

OLD LIKE US

The forgotten grave

SAMPLE
CHAPTER

ROD TRENT

Welcome, dear reader. I'd like to introduce you to the world of the Starlight Eldercare Facility where minds are younger, sharper and better toned than muscles, joints, and backs but there's still a keen sense of mystery, intrigue, and adventure.

This is one of those stories that came together quickly because it was fun to write, fun to read, and the characters took on a life of their own. I hope you enjoy it as much as I do.

As the author of this story, I began my career writing fiction, a passion that has never dimmed even as I ventured into the world of technology content to pay the bills and drive my career forward. The act of creation is not just a job; it is a therapeutic escape, a return to the roots of my creativity, and I am thrilled to be sharing this passion with you. In a very real way, this book is just for me. Selfish, huh? But for those that know me, I share everything, so, I hope you both excuse and enjoy my attempted intrusion into your world.

- Rod

Chapter 1

Reunion

The aroma of fresh coffee wafted through the air as Eleanor Grace Hudson stepped into the sunlit common area of Starlight Eldercare Facility. Her keen blue eyes immediately spotted George Alexander 'Alex' Reynolds, hunched over a newspaper in his favorite armchair by the window. His brow furrowed in concentration, he tapped a pen against his chin, lost in the world of black and white squares.

Eleanor suppressed a smile. Even in retirement, her old friend couldn't resist a challenge. She approached quietly, her footsteps muffled by the plush carpet.

"Seven down giving you trouble, detective?" she quipped, peering over his shoulder.

George startled slightly, then relaxed as he recognized her voice. "Eleanor," he said, glancing up with a twinkle in his eye. "Come to lend your expertise to this nefarious puzzle?"

She chuckled, settling into the chair beside him. "I wouldn't dare intrude on your domain, Alex. We all know crosswords are your forte."

George shifted in his seat and scrunched his face at her, baring his wrinkled face. His crowsfeet looked like ancient Aztec irrigation furrows. He hated when she used his nickname, but dismissed it as her fun of the day. At this age, fun is where you make it.

"Flattery will get you everywhere, my dear," George replied, his beard twitching with amusement. "But I must admit, this one's a

real head-scratcher. 'Archaic exclamation, four letters.' Any ideas?"

Eleanor leaned closer, studying the clue. Her mind raced through her vast historical knowledge. "Hmm... could it be 'zounds'? That was quite popular in Shakespeare's time."

George's eyes widened. "I asked for four letters." He penciled in another word, then shook his head ruefully. "I should have known better than to trust English and Math to the wisdom of a history teacher."

"Oh, hush," Eleanor said, playfully swatting his arm. "You solve more of these in a week than I do in a year. I just got lucky. What did you end up with?"

"The word was 'egad'," George confided.

As George completed the puzzle with renewed vigor, Eleanor found herself marveling at their enduring friendship. How many mornings had they spent like this over the years? Countless, and yet each one felt special.

"You know," she mused, "I think these crosswords keep your detective skills sharp. You're still as observant as ever."

George set down his pen, turning to face her with a wry smile. "Is that so? Then tell me, Eleanor, why are you really here this morning? I detect an ulterior motive behind that innocent expression of yours."

Eleanor's eyebrows shot up in mock indignation. "Can't an old friend simply enjoy your company without suspicion?"

"Not when that old friend has that particular gleam in her eye," George countered. "Come on, out with it. What adventure are you planning now?"

She laughed, caught out but not at all chagrined. "Oh, Alex. You know me too well."

Just as Eleanor opened her mouth to reply, the door to the common room burst open with a resounding bang. Mabel Louise Bennett swept in, her brightly colored scarf trailing behind her like a banner. Her arms were laden with a towering stack of worn leather-bound albums, threatening to topple at any moment.

"Eureka!" Mabel exclaimed, her green eyes sparkling with unbridled excitement. "I've found it, my dears! A veritable treasure trove of memories!"

Eleanor's eyebrows shot up, her planned adventure momentarily forgotten. "Mabel, what on earth —"

"No time for questions, darling," Mabel interrupted, unceremoniously depositing her stack of albums onto the coffee table with a satisfying thud. "We have a journey through time to embark upon!"

George peered over his glasses, his crossword puzzle abandoned. "I do hope you haven't been rummaging through the facility's storage again, Mabel. You remember what happened last time."

Mabel waved away his concern with a dramatic flourish. "Pish posh, George. These beauties are from my own collection. Now, gather 'round, my fellow adventurers!"

With surprising agility for a woman in her late seventies, Mabel began distributing the albums to Eleanor, George, and Harold, who had been quietly observing from his favorite armchair.

