

Santa Claus

VS

THE ALIENS



James Cardona

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Praise for Santa Claus Vs. The Aliens

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CHAPTER 1

THE UGLY RING

It was a bright, brisk morning, so different than the previous dark and cloudy night, the night that he threw the ring. He woke up feeling empty, suddenly, like nothing was inside of him. He felt like just an empty shell. Rolling out of his bed oh so quietly, he softly scuffled past the rows upon rows of beds in order to not wake the others, over to the bathroom somehow not knowing who he was anymore. He planned to brush his teeth and slowly wake himself up just like he did every morning but pausing and looking in the mirror he only saw a reflection of his father's face, thirty years younger, and quietly realized what he must do. He couldn't run from it, he couldn't hide from it; he was his father's son. Maybe he would never have a relationship with his father, maybe he would never see him again, but he knew right at that moment what he must do, he must get that ring back.

He washed, brushed and dressed, slowly and

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methodically, putting on his dusty-brown, patch-work coat, the only one he owned, and headed for the door as quietly as he could, already planning how he would sneak out past the Penguins. The Nuns, they ran the place but all the kids called them Penguins since they always wore funny looking black and white outfits. *Some of them even walked like penguins*, the young boy thought.

The other kids in the bunkroom, the left-behind kids, those without parents, the ones who no one came to pick up for the holidays, were all trying to sleep in. It was Wednesday but there was no school today; it was Christmas Eve after all. As he walked past the last bunk Frankie spoke out without moving, “Where ya headin', Cardona?”

Edwin whispered, “Nowhere. I lost sumin” last night. Goin” ta look for it.” The last thing Edwin wanted was Frankie tagging along but even though he tried to sound unemotional his voice couldn't help but show it.

“Wait. I goin” witcha. I'll help ya find what ya lost.” The way Frankie said it there was no arguing. Frankie was the toughest of the bunkroom and he always made sure everyone knew it too. All the other kids were afraid of him. They all did what he said. Edwin Cardona wasn't afraid of him, he told himself, but he always tried to maneuver him and direct him, to keep Frankie on his good side and not directly challenge his authority, especially in front of the others. He wouldn't back down from Frankie if he got right in his face, he told himself, but he hoped it would never come to that.

“Okay,” he said then whispered so only Frankie could hear, “but hurry up, I got a lot to do today.” He lied. He had nothing in the world to do today but he hoped just a little harder that maybe Frankie wouldn't come.

Frankie leapt from his bunk with a crash, the mattress springs squeaking, and stomped off to the bathroom, hollering, “Don't rush me! I'll be right there!”

Taboo, one of the newest kids, whined from his bunk, “Why the loud noise?”

Frankie turned on his heel and barked, “What'd you say?”

No one moved, even the ones in their beds held their breaths and after a few moments of silence Frankie replied sharply, “Thasss what I thought!” and returned to his self cleaning procedure loudly obliterating his favorite songs, *One Mint Julep* and once he got to the part where he didn't know the words he quickly switched to *Earth Angel*, then, finally, on to decimating Billy Ward and the Dominoes” *Have Mercy Baby*. It was 1954 and of course everyone loved *Have Mercy Baby*, which was why it was so painful to hear Frankie's version, but no one dared comment.

Frankie finished, stormed out of the bathroom, slammed the door then announced, “Lesss go, Cardona. Lesss find ya stuff.”

The two fourteen-year-olds slid down the banister of the New York City building, floor after floor, Frankie on the left and Edwin on the right, each trying to reach

the bottom the fastest. Edwin took the right side because it was closer to the wall and he could reach out his hand and hold it to balance. Frankie took the left, as he always did, because the only thing to grab onto was air and he liked the fact that he was the only one who would dare slide down on that side. Edwin knew that he could get down faster than Frankie since he had the wall to steady himself but he didn't dare beat him. It wasn't worth it. Especially not today. As they neared the first floor landing Frankie slowed intentionally, looking over at Edwin, smirking. Suddenly noticing that Frankie had slowed and Edwin might beat him, Edwin squeezed down his thighs hard, in a panic, his thighs burning from the friction, almost coming to a complete stop on the center of the railing. Frankie slid in slowly, looking over at him the whole time, leapt off the bottom step and said calmly, "Thasss right. I win," then strutted toward the front door without turning back.

Edwin ran to catch up, trying to not think about his burnt inner thighs.

"Now where'd ya lose ya stuff?" Frankie said, still walking, not having the slightest idea where he was going.

"Down past Grant's. By the west side field. Riverside," Edwin said quietly, knowing it was outside of the Children's Home, off limits and the only way to get there would be to sneak out.

Frankie knew better than anyone how to sneak out of the Children's Home. He loved tricking the Penguins and he loved the fact that he knew ways out that no one

else had yet found. He ordered, “Lesss go. The Penguins got nothin” on me.”

The two boys snuck out easy enough and took a train to Manhattan getting out on one of the local stops that the two knew well. They walked around the outside of Columbia University, past their big walls that bordered Harlem, both somehow knowing what neither of them had ever said, that those walls were there to keep kids like them out.

