

FICTION

WHISKER KISSES

Maddy Simpson was 7 years old, and she knew she had one job. She was going to her grandmother's house and vowed not to fail.

by CHRIS FABRY



In one corner, hidden by a lump of tinsel, was a small box wrapped in bright red paper. There was a tiny envelope taped to the front.

HER MOTHER LEANED DOWN before they got in the car, so close Maddy could smell the coffee on her breath.

"Don't make your grandmother cry," her mom said gently. "Try not to stir up the memories. You remember what happened last year."

Maddy remembered it all too well. She had tried hard to be good, to not whine or make too much noise or do anything else to upset her grandmother. Most important of all, she tried not to say anything about her Paw Paw. But when her grandmother picked her up and looked into her eyes, Maddy couldn't hold back.

"I miss his whisker kisses," she said.

Her grandmother crumpled into a chair at the kitchen table, grabbing a napkin and holding it to her face. The tears came with a wailing sound, and

Maddy felt bad that she had done something so awful. She wouldn't make that mistake this year.



As her father drove, Maddy's mother lowered the volume on the Christmas music. "Your grandmother has agreed to let us put up the Christmas tree. She couldn't do it last year. It was too painful."

"Because Paw Paw loved Christmas," Maddy said.

Her mother nodded. "He loved decorating and making sure all the lights worked. He loved buying your grandmother gifts — he was an incurable romantic."

"What's that mean?"

"He always showed his love by giving her little things. That's why Christmas is especially hard for her."

"And that's why she didn't put up a tree last year."

"Right. And she only agreed to put one up this year if we would help."



The house was warm and filled with an aroma of freshly baked cookies. Maddy ran to the table and saw dozens of gingerbread men and stars and snowflake shapes ready to decorate. She hugged her grandmother and remembered the way Paw Paw always picked her up and twirled her close to the ceiling. But she didn't say anything.

As the adults sat and talked in the kitchen, Maddy wandered down the hall to her grandfather's study. It was just like he left it. The dish with his favorite peppermint candy still sat near his coffee mug.

She ran a hand along the spines of the books behind his desk. He loved books almost as much

as the peppermint candy. Low on the bookcase was a large Bible storybook he always read to her. She opened it and looked at the pictures and could almost see his wrinkled hand on the page, pointing at David and Goliath or Daniel with the lions.

His voice. She remembered how it made her feel. When he said her name or prayed before meals, his voice made her warm inside.

"Time to get the tree," her father called from the hallway. "Ready, Maddy?"

She followed him downstairs, and he let her bring a box of ornaments to the living room. Soon her father had the artificial tree put together and was stringing lights.

Maddy opened the box and gasped at the silver and gold ornaments along with the tinsel and garland. She found a box of hooks for the

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ornaments and began pulling out the contents and arranging the silver and gold balls on the hearth.

In one corner, hidden by a lump of tinsel, was a small box wrapped in bright red paper. There was a tiny envelope taped to the front, and Maddy noticed the handwriting looked like Paw Paw's. She leaned closer and sounded out the word.

Helen.

"What was that, Maddy?" her father said.

"Who's Helen?"

"That's your grandmother. It's her middle name, but that's what your grandfather called her. Why do you ask?"

"Because I found this," she said, holding up the box.

He stepped off the stool and let the string of lights fall to the floor. He took the box and stared at it, as if in a trance. He glanced at Maddy, then back at the box.

"Oh, dear."

"What is it?"

"I think we ought to put it back," he said. Footsteps behind them.

"What's all this whispering in here?"

Maddy's grandmother said.

Maddy turned, startled. Her father stepped in front of her and discreetly handed her the box. "You're not supposed to see the tree until we get all the lights and the ornaments on. Now go back to the kitchen."

His voice was playful, but Maddy could only stare at the red box. There were no retreating footsteps.

"What do you have there, Maddy?" her grandmother said, craning her neck to see.

Her father stepped aside, and Maddy held the box behind her like she'd been caught eating a cookie before it was decorated.

"Let me see what you have," her grandmother said.

Slowly, Maddy held the box out and stared at her grandmother's face. Her mouth formed an "O" as she stood frozen by the fireplace.

Finally, she took the neatly wrapped box and read the name on the card.

"Where did you find this?" she whispered.

"In the box with the ornaments," Maddy said.

"But how ... " She looked at Maddy's dad, then put a hand to her head. "Spencer died in October. How would he have ... ?"

"Maybe it was left over from the year before," Maddy's father said.

She wandered back to the kitchen, and the four of them sat at the table with all the cookies cool and ready for frosting and sprinkles.

"Mom, what is it?"

Maddy's grandmother shook her head slowly, then held out the box. "I don't think I can open it. Would you?"

Now it was Maddy's mom's turn to stare at the box. Finally, she opened the envelope and pulled out a card. With a trembling voice she read the words:

"Dearest Helen,

I found this in a shop after Christmas last year and decided to wrap it and give it to you this year. It's going to look so pretty with one of your Christmas sweaters and those beautiful green eyes of yours.

All my love and Merry Christmas! Spence"

Maddy watched, breathless, as her grandmother unwrapped the box. The pendant inside sparkled in the kitchen light. It was gold with green and red stones.

Her grandmother put a hand over her mouth. "He was always doing this kind of thing. Flowers and candy and anything I said I liked, he would find it. When we took the quiz about love languages, it was clear as day. He just loved giving gifts. And my language was words, so he started putting little notes ... "

Her grandmother began to cry, and her shoulders shook, and the tears came, and Maddy jumped up and ran down the hall into her grandfather's study and sat behind his desk, her head in her hands. She had tried so hard to keep her grandmother from crying. It was her one job, and she had failed.



"Crying isn't a bad thing, Maddy. It's a good thing. It means you've lost something special."

Someone came into the room, and without looking up, Maddy said, "I did it again. I made her cry, and I promised not to."

Her grandmother spoke, kneeling in front of her. "You stop that now. It's not your job to keep me from crying."

"But my mom said ... "

"Your mom means well. She doesn't want to see me hurting. And she doesn't want to hurt either."

"But I went and stirred up all the memories."

"You stirred up good memories, Maddy. I don't ever want you to forget your grandfather, how he held you in his lap, the candies he would give you when you came over, the stories he told ... "

"The croquet games in the front yard! Don't forget that."

The old woman smiled. "I won't forget that as long as I live." Then her voice cracked, and a tear ran down her cheek, and Maddy brushed it away like her father had done to her own tears.

"But I'm not supposed to make you cry."

"Crying isn't a bad thing, Maddy. It's a good thing. It means you've lost something special. And the tears remind us how special it was."

"They're kind of like Paw Paw's whisker kisses, aren't they?"

She smiled. "Yes. They sure are. And I'm glad I waited to put up the tree because you and I will always have this memory, won't we?"

Maddy's eyes blurred, and she nodded.

"Oh, Spence loved you so much," her grandmother said. And then the dam burst, and her grandmother hugged her tightly, and Maddy saw her parents in the doorway, wiping something from their eyes, and it seemed like everybody in the house was crying.

But somehow, through all the tears, it didn't feel like she had failed. ☹

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