

Nutball Season

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

In my business, nutball season starts on Halloween, and goes to about Christmas. Oh, you get your occasional Friday-the-Thirteenth run on the precinct, and you gotta pray you get every full moon off, but the real serious wackos don't seem to surface until about the last week in October, and they don't disappear until New Year's Day. What they do the rest of the year, I haven't the slightest. But up until then, they're harassing me and mine, or folks just like us all over the country.

Every year, I got my favorite nut story. But last year's I don't talk about much. Because I ain't sure exactly who the nut is, me or the geezer what started it all.

You see, he walked into the stationhouse a shade before midnight on December twenty-third, wearing a red Santa suit and looking pasty and tired, that kinda tired we all get when we pull too many shifts in a row. The house was empty that night. The desk sarge was handling some crisis, the dispatch was doing his nails, for godssake, and most everyone else was either at their own homes or doing their beats.

Me, I was at my desk. I'd stopped in the precinct after a collar to finish up some paperwork before going home to macaroni, cheese, and tuna, my specialty. Not that I minded. It was better than Cindy Lou's meatloaf surprise, which I missed even less than I missed her. So I wasn't really in a hurry to leave—even though soaking up the camaraderie of the stationhouse at that time of night was kinda like trying to sleep in a rooms-by-the-hour motel.

The old guy came in as I was typing the last part of my report. He sat down in the metal chair before my desk, leaned over the files like he owned the place, and said, "Excuse me."

I held up my hand, signaling he should wait until I was finished, hoping someone else would come into the house and the old guy would trot off to them. No luck.

"Excuse me," he said again. "Where do I go to file a complaint?"

I knew I wasn't gonna get rid of him as easy as I wanted, so I said, "A complaint about what?"

"Mrs. Billings. She plans to shoot me if I land on her roof tomorrow night."

Now to understand that sentence, you had to know that the next night was Christmas Eve. And since it was Christmas Eve, and he was an elderly guy with a long white beard dressed all in red, it was pretty clear who he was gonna impersonate.

At least, that was how I thought of it at that moment. But I wasn't being quick on the uptake. I didn't think about the implications of asking this guy a question. Which I did.

"Does this Mrs. Billings have a child?"

"Well, of course," the old guy said in his precise way, and I realized then and there that I should have kept my mouth shut because I was buying into his fantasy.

Of course, my mouth hadn't stayed shut, and now I was in deep, and I tried to fix it, I really did. I told him, you know, that maybe he could wait a day or stay off the roof or just plain get outta town.

He looked at me like it was sixth grade again and he was Sister Mary Catherine trying to explain Algebra.

"You simply do not understand," he said. "I cannot stay out of town. I must come, and I must arrive on that night. I cannot change that. Too many children will be disappointed."

"Listen, bub," I said. "I know it's Christmas and all, but you know, kids really can't tell time. They won't notice if Santa arrives on Christmas Eve or the day after."

"They'll notice," he said in that precise way of his. It was his manner of speaking that really got me to look at him. He didn't sound like he was from around here.

I know, I know, I don't exactly sound Upstate either, but you can tell I do belong in New York. This guy sounded kinda English, but kinda like Katharine Hepburn, too. You know. Cultured.

And the voice didn't quite suit him, neither. I mean how do you expect a guy dressed like Santa to sound? Me, I'd think all deep-voiced and jolly. But no one'd think jolly about this guy. They wouldn't even think fat. This guy was big, but he was all muscle. His eyes weren't twinkling. They were that hard steel gray that some beat cops get after too many long days. And his beard wasn't snowy white. It was a yellowish silver, the yellow probably being tobacco stains from the pipe clenched tightly in his thin mouth.

"Take it from me," I said to him, "when I was a kid, there was this guy next door who worked for PhilcoFord. This was in the days when companies really cared about their workers, you know? And this guy's kid, he was my age. The company Santa drops by every year, not just to this guy's house, but to ours, too, and he always come on a Sunday, but I don't really notice, you know—"

"Not until thirteen-year-old Michael Trent pointed it out to you. I know," the geezer said. "He got coal in his stocking that year."

The hair on the back of my neck stood out. The moment was a bit too *Miracle on 34th Street* for me. Now, there coulda been a thousand explanations for him knowing that—I mean, I told that story a hundred times—but how he knew he'd get me that night, I couldn't figure.

I decided to ignore the geezer's last comment.

"Anyway," I said. "The point is—"

"That the children don't notice, but they do. They have an internal sense of what's right and what's not, particularly when it comes to Christmas. And that's at the heart of my dilemma."

