



Sometimes its Ok to Listen to the Voices

Kat hears everything around her. The wind, someone walking, a flutter or even someone talking to themselves. Some of the voices she hears are not connected to bodies any longer. She listens to them most carefully. One day she meets Wanda, another woman who can hear the same voices. Together they not only build a friendship but an empire.



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Kat is taking a walk along her favorite pathway in the park, the one most people don't walk along, because they say it isn't as pretty, but she only sees the beauty. Others say that this pathway is haunted by the people who used to live in the apartments that were torn down, before the county built the park. Kat doesn't mind a few ghosts, as long as they behave themselves.

This pathway is made of cobblestone so you don't get a lot of bikers, only walkers and an occasional runner who wants a quieter, less crowded run. There are flowerbeds along the way with seasonal flowers and some evergreens, so that the garden areas always looks plush and inviting. Most importantly, you can always find a bench to sit on and watch people go by. Which is exactly what she intends to do now.

Kat walks over to the bench that looks toward the playground and tries to sit down, “Hey, that’s my lap, find your own place to sit,” a voice says to her.

Without missing a beat, Kat wipes off the area where she was and a little further over on the bench and sits down. She plugs in her headphones to her phone and puts on her music. A little soft jazz, a spring breeze, an active playground, life is good right now. She thinks to herself.

“Why are you still here?” the voice says again

“Because I like this bench, and I like watching everyone at the park? More importantly, why are *you* still here?” Kat asks the voice.

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“Don’t you get sassy with me young lady,” the voice says irritably.

“Ah, so you’re a grandmother. How nice. Do your grandkids come here? Or are they gone too?” Kat asks.

“I have many, and a few great-grandchildren too, one is here today, over on the slide. The one with the broken arm. His father made that happen, I’m sure. I need to make sure he doesn’t do more damage to him. I was distracted and couldn’t stop him in time. I promised my granddaughter no more harm would come, and I failed her,” the voice says more softly.

“And you couldn’t get your granddaughter to leave before you passed, now I see the problem,” Kat says. “You can’t stay around forever you know. It’s not good for you. You’re intended to go elsewhere. I’m sure there is someone waiting for you above. Don’t you think?” she asks.

“Aren’t you afraid people will think you’re weird talking to yourself over here?” the voice asks.

“No, you see, with these wires people will assume I’m on the phone. Makes us crazy people look sane again. Now, about your granddaughter, where is she?” Kat asks.

“She didn’t come today, but her son told me she is not well. I think he is starting to hit her now too. I think she didn’t come because she is bruised up. I heard voices last night and yelling. I was too occupied with keeping the child safe I didn’t run to her. I’m failing at this, I made a

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promise to watch from above but I’m failing,” the voice sounds as if it is crying.

Kat sits and watches the playground. She looks at the bench, she can feel the woman now, she is trying to stay here and trying to move on, it is too confusing for her so that is what is making it hard for this ghost to do her job. Kat takes a deep breath, “I’ll be right back, don’t move. I mean it, don’t move.”

“Ok,” the voice says quietly.

Kat walks closer to the playground because there is a trash can there and she walks over to throw out a tissue from her pocketbook. She watches as the little boy keeps looking at the bench. He can see her, he feels safe. That is good. He looks at Kat and whispers, “You see Grandmamma too, don’t you?”

Kat looks at him and smiles. She doesn’t want him to get the wrong idea, she is hoping the smile is enough. “What happen to your arm?” she asks quietly.

“I fell down the stairs, we have a lot of them at our house,” he says with rehearsed words, but is looking at her with large eyes. He is asking for help, what can she do? Kat thinks to herself.

“Where are your parents? You shouldn’t be talking to strangers,” Kat says.

“My mother is home, she has a black and blue face,” he whispers again.

“Do you know how to use a phone to send a message? Do you know how to spell?” Kat asks not knowing how old the boy is.

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“Yes, and yes,” he says.

“Next time you’re scared, can you find your mommy’s phone and send a text to the words ‘I love me’, that’s my phone number. I’ll send you help,” she says.

“You will? For real? And Grandmamma can go see her husband?” he asks.

“Yes child, I will, it’s a promise. Remember, ‘I, love, me’, I have to go now,” she says and walks back to the bench.

“Who was that?” his father asks sternly.

“A woman from my school, she came to visit one day, I think she wants to be a teacher,” the boy lies and hopes his father can’t tell.

“And why does she specifically remember you?” he asks sternly.

“I was the only one in class that day with a broken arm. Remember? Johnny broke his arm after mine happened. Only now there are two of us with broken arms and Mitchel came in on crutches today,” he says cheerfully. “He came in and asked ‘who’s next?’ we all laughed,” the boy tries to keep his fear out of his voice for this lie.

The father nods and looks over at Kat who seems to be talking to someone on the phone. He remembers many times having visiting teachers when he was in school. He leaves his son alone to play.

“What did you say to my grandson?” she asks.

“I said I would help and gave him my phone number,” Kat says.

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“How is he supposed to write it down? I didn’t see him write it down, his memory isn’t so good with numbers,” she says worried.

“I was studying my phone number one day and I noticed it spells out ‘I love me’. I told him to remember that. He said he would. You’re right, by the way, he said that his mom is home with bruises on her face. You can’t do anything from your end but if he gets the chance to text me, I’ll send the police. Hopefully, it will be in time. Can you give me their address so I have it please?” Kat says.

“You’re really going to help? I’ve asked so many people, I know they hear me, but everyone runs away. Why are you going to help?” she asks.

“Because you need to move on, and he needs to be safe. He said if I help him you will be able to go see your husband. I believe he is waiting for you and you need to go. There may be something else you are supposed to be doing. Where are your children? Your granddaughter’s mother or father?”

“With my husband,” the voice says softly. “One father-children outing - four grandchildren now orphaned. I didn’t go, because I had the flu, I would have been gone sooner if I did. But I was here to walk this boy’s mother down the aisle, I was here to watch my other grandchildren graduate college and one graduate from the military academy, same one as his grandpa. But now, all seven of them are gone; now I have four grandchildren, this one’s mother is my granddaughter -

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two boys from my oldest son and one more girl from my middle son. My three kids, their spouses and my husband all gone because some truck driver hit the gas instead of the brakes after driving a twelve-hour haul. All the grandkids are over eighteen, but still, it’s been a hard five years. Some moved in with me, sold their parents’ homes and put the money in trust for themselves. Smart kids,” the voice says.

“Yeah, they will be ok, it sounds like they have each other. Anyone else watching out for this young man’s mother?” Kat asks.

“The oldest one, military. He wants to storm the house half the time. I try to keep him calm,” she says.

“You can’t be everywhere all day, every day. It’s wearing you out. Now go, look he is leaving now.

Remember ‘I love me’, that’s my number,” Kat says.

“I’ll remember,” she says.

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Three days have gone by and she hasn’t received a call, maybe the ghost grandmother worked things out. Kat is back at the park today, sitting on the same bench but the bench feels very oddly cold. She looks out at the playground, not too many people are here today. The temperature outside is colder than it was a few days ago, so she attributes the lack of people to the weather and plugs into her music.

No sooner is she comfortable when her phone buzzes, she looks down at the text, it’s a voice recording, *‘he is going to kill my mommy, he keeps saying so. I hear*

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hits. I can't leave, Grandmamma is here holding me down, hiding where he won't look.'

Kat jumps up and runs over to one of the policemen on patrol, she lets him hear the voice message and tells them the address; he calls in the information and gets her information too. He leaves and says, “Don’t go too far.”

Kat paces back and forth at the park, she is not sure what to do. She walks back to the bench and sits so she doesn’t look crazier than usual. A short while later a hand is on her shoulder, “They got there in time. Thank you,” a male voice says.

“And you are?” Kat asks

“Her oldest boy. Momma told me you’d be here, and here you are. No one is looking, you can talk to me now. I’ve been trying to get my niece to leave for a while, but she can’t, now I think she will. They caught him in the act, and when she was asked if she wanted to press charges, she finally found the courage to say yes. Messages are going out to all her cousins, they will be there shortly, they are a close bunch,” he pats her shoulder again and then there is silence.

Kat’s heart is still beating a hundred times faster than a resting heart should be, she sits until she can calmly walk away. She watches as the leaves of the bushes are pushed aside by what looks like the wind. With a deep breath, she gets up, when she gets to a nearby café, she calls her only friend who won’t think she has lost her mind. “Morris, you’re not going to believe this one,” she

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says and begins to talk to him quietly while sitting outside and having her coffee.

“Don’t move. I’m coming over. Sounds like you could use a good firm hug. I’ll get there in twenty minutes, order us both some lunch, I’m starved and I’m buying,” he says.

“Lunch does sound good. Ok,” Kat calls over to the waitress to tell her someone is joining her in twenty minutes and gives her the order for both of them.

The appetizers are brought out only a minute after Morris arrives, “Mozzarella sticks? My favorite, thanks Kat. Oh wait,” he jumps up and pulls her out of her chair and the two of them hug for a moment, he hugs her tightly and she does to him as well. When they break the hug, Kat feels cold, that’s an odd feeling from him, she thinks to herself. Warmth usually follows a hug. Especially from Morris.

“So, how are you Kat? Really.” Morris asks.

“I don’t know. I guess I thought since I hadn’t heard right away, that it wasn’t going to happen, then it happened so fast. I couldn’t believe the policeman was right there when I needed him. He didn’t even think I was nuts, I let him hear the voice recording and handed him the piece of paper I had the address written on. The day after the first visit the grandmother came to me and gave me the address. I’ve been carrying around that paper ever since. He asked me a couple of questions and I told him of the conversation I had with the child at the park. I didn’t tell him about speaking to the ghost first, that surely

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wouldn't have gone over too well, now would it?" she looks to him.

"I suppose not. Did he question why you were talking to a stranger's child?" he asks.

"Yes, I told him, at first, I smiled but then the boy looked as if he wanted to talk to me, so I let him and asked minimal questions. I told the officer what my phone number is and how I told it to the boy. He smiled and said, I should never lose my attitude, or my phone number. The grandmother told me that one of the cousins has wanted to go full military rage on this husband for a long time. I sure hope there is no permanent damage to the woman. Oh Morris, that would be horrible for that little boy," she puts her hand on her mouth.

"Yes, it would, but Kat, you're not responsible any more than I am for what that man did or didn't do. You did what you always do, you listened, you listened to the ghost and you listened to the boy, people are so busy with their own lives, no one stops to listen anymore. Except you, you always find time to listen no matter whose voice is talking. I don't know how you listen so well, but you do, to all kinds of voices," he smiles at her.

"But why me? Why do I hear them and no one else? The woman's son, another ghost, told me the father was caught in the act. No policeman told me," she explains to Morris.

"Honey, I just told you. You listen. Whether a person is of this world or not, you listen. I mean, you even listen to the horses, remember when we went riding

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and you walked along all the horses and found out one had an injury, the stable hands didn't even know yet. Your ears and more importantly, your heart is always listening. Remember that time you were listening to an empty theater talk to you? What did we find?" he asks.

"Oh, yes the theater, we went there to see if I could do the renovation design and I told the owner of the theater that nothing can be done until the back stage skeletons are let out. He thought I was crazy but when we went in the back and we opened locked doors and lockers we found two dead bodies. I was questioned for twenty-four hours after that; the police didn't know how I would know and finally I flat out said a ghost told me and if you don't believe me than it was too bad because I had nothing more to say on the matter," she laughs remembering that one.

"Yeah and when you were brought to the theater again, one of the cops received a rude awakening. We both saw him bend his head forward quickly like someone hit him and he turned to us and realized we were too far away to hit him and nothing was around him. He heard a voice, only to him, and began to listen and follow the instructions. That's when he found the bank ledger that lead them to figure out who the theater actually belongs to. The man who claimed to be the owner, was not, his name was not even mentioned on any of the papers but no one questioned him for some reason. No one asked for proof of his ownership, yet – even the bank. The real owners came forward and were

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given the appropriate papers. It was awesome. One of my favorite stories. I wrote that one into a mystery novel and it is still selling well,” Morris smiles.

“Is that why we’re friends Morris? So I can give you writing material? I’m your muse?” Kat says to him with some annoyance in her voice.

“You, my darling, are so much more to me than a simple muse, but you won’t let me show you. You keep telling me that you’re not looking for a relationship. What do you call what we have? Sometimes I think we are only friends, sometimes confidants and sometimes I really wish there was more, so tell me Kat, what do *you* think?” he asks pushing her to answer this time.

“Things I love, have a tendency to get lost, you know that. There is part of me that loves you Morris, really, I do. And yes, you are a big part of my life, I called you first after this, who else can calm me down and prevent me from eating an entire pound of chocolate? The cheese and this salad are doing the same thing. Filling my belly with warmth and sustenance. You fill my heart, but I believe, not in the same way that maybe I fill yours. Does that finally answer your question?” she looks at Morris, who actually looks heartbroken.

“Don’t give up on the chance of their being an us. How about this? Let’s say in three more months’ time, if you feel no differently, I will stop pushing and actually look for someone to date. Does that sound doable?” he asks.

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“Why do you want to waste three more months on me?” Kat asks.

“For me, it is not a waste. So, three months?” he asks again.

“Three months, but we aren’t dating, we are doing the same things we’ve always done,” Kat says specifically.

“Exactly my point,” Morris agrees.

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Kat heads back to her design offices and sits down at her desk to look over the next project proposals. She is being asked to bid on redoing an abandoned hotel. It has been declared sound by an architect friend of hers and she can go over and look around without fearing she will fall through any floorboards. She makes the call.

“Hello, this is Kat I’m one of the designers putting in a bid for the hotel. I was wondering if I bring myself there today, if someone would be there to walk me through the place?” she asks.

“This is Wanda, you’re still interested?” she asks cautiously.

“I’ve been quite swamped lately but I recently finished two big projects, I love working on large spaces and can’t wait to see what you are thinking. I have so many ideas only from looking at the pictures that were sent out,” she says enthusiastically.

“Well then, sure. I’ll be here until 7:00 tonight. Finishing up some paperwork. It will be dark by then, but you can still get the gist of the place. We have working

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electricity, not to worry, although we don't have a lot on right now," Wanda says.

"I'm not worried, I always view new places at different times of day anyway, you get the best feel for the place and can pick out the colors accordingly. Sometimes lighting changes in the night and the same color won't look good in the daytime. Quite a challenge sometimes to find something that will work with all the natural and artificial lighting a room will receive. But that's my job not yours. I'll see you then," Kat hangs up feeling charged about doing another hotel. The last one was only a few years old but was sold because the owners had no idea what they were doing, the new owners felt compelled to change a lot of the interior. Kat tried to minimize their changes to make sure the hotel still looked nice to the general public. To her, they had very tacky taste, she had to carefully tell them that their tastes were unique and in a public setting they had to conform to what the average traveler wanted. That seemed to do the trick.