"Come now, don't be shy," Mabel encouraged, her voice brimming with anticipation. "Open them up and let's take a stroll down memory lane!"

Eleanor carefully opened the album in her lap, a wave of nostalgia washing over her as she recognized faces from decades past. "Oh my," she breathed, tracing a finger over a faded photograph. "Is that us at the county fair in '62?"

George leaned in, adjusting his glasses. "Indeed it is. Look at young Harold there, trying to win that oversized teddy bear."

Harold chuckled softly. "If I recall correctly, I spent my entire allowance on that rigged game. Never did win that bear."

As they flipped through the pages, Eleanor felt a warmth spreading through her chest. These weren't just photos; they were snapshots of a life well-lived, of friendships that had weathered the tests of time. She glanced at Mabel, who was practically vibrating with excitement.

"Mabel, you wonderful woman," Eleanor said, her voice thick with emotion. "How long have you been collecting these?"

Mabel's eyes twinkled mischievously. "Oh, a lady never reveals all her secrets, dear. But let's just say I've been preparing for this moment for quite some time. Now, who wants to hear about the great pie caper of 1965?"

Just as Mabel opened her mouth to launch into her tale, the door swung open with a gentle creak. Harold shuffled in, balancing a tray of golden-brown cookies that filled the room with the irresistible aroma of vanilla and cinnamon.

"I thought I smelled trouble brewing," Harold quipped, his eyes twinkling behind his round spectacles. "Mabel, are you about to regale us with another one of your tall tales?"

Mabel's green eyes flashed with playful indignation. "Harold Eugene Mitchell, I'll have you know that every word I speak is the gospel truth!"

"Oh really?" Harold chuckled, setting the tray down on a nearby table. "Like the time you convinced us all that you'd once been a trapeze artist in a traveling circus?"

Eleanor couldn't help but giggle at the memory. "To be fair, Harold, she did demonstrate some rather impressive flexibility for someone her age."

George nodded, a grin spreading across his face. "I still can't believe she managed to hang upside down from that tree branch for a full minute."

Mabel huffed, but there was no real annoyance in her voice. "You doubting Thomases! I'll prove my storytelling prowess right here and now." She dramatically flipped a page in the album on her lap. "Ah, perfect! The summer of '68, our camping trip in the Adirondacks. Who wants to hear about the mysterious creature we encountered in the woods?"

As Mabel launched into her tale, Eleanor found herself transported back to that muggy summer night. She could almost smell the pine needles and feel the crackle of the campfire. Her friends' laughter mingled with Mabel's animated narration, creating a symphony of joy that filled the room.

Eleanor thought to herself, 'How lucky are we to have these moments, these memories? And how fortunate to have Mabel here to bring them to life with such vivid detail.' She reached for one of Harold's cookies, savoring its warmth and sweetness, a perfect complement to the warmth in her heart.

Eleanor's eyes sparkled with mischief as she set down her cookie. "You know, all this reminiscing has given me an idea," she announced, her voice carrying that familiar tone of authority that always commanded attention. "Why don't we play a round of charades? We can act out scenes from our childhood adventures!"

Harold clapped his hands together, nearly upsetting the cookie tray. "Oh, splendid idea, Eleanor! I call dibs on going first!"

"Now, hold on a minute," George interjected, a competitive glint in his eye. "Who says you get to go first?"

Eleanor chuckled to herself. 'Some things never change,' she thought, recalling how George and Harold had always vied for the spotlight in their youth.

"Alright, alright," Eleanor said, raising her hands in a placating gesture. "We'll draw straws to decide the order. Mabel, would you be a dear and fetch us some?"

As Mabel bustled off to find straws, Eleanor began clearing space in the center of the room. Her mind raced with potential scenes to act out. 'Perhaps the time we snuck into old Mr. Johnson's orchard? Or maybe our ill-fated attempt at building a treehouse?'

Mabel returned, and they quickly sorted out the order. George drew the short straw and stepped into the makeshift performance area with a theatrical bow.

"Remember, no words!" Eleanor reminded him, settling back into her chair with anticipation.

George nodded, then began to flap his arms wildly while hopping from foot to foot. His face contorted into an exaggerated expression of terror.

"Oh, oh!" Harold exclaimed, nearly falling out of his seat in excitement. "It's you running from Mrs. Finch's goose!"

George pointed at Harold triumphantly, then continued his performance by pretending to climb an invisible structure.

Eleanor leaned forward, her eyes twinkling. "The time you climbed the water tower to escape!"

