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Chapter 1



Sheila Nickels shivered as a blast of chilly March air pushed against her body. She slipped the tarnished key into the lock and opened the door. This was Grandma's house—the place throughout her childhood where Sheila had come for holidays, special occasions, and everything in between. She'd felt warmth, love, and joy whenever she visited this Victorian home on the north side of Casper, Wyoming.

Sheila stepped into the dark entryway and felt for the light switch on the wall closest to the door. "At least the electricity hasn't been turned off yet," she murmured.

An eerie sense of aloneness settled over her as she moved to the living room. Everything looked so strange. Much of Grandma's furniture was missing, and the pieces left had been draped with white sheets, including the upright piano Sheila and her cousins used to plunk on. Several cardboard boxes sat in one corner of the room, waiting to be hauled away. It was a dreary sight.

A sigh stuck in Sheila's throat, and she swallowed it down. She'd just come from visiting her grandmother at Mountain Springs Retirement Center on the other side of town. Grandma's

one-bedroom apartment looked like a fishbowl compared to this grand home where Grandma and Grandpa Dunmore had lived for over fifty years. Grandpa passed away two years ago, but Grandma had continued to stay here until she finally decided taking care of the house was too much for her. She'd moved to the retirement center a few weeks ago.

Grandma's old house didn't look the same without the clutter of her antique furniture. It didn't sound the same without Grandma's cheerful voice calling from the kitchen, "Girls, come have some chocolate chip cookies and a glass of milk."

Sheila slipped off her coat and draped it across the arm of an overstuffed chair. She then placed her purse on the oak end table and turned toward the stairs. She was here at her grandmother's request and needed to follow through with what she'd set out to do.

As a feeling of nostalgia washed over her, Sheila climbed the steps leading to the second floor. Another flight of stairs took her to the attic, filled with so many wonderful treasures. A chain dangled from the light fixture overhead, and Sheila gave it a yank.

"Kimber, Lauren, Jessica, and I used to play here," she whispered into the dusty, unfinished room. She lowered herself to the lid of an antique trunk and closed her eyes, allowing the memories of days gone by to wash over her.



"Look at me, Sheila. Aren't I beautiful?"

Sheila giggled as her cousin Lauren pranced in front of her wearing a pair of black patent leather heels that were much too big for her seven-year-old feet. Wrapped in a multicolored

GRANDMA'S DOLL

crocheted shawl with a crazy-looking green hat on her head, Lauren continued to swagger back and forth.

“You can play dress-up if you want to, but I’m gonna get the Bye-Lo baby and take her for a ride.” Sheila scrambled over to the wicker carriage, where the bisque-headed doll was nestled beneath a tiny patchwork quilt. Grandma had told her she’d made the covering many years ago when she was a little girl.

Of all the treasures in her grandmother’s attic, the Bye-Lo baby was Sheila’s favorite. She could play with it for hours while her three girl cousins found other things to do.

Sheila leaned over and scooped the precious doll into her arms. “Bye-Lo, I wish you could be mine forever.”



Sheila’s eyes snapped open as she returned to the present. Since Grandma had already moved, her house would soon be put up for sale. She’d called Sheila at her home in Fresno, California, and invited her to choose something from the attic that was special to her. Sheila knew right away what that *something* would be—the Bye-Lo baby doll. Some might think it was silly, but when she was a child, Sheila had prayed she could own the doll someday, and her prayers were finally being answered. Now all she had to do was find her treasure.

Sheila scanned the perimeter of the attic. An old dresser sat near the trunk, and an intricately designed wooden container was a few feet away. Her gaze came to rest on the small wicker doll carriage, which Bye-Lo used to lie in. It was empty.

“How odd. The doll always sat in that baby carriage.” She stood and lifted the lid of the trunk. “Maybe it’s in here.” Near the bottom she found several pieces of clothing that had

belonged to the doll. There was even a photograph of young Sheila holding her favorite attic treasure. The dolls she had owned as a child hadn't been nearly as special as Bye-Lo. The church her father had pastored then was small and didn't pay much. Sheila had learned early in life to accept secondhand items and be grateful, but she'd always wished for more.

She grabbed the picture and placed it in the pocket of her blue jeans, then slammed the trunk lid. "That doll has to be in this house someplace, and I'm not leaving until I find it!"



The telephone jingled, and Dwaine Woods picked it up on the second ring. "The Older the Better," he said into the receiver. "May I help you?"

"Is Bill Summers there?" a woman's gravelly voice questioned.

"Sorry, but Bill's not here. He sold his business to me a few months ago."

"Oh, I see. Well, this is Lydia Dunmore, and I did some business with The Older the Better Antique Shop when Bill owned it."

"Is there something I can help you with, Mrs. Dunmore?" Dwaine asked.

