

The Stuffed Bear

By Ashlee Winters

It was early in the morning and I was driving to the Franklins. It was too early for my liking, but it was something I was used to.

“Elizabeth?” My mother’s voice vibrated through the car speakers. “Did you hear me?”

“Sorry mom,” I said, yawning. “You must’ve cut out.” She sighed, and I could imagine how worried she must have been.

“Are you sure you can’t work the desk in this case?” she asked.

“No. I’ve done this plenty of times,” I said. “It’ll be quick. In and out, I swear. All I have to do is watch the little girl and try to find evidence.”

“I understand this is your job, but I can’t help but worry,” she sniffled. “What if something happens to you on one of these missions?”

“Nothing’s happened before and I don’t plan on failing now,” I said and pulled up to the home. “Okay, I’m here. I love you, mom. Don’t go through my sock drawer if I die.”

“Elizabeth,” she warned. I chuckle at her response. “I love you, honey. Be careful.”

I hung up the phone and turned off my car to get out. The wind blew as I walked across the street to the modern home. Begonia flowers were planted along the sidewalk leading you to the front patio like a red carpet.

I'm almost to the front steps when I see a black blob in my peripheral vision and duck as it comes my way. I stopped in my tracks and watched as it perched itself on the patio's banister. It was a raven and I've never seen one so close before. It watched me as I took closer steps and when I got to close it squawked. Apparently, it was loud enough you could hear it in the home.

"Shoo, you damn bird," Mr. Franklin said, as he came out of the house very well dressed and swatted his hand toward the raven. "I'm so sorry. Please, come in."

"No worries," I chuckled and followed him inside. "Birds are birds. They'll chirp when they want to."

"Thank you for coming so last minute. I couldn't get in touch with the last sitter," He said.

"I'm glad I could help, Mr. Franklins," I smiled. I heard something start to rattle and scrape on the floor. It sounded like metal on the concrete. I looked to the door and passed Mr. Franklins down the hall. He stomped his foot on the ground causing me to jump and the noise to stop. He cleared his throat and smiled.

"Ester, come greet your sitter," He called out. Ester was nine years old and clearly a very chirper girl by the way she flew down the stairs to the right of us.

"You're beautiful," Ester exclaimed.

"Thank you! You're stunning as well," I said. She giggled.

"Why don't you have a tea party while I'm gone," He suggested.

“Really?” she squealed, jumping up and down.

“Anything for you, my dear. I’ll be back in an hour. If plans change, I’ll make sure to call,” Mr. Franklin said. He grabbed his jacket and kneeled to Ester giving her a peck on the cheek.

“Goodbye Daddy,” Ester said.

“Have a good day, Mr. Franklin,” I said. He nodded and left.

“Time for a tea party,” Ester shouted. She grabbed my hand and pulled me down the hallway, where we passed the bathroom and two doors, went straight to the living room and opened the kitchen.

“You must really like tea parties,” I said. I looked around the kitchen.

“I do,” Ester said. “Daddy lets me have them with all the sitters I like.”

“Only the ones you like?” I asked. I search through the cabinets. Every cabinet was filled with very clean and ordinary kitchen supplies, nothing useful for information.

“Yes, the tea is special and can only be drunk by the best,” She said. “The tea set is in my room. I was playing with it earlier, but don’t tell daddy. I’m not supposed to have it when it’s not for parties.”

“I won’t say a word,” I said as she darted out of the kitchen and to a room in the hall. I took the opportunity to look around, seeing as I would have difficulty getting away from her.

I saw a window that looked into the backyard. The grass outside looked dead unlike in the front yard. Woods surround the open area beyond the fence another raven sat upon. I didn’t see anything suspicious, so I turned to the living room behind me. More Begonia flowers are in

vases on table stands next to the couch and pictures of Mr. Franklin and Ester line the walls. The home looked clean and nothing seemed out of place.

Finding evidence was harder than I planned. The reason why I was here was because there had been a lot of missing people reported after babysitting here. There were no leads other than Mr. Franklin, but his alibi checked out. I was put on the case to find evidence so they could get a warrant to search and arrest Mr. Franklin as they had a hunch it was him.

“Here you go,” Eater said as she came into the kitchen. “Can you make the water for me?”

I grabbed the set from her hands. The tea pot was porcelain, yellow, and had little red flowers painted on the sides of it.

“I know why your father wouldn't want you playing with this. It's glass and if it breaks it can hurt you,” I said as I filled the tea pot and set it on the stove to boil.

“I know,” Esther said.

I continued to ask her questions until the pots whistled on the stove. I turned it off and grabbed its handle and a potholder from a drawer next to me.

