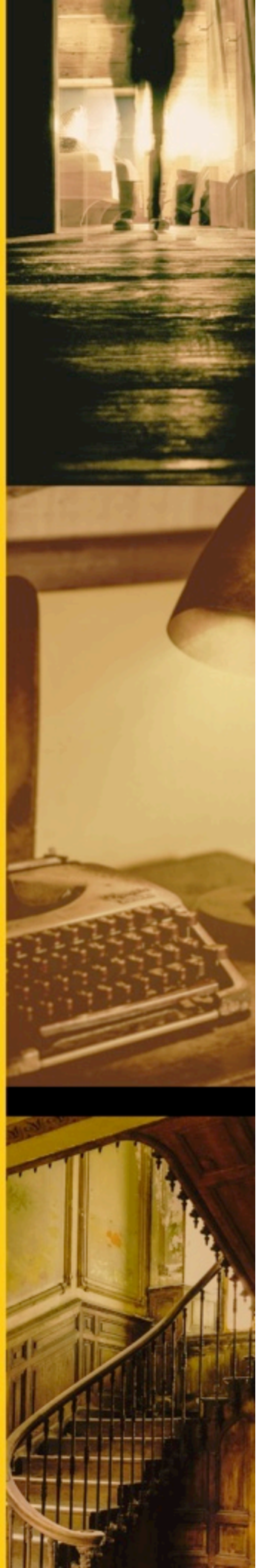


GHOSTWRITER

SOME STORIES NEVER DIE

TONYA E. LEE

A NOVELLA



GHOSTWRITER

Tonya E. Lee

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To my mother, Judy Lee--
For all the great stories you've introduced me to throughout my life,
May the stories I share with you make you proud.

CHAPTER ONE

Marcus Whitaker sat in his car, gripping the steering wheel like it was the only thing tethering him to reality.

The Mayfield House loomed ahead, waiting. Silent. The wind stirred the brittle, dead grass in the yard, sending a dry whisper through the air, like pages turning in an empty library.

His stomach churned.

This wasn't just a writing retreat. This was his last chance.

His last two books had flopped--badly. Critics shredded them, readers ignored them, and sales figures that once made him a king in horror fiction now barely justified the advances his publisher had paid out.

His agent had been blunt:

"The industry's changing, Marcus. If you can't adapt, we'll bring in a ghostwriter."

That single word--ghostwriter--felt like a knife between his ribs. No way. No how. It was his work, his words, or nothing. If he failed here, there was nothing left. No words. No career. No Marcus Whitaker.

And so, he had thrown everything into this one last shot at

inspiration.

Marcus Whitaker had always idolized Jackson Mayfield. The man was a legend in horror fiction--his words haunted readers long after they closed his books. Marcus had spent his teenage years pouring over Mayfield's novels, tracing the arcs of his prose, studying the rhythm of his dialogue. He could still remember the first time he had held a copy of *Hollow Man* in his hands, fingers trembling as he turned the pages. It had changed him. Made him want to be a writer. Made him need to be one.

And now, decades after Mayfield's suicide, Marcus had found a way to inhabit the very space where genius had crumbled into madness.

The property owner, a wiry man in his late sixties, met him on the front porch with a forced smile and wary eyes. "You sure about this, Mr. Whitaker?" he asked, his voice a low rasp that suggested he had smoked a pack a day for decades. "This house... it ain't like others."

Marcus had chuckled, shaking the man's hand firmly. "I appreciate your concern, Mr...?"

"Davenport. Just Davenport. Inherited this place from my aunt. The house has been in the family a long time. Never lived in it myself." He paused, glancing at the locked front door.

"Didn't want to."

He cleared his throat as if regretting speaking too much.

"The will says I can't sell it. If I do, I lose every penny from the rest of the estate."

Marcus's interest sharpened. "And you never thought that was odd?"

"I don't think about it at all." Davenport dug into his pocket, pulling out a brass key. "You a fan of Mayfield's?"

"More than a fan. He's why I became a writer."

