**Veronica Recycled**

A Novel

By Ruth E. Weiner

Chapter One

Veronica's chest tightened and her fingers twitched. Her daughter-in-law’s SUV was parked smack in the middle of the driveway. That busybody was in her house wandering where she didn’t belong. Veronica settled her bicycle against the railing and rushed inside.

 She heard heavy footsteps on the winding staircase and knew where Kate was headed. No way would Veronica let her into the turret room––not today, not ever. Before Kate could test the knob, Veronica flew to her side. “The room is not ready for visitors.”

 “I’m not visitors! I’m family, for God’s sake,” said Kate, her lips tight. “If I’m going to sell this house, I need to see the turret room. It’s the highlight of this old Victorian. You’d think you had a dead body in there the way you keep it locked.”

 Blood rushed to Veronica’s ears. “Since when is my house for sale?” She folded her arms across her chest and steeled her chin.

 “You and Johnny can’t take care of this house anymore, not with his dementia and you going blind. Besides, Robert has made his decision.”

 “I’m a long way off from going blind! And Robert has decided I’m moving?Who put my son in charge?”

 Kate’s nostrils flared. “Johnny signed papers turning all decisions over to my husband.”

 “Johnny can’t spell his name anymore and he can’t hold a pen without shaking.” Veronica’s hand shook too she was so angry. “Those papers can’t possibly be legal.”

 “Take it up with Robert, not me.” Kate stomped down the stairs.

 Veronica needed a baggie, immediately. She ran into the pantry, grabbed a two-gallon bag and shouted Kate-swears into it: dozens of full-throated, face-pulsing, mouth-spewing, all-capped insults. The shelves shook. Once her rage subsided, she crumpled to the floor in tears.

 “What am I going to do?” sobbed Veronica, caressing the bloated baggie. *So what if objects are wavy and faces disappear? How can a little vision problem keep me from taking care of my own house?*

 She zippered the bag and whipped it into the blue container labeled Kate.

 *A little pick-me-up is all it needs, some paint, some putty. I can do that myself, blindfolded! But my turret room! Nobody’s going to destroy my turret room. Robert and Kate think they can bulldoze their way through my home and take it all away. That I’d allow it. That at seventy-two, I’m feeble and spineless.*

 Veronica could barely breathe. She had managed a household since she was knee-high. Eyesight was not requisite. Experience was. After dialing her son on her cell phone, she steadied her voice. “Kate said you’re putting my house up for sale. You can’t do that.”

 Robert coughed. “Mother, we’ve talked about this, remember? It’s time you and Father downsized.”

 Veronica did not recall a serious discussion about selling the house. *Is Robert telling me the truth and it slipped my mind?* She knew she tuned out a lot. That’s how her marriage had worked. Johnny made decisions and she abided by them. She always felt like a ghost in her own house, like Johnny and Robert allowed her to live there as long as their meals were hot and their clothes were clean.

 “Listen, Mother, let’s talk later. I’ve got a pile of work to do.”

 “I’m not moving,” she said. *I will not give up my house. I will not give up my turret room.*

 “Of course you’ll move. I’ve ordered a dumpster for the end of the month. Kate and I and the kiddos will help. Whatever you want, we’ll box up. The rest we can give away or trash. It’ll be fun for all of us.”

 Veronica heard a beep on the phone.

 “Listen, Mother, I have a call coming in. Just so you know, I put your names on a wait-list for a two bedroom apartment in the Brightlight Complex. You’ll love it. There’s even a trail around the perimeter of the property where you can bike.”

 *How very thoughtful! A circular route like I’m a hamster on a wheel.* “And why wasn’t I informed that your father signed the house over to you?”

 Robert blew out a loud breath. “Mother, you were upstairs in your closet, as usual. Dad thought it was a great idea.”

 “Your father is not competent, you know.”

 “Competent or not, he signed, so the deal’s done.” Robert began a side conversation with someone at his office. “Sorry, Mother. No time to talk. Besides, moving is no biggie. You’ll be in your new digs in no time. How does that sound?”

 *How does that sound? Pushing me out of my house where I’ve lived for thirty-six years? Demolishing my turret room and leaving me beside a brain-dead man in a two-room prison?*  “I won’t do it,” Veronica stammered, but Robert had already hung up.

Chapter Two

Veronica unlocked the turret room door and entered. Light and color swirled around her. Wind chimes and dreamcatchers. Ceramic frogs and ducks. Gnomes and angels. Books grew into towers. Flags waved from the wall, and wreaths hung from rafters. Robert’s bronzed shoes and crayon drawings, chess trophies and school photos filled a corner. Draped around three memorial candles were three gold lockets, dedicated to the babies she had lost. A hand-written note rested beneath them: “A life may last for just a moment, but memory can make that moment last forever. You are with me always.”

 Veronica’s eyes blistered. *How can I leave all this behind? How can I part with everything that gives me hope and love and peace?* Veronica reached for a two-gallon plastic baggie. Her face grew hotter; her tongue swelled. She opened her mouth and another barrage of curses poured out: “Get out of my fucking house or I’ll whack you senseless until your teeth fall out.*”* The baggie bloated into a round balloon. She pulled out another one. Theplastic inflated with the scorching words. “You prune-sucking ungrateful SOB; go to hell.”

 Exhausted, she lay on her mat in the center of the room and looked through the domed ceiling. To her, the sky was a bright blue with a small black circle at its center. She frowned.*Why is this happening to me? The doctors say it’s a matter of time before darkness takes over.* She squinted up at the skylight. *Outlines! Everything will be in outline. Like my life has been. School. Job. Marriage. Motherhood. Servitude. Why have I allowed this? I’m seventy-two. Where have all the years gone? To Johnny. To his needs. What about me? What about my needs?*

 She channeled the instructor’s words from the senior center’s yoga class: “Breathe in through your nose. Fill your belly with air. Breathe out through your mouth. Breathe in. Breathe out. Take three more full, deep breaths.”

 Her chest settled. Veronica would not leave her house. It was that simple. But what if she were forced? What would happen to her turret room treasures? And what about the secret shoebox with all that money hidden under the floorboard beneath her yoga mat? Veronica’s face burned.

 *Enough*. *I need to talk this through.*

 She went down the stairs and out the door, finding Clyde abandoned against the fence where she had left him. She spoke to her bicycle as she wheeled him into the shed. “No one can take my room away from me, Clyde. I’ve spent too long creating a place just for me, where I feel whole. Right, Boy?”

 *My sweet Clyde*. She brought out the chamois cloths and the oil. Rubbing the bicycle down was second best to meditating in the turret room. She could talk to him about anything.

 “What are we going to do? Robert and Kate will sell the house from under us. They’ll take my car away too. Robert says I’m going to kill someone while I’m driving. Doesn’t he know there’s treatment available to slow the progression of macular degeneration? He doesn’t trust me to monitor my own vision.”

 Veronica checked Clyde’s front basket to see if a memory rock or a ceramic bird hid in the folds of the bubble wrap. *Nope. Nothing there.* The rear duffel was next and she knew what it contained.

 There had been a community yard sale on the Commons last week. Veronica cycled through after everyone packed up and left. She rolled Clyde slowly along the grounds, vigilantly looking for something shiny or sleek. Under a bush, she spied a plump package in plastic wrapping. She scooped it up and stuffed it in the rear duffel. She cycled a mile away from the Commons and leaned Clyde against an oak tree. Before she extracted the treasure, she imagined its contents. *Maybe a stuffed animal? Maybe a knit scarf or a hat?* What she found were a dozen pink fluffy booties for those cold winter nights. She didn’t need to hide them in the turret room even though she knew she would. Nowadays, she could fill any room in the house with found objects. Johnny would never know the difference.

 But Robert and Kate would. They’d see her treasures through jaded eyes. A maze of chipped animals and dangling webs, one-legged flamingos and wilted flowers. Hoarder, they’d hiss. Crazy old woman. This was where she spent all her time? What was the matter with her? We need to save her from herself, they’d say to each other.

 Veronica blew out a swear-less breath as she sat on the floor of the shed, the pink booties by her side. She ran the chamois through each spoke of her bicycle, wiping away years of hunting for the perfect addition to the turret room. How she would spot a treasure as she cycled the backroads. How her heart pounded as she inched closer. How she would look around, certain she could not be seen. And then she’d capture that special something. The thrill of it all. Bringing it to the turret, introducing it to its new home, finding the perfect place for it to live again.

 Until now.

 “We’re under siege, Clyde. Kate’s going to throw every single one of our treasures away. I see it happening. Her fat fingers picking up fluffy Gilroy by his tattered ear and dropping him into the trash. We’re done for it, My Beautiful Boy.” Veronica’s face fell like rain.

 Putting the cleaning materials away, she patted Clyde’s saddle. “Thanks for listening,” she said as she tucked the booties under an arm and closed the shed.

 As she approached the house, she saw Bertram’s car turn into the driveway with Johnny in the back harnessed into his seat like a child. He no longer knew which end was up. Last week she had asked him his name. Johnny smiled at her like a bashful child. “I’m . . . you know.” He looked down at his double-knotted laces. “Do you like my new shoes?”

 Veronica waved to her husband and Bertram, Johnny’s caretaker three mornings a week, changing her face to her good-wife look. She had practiced it for thirty-six years, but it was cracking, just like what would happen to her turret room treasures when Robert and Kate got ahold of them.

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 Long after Bertram left, and long after Johnny had been fed, bathed, and tucked into bed, Veronica tiptoed to her turret room, leaving the door open to hear if Johnny wandered. He hadn’t climbed the stairs to her turret room for most of their marriage. Early on, she decided it was her meditation room. Somehow Johnny heard it as menstruation room and never set foot in it. Every time Robert wanted to go upstairs, Johnny made an ugly face and said the room was for women only.

 Veronica lifted the floorboard under the yoga mat and withdrew the secret duffel. She had not opened it for ten years, afraid to confront the terror of that night so long ago. With shaky fingers, she withdrew three thick envelopes. Inside each was $30,000 in large bills. Over the years, lying on top of all that money on her yoga mat, she thought of the security it offered. She considered using it to run away from Johnny. She fantasized about creating a new life for herself on a tropical island. But how could she leave the home where her unborn babies might have roamed, where Robert climbed trees and pretended to be Tarzan, where she had no need to work, unless she chose to, and no schedule to keep, except to serve dinner at five o’clock sharp every night?

 She never felt guilty about keeping the cash. It was hers to spend as she saw fit, considering its base origins and how it would have been spent by those three dangerous drug dealers.

Fanning out the money, Veronica felt its power. She divided it into stacks of $7,500 and put each inside a pink bootie.

 An idea was taking shape.

 Veronica walked the rounded room in circles, studying all her treasures. Some blurred as her eyes lost focus. A black blotch webbed within the dream catcher. Words in the poster broke across the wall. “Love Who You Are” looked like an eye chart:

L O E

W O

Y U

A E

 She stroked cloth, yarn, and paper and caressed every blazing red, searing white and happy yellow. She picked up morsels of glass and wire, and traced the angles. Oh, the awe of it all. She marveled at how a casual bike ride could turn into a magical encounter and transform a lonely trinket into a lasting treasure.

 Veronica nuzzled Gilroy, the bunny who had been abandoned on a splintery ladder. The rabbit’s ear had been ripped and its innards hung out in chunks. Veronica nursed it back to health, stitching its seams, washing it in Woolite, fluffing it in the dryer. And what about Spencer, the green gnome, the one with the red triangle hat that she spotted practically buried under those rose bushes? His nose was chipped and his pointy ears splintered. Veronica molded a new nose and ears and glued them lovingly onto the fellow. She painted him and brought him back to life.

 After each acquisition, Veronica’s need to find more increased. She cycled closer and closer to treasures that called to her from the road. They were all on display, but no one saw them anymore. They were part of the landscape that people passed and ignored. *Like me. Invisible.* *How could I leave these masterpieces to rot?*

Sometimes she spied something so far out on someone’s property that it would never be appreciated. She felt it her right to bring it to a place where it would be admired and loved. No one would miss it, not the dreamcatcher whose netting had frayed or the wind chime that was missing a pipe. She knew how to restore them to their original beauty and showcase them to their best advantage, although she’d never show them to Robert and Kate. All they would notice were cracks and seams and stains that Veronica couldn’t get out, no matter how much bleach she used. They’d laugh at Gilroy and turn up their noses at the petrified bird’s nest. They’d rip down the velvet painting of dogs playing poker and rebuke her for saving a moth-eaten sweater of Robert’s from when he was a toddler.

 Robert might wonder about the candles and the three tiny lockets. He’d probably scoff and say, “That was so long ago, Mother. Put them away.” He’d never understand the what-if pain she experienced when seeing them, even after all these years.

 She lay on her yoga mat and closed her eyes for a long time. “Help me, my treasures. Tell me what to do.”

 The idea blossomed like a flower.

 She visualized green frogs hopping around a lily pond and pink flamingos standing proudly on lawns. Wind chimes tinkled from branches and bird feeders overflowed with real seed. Flags waved proudly in ancient cemeteries and whirligigs decorated grave markers. Her treasures whooshed and swirled, paraded and danced outside the turret room in the open air. She saw herself placing a glass butterfly on someone’s porch, hanging a dream catcher from an evergreen, tying a windsock to a lamppost and flying a happy-face banner from a mailbox. She would donate sweatshirts and towels to the homeless and give countless children tennis balls and rackets. They’d enjoy a new freedom.

 The baby lockets and candles she would wrap in the silk napkins she received from her godmother as a wedding gift and put them in her dresser drawer. She didn’t need them on display anymore. She’d give Robert the photos and mementos she had saved. *He might like that.*

 As she imagined this, she wondered how she might enjoy a new freedom too, away from the circular walls and the comforting glass dome where she had spent so much of her time, immersed in limbo as her eyes closed in on her.

 She sat up fast, ignoring the dizziness and the blurred vision and addressed her treasures. “I won’t box you up for no one ever to see you again. I’ll find you all new homes where everyone can appreciate your beauty.” Veronica’s body swiveled around the turret room as she admired her collections. “I’ll give you away, that’s what I’ll do, but only to people who’ll appreciate and cherish you. To places that will show you off. I’ll be Mrs. Santa on a bicycle.”

 *How can I pull this off ? Where can I go?* Her godmother had lived in western Massachusetts, but she passed away last year. Veronica had visited a few times over the years, but never in the fall. “You’ve got to see the foliage, Ronnie,” her godmother had insisted. Veronica imagined the rolling landscape, the vibrant oranges and vivid reds. She would honor Mae’s memory with a road trip.

 Veronica opened the blue container labeled KATE. Baggies floated like jellyfish. She reached in and brought one out at random. She took a few hits from the baggie, sucking deeply from the pool of curses, and gathered her courage. Straightening her backbone, she texted Kate.

Give me a few weeks before you show the house.

I need time to get it ready before anyone comes knocking.

 She hoped that would stall Kate long enough for her to put her plan into action.

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 Night after night, Veronica paced the turret room after she put Johnny to bed. She took Polaroid photos of her treasures and pinned them to the walls. The camera was one of the few possessions she had not found when bicycling.

 Last year, when she knew Johnny’s mind was deteriorating, she visited the Alzheimer center near her home. It had a recent vacancy so she was able to see a room. The administrator left her alone for a bit so she could sit on the bed and get a feel for the environment. Veronica inspected all the nooks and crannies. In the closet on a top shelf, she spotted a box. It must have belonged to the former resident, she thought, and took it down, intending to give it to the nurse on duty. But when she opened it, she saw a dozen cartons of film and a Polaroid camera, the old-fashioned type that clicked out photos in an instant. It was heavy and clumsy and seemed as if it had been on the shelf for decades. She decided no one else had wanted it, so she took it home. The photos she snapped in her turret room would last her a lifetime. Robert and Kate could never take them away from her. Veronica should have been able to tell her son and daughter-in-law to leave her and Johnny alone, to let them grow older in peace. But no, they demanded their share of the house now, figuring they knew what was best––especially for themselves. Veronica wasn’t surprised, not really. Robert always wanted more. One more toy, one more jacket. A better college. A newer car. When he met Kate, he had met his match. She wasn’t satisfied with the first diamond ring he bought her. She traded up for something flashier, insisting she was worth it. Once Kate made up her mind, she was a locomotive. When she decided to sell the house and put Veronica and Johnny in a senior living center, releasing her and Robert of their responsibility to his parents, it would take place immediately.

 But Veronica wasn’t about to surrender. She was seventy-two, way too old to succumb to Kate’s bullying without countering it, somehow. *I need to take control.* She just wasn’t sure she was capable. But she could try. A few more hits from her swear sacks helped cement her decision. She would only part with her home and her beloved turret room on her own terms. She could do it. She would.

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 In the morning, Veronica called Bertram to hire him as Johnny’s full-time caretaker while she was away. Bertram was familiar with Johnny’s decline and understood his needs. She was comfortable leaving Johnny alone with him.

 For the next week, while Bertram and Johnny were out for airings, Veronica loaded lawn ornaments, dreamcatchers, wind chimes, and bird feeders into her car. Her blue containers of full-blown baggies went in the trunk. She needed to release the bags somewhere safe where her anger and frustrations wouldn’t cause a tsunami. The most private and dangerous item, of course, was the money. She layered the pink booties in the glove compartment.

 She cooked meals for Johnny and Bertram and froze enough meatloaf, lasagna, and baked chicken to feed them for weeks. She wasn’t sure how long she’d actually be gone, and explained to Bertram how important this trip was to her.

 “My life is changing so fast,” she said to him. “I need time to catch up with myself. I trust you with Johnny and Johnny trusts you. On the off chance my son comes by, tell him I’m on an errand, then call me!”

 Neither Robert nor Kate had stopped by since Kate’s snooping spree. But Kate texted a thumbs-up reply to Veronica’s note, and Robert wrote: FYI: The dumpster is being delivered three weeks from Friday.

 Veronica inhaled from a few baggies, but they didn’t give her the courage she needed to call or text back. *Best to keep quiet and go about my business.*

 Bertram’s soft voice broke through Veronica’s thoughts. “I understand why you have to get away. My mother watched my father deteriorate and a year after he died, she passed too. It was so unfair. She never got a chance to enjoy life. I was so damn oblivious to her needs, too busy paying attention to the money gods. And then it was too late. They were both gone. In my thirties, I quit my sales job and for the last twenty years, I’ve helped care for seniors.” Bertram took Veronica’s hand. “So go on. Take your trip and be safe. Come back ready to see your man through his final days and have enough strength left over for yourself.”

 On the big leaving day, she joined Johnny on the blue polyester sofa as he stared at the television. She turned his face toward her and looked into his eyes. “I’ll be away for a while. Bertram will be here to take care of you.”

 Johnny’s eyes stared at her. She was sure she was just a foggy blob of white. “Johnny?”

 The man stirred. “Yup.”

 “You’ll be fine, right?” she asked.

 “Right as rain,” he said, his voice flat but clear.

 Bertram came in and tied a bib around Johnny’s neck. “Ready for lunch?”

 Johnny opened his mouth.

 “Hold on, Buddy. I have to set you up at the table first.”

 Bertram hoisted Johnny to a straight-backed chair. Veronica brought in a turkey sandwich from the kitchen and set it on the snack table before him. Johnny smiled with his lips, but not with his eyes.

 “Ready Teddy?” Bertram asked.

 Johnny nodded as Bertram wrapped Johnny’s fingers around a piece of bread. He fumbled for his mouth and finally found it.

 “Are you sure you can do this, Bertram?” Veronica asked, wiping Johnny’s drool with a napkin.

 “You’ve done yeoman’s work day in and day out. A few free hours every other day does not a healthy woman make! You need a break. Go do what you have to do.”

 “Remember, if Robert or Kate calls or comes by, I’m a phone call away.”

 “Don’t you worry, Veronica. We’ll be fine.”

 She kissed Johnny on his cheek, hugged Bertram, waved so long to her turret room, and backed down the driveway, with Clyde securely attached to a carrier on the trunk.

Chapter Three

Veronica drove west, along the Massachusetts Turnpike toward her deceased godmother’s town. She turned on the radio, but she didn’t connect with any of the tunes. She wished she had a tape deck in the car. Maybe those were obsolete, like her. But this wasn’t the time to think about being old and out of touch. This trip was all about her treasures and finding new homes for them.

 After a few hours, Veronica saw a sign for Stockbridge and recalled the 1960s Arlo Guthrie song about Alice’s Restaurant. “You can get anything you want at Alice’s Restaurant,” she sang. She accessed the ramp.

 On Main Street, Veronica flagged a man routing traffic around a road paving crew. No one was behind her so she stopped for directions. “I’m looking for Alice’s Restaurant.”

 “Alice Brock moved out long ago,” he said, his elbows on her window sill. “But you can visit Trinity Church. It’s south of town in Great Barrington. Hippy action still exists there.”

 *Hippy action*? She missed the thrill of that decade, even though her best friend Polly hadn’t. Polly was the flower child: drugs, sex, and rock and roll. Veronica had worked day and night at The Heart of Oaks Inn during the 60s and 70s. No free love for her and not a minute’s peace.

 “Is there food?” she asked the man as she googled a map of western Massachusetts on her phone.

 “I hear tell that Monday is free food and legal advice day at the church. Starts at noon.”

 *What a combination*. *Free food and legal advice. I could use both.* Veronica checked the time: 11:00. “How far is it?”

 “About six miles.” He pointed south.

 When Veronica arrived in Great Barrington, she saw a vacancy sign on a vintage farm house with chickens in the yard and cats on the porch. The lawn had been recently mowed and the inn seemed friendly and safe. Inside, the foyer was welcoming with hot coffee and a bowl of shiny apples.

 Her room was cozy and unpretentious and as much as she yearned to collapse onto the queen-sized bed, she wanted to check out Trinity Church, a promising place to begin her give-back journey. She logged onto Route My Ride on her phone and plugged in the address. She felt with it, as Polly might have said. Wouldn’t Robert be astounded to learn that his old bitty mother knew how to use the phone’s GPS.

 She unhitched Clyde from the car, got her helmet and water bottle and clasped her fanny pack around her waist. She checked its essentials: identification, keys, tissues, a credit card, her phone, Polly’s gold necklace, a few empty baggies and a pink bootie. She chose an assortment of treasures to put in Clyde’s basket––a wind chime, a nerf football, a few odds and ends, and some coins. Then she set off with the wind at her back and the open road ahead.

 She passed housing developments, mom and pop stores, markets and playgrounds. The dark spots in her eyes receded and a brightness expanded her vision. At least that’s how she felt. Like the world was sunnier. No Johnny. No Robert or Kate. No need to examine every yard, front stoop or porch for new treasures, even though she was tempted. It was just her, Clyde, and a desire to give everything away.

 She tackled hills, soared along stretches of sweeping vistas, and sailed down down down, trusting her years of cycling to maintain her balance and moderate her speed. Busy with whirring thoughts, she barely saw the pothole in time and swerved to avoid it. She ended up on the side of the road in one piece, but shaken. *How foolish am I?* *Out here flying through the air without a care in the world. An old lady on a bicycle in an unfamiliar place where I know no one.* “Damn,” she said aloud. She looked around in case anyone heard her. She had sworn without a baggie! “Hot damn,” she repeated and blushed.

 She checked Clyde’s tires and brushed off her saggy biking pants, then took a deep slug of water. From a nearby driveway, she heard a booming voice. “Check that door, young lady.”

 Veronica pinpointed the voice and saw a red-faced man half-in and half-out of a van shaking his fist at a little girl.

 Veronica shuddered as she heard her own father’s commands, so loud and slicing, so long ago and yet, right there, right near her, demanding her attention. The girl ran to the car, but not fast enough for the father.

 “Hurry up, Lazy-Legs. We don’t have all day.”

 Veronica’s heart seized like a vice had clamped onto it. “Lazy Do-Nothing,”her own father would have bellowed*.*

 Veronica shouted “Stop!” when she realized the front door to the house had blown open. “The front door’s not closed!” She hopped on Clyde and tried to catch up to the vehicle, but it screeched out the driveway and disappeared.

Veronica’s hands were sweaty and her pulse thudded in her temple. She cycled up the driveway, determined to help that little girl. The house was a colonial with a red door, its long-forgotten Christmas wreath wilted and brambled.

 *Close the door and turn around.* But her mind had a different plan. *Go in. Go in. Go in*, it said. *The house needs you to see it. You’re not going to take anything.*

 Veronica was no stranger to exploring houses. It was a favorite pastime when she was a young girl and suburbia grew up around her run-down cottage. Once she learned to ride a bike and gain some independence, Veronica continued to inspect new homes, even as owners moved in. It was an era when few locked their doors, so Veronica rejoiced when a home was accessible and she could see the furnishings and the wallpaper and the delicious details. She never took anything; she just looked, and she was never caught.

 It was an easy jump to inspecting rooms at The Heart of Oaks Inn after she graduated from Plainview High School. It was her job, after all, to make sure the rooms were clean. She still never took anything; in fact, she had a lost and found bin. If no one claimed possessions after two weeks, she distributed them among the staff.

 It wasn’t until she married Johnny that the need to take a treasure became visceral. She was certain, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that she would never be caught. Never. No one ever saw her. No one paid any attention to this silent woman on a bicycle. She could pluck a wreath off a front door and cycle with it around her handlebars for miles and no one would question its existence, or hers.

 So when Veronica saw that the door to the child’s home had not been closed, she had no worries about stepping inside. To the right, she saw two dark rooms. Instead of furniture, toys for toddlers grew like crops in a garden.

 In the rear of the house, a kitchen was cluttered with cereal and cracker boxes, bowls of fruit, a wine cube with an assortment of reds and whites, and crumbs everywhere. The room felt lived-in and nourished.

 She studied the photos of the family on the refrigerator. A smiling dad, a beaming mother, two towheaded toddlers with their arms around each other, and a frowning adolescent, the girl who hadn’t double-checked the door. *Why put a picture on the fridge if the kids are not all smiling?*

 Veronica was a frowner as a child, always on edge around her scowling father. “Veronica, do this, do that. Not like this. Like that.” She was never good enough. She wondered if this frowning child would get in trouble for not shutting the door properly. Veronica would have gotten the strap.

 A staircase off the kitchen led to the second floor. The first room she entered was sunny and bright. It had twin beds, hanging mobiles, alphabet posters, and stars painted in the ceiling. Photos of two pudgy boys framed the walls. A happy place to grow.

 The next room was dark. Navy walls and a navy comforter on a narrow bed. There was an old wooden desk, a stiff-backed chair and a bookcase filled with newspapers, notebooks, and ragged chapter books. A photo of the frowning girl leaned against a streaky mirror on the bureau. The room felt like it was crying.

 Veronica went outside to where she had parked Clyde and studied the contents of the basket deciding what a young girl might enjoy. She selected the peacock glow-in-the-dark wind chime that she couldn’t resist when she had seen it dangling featherless on a porch; a pink windbreaker she had taken off a clothesline when a cycling day turned blustery and she wasn’t prepared – it had been in good condition, but she really needed to stay protected; and a few shiny pennies. Veronica reached into her fanny pack and felt for her most treasured possession: Polly’s gold chain necklace.

 Polly, her childhood friend, was everything Veronica wasn’t: daring, opinionated, and extroverted. She had a nose stud and tattoos before anyone else. She marched in peace rallies and organized sit-ins. She jumped out of planes and swam with dolphins.

 Polly had warned Veronica not to marry Johnny. “He wants a wife, not an equal. His mother was the only love of his life.”

 “How do you know that?”

 “I know the type,” said Polly. “He only cares about his own needs. He’ll treat you like a second class citizen. You deserve a man who puts you first.”

 Veronica resented Polly’s words and kept her distance once she married Johnny, although Polly mailed Veronica postcards faithfully from every corner of the globe. When Polly fell ill and returned home, Veronica visited daily. She wanted to tell Polly she had been right, that Veronica was unhappy and invisible and was a slave to Johnny’s moods. But Polly was in so much pain that Veronica lied and said she was content.

 After Polly died, her mother asked Veronica to help clean out Polly’s room. “Take what you want,” she said. So when Veronica saw the gold chain on the bureau, she chose it as a reminder of Polly. Veronica clasped it around her neck, and immediately felt a heaviness that she couldn’t shake. Instead of Polly’s adventurous spirit infusing her, it was Polly’s words: “Johnny’s not good enough. You need a gentle man. He’ll always have the last word.”

 Once home and alone in her turret room, Veronica mounted the necklace on white cardboard, put it in a frame, and hung it above the light switch so whenever she entered the room, Polly would be with her.

 When Veronica switched off the light the morning she left on her give-back journey, she removed the chain from the frame, put it in a silk purse and tucked it into her fanny pack. *Come on, Polly, we’re going for a ride.*

 Veronica withdrew the gold chain and held it with reverence. Why had she found it a burden? Polly was light-hearted, high-spirited, quick to laugh, and quick to cry. On Veronica, the chain didn’t carry Polly’s optimism; it was weighted down by Veronica’s gloom.

 But maybe the necklace could help this sad little girl. She needed Polly-power and Veronica needed to shed Polly-grief. After thirty-two years, it was time to pass Polly’s optimistic attitude onto this child who needed a talisman to guide her into happiness without the regret that accompanied Veronica.

 In the child’s bedroom, Veronica found pen and paper and wrote the little girl a note:

This is a secret energy necklace. It belonged to Polly, a woman who loved life and took chances. It will remind you that the decisions you make impact more than the moment.

 If only Veronica had heeded the advice she offered the frowning child. But now was not the time to fret over the past. She was giving this little girl what Polly had tried to give her: confidence in herself but Veronica had been too proud to listen.

 Lovingly, Veronica arranged the necklace on the pink windbreaker. She hung the chimes from the ceiling light and scattered shiny pennies on the dark rug. Little girls needed fairy tales.

 Veronica descended the stairs and left the house, making sure the front door was shut tight. A seed of hope had opened. Giving the frowning child Polly’s necklace released a millstone that Veronica had carried for many years. Veronica didn’t need a chain to remind her of Polly; she needed air and light and blue skies. She needed independence and hope. Perhaps Veronica’s desire to live happily ever after in her own home might yet come true.

Chapter Four

Veronica cycled on until she saw a beautiful white church with pointed arches, a stained-glass rose window, and a square tower with a peace sign rather than a clock. The arched shingle said The Guthrie Center at the Old Trinity Church.

 She secured Clyde to a bike rack and withdrew a ceramic angel from his rear duffel. Perfect, Veronica decided, recalling how she had saved the small statue from disgrace. It was face down at the end of a driveway, covered in dirt, and spotted with lichen. Veronica restored it to its original beauty, resurrecting the angel’s outstretched wings and praying hands. She stood it gently against the gray foundation, where the angel settled in as if it had been born there.

 Veronica entered the church through the heavy wooden door. She gasped at the vastness of the space, its vaulted ceiling and airy interior, the pervasive smell of yeast and cinnamon, and the rhythmic pulse of Ravi Shankar’s music.

 “Come on in,” said a robed man wearing sandals. “I saw what you placed at our doorstep. Thank you for your kindness. You’re new to our congregation. Welcome.”

 “I’m just passing through,” said Veronica, “but I knew this would be the perfect home for my angel.”

 The man’s face lit up like a candle. “We’re rehearsing a medley of songs from the 60s. Do you want to join us?”

 “I don’t sing too well and I sure can’t play sitar.”

 “No worries. You can serve lunch to those of us who do.”

 “Sounds like a deal if I can eat too.”

 “Be our guest. Ah, working guest,” said the man, directing her to a long table with other volunteer servers.

 Veronica enjoyed a meal of rice and beans, cinnamon-raison bread, and carrot sticks drizzled with honey. She liked watching the musicians jam and hearing the singers practice. “I Want to Hold Your Hand”; “Baby, You Got What It Takes”; and “Daydream Believer.” She knew every word and hummed along. She might not have participated as a hippy in the 60s or a disco dancer in the 70s, but she knew the songs. Years ago, if Johnny had been here, he’d have twisted and gyrated to the music. With his handlebar mustache and his trim body, he enjoyed an audience. If she dwelled too long on the memory, she knew she’d see him like a cock rooster, strutting around and on the prowl.

 When she met Johnny, he was in his late forties, but he still ‘cut a rug.’ On the rare occasions they went to a club or a bar where there was dancing, she would watch him from a corner of the room, amazed that this good-looking man was her husband. When they got home, he still beamed from his performance and whirled her around the bedroom. *Where had that Johnny gone?* By the time he turned sixty, he was no longer interested in dancing or bedrooms, at least with her.

 And here she was today, toe-tapping in a corner. Her eyes surveyed the room for a worthy person who might benefit from a secret treasure.

 Veronica saw a sign at the back of the room: LEGAL ADVICE HERE.

 *I should go in there and ask what would happen to a son who forced his senile father to sign away his house? And is it legal to take away a home from aging parents if one is incompetent and the other is going blind?* There was so much she didn’t know about growing old. She had relied on Johnny and look where that had gotten her.

 A doddering woman hobbled out of the advice room. “Why did I come here? No one understands,” she muttered. She made her way to the food line and took a plate, but she put it down before Veronica could fill it.

 Veronica watched as tears streamed down the woman’s face. She guessed the advice was not so welcome. “Food’s really good. Let me serve you.”

 “How can I eat? My husband is dead.”

 “I’m so sorry,” Veronica said. “Mine is dying.”

 The woman patted her swollen eyes with a tissue. “My husband was a good man but he had a problem and now it’s mine.”

 *Johnny wasn’t such a good man, and now he’s my problem*.

 “My Artemus kept every single piece of paper he ever received. Magazines, books, brochures. You name it,” she sobbed. “I don’t know what to save and what to throw out.”

 “Why must things be saved?” asked Veronica, almost to herself. She thought about the turret room and how she had filled it with her treasures and removed them before her son trashed them all. Crazy old bat, he’d snicker. A secret hoarder. And what if Robert knew the truth, that she cycled onto people’s property and helped herself. Veronica didn’t see herself as a thief, more like a savior of forgotten objects, with a few exceptions.

 The old woman’s shoulders heaved. “I’ve searched everywhere for Artemus’ will. Topsy turvy, is what my house looks like. It tires me out just thinking about finding my insurance forms. Even my car keys are missing.” The woman shuffled through her purse and came up empty.

 *The poor woman looks like she’d have trouble sorting through crayons.*

 “Make me a plate to go,” she sighed.

 Veronica piled beans and rice, bread and vegetables onto the plate and covered it with foil. “Maybe I could help you.”

 “How?” asked the woman, taking the plate and putting extra bread in her handbag.

 “I’m a good sorter. I could give you a hand.”

 “Maybe so, but I don’t want a stranger in my house.”

 “You can’t do it alone.”

 “Watch me, whoever you are.” The woman shambled out of the hall, down the walkway, and onto the sidewalk, clutching her purse to her chest.

 The sandaled man approached Veronica. “Again I admire your kindness,” he smiled, and his eyes shone like stars. “That’s Constance Sanders. She thinks her husband died last week. Truth is Artemus has been gone four years. We tell her there’s a lovely assisted living facility in town. Three meals a day. Her own room. Bingo and sing alongs. The town wants to help her, but she threatens to shoot anyone who comes onto her land.”

 “Constance told me that her house is filled with paper and she can’t find essential documents that she needs.”

 “That’s only what she thinks,” said the man in sandals. “Her husband was the town clerk and as far as I know, everything is in order.”

 Constance Sanders was as confused as Johnny, thought Veronica. “Where does she live?”

 “A mile east on Blue Hill Road.”

 Veronica stayed to help for another hour before the wind picked up. It was a good thing the wind had shifted, and she was biking in the right direction. She sailed back to the inn well before twilight could play tricks on her eyes. She settled in for the night, happy to be alone on a queen-sized bed. So much space to stretch out, a real luxury. She called Bertram to check on Johnny.

 “Everything’s going great. Johnny’s been telling me about his childhood home in Worcester, how he lived with a beautiful woman named Mary who used to sew clothes for him.”

 “Mary was his mother,” said Veronica.

 “Ah, that explains a lot,” said Bertram. “Every time he mentions her name, he gets teary-eyed.”

 Veronica hung up thinking how Johnny’s early memories were surprisingly detailed. His mother loomed so large in his thoughts even as more recent events faded. Perhaps that’s why Veronica was so concerned about Constance Sanders living alone and wondered how she might help. Sometimes outsiders understood the whole picture better than the townsfolk who had known her forever.

 At breakfast, Veronica questioned the innkeeper about local families and whom Constance might have known well. If her memory was anything like Johnny’s, old names would be familiar.

 He told her that Constance watched the neighborhood kids before and after school. “Got them on and off the bus. Gave them snacks. Treated them like her own. She’s had a rough time the last few years. A real shame she won’t let anyone help her.”

 Veronica asked if the innkeeper remembered any of the names of the kids Constance had watched.

 “The Forresters had a slew of little ones. Let me think.” He scratched his head. “Gilly’s the only name I recall.”

 A plan swirled through Veronica’s mind as she searched in her car for the box with the Polaroid camera and film. She put it on the front seat, followed directions to the old woman’s home and parked on the street. She unhooked Clyde and cycled up the driveway to a large farmhouse with a saggy roof. A nearby shed had an X on it, like it had been condemned by the town. She saw Constance standing in the doorway waving a shotgun that looked like a relic from the Civil War.

 “Get off my land, stranger,” Constance warned.

 “Don’t you remember me? I’m Gilly Forrester. You were my babysitter when I was little. I came by to say hello,” chirped Veronica.

 “Gilly Forrester? Well, I’ll be a monkey’s uncle.” The woman put down the rifle. “Is that really you?”

 “In the flesh.” Veronica hopped off her bike and came closer, not at all worried that Constance might recall meeting her just yesterday.

 “Well, I’ll be. You look like your own mother.”

 Veronica guessed there were about fifteen years between them. “It’s been a long time, Connie. Do people still call you Connie?”

 “Connie. Yes, my Artemus calls me Connie. Just the other day he said, ‘Connie, you’re a sight for sore eyes.’ I figured he was giving me a compliment.”

 “Of course he was. Is Artemus your son?”

 “He’s my husband.”

 “I heard your husband was dead,” Veronica said.

 The woman pinched her chin. “Well, I’ll be. I think you’re right.”

 Veronica took the box with the camera inside and held it out for Constance. “I brought you a present.”

 Constance took the box and shook it. “Is it candy? I really like candy.”

 “Nope. Something that will last longer,” said Veronica.

 Constance put the box to her ear. “Is it a clock? I need a clock.”

 “Why don’t you open it and find out.”

 Constance sat on the porch stairs and discovered the camera inside the box.

 “If I can come in, I’ll show you how to use it,” said Veronica.

 Constance stood, clutching the camera with two hands. “What did you say your name was?”

 “Gilly. Gilly Forrester. You were my family’s babysitter, remember?”

 The woman tilted her head and her eyes widened. “Gilly Gilly Ossenfeffer Katzenellen Bogen by the Sea,” she sang. “In a tiny house by a tiny stream where a lovely lass had a lovely dream.”

 Veronica remembered the words from her own childhood and joined the woman in song. “And her dream came true quite unexpectedly. In a Gilly Gilly Ossenfeffer Katzenellen Bogen by the Sea - e - e - e -e.”

 The house was dark and Veronica’s eyes had trouble focusing. She had to twist her way into the room, maneuvering through the kitchen and into the living room like a maze, following a narrow pathway. What she believed to be a clear place to walk was a minefield of newspapers and magazines, boxes and large paper bags stuffed with paper.

 When her eyes adjusted, Veronica refocused her attention on Constance. “Let me show you how to use the camera.”

 Although Constance was reluctant to give it up, with some coaxing, she eventually handed it to her.

 Veronica zoomed in on a pile of tattered notebooks. “First I look in the little eye box for the image I want to snap. Then I press this silver button. See, it’s easy. Your turn.”

 Constance circled the room, snapping away. She looked like Christmas morning.

 As the photos popped out, Veronica picked them up and reloaded the camera with film. When she had a pile, she invited Constance to sit with her and take a look.

 The woman’s face pruned. “Why that’s my whole living room, but I can’t see the carpet. What happened to it?”

 “I bet it’s a lovely carpet. What color is it?”

 “Deep reds and purples. With flowers. Come to think of it, I haven’t seen it for years.” She studied the photographs. “Is it under all that stuff?”

 “Let’s check it out.” Veronica moved several boxes and bags to the front porch, revealing the flowery rug.

 Constance picked up some piles of newspapers and followed her. When a large section of the carpet was exposed, Veronica encouraged Constance to take more photos. They showered around her like dropped petals.

 “Do you have any tape?” asked Veronica, gathering them into a stack.

 “Coming right up,” Constance said and opened a desk drawer where ten tidy boxes of scotched tape waited.

 “How about we hang the photos on the walls.”

 “What fun!” said Constance. “Did we do this when I babysat for you?”

 “Not only that,” said Veronica. “We tidied up the room at the same time. Do you happen to have something to put this stuff in so we can see more of the rug?”

 “Darn tootin’ I do. Be right back.”

 Veronica heard the woman open a door and close it again. Constance appeared in the living room with a mound of cardboard.

