



## Chapter One

**W**hen I was small, one of my friends said something really silly. He said that Father Christmas didn't exist.


'So where do all the Christmas presents come from?' I asked him. He didn't have an answer.

'I don't know,' he said. 'It's just something my older sister told me.'

'Who comes down the chimney and eats the mince pies and drinks the brandy?' I asked.


'Who rides the sleigh?'

My friend was silent for a while.




‘You know what?’ he said. ‘You’re right. I don’t know why I brought it up. Do you want to play marbles?’

That night, I had trouble getting to sleep. I had won the argument, but my friend had planted a tiny seed of doubt in my mind. What if Father Christmas *wasn’t* real?



As Christmas approached, I began to ask myself all sorts of worrying questions: who *was* Father Christmas? Why did he bring presents? How did he deliver them all in one night? How did it all start?



I made up my mind that there was only one way to find out the truth. I had to meet Father Christmas, face to face.

Of course, I didn’t tell anyone about my plan. My parents would have tried to stop me, and my twin sisters would have wanted to tag along, even though they were much too young. This

was a serious operation and I couldn't risk it going wrong.

Finally, Christmas Eve arrived, and my parents came up to kiss me goodnight.

'Do you know what day it is tomorrow?' asked my mother, her eyes twinkling.

'Is it Wednesday?' I asked, pretending not to care.

She looked at my father, who shrugged.

'Yes, darling,' she said, trying to maintain an air of suspense. 'It is Wednesday. But it's also Christmas Day.'

'Oh,' I said. 'I'm not really that interested in Christmas.'

'Really?' said my father. They both looked very disappointed, and for a very brief moment I felt bad for tricking them.

'It's okay, I suppose,' I said, 'if you like presents and chocolate and sweets and things



like that, but I prefer to work through a few maths problems while listening to classical music.’ And then I faked a big yawn and closed my eyes.

‘Whatever makes you happy, darling,’ said my mother, sounding worried. They kissed me goodnight, switched out the light, and went downstairs.

I lay there in the dark, with my eyes closed, listening. I could hear my sisters in their bedroom down the hall, talking in their own special made-up language, which only they could understand. Usually, when I heard them talking like that it made me feel a bit left out, but not tonight, because I knew that I was doing something very special.

Eventually, my sisters fell quiet and the house suddenly seemed very deep and dark. I could hear the low murmur of my parents talking



downstairs, but soon that stopped too, and then the stairs creaked as they made their way up to bed.

I knew they might look in on me, so I acted as if I was fast asleep.

‘Goodnight, little man,’ my father whispered, as he gently moved my head back on to the pillow and pulled the covers up to keep me warm. Then I smelled my mother’s perfume as she gave me a kiss. The door closed, and I heard their footsteps crossing the landing to their bedroom.

I lay still, listening in the darkness. After what felt like the longest time, I decided it was safe enough to half-open one eye. My bedside clock showed a quarter to twelve. I had never, ever been awake that late before, and I wondered for a moment if, when it struck midnight, I would be turned to stone, like a child in a fairy tale.

I pulled back the covers, swung my feet



down on to the rug and tiptoed to the window. Outside, the window ledge was covered in snow. The moon was thin but bright, and in our neighbour's garden a fox picked its way across the white lawn. Above me, the blue-black sky was scattered with stars and little wisps of cloud. Nothing moved. No shooting stars, no satellites, not even a trundling planet. And definitely no reindeer-drawn sleigh.

I slunk back into bed. Using both pillows, together with one of the cushions from the chair, I made a sort of bed-throne, so that I could sit up and watch the open sky. Whatever happened, I wasn't going to sleep. I was going to wait until Father Christmas came.



It was the bells I heard first. I had expected





*A fox picked its way across the white lawn.*



jingle bells, like the ones in the song, but these sounded more like Alpine cowbells. I ran to the window. The sky was empty, just as before. Way off in the distance I heard the bells stop and start, growing a little louder each time. Little by little, they grew closer, and my excitement mounted. Then, finally, when they were at their loudest, there was a huge bang, followed by a loud grinding and sliding, and the whole ceiling shook. I'd always thought Father Christmas arrived quietly, but I couldn't have been more wrong. No wonder he has to wait until everyone is fast asleep!

Quick as a flash, I pulled on my dressing gown, slid my feet into my slippers, snatched up my toy rabbit and ran downstairs. Bold as you like, I burst through the sitting-room door and rushed to the fireplace. Lumps of soot fell into the cold grate. Father Christmas was coming!



Or, at least, he was trying to. The soot kept falling, and up in the chimney there were the muffled sounds of a struggle.

*'Urgggghhh,'* I heard him say. 'You'd think one person would clean their chimney on Christmas Eve, but, oh, no.'

