

Before
She Was
Helen



CAROLINE B.
COONEY



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ONE

Before she did anything else today, Clemmie had to check up on her next-door neighbor, Dom.

Why Dom had moved to Sun City was not clear. He had never joined anything, attended anything, nor shown interest in anything. He just sat in his villa watching TV, playing video games, and smoking cigarettes. He owned the tiniest of the three attached villas, the one in the middle with no side windows and little sun.

Clemmie lived on the left, and a couple she hardly ever saw owned the right-hand villa, using it as a hotel when they visited grandchildren in the area. When they arrived, which was infrequently, they used their automatic garage-door opener, drove in, closed the garage door behind them, and that was that. Nobody ever spotted them again. Clemmie wasn't sure she'd even recognize them.

It was agreed that Clemmie had the least rewarding neighbors in Sun City.

Luckily, in her pod—the slightly creepy collective noun Sun City used

instead of *neighborhood*—the little villas were tucked close together in heavily landscaped culs-de-sac, so Clemmie knew all her other neighbors—wonderful friendly people who hosted outdoor barbecues and took her bowling and car-pooled when everybody went to a Panthers game. Clemmie knew nothing about football, but she was following the Panthers now because everybody else did, and Sun City was all about doing what everybody else did.

Dom lived alone, and when he'd fallen last year, it took him a day and a half to crawl to his cell phone and summon help, so now he texted Clemmie every morning to let her know he was fine. She'd text back something cheerful like "Have a good day then!" although she found it hard to believe that Dom ever had a good day, since his only friends were the hosts of hostile political talk shows.

But this morning, Dom had not texted, nor did he answer her text, and then he didn't answer her phone call either. In spite of his COPD and arthritis, swollen ankles and weird splotchy complexion, not to mention all the beer he drank, plus still smoking in spite of his lung problems, Dom was actually in fairly good health. Still. Something must have happened.

He'd given Clemmie a key to his villa for emergencies, after first extracting a promise not to tell anybody she had his key. It was not unusual for old people to get paranoid, so Clemmie did promise, but in fact, everybody would assume that Clemmie had a key, because you always gave your neighbor a key. Well, Clemmie certainly hadn't given Dom one. The last person she would want in her unit or checking on her health was Dominic Spesante. Her across-the-street neighbors, Joyce and Johnny, had her key.

Clemmie so didn't want to go next door and find Dom dead. Or what if he had the flu, and she ended up taking him to the doctor's and picking up his prescriptions and buying his groceries and probably catching the flu herself? Although, of course, she had had her flu shot, and it wasn't flu season

anymore anyway, but it would be just like Dom to have a bug not warded off by last fall's injection.

It wasn't that Clemmie was ungenerous. She loved to do things for other people—just not for Dom, who had no personality unless he was swearing, and then he had a regrettable personality.

Clemmie sighed, opened her front door, gasped at the South Carolina heat even at nine in the morning, crossed her tiny front lawn to Dom's, and rang his bell.

There was no answer.

She knocked hard on the glass part of the door. She couldn't peek in because Dom had installed blinds over the glass. Still no answer.

Clemmie considered crossing the street and getting Joyce or Johnny to go into Dom's with her. Joyce and Johnny were in their seventies and not married but living together. They loved to say that. "We're shacking up," they would whisper, giggling.

Joyce's children were not okay with her decision to have a live-in boyfriend. The Oregon daughter thought Joyce should have moved to Oregon, and the New Hampshire son thought Joyce should have moved to New Hampshire. Joyce said her children just wanted free babysitters, and that was not what she was doing this decade.

Johnny believed that his children didn't even know about Joyce because he had kept his own Sun City house, which was half a mile away, and even kept the cleaning lady who still came every other Tuesday afternoon, and when anybody in his family visited, he just moved back in. Deception was easier than dealing with children still furious that Johnny had divorced their mother after forty-nine years of marriage, just prior to the big fiftieth anniversary party they had planned. Johnny's ex-wife in Maryland was not doing well, still shocked at what had happened to her, and the children

rightly held Johnny responsible. He wasn't about to tell them that the move to Sun City and acquiring a new woman were the best things that had ever happened to him.

