

Susanne Abel: Hold My Hand Tighter, No. 104

- The long-awaited, highly emotional new novel by No. 1-bestselling author Susanne Abel
- Acclaimed by the press and loved by readers: 'Stay away from Gretchen' was on the SPIEGEL bestseller list for 195 weeks
- »Susanne Abel spins entertaining, humorous novels out of the adversity into which we are all born, and powerless to alter. I take my hat off to her!« *Stern*



There's no path that doesn't lead home sooner or later

Amid the turmoil of the end of the Second World War, a young boy is found in the middle of Germany. He doesn't seem to remember where he came from or anything else about himself, so he is given the name Hartmut, and an estimated age, and grows up in a Catholic children's home ruled by strict order and punishments.

During his time in the children's home, he meets a slightly older girl named Margret, a war orphan, who does her best to protect him. The two become a life-line for each other, and decide to never let each other go. Wise, sensitive and touching, Susanne Abel tells the story of a lifelong love between two children trying with all their might to forget their traumatic past.



Susanne Abel
Hold My Hand Tighter, No. 104
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Susanne Abel worked as an educator before her time as a student of film studies led to directing numerous documentaries for German television. Since 2017, she has devoted her time entirely to writing. Her acclaimed debut novel 'Stay away from Gretchen' stormed to the top of the SPIEGEL bestseller list and was a sensational success, as was its successor 'What I Never Said'. Susanne Abel lives mostly in Cologne.

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(OT: Du must meine Hand fester halten, Nr. 104)

Sample Translation
By Lesley Schuldt

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Dear readers,

To begin with, I would like to warn you: this book deals with the violence and sexual abuse institutionalized children faced in the German post-war era, as well as the psychological consequences which are still evident today. If you are sensitive to these issues, you might prefer to read my novel with a trusted person close by, with whom you could discuss what you've read.

Susanne Abel

ONE

2006

The young girl is awoken by the rain pounding against the window. It is still dark outside, and it roars out just as weirdly as on the large bridge, which she walks across with her grandpa sometimes, where the cars make such a racket that you have to yell just to be heard.

She grabs Freddy, her cross-eyed, banana-clutching, cuddly gorilla, creeps through the apartment, and opens the door to the living room where her mother always sleeps on a mattress on the floor in front of the heater.

“Julia?” The little girl whispers because her mommy doesn’t like it if someone startles her during the night. But there isn’t any answer. Her mommy isn’t there.

She climbs up on the stool by the window to see if Julia’s red car is down below. But she can’t see anything other than that the storm is sweeping the tiles off the roof of the house across the way. Frightened, she hugs Freddy tightly and covers his ears. Her heart pounds wildly.

When the wind dies down and it isn’t as noisy outside, she pulls her raincoat on over her pajamas, slips into her yellow rubber boots, gets the little stick she needs to push the buttons on the elevator out of her room, and takes the elevator down the nine floors with Freddy. Then she runs off. Out into the night.

She knows exactly how to get to Grandpa and Grandma’s. Towards the bridge, under which are the people Grandpa sometimes gives something to eat or drink. She’s afraid of the one who doesn’t have teeth anymore, so before she gets there, she crosses the four-lane street at the

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traffic light, which is just blinking now. Attracted by the flickering blue light and the loud sound of a chainsaw, she keeps walking with Freddy.

“Where are you going in the middle of the night?” asks a fireman who is cutting up a fallen tree with his colleagues.

She doesn’t say anything because she’s not supposed to talk to strangers.

“I’m Kevin,” he says. “You don’t need to be afraid of me.” And then he pulls out a golden fleece blanket and puts it around her shoulders like a cape. “So, you don’t catch a cold. What are you doing out here alone?”

He stays with her, even when a police car stops in front of them and a police woman and her colleague climb out and crouch in front of her. She asks about her mommy. And what her daddy’s name is. The little girl stays silent. Under the blanket, she hugs Freddy tighter and listens while the policeman says into the radio that she’s about four years old.

“I’m already five.”

Kevin smiles then and tells her that he has a five-year-old daughter. “What’s your name?”
“Emily.”

