

## Harvest

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

\*1\*

\_Time to plant tears,\_ said the almanac, and so Kerry took the bucket she had carefully stored away at the back of the cupboard and went into the darkened bedroom. She took out each tear -- perfectly formed, perfectly remembered, perfectly stored -- cupped her hand around it so that the light from the hallway wouldn't catch the drop, and gently, ever so gently, tucked each tear in the fertile heart of the sleeping child.

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Steam beaded the wallpaper. Amanda shut off the burner and moved the whistling teakettle. The morning was cold and gray. She felt chilled even though it was the beginning of summer. She set a tea bag in the mug Daniel had given her for her thirtieth birthday, and poured the water. Steam rose, fogging her glasses. She took them off, leaving the world a blur of greens and grays, grabbed a towel, and wiped the lenses. When she put her glasses back on, she saw that the tea bag had already stained the liquid brown.

She picked up the mug, happy for its warmth against her cold hands. Then she leaned against the refrigerator and sighed. She hated mornings like this. A stack of orders waited for her in her workroom, and she barely had enough energy to make a cup of tea. Part of the problem was the grayness. It oppressed her, brought out buried aches and pains. How could she sew when her hands were tight with cold, when the artificial light clashed with the darkness of a cloudy morning, making her stitches nearly impossible to see?

She made herself cross the living room into the workroom. Half-finished clothes lined the walls. The dress for Missy Anderson's wedding, still lacking a hem; the shirt for Carleton Meyer with the intricate hand-stitching undone; the pile of fabric that should already have been skirts for the high school's swing choir -- all faced her like an accusation. The problem was the quilt that lay half-finished on the cluttered deacon's bench, the quilt that Amanda wanted to give Grandmother Kerry on her birthday only a week away.

Quilts were Amanda's specialty, but no one wanted quilts anymore. It was easier and cheaper to buy mass-produced things at the department stores down at the mall. Custom-made quilts were a luxury, like custom-made clothes, but for some reason people were willing to spend the money on a dress that they would use once rather than on a quilt that would cover their bed for the next fifty years.

Amanda looked at the projects hanging on the wall, and then at the others stacked in her workbasket. She set her teacup down on the end table covered with pins and patterns, then grabbed the stack of swing choir skirts. They would take her half a day if she set her mind to the work.

She moved her worktable over, picked up the bolt of fabric, and laid it on the floor. The dark green velvet seemed ostentatious for a high school group, but they had chosen it. She smoothed out the first segment, measured to see if she had the correct amount, and cut off the end of the fabric. Then she grabbed the pattern and pulled the tightly wrapped tissue pieces out of their paper folder.

Carefully, Amanda smoothed the tissue over the material. The thin paper crinkled as she worked. She checked knaps and widths, making sure that everything lined up properly, so that the skirt would be as beautiful as possible. Then she pinned the tissue to the velvet, shoving the slender silver pins in with a force unnecessary to her task. She pinched the fabric tightly, and shoved. The third pin went straight through both layers of velvet, shot across the tissue, and dug deep into the index finger of her left hand.

Amanda stared at the pin jutting out of her finger. Then the pain announced itself in a hard, burning jab. She pulled her finger away, squeezed the injured area, and watched the blood well into a tiny, tear-shaped drop. She put the fingertip in her mouth. It tasted of salt and iron.

A small smear of blood stained the green velvet. Tears rose in her eyes. She couldn't do anything right. She knew that she had to move quickly to make sure that the bloodstain wouldn't be permanent, but she remained still, sitting like a child, one finger in her mouth, and knees tucked under her body until her tears slowly slid back into the tear ducts where they belonged.

\*3\*

The clock in the dining room chimed midnight as Daniel unlocked the door and stepped in. The house felt heavy and oppressive in the dark. He flicked on the switch, and the soft lights scattered across the room, leaving corners filled with shadows. Amanda's tea mug sat on the floor beside the couch. A book, face down, leaned against the mug. A pillow, still bearing Amanda's headprint, had been crushed into the corner of the couch, and on the other end, a quilt had been thrown messily back.