But Joyce would refuse to come if Clemmie asked her to go inside Dom's. He was too creepy for her, and anyway, Joyce would be getting ready for their card game. She and Clemmie loved canasta, which they played twice a week at the clubhouse. The clubhouse was what turned Sun City into a magic kingdom; you just walked in and joined anything you felt like: poker, mah-jongg, pottery, table tennis, acoustic guitar jams, wine-tasting groups, Ohio State fans. Right now, Joyce would be choosing a complex outfit and accessories and fixing her face, having already blown dry and curled her hair. As for Johnny, he played pickleball today and was probably already gone.

Reluctantly, Clemmie inserted the key into Dom Spesante's front door. Don't be dead, she warned Dom silently.

Her own unit was sunny and delightful, but Dom's, having no side windows, was dark and unwelcoming. She poked her head in the door, sniffed the odd musty odor, and called, "Dominic! It's me, Helen. Are you okay?"

There was no answer.

Clemmie took a single step forward. She had never been inside Dom's, since she wholly agreed with Joyce that he was a creep, but she'd been in plenty of other middle units, so she knew exactly what the layout was. The miniature front hall was adjacent to the kitchen, dark in spite of the street-facing window in its tiny breakfast area because it did not get the morning sun. It featured white cabinets, a white counter, and white appliances, because Dom had not opted for the upgrades of granite and stainless steel.

"Dom!"

No answer. She peeked in the kitchen to see if Dom had fallen on the floor.

Dom's counter held a Keurig coffee maker, boxes of coffee pods, picnic-style cardboard salt and pepper shakers, and paper napkins still in their cellophane wrap. The dishwasher door hung open, revealing a few plates and glasses.

Dom had not bothered to buy a table for the breakfast nook, opting for a stool tucked under the tiny counter, although Clemmie was pretty sure that he actually ate every meal in front of his television, with his plate or his takeout in his lap.

He had no car, because the severe arthritis in his knees and ankles made it hard to accelerate or brake, but he did have a golf cart. A large, spiffy grocery store sat conveniently in the strip mall adjacent to Sun City, and since it could be reached by interior paved paths, golf carts never had to use a regular road and fight the cars. There were also a pharmacy, a bank, and a cut-rate hair salon in the strip. Clemmie doubted if Dom ever went to the library branch or the expensive gift shop, but there were four fast-food restaurants, so he could rotate Asian food, hamburgers, pizza, and barbecue. He tootled over once or twice a day and, no matter how hot it might be, kept the plastic sides of his golf-cart cover zipped, so he could be seen only in a blurry sort of way. It was a wonder he hadn't cooked in there.

Dom never accepted invitations to neighborhood cookouts and card parties. Friday evenings in their pod meant a cocktail party in somebody's driveway—to which you brought your own folding chair and drink, and Clemmie loved how convivial and easy it was—but Dom didn't participate.

She breathed through her mouth to avoid the smell, which was probably just the odor of musty old man but seemed more pervasive, more pungent.

The kitchen and hall opened into the living-dining room, very dark because Dom kept the heavy drapes closed. Clemmie almost never covered her own sliding glass doors because she loved to look out on her tiny screened

porch and the trees beyond. She turned on Dom's ceiling light, and the ceiling fan also came on, slowly rotating, the only thing alive in the whole place.

A brown recliner and a tan sofa faced a huge television fastened above the gas fireplace, where the pilot light provided a blue flicker. A floor lamp stood next to a substantial coffee table, on which lay empty pizza boxes, a charger but no device, the TV remote, and an old-fashioned heavy, glass triangle ashtray, half full. There was no body sprawled on the floor, however, which was good.

"Dom! It's me, Helen!"

No answer.

The guest room was closest, so she poked her head in. It was a tiny space with a twin bed, made up as if somebody actually stayed overnight now and then. The poor guest had no bedside table, no lamp, and no dresser. It couldn't be for Wilson, the only relative and, in fact, the only visitor Clemmie had met, because Wilson didn't usually stay more than an hour. Clemmie gave him full credit for that hour, however, because she could hardly be around Dom for five minutes.

