



Neighbors

by *Nina Kiriki Hoffman*



“Grandma, there’s a delivery truck out front,” Kyle said.

The grocery boy made a weekly delivery, and the postman brought occasional letters and bills and all the curricula for Kyle’s home schooling. Everything else they needed came from delivery trucks, except for a few special supplies. Kyle was good with computers and tracking shipments. He always knew when anything was coming, and he hadn’t mentioned a shipment due today.

Anna set her brush on the easel ledge below her canvas and went to peer over Kyle’s shoulder. “Are we expecting anything?”

A man climbed out of the truck by the front gate.

Kyle shook his head. He backed his wheelchair away from his observation post at the window. He always backed away when strangers approached. He was fifteen now, perhaps old enough to be better socialized, she thought, but perhaps not.

The doorbell rang.

Anna glanced at Kyle. He had retreated to the dark hallway; only the toes of his shoes were visible in the light from her still-life lamp. She went to the door.

The FedEx man was young. His hair stuck out in taffy spikes below his cap. “Please sign on line 28,” he said.

“Who’s it from? I wasn’t expecting anything.” She signed.

“Don’t know, ma’am.” He handed her a package about the size of a tea box. The address label was smeared. The return address label read, “A Friend” in handwriting she didn’t recognize. She frowned at it, then glanced at the address label again. “But this isn’t —” she called to the young man. He had jumped down the porch steps, crossed the front yard, and was already in the driver’s seat of his truck.

“Wait!”

The man touched his cap and drove away.

“What is it, Gran?” Kyle rolled into the room.

“Something for the Crandalls.” How could the delivery man make such a mistake? Her last name was Grant; she supposed the smear made “Crandall” look like “Grant.” But the address—well. The smear had disguised that, too.

The Crandalls, a man, a woman, and two bad-tempered children, had lived next door for six years. They had interested Anna and Kyle on many levels, but they were fairly secretive; details had been difficult to collect.

They had moved out last week, in something of a hurry; they had hired extra help, dark brawny young men Anna had never seen before. Kyle had entertained Anna while she painted by describing each item as it made the journey from the Crandalls’s front door to the back of their U-Haul. That day she had been painting one of her special commissions, a still life of cheese cubes and a stuffed raccoon, and she had to paint fast before the cheese dried. Polaroids weren’t big enough to derive fine details from. Still, Kyle’s report had made her look up from her work more than once.

They had learned things about the Crandalls that day that living next door for six years hadn’t taught them.

The exercise equipment must have come into the house in boxes to be assembled, but it came out whole, and there was a lot of it, with some really heavy weights. Some of the chrome assemblies with leather straps and strange-shaped seats had baffled Kyle, in spite of the fact that he watched workout videos for fun. Anna didn’t tell him what she suspected such equipment was used for. Perhaps when he was sixteen she would educate him in that direction, or maybe she should wait until he was eighteen. There weren’t many ways in which he was still young; she might as well treasure what slivers of innocence he had.

The giant brown globe with the continents laid out according to archaic and incorrect knowledge had made Anna wonder if she might not have liked the Crandalls if she had actually gotten to know them. The corporate shredder had also impressed her.

“May I see?” Kyle held out his hands for the Crandalls’s package.

“We shouldn’t.” She dropped it into his hands.

“What else are we going to do with it? Did they leave a forwarding address?”

Anna frowned. “Let’s see.”

Of course, the Crandalls hadn't stopped in to say anything about where they were going. Anna had never spoken to any of them except the boy, who had lost a Frisbee in her monkey puzzle tree the first year the Crandalls had lived in the house. Anna had given him permission to climb up and get it, but of course no one could climb a monkey puzzle tree. He had given up after the thorns pierced his palms. The Frisbee was still there, much faded.

The house stood there now with its windows blank and its lawn going brown, a FOR SALE sign pounded into the petunia bed.

She called the post office and asked if there was forwarding information for the Crandalls, but no.

She called the Realtor listed on the sign, and discovered that the Crandalls hadn't really owned the house; they had rented it from a third party who wanted to sell. No, no forwarding address for the Crandalls.

"I'll call Janie on the corner. She knows everything." Anna never talked to Janie or anyone else in the neighborhood if she could avoid it.

She sighed and dialed Janie's number.

"Oh, Anna," Janie said when Anna had identified herself. "How are you? How's that little crippled grandson of yours?"

"We're fine. Do you know how to get in touch with the Crandalls?"

"Nobody knows. I went over and talked to them on moving day, asked them where they were going. Not very forthcoming, those Crandalls. Did he ever tell you what he did all day?"

"Never did."

"Darn it. Six years and I could never figure them out. Their cars got more expensive every year, and those kids were wearing brand-name clothes, and shoes that cost two hundred dollars a pair, and I still couldn't figure out what he did, or who all those visitors he had were, the ones who always came after dark. It only took me a month to figure out that Mr. Fowler is gay and his wife is just for show, and just a week to find out about Beatrice Moravia's affair with the gardener. Oh, Anna, while I've got you on the phone, could you tell me what you're working on now? Will you be doing another gallery show anytime soon?"

"Just private commissions, Janie." Anna glanced at today's still life: a selection of nipple rings, silver, brass, and gold, laid out on a spotted rabbit pelt. Tricky textures and lights.

