

“CONGRATULATE ME, RED! And join me in a toast. To driving!” Myrtle took a swig from her wine glass.

Her son, Red, rolled his eyes at his wife as she kicked open the back door with their toddler on one hip and a bag of groceries on the other. He resisted the urge to hang up the phone on his mother. “What for, Mama? Finally beat Mrs. Meyers playing Scrabble?”

“You know I always let that poor woman win. No, I just came back from the Department of Motor Vehicles. They renewed my driver’s license for ten more years!”

Red, taking the grocery bag from Elaine, dropped the phone. Picking it up, he said, “But Mama, you haven’t even regularly driven a car for at least five years!”

“That didn’t seem to bother the DMV one bit. Besides, I do get some driving practice in from time to time. Miles drove me there this morning. I had a fantastic picture taken.”

“Why on earth do you even *need* to drive? I’m happy to drive you anywhere you need to go. You don’t even *own* a car. Shoot, Mama, downtown is only a few blocks away anyhow.”

“I’ll drive Caroline Wilson’s car. She told me just the other day that she wants it warmed up from time to time.”

Red battled a rising tide of panic. As Bradley, North Carolina Chief of Police, he took his duty ensuring public safety very seriously. Having his octogenarian mother terrorizing the citizenry in a borrowed 1978 Cadillac Fleetwood didn’t fit his vision.

Elaine watched as her husband’s face grew redder with his rising blood pressure. Elaine, ten years younger than forty-five year old Red, thought of his mom as more of a surrogate grandmother than a mother-in-law. This kept Myrtle from really getting on Elaine’s nerves. Out of concern for his mother’s safety (so he said), Red had made another ill-advised attempt to orchestrate his mother to the Greener Pastures Retirement Home last year. After a Clash-of-the-Titans-style fight, Myrtle won. Naturally.

“Tell you what, Mama. How about I bring you lunch? To, uh, celebrate. Elaine just came back from the store and she’s got some...” He looked at Elaine urgently as she pulled up various foodstuffs from the depths of the grocery bags. “...fresh-baked rye bread and Cajun roast beef. Mmm...and a melon bowl, too. If you’ve got some barbeque chips, and I bet you do, then we’ve got lunch.” Cementing the deal, Red hung up and scowled at the phone.

“Got to figure out what’s going on with Mama. Today it’s cars. What’s next? Motorcycles? You know how she gets these fixations.” Red checked the wall clock.

“Mama must’ve been at the DMV when it opened because it’s hardly even lunchtime now. She’s even opened up a bottle of wine.”

Elaine’s frown wrinkled her forehead. “She must really have been bored to hang out at the DMV all morning.”

Red pictured his mother in a jaunty riding hat, tooting her horn and yoo-hooing to any pedestrians she knew. He groaned and grabbed a few of the groceries. Giving Elaine a quick kiss, he hurried out the door, straightening his uniform as he stomped out toward a small house directly across the road.

Myrtle peered through her window as Red, clutching a grocery bag, walked briskly out of his house. She smiled. This was a record for her—a two minute phone conversation netted her both a free lunch *and* a visit with her son.

She watched his progress with a critical eye. He was a nice-looking boy, even if that scowl messed up his features. He was still a boy to her, even though the red hair that spawned his nickname was now liberally sprinkled with gray.

Red entered without knocking, headed into the kitchen, and unloaded the grocery bag. Myrtle’s growling stomach reproachfully reminded her that she hadn’t eaten all day.

“What’ve you got lined up at work today?” asked Myrtle, reaching for the bread.

Red rolled his eyes. “Mrs. Peterson wants me to drop by again after lunch.”

“More neighborhood kids cutting across her lawn?”

“Either that or the suspicious prowler lurking behind her hydrangeas again. Or she might be complaining that deaf, old Mr. Smith has his TV turned up too loud again next door. Could be anything. She just likes checking in with me every day.”

Myrtle sniffed. “She’s probably bored and wants company.”

“Don’t be smug, Mama, you’re sounding pretty bored yourself. But why, I don’t know. I thought you were still busy beating everyone in town at bridge.”

