

*A holiday story of fantasy and 'what ifs'; for the child in ALL of us. Are there dreams YOU never dared to dream? Or things you never dared to wish for?*

*If you can still believe - if you can still remember the child you were long ago, then this story is for you.*

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## **CHRISTOPHER HOLLIE**

§ Santa Claus IS Alive, Well & Visiting the Tunnels! §

*by Trisha Kehoe*

After looking around cautiously and finding himself alone in the park, the stocky figure took the final path, towards one leading into Manhattan. Shifting the heavy sack over one shoulder, the man's brilliant blue eyes twinkled with delicious secrets. He gazed up into the night sky; his small mouth pursed like a rosebud into a cheery smile. Ah, it had cleared nicely after all. Very good! His old bones would be grateful.

A new blanket of crunchy snow lay on the earth under his feet. It glistened all around him like chips of a brilliant diamond, as he trudged onward purposefully, with spirited steps. So many things yet to be done! So little time to fulfill so many dreams, before the year and another Yule were only memory; like something you dreamt of once - with the innocence and trust of a child.

Suddenly, off to the right, the chubby little man sensed another presence nearby. Hmmm, strange someone had managed to get this close, without him sensing it; he always knew. He HAD to know!

Darting furtively behind a large, ice-laden pine tree, the red-cheeked man watched the dark cloaked figure glide past in the snow without being aware of him, head bent against the rising wind. With widening eyes, he began to follow; 'this was a strange fellow ahead of him, indeed,' he thought. Though powerful appearing and very large, he seemed to walk with a natural grace; his booted feet made no sound as he crossed the footbridge.

As the cloaked figure stepped into an arc of amber light at the entrance to a tunnel of some sort, the man following felt a tug on his heart; such sadness was overwhelming! Well, he couldn't ALLOW this sorrow to pass unattended, now could he? Not at this time of the year, especially! Closing his eyes, the chubby little man sent forth his heart, to touch lightly to the mind and heart of the one ahead. Oh dear, oh dear... no... no... no, this wouldn't do at all! Pulling at his curly long whiskers, he lay one finger against the side of his nose, thoughtfully. Hmm, what to do... what to do?

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Shifting the cane into his other hand, Jacob Wells walked along carefully, picking his way over the uneven path leading to his older son's home. Devin would be HIDING Above when he needed him, as usual, these past weeks. A slightly grumpy look washed over Father's face. Oh, he knew why Devin had moved Above; to escape work, that's why! Jacob plodded along with great determination. He'd just show Devin he would have to go further than this to escape HIM!

"Ohhhh, help me, help....."

Jacob froze where he was, listening carefully. "Who is there? Speak up!"

"Ohhhh...."

Taking a step to the right, Father peeked over the top of a small boulder. Oh dear God, some poor soul seemed to be hurt! Getting to one knee, he turned the rag-clothed figure over to face him cautiously. After the incident of five years ago when strangers had jeopardized this world he had helped found, Jacob Wells was taking no chances.

His expert fingers probed among the rags, searching for injuries, but couldn't find any. Placing one hand at the old man's neck, Father helped him sit up. "What happened to you, my man? Are you ill?"

As the head encased in a sailor's pea cap nodded slowly, Father detected a slightly soured smell of whiskey. Ah, just a poor old hobo, looking for a place that was warm, most likely. The man groaned again, holding one hand to his head. "I think somebody hit m... m... me. .My head hurts..."

Helping the man to his feet, Father put one arm around his shoulder; there was no help for it, he'd HAVE to bring him up to Allegra and Devin's - it was the closest place. And safer, should this man turn out to be someone not trustworthy, after all.

Letting out a short grunt, Father made sure the old man's cap was pulled down far enough on his head to conceal what he was about to do; the entrance he was opening that led Above, to the home his sons owned. Leaning against the door, Father winced; oh, this damnable hip was killing him again! Was there no peace from it, EVER? Then... all at once, it eased!

Just as Allegra stepped into the pantry near the cellar door for a container of apple juice, Father banged on it and scared her out of her mind. "Holy... " Holding one hand to her heart, she threw the door open. "Oh, it's only you. You terrified me then, you sneak! What.... Cripes, what happened to him? Who in hell is he?"