There was a shout, followed by a falling noise, followed by a someone-getting-stuck-in-a-chimney noise. There was the sound of wriggling and muttering, and then a tiny figure fell into the fireplace.

I had always imagined Father Christmas to be a giant, but the creature in front of me was minute. He had a bit of a tummy, though he wasn't what you'd call fat. He wore an old-fashioned red velvet jacket, embroidered with green, with matching red velvet trousers and dark-brown leather boots. He also had pointy ears and a turned-up nose, with short curly

white hair stuffed under a red velvet cap. Suddenly it struck me. Father Christmas wasn't a person at all. He was an *elf*!

'Oh!' I shouted, in shock.

'Ah!' shouted Father Christmas, and jumped in fright, knocking over the fire irons, stumbling backwards and landing flat on his bottom in the fireplace.

'Ow!' he said. 'My ankle! I think I've twisted it.'

'I'm so sorry,' I said, feeling very guilty. 'It's my fault for scaring you. Let me help you up.'

I took him by the arm and helped him to his feet.

'Ouch!' he said. 'I can't put any weight on it, look.'

He tried to stand but was obviously in quite a lot of pain, so I lifted him by his armpits and sat him in my father's armchair.

‘Hello,’ he said, trying to compose himself as he took me in with his bright blue eyes. ‘Umm . . . I’m a . . . chimney inspector. From the council. And I’ve been told to inspect this chimney. I’ve had a look, and it’s fine, so I’m going now. Thank you so much for your help.’


‘A chimney inspector?’ I asked, pointing at a box of Lego that was poking out of his sack. ‘Are you sure?’ He quickly pushed the Lego back inside the sack and looked at me defiantly.

‘That?’ he said. ‘That’s my Lego. Lots of grown-ups do Lego. It’s a thing.’

‘You can’t fool me,’ I said. ‘I know who you are.’

‘You do?’

‘Of course,’ I said, trying to keep my cool. I was, after all, in the presence of a global superstar. ‘Everyone does. You’re Father Christmas. Every year children write a Christmas list, with all




the presents we'd like, and send it to you at the North Pole. You have a workshop, where your elves make the presents—'

'Woah, woah, woah,' he said. 'They aren't *my* elves. They're my *employees* and they come to the workshop because they want to.'

'Aha!' I said, with a clap of my hands. 'So you are Father Christmas!'

'Ah,' said the elf, looking like he'd been caught out.



'Shall I tell you what else I know about you?' I asked.

'I've a feeling you might,' he replied.

'Well, on Christmas Eve you load all the presents on to your sleigh and your nine reindeer, Prancer and Dancer, Donner and Blitzen, Comet and Cupid, Dasher and Vixen, plus Rudolph, pull it through the sky.'

'Go on,' he said.

‘At each house, you land your sleigh on the roof and then climb down the chimney to leave the presents by the Christmas tree. Exactly like you’re doing now. So you must be Father Christmas.’

‘It’s possible,’ he said. ‘It’s very possible. In fact . . .’ He took a long pause, and looked me right in the eye. ‘You’re right.’

And then he smiled. It was like someone had turned on a sunlamp. His eyes twinkled with kindness, and I felt a wave of happiness lift me like a toy boat in a bathtub. All my doubts were gone. Father Christmas was real, and here he was, in my very own house.

‘You must be Jackson,’ he said. ‘Why are you up so late, when everyone else is sleeping?’

‘I was waiting for you,’ I said. ‘I want to ask you a really important question. Can I?’

‘Shoot,’ said Father Christmas.

‘Who are you?’ I asked.

‘Who am I?’ asked Father Christmas.

‘How did all this start? How did you *become* Father Christmas?’

Father Christmas nodded slowly, as if my curiosity ever so slightly impressed him. ‘Do you really want to know?’ He smiled.

‘More than anything,’ I replied.

‘Are you super-triple-sure?’ asked Father Christmas. ‘It might not be the story you are expecting.’

‘No good story is,’ I said.

‘That’s true,’ said Father Christmas. ‘That’s very true.’ He poked a finger into a pocket of his waistcoat, and pulled out a silver pocket watch. ‘Well, I am slightly ahead of schedule. I suppose . . .’ Once again, he looked me right in the eye. ‘I suppose, as you’ve been *very* good, I could tell it to you quickly.’

‘Yes, please,’ I said.

Now, one thing you need to know about me is that I have an extraordinary memory. I can remember the dates and times of every single meal I have ever eaten – cheese sandwich, mustard instead of pickle, twelve-thirty p.m. three Wednesdays ago, being one such example – and my memory means that when someone tells me something, I can repeat every single word in exact order, for ever.

So, when I say that this is what Father Christmas told me, well . . . it’s as good as him telling it to you himself . . .