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# ONE

“I am like the rose that came out of the gravy,” Nikolai Hayes announced as he walked down the steps of Ambleside Chapel following the Easter morning service. “You know, Mommy? That rose?”

“A rose came out of gravy?” Elizabeth Hayes took her son’s hand to cross the street. “I’m not sure I understand, sweetheart.”

“Like in the song at church,” Nick said. “Up from the gravy, a rose.”

Elizabeth pursed her lips to stifle a laugh. “Up from the grave he arose,” she corrected.

“That’s what I said. When you got me from the orphanage in Romania, it was like I came out of the gravy.” He spread his arms and launched himself into a spin across the sidewalk. “And now I am a rose!”

With a gasp, she caught his thin arms just in time to prevent him from twirling out into the street. Not that the eight-year-old would have been in much danger. Traffic crawled through Ambleside, Missouri, even on this Easter Sunday morning. Most folks had chosen to walk to church beneath the pink haze of redbud trees that lined the town square. A gust of fresh air from the direction of the nearby Missouri River scattered white dogwood blossoms across the pale green grass as families strolled home for dinner.

“Good morning, Miss Hayes!” A stooped gentleman lifted his hat, his face a wreath of soft wrinkles. “And young Master Nikolai. Good morning to you, too.”

"It's Boompah!" Nick cried, pulling away from his mother and racing across the grass. "Didn't you go to church, Boompah? Today's Easter! Jesus died and came alive again, did you hear?"

Jacob Jungemeyer chuckled as the child danced around him. Nick had always called the old man Boompah, though no one knew why. Now everyone close to him used the nickname. "I heard that good news, Nick," Boompah said. "And I went to church this morning, just like you. But my church is that way—down Main Street past Zimmerman's Sundries."

"Guess what, Boompah—I'm like the rose that came out of the gravy," Nick declared.

"Oh? And how is that?"

"Hey look, Nick, there's Montgomery," Elizabeth cut in, hoping to avert a detailed explanation. Mr. Jungemeyer had come to America during the Second World War, and his own English could be a little garbled at times. She felt sure their similar backgrounds played a part in the bond of friendship between the old man and the child she had adopted three years before.

"How are you feeling today, Boompah?" she asked as Nick raced off to greet his best friend. No doubt Montgomery would understand perfectly about the rose and the gravy.

"Ach, I am down in the back, as they say it." Boompah rubbed his spine. "Maybe Cleo Mueller will be able to find a pill for me at his drugstore on Monday. I call him."

"Good idea." She slipped her arm through his and allowed him to lean against her as they walked across the square past a bronze statue of Harry Truman. "Would you like to have dinner with Nick and me today, Boompah? I've got a ham in the oven, and I whipped up a batch of fresh yeast rolls this morning."

"Thank you, but I go to Al Huff's house this Sunday, like

always. They expect me, you know. Oh, Elizabeth, I am sure you will miss eating the Easter dinner with Grace. I think your church must seem very empty without her this morning.”

Elizabeth nodded, recalling the jaunty rose-strewn hat she had always spotted three pews ahead of her. Grace Chalmers had never missed a Sunday service in her life. She was deeply missed by everyone in Ambleside, but Elizabeth was sure she felt the old woman’s absence more than most. The huge brick Chalmers House with its arched windows and lacy gingerbread porch sat right next to the antiques shop she owned.

The day Elizabeth had hung the sign for Finders Keepers, Grace had dropped by the shop bearing a gift of twenty-five embroidered handkerchiefs to add to the inventory. In addition, she had purchased a small china tea set, delighted because she had owned one just like it as a child. Grace and Elizabeth had become fast friends, and the old woman’s death the month before had been an unexpected blow.

“The auction is tomorrow,” Elizabeth said as she and Boompah reached the corner of the square on which a replica of the Liberty Bell sat on display. “I can’t believe everything’s going to be sold. It seems a shame. The china her mother hand painted. The pillows Grace embroidered. Her books.”

“The books. Ach, it will be impossible to think of Chalmers House without the books. And what is to become of the mansion itself?”

“Pearlene told me Grace willed the place to her nephew—lock, stock, and barrel. He’s the one who scheduled the auction.”

Elizabeth stopped and gazed across the street at the ivy-draped house. To the best of her knowledge, this so-called nephew had never visited his aunt a single time

during her long life. He would have no idea that Grace had planted the lilac bushes that were in full bloom near the long front porch. He'd never seen his elderly relative on her knees weeding the dianthus that filled the central circle in the walkway leading to the ornate double doors. Grace had been so pleased that the steady breeze off the river wafted the sweet scent of her flowers across the whole town.

