



CHAPTER ONE

Krampus for Christmas

The inflatable Santa bobbed and flopped in the winter breeze, held tight to the rooftop by a tangle of twinkling Christmas lights. It looked trapped, flailing about in desperation. Its red nose blinked on and off with annoying irregularity and it would slowly rise, only to be caught up in the lights and twist and turn, getting more ensnared.

“Now, that is too much,” anyone might say, looking at the sad decoration. But the person who actually uttered those words at that very moment was none other than Santa Claus himself.

Yes! Santa Claus!

“Is that what they think I look like?” he chuckled.

The bearded man perched on the roof as a light snow fell over the suburban night. His reindeer grunted in relief to be resting, unfazed by the inflating and deflating rubber Santa.

“No. Looks nothing like you. Except maybe the nose,” said an elf, sitting on the bench of the sleigh. The tiny pixie barely looked up, concentrating on a shiny gold watch and a long list.

“Oskar, that’s nothing like my—oh,” said Santa. “Funny guy, huh?”

The elf was being sarcastic and Santa was too distracted to tell. It was Christmas Eve. He had a lot going on.

“Let’s see if I can beat my record,” Santa said. He pulled his large red bag full of toys out of the back of the sleigh, dusted off the snow, and threw it over his shoulder.

He then reached into his pocket and produced a handful of magic elfin dust. He threw a puff of it into the air. The twinkling particles floated down slowly at first but then increased in speed and enveloped Mr. Kringle in a luminous blast of energy. Santa disappeared in the flashing light that then swept upward in an arc and shot down the top of a chimney.

Oskar the Chief Toymaker continued marking off items in his list, unimpressed by the spectacle; he had seen it all before.

“Roost One to Big Red,” a radio crackled from the sleigh. “Come in, Big Red!”

Oskar grabbed a microphone. “Chief here—what’s up? Over.”

“Chief—what’s your status?” asked another merry little voice. “Over.”

“Right on schedule, Roost One,” Oskar said back into the microphone. “Everything is A-okay. Over.” He put the microphone down and picked up his list. What did you expect? I’m in charge here.”

This might sound boastful. Perhaps conceited. But Oskar the Chief Toymaker was great at his job. He planned Christmas with unrivaled precision. After all, hundreds of years of experience resided between those two pointy ears.

An instant later, the bright light swooped out of the chimney and Santa reappeared. But just for a second. Next thing, he was off disappearing

down the neighbors' chimney. And then out and down another. And then another. He covered the entire neighborhood. Just like that.

"Still on schedule," Oskar mumbled, marking off names.

The team of reindeer waited, silently observing a random cat as it darted from a fencepost to the street.

"How was that?" Kringle asked, reappearing in a flourish of magic dust.

Oskar stopped writing, looked at his tiny gold watch, and grumbled up at Kringle. "Not bad, but no record. We gotta go."

"Yeah . . . I thought so," said Santa. "I stopped for this cookie. Double chocolate chip with walnuts."

"Another one?" Oskar rolled his eyes. "I won't mention this to Ms. Kringle."

"Don't," said Santa. He took a bite and hopped into the sleigh. "Ready?"

"Born that way," said Oskar as Kringle raised the reins. The reindeer snapped to attention and prepared for takeoff.

"Wait!" Santa yelled.

"What?" Oskar grunted.

"Do you hear that?" Santa asked, putting his hand to his ear and scanning the surrounding rooftops.

"No," Oskar said, "and neither do you. Let's go."

"It's the sound of an unhappy child . . . a frightened little boy."

"Nothing unusual about that," Oskar said, looking at his watch.

Kringle stood up in the sleigh and took off his goggles. He was perfectly still except for his ears which raised in concentration. The world stopped for an instant.

"There!" Santa pointed at a house two blocks away. "Right there."

He expertly pulled at the reins and the reindeer lifted off the roof and floated upward on a trail of sparkling dust. In a moment they landed on the house.

“Kris—we are now off-schedule,” Oskar stated. “We don’t have time!”

But Santa was hearing none of it. He sniffed.

“Do you smell that?” he asked.

Oskar was beginning to lose his cool. “Kris, we don’t have—”

“It’s . . . Krampus. I’d know that foul stench anywhere.”

“*Krampus*? Here? Not likely,” Oskar replied.

“Yes. Here. Oskar, who lives in that house?”

Oskar stared at Santa wide-eyed for just a moment and then flipped through his list. His extraordinary nimble fingers raced through the names at blazing speed and then suddenly stopped.

“James Bolton, age eight,” Oskar reported.

“Naughty or nice?” Santa asked.

“Naughty. Very, definitely naughty.”

“Okay—but no kid deserves what Krampus has in store for him.”

“Kris—we’re late . . .”

“Won’t take a minute,” Santa said and raised his hand up in the air, sprinkling dust over his head. He disappeared in a flash of light.

