

Despite the fact that it was early October, the trees still had most of their leaves - something that Grace was very much looking forward to taking pictures of - and that meant that the forest road was very dark. Even with the high beams on, it was difficult for Grace to see from one turn to the next, and at one point, she nearly went off in the wrong direction altogether.

When they finally went past a sign that read *Lookout Point Bungalow Retreat, 1 mile*, Grace breathed a sigh of relief and patted her partner's knee.

"Helen, love. We're almost there."

Helen Thomas harrumphed and sat up straight in the passenger seat. She adjusted her glasses and looked out of the windshield - and then furrowed her brow.

"Why are we only going twenty miles an hour?" she said and looked at Grace.

"It's dark," Grace said, gripping the steering wheel so hard that Helen was worried it might break in two.

"It's not that dark. And it's not like we haven't been here before... and do you really have to sit like that?"

Grace had the seat at the front lock, sitting so far forward that her face was almost on top of the steering wheel. The seat belt was strained to its limit and, by the look of it, so was Grace's bosom where the belt came down across it.

"I couldn't reach the pedals otherwise. And besides, I had to take out my contacts. They were bothering me," Grace said and scrunched up her face, concentrating hard on staying on the road.

"So we've driven through four miles of dense forest and 1500 feet up the side of a mountain without you wearing your contacts? God help us, woman."

"Well, we're here, so I guess she did," Grace said as they turned into a parking lot at the top of the forest road.

"The reception is over there," Helen said and pointed through the windshield.

"That's funny... wasn't it in the next bungalow the last time we were here?"

"No."

"I'm sure it was."

"No. I'll bet you a kiss it wasn't," Helen said and unbuckled her seat belt.

The SUV rolled across the parking lot and stopped in front of one of the fifteen bungalows that made up the retreat. A marquee above the entrance confirmed in hand-carved letters that they had indeed arrived at the 'Lookout Point Bungalow Retreat'.

Two advertising stands had been placed on the porch on either side of the door, one with postcards and one with maps of the area, and next to those was a small, round bucket filled to the brim with autumn-colored umbrellas.

The lights were on inside and Helen could see a young woman standing behind a counter, looking bored.

"I think we should ask the desk clerk if they moved it," Grace said and put her hand on the little lever for the door.

"They didn't," Helen said vehemently, earning herself a chuckle.

"Let's ask," Grace said, got out of the SUV and walked around the front so she could get to the passenger side door. She opened it and helped Helen step out of the large vehicle.

"Are you all right, love? You're a little pale," Grace said and caressed Helen's cheek.

"You're sure you can see that without your contacts?"

"Well, I'm not completely blind, you know."

"I'm just a bit tired, that's all. Come on, let's get the check-in over and done with so I can lie down in a soft bed... and cuddle up to a soft woman," Helen said and took Grace's hand in her own.

"Ohhh, you," Grace said and took Helen by the elbow, helping her walk safely across the wet, slippery gravel.

"Good evening," the desk clerk said as Helen and Grace walked through the door.

"Good evening, we have reservations for Helen Thomas and Grace Henderson," Grace said and put the paperwork on the counter.

"Thank you. Please wait," the young woman said and started tapping on the keyboard.

"I think I'll go back outside and find a couple of pretty postcards," Grace said and left the shop.

"All right. Find a good one."

While she was waiting for the computer to process their reservations, Helen studied the young woman behind the desk. She was in her early twenties with reddish hair and greenish eyes, and all in all, she was a pretty young woman.

'Not as pretty as Grace, though,' Helen said and chuckled quietly to herself as her thoughts began to revolve around her partner.

Grace Henderson had just turned 64, but in Helen's eyes, she was still the most beautiful woman around. Her hair may have turned gray and the crow's feet around her emerald green eyes may have become deeper, but her spirit was still as strong as ever. Grace had always been petite, but in the four years since she retired from teaching, her figure and face had begun to fill out - a subject that Helen, a retired Doctor, was reluctant to bring up because of the predictable endings to the discussions.

When she realized that she had been spoken to, Helen turned back and smiled at the desk clerk.

"I'm sorry?"

"Your bungalow is ready, Miss Thomas," the desk clerk said and handed Helen the documents.

"Thank you. Which of them is it... oh, #12," Helen said and checked the paperwork.

"Yes, it's #12. Do you need directions?"

"No, no, we've been here many times before. We're celebrating our thirty-fifth wedding anniversary."

"Oh, wow! Congratulations!" the young woman said, smiling broadly.

"Thank you. We came here for our honeymoon back in '75, and we enjoyed it so much that we decided to come back every five years."

"That's so neat!"

"Neat? I suppose it is," Helen said with a laugh.

"What's so funny?" Grace said as she walked back into the shop, holding a small stack of postcards.

"I was just telling... I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name?" Helen said, turning back to the clerk.

"Ally, Miss Thomas."

"I was just telling Ally about our anniversary."

"It's our thirty-fifth," Grace said and put the postcards and a handful of coins on the counter. Ally scooped up the money and put it into an old-fashioned cash register, and then put the postcards into a paper bag.

"Miss Thomas told me. Congratulations."

"Thank you, Ally. Well, we better get going. Oh... by the way, I could have sworn that the reception was in the next bungalow the last time we were here...?"

"Well, that's right, it was in the next bungalow up until a month ago. It's being renovated right now. A water pipe burst and flooded everything. We had to get the entire floor fixed."

Grace turned towards Helen and flashed her a simple, but effective, smirk.

After they had pulled up in front of bungalow #12, Grace put the shifter in Park and turned off the engine. Grinning cheekily, she turned toward her partner.

"Told you it was in the next bungalow the last time we were here," she said and clawed Helen's thigh.

"I guess I owe you a kiss. I coulda sworn it wasn't, though. Whatever," Helen said and opened the door.

Grace laughed and got out of the SUV. She quickly helped Helen out of the car and then went over to unlock the door to the bungalow.

"I'm glad to see it still looks the same... I love this place. There are so many good memories here," Helen said, leaning against the SUV. She took a very deep breath, filling her lungs with the rich forest air, and then exhaled slowly.

"Ahhhhhh... the air is still the same, too. We'll never have air like this in the city," she continued.

"That's a fact," Grace said and opened the rear end of the SUV. She picked up both their travel bags and carried them over to the bungalow.

As she watched Grace carry the bags, Helen furrowed her brows and looked down.

"Honey, I'm sorry that you have to do all the hard work. I know you must be dead tired, too. Believe me, if I could help you, I would," she said quietly.

"Helen, how many times do I have to tell you... don't worry about it. It's only been a month since your accident and you've only been out of hospital for two weeks. You need to rest," Grace said as she came back out to the SUV.

"Still..."

"Besides, I've always been stronger than you, so even if you were on top form, I'd still be carryin' the luggage," Grace said, adding a cheeky nose crinkle.

"Now, you could be right about that, actually."

After closing the hatchback and locking the doors, Grace hooked her arm inside Helen's and started walking towards the bungalow.

"I'm just glad you're here with me. Happy thirty-fifth anniversary," Grace said as they crossed the threshold to the bungalow. She stood up on tip-toes and gave her partner a loving kiss.

"Happy anniversary, love. Thirty-five years... Can you believe it?" Helen said and caressed Grace's cheek.

"Yes, I can."

"The world has changed so much... so have we for that matter," Helen said and ran her fingers through Grace's pale gray hair.

"Well, true, you're 67 and not 32... and your hair has turned gray... but your head and your heart haven't changed a bit. Nor has my love for you," Grace whispered and kissed Helen again.

"Let's unpack tomorrow. I'm so tired I could sleep standing up," Helen said, stifling a yawn.

"That's the best idea I've heard for years."

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After getting a good night's sleep, Grace rolled over onto her back and yawned widely. She rubbed her eyes and then looked at how her partner was doing on the other side of the double bed. Helen seemed to be sleeping soundly now, but Grace knew that the pain in her legs had forced her up twice during the night.

Grace sighed and started thinking about that fateful evening one month ago when she had received the phone call nobody wants to get - from the police telling her that Helen had been the victim of a hit-and-run.

Helen's injuries hadn't been life-threatening, but she had been roughed up so badly that the hospital had decided to keep her for observation for two full weeks.

Grace sighed again and looked around the smallish bedroom to chase away the negative thoughts. Even though the bungalows had been renovated twice in the intervening thirty-five years, they hadn't changed too much since the first time Helen and Grace had stepped over the threshold.

The kitchen appliances and the electronic gizmos were all new, but the unique atmosphere of the house remained. Warm and cozy, the bungalow was everything Grace wanted from a weekend retreat, and if it had been possible to buy one of them for personal use, they would have.

During the night, Grace had noticed that it had rained heavily, but now, the first rays of the morning sun peeked through the curtains, signaling that the day would be perfect for the things they had planned. She smiled broadly and turned her head to look at Helen's sleeping form.