He felt a twinge of guilt. Amanda had waited up for him and then, when she could wait no longer, had stumbled off to bed. He knew how he would find her, curled up like a child, fist against her face, hair sprawled against the pillow. He sighed. He lost track of time so easily, forgetting that she was here, waiting for him. And he found things that made it easy to forget. He hadn't needed that drink after work with Rich. Or to meet Margot for dinner. They could have discussed the Johnson account at the office, with a desk between them, instead of sitting hip to hip in Harper's while soft jazz echoed in the background.

Daniel left Amanda's mess -- he had long ago stopped picking up after her -- and went into the kitchen. She had left the light above the stove on for him, like she always did.

On the wall beside the teakettle, water beaded. As he watched, one droplet slowly ran down and fell onto the oven's smooth metal surface. She had to stop facing that kettle toward the wall. The steam would ruin the wallpaper. He grabbed a paper towel and wiped the water away. Then he shut off the stove light and headed to bed.

The bedroom was dim, but not completely dark. Amanda had left the bathroom light on as well, and it fell softly across the bed, illuminating her slender form. She was curled up on her right side, one hand stretched across his pillow. The quilt had fallen off her shoulder, revealing soft skin and one well-formed breast.

He grabbed the knot of his tie, slipped it down, and slid the tie from his neck. Then he took off his clothes and carefully folded them, setting them on the rocking chair beneath the shaded windows. As he crawled into bed, he picked up her hand and ran it down his body, setting it on his groin so that as she awakened she could feel his arousal.

"Amanda," he said softly.

She stirred. He caressed her, touched every part of her, and then slipped inside of her. She didn't wake up until her first orgasm and then she cried, "Daniel!" as if he had surprised her. He buried his face in her shoulder, smelling the musky scent of her. He grabbed her waist, rolled over onto his side, holding them together so that they faced each other and let sleep drift through his body. The bathroom light shone in his eyes, but he didn't care. Amanda stirred, awake now, and he thought he felt a shudder run through her, like a sob. But when he reached up to touch her cheek, the skin was smooth, soft, and dry.

\*4\*

Amanda set the tea tray down on the coffee table. She picked up the porcelain teapot and poured. The thin liquid filled the fragile cup. Carefully, she handed the cup to her grandmother, then poured another cup. Kerry seemed frail and tired that morning, but as strong as ever. She wore a dainty summer dress of pale pink and kept her lacy off-white shawl about her shoulders.

Amanda sighed and settled back into the armchair. The rain pattered outside, dousing everything in grayness. Kerry reached over and wiped a bead of water from the teapot. Since she had arrived, she had wiped water off the wall in the kitchen, the bathroom, even the foyer where the swing choir skirts hung, waiting for the director to pick them up.

"I don't know what it is, Grandma," Amanda said. "I think it's the rain causing the dampness in the house."

Kerry shook her head. "The house is well-sealed," she said. "It's time you had children, Amanda."

Amanda looked up sharply. The non sequitur surprised her. Kerry had never said a word about children before. "I don't have time for children."

"You need them." Kerry set down her teacup. She squirmed uncomfortably, wiped another water bead off the wall, and frowned. "I can't sit here any longer. I have to go home, Amanda."

Amanda set her own teacup down, feeling a sense of panic build in the pit of her stomach. Her grandmother was in her eighties. Perhaps something had happened to her to make her so vague, something Amanda hadn't known about. "You all right, Grandma?"

Kerry leaned heavily on her cane as she got to her feet. "I'll be fine once I get home. You just remember what I said."

Amanda grabbed a sweater, wrapped it around her shoulders, and walked her grandmother to the door. Though it had stopped raining, Amanda asked, "You going to be okay walking home, Grandma?"

Kerry nodded. "It is only a block, Amanda. I haven't fallen apart yet."

Amanda smiled. Her grandmother was feisty even when she was vague. Amanda went out onto the porch and watched as Kerry made her way down the sidewalk. Two houses down, she stopped, turned, and looked at Amanda. "You'll have my birthday?"

"I won't miss it," Amanda said. Her grandmother kept walking, slowly, toward her own home. Amanda frowned. The discussion had bothered her. For the first time, her grandmother had seemed unfocused, slightly out of touch. But she was getting older. And in some ways, loss was inevitable. Or at least, that was what Daniel would say.

