

Chapter One

The old elf sat on the porch of his cozy little cabin and gazed sightlessly out at the world, feeling, at once, worn out and useless. He sighed and rubbed a gnarled hand along his thigh. How frail he felt. How insubstantial.

Insignificant.

He sighed again and shuffled his feet, trying to find a comfortable position on his chair. He rocked back and forth, silently, for a few minutes.

Finally, he grunted and reached for his cane. Levering himself to his feet, he stood for a moment, securing his balance, then shuffled slowly to the end of the porch. Reaching it, he turned carefully and shuffled back.

Several times, he moved slowly across the porch.

Finally, exhausted, he dropped back into the chair and sighed again.

How long till supper? He tipped his head and listened to the sounds around him. The familiar sounds that had formed a background accompaniment to his life for as long as he could remember. The claps and bangs in the heavy production sheds. The ‘happy’, soft taps of the finer craftsmen. The wheeze and grunt of machinery. The occasional snatch of music. The giggles and chirps from the testing sheds.

There was a sudden sound of something heavy passing by overhead and then, a short time later, the unusual sound of shouts, but, other than that, all was as it had been for generations.

Suddenly, he heard the blare of a large, deep horn.

Ah. Break time. Only . . . he scrunched up his face thoughtfully . . . three and a half hours till supper.

Three and a half hours to get through. Then he could eat.

Then three more hours to get through and he could go to bed.

He sighed a third time.

“Grampa?” The sweet, little voice came from his left.

He jumped and turned his head.

“Yes?” his voice, so seldom used, came out gravelly and thin. He cleared his throat. “Who’s there?” he demanded.

“I walked over to see you. All by myself!” the little voice said.

Ah. Now he could identify his visitor.

Amy. His littlest grandchild. And only granddaughter. He reached out his hand. "Come closer, dear," he said gently. Soft hair touched his hand. He spread his fingers, sliding them over the small head. "Amy," he said, smiling.

Something thumped on the floor beside his chair and little arms crept around his chest. Then a small, warm body snuggled close. "I came all by myself!" The words emerged slightly muffled.

"All by yourself! Well, that *is* exciting!"

He could feel her smooth cheeks move against him as she smiled.

"Mama says that I can walk to your place whenever I want now," she went on, "because I'm going to be five!"

"Five *is* a great age," the old elf agreed. "Almost a lady!"

She giggled and snuggled closer. "I love to be with you, Grandpa," she whispered.

"And I love to be with you, my littlest Angel," he said.

She giggled again, then straightened away from him. "But, Grandpa, I brought you something!" She moved away from him briefly and he felt a sudden chill.

"What is it, Angel?" he asked.

Then she was back. She grabbed his hand and guided it to something she was holding.

His searching fingers encountered . . . wood.

"This feels like a piece of wood," he said, puzzled.

"It is!" Amy crowed excitedly. "The prettiest piece I have ever seen! I brought it for you!"

"For me?" The old elf frowned. "Whatever for?"

"I want you to make me something."

The words came out so calmly that, for a moment, he wasn't sure what she had said. Finally, "Make you something?" he asked.

"Yes, Grandpa. I want you to carve me something, like you did for all the other kids."

The old elf sat still, the lump of wood heavy and chill in his hand.

"Grampa?" The sweet voice was growing . . . uncertain. She jiggled his arm. "Grampa?"

He sighed again and lifted the piece, thrusting it back towards her. "I can't, Angel," he whispered. "I just can't."

"But why, Grampa?"

He could hear the tears behind the words.

"Why?" she repeated, the word almost a wail.

"I'm too old, Angel," he said, softly. "And I can't see."

"You don't need to see," the little voice came back, confident once more. "Papa says you only need hands. And heart." Her arms were around him once more and she squeezed him tightly. "I know you can do it," she whispered. "Papa says you are the finest carver in all of the North Pole."

"Your Papa says that, does he?"

"I heard him," she said. "He was talking to Mr. Poole – you know, from next door – and they were talking about the new toys Papa was designing for this season. And Papa said that he wished he had some of your talent. Or that you would carve again."

She giggled. "That's when I got my idea!"

"Your Papa says I have . . . talent?" For a moment, the old elf blinked his eyes quickly. Then he rubbed his free hand across them.

"Are you all right, Grampa?"

He cleared his throat. "I'm fine, Angel."

"So . . . are you going to make me something?"