On her way to the hotel, Kat's phone rings, "Hello?"

"Um, Hello, is this the woman from the park?" a female voice asks.

"Yes, is everything ok?" she asks.

"Everything is fine, our cousin is going to recover out here by us. We are upstate from where you are. We wanted to say thank you. My cousin's boy wants to speak to you," she says.

"Ok," Kat answers.

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“Hello lady. Momma believes me that Grandmamma helped to save her and me. But the others don’t, I can tell. When we left the hospital, Grandmamma told me that she is going away for a while. I’m sure she will be back. She loves us too much,” the boy continues to talk and tell Kat all that his great grandmother told him in his ear while holding him down. She was covering him in a warm hug, he felt her warmth. Earlier in the day when his mom came home, she was shaking and he knew something was wrong, before his father got home, he took his mother’s phone from her purse so he would have it to notify Kat. She has a couple of broken ribs now and a bruised up face but they are going to live with some other cousins now and be one big family together.

He also tells Kat he is not sure how they can do that with so many people he doesn’t know well, but he knows he will be safe, so he doesn’t care if he moves, as long as his mother is safe. Grandmamma told him she will find him wherever he is. Finally, he comes up for air.

“I’m happy you are safe and happy your mother is too. You’re a brave young man. I’m sure you will grow up to be a very strong and brave adult too,” Kat says and is about to hang up when she hears.

“Don’t change your number, ok?” he asks cautiously.

“I won’t. You take care now,” Kat says.

“Hold on,” he says.

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“Hello, this is Packard’s mom. I’m sorry if my words are slurred but the meds and all. Grandma says it was you who made the call to the police. Thank you for listening. We’re going to live with my cousins now. One is married, one is not, but they live together in a large home. The one who is married is in the military and is often not home so he thought it best to have people around his wife to help keep her company, safe and not lonely. Thank you again,” she says.

“All I did was share his call, it was your son’s strength and yours that pulled you through. And one tough grandmother,” Kat says smiling and hangs up. She continues on her way to the hotel in a very good mood. Her phone rings again,

“Hello?” she asks this time much more cautiously.

“Hey Kat, only me, what are you up to?” Morris asks.

“Oh, sorry, I received a call from the boy and his mother to say thank you, then a second after I hung up you called. I’m headed over to the hotel project I’m supposed to bid on. The one on Orchard Lane,” she says.

“Um Kat, you sure you want to do that?” Morris asks.

“Why not?” she asks. “Morris, what do you know that you’re not telling me?” she asks.

“If I say it out loud, you’ll be mad,” he says.

“No, I promise I won’t,” she says.

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“Word is that the place is haunted by evil spirits, not the friendly ones you are used to. Three of the other designers and two contractors have already walked away and here you are going at night and by yourself no less,” he says with a sigh.

“First of all, I always go at night first, this should not be news to you. Second, I’m not worried. I have a feeling a certain grandmother is not going to ever let me be in harm’s way. And Lastly, cool. I’ll call you when I’m done,” she hangs up.

While Morris is supportive of her listening skills, he also doesn’t like when she knowingly puts herself in what he deems a dangerous situation. Kat continues on her way and when she gets there, she is shocked. The place looks as if it is still uninhabited. However, the outside is fully in tack and beautiful to boot. She knocks on the door and it opens. She closes the door behind her and Kat walks straight towards what would have been the check-in desk. “Hello!” she calls

A woman walks out of the back room. “Kat?” she asks

“Yes, Wanda?” Kat asks back.

“You came alone?” she asks worriedly as she comes around from her office.

“I’ll be fine. Where do you want to start? Personally, I like to walk around like a customer would, so we start with walking straight to this desk, obviously in need of some serious refinishing, I know the perfect guy. This nice wood needs a little loving care to shine again.

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No need to replace this, besides, something like this, costs a small fortune nowadays.

Are you keeping the woodwork around the pillars? And what about the windows? While they seem functional, they look a bit outdated to me. What is your time period you want to capture?” Kat turns to see Wanda staring at her.

“Sorry, sometimes my mind starts working and my mouth needs to catch up. Am I asking too many questions? I sometimes talk out loud, you don’t have to answer them all right now, but food for thought, I’ll need those answers if you pick me to do the job though,” she says, “Shall we begin?”

Wanda shakes her head a moment, this woman seems unflappable. Ghosts don’t bother her, but many others haven’t even made it this far. Wanda sees them hanging around the lobby, watching each person who comes in, waiting for the right time to strike. They are patient with this one.

“Ok, as you said, we will walk through like a customer, so let’s stand at the front door. What do you see?” Wanda asks. “I’d like your opinion.”

Kat looks around, she hears noises, no, not noises, voices. “I think we stay with some of the gold, but not all. People don’t use gold as much now. I like the regal look on the top, not the bottom. I’d like to get rid of this carpet because something tells me there are blood stains being covered up and we need to get rid of all the negative vibes, you want people to walk in feeling good,

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feeling greeted.” The blood Kat hears is from two separate murders that took place here. Those people need to be released, they’ve never been able to leave. They are stuck where their blood is, they can’t let go. Something must be unsolved with one or both of them.

Kat walks over to what was once a sitting area, she looks around the floor and then to the front window, someone is hiding behind the curtain and that can’t be nice for people coming in. “We need to get rid of the curtains, curtains hold on to old energies too long, it needs to be released and the sooner the better,” she says as she pulls down one curtain and the rod as well as the old curtain comes crashing down.

Wanda watches this, she saw the ghosts in the curtains before, but now she sees nothing, a cool breeze passes her and the front door opens and closes. Wanda looks behind her at the door then around to the new woman in the room. Kat turns to her and says, “Did they leave?”

Wanda shakes her head yes. “Children,” Kat says “playing hide and go seek, there was a fire here years ago, many perished because they couldn’t get out. People then used to think if you hid, the fire couldn’t get to you. The dangers of fire were very misunderstood. These children have been here since then, almost forty years. I looked into the history of this place, I hope you don’t mind.”

“Mind that you checked, or mind that you pulled down the curtain?” Wanda asks smiling

“Both?” Kat smiles.

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“Do you see or you hear them?” Wanda asks.

“Usually only hear them, but the curtain was hanging in a weird way which meant only one thing to me, someone was inside. Do you know about the murders?” she asks Wanda

“What?” Wanda asks stunned.

“Hold on, I have the newspaper clippings. Here, this one,” she pulls them out of her folder.

“Well, isn’t that something, that sure explains a lot. That’s right here in this foyer, and this second one is over there, by the entrance to the bar. Come, let’s go look,” Wanda says, now very intrigued.

Wanda and Kat walk over to the front of the bar, Wanda bends down and pulls up the carpet from the corner and keeps pulling the piece up walking backwards as she does, she walks past the entrance where she finally drops the old carpet, folding what she is holding onto the carpet to view the flooring underneath. She shines a flashlight on the wood underneath, “Well, how about that?” she says.

Kat looks down too, they didn’t bother cleaning up, only covered it up with a new carpet because the new carpet has no blood on the bottom. “Do we clean this?” Wanda asks.

“If you want wood, I’d say we rip up these areas and burn them. This can’t be used again, too many memories in it and it may not be so good anymore between the fire, and the water that was poured onto it to put out the fire and all these carpet tacks that must be

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imbedded. They make some really nice flooring now that looks like any kind of wood but wears like stone. Never needs sanding; needs to be buffed and cleaned now and again but not the same kind of maintenance as floors of long ago. Can we look in the bar/lounge?” Kat asks.

“Yeah, here we have bar stools and tables but the contractor who was in here last left me a week ago saying that every time he moved a bar stool, it was back the next day and he thought it was me. When he went to the bathroom and came back, he actually saw one being moved and he walked out,” Wanda says.

Kat stands in the middle of the room and looks at the bar. She listens and signals to Wanda to come closer to her with her finger, she whispers to her, “They’re playing cards at the bar, listen,” Wanda listens and looks at the bar, well holy hell, she thinks to herself, the gal is right. But who are they?

Kat rummages through her research papers, she finds what she is looking for and taps Wanda. Wanda looks down and reads, *‘fifty years ago, all the workers from the nearby mines used to be treated to an after-hours drink by the owner of the hotel, those who perished in the mine were given bar stools with their names on them as a memorial.’*

“So, I’m thinking we make a historical memorial behind the bar where people can view the names and know that these people sacrificed their lives for their neighbors. Not in a fire fighter kind of way, but they still

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did. We can hang this article with the names in a nice frame. What do you think?” Kat asks.

Wanda walks over to the bar and looks under each stool, there, right in front of her, are name plates she never saw. “Why weren’t these ruined in the fire?” she asks.

“Because the fire was contained in the front foyer and west wing, it didn’t make it over here. How many names do you see?” Kat asks.

“There are fifteen on this stool alone. Oh Kat, I love the history of this place all that much more now. I think you’re right; people want to be remembered as being good. They aren’t here to haunt, they are here because they haven’t been given a way to leave, or a reason. With only their name, they will leave, it is the stool that is keeping them. You’re a genius!” she runs back to Kat and hugs her. This hug is warm, as it should be, not cold like Morris was, Kat thinks to herself.

Oh no. not Morris too. Kat puts her hand on her heart, she can’t lose him too. The two women begin to write down all they are doing in the bar/lounge and head back towards the next room and the next. They talk and laugh and discover that no one is there because they want to be, they are all stuck. Well, maybe some of them are, because they like to be social but most are stuck.

By the time they get to the fifth floor, the top, Kat realizes she is starved. She did not expect to be here for so long but there is so much history and so much to do and talk about, the time flew. Her phone rings, “Hello?”

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“Kat, where the hell are you. I went by your place and you’re not home,” Morris says.

“I’m still at the hotel. Wanda and I have discovered many wonderful things, I’m pretty sure I have this job. Going to be a grand hotel again Morris. I promise you that,” she says.

“Kat, you’re crazy. You sure you’re ok?” he asks.

“Positive, hungry, but ok,” she says

“On it. Does Wanda have any allergies?” he asks.

“Wanda any food allergies?” Kat asks

“No, why?”

“My friend is bringing dinner. I know the time is late but I’m starved,” she says.

“Oh, thank you so much. I’d love some food.

Tell him I’m a big eater too,” Wanda smiles.

Kat laughs and relays the information.

“I’ll be there in a few minutes. I’ll call an order in on my way over,” Morris says smiling. Getting to see Kat twice in one day is certainly making him happy.

“Wanda, don’t open that door. Not yet,” Kat says seriously.

Wanda looks to Kat, whom she now trusts very much, “Ok, what’s here?” she asks.

Another article to read, Wanda did not know half of this history when she bought the place, she certainly has a bigger appreciation for what she is doing now. This place will be magnificent when the two of them are done. Her ex laughed at her and said that it was a sucker buy.

“No, it wasn’t Wanda,” Kat says.

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“No what wasn’t what?” Wanda asks.

“It’s not a sucker buy, when we are done and you open to a full house the first week, he will be eating his shirt. Did you check all the papers and make sure he is not named on anything? People like to sneak in clauses you know. Somehow claiming some of the monies belong to them when others make good,” she says.

“I said that out loud?” she asks.

“No someone told me the same thing earlier this evening and I could tell by your face right now that you were thinking about being told those very words. I think we must have been friends in a past life because we certainly are now. Aren’t we?” Kat asks cautiously.

“Oh Kat, I couldn’t have asked for a better friend. I have the papers downstairs. When can we go in this room though?” she asks.

“Not tonight, they aren’t ready. Weird?” she asks.

“Yes, but I’m ok with your kind of weird. Come, let’s go back downstairs, the place seems very quiet tonight. I think we’ve been giving them the respect they wanted all along. Hey, here is an idea, how about we put out an ad in the paper asking for any old memories or pictures people have of the hotel? We can publish all that we get and have a historic book in each room like some hotels have bibles,” Wanda smiles.

“Oh Wanda, how wonderful. Bringing life back, this place is calling for life to come back in.” The two women practically run down the stairs, all the flights to get

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back to the office. Once in the office, Kat notices something very quickly. She stops in her tracks, “Wanda, you live here?”

Wanda looks at her now, new, best friend, “Obvious?” she asks.

“It’s too warm to be an office. Why?” she asks.

“Would it be weird if I told you my grandmother told me to buy the place?” Wanda asks.

“Not between us it wouldn’t,” Kat laughs.

Kat’s phone rings, “Do I just come in?” Morris asks.

“Food is here.” They walk out to greet Morris who is carrying five different take-out bags for the three of them.

Kat looks around for the right spot to have a picnic, she picks a spot near the back of the lobby. “I’m not even going to ask why here,” Wanda says.

Morris lays out all the food, there are sandwiches, soups, salads and pasta plus drinks. “Well Morris, when you put out a picnic, you sure do it well,” Kat says.

He leans over and kisses her cheek, cold again. “Hey no fair, where’s my kiss?” Wanda jokes.

Morris jumps over to her and with a joking smile he swings her backwards and plants a kiss on her lips. Wanda stands a moment, flustered. The movements were warm but the kiss was cold. She looks to Kat, who shrugs. She knows too. Kat must have felt that cold too.

The three new friends sit down to eat and talk. Kat and Wanda are non-stop talking about how great the

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place will be and what they are doing with each part. It's nearly midnight by the time they clean up from their dinner.

Wanda looks at Kat with concern, “Can we go in now; I feel we are supposed to go now,” she says.

“Yeah, Morris you want to join us upstairs?” she asks.

“You girls go, some of us have work in the morning at a place we have to show up on time for.” Morris teases. He looks once more at Wanda, she is a beautiful woman; that much he saw immediately. He walks over to Kat and kisses her goodbye and walks over to Wanda and does the same. Two kisses, one woman he knows, one he only met, but the second one is the one that has his heart pounding. That's weird.

“Ok, text me when you get home,” Kat says.

“You too,” he says to her.

“Oh, she isn't going home tonight. We're having a sleepover,” Wanda says frankly.

“Yeah,” Kat agrees immediately and smiles at Wanda. Wow, to sleep in this place? What a thrill.

~ ~ ~

The girls make their way up the stairs after locking up the front lobby and look at the closed door.

“Why this room Wanda?” Kat asks.

“I haven't been in there yet. All this time, and I haven't been in there. My grandmother told me that on the top floor many women were made into widows. That

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if a porter escorted a man up here alone, they were to report them to the manager, who then would check later in the night and find them hanging. All the other rooms here, the doors were opened, but this one was closed. I've never opened the door. Until now," Wanda says.