Clemmie forced herself into the master bedroom and found the king-size bed unmade, wrinkled, and empty. The print of Dom's curled-up body was overly intimate. The size of the bed was overly intimate too, because it implied that Dom sometimes shared it.

Dom was also not unconscious on the floor of his walk-in closet or bathroom.

It dawned on Clemmie that he had simply gone out on his golf cart and forgotten to text her, though why he wouldn't answer his cell phone, she didn't know. Perhaps he couldn't hear it. Perhaps he was going deaf and didn't even know because he so rarely spoke to or listened to other people. With his friend the television, he could just keep upping the volume.

She walked through the back hall, exactly large enough to hold a washer

and a dryer and be called a laundry room, and opened the door to the windowless garage. She flicked on the overhead light.

All garages in Sun City held two cars, but Dom had only his golf cart. Even his doctors were in the medical building between the library and the grocery. If he needed to go farther afield, he waited for Wilson.

Wilson was part of that crowd of young people with last names for first names, like her own grandnephew and grandniece, Bentley and Harper, which sounded like a law firm. Whatever happened to the sweet girl names? The cuddly ones ending in *y* or *ie*? Nobody nowadays was named Connie or Nancy or Janie.

She wasn't sure how Wilson was related to Dom. Not a son, certainly, because he didn't call Dom "Dad." Wilson was not particularly attentive. Not that Clemmie's young relatives were attentive. She texted them every week or two so they'd remember she was alive.

To her relief, Dom's garage was empty, which meant he was okay; he'd just gone shopping.

In fact, his garage was remarkably empty.

Most people moved here with tons of stuff from previously acquisitive lives and then installed garage storage shelves on which dozens of cardboard boxes and plastic containers rested, full of memorabilia, Christmas decorations, extra china, former hobbies, seasonal clothing, and the million other things they refused to part with. Some men packed their garages with tools for woodworking or plumbing. Many garages were so full of stuff the owners couldn't fit in one car, let alone two, and had to rent storage units in one of the massive facilities along the highway.

Dom's garage held his garbage wheelie, his recycling container, a broom, and to her amazement, an interior door. Not the door in which she now stood, which connected Dom's garage to his house, but a door cut through the far

side of his garage, which could only open into the adjoining garage of the third unit—the one belonging to the couple she never saw.

All these times she'd thought Dom sat home alone... Had he actually zipped through his secret door and hustled over to eat with that couple, and they all hid behind closed drapes so nobody would know that Dom actually had friends?

A thousand things were prohibited in Sun City. Sheds. Excess front-garden decorations. Doors painted colors other than black. Fences not approved by the landscape committee. More than two bird feeders. It was surely prohibited to cut a door between yourself and your neighbor. The door was oddly placed, because the bottom of the door was not level with the floor, but up six or eight inches, probably to avoid damaging interior wires or pipes, although what wires and pipes might be channeled along the garage floor she didn't know. Normal, non-Sun City garages often had side doors, but there was no such variation on the Sun City housing and garage scheme. And yet she had never noticed this. A door in a garage is so acceptable that the eye does not analyze its presence.

Clemmie went carefully down the two steps from Dom's utility room (carefully because of her fear of falling) and into his garage, walked over to the peculiar door, and tested the knob.

It wasn't locked. Paranoid Dom didn't lock his custom-made exit?

She didn't think the people on the other side were here, but if they were, perhaps Dom was visiting them right now. But no, since his golf cart was gone, he was also gone.

She couldn't think of their name. It was probably a year since she'd even waved at them. Forgetting names was a constant in Sun City, a precursor to senility, and everybody was quick to comfort each other: *Oh, I always forget names!* friends would cry.

Clemmie went back into Dom's house, out his front door, across his tiny strip of grass, and under the little front door overhang of the third unit. Marcia and Roy Cogland, she remembered, relieved. People hadn't named their children Marcia or Roy in decades. It dated them. Nobody had *ever* named a daughter Clementine, so Clemmie's name was both rare and dated. She rang the bell.

