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—  
OCCULT DETECTIVE



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Father Christmas is real, though.

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SAM HAIN  
A KRAMPUS CAROL

It was the week before Christmas, and all through the house an argument was brewing between a son, mother and spouse. Their voices were raised and cut through the air, until one bellowed out that it just was not fair...

"It's not fair!" The boy exclaimed, his voice striking that delicate pitch somewhere between being deep and yet shrill. "Why do I have to stay here?! The other guys aren't being forced to stay home."

"You're not going to Barbados for Christmas, and that's final," Sharon intoned. Her words were crisp and sharp - not unlike the winter weather - and she was trying her best to not snap. With Christmas only days away, she didn't need the extra stress. "We're having a nice family Christmas at home. We said this weeks ago."

"But that was before the squad bought their tickets!"

"And you'll have plenty more opportunities to go on holiday with your friends in the future. It's not even a week until Christmas, and you don't want to disappoint grandma and grandpa do you?"

Tyler spat in frustration. "I'm sixteen, mum, I can do what I like!"

"Don't you dare spit in this house, Tyler!" Sharon snapped. Her mask of remaining calm and collected had been broken; the pent up stress of making everything perfect for Christmas, the difficult negotiations with parents and in-laws trying to ensure everyone was happy, and now a petulant teenager who wouldn't think twice about leaving his family behind at Christmas was too much to pretend to cope with. She shouted with an anger which seemed to be drawn from another dimension, and was more guttural, more primal than one would expect from a middle-class woman. "That's disgusting and there is no excuse for it! There's no way you're even dreaming of going anywhere now." She spun on her heels to face her husband. "Are you not going to say anything, David?!"

David - or Dave, as he preferred to be called in all but the most serious of situations - was halfway up a ladder trying to fix a series of fiddly ornaments to the very top of their eight-foot Christmas tree. He leaned precariously off of the ladder, trying desperately and futilely to hook a bauble onto one of the branches. "Your mother's right, son, and don't spit in the house," he said, but offered no further input.

"That's not what you said to Becks! How come she's off with her boyfriend and I'm stuck here?!"

"They're having Christmas Day with his family this year, and Boxing Day with us. That's how relationships work! She's not jetting off for a party with other irresponsible teenagers!"

"Listen to your mother," Dave chimed in, trying to seem supportive, albeit somewhat distantly. The baubles were proving to be a bit too heavy for the topmost branches and were threatening to slide off at any moment.

"Yeah, really helpful, Dave, thank you. We've got your parents and mine coming in a couple of days. This place isn't even half decorated yet and we're having this stupid argument!"

"I'm decorating the tree, aren't I? You're not the only one stressing out about it all!" He bellowed, accidentally dropping one of the glass baubles on the floor and shattering it. "Oh for Christ's sake!"

"Is it too much to ask to just have a nice family Christmas?!" Sharon railed at no-one in particular. Her eyes were wild and her face was turning progressively redder.

"Ugh, you're ruining my life! I hate you! I wish you'd just butt out of my life," Tyler shrieked, and he stormed out of the room, making sure to slam the door dramatically behind him and putting extra effort into stomping up the stairs.

The sound of conflicts fading and reigniting carried on until midnight, when Sharon and Dave eventually decided to put it to rest, turn out the lights and head for bed, ready to deal with things, ideally more rationally, in the morning. A few hours later, the muffled sound of thumping could be heard coming from the roof, but it was barely enough to rouse any of them from their sleep.

It wasn't until the following day, when Tyler reluctantly decided to leave his self-imposed sulk in his bedroom, that he noticed something wasn't quite right. He had been dreading coming downstairs, knowing the argument was likely to continue, but to his surprise there was no further confrontation. No arguments, no shouting, and no cold shoulders. Even more surprising was the fact that his parents were not anywhere to be found at all. Normally, having the house to himself would've been a dream come true for Tyler, but something about it felt wrong. He wandered around the house, calling out for his mum and dad, but he neither saw or heard anyone else. It was as if the house had been abandoned.

It was then that he saw the note. An aged looking piece of parchment hung from one of the branches of the Christmas tree, a message scrawled across it in a sharp and aggressively scribbled handwriting.

**IF YOU DO NOT FROM THIS LESSON LEARN  
FOR YOUR MISBEHAVIOUR YOU MUST BURN  
YOU HAVE ONE DAY TO SET THINGS RIGHT  
PRAY I NEED NOT RETURN THIS NIGHT**

Beneath the note was a shiny red bauble, the screaming faces of Tyler's parents reflected on its surface.