"I heard weeping in here. Do you have the old logs? Anything like that?" Kat asks.

"I have from some years. Others were lost in the fire because it got the office, remember? Some were found in the basement storage when I was first here. There is no way to know who was here I'm afraid, not with any certainty anyway. The place has been abandoned for over fifteen years before I bought it six years ago," Wanda says.

"So maybe this room becomes a mini lobby for this floor. We take off the door, open the wall and in here we put vending machines and maybe a couch or two to simply sit somewhere other than their room. The rooms up here are large, this will work," Kat says.

"And this way, no one is trapped anymore, they can all leave. This is the roof level, we'll talk to a contractor and ask if he can put a sunroof here, right in the middle of that room's ceiling. Only sunlight will be beaming through, no sadness. Oh, Kat this is our best idea yet. Grandma would love this idea, she'd love you too. She told me I could bring peace back to this place, but I've been finding all the wrong people. Do you have contractors who would listen to you?" Wanda asks.

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“Yeah, I have a firm in mind for this kind of job. He is one of the best around, I think, anyway. He specializes in floors, he will know what to put down that will make it both beautiful and quiet for the floors below, no one wants to hear footsteps above them. Ok Wanda, open the door,” Kat says.

Wanda opens the door and a cold rush of air pushes past them both so hard they bump into each other. Kat’s only response is to kick at the door’s hinges. Wanda catches on quickly and helps her; they begin to bang and bang until the door falls off its own hinges. They walk in and do the same to the bathroom door and they unlock the window, not open, but unlock.

“Kat, a personal question?” Wanda asks as she takes a breath from all that physical work.

“Yes?”

“Is Morris sick? Because if he is, I sure would like for him to get better, that man completely rocked my insides tonight, just talking to him made me want to grab him. But his kiss was cold, is he sick?” Wanda asks.

“I don’t know. It’s never been cold before, I felt the cold too. I’ll get him to a doctor tomorrow. He’ll listen to me,” Kat says, ‘I hope’ she thinks to herself.

“Really, you did? I was hoping not, but maybe we caught something early? Come, a warm bed is needed after a night like this,” Wanda smiles.

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In the morning’s light Kat sends out messages to her contractors; floor guy, window guy and general contractor, they are all brothers. They will come, she will be ready to greet them. She asked them to come in two hours. That will give her time to go home and shower and change.

Wanda is doing the same, she promises to have breakfast for everyone when they get back. And breakfast she does well. When Kat walks back in the hotel she smells heaven to her stomach.

“Wanda? You cook too?” Kat asks.

“I used to be a caterer. Let me know what you think. Everything is on the house boys, please come in!” she calls to the door as she sees three men walking in hesitantly. They see Kat and smile.

“Ok, in a nutshell, we’ve heard from others about this place, Kat please give us the highs and the lows, while we eat, of course,” one of them says smiling.

Kat explains each floor, from the blood on the foyer floor to the top lounge room and all the pieces in between they’ve discovered since last night. When she finally finishes the oldest brother says, “I love the whole idea! We’re in. That is, if you’ll have us,” he looks to Wanda.

“You believe us?” she asks.

“Honey, when you’ve worked with Kat long enough, you begin to believe anything is possible. She hasn’t been wrong yet, and she keeps bringing us amazing work to do. We get to be creative in all that she has us do.

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No simple ripping up of floors, we have to care for the floors. Kat taught us that, and don't even get me started on plumbing,” he smiles at Kat in awe.

Wanda sees what is behind his smile, does Kat? She wonders. “Well gentlemen, now that your bellies are full, let me take you around, how about we start on the top and work our way down?” Kat says.

The women take the men throughout the hotel, again, this takes a couple hours to do because this time they keep stopping and drawing things down, writing ideas and perfecting them. Writing down exact materials, agreeing on things as they go along. Instead of bringing in samples, Wanda is satisfied enough with pictures and going on Kat's approval of the materials. By the time they get back to the front lobby, it is lunchtime.

“I'm so excited about this. History meets modern, this is going to be quite a feat Kat, but with these drawings and ideas already, we're ready to move. I'll get you an official pricing on the project, including materials and time by the end of the week. We are going to need to price this out. Wanda do you have a timeframe you want to get this done by?” the oldest one asks.

“My grandmother's birthday is in ten months, she is the one who inspired me to buy this place, is that realistic?” Wanda asks.

“Well, we aren't doing a lot of big construction, some taking down of walls, rewiring here and there but for the most part the walls are staying put. We aren't moving any barring walls either. I like the idea of making

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the rooms bigger so that most of the rooms feel like suites. People travel with families a lot more these days and need a place to be comfortable in this area. We can bring you a bunch of room dividers that can be stored in the closets so that people can close off sleeping people and still enjoy some awake time with each other. I'd bring my kids to a place like this, that is, if I had any. You know we never really introduced ourselves, I'm Prince, and these are my brothers Wilt and Dovie. I can't believe we never said our names all day," Prince says.

Wanda smiles, "Prince? Well, you certainly are. I can't believe this is all going to come true. For so long I assumed I was going to live in this hotel, with all its ghosts, all alone," she says the last word quietly.

Kat's phone rings again, it's Morris, "Hey friend, how are you?" she asks.

"Feeling a bit under the weather actually. I wanted to let you know so that you and Wanda can be careful since I kissed both of you last night," he says.

"I want you to listen to me Morris. Really listen, like you say I always do for everyone else. Get your ass to a doctor, something is really wrong," she says with a bit of urgency in her voice.

"Really Kat?" he says with some sarcasm.

"Yes," she says with conviction.

"Oh damn. Ok, I'm headed out now. I'll stop by the hotel on my way home. I'm assuming you'll still be there," Morris says.

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“Ok, we’ll wait here. Prince and the boys are here, they’re going to take on the job of the century; this place is going to come alive right before our eyes,” she says smiling.

“I’m sure it will,” Morris says feeling too tired to fight, he has seen Prince near Kat; only a fool wouldn’t know how he feels about Kat. He pauses and looks in the mirror, “You’ve lost her to a prince,” he sighs, then he thinks about his kiss last night. “Wanda”, he sighs again, his heart beating a bit stronger at the thought of her. Hmmm, maybe Kat is right, maybe I’m looking at the wrong woman. Time to get to the doctor, he thinks to himself.

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“Ok brothers of mine, we have our work cut out for us. How the hell are we going to get a main floor plus five floors of rooms all done in ten months?” Dovie asks after they get back in the truck.

“We’re going to plan right. I think if we get the main floor done and one or two of the floors with rooms, she can open and advertise she is open during construction. We’ll set the elevator so it won’t go further than the second floor except with a key that only we will have, once in business, people won’t mind hearing banging during the day because she already advertised being under construction. The top two are going to take a while because we’re enlarging the rooms which is a lot of moving of walls and adding that skylight room.

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Methodically, we can get half done by that time. Once she is making money, I think she will be fine with the continued construction. Don't you?" Wilt asks.

"Good idea, the bottom going up. The first floor is important though, we have to take careful care of each room. Did anyone assess the kitchen? I think she is looking for a total re-haul on that one, but I'm not sure, I really didn't see that room. Then there is the bar we have to take special care with those stools. Cool idea in there. We'll get Larry on that one, he'll love that kind of redo," Prince says rambling on.

"Yeah, that's right up Larry's alley. Costs? Are we going to be crazy? Can we bring down our overall costs as much as possible? Maybe we can work out payments especially if we get her earning money early," Wilt says.

"Always the practical one. But you're right, maybe that will help her if she knows she is earning money already. She can rent out the large ballroom, that will bring in good money. I figure it can seat almost four hundred people with no problem and still have room to dance," Prince says.

"And all that time with Kat ain't a bad bonus is it bro?" Wilt teases.

"If only," Prince says softly.

The brothers know better than to push that subject of Kat, so they remain quiet the rest of the ride back to their offices.

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Wanda and Kat sit in Wanda’s office and go through some of the finer more detailed items that need to be decided, every once in a while, she sends Prince a text about a color or material change. Some he has shot down with good reasoning, others he agrees with.

He also promised he was going to bring in something to cover the front window with before nightfall, it shouldn’t be left open, he told them, especially with Wanda living there alone. They all agreed to that.

Kat tells Wanda about Morris’s call after the men left. Wanda has been mulling over her words all day. “Did you hear back yet, Kat? It’s almost dinner time, he should have been here by now, no?” she asks.

“Yeah, been weird not hearing from him, he usually tells me silly things all day. I’ll get Prince to call him. Maybe he doesn’t want to tell us, he gets funny sometimes when he is sick. He thinks if he tells me he has a flu on the phone, I will catch it somehow. He is very protective of me,” Kat says.

“We didn’t really eat lunch, how about I fix us up some dinner. Come on, I’ll make you the best piece of chicken you’ve had in a long time,” Wanda says.

“Yeah, chicken sounds good, and I’ll cut a salad while you do that.” The two ladies work in easy synchronicity and conversation is comfortable. It feels as if they’ve known each other a very long time. Kat’s phone buzzes.

“Oh, it’s Prince,” she stops to read the message and looks up to Wanda with nervous eyes. “They’ve

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admitted Morris into the hospital. Sixth floor,” Kat watches Wanda to see if she knows what that means.

Wanda stares at her and softly says, “Oncology ward?”

“We should go,” Kat says.

“Did he say we should? If not Kat, no. We shouldn’t. He needs a moment to process this himself,” she says from experience. Kat watches her and waits for the explanation, she knows one is coming. “My ex was diagnosed with a lymphoma, took him three days to tell me. When he finally did, he also told me that he didn’t want me to come to the hospital. At first everyone told me not seeing him was for the best, that he needed time to process. And that was true because talking to him on the phone I could tell by his words that he was having a hard time with this new realization. He kept saying things like ‘if I ever get past this, I’ll buy you the moon’, or ‘if I make it through, we’re going on vacation’ but then reality hit me in the face.

You see, I went to visit, unannounced. I called from the waiting room, there was one spot where they let you make calls from, it’s partitioned off so you won’t disturb the others waiting there. Anyway, I called and asked how he was doing and he said things like that again, how we will see the world, how we will start a family, if he is allowed to, he was on a roll and kept talking so I started to walk towards his room and there I saw him speaking into the phone but staring at another woman’s face,

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holding her hands and softly rubbing his thumb over her knuckles,” Wanda takes a deep breath.

“So, I walked in saying how wonderful it will be to own a moon since all I own right now is a small catering business and a one floor ranch home. I leaned down to kiss his cheek, he was in total shock, so he didn’t move but in his ear I said, ‘we will be divorced before you leave this bed’, I kissed his cheek again and looked at the woman on his bed and said, ‘he isn’t worth it’. Then I walked out with my head held high.

I walked out of the hospital, and went straight to the cemetery to talk to my grandmother. She told me to buy this place immediately with his money, move out and she even told me which lawyer to use to do everything. She said his money but she didn’t really mean that. She wanted me to own this through and through. Mine, all mine. My brother helped me move in the minute the papers were signed. We had a joint account for personal money, my business is still my business, the ex can’t touch anything from that, never could. It was a lot cheaper than you think, this building, people really believed it was haunted when they walked in and wouldn’t look through the whole place, let alone buy the building. The realtor asked me if I was sure I wanted to buy, the previous owner practically kissed my feet for even saying a tentative yes.

The lawyer my grandmother told me to use is a pit-bull when it comes to fighting for the underdog, to get

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what they deserve. His goal in life is to make sure women believe not all men are like the ones who wronged them.

He told me he pinned for my grandmother for years after her divorce, she gave in to him being her forever boyfriend, but didn't want to get married again. He told me that during that time he was the happiest he had ever been. I only remembered him after he said that. He had been to all the big family events but not the small ones like a quiet birthday dinner. He loved her and when I said she told me to come he jumped to take my case immediately.

Apparently, my mother and her brothers didn't take kindly to the fact that their mother was fooling around, in their eyes anyway, so that is why he only came sometimes. She passed before any of us grandchildren were married, but this lawyer, he sent us large wedding presents and said they were from both of them, that she set aside money for these occasions and told him what to get for each person. I nearly died when I got mine. I used the money to open my business, my husband never got the benefit of that money. If he knew how much she gave me, he would have used some, if not most of it for some hairbrained scheme he was always looking into. Worse, he would have gambled it away, thinking it wasn't his anyway and any gains would be that much sweeter.

My paperwork you asked about? Iron clad Kat, no way my husband, ex-husband, can touch this place, that, I can surely promise you. The lawyer had the divorce papers drawn and brought them to the hospital

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himself, I didn't want anything, no alimony, nothing. I don't know why, those first two years were kind of difficult and I could have used the extra cash, but I did what Grandma told me to do. In the end, I was able to use my own money. Wiped me out of my savings, but I did what I had to do. I have this place and while others felt evil spirits, I felt hugged by my grandmother all day, every day. People said I should have asked for money from him, for the house, something, but then I would have been tied to him and sometimes you need to break ties altogether. I had my business, and I've been fine on my own. I have my home here, and that has been good too. I was always afraid that if I used his alimony money, he would say it was his money that made me successful.

Oh, here I am going on and on. Morris is right, you are a good listener," Wanda says wiping a tear off of her cheek.

"Wanda, I think we are going to be friends for many, many years to come," Kat smiles.

"Did he sign the papers in the hospital? Oh, how awful for him, but you did warn him."

"He said he was taking them to his lawyer, told my lawyer he had better be prepared for a fight. But you see, he hadn't read anything yet, he didn't realize I wanted nothing from him. In some ways the clean break is insulting to his ego, it meant I didn't need him at all. That I would survive just fine without him. When he got out of the hospital, his new girl moved in with him to take care of the poor soul. What a baby. Well, that aside, what?"

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I'm not heartless Kat, but his pain could not have been greater than my public humiliation. He began to tell all of our friends that I left him while in the hospital. All my clients began to withdraw from me thinking I was the evil one. My brother was the one who came to my rescue and started pointing out to clients what they didn't notice on their own, that there is already a new woman on his arm, as he said things against me at the party, my brother went on about how this very woman was there in the hospital for three days before I even went to visit, under his own request for the purpose of keeping me out. He could be blunt with them, I couldn't, it would have looked like I was fighting back rumor to rumor. But my brother has an impeccable reputation with a lot of these same people I did work for and they started to look at what was really going on, and started calling me back. The best part of this hotel is I don't need to rent a large kitchen for big jobs any more. I've been able to work from here.

I'm sorry, you should go see your friend, don't let my story stop you," Wanda says with regret.

"You already know Morris well, he needs time to process. If he didn't even text me, he is in his own world. But we'll go tomorrow, ok? Together?" Kat asks.

