

A HOME FOR ROSE

To a chorus of pop, sizzle, and snap, the old man savored the brilliant yellow, orange, and blue flames as they danced high into an endless black sky. His neighbor's double-wide would soon be no more.

"I'm afraid I have to take you in, Mr. Reynolds," said the Sheriff's Deputy as he broke ranks from a small gathering of onlookers, fellow deputies and a myriad of firemen, their hoses gushing as they fought to curtail the home's final destruction.

Hunched over with arthritis, Jacob Reynolds held out his wrists as the handcuffs slipped easily over his thin bones. With a final glance at the dwelling now bathed in cleansing fire, he smiled.

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Eighteen months earlier...

"That place is cursed." The old man spat out a dark wad as his gnarled finger pointed toward the burnt remains of what had been the house next door. "If I was you, I'd stay away from that place, and keep your young 'uns away, too."

Ann Mears turned her head as she tried hard not to laugh.

"Thank you, Mr. Reynolds," her husband said to the old man, shaking his hand.

Jacob Reynolds nodded his gray head to Ann and then walked off between the creosote bushes that lined the desert floor. Careful to wait until their neighbor was out of earshot, she whispered to her husband of ten years, "Where did we move to, Mike, *The Twilight Zone*?"

With a smile, he pulled her close. "Behave." Then with a quick peck. "Remember, we're the newcomers around here. It's not good to rub our neighbors the wrong way."

"Yeah, I guess so, but geez Mike, cursed, really?"

"What's cursed, Mommy?" Four-year-old Sabina had caught her parents unaware.

In one fluid motion, Mike lifted the dark-haired child and cuddled her against his chest. "Bina, aren't you supposed to be taking a nap?"

The little girl giggled. "I did, Daddy."

Ann glanced back at the blackened skeleton of what must have been a lovely home. With a frown, she followed her husband and still giggling daughter back inside their new-to-them double-wide. Like their partially unloaded U-Haul, there were boxes and furniture everywhere. "Bina thirsty, Mommy," the child called out as her father set her down.

A can of Cherry Coke in his hand, eight-year-old Preston came out from the kitchen, his brown eyes shining from under the same dark curls as his father and sister. "Mom, can I have a soda?"

"Preston, weren't you supposed to be watching your sister?" Mike sighed. He was beyond tired of scolding his son. "If that's too much to ask, get your butt outside and help me unload the truck."

Eager to avoid further harsh words from his father, the boy set down the soda and headed out the door. At least on Monday, when he started his new school, he wouldn't have to babysit his sister.

Halfway to the truck, a bright light caught Preston's eye. *What is that?*

The boy started toward it and then stopped to look back at the house. *Hmm, Dad is still inside.*

Compelled, Preston hurried toward his potential treasure. His mind so absorbed, he ignored the burned-out house just a few feet beyond. Instead, the boy pushed at the shiny thing with his foot. It wouldn't budge.

Squatting down, his strong, young fingers unearthed what appeared to be a gold ribbon embedded in the hard dirt. Preston grabbed hold of the ribbon and with no more effort than a pull on the long, bright fabric his prize was revealed; a doll, a small plastic doll with matted hair and a faded plaid dress.

"I found it in the desert," Preston told his mother. She'd been in the kitchen unpacking boxes. His father stopped arranging furniture in the living room to join them. "Do you think Bina, would like it? I mean, once it's cleaned up?"

Ann smiled, often amazed at how thoughtful her son could be. "I'm sure she'll love it, Honey." She filled the sink with water and dish soap. "How about we let it soak while you help your father?"

The boy nodded and gave no further thought to where he found it.

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"Oh, Momma, pretty baby," Bina squealed with delight as her mother handed her the doll.

"It's a present from Preston, Bina. What do you say?"

The little girl jumped up and down as she looked at her brother. "Pressie, Pressie, thank you." Pulling down the startled boy, she kissed his cheek.

The doll, when it was new, had long, curly, brown hair. Its eyes, sapphire blue, had closed when laid down and opened when picked up, and its upturned nose was dusted with light brown freckles.

But now, her once-pink plastic skin was stained from the harsh desert sand and what was left of her hair had turned orange. Her eyes still moved but not at the same time.

Sabina and the doll were instantly inseparable and all was well in the Mears' home.

* * *

Nine months later...

"Our first Christmas in our new home," Ann whispered as she slid the carefully wrapped presents beneath their Christmas tree. "I can't wait to see Bina's face when she sees her new doll."

Ann stepped back to survey her work and then joined her husband on the sofa. Mike smiled. "I'm sure she'll love it. Maybe even enough to replace that old doll she carries around."

In the bedroom at the far end of the hall, their daughter slept soundly in her small bed, oblivious to her parent's conversation. Her doll, the one she had loved and cuddled since the day Preston rescued it from the desert, was under the blanket beside her as its one closed eye popped open.

