

The snowstorm came out of the west on a wind that pummeled the car and threatened to push it off the road. The National Weather Service had predicted as much but the announcement came too late since I was a hundred miles from home and the snow had already started when I thought to turn on the radio. I gripped the wheel and tried to concentrate. Driving in bad weather frightened me, and I hated Interstate traffic in general.

The storm grew in intensity. Torrents of snow pounded the windshield like an endless supply of ice clad broom straws that cut visibility and made my eyes water from straining to see the roadway. An icy buildup formed below the wiper blades, and though they worked in earnest, the mixture of road-slop and ice crystals stuck to the glass.

A faded billboard announcing Marshall's Restaurant, Next Right appeared through the gloom. It came as a welcome relief. I put on the turn signal, eased the car onto the exit ramp, and merged onto Route 40. Not that there was much of a merge to it, I didn't see a single car. While the road service concentrated on clearing Interstate 70, the old highway remained clogged with drifting snow. A mile further along, a neon arrow pointed to a dilapidated diner and blinked a feeble welcome. Marshall's looked deserted, but the lights from inside reflected against the snow-covered parking lot. I parked near the entrance and went inside.

A row of empty booths flanked the front windows. I chose the last in line, sat facing the door, and ordered a cup of coffee. The waiter stared at me, pen poised above the guest ticket.

I stared back. "Just coffee."

Gramma's Box

He sighed and shuffled away. A minute later, he clanked a chunky, pottery mug onto the table and poured it to the brim with steaming coffee.

“Cream?”

“I guess not.”

One eyebrow lifted noting my sarcasm, and he set the nearly empty pot on the table.

“You here for the gathering?”

“Gathering?”

“Yep, last day of Jan-ya-airy, aint it? Been closing Marshall's come five o'clock everyday nigh on ten year. Everyday but one, Jan-ya-airy 31st. Don't know your face so I got to ask to see your invite. No invite you got to leave before time.”

“The gathering time, is it nine?”

“You got it.”

I took an envelope from my bag. Beneath a stylized logo in the upper left corner appeared the name Leroy Consteiner and Associates – Attorneys. “I have this.”

“Yep, Consteiner. He's the one told me to ask. You Sara Bishop?” He eyed the envelope.

“Yes, I'm Sara.”

“That's enough invite for me.”

“You know Mr. Consteiner?”

He slid into the booth across from me, swabbed the table with a tea-stained towel, rearranged the condiments, and nodded.

“Big shot, city lawyer come from over Indianapolis way. Come blasting through

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the door a week ago hollering-out for me. Calls me Donald. Says it real crusty like some kinda boss-man used to giving orders. Well, I look at him square on. 'Names Don,' I tell him. 'You want Donald best you get on out to the cemetery back of the Baptist church where my daddy's buried.' As usual he don't take the hint. Just goes on Donald this and Donald that. Like I aint got no say at all." He eyed the coffee cup. "Want a little more?"

"I'm fine," I said. "What did he want?"

"You first," he grinned. He toyed with the saltshaker, sprinkled a little mound onto the tabletop, and tried to balance the shaker on its edge.

"I only know what the letter says. I'm supposed to meet him here at nine. Something about my mother. I tried calling, but he didn't return my calls."

"That's it?" He shook his head.

"My mother died three months ago."

The shaker toppled, and he made a grab scattering more salt.

"Double damn," he said. "Ever try this?"

"No," I said.

"She must've been one of them." He centered the shaker again. "Takes a steady hand."

"One of whom?"

"The women." He raised his hand away from the table. "Don't breathe, now. Would you look at that? I did it. Damned if I didn't."

The shaker stood balanced in the salt mound.

"What women?"

An old furnace unit suspended from the ceiling behind the counter grumbled to

Gramma's Box

life, and its blower discharged warm air over the room. The shaker wobbled and fell. Don sighed, and mopped salt granules over the edge of the table and onto the floor. I waited for him to answer.

“Well, Sara girl, guess I can tell you since you got the invite and all. Only don't let on I did incase Consteiner gets a feather.... I mean incase he wants to tell you first.”

“I won't breathe a word.”

He rested an elbow on the table and leaned closer as if that made what he promised to reveal more confidential.

“Started out with four of 'em about ten years back. They came waltzing in like they owned the place. Fact is the oldest one, Mrs. Emberly, did. I'd never laid eyes on her before that night, but she had my pay check and went to apologizing for not getting it in the post on time. Well, that was proof enough for me who she was.”

“Daisy Emberly? That's my aunt. She's dead now.”

“Yep, reckon her name was Daisy. Anyway, she asked if I'd fix up a meeting space in the back. I did like she told me, and then she said I should lock up and go home.”

“Who were the others?”

He shrugged. “I never seen a one of them again except Mrs. Emberly for four, maybe five years, but I knew they came, too, because next morning I'd clean up four places. Then something must've happened cause Consteiner called telling me to fix the room, and he'd be along to check. Real picky I'd done it right, too. Four chairs set east, west, north, and south around that table and a green cloth on top.”

“My Auntie Daisy passed away about six years ago.”

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"Might explain why someone else signed my check for a spell. Not long though."

"Do you remember the name?"

"Lily something, don't remember the last name. Guess I should. She gave me a juicy raise. I 'member Consteiner brought along a box that time made out of some dark wood all prettied up with fancy carving."

Something caught around my throat like a cold hand from the past.

"The box, was it ebony?"