The tall woman was on her right, facing away from Grace. She was snoring lightly, but Grace knew that to be a good sign. An old memory flashed through Grace's mind and she had to chuckle.

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They had seen each other several times in the lobby of the building they both used to live in, but they hadn't spoken two words to each other until they had met at a birthday party of a mutual friend in June, 1972. The spark had been immediate and undeniable, and soon, one thing led to the next.

"I snore," Helen had said on their second ever date. Back then, the tall, graceful, black-haired woman with the ice blue eyes and the regal cheekbones had been a 29-year old medical student who had been so confident in her abilities that she had already made room on her mantelpiece for the Nobel Prize in Medicine.

"Doesn't bother me at all," the 26-year old Grace had replied. She had only just begun teaching elementary school, and her spunky attitude and youthful features had quickly made her very popular among her fellow - male - teachers. They seemed to like her perky nose, her short, honey-blonde hair and her emerald green eyes, and she always had a hard time making them understand that she just wasn't interested in their advances.

"It doesn't?" Helen had said.

"Nope. I have a few quirks of my own."

"Well, actually, snoring isn't a quirk but a medical condition. It's a vibration of the soft palate and the uvula caused by breathing through the mouth instead of using the..."

"So you're telling me you're a mouth-breather?" Grace had said, cutting off the doctor-in-training's stream of words.

"Cute. Very cute," Helen had said, and even though her words had a sharp edge to them, her eyes had sparkled.

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Grace chuckled again and looked at her partner.

Three years later, we tied the knot. And we've never looked back since,' she thought.

Grace started thinking about the many, many important moments they had shared - like the trip to Paris to celebrate Helen's 40th birthday. That had been the most extravagant and romantic weekend of Grace's life, with dinner at sunset in a small restaurant next to the Eiffel Tower and champagne at midnight in a picturesque and cozy *pension* .

When Grace started thinking about what had happened post-nightcap, she had to clamp her hand over her mouth so she wouldn't guffaw so loudly that she'd wake up Helen.

The next morning, after a night of wild and uninhibited love-making, they had gone downstairs to check out of the pension like they were supposed to. The receptionist had calmly showed them a formal complaint from a nun who had been staying in the room next to Helen and Grace. It turned out that the nun had been down to the night porter three times, each time complaining vociferously over the 'lewd and ungodly noises coming from her neighbors.' The last time, she'd had her suitcase with her, demanding her money back.

The complaint had been forgotten about when Helen had quietly slipped the receptionist a few Francs, but the fact remained that it was definitely an incident that Grace looked back upon with equal measures of embarrassment and fondness.

'Helen always was something else in bed,' Grace thought and grinned cheekily.

Even though Grace didn't want to think about it, her thoughts returned to Helen's accident and the aftermath... and to the long, lonely night she had spent at the hospital, desperately waiting for news in a cold, sterile, impersonal ward populated by nurses and doctors who seemed to take pride in ignoring her.

Grace wasn't afraid to admit that the long hours sitting on a hard plastic chair without being told anything about her wife's condition - except that she was alive - had taken a lot out of her, mentally speaking. It had been a wake-up call and it had certainly made the two of them realize how little it took to snuff out the flame of life.

Movement next to her made Grace snap out of the dark thoughts, and she turned over onto her right side so she was ready to give her partner a proper good morning kiss.

Helen rolled over onto her back and let out a sound that was a mixture of a yawn and a moan. She rubbed her eyes and then scratched her cheek. She opened her eyes and looked directly into Grace's green orbs.

"Good morning, love," Grace whispered and placed a tender kiss on Helen's lips.

"Morning."

"Sleep well?"

"Fairly well. I had to get up a couple of times during the night, but from four o'clock or so, I've slept great."

"Glad to hear it. We've got a long day ahead of us. Happy anniversary," Grace said and leaned in so she could kiss Helen again.

"Happy anniversary, hon," Helen said, once again yawning widely.

Grace swung her legs over her side of the bed and searched for her slippers with her feet. With a bit of an effort, she got off the double bed and took her bathrobe that was hanging over the back of a chair.

As she reached for it, a stinging pain flashed through her back, and she had to press a hand against it to make the pain go away.

"Damn," she said quietly, but Helen's sharp hearing picked it up anyway.

"Your back?"

"Yeah. This mattress is softer than our own. It's been a while since my back has given me this much grief. Damn old bones," Grace said and massaged her back.

"Well, your old bones look pretty good from over here," Helen said with a smile, observing Grace's round figure that was presently hidden by an oversized nightgown.

"Thanks, but you're not wearing your glasses, dear. Listen, stay in bed for now, I'll fix us some breakfast. I'll call you when it's done," Grace said as she put on the bathrobe and walked over to stand on Helen's side of the bed. She picked up Helen's hand and placed a small kiss on the older woman's knuckles.

"Sounds good, hon. I think I could use another wink or two," Helen said and yawned again. Grace chuckled and gave Helen's hand a little squeeze.

Softly shutting the bedroom door behind her, Grace tied a neat knot on the belt of the bathrobe and ventured out into the narrow hallway connecting the rooms.

After checking out the full-size kitchen, she went into the bathroom to answer nature's call and to get her medicine bag.

A few minutes later, Grace shuffled into the kitchen and put her medicine bag down on the kitchen table. She started going through all the cupboards to find a glass, and when she finally did, it was so dusty that she needed to wash it off before she could use it.

After filling it with cold water, she put it down on the table and opened her medicine bag. She took out her pill dispenser and poured a small hill of pills out onto the table - one for her high blood pressure, one for her irregular heartbeat and two for additional vitamins.

She sighed and shook her head. Grimacing, she took the first pill and chased it down with a large swig of water.

Once she had downed the entire glass of water, Grace started setting the breakfast table. She found two mugs and two spoons, filled the electric kettle with water and turned it on - then she reached into a plastic bag and took out a jar with their favorite brand of instant coffee and put it on the table.

While the electric kettle was humming, Grace shuffled into the living room and picked up the first of their two travel bags that she had dumped on the floor the night before.

Apart from their jammies, they hadn't bothered to unpack anything else, so Grace started removing the things they would need for the day's trip - their hiking boots, their gloves and their matching knitted hats.

The other bag held their indoor clothes and Grace's brand new digital camera, and when she found the small leather carrier pouch, she opened it at once and took out the camera. Smiling broadly, she held the expensive electronic equipment up to her eye and pretended to take a picture.

When she put it away, she noticed that her nose had left a smear-mark on the small display at the back of the camera. She wiped it off with her sleeve, wondering why they had put it exactly where people would have their noses.

Grace put the camera back into its leather pouch and continued emptying the travel bag - suddenly she stopped, thinking she had heard something. She stood up straight and looked around. The venetian blinds on all the windows were closed, so she couldn't see if anything or anyone was outside, and she furrowed her brow.

'Hon?'' Helen said again, her voice muffled by the bedroom door.

To Grace's ears, Helen sounded like she was in pain, so she spun around and quickly walked back through the narrow hallway. She opened the bedroom door with a whoosh and peeked inside.

Helen sat on the edge of the bed, holding on to the nightstand for support. Her face was pale and drawn, and it was clear she was in pain.

"Your legs?" Grace said and wrung her hands.

Helen bared her teeth and nodded.

"I'll get your painkillers," Grace said and hurried back out into the kitchen to get her medicine bag. A few moments later, Grace returned, carrying a glass of water and one pill.

"Two. I need two," Helen said in a strained voice.

"Love, it's morphine, you know how addictive it is. The doctor said you could only have one," Grace said and handed Helen the pill and the glass of water.

"Screw the doctor," Helen said after downing the first pill.

"Helen! What would your old professor Fields say if he heard you speak like that?"

"He taught me that phrase..." Helen said, shaking her head slowly.

Grace pulled a chair towards the bed and placed it right next to Helen.

"It's the mattress. It's too soft for us, old girl. Come on, lean on me. Once you get into the chair, it'll be better... I promise," Grace said and moved over to stand in front of her partner.

"All right... but please take care of your back," Helen said and raised her arms so Grace could get a grip around her chest.

Working together, they were able to get Helen safely into the chair without further drama. Once she was there, she sighed deeply and looked down, unable to hold Grace's look.

"Come on, love, it's just a bump in the road. You'll be as good as new in a little while," Grace said and caressed Helen's cheek. When Helen didn't reply, Grace leaned down and claimed her partner's lips.

"Right?" Grace said with a smile once they separated.

"I s'pose. But it still sucks."

"Good Lord, where did you learn such language? I think you're watching too many daytime talk shows," Grace said with a laugh.

Helen chuckled quietly and put out her hand. Grace took it at once and gave it a thorough squeeze.

"I have a great idea. How about breakfast in bed, huh? ...Or at least in the bedroom. We did that on our honeymoon, remember?"

"Well..."

"That's a deal, then. I saw a tray and a toaster in one of the cupboards. I've already had the electric kettle on, but I guess I need to do that again. Yep, I'll fix us some toasts and coffee and then I'll serve it in here. Wouldn't that be fun?"