Daniel. Amanda grabbed the porch door and let herself back inside. He had left before she was up that morning. She rarely saw him anymore. Supposedly they spent weekends together, but he usually went off to play golf with clients or back to the office to work. He was a workaholic, a man who barely had time enough for his own wife. And her grandmother wanted Amanda to have children with him. Children were a partnership, a joint gift that a couple gave each other. If she had children now, she would merely be taking, for herself.

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Kerry closed the door. Her house smelled like flowers and lemon furniture polish, not damp like Amanda's had. All the water on the walls, threatening to break through, and Amanda living there, working there, every day. Kerry made her way to the book on the shelf beside the stove. She picked it

up, rubbing her hands across its worn leather cover before thumbing past the ripped and stained pages to the last page with writing on it, the page that had been blank the day before. She knew what she would find.

\_Time to plant tears,\_ the almanac said.

Kerry closed the almanac and set it back on the shelf. Then she stared at the cupboard where her bucket was hidden, had been hidden for thirty years since Amanda's mother had used it months before her death. The bucket was dry and empty. Poor Amanda, Kerry thought as a wave of guilt twisted through her stomach. In some ways it was already too late. Amanda didn't want children, that was clear, and if she didn't have any, the water would burst through the walls and engulf her. Amanda would drown beneath the weight of her family's accumulated sorrows.

Kerry remembered her own grandmother explaining the process. \_Children are stronger. They can carry the pain with ease -- and pass it on when the pain grows too much for them.\_

It sounded so simple, except when someone wanted to take the pain back. Kerry was old. She could die and take all those hurts with her. But she knew that she could never reclaim her gift of tears; her grandmother had told her that it was impossible.

So she would take the only other solution, the only other way she could help her beloved Amanda, even though it would cost them some of their family heritage. Kerry opened the almanac to the first page and ran down the list of names until she found Steiger's. Steiger would hold the water at bay until Amanda decided to have children. He had done it before.

\*6\*

Amanda was finishing the hand stitching on Carleton Meyer's shirt while the radio blared a talk show. The topic, apparently planned weeks in advance, was how to keep cool in the summer heat. Callers reminded the poor host that the only heat they had felt so far had been from furnaces running to protect them from the chill outdoor damp.

The shirt was lovely. The stitching gave it an elegant, western look that would accent Carleton's appearance rather than detract from it. Three new projects sat on her worktable, waiting for her to start them. And the quilt pieces still lay on the deacon's bench, silently reproaching her. Her grandmother's birthday was only two days away. Amanda had nothing else to give her.

A firm rap on the front door brought her attention away from the shirt. A woman's voice echoed from the radio, suggesting dry ice in the bathtub as the best cure for the summer doldrums. Amanda gripped the ribbed dial and turned off the radio as she walked to the entrance.

The man standing on her porch was not a client. She could tell that immediately. He wore sturdy Levis and a workshirt under his rain gear. Water dripped from the brim of his hat onto the dry concrete under the overhang. She pulled open the door and adopted her best anti-salesman pose.

"Name's Steiger, ma'am." He handed her his business card. "I do house care. Been going door to door in this wet weather, asking folks if they're having troubles with mildew and damp."

Amanda frowned. She saw his truck parked near the curb. It was large and white, with STEIGER'S painted in blue along the cab. Underneath was a phone number and a slogan: SPECIALIZING IN LOST DREAMS AND MEMORIES. She glanced down at the card. The same phrase ran along the bottom. She pointed to it.

"What's that mean?"

Steiger grinned. He had a solid face, rather ordinary. She thought that if she had to describe it to Daniel, she would say Steiger had no distinguishing features. "Lost dreams and memories," he repeated and then shrugged. "Just personal fancy, ma'am. I like to think houses are part of their people. When they first buy the place, it's a dream come true. Then it becomes a headache filled with memories. Me, I try to turn it back into a dream again."

The idea pleased her. She felt a slight release as she stepped away from the door. "I have water dripping down my walls, Mr. Steiger. What would you charge to fix that?"

