

Coming Home

By Bill Judge

1

Following the mail truck with her eyes as it motored away from the little cluster of mailboxes in front of her multiplex apartment, Elsie Gammer leaned her grey-haired head forward into her front window and watched until the truck passed beyond her sight. Her forehead pressed on the white laced curtain and onto the window and she tilted her head as far to the right as she could. Her breath burgeoned into ever widening puffs of frozen steam on the window pane. She brushed the frost away with the edge of another curtain panel as she looked at the red taillights of the truck brighten up and move forward. When the truck had passed, she leaned back a little and sighed.

She picked up her gold leaf, white enameled tea cup. She sat back and sipped her wild sweet smelling blueberry tea. Setting the china on the end table, her eyes twinkled at a small brushed steel framed photo of her daughter and her two grandkids.

Without her glasses, their faces were undefined but she knew the picture so well that she never noticed the fuzziness. Jessica's bright smile and Jennie's shy slight curl of her lips, and Annie's arms around them seemed as real as yesterday.

The details were all in her mind. She remembered when she took the picture, almost twenty years ago to the day. Annie was, what, still in her early thirties, thirty three and Jessica and Jennie were ten and eight. Yes, her dear Jennie was all of eight when the picture was taken. The younger girls had worn the dresses that she had sent them for Easter. She remembered coordinating with Annie on the sizes, the colors and the styles. She knew she could have just given them money or a gift card but she wanted to be involved somehow. Nobody ever seemed involved any more.

A couple of cars passed by the window with billows of white steam swirling behind. It looked cold outside. She was glad she put her contribution in the mailbox yesterday.

She lifted up her eyes and looked over at the memories lined on the mantel across the room. She glanced at the decorative plates that stood upright inside the china cabinet. She saw the club chair across from her. Her precious Henry had sat there just a couple of years ago. Her eyes dropped to the braided rug and shifted back to Henry's chair. She felt the longing in its empty arms even as she remembered his swollen feet in his slippers. He never complained.

She pouted in an effort to keep back a tear and then decided against pouting and crying. The day before her birthday was not a day to give in to pity, she thought. No, she had better things to do. Such as? She prompted herself. Such as?

Such as, she wondered if the mailman had left her anything. If Annie had sent her a birthday card and maybe, she wondered, if the card had arrived a day early. That would be wonderful and well worth the day the good Lord made. Well, any day was well worth whatever the Lord made of it, she reasoned, but Annie and the girls made it even better. And Annie always wrote the most cheerful things. She picked up her tea and sipped again. The day could be quite the bodacious day but only if!

She quickly peeked out the window. No, she couldn't do that.

It was cold out and it had snowed and there was probably some ice. The wind blew some papers across the lawns.

But maybe, she thought.

It was what she needed.

But she really shouldn't.

But maybe she could.

She leaned forward into the window but turned to her left and checked the bottom of her stairway.

There was still a little glaze of snow and ice on it even though one of the neighbor kids had shoveled her

walkway and steps the day before. He was a good kid and conscientious even though the overnight cold and the wind had mused up his job.

Still, if she held onto the railing, and was careful, she could make it down the steps. The walkway seemed safe enough even for an old lady like her.

She had always gotten her own mail, she posited. She was her own woman.

Except when it snowed. Then she waited. She avoided snow and ice. She was her own woman but with good sense.

But, she thought, Annie might have sent the card.

Maybe. But it would be safer to wait a day. Wait until her birthday. The card would still be there.

But then she wouldn't know if Annie had sent it early. Annie never missed her birthday.

Annie would never miss her birthday and, in looking at the empty Henry chair, she needed a little birthday cheer, she told herself.

She pushed up out of her chair and tread across the living room to the small front hall alcove. Slipping on her dark grey coat and winter hat, she fished her gloves out of the coat pockets and put on the left one. She opened her front door with her right hand and slid on the other glove. She pushed open the glass paneled aluminum storm door and stepped out. A gust of wind threatened to yank the storm door out of her hand. She slipped her shoulder in front and straightened her hat.

Holding on tight to the railing, she patiently took the stairs one at a time. She laid down her left foot and followed with her right and kept a tight grip. She did it again. Down with the left, down with the right, and straightened up. Making sure of her balance, she held her grip and did it again.

When she reached the concrete of the walkway, she glanced back at the stairs and whispered, "Not too bad, for an old lady," and stepped forward. The path was clear. The edges had a little snow and ice but the concrete was clear and the roughness of the finish provided a good adhesion for her shoes.

She heard the crunch of a car's tires before she looked down the street for it. Another car approached from the other way. They crossed each other just down the block.

Before heading for the wall of post boxes by the street, she glanced at her neighbors' walkways. Nobody was out. Everybody was probably inside. Mary Russell. Gordon Ludebecker. They were both older than her, and probably napping. The Haskells would normally help them but they had left the day before.

They were good people. She looked again.

She noticed a plain brown paper package at the bottom of the steps down at Mr. Mullins' place. There was no way Mr. Mullins could retrieve it. He was in a wheelchair and the stairs were not accessible. The back door was. The front door was not. She stared at the box and thought about her options.

Should she get it or leave it? In order to get it, she'd have to cross over a couple of walkways and some icy, snowy grass plots. The walkways seemed okay but she wasn't sure about the grass. There was nothing to hold on to for balance and the wind was a killer.

But, if she left the package lying out in plain sight, someone would probably steal it. It was like sprinkling bird seed for the birds. Somebody would see it and snatch it. There was nothing fair or unfair about it since package theft was well-known. That's just the way it was. It didn't matter if Mr. Mullins had a security camera. They would take it anyway. Some of the thieves were brazen enough to smile at the camera.

While she hoped it wasn't valuable, she really had no idea what was in the package. It could be anything. It could be something for his kitchen or bathroom, or it could be medical equipment or medicine. She knew she couldn't call him and tell him about it. Once he knew there was a package, he would just sit in his wheelchair and torture himself by looking at it. Or worse, he would try to get it and end up hurting himself.

Maybe the neighbor kid down the street, who cleared the walks, could get it for him. But she'd have to make her way back inside, look up his number and then call him. And what if he wasn't home and it was stolen in the meantime and Mr. Mullins lost his lifesaving medicine?

She knew where her over-stimulated brain was taking her but that didn't stop her. Didn't the good Lord send the Samaritan? Was it easy for him? No. Probably was icy, too. She chuckled at her own wittiness. She took a step into the grass just to see what it was like. The grass crinkled and crunched. She liked the feel of it and the sound. It reminded her of happier times when she had been able to run and enjoy the snow. She took another step and then several more. The wind howled in her ears. She crossed another walkway and another little yard and another walkway and another yard and then onto Mr. Mullins' walkway where she picked up the package. It was addressed to Mr. Edward T. Mullins. So it was his. She looked at his stairs. They weren't cleared as nicely as hers. But she had come that far. There were only a few steps. She could do it, she thought. She grabbed his railing and climbed one step and then another while she held on with one hand and wrapped her other arm around the package. She reached the top step and rang the doorbell.

What if he doesn't answer?

Good question, Miss Marple, she said to herself. She looked for a hiding spot for the package on the stairs but there wasn't one. The doors were set back a little so there was some shelter from prying eyes but the box would still be exposed.

She rang the bell again. She hadn't talked to Mr. Mullins in a few years. She had found that he wasn't the most gracious of neighbors.

It was cold.

She rang again.

"Coming! Hold your horses!" An angry voice boomed from inside.

Elsie waited.

Eventually she heard the main door open behind its storm door.

She stepped in front so he could see her.

"What?" Mr. Mullins growled and then she heard him cough.

"Mr. Mullins, hello, it's me, Mrs. Gammer."

"Who?"

"Mrs. Gammer. You know. Just down a couple of doors. Can I open this?" She said and reached for the aluminum handle. She tried it but it was locked or stuck.

"What do you want?" He coughed again.

"I have a package for you." She wriggled the door handle.

"What are you doing?" He asked, agitated. "Darn chest cold."

"Trying to open your door," Elsie raised her voice.

"Why?"

"I have a package." She held up a box.

"What are you doing with that?"

"Good grief. I just," she started to say, while she maneuvered the handle, "I just wanted to give this to you before it was stolen."

"Who stole what?" He hacked again.

"Oh my, can you just open your door?"

"Oh," he grunted. "Women," he finished.

Elsie's eyes popped open but she bit her lip.

Mr. Mullins turned his chair so he could reach the latch on the door. He pushed it and said, "I keep it locked for a reason." He cleared his throat but his chest rumbled.

"Yes, I'm sure you do, Mr. Mullins, and it's very nice to talk to you again," Elsie said as she gave him a quick once over. His pepper grey balding friar's head needed a haircut and a shave. He had thick, wiry eyebrows and dark brown, runny red eyes. He wore a bathrobe over a tee shirt and striped pajama bottoms. He had thick woolen socks on his feet. His big hands belied his years in construction. She placed the box in his lap.

"This was laying out in your yard. I didn't want someone to steal it."

"Hmmm," was all he could muster. He looked at the label. "Good, good." He coughed towards her. "I've been waiting for this."

He slowly looked at her with a certain amount of suspicion in his eyes and his voice. "How did you come by it?"

"Not very easily," she replied through her teeth and then smiled. "Are you doing well?" She raised her voice.

"Hmmm?" He mumbled. He obviously didn't expect her question.

"Are you doing okay?" She asked again.

"Okay? Yeah, I guess."

She gave him a funny look.

"Well, if there's nothing else," she said and waited.

He looked at her. "Me? I've got nothing else. I still don't know what you're doing here."

She tutted and shook her head. "Well, you have a good day, Mr. Mullins." She managed to give him a wide smile. She looked at him briefly and saw that he ignored her and looked at his box. She took a step away and let the storm door gently close between them.

"Women."

She looked back at him but he was still staring at his box.

The world is wide and varied and full of the strangest creatures, she reminded herself as she gripped the railing.

She heard the door lock behind her.

"There's wallabies and platypuses and," she grunted with her first step, "Mr. Mullinses."

She huffed and puffed and made her way down the stairs.

It wasn't a wasted trip, she thought. He *did* get his package and it *was* something he wanted. Satisfied that she did some good even if Mr. Mullins wasn't quite appreciative, she moved carefully across the tiny lawns and walkways and finally, down her walkway, to reach the mailboxes. She felt incredibly tired. It came over her very suddenly and she thought it was the extra exertion.

Bobbing her head up and down just to orient herself with the big bank of boxes for each of the apartment dwellers, she located her box. She put a hand onto the bank and rested. Then she opened it and reached in and pulled out just the one piece of mail. It had a happy yellow envelope. She smiled. It was a party all by itself. She grinned like a kid as she held it up like a prize. Annie did send a card!

Elsie made sure the postman had picked up her monthly contribution to the cancer support organization. Although she had never used their services, she knew from experience how an outreach center could make a difference for both the victims and their families.

She remembered the shock of the cancer eating away at her Henry, and then the loneliness after his passing. It was too much to think about and relive. But the little bit of money that she had, she gave to the organization so others might not feel so alone in their grief.

Was it grief that she felt now? Or could there be joy that he was free? The good Lord took from her but gave him new life.

The tears welled in her eyes, she felt pressure in her ears, and her temples began to throb. She had a headache. She was tired. But she had something good. She had the card. She held the card. She remembered her Henry, and their Annie.

She stepped away from the boxes and leaned against a pole.

Holding up the yellow envelope, she read her name and then her daughter's return address. Good. It really was from Annie and it felt like a card. She should go in to read it. But she wanted to see it. She was so excited! She felt like a kid.

Maybe Jessica and Jenny had signed it too. Probably not. But maybe. But they had their own places.

How could they sign it? But maybe they did see it and sign it. She couldn't wait. Despite the headache,

she felt so light-headed. And, yet, she felt happy, like she was flying. Like she was a little bird. So happy. So sky uppy. Look at the winter birds flying. Her heart pitter pitter-pattered. She should open it and not wait. But...

She felt funny. Something was odd. Putting her hand to her head, she waited for it to pass and she thought, after a moment, well, maybe it did. She just felt funny.

She wanted to ignore it. She was surer it would go away. It wasn't worth another thought. But she felt a hum, hum, hum in her ears and temples. Maybe the wind had gotten into her ears. Her eyes felt full like they were pushing out. She squinted and tried to squeeze any tears out that might be there. It had to be all of the excitement.

Don't wait to open the card, she told herself.

She wrangled a finger into the corner of the envelope and pulled down across the sealed edges and lifted up so she could open it.

It WAS the card! She knew it! She should pull it out.

But she felt so tired and she had a headache.

Must be the excitement.

Just get a quick peek at the card, she mumbled.

She drew the card out. The front of it showed a picture of a little girl who had her arms wrapped around the legs of a beautiful angel and the angel bent down to the girl with her arms around her. The caption said, "A birthday hug for my mom. The angel in my life." It looked like Annie had added a pair of red hearts in red ink just after the printed words. An extra touch.

The envelope slipped out of her fingers and blew up against the stand of mailboxes. It wedged into a crack.

Elsie shot a glance at the envelope and vowed she'd pick it up in a second. She opened to the inside of the card and read the printed card company words. "A hug and a kiss to the woman who filled my life with love every day of her life." Where did she find such an unusual card, it was so sweet, Elsie thought. So unlike a card company card.

Annie had added in red ink her own hand, "Happy birthday, Mom. I wish I could be there but we're going up to Jessica's new place in New York. I'll try to call you on your birthday, or the day after. We might be traveling. Don't know. The girls give you their love. Love you, Annie." Oh that was nice, Elsie thought. She turned the card over. And then she saw that Jenny had signed on the back, "Happy birthday, grandma, you're an angel", with three red balloon exclamation points. She had drawn a little angel with a halo and a heart and "with love, Jen". Despite the throbbing, Elsie smiled. So Jenny was with her.

She didn't remember anyone talking about Jessica moving to New York. She wondered where in New York.

Oh the darn headache was so bad, she couldn't think. She held the card in her hand. She took a step towards the discarded envelope.

