

The Chest

I never met my grandmother. She died before I was born. Grandpa never really talked about her. I tried to get all I could out of him but each time he had been quick to change the subject. But now with his dementia, it was hard to get much out of him at all.

Now here I am, back in the home I've lived in all my life. The stairs that lead up to the second floor creaked. The old mahogany bannister was worn from generations of children running up and down its steps. Sun rays beat warm light into the house and illuminated my spot at the top of the stairs beside the old wooden chest I had pulled from a room. Years of dust lined its surface and encased the golden latch. The chest belonged to Grandma. I'd first seen it in Grandpa's room when I was a little girl. When I had asked him what was in it, he just said, "Things of the past," and would continue on as if the question had never been asked. But last year, for my eighteenth birthday, Grandpa had given me one of Grandma's necklaces. A dainty golden chain with a small key on it. I had never known if it actually opened anything until now.

I ran my fingers over the initials etched into the latch on the chest. Early this morning, Grandpa passed away. I had decided to start organizing some of his things and sort what was to be sold or thrown away. The house was a bit of a mess. Grandpa's dementia had gone from bad to worse quite quickly. But no matter how many times I'd tried, Grandpa would not leave this house for the retirement home. That was the one thing that stayed constant through his deteriorating thought processes.

I looked back at the lock on the wooden trunk. I pulled the necklace down from around my neck. The gold colour glinted in the afternoon sunlight.

Moment of truth, I thought. I inserted the key head into the lock. *No problems yet.*

I slowly began to twist the key.

Click.

I held my breath as I lifted the lid from its place. I peered inside behind the fallen dust particles to find beautiful linens and dresses that most definitely had been my grandmothers. But something in the corner under a blue piece of linen caught my eye. It appeared to be a brown paper package tied with twine. I pulled the one end of the twine bow holding the brown packaging paper together. I let the twine fall to the floor and carefully fingered the creased edges of the parcel. Inside I found a stack of letters. The letters' edges were worn and yellowed, like they'd been passed down from generation to generation. Elegant cursive lined their entirety. What looked to be months worth of writing waiting to be read. I looked at the top of the first letter.

Dearest Eleanor,

My heart is heavy as I'm writing this. I have come to the realization that I cannot leave with you to the new land. My mother needs me more than ever now as she's feeling the effects of her old age. Father needs me as his right hand man now that Fredrick is gone. I love you so much and I really do want the best for you. If I could I would sail across the entire world for you, but I just can't. I am so very sorry to be leaving you after such a joyous time we've had together. I wish you the best in the new land, I hope I can see you again.

Yours, Tom

Tom? Grandpa's name was Joey. Who was Tom? I looked at the next paper, a newspaper clipping attached to it.

THE BANNS OF MARRIAGE:

Thomas Daniel vanDanden & Eleanore Grace vanTroppe

Grandma had been engaged before? Before she met Grandpa? I read through the rest of the papers. I found more letters and diary entries as I leafed through the contents of the package. As I read through the entries and notes I gained knowledge of what really happened when my grandparents had immigrated to America.

In 1932, Grandma Eleanore was engaged to marry a man by the name of Thomas vanDanden. But Eleanore and her family were moving to America in hopes of a better life. Thomas was not ready for such a move and step and broke off the engagement. Heartbroken, Eleanore had continued on and moved to America with her family. Their new life was hard at first, but quickly became easier as the years went on. Two years after the move, grandma met grandpa, Joseph Douglas Beckett. After a whirlwind romance, the two were married just seven months after they first met. Soon after they built this house and started their own family.

That's where the letters stopped, but photos and even more newspaper clippings continued on the story without words. I set my findings back down in the chest. I closed my eyes. I finally knew something about my grandmother. But that story had just begun, what else could I find?