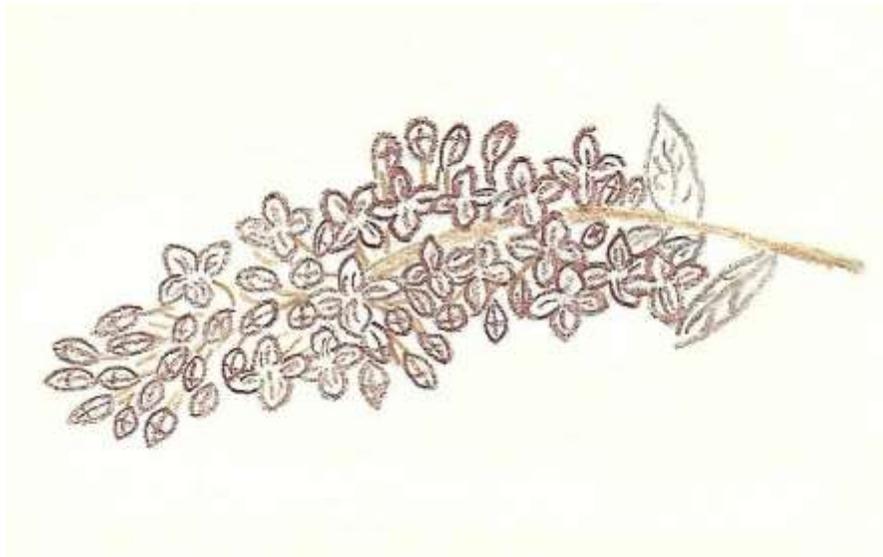




Lilac Gardens

Life has unexpected changes. Sometimes these changes can alter the view of one family member to another. When Sheila realizes who the good guy is in her life, she turns herself around quickly. Only trauma hits her before she can express her gratitude fully to the right person. Feeling her life is coming to an end, Sheila turns to the only thing she can, to save herself, she takes out her phone.



Copyright © 2019 by CAA

All rights reserved. Except for the use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereinafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the written permission of the author or illustrator directly.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

For questions and comments about the quality of this book, please contact us at dailyreader.caa@gmail.com



"Emergency hotline, what's your emergency?" the operator asks.

"There is a fire at 412 West Paddington Road, moving fast," he says.

"We will dispatch emergency vehicles right away. Sir, is anyone inside the building?" she asks.

"Sir? Are you ok? Is anyone hurt?" the operator asks a second time. She turns to her supervisor and says, "He hung up," she says quietly.

"That's not good, dispatch everyone, fire, rescue and police on the double," he says urgently. The operator does as she is told. Then she looks up the address to find the name of the owner and to find out if they can find a way to contact them if they aren't home.

Thankfully, there is a listing for Ms. B and a cellular phone number since no one really has a landline any more. She calls the number to notify this person that a fire has been reported on her residence.

"What!? Oh my god! I'm leaving work now. Oh my, oh no he didn't!" she screams and runs out the door with her purse, she yells to her boss what is going on and he runs out with her and catches up to her.

"Don't do this alone. I'll drive," he gently pushes her into her own passenger's seat and takes the keys from her."

Silently they drive to her house. The fire trucks are already there, the front of her house is ruined, totally wiped out already, the blaze is strong and fierce, thankfully, she is on a double-wide corner property and the next house is not in danger unless the winds pick up.

She stares at all the vehicles on her property and the house, her house, her own house, the one in her name, she bought when they were newly married from an inheritance from her father's wrongful death suit. Gone, all gone. She can't seem to get out of the car.

Suddenly there is banging on her window she looks out and sees her daughter's best friend looking frantic.

"Ms. B!! she yells "Where the hell is Sheila?!" she screams.

Now she jumps from the car. Her face scanning the crowd around her house. "Why isn't she in school with you?" she asks nervously. Her boss now standing next to her for support.

Emily looks down then back up at Ms. B. and starts rambling fast, "It's your birthday today. She has been working like crazy these past couple of months to show you how much she loves you and how much she is going to change her ways. Long story short, Billy proved to her that her father is the messed up one and that you are her true savior, so to say thank you and to say she is sorry for the grief she has caused you, she has been working double shifts to make enough money to pay for a cleaning crew to come to the house this morning and clean the whole house for you. She even got permission from school to be home to do this. It's an excused absence and they consider it part of her community service we were all required to do as sophomores but she never did that year.

Anyway, she came back home after you left and well, here....." she hands Ms. B her phone.

Mrs. B. looks down at the phone and sees a social media page open, there are a lot of posts from her daughter. She reads them and begins to slide down the side of the car to the ground, she hands the phone off to her boss and he reads them,



I came home today to do the best good deed I know how. Show my mom how beautiful she is by making sure the house is pristine and perfect for her birthday. How she is the queen of our community by giving her the thrown she deserves.

The cleaning crew was so nice, I used a new group they are all immigrants who decided to start a business of what they know how to do. One did the floors, really well, shiny too. One got on an actual ladder and did all the tops of windows, curtains, ceilings! Who does that?! This house is clean from top to bottom

When they left, there was one woman who was crying and thanking me for giving them the opportunity to do this. She said many people won’t hire them because they fear her kind of people. I hugged her and said, many don’t like me either and we hugged and cried together. Before she left I paid her and I added in a nice bonus too. I said I would post their name on this page. Please everyone call; “House Cleaners Extraordinaire, they really are good 555-963-1478. My house is spotless. Look at these pictures!!!

After they left, I went to start putting the lilacs all around the house. I made a lilac garland and put it on the fireplace, some are in a vase in the dining room and in my mom’s bedroom. Then I went into the laundry room. I happen to close the door because I always do, the walls are soundproof in here, I would not hear a thing going on in the house, ask anyone who has been here.

You see, now, the house is on fire. And I’m still here, in the laundry room. Why do we have this safe room you ask? Because the people my mom bought this place from were peace loving hippies from the 1960s and they had built a bomb shelter off of their kitchen instead of underground. The room is made so that it can withstand tornados as well as fire and other unnatural disasters. I happen to close the door. I was doing the last load of laundry, the towels.

When I opened the door to leave this room, I saw the fire in the living room, it was wild and strong, hitting the ceiling, my clean ceiling. I looked to my left and right to decide which window to run to get out, but then as I looked up, the fire saw me. I believe it literally saw me, like in a slow motion movie, it stared at me and I froze, the fire froze for a millisecond then it came barreling towards me like a charging bull. I did the only thing I could do. I slammed the door.

So, now I sit, no one can hear me if I scream. Not even if I use my stadium voice as my mom calls it. The door is airtight so I don’t see any smoke coming in. Yet, did you know fire is loud? So very loud, I can hear the house crying, breaking slowly, howling in pain. A sound so frightening that I feel it throughout my bones.

*This is my penance, my taste of hell, which is where I’m probably going anyway. This is my fiery death that I always assumed I’d have, but on my mom’s birthday? Is that fair to her? I ask you **IS THAT FAIR WORLD?** Don’t punish her for my sins God! Don’t do it!!*

Ms. B’s boss, Mica is thankfully a fast reader, he runs to the police chief who is talking to the fire chief on site and tells them the woman’s daughter is in the house, in the back of the house in a safe room. He shows them the phone, a new message pops up.

The air is getting warm in here, funny thing is the washer is still running. I was going to try and touch the door but as I got close, I can feel the warmth. Even iron has a breaking point I suppose. Fire is a hard death, I’ve seen burn victims at the hospital where I volunteer.

Copyright © 2019 by (CAA)

All rights reserved. Except for the use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereinafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the written permission of the author or illustrator directly.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

For questions and comments about the quality of this book, please contact us at dailyreader.caa@gmail.com



The three men walk over to Ms. B who is now standing next to two young people. “This is Emily, my daughter’s sister and this is Billy, her other good friend and brother. They say she is in the safe room.” She speaks with a soft voice because that is all she can muster.

“Can we get into that room from the outside?” the fire chief asks.

“There is only one window and it’s small.” Emily says. “You can’t fit in with your gear for sure,” she says.

