the sight of the truck's grill poised inches away from his face on the other side of the gate's arm. Strange, I didn't even hear it pull up, he thought. The headlights were dimmed, leaving only the amber fog lights and maze of glowing green running lights to identify the nondescript vehicle. The checkpoint's overhead security light offered little in the way of illumination, and instead, reflected a glare off the darkened windshield further obscuring the driver and any movement within the cab.

The guard adjusted his hat and holster involuntarily in a bid to regain his composure. Squinting, he stepped around the gate, switched on his flashlight, and raised the beam high enough to shed

light on the driver's face without shining it directly into his eyes. In a move clearly defying his authority, the tinted side window remained sealed.

A slight twinge of fear began to stir in his loins. He stiffened and nervously fingered the hilt of his nightstick while angling the flashlight's beam higher. Suddenly, a wave of relief swept over him. He relaxed and felt rather foolish in the same way one does when finally matching a forgotten name to a familiar face.

Smiling and waving recognition, he lowered the tire spikes, raised the gate, and stood aside as the truck glided by. He gave no thought whatsoever to how a truck so large could pass as if floating on the wind without making a sound. He watched as it glided to a halt in front of the recycle dumpster, quietly emptied the contents into its cavity, turned, and exited as silently as it had arrived.

He waved goodbye to his old friend, raised the tire spikes, lowered the gate and returned to the guardhouse. The only memory of the event remaining in his head was exactly how would he spend 230 million dollars if he won the lottery.

THE SAME SEQUENCE OF EVENTS PLAYED OUT ACROSS THE city until the first hint of day glowed in the east. The truck arrived at the airport, cleared the inflexible levels of security with the same ease and proceeded to the far end of the double fenced property where an airplane, equally as nondescript as the truck, patiently waited on the tarmac.

Upon arrival, the airplane's transport ramp lowered, allowing access to its spacious belly. The truck backed in, deposited its stuffed container, and drove forward exiting the airplane. A series of automated rollers on the floor of the aircraft raised and positioned the container neatly alongside others similarly stowed, then quietly raised

the ramp and prepared for take-off.

Mirroring the actions of the post office guard, air traffic controllers eagerly granted runway access, and held up all departing flights as the airplane taxied past and took its place at the head of the flight line.

Moments later, it quietly eased into the morning light without registering so much as the faintest of blips on any radar system known to man.



FAR ABOVE THE ARCTIC CIRCLE, THE AIRPLANE APPEARED clearly on the North Pole's radar system. Cleared for landing by tower controllers, the airplane touched down without incident on the smooth sheet of runway ice and skidded to a halt in front of a team of elves in red jumpsuits.

The containers were quickly unloaded, hitched to waiting transport trucks, and driven in a convoy officially escorted by a van trimmed with flashing red lights into a cavernous building to be unloaded again by another efficient team of elves.

The precious cargo was fork lifted deeper into the facility and emptied into a large hopper. Every flake of paper was siphoned downward and channeled onto a fluttering conveyor belt slowly making its way toward a series of mechanical arms that raked and sifted the fragments into a single layer.

Passing under the watchful eyes of elves, any hint of refuse or unwanted debris was picked from the shredded chards with their gloved hands before they were vacuumed into a sealed chamber where the letters were reassembled in a secret process and restored them to their pristine accuracy.

Much like the process used by human mail sorters, each letter

received a bar coded time stamp then routed by zip code through various mechanical gates. Sharp rotating knives opened the envelopes, removing, unfolding and steaming flat the contents and then digitally scanning and recording the author's names and addresses before carefully bundling and sealing each lot for further review.

Austen's letter was halfway through the process when alarms sounded. It was spit off the line, collected by an elf who placed it in a clear round container, then inserted it into a vacuum tube that sucked it skyward through a series of pipes. Its journey ended at the desk of an elderly, wise-faced elf wearing reading glasses.

While reading her letter, a concerned look crossed his face. He sat back in his chair, took off his glasses, rubbed his eyes and shook his head. After toying with the curls in his white beard, he lurched forward, stamped the letter and envelope URGENT REVIEW and placed it inside a lined manila interoffice envelope. He marked it 'Verna - Corporate, 12th Floor - URGENT REVIEW.' He stood, waddled out of his office, and placed the envelope in the clear clamshell outside his cubicle.