"It would, actually," Helen said and returned the squeeze from before.

Ten minutes later, Grace carried a tray into the bedroom and put it down on the bed.

"How do you feel now?" she said as she poured a spoonful of instant coffee into one of the mugs and added the hot water from the electric kettle.

"Better. I guess I didn't need the second morphine pill after all."

"Good. Here's your coffee. Careful, it's hot."

"Thanks, hon."

After stirring thoroughly, Helen took a small sip to test the quality of the coffee.

"It's great," she said, smiling.

"It still tasted better when we could put some sugar into it," Grace muttered under her breath.

"Well, sugar is not good for us, hon."

"Oh, I know. You've told me a thousand and one times," Grace said and sat down on the edge of the bed. She took one of the two slices of toast she had made and put a very thin layer of margarine on it. After putting the butter knife away, she held up three small jars of jam.

"Strawberry, raspberry or blackberry?"

"Mmmmm... blackberry, please."

"Comin' right up," Grace said and put a small amount of jam onto the toast. With a beaming smile, she handed the plate to Helen who immediately took a large bite out of the bread.

"Thanks, hon. You know, there's one thing I'm grateful for... no, actually, two things," Helen said after she had chewed on and swallowed the bite.

"What's that?"

"One, that we're here. For a while, I really doubted that I'd be... you know, able to come up here."

"I'm certainly grateful for that, too," Grace said solemnly.

"And two, I'm grateful that I still have all my teeth. This crust is damn hard!" Helen said with a twinkle in her eye.

"Oh, you! If I didn't love you as much as I do, I'd feel insulted!" Grace chirped and waved her hand in Helen's direction.

"I love you, too, hon."

After getting dressed - and vacuuming the bed to get rid of the crumbs from the breakfast - Grace walked into the living room to find their maps so they could plan the day's hike.

She found their trusty, old map in one of the travel bags, removed a few items from the large, shiny hardwood coffee table and then spread out the map on the table top. Sitting down on the couch, she started looking at the map. Almost at once, she started blinking and scrunching up her eyes, wondering why she couldn't read the map - then she remembered that she still wasn't wearing her contacts.

"Helen?" she said loudly.

"Yeah?" Helen replied from the kitchen where she was doing the dishes.

"Have you seen the little plastic container with my contacts?"

"No...?" Helen said and came out into the narrow hallway, wiping down one of the mugs with a tea towel.

"Where did I put it... Hmmm," Grace said, tapping an index finger on her lips.

"Where did you use them last?"

"Out in the car."

"Maybe they're out there, then," Helen said and put the mug into the cupboard. She dried her hands on the tea towel and hung it on a hook.

"Hmmm, no. I... duh!" Grace said, slapping her forehead.

"What?"

"I put it in my jacket pocket," Grace said and got up from the couch.

Grace soon returned fully equipped and sat down next to Helen on the couch.

"Honey, I don't think I'll be able to do the entire round trip today. The complete trek is nearly four miles long," Helen said and put her hand on Grace's thigh.

"I'm way ahead of you. Look, if we go the wrong way up... start at the ending, so to speak, Hurry Down Falls is only five or six hundred yards up the trail," Grace said and used her finger to trace the route she was suggesting.

"Oh, that's a great idea. I know how much you love the Falls. I should be able to do that."

"Good. I'm hoping I'll be able to take a lot of pictures up there. The weather is certainly perfect for it."

"Have you tried the new camera yet?"

"No, but I can hardly wait."

"Well, come on, then. Let's try it right now."

"Oh, I... Well, OK. Why not," Grace said and got up from the couch. She went over to a small table and took the leather pouch containing the camera.

As she sat down, she took the camera out of the pouch and turned it on.

"You know, I still think it's weird that we have to turn on the camera before we can use it. What if something important or exciting happens when the camera is off? I mean, we can't freeze-frame the world while we're waiting for the camera to heat up, can we?"

"Come on, take a picture of me now," Helen said and fixed her hair. She leaned back in the couch and put her arm on top of the backrest.

"Hang on," Grace said and moved the camera up to her face.

"Hon, you don't need to do that anymore, it's not like your old 35mm. Use the display on the back to find the image and... click."

"Uh, OK. I have you now. Just click?"

"That's right. Cheeeeeese," Helen said and smiled broadly.

Grace pressed the small button and the flash went off, doing its best to light up the entire living room.

Helen chuckled and lifted her glasses to rub her eyes. She leaned forward and reached for the camera.

"How did it turn out? Let me see..."

"Uh, not particularly well," Grace said and handed Helen the camera.

"Well, it's me all right. Too bad my glasses reflect the flash so much... I look like I'm wearing mirror shades," Helen said and began to laugh.

"I think you look cool, actually. Like a movie star," Grace said, cheekily poking Helen in the side.

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CHAPTER 2

Fifteen minutes later, Grace and Helen stepped out into the clear and decidedly chilly autumn air. They were both wearing hiking boots, lined jeans, leather gloves and down jackets - Grace's was green, Helen's was blue.

Grace looked up at the cobalt blue sky and took a deep breath. She released it slowly and performed a 360-degree turn in the middle of the parking lot to take in all the sights.

The Lookout Point Bungalow Retreat was located a third of the way up the west side of the 4700-foot Mount Reginald. The Lookout Point itself was an enormous niche carved into the side of the mountain, created in the late 19th century by local entrepreneurs. Below it, the dense forest stretched out for miles and miles on either side, nearly going out to the horizon. In several places, waterfalls streamed down the side of Mount Reginald, pooling at the base and forming the Ogilee river.

"Wonderful. Now we're really here," Grace said and put her camera around her neck.

As they started walking towards the trail that would eventually take them up to the Hurry Down Falls, Grace put on a fluorescent green knitted hat to protect her ears from the cold.

"Oh, you can't be serious about wearing that thing...?" Helen said and tried to shield her eyes from the glare.

"You bet I can," Grace said, reached into her pocket and produced a similar hat for Helen - a blue one.

"Oh, no. No, no, no," Helen said and shook her head.

"It's already cold here. And you know how windy it can get out at the Falls. Please?"

"Oh... all right," Helen said and put on the blue hat.

A few minutes later, they left the gravelly parking lot behind and walked onto a trail that snaked its way through the forest. Grace was very obviously enjoying herself, smiling broadly and taking picture after picture of the trees, the woodchip-covered path and Helen.

"Hon, did you remember to bring the spare memory card? The way you're snapping, the first one will be full pretty soon," Helen said and adjusted her knitted hat so it wouldn't impede her vision.

"Yes, I have it in my pocket. Oh! Look at that spider's web over there. Look at how the morning dew is highlighting the structure of the web," Grace said and left the path. She walked in between the trees, her footsteps nearly silent on the thick layer of leaves on the forest floor.

She lined up to get the best angle and then held her breath as she squeezed the little button. When she looked at the display, she furrowed her brow.

"Love, I need your help."

"Sure," Helen said and walked in Grace's foot prints over to the web.

"What's wrong?" she said once she was there.

"Look, I can't get it. It's almost like the spider's web is too delicate for the camera... or something," Grace said and showed Helen the poor image on the small display.

"I think we need to adjust the zoom. OK, try again," Helen said after going through the menu.

Grace held her breath again and snapped another picture - this time it came out just right.

"Great! I'm beginning to like this camera," Grace said. Moving quickly, she stood up on tip-toes and placed a kiss on Helen's lips.

"Don't forget to reset the zoom. Otherwise you're going to get a very-very-very close-up of your next motif," Helen said as she walked back to the path.

"Oh, look, there's a fallen tree. I don't recall that from last time," Grace said and pointed at a huge tree trunk twenty yards off the trail. It had obviously not been a clean break as a large portion of the trunk was still connected to the stump, creating a natural shelter in the triangular area between the trunk and the ground.

"Well, it's a living forest. Maybe they had a storm at one point."

"Maybe."

They walked on for a bit, content in each other's company and enjoying the forest's distinctly autumnal feel. Some of the trees they went past still had greenish leaves, but most of them were covered by foliage in all shades of yellow, red and brown - here and there, a leaf fell from a tree, fluttering silently down to the ground.

"Helen, would you mind taking a picture of me? There's a very picturesque tree over there," Grace said and held out the camera.

"No problem. That one?" Helen said, pointing at a low tree with leaves as red as blood.

"Yes," Grace said and got off the trail. As she reached a thick layer of loose leaves, she had to lift up her knees in order to wade through it.

"Love, don't come in here. It'll be too hard for you to get over here."

"Yeah, I noticed. Thanks. Time for the zoom again, I think," Helen said and prepared to take the shot.

She held the camera ready but then scrunched up her face.

"Hon, would you mind taking off that fluorescent green hat-thing you're wearing. It clashes with the colors of the tree."

"Oh... all right," Grace said and took off the knitted hat. She ran her fingers through her hair to make sure it looked good.

"Much better. Say cheese."

