

Timothy Slover, *The Christmas Chronicles: the legend of Santa Claus — a novel* (New York: Bantam, 2010) excerpted pages 60-78.

CHAPTER THREE

The Magic Reindeer



The wedding of Klaus and Anna was so glorious and merry and filled-to-bursting with good food and drink that everyone in the village under Mount Feldberg talked about it for three months. It was simply the most memorable matrimony anyone could recall.

Klaus and Anna, meanwhile, settled quickly and contentedly into married life—just as though the two of them had been made for marriage and for each other, which of course they had. Dasher would not set hoof into Klaus's

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house but only fixed Anna and Klaus with a defiant stare when they tried to usher him across the threshold. So Klaus built Dasher a fine and sturdy stable on the other side of the new house instead, which was much more practical, and gave his old house to the Worshipful Guild of Foresters, Carpenters, and Woodworkers as a residence for retired widowers. So it was a satisfactory arrangement all around.

Now it will be recalled that Klaus and Anna's nuptials fell just a few weeks before Christmas Eve and also that Klaus had agreed to include in this year's delivery of Christmas toys a village on the far side of Mount Feldberg.

And so it fell that on one clear, cold evening in mid-December, Anna and Klaus were lying snug in their large carved bed doing what they so often did in those early newlywed days. That is, Anna was embroidering a scene of the bloody and drunken battle of the Centaurs and Lapiths onto a coverlet she had just stitched, and Klaus was polishing off the last of her rabbit stew with sugared almonds—for Anna had found that with her new stove she liked cooking very much, and Klaus had found that he liked it, too.

But this night Anna could not help but notice that Klaus ate his last bit of bread and sucked every drop of

gravy from his fingers in a distracted, worried manner. "Are you concerned about delivering to the new village, Klaus?" Anna asked.

"Not at all," he said. "With Dasher, we'll make short work of the trip." He sighed.

"Is it the toys? Are there not enough?"

"More than enough." Another sigh, somewhat deeper.

"You're unhappy with their design this year. Not sufficiently ingenious."

"The cleverest I've ever made," Klaus replied miserably, and sighed deeper still.

"Then what is wrong, husband? All this sighing is doleful music."

"Nothing," Klaus said, and sighed so profoundly that in his stable Dasher looked up from his evening mash.

Anna put down her needle. She had just come to the part in the battle where a Centaur was smashing a well-aimed hoof into the eye of a Lapith, all purple and red and black threads, and it was hard to leave off there, but she did. She looked at Klaus. "Husband," she said, "you are the least skilled liar in the known world. Now tell me what is wrong."

And then with a cry of distress Klaus threw back the covers, scattering Anna's stitching to the four posters, and

paced the floor. He told her everything: how last Christmas half the toys he had delivered had been stolen from the village doorsteps and burned in a fire behind the Guild Hall, how it had wrung his heart to see the disappointed looks on children's faces, and how the doer of the evil deed had given him a stare of such naked malevolence at their wedding that he knew he would try to repeat his misdeed this Christmas Eve. He stopped his pacing and looked at Anna in anguish. "And how am I to prevent it?" he concluded. "How can I stop Rolf Eckhof? I cannot think of a way!"

Nor could Anna, at first.

But then her eye lighted on the scattered skeins of thread, and she clapped her clever hands together because suddenly she knew the answer. "You have married me in the very nick of time," she announced.

And so it was that on that year's Christmas Eve, clad in his splendid new red coat and breeches, Klaus found himself shuffling cautiously along the roof of the first house on his delivery rounds. He looked down at Anna standing in the sleigh.

"You're doing very well," Anna hissed up to him encouragingly.

Klaus found that he did not have quite the head for heights he had imagined, but in another few steps he was

at the chimney (and luckily in those days chimneys were very short). He peered down it and saw only darkness. Good. No fire burning down below. Then he let down the toy he was carrying—one of his signature bears—by one of Anna's embroidery threads. When it was a few inches above the fireplace, he swung the thread wide and let it go—and heard the bear land satisfyingly on the floor beyond the hearth. *Thump!* He had just delivered, for the very first time, a Christmas toy down a chimney—and thus safe from the thievery of Rolf Eckhof. He turned around and grinned at Anna down below. "Thank you for thinking of this," he mouthed. She helped him down from the roof and they were quickly off to the next house.