Davenport exhaled through his nose. "Yeah, I have to tell you the only reason I'm even letting you in is because my son thinks you're even better than Mayfield himself."

Marcus smirks at the thought. But then again, he might be. By the looks of the house, he sure has made a lot more money.

Davenport takes in a deep breath, "At least you've written a lot more books. Maybe stayed alive a little longer. Guess that helps."

"I'm just eager to get in and get settled, I guess."

Davenport held out the key. His hand trembling. Marcus took it with a grin, already eager to step inside. What a silly old man, Marcus thought. The moment the key turned in the lock, a draft whistled through the threshold, sending a shiver up Marcus's spine. He reveled in it.

Davenport didn't step inside. He backed down the porch and

exhaled slowly, rubbing his jaw as if debating what to say next. He let out a dry chuckle, but his eyes held no humor. "This house, and everything in it has a way of getting under your skin," he muttered. "You spend too much time inside; you might just understand why some doors should stay shut." He shook his head, then walked away, mumbling, "Just don't get lost, Mr. Whitaker. You got my number if you need me."

Marcus laughed a little as he watched the old man walk down the steps, onto the sidewalk, and peek up at the upper windows--back and forth--window to window. Superstition. That's all it was.

But Adriana wasn't laughing. She had been quiet the whole drive, arms folded tight. Now, she was watching the house with the same wariness as Davenport. "This is insane," she muttered as climbed the steps of the old porch. "Marcus, I don't like this place."

"Are you kidding me? This is exactly what I need. This is where he wrote," Marcus murmured, running a reverent hand across the door handle, as he inserted the bulky key into the keyhole. "This is where he created."

"This is where he died," Adriana snapped, her voice tight. "People say he lost his mind before--"

"That's just talk." Marcus waved her off. "People want to

believe a ghost story. That's all."

But deep down, something in him wanted to believe it, too.

Mayfield had been his idol, the god of horror fiction, the very reason Marcus ever picked up a pen. And now, Marcus was stepping into the same house where the great man had written, gone mad, and committed suicide.

If he couldn't write here, he wasn't a writer anymore. He was nothing.

He exhaled slowly, trying to shake the feeling crawling up his spine as the key turned and the hinges of the door creaked.

The house seemed to take a breath as the door swung open. Silent. Waiting.

Adriana lingered in the doorway.

She hadn't wanted to come. She had said it outright--"Marcus, this is a bad idea." She had practically begged him to pick anywhere else.

But Marcus had needed this.

So now, she stood just inside the threshold, arms folded tight. She hadn't said a word since stepping inside, but Marcus could feel the tension in her body.

She was waiting to hate it.

The house smelled of dust, old books, and something beneath it--faint, stale like a fire long burned out.

"Marcus," she said quietly.

He barely heard her.

The house was untouched.

The books, the cigarette-scarred desk, the leather chair turned slightly away from it, as if Mayfield had just stepped out for a moment.

Marcus felt it in his chest--the house had been waiting. For him.

He let out a soft laugh. "It's... perfect."

Adriana didn't answer.

She was looking toward the study. Toward the shadowed outline of the untouched, messy desk filled with blank papers and empty bottles. All straight out of 1942. It almost wanted to make her puke. The vintage stale cigarettes that are still in the ashtray.

The typewriter.

It sat there like an altar.

A Smith-Corona Electric Portable, positioned with almost too much precision among the trash and the mess, the last page still curled in the platen.

Before she could take a step closer, Marcus hones in on it too. He knew this machine.

He had seen it in old interviews, read about it in

biographies.

It was Mayfield's prized possession.

Marcus's fingers hovered over the keys, but no words came. The house was silent. Expectant.

He looked over at Adriana. She stood stiff in the doorway, arms folded, jaw tight. The way she was looking at him--like she was waiting for something to happen--made his skin itch.

"Marcus," she said finally, her voice barely above a whisper. "This house..." She trailed off, shaking her head. "Never mind."