"Cheese!"

The exact same moment Helen took the picture, the trees shifted in the faint breeze, allowing a sunbeam to shine through the crowns and illuminate Grace's hair. The unexpected light gave it the same honey-blond nuance it'd had when she was younger, and Helen's eyes grew wide when she looked at the image on the back of the camera.

When she looked up at Grace, the sunbeam was already gone, restoring Grace's hair to the shade of pale gray it had been for the last few years. Helen chuckled and shook her head.

"What?" Grace said, putting her hat back on.

"Nothing. I'll show you later. Hey, try to scoop up a big handful of leaves. I want to see if I can take an action-shot of you," Helen said and pointed at the thick layer of loose leaves.

"Uh, OK...?" Grace said and grabbed a large handful of leaves.

"Now throw 'em up in the air."

Grace did as instructed and threw the leaves high in the air. A few moments later, yellow, red and brown leaves rained down upon her, some landing at her feet and some landing on top of her hat. Suddenly filled with childlike enthusiasm, she laughed out loud and threw some more leaves into the air.

Helen smiled broadly and took shot after shot of Grace playing with the leaves - one of them was a close-up where she was laughing, focusing intently on a group of red leaves to her immediate right.

"Perfect," Helen said to herself and held up her hands to let Grace know that she could stop.

"Did you get a good one?" Grace said as she was wading back through the thick layer of leaves.

"Oh, you better believe I did. One I think we should get printed," Helen said and showed Grace the image she was talking about.

"Oh... wow, that's great, Helen."

"Yeah. Come on, the Falls can't be far now," Helen said and put her arm around Grace's shoulder.

They were still more than one hundred yards away from the Hurry Down Falls when the characteristic roar of the water hurtling down the side of the mountain reached them. Almost imperceptibly, Grace and Helen picked up the pace, anxious to see if the impressive waterfall had changed in the five years since they had been there last.

Once they walked through the final bend of that section of the trail, Mount Reginald and the Hurry Down Falls came into full view - and the two landmarks were just as majestic and imposing as they had always been.

Originating from a river that ran on a plateau further up the side of Mount Reginald, the wide stream of water rushed over the edge and came crashing into a crystal clear lake ninety feet below, constantly sending an ice cold spray of tiny droplets into the air.

Like she always did, Grace felt very emotional when she saw the Falls, and she had to discreetly wipe a tear away with her glove. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, awed by the impressive sights.

"Helen, love... I've said it before and I'll say it again. There's something primordial about having me and you in a place such as this. I feel that we belong here. I don't know what it is... we just do," Grace said and hooked her arm inside Helen's as they walked up to stand at the edge of the lake.

"I know exactly what you mean," Helen said. She leaned down and placed a gentle kiss on the top of Grace's knitted hat.

"Mmmmyeah. I wish we had a waterfall back in our apartment," Grace said, sniggering.

"Well, I think I have a pretty good clue as to what our downstairs neighbor would say to that, hon."

"You're probably right."

"Anyway. Go on and take a few pictures. That's what we're here for, right?" Helen said, moving away slightly so Grace would have a perfect view of the waterfall.

"Yeah. Where do you think the best angle is? Down here looking up, or further up looking sideways onto the water...?"

"Well, why not try both? Just don't get too close to the spray itself, I'm not sure the camera would like that," Helen said and pointed at the thick spray hanging in the air at the point where the water was crashing into the lake.

"Oh... gotcha. OK, I'll start by taking a few from down here and then I'll hike a bit further up the trail and take some from the reverse angle," Grace said, the excitement clearly shining through in her voice.

"Hey, pretty soon you'll be an expert! Sounds like a good plan, hon. Um, while you do that, I'll be resting my legs down here, OK? There's a bench over by the hot drinks vendor, and I..."

"Oh, love, are you hurting?"

"A tiny bit, but it's all right. I'm afraid the hill up past the Falls is just too steep for me," Helen said, looking at the trail seemingly going straight up as it followed the terrain.

"I'll do it real quickly," Grace said, but Helen grabbed her shoulder.

"No, Grace, take your time. It's all right. I'll just have a cup of coffee or something. Take your time... please?"

"And you won't get bored?"

"Nope."

"All right. I won't be long," Grace said with a smile. She turned around and walked away from the edge of the lake and back towards the woodchip-covered path.

As she watched her partner move away, Helen let out a faint groan and hobbled over to the park bench in front of the drinks vendor. Sitting down with a bump, she took off her knitted hat and her gloves and ran her fingers through her hair. A few moments later, she started massaging her legs to try to ease the pain.

When that only had very little effect, she reached into her pocket and found her morphine pills. She stared at them for a little while, debating with herself whether she should take one or not - finally making up her mind, she took one of the pills out of the blister pack and put it into her mouth.

Ten minutes later, Grace came back down the hill, waving her hands at Helen.

Helen waved back, wearing a strained smile. The morphine still hadn't kicked in so she could hardly move from the bench, but she tried to keep up appearances so that Grace wouldn't suspect anything.

On her way over to the bench, Grace took a picture of Helen, and then looked down at the camera, furrowing her brow as she did so.

"Is something wrong?" Helen said.

"I'm not sure... there's a small, red dot on the display," Grace said and handed Helen the camera as she sat down next to her.

"Mmmm, I think that means that the memory card is getting full."

"Oh. Well, I got the other one right here," Grace said and took off her gloves. She unzipped her jacket, reached into her inside pocket and took out a small plastic bag with a memory card, identical to the one already in the camera.

"Do we need to turn off the camera while we change the card? I mean, I don't want to delete what I've already shot...?"

"I'm not sure," Helen said, her voice suddenly sounding strained.

"Love, what's wrong? Are... are you hurting so badly?"

Helen opened her mouth to speak, but she knew that the pained look on her face already told the story, so there wasn't any point in talking.

"Oh, you should have said something. Can you even get back on your own?" Grace said and got off the bench. She crouched down in front of Helen and gently put her hands on Helen's knees.

"I've taken another morphine pill. It should work shortly."

Now it was Grace's turn to look worried. She put her hand across her mouth and furrowed her brow.

"I know what you're going to say... please don't. I needed it," Helen said quietly.

Grace nodded and started looking around. When her eye caught the hot drinks vendor, she got an idea.

"Love, have you had a coffee yet?"

"No, I... I couldn't move once I had sat down."

"Do you want one now? I think we could use it. I definitely could."

"Well... how about a hot chocolate instead? It's been too long since I've had one of those," Helen said, managing a wistful smile.

"That's a great idea. You got it," Grace said and got up, her knees protesting loudly by crunching and popping as she stretched her legs.

"Ouch, that didn't sound too good," Helen said, wincing in sympathy.

"We're getting old, Helen. There's no two ways about it. If you want something to do, would you mind changing the memory card while I get us the drinks?"

"I'm on it," Helen said and picked up the camera and the plastic bag with the spare card.

Two minutes later, Grace returned holding two Styrofoam cups, filled to the brim with steaming hot chocolate. She gave one to Helen and then put her own down on the park bench so it could cool off a bit.

"Here you go, love."

"Thanks. The camera is ready."

"Great," Grace said as she sat down next to Helen. She shook her head slowly and then turned to look at her wife.

"I'm... I'm so grateful you're here with me, now," Grace said quietly. The whirlwind of emotions inside her suddenly overwhelmed her and she choked up so badly that she wasn't able to speak another word. Letting out a long, trembling sigh, she wrapped her arms around Helen and gave her the hug of a lifetime.

"Oh, I..." Helen said as the hot chocolate sloshed over the edge of the cup, narrowly missing her fingers.

"I was so scared that you'd leave me. That you'd die. I don't know what I would've done if you had died that night in the hospital. I... I think I... I think I would've killed myself so I could be with you again," Grace said and buried her face in Helen's down jacket.

"Oh, honey... you don't mean that," Helen said and put her cup down on the park bench. She turned around slightly and put her hand on the back of Grace's head.

"Yes, I do," Grace said and started crying for real.

Helen whispered a few words of nonsense into Grace's ear and then took a deep breath. Even though no one was close enough to hear them, she started speaking for Grace's ears only.

"I never saw the car coming towards me at all, so I only knew I had been hit when I flew through the air. I didn't lose consciousness... the landing was the worst part, so in a way, I wish I had. As soon as I knew what was going on, you were all I cared about," Helen said, shaking her head.

"At that moment, when I was lying face-down on the wet asphalt in the worst pain I had ever experienced, a strange darkness flooded over me and I was sure I was going to die. But then I saw your face and I heard your voice. I felt your touch on my skin and I knew I couldn't leave you. I refused to leave you, hon. Then the world got a bit fuzzy, but the next thing I remember is when you came to me at the hospital. The real you," she continued.

Grace nodded, sniffing hard. She let go of Helen and pulled back slightly.

"That was the worst night of my life," Grace said, wiping her eyes.

