



VALERIE BONHAM

Kaleidoscope:

A Murderous Reunion

Kaleidoscope

A novelette

For all the friends at all the reunions.

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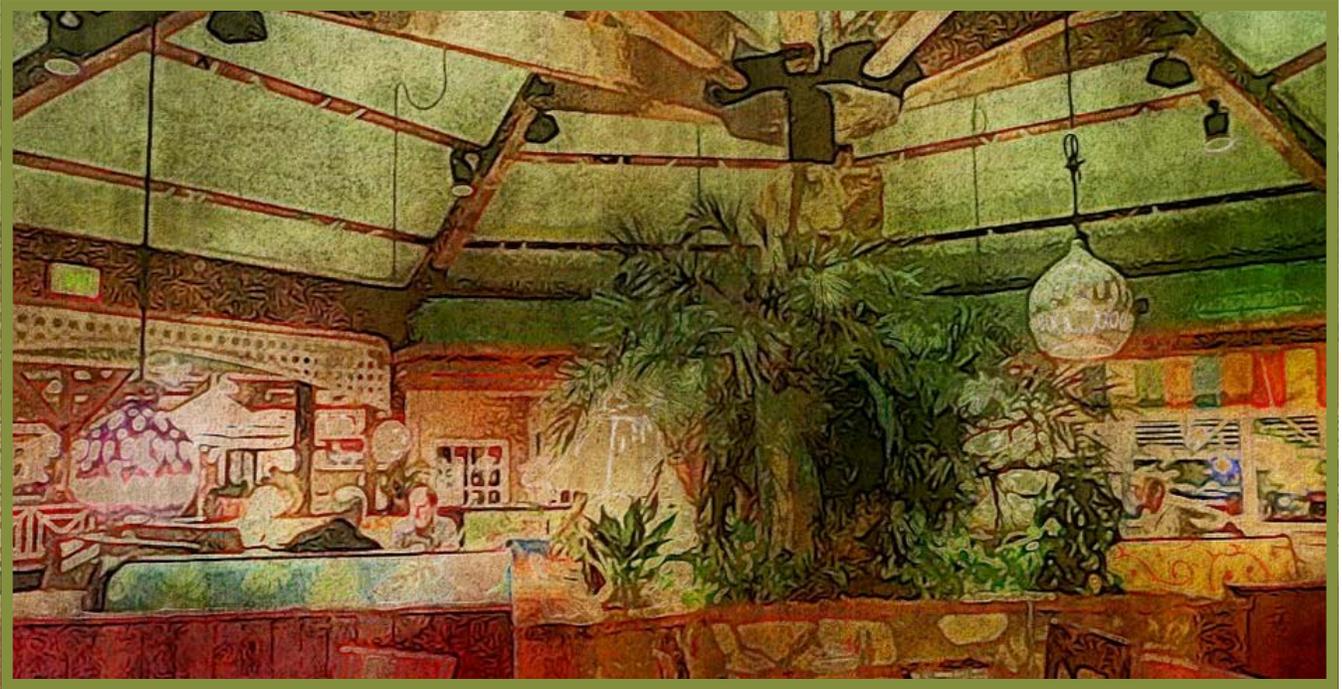
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After the late night at The Kaleidoscope Bar, Scarlett Madeiros baby-stepped from the serving alcove in the breakfast room of the suburban Atlanta hotel—one of those business hotels, tall and with amenities—past a man who gave off a smell of old luggage, and through the school reunion crowd towards a small table. Outside, the misty-gray day had settled around the suburb, the outdoor colors muted. At least it wasn't raining. Inside the hotel's breakfast room, the aroma of cooked waffles competed with the poofs of sausage essence each time someone slid open a chafing dish lid.

In one hand Scarlett balanced her plate so that the yellow, folded Frisbee-called-an-omelet, and an English muffin, wouldn't slide. In her other hand, she concentrated on keeping upright a cup of red juice—the label on the dispenser had said passion fruit. The three silver bangles on her wrist tinkled. After a week of hotel breakfasts because of a business trip to New York from her home in Bermuda that she'd scheduled to coincide with the reunion weekend, she hoped the juice that was red was a pleasant change from juice that was orange.

Scarlett expected to renew friendships with former classmates and was pleased to be providing unique objects—two of her miniature paintings—for the auction to raise funds for the next reunion. As she wove her way through the crowd, surrounded by the buzz of conversation, she moved toward an unoccupied table. Her concentration broke as someone brushed her elbow. The red juice slopped in the cup but didn't crest the rim. Her bracelets tinkled as she almost overcorrected the cup's tilt.

A man had pushed past Scarlett, moving towards the serving alcove. His passage left a wake of spicy aftershave. Scarlett glanced back at him. Harry McCollum. A teenage

boyfriend who'd jilted her. Before seeing him in the bar the night before at the early bird get-together, she hadn't thought of Harry for years. Forty? Surely not more.

Last night at the bar, after someone pointed him out, she'd waited for him to finish talking to a woman who didn't seem to be part of the reunion gang. Scarlett had approached him—bygones being bygones—and said hello, but he'd given her a blank look before returning her greeting. He hadn't remembered her. It wasn't a blow to her self-esteem, but she took it as a humbling reality. The change from her dark 1960s helmet-hair to her now-white ponytail might have something to do with his lack of recognition. The fewer mentions of her extra padding, the better. Menopause was a mixed blessing.

Perhaps Harry hadn't wanted to remember the way their little affaire had ended after his betrayal? Scarlett's memory of teen angst upon seeing his name in the list of attendees on the social media page for the now-defunct school on the now-closed base on land the United States had leased from Bermuda had surprised her. The tingle of remembered romance didn't give her a flutter so much as a twinge of anxious irritation. Where did that come from? The

romance had been intense, if she was remembering correctly. Even teenagers appreciate moonlit Bermudian beaches. As for Harry, once he'd been pointed out, his tallness had been the giveaway. He looked younger than she expected. Not much gray in his hair. Lucky him? Or maybe just-for-men products? The teen fireworks with Harry were so far gone they weren't even ashes, which was why the tingle when she saw who he'd become surprised her. The teen fickleness that had sent him off with someone else—Maura Dunahee, one of the reunion coordinators—had left a mark. Even though their romance hadn't continued, obviously, Scarlett figured that, as with your first kiss, you remember the first time you were dumped. She carried no torch for the boy, but she presumed she should hi for politeness, bygones, and all that, never mind her curiosity.