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The weather outside was frightful, but the fire was so delightful. Sam Hain reclined in his armchair, his feet perched on the edge of the coffee table, neatly resting beside the chaotic piles of books, paper, and clutter. He bathed in the warm glow of the open fire, taking a sip of tea and letting out a deep and satisfied sigh.

Despite the usual untidiness of Sam's home, Yuletide decorations adorned the living room and brought some much needed festivity to the otherwise unkempt flat. Holly and ivy were draped along the mantelpiece and bookcases, almost looking as if the place was becoming overgrown, and several sprigs of mistletoe hung merrily from the shelves. A small altar had been set up by the window, where a Yule candle flickered peacefully and wisps of smoke rose from a cast iron cauldron, filling the air with the scent of burning frankincense. A stone statue of Cailleach Bheur, the Queen of Winter, stood towards the back of the altar; Sam had decided to dress her in a Christmas hat and scarf, to bring a bit of festive cheer to the miserable old hag.

Sam glanced across the room to where his Christmas tree sat, a rather small potted spruce with twinkling white fairy lights winding around its tiny branches. It was one of his favourite times of the year. The days were cold and crisp, the cafes warm and welcoming. Festive cheer decorated the city and the people, and a sense of magic and joy permeated the air. Plus, for Sam, it was one of the few times of year he could relax, unwind, and really enjoy the festive season. As with every year, with his landlady away visiting family in the Cotswolds, he had decided to spend Christmas on his own and make the most of the peace and quiet; he was more than happy to go out and enjoy mulled wine with good company, but for Christmas itself, when everyone goes off and does their own thing, Sam too would do his own thing, and spend the day eating mince pies and watching crap - yet entertaining - television.

He spared a thought for Alice, who wouldn't be having quite as quiet and peaceful Christmas. She had been conscripted into work for late night shopping almost every night of the week, and had drawn the short straw having to work on Christmas Eve and Boxing Day too. In between that, her family was

coming to visit; it was her first year of playing host to the family Christmas, and she wasn't feeling the most relaxed about it.

Earlier that week, after meeting up for a drink in the festive wonderland of Covent Garden, Alice had invited him over to join her and her family for Christmas dinner. Sam politely declined the offer, reasoning that he didn't want to intrude on their family gathering. And, although he didn't share this part with her, he didn't feel too comfortable with being the odd one out at the dinner table; Sam and socialising were not a natural fit.

"Be careful, mister!" Alice had teasingly warned him. "With that attitude towards a family Christmas, you'll have those three ghosts that haunted Scrooge after you."

"How's that different than every other day?" Sam had rebutted with a laugh. "Besides, I'd like to see them try and break through my flat's metaphasic barrier and moonstone protection grid."

"There's no such thing as an "off" switch with you, is there?"

"Unfortunately not, no."

He was content, though. As he sat there before the crackling fire and the low light of the living room, he couldn't think of anywhere he'd rather be. *Since there's no place to go, let it snow*, Sam wished, *let it snow, let it snow*.

Of course, it did not snow. Despite optimistic wintery forecasts and weather warnings, London remained its grey and rainy self. The soft, white quilt which blanketed the quaint villages so frequently depicted on Christmas cards was not something Londoners often got to enjoy. Instead of a white Christmas, the city was generally treated to bitterly cold winds and the occasional torrential downpour. Even on the rare occasions when it did snow, the pristine gleam of freshly fallen snow was quickly lost to greyish-brown slush and black ice.

The sound of rain splattering against the window tapped softly in the background, mixing in with the light crackling of flames from the fireplace. Amongst the gentle ambient cacophony, another noise came tapping, as if a hand were lightly rapping on wood. Sam paused and listened, and the noise came again; three quick, rhythmic knocks came drumming on the door. With the exasperated sigh of a man whose peace has just been shattered, he put down his tea and the book he was reading, and reluctantly got up to answer it.

Stood on the doorstep was a boy, no older than his late teens, with his hoodie pulled up and partially over his face. What was once a light grey fleece had turned almost entirely black from the rain. He was soaked through, and if Sam was less paranoid and wary of what entity he might have been inviting in, he would have offered the boy to come inside and warm up. Instead he stood there in the doorway with indignance towards this interruption which - Sam was attempting to deduce - may or may not be something sinister wearing a human mask.

"Hello," he said curtly.

"Are you Sam Hain?" The boy on the doorstep asked. His voice cracked pubescently.

