

## The Third Man

by Michael G. Ryan

Eighty-six years old, at the end of the first decade of a new century, and her phone rings. Right then, part of Elizabeth dies inside a little more. She's been dying for decades, she believes. The phone rings throughout her immaculate little bungalow, the one she's never thought of as home, the sound bouncing off tile floors and bare walls in search of her with the relentlessness of a predator. She is blessed—or cursed—with fine hearing for her age, so she goes to answer it, to find out just how bad this next little death will be. Her morbid fascination with such things in the last few years is pretty much all she has left in her quaint, calm, forgotten life. She's nothing like she used to be.

She has been watching *Wheel of Fortune* and doing better than usual. Most of the time she has no idea at all what the solution is, and it is so frustrating that she cries sometimes. The legendary Elizabeth M. Lovejoy, who was once called “Hollywood’s fresh breath of love *and* joy” by *Daily Variety*, could not contain her furious tears and hand-wringing sobs when she couldn’t come up with the puzzle solution “John Quincy Adams.” Now that she’s been out of the public eye for so long that many believe she has already died, according to those dead pool games she sometimes heard about, any fans who might still recall her would be dumbfounded into silence to see her cry so. In fact, she has never even cried on film. Not once. A bit of trivia about herself she’d read years ago. But now she cries every day, it seems. She didn’t get to eighty-six without

understanding all along that life is tenuous and maybe even false, even at its very best.

"Who is it?" she answers the phone.

"I'm trying to reach Elizabeth Lovejoy," a man's voice says, clearing his throat. "My name is Detective Hale."

"This is she."

He hesitates; he can't seem to decide where to begin. She squeezes her eyes shut as tightly as she can, as if it will help her recall any reason at all that the police might call her. Has someone died? Who could it possibly be? She knows almost no one anymore, both due to age and because *knowing* is not as much a part of her mind these days. Then Detective Hale replaces that mystery with another when he says, "Ms. Lovejoy, I'm downtown at Third and James. We have a jumper here on the twenty-eighth floor of the Noda Tower. He's been asking to speak with you for the last two hours, and nothing else we say or do is working." As an afterthought, he adds, "I'm sorry to bother you."

She opens her eyes, and something stirs in her chest, as if the earth has quaked or a strong wind has rattled the windows, promising a dramatic storm blowing in after midnight. She feels something like anticipation, but she can't put her finger on the emotion. "Me? He's asking for *me*? Why?"

She wants to ask, *is he a fan?* but she knows it would sound vain. She doubts there are fans of hers out there anymore. And if Detective Hale doesn't know who she is, she'd rather not fumble her way through an explanation of how she used to be somebody important. Or at least popular.

He asks, "Do you know a Maximilian Montgomery?"

"No," she says, then lies when she says, "I'd remember that name, I would think. So unique."

"He says to tell you that he knows you from Wyckles Corner."

This should mean something, she knows. It stirs a memory, a place she'd known as a teenager, a hard life many decades ago before she'd come west, but like so much else, it has dissolved into pieces and then into nothing, like cotton candy in a bowl of warm water. *Wyckles Corner*. Something folds over in her mind, one of those puzzles where you fold and match the edges of one picture to make a new one, and she can suddenly see her father's funeral there and a horrific guilt, like a slap in the dark when you thought you were alone, rocks her. But only for a moment before this blur, too, dissolves. *Wyckles Corner*. Nothing good enough to survive had come from there, as far as she can tell, and yet it means something that a stranger could name one of her fragmented memories like this. But still.

"I don't know," she says into the phone.

"Mr. Montgomery took the elevator up to a law firm in the Noda Tower," Detective Hale says. "Do you know the place? He's a client of one of the lawyers there, someone named Chester Griffin." Hale pauses as if Elizabeth might know that name, and when she doesn't say anything, he goes on. "Griffin says Montgomery brought in some paperwork—a will, actually—and when Griffin left the room to get a secretary, Montgomery climbed out over the railing on

the balcony and all this shit started. I'm sorry, excuse me. This situation started."

"Why does he want to talk to me?" she asks. She tries to imagine what could be in this sad man's mind, but there just isn't enough of him to understand.

"He says he needs to make his final peace with you before he goes. We're hoping you can change his mind about that 'going.'"

This makes her set her teeth. "Make peace? With *me*? What has he done that I don't know about?"

