

From the second it touched her tongue, Julia Mcavern knew something was wrong. The usual tangy-sweetness had been replaced by the flavor of bitter trauma and fear. It wasn't until she tasted the staleness of her own blood that she linked in to what was happening to her. She tried to grab hold of the end of the piece of candy but its grasp was tightening as it weaved its way throughout her mouth. Julia ran into her kitchen, searching for something to give her some sense of relief. She was getting weaker as the blood loss began to accumulate. It seemed as though the candy was expanding, spearing down the center of her tongue like sharp-edged branches on an oak tree. She reached for the dual edge slicing knife her Mother had given her and Kevin for their second Wedding anniversary. Before she did the unthinkable, she signed the symbol of the cross, hoping to see peace on the other side.

She held onto the knife as best she could with shaking hands and swiftly began to saw into her mouth as deep back as she could past the candies edge. The pain was excruciating for only a brief moment. She soon feel forward, hitting her head on the edge of the counter. She collapsed to the floor, now bathing in the thick hot pool of her own blood. Slowly, mere seconds after Julia Mcavern laid dead on her kitchen floor, with a candy cane tightly wrapped around her mutilated tongue, a harsh breeze circulated the room. And next to her body, laid the small bag from which the candy in all its curved peppermint delight originated from. A breeze swept the bag into the air, if only for a moment, in which the label read, *Mabel, My Sweet*, before it found its way out the window and back into the night.

Harry Callahan was a hard-working man with a heavy heart. He opened his candy store, Mabel My Sweet, two weeks ago. It was an idea, however, that had been on his mind for two years. And it was exactly that amount of time in which he had lost his Mabel, subsequently naming his new venture into entrepreneurship after her. Her death was a sad one, not only for her widowed father, but for a small town that loved the little girl like she was each of their own. One night, on his way home from work, Harry called the babysitter and told her she could leave and that he would only be home in another five minutes. But along the way, he saw a big sign that read, **Christmas Shoes on Sale**. With only a week before Christmas, he knew his seven year old wanted only one thing this year: ruby red slippers just like Dorothy. He had been having such a hard time finding even just a pair of plain red shoes this time of year for a young girl that he had almost given up hope. He stopped in and found exactly what he was looking for. They were the most beautiful sparkling red little girl shoes one could ever see. They were so bright, they would've made Judy Garland add sunglasses to her list of travel items to Oz. The line was a bit longer than he had hoped, but after twenty minutes, he was back in his car and ready to see his greatest gift of all get her greatest gift of all.

As he approached his front door, he felt a sudden uneasiness that tingled throughout his entire body. He looked down as his hands began to shake. Something wasn't right. He somehow managed to get the door open after fiddling to find the right key amid his tense state. When he walked in the door, he saw her. Mabel was lying on the floor, face down. She wasn't moving, and he knew immediately, she wasn't breathing. He scooped her up and laid her onto the couch. Before he reached for her pulse, he could see in her cold blank eyes, which appeared as an off-set to her freshly blue skin, that she was no longer with him.

According to police records and the medical examiner, it seemed as if Mabel had been allergic to the nuts the babysitter had been snacking on, and without having prior knowledge of such an allergy, began snacking on the nuts as her throat closed up. While it wasn't confirmed that nuts were the cause of death, Mabel had appeared to have choked to death. Two years later, the image of his daughters lifeless body and knowledge that had he not called the babysitter to leave early and had he not stopped to buy those shoes, his Mabel would've still been here haunted him greatly. The guilt of that night never left, even as he smiled at patrons with what seemed an endearing heart, was actually a heavy one.

As he got ready to close his shop for the night, Harry reflected on the upcoming Christmas holiday, merely two days away, knowing another lonely one was ahead. Yet, somehow he hoped his new store would bring him the peace of mind he needed to make it through. His old passion had been product marketing, but since Mabel's death, he had to make candy his new one. Mabel loved candy; her favorite was the Christmas classic, the candy cane. Something about its upside down "J" shape and the swirls of red and white delighted her to no end. This year for Christmas, Harry wanted this store. He wanted it for her. She used to tell her father before she went to bed at night sometimes, that her dream would be to live in a candy land with him and her Mother, who had passed on when Mabel was two. *"One, Two, Three, just you, Mommy, and me...in a candy land to be!"* That is what Harry could still hear his little girl say. And it was because of that, he decided to honor his child's fantasy with a candy land that anyone could lose themselves in.

