

The Cedar Chest

By

Ken Gardner

The vacant look in Grandpa's eyes told me that he was imprisoned in his own mind and would never be released. There would be temporary furloughs, but those would be few and far between. The hard part was reducing his possessions to fit his memory care room that only had a bathroom, a small closet, and little else. Since the rest of the family lived out of state, I was the only choice for the job because I worked at the Missouri State Highway Patrol Crime Laboratory at Jordan Valley Community Health Center in Springfield, Missouri as a forensic DNA analyst.

The maintenance workers of the small Missouri nursing home had already moved his bed, nightstand, dresser, and television, so I needed to go through the rest of his possessions. It took all morning to separate and box the clothes, memorabilia, and knick-knacks. All that was left was the cedar chest he used as a coffee table.

The top layers were blankets and a couple of dresses in plastic vacuum clothes bags that he must have saved after Grandma died. There were brownish stains on the dresses, obviously from her famous chocolate cupcakes. She loved to bake but was a little messy.

The rest of the contents were pictures from the years they were together. Grandma was trim and tall with the same red hair I have. Grandpa was broad shouldered and a few inches taller with dark wavy hair. They were a handsome couple. He was devastated when she was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer when she was fifty-two, and more so when she died eight months later. He never dated, let alone remarried.

After clearing the last of the pictures, I noticed a small hole near the center of the chest. I put my finger in it and noticed that it didn't touch the shag carpet below. Bending my finger and

pulling, the false bottom easily popped up. The only things underneath was five small Ziplock bags that had locks of auburn hair that matched Grandma's. When his Alzheimer's took over, he began hiding things everywhere for reasons only known to him. Wondering if they were hers or mine, I took them with me to the lab.

The locks I found were perfect to run diagnostics on some of my machines since the hair roots were intact. The DNA should've match Grandma's or mine because we were in the system. She was nice enough to let me practice on her when I was in training, and mine was required for my job.

The next day, I looked at the results and was stunned. None of the samples matched Grandma's or my DNA. After putting them in NDIS (The National DNA Index System), waiting a few hours, and reading the results, my tears landed on the keyboard. Five missing women reports filled the screen. Each woman was the spitting image of Grandma. All missing and feared dead after Grandma had passed.