He turned back to the typewriter, exhaling slowly. He would make this work. He had to. This was where Mayfield had written, where he had created his best stories. But that wasn't all Mayfield had done here, was it?

His hand drifted absently over the desk, feeling the worn indentations. A groove here, a cigarette burn there. He glanced at the edge and saw it--a single, faint circular mark, the bottom rim of a glass burned into the varnish. Next to it, a smaller mark, dark and sunken. The tip of a cigarette that had burned straight through the finish.

A glass and an ashtray. Left in the same spot for eighty years.

His eyes moved to the chair beside the desk. It was

slightly pulled out. As if someone had just been sitting there.

And then he saw it.

A small, dark stain near the back of the chair, just below the curve where a man's head would rest.

Marcus stared. His breath caught in his throat.

Was it... blood?

His pulse quickened. No, it could be anything. Old varnish. A water stain. Something that had seeped into the wood long before Mayfield ever lived here.

And yet...

The longer he looked at it, the harder it was to convince himself otherwise.

Behind him, Adriana exhaled. He turned, and for the first time since they arrived, she wasn't looking at him--she was looking at the chair.

She didn't say anything.

She just turned and walked out of the room.

"Adriana?" he called after her.

Her voice came from the hallway, thin and clipped. "Let's just go to bed."

CHAPTER TWO

Marcus stretched out on the bed, letting out a satisfied sigh. The mattress was firm, but he liked that--it felt solid, expensive, the kind of bed a great writer would own. Jackson Mayfield's bed.

He rolled onto his side, propping himself up on one elbow, watching Adriana as she unpacked her suitcase near the dresser.

"Come on," he murmured, a slow grin spreading across his face. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime moment."

She didn't turn around. "What?"

"We're here. We're in his house." He ran his hand over the sheets, feeling the fabric beneath his fingers. "In his bed."

She stopped, her shoulders going stiff. "Marcus."

"What?" He sat up, patting the empty space beside him. "I mean, think about it. What are the chances? Two writers--well, one writer and his muse--sleeping where Mayfield did, in the very place where he--"

"Where he what, Marcus?" Adriana turned now, arms crossed, her face drawn. "Lost his mind? Blew his brains out? Yeah, real romantic."

Marcus scoffed. "You're unbelievable, Adriana. You know

that? You make it sound--"

"Like what? Like what it is?"

He exhaled hard, shaking his head. She never understood things like this. The importance of setting, of experience.

"You're killing the mood."

She barked out a laugh. "Oh, I'm killing the mood?" She gestured around the room. "Not the fact that we're literally lying in a dead man's bed?"

Marcus just smirked. "Come on." He reached for her wrist, but she pulled away before he could touch her.

"I'm going to sleep, Marcus."

She grabbed her pillow, turned her back to him, and yanked the blanket up over her shoulder.

For a moment, he just sat there, staring at the back of her head, before falling against the pillows with a sigh.

The bed felt bigger than it should.

He closed his eyes, but sleep didn't come.

Marcus stretched as he came down the stairs, a satisfied grin on his face. He hadn't felt this good in months--maybe years. His mind was clear, his energy was back, and for the first time in forever, he felt like a writer again.

Adriana, on the other hand, looked like she hadn't slept at all.

She stood at the kitchen counter, arms crossed, staring at the ancient white enamel stove like it had personally offended her. A cup of coffee steamed in front of her, but she hadn't touched it.

Marcus barely noticed. He grabbed a mug from the counter and poured himself a cup, humming under his breath. Damn, it even smelled better here.

"You're in a good mood," Adriana muttered, still eyeing the appliances like they might bite.

"Of course I am." He took a long sip, sighing. "This place is perfect."

She turned, raising an eyebrow. "For who? A war widow in 1946?" She gestured around the kitchen. "The coffee maker, the toaster--Davenport updated those. But look at this." She yanked open the refrigerator, and the door let out a low, tired groan. Inside, the shelves were made of thick glass, the compartments rounded metal, and the bulb overhead flickered dimly.