"I am..." Sam raised a quizzical eyebrow at his unexpected caller. "Where did you get this address?" He wasn't much in the habit of giving out his home address to people, let alone people he'd never even met before.

"Your location tag on Twitter," the boy replied, and he produced his phone from his jeans' pocket to show Sam. On the screen was one of Sam's recent tweets, along with a map, a marker placed perfectly on top of where his house would be.

"Huh. Fair enough. I'm going to have to stop it from doing that then. But I doubt you're here just to double-check this was my address. Who are you?"

"I, uh," the boy hesitated, almost reluctant to speak, "I-I'm Tyler, Tyler Stretton. You're legit about

the occult detective thing, right?”

“Yes, I’m “legit,”” Sam said with a weary roll of the eyes.

“You know, like, magic and stuff, yeah? Can you handle curses and demons and shit?”

“Yes,” Sam replied dully, “magick is real, and I’ve had more encounters with demons and extradimensional entities than I’d care to count.” He was about to close the door before this kid started to take the piss out of him - it wouldn’t be the first time - but as he looked down he saw the boy looking back at him with pleading eyes. His face was pale and wrought with fear and doubt. Something had clearly disturbed him, and Sam assumed that was where he came into the story.

“Um, I kind of need your help,” Tyler said. It sounded almost as if saying those words caused him pain.

Sam sighed reluctantly, but he couldn’t turn away someone who needed his help. He stepped back from the doorway and gestured for the boy to enter. “Okay then, Tyler, Tyler Stretton. Come in, I’ll put the kettle on while you tell me about your case.”

“No, there’s no time,” Tyler replied. Rather than offer any further explanation, he thrust a scrunched up piece of paper into Sam’s hand, along with a twenty pound note. “I know it’s nearly Christmas, but I don’t know what else to do and I really need your help. That’s all I’ve got, but we need to go now.”

With an understanding nod, Sam quickly pocketed the money and began to unfold the scrunched up piece of paper. It felt soft to the touch, more like old parchment paper, and thick black ink marred the page. He read the message scrawled across it and nodded again. “I guess we’re on a bit of a deadline then,” he said.

“Can you help me?”

“Explain the details on the way, there’s no time to lose.”

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The journey to the Stretton household was a fairly short one. The family lived in a house in West Hampstead, and were it not for the Christmas traffic the taxi ride would have only taken ten minutes. The driver had rather politely stayed out of the conversation while his passengers, a teenage boy and a man who looked like a noir-style detective, talked of cursed baubles and trapped spirits. Peculiarly, it was not the strangest conversation he had overheard in his career as a cabby.

They pulled up outside of the house, its frames draped in glittering fairy lights and windows fogged with fake snow, shortly before nine o’clock. A festive holly wreath hung on the door. It was the very image of a family Christmas. Sam presented the driver with the twenty pound note, adding, “keep the change. Blessed Yule to you, sir,” and hopped out of the cab.

Inside, the house was almost as festive as outside. In the living room, red, rustic stockings hung from the mantelpiece, Christmas ornaments sat on the shelves, and a tall tree was adorned with twinkling lights and decorations. Around the base of the tree, shining presents gathered in a pile for all members of the family. The faint smell of spiced candles, pine needles and a fruit bowl filled to the brim with clementines truly captured the Christmas spirit. The one thing which really let the Yuletide aesthetic down were the screaming faces of Sharon and Dave Stretton leering out of a shiny red bauble.

Sam carefully removed the bauble from its branch, holding it delicately in his hands and turning it over and over, inspecting it. It was - as far as Sam could see, anyway - a perfectly normal decoration with no obvious way two people could end up trapped inside. He reached into his coat pocket and retrieved the transphasic probe, waving the crystalline wand around the bauble prison. It pulsed and flickered like a dying Christmas light.

“Well, looks like a negatively-aligned Class IV Akashic artefact. The energetic residue is indicative of ancient, powerful magick...”

“Wuh?” Tyler grunted in confusion.

“This bauble isn't a bauble. It's a metaphysical prison which *looks* like a bauble. When charged with negative energy, the bauble was activated and was somehow used to capture the living essence of your parents,” Sam elaborated.

“That really doesn't clear any of this up.”

“Your parents are trapped in a bauble.”

“That's what I've been telling you!” Tyler shouted with exasperation. “So what do we do? How do we get them out? What does that message mean?”

Sam stood contemplating the bauble prison held in his hands for a while. His brow was furrowed and his eyes focused. If he was being honest with himself, he wasn't sure what would work, he would just have to throw things at the wall and see what stuck. “Have you tried a good old fashioned prison-break?” He asked, polishing the glass bauble on his trouser leg.