If they came to the door, she'd ask if they'd seen Dom today.

But nothing and no one inside stirred.

She rang again, and then a third time, and if they did come to the door after all and asked why she was so persistent, she'd say, *I thought Dom was here, and he's very deaf, you know.*

Since the living rooms of Sun City houses opened onto backyards, not front yards, any residents who were up and about were almost certainly not facing the street. And because everybody here had invested heavily in drapes, plantation shutters, shades, and curtains, the three units across Blue Lilac, which were oriented to the east, kept their single front window covered in the morning. It was highly unlikely that anybody had spotted Clemmie's perfectly ordinary activity of ringing a neighbor's front doorbell.

Clemmie went back into Dom's, surprised and embarrassed by how much she wanted to open that connecting door.

It would be breaking and entering, she thought. Well, no, it isn't breaking, because the door is unlocked. It's just entering. And I have a reason. I'm checking on Dom. And if they say, "But you knew his golf cart wasn't there, so you also knew he was out," I say, "Oh goodness, I just didn't add that up."

You never commit crimes or misdemeanors, she told herself. You never even think of them. Do not trespass. Besides, the only thing on the other side of that door is another garage.

Which would be less of a trespass: she wasn't going into Marcia and Roy's actual house.

What if Dom came back on his golf cart just as she was peeking through his illegal door? She decided that she would hear him in time to skitter back to his house, although golf carts were very quiet and she probably wouldn't, plus she was a little too rickety for skittering anyhow.

She told herself she would just peek, not put a foot on the other side of the high and somewhat dangerous threshold, if you forgot it was there and tripped.

She opened the unexpected door.

The light from Dom's garage illuminated very little in the Cogland garage, but Clemmie was never without her cell phone. Really, it was quite amazing that her first six decades had been accomplished without one: that she had once done library research instead of Googling, had owned a camera, had kept up with correspondence on carefully chosen letter paper. Who knew that a more satisfying telephone life—in fact, a more satisfying life in general—lay waiting inside a flat, slim rectangle of technology?

Clemmie turned on the flashlight of her iPhone.

The Cogland garage, its single exterior window covered by closed blinds, was literally empty. It didn't even have the required garbage wheelie and recycle container. But that meant nothing, because the Coglands were here so rarely. They probably carried their garbage out with them, since garbage was picked up only once a week, and they wouldn't be here to bring the containers back inside, and it was a definite Sun City no-no to allow your trash container to linger at the curb.

A dozen steps across the garage was the door that would open into the Coglands' utility room which, like the entire unit, would be the same as her own villa, just reversed.

Since most people left home through their garage, not through their front door, they generally locked their house by lowering the garage door,

and as a rule, they didn't bother to lock the interior door. Clemmie stepped over the raised threshold of the illegal connector door, tiptoed across the garage as if somebody might hear her, and fingered the knob of the Coglands' utility-room door.

It turned.

Go home, she ordered herself, and instead, she stepped into the Coglands' house.

Two

The Cogland utility room was as empty as the garage: every cabinet door closed, no clothes basket near the washer and dryer, not even a jug of detergent on the shelf.

A dozen more steps, and Clemmie stood in an utterly bare kitchen. No coffee maker, blender, or toaster sat on the counter. No salt and pepper shakers. The stove gleamed as if it had never seen a pot or pan.

It was hot in the villa, but not humid. They must have had their air-conditioning set to come on now and then to keep mold from developing, but not really cool the house.

In the living area, the sparse, bland furniture looked rented. There were no books, magazines, bowls, vases, or throw pillows. The flat-white walls were not disturbed by a single picture. There was not a television.

They really did use this place as a motel. They didn't fix meals and they didn't hang out, which made the connecting door even more puzzling. What were the Coglands and Dom getting together for?

And then perhaps the sun outside emerged from behind a cloud, because a prism of color suddenly danced on one bare white wall.

