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Aleen of the HairHaven

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All she ever wanted was to do hair and then go home. Aleen never wanted to own the HairHaven. At the shop on Colorado Boulevard, she and Deeda Pangburne did hair for older women, as well as for girls who needed big hair for proms and weddings. Rudy and Desmond did all the special cuts and “style” hair for younger women. Rudy owned the beauty shop, and between the four of them, they did a lot of hair. It was an arrangement Aleen and Deeda liked.

One weekend, Rudy went away with Desmond and didn’t come back. When Aleen came in Monday morning, Rudy had left them a note:

Girls – Desi and I are moving to Cheesman Park. This part of town is just a little too The shop is yours. The equipment, the supplies, everything. And this month’s rent has been paid. Take care of all the ladies and babies. Luv, Rudy

Ladies and babies were what Rudy called the older and younger women. Aleen picked up the phone and called Deeda. She came right down and sat in one of the upholstered chairs to study the message. After she said “hmm” twice, she walked to the liquor store and bought a pint of schnapps. Aleen drank a little in her coffee and watched Deeda consume the rest between appointments.

When they closed that evening, Deeda kicked off her shoes and said, “Aleen, I believe Sister Rudy done left us a nest egg.” And it was true, he had. That night Deeda talked Aleen into going country dancing with her and they stayed out late and ate breakfast together. For the first time in a long time, the HairHaven didn’t open until noon.

During the first eight or nine years after Rudy left, the HairHaven continued to be as busy as it ever was. Aleen and Deeda added two young women to do the style hair, and the two older women continued to handle their familiar customers. Eventually the two young women left and started their own shop and Aleen and Deeda hired a succession of stylists after them.

The day Deeda turned seventy-one, she announced she wasn’t going to work as hard anymore and began coming in half days three days a week. It was just as well, Aleen thought, because there wasn’t that much big-hair business anyway. When the last style girl quit, Aleen didn’t bother to hire another one and business dropped off even further.

One day after closing up, Boyd, a retired trucker Deeda had been seeing a lot of, stopped by to pick her up. Deeda announced that she and

Boyd had decided to move to Palm Springs to live in senior housing, get away from the cold. It was a surprise to Aleen, but the two women hugged and kissed and called each other “sweetie.” Then, it seemed the next day, Deeda was gone.

Aleen stood in the dark looking out through the neon HairHaven sign, wondering what she was going to do. She had done hair since she was eighteen and, at seventy-two, didn’t know another way to make a living. Her husband, Mr. Water, was dead. They’d never had children, and now her best friend was moving to Palm Springs.

During breakfast at the Solar Inn, Marvelle, the owner, told her to close up the shop and put it in her house, “Cut back on all that overhead.”

Aleen thought about it. The next morning, with the help of the motel staff next door, she began moving the things she needed, one at a time, to her enclosed porch. During the weekend, she had a garage sale and sold off the pieces she didn’t need. She taped a large sign in the shop window that said the HairHaven was closed, and to call her at home for appointments.

Within a few weeks, many of her regular clients had called and made appointments. Most days, she saw two or three customers, and that was plenty. She knew some of them made appointments just to have somewhere to go and someone to talk with. Aleen wasn’t ready to sit on the sofa with the remote control, so she didn’t mind fixing their hair.

Before Mr. Water had passed, he’d enclosed the front porch so that it was a comfortable place in summer and winter. Aleen kept the equipment there.

She didn't want people inside her house, touching things, prying into her life. In a window on the porch above the mailbox, Aleen placed a simple black and white sign that said "Beauty Shop."

Everyone who came to the house wanted to know how Deeda was doing. She told them, "Fine, Deeda's just fine." She and Deeda talked about once a week on the phone, and she often got post-cards from Palm Springs and southern California. Sometimes she showed her customers the cards.

"What was that man's name she went with?" Mrs. Maestas asked.

"Boyd," Aleen said. "Still is Boyd."

One day, while she was doing a permanent, a customer noticed how scabby and discoloured her hands were and suggested she have them looked at. "Overgrown liver spots," Aleen said, "Nothing to worry about."

While the woman sat with her hair pinned, she went on to tell Aleen how her niece had to have some kind of cancer taken off her neck and one of her lymph nodes removed. Aleen wasn't really interested in the story, but the woman chatted on anyway—about the niece's skin graft from her buttocks and how the first graft didn't take very well and how they had to do it again and how now she can never wear a bikini and how she had such a cute shape.

The spots on Aleen's hands got bigger and turned dark and irregular, and she finally made an appointment to see the doctor. The doctor himself was dark, Dr. Moreno. In the exam room, he rubbed the back of Aleen's large hands with his thumbs and asked his assistant to prepare for a

biopsy. With a small surgical knife, Dr. Moreno removed a piece of skin from one of the spots and placed it on the glass slide. He told his assistant to make another appointment for Aleen in three days. Aleen's bones had been aching for weeks and she'd been feeling nauseous, flu-like, but she didn't share that with the doctor.

That night, when Aleen called Deeda, Boyd answered the phone. He told her Deeda was out at the Knights of Columbus bingo, and he'd tell her to call when she came in.

"Anything wrong?" Boyd asked.

"No, no," Aleen said, "just wanted to catch up."

For a moment Aleen could see herself and Deeda standing together in the doorway of the HairHaven. Deeda was petite and outgoing, and Aleen was tall and reserved. They'd been friends for more than forty years. Aleen missed Deeda.