“What do you m-” Before Tyler had a chance to finish his sentence, Sam had spun his arm around and around like a cricket bowler, and at the apex of the third spin he released his grip and let the bauble fly. It hurtled towards the wall, and Tyler flinched in anticipation of shattering glass, but it never came. The bauble hit the wall at full force, bouncing harmlessly off of it and floating serenely, surreally, back towards the Christmas tree. Its ribbon tied itself around the branch when the bauble had glided back into position.

“Well, that was a short-lived idea,” Sam announced conclusively.

“Dude, I could've smashed that thing myself! Don't you think I've tried? I thought an occult detective would know what to do, not just try random shit.”

“It's not just “random shit,” Tyler,” Sam said, turning to face the boy, “if that had broken, then this would have all been a freak psychic accident involving a magical artefact. The fact that it didn't suggests that there is more to this bauble than just your parents getting sucked into a metaphysical prison. There's a purpose, an intent, behind this.” He unfolded the scrunched up parchment in his pocket and reread the foreboding message. “If you do not from this lesson learn... One day to set things right... What lesson? What needs to be set right?”

Tyler shrugged his shoulders with a dismissive “I dunno.”

“Why do I get the feeling that your “I don't know” isn't quite accurate? Tell me, what happened before you found your parents like this?”

Sam threw himself onto the sofa, resting comfortably between Christmas themed throw cushions, while Tyler recounted the events of the night before. He told Sam Hain about the argument, about how he had wanted to go to Barbados with his friends, and how he had stormed off to his bedroom after all of the shouting. It wasn't much different than usual, he said, with his parents being unfair and making out that he was in the wrong. And then, of course, what wasn't usual was that they were trapped in a bauble afterwards.

“Think carefully, and be very precise with your answer,” Sam said measuredly after he'd listened to the retelling, “did you say anything you might regret, anything you didn't mean?”

“I dunno.”

“Anything at all?”

Tyler looked away for a second. He swallowed hard and stared at the floor in silence before he eventually answered. “I, uh, I said I hated them. An-and that I, sort of, wished they would butt out of

my life?" He said to the carpet, before looking sheepishly up at Sam. "I did this, didn't I?"

"In a manner of speaking," Sam said, "but try not to put yourself on too much of a guilt trip; a lot of people your age say and do stupid things they don't really think about or mean."

There was a loud thud from above them, as if someone had just dropped a large piece of furniture on the roof. The lights on the Christmas tree began to flicker erratically.

"The problem is," Sam continued, "at this time of year, Christmas magick is all around. Yuletide spirits thrive on the merriment, goodwill and company people love to share at Christmas, and in return they visit us with wish fulfillment."

"What, like Santa Claus? That's just a story for little kids, though." There was another loud thump from above, shortly followed by another, and another, as if something was walking, stomping, on the roof. The faint sound of dragging chains echoed in the night. Tyler's eyes followed the sound across the ceiling as it seemed to draw closer, and he was already starting to regret his last sentence.

"The modern myths may be, but that doesn't mean there's no truth in them. Of course, with Christmas spirits, you're essentially dealing with omnipotent demigods. They know when you are sleeping, they know when you're awake. They know when you've been bad or good..."

The noise of what sounded like stomping hooves and rattling chains was closer than ever, and was starting to echo from the chimney.

"So be good for goodness sake," Sam concluded, his voice trailing off as he eyed the fireplace warily. He slowly started to back away from it, and he motioned for Tyler to stay behind him, holding his arms out defensively and with the transphasic probe in his hand.

"Wait, so Santa left the note, and put them in that bauble?" Tyler's eyes were wide, a look of bewilderment cross his face and his voice squeaked incredulously.

"No, not Santa," Sam replied, his voice low and monotone, "his dark reflection."

Soot and ash erupted from the fireplace, sending a black cloud flying up and into the room. The cloud swirled around, picking up speed as the thick black plumes twisted and turned, morphing into a form. The ash began to fall, and was quickly ground into the carpet beneath goat-like cloven hooves.

"Krampus," said Sam.

"W-what's a Krampus?" Tyler whispered.

"That thing is. Half-goat, half-demon. All-bastard."

The hideous form of Krampus stood in the middle of the living room. Its height rivalled that of the Christmas tree, its long, protruding, goat-like horns curving out from its twisted and demonic face. Its body was as black as charcoal, bulging with inhuman muscle and veiled in thick, wiry black hair. Long, rusted chains hung from its neck, wrists and ankles, which it held in its hand like a whip.

