

## Poisoned Kisses

*Elvadora, Queen of Fae, shifted her bulk and rose from her couch of repose. As she moved ponderously through her kingdom, fairy lights twinkled and she heard the sussuruss of fairy voices. The very air sparkled as she progressed through the gauzy veils of mystery.*

*“Danger!” called the angel from her tall pedestal, rustling her golden wings as Elvadora passed by. “Beware of the light cord!”*

*But it was too late. Elvadora crashed to the floor. Cries of fear and despair arose from the wooden cabinet where the dolls kept watch, their little plastic and porcelain hands over their mouths. The fairies gathered, twittering pitifully, over the fallen bulk of their queen. “Oh, my lady!” moaned the angel.*

*Elvadora lay on the dirt-encrusted Persian carpet, unable to move. She called and called for help, and the fairies and dolls cried out with her. The pain in her chest was excruciating. She groaned. All the dolls and fairies scattered around the apartment groaned with her. Now she heard voices at her apartment door, calling to her.*

*“Help!” she cried. “Help me, please!” But the door remained locked and shut. Unknown fists banged at the door, making an urgent racket. Something made a rattling noise. Elvadora couldn't breathe. There was such a heavy pressure on her chest, as though something dark and dense were pressing down on her, squeezing the breath away. She couldn't get enough air into her lungs, and gasped painfully. The fairies set up a chorus of grief. The twinkling lights began to dim. The dark thing pressed harder. The fairy voices faded into silence.*

*At last, Elvadora lay quite still. Air no longer strained through her lungs. Her heart rested quietly in her chest. The twinkling lights were dark. The veils of mystery could now be seen as thick layers of dust, furring the dolls' bright hair, coating the pictures on the walls, rendering every surface dim and gray.*

*When the EMTs finally got the door open, they found an enormous old woman, quite dead, in a tiny apartment full of dust, used tissues, and dolls.*

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Sandy's health had been precarious for years, but her death still hit me like a baseball bat to the stomach. She was my only sister and we had been extremely close as children. I felt cold and numb for days after hearing the news. But my husband David, who had never been close to Sandy, gently urged me on—her apartment had to be cleared out. Truthfully? My grief over Sandy was secondary to my dread of clearing out her living space.

As soon as I opened the front door of Sandy's apartment, her signature perfume assaulted me. Sandy had been wearing Poisoned Kisses since she was a goth teenager before goth was a thing. I had always disliked the smell. It was musty and funky and overly sweet. It hung on the air of the stuffy apartment like a phantom remnant of my sister.

Sandy's rent was paid through the month, so we had three weeks. You would think that three weeks would be more than enough to clean out a one-bedroom apartment, but to tell the truth, I wasn't sure we could do it. David and I stepped into the living room and looked around. David's shoulders sagged as he surveyed the job ahead of us.

Little trails through the accumulated jumble showed Sandy's accustomed path through her world. There was a display cabinet on the far wall. I knew it contained dolls, but there was so much blocking the way that I couldn't really see them. That was okay with me—I had always thought Sandy's dolls were creepy. So many beady little eyes, gleaming as they stared at you.

Sandy had been a compulsive spender and a hoarder. Essentially every surface in Sandy's apartment—including the stove top—was covered with boxes, bags, trash, used tissues, art supplies, fabric, magazines, books, more dolls—and where the dolls left off, the trash took over.

I had dug her out of three previous homes, each time getting rid of more things she had hoarded. The last time, I was able to sell almost everything she had squirreled away in a storage facility—five big rooms full of utter crap. I don't intend to be mean when I say, "utter crap." What else would you call a full-size concert harp (badly broken), several large boxes full of moldy rags, a "sculpture" created from a gourd that had been eaten out by rats, painted purple, and decorated with plastic beads—you get the idea. Sandy had some really nice things, too, but you had to pick them out of the mare's nest of strange, broken, dirty junk.

Sandy and I had both been tall and far from thin, and throughout our lives we traded clothes back and forth. I did take a few pieces of clothing I thought might work for me. It would be the last exchange of our lifelong tradition. I snagged a black, baggy garment to wear around the house as a caftan. Like everything in her closet, the garment reeked of Poisoned Kisses.