“I can,” Billy takes off running. The police officer catches him and pulls him back.

“No son, we can’t let you do that. You don’t know what will happen and you’re not equipped.” He holds on to Billy’s arm because he can see his eyes tear up.

“Don’t stand here doing nothing!” Billy screams.

Ms. B speaks up, “Wait, the window is small but the wall under it isn’t the original wall, my ex, he hated that room and he borrowed the window to put it in his office and replaced it with a smaller window, under it is simple drywall with brick façade, not with real brick, you can break it easily. Please, please, she is a good girl, she doesn’t deserve this. Please,” she pleads.

The phone pings again and the boss looks down,

I know what a turkey feels like. First it gets warm around you and the feeling as if you are under a warm blanket, now though I feel warmth on my skin. The warmth, in my throat. I’m in an oven baking to death.

Oh, Mom. The house was clean for you. If I get out of here, we will rebuild a new kind of home. Together, hand in hand, I promise. We will have flowers all around, in every room, life and love all the time. We will adopt puppies and kittens and everything cute that is full of love and life. You and me Mom, you and me. And Emily too.

And Billy, we can keep him around too ☺

The whole group is staring at the phone, Billy is on his own phone. He starts running this time he grabs a hammer from his car and begins to run back to the house. This time three men are needed to stop him, he is determined not to stand here and watch his friend die this horrible death.

Ms. B’s boss walks over to him and holds on to him as a father would. “Let them do their job, they are going with sledge hammers look, they know what to do now, where she is, but the situation is tricky, the house can crumble, Billy. They will get her. We have to believe that.” He says softly to the top of the boy’s head which is in his chest right now. He can tell the boy is crying but he is not letting on he knows. He stands and holds him. Emily is holding on to Ms. B. His heart is breaking watching her. He wants to console her, but he can’t right now. He is doing what he is supposed to be doing.

Ms. B’s phone rings, she grabs it, “Hello?”

“Mom?”

“Hey baby, how are you doing? I can’t believe the phone is working. We’ve seen all your postings. The firemen are coming, they are going to break the window and wall to get you. Can you hold on a few more minutes for them?” she asks letting the tears fall down her face, happy to hear her daughter’s voice.

“Is Emily here?” she asks.



“Of course, she is, right next to me waiting for you with open arms,” she says.

“Is Billy here?” she asks softly.

“Yes, honey he is,” she says to her daughter’s crackling voice trying so hard to stay in control.

“I can’t see him Mom, it’s raining down under,” she says with tears in her eyes.

“Ok, I’ll make sure no one sees that. I promise, you stay strong. They are coming,” he says.

“My throat hurts,” she says.

“I know, but I have water in the car and I think I even have some carrot juice that you like in there too, I forgot about those until just now.” Ms. B is trying with all her willpower to stay strong but she feels herself sliding down her car again to the ground. No one should have to go through this, not even her worst enemy.

Emily is sitting with her now, Mica has brought Billy over and the four of them are sitting in a huddle, holding hands and bowing heads together.

“Mom?” Sheila says her voice now sounding scared

“Yes, honey, I’m here,” she says.

“I can’t believe my phone works either, I guess the heat ruined the stronghold on all things wireless in here. Oh no, I can’t get out of here. I see him. I can’t believe I see him,” she says.

“Who, honey, oh Sheila who do you see the firemen?” she asks.

“Over his shoulder I see him, my father is in the Bercham’s tree. He is watching this. The bastard. He did this didn’t he? To punish me for loving you, he did this,” Sheila looks at the fireman, whose arms are out.

“Please maám, we need to get out, the place is crumbling. I’ve got you but you need to come to me. Please,” the fireman pleads.

Sheila slowly walks over to him and puts her hands up. He grabs her under her arms and pulls her out. Her first breath of clean cool air makes her choke, she didn’t realize how much she needed real air. The fireman is running now, another one is behind him. The roar of the house is intense, as they round the corner the top floor tumbles down.

“Max is in the Bercham’s tree.” She says out loud to Mica who quickly runs to tell the police. They, in turn, have four men running over there now.

“She’s coming!” Billy begins to walk over, but Ms. B grabs his arm.

“No, Billy she can’t see you now. She asked me that you not see her. She will explain later, but you have to give her this. Please,” she begs.

“Tell me she is safe, then I’ll leave,” Billy says, now holding on to Emily tightly.

“Ok,” she runs to the fireman who is carrying her daughter who looks quite limp from the ordeal. They immediately place oxygen on her face and have her laying down on a stretcher. Belinda reaches her daughter and slides her fingers into the limp hand on the side of the stretcher.

Sheila looks up and smiles, then she closes her eyes. The emergency technician says her vital signs are weak, but not dangerous. She will need to be observed. Belinda nods and climbs into the back of the ambulance with her daughter she turns to give Billy and Emily a thumbs up. She sees Mica there too who gives her an ‘I love you’ sign with his hands and mouth and then the doors close.



At the firehouse later that day, two firemen are sitting still on a bench when another alarm starts sounding. They can't move. After the earlier call, they are frozen in shock. The girl they saved was taken to a hospital but knowing her own father did the damage has hit them hard.

Her description of the fire coming towards her, can only mean there was an accelerant on the floor that came towards her. The flames were being attacked by the fire department mostly to keep them contained, but even by the time they came, some of them already could tell that the house would be lost.

They almost lost a person too. The look of sheer unadulterated fear in the girl's eyes will haunt them for a long time to come. You could tell her fear was coming from inside her soul, as she looked passed him. It wasn't until they were informed that she saw her father, that they fully understood how deep that fear was. She wasn't afraid of them at all.

The captain approaches them, "Don't move, we've got this one covered. You good?" he says to them both.

"No," they answer in unison.

He nods and leaves them to their own thoughts. Shaking his head all the way to the new call. He was on the first one as well, he knows the house, the occupants; they have been friends for many years. He has known Belinda since before she married the jerk of a...., thankfully now ex-husband. Knowing he did this completely changes things for so many people.

Some were beginning to believe him about being a victim in the divorce. That she kicked him to the curb without due cause. The chief never believed him though, he has known her for too long and she used him as a confidant during many of the hard parts of their marriage and divorce.

With a heavy heart, he approaches this new fire, seeing there is already enough men on the crew working, he approaches the other head fireman from district five. "Hey, you got this?" he asks.

"Yeah, go. Heard about this morning, all over the radio. That guy doesn't stand a chance on the inside. He will get what is coming to him. I heard when they got to the tree, he came down so slowly they were afraid he was armed, then he turned to them and asked what was up. Takes all kinds. Thankfully, this one looks contained and almost out already. Go. Take care of your men and your friend." He puts his hand on his shoulder and pats him.

The fire chief walks away, grateful for the reprieve. He gets back to the firehouse and goes to talk to his men. "Come, let's go to the hospital. Belinda may need some support and you need to see the girl as cheerful, sometimes looking at the happy ending helps the fear go away." He stands but sees they are still frozen in their seats. "Come." He says again, this time in his chief voice, not his friendly voice, they get up to follow him.

~ ~ ~

Belinda has been pacing the room now for half an hour, they took Sheila for tests and she isn't back yet. She has already counted the tiles on the ceiling, the bends in the curtains, how many steps it takes to pace the room. A hand grips her arm, she turns quickly to see Mica.

"Hey. The kids went home. Emily is pretty shaken up and Billy doesn't know what to do with himself right now. I called their parents, they came to pick them up and send you their

Copyright © 2019 by (CAA)

All rights reserved. Except for the use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereinafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the written permission of the author or illustrator directly.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

For questions and comments about the quality of this book, please contact us at dailyreader.caa@gmail.com



prayers. The police have Max in custody, they traced the call that reported the fire to his cell phone. He started the fire, waited fifteen minutes for everything to take hold of the house; then called the emergency in. “What’s he looking for Belinda?” he asks.

“He came to me six months ago begging me to sell the property. At the divorce hearing he tried to put claim on the house but my lawyer was too smart and knocked him away with all the reasons why he has no claim at all on the house. Legally, he has no claim, not even for a nail or a dust bunny that might be under the couch.