"Oh dear. I did love your show at the Matchbox Gallery last year, and I so wanted to see more of your work. Is there any chance I might take a peek?"

"Sorry, Janie. I signed nondisclosure agreements on all of these." If you let Janie into your front door, the next thing you knew she'd be going through the medicine cabinet, the

kitchen cupboards, the trash cans, and the fridge, and you couldn't keep her out of the basement or the still room, either.

Anna had only let Janie in once, soon after Janie arrived in the neighborhood. That was back when Anna's husband Hadrian was still alive; Anna and Hadrian had lived on the block the longest, and Hadrian had improved their house a lot before he passed, dug the secret tunnel to a hidden exit in the park, equipped the garage with all kinds of elegant and more or less secret storage places, brought in electricity and refrigeration for some of their special projects behind the walls. Hadrian had been crafty; he had known how to disguise the true uses of things, and a good thing, too.

Janie had seen enough in the house to keep her talking to everyone else in the neighborhood for months. Fortunately, she hadn't understood most of what she had seen.

Janie hadn't been in the house since Kyle moved in eight years earlier, after the accident that killed his parents and crippled him. Anna thought of how small Kyle had looked when she first met him, seven, thin, pale, and dwarfed by his new wheelchair and his fresh tragedy. His mother, Anna's daughter, had moved as far away as she could as soon as she could, and had stayed away the rest of her life.

Kyle's arrival had been such a gift.

Hadrian had lived long enough to make most of the house wheelchair-accessible, and he'd done special work on the basement for Kyle, though Hadrian and Anna hadn't known what directions Kyle's interests would take him.

They had an inkling when Kyle started his first collection. He was fascinated by the Victorian practice of weaving the hair of the dead into jewelry, ornaments, and three-dimensional floral displays under glass.

Hadrian had been dead a year by the time Kyle confessed his longing to connect with his parents in some tangible way. Anna, delighted, had worked out the details with him. Kyle had strong arms; he worked with weights and did exercises in doorways. It had helped with their night-time cemetery visits. They didn't enlist outside help for what they did.

Kyle had seen Janie peering in his bedroom window once. Anna had put squirt guns loaded with ammonia on his bedside table and his desk in case it happened again.

Anna said, "You're sure there's no way to reach the Crandalls, Janie?"

"They weren't friendly with anyone in the neighborhood. I don't know where he worked. Say, what did that young man just deliver to your house?"

"Art supplies."

"Oh." Janie's voice held a wealth of disappointment.

"Talk to you later," Anna said.

"The Baines boy at the grocery store said you ordered extra steaks," Janie said. "Expecting company?"

“No.” Good thing Janie had never seen the basement since its conversion. Good thing she couldn’t smell the basement air. Good thing she didn’t know what they were raising in the bins under the basement floor. “Good-bye, Janie.” Anna hung up.

“So can we open it?” Kyle asked.

Anna sucked on her lower lip, then nodded.

Kyle pulled his all-purpose tool from the pocket on the arm of his chair and slit the tape. He lifted the lid. “Ack.”

Anna’s nose wrinkled. The smell was unpleasant, a decayed meat scent mixed with chemicals. She joined Kyle.

Inside the box was a folded note. Kyle lifted it out with the needle-nose pliers in his multi-tool to reveal a mass of white cotton balls, stained with something the color of iced tea. They stared at it. Kyle used the pliers to lift the cotton away one ball at a time.

The severed finger was a strange, non-flesh color. It wore a gold man’s ring set with an opaque green stone.

Kyle set the box on his tray. He raised his eyebrows at Anna.

“Go on,” she said.

He opened the note. Mostly, it was typed. Anna read it over his shoulder.

“It is an offense to God that you can live with what you have done. We will make it harder for you. If you ever want to see your brother alive again, call this number and be prepared to pay.”

The area code was local. The signature was unreadable.

“They had night visitors,” Kyle said. His window faced the Crandalls’ house, and he had very acute night vision. “More people went in than came out.”

“Janie mentioned the visitors. I wonder how she missed the numbers not adding up.”

“They were good at quiet.” Kyle set the note down and stared at the finger.

Anna considered it too.

No way to reach the Crandalls, though she wished more than ever that she knew what they had done. She could call the number, tell whoever answered that their dreams were futile, that there was no money and no hope of remorse.

But interfering with the affairs of other people always gave them permission to interfere back. She didn’t like the tone of that letter. The brother was probably doomed anyway.

“You want it?” Anna asked Kyle.

“May I?”

“It’s yours.”

He gave her a very sweet smile. He closed the box carefully and scooted down the hall to the back of the house, to his ramp down to the basement, where he had his work room.

Sometimes she used things from his collection in her paintings. She had been getting more commissions that called for things like that. Word of mouth was serving her well.

More people went into the Crandall house than came out. What happened to the people who hadn’t come out? Perhaps some of them were still there?

Would it be worth a little nighttime exploration?

If there was a lull before the house sold, maybe they could tunnel in. Not such a distance, and Kyle was so strong these days. Who knew what they might find under the basement earth over there? If they had time, they could build a cover for the tunnel, make it impossible for the new owners to tell the tunnel was there, and thus have access to the house. Opportunities multiplied in Anna’s mind.

She mixed up a white gold for the highlights on the metal she was painting, then paused to look out the window toward the house where the Crandalls had lived. Who would move in next?

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