 “Some assembly required,” said Veronica, who shaped the cardboard into several boxes.

 Together they filled them with the rest of the living room’s clutter and hung the photos around the room.

 Constance clapped her hands. “It’s like the floor is on the walls.”

 Veronica and Constance carried all the boxes to the jam-packed garage. A fire hazard, for sure, thought Veronica, but at least the house wouldn’t go up in flames.

 “Now let’s tackle the kitchen. Do you have more boxes?”

 Constance frowned. “Nope.”

 “If you snap pictures of the kitchen, I’ll go to the church for some boxes and a few people to help us.”

 “I don’t want no stinking people in my house.”

 “You know me, right?” asked Veronica. “Remember my brothers and sisters? There are five of us and I’m visiting them right now. I can bring them by.”

 “The Forresters had five kids?”

 “Darn right. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten. I’d be really hurt. You were the best babysitter a family could have.”

 “I was damn good, wasn’t I?”

 Veronica drove to the church and told the sandaled man what she had been doing. “Do you think some of your volunteers would come back to Constance’s house with me?”

 Three women and two men joined the sandaled man; all were eager to help. They gathered dozens of boxes, even if it meant emptying full ones and lining the pantry shelves with fruits and vegetables. The group parked their cars on the street and walked up the path with Veronica.

 “We’re back, Constance,” called Veronica.

 The woman stood in the doorway again with her rifle. “No one trespasses my property,” she grumbled, “especially a gang of hooligans the likes of you.”

 Veronica stepped forward. “It’s me. Gilly Forrester. You used to babysit for me and my family here.”

 “Well I’ll be darned,” said Constance, setting down the gun. “Come on in and tell me what you’re all up to. I haven’t seen you since you were knee high to a grasshopper.”

 Veronica showed Constance again how to use the camera. While she snapped photographs, the “Forresters” emptied the house of reams of paper, cardboard boxes, and knick-knacks. As each room was cleaned, Veronica hung the photos on the walls, recreating the image of clutter without the clutter itself.

 It was dark when Veronica left the house that night. Her eyes tried to mislead her as she drove, but her heart assured her she’d get to the inn without a problem. She slept easy, happy to have begun a process that the townspeople promised they would continue. She had their word.

 The next morning, Veronica decided she’d move on from Great Barrington. From her bike riding adventures, she craved traveling around the next bend, seeing what surprises it held. Instead of seeking treasures to steal, she was seeking out new places to return them. Before she left town, she stopped by Constance’s house to say good-bye.

 “Who’s that trespassing?” said Constance standing in the doorway with her gun aimed at Veronica.

 “Just me, Gilly Forrester. I have another present for you.”

 “Well, Darling, come on in.”

 “I can’t stay, but I wanted to tell you that my brothers and sisters will be here soon to help you take more photos and box the upstairs rooms.”

 Veronica’s plan of replacing the overflowing rooms with photos had worked, just like it had in her own turret room. Once the house was clean and Constance’s essential documents were organized, the town would help Constance sell her home. She truly was not able to manage by herself. At least she’d have her photos to bolster her memory.

 Veronica couldn’t help but notice the irony, having just photographed her turret room. But Constance Sanders was not Veronica Russell. Maybe Johnny was, but each day that Veronica was on her own, she stopped seeing herself as Johnny’s appendage, Robert’s mother, and an old bicycling bitty losing her eyesight and squirreling treasures.

 Veronica stepped close to Constance and gave her a small bag. They sat in the hallway on the stairs while she opened it. Inside was a silver whistle on a chain.

 “What do I do with this?” she asked.

 “It works way better than a rifle. You blow into it when you see someone coming up the driveway. If they tell you they’re the Forresters, you’ll know they can come inside. Anyone else? Keep blowing the whistle. It’ll frighten them away.”

 “The gun works a whole lot better.”

 “Then let’s take a picture of it and hang it on the door.”

 “I always knew you were a smartie,” said Constance, grabbing the camera.

 After Veronica taped the photo of the gun to the door, Constance gave her the rifle and Veronica put the whistle around Constance’s neck.

 As Constance waved good-bye, the man in sandals approached the house. Veronica handed him the rifle, which he hid behind a tree. Constance blew the whistle and the man waved. “I’m Boris Forrester. Coming to help you. OK?”

 “Why Boris Forrester. I haven’t seen you since you were in britches. Come on in and tell me what you’ve been up to.”

 Veronica felt lighter as she drove away. A few more possessions had found new homes. She recalled how the whistle had become hers. A group of Boy Scouts had lined up to board a commuter train as she cycled by. She heard the scoutmaster blow his whistle like a drill sergeant. “Single file. Get moving,” he commanded. One kid was fooling around so the man blew the whistle into his ear. “What are you deaf?”

 Veronica hated how the Boy Scout leader treated the children in his charge. As he brought up the rear of the group, she pedaled toward him. The boys moved out of her way, but the scout leader hadn’t budged. Pretending to lose her balance, she rammed into him.

 “What the hell?” shouted the leader, who had landed on his butt.

 The boys reared back from him even as they surged forward to help Veronica to her feet and uplift Clyde.

 “Such gentlemen,” she said.

 They beamed as they boarded the train, and the boys who had already found seats were pointing out the window at the leader and laughing.

 She noticed he had dropped his whistle when he fell, but he didn’t see it as he screamed at her and entered the train. She could have told him. Instead she waited until the train pulled out and then retrieved it. He might buy a new whistle, but perhaps he’d be reminded of his humiliation and that made Veronica giddy. In the distance, she could hear Constance blowing softly into the whistle like it was a childhood toy.

 As Veronica sauntered to her car, she reached into the silk purse which had held Polly’s necklace and now contained wildflower seeds that she collected that morning. She tossed them along the path as she sang the final words to the Ossenfeffer song. “And the last I heard they still live happily in Gilly Gilly Ossenfeffer Katzenellen Bogen by the Sea-e-e-e-e.”

Chapter Five

Veronica surveyed the back seat of her car and realized she had only scratched the surface of give-backs. *Move on, Woman! Make it happen!* Perhaps the wrong choices she made in the past would bring her to the right places in the future. But before she pressed her foot to the accelerator, Veronica called Bertram to see how everything was at home.

 “Johnny’s doing great. Eating up a storm, like usual,” said Bertram.

 “Has he asked for me?”

 “I show him your picture every day. He says, ‘Who’s that broad?’ I tell him that’s his wife Veronica. ‘Wife?’ he says. ‘I’m just a kid. How can I have a wife?’ Then we laugh together. Can’t tell if he’s fooling with me or telling me the truth.”

 Veronica had to laugh along with Bertram. He was trying so hard to put her at ease. She wondered why Bertram wasn’t married. At forty-seven, he should have a wife and children. He’d make a great dad. What did she know about him anyway? He was reliable, caring, and honest. *Is he that way with everybody?* She wanted to believe that Bertram was all he appeared to be. She cleared her throat. “Has Robert called?”

 “Nope, not a word. Maybe when we were out, but there were no messages from him.”

 As much as Veronica didn’t want Robert to call, a niggle in her brain hoped he had. Just to check on them? To see if they were all right? Ultimately, she was glad Robert ignored them while he waited for her to ready the house.

 “I really appreciate how you take care of Johnny. Thanks, Bertram.”

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 On the highway again, Veronica headed south on Route 7. Driving wasn’t the same as bicycling. Things whirred past too fast, even on a minor road that wound through forests and farmland. Treasures stayed hidden on porches, behind trees, in fields. A good thing, thought Veronica. But that was done. No more searching. No more snooping. Her goal was to give back.

 She took to looking at street signs, deciding if one road would be more interesting than another. Route 7 had begun to seem endless in its lack of places to explore. When she saw a sign for Bow Wow Road, she just had to stop and look around, expecting dogs to appear at every turn. She parked and got out to stretch her legs.

 She walked into a clearing and discovered a small pond with a bench where she could enjoy the fall foliage. She remained absolutely still and let the surroundings speak to her. Within moments, a doe and two fawns loped to the shore and lapped the water. A monarch butterfly perched on the bench and chittering squirrels raced around a tree. Most of her life, she was hell-bent on getting somewhere: racing to pick up her son from school, shopping for dinner, buying a last-minute birthday present. Even biking had more to do with seeking out a treasure than soaking up the sights. The turret room was her only place where she could be still and quiet.

 As she relaxed on the bench, she could smell the earth, its rich dampness, and the honey-sweetness of wild woodbine. She heard lapping and scurrying and fluttering. She felt her heart beat, its thump assuring her that she was still in this world, perhaps not seeing it as she once had, but feeling its pulse.

 Quietly, so the wildlife wouldn’t be disturbed, she scanned the inside of her backpack to examine the goodies she had set aside for the day: her bloated baggies, a book, several wind chimes, wildflower seeds, and a pink towel.

 As she was assessing, two boys trampled reeds at the edge of the water, scaring the deer. They carried a bag from a fast food store and a six-pack of soda. A picnic. How nice for these young fellows, she thought, to sit by the shore and imbibe nature.

 When they saw her, they grimaced. “That’s our bench,” the taller one said.

 “Yeah, aint the same eating anywhere else,” said the one with pimples on his forehead. Veronica moved to the far end. “There’s plenty of room for the three of us.”

 “That aint our style.” The taller one said and pumped out his groin.

 The pimply one laughed. “Listen. We’re reasonable dudes. We’ll give ya some time to clear out. We’ll just sit under a tree for a bit while you get your shit together.”

 The boys strutted to an oak tree. They popped the rings off their sodas, lit up cigarettes and sat on the ground. When they smoked the butts into nubs, they flung them into the water. Then one of the boys went to the shore, unzipped his pants and peed. The other one joined him, arcing higher and further.

 “Got ya that time, mother fucker.”

 Veronica had had enough. She reached into her backpack and pulled out two of the half-gallon baggies and walked close to the boys, who had zippered up and were on their way to her bench.

 “Wait just a minute. This pond isn’t your toilet. It’s drinking water for local animals.”

 “We’re local animals. Besides I got a dog who drinks from the toilet. Animals don’t care.”

 Veronica stood her ground, all five feet of her. “Butts belong in an ashtray or in the garbage. You’re way too young to be smoking anyway.”

 “We should teach her that we’re old enough to do what we want,” said the pimply one. The boys walked her way, their swagger increasing.

 Veronica took the baggie and put her mouth to it. She sucked in every swear and breath of anger that had been in it and swallowed. Then her eyes widened and she growled like a pit bull with a thorn in its side. That swear sack had been labeled Johnny. It was the one she had used when she discovered Johnny’s affair with Taffeta. It contained a full-blown tirade of swears. With each inhale, anger had bulged at Veronica’s seams. Her cheeks bellowed red and her face distorted. Her back arched and her hackles stood on edge. She practically bared her teeth, like she was preparing to attack those boys and eat them afterward.

 The teens dropped their bags of food. “You crazy old bitch.” They circled around her, jabbing with outstretched fists, threatening impact.

 She picked up another baggie, blackened and bloated, which lay waiting on the ground. It was the second one she had used against Johnny’s infidelity, when her hurt and anger were so raw, and the words ran so hot, they seared the bag. She sucked deeply, then let her voice roar. “You shit heads. You’re a menace to nature, you pompous little pricks. This pond is off limits to you. Now and forever. And mark my words, I’ll be here tomorrow and the next day and every day after that, ready to tear into you. And if you think I can’t, try me.” She lunged at them. “Get your sorry asses out of here now or you’ll feel my wrath.”

 Faster than deer, they hightailed it away.

 Veronica didn’t know what had come over her, but she liked it. All that power all of a sudden. She smiled and reached into the backpack again and brought out the purse of wildflower seeds. Slowly and thoughtfully, she scattered them around the bench, creating a sacred space.

 Then she sat down and ate the boys’ hamburgers.

 Bow Wow Road had bark, bite and long-lasting beauty.

Chapter Six

Veronica picked up Route 7 again, both sapped and supplied with energy after her confrontation with the two boys. *How do kids become like that? Bullying and mean?* She thought about Johnny, how he had blustered and bellowed his way through life until one day, his bile turned inward and began eating away at his memory. She wondered if Robert was more like him than she let herself believe. She had spent her life on the edges of these two men. Now she felt emboldened by her newfound independence. She’d only been on the road for a few days, but she felt a shift in her self-confidence, like a determination to prove that she could change the course of her life, even if she hadn’t many years left.

 So preoccupied in her thoughts, Veronica failed to see the commotion up ahead until she was in the thick of it. Fire engines and police cars, private vehicles, motorcycles, crowds of people and barking dogs lined the road.

 An officer pointed directly at her. “Turn your car around, Ma’am. Now.”

 “What’s happening here?”

 “Just make a u-turn, Ma’am. You’re in a restricted area.”

 She complied with the policeman, even though the hairs on her forearms spiked and her teeth grit. She drove north along the banks of the Hoosatonic River until she spotted a small parking lot bordering a sandy beach. She unbungeed Clyde. “Time to find out for ourselves.”

 As she cycled closer to the detour, she pedaled alongside a man in army fatigues who strode with purpose toward the crowd. “What’s going on?”

 The man didn’t slow down as he poured out the details. “There was a murder! In the woods. Cops got a call from a pilot flying a Cessna along the river. He said a crazy man was chasing a woman along the embankment. Then she changed directions and ran into a field, dropping two bundles on the way.” The man pointed to a sloping meadow ablaze with wildflowers.

 “How did the pilot know the man was crazy?” asked Veronica.

 “He says the guy was pumping his fists and pointing a glinty thing. Maybe a gun or a knife, the pilot couldn’t tell. He buzzed close hoping to stop the man but the woman fled into a grove of trees and he lost sight of them.”

 “Why didn’t the pilot keep circling?”

 “He did until he ran low on fuel and had to land. That’s when he spotted the man coming out of the woods alone. His clothes were bright red and he beelined for the river.”

 “So the police caught him?”

 “Not yet, and they can’t find the woman, the woods are too thick. And they have no clue about what she dropped in the field.”

 It was getting harder to maneuver Clyde through the throng of people heading toward the field and forest. “Is there something I can do to help?”

 “That’s why we’re all here,” replied a woman in red rubber boots. “Everyone in town got an alert about a search and rescue operation. They were asking for volunteers.”

 Veronica heard barking dogs prowling the woods. This was a matter of survival for that woman. She could be bleeding to death. Veronica locked Clyde to a tree and joined the crowd.

 “The Sergeant has a plan. Shhh. He’s about to speak,” said a woman pointing to a lone tree in the middle of the field. The police officer stood in a crook of branches about six feet off the ground with a bullhorn at his lips.

 “Ladies and Gentlemen. Thank you for aiding the police in this search. We have valid information that a woman was pursued into the woods. We have found discarded clothing and our canine patrol is on the scent. But we have reason to believe that the two bundles she dropped in the field might be infants.” The Sergeant scanned the crowd. “We’re going to form four lines. Officers will position you around the perimeter of the meadow and we’ll walk toward the center.”

 Veronica had seen a human chain once at the beach when a child went missing. People linked arms and walked into the water. Thankfully, the child had been found within minutes. This chain was more like a net cast around a vast field.

 With one heartbeat, the crowd obeyed, stretching out at even intervals, ready for the sergeant’s orders. Veronica sucked in a breath, expanded her chest, and pressed back her shoulders. She felt like a soldier on the brink of action.

 “Slow and steady everybody, march forward. Keep step. One. Two. Three. Call out if you see or feel something.”

 Together four lines advanced through the flowers and underbrush, like picket fences on the move. “HALT!” came a shout from the center of the left line. The chain stopped while the police dashed into motion and approached the suspected spot.

 Questions buzzed through the crowd. “What did they find? Is it the babies? Bundles of cash? Weapons? Drugs?”

 The sergeant mounted the tree again. “False alarm,” he said. “We found the carcass of a deer. Let’s resume our march, Folks. Slowly. One, two, three. Stay vigilant and keep going.”

 Veronica surged forward with the others. Heads swiveled. Eyes widened. Hands sweated with each step. Everyone was on full alert. Nettles stung Veronica’s ankles. Spiky grasses and silky leaves brushed against her body, but she barely noticed. Her eyes didn’t matter as much as her legs and feet, determined to crunch through the underbrush and find what the woman had dropped or even the woman herself.

 A man on the right screamed.

 “Halt,” said the sergeant. The chain stopped.

 Veronica craned her neck to see. Whispers filtered down the row. “A bundle has been found.”

 “It’s a baby and it’s alive!”

 A uniformed officer lifted the bundle and cradled it in his arms. The crowd gasped, then silenced, as the Sergeant bellowed into the bullhorn, “An infant has been found, unharmed. But we know that two bundles had fallen from the woman’s arms. Let’s keep going.”

 The lines moved forward again until another shout was heard.

 Police converged on the area and the crowd moved back. Another officer lifted a bundle from the thick underbrush. A great shout rippled through the crowd.

 Again, the sergeant bellowed to the crowd, “A second child has been found. We did great, Folks.”

 “But what about the woman?” shouted a man from the line.

 As if on cue, Veronica heard a melee of dogs barking in the forest. Shouts cascaded through the field.

 “They’ve found the woman.”

 “Blood everywhere.”

 “Unconscious.”

 “Still breathing.”

 Veronica watched as EMTs entered the thicket of trees carrying a stretcher. “Give them space,” the sergeant thundered as more medical equipment rushed to the scene.

 “Thank you, Folks,” boomed the sergeant. “Our search and rescue has a happy ending. We’ve found a woman, and we’ve saved her two infants. An investigation will take place to find out what happened here,” the officer continued. “In the meantime, go home and hug your children.”

 The crowd raised its arms in thanks, crying, breathing sighs of relief. Veronica high-fived, hugged, and cheered. Like children, the group made a circle and did a victory dance, ending it with an all-fall-down and peals of laughter. But after exhaling together, the crowd wanted answers. “Who hurt that woman? Where did she come from? Who was the man chasing her?”

 Veronica felt an overpowering feeling of community. Some force of nature brought her to this place today. She looked around and realized that everyone had come together and worked as one. That had never happened to Veronica. Cooperation was new to her. Johnny and Robert competed against each other, and individually they took advantage of Veronica. Even when she was a child, she lived in a divide and conquer home. Her father raged, her mother cowered, Veronica submitted. Even before Johnny when she worked as manager of The Heart of Oaks Inn, she was an observer, helping at arm’s length, never part of the guests’ inner circle. But here, now, at this rescue, she understood being intrinsic to a cause, part of a chain of people dedicated to an important task. To watch a hundred people unite made Veronica realize the power of family. *Is it too late for me and Kate? Would Robert ever see me as a three-dimensional woman.* Veronica knew that she had to present herself as whole before Robert would regard her that way.

 Walking back to Clyde, Veronica thought about what treasure she could leave that would be meaningful and reflect her hope for a united future. At the bottom of Clyde’s basket, she found two dreamcatchers.

 She remembered when she had spotted them. As a bus driver for after-school activities, she had dropped the kids at a tennis match. Instead of hanging around in the lot chatting with other drivers or reading a book or newspaper, she explored the area on Clyde. She never drove the bus without Clyde mounted on the front rack. He was her constant friend and companion.

 One day, she passed a field where fire had decimated a forest. Stumps shot up from the ground, black and ragged, like lost dreams. She and Clyde walked among the ghosts. Dangling from the dead limbs of a charred tree were two turquoise hoops with intricate webbing, white feathers and yellow beads. She’d never seen anything like them. Veronica disentangled the creations and put them in the front basket. She felt a tug from Clyde, like he carried something magical and was eager to get it back to the turret room.

 When she returned home, she researched the objects and discovered they were called dream catchers. They were hung over cradles to shield infants from harm. She suspended them above the door of the turret room like mistletoe. Now she knew why she had found them. With the dreamcatchers in hand, Veronica sprang from the field where the babies had been found. She practically ran over the people still milling.

 “Wait,” she shouted to the sergeant with the bullhorn who was still in the center of a crowd of volunteers, reassuring them that the crisis was over, thanking them for their help and sending them on their way.

 “I’d like to give the babies something special, please, Sir.” She held up the two dream catchers.

 “Well, I’ll be,” said the officer, bowing his head slightly. “*Meegwetch*. Thank you. How did you know?”

 “Know what?”

 “That people around here are descendants of the Wepawaugs, a tribe that lived on the East bank of the Housatonic.”

 “I didn't know.” Satisfaction pulsed through her. Returning treasures to their origins was a goal on this journey.

 “Come with me,” beckoned the sergeant.

 Veronica stayed close behind the sergeant as he passed beyond the crowd and several police cruisers to an ambulance, its door wide open. Veronica heard a soothing lullaby and saw a burly policeman rocking two swaddled bundles, one in each arm.

 The sergeant attached the dream catchers to the babies’ blankets and kissed their foreheads. “*Kuh Whu Maw Das*,” he chanted. “May the gods protect you.”

 A buoyancy lifted Veronica off the ground and surrounded her with light, like the dreamcatchers were saying thank you. “You did well,” they whispered into the air. “Now we’ll do well by these two little ones. We promise.”

 As Veronica cycled to her car, she repeated the chant: “Kuh whu maw das. Kuh whu maw das. Kuh whu maw das.” With each syllable, her spirit soared.

Chapter Seven

Instead of accessing Route 7 again, Veronica drove on a sparsely populated street winding through southern Massachusetts. If she found herself in the middle of nowhere, maybe she’d figure out where she belonged. So far the mounds of booty in the back seat had not dwindled much. But she felt great about what had been given away: a camera, a whistle, dreamcatchers, wind chimes, a praying angel and Polly’s necklace. And two big bloated bags of anger that scared those hoodlums out of their wits. Veronica giggled at the memory. Aloud she shouted, “Take that, shit heads.” She flung her swears into space and released their power.

 She scanned the area, hoping for a clue to her next destination. Rolling hills and sweeping countrysides. Horses and sheep and deer. Oaks and maples, sycamores and elms, pumpkin patches and apple trees. Dogs ran free and children swung on backyard tires. She thought about the two swaddled babies and wondered what her granddaughters were doing; she had a sudden need to hear their voices. She checked the time: four-thirty. She certainly wouldn’t tell them where she was, but she wanted them to know she was thinking of them.

 She pulled the car to the shoulder and dialed the number on her cell phone. Kate’s voice crackled on the answering machine. At the beep, Veronica left a message. “Hi, it’s Grandma just saying hello and sending hugs and kisses to Cecelia and Molly. You too, Robert and Kate.” If Veronica included her son and daughter-in-law, maybe they’d reciprocate the kindness.

 Then she called home.

 Bertram answered. “Russell residence. Bertram speaking.”

 “Hi Bertram, it’s Veronica.”

 “Hey, Ronnie. That’s what Johnny said he used to call you.”

 Veronica thought back to when she met Johnny. She was thirty-five––an ugly old maid by her father’s standards––and had worked at The Heart of Oak Inn for seventeen years when she first saw him. She wore a plain shirtwaist, which was drab and colorless, but it showed off her sturdy frame. Johnny must have seen something in her that he liked. Or maybe he realized that a woman like Veronica would be grateful to have him in her life.

 Bertram chuckled. “He told me he called you Taffy too.”

 Veronica wanted to hang up. Taffy was the floozy Johnny fell for when he turned sixty. Veronica had suspected him of infidelity––the cliche perfume smells, scratches on his back, and lame excuses; one day she discovered the truth. She and Clyde had cycled two towns over because Veronica read about a house famous for its turrets. She had to see for herself how her own turret compared.

 She found the street easily, but what she hadn’t expected was Johnny’s car in front of a ranch house on the corner. She had no idea what to do. Ring the bell? Hide? Ignore it? Before she could decide, she saw Johnny’s familiar shape emerge from the house and he was not alone. Behind him on the landing was a red-headed big bosomed woman who leaned into Johnny and kissed him on his lips. She saw Johnny step back into the house, but the woman pushed him away.

 “Oh Johnny, you’re such a rascal,” Veronica could hear her say. “Haven’t you had enough for one day?” Johnny threw his head back and laughed, then jaunted off to his car like he was a teenager.

 Veronica stayed hidden behind a grove of trees for a very long time, barely seeing anything through a blur of tears, never mind the turret house. When she felt balanced enough to ride, she made her way slowly back to her house, but Johnny wasn’t home. He had left a phone message saying he was staying late at the office and not to wait up.

 The next morning, Johnny was gone when she awoke, and she decided she’d do some investigating. She biked to the woman’s house, not knowing exactly what she was going to do, but instinct took over. She parked Clyde and went up to the front door and knocked. No one answered. Her heart hammered like a tilted washing machine as she searched for an open door, which was remarkably easy since the slider on the back deck was unlatched.

 She entered the house and a slinky cat purred around her legs. Johnny hated cats and forbade her to have one. On a table leaned a Polaroid photo of Johnny standing beside the bosomy woman. He wore the yellow cashmere sweater Veronica had recently gifted him. He looked confident, his chest thrust out like a peacock.

 Veronica studied the woman, her long limbs, tiny waist and bloated chest, and compared them to her own muscular legs, saggy breasts, and round belly which churned like the ocean. She found the bathroom just in time and vomited up chunks of Johnny.

 Then she sought out other evidence. Finally, in a desk drawer in a spare bedroom, she found a ledger labeled “Men, Men, Men, Men.” A funny title, she thought, as she thumbed through it. Details sprang from the pages: purr, use feathers, likes pillow under rear, sensitive balls. Johnny’s name was on page eight.

 John Russell: First encounter, August 1996. Married. One son. Office Manager at Blanket Textiles. Received as gifts: 2 spa certificates (valued at $400), blue topaz earrings (valued at $340). Hates random talk. Brings yellow roses. Mission position preferred. Likes to dominate. Praises his mother and how different she was from all other women. Never talks about the wife. Demands silence during sex. Fluffy white towels and black coffee afterwards.

Veronica’s face turned crimson. Then from the depths of her insides emerged a guttural guffaw that made the cat hide. This woman was a floozy, a call girl! Cataloguing all her clients. Veronica read the entry again. Likes to dominate. *No surprise there.* He had dominated her throughout their marriage. And she knew Johnny told her not to talk during sex. “Shhh, Veronica. No noise,” he’d warn her. And Saint Mother Mary was revered above all others, Veronica knew that. *But fluffy towels, indeed.* She went to the woman’s linen closet and found a white damask towel trimmed with gold tassels. She draped it over her shoulders. She tore Johnny’s page from the ledger, picturing it on her turret room wall covered with poison darts.

 She looked into Taffeta’s bedroom, peeking into closets and drawers. In the nightstand were boxes of condoms, *thank god*. In a vanity table drawer were mounds of jewelry. And then Veronica’s heart crushed. There among the diamonds and pearls were the topaz earrings that Veronica thought would be her surprise fiftieth birthday present. She recalled the day she had been vacuuming under their bed and she saw a velvet box. Opening it, she nearly fainted at the beauty of the pieces. But when her birthday arrived, Johnny gave her brass pots and pans. She thought Johnny had returned the jewelry for something practical, something Veronica would use. But no, here they were in Taffeta’s room.

 Veronica refused to cry. She slipped the jewelry into her pocket. *Daffy Taffy won’t miss them. Maybe Johnny’ll ask why she’s not wearing them and Johnny’ll get angry when she says she can’t find them and go after her with nasty words and threaten her and leave her cowering in a corner. But a woman like that would speak up fast and never allow that to happen.*

 *Unlike me.*

 On her way out the door, Veronica spotted a crystal vase with yellow roses. *Yup. That’s a treasure worth taking, all right.* She exited the house, making sure the slider was closed all the way. Then she poured out the water from the vase, threw the flowers in the backyard, rolled the white-tasseled towel around the vase to protect it from breaking, and put it in the bubble-wrap section of the duffel. Clyde knew enough to watch out for potholes on the tearstained ride home. When she got to the shed, she left the towel on a hook to wipe off future clumps of mud on Clyde. Once safe in the turret room, she unwrapped the vase and placed it carefully inside the garden of gnomes. She would fill it with yellow dandelions when they were in season, a symbol of positivity, progress and survival, things she desperately needed.

 Over the next few weeks, Veronica stayed in her turret room thinking up ways to kill Johnny with impunity. She filled up baggies with swears and soaked dozens of tissues with her tears. Likewise, Johnny’s glow faded. She didn’t hear him whispering on the phone and he stayed home on his supposed poker night. Perhaps Taffeta gave him the heave ho. Or Johnny had berated her for not wearing the earrings and she couldn’t come up with a good excuse. He probably screamed at her in his normal Johnny-be-an-asshole voice and the relationship went sour.

 Amazingly, Johnny reached for Veronica in bed. She was ready, having memorized every detail of Taffeta’s page eight description. She bantered on about foods he might enjoy for dinner, and ignored him when he shushed her. When she ran out of words, she hummed. Johnny went limp. *Silence be damned.*

 Her memories collided with Bertram’s words and she picked up on their conversation. “So Johnny’s talking up a storm, huh?”

 “I wouldn’t say that. But he looks at your picture often and smiles. He brought me a shoebox of photos from his office closet. He’s been smiling at those too. He says they’re of family.”

 Veronica wasn’t aware of a shoebox of pictures; then again, she never entered his office, not even to clean. That was Johnny’s private world. Understanding that her turret room was her private space, she honored Johnny’s “Do Not Enter” rule. She wondered how many more secrets that man had locked in his brain. He’d never reveal them now, except by accident. *And what good would that do me?*

 “Did Robert call?”

 “Haven’t heard from him.”

 “What about Kate? Has she been checking out the house?”

 “No SUVs anywhere,” he said. “Just Johnny and me.”

 “Take care of him,” Veronica said. “He’s a real prize.”

 Veronica thought again about the two babies and the poor unconscious woman found in the field. How a man had chased her down and beat her up, but she managed to hide her infants to protect them. A mother’s instinct. While the man, probably her husband or her lover, took off. *Maybe the police found him? Maybe they have answers about why a man would do that to a woman? What could have happened to create such anger and violence?*

 Even when Veronica was hurt by Johnny’s relationship with Taffeta, she would never go after him with a weapon although the page from the ledger was shredded with holes. Veronica might think about killing Johnny, but she’d never see it through. Even now, she wouldn’t smother him with a pillow. She was his wife, no matter that he hadn’t been the best of husbands or even the best of friends. *Oh how complicated relationships are.* She wondered if Robert and Kate would love each other for better or for worse. *Is that clause in marriage vows because bad times lurk around everyone’s corner?*

 Before Veronica knew it she had crossed the Massachusetts border into Canaan, a small town in Connecticut. She thought that was prophetic. A Biblical name. She stopped when she saw a vacancy sign at an attractive bed and breakfast, the Yankee Clipper. When she registered, she read the words on the poster behind the desk: “Enjoy the warmth and hospitality of a true New England experience.” Something special was about to happen to her, she just knew it.

 After a mug of freshly brewed coffee and homemade doughnuts, Veronica felt a surge of energy. She wanted to reorganize her treasures to make it easier to distribute them. She spent the evening compiling small parcels with a variety of items so that she’d be ready for any opportunity. In every parcel, she included a pink bootie of cash.

 As she slept, individual items spoke to her. Telling their stories. All so different, yet all the same. “I was so lonely until you came along. . . No one loved me for years. . . I was caked with dirt, but you saw my value. . .I’ve been ignored, hit by rocks, and pooped on by birds; you gave me a second chance.” Veronica knew her treasures were ill-gotten. She hadn’t bought them or borrowed them or received them as gifts. She came by them as she cycled and they became hers. She felt obliged to find each a new home, a wonderful home, a home that would bring Veronica peace of mind.

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 At the Inn’s front foyer was a rack of places to sightsee in the area including a flyer for the Canaan Valley Playhouse. A Psychic Party was scheduled that morning at 11:00. The brochure said, “Bring a question, a problem, or an area you would like to explore. Believer or skeptic, we promise you will come away amazed.” Veronica learned from the innkeeper that the Playhouse was eight miles from the B&B–a doable distance for a bike ride.

 It was still early, so she repacked her car with her treasures and thought about which parcel to take to the psychic party. *Wind chimes? Money? A mask? Sass? Spirit? A sense of wonder?*

 She got directions to the playhouse, filled her backpack with an I-want-to-go-to-a-psychic-party assortment, and unbungeed Clyde.

 The whole way there, she saw signs for the event. Crystal balls. Tarot Cards. Candles. She dreamed up questions to ask the psychics: *What will happen to my eyes? Will they get worse, stay the same, or get better? What about Johnny? Will he lose more brain-power? Will he die soon? Will Kate sell the house and force me to live at an assisted living home? Might Robert permit me to live in my own house without Johnny? What kind of lives will my grandchildren have? Will they remember me? Will giving back my treasures insure a better future for me? for others?*

 Veronica arrived at a red wooden building by 10:00. She locked Clyde, tightened her backpack and was off to explore. In the large hall, stations were set up according to specific psychic abilities: Clairvoyants, Channelers, Numerologists, Mediums and Healers. It was way too early and the bustle of preparing the room prohibited her from sitting inside to approach the tables, so she went outside and studied the billboard that featured flyers of upcoming events.

 One poster caught her eye: a photo of a highway with puffy white clouds growing like mushrooms into the sky. What if she could drive down that road? Where would it take her? The play was called *The Laramie Project*. She’d never heard of it. The more she read, the more her stomach lurched. The road was not benign. It didn’t lead to rainbows and pots of gold. It was about a murder in Wyoming in 1998. On a cold night in October, twenty-year-old Matthew Shepard was robbed, tied to a cattle fence and beaten savagely, then left to die because he was homosexual. He was found eighteen hours later by a biker.

 *What if I were that biker? What if I had found that poor boy?* She thought about the man with the weapon pursuing the woman along the Housatonic. How the woman had dropped her infants into the field to protect them. *Why is there so much violence on this planet? What can be done about it? What can I do?*

 Veronica walked around the grounds until she spotted the central office of the Playhouse. A woman sat at a desk with her laptop and a stack of manuscripts.

 “May I help you?” she asked.

 “I thought I needed a psychic to address my questions today, but I believe you can answer one for me.”

 “I’ll try,” said the woman, offering Veronica her hand. “I’m Zoe Beth. Have a seat. What can I do for you?”

 Veronica was pleased by Zoe Beth’s hospitality. Here she had come in off the street, with her biking clothes on–her standard outfit of saggy padded pants and a bright yellow long-sleeved cotton shirt. Her white hair was flat against her scalp and she had brushed on a quick stain of raspberry lipstick.

 “I saw the poster for *The Laramie Project* and wondered how I could help people conquer their inclinations for violence,” said Veronica, trying to figure out how she might actually go about doing that.

 Zoe Beth handed her a form from her file cabinet. “There’s a charity called Donation Planet that allows you to select which charities you’d like your money to go to. Here’s the information.”

 “What about the Playhouse? How are you funded?”

 “We depend on grants and patrons,” said Zoe Beth. “We’re a grass-roots theater, encouraging local talent. We offer a residency for budding writers, actors, and musicians. And we perform plays about social justice.”

 “That’s the answer I wanted to hear.” Veronica found what she was looking for in her shoulder bag: two pink booties filled with money. “Here’s fifteen thousand dollars that I’ve saved. I’d like it earmarked for a play about domestic violence and teaching about tolerance and love.”

 The woman’s jaw fell into her neck.

 “I’d like to give more, but that’s all I have in my backpack this morning.”

 Veronica rose, shook Zoe Beth’s hand, and left the office.

 “Wait!” called the woman. “What’s your name? I want to list you as a donor.”

 Veronica waved her hand. “No need. I’m on a mission to give back.”

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 Veronica hated how she had come by that money.

 It had been twilight, much too late for her to be bicycling, but a bridge was closed and there was a convoluted detour. The wind had picked up suddenly and black clouds burst as she rounded a bend in the road. Clyde’s tires skidded and she lost her footing. When she saw an open garage where she could wait out the sudden storm, she cycled in. A skinny man in a ratty tank top stood at the screen door of the house. A cigarette dangled from his mouth.

 Veronica scooted into the garage and called out, “Is it ok if I wait here till the rain passes?” She hoped he’d sympathize with her distress.

 "Old lady, rain’s a bitch," he growled, coming at her like he’d seen a ghost. He pushed spindly fingers through his gnarled hair.

 Horrified, Veronica saw tattooed scorpions on his cheekbones and red-eyed tarantulas on his exposed shoulders. Spiders crawled across his chin, their legs dangling like whiskers along his jawbone.

 Veronica shuddered.

 The spiderman’s phone rang and he fumbled in his pants pocket. Answering it, he turned his back to Veronica but his voice cut through the thunder. “Goddamn assholes. Can’t no one do nothing without screwing up?”

 *Think*, Veronica told herself. *That nasty bug will hurt me if I don’t get out of here fast.* As she whipped Clyde around to face the street, she noticed the rows of shelves lined with duffels of all sizes. Like a collection in her turret room.

 Spiderman kept shouting into his phone. “Fuck yes. Everything’s ready for you. But I got an ugly witch in my driveway. I’ve got to deal with her.”

 Veronica overheard his threat. *What is that foul-mouthed insect going to do to me? I’m not sticking around long enough to find out!* Veronica saw her chance to escape when his back was turned. *But I’m going to teach him a lesson first.* *I’ll show him just how much power this old witch has.* She snatched a bag from the shelf, a small one, one that would fit in Clyde’s front basket.

 Spiderman railed at her as she skidded down the driveway. “You’d better get the hell out of here if you know what’s good for you. This is private property, old lady. Do you understand?”

 Veronica turned onto the side street just as a white Mustang cut into Spiderman’s driveway. Losing her balance, she fell on her face in the gulley by the side of the road, with Clyde landing on top of her. She saw two men leap from the car and run toward Spiderman. "Termite, load ‘em up. You got our cut, right?”

 Veronica wiped her face with a corner of her shirt, set Clyde upright, jumped on his saddle and pedaled like an eggbeater. Lightening tore through the sky, thunder crashed around her, but she kept a furious pace until she took refuge downtown under a store's overhang.

 Across the street from where she stood, the light turned red. Third in line was the white Mustang. Veronica tucked behind a sign and watched the driver pound on his hairy chest like Tarzan. His passenger threw back his head and laughed. The light turned green and the car lunged forward.

 What if those men had seen her? Would they connect her to Spiderman? Would they tell him where she was? Would they hurt her?

 It was dark when she reached home, although the rain had stopped. The lights were on, and Johnny’s car was in the driveway. Had he been worried about her in this weather? It was good Robert was away at college. He would have been frantic.

 She rolled Clyde into the shed, mud-laden and crusty. She felt bad that he was so dirty, but he’d have to wait until morning to be cleaned. Exhausted and still shaking from her encounter with Spiderman and the hairy apes in the Mustang, Veronica entered the house through the kitchen, hoping Johnny would rush toward her with a comforting embrace. Instead she saw the hand-written note propped on the table: No dinner? I went downtown with Harold to the diner.

 What had she expected, really? That the man would be driving throughout the town searching for her? Or that he’d be pacing from window to window wondering if she were all right in this rain and lightning and thunder. She wanted to race to the turret room for baggies, but she didn’t make it in time for a guttural scream to tear the air. She could be dead! That spidery man could have sliced her into pieces for all Johnny cared. She was just a food-making-machine to him.

 And Harold picked Johnny up? Horrible Harold from Monument Acres? The guy Johnny denigrated every time he talked about work? It was probably Taffeta, stealing up the driveway, entering Veronica’s house, laughing at her chintz curtains and teapot collection. And downtown? Were they right there in the restaurant when she hid from the apes at the traffic light? Were they enjoying a glass of wine and staring into each other’s eyes?

 *Breathe, for god’s sake*. *Breathe in. Breathe out. Take three full deep breaths.*Veronica’s heart settled. *I’m home. I’m safe. And I don’t have to explain anything to anybody.*

 She went to the liquor cabinet and chugged a shot of whiskey right from the bottle. Realizing she was puddling the floor and no one else would be cleaning it up except her, she stripped down in the living room, wiped the mess with her clothes, and went upstairs for a shower.

 She ran the water till it steamed, letting it roll over her like ocean swells. Still in her towel, she lay on the bed and fell into a deep sleep. She dreamt she was a nail being hammered into a wall by a chiseled rock. *Thud thud thwack thwack*, her head drummed with pain. She squirmed from under its grip and tried to run away. But she was a nail and had no legs. She pogo-sticked down the road until she spotted another nail who looked just like her friend Polly. Together they leaned into each other and moved forward one spike at a time.

 When her eyes opened at five in the morning, Johnny was snoring beside her in bed. She sat up, her calves tight and knotted, and her stomach aching. She put on a robe and crept downstairs to boil hot water for tea and fix herself a grilled cheese sandwich, her childhood comfort food. When Johnny entered the kitchen at seven, dressed and ready for work, his neck veins bulged.

 “I had frigging heartburn all night from that damn burger joint and I had to put up with Harold going on and on about meeting our sales quotas. What the hell, Veronica? What were you thinking? You know I like my dinner at five o’clock when I get home. I’m the one working to put food on the table while you’re out gallivanting on your stupid bicycle. You do that again and you’ll be eating alone permanently.”