True, letting toys down chimneys—or simple smoke holes, as many of the village houses had instead—took extra time. And true also, Klaus landed a few toys in smoldering remnants of nighttime fires at first and had to try again with a second toy. But the novel deliveries only had to be made in his own village, where Rolf Eckhof was lurking. And with Dasher's speed he and Anna easily made up the time on the rest of their appointed rounds, including the village on the other side of the mountain. They were home three hours before the matins bell chimed in the icy Christmas dawn. And amid the clamor and glee of the

children, which floated up to their house as they stood tired but satisfied, arm in arm, on their doorstep, they did not hear one wail or sob. All the blessed toys were safe.

Nor did they hear the muffled shrieks of rage and frustration from inside Rolf Eckhof's house. He had indeed been out on Christmas Eve but had found no toys to steal. Now he tried to shut out all the happiness assailing his ears by covering them with his two feather pillows, but found that he could not. His mind was poisoned now, almost beyond reason or reclaiming, and any success of Klaus's or crossing of his own plans heated his blood so intolerably that to cool it he had to smash or rend whatever object his eye lit upon. This he did now, and I'm afraid his house suffered for it—starting with the feather pillows, which he tore so violently that for a whole minute there was a blizzard inside his house. But an hour afterwards he sat on the floor, for he had broken all his chairs, and brooded his revenge in cold, clear anger. He did not know what he would do. He did not know when he would think of it. But he knew that he would. And Rolf Eckhof was the sort of man who could wait.

And so the years flew by, and no man can stop their flight; nor should they try. Each Christmas Eve, Klaus and Anna and Dasher delivered toys to a wider and wider

realm of children. Each year, just before they set out, a tiny frown flickered across Anna's face—unnoticed by Klaus—and something she longed to say came all the way to her lips, but then got no further when Klaus took her hand and with great delight escorted her into the sleigh. And each year, Klaus became more and more expert at letting toys down chimneys and smoke holes as a ward against Rolf Eckhof, until it became his preferred method of toy delivery—though in truth Rolf Eckhof never again tried to steal Christmas toys. People in all the villages learned to damp down their fires before they retired on Christmas Eve. It wasn't long before Klaus devised a special knot that he could undo with a deft flick of his wrist just as a toy came to rest on a floor, leaving it standing upright and allowing him to whisk its thread back up the chimney. And in this way the legend grew that somehow Klaus was taking the toys down the chimney himself, an absurd notion which persists to this day despite Klaus having scattered physics textbooks amongst his Christmas deliveries in recent years.

For a jest some tucked the toys Klaus delivered into the freshly washed stockings they set on their hearths to dry, or placed them under the evergreen boughs they hung about

their houses as a reminder that though the world was frozen, spring would come again.

Anna and Klaus continued in their professions, for their need of extra means to purchase wood and carving tools grew greater and greater. Anna stitched. Klaus joined and worked wood. Each year was busier than the year before. Still, Anna found time to indulge her new passion for cooking ever more sumptuous meals, and Klaus found time to eat them. And since Anna's dishes tended more—much more—toward the gravy and dumpling and goose variety—still and always Klaus's favorite meal—than they did toward the celery and cottage cheese and one-single-radish-on-a-plate variety, Klaus's girth improved wonderfully. And when, after years of selfless toil, Anna hit on the miraculous maple sugar cookie recipe for which she became so justly renowned, Klaus was finally able to fulfill the prophecy with which the villagers had teased him during that first year after the Black Death: "You'll grow fat if you keep eating like that!"

"So be it," he had said then, and "So be it," he said now, as he kissed his talented wife. "So long as Dasher doesn't mind the extra weight and the villagers' roofs hold, so be it!"

