

# A Christmas Mystery

A Short Story

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## Chapter 1

The sweet smell of pine filled the air as Josie walked out onto her porch and looked over the horizon at the rising sun. She had slept well. The children were still asleep and Hank was snoring. These quiet mornings were Josie's favorite time of the day. During the summer, she would sit in her rocking chair and listen to the birds chirping and enjoy the cool temperatures. But in the winter, she would take short walks in the woods behind the house, gathering pine cones for the wreaths she made and sold during the holidays.

Josie grabbed the basket she kept on the porch and walked down two steps to the ground. A rabbit searching for grass under the frost scurried away when he heard her, and Josie watched as his white bottom disappeared into the woods. The farm her parents had left her was now a nursery, and her husband, Hank, grew trees and bushes outside and flowers in the greenhouse adjacent to the house. Hank was Josie's first and only love, and their three children, Matt, Mike, and Mabel, were her pride and joy.

As she walked to the woods, she thought of them and smiled. This Christmas would be the best one yet. Her pine cone wreaths were selling well, and the money she made was going to pay for the children's presents. She and Hank had decided to forgo giving each other presents this year, the worst year the nursery had ever had. They had made just enough money to pay their bills plus the mortgage on the house they had taken out to expand the business ten years before, when things were better and the future looked brighter.

It hadn't snowed yet this year, and this made pine cone hunting much easier. Josie had to walk several feet into the woods to find them now because she had been gathering them for weeks and had collected the ones nearer to the house. She found two tall pines and was thrilled to see a huge pile of cones underneath them. She was bent over filling her basket when she heard someone moan. She looked around, trying to determine where the sound had come from when she heard it again. She stood, and there, a few feet away, she saw some lying on the ground.

Josie shivered. She wished she had brought her cell phone with her so she could call 911. She took a few steps closer to the body and heard another moan. It was a woman. Josie ran to her side and knelt down.

“Are you all right?” she said.

The woman moaned again.

“I'll go and call 911,” Josie said.

“No, please don't leave me. He'll come back.”

Josie shivered again, and looked around the woods. She hadn't seen anyone as she stood on the porch.

“I don't see anyone,” Josie said. “You need help. I have to go and call someone.”

The woman turned her head and looked at Josie. She had a black eye and her lip was cut and bleeding. Josie bit her lower lip and put her hand on the woman's arm.

“He'll come back,” the woman said again. “He's not going to let me go.”

“Do you think you can walk?” Josie said. “We can go into the house. My husband is there. He's got a rifle.”

The woman pushed herself up and sat. Josie hadn't noticed the way she was dressed, in a shirtwaist dress, high-heeled laced shoes with thick heels, and a cardigan. Her long hair was pulled behind her head and the comb holding it in a bun fell when she sat, allowing her hair to tumble into her face. She looked at Josie. Now Josie could see the other side of her face. It was black and blue.

“Oh, dear,” Josie said, putting her hand to her mouth. “Can you stand?”

The woman held out her hand and Josie helped her up. The woman groaned and held on tightly to Josie's hand.

“What's your name?” Josie asked.

“Helen,” she replied.

“That's a lovely name.”

She held Helen's arm and helped her walk. Helen limped slightly as they slowly made their way to the porch.

“Can you handle the steps?” Josie asked, and Helen nodded.

The old farmhouse had been built in the late nineteenth century, and rooms had been added over the years. Josie had been adopted when she was ten and had lived in the house all her life. The door from the porch opened into a recreation room with a sofa in the middle facing a TV up against the wall. It also had a crisscrossed rack for hanging coats, hats, and gloves. Josie took off her shoes and left them under the rack. She took off her coat and took Helen into the kitchen, which was the next room as you entered the house.

“Sit,” Josie said, and Helen sat at the table. Josie then picked up the phone to dial 911.

Helen grabbed her arm. “No, please don’t!” she cried. “He’ll kill me if you tell anyone.”

“It’s all right. The police will come. You’re safe here, Helen.”

“No! Please don’t. You don’t understand. He is the police.”

Josie hung up the phone. The look of fear on Helen’s face sent another shiver up her spine. She heard someone coming down the stairs in the living room and looked up. Hank appeared at the kitchen door.

“Hello,” he said.

“Hank, this is Helen. I found her outside.”

Hank saw the black eye and bruises. He gave Josie a look that said, let’s go outside and talk.

“Helen, I’ll be right back,” Josie said as Hank passed her. She followed him out to the porch.

“She’s a mess,” he said. “What the heck happened here?”

“I found her in the woods when I went to get pine cones. I tried to call 911 but she stopped me. She said her husband is a cop, and she’s scared to death of him.”

“She needs a doctor.”

“I know, but I don’t think she’ll go to the hospital. She’s terrified of him finding her.”

“So, we’re just gonna keep her here until he shows up? I don’t like the idea.”

“Hank, let me talk to her. Maybe I can find out what happened.”

Hank sighed. He knew his wife well, and he knew she wouldn’t abandon a person in need.

“Fine, but if she’s still here at the end of the day, we’re taking her to the hospital.”

“Okay.”

“And lock the door.”

She nodded. They went back into the house where they found six-year-old Mabel talking to Helen. Helen seemed to have calmed down and was listening to Mabel’s story about how her brothers were always teasing her.

“My brother used to tease me, too,” Helen said. “It’s not very nice.”

“No, it’s not nice,” Mabel said. “Mommy!”

Helen looked up to see Josie and Hank. “She’s adorable. I have a son.” Helen’s expression changed as she thought of her son. “He’s eight.”

“Where do you live, Helen?” Josie asked.

Helen looked at her hands as she thought of an answer. “I live on a farm.” She said it as though she wasn’t sure, but then smiled. “Yes, a farm.”

“Do you have any family we could call?”

Helen’s eyes grew wide. “Don’t call them. They don’t believe me.”

Josie and Hank looked at each other. “I’ll get your breakfast,” Josie said. “Sit.”

“In a minute. I’m gonna get the paper,” Hank said, heading to the front door.

Josie looked at Helen. She seemed so lost. Helen was watching Mabel, who was dancing for her. Helen smiled, but her sadness was overwhelming. Josie felt tears form in her eyes and quickly wiped them away.

“Would you like something to eat, Helen?”

“I’m not hungry,” Helen said.

“Would you like some coffee?”

“No, thank you.”

When Hank returned, he put the newspaper on the table and sat. Helen glanced at the paper.

“Do you ever get the local paper?” she asked.

“This is the only one I get,” Hank said, holding up the Atlantic City Press.

“I was hoping to see how my son fared. He had entered a pig in the 4-H fair.”

“They would post it here,” Hank said.

“In the Atlantic City paper? Why would a big city paper be interested in a country fair?”

“They have a section for Mays Landing,” Hank said. He went to a section and held it up. “See?”

Helen looked at it and looked perplexed. She reached out her hand and Hank gave her the paper. She looked at it and handed it back. Now she looked upset.

“Why don’t you tell us where you live?” Hank said softly.

She looked at him. The black and blue around her eye had grown darker and he flinched.

“You can’t let him get away with this,” Hank said.

“There’s nothing I can do.”

“There has to be someone we can call.”

“Please, I beg you, don’t call the police.”

“But you’re hurt. You have to see a doctor.”

“Maybe we can get one to come here,” Josie said. She was scrambling eggs and when the toaster popped, she took the toast and put it on a plate.

“Doctors don’t make house calls anymore,” Hank said.

“I’m fine, truly,” Helen said. She pushed the chair back and stood. “I’m going to go.”

Josie took the pan off the burner. “No, you can’t leave yet.”

“I don’t want to cause you any trouble. If...he finds out you helped me, he may hurt you.”

“I’m not worried about him,” Hank said. “Please sit.”

“I appreciate your help, but I really must go.”

“But where will you go?” Josie asked. “It’s freezing out there, and you only have a sweater on.”

Helen looked down at her clothes. “He dragged me out of the house. I didn’t have time to put on a coat.”

Josie put her arm around Helen’s shoulder. “Sit. Tell us what happened.”

Helen sat and Josie brought two cups of coffee to the table, then brought Hank’s breakfast. Helen was clasping her hands in front of her and staring at them.

“He came home last night and I knew something was wrong. Billy and I were having dinner. I wanted to get him fed and put to bed before Frank came home, but something happened and Frank came home early. I...smiled like I always do, but he looked angry. I didn’t dare ask him why. When he saw me looking at him, he came over and smacked me.”

Josie gasped. “Why would he smack you?”

Helen smiled sadly. “He just does that.”

“Go on,” Hank said.

“He asked me to get his dinner, and I nodded. Billy had left the table when Frank hit me, and I heard him go up the stairs. Frank sat and put his hat on the chair next to him. He hadn’t shaved that day. I didn’t dare say anything about it.”