"Okay, yeah, it's old," Marcus admitted.

"It doesn't even have a freezer."

Marcus smirked, sipping his coffee. "We'll live."

Adriana shot him a look, then gestured toward the stove. "That thing? The last person who cooked on it is probably dead. And the oven? No temperature dials. Just 'Low, Medium, High.'"

Marcus leaned against the counter, unfazed. "Adriana, it's an old house."

"No, it's a museum." She set her mug down with a little too much force. "I just--I don't understand how you can be so happy about this."

Marcus shrugged, a dreamy grin spreading across his face. "Because I'm here. I'm finally here."

Adriana stared at him for a long moment, then shook her head, muttering, "I can't even... you're impossible."

She turned back to the counter, but Marcus barely heard her. He was already thinking about the study, the typewriter, the words waiting to be written.

Today was going to be a good day.

Marcus stared at the blinking cursor.

Nothing.

He flexed his fingers, cracked his knuckles, rolled his shoulders--anything to force his brain into motion. He had been sitting at the kitchen table with his laptop open for the last forty-five minutes, and all he had managed to do was write, delete, and rewrite the same damn sentence five times.

This wasn't writer's block. This was something else.

He had been working on a story for months now--forcing it, reshaping it, trying to find a way to make it good. It wasn't

working. The premise was there, the outline solid, but the words refused to come alive.

His eyes drifted toward the open study door.

The typewriter sat just inside the room, waiting.

No. Not yet. That was just a gimmick. A distraction.

Marcus exhaled, rubbed his face, and stood. Maybe Mayfield had felt like this, too. Maybe the great ones all did.

He wandered into the study, trailing his fingers over the desk. It felt smooth, worn, familiar. The drawers were stiff, but he pulled one open, rifling through its contents. Old papers. Correspondence. Scribbled notes.

And then--pages.

A stack of them, yellowed with age, unfinished.

His pulse kicked up. Mayfield's work. A draft? Notes? A forgotten idea?

Marcus sat down, reading through them. Something about the voice caught him. The cadence, the rhythm--it was raw, unpolished, but distinctly Mayfield.

What would happen if he used it?

The guy was dead. No one was allowed in the house. No one would ever know.

Marcus hesitated. Then, he copied a few lines into his laptop. Reworked them. Reshaped them. Tried to build something

from them.

Still, nothing.

His gaze drifted back toward the typewriter. That's what he needed. He needed to sit in Mayfield's chair, behind Mayfield's old electric typewriter, and feel Mayfield's energy.

He shifted in his seat. His pulse was too fast. His fingers tingled.

He could almost hear the soft click of the keys.

Marcus stood slowly, walking toward it.

He ran a hand over the keys, expecting them to be cold, but they were strangely warm, like they had just been used.

His stomach twisted. Guilt.

That's what this was, wasn't it?

He sat down, flipped the roller switch to "on," and placed his fingers on the keys.

He pushed the first key. Nothing. They second, third, fourth... they didn't move.

Marcus frowned. He pressed harder. Nothing.

A machine like this shouldn't have locked keys. He jiggled them, tried again.

Still, nothing.

Behind him, Adriana peeks over his shoulder. She casually tapped a key.

A soft clack.

The letter struck the page effortlessly.

Marcus stared, then chuckled to himself.

Adriana barely noticed.

"Guess it just doesn't like me."

Adriana moved through the house, trying to ignore the thick, stale air pressing against her skin.

She didn't know what she was looking for--maybe just some sense of normalcy. Something that would make this house feel lived in, instead of preserved.

But the house wasn't normal.

She had noticed it first when she walked from the kitchen to the hallway. The temperature dropped suddenly, like stepping from sunlight into a basement. But only for a moment.

Then it was gone.

The logical part of her told her it was nothing. Old houses had drafts. But another part of her--one she didn't want to name yet--wasn't so sure.

She entered the study and ran her fingers along the desk, her eyes flicking over the neatly stacked books, the framed certificates on the wall. Everything was too perfectly arranged.