Moments later, a young messenger elf picked up the envelope and seeing it tagged URGENT REVIEW, took off running through the maze of cubicles at breakneck speed.

THE MESSENGER ELF NARROWLY ESCAPED HARM AS HE deftly weaved his way through the bustle of foot and snowmobile traffic on his snowboard. It skidded to a halt in front of a towering glass building emblazoned with the signage, Christmas Industries - Corporate Headquarters. He hopped off, slung the snowboard over his shoulder and entered the busy lobby. He sprinted erratically through the crowd on his trek toward the bank of elevators, and

squeezed his way inside the first available car to the annoyance of passengers inside just as the doors were closing.

He stepped off on the 12th floor. Acutely aware of his surroundings, he brushed off his feet, removed his hat, and respectfully slowed his pace as he made his way through the maze of hallways trying not to draw too much attention from the professionally suited elder elves milling about the corporate corridors. Finally arriving at the package destination, he checked his appearance then slowly entered Santa's spacious outer office.

"Merry Christmas, how may I help you?" quizzed Santa's executive secretary, Verna, without looking up.

"Merry Christmas. I have an Urgent Review from Receiving."

She glanced up over her reading glasses, beckoned him forward, and received the package with a concerned smile.

"Thank you. Merry Christmas."

She waited for him to leave and then opened the manila envelope to read Austen's letter. Another one. Santa isn't going to like this, she thought.

After returning the letter to the envelope, she entered Santa's office and gently placed the letter in his in-box.

THE PRESENT

“Come in!” exclaimed the Ghost. “Come in and know me better, man! I am the Ghost of Christmas Present. Look upon me! You have never seen the like of me before!”

- A Christmas Carol, Charles Dickens

CHAPTER 4



he tilt of the earth may have submerged the North Pole in complete darkness during the winter months, but it was far from that. The icy metropolis was awash in a sea of lights from above and below.

The aurora borealis (Northern lights) were particularly bright that year, making the holiday season more festive than ever. The sky swayed with shades of vivid green, yellow, and red glowing lights that both complimented and competed with the luminous blanket of city lights spread out far beneath them.

Overlooking the city, glacial mountain peaks reflected the heavenly light and shimmered like satin curtains. On lower slopes, forests of evergreen Christmas pines covered with mistletoe, infused the crisp air with cinnamon scent from their fragrant cones. Farther downward, the pines gave way to fields of wild holly bushes and peppermint shrubs sprouting miniature candy canes.

The outskirts of the city were ringed with clusters of elfin

lodges. Each subdivision was unique and borrowed its layout from distinctive shapes of snowflakes and named after seasonal iconography - Garland Farms, Tinsel Brook, Gingerbread Point.

Ice-covered lanes lit by gas lanterns connected the cozy hamlets. Viewed from above, their delicate design appeared as a symmetrical tapestry of form and function circling the bustling city center.

As far as the eye could see, Christmas literally hung in the air. Displays of every description celebrating Yule were suspended with the care human poets and writers had never witnessed, but imagined and wrote about anyway.

The air was filled with laughter and song. Colorful wreaths and banners were draped on every door and pole, snowmen guarded every yard, twinkling lights dangled from every eave, and ice sculptures glistened in every square.

The elfin inhabitants were not to be outdone by their surroundings. They strolled the city streets dressed in festive attire and took in the sights of shops and storefronts displaying the various seasonal wares produced by skilled artisans.

The entire city pulsed with anticipation and buzzed with excitement, as if the whole world was gift-wrapped awaiting children to tear it open and savor the good tidings it freely offered.

THE FOCUS OF ATTENTION WAS SANTA, BUT CELEBRITY status was clearly extended to his most beloved employee, the Ghost of Christmas Present.

The debonair Spirit cut a fashionable path as he strode confidently down the icy sidewalk. He wore a tailored red suit, starched white shirt, and a red and white striped tie that complimented two toned patent leather shoes. Commanding the

attention of all, he returned each greeting received with equal largesse and vigor.

The doorman at Christmas Industries, anticipating the Spirit's arrival, cleared a path and held the door open.