Helen paused. Josie looked at Hank, and he at her. Then Helen continued her story.

“I brought his food to the table. He was rubbing his head with his hand, like he was nervous. He was shaking. I began to get scared. I wanted to get away, so I told him I was going to help Billy get ready for bed. That’s when he stood and grabbed my arm.”

Mabel came and sat on Josie’s lap. “Honey,” Josie said. “Why don’t you go and get dressed?”

The little girl looked at her mommy and then at Helen. She felt the tension in the room. “Okay.”

They all watched her run out of the kitchen, then Helen began to speak again.

“He looked at me. His eyes were wild, but he looked real sad. It was strange, like he couldn’t make up his mind if he was mad or miserable. Then he started to talk.”

Josie and Hank were both leaning toward Helen. They were caught up in the story.

“He said he’d made a big mistake. He said they were coming after him and he didn’t know what to do. He grabbed my arm tighter and it hurt. He kept talking about taking money and hiding it. I didn’t understand what

he meant. He said he had no choice, that if he hadn't and they found out, they would have killed him.”

“Oh, my goodness,” Josie said.

Helen looked up. “I felt bad for him. I could see he was scared. Then he looked at me and realized what he had said. He pushed me away so hard I landed on the floor.”

“Oh, Helen,” Josie said.

“He kept talking about how he had to do something. He was afraid of me now, of what I knew, but I told him I didn't know anything. He was crazy, saying if they came, I'd tell them everything. But I didn't know anything. He didn't believe me.”

“And he hit you again,” Hank said, and Helen nodded.

“He dragged me out of the house. He took me into the woods and punched my face. He pushed me down and kept saying, I'll bury you over it. They won't find it then.”

“Oh, my God,” Josie said, reaching across the table and putting her hand on Helen's.

“Then something distracted him and he left.”

“Were you out there all night?” Josie asked.

“I guess I was.”

“But it was freezing last night,” Hank said.

“I don't know. I just know that if he comes back, he'll kill me. He thinks I know what he buried out there, but how could I know? He never told me what it was.”

“Wait,” Josie said. “You said he dragged you out of the house and took you to the woods.”

“Yes.”

“But I found you behind this house.”

Helen looked at Josie, then at Hank. Then, as they watched, she disappeared.

## Chapter 2

Josie stood and stared at the empty chair. She then looked at Hank, whose mouth was hanging open.

“You saw her, right?” Josie asked. “She was there.”

“Yes, she was there. But she’s not there now.”

Josie sat and took a sip of her coffee. “This is weird.”

“Beyond weird. She was there.”

“I don’t understand this. Was she some kind of ghost?”

“She was pretty real for a ghost.”

“Then what would you call it?”

“I have no idea.” Hank finished his coffee and ate his now cold breakfast. “Did she give us her last name?”

“No. Just Helen.”

“She was dressed kind of funny.”

“Old-fashioned. So, it would make sense that she was a ghost. But she felt real.”

“Are there rules for ghosts?” Hank asked.

“How would I know that?”

Hank smiled. “Because you know everything, remember?”

She smacked his arm and smiled. “Only a little about everything.”

“I’m going to work.”

“But what just happened, Hank?”

He looked at her and sighed. “I don’t know. All I know is people are coming by to get their Christmas trees and I have to open the store.”

“Oh, that reminds me. I left the basket out there when I brought her inside.”

Josie followed Hank outside and he turned right toward the small stand he called “the store,” while she went to the woods. She found her half-filled basket and looked at the spot where she had found Helen. She thought about what Frank had said, that he would bury her over whatever it was he was hiding. For a moment, Josie thought about getting a shovel and digging, but then remembered Mabel would want her breakfast, and the boys would be getting up soon, too, so she went back to the house.

She had set up a little workshop in a spare room off the living room and left the basket on the table there. Mabel came bounding down the stairs. She had dressed herself in her pink jeans and reindeer sweater. Josie smiled when she saw her.

“You look all Christmasy,” she said.

Mabel beamed. “Did I do a good job?”

“Yes, you did. Now come and eat so we can start working on the wreaths. We only have one more day to sell them.”

“Can I have some cocoa?” Mabel asked.

“You sure can. What else would you like for breakfast?”

“I want pancakes!” she cried.

“Pancakes it is.”

Josie made enough pancakes so the boys could serve themselves when they got out of bed. Mabel ate two and when she was done, Josie left the dishes to soak while she and Mabel went to the spare room.

The pine cones were affixed to a frame with wire, then little wooden ornaments were attached, and after Josie had them all in place, Mabel

would spray them with an adhesive and sprinkle glitter on them. When they dried, Josie would attach a pretty bow she made with her bow maker. She had sold them for thirty dollars each, and when Hank came home with a handful of money, she would clap and smile gleefully.

“Let’s take these over to Daddy,” she said when they had finished ten wreaths.

They were heavy, so Josie would use Mabel’s old red wagon to take them to the stand. She and Mabel would hang them on nails Hank had put into the wood for that purpose.

“How’s business?” Josie asked.

“It’s good. They like buying trees they can plant afterwards.”

“Great. And the wreaths?”

Hank reached into his pocket and gave her a hundred and twenty dollars.

“Wow!” she cried. “You sold four already?”

“People like them.”

“Do you mind if I go shopping?”

“And watch Mabel? No, go ahead. She’ll be my helper.”

Josie threw her arms around Hank’s neck and kissed him. “Thank you, sweetie. The boys are still in bed, but I left pancakes for them. They usually eat them cold anyway.”

Hank scrunched up his face. “How can they do that?”

She laughed. “I don’t know, but they do.”

She looked at Mabel, who was pulling the needles off one of the pine trees. “Mabel, don’t do that. No one will buy a naked tree. Listen, honey, I

have to go shopping. You're gonna stay with Daddy and help him sell the trees."

"Can't I go?" Mabel asked in her best sad voice.

"No, this is secret shopping."

"Oh, please."

"Not this time. You stay with Daddy and help him. I won't be long."

Josie left Mabel with Hank and went to the house to collect the money she'd saved. The boys had gotten up and were at the table eating the cold pancakes.

"Good morning," she said. Ten-year-old Matt and eight-year-old Mike grunted in response as she passed them on her way to her bedroom. She had the money in a sock in her dresser drawer.

Josie couldn't stop thinking about Helen. Seeing her disappear was the strangest thing that had ever happened to Josie, whose life so far had been relatively normal. She kept thinking about what Helen had said about being dragged from "the house" and taken to the woods where Frank left her. Where was Helen's house? Why would Frank leave her in the woods behind Josie's house?

Josie's curiosity was killing her. She had to find out who Helen was. The more she thought about it, the more she believed Helen was some kind of ghost, and if she was, she had shown up outside their house for a reason.

After she retrieved the money, she went downstairs and passed the boys on her way out the door.

“I’m going to the store. Mabel is with your dad. Matt, rinse the plates in the sink and put them in the dishwasher. Mike, take the clean dishes out of the dishwasher so Matt can put the dirty ones in.”

“Do I have to?” Mike complained.

“You do if you don’t want me to tell Santa you’ve been naughty.”

“Yeah,” Matt said. “Remember. Presents.”

“I know,” Mike said.

“So, I’ll be back later.”

She kissed them each on the top of the head before leaving, then grabbed her purse and keys. The old Ford Taurus her mother had left her was sitting in the driveway. She got in and turned the key. Nothing happened. The battery was dead.

Josie got out of the car and went to find Hank. He had jumper cables in his truck.

“Why don’t you take the truck?” he said.

“I hate the stick shift,” she said.

“But what if you get stuck at the mall?”

He was right. If she got stuck out there, he would have to close the stand to come and get her. They hadn’t been able to pay for Triple A this year.

“All right,” she said, taking his keys.

The big truck sat near the big garage at the edge of their property. Hank kept his mower and his plow in there. She climbed into the truck and it turned over when she turned the key. She was grateful for transportation, but when she tried to put it into gear, it made that awful grinding noise she hated.

“Put your foot on the clutch,” Hank shouted from the stand.

“I did,” she shouted back, though she hadn’t pushed it down far enough. Now she did, and the shift went into place without any noise.

The only thing she liked about driving the truck was the visibility. She could see over the other cars in front of her, and could see parking spaces. She found one close to the mall entrance and cheered.

The mall was packed with last-minute shoppers and she clutched her purse to her side. She didn’t like shopping alone in such a crowd, but it was either this or taking the whole family with her. The boys would want to go to the arcade, and Mabel would beg for ice cream. Hank would want to sit on a bench and wait for her. So she held on tightly to her purse and headed to the Toys R Us at the end of the mall.

She was able to find almost everything on the kids’ lists, except for some electronic toys that had been sold out since the first week in December, and she hoped the boys wouldn’t be too disappointed in receiving last year’s Playstation 3. The games were discounted, too. Mabel wanted an American Girl doll, but they were sold out, so she bought another doll that looked very much like an American Girl.