 Johnny didn’t even look at her during his rant. He just kept yelling, his face redder and puffier in between burps. She was glad he had heartburn. She’d go to that diner and buy up all the burgers and serve them to him nightly. But with the skimpy allowance he gave her weekly, she’d never get away with that.

 In the background, she heard the morning news on the television. Johnny had turned it on while getting dressed and hadn’t turned it off when he left for work. The anchor talked about a local man who was left for dead in his garage.

 “Basil ‘Termite’ Termitsky, lead drummer for the popular heavy metal band Arachnid, was in critical condition after being assaulted late yesterday afternoon in his Plainview home. The alleged assailants were apprehended driving a white Mustang on Route 95 near the Rhode Island border. In the car, officers discovered duffel bags filled with cocaine, heroin, and marijuana.

 Termitsky’s neighbor, Sandra Bliss, identified the car that had sped out of his driveway. Bliss said the two men frequented Termitsky’s house making noise into the early morning. Fed up with the disturbances, she had written down their license plate with the intention of alerting police.”

 Veronica flipped to other stations to hear the story repeated. It was then that she remembered the duffel from Spiderman’s garage. She went to the shed where poor Clyde leaned against the wall, stained with brown spots and gravel. Inside his front pack, she withdrew the bag. She opened it to find three envelopes labeled Hank, Skank, and Termite.

 She unsealed them and saw stacks of money in each. She recalled what the men had shouted: “Termite, you got our cut?*”* *Is that why the man was beaten? I took their money.* When Veronica remembered to breathe, she counted out the cash: $90,000. The cut had been $30,000 each. For selling dope to young people, muddying up their minds so they had to have more? For feeding addicts? For blurring the brains of vulnerable people? *Those men are the scum of the earth.*

 *What do I do now? Should I put the duffel back on Spiderman’s shelf? As heinous as those men are, that money does not belong to me.* She cleaned Clyde, changed into her biking clothes, and tried to recall exactly where Termite lived. She looked up his address in the phone book. When that failed, she tried Sandra Bliss, the whistle-blowing neighbor and easily located the house. She figured out a viable route, put the duffel of money into her front pack, and set out.

 After ten miles, she spotted a lone police car guarding the tattooed man's home, which was cordoned off with strips of yellow tape along the open garage. Veronica rode close enough to confirm that the shelves which held the gym bags were empty. She knew what had been inside them: drugs. All but one ended up in the white Mustang with those hairy beasts. There was no way she could return the duffel to the shelf.

 Part of her still wanted to return the money even if that condoned how it was gotten. Maybe she could write Spiderman a note while he was recovering in the hospital saying the money would be in a trust fund waiting for him to clean up his act and get out of the drug business. Or she could invest the money in children and use it to better the lives of others? She fashioned a hiding place under the floorboard in the center of the turret room and put her yoga mat over it. As she stretched, she weighed her options about what to do with the cash. Before she knew it, ten years had passed.

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 So now all these years later in a little Connecticut town that boasted the name Canaan Valley, the promised land, what better way to spend some of Spiderman’s money than to fund a theater that specialized in social justice.

 Retrieving Clyde, she cycled away from the Playhouse until she spied a lone table set up with paints, paintbrushes and colorful rocks with sayings on them. Posted on a tree was the sign *Take one. Leave one.*

 Veronica stopped and leaned Clyde against a tree. She read inspiring quotes on the stones like “Kindness Rocks”; “Life is Short”; and “Believe in Yourself.” But the saying that spoke most loudly to her was, “We rise by lifting others.” She placed it in Clyde’s basket. Then she dipped a paintbrush into a pot of cobalt blue and wrote: “Be a little boulder.”

Chapter Eight

Veronica left the Yankee Clipper Bed and Breakfast as soon as she returned from the Valley Playhouse. She didn’t want Zoe Beth tracking her down and identifying her. She drove east along Route 57 toward Greenville. The city sounded like hope and promise.

 She was feeling pretty good about her giving back adventure. Handing over fifteen thousand dollars felt exhilarating. Veronica wondered how Spiderman would react to that. It had been ten years. Had he forgotten all about the money, especially since the two men who pummeled him were imprisoned? She knew he had recovered, but knew nothing else about him. What’s more, she didn’t want to know what became of him. Giving his money away to good causes was a win-win for everyone.

 Before Veronica knew it, she was in the downtown area of the city and saw a sign for the Connecticut River Bikeway. She had no idea what she would see. What adventure she would have. She unbungeed Clyde and accessed the Bikeway. At first, she was among young people speeding along, seemingly on their way to meetings and jobs as the path paralleled busy streets and crowded neighborhoods with stores and offices. But as she ventured further into the outskirts, she paced herself with the older people who cruised along the path, veered around the young moms pushing baby carriages, and stayed out of the way of the single men and women clocking miles for exercise.

 It felt good just to ride and not think about traffic. She skipped through the events and faces of the last few days. The frowning girl who forgot to close the front door, the lonely widow who had overloaded her home with memories, the pursued woman and her two infants whom the town gathered to save, those disgusting teens who ran from her rant, and Zoe Beth’s surprised expression when Veronica handed her thousands of dollars. Besides shedding more of her treasures, what she needed now was a husband who remembered her, eyes that saw complete images, and a son and daughter-in-law who wouldn’t pull the rug out from under her.

 As Veronica cruised deeper into the suburbs, she heard mewling from the woods that flanked the path. She cycled toward it; the sound increased into cries, like thorns stuck in someone’s side, withdrawn, then pushed in again. She stopped Clyde when she saw a cat lying by the side of the trail writhing in pain. She understood that twist of the body, recalling the agony she endured through two late-term miscarriages and one stillborn. She didn’t have time for self-pity because seconds later, the cat gave birth to kittens right there on the edge of the pavement in the crook of a decaying log. A careless biker could have sped along and crushed them like ants.

 Veronica dismounted and angled Clyde so that others would have to veer around them. She was inches away from the tiny creatures, their bodies slimy, their whiskers long, and their noses pink. The mother licked each one clean; fluff balls emerged with slits for eyes and claws on their toes. Crying and yelping, the five kittens scampered over their exhausted mother’s body.

 Veronica sat beside the brood deciding how on earth she could protect them from being run over if she left them unguarded. She unzipped her backpack and withdrew a yellow sweatshirt she had pilfered years ago from a clothesline when the temperature dropped and she shivered in the cold. Like magic, the sweatshirt had been waiting for her. Now it was waiting for the mother and her litter.

 Veronica hummed softly so she wouldn’t scare the little family. Then she set the sweatshirt on the ground and gently lifted the mother cat onto it, positioning her so her babies would find her. They jumped onto the soft cloth and suckled their mother. Slowly so she wouldn’t frighten the mother or drop any kittens, Veronica carried the sweatshirt far from the path and tucked it beneath a bush. She offered the mother cat dribbles of water from her water bottle and sat back to watch them. The mother closed her eyes as her babies nursed.

 From the path, Veronica heard a group of cyclers pedal past. *Whoosh. Whoosh. Whoosh. Whoosh*. A dozen of them at least. Flying on their skinny wheels. Intent on their workout. They never would have seen the kittens in time to stop. She didn’t fret. The babies were safe because she had saved them.

 Veronica leaned against a tree and reached into her backpack again. She took out the hot pink sneakers she had found recently under a table in a restaurant, waiting to be worn. She opened the laces and lay some soil and leaves inside the shoes, making a comfortable bed and a hiding place when the mom went off to hunt. Then she withdrew the four wind chimes she had put in her backpack the night before. Moon and stars. Miniature trees. Hummingbirds. Butterflies. Made of glass and chrome and bamboo and metal. She attached each to low limbs where they tinkled soothing songs for the new family.

 Veronica wished she could stay and watch them, but she recalled the Robert Frost poem and said the words aloud: “The woods are lovely, dark and deep, but I have promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep.”

 As she headed back, her mind warbled with kitten mews and chime tingles. She wasn’t ready to pack it in for the day. Besides, it was barely noon. She wanted more adventures, more ways to give back, to do good, to help others.

 When she reached her car, she bungeed Clyde and flipped a nickel. Heads, north; tails, south. Both seemed appropriate to decide the future. Thomas Jefferson stared at her. His eyes were clear and direct, his smile a hint of acceptance.

 Heads it was. She liked the quiet roads, the outliers, the winding streets where she never knew what was around the corner. She got off the highway and drove as wide-eyed as her failing sight allowed, seeking out something special. And then she saw the sign: Flying lessons. Turn right.

 *Do I dare?* She turned right.

 Down a winding dirt path, she saw a grassy field with one old wooden building and a windsock along a rutted runway. On the side of the building were faded words:

Barnstormer flights

The Ultimate Flying Adventure.

Join us for a ride in an open-cockpit biplane.

 She parked, got her backpack, filled it with two fluffy pink socks, and walked toward a scruffy young man standing behind a make-shift counter.

 “I’m ready to fly,” she said. “What’s the deal?”

 The teen-ager rolled his eyes. “Must be a bucketlist wish,” he stage-whispered.

 Veronica gritted her teeth and clutched her backpack. She would have whipped one of the newly packed wadded booties at him if it hadn’t been filled with cash. She thought about taking out a baggie and breathing swears into it. Instead, she stood straighter, narrowed her eyes, and snickered. “I lost my broom stick. Thought I’d try a different way of flight.”

 The boy laughed, a little too loudly. “It’s fifty dollars for a half-hour tour of the skies. You have a choice: Adventure Flight or Hoosatonic Happening. I figure you’re a leaf-peeper. The Hoosatonic would work for you.”

 Veronica admired autumn leaves as much as any sightseer. But why did the kid have to peg her so quickly? Because she was old? “Tell me about the Adventure Flight.”

 “For the thrill seekers among us, we have an aerobatic option. Loops, barrel rolls, and stall turns.”

 She never had any experience with planes. She might as well get the full treatment while she could still see what was happening. “Yup, that’s for me.”

 His eyes bugged. “You’ll have to sign some forms first.”

 “Assuring you that if I have a heart attack, you’re not responsible?”

 “Something like that.” He set out the papers, which she signed. “We have snacks for sale, although you might not want to eat anything before you fly.” He looked to a corner of the field where a man pounded a hammer inside the cockpit of a plane. “It’ll be about a half-hour wait while the captain gets the plane ready.”

 Veronica’s head pulsed with each blow of the hammer while the young man jabbered about some MacGyver guy on television and how he jerry-rigged a plane. It was almost like he wanted her to hear how rickety the plane was and unsafe, so she’d back out or be too scared. *What makes him so rude? His youth? What right does he have to discriminate against me because I’m white-haired and have clocked a few miles? Does he think I’m an invalid, or worse, a catastrophe waiting to happen?*

 *Young people today think they have all the answers. They don’t give me the time of day. That’s the exact attitude that forced me take to the duffel from that**tattooed drug dealer Spiderman in the first place.* A darkness fell over Veronica, like her eyes were shrouded with black. She shuddered at the memory in the garage the night of the thunderstorm.

 “Your turn, Darlin’,” drawled a deep voice.

 *Darlin’?* She hadn’t heard that word since she was a child. Darlin’ was what Grandpa Bates had called her. He was her favorite man ever. To Veronica he was a god even though her father disliked him and didn’t let him visit. Veronica and her mother traveled into Boston to see him once a year. He always had gifts for Veronica: carvings of bulls and horses, and pen and ink drawings of cowboys in ten-gallon hats.

 Veronica had hidden them when she got home, but her father always found them, and made Veronica put them in the trash on trash day, taking no chances that she’d retrieve them when he wasn’t looking. “I want nothing to do with that man in my house.”

 But Veronica thought her grandfather was kind-hearted. He called her Darlin’ and yodeled for her. He taught her to ride a bike, tie a knot, and use a compass. All her father taught her was how to hide from his backhand.

 “Howdy! I’m Cap’n Jack.” The rugged man extended a rough hand with jagged cuticles. “You’re in for a rootin’ tootin’ rip-roaring ride. Are ya ready, Darlin’?”

 Captain Jack sounded like Grandpa Bates, down to the Texas twang. Veronica wanted to yodel. He took her arm and they two-stepped to the corner of the field where the biplane waited. She felt like a child being swept off her feet by her long-deceased Grandpa.

 “Yahoo,” Captain Jack hooted.

 “High Ho Silver, away!” Veronica could hear the William Tell Overture in her mind, remembering how she watched The Lone Ranger on Grandpa’s black and white television while her mother shopped at Jordan Marsh one day a year.

 Captain Jack helped Veronica into the biplane. *Will this be the last time my feet touch the earth? Will Johnny survive without me? Will Robert and my granddaughters miss me? Kate certainly won’t.* But Captain Jack seemed so confident, and she had loved Grandpa, one of the few men who talked to her face-to-face, heart-to-heart. Losing him when she was nine narrowed her world and sent her mother into a deep depression. Being with a man who sounded like Grandpa Bates gave Veronica a comfort she hadn’t felt in decades.

 The plane’s engine roared to life. Veronica’s body shook upon lift-off, but the seatbelt held her steady. She had on earphones and Captain Jack sang “Yippie-yi-yo, yippie-yi-yo-ki-yay, yippie-yi-yo-ohh-ohh.” Grandpa sang that all the time too. She hummed along.

 “Just how old is this plane?” Veronica asked.

 “Old enough to have muscle memory,” he said.

 When they were airborne, it was like being on her bike only weightless, soaring, gliding, feeling the air through her. She almost closed her eyes, but didn’t, fearful she’d miss a second of the spectacle laid out before her. Pumpkin-oranges. Scarlet fire-bursts. Sunflower yellows. Sparkling crystal lakes. Blankets of lush green grasses. Even the black spots in her vision couldn’t mar October’s pageant. Endless trees and leaves, lakes, ponds and waterfalls, rock ridges and canyons, church steeples and silos––a vibrant seamless quilt.

 Captain Jack pointed to an industrial area rising like cardboard in the distance. “That there was the paper capital of the world, the city of Holyoke.”

 “It looks so sad,” she said as she surveyed the steel roofs, the patches of gravel and tar, the grid of square roads and squat buildings, and a snaking waterway devoid of boats.

 “It thrived once, but it’s hit on hard times. It’s third on the list of the poorest cities in Massachusetts.”

 Veronica decided Holyoke was a great place to be today. She reached into her backpack. She wanted to spread a little unexpected joy.

 “Can we get closer to a factory?”

 “They’re pretty much all closed.”

 “Then how about one that’s pretty much open.”

 “If that’s your pleasure,” he said and buzzed low to a building where workers relaxed on the flat rooftop. It looked like they were eating lunch.

 Veronica pulled out a pink bootie, removed the rubber band, and dropped a fistful of money over the side. The air filled with green butterflies. The captain didn’t notice because the wind blew the hundred dollar bills behind the plane.

 “Let’s move on,” Veronica said, not waiting to see if the money had hit the spot she anticipated.

 “What’s your pleasure now, Darlin’?”

 Veronica wanted to find a place where women and children gathered. “How about a playground a little further inland?”

 “Sure thing, but I can’t get too low. Trees are in the way.”

 “That’s ok. Just so there are people down there.”

 “No problem. I know a spot.”

 The plane soared and dipped over a shaded park where tiny people climbed jungle gyms, rode seesaws, and slid down slides. Veronica glimpsed moms on the sidelines sitting on benches, chatting, keeping one eye on their little ones as they all breathed in the happy playground air. Veronica let loose the remaining contents of the bootie, and the paper dollars fluttered down like leaves, oh so gently.

 Captain Jack still hadn’t seen the money as it fell behind the plane. “Such a peaceful place,” he said. “I remember taking my daughters there when they were small. Ok. Darlin’, we have time for one more dipsy-do,” he said.

 Up ahead, Veronica spotted a field where teams of boys and girls played soccer. Moms and Dads and grandparents lined the sides, some sitting on beach chairs, some standing, others pacing.

 “How about we check out the soccer games?” she said.

 “We’ll loop-de-loop the field. Are you ready?”

 The plane whizzed and sputtered, gained speed and slowed. The crowd looked up and pointed. The games stopped. Veronica’s heart did too, thinking they were going to fall into the center of the field and create trauma for every child for the rest of their lives.

 “A little heart-thumper there, Darlin’. Don’t let it scare you. We’re doing great.”

 The plane circled the field––once right-side up, once upside down––to the cheers from the onlookers. Veronica felt like a cross between Amelia Earhart and Santa Claus as she tossed out chunks of money from the second bootie, letting it fly. This time the pilot caught wind of what she was doing and dipped lower into the cash as it fluttered.

 “You’re not one of those born-agains seeking out God before you meet your maker, are ya Darlin’?” he asked as one of the hundred dollar bills fell into his seat.

 “Each morning, I’m born again. It’s what I do today that counts,” Veronica said, recalling a sign on her church.

 “That’s a good philosophy,” said the captain.

 Veronica chuckled. She felt like a piñata filled with goodies, whacked into sharing, falling from the sky. She watched as the soccer players ran for the money. She prayed there wasn’t a stampede and that all received an equal amount although she knew that was impossible. The best she could hope for was that it lightened the mood in Holyoke, even for one day.

 “You must have a jim-dandy reason for dropping money out of a plane. Hope you saved some for yourself.”

 “I’ve saved some for you,” she said.

 “Hot diggity!” he said.

 This man used so many of her grandpa’s expressions, it was like channeling him. She hadn’t thought about Grandpa Bates in oh so long. That’s what was wrong with her, she thought. She had forgotten that she had once been someone’s Darlin’. Veronica was so grateful for the flight and the familiar presence of grandpa that she gave Captain Jack five one hundred dollar bills.

 “This is our secret, all right?” said Veronica.

 “I knew you were special the minute I saw you, Darlin’. Something about your eyes, how bright their centers are, like they’re lighting up the sky.”

 Veronica never considered her eyes an asset, especially now that they were failing. But to know they spoke to this man had to count for something.

 “I’d like to find a place to spend the night nearby, but not in Holyoke.”

 “You’re the Lone Ranger,” Captain Jack said. “I get it.” He winked at her. “Take the Pike to Exit 8 and drive south on Route 32 to Monsoon. It’s a sleepy little town with a great bed and breakfast called Lord Manor. Everyone there is treated like royalty. Tell them I sent you.”

 Veronica reached into her backpack and brought out a colorful knit-wool cap that she had found moldering on a shriveled scarecrow. She washed it and restored its hand-crafted quality. “This will keep you toasty warm in the winter.”

 “Thanks Darlin’, and good luck to you.” He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it gently.

 “That will keep me warm all winter,” she giggled.

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 Driving to Lord’s Manor, Veronica replayed her airplane adventure. The high of literally being on top of the world, scattering Spiderman’s money to the needy, and reconnecting with her grandpa. At seventy-two years old, she felt young again. She turned the radio to Golden Oldies, rolled down the windows in the car, and belted out tunes.

 Once at the Bed and Breakfast, Veronica called home. Bertram’s voice sounded like candy. “You’ll never guess what happened today. Johnny and I were watching the news on television and saw money dropping from the sky in this city in western Massachusetts. Some guy on the ground filmed it all on hisiPhone. Damnedest thing.”

 Veronica gulped. She hoped no one saw her or identified the plane.

 “But it’s what Johnny said that was amazing. He babbled on for ten minutes about being on his honeymoon in Nantucket. And how he parasailed along the beach and his wallet flew out of his pocket and disappeared. The man laughed like it really happened.” Veronica had forgotten all about that. She had sat on a blanket and watched Johnny soar, amazed at his confidence and devil-may-care attitude, worrying if she’d be a widow before she had a chance to be a wife. When she saw Johnny’s wallet fly through the air, she tried to follow its trajectory. South, she thought, toward Surfside Avenue.

 After Johnny disentangled himself from his safety gear, Veronica hugged him and told him how proud she was of him, then gave him the bad news.

 “Your wallet is gone,” she said. “Flew the coop!”

 “Did you see which way it went?”

 Together, they hopped on their moped and headed south, searching for the downed wallet until they saw a long-haired tie-dyed hippy waving the wallet into the air and ranting. “The gods must be crazy! First a coke bottle falls on my head and now a wallet. I’m a gonna for sure.”

 Johnny pulled up beside the man and calmed him down by taking the wallet, withdrawing his license, and showing him his photo. “No one’s dead. I just lost my wallet while I was parasailing.”

 The man stared at Johnny and Veronica with glazed eyes and smokey breath. “No matter what befalls me, I’ll recover,” he intoned and trotted across the dunes to the sea.

 For years, Johnny and Veronica’s catch phrase when something out-of-their-control happened was “No matter what befalls us, we’ll recover.” It became a mantra for Veronica and made her years of invisibility bearable.

 But thirty-six years had passed and Johnny’s days of recovery were behind him. But what if she came home to a different Johnny, one who harbored happy memories of their past. Maybe they had a future together. Perhaps she should save a few booties for herself and her family.

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 The next morning, Veronica put her suitcase in the car and thought about what she needed for her backpack, deciding to store her booties in her glove compartment for the day, afraid that notoriety would find her if she kept on distributing it haphazardly. Even though she wouldn’t mind repeating her flying adventure, she decided to keep two feet on the ground. Perhaps she could hike along a path and plant a ceramic garden with miniature flamingos, ceramic gnomes, frogs, and a garden fairy. She noticed loose hundred dollar bills at the bottom of her backpack but left them there, just in case. As an afterthought, she added the scarf and gloves that she had found one June day hanging from a tree limb outside a five-story apartment building. They had been there for a week and no one had claimed them. Looking brand new, their tags were still attached.

 “I’d like to do some hiking,” Veronica told the innkeeper at breakfast. “Where’s a friendly place?”

 “Around Clear Pond. Turn left out of the drive. Up about five miles. You’ll see the signs.”

 *Clear. Clarity. Sounds just right.*

 Five diners joined Veronica as she finished her breakfast at the long communal table. Their voices were high-pitched and whiny as they continued the conversation they were having before they were seated.

 “Who drops money from a plane?” said one person. “It’s so random. Isn’t there a better way? Like give it to me directly.”

 “I’m always in the wrong place at the wrong time,” said another.

 “The only thing that ever dropped from a plane in front of me was a headless goose,” said someone else, who explained that the bird had flown too close to the plane’s propeller as it came in for a landing. “Thud. Right smack on the ground.”

 Everyone cringed including Veronica, but she wondered if her approach to parsing out the money anonymously was effective. She liked how she had given the Canaan Valley Playhouse a donation directly; perhaps she was too impulsive with the barnstorming.

 The yammering circled back to why someone would choose Holyoke.

 “I knew the town was in trouble, but for someone to just let loose with thousands seems foolish.”

 “The person must have worked in the paper mills and hit the lottery. Dumping on his friends for fun.”

 Veronica lost her appetite listening to the guests ridicule a person who would drop money so cavalierly. Was it so hard to imagine a person being altruistic just because?Her whole reason for her road trip was to give back. Was that so unusual? Was she actually being selfish and doing this for herself, not others? Veronica studied the people around the table and decided they were being chatty, not malicious. But she didn’t want to hear anything negative about what she had done. She packed the rest of her breakfast in a napkin, nodded to the diners, said good bye to the host and set out in her car to find Clear Pond. Maybe a walk would clarify her motives.

 The area was quiet and peaceful. Yellow leaves crowded the branches of trees along a shoreline. Reds and oranges lined the opposite bank. As she hiked, a toothless old man on a rickety bike passed her several times. She wondered how he kept his balance amidst roots and mud.

 When she got to a clearing, she assessed the area, thinking to plant her treasures. Hikers would come upon the place and find it magical. But she was so tired; she lay back and closed her eyes, mapping out the area in her mind. She never heard the old man approach. He was there and gone with her backpack within seconds. When she realized it was missing, and saw thin bicycle tracks nearby, she suspected the toothless biker. She raced around the pond searching for his silhouette. To no avail. He was gone, along with flamingos, gnomes, frogs, scarf, gloves and several hundred dollars.

 When Veronica returned to her car, her back tire was flat. She wondered whether the old man had done it and if so, did he do it intentionally so she wouldn’t pursue him. *Now what?* She had her phone, her keys, her credit cards and license in her pockets, so this all could have been worse. The backpack held her faults, her secrets, her bad Veronica ways. It was just that it was hers. The irony hit her hard. She couldn’t decide whether to laugh or to cry.

 She usually took innocent things. Like a frog on the lawn. Or a sweatshirt on a clothesline. Or a forgotten scarecrow a month after Halloween. She felt like they were there for the picking, set out for her to find them and make them hers. She never associated a person with the belongings except for the glass vase in Taffeta’s house and the jewelry that Johnny had bought her. How could she be so disconnected? Was that what violence was about too? Removing oneself mentally from a crime? Being the onlooker, not the participant? There was a difference, wasn’t there? But unlike a real criminal, she wasn’t hurting anyone when she stole a gnome. Nobody would miss it. But maybe that gnome signified a new birth or a special trip. Oh how unfeeling people became when they weren’t threatened directly with pain.

 But the toothless biker stole something of value to her. In truth, though, everything inside the backpack was meant to be distributed, so why not dismiss what he did to her as his need, his hope that maybe there was food in there, or better yet, dentures.

 Veronica thought about the word empathy. She had felt Robert's pain when Johnny locked him in his room, neglected to give him dinner, or made him go outside barefoot to get the morning newspaper in the winter. She demurred to Johnny’s judgment, thinking his ways would toughen Robert up. But it only made her weaker and hardened her son against her for not protecting him. She understood that now.

 If she failed to feel the pain others suffered, then she was guilty. When the spider-faced man in the garage was beaten by those nasty Mustang Men, she felt removed from it, although she was the cause. She took that duffel of money that belonged to those men. Spiderman had every intention of paying them their share; their names had been on the envelopes. Veronica had justified the theft by convincing herself that she saved innocent people from starting a fatal drug habit or maintaining one. That money still burned a hole in her conscience. She should have tried harder to give it back instead of burying it beneath the floorboards of her turret room and keeping it hidden for ten years.

 Veronica hung her head and kicked the damn flat tire.

 “Need some help?” a female called from an open window.

 Veronica looked up to see a petite woman in a blue work shirt, her red hair pulled into a ponytail.

 “I can get you back on the road in a jiffy. No need to be upset.”

 Her voice was high pitched, like it hadn’t fully developed. Veronica stared at her and realized she was just a teen. How could that be? A young girl on a country road in a beat-up car fixing tires? Maybe Veronica hadn’t had enough sleep and this was an illusion, her eyes tricking her.

 “My name’s Willie, with an I - E at the end, not a Y,” the girl said as she examined the tire. “Daddy wanted a boy. Momma, she said if my name was Willy, it’d have to be spelled girlie-like.”

 Veronica closed her eyes hard and blinked several times and opened them wide. The girl was still there jacking up Veronica’s car and removing the tire. She rolled it around. “See that?” she pointed to a nail in the tire. “That there’s the problem.”

 Willie opened the trunk looking for the spare. Veronica was glad that several boxes had already been emptied; otherwise, the girl would have thought Veronica was living in a Dollar Store. Jacking up the car, Willie removed the flat, rolled the tire to the side and affixed the spare. “Where’d you learn to do that?” asked Veronica.

 “My Daddy taught me. We’re in the auto repair business.”

 “But you’re just a little bit of a thing.”

 Willie stood taller. “What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked as she put the tire back on the car and tightened the lug nuts. “This is the twenty-first century, you know. Just because I’m small doesn’t mean I’m not strong.”

 “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that you couldn’t be a mechanic, it’s just that it’s such a dirty job.”

 “And what did you do that was so clean?”

 Veronica winced. “Actually, I was a caretaker for an inn for twenty years.” Cleaning other people’s dirty sheets and towels, and toilets when necessary. After she married, she cleaned up after Johnny and then catered to her son Robert’s messes. She drove a dirty school bus while he was in school. Bicycle riding was clean, she decided, but stealing lovely objects whenever they presented themselves, not so much.

 “And now what?” asked the girl.

 “Now what? Meaning?”

 “You’re not such a big bit of a thing. I could teach you how to change a tire.”

 Veronica laughed.

 “I’m serious. It’s a good skill to know. You look strong enough.”

 “I’m seventy-two years old.”

 “You have to have skills. That’s what my dad says. I can fix any part on a car that needs fixing. Blindfolded.”

 Blindfolded, thought Veronica, what she would experience if this macular degeneration advanced like predicted. “How old are you, Willie?”

 “Eighteen. Next up is the military. I’m going to learn how to fix airplanes. Now that’s a useful skill.”

 Veronica had yet to fix a tire on Clyde, never mind on her car. And here was this sprite of a girl hell-bent on repairing whatever was broken. *Can she restore me*?

 Before Veronica could find a treasure to give Willie, the girl hopped into her car. “Go to a mechanic and get that nail removed,” she shouted and waved good bye.

 “Wait,” Veronica called. “I haven’t thanked you. Let me give you something for your efforts.”

 But she was already down the road and out of sight.

 *What just happened?* Veronica scratched her head and rubbed her eyes. It was almost like The Lone Ranger had come along to help her. To encourage her. To empathize with her. A young girl gave her a pep talk and vanished.

 *Now what, indeed!* What choices did Veronica have? She thought back on the decades of her life, especially growing up in the 50s. She could have become a secretary, a nurse, or a teacher. That was it. Of course, she could marry and not worry about any career. That changed quickly in the 60s, but not for Veronica. Only for dreamers and risk-takers like Polly. But now, now in the twenty-first century, women could reinvent themselves. Even an old lady needed new skills according to young Willie. *Hah!* Skills. She could clean like nobody’s business. She was good at bookkeeping, especially after Johnny became ill. She knew how to paint a house, fix a gutter, plant a garden, but most of all, she knew how to ride a bike. If her eyes were stronger, she could be a tour guide for one of those backroad companies. She’d point out all the best ways to be on a stranger’s property without getting caught. Now that was a skill. But it was only for the invisible. Veronica’s specialty.

 What would Veronica have given Willie if she had the chance? The girl certainly didn’t need a dream catcher; her dreams were wild and blowing in the wind. What about a wind chime? One with birds on it. That might work for a young girl in flight. Veronica made a mental note to find Willie’s auto repair business and send her a thank you gift. Maybe she’d tuck in a few shiny pennies for good luck, although the girl seemed like she had everything going for her.

 Veronica got back in her car thinking about her future. She needed to listen to her body, to its needs, and one was grumbling in a big way. Her belly. She remembered that she still had her breakfast wrapped in a napkin, so she turned onto a patch of gravel along the shoulder and nibbled her muffin. As she was doing this, who should cycle by, but the toothless old man wearing her backpack.

 She could have gone after him. She could have flagged him down. Confronted him. Demanded her possessions be returned. But she didn’t. The backpack fit him properly; the wool cap was on his head, and she thought she noticed he was wearing the gloves. Without a doubt, he could use the money. Instead of feeling violated, she embraced the karma of the situation.

 When she finished her muffin, she drove onto the road and caught up with him, beeped and waved. She gave him a thumbs up. She could see him in her rear view mirror. He had stopped short. He straddled his bike, one foot on either side on the ground. She saw his puckered face. She saw the sun behind him, an aura of leaves and autumn light. Empathy had a color and it was gold.

Chapter Nine

Veronica continued southeast and saw a sign for Hungry Hill. *Whew. Hungry Hill. That hits home. A measly muffin was not enough to satisfy me.* She was starving, actually. Her body craved nourishment even though she had been feeding it over the last five days. Giving it jolts of give-away, just what she had hoped she’d accomplish. But her stomach still growled.

 She saw a diner along the road and stopped to buy a ham and cheese sandwich. Then as she leaned against the car to eat it, she stared into the trunk selecting what to give away next. Because of the toothless biker, she had no backpack to put things in. She had some crates with ceramics and a few shoeboxes with trinkets. She decided on the assortment of balls she had accumulated which was stuffed into mesh bags.

 It’s not like she had stolen the balls from kids; it’s more like the kids let them root wherever they fell. Children needed lessons on the value of putting their toys away. Veronica made sure her son’s toys were stored in the shed. Every time Robert used them, he knew he was responsible for them, although more often than not, Veronica surveyed the mess of balls on the lawn and ended up putting them away. That’s what a mother was supposed to do.

 Her son had loved when she gave him a new basketball or soccer ball or tennis ball, but she wondered if his poor performance in sports was the result of cursed balls. Robert couldn’t catch, throw or play a decent game of dodgeball. He was the boy picked last.

 She was never a ball player so she left it to Johnny to teach his son. Johnny would yell and scream at Robert’s inabilities, and then give up. Why hadn’t Veronica invested the time to teach Robert herself? She believed it was Johnny’s job to teach his son to throw a ball. She had failed Robert and herself. Why couldn’t she be good at throwing and catching? Age was no excuse.

 She grabbed one of the meshed bags, locked Clyde to the back of the car, and followed a well-worn path to the advertised “Hungry Hill.” She walked until she came to a ridge, beyond which was a sandy stretch of beach along a pond. There were picnic tables and barbecue grills, shady trees, and a fenced-in dog park. There was a paved area for kids to play four square, but no one was using it. She chose a rubber ball, bigger than a tennis ball but smaller than a soccer ball. She bounced it, awkwardly at first. Then she bounced it, one handed, two handed, under her knee, then one handed, two handed again and again, creating a rhythm. When she tired, she tossed it into the air and caught it like the bell had rung and recess was over.

 After a short break, she kept at it, practicing over and over. She didn’t need to see the ball to intuit its whereabouts. She could hear the whoosh and bounce of it. Down, up, down, up. Sight was not the only engaged sense. The ball was just a symbol for what could be held, released, and held again.

 She chose a harder ball and tossed it against a nearby tree. Most of the time she wasn’t quick enough to catch the ball before it fell, but once in a while she did. And it felt wonderful, like she was in control.

 “Drop it,” shouted a young woman.

 Veronica dropped the ball immediately.

 “Get over here,” said a commanding voice.

 Veronica’s body stiffened. Then she saw the golden retriever with a ball in its mouth slinking toward a young woman whose braids curled around her ears and whose pants hung low on her hips. Veronica realized she had left the mesh bag gaping so that loose balls dribbled out and the dog had lunged for a ball that had rolled its way.

 Veronica laughed. “Let him have it. I have lots more.”

 “Really? Goldens are such sillies when it comes to tennis balls. Thanks!” The woman picked up the ball and tossed it to the ever-ready dog. “There you go, Frankie. You never know when you’ll get lucky.”

 Veronica had heard those words and always associated them with men and sex. But look how happy that dog was, like he had a treat.

 Other walkers and their dogs came along and Veronica pitched balls to them too. That was one way to find the balls a new home. But she got to thinking about how maneuvering the ball helped her coordination and an idea came to her.

 “Do you know where there’s a rehab center or nursing home around here?” she asked a dog owner.

 The man’s eyebrows arched. “There’s Brightlight in East Meadowland, a soup-to-nuts retirement village. Go right out of the parking lot. It’s a few miles down Route 83. I heard it has great food. You’ll like it.”

 Just because she tossed balls at trees, gave doggies free toys, had white hair and filmy eyes didn’t mean she required assisted living, contrary to what her son and daughter-in-law believed. “Thanks a lot,” she told him, her tongue like metal.

 But off she went in search of the Brightlight, following the man’s directions. When she saw the sign for the senior living center, she turned into the lot and parked. She gathered the mesh bags with an assortment of balls in them and brought them to the front desk.

 “Do you have a physical therapy room?” Veronica asked.

 “Down the hall and to the right,” said the woman on duty.

 She delivered the balls to a curly-haired man who sorted through them: one basketball, one soccer ball, two whiffle balls, four rubber balls, two semi-inflated footballs and two flat beach balls.

 “An even dozen,” said the man with a smile. “We can put these to good use."

 *Whew, one more weight off my shoulders*. She sailed along the hallway as light as hope. Halfway down, however, she realized she was going in the wrong direction.

 As she passed a room, she heard the most beautiful music she’d ever experienced. Violin chords wafted through the air with such strains of emotion that she stood transfixed in the doorway. The tune was familiar: “Sunrise, Sunset” from her favorite movie, *Fiddler on the Roof*. “I don’t remember growing older, when did they?” The words poured out of her and her tears flowed. It was only when the music stopped and she opened her eyes did she realize she has intruded on the violinist’s private space.

 “I’m so sorry I interrupted. Your playing was lovely,” she said.

 The man put down his bow and faced her. His eyes were glassy blue with pinpricks for pupils. “Come closer,” he said.

 Veronica stomped forward, thinking that the noise she made would indicate her location, for she realized he could not see.

 “No need to be a clod-hopper. I can sense your presence,” he said, his voice direct, but soft. He sniffed the room. “You’re earthy, like you’ve been in the woods.”

 “I was at Hungry Hill playing ball,” she sputtered.

 “You must have slid into home from the scent of you.”

 Veronica chuckled. She looked him over. Salt and pepper hair, shaggy eyebrows, whiskers in his nose and ears, and stubble on his neck. He wore a red flannel shirt, overalls with purple suspenders, and green slipper socks.

 “I like your laugh. It’s easy. Are you easy?” he asked.

 Veronica never considered herself easy, hard, or anything in between. She wasn’t quick to laugh, cry, or become angry. She left the deep emotions to be poured into baggies. She remembered a time in a movie theater when the subject matter was so hilarious, she couldn’t stop giggling. Everyone turned around to shush her, so she brought out a baggie and chuckled into it. That baggie had a place of majesty on a makeshift shelf in her turret. She had packed it separately for this trip, wrapping it in a bandanna and storing it in Clyde’s rear carrier. She never knew when a baggie full of laughter might be needed.

 She studied the expression in the violinist’s eyes, so unlike Johnny’s. This violin-man was present behind them, even if they didn’t function. His brow wrinkled and his nose twitched. When she came close to Johnny, he would just stare, his face impassive. Johnny’s face was blank paper; this man’s was musical notes, with pitch and octave.

 Veronica wondered how long the violinist had been blind. If he had macular degeneration like her, how fast it had progressed. So far she just had blurriness in the center of her vision. She could still drive, but not at night, and she could still ride her bike. That was muscle memory as much as vision. She wanted to ask him so many questions.

 “I’m feeling tension in the room,” he said. “Like there’s a balloon being squeezed.”

 “How can you feel that?”

 “The air. It’s heavy, like your breath is heating it up, making it rumble. I guess I have to ask,” he sighed. “What’s bothering you?” He leaned forward, sniffing her again.

 “If you could play another tune for me, I could gather my thoughts. Would you do that?”

 “Any requests?”

 “Do you know *Here Comes the Sun*?”

 He coaxed sounds from the violin, first wistful, then thoughtful, then with rising joy. When the part came that corresponded with the words “Here comes the sun and I say, it’s all right,”Veronica’s heart doubled its beat. She felt energy pour through her that she hadn’t felt since she first heard the Beatles when she was a teenager.

 “‘And I say, it’s all right, de de da da da,’” she whispered.

 “That's the spirit,” said the violinist. “The trick is to sing it like you mean it. Like a lioness roaring.”

 Veronica wished she could inhale her happiness baggie, but it was in the car. She imagined taking in its energy, filling herself up and belting it out. “I’ll disturb the whole place if I’m too loud.”

 “Don’t you worry about Brightlight. People shout all the time, rarely from a place of strength. It would do this place good if they heard a healthy person give it her all.” The man raised his bow and went at it, his shoulders in rhythm with the words. “‘And I say, IT’S ALL RIGHT!’ Come on, Woman. Let me hear you.”

 Veronica breathed deeply. She closed her eyes and heard the string of the violin ease into the chord. She thought about how many treasures remained unreturned and realized she still had a car full of misdemeanors, not to mention around sixty thousand dollars of Spiderman’s money. But the song spoke to her and the words bubbled up from her belly, up her windpipe, onto the back of her throat and suddenly a raspy ‘A’ growled into the air until it took on shape and size. “‘And I say, it’s all right. DA DE DA DA DA,’” she roared.

 “That is precisely why I play,” said the violinist. “To release the beast.”

 If the man could see, Veronica would have been embarrassed. Her face blazed. Her nostrils flared. Her eyes were on fire. But he couldn’t see. And that made all the difference. She had lived her seventy-two years in secret, blowing into baggies, taking treasures that gave her purpose, forgetting grievances by her husband, her son, and her daughter-in-law. She couldn’t recall a time when she let loose unless being six years old and smashing her front teeth on cement counted. She wailed until her father picked her up like a stray cat and tossed her onto her bed.

 “The Tooth Fairy will never reward a screamer like you,” he said.

 Sure enough, no money was left under her pillow. Veronica learned quickly to grin and bear pain. But the Tooth Fairy never made a visit. Even one missed step, she thought as a child, ruined her chances for reward. Better to be quiet and subservient. That behavior stuck long after she discovered that the Tooth Fairy and Santa Claus weren’t real.

 In the background, she heard the violinist strum an old tune from her teenage years. “‘What’s your name, is it Mary or Sue? What’s your name? Do I stand a chance with you?’”

 She always wanted to be Linda, a name that danced, that swayed, that accepted kisses. Or Xena, punching her way into people’s hearts. Or Bridgette. *Ooh la la*.

 Before she could respond, the Violin Man played a few chords of *You are the Sunshine of My Life*.