"How's that?" I ask.

"She has a child. A boy of three. He's a good boy, too, and doesn't ask for much. Her neighbors' children have all grown, and they visit their grandchildren on the holidays, so her son is the only child on the block. Logic dictates that I skip the house, but I simply cannot. In the centuries that I have been doing this work—"

Those hairs rose again. I was gonna have to get them trimmed.

"—I haven't skipped a single child. At least, not a single child who met the criteria."

I didn't want to ask about criteria. I didn't want to know the details. I was sure the old guy would give them to me.

"Mr.—"

"Kringle."

"Yeah, right. Listen, we can visit the lady, ask her to stop threatening you, but without proof or an incident there ain't much we could do. Now you can get yourself a lawyer, and have some judge order her to stay away from you, but even that won't do no good when you go visit her house, don't you see? Maybe there's some other way you can get the presents to the kid."

He stared at me for a moment, and I got the sense, even though he was too polite to say it, that I just didn't get it.

"I have proof," he said softly.

"You do?" For all his complaints against this woman, he never once said nothing about proof. "Well, lessee it."

He gave me photocopies—dozens of them—all letters, all from different children, all return addresses right here in our little burg. As he passed the copies to me, he stuck his finger on the top letter and hit it with such force that the sound echoed through the empty precinct.

"Right"—tap—"there."

I glanced at the top letter. It was from a nine-year-old girl. It said that she heard Mrs. Prudence Billings say she'd shoot Santa if he landed on her roof. The little girl, she was writing to warn Santa, and to tell him it was okay if he skipped her this year because she'd rather he'd be safe.

The kid was probably trying to guarantee free presents for life.

Then I thumbed through the letters. They were all versions of the same thing: the kids had heard this Prudence Billings say she'd shoot Santa.

What a great woman. Jeez. What was she doing telling children them things?

"You need a lawyer, mister," I said, handing the letters back to him.

"But that doesn't solve my dilemma," he said. "I need to go to her house."

"Like I said, get someone else to deliver." And I leaned back in my chair thinking about her poor kid. Imagine having a mom who didn't let you believe in Santa, who didn't let you have that one night when you thought anything was possible, when you actually believed some fat bastard who had flying reindeer could squeeze himself into a space barely wide enough for a broom and give you your heart's desire.

"I can't get someone else to deliver," the geezer said, sounding kinda forlorn. "This isn't a task that can be handed from person to person."

I was feeling a bit bad now. I mean, everyone's entitled to their own delusions if they didn't hurt nobody. But the guy wanted to waste police time on something that wasn't ever gonna happen, and I had to let him know that we didn't send squads chasing after every elf in the bushes, metaphorically speaking.

But then, on the other hand, they teach you at the academy to listen to these nuts on the off-sides that even nuts sometimes know something what might be true.

So I got to thinking I had this guy figured out, so I leaned forward and I said, "Pop, I know it's tough when families don't get along, and it ain't fair your daughter keeping you away from your grandson, but

you know, the kid ain't gonna hold it against you if you get a friend to bring him his toys this year. The kid is gonna be a might upset if his mom takes out the deer rifle and pops you one. I mean, if those're your options, you gotta know which one I recommend."

He got up and his voice went all deep, just like I was thinking it shoulda been, except it still wasn't jolly, and he said, "I *hate* going to the established authorities. They never believe me. Why can't you people have an open mind for once?"

The dispatch, he looked up from his nails, and the desk sarge, who had come back in from wherever the hell he'd been, looked at the old guy throw a fit right in front of me, a very cultured fit, but a fit all the same, and I knew what the sarge was thinking: he was thinking, there goes Mantino again, pissing off some citizen.

I'd already heard the lecture about my melancholy state, about the way I should maybe get some help now that Cindy Lou was gone, only the lecture probably wouldn't go that way. It probably would be a bit harsher since Cindy Lou'd been gone nearly six months, and my mood hadn't improved much. It was that empty house, you know, the starter, with two bedrooms the size of a closet, and the one empty as a grave, what was supposed to be for the first little Mantino way back when me and Cindy Lou actually liked each other. I'd been spending those last six months thinking, not about Cindy Lou, because me and her we weren't right, but about family and how some people want one and never get it and how some people get one and never want it.

All this went through my brain in like a split second, while the geezer's using his elegant voice to broadcast to the whole house how I failed him. So I got up, and I said, not so loud that the sarge could hear, but loud enough to shut up the geezer, "If you got the magic that can make reindeer fly, how come you can't land on a roof without some wacko with a shotgun seeing you?"

