

THE MUSIC BOX

I've loved music ever since I can remember. When I was five years old, my grandma Edith gave me an old music box. It was something she had since she was little, and she wanted me to have it. It was a simple wooden box, and on the inside was the figure of a ballerina. She wore a white tutu and had a perfect bun in her hair. The music it played was like nothing I'd ever heard or will hear again. I tried to look it up when I got older; I could never find a title or a composer.

Grandma Edith died when I was eleven. She had a heart attack in her car and crashed into a pole. I was devastated. In the few years I'd known her, we had become close, and I missed her dearly. She could see my blossoming love of music, and she had just begun to teach me how to read sheet music before the accident. She was living with us since my grandpa had died a few years before I was born, and every night she would come into my room to sing me a lullaby or tell me a story. She always told the best stories, but they were never about her. One night I asked her about her childhood and how she started to love music.

"You don't want to hear an old woman go on and on about her past." She would say. Before I could protest, she would find an excuse to change the subject.

She made time every night to come in and sing me a lullaby. She had the most beautiful voice, and before she tucked me in, she used to tell me, "When I'm gone, don't be sad. You'll see me again. I'll be watching you."

"From up in heaven?" She would smile at that, then kiss me goodnight.

When I was seven, my mom had me start taking piano and voice lessons. I excelled in my training. My teachers would always compliment the way I made everything look effortless. My music box was my constant companion throughout all those years. It sat on my piano; always

open, and I would listen to the music for hours. The ballerina's "dance" (spinning, really) mesmerized me.

When I graduated high school, I knew what I was going to do with my education. My mother encouraged me to double major in piano and vocal performance, and I agreed; why should I have to choose? I wanted to make my grandma proud, and I was going to go after my dreams. I was able to get a scholarship to one of the best music schools in the country, and I couldn't wait to get started.

2 Years later

I'm on my way to the on-campus recording studio when I bump into my dead grandmother for the first time. She's in a short pink dress, and her brown hair is in curls. I was on my phone when we crashed into each other, and it falls to the ground, cracking the screen. Shit.

"Watch where you're going!"

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Is there anything I can do to help?" Her voice is calm, serene, and almost lyrical.

I look up at her. *Wait a minute.* I gasped. "Grandma?" I whispered. The woman looks back at me with a confused but expectant look.

"Oh, um, uh, no, no. I'm sorry for yelling; don't worry about it. I can just take it to the repair shop. It looks like it was just the screen anyway."

"Alright. I apologize again for bumping into you. I'm Lyra, by the way." She extends her hand and I hesitate before shaking it. I try to keep my arm steady; it couldn't be her.

“Aria. Nice to meet you. I’m sorry, but I have to be on my way. I was headed to the recording studio to play some new music. Have a good day.” I start walking away, wanting to forget the weird encounter, when I notice she turned to walk beside me.

“Oh, new music? Do you sing?”

“Yeah, and play piano. I’m double majoring in piano and vocal performance, and I’m sending out music to studios.” *Why am I telling her this?! I sound like an asshole. Retreat! Retreat!* I start to walk faster, and then she starts to walk faster.

“That’s brilliant! How long have you been recording?” I look over to see her beaming at me, and I start to feel more comfortable.

“Um, since I got here, so two years. What year are you?” She stiffens, then eases into a smile.

“I actually don’t go to school here. I’m here to see you.”

“Me? Why?”

“I represent a label that’s been very interested in working with you. Your professors have contacted us to listen to you perform. Then we’ll decide whether or not to sign you.”

Okay, any trust I had in her just went out the window. A label, really? This woman expects me to believe that? She can’t be that much older than me.

“Uh-huh. Sure. Lady, I don’t know what kind of game you’re trying to play, but I’ve got a busy day. It was nice meeting you. Goodbye.” I begin to speed walk away when she grabs my shoulder.

“No, please. Listen to me. I’m not lying. I’m supposed to be here to hear your music. I know it seems too good to be true, but your professors wanted to surprise you. I just happened to find you first.” She smiled, expecting me to believe that bull. I decide to humor her; there’s

something about her that I can't quite place. I refuse to believe what my mind told me earlier. There has to be a better explanation.

"Alright. Follow me."

When we got to the studio, our receptionist, Linda, greets me with a smile. I give her a little wave.

"Happy birthday Aria!"

"Thank you, Linda."

"How does it feel to finally be old enough to have a good time?" She wiggles her eyebrows at me. I burst out laughing.