With the sudden shock of extreme pain, she saw blazing stars and dropped to the ground. Her head thudded like a pumpkin but it was already searing and she already saw flashes of light. She felt something in her hip snap. It jolted her like a bolt of lightning, grasping for her attention against the unbelievable migraine. She knew she wouldn't be able to get the envelope and, for a brief second, she knew how stupid that seemed. That she was focused on the envelope while she tried to ignore the collapse of her body.

She couldn't see anything. She couldn't understand what had happened. Things swirled. Hurt. She felt another shot of unbelievable pain.

She passed out.

As she added a banana, an apple and a yogurt to her half-filled lunch bag, Amada Perez couldn't believe she was running late again for her shift at the hospital. After getting Antonio's text that his shift at the plant had gotten extended, she had driven over to the middle school to pick up their daughter, Trini, after classes. Normally, she would have been one of the first in the pickup line but, since she had no warning that she had to pick her up, she was one of the last.

She relived the quick conversation she had with Trini in the car.

"How you doing?" She had asked her daughter who was as beautiful as a movie star, with long curly locks, rosy cheeks and lips and big gorgeous almond eyes. If she wasn't a boy killer, she would be. The thought wasn't a comfort to her.

"Okay."

She watched out for the other kids crossing through the parking lot and drive. Some still wore their Covid masks. "School, okay?"

"Yeah," her daughter nodded without looking at her and then turned further away to look out of the window at a couple of classmates. Both girls.

"Do you know them?"

Her daughter shook her head. "Not really."

She knew that wasn't the truth but maybe it was partly true and Trini just didn't want to talk about *those* two girls. She moved away from that topic to the one she had really wanted to talk about. "Did you see Tony?"

"No. Is he home?"

"No, and I haven't heard from him. No idea?"

"No. He doesn't talk to me anyway."

Amada considered the info. "Can you ask Kaisley to ask her brother?"

"Sure. But he's probably staying at one of his friends until dad cools off."

She gave a quick look at Trini. She wanted to say something about both of them being in the wrong but she didn't want a fight. "I hope so. Just as long as he's safe." She watched the traffic and then said, "He won't answer the phone when I call him."

"Dad probably cut his phone off." Trini said it matter of factly, without looking over at her.

Making a left, she had raised her eyebrows. Trini might have been right. That would have been a stupid thing to do but Antonio might have done just that. Stupid because Tony Jr. wouldn't be able to call if he were in trouble. And also stupid because she wouldn't be able to try to smooth things out between the two.

What started out as a transgression for staying out all night turned into a blowout over poor grades, no work ethic, bad friends and no future. It ended when Tony slammed the front door on his way out.

At first, she had thought he would just spend some time thinking, cooling off, or talking with a friend. She had to go to work but when she got home from the evening shift, he still hadn't come home. Nor the next day or night.

She didn't know if he had skipped school. She didn't want to call the school office. That would only bring in more trouble. Her emotions were torn in every which way. The school didn't want to help. They just wanted to get involved. She knew how they helped other people. They got Social Services involved and sometimes the police. She didn't want that.

Desperation seemed to be just one step behind her. She had to figure a way out.

She said a quick prayer, a mumble of her lips between her and God and his guardian angels.

She glanced at her daughter and then said, "You and me are okay, right?"

Her daughter, with her dreamy eyes, looked back at her and then said, "Yeah, I guess, mom."

She smiled anxiously at her. She didn't know what there was to guess about but she knew she couldn't get to the bottom of that in the few minutes they had in the car.

"You're a sweetheart," she said. And then she straightened up and added, "I need to tell you this while I've got a chance. I put the casserole in the oven and set it. Can you take it out at six? I left some instructions on the stove. I've got to go to work."

"Sure. Okay. I thought you were off this evening. You picked me up."

"No, your dad's working late."

"When will he be home?" It didn't sound like Trini looked forward to it. Antonio could be almost as gruff with her as with Tony.

"I think six. You can eat then."

"Okay." Trini shrugged.

Amada had pulled into the drive and walked into the house with Trini. She checked Tony's room. He wasn't there. She shook her head. Trini closed the door to her own room. Amada mumbled another prayer.

Grabbing her sweater and coat from her room, she left them on the chair by the front door.

Even after going through the conversation she had with Trini, she wasn't sure what to do about Tony, about her husband. Fact of the matter was, she and Antonio didn't see much of each other, between work, overtime, different shifts and the kids. She wondered if it bothered him as much as it bothered her. Antonio had never talked much but lately he was edgy. She didn't know what she could do. She finished packing her lunch bag and set it on the chair.

Pulling her phone out of her purse, she texted Antonio and asked if he had cut off Tony's phone. She didn't expect to get an answer right away since he would be working on the product line. She knew she's have to check her phone later for a text when she got a break that evening.

"I'm going, honey." She called down the hall. She put her phone in her purse and took out her keys. "You take care. Get your homework done." She raised her voice a little. "Call Kaisley, okay?"

She realized she had worried so much about Tony that she hadn't thought about Trini and her school work, which was another worry.

"Okay," Trini answered from her room.

Taking a deep breath, Amada wished everything was okay.

--3--

Driving to the hospital, she ran through all of the things that bothered her. There was Tony Jr. And Antonio. Why couldn't he just stay calm and talk with his son? Why did he always jump to the worst conclusions?

Tony stayed out all night without permission. How many other seventeen year old boys did that? At least every other kid at his school. No, he didn't ask for permission but he did send a text. But 'it was too late to be seen', Antonio had said. But, at least he sent one. It didn't matter to Antonio.

It was almost like he wanted to argue. Maybe it was the long hours. Maybe it was something between Antonio and her that made him crabby. Things weren't always the best there, either. No alone time, too many bills, and then, their teenagers. Ah, teenagers.

She made a right into one of the hospital's garages, waved a parking pass and entered the employee area.

Trini wasn't thirteen yet but she was close enough. Some of her friends were thirteen. And kids grew up faster than they did when she was young, faster in more ways than one.

She didn't want to think about that aspect but she had to.

And then there was Tony. How fast was he living? Antonio might be right. He was the one with the testosterone. Maybe Tony needed a heavy hand. But Tony Jr. was her first baby.

She slid out of her car, adjusted her sweater and coat, and grabbed her purse and lunch. She locked the car and walked to the garage elevators, all the while thinking. She slipped on her mask. She barely noticed any of the other people coming and going. Some were medical, some were patients and some were patients' families. The families couldn't visit on the hospital floors, due to the pandemic

restrictions, but they could take their loved ones to the medical buildings that were joined with the hospital.

How was Trini going to go to college with her grades? Granted she had some tough courses in advanced math and science but still, she had to get really serious if she was going to be eligible for any scholarships.

She crossed the parking garage bridge into the hospital. It was still light outside but she could see the lights had already lit along the dark shadowy edge of the outside garage wall. Stepping into a foyer, she entered and rode the elevators again up to her floor.

What was she going to do with Tony? Almost to her floor, she jabbed at her blouse to tug it into her hospital slacks. She felt the extra weight. Just one more thing to think about, gaining weight.

“Hi Maddy,” one of the nurses greeted her as she walked through the doors to her floor.

“Hey, how’s it going?” Amada replied. The girl that greeted her was new and young. She didn’t have to worry about weight, or teenagers.

Jaci glanced up at the big floor clock and said, “Just two more hours.”

“Wish I was you.” Amada tried to give her a smile.

“You doing twelve hours, huh. Going until six tomorrow morning?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Amada looked at her assigned beds on her computer. It looked like they added one more patient from the night before. A stroke victim in her seventies. She was a Jane Doe. Odd. Oh well, she’d coordinate with Luce.

“Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

She printed her assignment sheet, added it to her clipboard, and added equipment to her computer and cart. She hooked up the blood pressure machine and thermometer and added more gloves, gowns, masks and face shield.

She finished with her first few patients and reviewed Jane Doe’s charts before entering her room.

Something didn’t make sense.

Luce came down the hall.

“Hey, Luce, did you have a minute?” Amada asked. “Looking at this.” She pointed to the screen. “Why isn’t she in ICU?”

“No beds.”

“No beds? But this is insane. A brain stem stroke? Breathing problems, ventilator? We’re supposed to care for that on this floor?”

“Covid is what they tell us.”

“She doesn’t have that, does she?” Amada could feel a little bit of adrenalin kick in.

“No, or she’d be down in the Covid ICU. She tested negative. See?”

Amada looked at the screen. “Yeah, but still.”

“I know.” Luce said, as she rolled her cart side to side with Amada’s.

“And a Jane Doe?”

“No positive id yet. They found her outside some apartments. There’s an open birthday card on her table. Sweet old lady. It’s a shame.” Luce said, dispassionately as she worked through her own set of medical cases.

“Okay. Well, thanks, I’ll take her from here.”

“Right.” Luce said with her head down.

Amada straightened up her cart and wheeled it right before Jane Doe’s door.

“Hey, Jones is looking for someone to take her Thanksgiving shift.”

“Thanksgiving? Really? Good luck with that,” Amada said.

Luce snickered.

Amada backed into the door and pulled her cart with her. The room was dim. Jane Doe was alone, without a roommate.

Amada had nothing to really do except examine the connections on all of the equipment and ensure the patient had no adverse reactions to all of the plugs, hoses, wires. Because she was still on a ventilator and in a coma, Jane Doe had her vitals constantly checked with the updates sent to floor station.

The old lady seemed to rest comfortably, even with the tube taped around her face and down in her throat. Grey musty hair, thin grey skin, wrinkles around her neck and hands and arms. Amada touched her hand. She was icy cold but her body temperature was ninety-seven nine. Oxygen was ninety, even with the ventilator. She draped another thin blanket over her feet and lower body.

She saw the flowers when she had first approached the bed but she wanted to check the patient. She moved over to the table tucked into an alcove over from the foot of the bed. She touched the dark green glass vase of yellow Chrysanthemums, marigolds, zinnias, and rich purple violets. They were strangely regal, Amada thought. She looked over at the old lady. She wondered how she had flowers but no name. People don't send flowers to a Jane Doe. Who would have sent them? If they knew Jane Doe was in the hospital, wouldn't they know her condition?

They couldn't have been sent to Jane Doe. It was a mistake.

She searched for a card from the florist but only found a small one by two card, a calling card, written in cursive that said, 'Happy Birthday'. There was no other card attached to the flowers.

She lifted up and read the birthday card that she had found. Jane Doe was a mom and a grandma. She had a daughter named Annie and a granddaughter named Jen.

The flowers were for her birthday. Looks like maybe, it wasn't a mistake, was it?

She looked again at the old lady and guessed at her age. Seventies? Maybe eighty? The granddaughter must be in her twenties or thirties? Who are they? Where are they? Who would send flowers to an unconscious stroke victim? Unless they didn't know. How could they send them to the hospital and not know her condition?

They'd want to know.

If it were her mother, she would want to know, Amada thought.

"But I can't do anything about that," Amada whispered even as she put the card down and lifted the flowers to smell them. The fragrance was light, happy, and uplifting. She sniffed them again just because it made her feel good.

Looking over at her patient, she hoped Jane Doe's family knew what happened but there was nothing else she could do.

Really? What would Johnnie, her sister-in-law's husband, do? He was a detective. He could find out or he'd have ways to find out.

Maybe her family was out of town and they've already been alerted. If so, they'd be in soon and contact the hospital.

Amada rechecked the medical equipment and left. She didn't understand why she admired the flowers, a patient's flowers. She never did that.

And, she admonished herself, thinking she didn't have time to waste. She had a full night ahead of her. She set the flowers down. Tending to Jane Doe one more time, she peeked at the flowers again.

They almost shimmered.

--4--

Amada checked her personal messages during her break.

Antonio had replied to her question about Tony's cell phone with a simple "Yep".

She rolled her eyes. She typed in, "What if there's an emergency," and sent it back to him. She blew out a breath through pursed lips. She got a reply almost right away.

"k".

Really? What does that mean? Why did he make her make him spell it out? Just communicate. "Are you going to turn his service back on?" She typed a little harder than she needed. She pushed go.

She waited. Finally, she felt a buzz.

"Y".

When? "When?" She typed and sent.

"Guess now."

She wanted to ask him more but she didn't have time. Not when he was playing, "Guess what I mean".

She called her sister-in-law.

"Suze," she said, when her sister-in-law answered. "You okay? Got a minute?"

"Yeah, sure. What is it?"

"Got something for you to ask Johnnie."

"Somebody in trouble? Tony?"

"Oh, Suzie, no, but well, that's another conversation. No time. Tony's not in that kind of trouble. I don't think." She paused. "Got an old lady here, on my shift. A Jane Doe."

"Yeah?"

"How do they go about finding the family?"

"She been there awhile?"

"No. Just yesterday."

"One day? What are you worried about? They've probably found them already. Out of towners. They'll claim her when they get there."

"I don't know. I got a feeling about this one."

"What?"

"I just think no one knows she's in here."

"You don't have enough problems?"

"You're right. You're right." Amada gave a rueful smile and then continued. "But what would Johnnie say?"

"He'd tell you that you're crazy."

She smiled, "I know. He's told me that before but he said it's because I grew up with you." They had gone to school together. Antonio was Suze's brother.

"Yeah, something he'd say. Hang on."

Amada waited. She checked the time. She only had a few more minutes on her break.

"He said you're nuts."

"We knew that."

Suze chuckled. "He said, he'd check her phone and her home."

"She didn't have a phone."

"Check her home."

"Not sure where she lives."

"That's going to make it tough. Might be why she's still unknown."

"Yeah, yeah," Amada said. "But you've given me an idea. Tell Johnnie thanks and we'll talk later."

"Good."

"Hey, wait. Did you talk to mom?"

"No." There was a silence and then Suze said, "I should have. Have you?"

"You know I did."

"Everything alright?"

"Just her diet and diabetes. She doesn't like either."

"Yeah, I know. I hope she's alright."

Amada could hear the guilt. She didn't want to make her sister-in-law feel guilty. She just wanted her to call more. She sighed.