"Good morning, Christmas Present. Merry Christmas, sir!" he said with a tip of his hat.

"Thank you, Merry Christmas to you, too!" returned the much adored Spirit.

"They're waiting for you straight ahead, sir," instructed the doorman.

The corporate lobby buzzed with activity. Everyone scurried to complete any final arrangements necessary for the big night ahead, yet took time to greet Christmas Present and offer directional guidance.

"Good morning, Christmas Present, keep straight ahead, sir."

"Hello, Present, the elevators are directly ahead on the left, sir."

"Looking good as always, sir. Almost there."

As he strode past the bank of elevators, an attendant corralled and guided him into a waiting car.

"Twelfth floor, sir?"

"Uh, yes, twelfth floor."

"Twelfth floor it is, sir. Thank you."

"You're welcome," answered Christmas Present, though he wasn't sure why.

Before Christmas Present had a chance to ask the attendant exactly why they were headed to the twelfth floor, they had arrived. The moment the doors opened, Claire, his secretary, immediately intercepted him.

"Good morning, sir. My, don't we look festive today!"

"Good morning -- "

“Claire, your secretary, sir.”

“Of course. Good morning, Claire!”

Ignoring his bewildered look, she locked her arm in his and escorted him through the wide hallway.

“As you know sir, its Christmas Eve,” she informed him.

“Who could forget that?” Christmas Present snickered.

“Oh, you’d be surprised, sir,” she said holding an office door open for him.

Had he been paying closer attention instead of quizzically surveying his surroundings while responding to the variety of greetings tossed his way, he would have noticed the hand painted gold leaf moniker on the glass door identifying the office occupant as the Ghost of Christmas Present - Director of Human Relations.

“Nice office!” he marveled upon entry.

“Your office, sir, is very nice,” she corrected.

“*My* office?”

“Yes, sir, *your* office.”

The morning ritual ended, or from his perspective, began the moment Claire seated him behind his desk. Knowing exactly what was coming next, she continued with her activities while he spent the next minute quietly familiarizing himself with his surroundings.

He would lean back and rock in his chair, testing the springs and marvel silently at the fresh smell of leather and how comfortable it was before sitting forward and running his hands back and forth across the desk’s lacquered top. Then he would open each drawer, viewing minimal contents, look at the phone and slide it closer. The framed picture of he and Santa would catch his eye. He would pick it up, stare at the smiling faces and recognize himself. Then like light illuminating darkness, it would all become apparent.

The surge of remembrance would produce a sigh of relief easily

heard from Claire's outer office, whether the door was open or shut. It signaled that it was almost time for her to brief him on his agenda for the day.

He would then walk about the office and look at other pictures, mementos, and awards he had received over the decades. He would read a framed copy of a letter from little Raven Slade, the first child to ever write and thank Santa for her gifts.

Eventually, the panoramic view from his corner office window would command his attention. Claire would find him standing there, his back to her, looking out at the glowing landscape stretched beneath him like a flickering carpet and comment on the exceptional view.

As Claire waited, a smile crept over her face. Watching him at the window reminded her of why he was so beloved. He was a child. Christmas and all its magic and wonder lived in him and burst forth like a fountain of youth each minute of every day, regardless of the season. His joy was contagious, infecting everyone he encountered.

To human children, Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer was the North Pole's unofficial mascot, but to elfin young and old, the Ghost of Christmas Present embodied the spirit of Christmas. His exploits and misadventures became the fodder for tabloids and press junkies. Marketing executives loved his appeal and splashed his face on billboards and television. His bobble head doll was an annual best seller and recently was on pace to outsell Santa's.

AT THE START OF CLAIRE'S EMPLOYMENT, HE USED TO frustrate her to no end. As his name suggested, he lived in the present, and, therefore, had no real memory.

On a good day he could retain a thought for as long as four or five minutes but that was a stretch and couldn't be relied upon. After

that, all of his emotions, thought, and speech would transfer to the Ghost of Christmas Past.

The process astounded Claire and proved a mystery more enduring than how Santa managed to deliver gifts to every home in every time zone exactly at the stroke of midnight. He remained as much mystery to her today as he had been when they first met decades ago. He had no known family and couldn't tell of his origin. Even Santa didn't know and if he had, refused to say.