“Follow me. We can have the tea party in the playroom,” Ester said. I followed her down the hall into a room next to the one I assumed led to the basement where the noise came from earlier.

The room had an odd scent that I couldn't decipher. It was like something was trying to be covered by a flowery fragrance. The room was nothing but pink, bears and dolls sat on a shelf on the wall and there was a single window. A small wooden table sat in the center of the room. I walked to it and sat the teapot down on the holder.

“You can sit here, Miss Lizzy,” Ester said, pointing to a small cushion on the wooden floor. I sat across from the little girl and watched as he pulled out an unlabeled tea tin from a small toy dresser by the door. To my left was a teddy bear on a small rocking chair that was dragged over and positioned at the table. The bear was filthy, and it was a big contrast to the house and the rest of her toys as they looked untouched and clean.

“Where’d you get your bear from, Ester?” I asked.

“Daddy made it. Her name's Gennie” She giggled and set the table.

“She is beautiful,” I said.

There were a couple brown stains scattered on the bear and a putrid smell wafted from it. It was hard not to gag. I remembered the name in the papers I read when I was assigned. *Gennie Mackenzie* was a girl who went missing last week and it was their last sitter’s name. A chill runs down my spine. That bear was evidence and I needed to leave here with it.

“Here’s your tea Miss Lizzy,” Ester said, placing a small plastic mug in front of me.

“Thank you,” I said. Her eyes never left my face and I assumed she was waiting for me to take a sip. I lifted the mug to my lips and gulped down the small amount of liquid it held. I coughed and set the mug down.

“Do you not like it?” Ester asked. My eyes pricked and I smiled at her.

“It was great, but it went down the wrong pipe,” I lied. The tea burned in my throat, but not from heat and the thickness was heavier than water. I stood, “I’m just going to get myself a glass of water.”

“Okay,” Ester giggled. She started talking to the bear as I left the room.

I take fast steps to the kitchen and straight to the sink. I didn't care about grabbing a glass and turned on the faucet and shoved my mouth into the thick stream of water. I gulped it down in hope to rid my taste buds from the vile tea.

I came up for air clearing my throat as I turned off the water and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. I looked to the window above the sink and a headache started to form. The light hurt my eyes although the pot of begonia flowers looked sad from the lack of it. They weren't that pretty and looked poisoned by the way the green leaves were lined with red and slowly withering.

A muffled sound of metal scraping along the floor catches my attention again. Ester was distracted in her room and I found a chance to search further as I probably couldn't get the bear away from her to take with me.

"Ester," I called out. "I'm going to the bathroom."

"Okay," Ester said sweetly.

I walked past her room, her attention still on the bear. I grabbed the handle to the basement door. Immediately upon opening the door was a smell that could've knocked me over. It was stronger than the bear's scent in her room. I walked down the gray stairs and felt for the light switch and turned it on. I gasp at the sight.

There was a girl in the right corner of the room chained to the floor and looked like skin and bones and blood pooled below her to a drain. To her left was a metal table with tools on top of it that looked used. The wall to the left was lined with different parts of dolls and bears and a little sewing station as well. The girl let out a muffled groan and looked at me.

It was Gennie Mackenzie.

“Daddy's not gonna like that you're down here,” Ester said.

I whipped around and my head disagreed with the action and I fell to my knees. I looked up to Ester who stood at the top of the stairs. Everything I looked at started to wave. I reached for my phone as I heard a click of a door opening echo down the stairwell.

“Daddy,” Esther exclaimed. “Miss Lizzy's in the basement.”

“What?” Mr. Franklin shouted.

I tried to call the precinct, but the numbers were all mixed and jumbled. When I looked up again Mr. Franklin was at the bottom of the stairs and grabbing me by my arm. He yanked me up like a doll and dragged me toward Gennie.

“No, someone help me,” I shouted, but it seemed louder in my head than through my mouth. I managed to slip through his grasp and run towards the stairs that twisted in my sight. I got to the top and passed Ester and ran into the playroom. I shut the door and locked it as I pressed the emergency button on my phone.

“Bear and phone out the window. Gennie Mackenzie's here. Both drugged,” I said, incoherently. I used the last of my strength to open the window and tossed the items.

Mr. Franklin's arms wrapped around me, carrying me out of the room and tossed me back down the stairs. I couldn't feel anything upon impact.

“I'm sorry, daddy,” Esther said

“No. You did well, my dear,” Mr. Fitzgerald said. “It won't happen again. Understand? She could've gotten away. That means no more toys for you.”

I blinked a final time before everything seemed to go dark, but not before I heard faint sirens in the distance.