A pocket watch sat on a side table, still ticking softly.

Adriana frowned.

The house had been abandoned for decades. Davenport said no one came here.

So why was it still ticking?

She moved to the bookshelf and ran her fingers along the spines. Familiar titles--classics, old first editions, some books she recognized from Marcus's own collection.

Then she saw it.

A thin sheet of paper, folded neatly, tucked between two books.

Adriana hesitated before pulling it out.

The handwriting was slanted, deliberate. Not Marcus's.

She skimmed the words.

"She doesn't understand me. She never did. But she will."

Adriana shivered.

She had never cared about Jackson Mayfield before--never read his books, never listened to Marcus go on about him. But now, here in his home, touching his things... she felt him.

The air around her seemed heavier.

A soft creak sounded behind her.

She turned sharply.

The doorway was empty.

Her pulse kicked up, and she exhaled through her nose. This was ridiculous.

She put the paper back and left the study.

Marcus was in the office, hunched over his laptop, his fingers drumming against the table in frustration. He barely looked up when she walked in.

"I hate this place," she muttered.

Marcus snorted. "You're overreacting."

Adriana opened her mouth to argue, then stopped.

What was the point? He wouldn't listen.

Instead, she grabbed her coffee and left the room, ignoring the feeling that someone was watching her as she walked away.

Marcus sat at the desk, flexing his fingers over the typewriter keys.

This time, he would make it work.

The entire day had been wasted. Nothing on his laptop. Nothing in his notebook. Even Mayfield's old pages hadn't helped. But here, now--he was ready.

He pressed a key.

Nothing.

Frowning, he pressed harder. The key refused to move.

Marcus muttered under his breath and tried another. Still nothing.

The typewriter wouldn't budge.

A prickle of irritation crawled up his spine. He had just

seen Adriana strike a key earlier. It had worked fine. But now?

Now, it was completely locked.

His jaw clenched. He pushed back from the desk and rubbed his temples.

Behind him, the house creaked softly. The air felt thick, like a held breath.

Marcus exhaled and shook his head. He was tired. Stressed. Overthinking.

He tried again--pushing his fingers firmly against the keys.

Nothing.

He let out a frustrated laugh. "You've got to be kidding me."

Marcus sighed and rubbed his face, glaring at the typewriter.

"All right, you stubborn piece of junk," he muttered. "Let's see what's wrong with you."

He yanked open the cover, expecting dust, rust--something mechanical he could fix. But the insides were pristine. The metal gleamed, the ribbon looked new.

No reason it shouldn't work.

Frowning, he reached in, adjusting the mechanism. The moment his fingers brushed the typebars, something sharp sliced

into his skin.

He yanked his hand back with a hiss, blood welling on his fingertip.

Marcus blinked at it, then let out a short laugh.

"Great," he muttered, shaking his head. "Not going any better for me here than it did in New York."

Sucking on his finger, he reached over and flicked the switch, turning off the typewriter.

The small desk lamp flickered as he stood.

He left the study, flipping off the light as he went.

Behind him, the typewriter sat in the dark.

Silent.

Still.

Then, the soft hum of electricity buzzed through the air.

CHAPTER THREE

The house was too quiet.

Adriana sat up slowly, rubbing her arms. She hadn't slept-- not really. What little rest she had managed was light and fitful, her body aware of something her mind hadn't quite named yet.

Marcus was still asleep beside her.

She slipped out of bed carefully, barely making a sound as she pulled on her robe and stepped into the hallway. The house felt different this morning. Not colder. Not darker. Just... heavier.

She didn't know why she walked toward the study. She wasn't even thinking about it. Her feet just carried her there, as if the decision had already been made before she woke up.

The door was open.

The air smelled faintly metallic, like ink or old paper. The typewriter was on.

Adriana frowned. Marcus had turned it off last night.

Her stomach twisted as she stepped forward, her fingers brushing the edge of the desk. A full page sat in the carriage. Crisp. Fresh. Waiting.