Anyway, he came to me telling me I could make top dollar if I sell to this one builder who wants to put up apartments on my land. He told me that the guy doesn’t even want the house and that I wouldn’t even have to clean it.” With those words she begins to cry again, thinking about how clean the house was before all this happened.

Mica holds her and lets her cry into his chest. Sheila is brought back in, “Mom?” she says “You ok? I’m ok, I’m here now.” She calls to her mother in a bit of a raspy voice. Belinda wipes her tears and turns around to see her daughter sitting up now in bed. A welcomed sight.

Mica walks behind Belinda with his hand on the small of her back for support. Sheila sees this and smiles to him. Tonight, they were supposed to go out to dinner and he was going to confess his love to her. Together she and Mica schemed the whole thing.

“Oh baby, you look so much better now,” Belinda says

“Yeah, great stuff in these bags, can’t taste it though but it sure picks a girl up now, doesn’t it?” she tries to smile. Her face and parts of her that were exposed to the heat are still tender, the doctor says she isn’t any more affected than a bad sunburn. “They tested my lungs for a long time, for fumes that might have gotten in, they told me it doesn’t look like any serious damage was done. Good huh?” she looks at her mother who is looking quite ragged.

“I’m sorry Mom, for my attitude since the divorce. The arguing, the being stubborn. I didn’t know. I didn’t understand. You probably still hate me, don’t you? I’ll understand if you do.” Sheila says softly.

“I remember your mom once told me the two of you got in such a fight that you actually both had fists up, when she told me that I began to laugh. And do you know what happened after that?” Mica asks Sheila. She looks to him with tears and shakes her head no, she remembers that too.

“We both began to laugh. She told me she couldn’t believe that he had such a hold on you that you knew all the buttons to push. After that, she realized that every fight you had before that day, was after you returned from being with Max. He had been poisoning your mind. She knew that then and knows it still, there is no hate, only pain *for* you Sheila not *at* you, and she hurts for you and *with* you. Can you understand that?” Mica asks, never before having said anything to either of them on the issue.

Mica looks at Belinda and she has tears in her eyes, she can’t believe he is so supportive after all this, after being through all this nonsense with Max, with Sheila, Mica is still here for her. She takes a deep breath and looks to her daughter.

“Lilacs on the bedroom furniture was a nice touch,” she says to Sheila.



“I bought the vase you admired in the market’s window too Mom, did you notice? The blue one with white filigree on it.” Sheila looks to her mom hopeful.

“I’m sorry baby, my mind was whirling, I didn’t see details. Can you show me the pictures again when we get home? I think they are holding you overnight tonight, maybe even tomorrow, not sure. Billy is going nuts and Emily is too. But you know what is the most surprising? That your phone worked in that room. It never did before,” she says almost in awe.

“After I saw the first post go out, I kept doing more, I figured if no one could hear my physical voice, at least someone – well Emily for sure – would see my words and maybe I’d get out. I couldn’t see them like that Mom, it was, well, it was embarrassing. I’m almost eighteen,” she says with tears.

“Honey, grown men in your situation would have done the same thing. No one noticed, not the firemen who carried you, not the ambulance guy, no one. They were too focused on everything else. Like getting your breathing monitored,” she looks to Mica to see if he knows what they are talking about.

“You know Sheila that whole wear clean underwear in case you’re in an accident thing? A complete misnomer. Usually the first thing that happens for anyone who fears for their life is loss of bladder control. I think people would have been surprised if you hadn’t. Happen to me in college when I wasn’t even the one in the accident, I watched a friend lose control of the vehicle after an icy storm. Car was in flames, about four of us ran over there afterwards, no one even noticed until afterwards, no one said a word, no one ever will. You know that, right?” Mica says.

“I don’t know why I believe you, but I do. Is there anything of the house still standing?” Sheila asks and gets her answer as she sees her mom’s hand go to her mouth and her face now buried into Mica’s chest.

She looks to Mica for answers. “When your parents got divorced, Max tried to get the house and or part ownership of the land. He got nothing, but you know your mom, she always has to be fair, so she told him, that should she ever do anything with the property or the house, she would give him ten percent of what is left after paying all that she had to pay off. Figuring at least it would shut him up. It did, until recently. My guess is he is short on money and could use the ten percent right now. He is in police custody thanks to you. Tonight, while you and your mom sleep here, I’ll be shopping with Emily and Billy to replenish your wardrobe and get your rooms ready.” He smiles at Sheila because she knows where he is referring to and she nods in approval.

“Are we interrupting something?” the fire chief asks.

Belinda recognizes that voice and immediately looks up to her old friend. She smiles and walks to him with open arms. Mica follows her and reaches out his hand to shake, the chief pulls him in for a hug too. “You ok with housing them?” he whispers. Mica shakes his head yes.

The chief pats Mica’s shoulders as he pulls away and nods. “Gentlemen, this is Sheila, the young life you saved today. As you can see, she is doing well. Nice color in those cheeks Sheila.” The chief jokes. She smiles, she has known him her whole life.

“I didn’t know you were there,” she says somewhat shyly.

“I heard the address,” he says simply.



“You look different without all your gear on, you don’t look much older than me in fact.” She says to the dark-haired man next to the chief. The other one is still hiding behind him.

“I’m in local college and doing this on the side to help pay for school. I trained in Ocean County, but I like life here better,” he offers to her.

“I’m going to go to local college too. I think they may be the only ones to take me, but that’s fine with me, I need to be home with my mom for a while, we need some catch up time to do things together.” She reaches out her hand and Belinda grabs her hand to kiss her palm a number of times in quick succession. Her baby has decided to go to college; that is an even bigger birthday present than having the house clean.

Sheila squeezes her mom’s hand, she knows what she is thinking. Everyone visits for a few more minutes together. Finally, the chief escorts the two young men out. He and Mica exchange a few glances of understanding between them and then they leave.

“Ok, you two going to be fine without me around? I’ll send you pictures of everything I find and you can say yes or no to all of them. Deal? No purchases without consent. I’ll have Emily try on the clothes if you want,” Mica looks to Sheila.

“She and I aren’t exactly the same size, but you’re a man and you wouldn’t know, so that’s cool with me, because if you noticed, it would be weird.” Sheila smiles and so does Mica.

“Ok, so pictures it is, and if there is a particular store you want us to go to let me know. You two think about it. The doctor said you can have any food you want so text me and tell me where you want your dinner to come from and I’ll make that happen.” He leans down to kiss Sheila on the cheek. She whispers to him, “Get her something nice to wear that I’ll never see.” Mica stands and smiles.

Getting permission to buy her mother lingerie is as good as getting approval to marrying her, which is his intent eventually, but having that permission is really nice, especially when he hasn’t asked yet.

“You take care of this young lady, she is quite something,” he smiles at Belinda, then bends down and kisses her square on the lips. He holds her hands and lays a box in them that he took from his pocket, then he turns and leaves.

Belinda looks to Sheila who smiles, “Open the box, you’re killing me Mom.”

Belinda opens the box to see two interlocking rings, one is a sapphire, her birthstone, and one is a ruby. Quickly she puts her hand on her mouth and looks out the door, a large tear falls down her cheek. “Mom?” Sheila asks.

“That’s his birthstone,” she answers quietly pointing to the ruby.

The two women spend many hours talking, laughing and crying together, making up for all the lost time they created around themselves in recent years. Both taking blame for what happened, not giving any to the other person.

Eventually, Belinda falls asleep holding on to her daughter’s hand, slumped over on the bed. They sleep that way through the night.

Mica, Emily and Billy spend two hours shopping for essentials. Billy brought some money given to him by his mom to use, then neighbors saw them out together shopping and made a



deduction as to what they were doing and gave Mica money too. Word spread quickly and many of the shop owners gave either great discounts or sometimes extra items free.

Mica turns to Emily, "If Sheila was helping to clean, what are the chances she was wearing her grandmother's ring?" he asks.

Emily stops and thinks hard, "Um, none. Oh no, that was her most prized possession. That woman was a saint and she has only been gone a year or so. Mica we have to do something," she says with tears in her eyes.