Helping Father with the man, Allegra led him to a kitchen chair. "Here, sit down while I get my medical bag. Father, loosen his clothing."

The man threw her a scathing look. "I KNOW what to DO, thank you very much!"

Father sat opposite the man, looking him over carefully as Allegra examined him. She patted the old guy on the arm. "Well, nothing seems to be broken, anyway. What happened, pops?"

He looked up at this tiny woman, sadly. "I don't know exactly. One minute, I was just trying to keep warm, the next - the lights sure went out fast!"

He tried standing up. "I shouldn't be troubling you folks, just hand me my jacket and I'll..... " He sat back with a thud. "Ohhh!"

Allegra turned to the stove and heated up the morning coffee. "You stay put, you look ready to pass out. I'll bet you're hungry, huh?"

A faint smile and a nod of his head gave Allegra her answer. "Well you just sit there, okay? I'll fix ya right up!"

Thinking to himself if SHE cooked for this poor soul, he wouldn't be fixed, he'd be DEAD, Father got to his feet; he couldn't WATCH!

"Is Devin home?"

She turned from the refrigerator with three eggs in her hands. "Yeah, why, he's..." She mouthed the rest of the words...'next door with Vincent.'

"Oh. Very well, cook for the man, but please, don't force him to eat it, if he doesn't want it, all right?"

"Are you saying what I think you are? Shoo, go away, you old grouch or I'll make you EAT these eggs - RAW!" Allegra advanced on Father as he backed his way out of the room quickly, throwing the man in the chair a sly wink as he shut the kitchen door, right in Allegra's surprised face.

Having heard a strange voice and two he recognized as he stepped from his pantry with a jar of mustard, Vincent neared the sliding doors just as Father was about to knock.

"Father, I didn't expect to see you until tomorrow morning; Catherine will be pleased you've come a day early. I am quite sure she would appreciate help with the twins while she finishes a bit of wrapping. Devin and I have some last minute things to do. Catherine always seems to find... OH...! MORE presents."

He kissed his father gently, hugging him hard, then stepped back. "I heard a voice I do not know a moment ago. 'Legra has company?'"

Vincent listened carefully to Father's explanation as he climbed the stairway with him to the second floor. "...and so, I HAD to bring him with me, I couldn't just LEAVE him there..... "

"No, of course not, Father. Don't be concerned; I'll be careful." Vincent went into the spare bedroom just ahead of him. "Devin, Father is here."

A dark haired man lay flat on the floor, grinning up at his brother. "Oh, goody, just who I wanted to see." He saluted as Father stepped into the room. "Hey old man, what's new?"

"Don't you old man ME! I am here early, thanks to you."

"Why thanks to me?" Devin looked puzzled.

"I wanted to go over my NEW medical journals from Peter, but couldn't and decided to come here earlier than planned. If you'd unpacked them as you PROMISED to last week, I would still be in the chamber comfortably preoccupied..... "

"Whoops. Jeez, I'm sorry, Pops, I really DID forget." Devin gestured to the blueprints on the floor. "Busy, busy, busy! Vin and I are going to build shelving in the attic. There's a lot of extra space up there. And we're gonna install another half a bath, too. For the kids, when they're playing up there. Sounds good, huh?"

Father looked very skeptical. "You and your brother are going to do all this by yourselves?"

"Yeah, why?" Devin nudged Vincent's arm. "He doesn't seem very SURE of our capabilities, does he, Vin? Why, this house has become my MAIN hobby, Pop! Between 'Llegs and THINGS she wants done and helping little bro' over here, I'm learning new stuff all the time."

Vincent's head went down, hiding a smile as he responded. "Yes, you've learned many things, Devin, including how to catch your fingers in vises, how to cement your thumbs together with wood glue, how to ..."

Devin pulled his brother's hair - hard! "Ah, shaddup, smart face! Least I didn't cut five very EXPENSIVE pieces of shelving each three inches too SHORT to be used - you did that, all by your own little self!"

Father seemed to ignore both of them as he turned to look out the window into the yard, smiling. Those two - ah me. Wasn't life something? Just when you thought you had it all very carefully arranged, all figured out - along came Catherine and home came Devin! Well, just goes to show one, what happens, when one becomes COMPLACENT. THINGS sneak up on one!