In between purchases, she took her bags back to the truck and put them on the floor, hoping to hide them from view. She had only one more thing to buy – a dress shirt for Hank. That’s what he had asked for when she asked him what he would like, and she thought it was odd, but Hank always had strange requests. He rarely wore anything but a flannel shirt and blue jeans, except when they went to church, but a white dress shirt when he didn’t have a suit jacket surprised her. She found one in J.C.

Penney that fit her budget and felt a glow of satisfaction over having gotten the shopping done in one trip.

As she approached the truck, she noticed the door wasn't closed all the way and ran to it. All the presents were gone. She began to cry.

## Chapter 3

Josie went home. She didn't know whether to report the theft or not, as she didn't feel there was any way of finding the thieves. She had cried all the way home. All her hard work was for nothing, and the kids would have no presents this year. She parked the truck and sat. She couldn't stop crying.

When she was able to pull herself together, she slid out of the truck and walked to the house. The boys had done the dishes, and were sitting in front of the TV.

“Hey, guys, why don't you go and help Dad? He's got customers.” The boys began to protest and she began to shout. “I said go and help Dad!”

The boys got up, put on their coats, and left, and Josie went out the front door to get the mail. The box was full of catalogs and Christmas cards. She walked down the driveway to the back porch and left the catalogs in the recycling bin before taking the mail inside.

The cards were from old friends and relatives who lived out of state. Josie had sent hers two weeks ago. She had collected them from various charities she contributed to that sent them as an incentive to give more money. It was one way she could save and still send cards.

There was a bill from the mortgage company. Hank usually took care of the bills, but Josie was curious as to how much they still owed and opened it to look. It was not a bill – it was a past due notice saying their house was now in foreclosure and they would need to bring their mortgage up to date or they would lose their home. Josie was shocked. Hank had

never said a word to her about it, and though she knew he was probably trying to spare her, she still resented not being told.

Josie's head began to hurt. It had been a long time since she'd had a migraine, but with the way this day had been going, it didn't surprise her at all. She took her medication and hoped it would work. She didn't have the money to see the doctor since they had lost their insurance ten months ago and the out- of- date medication might not be potent enough to handle her pain. Josie wondered why things had gotten so bad. She and Hank had done everything they were supposed to do, and yet bad things just kept happening.

She pulled down the shades over the windows and lay down. She closed her eyes and tried to think of something else, something good. When she was a girl, Christmas had been a wonderful time. The farm had just been converted to a nursery with money her parents had inherited from a distant relative. They were doing well, and the children got wonderful gifts. There was food, and people came to the house to celebrate. They would go to church on Christmas Eve and listen to the carols they all knew by heart sung by the choir.

What would her children remember about this Christmas? She began to cry again, and it only made her head feel worse, so she gulped back the tears. Her medication began to work, making her drowsy, and she fell asleep. When she woke, Mabel was standing next to the bed.

“Hi, mommy,” she said. “We sold so many trees!”

“That's nice, honey.”

“Are you sick?”

“No, not anymore.”

Josie grabbed her daughter and Mabel climbed onto the bed, cuddling her mother. They lay like that for a while, then the boys came to the bedroom door.

“We’re hungry,” they said in unison.

“I guess it’s time to get up,” Josie said.

She and Mabel got up and followed the boys downstairs. Hank was at the table looking at the mortgage bill.

“I guess you saw,” he said.

“Kids, why don’t you go watch TV while I get dinner ready?”

The children left the kitchen and Josie began pulling food out of the fridge.

“Aren’t you gonna say anything?” Hank asked.

“What can I say? You should have told me? You already know that.”

“I didn’t want you to worry.”

“So, now instead of worrying about making a payment, I can worry about losing my house.”

“I’m sorry, Josie. I thought I could cover it before you found out.”

She turned and looked at him. “How could you do it? How could you not tell me?”

He stood and walked over to her. He put his hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes. “Because I felt like an idiot. I couldn’t even take care of my family.”

“My family, too. We’re in this together.”

“I know.”

“So, what are we going to do? If you had told me, I could have gotten a job, at least for the holidays, and we could have caught up.”

He dropped his hands and turned his head. “Yeah, I know.”

“Then why didn’t you...”

“I know, Josie, I screwed up. What do you want from me?”

“I want you to make it better! I want someone to make it better.”

She began to cry again and stamped her foot. Her frustration over the events of the day was taking its toll on her nerves and she felt the urge to hit Hank. She held back, feeling helpless and foolish. Why hadn’t he talked to her about it? What was wrong between them that kept him from coming to her?

Hank worked hard every day of his life. He was good to his kids and spent his spare time with his family. When Mabel was born, Josie had quit her job to stay home, believing they had enough income, and Hank had supported her decision. She’d never thought about how hard it must have been for him.

He had wanted her to be home with their kids and thought he could handle their finances. But when he saw more was going out than coming in, he should have talked to her so they could decide together how to make things work. It was too late now – they were too deep in the hole to get out.

“Did you get the kids’ presents?” he asked, and she began to cry again.

“Oh, God, what a terrible day.”

“Why? What happened?”

“Someone stole the gifts out of the truck.”

“You’re kidding!”

“No, I wish I were.”

“Damn,” Hank said. “Damn.”

“Mom, is dinner ready?” Matt shouted from the living room.

“Soon,” Josie yelled back. “I guess I better start cooking.”

Hank sat at the table. He looked at the chair across from his. “Was she real?”

“Who, Helen?”

“Yeah, was she real, or was it some kind of hallucination?”

“If it was, we both had it, and Mabel, too. We all saw her.”

He tried to remember exactly what Helen had said. “She said he wanted to put her on top of whatever he was burying to hide it.”

Josie turned and looked at him. “What are you thinking?”

“That something is buried in the woods.”

“And you want to find out what it is.”

“You have to show me where you found her.”

“It’s too late now. It’s too dark to see.”

“Then I’ll do it first thing tomorrow.”

“You know how crazy this sounds, Hank, don’t you?”

“What have we got to lose?”

She had filled a pan with leftover macaroni and cheese, hot dogs, and green beans. She left it to simmer and sat at the table.

“I guess it’s not any crazier than believing in Santa Claus.”

He

She looked at their hands. “I know.”

## Chapter 4

That night as they lay side by side, Josie and Hank couldn't sleep. They kept thinking about Helen and wondering who she was.

"Maybe she's a relative. I mean, I was adopted. Maybe she's someone I never heard about."

"So you think she lived here?"

"It would make sense, wouldn't it? She said he dragged her out of the house to the woods. I found her in the woods, and she thought he was coming back."

"Who could we ask?"

"Aunt Judy. I just got a card from her. I could call her and ask."

"How old is she? She must be a hundred by now."

"No, she's in her nineties I think."

"She's your mom's sister, right?"

"No, my mom's aunt who lives in Wisconsin. My mom would have been sixty."

Hank put his arm around her. "It's been almost two years."

Josie's parents had died within a few months of each other, both from cancer. It had been a terrible time for the family.

"I miss them all the time. I wish they could see the kids."

"They do," Hank said. "I'm sure of it."

She kissed his cheek and held him. "I'll call Aunt Judy first thing. Old people get up early, don't they?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Hank, what are we going to do?"

“I may have to get a job at the casinos. Jerry told me he could get me a job in A.C.”

“But you hate being indoors.”

“I’d hate being outdoors in a tent, too.”

“I can get a job there. I had one once, remember?”

Josie had worked in the casinos when she got out of college. She had been a cashier. The pay was good but the hours were brutal.

“Not unless you have to.”

“I don’t mind working.”

“When Mabel is old enough.”

“Mabel is in school full time,” she said. “I can work during the day.”

“Only during the day.”

She squeezed him. “Okay.”

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The next morning, Josie looked up Aunt Judy’s number and called her. The old woman answered the phone after several rings and when Josie told her who it was, Judy paused.

“I’m Joan’s daughter,” Josie said. “I live in Mays Landing.”

“Oh, Joan’s daughter. I remember.”

“Merry Christmas, Aunt Judy,” Josie said.

“And Merry Christmas to you.”

“Aunt Judy, I wanted to ask you about our family. Did we have a relative named Helen?”

“Helen? Why, she ran away years ago.”

“She ran away?” Josie said. “What do you mean she ran away?”

“She left my brother, Frank, to go to Atlantic City to be a chorus girl. The rest of the family didn’t speak of her after that. She left her young son all alone.”

“How do you know she became a chorus girl?”

“Frank told us. He was the chief of police at the time.”

“Do you remember what year that was?”

“Oh, my, let me think. It was a long time ago. Helen was Billy’s mother. You know Billy?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Why yes you do. He was Joan’s father.”

William! Her grandfather’s name had been William. “Yes, I do remember him.”