"Mmmm," Helen said and moved her hand up to caress Grace's cheek. With her thumb, she wiped away a few tears and then she leaned down to place a loving kiss on Grace's forehead.

Grace sighed and reached into her pocket to find a handkerchief. She wiped her eyes again and then blew her nose several times.

"I needed to cry. I had that bottled up inside me... and... and I don't know why I couldn't talk to you about it, but..."

"Shhh. It doesn't matter now. We're here, you and I, and that's the most important thing. You're going to have to put up with me for a good while yet, Grace Henderson," Helen said and gave Grace a gentle thump on her shoulder.

"Thank God," Grace said and stuffed the handkerchief back into her pocket.

"Your chocolate is getting cold. It's actually really good," Helen said and picked up her Styrofoam cup. She took a long swig from it, marveling at the way the hot chocolate warmed her insides.

Grace sighed deeply and picked up her own cup. She took a short swig and then nodded in agreement.

"You're right. Tastes just like it should."

"Of course. It's probably got a ton of sugar in it," Helen said, trying to coax a smile out of Grace - it worked.

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"Love, even my legs are getting tired now, so how about we called it a day and started walking back to the bungalow?" Grace said an hour or so later. By taking an alternative route - literally going the long way around - they had made it all the way to the top of the Falls and were standing arm in arm, looking at the river come rushing past them.

"I'd offer to carry you, but, you know..." Helen said with a grin.

"That would work for the first two steps, but then we'd need someone to carry you," Grace said, nudging Helen's shoulder.

"Cheeky... but true. So you're not upset we didn't get to see Lookout Point itself?"

Grace shook her head and wrapped her arm around Helen's waist to give the taller woman a small squeeze.

"No. There's always so much hustle and bustle there. I prefer the Falls. It's more tranquil... well, if you overlook the small fact that the water is impossibly loud when it crashes into the lake."

"Yeah..."

They turned around and began walking back towards the woodchip-covered path that would lead them home to the bungalow.

"But anyway, I got what I came for. Didn't you?" Grace said.

"Sure. I got to see your face light up like a little sun when you caught your first glimpse of the Falls. I've always said your smile could melt even the frozen tundra," Helen said and leaned down to steal a kiss.

"Oh, you!"

A little while later, they walked past another of the local landmarks, the Lord Alexander boulder. Named after the patron of one of the many expeditions that had explored the area in the late 18th century, it was as wide and as tall as a house. At some point in time, the boulder had cracked straight down the middle, creating two equally large halves that nature had slowly reclaimed over the millennia.

"Oh, no, look at that... someone has smeared graffiti on Lord Alexander. I mean... Jeez!" Grace said and threw her arms in the air.

"It looks recent. We better let the Park Rangers know when we get back. Hon, why don't you take a picture of it? That way we can show the Rangers exactly where the graffiti is and how much damage it has done."

"Good idea," Grace said and unzipped her jacket. She took several pictures of the graffiti and then put the camera away.

"Is nothing sacred anymore...? I mean, vandalizing such a work of nature is just... just... idiotic! The Off-Limit signs are clear to see and... Oh!" Grace said once she had zipped her jacket back up.

"I agree with you, but I seem to recall that you crawled onto it, about, oh, twenty years ago?" Helen said and put her hands in her jacket pockets.

"Oh... uh, yes, but that was different."

"Different?"

"Yes, I wasn't trying to vandalize it. I just wanted to check out if it was possible to see the bungalows from there."

"And when you crawled back down, you slipped and fell on your head," Helen added dryly.

"Well... yeah, but you made sure I was well-pampered and well-loved once we got back to our house," Grace said and laughed out loud as she thought about the silly incident.

"I guess I did."

"Of course, now, I couldn't even begin to contemplate climbing on it."

"Well, you better not try, hon. Like we worked out before, I'd only be able to carry you two steps. Possibly three. But then we'd be stuck out here. We'd end up as two frozen popsicles long before they'd even think about sending out the search and rescue teams."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I remember that one of the reasons I did it back then was because I wanted to prove to myself that at forty-four, I was still as agile as I was when I was thirty..." Grace said, still chuckling.

"Well, you sort of proved that you weren't. But who cares about that now. I loved you then and I love you now, hon," Helen said and lifted Grace's chin with her hand. Pausing briefly to look deeply into Grace's sparkling eyes, she leaned down and placed a loving kiss on the lips that she knew so well.

"Mmmm, I love you too," Grace purred once they separated. She smiled broadly and traced Helen's features with her fingers.

"What are your plans for this afternoon?" she husked, leaving her intentions very, very clear.

"Oh, I don't know... maybe a nap. Maybe an early lunch. Read the business pages of the newspaper... you know, boring stuff," Helen whispered and kissed Grace again.

"Maybe make love to your wife...?"

"Mmmm... I s'pose I could find room for that," Helen said with a wink.

"Excellent. Oh, it's so good to be back here. Everything is so much better in the fresh, crispy, clean mountain air," Grace said and reached for Helen's hand. As soon as she had it in her own, she gave it a little squeeze and started swinging her arm back and forth.

"Well, I'll certainly do my very best, hon," Helen said in an appropriately saucy voice.

Wearing identical goofy grins, they turned away from the Lord Alexander boulder and resumed their walk back to the bungalow.

"Helen, do you remember our honeymoon?"

"Of course, hon."

"So do I. It was the first time we'd gone anywhere together for more than a few days at a time, and... heh, I was a bit worried that things wouldn't go smoothly."

"Really? I can't believe you've never told me that," Helen said and guffawed loudly.

"You know... we were both fairly headstrong women back then. I was a bit embarrassed for even thinking that way," Grace said with a sheepish chuckle.

"Well, we'd been dating for three years. You should've been able to deduce something out of that at least...?"

"Oh, sure, and I did. I deduced that we were both fairly headstrong women," Grace said and laughed out loud.

"Well, we were both busy with our careers back then, otherwise we would've gone on holiday together sooner. I don't think there's much doubt about that. And it's not like we're pushovers now."

"We may be coming apart at the seams, but we're definitely not pushovers, you're right about that," Grace said and took Helen's hand.

"I remember something else about our honeymoon... I remember the poncho-dress-whatever-thing you were wearing. It was pale green and it had large pictures of yellow and white sunflowers on it. You also had a hat the size of Rhode Island... remember?"

"Ugh. I remember. Don't forget the full-face sunglasses. Hey, it was 1975. That kind of poncho was the height of fashion then. And it cost me an arm and a leg," Grace said, wiggling an accusing index finger at Helen.

"I know, I know. Well, if that thing couldn't stop me loving you, nothing will."

"And it's not like you were dressed like Miss Universe either, you know. Mud brown polyester slacks have never been considered hot stuff. Not even in 1975."

"I can't remember anything about that. In fact, I've never worn mud brown polyester slacks in my life. Nope. Nuh-uh," Helen said and held her hands against her chest while she shook her head vehemently.

"We have about fifty pictures from our honeymoon, love. It's all right there, in glorious Technicolor... well, Polaroid, anyway. There's no point in trying to feign amnesia."

Helen chuckled and gave Grace a gentle love tap on her shoulder.

"Well, those slacks came real cheap."

"I'll bet."

"Oh, the 1970s. That was a weird decade," Helen said and took off her glasses so she could polish them. Suddenly feeling weary, she stopped to take a few deep breaths.

"Hear, hear.... Oh... are you tired?"

"A little bit, yes."

"Is the pill wearing off?"

"No, I'm just tired. If you don't want to wait for me, you can go ahead. I'll follow at my own pace," Helen said and put her glasses back on.

"Oh, no. We go together. Look, there's an old stump right over there. You could sit on that."

"Yeah. Just for a few minutes," Helen said and walked slowly over to the tree stump. She carefully lowered herself down on the low stump, letting out a long sigh when she was firmly seated.

"Damn, I really hope this'll get better soon. I hate being this immobile," Helen said quietly.

"I'm sure it will. Before long, you'll be back doing all the things you did before the accident. Perhaps we should take up swimming? I've heard that's good for the back and the legs."

"Swimming? Well... then I'd have to cram myself into a bathing suit, and... no. Just no."

"Oh, come on, it'd be fun," Grace said and crinkled her nose.

"No. No, I don't think it would, quite honestly. I'd love to buy a new bike, though."

"Mmmm," Grace said, not liking that idea at all.

"Anyway, let's talk about that when we get back home... OK?"

"Sure."

As they were talking, the winds picked up and Grace shuddered slightly. She looked up at the sky and saw a large cluster of fleecy clouds approaching fast. The blue sky was chased away surprisingly quickly and the temperature dropped noticeably.

"Wow, I think we're going to get bad weather real soon. It was a good choice to go to the Falls this early, then. I don't think it's much fun to be out there in the pouring rain," Grace said, craning her neck to look at the sky.

"Well, if it's going to rain like it did last night, we'll be soaked. We better get a move on," Helen said and tried to get up from the stump. When she wasn't able to get up by herself, she let out a growl and shook her head angrily.