“A beautiful name,” the police officer says. “Do you know where you live?”
“Gernsheimer Street.”

“What number?”

Emily raises four fingers.

“That’s one of the low income housing blocks,” she hears the police officer say.

Then she has to get into the police car with Freddy because they’re going to take her home. She gets to keep the golden blanket.

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“What are your parents’ names?” the police woman asks when they’re standing in front of the nine-story building.

“My mommy’s name is Julia,” whispers Emily.

“And what else?”

She presses her lips together.

“Is their name Knosalla? Schmitz? Or Ataman? Vuković?”

Emily doesn’t react. Not until the woman says “Willeiski” does she nod.

The police officer rings the bell, and when no one answers, they drive to the police station. There they give her warm tea and ask her more questions, for which Emily doesn’t have any answers.

“How is it that no one misses a child?” someone asks.

After work, Hartmut Willeiski, who everyone calls Hardy, gets on his motor scooter and, unlike normal, doesn’t go right home, but rather to Gernsheimer Street to see if everything is alright with his granddaughter, Julia, and her young daughter, Emily. He’s been unsettled the entire day working at the mill, by the news that the tornado had left behind a path of destruction in the early morning hours in Cologne-Kalk, killing three people.

When he sees that the multi-storied building where they both live is undamaged, a heavy stone lifts from his heart. Julia’s red Fiesta isn’t in the parking lot, and no one answers when he rings the bell, so Hardy hopes the two have driven to his house, as they often do, where Emily likes to play in the backyard, and his wife, Margret, always takes care of the entire family.

On the drive home, he has to take several detours because the fire department and streetcleaners are still busy cleaning up the remnants of the storm. Barely twenty minutes later,

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Hardy turns into Salm Street in Cologne-Poll, sees Julia’s car from a distance, and is relieved.

Soon his little great-grand-daughter will come running out of the house or backyard to tell him excitedly and without stopping to breathe, about everything she’s been doing. But today, nothing is as usual.

“That fucking child protective services! They can’t do that!” he hears his granddaughter, Julia, yelling through the partially open window.

Puzzled, he opens the back door to the kitchen. Everyone is sitting around the table: Julia, Margret, and even his daughter Sabine, who rarely comes over. “What’s wrong? Where’s Emily?”

“In a children’s home! They said that she’s not safe with me. They can’t just take my little girl away, Grandpa!” Julia says in a tearful voice.

He looks at Margret aghast, who likewise has dismay written all over her face. The blood rushes to his legs, and he feels dizzy. He has so many questions, wants to say something, but nothing comes out of his mouth.

“Sit down, Hardy.” Margret jumps up.

But he shakes his head, leans against the doorframe, pulls a pack of cigarettes out of his jacket with shaking hands, lights up, and blows the smoke outside because Margret doesn’t like it when anyone smokes inside. He tries to comprehend what he’s just heard. But his mind is blank. Through a fog, he hears Julia crying, Sabine’s accusations, Margret’s attempts at mediation.

“Now you have to pay the price. How can you leave a five-year-old child alone in weather like that?” Sabine is getting more worked up.

Suddenly, she’s standing next to him, smoking and talking insistently to him. “She probably let some guy pick her up again.”

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“You’re one to talk! Shut your stupid trap!” Julia snaps, and her voice cracks.

“I always said that she shouldn’t have the child because she’s so immature.”

“You don’t have any right to say anything to me. You were just eighteen when you had me!”

“Yes, but not seventeen like you. Besides, I was engaged to your father. And didn’t go running to my mother for every little thing and expect her to bail me out.”

“Would you two just shut up!” Margret steps between them.

But Sabine doesn’t even consider that. As if Julia weren’t even in the room, she says, annoyed, that she barely slept because she had already woken her up early and sounded the alarm. “She called me constantly all day so I would put in a good word for her with child protective services.”

“Once. One single time I asked you to do something for me!” Julia yells.

“I don’t think so! You can’t even count, can you?” barks Sabine. “I can’t just drop everything I’m doing at work!”

[...]