Suze must have heard her. "I wanted to but it got crazy here. You know how that is."

Amada nodded on her end. "I do. I do. But try to call her. You know how she is."

"I will."

"Okay. I got to go. Break's over."

"Love you."

"Love you, too."

--5--

Amada worked through midnight and into the next morning. She checked up on her Jane Doe several times. She couldn't help but keep busy while she waited for the day shift. They started coming in around five thirty. She waited for one particular nurse, Natalee.

"Hey Nay," Amada greeted her as she slipped behind the counter.

"Hey, girl, what's happening?"

"Not much, got a question for you."

Natalee stored her things and then turned to her. "Sure."

"About Jane Doe. Anybody know anything about her?"

"Let me look."

"Don't bother. I looked through her files. I was wondering if you had any leads yesterday."

"Leads? No. This isn't a detective agency," Natalee smiled at her.

"I know, I know. It just bothers me for some reason."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Maybe she reminds me of my own mama."

"Uh-oh. Feelings. Can't have any of those around here."

Amada smiled at that. She waited, then gave a little perplexed frown and asked, "Do you know where they found her?"

"Let me look and see where they dispatched EMS." She switched screens. She scrolled to the day before, down to the late morning. "Ah. Here we go. Jefferson Garden Apartments. On Hundred Fifteenth Street. Found her outside the buildings. Maybe she lives there, maybe not. That help?"

"Yeah, yeah, I guess," Amada nodded, "thanks a lot." She moved in front of the desk.

"You're welcome."

"I wonder why they dispatched out of here rather than Central. They'd be closer."

"I don't know, girl." Natalee shook her head while going through her paperwork. "Maybe Central was already busy."

"Yeah, maybe. Thanks."

--6--

Amada ended her shift late which was pretty normal. There was a hold up between one of her patients and the OR. She never understood how they could run late with the first surgery patient when the surgeon was already in the house but they did. They finally came for the gall bladder at six thirty. She was able to leave twenty five minutes later.

She popped in on Jane Doe one last time on her way out. The old lady was unconscious. Most of the flowers had a slight wilt to them. She looked the card over once again. Annie and Jen. If she only had a last name. She, or the authorities, could contact them.

She had texted Antonio that she was running late. He said he would drop Trini off at school on his way to work. He hadn't heard from Tony. She wanted to say, 'But did you try?' But she only thought that. She didn't ask. She didn't want another argument.

She sent Tony a text while she sat in her car as it warmed up. 'Where are you? Please come home. Call me. Love Mom.' She'd take any of his possible responses except no response. She prayed, again, that he was still alive. They could fix anything if he was still alive. Please God.

She backed out of her parking spot and left the garage. On her work days, she normally stopped by their mom's, even after the all night shift. She wanted to make sure their mom had the right things to eat. She checked the time. Nana Maria would be up. Her place was sort of on the way home, maybe an extra twenty minutes or so. But, did she really have the time?

She got stuck in a traffic jam even before the freeway. After she navigated around it, she saw that it put her closer to a Hundred and Fifteenth.

Should she?

Looking in her rearview mirror, she saw the traffic backed up in the new approach. She decided on Hundred and Fifteenth. She couldn't shake the depressing feeling that nobody was looking for the old woman's relatives.

Pulling over to the side, she typed in the street and the Jefferson apartments into the phone app she used for directions. She waited for the response.

"In five hundred feet, take a right turn onto Mayflower Avenue. Continue east on Mayflower."

There we go. It took her away from the jam.

She shifted her car into drive and then turned onto Mayflower.

"In a quarter mile, there is a fork, stay right." It repeated itself. "In a quarter mile, there is a fork, stay right. Continue on Mayflower."

She took her time. She knew most of the other drivers were anxious to get to work. She had plenty of time. She could wait.

"Continue on Mayflower for another mile." That was a long way. The direction app got her onto a highway and she took it to Ninetieth. "In twelve hundred feet, turn right onto One Hundred and Fifteenth Street, continue for a half mile."

She slowed down when she saw the apartment complex. There was a strip of average looking single floor apartments and condos that were all connected. They were surrounded by larger apartment buildings that appeared to be newer but also very bland and generic. Pulling into a parking spot, she gave them a closer look. They had a brownish red brick exterior, white gutters and drains, concrete walks, and small front lawns.

She didn't know what she was doing there. What did she expect to see? An apartment with a sign that said, 'Missing old lady, bring her home'? She got out of the car and walked to the edge of one of the lawns. Maybe she lived in one of the single story apartments but maybe she lived in one of the larger buildings on the side, or maybe she didn't live there at all.

But she had to live there, Amada thought. An old woman doesn't just walk around the city with a birthday card.

She looked around for mailboxes. Maybe they had names on them. There were a cluster of boxes near each of the bigger buildings. She checked the nearest cluster.

All of the boxes had numbers and some of them had names.

She took a deep breath and shrugged her shoulders. She needed to head to their mom's house.

A plastic wrapper blew past her and it caught her eye. It tumbled past a yellow envelope snagged in between the bottom of the mailboxes and the concrete wall. Getting a tingle, she walked over, bent down and picked it up.

It was addressed to 'E. Gammer' with an apartment address. She held it up and looked at the buildings. It had an address for one of the single floor apartments. The return was simply a last name, 'Joiner' with an out of state address.

Amada figured it was possible that the envelope was the envelope for Jane Doe's birthday card. It was a festive yellow. Real proof, Amada scoffed.

She walked over to the address on the envelope and rang the doorbell. Receiving no answer after a few tries, she knocked. She still got nothing.

She tried a neighbor on each side of the apartment. Neither answered the door.

Standing in the cold in the little yard in front of the apartment building, she scanned for the manager's suite but didn't see one. With the wind starting to nip at her eyes, she made a mental note to call later and headed for her car.

She slipped the envelope into her purse and pulled out the keys and headed to their mom's.

--7--

Letting herself into Nana Maria's place, she called out, "Hey mom, it's me, Maddy." She dropped her purse on the kitchen table, her coat on a kitchen chair, and snooped into a box of chocolate candies. A few of the pieces were missing. She read the ingredients. Most of the candies had sugar in them.

"Mom, where are you?" She called out louder than before. "Don't make me come get you."

"I'm right here," Nana popped her head into the kitchen from the bedroom end of the hall.

"Mom," Amada said as she lifted the box, "what are you doing? Trying to kill yourself?"

"Bah." Nana waved her off. "One piece."

"There's more than that missing, but one piece is bad enough, mom." Maddy said, sternly. "I don't want to be the bad guy."

"Well, don't."

"You're impossible."

"No worse than you, me trying to get you and Suzie through high school."

"There we go again."

"What?" Her mother shrugged.

"Can't have a grown up conversation with you."

"Oh, tsk-task. It didn't have sugar in it any way."

"It didn't?" Amada picked up the box and reread it. Some pieces were sugarless. "I'm supposed to believe that?"

"Believe what you want."

"Why did you get the candy at all?"

"Some kids were selling it in the neighborhood."

"So you thought you'd just buy the very thing that could kill you."

"Oh, it's not that bad."

"It can be that bad."

"Oh, bosh." Nana waved her concerns away.

"Mom, I'm just trying to look out for you. Did you take your blood sugar today? Did you write it down?"

"No and no."

"Do you want me to do it for you?"

"No, I will get to it."

"You usually would have already gotten to it by now. What's going on? Did you sleep in?"

"Maybe." Nana said, coyly.

Maddy looked over at her. "Up late, a night on the town, eh, mom?" Maddy laughed a little, trying to lighten up.

"Could be," Nana said with the trace of a smile on her face. "I just stayed up late and decided to sleep."

"It's okay, it's just different for you."

"I'm glad you're okay with it."

"Seriously, mom. Sugar imbalance is nothing to joke about. I'm trying to be easy going."

Nana made a face and a coughing noise.

"But a side effect is fatigue, worn out, sleeping all the time. Is that you now?"

"No," Nana scoffed. "Don't worry about it. Okay?" She gave Amada a good, long look as she said it.

Maddy tried to read her face, decided it was hopeless and then said, "Yeah, okay." She shifted the conversation. "Do you need anything? I'm going to the grocery store today. Let me look in your fridge."

Maddy bent over and peered in after she opened the door. "You could freshen up your fruits and vegetables. And some sliced chicken and lean beef." She picked up the milk container and gently shook it. "Milk, too." She straightened up. "Didn't we just get milk? Do you have a cat coming around?" She laughed and closed the door. "Do you need bread?" She checked the bread box.

"Cheese. Let me look again." She looked inside the refrigerator. "I guess a packet of cheese. I might need to write this down."

"And a box of cereal," Nana said.

"No sugar," Maddy said.

"Fine. Cheerios are fine, if you don't mind," her mother clucked to end the sentence.

"Okay, I'll write it down." She pulled a pencil and a small pad of paper out of a kitchen drawer and wrote the items down. "Anything else?"

"Pepsi and chips."

"You're kidding."

Nana lifted her shoulders. "Maybe."

"Well, forget it." Maddy looked over the list. "I think I've got it." She ripped off the small sheet and dropped it in her purse. "You want me to take your blood sugar while I'm here." She took a step towards the hall, thinking she'd get the test from Nana's bedroom.

"No, I can do it." Nana didn't move. "I might watch some TV in the living room."

"There's nothing on."

Nana tilted her head. "How about The Price Is Right?"

"Oh, please, mom."

"Well, there could be other things, too."

"Yeah, I guess so. But your brain will turn to mush. How about a crossword puzzle? Or Sudoku?"

"Maybe later."

Maddy looked at her. "Something's up. What's going on with you? Are you alright? Are you dizzy?"

"Nothing. I'm fine." She stood up. "I'm just slow to get moving."

Maddy took her hand, held on and then slyly slid her fingers down to Nana's wrist and looked at her watch. "Hold on." She waited sixty seconds. "Good pulse."

"See? You worry too much."

"Yeah, well. You take care."

"You, too."

Maddy glanced around the kitchen one last time and grabbed her coat and purse. "I'll be back later with the groceries."

"Okay, I'll be here," Nana said, with a smile.

Maddy gave her a little hug.

Maria watched Amada leave through the side door to the drive way. She got up out of her chair, took the box of candy and walked down the hall towards her bedroom. She didn't want a nap but she didn't want to be told what she could or couldn't do, either.

--8--

Annie returned home the day after her mom's birthday. She had tried calling on her birthday but received no answer. She didn't think much of it. She had left a message and then she and Jen had visited with her other daughter.

After dropping Jen off, she brought her suitcase and travel bag in, unpacked and then sat on her bed. The past few days had been a whirlwind. She and Jen drove to her other daughter's home and attended a shower. They went to dinner together and then breakfast and lunch, all the while visiting with Jessica and her husband, and talking about the new baby. And then she drove all the way home without stopping just so Jen could get back to work.

Kicking off her shoes, she lifted her feet on the bed and stretched out across the upper blankets. She looked up at the ceiling but it had an uneasy swirl. She closed her eyes and waited until the motion of the car and the rush of the road ebbed from her brain.

After a few minutes, she picked up her cell, dialed her mom's number and lay back with the phone against her ear. She listened to the buzz as it tried to connect. She heard it ring and waited four, five, six, seven, eight times and it finally changed to voice mail. She left another message and hung up. One misconnect was bad. Two was terrible. She didn't know what to do. She had no other numbers to call.

She didn't want to drive the several hours to her mom's just to find out her mom had forgotten to charge her phone again. She didn't think she could. Not with the way she felt. Why couldn't her mom be more responsible? Didn't she know how much she worried?

She tried to sit up. She couldn't. She was just too dizzy.

She got back on her bed, stretched out and fell asleep.

--9--

Amada knocked on the glass pane of the side door. "Hey mom, it's me, Maddy."

No one answered.

She rapped again and called out.

No answer.

Groaning, she set the grocery bags down and dug the keys out of her purse. She kicked herself for not having the keys ready to begin with. She unlocked the door, picked up all of the bags and let herself in. She parked the groceries on the table.

"Mom, it's me, Maddy. Back from the groceries," she raised her voice.

She heard a muffled sound. A bedroom door open and then an "Okay, coming," came down the hall.

The older woman came into the kitchen from the hall with her grey hair mussed and a house coat.

Maddy was already putting the groceries away. "What were you doing, mom? Napping?"

"Just for a minute."

"You'll get your clocks screwed up that way."

"Yeah," she said and yawned.

"No Price Is Right to keep you up?"

"I didn't feel like watching."

"Okay," Maddy turned to her after she finished storing the groceries. "I'd stay but I need to pick up Trini and fix dinner. Are you okay? Can you fix something?"

"Sure, there are some Swanson's frozen dinners in the freezer."

"Right, low cal. I saw them. You good with that?"

"It will be okay."

"I'll fix some burritos tonight and bring you some, okay?"

"Okay," she said, "bring some real sour cream with it, too. Not the diet stuff."

"Mom," Maddy cautioned.

"Well, the real stuff is better."

Maddy nodded.

"I got to go. Running late. You take care." She bent down and kissed her cheek. "Bye, love you."

"Love you, too. Give my love to Antonio."

"Sure will, mom. Bye."

Amada picked up her things and left for home to take a nap. She figured she could get four hours' sleep before she had to get Trini and then take off for work again.

--10--

As much as Amada wanted to get to bed, she called the hospital's HR department and gave them the story of the envelope along with the names and addresses. They didn't seem impressed but thanked her for the information.

Amada then set her alarm and tried to sleep. She kept dreaming of trying to find a Mrs. Gammer or Miss Gammer. She climbed stairs, opened doors, looked through windows, talked to strangers, and even the police. Each time she got close but couldn't find her. She tossed and turned as the light from their window illuminated their bedroom and lit up the backs of her eyes. She squinted and held a hand up to block the sun. But it was no use.

After rolling over to shut off the alarm early, she rose and took a shower and dressed in baggy gym pants and a sweatshirt. She had to make dinner and she needed to be comfortable.

