

**Emma Rose**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Cypress Bay High School, Weston, FL

Educator: Shawntee` Herring

Category: Short Story

---

## **A Murder of Need**

The silence within the mansion was unbroken save for the mournful sound of rainfall beyond the tall frosted glass windows that lined the walls. A chill hung heavy in the air, as if it could sense that someone had died in the night just a few rooms away. Rosalie shivered, drawing her arms close to her chest as she fidgeted on the extremely fancy yet uncomfortable couch. The lack of practicality in the decor was just one of the many reasons she hated coming to her grandmother's mansion, but this was not the time to complain about the itchy cushions.

Her gaze roved around the family members who were arranged in a loose circle around the living room, scanning each of their faces for the real reason they had been brought together, since mourning was not considered a group activity in this family. A few faces were missing from the assembled group, including the only member of Rosalie's extended family who she enjoyed the company of, which wasn't saying a lot, as she couldn't stand the rest. Rosalie wondered what it would be like if she had been blessed with a normal family, one who loved each other and took care of each other.

Such a thing was just a dream to her, but she really couldn't care less. Her childhood had been less fancy than some, but Rosalie couldn't have been raised by a better mother, and she never even missed whoever her father had been. Even if her grandmother hadn't approved of how they lived, then it wasn't any of her business, even if she was dead and gone by now. Although, Rosalie probably shouldn't think about her in such a disdainful way.

But Rosalie had spent her entire life being watched by her grandmother's disdainful eyes. If she had wanted sympathy from her granddaughter upon her death, then she should have been kinder.

"You feeling okay, sweetie?" her mom asked, her voice hushed so as to not to draw too much attention to the pair sitting together on the couch.

She glanced up, offering a smile to her mother. "I'm fine, promise," Rosalie said, squeezing her mother's hand gently. The news of her grandmother's death hadn't really affected her at all, seeing as her grandmother had never really acknowledged her existence, and Rosalie actually preferred that kind of relationship. But Rosalie knew that her mom had taken the news hard, her eyes still a bit teary. "What about you?"

Her mom nodded quickly, wiping at her eyes. "She's in a better place now."

Rosalie decided to not comment on that statement for her mother's peace of mind, but she did have some choice words about exactly how her grandmother's afterlife was playing out. Instead, she decided to think about where Eden could be, and why they were leaving her to suffer without backup at this dysfunctional family function.

Like clockwork, another one of her family members opened his mouth seemingly solely for the purpose of annoying her. "So... she killed herself?" Pierre asked, his voice jarringly loud. "What did the note say?"

Rosalie wrinkled her nose at her cousin's stupidity, but she kept her mouth closed. It seemed clear to her that something else had gone on, either an accident or something more sinister, because her grandmother seemed to have a clear plan for the future that did not include being dead so soon.

Her uncle sighed, running his fingers through his thinning hair. "The note we found said that she was in pain and felt isolated from her family," Uncle Ray said, "which is a load of crap." He crossed his arms, exchanging a look with his wife. "She was my mother. For god's sake, my kid spent hours with her every day."

One of his sisters tilted her head at the mention of the golden child of the family. "Where is Eden?" she questioned.

"And their sister, that Elizabeth."

"The twins are leaving school early," Uncle Ray said. "They'll be here soon."

"Who's signing them out of school?" she asked.

He smiled dimly, the lingering grief on his face ebbing slightly for the first time all day because of the pride he felt for his child. "Eden knows how to fake my signature, so they can sign them and their sister out," Uncle Ray said. "And once they get home, we'll figure this thing out."

Rosalie rolled her eyes, earning a harsh look from her uncle, but neither of them started any trouble. The sooner this

conversation began, the sooner it would end and Rosalie could go home.

"Is Liza doing any better?" her mom asked, sympathy in her voice. Elizabeth had always been a sickly child, always coughing and deathly pale all the time. The fact that she had survived until now had probably been a miracle, to be honest, especially since Rosalie knew that Uncle Ray had been lying about his business for years and was actually close to broke. He and his family lived in the mansion because Rosalie's grandmother had always favored him, but neither of them ever got Elizabeth any medical help that would make her life less fraught with the fear of death.

Uncle Ray just stood there for a moment, a strange look on his face as he processed the question, then he said, "She's always going to be somewhat sick. I think we've all accepted it, even her."