At the breakfast table, Scarlett set down her paper-plate-with-Frisbee-eggs and sides, plastic flatware, napkins, and the juice. She swiped her hand across the faux wood tabletop. No bumps of crumbs or gummy stickiness. A benefit of being first at breakfast. She settled into the chair and surveyed the room, school memories of classmates, long-scattered after they'd left Bermuda either for college

or for a different base with their families, playing like a movie.

On the other side of her table a waffle-on-a-plate slid into view interrupting Scarlett's reverie.

"Good morning," said Joy-Roxanne Creighton, her best friend from this school. Joy-Roxanne also had a hair color change since school, but to black instead of to white.

Scarlett answered with, "What did you get up to last night?"

"The hotel hospitality room rocked." In Joy-Roxanne's southern lilt, she took twice as long to produce a sentence as did any Bermudian. "Everyone brought their yearbooks, and we talked and talked. The diddleyboppers relived their motorbike accidents. The stories about the parties on Hawkins Island. We even had rum and ginger beer for Dark 'n' Stormies. So where were you?" Joy-Roxanne sipped her drink, one elbow on the table, one slender leg crossed over the other, the delicate scent of high-end perfume in the air. She was a cross between Cleopatra and a well-maintained Auntie Mame.

Before her trip, Scarlett's feeling had been of island claustrophobia. She'd needed to see something different as

twenty-one square miles didn't contain much variety. That changed during the week of New York bustle and then the airport marathon to get to Atlanta. Now she missed the island's coziness. Scarlett took a mouthful of her juice. "I needed rest."

Joy-Roxanne gave an eye-roll, the look edged in eyeliner and mascara.

"I may have overdone my trip," Scarlett said, "planning those meetings in New York before coming here to get the most out of a plane trip off the island." She eyed Joy-Roxanne's glass glinting in the beam of an overhead light. Was that cup from the hospitality suite? Scarlett hadn't seen tomato juice at the breakfast bar. Mind your own business, love. With the side of her plastic fork she cut into the omelet and took a bite.

Joy-Roxanne shook her hair, a blunt-cut bob, a style at odds with her tennis shoes. "Y'all should come with me to the fitness room. That would perk you up."

Scarlett swallowed, ignoring Joy-Roxanne's implication. "And not to ruin your memories, but Hawkins Island is now a wedding venue."

"At least tell me Bermuda still has diddleyboppers."

“They’re as common as the cockroaches.” Young men on motorbikes dipping in and out of traffic had always been a constant on the island’s roads. “Are you ever going to outgrow tennis shoes?”

Joy-Roxanne paused in mid-nibble and stared at her dangling foot sporting a hot-pink Converse sneaker. She all but twinkled at Scarlett. No answer. Another nibble. “I suppose a wedding venue is a good follow-on for Hawkins Island. I’ll bet those parties caused more than one shotgun version of getting hitched.” Joy-Roxanne pushed aside the newspaper she’d brought with her. “Who did you meet in New York?”

“My agent and a client.” Scarlett took a bite of toasted muffin.

“You show your work in New York? Is there a demand for paintings of Bermuda?” Joy-Roxanne’s question sounded sincere.

“Those are tourist items,” said Scarlett. “Post cards, gift cards, watercolor souvenirs. Book illustrations are my bread and butter. I met with a celebrity who’s getting into writing children’s books. And with my agent.”

“Which celebrity?”

“Sorry, sworn to secrecy.” It was Scarlett’s turn to twinkle.

“So, kids books?”

“Consistent money if you become a thing,” said Scarlett. “Haven’t you ever noticed what kids do to books?”

Joy-Roxanne’s head-shake was as slow as her lilt. She was widowed like Scarlett, but childless, unless you believed the rumors that used to be scandalous but were now just another form of family.

While Scarlett and Joy-Roxanne talked, other early bird classmates gathered for their breakfasts. They chattered, collected food, and then settled, like a flock of happy starlings on a lawn, at the crowded table-island in the middle of the room. Stragglers shoved together smaller tables and dragged over unoccupied chairs. By the entrance, Maura Dunahee had a man buttonholed.

Joy-Roxanne swished her hand in the air over her head at some woman who waved back. Scarlett didn’t recognize her. Maybe she was from another class, or a classmate whose father’s assignment to Bermuda had ended when Scarlett’s dad’s assignment had begun? Among the other people at the reunion were friends who’d left the island,

none of them ever expecting to see each other again. Because of the churn of military personnel, the pattern of American social life overseas shifted and changed like the patterns in a kaleidoscope. Not only was that normal military life, but what kid imagines a fiftieth reunion?

“I don’t know half these people,” said Joy-Roxanne, “but it’s weird. Do you know...” she stopped and scanned the room. “No, she’s not here. Anyhow, I met this lady last night—Hadley-Hallie-Holly, something like that—and we lived in the same house in St. George’s, two years apart.” Joy-Roxanne’s voice squeaked. “We had the same bedroom. Can you feature it? I swear, all night we compared things we remembered about that house. We both even knew the neighbor’s dog.”

Scarlett laughed at her friend’s enthusiasm. Joy-Roxanne was the same perky person she used to be, and it was nice to remember that dog by her house, a house that Scarlett could practically see from her house across the harbor. “Lulu,” she said.

“What?”

“That dog. By your house. Lulu.”

“You remember the oddest details.”

Details. That was Scarlett. Remembering Lulu's owners, though, wasn't difficult if you'd regularly seen them around the island. Lulu had been fifteen when she'd died.

Joy-Roxanne went back to people-watching. She turned this way and that. Half-standing, she waved at those she recognized, far more than Scarlett knew. Joy-Roxanne popped up again. "There she is. Be right back."

Scarlett watched her friend approach Hadley-Hallie-Holly and launch into an animated conversation. From long habit, Scarlett fished around in her purse and pulled out her sketchbook and a pencil. She flipped to a blank page.

A tune attracted Scarlett's attention. Harry McCollum again. He moved towards the women through the breakfast bunch. He inched behind Joy-Roxanne with his plate at shoulder height, maybe so he wouldn't bump anyone this time. Your own food matters.