 The man’s eyes crinkled. “I’m going to call you Sunshine.”

 *He’s flirting with me. He has no idea whether I’m his age or younger. He has no idea that I’m returning stolen goods. He has no idea that I’m married. All he knows is my scent and he likes it. Earthy, he said.*

 “Tell me about yourself, Miss Sunshine. What’s on your mind that weighs so heavily, even though I’m feeling that cloud is lifting and the real you is trying to shine.”

 “I want to know what it’s like to be blind. It’s happening to me.”

 “Oh, I see very clearly as a blind man,” he laughed. “That’s how I live.”

 “Seriously, I have macular degeneration and I’m scared. Can you see at all?”

 “Some shadows. Some light. In my late thirties, I developed a condition that caused my optic nerves to atrophy. Little by little, I lost my vision but I’ve figured out how to compensate.” He raised the bow to his violin and ran it across the strings. “It’s my turn to ask you a few questions.”

 “Shoot.”

 “Are you visiting someone at Brightlight?”

 “No. I stopped by to deliver a package to physical therapy.”

 “Do you live around here?”

 “No. I’m from Plainview, Massachusetts. A good distance away.”

 “What color is your hair?”

 “Pure white.”

 The Violin Man’s face lit up. He made a little bowing motion to her and settled back to play *White Christmas*.

 Veronica had been mousy brown until her early sixties, when she became white with blond highlights. She recalled the day at the beauty salon like it was yesterday.

 After driving the varsity tennis team to their match in a suburb south of Boston, Veronica parked her yellow school bus under a shady oak. It would be hours before the kids were through, so she unhinged Clyde from his makeshift carrier behind the driver’s seat.She wheeled him out of the bus and attached the handlebar bag and kicked off.

 “Clyde, old buddy," she said, “we could pedal down the middle of the road naked and no one would notice.”

Veronica melted into space, the air gliding through her. Oblivious to her surroundings, she collided with the side of a convertible that was parked at a careless angle. She lost her balance and fell against its hood.

 Which is when she spotted the scratch ticket on the dashboard.

 “Sucker’s game,” Johnny would say. “A waste of hard-earned money.”

 “Six ways to millions,” taunted the card.

 Johnny would never know, she decided, no one would ever know. She reached inside the open window, swiped the ticket, and took off down the street. In the bike’s mirror, she saw the car, but no one had seen her. When she stopped around the corner, she leaned Clyde against a mottled sycamore and crouched next to him. Her heart pounded with anticipation as she studied the ticket. Match any of your numbers or the bonus number to either winning number and win the prize shown. She was a little confused, but figured millions of people bought these cards daily. She’d figure it out. Veronica scratched the numbers. There was a match! For $100.

 When Veronica biked downtown the following day to cash her pilfered lottery card, she remembered how her best friend Polly enjoyed shocking people. One month her tight red curls would be pink and black-streaked, the next, yellow striped. When her hair fell out from her treatments, she shaved her head and dotted it with stars of green or purple or blue, depending on her mood. “You need to be seen, Vee.”

 With money in her pocket, Veronica stood outside a beauty parlor window unsure of her next move.

 “How about coming in, Ma’am?” said a stylist who stood in the doorway. “A little make over might do you good.”

 The gum-smacking woman ushered Veronica to a black plastic chair. “You got pearly teeth. And your skin is like honey. I suggest eggshell white with blond highlights. It would look nice on you.”

 Veronica pictured a white egg, hard on the outside, soft in the middle. She could use a tougher shell.

 “Why not,” said Veronica, who dozed as the woman worked. Within the hour, Veronica’s squirrel-brown was white-blond with finger waves.

 The stylist swiveled Veronica around to check herself out. “Whaddaya think?”

 Veronica stared at her bombshell hairdo. She leaned in, her eyes large and leery. “I. . .I think my husband will be surprised.” Then she spied the line-up of lipsticks in creamy colors.

 “Cinnaberry, the hottest shade this season,” said the hairdresser as she dabbed it on Veronica’s lips. “A little mascara too, Sugar?”

 When she emerged from the shop, Roscoe Rodney, a regular at The Heart of Oaks Inn whenever he and his wife had a falling out, was going into the pharmacy next door. “Veronica Wheeler, well, I’ll be. Didn’t you age into a beauty!”

 Veronica blushed. “I’ve been Veronica Russell for decades,” was all she could think to say.

 “And I’ve been single for a decade. If you’re ever in the market, I’m interested,” he said and wiggled his eyebrows.

 She nodded to him and muttered a thank you, then scurried to Clyde and took off quickly.

 At dinner, Johnny said, "Veronica, you look so different.”

 "Had my hair styled.”

 He got up, leaving his dishes on the table, and moseyed into the family room.

 “Would you like it better if I were a redhead?” she said as she followed him and waited for his reaction. *Then I’d look like your harlot Taffeta.*

 Johnny’s forehead furrowed. “It’s not a matter of liking. I gotta get used to it,” he said, then he switched on the TV.

 “Roscoe Rodney saw me outside the salon and said I looked great.”

“That horny loser is looking for a little action.” Johnny waved her off. “Let me watch my programs, Veronica. I’ve had a busy day.”

 Veronica ran her fingers through her hair, feeling its newness, enjoying its bounce, remembering a picture of Jean Harlow emerging from a pool, sleek and sexy, her head tossed back, her eyes on the sky. Bolstered by her new image, Veronica stood in front of the TV blocking Johnny’s view of the screen. “Do you ever think about me when we’re not together?”

 Johnny sank down on the couch. “I’m thinking that beauty parlor dyed your brains.”

 “When’s the last time we went to a movie or a restaurant?”

 "Why all these questions?” He sat up and tugged his wallet from his back pocket.

 "I need more than money. I want to travel and not just by bicycle. Let’s take a road trip, just you and me, while Robert’s away at college.”

 “You’re talking foolish. You know I hate being cooped up in a car for hours.” Johnny looked at his watch. “It’s six o’clock and the news is starting. Move aside and leave me be.”

 Veronica turned on her heels and steamed out the back door. She grabbed a new box of baggies on the way, and once she was a decent distance from the house, she roared into the plastic, bloating one after the other. Her anger ebbed long enough for her to reenter the house and ascend the stairs to the turret room. By the time she added the baggies to the growing stack of Johnny-Tupperware-containers, her breathing had steadied. She lay on the yoga mat and wondered why Roscoe Rodney found her desirable when her own husband didn’t look at her twice. What did it matter that her hair was a different color? Her insides had not changed and neither had Johnny's. *Accept me as I am or I’ll never be at peace.*

 On her way out of the room, she caught sight of her reflection in the window. A dazzling white-sunshine woman, at least she had felt that way for a few fleeting hours. But Johnny had squashed her self-confidence before it took root. When her highlights faded, she never bothered to dye her hair again and by her mid-sixties, she had a crown of pale-white for real.

 Veronica tuned into the blind violin man’s final chorus: “May your days be merry and bright and may every day of sunshine be white.”Veronica smiled so wide she felt like her face had broadened into a pumpkin.

“You liked my version of *White Christmas*!”

 “Absolutely, but I haven’t said a word and you can’t see me. How do you know that?”

 “I heard it. Your mouth watered when you smiled and you made a *mmyah* sound. Did you know that?”

 “There’s so much I don’t know,” said Veronica. “Like your name, for example.”

 The man sat straighter and fixed his bow on his violin. He played a quick tune. “If you can’t guess my name within three tries, I’ll turn into Rumpelstiltskin.” He played the tune again.

 She knew the song but couldn’t quite recall the words. It was on television when she was a teenager, about a horse. She sang the words to the chorus: “A horse is a horse, of course, of course, and no once can talk to a horse, of course. That is, of course, unless the horse is the famous Mr. Ed.” Veronica jumped up and down like a child. “Mr. Ed. Your name is Ed!”

 “At your service.” Then he made the strings twang and jive with the rest of the words: “Go right to the source and ask the horse, He’ll give you the answer that you’ll endorse. He’s always on a steady course. Talk to Mr. Ed.”

 Ed stood and bowed. Veronica giggled.

 “Miss Sunshine, you have a lovely voice.”

 “Mr. Ed. How have you coped with your blindness?”

 The man tilted his head and held his violin close to his heart. “I’d always had eye problems, but one day, everything turned muddy and over the next three years, my sight went poof.” He readied his bow again and broke into song: “Great green globs of greasy, grimy gopher guts, mutilated monkey meat, French fried flamingo feet, French fried eyeballs swimming in a pool of blood and me without my spoon.” He shrugged. “Eh, the world went on, but I couldn’t taste it until I learned to hear again.”

 Veronica calculated that Mr. Ed was close to eighty, but there was a sprightliness about him that belied his age.

 “I want to be like you when I grow up,” she laughed.

 “You can be like me now. There’s no need to be afraid. As long as we take one day at a time, we can achieve anything.”

 “But I have so much to do before I can’t see anymore.”

 “You’ll always have things to do. It’s how you’ll do them that will change. I’ve chosen music as my way to communicate. You’ll find your way.”

 Mr. Ed sounded a lot like Willie the tire-changer who told her she needed new skills. Veronica doubted that would happen.

 “Miss Sunshine, would you dine with me? The early bird special is about to be served.”

 Veronica had no other plans. “Mr. Ed. I’d be delighted.”

 “I’d like to show you how darkness can be your friend if you let it. You have to trust me. Can you do that?”

 A shiver crept through her, but Mr. Ed played a quick chorus of “‘And I say, it’s all right, da de da da da.’”

Chapter Ten

Mr. Ed led the way to the cafeteria using a red-tipped cane. His robust body moved with a joyful beat. Veronica carried his violin case.

 “I have a stop to make first. Can you wait here?”

 She saw him enter the swinging door of the kitchen and chat with the cooks. They nodded and clapped him on the back.

 Mr. Ed returned and together they entered the dining hall. A woman welcomed them and showed them to a table in a back corner. Mr. Ed maneuvered his way easily. She figured he had memorized every inch of the room.

 When they sat, a young man approached with a cloth napkin, but instead of putting it on the table or on Veronica’s lap, he asked permission to tie it around her eyes.

 Mr. Ed’s face crinkled like a jolly Saint Nick. “‘And I say, it’s all right.’” He pretended to pass his bow over his violin strings. “The eyes are useless when the mind is blind.”

 Veronica frowned, but she vowed to take on adventure and if Mr. Ed could ease her mind about her losing her sight, why not allow it.

 The young waiter tied the napkin gently.

 “Do you do this for all your diners?” Veronica asked him.

 “Only friends of Mr. Ed’s.”

 “Really?” asked Veronica. She could hear the lip smack that Mr. Ed had mentioned when someone smiled. “You’re pulling my leg, right?”

 “I bet you have a lovely leg,” Mr. Ed teased. “But then I’d have to feel it.”

 Veronica blushed beneath the linen cloth. It would take a blind man to appreciate her well developed calves from all the years of biking. Johnny wasn’t a leg man, more like a can-you-cook-that-for-me man. All she needed to do was make meatloaf or lasagna, potatoes au gratin or blueberry cobbler and he was all in. Forget about stroking her leg or any other part of her as long as he could pat his belly and burp with abandon. *Unless my name is Taffeta.*

 The waiter returned with something hot and steamy.

 “Soup?” she asked.

 “Can you tell what herbs are in it by its smell?” asked Mr. Ed. “I’ve developed quite a schnoz since losing my sight.”

 Veronica sniffed. She wished she could say basil or cloves or dill. “I know there’s no garlic,” she managed.

 “Find your spoon and try it.”

 She felt around for her spoon, picked it up and dipped it into the soup, tasting the hot broth. But she still couldn’t name the seasonings, even though there was plenty of flavor to describe. Johnny liked his soup plain: a little salt, some onion powder, carrots, and celery. This soup made her tongue tingle.

 “I taste something tangy and sweet at the same time. Like hot and sour?”

 “Very good. It’s seasoned with ginger, pepper, vinegar and chili. You’re missing out on life’s spices if you don’t pay attention to what you eat,” said Mr. Ed.

 *The soup is delicious. Isn’t that enough to know?*

 The next course she could identify easily. Spaghetti and meat sauce. The problem was keeping it on the fork. She twisted the strands as best she could but when it got to her mouth, it had disappeared. Mr. Ed sounded like he was shoveling in the food, slurping and tapping his fork on the plate. She, however, wasn’t getting a lot accomplished.

 “There’s a trick to it, right?” she asked.

 “No trick, just focus.”

 She worked at twirling the spaghetti and managed to get it to her mouth successfully.

 When the meal was over, Mr. Ed said he had a game he wanted her to play. “Take off your blindfold and watch.” The waiter brought him an empty soup bowl and a large metal spoon. Then he scattered thick cotton balls in front of him. “The rules are simple. I can only hold the spoon and the bowl in my hand to find the cotton balls. No using my fingers.”

 Veronica saw how he patted the table with the spoon and located the cotton. Turning the spoon backward, he dragged each cotton ball to the bowl. Then he used the bowl to scoop the cotton ball onto the spoon. Finally, he raised the spoon up the edge of the bowl and dropped the cotton ball into it. Within five minutes, the bowl was filled with all ten cotton balls.

 “Your turn. Remember, you may not use your fingers. Only the spoon and the bowl.”

 Veronica retied the napkin and the waiter emptied the soup bowl of cotton balls and scattered them on the table around her. She took the metal spoon and did exactly what Mr. Ed did, tap the table to find the cotton. But try as she might, she succeeded only in capturing four and putting them in the bowl.

 “I’m a failure at being blind,” she said.

 “You’re a failure at listening with your senses other than sight,” said Mr. Ed.

 “Then I have a long dark road ahead of me,” said Veronica.

 “The eyes are useless when the mind is blind,” Mr. Ed repeated.

 She needed a baggie to expel her frustration. *Then again, maybe Mr. Ed is right.* *I should pay more attention to my senses, get in tune with myself.*

 “It’s late,” she said. “Time for me to find a place to stay for the night. I want to be settled before it gets too dark to drive.”

 “Stay here, Miss Sunshine. I have a spare bedroom and I don’t snore.”

 Veronica weighed her options. To find a place would be dicey at twilight. She didn’t know much about Meadowland, and here was this kindly gentleman offering her a room.

 “If I stay, I really need to formally introduce myself. I’m Veronica Russell, aged 72, married with one son, a daughter-in-law and two granddaughters.”

 Mr. Ed extended his hand. “And I’m Edward Samson Clark, age 78, widowed, with no children but 3 violins, 2 guitars, 1 shakuhachi, a bunch of tambourines, and a primo record collection like you’ve never seen.”

 Taking Mr. Ed’s hand in both of hers, she said, “I’m on a quest to give back, but I have the feeling I’m getting so much more than I’m giving.” Veronica smiled and could hear the *mmyah* sound she made. “Thank you. I accept your offer.”

Chapter Eleven

Veronica went to her car for her overnight bag and studied the mound of ill-gotten gains waiting for her in the trunk: dream catchers, wind chimes, flags and wreaths. Only the wind chimes would have meaning for Mr. Ed, and they were hardly full-fledged music. She looked at her booty and thought about the man and his blindness. *Is it sight that attracts me to my treasures? Am I that shallow?*

 She stuffed the duffel with a variety from the trunk in order to look through them when she was settled. Mr. Ed wouldn’t see what she was doing and she was free to think about each item and where its future home should be.

 Mr. Ed waited for her at the front door of Brightlight and together they ascended the elevator to the tenth floor. She wondered why he chose an apartment on such a high floor. He certainly couldn’t benefit from the view.

 His place was spare, no knick-knacks anywhere. Table tops were clean and there was no television. But there was a mahogany Victrola console, like the ones in the 1930s. In Mr. Ed’s apartment, it was the central piece of furniture.

 Mr. Ed made a beeline for the radio dial and turned it to classical music. The sound wasn’t tinny like her mother’s radio. It was rich and warm, like an orchestra blanketed the walls.

 “Your room is to the left. It’s pretty basic, but comfortable. My sister used to visit, so it has a few girly things. Guest bathroom is straight ahead.”

 Veronica entered the bedroom expecting pink. She flipped the switch for the light and was assaulted by glossy white walls, a blazing orange and yellow blanket, green pillowcases, a turquoise scatter rug and a bureau and night stand hand-painted with rainbows. It was like she was in a Caribbean scene, complete with window drapes that sported palm trees with coconuts and bushy plants with clusters of bananas. The only thing out of place was the brown leather recliner.

 “Was your sister blind too?” Veronica asked.

 “God, no. She believed that color is like a smile. It brightens moods.”

 “Do you know how she decorated this room? To put it mildly, it’s vibrant.”

 “I feel its heat whenever I come in,” he said. “I like to pull open the drapes and sit in the chair in the afternoon sun. That’s when I feel her presence the most.”

 “Where is she now?”

 “She’s been gone for three years. Another adjustment I’ve had to make.”

 “I’m sorry for your loss.” *I wonder what his wife was like and how long ago she died? But now’s not the time to ask.* “Tell me about your sister.”

 “I called her Potato.”

 “That’s an odd name.”

 “She liked it. Potatoes come in every variety and they’re good no matter how they’re cooked and they can be cooked in dozens of ways.”

 Johnny liked mashed or baked, although Robert enjoyed fries which she bought frozen and heated. She imagined new ways she could have prepared potatoes: au gratin, roasted garlic, sweet potato pie, potato pancakes, potato salad, home fries, potato puffs. Then she ticked off types of potatoes: russet, Idaho, yams, Yukon gold, red bliss. *Jeez, why couldn’t I have introduced a new style?* She shook her head. *Johnny would have hated it.*

 Mr. Ed hummed the one potato two potato children’s song. “She was Potato and I was Tomato. ‘Potato, Potahto, tomato, tomahto,’*”* he sang. “'Let’s call the whole thing off.’ She loved that song.”

 Mr. Ed felt for the chair and eased himself into it.

 “How did your sister die?”

 “She slipped off the edge of the highest mountain range in the Scottish Highlands, tumbled down a rough scree slope, bounced over three cliffs, and came to rest against a boulder.”

 Veronica gasped. Even Polly would not have risked her life and limb like this woman.

 “She died like she lived,” Mr. Ed said. “Fully and without regret.”

 “How old was she when she passed?”

 “Seventy-two. She followed her passion, but it caught up to her.”

 *Seventy-two? Like I am now.* Veronica thought about barnstorming in that plane yesterday. *That was dangerous. And confronting those hooligans in the woods? That was dangerous. And stealing treasures from people’s houses? Wasn’t that dangerous too? But climb a mountain? Would I ever have the nerve to do that? My legs would certainly be strong enough, even if my eyes are compromised.*

 Mr. Ed opened a drawer and handed Veronica a stack of photos. “She sent these to me even though she knew I couldn’t see them. She figured I’d have someone describe them to me. I had to wait until she visited to do them justice.”

 Veronica saw a gray-haired woman with round red glasses riding a camel; wearing an Indian headdress; swimming beside a dolphin––all things that Veronica’s childhood friend Polly might have done. Potato posed in front of the Taj Mahal, the Kremlin, Victoria Falls, and the Great Wall of China. *How could all that energy dissolve into dust?*

 “When was the last time you saw her?”

 “Just before her accident, about four years ago.” Tears steamed down Mr. Ed’s unseeing eyes. “My baby sister. My Potato, all mashed up.”

 Veronica found some tissues and handed them to Mr. Ed. “She reminds me of my friend Polly. Always searching around the next corner for the brightest light.”

 Mr. Ed said good-night and left Veronica to think about Potato, her adventures, and her untimely death. *It’s only 8:00, early enough to call home.*

The answering machine picked up when Veronica called the house. “The Russells cannot come to the phone right now. Leave a message.”

 “Bertram, it’s Veronica. Just checking in. I’ll try your cell.”

 She dialed Bertram’s mobile.

 “Can’t talk. Johnny fell. I’ll get back to you.”

Chapter Twelve

Falls happened to Johnny every so often. So far, she’d been lucky because none resulted in anything serious. But falls could be killers. Her mother’s decline began with a fall, but that wasn’t what killed her, although it contributed.

 Veronica gripped the cell phone and paced the small room.

 “I wouldn’t have invited you here if I knew you couldn’t sit still,” said Mr. Ed from the kitchen. “Have a cup of tea with me. It’ll calm your nerves.”

 Veronica left the bright bedroom and entered the dark hall and kitchen. She fumbled for a light switch.

 “Sorry,” said Mr. Ed, “I have no need for light. Stay still and I’ll turn one on.”

 Mr. Ed was at the microwave putting in two cups of water. “No stoves allowed in the apartments. Fire hazard for people who can see, never mind a blind person.”

 Veronica’s phone rang and she jumped. “Bertram, how’s Johnny?”

 “A close call, but he’ll be all right. He whacked his nose on the edge of the table on his way down and banged his knees when he hit the ground. It was a tough landing and he bit into his lip hard. I had a bit of a wrestling match getting him up, but I finally got him into bed.”

 With all the medications he was on, Johnny bruised easily. She knew Bertram had been careful with him, but Johnny probably looked like he’d been hit by a truck.

 “I would drive home now, but it’s too late and I have trouble seeing in the dark,” said Veronica, leaving the kitchen and retreating to Potato’s bedroom.

 “My niece is on her way over,” said Bertram. “She has experience in geriatrics. She and I will take turns tonight watching him so I can catch some sleep. I’ve got it under control. Don’t you worry. Just enjoy your trip. OK?”

 Veronica hung up and lay back on the bed. A knock on the door roused her.

 “I hope mango tea with two sugars meets your fancy,” said Mr. Ed, holding out a tray which Veronica took and set on the night stand. “Cell phones are so darn loud, I couldn’t help but hear that you have a problem at home.” He wiggled his ears like a rabbit.

 Veronica sat on the edge of the bed and sipped the tea as her eyes welled.

 “I’m sensing such heaviness, Miss Sunshine. Tell me about it.”

 Veronica sighed. “My husband Johnny has Alzheimers. Sometimes he remembers who I am, but most of the time, I’m just a familiar presence. I left him in the care of a wonderful man while I took care of some personal business. And now I found out that he fell. Do you know what a fall does to an old man?”

 “And to a youngish woman,” said Mr. Ed.

 Veronica gulped, realizing he was talking about his sister. “I’m so sorry. But I’ll bet you liked your sister way more than I’ve liked my husband.” Veronica gulped again, wondering where those words had come from. “I don’t mean that. It’s just that Johnny has always treated me like furniture. My son too.”

 “There are all types of furniture,” Mr. Ed said, sitting in his recliner.

 “I’m a couch,” she said, “worn out from being sat on for so long. My son thinks Johnny and I are ready for the junk heap.”

 “And what do you think?”

 “I just need reupholstering.”

 “I think it’s time to examine where you’ve been and where you’re going,” said Mr. Ed, staring at her as if he could see. “Don’t stand too long at the crossroads or you’ll get run over from both sides.” Mr. Ed wagged his index finger at her. “My motto: Be true to yourself.”

 Veronica thought about her son, who was hell bent on ruling her life. When she returned home, she hoped she had enough energy to stand up for herself. She could not allow Robert and Kate to make decisions for her. They exhausted her. Sapped all the life out of her. She had no intention of moving to an assisted-living facility with Johnny. Stuck beside that man while he deteriorated and while she still could have a future?

 She wanted to return to her turret room, refill it with new treasures, not stolen ones. She wanted to get up each morning, run outside and yell, “Hey you fucking world. I’m here and I’m a bad ass and I’m going to eat, drink and be merry today, tomorrow, and for as long as I have breath.” She’d throw away all her baggies and live like Mr. Ed, with music and joy. Veronica let tears fall. Mr. Ed couldn’t see them, so they ran freely.

 Mr. Ed was so peaceful in his reclining chair, surrounded by haloes of color. For the first time in oh so many years, she didn’t feel the need to escape, to run, to blow hot air into baggies or tiptoe around pain. She felt alive and vital sipping tea in a blazing-bright bedroom in the middle of Meadowland in the apartment of a blind man who sang like a songbird, played violin like Stravinsky, and showed her more compassion in three hours than her family had in three decades.

 “Miss Sunshine,” Mr. Ed said, “I feel your sorrow and frustration. I have a diversion for you to take your mind off your troubles.”

 If it was another humiliating game of cotton balls, she would run all the way back to Plainview.

 “Look out the window. Do you see the sign across the street that says Escape Games?”

 Veronica saw a silver glow from a storefront.

 “They’re open until midnight. I can call for a 10:00 appointment if you’re up to it?”

 “An escape game? Will I disappear into the woodwork?”

 “Better than that. Trust me, ok? Do you have anything with you that you wouldn’t mind smashing to smithereens?”

 The first item that came to mind was Taffeta’s vase, the one Veronica took when she entered that hussy’s house uninvited. “Yup.”

 “Then let’s get it and get smashing. You lead.”

 Across the street, the store was hopping with young people playing video games.

 Mr. Ed approached the front desk. “I called about my friend renting the Smash Room.”

 The woman at the counter nodded to Veronica. “Did you bring your own or would you like us to provide you with breakables?”

 Veronica had stopped at her car to retrieve the crystal vase, a chipped frog that never accepted glue, and a one-winged butterfly with a crack down its middle. She also grabbed a bunch of baggies, some flat and some bloated. If she was going to get rid of frustration, she wanted a back-up plan. “I have a few, but how many am I allowed?”

 The woman showed Veronica the various fifteen-minute packages: $35 for 8 small breakables, 5 medium breakables, and 3 large breakables; $45 for 10 small, 8 medium, and 6 large. Veronica bought both packages.

 She was shown into a small windowless room with walls of fire-resistant, soundproof sheetrock. The woman handed her personal protection gear, including coveralls, gloves, and shields for the head, face and chest. Then she offered Veronica a medley of weapons: golf clubs, bats and hammers to pummel the glass, mirrors, furniture, old guitars and electronics. Heavy metal music blared through a sound system as the woman closed the door and Veronica was alone to channel her energy.

 At first, she stood outside her body and watched herself bat away at a mirror. But when she set Taffeta’s vase in the center of the room and tossed her bloated baggies around the space, she went to town. Pummeling. Stomping. Shattering. Whacking. Bashing. All about her shards and wood and swirls of air whooshed and cracked. She felt her arms whoop with abandon. *Take that, John Anderson Russell. Take that, Taffeta-Yaffeta. Take that, Robert. Kate. Take that, Mother. Take that, Father.* After she smashed each breakable, prisms of light bloomed throughout the room. Release and Relief.

 When three bells sounded, she knew her smash time was at an end. She laughed from her gut, so loud that if someone had heard her they’d cart her off to the funny farm. What she felt at that instant was a disembodiment reuniting with itself. Like a baptism in glass and wood and clay and tiles, all consolidating into Veronica, the Original, the Woman She Was Meant To Be.

 When she took off the padding, she was reduced to old again but something inside her had shifted. She was still concerned about Johnny, but contrary to what she had believed and Robert insisted, she would not be Johnny’s sole caretaker. She had been his wife, and a damn good one. He had wanted subservience and she let him dominate. She stayed quiet and docile and amiable no matter what. But she was realizing that at seventy-two, she hadn’t many years left to be her own person. “You need to be seen, Vee,” said Polly’s voice again. *She is so right.*

 *If I need someone, I’ll hire them, without feeling guilt.* *Without restricting myself to a few hours every other day.* She did not need to continue to sacrifice her life for Johnny’s well-being. He hadn’t sacrificed a day for her, so why did she have to subject herself to a lesser life just because her husband’s health was failing and her eyesight had diminished. *There’s more to me. I just feel it.*

 That night she slept well in Mr. Ed’s apartment. In the morning, Bertram called to say that Johnny was fine even though his nose and lip were swollen and his skin was mottled from hoisting him onto the bed. “But he ate his mashed bananas and had a normal bowel movement.”

 “Has Robert called?”

 “Nope, not a word.”

 Mr. Ed stood in the doorway again holding tea with sugar. “Good morning, Miss Sunshine, or should I call you Miss Elsa? You came out of The Smash Room last night roaring like a lioness.”

 She hadn’t thought about Elsa since she had read *Born Free* in grade school. The lion cub was too docile to return to the wild. But with love and encouragement, she took on her true nature. *Is that what is happening to me?* She was breaking free from the prison of naiveté, challenging herself to grow, even at her age.

 Veronica had loved The Smash Room and would do it again. Maybe she’d transform her turret room into a smash room. Pad the walls. It would be her private baggie! She could let loose and be rowdy. Veronica giggled at the idea. *Veronica gone wild! What would Robert say to that?*

 After breakfast, Mr. Ed said he had something to show her. *What else is there?* He’d already revealed the potential of life after blindness. She was so grateful to have met him, she’d follow him anywhere. He led her to an area behind the occupational therapy room where Veronica had left the meshed bag of balls just yesterday. On a back wall was a window-sized rectangle with weird things on it.

 “You’ll have to put on the blindfold again for what I have to show you. All right?”

 Veronica nodded, then piped up, “Yes,” realizing that he couldn’t see her nod in agreement.

 “Step close to me and reach out with your hand,” he said.

 She felt his body heat close to hers. All Christmas warmth. She wiggled her fingers and caught the movement of a feather from the board.

 “Tell me what you feel,” Mr. Ed said.

 She probed each item, and described what was nailed to the board: a velvet cloth, a plastic cup with goo inside, a key, a sack of marbles, a stick of licorice.

 “Good, now hold on to me. We’re moving on to the table.”

 She again stood by his side and reached out.

 “What can you identify?”

 She picked up the items more slowly and examined each with her fingers and her nose. Each one was distinct. “Rose petals, buttons, feathers, jelly beans, marshmallows.”

 “Now, give a smell. What’s in the jars?”

 She unscrewed the tops and sniffed. “Pinecones. Garlic. Tar. An orange. A lemon. Lavender.”

 “Take off your blindfold,” said Mr. Ed.

 She looked at the wall and the table and saw all the other jars and items she hadn’t touched. *Wow.* She could create a sensory board in her home and practice. Maybe her other senses would compensate for her loss of sight.

 “How can I thank you?” she said, knowing her words were feeble, but heartfelt nonetheless.

 Mr. Ed opened his violin case and played a quick rendition of the tune *Born Free.*

“Born free, as free as the wind blows

As free as the grass grows

Born free to follow your heart.

Born free, and life is worth living

But only worth living

'cause you're born free.”

 Mr. Ed leaned in after he finished fiddling. Veronica met his lips and kissed him, sweet and strong.

 “You’re life-changing, Mr. Ed.”

 “And so are you, Veronica Sunshine. Now go get ‘em.”

 Veronica repacked her trunk, assessing what remained: two woolen hats, a bamboo wind chime, a fall wreath, three bright red glass tulips, eight pink booties, a scarf and an assortment of brick-a-brac that was difficult to categorize.

 She returned to Mr. Ed’s apartment to say a final good-bye and give him a present. The door was unlocked, but he wasn’t there. Oh, how she wanted to give him a hug, to tell him how much he meant to her, and to say, “Mr. Ed, you’ve changed me. In one day, I am new because of you.” To show her appreciation, she draped a chenille scarf over the recliner and put one of the woolen hats on the seat. They would keep him warm and cozy throughout the winter.

 After giving it much thought, she removed the pink booties from her purse, opened the closet in Potato’s room and hid them on a high shelf under a pillow. Mr. Ed would never check his closet and even if he did, he couldn’t see what Veronica had hidden. The remainder of Spiderman’s money would be safe there until she decided what to do with it. She didn’t want to hide the booties in her house or on Clyde. And she wasn’t ready to spend them either. Even if they stayed forever in Mr. Ed’s closet, they’d bring happiness to someone down the line.

 She glanced into the room as she left, eyeing the burgundy scarf, so soft and warm. Now it would belong to this gentle man who gave her twenty-four hours of wisdom. She owed him more than a soft scarf and a wool cap. She imagined him sitting in Potato’s chair, thinking about what he’d have for breakfast or lunch or dinner and who might stroll his way out of the blue, just looking for a howdy and a harmonious tune.

Chapter Thirteen

Before Veronica started the car, she phoned home.

 Bertram picked up immediately.

 “Bertr. . .”

 “Veronica! I was just going to call you. Johnny’s sleeping late this morning, but he had a good night. My niece said his breathing was steady and he wasn't in pain. I’ve got to give you credit. Taking care of Johnny has been harder than I imagined. No wonder you fly out of here when I’m on duty.”

 Bertram seemed like he’d had enough. “How are his bruises?”

 “His bottom lip is like a tire tube and his arms are blotchy. He’s having trouble walking, but that’s nothing new. All-in-all, he could have done a lot more damage. In a few days, he’ll be good as new.”

 *I wish*. “Thank you, Bertram, for being so conscientious and caring. No one could take better care of him than you. I’ll do my best to be home in a few hours.”

 “Take your time. Johnny will be happy to see you whenever you arrive.”

 *Right*, *because I’m so memorable. Bertram can spoon one more meal into Johnny before I take over feeding him forever, if Robert and Kate have their way.* “Ok, then. See you mid-afternoon.”

 When Veronica saw the sign for the Blackstone River Bike Path about ten miles south of Plainview, she knew she had to take a final carefree spin. Many of the turret room treasures had found new homes, although plenty remained in the car, but her frustration had been released in The Smash Room. Baggies had exploded in a safe place and she felt calm.

 Parking in Cumberland, Rhode Island, she unbungeed Clyde, turned off her cell, and cycled unencumbered. As the wind blew, she felt a lightness that she’d never experienced before. It was like Mr. Ed’s violin strings propelled her through space. As she pedaled, the wind picked up, swirling the fall leaves in patterns of yellow, red, and orange.

 She passed a few solo riders and a mom with a toddler on the back of her bike. Walkers stayed to the right as she veered around them. Along the side of the path were small ponds where Canada geese had gathered on their way south. Two swans hugged in an inlet, their necks entwined, and a blue heron spread its wide wings and sailed through the air. It was a champagne morning.

 From behind her, a screech rang out. “Thief! He stole my bike! Stop him. Stop him.” In Clyde’s rear view mirror, Veronica saw a man in a hoodie on a sparkling silver bike race down the path like he was on fire.

 Veronica made a split-second decision. She angled Clyde across the path so the biker would either crash into her or detour to the right or left and go into a ditch or a tree or the pond. A man and a teenager jumped out of the way as the biker careened into Clyde, tipping Veronica sideways and onto the shore’s edge. The biker swerved from the impact, lost his balance, and fell. He abandoned the bike and limped toward the trees.

 The screeching woman ran to her fallen bicycle. “Thank God my bike is in one piece.”

 “I took a bad spill,” Veronica said. She tried to get up, but nothing in her body agreed with that decision.

 The man who witnessed the crash rushed to Veronica’s side. The teenaged boy held up his cell phone. “Got it all live as it happened,” he beamed.

 “So you have a picture of the thief?” the woman asked the teen.

 “Sure do,” he said. He enlarged the photo for her.

 “Well done, kid. Call the police and let them know.”

 The man turned to the banshee-voice. “Is that all you care about? This lady needs help. Call 911, now, damn it.” Then he turned to the boy. “Record this, Jimmy. The EMTs will find it helpful.”

 The man crouched beside Veronica. “Do you know your name?”

 “Of course, Veronica Russell.”

 “Do you know the day of the week?”

 “Friday, right?”

 “Who’s the president?”

 “Trump,” said Veronica, and grimaced. “Why are you asking these questions?”

 “Making sure your brain is working. How about your body? How do you feel?”

 Veronica blinked. “Like a truck ran me over.”

 “Tell me, why on earth did you put yourself in harm’s way?”

 “That man took someone’s bicycle. A bicycle! Do you know what a bicycle means to me? Freedom. Independence. Adventure. Would you want that taken away from you?”

 “Enough chit-chat,” said the woman who still sounded like a howler monkey, “Help her up already.”

 The man rolled his eyes and turned his attention back to Veronica. “Do you believe the nerve on that woman? She’s more concerned with her expensive bicycle than she is with you.”

 Veronica looked into the man’s eyes and had an aha moment. “People never know what defines them, until it does.” She flexed her legs and wiggled her toes. They did what she had asked. Then she rose, holding the man’s arm. “Thank you. I’ll be ok. Really.”

 The man turned to the screeching woman. “You called 911, right? What did you tell them?”

 “That a person was assaulted on the bike path and she needs medical attention. And that a thief stole my $8000 bicycle and if the police don’t get here fast, he’ll be long gone.”

 The woman finally approached Veronica. “I’m grateful for your quick thinking. I paid a fortune for this bike. It’s all titanium. I went in the house for one minute for a bottle of water and when I came out that hoodlum had stolen it. Living on the bike path has been a nightmare. If people think they can take other people’s possessions at will, they have another thing coming.”

 The ranting woman blustered on. Veronica shrank with each word.

 The teenager fiddled with his phone. “Hey, Dad. You look so professional. The world’s gonna love this. I’m gonna title it, #MyDadHelpsOldLadyAfterAssaultOnBikePath.” The father shook his head at his son. “Damn it, Jimmy. This isn’t a side-show. Remove that video now.”

 “Too late, Pop. It’s in the cloud."

 The noisome woman shoved her way to see the film. “You should put up the face of the little shit who stole my bike. Let that go viral.”

 The man shook his head. “I’ll show that part to the police first.”

 The woman grabbed the boy’s phone. “You’ve presented me like a shrew. Take that down now. I’ve been violated!”

 *So have I. Violated by a selfish, loud-mouthed woman who thinks I’m worth less than her bike.* “What’s more important?” Veronica asked, “your bike or a human life?”

 “Why a human life, of course.”

 “Then what are you making such a big fuss about? Your bike can be replaced even if it cost $8,000. You have insurance, right?” asked the man.

 “That’s not the point. He stole it from under my nose, in my own backyard, in the middle of the day. How does a person do that?”

 “But he didn’t succeed, did he?” said the man. “Thanks to this woman whose name you don’t even know.” The man picked up Clyde and checked his tires. “Looks like it survived the assault.”

 Veronica tested out her legs and made sure all her body parts functioned. She had cuts on her knees and elbows and scratches on her chin; otherwise, she was good to go. In the distance, she heard sirens, realizing they were for her.

 *Nope. No way will I go to a hospital. I need to get home to Johnny. Besides, I’d have to answer all kinds of questions, like why did I put myself in danger. And there’d be reporters and photographers. I don’t want Robert knowing I haven’t been home.*

 Before the screeching woman blinked and the father and son noticed, Veronica cycled away. She turned on her phone the minute she got in the car. Texts bombarded her from Bertram and Robert. “Call ASAP.”

 She tried Bertram first, but no one answered. She dialed Robert’s number but the phone went to voice mail. She called Kate.

 “What’s going on?” asked Veronica.

 “A lot you care. Johnny had a bad fall. That’s what,” Kate hissed. “Robert is with him picking up the pieces.”

 *So Robert knows I’m not home!* “Johnny fell last night,” said Veronica, “not this morning. I’ve been in touch with Bertram every few hours. He said Johnny’s doing better now.”

 “No thanks to you. Robert stopped by on a whim after he dropped off the girls and said his father had a swollen lip and bruises all over his body. He asked where you were and that man said you were visiting a sick friend in Western Massachusetts. Veronica, how dare you do that with Johnny so disabled? Leaving him alone with that man Bertram, without telling us? What were you thinking? Oh that’s right, you weren’t! Robert called 911 for an ambulance and reported Bertram to the police.”

 “An ambulance? The police? What in hell are you talking about?”

 “Veronica, you are not listening,” Kate yelled.

 Every word thumped into Veronica’s bloodstream.

 “That man beat him up. Johnny’s a wreck and it’s your fault. How could you trust a stranger? Bertram’s being questioned by the police right now.”

 “Bertram has been Johnny’s caretaker for months. He’s devoted to Johnny’s well-being. And so am I! Kate, you and Robert are so wrong. Wrong. Wrong. Wrong.” Veronica stilled her breath. “Where’s Johnny now?”
 “He’s having tests at Sturdy Memorial for brain damage. Looks like his fall was serious. It never would have happened if you were home.”

 *Brain damage? What are these people thinking? Of course Johnny has brain damage, but not from Bertram!* Veronica needed baggies. Dozens of them. She was about an hour away from the hospital, so she drove directly there, questions blazing through her mind about Johnny and Robert and Bertram. When she entered, nurses ran to her. With dried blood coagulated on her legs and arms and bruises on her chin, they thought she needed emergency help. But she shooed them away.

 “Where can I find John Russell?” she cried.

 From a distance, she saw Robert approach. He shook an index finger at her like she was a child and his voice rose and fell on words like shame and blame, selfish and thoughtless.

 As he got closer, he stopped and stared at Veronica. “Mother, what the hell happened to you? Where have you been? Were you in an accident?”

 “Never mind me. How’s your father?”

 “He’s having a brain scan as we speak. That damn Bertram beat him up. How could you leave Dad with that man?”

 The words seemed far away, like Veronica was hearing them from inside a tunnel.“Where is Bertram now?”

 Robert loomed over her, making her feel like an ant about to be crushed. “At the police station where he belongs. I brought charges against him.”

 “What kind of charges?”

 “To begin with, negligence. And premeditated assault,” said Robert.