The question is so loaded that it practically crushes her with the weight of its implications. She leans against the wall in the hall, staring down its empty length toward the television, and she recognizes the beginning of a panic attack. It's been so long since she last had one that she thought she was all done with that nonsensical nonsense, as her sister Mary used to say. The fact that she can remember this expression gives her some slight comfort, but she still can't even begin to fill the void created by her question. *What has he done that I don't know about?* The answer could as easily be *everything as nothing at all*. Every day she remembers less about her own life, and now it's coming back to haunt her, all that she has forgotten.

"Would you talk to him?" Hale asks. She notices that he doesn't answer her question, but she lets it be. On *Wheel of Fortune*, the answer is clearly "Elementary, my dear Watson," but no one is getting it. She wishes she hadn't answered the phone.

"Yes," she says. "If I must. But what should I say to him?"

But Hale is already gone, as if he'd been holding his breath while he waited for her answer, and now that he has it, he cannot wait to shift the burden of this matter to her old shoulders. The line clicks and buzzes, and then another voice comes on. An older voice. A weary voice. A voice that seems to know her, even if she doesn't recognize it.

"Hello, Betsy," he says.

She's taken aback for a moment; there's strong magic in some names, she knows, and it was the tainted magic of that name that made her stop using it after she came here to Los Angeles. It was the name for another girl, and she'd been encouraged to shed it and her last name by her first Hollywood agent. "No one has called me that for a long time," she says. "I don't even think anyone alive still knows it."

"I'm still alive," he says, "for a little while longer, at least. Until I'm done talking with you."

"Now, that's just plain nonsensical nonsense, do you hear me? Do I know you, Mr. Montgomery?" she asks. She is pleased that she can remember his name.

"Yes. And no."

"Well, you choose one, and then tell me why you need to make peace with me. That's what the policeman said, 'make peace.'"

"I've known you for most of my life," he says. "Your life, too. You just don't know *me*. But I can tell you, I was there for you whenever you needed me."

"There for me? What do you mean to say, sir?"

"You know they say that everyone has a guardian angel? Well, I wanted to be yours." Maximilian Montgomery sighs. "Not that I'm some kind of angel. No. I don't mean to say something that fine about myself. Just that I was always around you to keep you safe."

"I think I've been quite safe," she says, meaning it to praise his success, not to refute his intentions, but he's already cutting her off.

"No one is safe, Betsy. No one, nowhere, never. It's everywhere, and believe me, I learned it the hard way. I'm not talking about just the big killers, either, though those bastards are out there. Do you remember the time a neighbor's dog bit you? A nasty little mongrel, a little rat dog, shivering and shaved. I knew it was loose, and I knew you hated it, but I didn't think to come and get it out of your front yard. It never even crossed my mind that it might hate you as well. And I guess I figured it would just wander out again on its own. Then you came home and tried to send it away, and it bit you. And I didn't keep you safe. Not even from that little one."

Elizabeth raises her free hand, the one with the TV remote in it still, and looks at her fingertips. There across three of them are old scars, from forty years ago or more, and she has a flash—*Zsa Zsa. The little bitch's name was Zsa Zsa.* She doesn't recall the dog as small or large, or how her pinky finger came to be spared the carnage, but she knows that Maximilian Montgomery has at least done his homework.

"Well, now," she says, suddenly unsure of her footing, much as she imagines it must feel up on the edge of a high-rise, the wind now your enemy, the world small and indifferent below you. "I wonder where you read about *that*. I can't imagine I'd have ever mentioned it in an interview, but then again, I don't remember things quite the way I used to."

"I hope you don't think I'm just some admirer." He sounds incredulous. "A stalker with magazine clippings of you on my walls?"

"The detective told me you needed to make peace with me before you do this thing you think you want to do," she says. "But you don't need to do such a horrible dramatic thing if all you wanted was to reach me. I'm hardly a reclusive star, you know. In fact—" She hesitates. "—in fact, I'm no one now. I'm not much of anyone anymore. You could have walked right up to my front door and no one would have thought twice about it."

"I know." He sounds defensive now, but she can't imagine how a suicidal man can feel protective of a life he means to throw away. "I know where you live and even *how* you live. I wish you'd move back to your old house, the one you built out here, but I guess you're done with that part of your life now. You can't imagine how your success and fame drove me crazy. For a long, long time you really *were* very close to inaccessible. I spent a healthy part of my family fortune paying men to let me into places that wanted to keep people like me out. I hated that dance club you used to go to in Vegas, but I didn't have any choice. If you went, I went."