The store wasn't incredible large, yet it beamed with excitement and seasonal delight. The moment you walked in, the scent of hot chocolate and cinnamon swirls clogged your senses. It wasn't very popular, yet, but several patrons had come in and sampled little bits here and there, a few over the weeks buying some candies for their children, mostly mixed chocolate bars, and the special liquor flavored ones for themselves. Just yesterday, however, Harry was very pleased when a young woman in her late twenties named Julia Mcavern bought a small bag of his special candy canes, of which he had been nicknaming *Mabel's Upside down J's*. There was something about giving the joy of Mabel's favorite candy of all to others that gave him a sense of right. He knew in his heart his little girl would've wanted others to enjoy the minty sweetness that she was able to enjoy not so long ago.

As he closed the cash register for the night and began to put on his coat, a knock came at the door. It was ten fifty-one at night and Harry was exhausted, and felt that if he stayed open another hour longer, the sugar fumes in the air would suffocate him. He walked over to the door and saw a young blonde woman and an elderly woman by her side. The blonde tapped lightly on the glass door as her older companion stood shivering in the night's chilly air with a bright red jacket and an impatient smirk on her face. Harry walked over and unlocked the door, letting the two women in.

"Thank you so much sir, I know it's late, but my Grandmother really wanted to stop and check out your shop", the young blonde said.

"Well, I was just about to close up, but what's a couple of new beautiful faces to end my night, right?" Harry said with a sincere laugh.

“Pfft,” the older woman scoffed as she began browsing and inspecting some of the bins with candy.

“I’m Elanora,” the young blonde woman said, extending her hand out to Harry.

“Harry Callahan, owner, candy man!”

“You know, I wouldn’t go around waving that title to people if I were you.” Elanora said. “People might get the wrong idea that if they say your name five times, you’ll appear to them and shove bees in their mouth.” She laughed as Harry stood there a bit confused.

“The movie Candy Man?...Sorry, I watch a lot of weird shit.”

The older woman stood in the corner of the shop, shaking a box of chocolate cordials, immediately grabbing Harry’s attention.

“Oh Mam, please don’t do that, they tend to crack easily.”

“Well, then what good are they? Most of this stuff looks like cabooney! You order your goods from Indonesia or something?”

As Harry attempted to reassure the older woman of his importing choices, Elanora began to browse the other side of the shop. There was something about the intoxicating smell of cinnamon and cocoa dipped sweets of all kind that could put her in a trance. She enjoyed the rush, if only for a moment, as she suddenly began to feel something else. A wave of intensity came over her, a mix of fear and childish curiosity. It led her to a small display bin of candy canes. She didn’t understand why she was so suddenly drawn to them, considering they were her least favorite candy. Even during this time of year, the thought of peppermint eclipsed in corn syrup was as appealing to her as chewing gum and downing a bottle of cough syrup. But something about this bin had taken over her. She found herself standing directly over them, suddenly transfixed by the various intertwining shapes within the wooden barrel. She thought for a moment they were moving, like worms under a rock. She blinked, thinking her mind was in over-drive mode because of all the driving she had been doing to help her Grandmother Christmas shop all week. But as she edged in closer, she saw something else.

Amongst the red stripes and tightly plastic wrapped pulled canes was something blue burrowing near the bottom. She thought she’d heard a child’s laugh. She turned to the rest of the store but only saw the owner and her grandmother on the other side. She looked back into the bin and reached towards the center, drawn like a magnet to a fridge. Bells rang in her ears and for a second she thought she was experiencing an epiphany of joy. But the joy turned to panic as the blurred blue object reached for her, pulling her down by her coat further towards the barrel. It was a sharp pull, violently swinging Elanora face first into the candy canes. She felt like she had been dunked under-water, her chest feeling pressed down on as she struggled to make out what was beneath the deep force. What she thought was blood began to trickle alongside her face. She felt hot, like she had been a piece of meat left to rot in the sun. She was then able to see more clearly that the red ooze sticking to every inch of her was actually the melting candy canes. They burned her eyes and skin just by being in their mere presence. The same

blue hand that pulled her down was now reaching for her once more. As a connecting body began to show its form to her, she heard the sound of laughter. And as quickly as she was pulled under, she was jolted back up.