"Depends on the problem, ma'am." He shook the water out of his coat, removed his hat, and walked in. Then he hung everything on the coat-tree near the door, careful to move the tree so that the rainwater dripped onto the tile entry instead of the carpet. "Let's take a look."

She led him into the kitchen where water still beaded near the stove. She had turned the teapot that morning so that the steam exploded against empty air, but the beading remained. He examined the water as closely as a jeweler examined a diamond. Then he let out air gently. "You need my services, ma'am."

"What will you do?"

"First, I'll clean up the water. Then I'll see what I can do to dam it up."

"How much will it cost?" Amanda clutched her hands tightly together. She felt tense.

He continued to stare at the water. "Seventy-five dollars."

"Per hour?"

He shook his head. "Just seventy-five dollars."

No wonder he was going door to door; he couldn't make any money at the prices he charged. "I'll pay you by the hour," Amanda said.

He looked at her. His eyes were dry and inwardly focused, like the eyes of a person who had been reading for hours. "You're very kind, ma'am. But all I charge is seventy-five dollars. Feels like I'm cheating you at that rate."

Amanda wasn't going to argue with him. She ran a hand through her hair. "Will it take you long?"

"A few hours, at most. You have this anywhere else?"

"In the bathroom." A memory touched her mind, a small one, of waking up alone. "And I think some are starting on the ceiling in the bedroom."

He nodded, as if he had expected her to say that. "Don't worry, ma'am. I'll take care of it for you. You just go back to whatever it was you were doing, and leave the rest to me."

Amanda returned to her office as he ran to his truck. Carleton's shirt lay crumpled where she left it, needle still piercing the fabric. She started to flick on the radio, but stopped. Her hand went to the quilt, and this time, she didn't stop.

\*7\*

Daniel couldn't explain why he was driving home in the middle of the day, but when he arrived and saw

the unusual truck parked outside, he knew that his sixth sense had been working overtime. Amanda had gotten in trouble. He could feel it.

He opened the door and stepped into the house. It was quiet. The damp smell he had been noticing over the past month was barely there. A raincoat and hat he didn't recognize hung on the coat-tree by the door. A light trailed down the hallway from the sewing room. The bedroom was dark, but he heard rustlings coming from it and suddenly felt ill.

He had been neglecting Amanda this past year, and she had not complained. He had never thought that she would see someone else, that slowly she was replacing him as the center of her life. His breathing became shallow as he walked. He rounded the corner into the bedroom door, expecting to find Amanda as only he had seen her, cheeks flushed with passion, eyes bright, hair flowing across her well-formed, naked body. Instead, he found a man he had never seen before scraping the ceiling.

"What the hell are you doing?" Daniel demanded.

The man stopped working. He took the little vial he had been holding in his hand and shoved it in his pocket. "I'm done," he said as he stepped off the stool he had been standing on.

"Let me see what you have there," Daniel said. He knew that the man had taken something valuable, could feel it in his bones.

"Sorry," the man said. "I contracted this work with your wife."

Daniel turned. "Amanda!"

She came out of the sewing room into the hall. Her expression was sleep-blurry, and her hair was mussed. In her right hand, she clutched an oval-shaped quilt piece. "I didn't know you were home," she said.

"Damn right. What is this man doing here?"

Amanda smiled. "He's cleaning out the water."

"He's been stealing from us." Daniel could feel it as firmly as he had felt the impulse to come home. The man had been stealing. Valuable things. Family heirlooms. Things passed from generation to generation.

Amanda shook her head. "Don't be silly, Daniel. There's nothing to steal."

"I want him out of here," Daniel said. "Now!"

The man opened his hands, bowed slightly at Daniel, but spoke to Amanda. "I'm sorry," he said. "It's nearly finished."

"Let me walk you to the door." Amanda walked beside the man. Daniel followed, feeling angry, betrayed, as if she had dismissed him and sided with the thief. She picked up her purse from the bench near the door and handed the man some money.

"Amanda!" Daniel cried. "The man has been stealing."

"Thank you," she said without a glance at Daniel.

The man took the money, stuffed it in his shirt pocket, then put on his rain gear. "You are too kind for this," he said. "I wish you the best, Amanda."

