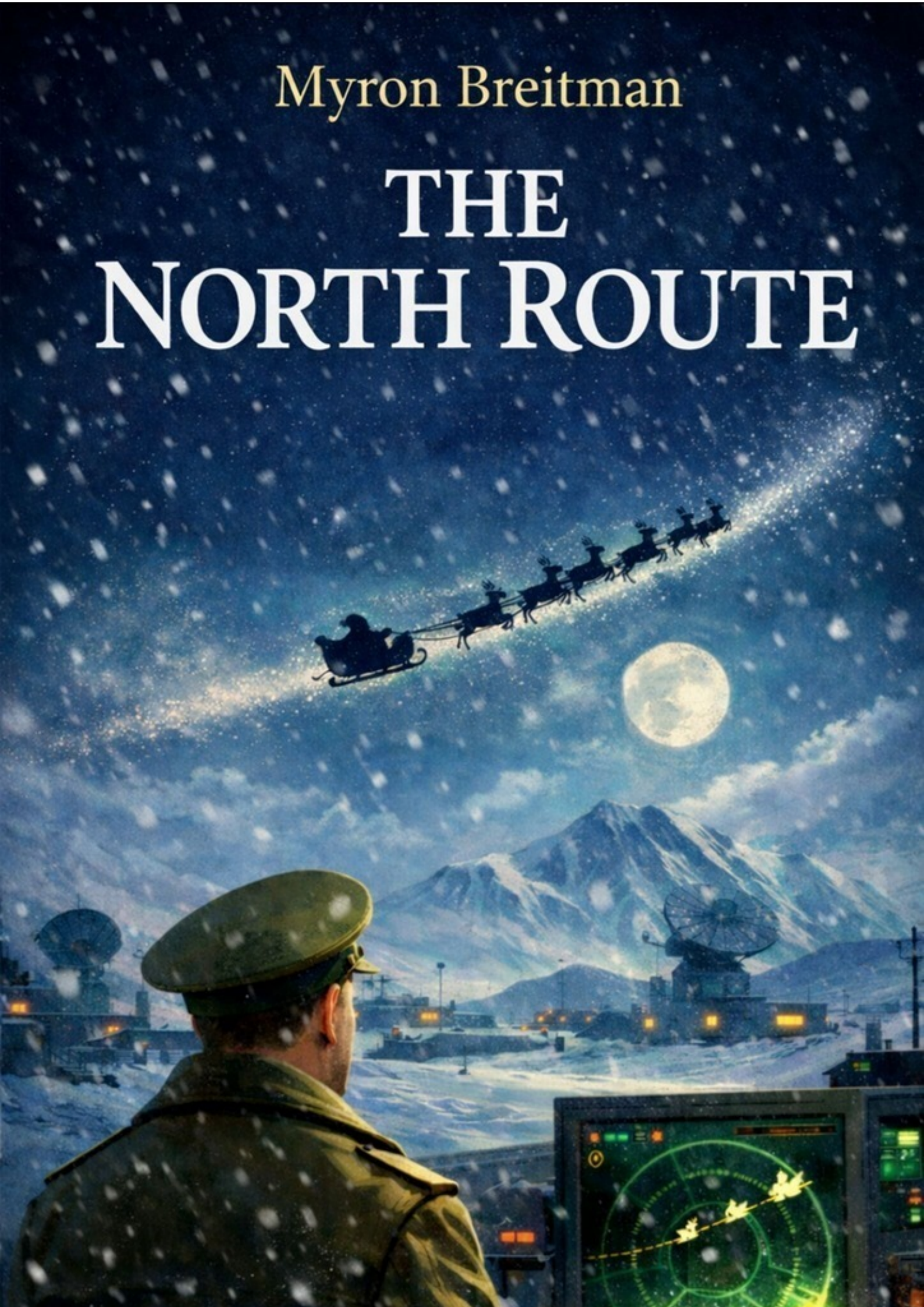


Myron Breitman

THE NORTH ROUTE



Myron Breitman

**The North Route. A Novella
of Hope in the Cold War Sky**

«Издательские решения»

Breitman M.

The North Route. A Novella of Hope in the Cold War Sky /
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1955. Cold War. In a high-stakes military base, Colonel Caldwell watches the skies for nuclear threats. But when the red phone rings, it isn't a command — it's a child asking for Santa. In the haunting, lyrical style of Ray Bradbury, «The North Route» reveals the secret origin of the world's greatest holiday tradition. It's a story of one man choosing kindness over protocol, turning a radar into a beacon of hope. A timeless novella about the night the world stayed safe for a miracle.

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Содержание

Foreword	6
Chapter 1. The Night That Breathed	7
Chapter 2. The Room Without Windows	13
Chapter 3. The Men Who Wait	18
Chapter 4. The Telephone	23
Chapter 5. The Voice of a Child	28
Chapter 6. The Pause	33
Chapter 7. The First Route	38
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	41

The North Route

A Novella of Hope in the Cold War Sky

Myron Breitman

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Foreword

Listen. Do you hear it?

It is 1955. The world is a vast, shivering clock, ticking toward a midnight no one wants to see. It is a time of iron curtains and leaden skies, where men in windowless rooms watch green-phosphor eyes for the end of everything. They are guardians of the Void, shepherds of the Great Cold.

But then, the miracle. Not a miracle of fire or thunder, but a miracle that arrives as a whisper through a copper wire.

We often think that history is made of grand speeches and heavy boots. We are wrong. History is made of the moments when a hand hesitates over a button, when a heart decides to beat against the rhythm of a machine, when a soldier chooses to become a storyteller.

This is the story of a Red Line. Not the line that divides nations, but the line that connects the lonely earth to the soaring stars. It is about a map where the North Route is carved not by bombers, but by the laughter of a thousand children and the jingling of silver bells.

Open this book as you would open an old watch – carefully, feeling the gears turn. Step into the snow. Hear the hum of the radar. And remember: as long as one person is brave enough to answer the telephone and say «Yes, I see him,» the world will never truly go dark.

The sleigh is in the air. The radar is locked on.

Believe.

Chapter 1. The Night That Breathed

Christmas night came to the North softly – almost a ghost.

It did not arrive as a storm does – with howl and clatter, rattling shutters, sobbing in flues. It did not arrive like spring – with silver rush of meltwater, shout of birds, raw scent of thawed earth.

It came differently.

Like a dream.

Like a memory.

Like something that has always been and always will be, yet remains impossible to hold.

It came as an exhale.

Colonel Henry Caldwell stood by his office window and watched the sky. It was black and scrubbed clean – the stars burned there so fiercely it seemed someone had pricked holes in dark velvet to reveal a world of pure light hidden behind it. He watched the stars and wondered what they had seen. How many centuries. How many wars. How many men had stood just like this, peering upward, asking: What is up there? What hides in the hollow dark between the sparks of light?

Caldwell was no romantic. He was a soldier. He knew that up there, in the Great Void, nothing good lay in wait. Metal birds flew there, pregnant with fire. Invisible borders were drawn there, lines that must never be crossed. There, in that silence, in that emptiness, the end of the world might begin.

And his job was to watch it.

To ensure the end did not come tonight.

He checked his watch. Five minutes to ten. Time. He turned from the window, plucked his cap from the rack, and stepped into the corridor.

The corridors of a military base are always the same. Long. Hollow. Concrete walls painted that particular institutional gray – a gray that does not exist in nature, found only in those places where people do not live, but merely exist: schools, hospitals, barracks. Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead like a swarm of glass bees. His footsteps echoed back at him, until it felt as though he weren't alone, but followed by a phantom army in polished boots.

Somewhere far off, behind heavy doors, someone laughed. Perhaps in the barracks, soldiers were gathered around a television. A Christmas special. A movie. Or perhaps they were just telling tall tales, because tonight was a night when you could loosen the collar, forget the regulations, and simply be human.

But Caldwell could not loosen his collar.

He walked, feeling the holiday fall away with every step. The laughter grew faint. The warmth receded. Ahead lay only the door – the heavy steel door behind which holidays did not exist.

He paused for a heartbeat.

Christmas, he thought. A strange word. As if something were truly being born. As if the world started over every year, fresh and new.

But the world does not start over. It only continues. It spins, it grinds forward, and the only thing a man can do is watch, making sure it doesn't come to a sudden, grinding halt.

Caldwell pushed the door open and stepped inside.

The Headquarters met him with its familiar thrum. It was always loud here, though the men rarely spoke. It was the machines that made the noise – a low, rhythmic pulse, as if some Great Beast were breathing beneath the floorboards. Radios crackled. Screens flickered – dozens of them, large and small, each offering a fragment of the world. Dots. Lines. Numbers. Coordinates. Trajectories.

Everything happening in the sky was reduced here to glowing specks on dark glass.

«Evening, Colonel,» said Sergeant Thomas without looking up.

«Evening, Sergeant,» Caldwell replied.

He surveyed the room. The night shift – six men. Corporal Miller at the radar. Technician Johnson on comms. Lieutenant Harris with a clipboard. Three others, young boys whose names Caldwell couldn't quite summon. They sat at their stations, staring at screens, scribbling in logs. Working.

But Caldwell saw that their minds were leagues away.

Home, perhaps. At a table laden with food. Where a tree glowed and the air smelled of cinnamon and pine.

He understood them. He was thinking of home himself. Of his wife, likely clearing the table now. Of his son, lying awake in bed, unable to sleep because tonight is the night children simply cannot sleep.

But here, in this room without windows, home was only a thought.

Caldwell took off his cap, hung it on a peg, and sat at his desk. It was an old wooden thing, scarred and worn. A mug of cold coffee sat there – a ghost of the previous shift. A stack of papers – reports, briefings, manuals. And the telephone.

The black telephone.

A common thing, found in homes across America.

Caldwell looked at it and thought how strange it was. This entire headquarters, these machines, these eyes that saw the invisible and ears that heard the silent – all of it built to catch a threat before it became a reality.

And the telephone just sat there, mute.

Until it rang.

Caldwell took a sip of the coffee. It was cold and bitter. He grimaced and set it aside, glancing at the clock on the wall. A large, round face with black hands.