Scarlett could hear the catchy melody Harry whistled—the theme from a popular television crime show. The tune carried through the buzz of conversation and dimmed the shine on Scarlett's memory of him. Her juice finished, she sipped her coffee. He nodded as a woman, maybe Maura?,

gestured to an empty seat. Scarlett captured the small moment on the blank paper.

Joy-Roxanne had left the woman she'd spotted and continued to work her way around the room. Scarlett saw a man at a table pour something from a container into her friend's cup. She envied Joy-Roxanne's ease with other people and sometimes wished it was one of her skills. Her mother's voice came to her. "Get out there. Mingle. Don't be such a wallflower." No wonder kids hated having their parents chaperone. As nice as sociability was, though, Scarlett prized her art. Attention to detail was her hallmark. Standing at the back of a crowd and watching the small things was her technique. Her repeated contracts as a book illustrator proved that technique's worth.

Scarlett opened Joy-Roxanne's newspaper after putting down her coffee cup. Same-old, same-old. Political head butting. If it bleeds it leads. Something about the FBI and an increase in violence concerning robbery and identity theft. The dire state of the environment. And everyone's favorite, the weather. The forecast for the local area showed that they'd soon be enjoying blue-sky days.

With a sneaker-squeak on the intricately tiled floor, Joy-Roxanne lighted in her chair. She'd picked up a banana in her travels, one of the big ones so different from the tiny bananas grown in Bermudian gardens, or had grown in them until another hurricane struck. After that last storm, a real tempest, Scarlett found out how time-consuming replanting a grove is. In her half-hazy reverie while Joy-Roxanne settled down again, Scarlett let her gaze drift across the crowd. She waited for her recognition of anyone to snap into focus, a young lens on these old people. To herself, Scarlett said, "I don't think he's who he says he is."

"Who?" Joy-Roxanne, swiveled in her seat to regard Scarlett, the banana now peeled to half-staff, its top bit off. "Or is this another sworn secret?"

Scarlett hadn't thought she'd spoken aloud. She put the coffee cup up to her mouth. Her bangles tinkled. No talking with your mouth full.

Someone brushed against Scarlett's shoulder. "Oops, sorry."

Scarlett glanced around, registering a bulky Irish sweater, that was a bit stretched. The old-luggage-smelling man Maura had buttonholed earlier.

“Aren’t you...?” he paused as if searching for her name.

“Scarlett,” she said.

“Scarlett. That’s right. I sometimes get things mixed up when I first hear them.”

“Not a problem,” said Scarlett. “And, forgive me, you are?”

“Pye Dalton. P. Y. E., not P.I.E.”

“I don’t think I remember...”

“I was a few years behind you.”

“Ah. Okay.” She smiled and nodded.

The man performed the same introduction with Joy-Roxanne.

An incipient hot flash threatened Scarlett. What had stressed her? She held her non-bangled wrist against the table top to cool it, a pulse point. This Pye Dalton and that musty sweater. He must be roasting under that wool. Atlanta wasn’t cold, more damp and chilly, almost Bermudian. As if to remind her about her own girth, her waistband chose that moment to pinch. One Frisbee-omelet shouldn’t be so filling.

Pye moved on.

“So who isn’t who he says he is?” repeated Joy-Roxanne. She leaned over the little table towards Scarlett. The empty juice cup wobbled.

“Quiet,” said Scarlett. As if anyone could overhear them in that chirpy, chattering flock.

“You can’t say that and then stop. Spill.”

Scarlett looked around the room. The other people stood far enough away. They couldn’t overhear. “Harry McCollum.”

Joy-Roxanne swiveled back to the room, again half rising.

“Sit down, for crying out loud,” said Scarlett. “You look like a meerkat.”

“Harry?” asked Joy-Roxanne. “Really? What makes you think he’s not who he says he is? Why would someone do that? Did he say something wrong?”

“That’s just it,” said Scarlett, leaning forward on the table. “He doesn’t say anything original. Last night, all he did was repeat things.”

Without warning, again, Joy-Roxanne popped out of her chair. She grabbed her used napkins and cup as well as Scarlett’s.

“Where are you...” No use in finishing the sentence. Joy-Roxanne was gone. Joy-Roxanne ignored the trash bin closest to them, maneuvered around the room, and sidled up to the bin near the table where Maura Dunahee had sat next to Harry McCollum. To his credit, in Scarlett’s opinion, Harry looked uneasy. Or maybe she was projecting? Maura, their former class president and an organizer of the reunion, was the girl whom Harry had chosen over Scarlett.

To Scarlett’s personal embarrassment, when she saw Maura and Harry together now, her apparently dormant teen resentment returned. The irritation eclipsed Scarlett’s doubts about Harry’s identity. Funny, how something forty years ago could even matter. Why should she care? Her caring about it bugged her. This was childish. Was it that, if you had no resolution, ancient grudges picked up where they left off as did youthful friendships? Last night, seeing Maura giggling at Harry, Scarlett had imagined her strapped into one of Bermuda’s historic tourist attractions, the ducking stool. Scarlett had enjoyed her vision of Maura splashed into the harbor and hauled out, dripping. Harry could sit in the stocks in St. George’s. Why was she even

thinking this? She turned her chair, flipped her sketchbook's page, and sketched a scene of people in front of the dining area's window.

Joy-Roxanne returned to the table. "No dice on gossip," she said. "She's quizzing him on his life." Joy-Roxanne gave Scarlett an exaggerated eye-roll. "Boring."

Joy-Roxanne's report brought Scarlett back to the present. "Thanks, Sherlock."

"You're welcome, Miss Marple. Somebody has to collect clues."

As clues went, Scarlett thought Joy-Roxanne hadn't found much. Which still left Scarlett wondering whether this man saying he was Harry McCollum really was the Harry she'd known?



In the corporately neutral, earth-toned hallway Scarlett and Joy-Roxanne stood at the bank of elevators. When an elevator arrived, the door struggled to open. The door

closed before they could step in. And struggled to open, again.

“That didn’t inspire any confidence,” said Scarlett. “Let’s take the stairs.”

Joy-Roxanne made a face. “Eight floors?”

“The walk will do us good, Miss Tennis Shoes.”

“They’re for aerobics. I dance to stay fit. I don’t use that boring stair machine.”

“I’ll keep you entertained.”

They trotted up the first flight. Scarlett was glad to be inside as even seeing the gray light through the stairwell window made her shiver. Becoming used to the American winter chill took longer than a week.

