

Ella's Attic

The wooden slats creaked and groaned as Phineas gingerly eased his weight onto the old steamer trunk. The late afternoon light painted the room in shades of fire, and every crate and armoire cast an elongated shadow, creating a smudged city scape that slowly edged sideways across the floor.

Phin sipped his cold take-out coffee as he sat and watched Penny roam the attic. She poked her head into a square opening next to the chimney and pulled it out again quickly. She slid a panel into place to cover the hole, which left it barely discernible from the rest of the wall.

Penny had been nervous about coming into Ella's house. She'd twitched at every unexpected sound as they'd packed up the place. She had only reluctantly climbed the ladder into the attic after Phin had gone up and left her alone downstairs.

"I wonder if Eric had been selling Ella's valuables." Phin said.

"That weasel probably sold everything he could get his hands on."

"At least it makes it easier for us to know what's worth keeping."

"How about this?" Penny asked. She pulled a fur coat from a box and slipped her arms into the sleeves. She slapped the front of the coat and coughed as great billows of dust rose from the fur.

Phin snorted laughter. "I was hoping more for something my great-uncle might have left about the crystal." He gestured to the boxes they'd stacked near the trap door in the floor. "It's all junk. Busted top hats and mouldy black capes. Not a single letter or diary. I mean, who keeps boxes of musty fake flower bouquets and broken bird cages?"

“If there was anything in this house about that stupid crystal, Eric would have found it. That guy was obsessed.” Penny shivered and took off the fur, tossing it into a box and causing another dust cloud.

“If Eric had found anything about that stupid crystal he wouldn’t have sent you to Cricket Lake.”

“At least he missed Ella’s safe or you’d never have gotten this house.”

It was Phin’s turn to shiver, and he stood abruptly. It was the second time in only a year that a woman had died violently and left Phin as heir to all her worldly possessions. The last thing he’d wanted was another house filled with an old woman’s mementoes, faded furniture covered in doilies, and far more towels than any one person could ever use.

A realtor had come around to appraise it. Phin said to sell it fast, and that he wasn’t interested in haggling over price. He’d empty it and have a cleaning service prep it for showing within a week. The realtor had sent a local charity and their large truck. They’d filled it with all the furniture from Ella’s house. They’d also taken away countless boxes of dishes, and bags of clothing and linens.

Phin and Penny had boxed up the dozens of framed photos that covered the walls, along with several albums of family photos they’d found on a shelf in Ella’s bedroom closet. Phin hoped that Mabel might recognize some of the faces and help him piece together his past.

“Not much left here, just this trunk and those two boxes.” He opened the trunk, which was half-filled with old newspapers and show posters that were yellowed and crumbling at the edges. They all featured the Great Nico. The corner

of Phin's mouth twitched upward. He'd discovered a family he'd never known he'd had, and they were all dead. Phin put the posters aside to take home.

The rest of the trunk held a pile of old running shoes and a stack of t-shirts. He shook out one of the shirts. The front was covered in rows of faint symbols.

"These look like some kind of Viking runes," he called to Penny.

She whirled to face him and her mouth dropped open at the sight of the shirt. Her cheeks flushed a bright pink and she snatched it out of his hands and escaped down the ladder to the main floor.

Phin's eyebrows rose and he shrugged. He reached into the trunk for the rest of the stack. Mabel said to keep an eye out for souvenir t-shirts. He wondered how she'd known they'd be here.