10:05 p.m.

A whole night lay ahead. A long night. A Christmas night.

Nothing will happen, Caldwell thought. *Nothing ever happens on Christmas*.

But he knew that was a lie.

He knew that danger does not take a holiday. That the enemy does not celebrate with you. Somewhere, thousands of miles away, in other windowless rooms, other Colonels sat before similar screens, thinking these very same thoughts.

The world was full of men who waited.

Waited for an order. Waited for a signal. Waited for the moment when everything would change.

Caldwell leaned back and closed his eyes. He felt a weariness. Not the kind that sleep cures, but the other kind. The kind that piles up over the years. The exhaustion of a man who spends his life searching the sky for death.

«Colonel,» someone said.

Caldwell opened his eyes. Sergeant Thomas stood by the desk with a tablet.

«Evening report, sir,» he said. «All quiet. Three commercial flights over Alaska. Two military transports. One weather balloon. Nothing unusual.»

«Good,» Caldwell said. «Thank you, Sergeant.»

Thomas nodded and retreated.

Silence.

The thrum of machines.

The flicker of screens.

Caldwell stared at the map of the world on the wall. A vast thing, marked with bases, routes, zones of responsibility. He knew it by heart. Every dot. Every line. He could see it with his eyes shut.

And suddenly, he thought: *How fragile it all is*.

How easily it could all shatter.

One mistake. One false signal. One dot on a screen misread by a tired eye.

And that would be the end.

He shook his head, chasing the thoughts away. You couldn't think like that. You couldn't let the fear crawl in. Fear was a poison; it paralyzed. It bred doubt. And here, in this room, there was no room for doubt.

Only for the work.

Watch. Wait. Be ready.

In the corner, Corporal Miller began to hum softly. Caldwell listened. The tune was familiar. *Jingle Bells*. An old song. A simple song. The kind children sing.

Miller stopped abruptly, as if catching himself. He shot a glance at Caldwell. But Caldwell said nothing. He only offered a small nod – *Go on, if you like*.

Miller didn't go on.

The silence returned.

And in that silence, in the humming of the wires and the glowing of the tubes, there was something strange. Something Caldwell couldn't name. An expectation. But not the usual kind. Not the jagged, anxious kind.

Something else.

As if the night itself were waiting.

Caldwell looked at the telephone.

The telephone was silent.

He picked up a pen and began to move through the paperwork. Routine. Signatures. Figures. The work that never ends. He read, but the words slipped through his mind like shadows.

The clock ticked.

The hand moved sluggishly, as if time had turned to syrup.

10:15.

10:20.

10:25.

And then, in that silence, in that waiting, the telephone rang.

The sound was not loud. Almost polite. *Ring-ring*. Not sharp, not demanding. Just a ring. An ordinary phone call, the kind that happens a thousand times a day.

But everyone in the room froze.

Caldwell looked at the receiver. A black handle on a black base. It sat there, yet the ring continued. *Ring-ring*.

Sergeant Thomas looked up. Corporal Miller turned around. Lieutenant Harris paused, pencil mid-air.

They all stared at the telephone.

Why, Caldwell didn't know. It was just a telephone. Perhaps another department. Perhaps HQ. Someone wanting to verify data or pass on a memo.

But for some reason, no one spoke.

Ring-ring.

Caldwell reached out. His fingers brushed the cold plastic. He lifted it to his ear.

«Continental Air Defense Command, Colonel Caldwell speaking,» he said.

His voice was level. Calm. The voice of a man who knows exactly what to say.

There was silence in the receiver.

Not an empty silence. A living one. One that held a presence. Someone was there. Someone was breathing. Someone was holding their breath, not knowing how to begin.

«Hello?» Caldwell said, a little softer.

And then, from the receiver, came a voice.

Thin.

High.

Cautious.

A child's voice.

«Hello,» the voice said. «Is... is this really Santa?»

Caldwell went still.

He sat at his desk, the telephone pressed to his ear, unable to move. The words snagged in his throat. He looked at the screens where the glowing dots crawled – planes, satellites, everything that drifted over the world. He saw the map on the wall. He saw Sergeant Thomas, who had turned toward him with a confused frown.

Santa?

«Say that again, please,» Caldwell said.

The voice in the receiver grew smaller, as if the child feared they had said the wrong thing.

«Mommy gave me the number,» they said. «She said I could call and find out where Santa Claus is right now. That you track him. That you have radars.»

Caldwell closed his eyes.

Of course.

The advertisement. He remembered now. Last week, someone had shown him a newspaper. A local store – Sears, he thought – had launched a Christmas promotion. «Call Santa!» in big, bold letters. And a phone number at the bottom. For the children.

Only the number had been printed wrong.

One digit. One tiny error in the printing press.

And now, instead of a department store, the children were calling here.

To the Continental Air Defense Command.

To the place where they tracked missiles, not sleighs.

Caldwell opened his eyes. He looked at the telephone in his hand. At Sergeant Thomas, who was waiting for him to speak. At the others – all of them motionless, all of them listening.

Silence in the receiver. The child waited for an answer.

And Caldwell suddenly realized: in this moment, he was the first adult who could either preserve the miracle or destroy it.

He said nothing.

He waited longer than he should have.

He waited because in that pause, there was too much to weigh.

His own childhood – a winter in Mississippi, a small house, a Christmas morning when he had raced to the tree, and there...

Nothing.

Because there was no money. Because his father was away at war. Because his mother was crying in the kitchen, whispering, *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, next year will be different.*

But a miracle, once vanished, does not return.

Caldwell remembered sitting on the floor by that bare tree, thinking: *So, it's all a lie. The adults had lied. The world was not made of the things he thought it was.*

Something inside him had snapped that morning.

Something he had never quite been able to mend.

And now, many years later, he sat in a windowless room, holding a telephone, listening to the voice of a child who still believed.

Believed that there was magic in the world.

That somewhere, Santa Claus was in flight.

That adults did not lie.

Caldwell thought: *I could tell the truth. I could explain the mistake. That Santa isn't real. That we watch for other things here – terrible things that children should never have to know.*

He could tell the truth and shatter the wonder.

Or...

Or he could lie.

But would it be a lie?

«Santa,» Colonel Henry Caldwell said slowly, as if weighing every word on a fine scale, «is currently...» – he looked at the map of the world on the wall – «...over the North Pole.»

In the receiver, the silence changed.

It became light.

It became full of hope.

«Really?» the child gasped.

«Really,» Caldwell said. «He's preparing for takeoff. Checking the sleigh. The reindeer are ready. Everything is on schedule.»

«Will he be here soon?»

«Very soon. But you have to be asleep. You know the rule, don't you?»

«What rule?»

«Santa only comes to those who are sleeping. The sooner you go to bed, the faster he'll arrive.»

«I'm going right now!» the voice rang with joy. «I'm running to bed right now! Thank you! Thank you so much, sir!»

«Goodnight,» Caldwell said.

«Goodnight!»

Click.

Caldwell slowly lowered the receiver onto the cradle.

He sat motionless, staring at the telephone. A black telephone. A perfectly ordinary thing.

Then he raised his eyes.

The entire shift was watching him.

Sergeant Thomas. Corporal Miller. Lieutenant Harris. Technician Johnson. All of them. They watched and they were silent, not knowing what to say.

Someone in the corner let out a soft huff of a laugh.

Then someone else.

And then Sergeant Thomas smiled. Not a wide smile. Not a loud one. Just – a smile.

And laughter began to ripple through the room. Soft. Warm. Not mocking, but kind. The laughter of relief. The laughter that comes when something unexpected – something good – happens.

Laughter that had not been heard in this headquarters for a very long time.

«Alright,» Caldwell said, trying to summon his sternest voice, though he couldn't keep the corners of his mouth from twitching. «Back to work.»

The laughter faded.

But something had shifted.

The air felt warmer. It was easier to breathe.

Caldwell looked at the telephone. Then at the screens. At the glowing dots moving along their invisible paths.

And he thought:

Maybe we really should be tracking Santa.

The thought was foolish. Absurd.

But it wouldn't leave him.

Outside, the snow was falling. Caldwell couldn't see it – there were no windows – but he knew it was there. Falling silently upon the earth. Draping the world in a white blanket.

And somewhere out there, in that world, a child was tucking themselves into bed, believing that Santa Claus was flying toward them.

Believing that miracles exist.

Caldwell leaned back in his chair.

The night breathed softly.
And in that breath, there was hope.

Chapter 2. The Room Without Windows

The Headquarters was a place apart.

It was not like a home. It was not like the street. It was not like any other place where men drew breath and lived their lives.

The Headquarters was a place without windows.

Caldwell thought of this often during the long, graveyard shifts when time stretched out slow and thick as clover honey. He wondered: Why are there no windows here? The official manual offered a cold, logical answer: security. Windows were a frailty. Through them, light could leak, sound could spill, a blast wave could shatter the peace. Through them, the enemy could peer in.

But Caldwell knew the deeper truth.

There were no windows because the men who labored here were not meant to see the world. They were meant only to see the screens. Only the dots and the lines. Only the cold geometry of numbers and coordinates.

They had to forget that outside, there was a sky. That beneath that sky, there were cities. That in those cities, there were houses. And in those houses, people lived.

For if you remembered these things every hour of every day, you could not do this work.

You could not sit and wait for the signal that might spell the end of everything.

Caldwell rose from his desk and paced the room. His legs felt heavy – he had sat motionless for too long. He approached the great screen that swallowed half the wall. On it, the map of North America glowed – from ocean to shining ocean, from the white wastes of Canada to the heat of Mexico. Green sparks marked their own birds. White sparks were the civilian flights. Everything else was a void – dark, silent, and deep.

«Anything of interest, Corporal?» he asked Miller, who sat hunched over the radar.

«No, sir,» Miller said, his eyes locked onto the electronic pulse. «An ordinary evening. Three commercials on the West Coast. One military transport over Montana. Everything is within the margins.»

«Good.»

Caldwell returned to his desk. He sat. He watched the clock.

10:38 p.m.

The night was only beginning to breathe.