“He was just a boy then. Frank left Billy with his sister while he went to work.”

“What happened to Frank?”

“Oh, that was a terrible thing.”

“Ah, what happened?”

“It was the thirties, you know. He got himself involved with some people he shouldn’t have and someone killed him. It was quite a scandal.”

“So, it would have been in the newspapers?”

“Yes, it was. I was a girl and my mother made us all stay inside for a while. She was afraid the people might come looking for us.”

“Why would they come for you?”

There was another pause. “Frank had stolen money from...those men. No one knew where it was. They were bootleggers. They were hard men.”

Josie felt a shiver run up her spine. “And no one ever found the money?”

“Not that I know of. Those men would come around asking about it sometimes. That’s why we moved out here.”

“But Billy stayed here?”

“No, he went with us. He went back when he was old enough to take over the house. After the war. He was in the air corps.”

“And he got married and they had my mother.”

“Yes, a lovely girl. I came to visit once when the casinos opened. She was a sweet girl. I was sorry to hear about her.”

“You sound well, Aunt Judy.”

“Oh, I’m plugging along. It’s good to hear from you, Josie. You have a nice holiday.”

“You, too, and thanks for the family history.”

Josie hung up the phone. She thought about poor Helen and the bruises on her face. The family thought she had run away and never questioned her absence. Josie felt a tug in her chest. Frank had killed her, and no one knew. She wished she had asked Judy about Helen’s family. Why hadn’t they questioned her disappearance?

It was Christmas Eve. Hank was out in the woods with a shovel, digging in the spot Josie had showed him earlier. Mabel was up and dressed. She loved to go to the library.

“Mabel,” Josie shouted. The little girl came to the kitchen. “Do you want to go to the library?”

Mabel’s eyes lit up. “Can we?”

“Get your coat.”

Josie went to the stairs and shouted to the boys. “We’re going to the library. Do you want to go?”

When she didn’t get a response, she wrote a note and left it on the kitchen table. Then she and Mabel went to the truck.

“Let me tell Daddy where we’re going,” she said as she put the seat belt on Mabel. She didn’t like the way the top of the belt sat on Mabel’s chest. “I better get your seat.”

Josie walked to the woods and saw Hank standing beside a huge hole. He saw her and smiled.

“Nothing here,” he said.

“Really? I was sure we’d find something.”

“It had to be another house.”

“But this was my grandfather’s house. It had to be here.”

“Your grandfather?”

“I talked to Judy. She said Billy was my grandfather.”

“The kid, her son.”

“Right. She also said Frank was her brother and he told everyone Helen ran off to A.C. to be a chorus girl.”

“Nice guy.”

“She also said he was murdered by the bad guys for stealing their money. No one ever found it.”

Hank’s eyes widened. “That had to be what she was talking about.”

“Which means it’s buried somewhere around here.”

“This place is huge.”

“I’m going to the library to look up Frank.” She looked toward the truck and saw people at the stand. “You’ve got customers.”

“Yeah, I was just gonna pack it in. Let me know what you find out.”

She kissed him and took his keys out of his pocket. “Sorry. I have to take the truck again.”

“Depress the clutch.”

“I know, I know.”

She got Mabel’s seat out of the car and put it in the truck. After strapping her in, Josie got in the driver’s side. The roads were packed with people heading to the mall, and it took a while to get to the library. It would be open until two, giving her plenty of time to look through the newspaper archives. She left Mabel in the kids’ section and went to ask where she could find the archives.

“We have them all online now,” the librarian said. “It’s slow today. Everyone is shopping. You can use number 3,” she said, pointing to the line of computers across from the checkout desk.

Josie logged onto the library website and found the newspaper archive. She glanced over at the kids’ section and could see Mabel reading a book at a small table. The archives were listed by year and she went to the 1930s. She assumed Frank’s last name would be the same as her grandfather’s and looked him up. His name appeared frequently as he was the chief of police. She found what she was looking for in 1933, an article about his murder and how his body was found on the causeway between Atlantic City and Absecon. He had been shot several times.

She then put Helen’s name in the search box. There was one article. It was an article asking if anyone knew her whereabouts and had a picture of her. It was Helen.

“That’s the lady in the kitchen,” Mabel said. She was standing at Josie’s elbow. “She was nice. She said she liked our house, but it wasn’t as nice as hers.”

Josie turned to look at Mabel. “What did she say about her house?”

“Just that it was nicer.”

“Did she say where it was?”

“I don’t know, Mommy.”

“It’s okay. I just thought she might have said a street or something.”

“She was talking about perfume.”

“Perfume?” Josie asked. “What did she say?”

“She said her house was on perfume.”

“That’s strange.”

“I asked her if it smelled nice and she smiled.”

“I’ll bet she did.”

“Can we go home now? I want to see if Santa came yet.”

“Oh, he’s not coming until tonight.”

Josie looked at her daughter and tried to smile. What would Mabel say when she woke up to no presents?

“Can we go?”

“Yes, just let me log out of here.”

They left the library and got into the truck. Josie pulled out of the parking lot and headed toward home. As she turned onto her street and noticed the sign, a light went off in her head. The street was Cologne Avenue.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” she said. “I live on perfume avenue.”

“What, Mommy?”

“Did the lady say she lived on Cologne Avenue?”

“Yes, that’s it.”

The little girl had confused the two words. The house Helen had lived in was on the same street as Josie’s. So why was she behind Josie’s house? She had assumed Helen had lived in their house, but Hank had dug up the ground and found nothing. Josie was convinced that money had to be buried somewhere near her house, and now she was sure of it. But Helen had said her house was nicer than Josie’s, which meant it was a different house. She sighed in frustration and Mabel touched her hand.

“Are you okay, Mommy?”

“I’m fine, honey.”

Oh, Mama, I wish you were here, she thought. Her mother had lived there all her life and knew everyone. Someone must have known Frank and Helen. Someone would know where they had lived, and why Billy had inherited a different house.

She pulled into her driveway and to the back where she parked the truck. The stand was filled with last-minute tree buyers and Hank was busy, so she and Mabel went into the house. Hank had pressed the boys into service and they were at the stand with him. Josie’s house had an attic that she hadn’t been in for many years. She would put things on the stairs leading up to it, but the place was creepy so she never went all the way up. Now that she was looking for answers, that attic came to mind.

“Do you want to go upstairs to the attic with me?” she asked Mabel.

“No. I don’t like that place.”

“Me neither, but I want to look for something. Are you gonna be all right down here alone?”

“I’m a big girl.”

“You are a big girl. So I’m trusting you to sit and watch TV for a little while, while I go upstairs.”

Josie went up to the second floor and turned right. She walked past the kids’ bedrooms and came to the staircase leading up to the attic. It was covered with stuff and she had to move it out of the way so she could go up the stairs. The attic door was in the ceiling and she pushed it up to open it. A blast of cold air hit her face as she opened it all the way. She climbed up onto the attic floor and looked around. There were piles of clothes, trunks, pictures, and toys littering the room. She was mostly interested in the trunks, so she pushed aside the other items until she could pull the first one out and open it. There was a small window giving her some light, but it would be dark soon. She had to work fast.

The trunk yielded very little useful information. It must have been a hope chest of some sort, as it contained linens with her mother’s initials on them. There were picture albums and some children’s drawings along with some old costume jewelry. She pushed it back and pulled out another one. This one looked older. She opened it and found more photo albums, but these she took out to look at.

There were photos of her grandfather William in his air corps uniform. There were also pictures of her mother, Joan, as a child. But when she turned the last page, she gasped. There was a picture of Helen with a man standing in front of a house. It was a two-story house with dark shingles. There was a single tree in the front yard. Josie recognized the house immediately. It was the house that had stood across the street ever since Josie could remember, an abandoned house with two floors and dark

shingles. She turned her head and looked outside, and she could see sunlight reflected on the windows of the old house. The house had two windows on the top floor, and one of them was broken. It looked as though the house was winking at her.

## Chapter 5

Josie ran down the stairs and passed Mabel. She ran outside and over to the stand where the last customers were picking out their trees. She found Hank tying one to an elderly man's car roof.

"Hank," she said, gasping for breath. "It's the house across the street."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's that house," she said, pointing toward the dark old house. "That's where Helen lived."

"That house belonged to the chief of police," the old man said. "It was quite a scandal. No one has lived in it since."

"Do you remember him?" Josie asked.

"No, I wasn't born yet, but my dad told me all about him. He was a rumrunner. Used to run boats out of Margate."

"He was a bootlegger?"

"Well, he worked for bootleggers. I think he stole from them and they..." He ran his finger across his neck. "That's how they solved their problems back then, and from what I understood from my dad, he was a problem."

"And he lived in that house?" Hank asked.

"Let me think. I think his daddy owned this house, the one you live in, and built that one for Frank. His daddy owned all this land back in the day."