"Hello!! Where are you guys?" a voice calls to them.

The two women run out from the kitchen, to see Prince. He looks at Kat and opens his arms, she walks right into them to be enveloped in the hug she really needs, a tight, warm, comforting hug from a close friend.

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Prince lets go and pushes her out at arm’s length, “He is scared, I called his mom for him. Not fatal, the doctors keep telling me, I told his mom already. The doctor also told me that it is very early, that he has never even seen what it looked like so early. They said they aren’t even sure how he knew to come in. But we both know, don’t we? You told him to go in, didn’t you?” Prince looks into her eyes, Kat nods and so does Wanda.

Prince catches Wanda’s nod, she knows too?
“His hug was cold,” Wanda says with a shrug, she also didn’t want to admit she was kissed.

Prince looks at Wanda, Morris is right, the new girl is beautiful, but not as beautiful as the girl in my arms. Ok Morris, let’s make this work for the four of us, he thinks to himself. “Ok girls, so while his mom is there, she will take tonight’s shift, I don’t think she will leave his side. His brothers are on a plane now and his sister is on her way. So tonight, it’s us. I’m assuming you didn’t eat dinner. Pasta House, my treat?” Prince says.

“We were making dinner in the kitchen when you called to us,” Kat says.

“So, is that a no?” he asks.

“I can put the raw chicken back into the refrigerator and wash up in five, Kat?” Wanda asks

“Are you sure?” Kat asks.

“Your salad will keep for a midnight snack. Sleepover again?” Wanda asks.

“Prince?” Kat asks.

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“I’m up for a sleepover, can we watch a movie on the big wall in the banquet room?” he asks

“Definitely!” the girls say in unison.

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Wanda is already pacing the floor when the sun comes up. Her heart is beating fast and she can’t catch her breath now. “Kat!” she calls.

Kat jumps up from her sleeping bag and looks around, “Wanda! What is it? What’s wrong?” she asks stumbling to her feet. “Prince!” she calls

Prince comes running in to the room, he slept in the next room last night. “What’s wrong? Wanda, hey are you ok? You look stricken,” he grabs her shoulders to hold her still.

“I’ve been up all night. I need to see Morris, something is wrong. I have to be there. Now. Prince, can you drive. I’ve already changed my clothes twice,” Wanda paces again rubbing her hand through hair.

Kat runs over to her. “You should have woken us sooner Wanda. What did she tell you?” Kat asks.

“She said there’s a problem, that’s all. Oh man Kat, I don’t know what is going on, but that man needs me or I need him I’m not even sure any more. Or why,” she says through tears and touches herself on her cheek where he had kissed her when they met.

“Ready. Come on. Wanda lock up,” Prince says as they walk out the front door. She double locks the doors and turns to her new friends. She has needed friends for a long time, it feels good to have some.

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Prince calls the hospital from his car, he asks to speak to Morris’s doctor and tells him he is bringing in two women whose premonitions shouldn’t be snickered at and they say there is a problem with his friend. The doctor does not laugh, in fact he answers by saying, “We have those in our family too. I’m going to his room right now. I’ll see you soon.”

Once at the hospital, Prince leads the women up to the oncology ward, he doesn’t see any of Morris’s family in the waiting room, but he does see a nurse he recognizes from yesterday. “Any word on my friend?” he asks.

“Oh, you’re the one who called in. Let me get the doctor. Don’t move,” she runs down the hall and moments later the doctor comes rushing down to greet Prince, his hand extended.

“Morning,” he says as they shake hands.

“He sent his family home last night, well, to his apartment, they were crowding him and every time they were in the room his breathing became erratic with panic. When you called, I went in right away. We drew some blood, he is on oxygen now, and we’re going to do a CT scan to see if we are missing something. There must be a blockage of some sort, but the good news is I don’t think this is related to the lymphoma, I think it is secondary to his condition. Who do you have with you? Family or friends, you probably shouldn’t have been told any of that by law but by the patient’s direct orders to me, you

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specifically are to be told everything,” the doctor comes up for breath looking directly at Prince.

Prince looks up and sees his friend being pushed quickly down the hallway. “Can you stop them a moment so she can see him?” he asks.

“Yeah, but only a moment, go get them,” he runs down the hall and Prince heads back to the women, “Wanda, they’re rushing him for a CT scan, possible breathing blockage – the doctor is holding him up so you can see him. Go, down the hall. Quickly,” he says.

He looks to Kat and she nods. Wanda takes off down the hall and slows as she gets closer to the gurney carrying the man she is so connected to. She walks over to him and looks down at him hoping he recognizes her. She touches his hand and he squeezes her fingers and smirks under his mask.

“Hey, thought I’d stop by and let you know we’re going ahead with the building plans. Prince is amazing for the job. How ya doing?” she asks playfully.

Inside his mask she hears him say, “Better now.”

“I’ll be waiting. Behave for them please,” Wanda turns to the staff around Morris and says, “Take care of him or you’ll have to deal with me,” he squeezes her hand again and when she looks down at him he has a tear running down his cheek. Wanda wipes it off with her finger, then she kisses her finger and touches his forehead. “I’ll be waiting,” she says softly again and backs up so they can take him.

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Prince and Kat are standing hand in hand watching this from down the hall. Kat realizes that she is holding his hand and tries to pull out. “I’m ok with this if you are,” Prince whispers while still watching Wanda. Kat takes a breath and realizes that her best friend and her new friend are so connected she could feel him, she also senses that holding Prince’s hand is what is keeping her from breaking down herself.

Wanda walks back to her new friends to be engulfed into a three-way hug in the middle of the waiting room floor. “Come, you can wait for him in his room,” the nurse says to the group. Everyone had watched what happened. You can’t fake that kind of love; internal, spontaneous. No one at the hospital knows that some of them only met a couple of days ago.

The wait has them all a bit jumpy. After an hour and a half, the doctor comes in. “So, here I am talking to the one man I was told to tell everything to, not anyone else,” the women nod.

“The scan showed some kind of growth near his lung, they are positive it is not related to the lymphoma but it is being removed right now, because it appears to be small. Once he saw you Ms., his vitals calmed down. He did not seem scared to have the scan. It made for much clearer pictures. He stayed calm.

If anything is found on the mass they take out, proper treatment will follow. But as of right now, everyone truly feels this is unrelated. He will be brought to the intensive care unit for recovery and brought back

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here hopefully by the end of the day, or by morning the latest, that’s what we hope for. We have to watch for a collapsed lung since the procedure will be so close to the organ. Was he ever in the military?” he asks Prince.

“Yes. Served six years until he was injured. Purple heart, honorable discharge, why are you asking?” Kat says.

The doctor looks from one to the other, a close bunch clearly. “The mass is oddly shaped, now it makes more sense, this could have been a piece of shrapnel that dislodged from somewhere else and has been floating around until now, where it found a place to land and stick. Finding it now probably saved his life. If this mass moved only an inch to the left, the lung would have for sure been punctured. I’ll let them know upstairs that they are probably going to find shrapnel. Thanks for the call,” he pats Prince on the arm and walks out.

“Oh Wanda, your grandmother is watching him?” Kat asks with her hand covering her mouth in surprise.

“It didn’t sound like her, maybe it is his own grandmother, I don’t know. But she was pretty insistent and I got scared. I’m sorry,” Wanda says

“Sorry for saving a man’s life? I’m confused,” Prince says.

“No, but you see, I’ve only known him for hours whereas Kat has known him for years and you too, she should have been told this information,” Wanda says softly pointing to Kat.

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“To be honest, my head was full of its own voice last night. I didn’t sleep much. I got up four times to go check the piano room. There was nothing there but someone kept saying piano room, straight ahead. When Morris gets out of surgery, Wanda why don’t you go down to the intensive care recovery? Prince and I will go back to the hotel and check out the piano room. That is, if you trust us in your home. I keep forgetting it is your home,” Kat says.

“My home has so many guests all the time. I want them either out or settled before we open up again. Ha! Listen to me, I said we,” Wanda smiles.

“We sounds good Wanda. When I first called you, you also said we, my guess is so that I didn’t think you were alone. No more alone Wanda. You’re not alone,” Kat walks over to her new friend and they hug each other very tightly. Wanda whispers in her ear, “I needed friends when I bought the place, I’ve been alone until I met you.” She holds Kat with arms stretched out now and looks into her eyes, “Kat I’ve been so alone and scared. Not of the ghosts but of all the rejections. I was beginning to believe, he was right, that it was a sucker buy.”

“A sucker buy? Who told you that? No wait, don’t give me a name,” Prince says angrily. “We made a plan yesterday. We’re going to do the main floor first, so you can rent out the ballroom for catering right away and you can open the bar/lounge to the public for dinner hours only. Then the second floor will open shortly

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thereafter and people can start staying there. You can begin to advertise that you are open during construction and charge a little less. People like to be the first ones in. The place will be sold out quickly, you’ll see. When each floor is finished you can have another grand opening party if you want. Then, when the whole thing is done, which might not be until next New Years, which is more than ten months away, but you can host the first annual New Year’s party. In between all this, you can cater parties in the ballroom or the other smaller rooms on the main floor. We can have contests to name them in the paper. People love to be part of history. All this planning was in the truck on the way back yesterday,” Prince says.

Wanda looks to Prince, “Are you kidding me? We can do this floor by floor and I can start earning money right away? How do we lock up the upper floors? People will want to go up and look,” she says.

“Specialty locks, and only you, me and my brothers will have the keys to the elevators to go above any floor not finished. Doors will have them as well. Total project may end up being a year and a half. But first floor and possibly second will be done in the ten months as you requested. At least, after that, you can start opening up. Bit by bit,” Prince looks at both women.

Kat is smiling at him really wide and Wanda is too. “If we weren’t in a hospital, I’d be screaming right now Prince. Oh Kat, this venture is going to work isn’t it? Grandma was right. I can do this. I can show him up.”

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When Morris is brought back to his regular room Wanda is there again, she had been visiting him while he was in intensive care, as often and as long as they allowed her. Now here she is again, “Welcome home,” she laughs.

“Hey. How do you keep looking so beautiful? Even in a hospital?” he asks. Why does this feel so right? Her, with him. This is what he was looking for, and he thought it was Kat, but obviously not. This is the woman he is meant to be with. He reaches out a hand for her after they get him in his bed.

“It’s only what you see, no one else does,” Wanda says.

“How did you and Kat get so close so quick? How did we?” he asks.

“I don’t know, but I’m not going to complain and if you start, I’m going to have to hit you with something hard,” Wanda says.

“Oh, my dear sweet woman, I’m not complaining but I’ve never had something like this hit me so hard and so completely. Then I end up here and I’ve got all this drama to deal with. Doc says you’re the one who called to say I needed help. Who told you?” he asks.

“At first I thought it was my grandmother, but her voice was odd, so I’m not sure,” Wanda says.

“Did it sound like this?” Morris says in his best Aunt Bessie impression.

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“Yes, as a matter of fact it did. Who is that?” she asks.

“Aunt Bessie, my mom’s sister. Mom and she fought all the time. My whole life, they could never be in the same discussion and take the same side. Aunt Bessie loved that I was going into the military. She promised to look after me. The first letter I got from home was from her telling me she was dying. That she probably won’t be there when I get back. She sent me her love and then she sent a very large check to Prince and told him to deposit the money in my account as soon as he receives it. He did and asked me about it later. Seems she didn’t want her kids to get most of her money because they took her and her money for granted. While she was still in her full mental capacity, she gave a large chunk to me and even some to my mom and some to my other siblings. No one ever said how much they got but they sure talked about it a lot at the table to say how surprised they were that they even got any.

Then after the funeral we found out our cousins did not get much from their own mother, she left her house in shambles and left them the house. Her last year she lived with my mom so whatever was broken, stayed broken. If that was the voice, it was her looking out for me again. When I was injured in service, the medic said I was the calmest person he ever knew to get injured. I told him it was because my guardian angel was with me. My aunt kissed me then. She knew I felt her. She brought me home to my mom. Who then went into such a panic, I

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called Prince and he took over my care. She is good at pacing and worrying, but comforting? Not so much.

Aw man, I sure do shoot my mouth off a lot. I'm sorry. Thank you for being here Wanda. Thank you for falling into my life, however weird the circumstances," he reaches out his hand again and she holds his hand with both of hers.

"My good friend Kat has taught me a lot about listening," she smiles.

"Hey who's mentioning my name without me?" Kat says as she and Prince walk in.

"Me. Morris was just telling me about his experiences with his Aunt Bessie," she says more to Prince than to Kat.

"Ah, she was a pill that one. We all miss her Morris. Wait, you mean to tell me she is the one who talked to Wanda?" Prince asks.

"Yeah, seems that way," Morris says.

"That woman sure loved you man. Speaking of love, Wanda I am in love with that hotel. Kat and I spent hours yesterday walking around each room, each floor. Every time we do, more ideas come to mind. We wrote them down this time, you and Morris can go over them during some down time here," he says and hands her a clipboard with a stack of papers.

"And the piano room?" Wanda asks.

"The straight away part was the confusing part. I walked straight from the door, nothing. From the piano in each direction, nothing. Then we opened the top of the

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piano and we found these,” she hands Wanda some very old photographs that were hidden in the piano. “It must have been saying strings not straight. Sometimes clarity is a problem. But look at them. All dated back when the place was hopping with celebrities. Do you want them in the piano room or in the bar with the other pictures and memorabilia?” Kat asks.

“No, the piano room. Look at all these old stars. Oh, we need to decorate this place, just like this picture. Look, this one has the most detail. I don’t know about the coloring but I like the rest. We can research this don’t you think?” Wanda asks.

“Well. I kind of already did. Here look at this,” Kat hands her a folder with swatches and each one marked for what they will be. “Then around the room, at an even height we will have these pictures. No one will forget the history. And in answer to your ad you put in about memories and photos in yesterday’s newspaper? I’ve received seventy-five responses already in the special e-mail we set up. This history book will be on sale in the lobby, not sure we should give it away. After everyone sees each piece we are displaying, they are going to want to know about why it is important. Good and bad. History makes a place interesting. The more we look the more we find. Well, here is the most interesting part, the more we find the calmer the place is. They stayed because they wanted to be remembered. Even the children in the curtains. The fire will be mentioned in the history book because I found the police report, I found all the names

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of those who perished in the fire too. No pictures, but names are good to know. The upstairs room? Found many of the police reports of those too,” Kat says.

“How do you do this with so little time? I’ve been there a few years and I still didn’t have half of what you have,” Wanda says feeling overwhelmed. Morris squeezes her hand.