She gasped for breath, leaping backwards in shock, knocking down a nearby display of jelly beans. The attention of the room was now on her as both her Grandmother and Harry rushed towards her. She touched her face for signs of the sticky peppermint residue that appeared to be burning her just a few seconds ago.

“Is everything ok?” Harry mused as he began to pick up some of the candy that Elanora had knocked down.

“No, I’m fine. I just...what did you put in those candy canes?”

“Well, actually, we here at Mabel my Sweet—“

Both women looked at him, and then around the small, seemingly one-man managed shop in contemplation of that statement.

“Well, I, I mean, call them Mabel’s Upside Down J’s.”

“Cute...but where I’m from, which is fucking earth, they’re called candy canes,” the old woman snapped.

“Grandma, please—“

“Oh, I’m not going to apologize for the fact that he almost gave you a heart attack bubala! What did you have another one of your allergy seizures?”

“Oh My God, I didn’t know you had...well, I don’t really know what that is, but I’m so sorry if it’s something from my store!” Harry was urgent and uneasy about harming a customer. His main goal for his store was happiness. Happiness and comfort in honor of Mabel.

“Oh no, I’m ok. It’s just...”

She didn’t know what to say. She looked at her Grandmother and back to Harry and could tell by their faces they thought she was having some sort of “episode,” and for Elanora, this type of episode wasn’t something new.

“You know what Grandma, I think we should maybe come back another day this week, It’s late and I’m sure this man wants to close up and go home...we should do the same.”

“Yeah, but I want my candy-canes first.”

Elanora shuttered at the thought of taking even a single one of those melting devil-curves home with them, while Harry perked up with excitement.

“Oh wonderful! Just take one of the small bags over there and just pile in as much as you like,” Harry beamed.

“Well go easy Grams, your doctor said you need to severely watch your sugar, so just get a few ok?”

“Oh what does he know? My last visit he gave me a referral to see the podiatrist...stupid idiot...I’m not a plant!”

“Well do you have sugar free versions?”

“Oh no, dear I’m sorry we don’t,” Harry rued. “But if you buy a bag now, I can surely make sure to put in an inquiry about getting in a whole slew of sugar free items if you’d like?”

“Don’t bother...that artificial crap is laced with camel chemicals. It makes my waste look like mashed fruitcake.”

“What?” Elanora shook her head to herself, knowing that once her Grandmother got going, there was no real way to keep her quiet. She decided to let her fill up a small paper bag with candy canes and brought them to the register for purchase.

“Have a wonderful night, ladies! I hope to see you back here soon!”

A harsh chill ran through Elanora at the thought of returning to the shop. It wasn’t Harry, he was a sweetheart in her eyes, it was the store itself. Something lingered there that wasn’t at all right, something that didn’t belong. The women left the store and headed home as Harry closed the store lights and locked the door for the night. Before stepping away, he took a brief moment and looked at his shop as its outer lights sparkled in the evening’s twilight. A large grin appeared on his face as he got into his car and headed home, knowing he had just brought some joy to two lovely people enjoying the season, just as much as his Mabel always did.

As Elanora closed the door to her Grandmother’s room, she felt a sharp pain in her stomach. This wasn’t an unusual sensation for her. It usually meant something, or someone was trying to tell her something. Since the death of her parents at age three, Elanora was blessed, or as she often saw it, cursed, with a gift. She could hear and sometimes see spirits that were lingering on the earth, those not accepting their state. She learned at a young age how to turn it on and off, often times shutting herself off from the world because of it. Her Grandmother thought she was very sick. Elanora tried explaining it to her Grandmother when she was eight and was sent to a mental hospital for three weeks. Since then she learned to go along with the adage that she was “a very sick girl.” She learned to live with her ability, comforting the odd spirit here and there, and living her life as any young twenty-something medium raising her fiery seventy-eight year old Grandmother could.