"No way," Tyler breathed, "th-that's..." His voice quavered in fear as he stood, slack-jawed, staring at the monstrous apparition in front of him. It was like a heavy metal album cover had come to life, but the reality of it was not as cool as Tyler had imagined.

The demon stared at them both with contemptuous yellow eyes. It growled a blood-curdling growl, revealing its fanged teeth, and a long, pointed tongue lashed around its maw. Sam instinctively jabbed the transphasic probe in Krampus's direction, firing a bolt of bright white energy at the demon. The bolt struck the creature in the chest, crackling and rippling across its body, but with very little effect. Krampus remained untouched and, if it was possible, only looked angrier than it had done before.

"Tyler, I have some very important advice which has saved my life more times than I can count, and you're going to have to listen very, very carefully," Sam spoke quickly, almost stumbling over his words.

"Wh-what is it?"

“Run!”

They ran. With a swift spin, they took off and fled from the living room, sprinting up the stairs as fast as they could. The sound of a vicious roar followed them, a roar filled with raw fury and malintent. Krampus stomped about the living room, rattling its chains. The lights flickered manically like a Christmassy rave.

Tyler and Sam barged through the door into his bedroom, slamming it shut behind them and sliding the bolt across. Locked. Tyler stood, panting, staring at Sam with wild, terrified eyes.

“What do we do? What do we do?!” He wheezed through heavy breaths.

The sound of chains being dragged around and the thumping of heavy, cloven hooves still came from downstairs, and there was an odd scraping sound, as if the creature's horns were dragging across the ceiling.

“It's toying with us,” Sam said. He pointed the probe at the door handle and rotated it clockwise. “There, I've added a rudimentary magick seal. It won't hold it for long, but it will at least slow it down.”

“Doesn't it want to kill us? Why is it toying with us?”

“It doesn't want to kill me, it's come for you,” Sam said matter-of-factly, before realising that this probably was not the most reassuring thing he could say. “It trapped your parents and left the note for you.”

“You're not helping!” Tyler exclaimed. He was visibly shaking and barely holding it together.

“Krampus is an ancient spirit,” Sam began to explain, “the shadow of Saint Nicholas. According to folklore, jolly ol' Saint Nick gives presents and brings festive magick to all the good children of the world, whereas Krampus... Krampus torments and punishes wrong-doers and those who don't share the real reason of Christmas... Sometimes, it drags them to Hell.”

“So we're going to Hell? Great.” The slow and methodical stomping of hooves on stairs echoed in their ears. Chains clanked and rattled as they were dragged behind the demon, step by step. “Why doesn't it just get it over and done with?”

“Would you really rather that? It takes pleasure in instilling fear in its prey. A lot of demons do; us mortal beings are mere playthings in their eyes. It's all just a game to them. As for Krampus, this is all part of its punishment. Fear and dread are its weapons of choice. As well as the chain whip.” The sound of the monster drew ever closer. “Quick, under the bed,” Sam instructed, crawling into the space beneath the bed, and Tyler followed suit. It was cramped and more than a tight squeeze, but it was soon to be their last line of defence.

Peeking out from beneath the bed, the edge of the duvet partially hiding his face, Sam watched and waited. Sharp claws scratched at the wooden door, and the handle rattled violently. A low, frustrated growl rumbled from the other side.

“Good, that's stumped it for a little while. Bet you wish you were in Barbados right now.”

“Dude, seriously? I could be dragged to Hell at any moment. All I want is for this nightmare to end! I'd give anything for a family Christmas now. I mean, sitting around having dinner with mum and dad and my grandparents can't be worse than Hell, right? I just want, like, a nice normal Christmas... Y'know?”

“Right answer,” Sam said, and he awkwardly twisted his arm around beneath the bed to pat Tyler on the shoulder. The lock on the door rattled again, but this time the key turned and the lock unbolted itself.

The sight of hooves and wiry-haired legs appeared through the gap beneath the bed. Krampus prowled the bedroom, snorting and sniffing the air like a beast in the middle of a hunt. The chains

dragged behind it, and its hooves came to a stop mere inches from their faces.

“Head back to your parents,” Sam whispered, “you know what you need to do.”

“I'm not going to get past that thing! Are you insane?” Tyler's eyes were wide with fright. “I'm staying right here.”