“Kat is a whiz at finding things, she has a radar. Sure, sometimes she hears voices, but other times? I swear information finds its way to her. I have no explanation other than that. Prince you agree?” Morris says.

“From the moment we met her. Listen Wanda, we took the liberty of bringing you a change of clothes and some food for today. Look over the main floor decisions today, we’d like to start as early as next week,” Prince says.

Wanda looks at each person in the room, she is so lucky to have fallen in with this group. “Kat, can I speak with you outside a moment?” she asks.

“I’ll wait for you outside Prince,” Kat and Wanda walk out to the waiting room.

“No one’s life is supposed to turn around like this, so quickly. Kat I’m out of my league here. You guys have known each other years, I’ve known you hours. How are you so accepting?” she asks.

“You gave us your keys, sounds as if you’re equally as accepting. Or equally as crazy, whichever way you want to see the situation,” Kat says.

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“Where do you live Kat?” Wanda asks.

“On Water Street in a month to month rental. Why?” Kat asks.

“The main floor apartment, you’ve seen where I live. It’s huge. I have four bedrooms, my own kitchen and two bathrooms back there. Move in with me during all of this. I have a feeling I’m going to need you by my side to get through all of this hotel business, and everything that has to do with Morris. Oh my, that was so bossy of me. I’m so sorry. Forget I said anything,” Wanda looks down at the floor. “That’s why I have no friends. I don’t know boundaries.”

“You don’t even know if I’m clean or a slob. I could be the world’s worst bathroom shower singer. I could have horrible habits and you want me? As a roommate? No one wants me. Weird Kat, the one who talks to anything with or without a physical brain. Yeah, that’s what they used to say about me in high school and then again in college.

Don’t talk to her, she talks to dead people. Don’t look at her, she has evil inside her. To top it off, everything I’ve ever loved has gone away,” Kat looks at Wanda.

“I’m not going away Kat. I think we need each other now. You can take one of the offices on the main floor and work from there. Have yourself a field day and design the best office there is. There are a lot of spaces I don’t personally need. Please consider what I’m saying,” Wanda asks.

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“Ok. I’ll let you know tonight. I think Prince and I are going to go to dinner tonight. The two of us, I don’t think this will be a friend’s dinner if you know what I mean,” Kat says.

“Oh, Kat I’m a bit envious. I wish I could go out with Morris,” Wanda says.

“He talks a lot. You’ll get to know a lot about him sooner than you think,” Kat smiles.

“I’m going back in, he wants me there when his family comes back later,” Wanda kisses Kat on the cheek and walks back into Morris’s room.

~ ~ ~

Over dinner Kat tells Prince about what Wanda proposed to her about moving in.

“Well, you will definitely have more room than you do now. Did you tell her you rent a room or a place? If I know you, you said place indicating it could be any size,” he smiles at her and Kat nods. “I knew it. She is amazing Kat. She fits right in with our kind of crazy. Don’t you think?” Prince asks.

“Yeah. We melded pretty easily together and pretty much instantaneously too. Hard to think we haven’t known her as long as we have known each other. But living together is a big deal don’t you think?” Kat asks.

“Kat, you live in a bedroom, you share a bathroom with eight or more people at any given time, you work from your bed or from any other public place you can plug in your computer. Your desk is as squished

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in as can be in that room and somehow you make yourself feel you are in an office. You’ve been doing this to save money to buy yourself something nice. The apartment alone will give you what you need, what you deserve, and if that’s not enough room, you’ll have the whole hotel to walk around and pace in when you’re thinking. And the biggest bonus, I live only five minutes away,” he smiles at her and holds her hand across the table.

“Five minutes away huh?” she smiles.

“Yeah.”

“Something to consider,” she smiles again. Kat’s phone buzzes. *‘Oh my, his mom is a piece of work. She asked who I was and Morris said his girlfriend, then she looked at me and said not for long then he went nuts. He made them all leave’*

Kat shows her phone to Prince. “Ok, let me get the check. Tell her we’re on our way.”

‘Paying the bill, we’re on our way’

‘Thank you. The nurse just gave him a sedative.’

Prince drives as fast as he can legally and gets to the hospital within minutes. They both run up the stairs to Morris’s floor, neither one has patients to wait for an elevator and he needs to burn off steam hoping he won’t run into Morris’s mother.

Once on the floor, they take a deep breath and open the door, he walks to the nurses’ station and asks if anyone else is still here, they tell him the family went downstairs and he could go in.

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“What the hell?!” he says to Morris.

The sedative was to calm him down, not put him to sleep, so Morris answers, “I lost it. I couldn’t believe she said that in front of Wanda. My siblings are allowed happiness but not me? Prince, not me?” he questions his oldest and dearest friend.

“You deserve this, yes. Tell me the whole thing,” he sits down on the corner of the bed and listens to Morris tell him how his mother told him, in front of Wanda that he will date when she says he can, and now is not the time. Then he argued that his sister is living with a man and he can’t date? To which she said, that’s a different situation. His married brothers, also different situations.

So, Morris told Prince that he yelled at his mother that she was being as bad as she used to say her sister Bessie was and that if it wasn’t for Bessie he would have died in combat. “Oh no, you didn’t,” Prince says.

“Yeah,” Morris bows his head, he is a bit ashamed that he said it, but thankful he said combat and not in the hospital.

“And now?” Prince asks.

“Now they went downstairs to regroup. I think they are going to start their stupid, he is not in his right mind crap and want to take over my care. I’m perfectly sane Prince. I already spoke with the doctor earlier today because I had a feeling they were going to challenge my mental capacity again. I saw something in her eyes earlier. He asked why and I told him that she likes to be in

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control even when she doesn't understand the situation. She will nod and smile and say 'let me think about it' and go get information on what was said. I told him exactly how things were going to go down today when they met Wanda. He was right outside actually, at the nurses' station, he heard the whole thing. I didn't know that until they left and he came in. He handed me papers to sign that says you are my only medical liaison, or proxy or some sort thing. He had a psychologist already come to confirm that I was of sound mind. So, tag, you're it. Again. But this time legally. I'm sorry," Morris says.

"Hey, you'd do it for me," Prince says.

"In a heartbeat," Morris says looking at his friend in the eye.

"So why the long face?" he asks.

"Did you hear what she said to Wanda? To her face yet. The woman saved my life," he says.

"I know, you know and the doctor knows. He also knows the situation here and when they come back up, I'll politely send them home, all the way home. Your siblings are afraid she will cut them off financially. You're not. Nor do you care, but they do. They will back her up, we know that. I had to call them though, initially anyway. But we have the truth on our side. Are you prepared for them not to come back? At all this time? It will only be the four of us then I'm afraid. Well and my brothers," Prince says.

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“Wanda, are you ok with that?” Morris asks. “It’s too early in our relationship for you to be brought in to my family’s drama.”

Through tears in her eyes Wanda says, “This is the craziest thing ever but yes. After only a moment in time, a lifetime of memories has been shared between us. I’m so lucky to have found you guys,” Wanda leans over to Kat who is now holding her tightly.

“So, things are settled. Morris, I’ll move your stuff to my condo and handle the exit fee for your place right now. Kat is going to move into the apartment at the hotel with Wanda and we’ll all be one big happy family only five minutes away from each other. With two annoying younger brothers and their families,” Prince laughs.

The rest of the group does too. Someone clears their throat behind them. Prince stands to face Morris’s mother. “Good evening Maám,” he says formally.

“Prince, take these women out of my son’s room. They don’t belong here. I will be taking over now and extra people is not what he needs,” she says with a sneer of confidence on her face, the kind you see after someone sucked on a lemon.

“No Maám. I believe you have the situation all wrong,” he pauses, “again. The first time was quite a scene, are you going to do that again? Or can we make this one nice and simple. Turn around, gather your stuff from his apartment and leave for home tonight. I’m sure there is a 9:00 flight still on the schedule tonight,” he

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stands firmly in front of the women and Morris, with his arms crossed in front of his chest.

“Don’t make me get the authorities Prince,” she says.

“That’s the thing Maám, I am the authority right now. The only authority. I don’t take kindly to your threats though, Maám. The only authority in this patient’s care is me, the papers are already signed, from the moment he came in. I’m the only one who can make any medical decisions for him, if he is not conscious himself. Only me. The paperwork says so and this is legal and binding, if you try and dispute the idea, we will have a worse problem than last time. I called you out of concern for your son, but you clearly didn’t learn from the last time how to behave. So again, I ask you nicely, don’t turn this into your own personal drama. Nothing around here is about you. The patient is the only one I care about, his physical and mental well-being. You need to leave. Now,” he takes a step forward towards her.

Her initial reaction is to be defiant and stand there, then he takes another step and she takes a step back calling to her son, “Your aunt would be so proud of you, kicking out your own mother. As she did with hers, you are no longer a part of me.”

“Enough drama. You’ve had your moment, and no one here cares to hear any more. Morris doesn’t need your money to survive, never did. Aunt Bessie made sure he was always supported, both emotionally and financially, did you?” Prince shuts the door before she

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can answer. He turns to look at Morris, “I’m sorry, I overstepped bringing up the money.”

Morris looks to Wanda and Kat, “When Mom gave me a five for spending money, Aunt Bessie gave me twenty. She knew my mother’s routine. Bessie would overstep any chance she could when it involved me. We were kindred spirits in some ways. Mom hated me being independent. She can’t legally find out how much Bessie gave me, can she?” Morris asks.

“No, she has no right to. It was a binding Will and that check came before she was too sick to write one, she had every right to send you what she wanted to. Bessie had envelopes for each niece and nephew and child, when your mom complained about how stingy her sister was, your sister gave your mom her own money from Bessie. It was only two hundred dollars, I had seen the checks. Don’t ask me why, I’m not allowed to say. Your brothers got a little more but not much. She wanted one more chance to spit in her sister’s eye. Do you know why?” Prince asks.

“No, but I have a feeling you do,” Morris says.

“Something to do with a man believe it or not. When they were of dating age, Bessie apparently stole a man from your mom. That man died in service and your mom told Bessie it served her right for stealing him from someone who Bessie knew was better than her. Bessie forgave her but your mom never forgave Bessie.

When she married your dad, she did so because he was in what she considered a higher social status than

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Bessie and her husband. But she was never as happy as Bessie was. Bessie, as you know, was constantly happy, sorrow was part of life, but life was happy. She tried to raise her kids to be happy but they became cynical. They put down their own mom’s happy life as being a way of coping with so little she had to make herself happy. They had no idea how much money she and their dad really had. Bessie and her husband chose not to spend so much on their children, not because they were stingy but because they felt their kids had all they needed.

When I say you got the lion’s share Morris, I mean the kind of the tribe leader lion’s share. When she was first diagnosed with her illness, she began to let the house go to disrepair on purpose. She guilted your mom into letting her live with her in the end only because you weren’t there, and she wanted to live in your room in the end. She wasn’t in hospice, she was in your room. We talked for hours sometimes. She told me all this.

She told me that her house, because of the lack of up-keep is going to be worth almost half of what it should have been and it made her laugh, as you can imagine.

She also told me you were going to find a special girl and that she will make your world shine. She must approve if she spoke to her already. In other words, your mom married your dad to one up Bessie, but she lived a miserable life and Bessie a happy one. End of mystery,” Prince says

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“I knew it was dumb. I mean, how could anyone not like Bessie?” Morris says.
~ ~ ~

With the construction under way for weeks now and Morris on the mend. Things have been working out very well for these four friends. The new roommates are getting along well, they give each other space and then sometimes talk all night.

Morris walks into the hotel and towards the ballroom, Prince told him he'd be there. “Hey. Driving me for treatment today?” he asks.

“No, Wanda is. My truck broke down and I came with Wilt. You ok Buddy?” Prince asks.

“Kind of worn out this week. I quit my writing job this morning. They were being jerks about medical leave, saying I should be able to work while going through treatments and that working two days a week was not worth their money.

I gave the printout of the email to Wanda’s lawyer, he said to go ahead and quit, but he was suing them for medical care and false dismissal or some sort of thing like that, you know I don’t follow legal talk. He also said not to worry about my medical bills, they will be paid, that he will make sure they are. I don’t know what I’ll be doing after all these treatments in a year,” he says.

“How about managing a hotel?” Wanda says from behind him. Morris turns around slowly and looks at her questioningly. “What? I’m going to need someone

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and you have management experience and you love this hotel already, said so yourself a few times,” she says.

“I said I love a woman who owns this hotel,” he corrects her.

“Oh,” she blushes, “Oh my,” Wanda stands there not knowing what to do.

Prince begins to laugh, “Still have your wit, that’s a good sign. Morris, do you need me to drive? I’ll borrow Wilt’s car.” Wanda is still stuck in her spot, he loves me? She thinks to herself. Part of her wants to run out and tell Kat but she is out buying materials.

“If you don’t mind,” Morris says weakly to his friend.

“Wanda, go back to work. I’ve got this run,” Prince says.

“Um, ok. Use my car, Wilt might need his for supplies later,” she tosses him her keys and walks out of the room.

“I have no filter Prince. I’m afraid to be around her when I’m vulnerable. I do love her, that was no slip of the tongue, I promise,” he says.

“I know. Come on, let’s go get your jacket and go. But I need to wash up first, sit down here in the lobby.” Prince walks away to find his brother to say he is taking Wanda’s car. In the meantime, he sends a text to Kat about what was said, he knows she will run back now to Wanda.

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In the hospital Morris appears very weak. “Hey, is he usually like this? Seems a bit extra sluggish today,” Prince tells the nurse.

“Yeah, I was thinking the same thing. Let me get the doctor,” she says as she walks off.

The doctor checks Morris and decides he needs to be admitted again. “He is very dehydrated and we need to power him up. Probably only overnight. You ok with this?”

“Yeah, we’re good. I’ll call the girls,” Prince says. He sends a text instead. Morris must have known he wasn’t going home today.

With the boys gone for the afternoon, Kat and Wanda decide to drive out to the cemetery so Wanda can meet Aunt Bessie. Kat knows where she is buried.

“Wow, under this beautiful tree?” Wanda says.

“She said if the tree ever dies, they have to plant another one, she needs shade, always hated being in too much sun,” Kat laughs at the memory.

The two women sit down in front of the grave. “Hi Aunt Bessie, this is Wanda, she is the one you spoke to. His real girlfriend. Morris needs your help again. I think the treatments are getting to him, emotionally and physically, we can only do so much. Your turn,” Kat says.

Wanda sits in silence but is nodding her head every once in a while. Kat stands and leaves her alone next to the grave, she walks back to stand by the car, watching.

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“Look, there she is! I told you,” a small boy’s voice says.

