

Unwanted Discovery

By Tamarine Vilar

As the ambulance drove off, Officer Jackson turned to question the driver. He was pretty sure the driver was not at fault but he had to question him anyway. The streetlight was burned out and the old woman was wearing a black coat.

“The car was stopped right where it is now. I drove around it slowly, I didn’t realize she had gotten out. She just stepped out in front of the car. I was able to stop, but I guess I bumped her and she fell down.”

Officer Jackson suspected as much. Even in the dark, he recognized Alice as soon as he came on the scene. He immediately saw she was injured seriously, probably from the fall. After all, she’s in her eighties.

“Sharon, are you going to answer your phone?” Jack asked her. Sharon rolled over and groped for her phone. She really should take it out of her purse before going to bed. She finally finds it and croaks a groggy “Hello?”

“This is Officer Jackson. Is this Sharon?”

Sharon jerks upright, now awake, “Yes. What’s the matter?”

“Alice Frainey is on her way to City Memorial Hospital,” he continues, “She had this phone on her and your number was the only one in here. Are you related to Alice?”

“Yes, she’s my mother”, Sharon worries, “What happened?”

“She was hit by a car and has probably broken her hip.” he adds, “Can I meet you at the hospital? I’d like to ask you some questions.”

“I guess so, I can be there in about a half hour; I need to get dressed.” Sharon groaned. She’d known this was a possibility. She was thankful she had given mother that phone with her number programmed into it, even though her mother never used it – at least not to call Sharon.

Jack asked what happened and Sharon filled him in as she got dressed. She was thankful she didn’t have a job.

On the way to the hospital, Sharon berated herself for not enforcing her mother to stop driving. But that would have been impossible; Alice was too headstrong and belligerent.

Officer Jackson was there when she arrived. Doctor Callahan joined in to get some answers too. Alice wasn’t actually hit by the other car, she had just lost her balance because of the surprise. Because of her age, she suffered a broken hip from the fall. Doctor Callahan said she would have to be in the hospital for two weeks, in a care facility for another six weeks and then would need to have permanent care. The doctor questioned Sharon about Alice’s mental condition. They didn’t know if she had some amnesia or dementia.

Sharon had suspected dementia for some time now. She described what she knew and the doctor added ‘dementia’ into the chart. Officer Jackson got all the information he needed and left.

Sharon knew this was coming someday and had been dreading it; she just didn’t expect it to happen so soon. She and Jack had discussed it previously and although they knew it would be their biggest challenge, they decided they would have to move Alice into their home. Obligation and guilt won over common sense. At least they had a couple of months to prepare.

Sharon made an appointment at the lawyer’s office. She secured guardianship, power of attorney and a trust for her mother. She had a long job ahead of her, not just getting her home ready for Alice but also going through all of her mother’s personal belongings, furnishings and

preparing and selling the house. They would have to sell her estate and place the proceeds into the trust for her care. Now she was really thankful she didn't have a job. This would now be her job.

She called Ruth, her mother's housekeeper, to cancel the weekly cleaning. She was promised a two week severance. Sharon had arranged her services years ago and they had become friends. Ruth also kept her informed on her mother's condition. She hadn't understood the symptoms and how severe they were.

Sharon was stronger than she realized. But even this would test her limits. She was thankful that her daughter still lived at home. Callie had just graduated from high school and hadn't found a job yet. She offered to help take care of Alice.

Callie was a nickname, after Calamity Jane. Her real name was Diane, but Callie seemed more of a fit, especially after she turned twelve. She was a bit of a rebel and loved excitement. But she was very responsible. That's what Sharon counted on; she would certainly need her help.

Jack didn't help much around the home. He was old school, 'the woman worked in the home', but he did give her latitude. Whatever advice or help she asked of him, his response was always, "Whatever makes you happy, Pookie." In fact, she pretty much raised their kids without his help; that was woman's work too. He provided a roof over their heads and she provided resourcefulness. Without this teamwork, they would have lost their home years ago.

Sharon and Callie spent about a week converting David's old room into Alice's new bedroom. He was away at college out of state and the room was on the main floor, so it worked out perfectly. At least they wouldn't have to worry about her falling on the stairs . . . as long as

she didn't wander. Hopefully, the dementia had progressed enough that Alice wouldn't remember to think this small room was beneath her. She had been a bit of a prima donna.

Now Sharon had to deal with selling the leftover belongings that were left behind in mom's house. This was going to be a long process; a whole household would not fit into a small bedroom. And Alice had a big house. At least the proceeds should take care of all her needs.

Sharon hadn't been here for many years. Up until her father, Don, died ten years ago, they had met at her parent's favorite restaurant for dinner to celebrate their anniversary. After he died, Alice shut everyone out. It was a miracle that Alice accepted the cell phone.

The living area was always showroom perfect. Every curtain was opened to let in just the right amount of light, every flower was positioned correctly, expensive furniture was placed to showcase the décor perfectly. Even the oil paintings were placed according to appearance; never a family photo or personal item. Some of the furniture might go into Sharon's home. Almost everything would be too ostentatious for Sharon, who always valued functionality before fashion. At least the valuable furnishings would fetch a decent price. She might have to find a private buyer to get the best deal. She put that on her list of things to do.

She decided to collect mom's personal items first. Bathroom, bedroom and whatever she thought mom might need as she went through the house. This took the entire first day. She brought them home and Callie helped her put everything away. The room was now ready for Alice.

The next day, she decided to tackle the inventory. As she went through, she was able to salvage a variety of cleaning supplies and equipment. Next on the agenda was the kitchen. Since Alice was not much of a cook, the kitchen was more of a trophy to show off. Sharon secretly wished the high end appliances would fit in her kitchen.