"We've got this, do you have a picture? I'm not sure I do." They both start looking through their phones, they sent Billy to go buy the electronics and other non-clothing essentials, he was happy to get away from the women's clothes. He has a list from Mica and a credit card to cover all that is not covered by the cash they were given. This is the biggest trust test Billy has ever been given. In the past, he has not been good with his own money, let alone someone else's. Billy knows this, and he is completely focused on Sheila. Any time his mind wanders he pulls up her social media page and reads the last part about her thinking she is going to die like a turkey in an oven. He stands up and carries on his appointed duties.

"Got one, we compared her ring to the one my mother gave me for my sweet sixteenth birthday. Will this do?" she asks.

"I sure hope so, come on there is a jeweler about two miles from here. Call Billy, see if he is done. We will meet him out at the car. I've had enough of this mall anyway," Mica says.

"Ok Mica, but can I ask you something?" she pauses, "Are you and Ms. B going to get married because if you're not and you're stringing her along, well, you know me and Billy we'll cut your throat, right?" She says trying to sound convincing, although this is not her strongpoint.

"Message received. Is he coming?" he asks as they find the door to the mall.

"Yeah," she says now remaining quiet. Mica met Emily and her parents years ago at a community social event, he met Sheila through her and immediately liked her. He has been helping Sheila out during her transition from two-parent to one-parent family. It hasn't been easy, Belinda's ex definitely had made it harder than he believed it should be, but he has never let her down, never given up on her. Until today, today he let them all down.

He should have believed the threat. But what man would go to such an extreme simply to prove a point? Mica stops at his car and waits for Billy while Emily loads up the car and scoots herself into the back seat. Mica searches his phone for the email he received from Max a few weeks ago, "Found it." He whispers and then sends this information to his cousin on the force to tell him to take care of the situation for him but he also made himself available in case they want to talk to him further.

"Mica!" Emily yells. "Where did you go just now? You ok?" she asks softly.

Mica shakes his head and gets in the car, he checks the back to see Billy not looking happy about something. "What's wrong Billy?" he asks.

"Nothing," he grumbles.

Mica leaves everyone to ponder their own thoughts as he drives. He knows the exact jeweler to go to. An old friend who would do anything for Belinda. The two of them go back a lot of years. He walks in with Emily, Billy has decided to brood in the car about something.



“Is he going to be ok?” Mica asks.

“Yeah, he commented about how we should have been able to see Sheila in the hospital and I told him we have to grant her the one request she asked for,” Emily answers.

“But it was only at the house that she didn’t want to see Billy, you know why right?” he asks.

“Yeah, I heard what she said to her mom because her mom was barely holding the phone, so I was holding it to her ear for her. I understand, but it only seems right to give her and her mom some time together. It is Ms. B’s birthday today, you know.” She smiles at Mica.

“Yeah, I know. We were supposed to have dinner tonight. Dinner!” he slaps his forehead and checks his phone, no response from them in a long time. Hopefully they are sleeping. He quickly walks up to the counter and asks for his friend, he shows them the picture of Sheila wearing her grandmother’s ring. “Got any?” he asks, “Now?” he reiterates.

“Whoa, tall order, I’m doing fine, thank you for asking,” he says as he takes a look at his friend’s phone.

Emily looks at the man, he looks familiar. “Hey, aren’t you Ms. B’s old friend?” she asks realizing she has seen him at the house before.

“Who?” he asks.

“Belinda,” Mica says.

“Oh, yes, yes I am and you are?” he asks

“Emily, Sheila’s best friend, can you remake the ring or not? Otherwise we’ll go somewhere else. We need this immediately considering what happened today,” She says with tears and buries her face into Mica’s chest. She hasn’t cried all afternoon, or all night so far, why now? She asks herself but allows herself cry anyway.

“Mica, what’s up? Is Belinda ok? Sheila?” he asks.

“You are probably the only one in the community who doesn’t know if you’re asking that question. There was a fire. The whole house, Sheila was trapped inside but thankfully came out with only minor injuries, they are holding her overnight at the hospital.” He simplifies the situation because it is too hard to recall right now. He pulls Emily in a little tighter, poor thing has been strong this whole time.

“I saw the news, they didn’t use names only that the fire happened. The only thing they mentioned was that the ex-husband is suspect. Even in the media there are some who respect privacy and they left Sheila and Brenda’s name out. Is this her grandmother’s ring? You think it was lost in the fire?” he asks for clarification.

Mica simply nods.

~ ~ ~

Time passes quickly when you spend your time sleeping, eating and sleeping again. The first twenty-four hours have passed and Sheila is now beginning to get very antsy about leaving the hospital. She knows that Mica has room for them, that isn’t the issue. Dealing with all that has happened is the bigger issue.

The knock on the door startles her, she looks up to see Billy and Emily. “Hey you two, did you bring me something good?” she asks.



Billy laughs and pulls a milkshake from behind his back. Sheila smiles, Billy thinks that ice cream is the root to solving all problems. “Don’t just stand there, bring yourselves in.” Sheila smiles.

The two friends walk in slowly. It has been hard for Emily to stay away but she promised Billy she would not go without him. This afternoon he finally said he could go, so she jumped at the chance and picked him up immediately before he weaseled out again.

“mmmm, mint chip, best kind of shakes. Thanks Billy. So, how bad are the rumors at school?” she asks knowing full well they will tell the truth.

Billy looks at Emily and she smiles, “Actually, there is a large collection going on for you and your mom. Kids and teachers have been dumping money in all day yesterday, since they heard about the fire and all of today too. We don’t know how much is in there yet, they’re using that giant collection jar that was used when we did the campaign to save the children’s home. Remember that?” Billy asks.

“Yeah, we collected a couple thousand dollars that way. Who started this?” she says with a choked-up voice.

“Mr. Henderson,” Emily says.

Sheila contemplates what is said to her. “The man hates me,” she says.

“No, he hated your attitude, but he has seen the change, as well as everyone in school. When the kids at school found out who set the fire, the whole place was up in arms. You had to hear some of the guys talking. Saying things like, it’s a good thing the police have him because we’d make sure he had no reason to live, let alone a place to live in. Or my favorite was when the group of guys from our chemistry lab asked the teacher if they can bake him a cake to take to him in prison. The teacher paused before he said no. The whole place was laughing. Not that it is a funny situation but a cake? Come on!” Emily says.

“Yeah, some of those people are barely passing lab, having them bake using real ingredients is probably scary enough, forget that they wanted to poison it. The fire chief stopped by yesterday with the two guys who got me out of the house. One of them is so hot I am sure I was blushing, good thing he couldn’t tell,” she smiles.

“I can’t believe you!” Billy says. “I’m dying here and you’re flirting with a fireman? I almost peed in my pants trying to get back to you in the house, three men had to hold me back. Three!! I told you I’d never let harm come to you. Some big brother I am.” He grumbles to himself a bit. Ahh, now Emily realizes the real reason for his stalling to come. Billy is the best, she can’t believe she never saw how much before.

“Billy, you’ll always be my big brother. You didn’t have to save me to prove that. I know who you are to me. A lot of crap happened in our lives, we lost our real brothers in the same accident, and you stepped in to replace him. I appreciate that more than you know, even if you are only six months older than me.” She tries to smile at him.

Billy leans down and grabs her in for a hug. He holds on tightly, turns his head to kiss her cheek and stands again. “Mica is great for your mom, and for you too. You have to see the wardrobe he bought you. Damn, does every girl have two weeks’ worth of underwear? He seems



to think you need that much. I have no idea how much he spent, he and Emily did all the clothes shopping. I did the important part. Here,” he hands her a box.

Sheila opens the box and sees a new phone, not any phone but the newest one on the market. “Billy?” she questions him saying his name slowly.

“Everywhere we turned there were people shopping, they kept handing us money when we said why we were there. Even strangers did. I assumed you may not want to use the same phone anymore. Maybe the heat ruined it, maybe the memory would be too much. I don’t know, but this is a different size so it will feel different in your hands even if you have the same contacts. Sorry, I should have thought of more practical things. I’ll take it back.” He reaches out his hand and Sheila grabs his hand.