If anyone had the answer, it was the Ghost of Christmas Past, but the thought of even approaching, much less asking, that disagreeable spirit was not something Claire even remotely looked forward to doing any time soon. The one thing she had learned over the decades was that stress would diminish Christmas Present's abilities. She had learned to take everything in stride and make sure he felt as though everything was running smoothly, even if it wasn't. Today however, would be a challenge to everyone involved.

"What a great view!" he said as he plopped down in his chair.

"I wouldn't get comfortable, sir. Santa wants you in his office immediately."

Christmas Present leaped from his chair in half the time it took him to sit.

"Why does he want to see me?"

"His executive secretary, Verna, didn't say."

He sat again and began to slowly fidget. Without the ability to remember he had no reference point from which to judge his relationship with others. Had he done something wrong? Was Santa mad at him for some reason? Maybe he was getting another award.

He searched Claire's face for an answer, but saw no indication. What he *did* know and could never forget, since there were constant reminders was that Santa was a very powerful man and a revered

icon. To be summoned to a private meeting with him was never a good thing.

Claire knew how he would take the message and prepared for it ahead of time. She had mastered the art of concealing her emotions and offered him a smiling palette from which he could gather no indication whatsoever. After all, if he saw her upset, his ability to effectively do his job would be severely diminished.

“I’m not sure what this is all about, Sir, so I prepared some notes for you.”

She handed him index cards on which were written relevant information.

He thumbed through them voicing them aloud.

“My name is the Ghost of Christmas Present. I am the director of human relations. I have worked in that capacity for 160 years. Our mission is to bring joy and happiness to every boy and girl and spread the spirit of Christmas throughout the world.”

He would have stood there going through the notes until he was comfortable with the information, but Claire knew that could take most of the morning and Santa was waiting.

“Sir, I think you should be going. We don’t want to keep Santa waiting. It’s Christmas Eve and he has a tight schedule.”

Christmas Present took a deep breath and tried to steady his nerves. Claire used this opportunity to straighten his tie and reassure him that everything would be ok.

“You’ll be fine, sir. Just try not to speak unless spoken to. Here,” she said placing a pen in his pocket. “Don’t be afraid to jot down anything he says that you feel is important. Ok?”

“Ok.”

She guided him toward the front door, and after a final brush of his jacket, urged him forward and followed him with her eyes like a

dotting mother watching her child go off to school for the first time.

He was barely into his journey when he stopped dead in his tracks. Anticipating the hesitation, Claire waited for him to turn. The puzzled look on his face told her he had no idea where Santa's office was located.

She pointed at his feet. He looked down, then back at her.

"Follow the red line on the floor, it leads to Santa's office," she whispered loudly.

He looked down again and noticed he was straddling a red line. He beamed a smile, gave her a knowing salute, then turned and continued on his way while reviewing his notes.

Claire shook her head and returned to her desk. Something told her that this was going to be a long day.

CHAPTER 5

 he cab pulled up outside 49 Carolina Place and deposited a world-weary Beverley onto the sidewalk. She had switched schedules with another flight attendant whose sister was getting married, giving her the rare opportunity to travel abroad while granting precious days off during the busy holiday season.

Beverley loved Christmas. She had grown up in a large family and the holidays were a welcomed time of the year. Thanksgiving was a mini-reunion of sorts, and she made it a point never to miss the food filled gathering. Christmas on the other hand was usually spent away from the family and alone.

Her job had taken its toll on her relationships. At 29, she had been a flight attendant for 8 years, long enough for the romanticism of flight to wane. The dream of meeting and falling in love with a handsome international jet setter had been replaced with a more sobering reality. Most of the men she met were already married and

those who weren't were in relationships or were simply looking to get laid.

Whenever she did meet someone nice, he usually lived in another city. Her flying privileges made it financially feasible for her to visit him, but coordinating days off to spend the necessary time together to take their 'special friendship' to the next level was difficult at best. Eventually, the passion would cool and the relationship would wither on the vine before it had a chance to bud. Phone calls that once came twice a day slipped to every other day, then dwindled to once a week, indicating the end was near.

She was a victim of the consummate cycle that claimed many young women. After college she had concentrated on building a career. Now that she had established herself in the workplace, the men she regarded as her peers were married or divorced with kids and had no intention of getting serious anytime soon.