Myrtle shook her head. “The thrill has gone, Red. No one will play against me. They think I’m a card shark. It’s the unfortunate downside of tremendous success.”

“You could try another card game,” said Red. At her questioning look, he innocently asked, “Poker?”

Myrtle drew up and peered down her nose at Red. Her affected patrician Southern lady look clashed with her big boned, solid frame. “I’ll pretend you didn’t go there,” she said regally.

“Or bunko or Crazy 8s or Old Maid. Just stay out of trouble, please. Don’t get bored. Remember the last time you got bored? You got all tangled up in local politics...and you remember how well *that* turned out.”

“For your information, Red, sit-ins are an excellent way to draw attention to a cause. Civil disobedience and all that.”

“Sit-ins are not ideal for arthritic elderly ladies, Mama. Miss Hanover is still molded in prime sit-in position this very day.”

“Next time we’ll bring chairs.” Myrtle frowned. “Old age is a terrible thing.”

“It beats the alternative,” said Red.

“I’m not so sure.”

“What about ‘Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be?’” Red looked pleased with himself with summoning up the line. Growing up with an English teacher for a mom, he’d certainly heard plenty of quotations. She sure hoped some of it had stuck.

“Robert Browning was a mere child,” said Myrtle with a sniff. “What did he know? Anne Bradstreet had it right:

*My memory is short, and braine is dry.*

*My gray haires doth flourish now.*

*And back, once straight, begins apace to bow.*

Red studied her. “Your back looks plenty straight to me. The brain and gray hair are a different story, though. What’s with the quotes? Seems like you’ve been doing them a lot lately.”

“*Quotations*. I’m just trying to keep my brain from going to mush. Which is hard, considering there’s a tremendous lack of intellectual stimulation here in Bradley.”

“What about your book club?” Red seemed to be trying to hide a smile.

“Please! No mention of that horrific book club.”

“Did it ever switch back from being a supper club to being a book club again? I’ve lost track of its different incarnations,” said Red.

“Yes, it has. And I think we’re supposed to be reading some dreadful novel this month. I’ve about given up on it. The books are all *Heather’s Lost Love* or that sort of thing.” Myrtle gave an exasperated sigh.

“Maybe you should take up art.”

“Is art something you just *take up*? Isn’t it more like a calling?” asked Myrtle.

“I’ve no idea. Either way, Elaine just got called. She’s been busily painting for the last few days now.”

Myrtle frowned. “She’s painting *canvasses*? Not rooms? I didn’t realize she could paint.”

Red said delicately, “Well, that remains to be seen. All I’m saying is that she’s painting. And from what I could see of the canvas, I think you might be the subject of one of her masterpieces.”

He checked his watch. “Sorry to end our fascinating lunch discussion, but I’ve got to run check on Mrs. Peterson now. Enjoy your afternoon.” He gave his mother a peck on the cheek. “Why don’t you visit Elaine? You could play with Jack for a while. Or take a look at Elaine’s painting.”

“Maybe after *Tomorrow’s Promise*. I missed it yesterday and haven’t watched my recording yet. And I should probably pick up some veggies at the farmer’s market, too. Is Elaine doing anything a little later?”

“I don’t think so. Later probably works better anyway, since it’s almost Jack’s naptime now.” He opened her pantry and grabbed a couple of chocolate chip cookies. “Glad you still keep the pantry stocked for me,” he said with a wink and left.

Myrtle smiled and pulled out a cookie for herself. Picking up the remote, she plopped down on the sofa and clicked on the television. Life, relationships, and routines might change, but her soap opera was forever.

After an hour of following most of the convoluted subplots on *Tomorrow’s Promise*, she turned off the TV, grabbed her cane, and made the short walk on tree-lined streets to the farmer’s market. She sighed. Same old brick stores. Same old people. Some things never changed. And sometimes she wished they would.

She walked up to the small commons area near City Hall where farmers sold produce on summertime Saturdays. Shoot. She’d forgotten her bag. And the corn was looking awfully good. There were *peaches* here, too! Where had those come from? Surely there shouldn’t be any peaches anymore.

Agnes Walker, wearing a large hat to protect her genteel features, held a wicker basket of vegetables as she peered at some beans. She studied those snap beans with the same careful consideration she applied to everything in life.