“Billy, this is a practical thing. I love it. Did you put any contacts in already? Is the service already on?” she asks.

“I copied my contacts, you may be missing a couple, Emily added in one or two. I don’t have your doctors or any other family you may have had. Your mom is there under Ms. B. I think,” he says softly still feeling bad for not being more involved.

“Billy what else did you get?” she senses he is not feeling good about his purchases and is feeling what he did is not as important as what Mica and Emily did for her.

“I found that new clock radio that has a dock for your phone to charge on. I got you a new music player and added on real music to this one. No more listening to solemn music, only happy things for you now. The guy asked who it was for so I told him and he asked if you were the person from the TV. The fire was on the news, no names mentioned. I said yes, he upgraded what I was going to buy for the same price and threw in a purple arm band for you to wear too. Free, all upgrades were free. In fact, when I got to the phone store, they looked up your phone number and saw you were actually eligible for a new phone anyway and gave me a great deal on the phone, plus screen protector. I declined the phone case because he was giving me one that is orange and everyone knows Sheila hates orange,” he smiles seeing her eyes wide open looking at him.

“You did good Billy. Really good. I assume everything else is at Mica’s house,” she says.

“Yes, he is so nervous about you and your mom coming. The man called your cleaning service and had them do his house today. He is there with them now. He had to tell them three times that you were safe and that you were ok. The young one, with the scar on her cheek, she kept cleaning and crying, that is when we left,” he looks to Emily.

“She said you gave them almost double the amount, that’s not just a nice tip Sheila, that’s tremendous!” Emily says.

“Everyone deserves to be believed in. I believe they will do honest work. Ethnicity shouldn’t play a part in it at all. They are a melting pot of people, Native American, Polish, Spanish and I forget the last one, but their skin is darker than some people, so out of ignorance, people make assumptions and follow them from room to room, it makes them uncomfortable. She told me that one time, they left in the middle because they said it was a hostile work environment. The woman of the house said it was only hostile because they made it that way. Can you believe how dumb people are?” she asks. Sheila has been rude on many accounts in her life but never for senseless hate or prejudices.

Copyright © 2019 by (CAA)

All rights reserved. Except for the use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereinafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the written permission of the author or illustrator directly.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

For questions and comments about the quality of this book, please contact us at dailyreader.caa@gmail.com



“Mica took us all out last night, me, my mom and sister, Emily and her parents. We went to the Italian place on Fifth Street. The meal was great as far as food goes, the company was rather quiet but we all needed each other. Emily’s dad and Mica talked a bit but no one else did. Not awkward, simply silent. We ate birthday cake in your mom’s honor. Now *that* was good.” Billy smiles.

Sheila laughs, it’s not as hard today as it was yesterday. “The doctor says he is discharging me as soon as my mom gets back. She had to run a couple of errands, her sister picked her up. You remember my Aunt Willa, right? She came in full of tears this morning. She doesn’t do hospitals well. I’m happy she lives in a small apartment because no way could I live with her. We decided what to do with the land though.” Sheila smiles to her friends.

~ ~ ~

Living with Mica has been great, the first six months have flown by quickly, Sheila has graduated early from high school now and is working with her mom part time and going to school part time. Their grand opening will be in two weeks. Right before everyone’s spring break.

Mica has helped with all the business aspects of their dream but Sheila and her mom have been the creative partners to make this happen.

Mica has given Sheila everything she needs to start over, a brand new wardrobe, probably more expensive than she would have spent herself, though, she will never tell him. She showers him with kisses each time she puts on a new outfit she loves.

Belinda and Mica are as close as any couple could possibly be, sans a marriage certificate. But that will soon be remedied. Mica and Sheila have planned out the day and time for the proposal. Turns out to be exactly six years to the day that Belinda started working with Mica. Six glorious years as Mica says.

“Sheila? You ok dear?” her mom asks.

“We did it, Mom. You and me, not only did we do it but we’ve knocked our idea out of the park. Lilac Gardens is our best dream ever. If Max ever gets out of jail and sees that not only did we not sell the property but we created an indoor/outdoor park out of the place? He will flip completely.

Look at everything Mom. We have the best outdoor equipment money can buy; the ground is covered with recycled rubber tires to help prevent injuries. The inside is the same. A three-story building that can be a playground all winter long or when there is rain. Each piece of equipment is aptly named another flower and painted the appropriate color too. You should be proud of what we’ve done,” Sheila says to her mom.

“I should? And you shouldn’t? Sheila, in the hospital you spelled out the whole thing. I only helped this come true for *you*. A place full of love and life; that is what you wanted. No sorrow here. We have the best security system around, there is no corridor or room that is not covered by secret cameras. We created a true safe haven for parents or grandparents to bring their kids. Our corner lot will always be full of life, no one will ever see the burnt patch. Not now, not ever. You did good Sheila. I couldn’t be prouder and college? Who knew, huh?” she hugs her



daughter whom she never thought would ever get out of her angry funk and become the beautiful person she sees before her today. The person Belinda knew she had inside of her.

“Harry and Nick would have loved this place, don’t you think?” she asks referring to her and Billy’s brother.

“Yeah but he would hate that we used daffodil yellow, he hated yellow, do you remember that?” Belinda asks.

“He didn’t hate yellow, he despised yellow.” A voice from behind says. They turn to see the fire chief. Belinda gives him a hug.

“What are you doing here?” she asks.

“Final inspection. I brought my grandkids to test the place out. Ok gang, you ready? Go!” he tells them as they charge through the back door to the outdoor area, screaming and laughing all the way.

“Hey chief,” Sheila says.

“How’s my star pupil?” he asks.

Belinda looks from her old friend to her daughter with a questioning look on her face. He laughs, “Not at the station, no dear, I teach chemistry at her school. She is a sponge with the stuff, become my go to gal when another student needs help. You ever run into Archer?” he asks referring to the one who rescued her.

“Who?” Sheila asks.

“Archer, the firemen you met in the hospital, he goes to the same school you do,” he says.

“No, I haven’t. Guess he isn’t taking sciences,” she smiles.

Only the chief knows that he is, which means he is avoiding her. The chief decides he will talk to him at the station about this. “He never mentioned his major,” he says.

“Looks like the kids are having a great time. What a fantastic idea, putting a playground in the middle of a semi-suburban community. There is no shortage of kids around here and certainly a shortage of parks. Bad planning on the city’s part. The nearest one to this area is one you have to drive to and then pay for parking. You guys did this right. You’re asking for donations as they come in like they do at museums and patrons really like that; give what you can, when you can. If they want to have the park continue to be free, people will donate. You may even get some corporations to sponsor the place, let them, it’s good for everyone. Genius, simply genius. Besides, you upped the value of all the homes around here so who is going to argue with you?” He smiles and gives Belinda another hug. It’s been a long time since he has seen her this happy.

“I hope it doesn’t get too crowded on opening day,” Sheila says. “We don’t want to push people away. We did say the place is only free to locals, people have to show ID that proves they live around here. We investigated and saw that other parks do that. There is a charge for outsiders. Not much, but we were hoping to keep this for the local kids. The Bercham’s cut their tree down, did you see that?” she asks the chief. Sheila finds that she tends to ramble on these days, especially when talking about Lilac Gardens.

“I saw, they couldn’t bear to see the place Max hid in. I don’t blame them. He came down for one of your permits and said he needs a permit as well to take a tree down and drive it up someone’s ass.” The whole place laughed until we saw he wasn’t joking or laughing. He meant



those words. We gave him the permit even though the tree was perfectly healthy. I couldn’t make him look at that every day. Look at those kids, they haven’t stopped moving. You did good girls, you really did good,” he says.

With the opening of Lilac Gardens tomorrow and the exams she has to take later today, Sheila is completely focused as she walks through campus but not focused on the world around her, she bangs right into something hard. As she looks up as to what she hit, she sees not a what but a who. “Fireman?” she asks.

“Yes, and you are?” he asks.

“Sheila, oh I’m sorry, I thought you’d recognize me, you saw me in the hospital after you pulled me out of my house. Guess you see a lot of faces. Sorry,” she turns to walk away quickly embarrassing herself in front of the hottest guy on campus.