"Honestly, 21 doesn't feel that much different yet. Maybe I just haven't got the full experience." I give her my best smile, despite the fact that my hairs are now standing on end. "Is my room ready?"

"Yep. Chris just got finished. Go right in."

I lead Lyra into the recording studio. It's small compared to some of the other rooms, but it's my favorite. For the first time in a while, Lyra speaks up.

"This place is very nice. You're lucky that your school has all this equipment."

I make up my mind to try and catch her in her lie. I *know* she isn't from a label, but who is she?

"Yeah. It's pretty cool. It's probably one of the main reasons I chose this school. Hey, what label did you say you represented?" Lyra stiffens again, and then changes the subject like I figured she might. I'll let it go for now.

“Let’s listen to what you have and see what we can do for you. I’m very interested in hearing the kind of sound you could bring to the table.” She gestures to the recording booth and sits down in one of the seats at the front of the mixing console.

“Okay.” I step into the booth, sit at the piano, put on the headphones, and start playing. It’s a new song I’ve been working on, trying to mix some elements of classical music with a rock sound.

I start singing, and I completely lose myself to the music. I forget about the recording studio, about Lyra, and I play my heart out. When I’m finished, I opened my eyes. *When did they close?* I look sheepishly into the other room, where Lyra is beaming from ear to ear.

“That was amazing!” She burst through the door into the booth, surprising me with a bear hug that almost knocks me off the bench.

“Oof! Thank you! I’m glad you liked it.” She pulls away and looks directly in my eyes.

“You’re amazing! I can’t believe how far you’ve come!”

“What do you mean? That’s the only time you’ve heard me.”

“Oh, um, what I mean is that it’s much improved from the recordings your professors sent us.” I raise my eyebrow at that. Whatever she wants me to believe, I guess.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it. If you want, we can go get some coffee and talk about it.” Next thing I know, we’re down the street getting coffee and talking like old friends. I seem to have almost forgotten my plan to expose her. I explain my ideas about my music to her, and she seems so enthusiastic. She tells me a story about how she wanted to be a singer when she was younger, but that things didn’t work out in the end.

“Why didn’t you pursue it? It was your dream!” She gives me a sad smile.

“There were some complications along the way. Family issues, stuff like that.” I have the feeling she doesn’t want to talk about it, so I don’t press her further. I’m just happy we get along so well. We end up back at my apartment and I show her some family pictures, old music, and just some of the knick-knacks I’ve collected over the years. She gravitates toward the piano and the open music box on top. She winds up the key on the back, and its haunting melody fills the room once more.

“It’s beautiful,” she said.

“Yeah. It was a gift from my grandmother when I was four years old. She’s been with me every step of the way.” Lyra gives me a look that I can’t quite place. It seems like pride, but there’s something...*off* about the smile she gives me, almost like she has to keep herself from laughing. *Weird*. Alright, enough is enough.

“Okay, I’m sorry if this is rude, but what’s up with you today? When I ask you about your backstory you either bristle or change the subject, and now you’re giving me a look like you know the punch line to a joke, and it’s gone over my head. What’s going on? Is this a scam? Are you just messing with me? What is it?” I hold my breath, waiting for the answer that I’ve been both dreading and anticipating.

“Alright, you’re right, I’m not actually from a label trying to sign you. But if I told you who I really was or what I was doing here, you wouldn’t have believed me.” Now I’m getting annoyed. *She lied to me and now she’s giving me some bullshit story instead of just telling the truth?*

“Get out.”

“What?”

“Get out! Did you think I was going to keep listening to this garbage? Go waste someone else’s time!” I stomp over to the door, but when I try to open it, the knob won’t move. *What the fuck?* I keep trying to turn the knob, but it won’t budge.

“Trouble?” Lyra’s voice sends a chill down my spine. I turn back to see her holding her hand up.

“What are you doing?”

“Making sure you can’t open the door until you hear me out.”

“What?” My annoyance is quickly turning to fear. I don’t know what’s going on, but I know that I don’t want to get Lyra any angrier than she already is. “Uh, o-okay. Let’s just calm down.” I take a deep breath. *Keep it together.* “I’m listening.” Lyra puts her arm down and gestures for me to sit on the piano bench. I oblige, and I wait.

