

He Sees You When You're Sleeping...

By Christopher Morgan

Part One

There were no visions of sugarplums dancing in Danny Lundgren's head. He wasn't even sure what a sugarplum even was. When he heard the line he imagined fat raisins dragged through granulated sugar. He figured he couldn't be that far off and what did it really matter, sugarplums may not even exist, he simply didn't care.

Danny stuffed his hands under his pillow behind his head and looked up at the ceiling.

Christmas Eve was always the hardest night to get any sleep. Ever since he was a little kid he remembers lying awake for half the night, salivating at the bounty that he would tear open under the tree in just a few short hours.

But he wasn't a kid anymore. At fifteen, Danny had been aware there was no such thing as Santa Claus for years now. But that didn't matter, as long as Tommy still believed. Having a little brother kept the "Santa Claus" myth alive for a few more years and that meant he was still raking in the big loot from mom and dad who had to keep buying Danny the expensive "Santa" presents to keep Tommy from suspecting anything.

Sleep might not come at all tonight but Danny didn't care. In just a few hours he'd have his hands on that brand new iPad he'd been asking for since October. Ohhh, Danny couldn't wait. The anticipation was killing him. He thought about how specific he was every time the family went out shopping in the last few months. Telling his mother exactly which one he wanted and explaining to her that anything less just wouldn't do.

God, can you just imagine having to show up at school with only the sixteen gig version?

Everyone would laugh at him. Danny knew that wouldn't happen. Not after the iPhone debacle from his birthday. He told his mom exactly which iPhone he wanted but she bought the older version anyway! Can you believe that? She actually did it on purpose! She said something about how it did almost everything the newer version did but it was discounted at half the price. Danny was so mad he didn't talk to his parents for an entire week. He threw the iPhone in his backpack and didn't get to show it off to anyone because it was only the 3G, not the 4S version... Everyone else was talking with their interactive phones and Danny had to pretend he left his at home.

After a week of this humiliation, Danny was fed up with his inferior piece of garbage. While walking home from school he ducked down the alley behind Phillip's Pizzeria where he threw his new iPhone down on the ground. When he picked it up he was disappointed to see that it was still intact. He threw it down a second time and then stepped on it for good measure. This time when he picked it up Danny smiled. The corner of the glass was shattered. There was a small crack leading out into the screen and it was spreading.

By the time Danny got home he had pressed the screen enough to make the small crack spiderweb and advance across the entire screen. He was even able to remove one of the small

chips of glass from the original shatter area. He put on his best “worried” face and opened the front door.

It only took about an hour before Danny’s mom agreed to buy him a new iPhone. Danny was an excellent liar, he knew enough to make sure the story had some details that made him look good but not to drop in too many details lest his mother get suspicious or worse, try to verify any of the facts. The tale involved running to class to ask for extra math problems to make sure he understood the work and then he got knocked down by Martha Andrews, (the mentally handicapped student) so he stopped to help her pick up her books. It was only THEN that he discovered his precious iPhone had been knocked loose and broken...

If only his mom knew just what he and Joey Devereaux had done to Martha just a few weeks before then. Joey started to feel bad about it but Danny convinced him that it “didn’t count because retarded kids don’t have feelings like us, that’s why they are in special classes...” Joey had his doubts but after Martha left school three weeks later, he began to relax. The teachers said she was going to a special school over in Dupree, but there were rumors that she had committed suicide. Danny hoped it for the latter, suicide keeps secrets longer.

But Danny’s mother had no idea what her son was up to and by the time she heard Danny’s story, she was proud of her son and almost couldn’t wait to reward him with a replacement iPhone. Danny was pretty sure his father was on to him breaking it himself but dad didn’t say anything so, Danny figured he was safe. Mom said they’d go to the Apple store this weekend but after a half hour of pleading and careful planning, Danny convinced her that they had to go that very night. Within three hours of smashing his 3G, Danny had his hands on the brand new 4S iPhone.