George beamed and took an exaggerated bow. Eleanor couldn't help but marvel at how vividly she could picture the scene – a gangly teenage George, red-faced and panting, perched atop the town's water tower while an irate goose honked below.

As Mabel stepped up for her turn, Eleanor felt a warm glow of contentment. 'This is what it's all about,' she mused. 'Laughter, friendship, and the joy of shared memories.'

As the laughter from George's charade performance subsided, Mabel's eyes twinkled with mischief. She clapped her hands together, her colorful scarf swaying with the movement.

"Oh, I have a splendid idea!" Mabel exclaimed, her voice brimming with excitement. "Let's play 'Two Truths and a Lie'! We each share three stories about ourselves – two true and one false – and the rest have to guess which is the fib."

Eleanor felt a flutter of anticipation in her chest. "That sounds marvelous, Mabel. Your games always bring out the most fascinating tales."

"I'll start!" Mabel announced, settling into her chair. She closed her eyes for a moment, as if conjuring up her stories. "Alright, here we go. One: I once tap-danced on stage with Gene Kelly. Two: I taught a parrot to recite Shakespeare. Three: I accidentally set my classroom on fire during a science experiment."

The room erupted in animated discussion. Eleanor leaned forward, her mind racing. "The tap dancing must be the lie," she declared. "It's too fantastical!"

George shook his head vigorously. "No, no, it's got to be the parrot. Mabel's good with stories, but teaching Shakespeare to a bird? That's a stretch!"

Harold chuckled. "You're both wrong. I remember that fire incident. The whole school was talking about it for weeks!"

Mabel's eyes sparkled as she listened to their debate. "Well, well," she said, drawing out the suspense. "I hate to disappoint you, Harold, but the fire is indeed the lie. I may have singed a few eyebrows in my day, but I never quite managed to set the classroom ablaze!"

Eleanor's jaw dropped. "You mean you actually danced with Gene Kelly? Mabel Louise Bennett, you've been holding out on us!"

As Mabel launched into the tale of her surprise encounter with the famous dancer, Eleanor marveled at how this simple game was revealing new layers to her old friend. 'Just when you think you know someone,' she thought, 'they surprise you with a hidden treasure from their past.'

Eleanor raised her glass of sparkling cider, the bubbles catching the warm light of the common room. Her blue eyes twinkled with mischief and affection as she gazed at her lifelong friends.

"My dear companions," she began, her voice rich with emotion, "I'd like to propose a toast. To us, to our enduring friendship, and to the countless memories we've created together."

George cleared his throat, lifting his own glass. "Here, here!"

"You know," Eleanor continued, a wistful smile playing on her lips, "I never imagined when we were children, scraping our knees and solving neighborhood 'mysteries', that we'd be sitting here today, still thick as thieves."

Mabel chimed in, her voice wavering slightly, "Oh, Eleanor, you always were the sentimental one. But I must say, I wouldn't trade our adventures for all the tea in China."

Harold raised his glass higher, a tear threatening to spill from the corner of his eye. "To friendship," he said simply, his usual wit momentarily replaced by sincere gratitude.

