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## Discovery

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## DISCOVERY

by Frances Ames

Carrie counted the blocks from the traffic signal, peering squint-eyed through the windshield. Three blocks, the big white building, side entrance, third floor. She'd been on this street, which was really Highway 34, the part that went through town, at least once a week. Old houses, once occupied by wealthy families during the lumbering days, now turned into real estate offices and investment agencies, lined the sidewalks. The offices seemed somehow foreign to Carrie as her eyes sorted them over. Her "appointment" was at a boarding house she never knew existed.

She saw it ahead and shuddered. Why did she have to get stuck with this family errand, as her mother had called it. Carrie remembered her mother's exasperated voice as she had hung up the phone that morning.

"That was Grandma. Seth is back."

Seth. Bum, beggar, drunk, leech, and uncle. The words marched through Carrie's head. Her relatives had neatly classified him as such and left no reason for doubt. He wandered into town every few years and usually managed to spend the cold winter months at Grandma's. There was a cot in the basement for him. He spent perhaps half the nights there. When he got too drunk for Grandma to handle, which was generally around the first of the month when the government sent out social security checks, she had him put in the county jail for the night. That's how the story went. Story? That was it; that was his life. It made good gossip anyway, Carrie thought.

"He called Grandma from some flophouse downtown. Says he fell and hurt his knee. He wants to come home to mama for awhile."

Carrie's mom was sarcastic. And with good reason, thought Carrie, if any of mom's stories were accurate.

The attempted suicide when mom and dad were newly-married and young was the beginning. They had taken him in out of sympathy, or vulnerability as Carrie's mom called it now.

Carrie's dad died in a car accident two years later when Carrie was a child just barely able to walk and Seth was then asked to leave. But Carrie's mom kept abreast of Seth's doings through Grandma, though his exact whereabouts usually remained undetermined. So the collection of stories grew larger and took on a distinct flavor of notoriety and mystery.

Carrie watched the signal impatiently. She wanted to pick Seth up, take him to Grandma's house, and get the disgusting affair over with. She supposed she would be expected to add a tale to the collection now, too. She hoped he wasn't drunk or something up in that room. She didn't need any background material. As the signal changed, Carrie lurched across the intersection and parked up the street past the white house, deciding that she would be checking out an office receptionist job if an unexpected acquaintance should decide to ask.

She walked hurriedly up the steps and knocked. A tiny old lady answered. It was the landlady. Carrie asked for directions to 'Mr. Seth Martin's room.'

"Around the corner and up three flights. But why, child?"

"Actually, I don't really know him," Carrie answered as if in reply. The landlady looked unsatisfied. "I'm his niece," Carrie said.

As she turned to walk up the first flight of stairs, she saw him coming down, slowly, slowly both hands gripping the handrail. A frayed satchel was on the step below him. He stepped down next to it, then moved the satchel down to the next step, and started over again. He was horribly thin, with sunken cheeks and grayish, wispy hair. He seemed to have too much skin, his face and arms were so wrinkled. His head

hung, his shoulders hung. His frame was barely enough to support his body. And beneath his baggy trousers, his knee was visibly swollen. At the last step, he finally lifted his head as if to acknowledge her presence.

"Little Carrie . . . Carrie. Ma said it was you that was comin'. I know you don't think much of doing something for this old man but I'm glad of it, for sure."

Old, thought Carrie. You're only a child. A child almost fifty and nearly eighty. She bowed to lift the satchel and then reached out to hold his arm, whispering, "How are you . . . Uncle Seth?"