The first thing she did was call Suzie. She asked her to ask her husband to check out the info. Suzie said she would. If she found anything, she would call her.

Sliding her feet into her slippers, she trudged off to the kitchen still half asleep. She preheated the oven. After preparing the burritos, she slid the pan into the oven and set the timer.

She called Tony again and got no answer. She left another message.

Setting the table, she pulled back Tony's plate and put it away. She also didn't set a place for herself. It would be just Trini and Antonio again. She wondered how they were getting along. Antonio was not easy to talk with as an adult - she couldn't imagine how he was doing alone with his almost-a-teen daughter. Adding some dishes to the dishwasher, she knew his heart was good even if his communication skills were not.

Although she didn't want to get other people involved, she called one of Tony's friends' moms, Christina. She had to find out where he was. He might almost be a man but Tony didn't seem to have the skills to make it alone.

Christina picked up her call almost immediately.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Christina? This is Maddy, Tony's mom."

"Oh, Maddy Perez, hi."

Amada didn't hear a lot of warmth in her voice but she didn't feel it either. She pressed on.

"Hi. I was wondering if Tony was over there."

"No, I haven't seen him."

"Tom there?" Amada asked about Christina's son, hoping, maybe, he knew something about Tony.

"Well, he was but I think he's gone out. Anything wrong?" Christina asked innocently.

Oh, the dreaded words. Amada shrank back. As innocent as the question sounded, she knew it wasn't.

Although she needed to talk to someone, almost anyone, Tom's mom was not the someone she could confide in. If she said anything remotely personal, the rest of the school would know.

Amada rubbed her forehead and said, "No, just checking. He was supposed to call but he didn't. You know how boys are."

Christina giggled. "Oh yeah, they don't talk anyway. They just text."

"Right. I didn't think of that. I'll do that. Thanks." Amada let her think she was helpful.

"You're welcome. Is that it?"

"Yes."

"You sure?"

Amada could feel her fishing. "Yes, just trying to catch up with Tony."

"Oh, okay." She sounded disappointed.

"Well, thank you." Amada broke in.

"Yes, ok. Take care."

"Bye."

Amada disconnected the call and blew out a breath. She wouldn't do that again. She got up and checked

on the burritos. She turned off the oven, cracked open the oven door and went to their bedroom to change for work.

Coming back into the kitchen with her scrubs on, she transferred the burritos to the fridge, closed the oven door with her hip, and figured they could warm them up whenever they wanted. She picked up her keys, purse and coat and got in the car to get Trini.

--11--

Twenty five minutes later, Trini opened the car door and slid in.

"Hi baby, how was school?"

"Okay." Trini said without turning to her mom.

"Algebra any better?"

She looked down into her lap and clenched her fists. "Ugh, wish Tony was home."

"I know, me too. More than you know."

"I know, mom. But he could help me with math."

"Tony helped you?"

"He used to."

"He did?"

"Yeah, he's pretty good at it."

"I know but I didn't know he helped you."

"He's not a bad guy," Trini emphasized.

"I know he's not."

"Then why did he get kicked out of the house?"

"He didn't get kicked out. Where did you get that idea?"

"Dad did."

"Dad did what?"

"He told him to get lost."

"He did?" Amada looked away from the road and at her. She realized she had only known what happened based on what Antonio told her. She didn't think he would cover up anything but there's always another side to a story. She decided to listen, if nothing else, for Trini's sake.

"Yeah, he said why don't you get lost."

"When they were fighting?" She looked back at the road but gave Trini a quick glance.

"Yes."

"I see," she said, as she adjusted her grip on the steering wheel. "That's not exactly the same thing as kicking him out of the house." She wanted to defend Antonio but maybe it would be best to listen and get the full story.

Trini didn't say anything. She just looked out of the window.

"Did you talk to Tony? Did he say something?"

Amada saw Trini give her a sideward look before she answered. "No."

Amada knew she wasn't getting the full story.

"What happened that night?"

"I don't want to get into trouble."

"What do you mean?" Amada slid one of her hands over to Trini and laid it on top of her closest hand.

"You won't get into trouble. What happened?"

Trini searched her mom's face.

Amada gave a little nod while she kept her eyes on the traffic.

"Tony tried to sneak in the house after dad went to bed."

"You were up?"

"Yeah," Trini nodded. "But dad wasn't asleep yet and he heard him and came out yelling, 'where have you been?' And all kinds of stuff. Calling Tony a coward for trying to sneak in. I think that's what got Tony mad." She quit talking and looked out the window.

"What happened after that?" Amada prompted her.

"Tony got mad and said he didn't need to sneak around and when he got out of school he was going to find a job and move out."

"Yeah," Amada encouraged her.

"And dad laughed at him and said, 'you think it's easy making a living? You should try it. Grow up. Be a man.' Tony stared at him all mad. I could tell he was really mad but dad said, 'how you going to get a job, your grades aren't good enough because you don't work at things now. I work my fingers to the bone. You should try that sometime. A little work.' And they just stared at each other.

Tony said he works hard but Dad said bull. Not hard enough and he hangs out with his friends who don't work, who don't do nothing. A bunch of lazy bums."

Amada wondered about Tony's friend, Tom.

"None of them will get anywhere. All a bunch of cry babies and sneaks and he says, 'Just like you, a sneak, a coward.'

And Tony got all red and up in dad's face and started breathing hard. And dad got all big and angry and he yelled, 'You want to make something of it?' It was scary." Trini sniffled.

Amada nodded. "I'm sorry, honey."

"Tony didn't do anything but you could tell he was close to fighting."

"Right," Amada agreed.

"And that's when dad said, 'why don't you just get lost?' And Tony said, "'Okay, okay,' and he backed away from dad, and picked up some stuff. Dad said, 'Grow up and quit sneaking around.' Tony said, 'I will' and he left."

"That's it?"

"Yeah."

Amada sat quietly, thought, and then said, "I'm really sorry." She reached over and took Trini's hand.

"We'll make this better. We'll get Tony back."

"I hope so but how, Mom? They were both pretty mad."

"I'll talk to dad."

"Okay."

They drove for a couple of blocks.

"I just wish Tony could know that it will be okay," Amada broke the silence.

Trini looked at her for a few moments, didn't say anything, sniffled and then looked forward through the windshield.

They pulled up to their house.

Trini looked at her mom as they got out of the car. "When can you talk to Dad?"

"Tonight, I guess."

"Don't you work?"

Amada opened the door and let them in. "I do but I guess I'll have to call him. Maybe on break."

"Okay, mom." Trini said, but she delayed going down the hall to her room.

"Okay, what?" Amada looked after her with intensity in her eyes.

"It's just that, everybody's working, you, Dad, Tony's gone."

Amada bit her lower lip. She didn't want to work all the time, especially the twelve hour shifts, but they needed the money especially since Antonio was worried about his job.

She walked over to Trini and hugged her tight. "I know, baby. I miss you. I miss you so much. I'll bet it's hard to be alone. It will get better. I promise."

"It will?"

“Yes. It will. I promise.”

She let go of her baby. She didn't know how it would ever get better.

--12--

Hurrying down the hospital hall, Amada thought it was strange that the corridor was almost empty. There were no conversations outside the doors. No nurses handing off duties to the aides. She saw the back of a nurse's aide several doors down just before the aide entered a patient's unit.

She didn't stop to figure it out. She was determined to check on Ms. Gammer before she clocked in at the front desk.

Was Ms. Gammer still there? Did human resources find her relatives? Were the relatives already there? She fitted her mask, her face shield, gloves and gown and pushed opened the door.

Before she even made it all of the way in, she knew the answer. She could feel it. An ominous silence haunted the gaps between the mechanical clicks and pumps of the ventilator and the beeps of the monitor.

No one else was in the room. And no one else had been in the room except Ms. Gammer.

The room was dark and empty. And the fragrance had faded. She hurried to Ms. Gammer's side.

There was no buzz, no tension, and no movement. Ms. Gammer lay completely still in her bed. The ventilator hummed and sucked. The machines beeped.

Amada checked the vitals on the screens. Ms. Gammer's oxygen was in the mid 80s, which was low. It was much lower than it had been the day before. Amada frowned. She took out a stethoscope from her pocket and listened at Ms. Gammer's chest and at the side of her chest. She heard a rasp and a squeak. Was it pneumonia? Maybe. She needed a doctor to see her. But where was everybody?

The oxygen had to be setting off an alarm at the desk. She checked the flow to be sure it was working. It was. Ms. Gammer was congested and her lungs just weren't absorbing the oxygen.

Amada's heart picked up some beats.

Could it be Covid? Amada thought of her daughter, her son and Antonio. If she got it from Ms.

Gammer, she wouldn't be able to quarantine. How could she quarantine with all of the mess going on at home? Pleeeaaase, no. She had too much to do. She couldn't handle one more thing.

It was already hard to breathe through the mask and it was hot under the shield. Beads formed on her brow. She couldn't let panic get the best of her. She wanted to wipe the sweat off her forehead. If she could just do the little things, she could keep panic from taking over.

She checked Ms. Gammer's chart once again. Good. Her Covid test had been negative. But she worried if the test had been taken too soon or if it was a false negative. The pulmonologist would probably order another test, along with flu tests and chest x-rays.

She turned away from the bed and spotted the vase of wilted flowers. Only a couple of them had kept some of their color. Given the condition of the old lady, she had to find Ms. Gammer's daughter.

But a doctor first.

And then Tony. And Trini. And Antonio. And Nana Maria. Her mind jumped from one thing to the other. She hustled out of the room and nearly knocked over the afternoon dinner orderly. “Oh my gosh! 'Scuse me,” she said as she twirled sideways away from the cart. She wanted to ask about the empty hall but she was in a hurry. She darted behind the deserted desk and signed on and sent out another page for Ms. Gammer's assigned doctor and the charge nurse.

She was totally confused by the emptiness around the desk and down the halls. Where was everybody? She scanned the day duty list. Almost half of the nurses had called in. Probably down with Covid. She wondered if Ms. Gammer had it. She definitely had some chest congestion. She glanced at the wall clock.

She was still a half hour early. She checked her rooms for the day and made a note of any extra duties. She no longer had Ms. Gammer as a patient but she had at least another dozen rooms. Shaking her head, she didn't know how many she could handle.

But then, a thought occurred to her. She tried to open up the patient information page and entered Gammer into the search bar.

The search returned thirteen Gammers. She sighed. So many? But she clicked through them. She pulled up a Henry who lived at the apartment complex. The web page said he had died two years earlier. That could explain why the woman was undiscovered and unclaimed, she thought.

And then she pulled up an 'Elsie Gammer', female, birth date just a day earlier. She was eighty three. Her address was the same as Henry Gammer. Her contacts were – Henry and an Annie Fischer. There was a number for Annie. She added her as a contact to her cell.

Standing up from her desk, she found a small unoccupied conference room. She closed the door halfway, just enough to keep an eye on the front desk. She almost called Annie Fischer's number. Instead, duty prevailed. She called the in-charge nurse, received no answer and had to leave a message. Then she called Annie's number. Her heart sunk when she heard a strange ring and recording. The Fischer number had been disconnected.

She returned to the front desk computer and checked the number on the screen with the one she had called. They were the same. Darn. She deleted the contact.

She called the in-charge again and paged the doctor again. She got up from the desk and checked on Mrs. Gammer, now that she knew she was a Mrs.

Her oxygen level was even lower and she seemed to struggle to breathe. Amada adjusted what she could and rushed out of the room. She had to find the pulmonary specialist.

Popping her head into the various patients' rooms as she made her room down the hall, she spied Luce coming out of the elevator. Luce was breathing heavily and she immediately turned toward the floor desk.

"Where is everybody?" Amada asked as she caught up with her.

"Amada, oh my God, the virus is just everywhere. We got called down to build another ICU."

"What?"

"We're overflowing with patients. Most of our doctors are down there."

"That explains it."

"I got your page as I was coming up. Yes. What's up?" Luce asked as she ducked behind the desk and signed on. "Our Jane Doe?"

"Yes, Mrs. Gammer."

"Gammer? How do you know?"

"It's a long story. But, er oxygen level is low. I listened to her breathing. She has some congestion. She needs a doctor."

"Her doctor is down in the new ICU."

"Can we move her there?"

"She's Covid?" Luce scanned the computer screen. "She's negative."

"She's got the symptoms."

"We need a doctor to diagnose and order the tests."

"I know. That's why I paged."

Luce closed her eyes, let out a breath and said, "Yeah, right. I know." She placed a hand on the desktop.

"Look, I'll get Dr. Mara up here. You go do your rounds."

"Where's everybody else?"

"Sick."

"Everybody?"

"No, just half of the workforce."

"Oh, okay. Just half," Amada smiled grimly.

"And a new ICU." Luce called after her as Amada hustled to her patients.

An hour later, she called her sister-in-law. Sitting on the edge of a chair in the empty visitors lounge, she listened to the rings. Her face guard was tilted back and her mask was pulled down. She wiped the sweat off of her brow and around her eyes with a Kleenex.

"Come on, answer, please."

Her back and arms ached, as well as her feet. She slipped her shoes off and wriggled her toes. She rubbed the instep of each foot using the other foot. It helped. A little.

"Amada," Suzie answered with a welcoming tone in her voice.

"Hi Suze, how are you?"

"Good. You?"

"Fine." Amada dived right in. "I don't have much time. I'm on break and we are just slammed here with Covid."

"Oh no!"

"Yeah. Look, could you ask Johnnie to find a number for me?"

"Oh, Amada, you know how he is."

"I know, I know, but I'm so close to finding out who this old lady is. And she's in bad shape."

"Oh no," Suzie commiserated.

"Write this down. Okay?" Amada waited. "Got a pen and paper?"

"I'm ready."

"The old woman's name is Elsie Gammer." Amada gave her the address. "Her daughter's name is Annie Fischer. She had a phone number but it's disconnected. I'm hoping she has a new one."

"What's the old one?"

Amada gave it to her.

"And you want Johnnie to get the new number?"