They headed west, away from Frankie's normal territory of East Harlem. Frankie still called it Italian Harlem, refusing to acknowledge the fact that everyone knew. The Puerto Ricans were taking over. They had been moving in and the Italians moving out for so long now that no one called it *Italian* anymore and that made Frankie mad. Spanish Harlem had quietly grown hungry, rose up and swallowed the Italian section whole while no one was looking. Frankie was a proud Italian. Too proud maybe and maybe too proud of the wrong things. He loved gangster movie, especially ones where Italians, preferably dark-skinned Sicilians with hairy knuckles and fat pinky rings, sprayed *coppers* with bullets from their Tommy guns and uttered memorable, inspirational and motivational phrases such as, “Die, Copper, Die,” or, “You dirty rat, I’ll fill ya full of lead.”

Just as they reached the back edge of Riverside Park, Grant's Tomb in sight, Frankie slugged Edwin on the arm and said, “Who's buried in Grant's Tomb, Cardona?”

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Knowing the obvious answer and that Frankie never asked obvious questions, he replied with trepidation, “Grant?”

Frankie, walking wider now, smacked the back of Edwin's head hard, then yelped, “No, you dunce! No one is buried there! Grant is *entombed*. I heard it last night on *You Bet Your Life*. Boy is that Groucho...”

Frankie stopped quick and turned hard when Edwin grabbed his arm and said slowly, voice shaking, “Frankie, don't wild out now. You run the bunkroom and I ain't askin” about that b-b-but if you ever do that again we're comin” ta blows.”

Frankie squeezed his eyes down tight and squinted back through two slits, looked around to make sure they were alone then laughed, “Ha ha ha. Yeah, okay kid.” Edwin exhaled a sigh, his breath forming a cold mist in front of him as Frankie walked off.

They both scuttled around the building cutting through the well worn dirt path along the back side of Grant's tomb and on through the trees and bushes that led to the open field, one of the few in this area of Manhattan where kids could play football without having to worry about the traffic or being tackled on the pavement when they played in the street between the rows of parked cars that lined either side. They stopped on the edge of the field. It was still early, only a few people were in the park, just two parents with a baby stroller walking all the way on the other side of the field, appearing to thoroughly enjoy the view of the river.

“So where issit?” Frankie asks.

“I dunno. I threw it.”

Then came the question that Edwin knew was coming ever since Frankie decided to come along in the bunkroom, the question he was trying to avoid and the one he knew Frankie would ask if he tagged along, “What issit anyway? What’d ya lose?”

Not wanting to give too much information, not wanting to say anything really, but having to say something, he answered quietly, looking away, “A ring.”

Frankie's eyes lit up as he began to scan the ground, “Ohh really?”

They both looked at the ground and walked slowly, searching for the ring, Frankie in meandering circles, loops, figure-eights and arcs that often crossed themselves, Edwin in a systematic grid pattern similar to one he would use if he were mowing the grass. Frankie had no idea where Edwin threw it so he kept somewhat close to him, looking hard, trying to find it first.

Edwin saw a glint about ten yards away and in excitement pointed, exclaiming, “I think I see it,” then instantly wished he could grab his words back from the air.

Frankie and Edwin both ran and dove for it but Frankie got to it first, clutching the ring tightly, yelling, “I got it! I got it!”

They both stood up and Edwin stretched out his hand saying, “C’mon, Frankie, ya know that’s mine! Cough it up now!” He was desperate to have it.

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Frankie clutched it tightly and turned his back to Edwin. “Now wait a minute here... Lemme see, lemme see...” He opened his hand to see a face staring back at him. It was a large ring, a gaudy ring, a ring that would cover half of a person’s hand if someone would even dare to wear it. It had a silvery color and that’s what interested Frankie but the big face on it... No, that was too ugly and too weird. *Who would buy such a ring?* Frankie thought.

Frankie scratched at it with his fingernail with a look on his face of consternation while Edwin kept trying to circle around Frankie’s constantly turning back.

‘This ain’t gold, Cardona, and it ain’t no silver neither. It don’t feel like no metal at all... It feel... summin’... like... bone?’

He suddenly turned and threw it at Edwin’s chest saying, “Here, you keep it. Isss junk.”

Edwin quickly retrieved the ring from the ground, not saying a word, when he noticed the two parents had left the path and were both pushing the large baby stroller across the field toward them. Frankie saw it too. At the same time they both realized that they didn’t look quite like parents at all. They couldn’t be could they? They were both men. Funny looking men, strange looking men who walked funny too. They both had on nearly identical black suits, the off-the-rack kind that they sold down at Macy’s on 34th Street and large black hats covering their completely bald heads. But it wasn’t so much the clothes that struck them odd and it wasn’t so much that they were both completely bald, it was how the clothes moved. Their

upper bodies were taunt and rigid, gripping the humongous stroller firm with both hands, a stroller so large that it took both of them to push it, their arms locked out straight and unmoving while their legs walked toward them, stepping in unison. The odd thing was their legs seemed to bend back just a little too far, a little farther than normal, like *how-could-their-legs-bend-like-that* far, as if they had no knee caps to stop their legs from bending backwards like that. And their hips, they had an odd sort of pivot, as if the bones came out the side a bit before heading down.