She feels a survival instinct begin to stir in her breast, a fight-or-flight sensation aroused by Montgomery's tone—he does not doubt the veracity of his claims. He speaks of stalking her as if it's an everyday occurrence, a given premise that she must accept in order to understand their current hypothesis that he must *make peace*.

"Why?" She doesn't wish to believe she has been so closely shadowed by a stranger for so many years, one she never even noticed despite prolonged exposure to him like secret radiation, but this question is the most natural path to follow. For now.

"Do you remember—" he begins, and she hates, even *loathes*, any question that begins this way. "—that Cadillac you used to drive? And do you remember how it broke down outside of Vegas, on that highway with tumbleweeds the size of garages? I'd have given almost anything to keep you from walking to that gas station *miles* back, but I couldn't stop to help. So, I just drove right on past you, even though I saw you wave. Couldn't stop. I bet you had some choice words for me that day when I just kept on. I'm sorry, so sorry you had to walk all that way. What did that attendant say when you came back and the Caddy fired up fine?"

"I don't remember," Elizabeth says.

"It was just overheated. That was all. I put water in the radiator for you."

"I have to tell you again," she forces herself to whisper, "that I don't remember as much these days as I once did. I have—I mean to say, I'm a little sick. My memory, it—"



"I know." His voice is gentle, understanding, sympathetic, even sad. "I've seen it happening to you. I put stamps on your bills for you last week. The postman won't take them otherwise, you know. I see what you're going through. And I know you won't see a doctor, no matter how bad it gets. And it's getting bad, Betsy. You forget so easily these days. When you were living in Lovejoy Manor, there was always someone around to do things like the stamps for you. But not now. Now it's just you and me."

She wants to rage at him—*My mail? What do you know about my mail?*—but even that would feel mixed up to her. Her face feels hot, flushed. *I forgot the stamps?* She looks up to see if anyone has solved the puzzle on *Wheel of Fortune*, but it's a commercial now. An assisted-living advertisement, Four Corners Retirement Community, and she gets another flash of recollection, something he just said a while ago. "I don't really remember Wyckles Corner, either. I believe it was a long time ago—"

"Yes, when you were a girl. A teenager."

"You were there? Back then?"

"No, not before you got to college."

"I don't mean to sound rude, Mr. Montgomery, not given your predicament, but I feel as if you're hiding how we met. How I might know you. So, now, we've determined that you've known me since I was living at home, is that right? With my parents?"

"We met when you went away to college," His voice has turned to gravel. "At the University of Chicago. You didn't stay more than that first month before you went home again. Fall of 1942. Do you—you don't remember?"

She is about to ask if he was a soldier, an automatic response to the year he's just named, but her memory is a fickle thing, and it is often merciless, she has noticed lately—it slams her with a far more specific memory of 1942 than "Don't Get Around Much Anymore" and *Casablanca* and her father's pleasure that FDR gave a green light to professional baseball during the war. It doesn't just assault her; it spears her with intent to kill.

"Yes, I went home," she whispers. Her knees feel their age, and she wants to sit down on the floor here in the shadowy hallway, the light of the TV gentle and familiar from the other room, and make the corridor her tomb. She takes three short breaths—*one, two, three*—counting them in her head, sharp and short, short but sharp as knives, like a woman giving birth. This is a memory she could have gone the rest of her fragile days without, thank you and please. But here it is just the same, fresh as the day it happened, the day she didn't even scream, as she told Mary later. *It was my fault because I didn't even scream.*

She hears Mary's voice in her mind, from not long after Papa was dead and buried, when Mary was about to go away forever, and Elizabeth was struggling with the ramifications of what had happened to their family and what she wanted to do next with her life, all at the tender age of nineteen. *Always tell yourself it's just teatime. You're just serving tea, Betsy, to anyone who asks for it. That'll get you through the worst of times.*

"I killed Willy Schultz the weekend you went home," Montgomery suddenly says. "He was one of them. He was a junior, talked once in a while about the fatherland and how his folks wanted to move back to Austria when the war was over. I made it look like it was because he was a drunken kraut. Not because he was a rapist."