Remembering how good he was at manipulation made him proud, Danny smiled at the ceiling and waited for morning. He just knew, without a doubt, that the iPad he wanted was just twenty feet away in the living room. Or at least, it better be or there will be hell to pay come Christmas morning...

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“Creeeeak”

Danny’s eyes flickered open and he turned his head toward the clock. It was already after three in the morning. He was shocked to find that he had fallen asleep after all. He rolled over in his blankets and looked out the window. The wind blew small puffs of snow from the roof. Danny watched the small crystallized ice pellets flounder in the wind gust as they fell past his window to the ground. He closed his eyes and tried to go back to sleep. Visions of iPads, gift cards and cash danced in his head.

“Snickt”

This time he knew he heard something. It was quiet and soft but it was in his room. Danny looked at the window. Nothing new to see. He tossed a glance around the room, the light from the various power LEDs around his room perpetually illuminating the darkness as though it were merely twilight. Danny didn’t see anything unusual. He tried to pass it off as “house settling” noises but there was something... alive... in those noises, almost slithering. Danny began to breathe in shallow gulps of air and looked around the room a second time.

It was only after the second review that he started to feel better and then it suddenly dawned on him that the noises must have been his mom and dad setting up the presents under the tree.

Either that or it was Tommy trying to sneak out and take a look. Their parents had always kept

to the tradition of the kids staying in their bedrooms until 6:00am at the very earliest. “If he’s sneaking out, he’s in a world of shit” Danny muttered as he rolled over in his blankets and closed his eyes again.

“Snickt, scrrap”

This time Danny hadn’t gone back to sleep yet. He held perfectly still and held his breath. With one hand carefully lowering the blanket from his face, the other slowly reached behind him and began to snake under the mattress where he kept a flashlight. His hand hadn’t quite reached the light when the blanket fell from his face and he saw the object at his door.

Danny bolted upright in terrorized panic. Every muscle in his body contracted and he all but clawed his way through the wall behind him. There just inside his door was a three foot tall statue of an elf. Red jacket, green pants, white beard... the big floppy Santa hat, ears that came to an elongated point and a smile that showed years of neglected teeth. In the poor lighting, the happy Christmas elf looked absolutely menacing.

Danny was pushing himself against the wall, kicking the blankets down away from him as he began hyperventilating. His mouselike squeals were all the sound he could make. He banged his head on the wall out of sheer confusion as his hands tried to tunnel away from the terror, succeeding only in tearing down Danny’s posters of half nude women and leather clad rock stars. Just as his voice returned to him, his eyes had accustomed to the light, saw the statue wasn’t real and he began to calm down, no longer feeling the urge to scream.

As he finally resumed breathing in small measured gasps, Danny started to laugh out loud. A downright titter. It wasn’t long before his nervous laughter became full on belly chuckles. The damn thing looked so lifelike, it scared the hell out of him. He wondered if it was his mom and

dad put it there or if it was one of Tommy's new toys. "He really is in a world of shit now" Danny said. He wanted to see this thing up close. Danny turned to the wall and fished under his mattress for the flashlight. He pushed aside the magazines he stashed there and felt the small box of weed he had just scored from Alex Mason but he couldn't find the flashlight.

He knelt on the far side of the mattress and pulled up the side against the wall. He saw all of his contraband but there was no flashlight to be found. He let go of the mattress and flopped back down on the bed. He reached for his table lamp but froze solid as he did, the ugly statue was gone.

A frantic glance at the door confirmed that it was still closed, Danny presumed that was what the noises he heard were, Tommy opening and closing his door to plant his new toy elf. But this time, there was no noise, and not enough time to move the statue quietly. His little brother must still be in the room.

"Tommy, if you're in here I'll kill you!" Danny warned the empty darkness.

There was no response.

"I swear you little bastard, I'll cut you for this..."

Time stood still and the room shifted into a dizzying spin as Danny heard a stranger's voice respond, "What a magnificent idea."