Kat turns around to see the little boy she saved not so long ago, why would he be here? She waves and he comes running to her and gives her a big hug. He holds on tightly. When he lets go, he says, “You didn’t answer your phone. I tried calling twice today but then Grandmamma told me where you were. They don’t like me, my mom’s cousins, and my mom pushes me away now too,” he whispers.

Kat looks up to see three people, one woman in particular is looking at her, she approaches. “Hi, I’m the woman you saved,” she says putting her hand out.

“Hello,” Kat says shaking her hand, the hand is ice cold. Not the cold like Morris had, but chilling cold to the bone. She looks into her eyes again, there is no soul there. She is lost. Kat looks to her with sympathy, this poor woman.

“We didn’t know your name so we let him find you in his own, um, unique way,” the mother says.

“Why did you need to find me?” Kat asks.

“To be honest, I have a hard time looking at him, he looks like he could be his father’s twin. But also, he is as crazy as my grandmother was sometimes. I loved her to pieces, but she used to spook me all the time too, with talk of ghosts and voices. I can’t deal with that. I need sane. I need serene and quiet. That is what life is like with my cousins. We’d all like things to be normal again, you know what I mean?” she asks

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“I’m not sure where this is going, no. What does this have to do with finding me?” Kat says.

“One second,” the woman walks away back to the black car where three other people are standing with their arms crossed.

A familiar voice speaks to her, ‘they want to put him away in foster care because they don’t understand how he hears me, I tried to keep myself quiet but I have to watch him still. They ignore him. She is giving him to you, I trust you. If you take him, I will leave him and you alone. I promise. He needs love and happiness and understanding. They don’t understand him, and worse, they have no love for him. Even his own mother,’ the voice pauses, ‘really, nothing.’

Kat looks back at Wanda she is crying now and needs her but the boy who is holding on to her needs her too. Oh, Prince you’re not going to like this. In her head she thinks, ‘People I love always leave.’

‘Not this time, Prince is here for the long haul, and that hotel will be a wonderful place to raise him. You’ll see.’

A man in a suit carrying a backpack and an envelope approaches her. “Maám, do you understand what is going on here?”

“No,” Kat says honestly.

“The child,” he says.

“The child has a name,” Kat says in disgust, how dare he address him as property.

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“Normally I conduct all business of such a serious nature in an office or at the courthouse, this is highly irregular,” he says.

“I am certain I had no idea you were coming, the young man here, hey what is your name?” Kat stops to ask.

“Kids at school call me stinky, my mom calls me Packard,” he says.

Packard? That’s a name? Kat thinks to herself. ‘Yes, a dumb one too, father named him before she had a chance to see the birth certificate papers. He thought it was funny because he was packed in her for so long. You can change it legally.’

“Ok, so Packard it is, as I was saying, I had no idea that Packard and his mother were going to be here. I brought my friend here to see her aunt. That is why I’m here, and I need to get back to her,” Kat says to the man

“Whatever the reason you are here I don’t care, the boy brought us here insisting you were here and here you are. Because the police would not give us your name. Even though I’m sure it is in the report somewhere. But who cares, here you are. Driver’s license please,” he asks.

“No,” Kat says, “State your business sir.”

“I’m here as the lawyer who represents the woman you spoke to a moment ago. She is hereby signing over all parental rights of her son Packard to you. I need to put your legal name on the document, there is another man in the car who is a notary and we need one witness, we can use your friend,” he says frankly. “The father

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already lost his rights, he won't be coming after you, I assure you of that.”

“Packard come with me a moment,” she says as she takes him over to Wanda. She gives her a quick rundown of the weird scenario she finds herself in right now.

Before Wanda can say a word, Packard says, “Hello Aunt Bessie, nice to meet you too.”

“Oh, he has to come now,” Wanda says.

“I guess so,” Kat laughs. “Come, we aren't related, he said he can use you as a witness. I don't know if any of this is really legal. We will have your lawyer check all of these papers as soon as we get back.”

“Cool, I hear labor is hard; whew, we got this delivery thing down pat,” Wanda jokes and Kat laughs.

Packard is holding Kat's hand the whole way back. She takes out her driver's license and hands it to the man in front of her. This is the strangest thing that has ever happened to her. “How old are you dear?” Wanda asks.

“I'm six almost seven, that's why I knew how to call her on the phone,” he says proudly.

“You're a very smart six almost seven-year-old, do you know that?” she asks.

“Not always, but thank you,” he smiles.

“Kat, its Aunt Bessie, he is a good boy, the woman needs to separate from a bad part of her life, if he looks like her husband, she will grow afraid of her own son when he gets bigger, regardless of what his personality

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is. I'm sure this is hard for her too. Your heart is big. You will have your own one day and your heart will grow even bigger. Oh, I'm so proud of you and Prince and Morris. I'm going to him now. Bye love,' and with that Kat feels a kiss on her forehead.

Within a matter of moments, Kat becomes a mother. They watch the black car pull away. No suitcase, nothing. "What is in your bag," Wanda asks.

"My clothes and my two dolls from Grandmamma," he says.

In the car Wanda calls her lawyer and explains everything as the child falls asleep in the back. "What! Why couldn't they ask you to meet them when you were done? Oh hell, don't answer that question. Send me a picture of the document I want to make sure it is perfectly legal and the father can never come after Kat. Shenanigans like this is so stupid, this could have been handled better. I hate stupid lawyers. A quick visit to a judge's chamber could have done this as well. Shenanigans is what this is," he says in disgust.

"He is in jail, lost those rights I thought," Wanda says.

"Not always, I'm going to look his case up. I'll be by for dinner tonight. I'm expecting steak," he jokes.

"Funny that is exactly what is on the menu. See you then," Wanda relates what he says. Kat is quiet.

Wanda types on her phone, Kat drives lost in her own thoughts, what just happened? Wanda sends the e-mail for Prince and Morris to see. While Morris sleeps

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Prince reads the e-mail Wanda sent. Oh no, “Kat,” he whispers. He knows what she is thinking, things she loves either die or leave. Now she has this boy and she is afraid to love him. He looks to Morris, he can’t leave him, not tonight.

He calls Wilt and explains the whole thing. All of it from Kat’s moment at the park bench all the way through to today. “Where do you want me? The hospital or the hotel?” he asks

“I think here, if you can. His family left but I’m paying for security at the door anyway. Call me paranoid,” Prince says.

“No, I’ll call you wise. Wife says you’re right, I should come there. Give me half an hour,” Wilt says.

“Ok, thanks. I owe you.....” Prince says.

“Nothing, you owe me nothing, I’m your brother, family does this.” Wilt hangs up and gets himself ready to head over to the hospital he calls Dovie to say what is going on before he leaves.

When the women get back to the hotel Wanda is the one who has to wake Packard and help him into the apartment. Kat is still too quiet. Dovie sees them come in and runs over to tell Wanda Prince is on his way and that Wilt is headed over to relieve him at the hospital. “Ok, thanks. Everyone coming to dinner tonight?”

“If by everyone you mean our wives and kids, yes. Crew said not today. They want to wait for a real banquet,” he smiles.

“Yeah I promised that didn’t I?” Wanda laughs.

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Wanda and Packard are in the kitchen making cookies when Prince comes in. “Hey little man, I understand you’re going to be living here too. My name is Prince, you’ll see a lot of me here.”

“My name is Packard,” he says almost embarrassed to say his name.

“Naw, that’s not a name for you, how about we call you Jasper. You look like a Jasper to me,” Prince says smiling.

The child looks up at him, then gets off his stool and runs to him, Prince picks him up. The child holds on around his neck quite tightly. “Grandmamma said one day I will meet a real prince and he will turn me into his Jasper.”

“When did she say that?” Prince asks.

“After the first time my dad hurt me,” he says quietly.

“Maybe she said jester that is the word that goes with prince, but I prefer Jasper. Well then, I guess she was right,” he scratches the back of his head. He came up with the name on the spot. No voice heard. Wanda shrugs and he does too. “I’m going to go find Kat. You stay here and help Wanda with dinner ok?”

“Ok,” he says softly and climbs back to work with Wanda.

Prince finds Kat where he knew she would be, upstairs on the fifth floor in the room that will soon be a mini lobby. “Hey there, weird day huh?” he asks.

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“How’s Morris?” she asks.

“He’ll live. Dehydrated. We’re going to have to be on top of him with that. Kat? You can’t hide from him. He sure is a cutie. I told him I didn’t think his name matched him and I said,”

“It should be Jasper,” Kat says.

“Um, yeah, I said we were going to call him Jasper,” he looks at her. Kat shrugs. “At any time today was there a voice telling you things will be ok?” he asks.

“Aunt Bessie did,” she says.

“And that’s not enough for you?” he says.

“I feel like my life has been out of order,” Kat says.

Prince thinks about that for a moment. “Let’s see, you experienced death at a very young age. Tragedy a few years after that, met a couple of ridiculous guys a couple years after that, saw divorce, been stood up for an important day in your life and now? Now Kat things are getting back on track. Ok, so you have a son, but assumedly you also have a man in your life who loves you deeply and welcomes any extension of you at all. You don’t have a son alone Kat, I’m here. Wanda, Morris, when he gets better, Dovie and his kids will love him, Wilt and his wife and soon to be other cousin. This tremendous hotel to live in. Ok, so you experienced life backwards but you know what that means? It means your adulthood from here on out will be like most people’s childhood. Fun, loving and carefree. Like Bessie’s was. Kat, we have a boy downstairs who needs our love,”

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Prince says. “What are the voices telling you now Kat?” he asks cautiously, “Right now.”

“Only one voice,” she pauses. “Mine. And it thinks I love you too,” she smiles and lets the tear fall out of her eye she has been fighting to release all afternoon.

Prince leans down and kisses her deeply. Kat finds herself lost in his arms, his body, his soul.

~ ~ ~

The first grand opening is about to take place. They have the first two floors done as Wilt said they would. On time, at the ten-month mark. Invitations went out to people who arrange parties professionally, to people who are in charge of business conferences, and anyone they could think of that would need any of the meeting or banquet rooms on this floor.

An online presence was made with constant new pictures as each room was finished. Morris has been handling all the online advertisements. The second floor is completely booked from opening day and for the next two months after that. Morris decided that he won't book more than two months in advance because of the risk of change is too high then.

Curiosity has many people from the historic society wanting free private tours. Wanda is not interested, she told them they can pay for the opening banquet like everyone else. Kat and Wanda worked incredibly hard on finishing the history book of the hotel, complete with myths and reality of what happened here in

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the hotel’s past. When they had pictures, they added them in, when they had newspapers or handwritten letters, they put those in too. The book is over three hundred pages. Tonight’s VIP guests are receiving one for free. There are a hundred and fifty of them coming. The guests are free to roam the whole main floor and second floor guest rooms that aren’t booked for tonight. For tonight only, they have a guard watching all of the doors so no one walks in and tries to go up further. As well as a guard on the upper floors in case someone finds a way to get up there, they will be escorted out immediately. Besides not being finished, the other floors aren’t even safe.

Wanda has made some of her favorite foods, some old classics, and even made them look better by making them into bite sized finger food.

Jasper and Prince are making the final checklist of everything. Wilt’s wife is going to babysit him in the apartment after the opening ceremonies. Wanda and Morris are wearing matching colors to the hotel. The wait staff for tonight are from Wanda’s catering company. They have been waiting to see everything themselves. Hoping to get more gigs at the hotel instead of at people’s homes where she sometimes caters. She and Morris bought her staff special uniforms to wear that match the theme of the hotel, everyone was very excited to get them since they even have their name on them.

Morris finds Kat upstairs on the fifth floor. “Not today Kat, no sadness. I’m doing much better, Wanda is

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amazing, Prince and his brothers did phenomenal work downstairs, Jasper has melded into your life with ease, all our lives actually. What could have brought you up here to this sad room?” he asks her.

“Oh Morris, I’m not up here because I’m sad. Come in here, stand near me for a moment, do you feel the warmth? You see? No more cold souls are here. They like what they see, especially in the old bar/lounge. The mine workers are happy to move on now. They’ve thanked us, by leaving. Things are so open here, I thought, well you know what I thought,” she sits down on the floor feeling a bit foolish.

“You’re still looking for his approval, aren’t you?” Morris asks.

Kat looks up at her old friend, she knew he would understand where her head is. “Kat, you’re right, this place is very open to talking to ghosts, the people around you don’t think you’re crazy anymore, and now that you’re engaged to Prince, the two of you officially adopted Jasper. You’ve made him proud, why do you need his words?” Morris asks

“His last words to me on his deathbed were ‘make me proud Kat’, how do I know if I have?” she asks. “Everyone talks to me but him. I’ve never heard from him, ever. It’s been so many years.”

“How do you know he hasn’t been the one to lead you to this point? To this particular hotel when you had four other projects to bid on at the same time. Why was this one on the top of your list? You could have

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finished all four of the other jobs by now and still done this one. Think hard, what is his connection to this place Kat?” Morris asks her.

“I’ve been trying to find one. Here, there are so many voices, I’m only looking for one,” Kat looks up at Morris who is still standing.

He reaches out his hand to take hers, she stands up and they walk to the elevator, use their key to go back down and join everyone. “When its time, he will tell you. You’ll see,” Morris says as they exit the elevator.

Prince sees them coming out of the elevator, he knows where she has been. He’ll ask Morris why later. He walks over to them, “Hello gorgeous. Kat,” Morris laughs and hits his friend in the shoulder lovingly.

“Never gets old man, never gets old. Where’s Wanda?” he asks.

“She is with Jasper, Wilt and Dovie going over last minute items. Come on, she is looking for both of you.” Prince turns to walk and the two friends follow him. Kat catches up to him and slides her hand into his. Every time he holds her hand, he feels whole, without her by his side, he feels as if he is missing something. They are engaged but Kat is holding out on setting a date. I’ll ask Morris later, he’ll know, Prince thinks to himself.

“Oh, there you are!!” Wanda calls to them. “Ok everyone, we’re all here in the lobby now, pull together I have an announcement to make,” Wanda calls to everyone. All the workers on this project are here with their wives or significant others, her wait staff is here, her

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new hotel is about to be opened but she has to say something now before she loses her nerve. Everyone gathers closer to her and she stands up on a chair to talk to them all. “For one thing, holy hell we made it!” everyone claps.

“Without you, all of you, this never would have come to fruition. The last parts to go up are the names for the rooms. Morris and I have been working really hard on finding the exact name that will fit each room. All names are on these plaques that need to go up in the spots saved for them. No arguments from anyone. We did a lot of research, we also laughed a lot because you can’t name something **Kat Hall**, it sounds too much like catcall and that is not what we are looking for,” she laughs and so does everyone else.