“I’ll tell you what’s going on if you promise to keep quiet until I’m done.” I nod. “Good. Now, first off, my name isn’t Lyra. It’s Edith.” She pauses, and for a brief second I think back to when I first saw her—*but that’s not possible.* I blurted out,

“That’s my—

“Grandmother’s name, I know. It’s good to see you again, Aria.” My brain short-circuits. *What? She’s crazy! I have to get her out of here. I might have to move. Why in the hell did I let her in? I just met her—*

“Aria?” I came to and saw Lyra’s (Edith’s) hand waving in front of me. “I know this sounds crazy. Please say something.”

“Prove it.” I don’t know why I said this, but it was the first thing I could think of. I thought that if I could stump her, she would give up this notion and leave.

“Oh, okay. How?”

“Tell me something only my grandmother and I knew.” She thought for a moment, then reached over to the music box. She reached behind the ballerina and pulled up the platform to reveal a secret compartment in the box. She pulled out an old photograph. I freaked out.

“How did you know about that?”

“Because I’m your grandma. This is me.” Before she had died, Grandma Edith had talked to me in my room. She gave me an old picture of herself and told me a story about family keepsakes and that whenever I needed her, all I had to do is look at the picture, and I would be able to feel her there. I was six, so I had believed her. Now, here’s this woman who claims to be my long-lost grandma who knew about the secret compartment *and* the picture. I take a good look at her face. She had my same brown eyes, and her brown hair looked a lot like mine. Her face was a lot like mine too: heart-shaped, with a small nose, but a more angular chin than mine. She looked *exactly* like the picture. I stare in disbelief.

“Gram?” She smiles and nods. I start to tear up, and I jump up to give her the tightest hug I’ve ever given anyone. “But, how? How are you here? How are you younger?” She pulled back and wiped away my tears.

“Sweetheart, I was given a second chance. I gave you that picture so I could connect with you and appear in a corporeal form. Your strong emotional connection to me helped me to regain that power over time, which is why I haven’t shown up until now.” I smile. I brought my grandma back. But there was another question that needed answering.

“So, are you a ghost or...?” Her smile vanishes.

“Unfortunately, yes. Kind of. You’re the only one who can see me. I’m solid enough to touch things, so if I were to touch someone, they would feel it, but I only have enough energy to show myself to you.”

“Okay. That makes sense.” I’m just happy to have my grandmother back with me in any form.

Over the next few months, I’m able to really get to know my grandma. I went to classes during the day, and when I come home, she tells me stories about her life. One day we’re sitting on the couch in the living room when she tells me how she became interested in music to begin with. She found a love for singing when she was very young and heard jazz musicians in the city, but her family was not nearly as encouraging to her as she had been to me. Okay, that’s an understatement. They were horrible to her; she was never allowed to sing in the house, and if she was caught, she would get a beating from her father. She was told that her only goal should be to excel at the domestic tasks she would have to perform as a wife and mother. She shouldn’t concern herself with trying to make a career out of music.

“That’s terrible!”

“Well, that was the belief of the time. Now, in this day and age, I would be able to pursue my dreams without nearly as much criticism. I mean, if I had enough energy.”

“Grandma, I promise that we’ll find a way to bring you back, no matter what it takes.” She starts to say something, then seems to think better of it. “What is it?”

“There is one way I could come back.” I’m surprised; she never mentioned this before.

“Did you know that this whole time?” She nods, a mournful look on her face. “Why didn’t you tell me then?”

“Because I knew you wouldn’t approve of it.” *Huh?*

“How do you know? Just tell me how we can bring you back.” She sighs and gently puts her hands on my face.

“Sweetheart, I would have to possess you.”

“Very funny, grandma.” I give a half-hearted chuckle. She was silent. “You’re serious?” She gets off the couch and turns her back to me.

“See? I told you that you wouldn’t like it.”

“Well, duh! I’m sorry, Gram, but that’s just too crazy for me! There has to be another way. Can’t we, I don’t know, find a body that’s already...not-living?” I can’t believe the words coming out of my mouth. *Am I insane? That’s grave robbing! This is just too much. I need to think of something, and quick!* I put on my best poker face and touch her shoulder. She turns around to face me.

“Can I have some time to think about it?” She gives me a look of surprise and hope.

“Of course. How long do you need?” I think about it. *How long can I stall her? I need to do some research and figure out a way out of this.*

“Give me a week.” I’m scared what might happen if I make her wait longer.

“Alright. A week it is.”

“Good. Now, I need some sleep. This has been kind of a stressful day.” Grandma runs her hand through my hair.