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"Her name is Mary, for Mary Christmas," Sabina told her mother.

It was the day after Christmas and Sabina was playing on the living room floor while her mother folded laundry. "Rose doesn't like her."

Ann looked up from pairing socks. Rose was the name Sabina had given the doll Preston had found in the desert.

"Where is Rose now, Bina?"

The child frowned as she slipped a small white sock over a plastic foot. "She's in time out, Mommy."

Ann gave her best serious face. "Why is she in timeout, Honey?"

Sabina looked up, "She hit Mary, Mommy. I told her if she can't be nice she needs to be in timeout."

Using her pile of folded laundry, Ann hid her smile as she got up. Sometimes her daughter was just too cute for words.

Less than an hour later, Sabina was down for a nap with Rose on one side and Mary on the other. Ann was in the kitchen, seasoning chicken thighs for supper, when an uneasy feeling hit her. Quietly, she walked back down the carpeted hallway; if Sabina was asleep, she didn't want to wake her.

The door was open just a crack, the way Ann had left it. But on the bed, though Sabina didn't look like she had moved, her dolls had changed positions. Rose was now on the other side where Mary had been and the new doll was on the floor. With a shrug, Ann went back to the kitchen.

As they settled into the quiet calm of mid-afternoon, Ann had just fallen asleep on the sofa, when she heard the scream. Startled, but not yet awake, she ran down the hallway as Sabina shrieked, "No, Rose. No!"

Ann hurried into her daughter's room to find Sabina sitting up in bed. The two dolls were on the floor with Rose on top of Mary, and in her hand was a mass of dark-brown curls.

"Sabina Maria, why did you scream?" Ann lifted the small doll and took the synthetic mass from the plastic hand. "And why did you rip out Mary's hair?"

"No, Mommy. I didn't. Rose did."

I can't let this go, Ann thought. Make believe was one thing but this, this can't be ignored.

Ann set Rose down on the bed and picked Mary up from the floor. The doll had a bright pink spot on her scalp where the hair had been pulled.

"Bina, we both know dolls can't really pull out each other's hair."

"Mommy, I swear. I didn't do it." Tears were rolling down her chubby cheeks. "I love Mary."

Beside herself and unsure what to do, Ann went back into the hallway, the doll still firmly in her grip. She had heard of children destroying their toys, and had even witnessed her nephews abusing their sister's dolls in play. But never Sabina, she had always been so careful, so tender with her toys.

Frustrated, Ann put the doll on the top shelf of her closet. *So much for my afternoon nap.*

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Hours later...

"I don't understand it, Mike, she's never done anything like this."

Mike nodded. "You did the right thing, Honey. I'm sure she's learned her lesson."

That evening, the doll was returned to Sabina with a stern warning to take better care of it. "That went well," Mike whispered to his wife as they left their daughter's bedroom.

Ann smiled. "I'm sure you're right." Neither of them had noticed Sabina's worried glance at the desert-stained Rose. But once she was sure the family had all gone to bed, the small doll left her place alongside the sleeping Sabina. She had no intention of obeying the child's parents.

Ann's eyes flashed open in the darkness, something wasn't right. In fact, something was very wrong.

That same ill feeling that had descended upon her hours before was back, only now it was much stronger. Not wanting to wake up her husband, Ann wrapped her terry-cloth robe around her and hurried across the dark expanse of the living room.

With the nightlight outside Preston's bedroom and across from Sabina's as her only light, Ann peered inside her daughter's room. She was just about to whisper Sabina's name, when she caught movement in the receding darkness.

Ann stepped closer, unsure what she was seeing. On the floor by the bed, was the flurry of small plastic arms as they jerked from side to side in ways they were never meant to bend.

With a gasp, Ann stepped back as Rose turned her head, in her hand was a large mass of dark curls. The permanently serene, happy smile was gone, replaced by what Ann would later describe as a hideous, evil grin of very small and very sharp teeth. Her two sapphire-blue eyes were both open.

Ann blinked not wanting to believe what she was seeing. It was then that doll leaped toward her, leaving the now half-bald Mary on the floor.

Ann jumped backward. Her feet landing hard, she tripped over the carpet and fell back into the hallway. The evil grin was following her, coming for her.

At the other end of their home, Mike awoke to a scream and then another as he found his wife's side of the bed empty.

Not bothering to grab his robe, he hurried through the house just in time to see Ann scoot backward across the hallway until she was pressed against the brown, paneled wall outside Preston's room. She screamed again, her hands outstretched as if to ward off some unseen aggressor.

As he reached her side, Mike grabbed Ann under the arms and pulled her up. "Honey, what is it?" His eyes followed hers into the darkness of the open doorway, but saw nothing.

A sleepy Preston came out of his bedroom. "Dad, what's going on?"