 She stared at her son, hulking before her, his eyes like arrows. “You’re so wrong about Bertram.”

 She had to get to the police station, immediately, and drop the charges against Bertram, but her legs refused to move another foot. So did her head. And there in the hospital in the waiting room across from her adult son, she passed out cold.

Chapter Fourteen

Veronica awoke in a hospital bed with an IV tube in her arm. By her side sat Robert. He slumped in his chair, his eyes closed.

 “What happened?” she asked. Her head felt like a watermelon.

 “You collapsed,” Robert said, running his fingers through his dark curls.

 “Then what?”

 “You babbled on about someone named Clyde. Who’s that?”

 “My bicycle.”

 “You named your bike?”

 “When you spend as much time on two wheels as I do, you’re best friends. And friends need names.”

 Robert frowned. “That’s daft, Mother.”

 “You’re daft, Robert, thinking that Bertram beat up your father. That’s insane. Call the police and get that man released immediately.”

 “God, Mother, how irresponsible can you be letting that man watch father overnight?”

 Veronica’s head cleared long enough to realize Robert didn’t know she’d been away for five nights. She lay back in bed and studied her son. He was a nice looking man, average height and weight with small ears, a straight nose, and good teeth. But his eyes lacked spark. Maybe it was just that they were in a hospital room and he was tired from the strain of his father’s fall and his mother’s fainting spell. Or maybe it was something else.

“Have I been a good mother to you?” she asked.

 “What kind of question is that? My mother would never ask it. I don’t know what’s happened to my mother. Have you hidden her somewhere?” Robert shook his head. “My mother is quiet, easy-going, and ridiculously concerned with her family’s well being. She listens more than she talks and she’s always by my father’s side when he’s not at work.”

 *More like plain ridiculous!* “And how is your father this morning?”

 “Resting comfortably. I saw him before I came to you. I don’t understand why you allowed a stranger to watch him, even for a few hours. He’s your responsibility, Mother.”

 “Do you happen to have a plastic bag somewhere close by?” Veronica asked, feeling the rise of swears so powerful that they would spill out of her mouth any second and she’d lose total control.

 Robert grimaced, but rose and looked through the drawers. There was a large bag that held Veronica’s clothes.

 Veronica took it, removed the clothes and sucked in her breath. She expelled the air into the bag and watched it balloon out. *Damn that feels good*. Robert’s lips pursed and his face soured. “Did you see what I just did?”

 “You blew into a bag.”

 “Have you ever seen me do that?”

 “Nope. That’s a new Mother move.”

 “Robert, do you know how old I am?”

 “Seventy something. Four, maybe.”

 “How long have your father and I been married?”

 “Let’s see. I’m thirty, so thirty-two years?”

 *I guess I never told him about his three baby siblings. Why not? And is it too late?* “When I was in the turret room, what do you think I did up there?”

 “Sew, knit, read. Girly stuff, you know.”

 “Well, I have to tell you. I’m seventy-two. Your father and I have been married for thirty-six years and I have no idea how to sew or knit. My turret room is my private haven away from the tyranny of your father.” *No need to mention the three memorial candles and three gold lockets, not now anyway.*

 “So I’m a shitty son because I’m foggy on the details. Is that what you’re telling me?”

 “No, Robert. I’m saying I’ve been too submissive, too willing to feel hurt inside and not express it. Do you know why?”

 “Because Dad is a jerk?”

 “Ah, at least you have one answer right. Over the years, I’ve poured my anger and frustration into plastic bags and saved them. How daft is that?”

 Robert looked at the ballooned-out bag. “So blowing into bags is nothing new either?”

 “You’ve got that right. I’m still your mother but the woman you’ve imagined me to be does not exist. Perhaps she never did.”

 Robert paced the room. “Is that why I have trust issues and believe the worst in others? Because you and Father haven’t been honest with each other?”

 “Are you saying your father and I are at fault for your flaws?” Veronica asked.

 “I’m saying nothing is what I think it is, ever. I come home from a long day at work, and my kids barely notice. My wife has eaten her dinner already and left a cold plate on the table. I thought marriage would make my life easier. Instead, I feel pressure to perform. And now that I have to pay attention to you and Father, it’s just too much for me.”

 Veronica knew that Robert put himself first, always. Even as a little boy, everything centered around his needs. Veronica acquiesced to that. When Robert married, he believed Kate would behave the same way. *Surprise. Surprise.* Kate was an alpha dog and there was no room for Robert’s ego in their relationship. “I wonder, Robert, if you see me as more than just your mother?”

 Robert folded his arms across his chest. “You’re Veronica Russell. A seventy-two year old woman who is going through a life change. I am her only son and I have been so busy with my own life that I haven’t paid her enough attention the last few years.” Robert pulled his elbows tighter. His bottom lip sagged.

 That wasn’t what Veronica wanted Robert to say. She wanted him to address her, not himself. “I’m asking if you think about me as a person separate from your father and his needs. I want you to care about me as a person. Someone who blows anger into plastic bags and gives her bicycle a name. Someone stuck caring for your father even though I don’t like him very much.”

 “Oh, Mother, don’t say that.”

 “It’s true. You live in a bubble of your own making. You have trouble seeing what’s real and what’s your idea of real. Most of your time is spent thinking about yourself so you miss the details of the other person’s life.”

 Robert approached the bedside, leaned down, and pecked a quick kiss on her forehead. “I have to leave. I’ve had enough reality for one day.” He turned his back on her and left the room.

 *How did I go so wrong with that boy*? *Was it when he was little and Johnny whacked him for not finishing his supper? Should I have fed the kid separately? Maybe I took Robert’s pacifiers away when he wasn’t ready. But Johnny threatened to burn them! ‘You’re spoiling that kid, Veronica. He’ll grow up to be a pansy.’ Johnny would say that over and over again. What about when Johnny accused me of being unfaithful! ‘Where do you go all day, Veronica? To Big Bob’s?’ Such an asinine thing to say, probably covering for his own sins, but Johnny hammered it into the boy’s head that I was a liar and a cheat and I wasn’t who I said I was. I was innocent, but Robert believed him and wiped away my kisses and ignored me. Just like his father. Isn’t that what abuse is all about? I married a bully who encouraged his son to be a bully. Why am I just realizing this now? Have I been in denial all these years?*

 She touched her forehead where Robert had kissed her. *Is that his attempt at empathy? At acknowledging me as a person? Is it a start?*

 A nurse entered the room. “How are you feeling, Mrs. Russell? Your bruises are all superficial but it seems as if you’ve suffered a concussion. We have to keep an eye on you for twenty-four hours before you are released.”

 “Can I see my husband, John Russell? He’s had a series of tests to determine the extent of damage from a fall.”

 “Yes, we’re arranging to have you brought to his bedside for a short visit.”

 The wheelchair came two hours later. Time moved slowly in hospitals. The nurse removed Veronica’s IV and settled her into the wheelchair, as if she were one-hundred and ten. Once in Johnny’s room, she got out of the chair and leaned over her husband. His bottom lip puffed out, and his nose had a bandage across its bridge. Thick red blood clots dotted his arms like moles, but she was used to seeing those. All the meds he took thinned his blood, so that was not unusual.

 “Johnny? It’s Veronica.”

 He opened one eye in response to her voice.

 “Water,” he said.

 “No Veronica.”

 A deep guttural sound came from Johnny. “Water,” he repeated.

 She put a straw to his mouth and he sipped the water that had been on his nightstand.

 “Can you see me? I’m your wife.”

 Johnny’s eyes filmed over and he closed them. “I’ve been such a bad boy, Taffeta.”

 All the energy seeped out of Veronica with those three syllables. Whether or not he was in his right mind made no difference. Thirty-six years? Cleaning, cooking, caring for the man only to hear him whisper another woman’s name. Somewhere in his heart, she was sure, he remembered that he had a wife, but that wasn’t enough.

 Veronica allowed the volunteer to take her back to her room. The nurse stepped in and said the doctor would conduct an evaluation in the morning.

 “What kind of evaluation?”

 “Routine. They’ll ask you a bunch of questions and judge your competency.”

 Veronica understood. *Competency. Has the fall from Clyde addled my brain? Did the concussion compound it? Am I capable of going home on my own?* Veronica decided that she would determine her own fate.

 “What if I don’t allow it?”

 “That would be against medical advice and there’d be repercussions.”

 “What does that mean?”

 “Paying for your hospital stay, for one.”

 “Thank you. I appreciate the information,” said Veronica, brewing a plan.

 After the nurse left, Veronica put on her clothes, made the bed, and slipped out the door. She had her keys, her car, her Clyde, and could get home in the dark if she squinted real hard and didn’t go fast and drove on back roads. Normally the ride would take fifteen minutes, but it took over an hour. When she got home, she didn’t look around or check the house, she just collapsed into bed.

Chapter Fifteen

In the morning, Veronica woke to banging on the door.

 “Hold your horses,” she called and stumbled to open it. Her legs felt like wooden spikes and her head was as heavy as a melon.

 Robert stomped into the house.

 “Don’t you have a key?” she asked.

 “If I had one, don’t you think I’d use it?” Robert ran his finger along the nicks in the countertop, and rubbed away a smudge on the cabinet. “The sooner we sell this relic, the better.” He practically spat as he punched out the words. “What the hell are you doing home, Mother? The hospital said you had vanished. What is the matter with you?”

“What’s the matter with ME?”

 “Sit down right now. We have to talk.”

 Veronica held up her hand to him. “After I’m dressed and have had my morning tea.”

 “Now, Mother,” he yelled.

 “Listen here, Robert, this is still my house and we’ll talk when I’m ready.” She put on a pot of water and excused herself to get dressed. She returned to Robert pacing the kitchen, steam fuming from his ears, although he had prepared a cup of tea and a slice of toast for her.

 Robert took a deep breath. “Mother, you left the hospital against doctor’s orders. That is unacceptable. And Father is on death’s door because you allowed that man Bertram into this house to beat him up and cause permanent damage. You are responsible for this mess.”

 “Is that right?”

 “You saw Dad last night, didn’t you? He was so out of it he couldn’t put two words together. And did you see the bruises up and down his arms and the lump on his nose? He didn’t do that to himself!”

 “And you think Bertram hit him?”

 “I have eyes, Mother.”

 “But no heart,” she grumbled. “When was the last time you visited your father?”

 Robert poured himself a glass of water. “This isn’t about me, Mother.”

 “Humor me.”

 Robert’s nostrils lost their exaggerated snort. “Father’s Day.”

 “If you recall, he was asleep when you arrived and you didn’t want to wake him. You left him a gift, right?”

 “Absolutely.”

 “A book?”

 Robert puffed out his chest. “Billy Crystal’s “700 Sundays.” It’s all about his relationship with his father.”

 Veronica shook her head. “That would have been a perfect gift for a man whose brain still functioned. If you cared enough, you would have gone into his room, wished him a happy father’s day, and sat down to read him a few pages. He would have smiled and thanked you. But no, you left without a wave good bye.”

 “I didn’t want to disturb him.”

 “No, Robert, you were afraid he wasn’t the father you knew. You didn’t want to see his slack jaw or his yellowing teeth or his vacant eyes. You didn’t want to see his paper thin arms and the bruises up and down them.”

 “So he’s had those red blotches all along?”

 “They’re due to the medicines he takes. Even the slightest indent of his skin causes marks.”

 “I didn’t know that.”

 “There’s a lot you don’t know. You barged in here hell bent on blaming Bertram for your father’s condition and accusing me of neglect. Where do you get off doing that?”

 “But you didn’t see him! Dad was muttering and drooling and babbling. His lip was as big as a balloon, his arms were dangling and he shuffled like he couldn’t control his legs. I couldn’t believe my eyes. After the ambulance drove off to Sturdy Hospital––Kate went with him by the way––and the police left with Bertram, I did a quick walk through the house. That’s when I saw it was pillaged. . .”

 “Pillaged? What a barbaric word.”

 “Mother, have you checked the house? I suggest you stop accusing me of being a rotten son and take a minute to look around.”

 Veronica noticed nothing amiss until she opened the hall closet; the winter jackets were gone. She checked other closets; blankets and towels were missing. In the spare rooms, no comforters were on the beds. In the kitchen, the pots and pans cabinet was empty. It was like Veronica had bicycled through the house taking whatever would not be missed right away if it had disappeared. Blankets. Coats. Quilts. Pots and pans. *I don’t understand.*

 Robert followed her around. “See? Bertram sold us out room by room. That man is a lying thief.”

 She climbed the stairs to the turret, Robert traipsing behind. *I have nothing hidden in there anymore. Might as well show him how empty it is.* When she opened the door, both she and Robert gasped. The entire room was covered in blankets and coats. On the floor were pots and pans with large ladles in them. What dawned on Veronica was how the room had been used: like a child’s playroom.

 “What in the world?” said Robert. “It looks like the downstairs was tossed upstairs. I thought all this had been stolen. So Bertram didn’t take the stuff, but he sure made a mess of it all.”

 “Don’t you see?” Veronica said. “Bertram brought Dad up here to have some fun.” Veronica imagined Johnny stretched out looking through the dome of glass. Maybe he scissored his arms and legs, so happy to be free from that plastic lounge chair. She hoped he felt the freedom she always felt when she was in the turret room. “Bertram was being imaginative and thoughtful of your father’s needs. Look what you’ve done. You’ve sent him to jail. You got the man into this mess,” Veronica pointed her index finger at him, “you will get him out of it.”

 Robert looked at his mother like she had a body transplant. “How am I supposed to do that?”

“You jumped to conclusions and implicated an innocent man. You probably didn’t even let him explain how your father got his bruises. That’s what’s wrong with you and Johnny. You talk over people. You don’t allow them to have a voice.”

 She stopped before she told him how selfish he was and how his wife was a snob and how they were bringing up their kids to be afraid of their own shadows. It was Robert’s time to prove he wasn’t the bully she feared he had become.

“We’ll go to the police and make this right,” she said, grabbing a sweater and her purse and pushing Robert out the door.

 At the station, Veronica told the officers that the family was dropping the charges because no crime had been committed. But the sergeant said that Bertram had been released on his own reconnaissance and the process was already in place.

 After a silent drive home, Veronica slammed the door on Robert. Then she called Bertram’s cell phone a dozen times, but he didn’t pick up. She knew where he lived, so she drove to his house.

 She knocked and rang the bell and called out, but no one came to the door. Experienced in entering homes, Veronica went around to the back, knowing that most people did not lock their rear door or secure their sliders. But Bertram’s house had no access to the back door. It had been sealed over and the stone steps removed. There was a huge yard with a tennis court and trees with wind chimes and bird feeders. If Veronica had been there over the summer, she might have done an eenie-meenie-miney-moe and selected the diving dolphin chimes. She dismissed the temptation and returned to the front of the house to wait in the rocker on the porch.

 “What are you doing here?” a gruff voice asked, waking her from a sound sleep.

 “Bertram! I’m so sorry. My son was so wrong.”

 “You’re telling me. Your son has no clue about aging. He lives in a bubble with no understanding of how fragile his father has become. It wasn’t my fault that Johnny fell.”

 “I know that. Robert will clear this whole mess up. I promise you.” Veronica hoped that would be true. She took Bertram’s hand. “You’ve been so good to Johnny. I saw the playroom upstairs. That was genius.”

 Bertram held Veronica’s hand and patted it like she was a child. “Emotion has gotten the better of me. You don’t deserve my anger.” He closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths.

 Veronica wanted to draw the man into a hug, but she knew his pride would never allow it. “Sit with me, Bertram. Let’s make this our time.”

 Bertram nodded. “The playroom came out great. Johnny loved it. Rolled around like a little boy in leaves. Hmmm, I should have thought of that. Putting leaves in the room too. I’ve got to tell you something important though, Veronica. While I was watching Johnny one day, a woman visited.”

 “Someone other than your niece?”

 Bertram nodded.

 “Was she a redhead and was her name Taffeta?”

 “Yes.”

 “How did she know I wasn’t home?”

 “Johnny asked me to call her.”

 Veronica couldn’t wrap her head around this. Johnny barely remembered he had a son and twin granddaughters, but he remembered Taffeta’s phone number? Veronica sat down with her head in her hands.

 “I didn’t want to call her, but Johnny started to cry. I didn’t know what else to do.”

 “What happened when she arrived?”

 “She came in the house like she owned it. I brought her to Johnny because he’s so frail and I didn’t want her to see him walk. You know how he shuffles.”

 *Sure, Johnny was once masculine and strong and to see him now might disgust Taffeta! Boo hoo.*

 “She went right up to him and gave him a hug. And the strangest thing happened.”

 Veronica tilted her head waiting for the last blow.

 “Johnny looked at her, smiled that funny way he has, and said, ‘Who are you?’”

 Veronica grinned.

 “‘I’m Taffeta, you horny old coot. Remember me?’ she said. And he said, ‘But Taffeta has big bosoms.’ Then she removed her jacket and did a little shake. Johnny closed his eyes and fell asleep.”

 Veronica laughed hard and the tears fell freely. She didn’t know if they were out of frustration, humiliation, or just plain relief that Taffeta was dismissed so flagrantly.

 “I didn’t want to be disloyal to you, Veronica, but Johnny was so insistent that she come by. After she left with her lips turned down so low, I thought they’d fall off her face, Johnny woke up and asked for her again.I told him she had come and gone and she had given him a hug and told him to be well. Do you know what he said?”

 “Do tell,” snickered Veronica like she and Bertram were in high school sharing snarky gossip.

 “He said, ‘That old bat was Taffeta? Bring back Veronica.’ He actually said that. Like he was lucid.”

 Veronica appreciated how Bertram tried to make her feel better.

 “Bertram, will you continue to help Johnny after rehab?”

 “Veronica, how about coming inside for some milk and cookies? I even have your favorite, Oreos.”

 They sat at a neat little table in a neat little house in a neat little kitchen.

 “Veronica, I doubt Johnny will come home ever again.”

 Veronica wasn’t surprised, but she didn’t want to believe him. Johnny always came home. After business trips to Las Vegas and weekends fishing with Big Bob. After forgetting to call her and showing up two days later hung over. After staying late at work night after night. Johnny always came home. *I accepted that. Why? Why was I such a coward? Such a nothing? So invisible and weak?* *And now that Johnny has no recollection of the hurt he caused, and I want to talk to him about how I’m getting stronger and understanding myself better, there’s no Johnny. What kind of karma is that?*

 She thought about how her mother never came to terms with her father’s neglect either. She never left the house and he was rarely home, and when he was, he poisoned the house with his venomous tongue. *No wonder my mother hid.*

 *Is that why I never stood up to Johnny? I was afraid of him?*

 She wasn’t afraid when she pedaled down someone’s driveway and snatched a towel from a clothesline. She wasn’t afraid when the dry cleaner truck left newly pressed shirts and a yellow cashmere sweater hanging from a front door and she knew it would look nice on Johnny. She didn’t faint when those two hairy men sat at that red light in the center of town and she saw their faces and heard their roaring laughter after they smashed Spiderman into pieces.

 *Why have I allowed Johnny to control me? Has he always made me feel so unloved that I believed it? And what about now? What about after meeting Mr. Ed and hearing him explain how to take a different path? Is that possible? Especially with Johnny out of commission? But I still have a son, a daughter-in-law and two granddaughters, even if they don’t realize how important I am in their lives. I need to prove my value to them. Don’t they deserve a mother and grandmother who dotes on them and believes in them unconditionally. Or is that self-defeating?*

 “Thank you, Bertram, for telling me. I apologize for my son’s behavior. And I promise, I’ll repay your kindness.”

 Veronica returned home deflated. What she imagined would be the beginning of a new period in her life overwhelmed her. *What do I do now? Robert says he’s confronted with too much reality. Maybe I’m immersed in too much fantasy. How do I reconcile the Veronica I became in the smash room with the Veronica who has to be by Johnny’s side, like always? How can I be me?*

Chapter Sixteen

For days, as Johnny endured more scans, blood tests, and rounds of visits from teams of doctors, Veronica stared out the window of his hospital room and dreamt about her vanished freedom. She had enjoyed being on her own. She knew Bertram had been invested in Johnny’s well-being, so she allowed herself the time to explore. Had it only been a week ago that she barnstormed with Captain Jack, or stopped a thief from stealing a titanium bicycle? Now she fretted that downsizing was imminent, that her life would revolve totally around Johnny’s needs.

 At night in her own bed, she slept poorly. Too much circulated through her mind. What would happen to Johnny? How would her son rise to the occasion? Would Bertram be absolved of charges? Would she ever see Mr. Ed again?

 She wandered through her home, searching for herself. The wind blew fall-wild; the leaves detached from their branches and littered the yard. This should have been the time when wind chimes belted out vibrant sounds in the turret room. Veronica used to keep the arrow-slit windows open so the breezes would filter through the room and the chimes would vibrate with life. Life that she had created. At least her wind-chimes had found good homes, especially for the new-born kittens. But on this morning, her turret room was not only eerily quiet, it was padded, like a crazy person’s cell. She tried rolling around in it like Johnny must have done, but felt tiny and helpless. She was not going back in time. That was not her purpose. *I have to move forward*.

 Poking around her house for Johnny-Bertram moments, she came upon two stacks of photographs tucked in a shoebox in Johnny’s closet. Were these what Bertram had found? What he used to jog Johnny’s memory?

 She sorted through the first pile. Johnny as a little boy sitting on his mother’s lap. Johnny hugging his mother. Johnny and his mother in a picture booth. Johnny and his mother at a formal occasion. A dozen photos of his mother, none of his father. The woman reminded Veronica of a Hollywood bombshell: curvy and sensual with a movie star face and thick black hair, brushed away from her forehead and tucked behind her ears. In most of the photos, she wore hooped earrings and a gold chain necklace, black stockings and red stilettos. Veronica recalled Johnny’s description of her: every move she made shouted power.

 When Veronica and Johnny were first married, he talked about how much he missed his mother, how she had died after a long illness. How he had taken care of her until her final breath. Veronica was nothing like her, he said, and he was glad because his mother could never be replaced. At the time, Veronica took that as a compliment, but now she saw how different she was from this commanding woman and Veronica could never measure up.

 The other stack gave Veronica stomach cramps. All were Johnny and women standing like lovers, eye to eye or thigh to thigh. The women were dressed in silks and brocades, shirtwaists and gowns. They wore flowing skirts and elbow-high gloves. All glowed and all looked adoringly into Johnny’s eyes. In most of the pictures, Johnny had yet to grow his handlebar mustache, so this was way before he and Veronica met.

 Veronica wondered if her angst throughout her married life was due to living a lie. Never being secure. Never equal to Johnny’s mother or Taffeta or any other woman he had loved. Sure, she was the mother of Johnny’s son, but once Robert was born, Johnny lost interest in her physically. She only mattered for her cooking and her ability to keep a tidy house. It occurred to her that Johnny married her because she was weak and mousy. He could dominate her without even trying. He could do whatever he wanted and she’d still obey him.

 She had to get out of the house. She wanted to ride with the wind and let all these thoughts vanish in the air. But when she unhinged Clyde from the carrier, she realized his back tire was flat. The accident with the bike thief deflated him too. *Now what? Even Clyde can’t be trusted?* She searched through her toolbox for an inner tube, but the rubber on it had lost its elasticity. So she drove downtown to the bike shop and waited while a young man with tattoo sleeves on both arms fixed him. *What is this attraction to tattoos? At least they aren’t on his face, like on Spiderman’s. That man was so hideous, the webs coming out of the corner of his eyes and circling his neck. The red scorpions on his cheeks. I wonder if he’s added more in the ten years since I saw him last. If he’s become a real Spiderman with skull and crossbones images on the spiders’ faces and webs catching flies, mosquitos, cockroaches, and moths.* *Yuck!*

 “Good as new for an old set of wheels,” said the tattooed worker rolling Clyde to where Veronica waited. His voice was as smooth as creamy frosting.

 Veronica didn’t understand how this circus freak spoke like butter and her son Robert spoke like spikes. Veronica’s world was tipping and she had trouble standing straight.

 “Thank you. Do you think he has a few more years left to him?” she asked.

 “If you treat him well, I don’t see why not.”

 *That isn’t enough*. She had treated Johnny like a king and Robert like a prince. Veronica never questioned her role as their inferior. She was there for them, period. No questions asked. Was that a bad way to have lived? At seventy-two, how was she to correct that? Treating Clyde well was one thing. He was a bicycle, after all. But her son? Her daughter-in-law? Her husband? Did they deserve her unconditional love?

 Instead of putting Clyde back on the car and returning home, she rode him out of town toward the Long Meadow Cemetery where her parents and her best friend Polly were buried. She needed to stand over their graves, absorb their excuses and embrace their love.

 She parked Clyde, so dapper with his new rear tire, and entered the sacred ground. Her parents were toward the back, away from the street and under a large oak. There was a single stone. Her father’s name was at the top: Brian Wheeler. 1925 - 1990. In smaller letters below was her mother’s name: Mary Lou Bates Wheeler. 1927 - 1990.

 On the night they died, her father had been driving her mother to the hospital. She had tumbled down the stairs but hadn’t complain about it. Veronica wondered if her father had anything to do with her fall. After a few days, her mother’s knees had swollen to the size of bowling balls. As Mary Lou lay on the back seat of the car and Brian floored it to the emergency room, he coped by swigging vodka from a thermos. They never got to the hospital. Brian hit a tree and that was the end of the Wheelers.

 Veronica was forty-four at the time, married with a toddler. She hadn’t seen her parents in months, not because they lived so far away, but because Johnny decided they were a bad influence on their family. The drunk and the recluse, he called them. He said her parents’ house smelled like moth balls and cat litter. He didn’t want his son exposed to their filth. He forbade Veronica from calling them too, saying they upset her too much and she was always distant and sad after speaking with them. Better to be rid of them, Johnny decided, but when they died, he was the first in line at the wake and cried the loudest at the burial, pretending to be the dutiful son-in-law. At the time Veronica poured her regrets into plastic baggies and left them to bloat in her turret room.

 She stood over her parents’ grave and let them feel her presence. After a while, she sensed the rumble of their words.

 “Who’s there?” they asked in one voice.

 “It’s me. Veronica.”

 “We don’t remember anyone named Veronica. Are you sure you’re visiting the right gravestone?”

 Veronica shifted her feet. “I haven’t been to see you in a long time. I need to talk.”

 “We have no place to go. Talk away.”

 “Mother, I need to know why you didn’t warn me. You lived with a bully, a man who made you cringe with fear. Wasn’t it your duty to keep me from marrying a man like Dad? And Dad, why did you think so little of Mom and me? Why didn’t you value us? I don’t understand what I did that made you hate me.”

 The earth gave a shake under Veronica’s feet.

 “Ok. Maybe you didn’t hate me, but you sure didn’t love me. That’s how I’ve lived my whole life, not being hated, but never being loved. I followed orders. Do this, Veronica. Do that, Veronica. Don’t ask questions, Veronica. Do what your father tells you to do, Veronica. Make dinner. Clean the house. Wash the floor. Go to sleep. Never, how are you, my lovely child? Never, how can I help you solve a problem, my sweet girl? Is that why I’ve bent over backwards for both my son and my husband and stayed quiet and accepting? Mother, Father, help me here. Show me a path to follow.”

 And then it occurred to Veronica that following was the problem. *Being a good girl. Causing no trouble. Denying what I need, always trying to please.* Veronica sank to the ground. She held herself very still and let the air from beneath the earth find her. A shiver crept up her legs, into her belly and pierced her heart. And she knew for certain the message she was receiving: *It’s time to learn how to love myself.*

 When she regained her legs, she visited Polly’s grave. Pauline Baker. 1946 - 1986. Veronica read and reread the inscription that Polly chose for her headstone: “Death leaves a heartache no one can heal. Love leaves a memory no one can steal.”

 As a child, Polly lived across the street from Veronica in a ramshackle house, a mirror image of hers. Polly’s parents adored her, showering her with praise and telling her she could be anyone she wanted to be. Veronica escaped there as often as she could, climbing out her window, lying beside her friend giggling and gossiping. She was the one soul Veronica could visit and not feel tiny until high school, when Polly’s parents moved to a better part of town, and Veronica felt abandoned. When they graduated, Veronica got a job at The Heart of Oaks Inn. For room and board, she cleaned, cooked, answered phones, and solved problems; she was overjoyed to be away from her parents.

 At the same time, Polly’s adventures had just begun. She went to college in California and explored the West. When she came home for visits, Polly told Veronica stories about rafting down the Colorado River, backpacking along the Pacific Crest Trail and chasing buffaloes on the plains of Oklahoma. After graduating college, she surfed in Waikiki, and kayaked in San Juan. In her thirties, she walked the Great Wall of China, and swam with sharks in Fish Rock Cave, Australia, all the while holding down a great paying job as a journalist. Maybe Polly exaggerated the truth, but what did it matter? Veronica lived vicariously through those adventures.

 When Veronica stood before Polly’s grave, she realized with a jolt that Polly had been forty when she died and had been gone for thirty-two years. Polly packed all that energy into such a short life. Cancer didn’t discriminate when it came to sneaking its way into one’s system. Rich, poor, adventurous, sedentary, fat, skinny, no matter. When Polly died, Veronica was by her side. It was the only time Veronica had left frozen dinners for Johnny to heat up.

 The last week of Polly’s life had been the hardest: watching Polly weave in and out of consciousness as the morphine did its job. Veronica sat by her side, sharing every postcard, every letter, and every photo that Polly had ever sent her, proving to herself and to her friend that Polly hadn’t lost to cancer; she beat cancer by the way she had lived.

 “Polly, I should have listened to you when you said Johnny wasn’t for me,” said Veronica as she stood by her friend’s grave.

 The ground shook and Veronica wobbled.

 “You’re still powerful, my friend. I hear what you’re saying. Life’s too short. I need to pay attention to my own needs.”

 Veronica left the cemetery with her head held higher. She had met a reality. Her sight might be failing, but her body and her mind were vibrating with energy. There was no reason to believe that she’d die soon or that her brain would melt or that she’d escape to her padded turret room and never leave. *This is not a fantasy I’m going through. Maybe I’m becoming somebody new?* As she cycled to her car, she saw a porch with ceramic rabbits, dozens of them, all sizes, lining the railing, the stairs, the walkway, and the garden of an old Cape Codder.

 Veronica had been born in the year of the Rabbit. “Anything you start now will move you forward in leaps and bounds,” she recalled reading on a Chinese restaurant take-out menu. She had lived like a rabbit confined to its hutch, the one who boxed itself in the corner. Timid. Shy. Afraid.

 She rode Clyde close to the house. Veronica’s fingers twitched as she reached for a stone rabbit, its eyes looking to the sky.

 “May I help you?” asked a woman in the doorway. She had long blond hair down to her waist and a pinkish face.

 “I was admiring your collection,” Veronica stammered. “I was born in the year of the Rabbit. Is that why you have so many on your lawn? Are they your personal totem?”

 The woman nodded. “I guess you and I have something in common.”

 “Rabbits are symbols of fertility,” said Veronica. “Looks like yours have grown and multiplied.”

 The woman honked out a laugh. She slipped into the house and came out with a book with rabbits on the cover. She flipped to a well-worn page. “Listen to this. ‘Rabbits are guides into the shadow world where our personal fears lie. When the rabbit shows up, it’s time to examine those fears that hold you back from growing.’”

 Veronica put Clyde’s kickstand down. “May I see the book?”

 The woman handed it to her. There were several book-marked pages, like they were the woman’s Bible. Veronica reread the passage to herself that the woman had read aloud, then read the next line aloud. “‘It’s time to examine those fears that hold you back from growing.’” *How can I grow at seventy-two, other than old?*

 Veronica flipped through the book and the Chinese astrological chart caught her attention. She read another passage aloud. “‘Those born under the sign of the rabbit are conservative, friendly, and deeply compassionate. They are creative and active and avoid conflict.’”

 “That describes me perfectly,” said the woman. “What about you?”

 “I avoid conflict, that’s for sure.” Veronica turned the page and kept reading. “‘The rabbit reminds us to examine and utilize the tools we have within ourselves.’”

 It seemed to Veronica that the book had been waiting for her, like the smash room and Mr. Ed––something and someone to remind her how to move forward.

 “I’d like to buy a copy of this book,” said Veronica, returning it. *I could use a guide to living.*

 The woman wrote the name of the book and the author on a slip of paper.

 Veronica crouched down and stroked a stone rabbit that demanded her attention. Its eyes were half-closed, its ears donkey-large, and its belly saggy. She would never call it cute, but it looked natural, like it had lived in the woman’s garden for decades.

 “I call him Wyler,” the woman said.

 “Why Wyler?” Veronica smiled.

 “Well, he looks like he has no answers to anything, just questions.”

 “How do you know he’s male?”

 “Women always have the answers, don’t you think?”

 “Not me,” said Veronica.

 “Then you need a hare like Luka.” The woman picked up a sleek rabbit that was in mid-run, its back legs high and flowing. “She’s out there getting answers to every question. Can’t you feel her determination?”

 Veronica touched the statue’s flying feet, strangely alive, their movement palpable.

 “I’d like you to have her,” said the woman.

 “Me? I don’t deserve her.”

 “You seem like someone who admires beautiful things but never quite believes they can be hers. Luka’s your gal.”

 “But she holds the answers for you too.”

 “I think you need them more than I do.” The woman turned, her hair flowing, and disappeared into the house.

 “Double lucky rabbit’s foot,” said Veronica, caressing the statue. It wouldn’t go in the turret room but would take a place of honor in the living room, beside the television that Johnny would never watch again.

Chapter Seventeen

After Veronica pedaled back to Plainview Center, she saw the list of notices on her cell phone which she had left in the car. She was glad she had forgotten the device. She had needed the time alone, but she felt guilty that she missed so many calls.

 She scrolled through the names: three texts from Robert, two from Kate, and the last one was voice mail from Mr. Ed. It was a no brainer which one she’d check out first.

 “Miss Sunshine,” said a happy voice that made Veronica breathe easier. “I honor you this morning with James Taylor’s *October Road*: 'Keep me walking, October road. Keep me walking in the sunshine.’*”*

She imagined Mr. Ed sitting in his lounge chair strumming a morning song just for her. Oh how she’d like to be in Potato’s room listening to her new friend play the violin.

 Reality interfered when her cell phone vibrated.

 “Hello Robert,” she said, seeing his cell number on the screen.

 “Where on earth have you been, Mother? I’ve been trying to reach you all morning. Have you no regard for others?”

 “What’s the matter, Darling?” she said, holding her breath.

 “Didn’t you get my text? What is the matter with you? Why haven’t you gotten back to us!”

 “Robert, what’s going on?”

 “Father fell again this morning in the hospital, that’s what. They transferred him to intensive care. When I checked on him, he was drooling and his speech was slurred and he didn’t recognize me. They’ve strapped him to his bed, Mother, like he was a criminal. I’m afraid this is it for him.”

 Veronica put the good luck rabbit in her lap and caressed its outstretched feet as she measured her next words. “What did the doctors say?”

 Robert huffed out air. “They don’t know what they’re talking about. They said they need to do some tests, but it’s plenty clear to me. Father’s eyes are rolling around in his head and he’s babbling on about salt water taffy or something crazy like that. Mother, he’s dying.”

 Veronica was pretty sure Johnny was not dying, at least not at that moment. Robert had never witnessed Johnny’s disease up close and it was frightening the bejesus out of him.

 “Kate is here with me. Mother, we’re afraid this might be it.”

 *Such drama.* *If they had paid attention, they’d know Johnny had spiraled over the last few months. All of a sudden, they’re the authorities on his health?* “I’ll be along in a little bit.” “He might not have a little bit,” Robert bellowed.

 She could hear Kate in the background trying to calm him down.

 “Yes, well, I want to pick up Bertram and bring him with me if this is a final farewell.”

 “That man is not family. Besides I don’t trust him. Your presence is required now. Are you home? I’ll pick you up.”

 “No, I’m not home. I’m downtown near the bike shop. Clyde needed a new tire.”

 Robert burst with fire-like force. “So your damn bicycle is more important than your husband? Mother, go home now. Kate will be there within the hour. She’ll drive you to the hospital.”

 Veronica sighed. “I can get there myself.”

 “No. Kate will come for you. Go home now and wait.”

 Her son thought she wasn’t in her right mind. That she was in shock or something worse. She could drive to the hospital and intercept Kate. But Kate would already have left and then she’d be angry with Robert for sending her on a wild goose chase and they’d both blame Veronica. She might as well acquiesce and do what she had been told. *One step forward, two steps back. What a lousy saying, and all too true.*

 She pulled into her driveway and put Clyde in the shed. She mounted him on a makeshift rod that kept his tires off the ground. *Treat him well*. She entered through the kitchen, put on the kettle, and settled in to wait for Kate.

 Veronica felt wrung out. She had wanted to do good, to give back, to soothe her conscience about stealing from people’s yards, even inconsequential things that the owner barely noticed anymore. *What had the last week accomplished?* She felt good about giving money to the playhouse and to the down-and-out folks in Holyoke. But in truth, it wasn’t her money to give away. She closed her eyes and rested her head on the table.

 The teapot whistle blew, but Veronica was confused when the noise suddenly stopped on its own. She hadn’t heard Kate come in. She looked up to see a ragged man with spiderwebs around his eyes and neck, and red scorpions dotting his cheekbones. *Spiderman!*

 Veronica figured she was dreaming or her eyes were playing tricks on her. *How could Spiderman actually be in my house? How did he get in? Did I forget to lock the back door again? How did he find me? How on earth would he know who I am? The day I biked into his garage was dark and stormy. I had on my helmet and I barely spoke to him. I’m having a nightmare, that’s the only explanation.*

“Are you here to hurt me?” she asked, even though his apparition looked like a feather and she could knock him over with a strong exhale.

 The spidery man sat like a skinny troll at the kitchen table, his phone in front of him. “First we’re going to talk and then I’ll decide.”

 *I think he’s real.* *What should I do?*

 “So you know who I am and you know why I’m here?”

 Veronica nodded and shrugged at the same time, like a bobble-head. “You’re Basil Termite, the lead drummer for the rock group Arachnid. People call you Spiderman.”

 Veronica stared at the ghostly figure sitting across from her. *Such a realistic dream!*

 “I used to be a drummer.” He held out his fingers, crooked and gnarled. “Those goons broke every bone in my hands.”

 Veronica reached out and touched him, shrinking back when she felt real flesh and bone. “I’m sorry, I truly am.”

 “You should be. It wasn’t until I saw your face on TikTok that I put it all together. I had blurry nightmares about that night, but seeing you clarified it all.”

 “TikTok?” *I am so confused.*

 The man pressed a few buttons on his phone and a video appeared. It was Veronica staring up at a camera and speaking in a distant voice. “That man took someone’s bicycle. A bicycle! Do you know what a bicycle means to me? Freedom. Independence. Adventure. Would you want that taken away from you?”

 Veronica couldn’t believe anyone saw this clip, never mind Spiderman!

 “I knew it was you. I never forget faces, especially yours. The filmy eyes, the thin nose, the plump bottom lip, that mole near your earlobe. You look like my fourth grade teacher.” Spiderman’s eyes teared. “That woman was a monster, yelling at me for something I couldn’t control, embarrassing me in front of the whole class. I hated her, just like I hated you the moment you came up the driveway like you owned my house and were entitled to take over my garage.”

 “And you’ve been harboring this hate for the last ten years, looking for me?”

 “No, I’m not that insane. I’m a TikTok junkie and when something goes viral, I get an alert. And there you were, my nemesis from fourth grade.”

 “I never taught fourth grade. I was just looking for shelter from the thunderstorm.”

 “But you got more than you bargained for, didn’t you?”

 *I sure did. Ten years of guilt. Ten years of what if the money were mine. One week of adventure trying to give back what I stole.* “How did you find my house?”

 “Easy. You gave the man videotaping you your name. Remember?”

 She thought back to when she fell. The man rushed over and asked her three questions: what was her name, what year was it and who was the president. She had answered each dutifully, unaware that her voice and information was going viral. *How stupid am I?*

 “Now that you found me what do you want?” she asked, calculating what she could do to protect herself. Maybe she could grab the teapot and pour boiling water on him. But he didn’t look dangerous, aside from those disfiguring webs on his face and neck.

 “Let’s see. How about my money?” he growled, his voice seeking the power his body clearly lacked.

 “I don’t have your money,” she lied, *not all of it anyway*. She did a rough calculation: $15,000 to the Canaan Valley Playhouse, about $14,000 to the good people of Holyoke, $500 to Captain Jack and a few hundred to the toothless old man who stole her backpack. Eight booties were still hidden in Mr. Ed’s closet.

 Spiderman stood up and limped around to her chair. “There was a duffel of money that you took. That my dealers and I were splitting three ways. You stole it and left me to die at the hands of those men.”

 “And it was my fault that you were dealing drugs and working with thugs?”

 “It was your fault that those men beat me to a pulp, yes. So I’ll ask you again. Where’s my money?”

 Veronica thought she saw a shiny object in his hands. *A knife? A weapon? A skinny brazen wanna-be drug dealer is not going to get me. Maybe he thinks an old woman has no strength, but he is so wrong.* She stood up quickly and backed her chair into him like a plow. Catching him off guard, he fell hard and hit his head on the ground. A jackknife tinkled to the floor.