Before he could register the soft spoken stranger's voice, two hands grabbed his arms and a third covered his mouth. A knife appeared in Danny's peripheral vision.

The knife wiggled for emphasis when the elf's face emerged from behind Danny, "You know what this is, you know the threat, you know the drill. One sound out of you and I'll split you wide open to see where it came from."

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The Lundgruns buried Danny a week later. There was no sign of a struggle, no indication of foul play. The coroner found an enlarged and distressed heart possibly indicating a rare heart disease but according to all reports, Danny Lundgrun simply died in his sleep on Christmas night. His younger brother Tommy claimed to have seen a Christmas elf in the house that night. He claimed it spoke to him and asked him if he had been naughty or nice but all too quickly, people dismiss the crazy stories a stressed eight year old can tell...

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Part Two

The knife was already to her throat when she felt the hands restraining her arms. Unable to swat the knife away and unable to scream, Susan kicked her feet until she felt them being secured by unseen hands.

“Susan,” began the calm voice of an old man, “I’m only going to tell you once, you will hold still or I will make you still... Very still indeed. Do you understand?”

Sudden fear of what could happen next caused her to rapidly gain control of herself. She tried to speak, to say she understood but the old man shushed her and put a finger to the back of his hand where he had covered her lips, “No sounds sweetheart, just nod if you understand.”

Lying completely still, Susan lowered her jaw toward her chest by the slightest degree.

The deranged elf smiled widely showing his dark and erratic teeth, “Good girl. You stay calm, remain quiet and I’ll make this quick.”

In spite of the threat and Susan’s attempt to remain perfectly still, she still shivered and shuddered at the elf’s words.

There was a dissonance between the placid and comforting voice emitting from the jagged and ugly face of her attacker. If she had heard the voice without seeing his face, Susan would conjure images of a kindly grandfather or a wise old man. But the face that was hovering inches from her own belonged to the voice of a broken and squealing monster. Susan began to feel the walls close in on her as the floor began to spin.

“Stay with me Susan, don’t go to sleep just yet dear.” The elf brandished the knife closer to her face, twisting it in the darkened room trying to catch the stray light from the streetlamp outside her window. He removed his hand from her mouth.

Susan fought the urge to scream for her parents. The knife was a very tangible reminder of what might happen if she did. She held still and quiet, hoping this was all a vicious nightmare.

The elf sat up on her upper legs, straddling her chest with his feet. He took off his red pointed hat and revealed a bald head between his large pointed ears. “You have made the “naughty” list Susan. I’m afraid I’m going to have to punish you for that.”

He dropped his hat on her chest and reached out to his left. A hand emerged from the darkness and handed him a sack. After looking into Susan’s eyes and assessing her stability, he pulled the knife back and reached it out to his right where another hand took it from him. He opened the dirty canvas bag and a small bit of light escaped its rim lighting the twisted elf’s face, making him look more horrible than he had in the darkness. He looked down into the sack and after some searching, pulled out a small black rock. A lump of coal.

“This is your legacy for the year Susan, this is what you have sewn with your actions and thoughts.” He placed the black rock inside his hat and shook it with vigor. He reached in and pulled out a lump of sparkling darkness. It was a paradox, a contradiction of light and dark,

good and evil. Susan watched in fascination as the sparkling lights swam in the small cloud of emptiness confined to the space between the elf's fingers.

“Susan, you will consume this and relive the pain you have caused others. It will give you nightmares, it will make you sick. Depending on just how naughty you have been, it just may even kill you.” The elf paused at this, waiting to see if Susan would begin to scream at the thought of her own death. When she stayed perfectly still, he smiled with contentment and continued, “If you live through this, you will not remember this night but you will remember the pain. I will not instruct you in how to behave but hopefully, the remembered pain will.”