He pulled a folder of reports toward him and began to read. Technical maintenance for Radar Station Seven. Equipment replacement at Outpost Fourteen. A request for more men at the Colorado base. Papers. Endless, drifting snows of paper. An army is not made merely of men and steel – it is made of papers that never cease to fall.

He signed one report. A second. A third.

Somewhere in the corner, a radio crackled like a small, dying fire. A voice recited coordinates. Another voice confirmed. A routine exchange of information. Mechanical. Stripped of all heat and emotion.

Caldwell listened to those voices and thought how they – he, Sergeant Thomas, Corporal Miller, all of them – lived in two worlds at once.

There was the world outside. The world where it was Christmas. Where lights burned in windows. Where children lay awake, ears strained for the ghost-sound of bells. Where the air smelled of cinnamon and pine needles. Where people laughed and held one another, believing – if only for this one night – that the world was a kind place.

And then there was this world. The room without windows. The thrum of the dynamos. The flicker of the cathode tubes. The waiting that never ended. Because danger does not take a holiday. It is always here. It simply keeps its peace, hiding, waiting for its moment to strike.

And the men in the Headquarters stood between these two worlds. They guarded the one from the other. They watched so that the shadows would not break into the places where the lights burned and the children laughed.

But the price of that vigil was to forget that the other world even existed.

To lock oneself in a room without windows and look only at the glass eyes of the machines.

Caldwell set the folder aside. He rubbed his eyes. The weariness wasn't in his muscles – it was deeper, in a place his hands couldn't reach.

«Coffee, sir?» Sergeant Thomas asked.

Caldwell looked up. Thomas stood there, a thermos in his grip. He was a sturdy, block-shaped man with a face that remained solemn even when he smiled. A good soldier. Solid. The kind of man who could hold up a collapsing wall.

«Thank you, Sergeant,» Caldwell said.

Thomas poured the coffee. It was hot and black. The scent was wonderful – the only living smell in a room that smelled of scorched metal, ozone, and recycled air.

«That was a strange call,» Thomas said softly. «The one about Santa.»

«Yes,» Caldwell agreed. «Strange.»

«A misprint in the paper?»

«It seems so.»

Thomas nodded. He was silent for a moment. Then he asked, «You did the right thing, sir. Not telling him the truth.»

Caldwell looked at him. «Do you think so?»

«I'm sure of it.» Thomas offered a thin smile. «I've got two of my own. A girl, five, and a boy, seven. They're waiting for Santa, too. And if someone told them he wasn't...» He shook his head. «I don't know. It's like taking something vital away from them. Something they still need.»

«Childhood,» Caldwell said.

«Yes.» Thomas looked away, into the gray distance of the room. «Childhood. It's a short season. And then you spend the rest of your life remembering it, wondering if it ever really happened at all.»

He caught himself and straightened his posture. «Sorry, sir. I'm rambling.»

«It's alright, Sergeant. I understand.»

Thomas nodded and retreated to his station.

Caldwell sipped the coffee in small, thoughtful measures. He thought of Thomas's words. Of childhood. Of how swiftly the light fades from it. How one morning you wake up and realize you no longer believe. Not in Santa, not in fairies, not in the impossible. Now you know how the world is geared and bolted together. And that knowledge – heavy, cold, and gray – settles on your shoulders and never leaves.

His own son, Michael, no longer believed. He was twelve, and at twelve, the magic has usually leaked out. But Caldwell remembered the exact moment the belief vanished. It was two years ago. They were sitting on the porch in the autumn dusk, and Michael had suddenly asked:

«Dad, is Santa Claus really just you and Mom?»

And Caldwell hadn't been able to lie. He looked into his son's eyes and nodded.

«Yes, son. It's us.»

Michael didn't cry. He didn't shout. He just nodded, as if he'd known all along and simply wanted the final confirmation.

«I see,» he'd said.

They never spoke of it again.

But something had shifted after that talk. Something Caldwell couldn't quite put a name to. Michael became graver. More grown-up. He looked at the world with different eyes – not the wide, wondering eyes of a child, but the tired eyes of someone who had already learned to be disappointed.

And Caldwell sometimes wondered: *Did I hurry him? Could I have given him one more year? One more Christmas to hold onto the dream?*

But time does not flow backward. Words cannot be swallowed once spoken.

Childhood ends, and no man can bar the door against its departure.

Caldwell finished his coffee and looked at the telephone.

The telephone was silent.

The child was likely asleep by now. Tucked into bed, eyes shut tight, dreaming of sleighs and reindeer and a beard as white as a mountain peak. Dreaming of the miracle that would descend in the night.

And Caldwell thought: *What if he calls again?*

The thought was irrational. Why would he call again? It was a stray call. An error. One of a thousand tiny glitches that happen every day – a wrong number, a slipped digit, a coincidence.

But something inside Caldwell whispered: *This is not the end.*

This is only the beginning.

He stood and walked back to the great screen. The map of the world glowed in the gloom. Continents, oceans, borders. All of it was there, compressed into the size of a wall. You could reach out and touch Europe. Asia. The North Pole.

The North Pole.

Caldwell gave a short, dry laugh. He had told the child that Santa was over the North Pole. It was the first thing that had come to his mind. Where else would Santa be but the North Pole?

But now he looked at that point on the map and thought: *What if I plotted a route?*

What if I imagined that Santa were truly in flight? Where does he start? Where does he go? At what speed does he travel?

«Nonsense,» he told himself. «You have real work to do. Real objects to track. Real threats.»

But the idea would not let go.

It hummed in his mind like a song you can't stop whistling.

A route.

The North Route.

«Sir?» Corporal Miller called out.

Caldwell turned. «Yes?»

«Is everything alright, sir? You've been standing there a long time.»

«Everything's fine, Corporal. I was just... thinking.»

«About what, if it's no secret?»

Caldwell paused. Then he said, «About trajectories.»

Miller nodded, though he clearly didn't follow the meaning.

Caldwell went back to his desk. He sat. He took a pen and a sheet of paper. He began to draw. At first, they were just lines – meaningless, chaotic. But then the lines began to knit themselves into a path. North Pole. Greenland. Iceland. Europe. Asia. The Pacific. America.

A great circle around the Earth.

He looked at his drawing and thought: *If Santa truly existed, if he truly flew, if he had to circle the world in a single night – what would his flight plan look like?*

And suddenly he realized: it wasn't that difficult.

It was just mathematics. Time. Distance. Velocity.

If you start at the North Pole at midnight and move west, chasing the time zones, using the Earth's own rotation...

He began to calculate. The numbers clicked into place in his mind, easy and fluid. He had worked with trajectories his entire life. He calculated speeds, angles, coordinates. This was his language. This was how he understood the universe.

And Santa Claus, if he existed, would simply be another object in the sky. Another dot on the screen. Another trajectory to be tracked.

Caldwell smiled at his own thoughts.

I'm losing my mind, he thought. *I'm sitting here calculating a flight plan for Santa Claus.*

But he couldn't stop.

He wrote, he drew, he calculated. The paper became a map of numbers and lines. Time, distance, speed. It all fit. It all made sense.

«Colonel,» Sergeant Thomas said.

Caldwell looked up. For a second, he didn't realize where he was. He had been so deep in the calculations that the room had faded away.

«Yes, Sergeant?»

«The telephone, sir.»

Caldwell looked at the telephone.

It was ringing.

Again.

Ring-ring.

Caldwell checked the clock. 11:15 p.m. Less than an hour had passed since the first call.

He reached out and lifted the receiver.

«Continental Air Defense Command, Colonel Caldwell speaking.»

A pause. A breath. Then – a voice. A different voice. Another child.

«Hello,» the voice said. «Is it true that you can see Santa on your radars?»

Caldwell closed his eyes.

Of course, he thought. *Of course there won't be just one.*

The newspaper had hit the doorsteps this morning. How many children had seen that ad? How many parents had given their children this wrong number?

How many would call tonight?

He opened his eyes and looked at the paper before him. At the numbers. The lines. The route he had just drawn.

And he suddenly understood: this wasn't an accident.

This was an opportunity.

An opportunity to do something... different. Something he had never done before. Something that had nothing to do with war, or fear, or danger.

Something simple.

Something kind.

«Yes,» he said into the telephone. «Yes, we are tracking Santa on our radars.»

«Really?» The hope in the child's voice was so sharp it made Caldwell's chest ache.

«Really.» He looked at his drawing. «Right now, he is over Greenland. Heading east. His speed is...» He hesitated, then continued, "...very great. The reindeer are flying fast tonight.»

«Wow!» the child breathed. «When will he be here?»

«Where do you live?»

«Colorado Springs.»

«Then...» Caldwell did a quick mental calculation, "...in about five hours. But remember – he only comes to those who are sleeping.»

«I'm going to bed right now! Thank you!»

«Goodnight.»

Click.

Caldwell set the telephone down.

He sat perfectly still and looked at the telephone. Then at the screens. Then at the men in the Headquarters.

Every eye was on him.

«Colonel,» Sergeant Thomas said slowly, «what is going on?»

Caldwell picked up the sheet of paper with his calculations. He looked at it. Then he looked at Thomas.

«Sergeant,» he said, and his voice was calm, the voice he used when giving orders, «I need you to do something for me.»

«Sir?»

«Take the map. Mark a point over the North Pole. Time – midnight GMT. The object is moving west at a speed of...» He checked his notes. «...approximately three thousand miles per hour. Plot a course through the major time zones. Europe, Asia, Pacific, America.»

Thomas blinked. «Sir?»

«Do it, Sergeant.»

«But... sir, what object? We don't have – »

«There is an object,» Caldwell said firmly. «A non-standard object. It requires tracking.»

He looked Thomas in the eye.

Thomas looked back. A long moment passed. Then, slowly, he nodded.

«Understood, sir. A non-standard object.»

He took his tablet and began to work.

Corporal Miller turned to Caldwell. «Colonel, what kind of object is it?»

Caldwell looked at him. Then at the others. They were all waiting.

He could have told the truth. He could have explained it was just a game. That he had decided to humor the children who would be calling tonight.

But instead, he said:

«Classified object, Corporal. Details are not for discussion. Carry on with your work.»

Miller nodded and turned back to his station.