"As a matter of fact, there is. I'd like to see about having my old piano appraised. I've recently moved and will need to sell it."

"Sure. No problem. When would you like to have the appraisal done?"

"How about this afternoon? One of my granddaughters is at the house right now, and she could let you in."

Dwaine reached for a notepad and pen. "If you'll give me the address, I'll run over there and take a look. Would you like

me to call you with my estimate, or should I give it to your granddaughter?"

"Just give it to Sheila. She'll be coming back to the retirement center where I live to return my house key sometime before she leaves Casper."

Dwaine wrote down the particulars, and a few minutes later he hung up the phone. Lydia Dunmore's house was on the other side of town, but he could be there in ten minutes. He put the CLOSED sign in the store's front window, grabbed his jacket off the antique coat tree, and headed out the door. Things had been slow at The Older the Better this week, but it looked like business might be picking up.



With an exasperated groan, Sheila shut the lid on the cedar chest—the last place she had searched for Grandma's old doll. For the past couple of hours, she'd looked through countless boxes and trunks, organizing each one as she went. Except for the room being much cleaner now, her trip to the attic had been fruitless. There was no doll to be found.

"Grandma would probably tell me to choose something else," Sheila muttered, "but nothing here matters to me except the Bye-Lo baby."

Once more, Sheila thought about her grandmother's recent move and consoled herself with the fact that if Grandma hadn't left this rambling old house, Sheila and her girl cousins wouldn't have been asked to choose something special from the attic. The boy cousins had been invited to check out the basement for an item they would like to have.

"Too bad I can't find what's special to me," she grumbled.

Maybe the doll had been removed from the attic and was in one of the boxes downstairs. Sheila decided it was worth the time to take a look. She yanked on the chain to turn off the light and headed for the stairs. If she didn't find Bye-Lo in the next hour or so, she planned to head back to the retirement center. Maybe Grandma could shed some light on the doll's disappearance.

Sheila entered the living room and was about to kneel in front of a cardboard box when the doorbell rang. "I wonder who that could be."

She went to the front door and looked through the peephole. A man stood on the porch—an attractive man with sandy-blond hair and brown eyes. Sheila didn't recognize him, but then she hadn't lived in Casper for twelve years and didn't get back for visits that often. The man could be one of Grandma's neighbors for all she knew. He could even be a salesman, a Realtor, or . . .

The bell rang again, and Sheila jumped. Should she open the door? She sent up a quick prayer. *Protect me, Lord, if this man's a criminal.*

She slipped the security chain in place and opened the door the few inches it would go. "May I help you?"

"Hi, I'm Dwaine Woods from The Older the Better Antique Shop across town. I got a call to come here and take a look at an old piano."

Sheila's gaze darted to the living room. Grandma obviously had left the piano behind because there wasn't enough room in her apartment at the retirement center. How sad that Grandma felt forced to sell something she'd dearly loved for so many years.

"I have my business card right here if you'd like to see it," Dwaine said, as if sensing her reservations about opening the door. He reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out a leather wallet, and withdrew a card. "I bought the place from Bill Summers not long ago." He slipped it through the small opening, and Sheila clasped the card between her thumb and index finger. She studied it a few seconds and decided it looked legitimate.

"Who asked you to look at the piano?" she asked with hesitation.

"Lydia Dunmore. She called awhile ago and said she'd like an estimate. Told me her granddaughter Sheila was here and would let me in." He shuffled his feet across the wooden planks on the porch. "I presume that would be you?"

Sheila opened her mouth to reply, but the sharp ringing of the telephone halted her words. "I'd better get that. Be right back." She shut the door before Dwaine had a chance to say anything more.



Not knowing how long he might be expected to wait, Dwaine flopped into the wicker chair near the door. He couldn't believe how nervous the young woman seemed. She acted like she didn't believe Lydia Dunmore had called and asked him to give an estimate on the piano.

She must not be from around here. Most everyone I know is pretty trusting. Dwaine hadn't been able to get a good look at her face through the small opening in the doorway, but he had seen her eyes. They were blue, like a cloudless sky, and they'd revealed obvious fear.

Sure hope she comes back soon and lets me in. Now that the sun's going down, it's getting cold out here. Dwaine stuffed his hands inside his jacket pockets while he tapped his foot impatiently. Finally, he heard the door creak open. A young woman with jet-black hair curling around her face in soft waves stared at him.

"Sorry for making you wait so long," she said. "That was my grandmother on the phone. She called to let me know you were coming to look at the piano."

Dwaine stood. "Does that mean I can come in?"

She nodded, and her cheeks turned pink as a sunset. "I'm Sheila Nickels."

Dwaine stuck out his hand and was relieved when she shook it. Maybe now that her grandmother had confirmed the reason for his visit, Sheila wouldn't be so wary.

"It's nice to meet you. I take it you're not from around here?"