TWO

1945

The woman removes the cardboard sign, which hangs on a string around his neck. “He’s from Sopot. Children’s transport four from Gdańsk. The rest isn’t legible,” she says and looks down at him.

“What’s your name? What do they call you?”

He looks at her wide-eyed and doesn’t answer.

“What did your mother call you?”

“Mother,” he whispers and thinks about her cold hand that he held while Batsi buried Mommy in the snow.

“WHAT? ARE? YOUR? PARENTS?’ NAMES?” asks a toothless man loudly and very slowly.

He can’t say anything. He doesn’t know. He’s afraid.

“DO? YOU? KNOW? WHO? YOU? FLED? WITH?” The man doesn’t let up.

He trembles and watches as the stranger studies the cardboard sign they hung around his neck, when Batsi was still with him. We don’t want to lose each other, she had said.

“The deportation card starts with WIL. Maybe Willeiski,” the man says, picking up a pen and writing something down. “What’s the next first name on the list?

“Hartmut,” says the woman.

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Another lady pushes him to the next table, undresses him. He is good. He’s placed on something.

“Twenty-six and a half pounds,” she says, pressing him against the wall. Something touches his head. “Three feet three inches.”

She sets him in front of a man in a white coat, sitting on a stool. “Open your mouth and say ‘Ah’,” he orders, looking at him seriously. The man wears glasses like Daddy.

He trembles, wants to obey, but he can’t open his lips.

The man forces his mouth open with his big hand and peers in. “The molars broke through some time ago. So, he must be three. Note his birth year as 1942, Sister,” he says over his head.

Then the lady dresses him again. She says that from now on, his name is Hartmut Willeiski. He’s afraid and wants to go to Batsi. But he doesn’t cry because he’s a big boy. And brave.

He has to sit on the little bench. With the other children with new names.

With Hajo. Hanno. Hans. Hannelore. Harald. Harry. Hasso.

They don’t say anything either. Only the grownups can be heard.

THREE

2006

Hardy lies in bed and can't fight the images climbing out of the fog of his mind. They always appear when he wants to surrender to sleep, when he feels the control over his thoughts slipping away.

How the young boy was shaved completely and deloused.

Doesn't understand anything.

Is lonely.

Is hungry.

His entire life, it seems as if these experiences belonged to someone else. But now that Emily is in a home, these images have become a clear memory to which he is helplessly exposed. He knows he is this young boy. And he senses how the tears he shed inwardly threaten to drown him.

He gets up quietly so Margret won't wake up, and slips out. Out behind the house to smoke. The moon slides out from behind the branches of the walnut tree. This moon that has always been there with him, which brightened the darkness for him as a child when he was locked up again because he wanted to escape. And he wonders if Emily will be locked up, too, so she doesn't run away.

Hardy stubs out the cigarette in a tin can and goes into the shed next to the aviary. He has to do something to stop these thoughts. So, he tidies up, sorts the cords he has pulled out of one of the construction site containers by length, and jams them into a shelf next to the replacement

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parts for his old motor scooter. Then he restacks the reinforced paper bags from the mill in which he stores the animal feed, and is glad when it’s finally morning and he can go to work.

After work, he drives to Cologne-Merheim, to the psychiatric hospital where Julia was placed a week ago. As usual, she’s lying there with her eyes closed when he arrives. Hardy pulls the chair up next to her bed and watches her. She looks so fragile, he thinks, and is glad that she’s here. Protected from herself. Voluntarily involuntarily because she couldn’t stop crying during this never-ending period waiting for a resolution for Emily. And, also because the lawyer said that another screaming tantrum at child protective services, would mean the chances of getting Emily back again would be next to zero. As usual, she hasn’t touched her dinner.

“My little Julia,” he whispers. “You have to eat something.”

“Grandpa,” she says softly, opening her eyes and smiling tiredly. Using the remote, she sits upright, pulls the tray towards herself, and sips the black tea.

“Is there any news?” she asks.

He shakes his head and hopes she’ll eat the cheese sandwich.

But she pushes the tray away again and puts the bed back down.