"We still own that plot over there," Hank said. "The county condemned that house and told me I had to tear it down."

"I remember that," Josie said. But we never had the money.

“Too bad. From what I hear, it was a nicer house than this one.”

Josie shivered, remembering what Mabel had said.

Hank finished tying down the old man’s tree and the old man took off as they waved.

“I think the money is buried there,” Josie said. I think we should at least look there.”

“It’s a big plot of land, Josie. I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“But I feel like Helen came to us for a reason. Not just to tell us about the money, but to clear her name. People thought she abandoned her family. Maybe she can’t rest in peace until someone finds her bones.”

“That ground was hard to dig, Josie. My arms ache, and unless we know exactly where to dig, I’m not even gonna try. Maybe in the spring.”

“But if we lose the house, we’ll lose the money, too.”

“We’re gonna lose the house?” Matt asked.

His parents looked at him.

“No, son, we’re not gonna lose the house,” Hank said.

“We have to get the ornaments out of the closet,” Josie said. Dad will bring in a tree. We have to be ready. I’ve got some marshmallows we can roast over the fire in the fireplace. Come on, boys.”

Hank watched them walk away. It was almost five and already dark. He would close up the stand and pick out a nice tree, one that would fit in their tall living room. He glanced across the street at the old house. Despite his misgivings, he was willing to go on a treasure hunt, but he had to know where to start.

“Tell us where to dig, Helen,” he said.

## Chapter 6

Mabel screamed when her marshmallow fell off the long fork she was using to roast it.

“It’s okay,” Josie said. “I’ve got more.”

Josie put another one on Mabel’s fork and turned to Matt.

“You are supposed to help her.”

“I was watching,” he said.

“Would you rather put the ornaments on the tree?” Josie asked.

“No, I’ll watch her.”

Mike laughed, and Josie gave him a stern look. “Come, you’re gonna help me.”

“Why?” Mike whined.

“Because I need help and you’re having too much fun over here.” He got up and followed her to the tree. She pointed to a box of plastic ornaments. “Start with those, and spread them around so they are not all in one place.”

Hank was standing by the window looking at the house across the street. Josie looked up.

“Hank,” she said. “Will you put the star on the tree?” He didn’t move, so she said it louder. “Hank.”

He turned and looked at her. “What?”

“Will you put the star on the tree?”

“Sure,” he said, and went to find the star in the box of ornaments.

“I got it out already,” she said, pointing to the star which she had put on the rocking chair.

He picked it up and stuck it on the top branch of the tree, which drooped.

“It won’t stay,” he said.

“Well, make it stay,” Josie said. “Are you all right?”

“I keep thinking about that house.”

“I know. But right now we’ve got to get this tree done.”

“I asked Helen to show me where to dig.”

“You did what?”

Josie was staring at him with wide eyes.

“I asked her to show me. She came here once. I figured if she really wanted us to find it, she’d show me where to look.”

“Oh. I never thought of that.”

“Who’s Helen?” Mike asked.

“My great-grandmother.”

“Did I meet her?”

“No, you didn’t.”

“Can I meet her?”

“No, Mike, you can’t. Now finish putting those ornaments on the tree.”

“I met her,” Mabel said with a sly smile on her face.

“If Mabel met her, why can’t I?”

“It’s a long story. Just put the ornaments on the tree.”

“It’s not fair,” Mike said.

“I met her,” Mabel said in a sing-song voice. “I met her.”

“Shut up,” Mike said.

“I met her,” Mabel said again.

“Mabel, enough,” Josie said. “Did you get a marshmallow roasted yet?”

“Yes. Matt helped me.”

“Then come and help with these ornaments.”

Matt had been listening to his siblings and looked at Josie. “How did Mabel meet her?”

Josie looked at Hank. Hank then looked at Matt.

“She had a dream about her,” he said.

“Hank, don’t lie.”

“What, you want me to tell him the truth?”

“Well, it’s always better to tell the truth, isn’t it, Dad?”

“Yeah, but I’m not sure how to tell him about this.”

“Was there a ghost in the house?” Matt said.

“She wasn’t a ghost,” Mabel said. “I felt her hand.”

“We don’t know what she was, Mabel, but Matt, I found her outside yesterday morning and brought her in. She was hurt and I wanted to help her. We were talking and she suddenly disappeared.”

“So she was a ghost,” Matt said.

“We don’t know what she was, but I had a relative named Helen, so who knows? Maybe she came back to tell me something.”

Hank had turned back to the window. Josie looked over at him and sighed.

“There’s something else I have to tell you kids, and it’s not easy, so please just listen.”

Hank turned and shook his head. “Josie, don’t.”

“I have to, Hank,” she said, and turned to the kids. “Something happened and Santa can’t come to the house this year. He promised to come next year, but there was a problem with one of the reindeer and he has to stay home.”

Matt looked at Josie. She didn’t know what to say. He was old enough to understand, and it hurt to think he knew they had no presents for them. She would take him aside later and explain, but she couldn’t in front of the younger kids.

Mabel began to cry, and Mike just got mad.

“That sucks,” he said.

Josie went to Mabel and put her arms around her, then Josie began to cry, too. Hank, unable to handle their tears, left and went outside the front door. Matt followed him.

The sky was clear and the quarter-moon gave off a little light. Matt stood next to Hank and tugged on his father’s sleeve.

“What really happened?” he asked.

“Somebody stole the gifts from the truck when your mom went shopping. She’s really upset about it, so be nice to her.”

“I hate them,” Matt said.

“No, don’t hate them. It’s not gonna do you any good to hate anybody. For all we know, they’re worse off than we are. Just let it go.”

“But I don’t want to let it go. Mom worked hard making those wreaths. I know she was saving the money for presents. There has to be something we can do.”

Hank put his hand on Matt's shoulder. "I'm glad you noticed how hard she worked. I wish there was something we could do, but we don't even know who took them."

"Maybe they are worse off than we are," Matt said.

They stood looking at the house across the street.

"Why are you looking at that house?" Matt asked.

"Because Helen lived there."

"The ghost lady?"

"Yup."

"Did you really see her?"

"I saw her, and mom and Mabel did, too."

"And she just disappeared?"

"Yup, just like that."

"I hate it when they do that."

"Yup, me too." Hank pulled the collar of his coat up around his neck. "It's too cold out here. Let's go in."

As they turned to go, something caught Hank's eye and he looked across the street. He saw someone standing next to the house for a moment. Matt saw the person too, but before he could say anything, whoever it was disappeared.

## Chapter 7

Matt ran over to Josie, who was putting tinsel on the tree.

“We saw her,” he said.

She looked at him and noticed his red cheeks. “You were out there a long time.”

“Mom, we saw her.”

Josie looked at Hank coming up behind Matt.

“We saw someone, but we don’t know who it was.”

“It had to be her,” Matt said. “She’s trying to tell us something.”

“Did it look like her?” Josie asked.

“It was too dark to tell,” Hank said. “It was a figure, that’s all.”

“But who else could it be?” Matt said.

“Maybe it was her, but there’s nothing we can do about it tonight.”

“Yeah, buddy, it’s getting late,” Hank said. “You go on up to bed now.”

After Matt had gone upstairs, Josie and Hank sat on the sofa and looked at the tree. It had taken Matt an hour to unravel the lights, and he was elated when they all worked. They were twinkling, and Hank reached over and turned off the lamp on the end table next to the sofa. He then put his arm around Josie and pulled her close.

“Do you think it was her?” she asked.

“I hope so. It would mean she heard me.”

“And there is something out there she wants us to find.”

They sat for a few moments enjoying the quiet time together, then Hank jumped up.

“What?” Josie asked.

“I just thought of something,” he said, rushing to the front door.

“Hank, it’s after midnight.”

He ran outside and across the street. She couldn’t see him as he went to the side of the house. He didn’t have his coat on and she worried about him catching cold. Then she saw him coming back to the house.

“I went to where I saw her standing” he said. “It’s the basement door.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“I think whatever it is, is in the basement.”

“But he said he would bury her over it. Doesn’t that mean in the ground?”

“That old guy who bought the tree said Frank’s old man built the house. What if Frank helped him? What if Frank knew how to build walls? Couldn’t he hide the money in a wall in the basement, and put her body in there, too?”

“Like how? A basement wall would be built against dirt, wouldn’t it?”

“Not if he made a fake wall. He builds the basement with his old man. Then, when he steals the money, he builds a fake wall, puts the money behind it, and seals it up, thinking nobody will know. It’s also a great place to hide a body.”

“Like the Tell-Tale Heart,” Josie said.

“Exactly. Just like that. Only Helen’s heart couldn’t stay put. She had to come out to tell us.”

“Knocking down a wall would be dangerous in that old place. It might collapse around us.”

“It’s not a bearing wall. If I’m careful, it should be okay.”

“I don’t like the idea of you swinging a sledgehammer out there all alone.”