Joy-Roxanne returned to her earlier question, “What makes you think Harry’s not who he says he is?”

“Whistling.” Scarlett glanced around. “Nice stairs. They aren’t usually carpeted.”

“Whistling?” asked Joy-Roxanne. “Really? Whistling?”

“Last night, after the bar, when I walked down the hallway...”

“You pooped out,” interrupted Joy-Roxanne as they cleared the second flight and continued climbing. “You should have come to the hospitality suite with us.”

As Scarlett grasped the handrail, pulling on it just a bit and making her bangles tinkle. She didn’t bother repeating her reasons for going back to her room. “So there I was. Going down the hall behind Harry. His room is on the same floor. He was whistling.” Scarlett’s heart thudded as they reached the third flight. She needed to slow her climb.

“So?” Joy-Roxanne took a breath. “People do whistle.”

Scarlett slowed her climb.

Joy-Roxanne matched it without protest passed the entry to the fourth floor. “I think. We’ve proven. We can climb. Stairs.”

“We can. The stairs. Might kill. Us. But we can.” Scarlett pulled at her fine-gauge cotton sweater to puff air over her skin, wishing she hadn’t worn a turtleneck. Hot flashes and exercise weren’t a happy combination. This puffing wasn’t worth the effort, and it wasn’t just her. Joy-Roxanne’s perfume had bloomed with the warmth of her activity.

At the next exit to some floor, Scarlett saw it was the fifth according to a number painted on the wall, the two

women paused in the hallway, breathing deeply. After taking time to study the paint, the carpet, the handrails, and examine the ceiling, they walked to an elevator. Scarlett stepped purposefully as they went, casually stretching her steps to keep her now-tight leg muscles from cramping. At the elevator bank, they waited in breathy silence. They took the first arrival. It was another one with a clunky door and a latent smell of something spicy, like aftershave.

In the elevator, Joy-Roxanne returned to asking about Harry. “So what’s with your fixation about this whistling?”

“Harry hated whistling. I remember that.” Scarlett’s breathing was easier. “One day, a bunch of us were walking on base—maybe going to the movies?—when someone whistled the beginning of the song from that World War Two movie. The Colonel Somebody March. Harry almost went ballistic. Never said why, just yelled at the guy, ‘Cut it out.’ He did it any time anyone whistled.”

“That’s it?” said Joy-Roxanne as the elevator slowed and sank to a stop with a muted thud.

“If you’d heard him yell about it, you wouldn’t say that,” Scarlett said as the doors tried to open but stuck. Instead

of opening, the doors chunked back, as if to close. “Is this that same elevator?”

Joy-Roxanne banged on the door with her fist and continued with her train of thought. “He could have changed for any reason.”

With a shudder, the obstruction gave way, and the elevator’s doors slid open revealing another beige hallway.

“Someone needs to tell the staff about this door,” said Scarlett.

“Maybe Harry hated the song? Or, since then, he’s had a brain tumor that warped his personality so that now he whistles?” Joy-Roxanne sounded as scornful as a sibling. “It’s been forty years, Scarlett. You can’t say someone’s not himself if you haven’t known him.”

“That’s not all,” said Scarlett. She paused and checked the number on a dark-beige door before she swiped her keycard. This was going to sound silly. “He never starts any conversations, he never does the remembering.” What she didn’t add was Harry didn’t remember her. Vanity? Yes, she and Harry had dated ages ago, but still, the school hadn’t been that big—a hundred and fifty, tops? Scarlett pushed open her door. Inside she threw her purse on the small sofa

in the tiny foyer to the room. “He listens, and then he puts together the information everyone has been talking about and recycles it.”

“Crime of the century,” said Joy-Roxanne, still in sibling-mode. “A man who listens. He’s chatty enough in the school social group.”

“And anywhere else?” asked Scarlett. Her friend was one of the people-finders for the group.

Joy-Roxanne stared into space. “We didn’t find him on Classmates,” she said. “He got in touch with us on the social media page.”

“What does that tell you?” asked Scarlett. Had Joy-Roxanne’s scoffing tone decreased?

“It tells me he’s on some social media but not all of it. Not everyone is.” Joy-Roxanne changed the subject. “So what shall we do today? Shopping? Sight-seeing?”

They settled on shopping, a warm, indoor activity. Joy-Roxanne left for her room to freshen up while Scarlett did the same.



Later, as Scarlett was leaving her room, and as her door closed, she saw that man, Pye, walking away from the elevators. He stopped at one room, but didn't go in. She stepped back into the shallow recess for her door, turning as if to re-enter. Of course she'd see the reunion people in the halls, but she didn't have to run to catch up with the strangers. And he smelled.

She glanced down the hallway again and saw he was at a different door. She didn't see him look in her direction. Had he forgotten his room number? Maybe the dreaded 'senior moment?' He tried another door before disappearing into a room.

Scarlett tugged at her jacket collar and straightened her neck scarf as she resumed her walk down the hallway. She hoped she didn't get that junky elevator. The stairs? The twitch of a calf muscle vetoed a repeat in the stairwell.



In Joy-Roxanne's SUV, an SUV that, to Scarlett, occupied space like a tank compared to Bermuda's smaller cars, the GPS guided them around Atlanta's suburbs. This

talking travel guide announcing where and when to turn amused her. Bermuda's fish-hook-shape was perhaps 21 miles long and a mile wide with only three major roads going east and west. Tourists and pizza delivery drivers were usually the only lost travelers.

A few hours later, the two women returned to their rooms with assorted shopping bags. Joy-Roxanne had soft, packable items she could squeeze into the nooks in her suitcase. Scarlett had bought a couple books, items which were duty free coming onto the island. She made an exception about paying customs fees for a pair of cute shoes—red pumps—a weakness.

Scarlett then decreed a nap. “The rush of New York, and then last night...”

“You didn't even party late.” Joy-Roxanne, the interrupter. “You're getting old.”

“I am not,” said Scarlett, “I have red shoes.”

“And at your age, you'll wind up with a broken ankle, even in those,” retorted Joy-Roxanne wobbling her feet in her sneakers.

“They're not that high, and you're still in the way of my nap.” Scarlett said the words lightly, but a break was in

order from an afternoon of Joy-Roxanne's perfume. "I'll meet you in the lobby."