The geezer sighed and got back in his chair. The desk sarge looked down, the dispatch went back to his nails, and all was right with the world.

Momentarily.

"The magic works like this," the geezer said. "Anyone who believes in me can see me."

I said, "Look, from what I can see in them letters, she don't believe in you."

"You haven't read closely enough," the old man said. "She believes strongly enough to see me as a threat to the entire civilized world. Unfortunately, she is probably the person who believes in me the most of all the adults in all the world."

He had a point. He had a delusion, she had a delusion, and it was shared and there was a gun mentioned, and I probably shoulda been taking this whole thing a lot more seriously than I had been.

"Okay," I said. "Whatta you want me to do?"

"I want you to go see her," he said, "and make her promise not to shoot me tomorrow night."

"You think that much hate is going to keep a promise?" I ask.

"She's a fanatic, isn't she?" he said. "She should keep a holy vow."

Right. Like I could extract a holy vow from a woman who hated Santa Claus. But it wasn't the hardest thing I'd ever had to do on this job.

So like an idiot, I agreed.

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Christmas Eve, my shift started at noon, and since I didn't have a family, I was thinking maybe I'd work late and then pick up some hours Christmas Day. I wasn't lying to myself that one day was like another; I knew Christmas was special. I just figured if I worked through it, I wouldn't notice.

When I was a kid, the festivities started with the whole Advent season. The second the decorations went up in church, they'd go up at home. My mom did the Advent calendars and the whole nine yards, and it made December something else. I'd felt the lack ever since I moved from home—it wasn't the same after I'd left, and it got worse after she died—but it was never so bad as on Christmas and Christmas Eve.

I probably shoulda gone to midnight Mass. I had it in my head I'd do it when I got off work, but I wasn't sure I wanted to see all them folks and their families in the red velvet and the fake fur coats, and me coming in in my uniform. I didn't figure it'd look right, you know?

And that's what I was trying not to think about as I drove up to this Prudence Billings' house. She lived in one of them ritzy areas of town—you know, those colonial houses with the columns and the eight miles of lawn before you even get to the front door. Santa had not just his choice of roofs, but he had his choice of chimneys here.

I didn't like her even worse than I didn't like her before, and that was before I got outta the squad.

I walked up that long sidewalk alone, noting that whoever shoveled didn't do a fine job as there was still a thin layer of ice that cracked beneath my boots. Someone had salted the steps, and the salt had melted through the ice, but no one'd bothered to kick the ice away, which I did, just as a courtesy.

Then I rang the bell.

The door opened and there was this kid wearing a pair of red shorts and a Santa hat, and grinning like there was no tomorrow. In that face, I saw every devil that ever walked, and I knew that the geezer lied.

This kid wasn't good, he was hell on wheels, and I was just about to give him flight.

I caught him with one arm as he was about to sail into the snowy depths of the yard.

"Hey, kiddo," I said. "You ain't dressed for winter."

"Don't care," he said, struggling against me.

I wrapped my arm around him, lifted him off the ground, and stepped inside with him. The hallway was one of them all-wood jobbies with a staircase going up the side. The banister was covered in pine boughs, and there were ornaments hanging every which way.

"Miles?" a woman's voice shouted from above.

"He's down here," I said, hoping I didn't give her too much of a start. "I caught him going out the door."

I heard someone running across the floor upstairs, and then this girl peeked around the banister. Only it took me a half second to realize that wasn't no girl. That was a woman about my age who managed not only to keep her figure, but to keep lines off her face as well. Only her eyes told me she'd seen more of the world than any twenty-year-old ever could.

"And you are?" she asked, like someone in a uniform stood in her entry every day of the week.

"Name's Mantino, ma'am," I said with as much dignity as a man could muster when a three-year-old was squirming over his left arm and kicking him perilously close to his private parts. "I'm with the police."

"I would hope so," she said. "Would you mind closing the door? It's got to be at least twenty degrees out there."

"Eighteen, ma'am," I said, mostly because she had me a bit flustered. I didn't expect a person named Prudence Billings to look like this, kinda like a ballet dancer only without the ugly feet.

"Miles," she said, "where did you get that hat?"

The kid froze like he'd been dipped in ice, and truth be told, I kinda did, too. I only heard one other woman on earth use that tone, and it was my mother back when I knew she'd caught me at something but good. My backside was twitching, and I would wager Miles's was, too.

Still, he lifted his head over my bicep and grinned that Ain't-I-Cute? grin. "Got it at school," he said.