She motioned him to follow as she led the way to the living room. "I grew up in Casper, but twelve years ago my folks moved to Fresno, California. My father's a minister and was offered a job at a church there. I was fourteen at the time."

"So you're a Christian then?"

She smiled. "I have been since I was twelve and went to Bible camp. That's when I acknowledged my sins and accepted Christ as my personal Savior."

Dwaine grinned back at her. "I'm a Christian, too, and it's always nice to meet others who have put their faith in the Lord."

She nodded. "I agree."

"What brings you to this part of the country?" he asked.

Sheila motioned to the array of boxes stacked in one corner of the room. "Grandma recently moved to Mountain Springs

GRANDMA'S DOLL

Retirement Center, and she'll be putting this old house on the market soon."

"Which is why she wants to sell the piano?"

"Right. Grandma called me a few weeks ago and asked that I come here. She said she'd like me to choose an item from the attic—something I felt was special. Since she needed it done before the house sold, I decided to take a week's vacation and fly here before everything's been gone through." Sheila sucked in her lower lip. "She asked each of her granddaughters to come, and I'm the first to arrive."

"Have you found what you wanted yet?" he questioned.

She shook her head. "It's an old doll I'm looking for, but there was no sign of it in the attic."

Dwaine massaged the bridge of his nose. "Hmm. . .did you ask your grandmother about it? Maybe she moved the doll to some other part of the house."

Sheila pulled out the wooden piano bench and sat down. "I would have asked her when we were on the phone a few minutes ago, but I didn't want to leave you on the porch in the cold."

"If you'd like to call her back, you two can talk about the missing doll while I take a look at this old relic," he said, motioning to the piano. "I should have an estimate by the time you get off the phone."

"That sounds fine." Sheila turned and walked out of the room.

Dwaine moved over to uncover the piano and smiled. *She's sure cute. Guess I'll have to wait 'til she comes back to find out if she's married or not.*

Chapter 2



Sheila returned to the living room ten minutes later, a feeling of defeat threatening to weigh her down. She'd come all the way to Casper for nothing.

She tossed aside the white sheet on the aging, olive-green sofa and groaned. "I can't believe it!"

Dwaine sat on the piano bench, writing something on a notepad, but he looked up when she made her comment. "Bad news?"

She nodded, not trusting her voice and afraid she might break into tears if she related her conversation with Grandma.

Dwaine's forehead wrinkled. "What'd your grandmother say about the doll?"

"It's gone." She paused and drew in a deep breath. "Grandma said she sold it to you."

He shook his head. "I've never met Lydia Dunmore. The first contact I've had with her was today, when she asked me to appraise this." He motioned toward the piano with his elbow.

"She said she took the Bye-Lo doll to The Older the Better Antique Shop last fall and sold it."

"That may be, but I wasn't the owner back then. I bought

GRANDMA'S DOLL

the place from Bill Summers two months ago.”

Sheila sniffed. “Guess I’d better talk to him then. Do you have his home phone number or address?”

Dwaine fingered the small dimple in the middle of his chin. That, along with his sandy-blond hair and dark brown eyes, made him the most attractive man Sheila had met in a long time. *Of course, looks aren't everything, she reminded herself. Kevin Carlson was good-looking, too, and he broke my heart.*

“Bill moved to Canada right after he sold the store. I’m sorry to tell you this, but he’s in the early stages of Alzheimer’s, so his daughter and son-in-law came to Casper and moved him up there to be near them.”

Sheila tapped her fingernails along the edge of the couch. “Are you saying he probably wouldn’t remember what became of my grandmother’s doll, even if I could contact him?”

“Exactly. The poor man wouldn’t have been able to handle the details of selling the store if his family hadn’t taken over and done all the paperwork.” Dwaine shook his head. “It’s sad to see an older person forced to give everything up when some unexpected illness overtakes his body or mind.”

Sheila nodded and swallowed around the lump in her throat, feeling sad for Bill Summers and thankful Grandma was still fairly healthy. Then her thoughts went to the doll she would never have, and unable to control her emotions, she covered her face and let the tears flow.



Dwaine stayed on the piano bench a few seconds, unsure of what to say or do. He didn’t want Sheila to misread his intentions if he offered comfort. He wrestled with his thoughts a

moment longer and finally realized he couldn't remain seated and do nothing but watch her cry.

He hurried across the room and took a seat beside her on the couch. "Would you like me to call someone—your husband, grandmother, or some other relative?"

"I—I'm not married," she said with a snuffle. "And I don't want to bother Grandma. She's got enough problems of her own right now." Sheila lifted her head and looked at him through dark, heavy lashes. Her blue eyes were luminous behind the tears that filled them, and her chin trembled as she made a feeble attempt at smiling. "Sorry for blubbering like that. I don't know what came over me."