“You’re looking rather sour this morning,” observed Agnes, catching sight of her friend.

Myrtle frowned. “I forgot my produce bag.”

“That’s it?” Agnes raised her eyebrows. “That’s your only complaint?”

“And I’m...a little bored.”

Agnes dropped the snap beans into a paper bag. “Surely that’s not allowed. I thought only children were permitted boredom.” She pointedly looked Myrtle up and down from her carefully arranged thinning hair to her sensible SAS shoes. Myrtle certainly didn’t qualify as a child.

“I’ve earned the right to boredom,” said Myrtle. “I’ve sampled all the entertainment for the elderly in this town. Bingo and bridge. Mad Hatter teas and early bird supper deals. Book clubs and the historical society. I’ve been around a long, long time. I’ve done it all, seen it all, and now I’m bored with it all. Welcome to Bradley,” she said grouchy. “Maybe I’ll work for the tourism board.”

Agnes considered the problem while the farmer weighed her beans. “There’s always travel,” she offered.

“Who would go with me? Red and Elaine are busy with Jack. And all my ancient friends are dropping like flies.” She brightened. “Say Agnes, what if you and I—”

“Allow me to stop you right there. My traveling days are over. Been there, done that. Sitting still for long distances in a car makes me stiff.”

“There are airplanes,” explained Myrtle, in case Agnes hadn’t heard the news.

“I’m aware of that,” said Agnes with dignity. “I don’t care for the cramped powder rooms. No, Myrtle, I’m finished traveling. There’s nothing much I care to see. Any family who wants a visit can come to me.”

Myrtle sighed. “Fine. Well, if you won’t travel, then maybe you and I can at least go over to Greener Pastures tomorrow and visit. The Sunday dinner there is decent.”

“That’s awfully altruistic of you.” There was a suspicious gleam in Agnes’ eyes. “Are you sure you’re not just wanting to prance into Greener Pastures to show off your vim and vigor?”

“It’s definitely the *food* that’s the draw.” Myrtle set her chin.

“I heard you complaining about the food there only last week! I simply can’t figure you out, Myrtle. It’s actually quite lovely that Bradley is as quiet and serene as it is. And you’re doing things like tapping your foot at the curb while waiting for the mailman.”

Myrtle flushed.

“Then last week you called me to ponder the inconsistencies of the garbage collection service. You’ve got too much time on your hands,” said Agnes.

“Have you been hanging out with Red? There’s no reason a citizen shouldn’t reasonably expect her mail delivered or garbage picked up at the same time each day or week,” said Myrtle.

Agnes smiled. “Still rating the weather forecasters’ predictions and emailing them reports of their mistakes?”

“And miserably error-prone crackpots they are, too!”

“There’s no reason for you to be bored, anyway,” said Agnes. “There’s plenty of local intrigue.”

Myrtle’s ears pricked up. “Go on,” she urged.

Agnes’ natural discretion seemed to be warring with her urge to gossip. Then discretion won out. Rats. Agnes clamped her lips in a tight line to keep the gossip from bursting out. She said mysteriously, “You’ll find out tomorrow morning at the Beauty Box.”

“Has Tammy lost her mind again?” Tammy was the hairdresser and former confidante of the ladies who saw her. But drinking made Tammy loose-lipped and cats were flying out of bags with amazing regularity in recent weeks.

“You’ll see.”

“Too bad Tammy’s going downhill like this. Are...she and Connor still going out?” She tried to make sure that only friendly concern showed in her expression. Connor, as Agnes’ only child and her pride and joy, had been having an on-again off-again relationship with Tammy. Agnes either didn’t hear her or didn’t choose to hear her. “See you tomorrow,” she called as she walked away.

Both Elaine and toddler Jack beamed at Myrtle when they opened the door. Jack raced to grab a toy dump truck to show his grandmother. Myrtle settled on the lofty perch of the sofa; she’d learned her lesson a week ago when she got stuck on the floor playing with Jack. Getting down there wasn’t bad, but getting back up again thirty minutes later was a different story.

Elaine joined them in the living room, regarding Myrtle with all the eagerness of a stranded stay-at-home mom. “So! Any excitement?”