But Anna's culinary talents did not extend only to Klaus. No person in the village under Mount Feldberg ever went hungry if Anna could help it. So long as her larder held out, Anna fed all and sundry, and Heaven help anyone who tried to resist a second helping of anything. They got a tongue-lashing about keeping up their strength and were then watched over until they had eaten everything she had made for them. And so, when the harvests were good, all girths improved as the years rolled by.

But specially did Anna see to the retired widowers of the Worshipful Guild of Foresters, Carpenters, and Woodworkers. They had made of Klaus's old house an ever-expanding warren as each took up his tools and added on his own room. But they took their meals in a splendid common dining hall they had labored together to construct. The joke went round the Guild that you had better retire hungry because Anna was going to fill you right up to the brim once she got you in that hall. In due course, Father Goswin, having heard the joke, moved in, even though he was not a member of the Guild and had not retired. "You all need spiritual guidance in your waning years," he said. "Pass me the shepherd's pie." He was welcomed, and he soon wrote a moving epistle to the Bishop about how he

had founded this charitable institution for widowers—which was no more than he came to believe.

If the years were busy for Klaus and Anna, they were also jolly. Both knew the deep contentment of loving the useful work they did. They scarcely noticed the advancing streaks of white in their hair—and Klaus's beard—and they certainly paid no attention to the lines that laughter brought to their faces. In their hearts and in the hardihood of their bodies, they seemed age-proof. If they had one sorrow, it was that no children of their own had come to them. But then, as Klaus often said, and Anna agreed, it tempts fate ("Heaven," Father Goswin corrected them) for two happy people to have all they desire, and surely they felt a stake in the lives of hundreds of children throughout the villages of the Black Forest.

Life went on like this pleasantly for years and years and still more years.

And then something extraordinary happened.

One summer Rolf Eckhof turned up at the retirement home. Certainly he had reached retirement age, and he was not a widower only because he had never married. Some thirty-one years had passed since his mischief with the toys—which Klaus had never revealed to anyone but

Anna—and no sequel had followed. But no one expected to see him standing at the door with his possessions in a cart behind him.

"I have a right to be here," he barked at the Guild member who answered the door. "I have worked hard all my life."

Well, how could he be refused? As Father Goswin noted, even the uncharitable have a claim on charity. He had made his life a lonely, bitter one, but still his loneliness was real. "Rolf Eckhof may share my room," said one of the kinder widowers, "until he builds his own."

Which Rolf Eckhof soon did. And if it was not as skillfully made as some others in the winding old house, no one was tactless enough to comment on it. And certainly Rolf Eckhof seemed to be a new man in retirement. He did not actually smile, nor did he ever do much talking, but he did help. Having cooked and cleaned for himself all his life—which few in the house had done—he made himself useful all around the place, but specially around the cookstove. And anyone who cooks will always find some welcome wherever he goes.

Soon even Klaus and Anna reconciled with their old enemy. And though their doing so has been much criticized in the court of historical opinion, I have always

maintained that, despite what happened later, they did right to forgive him.

On the Christmas Eve after Rolf Eckhof came to the retirement house, Klaus readied himself for a long night of deliveries. The very last village in the Black Forest had been added to his rounds at the Saint Bartholomew's Fair that summer, and so he would be traveling farther than ever. In his enormous toy bag—now a dozen flour sacks stitched together and embroidered all over by Anna with likenesses of Roman emperors and mythical beasts and constellations major and minor—were over six hundred toys. This year's new item was a puzzle box made of white pine and ash that opened if one pushed and pulled sliding panels in just the right way. Inside each was a flower seed, so that the children could look forward through the winter to planting it in the spring and seeing what kind of vegetable or flower it would be.

Klaus heaved the huge sack into the sleigh. Dasher stamped the snow, eager to be off, as impatient as ever. For though the weight he pulled had grown steadily over the years due to the increase in the number of toys and the belt size of their maker, it was still a trifle to him. Klaus hesitated. A corner of his heart was heavy. Anna was not coming with him, and it was the first time this had happened.