Much to her disdain, a great many had no respect for her ability, acumen or profession, and considered her the airborne version of their favorite waitress or bartender. Frustrated, she had given up looking for Mr. Right and decided to quit looking and concentrate on other aspects of life. She took comfort in the familiar saying, 'when you quit looking, that's when it happens'.

The one thing she was looking forward to was time off. She still had some Christmas shopping to do, but wasn't too concerned about it. She had already bought gifts in town for some of the people on her list and would wrap them later on that night for delivery in the morning. Everyone else was out of town and she would put their gifts in the mail after Christmas.

She pulled her luggage along the brick walkway and dropped it off at her door then made a return trip to the mailbox. Halfway there she remembered that Austen promised to pick up her mail and hold it

for her. Austen was at the age where she craved responsibility and it gave Beverley an excuse to see her little next-door neighbor. She had a surprise for her.

Austen must have read her mind because no sooner had Beverley placed her key in the lock than Austen appeared at the door on her side of the duplex and peeked out.

“Hi, Ms. Beverley,” she said cheerfully.

“Hello, Austen, how’ve you been? Come here and give me a hug.”

Austen was more than willing to oblige and quickly exited and wrapped her arms around Beverley’s waist.

“I missed you,” said Beverley returning the hug and stroking her hair.

“I missed you, too,” said Austen. “Where’d you go this time?”

“A couple of places. Let’s see if you can figure this one out. You ready?”

Austen nodded and stared at Beverley intently, ready for her geographic pop quiz.

“It’s an Asian country known as the land of the rising sun whose capital used to be called Edo, but now, it’s called Tokyo. People who live there call it Nihon, but we call it . . .”

“Japan!” screamed Austen.

“That’s right! And guess what?”

“What?”

“I brought something for you.”

“Really?”

Her eyes grew big at the promise of a surprise. Beverley purposely took her time zipping open her luggage to retrieve the gift, feigning clumsiness as Austen fidgeted.

“Gee! I know it’s here somewhere. I hope I didn’t forget and

leave it on the plane.”

The anticipation on Austen’s face was palpable, causing Beverley to smile at the excitement she was generating.

“Uh-oh! What’s this? Is this it?” she questioned with a surprised look. Like a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat, Beverley snatched the gift from her luggage and handed it to Austen, now beside herself with glee.

“Thank you, Ms. Beverley. Thank you. I have something for you, too.”

“You do?”

“Yep!” said Austen, and quickly darting inside, moments later returned with Beverley’s bundle of mail neatly arranged according to size.

“I checked the mailbox everyday just like you asked me to.”

“Thank you. I really appreciate that,” replied Beverley cradling the bundle.

She could tell by the way Austen ran her hands over the gift that she wanted to open it.

“That’s your Christmas present. You can’t open it until tomorrow, ok? Put it under the tree with your other gifts.”

Beverley winced as Austen’s smile receded. She had committed a tragic faux pas and regretted it instantly. Like a cosmic voice making its disapproval known to all, the timer on Beverley’s outdoor Christmas display activated, lighting her half of the duplex, further illuminating her error.

Beverley glanced up and took in a sight the neighborhood was accustomed to seeing during the holiday season - the solitary overhead porch light at the Fisher residence. In the three years she had lived next door, no recognition of Christmas had ever surfaced. It was the only dwelling on the street that consistently refused to

participate in the holiday celebration.

Austen's father, Arthur, was not a coarse or callous man. Despite the lack of outward displays, he was a caring single father and so far seemed to be succeeding in raising a happy, socially adjusted child who was well disciplined and respectful.

He played with Austen often and did his best to make sure she participated in activities with children her age in the neighborhood. Earlier that year, Beverley helped him stage a surprise birthday party for Austen complete with a magician dressed like a clown and an inflatable waterslide set up in the front yard.

He was equally meticulous when it came to her education. She was enrolled at a private school and the scope of her intellectual curiosity always amazed Beverley. She had definitely not been that smart at Austen's age.

However, when it came to Christmas, Arthur's efforts flagged. He refused to even put up a Christmas tree.