"....and now, I don't know what to DO with him!" Father shrugged his shoulders looking at Catherine and Devin. "It's nearly the holidays, I can't just ask one of our Helpers to take him in; he's a stranger, after all." Father lowered his voice so the man downstairs wouldn't hear him. "And I believe he.... drinks."

"SO? I drink..." His older son loved to tease his father!

"Yes, I know you do; sometimes. But, at least you don't SEEM to wear most of it, Devin, as this man does. Now, help me decide what to do, will you, instead of being your usually fractious self?"

"What did Allegra say?"

Father sighed. "She said exactly what I KNOW you will; to let him stay at your house for now."

Devin grinned. "Okay, now tell me what she REALLY said?"

"That if I had any plans of putting that dear, dear, sweet soul out into the snowy street, I was a miserable old Scrooge, that's what she said!"

"That's my girl...." Devin glanced at Catherine. "How do you feel about strangers so close?"

"Devin, who you have in your home, is your business. I know you and Allie wouldn't do anything to put my husband in danger, so does Vincent. Let me be honest; I'd like to meet this man, if it's okay?"

"Hey, sure!" Devin snapped his fingers. "I've got it! I'll grab us a pizza later from Sal's and you and..... " He looked away. "Where in hell is my mind? I'm sorry, Cathy."

Knowing he had almost invited Vincent to dine with a complete stranger, Catherine nodded at her brother-in-law, smiling.

"Vincent will like that when I tell him, Devin. You didn't stop and think..." She patted his shoulder and dropped a quick kiss on the side of his face. "... of... differences or anything else. That was sweet."

He looked over at the 'old man'; he didn't seem to think it was sweet at all! Crap.

"Come on, Father, it was just a slip..."

"One such SLIP is ONE too many, Devin!" Jacob was about to say more, but Vincent came into the bedroom, pulling off his flannel shirt. He stopped with the shirt halfway over his head, sensing others besides his wife were watching him. One eye peeked out through a sleeve.

"Hello. Is this a private conference or may anyone sit in?"

Tucking the shirt back in, he put one hand at his wife's waist. "What is going on?"

"We were just discussing that old guy...." His older brother appeared a bit embarrassed. "We should go, Father, and let Cathy explain, huh?"

"Yes, perhaps you're right. Vincent, will you be coming down later for a game of chess, while Devin finally gets the journals sorted for me?"

"Hey! How come HE gets to play chess, while I WORK?" Devin looked a bit peevish. "I'm older!"

Father nodded. "Yes, you ARE older. But older or younger isn't the point, Devin. YOU are the one who told me that you would help any time I needed you."

"Oh no, I didn't do any such thing! He turned to look at his sister-in-law through narrowed eyes. "Has my wife been VOLUNTEERING my services again, without asking me?" Silence. "Cathy, what about it?"

Catherine bit her bottom lip and placed one hand over her heart. "I'm taking the fifth!"

"If that WOMAN doesn't QUIT making *ME* MR. HELPFUL around here, I'm gonna DRINK a fifth!"

Muttering to himself, Devin followed Father out of the room. "Wait 'til I get my hands....."

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In the den next door, Allegra and the stranger were having a fine old time with her son and Vincent and Catherine's twins. The dear old man was on his hands and knees playing peek-a-boo like a child. The three imps were not EVER this friendly with total strangers that Allegra could recall. She sat back, smiling. They were friendly with this grizzled old geezer, though!

With a shriek of delight, Marca covered her face as the man peeked out from his fingers. "Boo, got you again!"

"EEEEK." Marca's chubby, cookie crumb covered hands parted slightly. "I SEED you! J.D., get 'em!"

Capturing her twin brother in his arms, the man rolled on the floor in pretended fright as Marca and Allegra's son Devin, Junior, buried the man in couch pillows. Allegra burst into a fit of laughing. "Watch yourself, Chris, they're dangerous!"

As he sat up, rolling off his adversaries to the rug, Christopher Hollie wiped his sweating face on the clean shirt Catherine had sent over to him. "Oh dear, oh dear, I haven't played like this in a

very long time! My, my, I AM getting too old for this!" He struggled to his feet and sank wearily onto the couch, as his three antagonists lunged at him again.