She whispers the name—*Willy Schultz*—because it's the first time she's heard it, ever, and she wants to taste it on her lips. For almost seventy years she's not had a name or a face, but here's one. *Willy Schultz*. She stops herself from wondering which one he was. *There were three*, she thinks. *Pretty certain. Three*. They were all giants. Towering over her on the grass of the Main Quadrangles. No moon. And no screams.

"How did you find him?" she finally asks.

Montgomery hesitates, then says, "He was in my brother's fraternity. The university hated the fraternities anyway—most of them had been eliminated, just like varsity sports, so they could focus on the 'common core,' whatever that crap was. So, they flew in the administration's face by drinking like fish every weekend. No common core for them. I hung out there a lot, I suppose you could say. When Willy got drunk, he talked. He bragged. Sometimes he even slipped into German or Austrian or whatever it was. Sounded like the enemy to me. But I really didn't feel anything about that. It was when he started talking to me about you that I did what I did. I pushed him off the third-story balcony during a weekend bender at this off-campus party. He landed on the sidewalk below and broke his—" Montgomery hesitates again, and Elizabeth imagines he

is looking down from the twenty-eighth floor at the concrete so far down there, the sidewalks that are just waiting to crush his old bones to pulp when he crashes down onto them, perhaps turning in the sky as he falls because he's changed his mind and can't look at the concrete rushing up to meet him now that it's too late to go back. "Broke his neck."

"What did he say about me?" Elizabeth asks. She can't breathe, it seems.

"It doesn't matter what that dirty—"

*"It matters!"* She doesn't mean to scream, but she does anyway, a shriek straight from underneath a dead weight she's been carrying in her heart. A dead weight that's suddenly breathing, alive and kicking again, when she can't fill her own lungs.

"I don't want to, Betsy."

*You're just serving tea, Betsy. Tea for two or tea for three. Tea for you and tea for me.*

Mary's crazy talk.

"You should tell me," she whispers, "or you should jump. So, go on now. Choose one."

Maximilian Montgomery hesitates, and she waits for the line to go silent or the wind to whistle across the cell phone signal as it chases him down, down the side of the building, picking up speed down to the pavement and a bloody, crashing end. Instead, he says, just as brutal as the horrible finality of that suicide leap, "He said you were a dead fuck."

She gasps, but it's really a relief to breathe again. She even feels herself smile, though she imagines it's the humorless grin on an eighty-six-year-old

skull. "Well, that's just fine, then. I wouldn't want him to say he enjoyed it. 'Great fuck' would have really bothered me, you know."

Montgomery barks a startled laugh. She imagines such language from her must come as quite a shock to him. She was never one to indulge in too much sailor speak...but he probably already knows that, since he's been watching and listening to her forever.

"You keep surprising me, Betsy," he says. "Even after all these years."

"I aim to please, you sees." It's a line from one of her films that she doesn't remember at all. Just the line. She doesn't mind forgetting some things, she realizes. "There were others. Two others. That night."

Montgomery pauses, and she wonders if she's remembered it wrong. He could tell her there were forty of them, and she'd accept that her memories were out there in the breeze now. But he finally answers, "Yes. I know. Three of them. I know about both of the others besides Willy Schultz. The second one was a friend of Schultz's, I don't really know how they knew each other. I only met him a couple of times. Mostly in bars."

"And what's become of *him*?" She feels horrific shame to find herself hoping that the answer is the same as the tale of Schultz, that the second one is dead and buried, executed for his crime. That Montgomery killed him for her. Her heart feels expanded and bound to him, this stranger who knows her so divinely, so well that maybe he even knows her sudden shame at hoping her attackers have all had divine justice—retribution—struck down upon them.

"He's gone."

"What does that mean? How? When? What was his name?"

"Betsy, does all that matter, honey? It was damn-near seventy years ago. Millions of people have been born and died since then, lived their whole lives, all the way from womb to tomb."

"You and I are among them, Maximilian."

"Max."

"You don't think part of me has been dead inside for all these years? Tell me everything, Max. You cannot start a tale and stop it when the telling becomes difficult. You have to finish. Isn't that making peace?"

The expression seems to motivate him, though she suspects he wanted to tell all along. "All right. I don't have it in me to tell you 'no,' anyway. Anything you've ever wanted, you understand?"