“You can stand on the outside. If the house falls down, you call 911.”

“This isn’t funny, Hank. I mean it. You can’t do this alone.”

“I can’t lose our house, either.” He looked into her eyes. “I’ll wear my hard hat. Besides, I’m not gonna knock anything down unless I’m sure it’s a fake wall.”

“You promise?”

“I promise. I don’t want to die.”

“Okay, but I’m going with you.”

Hank kissed her and put his arms around her. They held each other for a long time before turning off the lights and heading up to bed.

There were no screams of excitement the next morning. The children woke up and ran downstairs, hoping Santa had fixed his reindeer and brought their presents, but there was nothing under the tree. Mabel and Mike went to the tree and Mabel lifted the skirt to see if there might be something hidden underneath.

“This is the worst Christmas ever,” Mike said.

“Yeah,” Matt said. “It is bad. But don’t talk about it.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s bad for Mom and Dad, too, and they worked hard this year. Let’s try to be happy even though we didn’t get anything.”

“I don’t know if I can be happy,” Mabel said.

“Sure you can. Just remember how good that marshmallow tasted when you finally got it roasted.” She smiled, remembering the gooey goodness of the marshmallow. Matt smiled too. “See?”

Josie ran down the stairs and looked in the living room.

“Where’s Dad?” she said.

“I thought he was still in bed,” Matt said.

“Oh, my God,” Josie said, running to the back room to get her coat.

Matt followed and put on his coat, too. Josie turned to him.

“You have to stay with the kids,” she said.

“I want to go.”

“Please, Matt. I need you to stay with them. I don’t have time to argue.”

She ran past him and out the front door. Matt stood at the door and watched her run across the front lawn toward the house across the street. He was dying to follow her, but he obeyed her and stayed with his siblings.

As Josie got close to the house she could hear banging and knew Hank was breaking into the basement wall. She saw that the basement door was open and when she got there, she looked inside. There were steps going down and she couldn’t see any farther. She walked down the steps and saw Hank surrounded by broken pieces of cement. He was wearing his hard hat and swinging the sledgehammer.

“Hank,” she said.

He turned and smiled. “It’s a fake wall.”

“You promised I could be here.”

“It’s a fake wall,” he repeated.

“Yes, but it’s still dangerous.”

“I’m sure this is where he put the money.”

“Maybe there is no money.”

“There has to be, Josie. There just has to be.”

She put her hand on Hank’s arm. “But what if there isn’t?”

“Then I’ll die.”

“No, you won’t die, Hank. I know you feel bad, but we still have each other. And three healthy kids. They can’t take that away from us.”

“But how can I look at my kids? I’ve got nothing to give them for Christmas.”

“Those kids love you. They always will, no matter what.”

“I have to take down this wall, Josie.”

“Okay, but I’m gonna stand outside.”

She left him and he began to knock the bricks out of the wall. The banging went on for several minutes, then he stopped.

“Josie, come here,” he shouted.

She came down the stairs and looked. He waved her over and she came to his side. He looked at the wall and she followed his gaze. Inside was a skull, and underneath it, the dress Helen had been wearing.

“Oh, my God,” Josie said. “It’s Helen.”

“He killed her.”

“Oh, poor Helen. We have to stop now. We have to call the police.”

“No, just let me take down those bricks.” Hank pointed to the ones above Helen’s body.

“No, it might collapse on her bones.”

“It can’t hurt her.”

“No, Hank!” she cried. “Enough. I won’t let you do it. We’re going home and calling the police.”

“But what if the money is there? Josie, this is our shot.”

“I don’t care about the money, Hank. I care about you, and about Helen. She wanted us to find her and we did. Now let’s go home.”

Hank looked into her eyes. As much as he wanted to break down that wall, he knew she would never forgive him if he hurt Helen again, so he gave up the fight and followed her home. They called the police and reported finding the body. When the police arrived, the children were so caught up in the excitement of finding Helen and the hullabaloo surrounding her exhumation that they almost forgot they hadn’t gotten any presents for Christmas.

The police asked Hank why he was knocking down the wall and he told them he was testing out the sledgehammer he’d gotten for Christmas. Whether or not they believed him, they let it go, and wrote a report giving Hank credit for finding Helen’s body.

Six months later, the bank advised Hank and Josie that they had three months to vacate the property. They began to pack their things and clean out the place. Josie held yard sales and Hank dismantled the stand. They had both applied for jobs in the casinos and had been hired. They would have to find a place to rent close to the kids’ schools. One day, they received a certified letter from a law office in Brigantine and sat at the kitchen table together to read it.

The letter was from Kevin Gilford, Attorney at Law, and he represented a wealthy family in Brigantine. Many years before, they had posted a reward for information leading to the whereabouts of their

beloved sister, Helen. She had been reported missing by her husband, and they wanted to let her know she could always return to her family, and to bring her young son, Billy, with her. They posted the reward, but no one had come forward.

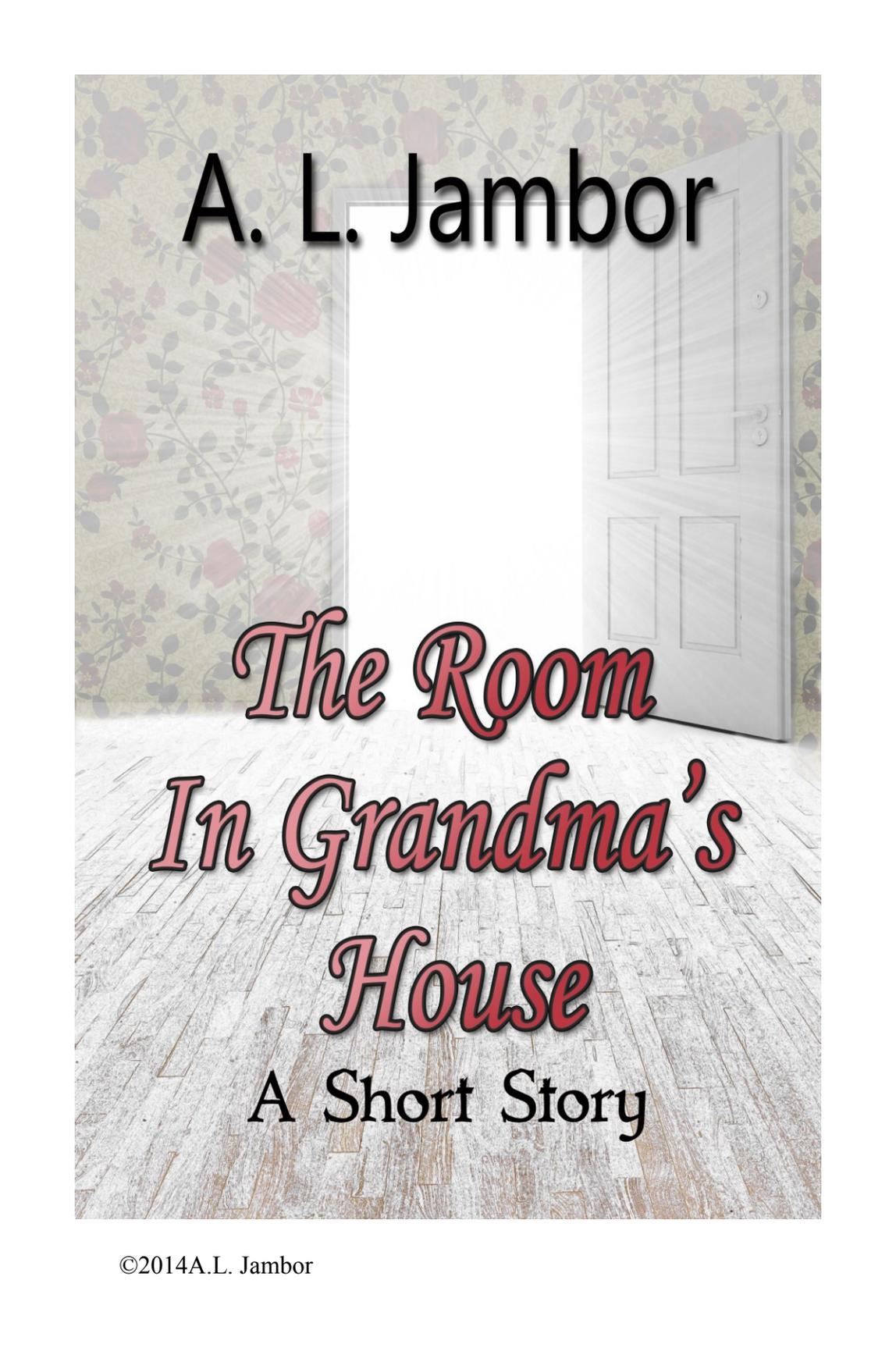
The family had given the law firm the money, which had been duly placed in an interest-bearing account, to be held in trust until Helen was found. When they heard about Hank's discovery, they ordered a DNA test be performed on the bones he'd found. Those tests confirmed her identity and since she had been found, the money was to be disbursed to the one who found them. The letter contained a check in the amount of seventy-eight thousand dollars.

