

# *The Arctic Flyer*

By Jody Studdard

## **Chapter 1**

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Wil Ofgood. Here at the North Pole, the other elves call me Chief, because I'm the chief elf in charge of toy making at Santa's woodworks factory. I've been in charge of the woodworks factory for about five years now, give or take a couple of years. My story begins several days before Christmas, a few years back. Santa and the reindeer were on the edge of town making test runs for that year's Christmas Eve trip. The reindeer had just gotten the sleigh off of the ground and were flying at a good pace when the evil ice sorcerer Orin Daman swooped out of the sky atop his enormous, white dragon. Santa tried to steer the sleigh out of the way but didn't react in time. A cloud of frost shot from the dragon's mouth and all nine reindeer, including the great Rudolph himself, were hit and frozen as hard as icicles. They fell from the sky and landed in a bank of snow with a loud THUD! Poor Blitzen suffered the worst. After he hit the ground, Santa's sleigh fell right on top of him, breaking one of his antlers completely in half.

Luckily, the guard at our village watchtower spotted what had happened and rang the alarm bell. We elves dropped our woodworking tools, grabbed our bows and quivers, and came running as fast as we could, and we attacked Daman with everything we had. Daman and the dragon, whose name is Frostbite, put up quite a fight, but even Daman, as powerful as he is, knew he was no match for our steady onslaught of arrows (after all, we Arctic elves are renowned throughout the land for our marksmanship with our bows). Daman pulled on Frostbite's reins and retreated into the distance, cackling gleefully as he disappeared into the frozen horizon. Even though we had defeated him and driven him from the village, he knew he had accomplished what he had come to do.

He had ruined Christmas.



## Chapter 2

Luckily, Santa survived the crash. He had a few bumps and bruises and a nasty cut above one eye, but other than that, he was fine. Mrs. Claus, who is also our village doctor, patched him up in no time.

The sleigh, on the other hand, was a wreck. There was a big dent on one side, and another near the back. One runner was bent and the other had snapped completely into two. Despite the damage, however, we weren't too worried, because we knew the elves at Santa's smithy could fix the sleigh well in advance of the upcoming Christmas Eve trip. Like all of the elves here at the North Pole, the elves at the smithy are extremely good at what they do.

The greatest concern by far was the reindeer. As you can probably guess, reindeer are not nearly as easy to fix as a sleigh. We were able to thaw them out by building a large bonfire, but even so, things were not good. Every reindeer was injured. Comet, Cupid, Donner, and Vixen had strained muscles in their legs and could barely stand. Prancer and Dasher had bruised their hooves, and they could barely walk. Dancer had a large bump on the top of his head, and Blitzen had broken an antler when the sleigh fell on top of him. Even the great Rudolph, who was the strongest and bravest of them all, had hit his head so hard that his brilliant, red nose didn't even light up any more.

Unlike the sleigh, the reindeer would not be ready for the annual Christmas Eve trip.

Great fear spread throughout our village.

"What will we do?" NeeNee asked. NeeNee is the owner of NeeNee's Mittens and Stockings Shoppe, a small store that sits on Icicle Avenue, the main street that runs through the middle of our village. She is a young, thin elf, with brilliant red hair and sparkling, emerald eyes. Her boyfriend, Rimp, runs the cookie shop on the far side of town.

“Who will pull the sleigh?” Orly and Obbie asked. Orly and Obbie are twins. They work with me at the woodworks factory.

“How will we get all of the toys to the little boys and girls?” Hassel asked. Hassel is our village barber. Unlike the rest of us, he is completely bald. I’ve always found it ironic that the only elf in town that has no hair is our town barber, but I guess that’s the way it goes sometimes.

Everyone was sad. It looked like Orin Daman had finally succeeded. He had finally figured out how to ruin Christmas.

I should probably take a couple of minutes to tell you about Orin Daman. You might have heard of him before, if you’ve taken a class in Modern Arctic History. Daman is the nastiest, most vile man in all the north. There are rumors that his father is a snow goblin and his mother is a witch, but nobody knows for sure. Regardless, he has a heart as cold as ice, and one of his few desires in life is to stop Christmas. No one knows why he hates Christmas so much, but there is no doubting that he does. Daman is a small, wiry man, with a crooked back, thin arms, and a long, pointed nose like a penguin. He wears a flowing black cape and carries a cane to help him walk. The cane is much more than just a crutch, however. It is a magical staff and Daman, being a powerful ice sorcerer, can make it do many strange and terrifying things. Once, when I was just a boy, I saw Daman shoot a powerful bolt of white lightning out of it. The lightning hit an iceberg and shattered it into a million pieces. I had to run for cover to avoid being buried alive.