"The doll." Ann pointed toward the open door, her eyes fixated. "The doll," she cried.

"Preston, stay with your mother," Mike called over his shoulder and went into Sabina's room.

Inside, the child was sitting up, wiping the sleep from her eyes. "Daddy?" she asked as Mike picked up the damaged doll and sat down beside her. He took a deep breath as he prepared for the lecture he knew he would have to give. Instead, Sabina's small voice stopped him. "Mary! Daddy, her hair."

Confused and bewildered, Mike was still searching for the right words when Ann swooped down and pulled their daughter from the bed. In her retreat back to the hallway, the now crying Sabina in her arms, Ann pointed toward the orange-haired doll that lay just inside the doorway. "That doll, Mike. Get rid of it."

"What?" In the half-light from the hallway, the doll looked small and insignificant, nothing to be afraid of.

Without hesitation, Mike left Mary on the bed while he retrieved the other doll. It looked the same as he saw it last, one eye open, one shut, and a closed lip smile.

Out in the hallway, Sabina was still crying as she clung to her mother while Ann held her just as tight. "That doll," Ann hissed. "It's evil, Mike. Get it out of here." Barefooted and only in his pajama bottom, Mike took Rose out into the cold darkness of the desert.

Now what do I do? He thought as he glanced back toward the house.

After a full day at work, Mike was tired. Not knowing what his wife and daughter were going on about, but sure there was definitely something amiss with the doll; he placed it carefully on top of the green trash bin a few yards from their front door.

In the morning, if Sabina and Ann felt differently, the doll would be unharmed. If their feelings were the same, he could easily bury it inside the bin.

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As Ann stirred in the warmth of the winter sun, flashbacks of the night before jerked her awake. After confirming Sabina was still asleep beside her, Ann followed the creak of a cupboard door and the aroma of fresh coffee as she headed for the kitchen.

"Mike?"

"Good morning, Honey. Coffee?" Mike pulled a second cup from the cupboard. His smile faded as he noted his wife's still-puffy eyes and red face.

"Yes, please." She hugged herself and shivered. "The doll?"

"It's on top of the trash bin. It will go out with the trash later if you'd like."

Ann nodded as she rubbed her arms through the sleeves of her cotton nightgown. "Yes. Please." She left the kitchen.

Seconds later, she called from the front window, "Mike, did you say you left the doll *on top* of the trash bin?"

Mike joined Ann at the window, two cups of fresh, hot coffee in hand. "Here," he handed her a cup as he looked outside. The lid of the trash bin was empty. "I left it right there, in the middle."

Ann shivered again. "Are you sure?"

Her voice seemed small, almost childlike to Mike's ears. In all the years he'd known his wife, she'd never seemed so fragile, so vulnerable.

"Oh, no. Sabina!" Ann ran for their bedroom, oblivious to the hot liquid that sloshed from her cup and ran over her hand.

Sabina was there, where she'd left her, still asleep on the bed. But Ann's relief was only temporary as she moved closer. There, just under the blanket beside Sabina's dark hair, was a small mound of orange hair.

Fear consumed Ann as she yanked the bedcovers back and screamed.

Mike, who had followed close behind, seized the doll from the bed, yelling for his son at the same time. Their daughter, awakened by the commotion, shrieked as she jumped up from the bed and climbed into her mother's arms.

In the ringing aftershock, footsteps pounded across the floor as Preston came running from his room. "Dad?"

"Preston." Mike knelt down in front of his son, the orange-haired doll in his hand. "Did you bring this doll back into the house?"

Large brown eyes fixated on the doll. "No, Dad."

Not wanting to believe the alternative, Mike asked again. "Are you sure you didn't go out either last night or early this morning to get this doll?"

The boy shook his head slowly at first and then, emphatically. "No, Dad. No."

Mike's eyes met Ann's. Until that moment, he'd been sure his wife's overactive imagination had gotten the best of her. Without hesitation, Mike knew what he had to do.

"I'll be back," he said on his way out the door, keys in hand.

That was the last time Ann would see her husband alive. In his haste to dispose of the doll, Mike had pulled out in front of one of the many tractor-trailers that sped along the road outside their housing area. He had died instantly. Rose, the doll, was returned with his personal effects.

The months that followed were a haze to Ann. Convinced the strange widow who ranted of a doll killing her husband was mentally unstable; the authorities took Preston and Sabina away from their mother. Days later, Ann committed suicide while Rose, the doll, watched.

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Exactly eighteen months after Mike and Ann Mears moved in, Jacob Reynolds set fire to their abandoned home. "It was cursed," was his only defense.

Beneath the badly charred mattress in what remained of the burned out double-wide's master suite, a fireman found a small doll with orange hair. "Hey, Chase, look what I found," he called to his partner. "I think I'll take her home to my little girl."

~ The End ~