The grotesque elf moved his hand ever closer to Susan's mouth. She wanted to struggle, regardless of the mysterious elf and the possibility of the knife she wanted to scream but found that she was quite incapable of any movement at all. The elf had full control of her body and she opened her mouth to receive the sacrament of her evil deeds.

He remained perched on her lap and watched as it dissolved on her tongue. Her face wriggled in disgust. “Stay off that naughty list Susan” he whispered and began his preparations to leave.

From a million miles away, through a delirium of lies and deceit, Susan stammered one lucid word, “Who?”

The elf looked up at her face, “I thought we agreed on utter silence from you Susan. Isn't that what your nod indicated?”

Susan held stock still not making a sound, not acknowledging the question, fighting off the anxiety and aberration her mind was already experiencing, terrified to breathe.

“But, since you asked so nicely, I may as well introduce myself.” The elf stood, donned his red pointy hat and tossed his canvas sack over his shoulder, “I am the one, the only, the eternal... Santa Claus.”

Before Susan could even question her sanity, her eyes closed and she fell fast asleep.

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Part Three

The dark house offered no new surprises to the ancient burglar. Santa had seen it all over the centuries. Boarded up houses, no chimneys, alarm systems, motion sensitive lights, cameras... He could get in and out of any house on the planet undetected. The only real problem he found were the dogs. He whispered a word to them and they slept through it all, but he had to see them before they got in their first bark, otherwise they'd wake up the whole house and he'd have to start all over.

The dark elf confidently walked right through the kitchen, into the living room and pointed a finger at the sleeping cocker spaniel whispering his magic word without even casting a glance at it. When he got to the end of the rug that lead down the hall, the elf noticed there was already someone awake in the house. He paused and concentrated on his senses to locate the trouble.

He peered down the hall and almost chuckled to himself. One of the kids had set up an elaborate mousetrap to catch him in the act. It was a ramshackle assembly and a marvel that the family dog hadn't set it off before now. Santa thought back through his records and remembered that

this house had only one kid in it, Martin Long. Martin was only mildly naughty and deserved a warning, nothing too major. Feeling generous, Santa played into the child's ruse and sprang the trap. It was only when the golden cage slammed down around him and his senses went dark that he had doubts about this being a good idea.

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To Santa's surprise, it was not Martin but an adult, a small frail woman (presumably Martin's mother, or possibly even his grandmother) that appeared from the doorway at the end of the hall. Santa began rifling through his memories of the household, who was this woman? He watched her shadowy form as she quietly stalked down the hall toward her captured prey. When she reached the end of the hall, she squatted by the cage and peered in.

Her voice was soft and mellow, not the cracked voice one would expect from her withered old face, "Hello there Kringle."

Santa's view was obscured by the cloak of grey hair hanging down between the old woman's face and his cage but the moment she spoke his name, he knew hers.

"Befana. It has been a long time."

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The woman was remarkably spry for her aged appearance. She plopped down on the floor next to the cage and sat cross-legged as she addressed the elf in the cage, "What are you doing here Santa?"

Unaccustomed to having his near infinite knowledge and powers held in check, the elf shook his fist at the old woman, "You let me out of here this instant you old bitch!"

“Now Santa, those are some harsh words to casually toss around between old friends. Relax, I’m not here to hunt you, I’m here to ask questions.”

“Then why the cage old woman?”

Befana smiled and gave a small chuckle when she answered, “Because I knew you wouldn’t sit still long enough to answer me... old man.”

Santa grabbed one of the bars of the cage and instantly pulled his hand back. The golden cage was charged with the same elfin magic he used. When he touched it, the feedback loop was overwhelming.

“You really should relax. Every move you make only justifies my use of the cage.”

Resigned to being caught, Santa stood in the middle of the cage with his arms crossed, still defiant toward his captor but less angry now. “So what’s this all about then?”