 “Damn,” said Spiderman, trying to get up. “Have a little mercy on me.”

 “So you can kill me?”

 “I’m not going to kill you, Old Lady.”

 “But you have a knife!”

 “That barely opens an apple. I just wanted to scare you.”

 “Why are you here?”

 “I want my money.”

 “I don’t have it.”

 Spiderman curled into a fetal position on the floor of the kitchen. “That’s what’s wrong with do gooders,” he sobbed. “They think no one’s wise to them. I know you have my money. A little birdie told me you let thousands fly over the city of Holyoke last week.”

 Feeling a pang of hurt for him, Veronica sat beside Spiderman on the floor. She put her hand on his arm. It was as thin as a reed and the man had about as much strength as a teacup. He didn’t even squirm.

 “I don’t know how you could have gotten that information,” she said, listening to tire wheels on the driveway outside.

 “I got a phone call thanking me for my generosity,” he smirked.

 “A what? Who called you?”

 “Someone on the ground who caught a one hundred dollar bill with my cell phone number on it.”

 In her mind’s eye, Veronica saw the flutter of the bills as the people on the field looked up in wonder. She imagined a man grabbing a floating piece of paper, and thanking the gods for his being in the right place at the right time. “But why was your phone number on the bill?”

 “It was to be my souvenir. My first venture into drug dealing. I was going to frame it.”

 Veronica absorbed those words. So he had been new to the drug underground. And his first time out an old lady stole his profits and practically got him killed. *How’s that for justice?*

 Veronica heard Kate’s SUV in the driveway. She would be walking through the kitchen door in no time. “My daughter-in-law is here to take me to the hospital to see my husband. She’s huge and mean and if she sees you, she’ll sit on you until you’re flat and even more useless.” Veronica helped Spiderman to his feet. “I feel bad for you and regret what I’ve done. I’ll tell you what. Come back in a few days after I know how my husband is doing. We can talk about your money then.”

 She shooed him out the front door. He wobbled and teetered, like a breeze would knock him down again. “Old Woman, you’d better not be lying to me. I might not be as strong as you, but I’m smarter.”

 “We’ll see about that.” Veronica watched Spiderman slink away. She felt responsible for his downfall and wondered what she could do to make things right for him. *The money, after all, is his.*

 Kate barged into the kitchen. “Who are you talking to?”

 “Myself, mostly.”

 “I swear, Veronica, you’re getting as senile as Johnny. Get your purse, and let’s go.”

 “I’ll follow in my car.”

 “No, I have strict orders from Robert to take you personally.”

 Veronica didn’t have the energy to argue.

 As Kate drove onto the street, Veronica saw Spiderman limping along the shoulder of the road.

 “That man looks like he needs a lift,” said Veronica, wondering why he didn’t have a car and how far he’d have to walk.

 Kate stared at her mother-in-law. “Veronica, that’s a shiftless homeless man. I see him on the streets in town all the time, begging. As much as I want the down-and-out not to struggle, I don’t have to help them directly. I give to Father Bill’s charity. That’s as close as I want to get.”

 “That’s very generous,” said Veronica.

 “Thank you,” said Kate in an I-am-a-good-and-thoughtful-person tone.

 Veronica craned her neck to see Spiderman, but they were long past him. She was the cause of his suffering. But he would have caused others to suffer had he gotten into the drug business. She was both a sinner for stealing his money and a saint for not returning it. She had no idea how to reconcile the two.

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 At the hospital, she and Kate were admitted to the Intensive Care Unit where Johnny had been transferred. Johnny’s room was opposite the nurses’ desk and she could see Robert talking to a doctor.

 “Ah, here she is.”

 “Are you Mr. Russell’s health proxy?” the doctor asked.

 “Unless my son has overruled me,” said Veronica looking at Robert.

 “I decided to leave the health care decisions up to you,” said Robert.

 *Isn’t that just like Robert! Johnny’s finances would go to him, but I’d be responsible for deciding whether Johnny lives or dies. That would free my son from guilt.*

 The doctor handed her a pack of papers. “Please look these over and decide if you want to resuscitate your husband if he goes into cardiac arrest. You have the power to sign the forms since he is not competent to make his own decision.”

 *Nothing like being blunt.* “May I see him first.”

 The men stepped aside so she could go into Johnny’s room.

 He was a smidgen of white on a narrow bed, hooked up to monitors and tubes. His mouth was wide open and his breathing was shallow. Veronica pulled a chair to his bed.

 “Johnny, it’s Veronica,” she whispered.

 He didn’t respond.

 She took his hand, mottled with brown spots and red blood clots. “Johnny,” she said into his ear, “it’s Taffeta.”

 The man stirred and his eyes fluttered.

 “The time I spent with you was like a fairy tale come true. Johnny, Dear, I met your lovely wife, Veronica. She was very understanding. A real saint. She had no animosity toward me or you. In fact, she gave me a present.”

 Johnny’s lips curled.

 Veronica angled herself toward him so he could see the topaz earrings that he had bought for Taffeta. Veronica gifted them to herself the day she discovered Johnny was only one among a notebook filled with Taffeta’s clients. This morning she had extracted them from an old purse at the bottom of her closet and put them on, thinking they might jar Johnny’s memory. “Here I thought I had lost them,” she said, pretending to be Taffeta. “I kept that a secret from you all these years. Do you remember when you asked where they were, I said I was saving them for a special occasion. I have them on now. Aren’t they pretty?”

 Johnny’s mouth opened to talk but no sound came out, just hot air.

 Veronica patted him on the forehead with just a little extra force than necessary. “I’ll tell Veronica how nice she was to think of me, ok?”

 Johnny nodded, or that’s what Veronica wanted to believe.

 Robert and Kate came into the room, keeping their distance at the bottom of the bed. Veronica looked like the picture-perfect wife, fawning over her frail husband, whispering in his ear, offering him words of endearment. They approached Veronica and put their arms around her.

 “I’m sorry, Mother. He’s a shell of the man we once knew,” said Robert. “I should have paid more attention and now it’s too late.”

Chapter Eighteen

Johnny did not go into cardiac arrest. His breath became shallow, but with a tab of morphine, he rested comfortably. Veronica slept fitfully in a plastic recliner throughout the night; her son and Kate had gone home. In the morning, the nurse said Johnny would be moved out of the ICU to the cardiac care unit.

 “From there, he’ll go to rehab,” said the nurse.

 “He doesn’t need rehab,” said Veronica, stretching her sore back. “He needs a place to die.”

 The nurse stared at Veronica. “What a terrible thing to say.”

 “This man, John Russell, whom I’ve been married to for thirty-six years, cannot think, cannot walk, and can hardly breathe. What is rehab going to do for him?”

 “There’s always hope,” said the nurse. “Hope means hoping when everything seems hopeless.”

 Veronica wanted to put her fingers down her throat. “When will he be transferred to a different floor?”

 “Within the hour.”

 Veronica called Robert to update him. She asked if he and Kate would take turns with her at the hospital once Johnny was moved so she could go home, take a shower, and rest.

 “Mother, I have a presentation to prepare for tomorrow. And Kate is passing papers on a house this week.”

 And here she thought Robert and Kate had taken a step forward in the empathy arena. *Fat chance.*

 Veronica called Bertram. “I wonder if you’d come to the hospital and sit with Johnny for a few hours?”

 “I miss the old guy,” he said. “But the restraining order is still in place, so I’m not your man.”

 “My son is working on that,” said Veronica.

 “Not fast enough,” he said and hung up.

 *Damn*. The room was claustrophobic. The walls were stark white and the air was thick with antiseptic and bleach. There were no wind chimes or dream catchers. She saw no flags and wreaths and comforting dome to breathe in the sky. She was in a prison of Johnny’s creation and she saw no way out.

 When Johnny was moved to the fifth floor, a strange thing happened. Veronica heard the tap-tap of heels outside the room and a light knock. Nurses wore rubber soles, and Kate clod-hopped down a hall, no matter what her footwear. Before Veronica could rise to see who was there, a woman with orange hair, red lipstick, and false eyelashes tiptoed in on high-heeled boots. She wore half-a-dozen gold bracelets and carried an enormous leather purse that Veronica could have used totransport five ceramic bunnies, two gnomes, and a flamingo.

 “You must be Veronica,” she said extending a manicured hand.

 Veronica didn’t need an introduction. “And you must be Taffeta.”

 “That man Bertram called me and said you could use some help.”

 Veronica glanced toward Johnny to catch his reaction, but his eyes were closed, his mouth was open, and his breathing was steady. “So you’re the woman that man over there loves.”

 “I’m the woman every husband loves.” Taffeta made room for herself at the bottom of Johnny’s bed, like she’d been invited. “I make no demands. No man has to take out the trash, or see me without make up, or sit by my side when I’m sick. But it occurred to me when I was in your house that you put up with a lot of shit from him.” She motioned a thumb in his direction.

 “And how did you figure that?”

 “Because Johnny could be an ass. He was always telling me what to do. Badgering me like I was his possession. He’d call and expect me to be ready for him on a moment’s notice. Somehow he got the twisted notion that I belonged to him and him alone.”

 “But you didn’t.”

 “Not by a long shot. But he’d park at the bottom of my street and follow my other lovers to the house and put on these police-type lights and scare them off.”

 “So how did you get him to stop?”

 “I gave him a time slot and an ultimatum. And the next time he showed up, I spanked him.”

 Veronica nearly fell off her seat. “Spanked him?”

 “Yup. And he liked it. Crazy coot. And it worked.”

 Veronica couldn’t believe what she was hearing. So many times, she would love to have taken a belt to his rear and whelp him like her father had done to her. And here this woman cowered him that way and Johnny became servile? *What a world.* Just the thought of it all exhausted Veronica. “So why are you here today?” Veronica asked.

 “It’s Sunday, my day off. Not getting paid, not getting laid,” she laughed. Her eyes circled the room, resting first on Johnny and then on Veronica. “Believe it or not, I sometimes put myself in the little woman’s shoes. I understand how angry you must be at someone like me. Listen, Veronica, I could use some time alone with this old geezer. I need to get a few things off my chest.”

 *I don’t doubt that.*

 “Why don’t you go home and get some rest. Come back tonight after dinner. I’ll stay until you return.”

 Veronica thought about all the bloated baggies devoted to Taffeta. She should leave the woman indefinitely. Let her sit by his side and clean up his drool. But Taffeta was not the thief of love, just the vehicle Johnny used.

 “He can’t talk, you know, or perform, if that’s what you’re looking for.”

 Taffeta laughed, a throaty chuckle that shook the bed. “Being in your home made you real to me and when Bertram called, I thought, well, what the hell. I can lend a hand.”

 Somehow, Veronica believed the woman was sincere, so she called a cab, left the hospital and went home. It was only ten in the morning and the day was hers. She fixed herself breakfast and called Mr. Ed.

 “I need some advice,” she said.

 “At your service, Miss Sunshine.”

 “The world is weighing on me. I know you told me to find a gentle path, to nurture my needs, to make peace with my destiny. But all I see are obstacles and frustration,” *and bloated baggies floating to the glass dome in the turret*.

 “Veronica, I’m going to give you the words of inspiration I live by every day. They’re my secret power. Say them when you wake up and before you go to sleep. You’ll see. They’ll get you through the rough patches.”

 Veronica believed in objects, not words. She always sought out tangible things to bolster her spirit––wind chimes, dream catchers, bird feeders, froggies, flags, gnomes. It didn’t matter if they were chipped or muddy or frayed. They gave her power. Now Mr. Ed was offering something abstract and fleeting. *Why not. Nothing else is working.* “Ok. I’ll give it a try.”

 Mr. Ed cleared his voice. “Repeat after me: I am enough. I have enough. I do enough.”

 “I am enough. I have enough. I do enough,” said Veronica.

 “I hear no conviction, no belly of the beast. You can do better.”

 Veronica looked around the house. No one was within earshot. She pumped up her chest and belted out the words. “I am enough. I have enough. I do enough.”

 “That’s the spirit,” Mr. Ed said. “Veronica, you are in charge of yourself, who you are every day. Choose to believe that.”

 After she hung up the phone, Veronica climbed the stairs to the turret room and sat yoga-like in its center, amidst blankets, quilts, and pots and pans. The photos of her treasures had been packed away and the walls were yellow where posters had hung. Music no longer tinkled from chimes. The pyramid of balls was gone. The shelves with ornaments lay bare. She had the satisfaction of knowing she had made others happy. A lonely child. An old woman. A dozen dogs. And the town of Holyoke was richer because of her. But why did she still feel the need to shout into baggies? Why was her son like bitter rain and her daughter-in-law like unyielding steel? Why did Johnny’s sporadic memory sting like biting fire? Shouldn’t she still be on her road trip, giving back? There were dream catchers and wind chimes and ceramic frogs left to distribute.

 She quieted her mind and rested it on the nine words Mr. Ed told her to repeat: *I am enough. I have enough. I do enough.*

Chapter Nineteen

When Veronica left the turret room, she breathed more easily, not freely, but her heart didn’t feel like it was in her stomach. Downstairs in her kitchen, she admired the chintz curtains, the sparkling linoleum floor, and the polished wood cabinets. She imagined the table spread with years of birthday cakes and Thanksgiving dinners, pot roasts and hams, brownies and hot-baked bread. She fiddled with the gold ring on her finger, and realized that it never fit quite right. Too loose. Too wobbly. Never secure. She was always replacing the bandaid-cushion.

 Johnny never wore a ring. He said he didn’t believe in it. He knew he was married and that should be sufficient. The day they wed, he slipped a cigar band on her finger. He had painted a silvery circle on its surface. “That’ll have to do until you find a ring that suits you.”

 She didn’t need a ring either. No man before Johnny had ever looked at her twice. When he appeared one day at The Heart of Oaks Inn looking for a room and noticed her, she thought he was joking, but he wasn’t.

 “Pretty lady,” he said at the front desk. “Ding, ding, ding.”

 Veronica looked around for his guest, figuring he wasn’t talking to her. She’d never been called pretty. Ever. And here was this square-jawed crystal-eyed man with a gray broom mustache calling her pretty. She gave him the best room in the house. The one where she embroidered the pillows with forget-me-nots and scented them with lavender. The room overlooked Holyfield Pond where she sat on a bench in the evening, gazed at the stars, and invented a future.

 On Johnny’s fifth return to town, he brushed her hand when she gave him the key. A ripple of excitement fluttered through her.

 “Veronica, I got a full time job at Blanket Textiles. I’m looking to buy a house. Can you help me?”

 Veronica knew every acre in Plainview from when she and her dad had delivered the morning newspaper. The town slept as she studied the cottages around the lake and watched new homes built with trees felled from local forests. She tossed papers at the threshold of businesses in the thriving downtown, including the towering Heart of Oaks Inn. Father and daughter finished the route at the Blanket Textiles plant, a successful local industry.

 Veronica took an afternoon off work after doubling her morning rounds in the inn to accompany Johnny house-hunting. She hadn’t circled the town since arriving at inn seventeen years ago, after she graduated high school. She never learned to drive. Lessons were too expensive, and her father didn’t trust her with a car. “You’re too distracted by squirrels to keep your eyes on the road,” he crowed, making Veronica shrink to the size of an acorn.

 Johnny wanted to buy a home with a lot of land on the outskirts of town. “I like my privacy,” he said.

 Driving through the town with Johnny was heart-thumping. So much had changed and so much had stayed the same. Sure, there were McMansions, and certainly there were ramshackle houses like hers and Polly’s. But the town felt alive with possibility for Veronica, so unlike the days when she felt dead and walked to The Heart of Oaks Inn seeking refuge.

 Seventeen years she had been incarcerated at the inn, although she never regarded it that way. She had the run of the house and she ran it like a clock. She even had a daily check list and was so proud when all the boxes were filled in before she fell asleep at night. Once or twice a month she visited her parents, although she blocked her senses like she had a clothespin on her nose when she went into their home. She wanted nothing of them to touch the inside of her.

 So when Johnny opened the door to a four-door Impala Chevrolet that had a radio blasting *Nothing’s Gonna Stop Us Now*, Veronica felt the outline of her body take shape.

 The house Johnny liked looked like two different bodies. On the left were two boxy floors of white farmhouse, strong and sturdy, like Veronica. But on the right was a turret rising into the air from the second floor, its rounded room windowless, its dome a roof of glass. It called to her, whispering her name.

 Entering the house, she was drawn to a door leading to a circular staircase that led to a cozy round room at the top. The walls were windowless, but triangles of glass winked down on her; beams of yellow landed on her arms, and rainbow prisms shouted from the walls. It was like the outside was inside. She felt her body turning pink. She would give anything to occupy this space.

 When she descended, Johnny took her hand. “Will you live here with me, Veronica?”

 “As your innkeeper?” she said, imagining sleeping in the turret room under the dome of stars.

 He nodded, “And as my wife.”

 This was her chance to begin life again, away from The Heart of Oaks. To have color, to fill in her form, to be a new person. To be Veronica Russell, a married woman.

 “I would be honored to be your wife,” and she meant it.

 After a business-like marriage ceremony at Plainview Town Hall, Johnny and Veronica drove to Woods Hole in Falmouth, where Johnny parked his car and they crossed on the ferry to Nantucket at sunset. The sky was pink and orange, violet and red, just like Veronica felt on this special of all special days. As the land receded, the ocean expanded and she absorbed its glow.

 They rented a small cottage with a wrap-around deck, and maid service. Paradise for Veronica. To be in a place where she didn’t make a bed, fluff a pillow, answer the phone, listen to complaints or needs or nightmares. Johnny was her savior, her knight.

 Their first night together as husband and wife, Veronica expected Johnny to be grateful and thrilled that she had waited for marriage to lose her virginity. She’d read about making love in the moonlight, drinking champagne and lolling naked all day. She had high expectations for magic.

 Johnny, however, was so tired and tipsy from drinking to their marriage throughout the day, that he fell asleep without even taking off his shoes. Veronica did it for him, but left him dressed. She got into the silk negligee that her childhood friend Polly bought her for her wedding night and lay awake until dawn when she finally drifted off. When she woke, Johnny wasn’t in the room. Out the window was a white-sand beach. She’d never been to the ocean. Plainview was an inland town with a snake-like river running through it and a few muddy ponds. But in Nantucket, the water glistened. The waves rolled and the sun beckoned.

 She scanned the figures strolling along the sand and saw her husband’s compact silhouette. He stopped to speak with sunbathers, who seemed scantily dressed to Veronica, whose bathing suit was high-necked and skirted. He lingered beside one woman a long time. Veronica lost sight of him when he crossed the boardwalk and disappeared into a package store.

 Veronica wondered what to do next. She could walk or swim or go for breakfast, but by herself? On her honeymoon? That seemed all wrong. So she waited for Johnny to return, which he finally did, smelling like booze and sweat, reminding Veronica of her father.

 “Let’s get this honeymoon started,” he said, lifting her up and swinging her in a circle.

 Veronica shook off her fears and kissed him on the lips. Johnny’s tongue wriggled in her mouth and he spread her on the bed, still glued to her face.

 *Now I’m going to learn the secret!*

 A sweet shiver shook her body as Johnny slipped into her. She had read enough about sex to anticipate first-time pain, so she made sure she was well lubricated. He pushed a few times, took a few deep breaths, thrust hard, grunted, and collapsed on top of her.

 “Hot damn,” he said. “You’re amazing.” Johnny beamed, rolled to his side and patted her belly. “We’ll make good parents, don’t you think?”

 Babies were the last thing on Veronica’s mind. Even though she had just turned thirty-six and the clock was ticking, she needed at least a year to enjoy being a wife before she became a mother. She wanted Johnny to be the playmate she never had, someone to cherish her. She was in good shape, she knew that. No cellulite. No saggy breasts. No pelican arms. Strong from making beds and scrubbing floors, nailing shingles and painting walls, everything from puttering in the garden to tiling the roof at The Heart of Oaks. She was a woman of husbandry, she mused. Now she could use that word for true.

 They took a shower together and Johnny scrubbed her back. That was more like it, she thought, as he swirled soap lower and lower onto her buttocks and thighs. She turned around, with the soap ready to massage him and noticed scratch marks on his chest.

 “Did you have a fight with a cat?” she asked as she traced the lines.

 Johnny got out of the shower and grabbed a towel, stomping out of the bathroom. “Oh, I see,” he said. “You’re one of those question question question women! And here I thought you were sweet and quiet.”

 “I . . .I. . .I just got worried. Maybe you need to put Vaseline on those scratches. You know there is such a thing as Cat Scratch Fever.”

 Johnny looked at her and his eyes squinted into a smile. “My Veronica. You’re a good girl, aren’t you?”

 Veronica nodded and vowed not to ask Johnny questions. She wanted her marriage to be smooth and harmonious, not contentious like her parents’. She’d figure out how to get answers in a back door kind of way.

 That night when they lay on the bed together, Johnny stroked the curve of her hips and the flat of her belly. “Time to make the babies,” he whispered as he mounted her. Veronica tingled with anticipation, but Johnny was finished before she could even react. She was beginning to realize that sex and making love were not the same.

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 Mid-week, the manager of the cottages knocked on their door. “Phone call in the office for Mr. Russell,” he said.

 “What the hell? I’ll be right back, Veronica.”

 Johnny returned a half hour later red-faced and huffy. “There was a problem at the factory. I have to see to it or I’ll lose my job.”

 He didn’t elaborate and she didn’t want to question him. He packed his small suitcase, kissed her on the cheek, and told her he’d pick her up at the ferry on Saturday.

 “Can’t I go with you?” she cried.

 They’d only had four days of getting to know each other.

 “We have a lifetime together. What’s a few days? You’ve never had a vacation, Veronica. Stay here and enjoy the sunshine. Relax. The house will be ready for you when you get there.”

 He’d already spent time in the rambling house by himself before their wedding, painting the interior and moving in furniture. She’d been needed to finish out business at The Heart of Oaks before leaving.

 “I’ll miss you,” she said.

 “And I’ll miss you, my sweet little wifey.”

 She wasn’t sure she liked that moniker, but she smiled and watched him go.

 She didn’t hear from him the next day or the day after. She dialed the house but no one answered and Johnny refused to install an answering machine. Too invasive, he had said. He insisted on separating work and family. She had wanted to call his office, but Johnny said he hated when wives called looking for their husbands. “Those wives don’t trust their husbands, not like you.” He pecked a kiss on the top of her head. “I know you’ll never do that to me, embarrass me like that. Right?” She nodded her head in agreement.

 Alone on Nantucket, she walked in circles around a marsh until she was dizzy. Then she rented a shabby brown three-speed bicycle with upright handlebars and explored the boomerang-shaped island. Veronica cruised Beach Ave, studying the girls in bikinis and boys with chiseled abs, watching couples swing on hammocks and cuddle on lounge chairs.

 Veronica ached to be part of their fun. She parked the bike and spied on a group of teenagers from a distance, trying to understand what she had missed when she was young. Right after high school, she began work at The Heart of Oaks. She received room and board in exchange for light housekeeping and manning the reception desk. One year turned into seventeen, advancing all the way to full-time manager with a first floor room and bath, in addition to meals, which she often prepared for guests when the cook was sick.

 On Saturday morning, before she returned the bike to board the ferry to Woods Hole, she cycled by a Victorian with a seasonal rental sign on the lawn and leaned her bike against the railing. The place was empty. Beer cans littered the lawn and a few cigarette butts were smashed into the dirt. Veronica found a trash can and cleaned the area. Houses were alive to Veronica, each with its own personality. This sea-blue mansion was regal and stately. It didn’t deserve neglect of any kind.

 She walked up the stairs to the porch and checked the doors. All locked. She came around to the back of the house and saw the wide-open window with no screen to keep out bugs. She hoisted herself onto the sill to close it and somehow tumbled into the house.

 Once she got on her feet and looked around, she was amazed. The house was neat and ready for new tenants. No overflowing barrels, no crumbs on the table. The refrigerator was empty; the stove and lights were off. Nothing amiss. All was in order, like Veronica had swept the place herself.

 She climbed the winding staircase and checked the bedrooms. In the last room on the right, lying on a lumpy mattress, a gold ring glittered. In all the years at The Heart of Oaks, she never took anything a traveler had left behind, and there was plenty of opportunity. Jewelry, money, trinkets, clothing. She’d pile them into a bin in the kitchen. If the traveler hadn’t claimed the item in ten days, she donated it or gave it to an employee.

 When she saw the gold band on the bed, she put it on her ring finger. It was a little loose, but with some tape, it would be just right. She sure wasn’t going to leave it there for the next tenants. Why should she? Instead, she claimed it as rightfully hers, placed there specifically for her, to honor her new life. *Won’t Johnny be surprised!*

 She left the house in a daze and pedaled along the ocean road. She flashed the gold as she rode and knew that this was the sign she needed that her marriage would be solid.

 Late Saturday afternoon, Johnny met her at the landing and swung her around, lifting her off her feet.

 Veronica felt like the child she never was. “I’m so happy to see you. Did you put out the fire?” she asked after she caught her breath.

 “Fire?” he furrowed his brow.

 “You know, the emergency.” She rolled the ring around her finger.

 “I got there just in time to save the day.” Johnny patted her hand. “I’m sorry, Veronica. Truly. But it couldn’t be helped.”

 She could have been upset that he had abandoned her on their honeymoon to work. She could have been frustrated that he only called once, and they only spoke for a few minutes exchanging hi-how-are-you-words, nothing lovey-dovey. And she could have felt dejected that he hadn’t notice the gold band on her ring finger. But what difference would it make? She slipped off the ring and tucked it in a pocket. She would show it to him on a special occasion and he’d be happy for her. “Take me home, my husband,” she had said instead.

 “That’s my good wifey. I knew you’d understand.”

 As Johnny drove, he hummed Sinatra’s tune *You Make Me Feel So Young*. Johnny was twelve years older than Veronica. To her, he was experienced and worldly. If she made him feel young, that was wonderful. She hummed along as they drove up the path to their castle.

 Johnny carried her over the threshold and kissed her full on the lips. A firework boomed in her heart and exploded. He held her hand and together they walked through their home.

 The wooden floors in the simply furnished living room creaked hello. Johnny had strung a welcome sign on the fireplace and displayed their wedding photo on the mantel. Veronica, slim and tidy in a white sundress and an orchid in her short bubble-cut hair; Johnny casual in a white shirt and khaki slacks, his mustache waxed into handlebars. He also placed a framed photo of his mother beside it, a curvaceous woman in a flowing evening dress, fitted on the top to highlight her ample bosom. Her shiny black hair was long and lush; her face caught the light like a model in an ad for Revlon. Veronica felt plain and mousy beside her; she made a mental note to relocate the overpowering photo.

 In the kitchen, Veronica saw a pot of soup on the stove: her favorite, chicken and vegetable.

 “Did you make this for me?” she asked, even as she spied the Campbell’s soup can in the trash.

 He blushed. “Nothing’s too good for my bride.”

 The table was set. A bottle of red wine. A loaf of bread. Cheeses and olive oil. A vase with dandelions and purple clover. An envelope and a large gift box was tucked on her seat so she couldn’t miss it when she sat: To my wifey Veronica from your hubby Johnny, said the envelope.

 Veronica shivered with joy. “This is all for me?”

 “Another question! Darn it, Veronica.”

 Quickly, she pulled down his face and kissed him on the lips. “You’re so nice to me.”

 “That’s what I want to hear.”

 Veronica opened the box. Inside was a cinnamon-scented stuffed dog, and a white-lined piece of paper with a typewritten note:

I hope you like my little guy Scruffy. He’s been my companion since I was a boy, and now he belongs to both of us. My mother always said,“The more we share, the more we have.” I am happy to share him with you.

Your husband, Johnny.

Veronica pulled Scruffy close and kissed his nose, stifling a sneeze.

 Johnny beamed. “I knew you’d like him. We’re going to do just fine.”

Chapter Twenty

Veronica sat at her kitchen table and wondered where all the years had gone. She had no recollection of what happened to that stuffed animal Scruffy. Maybe Scruffy was in a trash bag in the basement, along with Johnny’s bowling trophies and Celtics’ t-shirts. Maybe Robert buried it in the backyard after being punished for putting salt in the sugar bowl and ruining Johnny’s morning coffee. But the ring was still on her finger, no longer tight, but never quite right.

 “I am enough. I have enough. I do enough,” she said softly as she removed the ring and set it on the counter. She channeled Mr. Ed, forming the words that he would say. “Sometimes things must change so I can change. I’ll release the things out of my control and allow each step to take me to where I want to be. I am enough. I have enough. I do enough. I am in charge of how I feel and today I choose happiness.”

 She wandered into the den and sank into Johnny’s recliner, but her neck hit the head rest wrong. No wonder she never liked sitting there. She scooted forward and clicked on the TV, hoping for *Wheel of Fortune* or *Family Feud*. Station after station showed killings and torture, bank robberies and smashed up cars. There was nothing to watch that was soft or silly or satisfying.

 She repeated Mr. Ed’s mantra a dozen times. She paced around the house and climbed the stairs to the turret room, standing at its threshold, blinking again and again, wishing her eyes could conjure her treasures. Her body twitched. Her heart raced. “Get me out of here,” she roared, just like Mr. Ed had recommended. *Release the beast!* She ran down the stairs, grabbed a sweater and her purse, and fled out the door.

 The day was blustery, so riding Clyde was a no-go. She got in the car and drove downtown. The Heart of Oaks Inn had a welcome sign on its lawn. She parked out front and surveyed the place where she first met Johnny. She wanted to resurrect a positive memory, to see herself, a newly minted thirty-six years old, bounding down those front stairs, eager to begin a new life. Maybe that would force the time that had passed to melt into good memories.

 All she saw were paling trees and peeling paint until she spotted a man limping on the sidewalk near the inn. His hoodie covered his head, but she caught a glimpse of his face when the wind caught the material and he shook it loose. She saw black webs, red scorpions, stubble and pain. *Poor Spiderman*. She watched as he approached passers-by. They shunned him or waved him away or crossed the street before he could get near them.

 Had she turned that man into a beggar? Would he have become a derelict regardless of her, following a path of self-destruction? Or would he have rocked the town with music after making a fortune selling drugs to children and teens and vulnerable addicts and weekend party-goers? *Am I responsible for what he’s become?* She continued to watch him as he dropped between a shed and a fence, covered himself with newspaper, and passed out in the weeds.

 She must have fallen asleep in the car because she woke with a start. The clock said three-thirty. She only had an hour and a half before it was twilight and her eyes would play tricks on her as she drove. She checked the shed, but Spiderman was no longer on his stretch of grass; she felt pressured to return to the hospital to see how Johnny had fared with Taffeta. But first, she had to see her granddaughters. It had been too long and she had set aside treasures from the turret for them, including the painted rock from the Canaan Valley Playhouse that said “We Rise by Lifting Others.” Maybe she’d be lucky and the girls would be playing outside. Kids never cared about a little wind. She needed to see them without alerting Kate or Robert. *Maybe? Maybe. I am enough. I have enough. I do enough.*

 She turned off the main road toward Robert’s house and saw only Kate’s car in the driveway. She reversed directions and parked down the street where her car wouldn’t be noticed even if Robert drove by.

 Veronica gathered the gifts she had selected and made her way through backyards to her son’s house. It was a long ranch except for the second floor addition on the left where Kate set up her real estate office. The light was on in her workroom. *Now’s my chance to see my girls on my terms.*

 Carrying a bag slung over her shoulder, she slunk to the sheltered side of the house where the girls shared a bedroom. She opened the satchel and spread out the contents. On the long branches of a blue spruce, she hung bamboo wind chimes, a wire spinner and copper pipes that sounded like church bells. She placed a rainbow whirligig at the base of the tree and surrounded the trunk with marbles, shiny pebbles, and ceramic frogs. Then she knocked on the window which was a tad taller than Veronica’s head, hoping the girls were playing inside.

 Two little faces came to the window. Veronica flashed a light from her phone onto the tree. She shook the branches and the ornaments danced.

 “Wow!” said Cecelia.

 “Is it Christmas?” asked Molly.

 Veronica stood close to the tree and shone the light on herself. She waved to the girls and blew them kisses.

 “Granny?” asked Cecilia, opening the window.

 “What are you doing outside? Are you playing Santa?” asked Molly.

 “I’m the tree fairy,” she said. She danced around the evergreen, strobing the light over the colors, casting rainbows on the ground.

 The girls lifted the screen and began to climb out.

 “No. No. It’s getting late. You can come out tomorrow to see them. Right now, they’re preparing for a concert.”

 “A concert?”

 “Yes,” said Veronica. “The wind is picking up. When that happens, it becomes Tree-Singing Day.” She shook a branch on the spruce and the chimes clanked and tinkled. “The trees love the breezes and will sing beautiful songs just for you.”

 “Is today the only Tree-Singing Day?” asked Molly, lowering the screen.

 “Oh, no. Whenever the wind blows, you’ll hear music.”

 Veronica watched their faces blossom into smiles. She took a silver wand from her backpack and pointed it at the girls. “I bestow on you the sacred honor of Keepers of the Singing Tree.” Veronica tickled the chimes and delighted the girls with clangs and clatters. “I’m counting on you to be my fairy helpers. If the chimes fall to the ground, will you be their guardians and pick them up? The tree needs to stay decorated for the chimes to perform.”

 “We can do that Granny.”

 “That’s my girls.” Veronica got close to the window and blew the girls more kisses. “I have to leave now.”

 “Come in the house. I want to show you my stamp collection,” said Cecelia.

 “I’m off to see Grandpa.”

 “Will you make him a singing tree too?” asked Molly.

 “Maybe the tree fairy will make Grandpa one tomorrow. Ok?”

 “Ok,” the girls said at the same time.

 “I love you very much,” said Veronica.

 “We love you too,” said the twins. They leaned into the screen and kissed it. Veronica felt the sweet vibration.

Chapter Twenty-One

When Veronica entered Johnny’s hospital room, he was sitting up in bed supported by a clump of pillows while Taffeta fed him jello.

 “That’s a good boy,” Taffeta said.

 Johnny kept opening and closing his mouth.

 “I see you did all right,” said Veronica, who was grateful for having had the day to herself.

 “I could be the Jolly Green Giant for all he knows,” said Taffeta. “He’s a long cry from the Johnny we knew.”

 Veronica wondered if they ever knew the same man. Johnny had many faces and he saved his worst one for her. He was probably the young Johnny with Taffeta, a man with a future, a man with charm, even if he was self-centered. When he included Veronica in his orb, she felt present. So often, she had been chasing an orbit that she never had a chance of circling. Veronica had a break-through insight: it didn’t matter what Johnny was like with Taffeta. The man she knew was the man she knew, the side he showed her. That was her only truth.

 “Was he kind to you?” Veronica asked.

 “Today? He didn’t bite my hand when I fed him, if that’s what you mean.”

 “I mean in your romance together.”

 “Honey, your man took nothing away from you by being with me. We played a game when we were together. I was the mother figure. He was the bad little boy who deserved to be punished. That’s the Johnny I knew.”

 Veronica was gob-smacked. Of all the things Taffeta could have said, to think that Johnny needed her to fulfill a mommy role was preposterous, although Johnny’s mother did loom large for Johnny. He looked at that photo on the mantel so often, it was tear-stained. She never did have the courage to move it.

 “He’s not that Johnny anymore,” said Taffeta, putting on her shoes and gathering her belongings. “The nurse said they’re transferring him tomorrow to Brightlight Senior Living Center in North Plainview.”

 “Brightlight? I didn’t know there was a place with that name around here,” although in the back of her mind she recalled Robert saying something about a waitlist at a senior facility.

 “The nurse said they’re new to the area. Most of them are in central Massachusetts.”

 Veronica’s wheels turned. *What if I transfer Johnny to the Brightlight near Mr. Ed. I could move out there and all my problems would be solved. End of story! I’ll sell my house like Kate wants me to do and use the profits to live in Western Mass. I’d visit with Johnny and see Mr. Ed.* Veronica almost did a little dance. *I could hear music every day and I’d be happy, even if my sight was going bonkers. What would it matter? I’d be somewhere I wanted to be.*

 “Veronica, may I ask you a question?” asked Taffeta, shifting Veronica’s attention away from the daydream.

 “By all means.”

 “Why’d you stay with Johnny all these years? You knew he wasn’t faithful and yet you stood by him. If I had been his wife, I’d have left him long ago.”

 Veronica was gobsmacked again. The hussy wanted an honest answer. *Why should I bother to give her one? I should just say I adored the man and believed in him and that would be that. Taffeta could think I was dependent and daft. What difference would it make?*

 Veronica looked at Johnny, his slack face, his vacant eyes. *She wants honest. Well, ok, then.* Veronica took a deep breath. “We all survive differently,” she said, staring at Taffeta’s teased hair, her shimmering eyes, and her ample cleavage. But she spied pale beneath the shine and a crack in Taffeta’s steel armor. “Some of us ignore the pain until a trauma occurs and we have to face it head on. That’s what happened to me. I let Johnny’s life rule mine and never took the initiative to stand on my own, until recently.”

 “It’s about time, don’t you think?” said Taffeta.

 *What a nerve she has telling me to move on, but she has a point*. “What about you? Are you satisfied being the second woman in every man’s life?”

 “I don’t look at it that way. I have my independence. I choose when I want to be with a man, and he’s dying to be with me.”

 Veronica looked at Johnny. “That’s the truth.”

 “Now that I’m older, I might find one steady lover to keep me happy. That would be a nice change of pace.”

 “I’m thinking I’ll throw Johnny out the window and that’ll be the end of it.”

 Taffeta laughed. “You’re a hoot, Veronica. Open the window. Let’s throw him out together.”

 Veronica laughed too. “The old shit, huh?” Veronica had thought about using a baggie to repeat this phrase and watch the air bloat around the words. Instead, to her surprise, she hugged Taffeta.

 “Whoa. What was that for?” asked Taffeta.

 “Vengeance is a strong reason to survive, but self-acceptance is even stronger. You’ve given me a chance to understand that Johnny didn’t hold me back all these years. It’s all on me.”

 As Taffeta pulled away, her scarf caught on Veronica’s earring.

 “Those look familiar,” she said, touching the topaz and raising an eyebrow.

 Veronica's face flushed, but Taffeta’s turned bright red.

 “That bastard,” she said and pointed to Johnny in his hospital bed. “He accused me of losing them when all along HE had them. Oh, we had a blow out fight about it and still he didn’t admit that he took them.”

 Veronica felt a tinge of guilt remembering how Johnny moped around the house for weeks after she had stolen the earrings and necklace. She remembered the “Men, Men, Men, Men” journal of Taffeta’s and Johnny’s preferences and how she had thwarted him in bed. *Oh, Johnny, look at you now.*

Taffeta was still talking. “It took weeks of him groveling before I let him near me again. And I upped his price!”

 Veronica unclasped the earrings. “Here, you take them. They’ll remind you of him every time you wear them. Besides, now that I know they were meant for you first, I don’t want them.”

 Taffeta took the earrings. “I bet I can pawn them for cash. I’d say this has been a win-win day.”

 “I want to be alone with Johnny now. He and I need to have a long talk,” said Veronica.

 “Good luck with that,” Taffeta snickered. “Talking was never his strength.”

 “What was?”

 Taffeta’s face turned to stone. “The truth? He had no strengths. He was a weak man who thought he was always right.”

 Without ceremony, Taffeta turned on her high heels and left without a second glance at Johnny. Veronica felt relieved in so many ways. She pulled a chair beside Johnny’s bed and watched his shallow breathing, his open mouth, his limp mustache, and his bony collar bone. And she looked herself over. Still in decent condition. Still strong. Sure, her eyes were failing, but she could learn to live with this new reality. Work around it. See around it. It was not a death sentence, only a change of living conditions. *I am enough. I have enough. I do enough.*

Chapter Twenty-Two

Veronica slept in the recliner in Johnny’s hospital room. She repeated her mantra and a blanket of peace enveloped her. In the morning, Johnny kicked off his covers and waggled his head back and forth.

 Veronica jumped up, alarmed. “Can I get you something?”

 “I had a dream,” he said, his voice raspy like a thin reed. “Taffeta and Veronica were hugging. And they both were laughing at me.”

 How did it happen that a lucid thought could filter through all that plaque in his brain? Veronica stifled a laugh. “It’s true, Johnny. Your wife and your lover hugged right here in this room, right in front of you. Imagine that.” Veronica took a pillow from her recliner, preparing to put it on his side like the nurse had shown her. “You have no power over either one of us anymore.”

 Johnny’s eyes opened wide as she rolled him onto his side. He drew in a breath that shuddered through his ribs and made him cry out. At that precise moment, Robert came through the door.

 “What are you doing, Mother? Trying to smother the man?”

 She yanked at one of the pillows, intending to buttress him in a more comfortable position. “And hello and good day to you too, Robert. Don’t just stand there. Help me. He’ll have bed sores if he’s not moved frequently.”

 “Aren’t the nurses supposed to do that?” asked Robert, who according to Kate had never changed his daughters’ diapers, not even once.