I took the caftan home and threw it in the wash with some other clothes. When I took the laundry out, the caftan had bled over everything—every piece of clothing now looked grimy. My bra in particular gave me a bit of a turn. It was covered in what looked like dirty, blackish-purple writing in an ancient script, like a curse in an unknown language. It turned my gut when I saw it. The entire load still smelled strongly of Poisoned Kisses. I knew I was being irrational, but I trashed the entire load of clothes and didn't say anything to David.

We packed up everything that we didn't put in the dumpster, intending to either donate or auction Sandy's possessions after we got the apartment cleared out. That sounds simple, but it wasn't. It was heartbreaking. For example, Sandy paid a medical alert company because she had numerous health problems and was prone to falling. The company had provided her with a device to wear around her neck at home, another to take when she went out, and finally, a lockbox for the door so that emergency personnel could get into her apartment quickly. David and I found the lockbox with its instructions sitting in a cardboard box on her stove. If she had just put the lockbox on her door, she would now be alive.

Because Sandy spent so much money on dolls, clothes, jewelry, and cosmetics, you might think she was well-off. In actuality, she was living on a meager pension and Medicare. I had hoped when I moved her into that tiny apartment with just enough furniture, just enough things, just enough money to meet her basic needs, that she would stop spending what little money she had on things she didn't need. But that never happened. She was always complaining that she didn't have enough money for her many medications. The apartment, crowded with the press of expensive things, told the story.

With our mother dead in childbirth, it was me and Sandy against our rage-fueled alcoholic father and our mean-spirited older brother. We were a team. We made up games and played together for hours. We were our own little club. We protected each other from the many perils of our childhood. The intimacy of our childhood began to evaporate as Sandy and I grew up and pursued our own lives, sometimes living thousands of miles apart. I don't know what sent her down the road of obsessive overspending and hoarding, but by the time we had both reached our so-called golden years, Sandy was firmly entrenched in her ways, having impoverished herself and ruined her health.

When at last I realized that Sandy was not sane and barely able to take care of herself, I cried for hours. I had lost the companion of my besieged childhood. My sister had been replaced by a moral responsibility to someone I wasn't certain I even liked any more. For the past twenty years, our relationship had been more caregiver-to-dependent than the easy company of sisters. I missed that long-vanished relationship, but it perished decades before her death.

David had been doing yeoman's work, carrying bags and boxes out to the trash, moving furniture, boxing up china, buying more packing supplies when we ran out. About four days into the job, he returned from a trash run dripping blood. He'd cut his arm on something he was throwing out. I bandaged him and didn't think much more about it. But the next day, he was maneuvering Sandy's heavy desk, trying to get at an electrical socket to plug in a light, and the desk slipped, crushing his right hand between the desk and the wall. A visit to the emergency room resulted in a cast. As we were heading home, hot and exhausted, David said, "Sandy never did like me."

I was driving but glanced at him in surprise. "Why do you say that?"

“She never liked me when she was alive. You know that. All the time we’re in her apartment, I feel she’s angry and wants me gone. Well, she got what she wanted. I can’t help you pack and carry stuff with a broken hand.”

I cannot emphasize enough how unlike David this was. He was an engineer, a rational man. He didn’t believe in ghosts—hell, he didn’t even believe in an afterlife. His comment upset me. Maybe he and Sandy hadn’t exactly been chums, but to think that her angry spirit was attacking him? Now I was worried about David’s mental health, in addition to grieving my sister’s death, and clearing out that dreadful apartment.

While emptying her tiny bathroom. I found a lurid purple glass bottle of Poisoned Kisses perfume. I recognized the bottle, although it had no label. Instead, the brand relied on a spiky-looking red crystal stopper to lend it a unique look. On a whim I opened it and sniffed. It smelled like Sandy. I put it down. My throat closed up and ached. For some reason, I couldn’t bring myself to toss it in the trash. Throwing it away seemed a little like throwing my sister away. Stupid, I know.

The living room was still so crowded that I couldn’t get to the dolls in their display case. I looked at them every day, unreachable though they were. I decided to leave them for last—not that I had a choice.

Sandy’s taste in furniture ran to the enormous and heavy, which meant that the few pieces of her furniture we were able to squeeze into her last apartment took up a lot of space. Her six-foot-long oak chest of drawers crowded right up to the bedroom doorway. Every time I went through the door, I somehow managed to come into contact with that bureau. My left arm had bumps and scrapes by the end of the day, my hip was bruised, and I had several bloodstained

bandaids here and there. I seemed to hit myself on that damned bureau even when I remembered to dodge it. As I said, it was close quarters, and a couple of times I rebounded off the iron post of the bedstead in an effort to outmaneuver the chest of drawers.