Her latest remedy to rid herself of this unwanted spiritual anxiety was to make herself a mix of what she called “Awaken tea,” a mix of oolong, chamomile, and a splash of espresso coffee. Somehow the combination of caffeine and relaxing herbs put her at ease. But tonight, it would prove useless. To

help hinder her Grandmothers attempts at munching on the candy canes, she decided to put them up as decorations in their Christmas tree. When she was finished, she considered making this a new tradition. She may have loathed the taste of the little swirly wonders, but damn it to hell if they didn't look fabulous all along their four inch pine.

Shortly after midnight, Elanora sat down to bed and feel asleep. Merely ten minutes later, her Grandmother quietly arose from her bed and crept into the kitchen, searching for the bag of candy. To her immediate dismay, the bag was not left where she had last seen it. She moped into the living room to raid her secret sugar drawer, despite her yen for candy canes. As she idled past the Christmas tree, a shimmer caught her eye. And there they were; the delectably sweet candy canes of her dreams. She plucked one off the tree and sat down in front of the television, surfing through various late night infomercials and cable-doomed movies.

She unwrapped the candy, smelling it first before letting it touch her tongue. As she began to indulge with glee at its initial sweetness, she heard something coming from the direction of the tree. She looked over as what she thought was a small shadow appeared and then moved swiftly across the room. She brushed it off as the night jitters and continued to flip through the channels on the television, until she heard something crack. She quickly assumed it was she herself biting down on the candy, until she realized she didn't have her teeth in. To her horror she knew it was not she who was biting down on the candy cane, but the candy cane clamping down on her own tongue. The metallic taste of her own blood came shooting down her throat in gushes. She heaved violently, trying to reject the shards of dried boiled syrup that were piercing all around her mouth. She managed to reach the Christmas tree and pulled it down, causing many of the ornaments to topple over, a few even shattering on her leg, causing her to bleed in more places.

The sound of the commotion was enough to jolt Elanora out of her dead sleep. She rushed to the living room, horrified as her Grandmother lay helpless beneath the Christmas tree, drenched in deep red blood. She ran to her as fast as she could, trying to dodge the scattered pieces of broken glass from the ornaments, but still managed to get a few pieces wedged into the soles of her feet. She ignored the searing pain, instead focusing on reaching her ailing Grandmother. She lifted her head up and could see her gasping for air, tears streaming down her face. As she opened her mouth, Elanora could see the candy cane, wrapped in swirls around her Grandmothers tongue like a shoelace through the eyelets. They were moving deeper, trying to pierce her cheeks from the inside out. Elanora did the only thing she knew she had to. She pulled the old woman up off the carpet and rushed her to the kitchen. Once there, Elanora raided the drawers until she found a small pair of pliers. She held her Grandmothers hand tightly with her left hand and with the right plunged the pliers to the nearest tip of the candy cane and pulled as hard as she could. Her Grandmother screamed out in agony as her tongue now began to split completely in half. But Elanora's grip was sturdy despite her uneasiness with the task at hand. With a few more pulls, she managed to pull the candy cane completely out. As she lunged what looked like a lethal curl of hair into the sink. She felt a tingle in her spine as it dissolved the instant they hit the sink.

She tried to keep her Grandmother calm by placing a towel where the blood was gushing from her mouth. She managed to bundle her up in her coat and packed her in the car to drive to the hospital.

As Elanora ran back to the house to lock the door, she heard the same laughter she had heard earlier that night at the candy store. But this time the laughter was joined by the faint whisper of a young female voice that uttered, “*No more candy.*” She closed her eyes and ran back to the car and drove her Grandmother to the hospital. The old woman would survive, but not without a harsh lesson in late night snackery. Elanora would toss and turn the rest of the night as she stayed by her Grandmother’s side. Something needed to be done, and she knew where she had to go to fix this.

