



“STRINGS”
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Thawing his liver-spotted knuckle, Geppetto moved closer to the window, watching with dread as the dark cloaked figure walked slowly up and down the snow-blown street, then stopped in the doorway opposite.

The stranger's features were hidden behind a scarf and the deep shadow cast by the three-cornered hat, but the white-haired carpenter didn't need to see the face to know who it was and what he wanted.

His blood chilled as the man glanced first one way then the other up the cobbled thoroughfare and began to approach.

“What's wrong, Father? You've gone as white as a sheet!”

Geppetto jumped. He'd forgotten that Pinocchio was there. “It's nothing,” he told his enchanted son. “Go on, into the back of the shop. Let me deal with this.”

Putting an arm around Pinocchio's wooden shoulder, Geppetto guided him away, but the puppet peered anxiously through the glass.

“I don't like him,” the boy said, voice rising. “Why does he hide his face?” he looks scary.”

The old man tried to smile reassuringly, but sensed he wasn't allaying the boy's fears.

“It's a customer, simply a customer. It will be fine, now shoo. Give me some privacy.”

The shop bell rang as the door opened and a blast of cold air burst in.

Swallowing, Geppetto turned to face the newcomer. For weeks he'd prayed the

stranger would never return but deep in his troubled soul he'd known it was inevitable.

“Good afternoon, Master Woodcarver.” The mellow voice oozed authority. “I said I would come back. And now I want an answer. Have you considered my offer? Have you come to a decision?”

The carpenter dared not make eye contact. He knew if he did he was lost. This was the stranger's third visit and each time the man was more determined, grown increasingly insistent.

“I need...I need more time,” Geppetto said, almost a whisper. “What you ask, what you want. It's unthinkable. I can't.”

“Can't,” the man prompted, “or won't?” He cast a disparaging eye around the shabby puppet shop, at the piles of unsold marionettes, at the rags the carpenter wore. Geppetto knew what he was thinking. It wouldn't take much to make the old man capitulate. This time the fine gentleman's entreaties and bribes would finally destroy what was left of Geppetto's crumbling resistance.

It was so much money...and he was desperate. It had been many months since he'd last made a sale; so long since he'd been able to afford more than watery soup, or to light the meager fire.

“I offer you a way out,” the visitor urged. “I am willing to be most generous. You need a benefactor if you are to survive the winter.”

“But he is my son!” Geppetto snapped back, tears forming.

“He is merely a piece of wood,” the stranger corrected. “Nothing more than tinder. You should put this stupid sentimentality to one side and concentrate on securing you salvation. I will increase my offer, double it...but I will have the puppet.”

The wood-carver swept his hand helplessly round the shop. “But there are so many others here. You could choose any. Why him? Why Pinocchio?”

“You already know the answer to that.”

Geppetto trembled. Oh yes, he knew, and it was that knowledge that tore his heart apart.

“Father, Father—don’t let him take me. I want to stay with you. Don’t sell me! Please, please don’t sell me!”

Pinocchio ran through the curtain which concealed the workshop and flung his spindly arms around his father’s legs.

“I’ll be good. I *promise*. I love you. Please don’t give me away.”

Geppetto held the boy tightly; sighing with relief. For a moment—just a moment—he had faltered, allowing his hunger-ravaged brain to consider the unconscionable. Pinocchio’s outburst had come just in the nick of time.

“I have my answer for you,” he told the stranger firmly. “And it is my final answer. I will never sell him. I would rather starve. I promised him a life of freedom, an existence without strings, and that is what he will have.”

If he expected that man to display anger, he was wrong. Instead, the gentleman smiled sadly and said, “I feared that would be your reply.” Producing a heavy cudgel from under his cloak, he added, “But I will not be denied.”

The blow was well aimed and delivered with force. Geppetto felt intense pain and surprise as his legs buckled under him and blood poured down his face.

It ran into his eyes, making it difficult to focus—but even so, he stared in horror as the man grabbed Pinocchio and bundled the shrieking wooden boy into a canvas sack.

The old man tried to cry out in protest but his lips could hardly move, the throbbing in his head excruciating. As he lay moaning, he was vaguely aware of the shop bell ringing again and another gust of frozen air before total blackness descended.

Even though it snowed heavily, the entire town crammed into the humble cemetery to say good-bye to their beloved Geppetto. Staring somberly at the lowering coffin, many whispered how scandalous it was that the constables hadn’t yet apprehended his killer or managed to trace the kidnapped boy.

But at least, the burghers consoled themselves, the old man had received a dignified send-off. No one would ever forget the moving ceremony—especially the spellbinding moment when the great maestro himself came down from the grand orchestra hall to play a lament at the grave-side.

Every plaintive note on his magnificent new violin had been ethereal, haunting, tragically sublime.

None could fail to be touched by its melancholy tone, the mourners agreed; so forlorn, so wretched, so raw and alive. Sounding so disturbingly like a lost child’s desolate sobbing.