

The Heart of a Home  
by Kim Switzer

Stacey slowed and tugged Robin's sleeve. "There she is again. In that same window. She's always in that same window, like she's locked in that room. Like she's a prisoner."

"Or like that's her room so that's where she hangs out the most?" Robin tugged her sleeve free.

"No, that's not it." Stacey stopped at the gate and stared up at the woman in the window. She raised her hand and gave a small wave, and after a long pause the woman waved back.

"How do you know?" Robin asked. She stepped up to the gate beside Stacey and turned her back to the house, leaning against the tall, wrought iron bars.

"For one thing, that window is all the way at the top of the house. Who lives in an attic? And sometimes, there's an old, green car parked in the driveway. On those days, she ducks back out of the window really fast if she sees me looking, and one time I saw somebody pull her away from the window. Tell me that doesn't sound like a prisoner."

"She's not a prisoner," Robin answered. "Otherwise, why wouldn't she just leave when the green car guy isn't around?"

"She's probably locked in."

"Then why doesn't she just break a window and scream for help? Or signal someone. Like you. You said you see her all the time, and you've seen her looking at you. If she was a prisoner, why wouldn't she signal you for help?"

"I don't know," Stacey admitted. She looked back at the window. "She's still watching us."

"Maybe she's just a voyeur," Robin said.

The woman in the window looked over her shoulder, then twitched the lace panels aside and leaned toward the window until her forehead touched the glass. Her skin was pale and smooth, drawn tight over a wide forehead, wide cheekbones, and a pointed chin. Her silver hair was piled on top of her head in an elegant bun, and she wore a plain white blouse buttoned high at her neck.

"What's she doing?" Robin whispered, turning back to look up at the house.

Stacey stepped closer to the gate, putting one hand on the latch. "I think she's waving for us to come inside."

"No, she isn't."

"She's waving."

"She's probably just fixing the curtains or something."

Stacey met the woman's gaze. She touched her own chest and raised her eyebrows. "Do you want us

to come in?" she mouthed.

The woman in the window nodded vigorously and waved again.

"I'm not going in there," Robin said. "We don't know what's going on in there. We don't even know for sure she's alone. Just because there's no car in the driveway doesn't mean there isn't someone else in the house with her. And what if she's a crazy old lady with a giant knife, just waiting to lure someone in and stab them in the shower like in that Alfred Hitchcock movie we watched?"

"That was a crazy guy dressed up as an old lady," Stacey said, laughing. "And I wasn't planning to go in and take a shower. Besides, she looks like she's ninety if she's a day. I'm pretty sure I can outrun her."

"What if the green car guy comes back?"

"Fine," Stacey said. "You stay out here and stand watch. Whistle or something if you see anyone coming in" She eased the gate open just enough to squeeze through and pulled it closed behind her. "You should stand someplace inconspicuous. Hanging around here by the gate by yourself looks suspicious." She hurried toward the house and disappeared around the side.

Stacey slowed as she neared the rear of the house. She pressed herself against the faded blue siding and peered around the corner. When she was sure the yard was empty, she sprinted to the back door and tried the handle which turned easily under her hand.

With a deep breath, Stacey pushed the door open and stepped inside. She was in a large, old fashioned kitchen with worn, scrubbed wooden counters, white cabinets with the paint chipped and scarred at the edges, and a large trestle table in the middle of the room with no chairs around it.

Across from the door she had come in through was a swinging door. Stacey put her ear to it, listening for any movement on the other side, then she pushed through and entered a long dining room lined with floor to ceiling windows on one side. A huge chandelier with missing crystals hung over the center of the dust coated table. The cabinets along the wall opposite the window were empty and also coated in a thick layer of dust.

The next room was a parlor crowded with overstuffed, flowery sofas and doily covered side tables. Through the doorway, Stacey could see a marble floored foyer and a wide staircase leading upstairs. She crept to the foot of the steps and looked up.

"Hello?" she called. She winced as her voice filled the empty, silent space.

"Hello." A faint voice drifted down to her.

Stacey climbed the stairs and hurried down a long hallway lined with closed doors. At the far end was a narrower staircase. She stopped again and called out once more. "Hello? Are you up there?"

"Yes." The voice was louder now, high pitched and wavery.

Stacey ran up the narrow, uncarpeted stairs and found herself in another, narrower hallway also lined with closed doors. "Where are you?"

“Here”

Stacey followed the voice to a locked door at the end of the hall. “Can you unlock this door?” she called.

“I don't have the key,” the woman said. Her voice came from just on the other side of the door, but it still sounded weak and distant.