“I’m the one asking questions if you don’t mind Kringle.” Befana chuckled, “Oh, I just sounded like a movie star cop didn’t I?” Amused with herself, the woman stood and walked to the end of the hall once more. She flicked on the lightswitch and the hall flooded with the glow of the single overhead incandescent bulb. “If you don’t mind the light, my eyes aren’t what they used to be.”

With the additional light, Santa saw his old friend in her usual garb. She looked like a Halloween witch before they “sexified” the image with wet leather and corsets.

He shot a barb her way, “Still dressing like Baba Yaga I see?”

“And why not?” Befana shot back, “She was as good a friend as any back in the day. I see you’re still dressing up as a Coca-Cola commercial?”

“This is the look they expect when ‘Jolly St. Nick’ arrives, so I give it to them.”

“You’re three feet tall and you’ve got Spock ears! They’re expecting a six foot white man you idiot.”

The venom of the conversation lulled as Santa despondently replied, “Yeah, no one reads that poem closely enough. Miniature sleigh, eight tiny reindeer. Christ, he even wrote that I’m a ‘right jolly old elf’. He frigging spells it out, E-L-F... yet they always expect the Coke image.”

There was a pause as the two of them laughed a bit in spite of the circumstances.

“What happened to you Kringle? Why are you back? And why did you switch teams?”

“I never left Befana, I was just pushed into the background. I’m not part of Christmas anymore.”

The old woman thought back to the night she sheltered the three astrologers on their trip to see the newborn Jesus, “That happens to all of us Kringle, time moves on without us. You are not the first of us to be phased out of the season, out of the hearts of men.”

The elf objected to her speculation, “But the season grew a life of its own. I’ve been outsourced old friend. My reason to exist is still out there, only they’ve downsized my job. I...” Santa paused and directly addressed the old woman, “You and I Befana, us and the dozens of others like us, we used to deliver rewards to the children of the world, we used to spread happiness and cheer, remember?”

Santa looked into the eyes of the old woman, she was deep in the memories of the old times.

“Have you watched the faces of the children today? Have you seen happiness and joy? No, of course you haven’t. You’ve seen greed, you see spoiled brats falling prey to rampant commercialism. We used to give candy, berries and nuts or simple wooden toys and the children would light up with surprise.”

Befana interrupted, “They still light up Santa, not all of them are spoiled like you say they are.”

The elf dismissed her assertion with a wave of his hand, “They light up for an hour. Or at least until the batteries go dead on the new gadget. On one of the many gadgets they’ll get this year. And when it breaks, they’ll pine for the newest gadget next year. And they expect it Befana, they are spoiled! They are being bred as consumers, not people. They don’t deserve rewards, they need to be taught a lesson.”

Up to this point, Befana’s voice sounded like she would offer you milk and some home made cookies. But now her voice became stern and louder, “That was The Krampus’ job Kringle, **NOT** yours.”

Santa looked up at the old woman’s face, “He’s dead and gone Befana, he’s as cold and dead as your dear friend Baba Yaga. They took Krampus out of the ever increasingly sanitized Christmas lineup and look what happened to him. They forgot about him and now he’s gone. All the old gods are dying off as we are forgotten. One by one, we fade from this world. WalMart has taken over my job of rewarding the good, Krampus isn’t here to terrorize the brats, so I’ll take over his job of punishing the naughty. If I don’t, I’ll have no purpose and then...”

“And then you’ll die.”

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Santa watched as Befana let a tear roll down her cheek. It was followed by several more, forming a wet stream down her face. Santa carefully reached through the bars and offered her his handkerchief. She took it and nodded her thanks as she blotted her eyes dry.

“I am feeling rather old myself Kringle. The end is coming soon enough, why prolong it? If we are destined to die, how can we fight it?”

The elf smiled in disbelief, “You talk of destiny... have you forgotten who you are? Have you forgotten that we are gods ourselves? We may be the last remnants of the old guard but we are still members of an elite class of immortals. I have absolute power. I see all, I know all, I reward, I punish. How is this NOT a definition of god?”

