

TWO

The Old Lady's Night Aide

AS SHE SLIPPED INTO HER CLOGS, VENERA THOUGHT ABOUT Mrs. Gartner's attempts to learn a few words in Croatian. It reminded her of the way her beloved grandmother botched the few words she knew in English when they watched old American movies together. Would that she could afford to mangle English that way, Venera thought, not that she would want to. She learned vocabulary and grammar in school, proper pronunciation and conversational English from the TV shows and movies she watched over and over and over. She was proud of how well she spoke English, without which she would never have gotten her job.

Venera decided to look in on Mrs. Gartner to see how she seemed before getting the coffee maker started. To her relief, when she opened the bedroom door, she heard light snoring. Mrs. Gartner must have dreamt that it was morning, Venera thought, even though she said she knew it was four.

Venera left the intercom on so she would hear if Mrs. Gartner woke up, then quietly closed the door. As she returned to her bedroom off the kitchen, Venera's mind returned to strokes and what could happen with old people, triggering her fear that her grandmother might have another stroke, could even die, before she returned to Jelsa. *I will never*

forgive myself if that happens, she thought, overwhelmed with remorse about all the people she had let down when she came to America without saying goodbye.

Especially her fiancé.

Since then, despite calls, emails, texts, and postcards, she had not heard one word from him. Not one, which indicated just how hurt and angry he must have been. And who could blame him? Her family had cut her off as well, which she understood; she had shamed them before their small, tight community. However, she knew in her heart that when she returned, they would welcome her home back even if Jusef couldn't. Yet along with the remorse was the knowledge that if she hadn't come she would have spent the rest of her life regretting it. Jelsa: New York? Croatia: America? Little life: Big life. In Jelsa, she had a sense of belonging. Here in New York, even though she loved the excitement of city living, she was anonymous. How to decide? It was so confusing. Since her visa had expired, she knew if she were deported, the choice would be taken out of her hands.

Now that she was all worked up, there was no point in even trying to go back to sleep. Venera turned the volume high on the intercom in case Mrs. Gartner called out again, then opened the window and crawled onto the fire escape. The moon was hidden by clouds that left the night sky dark. A few lights were on in neighboring buildings, and the sound of the traffic could be heard. New York City, Venera mused, there was a reason it was called the city that never sleeps. At this hour in Jelsa, the only sound you might hear was the howl of mating cats.

She inhaled deeply, hoping to get a whiff of salt air from the nearby Hudson River. When she got off in the morning, Venera thought, unless the weather was really bad, she would go to the Boat Basin at 79th Street and watch the river traffic. Hopefully there would be some tugboats pushing huge cargo ships north.

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For some reason, tugboats had always captured her imagination. She would love to meet a tugboat captain to find out what his life was like. She assumed they were all men. She would ask how he chose this job. Did he dream of being a tugboat captain as a kid? Was his dad a tugboat captain? What kind of training did he need? Did he find it romantic and adventuresome or boring? How often did he get to push an ocean liner?

Living in Manhattan with all its skyscrapers and being close to the Hudson River felt like a dream come true. Venera took a moment to thank the fates for landing this job two months ago. Before that, while living in a cramped apartment with her friend in a sketchy neighborhood, sometimes at night she would walk west to the river just to see the shimmering lights of the George Washington Bridge reflected on the water. She soaked up the view, her visual candy, storing it in her memory bank to access when in all probability she would wind up returning home to the life that awaited her.

There was a chill in the air, and Venera fleetingly considered going back in. *So what if I'm cold*, she thought. People the world over are cold and starving, living in refugee camps and war zones. Feeling like she might cry, she slapped her face. *Cut that out, you're just feeling sorry for yourself, not for them. And for what? You have a home; you can return anytime you want.*

A light was on across the air shaft in the bedroom of a potbellied, middle-aged man who often stood naked by the window. Venera figured he wanted an audience as some kind of a twisted turn on. She had seen him there at different times and wondered if he spent the whole night like that. "*Pokvarenjak*," she yelled into the night. Then, in English to make sure he got the message, "Pervert." Seeing him look up to see who had spoken, she ducked down, tucking her head between her knees. She had no intention of giving him the pleasure of thinking she was watching.

He reminded her of an old man who lived in her neighborhood back home who had wandered around exposing himself to people. Venera found him creepy, but her friends found him funny and used to toss rocks at him.

One day Venera's mother caught them doing it. "Stop, stop," she yelled, shooing them away with her hands. Then, walking over to the man, she said, "Close your pants and go home. Your sister is looking for you." After steering him in the right direction, Venera's mother approached the girls. "It's not right to be mean to someone who doesn't know what he's doing. He's a little . . ." She touched her head to indicate he was crazy. "He has never harmed anyone."

At the time, Venera had been confused by her mother's response. The old man may have been harmless, and yes, it was wrong to throw rocks, but Venera had also been taught that it was wrong to show your privates in public. Which was worse? Thinking about it now, Venera didn't understand why her mother hadn't warned him to stay away from them. Just as quickly, Venera chastised herself for mentally criticizing her mother. She was so kind; she only saw the good in people.

Her thoughts turned to Mrs. Gartner's early call, and she wondered if she should tell Mrs. Haight, Mrs. Gartner's daughter, about it. During her first week on the job, Mrs. Haight had told Venera to call her right away if she noticed anything at all wrong. She was very specific. "Call me, not Rosie." This was the first time since Venera had been working for Mrs. Gartner that she had been summoned in the middle of the night. And for what? Coffee! What could she possibly have to do before dawn? To her knowledge, Mrs. Gartner had never left the apartment in the time she had been working there and had nothing pressing to do during the day. It seemed out of character and worrisome. Maybe she had had one of those mini strokes—what was the name for them? Transient something or other? That might explain

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her being disoriented. Or the beginning of dementia? Although the old lady seemed totally sharp.

Rosie had warned her that Mrs. Gartner resented anything that anyone did that took away from her own authority, especially where her daughter was involved. And Venera got it. It infantilized her. But suppose something was wrong with her?

Venera climbed back inside, feeling weighed down by the responsibility for Mrs. Gartner's well-being. No matter what, though, even if she were to call Mrs. Haight, she would have to wait until morning.