"You know, if Grace were alive," Elizabeth mused, "that vase in her foyer would be filled with lilacs and forsythia branches."

"The blue Chinese vase? Yes, I see it so many times when I go to deliver her groceries." Boompah nodded. "In the summer she puts in lavender and purple coneflowers. In the autumn, it is maple and pyracantha branches. In winter, cedar and . . ." He paused and peered at the house. "Who is inside there, Elizabeth?"

"In the mansion? Nobody. It's been empty for a month."

"Ja, but somebody is walking up the stairs. I see it just now, one minute ago."

Elizabeth frowned. "Boompah, the place is locked up tight. Maybe you saw a shadow from the maple tree."

"Mom, Mom!" Nick ran up and grabbed her hand. "Can Magunnery come to our house to play after lunch? Please, Mom? It's OK with her parents if it's OK with you. We want to swing."

"That's fine, Nick, but . . ."

"Yesss!" He pumped a fist in the air and raced away.

"You can come, Magunnery!"

Montgomery, her bright red hair caught up in a pink bow, jumped up and down with joy. Normally clad in a pair of jeans, a T-shirt, and some well-worn sneakers, on this day the little girl was a pink confection of lacy petticoats and organdy skirts. Elizabeth waved at Montgomery's parents, confirming the coming visit. It was hardly news. Their child practically lived at the little apartment behind Finders Keepers.

“Look, I see it again,” Boompah said, squeezing Elizabeth’s hand. “There on the second floor. It is a person, maybe two.”

Elizabeth let out a breath. “I hope it’s not the kids.”

The Ambleside High School students known as “the kids” had lately taken to piercing their ears, noses, and eyebrows, sporting fake tattoos, and looking for hideaways where they could smoke cigarettes and drink beer. Mick and Ben, Ambleside’s dauntless police force, had been compelled to clear out Chalmers Park more than once. Twice they had locked the gates at 8 P.M. just to keep the kids dispersed.

“I try to hire them to work at the market,” Boompah said, “but they steal the beef jerky and empty all pennies from the gumball machine. If those kids get into Grace’s house, they will break something, of that I am sure. We better take a look right now.”

He started across the street, giving Elizabeth barely enough time to grab Nick’s hand. “Boompah, why don’t you stay outside with Nick? I’ll go check the mansion.”

“You?” His sparse white eyebrows lifted. “Look at you, Elizabeth, very skinny and wearing those high-heel shoes.”

“And you’re down in the back. Besides, we don’t know who—”

“Ach, who is nothing to me,” he scoffed. “Did I not escape from Adolph Hitler himself? He tries to kill my family because we are of the Roma—the Gypsies. He tries to capture us and put us into his camps. But I escape!”

“Who’s trying to kill you, Boompah?” Nick demanded, his green eyes flashing. “Where is he?”

“Adolph Hitler!” Boompah spat. “He is putting everybody into cars on the railroad. Like we are cattle.”

Elizabeth left the old man wandering down the paths of memory, a curious little boy tagging along. Germany was a bit like Romania, she would tell her son later. Two evil rulers who cared nothing for tradition, faith, or humanity had

tried to tear down the old and build new worlds of their own imaginings, destroying millions of lives in the process.

Elizabeth unlatched the iron gate and followed the brick path to the porch of Chalmers House. She knew her son could not fully comprehend the situation that had led him into an orphanage. But she would assure Nick, as she had so many times before, that God had a wonderful plan for his life. Hadn't Jesus brought them together—a lonely woman and an abandoned child? And wouldn't he continue the joy in their lives?

She slid a loose brick from the wall and drew out the key Grace had always kept hidden there. Doors were rarely locked in Ambleside, "but you never know," Grace had said.

No, you couldn't always know, Elizabeth thought as she turned the key in the door. It didn't pay to be careless.

"Hey, up there!" she called at the foot of the dusty staircase. "This house belongs to the Chalmers family. It's not open to the public."

She heard footsteps creak across the oak floorboards. "I mean it," she said, stepping onto the first stair. "You don't have permission to be up there. Now, get your backside out of here this minute, or I'll call Mick and Ben."

"Mick and Ben?" A pair of well-shined cordovan loafers began to descend; next came crisply pressed khaki slacks, a brown leather belt, a starched white oxford shirt, and a striped silk tie. "Are they in charge of backside removal?"

Elizabeth reached for the banister as a pair of deep-set gray-green eyes focused on her. "Uh . . . I thought . . . I thought you were one of the kids."

The corner of the man's mouth turned up. "No," he said. The hazel eyes surveyed her up and down for a moment. "And neither are you."

