

2



Felix Zohlar sat transfixed in the leather Milford chair in his library, staring from bullish eyes. His proud, stern face had paled as the *Ontario Times* fell to his lap. Sweat blotted the paper where his fingers had been. He had just finished reading the front-page article, “Whatever Happened to Harold Ramsey?”

The door opened. “Felix?” His wife entered. “I knocked, but apparently you didn’t hear me. Rose has breakfast ready. Felix, what’s wrong? Are you ill? Should we check your blood pressure?” She approached him.

Her questions only added to his frustration. He stood and stalked to his desk, his massive frame nearly pushing her aside. “I’m perfectly all right, Margaret. I don’t need you plaguing me like some virus.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Tell Rose I’ll be there shortly,” he snapped.

Her shoulders sagged slightly as she turned to leave.

“Isn’t there a meeting of the Arts Council today?”

She stopped and looked at him. "I don't know. I haven't given it a thought."

"No, I don't suppose you have given much of anything a thought."

She flinched.

"Be at that meeting, Margaret. I'm tired of making excuses for you. Doesn't it bother you that people are talking, the things they're saying?"

Her face hardened. Her eyes took on a fury. "I stopped caring a long time ago what people have to say about me, particularly that brood of cackling hens at the Arts Council."

Heat rushed through his body. "Those women are trying to bring some culture into this dry-as-dust town. It seems to me you would want to have a part. I know it's hard for you to understand, but this much you better get straight, you will be at that meeting."

Her eyes flashed. Her neck and shoulders stiffened. Then her stare went blank. She turned off her emotions like she had turned off the television, leaving the screen cold and dark.

He placed his briefcase on the desk and opened it. "And fix yourself up. No telling what they'd say."

"I don't care." Her stinging response startled him, causing him to look at her. "What they say, or what they think, or what they do, or anything about them."

"I know you don't," he growled. "The only thing you care about is Thomas. But he's gone. And it's time you accepted the fact and grew up. You're sixty years old."

"Sixty-one." She spoke soullessly. "My birthday came and went three weeks ago. You needn't look so censurable. I didn't expect you to remember."

He grunted as she left the room. "Might as well be a hundred. The way she locks herself away in this ... mausoleum." He bent over the newspaper and lifted it

cautiously as if it would singe his fingers, then spread it on the cold logs in the fireplace and lit a match. Standing over the fire, he watched the name of Harold Ramsey burn.

Felix lifted his gaze to the young soldier who looked on from his post on the mantel. Again, a dull, empty ache gnawed at his gut. He picked up the photo and returned the serious gaze of his son. "Why, Thomas?" The words nearly choked him as he blinked back tears. "Why, just once, couldn't you have listened?"

Ada went to her desk and took the letter opener from the pencil can. "Who do I know in Philadelphia?" she asked herself. "No, no, this isn't addressed to me, it's addressed to *Adrienne*. Someone in Philadelphia wants Adrienne's advice? How did they hear about her? Surely her fame hasn't spread that far." She opened the letter and positioned her reading glasses on her nose.

Dear Adrienne,

While going through my mother's papers, I came across this clipping. If there is anything more you can tell me about Thomas Zohlar, please write to the address below. I understand this is not your usual way of responding to readers' questions, but I do hope you will help me. I don't know where else to turn. You are my only hope.

Apartment 5
23 Stanton Street
Philadelphia

“Mercy, who on earth ...?” She unfolded the yellowed *Ask Adrienne* column dated nineteen years earlier. The lines she read prodded her memory.

Dear Adrienne,

Since my move from Sackets Harbor, I have lost contact with a classmate, Thomas Zohlar. I have been unable to obtain any information on his current status. Could you possibly help me in this matter?

Signed,
Just Curious

It all came back to her. The letter had arrived several weeks after Tommy’s interment. She had thought it peculiar at the time. She read her answer to the curious writer.

Dear Just Curious,

It is with deep regret that I inform you of the death of Thomas A. Zohlar. A few weeks after he had enlisted into the army, his helicopter crashed during training maneuvers, and he was killed. I am sorry you, too, now share in our loss.

Adrienne

The correspondence left her thoroughly mystified. Who could possibly want information about Tommy after all these years? She went to the file cabinet and searched through the folders for a copy of his obituary, hoping it would prod her

memory. After several minutes she surrendered. Gwen's filing system resembled a cruel maze.

Gwen entered the study carrying a tray. Steam spiraled upward from a teacup as she placed the tray on a small, marble-top table. "I made you a cup of tea. I'm still hoping Janet will bring back some sweet rolls."

"Where would I find the write-up on Tommy Zohlar's death?" Ada stood over an open file drawer. Manila folders poked and protruded at chaotic angles.

Gwen's green eyes bulged. Her mouth hung open. Her red hair cast a fiery hue over her face. "I will get it for you. *If* I can restore some semblance of order to that ... that ..."

"I'm sure you can, dear." Ada took refuge in her favorite chair and sipped the cinnamon-apple tea while Gwen reorganized the file cabinet with theatrical flair. How had they managed to live in the same house for three years?

When Ada retired from teaching at sixty-five, her older sister, Frances, had insisted she take in a companion. On her own since their dear mother passed on, Ada had felt no need for a companion. Yet, knowing the arrangement would provide Frances with peace of mind, even if it didn't do the same for herself, she acquiesced.

The younger sister of Frances's daughter-in-law, Gwen Dunbar had recently been, as some so cruelly said, dumped. And Frances felt Ada's home tucked away in a quaint lakeside village would be "positively the perfect haven for the disturbed child." Ada grimaced. Pushing forty at the time, Gwen hardly could have been considered a child. Nor did she seem particularly disturbed. Except when someone sifted, however slightly, through her files.

Gwen stood with her hands on her hips. "If I had to file that write-up today, I would file that under ... T-Y."

"T-Y?" Ada set down her teacup.

“Yes. I give everything a subject letter and a division letter. T is for Tragedy. And Y is for Youth.”

“Did you read a book on how to devise the most difficult filing system?” Ada worked to mask her annoyance.

“Not at all. I invented it.” Gwen retrieved a folder and soon had the article in hand. Passing it to her, she asked, “Why do you need this?”

“Someone wants information on Tommy.” Ada handed over the letter from Philadelphia. While she reviewed the write-up on Tommy, Gwen read the yellowed clipping and the letter from Apartment 5.

“You are my only hope?” Sounds a bit melodramatic, wouldn’t you say?”

“That’s what has me puzzled, Gwen. The letter does read like a younger person has written it, but what young person would hold such an interest in Thomas Zohlar?”

Gwen shrugged.

“Regardless, I dare not ignore the plea. One never knows the full depths of another’s desperation.” She motioned for Gwen to sit down at the computer. After some thought, she began to dictate her response to Apartment 5.