She pulled it free.

At first, the words didn't make sense. She read them too fast, her mind trying to keep up with the sentences, until they finally clicked.

Her breath hitched.

The page wasn't a story. It was an account. Last night.

Marcus's rejection.

Her rejection of him.

But the way it was written--brutal. Twisted.

"She lay beside him, cold as ice. Frigid. Empty. A woman-shaped ghost, pretending at love. He reached for her, and she recoiled like a snake--coiled and venomous. Unwanted. Unneeded. A wife in name only. A woman who deserved to be left to rot."

Adriana's hands shook.

Her heart pounded, but her skin was cold.

She scanned further, her stomach turning. The words cut into her, sharp, like whoever wrote them had peeled her open and found everything ugly inside her.

"She never understood him. Never wanted to. She did not deserve him. She deserved nothing at all."

Her vision blurred.

Her pulse hammered in her ears.

Marcus.

She turned sharply, gripping the page so tightly the edges crumpled in her fist.

He had written this.

He had sat here, after she went to bed, and poured this onto the page.

A punishment.

A warning.

A man's final word to a woman who had refused him.

Her legs felt weak, but her fury held her up.

Adriana took the stairs two at a time, the page crumpling in her fist.

She didn't stop to breathe. Didn't hesitate. Her pulse slammed in her ears, and she didn't care how loud she was.

She shoved the bedroom door open, hard.

Marcus startled awake, jerking upright. His eyes were groggy, unfocused, blinking against the dim morning light.

"What the--"

Adriana didn't wait. She threw the page at his chest.

"How dare you!"

Marcus barely caught it, fumbling against the sheets. His brows furrowed as he looked at her, still sluggish from sleep.

"What?"

"The page, Marcus." She stabbed a finger toward it. "Why

would you write that?"

He rubbed his face, exhaled through his nose, and glanced down at the words.

Adriana watched it happen.

The sleep drained from his eyes. His forehead creased. His grip tightened.

Then his eyes went huge.

His head snapped up. "What is this?"

Adriana laughed. A sharp, brittle sound. "You tell me."

Marcus looked back at the page. He read it again, slower. His breathing changed.

"Frigid ghost... pretending to love."

She saw the exact moment he reached that line.

His brow knitted, the way it did when he was deep in thought. Then, his eyes widened--like she'd slapped him. The color drained from his face.

Adriana folded her arms, locking them tight against her chest, the fury burning through the exhaustion.

"You have some nerve, Marcus," she said, her voice shaking with rage.

He looked up at her again, his confusion raw, desperate.

"Adriana--"

"No, you don't get to talk. Not yet." She took a step

closer, her pulse pounding. "You dragged me all the way out here. Away from everything. Fine. You want to be some tortured artist? I'll support you. I always have."

Her hands curled into fists. "But because I didn't want to do it on the first night in a dead man's bed, I'm a frigid ghost who's pretending to love you?"

Her voice broke on the last words, but she swallowed it down.

Marcus threw the page aside and scrambled off the bed. "Adriana, I swear to you--I didn't write that."

She let out a sharp breath, shaking her head. "You really expect me to believe that?"

Marcus's hands went to his hair, gripping at the back of his head. He wasn't defensive. He wasn't angry.

He looked completely wrecked.

"Adriana," he said again, his voice hoarse. "I didn't write it."

"Then who did, Marcus?" She gestured wildly around the room. "Because the last time I checked, there are only two people in this house."

"I don't know," he choked out. "But it wasn't me."

Adriana let out a shaky exhale.

She wanted to stay furious.

But something in the way he was looking at her--completely shattered--made her stomach twist.

Marcus wasn't lying.

He was scared.

And that scared her more than anything.

Marcus sat in front of the typewriter, hands hovering over the keys.

The thing sat there, silent, stubborn.

He pressed one key.

Nothing.

He tried another.

Still nothing.

With a sigh, he flipped the switch on the side. The small hum of power buzzed through the machine.

Marcus cracked his knuckles, rolling his shoulders like a boxer before a fight.