Three days later, after he'd taken X-rays, the doctor sat with Aleen in a small conference room. He had literature in front of him that explained the different types of skin cancer.

"Normally, when we are doing the biopsy," Dr. Moreno said in his accented English, "it takes a week. When I saw your hands, I had the lab rush the biopsy, because I was very concerned. There are three types of skin cancer, Mrs. Water: basal, squamous, and melanoma. Mrs. Water, you have the most serious form of skin cancer. You have advanced melanoma cancer."

Liver spots, Aleen said to herself, they're liver spots. I'll rub them with cream every night and they'll be gone in a week. A real doctor would rec-

ognize that. She never should have come to this clinic, with foreign doctors. Skin cancer. She would go home and take a hot bath and rub her hands.

When the doctor finished talking with Aleen, he asked if she had friends or family around. She said no, and he gave her the number of the hospice and suggested she call them.

“I’m very sorry to tell you this, Mrs. Water,” Dr. Moreno said, patting Aleen’s hands, “but after looking at your X-rays, I must tell you—you are dying, and I’m afraid we cannot help you.” Before she left, the doctor wrote out a three-month prescription for pain medication and told her she would need it over the coming days and weeks.

On the drive home, Aleen wept quietly. She had never been much for emotion, not even with her husband when he was alive. She watched people coming and going on the streets and sidewalks and thought about how, for most of her life, she had taken care of others, but never found time for herself. Aleen was familiar with loneliness, but now she was dying, and she heard the drone of her own imminent death in her ears. She wished Deeda were there. Deeda always knew what to do and how to handle things. She wanted to call Deeda, but didn’t want to bother her or Boyd.

Aleen parked in front of the HairHaven and sat in the car. The store was located next to a motel owned by Nisha and Rajiv, from India, whom Aleen had befriended. The shop was still empty, with a “For Lease” sign hanging in the window. Maybe she should just go home and call the hospice, she thought, get it over with. Aleen drove

the car down the block to the Solar and went in for coffee.

Marvelle came and sat with Aleen and asked if she was feeling all right. "Hon," Marvelle said, "you don't look so good. You want some soup or something? Let me buy you some soup." Aleen struggled to tell Marvelle what was wrong, but couldn't. She put her hands flat on the table, on either side of her coffee.

"Girl," Marvelle said, shaking her head, "you better get you some cream for them hands."

Aleen smiled and asked Marvelle if she had a gun.

"Sweetheart," Marvelle said, "what's an old gal like you gonna do with a gun?"

Aleen explained that there was a fox in the neighbourhood that had been eating some of the cats, and the other night he almost got her cat. She wanted to wait up a few nights to see if she could take care of the problem.

"Aleen, you ever use a gun?" Marvelle asked.

Aleen lied and said Mr. Water had shown her all about guns.

"Well," Marvelle said, "I got a little popgun twenty-two I'll let you have. But you got to promise me you're not gonna go right over to the First National and make a withdrawal with it."

Marvelle wrapped the gun in a white pastry bag and brought it out to Aleen once she'd finished her coffee. Aleen set the bag next to her on the seat in the car and tried not to look at it. She examined her hands on the steering wheel as she drove and wondered how it was these damned dark spots could cause so much trouble. She

wanted to be angry at something or someone, but didn't know how.

That night, Aleen brewed a pot of strong coffee, took some of the pain medication, and sat in her chair on the back porch with the gun. She'd never really seen a fox around her house, but neighbours had told her they had.

With her cat, Stripes, in her lap, Aleen dozed. She imagined a photo album of her life and began to look through its yellowing pages. Mr. Water in his khaki uniform, home from the war. Short Mr. Water, with his big feet and ever-present grin, standing in front of their house in Alamosa, not far from the first salon where she'd worked. Aleen's mother and two sisters at her wedding, standing arms folded, with serious looks on their faces. Her brother Thomas, visiting them from the seminary in St. Louis, looking at the camera just as seriously. And Aleen, standing in front of the shop next to the motel in South Denver, staring, a hand over her mouth, looking very serious.

Aleen got up from the chair and went into the bathroom for more medication. Everything inside her rib cage hurt, and her body ached. She made another pot of coffee and wandered through the house, looking in each of the meticulously arranged rooms. *Shouldn't there be pictures and knick-knacks?* she thought. Deeda had pictures and knick-knacks everywhere in her house. *Where are my pictures and knick-knacks?*

Aleen brought the pills out of the bathroom, took four more, and set them on the kitchen table. She held up her hands and spread her fingers and

was surprised to see them glowing brightly. The dark cancerous spots now formed beautiful circles that radiated up her arms and over her body in pulsing waves. She went to the porch for the gun.

When Aleen returned, she took the remainder of the pills and lay down on the sofa in the living room. She thought about covering her glowing hands with rubber dishwashing gloves but didn't feel like getting up to get them. Aleen held up her left hand, pointed the gun at it with her right, and tried to pull the trigger, but nothing happened. She found the safety and released it, then fired at one of the circles. The bullet burned through the back of her hand and exited through her palm. The glowing stopped.

Aleen was pleased and folded her hands together across her stomach. When she closed her eyes she could see Mr. Water, grinning, in his dress uniform. She could hear the rise and fall of the blood in her veins and feel the warm wetness on her hands. In the morning she would try to remember to call the hospice.

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