Elizabeth could feel herself flushing as he advanced. The man was good looking with his dark hair and deeply

tanned skin, and she breathed a prayer of thanks that she wasn't wearing her usual Sunday-afternoon shorts and T-shirt. A quick inventory of her appearance assured her that she wore an ivory sheath that was the essence of elegance, a pair of matching heels, and her grandmother's pearls. And she'd painted her nails.

She touched the pearls at her neck with one hand as she extended the other. "I'm Elizabeth Hayes. I own the shop next door."

"Aha," he said, taking her hand in a firm grip. "Zachary Chalmers. Pleased to meet you."

"Oh, you're the nephew." Elizabeth let out a breath. "I should have guessed. You're here to look over Grace's things before the auction tomorrow."

"Does everyone in Ambleside know the details of my personal business, Miss Hayes?"

"Grace and I were close friends. And, yes, everyone knows everyone's business in Ambleside." She stepped back onto the marble floor. Now that she knew who she was dealing with, she could tackle her concerns head-on. "Listen, Mr. Chalmers, I realize you had little or no contact with your aunt during her lifetime. But I think you should be aware that the furnishings in this house were precious to Grace. Many of them are quite valuable. I hope you don't intend to just get rid of all these items without finding out exactly what your aunt had here. That vase, for example, is museum quality. You ought to ascertain its worth so it isn't just sold off like some knickknack from a curio store."

Without waiting for his response, she walked across the hall and lifted the vase in which Grace had always kept the season's bounty. "These things not only have monetary value," she said, "but they have great sentimental value. Grace was a wonderful woman. She was gentle and kind, and the furnishings in her home reflect that. This is her legacy."

Zachary Chalmers had remained at the foot of the staircase, but his eyes were locked on her. “As you mentioned, I wasn’t close to my aunt. I appreciate that you were her friend, but her legacy has no sentimental value to me.”

“It’s more than just my feelings, Mr. Chalmers. Grace’s legacy means a lot to this whole town. Everyone in Ambleside loved her. Her house was in the Chalmers family for generations—”

“Not *my* side of the Chalmers family, ma’am.” He hooked his hands in his pockets and took a step toward her. “I grew up in a trailer park at the edge of Jefferson City, and my folks never even told me I had an Aunt Grace. She never invited us here for a visit. Her name was never mentioned. So, while I appreciate your fondness for the woman, I can tell you that I have no intention—”

“Boompah nearly got killed by the nachos!” Nick burst into the house and ran to his mother. “They tried to catch him and put him into a train. They were bad, evil nachos!”

“Nazis,” Elizabeth clarified. She knelt on one knee and took her son’s shoulders. Clearly Boompah’s story had upset the child, and she knew it would be hours before she could help Nick sort through the confusing information. “Sweetheart, the trouble between Boompah and the Nazis happened a long time ago. Boompah is fine.”

“Yes, I am fine now,” the old man announced as he entered the room, “but where are the kids who have come to steal from Chalmers House? I will speak to them. I am not afraid!”

Elizabeth held out her hand to calm the old man. “Boompah, there were no kids. You saw Grace’s nephew through the window. Mr. Chalmers is here to look things over before the auction.”

Like a trio of territorial cardinals, the three males inside the mansion assessed one another. Clearly, each felt that he was being intruded upon. Boompah sniffed as he observed

Zachary Chalmers's tailored appearance. Chalmers lifted one brow at the sight of Boompah's rumpled brown cardigan and sweat-stained hat. Nick frowned up at the newcomer, his own tie spotted with water from the drinking fountain at church.

"Are you a nacho?" he asked Zachary Chalmers, his green eyes wary.

"No, but I was a Tootsie Roll one Halloween." The man smiled. "What's your name, young man?"

"Nikolai Hayes. I was born in Romania, but my mommy came and adopted me three years ago. I'm eight years old. It's Easter today because Jesus died and came to life again. Did you know that?"

"I did."

"I have a swing in my backyard that Magunnery plays on with me. Do you want to see it? You could come to our house for lunch. We have extra, because Mommy invited Boompah, but he can't come."

"Nick!" Elizabeth grabbed her son's hand.

"We're having ham," Nick added. "And fresh rolls."

"Ham, huh?" Zachary Chalmers pondered a moment.

"Well, I guess I could make room in my schedule—"

"Just a minute now," Elizabeth cut in. "Nick, please take Boompah outside and make sure he gets down the stairs all right. His back is sore."