I know this sounds crazy. I began to feel, like David, that Sandy was angry at the desecration of her shrine, the unmaking of all the barriers she had erected between herself and the world. It felt like Sandy was making me hurt myself. I suppose I was influenced by David's strange response, on top of the shock of my sister's death, the heat—everything felt strange and surreal, like a waking dream. I could believe almost anything. I finally stopped next to the demonic bureau and took a deep breath. Then I slapped it, and yelled, “You stop that right now, Sandy! Stop it! I have to do this. I don't have a choice. I'm sorry.”

I guess I sounded like a lunatic. But no one was there to witness my outburst—except possibly Sandy. I carried on clearing out the bedroom, but I didn't hurt myself after that. Cursed bra, injured husband, malevolent furniture. Maybe *I* was going insane. It was a family tradition.

Things went smoothly after that. I finally got down to the dolls. They were mostly in the large display case in the living room, though several were scattered around the apartment on stands, or on her chest of drawers, or on the table that obviously had never been used to eat a meal. I had to move a tremendous amount of random junk out of the living room before I could even reach the display case. I was a little shocked when I got close enough to the dolls to really see them.

Sandy didn't collect ordinary dolls. She collected one-of-a-kind art dolls, antiques, and high-end porcelain dolls from well-known doll artists. These were her treasures, the most valued among all her treasures. I saw that the costly dolls, like everything else, were coated in gray dust,

their hair filthy with it. Didn't she see that they needed cleaning? Didn't she see that *everything* needed cleaning?

I hesitated. It was late in the day, and hot. I stared at the dolls. They stared back at me through their coats of dust, impassive, smiling, frowning, grinning. It was mid-afternoon, so there was plenty of time to start packing the dolls. Something told me to leave them for now. I closed up the apartment and drove home to cook dinner for my wounded husband.

“Did anything... happen today?” David casually asked over dinner.

“What could happen? I'm clearing out an apartment.”

“Did you hurt yourself? Or anything?”

I put down my knife and fork and looked at him. “David, where are these questions coming from?”

“I don't know. I just worry about you all day, knowing you're in that apartment all alone.”

“Why?”

But David just shook his head, managing to look worried and embarrassed at the same time.

I took a few days off to spend time with David and get some chores done at home. I had taken a few more items of clothing from my sister's closet. They were brand-new with tags still on them—Sandy would buy clothes online and if they didn't fit, she would keep them anyway. Like everything else in Sandy's apartment, the tagged clothes I picked out for myself reeked of Poisoned Kisses. I removed the tags and washed everything. When I opened the washing



machine, I could still smell the perfume. Curiously, it didn't seem as objectionable to me now. I ran the load again, and this time, the clothes came out smelling fresh.

David and I did normal things together for a few days. We took in a movie, went on walks together, and had dinner at our favorite restaurant one night. I was still upset by Sandy's death and wanted to talk about it, but every time I raised the subject, David shied away from it and changed the subject.

The next time I walked into Sandy's apartment, I wondered if the bottle of Poisoned Kisses I set aside had somehow broken. The smell hung in the air like a miasma, but the little purple bottle was still squatting on the bathroom counter where I left it, intact. I opened all the windows and the patio door to air the place out.

I intended to tackle the dolls today. I stood in front of the display shelf and regarded them. I picked up a fairy doll clad in dusty silver. She had long, white hair and butterfly wings, but one of her wings was missing. I ripped off the remaining one and immediately felt like a cruel child tearing the wings off flies. I put the doll down, and her weirdly distorted face and dark eyes seemed to follow me.

I moved on to a vampire doll. This was a gaunt male in a black suit. He was wearing a black cape lined with cherry-red silk. His face was handsome, but leering, and tiny fangs gleamed white against red, red lips. He wore a thick carpet of dust on his shoulders which I blew away, sending me into a coughing fit. I set him down next to the fairy. They seemed to go together.

My plan was to send the dolls to an auction house. I wasn't sure I could sell some of them. A porcelain Alice in Wonderland the size of a toddler had a broken finger taped to her

wrist. An antique baby doll was holding its own right arm in its white lace lap. If she cared so much for these things, why hadn't Sandy taken care of them? Why didn't she mend them when they broke? Clean the dust from their expensive little bodies?