 Veronica stopped what she was doing and returned to the recliner. “You’re right, you know. I am not responsible for his bed sores or his absent brain or his infidelities.”

 “What are you talking about?” asked Robert, ever the skeptic.

 “I have a question for you. How often do you hug Kate?”

 Robert’s lips turned down. “Every day. And I kiss her too.”

 “And how often have you seen your father show me any affection?”

 Robert scratched his head like a cartoon character.

 “Don’t you think I’ve deserved his love? I cooked nutritious meals. I kept a clean house. I didn’t spend his money on frivolity.”

 “Mother, you’re exaggerating. And I think what you’re doing is detaching yourself from Dad when you should be paying more attention,” he said, like a bedside psychiatrist.

 “And what about your responsibility?” she asked.

 “I’m here now, aren’t I?” said Robert.

 “Hah! That’s the attitude.” Veronica picked up the marking pen on the room’s white board tray. “We’re going to create a schedule. You and I are going to share the time your father has left. Kate too. How do you like them bananas?”

 In characteristic Johnny form, Robert shook his head and folded his arms across his chest. Veronica had seen Johnny use that move hundreds of times. When Robert wanted the car for a few hours, when he needed an extra ten dollars for a night out, when he asked his father’s help to solve a problem. A silence settled over the room except for Johnny’s labored breathing.

 “You know, Mother, you’re the only one who has the time to care for him. Kate and I work and we have to care for our daughters.”
 “And I have nothing else to do,” she said, her voice flat and lifeless.

 “Exactly,” said Robert.

 A nurse entered the room to check Johnny’s vitals. “He’s doing great today. His heart’s strong.”

 *Oh joy. He’d outlive us all.* “Since you’re here now, Robert, I’m leaving for a few hours.”

 Robert tapped his watch. “Well, okay. But be back by one o’clock. I told the girls we’d go to the movies.”

 *Why doesn’t he ask me to join them at the movies. Oh, right, I’m watching Johnny all afternoon.*

 Like Taffeta, Veronica left the hospital room without looking back. Instead of driving home, she scoured the town looking for Spiderman. If she found him first, she’d have the upper hand, rather than if he showed up at her house again uninvited. From the quarries to the cemetery to the downtown to the outskirts of Plainview, she drove up and down side streets and Route 1. She stopped for lunch at Papa Gino’s on East Bacon Street. A slice of pizza always reminded her of escape. When she was young, she rode her bike to the Pizza House and sat behind the store eating one slice of pizza without her father or mother knowing where she was, probably not caring, except that there wasn’t a gopher in the house to do their bidding.

 She looked around at the red and white checked tablecloths, the sterile counter, the plastic seats and wondered where the mom and pop store was where she used to hide as a child. Spiderman was not there either, but she did spy two beautiful little girls in a corner booth. Her heart spilled over with love for her granddaughters. The minute they saw her, they raced toward her.

 “Granny!” Cecilia ran to her and hugged her around the waist. “We didn’t tell Mommy or Daddy. It’s our secret,” she whispered.

 “What secret?” asked Kate who came up behind the child with a tray filled with food.

 “About the singing-tree fairy,” said Molly.

 Kate’s mouth twisted. “What foolishness have you been spreading now, Veronica?”

Kate’s phone rang and Veronica had a few minutes to tickle the girls and kiss their faces.

 “That was Robert. He said they were moving Johnny to the rehab center in a few hours. I told him I’d let you know. You should be there for the transfer.”

 “You’re right, Kate. You’re always right,” Veronica snapped.

 Kate set two slices of pizza on the table for the girls as she drank a black coffee from Starbucks.

 “You can share with me,” said Molly.

 Cecilia piped in, “And me too, Grandma. It’s plain cheese and tomato. Just like you like it.”

 Veronica cut a small slice off each pizza and wrapped them in a napkin. “You girls are so generous. I love you both to the moon and back. You know that!”

 The girls settled in to eat their lunch.

 “Kate, can I have a word? How about joining me at the counter while I get some lunch to go.”

 Kate pushed herself away from the table. “Be right back, girls. Be good.”

 Veronica ordered, gathered her courage, then looked Kate in the eye. “You know, one day you’re going to realize that you don’t know everything. You saw Johnny lying there? What good did knowing everything do for him? Take a lesson, Kate, and cut people some slack, especially me. You think I’m dutiful and submissive and you can all boss me around. How do you want your girls to grow up? I’m sure you’re teaching them to stand up for themselves. I never had that luxury. I put my head down and did what I was told. Could you do that? I doubt it.”

 Kate tilted her head. Her lips chunked out as if she were about to say something, but Veronica cut her off.

 “You’ve always been a force to reckon with, and I’m going to take a lesson from you. I’m not going to put my head down anymore and do what I’m told. Johnny holds no sway over me anymore. I’m the one who will make our decisions for the two of us. You and Robert are welcome to offer your opinions, but ultimately, I decide.” Veronica took her order, waved good-bye to the girls and pecked a brief kiss on Kate’s cheek. “I am enough. I have enough. I do enough. See you later.” She turned and left the restaurant.

 Veronica drove to the hospital, her knuckles white on the steering wheel. She’d never had the courage to raise her voice to her husband or son, let alone her daughter-in-law. That’s what her baggies were for. *What was I thinking? Kate would probably ban me from the grandkids.* *But they’ll have the singing tree to remind them of me.*

 Veronica perched on the window ledge in Johnny’s room, looking out the window, wishing she were in the turret, wishing she were talking to Mr. Ed, wishing she were on Clyde, wishing she were anywhere else but there.

 An ambulance moved Johnny that evening to Brightlight Senior Living Center on the Plainview-North Attleboro border with Veronica trailing behind. The ambulance didn’t take Route One, an easy road for Veronica to maneuver at night. Instead, it curved through side roads and zigzagged a labyrinth of streets. Veronica tried to follow but she was so tired that her eyes burned and she couldn’t focus. She beeped and beeped, but the ambulance kept going. She pulled to the side of the road outside of downtown and called Robert.

 The call went to voice mail. She left a message saying she couldn’t keep up with the ambulance and would he go to the nursing home to make sure his father was comfortable.

 She parked the car on a side street thinking she should just rest there until her eyes were under control, but what if that wasn’t until the morning? The Heart of Oaks Inn was only five blocks south, about a ten minute walk. She could check in for the night and enjoy a hearty breakfast. Such luxury. She grabbed her overnight bag which had never made it out of the trunk and locked the car.

 The streetlights were dim but she reached Main Street and felt confident in her decision. Johnny would be fine. She’d call Brightlight when she got to the Inn and explain why she wasn’t with him. Johnny wouldn’t realize it, but the nurses might wonder why he was alone, unless of course Robert got her message.

 Walking in the evening along Main Street was strange. Store fronts were dark. Traffic was nonexistent. She noticed a fabulous rainbow flag unfurled in the doorway of the ice cream shop. It was a reach away. No one would see her take it. But she had nowhere to conceal it. Besides, she was learning that she didn’t need that boost anymore. Her interior worth was surfacing, she was sure of it. No longer did reminders of her father’s gnawing insults cause her to crawl inside herself. No longer did Johnny’s disregard for her make her feel invisible. It was he who needed her now. And she could decide how much attention she would offer him.

 She was so deep in thought, that she didn’t notice the frost heave in the sidewalk until it was too late. She landed spread eagle on the pavement. Her first reaction was to laugh, kind of an I-don’t-believe-this chuckle. Then she examined her body, stretching out her legs, rolling her shoulders, opening and closing her hands. Nothing was broken or bleeding, but she was so out of breath, and so fatigued. She sat up, but decided not to stand right away. Instead, she inched her way to the protection of the storefront alcove. Hugging her luggage to her chest and leaning against the doorframe, she gave in to her exhaustion. Like a homeless bag lady, she fell asleep.

 She awoke to the ringing of her phone but by the time she found it, the call went to voice mail. She didn’t recognize the number. Nobody except Robert or Kate ever called her cell phone. It must have been one of those robocalls, so she didn’t redial. She tried to stand, but her legs wobbled.

 “Let me help you,” said a gravelly voice.

 *I know that voice.* “I’m in a nightmare, right?” asked Veronica.

 “So am I,” said Spiderman, an unlit cigarette dangling from his lips. “What in the world are you doing here?”

 “If I said I was sleeping off a drunk, would you believe me?”

 “Nope. I wouldn’t believe you. Are you avoiding going home? Are you afraid of me?”

 There was truth to what Spiderman said, but there was more to it. The house held no magic for her. The turret had become a padded cell. The walls were bare. The shelves were empty. Even the light from the dome dimmed. Downstairs, the kitchen had been compromised by Spiderman’s unexpected trespassing, and everything that Johnny owned seemed layered in secrets.

 “Listen, Old Lady, I’m not going to hurt you. Just give me back my money and you’ll never see me again.”

 “What remains of your money is in Meadowland.”

 “Like buried in the cemetery?”

 “No, like in a town in western Massachusetts.”

 “That has the same name as the local cemetery?” he asked.

 “A lot of places have names in common.”

 The man tilted his head, his stringy hair crooked on his neck. “There’s a Main Street in practically every town in America. And a Washington Street. And there’s a Plainview in Connecticut.”

 Veronica wondered whether the man had lost his marbles, but went along with the list. It settled her nerves. “Did you know there were thirty states that had a city or town named Greenville?” She had just learned that from a trivia poster she had read as she cycled through the city.

 “And Park Street is the most common name in Massachusetts,” said Spiderman. “I grew up on a Park Street, so I put that in my memory bank.”

 Throughout their banter, Spiderman had helped Veronica to her feet. “What time is it anyway?” she asked.

 Spiderman checked his phone. “Two in the morning.”

 Too late for the Inn to be open. If she rang the bell or knocked on the door, she’d alarm everyone in the house and make a spectacle of herself. “I guess I’m spending the night in my car,” she mumbled. “Where do you sleep?”

 “When it’s not too cold, I have a shelter off Park Street. How’s that for a coincidence. Why don’t you just drive home? I won’t be there to scare you away.”

 “I can’t see well in the dark, so I have to wait until morning.” She hobbled in the direction of her car. Spiderman stayed by her side, carrying her overnight bag, and helping her walk.

 When they found the car, Veronica laughed like a woman who had lost her mind. *Now what?* She knew if she slept in the car, her back would never recover. Sure her home had lost some magic, but her bed was calling. She stared at the skinny vagrant whose body was a shadow and whose eyes sank into deep hollows. She unlocked the car and handed Spiderman the keys.

 Spiderman jumped back. “You’re going to trust me to drive you home?”

 Veronica grimaced, her lips tight, but her jaw firm. “I’m exhausted and maybe I’m not thinking straight, but you seem to be my only option. You do have a license, right?”

 “I have one, but it’s expired. No reason to renew it since I have no wheels. It’s the middle of the night. Aren’t you worried that the local cops will stop me? They know I don’t have a car. They’ll think I’m kidnapping you, ah, old-lady-napping you.”

 She eyed him sideways. He was puny and scraggly. All he wanted was his money, not her life. “I’ll take my chances. Let’s go.”

 Spiderman drove with an even foot and Veronica relaxed into the seat. Whenever Johnny drove, she was tense. He liked to speed up behind the car in front of him and tailgate it, or do the opposite, drive so slowly that cars would get too close and then he’d slam on the brakes making the car behind him swerve or crash into him. There were many insurance claims where Johnny collected a pretty sum of money.

 “How did you get involved in selling drugs?” she asked.

 “You know, drugs, sex, and rock and roll. My band was a hot mess. None of us got along well, always vying for the spotlight. And you see what I look like, skinny tattooed spider face. No girl wanted my ass in her bed. So drugs looked like my ticket.”

 “And were you telling the truth that the money I took from you was from your first deal?”

 Spiderman turned to face her.

 “Eyes on the road,” she said.

 “Right. Ok. I lied. It was my third deal, but my first one with Hank and Skank. The first two deals were pills and weed, not cocaine and heroin. Big time shit. I was in over my head and knew it, but I couldn’t find a way out.”

 “So I actually helped you.”

 “Lady, you’re delusional. You almost got me killed.”

 “But I saved you from a life of crime.”

 “And traded it for a life of poverty and a broken body.”

 Veronica almost felt bad for the man. “I’m sorry,” she said.

 “Sorry won’t help me, but my money will. Tomorrow, let’s say we drive to Meadowland and get my cash.”

 “I have to visit my husband Johnny first in the rehab where he was transferred.”

 “Well, then, that’s what we’ll do.”

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Veronica settled Spiderman in the room off the kitchen where Johnny had an office. She gave him sheets, a blanket and a pillow for the day bed.

 She decided she would not worry about Spiderman being in the house. He’d either kill her and never get his money or sink into a soft bed without the night chilling his bones. The previous owner of the house had used the room as maid’s quarters, so it had its own bathroom. Johnny told Veronica on many occasions that he slept there because he didn’t want to wake her when he came home so late. *Yeah, sure!* Veronica had awoken hour after hour waiting for Johnny’s car to crawl up the driveway. He’d slept in the office in their house all right, for exactly ten minutes before Veronica officially awoke. *The double-dealing two-timing liar.*

 She could hear Spiderman in the shower singing. She wondered when the last time was that he was clean and if it was her fault for starting him down that dirty path. But Jeez, he was a creep long before she escaped from the downpour and ducked into his garage. He said so himself. She just speeded up the process.

 Veronica checked her cell phone and saw that Robert had replied with a brief message wishing his father luck on the move to Brightlight. No mention of going to check on him. No see you tomorrow. He signed off with some sort of smiley face that winked. As if she knew what that meant. She found the number for Brightlight on some papers in her purse. The all-night nurse checked Johnny’s status; he was comfortable and she shouldn’t worry. There was nothing more she could do, so she went to sleep.

 When Veronica woke in the morning, her bones ached and her head felt like a hammer pounded it. She called Robert. “I’m not feeling well. There’s no way I can go to see your father.”

 “It’s Tuesday, Mother, a work day.”

 “What about Kate? Can she go?”

 “Mother, Kate has responsibilities. I’m sorry you’re not feeling well, but visiting with father will relax you. Bring some magazines or watch *Judge Judy* or *Days of our Lives.* The repeats of all your favorites are on the Neapolitan Channel. I have faith in you to get through the day.”

 She called Bertram. “Johnny’s at the Brightlight Senior Rehab Center on the Plainview-Attleboro line. I’m not feeling well and neither my son nor his wife can check in on him. I’m worried that he’ll be confused in a strange new place. He needs to see a familiar face.”

 Bertram coughed a few times and cleared his throat. “Since the court order has been dropped, I’m all right with going. It’ll be good for Johnny, and I know it’ll be good for you. As far as that son of yours goes, if I never see him again, I’d be as happy as a mosquito in a nudist colony. How did you two ever raise such a selfish SOB?”

 *Is that true? Is Robert a son of a bitch?* Veronica believed that Johnny deserved the lion’s share of the blame. Bertram didn’t know Johnny before his mind turned to applesauce, how strict and domineering he had been throughout Robert’s youth. But she contributed too. Her wussiness and compliance allowed Robert to steamroll her time and time again. *Not anymore*. *Not anymore!*

 Bertram coughed again. “I have to charge you extra though, Veronica. Something has to make this worth my while.”

 “You’ve got it, Bertram. Thank you.”

 With Johnny taken care of, Veronica broke the news to Spiderman. “I’m sorry, but we’re not going to Meadowland today. I promise we’ll go tomorrow. I’m really sick.”

 “You look sick,” he said.

 “Thank you.”

 “That’s what happens when you sleep on the streets. I’ll make you some soup. Get back into bed.”

 Spiderman brought her vegetable soup, buttered toast and tea with honey. “That’s the best I could do. Not much pickings in the fridge. When’s the last time you shopped?”

 “I’ve been a bit busy,” she said.

 “I know how to make something from nothing. It’s a trick I’ve learned over the last six years.”

 “Six years? Those men pummeled you ten years ago, right?”

 “That’s true. But I didn’t sink completely until my mother and father sold the house. That’s when I went it alone.”

 “So before that?”

 “Well, I never got arrested, for one, so my folks let me stay in the house after I was shrunk to nothing. Hank and Skank got twenty years for trafficking and for assault and battery. Me, I got off with broken hands, a bum leg, and no appreciable skills to keep me fed.”

 “So your parents helped you?”

 “Until they split. Mom went to Florida. Dad to Maine. I stayed in the house for two more years and then they needed the money, so they sold it out from under me. Gave me twenty-thousand dollars and called it even.”

 “Did they pay the hospital bills?”

 “Nope. I was over twenty-one, but I had no income. So I guess your husband and all those other rich Massachusetts residents paid for me.”

 “Johnny was never rich.”

 “Yeah? Well it looks like you lived rich. Nice house. Nice car. Nice clothes. I bet your kid went to college. Right?”

 “Is that the measure of being rich?”

 “It sure as hell is from where I’m standing.”

 Veronica sipped her tea and sized up this scrawny tattooed man who sat cross-legged on the floor in front of her. Someone at some point had taught him manners. If only he didn’t look like such a thug. “Why did you get all those tattoos? And why spiders?”

 “My buddies named the band Arachnid. Spider tattoos were a natural.”

 “But on your face?”

 “Rock stars need to stand out.”

 “And is your real name Basil Termite?”

 “It’s really Basil Termitski. Termite sounded more spidery.”

 “And were you a good drummer?”

 “The best, although my parents thought I played like Bozo. They never supported my dream.”

 “Is that why you turned to drugs?”

 “Drugs were what you did when you were in a rock band. That’s basic. Even an old lady like you should understand that.”

 Veronica nodded. “I am an old broad, you’re right, but I’ll never understand why drugs take control of people.”

 “It’s simple. They overpower the senses and make the mundane seem miraculous.”

 *Really? I wonder if stealing treasures held the same control over me, overtaking my senses, making my days joyous.* “How did you stop?” she asked.

 “Too expensive. Cheap booze is my friend now. And even that’s getting old.”

 Veronica’s phone buzzed. It was Mr. Ed.

 “I haven’t heard from you, so I was getting worried. Are you all right?” he asked.

 Veronica sneezed into the phone. “Got a bit of the doldrums, that’s all. Do you have a cheer up song for me?”

 She could hear Mr. Ed put the receiver down and take up his violin. “I sure do!” He began playing *High Hopes.* Veronica put her cell on speaker phone. Spiderman knew the words and sang along with the music:

“Next time you're found

With your chin on the ground

There’s a lot to be learned

So look around

Just what makes that little old ant

Think he'll move that rubber tree plant

Anyone knows an ant, can't

Move a rubber tree plant

But he's got high hopes

He's got high hopes

He's got high apple pie

In the sky hopes

So any time you're gettin' low

'Stead of lettin' go, just remember that ant

Oops, there goes another rubber tree plant.”

 Just listening to the violin and Spiderman singing were enough to make her feel better.

 “Who’s that in the background?” asked Mr. Ed. “Your son?”

 How was she to answer? A tattooed man whose money was in Mr. Ed’s closet? A homeless vagrant who begged on the street and who slept in her house last night and brought her soup and talked to her like she was a friend. “Basil Termitsky, an old acquaintance,” she finally said.

 “Give him a howdy from me,” said Mr. Ed, “and tell him to be nice to you. Kindness is the language which the deaf can hear and the blind can see.”

 Veronica always felt stronger after speaking with Mr. Ed, but she needed to get some rest if she were going to be well enough to see Johnny and then drive to Meadowland the next day. She thanked Mr. Ed for his cheer-her-up tune and lay back in bed. “Basil, thank you for feeding me. No one has done that in I can’t remember how long.”

 “Veronica, I believe in silver linings? Do you?”

 *Silver linings, what does that mean? That bad things can reveal something good? That a man like Basil Termitski, who’s gone through physical hell, has found a bright side to his pain?* Veronica searched her memory for the ugly duckling who transformed into a beautiful swan.

 “I believe in pennies,” she said. “Grandpa Bates told me that angels toss them down to cheer us up and make a smile out of our frown. ‘Don’t pass by that penny when you are feeling blue. It may be a penny from heaven that your guardian angel tossed to you.’” As Veronica said this, she chided herself for her simplicity. It was time for her to delve deeper, to realize that Johnny’s descent into mindlessness was creating a world of awareness for her, a world where silver linings erased the ugliness and beauty might emerge.

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 Veronica awoke the next morning to the sound of the vacuum cleaner. *What on earth?* *No one but me has ever used the vacuum cleaner, ever.* She followed the sound to see Spiderman pushing the vacuum around the room where he had slept. Veronica never went into Johnny’s office. It was the one place she was not allowed to clean. “I know where everything is,” Johnny scolded. “If you move things around, I won’t find anything. So stay out.”

 Not a problem, she decided. It was one less place she’d have to worry about, but her curiosity got to her occasionally. Would she find evidence of an affair? Remnants of Taffeta? A receipt from a hotel? or from a florist shop? She’d step over the threshold if he wasn’t home, then retreat, imagining Johnny’s swift backhand. She repeated Mr. Ed’s mantra: “I am enough. I have enough. I do enough.” And she breathed more freely.

 But there was Basil tidying up the room like he was making it his. She wondered if he had used Johnny’s computer. If he had seen Johnny’s photos of his mother? If he had found something stashed that Johnny had hidden from her?

 “I see you’re straightening up the room,” she managed to shout.

 Basil turned off the vacuum. “Your penny story got me thinking about my grandma. She said that messy rooms reflect a messy mind. The least I can do is honor her memory and clean up after myself.”

 Johnny had always left a trail of dirty clothes whenever he entered the house; she trotted behind him picking them up. Robert too. What a fool she was. Looking around Johnny’s office made Veronica realize that Johnny had kept a neat room without her help.

 She made her way toward Johnny’s desk like it was natural for her to be in this room. She took a breath and opened the top drawer. Nothing unusual. Paper clips. Rubber bands. Tape. Pens. Pencils. Paper. She opened the right file drawer. Hanging folders labeled mortgage, auto, bank, and one that said Veronica. *Surely I can look at that.* She took it like it belonged to her and went upstairs to the turret.

 She lay inside the blankets and comforters with three pillows under her head that she hadn’t as yet returned to their rightful places. She wanted to whip the folder open but she held its secrets a few moments longer. Would it contain a love letter? a photo? documents from a lawyer about an imminent divorce? Stop, she thought, and shook the contents onto her belly: one sealed envelope with her name on it. She ripped an edge to reveal a letter and a tiny brass key. She leaned in so close to the paper that the fractured letters united into readable words.

 Veronica,

 If you’ve found this, I’m dead. Otherwise, you wouldn’t be in my study. You’re not the type to snoop; it’s just not in your nature.

 After my dear mother died, you filled the void. In you, I found a woman who understood how much I loved her and how deeply I experienced her loss. You accepted my flaws and adhered to my rule of never asking questions. I have always appreciated that.

Use the key to open a security deposit box at Bay State Savings Bank on Franklin Street in Worcester. Perhaps it will supply some answers.

Johnny

Veronica never cried. She saved all those angry tears for her baggies, but alone in her stripped bare turret room, she burst like a pipe. *How dare Johnny provide me with answers only after his death? And he married me because I was a substitute for his mother? And he thought I wasn’t a snoop! Hah! That was how well he knows me!* Rage boiled up from her toes. She needed another Smash Room, immediately.

 *Damn, where were those baggies? Nope. No. And no. No baggies. I am enough. I have enough. I do enough.* She wrapped herself in the blankets and comforters and stared at the domed glass.

 *Give me strength. Now. Now. I need it now. What do I do next?* She resisted the temptation to roll around the room like a crazy woman, pounding the floor with her feet. She needed to think. *Ok, Veronica. Get ahold of yourself. Don’t let all those days you were away go to waste. What would Mr. Ed advise? You don’t have to figure this all out right now, he’d say. Stay calm. You can do this. Make a list. Think it out.*

 She closed her eyes. *All the better to see you with, said the wolf who was about to eat Grandma! Focus, Veronica. Focus. Make that list.*

 One: Get directions to Franklin Street in Worcester.

 Two: Confront Johnny and find out if the man had any brain cells left to tell you about the safety deposit box.

 Three: Fill a bushel full of breakables to bring to the Smash Room.

 Four: Convince Basil to go to the registry to renew his license so he can drive you to Worcester and Meadowland.

 Five: Put the plan into action.

 *I could do this.* She opened her eyes and stared at the glass dome. The black stain in her eyes was back. Larger than before. *Is that my future? Seeing only the periphery and never the center. Is that a summation of my life?* *I cannot allow that.* She felt as if she were growing, not diminishing, like her life was on the edge of something visible and tangible. *Mr. Ed has the right attitude. I am in charge of my own destiny: I am enough. I am. Macular degeneration, be damned.*

 She would see to that.

Chapter Twenty-Three

When Veronica approached Basil with her plan, he was in Johnny’s study lying on the day bed picking his teeth with the sharp end of a knife. “Why don’t you use a toothbrush or dental floss?”

 “If I had either do you think I’d be using a knife?”

 “Don’t you have a bag full of belongings somewhere?”

 “What you see is what you get. I wear layers and fill my pockets. That’s why I look so chunky.”

 Veronica could see beneath his t-shirt and felt responsible for the man’s condition. It was she, after all, who stole his money and caused those thugs to beat him up. She accepted some responsibility for his downfall.

 Veronica whacked her hand against her forehead. *What am I thinking?* She had spent a week divesting herself of years of accumulation. And here she was in this house with a closet full of Johnny’s shoes, hats, warm woolen coats, trousers and shirts. Johnny was never going back to work or to dinners with Taffeta or on a weekend rendezvous with God knew who. His clothes should be put to good use.

 “Come with me,” she said and led Basil to Johnny’s closet. “You’re thinner and taller, but some things might fit. Help yourself. You’ll find a new toothbrush under the sink in the bathroom. Toothpaste too. It’s time you rejoined the living.”

 I *should talk.* It seemed as if she slept-walked through the last thirty plus years, ever since her two miscarriages, one stillbirth, and then the miraculous appearance of Robert when she was forty-two. Before that, at least Johnny paid physical attention to her, but after Robert’s birth, Johnny claimed he was tired or had a headache or pulled a muscle.

 “I miss your touch,” she told him, but Johnny only feigned interest. Veronica used up dozens of baggies when frustration set in, and he gave in to her advances every few months, but she was a healthy woman with an active libido, which she had repressed for years. Now she thought about Johnny and Taffeta and who knew who else. *If I was a stand in for Johnny’s mother, then yuck. I shouldn’t have been physically attractive to him in the first place!*

 When Veronica had kissed Mr. Ed, something vital stirred in her. No one could tell her she was a dried up old prune. What would happen once Johnny passed? And who was to tell her that Johnny had to die before she experimented with sex? She was seventy-two. Her body was firm and her mind intact. So what if she couldn’t see. She could touch and hot damn, she could taste. She let her mind wander until Basil cleared his throat.

 “So I can take anything from the closet? Anything?”

 “Johnny will need the basics, but you’re welcome to shop.” She checked the time. Ten o’clock. “I’m taking you to the registry this morning in an hour, so look presentable.”

 “The registry, like in motor vehicles?”

 “It’s late October and the weather is changing. It’ll be daylight savings next week. Johnny’s rehab is six miles away which would normally be an easy bike ride except I can’t ride home in the dark. I need a driver, so I’m hiring you.”

 “I need a mailing address to renew my license.”

 “Use mine.”

 “So I can stay here?”

 “As long as you don’t steal from me or kill me during the night.”

 Basil leaned against the wall. “Let me get this straight. You’re hiring me to drive for you. You’re letting me sleep in the house, you’re giving me clothes to wear, and you’ll return the money you took from me. Why?”

 *Guilt. Empathy. And damn it, loneliness.* “I need help,” she finally said. “My eyes are failing me, my husband is debilitated, and my son has a life of his own.”

 The skinny, tattooed-faced man with unbrushed teeth and gnarled fingers stared into her filmy eyes. “Sounds like you know what you want.”

 No one ever said that to Veronica before. She was beginning to like this Basil Spiderman Termite Termitski fellow, no matter how scary he looked. “Put on some new clothes and let’s go.”

 Veronica went to the turret to fold the blankets and comforters while Basil changed. She studied the room, bare and empty. She thought about Mr. Ed’s sister Potato and the colors she used to create a space of vibrant life and energy. Veronica loved yellow and silver, hot pink and crimson. If Robert and Kate didn’t get their way and she kept the house, she’d paint stars on the ceiling and sunflowers on the walls. Instead of stolen dreamcatchers and wind chimes, she’d create them with yarn and bamboo, cymbals and shells. She’d assemble a touch table where she’d tickle her senses and a hearing station where she’d have clickers and knockers and strings and bows. She would make the room into a place where her sight was not essential, and her senses would be engaged. *Anything is possible. I am enough. I do enough. I have enough.*

 Bringing the blankets and comforters downstairs, she stopped short when she saw Basil pacing in circles, waiting for her. He wore familiar black cargo pants, a white buttoned down shirt, a black and yellow paisley tie, and the yellow cashmere sweater Veronica had boosted from a deliveryman who had left it hanging from a doorknob, the same sweater he had worn in the photo in Taffeta’s house. She couldn’t resist snagging it for Johnny’s birthday present. Yellow was his color. It looked pretty good on Basil. He had braided his hair and put on Johnny’s wool fedora at a tilt, shadowing the tattoos on his forehead and around his eyes.

 “You clean up well,” she heard herself say, an expression she’d always wanted Johnny to use for her.

 “At your service,” said Basil. “If we’re going to do this, let’s get moving.”

 Veronica dropped him at the registry and gave him a blank check for the license and a twenty dollar bill. “I’ll meet you at the Dunkin’ Donuts at the corner. I’ll be back in a few hours. You have my cell number if there’s a problem.”

 For the first time in years, Veronica felt maternal, like this fedora-hatted, yellow-cashmered ghostly thin man was her responsibility. She liked the warmth that went along with motherhood. Robert had dismissed her years ago. *Where’s the Robert who once had been sweet and loving? Oh so so long ago. Will he ever return?*

 At the rehabilitation center, Veronica signed in to the Alzheimer’s ward. Johnny was in Room 3, past the common room. She spotted him in the cafeteria waiting for lunch. He had been shaved, his hair combed, even the tips of his mustache turned up. He sat in a wheelchair like a king with nurses and aides flurrying around him preparing the room for lunch.

 Big band music played on a speaker in the background, bouquets of flowers bloomed on the tables, and the smell of hot bread permeated the room. She was reminded of the Guthrie Center at the Trinity Church. Any minute a sandaled man would come in and play sitar. She wondered if Constance Sanders had received treatment. If her house was spotless and the community had rallied to care for her. Was that only last week that she was in Great Barrington? Veronica felt so much older and so much younger all at the same time.

 “May I help you?” asked a buxom woman who wore an apron.

 “I’m here to see John Russell.”

 “Ah, our newest resident. Such a charming man.”

 Veronica’s eyes bulged. “I’m his wife.”

 “I’m Tameeka, the aide for the day shift. Mr. Johnny has such a nice smile. He must have been a caring husband.”

 Veronica didn’t laugh. She didn’t flinch. She didn't set the woman straight either. She just nodded and brought a chair over to Johnny’s table to sit beside him. “Johnny. It’s me. Veronica.”

 Johnny had been folding and refolding his hands. When she spoke, he looked up. “I knew you would come for me. I’ve been waiting.”

 Veronica smiled.

 “Mama, get me out of here.”

 The maternal instinct she had harbored for Basil dissipated. “It’s Veronica. Your wife.”

 Tameeka, the aide, drew near. “He’s got one thing on his mind now. Going home. When that happens, you have to distract him.”

 Veronica took Johnny’s hand and put the security key that she had found in the folder in it. “Johnny, Dear, what does this key open?”

 Johnny’s fingers kneaded the key. “It’s a secret.”

 “Can you tell me about it?”

 “Can I trust you?”

 “Of course. I’m your mother,” she whispered. At this point, she figured being Mary Margaret Russell would get her further than being Veronica Russell.

 “I knew you would come.”

 Veronica opened Johnny’s hand and stroked the key. “Tell me what it opens.”

 “A box, of course.” Johnny leaned in. “Our box. The one that has the papers.”

 “Which papers?”

 Johnny clasped the key in his fist. “Our papers, Mama. The ones you hate. The ones that make you cry.”

 Johnny opened his fist and lifted his hand to put the key in his mouth.

 “It’s a silver key, isn’t it?” said Veronica.

 Johnny’s hand clasped shut. “I like silver.”

 “May I look at the key?” asked Veronica.

 Johnny thrust it at her. “I hate that man. He’s evil. He made you cry.”

 Veronica pocketed the key and wrapped her arms around Johnny. “He’s gone now and won’t hurt us again. OK?”

 “Do you promise?” asked Johnny.

 “I do.”

 Tameeka nodded in their direction. “Good job, Veronica. Look, he’s smiling. I told you he was charming.”

 If all it took was a hug to make that man happy, she would have opened her arms every day of her life. But it was his illness reacting now. She had read that Alzheimer patients could be belligerent. Johnny always was oppositional. If everyone said yes, he’d say no. If everyone went right, he would go left. If Alzheimer patients were angry, it was a natural for Johnny to be easy-going. Maybe living with the man with a horrible disease would be smoother than living with him healthy.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Veronica told the front desk at the rehab center that she’d be away on Friday and wouldn’t return until Saturday or even Sunday. She watched them write down the information. She gave them her cell number, although she was sure they had it in their records.

 “My son Robert will come, I hope,” she told them.

 She called Robert when she left Johnny’s room, but he didn’t pick up. She wondered if his phone had a specific ring-tone that warned him his mother was calling. Certainly he picked up the phone for everyone else. She left a message that she would be away for a few days and would he check on his father. Then she called Kate.

 “I’m in the middle of a real estate deal,” she told Veronica. “I’ll call you later.”

 For Veronica, when Kate said later, it could be an hour, a day, or even a week. Veronica had no control over this woman, or over Robert. And Johnny had no power over anything at this point. She decided to go about her business and not worry that she’d be away without Kate or Robert’s knowledge or approval. Brightlight knew how to find her and she could always call Bertram for back up.

 She met up with Basil at Dunkin’ Donuts.

 “Lookie, Lookie. I’m official,” he said, holding a temporary license. “The real one will come in the mail next week.”

 They returned to the house late in the day. Even if they left that moment, the bank would be closed by the time they arrived. Besides, Veronica was dead tired. If she was going to confront a safety deposit box with documents that made Mary Margaret cry, she’d better get a good night’s sleep. She called Mr. Ed to say she’d be visiting him on Friday afternoon.

 “Stay the night,” he said.

 “There are two of us,” she said.

 “You and your son?”

 Veronica could lie but relationships were based on truth. “No. The *High Hopes* singer.”

 “I have a blow-up mattress. He can sleep on that.”

 Veronica knew that Basil had slept on worse. “That will work. I’ll call when we’re close.”

 Mr. Ed put the phone on speaker and played the tune *When Will I See You Again?* “Are we in love or just friends? Is this my beginning or is this the end? When will I see you again?”

 Veronica responded by singing “Winter, spring, summer or fall, All you've got to do is call, And I'll be there. You’ve got a friend.”

They both laughed but Veronica felt tingly inside, Smash Room hot. *So what if he’s old and blind. So am I, kind of!*

 In the early morning, as Veronica and Basil prepared to leave, Robert’s SUV sped up the driveway. “Mother, I got your message. Where the hell are you going now? Your only responsibility is to be with Father. What the hell is the matter with you that you don’t get that?”

 Veronica looked toward the house to see if Basil was in sight, which he wasn’t. “I have business in Worcester. I’ll be back tomorrow.”

 “Worcester. That’s a half hour from here. You can be back in two hours.”

 “And during those two hours you could sit with your father.”

 “And do what? Twiddle his thumbs?”

 “And that’s what you want me to do?”

 “Mother, the man could fall again. He could choke. Nurses and aides are spread thin. They can’t watch him every minute. But you can. He needs your attention. Why don’t you understand that?”

 From the corner of her eye, Veronica saw Basil emerge from the house and scoot back inside. “Robert, do you know what commitment means?”

 Robert scowled. “What you’re bad at?”

 “What I am good at,” she said. “I have been by your father’s side for thirty-six years. Through infidelities and insults, but that makes no difference to you, does it? As long as your life goes on smoothly. I’ll be away overnight perhaps. Perhaps not. It depends on what happens today.”

 “What happens today is a man in a nursing home is crying for his wife to sit beside him. He feels abandoned and you’re the only one who can calm him down.”

 “Is that right? Have you tried?”

 Robert’s face turned red. “Of course I’ve tried. I was there the other night and saw him wet his pants and then cry so loud he frightened a dozen patients. Do you think I want to sit through that? You’re the one that comes in the room and settles him down, not me.”

 “The nurse advised that I just change the subject and distract him when he’s having trouble coping. Tell ya what. Talk about Taffeta or ask him about Grandma Mary Margaret. That’ll change his mood. I guarantee. In the meantime, split the time over the next two days with your wife. I’m on a mission and will call you when I get home.”

 Veronica waved to Basil who was hiding behind the shed. “Come on out. My big bad son won’t hurt you.”

 Basil emerged, fedora in hand, and got into the driver’s seat.

 “What the hell?” Robert yelled. “That’s Gutter Punk Lunk, the town drunk. What is he doing here?”

 Veronica didn’t react when Basil flashed Robert the bird; he deserved it. She waved good by to Robert with an innocent nod. In the rear view mirror she saw Robert shake his head like a flag flapping in a storm. She didn’t care if she was in deep shit with her son. He’d either get over it or he wouldn’t. *I am enough. I do enough. I have enough.*

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 Basil parked in front of the Bay State Savings Bank in Worcester at 9:05. Veronica gathered her courage, told Basil to stay put until she was finished, like she was robbing the bank and needed him for the get-away.

 Veronica was alone in a private room when she opened the safety deposit box. She had no idea what to expect. Inside were several Worcester Gazettes and lots of random envelopes and papers shuffled together, like they’d been looked at again and again without regard to order. Trying to sort through the box, she recognized familiar names and legal seals, separated a pile of photographs from the rest and examined a silk purse that contained shiny earrings.

 She decided to concentrate on the documents first, but her eyes failed to focus. Instead of spending time at the bank pouring through the material, she dumped the entire contents into a valise she had brought with her, re-locked the box, and signed out.

 Basil was in the parking lot waiting for her. “I expect all went well, Ma’am?” he asked as if he were her official chauffeur.

 “There’s so much to read and I need time,” Veronica said, her voice jittery.

 “I scoped out the area while you were in there. Closed up store fronts, an insurance agency, a consignment shop, and a real find, an old-fashioned diner that looks like it’s been there for decades. We’ll sit at a booth and spread out your papers.”

 Veronica looked at Basil with gratitude, wondering when he had morphed into a human who seemed to care for her, and not just for the promise of money.

 They entered the Railcar Restaurant, an authentic diner replete with a lunch counter, a row of bar stools and a small galley kitchen. Old-timers sat along the counter reading the newspaper, drinking coffee, and wiling away the time like the place was their second home. Along the wall were a dozen booths with chrome tables. Veronica slid into the last one, figuring it would have the most privacy.

 She ordered two freshly baked blueberries muffins and two vanilla frappes for her and Basil. He sipped his soda through a straw and played games on his iPhone as Veronica pulled out one of the documents from the valise.

 Johnny’s birth certificate: John Anderson Russell, April 2, 1934. *No surprise there.*

 Next, she opened an envelope with two amateur photos of a woman with a beehive hairdo and hooped earrings sitting at a Singer sewing machine. She wore a beaded dress and heels but was one hundred percent focused on mending a cotton shirtwaist. Yards of material were stacked beside her and spools of thread in dozens of colors perched on spindles. Veronica turned to the back of the picture: Mary Margaret Russell, 1956. *Johnny’s mother.*

 Veronica knew she was beautiful from the photo on her mantel, but why was she dressed like a movie star to sew? Maybe it was an advertisement for Singer, but the picture wasn’t professional quality. Even so, she was pretty enough to be a model.

 The second photo was Johnny in cap and gown. John Anderson Russell, Worcester Technical High School, Class of 1952. His face was a soft sepia, the glow of youth on his full cheeks.

 Veronica studied the picture. Robert had Johnny’s snub nose, which had drooped and grown fleshy with age. Johnny’s eyes were deep-set. Robert’s too. And he had Johnny’s pointy chin. *Where are my high school photos? Maybe at the historical society!* She looked herself over. *Robert has my long neck and flat ears.* She studied her torso. *And my well-developed calves.*

 Next were two death certificates. Mary Margaret Clemens Russell, May 1978 and Leon Russell, 1957. *Son of a gun, the phantom father.* Veronica remembered asking Johnny about him before they married, before Johnny’s Never-Ask-Me-Questions decree became a hard-stop rule. “He’s dead,” Johnny said. “That’s the only thing you need to know.”

 Johnny’s mother survived her husband by twenty-one years. Both died of cancer, Mary Margaret at 64 and Leon at 43. How terrible that must have been for Johnny to watch both his mother and his father die young.

