

## Prologue

Rebecca opened the door.

A neatly-dressed young Elfa stood there, clutching a new leather folder to her green-coated chest.

"Ah, Dorothy! Just in time." Rebecca smiled and swung the door wide. "Come in!"

"I tried to give you a few minutes," Dorothy said, rather breathlessly, stomping the snow from her warmly booted feet and stepping inside on a bright, hand-hooked rug. "I figured it would take you a while to say good-bye after Santa's lift-off."

Rebecca laughed. "You know me well, dear," she said. "I do like to speak to everyone after we wave Santa off." She pushed the heavily-carved door shut.

"Come in, dear and let's get comfortable, shall we? We've got plenty of time."

Dorothy laughed. "Yes, it'll be a few hours before Santa gets back."

Rebecca nodded. "It's usually a long night for me," she said, sighing. "I'm sure it goes a lot faster for him."

"Mama always says that keeping busy is the best way to make time pass," the little Elfa said.

"Your mama is a wise woman," Rebecca said. "Now let's go in here, shall we? There's a spot for you to put your writing materials and we'll be close to the warm fire."

"It *is* a chilly night," Dorothy said. She grinned, "But what else can you say about the North Pole on December the 24th?" She glanced around the comfortable room. "Oh, Mrs. Santa, you have such a nice home!"

Rebecca followed the little Elfa's glance.

Gleaming pine logs formed the walls of the long room. A large, stone fireplace took up most of one side, its mantle covered with carvings and pictures and cherished nick-knacks.

Thick, hand-knotted rugs covered most of the wide, darkly polished floorboards.

A massive oak desk, piled high with papers and books, stood at the far end of the room. The large, empty chair beside it, mute evidence of its owner's absence.

Other furniture in the room - chairs, sofas and assorted small tables - was equally heavy, obviously lovingly carved, and highly polished.

Dorothy sank into one of the two large chairs near the fireplace and dragged off her green knitted cap. She dropped it to the floor beside her and unbuttoned her coat. Then pulled a sheaf of papers and two pencils from her satchel and placed them neatly on her lap.

Finally, she folded her hands together and looked at Rebecca. "So, where do you want to start, Mrs. Santa?" she said.

Rebecca sat down in the chair opposite and smiled at the eager little Elfa. "Well, dear, you asked for this interview," she said, her eyes twinkling from behind her glasses. "Maybe you have some idea of what you want?"

"Oh, I do!" Dorothy said eagerly. "I want to know it all! How you met! Fell in love! Moved to the North Pole! Everything!"

Rebecca laughed. "That's a *tall order*, if you'll pardon the pun."

Dorothy's face puckered into a frown. "I don't get it," she said.

"Don't worry, dear, you will!" Rebecca said.

She leaned back in her chair and turned to look at the flames crackling quietly in the fireplace. "So. Where to start . . ."

Finally, she turned back to the little Elfa waiting patiently across from her. "I guess the best place to start is the beginning," she said.

Dorothy picked up a pencil and looked at her hostess expectantly.

"When Kris and I first met," Rebecca said. She smiled happily and brushed a hand across her eyes. "It was . . . oh, a very long time ago . . ."

## Chapter One

"Hey! Who does Abel have with him?" Red-headed Bert pointed behind us.

Everyone turned for a look.

A tall, blonde boy had followed twelve-year-old Abel Bauer from his house.

"I don't know," Margaret said, smoothing her fluffy gold hair and blinking her china-blue eyes. "But he is certainly handsome!"

Trust Margaret to notice that. She is only nine, like me, but is always following the boys around and smiling and making 'flutter' eyes at them.

And they notice her, too. Because she's tall. Nearly a head taller than me. And pretty.

Self-consciously, I stroked a hand down my own, long, rather nondescript light brown hair and sighed.

"I think it is his cousin," Little Paul spoke up. "He and his mama are here to stay for the summer."

"Oh," Bert said. "Well, I guess that's all right."

I snorted. "As if it's up to you, Bert!" I said, loudly.

Bert glared at me, but said nothing.

Bert and I had had dealings before and he was rather hesitant to start anything with me again. His ego couldn't take two beatings by someone half his size.

Abel and his cousin joined us. "Hey, everyone, this is Kris," Abel said. "My cousin."

There was a chorus of 'Hi, Kris!' and 'Hello!' and 'Glad to meet you!'

Then silence.

Everyone had obviously used up their conversational quota.

"So, Kris. Where are you from?" Bert said, finally.