“Kringle!” huffed Oskar looking at his watch. He took out a notebook and began rescheduling. “We’ll make it work. Somehow.”

That moment in the fireplace of Eight Thirty-Five Spring Drive, a splendid light show dazzled the living room. Santa emerged from the hearth. He brushed his head against a stocking which he had already filled with coal. Santa eyed it with regret—but that was his code: presents for the good kids, coal for the bad. It did not make Santa happy giving coal

to a child but James Bolton, age eight, definitely earned it this past year as he embarked on a career of bullying, lying, thieving, and terrorizing.

Santa looked around the dimly lit room. It was large. There was a comfy couch, a coffee table, a nice chair, a beautiful Christmas tree, and a demon. Yes, a demon who towered over a terrified, little boy.

Krampus, the horrible creature, pointed his twisted and gnarled finger directly at the young face of James Bolton. If you have not heard of this awful brute then prepare yourself: he is most foul. Covered by matted fur that has never seen a bath, he stands about seven feet tall not counting the two twisted horns protruding from his head.

“Kringle,” it snarled. “This wicked little child is mine. It is my right by the Supreme Council of Sorcery, Witchcraft, and Tricks!”

“I never recognized those jokers’ authority,” Santa said, already reaching into his pouch of magic dust.

“Santa!” young James shrieked. “You’re real.”

“Of course I am,” Santa said.

“What is he going to do to me?”

“Terrible things,” Krampus purred. He delighted in frightening little children.

“Santa,” James choked, “I’m so sorry.”

“Too late for that,” Krampus hissed.

“No,” said Santa, “it’s never too late.”

He tossed a dash of magic dust toward the creature, catching him in the eye. Krampus shuddered and coughed. Santa grabbed the boy and pulled him to his side.

“He is a very bad little boy,” snarled Krampus, “and, therefore, mine.”

“He’s not *that* bad,” Santa said, wiping James’ tears.

Krampus gave Santa a knowing look. “He hit—”

“His cousin with a shovel. Yes. But that was not completely one-sided,” Santa shrewdly countered. “She threatened him with a rake.”

Undeterred, Krampus shot back, “He broke—”

“His mother’s favorite vase. Intentionally. Yes. Bad.”

Slightly satisfied, Krampus continued, “He—”

“Flushed his father’s phone down the toilet. Terrible,” said Santa. “Funny? Yes. But not a good thing to do.”

Krampus sneezed out the last bit of elfin dust and glared at Santa; the monster’s bloodshot eyes widened and his nostrils flared. “Christmas is as much mine as yours, Kringle. More than you will ever know. I will take this boy despite your wishes.”

Krampus unclenched his fist and bared sharp claws. He snarled and stomped his cloven hooves, preparing to charge the man in red.

“Santa,” cried James as he grabbed the old man in fear, knocking Santa off-balance.

“Your magic pixie dust won’t save you, Kringle,” yelled Krampus as he barreled across the living room.

Santa rolled out of the way, avoiding a love seat and pulling James along with him. Krampus raced past, just missing his target and brushing up against the hanging stocking.

Santa got up and bumped against the Christmas tree. He reached over and raked his hand over a branch. Tiny pine needles fell off and mixed with the shiny elfin dust particles floating in the air.

“You can’t dodge me, Kringle!” Krampus snarled.

“Not my plan,” Santa said and thrust out his hand, sending pine needles flying toward Krampus. The green flurry blew forward, landed on the beast, and turned into twisting roots that ensnared the creature. “Get out of here, you devil,” Santa yelled.

A swirl of magic burst from Kringle's hand and enveloped Krampus in a glowing cocoon which lingered for a moment and then popped away up the chimney, leaving behind a mist of fine elfin dust. Krampus yelped as he shot away into the night.

And then Santa turned to poor, small, terrified, little James. "Hello. That was exciting, wasn't it? He won't be bothering you—I just sent him on a little orbit around the earth."

James was silent—perhaps permanently.

"Well, James—I can't say you've been a good boy this year or any other," Santa said as he reached into his bag, "but it's Christmas and I'm Santa so . . ." He waved his hand and produced a small present wrapped in dazzling red and white. "Merry Christmas."

Young James stared at the present, wide-eyed with wonder.

Santa crawled into the chimney, brushed against the stocking, and changed the coal into a candy cane before disappearing up the flue in a puff of magic.

On the roof, Oskar waited. Even the reindeer seemed to know they were late.

"I hope that was worth the three minutes it cost us," Oskar said as Santa burst from the chimney.

"Ah, come on," Santa smiled. "Kicking old Krampy's butt is *my* Christmas present. We'll catch up. The day I can't bring Christmas is the day I give up."

And with that, the old man in red hopped into the sleigh, grabbed the reins, and disappeared into the night. Looking out a window, young James Bolton watched him go.