"Everyone but Eden," Rosalie muttered under breath. The rest of them might have given up, but she knew that Eden still thought about and poured much of their time into researching medical procedures that would give Liza a life without danger of her lungs giving out.

As if summoned by the devil herself, the twins walked through the door, a somber look on both of their identical faces. Eden waved to everyone as they put down some papers and their bookbag, but Liza barely gave her family members a glance.

"I'm going to get a snack," Eden announced, their gaze falling onto Rosalie. "Rosie, wanna come with?"

Rosalie shrugged as she rose from the couch. "Sure." The pair went into the kitchen, and she let out an involuntary sigh of relief at leaving the rest of her family behind to talk with her favorite cousin. "So," Rosalie said, "how are you holding up?"

They let out a dark chuckle as they opened the pantry door. "Badly," said Eden. "I mean, my grandma just died."

The one thing that Rosalie and Eden could never agree upon was their feelings for their grandmother. Eden thought she had flaws but still loved her, while Rosalie thought she was a horrible grandmother and worse human being.

"Why weren't you here yesterday?" Eden questioned as they grabbed a bag of chips. Their dark curls framed their face like a picture, and Rosalie remembered the day that Eden had cut their hair into that bob. Their grandmother had dug up some old pictures of how she had a similar haircut decades ago, and she compared those pictures of the two of them for days on end.

Rosalie had never gotten that kind of attention from her.

She leaned against the kitchen counter, tapping her fingers against the polished marble. "That witch didn't invite me," she said, her tone carefully careless. "Or my mom. We didn't even know about it." Instead, the two of them had held their own Thanksgiving dinner, and Rosalie had enjoyed spending the time with her mom.

Eden grimaced. "Please refrain from calling our deceased grandmother names," they said. Their gaze darted to the open doorway, and Eden took a step closer. "Especially in earshot of the family who thinks she was murdered, if what my dad texted me was true."

"She *was* murdered," Rosalie said. "I mean, what else could have happened?"

They met her eyes, a startled look on Eden's face. "You think-" They cut off abruptly, their voice dropping to a hush. "You think one of them killed her? You really think we're related to a murderer?"

"I mean, don't you?"

"No," Eden said, "listen, Rosie, we've known these people since birth. Don't you think we would have noticed if one of them was a murderer?" They shifted nervously at the thought. "How could any of them murder Grandma?" Rosalie wondered if any of the other family members had enough faith in each other to feel that way. She certainly did not.

"We should get back in there," she said, and Eden nodded. They went back through the doorway, and all conversation hushed as the pair sat down on the couch.

"Good," Uncle Ray said. "We're all here. Let's get down to business." He walked into the middle of the living room, a few papers and a folder held tightly in his hands. "Okay. My mother was murdered, and the police are no help. They think it's a suicide, and-"

"Are we sure it wasn't?" Liza interrupted, tilting her head. "I mean, just look at the signs. That Thanksgiving dinner yesterday could be interpreted as a farewell party for herself, since she was the center of attention as always." She took a breath, and continued by saying, "She made sure that she was surrounded by the people she loved, and then took her life." Liza paused, considering the facts for a moment as did the rest of the people in the room. "It's not definite, but we can't just rule that out."

Uncle Ray shook his head. "It just makes no sense, Elizabeth." He shuffled through his papers, before finding the delicate scrap of paper that the suicide note had been penned on. "In this note," he said, "my mother said she was in pain because of her arthritis. But she never mentioned anything like that to me."

"But she was," Liza said, her voice certain. She glanced around the room at everyone before finally settling on her sibling. "Eddie, didn't you tell me that?"

Eden nodded, their brow furrowed. "Yeah, Grandma told me about it, and I must have told Liza later that night, and- she never told you guys about that?"

When it quickly became clear from the confused looks around the room that the twins had been the only ones to know this information, Liza said, "But anyone could have overheard you tell me. It's not like either of us kept this under lock and key." She looked paler than usual, her face tight, and exchanged a look with Eden that Rosalie couldn't quite decipher.

"I just don't understand why she wouldn't share that with the rest of us," said Uncle Ray. "I mean, you were the closest one to her, Eden, so I guess you knew her better than most. Did she ever seem 'isolated from everyone' to you?"