"Yes."

"Okay."

"I think she needs to know about her mother."

"I see. Okay. Will do. You alright? You sound tense."

Amada rolled her eyes and her neck. "No, I'm fine. It's just work. You know, this Covid thing." She said it but she knew Suzie couldn't fully appreciate the havoc at the hospital. "I've got to go. Thank you, Suzie. I really appreciate it. Just getting nowhere here, with HR." Under her breath, she added, "They probably have Covid, too."

"Everything's Covid. Is it really that bad?"

Amada paused before answering, thinking about the twelve hour shifts that sometimes turned into fourteen hours, the trips to her mother-in-law's home, her husband whom she never saw, her lack of sleep and, of course, Tony, who was still missing. And Trini. Was Covid really that bad in the scheme of things? What should she say?

"Everybody has problems," she said with a thin resolve.

"That's what I say. That's what I tell Johnnie. It's bad but Maddy is doing alright."

"Right," Amada shook her head. She knew she wouldn't be able to explain. And then she yawned.

"Gotta go before I drop on my feet. Call me as soon as you hear from Johnnie. I don't think this lady is going to make it."

Luce told Amada that she was able to get one of the doctors up from the new ICU to tend to Mrs. Gammer, although she was still listed as a Jane Doe. He ordered an antigen Covid test, a molecular Covid test if the antigen was negative, and a series of in-room chest x-rays.

She also said that they would transfer her to an ICU as soon as a unit became available.

"So she has pneumonia," Amada said.

"She has something, and the stroke has affected her ability to breathe."

"Would they put her in with the Covid patients even if she doesn't have Covid?"

"No, but in order to get a unit, she might be better off with a positive test."

"I guess if we want to get some rest, we might be better off with a positive test," Amada grunted as she loaded her cart for her next round of patients.

"Isn't that the truth?"

"Let me know," Amada said, as she pushed her cart down the aisle.

"Sure," Luce said, without looking up.

--15--

Amada toiled through the night. Nearing the end of her shift, she donned her PPE and checked in on Mrs. Gammer. Her breathing was terrible, her oxygen level was low and she still was not conscious. Looking through her charts on the computer, she was receiving more visits, her condition was critical, and she had been scheduled for the respiratory non-Covid ICU. But a unit wasn't available. She took Mrs. Gammer's hand and held it for a moment. Of the many sad things she saw in her job, seeing an old person die alone was one of the saddest. Glancing over at the flowers, they seemed even more wilted. Once again, she thought she should toss them but there was a single marigold that still held its yellow. It wasn't as bright and brilliant as the first night but Amada decided to leave them. She let go of Mrs. Gammer's hand, walked across the room to the hall and closed the door behind. It was time to go and her shift change was there.

--16--

Heading out to her car, she got a message from her sister in law. Suzie's husband, Johnnie, had tracked down Annie Fischer. Despite her aching muscles and mushy brain, Amada got so excited she stopped walking and held the phone tight against her ear.

Annie was a New Jersey resident. Which explained, in Amada's mind, why she might not have learned about her mother. Amada saved Fischer's number to her phone. She planned to call her as soon as she got home.

She also had a message from Antonio. He couldn't take Trini to school. Oh no. He had to go in early. She'd barely have time to get home and take her. She didn't know how she could manage to do everything. She slid into her car with a big yawn and called him.

"I knew you'd call." Her husband said, as he answered the phone.

Saddened, she had hoped he would have at least said hi. With each day, it seemed like they were growing further apart. "Antonio, no, it's nothing," she started to say. She didn't want to fight about it.

"I'm just lucky to get off my shift on time to take her. What's up with work?"

She backed out of her parking spot and shifted into drive. She was headed home.

"I don't know. They called us into an emergency all-hands meeting fifteen minutes before our shift. I really got to go. And I can't chance being late."

"I know, I know. But you don't know what it's about?"

"No. It could be anything. I don't know." His voice trailed off. "I don't know," he repeated. She could hear the stress, and a sadness, in his voice. "I'm on the bubble here. It could be the end of my job."

"Oh, Tonio, don't talk like that. It will be alright," she tried to comfort him but she knew her words were not enough. If she could just be there for him, she thought. But words, right now, were all she had and she had trouble finding the right ones.

"You never know," was all she could muster. "I'll be home soon."

"Well, I'll be gone. Getting into the car right now."

"Okay, okay. Look," she paused. "I'm going to take some of the burritos to mom. Anything you want me to say?"

"To mom? No." He went silent and then asked, "But weren't you just over there? Aren't you overdoing it?"

"What do you mean? You don't want me to go?" She suppressed another yawn in spite the irritating question. "She's *your* mother." Oops, she knew she sounded cross. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that."
"Never mind. It's alright."

Whew. She didn't want to argue. Unable to hold back, she went ahead and yawned, but she held the phone away from her.

"I mean, where's Suzie? What's with her?" She heard Antonio ask in a far away, tinny voice. She pulled the phone back to her ear.

"I don't know. I hate to say it but she's your sister." She couldn't believe she said it. What was wrong with me, she asked herself. She had no filter this morning.

Silence on the other end, confirming that she had said something stupid.

"Hey, look honey, I didn't mean it that way. I just meant. Well, you know. She doesn't tell me. She says she's busy." Amada said as way of an apology.

Antonio grunted. "What? She's got grad school or something? Big deal. I wish we had time for grad school. Her job? Can't be no worse than us. I don't know. Look, I don't want to fight. Not with everything going on. I got an all-hands meeting, you know?"

"Right, dear. It will be alright," she said it but she wasn't sure about it. "Tell Trini, I'll be home soon." She checked her mirror before she turned right. She said, "Bye, baby," but he had hung up.

--17--

"Heard anything from Tony?" Amada asked Trini as she drove her to school.

"No," her daughter answered as they both look ahead through the windshield.

Amada gave her a quick look. Her little girl was growing up quickly.

"How are you doing?"

"Alright."

"Homework finished?" Amada asked hopefully.

"Yes."

"Even your math?"

"Mom." Trini said with some annoyance in her voice.

"You know I have to ask," Amada said, as she reached over and touched her daughter's hand with her fingers. "You know I miss you, baby." Yawning, she pressed her fingers lightly on her hand. "And with Tony gone." She barely brushed Trini's knuckles with her fingertips. "I love you," she said, tenderly.

"Mom, you should watch the road," Trini frowned and did something funny with her lips, but she didn't pull her hand away.

"I am, I am," Amada replied with a laugh and she snuck another glance at her. She placed both hands on the steering wheel. "I'm off on Sunday. Maybe we could make some cookies. How about some Polvorones Rosas and Biscochitos?"

Trini smiled. "How about some chocolate chips."

"Hahaha, okay, my little Americano."

"Mom, you were born here, too."

"Si, senorita, pero es bueno recorder," Amada laughed.

"I guess so," Trini agreed with her. "Besides, I do like our cookies."

"Yes, me too. Well, here we are," Amada said as she stopped in front of the school.

"The prison," Trini said without emotion.

"That bad?"

"No, no," she grunted. "It's only bad Monday through Friday."

Amada smiled. She remembered thinking the same thing when she was her daughter's age.

Trini opened the car door, grabbed her backpack and got out. "Hey, look, there's Sandy," she said with her voice sailing off in front of her. She hoisted her pack over her shoulders and bumped the door closed with it.

“Have a good day, honey,” Amada said hurriedly, leaning over into the passenger side to get one last look at her girl.

Trini joined up with the other girl and they headed down the walk to the school. Amada watched them walk shoulder to shoulder, watched Trini’s ponytail bounce in a rocking motion, from side to side, and watched as the two girls dipped their heads together when they talked. To be a young girl again. Sighing, she shifted into drive and headed home.

--18--

After preheating the range, Amada pulled yesterday’s burritos out of the fridge and stuck them in the oven on low. She headed to the shower and let the warm water wash over her. She realized the house was empty and her head was filled with images of Tony and Nana and Antonio and her job, and Trini, and the old lady alone in the hospital. She had so many problems and felt inadequate for any of them. With no one home and nothing to stop her, her body just started shaking and bobbing up and down as she cried. She didn’t expect it. She didn’t plan it. She didn’t care.

She was dead tired. She knew that. The sound of the water drowned out all of the other home and neighborhood noises except for her sobs. Her mascara ran down her face – she didn’t care - it was going to run down anyway.

She felt fat and unwanted and, worse, too weak to stand up to any of it.

She turned around, with her back to the shower head and clasped her hands in front of her over her breasts in sort of a prayer. And then she turned back into the water and cried some more.

She didn’t know why. Oh, bull, that’s not true. She knew why, she told herself.

There was Tony, her baby, out there somewhere and God knows where. Almost a grown man but definitely not grown up at all. Only his scraggly whiskers said he was a man. Everything else said he was still her little boy.

And Antonio. When was the last time he touched her? Or held her close? When did they even say anything nice to each other? And whose fault was that?

She stretched forward and placed her palms on the wall under the shower head and let the water soak her hair and carry away her tears and the little bit of makeup she wore to work.

Her little girl was getting so big so fast. And then Suzie and her mother in law.

She worked some shampoo into her scalp, and gave her head and neck a hard scrubbing. She wished Antonio was home. Just a kind word between them was all she wanted. A conversation without tension and expectation and hidden resentments.

And then she remembered the all-hands meeting and wondered how Antonio was handling it and if he’d been fired. Wondered if he even been told yet. As the husband and father of the family, he took his job seriously. He never missed a day. Never took a sick day even when he was sick. He was the provider and his job was everything to him.

They wouldn’t fire him that day, would they? They’d give him notice, right? So they would get a chance to talk it out and plan their future together? It wouldn’t be easy but they could make it, right?

She wasn’t sure about the money because Antonio did the finances but she figured they could do anything if they could stick together. But, if he was laid off, Antonio would take it hard.

There was too much to think about. Antonio, Tony, Trini, Nana Maria. And the old lady.

The little old lady in the hospital. Mrs. Gammer. Dying all alone and she wasn’t even conscious of it. Amada felt guilty thinking about her own problems. The woman was dying alone and there weren’t enough doctors to go around because of the pandemic. She wasn’t sure what they could do for her. Mrs. Gammer didn’t have Covid and she was on a vent already. Still.

Amada was so darn tired. She just wanted to lie down. But the problems swirled through her head. She had trouble connecting all of the dots and she knew it. A pernicious fog seeped through her brain and body. She let the water beat on her head and she rinsed out the shampoo.

And then, another thought. Annie Fischer!

Amada had forgotten all about calling her! She had thought about the old lady but then forgot about Annie Fischer. How could she? Yeah, that was the brain fog.

She hurried through the rest of her shower. Wrapping a towel around her hair and another around her body, she pulled the burritos out of the oven and went to the bedroom to change.

She came out in a coordinated two piece black and white striped sweat suit with the towel still around her head. She picked up the burrito pan with an oven mitt, added a jacket, lifted her purse over her shoulder, grabbed her keys and headed out the door.

She called Annie Fischer on the way to her mother-in-law's but received no answer. She hung up, thinking there was too much information that she wanted to give to leave on a message. She wasn't prepared mentally. If she had to leave a message, she had to know exactly what to say. Just give Annie Fischer what was necessary. But her brain was mush.

She dropped off the burritos at Nana's with only a few words exchanged. Her mother in law seemed a little more animated but also, strangely, she didn't seem like she wanted to talk. Amada was okay with that. She just left with a simple, "Bye mom, I'll see you soon," and got into her car and headed home.

She practiced what she wanted to say to Annie Fischer.

Satisfied that she could do it, she tried Fischer again. The phone rang and rang and then went to message. She was ready. Her brain was organized.

"Ms. Fischer, my name is Amada Perez. I'm a nurse at the Mercy Hospital in Pittsburgh." She paused and oriented her position in the day time traffic. She thought, 'I shouldn't do this. I could lose my license.' But she plunged forward.

"I'm calling you about your mother, Elsie Gammer. She's been admitted to Mercy. I'm not going to give any health details but I advise you to call the hospital. The number is 1-800-555-8762. If you need to reach me, I'm at 412-555-1412. My name is Amada Perez. Thank you."

With that finished, she went home and slept until it was time to pick up Trini.

--19--

She had checked her text messages before leaving to get Trini. There was no word from Antonio. She drove to the school lost in her thoughts and short on sleep.

Did he resent her that much that he wouldn't even tell her about his job? She gripped the steering wheel with both hands as she sat in the car and waited for her daughter to come out of school. No. Things couldn't be that bad, could they? She could text him but then decided that they'd see each other before she left for work. Antonio didn't like to be smothered.

She sent a text to Tony. 'I love you.' She didn't know what else she could say.

Yeah, she did. 'Come home,' she typed and sent. She thought about her text and sent another, 'Please.' As she finished sending, her car door opened.

"Hi, baby," Amada greeted Trini as she slid into the passenger seat. Trini was smiling. "Good day?" She asked her daughter.

"At school? Naw. Just Cassie Miller being Cass."

Amada didn't know what that meant. She drove home as she tried to get information about school. But all she learned was that there were still six letters in the word 'school'.

They pulled up to their home and Amada noticed Antonio's car was missing. So, she figured, he wasn't fired if he was still working. Maybe he'd get home before she left.

"What should we make for dinner?" She asked Trini.

"Do we have to make something? Can we get something delivered?"

"I've tried to teach you that it's cheaper to make a meal at home."

"But it's nice to take a break, too, isn't it? Can't we just order a pizza?" Trini didn't exactly whine but she tugged at it with her voice.

And Amada, being tired, didn't object. "Well, maybe. I could make a salad to go with it."

"Yeah, you could, mom," Trini was encouraging.

“With a little help.”

“Okay, but can you call the pizza place?”

“Where?”

“Pizza Hut.”

Amada frowned. She didn't like franchise pizza but it was family time.

“Get me the lettuce and a couple of tomatoes out of the fridge, okay? You know dad doesn't like the pizza chains.” S

“Ugh. What's he want?”