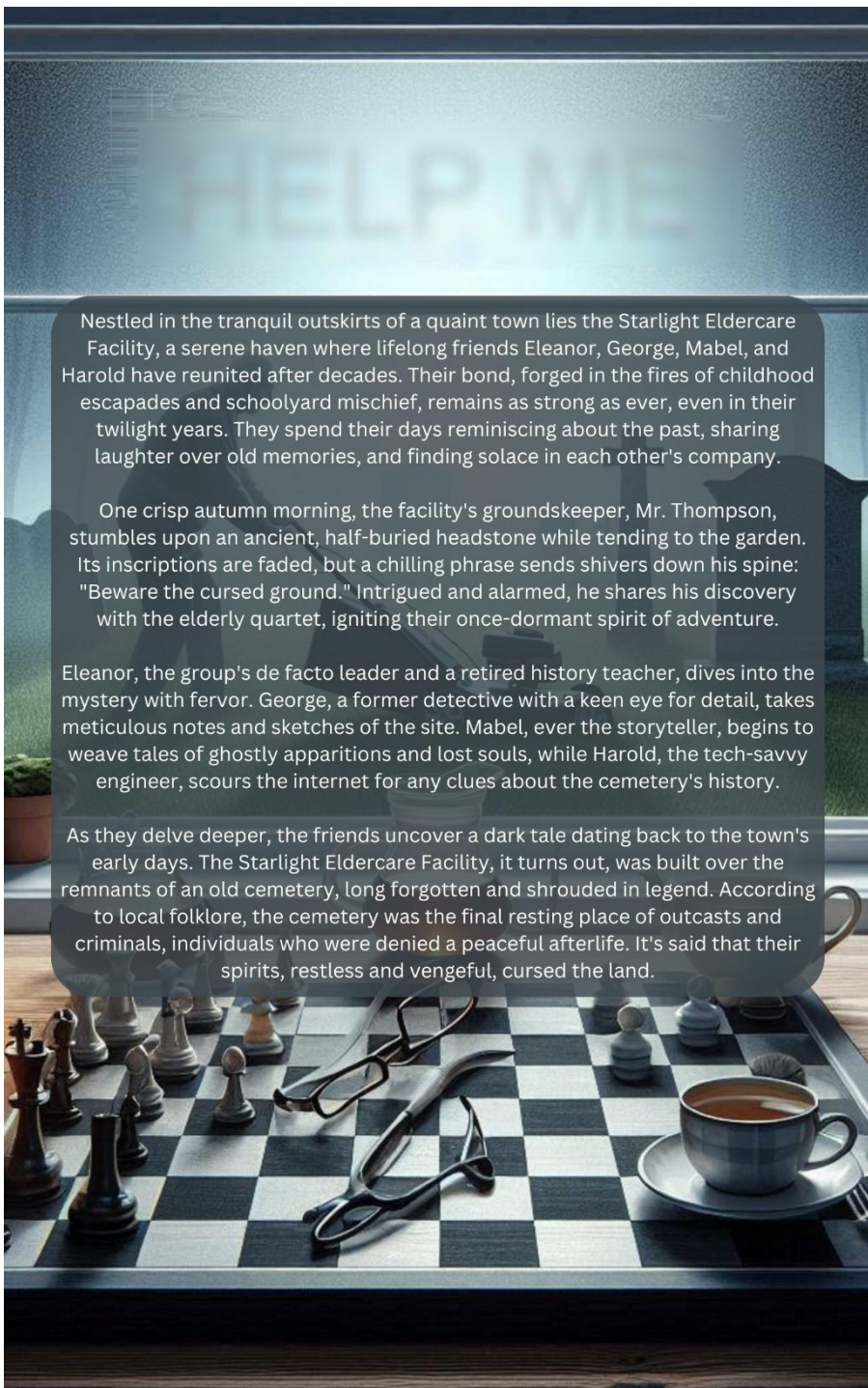
As they clinked their glasses together, Eleanor felt a surge of warmth in her chest. 'We may be in our twilight years,' she thought, 'but our spirits are as bright as ever.'

Laughter bubbled up, mingling with the sound of clinking glasses. George attempted to recreate his tap-dancing glory days, resulting in a comical stumble that had them all in stitches.

"Well," Eleanor said, wiping tears of mirth from her eyes, "I'd say we're just getting started. Who knows what escapades await us?"

Mabel's eyes gleamed with excitement. "I do hope you're right, Eleanor. After all, age is just a number, and we've got plenty of life left to live!"

As the laughter continued and the warmth of friendship filled the room, Eleanor couldn't help but feel a tingle of anticipation. Something told her that their greatest adventure was yet to come.



Nestled in the tranquil outskirts of a quaint town lies the Starlight Eldercare Facility, a serene haven where lifelong friends Eleanor, George, Mabel, and Harold have reunited after decades. Their bond, forged in the fires of childhood escapades and schoolyard mischief, remains as strong as ever, even in their twilight years. They spend their days reminiscing about the past, sharing laughter over old memories, and finding solace in each other's company.

One crisp autumn morning, the facility's groundskeeper, Mr. Thompson, stumbles upon an ancient, half-buried headstone while tending to the garden. Its inscriptions are faded, but a chilling phrase sends shivers down his spine: "Beware the cursed ground." Intrigued and alarmed, he shares his discovery with the elderly quartet, igniting their once-dormant spirit of adventure.

Eleanor, the group's de facto leader and a retired history teacher, dives into the mystery with fervor. George, a former detective with a keen eye for detail, takes meticulous notes and sketches of the site. Mabel, ever the storyteller, begins to weave tales of ghostly apparitions and lost souls, while Harold, the tech-savvy engineer, scours the internet for any clues about the cemetery's history.

As they delve deeper, the friends uncover a dark tale dating back to the town's early days. The Starlight Eldercare Facility, it turns out, was built over the remnants of an old cemetery, long forgotten and shrouded in legend. According to local folklore, the cemetery was the final resting place of outcasts and criminals, individuals who were denied a peaceful afterlife. It's said that their spirits, restless and vengeful, cursed the land.