Joy-Roxanne laughed. "I'll see you then."



As her room door closed on her friend, Scarlett reconsidered her problem with Harry McCollum. Despite Joy-Roxanne's assertion that anything could happen in forty years, Harry didn't act like someone who'd had a brain tumor. He was confident, quick-moving, sharp-minded. He was also more youthful than she expected. Something was out of kilter.

As Scarlett laid out her clothes for the evening later on, she mulled over what she saw from her former classmates interacting on social media. They had structures defining their lives—favorite topics, GIFs, memes, or selfies. Their albums of scanned photographs from then, and digital pictures from now, showcased their lives and personalities. Harry volunteered nothing. Then again, people can be private. All you know about them is that they harvested their crops or won 500 coins.

In the bathroom, as she rolled her hair on curlers and spritzed the her head with hair spray to hold the curl in place, her mind continued to tick over about Harry. She hadn't picked up any familiar vibe from his own page. She wasn't media friends with him, but in their alumni group she could see the items he'd shared. He impressed her as a collector, a taker-in of information, a recycler and reorganizer of the collected tidbits—all of it gleaned from others. The things she gathered from their classmates were full remembrances. From Harry, only an echo. Who was *this* Harry McCollum? She'd expected something of a connection because they could now laugh now about that silly teen incident. But there had been nothing. The only common descriptor she'd have used for the two Harry McCollums, young or old, would be tall. You can't fake tall.

The bed beckoned—naptime before a busy evening—but instead of a snooze, Scarlett, ever interested in details, settled down at the desk in the room and opened her computer notebook, what she called her large-print version compared to her phone. She jumped through the hotel's hoops to connect with the free Wi-Fi and a few minutes later, she was online. Google was her friend.

When she researched subjects for her book illustrations at home, Scarlett always needed more than one browser window open on her laptop with at least four tabs open in each window. She'd collect text, images, and URLs, then copy them into her document. Practically second nature to her.

Today, however, in her search for information about Harry McCollum, she had only his name at the top of the document and one notation about a man of the same name. That man had died in Vietnam. Scarlett paused and thought of the Harry she'd known at school. She hoped the man who'd died hadn't been him. Another listing for a Harry McCollum from a popular alumni site had the man graduating from a stateside school far away from any military installation.

The more Scarlett didn't find about a correctly aged Harry McCollum, the more curious she became about the man here at the reunion. It was one thing for someone not to be findable — some people weren't online. It was another thing to find nothing on a person who had plugged himself into enough social networking sites to be active and attend reunions, but who had a social site page with

few updates and no information to identify him. Even at her age, Scarlett had seen parents of online friends with more active social accounts. In the alumni group, Harry commented on updates shared by other classmates, but only since Maura had announced the reunion.

Scarlett's search had turned up nothing. How could there be nothing? This mystery was eating into her time.

Roused by that sense of a missed appointment, Scarlett glanced at the timestamp on her screen. Her afternoon had seeped away like water out of a fractured flowerpot. She needed to be at the hotel's front door in twenty minutes to catch a ride to this evening's reunion celebration at the rented clubhouse.

Scarlett slapped her notebook shut. Nineteen minutes later, with hair curlers scattered in the bathroom sink and her ponytail pinned into an elegant loop for evening, she emerged from the stairwell door nearest the lobby. She heard a commotion from her former classmates before she saw them.

Scarlett spied Joy-Roxanne. "What's going on?"

“Two people lost their wallets. They said that burglar must be here, but if you ask me, those wallets are in the hospitality suite.”

Maura’s voice cut through the white noise of chatter. She was small, but mighty. “Now we’re here, who’s riding with whom? Harry, do you have a ride?”

“Come on,” Joy-Roxanne said to Scarlett. “You’re with me.”

Was that a lip-curl of derision on her friend’s face? Silently, Scarlett followed her friend. Once they were in Joy-Roxanne’s SUV, they were underway.

The GPS guide’s instructions were accurate and Joy-Roxanne and Scarlett arrived “at their destination on the right.” Joy-Roxanne drove past a white building on the shore of a small lake and pulled into a parking area.

“Well that’s a king-sized gazebo,” said Scarlett. The too-small dock might service a rowboat, as if there was room on that small lake for actual boating. After years of living in Bermuda, she was a water-size snob. Nothing compared to an ocean.

Out of the car, the wind, fresh and brisk, rippled the little lake's water. Scarlett and Joy-Roxanne tried to protect their hairdos. Windblown was never Scarlett's best look.

Inside the building Maura and the rest of the reunion committee had deployed the tablecloths, the centerpieces, and had arranged a drinks bar. Maura was now bending the ear of the disk jockey. People filtered in, some recognizable to Scarlett, some not. Harry, of course, stood almost head and shoulders over the crowd. The sensation of her eyes narrowing, and tension in her jaw, forced Scarlett to look away. Tonight's for fun. Pffft to Harry.

The caterers provided a tasty buffet, and the bartender knew his way around a cocktail shaker. Scarlett and Joy-Roxanne danced to oldies along with other women. A few brave men, fueled by rum and ginger beer, joined them, Pye Dalton among them.

Bursts of light from cameras told Scarlett their flashback fun would show up on social media.

"Time for a break," Joy-Roxanne declared. The heat from her dancing made her Cleopatra-scent aura more potent. The Righteous Brothers now crooned from the speakers.

Scarlett walked off the floor ahead of Joy-Roxanne, but headed for the bar instead of their table. “A Sprite, please,” she said to the bartender. Joy-Roxanne wasn’t at their table so Scarlett sat down and watched the married couples swaying to the righteous melody.

Just as God granted the singer’s request to have love sped to him, the music went down. Maura’s amplified voice replaced the blue-eyed soul. “I guess we’ve gotten too vigorous,” she announced. “We’ve had items go missing. Please stop what you’re doing and check the floor around your feet and under the tables.” Maura continued with items from three women: an evening clutch bag, a jeweled watch, and something else that Maura garbled.

Scarlett checked the area under her chair. Nothing. No one else volunteered a discovery. Scarlett looked for the man who said he was Harry. Could crashing reunions really be a lucrative scam? It didn’t seem likely, but if he was the thief from the newspapers, he’d have fled with his booty. But there he was. Pye, in that bulky sweater, was with him. Someone aimed a camera at them, but Harry sidestepped the targeted subjects before the flash went off. From what Scarlett saw, motorbikes still held center stage with the

guys. One man held his fists at forehead height and twisted his right hand up and down in place. Gooseneck handlebars. Because Bermuda didn't issue driving licenses for cars, or even motorcycles with gears, until a person was 21, the motorbikes of their teen years were the car talk for the former diddleyboppers.