“Maybe Frazelli's.” Amada cut up the lettuce and tomatoes.

“Frazelli's?”

“Get me a yellow and red pepper. And a red onion.”

Amada glanced over at her daughter as Trini stuck her head in the fridge.

“Or Tui's?” Amada chopped up the peppers and onion.

“They don't have cheese stuffed crust.”

“No, I don't think so. Mushrooms? Should we add some mushrooms?”

“Yeah. Can we get a pizza from Pizza Hut and one from Frazelli's?” Trini handed her a carton of mushrooms.

“I don't think so.”

“Why not?” Her daughter asked.

“Two drivers. Two tips. Too much.”

“We don't have to give them a tip.”

“Trini! We can't do that! How would you like to work for free?”

Trini's eyes opened wide. “They get paid,” she said.

Amada shook her head, “They get paid only, like, a dollar an hour. Not enough.” She cut the mushrooms. “No, we'll tip them.” She scooped up the slices and added them to the salad bowl.

“Parmesan?”

Trini passed the shaker of grated cheese.

“There. Ready with that. What kind of pizza do you want?”

“Cheese.”

“Plain cheese? What's the deal with all of the cheese?”

“No meat. It's good for you, mom. Our bodies are healthier without the meat.”

Amada wanted to just say no. She liked her pepperoni and sausage pizzas. She knew humans had teeth called canines for a reason. And plain cheese was just too plain.

But she liked the interest Trini took in her own health and body. Still, there were roadblocks ahead. “Dad is going to want meat. Sausage, bacon.”

Trini grimaced.

Amada snuck a look at her. “Cheese?” She asked again.

“Please?”

“Okay, okay, we'll get two. One of them can be cheese. But it's got to be Frazelli's, not Tui's. Frazelli's will deliver and I need them to deliver. I'm going to get ready for work. Can you call them?”

“Sure, but I'll need your credit card.”

“We don't pay them when they show up?”

“Mom, how old are you?”

Amada wondered – that was a good question. She felt about sixty sometimes when her daughter was talking to her. She looked over at Trini. “It was fun putting the salad together.”

Trini smiled.

Amada was grateful for one small oasis.

She laid her uniform on the bed and went into the bathroom to clean up and add a little makeup. Satisfied, she crossed the room. Her cell phone rang just as she pulled her blue scrub top over her head. "Antonio?!" She exclaimed. "How are you doing? What happened?" With her cell to her ear, she walked over to the closet. She slipped her feet into her Nikes.

"I would have called sooner but they had the meeting and then we went right into work."

She wanted to break in and ask 'what happened' again.

"But?"

"Sounds like the company got bought out."

"Merger?"

"I dunno."

She could hear the worry in his voice. Mergers were almost never good, but 'bought out' meant 'replaced'. "Are they going to keep you?"

"I don't know that either."

"Who bought who?"

"Zerco bought us."

"Who are they? What do they do?"

"Out of towners. Manufacture machine parts like us. But they're in a different industry. Aerospace."

"I wonder what that means."

"Yeah, I don't know."

"You staying late?"

"Yeah, just an extra hour. They are going to talk about some changes they want to make."

"Oh boy," Trini took a deep breath. She knew Antonio didn't like hysterics or panic. "I'll say a prayer."

"Yeah, thanks."

"Did you hear from Tony?"

"No. You didn't either?"

"No."

"When I get my hands on that kid."

"No, Antonio, no," Amada pleaded. "That's not the way to go. We got to listen. Let's hear what's bothering him. Okay?"

"*What's bothering him?*" Antonio sneered. "I'm worried about my job, we're both working almost around the clock, and we're supposed to worry about what's bothering him?"

She took a deep breath. "Let's find him and listen, okay? Maybe he's just scared."

She heard Antonio thinking on the other side. That was a good sign. He wasn't fuming.

"Well, let's get him home first," he finally said. "How do we do that?"

"Call him. Text him. Tell him you love him."

"Oh, gee, Amada, you laying it on me? You know I do, you know. He knows I do. So what are we going to do, baby him?"

"I know you love him, but once in a while, you got to say it. That's not babying him."

A few seconds of silence passed and then he said, "Yeah, well, I hope he gets himself home."

"Let him know, Tonio. I love you, too." She heard him grunt. "Doesn't hurt to say it, does it?" She paused for just a second and then she added, "We ordered pizza. It will be cold when you get home. I didn't know you were staying late."

"It's okay. I'll heat it up."

He hesitated. She could hear that he wanted to say something else but then he didn't. She wanted to wait until he had to say something, anything. Something on his own. Things that he was feeling and dealing with. She was willing to wait all evening.

She wanted to call in and be home when he got home and renew what they had together. She thought all they needed was just time alone, a few hours, without the worries. But, she guessed, tonight was not the night.

"I've got to go, Tonio. Have a good night."

"Yeah, you too."

They disconnected. She laid her cell on the bed.

Things were getting real at his job. She took another deep breath and then yawned. She still didn't get near enough sleep and it was time for work.

She walked past Trini's room and knocked and then stuck her head in. "You want to have dinner with me or with your dad when he gets home?"

Trini looked over from her desk. "I'm going to call Cassie in a minute."

"Okay." Amada took the hint and shut the door. She picked her credit card up off the table.

She ate a piece of the sausage pizza alone and packed a slice of cheese pizza for her break. Reaching into the fridge, she picked out the salad and then packed a Tupperware.

--21--

With a yawn, Amada reported early to work and checked her schedule. She had Mrs. Gammer until ten that night and then there was another shift change and a re-arrangement of patients.

She checked Gammer's dry erase board and then her oxygen. She wondered why they hadn't moved her to the ICU yet and then wondered if her daughter had gotten her message. Feeling her phone buzz, she adjusted the blankets.

Mrs. Gammer's dead flowers still held the single, fading yellow bloom. She wanted to pull out all of the other wilted flowers and toss them in the wastebasket but she decided to leave them for housekeeping. She left the room and received a text. It was from Tony. She fumbled her phone, settled it and then read his message.

'Mom, I'm okay. Safe and sound. Love you.'

She backed up against a wall in the hall and read it again. Tony didn't mention his father, which may be good or maybe just avoidance.

Positive that Antonio would never reach out, she tapped reply and typed as fast as she could. 'Come home. We love you. Dad loves you. We can work it out.'

She hit send and immediately regretted typing 'work it out'. Tony would think his dad held something against him. True or not, she didn't want him to think that. She wanted to type something else to fix her text but she couldn't think of anything else. She was too tired and her emotions were drained.

Then all hell broke loose.

Mrs. Gammer's monitor flat lined.

--22--

Amada rushed back into Mrs. Gammer's room and checked her pulse, while checking the cardiac leads with her other hand. Within seconds, the room filled with nurses and doctors and a couple of carts filled with instruments and meds. One of the doctors, Ramamurthy, called out the word 'asystole', which she knew and then called for 'vassopressin' which she expected.

Another performed CPR although she knew CPR in Mrs. Gammer's case was more drama than effective. Several more seconds passed by, more medical people filled the room. There was a blip on the monitor and a beep.

"We got a pulse," someone called out.

"Vassopressin worked, good," Doctor Ramamurthy said.

Another nurse was off to the side, conferring with the cardiac intensive care unit. She requested a bed stat.

Dr. Ramamurthy spoke up. "We need to get her to the cardiac ICU."

"On it," the nurse on the phone spoke up and lifted her hand.

Ramamurthy looked over at her. "Now," he grunted.

She held up her index finger as if to call for patience.

"Okay, they are ready. Let's go," the nurse called out.

The monitor, the IVs and fluids, the bed, and a dozen people squeezed out of the room and down the hall to the elevators. Amada walked with them until they boarded and watched as the doors closed on Mrs. Gammer.

--23--

She walked back into her room to make sure nothing was left behind. Everything seemed to be in order. She turned off the screens on the wall. The flowers had been pushed into a corner. Her phone buzzed. She didn't recognize the number.

"Hello?"

"Amada Perez?"

"Hmmm," was all Amada was willing to acknowledge.

"This is Annie Fischer. You called about my mom, Mrs. Elsie Gammer. I'm here at the hospital but they won't let me in."

"Oh, Annie Fischer," Amada repeated. Then, the name broke through all of the other events, and she said, with feeling, "Annie Fischer, yes, good. Good."

"How is she?"

Amada paused. What should she say? What could she say? What could she do? Amada tried to figure out what to say.

"Is she alright? Is she better? What's the matter with her?" Annie Fischer pressed her.

"Where did you say you were? Here?" Amada asked.

"Yeah. The hospital. Outside the main entrance."

"You're here? Which street?" Amada wondered what an out-of-towner would consider a main entrance given that there were several entrances.

"Uh, I don't know. I don't remember."

Amada thought for a second. "Did you pass the emergency entrance? Are you by that?"

"Yes."

"Can you meet me there? I can be there in a minute," Amada said, though she still didn't know what she'd say.

"I guess. Yes. Will they let me in?"

"No. Covid precautions. But I'll meet you right outside the doors. I can be there in five minutes."

Good God, Amada thought to herself, what was she going to say? What was she thinking? She could get fired and maybe lose her license.

She had patients to check. She had Mrs. Gammer's charts to do. She had been at work for an hour and she was already two hours behind. And then this.

She stopped at the desk.

"Luce, something came up. I need to step out. Can you cover me?" She asked her friend at the desk.

"Sure, how long?"

"15, 20. No more."

"Okay."

She knew she was lucky that it was Luce behind the desk and not one of the other nurses. 'Thank you,' she whispered with her eyes turned upward. Stepping into the elevator, she stopped at the garage cross over and walked to her car. Popping the trunk, she dug out a pair of scrubs and her old badge. She stuffed them in an empty plastic grocery bag and locked the car.

Crossing back over the walkway and to the elevators, she rode down to the main level and walked to the ER entrance. She glanced at the middle aged in-charge nurse. She didn't know her, which was a good

thing. She also didn't know the pretty, young reception clerk or the thirty something guard with the chiseled jaw. She noted the empty chairs and thought it was so strange to have no one in the waiting room but Covid kept all visitors out in the evening and the patients had been taken inside. Staring through the doors into the lighted area just outside, Amada saw a woman into her forties, maybe fifty, with a thick grey knit cap and three quarters dark grey woolen coat and boots. She realized the woman had spotted her as she looked and the woman at her waved with an anxious smile. Amada didn't understand how she knew who she was but she was right. Amada stepped through the doors and out into the cold night air.

"Mrs. Fischer?"

"Annie, please. Call me, Annie."

"Okay, Annie, can we walk to your car?"

"What about my mom?" She asked with a plea in her eyes and voice.

"I'll tell you but let's get away from the doors." Amada led her to the side. "Your car?"

"This way."

"How to start. Currently, your mom is in the ICU. She's had a stroke and they needed to transfer her to the ICU."

"Is it bad?" Panic squeaked.

"She coded just thirty minutes ago."

"She coded?" Annie looked over at Amada. "What's that mean?"

"Her heart stopped."

Annie grabbed Amada's arm. "But she'll be alright, right? She's not dead, is she?" She turned to go back.

"No, don't." Amada pulled back on her. "They resuscitated her but she's still in a coma."

"But I've got to get back in there and see her."

"They won't let you in."

"But I don't understand." She begged. "Why wouldn't they allow her daughter to see her when she can't function? Why did I drive all the way here?" Tears welled in her eyes.

Amada put a hand on her shoulder and murmured, "Hold on. We'll think of something."

They kept walking and paused next to a dark blue Ford Escape.

When Amada had called her, she had expected that Annie would call the hospital and get the information she needed. She didn't expect her to show up. But she knew she couldn't send her home without seeing her mother.

"Is this yours?" Amada asked, pointing to the SUV.

"Yes."

Amada dug through her grocery bag and pulled the badge out. She handed the clothes to Annie.

"Change into these."

"Why?"

"We're going to get you inside."

"Really?" Hope sparked in Annie's eyes even as creases crossed her forehead. "How?"

"They let nurses in the hospital, don't they?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, easy. You've got to change into a nurse."

Annie raised her brows and looked around at the other cars. "Here? In the garage?"

"Yeah, why not?" Amada grimly smiled and then nodded her head. "They do it all the time." Amada touched the back of her shoulder with the slightest push. "Go ahead. Change in your car. I'll wait."

"Okay." A shyness came over Annie. "You sure it's okay?"

"Changing out here? Yeah," Amada answered.

But, allowing someone to impersonate you as a nurse? No. She couldn't help but think of the trouble she'd be in. The disgrace. Her license. The lawyer bills. Antonio. No job. No money. The kids. And no prospect of a job. What was she thinking?

She thought of Tony – out there, somewhere. Alone. She thought of herself at home earlier in the day, eating alone in the kitchen while everyone she loved went on with their lives.

She didn't like the thought of being alone. Like Mrs. Gammer. Under the rules, none of her family could be there for her. And then this woman. How could she let her mother lie alone in intensive care when she had a chance to help? "Come on," she urged. "We've got to hurry."

Annie, once she agreed, changed quickly and slid back out of the Escape. "Okay. Now what?"

"Here, slip this on." Amada handed her the badge. After Annie dropped it over her neck, Amada flipped the ID on the lanyard so the photo didn't show. "There. They won't ask you to show it once you get inside."

"But what about getting in?"

"Come on." Amada started walking back to the entrance. "Leave that to me. Just stay right next to me."

"What happened to my mom?"

"She suffered a series of strokes. One of them has affected her breathing."

"Oh my gosh. Is that why she coded?"

"I don't know. Maybe there's something else going on. I was only in long enough to know they got her heart started again and they took her to the ICU." Amada gazed at her. "Don't worry. She's in good hands. She'll be alright. They'll figure it out." She motioned to Annie as they approached the entrance.

"A little bit closer and behind me. Put me between you and the guard, okay?"

"Okay."

"I'm going to swipe my card at the entrance and you just follow in right behind me."

"What about masks?"

"There will be some available just inside the door. Watch me."

Once they made it through the doors, Amada waited a step for Annie. "Okay, good, just act natural."