Devin stood in the doorway, watching the BRAT ATTACK with amusement. He whispered to Father, "He seems like a nice guy, huh?"

"Hmmm, I suppose so. I..." Father moved forward quickly, rescuing the man just as J.D. picked up another pillow for a sneak attack behind him. "No, that's enough now, let the man rest, all right?"

Devin laughed. "Yeah, come on, you three; Grandpop's right. It's time for you to eat. Who's coming to Sal's for pizza with me?"

Three chubby arms and one slender one shot into the air. Allegra waved her hand wildly. "OH, OH, me, me!" She stopped and turned to Father. "Is that okay? You can take care of... things here?"

"Yes, yes. Go ahead, before my grandchildren STARVE to death in front of my eyes!" He shook his head wearily. "I'm sure Mr. Hollie and I can find something to occupy our time. Mr. Hollie, do you play chess, by any chance?"

"Oh yes, but I'm not very good at it. I can never seem to make the right moves at the right moment. Perhaps you can improve my game. And, please? Call me Chris or Christopher, it sounds friendlier!"

Vincent stood outside the den, listening to this conversation with pleasure. Catherine had asked him to do this and he had agreed to it reluctantly, not being the sort who usually eavesdropped!

But, he agreed with Catherine; he should try and find out, for himself, EXACTLY what kind of man this was. If he could be trusted or not. Because Vincent wanted to meet him and he wanted to meet him soon. Easing away from the doorway, Vincent turned for his own home, a bit puzzled at himself; he didn't usually look forward to meeting strangers - why then, was he anxious to meet this particular man? It was puzzling him.

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Later that same evening, Catherine and Allegra sat in the kitchen, sharing a final cup of tea. Catherine laughed aloud as her friend described her first meeting with Chris earlier.

"When Father told me what had happened, Catherine, I looked at that man and thought to myself - 'oh my GAWD, somebody's MUGGED Santa Claus! You got a peek at him, earlier. Well?"

"He does look a bit like something out of a story book, doesn't he, Allie? I thought it was just me imagining it! Glad to know you're as wacky as I am!"

Before Allegra could answer, she spotted the object of their conversation coming down the stairs from the guestroom.

"Shhh, there he is now! I thought he was fast asleep! Hi, Chris. Catherine Wells, this is Christopher Hollie. Chris, this is my neighbor, Catherine; it was HER twins that destroyed you earlier!"

Bowing slightly over her hand, Christopher looked INDEED like something from a storybook. Allegra had taken his clothing to wash and given him one of Father's nightshirts, she kept here for his visits. It was long and flannel and had a silly matching nightcap, which, naturally, Father NEVER would model for her. Well, Chris WAS wearing it and Allegra wanted to ROAR; he DID look like Santa in that get-up!

Sensing her friend's thoughts matched her own this minute, Catherine turned her face away for a moment, trying to compose herself. But, the man's next words nearly made her pee her pants!

"HO, HO, it's been a very interesting day. Lovely children to romp with, a delicious pizza for my supper. HO, HO!"

Allegra looked at Catherine, eyes wide. Catherine looked at Allegra, eyes WIDER. With strangled, choking sounds, both women excused themselves and went into the next room. Where they buried their faces into couch cushions and lost their minds completely.

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With a grunt of surprise, Vincent found himself sitting straight up in bed, staring at the window across the room. Something had disturbed his sleep, but what? He looked around cautiously, but could see nothing alarming. Putting his head down, he listened to sounds and heartbeats as he glanced over at Catherine. She was fine; deeply asleep, as were the children. How strange.

Yawning widely and stretching his long arms over his head, Vincent sat up, smacking his lips. Hungry. That's what it was - he was starving. The pizza Devin had brought back earlier had been very good, but pizza didn't stay WITH you long enough.

With a deep sigh, he pulled on his sweatpants and slippers - FOOD, he needed food.

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Bending over, Vincent stuck his nose into the refrigerator, then growled. Wonderful, someone had finished ALL the milk - AGAIN. Gaahhh.

Scratching his head, he went to the doors that connected the two homes together. Doors that made it easier for him to wander from one home to the other when necessary. Necessary like NOW, he wanted a glass of milk with these cookies and he wasn't going to let ANYTHING keep him from 'Legra's refrigerator. His own children loved milk, her son did not, she'd have some extra, a STILL HALF ASLEEP Vincent was certain of it.