He lifted the wood towards her once more. "I can't, Angel," he whispered, brokenly. "I wish I could, but I just can't."

"But . . . Grampa . . ."

"I'm sorry, darling."

"Well, you can have the wood, anyways," she sighed. "It's really pretty, just like it is!"

He lowered the wood, setting it, finally, in his lap.

"I have to go, Grampa," the little girl said. She threw her arms around him and gave him another squeeze.

"But you just got here!" he protested.

“I know, but Mama told me that, if I showed I could walk over here and come straight back, that she would let me come again!”

The old elf digested that for a moment. “Well, so long as you can come back . . .” he said.

“Ex-actly!” she sang out. “Bye, Grampa!”

“Goodbye, my Angel,” he said. “Come back really soon!”

“Really, really soon!” she said.

He heard her little feet clatter down the steps and along the walkway in front of his home, growing steadily fainter until they had faded completely away.

He sighed and ran his hands over the chunk of wood. It felt smooth and cool to his touch. Heavy. The kind of wood that he would have chosen himself . . . if he had still been a carver.

He dropped it to the floor beside his chair and sighed. Then he leaned back and rested his head against the back of the chair and started rocking. Unbidden, pictures suddenly came to his mind. Beautiful pieces he had carved in the past. Dolls, soldiers, and animals by the dozens. Trains, airplanes, boats, trucks and cars. Intricate and delicate machines that could be wound to produce music or to entertain.

Every day had been an endless procession of figurines and toys, lovingly and painstakingly carved. And he had loved every minute of it.

Even Santa had spoken of him often, mentioning his name at nearly every year-end review.

It had been a wonderful and enjoyable life. And he had lived it. Fully. Completely.

And now it was over.

He had continued carving even as his eyesight had slowly failed him. Carved as lights became dimmer. As sunrises and sunsets became muted. Less spectacular.

Carved until the light finally left him. Until the darkness closed over him, encasing him in eternal night.

Forever.

He rocked, heedless of the tears that ran down wrinkled, leathery cheeks to drip from his chin and spot his worn and patched sweater. Heedless, for once, of the passing minutes.

Finally, he stopped rocking and leaned forward, both hands on his bony knees. Then he slowly reached down, groping a bit until his searching fingers once more encountered the piece of wood. He lifted it to his face and sniffed, smiling suddenly.

Ah, the smell of potential. Of possibilities.

He sat quiet for a few more minutes, content to hold the piece. To run expert fingers over it. Take note of its unique characteristics. Then he reached, once more, for his cane. Carefully, he stood up, leaning heavily against it.

For several seconds, he stood there.

Then, for the first time in a decade, he turned and walked, with purpose, into the cabin.

The low cupboard door, at first, resisted his efforts to open it. Finally, he sat on the smoothly polished floor in front of it, braced both of his feet against the wall on either side and heaved. The door popped open suddenly, upending him, and he landed unceremoniously on his back. For a moment, he lay there, collecting himself.

Then he sat up and crawled back to the cupboard. Gingerly, he reached inside, fumbling around in the dust for the toolbox that he knew should be in there.

Finally, his questing fingers encountered smooth wood. He brushed off the ten years accumulation of soft dust which coated the box, and pulled it towards him. It slid easily. Happily.

He felt along the side and finally, was able to release the catches and push back the lid.

His memory supplied a picture of the contents. The friends which had worked alongside of him for over seventy years. Carefully, he reached inside and lifted, one by one, the chisels, fishtails, sweeps and veiners. The v-tools and fluters. The spoons and rasps. The riffers and whittling knives. Each, he arranged tenderly on the floor.

Finally, surrounded by the friends he had unwillingly forsaken, he chose one last tool. His favorite. The whittling knife used so often and for so long that it had formed itself to his hand. Become a part of him.

Reverently, he lifted it from the box and brushed his hands over it. The memories rushed past him in a tide and, for several minutes, he was awash in them. He smiled and cradled the small tool. Then, clutching it tightly, he maneuvered himself to his knees. Then, more slowly, to his feet.

He walked with surer steps to the table where he had deposited Amy's piece of wood and, carrying it and the knife, sought out his comfortable chair beside the fireplace.

He laid the knife down on the footstool and simply held the wood. Rubbing his hands over it. Testing it.

Feeling it.

The he reached for the knife once more, and, sitting back in his chair, began to carve.