“So, the new bar/lounge is going to be called ‘The Miner’s Honor Hall’ in honor of those who perished,” Clapping ensues.

“Oh guys, I’m not done. Hold on. We wanted each floor to have its own identity, so on the elevator as the floors are ready, they will be marked as such. Top floor, level five will be known as the sunshine floor on account of the mini sun lobby up there. fourth floor will be the wonderland floor, third will be the starlight floor and the second floor will be the moonstruck floor because of the decorations already there in the woodwork we refinished. Well, you refinished. Each floor will be kept in accordance to its name with various details in the rooms, and the carpeting in each hallway.

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Now for this floor, we have the Miner’s Honor Hall and as you go down the hallway over there to the other meeting rooms, on the left side we will have the Dovie, Wilt and Prince rooms, in name only. They will remain simply decorated for meetings and small parties. On the right we will have our boutique called Jasper’s finds, Kat’s official office will be there and we are going to look for two more unique stores to be there, I’m thinking a tailor or seamstress and one other item that we don’t find often anymore,” she takes a breath.

“How about shoe repair,” someone calls out.

“Oh my, that’s perfect. Now, on the other side of the lobby, where we have the two biggest rooms for large parties, the banquet room we are using tonight will be named K & W Dream Room and the smaller one will simply be Bessie’s Lounge. Any questions?” she asks.

“What about the lobby, you’ve named everything else, the lobby deserves a special name. I mean look at this place, its pure magic Wanda, the end result of your and Kat’s imagination is truly magical. This place is going to be the place to be for everything, for everyone. Only one comment though, if you have a seamstress and a shoemaker, you might be inundated with requests from florists who want to come in and be your exclusive,” Wilt says.

“Ah, good point, but Jasper is allergic to a lot of flowers so I’d never do that here. Besides I’m not into exclusives accept when it comes to my catering and my men,” to that everyone laughs again.

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Morris takes that as his cue, he hops onto the chair near hers and says, “And as said man, well Wanda you’ve been through the sickness already, so here is to health and happiness the rest of our days together,” he hands her an open ring box. The crowd around them begins to scream in excitement.

Wanda whispers, “Are you sure?”

Morris looks at her and says, “I can say the same to you,” she opens her arms and hugs him.

Prince let’s out a loud whistle to get everyone’s attention back to reality. “Ok, one hell of a bunch we are, that is for sure. I want to thank all of you for giving it your all and being flexible and understanding about who we’ve been dealing with in setting this hotel right again. We proved to all those other contractors that it could be done and could be done damn well, if I do say so myself. I’m sure they will be clamoring to get in to see what was done that they couldn’t do.

In only two hours this place will be brimming with people. After the first two hours of VIP guests only, we are opening to the public. The gold and black uniforms on everyone look pristine now, so let’s keep it that way throughout the night. There are spares in the kitchen store room if necessary but those don’t have your name on them. Food is ready, now we will hang those name plaques, great choices by the way Wanda, and you guys may want to take some time to walk around and enjoy our own work. Be proud of yourselves tonight and if anyone asks who you are, feel free to say you are part of

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the design team that helped bring life back into this historic place. This wasn't only a rebuild.”

With a few more applause, the group disperses to do just that, take a few minutes to really look at all they've accomplished in the end. Usually they finish a job, get paid and walk away. But on this one, they are part of the celebration. A big night for all.

~ ~ ~

Three weeks after the big opening night, a man walks into the hotel and walks straight up to the front desk and asks to speak to Kat. Morris looks at him suspiciously and asks why.

“It’s a business matter, I heard you were looking for a shoemaker – I’m the only one who could work here,” he says.

“And why is that?” Morris asks protectively.

“My father and grandfather owned the shoemaker operation here forty years ago, who better than to take over his spot?” he asks with a smile and produces the picture of his father’s store in one of the exact places they have left open for stores.

“Let me take this to her. Stay here a minute,” Morris walks away and down to Kat’s office. He walks in and says, “You’re not going to believe this, or maybe you are.” He smiles and hands her the picture.

Kat smiles, “Where did this come from?”

“The son, he wants to move his shoe repair store back where it belongs,” Morris smiles.

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“History is a powerful thing,” Kat says and walks with him out to the front desk.

“Hello, I’m Kat, happy to meet you,” she says holding out her hand.

The man stares at her, he can’t move. “You can’t be Kat. You’re, oh no, my father is going to flip. You! Of all the damned things. I’d remember those eyes anywhere, and that scar next to your left eye,” he says.

Kat looks at Morris and back to the man in front of her, “I’m the one who put it there. Oh man, I have to call my father,” he walks away.

“Kat?” Morris looks at her.

“As a young child, my father was friends with a man down the block, his son was rambunctious, older than me by a few years, he used to chase me down the block all the time, I fell and hit my head face down on the sidewalk. Turned out, he thought I was playing tag with him all the time, he had no idea I was running from fear,” she smiles now at the memory. She looks at Morris, “History,” she smiles again.

“I’m sorry I walked away, I’ve met maybe a handful of people named Kat over the years, always hoping I’d find you again. That day changed my life, my father said either I grow up or I don’t but I had to make things right by you. Your dad made me work for him after school every day until I graduated from high school. That was five years I worked for him. Then my dad got sick and I worked for him instead, after high school I worked full time, he taught me all he knows, he sent me to school

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to learn new things about running a business and we've still been in business all these years. He is on his way. Wow Kat, you sure did well for yourself," he looks around the hotel.

"It's not my place, but I did decorate it. I do interior decorating for a living. My best friend owns this place and Morris here is the manager. My other best friend," Kat says.

"Kat, a minute?" Prince says behind them.

"Sure," she walks over to him.

"Do you know who you are speaking with?" he asks.

"Yes, a boy I knew as a kid, he is the one who gave me this scar," she points to her eye. Prince kisses the scar.

"Really?" he says.

"Why, what do you know? Did he become a bad person?" she asks.

"He is a very wealthy man who owns about a dozen or more businesses. I did a remodel for one of his homes a year ago. Nice man, but what does he want with you?" Prince asks.

"He apparently owns his father's shoe repair business too and his father's store used to be here. Down the hall in fact in one of our soon to be filled rooms," she says.

"Well, how about that? History repeating itself. Maybe we should look for the old seamstress, see if she is still around. I only came down to tell you the guys are

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starving and are wondering if Wanda can do lunch for them, we’re swamped and no one wants to leave to get food,” he says.

“I’ll go tell the kitchen staff. He can wait a minute,” she says. When she gets back the man she knew as her father’s friend is there with Wanda, talking shop. “Hello Mr. Murphy, you look fantastic,” Kat says, instantly recognizing him, he hasn’t changed much from her memory.

“Ah child, it is you who looks beautiful. Wanda here was telling us all about this rebuild here. Some story, she gave me a copy of the history book you have. Told me I should add to it. I think I might, some things I remember well, I may have some pictures for you too. Can we see the space you have set aside for a shoe repair?” he asks.

“You’ll have to talk to the boss, that would be Wanda here, not me,” Kat says.

“Funny, she said to speak with you, something about making sure it feels right to you,” he looks from one woman back to the other. Kat smiles. She knows what Wanda is thinking, will the spirits allow him to move in. Do they remember him? The first two people who came, were not good, as soon as they walked into the space available, the room turned cold and they immediately complained that the thermostat would have to be changed or fixed.

The two women walk into the room first, when the men walk in, the room becomes very warm almost as

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if it is hugging them both, welcoming them back, Kat smiles at Wanda, she nods back. “So, I know it doesn’t look the same, but will it do?” Kat asks.

“This renovation must have been quite expensive, are you financed by the bank or investors?” the son asks.

“Paid outright, no one else but me. My money, my decisions. No one to answer to but me,” Wanda says with conviction and authority.

“Best way. Good for you. I’ve done a few business models in the past, if you need any free advice please don’t hesitate to ask. Really, I owe Kat my life, if you’re her friend I’m happy to help. Here’s my card. Do you have a contract to sign? Or are you doing it as they come in?” he asks.

Wanda laughs, contracts are what they feel, but she can’t tell him that. “We are asking for ten percent of monthly profits, all the rest is your responsibility. Your electricity will be billed directly to you, phone bill in your name only, water is on us,” Wanda says.

“Really? You’d trust us to do that?” he asks.

“We have ways of verifying everything that happens here, if something is not right, we’ll know right away, and we reserve the right to kick you out without warning. Simple contract. That’s it. No hidden clauses.”

“Ten percent seems like a lot to me, but then again,” he pauses, “the other businesses are ok with this?” he asks.

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“What other businesses? Jasper’s is owned by Kat’s son. We’re still looking for a seamstress/tailor and the last place we aren’t sure what to put in yet. You’d be the first to actually move in. I suppose for a friend we can do seven percent but the math is easier with ten,” Wanda says.

“You mean to tell me that if I only make a two hundred dollar profit the first month, I only pay you twenty dollars? For the whole month’s rent?” he questions her in his business tone.

The room’s temperature isn’t changing the women are happy now. Even with negotiations, the spirits are happy to have him back. “Look sir, we aren’t aiming to profit from these stores, the building is mine outright. I meant that. I expect to make most of my money on the Miner’s Honor Lounge and the catering halls. The rooms upstairs are second in income to that. These businesses are more as a courtesy to the guests, than a profit for me. If you don’t want to move in, we understand,” Wanda says a bit annoyed now.

“You have this in written form?” he asks.

Wanda pulls out the contract from her folder and hands it to him. He looks at his father, who has been walking around the room, feeling the walls. “Dad?”

He turns to Kat, “Oh Kat my dear. My friend would have been so proud to see you as part of this. So proud indeed. He used to tell me all the time. Watch, my quiet little girl is going to turn the world upside down and make me so proud. Told me that very thing the last time I

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saw him in the hospital. He is right you know. You’ve made this old man proud too. Proud to say I knew you before your genius came out. Wanda, you take care of her, she is one special lady.” he says to them both. “In fact, we should name this place Stuben’s Shoes after him, son. Let’s do it, sign the damn paper already we’re moving in as soon as possible,” he walks over to give Kat a hug.

Kat can’t believe what she is hearing. Is this the sign she has been looking for?
~ ~ ~

Kat and Wanda have been looking through all of her business plans. The next floor is almost ready, and they are deciding whether or not to have another open house. “I’m thinking we announce it on social media and take out a full-page ad in the papers we’ve gotten the most responses from. We’ve been steadily gaining patrons all along, the Minor’s Honor Lounge is full for dinner every night from walk-ins. Our history book is selling out almost as fast as we print more. I think another party looks desperate, and we’re not,” Kat says.

“I was thinking the same thing. I’m so caught up in all of what we have so far and dealing with Morris and his illness. Doctor says things look great by the way, and he only has one more treatment left. After that he said we can set a date for the wedding,” Wanda says.

“So, the doctor is telling you when to get married now?” Kat asks with a smile.

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“No, I meant Morris. I have to say, that man turns my head daily. Not a week goes by that he doesn’t buy me a gift, little things, but beautiful all the same,” she says.

“Knock, knock,” Prince says.

“Hey, how are things going upstairs?” Wanda asks.

“Wanda, you’re a superstar to my workers. I think that should be your new business niche. Contact contractors and bring lunches to them at the job site. Better than fast food and the guys work well, as long as they know food is coming. It’s healthy food, they all take a break at the same time, then go back to work satisfied. But that’s not why I’m here, you always side track me.

Wilt and Hilda are bringing over her seamstress, she also claims to have ties to this place in the past. So many years ago, this was the place to be apparently. Sucker buy my ass. You’re going to prove whoever said that to you so wrong. If they ever come by looking for anything from you, don’t tell me it’s them, I get pretty protective over the women in my life,” Prince smiles. “They’ll be here in a few minutes if you want to meet them in the lobby.”

Wanda looks at Kat, “Good idea, let’s meet them in the lobby.” They get up and walk to the front desk where Morris is talking to some of the patrons of the lounge. It looks like two older gentlemen.

Morris calls them over, “Ladies I’d like you to meet two young men who used to be ushers at this hotel,

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their first jobs were about forty-five years ago,” he smiles knowing full well the ladies love history.

“Oh, the stories we could tell. This place was a bed of secrets. We were paid well for being discreet with all the patrons. Men and women may or may not be husband and wife we were told. Everyone was to be addressed as ma’am or sir. Celebrities sometimes paid us extra if we would escort a young lady or man up to their room after they left the ballroom or the bar. Worked here all through college and then afterwards as a manager. Best years of my life. You ladies did a wonderful job. I love the minor’s tribute. A beautiful thing. The newspaper articles posted all over are amazing. I was there for some of those events. You’ve got it all right. That’s for sure,” one of them says.

“Would you be willing to be interviewed about those things? Morris, I’m thinking of an ongoing podcast with real workers from the past, as many as we can find.” Wanda looks at Morris who stands a little taller, full of pride.

Kat is very quiet, something is wrong. Oh no, it is the second man, he doesn’t have long in this world. This trip here is a gift to him by his friend she is assuming. To celebrate their lives. ‘Go on, give him a hug, he can use it’ Kat’s own grandmother tells her.

Kat moves forward and slowly opens her arms, the man is happy to hold on to her. She feels his coldness and she tries to reassure him with her warmth. “You hear

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them too?” he whispers in her ear. Kat nods. “They like it, all of the changes. Thank you,” he whispers.

“Can you show two old codgers the upstairs? We promise not to tell,” the first man says.

Wanda nods and takes his hand. Kat takes the other man’s hand and they lead them to the back elevators where they can easily go straight up and work their way down. Once on the top floor, they immediately go to the open space, they know which room this is, Kat and Wanda can tell. They look up, the skylight has been put in already and the sun is beaming down on them now. “Did you know someone in this room?” Wanda asks.

“Rita, our sister. They say she was the first,” the second man says.

“Rita’s Lounge it is then,” Wanda says out loud and smiling. She takes out her permanent marker and writes it on the wall outside of the lounge. The men watch her and both of them shed a tear.

“You aren’t teasing us, are you?” the sicker man asks.

“Nope, written in permanent marker not pencil. We honor all those lost for good or bad. History wants to live here, she can visit but she can’t stay, no door, nothing to hold anyone here any longer. They’re all gone,” Wanda smiles again.

She could tell they were the real thing, so can Kat. They’ve had others try and make that connection to them to get a first-hand look up here, but only the real ones have been allowed, they can tell. The sick man looks

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from Kat to Wanda and back to Kat and he says, “I’m sure your daddies are proud of you. If you want me to tell my story, I’d have to do it sooner than later though,” he says softly.

“After the tour. Come, let’s look down at the next floor, you can tell us things we don’t know yet,” Kat smiles and takes his hand again while walking toward the elevator.