"Well, take it off," she said. "You know we don't allow that rubbish in here."

"Ma—"

"Miles."

He looked up at me and whispered, "Sorry, but I gotta go now," and squirmed his way outta my arm. Then he tossed the hat at me like I gave it to him and took off like a bat outta hell in the opposite direction. From that way, I smelled Christmas cookies, so I was wagering he was off to the kitchen to torment some poor housekeeper.

The lady sighed and came down the stairs. She was barefoot like I said, and her toenails were painted red and green and decorated with sprinkles that accented the colors. When she stopped on the landing, I noticed she was shorter than I expected. I figured when she was standing flat-foot on the floor, she wasn't even gonna come up to my shoulders.

"What can I do for you, Officer?"

I was twisting the red hat around in my hands like it was mine. She held out her hand for it, and I gave it to her. Her fingernails were long and painted the same as her toenails. She didn't wear any rings.

"Prudence Billings?"

"Yes," she said.

I glanced at the hallway, lowered my voice, and then said, "I got some geezer come to the stationhouse last night saying you've been threatening Santa Claus."

She laughed. The sound was like a series of bells ringing on a starry night. "I have been."

I nearly took off my hat and started twisting it in my hands. "You said if he landed on your roof, you'd

take a shotgun after him?"

"I said it to anyone who'd listen, Officer."

"Did you mean it?"

She looked at me, and I got the sense that this woman didn't do nothing she didn't mean. "Why do you ask?"

"Like I said, we gotta complaint—"

"Yes, I know. But not many folks would follow up on it. After all, my threat is only good if some man dressed in a red suit has his flying reindeer land a sleigh on my roof. In fact, I won't really do anything unless he slides down my chimney. I don't plan to sit on the lawn with the gun in my lap."

"Good thing," I said, "since it ain't something the neighbors would appreciate."

She laughed even though I was serious. So I got just a tad more serious.

"You gotta license for that shotgun?"

Her smile didn't just fade, it vanished like it never was, and I knew I had a lady who knew nothing about guns at all. A lady, a gun, and a kid. I didn't like how this was shaping up.

"Fraid you gotta give it to me." I figured I'd keep it for the next few days, and the geezer wouldn't got nothing to worry about. By then maybe she'd rethink the whole gun-owning business. And if she didn't, I'd give her a stern lecture when I got back on gun responsibility.

She stood on the landing and said, "If you take the gun, will you protect me?"

"Seems to me that's a husband's job, ma'am," I said.

She looked up at me, and anger flared in her pretty eyes. I kinda liked the spark.

"Well, seeing as I don't have a husband, I'm relying on either myself or the police for protection."

"Protection from what, ma'am?"

"Santa Claus."

I sighed. I couldn't help it. "You know, ma'am, seems to me there's a lot more to worry about in this world than a man in a red suit who lands on your roof."

"You don't see it my way."

"No, ma'am. I always thought Santa was one of those guys who brought a little joy in the world, if you know what I mean, ma'am." I was treading lightly here because while this broad was one of the most beautiful creatures I'd ever seen, she was probably some religious nut, and I wasn't in the mood to argue the religious implications of jolly ole St. Nick.

"He doesn't always bring joy," she said.

"No, he don't. Sometimes he misses kids. But the fire department and us, we do what we can to make sure them kids get something."

"To keep up the myth." Her voice was rising. I knew then I'd made some kinda mistake.

"Well, you know, it's kinda nice to have something to believe in." Then I winced, thinking she'd launch into the Jesus lecture, you know, the putting Christ back into Christmas thingie.

"No, it's not," she said, and I looked at her. I mean really looked at her.

This lady was scared.

So I said, "Tell me why you're doing this. It ain't natural to have something against Santa Claus."

"I'm trying to protect my son."

She *was* a loony. I sorta let the sigh out this time. "Lady, Santa leaves presents. I ain't never once heard a story where he traded 'em for the kids."

"That's not it," she said. "You saw him." And at first, I'm thinking she meant Santa Claus. Then I realize she meant the kid.

"Yeah," I said. "He's a pistol."

"Exactly." She came the rest of the way down the stairs, and I was right. She didn't come up to my shoulders. But she smelled like roses, all delicate and fragile. "Miles is just like my brother."

"Is that a good thing, ma'am?"

"Not in this case. You're new to town, aren't you, Officer?"

"Been here more'n two years, ma'am."

She shook her head. "When he was little, my brother fell off that roof and died. Broke his neck, which was probably for the best, or so they tell me, since we didn't find him until Christmas morning. By then he was frozen stiff."