The next morning, as Harry entered his shop in preparation for the Christmas Eve customer rush, he was shocked by the headline in the paper. “Local woman found dead in apartment, believed to have suffocated.” Two things hit him immediately. The first was the headline that sounded almost identical to the reports on Mabel’s death two years ago. The pain of seeing those words with his daughters’ precious picture beneath had hit him hard. The second was the photo of this young woman, her name, according to the article, was Julia Mcavern. He recognized her. Only a few days ago she had come into his shop. He remembered her because not only was she bright and quite lovely, but she was the first customer since the store had opened to purchase his special candy canes. This troubled him. He didn’t know why, but random asphyxiation didn’t seem normal to him.

He wasn’t set to open shop for another hour, but a tapping came at the door. This was now the second young familiar face that appeared to him today. Elanora was wrapped in her Grandmother’s large red wool coat, shivering as the light dusting of snow began to come down on her. He unlocked the door and let her in.

“It’s good to see you again dear, but you know we’re not officially open for another hour, is everything all right?”

She glanced down at the paper he had in his hand. She too had read the headline. And she wondered if he knew more about it than she did.

“I know, and I’m sorry to bother you like this on Christmas Eve, but I had to come here to talk to you.”

“Well, ok, sure, is this about the candy? I haven’t placed the order for the sugar free for your Grandmother yet, but after the holiday, I’m expecting some new catalogues.”

Elanora shook her head, still trying to recover from the cold. She realized however, that it wasn’t because of the outdoor temperature that she was shivering in place. She nodded for Harry to take a seat as she glanced occasionally around the shop as she addressed him.

“I know this is going to sound weird, but—” She wrestled on how to get the next part of that sentence out without having a sparkling-wreath lit adjourned store door slammed in her face.

“I think your candy canes attacked my grandmother last night.” Once she said it out loud, she felt a wave of relief hit. She stared back at Harry for a moment as he took this in. He looked back down at the paper in his hand and at Julia’s photo.

“It can’t be true.” He said, almost in a whisper.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have bothered you. You see I have this thing, that I’ve never quite been able to properly deal with and it’s bringing me here to fix...something.”

Harry listened, half a believer, and half trying to battle his inner cynicism.

“Do you have any children? I know that must sound out of line, it’s just that when I was here last night I heard a child laughing and I just thought—”

“I’ve heard it too.”

“You have?”

“It’s her. It’s my Mabel.”

Elanora could sense he was in great pain. She debated whether or not coming here was a mistake. Could she actually help him? She listened as he told her all about Mabel and her death. It was hard to hear about such tragedy as she herself knew exactly what that felt like. Things began to make more sense to her.

“I think she’s trying to reach you.”

“*By killing people?*” It almost broke Harry to think this.

“No. I don’t believe she’s out for vengeance, I think she’s scared. I think she’s alone. If I’m able to bring her out and talk to her, I think we can fix this.”

“What do you mean bring her out here? You can do that?”

“Well, I’m no Haley Joel Osment, but I can’t help it that sometimes the deceased, not the dead, that term just seems really offensive...get confused and they need guidance. I don’t know what comes after death for everyone, but your daughter clearly is trying to reach out and now seems as good a time as any. So if I were you, I’d pull those shades in the front window down and make sure that closed sign is legible.

Harry listened, as crazy as this seemed, and closed the blinds. If anyone passed by and witnessed a man in his late forties trying for privacy with a young female alone in a store, it would sure to have been misconstrued. Elanora began by closing her eyes. She could hear the whispers. Her head began to pound, starting at the temples, the pain then making its way behind her eyes. The sensation was overwhelming, but she knew she could handle it. Harry felt the temperature of the room suddenly drop even steeper.

“I can feel her.” Elanora felt a tightening in her chest as she began to kneel to the floor, suddenly bursting into tears. She rocked back and forth, pulling at her hair. Harry bent towards her, not quite sure what he was to do next. He reached out to touch her arm and before he could make contact she lifted

her head up at him and screamed with childish agony. The sound was so loud it thrust him backwards. He realized as he stared at the woman before him, that it wasn't the same woman he was just talking to only a minute ago. Her face was slightly distorted, eyes and other features not fully where they should be. Her skin looked bruised, almost swollen to a bluish mauve shade. But it was her eyes that made him break down. Elanora's blue eyes were suddenly oak brown, eyes he knew well.