He listened at the doorway carefully before sliding it open a crack. Hearing only his own heartbeat echo, he crept quietly into the kitchen.

As he opened the door, a small light came on ahead of him; he froze dead still. NO! There was someone in here! How was that possible; he hadn't heard a sound a moment ago! Trying to make himself invisible, Vincent shrank back into the shadows next to the kitchen table as a head appeared over the top of the refrigerator door. Vincent's eyes shifted to the left, then the right; he was almost in a panic. He knew who was in here with him and it was NOT one of his relatives... CHRISTOPHER!

Without looking over, the man with the long white whiskers spoke. "Come in and join me, please Mr. Wells. I've been waiting to meet... you - most anxiously. Come in, Vincent, I don't bite!"

"H... h... how do you know my name?° Vincent slid a chair out, cautiously still keeping his face turned to the shadows. Curiously, Vincent felt no TRUE fear.

The man shrugged. "Now, isn't that funny? I don't know HOW I know, but I do! Would you like a sandwich?" Chris patted his rather large tummy. "The pizza was wonderful, but it doesn't seem to stay....."

Vincent nodded. "With you?"

"Yes, precisely! Ah, I understand; you too, huh? Well, what would you like?" Chris went to the refrigerator, peering inside. "Let's just see now... there's chocolate pudding, something that looks like salami and a half of an apple pie. Which shall it be?"

"Nothing to eat, thank you." Vincent went to the cabinet, pulled out a glass and slid it across the table quickly, before pulling his hand back from the light. "But, I would appreciate a glass of milk."

Saying no more for the moment, Chris poured the glass nearly full and waited for Vincent to take it. He couldn't see this man, but was amazed at his voice. Did people really HAVE voices like that? He'd never, in a very, VERY long time, if EVER, heard any voice like THAT before. Goodness, it

WAS mysterious and almost hypnotizing. A voice Marc Anthony would surely have been quite envious of!

"Vincent, don't you want your milk?" Christopher edged the glass closer to the giant shadow, then looked away.

From the corner of one eye, he spotted a large hand reach out. A large hand with curved, long nails and... FUR? HAIR? SOMETHING! Clearing his throat, he got to his feet, reaching for the light switch. A sudden startled cry stopped his hand.

"Please don't! Please!"

"Why not, Vincent? What are you afraid of? Not me? By the way, in case you hadn't heard it, my name is Christopher Hollie. Please call me Chris?"

"No, I am not... afraid of you. I do not want you to be... afraid of... me." There was an eternity of torment in that voice - and deep sorrow.

Vincent ducked his head, a note of painfully shy embarrassment in his voice. "Be aware I am not what you think, Christopher.... Chris. I am not like... you."

"I'm not sure I understand you, Vincent. Not like me, in what way?" The voice was calm - very accepting. Almost... protective. And, Vincent let himself trust the man.

That very hairy, clawed hand lay open on the table between them. "In this... way."

"Oh. Yes, I can see what you mean."

Vincent tensed as his hand was lifted suddenly, but he didn't pull away. He didn't know why or how much he trusted this gentle speaking man, but trust him - he did. And it felt... good.

"May I switch on the light, Vincent? Please?"

"As you wish."

Both men blinked as the brilliant overhead light nearly blinded them. Vincent opened his eyes to find himself being quite openly stared at. But, the face was friendly and kind. He felt himself smile back.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Chris."

The man in the flannel nightshirt held out one rather large hand of his own. "And it is MY pleasure to meet you, my boy." The hand patted Vincent quite warmly. "You don't lie, do you?" Chris smiled.

Looking up into eyes somewhat like his own, Vincent grinned as wide as he COULD grin. "No, I do not lie."

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Staggering slightly, Devin clumped down the stairs at six in the - as he called it - freaking morning. WHY did his body INSIST on coffee this early, dammit?

Stubbing his toes on yet ANOTHER wretched, rotten toy, he cursed under his breath and flung open the kitchen door. And found himself face to face with two EARLIER risers. "Holy Mary, Mother of...."