Clemmie moved into the living area to see what had caused the rainbow, and there, sitting on a tiny round table in front of the sliding doors, was a glass sculpture like nothing she had ever seen. It was both a tree and a dragon, its tail curving like a powerful whip, its spine and claws also tree leaves on fire. It was a fabulous piece, organic and elegant, emerald green with spurts of gleaming red and gold. It was complex, with an arch of glass that could be a handle and another that could be a spout as well as the dragon's head.

She was dazzled by the tree dragon's beauty. She stared at it, circling, seeing it at every angle, and then, reminded by the weight of her cell phone in her hand, took a photograph before she headed back into the Coglands' garage. Stepping carefully over the illegal door's threshold, she turned to snap a picture of that too, so she could share this weird story with Joyce and Johnny. Then she went back into Dom's house, leaving all doors unlocked, just as they had been, left by his front door, and locked that behind her with the key he'd given her.

Clemmie was exhilarated. Snooping in a neighbor's garage was, sadly, probably the definition of adventure for a semiretired Latin teacher. It was also sleazy. Perhaps she would not tell Joyce and Johnny after all.

She puzzled over the connecting door. If Dom didn't want to be seen going to the Coglands', why not go out his sliders? The three attached villas backed onto a deep woods (well, deep for a highly developed area; probably fifty feet) so there was no one from that direction to see. Hollies had been planted between each tiny patio, now grown so tall and dense that even if Clemmie were sitting outside, she would not see her neighbors' movements. But Clemmie never sat outside, because her unit had a small, rectangular

screened porch set into the building, and if she wanted fresh air, she sat there, and had no view of anything ever at Dom's.

Perhaps Dom was having an affair with Marcia. Perhaps Roy didn't come most of the time and only Marcia came, and she and Dom had become a hot ticket. Fat, grubby, whiny, smelly, lurching Dom? Surely Marcia could do better. Besides, what kind of affair was only two or three times a year?

Clemmie giggled to herself, looked down at her cell phone, and admired her snapshot of the amazing glass tree dragon.

It was crucial to stay connected to her grandnephew and grandniece, or Clemmie would be stranded in old age with absolutely no one. Bentley and Harper were uninterested in her life, which was not surprising, because how excited could people in their twenties be about some old gal's card games? How delightful to have such a cool image to send.

She forwarded the photograph to her other cell phone—her family phone—and from that phone, she sent a group text to the two grands. Attaching the photograph, she wrote, Look at my neighbor's glass sculpture!

Then she studied her to-do list. Every day, she took a fresh page from her Hallmark card shopping pad and wrote down her chores, club meetings, card games, commitments, errands, and grocery list.

Clemmie was still teaching Latin part time at a county high school, so from late August to mid-May, life was satisfying, but over the summer, she could get frightened that her existence had dwindled to card games with strangers. The list gave her something to hang onto.

Of course, her card partners weren't strangers anymore; they were her best friends. But the fact was, people arrived in Sun City without a past and without acquaintances. They set about joining groups and making those friends, but in many cases—certainly in Clemmie's—they never recited a history. "Oh please, too boring," someone might say, and later you'd find out he

was a famous cardiologist. “That’s so last year,” someone else might reply, and then you’d be told that she had been vice president of international affairs for some conglomerate, or else a drugstore clerk.

Clemmie set her mug on the coaster on her coffee table and leaned back on her sofa, both cell phones in hand. Like everyone these days, she used the phone as a pacifier. One stroked one’s phone, opening the comforting apps of word games and weather, headline news, and Instagram. It was quite similar to sucking one’s thumb.

Her family cell phone sang out the crazy cascade of notes Bentley had installed for her, and indeed it was Bentley, having received her snapshot of the tree dragon. Clemmie was thrilled to hear from him, because Bent had little use for his elderly aunt. If she ever ended up in assisted living or, God forbid, an Alzheimer’s ward, Bent was not likely to visit. Cool! he texted. But it isn’t a sculpture. It’s a rig for smoking pot.

Clemmie’s jaw dropped. You smoked a drug out of that gorgeous glass? How? Where did you put your mouth?

Harper texted seconds later. It’s beautiful, all right. Your neighbors are serious stoners.

RICH serious stoners, added Bentley.