Hardy would like to tell her not to lose hope and that everything will be fine. But he is a man of few words. And certainly not of empty promises. So, he doesn’t say anything, rummages around in his inside pocket, and pulls out a candy bar like the ones he comforted Julia with as a child, and is relieved when she at least takes a bite.

The next day, Margret visits him during his lunch break. She never does that. She has an envelope in her hand.

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“We have been awarded temporary custody.” Excitedly, she reads the letter from the family court to him.

Hardy hears the words like “Emergency removal” and that they are obligated to accept the offer from the child and youth services. And then … “When?” he interrupts her.

“The day after tomorrow. We desperately need doors. If youth services inspect our home, and see we don’t have any, they could still maybe …”

Right after work, he attaches a trailer to his motor scooter, races through Poll, and pulls everything that he could possibly use out of a container filled with construction debris from an old building that is being renovated. He works all night. He lays bricks, saws, hammers, and paints.

When he drives to work the next morning without having had a minute of sleep, the house is in a condition he never wanted it to be in. Because, back then, when he had built it with his own hands, he swore there would never be a door in the house, because he couldn’t bear to be locked in.

“I found a bird on the Alfred Schütte Boulevard,” says an apprentice and shows Hardy the featherless little crow. “You can nurse him back to health, can’t you?”

Actually, he has other things to do right now than to take care of a bird, but when he sees the frightened little animal that had probably been thrown out of the nest by the parents because it has crippled little feet in the box, he can’t say no. After work, he carries the bird home under his jacket, looks for worms in the backyard, and feeds it with tweezers. Then he makes a nest for

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it out of hay in a cardboard box and puts it next to the aviary where he is nurturing other injured feathered creatures.

“We have to tell Julia,” he says at dinner.

“No,” Margret says. “She has to recover in the clinic first. We need to have some peace and quiet here.”

“And what do we say to the young girl?”

“That her mommy is traveling.”

“This is your room now,” says Grandma Margret, and shows Emily where she’ll sleep. Upstairs under the roof.

She hugs Freddy tightly like she did at the children’s home when the woman, who told her to call her Sandra, came and drove her through Cologne in her car.

“But why can’t I sleep with you anymore?”

Emily sees Grandma and Grandpa exchange a look.

“Because you’re a big girl now,” says Grandma.

Sandra looks strange and says that it’s very cramped.

“We brought up our daughter, Sabine, here, and even Emily’s mother grew up here for a little bit,” says Grandpa and strokes Emily’s head.

Then they walk down the narrow stairs, and Grandma offers Sandra coffee and a piece of cake with cream.

“Do you like cake?” Sandra asks.

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Emily nods and just wants her to stop asking questions. And she wants Grandma and Grandpa not to be nervous anymore.

[...]

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“You’re a sweetheart,” Sister Babsi said and hugged him.

Hartmut felt a tear roll down his cheek. He wiped it away quickly, ashamed. Because he was a German boy. And German boys didn’t cry.

In the evening, when the lights had been turned off, he thought about Sister Babsi and her smile stayed with him into his sleep.

In his dream, Mommy called out loudly, “Babsi!”

She was a big girl, and she was crying.

There was snow everywhere. And large black birds. And Mommy’s hand was very cold.

“Stop it, you idiot!” Kai-Uwe shook him.

Hartmut was immediately awake, and when the boy, who was older and the leader of the dormitory, had gone back to bed, he felt that his pillow was wet from his tears.

The next morning, even before they were awoken, an unusual sound drove all the boys out of the dormitory to the window.

“A truck is coming!” Kai-Uwe shouted.

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Even Hartmut, one of the smallest, stood on tiptoes and watched as a large vehicle drove up outside. It was like the one that had brought him here. Men climbed out and unloaded crates from where he and the other children sat at the time.

“What’s going on? There’s nothing to see!”

Hartmut startled. Suddenly, Sister Generosa was in the room. No one had heard her come in.

With lightning speed, they stood rigidly next to their beds and waited until the order came for them to march to the washroom. He was so glad that his diaper was dry because Sister Generosa was with them the whole time.

“42, 17, 38, 104. Step forward,” she ordered them.