"His name was Marchmont. Big one-legged sonuvabitch from Amarillo. Oil heir. He'd been a varsity football player but had a hunting accident in the winter of '41 that cost him a leg and kept him from signing up to go fight the Germans. I heard it was a self-inflicted wound, though. He was too gutless to go to Europe or to the Pacific. I don't know if it's true or not, that he shot himself. He was one arrogant bastard just the same, very defensive about what a soldier he could have been. Anyway, he'd flunked out of Chicago the previous spring, but he kept hanging around the campus, going out to liquor up with the boys most weekends. He got around with a cane and a fake leg, and they both made a lot of noise when he walked so he sounded like the Norfolk & Western coming down the tracks. Clickety-clack, clickety-clack. Cane and leg, cane and leg."

It has already come back to her, long before his imitation of the sound. It has come back from the dead. "Oh, no," she breathes. "Oh, no. I remember. He couldn't get up to his feet afterward. After he did—he couldn't stand up again because of his leg—his leg fell off while he was on top of me. I had grabbed—"

She chokes on a memory so strong that it's like having a floodlight blaze to life in a room where darkness is all she's ever known. It blasts her with a physical force, a vision of the big man's leg falling down between her bare young legs like a tree pitching forward, and she hears his voice again, a sound like a cartoon villain. *But that can't be how he sounded, she thinks. I'm filling in a blank.* He had turned to one of the others and says something guttural, meant to be funny—at least to the three of them, not to her, there's no "funny" left in the entire world for her that night—and in her memory she sees the first man, too, there with the one she now knows is the German Willy Schultz because he grunted "*gut, gut, gut*" over and over while he violated her. The German, and the one-legged man, and the other one. Willy Schultz, Marchmont, and the one she knows Maximilian Montgomery can also identify. The third man.

"He's dead too," Montgomery says then. "Marchmont. He came out of this little pub, I don't remember the name; it was an Irish place. He'd been there drinking with someone they couldn't locate afterwards, the newspaper stories all said in their little society columns later on. He came out, he walked across the street toward the bus depot, and that's where a bus hit him. Right in the middle of the street. The bus driver said he was hopping on only one leg—the other one had come off right before the bus knocked him down the block. There

was a story floating around that he'd taken it off to scratch an itch and then forgot to put it back on when he started trying to cross the street. They found it at the bus stop."

Elizabeth says, "How long after...*me*...did this happen?"

Montgomery says, "A week later. The day after Willy Schultz's funeral. I'm the one, Betsy. I killed him." He says it with such ferocity that she can hear his teeth click together over the phone. "I was waiting outside the pub, and when he got to the curb, I got to him. He knew me. I got him to take the leg off, easy as you please, just by telling him that Schultz had been saying before he died that the Germans would've snatched that leg off of Marchmont on the battlefield and the cripple would've been helpless and had to wait for the French to come along to save him. Marchmont was too damned arrogant to let that comment go, so he took it right off there in the street to show me how fast he was on his feet without it. Then, I just gave him a push when the bus came around the corner, and that was that."

It's all becoming jumbled in her head, and Elizabeth doesn't know what to ask or even *how* to ask anymore. This angelic shadow has murdered men in cold blood on her behalf, killing her rapists one by one; it's a story that could have been one of her movies during the 1960s, when she made half a dozen that the critics later dubbed "sexploitation" films. She knows she should feel horror, but instead she feels like an outside observer, but one who is gratified. She marvels at Maximilian Montgomery's inexplicable devotion to her—not just that he did terrible deeds in her name, but that he then stayed at the fringes of her life for



the years that followed, trying to protect her from a world that brooks no dissension when it comes to equal unhappiness for all. And yet she hears her sister Mary's voice from the months after she went home, echoing in the bathroom where Elizabeth took shower after shower. Before Papa was gone. *Everybody's got secrets, Betsy, Mary whispers. Now you have one, too. Someday I'll tell you mine, and maybe you won't feel so scared anymore. Do you think? And now that we're both here, I'm thinking about teatime. Maybe I'll tell you just what I think about teatime someday, too.*

"No one ever connected them," Montgomery says. "Marchmont and Schultz. No one knew what they'd done to you, so no one put the pieces together that they were more than just acquaintances. Two drunks who were too stupid to live."

Elizabeth says, "Someone else knew. The third man."

Montgomery sighs. It's deep and heartfelt, and she senses that some deeper secret is about to be revealed when his voice changes. Gone is the fury at the first two rapists; a creeping sympathy takes its place. "You remember there was a third? Yes. But he already knew what was happening."