"Hang on, I'm here," Grace said and helped Helen up.

When they finally rounded the last bend on the woodchip-covered path and walked onto the gravelly parking lot, they could feel the first drops of rain in the air, and they picked up the pace so they wouldn't get caught in case it turned into a deluge. They were almost back at their bungalow when Helen suddenly pulled Grace to a stop.

"Love, if you're really hurting that much, perhaps we should call a..." Grace said in a concerned voice, but Helen waved her hands dismissively.

"No, I'm fine. I was thinking about going over to the reception to report that graffiti. They probably know how to contact the Park Rangers."

"Oh... right. I'd already forgotten all about that. Uh, here's my camera. I'm sure you know how to get it to show the last image," Grace said and unzipped her jacket so she could get to the camera.

"I'll figure it out. Thanks."

"While you do that, I'll fix us some lunch. Beef baloney on rye?"

"Sounds great," Helen said and looked around. She wiggled her eyebrows and leaned in so she could kiss Grace on the lips.

"Don't take too long," Grace said and winked.

"Oh, you needn't worry about that. Not with that kind of prize waiting for me. I'll be back before you know it."

When Grace heard the words, she briefly froze. 'I'll be back before you know it' - those had been the last words Helen had said to her the night she'd had her accident. The smile faded from Grace's face, but she managed to keep it on for so long that Helen didn't notice anything.

Watching Helen walk slightly labored across the gravelly parking lot, Grace gulped nervously and felt a cold shiver run down her spine. Sighing deeply, she shook it off and put her key into the lock in the bungalow's front door.

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CHAPTER 3

Ten minutes later, Helen walked back across the parking lot - when she reached the bungalow, she didn't even have time to knock on the front door before Grace had opened it with a whoosh.

"Wha...?" Helen said, taking a step back.

"Hi again. Did it go well?" Grace said, looking like she could burst into tears at any moment. In the intervening minutes, she had changed into a dark green sweatsuit that matched the color of her eyes. She nervously fidgeted with her sleeves, first rolling them up and then down again.

"Uh, yes... what's... is something wrong, hon?"

"No, I'm just glad you're back. Come on in. It won't stay dry for long now," Grace said and walked back into the kitchen. As Grace had turned the corner, Helen could hear her partner breathe a huge sigh of relief.

Helen shrugged and closed the front door behind her. She took off her voluminous down jacket and hung it on a hallstand that almost tipped over from the weight.

She looked down at her boots and realized that she wouldn't be able to bend down to unlace them without something to sit on.

"Hon? Would you mind bringing me a chair. I can't..."

"I'll do something better," Grace said and zoomed back out into the hallway. She crouched down, quickly untied Helen's boot laces and then got back up, accompanied by the customary sound of her complaining knees.

"Thanks, hon," Helen said and kicked off her boots.

"Lunch is almost ready. What do you want to drink?"

"Just water, please."

"All righty."

"I need to change and to freshen up a bit first. See you in two minutes," Helen said and disappeared into the bathroom.

After she had carried their two plates into the living room, Grace stopped and rubbed her face. She put a hand on her heart, feeling it pounding hard. She shook her head and went back into the kitchen to get the rest.

"Ahhh, this was delicious. My compliments to the chef," Helen said and put her fork down on the plate after scooping up the last piece of her beef baloney.

"Thanks, love," Grace said and put her elbows on the table.

"You're welcome. Nothing beats simple living. Eat, drink, sleep, love. What more could a woman want, eh?"

Grace laughed and reached over the table to playfully slap Helen's hand.

"Hon, what happened to get you so spooked before? I mean, I was only gone for nine minutes or something...?"

"Oh... well, it's silly. Nothing, really," Grace said and smoothed out a non-existent crease on the tablecloth.

"Grace, how long have we two known each other?"

"Uh... is this a trick question?"

"Yes. I know you, remember. And more than that, I love you. I think I deserve to know what's on your mind," Helen said and reached across the table. She took Grace's hands in her own and gave them a little squeeze.

"Oh, it's just... you said the same thing you did the night you were run over. But lightning never strikes twice, especially not out here. I was already quite emotional from the talk we had out on the trail, I... I guess I just overreacted. I'm just being silly."

"Hon, that's not silly at all. I can't even remember what I said. What was it?"

"I'll be back before you know it'," Grace said and shrugged.

"I'm sorry I said something that upset you, hon. It'll probably happen again. You know me. I've forgotten all about this in ten minutes' time."

Despite the somber topic, Grace chuckled. She raised her head and smiled wistfully.

"That's right, I know you. And I'd like to keep knowing you. Which reminds me, you didn't take your noon medicine, did you?"

"Ah... no. Told you so," Helen said and got up from the table.

On her way back from the bathroom, Helen stopped and put her hands on her partner's shoulders. Leaning down, she gave Grace a loving kiss on the neck and then moved a stray lock of hair behind Grace's ear.

"Are you still up for the thing we talked about?" Helen whispered.

Grace answered by nodding and leaning into Helen's touch. She reached up to her right shoulder and started caressing Helen's hand.

"Well, I was thinking... you and me... on the couch... maybe light a candle or two... maybe some soft music on the CD player... maybe even start a fire in the fireplace over there. Hmmmm...?" Helen whispered, leaning in to kiss Grace's neck between each sentence.

"Ohhhh... well, that sounds quite... um, quite interesting," Grace said, turning around so she could look into Helen's eyes. Their strong connection asserted itself and soon, the simmering flames inside both women turned into raging infernos.

Outside, the rain started falling heavily, tapping a frantic beat on the roof of the bungalow and coating the windows with streams of water. Even though it was only just past noon, the rain clouds were so heavy that it had turned very gloomy.

"Perfect," Helen said as she was looking out of the window. She gave Grace's shoulders a little squeeze and then moved over to the coffee table next to the couch. Finding a matchbook, she lit two candles and then pushed them into the center of the table.

The candles were soon shining brightly, adding to the cozy atmosphere; the orange, flickering flames illuminating the room turned dark by the rain.

"Do you need a nap first, old girl?" Grace said, winking. She walked over to the gas-driven fireplace and ignited the flame. After waiting for a few seconds, she adjusted a knob to make it just right. Wearing an enigmatic smile, she came out to stand in the middle of the living room.

Satisfied with the way the candles were burning, Helen moved over to the CD player and put on an album with instrumental evergreens.

"No. Do you?" Helen said and kicked off her shoes. She sat down on the couch and patted the seat next to her.

"I'll do it a little later," Grace said and slithered over to sit next to her lover. With a satisfied sigh, she folded her legs up underneath her and leaned in, using Helen as her support. She put her hand on Helen's thigh and clawed it gently.

"I love you, Helen Thomas," Grace whispered, positioning her head so their lips were only inches apart. Looking down, she studied Helen's strong mouth, very much looking forward to getting reacquainted with it. Acting purely on instinct, she let the pink tip of her tongue run across Helen's lips, a move she knew would make Helen's heart beat a lot faster.

"I love you, too, Grace. Happy anniversary," Helen said, already sounding slightly out of breath. She moved her arm around Grace's body and started caressing the shorter woman's well-rounded backside, earning herself a chuckle in the process.

Grace looked up and locked eyes with her lover. For several seconds, none of them made a move, but then Grace closed her eyes and leaned in, eager to claim her partner's lips.

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A good while later, Helen came out from the bathroom, drying her still damp hair with a terrycloth towel. She tied the bathrobe around her waist and then moved into the living room to see what Grace was doing.

While Helen had showered, Grace had put on her clothes and had gone back to sit on the couch - she was so mellowed out that she appeared to be almost boneless. She was leaning her head on the top of the backrest, humming an unrecognizable tune. When she saw Helen walk in, she raised her hand and greeted her lover with a floaty little wave and a goofy little grin.

"Hi, honey," Helen said with a chuckle. She winked at Grace and blew her a kiss that the shorter woman pretended to intercept with her lips.

"Do you want to eat out tonight?" Helen said as she sat down on the couch. She started caressing Grace's knee, running her fingers gently up and down the fabric that now covered the bare skin she'd had so much fun with only a short while earlier.

"Oh... what time is it? Did we really..."

"No, it's not dinner time yet. It's only two o'clock," Helen said with another chuckle.

"Oh. Well, do you remember the Texas steak house down in Fort Rockwell? I wonder if that's still there?"

"I don't know, but I guess we could go over to the reception and ask."

"That used to be a good restaurant, so maybe we'll get lucky," Grace said, sniggering when she realized the double entendre.

Helen opened her mouth to give a snappy comeback, but changed her mind at the last moment. Instead, she leaned in and gave Grace a loving kiss on her forehead.

"I don't think it's possible to get any more lucky than you and me, hon," Helen whispered.

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Just before five o'clock, Grace returned to the bungalow, shaking off her umbrella as she got into the hallway.

"Good news, love. The Texas Longhorn Steak House is still in business," she said loudly, trying to get Helen's attention.