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Catherine, Father and Allegra sat with the twins in Catherine's dining room waiting for their 'special breakfast', as Devin had called it. Allegra looked over at her girlfriend, arching one eyebrow. "What's HE doing? Do you know, cuz I don't have ANY idea!"

"Me neither, I only know what I told you. I found a note telling me to BE HERE at eight a.m. sharp for a SURPRISE breakfast. Vincent's still asleep, very late for him."

Father tapped the end of his plate. "Just as well, for now." He looked over at Chris, then away again.

Christopher didn't appear to notice anything strange or different was going on here this morning, as he played finger games with the children; making dogs and birds with the shadows on the wall with his long fingers. Father had noticed the man's hands the previous evening. He had pointed out a fact to Catherine and Allegra; his hands were not calloused or neglected as a hobo's might be; they were soft-looking and the nails seemed to be polished and carefully cut. And he was a BIG man, not emaciated, nor did he seem to be craving any kind of alcohol. When Devin had offered him a drink with his pizza, the man had chosen a soft drink! Hmmmmm, this was getting just a bit - weird?

"TA DA!" Devin waltzed into the dining room, carrying a large tray heaped with freshly made maple waffles, surrounded on one side by bacon, on the other by sausages. Quickly taking it from him, Allegra watched him race towards the kitchen again. She laughed, "That man LOVES to cook. Cathy, I PITY your kitchen!"

Taking the second platter filled with fried potatoes and onions, Catherine nodded her head. "Yeah, me too. Poor old kitchen - it never did ANYTHING to him! Devin, this looks scrumptious, thanks!"

"Oh, just a little something I whipped up. And you're QUITE welcome, Sis. Now, now people...."

Father, Allegra and Catherine stopped passing platters of yummy smelling food long enough to stare at him a second. Devin looked at Father, then to Chris, his face expressionless. "Don't eat it ALL before Vincent gets here; he called on the intercom - he's on the way. LOOK OUT FOOD!"

Horrified, three people jumped to their feet, rushing to stand at the dining room entrance; peeking around the corner up to the second level. But Vincent, it seems, had come down the back stairway and now stood directly BEHIND them!

"Good morning, everyone." Vincent's voice boomed.

Father held one hand on his heart, Allegra screeched like a banshee and Catherine? She smiled! Father and Allegra couldn't believe it - she stood there, smiling at her husband - CALMLY! Of course Catherine was smiling; she felt a warm glow around her heart and knew her husband was WELL aware of exactly who was in this ROOM. She would get him later!

"Good morning, Vincent. Are you hungry?"

Father stared from her to Allegra to Devin, then to Christopher - only to shift his focus and begin the entire procedure over again. The three children watched this FUN with wide somber eyes. Daddy was here with the MAN? The twins looked puzzled.

Devin pressed his lips together, trying not to LOSE IT, when Father seemed about ready to foam at the mouth. "Vincent! I... What are... HAVE YOU LOST YOUR MIND!"

Vincent poked one finger into his ear. "No, Father, my mind is still with me, and I can HEAR your ability to HOLLER, is still with you. Good morning, Chris, you slept well?"

"Like the proverbial rock, my lad. And you?"

Vincent passed him the platter of waffles, smiling. "I also slept like one dead; it must have been that fourth glass of milk you gave me earlier."

Father sat as though someone had sucked away all of his skeletal bones; leaving only limp flesh - FLOP! Allegra dove for her chair, sliding it in with one hand and reaching for the plate of potatoes with the other one.

"Devin, remind me later, I want to TALK to you."

"Yes, DEAR." He gave his wife a vicious grin; she couldn't help it, she smiled back and plopped a piece of bacon into his mouth.



Father handed the plate of waffles to his younger BRAT of a son. "You almost gave me an early Christmas present, thank you very much. Something NEW, something DIFFERENT. HEART FAILURE!"

Vincent eyed him warily. "I know and I apologize for it, Father." He began cutting his waffles and reached for the syrup without looking up. "The devil made me do it."

Catherine screamed with laughter, walloped Allegra on the back as her friend choked on her food, and howled even louder as Devin laughed so hard, he frightened all three of the children.

Father ate silently, looking neither at his BOYS or their wives or ANYONE else! He had HAD IT with these... these... PEOPLE! WHY had he not KEPT that leather strap, used only as a threat from years ago? He could have actually USED it this morning. On quite a FEW behinds especially one extremely GOLDEN one!