As she pulled things out, more stuff seemed to appear in their place. There were a few things she could use but most was listed to inventory. In Alice's declining dementia, odd things were stored in strange places. There was an old set of keys wrapped in a napkin stuffed far back in a drawer. Her 'lost' hearing aid was in a souvenir cup on the top shelf. A bag of moldy bread was in the oven. She began to dread what horror she might find elsewhere.

Sharon wondered what mom had done with her old room. Had she turned it into a library, a hobby room or perhaps storage? Alice always cared more about what people thought than what was real. No one ever knew about Alice's bad temper or mood swings – except for the immediate family of course.

When she entered her old room, she was taken back to her senior year in high school. Everything was as she left it. She paused and pinched back a tear. She never knew her mother could be so sentimental. Why hadn't her mother shown her this side? This softer side would have made growing up so much easier. Maybe she wouldn't have been in such a hurry to move out.

Although her childhood had been difficult, Sharon was thankful for the lessons learned from it. She always tried to make her home a welcome place – a contrast to her mother. Her children's friends were always welcome. She never wanted her children to be anxious to leave home. She'd learned from trial and error, mom was never an example and Jack was uninvolved emotionally – woman's work. Although it was a challenge, she succeeded.

She slowly strolled around the room, caressing the drama trophies, smiling at the memorabilia, stroking the desktop where she spent so many hours doing homework. Embracing the flashbacks, she now realized how much school had meant to her. Everything in here

reminded her of the special events, the joy of homework, practicing her parts in successful plays – her lifeblood.

After reveling in her memories, she eventually started to pack. Nothing in here was going to be thrown away or donated. She hoped there would be room in her attic for everything. Then she stopped short. She carefully put everything back where she found it. She wanted to bring Callie to see it, to share the memories.

This thought made her realize that she knew very little about her mother's history. Her grandparents were dead, but where had they lived? What was her childhood like? How did her parents meet? The questions multiplied exponentially. Alice never appreciated sentiment.

Sharon knew that Alice had one sister, Georgia, whom she never spoke to. Sharon had often asked why but Alice would never discuss it, she would just change the subject. She recalled that this aunt lived nearby. Perhaps she would look her up to get some history. But that would have to wait; this daunting task compelled her to return to work.

Having resolved to leave her room as is, she decided to go up to the attic. She was glad she had brought a lot of garbage bags, boxes and bins. Apparently, Ruth had never been allowed to come up here. The dusty spider webs, creaky floors, poor lighting and so much clutter made this a real challenge. She faced a seemingly insurmountable mountain. Things were everywhere with hardly a path through the tangle. There was no system to this 'storage'.

Boxes of varying sizes were stacked haphazardly, lots of furniture – some broken, a couple of dusty trunks with broken locks. Oh, there's mom's old doll collection. It's too bad she didn't store them properly; they might have been worth something. As it was, the mice had made nests of the dolls' dresses and hair and the accumulated dust caked the rest.

Since it was summer, she opened the windows at each end of the attic to let in some fresh air. With the musty smell and clouds of dust that arose from the slightest movement, the breeze was welcome. She placed a box fan at one window to blow out the dust. The single overhead light bulb did little to help her see, especially with things stacked so high. She brought up a mechanic's light from the garage to help. At least she could move it around as she was working.

She had been working several days in the attic, carting out garbage bags of trash, boxes for donation to charity and bins of things for the upcoming sale. She was going to have to give up the idea of the sale happening soon. There was too much stuff and everything needed to be cleaned. She thought about renting a dumpster but dismissed it.

She secretly wished there was something up here to give insight on mom's history or something exciting to break the monotony. On the fourth day in the attic, she found a locked trunk. Thinking that perhaps one of the keys she found in the kitchen might open it. Now where did she put them? Oh right, she had put them in the 'what is this' box which she had set on the kitchen counter. Racing down the ladder and into the kitchen, she rifled through the box excitedly. She found the keys and hurried back to the attic.

There were seven keys to try. The fourth one worked. On top there was a box of old wedding invitations, birth announcements, death notices, newspaper articles and Hallmark cards. This could prove to be valuable in piecing together family history. She decided to take this box home for further examination.

After pulling out many boxes, albums and portraits, she found a carefully wrapped shoebox with a ribbon neatly tied around it. This must be especially important or it wouldn't have been wrapped so thoughtfully. Perhaps they were documents or love letters. Anticipation shaking her fingers, she opened it with care.

She was not prepared for what she found.

The hidden letters from several strangers now stared at her. They were all addressed to her dad and stored by date with the oldest at the bottom. Starting there, she became frozen in time as she read. It was postmarked in 1966, and was written in a young child's handwriting. Starting there, the salutation stunned her! This child called him dad. The air seemed to leak from her lungs. Head against the wall, she forced herself to breathe, hands limp in her lap. After collecting her composure, she continued reading.

As the letters progressed, she counted three daughters. Sharon had three half-sisters? If only she could have known them growing up instead of being an only child! At first, these girls begged him to come back. It seemed like they eventually accepted his absence and the letters become less frequent. They tell about getting married and their children. Then 20 years ago, the letters stopped.

This was so surreal. She felt like she was thrown into a badly written soap opera.

She sat up like a bolt; mom *had* to know about this! Dad would never have wrapped up the box like that. More questions flooded her mind.

It would be impossible to get any information from her mom. Her dementia was too far along. Even without that, would mom actually tell her anything? This is something that the public would frown upon and Alice wouldn't have that. The grand façade would be shattered.

Sharon would have to get the details on her own. She decided to re-read the letters for clues about the situation. She started to write down return addresses and facts as she discovered them. Who knows what detail might be essential in discovering the truth. She was going to be a detective.