Narrowing her eyes and frowning, Annie looked at her like she was crazy.

"Good. That's the way most of us look."

Amada managed to make her smile.

"See," Amada pulled a mask from a box on a counter. "Take one and put it on."

When they were fitted, they walked in front of the guard.

He grumbled "Hello," and tried to give a half hearted smile at the nurses. Amada replied, "Hi," and then turned her head to Annie. "We need to go to the ICU."

After they pushed through a pair of doors and into the hospital lobby, Amada said, "Not too bad." She pointed to a sign that said 'Green Elevators'. "She should be on the third floor."

"Okay."

Amada's phone vibrated in her pocket. She resisted the urge to look at it. She knew she was running late. Alone in the elevator, she cautioned, "It's going to be tricky. We'll only be able to let you see your mom from the doorway. Understand?"

Annie nodded.

"Don't interact with the other nurses. Let me do the talking." She saw a dazed and scared look in Annie's eyes. Amada took her arm and whispered, harshly, "Please listen to me. If we get caught, I'm in a lot of trouble. Probably fired. And maybe worse for the both of us. Okay?"

Annie blinked and bobbed her head once.

They stepped out of the elevator.

"This way," Amada said and led the way to her right. Her phone buzzed and she pulled it out. "I've got to take this."

Amada held the phone up to her ear. "Luce. Yeah, okay, I'll be right there."

She ended the call and stuck the phone back in her pocket. "I wanted to stay with you." They both could see the overhead sign for the ICU. "I am going to take you in there and then we have to go."

Once inside, Amada quickly surveyed the area. One of the stations, on the other side of the control center, had a group of twelve personnel crowded outside, and just inside the room. She knew there were probably even more around the patient. Taking a deep breath, she headed that way but glanced into each open station while Annie followed. They stood outside the crowded cubicle.

Unable to get a definitive look, Amada bobbed her head around a couple of nurses and quickly stepped back.

It was Mrs. Gammer.

Annie jerked forward.

Amada grabbed Annie's arm and pulled on her before she could get into the room. She whispered, "Just a look," as Amada held onto her arm.

Annie took a step forward and with a gasp tried to take another. Amada pulled her back. "We're assigned to Smith," Amada mumbled and slurred to her, such that the Smith could have been almost any name. "Let's go."

Annie composed herself and reluctantly followed Amada until they were out of the ICU.

"What are you doing?" Amada hissed.

"I can't leave her," Annie said, looking back at her mother's cubicle.

"But you can't stay," Amada rebuked her. "You can't stay. We have to go."

"I can't. You can't ask me to just leave. Can't I just stand outside her room with the others? Who's going to know?"

Amada's phone buzzed. "I don't believe this. Really? I can't." She stared into Annie's eyes and realized that if she wanted to get her to leave, she would have to drag the woman out of the hospital, and then explain to who saw her how Annie got her scrubs and her badge.

"Please," Annie begged. "Please, I won't go in."

Amada looked around the corridor. A couple of nurses walked towards them. Her phone whirred again. Luce was probably beside herself. She sighed. "Okay. Ten minutes. Please, no more. They will spot you like a purple panda. If somebody says anything, just turn away and say you got called. That's all you need to say. 'I got called.' And then walk away as fast as you can. Got it?"

Annie nodded.

"I need to go back to the eighth floor. You got my number. Call me if anything goes wrong." Amada looked deeply into the frightened Annie's eyes for just a brief second before Annie glanced away. "Call me."

Annie tilted her head, yes.

"Okay?" Amada asked again. She still wasn't sure Annie was listening because Annie kept looking back into the ICU towards her mother's room. Amada's phone buzzed in her pocket. "Okay, I got to go. Ten minutes."

--24--

Amada rode the elevator up to her floor and hustled to the nurses' station. Luce was gone. She checked her boards. Shaking her head, she saw that half had their lights on. She scanned the schedule. She hadn't missed an appointment.

She looked at her duties. Pain meds for Anderson. She checked for any hand written notes. Tentemeyer wanted water, something an NA could fill. Munteanu would need a bandage check.

She loaded her cart. Anderson probably wanted his pain meds immediately but it was still too early, so she checked on Tentemeyer and Morrison, who needed his stats checked. Then she went to Anderson.

"Mr. Anderson?" She called as she knocked. She didn't wait for an answer. She pushed her cart ahead of her.

"Oh, there you are. Finally. My God, what keeps you people?" Mr. Anderson opened his eyes and glared from her underneath his bushy grey eyebrows. He had a thin circle of mostly grey hair around the lower half of his head. "I buzzed you a half hour ago. I need my pain medicine."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Anderson. The script is for every four hours and it's just rolling up to time now." She arranged the items on her cart as she spoke. "I can't give it to you early but I can talk to the doctor if you're in that much pain."

"I am. It hurts like crazy."

"Oh, I'm sorry." She moved to the side of his bed. "Let me check your stats and then we can give it to you, okay?"

"My blood pressure will be out the roof because of the pain."

"Okay, Mr. Anderson."

Taking his BP and pulse, Amada told him, "Your blood pressure is fine, Mr. Anderson, one eighteen over seventy eight. That's perfect."

"I don't understand. There's something wrong. It's just killing me."

"The doctor put you on BP meds, too." She unclipped the O2 sensor from his index finger. "Your oxygen is pretty good at ninety six. Pulse is good at seventy two."

Amada popped a pill out of a foil wrapper. She scanned the bar code on the wrapper and then Mr. Anderson's bracelet. Her phone buzzed. She handed the pill to him and a small paper cup full of water. The phone buzzed again. "Here you go, Mr. Anderson." She checked her watch. "Next dose will be four hours from now. I'll write it on the board."

"But you'll check with the doctor?"

"Yes, Mr. Anderson."

Goodness, she thought, as she still felt the phone's vibration. She wondered what was so urgent. She couldn't work any faster or be stretched any further.

Exiting Anderson's room, she stuck her hand into her pocket for her phone. Munteanu was next.

--25--

Annie stood outside the ICU cubicle while the other medical personnel surrounded her mother and tended to her. They spoke to each other in harsh whispers and codes. She didn't understand any of it. All she could do was watch.

And then her mother coded again. She jumped at the sound of the alarm and the flat line of the monitors. Her mother's doctors pressed in on her and worked on her. Annie crept forward into the room. They got a pulse back. And then they lost her again. She came back again.

Her mother's hand flopped over the edge of the bed. Annie stepped all of the way forward to her mother's side and loosely held her fingers. Elsie Gammer opened her eyes and looked at Annie. Her fingers tightened around Annie's hand for a second and then dropped limp over the side of the bed. Annie grabbed her hand but felt nothing. She would later swear her mom smiled at her before she passed, although her mom had worn some kind of medical mask.

The monitors flattened. For good.

She was gone.

--26--

"Hey Amada, what happened?" A voice crept over her shoulder and Amada jumped. She turned around and stumbled into her cart. Luce popped out of nowhere.

"Whoa, girlfriend, easy there," Luce said. "What happened to you? Where were you?"

"I got tied up." Amada said as little as possible.

Luce crinkled her brow. "It was almost an hour. How?"

"A friend's mom."

"What? How's that happen after hours? What do you mean?"

Amada's phone buzzed again.

"I've got to take this, Luce."

"Already? Okay, girl, but you better slow down." Luce touched Amada's arm. "We'll talk. After you get caught up. I'm worried about you." She continued with concern.

"I know. Thank you. But I've got to get this." Amada pulled her phone out of her pocket and watched Luce turn away and walk down the hall.

Amada glanced at the missed call. Tony! She was just pressing call when another call came in. It was Tony again.

"Tony," she managed to say.

"Mom, it's grandmama. She's shaking."

"What do you mean she's shaking? How do you know? Where are you?"

"Mom. I'm over at grandma's. I was sitting at the kitchen table and I heard her in the hall. She must have fallen or something. But she's sitting. But she didn't fall. But she's shaking."

Amada squinted and thought. "Is she passed out?"

"No, but she's sick or something."

"Could be a stroke, but it's probably her blood sugar," Amada mumbled and paced back and forth. "We should call 911. But hold on. Check the fridge. Does she have any orange juice?" Amada tried to remember if there was orange juice in her refrigerator but then, as soon as she tried to visualize Nana's kitchen, she was bombarded with a hailstorm of thoughts – what was Tony doing at his grandmother's house? She had to get to her other patients. And Antonio? Did he still have a job?

What about Annie Fischer? Was she still downstairs in ICU, using her old badge and uniform? They both could get arrested for that. And poor Mrs Gammer, how was she doing? What was in Nana's fridge? She needed to focus. What about Trini? Did she do her homework? She was alone way too much. Who were her girlfriends? Will Antonio call? What was in her fridge? The thoughts bounced around like a swirl of glitter. She couldn't hold onto just one or think straight.

Waiting on Tony, Amada saw Luce down the hall so she had to turn her back and push her cart towards Munteneau's room. Then she squatted down behind it. Please, she began a silent prayer.

"Mom," Tony said as he returned to the phone. "Yeah, she has orange juice."

"Good, good," Amada whispered harshly into her cell. "Pour her a glass and make sure she drinks it."

"Already poured."

Amada heard a plunky clink.

"Here, Nana, drink this," she heard Tony say and realized he must have set his phone down.

"Tony, Tony," she called into her phone.

"Yeah, mom?"

"Did she drink it?"

"Yeah, mom."

"Okay, give her a few minutes. Call me. Call me if she gets worse. I can't stay on. Okay."

"Okay."

"Call me anyway, okay?"

"Okay, mom."

"I've got a patient."

"Okay."

"Love you, Tony. Call me."

"Love you, mom."

--27--

Amada needed to see her mother in law. She wondered why Tony was there. And where in the world was Annie Fischer? Her pulse raced, her heart pounded and her chest felt heavy. She had a headache. She knew she needed a break. And those words kept repeating in her brain, 'need a break', 'need a

break', 'need a break'. She wouldn't get a break. She had just had one with Annie Fischer. And then, another thought - 'Tony, call me'.

Half seriously, wondering if she was having a heart attack, she knocked on Munteneau's room and walked in. Mrs. Munteneau was sleeping. She took her vitals anyway and charted them while she woke up.

She took a deep breath and said, "I need to change your bandage, Mrs. Munteneau."

She turned the patient so she could get to the incision. With the drainage tube fully exposed, she cleaned it and then rebandaged her.

"You're as good as new, Mrs. Munteneau," she said to the older woman. "How's that feel?"

"Just fine. I don't feel a thing with whatever they gave me."

God bless her, Amada thought. A patient without complaints.

"Just call me if you need anything," Amada, said. She walked over to the other side of the bed and showed her how to work the call button control. Mrs. Munteneau said something to her in a foreign language. Amada knew she had said 'thank you' in Greek because Munteneau's son had told her on a previous visit. Amada smiled at her and pushed the button. "See?" She held it up. "If you need anything."

Mrs. Munteneau replied, "Kala."

"Okay. That means okay." Amada nodded her head. "I'll be back."

Once in the hall, Amada picked her buzzing phone out of her pocket.

"Mom, she's better."

"Thank you, God. Can she talk, Tony?"

"Nana, mom wants to talk to you, okay?"

"Tell her that I'm alright."

Amada heard Nana's voice and rolled her eyes and said, forcibly, "Tony, put Nana on the phone."

"She wants you," she heard Tony say.

"Amada, don't worry about me. I'm fine," Nana said as soon as she had gotten the phone.

"Mom, hang on. Did you use your pen today? Your insulin pen?"

"I don't know. I can't remember."

"Think, Mom. It's important. Where did you stick yourself today?"

"My stomach. On my right side. No, wait, my left side. Wait. Maybe that was yesterday."

"Yeah, pretty much what I thought. Okay, Mom. Okay, it's okay," Amada paused for a moment. "What have you been eating? No wait, put Tony on."

"Tony," she heard her mother in law say.

"Yeah, mom," Tony said when he got the phone.

"What's Nana been eating? Has she been eating the chocolates that I saw on the counter?"

"We both did. She said it would be okay."

"No, Tony, it's not okay. She's a diabetic." Amada hissed into the phone and then realized what she had done. "Tony, I'm sorry. It's not your fault. But no, it's not okay. She does that to everybody. Don't let Nana fool you. She can't have that stuff. It can kill her."

"I guess ice cream is out, too?"

"Oh my."

"She had me buy some. Said we were celebrating."

"What were you celebrating?"

"She didn't tell me."

Amada heard her mother-in-law snicker. She ignored her. "Well, no, she can't. She needs to regulate her sugar. I wonder how long she's been doing this." Amada said, almost to herself.

"I don't know, Mom."

"Tony, I've got to go. Nana should take her insulin pen today. Help her with it. Okay?"

"I don't know where it is. I don't how to do it."

"They should be on her dresser in her room. Go get one. She can do it but sit with her. Make sure she does it. Have her use the back of her left arm. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Call me if you have any problems. Any problems at all."

"Okay, Mom."

"And throw that candy and ice cream away, outside, in the trash. Tell her I said so."

"Okay."

"And, Tony, we'll talk after this, okay? Will you be there?"

"I'll be here. Don't tell Dad though."

"Don't worry, I'll talk to you first," Amada replied, "but stay with Nana."

"I've been staying with Nana."

"You have?" She had a whole new set of questions but she felt relieved. A prayer of gratitude and relief settled on her heart.

"Bye, Mom."

"Bye, Tony."

She hung up. Tony has been at Nana's? Was he there when I was there, she wondered. Oh thank goodness he's not on the streets.

--28--

Amada walked towards Pietro's room and stood outside Mrs. Gammer's old room. For some reason, she left her cart in the hall and walked into the dark room. She was struck by a wonderful, almost ethereal smell of roses and hydrangeas and scores of other delightful scents that she couldn't name. Rich, luxurious aromas and light, airy fragrances. Her spirit soared. Even in the dark, she smiled. But, then, she noticed it wasn't quite dark.