"Don't know wood that well, but the carving popped right out, pretty as you please, all flowers and leaves, and right in the center a little face peeping out."

He didn't have to describe it more. I remembered Gramma's box. She'd kept it on her dresser more than forty years ago. The box she forbade me ever to touch, but one day I caught her gone and stole upstairs. The sweet scent of Emeraude, Gramma's scent, like jasmine mixed with a tang of citrus filled the room. Gramma's box whispered to me that day in a dry, rustling sort of voice like fall leaves caught on the wind, and I ran.

I reached for the pot of stale coffee to wash away the bitter taste in my mouth.

"That'll be cold," Don said. "Got another in the back."

"No, just go on. What else do you know?"

"Well, like I said, name on my checks changed right after."

"Lily Michaels signed your checks. She died six months after Auntie Daisy."

"Yeah, name was Lily, but that stopped and Consteiner's signed them ever since. He's the one calls to remind me about the gathering. Like I need reminding. Always the same time, Jan-ja-airy 31st."

The gleam of headlights reflected against the dirty glass of the diner windows.

Gramma's Box

The fury of the storm and cascading snow choked off the narrow beams a few feet from their source. The car inched close to the door, and the engine stopped.

Don slid across the seat and got up. "I reckon that'll be Consteiner. You won't tell him I been talking to you. Could a got my facts turned round-a-bouts. I expect that'd make him mad."

"Not a word."

He nodded and moved behind the counter.

Through the window, I watched Mr. Consteiner open the trunk and retrieve a bundle wrapped in a red, checkered tablecloth. He held it gingerly with both hands and backed through the door calling for Donald.

"Ah, there you are. You can be on your way now. Would you mind closing my trunk as you go?"

Wiry with too many sharp corners and a prominent nose that hooked at the end, Leroy Consteiner, despite his short stature, looked like a man who expected people to move out of his way. Still carrying the checkerboard wrapped parcel, he walked behind the counter and out of sight.

"Come along Mrs. Bishop. Donald will lock up."

I found him waiting just beyond a partition that hid the kitchen from view.

"This diner belonged to your aunt, Daisy Emberly. Here, come this way, through the door."

The breath caught in my chest the minute I entered the room. Gramma's box, now free of wrappings, rested in the center of a round table. Mr. Consteiner motioned me toward one of two chairs and sat down in the other.

Gramma's Box

“My name is Leroy Consteiner. I acted as Daisy's attorney while she lived, and afterward, your mother, Rose, asked me to continue. Your mother is the reason they formed the tontine.”

“Isn't that some kind of investment contract?”

Consteiner raised an eyebrow. “You know more than I expected. A tontine is an investment contract between members of a group. The last surviving member inherits the investment. Your mother and her sisters agreed to meet on the same day each year as part of the agreement.”

“What agreement?”

“The nature of the agreement makes being more specific impossible, Mrs. Bishop. I can tell you simple facts. Iris Sanders died last February. Your mother, Rose, followed in October. Because she outlived her sisters, the investment belonged to her. In her personal section of the contract, she names you as her heir.”

“But my father inherited my mother's estate.”

“The tontine was a private contract between sisters. I doubt your father knows about it at all.”

“Why?”

He shrugged.

“I am only the administrator, Mrs. Bishop. I don't know.” He pushed a fat envelope across the table. “I've kept the box and these documents in safety deposit since Lily Michael's death. I took the liberty of transferring the diner's deed to you. You'll find a letter and the tontine contract there, too.”

“A letter from whom?” I asked.

Gramma's Box

“From your mother.”

I stared at Gramma's box for a long time after Consteiner left, and then I opened Mother's letter.

My Darling Sara,

I do so hope that what you are about to read will not change the way you feel about me. No mother ever loved a child more than I love you, but I've kept a secret hidden from you and Daddy for more than forty years. It started when I fell in love with a student while in college and became pregnant. I was afraid to tell your grandmother and the young man never knew. I prayed for a miracle, and after a few months, my symptoms disappeared, and my normal cycle resumed. Two years later, I married your father.

You were born at home during a tremendous snowstorm. Daddy was away, and I had only Gramma to help. I heard you cry, and Gramma put you in my arms. You quieted right away. Then I heard the other one. I kept asking to see the other baby. Finally, I was screaming at Gramma to let me see when she turned and held it up.

Sara, darling Sara, the other one had skin the color of yellowed teeth and a texture like a dried-out, sea sponge. Gramma called it my sin and locked it inside the ebony box. I guess she thought it would die. I never looked at it again, but she kept it on her dresser to remind me. When she died, she willed the box to me. I wanted to throw it away but heard that wretched cry echo in my head. All those years, and I still heard it cry. I went nearly crazy from the sound. Finally, I called your Auntie Lily.

I expected revulsion when I told her, but Lily always was a wonder. She dug around for an explanation. I know I'll tell this wrong my darling, and for science you'll have to look elsewhere, but here is what I know. The thing in Gramma's box is a Lithopedion, a rare formation that happens sometimes when a fetus dies and is not expelled from the womb. But my sweet Sara, dead things simply do not cry. Somehow, somehow, my stone baby was alive.

Lily gathered the rest of your aunts and we formed the tontine. They kept my secret and helped me live with what I know dwells inside Gramma's box. I regret the burden that falls on your shoulders, but I know your heart. Choose well, my daughter.

Momma

Whoosh-gush, whoosh-gush, the sound of the furnace blower sprang to life. I reached for Gramma's box.