**The Tithing House Echoes**

The weight of the calling settled on Eliza Harmon not like a comforting mantle, but like the damp chill that permeated the lower level of the Oakhaven Ward meetinghouse. Relief Society President. It sounded important, venerable even, a link in a chain stretching back to Nauvoo. But here, in this aging building tucked into a shallow canyon where the Utah sky felt simultaneously vast and close, it mostly meant wrestling with leaky faucets, outdated decor, and the labyrinthine politics of the annual Harvest Dinner.

And the basement. Especially the basement.

Oakhaven wasn't large. Founded by determined pioneers who’d found the valley defensible and the creek reliable, it had thrived, then plateaued. Now, it mostly held onto its history and its aging population. The meetinghouse itself was a testament to that history – a sturdy, rock-faced pioneer structure from the 1880s, expanded awkwardly in the 1950s, and cosmetically touched-up sometime in the late 70s, judging by the avocado-green accents in the foyer bathrooms.

The basement, however, felt older. It was part of the original foundation, its low ceilings crossed by thick, hand-hewn beams. The air down there was always cool, carrying the scent of damp earth, aging paper, and something else Eliza couldn’t quite name – a faint, metallic tang like old blood or rusted iron. This section had originally served as the settlement's tithing house, a place where Saints brought offerings in kind: bushels of wheat, jars of preserves, slabs of cured meat, vegetables wrested from the rocky soil. Now, it housed the overflow storage for the library, forgotten Primary supplies, and decades of Relief Society clutter – fabric bolts leaching color, stacks of outdated manuals, and boxes labeled simply "Decorations" in fading marker.

Eliza, barely a month into her calling, was tasked with organizing this subterranean maze in preparation for the Harvest Dinner. Sister Beaumont, the previous president whose serene smile never quite masked a will of iron, had assured her it was "a good way to get acquainted with the society's resources." Eliza suspected it was more a way of offloading a task no one else wanted.

Her first few forays were mundane enough, marked only by sneezing fits from the dust and the constant, unnerving coolness. She started mapping the shelves, consolidating boxes, creating a semblance of order. It was on her third afternoon, wrestling with a box overflowing with brittle, yellowed lace doilies, that she heard it first.

A whisper.

Indistinct, like breath catching on a word. She froze, cocking her head. The building was empty except for her; Bishop Evans was working his ranch miles away, and Sister Davies, the ward clerk, only came in on Tuesdays. The hum of the ancient freezer unit in the corner was the only steady sound.

"Hello?" she called out, her voice sounding thin in the heavy air.

Silence answered. Just the thrum of the freezer and the faint drip of water somewhere in the walls – a sound common in old buildings. She shook her head, blaming the quiet, the isolation. Probably just the building settling, she told herself, echoing the phrase her practical husband, Mark, would use.

But the feeling of being watched prickled at the back of her neck. She forced herself back to the doilies, her hands moving a little faster now.

Over the next week, the whispers became more frequent, though never clearer. They seemed to sigh from the corners of the room, just at the edge of hearing. Sometimes, she thought she heard a name, soft and drawn out, "A… bigail…" or maybe "…give back…" It was impossible to be sure. Along with the whispers came cold spots, sudden pockets of air so icy they raised goosebumps on her arms despite the thick cardigan she’d taken to wearing. They drifted, unpredictable, making her shiver violently for a moment before dissipating.

One evening, working late under the flickering fluorescent lights, she was sorting through a box labeled "Pioneer Day Skirts." As she lifted a heavy bundle of faded calico, a small, leather-bound book tumbled out, landing softly on the dusty concrete floor. It wasn't a standard Church manual or journal. It was smaller, simpler, bound with rough twine.

Curious, Eliza picked it up. The leather was dry and cracked. There was no name on the cover. She opened it carefully. The pages were brittle, filled with spidery, faded brown ink. It appeared to be a tithing ledger from the very early days of Oakhaven.

October 14, 1888: Br. John Carter – 2 bushels wheat, 1 sack potatoes. October 16, 1888: Sis. Martha Rowe – 6 jars peaches, mending for Elders. October 19, 1888: Br. Heber Jones – ½ cured ham.

She scanned the entries, a poignant glimpse into the hardscrabble lives of the Saints who had built this town. Then, an entry near the back caught her eye, dated almost a year after the others, squeezed in at the bottom of a page:

September 5, 1889: Abigail Vance – ? – Inquiry made. None forthcoming.

The entry below it was stark:

September 12, 1889: Abigail Vance – Loss recorded. Presumed lost to elements or misfortune.

Abigail Vance. The name resonated with the whispers Eliza thought she’d heard. Presumed lost. What did that mean? And what was the offering that wasn't "forthcoming"?

A sudden, intense cold enveloped her, colder than any spot she'd felt before. The air thickened, pressing in. A distinct, soft weeping sound echoed from the far corner of the basement, near the wall that had once been the exterior entrance to the tithing house, now bricked over.