A slight yellow halo of light was barely visibly in the alcove, where housekeeping would have rolled the patient's table.

Whatever it was, it didn't quite glow but she could see it. It was like a ghost or an apparition. Later she would think of the right word. It was luminescent.

Wondering what the source of light could be, she stepped back and flipped on the lights. But in stepping back, she couldn't see the source of light any longer.

But, just as she expected, the beds were empty. Eagerly stepping forward, her eyes shot to the corner and her mouth dropped open. The same vase that held wilted blooms earlier in the night, now bursted full of fresh golden yellow flowers - marigolds, zinnias and mums.

But how did they get there? Nobody was in the room. Nobody was due to be in the room. And they wouldn't deliver flowers late in the evening. And even then, once again, someone had sent flowers to someone who wasn't there. They couldn't have been for Mrs. Gammer but there was no one else. She didn't understand.

She walked over to the vase. It was the same vase that held the dying flowers, or, it seemed to be. The same dark green glass vase. She saw a small card, a calling card, just like before, and picked it up.

Handwritten in cursive, all it said was, 'Coming home'. No name. There was nothing to indicate who it was for or who sent them. Or how they got into the room.

Maddy remembered there was a card before. What did it say? Happy birthday? Right. That's right. And Mrs. Gammer's birthday card was still on the table next to the vase. Those flowers had to be for Mrs. Gammer. Does that mean these flowers are hers? There was no else, she thought.

"Amada."

Her heart quickened as Maddy heard her name from the doorway and she turned around, expecting another nurse. It was. It was another nurse, dressed in scrubs.

Annie's brain adjusted and her attention focused. No, it wasn't another nurse. It was Annie Fischer. Annie Fischer! Thank goodness.

"Oh good," Amada said, "I'm glad you're back. "How's your mother?" She asked, but then she knew. Tears started running down Annie's face.

Annie dabbed at the corners of her eyes. "She's in heaven now."

Unbelievably, Annie seemed calm. "They couldn't?" Amada hesitated. "She passed?" Amada whispered. "Yes, about twenty minutes ago." Annie took a step forward. "She went peacefully. I was able to be there." She took another step forward and another and then Amada stepped towards her. Amada wrapped her arms around her and Annie hugged her. "Thanks to you," she said, with her head on Amada's shoulder.

"I'm so sorry," Amada breathed.

"No, no, because of you, I was able to see her go. She saw me. She opened her eyes and she saw me. I know she did. And then, she smiled."

Annie Fischer sobbed on Maddy's shoulder. "I'm sorry. I can't help it," Annie started to say.

"I know, I know. It's okay to cry. I'm here. I'm so sorry."

"She was a wonderful mother."

"I know. I'm sure she was."

"Always ready to help others," Annie said.

Amada stood back and held her shoulders with her hands.

"She never missed anything for anybody. For me, every day was a birthday. She'd remember everybody. And she often threw parties just for fun. Just give her an excuse." Annie chuckled through her sobs.

"Even when I moved away, I loved seeing my parents on the holidays."

"I wanted to send her flowers, but," Annie dropped her head, "I forgot. With my daughter's pregnancy, I remembered her card but forgot to send her flowers. I should have done it ahead of time."

"You didn't send these?" Amada asked but she already knew the answer.

"No," Annie said with a puzzled look on her face. "Those are hers? That's so strange. I don't know anybody who would have sent them, if it wasn't me." She looked over at the bouquet. "They are so beautiful. Just what my dad would have given her. It's what he always gave her." A far away smile played on her face like the fading of a sunset. "She loved bright, yellow flowers."

Amada's skin prickled and chilled.

Annie walked over and picked out the little card stuck in the dark green leaves. She held it up and said, "Coming home? What does that mean?" She looked at Amada. "Where did these come from?"

"I have no idea. I was hoping you knew," she answered. "There was another bunch after she first arrived. It said, 'Happy birthday'."

"That is so strange," Annie said, "and I wanted to send her flowers." Her face dropped, "But I didn't."

Her fingers lightly separated each of the petals. "They're magnificent. Quite lovely. I'd love to have one. Can I take one? And the card?"

"They are all yours. Your mom had the birthday card with her when they found her outside her apartment," Amada said. Her phone buzzed again. She picked it out of her sweater pocket, thinking it would be Tony, and looked at the ID. It was Antonio.

"Thank you," Annie said.

"I need to take this. I'll be right back."

--29--

Stepping outside the room, Amada listened to Antonio's voicemail.

The good feelings left her. He told her to call him back. What did that mean? Why couldn't the man just leave a message? Did he have a job or not? Why was everything so complicated? She'd need to call him back but she couldn't leave Annie alone for long. She took a deep breath and hit the call button. She wasn't looking forward to his news.

As soon as he connected, she said, "Tonio, it's Maddy, it's kinda late. You wanted me to call you?"

"Maddy," her husband sounded excited, "my job."

Great. "What about it?" Why couldn't he just tell me, she thought. We've been through worse.

"You won't believe this."

"I'm ready."

"I don't think so," he said. Her heart sunk.

"I got promoted."

She heard the words, considered the emotion in his voice and still couldn't reconcile what she thought she had heard him just say with the worry that she had choking her. "What? Did you get fired? Wait.

No? You didn't get fired?" Her head spun.

"No. No, no, no, the new people needed somebody to lead an effort they have so they took Robert, you know, my boss."

She knew.

"And Robert recommended me, out of all of the other guys, to replace him." Antonio's voice positively bubbled.

"Yeah? He did?" She still couldn't quite believe what she heard.

"And they did. They gave me the promotion."

"They did? They gave you a promotion?" The pitch of her voice almost squeaked. It began to sink in. "Oh my gosh." A spirit of gratitude filled her. She couldn't believe it. "It's a miracle.

"Yeah. That's what I thought."

"When? When do you start?"

"Now. Right now. Your Antonio is now a manager." He laughed. "I'm a big shot. Well, maybe not a big shot, but a shot." He was still laughing.

"Oh Tonio, that's wonderful news. I'm so happy for you," she said, as she placed a hand on her heart.

"One more thing. There's a raise that goes with it. A big one. You won't need to work extra like you've been doing. You can stay home with the kids. If you want," Antonio said.

"Wait. What? How big is this raise?"

"We'll manage. The kids need someone home. You could go part time if you want."

She slumped against the wall. "Tonio, this is too much to think about. It's hard to believe. Can we talk when I get home?"

Antonio laughed. And Amada thrilled. It had been a long time since she heard Antonio laugh like this.

"Well, you may not have to go to work, but I do," He said. "But, we can talk tomorrow, when I get home from work. You'll be home tomorrow afternoon, right?"

"Yes."

"I will be, too. We can talk all afternoon and all night, if you want."

That was her Tonio? Wanting to talk? Could it be? She wanted to pinch herself.

"That would be nice, Tonio. I'd like that. I'm just so proud of you. And so happy."

"Thank you. I better let you go. It's late. Love you," Antonio said.

Amada couldn't remember the last time he had said that to her, especially on the phone. "I love you, too," she said. "Bye." She clicked off the call and tried to compose herself before she walked back into Mrs. Gammer's room.

She didn't want to smile while facing someone who had just lost her mother.

--30--

Annie sat on the bed holding the birthday card in her hand. She looked up at Amada.

"I'm sorry," Amada said. "My husband."

"Everything okay?"

"Yes, we're good, thank you."

Annie set the card down and glanced over at her. She sighed. "What happens now? To my mother?"

Amada thought for a minute and then answered, "Well, they still don't know who she is for sure. I really don't think they checked out my information about your mom. So they will contact the morgue. You'll need to call them so you can identify her for your arrangements."

Annie nodded.

Glancing at her watch, Amada added, "But, not tonight. They won't be available tonight." It was after eleven. "Do you have a place you can stay?"

Annie shook her head.

"You could stay at my house but, in my son's room, but he's not there right now," she said as her brain suddenly skipped out of control. Tonio's news and Nana and Tony. It was too much. But she continued to blab, "But he might be, and, you know, I'm not home right now, and, it would be hard to work it out," Amada tried to explain but she was all over the place.

"No, no no no, you've done enough." Annie hushed her. "I can get a room here. There's a Westin a block away."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Amada nodded. "You have my number if you run into any trouble."

Annie smiled. "And I need to switch my clothes again."

Amada nodded again. In the back of her mind, she was still trying to digest Antonio's news.

"Now?" Annie smiled. "I should change and go and leave you alone."

"Oh, okay, I have just one more patient," Amada said, walking over to the door, "but wait for me by the elevators." She shrugged. "You just can't wait here. Housekeeping may need this room at any moment. And I won't be able to run interference."

"It's okay."

"Okay." Amada held the door open and checked the halls and motioned for Annie, "And please, don't talk to anyone. They all know my badge."

"Right." Annie said, as she held the flowers and the cards.

Amada showed her to the elevator lobby and then tended to Mr. Pietro. He just wanted ice chips, which he knew he couldn't have.

"I know, Mr. Pietro. I will check with the doctor. It was his orders."

After another grunt from the patient, she assured him she would bring cup of chips as soon as she could. She checked her schedule and her computer for any more patient calls before meeting Annie.

--31--

Amada walked with Annie to the garage and then to her SUV where Annie changed. She held the flowers when Annie crawled into the car.

Just the touch of them, and their fragrance, lifted her spirits again. All of her cares disappeared. Tony, Nana, her job, even the excitement and the changes around Antonio's promotion – she just knew everything would be okay.

She leaned against her car and lifted the bouquet and then buried her face in them. She touched each blossom with her nose, and wished the feeling would never leave.

Hearing the door open, and then close, Amada lowered the flowers.

"Here, make sure you take these, too" Amada said, as she handed the arrangement to Annie.

Annie took them.

"I'm so sorry for the loss of your mother. She must have been an angel," Amada said.

Annie smiled over the flowers. "That's what she was. Heaven sent." She looked at the blooms. "You know, I know these are just what my dad would have given her, but he couldn't have. He's been dead, you know. About two years ago."

Annie held them away from her. "I don't feel like they're really mine, you know? I have no idea who sent these." She frowned. "We don't have any family in town. Nobody knew she was in the hospital."

She looked up at Amada with askance in her eyes and then she dropped her gaze. "They are lovely, though. And they were in her room." She separated a flower from the bunch. Amada thought it might have been the one that had lived the longest.

Annie held the single flower in one hand and the bouquet with the other. "Here, I want you to have these." She held out the bundle of flowers.

"Me? I can't. They're yours."

"No, they're yours. I'm sure of it. None of this could have been easy for you. Finding me. Sneaking me into the hospital. Risking your job. My mom would have wanted it."

"I can't."

"I insist. It's the least I can do. Please," Annie pleaded. "I have no place to put them for the next few days. You take them." She thrust them into Amada's hands.

"Really? Oh my, thank you, thank you," Amada suddenly gushed with tears and she leaned forward and hugged Annie again. After a moment, she said, "Please let me know about your mother. I'd like to go to the service."

"Alright, I will," Annie sobbed and stepped back. "I must be going and you, I'm afraid you need to go back to work."

"I do," Amada nodded, "I do."

"I'll call you," Annie assured her and gave Amada another hug. She stepped back. "My mother would have loved you."

"Thank you, I'm sure I would have loved her, too," Amada said as she pressed her hand. Annie held her hand for a second and then walked towards her own car. Amada watched, and waved, until Annie turned a corner.

Amada stored the flowers in her SUV and then went back into work.

--32--

Amada finished her shift and clocked out at six fifty five – almost an hour after her scheduled shift. She was dead on her feet. Yawning, with one hand, she waved to a different guard as she headed to the exit for her garage. Just outside the door, she dug in her purse for her keys.

"Mom!"

She knew the voice. But it couldn't be. Her head jerked up. Tony!

"What are you doing here?" She asked with her mouth wide open. She ran to him and hugged and kissed him.

He pulled back but smiled. "Grandmama thought I should, maybe, see you."

"She did, huh?"

"Yeah, we talked it out."

"You did?"

"Yeah. We talked about a lot of things this week."

"Oh yeah?"

"She told me about dad when he was young."

"Ahh, I see," Amada thanked her mother-in-law. "Good things, I hope."

"I learned a lot. Good things."

"Your father loves you."

"I know. But, sometimes, you know."

"I know." She still had a hand on him. "How did you get here?"

"Aunt Suzie."

"Really?"

"Yeah, she picked me up on her way to class. Says she has an early morning class."

"I didn't think they were meeting in person."

Tony scrunched his face and then said, "I don't know. That's what I was told."

She made a mental note to thank Suze. "So, are you coming home with me?"

"Yeah."

"Dad won't be home until this afternoon."

"I know. I thought maybe we could talk first. You and I."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I'll need help with Dad."

She linked her arm into his and said, "You've come to the right place. We can develop a plan." She chuckled.

--33--

Climbing into the passenger side of her car, Tony said, "Wow, those are great, Mom. Where'd you get them?" He saw the flowers on the floor of the passenger front side.

"A long, long story. One of my patients," she said. "I think." She looked down at them again and reveled in their beauty. And aroma.

She lifted the flowers, breathed in the fragrance and then set them in the backseat.

They both locked their seatbelts and Amada started the car. She navigated through the parking and out onto the street.

Amada's phone buzzed. What now? She looked down. She had a text from Trini. Her heart sunk as all sorts of things went through her head. Was she sick? Did she forget to do her homework? Or did she just skip it and now wanted to skip school? Was there trouble at home?

She lit up the text at a stoplight.

'Jim Beller asked me to Cassies outdoor party. Plz'

Amada bowed her head.

Trini? Her little baby?

Tony looked at her and saw the lines on her face.

Oh Lord, Amada thought. Was that a date? Not already. Please, no. At twelve years old?

She puffed her cheeks and blew a deep breath through her lips.

She didn't need to ask. She knew what it meant. Her young girl was becoming a young lady. And needed her mom.

Amada typed, 'Coming home'.

And then, she thought about the words on the card.

Coming home. Her heart melted and she cried.

"Mom?"

--The End--