Caldwell leaned back in his chair.

He had done it.

He didn't know why. He didn't know where it would lead. He didn't know if he was being a fool.

But he had done it.

And now, on the map of the Headquarters, a new line appeared. A new route. A route that didn't exist.

Santa's route.

The North Route.

The telephone rang again.

Caldwell picked it up.

And the night went on.

Chapter 3. The Men Who Wait

The soldiers talked of trifles.

They talked of the weather – how the cold bit deep today, how the snow had fallen for three days running, how the roads were choked and the cars crawled like frozen beetles. They talked of food – how the dinner turkey had been dry, as it always is in a mess hall, but at least they had tried; they had reached for some semblance of a holiday. They talked of home – a letter received, a parcel expected, the slow tally of days until leave.

Trifles.

Small, ordinary things people speak of when they wish to avoid the weight of the truth.

Caldwell listened with half an ear, knowing they avoided the heart of the matter because the heart was too heavy. Too solemn. You do not speak of it in passing. You keep your peace.

The heart of the matter was that they were here. On this night. On Christmas. Instead of being home.

Instead of sitting at a table with family. Laughing. Holding one another. Watching children tear into the bright skins of presents.

They were here. In a room without windows. Staring at screens and waiting.

Waiting for something they hoped, with all their souls, would never happen.

Caldwell knew the taste of that feeling. He had lived with it for years. It was the strange, leaden weight of the man on guard. You wait for danger. You know it might arrive at any heartbeat. You are ready to meet it. But in the cellar of your soul, you hope – not tonight. Not now. Let it be that tonight, on this particular night, the world remains still.

But hope and waiting are not the same.

Waiting is heavier.

Especially when the world is at prayer.

The telephone rang again.

Caldwell wasn't surprised. He knew now it would go on. The calls would come one after another, because out there, in a thousand houses, children had seen an advertisement, begged their parents to dial, and now they were calling here – into the iron heart of the Headquarters – believing they spoke to the men who kept watch over Santa.

He lifted the receiver.

«Continental Air Defense Command, Colonel Caldwell speaking.»

The voice was small. Timid.

«Hello... is this... is this the place where they talk about Santa?»

A girl. Very small, by the sound of her. Five years old, perhaps less.

«Yes,» Caldwell said softly. «This is the place.»

«Do you really see him? On your radars?»

«We do.»

«Where is he now?»

Caldwell looked at the map Sergeant Thomas had spread out. A red line was drawn there now – a crimson thread winding from the North Pole, through Greenland, Iceland, and further east. A route. An imagined journey that existed only on that paper and in Caldwell's mind.

But in that moment, looking at the girl through the copper distance of the telephone wire, he felt the route become real. It was real because someone believed in it.

«Right now,» he said, tracing the line with his finger, «he is over Norway. Flying east. The reindeer were a little tired, but Santa let them rest, and now they are swift again.»

«Oh,» the girl breathed. «Will he come to me?»

«Without fail. What is your name?»

«Susie.»

«Susie, Santa comes to every child. But you must be asleep when he arrives. Is it a deal?»

«It's a deal,» the voice said, solemn and grand, as if she were taking a holy oath. «I'm going to sleep right this minute.»

«Good girl. Goodnight, Susie.»

«Goodnight!»

Click.

Caldwell set the telephone down and checked the clock. 11:32 p.m. Only an hour had passed since the shift began, yet it felt like a lifetime had unspooled.

He rose and walked to the map. Sergeant Thomas stood beside it, a red marker in his hand.

«Another one, sir?» he asked quietly.

«Yes,» Caldwell nodded. «And there will be more. Many more.»

Thomas looked at the map. At the red line he had drawn on the Colonel's orders. At the dot representing the current position of the «object.»

«Sir,» he said slowly, «what are we doing?»

Caldwell didn't answer at once. He watched the map and wondered how to dress the truth in words. What were they doing? Lying to children? Playing a game? Breaking the rigid clockwork of the regulations?

Or were they doing something else?

«We are answering questions, Sergeant,» he said at last. «The children call and ask. We answer. Nothing complicated.»

«But it's...» Thomas hesitated, searching for the right gear. «It's not in the manual, sir.»

«It is,» Caldwell said firmly. «Our duty is to protect people. All people. Including the children. And if they call here, expecting to hear something good – something to make their night a little brighter – we have an obligation to answer. It is just as vital as watching the screens.»

Thomas looked at him for a long time. Then he gave a slow nod.

«Understood, sir.»

He turned back to the map and resumed his work.

Caldwell returned to his desk. He sat. He reached for his coffee, but it had gone cold. He set it aside and surveyed the room.

The Headquarters functioned as it always did. Corporal Miller watched the radar. Technician Johnson logged data. Lieutenant Harris checked communication codes. Everything was normal. Everything was as it should be.

But something had shifted.

Caldwell couldn't put a finger on it. Perhaps it was the atmosphere. Perhaps the set of their jaws. Perhaps the way the men carried themselves – a little less brittle, a little more at ease.

As if the burden they carried had grown a fraction lighter.

As if the dread that always pressed against them had stepped back a pace.

And Caldwell realized: it wasn't just about the children calling in. It was about them. The soldiers sitting here, on this Christmas night, leagues away from home.

They, too, were waiting for a miracle.

Perhaps they didn't know it. Perhaps they would never admit it aloud. But they waited. Waited for something different to happen on this singular night. Something not frightening, not anxious, not born of danger.

Something simple and kind.

And now, it had arrived.

The children called, asked about Santa, and the Colonel answered. The soldiers listened to these fragments of conversation and they smiled. Not loudly, not openly, but they smiled. Because in those

voices was a reminder: the world was not made only of threats and shadows. There were still children who believed in wonder. And as long as they believed, there was a reason to stand guard.

The telephone rang again.

Caldwell looked at it and chuckled. It seemed he would be answering calls more than anything else tonight.

He picked it up.

«Continental Air Defense Command, Colonel Caldwell speaking.»

«Hello!» the voice was bright, vibrating with energy. A boy, older, maybe nine or ten. «Is it true you have a special radar for tracking Santa?»

Caldwell smiled.

«Not exactly special,» he said. «We use our regular radars. But they are powerful enough to see anything that moves in the sky. Including Santa's sleigh.»

«Wow! How fast is he going?»

The question caught him off guard. Most children just asked where and when. This one wanted the mechanics.

«The speed varies,» Caldwell said, improvising. «Over the oceans, he might hit three thousand miles per hour. But over the cities, he slows down. It's safer that way.»

«But how do the radars see him? The sleigh is magic, right?»

A smart one, Caldwell thought. Asking the right questions. Not just believing, but trying to understand how the gears turned.

«You see,» he said slowly, «radars pick up any object in the sky. And even if the sleigh is magic, it still creates... a certain disturbance in the atmosphere. Especially Rudolph's nose. It glows, and that creates a heat signature. That's what we're tracking.»

It was absurd. It was ridiculous. But the boy seemed to catch the bait.

«I get it!» he said with enthusiasm. «So Rudolph works like a beacon!»

«Exactly so,» Caldwell agreed.

«Thanks! That's so cool! I'm going to tell everyone at school!»

«Glad to help. Goodnight.»

«Goodnight!»

Caldwell hung up and realized he was smiling. A wide, genuine smile. He couldn't remember the last time he had smiled like that, for no reason at all, simply because his soul felt light.

He looked at Sergeant Thomas.

«Sergeant, put it in the report: Rudolph functions as a beacon. The heat signature of the nose allows for tracking of the object.»

Thomas broke into a laugh. Soft, but from the heart.

«Yes, sir,» he said, still chuckling. «Heat signature of the nose. I'll make sure it's in the log.»

Corporal Miller turned around. «Colonel, what if the brass asks what we're doing here?»

«You tell them the truth, Corporal,» Caldwell replied. «We are tracking an unconventional object. Everything according to protocol.»

«And if they ask what kind of object?»

«Tell them the information is classified.»

Miller grinned. «Understood, sir. Classified.»

Lieutenant Harris rose from his station and walked to the map.

«Sir,» he said, «may I help? With the route, I mean. I think if we calculate more precisely, factoring in time zones and population density...»

«Sit down, Lieutenant,» Caldwell nodded. «Work with Sergeant Thomas. You'll figure it out together.»

Harris nodded and sat by Thomas. They began to murmur, hunched over the map. Now and then, one would point to a spot, the other would nod or shake his head.

Caldwell watched them and thought how strange it all was. An hour ago, this was an ordinary shift. Dull, stretching like taffy, like a thousand others. The soldiers sat at their posts, performed their routine tasks, thought of home, and waited for the night to die.

And now they were working together on Santa Claus's flight plan. Earnestly. With focus. As if it were a real objective, a real mission.

And perhaps it was.

Perhaps this was the true mission. Not to guard the sky from rockets. Not to hunt for enemies. But to protect something else. Something more fragile. More vital.

To protect belief. To protect hope. To protect childhood.

To protect the miracle.

The telephone rang again.

And again.

And again.

The calls came in a steady tide. Different children, different voices, different questions. But the heart of it was always the same – where is he? When will he arrive? Do you see him?

And Caldwell answered. Every one of them. Patiently. In detail. He looked at the map, at the red line of the route, and told them where Santa was at that very moment. Over Russia. Over China. Over Japan. Over the Pacific.

The line moved west, chasing the night.

And the children listened, holding their breath, before whispering their thanks and running to bed.

At some point, Caldwell realized he had lost count. Ten? Twenty? More? It didn't matter. What mattered was that every time he set the receiver down, he felt a warmth in his chest. Something he hadn't felt in a long, long time.

Satisfaction.

Not the kind born of a job well done or a correct decision. Something else. The kind born of doing something kind. Something simple, yet necessary.

Of helping someone believe.

The wall clock showed 12:45 a.m.

The shift moved on. Screens flickered. Radars scanned the heavens. All was quiet. No alarms. No threats. Just a silent Christmas night, the way it was meant to be.

Sergeant Thomas and Lieutenant Harris finished their work on the map. The route was now detailed – marked with times, major cities, and speed calculations. They hung the map on the wall, right beside the primary monitors.