"Boompah's going to Al Huff's house for lunch," Nick informed Zachary Chalmers. "Al owns the gas station, and he sells barbecue ribs and beans and cold slaw, too. He has a sign that says Eat, Get Gas and everybody laughs, but Al won't change it. Al and Thelma always have Boompah over for Sunday lunch. That's how they do it. It's called a tradition."

"Aha." Chalmers watched the little boy lead the old man out onto the front porch. "Bye, Nick. Bye, Boompah."

"My mom is the best cooker in the whole world," Nick

called over his shoulder. "You better come try her ham. You'll like it."

"My son is . . . enthusiastic," Elizabeth explained.

"I liked his comment about the nachos."

She smiled. "Nick still trips over words sometimes. You have to listen carefully to understand what he's trying to tell you."

"I'll do that." He took a step toward her. "So, is the lunch invitation good? I haven't eaten."

Elizabeth glanced out the door as Nick assisted Boompah down the stairs. "Look, Mr. Chalmers, we've just met, and I'm afraid I'm . . ." She tried to think of a good reason not to let him come. She wasn't too busy. She had no plans for the afternoon. There was plenty of food. But the man was a total stranger—and not a particularly pleasant one, at that.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not comfortable having you in my home." She shifted from one foot to the other. "I, uh, I hardly know you."

"Zachary Chalmers. Grew up in Jeff City. Trailer park. Aunt Grace's nephew. You already know me better than most people do."

*And I don't like you*, she wanted to add. The man was far too self-assured to be appealing, and his attitude toward Grace was cavalier. Clearly, he intended to sell off every stick of furniture in the mansion without the least compunction. He'd make his money and then drive away, leaving the old house stripped bare.

"Mr. Chalmers," she said, "I'm not in the habit of inviting men to my house for any reason. So if you'll excuse me, I need to get that ham out of the oven."

"I take it you're not married," he called as she headed for the door. "Neither am I."

"Good-bye, Mr. Chalmers."

"Zachary."

"Just don't forget what I told you about Grace's things," she

said, turning in the open doorway. "You shouldn't let go of the past. This house is filled with traditions, memories, and heirlooms. Don't sell off your heritage, Mr. Chalmers."

"Out with the old, in with the new," he said. "I'm an architect, Miss Hayes, not a museum curator."

Elizabeth had to force herself to keep from slamming the door behind her. Of all the gall. *Out with the old, in with the new*. The man was clearly a nacho!



"You'd better not go to that auction this morning, Liz," Pearlene Fox said as she swept the sidewalk in front of Très Chic, the ladies' apparel shop she owned. "You know good and well that man is going to sell every last thing right out of there. Phil said he wouldn't be a bit surprised if Zachary Chalmers tore down the whole mansion."

Elizabeth paused and leaned on her own broom. "Tore it down?"

"That's what Phil said. We were eating leftover ham sandwiches last night, you know how you do after a big meal, and I said to him, 'Do you reckon that nephew of Grace's is going to strip that mansion bare at the auction tomorrow?' And Phil said, 'Strip it bare and tear it down.' That's what he said, and you know Phil is always good for the latest news, him being on the city council and all. He said there was likely to be a wrecking ball over there by the middle of the week."

"Zachary Chalmers can't tear down the mansion!"

"I guess he can, too. It's his, you know."

"It belongs to Ambleside as much as to anybody."

"Make a good parking lot, Phil says. I've got to tell you, I agree with him, Liz. Our business would just about double if we had better parking around the square. As it is, folks are liable to get themselves killed trying to cross the street over there by the pavilion."

"I don't want a parking lot beside Finders Keepers. I want Chalmers House." Elizabeth could hardly believe what she was hearing. "Pearlene, what would Ambleside be without the mansion? It'd be like a smile with a front tooth missing."

"You're just attached to that old house because you loved Grace so much." Pearlene swept a pile of leaves off the curb. "Most folks think the mansion is an eyesore. Why, it's like something out of the Addams family. Besides, who'd ever want to buy it? There's no central air, the heating system must go back a hundred years, the plumbing's from the Dark Ages. And take a look at that ivy, would you? You can tell it's eaten clean through the mortar. I bet if you gave those vines a jerk, the whole house would fall right down."

Elizabeth propped her broom against the wall of her antiques shop and studied the old mansion next door. Movers had been carrying Grace's furniture onto the expansive lawn since just after dawn. Already the crowd that had gathered for the auction threatened to overflow onto the street.

"Are you going over?" Pearlene asked. "There's probably some good antiques you could snap up for resale in your shop. Phil was in the mansion a time or two, and he told me the place was loaded. Last night he said, 'Who'd want that old junk, anyhow?' and I said, 'Liz Hayes would, that's who.' And he said, 'That furniture's probably full of termites. They ought to put the whole mess in a bonfire and be done with it.' But that's Phil, you know. He doesn't understand antiques."