"All right, let's do this."

He placed his fingers on the keys.

Pressed down.

Nothing.

His eye twitched. He pressed harder. The keys wouldn't budge.

Marcus exhaled slowly through his nose. He turned the

typewriter off, then back on.

Pressed the keys again.

Nothing.

He frowned, tilting his head. He wasn't crazy--he had just turned it on.

He flipped the switch again.

The hum stopped.

Turned it back on.

Nothing.

Marcus blinked at it. "Are you kidding me?"

He stood up, rubbed his temples, and paced the room. Maybe it was user error. Maybe he needed to give it a second.

A beat of silence passed.

Then, behind him, the typewriter let out a soft, deliberate hum.

Marcus froze.

Turned around.

It was on.

Slowly, carefully, he walked back to the desk, watching the machine like it might scurry away if he moved too fast.

He sat back down. Stared at the keys.

Slowly, he reached forward and pressed one down.

The typewriter shut off.

Marcus let out a short laugh, rubbing his face. "Okay. Okay. You're messing with me now."

He flicked the switch again. Nothing.

Off. On.

Nothing.

He hears it. A slight bump at first, then something else. Were those footsteps? He knew Adriana was still mad, but wow, it's not like her to stomp around like that.

Wham! The sound rattled down the stairwell, sharp as a gunshot.

Was that a door? Is she slamming doors now? He stands, takes a beat, then walks to the door of the office peering up the stairs like a toddler on Christmas Eve. Nothing. "Idiot."

The word is barely out of his mouth when the old Smith-Corona buzzes to life, fiercely, like it's about to catch on fire.

"Oh... sh..."

He darts to the desk, slamming down into the chair, pulse racing a thousand miles a minute. Ready to catch every minute of magic.

Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

"You know what?" He stood up, hands on his hips. "Fine. Fine. You win."

He shut off the desk lamp and walked out.

Behind him, as he stepped into the hallway, the typewriter buzzed to life.

Marcus stopped.

Turned his head.

The light from the hallway cast a faint glow into the office. The typewriter sat perfectly still.

He let out a breath and shook his head. "Losing it," he muttered.

The typewriter hummed softly in the dark.

Marcus let out a sharp breath and ran a hand through his hair. The house was getting to him.

The typewriter, the damn keys refusing to move, the way the study felt too small, too thick with air that didn't belong to him.

He needed out.

He grabbed his jacket, yanking it from the coat rack, and headed for the door. He stopped.

"Adriana," he called, his voice echoing up the stairs.

No answer.

He hesitated. Shifted his weight. The house felt too still.

"Adriana," he tried again, louder this time. "I'm going out for a bit. Need to clear my head."

Still nothing.

A faint sound--water sloshing against porcelain.

He climbed halfway up the stairs. From under the bathroom door he could see steam curled, thick and slow, carrying the faint scent of soap and something floral. Smells like an old woman. Very unlike Adriana.

She was in the tub.

Marcus exhaled and knocked lightly. "Hey. I'm heading out."

There was a pause. Then, muffled through the door, a quiet, disinterested hum.

That was all he got.

Marcus flexed his jaw, looking at the closed door for a second longer than necessary. Then he shook his head, turned, and left.

The front door clicked shut.

The water had gone cold.

Adriana hadn't noticed at first. She had let the warmth lull her, let it soak into her skin, unwind the tight coil in her chest. But now, goosebumps rippled up her arms. She shivered, exhaling through her nose.

Enough.

She pushed herself up, water sloshing against the porcelain. The house was too quiet.

Dripping, she reached for her towel, the cool air biting at her damp skin. She dried off quickly, knotting the fabric of her robe around her waist, trying to shake the unease that had settled in since the fight that morning.

Marcus was gone.

She should have felt relief, but instead, the house felt too still.

She pulled the plug from the drain, watching the water swirl in lazy spirals. The faint scent of soap and something floral lingered in the air. She frowned. She hadn't used anything floral. She hated that old lady smell.

