

Janie walked out of the old, red schoolhouse in the middle of Snowy Wood, which is in the middle of the Colorado Rockies. Feathery flakes drifted down from the gray, cloudy sky. "Abigail, Abigail," she called loudly to her cousin. At last she had the reward of seeing Abigail turn around from a group of girls who were happily chatting away and tapping iPhones.

Janie hugged her cousin. "I hate when you talk with those girls, Abigail. You know how they are always cutting people down. They will never keep a secret for anyone."

Abigail looked a little crestfallen. She replied, "Well, Janie, I just can't stand to be away from a good talk. Otherwise, it isn't the same without me." Janie had to agree with this, as Abigail was a friendly and happy girl, and no party felt quite complete without her.

Abigail glanced at her cousin's leg, bandaged around the ankle. "How's your leg?"

Janie grimaced, "I can't run for a month. Can you imagine? No football or ice hockey. Blast that darn door scraper!"

Abigail giggled, "Well, maybe if you hadn't been trying to juggle three snowballs and balance a soccer ball on your head, then you would have seen the door scraper when you knocked."

Janie laughed ruefully, "Oh well, I guess I'll just have to put up with limping."

Abigail looked at her watch and sighed, "Uncle Joe has forgotten to pick us up again. Now we'll have to walk home, and in the middle of winter too."

Janie groaned, "My ankle will not like that. Great."

The two cousins looked nothing alike. Abigail was slender, with rosy cheeks, golden hair, a white face that could never tan, and laughing blue eyes. She was full of good-will and friendly, and she could never hold a grudge. Janie was almost her exact opposite, with wavy black hair bluntly cut, broad shoulders, and stormy gray eyes that made people in the street nudge each other and say,

"Now there's a bad one. I wouldn't like to be in the way of her temper. She would be up for something bad." They were right and wrong. Janie had a quick temper that was apt to flare up. However, Janie was honest and loyal. She would never tell a lie or be mean to a friend.

Abigail and Janie walked down a mountain path that was quickly becoming covered with snow. Janie limped and gritted her teeth but made good progress. Suddenly, she tripped and fell over a rock, half hidden by the thick snowflakes.

"Ouch!" she cried.

Abigail stopped and knelt down. "Are you hurt?" she anxiously asked.

"No, but I don't think that I can make it home." Poor Abigail didn't know what to do. Janie obviously couldn't walk without a crutch. It would take several hours to get to the nearest house.

Through the thick, white blanket of snow, they both saw a figure approaching. The figure slowly clarified into that of an old lady carrying a basket. When she saw Abigail and Janie sitting on the road, she stopped suddenly.

"What are you two doing out in the snow?" she asked.

"My cousin fell and broke her ankle," said Abigail cautiously. "We were walking home to our house." Even though she was a friendly girl, the woman was a stranger.

"Where's your house?" the old lady asked.

"Corona Farm." The old lady suddenly turned pale. She turned abruptly, and she walked away as quickly as she came. Soon, she disappeared into the sheet of snow.

"Why did she walk away?" asked Janie, rubbing her ankle.

"I don't know," said Abigail, looking puzzled. "Maybe there's some bad history connected with the farm."

Janie promptly retorted, "If so, I never heard of it. Old Aunt Susie and Uncle Joe would have told us." The girls lived with their aunt and uncle, whom they thought of as the most ancient and kind people on the face of the earth. Janie

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especially loved to sit at the foot of Uncle's old rocking chair, listening to stories

of fairies, elves, and gremlins. Uncle Joe got along with everyone except an older sister that nobody had seen for years, and Aunt Susie could bake the best gingerbread in the world.

The cousins were still thinking about the strange encounter when the old woman reappeared, this time holding a cane. She thrust it out at Janie.

"Uh, thanks?" said Janie quizzically, studying the old, battered cane that was elaborately decorated, topped with a carving of a grimacing human head. The woman did not reply. Instead, she silently hobbled away.

A few minutes later, they saw a pair of headlights advancing slowly on the road towards them. Uncle Joe's truck materialized, and he jumped out. Abigail ran into his arms. She then dragged him by the arm to her cousin, sitting immobilized in the road.

"I was worried about you two," he said, hugging them tightly. They drove back to Corona Farm.

When the girls got home, they received hot chocolate and hugs from Aunt Susie. When she saw the cane, she stared at it fixedly. Nothing more was said about the old lady, but the cane was carefully stowed in the attic.

One rainy day, Abigail and Janie were poking around in the attic. Bored, they searched through the old cardboard boxes to see if there was any interesting family history. They were about to go downstairs, when a small box caught Abigail's eye. A key was tied to the box tightly. They soon opened it and discovered an old diary, with the name Violet Hawkins inside the front cover.