All the attention turned to Eden, who shifted under the weight of everyone's gaze. "I- sometimes," they said. "Part of the reason why she never liked to share money with us was because she wanted to make sure that we didn't love her for the money. That we loved her for her." Eden's voice cracked, and they looked close to tears for a moment before closing their eyes to compose themselves. "I don't think she really trusted any of us."

A solemn silence filled the room, before Pierre opened his dumb mouth again. "Speaking of her money," he said, "let's open the will!"

A buzz of silence rushed through the people in the room, and it seemed that the ongoing mystery of the murder had been put on a backburner in favor of the chance of money.

Uncle Ray held his breath as he slowly opened the folder that held the will, and so did Rosalie, along with most of the surrounding family. With each passing second, the tension built and built, until finally he unfolded the document and scanned it quickly. Uncle Ray looked up from the will, fear entering his eyes. "Eden, did-" He cleared his throat, shaking off whatever he was about to ask his child. "She left all of the money and properties to Eden."

Eden's eyes widened, and Liza drained of color, spinning around to lock eyes on her sibling. "Damn it," she said, immediately beginning to put up a defense. "You didn't know about this, did you?"

Eden quickly shook their head, curls bouncing around their head. "Grandma never mentioned anything like this," they said, their voice almost betraying them by giving in to a sob. "Why would she-"

"Who knew about this?" an aunt said, hands on her hips. "And why would she do this?"

"What about my kids?"

"What about me?" Rosalie said, but her voice was too quiet and she wouldn't have received an answer anyway.

"I didn't know!" Uncle Ray yelled. "I don't know, I-" He broke off, running his fingers through his hair.

Liza seemed hardly surprised at the idea of getting left out of the will. All she seemed to care about was shifting the blame away from her and her sibling. "Eden and I were together all night," she said. "We share a room, and neither of us left all night."

"You're lying," said Pierre. "I saw you last night, near Grandma's wing."

"Why were *you* near Grandma's wing?" she snapped back. "And I wasn't." She hesitated. "I- well. I went to get a snack during the night. But Eddie- they were asleep the whole time."

"Well," he said, "then why were you so far away from the kitchen?"

Her eyes darted to Eden, and then back to Pierre. "I couldn't sleep," she said. "I wander around after I get snacks."

"She does do that," Eden said quickly, backing up their sister.

The rest of the family members seemed bored with the conversation and had begun to file out of the living room, probably to take whatever priceless items they could before someone could catch them. Uncle Ray and his wife went to make some calls about the sudden rush of money given to their child, and Liza dragged Eden off into a nearby hallway, leaving Rosalie alone in the living room. Even her mother had left, murmuring something about an empty stomach, and Rosalie was free to figure out what had been bugging her.

She walked over to where Eden had dropped their bookbag, and picked up the scrap paper lying next to it. Rosalie looked at the words written on the paper.

Eden frowned. "Rosie, what are you doing with that? I should have thrown that out."

The crumbled up piece of paper had been used to practice forging someone's handwriting. Because Eden could forge handwriting. Something fell into place, and Rosalie spun around to face her cousin. "You killed her," Rosalie said, leveling her gaze across the room at her cousin. "I thought you loved her."

"I love my sister more," Eden said, as if the words were automatic. They took a deep breath, conflict written on their face as plain as day, and Rosalie dimly wondered how she hadn't seen it before. "Grandma- she could be so cruel sometimes, so unfeeling. Liza needed me to protect her. I did it for her. And I'd do it again."

"What did you do?" Rosalie breathed.

"What I had to." The silence hung heavy between them for a moment, before the words began to spill out of Eden like a river of pain. "It was painless, I promise, but her money is going to me, you know, not anyone else, and you know that she wasn't going to use that money to help Liza with anything, not even a life saving surgery. And if I had the money- I could- I could-"

"Hey, hey, I-" Rosalie broke off, taking a step closer to Eden. "It's alright, I won't tell anyone. It can be our secret,

you know?"

After a beat, Eden nodded, a grateful look in their eyes.

Rosalie offered them a smile. She didn't look at Eden differently. The murder had been an act of love, not hatred or cruelty, a murder of need.

And, besides, the murderer would be perhaps the only one to truly miss their grandmother out of all of those who had gathered in the large soulless mansion.