Caldwell stood and went to look.

It was beautiful. Strange, absurd, but beautiful. The red line encircled the globe like a ribbon on a gift. Along it were dots – London, Moscow, Tokyo, Los Angeles, New York. The cities Santa was meant to visit. The children who waited for him.

«Good work, Sergeant,» Caldwell said. «Lieutenant.»

«Thank you, sir,» Thomas looked at the map with pride. «I haven't done anything this... creative in a long time.»

«Creativity is important, Sergeant,» Caldwell said. «Even here. Especially here.»

He returned to his desk. Sat. Looked at the telephone.

The telephone was silent.

Perhaps for a moment. Perhaps the children were finally tired of calling. Perhaps the parents had decided enough was enough, time for bed.

Or perhaps it was just a pause.

Silence.

Caldwell leaned back and closed his eyes. He felt tired, but not that heavy, crushing exhaustion he usually felt after a shift. This was different. Light, almost pleasant. The tiredness after a good day's work.

He thought of the children he had spoken to today. Of Susie, who had run to bed. Of the boy who asked about Rudolph's heat signature. Of the very first child who called and set the whole thing in motion.

He thought of how they would wake up tomorrow, race to the tree, find their presents, and be happy. And they would believe that Santa had come. That miracles exist.

And it would be the truth.

Not because Santa was physically real. But because someone had cared enough to make them believe. Someone had spent time, effort, and attention to sustain their faith.

And that was the miracle.

A miracle isn't magic. It isn't a trick. It isn't something that breaks the laws of nature.

A miracle is when people are kind to one another. When they care. When they try to make the world a little better, a little brighter.

Even if it is just a conversation on the telephone.

Even if it is a white lie for a good cause.

Even if it is Santa's route, drawn on a map in a military headquarters.

Caldwell opened his eyes.

Around him, the men worked. Quietly, focused. Each at his post. Each doing his part.

But something had changed in their faces. They looked... lighter. Happier. As if they had found something they were looking for, without even knowing they were searching.

Meaning.

That is what they had found.

Meaning in this night. In this shift. In this work.

Not just watching the sky, waiting for danger.

But protecting something. Something real, living, and important.

Protecting those who believe.

The telephone rang again.

Caldwell smiled and picked up the receiver.

«Continental Air Defense Command, Colonel Caldwell speaking.»

And the night went on.

Silent. Warm.

Full of waiting. Full of hope.

Chapter 4. The Telephone

There were things a man grew used to.

The thrum of the dynamos. The flicker of the screens. The scent of coffee that brewed all night until, by dawn, it turned as bitter as medicine. The ticking of the clock on the wall – monotonous, infinite, like the heartbeat of some vast, slumbering mechanism.

Caldwell had grown used to it all. Over the years of service, he had learned to tune out the noise, to ignore the flickering pulse of the lights, to swallow the chill of the dregs in his cup without a grimace. He had learned to exist in this space as a fish exists in the deep – naturally, without thought, moving on instinct.

But the telephone was different. He could not grow used to the telephone.

One could never truly adapt to it, for it was a creature of whim. You could sit through a whole shift and it would remain as mute as a stone. And then, the moment you touched your chair, it would ring, demanding your soul, pulling you out of the silence and into some startling new reality.

The telephone was the frontier between one world and another.

Between the silence and the voice.

Between the waiting and the answer.

Caldwell looked at it now – a black shape upon the wooden desk – and thought of the strange clockwork of life. This simple instrument, found in a million parlors across the land, was transformed here in the Headquarters. It became a bridge. A bridge spanning the gulf between the men in the windowless room and those who lived beneath the open, star-washed sky.

Tonight, that bridge led to the children.

The ring came again – for the umpteenth time that hour; Caldwell had long since lost the tally. He lifted the receiver, already knowing the music he would hear. The small voice. The question. The fragile hope in the tone.

«Continental Air Defense Command, Colonel Caldwell speaking.»

«Hello,» the voice was a mere sliver of sound, a whisper. A girl. Tiny. «Mommy said I could call to ask about Santa. But I'm afraid to bother you.»

Something tightened in Caldwell's chest.

«You aren't bothering us,» he said, his voice finding a softness it rarely used. «Not at all. That is why we sit here – to answer questions just like yours.»

«Really?»

«Really. Ask away.»

A pause. A breath. Then:

«Will Santa... will he come to us? We live so far away. In a tiny town. Maybe he doesn't know where we are.»

Caldwell closed his eyes for a heartbeat. In that question lay the oldest fear of man: the fear of being forgotten. That you are not important enough. That the miracle is a guest for other houses, but not your own.

«Listen to me closely,» he said. «Santa knows where every child lives. Every single one. It doesn't matter if the town is big or small. He comes to everyone. Without fail. Do you understand?»

«I understand,» the voice grew a fraction sturdier.

«What is your name?»

«Annie.»

«Annie, right now Santa is over Asia. He is racing east, toward America. In a few hours, he will be over your town. Wherever you are – he will find you. Is it a deal?»

«It's a deal. Thank you.»

«Goodnight, Annie.»

«Goodnight.»

Click.

Caldwell set the receiver down and sat motionless, staring into the middle distance. He thought of Annie, living in a speck of a town, fearing she might be overlooked. He thought of how many children inhabited the world just like that – those living at the ragged edges of the map, in places rarely mentioned. Those who feared being invisible.

And he realized: what he was doing now was vital.

It was a way of saying to them: *You are seen. You are remembered. You matter.*

Even if you live far away.

Even if you are small.

Even if the world seems too vast to notice a single flickering candle.

The telephone rang again before he could finish the thought.

Caldwell reached for it.

«Continental Air Defense Command, Colonel Caldwell speaking.»

«Good evening,» the voice was adult. A woman. A mother, likely. «I'm sorry to trouble you. My son is desperate to speak with you. He's four, and he's so restless. May he?»

«Of course,» Caldwell said. «Put him on.»

A rustle. A whisper. Then – a voice brimming with wonder:

«Hello?»

«Hello there,» Caldwell said. «What's your name?»

«Tommy.»

«Tommy, listen. I have good news for you. Santa has already departed the North Pole. Right now, he's flying over Japan. He'll be in America soon.»

«Does... does he know I'm waiting?»

«He certainly does. He knows every child who is keeping watch.»

«What if I don't fall asleep? Won't he come?»

Caldwell smiled. «Then you must try your very best. Close your eyes. Think of something wonderful. Sleep will find you. And when you wake – you'll see that Santa was there.»

«Okay. I'll try. Thank you!»

«Goodnight, Tommy.»

The receiver went back to the mother.

«Thank you,» she said, and her voice held a gratitude that was raw and deep. «You have no idea how much this means to him. To us. Thank you for taking the time.»

«It's my job, ma'am,» Caldwell said. «Have a pleasant evening.»

«And you.»

Click.

Caldwell hung up and felt a glow move through him. That woman's gratitude was real. It wasn't formal or merely polite. It was genuine. She was thanking him for something profoundly simple – for an answer. For finding the right words to anchor a child's dream.

And Caldwell suddenly thought: *Perhaps this is the true purpose of our vigil. Not just to watch the sky, but to answer those who look up into that sky with hope.*

He checked the clock. 1:00 a.m. Half the shift was gone. But time was behaving strangely – now dragging, now sprinting, as if the gears of the night had slipped their rhythm.

Sergeant Thomas approached with a fresh thermos of coffee.

«Colonel, you've been on the line for an hour without a break,» he said. «Shall I take over? Or Lieutenant Harris?»

Caldwell shook his head.

«Thank you, Sergeant, but I'll see it through. This...» He searched for the words. "...this must be done just right. They need to hear the certainty in the voice. So they don't doubt.»

«You're doing a fine job, sir,» Thomas said. «I can hear you speaking to them. You have the touch.»

Caldwell nodded.

Thomas poured the coffee and returned to his post.

Caldwell took a sip. It was hot, scalding, but good. It warmed him from within, sharpening the edges of his mind.

The telephone was silent.

A temporary lull. Perhaps the children were finally drifting off. Perhaps parents had decided enough was enough. Or perhaps it was simply a pause – natural and inevitable, like the silence between two breaths.

Caldwell leaned back and looked at the map on the wall. The red line of the route was now cluttered with annotations. Sergeant Thomas and Lieutenant Harris had added city names, arrival times, even little marginalia: «Five-minute stop here,» «Clouds, visibility limited.»

It looked professional.

Almost like a genuine operational plan.

And in a sense, it was. An operation. A special one. One they didn't teach at the Academy. One not found in the field manuals.

The Operation to Preserve What Matters.

Corporal Miller turned from his radar.

«Colonel,» he said, «what if the brass walks in? What if they see the map and ask what it is?»

«You tell them the truth, Corporal,» Caldwell replied. «It is the trajectory of an unconventional object being tracked at the discretion of the Duty Officer.»

«And if they ask why?»

«Tell them: for the maintenance of public relations. A Christmas initiative.»

Miller smirked. «A Christmas initiative. I like that, sir.»

A soft laugh echoed from a corner of the room. Warm. Kind.

Caldwell knew his men didn't think he was being eccentric. They understood. They felt the same pulse. That tonight was a singular night. That tonight, the standing orders could be bent. That tonight, kindness was the only regulation that mattered.

Because sometimes, the kind thing is the right thing.

The telephone rang.

Caldwell picked it up, already smiling.

«Continental Air Defense Command, Colonel Caldwell speaking.»

«Hello,» the voice was boyish, serious. A teenager, perhaps. Thirteen or fourteen. «I'm calling for my little brother. He's six. He's really worried. Mom told me to call and find out... about Santa.»

Caldwell heard something familiar in that voice. The desire to protect a younger one. The need to ensure the world remained magical for him a little longer.

«I understand,» Caldwell said. «What is your brother's name?»

«Danny.»

«Tell Danny this: Santa is over the Pacific right now. Flying toward the States. In three hours, he'll be in your state. Tell him to go to sleep and not to worry. Everything is going to be alright.»

«Thanks,» the teenager said. Then, after a pause: «It's... it's good that you're doing this. Answering. It matters.»