He walked out into the rain. Daniel leaned out the door and memorized the license off the truck. Then he went to the phone.

"What are you doing?" Amanda asked.

"Calling the cops." Daniel pushed the buttons, dialing as fast as he could. "He was robbing from us. And you paid him."

Amanda reached over, took the receiver from his hand, and hung it up. "It was my money. And he wasn't stealing. He was cleaning. Tell me what he took."

Family heirlooms. Treasures passed from generation to generation. "I don't know," Daniel said slowly. "But I could feel something -- "

"You don't feel," Amanda snapped. She walked down the hall to the sewing room and closed the door. Daniel stood in the darkened hallway. She had rebuked him, turning his words to another meaning. For the first time with Amanda, he felt unsure of himself and a little frightened.

\*8\*

Amanda sat on the deacon's bench. While Steiger had been there, she had nearly finished the quilt. She wished he had stayed, had been able to finish the job. Somehow, now, she felt that the burden was on her. Her eyes were tired and her back ached. She hadn't meant to snap at Daniel, but he was so self-important. He had offended her and, she realized, it had not been the first time. He always assumed she would be there, but he treated her as if she were replaceable, as if she didn't matter. A tear formed in her eye and rolled down her cheek. She shivered as the warm drop traced her jawbone and settled on her chin. It had been a long time since she cried. She couldn't remember the last time.

Carleton's shirt still lay crumpled on the floor. An accusation. Shirts made money. Quilts did not. She picked up the shirt and stroked its fine handwork. Only an hour's work left on that versus an evening with the quilt. She sighed, thinking that if she still had energy when she finished the shirt, she would work on the quilt.

She could hear Daniel slamming about in the kitchen, trying to call attention to himself with the noise he was making. This time she would not go and try to calm him. This time she would take care of herself.

The shirt felt heavy in her hands. Carleton could wait an extra day for the shirt. She wanted to work on the quilt. No project had ever absorbed her like that one. She took the thick material and ran it across her lap. The tear dripped from her chin into the fabric. A round moisture stain appeared for a moment, and then faded. Amanda squeezed the material. It felt thicker where the tear had landed, but not wet. She nodded, feeling her eyes overflow. Slowly, she stitched and ignored the tears as they fell.

\*9\*

The presents sat at Kerry's feet like obedient schoolchildren. Conversation hummed around her. Aunts, cousins, second cousins, friends all filled Amanda's living room. But Kerry didn't watch them. She watched Amanda flow through the crowd with a grace the girl had never had before. Amanda poured herself a glass of punch, then came and sat beside Kerry.

"You're not socializing," Amanda said.

"I've been watching you." Kerry took her granddaughter's dry hand into her own. "You're not pregnant, are you? You have that glow."

Amanda shook her head and lowered her gaze, but not before Kerry saw what was in it. No children. Not then. Not ever -- at least, with Daniel. "I want to talk to you, Grandma, but not today."

Kerry nodded. She didn't want to hear it today. At least Steiger had helped, a little.

Amanda reached down and grabbed the largest box. It was wrapped in silver paper and tied with a large red bow. "It's from me, Grandma. Open it."

Kerry took the package and set it on her lap. It felt heavy and oppressive. Her hands shook as she reached for the red bow. Slowly she untied it, then slipped her fingers through the cool paper. As she pulled off the lid, her heart thudded against her chest.

"It's a quilt, Grandma," Amanda said. "I made it for you."

But Kerry didn't have to hear the words. She knew that the quilt was hers. She recognized the tears woven into every stitch. She touched the first and saw the day her father died, that stark, cold gray day when her father's face had matched the sky. And the next tear -- the day Thomas first hit her. Married only a month and already he had drawn blood. And older tears, memories that weren't hers, but that she had carried for years until she had harvested them along with her own crop and planted the seeds with the next generation. She had thought of taking them, but she had never realized that a child could give them back.

The gift had been given, the seeds planted. But there would never be another harvest.

"Is it okay, Grandma?" Amanda sounded worried. "I thought you would like it."

Kerry looked up and saw that her granddaughter was happy for the first time. "I love you, child," Kerry said, hugging the quilt tightly to her chest.