On numerous occasions in the past, Daman had tried to ruin Christmas, but we elves had always managed to stop him somehow. You’ve probably heard the story about the year he tried to melt Frosty the Snowman. If you haven’t, I’ll tell it to you sometime. On another occasion, Daman tried to keep Santa from meeting the soon-to-be Mrs. Claus. Thank goodness we saved the relationship and got Santa to the wedding chapel on time. On a third occasion, Daman tried to steal Santa’s Christmas letters in an attempt to

prevent him from knowing what all the boys and girls wanted in their stockings that year. Once again, however, we thwarted his diabolical plans.

As a result, Daman was really upset at us and really determined to finally succeed.

The thought alone brought a tear to my eye. I just couldn't imagine a year without a Christmas. What would all the boys and girls do when they woke up on Christmas morning and found no presents under their trees?

Santa called an emergency meeting at his home, Claus Manor. Claus Manor is a fancy mansion that sits at the far end of town, right at the intersection of Icicle Avenue and Candy Cane Lane. Its thick, wooden walls are lined with decorations and wreaths of all shapes, sizes, and colors, and its yard is covered with snowmen. The meeting was held in the grand dining room around a shiny, oak table.

“Here ye, here ye!” Santa said, catching everyone’s attention. “This meeting will now come to order. As you are all aware, we have a big problem, and we need a solution fast. Any ideas?”

For several minutes, the room was silent as we tried desperately to think of something.

Finally, Hassel the barber spoke up. His voice was timid, and his suggestion was more a question than an idea. But at least it was something. “Maybe we could use some of the other reindeer?” he said.

For a brief minute, a ray of hope shone through the room. Unfortunately, the ray faded as quickly as it had originally appeared.

“All of the other reindeer are too young,” Santa said, shaking his head. “The only one that’s even close to being old enough to pull my sleigh is Rudolph’s son, Randy. Unfortunately, one reindeer cannot pull a sleigh by himself. Even a promising young buck like Randy.”

The room grew silent as we tried to think of another solution.

“Maybe we could deliver the toys ourselves,” NeeNee said. “If we all worked

together as a team. We could get all of the elves, from all of the surrounding hamlets, and pool our efforts.”

Once again, our faces began to show a little hope. As quickly as before, however, our smiles vanished.

“We could never do it in time,” Santa said. “Not on foot, at least. We need something that can move quickly and can carry a lot of presents, like the reindeer and their sleigh.”

At that point, an idea came to my mind. At first, I thought it was a little crazy, and I hesitated to mention it at all, for fear of it being rejected like the previous ideas. The more I thought about it, however, the more I liked it.

“What if,” I offered, “we got a train?”

At first, I regretted that I had said it. For several long minutes (that seemed like an eternity), everyone stared directly at me with blank looks on their faces, and the room was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Then, the mood of the room changed completely.

“It might work,” Santa said. “It’s a long shot, but maybe.”

“Yeah,” Hassel said. “A train moves fast, even faster than the reindeer. And it can hold a lot of toys.”

“Even more than a sleigh,” NeeNee said. There was a hint of excitement and hope in her high-pitched voice.

“Bunches and bunches,” the twins added in unison.

“But where can we get a train?” NeeNee asked.

“If I remember right,” I said, “there used to be a train, the Arctic Flyer, that came to the North Pole once a week. It stopped at the old depot just outside of town. The one that was closed down years ago.”

“That’s right,” Santa said, remembering. “It’s been so long I had almost forgotten. But no one’s been out to the old depot for ages. It’s probably a mess out there. And the Arctic Flyer, who knows where it is nowadays? It could be anywhere.”

“We can find it,” I said. “It has to be somewhere, right? We’ll send a group. I’ll lead the quest myself—if that’s alright with you, Santa. In the meantime, everyone else can clean up the old depot and get it ready for our return. Once we get back, there will be a lot of packing to do.”