Their mouths dropped open. They kept reading the figure on the check over and over. It would be enough to pay their mortgage and have something left over to buy the children their Christmas presents.

"We'll have Christmas in July," Josie said. She was smiling as tears rolled down her cheeks.

"It'll be the best Christmas we've ever had," Hank said.

Here's a peek at my short story, *The Room in Grandma's House*



A. L. Jambor

*The Room*  
*In Grandma's*  
*House*

A Short Story

*The Room in Grandma's House*

*A Short Story*

*A.L. Jambor*

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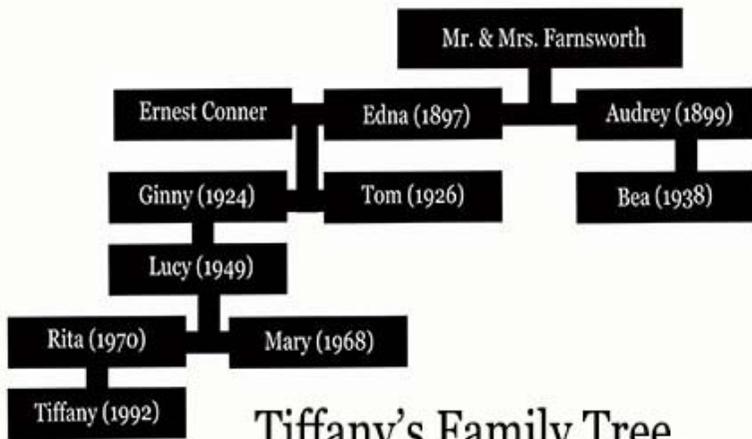
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## Chapter 1

Snow. So much snow had fallen in the last hour that Tiffany Warren feared she wouldn't be able back her old Impala from the driveway to the street.

She cursed as she stood on the porch of her great-great-grandmother's house on Four Mile Road. The Connecticut winter was proving too much for Tiffany, who was used to the milder winters of North Carolina. Her mother, Rita, had packed all her warm clothing, but her thermal underwear was no match for the below zero New England temperatures.

Before the storm arrived, Tiffany hadn't thought to look in the dilapidated garage in the back yard to see if Grandma Edna had a snow shovel. Now with eighteen inches of snow covering the driveway and no plow in sight, she finally conceded that there was no way she was leaving the house this morning and went back inside.

The house had been built at the turn of the last century, sometime in 1901. Grandma Edna had bought it in 1917 in anticipation of her impending marriage to a doughboy named Tom Shafer. Tom never came home from France, but Edna had found some way to hold onto the huge, four bedroom house. Tiffany admired her for that.

What she didn't admire was Edna's penchant for collecting. She had more knickknacks than God should allow, and Tiffany had been charged with packing them up to be shipped to North Carolina. The house had to be sold, and Tiffany was unemployed. When the vote to see who would go to Connecticut and pack up the house was taken, she had been elected.

Tiffany had arrived in Connecticut at the end of January during a freakish warm spell and was pleased to see her mother had been wrong.

Connecticut wasn't such a bad place after all. She even walked outside without her jacket and laughed at her mother's insistence that she take extra socks and her boots. Mr. Benson, the old man who had taken care of the house since Edna had left it in 1982, told her not to get used to the warm temperatures, but she dismissed his warning. *Old people are always cold*, she thought. Then the storm came. When Tiffany woke up that morning, she was freezing and quickly put on a second pair of socks. She looked out the window and the brightness of the snow stung her eyes. Everywhere she looked was covered in a blanket of pristine snow. It was beautiful but reminded her that she should have gone to the store the day before.

As she descended the steps to the first floor, Tiffany glanced out the window on the landing between floors. Her car was covered with snow. She sighed but still believed there was hope of getting it to the road. She made coffee in the old Mr. Coffee her mother had packed and ate the last bagel she'd bought on her last trip to the supermarket. Then she got dressed and went to the porch, where she decided she wasn't going anywhere.

The wind howled and tree branches gently brushed the windows. Tiffany made another pot of coffee and sat at the kitchen table. The only phone in the house was on the wall next to the table, and she used it to call her mother. Her cell had been turned off when she lost her job, and the no-contract phone she used now was running low on minutes. She wanted to save them for an emergency. Rita answered on the second ring.

“Hey, sweetie, how ya doin’?”

“There's over a foot of snow on my car,” Tiffany said.

“Wow. I saw that you had a storm on Good Morning America. How bad is it?”

“I can’t get out of here.”

“Do you have enough food?”

“I have enough for a day or two.”

“Then you should be all right. They’ll dig you out. Four Mile Road is a main road.”

“I know, but I was craving some chocolate.”

Rita laughed. “I guess the packing is getting to you, huh?”

“It’s brutal. Edna saved everything.”

“Speaking of Edna, she’s going downhill. The reporters were at the hospice this morning.”

“Really? She’s that bad?”

“I’m afraid so, sweetie. I’m sorry you’re so far away, but you understand it had to be done. When she goes, the house has to be sold quickly.”

“I know, but I wish I could see her.”

“Just think of it this way – she’s all over that house. Just look around. You’re with her.”

Tears stung Tiffany’s eyes and her emotional response to Rita’s words surprised her. Six months earlier, she never would have thought she’d feel this way about Edna, but her lack of employment had put her in a position to be used by the family as a “caretaker” for Edna, which meant she sat with her in the nursing home so the others wouldn’t feel guilty about neglecting the oldest member of the family. Tiffany had resented her

confinement with what she secretly referred to as the living dead, but as the weeks went by, she grew fond of Edna.

Tiffany loved to draw. She had longed to study art in college, but her mother encouraged her to get a job, saying one day Edna would die and they would inherit enough to pay for Tiffany's education. At that time, Edna was 112 years old. She was the oldest living woman in North Carolina and Rita surmised that she wasn't long for this world.

"It won't be long, sweetie," she would say. "Then you'll go to school and won't be saddled with student loans."

That was four years ago. Tiffany was twenty-one and the only job on her resume was that of checker for a supermarket chain that just went under, laying off all its employees. Tiffany had cried for weeks when she lost that job. She felt useless and afraid of what the future would bring. She looked for jobs, but the chain had employed hundreds of people, and they were all competing for the same jobs. Tiffany wanted to apply for loans and go to college, but her mother kept discouraging her.

"You'll never pay them off," Rita said. "You'll be paying them the rest of your life."

"But what do you want me to do? Sit around here all day?"

"We need you to watch Grandma Edna. Everything happens for a reason. You can put it on your resume."

"Oh, yeah, watching an old person. That should stand out."

"No, caretaker, like a CNA or something. It shows you're well-rounded."

Then she actually started sitting with Edna and listening to her grandmother's rambling thoughts and saw that there was still a person

inside who wanted to be heard. Tiffany began to write those thoughts down in a small notebook she kept in her purse. She also took to sketching Edna's face. Tiffany was fascinated by the lines in Edna's face, the wrinkles above her brow and the veins in her hands. She had brought the notebook and sketchpad to Connecticut and kept them in her room. At night, she would sketch the rooms Edna had lived in and place her grandmother's form amidst the clutter.

"I'll let you know what happens," Rita said. "When it happens, we'll send you money to come home."

"I don't know if I want to," Tiffany said. "I'd like to remember her the way she was."

"But they always do them up nice at Jenkins'."

Jenkins' was the local funeral parlor. Its makeup and hair person was legendary in the small town. She always made her subjects so lifelike they looked as though they would sit up and start talking.

"I know, but I'd still rather remember her alive."

"Suit yourself; but Mary will have something to say about it."

"She's your sister, Mom. Just tell her I'm busy doing something no one else wanted to do."

"I know, but she'll say something that will make me feel guilty and I won't have anything to say back."

"I don't know why you're so afraid of her."

"Oh, she just hits me the wrong way is all. She's done it since we were kids."

"Well, if it happens soon, I'll be stuck here because of the snow and you won't have to make excuses."

“That’s true. Let’s keep our fingers crossed!”

“Mom, you’re talking about her dying while there’s still snow on the ground.”

“I know, sweetie, but she is a hundred and sixteen. It’s not like she hasn’t lived long enough.”

*But what was long enough?* Tiffany thought. Was anyone ever ready to die?

“Oh, damn, it’s snowing again,” Tiffany said as she looked out the kitchen window.

“So, what have you got planned for today?” Rita asked.

“I’m going to the attic. There’s a room up there. It’s locked and I’m going to look for the key.”

“I remember there were two rooms up there.”