104, that’s me, thought Hartmut, forgetting to hang his night shirt on the hook, and followed the other boys into the storeroom where, while being supervised, the older girls handed them their Sunday clothing.

“You’re going to be filmed,” Hartmut heard a girl whisper to Kai-Uwe.

He didn’t understand what she meant.

When they had changed and were making their beds upstairs, Kai-Uwe said that the men were filmmakers. And that they worked for the German Red Cross. He had even heard that in newsreels that were shown in the movie theaters, children said which relatives they were looking for. “That’s our chance to finally get out of this miserable children’s home!”

The rattling of a bunch of keys silenced him. Sister Generosa emerged and inspected every detail. “Do it properly! Otherwise, no one will find you,” she said and looked sternly down at Hartmut.

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At breakfast, the men sat together with the Red Cross sisters at the nuns’ table. Hartmut couldn’t think about anything other than doing it properly. What exactly ‘it’ was, he didn’t know, and he could barely eat anything even though he was hungry.

There wasn’t the usual Amen after the prayer of thanksgiving.

“Father in Heaven,” continued Mother Bernarda, “Bless this film work so that the poor souls entrusted to us will be led back into the arms of their families.”

“We ask that you hear our prayers,” replied the other nuns.

Hear us. Hear us. Hear us, thought Hartmut, and pressed his praying hands tightly together. Furtively, he squinted and saw that one of the filmmakers didn’t have his eyes closed and sat with his arms crossed. He was the tallest of them and sat right next to the Mother Superior.

Surely, she or Sister Generosa would reprimand him, he thought. Or maybe even punish him.

“Amen,” said the Mother Superior.

And everyone else said, “Amen.”

Except for Hartmut and the filmmaker. When he saw Mother Bernarda smile at the man, he was certain that he was more important than she was.

He had to go with the other children into the chapter house and take a seat on a long bench. He watched as the man who had not prayed lit up a cigarette, and another one turned on a bright light. Then the first girl was called up and had to stand in the light.

Mother Bernarda sat next to the smoking director, who now gave all the orders.

“Audio?”

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Another man who held a long pole in his hand answered, “Rolling.”

“Camera?”

Now the man standing behind a crate on three long legs said, “Rolling.”

With his mouth agape, Hartmut watched as the youngest of the five men held a slate under the girl’s nose and said loudly, “Search service. Child one. Take one.” After that, he clapped the top part of the slate down and jumped quickly to the side.

“And action!” the man sitting next to Mother Bernarda called then.

The girl with the blonde curls said softly, “My name is Marie-Luise Bednarz from Königshütte. And, I lost my parents while fleeing...”

“Cut!” called the director. “You have to speak louder. And look into the camera first. Then to the right and finally to the left.”

The commands follow again and after “Search service. Child one. Take two.” Marie-Luise tried again.

It still wasn’t right because first she stuttered and then she had obviously forgotten her lines. Hartmut knew that she knew them because earlier, when they sat on the bench, she had mumbled them to herself over and over. Red Cross Sister Babsi spoke softly to the girl and then stepped to the side with an encouraging nod.

“Search service. Child one. Take six.”

“Smile!” Mother Bernarda called and clapped her hands.

Marie Luise startled, and Hartmut saw that the film director didn’t like that because he glared angrily at the Mother Superior and lit another cigarette.

When everyone was finally satisfied, Ingelore was up next.

“Search service. Child two. Take one.”

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“My name is Ingelore Ratzack and I’m seven years old and am from Berlin. My mother died because she poisoned herself, and my father was on a war ship, the last I knew.”

Then Heinrich from Preussisch Eylau was filmed. ”I’m looking for my father, who is a soldier, and my sisters, Ruth and Annemarie, whom I lost while fleeing. And my mother, who was buried alive in Berlin.”

One child after another was filmed. Girls and boys. Older ones and younger ones. Many of the young ones couldn’t speak, but had to smile.

It occurred to Hartmut that Sister Generosa made sure that those who had already gone, left the room; the others moved up, and, at her signal, stepped forward.