"I'm just feeling under the weather, Klaus. It's nothing to worry about," she had said.

"I won't go. It's just one year."

"Not go! What utter nonsense. You are responsible for our children. If you don't bring them toys, their parents will make up any number of reasons why they don't deserve them."

"But, Anna, if you're ill and need looking after—"

She had fixed him with her bright blue eyes. "Do not presume, carpenter, that because you are the handsomest man in the Black Forest, you know anything about leechcraft. I will be fine. I have made a broth. Master Eckhof has brought me the herbs." Then she had laughed her silvery laugh that dispelled all gloom, and he had felt much better.

Except for that one small corner of his heart. And as the night wore on, the troubled feeling in that corner spread and spread.

Klaus and Dasher delivered the toys to the houses of his own village in good time as well as to the three villages east and west, but for the first time it brought Klaus no real pleasure. He was distracted. *Is Anna all right?* he kept wondering. *Should I have left her?* Dasher was racing up the steep track that went over a shoulder of Mount Feldberg and was just clearing the tree line when Klaus suddenly

signaled for him to stop. The sleigh slid to a halt. Dasher snorted once, and then all was silent. The winter stars and half a moon glimmered down on the two. Klaus got out of the sleigh and stood beside it.

He did not know why he had stopped. He had never done so before unless there was a runner that wanted fixing or a harness buckle to adjust. But now he felt a need to be still. Something was happening, he felt, though he did not know what.

He looked down into the valley at his village. Waves of frigid air rose up from there and made him shiver. He pulled his crimson coat close, but he could not get warm. The cold current made him feel exhausted to his very bones. He caught a glimpse of his beard, almost all white now, as it caught the icy breeze and danced before his eyes. *I'm old*, he thought, *too old to keep making these deliveries*. For it seemed to Klaus that the weight of the years he had ignored for so long now piled themselves upon him all at once. They made him stoop and stagger.

At this Dasher grew alarmed. He stamped a hoof and snorted again. He rubbed Klaus with his glossy flank, as if trying to rally him. He caught Klaus's gaze in his large, brown reindeer's eyes, and to Klaus it seemed as if those eyes were urging him to do something. But what? He was

so tired. Impulsively he threw his arms around Dasher's neck, his own eyes filling with sad and weary tears.

"Great heart," he spoke low into the ear of the beast, "I feel my strength is gone. I feel I'm at the end of things. What shall I do?"

Now it happened that Dasher had been waiting through all these decades for Klaus to speak to him spirit to spirit. For though he was Anna's deer, in truth he had been made for Klaus. And now that Klaus had finally spoken to him not as a man talks idly to a beast but as one soul seeks out another, Dasher was able at last to reply.

"Your strength is not gone, Klaus," he said. "Indeed, the beginning of your true strength is about to come upon you."

"Are you—are you *speaking* to me, old friend?" Klaus asked Dasher in amazement.

"I am," Dasher said. "You have spoken to me as one soul to another. And that has unleashed the Magic. Cover your ears, O Man!" And then Dasher threw back his great antlered head and bugled as no reindeer had ever bugled before or ever has since. The sky rang with the immense sound as it echoed and re-echoed up into the Heavens. Then silence fell while Jupiter, Klaus's Jovial star, beamed benevolently down on them.

"What will happen now?" Klaus asked in an awed whisper.

"Wait and see," Dasher said. In the hush, the mountain, the man, and the reindeer, the very air, seemed poised for something—something even more extraordinary than Dasher finding speech at last. Klaus caught a scent in the air, clean and bracing. *Why, it's peppermint*, he realized, and felt much better. Still he waited.

Then he heard the joyful sound of sleigh bells. He looked back down the track to see who was approaching. But the sound wasn't coming from the track. Nor was it coming from anywhere on the shoulder of the mountain or from the valley below.

It was coming from above Klaus's head.