"Excellent. Are we going?" Helen said, putting on her wristwatch.

"You betcha. Oh, by the way, we have company. There's a car parked in the space for bungalow #11. It's got a rainbow sticker on the back, believe it or not."

"Oh? Well, that doesn't necessarily have to mean anything these days," Helen said and peeked through the narrow, yellow-tinted window next to the door to try to get a glimpse of the car.

"That's true. Uh, even though the rain has eased off, would you mind driving?" Grace said, looking sheepish.

"Not at all. I'd love to. I know how much you dislike driving in the rain."

Helen walked over to Grace and put a hand on her cheek. Crinkling her nose, Grace turned her head so she could kiss the inside of her lover's palm.

"Well, I actually like driving in the rain, but only as a passenger. It's got something to do with the gloomy conditions. My contacts don't work too well in the dusk," Grace said, reaching up to put her hand on top of Helen's.

"I think it's your eyes instead," Helen said and kissed Grace's forehead.

"No way, they're as good as new."

"Uh-huh?"

"Do you want to go and eat or what?" Grace quipped and gently slapped Helen's backside.

"We're going, we're going. I just need my jacket and we're out of here," Helen said and reached for her down jacket.

As Helen and Grace walked across the parking lot to get to their SUV, one of the people who had rented bungalow #11 came out to begin the unloading of their car.

"Oh, look at her," Grace whispered, referring to the very pregnant young woman who had just picked up a small bag from the trunk of the car. She was a pretty strawberry-blonde in her late twenties, with cute dimples and a few freckles spread out over her face.

"Probably seven and a half months down, maybe even a week or two more," Helen said, easily assessing the woman by tapping into her nearly forty years of experience.

"Looks like it could happen at any moment."

"We better leave in a hurry, then. I don't feel like delivering any babies today," Helen added dryly.

"Oh, you!"

Just before Helen and Grace reached their SUV, the pregnant woman came back outside and dusted off her hands.

"Oh, hello... are we neighbors? My name's Mary Whitlow," she said and put out her hand.

"We are, yes, though only for a day and a half. We're going home tomorrow evening. I'm Helen Thomas and this is my wife, Grace Henderson," Helen said and shook Mary's hand.

"Pleased to meet you both," Mary said and shook Grace's hand.

"When are you due?" Grace said.

"Next month. Well, if everything's on schedule, that is."

"Is it your first?"

"Yeah... I'm kinda nervous, actually," Mary said with an uneasy chuckle.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry too much if I were you. You're young and fit. It'll be fine," Helen said, accidentally slipping into her patented Authoritarian Voice - and earning herself a nudge in the side by Grace.

"Well, I certainly hope so. Oh, there's my partner, Jenny," Mary said and waved at a woman coming towards them.

Jenny appeared to be the same age as Mary, but she was slightly shorter and of a stockier build. She had shoulder-length ash blonde hair and bluish eyes, and while her face was more angular, she was just as pretty as her partner.

"Jen, these are our neighbors, Helen and Grace," Mary said with a smile.

"Hi, I'm Jenny Whitlow," the woman said when she was close enough. She put out her hand and Helen and Grace shook it.

"I'm just gonna get this one," Jenny continued and picked up a large suitcase. She smiled at the two older women and then walked back towards the bungalow.

"She's the strong, silent type," Mary said and winked.

"I know the type well. Right, love?" Grace said and hooked her arm inside Helen's.

"Right."

"See? Anyway, it's too bad you two didn't arrive sooner. The weather was fantastic this morning. Have you been here before?"

"No, this is the first time we're here," Mary said, putting a hand on her belly.

"Well, in that case, I can definitely recommend the Hurry Down Falls. They're about six hundred yards away over on the main trail and... well, in my opinion, it's an absolute must-see."

Suddenly the rain started coming down harder. Large, heavy drops began to fall from the leaden sky, hitting the parking lot and the people there.

"Oh... we better..." Grace said as the heavy drops started falling on her head.

"Thanks for the recommendation. It was nice talking to you," Mary said and gave Helen and Grace a wave and a warm smile.

"You, too," Helen said and unlocked the car. Grace hurried around the front of the SUV and climbed aboard.

"Nice people," Grace said after they had driven a little while on the perilous, winding forest road.

"Yes. Reminded me a bit of us when we were young, actually," Helen said and steered the SUV through one of the innumerable turns.

The heavy rain had made the forest road even more slippery than the night before, and the impossibly tall trees towering over the road created an unsettling funnel-like effect. The low, thick, gray clouds only added to the confusion and Helen had to concentrate very hard on the driving.

"Yeah. We've never had a baby, though," Grace said and patted Helen's thigh.

"Really? I coulda sworn we did."

"Uh, no," Grace said with a chuckle.

"Damn, I think I'm getting old. I don't remember it being this tough the last time we were here," Helen said, staring out of the windshield. The wipers were going back and forth on the second-fastest setting, trying their best to clean the screen of the pounding rain.

"That's what I said last night. Love, perhaps we should pull over right there... you know, to sit out the worst...?" Grace said and pointed at a small lay-by a few hundred yards in front of them.

"Well... OK. I don't feel particularly heroic today," Helen said and activated the turning signal. They soon drove into the lay-by, bumping over a few twigs and small branches that had been blown off the trees above them.

"There's no point in taking risks. I mean, we haven't made reservations or anything, so it doesn't matter when we get there," Grace said and unbuckled her seat belt.

"Nah," Helen said and turned off the engine. The raindrops continued to pound on the roof of the car, sounding very much like someone attempting to play a tune with a set of drumsticks.

"Perhaps we should be building an Ark instead...?" Grace said, looking out of the side window at the driving rain.

"Could be. At least it's kinda cozy in here."

"Yeah. Helen, those two young women, Jenny and Mary... do you think they'll be as happy together as we've been?" Grace said, turning in the seat so she could look at Helen.

"Oh, that's really hard to say. I hope so. But, you know, long-term relationships are... how can I put it... well, they appear to be less important today. That's the impression I get from TV and magazines, anyway," Helen said and picked up Grace's hand.

"Mmmm. I know what you mean. But since they've decided to bring a new life to the world, I'd say they're serious about it."

"Well, like I said, I hope so. In a way, it almost feels like they're picking up the baton, doesn't it...?"

"Yes it does, actually," Grace said and furrowed her brow. She fell silent and started staring out of the windshield, almost like she hadn't expected that reply.

"The rain has eased off now. Do you want to continue?" Helen said a few minutes later.

"Oh, sure. My stomach is sending out distress calls," Grace said and reached for the seat belt.

By the time Helen and Grace reached the Fort Rockwell city limits, the rain had stopped completely, and Helen breathed a sigh of relief as she was finally able to turn off the windshield wipers.

Fort Rockwell looked the same as it always had - very busy. People were milling about everywhere, looking at shop windows and sitting well-wrapped at sidewalk cafes. In the square in front of the town hall, a travelling circus had put up a small big top and there were long lines of children waiting impatiently to be let inside.

The leaves from the trees lining main street were blowing rampant through the town, giving it a very autumnal look and creating colorful piles on the sidewalks that the many pedestrians had to wade through.

"Looks like business is booming," Helen said and slowed the SUV down to a crawl as they came up to the rear of a long line of cars, all rather obviously searching for somewhere to park.

"I'll say. I don't think we've ever seen Fort Rockwell so busy before," Grace said, observing all the people walking past them.

"We're never going to find a spot to park in."

"I guess we could buy a pizza and eat it on the way home," Grace said - and chuckled when Helen's only reply was an eyebrow that was raised almost to her hairline.

"Well, there's the Texas Longhorn Steak House... looks like they've renovated the facade," Grace said, pointing at the restaurant.

"Yep, and even better, they have a parking lot that's reserved for guests only," Helen said and quickly turned into the lot.

Just as Helen and Grace walked out onto the sidewalk in front of the restaurant, the lights were turned on in scores of gas lanterns that were lining the town streets. Here and there, clapping and cheering could be heard, and many people took pictures of the old-fashioned street lights.

High above them, the last of the rain clouds had been chased away, revealing a deep blue sky that was rapidly giving way to the approaching dusk. The new moon had risen and was suspended halfway up the sky, shining a ghostly light down on the busy town.

"Awww, this is so romantic," Grace said and put her hands together.

"Yeah," Helen said with a grin, wrapping her arm around Grace's shoulder.

Faint sounds were heard from the big top on the Town Hall Square; music and laughter mixed with the noise of the traffic floated its way up the busy street, drifting in and out between the many people.

"I've said it before and I'll say it again. If we had the money, we'd move here in an instant," Grace said vehemently.

"Well... I have a feeling that it would lose some of the magic if we saw it every day."

"No chance," Grace said, patting Helen's hand.

"Yes, dear. Come on, let's go eat."

They were soon standing at a centrally placed desk that had been made up to resemble a bar counter from the Old West. Booths were lining the outer walls all around the restaurant, and paintings and various wild-west props were hanging everywhere.