Archer takes two steps to catch up to her, he grabs her arm, “The back room girl?” he asks.

Sheila looks at him and nods, now embarrassed even more. “I’m sorry, your face looks different now. I’ve never forgotten you though,” he says.

“My face is naturally this color, you saw me when my face was red from heat burn,” she says.

“Actually, I didn’t say that right. I remember your eyes, to be honest, they haunted me for a while. The look of fear you had as you looked over my shoulder; that is what I’ll never forget. You don’t look anything like that memory I’m happy to say,” he smiles at her. “Where are you headed so focused?” he asks.

“Oh, I’m headed to McKenzie’s review he is giving before the test today. You?” she asks

“I took his class last semester, he may confuse you with his review. He likes to throw in things he didn’t cover. Want to study for his test with me? We can go over to the benches over there, the area is quiet around here this time of day,” he smiles at her.

“Why would he do that?” she asks.

“He feels that if you’re coming to the last minute review it’s your only time of review which means you haven’t put much effort into his class. I asked him flat out once and that was his answer. Egotistical prick, that’s what he is. He thinks he is so smart and yet his class enrollment is the lowest of all of the biology professors. The only people who take his class are the ones who have to squeeze it in at an odd timeslot and he is the only one who gives class at that hour. Come, I did well in that class I can help you,” he holds out his hand.

Sheila takes his hand and they walk over to the bench for her own, personal, last minute review. Archer walks her to the exam afterwards too, “Good luck.” He calls to her after she walks away. Then he sits down on the bench outside Bio Hall to wait. He doesn’t want to lose this chance to get to know this special girl. His chief has been hounding him to look for her, but he never saw her until today. Maybe he has in passing but he was looking for her eyes, the rest of her is gorgeous. He could never match up to someone like her. She is above his stature, he thinks to himself. He will wait anyway, at least today.



Waiting is killing him so he sends a message to the chief to tell him he finally found her. The chief fills him in on the grand opening of tomorrow and what they did to the lot where the house burned down. He wants to give him something to talk about.

“Thanks chief,” he says to his phone.

“Why are you thanking your chief?” Sheila asks. “You didn’t wait here for me, did you?” she asks nervously.

“If you’re happy I did, the answer is yes, if you’re creeped out by the answer, then this is a simple coincidence?” he responds.

“How does happy surprise sound? I’m glad I studied with you. You were right, he had the question about the last lab on the front page. Everyone was moaning about that one, everyone except me that is,” she smiles. “Why are you taking his class? What is your major?” she asks.

“I’m considering pre-med not because I want to be a doctor but because I may want to go into medical research or I may go for my license in being a paramedic. I can get paid by both the fire department and the hospital and my days will always be different. I kind of like the sound of that,” he says.

“Ok super hero. That sounds like a whole plan. I happen to like science, don’t know what I want to do yet. So that makes you ten steps ahead of me. I also like math, so I’m leaning to engineering as well. I also like being creative and putting things together.” She takes a breath and before she can say her next sentence Archer pipes in.

“You helped design Lilac Gardens I assume?” he asks, he watches as her eyes light up with pride.

“You’ve heard of us? Oh, I’m so excited you’ve heard about our place that means our advertising is working!!” she jumps on him and gives him a hug. Then she bounces off, “Sorry,” she says.

“I’m not. What time is the grand opening?” he asks She looks at him for a moment, he knew about the place but doesn’t know the opening time, did they forget to put that on the fliers? “Hey, don’t think so hard, I’m a guy, I remember big things, not details,” he smiles.

“Every detail has been on my head, it’s a wonder I even remembered that I had this exam today,” she says.

“Have you eaten since last week?” he asks smiling.

“Good question. Probably, we live with Mica now, he was there informing you guys who I was and where I was. He makes sure meals happen, at least at dinnertime. Breakfast is always a crapshoot but Mom and Mica seem to love preparing dinner together. For the first time in a long time I have a real family. Been nice. He is going to propose to my mom before the grand opening. She doesn’t know this yet. I’m about bursting inside.” Her voice bubbling over now.

“Tell me when that is, I’ll make sure to be there on time,” he says. “I’m a sucker for a good proposal,” he grins.

“Well, you’d have to come about an hour before the ribbon cutting ceremony. He is going to ask inside the garden. But I happen to know someone who might let you in early if you want to be there,” she smiles.



“That’s a hard invitation to turn down. I’m assuming chief will be there with his grandkids, he told me he went already, cheated on the inspection.” He smiles at her. Wow this is no girl, I’m standing in front of the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. Don’t blow this Archer, he says to himself.

~ ~ ~

“Opening dayyyyy!!” Sheila is running around the house screaming, the hour is early but she doesn’t care. Archer is coming because she asked him to, no other reason, she can’t believe this. She texted Emily right after their afternoon together. She snapped a picture of him, hopefully without him knowing. Emily told her she is jealous but she said the words with love. Besides, Emily is busy herself these days.

Since the fire, Emily and Billy have decided that they are more than friends and Sheila couldn’t be happier. They started off slowly but recently things have been moving much faster. Billy, Emily and Sheila have all known each other since middle school. They have seen each other at their worst and at their best, been there for each other through all life had to give them.

“Sheila!” her mom calls to her as she dances around the living room, she turns to see her mom smiling and runs into her arms. “We did it, baby, you and me,” she says as she holds her daughter.

“No, we did it, you, me and Mica and the chief, and the Berchams. Our idea, yes, but everyone pulled together. Even the contractors were excited to work on this with us. We are going to make everyone happy. Happiness is all around us. Every day. It’s what we said we would do if I got out. And we’ve done exactly that. The world is next!!” Sheila screams.

Mica walks in laughing, “You girls should go shower and get ready. Belinda your outfit is on your bed, Sheila yours is hanging in your bathroom right now.” He smiles at her.

Sheila goes running to see what he bought her now. Mica has been surprising her as a real father would do, every week almost, he has given her something he ‘happen to see’ he would tell her. Sheila turns into her bathroom and sees a beautiful lilac colored skirt with a blouse that has long angel-looking sleeves on it. She jumps into the shower eager to put the outfit on. Sheila spends some time readying herself for the day, when she is finished, she heads out to the living room and she sees Mica and her mom slow dancing. Sheila stops to watch, she takes a picture and sends it to her grandfather, he will appreciate seeing his daughter happy again.

Her uncle is bringing him by today but probably not until the end, the crowds make her grandfather nervous. She has seen him a few times since the fire and each time he hugs her and cries. Her uncle told her to call or text because seeing her is too hard for his father since he lost his wife to fire. She has obliged but it has been hard. She used to see him once a month or sometimes more.

She slips back to her room and stands and looks at herself in the mirror. She sees something she is not expecting to see, a box on her dresser. She walks slowly to her dresser and lifts the small jewelry box, Sheila opens the top and gasps. Her grandmother’s ring? She has forgotten about this precious gift all this time. Mica had given her a simple ring with her grandmother’s birthstone the day after the fire, in the hospital, but this looks identical to the real thing.

Copyright © 2019 by (CAA)

All rights reserved. Except for the use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereinafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the written permission of the author or illustrator directly.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

For questions and comments about the quality of this book, please contact us at dailyreader.caa@gmail.com



She slips it on her finger, the pointer finger on her left hand, it is where her grandmother wore it because her grandfather bought one too big for her ring finger and she would never insult him by having the ring resized. Sheila always thought the sentiment was the most beautiful thing she ever heard. She slides this one on, and it fits. Of course, Mica wouldn’t give her anything less than perfect.

Walking out into the living room she sees her mom wearing a beautiful white dress with lilacs embroidered in all the right places. A willowy dress but not too full, her mom looks like the bride to be Mica wants her to be. Sheila finds a tear rolling down her cheek that she doesn’t wipe away. Mica comes towards her, he is wearing a white suite with a lilac colored shirt to match his girls. “You found the ring, I assume,” he says.

Sheila looks down at her hand. “How did you do that?” she asks.