Kris looked at him. "Germany, actually," he said. His voice was soft, but oddly piercing. And he had a distinctly German accent.

"Oooh. Germany is my favourite place!" Margaret said, moving close.

He smiled down at her. "Good," he said.

"What does your papa do?" Bert wasn't going to be side-tracked. He was the self-proclaimed leader of our little group and he wanted to prove it to the new kid.

"I don't have a papa," Kris said.

"What? Why?"

I pushed Bert with one hand. "Stop it, Bert. Maybe it's something Kris doesn't want to talk about!"

Kris smiled. "It's all right," he said, raising his eyebrows at me. "Miss . . .?"

"I'm Rebecca," I said.

"Rebecca," he echoed, his smile widening. He looked at Bert. "My papa drowned," he said.

"When I was just a boy."

"Oh." Bert was embarrassed, but he tried hard to cover it. "Sorry."

"So what is everyone doing today?" Abel asked.

"We're going to raid Mrs. Schmidt's cherry trees," Bert said proudly.

"I don't have to tell you whose idea that was," I said, grinning.

The other kids laughed.

"Raid?" Kris said, frowning.

"Actually, Mrs. Schmidt leaves her trees for us to 'harvest'," I said. "She's old and can't do it herself any more, and doesn't trust anyone else to do it, so she lets us take what we want. All we have to do is leave a bucket of the best beside her front door every time we go into the orchard."

Kris' face cleared and he happily joined us as we started towards the last house on the block.

Every yard on our beautiful street of large homes was surrounded by a picket fence, neatly painted in whatever colour the homeowner currently favoured.

Mrs. Schmidt's was the same.

Everyone headed towards the front gate.

There, Kris stopped. "What's this?" he said. He was looking at the board, nailed to one of the gate posts and jutting out over the sidewalk. He glanced at me. "A sign?" He frowned. "There's nothing painted on it."

"Oh, it's just a measurer," I said, stepping past it, heading for the gate.

"A measurer?"

I stopped.

Kris had one hand on the sign, which hit him about chest height. "A measurer for what?"

I stared at him. "Well for measuring!" I said.

He cleared his throat. "Measuring what?" he said again, more slowly.

"Well, for Elves," I said.

He turned to look at me. "Why would we need to measure Elves?" he asked.

I blinked. Was he crazy?

"So we can tell who is welcome and who isn't," I said in my most practical voice.

"Welcome?"

Okay, he *was* crazy.

"Kris," I tried to sound patient. "We need those measurers to keep the Elves out."

"Out of what?"

"Out of everywhere they're not allowed to go." I was beginning to lose patience. "Honestly, Kris, don't they have measurers where you come from?"

"No."

I felt my mouth drop open. "But . . . how can that be? How do you know who's allowed and who isn't?"

"Everyone's allowed."

"Oh, that's just crazy!" I said. "You mean that the Elves can go wherever you go?"

"Exactly."

I shook my head. "Well, I'm just glad I live here," I said.

Kris' hand shot out and grabbed my arm.

"Ouch! Kris, that hurts!"

"You honestly agree with this?"

I managed to pull my arm from his strong grip. "Agree with what?" I said, rubbing the reddened skin. "That really hurt!"

Kris scratched his forehead above one eyebrow. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you," he said. He took a deep breath. "But do you really agree with this . . . this . . . *measuring*?"

"I don't understand why you are asking," I said. "Of course I agree with it. That's how it's done!" I stared at him, "Well, except where you live."

Just then, Mrs. Schmidt opened her front door. "Hello, dears!" she called out, cheerfully. Then she turned away from us and scowled. "Here! Right here!" She stomped a foot. "Oh, you Dienes are the stupidest creatures ever! Get out of the house before you make it unfit for me to live in!"

Two Elves came out of the doorway, heads respectfully bowed.

Mrs. Schmidt heaved a sigh of relief. "Now, can we start again?" she said.

The two Elves stood in front of her and waited.

"I asked you to fix the roof. The roof! Not the ceiling! Are you too stupid to know the difference?"

"We're very sorry, mistress," one of the Elves said, his voice high and squeaky. "But we noticed that the damage to the roof went through and into the house itself and we were just checking to see if it had damaged any of the interior rooms."

Throughout this little speech, Mrs. Schmidt moved her mouth and mimicked speaking, obviously mocking the little Elf.

"Well, then you should have knocked properly and asked me," she said, finally. "Do you think I want the likes of you inside my house? You'd steal me blind!"

I lost interest. "Let's go," I said to Kris.