“That's an ever worse plan!” Sam hissed. “Look, I've got you covered.” The hideous bearded face of Krampus sniffed at the edges of the duvet, its pointed tongue twisted like a serpent in front of them. Its breath was hot and foul on their faces. “Show time.”

Sam crawled backwards from under the bed, emerging the other side and dusting himself off. He stood upright to face the demon, which glowered at him with a vengeful eye.

“Hey, goaty! Don't you think you've done enough already?” Sam challenged the creature, fumbling with the wand in his pocket, ready to defend himself.

“The wicked shall be punished,” Krampus growled, rising to its full height and slowly stalking its way around the bed towards Sam.

“I'd hardly call wanting to go to Barbados with friends “wicked.” Ill-advised at Christmas, perhaps, but not wicked.”

“You lack the holiday spirit,” Krampus hissed. Its speech was slow and measured, every word as pointed as the tongue which spoke them. “You, who claims to revel in the season, but would rather stay in solitude. You, who would turn away from those you claim to care about, rejecting the spirit of togetherness. You reek of isolation. Maybe I should take you somewhere where you would never see another soul again.”

Sam paused for a moment. The demon was right; he claimed to love how the festive season brought people together - even complete strangers would reach out to each other - and it was about the only time when the world seemed to be filled with love, happiness and goodwill. These things seemed to be in short supply the rest of the year, but at Christmas everybody comes together in one way or another. And, if he was being honest with himself, he was touched that Alice wanted him there for Christmas dinner. There weren't very many people who had, and he was more accustomed to the solitude than getting together for the holiday. He composed himself, standing up to the imposing creature, which seemed to fill the whole room with its malign presence.

“Quite the opposite, actually,” Sam said, trying to come across as nonchalant as possible, “I fully intend to be with one of my closest friends.”

“A change of heart which comes too late, when being faced with Hell's eternal gate,” Krampus said, an almost sing-song lilt to its guttural speech.

The bedroom door slammed and swung chaotically on its hinges as Tyler sprinted out of the room and back down the stairs. Krampus snapped its head around with rage and snarled as it began to stomp after its quarry. The door was flung from its hinges, and the chain-whip lashed and cracked against the walls. The demon rampaged back towards the stairs in a fit of fury. Sam began to give chase, his wand raised, trying to slow the creature down, but Krampus seemed to simply shrug off magick; unhindered and unharmed by any spell Sam Hain could throw at it.

A sinking feeling grew in the pit of Sam's stomach as he watched his efforts bounce futilely off of the demon. He was only a few feet behind the hulking monstrosity, and yet there was very little he could do. In that moment, a wave of desperation washed across him, and all he could fall back on was the hope that Tyler would be able to set things right in time. “I don't mean to rush you,” Sam shouted over the bannisters, and he had to quickly duck backwards to avoid being hit by one of Krampus's chains, “but the demon's coming after you, and he's just started rhyming for some reason!”

Knelt down by the side of the Christmas tree, Tyler held the bauble in his hands with his eyes

closed. He tried to ignore the sound of the monster coming ever closer, crashing its way through the house towards the living room. Towards him. His heart was pounding faster and faster, and his body felt numb and distant. A roar which sounded like it had come bellowing from the very depths of Hell shook through his bones and through his soul.

“I didn’t mean the things I said,” he whispered into the bauble. He would’ve felt stupid doing this earlier, but now that a demon was mere moments away from claiming his soul, he had nothing to lose. And, if this was to be the last thing he ever did, he wanted to be with his parents. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. This is all my fault, I don’t even know how things got this bad over something so stupid, but...” The trickling sensation of hot tears began to run down his face and he clasped the bauble tightly in his hands. “I don’t know why I even wanted to go to Barbados! All I want is to have Christmas like we always used to... Family, presents, love and all that stupid shit! I wish I could tell you how sorry I am. I-I wish I could just make things right.”

The sound of lumbering hooves and the sudden splintering of wood shattered through his mind, snapping Tyler out of his thoughts. He placed the bauble back on the tree and slowly turned around. The living room door was hanging off of its hinges, wobbling in distress. Standing in the doorway was Krampus; its eyes were burning, its nostrils flared, and its impossibly black shadow loomed across the entire room.

“All too late the lesson’s learned, your fate can not be turned.” Krampus grinned a rictus grin. Its sharp tongue lapped around its lips gleefully, and its fist tightened around the grip of the chains. “Another soul who had to be shown; another child to snap the bones. For they who can not atone, will forever suffer beneath my throne.”

