

A mystery grows at Chimney Bluffs

Chapter 5: "Girl of stone"

by Jonathan Everitt

Illustration by Steve Smock

Eleanor smiled as she reached into her deep denim pocket and retrieved a key. The tiny cottage needed work, but it was hers. Unraveling curtains strained over window panes hazed by changing seasons and neglect. A back porch looked out over the Erie Canal through low-slung willows. A stone fireplace would bake away the April dampness.

Her rocking chair would go right here. The work table, over there. The supplies, back there.

The door creaked closed behind Eleanor as she set down her tired satchel on the dirty pinewood floor. It was early spring, and light rain left it speckled with tiny drops. But the sketchbooks within were safe and dry, and she bent down to pull them out—a mess of papers askew and marked with charcoal and graphite. Huge leaves of off-white pulp, unsorted, corners poking out from each other like kindergarten construction paper.

"Sea Child, it's time to come back," Eleanor whispered to her sketches, each one bearing a different angle of a stone sculpture she'd drawn from memory.

She'd never seen the Sea Child statue for herself. All she knew was what her mother had told her. It was light gray stone, three feet tall. A figure of a little girl in a simple dress. Hair swept up and loose, here and there a lock caught in some forgotten wind. A downward gaze, as if admiring a bed of daffodils or something written in the sand where it touched the water. A knowing grin beyond her years.

The original vanished decades ago—if it was ever real at all. But whenever Eleanor's long-dead mother had told her the story of Chimney Bluffs and its strange clearing in the woods, the statue was always present. A silent character in a ghost story. Someone's daughter. Or sister. Or mother. Or wife. A little girl without a name, who changed a family forever.

The rain returned to the cottage now, and Eleanor swept with a vengeance. It would be good to have this quiet, secret place. Here, tucked back in the trees from the canal like a chapel. A tiny dot between two ports, miles in each direction. A sacred undertaking, the resurrection of her muse. In utter solitude. Or so she'd hoped.

A stranger knocked as the spring shower took a dark turn and rumbled through the rough-cut eaves. Eleanor looked up, disappointed, then opened the door just a crack. A gust caught her loose gray hair as the doorway opened wide in the wind.

A teenage boy huddled against the downpour and she gestured him inside.

"Eleanor Josephson?" rushed from his mouth.

"What is it?" she closed the door behind him. His clothes dripped like laundry.

"I think this belongs to you," he said, reaching into his jacket.

He pulled out a battered leather journal, filled with recent bookmarks.

"The statue ... the Sea Child ..." said the boy. "I know what happened."

Eleanor's eyes hooked into his own as she stepped back in astonishment.

"I've been to Chimney Bluffs," he said. "It's all true."

To be continued...

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