

PROLOGUE

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Anything Scott knew about his grandfather started with a whisper from his older cousin.

“I have a secret,” Deirdre said, leaning in close to his ear. “David told me.”

“What is it?” Scott asked.

They were at his grandmother’s house for Easter. Exactly when he couldn’t remember, but they were teenagers. They’d been out back weeding their grandmother’s flower garden for a few hours in the afternoon, and decided to take a break and walk around the block.

“You can’t tell anyone,” she said as they approached the sidewalk and got further away from everyone in the house. “You have to swear.”

“I swear.”

They continued down the sidewalk for a while without speaking.

“You know how no one talks about our grandfather?”

“My mom’s dad? Your dad’s dad?” Scott asked to help keep it straight. He had no mental picture or reference for his grandfather. Deirdre’s question took him by surprise. “Yes. It’s weird. We know nothing about him.”

“Because he killed himself.”

Scott suddenly tensed and stopped walking. He looked at Deirdre.

“How do you know?”

“My dad told David,” she said. “Think about it. Grandma was always alone. Grandpa was never mentioned. We don’t even get to see pictures. No one wants to remember him. Like they’re hiding something. It makes sense.”

In a scary way, it *did* make sense.

“Did your brother say what happened?” Scott asked.

“Not exactly. But something about the basement and maybe a belt. I think that’s what he found out. I’m afraid to ask more. Don’t tell anyone I told you.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

They continued walking. Scott listened as Deirdre changed the subject and made a joke, but he couldn’t concentrate. The secret unnerved him. Why had his parents never told him?

Years would pass before they ever mentioned it to each other again. They lived in different states, and after this visit, would only see each other a few times as they grew older. They lived separate lives, and communications between Scott and his relatives were formal, measured and infrequent. Scott’s mother, Ava, had kept tight control of family interactions with them.

Even now as a full-grown man, Scott felt the act of searching the Internet for details of his grandfather’s death was an act of disobedience. Ava would see it as an invasion and forbid it. Scott felt nervous as he researched his book and found a listing in the Death Indexes of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission website.

He searched via his mother’s maiden name, and deduced the year of his grandfather’s death from the date of his mother’s birth. It was an unusual detail, and the one piece of information he actually knew: Scott’s grandfather killed himself before Ava was born.

Scott finally learned his grandfather’s first name. It matched his uncle’s, but Scott had never made the connection. Now it made sense because eldest sons were often namesakes.

Scott was excited by his discovery, salvaged from more than seven decades, recorded in pixels for eternity: A first and last name (Dimitri Adamov),

his age at time of death (35), and date of his passing (July 8, 1938) — exactly three months and twelve days before Ava’s birth.

The story was true. He’d uncovered the proof.

Scott surmised he was the only living member of the extended family to know the age of his grandfather when he killed himself. It was a much younger age than he had imagined.

How could it have happened? It was an impenetrable secret. And like most horrific tragedies, it was better to forget and move forward in an attempt to heal than to recount or discuss in an attempt to find meaning. There was no meaning. Nothing good or comforting could be said. No lesson or wisdom could be gleaned from its exploration, only pain and damage.

And so no one talked about it.

And the ghost crept in unnoticed.