The one and only piece of decor in Marcia and Roy’s entire home was a marijuana rig? She wondered now about the scent in Dom’s place. Was it in fact the scent of marijuana?

Clemmie had not led a sheltered life, but pot was not among her experiences. She had read somewhere—she took three newspapers and glanced at headlines from three more on her smartphone—that aging baby boomers had returned to using weed, and it was commonplace all over again.

Clemmie ran her mind over all the men and women she knew from pinochle, euchre, canasta, dominoes, line dancing, water aerobics, book club,

pottery, beading, and pickleball, although she no longer played pickleball, having fallen once and twisted an ankle. She considered everybody she knew from Monday-night lectures and Tuesday-morning Bible study. She visualized every other couple and single in her own pod of twenty-one villas. All those people were smoking weed?

Impossible.

And if Dom and the Coglands were using pot, they didn't need a door linking their garages to accomplish it.

Bentley texted again—Bentley, who never sent a birthday or Christmas card or thank-you note. Which neighbor? he asked. The guy with arthritis? It probably helps him feel better.

The guy with arthritis was Dom. She must have bored the grands with a list of Dom's ailments at some point. She wondered if Bent remembered any of *her* complaints, and whether marijuana would actually help Dom's arthritis or just cast a fog over the pain.

She was fixing herself a piece of toast when yet another text arrived. She had never excited her grands this much.

I did an image search on that glass, Bentley wrote. It's stolen. It was made by a lampworker called Borobasq. Go to Instagram and read his posts.

Clemmie's mouth went dry, which happened now and then due to medications, but this time it was horror. The third unit's sole accessory was stolen goods? She had been tiptoeing around leaving fingerprints in a place where neighbors completely unknown to her stored stolen drug paraphernalia?

She had never heard of an image search. Was there an app where you plugged in your snapshot and the app ran around the virtual universe and located identical photographs?

Clemmie tapped her Instagram icon, carefully entered the oddly spelled

Borobasq, and sure enough, up popped a picture of the very glass she had seen while trespassing.

This fellow Borobasq, who had an astonishing eighty thousand followers, was in a rage, using many WTF's to describe his predicament. It wasn't clear how the piece had been stolen. Perhaps he had outlined that in an earlier post.

What was clear was that Clemmie's grandnephew, Bentley, had already posted on Borobasq's site: Your rig is sitting on a table in the house next door to my aunt. He had included her photograph of the tree dragon in the shaft of sunlight.

Bentley had involved her in a theft.

Borobasq of the filthy vocabulary now knew that he could find his stolen drug paraphernalia by coming to Clemmie's. The police would be summoned to arrest the thieves. Dom would find out that she had crept through his unit, found his cut-through door, and used it. The Coglands, owners of stolen goods, would find out that she had trespassed in *their* unit, photographed their possessions, and ratted them out.

Dominic Spesante had always sounded to Clemmie like a mob name. A name for somebody who offed people and abandoned their bodies in Jersey swamps. Did she want Dom for an enemy? On the other hand, would mob people name their son Wilson?

But Clemmie was in possession of some strange knowledge. Last year she'd been standing in front of her little villa, wondering whether to grub out a particularly boring foundation shrub and replace it with her favorite bridal wreath spirea, when Dom's garage door opened and out came his golf cart with its harsh backing-up beep. Dom always started lowering his garage door before he was wholly out, so that you always worried that the cart would get caught by the descending door. It occurred to her now that he didn't want anybody to spot his connecting door.

On that particular day, he had not zipped the cart walls up. A gust of wind blew a piece of paper from Dom's hand, or from the seat next to him, into Clemmie's yard.

She reached for it, but it blew further away. She pounced; it eluded her. On the third try, she stepped on it, picked it up, and because she was a compulsive reader, read the address on the envelope.

It was addressed to somebody named Sal Pesante. Very similar to Dom's name, which was Spesante.

S. Pesante.

Was it possible that the name Spesante didn't exist? That it was a condensed initial and real surname? She had been laughing when she handed the envelope back, not because of her uncoordinated leaps over the grass, but because—perhaps—both she and Dom were faking their identities here in quiet, bland Sun City.

