

# PAINTING THE SOFA RED

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*MENTALLY AND PHYSICALLY INCAPABLE of living alone. Socially isolated.* Richard tightened his grip on the armrests of his favourite wing-backed chair. He stared at the battered leather suitcase on the opposite side of the room and swallowed a wave of emotion. The day before, he had taken the framed photographs of his children off the walls, not to dust, but to remove from sight. His three offspring, including the daughter who lived one province away and only visited every two years, had ganged up against him. In a carefully worded letter, with enough veiled threats to shake him to the core, they had branded him a doddering old man. He had turned seventy the month before. The new forty, he had heard the baby boomers call it.

The clock on the mantelpiece struck nine. Half an hour left to enjoy his independence. His children had chosen a gated community in the heart of the city over an hour away. Assisted living, the pamphlet described it. For those in their twilight years. “We didn’t want you to end up in some government-run facility,” his son had said. “Obviously, in situations such as these, prudence is key.”

Richard had always been careful with his money. He had assisted the kids through their university years and a few financially tough times. The house, with its views of the ocean and the mountains, was his prize after forty gruelling years of office work. He walked the nearby trails every day, knew the neighbours by name. He was the crime watch captain and, if numerous locals had had their way, he would have been a contender in the recent local election. Sure, he had fallen, but only once when he had not placed the ladder properly. Nothing to do with age. It was his own damn stupidity.

He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands, smearing a few tears. The ambush had been slow, carried out over three years. At first, they had simply badgered him at every family get-together. Did he have a plan? What was his plan?

“For what?” he’d asked, laughing.

“Infirmity,” was the response. “Death.”

“Such a long way off,” he said. “I’m happy where I am.”

Then the telephone calls started. Out of the blue. He picked up the receiver, hoping to hear about his grandchildren. Instead, his children bombarded him with more challenges. “Why can’t I just enjoy my retirement?” he said. “I’ve barely begun it.”

“Don’t expect us to enable you,” was the answer. “We’re not setting foot inside that house until you agree to sell it.”

And true to their word, they had not. For the most part.

When the youngest, thirty years old and still trying to find her path in life, had asked to move home so that she could attend community college, he had jumped at the opportunity to mend the rift. In exchange for room and board, she vacuumed and cleaned the bathrooms. He thought the situation worked well. “Just put whatever you want on the grocery list,” he told her. “Concentrate on your studies. I’ll worry about everything else.”

Little did he know she’d fed tidbits to her siblings. Every time he misplaced something, stumbled, burned his breakfast or talked about the black bear that had traipsed through the backyard one spring morning, he was sealing his fate. These things were twisted until they represented danger and incompetence. He was alone. He was a widower. He was a fool. The emotional fallout reminded him of the time when he was six years old and he’d tried to assist his unhappy mother with the living-room renovations. Armed with a pot of red paint, he had gone to work on the sofa. “Momma, I helped,” he said when he finished, only to be given the strap and sent to bed without dinner. Bamboozled and hurt, he’d hid under the covers and cried.

“If you expect to maintain normal family relations,” his son finally threatened, “you had better be prepared to sit down and discuss this with us.”

“Go to hell,” said Richard, fed up.

That’s when they sent the letter.

They had used his stubbornness against him. Said he was refusing to accept the natural aging process. Said it was time he faced the inevitable.

“The inevitable what?” said Richard. “I’m not old.”

He stretched his legs, looked at the hiking boots he’d put on that morning without thinking. He’d been too embarrassed to talk about the letter with his fellow retirees—not the sixty-five-year-old couple living next door, the eighty-year-old widow living down the street or the ninety-two-year-old couple who owned the house around the corner. Internet research threw up

a new term. Elder abuse. Bullying masked as concern. He couldn't stand the idea that he was a victim.

"Dad?"

His youngest daughter's voice was light-hearted, sweet. She didn't seem to mind that her siblings were kicking her out too.