Eliza scrambled to her feet, the ledger clutched in her hand. The weeping intensified, filled with a palpable despair that clawed at her own heart. It wasn't just sadness; it was anguish, betrayal.

"Who's there?" Her voice trembled.

The weeping stopped abruptly. A heavy silence fell, broken only by the frantic thumping of her own heart. She backed away slowly, her eyes scanning the shadowy corners, the towering shelves laden with forgotten things. A stack of metal folding chairs rattled softly, though there was no draft.

Eliza didn't stop backing up until she reached the stairs. She ascended them quickly, not quite running, but close. She fumbled with the light switch at the top, plunging the basement back into darkness, and firmly closed the heavy wooden door, leaning against it for a moment, breathing heavily. The ordinary familiarity of the upstairs hallway – the bulletin board cluttered with announcements, the worn carpet – felt like a different world.

She needed to talk to someone. Not Mark – he’d tell her she was stressed, imagining things. Bishop Evans? He was kind, but practical. He’d likely suggest praying about it and getting more sleep. Sister Beaumont? Perhaps. She had been in the ward her entire life.

Eliza found Sister Beaumont pruning her immaculate roses the next afternoon. The older woman listened patiently, her expression unreadable behind her placid smile, as Eliza recounted the whispers, the cold, the weeping, and the ledger entry.

When Eliza finished, Sister Beaumont carefully snipped a fading pink bloom. "The basement," she said slowly, not looking up. "It has always been… repository. Of things best left undisturbed."

"But what happened to Abigail Vance? What was the offering?" Eliza pressed.

Sister Beaumont sighed, finally meeting Eliza’s eyes. Her own were shadowed. "Local tales, Sister Harmon. Mostly forgotten now. Abigail was young, newly married to Jedediah Vance, one of the first settlers here. A hard man, by all accounts. There was talk… she wasn’t happy."

She paused, choosing her words carefully. "The story goes, there was a poor harvest that year, 1889. Very poor. People were struggling. Jedediah was away, trading up north. Abigail was left alone. The Bishop at the time… well, let's just say he expected everyone to contribute their share, regardless of circumstance."

"What didn't she bring?"

"No one knows for sure. Some said food stores she didn't have. Others whispered… something more personal. A sacrifice the Bishop demanded." Sister Beaumont's voice dropped lower. "She disappeared right after that inquiry was made. Jedediah came back to an empty cabin. They searched, found tracks leading towards the mountains, then nothing. That's the official story – lost to the elements."

"But you don't believe that?"

Sister Beaumont looked towards the old meetinghouse, visible down the street. "Things were different then, Sister Harmon. Harsher. Judgments were swifter. Some said Jedediah was furious, not just at her disappearance, but at the shame. Others claimed the Bishop… facilitated her 'loss' to avoid scandal when she couldn't meet his demands. And some whispered she never left the settlement at all." She gestured vaguely towards the church basement. "That her despair… lingered."

"In the tithing house?" Eliza felt a chill despite the afternoon sun.

"It was the last place she was known to be, arguing with the Bishop's clerk, weeping," Sister Beaumont said quietly. "Just stories, of course. Unsubstantiated." But her eyes held no dismissal. "My advice? Focus on the Harvest Dinner upstairs. Let the past rest."

Eliza tried. She delegated tasks, focused on tablecloths and centerpieces in the brightly lit Cultural Hall. She avoided the basement, sending the Young Women down for folding chairs with cheerful instructions. But the Harvest Dinner required extensive use of the kitchen, which shared a wall – and plumbing – with the old basement section.

The night before the dinner, Eliza was alone again, scrubbing out the industrial-sized roasting pans. It was late; the building was locked and silent. The familiar hum of the freezer from below seemed louder tonight. Suddenly, the water pressure in the sink dropped, the flow slowing to a trickle. Annoyed, Eliza turned the faucet off and on again. Nothing.

Then came a sound from the pipes within the wall – a low, guttural gurgling, followed by a series of sharp raps, like knuckles on metal, traveling up from below. Rap. Rap. Rap.

Eliza froze, soap-covered hands hovering over the sink. The rapping stopped. Silence. Then, a faint, wet, dragging sound seemed to echo up through the drain.

Panic seized her. She backed away from the sink, wiping her hands frantically on her apron. She could feel it – a presence, cold and heavy, gathering just on the other side of the wall, down in the dark. The air in the kitchen grew icy. The stainless-steel countertops gleamed under the lights, but the shadows in the corners seemed deeper, darker.

A whisper slithered into the room, clearer than ever before, laced with ancient grief and chilling rage. "Give… back…"

The large, walk-in pantry door, located on the wall adjacent to the basement stairs, creaked open slowly, revealing shelves stacked high with canned goods and paper products. Darkness yawned from within.

"Mine…" The whisper was closer now, seeming to emanate from the pantry's depths.

Eliza couldn’t move, couldn’t scream. Her heart hammered against her ribs. She stared at the open pantry door, expecting… something. A figure? Eyes? But there was only darkness and the profound cold.