«Thank you,» Caldwell said. «And you're a good brother. Take care of him.»

«I will. Goodnight.»

«Goodnight.»

Caldwell hung up and stared at the black plastic for a long time.

That call was different. The boy hadn't called for himself. He had called for Danny. He wanted his brother to find peace. To sleep without shadows.

And there was something profoundly right in that.

The elders watching over the young. Passing on the light they had once received.

Caldwell stood and walked to the map. He stood before the red line that encircled the globe.

A route.

A path someone treads every Christmas.

It didn't matter who, exactly.

What mattered was that the path existed. That someone was walking it. That someone was carrying kindness from house to house, from child to child.

And perhaps everyone who did something kind this night – every mother, every father, every older brother, every soldier in a windowless room answering a telephone – they were all part of that path.

They were all Santa.

Caldwell returned to his desk.

The telephone rang again.

And again.

And again.

The calls were a flood. Children from every corner of the nation. From the sprawling cities and the hollowed-out towns. They all wanted the same thing: Where is he? When will he arrive?

And Caldwell answered. Every one.

His voice grew husky with the effort, but he pressed on. Because every call was a soul. Every child deserved an answer.

Somewhere around 2:00 a.m., the words began to flow of their own accord. He looked at the map, saw the red thread of the route, and spoke. Naturally. Easily. As if he had been doing this for an eternity.

«Santa is over California.»

«Santa is approaching Texas.»

«Santa saw your house; he'll be there for sure.»

The words became a stream. Time flowed. The clock ticked.

Sergeant Thomas stood by the map, updating the markers. Lieutenant Harris helped him, checking the watches. Corporal Miller would occasionally turn and smile, listening to the fragments of the conversations.

They were all part of something larger now.

A collective effort.

The telephone rang again.

Caldwell lifted it.

«Continental Air Defense Command, Colonel Caldwell speaking.»

«Hello,» the voice was sleepy. A very small girl. «Is Santa close now?»

«Very close,» Caldwell said softly. «He'll be at your window before you know it. Go to sleep, little one. When you wake – you'll see.»

«Okay,» a yawn. «Goodnight.»

«Goodnight.»

Click.

Caldwell smiled.

The night went on.

Warm.

Alive.

Filled with voices.

Filled with hope.

And somewhere in the dark, beyond the steel walls of the Headquarters, over the snow-dusted cities and the empty fields, flew the one millions of children waited for.

Traveling his route.

The North Route.

And Caldwell, sitting in his room without windows, helped him fly.

With words.

With faith.

With care.

Chapter 5. The Voice of a Child

Children do not speak as adults do.

Adults speak in words. Many words. They explain, they clarify, they garnish the truth with details. They build sentences as men build houses – brick by brick, layer upon layer, until they have constructed something sturdy and plain.

Children speak differently.

They speak through what lies between the words. Through the silences. The inflections. The very rhythm of their breath. You can understand everything without hearing a single word – simply by listening to how they sound.

Caldwell understood this somewhere around the third call.

No, even earlier. From the very first. When that first child had asked about Santa, and there had been so much hope in the voice that one could almost touch it, like something material – warm and pulsing and alive.

Now, answering yet another call, Caldwell did not listen to the words. He listened to the voice. And the voice told him everything he needed to know.

«Hello?» It was a girl. Quite small. Three years old, perhaps four. A voice like the silver chime of a bell.

«Hello there,» Caldwell said gently. «What is your name?»

«Lily.»

«Lily. That's a beautiful name. Did you want to ask me something?»

A pause. A soft intake of air. Then:

«Is Santa coming?»

Three words. Only three. But in them lay an entire universe. The question wasn't about where Santa was. It wasn't about when he would arrive. It was about – would he come at all? Would there be a miracle? Or was the world a cold place where miracles do not happen?

«He is coming, without fail,» Caldwell said, and there wasn't a shadow of a doubt in his tone. «He is already on his way. Flying toward you. He'll be there soon.»

«Really?»

«Really, Lily. I promise.»

An exhale. Relief. Joy.

«Thank you.»

Click.

Caldwell hung up and closed his eyes for a second.

I promise.

He had said the word without thinking. It had escaped on its own. And now he realized: it was vital. Not just a «yes» or an «of course.» But specifically, «I promise.»

Because a promise is not information. It is a covenant. It is something to lean on. Something you can believe in when the night grows dark.

And Lily had believed.

The telephone rang again.

«Continental Air Defense Command, Colonel Caldwell speaking.»

«Hello,» a boy. Older. Seven, perhaps. «I'm Ben. I need to know the exact arrival time for Santa in New York.»

Caldwell smiled. The exact time. As if they were discussing a train or a transcontinental flight.

«Ben, let me check,» he glanced at the map, at the red thread of the route. Sergeant Thomas stood nearby, pencil in hand, ready to update the data. «Santa is over the Pacific. To New York, it's

approximately... three hours and fifteen minutes. But that's an estimate. He might be a bit early if the tailwinds stay with him.»

«Understood. I'll write that down. Thanks.»

«Always a pleasure, Ben.»

Click.

Sergeant Thomas smirked. «Businesslike kid.»

«Yes,» Caldwell agreed. «He wants the facts. Probably planning to stay awake and intercept him.»

«Will he?»

Caldwell looked at the sergeant. «No. He won't make it. He'll fall asleep first. They all fall asleep. It's the way of things.»

Thomas nodded and returned to the map.

Caldwell sipped his lukewarm coffee and thought about those voices. How different they were. How each one carried its own unique resonance.

There were the timid voices – those who feared they were bothering him, afraid to ask a foolish question. Caldwell spoke to them with particular softness and patience, until the shyness ebbed away and the voice grew steady.

There were the jubilant voices – those ringing with delight, laughing, shouting the words. Caldwell laughed with them, for their joy was as infectious as sudden sunlight.

There were the serious voices – those who asked deliberate questions, demanded details, wanted to know the mechanics of the world. Caldwell answered them just as seriously, without oversimplifying, never speaking down to them.

There were the drowsy voices – those calling from the very edge of sleep, barely holding on, yet desperate to know. Caldwell spoke to them in a whisper, the way one speaks at the bedside of a slumbering child.

And there was one voice that Caldwell remembered above all.

The telephone rang around 2:00 a.m.

«Continental Air Defense Command, Colonel Caldwell speaking.»

Silence. Long and deep. Caldwell began to think the line had gone dead.

Then – a voice. Barely audible.

«Hello?»

«Yes, I'm listening,» Caldwell said. «Go ahead, don't be afraid.»

«Is it... is it okay to ask about Santa?»

«Of course. Ask anything you like.»

A pause. A ragged breath, as if the child had recently been crying.

«What if... what if you were bad? Will Santa still come?»

Caldwell froze.

The question was so quiet, so cautious, as if the child were terrified of the answer. And Caldwell knew instantly: this wasn't an abstract inquiry. This was personal. The boy believed he had been bad. He thought Santa would bypass his house. And he was terrified to hear it confirmed.

«What is your name?» Caldwell asked.

«Michael.»

Caldwell winced. Michael. The same name as his own son.

«Michael,» he said slowly, choosing his words with the precision of a watchmaker, «listen to me very carefully. No one is perfect. Everyone makes mistakes sometimes. Even grown-ups. Even me. But Santa knows that. He knows that children are learning. That sometimes they do the wrong thing, but that doesn't mean they are bad people. Do you understand?»

«I think so,» the voice was uncertain.

«Santa doesn't look at the mistakes. He looks at how hard you try. He looks to see if you are trying to be better. And if you are trying – he will come, Michael. He will absolutely come.»

A long silence followed.

«I am trying,» Michael said softly. «I really am.»

«Then everything is alright,» Caldwell said, and felt a sudden tightness in his throat. «Santa will come. Without fail. Go to bed now. You'll see in the morning.»

«Thank you,» the voice sounded lighter. «Thank you so much.»

Click.

Caldwell hung up and sat still for a long time.

Michael.

His own son was Michael. And his Michael, too, sometimes thought he wasn't good enough. Caldwell had seen it in his eyes when the boy brought home a poor grade from school. Or when he forgot a chore. He had seen how the boy blamed himself, how he tried to be better, how he strove.

And Caldwell had never said to him the words he had just given to a stranger over the telephone.

He had never said: *I see how hard you're trying.*

He had never said: *It's okay to make mistakes.*

He had never said: *You are good, even when you feel like you aren't.*

Why?

Why was it easier to say this to a voice in the dark than to his own flesh and blood?

Caldwell didn't have the answer. Or perhaps he did, but he didn't want to look it in the face.

Maybe because he wanted to be firm with his son. He wanted to raise him strong, responsible, ready for the world. He feared that if he were too soft, the boy would grow up brittle.

But now, at 2:00 a.m., in a room without windows, Caldwell suddenly understood: firmness is not the absence of care. You can be firm and still tell a child he is good. That he is valued. That his effort is seen.

You must say it.

Otherwise, a child will think, like that Michael on the telephone: *I am bad. Santa won't come.*

Caldwell pulled a notepad from his pocket. He wrote: «Talk to Michael. Tell him I'm proud of him.»

Then he tucked the notepad away.

The telephone rang.

«Continental Air Defense Command, Colonel Caldwell speaking.»

«Hello!» the voice was brisk, full of life. «It's Emma! I'm six! Is Santa over America yet?»

Caldwell smiled.

«Hello, Emma. Yes, he's over America now. Over the West Coast. Flying east.»

«Wow! Can I wave to him? If I go outside?»

«You could try,» Caldwell said. «But he's flying very high. Very high indeed. He might not see. You'd do better to leave him something tasty. Cookies, perhaps. And milk. Santa loves milk.»

«We have cookies! Mommy baked them! I'll put them on the table!»

«Excellent idea, Emma.»

«Thank you! Bye-bye!»

Click.

Caldwell set the receiver down and looked at Sergeant Thomas.

«Sergeant, Santa is over the West Coast.»

«Understood, sir,» Thomas updated the map. «Moving east. Estimated speed – three thousand miles per hour.»

«Correct.»

Lieutenant Harris approached with a fresh cup of coffee. «Colonel, I brought you some. Hot.»