I was annoyed. It seemed like such a waste. Then another thought struck me. Why shouldn't I take care of them? I could glue the finger back. I could find new butterfly wings for the fairy. I could mend the baby doll's arm. I could carefully clean the dust of years from their clothes and hair.

Yes, I decided. That's exactly what I would do. I would take all the dolls home with me. The golden-winged angel doll that was easily the size of a two-year-old child—the largest and most expensive doll in the collection. The Victorian lady with her pompadour and high-necked gown. The antique German doll with ceramic hair. The grinning, red-haired, freckled girl doll with pigtails. The white-haired fairy and her vampire boyfriend. All of them must come home with me and be treated properly. I packed dolls all day and put the resulting pile of boxes in the back of my van.

When I walked into the kitchen that evening, David was sitting at the table with a mug of tea. He wrinkled his nose. "Sheesh! You smell like Sandy. That awful perfume she used to soak in. What happened?"

I stared at him. I was unaware of any trace of Poisoned Kisses in the air. But that's the way scent works, isn't it? You smell something briefly, then you don't notice it. "I'll take a shower," I said. When I emerged fifteen minutes later, smelling like soap, I told David about the dolls.

“They’re all in the back of the van,” I told him, toweling my wet hair. “I’ll get them in the morning.”

“You brought her dolls *here*? Why?” David’s voice rose. “You hate Sandy’s dolls. You’ve told me over and over how creepy you think they are. Have you lost your mind?”

I froze in mid-toweling. He was right. I did hate Sandy’s dolls. I had always thought most of them were repulsive. What was I thinking?

“I guess so.” I tried to laugh it off. “I’ll take them back tomorrow. I don’t know—it seemed like a good idea at the time.”

David and I looked at each other. I think we were both wondering about the other’s sanity.

I drove the dolls back to Sandy’s apartment the next day, feeling sheepish. I arranged for a storage room and set up a time for movers to come and take away the boxes and furniture. I packed the last of the boxes for storage and took the final garbage bag out to the dumpster. Feeling I had accomplished a great deal and relieved that this part of the task was almost over, I drove home.

I parked in our driveway and got out of the van. I was almost through the front door before I remembered. The dolls were still in the back of the van. I had forgotten to take them out.

I didn’t mention the dolls to David. I figured I would just take them back the next day, the movers would take them to storage, and he’d be none the wiser. David didn’t complain about the smell of Poisoned Kisses that night. We had a quiet evening at home. In bed, he snuggled up against me, his arm draped comfortably over my back. I thought maybe he was getting used to the fragrance. I couldn’t smell it any more myself.

The movers arrived at Sandy's apartment the next day. They wrapped the furniture carefully and moved everything with admirable speed into the storage room I had rented. I paid them, thanked them, gave them a tip, and watched them drive away. Then I turned back to my van and remembered. The dolls were *still* inside. I had forgotten to tell the moving men to put them into storage with the rest of Sandy's things. I opened the rear hatch and regarded the boxes. They filled the entire cargo space from top to bottom, even with the back seats removed. I could move all those boxes out of my van and into the storage room by myself—none of them were heavy. That would be the quickest and easiest way to handle the situation, but I just didn't want to do it. I was tired and sweaty. I decided I would handle it tomorrow, and drove away.

When I returned home, I prepared to take another shower. When I took my jeans off, I felt something lumpy in the hip pocket. I thrust my hand inside and drew out a small purple bottle. I had no memory of putting the perfume bottle in my pocket, but there it was. I set it down on the long counter and cleaned up. David and I had dinner and talked about the news and watched television. I thought about the boxes in the back of my van, which made me squirm a bit, but I didn't mention them to David.

The next morning, David took a shower, first putting his cast in a plastic bag with a rubber band around it to keep the water out. I walked in a little while later and found him with a towel around his waist and wet hair. He had a little purple bottle in his good hand. It was open and a strong scent of Poisoned Kisses hung in the humid bathroom air. The spiky red stopper glittered on the counter.

"What's this?" David asked. "You bought a new perfume? I like it."

I stared at him. He loathed the smell of Sandy's perfume, as did I. Or at least, I used to. It was growing on me. I reached for the bottle, which he handed over. I dabbed a little perfume on my pulse points.

"Come help me unload the car when you're dressed," I said, smiling at him. "All the dolls are in there. Waiting for us." He nodded and began to brush his teeth.

I just know he's going to love that angel.

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