I didn't like how this was going. "I'm sorry to hear it, ma'am."

"He was seven. He was up there to watch Santa land." She swallowed. "My son is just like him. I don't want him to get wrapped up in the Santa myth. I'm afraid he'll do the same thing, and then I'll lose him, too."

Her voice broke a little, and I put a hand on her shoulder. She didn't seem to mind.

"Look, ma'am," I said, feeling for her, knowing that we all go a little crazy over the things that hurt us most. "Your son ain't your brother—"

"I know," she said, "but I worry. And I think the best thing is to let him know that Santa isn't real, so then he'll avoid the whole thing. And he would be able to if the town didn't buy into this. I tried to prevent them from doing so, but it didn't work. Everyone still talks about Santa, and you've seen what it does to my son. He's got his Santa hat, and he's ready to show me that I'm wrong."

"Well, I think you are, ma'am," I said. "Santa ain't about materialism, not really, if you think about it. He's kinda a cherished cultural whatchamacallit—"

"Icon," she said.

"Yeah, whatever," I said. "He's one of them. Not because he brings us stuff, but because we think he does." That didn't come out the way I wanted it to, so I took a deep breath and started over. "What I'm

trying to say is this guy is okay to believe in because he's like pure good, you know. How many other examples do we got of someone who spends his whole year making stuff for others, then gives it all away in one night—to everyone, no one left out?"

"That's not how it works."

"Ain't it?" I said. "I been on various police forces for the last twenty years, and in all that time, I never seen a kid get missed by Santa, even if the Santa was a Toys for Tots program."

"If Santa were real," she said, "my brother wouldn't be dead."

"Ah, lady." I wanted to crouch down, face her at eye level and talk to her like a kid, because that's what she was sounding like. Some little teeny kid. "How old was you when all this came down?"

"Three," she whispered.

You didn't have to be no rocket scientist to figure out who she was protecting here, and it wasn't that underage demon in the red pants munchin' cookies in the kitchen.

"Look," I said, "You give me your shotgun, and I'll come back here when I'm off duty. I'll make sure Miles stays in his room, and Santa stays outside."

She raised her head. Her eyes were wide, and I thought I'd never seen anything so pretty in my whole life.

"You'd do that?" she asked. "Why?"

"Let's just say I think every kid needs a little guaranteed joy once a year, and three's too young to have it snatched away from you. Besides"—I smiled at her—"I met your kid. He seems to me to be the type who'd go to the roof to prove to you that Santa *does* exist."

"I've been worried about that," she said. "I just hoped if I talked about it enough, the whole town would forget about this nonsense."

"It ain't nonsense, and no one'll forget," I said. "We all remember what it's like to be a kid and having that hope on Christmas Eve. We ain't gonna give it up, and we ain't gonna deny our kids the same thing."

"Do you have kids, Officer?" she asked.

"I ain't found the right woman to have them with," I said.

She put a small hand on the side of my face. "Some woman doesn't know what she's missing," she said. Then she went upstairs and brought me the gun.

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I worked my regular shift, got off around eight, and flew outta the stationhouse. The dispatch, he made some crack about me having a date, and the whole group laughed like it wasn't possible, but I didn't say nothing. I just drove to the Billings place, hoping I wasn't too early. As it was, they was waiting for me.

Prudence Billings opened the door when I pulled up out front and motioned me inside. The pistol was wearing feet pajamas and his Santa cap and holding a plate of cookies. I was thinking this kid wasn't gonna sleep for two weeks, judging by the brightness in his eyes.

"Miz Billings?" I'd changed into jeans and my heavy winter coat, figuring I was spending the night outside, waiting for the jingle of tiny sleigh bells.

"Priddy," she said.

"Ah, beg pardon?"

"Call me Priddy," she said. "Everyone does." Then she grinned. "It's better than Prude."

"Much," I said, thinking it seemed more accurate, too. The house was looking nice. There was a tree in the living room and white lights on the evergreen bows on the stairs. The place was fairly bursting to be festive, and I figured it wouldn't take a lot of work to get Priddy Billings to start celebrating in a way that'd satisfy the kid.

"I got cookies for you, mister," the pistol said.

"Thanks," I said, and took one. It was a sugar cookie with a bit too much frosting, but it had a sweet lemony taste like the ones my mom used to make. The taste of Christmas, sure as I breathed.

"It's officer," Priddy was saying to the kid. "Officer Mantino."

"Actually," I said, "it's Nick."

