

The Real Santa

She had always known the old house held a secret, but that Christmas she was the last to find out what it was.

She knew *something* had happened there: a beautiful house rarely comes cheap. Despite recent renovation, it remained unsold for a year. Miranda took it the day she saw it. She wasn't superstitious about things like that. Besides, how else would she afford such a house for herself and her daughter?

It was Ellie's behaviour that made her think something might be wrong. When Miranda rolled out a rug beside the hearth, Ellie sighed with relief. Her mother looked at her, puzzled. Ellie just smiled, but she never walked on that rug.

She avoided the armchair, too. Miranda sat there to read, but often she looked up and caught Ellie staring at the space above her. Ellie might've been daydreaming, if it weren't for the serious expression. Still, Miranda attributed it to quirkiness and thought little of it.

Then the children started to call. Just a couple at first, while Christmas was a few weeks away, but then several of them every night as the holiday got closer. They always asked the same questions:

"Where's the real Santa? Doesn't he live here anymore? Well, how am I gonna get what I want for Christmas?"

Miranda indulged the first ones, thinking it was cute, though she found it less cute when they left disgruntled. She took to answering the door with the words: "It's late, it's dark, and you're very little – maybe you should go home and write him a letter instead."

They scoffed when she advised them to go and see Santa at the grotto in the shopping centre. *That's not the real one*, they told her. The *real* one would guarantee they'd get what they wanted.

She wondered if this "real Santa" had something to do with whatever had befallen the house in the past – maybe he was some creep who lured children in with presents – but she dismissed the idea. Why would children keep coming if it was something like that?

The curious thing was, the more children that called, the more anxious Ellie became. She said she wished they'd stop coming. Miranda worried that Ellie wasn't settling in well at school. She asked her if the other kids were bullies, but Ellie said no.

When Miranda asked her daughter if she'd decided what she wanted Santa to bring *her*, Ellie's eyes widened with fear rather than childish joy.

"I don't mind," she said, making her voice steady and clear as though she were rehearsing something, "y'know, I'd be happy if I got nothing."

Miranda felt guilty. She'd explained, after Ellie's dad left, that they wouldn't have as much money for holidays and treats. It was hard, with no family to help, to provide for Ellie in the way she wanted, although she'd endeavoured not to make her miss out. But a seven-year-old trying to be stoical about Christmas just wasn't right.

Miranda bought a tree and decked it with baubles. It was earlier than she'd normally bother, but it would be a surprise for Ellie.

When Ellie saw it, she cried.

"What's the matter? Don't you like it?"

"It's pretty," Ellie sobbed, "but...Christmas is really coming, isn't it?"

"Yes. Isn't it exciting?"

Perhaps the child was *over*-excited, Miranda thought. And it wouldn't be unreasonable for her to miss her dad more at this time of year, either.

When she moved in, the neighbours avoided Miranda. She hardly noticed, occupied with unpacking and the busy life of a working mum. But, as Christmas drew closer, and because she had met so many of the children, she invited the parents of Ellie's classmates over for mulled wine and mince pies.

Her guests were too distracted looking around her living room to be cheerful company.

They weren't admiring the Christmas lights and the open fire. They were imagining what the room had seen before, as though past events had left an imprint that was visible beneath the fresh décor and simple furniture.

Miranda was glad for the excuse to leave the room when the doorbell rang. It was a little boy, asking for the real Santa. Miranda was explaining, for the thirtieth time, that he wasn't there when Ellie came downstairs. She was in pyjamas; Miranda had put her to bed before the guests came. She crept to the door and said "Ssh! Go home. He'll hear you."

Miranda looked at Ellie. "Who'll hear him, love?"

"Santa!" Ellie whispered.

"So he's here!" the boy cried. "It's true, he's still here!"

At the boy's excited voice, one of the mothers rushed into the hallway to recognise her son.

"Matthew! What are you doing here?" she said, her face ashen. "I told you never to come up to this house. You should be in bed. What happened to the babysitter?"

"I came...to see..." the boy said, then stopped and looked at his slippers, muddy around the edges. Miranda couldn't be sure that little Matthew was merely trying to mitigate the trouble he was in when he added: "I don't remember."

The mother picked up her boy, though he was really too big to be carried, and Miranda noticed tears in her eyes. "It's happening again," she muttered, as she scuttled down the drive.

Once Ellie had gone back to bed, Miranda explained to her remaining guests about the hurried departure of one of their number, and they told her about the house. In hushed voices, as though confessing to murder themselves, they told Miranda that it had been empty for years before a property developer bought and renovated it. Fifteen years earlier, a young father murdered his son on Christmas morning before committing suicide. Opinion was divided on whether the house had been haunted or whether someone else was responsible, but children from the village disappeared and turned up dead there. Over the past fifteen Christmases, the bodies of ten children had been discovered. There were investigations: forensics, experts, everything. No culprit was found.

Miranda believed that the past stayed where it was and that there was nothing to worry about. But she wondered why Ellie was keen to keep other children away: had she heard something at school? It was best to tell her the facts and hope that the truth, though distressing initially, would stem any silly fears. She chose Christmas Eve to do it, since she could distract Ellie with the coming festivities if she got upset.

"I don't know what you heard about the man who used to live here, Ellie, but I want to tell you something about him. Now, it's nothing to be frightened of, but he died in this house years ago."

"I know," said Ellie. "And not just a man; a boy too."

"Did you hear that at school?"

"No. *He* told me," she said, pointing to the rug on the hearth. There was no one there.

"You can see the boy?" Miranda asked.

Ellie nodded.

"Did he tell you what happened to him?"

"He came downstairs on Christmas morning and saw his daddy putting a present in his stocking, so he said 'hey, you're not the real Santa!' and his daddy told him that Santa's not real and that, now he knew, he might as well have his present. The boy opened it, but it wasn't what he asked for and he was sad. He knew it was naughty to cry, because he and his daddy were like you and me. They didn't have family to help them at Christmas."

"What happened then?"

"His daddy went crazy and put the boy's stocking over his head until he turned blue and died. There, on the rug." She gazed at the spot above the armchair. "Then he strangled himself on the Christmas lights because he knew he was in trouble."

"That's a terrible story," said Miranda, cuddling Ellie closer. "Is that why you've been upset about Christmas? Because, whatever happened here before, I would never do anything to hurt *you*."

"I know, Mum. It's not that."

“What is it?”

Ellie looked from the rug to her mother and back again.

“He’s lonely – that’s why he says he’s the real Santa. Children like Santa, especially if he gets them what they want for Christmas.”

“But how does he do that?”

“He doesn’t – that’s his secret. Most kids’ parents get them whatever they want anyway, but they think it was the real Santa that did it. It’s the ones who come back...the ones who complain like him...they’re the ones he kills. And if he finds out I’ve been warning them, he’ll kill me!”

She looked over her shoulder at the hearth rug. Her empty stocking was crumpled on the floor under the Christmas tree.

“Pack a bag, Ellie,” Miranda said, scooping her daughter off the sofa and pushing her towards the stairs. “We’re going to a hotel for Christmas. We’ll find the money somehow.”