«Thank you, Lieutenant.»

Caldwell took the cup. The coffee was indeed hot, scalding his lips. But it felt good. It anchored him to the present.

He checked the clock. 2:30 a.m.

The night had passed its meridian. The darkest hour. The time when it feels as though morning will never break. That the night will stretch on into eternity.

But Caldwell knew: the morning always comes.

Always.

You simply have to wait it out.

The telephone rang again.

«Continental Air Defense Command, Colonel Caldwell speaking.»

«Hello,» the voice was quiet. Not a child's. A teenager's. A girl of perhaps fourteen. «I'm sorry, I'm probably too old for this. But my little sister can't sleep. She's worried. Can I ask for her?»

«Of course,» Caldwell said. «Ask.»

«She wants to know... if Santa has already visited other children. If you've seen it on the radars.»

Caldwell thought for a moment.

«Yes,» he said. «We've seen him stop. In Europe. In Asia. Everywhere children live. He visits everyone. He doesn't miss a single soul.»

«Good. I'll tell her. Thank you.»

«You're very welcome. And you're a good sister.»

A pause. «Thank you,» the voice grew warmer. «Goodnight.»

«Goodnight.»

Caldwell hung up.

He thought of how good it was – when the elders looked after the young. When they called not for themselves, but for those who were smaller, who still believed, who were anxious.

This, too, was part of the miracle. Not the magic itself, but the way it was passed from hand to hand. How it was cherished. How it was protected.

Corporal Miller turned from his radar. «Colonel, I was just thinking. What if one of the kids asks what Santa looks like on the radar? What should I say?»

Caldwell considered. «Tell them: like a bright dot. Very bright. Because Rudolph's nose is glowing. It creates a powerful signal.»

Miller nodded. «Rudolph's nose. Makes sense.»

Technician Johnson laughed. «If someone had told me a year ago that I'd be tracking a glowing reindeer nose on a radar, I'd have said they were crazy.»

«And now?» Caldwell asked.

Johnson smiled. «Now it seems like the most normal thing in the world.»

True, Caldwell thought. An hour ago, it had seemed strange. Absurd. Wrong.

Now – it was normal.

Because they were doing it together. Because it was important. Because out there, beyond the steel of the Headquarters, children were falling asleep in peace, knowing Santa was flying toward them.

And that made it worth it.

The telephone continued to ring.

The voices followed one another in a parade. Boys, girls. Small, large. Timid, bold. Each with a question. Each with a hope.

And Caldwell answered.

Again and again.

Because every voice was vital.

Every child deserved an answer.

And somewhere out there, in the sky, along the red line on the map, flew the one they were all asking about.

Flying through the night.

Through oceans and continents.

Through time itself.

Flying, because he was expected.

And Caldwell, holding the telephone receiver, helped him fly.

Word by word.

Answer by answer.

With a voice that said: *Everything will be alright.*

Believe.

Chapter 6. The Pause

There are singular moments in a life.

Not the grand ones. Not the loud ones. Not the ones you recount to grandchildren or etch into memoirs.

Small moments.

Pauses between events.

Instants when time seems to lose its footing and stand still, allowing you to see yourself from the outside – who you are, where you are, and what you are doing.

Caldwell sat at his desk in the windowless room, the telephone receiver still warm in his hand, and suddenly understood: this was one of those moments.

The telephone was silent.

It was strange. For the last two hours, it had rung almost without reprieve – the moment Caldwell set the receiver down, a fresh ring would pierce the air. Children had called in a relentless tide, an endless succession of voices, questions, and yearnings.

And now – silence.

Caldwell returned the receiver to its cradle and leaned back. He looked at the clock. 2:53 a.m. Nearly three in the morning. The deepest, darkest hollow of the night.

The hour when all the world sleeps.

And the children were sleeping too.

At last.

He closed his eyes and allowed himself to uncoil. His shoulders ached – he hadn't noticed how he'd been tensing during the conversations, leaning forward, gripping the plastic too hard. His neck was stiff. His throat felt raw from the hours of talking.

But it was a good ache. The ache of work finished.

«Sir?» Sergeant Thomas called out softly.

Caldwell opened his eyes. «Yes, Sergeant?»

«Doesn't it seem... quiet to you?»

«It does,» Caldwell agreed. «The children are falling away. It's late. Even for the most stubborn of them.»

Thomas nodded. He stood there for a moment, then asked, «Did you think there would be so many calls?»

Caldwell shook his head. «No. I thought there might be five, maybe ten. But it turned out... how many was it?»

«I kept a tally,» Lieutenant Harris chimed in. «Forty-seven. Forty-seven calls in two and a half hours.»

«Forty-seven,» Caldwell repeated. «Forty-seven children.»

He imagined them all at once – Susie, Tommy, Annie, Ben, Lily, Michael, Emma, and all the others whose names had blurred into a tapestry of memory. Forty-seven voices. Forty-seven fragile hopes that he had held in his hands like delicate glass, passing them back carefully, unbroken, whole.

«You know what's strange, sir?» Corporal Miller said, his eyes never leaving the radar sweep. «I thought this would be... I don't know, funny. Or silly. But it felt... right. You know?»

«I know,» Caldwell said.

And he truly did. At first, it had seemed like a game. An improvisation. Something not to be taken with gravity.

And then, it had become grave. On its own. Without a command. At some point, he had realized: *This is not play. This is real. What I am doing now is vital. Perhaps more vital than much of the rest.*

Caldwell stood up. He walked to the map on the wall. The red line of the route was nearly a closed circle now. Santa, by their reckoning, was over the Eastern seaboard. The final leg. The last cities. The last houses.

He traced the line with his finger. From the North Pole through Europe, Asia, the Pacific, and America. The whole world in a single night. An impossible journey.

But the children believed it was possible.

And as long as they believed – it was.

«That's a fine map we made,» Sergeant Thomas said, coming up behind him. «Shame to take it down in the morning.»

«Who said we're taking it down?» Caldwell looked at him.

Thomas blinked. «But... sir, it's just...»

«It's an operational map, Sergeant. A successful operation. It must be preserved. For the record.»

«For the record,» Thomas repeated with a grin. «Understood, sir.»

Caldwell returned to his desk. He poured some coffee from the thermos. It was lukewarm now, but it didn't matter. He drank slowly, in small sips, and he thought.

He thought of many things.

Of childhood. Of his son. Of that very first child who had called hours ago and set the gears in motion.

Of how, sometimes, life grants you the chance to do something simple and kind. And you shouldn't overthink it – you should just do it.

He thought of how he sat here, in a military headquarters surrounded by machinery designed for war, using it all to safeguard a child's faith.

How strange it was. And how utterly right.

Technician Johnson yawned, covering his mouth with a hand. «Sorry, sir. Tired, I guess.»

«It's alright, Johnson,» Caldwell said. «It's been a long night. Go rest if you like. I'll call you if anything breaks.»

«No, sir, I'm fine. Just... an unusual night. I've worked a lot of shifts, but never one like this.»

«And there won't be another,» Lieutenant Harris said. «This is a once-in-a-lifetime thing.»

Caldwell looked at him. «Why do you think it's only once?»

Harris shrugged. «Well, it was an accident. A misprint in the paper. Tomorrow they'll fix it, and that's that. No one will call again.»

«Perhaps,» Caldwell said. «And perhaps not.»

«How's that, sir?»

Caldwell paused, gathering his words. «Today, we did something. Something people will hear about. Parents will tell their friends. Children will tell their classmates. Someone might even write to the papers. And maybe, next year... they'll call again. On purpose this time. Knowing we are here to answer.»

«And then what?» Thomas asked.

«Then we shall answer them again,» Caldwell said simply. «What else is there to do?»

Thomas gave a slow, deliberate nod. «Yes. I suppose you're right, sir.»

Silence settled over the room. Not a heavy silence, nor a tense one. A calm. The silence of men who have done their duty and can now catch their breath.

The thrum of the machines continued. The screens flickered. The clock ticked. Everything was as it had always been. Yet something had shifted. In the air. In the atmosphere. In the way the men looked at one another.

As if they had passed through something together. Nothing dangerous, nothing terrifying. But something significant. And they were a little closer for it.

Caldwell thought of his own life. The years of service. The thousands of shifts spent in rooms exactly like this, at desks exactly like this. How many times he had stared at the screens, waiting for the arrival of something terrible.

And how today, for the first time in an age, he had looked at the screens and seen not a threat, but a path. A route. A line that carried not death, but joy.

It was... liberating.

As if the weight he had carried for years had grown lighter. Not gone. But lighter.

«Sir,» Corporal Miller said, «can I ask a question?»

«Of course, Corporal.»

«Do you... do you believe in it? In Santa, I mean.»

Caldwell thought for a long time. Then he said, «I believe that when a person does something kind, it matters. It doesn't matter what you call it. Santa, a miracle, magic. What matters is that somewhere tonight, children are sleeping peacefully because we answered their calls. That is real. It happened. And in that sense – yes, I believe.»

Miller nodded, clearly weighing the words. «Understood, sir. Thank you.»

Caldwell looked at the telephone. It remained silent. A black, ordinary telephone that had become something more tonight. A bridge between worlds. Between adults and children. Between fear and hope.

He wondered: *What if that first child had called at a different time? On an ordinary day, not Christmas? On a different shift, to a different officer?*

What would have happened then?

Perhaps they would have been told: I'm sorry, you have the wrong number. And that would be the end of it.

Nothing would have happened. No route. No forty-seven calls. None of this night, which would now remain in his memory forever.

But the child had called today. To him, specifically. To Henry Caldwell. And he had answered. Not as he was supposed to, but as his heart dictated.

And that had changed everything.

A small decision. A few words. A pause in which he could choose – to tell the plain truth or to preserve the miracle.

And he had chosen the miracle.

Caldwell stood and paced the room. His legs were cramped from the long vigil. He rolled his shoulders, cracked his neck. The fatigue was there, but it wasn't heavy. It was the pleasant weariness that follows a good day.

Though the day hadn't been «good» in the usual sense. It had been an ordinary day. A workday on the eve of Christmas.

But the night had been good.

This night.