'Cast an eyeball at these two," Frankie whispered under his breath.

The two forgot about the ring as they stared at the strange looking, strange walking men pushing the strange looking, unusually large baby stroller towards them. Then, when they were about three-hundred feet away, Frankie, attempting to sound nonchalant, said, "I found your ring for ya, now I'm breezin" over ta Rau's. A young Italian's gotta feed ya know." Frankie quickly moved away, eyes still glancing back at the strange sight, leaving Edwin standing there.

As they got closer, Edwin shook his head as if he was shaking himself awake from a trance then realized that they were heading directly toward him and a shudder suddenly crossed his spine. He quickly stuck the ring in his pocket and dodged to the right towards a small patch of trees at the edge of the field. Once he reached the trees he ducked behind a large oak, turned and peered back, his

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hand in his pocket still clutching the ring, and saw the two strange-looking men continuing to push the humungous baby stroller as if they never even saw him. They reached the end of the field then turned around, shifted a little to the right, then headed back towards the river. Edwin tucked himself behind the oak tree and watched them, back and forth, back and forth, traversing the field. As they got closer to him he heard them talking -I guess you could call it talking- in a strange language that sounded like a series of clicks, snaps and beeps and he didn't know what to make of it. Edwin was mesmerized by the two. He had never seen anything like them. It was still pretty cold out but Edwin decided he could stay there and handle the cold for a bit and watch the two strange characters.

Where were they from? Africa? Mongolia? China? Edwin wondered, There are so many different people in New York from all over the world, but I never seen anything like this!

Finally they passed just on the other side of the tree, his tree, the tree he was hiding behind, but this time they stopped. They were so close he could almost reach out and touch them. He heard them speaking again in their clicking-snapping-beeping language and it sounded like they were arguing. Edwin didn't think anything of that though. Edwin had heard lots of languages that sounded like arguing or yelling if you didn't know what the people were saying. But there was something else there too. Another sound. It was almost like a low hum followed by a slurp and it seemed to be coming from the

baby stroller. Edwin didn't want to move from the tree but he wanted to look too.

They didn't seem ta see me when I was standin' in the middle of the field, maybe they won't notice me if I peek around this tree, Edwin thought.

'Slurp. Slurp. Slurp,' came from the other side of the tree, louder this time.

He got down on the ground and crawled around the tree just enough so he could see a little. The front wheel of the baby stroller was next to his forehead and Edwin couldn't see much, just the two strange looking men arguing and pointing at something inside of the stroller. The slurping noise was definitely coming from the stroller Edwin realized. He shifted himself on the ground as quietly as he could, trying to get a better view when his head bumped the wheel of the baby stroller and POW! something hit Edwin on the head like a lightning strike and the humming and slurping stopped. He pulled himself back as quick as he could, smashed his back tight against the tree and tried to not make a sound. His ears were ringing painfully.

Boy, did that hurt! What was that! Edwin thought, hoping the men wouldn't find him and if they did that they wouldn't be angry with him.

The two men were silent on the other side of the tree. Edwin couldn't hear them talking; he couldn't hear them moving; his ears rang painfully.

'What are they doing over there? Are they gonna come get me?' Edwin worried.

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A few minutes passed and his head began to clear. After waiting nervously about ten minutes longer he couldn't take it anymore. *If they're gonna goon out on me, then let's have it*, he thought. He shakily stood up and carefully stepped out from behind the oak tree to see that the two men had pushed the stroller away and were down by the edge of the field again. Edwin wiped the cold sweat from his forehead and decided that he was done watching these two strange characters. He was shivering.

He hustled back towards the city, hand still in his pocket caressing the ring, then pulled it out to look at it once more, just to make sure he really, truly had it, the ring he almost lost forever. It was just a big, stupid ring, certainly ugly by any standard, with a giant grinning face on it that kind of reminded him of Santa Claus. Not the Santa Claus everyone is used to seeing, the happy, jolly Santa Claus with the big white beard, rosy cheeks and plump red nose, but the old-timey Santa Claus, Kris Kringle he thought they called him, with the tall, pointy hat and a longish face. And right where the nose was supposed to be was a red jewel. Edwin used to think that it was a ruby when he first got it but it didn't look like any ruby he had ever seen in any of the jewelry store windows. It was just a flat, round, cloudy, red stone. It didn't have any precision cuts on it like the ones in the jewelry store. It was just a little red rock.

And the stone, where they put it, right on the tip of his nose, why would anyone wear summin' like this? Edwin thought.

“Well, anyway, it’s all I got and I guess that’s good enough,” he told himself as he placed it back in his pocket and shuffled back toward Broadway.

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