*September 18, 1947*

*Dear Diary, I am so excited! I got my first job today. I am to be a flower girl, high up above the stage on a trapeze, and throw flowers to the audience. I can't wait! Aunt Louisa says that I will fall and break my neck, but I don't care what Aunt Louisa says. I don't want to be like her when I am old. She has such ugly,*

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*crooked teeth and a hunched back.*

*September 20, 1947*

*Today I noticed a young man watching me. He walked up to me after the show and said 'May I see you home?' It was so romantic! He showed me a photo of me, high up on the trapeze. His name is Ron, and his father owns a big company that sells coal.*

*September 26, 1947*

*I hurt my foot today while I was walking in the park with Ron. He gave me an old cane, and on top is a totem from Africa. It is very intricate woodwork, and I like it very much.*

*October 29, 1947*

*I'm in love! Ron proposed to me today and says we will be married when the birds begin to sing. That means the spring! He says that is proper because violets bloom in the spring, and that is my name.*

*October 30, 1947*

*My brother Joe doesn't approve of my engagement. I told him that he shouldn't be talking, with him married already. He flew into a temper, and now the family is ignoring me. I don't care! When Ron and I get married, we will live in a mansion, and its name shall be Shell Brook.*

*November 1, 1947*

*Ron says he has to go away for a while on a trip for his father's company to check the coal mines. I'm so worried for him! He has to go on a train, and trains sometimes get held up by bandits and then everyone is killed.....*

*November 5, 1947*

*Still no word from Ron.*

*November 12, 1947*

*Still no word.*

*November 19, 1947*

*His train is listed as being held up by bandits in Virginia! Oh, please, please,*

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*please let him be all right!*

*November 20, 1947*

*It's my birthday, but I have no appetite. My cake tasted like cardboard, and I*

*couldn't swallow it.*

*November 23, 1947*

*The train has pulled into the station, with only one casualty. Whoever died was a young man.....*

*November 25, 1947*

*The newspapers were full of the heroic deed that a young man performed on Ron's train. He attacked the bandits, but one of them shot him in the head. Stirred by his brave actions, the rest of the train revolted and the bandits were conquered. And the hero was Ron! They found a photo of me in his pocket.*

*But Ron is gone. I wish he wasn't so heroic.*

At the back, Abigail and Janie found three photos. One had many creases, as if it had been in a pocket for a long time. It was a photo of a girl on a high trapeze, laughing as she threw flowers to the audience. Another was a photo of Uncle Joe and the old lady, laughing and both looking many years younger. And the final one was of a handsome young man and the flower girl, beaming happily at the camera. And in the flower girl's hand, they saw the cane that she had given Janie.

Abigail and Janie solemnly locked the trunk and went back downstairs. When they went came down from the attic they saw Uncle Joe reading a book.

Janie nudged Abigail, "Wasn't that a picture of Uncle Joe with that girl?"

"Yeah," Abigail replied hesitantly.

"Maybe that old lady was the one in the diary! She could be Uncle Joe's older sister!" Janie whispered with mounting excitement.

"You ask him," said Abigail. "I'm too shy."

Janie boldly stepped up to Uncle Joe and asked in one breathless jumble,

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"is the girl who wrote that diary upstairs in the attic the same person as the old lady who we met on the road?"

Uncle Joe looked up from his book with considerable surprise. "Where did you find that diary?" he asked.

"In the attic," said Janie breathlessly, "and is it true?"

"Yes," Uncle Joe replied somberly. Janie and Abigail were astonished. They huddled near his chair, like they used to do when listening to stories. Several minutes seemed to pass in silence.

Uncle Joe sighed. "After Ron died in the train accident, Violet moved back near Corona Farm. I saw her picking out groceries twenty years ago. I just went right up to her and asked her to start talking to us again. She looked at me coldly and walked away. Now she comes to town once a week for food, never talking to anybody except for the market people."

"Where does she get the money to buy groceries?" Janie asked.

"Ron wrote a new will when he proposed to her, giving more than three hundred thousand dollars' worth of things to Violet upon his death that he got from his father's company. She used part of it to buy a little cottage called Shell Brook in the middle of Snowy Wood. The rest she uses to buy groceries. She lives like a hermit."

Uncle Joe raised his book up again, ending the conversation. The girls noticed his eyes were very bright.

Abigail and Janie reverently took the cane down from the attic and put it in their room that they shared.

A few months later, a small obituary appeared in the paper stating that Violet Hawkins, aged ninety-five years, had died. She had wanted to have her remains cremated and her cottage burned with her remains. Janie and Abigail searched for the ashes of the cottage, but they never found them.