He walked to the door and cracked it open. He peered into the corridor. A hollow hallway with buzzing fluorescent lamps. Distant voices echoed from somewhere else – other soldiers, other shifts. Life was continuing as usual.

But here, in their small headquarters, there was a different life. A parallel one. One where they watched not only for threats, but for wonders.

Caldwell closed the door and returned to his desk.

He checked the clock. 3:10 a.m.

Nearly three hours left in the shift.

The telephone was silent. The children slept.

Santa, by their calculations, was finishing his route. The last cities. The last houses. The last children waiting.

Caldwell took a pen and a sheet of paper. He began to write. Not a report. Not a memo. He simply recorded his thoughts. So as not to forget. So that years later, when this became a distant memory, he could return and read it.

«December 24, 1955. Duty at CONAD Headquarters. An unusual night. Children called, asking for Santa Claus. A misprint in the paper – our number instead of a department store. I answered the first one. Then came the others. Many others. Forty-seven calls. Forty-seven children.

We drew a route. We plotted a path from the North Pole around the Earth. Calculated the time, the speed. We did it seriously. Like a real operation.

And the children believed.

They believed we were tracking Santa. That we saw him on the radars. That we knew exactly where he was.

And perhaps, we really did see him. Not on the screens. Somewhere else. In the place where hope lives.»

Caldwell re-read what he had written. He wondered if it sounded foolish. Sentimental. Un-soldierly.

But he decided to leave it exactly as it was.

Because tonight was not a soldier's night.

Tonight was something else.

The telephone rang.

Sudden. Sharp. After the long silence, the sound seemed loud, almost startling.

Caldwell snatched up the receiver.

«Continental Air Defense Command, Colonel Caldwell speaking.»

«Hello,» the voice was a child's, but strange. Frightened. «It's... I'm Jake. I woke up. I heard a noise on the roof. Is it Santa?»

Caldwell froze.

A noise on the roof.

A child had woken and heard something.

And thought it was Santa.

«Jake,» Caldwell said softly, «where are you right now?»

«In the kitchen. Everyone's sleeping. But I heard the noise and I woke up.»

«I see. Listen, Jake. According to our data, Santa is indeed in your area. Right now. So it's very possible that was him. But do you remember the rule?»

«Which one?»

«Santa doesn't like to be seen. If he realizes you're awake – he might fly away without leaving the presents. Do you understand?»

A pause. A breath.

«I understand.»

«Then do this. Go back to bed. Close your eyes. Pretend you are fast asleep. And lie very, very still. Santa will do his work and fly on. And in the morning, you'll see the presents. Is it a deal?»

«It's a deal,» the voice grew steady. «I'm going. Thank you!»

«Goodnight, Jake.»

Click.

Caldwell hung up and smiled.

A noise on the roof. Likely a branch falling. Or a squirrel scurrying. Or just an old house settling in the cold.

But for Jake, it was Santa.

And Caldwell wouldn't dream of telling him otherwise.

Because maybe, just maybe, it was Santa.

Not the one from the postcards.

But the other one.

The one that lives in the expectation. In the hope. In the sounds of the night that a heart can interpret however it wishes.

And if a child wants to believe it is Santa – let him believe.

Let him run to his bed, close his eyes, and lie very still, listening to the footsteps of a ghost walking across the roof on this singular night.

Caldwell looked at his men. They were all smiling.

«The last call?» Sergeant Thomas asked.

«I don't know,» Caldwell replied. «Maybe.»

But the telephone did not ring again.

The silence returned.

The children slept.

The night moved toward the dawn.

And in a room without windows, six soldiers sat at their posts and thought about how today, they had done something extraordinary.

Something they would remember. Something worth living through.

The pause had ended.

But what had happened within that pause remained.

Forever.

Chapter 7. The First Route

There were things that were born of chance.

Not by design. Not by command. Not because someone had decided: this must be done.

They were born of themselves. Out of necessity. Out of the moment. Out of a word spoken by someone that proved to be the right word, and then that word began to breathe and live a life of its own.

The Route was born exactly like that.

Caldwell sat at the desk and looked at the map they had drawn with Sergeant Thomas and Lieutenant Harris. The red line encircled the globe. From the North Pole through Europe, Asia, the Pacific, America, and back to the Pole.

A circle.

A closed path.

He traced the line with his fingertip and suddenly understood: this was more than a drawing. This was a travel log. A map of a journey that someone makes every Christmas.

It didn't matter who.

What mattered was that the journey existed.

«Sergeant,» he called out.

Thomas approached.

«Yes, sir?»

«This map. We need to preserve it.»

«I understand, sir. You mentioned that.»

«No,» Caldwell shook his head. «Not just keep it. We need to... formalize it. Make it official. Do you see?»

Thomas frowned.

«Not exactly, sir.»

Caldwell stood and walked to the map. He studied it intently.

«You see, we drew this for the children. To give them something to hear when they call. But it turned out to be...» he searched for the words, "...something more. It turned out to be a plan. A genuine operational plan. With a route, times, coordinates. Everything in its place.»

«And what of it, sir?»

«It means it can be used. Not just once. Every year. If the children call again – we will have a route ready. We won't need to improvise. We will know exactly what to say.»

Thomas gave a slow nod.

«I see. You think they'll call again? Next year?»

«I don't know,» Caldwell answered honestly. «But if they do – we'll be ready.»

He returned to the desk, pulled out a clean sheet of paper, and began to write.

«Route of Object „North-1“. December 24, 00:00 GMT. Start: North Pole. Coordinates...»

He wrote slowly, meticulously. He transferred the data from the hand-drawn map to the official document. Times, coordinates, speed, flight altitude. Everything required for a true tracking mission.

Lieutenant Harris stepped up, peering over his shoulder.

«Sir, are you drafting an official plan?»

«I am.»

«But... it's...»

«It's what, Lieutenant?»

Harris fell silent. Then he said:

«Nothing, sir. It's a fine idea.»

Caldwell continued to write. Numbers and words fell onto the paper in disciplined rows. He worked with concentration, undistracted. It was calming. It felt like the familiar work he had done for years – drafting plans, calculating trajectories. The things he did well.

Only the subject was different.

Not a missile. Not a bomber. Not a satellite.

Santa Claus.

Object «North-1.»

Caldwell smirked at the thought. If someone were to find this document years from now, they would wonder: What was this strange operation? What object were they tracking?

But perhaps that was for the best. Let it remain a mystery. Let future officers find this paper in the archives and marvel: Could this really have happened?

And someone would tell them: Yes, it happened. Once, on a Christmas night, the military watched for something other than the enemy. They watched for Santa.

Caldwell finished writing. He proofread the document. Everything was correct. Precise. It could have been used for an actual operation – that was the level of professionalism he had applied.

«Done,» he said. «Sergeant, file this in the archive. Folder...» he paused, «...«Special Operations’. Mark it «For Official Use Only’.»

«Right away, sir.» Thomas took the paper. He looked at it and smiled. «„Object North-1.“ I like the sound of that.»

He walked away.

Caldwell remained alone at the desk. He checked the clock. Three-thirty. The night was drifting toward dawn. Two and a half hours left in the shift.

He thought about what he had just done.

He had translated a child’s fairy tale into an official document. He had anchored a non-existent route to the page. He had made a fantasy a part of reality.

It was... strange.

And right.

Because sometimes, a fantasy becomes reality if enough people believe in it.

Corporal Miller turned from his radar.

«Colonel, may I ask something?»

«Go ahead.»

«Do you really think this will go on? That kids will call every year?»

Caldwell pondered this.

«I don’t know, Corporal. Maybe. Or maybe it was a one-time thing. A single night. No one knows the future.»

«But you made a plan. Does that mean you’re hoping?»

«Yes,» Caldwell replied simply. «I am hoping.»

Miller nodded and returned to his task.

Caldwell stood and walked to the large display. The world map glowed in the gloom. Green dots for friendly aircraft. White for civilian flights. All quiet. All under control.

He looked at the map and imagined: What if there were one more dot? A red one. Moving along the route we just drew.

What if they really could track Santa?

What if the technology allowed it?

Maybe someday. Years from now. When computers became better, swifter. When a program could be written to show children on a screen: Here is where Santa is now. Here is his path. Here he is, approaching your town.

That would be... magical.

Not true magic. Technical magic. Built by human hands. But no less important for that.

Caldwell returned to his desk. He took another sheet of paper and began to jot down notes.

«Idea: Create a tracking program. Route visualization. Public access. Perhaps through radio? Or television? Needs thought.»

He wrote, and ideas began to cascade. They could do a broadcast. Announce Santa's location once an hour. They could invite an announcer who could speak with a voice for the children. They could add music. The sound of sleigh bells.

It would turn into a true event.

Not a small thing like tonight – a few calls, a few conversations.

But something grand. For thousands of children. Millions, perhaps.

And it would all start here. In this room. In this night. From a single telephone call he had decided to answer differently.

Caldwell set the pen aside. He looked at his notes.

Perhaps it was all nonsense. Perhaps nothing would come of it. Perhaps in the morning, he'd go home, sleep, wake up and think: What was I thinking? What program? What broadcast?

But now, at three in the morning, after forty-seven calls from children, it felt possible.

More than that – it felt necessary.

Sergeant Thomas returned.

«The document is in the archive, sir.»

«Thank you, Sergeant.»

«Sir, may I say something as well?»

«Speak, Sergeant.»

Thomas sat on the edge of the desk.

«I've served twelve years. I've seen a lot. Good and bad. But today... today was a singular day. It's the first time I felt that what we do has a meaning beyond the military. Do you understand?»

Caldwell nodded.

«I do.»

«And I was thinking,» Thomas continued, «that if every soldier could do something like this even once... something kind, something that helps people not to fight, but to live... the world would be a better place.»

«The world can always be better, Sergeant,» Caldwell said quietly. «The question is whether we are willing to make it so. Even with small steps. Even in strange ways, like answering children's calls about Santa.»

«I'm ready, sir,» Thomas said firmly. «If they call again next year – I'll be here. And I'll answer. I promise.»

Caldwell looked at him. He saw the gravity in his eyes. The resolve. The faith.

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