"Did you kill him, too?" she asks.

Montgomery hesitates so long that she can begin to hear the cars and sirens in the streets far below him. She has forgotten that he is on a ledge high in a downtown tower. She has forgotten so much, but it's starting to come back.

"Betsy, please, I can't." He makes a sudden sobbing noise, a heartbreaking sound that takes her breath away. He seems on the brink of saying one thing—she can hear him whispering to himself, unintelligible words, as if he's coaching himself to find the nerve to speak. And then he finds himself again and says, "I couldn't. He was my brother. He was stupid and he was young, but I couldn't do anything about him. It was all so much bigger than me. If he came forward to say what he'd done to you, he'd have gone to jail. Can you imagine his whole life ending because he'd let those men pervert him for one night? The shame of his downfall would've ruined our family. He was trying to be his own man, get out from under our father's thumb. He had a future, Betsy. Not like those other two. He had a chance to be something, and he was a good young man. He just made a terrible decision not to...not to fight for you when he could have. He was scared of them, of Schultz and Marchmont. So, he kept his mouth shut, and so he—and he watched what they did to you. But he told me everything he saw and everything he felt, and I have never been scared to fight for you, Betsy. Not me. He told me you were brave when they hurt you, and I promised him that I'd be brave for him. I'd protect you from everything else after that. And I started by smashing Schultz's body into pieces off that balcony. And then I smeared Marchmont's blood all over that bus's grill. I did it for you, I did it for him, and when the bloodshed was all done, I just kept doing it. I did it for the rest of our lives."

When she says nothing, he says, "Forgive him, Betsy. He was just a stupid boy. He didn't have any spine back then. But I tried to save his soul by

protecting yours, and now I need to ask you for forgiveness. I need this peace in my own soul. Can you forgive?"

Elizabeth says, "I can forgive. But tell me his name."

Montgomery hesitates, and Elizabeth thinks as she did earlier, when he first called her *Betsy*, that there's strong magic in names. It's why he doesn't want to reveal his brother's name, she knows, because it will give her some power over him. To find him, if she wants. To accuse him. But she knows that Montgomery trusts her, so he tells. "His name was Chester."

"Was?"

"He died. Not by my hand, don't think that, but he died, Betsy. Last week. Cancer. But even not that, not really. He chose to kill himself instead of waiting for the cancer to do it for him."

Mary's voice comes again, as if she's in the living room watching *Wheel of Fortune* give way to *Jeopardy!* on the television, calling out to Elizabeth in a disturbingly casual tone. *Tea for two. We can have it together, if you like, you and me for tea, if you feel like it, if you feel that way about it all anyway. It's how I feel, that's my secret, don't you know. And tea makes every little hurt feel quaint and calm.*

She doesn't remember if Mary ever actually said this, but it certainly sounds like the way she spoke after she was institutionalized.

*Quaint and calm*, she repeats in her head a dozen times. She finally interrupts her own thoughts to ask, "Why are you doing the same thing?"

"I promised myself when I learned what he did that I'd make it up for your whole life or for his. And I feel like the debt is paid, now that he's gone."

Montgomery sighs. "If he'd promised to watch over you after what he did to you, it would have ended with one of your deaths, of course. Now that it's done, I don't have anything left for *myself*, you see. You both lived long, happy lives, and I lived for both of you, so I'm finished, too. I can let go now. I'm just a tired old man, and I'm ready to rest."

"You mustn't talk this way," she says. The hallway seems to strengthen in clarity as she recalls where this conversation has begun and, more important, why. She presses away from the wall's support. "You've not even had a life because of me."

"Because of my brother," Montgomery corrects her.

"Because of something that happened between your brother and me," she goes on. "I won't allow this nonsensical nonsense. How could you even think of leaving this world without allowing me to thank you?"

"There's nothing to thank me for. It was penance."

"It was kindness. And I want to see you. I want you to come off that ledge and let me see you in the flesh."

"My time is over, Betsy."

"No, it's not."

"Forgive."