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The day had gone by all too quickly; it was suppertime Christmas Eve. The twins had been bathed and fell asleep fast for a change; their day with the MAN had plumb tuckered 'em out! Catherine and Vincent each placed a soft kiss on two shiny clean faces, as they closed the door to their children's room. He stood beside her in the hallway, near the top of the stairs.

"It has been a wonderful day, Catherine."

"Yes. Even for Father, once he forgave you, Devin and Chris."

"Hmmm, I imagine winning six games of chess in a row - as Allegra would say - 'blew his brain'. Do you agree?" Vincent had a very strange tone in his voice; as though he was fighting not to choke.

She giggled. "It's blew his MIND, love, not his brain and yes, I do agree. What time did Devin say he and Chris would return?"

"Sometime around -- six, I think he said. They didn't tell Allegra where they were going?"

"She said they didn't, but she LIES sometimes!" Catherine started down the stairs, but her husband grabbed her by the hand.

"Have you a moment? There is a... thing I would like to discuss with you, in our room, Catherine."

She looked up, meeting his calm blue eyes with flashing green ones. "Oh? A...THING, huh? And it will only take a moment - are you sure?"

He urged her into the bedroom, closing the door behind her quickly. "Longer than a moment, much, much longer." A voice **besotted** with love and many other emotions strayed through the closed door. I... LIED."

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Allegra and Catherine came into the kitchen with the last of the supper dishes, to find Chris up to his elbows in bubbles. Catherine stood next to him, hands on her hips. "And what, may I ask, are you doing in here, MR. HOLLIE?"

The man held up a plate, saying nothing. Allegra tugged on his beard a bit. "You old fox! I thought you wanted a glass of water?"

"I did. I had one." He chuckled as Allegra tied a very frilly red apron around his waist or what he laughingly referred to as his waist!

"Can't let OUR Santa get all wet, now can we?"

For a moment, Chris had a very enigmatic look on his face. Then he remembered he was PLAYING Santa Claus for the tunnel children tonight. Ah...yes!

"No, a soggy Saint Nicholas would be very bad, my dear. Oh, when a saint sneezes, it causes SUCH a terrible TA DO!"

Catherine dried while he washed and Allegra swept up crumbs and greeted the babysitters. Brooke and Jan entered the kitchen in a friendly argument; one concerning, as be the case, Santa Claus.

Brooke was insistent. "But, he WAS real, a long time ago. People called him Father Christmas, Saint Nick, all kinds of names, Jan!"

"Nah!" Her friend was a DISBELIEVER! "He was only a STORY, that's all - for the little kids!"

Allegra swiped at both of them with the broom. "My son or the twins hear THAT, my girl and YOU will explain to them that there is NO SANTA CLAUS, NOT I!"

The girls weren't paying any attention to her, they were staring - mouths agape - at their friend's dishwasher: Catherine beckoned to them. "Come say hello to Christopher Hollie, girls."

The rotund man turned from the sink, his eyes twinkling, his face flushed from the hot, steamy dishwasher. "Hello. My, my, what pretty young ladies! It's nice to meet you."

Catherine and Allegra looked at each other, fighting off smiles. Brooke and Jan seemed dumbstruck as they gulped, fidgeted and finally each shook hands with Chris.

"Ah... um... Hello." Brooke was a pretty pink.

"Yeah, like hi." Jan merely looked disbelieving.

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Going into the room quietly, the man stood over each of the twins for a moment - until they sat up, grinning at him, their eyes WIDE with wonder.

"Santa Claus, it IS Santa!"

"MY SANTA!" Marca hugged the man to within an inch of his life, pulling his white, fluffy beard again and again. "It's a WEAL beard, Jake!"

He sat with Marca and J.D for about ten minutes; quietly talking of things only a child - or Santa Claus?- would really, truly.... understand. Things you don't USUALLY talk about in the dark. Monsters and ghosts and ICKY STUFF that reached up from under the tub to GRAB little kids or reached out of closets to scare them sometimes.

Then, he went and talked with D.J on the other side of this lovely old house for a while; until it was time to go into a world he simply HAD to see for himself!