“I’m so sorry,” Tyler whispered as the faces of his parents flashed through his mind. “I’m so sorry.” He remembered previous Christmases growing up; the joy and excitement of the morning, discovering the shining presents beneath the tree; the mild disappointment of finding walnuts or a tangerine in the stocking; Christmas Specials on TV, which were never as good as the regular thing but still oddly entertaining; Christmas dinner with the whole family, talking and sharing and laughing around the table.

He could feel the joy and excitement in his heart as he thought of everything Christmas had always meant to him. He remembered how magical the build-up to the 25th of December was; he remembered the cold nights out with his sister and mum and dad, looking at all of the Christmas lights twinkling in the frosty air; he remembered the smell of pine needles throughout the house when they bought the tree each year. He had forgotten how he had felt as a child at this time of year, but the more thoughts flashed through his mind the more he was right there: eight years old on Christmas morning. He thought of Christmas crackers, paper crowns, bad puns, Coca Cola adverts, stupid woolly jumpers, sparkling lights, mince pies, Bucks Fizz, old Christmas songs, Chocolate Orange...

Behind him, Tyler heard the sound of glass smashing.

He looked up at Krampus fearfully, and noticed that the creature no longer stared at him with sinister glee. It didn’t hiss or growl or try to rhyme, it simply stood, and almost like a fading nightmare, the goat-like monstrosity began to dissolve. Tendrils of thick black smoke wisped away from the hideous creature, wafting and spiralling through the air, towards the fireplace and up the chimney.

“Nice work,” Sam commended. He appeared from behind the translucent shape of what had been Krampus, and he gave the smoke-like form a swift kick. The form dispersed and drifted away into nothingness, like a cloud of dust caught in the wind. “Looks like you broke Krampus’s hex. Its essence is no longer bound to a physical manifestation, so it won’t be troubling you any more; you can enjoy Christmas in peace.”

“It-it’s finally gone? It’s over?” Tyler’s tear-strewn face was now the picture of relief, although his voice quavered with disbelief. “That thing’s gone forever?”

“Oh no,” Sam replied, “it’s an ancient creature, it’s not gone that easily. It’s always watching. But,

unless you give it good reason, you won't be seeing Krampus again. More importantly, I think there are some people you *do* want to see again who are going to be very confused soon."

Lying beneath the Christmas tree, crumpled up among the brightly wrapped presents, were Sharon and Dave Stretton. The bauble they had been trapped in had disappeared along with Krampus, leaving no trace of the demonic magick other than two very confused parents slowly picking themselves off of the floor with aching groans. Before they could stand up properly, Tyler had rushed to their sides and flung his arms around them both in a tight embrace.

"What the blazes is going on?" Dave muttered as he tried to get his bearings, and was doubly confused when he realised he had his son's arm wrapped around him.

"Tyler, wh-" Sharon began to speak, when she looked up and saw a man in a black overcoat and hat standing in the doorway to the living room. Sam Hain smiled and gave her a cheery wave. "Who is that man, and why is he in our house?"

"I'm the man who saved Christmas!" Sam said with a grin and an over-the-top bow. "In a manner of speaking, anyway. In fact, it was your son who put things right in the end."

Sharon blinked, bleary eyed and confused. It was then that she noticed that the doorway Sam was standing in looked suspiciously off. The door was battered and hanging at a rather unsettling angle from only one of its hinges. She broke free from her son's embrace and stood up to her fullest. "What the hell happened to the door?!"

"Mum..." Tyler began, his voice pleading her not to start.

"There's a very good - albeit very unbelievable - explanation for all of this," Sam stated. "I'll let Tyler tell you the tale, but try not to get angry with him. Considering everything, he's been brilliant."

"Who, Tyler?" Sharon asked with shrill incredulity. Her face contorting in confusion. She looked at her son, and then back at Sam. "Tyler-Tyler?"

"Yes, Tyler-Tyler," Sam said, "he'll fill you in on everything that's happened; I'm sure he has a few things he wants to say to you anyway. The important thing is, you're going to be together as a family this Christmas. And I wish you a very merry one at that, too." He tipped his hat to the three of them, and before they had a chance to protest or call him back, Sam had strode out of the living room and through the front door, into the cold winter's night.

As Sam began to walk down the garden path and away from the Stretton household, he heard the voice of Dave Stretton exclaiming from somewhere behind him "why are there hoof prints all through the house?!"