"I forgive." She suddenly feels a greater power come upon her than she ever could have experienced simply by knowing the names of her attackers; she feels the power to save a life, to protect another soul from imminent destruction. She feels the fierce control that must have its degenerative

counterpart in the heart of a rapist, yet here it comes in the guise of a savior, and she revels in it. For nearly seventy years, she knows now, this stranger has had the power to guard her days in his hands, and by virtue of attempting to control only his own existence, he has given it all back to her, the power over one life and one death. The lifeless hallway where she has paced every morning in a state of undefined, mechanical maintenance feels transformed; the little bungalow where she has disappeared from the world with the expectation that it would one day be her tomb now feels like a fishbowl where she has lived under Maximilian Montgomery's tender scrutiny. But the fishbowl, she sees now, held them both. The ocean now yawns before them as the waters mix, and she knows she is the one who will lead them to safety in this new world. She must. She wishes she could remember the home Montgomery mentioned—Lovejoy Manor. The name sounds so opulent to her, but she doesn't remember ever owning or living in a mansion. In fact, she remembers so little of her life that much of it has lost meaning and purpose, but here is a chance to do something good enough to redeem the loss of those memories in her midnight hour. That redemption, she knows, begins with forgiveness.

"I'll come with you to his grave," she whispers. "I have flowers here on my kitchen table, and I'll bring them with me. I'll stand there and hold your hand, and you can tell him what you did for all of us. And when you're done, I will tell him his sins are past now. If you can forgive him for taking your life away, I can forgive him for what he did to me."

"I'm sorry," Montgomery says.

"There's no more need for sorry or sorrow. Come inside and be with me. My angel."

She hears him begin to cry then, a soft sound, a sound she cannot remember ever hearing from an old man before. Montgomery tries to suppress it, tries to hide it from her, but she hears it nonetheless. She wonders if the world far below his feet blurs through his tears, and she suddenly wants to rescue him so desperately that she would consider threatening to take her own life if it would move him back into the safety of the tower where he waits to die.

"For close to seventy years," Montgomery says, so low that she almost can't hear him, "I have wanted to kiss you. After what they did to you, I knew there was no hope of any such thing ever happening. When you kissed those Hollywood actors up on the screen, I imagined it was me, but I knew it never could be. And still, it became so important to me that you be the first girl I kiss, Betsy, that I never kissed another woman. My whole life, never a single one. I waited, and now it's too late."

"Come off that ledge." She speaks calmly, though her heart pounds so loudly that she wouldn't be surprised if he can hear it. "If you come back inside and give up this notion of dying, I'll kiss you. I promise."

"My Betsy." He whispers her name like a prayer.

And then he's gone.

For a moment, she doesn't understand that the line has gone silent. She thinks he's disguising his years of pent-up grief or that he's giving deep

consideration to her offer. Then when she says his name again and there's no response, she realizes that he's hung up. She waits long seconds in the wild, desperate belief that the detective—she can't remember his name—will come back on the line to tell her that it's all right, Maximilian Montgomery didn't jump, he didn't explode into a horrific red splatter of tired flesh and blood on the concrete hundreds of feet below, he's standing right here in the room with us, and please come down now and talk to him and it's all going to be just fine now if you could just—

She hangs up the phone very suddenly. It has occurred to her that if anyone is trying to call her, they can't get through. She's been listening to a dial tone now anyway. And instantly, the phone rings.

"Is he alive?" she answers. "Tell me he's alive."

"He says he's coming in." It's the detective, the one whose name she can't recall. "He says you're coming down here, Ms. Lovejoy, and when you're here, he'll come in. Whatever you said to him, it was the right thing to say."

"You didn't hear? You weren't on the line?"

"No, ma'am," the detective says. "We dialed you through to his cell phone."

Relief floods her like a spiritual moment. *They don't know what you've done for me, Max,* she thinks. She has no doubt that they would arrest him for murders more than six decades old, regardless of his motives behind committing them. She doesn't know if his conversation with her would constitute a confession,

but she now won't have to find out. She lets out an *aaah* of relief that the detective clearly hears.

"Are you all right?" he asks.

"Yes. Yes, I'm just fine. I'll be there soon." She wonders which bus she'll need to take to get downtown. She knows the detective has told her the name and address of the building where Montgomery went to make his last stand, but she can't remember now, and she doesn't want to ask again. Surely there will be a crowd on the street she can look for? She thinks that instead of a bus, she could hail a cab. Instead, though she doesn't want to sound like some pampered Hollywood has-been, she decides to ask, "Perhaps you could send a car for me?"