*Out with the old, in with the new*, Elizabeth thought, recalling her conversation with Zachary Chalmers. She'd never had much in common with Pearlene's husband, and she had a feeling he and Grace's nephew were two of a kind.

"Look at old Jacob Jungemeyer over there," Pearlene exclaimed. "He just up and leaves the market anytime he

feels like it. And then he blames the kids when his gumball money turns up missing. I'll swan."

"I'm going to take a look," Elizabeth blurted out. She opened her front door and flipped the sign from Open to Closed. As she turned the key in the lock, she could hear Pearlene grumbling. Bad enough the Corner Market stood abandoned at nine in the morning, she was probably saying. Now Finders Keepers was shut down, and who knew which other store owners would lock their doors just to take a gander at the auction?

"Might as well shut down the whole town," she muttered as Elizabeth crossed the crowded lawn.

"Morning, Boompah," Elizabeth greeted the old man. He took off his hat and gave her a little bow. "Are you here to buy some of Grace's books?"

"Where can I put more books in my little house, Elizabeth? No, I am here to say good-bye to Grace. Ach, it is a sad day for Ambleside."

"There's her blue vase."

"Her hats thrown into a basket like so much dirty laundry."

"Her crystal."

"The painting of the horses."

"Her favorite chair. Oh, Boompah, I think Pearlene was right. I shouldn't have come."

The old man took her hand and patted it. "You want to come with me to Dandy Donuts? We have a cup of hot tea together, Elizabeth. Maybe we feel better."

"Good idea." They started across the grass, but as they passed the books, Elizabeth couldn't resist running her fingers over their familiar leather spines. Gilt-edged pages ruffled in the breeze. Classics that Grace had loved to read in the evenings lay scattered across card tables. *Moby Dick*. *Jane Eyre*. *Pride and Prejudice*.

"Her Bible!" Elizabeth picked up the old black leather

book and hugged it close. “How can Zachary Chalmers sell Grace’s Bible? Where is he? I’m going to give that man a piece of my mind.”

She scanned the crowd. Oblivious to the intricate wooden fretwork overhead, Zachary Chalmers stood on the porch and conferred with the auctioneers. His shirtsleeves were rolled to his elbows, and his dark hair ruffled in the river breeze. A pair of sunglasses concealed his eyes. Grateful she wouldn’t have to actually look at him, Elizabeth tucked the Bible under her arm, left Boompah’s side, and started for the house.

“Ma’am,” a man called, catching up to her. “You can’t separate the merchandise. I’m sorry, but that Bible belongs with the other books on the table. It’s Lot 39. You can bid on the whole batch when the number comes up, but we can’t let you carry off one book.”

She glared at the man. “I’ll have you know this is Grace Chalmers’s Bible.”

“I don’t care if it’s the Declaration of Independence. You can’t cart it off. It belongs to Lot 39.”

“You don’t seem to understand.” She flipped open the book, its pages underlined in inks of blue, black, red, and green. Notes in Grace’s trembling hand filled the margins. “This Bible is a record of a woman’s faith journey. It was a part of her daily life for years and years. She treasured every word.”

“Maybe so, but you still can’t take it from the table.”

“But this Bible is not like the other books. This was personal.”

“That’s the nature of an auction, ma’am. Its purpose is to sell off personal goods. And we sell things in lots.”

“Fine.” She set the Bible back on the table. “Come on, Boompah, let’s go get some tea.”

“You’re not staying for the auction, Miss Hayes?” Zachary Chalmers inserted himself between her and the old man.

“I’m not too crazy about hanging around here myself. Mind if I join you two for a cup of coffee?”

Elizabeth looked at her reflection in the man’s sunglasses. “I’m afraid Mr. Jungemeyer and I would bore you,” she said, unable to keep the flint from her voice. “We’re part of the old guard, you know. We value the heritage a person leaves. We consider old tables, old vases, and old books worth preserving. We would never tear down an old house and put in a parking lot, Mr. Chalmers. So you’ll just have to excuse us.”

She took Boompah’s arm and stepped off the curb. If the new was so eager to send out the old, he could find someone else to have a cup of coffee with. Maybe Phil Fox would join him.

“A parking lot?” Zachary Chalmers said behind her. “Where’d you get that idea?”

Elizabeth swung around, her heart suddenly lifting. “You’re not planning to tear down the mansion and put in a parking lot?”

“No,” he said, “I’m going to tear it down and build a new office complex.”