A floorboard creaked above her.

Her breath caught in her throat.

She went completely still, listening.

Nothing.

A long pause.

Then--another creak.

Her pulse hammered.

She looked up. The attic. No way. No how. It's just her mind playing with her.

Another shift in the ceiling, the softest groan of wood bending under weight.

She gripped the towel a little tighter. It was probably

nothing. Old houses settled. Heat expanded wood. But the sound had been... deliberate.

She stepped into the hallway, her bare feet silent on the floor, leaving water stains with every step.

The air felt thicker.

She moved slowly, cautious. As if she were walking on glass. The attic door loomed at the end of the hall, the old wood warped and swollen with time.

The knob was tarnished with age.

Her fingers trembled as she reached for it.

She hesitated.

Then turned it.

The latch clicked. The door swung open on its own weight.

The attic exhaled a stale breath of air, thick with dust, paper, old ink, and something deeper--something bitter.

The stairs were narrow, steep. Shadows pooled between them, the light from the hallway barely reaching beyond the threshold.

She swallowed hard. Then she climbed.

Each step creaked beneath her weight, the sound stretching too long, like something underneath the floorboards was shifting in response.

The attic was small, just a single window at the far end, smeared with dust. Pale daylight seeped through, illuminating

stacks of papers, books, forgotten things.

Something was waiting.

She turned toward the far side of the attic, where an old dresser stood against the wall. It was small, unremarkable, the paint peeling along the edges. But something about it pulled at her.

Her fingers brushed over the surface, leaving trails in the dust.

An envelope lay on top.

Yellowed with time, edges curling, but the handwriting was still visible.

For My Love.

Adriana's chest tightened.

Her fingers hovered over it, hesitant.

Then she picked it up.

The paper was soft, fragile. She turned it over, sliding her thumb beneath the flap, pulling out the card inside.

A Valentine's? An anniversary card?

It didn't say.

Inside, the ink was smudged in places, but the words remained legible. The message was short. Too short.

Not signed.

Not dated.

Not even a name.

Her pulse quickened.

A thin ribbon was tied to the corner of the card, holding something small, something that glinted in the dusty light.

A ring.

Simple. Understated. The kind of ring that wasn't for show, but for sentiment.

Adriana ran her thumb over the band, brushing away the dust.

A faint warmth curled inside her chest.

She didn't know why she put it on.

She shouldn't have.

She should have left it.

Instead, the ring slid easily onto her finger, settling against her skin like it belonged there.

A shift in the air.

A whisper of dust moving across the floor.

The attic recognized her.

Her breath came faster, shallower, but she didn't take the ring off.

She turned--

And her gaze landed on the stack of papers at the center of the room.

Too neat. Too intentional.

She took another step forward.

The floor groaned beneath her.

She knelt down, allowing her fingers to hover over the pages.

The pages were yellowed but preserved, the ink dark against the brittle paper.

She picked up the first page.

Handwritten. Messy but deliberate.

Her stomach twisted.

Title: Unfinished Manuscript.

This must be the last thing Mayfield ever wrote.

Her hands trembled. She didn't know why, but she felt it in her bones--she shouldn't be touching this.

A soft whisper of movement.

A shift of paper behind her.

She turned sharply.

Nothing.

The attic watched.

She clutched the manuscript tighter and stepped back toward the stairs.

She didn't look behind her.

She didn't breathe until she reached the bottom.

The attic door shuts slowly behind her as if it has had a visit from an old friend.

About the Author

Tonya E. Lee writes stories that live in the quiet spaces between light and shadow--where fear and truth often share the same name. A lifelong lover of great books, she grew up reading everything from gothic novels to literary classics, never knowing those worlds would one day come alive in her own imagination.

Tonya is also the author of non-fiction works on faith, purpose, and critical thinking, but fiction holds a sacred space in her heart--the place where unresolved questions go to breathe.

She currently lives in Georgia, where she splits her time between writing, teaching, and drinking far too much coffee. This is her first published novella.

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