Befana’s aging body was aching as she sat on the wooden floor. She shifted her legs and sat back against the far wall as she spoke, “There is a reason they forgot about The Krampus, they didn’t want him around anymore. He was terrifying. He ruined the spirit of what we were trying to build Christmas up to be.”

“They may not have wanted him, but they needed him. They need someone in that role Befana. Look at what they have become without him. Look at what has happened to your beloved Christmas spirit. Do you see any shred of it left in the hypnotized faces of the Mall-Zombies? Do you see one shred of it left in the empty coffers of the charity collectors?”

Santa’s voice began steadily rising, his face was gleaming, his energy pulsed with each word he spoke, “Every Thanksgiving and Christmas church-goers flood the shelters and carve turkeys in front of the news cameras but where are they the other three hundred and sixty three days of the year?”

His voice was now booming from the rafters, bellowing louder than his small body could possibly project. He spread his arms as wide as the cage would allow, “Where is this spirit of charity you claim to be nurturing?! It has been brutally murdered and they are the ones responsible for it! I AM VENGEANCE, I will give the naughty children of the world something very real to dread, I am Krampus reborn!”

The room shook with Santa Claus’ voice echoing like a thunderclap in the silence. Relieved that she had shifted away from the cage, Befana stared at her old compatriot with wondrous shame and contempt, “You’ve gone mad with power old Kringle.”

The elf only responded with a single “Hmmpf.”

“Maybe recent years have been unkind to you but you had a good run of it, better than most. Now we must make way for the young gods. You don’t get to reinvent yourself when it comes time for you to bow out. You don’t get to impersonate long dead gods. We are not immortal, we live in the hearts of mankind. And when they chose to discard us, we die. It is the way of things.”

Santa gave a sly smile at the old woman. His voice once again returning to the calm restraint of a wise old man, “Maybe for you tired old Befana, maybe for you. But I don’t intend to make it so easy for them. They may associate the name ‘Santa Claus’ with images of a non-existent kindly old fat man who buys his toys at Best-Buy but they will also remember the name of our fallen friend Krampus. I will rebuild his cause, I will carry on his legacy. Naughty children will fear the dark hours of Christmas once again.”

The old woman shook her head in disbelief, “What happened to that grateful orphan I once loved? When did you turn so dark? You’ve become a monster.”

The ugly little elf sighed and stared at the floor, “That’s a disappointment Befana, I was hoping you would join me. We could have teamed up, just like the old days. You rewarding, me punishing, traveling together...”

“Those were your good old days Kringle, you and Krampus, I’ve never murdered children and I can’t in good conscious allow you to continue executing innocent children on Christmas Eve.”

“Innocent?” Santa called out in mock surprise, “You call them innocent? These kids drive a world economy that is overinflated and ready to burst. They demand the latest toys before the old ones are ever out of the boxes they arrive in. They cry and complain until their parents, who are just as spoiled as their children are, give in and buy it for them just to shut them up! There’s no innocence left in this world Befana, you know this as much as anyone.” After a small pause and clearing his throat, he continued, “And how dare you accuse me of murder. I’ve never hurt these children...”

Hoping to drive the point home and dissuade him from his plans, she began to assault him, trying to break him down, “No, you absolve yourself from your guilt by forcing them to face their evil deeds all at once. At least your pet Krampus had the nerve to carry them off and kill them himself. You don’t have the stomach to take on Krampus’ mantle. You’re nothing but a neutered and weak impression of him.” As soon as the words came out of her mouth, Befana discovered that she regretted turning on her friend. “I’m sorry Kringle, I... I just don’t know anymore.”

Santa Claus smiled at her, “Well... It’s been nice chatting with you old friend, let’s catch up again some time when we’re both not so busy, I really would like to see you again. But right now, I’ve got some work to do...”

With that, he placed his finger aside his nose and simply disappeared from the golden cage.

Happy Christmas to all, and to all, you better watch out...

Written 2011, December 14 and 15.