When they finally get back to the lobby Morris is talking with Wilt, his wife and two other women, one significantly older than the next. “Well I’ll be a son of a gun, look what the cat dragged in?” one of the men says.

The older woman looks over at them, it takes but a moment, then recognition is there. “Well, it takes all kinds of people to run a hotel don’t it?” she responds and the three of them begin to laugh. Wanda puts her arm around Kat’s shoulders and pulls her in.

“This woman used to fix up my uniforms at least once a week so I wouldn’t get in trouble. I’d bring her some sweets from the kitchen. Cook never minded, I think he had a mighty big crush on you, if memory serves me correct,” the sicker man says.

“Serves you correct, my husband and I were together for nearly fifty years but he was needed back in heaven, so he has been hanging out there these past few years waiting for me, probably causing all kinds of trouble too. No doubt he started a poker game there too,” the three of them laugh and walk over to the couches nearby and play catch up.

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Kat looks at the younger woman, “Your grandmother?”

“Yes, she trained me personally. Seamstress to the stars. Only no one knows her name because she refused to tell them. Made her money from word of mouth, never had to advertise a day in her career. Taught me all I know about material and then some. I have my portfolio if you’d like to see it. I’ve been living in her home, working out of there when we both saw your ad, I had to move in. If it’s not already taken that is,” she looks over at her grandmother, the three of them are acting like kids again laughing away at whatever story they are sharing.

“I’m getting my video equipment. We’ll do the interviews now and right out here,” Morris says and excuses himself.

“Come, let me show you her old storefront,” Wanda says. “Hated it in school but I sure do love history now.”

~ ~ ~

Word got out that Morris was recording interviews of old employees of the hotel, ever since then, he has had at least two a week showing up and giving him tale after tale about how the world was back when they were working here. Since it has been closed for over twenty years, the stories seem to be of another era completely.

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He is proud to say, no one dropped any names, they still use their discretion and told a tale with no names, of women and men, in various situations in the dark of a back store room. In a stairwell, or some even right out in the open for all to see. Stories of royalty from various countries showing up with full entourage and how some of the body guards found time to have playtime when no one was looking. The back-room card games that were never official but somehow happened weekly.

The hotel is almost in full swing now. Historic societies are still trying to get in free to have a tour of the place or to even give tours to others. Wanda wants none of that, she keeps having to tell them. People bring in grandparents to try and get free meals because their grandparent is old enough to have worked here. But Wanda and Kat know the truth, someone is always around to tell them yes or no. Besides, they’ve been able to accumulate most of the names of the people who worked here and can easily verify that way too. The place is no longer haunted, it is fully lived in. The restlessness has stopped. Only residents live here now.

Many left, having their stories told either in the book or on one of the walls. Those who have stayed are adjusting and learning to live with people around them again. No disturbances have been reported. ‘There’s a man here looking for something, don’t go near him. He is armed, call security to approach him, not you. You hear me? Not you!’ a strong voice says to Wanda. She runs out to find Kat to tell her what she heard.

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“There was the story of the games, someone must have lost a lot of money or stashed it here somewhere. But so many walls have already been opened, where could it be?” she asks out loud.

‘Right where I left it,’ a voice says.

“Damn, that’s not funny. I don’t want trouble here, cough it up now!” Kat yells.

‘Yeah, you deserve that, you named the room Dovie, same as the son I lost that night. He is with me now, he was a sickly child. I was trying to win the money to save his life. I was told, after being shot, and before I died, that the money wouldn’t have helped. Go to Dovie’s room, back corner, it’s not a vent, it’s a safe. Thank you, you gave him life which is more than I gave him,’ a cool breeze tells them he is gone.

“Damn, stupid gamblers. Come on Wanda. Did you hear that?” Kat asks. It is times like this that she is glad that Jasper is in school during the day.

“Yeah, let’s get Prince and Morris first,” Kat nods to that. The men meet them in the room. Prince unlocks it and then locks it again behind him.

“Why didn’t we check? We all assumed it was a vent, there is air coming out. Put your hand in front, you can feel the air,” Morris kneels down and nods.

Prince pulls out his crow bar and lifts the top of the vent. Wanda gets on the floor and runs her hand into it. “Did he give us the key?” she asks.

“Feel around there,” Kat says. Sure enough, Wanda finds a key, she feels around and finds the

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keyhole too – once opened she pulls out a wrapped package. She pulls it out and they close the vent top again.

She opens the package and they all look down to see some photos as well as some money. “We need to call the police. This is pretty incriminating evidence don’t you think?” she says.

Kat looks again, sure enough, there is a man with a gun to the head of the next, then there is the same man dead in the next picture, the third picture captures the mirror which shows everyone in the room who was facing the man on the floor. Whoever did this, was either going to be a snitch or blackmail. Is this why he was shot?

‘No, I was shot because I turned in one of the photos to the cops and told them there was more, but I didn’t know that cop was on the take from these same people. Vent number two is in the kitchen, behind the new storage cabinet for uniforms. That one has the cop, he killed me the day before I was going to turn in all the photos. Right there in the lobby, claimed I had a gun. I didn’t, I had my son’s medicine in a bag. The medicine he never got and desperately needed. Go, call the police before you go into the kitchen. Thank you again,” and he is gone.

“Kat? What did he say?” Wanda asks because she didn’t hear it but she felt him leave.

“Prince, call the cops. Um, call the one who would never be on someone else’s payroll if you know what I mean?” she says.

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“You mean that the man who was killed here was killed by a cop like the article said but the cop was bad. Ok, I’ll call Horace, my cousin. Should we wait here?” he asks.

“Does security have that man yet?” she asks.

“Hold on let me check,” he looks at his phone but before he can check, it rings, “Hello?”

“Hey big brother, I have a gentleman who said you let him in the kitchen but no one has seen you in over forty minutes,” Dovie says.

“He is armed,” Prince whispers.

“Not anymore,” Dovie laughs. “Connected to the counter by a chain I happened to have on me when the kitchen staff said he was in here. We’re already checking everyone to see how he got back here. So, hold him, yeah?”

“Yeah,” he looks to everyone in the room and wraps up the package and stuffs it in his shirt. “Dovie has him.”

They all walk out to the kitchen. Before entering, Kat’s shoulder is pulled back. ‘Not you, don’t go in. You can’t go in,’ this time the voice is a whisper but the same voice. Wanda looks to her friend, “Go on boys, I’ll wait here with Kat,” she says.

One of the busboys brings the two police officers towards the kitchen, “Hello boss, I was told to bring them back here.”

“Who allowed the other man into the kitchen?” Wanda asks.

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“That would be me,” he says softly with his head down.

“Chuck?” Wanda looks at him with concern.

“I know his people, I was afraid, I’m sorry. I saw the tattoo on his neck. If it is the same crime family I’m thinking of, then it is not good. If it is a coincidence than I’m sorry for my paranoia. Am I fired?”

“Why didn’t you tell me? Or Morris, or anyone?” That’s why we’re here Chuck. You’re always safe here, this is a safe place for you and everyone who works here. We have no time for this nonsense. You’re safe here, do you understand that?” Wanda asks with a bit of motherly concern for him. “Do you believe in me, as I do you?”

“Yes Maám,” Chuck begins to cry as a small child would, he falls to his knees and Wanda is right there next to him. She hired him because he showed so much potential, he wants to get away from the hard life of his childhood and neighborhood. Wanda gave him that chance.

‘He is not mob as the boy says, he did some research and found out the booty was never found, my booty. Modern kid trying to play old gangster. Idiot,’ the voice says.

‘So why not me?’ Kat says in her head.

‘You know him, it will be embarrassing. For him,’ he says.

In the kitchen the policeman asks the young man chained up why he was there. “I was given permission to tour the place,” he tries to say with confidence.

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“By whom, the owners are standing in front of you. Which one told you it was ok to come in the back of a hotel? Which one said you could come in with a gun? Is the gun even registered? Is it yours? Did you hurt anyone to get in here in the first place? A lot of questions you need to think about before you open your mouth again,” the officer says.

“This place has a lot of history I came to look, so what?” he says trying to stay strong and confident.

“History looking doesn’t require a gun. Can you release this young man so we can bring him with us? If nothing else, possession of an unregistered weapon is a problem in it of itself,” the officer says.

When he leaves with one of the officers, Kat comes in the room and walks to where she was told to go. She opens the vent and pulls out another satchel. Only this one has many more pictures and a lot of money. She hands it to Prince’s cousin. “Take care of all of this and don’t bring any pictures back here, this is not the history we want immortalized,” she says.

“And this,” Prince pulls out the other package.

“Anything else he told you?” the officer asks looking at Kat.

“No, only that I shouldn’t come in when you had the young man because I know him and it would embarrass the poor thing. He is someone who looked up to find out the booty was never found so he came wanting to be the one to find it. I don’t know why he needed a gun though,” she says.

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“Ok, so I won’t show him I have this. You have a bag I can put it in?” he says.

Wanda hands him a hotel bag with a couple of sandwiches in the bag too. “Thank you, I’ll let you know what transpires, for curiosity sake,” he says and leaves.

~ ~ ~

“Mommmyyyyy!” Jasper screams in the middle of the night. Wanda and Kat both go running to his room. They see him sitting up in bed and scared.

“What happened?” Kat asks

“A man, he came in my room and sat on the end of the bed. He woke me up,” Jasper says.

“What did he look like?” Kat asks.

“Like Grandmamma does when she visits,” he says.

Ok now Kat knows no one is really in the hotel but still, her son is quite frightened. “Did he speak to you?”

“Yes, but his voice was very low and soft,” he looks at Wanda with big eyes, she runs over to him to hold him while he talks to Kat who is sitting in front of him to listen. As she always does, Kat listens.

“Take a deep breath Jasper and tell me what he said,” Kat looks at her son. It is hard to believe she missed the first six years of his life, she feels as if she has always known him.

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Jasper does as he is told, he takes a deep breath and says, “The man said I was a good boy. He said I will grow up strong.”

Kat waits, “Then he said I had to tell my momma something and I said I don’t talk to her anymore, so he said not that momma, Kat, your new momma. I’m sorry I was sleeping I forgot.” Kat smiles at him and waits for more. “He said tell Momma Kat to remember July 16th when the sun was red. Did I get it right?” he asks.

Kat sits back and remembers for a moment. July 16th, her half birthday, her father came home to see she had finished planting a whole garden even though the sun was hot. He told her he was proud of her. Kat gasps and puts her hand on her mouth, then her heart then she lets her tears come running down her face.

“Did I do bad?” Jasper asks looking at Wanda.

“No honey, I think you did perfect, those are happy tears. You spoke to Kat’s Daddy is my guess. He sent her a great message. Can you go back to sleep now knowing you did a wonderful thing. You’ve made both Kat and I very proud, very proud indeed,” Wanda asks.

“I think so, can you turn on the music?” Wanda turns on his radio and leads Kat out of the bedroom and down into their shared living room.

“He said he was proud of you on that day, didn’t he?” Wanda asks.

Kat can only nod. “What else happened that day?” Wanda asks.

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“My aunt got divorced and my father died for the first time. He beat death three times before it finally won. A long story, another time?” she asks.

“Yeah, but I’m thinking those numbers need something positive attached to it, how about we have a double wedding on 6/1 at 7:00pm?” Wanda asks. “We’ll have the grandest opening party ever seen on New Year’s because, as promised, Prince said it will all be ready. Then we will have six months to plan both our weddings. We don’t have an outside courtyard or anything but I’m thinking rooftop ceremony and a grand banquet in the K & W room. There is a great seamstress we know who will love to do our dresses. Oh, and let’s not forget two men who are dying for a timeline. Morris was given a clean bill of health last week. We’ve been so busy I forgot to tell you,” Wanda stares into Kat’s eyes.

“Rooftop ceremony? You’d do that for me?” Kat asks.

“Honey I’d do just about anything for you. I’m thinking we should build a second floor to this apartment for you and Prince and Jasper. We can make them both into whatever we need, the space is here, we should use it, I know a good contractor,” Wanda says with a wink.

~ ~ ~

It took a couple of months but Prince’s cousin got back to them. The pictures were clear evidence as to who was there when the man was shot and who shot him. Three of those people were found immediately, they’ve

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since retired as police officers but now they are being tried as criminals. The man who was shot, left behind his wife and child, they are both still alive and they’ve been informed of the information. Closure for them and the money he had earned has been given back to them.

The boy who was arrested claimed to have ties to the hotel and that it was his right to find the booty lost in the hotel. His claims were easily disproved. He is of no relation to the man Wanda bought the hotel from. They checked directly with the man and he had no idea who this boy was or his parents.

His charges weren’t big but landed him serving eighteen months of jail time and it will be on his permanent record. Kat does know him from her old neighborhood. He is a boy who used to tease her about talking to the walls. He had gotten a hold of one of the history books and looked up more history and found out the murders and booty were unsolved. His tattoo was drawn on, not real, he wanted to be a somebody on the streets, now he is a nobody in jail.

~ ~ ~

The New Year’s party was sold out in two weeks. The hotel is booked through February, top to bottom. Wanda knows it will slow down eventually but to have all they have now, is the best gift ever. She sits in the middle of the lobby at 3:00 in the morning, when no one is around. “Thank you Grandma. This place is everything we wanted it to be, and more. I have friends, I will have a

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husband, children, the works. All because you said you believed in me. I hope my ex shows up, it will be interesting to see what he thinks. He always thought I had small ideas.

Only people who believe can work here, we’ve had to let a couple workers go, they didn’t understand the place. You have to understand it to work here. My kitchen staff is great, but I’m not sure about that new sous chef, we’ll see. Chuck is doing his homework each day before he leaves here. Morris and I are going to surprise him after New Year’s and tell him we are going to sponsor him to go to the local charter high school for his last two years of high school to give him a chance at a good college. I sent all the paperwork in without him knowing. But now you’ve spent enough time with me. Go be with Grandpa. Love him like you always did, dance with him a little and go see the sights you never saw,” Wanda stands up and turns around to go back to her apartment, she sees Kat standing there.

“What?”

“Someone tapped me on the shoulder and kissed me on the forehead a few minutes ago. Only Aunt Bessie did that, I went to tell you but you weren’t there. Saying goodbye to Grandma? I think they see we can do this now. On our own. I’m sure they will be back. Especially for the weddings,” Kat says.

“Yeah, this is the best time to be in this lobby. You can hear everyone walking around. Listen Kat, the place is bustling again,” Wanda says. Kat sits down next to

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Sometimes its OK to Listen to the Voices

102

Wanda and does what she always does. Then Wanda
does what her friend taught her to do. She listens.

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