“An old friend of mine, happens to know your mom longer than I have, he is a jeweler and knew where your grandparents got engaged, apparently everyone in this town knows that story. He contacted the original jeweler he thought designed the ring. The man is ten years older than your grandfather but when my jeweler friend told him what he wanted and why, well, it’s taken him this long to recreate the perfect match. Worth every penny don’t you think?” he says smiling

“Does Mom know?” she asks.

“Yes, she saw what I had beforehand and told me this was the best way to present it to you. The blouse is a bit too big for you, I’m sorry, usually you like things to fit closer to you,” he says.

“No, this style is ok to have loose. I kind of like the room the looseness gives. If I lift my arms, I feel like I can float away with the wind. That’s a nice thought sometimes. Everything you do for us is out of love Mica, I couldn’t be happier than being part of your family. You’ve made this transition so easy,” she says

“Your grandpa doesn’t like me much. He thinks I’ve ruined his daughter living with her for so long. Your uncle set him straight though, I have his permission, finally. Yesterday,” he smirks.

“Really? He made you sweat this long?” she laughs.

“Funny for you maybe.” The two of them laugh all the way to the car. “Time to get this day rolling.” He says as they drive over to The Lilac Gardens.

~ ~ ~

Archer spends a good amount of time in the chief’s office learning about Sheila. He wants to know everything he can before the big day tomorrow. Things like, should he be prepared for her to be in a good mood or scared, is she going to be filled with happy tears or sad?

“I can’t tell you how she will feel son, you’ll have to play that by ear.”

“You don’t understand sir, she asked me to come an hour before opening because Mica is going to propose tomorrow,” he says concerned.

“He is? That son of a gun, the old man must have finally given him permission,” he says more to himself than anyone else.

“What sir? I need permission from who?” Archer asks totally confused now. “I don’t think you understand the gravity of the situation sir. I’m out of my league here. She is so much more than I deserve, I need to do things right just to even have a chance. Maybe she is only inviting me



because I was the one who pulled her out. She isn’t asking *me* to be there then, she is asking a fireman.” He says slumping back into his chair feeling defeated.

The chief watches and listens to what has happened in front of him. This boy is already head over heels in love with Sheila, well, he approves and he is pretty sure that Belinda will too. Mica may give him a hard time though. “First things first, I don’t know why she is out of your league.”

Archer explains to the chief that he is two years older than Sheila and has finally started college. He is definitely not the best looking guy around considering he has three scars on his face. He only has one brother who doesn’t even talk to him anymore and Sheila loves family and is all about family. “I should bow out of tomorrow, that would be wise.” He begins to stand up.

“Hold up soldier.” The chief says in his chief voice. Archer turns to sit down. “Those scars on your face are from doing your job, we all have a few. My wife never left me because I had a few scars. You and Michaels are the only two left that are single in this department, people don’t stay single around here, is my point. You were out with Kirby on that day. You know what he did in response to that crazy day? He went home and created another baby that is what he did. He told his wife one is not enough and ten may not be either but right now he will settle for more than one. God answered him with the twins they are expecting. You do know what you want. Your love and passion are here at the station. You love working at the hospital too, so go pursue the paramedic degree too. Sheila will never fault you for being and doing what you love. She only wants love in her life. We have a hard job, we all know that, it has its risks, you work it for as long as you want and you get out when there is no more passion. No one will fault you, not even Sheila. Sheila loves her family because of the size. She has lost a brother and knows the value of family and life. You have a lot to discuss with her, each day will bring a new conversation. Go tomorrow, if she asked, it means she wants *you* there. You Archer, not fireman Archer. I suggest you wear something with the color lilac though.” He smiles at the young man before him. When Archer leaves, he calls Mica.

“Hey, how come Sheila gets to invite someone to the proposal and you didn’t think to invite me?” he jokes.

Mica looks around the room, no one is listening. “I didn’t know she did. Wow, that says a lot, doesn’t it? Yes, I got permission if that is what you’re calling about. About an hour ago. Tomorrow can’t come soon enough.” The two men laugh for a while before hanging up.

~ ~ ~

When they pull up to the Lilac Garden’s parking lot, Sheila immediately sees Archer standing there leaning on his car, he is wearing a lilac colored shirt like Mica is. She puts her hand on her heart because whether or not he thought of that himself doesn’t matter, he did this for her, and more importantly, he is here.

“Looks like we have company,” Mica says.

“Oh, sorry. I invited him yesterday after our afternoon’s conversation on campus. Mad?” she looks at Mica then her mom then back at Mica because for him this is a big day.



“We are thrilled honey. Go say hi and bring him in. We have a few things to do inside to get things ready,” Belinda says.

Sheila doesn’t need to be told twice, she jumps from the car and he stands up, almost at attention. She slows down. “Everything ok? Nice shirt.” She says calmly even though her insides are bubbling over.

“You look fabulous. Like an angel floating on a purple cloud.” He says before he realizes that his mouth said what his mind was thinking, she is standing in front of him.

“Come, we have things to prepare before we open. People will be arriving soon. Smart of you to park inside the lot. We are expecting the street to be full and we only put the minimum amount of spots here required by the town, and half of them are for the handicapped.” She puts out her hand and he takes her hand happily in his. They walk inside together.

The bright colors are what first pull you in, then he realizes something, “What is scented here? I smell lilacs, don’t I?” he asks.

“We have the scent blowing in the vent system but it is artificial because we don’t want people to get sick who have real allergies. However, we also were careful to find a scent derived from real things so people aren’t inhaling a bunch of chemicals. FDA approved and everything.” She gives him a guided tour of each floor. How there are some activities that require adult supervision and some that require none. Each floor is a new color scheme based on the flowers they picked for that floor. The biggest attraction, he sees is the two-story slide. It will take the children down from one floor to the next with a swirl and land right in the middle of the main floor which has a grass-like surface to land as a floor. The slide itself looks like a stem of a flower and the ceiling above them is painted like the underside of a flower.

There is an indoor climbing area that will be opened to the outside climbing area today to allow the kids to go in and out as they please. They designed an app that everyone who comes in should download on their phones because they will be able to watch their child and follow them as long as they wear the special bracelets which connect parent and child. Every safety precaution has been built in. Chief helped out a lot and so did his friend at the police force. This is truly a safe community park. Some say the safety features were over the top but Belinda and Sheila wanted people to come here and be able to relax not worry. No more worry on this land. If someone doesn’t want to use the app, they don’t have to, but it is there to use.

“What is this room? I think it’s my favorite,” Archer says.

“This is the bud room. For toddlers to play. See the mini slide over there and the swinging ropes that are only two inches off the ground? This was Mica’s idea. He says it’s the new life we were talking about. Oh, hurry, almost time.” She grabs his hand and runs through the building to the middle where Mica and Belinda are standing at the bottom of the big slide. The sunroof is shining down on them. Sheila takes a picture. You couldn’t have planned for better moment.

From behind the slide out comes her grandfather, Sheila gasps and grabs hold of Archer’s arm. He pats her hand with his other hand and then leaves it there for support.

From behind another large flower comes a voice, “Who here gives this woman away in holy matrimony?” Sheila looks over and sees the Chief there smiling as large as can be.

“I do,” her grandfather says proudly.



Belinda is looking around, and now she has her hand on her mouth as Mica slips a ring on her finger, the same finger her mom wore hers on, the left hand pointer finger. Sheila sees her grandfather walk over to them and hold on to her mother a little tighter. He appreciates the gesture that Mica is doing. Sheila wants to scream but she can’t find her voice. Instead she snaps picture after picture along with captions as to who is doing what. When Belinda jumps into Mica’s arms everyone begins to clap. And by everyone Sheila realizes that Mica had this all set up. Emily and Billy come out to greet them, with hugs and tears, Belinda’s co-workers from Mica’s office, the jeweler who Sheila now recognizes and many of their closer neighborhood friends. She keeps snapping pictures, tears running down her face.

Behind her Archer says, “Cute, but not original.” Sheila should be incensed by what he said but then she realizes his arms are around her and he is pulling her back so that her back is against his chest, she can hear his heart beating as fast as hers is now. For that, she quickly forgives him. He is as nervous or excited as she is.