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On the long walk home, the 'four Musketeers' and kids teased and spoke of their most special Christmas holiday dreams. Allegra wanted an antique Spanish comb for her hair she had seen only once, about twenty years ago, in a museum window. Dev was surprised she even REMEMBERED.

Devin wanted a Harley motorcycle; said he'd even give old Vin a ride around the park on it, if he should ever be lucky enough to get one - someday!

Catherine spoke of a wonderful gold, gilded egg for her collection with great animation, but Christopher didn't believe her. For, you see, he had read her heart and knew what she longed for, as well as her husband did. Another child.

Knowing if he tried to tell his family ... fibs, they'd catch on immediately, Vincent could not be coaxed into expressing any wish at all.

And, it was for that VERY reason that Christopher Hollie was here. Because for this very special man, Mr. Hollie had a VERY special gift.

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The loud banging at their bedroom door had Allegra swearing to herself, as she ducked under her pillow and Devin walking to open it like a ZOMBIE from hell. Catherine stood there clutching her robe closed. Vincent had a very sad look on his face.

"He is gone, Devin. Christopher is gone."

Allegra came to the door pulling on her bathrobe. "What do you MEAN, gone? On Christmas morning? Gone where, for the love of Mike?"

"It's five in the BLESSED morning! Even the CHILDREN are still SLEEPING!" Dev glared at baby bro'. "VINCENT, WHHHYYY are you rattling my CAGE this early, man!" Devin wailed and leaned on the doorframe.

"I... we... apologize, Devin, but please, you must see! Come and see what he.... left in the guestroom. There is no note, I don't KNOW where he went." Vincent sounded very upset. He WAS upset!

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They sat around the dining table, each holding a small gold box in their hands, looking at each other. With a grunt of determination, Allegra went first. "Well, maybe YOU PEOPLE aren't curious, but I AM!"

She tore into the wrapping paper as if possessed, then pulled out a piece of paper. "Here is what you SAY you wanted, but not what you dreamed of, my dear. You will get the other wish at another time, I promise." She stared at that note a long, long, time. Then, began to cry as she reached into the box, pulling out a large, rather ornate, antique comb - of Spanish design. "I don't believe it!"

Devin grinned. "Oh well, if HE was fulfilling WISHES, mine ain't IN THIS BOX - no motorcycle would fit in here." He read the note to himself. "Your wish is that you could give your wife all she wants. You shall, my boy, you shall. Look in your pantry." His handsome face went very strange looking for a few minutes. Then he grinned from ear to ear and sprinted from the table. "Holy Saint Hollie, I love YA!" He came out walking a brand new motorcycle towards his sister-in-law's dining room.

Vincent watched his wife as she also read a small, very old looking, bit of vellum writing paper. She ran her fingers along the edge of a beautifully decorated gilded egg. Her joy slammed into him so hard, he closed his eyes, gulping back the urge to cry out. My God, what was in that note? He touched her hand, but she shook her head, her lips forming the words ... 'later'.

Holding up a small copper-colored coin, Vincent read the strange Latin verse, translating it to English. 'How wise the mind that knows of boundaries. How foolish the heart - that believes the mind is ALWAYS right.' \*

Vincent also read his note in silence, "My dear Vincent. I give only one true wish to you; the one you dared not ask for, even in dreams. The same one your wife wants most - for both of you. And - I give you a special gift, because of who you are; a look into the future. Whenever you are ready, close your eyes, trust your heart and nothing is impossible. Nothing is beyond your wildest dreams - you know THAT. You MUST know that - you have Catherine."

He didn't know when or even IF, he'd ever want to claim his special gift. He wasn't afraid, but, did a man, ANY man, have the RIGHT to know the future? And what if that future was too sad to

contemplate? Did he wish to know it - ahead of time? Vincent thought not. But, wasn't it a wonderful thing - to have the choice?

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As Devin held his wife's hand and Catherine held her husband's, the four looked around the table at each other. There were tears on each face - happy tears. For only a short time, they had had a splendid visitor whoever - whatever... he truly had been. For just a little while - Santa Claus had been alive and well and REAL! And visiting the tunnels - ta ra, ta ra!

§§§§§§§§

\* P.A.K

"And I heard him exclaim, as he drove out of sight, happy Christmas to all and to all - a good night!"

END