“You and I are in the same boat, aren’t we? I may have some gossip soon, though, courtesy of the Beauty Box. Apparently that’s where all the action is.”

Elaine put a protective hand to her hair. “I’ll let you get the low-down, then. Tammy butchered my hair last time and I haven’t been back since. Jack could have done a better job with it. Remember? That’s how I ended up getting this bob. Red liked me with long hair better, and he’s still steamed with Tammy.”

Maybe so. But the bob suited Elaine’s heart-shaped face and highlighted her high cheekbones. Red was a lucky man.

“I love your hair,” said Myrtle. “But you’re right to steer clear of the Beauty Box. Tammy’s completely unreliable right now.”

“It’s too bad. Tammy gave the best scalp massages. I felt so relaxed when I left there.” Elaine gave a wistful sigh. “What kind of trouble is happening at the Beauty Box?”

“Agnes wasn’t too forthcoming, unfortunately. But from what I’ve seen, Tammy is hitting the sauce with a vengeance now.”

Elaine watched Jack ram the dump truck into a toy ambulance. “Hmm. Tammy drinking? That could have dangerous consequences. She knows all the secrets of every woman in town. It’d be like a bartender spilling secrets.”

Myrtle nodded. “Or a priest. Tammy knows all the dirt on everyone. Even if they don’t tell her their secrets, she’s got some kind of instinct for them. That was fine when she was professional enough to keep secrets. But once she threw alcohol in the mix?” Myrtle shrugged. “Anyway, that’s the news. I’ll give you the scoop tomorrow.”

“Aren’t you worried that Tammy will make you look like Bride of Frankenstein?”

Myrtle thoughtfully fingered her hair. As usual, it stood up on end like Einstein’s. “Not really. My hair has a mind of its own.”

“Tammy has a new girl at the shop, doesn’t she? Kat—she’s her niece, right? I wonder if she does a better job with hair.”

Kat’s hair was dyed fuchsia and she sported rings through her nose, bellybutton, and probably other places Myrtle didn’t want to know about. So far the ladies of Bradley appeared reticent to entrust their precious locks to Kat’s care. But with Tammy incapacitated, Kat’s clientele might be on the rise.

“She probably knows what’s trendy. You could always try her, I guess.” Myrtle stood up. “I’m going home to put my feet up for a while. The DMV will sure take it out of you.”

Elaine snapped her fingers. “Before you go, I wanted to give you something.” She pushed open the kitchen door and Myrtle saw that it had been transformed into a sort of transient art studio. Not a very organized one, either. Elaine leafed through a short stack of canvasses on the table. “Let’s see. Here it is!”

Elaine held up a painting that made Myrtle immediately want to cover her eyes. “This is for you, Myrtle! What do you think?”

She was having a visceral reaction to the painting. A small, pained cry escaped from her, which Elaine fortunately attributed to delight. “See? This is you. And this is Miles. And you’re both surrounded with books!” Elaine smiled at her.

Myrtle, summoning incredible willpower, beamed right back at her. “I’m speechless. I’m...wow.” She nodded wordlessly at the painting. So, that blobby thing was her? And the other thing was Miles? But Miles looked more like a woman than she did! And the books seemed to meld into each other with more muddy blobbing.

“I thought you might need something for your mantle that represented your life with books and maybe also the friendship you found in books. And Miles is a literary friend!” said Elaine.

It all made wonderful sense. Except for the fact that what was being proposed to decorate the mantle was a complete abomination.

She hugged Elaine tightly. “Yes! It’s an amazing painting, Elaine. But I think it might be selfish of me to hog it. Miles and I could *share* the painting. Maybe a week at my house and a week at his.”

Elaine said in an excited voice, “What a nice idea! Because, really, it’s a painting about friendship. The friendship between the two of you and your friendship with books.”

“Exactly.” Miles wore glasses, after all. He could simply take them off when it was his turn with the painting. Without his glasses, it would probably seem like a lovely, vague Monet.

Jack came over to hug her bye before resuming wrecking his trucks into each other. Myrtle smiled bravely as she took gingerly took the painting in one hand, grabbed her cane with the other, and gratefully took her leave.