She reached for him, still crying, shaking to her core.

“Mabel, is that you?”

“I can't breathe Daddy! Help me!”

“How, baby? How can I help you?”

She began to writhe back and forth, bleeding from the eyes, as her throat began to expand like a croaking frog. She fell face first to the floor. When Harry ran to her, pulling her upwards, Mabel was gone. Elanora was back, shaken, but able to speak.

“She needed you to see that. She needs you to know that what happened to her wasn't what you thought.”

“What do you mean? It was an allergy?”

Suddenly the display of candy canes came shattering down at them, melting into the floor with rising heat, decaying around them. As they backed away from the acid puddles, Elanora placed her hands over his. He was shaking.

“It was the candy cane.”

“What?”

She saw it all so clear, and all through Mabel's terrified eyes.

“When the babysitter left, Mabel had taken a candy cane from her purse. She thought she could swallow it whole, like I suppose she had done before, but it got tangled around her tongue. She tried to spit it out, but it was too sharp. It began to cut into her tongue. It sliced the vein underneath and she choked on her own blood. When she passed out the candy cane got wedged down her throat. She choked to death because of the candy cane but the medical examiners couldn't find it in her body because when she died, her spirit caused it to dissolve. It disappeared like they do after every attack. She meant it as a warning.”

Harry didn't understand how killing innocent people with candy canes could be a warning for anything except maybe as a twisted symbol for candy contraceptive.

“But she loved candy canes!”

Elanora shook her head, watching as Harry came to realize he had been advocating the very thing that caused his daughter’s death as a sign of joy and Christmas pleasure.

“What does it mean?”

“She’s still here because she doesn’t want you to blame yourself and she doesn’t want you to keep the store open. It was never her dream and she knows it was never yours. She knows now where she belongs. She needs you to find that place for yourself here on earth.”

He knew Elanora was right. It was never his dream. He loved his old life. But he’d lost his life as he hadn’t moved on from Mabel’s death. The store was just another thing preventing him from finding his life again. A warm tear fell from Harry’s eye as he saw in the corner, his little girl Mabel, dressed in her fanciest blue dress, and wearing the ruby red slippers that were always meant to be. She blew him a kiss as she shouted, “No more candy Daddy!”

She skipped towards the blue rays in the distance, all the while singing: “One, two, three, just you Mommy and me...in a candy land for three!” The room became quiet. As they pulled themselves up off the floor, Elanora and Harry noticed the store had shaped back to the way it was previously without stir and chaos, now just basking in a Christmas Eve calm.

“I love you Mabel. Merry Christmas my sweet.”

He walked over to the bin of restored candy canes and tossed them out into the cold. He met back with Elanora and held onto her hand with shaky gratitude in his voice.

“Thank you. I hope you never have to know this pain in your life.”

She felt her emotions getting to her, but she held strong. Everyone in their life knew pain, and sadly for her, she was cursed with knowing much about that of others. But just as much as she dealt with pain, she also felt the joy of amends. And helping Harry deal with the death of his daughter, eclipsed, if even for a moment, any pain she currently felt. She left the store to be with her Grandmother. As she walked away, she paused, looking back at Harry, a man now left to search for his next life alone amongst the Christmas frost. She just hoped in her heart that he’d find it eventually. And in the corner window, only known to her, was the waving hand of a little girl in a blue dress and ruby red shoes.

One year later, as the Christmas tree on Main Street sparkled on Christmas Eve, Billy and Kelly-Ann Lewis were busy in the kitchen of their brand new bakery, *Sugar-Ness*. As the phone rang in the front, Kelly rushed to catch the call. When she returned to the back she jotted down the delivery request as she simultaneously began to bake and mix. Written down on the sheet were the words: ***Sugar-Ness famous candy-cane spiced hot chocolate-2 tins.***

“Ok Billy, make sure the candy cane chunks are visible. That’s the best part!” Kelly kissed her husband lightly on the lips as she prepped for their most popular-selling item since their opening one week ago.

As the cocoa began to melt and the candy canes began to crush, the locked door of the shop slowly became ajar and the chilling laugh of a little girl echoed amongst the walls.