**A Guide Dog's Night Before Christmas By: Jill Savino Nieglos**

Twas the night before Christmas,  the kennels were still,

with most dogs asleep, having eaten their fill.

The labs were sprawled out, quite snug in their beds,

While visions of milk bones danced in their heads.

The Goldens and Labs were curled up on the floor,

some twitched in their sleep and some even did snore.

The dog food was stacked in the feed room with care,

In hopes that a trainer soon would be there

Off by the window, a kennel cat lay,

surveying the lawn at the end of his day.

Something was different, that little cat knew -

something would happen, it had to be true.

That day as the workers had left to go home,

they'd wished "Merry Christmas" before starting to roam.

The dogs had all noticed that during their walks,

the trainers seemed happier and eager to talk.

In the mall where they worked amid people and stores,

there were decorations, music, distractions galore!

Most dogs pranced along without worry or fear,

some barked at the man with those fake-looking deer.

The cat was near sleeping when he first heard the sound,

a whoosh through the air and a jingle abound.

The sound of a collar when an animal shook,

but the sound just kept growing - he'd better go look.

From the ceiling there came a kind of a thunk,

As the kennel cat climbed up on a pile of junk.

But the dogs were still quiet, all sleeping so sound,

as this man dressed in red made his way to the ground.

He patted the cat as he climbed past his spot,

then made his way right to the old coffee pot.

A labrador sat up, not fully awake,

then a golden soon followed with a mighty loud shake.

That did it...the dogs filled the kennel with noise,

but in spite of the din, the old man kept his poise.

He filled the pot full and it started to brew,

then he pulled up a chair and took in the view.

Dogs all around him, so carefully bred,

he knew well their jobs, and the people they led.

Some had stopped barking and looked at him now,

while others continued their deafening howl.

Laying a finger in front of his lips,

the jolly old man soon silenced their yips.

He smiled, laughed, and took a short pause.

"You may not know me, but I'm Santa Claus,"

He filled up his mug with hot coffee and cream,

and said, "Meeting you all has been one of my dreams."

The cat jumped down to explore Santa's pack.

He said, "Sorry, kitty, I've emptied my sack."

Santa smiled, drank, looked in their eyes –

deep brown and gold, all wide with surprise.

Some of these dogs he'd seen just last year,

All in their homes - cute, full of good cheer.

He'd seen the effect of a pup on a tree,

but now they were here, just waiting to be.

"I didn't bring presents or bones to chew.

But I'll tell you what's better – and what you're to do.

You'll all worked hard and the trainers will share,

both praise and correction, gentle and fair.

You'll go lots of places and face scary things,

you'll ride buses, planes, and hear sirens ring.

Cars will drive at you, you'll know what to do,

Moving from danger, not moving into.

Then, when you think your trainer's the best,

the kindest, and funniest, just toss all the rest;

That trainer will leave you, and give you away,

handing your leash over despite your dismay.

The one who will feed you might see just a tad,

Or maybe it's just that their focus is bad.

So you little buggers will work as their eyes

To be a great team and discover the prize.

The prize isn't kibble, or even new toys,

It's leading your partner, you good girls and boys.

Santa sipped coffee, looked over the brood,

But what he said next seemed just a bit rude.

"Some may not make it and won't become guides.

But time here's not wasted, no casting aside.

Some will be drug dogs and some will find bombs,

some will be pets with new dads and moms."

When the last drop of coffee had gone from his cup

Santa turned, and smiled at each wide-eyed pup.

"The best gift of all is to give something back.

And that's why there's nothing for you in my pack."

Draining his mug, he went to each pen,

Petting and scratching each dog yet again.

"The following years, even more after that,

you'll all give great gifts wherever you're at.

You might lick a hand on a really bad day,

or notice a car and step out of its way.

You might catch a crook or discover some loot,

bring joy to a old man in a funny red suit.

Your master will love you and treat you with care,

knowing your training will always be there."

After the last had been petted and soothed,

He rinsed out the mug and made ready to move.

To the ladder he climbed for the door high above,

with a smile and a wave as he slipped on his glove.

All the dog's ears were pricked as he flew out of sight,

Saying, "Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night!"