At this point, even Santa, as wise as he was, didn’t know what to say. I could tell he wanted to believe in my plan, and he wanted it to work, but he just wasn’t certain that it would. I knew I had to act quickly if I wanted to make my plan come to fruition.

“Who’s with me?” I asked, trying valiantly to muster some support.

After a brief pause, Hassel stood up. “I am,” he said.

“I knew I could count on you, Hassel,” I told him, shaking his hand enthusiastically. Maybe a little too enthusiastically. For a brief second, I felt like I was a politician trying to win an important election. I turned back to the others. “Anyone else?”

“I’ll go,” NeeNee said with a big, warm smile.

“Us, too,” the twins said.

“And me,” Gramps said as he flew into the room through the back window, which had been left open to let fresh air in. Gramps is one of our village snowbirds. Like most snowbirds, he has gray and white feathers, a big, brown, beak, and long wrinkles under both eyes. He landed in the center of the table and folded his wings behind him.

“Gramps?” I asked, somewhat surprised at his sudden appearance. “I thought you and the other snowbirds had already headed south for the winter.”

“The others did,” Gramps said. “But I stayed behind. The old bones were telling me that something bad was going to happen this year. I just knew Daman was going to try something, and I knew you young’uns would need my help.” He paused for a second, then added, “And besides, that Arizona just ain’t all it’s cracked up to be. If you’ve been there once, you’ve been there a zillion times.”

“How about Florida?” I asked.

“Florida?” Gramps responded, shaking his head. “There’s nothing to do in Florida but stand around and talk to those darn flamingos all day. And all they want to talk about is the weather. Boring.”

“But this may be a long and dangerous mission. Are you certain you’re up for it? You’re getting pretty—”

I regretted the minute I said it. I had known Gramps for a long time, and if there was one thing I knew about him, it was that he hated to be called—

“Old?” he asked. His feathers ruffled and his eyes grew red with anger. “I’ll have you know, sonny, I may be old, but I’m more than capable of keeping up with the likes of you. For your information, I was working for Santa long before any of you whippersnappers came around. Heck, I was working for Santa long before most of you were even born. I—”

I knew I had to do something quickly. I wasn’t exactly certain how an old timer like Gramps would help us on the upcoming mission, but, to be perfectly honest, I didn’t really care. I was just happy to have some support for my plan, no matter what form it came in. As such, if Gramps wanted to come along, so be it.

“You may be right,” I interrupted, trying to calm him down. “Since you’ve been around so long, your knowledge of the arctic environment could be invaluable to us on our upcoming mission.”

“You bet it could,” Gramps said matter-of-factly.

“And, based on all your experiences over the years, you may be able to provide us with ideas that none of the rest of us could even start to think of.”

“Of course I could,” Gramps said. “I’m full of ideas.”

“That’s not all he’s full of,” Hassel whispered to NeeNee with a wry chuckle.

“I heard that,” Gramps said. “I may be old, but my hearing is still pretty good, young fellow.” He was clearly offended by the comment, but at this point, he was more interested in what I was saying, since he knew I was the one making the decisions

regarding the upcoming trip. “So, what is it, sonny? Am I in or not?”

“In,” I said emphatically. “After all, we can use all the help we can get.”

Gramps puffed up his chest and paraded around the table like he had won a major battle. “You’ve made a good choice, Chief. Old Gramps won’t let you down.”

He lifted his wings as if to fly away.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“After all this commotion,” he said. “I need to take a nap. I’m not as young as I used to be, you know.”

We all laughed as he soared through the window and vanished from view.

Gramps was a good guy, but he certainly was a peculiar old bird. Sometimes his actions and words were more than a little contradictory, if you ask me.

Santa sighed loudly and brought us back to task. “I have to admit,” he said, “I still have some doubts about this plan of yours, Chief, but unfortunately it’s the best one we’ve got. And now it looks like we’ve assembled a good team, so I say let’s give it a try.”

There was a loud cheer. Once again, hope had returned to our village. We had a plan and a group ready to carry out that plan. I was excited. It was my duty to find the Arctic Flyer and save Christmas. It was a big responsibility, but I felt I was up to the task. Unfortunately, I had no idea at the time what I was getting myself into. The quest to find the Arctic Flyer would quickly become the toughest, most grueling, most demanding experience of my entire life.

But it would also be the most rewarding.