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BELOW



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HOLIDAY HOUSE  NEW YORK

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Printed and bound in TK at TK.

www.holidayhouse.com

First Edition

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data TK

For Marie, who is remembered



Baker and I peeked between the curtains and watched our grandmother’s bright red sports car speed to the end of the driveway and turn left onto the road. When it disappeared behind the trees, we raced down the basement stairs and crawled underneath the table we’d walled off with jumbo cases of toilet paper: Disaster Headquarters.

Grim Hesper had said she’d be back after her celebration, so we needed to get to work. Baker squeezed beside me as I flipped my laptop open, clicked Compose, and filled in the subject line.

I took a deep breath and began to type.

Dear Aunt Tilly,

We know you’re working on your new project, and we’re sorry for the kabillion phone messages and texts and emails, but the most terrible thing happened, and we need you home NOW.

Twelve days ago Great-Grammy keeled over—and died!

It started back in March, when she fainted in the yard.

Baker leaned into my shoulder. “Rosie, what are you doing, writing a book? Just hit Send already.”

“I will,” I said, nudging him off me.

“We have to search Grim Hesper’s room for the lockbox! *Please*, don’t make me go in there alone.”

At this point I’d usually call him a baby, but I was trying not to do that anymore.

“Don’t you get it?” I said instead. “We have to stay at the top of Aunt Tilly’s inboxes so when she checks her messages she’ll see ours first. I bet the email you sent yesterday is buried under a hundred more from people all over the world.”

Baker rose onto his hands with a huff. “*You’re* the one who told me to keep it simple. You said put EMERGENCY in the subject line, and then tell her Great-Grammy’s sick and she needs to come home. ‘*That’s it,*’ you said. And what about never *ever* saying Great-Grammy’s dead in actual writing? We’re going to end up in jail. Again!”

“We were never in jail, Baker.”

“I was six feet from a jail cell, Rosie, and there were handcuffed people everywhere. For eleven years old, that qualifies.” Baker stabbed his finger at the screen. “At least take ‘Great-Grammy’s Dead!’ out of the subject line.”

I cranked my head and met his eyes. “She *is* DEAD!”

I didn’t mean to shout. I’d been working very hard at *not* shouting, or calling names, or being difficult. The things that probably made Great-Grammy miserable—and disappointed—when she was alive.

I counted to five and started again in a lower voice. “Sick is not the same as dead. *Dead* gets a person’s attention. That’s what we’re trying to do: get Aunt Tilly’s attention!”

Baker rolled on his side to face me. “You know what happens when she goes underground to research her books.”

“She promised Great-Grammy she would check her messages this time.”

Baker shook his head. “Aunt Tilly doesn’t visit places with phones and Internet. Remember when she went camping in Iceland? In *winter*? She disappeared for three months. Great-Grammy was worried sick.”

“How else was she supposed to get those pictures of the northern lights?”

Baker might have been the brainy one in our family, but I was older, and I had a good reason for being bossy. Even if Aunt Tilly was living in some sort of laboratory base station at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, this email was our last chance.

We needed our aunt’s help. Horrible Hesper was *her* mother, after all.

I hunched over the keyboard and kept writing.

Aunt Tilly, it’s time to tell the truth. We’ve done something worse than bad, but we have a very good reason. See, Great-Grammy told us to do it. And she put it in writing! It was practically her last will and testament, and isn’t it pretty much a commandment that you have to do what dead people want you to do? Especially with their bodies?

Baker mashed his face into the blanket underneath us and groaned. Then he got to his knees and heaved a frustrated sigh. “You’re really

going to tell her all of it? That Grim Hesper's living here and she's selling this place, and it's about three inches away from being bulldozed? And about the money, and the will, and the reason those things are important: because Great-Grammy's—?"

I propped up on my elbows and glared straight into his eyeballs. "Yes. Because she's D-E-A-D, Baker. *Dead.*"

Baker cringed, then slowly backed out of our "office." For a second I felt guilty. Maybe I should have been helping Baker. But our aunt had to come home. Even *she* would be shocked by how despicable *dear* Grim Hesper had become.

I turned back to the keyboard. Letter by letter, I typed the impossible-to-believe words:

Aunt Tilly, I better get to the point:

We put Great-Grammy in the basement freezer, and we're pretending she's alive until you come home.

But like I said, we have a very good reason.