

## No Evidence Of A Struggle

It had been a long, hard day of working the land.

The girl's legs trembled in her worn, green wellingtons as she marched the rough dirt path towards her step-father's house. Nothing could be heard but the thumping of her own footsteps and the swaying and snapping of the golden wheat stalks in the fields. Squinting in the growing darkness, she dropped off her shovel and work gloves at the shed near the stables. The horses watched her impassively from their stalls, their tails swatting flies in the late August heat. At the end of the dirt road, past the animal pens and the fields, lay the main house. Long past its prime, the farmhouse had long since fallen into a state of disrepair. The reflection of the dying sun off the upper windows reminded the girl of a cat's glowing eyes. They too watched her as she made her way up to the oak front door.

The girl produced a small, gold key from her overalls. Standing on her tip-toes, she reached up to slide it into the keyhole.

She paused.

The door was already unlocked.

Slowly, she pushed the door open, wincing when it creaked.

She knew better than to announce herself.

For once, the living room TV was off. The sofas and dining table cast distorted shadows over the walls. A prickly, uneasy feeling made itself home in the girl's gut as her eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness.

Had she been anyone else, she might've assumed the house was abandoned. However, before she could turn away from the scene, something caught her attention.

In the decorative ashtray on the mantel lay a cigarette. Wisps of white smoke curled upwards from the lit end, which was fast greying and crumbling away.

It would not have been an unusual sight, were it not for the fact that the girl knew her stepfather didn't smoke.

Sliding between the furniture, the girl walked over to the mantel, reached up, and pressed the pad of her index finger to the lit end. She jerked away with a hiss, pulling her finger back to her chest. It was still hot. That meant whoever had lit it couldn't have been gone for long.

If they were gone at all.

The more she roamed around the house, the more her mind and body screamed at her that something was very, very wrong. Not that there was anything hugely *different* about the house. No, quite the contrary. It was the small changes she noticed as she snuck from room to room that made her deeply uncomfortable.

It was the fact that the six pack of beer at the top of the stairs was untouched.

It was the way her stepfather's bed had been made.

It was the feeling that there was someone following her every move.

When she reached the bottom of the stairs, she froze.

How had she not noticed it before?

Her step-father's easy chair, the one with the broken leg that always sat in the corner, was empty.

That was all the confirmation the girl needed. Careful to avoid the creaky floorboard under the threadbare carpet, she went to the landline near the couch. Eyes still on the chair, she dialed 911.

"911, what is your emergency?"

"Hi. My name is Charlie, and I'm eight years old."

"Hi there, Charlie. Is anything the matter, sweetie?"

"My step-dad is missing from our house."

“Okay,” Charlie heard the sound of a keyboard clacking on the other end of the line. “And are you alone in your house?”

Despite everything in her telling her otherwise, Charlie nodded. “Yes, I think so.”

“Can you tell me your address?”

“Yes, it’s 10 Land’s End Drive, Pincher Creek,”

“Okay, I’ve got two officers who are on their way. Now, where did you last see your stepdad?”

Charlie opened her mouth to answer, but something in the doorway of the kitchen made her drop the receiver with a *click*.

The kitchen light, which Charlie was sure had previously been off, was now casting a bright, artificial glow into the living room. Her heart leapt to her throat.

There, sitting in a chair in the middle of the kitchen, was her step-father.

Eyes wide open. Unmoving.

For the first time that evening, Charlie felt a twinge of real, palpable fear.

She inched closer to his prone figure, terrified that at any moment, those eyes would rove around in their sockets and zero in on her. That those large, limp hands, which were looking clammy and paler the closer she got, would resume their nightly endeavour of leaving her covered in hues of purples and blues.

Cautiously, she leaned over him, her fingers floating upwards to tug anxiously at her blonde ponytail.

*There.* Underneath the collar of his dirty blue plaid shirt. Charlie’s eyes roamed over the deep, clean cut in his skin. Over the shimmering rivers of ruby-red blood soaking through his shirt. Dripping onto the floor.

*Drip. Drip. Drip.*

She was looking at a corpse.

Abruptly, she became hyper aware of the sound of heavy breathing, coming from directly behind her.

Without turning, she asked, “Did you do this?”

The killer’s voice was ragged. “I-”

Charlie whirled around. He was standing just five feet away from her. His clothes were shabby, his eyes exhausted. In his gloved hand, a knife spattered in red.

“Did. You. Do. This?” She asked again.

A pause. Then, “Yes.”

Charlie’s bottom lip trembled as she nodded. The tension in the room swelled.

If the whole situation was a terribly built dam, then the presence of her stepfather’s bleeding body was surely the last catastrophic surge that would send the whole structure crashing down.

And crash down, it did. Without preamble, Charlie went barreling towards the intruder. His body only tensed slightly when she threw her arms around his midriff and buried her face in his shirt.

*“Thank you.”*

The man knelt and cupped her face, his palms rough with calluses from working the nearby field.

“I had to make sure he wouldn’t hurt you anymore.”

“I know.” Charlie mumbled. She scrubbed furiously at her eyes before gazing imploringly up at him. “You really need to quit smoking, Mr. Faulkner.”

Mr. Faulkner let out a bark of laughter. “I don’t think that’s our biggest issue right now,”

The pair turned to look at the corpse in the chair.

“Did he go quietly?” Charlie asked somewhat curiously.

“I didn’t give him the chance to go any other way,” Faulkner replied grimly.

Both of them tensed at the approaching sound of the sirens, wailing like banshees into the night.

The man sighed, rubbing a bloody palm over his face. “I’m going to jail, kid.”

“No, you aren’t,” Charlie insisted, shaking her head fiercely. “I won’t let you.”

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For the next few weeks, it was all anyone in town could talk about. People whispered and gossiped about the child who'd emerged from her foster home with her hands in the air, proclaiming loudly that her step father and legal guardian had killed himself.

Of course, they knew nothing of her neighbour, who'd narrowly escaped the crime scene by climbing out of one of the farmhouse's many back windows. Nor did they notice that the girl seemed to feel nothing whatsoever over the night's traumatising events.

During a subsequent interview with the local police department, one of the officers reported: "It's a textbook suicide. The weapon matches the injury, and the little girl swore she saw it happen. Besides," he quickly glanced over his notes. "There was no evidence of a struggle."

The End.