“Search service. Children twenty-one and twenty-two. Take one.”

“We’re looking for our mommy and daddy. Please help us find them again,” said the two little girls simultaneously and fearfully.

Hartmut knew that he would be up soon. He thought about Sister Generosa’s words. That he had to do it properly because otherwise, no one would find him. Then he had to smile. And speak.

In his mind, he repeated what he wanted to say. *My name is Hartmut Willeiski. I’m five years old and am from Sopot near Gdańsk.*

But then he couldn’t think about it anymore because he had to go to the bathroom. Urgently. It wasn’t bathroom time, though. He couldn’t just stand up and disrupt everyone. He wasn’t allowed to. And it was almost his turn.

[...]

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“Is that any way to speak to your grandfather?” Margret snaps at her. It’s unbelievable that Julia, of all people with her strange lifestyle, is putting on such a show of being a devoted mother. When she doesn’t stop the accusations, she wants to yell at her that Hardy suffered a lot in the children’s home. But she bites her tongue. “What are you wearing, anyway?” Julia tugs at her much-too-short skirt with which she’s wearing over-the-knee, patent leather boots.

“It doesn’t matter. I was about to go out.”

“In the middle of the day? With whom?”

“I’m twenty-four and can do what I want.”

Margret knows that it would be better for her not to say anything else because every additional word would be like pouring oil on a fire. But she can’t help herself. “What’s his name this time?”

“It’s none of your business! I won’t let you tell me anymore that my child isn’t safe with me. I’m going to child protective services tomorrow.”

“Feel free. The name of the appropriate woman is Mrs. Hundgeburth. Second floor. Third door on the right.”

At night, when Emily has settled down again and Julia is long gone, Margret lies wide awake next to Hardy. She can tell by his breathing that he isn’t asleep either and knows that Julia is right: the child isn’t safe with him because he is always incapacitated in an emergency. But one other thought keeps her awake. An appearance by Julia at child protective services could ultimately cause Emily to be sent back to the children’s home. And she has to prevent that at all

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costs. At four a.m., she wanted nothing more than to get up and call Julia to offer her what her granddaughter has demanded for a long time: that Emily be allowed to spend the weekend with her every now and then.

The next morning, Emily walks hand-in-hand in silence with her grandpa along Siegburger Street to school. She has a guilty conscience since they always fight because of her. And because she doesn't want him to be so sad.

“Was that your daddy?” her desk mate, Sophie, asks after she climbs out of one of the many cars in front of the school and walks with Emily into the classroom.

“No, my grandpa.”

“Why doesn't your daddy bring you?”

“He doesn't have any time. He's in the fire department and always has to cut up trees.”

As always, Grandpa picks her up after school. She notices that he is still sad. As always, he takes her school bag and has a little chocolate for her. Yet, somehow, it's different. He doesn't even laugh as usual when she sings the song about the hen house grandma, but only smiles.

When they get home, her mommy is there. She eats with them, and Emily is surprised that Grandma and she don't fight. Julia even clears the soup bowls before dessert. She never does that.

“We've decided that you can go with your mother until Sunday afternoon,” Grandma says after the pudding.

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“Can I sleep there, too?”

“Of course!” says Julia. “We’ll go right upstairs and pull together some things. Okay?”

Emily quickly packs her pajamas and even her cuddly gorilla, Freddy, into the new backpack her mommy brought. But before she gets into the car with her, she runs into the backyard to her grandpa, who is taking care of his birds. Kevin, the crow who can’t fly, hops in pleasure at seeing her, as always. But Emily doesn’t have any time to feed him or play with him now.

“Grandpa?”

He turns around. She opens her hand and shows him the wiggly tooth that fell out when the boys were racing in circles with her. No one had noticed it yet.

“It’s for you,” she says.

Finally, Grandpa smiles again. But in his eyes, there is a gleam that Emily has never seen before.

“Are you crying?”

He shakes his head, takes the tooth, and hugs her.

“That is a beautiful present.” His voice sounds odd.

Emily would rather have stayed with him, even though she is so happy that she is finally going to be able to spend the weekend with her mommy.