If Harry were a thief which still seemed likely to Scarlett, and if he were a pickpocket, an old pickpocket whose skills had slipped and he needed victims with reactions as slow as his own, why was he still here with the loot?

Scarlett leaned back in her chair, took a long drink of her Sprite and eyed the men. Or was she ignorant about pickpockets? She decided to mingle. Find out what the guys had to say about their classmates, actually one classmate in particular.

She mingled. Mom would have been proud. Scarlett stopped by each table to introduce herself to anyone she didn't recognize, to ask for names, to shake hands, to inquire about which years people lived on the island and find out the names of their houses. To learn who they remembered and who they didn't. She used friendly nosiness as her cover to shadow Harry. Apparently, her

sleuthing skills were as poor as she assumed Harry's pickpocket skills were. That is, if this man whom she suspected really wasn't Harry. Had she imagined all the discrepancies?

As Scarlett reached Harry's group, motorbikes were still the topic of discussion. Girls who'd ridden 'bikes, Scarlett included, often owned pink or blue Mobylettes. A pink Mobylette with gooseneck handlebars would be as impressive as those small cars with loud mufflers that sound like lawnmowers. Since she hadn't ever tried to jazz up her bike—her dad would have had a cow—she had nothing to add to the motorbike conversation. By now, Harry was yukking it up with the guys, throwing out references, along with the others, to Zündapp and Cyrus, two of the big names for 'bikes.

She moved away from the guys. Even a competent feigning of interest, but with no real contribution, looked sketchy after more than a few minutes. If she outed him publicly, though, it would satisfy her to see Maura take him down, and Maura would. Oh, Scarlett, Scarlett. What a petty vengeful imp lives in your head. "I've got to find another way to expose him."

“Expose who? That sounds racy.”

Scarlett jumped. Had she spoken aloud again? She turned to see, not Joy-Roxanne, her expected interrupter, but Pye Dalton. Scarlett’s face grew hot. Her smile felt tight, lips clamped, no teeth showing. She couldn’t say how she thought another classmate was a crook. “How are you enjoying the evening?”

“About ready to call it a night,” said Pye. He had a jacket over his arm. “The years are catching up with me. Not like those times on Hopkins Island.”

She bristled over his mispronunciation, but let it slide. Senior moments. “Don’t remind me,” Scarlett said. She’d had her own Dark ‘n’ Stormy initiation on the party island in the ‘60s with others of the senior class.

“See you tomorrow at breakfast?” asked Pye.

“You can count on it,” said Scarlett, although, if she followed Harry to the after-party in the hospitality suite—if that’s where he went—she might not be up early. A lack of sleep was now on a par with youthful hangovers.

As Pye left, Joy-Roxanne arrived and settled in next to Scarlett, the scent of rum drifting from the short plastic tumbler in her hand, competing with her perfume.

“After-party?” asked Joy-Roxanne.

“Why not,” said Scarlett. She lifted her own cup and toasted Joy-Roxanne.



At the after-party, Scarlett had carried around ginger ale, fizzy and pale brown as if mixer had liquor added. She hoped it would keep her from having too many offers to fill her glass with other drinks. One man, though, a guy with a party animal rep from back in the day, asked Scarlett if her glass contained ginger ale. When she said yes, he gave her a sympathetic look and tapped his plastic cup against hers. “Here’s to sobriety.”

With wry amusement, Scarlett hoped her agent and the authors of the children’s books she illustrated never developed this opinion about ginger ale.

Joy-Roxanne percolated around the room. The woman was in her element.

Harry proved to be a late partier, but was he also drinking ginger ale? The remarks Scarlett had overheard from him aroused her suspicions: where people lived, what

their jobs were, whether they had kids or grandkids. Information collection like she had done. But what could he be up to? Insurance sales?



The next morning, Scarlett was surprised by an early morning visitor. Maura Dunahee.

“Would you like to go stair-walking?”

“What?” Stair-walking? With Maura?

“I haven’t seen much of you. We can talk about old times.”

“I really have to take a shower,” Scarlett said, demurring. Her ponytail looked like a donkey-tail.

“Maybe at breakfast, then?”

“Sure,” said Scarlett, still flustered. Joy-Roxanne would get a kick out of this.

After her shower, Scarlett laid out nice clothes for the hotel breakfast room. She refused to look like a dead lizard that the cat dragged in, especially if she’d be breakfasting

with Maura. Her outfit coordinated with the new red pumps.

Sharp bangs on her door startled her. Scarlett put her eye up to the peephole. She expected to see an after-party die-hard at the wrong room or maybe no one. Earlier, someone had rattled her door handle, but when she'd called out to wait a minute, there was no reply. This time, Joy-Roxanne stood outside.

Scarlett pulled open the door, standing behind it in her nightgown.

Joy-Roxanne pushed in. "Maura is dead." Joy-Roxanne collapsed on the small couch.

"What?" Was Joy-Roxanne drunk?

"In the stairwell. Holly and I found her. We were walking the stairs and Holly was telling me she thought someone had been in her room while she was gone last night."

"I thought you hated..."

"I didn't like how winded I got on those stairs." Joy-Roxanne brushed aside Scarlett's confusion. "She's banged up. Blood in a puddle."

“Did she fall?” Falling was Scarlett’s immediate thought though blood made little sense because this hotel had carpeted its stairs.

“I don’t know,” said Joy-Roxanne. “She was just there. Crumpled in a ball.”

“That’s terrible.” To Scarlett, Joy-Roxanne’s description sounded fantastical, but why would she invent something crazy like that?

“Holly went to tell the front desk.” Joy-Roxanne’s voice was pitched higher than usual.

Scarlett lowered her gaze, shaking her head in disbelief. “Which stairwell is she in?” It couldn’t be true. Maura didn’t deserve this. Maybe tripping in the parking lot and scraped knees, but not this. A clinic visit, but not a coffin.

Joy-Roxanne waved her hand to the left, but didn’t speak.