"I'm not married either, and I may not know a lot about women, but I do have a sister who can get pretty emotional at times, so I try to be understanding when someone's in tears."

When Sheila offered him another half smile, Dwaine fought the urge to wipe away the remaining moisture on her cheeks. He couldn't explain the reason this dark-haired beauty made him feel protective. He'd just met the woman, so it made no sense at all.

"I'd like to help you find that doll," Dwaine announced.

Her eyes brightened some. "How?"

"The first place I want to look is my antique shop. Even though I haven't seen any Bye-Lo dolls lying around, she could still be there hidden away in some drawer, a box, or a closet."

Sheila's dark eyebrows disappeared under her curly bangs. "You think so?"

"It's worth checking. At the very least we ought to find a receipt showing the doll was brought into the shop, and if it was sold again, there should be a receipt for that, too." Dwaine

returned to the piano bench, where he retrieved the notepad. He ripped off the top page, moved back to the sofa, and handed the paper to Sheila. "Here's the estimate on the piano. If you want to give me the phone number of the place where you're staying, I'll call you if and when I locate the doll."

She frowned. "I was hoping, before I return Grandma's house key, that I might go over to your shop and see what you can find out."

"I haven't been all that busy today, so I guess we could head over there now and take a look."

"I'd appreciate that." Sheila reached into her jeans pocket and withdrew a picture. "This is me as a child, holding the Bye-Lo, in case you're wondering what the doll looks like."

He nodded. "Yep. About the same as the ones I've seen advertised in doll collector's magazines."

"I'm only here on a week's vacation, which means I won't be in Casper long. So if we could go to your shop now, that would be great."

It was obvious that Sheila was desperate to find her grandmother's doll, and Dwaine didn't have the heart to tell her it could take days or even weeks to go through everything in his store. Bill Summers hadn't been much of an organizer, not to mention the fact that he'd become forgetful toward the end. Dwaine had already discovered this was the reason so many things seemed to be missing or were found in some obscure places. Of course, Dwaine couldn't say much about being disorganized. Tidiness was not his best trait, either.

"If you have your own car, you can follow me over to the shop. If not, I'll be happy to give you a lift," he offered.

"That won't be necessary. My rental's parked in the driveway."

“Sounds good. Are you ready to head out then?”

She nodded and grabbed her jacket from the arm of an overstuffed chair, then reached for her purse on the end table.

“Oh, and by the way,” he said, turning back to the piano and lifting the sheet off the top, “I found this while I was doing my appraisal. It looks old, and I figured it might be a family treasure.” He handed her a black Bible with frayed edges and several pages ready to fall out.

Sheila smiled. “Thanks. This must belong to Grandma. I’ll take it to her when I return the house key. She probably didn’t realize she’d left it on top of the piano.”

Dwaine felt a sense of relief. At least Sheila was smiling again.



Sheila had never been inside an antique store so full of clutter, but she remembered Dwaine saying the previous owner’s memory had been fading. The poor man probably had struggled with keeping the shop going and hadn’t been able to clean or organize things. For all she knew, Dwaine might not be any better at putting the place in order. He did seem to be kind and caring, though, if one could tell anything from first impressions.

Kind, caring, and cute, Sheila mused as she followed Dwaine to a long wooden counter in the center of the store. An antique cash register sat on one end, and a cordless phone was beside it. An odd contrast, to be sure.

“I’ll start by looking through the receipt box,” Dwaine said as he reached under the counter and retrieved a battered shoe box that looked like it belonged in the garbage.

Sheila stifled a groan. *That’s where he keeps his receipts? I’d*

say this man's in need of a good secretary as well as some new office supplies.

While Dwaine riffled through the papers, Sheila leaned against the front of the counter and reflected on her job back in Fresno. For the last two years, she'd worked as a receptionist in a chiropractor's office. The clinic had been in total disarray when she was hired, and it had taken nearly six months to get everything organized. She'd finally succeeded, and the office was running more smoothly and efficiently than ever before. Dr. Taylor often praised Sheila for her organizational skills.

"Do you miss living in Wyoming, or are you a bona fide California girl now?" Dwaine asked, breaking into Sheila's thoughts.

"I like my job working as a receptionist for a chiropractor," she replied, "but I miss some things about living here."

"Such as?"

"Grandma for one. I used to love going over to her house and playing in the attic with my girl cousins. There were so many wonderful treasures there." She wrinkled her nose. "The boy cousins preferred to play outside or in the basement where they could get dirty and look for creepy crawlers."

Dwaine chuckled. "Anything else you miss about living in Casper?"

"The cold, snowy winters, when we went sledding and ice-skating."

"Guess you don't get much snow in California, huh?"

"Not in Fresno."

Dwaine laid the stack of receipts he'd already gone through on the countertop. "Is Lydia Dunmore your only relative living here now?"