“Do you know where the key is?”

“He keeps it,” the woman said. “He keeps it with him.”

“Great,” Stacey muttered. She grasped the doorknob and rattled it in frustration. “Hey. The plate around this doorknob is loose. Hang on a minute.”

She ran back down to the kitchen and started pulling open drawers. Most of them were empty, but she found a few that had random kitchen items stuffed haphazardly inside. Dish towels, a few pot holders, mismatched serving pieces, a single set of eating utensils. She grabbed a rusty pair of scissors and the butter knife from the flatware and ran back up to the locked door.

“I'm going to try to pry this plate off the door,” she called. There was no answer. “Ma'am? Can you hear me? Are you all right?”

“Yes, I hear you. I'm fine. I just don't know how to thank you enough. I've been here for so long. I didn't think I would ever get out.”

“Don't worry,” Stacey said. “We won't leave you here.”

“We?”

“Yes, my friend is downstairs. She's standing watch in case the green car guy comes back.”

“What is your friend's name?”

“Robin. And I'm Stacey.” Stacey grunted and stumbled back as the scissors she had wedged under an edge of the doorknob plate broke.

“Are you all right?” the woman called from inside.

“Fine. I just broke the scissors I was using to try to get the door open. But I think I almost have it. Hold on one more minute.” She shoved the butter knife into the gap she had made and wiggled it back and forth, glad that it was an old fashioned, heavy knife. The ancient wood around the doorknob cracked under the pressure. Stacey pushed harder with the knife, the doorknob fell to the ground with a heavy thud.

Stacey yanked the door open and stood face to face with the woman from the window. Up close, Stacey could see lines around the woman's eyes and mouth and creases on her forehead, but she was still a beautiful woman. Her blue eyes were clear and sharp. She stared hard at Stacey for a moment, and then she smiled.

“Aren't you a fine, brave and strong young lady. So resourceful! At your age, I would have never had the courage to do what you just did. I thank you so much. I truly did think I was trapped here forever.”

“We're not out yet,” Stacey said. She held the door open and gestured toward the hallway. “We should leave before anyone comes back.”

The woman smiled again, kindly and sympathetic. “I'm afraid we won't be leaving.”

“What?” Stacey stared at her, shocked. “After all this, you don't want to leave?”

“Oh, I'll be leaving. But you won't. You see, every great house has a heart. Older houses, the kind made with wood and brick and stone, they have very strong hearts. And they can't stand without those hearts, just the way a person can't live without their heart. I've been the heart of this home for too long. When the people all left, I should have been allowed to fade away, and the house should have been left to fade away, too. But my descendents didn't want to let the house go. They couldn't afford to do what needed to be done to restore the house and give it a new heart, but my grandson, he figured out a way to keep me here and keep the house standing. And I admit, I wasn't yet ready to let this old place go. So I agreed to do what he needed, to stay here just until the house could be made grand again. But now it's my great-grandson keeping me here, and the house isn't being restored, and I'm trapped. Or I was.”

“What are you talking about?” Stacey demanded. She started backing away, but the old woman's hand darted out and grabbed her arm, her thin fingers and sharp nails digging in painfully.

“I'm talking about getting to leave this place. I made a bargain, and I cannot leave this house without a heart. You will be that heart, and I will finally be free.” The woman yanked Stacey further into the room and shoved her toward the window. “At least it's a lovely view, my dear.”

Stacey lunged for the door, but the old woman darted out into the hallway and slammed the door between them. Stacey shoved it with her shoulder, but the door held. As she watched, the knob settled into the hole she had pried it from, and the wood started to heal around it.

“Don't worry,” the old woman called through the door. “My grandson will bring you food and water and books. It's a safe, secure life. No harm will come to you. Goodbye, Stacey, and thank you again!”

Stacey heard footsteps hurrying away from the door. “Hey! Hey! Come back here! Let me out!” She pounded on the door and jerked at the knob, but it wouldn't budge.

She ran to the window, looking for Robin. She could just see the top of her head over the bushes that lined the inside of the fence. “Robin! Robin!” Stacey screamed as loudly as she could and pounded her hands against the window, but her friend never turned to look.

The old woman emerged from the side of the house. She looked up, smiled, and winked at Stacey. She strode toward the gate, her steps seeming to gain strength as she went. As Stacey watched, the old woman's form blurred and shimmered, and the old woman slowly morphed into an exact replica of Stacey herself. At the gate, the false Stacey turned once more toward the house, gave a jaunty wave, and then slipped through the gate and out into the world.