“Yeah, one is open. It’s small, and it looks like someone tried to fix it up once. The carpet hardly looks worn.”

“I think that was Bea. She was living with Edna for a while. She fixed up that room and stayed there a while, but not for long. I think it was too high up, you know, too many steps at the end of the day. She went home after that.”

“I don’t remember her.”

“She was Edna’s niece, Audrey’s girl. She died years ago, before I was born.”

“Oh. Well, I think I’ll get started. Call me about Edna.”

“I will. Button your neck up when you go outside.”

“I will, Mom.”

Tiffany poured herself another cup of coffee and took it upstairs to the attic. The stairs leading up creaked when she stepped on them, but they were sturdy. At the top of the stairs, she moved a small table to the landing and put her cup on top, then turned to the door on the left, the door she couldn't open, and examined the lock.

It looked like an original, with a glass knob and brass plate. It looked like it would open with a skeleton key if Tiffany could find one. She picked up her cup and sipped her coffee. She'd been all through Edna's bedroom. Where would someone keep a skeleton key? A junk drawer?

She picked up her coffee and went back downstairs. Edna's bedroom was the large one at the front of the house. It was huge, with a dressing room and bath of its own. The dressing room was the size of Tiffany's bedroom back home, and the bath had an old, claw-footed tub and chain-pull toilet. Tiffany had been staying in that room because the others contained too much junk. Edna must have thrown everything in them over the years since her kids had left home.

Tiffany put her cup on Edna's dresser and opened the drawers. The top drawer was full of old bobby pins, a hair brush, makeup, handkerchiefs, white gloves, and costume jewelry. The bottom drawers were empty. She then went to the armoire on the other side of the room. It had belonged to Edna's husband. Tiffany knew he had left Edna a long time ago and figured the armoire would be empty, but she checked inside just in case. The closet was empty but for a single tie hanging on a hook, and the drawers held an empty jewelry box. The drawers in the end tables by the bed yielded nothing of value either so she went downstairs to search the kitchen drawers.

The snow had stopped and Tiffany hoped it would stay that way. The lower floors of the house were cold as the hot air rose, and she shivered as she walked down the stairs. She shuffled to the kitchen and began opening and closing drawers. She had already been through the junk drawer and found nothing. When a search of the kitchen proved fruitless, she knew what she had to do. She had to go to the basement.

She hadn't been down there and didn't want to go, but if Edna's husband had a workbench down there, that's where he might keep a skeleton key. When she had arrived, she had opened the basement door and looked down the stairs. It was dark and smelled musty. She had closed the door and decided that someone else could clean that place up. Now she was determined to find that key, as her curiosity about that room had grown to a fever pitch. The door was off the kitchen and she took a deep breath before opening it.

A blast of cold air hit her face and she shivered again. She could hear the steady hum of the old furnace. She switched on the light and a soft glow filled the passageway to the cellar. As she went down the stairs to the landing, she kept listening for rodents scurrying away but heard nothing. At the landing, she bent over and looked around. It was surprisingly clean. Edna's husband must have been a neat man.

There was a workbench near a wall and a washer and dryer. Tiffany had been going to a laundromat. When she didn't see a washer and dryer in the mudroom, she assumed Edna didn't have any. She smiled. It would save her a trip, and the cellar wasn't as scary as she thought it would be.

She continued to walk down the stairs and went to the workbench. All the nails and screws were neatly arranged in baby food jars while the tools

were hung on the wall. The drawers were organized with old Tupperware food containers. And there, in a pile of keys, was a long, brass key. It was different from the others. Tiffany grabbed it and headed upstairs.

She was out of breath when she finally made it to the attic but excited by the prospect of getting into the room. As she put the key into the lock, she crossed the fingers on her other hand and turned it. She felt the lock move and then turned the knob. The door opened, and she switched on the light.



## Chapter 2

The room was like something from another time. Unlike Edna's other rooms, this one was neat, and the items were arranged to form a lovely sitting room. There was a settee with lacy pillows, a divan with embroidered upholstery, a tea table, and a double bed with a white chenille bedspread. Tiffany walked inside. She noticed that the walls were covered in floral wallpaper and there was an overstuffed chair pushed up against the wall. The room was bright and when Tiffany sat on the chair, she glanced out the window. The sun was shining and she was glad because it might melt the snow on her car. But then she noticed something strange. The tree branches had green leaves.

She got up and walked to the window. Outside, the grass was green and the trees were covered in leaves. There was a woman walking in the yard next door and she wasn't wearing a coat. Tiffany stared at her trying to decipher what she was wearing. It was a long dress, but like none Tiffany had ever seen.

"Pardon me."

Tiffany spun around and looked at the door. A handsome young man in a uniform was standing there smiling at her. He was holding his hat in his hand. She freaked out.

"How did you get in here?" she yelled.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you," he said. "I was looking for Edna."

"What?" Tiffany asked.

"I stopped by to see Edna. I have to see her before I go."

“She’s not here. And you didn’t answer my question. How did you get in here?”

Tiffany felt her cell phone in her pocket. She thought about calling 911, but the young man didn’t seem all that terrifying, so she kept her hand on the phone just in case.

“It’s important I see her,” the man said. “I just got my orders and I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“She doesn’t live here anymore,” Tiffany said.

The young man’s face fell. “Oh, but that can’t be. We bought this house together. When I get back, we’re getting married. We plan to fill it with children.”

He smiled broadly.

Tiffany narrowed her eyes. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Tom. Tom Shafer. “Edna’s fiancé. I must see her. Today’s the last chance I have to tell her goodbye.”

Tiffany sat on the settee and stared at Tom. She remembered his name. Grandma Lucy had told her about Edna’s first love, Tom Shafer. While Tiffany sat in the hospice watching the old woman, Edna had called out “Oh, Tom, Tom...”

Now Tom was standing in front of her telling her he had to tell Edna goodbye. Had he done this before? Or was he showing up now because Edna was dying?

“If you tell me,” Tiffany said. “I’ll make sure she gets the message.”

Tom lowered his head. “Will you tell her I love her?”

Tiffany blushed. “I think I can.”

Tom took his pocket watch out and looked at it. “I must go. I can’t be late.” He looked at Tiffany. “Please tell her I talked to her father and he agreed to the marriage. And tell her that nothing will stop me from coming back to her.”

Edna’s father had been a businessman in Hartford. Tiffany knew very little about him, only that he had left his daughter lots of money and real estate in the area, and that Edna had sold most of it when he died.

She looked at Tom, whose eyes were misty, and smiled. “I’ll be sure she gets the message.”

He seemed reluctant to leave. “Tell her I’ll write every day. I promise. Please, ask her to write to me.”

“Does she know where to send the letters?”

“Yes.” Tom slid his hands over the brim of his hat. “I wanted to say goodbye.”

Tiffany’s heart went out to him. “I’m so sorry she wasn’t here. Do you want to leave a note?”

Tom shook his head as he looked at his watch again. “There’s no time. Please, just tell her what I said.”

Tom walked away and Tiffany went after him. As she entered the hall between the rooms she looked, but he was gone. There was no one on the stairs going down and no sound in the hall below.

Tiffany turned and looked at the room. Something magical had happened, and she’d read enough paranormal books to believe anything was possible, but to find a portal to another time in Grandma Edna’s house was a little overwhelming, and Tiffany decided to go downstairs for a while.

She went to Edna's bedroom to retrieve her sketchpad and sat on the old couch in the dressing room. There were windows along the wall that provided light and Tiffany sketched a picture of Tom. She flipped through the pages and landed on the one she had sketched of Edna the first time she saw her in the nursing home. Something had changed, but it was so subtle that Tiffany couldn't discern just what it was. She just knew that Edna looked different.

She closed the sketchpad and went down to the kitchen. The gray clouds were drifting, giving way to blue sky and sunshine. She opened a can of chicken noodle soup and made a peanut butter sandwich. It felt a little warmer in the kitchen and that made her smile. Then she thought about Tom. What had just happened? She sat on the chair and stared at the old calendar on the wall. It was from 1982. Everything in the house was out of date and old. Was the experience she just had real, or was being here causing hallucinations? She had been alone for two weeks. Maybe that was it. It couldn't have been real. But wouldn't it be nice if it were?



I hope you enjoyed reading this excerpt from *The Room in Grandma's House*. This short story is available on Amazon.com for \$.99.

<http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00HOZO006>

## About the Author

I love stories that make you think and keep you guessing until the very end. For many years I worked for a criminal attorney and the stories I could tell you - well, you'll just have to take my word for it. My other books include a series called Pello Island. There is a mystery at the heart of that series, too. I guess I just like to figure things out, step-by-step, with a big revelation at the end.

I see my stories as movies in my head and the characters become very real. Sometimes, even when a book is completed, they will come around and tell me they want to say more, but I tell them it's too late - that they, like the rest of us, will just have to live with their destiny.

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