Belinda finally turns around to see her daughter and she smiles the largest smile Sheila has seen on her in all of her life. Love; that is what she wanted for both of them to find. Love and life and lots of it.

“Go” Archer whispers as he releases her. Sheila runs to her mother’s arms.

“Grandpa has to leave now. Go say goodbye ok.” Belinda asks.

“No, Uncle Raymond told me not to anymore,” she says. Belinda nods and turns back to Mica and her guests. “I hate to ruin this moment with business but we have a party to set up people.” Everyone laughs

The group gets busy with setting up all the last-minute things and making sure the tickets and bracelets are all ready for their guests. Sheila looks outside and gasps loudly this time, “Archer, look outside,” she whispers because she doesn’t have a voice for what she sees.

Everyone who has come by to be part of opening day has brought a flower, they are tying them to the fence all around the property, then getting in line. Happy tears run down her face and Archer is there again with his arms around her holding her tightly to him.

The inside of the building has become quiet, everyone is looking out a window and seeing what is going on, happy tears are shed all around. “Ok people, let’s open these doors, man your station!” Belinda calls.

Belinda and Mica walk outside, Sheila follows them and she pulls Archer with her, she needs his strength. “Welcome to Lilac Gardens. We may take a moment or two to check everyone in properly, but remember, this is for your own safety. We hope to do this as smoothly as possible.” Belinda says and with that, she uses a large scissors and cuts the lilac colored ribbon.

Before the first group of people are let in, a large green pick-up truck pulls in front of the building. Belinda recognizes the woman and man standing on top of the truck’s bed. Max’s sister and brother in law. Max’s sister holds up a bull horn again and says, “This is the crap you made with my brother’s money? Damn shame you know. Flowers wilt and die, especially in the heat.” Emphasizing the words die and heat.



No one has a chance to respond to her because the crowd did that for them. People started pushing the truck and rocking it from side to side. Sheila sees it before the others and she screams, "GUN!!" Everyone stops and sees that Max's sister is aiming right at her.

"Shut up you delinquent, you were supposed to be in school!" the gun still pointing right at her. Archer steps in front of her and pushes her back behind him, Mica does the same to Belinda; then the crowd around them starts to do the same. Each person takes their children and puts them behind them but backs up towards the Lilac Garden's front door. There are now twenty people standing in front of Max's sister daring her to shoot. Then there are forty and then who knows how many. One by one the parents and children are slipping inside the building daring her to do anything to ruin the day. The chief, Emily and Billy are signing everyone in. Once inside they forget the ordeal outside and assume their roll of having fun today. They prove to these people that they will continue to live and love. Finally, the sirens and Max's sister has nowhere to go because while they were watching the people file into the park, they weren't watching the cars, people pulled up close to the truck so the truck has no place to go without ramming through them.

When the police take them away, the driver, the sister and her husband, then the cars move away and the drivers come inside to join their families.

Belinda, Mica, Sheila and Archer are still standing outside the door as the last of the drivers come in to join their families. No one is talking. Behind them a voice says, "Come, watch the magic inside, an amazing thing is going on inside here." They all turn to see the chief and they follow him inside. Sheila takes one look back at the truck that hasn't been towed yet. Archer stands in her way and lifts her chin to face him and not the outside. "The magic is inside." He points to her heart and she smiles and turns to go inside to see the activities.

All around them they see laughter and life. Fathers catching children at the end of slides, siblings helping siblings climb from the outside climbing tree to the inside, smiles are all around. They are most likely passed capacity right now but no one is complaining, not a single parent, not a single child. Not even the fire chief.

Something tugs at Sheila's skirt, she looks down and sees a small boy; she squats down to see him. "Hello," she says.

"Mommy says you made this," he says.

"Yes, I helped, do you like playing with flowers?" she says.

The boy flings his arms around her neck and kisses her all over her cheeks. "I have allergies, I can't play at the outside park with real flowers." With that, he runs back to his mother who smiles and waves. Sheila waves back.

The whole day continues like this. Every so often a hug or a kiss from a child. Sheila is humbled by each one. At one point the kids asked her to join them outside and she does, they play catch, she runs and chases them around. When they found out Archer is a real fireman, he takes many of them on his shoulder for a ride and teaches the older ones how to successfully climb the ropes.

As the sun begins to set, the lights around the garden come on to the sound of many oos and ahhs, the bright colored lights are there the whole night, not because the park will be open all night, but in case someone thinks it is, they will be seen. They are all pointed down into the park

Copyright © 2019 by (CAA)

All rights reserved. Except for the use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereinafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the written permission of the author or illustrator directly.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

For questions and comments about the quality of this book, please contact us at dailyreader.caa@gmail.com



so it won't bother any of the neighbor's homes. The fence is high so no small child will be climbing in or out. The video cameras are wired directly to the police emergency line. But they decided precautions will be taken at all times despite that. The Berchams told them to put a monitor in their house so they can keep an eye on things after hours. Every immediate neighbor has ensured them that they will keep a watchful eye to make sure Lilac Gardens stays bright and always full of life.

“Ladies and gentlemen and children all around Lilac Gardens. Closing time is here. We hope you enjoyed your time here. Please take a brochure on your way out to get the official hours and a schedule of upcoming events.” Belinda’s message had been pre-recorded and for good reason, she certainly doesn’t have much voice left tonight.

With the last patron gone, Emily and Billy walk up to Archer and Sheila. “Hell of a day to be introduced to everyone. Welcome.” Billy puts out his hand. Sheila swallows a tear because for Billy, that is as good of an approval as she and Archer are going to get.

“The pleasure has been all mine. Next time I say we go eat dinner together at the all you can eat sundae place on Franklin Boulevard,” Archer says.

“Now that’s my kind of dinner. I’m in, Emily?” Billy smiles.

“Wherever you take me love, wherever you take me.” She stands on her tip toes and kisses his cheek. They say goodbye to Ms. B and Mica and leave holding hands.

Mica and Belinda have closed up all over except for the front door. The four of them walk out. “Have her home before midnight even though spring break starts tomorrow,” Mica says sternly to Archer, realizing that he came in his own car, and selfishly because he’d like some private time with his fiancé that he hasn’t had since proposing.

Archer smiles and leads Sheila to his car. They drive in silence for about an hour, Sheila has no idea where he is taking her. He pulls off the road to a parking lot and pulls up to the edge of the parking lot near a line of other cars. Sheila looks at him suspiciously, is he expecting her to do something with him in this car?

Archer gets out of the car and opens her door, he gives her his hand and silently they walk along a path to an opening where the moon shines brilliantly through the trees every night, there are loveseat benches all around this clearing. Each one has an older couple sitting there holding hands.

He guides her over to the only one left with no one sitting there yet and wipes it off for her to sit down. She sits down and he sits next to her and puts his arm around her shoulders. “Take a deep breath,” he says.

Sheila takes a deep breath and quickly looks at him. “Lilacs?”

“Yes, real ones my dear. Real lilacs with a real moonlight glow all around. A garden of peace after your day. I thought this would be the best place to take you,” he whispers, “the couple to our left has been coming here for twenty years, imagine that, the one across from us, fifteen. Once a week, sometimes more.”

Her eyes follow his conversation, her heart beats slower as she relaxes with all these people, Sheila curls up her legs to one side and leans into Archer, she puts one hand around his



chest and her head leaning into the crook of his arm watching the other people who are simply enjoying the moment with someone they love. His arm comes down around her.

“I don’t have diamond rings or fancy cars, probably never will, but this, this Sheila is what I can give you, any time you want. Peace and moonlight,” he says and leans over to kiss the top of her head.

Sheila finds herself breathing slower, almost sleeplike. She takes another deep breath to hold in all of this. She exhales and says, “Lilac gardens are all I ever need.” She purrs into his chest. “And you,” she whispers.

Copyright © 2019 by (CAA)

All rights reserved. Except for the use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereinafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the written permission of the author or illustrator directly.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

For questions and comments about the quality of this book, please contact us at dailyreader.caa@gmail.com