"Of course. We'll have someone there shortly."

"I'll be ready, detective. Please tell him again that I forgive his brother everything. He must wait for me."

The detective—*Hale*, she remembers now, like "hail a cab"—says, "Ms. Lovejoy, he doesn't have a brother."

She blushes, though there's no one to see. "Of course. Forgive me. It's complicated, I know, forgiving someone who's died. I'm sorry. I don't always come across so simply."

"He's never had a brother, ma'am. We did a background search on him as soon as we IDed him so we could call someone in the family. He's never had any brothers or sisters."

She swallows painfully. "Chester?"



"You mean Chester Griffin? His lawyer. The one he came to see today. Remember?"

The world falters, and Mary comes again, reminding her that there's tea in the cupboard. Mary, who also told lies, big black ones, not tiny white ones. Lies that got her put away as a crazy woman. Elizabeth says, "His brother went to the University of Chicago."

She hears Detective Hale say something to someone, a mutter, then papers shuffle. "Maximilian Montgomery went to Chicago, two years, 1941 to 1942. Rushed a fraternity, declared a major early, psychology. Dropped out and never came back to finish his degree. All sorts of stories about him having a breakdown and disappearing entirely for years. He could have been in jail or institutionalized or something, but there's no record of anything like that."

She says, "Mary was institutionalized. Because of the poison."

Hale says nothing. She knows what he's thinking nonetheless—that the old woman on the other end of the line has gone daft, tripped right over the edge of normalcy, but she knows better. She says she'll be waiting for the car, thank you, and she hangs up quickly before he can ask her questions about the conversation. There will be questions. And she has no answers that she can be sure about.

She stands with one hand over her eyes and tries as hard as she can to remember: did the third man rape her? She pushes so hard that she imagines there's blood on her temples. She half-swoons. The day has turned savage on her, as if the sun has blazed down on a hot set where she doesn't know her

lines and the entire crew is looking at her, and her leading man has moved off to the side in disgust. He won't help her, no one will, and she has to remember her cues all by herself, but she can do it because she's Elizabeth M. Lovejoy, Hollywood's fresh breath of love *and* joy, and she will ignore what she can't control and when she hears her cue, she'll kiss her leading man with the professionalism of someone who can—

It detonates on her. *Yes. He did.*

He kissed her.

The third man was the only one who kissed her while they violated her.

*A lady serves tea with her pinky extended*, Mary said, but poor Mary was long ago gone around the bend and it had all meant nothing. The nurses certainly weren't going to give her tea, and she couldn't raise her pinky from where her arms were bound to keep her from hurting herself, and at times Elizabeth wasn't allowed in the room with her. She could only look through the glass and weep silent tears for her sister. Tears she can feel coming again now, but not yet.

No time for tears. The car is coming for her, and she needs to be ready.

She goes to her small kitchen where she prepares meals for one three times a day like clockwork. In one cabinet is a nice selection of tea, and though she promised Maximilian Montgomery a kiss, she can certainly serve tea before their moment. She has no doubt he will appreciate it. Earl Grey seems the best. It's manly, not the sort of tea that Mary ever favored at all, though the tin Elizabeth brings down is the same one that Mary had all those years ago. A

family heirloom, that tin. Maybe the only heirloom they ever really had as a family.

As she takes it from the cabinet, she catches sight of those scars on her fingers again, where the dog bit her, the dog Montgomery regretted not protecting her from. Part of the world he could not hold back, no matter what penance he did for what he and Schultz and Marchmont did to her in the fall of 1942. In fact, he himself was part of that dangerous world. For sixty-nine years, though, he held himself back as surely as he'd held back whatever other threats he could see looming on her sheltered horizon.

She could understand him. And she could feel herself hating him while she was forgiving him.

"We'll have tea," she tells herself calmly, marveling at her willingness to forgive it all but still perhaps not be able to forgive enough. She steps over to her small kitchen table and takes one of the flowers—a daisy, the same flowers every week, though she no longer has any recollection why she first chose that particular flower—from the vase to take to him. "We'll have tea, and I'll give him a daisy, and I'll kiss him just as I promised, and we'll see what happens to us after that."

She hears a car in the driveway as she gathers what she needs, and she is ready to go as the doorbell rings. When she opens the door and sees the uniformed officer waiting to escort her to see her last living rapist, she doesn't feel protected at all. Not at all.