She grinned. "How appropriate," she said.

I guess it was. I never thought of it that way. "Well," I said, "what's the plan?"

"The plan is to get Miles to bed, and then I'll hold down the inside while you guard the outside."

"Seems fair," I said. "You ready to sleep, sport?"

"I'm not gonna sleep," he said. "I'm gonna show Mom that Santa's coming."

Priddy closed her pretty eyes.

"Well," I said, crouching down to be at his level. "You ain't gonna do that by staying awake."

"Why not?" the kid asked.

"You don't know?" I said. "Santa don't come to houses where kids are awake."

I thought Priddy's mouth was gonna fall off her face. I guess she hadn't thought of that one. It was a simple solution to her problem. Keep the kid awake all night and Santa wouldn't show up. Too late now. I'd spilled the beans.

"That true?" the kid asked.

"Scout's honor," I said, holding up my hand.

"You was a scout?" he asked.

"Eagle," I said, not lying.

"Wow," he said. "You know, I wanna be a scout."

"*Miles*," Priddy said in that voice again.

"Ah, Mom," he said, but started up the stairs anyway. Halfway up, he stopped. "You wanna read to me, mister?"

"Officer Mantino has done enough." Priddy marched past me and went with the kid. "He'll be guarding the house tonight, so you say thank you."

"Thank you," the kid said. "Merry Christmas."

That last was a little forlorn, so I grinned at him. "Merry Christmas, sport."

Then he trudged the rest of the way up the stairs. She followed. I wandered into the living room, wondering if she really wanted me to snoop that far into their lives. The tree was big and green and smelled like pine heaven. Under it were more presents than I'd received since I'd grown up, all in that shiny wrapping paper that reflected the lights.

The lady wasn't loony. She was just fighting something she shoulda dealt with long ago. She'd mixed up believing in Santa with the death of her brother, and then with the growing up of her kid. I was really glad now I got the shotgun outta the house. I wasn't looking forward to a night in the snow, but I figured it was a small price to pay for what I hoped was a chance to take Priddy Billings to dinner—when the holidays was over and she turned back into a normal person again.

It took her a while, but she finally came down the stairs. I was back in the hallway by then. She put a finger to her lips and led me into the kitchen. In there, I saw the remains of a Christmas ham. She handed me a bag filled with sandwiches and a thermos of coffee.

"Sorry to send you out on a night like this."

I shrugged. It wasn't a bad night. Just cold. "I volunteered."

"You're a nice man," she said.

"I got my moments."

"You think I'm crazy, don't you?"

That's one of them trick questions. If I said yes, I doomed this friendship for life. If I said no, I'd be lying. "I think you got issues," I said.

"You're polite, too," she said.

I set the bag and the thermos on the table, then pulled my gloves outta my pocket and put my wool cap over my ears. "I'd better get out there."

"You think he'll come this early?"

"Priddy." I liked the way the name sounded when I said it. "I don't think he'll come at all, but I think we should be vigilant now, just in case."

"Good point," she said, and went back upstairs. She stopped at the kitchen door. "Thank you, Nick."

"You're welcome," I said, and let myself out the back.

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I wasn't gonna hide. I thought the worst thing I could do was wedge myself behind some bush and freeze to death, making Priddy relive her Christmas horror and giving the kid a bad fright, too. I had this all figured. In my car were a few things that a sales clerk assured me a three-year-old boy would like. I was gonna give 'em to Priddy around dawn, before the kid was up. I figured it was up to her to say whether the stuff came from me, a stranger, or Santa, a made-up stranger.

Maybe by then she'd be willing to acknowledge Santa. If we made it through the night without him, that is. And I figured we would. First, you know, adult common sense said there was no such thing as Santa. But if there was, no self-respecting Santa would show up when people were looking for him. But I did figure there was a chance the geezer would come, and I kinda wanted to head him off at the pass. Maybe sometime in the next year, him and Priddy would resolve whatever differences they had. Maybe I'd still be around to help 'em do it.

So that's what I was thinking. I trudged around the yard, wearing a hole in the snow that probably wasn't doing the lawn any good. I watched the neighbors' lights go out one by one, and I sucked down too much coffee and had to wait until one whole side of the neighborhood was dark before getting rid of some of it.

I think it was long about one A.M. when I got the bright idea to get the ice off Priddy's sidewalk. It was too late to use a shovel—that scrape-scape-scape would wake up the dead—so I decided to use my boot.

I was working my way from the porch to the road when I saw something move on the roof. I let out a four-banger blue alarm cuss that woulda sent me packing if Priddy heard it, and stepped back for a better look.

