

PsychoToxin Christmas

ONE LAST CHRISTMAS



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"I remember playing in here with Jared when we were kids," Devin put his backpack on the couch, looking at the framed drawing of the funeral home hanging above it.

Ken smiled. He'd been the town's undertaker for longer than Devin had been alive, and his son was one of Devin's closest friends. "And I remember cleaning up the mess afterwards."

"I'll try not to do that this time." Devin looked around. Not much had changed at the Funeral Home. The same furniture, the same curtains, and the same curios in display cabinets. People in small towns don't like change, and when a loved one passes away, the last place they want to see something different is at the Funeral Home. The only nod to the season was a Christmas Tree in the corner of the foyer, white and gold decorations shimmering as the last rays of sunlight came through the window.

"If you need anything, you've got my number." Ken said.

"I appreciate you letting me do this." Devin extended his hand.

"Oh, absolutely," Ken shook the offered hand. "I wish more people would. I hate thinking about people being left alone at the holidays, even if they are deceased." He held up a key on a metal ring. "There's a coffee pot in the breakroom, sodas in the fridge. Come and go as you want, just lock up when you leave for the night. You can bring the key back tomorrow."

Devin nodded, taking the key from the older

man. "Thanks. I think I've got enough to get me through the night."

#

When Ken left, Devin locked the door behind him, then headed to the room where his grandmother's casket was lying in state. A small Christmas tree was at the head of the casket, a reminder of her love for Christmas. Some members of the family had hoped she would make it through the holiday, but Devin was secretly glad she hadn't. The way she had looked, lying in the hospital bed in her living room, a shell of his grandmother. Mentally, that was. Her yellowed skin had expanded, edema pushing it to its limits, and the gasps and coughs seemed to hurt him more than it did her.

Family had drifted in and out during the days, but they'd taken turns staying with her at night. Devin had been there when she passed. The family had come, upset that they hadn't been there in her final moments, yet he was the only one willing to spend Christmas with her.

He'd never understand people.

Looking out the window, he saw the sign on the bank flash sixty-two degrees. So much for a white Christmas. Grandma always said she wanted to see a white Christmas, but Texas had never given her one. Turning away, he put his hand on the casket. "I'm here, Grandma," he said. He knew she couldn't hear him, but saying it reassured him.

#

Devin didn't notice the tapping at first. It started

softly, a gentle ping of something hitting metal. It got louder, and Devin looked up from his book. Where was it coming from? The only metal object in the room was the casket. Getting up, he walked over to it, checking the sides and back. Nothing was hitting it.

He returned to his reading, but the tapping started again. Standing again, he gave the casket a more thorough inspection, the tapping getting louder as he did. Nothing on the casket, under the casket, around the casket, but still, the noise continued.

The sound of a hard clang, like a hand hitting the casket, made him jump back. Devin stared at the closed metal box. "Impossible," he whispered. Ken had embalmed his grandmother, there was no way she could still be alive.

Another hard clang. He had to be sure, didn't he? Staring at the casket, he tried to work up the nerve to approach it again, to open it and put his fears to rest. Jared had shown him the latch when they were kids. Just open the casket and make sure Grandma wasn't alive.

But this was absurd. Maybe a rat or something had snuck into the casket before Ken closed it?

The next hit seemed to make the casket jump off the bier. He couldn't wait. He approached the casket half a step at a time. Reaching under the lid, he pulled out the metal latch.

The lid sprang open, and his grandmother sat up. Turning her head, she looked at him, eyes glowing red.

"Devin Michael Lambert," she hissed.

He fell where he stood, using his hands to crawl backwards until he hit the couch. "Hi, Grandma."

She opened the foot of the casket, then stood up, towering over her fallen grandson. "Christmas in a casket, Devin? Was that your final present for me?"

He covered his ears, the screech of her voice almost too much to bear. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Her dress slid forward off her body, and Devin remembered Jared telling him dead people's clothes were slit up the back. It was like the hospital gown she had worn in her last months, bare fabric, barely hanging on to her aged body. The jaundiced skin had turned green during the embalming process, the reason Ken had recommended a closed casket. Devin had silently been thankful when the rest of the family had agreed. He didn't want to see her like that.

And now she was standing over him, the fullness of her condition apparent. It was horrifying, disgusting, and though he wanted to cover his eyes, he couldn't look away.

"Was one last Christmas too much to ask for, Devin?" Wind began picking up as doors and curtains slammed closed. The lamps started to flicker, then went out, leaving her glowing red eyes and the lights on the Christmas tree as the only sources of illumination. "One last holiday with my family?"

"You looked so pitiful," he whispered.

"I was dying!" The yell pushed him back against the couch. "It's not a pleasant experience!"

“You needed to be at peace!”

“How would you know what I needed?” she roared. “Do you know what it’s like, to drift away from your body and realize you’ve been betrayed by someone you loved? To watch your naked body be cut open and injected with chemicals because you can’t move on? Stuffed in a casket and rolled out for people to gawk at and whisper about? I’m trapped, Devin! Trapped on this earth, unable to find peace because I was murdered!”

“It wasn’t murder,” he whimpered. “It was mercy.”

“Mercy? You think what you did was mercy?” She leaped from the casket, landing in front of Devin and making the room shake. “It’s only mercy if it’s wanted! I didn’t want to die, Devin!”

“But you were in pain! You were miserable!”

“I was alive! I was loved! I wanted to enjoy that love just a little while longer, have one last Christmas with my family before I let go.” She leaned down, the smell of the chemical preservative penetrating his nostrils. “You robbed me of that!”

“I’m sorry,” he blubbered, pulling his knees to his chest. “I thought I was helping.”

“You were only helping yourself,” she snapped. “You couldn’t handle it anymore. Now you’re here, spending your Christmas alone because you’re too guilty to face the rest of the family, knowing what you did.”

“I know!” Tears streamed down his face. “I’m

sorry, I know!"

"Murderer," she roared, the chemical smell overpowering him. A cold hand closed around his throat. "You've trapped me in this miserable existence, floating above what's left of my body. There's only one way to break free and move on."

His eyes went wide as her hand squeezed harder. "No! Don't kill me! Please."

Laughter echoed through the room. "Did you give me a choice, Devin?" She threw him across the room, his body hitting the casket with a sickening thud, knocking it to the floor with a crash. Dazed, Devin saw her stand and walk to where he had fallen.

Grabbing him by the neck, she hurled him into the wall, opening a hole into the next room. He fell to the floor, pain radiating through his body. Devin wanted to look away, to close his eyes and open them to find everything as it should be.

But he couldn't.

Grandma grabbed the Christmas tree off the table, ripping the plug from the wall as she stomped across the room. As she raised the tree above her head, the glow from her eyes glinted off the metal stand underneath. Devin held up his hands to shield his head.

A smile crossed his grandmother's face, the green skin stretching as the red eyes glowed. "I hope you like your Christmas present... Looks like Ken is going to have a mess to clean up after all."



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