A few moments later, out in the hallway, Scarlett crept down the stairs. Something huddled near the edge of a landing, only just visible. Voices with an urgent tone rose from lower down. Scarlett scampered down, careful not to touch the railing. The heap was Maura and around her head on the carpet was a reddish brown halo of a puddle. From her research for illustrations for medical texts, Scarlett

remembered pictures like this. That much blood wasn't from a simple wound caused by falling, especially not on a carpet. As the voices drew nearer, Scarlett returned to her floor. Those people could be the witnesses.

Back at her room, she rapped at the door and Joy-Roxanne opened it.

“I need to get cleaned up and dressed,” Scarlett said. “Shall I meet you in the breakfast room?”

Joy-Roxanne glanced at the door, her arms folded in front of her.

“With everyone around, things will be fine.” Scarlett put her arm around her friend. “Just don't be alone with anyone you don't know.” Too late to save her decency, Scarlett rummaged in her suitcase and pulled out the red silk dressing gown she traveled with in case of mischief fire alarms at midnight. “I'll stand with you at the elevator. Is that okay?”

“Now I feel like a baby,” said Joy-Roxanne. “And I even take self-defense classes.”

Joy-Roxanne's face hardened into an expression Scarlett could only equate to a constipated chipmunk.

“I'll be okay.”

“I’ll walk with you,” said Scarlett, and she picked up her key card from the dresser.

With Joy-Roxanne delivered to an empty elevator, Scarlett completed an abbreviated version of her morning routine. Breakfast was necessary. She pulled on the chosen clothes, but hesitated about the red shoes. Now, her shoes reminded her of Maura’s blood. The muted wail of emergency vehicle sirens came through the unopenable windows. In a hurry, she shoved her feet into the new pumps.

Out in the hallway, Scarlett shut her room door and set off toward the elevator. As she walked, another door closed in the hallway and Pye Dalton, in a jogging jacket and loose workout pants, carrying a small suitcase, trotted to catch up. His face was red with a sheen of sweat. Nowadays, everyone exercised in the morning. This time, she couldn’t avoid him and what do you say to a casual acquaintance on a morning when someone you know died? Scarlett stuck to a boilerplate greeting: How are you? Fine? And you? Maybe Pye didn’t know about Maura. Scarlett didn’t want to start that kind of conversation with him.

The sound of the elevator's arrival stalled their desultory casual-acquaintance-conversation. A relief to Scarlett at first, but this was the glitchy elevator. How busy were the local elevator repair technicians that they couldn't get this fixed?

Inside the elevator, Scarlett turned as the doors jerked shut and she leaned back, her hands resting on the waist-high rail around the walls. An aftershave scent hung in the air, but not from Pye.

Pye stepped in front of the control panel and reached down. Scarlett assumed he pushed the lobby button. The doors closed with a clunk. Scarlett wished for a quick descent. She'd used up her conversation out in the hall.

The floor indicator pinged once and Pye reached down towards the control panel again. He pressed a button. The car juddered to a halt. The doors stayed closed.

Pye's action confused Scarlett. "What are you doing?"

"Shut up," Said Pye Dalton.

His reply startled her, but not into silence. "I will not shut up. You start this thing, right now."

"Shut. Up." Pye's hand came up. A gun.

Scarlett thoughts piled up like a train wreck.

“Here’s what we’ll do,” said Pye. “In the lobby, you’ll walk ahead of me, straight out the main door.”

“What are you talking about?” The man made no sense.

“Then, you turn left and we walk on around the building until I tell you to stop.”

“Why?” What was up with him?

“Do it or stay here in the same condition as that other waste of space.”

“Maura? You did that to Maura?”

“Get over there.” Dalton motioned at the door with the pistol.

This is impossible. How could this happen? In a safe part of the city? Why was her stomach shaking? Don’t throw up. Don’t throw up. Oh dear lord, don’t let my legs go out.

Dalton moved behind her. “Don’t be stupid. Point blank range.” He poked her with the pistol. “When the doors open, go straight out the main doors.” He pushed a button. The car wobbled into motion.

Frenzy paralyzed Scarlett’s mind, the pieces in front of her, but frozen, like a single frame of a movie. The floors pinged by. Her mind raced. How to get away? Heat radiated from Dalton. He was so close. The gun poked her in her

back. It underlined his control. A bullet would shatter her spine. Did he care that it would ricochet? Would it hit her again?

The elevator car sank and gave a cushiony whoosh as it settled to a stop.

Scarlett's heart hammered as Dalton pressed the muzzle of the gun into her as if to move her forward. She had no place to go. The pressure on her back remained, but didn't increase. The doors moved as if to open, but stuck.

"Move!" said Dalton.

Who? Her? "The door sticks," she answered in a stutter.

"I said move," Dalton repeated, as if he, too, worked from a frozen mental loop.

Scarlett leaned away from the gun's pressure but the satiny stainless steel doors held her. A gun and a hard place. Their reflections in the door were only hazy colors. Anger replaced fear. People forced to leave like this didn't come back. He wanted her for a reason. She wasn't going with him and she needed to alert others. She would do something, anything. She tensed, ready to scream at passers-by about Dalton: Gun!

As the elevator shuddered open, the hallway was as empty as if this were a Twilight Zone episode. Nobody was there to warn. Still, Scarlett pushed. Slide through fast. Squeeze. The metal of the door scraped her face, but the gun muzzle pressure vanished. She was out. The door would trap him. Run. Run!

The slick sole of her new shoe slipped on the carpet and Scarlett fell. The jolt of the fall shocked her. One ankle twisted. Burning on her palms. An explosion behind her. A shot? She scrambled. Her shoes slid. Pain from her ankle. Go! Go! Down the hallway, a tunnel to get through. Run, while he was wedged. She stumbled. Where was her shoe?

Bang! Another explosion. Dodge. Someone loomed. Blocked. McCollum? A gun, too? In it together. Scarlett stopped. No further. An enemy behind and in front. Trapped. But, why? McCollum reached out for her and Scarlett fought. Pain in her injured ankle. She lurched. McCollum's mouth was moving, but his words were only noise. She didn't care what he said. She was not going with him. People would know he was taking her.

Scarlett found herself hauled around a corner before she caught enough breath to scream. She staggered. McCollum

pushed her away. Other hands grabbed her and yanked. A gang? McCollum turned, his back to her. The other hands became arms. The arms pulled her behind the reception desk and someone shoved her to the floor.