Eager to reclaim Austen's smile, Beverley offered, "What if I keep your present under my Christmas tree? That way you can come over tomorrow and we can bake some Christmas cookies and open our presents together. How about that?"

"Ok," said Austen, her smile returning.

Relieved, Beverley caressed her cheek and spontaneously remarked, "You have the prettiest smile."

A blast of cold wind broke the moment and reminded Beverley she still had a lot to do.

"I'll see you tomorrow, ok?" promised Beverley.

"Ok," replied Austen weakly.

As she reached to open her door, Beverley sensed that neither wanted the moment to end. Knowing she had last minute shopping to do, she made the snap decision to ask Austen to accompany her.

Arthur certainly wouldn't mind and both of them would enjoy the outing. Being able to walk with Austen through the mall and expose her to the remaining sights and sounds of Christmas would at least make it feel like Christmas in the Fisher household, even if it didn't look the part.

"I've got some Christmas shopping to do in a little bit. Would you like to go with me?"

Before she could finish her sentence, Austen belted, "Can I?"

"Of course you *may*," corrected Beverley. "But we'll have to ask your dad, ok?"

"Ok!"

Beverley stifled a laugh as Austen darted inside to get permission from Arthur. Though she had a long list of gifts to purchase, she would never find one more precious than the smile she had just drawn from Austen's face.

CHAPTER 6



hristmas Present stood outside of Santa's office and like everyone else on the verge of entering the saintly domain, checked his appearance, took a deep breath to settle his nerves, and tried to imagine what the encounter would be like.

He glanced at his notes a final time, then slipped them into his jacket pocket and entered.

He strode confidently across the red carpet to announce his arrival to Verna.

"Hello, my name is --"

"Christmas Present. Go on in, he's waiting for you," she said brusquely.

All composure escaped Christmas Present. This can't be good, he thought feeling imaginary beads of sweat forming on his brow and wiping them with the back of his hand.

He gingerly turned the ornate knob, stepped inside and saw

Santa staring out the window. Christmas Present thought his own view was great, but Santa's panoramic expanse made him feel like he was floating on the horizon.

"Gorgeous isn't it?" Santa remarked more than questioned.

"Ahem! Yes, sir," agreed Christmas Present while nervously clearing his throat.

He eased shut the door and slowly closed the distance while fighting the urge to review his notes until he stood at the edge of Santa's desk. As if on cue, Santa turned abruptly and stared openly at Christmas Present.

This was not the image of Santa Claus the world embraced. Gone was the fat, jolly, silver-bearded Santa wearing a red suit with black boots and wide matching belt. In his place stood a fit executive wearing a red tracksuit as if on his way to a morning workout. His close-cropped silver hair and neatly trimmed beard and mustache framed a chiseled face that complimented the steely gaze boring a hole in Christmas Present.

Though casually dressed, he wore the countenance of royalty and projected the authority of corporate power. Christmas Present both withered and straightened under the scrutiny of the intense gaze that was as veiled as his words. Christmas Present didn't know whether to laugh or cry so he found a spot on Santa's desk halfway between his gaze and the floor to study while awaiting any words from Santa.

"I assume Claire provided you with notes to save my reminding you where you are," he said at last. "She's good about that."

"Uh yes, sir,"

"As for why you're here..."

Santa stepped away from the window and contemplatively crossed to the wall on his left which supported a long glass case filled

with pictures, keepsakes, mementoes, and prized awards. It was a shrine to his leadership and reflected the decades of guidance and inspiration he had provided. He lovingly scanned the collection as Christmas Present edged closer and stood beside his boss.

“Christmas is changing, Present. It used to be a simpler time,” Santa began in a somber tone.

“It used to be girls and dolls, boys and their wagons. These days, it’s all about iPod’s and X-Boxes - things we don’t make.”

Santa opened the case and gently selected a yellowing black and white picture of a larger man in a Santa suit standing in front of a small wooden structure. He ran his finger wistfully across the glass frame.

“That was my first workshop,” he reminisced.

“Is that you standing out front?” asked Christmas Present.

“Yeah. That’s me...a hundred pounds heavier. I had to lose weight,” he said returning the framed piece to its resting place. “High blood pressure and diabetes run in my family.”