“Of course, love.” I go into my room and shut the door. Then I break down in tears.

What the hell am I going to do? I have a week to do as much research as I can to find out how to put a ghost to rest. *I think she’s lost it. I love her so much, but I can’t let her possess me. I just can’t.* I have a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. For the first time in my life, I don’t trust my grandmother, and I know that she needs to, finally, move on from this world.

A week passes, and I have my plan. I don’t know if it’s a particularly *good* plan, but I have to try something. I get home from class to see my grandma sitting at the piano, watching the

music box as the ballerina spins to her music. She's humming along; she seems so serene, which almost makes me feel guilty for what I have to do. *I have to do this, or I'll never be free of her.*

"Hey, Grandma. I'm home." She turns around to look at me and smiles sweetly.

"Hello, sweetheart. How was your day?"

"It was good. Listen, it's been a week, and I've made my decision."

"Oh?" She gets up from the bench and walks over to me. "And what did you decide?"

"I can't do this." Her expression changes into something I've never seen before. I'm reminded that she's not *human* anymore. I can't lose my resolve though. "I can't share my body with you. It's not right. I have my own life to live, and since I've been thinking about it, I think it's time for you to move on." Silence. I turn back and make my way to the door.

"I need some air." I try to open the door, but it won't budge. *Uh-oh. Not again.*

"Grandma, open the door."

"I'm afraid I can't do that. I'm tired of waiting, and I had hoped that you would do this willingly, but perhaps not."

"What are you talking about?" I try to sound less afraid than I am. It doesn't work.

"Think about it. We could share the same body; you would still have me with you, and I could live out my dreams through you. We would have equal control." All of a sudden, she's directly in front of me, grabbing my arms, and I wince. "I thought you wanted to help me. We're family, and sometimes sacrifice is necessary." I can feel her starting to enter my mind, and with all the strength I have, I push her away. I had read about this kind of thing, and I try to implement the techniques I had read to keep her out of my mind and body. She keeps trying to force her way in, and I counter by pushing her out the best I can. I need to reach the music box. I kick her in the shin, and with a surprised look on her face, she lets go of me. I run over to the

music box and smash it onto the ground. I pick up the picture and pull out a lighter. By this time, Grandma had turned to face me, and when she realizes what I'm trying to do, she runs at me and knocks the lighter and the picture out of my hand. They land on the floor behind her. Then she slaps me.

"Stupid girl! What are you doing?" I'm in shock. She had never hit me before, even when she was alive. *She's completely lost it.*

"I'm trying to help you move on!" I shout, and I try to run past her to get to the picture and lighter. She grabs me again and twists my arm. I feel the bone break, and I fall to the floor in pain. She doesn't seem to know that I've landed right in front of the lighter, and the picture is only a few inches away. I could feel her standing over me, and the room felt icy cold.

"I don't need to move on! It's *my* time now! I should get to live out my dreams! You said so yourself! Now, if you won't give yourself over to me, I'll take you by force!" She grabs my broken arm and turns me over, making me scream. The room starts to fill with smoke. She looks above my head to see her picture burning. She screams and lunges at me, but as she's about to...I don't know, kill me?...flames start to travel up her body. Her screams turn from anger to agony as with the last of her strength, she tries to strangle me. I can feel the air leaving my body, and everything goes black.

I wake up in the hospital. The doctors tell me that I was lucky a neighbor had noticed the smoke and called the fire department. In addition to my broken arm, the origin of which I told them I couldn't remember, I also had some second-degree burns on my back. They tell me that my mother is in the waiting room if I wanted to see her. I tell them I do, and she bursts into tears the minute she walks in.

“Oh, baby, I’m so happy you’re awake!” She throws her arms around me and I wince.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I forgot about the burns. What do you remember?”

“Not much.” I’m telling the truth. I can’t remember why I’m here at all. I was told my apartment caught fire, but I can’t recall any of it. *My head is killing me. Why is my arm broken? What happened?* I look away from my mother to the mirror on the opposite wall. I look terrible. My face is pale and tired-looking, and my eyes were...were...

Ah, this feels good. Thank you for your generosity, Aria.

“What?”

My mom looks confused.

“Did you say something, sweetie?”

“Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

She can’t hear me, darling. Everything goes cold. I know that voice. Suddenly, my memories come flooding back. My arm. The picture. The fire. All that chaos. For *nothing*.

My head fills with laughter, and I start to scream.