Damned if the geezer wasn't there, in his red suit and red hat, and looking jolly. Behind him was reindeer—at least, some kinda deer—hooked onto a sleigh that was made of dark wood with red trim. It had curled runners, and the back end was piled high with toy sacks.

The geezer held up his mittened hand and waved at me. Then he hoisted himself onto the chimney, and I started cussing again. I mean, what was I gonna do to stop him, pelt him with snowballs? By the time I got to the back door, the geezer'd disappeared through the chimney and I was praying to every god I could think of that Priddy hadn't hid another weapon where I couldn't see it.

I slid through the back door and tracked sludge on the linoleum. I slammed open the swinging doors, hurried through the decorated hallway, and stopped in the living room.

There he was, crouched beside the tree, laying train tracks—bright yellow and blue PlaySkool® train tracks with a big fat engine just perfect for a three-year-old. He set a kid-sized basketball hoop on the antique chair beside the fireplace and put a small basketball beneath it. Then he turned around and pointed at me.

"I expect you to make sure he uses this," the geezer said in that prim tone of his.

"Me?" I said, looking behind me, thinking maybe Priddy was there. But she wasn't. I could hear her light step on the floor above. "Hey, you didn't tell me the whole story."

"But I do want to thank you," the geezer said. "I didn't see a shotgun."

"I got the shotgun," I said. "But she has a legitimate gripe. Her brother died on Christmas Eve. He fell off the roof. You got magic. How come you didn't do nothing?"

The jolly left the geezer's face. Suddenly it was like he was eighty years older than he'd been before.

"Magic has limitations," he said. "Mine is limited to this kind of joyfulness. Do you know how many little children ask me to get their mommies and daddies back together or to put an end to war? I can't. I don't have the power."

"You got the power to grab some kid who's sliding off a roof," I said, and there was a bit of force behind my words. You know, if this guy was who he said he was—and he had to be, didn't he?, I seen the deer—then I'd been idolizing him for some time. I coulda caught a kid with one hand and pulled him to safety. This geezer coulda, too.

"No, I don't," he said. "And you know why."

"The hell I do," I said.

He squinted at me.

"Because," he said, "I don't come to houses where people are awake."

"I'm awake."

"Yes, I know," he said. "But I asked you for help with Miss Billings. It's a slightly different circumstance. And I wouldn't be here if Miles weren't sleeping. Soundly."

"So you didn't come at all that night, the night the kid died?"

"Ask Miss Billings," the geezer said, looking over my shoulder.

I turned. She was behind me, looking small. Her eyes were bright with unspent tears. They reflected the tree lights.

"You didn't come, did you?" she said in that little kid voice. "There were no special presents under the tree. I remember now. I hadn't thought of that. It hadn't seemed like Christmas that day. You didn't come because I was awake. I was waiting for my brother to come back to bed. Oh, God," she said, and her voice broke. "I killed him."

"No," I said.

"No," the geezer said at the same time. Only he went on. "It was one of those things that magic doesn't have a solution to. I'm so very sorry."

We were silent for what seemed like forever, waiting to see what Priddy would do. Finally, she blinked and one of the tears fell. Then she looked at the tree.

"Are those for Miles?" she asked.

"Yes," the geezer said.

"Wait," she said, and disappeared around the corner. I was hoping that she didn't go to do something stupid, but I didn't stop her. It was between her and the geezer now.

"You coulda told me," I said.

"You had to discover it for yourself," the geezer said.

"Why?" I ask.

He smiled. "Because I can't do anything without making a gift out of it."

"A gift?" I say.

He nodded, and then Priddy came back into the room. She was carrying that plate of cookies that Miles had out for me, and a glass of milk.

"We need to follow the tradition," she said.

The geezer took one of the cookies and ate it. He grabbed the rest of the cookies and shoved them in his pocket—"for the reindeer," he said around the food—all except one, a Santa whose red suit was a bit too pink. He bit the head off it and left it and a bunch of crumbs on the plate. "A tradition," he said, and swallowed. He took the milk from Priddy, drank it all, and handed her the glass back. His mustache was dripping.

He looked at Priddy. "I'm glad this is finally settled."

"Between us it's settled," she said. "But it'll never be all right."

That sad look was back on his face. "My dear, things like this are never all right. But we do learn how to go on living, despite the pain."

"I guess we do," she said.

Then he smiled at her. "There is a gift for you here, too," he said. "If you only see it."