"Dad, I put your suitcase in the living room. Is there anything else you want to bring?"

Richard swallowed hard. He hadn't been able to find his voice, his real voice, in days. Another person had taken control of his vocal chords. Someone feeble and nervous. That pathetic old guy his children kept hounding.

"I'm fine," he said.

She stuck her head in the room, smiled brightly. "Did you get lunch?"

He nodded, averting his eyes.

"Something healthy, I hope."

"Tomato soup."

"I'll make you a grilled cheese sandwich," and she disappeared into the kitchen.

The three of them were going to take care of the house and its contents. They would divide everything between them. "You don't need to stress about it," they'd told him. "We'll have the place on the market by the end of the week."

Richard reached down to pet Ally's head. The black lab gazed up at him with mournful eyes. Normally, they'd be midway through their walk by this hour of the morning. Early enough to catch the changing tide, late enough to grab the mail from the village post office. He knew she would hate her new home where the only two paths were flat and paved for walkers and wheelchairs. Swimming for sticks was out of the question.

A car turned into the driveway, signalling the arrival of his other two children. His eldest daughter was going to whisk him out of the house while the others rolled up their sleeves and got down to business. "I've updated my will," Richard had told them defiantly.

"Fabulous," was the dismissive response.

The front door opened, bringing with it a burst of voices. "Hello Dad," his son said, in a jubilant voice, and then the three of them started whispering.

Richard leaned forward. He strained his ears.

"He's been in that chair for hours," his youngest daughter said.

"Moping," said the next daughter up.

“He’ll get used to it,” said his son. “He doesn’t have a choice.”

Ally stood and rested her head on Richard’s knee. As if sensing his defeat, she let out a moan. “There’s nothing I can do,” said Richard, miserably. “They hold the ace card.”

He had yet to see his grandchildren, but he was hopeful. Two years had slipped by thanks to his pride. The letter had been very specific. If he expected to maintain normal family relations, he had no choice but to comply with their wishes.

“I’m sorry, Ally,” he said. “I don’t know what else to do.”

The whispering continued. The smell of grilled cheese filled the air. Richard closed his eyes and swallowed his pain. Ally nudged him. She had the leash in her mouth.

“I suppose one more walk couldn’t hurt,” said Richard.

He stood and looked around the room, memories of his life there flooding back to him. His late wife had sewn the pillows on the sofa and made the drapes out of fabric they’d purchased on an impromptu trip to Seattle. Peg had also insisted they repaint the place the year before he retired. “Why not?” she said, when the children questioned the wisdom of it. “This is our home for as long as we choose it to be.”

Adopting Ally had been Peg’s idea too. The dog came to live with them exactly a week after Richard walked out of the office for the last time. “Why not?” said Peg, when the children questioned her on it. “Your father is retiring, not falling off the face of the earth. We have the rest of our lives ahead of us.”

Richard opened the french doors that led into the garden. He hurried down the footpath with Ally close on his heels. The thought of Peg gave him strength. Even during the final stage of breast cancer, she had treated each day as if it were another adventure. “I’m not dead yet,” was her motto. “Any one of you healthy people could still go before me.”

The beach was deserted, the tide on its way in. Ally jumped about excitedly, charging into the water to retrieve the stick Richard threw. As he wandered along the shoreline, blinking back tears, he saw a pair of seals pop their heads out of the water. They watched Ally, who triumphantly returned to land with her stick and went to work digging a large hole in the sand. Before Peg became ill, she and Richard had often brought a thermos of coffee down to the beach, sharing a mug as they watched the ever-changing tide.

“Oh Peggy,” he said, remembering the day he had scattered her ashes.

“I don’t know how much time I have left, but I sure as hell know how I want to spend it.”

His hands shook as he retrieved the cell phone from his pocket. He swallowed hard as he dialed 911, but he didn’t hesitate. “I need police assistance,” he said, when the operator answered. “There are three intruders in my home. I am seventy years old and they are my children.”