"What's so funny?" Dom had snapped.

"Life," she had said.

He glared, gripped the envelope and the wheel at the same time, and drove away. Of course she hadn't told anybody about Dom's possible other name and never would, because she was filled with admiration for anybody who could pull off the trick of living under a false name. She well knew how hard it was.

Her family cell phone rang. An actual call, not a text. The only people with whom she used this phone were her niece, Peggy, who called monthly, and Peggy's children, Harper and Bentley, who never committed actual live conversation.

Clemmie did not recognize the number or area code on the caller ID. But then she didn't know the grands' phone numbers by heart, because she just tapped the little conversation balloon next to their names and typed a text without glancing at the number. And here in Sun City, where people

came from all over the country and kept their original cell numbers, any area code could actually be somebody in her own pod. Except nobody down the street possessed the number of her family phone; she gave them her local cell number. The landline was for when she had to give out a number and didn't want to: the newspaper subscription, the plumber. She thought of it as another line of defense.

"Mrs. Lakefield?" asked a male voice she didn't know.

There was no Mrs. Lakefield, so this had to be somebody selling cruises or gutter guards. She used her stock answer, courteous but firm. "I don't purchase anything over the phone, thank you. Please take my name off your calling list."

"I'm not selling anything," said the man quickly. "It's my glass you located, and I'm grateful. Can we talk about how I'm going to get it back?"

Clemmie's eyes felt hollow, as if something had drained away her mind. Bentley had not only posted her photograph; he'd given out her phone number to a total stranger? To a man he knew in advance had, to say the least, a questionable career? Clementine Lakefield never told anybody where she lived, let alone self-proclaimed drug dealers. "I didn't post anything," she told him. "My grandnephew did that."

"And I can't tell you how thankful I am." He had good diction, which mattered to Clemmie. And he knew better than to use a WTF out loud, so he wasn't completely basement quality. "Where are you?" he asked.

"You're a total stranger. I can't tell you anything."

The man's voice became warm and comforting. "You are so right to be careful. I wouldn't want my aunt or grandmother handing out her address to just anybody either."

Makers of drug paraphernalia had grandmothers? Clemmie would never have pictured that.

He said, "I'd like to come and pick up the rig."

Clemmie had not felt this degree of panic in years. She sidestepped. "Why is it called a rig?"

"Well, in this case, because it's used for smoking oil. Marijuana oil. So it is an oil rig, just not petroleum-in-Saudi-Arabia-type oil."

Clemmie had never heard of marijuana being oil. She pictured it as dusty little dried-up mounds. She said faintly, "I thought the glass was just a pretty sculpture. A tree dragon prism. I cannot be involved in this. Please don't call back."

He didn't raise his voice or sound upset but said nicely, "I can see how this is a problem for you, Mrs. Lakefield. Tell you what. I'll call your nephew back, and we'll work something out. Don't you worry about a thing, okay?"

Not worry? When the only way to get the man's glass was to trespass again through a villa that would shortly contain Dom?

She disconnected without saying goodbye, rudeness very rare for Clemmie, and stared at her snapshot. The gleaming tree dragon gave no clue as to how one smoked it, or where you put the oil, or how it was lit, because you couldn't smoke without fire, could you?

Her Sun City cell phone rang with the imperious *rat-a-tat-tat* drum roll she kept meaning to change. Somebody's grandson at the clubhouse had set it up for her, and she hadn't wanted to be rude and tell him she hated his choice.

"Five-minute warning, Helen!" caroled Joyce, who often half sang instead of speaking. Joyce was almost always the driver when they went to the clubhouse for cards. Clemmie gave her usual answer, the one they both understood all too well. "Just let me powder my nose."

There were those who could speak quite graphically about the need to pee frequently, but Clemmie was not among them. She went into the bathroom for her final, never-skipped checkup and found that she was so anxious about

the Borobasq call that it was affecting her nether regions. She considered not playing cards after all so she could think about Borobasq and Bentley, but she needed to get out of the house and get fresh air, and since Joyce drove very fast, being her passenger meant serious fresh air.