Then, from the pantry, something rolled out slowly onto the linoleum floor. Not a can, not a box.

A small, dirt-encrusted, porcelain doll's head, eyeless sockets staring blankly, painted lips fixed in a faint, unsettling smile. It looked incredibly old, possibly pioneer-era. It rolled a few feet and stopped, facing her.

The whisper came again, right beside her ear, a breath of absolute zero. "He… took… Give… back…"

That broke the spell. Eliza screamed, a raw, terrified sound. She whirled and fled, stumbling out of the kitchen, through the Cultural Hall – tables half-set for the feast – not stopping until she burst through the main doors into the cool, clear night air. She didn't look back, didn't stop running until she reached her car, fumbling violently with the keys, her whole body shaking.

She called Bishop Evans from the car, her voice cracking. "Bishop… something's wrong. At the church. The basement… I think…"

"Sister Harmon? Eliza? Calm down. What's happened?"

She couldn't explain it coherently. She stammered about whispers, cold, the pantry, the doll's head.

To his credit, Bishop Evans listened patiently. "Okay, Eliza," he said, his voice calm and steady, though she detected a new note of concern. "You go on home. Get some rest. Lock your doors. I'll head over there with Brother Peterson right now and check things out thoroughly. Probably just the old building settling, pipes making noise… maybe some kids playing a prank."

She knew it wasn't settling pipes. She knew it wasn't a prank.

Eliza didn't sleep. She sat in her living room, lights blazing, jumping at every creak of her own house. Mark tried to soothe her, but her fear was a wall between them.

The next morning, Bishop Evans called. His voice was reassuringly normal. "Eliza, we searched the entire building, top to bottom. Basement, pantry, everywhere. Didn't find anything amiss. No doll's head, no signs of forced entry. Pipes seem fine. I think you were just overtired, working too hard down there." He chuckled softly. "That basement storage gives everyone the creeps. Don't you worry. Everything's fine for the dinner tonight."

Everything was not fine. Eliza knew what she had experienced. But the evidence was gone. Had it ever been there? Or had the Bishop… tidied up, wanting to avoid panic before the big community event? The thought was disquieting.

She considered refusing to go back. Calling in sick. Handing the calling back. But the ingrained sense of duty, the fear of judgment – not just from the living, but from the lingering echoes in that basement – propelled her forward. She had to see it through.

The Harvest Dinner was a success, outwardly. The Cultural Hall buzzed with conversation and laughter. The Relief Society sisters, Eliza included, served turkey, mashed potatoes, green bean casserole, and endless varieties of pie, their smiles firmly in place. Eliza moved through the motions, her own smile feeling brittle, painted on like the doll's lips.

Every time someone went near the kitchen, every time the lights flickered momentarily, her stomach clenched. She kept glancing towards the basement door at the end of the hall, half-expecting it to swing open.

During cleanup, Sister Beaumont approached her quietly, drying a plate. "Bishop Evans told me you had a fright last night," she murmured, her eyes scanning Eliza’s pale face.

"It wasn't just a fright, Sister," Eliza whispered back, her voice low and urgent. "It was real. Abigail Vance… she's there. In the basement. She wants something back."

Sister Beaumont placed the plate carefully on the stack. She leaned closer. "Some things, Eliza," she said, her voice barely audible above the clatter, "are buried for a reason. Some offerings… are best forgotten. Let her rest. Let the story rest." There was a warning in her eyes, sharp and clear beneath the placid surface. A warning that spoke of community preservation, of smoothing over the cracks, of letting the dark corners remain dark.

Eliza understood. No one wanted to dredge up the ugly possibilities of the past. They wanted the comforting narrative of faithful pioneers overcoming hardship, not stories of desperation, coercion, and potential murder hidden beneath the chapel floor. Abigail's tragedy, whatever its true nature, was an inconvenient echo in the polished history of Oakhaven.

As the last of the helpers left, Eliza did a final walkthrough. The building was quiet again, settling into its nightly repose. She stood before the basement door, her hand hovering over the knob. The air flowing from beneath it felt cold, carrying that faint, metallic tang.

She thought she heard it again – a single, despairing sigh from the depths. "Mine…"

Taking a shaky breath, Eliza turned away. She locked the main doors, the click of the bolt echoing in the silence. She could not fix what had happened to Abigail Vance. She could not give back what was taken – whether it was tithing goods, dignity, or life itself. All she could do was choose to heed Sister Beaumont's warning. To let the echoes fade, to add another layer of silence over the basement's secrets.

But as she walked towards her car under the vast, starlit Utah sky, she knew the cold would remain. The whispers would linger at the edge of hearing. And she knew, with chilling certainty, that the basement of the Oakhaven Ward meetinghouse would always hold more than just dusty boxes and forgotten decorations. It held a sorrow that time could not erase, an echo of a debt that could never truly be repaid. And part of her feared that Abigail wasn't resting at all. She was just waiting.