He looked up in wonder, and this is what he saw: Coming fast from the north, cleaving the cold air in strict formation, were seven reindeer, six almost as large and deep-chested as Dasher; the seventh, a female, more dainty. And these reindeer were flying—not metaphorically, but really, truly flying. Swift as eagles, fast as racehorses, they galloped through a bank of cloud, and their antlers flashed in the moonlight as they scattered it in all directions. "I have seen many astonishing sights in my life," Klaus reported years later, "but none to compare with that. They

were so fierce and alive, coming on like quicksilver, flashing across the sky. I shall never forget it." And nor does anyone else who has had the privilege of seeing that sight.

One of the reindeer gripped a harness in its teeth, and it was the bells from this that Klaus was hearing. All alighted and pressed up against Dasher, as though to reacquaint themselves with him. "It has been long, brother," Klaus heard one say. Dasher looked at Klaus and saw his deep bewilderment.

"We are not demons, Klaus, nor angels. We are reindeer, just as you see us. But we were awakened long ago for this very purpose. For the moment when your burden would prove too taxing. Harness us."

And so, in a kind of dream, Klaus unhitched Dasher's tack from the front of the sleigh and replaced it with the new harness. With Dasher in the lead, all eight reindeer stepped into their traces as one, and Klaus buckled them in. "Now get in the sleigh, Klaus, and hang on. For we," Dasher shouted as all the reindeer pawed the snow, "are the Eight Flyers!" And just as Klaus found his seat in the sleigh—and not a split second too soon—the reindeer leapt into the air like arrows shot from a bow.

Klaus's first flight was more glorious than any of us who have not ridden in a sleigh pulled by flying reindeer can

ever know. After a few moments of initial vertigo and not knowing up from down, he took to flying in his sleigh as if he had been born to it, which of course he had. He exulted in the wind blowing through his hair and at the sight of the sleeping villages below and the wheeling stars above. And when he thought of how quickly he would be able to get his toys to the children now, and then when he thought that he could be let down to a roof rather than having to climb up to it, and then finally when he thought how quickly he would be back by Anna's side, sheer joy bubbled up in him. "Hee, hee, hee!" he began. And then, "Ha, ha, ha!" he noted as he warmed to his theme. And then, finally, in his deep, rich bass, "Ho, ho, ho!" he laughed as he sailed through the roaring winter night.

Klaus was through with his deliveries so early on this astonishing Christmas Eve that he thought for once he would be able to get half a good night's sleep. The Flyers landed the sleigh with a hiss of runners between his house and Dasher's stable. "Thank you, Comet. Thank you, Vixen, my girl," he said. "Thank you, Cupid and Donner and Prancer and Blitzen and Dancer." He put a hand on Dasher's neck. "And thank you, my old friend. What a night!"

"Good night, Klaus," said Dasher. He yawned like a

cavern. "We'll sleep under the pines tonight. Sort accommodations out in the morning." And he trotted away with his brothers and sister.

Through the window Klaus saw a candle lit in their bedroom. He smiled to think how surprised Anna would be to see him home so early.

But when he got to his bedroom, what he saw at first was not Anna, but Father Goswin. He was sitting in a chair drawn up to their big bed, dressed in his church vestments and murmuring Latin. When Klaus entered the room, the priest looked up, and Klaus saw the tears on his face. Then he saw his beloved wife, small and still under the coverlet on the bed, her eyes closed. He did not understand. Anna was never still.

"I'm so sorry," Father Goswin said. "I have administered the Last Rites."

Klaus collapsed in a swoon.

Rolf Eckhof, of course, had fled long ago.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Green Council Convenes



Klaus was dreaming. In his dream he was racing in a sleigh drawn by eight reindeer up a tremendously steep, shining Road of ice that ran straight and true, right into the sky. It was dawn, and as the sun rose, Klaus glimpsed above the gilded clouds a far, wintry country. There were parklands and mountains and a waterfall spilling through a hole in a frozen lake. In the midst of it all was a magnificent castle of green and silver and pearl. *I'm going home*, Klaus thought in his dream. *Home to Anna.*