She looked at the tree. I was watching him. He put a finger alongside his nose, gave me a nod—and just like in the damn poem—up the chimney he rose.

Priddy looked back at me.

"He's gone," she said.

"Yep," I said. Then I cleared my throat. "I guess you won't be needing me no more."

She put a hand on my arm. "It was kind of you to give up your family time to help us."

I shrugged. "Ain't got family no more, ma'am. So it was no bother at all."

She looked at me like she was seeing me for the first time. "Then I insist you stay. We have a guest room, and a Christmas turkey that's too big for Miles and me."

"I couldn't," I said. "It's a family day."

"It's no bother," she said. "Really. You helped us. I'd like to repay you."

Then I grinned. She meant it. She really did. "I got stuff for Miles in the car."

"You were going to be Santa," she said.

"I think it's important," I said.

She glanced at the chimney.

"I guess it's important," she said, "even when we don't admit it."

"Especially then," I said.

.....

Now I wouldn'ta told you all this except in the context that we been discussing nutcases. You see, the next morning, over Priddy's protests, I went out on that roof, and there weren't no sleigh marks or footprints or hoofprints. There wasn't no soot on Priddy's polished floor, neither, and later I found a receipt for one basketball hoop, child-sized, by the cookie jar in the pantry.

I woulda thought Priddy was humbugging us all with them threats while celebrating like everyone else did if I hadn't come down with a humdinger of a cold from standing outside for too long on an icy December night. Priddy brought me her housekeeper's famous chicken soup and she took care of me during that awful week.

We've become something of a thing, you know, me and Priddy, and the guys at the stationhouse think it's funny; some woman from old money hooking up with a guy like me. But they don't know that we have lots to share, her and me. I'm the one who believes in stuff; she's the one who needs to. She's the one with the family; I'm the one who needs one. Stuff like that.

We're gonna make it official next Christmas season, but we're getting a new house. Something between my starter and her colonial, something that's just ours. It'll have a roof, but nothing too high, so if the kid gets adventurous—and he won't, not while I'm around—he won't get killed if he slips off.

I just keep thinking about the geezer, you know? I keep thinking maybe we should invite him to the wedding. After all, he's the one what brought us together. And I wonder if we send a wedding invite to that North Pole address the kids use, if he'll get it, and if he gets it, will he show?

Then I think about what I'm worrying about, and I check to see if it's a full moon or something. You know. Nutball season.

Because there's a part of me that's still embarrassed I believe in the old guy, even though I do. Since he was right. He gave all three of us a gift that night.

He gave the kid Christmas and he gave me and Priddy each other.

And that's enough to make anyone believe in Santa—even nutballs. Like me.

The End

Author Biography and Bibliography

Kristine Kathryn Rusch is an award-winning fiction writer: her novella "The Gallery of His Dreams" won the Locus Award, and her body of fiction work won her the John W. Campbell Award in 1991. She has been nominated for several dozen other fiction awards, and her short work has been reprinted in six Year's Best collections. In 1999, her story "Echea" was nominated for the Locus, Nebula, Hugo, and Theodore Sturgeon Awards. It won the HOMer Award and the *Asimov's Science Fiction* Readers' Choice Award. In 1999, she also won the *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* Reader's Choice Award and the *Science Fiction Age* Readers' Choice Award, making her the first writer to win three different readers' choice awards for three different stories in two different genres in the same year.

Rusch has published twenty novels under her own name She has sold forty-one total, including pseudonymous books. Her novels have been published in seven languages, and combined have spent several weeks on the *USA Today* and *Wall Street Journal* bestseller lists.

Rusch has written a number of *Star Trek* novels with her husband, Dean Wesley Smith, including a book in this summer's crossover series called *New Earth*. Her most recent novel is *Utterly Charming*, a lighthearted romance (with magic) written under the name Kristine Grayson. Her most recent fantasy novel is *The Black Queen*, the first book in her Black Throne series. She has written an sf series, *The Tenth Planet*, with her husband, Dean Wesley Smith. She has also published a mainstream crime novel, *Hitler's Angel*, which was called "a great story, well told," by *The Oregonian* and received a full-page review in *The New York Times*. Her next book will be the second book in her Black Throne series, to be called *The Black King*. Under the name Kris Nelscott, she has just sold two mystery novels set in 1968 to St.Martin's Press.

Rusch is the former editor of the prestigious *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and has won a Hugo for her work there. Before that, she and Dean Wesley Smith started and ran Pulphouse Publishing, a science fiction and mystery press based in Eugene. She lives and works on the Oregon Coast.

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