"They've redecorated. And not for the better," Helen said in a flat voice.

"Uh, yes. There's a table right over there. Want to take it?"

"It's as good as any," Helen said and put her hand on Grace's elbow, guiding her over to the booth.

A few minutes later, a voluptuous waitress in her mid-thirties came over to the booth carrying two menus. She put them down on the table and then dug into her fanny pack to find a lighter.

"Howdy folks. New in town?" she said in a Texas accent that was so exaggerated that it bordered on being a parody.

"No. We've been here before," Helen said.

"That's nice. We've been doin' some redecoratin'. How d'y'all like it so far?"

"Well.. it looks... nice."

Reaching across Grace, the waitress proceeded to light the two candles that had been placed at the far end of the table. Once she had done that, she put the lighter back in the fanny pack and put her index fingers on the menus.

"Well, there y'all have 'em. Just gimme a holler once you're ready to order," the waitress said and moved away from the table.

"Thank you," Grace said, wearing an unreadable expression on her face.

Helen took a deep breath and then let it out slowly.

"Hmmm. Good Lord, who are they trying to fool? She's even less Southern than I am," she said and shook her head, chuckling quietly to herself.

"I guess they think it's adding to the texture of the restaurant."

"Well... could be. Never mind. What would you like tonight, hon?"

"I was thinking... none of us eat that much anymore, so how about we just ordered one T-Bone and split it down the middle?" Grace said, looking through the menu.

"Fine by me, but I don't know if they'll do that here," Helen said and looked around at the various decorations.

"Can't hurt to ask. A baked potato each and two club sodas?"

"Sounds good. Waitress!"

Fifteen minutes later, the voluptuous waitress came back to the table carrying a tray with an enormous T-Bone steak on a plate, two smaller plates with baked potatoes and two glasses filled to the brim with fizzling mineral water.

"One T done in the traditional Texas style, two baked an' two club sodas, here ya go," she said and put the various items down on the table.

"Yum, smells delicious," Grace said and immediately picked up her knife and fork.

"Y'all have a great time eatin' your T now, ya hear? If ya want anythin', just holler my name. Vicky Lou, that's me."

Grace noted that Helen was trying very, very hard to keep civil, so she mouthed 'be nice' and put a calming hand on top of Helen's.

"We will. Thank you," Helen said, about to break out in a rash from the fakeness of the waitress.

"You betcha," the waitress said and carried on to the next table.

"Oh, I wish she'd quit that faux-Texas act. I'll bet she's really a very nice woman when she's off-duty," Helen whispered as soon as Vicky Lou was out of earshot.

"Could be. Anyway, don't forget your pills, love," Grace said, busy cutting a slice off the large slab of meat.

"Yeah, I got them right here."

Helen reached into her shirt pocket and took out a balled-up napkin. After unfolding it, she put the pills down on the table next to her plate. With a shake of the head, she swallowed the first pill and chased it down with a swig from the club soda.

"Damn pills. I miss my red wine," Helen said under her breath as she took the next one. After downing all the pills, she cleared her throat and raised the club soda high in the air. A calmness fell over her and a broad smile graced her features.

"Well, never mind that now. Happy anniversary, hon."

"Happy anniversary," Grace said and clinked her glass against Helen's.

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After finishing the meal, Grace pushed the empty plate away and leaned back in the booth.

"Ahh, that was good," she said and patted her belly.

"Yeah. At least they hadn't forgotten how to make them," Helen said and wiped her mouth on a napkin.

Grace nodded thoughtfully and then fell silent.

"Is something on your mind, honey...?" Helen said.

"This anniversary is almost over now. How many more do you think we'll be allowed to have?"

"Oh, that's... statistically, two more. But who reads the statistics, anyway."

"You always have," Grace said with a faint smile.

"Well, it was part of my job."

An uneasy silence hung in the air between the two women, filled by the constant background noises of the other guests of the restaurant and the typical cling-clang of the knives and forks hitting the plates.

"Two more?" Grace said quietly.

"Give or take, yes," Helen said and put her elbows on the table.

"You know, I was glad I had that cry this morning. I think it has made me come to terms with your accident... and the fact that you were incredibly lucky. Up until today, I just couldn't... but... but now I feel I'm ready to put that behind me and move on."

"Well, that's good," Helen said and took Grace's hands in her own.

"Yes. We need to live now, because there might not be a tomorrow."

Helen cocked her head and opened her mouth to reply, but before she had time to speak, they were interrupted by Vicky Lou.

"Hey, y'all. Judgin' by the empty state o' those plates, it sure looks like you enjoyed the meal," she said and began to collect the plates and the glasses.

"We did, thanks," Grace said.

"Can I tempt you with some coffee an' pecan pie, or somethin'? We have the best pecan pie in town. Done in genuine Texas-style, the best kind. Comes with two large spoonfuls o' whipped cream an' everythin'."

"Whipped cream?" Grace said, moving forward on her chair.

"Uh, coffee sounds fine, but no pie. Two cups of coffee, please," Helen said, trying to ignore the look of annoyance on Grace's face.

"Two cups o' coffee comin' right up. An' you're sure you don't want no pecan pie?"

"Absolutely sure. Thank you," Helen said, wishing that the waitress would hurry up and leave.

"You betcha," Vicky Lou said and carried the empty plates away from the table.

"So, hon... where were we?" Helen said, running a hand through her hair.

"No whipped cream?" Grace said, raising an eyebrow.

"Uh, it's not good for us."

"Hmmm. I'll let it pass just this once."

After Grace had taken the first swig of the coffee, she sighed and looked down. She started toying with the red-and-white checkered tablecloth, almost like she was debating with herself whether or not to go ahead with what she wanted to say.

"Helen, I have two big worries in my life. That I'll lose you, and... and that I'll lose myself. You know that my mother suffered from Alzheimer's late in her life and one of her sisters had it, too."

"I know, but it doesn't automatically mean that you'll get it. Believe it or not, I used to be a pretty good doctor. I know the early warning signs; I've seen them often enough in my patients. You don't have any of them."

"Yet," Grace said quietly, remembering all too well how much her mother had changed when the illness had struck her.

"Honey, none of us can look into the future. Whatever happens, I'll be there for you. Hey, I'll even write it down just to set it in stone," Helen said and took a napkin. She reached into her jacket, found a ball point pen and then started writing on the napkin.

'Grace Henderson, I'll love you forever - Doctor Helen J. Thomas, MD, Ret. - Saturday, Oct. 9, 2010.'

"Done," she said and pushed the napkin across the table.

"Oh, you," Grace said as she picked it up. She briefly looked at it and then folded it up and put it in her jacket.

"I'm going to keep it, you know. I'm holding you to it," she said and blew Helen a kiss.

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Some time later, they left the restaurant and ventured out into the cold October evening. Briefly getting the shivers, Helen zipped her jacket all the way up and then thrust her hands into her pockets.

"Brrrr, it's chilly now," she said, her breath forming a cloud of condensation as she spoke.

"Yeah. We should've brought our hats."

"Mmmhh...?"

"Do you think you can manage walking down to the Town Hall Square, love?" Grace said, hooking her arm inside Helen's.

"I think I can. Do you want to see the big top?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. Do you object to that?" Grace said cheekily and started to walk slowly down Main Street, pulling Helen along with her.

"Oh, no."

Despite the many people, it didn't take them long to reach the square. As they turned off Main Street, they paused to take a look at a poster promoting *'The Jack Rogers Travelling Circus - Circus as it was in the 19th Century!'*

Apparently not satisfied with the flickering light emanating from the gas lanterns, the circus had put up dozens of torches all around the square, all burning merrily and all sending out a cozy orange light and the occasional plume of smoke.

The long lines of children were gone, replaced by a throng of people watching several exhibitions with firebreathers, jesters, sword swallowers, jugglers and even a strongman bending iron bars.

At regular intervals, two firebreathers blew big balls of fire into the chilly air, sending the crowd into a frenzy of ooh-ing and aaah-ing. Two men, dressed in traditional jester costumes, were busy running around teasing each other, the spectators and the strongman - who at one point picked up one of them and held him high above his head, threatening to bend him like the iron bars. The spectators loved this, too, and laughter rippled through the crowd.

"Oh, wow, this is really great," Grace said and wrapped her arm around Helen's waist.

After a few seconds, Grace looked up at her partner. As always, their connection asserted itself, making Helen turn her head and look down. Gazing deeply into each other's eyes, they both smiled and gave each other a little squeeze.

Around them, the crowd cheered over a particularly difficult act by the jugglers, but Helen and Grace only had eyes for each other.

"I love you, Helen Thomas," Grace said for Helen's ears only. Standing up on tiptoes, she caressed Helen's cheek and then placed a loving kiss on her lips.

"I love you, too, Grace."

Smiling, they turned away from the first exhibition and moved on to the next one, soon disappearing into the mass of people watching the artists perform.

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THE END.