After some difficulty, Clemmie finished in the bathroom, tidied her wig and reapplied lipstick, located her purse, which sometimes got lost between the door and the kitchen counter where she liked it to live, stepped out her front door, and locked it carefully behind her. They lived in the safest zip code in America, and if anybody wanted to rob a house in Sun City, they wouldn't creep among the tiny villas; they'd hit the streets with four-thousand-square-foot mansions on three levels, but nevertheless, Clemmie exercised care.

But if the Coglands exercised such care to stay invisible that they created an inner passage, why did they not lock it? Perhaps they were so sure of their exterior locks that they shrugged about their interior locks.

Joyce and Johnny were ardent Panthers fans, and Joyce had stitched Panthers boxer shorts together to make a skirt around the roof of the golf cart. She was just now backing out of her garage, so she had thoughtfully waited ten whole minutes for Clemmie to have her checkup. Like most people, Joyce had had the automatic backup beeper silenced. Otherwise the only sound you'd hear all across Sun City would be that annoying high-pitched repeat.

The golf cart's top speed was twelve miles an hour, but Joyce hunched excitedly over the wheel as if she were going ninety. Clemmie had never gotten a golf cart. Every year she considered it, and every year, she passed. It was more fun to hitch rides with friends than to go alone, and with her villa so close to the shopping strip, it was a pleasant walk to return a library book or pick up a prescription.

Joyce had her usual massive handbag. She liked to tote her entire life

around. The handbag took up so much floor space in the golf cart that Clemmie barely had room for her feet.

Joyce launched into a detailed story of how her pinochle group, with whom Clemmie was only a sub, had met at Myra's house last week, and Myra had refused to follow the new rule on refreshments, which required the hostess not to tempt women on diets, and nevertheless Myra had gone and offered seven fattening desserts instead of carrot strips and hummus. Furthermore, she cut the desserts into large slabs instead of narrow slices. The whole thing was unforgivable, especially since Joyce had eaten some of each.

They went into the clubhouse, Joyce showing her pass on her cell phone while Clemmie located the little laminated card in her wallet. She realized with a start that she had both cell phones with her, although it was her never-broken rule to leave the family cell phone at home. She silenced each phone and followed Joyce into the card room.

After everybody had hugged and asked after physical woes and updated one another on the betrayals or successes of a child or grandchild, and when it was ascertained that the cards had been adequately shuffled, the game went with amazing speed and Clemmie was so anxious she could hardly keep up. It always seemed to be her turn, and she thought, Maybe I'm having a stroke.

"It's your go, Helen!" yelled her partner, Evelyn. "Pay attention!"

Clemmie looked down at the cards lying on the table and the cards in her hand and could draw no conclusions. "I'm having a senior moment," she said, which was completely true because until Evelyn had shouted her name, she had lost track of whether she was Clemmie or Helen right now. "What game are we playing anyhow?"

Everybody was giggling. Senior moments were a constant, and the only way to deal with them was to laugh it off, or you'd be awake all night wondering if it was time to take anti-Alzheimer's medication. Aricept, the usual

drug, not only gave you insomnia, lethargy, and a tendency to stumble, but its only promise was that it *might* slow the rate of memory loss. And you wouldn't even know whether it worked; somebody else would have to tell you. "Hand and foot canasta! You and Evelyn need another pure."

The game hurtled on.

Clemmie thought, The only decor in that villa is a stolen marijuana rig. When a stolen object is found, the police are called. My fingerprints are on two doorknobs. No, they're on four. Each side of two doors. No, six. Each side of three doors! Dom's garage, the illegal door, and the Coglands' inside door.

She had spent decades protecting herself. In one stupid, self-indulgent moment of curiosity, had she become the agent of her own destruction?

By now Dom would be home. Clemmie couldn't get through his garage again.

When the police come, I could play the senility card, she thought. Say that Dom asked me to watch out for him and I sensibly checked every door.

She might be able to pull that off. God knew there were enough examples of senility around here.

But what would happen when they identified the fingerprints?