But Kris didn't move. He was staring at the trio in front of Mrs. Schmidt's comfortable home, his expression cold and fixed.

"Kris? It's nothing to do with us," I said. "Come on."

Finally he looked at me.

I nodded encouragement. "You know? Go? Join the others?" I made two little walking legs with my fingers and mimed walking towards the back yard.

But Kris still didn't move.

"Go on! Get out of here!" Mrs. Schmidt said to the Elves, waving one hand dismissively.

The two Elves disappeared around the house.

Mrs. Schmidt heaved a great sigh. She looked up. Seeing Kris and I still standing there, she smiled once more. "You two want some cookies?" she said. "I've been baking!"

"Oh, no thank you, Mrs. Schmidt," I said. "We're heading out back to raid your orchard."

"Oh, good." she said. "Have fun!" She went into the house, closing the door firmly behind her.

"Well, that's over," I said. "Come on Kris, let's go."

But still, Kris stayed where he was.

"Kris?"

He glanced at me, then put both of his hands on the measurer.

Suddenly suspicious, I moved closer. "Kris?"

He looked away for a moment. Then there was a sharp crack as, with a quick jerk of his two hands, he suddenly ripped the measurer right off its post.

I jumped back and stared at the white board clutched in his strong hands.

Mrs. Schmidt came running out of her house. "What have you done?" she shrieked.

Kris looked at her, then, deliberately, lifted one knee and smashed her measurer over it, neatly breaking it in half.

It was done so slowly and deliberately that, at first, Mrs. Schmidt didn't know what to do.

"Oh! Oh!" she said. She jumped up and down a few times.

Then she began to scream.

Within seconds, the street behind us was boiling with people.

A policeman forced his way through the crowd, finally coming to a breathless halt beside the still-screaming Mrs. Schmidt.

He put a hand on her arm and she glanced over at him, abruptly silenced.

She lifted one hand and pointed a knobby finger at Kris, who simply stood there, the two pieces of her measuring board held casually in one hand.

"This . . . this . . . this . . ." She couldn't get any further.

"Take a deep breath, Mrs. Schmidt," the officer said.

She did so. "This . . . this . . . *hooligan* . . . destroyed my property!" she managed at last. "My personal property! I want him arrested at once!"

The officer turned to look at Kris. "Have you anything to say, young man?" he asked.

"No." Kris said, handing the two pieces of board to him.

The officer looked down at them. "What's this?"

"I think you call it a measurer," Kris said, lightly. He looked at me. "At least that is what this young lady says."

"Kris!" I said in my loudest whisper as I shrank back behind the nearest person.

The officer glanced briefly in my direction, then back at Kris. "You . . . how did you get this?"

"I broke it off," Kris said.

"Broke it off?"

"Yes. It offended me." He glanced around at the crowd, letting his gaze rest on several Elves who were hovering in a small group apart from everyone else.

Then he looked back at the officer. "It should offend all of you."

I moved further away, putting several people between me and the crazy boy from Germany.

"You see?!" Mrs. Schmidt said. "You see! Loony as a sack of nuts!"

"I think that's supposed to be 'nutty as a sack of nuts'," Kris said calmly.

"What . . ." Mrs. Schmidt sputtered into silence.

"Young man, if what Mrs. Schmidt says is true, you are in a powerful amount of trouble," the officer said.

"If?!" Mrs. Schmidt said. "I watched him do it!"

"You saw him tear the measurer off your post?"

"Well . . . no. But that girl did! She was standing right beside him when I came out of the house!"

"Girl?" the officer surveyed the crowd.

"That Rebecca from down the street! I saw her!"

I slid further into the crowd.

"Rebecca?" the officer was scanning the people, then spotted me. "Rebecca, come here."

I sighed. "I'm here." I began to edge closer. Finally, I again stood beside Kris. "I'm here," I repeated.

"Did you see this young man tear this off the gatepost?"

I looked at Kris.

He was smiling slightly. He looked at me, raised his eyebrows and nodded slightly.

I turned back to the officer. "Umm, yes I did, officer," I said.

"That's good enough for me!" Mrs. Schmidt said loudly.

"For me, too," the officer said. "I'm afraid you'll have to come with me, son," he said, putting a hand on Kris' shoulder. The two of them disappeared into the crowd, the officer clutching the tell-tale board in one hand and Kris in the other.

The crowd quickly dispersed.

I was watching the group of Elves. They had quietly turned and were walking down the street behind the officer and his prisoner.