 The jaw-dropper came next. An official document from Sing-Sing prison in New York about the incarceration of Leon Russell in 1953. *Johnny’s father. A felon. A fifteen-year sentence. What on earth? Johnny’s father was in prison? Why?* If he was imprisoned in 1953, he was 39 but the death certificate said he died at 43. He must have suffered from cancer in prison and passed away there. *How awful.*

 Veronica reached into the bag and brought out a pile of Worcester Gazettes. Above the fold, on Friday, May 14, 1953, the headline read: “Russell embezzles family fortune; sinks local business.” The accompanying photo was of a small man in a black overcoat standing in front of a five-story brick building. The caption identified him as Redmond Clemens, owner of Clemens Textiles, a major employer in the Worcester. Another newspaper covered the same story. *Redmond Clemens must have been Mary Margaret’s father and Johnny’s grandfather. The poor man.*

 *Johnny’s father embezzled over one-hundred thousand dollars from Clemens Textiles. Wow, that would be over a million dollars on today’s market! Leon Russell was a bonafide thief. And worst of all, he stole from his wife’s family.* Veronica jumped to an inner page and learned that Leon had invested the money in a New York Ponzi scheme that promised a fifty percent return in ninety days. When the venture was exposed as fraud, Johnny’s grandfather Clemens pressed charges against his son-in-law, who pleaded not-guilty. It went to trial where the verdict was a fifteen year sentence. *So that was why Leon was such a secret. He was the skeleton in the closet, the elephant in the room.*

 A 1957 newspaper headlined with a story about Clemens Textiles declaring bankruptcy and putting the factory up for auction. *Wow!* *Johnny was still in high school when his mother’s standing changed radically. No wonder they had an unbreakable bond. They were united in shame.*

 Veronica breathed out a puff of air and dropped her arms like she had been carrying a fifty-pound weight and could finally put it down. A light went on in Veronica’s mind: *I could never compete with Just like Princess Diana, there were three of us in my marriage. I never stood a chance.*

“Basil, are you in contact with your parents?”

 “They hate me.”

 “No parents hate their children.” Even as she said this, she felt anger rise for her own son. How he treated her like a puppet. How he disregarded her as a walking-talking-feeling human and saw her only as Weak and Enfeebled Mother. *I have to give Mary Margaret credit. She lived and breathed Johnny, and Johnny lived and breathed Mary Margaret.*

 “I’ve been watching you, Veronica Russell.” Basil’s spiders twitched. He leaned in and cleared his voice like he was ready to make a public announcement. “You’re a victim,” he said, sitting back and crossing his tattooed arms.

 Veronica found the label validating but she didn’t have time to think about it. The man at the next table suddenly jumped up and waved his arms, jiggled his legs and turned a deep shade of purple. He clutched his neck and writhed through the air.

 The word victim raced through Veronica. “I can help you,” she shouted, as she flew to the man and wrapped her arms around his waist. Muscle memory kicked in. With one hand she made a fist and with the other she clutched it close. Just as she had been trained, she made a series of thrusts in quick succession.

 A walnut shot from the man’s mouth across the room and onto the counter at the front of the diner. The entire restaurant stood and applauded. A waitress rushed to the man with a glass of water as she shouted to a busboy to call 9-1-1.

 Basil put his arm around Veronica and helped her to their table. Her heart raced like she’d cycled uphill for miles, finally reached the top and could take a breath. She felt Basil’s spindly fingers push the hair back from her sweaty forehead and she absorbed the sweet smell of coffee on his breath.

 “You’re a hero,” he said.

 “Two minutes ago I was a victim and now I’m a hero?” gasped Veronica.

 “That’s how fast our lives can change, Veronica Russell.”

 *Just like yours changed when Hank and Skank crushed your hands and nearly killed you?*

 The restaurant erupted with noise when the EMTs entered and ministered to the man who had been choking. He pointed to Veronica with a smile as broad as a toddler eating cake for the first time. “She saved me.”

 Veronica accepted the praise and after answering the EMTs questions, she shrank into her booth, the papers and documents strewn haphazardly in front of her. *Will I ever make sense of all this?*

 Basil shooed everyone away. “She needs her privacy,” he said. “She did a good deed. That’s in her nature. But now she’d like you all to move on.”

 Whether it was the spiders on his face that made people back off, or the scorpions on his temples that seemed to wriggle and pulse, the people in the diner gave him and Veronica a wide berth as the EMTs escorted the man out of the restaurant and all resumed in slow motion for Veronica.

 The manager came by with a gift certificate for her for $50. “Your meal today is on the house.” She thanked hime and put the certificate in her purse.

 *Back to business. But what a mess!*

 During the commotion, several newspaper pages had fallen to the floor. An ancient man picked them up and brought them to Veronica’s table. “In all the hullabaloo, you dropped a bunch of stuff,” he said as he scratched the scraggly hairs on his chin. He made a pile of the papers and pointed to a front page photo. “That’s Redmond Klemens in that picture. Good bloke, he was. Damn shame what happened to him.”

 Veronica’s face turned cherry-red. *What were the odds?* Although looking around at the diner’s clientele, she realized most had lived in the area for decades. “So you know the Klemens family? And the Russells?” asked Veronica, eager to hear a first-hand account.

 “Everybody from the old days knows their story and it’s a long sad tale.”

 Basil huffed in his seat. “And I suppose we’re going to hear it.” He tapped the watch he wore, which was Johnny’s. “Meadowland? Remember?”

 Veronica gave Basil a look that said if-you-want-what-you-want-you-had-better-let-me-get-what-I-need.

 “Do tell,” said Basil.

 The old man folded himself into the booth, his knees cracking, his hands shaking. He smelled like mothballs and cat litter, and his voice rattled as he spoke. He picked up the photo of Mary Margaret. “The prettiest gal in town. I was a wee one when she married Leon Russell, a smooth talker, a showman. My da said he was a *right bollix*, you know, a real bastard.” He spit into his hand and wiped it on his pants.

 “Yes, sirree. It was the biggest scandal round the neighborhood. Leon Russell convinced the shareholders of the textile mill to buy into this cockamamie scheme of his. Fast money, big returns and all that nonsense. The ruin of us all. Closed down the factory, the largest employer around here.”

 “So you worked for Clemens Textiles?”

 “My da did and when I was old enough, I did too. We owned shares in the place. All the workers did.”

 Veronica showed him the article from 1955 and the bankruptcy notice from 1957.

 “Aw sure. Look at that.” The man’s lips pursed like he’d eaten lemons.

 “What did you all do once the factory closed?”

 “I was in the prime of life, so I could reinvent myself. But my ma and da and old man Clemens, they wasted away.”

 “What about Johnny Russell? Did you know him too?”

 “Yeah, I remember the wanker. That *boyo* walked around like he owned the block. Got his comeuppance when his father was arrested. Gotta say, though, he was devoted to his ma. Stuck by her side, like a doberman. But the Granda, Old Man Klemens, the whole mess took the steam out of him. He died broken and broke.”

 “But Mary Margaret and Johnny stayed in Worcester after the trial and the closing of the factory?”

 The old man crossed his legs and put his hands behind his head like he was settling in for good.

 Basil groaned.

 Veronica nodded to the old man and he went on with his story. “Mary Margaret was a skilled seamstress. She set up business in the house and made dresses for uptown ladies. Johnny helped her, I remember that, even when she was weak and dying.”

 Veronica thought about all the photos Johnny stashed in his closet. All those women dressed so beautifully. *They weren’t Johnny’s lovers! They were Mary Margaret’s models or her customers! Maybe she used the pictures to advertise her business.* Veronica began to see Johnny in a new light and almost felt sorry for him. Almost*.* “What happened to the house after she died?”

 “Johnny sold it.”

 *So Johnny met me soon after his mother died. No wonder he had enough money to buy our house.* All along Veronica believed he had earned it through hard work. To be fair, he did work hard, but it was his mother who sacrificed.

 “Odd guy, that Johnny. I’d see him every so often walking the streets round here, like he was looking for his long gone ma. Stopped in the diner a few times over the years, but he never talked to no one.”

 *Maybe that’s why the safety deposit box was here? It was a reason to come to Worcester?To relive his days with his mother?*

“If ya don’t mind my asking, what are you doing with all this? Now? After what, fifty years? Are you writing a book about the old mill? Torn down now, but in its heyday, it was the center of the town. And the Klemens house, a showpiece back then. Even now, it’s impressive.”

 Veronica hesitated but found her voice. “I’m Johnny’s wife Veronica Russell and I’d be obliged if you could give me directions to the house.”

 “Come on. I’ll show you. I live nearby.”

 Veronica gathered up all the papers, and dumped them back into the valise, along with a bunch of documents she had yet to read.

 “It’s only two blocks. Shall we walk?” asked the old man.

 Basil snickered. “You walk. I’ll follow with the car.”

 Veronica took the man’s arm. “How rude of me. I haven’t even asked your name.”

 The man stopped at a storefront a few doors down from the diner. The sign said Conan McCarthy Insurance. Inside, a few men waved from their desks. One of the young women blew the man a kiss. “My business. Built from the ground up. Once the factory closed down and all our money was gone, I swore I’d figure a way to make sure that didn’t happen to others. Insurance. The only way to go.”

 Veronica imagined a young Conan McCarthy, a warrior hell-bent on saving his family.

 Veronica and Conan turned left onto Main Street and right onto Chandler Street, passing an elementary school. It was a square brick building. Johnny probably stared out those windows imagining a magical future. At the next corner, a sign said Bluff Street. The name alone should have warned Mary Margaret that misfortune would befall her.

 “There she is,” said Conan, pointing to a looming Victorian that resembled The Heart of Oaks Inn. “The Clemens family home where Mary Margaret lived with that scoundrel, even after they married and had the kid.”

 Veronica’s heart seized. The house was huge with a wide-planked staircase, a wrap-around porch, steep gables, and bay windows. *It looks just like The Heart of Oaks Inn!*

*No wonder Johnny stayed there when he was in Plainview. It reminded him of home. Maybe that first day when he checked in and called me pretty, he wasn’t seeing me at all, but a vision of his mother.* *I could never be the woman of his dreams.* Veronica understood then how from the very beginning, there were three of them in the marriage, plus the haunting ghost of the father. She could have filled a container full of baggies. Instead, she let the bloated air float around her, surrounding her with sadness.

 “Quite a house, wouldn’t you say?” Conan McCarthy said.

 “Quite a house,” agreed Veronica.

 Conan pointed to a modest cottage nearby. “That’s my humble abode over there.” He looked at his watch. “High noon. Lunch time.”

 He and Veronica made their way down the street, away from the shadow of the mansion. When they neared Conan’s home, Veronica gasped when she saw a half-dozen unusual wind chimes suspended from an overhang: frogs, watering cans, pinecones, keys, dragonflies, owls.

 “Such beautiful wind chimes,” she said. *Once upon a time, I would have coveted one for my turret room. But not anymore.*

 Conan struggled up the front stairs. A teenaged girl met him at the door. “Papa, we thought you got lost again.”

 The old man gave the girl a kiss on the cheek. He looked toward Veronica. “You’ve made me happy to recall the old days, even if they weren’t all so good. Now let me give you something special. I see how much you like my wind chimes. Which one do you like best?”

 If Veronica had been cycling, her fingers would have twitched at the chime with a dozen keys dangling and clanging together at the far corner of the porch. *All those houses I snuck into. All those stored secrets.*

 The old man noticed her gaze. “Sweetheart,” he said to the young girl. “Bring the woman the key chimes.”

 *Is it all right to accept the treasure, maybe as a reminder of my former self?* “I have nothing to give you in return.” Veronica brightened when she remembered the gift certificate to the diner. She took it out of her purse and handed it to the girl. “How about you and your Papa enjoy some scones on me.”

 The old man nodded and the girl took the envelope. In exchange, Veronica accepted the chimes.

 “Thank you for bringing Papa home.”

 Veronica saw Basil turn the corner ready to pass them for the tenth time. She hailed him.

 “On the contrary, your Papa brought me home.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Veronica wanted to study the rest of the papers, but her eyes wouldn’t focus on the words. The documents had waited this long, what was another few hours. Besides, she had made a promise to Basil and she intended to keep it.

 As they drove, she called the rehab center to check on Johnny and asked if Tameeka was on duty.

 “Yes, this is Tameeka. Can I help you?” she said when she came to the phone.

 “I’m John Russell’s wife, Veronica. How is he doing today?”

 “Good. Good. No problems. I fed him breakfast in the common room. There’s entertainment this afternoon, a singer. He’ll like that.”

 “Do you know if he’s had any visitors?”

 “Let me check the log.”

 Veronica waited.

 “Ah, yes. One visitor. Kate Russell. Arrived at ten this morning. She hasn’t signed out yet. Would you like me to find her for you?”

 *Kate! Wow. Maybe telling her off made her think twice about Johnny and me!* “No. She’s there to spend time with Johnny, not to talk with me.”

 “I’m on duty until three if you want to check again after lunch. I’ll take good care of your man.”

 “Thank you Tameeka.”

 Basil glanced at Veronica. “So the old man’s doing all right without you?”

 “He always has.”

 “You sell yourself short, Veronica. Back at the diner, I watched you in action. There’s power to you. Why don’t you own it?”

 Veronica didn’t know how to answer that. She could say that she was stifled at a young age by a raging father. Or her boss at The Heart of Oaks Inn never gave her the raise or the praise she deserved. Or her husband never allowed her to ask any questions. Or her son forgot that she had her own opinions too. She’d been a good girl and stayed quiet and compliant, using baggies to vent her anger. She could tell him she made the turret room into a haven so she wouldn’t have to spend time with Johnny and feel like an ant. She could say she met a man recently who made her aware of her power, but then she’d have to admit that it was two men who shed light on who she was and who she could become: Mr. Ed and Basil.

 Instead, she rubbed her eyes. “I’m tired. Let me rest.”

 “You’re avoiding the topic, talking about yourself. I’m giving you that opportunity. Like a therapist, you know.”

 “Why would I tell you my deepest insecurities? I barely know you.”

 “Oh, but you’ve known me for ten years. I’m sure of it. You’ve thought of me daily. People like you carry their hurts so quietly that down-and-outers like me can see right through them. You think you’re invisible. I think you’re transparent. There’s a difference.”

 Veronica lowered the window. She needed a change of air. The October wind blew into the car and swept back her hair. She tilted her chin toward it and let the air lift her face. “I’m trying to figure it out, Basil. I’m just now learning that I never knew anything about my husband and he never attempted to understand me. Isn’t that a waste of a life?”

 “Seems to me there’s nothing much that your husband can do to change his fate, but you can. You’re just beginning to grow into yourself.”

 “How’d you get so wise?” asked Veronica.

 “I’ve lived in libraries and in theaters. In the basements of crazy people. And I once had a loving and caring grandmother who doted on me and read me books and encouraged my drum playing. She’s still by my side, even when I eat from trash bins. You’d think my brain would be mush, but I’m a poet at heart.”

 “Then what was that cockamamie story about me looking like your fourth grade teacher?”

 “I was telling the truth. My granny told me to channel my anger at that woman who stole my dreams in the fourth grade. When you came up the driveway that night invading my drug deal, I was mad as all hell. What right did you have to be there? You looked just like Miss Heel, my fourth grade teacher, and I hated her.”

 “I’m sorry, Basil. I stole more than your money the day I took that duffel.”

 “You’re right. But I harbor no anger toward you. Not anymore. I’ve had a long time to think over the errors of my youth. But I’m still young, only thirty-two. I have a story I can tell, even with a broken body. Everyone loves a rags to riches tale. Once I have my money, I’m going to start new.”

 “But your spider tattoos are permanent. They frighten people.”

 “Are you frightened by my tattoos?”

 “Not anymore.”

 “Well then, I’ll have to think about a way to un-frighten people. To have my tattoos seem normal or larger than life. I’ll work on that. What will you work on, Veronica?”

 “I’d like my eyesight to improve.”

 “But you have no control over that.”

 “Then I will have to work on my other senses.”

 “Now you’re talking,” said Basil.

 Before they knew it, Basil had parked at The Brightlight Senior Living Center in Meadowland. Veronica dialed Mr. Ed.

 “We’re here. Can we come up?”

 “Come on over. Come on in. Pull up a seat. Take a load off your feet*,*” sang Mr. Ed with a southern twang.

 Basil sang the rest of Shania Twain’s words, “You can unwind, take a load off your mind. Get a life, get a grip. Get away somewhere, take a trip. Take a break, take control. Take advice from someone you know. Oh Come on over, come on in.*”*

Veronica was not surprised that she had never heard that tune, but she sure did like the lyrics.

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 Veronica pressed the button to the tenth floor.

 “I thought you said the dude was blind. Why would he live on the tenth floor?”

 “I wondered the same thing,” said Veronica. “You should ask him.”

 “All I’m going to ask is for my money and then we can get out of there.”

 Veronica pressed the stop button on the elevator. “Mr. Ed doesn’t know I hid the money in his apartment. So you’ll just have to be patient until I find the right time to give it to you.”

 “You’re screwing with me, right? We’ve come all this way, and you’re holding out now?”

 “You’re going to have to trust me.”

 Basil kicked the wall with Johnny’s leather loafers.

 “You still have anger issues to resolve, young man,” Veronica said and pressed the resume button.

 Mr. Ed met them at the elevator wearing his chenille scarf and wool cap. Suspenders held up his loose jeans and he sported his signature red flannel shirt. “My girl! How are you?” He leaned in for a hug, which Veronica returned.

 Basil mouthed the words Santa Claus to Veronica.

 “So good to see you,” she said.

 “So good to be seen,” said Mr. Ed.

 “I’d like you to meet my friend Basil Termitski.”

 Basil shook Mr. Ed’s hand.

 Mr. Ed lingered over Basil’s fingers. “You’re in a lot of pain,” he said.

 “You just met me. How would you know that?” asked Basil.

 “I can feel it.” Mr. Ed probed Basil’s palm, his fingers, his wrists. “Your hands are soft. Yet brittle. Angled. Yet lumpy. A whole mixed bag of digits. What happened to you?”

 *Oh God. Now this wonderful man is going to know that I’m the reason Basil is in pain.* How had she not paid attention to Basil’s crooked fingers? Most of the time they were clutching his iPhone as his thumbs flew over the keys.

 “I had an accident ten years ago. I’ve had trouble recovering,” he said.

 “Things change all the time. The sooner you realize things will never be the same again, the sooner you can move on,” said Mr. Ed.

 Basil shrugged. “I have nothing to move on to.”

 “Veronica, could you go into Potato’s bathroom and bring me the salve in the cabinet, the one that says Buckwheat Honey Cream.”

 Veronica wanted to slip into Potato’s room for the pink booties in the closet, but Basil was watching her. She needed to be alone when she retrieved the money, even though Basil was entitled to know where it was hidden. She found the cream and brought it to Mr. Ed.

 “Basil, I’m an old blind man, but I never let that stop me. Please sit.”

 Mr. Ed rubbed the cream into his hands. “Stretch out your fingers for me, Basil.”

 Basil did what Mr. Ed asked. Mr. Ed massaged each twisted finger, slowly, thoughtfully, humming as he went along. Then he worked on Basil’s palms and wrists. “Veronica, in the front closet are cloth gloves. May I have a pair?” Mr. Ed put them on Basil’s hands after finishing the massage. “Now comes the best part. Veronica, dear, one more thing. There’s an electric blanket in my Potato’s room on the recliner. Could you get it for me?”

 Veronica had no time to check the closet for the pink booties. Mr. Ed and Basil were both waiting for the blanket. She grabbed it and gave it to Mr. Ed who wrapped Basil’s hands inside it and plugged it in. Then he went to a wooden cabinet filled with instruments. He located a bamboo reed with five finger holes. “This is a shakuhachi, an ancient Japanese instrument that my friend uses in meditation. I want you to feel the music wash over you.”

 Veronica watched and listened as Mr. Ed raised the flute to his lips and blew across the top. The sound was like the seasons: Warm summer rain. Gusty autumn breezes. Honking wild ducks, winter in their wake. Sweet mountain lakes fed by early spring runoff.

 Basil’s face softened. His eyes lost their haunted darkness and his skin brightened. The spiders on his face glowed like onyx gems. Before Veronica was caught in the trance, she made her way to Potato’s room and closed the door.

 She opened the closet and brought out the eights pink booties stuffed with Basil’s cash and put them on Potato’s bed. Each contained seven thousand five hundred dollars. Sixty thousand dollars total. *Ok, so this isn’t the ninety-thousand I stole from him, but it’ll have to do.*

 When Veronica returned to the living room, Mr. Ed was still playing the flute. Basil lay on the floor spread-eagle, smiling like heaven was singing to him. *What has Mr. Ed done to the twitchy young man who entered the apartment less than an hour ago with me?*

 Mr. Ed stopped playing. In a soothing far-away voice he said, “Breathe in. Slowly. Gently. Deeply. Breathe out. When you own your own breath, no one can steal your peace.”

 Basil lay quietly for a while, his breath even, his face calm. After a while, he sat up. Mr. Ed unwrapped Basil’s fingers from the blanket and removed the gloves. The young man put his bare hands into the old man’s palms. Mr. Ed massaged Basil’s fingers like he was molding clay.

 “Release the stress,” said Mr. Ed. “Let go of things you cannot control or change.”

 Out the window, Veronica saw The Smash Room sign and she understood what Mr. Ed was doing for Basil. Smashing his tension. Draining him of his frustrations. She was ready to go across the street to rid herself of hers.

 “My fingers feel newborn, like I could play music again,” said Basil.

 “Perhaps you’d like to try the shakuhachi?” Mr. Ed handed Basil the instrument and showed him where to place his lips. “Blow across like on a bottle.”

 The sound emerged sweet and strong.

 Mr. Ed arranged Basil’s fingers over the holes in various configurations and encouraged him to try out the sound. Little by little, Basil’s attempts turned into melody.

 With music in the background, Veronica returned to Potato’s room and dumped Johnny’s papers onto the floor. Before diving in, she took Mr. Ed’s advice: *Breathe in. Slowly. Gently. Deeply. Breathe out.* When her pulse calmed, she tackled the documents she had not read.

 The first was an envelope dated 1952, the year Johnny graduated high school. In it was one share of stock from Berkshire-Hathaway made out to John Anderson Russell. Attached was a sticky in Johnny’s handwriting: 1998 market price, $70,000. Veronica gasped. *Now that’s one hell of a secret that Johnny never mentioned!* She understood that twenty years later the share was worth a fortune.

 The next envelope contained a whole life insurance policy for $5000 from John Hancock opened in 1934. Johnny’s mother must have taken it out for him when he was born.

 Other life insurance policies were from Blanket Textiles, where Johnny worked, for $50,000, and from AARP for $50,000. Both named Veronica Russell as beneficiary.

 Johnny’s Final Will was next and included a document naming Veronica Russell as Health Proxy and giving her Power of Attorney. On the signature line, Veronica saw her name and a likeness of her writing. *Did I actually sign this without knowing what it was?* Johnny often shoved papers at her and told her where to sign. He’d whip the documents away before she had time to question them: income tax forms, stock certificates, bank notes. *Maybe that is my real signature! But why didn’t he tell me? After all, it was my future too.*

 She didn’t understand. He obviously wanted her taken care of but he didn’t want her to know about any of this until he had passed? Did he think he’d go first and he wouldn’t have to bother? *Oh Johnny. He never gave me enough credit for being a whole woman. He saw only who he wanted to see but I was so much more than that. Oh how he missed out.*

 Realization that the house was hers and Robert had no claim to it dawned on Veronica. A bubble burst inside her, like she were a baggie and all the bad air whooshed out. She sat back and examined the rest of the booty. At the bottom of the pile, in a silk purse were three rings. Two were wedding bands that had initials inside them: MMR and LR. Mary Margaret and Leon Russell. The third, a diamond ring, was a beauty, with two stones surrounded by six baguettes. Veronica thought she could refashion the ring into necklaces for the twins.

 The last envelope held a letter from Mary Margaret to Johnny:

My Dearest Boy,

 You have been my champion and my lifeline. Thank you for all you have sacrificed since your father left. Without you, I would have died alone and lonely long ago. My prognosis is terminal, my sweet child, so I will share with you my advice for what will keep you safe after I pass.

 Keep your options open. When you find a woman who makes you happy, make her yours, but save some of yourself for yourself. This is not being selfish. It’s being realistic.

 You’re a talented man, handsome and smart. Don’t let a woman take advantage of your good nature. Keep your deepest secrets private. You’ll be happier in the long run.

 And Johnny, marry a quiet humble woman, someone who doesn’t require constant attention. Find a Plain Jane who worships the ground you walk on and won’t put up a fuss when your needs come first.

 You deserve the best, so take it whenever you can.

 Remember the happy times and keep them close to your heart. I will be with you always.

 Your loving mother, Mary Margaret

 Veronica’s heart stopped. She guessed she never would have called this woman Ma or Mother. She’d be Mrs. Russell or Madame Queen or Lady Macbeth or Cruela De Vil. In her presence, Veronica saw herself bowing out of the room with her head down.

 *No wonder Johnny never heard me. His mother was always in his ear. I was his maid, never his lover or his friend. I tried and tried to be a good companion, but Johnny was never all there for me.*

 Veronica had planned for the smash room anticipating what was in the safety deposit box. She had raided her house for breakables: lamps, lightbulbs, dishes, and flowerpots. In Robert’s room, she found a cracked piggy bank and a stringless guitar, a tinny Eiffel Tower and a green pitted Washington Monument. Veronica was ready to pound the daylights out of her anger. But after reading Mary Margaret’s letter, Veronica felt like a deflated baggie that had been turned inside out and dropped in mud. At seventy-two, she needed to move forward, without baggies, without anger, and without Johnny. *What if I can meet myself halfway? How is that possible? I need to think.*

 As Basil and Mr. Ed began a harmony on the flute and the violin, Veronica lay on Potato’s bed and closed her hurting eyes.

Chapter Twenty-Six

A knock on the front door to the apartment interrupted both Veronica’s dark thoughts, and Basil and Mr. Ed’s sunny melodies.

 “That’s our mid-day snack,” said Mr. Ed.

 “Delivered? Wow, this is quite the place,” said Basil.

 “Nothing but the best for Veronica and my new friend.”

 Veronica heard Mr. Ed’s words. So different from Mary Margaret’s who desired the best for her son at the expense of anyone else, as long as he got the choicest piece of meat or the last piece of pie, even if others went without.

 Veronica checked the time: 2:30. If she had a quick bite to eat, she could be on the road to Plainview well before dark. She arranged the pink booties on the bed and smoothed the covers. Then she gathered all of Johnny’s papers into her valise and clung to it like it was a life raft.

 Opening the door to Potato’s room, Veronica heard upbeat notes that made her feel buoyant, like anything was possible.

 “Basil is a natural on the shakuhachi. I’ve never heard anyone pick up the tunes so quickly,” said Mr. Ed.

 “And Mr. Ed is a master teacher.” Basil reached in for a fistful of cheese popcorn. His hands seemed to glide without pain. “Music is coming alive for me again. Can you teach me more about the shakuhachi?”

 “Of course,” said Mr. Ed. “It’d be my pleasure.”

 Veronica snacked on some popcorn and bit into an apple slice smothered in almond butter. *Basil’s right. This is quite the place.* Watching the fast friendship develop between these two men made Veronica realize that her world was opening up in a way she had never anticipated. The consequences of the documents she just read released her in so many ways from the life she had led. But she didn’t know what was next, other than it was her decision to make.

 “Basil, can I talk to you privately for a few minutes. Would you excuse us, Mr. Ed?”

 Mr. Ed nodded and Basil and Veronica went into Potato’s room together.

 “I want to thank you for helping me today. The documents from the bank have revealed so much about my husband and his family.”

 “They’re your family too,” said Basil.

 *My family too? I’ve lived with Mary Margaret all these years and never knew it. Oh Johnny, why didn’t you share yourself with me? Why did I need to feel so alone? But I can make a new direction for myself. I can. I can. I can.*

 *“*As much as I’d like to stay the night, I need to see Johnny today,” said Veronica.

 The spiders on Basil’s face darkened, the webs narrowed. “What about our deal?”

 Veronica pointed to the booties on the bed and felt the final weight of her journey-to-give-back rise off her shoulders.

 “Socks?” he asked. “What am I going to do with pink socks?”

 “Your money is rolled up inside them.”

 Basil picked up a thick bootie and peeled down the top. A roll of green peeked out. Basil grinned.

 “You’ll find sixty thousand dollars in all. If you give me a chance, I’ll explain where the rest of the money went.”

 “Thirty thousand is my share. That’s all I want. I’m lousy with money and I have nowhere to stash it. Either invest the rest for me or spend it on yourself or give it charity. I don’t need more than my due.”

 Veronica didn’t understand this spiderman at all, but she didn’t have time to argue or deliberate. Daylight was waning and she needed to get on the road. She took four booties and stored them back in the closet. *I’ll sort this out, just not now.*

 “Basil Termitski, you’re an enigma to me.” Surprising herself, she gave him a hug, his bony body so fragile under her embrace. “You need to eat more!”

 Basil caressed the booties. “I was thinking the same thing.”

 They rejoined Mr. Ed in the living room. “If I’m going to be safe driving on my own, I have to leave now,” said Veronica.

 “I’ll drive you home,” said Basil.

 “No, I have a lot to think about and I need to be alone right now. There’s an inn down the road. I saw it on the way over here. I’ll drop you off for some rest and relaxation. You deserve time to get used to your new station in life. I’ll come back for you in a few days after I’ve sorted out some personal business.”

 Still clutching the booties, Basil stared out the window.

 Mr. Ed rose from his seat at the kitchen table. “If you have to go home and know that’s the best decision for you at this moment, then so be it. You’re a strong woman who knows her own needs."

 Veronica kissed Mr. Ed on the forehead. “You are so kind and understanding. How did that happen?”

 “The secret is to believe in myself, and when I do, I believe others have the same capacity. I think you’re on a similar journey.”

 Veronica nodded and felt the air shift around her. “You’re right. Maybe I’m not as kind and understanding as you, but I’m getting there.”

 “I guess this is it,” Basil said, directing his voice toward both Veronica and Mr. Ed. “I’m resourceful, especially now that I have some resources.” He patted the booties in his pocket. “I’ll be fine on my own. No need to worry about me.”

 Veronica thought she saw tears in Basil’s eyes.

 “Basil,” said Mr. Ed, “is there any chance you could stay here with me for a few days until Veronica returns for you? My albums are in such disarray and I need a pair of eyes to sort them out. Besides, I so enjoy your embrace of music and I want to teach you how to play the shakuhachi. I know you’d rather be at an inn or running around Worcester’s hot spots, but if you could do an old man the favor of your presence, I’d be grateful.”

 Veronica watched Basil’s face beam, like his spiders were dancing on his face. He lit up like a candelabra. “I’d be mighty pleased to help you and I’d be honored to learn the shakuhachi from a master teacher.”

 “I don’t know how I’ve come to this juncture in my life,” said Veronica. “But I’m happy to experience it with the two of you.”

 Basil scrunched up his face, his tattoos on alert. “I think karma is playing games with us. You found me in my driveway by accident, and then ten years later, I found you by accident.”

 “It was only by finding each other, that we were able to find ourselves,” said Veronica.

 “Coincidence is a plan in disguise,” said Mr. Ed.

 *I’ve never felt anything like this. Ever. With these two men in my life, I’m beginning to believe that I am enough. But I have unfinished business and I have to see to it on my own, by myself, without baggies, without treasures, without the need to compromise or acquiesce.*

 Veronica hugged Basil lightly this time. “I’ve made my first independent decision. If you’re amenable to it, I’m going to put you on salary as my driver. I’ll pay you with your own money,” Veronica laughed. “What’s more, I’m going to see to it that there’s a room at my house just for you.”

 “What about your son?”

 “He has a home of his own.”

 Veronica gathered her belongings. “I’ll figure out a time to come and get you,” she told Basil.

 “No rush,” said Mr. Ed. “I like this young man. He gives me energy.”

 Before Veronica left Meadowland, she stopped at the Smash Room and donated all the breakables she had gathered, and a few additional items from the trunk that hadn’t found homes. Next time, she’d bring more and perhaps stay to play.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

When Veronica arrived at Brightlight, an aide was wheeling Johnny to the common room for dinner. “I’ll take him from here,” she told her.

 Johnny was clean and wide-eyed. She wondered how he and Kate had communicated. Had Johnny perked up if Kate mentioned Veronica’s name or did he ask for Taffeta? Did Kate feed him his lunch? Did he try to bite her finger? Did she kiss him good-bye?

 Sitting beside him, Veronica took his hands in hers and looked into his eyes. There was wonder there, like a child’s, like what’s next, mama? “Johnny, do you know my name?”

 Johnny’s eyes opened wide. “Of course. It’s Mary.”

 “That’s right,” she said and kissed his forehead.

 Johnny’s shoulders settled and his eyes softened. “Did you bring me a present?”

 “I did,” said Veronica. On her way to the nursing home, Veronica made a pit-stop at a convenience store. She picked up a snack and a bottled water. When she went to pay, she saw an assortment of stuffed animals for sale. She selected a scruffy white dog.

 Veronica handed Johnny the little pooch she had bought. Johnny hugged it and rubbed it against his cheek and over his forehead and snuggled it into his chest.

 “I’m glad you like it,” she said. “Johnny, do you remember a man named Leon?”

 Johnny’s eyes narrowed and he held the pup tighter.

 Veronica felt Johnny’s pain. “Do you like ice cream?” she asked, changing the focus of his attention. Immediately, Johnny’s face found a balance. “I think I do.”

 She tried a different approach. “Johnny, you have a son named Robert.”

 Johnny nodded. “Robert Russell. Such a good name.”

 “That’s right. His grandfather was a man named Leon.”

 Johnny nodded again. “Leon was a bad man. He hurt you.”

 For a moment, Veronica had forgotten that she was Mary Margaret. “That’s right. And he hurt you too.”

 “He lied.”

 “That’s right,” she said, amazed that he had some recall. “What about you? Have you lied?”

 Johnny wrinkled his lips into prunes. “I’m a good man, not a bad man.” Then he shook his head hard. “But I wasn’t nice to my wife even though she was nice to me.”

 Veronica sat back stunned. “And what was your wife’s name?”

 Johnny held the white dog to his chest. “I’m too young to have a wife!” he giggled.

 “But if you did, what name would she have?” Veronica held her breath.

 Johnny’s eyes went blank. His lips flattened and his shoulders sagged.

 Nothing was to be accomplished by asking Johnny questions about his father or his mother or her or about any of the papers in the security deposit box. She would have to make peace with that.

 But she’d be damned if she didn’t let loose with her own pent up feelings. “Johnny,” she began, taking the official power of attorney papers from her valise. “It says here that the house is mine and I have a right to decide its fate.” She pointed to her signature. “Why have I always been the last to know everything? Why couldn’t I have come with you to the lawyer’s office? Why did you keep me in the dark, using a bank hours away in your childhood town? Why didn’t you allow me the peace of mind I needed when Robert and Kate confronted me with their bogus claim?”

 Johnny’s eyes filled with tears, as if he understood what she had said. “Water,” he mumbled.

 Veronica helped him with the straw as he sipped the fresh water she had poured into a plastic cup. She watched his lips clamp around the straw. Those lips that she had wanted to caress her with kisses when they were newly married. Those lips that berated her when the first blush wore off and she realized Johnny was not in love with her.

 “I knew you didn’t love me, but couldn’t you have faked it every so often? I was more than a dishrag, you know. I am the mother of your son. I know what you’re thinking. That you wanted more children. You would have needed a different wife to manage that, but after six years and three tiny grave markers, you settled for the easy route. Using me in your home and Taffeta in your bed, and god knows who else for whatever else you needed.”

 She heard Johnny gulp the water and then hiccup. She rubbed his back, soothing the man’s spasms.

 “I didn’t mind our life together for the most part. I could come and go as I pleased as long as your meals were on the table. My bike rides and a turret room filled with private treasures gave me pleasure. I just wish you had let me share something significant with you.”

 Johnny smiled at her, his eyes unfocused but aimed in her direction.

 “So now, my lost husband, I have more peace than I’ve ever experienced. There’s money for my old age, a roof over my head, and two new friends who care about me. Robert and Kate have no idea who I am, but the girls will. I’m determined to show them that their granny has spunk.”

 Johnny lifted his hand as if he were saluting her.

 “Yes, Johnny, it’s time for bed. Let me help you.”

 “Thank you, Ronnie,” he said and she nearly fainted.

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After Johnny was in bed, Veronica settled into a cushioned chair by his side, figuring that’s where she’d sleep for the night. It was dark and way too late for her eyes to drive her home safely. She wondered what Mr. Ed and Basil were doing. She dialed Mr. Ed’s number.

 “Veronica, we’re so happy to hear from you. Is everything all right?” asked Mr. Ed.

 Basil got on the phone. His voice hummed like a happy bee. “You know how to access the Internet from your phone? Right?”

 “I think so,” said Veronica.

 “Go to YouTube and type in The Peter Parker Duo,” said Basil.

 “I’ll try,” she said. “I’ll call you back.”

 Veronica did as he asked and instantly a video appeared on the screen. Basil was playing the shakuhachi while Mr. Ed was strumming the violin to their version of *Don’t Worry, Be Happy*. They both had ear-to-ear grins and complemented each other like salt and pepper. The song washed over Veronica like a wave, immersing her in a joy so overwhelming, she felt weightless.

 Calling them back, she giggled into the phone like a teenager. “It’s wonderful! I’m so glad you two are creating music together.”

 “We’re going viral,” said Basil. “We’ve already gotten ten thousand hits, and more keep coming. We’ll be an overnight sensation.”

 “I just have one question,” said Veronica. “Who’s Peter Parker?”

 “Who’s Peter Parker? That’s Spiderman’s original name!” said Basil.

 “I am so out of touch,” said Veronica. “So now you and Mr. Ed are both Peter Parker?”

 She could hear Basil sigh.

 “Mr. Ed and I are the Peter Parker duo! Duo! Together! He’s on violin and I’m on the flute and we harmonize. We’re playing and singing together using the stage name Peter Parker Duo. I told you I’d turn my spiders into an asset,” whooped Basil. “The Internet is loving us and my tattoos!”

 “I’m so proud of you!” gushed Veronica, realizing that she didn’t need the baggie full of laughter to propel her into giggles.

 “What’s going on?” asked a man’s voice. “I thought you were away again?”

 Veronica looked up to see Robert in the doorway of Johnny’s room. “We’ll speak tomorrow,” she whispered into the phone and slipped it into her purse and composed herself. “Robert! I didn’t expect you.” Warmth poured through her knowing he had come unbidden to see Johnny.

 Robert patted his father’s shoulder gently and kissed her on the cheek.

 *I have so much to discuss with you! I can’t believe you’re here.*

 She needed to tell him about all the documents she found in the safety deposit box. Most important was the fact that she had power of attorney and could do as she pleased with the house. She’d have enough money to stay where she was and provide care for Johnny in a nursing facility.

 She could tell him about the overpowering vision she had as she drove home from Mr. Ed’s. How she’d turn her home into The Heart of Hearts Inn and invite women to stay there as they rebuilt their lives. She would hire Bertram as day manager and Basil as night manager––unless his Peter Parker career skyrocketed. She would assure Robert and Kate that Basil Termitsky was a decent honest man whom she trusted to be her eyes as she aged.

 Her biggest wishful-thinking plan though was spending time in Worcester with Mr. Ed, but that would have to wait for another conversation.

 Instead, Veronica patted the chair beside her and invited her son to sit. She reached into her purse and withdrew two shiny pennies. “One for each of my beautiful granddaughters.”

 “They need more than pennies,” Robert chuckled.

 “‘Don’t pass by that penny when you’re feeling blue. It may be a penny from heaven that your guardian angel tossed to you,’” she said, her voice like violins and flutes.

 “You sound happy, Mother, not blue.” His lips curled into a half smile, his eyes focused on her.

 “You look like your father,” she said.

 “I hope not,” said Robert, shaking his head of curls.

 “There was a time when he was robust.”

 “Robust was not the word I’d use. More like controlling, domineering, bullish.”

 “There’s a lesson to be learned here, Robert.”

 “To be more like you and less like him?”

 *More like me? Submissive? Plain? Voiceless?* “What do you mean?”

 “You look on the bright side, Mother. Maybe you’ve been too trusting, but that’s part of your charm.”

 Veronica’s cheeks reddened. *My* *charm? Did Robert actually use the word charm? Maybe there’s hope for a future relationship for us. Maybe he’s coming around to my side. Maybe Kate too.*

 She thought about Basil and Mr. Ed and their new chapter. She thought about Clyde’s new tire and how he was ready for more adventures, not acquiring treasures, just being available for a ride if she or the ladies in the house wanted fresh air. She even thought about Johnny and how she now had help to care for him as he declined.

 And most of all, she would take her rightful place as matriarch of the Russell family, speaking her mind, embracing each day, and smoothing out a path for others to follow. Aloud, she said the best words to convey her new status: “‘And I say it’s all right, da de da da da.’”

 And, indeed, it would be.

*The End*