The roar in her ears faded.

“It’s okay, you’re safe. It’s okay.”

Scarlett looked up, a woman. The woman—the one Harry had been talking to the other morning—had a..., a carapace? No, that’s insects, turtles. The woman had a protective thing. The thing sounded like K-, like carapace. Not flak jacket—a photo of her dad. The word had a K-sound. The K-sound. What was the word? Her brain whirled from fight or flight. What had been paralytic was now a swirl of thoughts and images. A kaleidoscope.

“I’m police.” The woman pushed on her. “Stay down.”

Another bang. Two more.

The woman pressed Scarlett onto the floor, hugging her.

Shouts. Pounding feet.

Eventually, Scarlett stood, favoring her sore ankle. How long had they been lying there? EMTs rumbled an ambulance gurney past, an exercise-suit-clad figure on it, strapped in place. A short time later the clamor of an

emergency vehicle rose from the main entry doors and then wailed away into the distance. Maura? Pye?



In the breakfast room, Scarlett shivered at a table, a paper cup of hot coffee held in her hands, its heat ineffective. Someone had draped a jacket over her shoulders. The woman officer hovered but didn't sit. A medical technician had checked Scarlett, wrapped her ankle, and quickly cleaned her scraped palms and knees. No major injuries.

Harry McCollum stood at the intersection of the hallway, the lobby, and the breakfast room. Other men in Kevlar vests talked with him. She knew the word for the vests now that her mind functioned—Kevlar. Harry took a step back from the little grouping, paused, turned, and came towards Scarlett's table.

“How are you doing?” he asked.

“Jittery.”

“Shock. Drink your coffee.” He smiled.

“Obviously, you’re a policeman,” she said, “but what happened?”

Harry hitched up the lower edge of his vest as he sat down on a chair. “I’m FBI...”

“FBI? For *our* reunion?” Scarlett blinked three times. “That’s a little over the top.”

“Yours was just the next gate-crashing he’d scheduled.”

“He? He who? Pye?”

“Al Latoona.”

“Who? Nobody named that went to our school.”

“No, Al Latoona’s a scam artist, con man, identity thief. Part of an organized crime group. Interstate stolen property. As one of their tricks, they buy yearbooks.”

“Yearbooks? Why would anyone want those?”

“Research on attendees.”

“Where do you get yearbooks?” This made no sense.

“Estate sales. eBay. Alumni sites.”

Harry had offhandedly produced a list about something Scarlett had never imagined. “Our yearbooks are at our alumni site,” she said. “You almost need a link to find the page, but anyone can see them.”

“I know.” Harry’s chuckle was rueful. “And Latoona figured it out, too. It’s his M.O. On the same level as someone who goes around graveyards and collects names to work up a fresh identity. If there’s a background check, something will pop. Latoona uses yearbooks to get into online alumni groups. He reads through the group’s conversations to find out about people, about friends of the person he’s picked who he might look like. We’re pretty sure he banks on everyone having changed since they were in school.”

“What if someone in the online group knows him well?”

“He backs out, cuts his losses. Ghosts.”

“And if no one knows him?”

“He shows up at a reunion, steals whatever portable valuables he spots. Jewelry, like last night, and going through rooms during the reunion’s main event when all the classmates are out of the hotel. Credit cards, cash, mobile devices. Then he fades away. He has an RV. It’s parked about two miles from here and he has an enclosed trailer attached for a motorcycle. He can drive off without being connected to the ‘cycle, in case anyone noticed it. After a few years of tracking trends, we knew we had a

problem, but we're always playing catch-up. We finally zeroed in on him, and others, and got on their tails. This is a long-term project. Recently we've linked three deaths to him."

"Oh, my god," said Scarlet. A consuming shiver overtook her. "Maura."

Harry McCollum said nothing.

"But, you? And our class? How did you...?" Scarlett trailed off.

"Of the people on our team, I most looked like someone in your yearbooks — Harry McCollum. I'm also generally the right age, old. So I and my team infiltrated along with Latoona."

"So, you're not Harry? And you have a team?"

"Agent Robin Whitfield. I'm afraid your Harry died in Vietnam. You met one of my colleagues."

"The woman officer? How did she know...?"

"Yes, the woman officer. The hotel manager knew we were here. I didn't have time to prepare for the role like Latoona did. Last night, I thought 'diddleybopper' would give me away. I thought it was a headband with bobbing things on springs, those gizmos people wear at parties."

“A diddleybopper’s a guy on a ‘bike, a motorbike,” said Scarlett. She gave a ragged laugh. “Pye, um, Al Latoona? He did mess up, but I didn’t notice. He said Hopkins Island instead of Hawkins Island.” She choked. What had been a laugh turned into a sob. “It’s a good thing I’m not a detective.”

“You’re not that bad. You had me figured out.”



The next day, on the elevator ride to the lobby, the memory of yesterday’s danger made Scarlett’s heart rate skyrocket. Her doctor wouldn’t have liked her blood pressure. Still, thumping her suitcase down those flights of stairs past where Maura had breathed her last was unthinkable.

When Scarlett escaped for a second time from the elevator, she found Joy-Roxanne parked in one of the lobby’s overstuffed armchairs. Her luggage sat nearby, she had her legs crossed, a tennis-shoed foot bobbing in the air. Joy-Roxanne had already cross-examined Scarlett about the

ordeal so Scarlett had hopes of being left in peace while she waited for a taxi to the airport. She wanted to be home.

Joy-Roxanne looked sweet and soft, though this morning her perfume was only a shadow of its usual pungency, but she'd rebounded well and shifted gears. "Will you be coming to the next reunion?" she asked gently. "We'd already planned to do a get-together next year. We've even sent a deposit."

"I'm not sure," said Scarlett.

Joy-Roxanne bobbed her foot. "I think I've got a line on the real Pye Dalton although I can't find a thing on Harry McCollum."

Scarlett didn't say anything about Harry. "I don't know if I can swing another long trip to the States," she said. And if any Pye Dalton never showed up that would be fine with her. She didn't want to think of either Harry or Maura. She would plead a depleted bank balance, which was not a lie.

"Didn't I tell you?" asked Joy-Roxanne. "We're getting together in Bermuda." Her face had 'Surprise!' written all over it. "We'll be coming to see you."

End