He enjoyed the walk back from West Hampstead. It was cold and dark, but the streetlamps and Christmas lights which lined the streets lit up the night, and Sam was starting to feel the festive spirit again. There was something magical in the simplicity of Christmas lights. The walk gave him time to think, too, as something had been weighing on his mind, and he needed the chill in the air to clear his head and work out what it was. Christmas, he had always believed, was about spending time with the people who mattered most, and it wasn't like he didn't do anything social in the weeks before Christmas, but for the most part he very rarely did anything for the day itself. This year, he thought, he fancied a change, and he knew where he wanted to be.

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It was Christmas morning, and the streets of Islington were glistening with a soft white layer of snow. It clung to the rooftops, and the pavements were coated with a pristine white blanket. When Alice opened her curtains that morning, she squealed with excitement; Christmas day was finally here.

The flat was adorned with Christmas decorations. Festive ornaments stood proudly on the shelves,

the doorframes were draped with shining fairy lights and a large holly wreath hung on the front door. A modest Christmas tree took pride of place in the living room, wrapped in more lights, and glittering decorations hung from every branch.

Rachel was back home with her family for the holidays, and Alice was making the most of having the flat to herself; she had settled comfortably on the sofa, surrounded by the festive decorations, and treated herself to a breakfast of Bucks Fizz and Chocolate Orange. She curled up in her cosy pyjamas and fleece-y dressing gown while enjoying morning television. It was still only early, but most of the channels were dominated by Christmas films already.

She had turned up the volume on the TV when a playlist of the top Christmas songs came on, and the music blared throughout the house as she started to prepare the dinner. It was only a few hours until her family was due, and she wanted everything to be sorted and perfect by the time they arrived (lest her mother tried to get involved and take over the cooking). Alice had been dancing around the kitchen, sipping more Bucks Fizz and washing the vegetables, while she sang along to Slade's *Merry Christmas Everyone*, when there was a knock at the door. She thought her parents must be running early, and hurriedly put the vegetables - minus Brussels sprouts - into the steamer.

"The Darkness is coming up next, with *Christmas Time (Don't Let The Bells End)*," the TV DJ announced, as Alice made her way to the door.

She opened the door with her arms wide, but instead of seeing her mum and dad, she was greeted by a sight she hadn't expected to see. A purple paper crown sat atop a mass of unruly hair, and a questionably vibrant Christmas jumper peeked out from beneath a long black overcoat.

"Merry Christmas!" Sam Hain announced, brandishing a small bag of presents and a pack of mince pies. He grinned broadly at Alice.

"Merry Christmas to you too," Alice said, slightly taken aback. "I thought you were spending Christmas at home?"

"Well, it wouldn't be Christmas without seeing the people who matter the most to you, would it? Ooh, I love this song," he said, brushing aside his sentimentality as he made his way into the flat, singing along to the song and trying - but not quite succeeding - in harmonising with Justin Hawkins's high-pitched vocals. Alice smiled.

"I'm glad you're here," she said, "maybe you could help me get everything ready before my parents get here. I could use a hand in the kitchen." Sam was more than happy to help, and although he knew his skills in the kitchen were somewhat lacking he thought he'd give it a shot. It wasn't long before Alice discovered this fact, and promptly ushered him away from the roast potatoes, threateningly brandishing a ladle. Sam soon found himself relegated to the responsibility of laying the cutlery out on the table and placing a Christmas cracker next to each place-mat.

Over dinner, when Alice's family had arrived and the introductions had been made, they joked and laughed and shared stories. They pulled crackers, putting on the paper crowns which tore all too easily, and read out the bad jokes to groan-worthy effect. Among the tat which crackers tend to spring forth, including a tacky corkscrew and a pair of blunt nail clippers, was a fortune teller miracle fish, which Sam claimed would almost certainly come in handy one day. They drank copious amounts of rich and fruity red wine, and heartily congratulated Alice, many times, on a perfect Christmas dinner, to which she humbly said it was nothing. Sam even found, much to his surprise, he was actually enjoying himself, which very rarely happened to him in social situations.

As the evening began to set in, and everyone was relaxing in front of the television, Sam decided to take his leave. He hugged Alice goodbye, thanking her for the wonderful day, and bid a cheery farewell to her family. Then they heard him exclaim, as he walked out of sight, "happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night!"

## About the Author

Bron James is an author of science fiction and magical realism. He was born with a silver pen in his mouth and has been making up stories for as long as he can remember. His professional début work of fiction, the first instalment of the *Sam Hain* series of short stories, was first published in 2013.

Born and raised in the south of England, Bron presently lives in London where he writes stories, drinks tea, and dreams improbable dreams.

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