**Over the River and Through the Woods**

“I’m nervous,” I fidget in my seat.

My mom doesn’t even take her eyes off the road. “Don’t be. It’s just your grandmother. There’s nothing to be nervous about.”

“Yeah.” My sister twists in her seat to look at me. “She’s super sweet and she’s gonna love you. Promise.”

I nodded. She smiled at me once more and turned back.

The second she wasn’t looking, I frowned, shivering. All the talk and excited energy were making me anxious.

“Ooh, ooh, ooh! I bet she’s got white hair like Timmy’s grandma! She’s super old and covered in wrinkles!” My little brother spoke up from next to me.

“Most grandparents are and Grandma is no exception,” Mom laughed.

“Well, *I’m* not nervous about meeting her. I wanna tell her about first grade and my teacher and my missing tooth!” He looked at me with a grin, sticking his tongue through the hole. I stuck my tongue through the hole and looked away.

“I’m sure she’ll love to hear all about it.”

I looked out the window, watching the trees grow taller and taller until we finally passed through the huge cast-iron gates protecting the place where Grandma lived.

I pressed my face against the glass to get a better glimpse at the residents’ homes.

They were huge, soaring structures, intricately decorated and sporting immaculate landscaping.

Flowers were everywhere and wreaths hung on all the doors. Windmills and figurines dusted the lawns.

Mom pulled up to the clubhouse where we were to meet Grandma and the little butterflies living in my stomach returned.

We got out of the car. My older sister grabbed my hand and squeezed hard. The biggest smile ever was on her face.

We walked hand-in-hand into the building, where we were ushered to a table in the back. Once seated, we waited impatiently for the lady to get Grandma for us.

After a few moments, she returned with a smile, someone trailing behind her with eyes sparkling with excitement, mischief set into her perfectly-wrinkled face.

“I told you she would have white hair!” My brother said.

“Shhh,” my sister chastised him as we watched our mother stand and walk to the woman.

“Mom?” She whispered.

The woman nodded. “It’s me.”

Tears filled both of their eyes as they hugged, talking over one another.

“It’s been so long-“

“I’ve missed you-“

“Going on eight years now, right?”

“I can’t believe you never brought the younger two to visit me! I’ve been wanting to meet them ever since they were born!”

“We only just moved back-”

“I wish-“

“I know.”

I watched the back and forth intensely before standing. I hesitantly walked over to them.

“Grandma?” I asked quietly.

She turned to look at me for a moment before immediately swooping me up into a hug.

“Darling, I’ve been waiting to meet you for years! I was so unhappy the last time your mother visited and you weren’t with her. You’re so big now! Practically grown!”

She rubbed her tears away as I blinked back some of my own.

I squeezed her back. “I wish I could’ve met you sooner, too. You wouldn’t believe all the stories I’ve heard about you. Is it true you went skydiving for your sixtieth birthday? That’s so badass!”

My mother shot me a sharp look. “*Language*.”

I looked at my feet. “Sorry.”

Grandma just laughed. “*That one* is true. But that was a long time ago! This old bag-of-bones won’t be doing anything of that sort ever again.”

“I want to be just like you when I-“

My brother cut me off, bounding up to us. “Grandma, Grandma! I have a hole in my mouth!”

She turned to him and smiled. “*You* must be Cory! I’m so glad I finally get to meet you! Look at you! Practically grown and man of the house!”

Cory puffed out his little chest in pride at her compliment. “I’m in first grade now! At first, I didn’t like reading, but now I do! And Mrs. Carp— that’s my teacher— she says that I’m one of the best readers in the whole first grade!”

Grandma laughed again. “That’s wonderful!”

“Hi, Grandma,” my sister slid in to join the conversation.

Grandma turned and embraced her. “Sara! My, you’ve grown! How old are you now?”

“Nineteen.”

Grandma clasped her hands together in delight. “And I’m sure you’re going to a wonderful college?”

“I got accepted to a bunch but for now I’m taking some time off to travel. See the world.”

Grandma waved her hand. “Never mind that. I’m just happy that *you’re* happy!”

Sara nodded. “I am. I really am.”

I backed out of the way, a soft smile on my face. My mom moved back in, a flurry of hands and hair as she excitedly started talking to her mom.

I watched them for a few more minutes before the lady came back out. She tapped on her watch to let us know that our time was almost up.

The others said their tearful “goodbye”s and “see you soon”s and “I promise it won’t be another eight years”s before I finally walked up.

I embraced Grandma again. “Bye. I’ll miss you.”

She hugged me back, tighter than before. “I’ll miss you, too.”

The lady held her arm out and Grandma latched on.

We started walking toward the door.

“Love you!” Grandma called to us.

“We love you, too,” we chorused back, the way our mom had taught us.

I walked back to the car with my family, quietly crying. We climbed in, my mom turning on the car in preparation to drive away.

“See,” Sara said. “I *told* you there was nothing to be nervous about.”

I just nodded thoughtfully as we pulled away, watching the lady help Grandma to her home.

I caught a brief glimpse of the polished white engraving on the door: *Juliette Peterson, Beloved Wife, Mother, and Grandmother. Forever in Our Hearts. R.I.P.*

“Happy Death Day, Grandma,” I whispered to myself, watching as she was sealed back into her tomb. “I’ll see you next year.”