He continued to stare at the photo and speak slowly as if he were invoking words that held the power of nostalgia. “Back then I made everything myself and only needed one reindeer and a wooden sleigh to make my deliveries.”

He broke off his stare and continued his mini-tour of the keepsakes. “Over the decades we certainly have grown. We now deliver to one hundred and forty countries and oversee the manufacture and distribution of more toys than any other company in the world.”

Reality rudely snatched him from his reminiscence. He quickly turned and faced Christmas Present.

“If Christmas Industries wasn’t a non-profit we’d be bigger than Microsoft, Time Warner, and General Electric, combined. Did you

know that?”

Ignorant of such facts and anxious to place the focus anywhere than where it was being directed, at himself, Christmas Present pointed to a picture of a stoic figure sitting at a desk.

“Who’s that?”

“That’s Charles Dickens. You don’t remember him, do you?”

Christmas Present closed his eyes and tried his best to contribute something, anything to the conversation. Disappointed at his inability, he sadly shook his head ‘no.’

“Nice guy, good writer. He’s part of the reason I asked you here today.”

“How’s that, sir?”

“The Christmas he knew, loved, and wrote about with a little inspiration from us, has been fading over the decades.”

Santa began to pace. Christmas Present had never seen him lose him composure, that is, as far as he could remember.

“We’ve been so concerned with growth that we’ve lost sight of what used to make Christmas special - customer service. Our goal has never been to compete with other corporations for revenue, it’s always been about the children.”

Santa’s pace quickened in tempo with his escalated speech.

“I used to climb down each and every chimney. Now I have ‘drop zones’ and ‘delivery specialists’ who blanket a subdivision from a single rooftop. I can’t tell you the last time I caught a kid out of bed who should have been sleeping!” He slapped the edge of his desk for emphasis. “We’re losing the hearts and minds of both parents and children alike!”

He reached across his desk, picked up Austen’s letter and shook it at Christmas Present.

“This year alone I’ve received more letters like this than in all

my years as Santa.”

Christmas Present took the letter and quickly read it as Santa retreated to his seat and tried to regain his poise. He waited until Christmas Present was finished and answered his question before he had a chance to ask it.

“She’s a good kid. Her dad is a loving and caring parent. They’ve been through a lot together.”

“May I ask what she requested for Christmas, sir?”

“That doesn’t matter. What matters is that you find a way to reverse this trend.”

“Me?” said Christmas Present, surprised at how fast he answered.

“Yes, you,” answered Santa. His position of responsibility demanded some action be taken. After all, he had a business to run and a board of directors awaiting answers. Though a non-profit, Christmas Industries was the largest employer in the North Pole and responsible for the welfare of thousands of workers and their families, not to mention the millions of children depending on them to fulfill their mission statement.

“As director of human relations, this falls under your purview,” he said staring into his hands. “I don’t think I need to remind you how important this is.”

Regardless of the way Santa may have sounded to an outsider, he was fond of Christmas Present and held the Spirit in high esteem. Otherwise they would not have been having this conversation. He would simply have had Verna send an e-mail to Claire for her to relay to Christmas Present. That wouldn’t have underscored how serious he was. Besides, he didn’t want Christmas Present to panic and start to imagine scenarios that didn’t exist. What he needed was to make sure his director of human relations understood clearly that he wanted

careful attention paid to a matter threatening the very livelihood and future survival of the North Pole. It was a tough assignment calling for tough love.

“Yes, sir. I understand, sir. Anything else, sir?” responded Christmas Present.

“Just one thing.”

He pressed the intercom button on his phone. “Verna, please send in the Urgent file.”

Her response crackled through the speaker, “The entire file, sir?”

“The entire file.”

Before Santa could lean back in his chair, the side door of his office opened and a team of elves entered, each dragging two large mailbags and dropped them at Christmas Present’s feet. By the time they were finished, he could no longer see the floor around him.

He opened one of the bags and grabbed a handful of letters. By his count, “There must be at least fifty-thousand letters here, sir.”

“Fifty-six thousand, two-hundred and forty-two, to be exact,” said Santa.

“How am I supposed to review this many letters, sir?”

Santa stood up and checked his watch. He was going to be late for his morning workout.

“I suggest the same way we answer them - one letter at a time.”