

That annoying flash kept sparking on the edge of her vision. She had moved further down the line of tables out in the blazing sun, but that odd glint of light seemed to follow her. Either she was on the verge of a heatstroke, or something nearby reflected the sun.

She hadn't seen anything reflective enough to do that. In fact, everything she passed leaned more toward wood and rusty cast iron. Nothing that would catch the sun.

Grace lifted her ponytail off her sweaty neck, trying to pretend that would cool her. It didn't work. Open air flea markets were such fun, but not when the day was this brutal.

The flash came again, and she finally turned to find it.

There it was, right near the edge of the table she just passed. That was odd. She'd already looked at everything the seller had, and saw nothing worth more than a glance. Bent metal cups, an old comb, possibly celluloid, with several teeth missing—part of a set with brush in about the same condition, bristles sticking out every which way. A little further down sat several flour sifters clogged with spiderwebs and dust, and a few nice pieces of mismatched china.

If that shine was anything worth buying—and goodness knew, in this heat and humidity, it would be easy to overlook a treasure—she would never find out unless she went back.

Grace had a bit of splurge money in her purse. What a pity it would be to go home with it unspent.

She lifted the hair off her neck again, and hoped for a breeze while she tried to find the energy to decide whether it was worth retracing her steps. The wind didn't have to be cool, it just had to move the air.

The van was filled with her current client's requests. "Antique chairs. Queen Anne legs and carved oval backs, the older the better. Make sure there is one wing chair." They didn't look like much now, tattered upholstery and dull finishes, but they would be great when she finished them.

"Oh, why not?" She asked the question to the open air. Working alone tended to make her do that. Grace retraced her steps.

The table looked as unpromising on the second examination as it had on the first. The sparkle must have come from the next table over—although she didn't think her sense of perspective was *that* badly affected by the oppressive humidity and the broiling temperature. The sun reflected dully off old glass. Heavy carving framed a small oval of beveled glass. It fairly screamed of age.

Her hand reached for the useless but beautiful antique vanity mirror as if pulled by a string. She took it up and the handle fit perfectly, almost like she had held it before. Scallops etched the long, solid handle and curled up and around the clouded glass. Despite the heavy carvings, her fingers shifted automatically to compensate for the design, and tightened in possession. The handle was warm, as if someone just set it down, but that had to be from sitting in the sun.

A heavy layer of tarnish turned the entire mirror nearly black. Silver-plate or the real thing, only checking the hallmark would tell, but the weight made Grace suspect it was solid silver.

How could she have missed this her first time past?

"I thought that one was gone," a gravelly voice said from nearby. Grace gave a start and spun around toward the sound. Middle-aged and paunchy, wearing jeans and a t-shirt that probably started the day white, a man sat on a rickety stool behind the table, obviously the seller.

She had not seen him before, but during slow times dealers often stepped over to visit with friends, and kept a watchful eye on their own display from a short distance.

A steaming cup of coffee sat next to his register, an antique nearly as old as the mirror she held. Grace looked at the vapor rising from the coffee and shuddered at the mere thought of pouring something hot down her throat. People believed Minnesota was cold? They should visit in August, she thought, as perspiration trickled down her back.

The man rose and came over, his eyes fixed on what she held. His face was shiny with sweat, either from the temperature or from that coffee.

"I just sold a whole collection of 'em," he said when he stopped across from her. "I told them to take whatever they wanted. I guess they left that one behind."

He raised his watery blue eyes to meet hers. The pale gaze held Grace in place, the blue seeming to deepen with his every word. She stared at those eyes, watching them change, darkening into a rich sapphire while he continued. "The glass is bad. I bet that's why those folks didn't buy it. Their loss. That glass is original. I suspect all the silvering on the back is gone, and that's probably why it doesn't reflect well." He scratched his head through his baseball cap, but his gaze still held Grace's.

It took effort, but she broke that odd hold from those mesmerizing eyes and looked down at the mirror again, where it nestled so comfortably in her grip. The metal seemed to lighten in the sun, the tarnish fading to hint at its original glow.

As she tilted it for one last look before she made herself put it back, she suddenly caught her reflection in it, but something was wrong, the hairstyle maybe. The image vanished, leaving her looking at the grimy glass again. She tilted the mirror, hoping for another peek at that reflection, wondering if it had been there at all or if the sun played a trick on her.

The man interrupted her reverie. "I'll knock five bucks off the price if you want it. It's real old, or I'd take off even more. You pay for age."

She nodded before she gave herself a chance to change her mind. The mirror didn't want to be left behind. She sensed it, an urgency, like the mirror was pleading for rescue. She sometimes felt that way when she walked past a chair frame, as if the poor thing knew it was destined for the garbage burner.

Forty dollars poorer, she walked away, the mirror in a white paper bag clutched tightly in her hand, but satisfaction buoyed her all the way to the van.

* * *

Grace pulled into the driveway behind her house and turned off the engine. The heat pressed against the windows when the air conditioner stopped. She had the oddest sense that the bag holding the mirror might disappear at any moment unless she got it someplace safe—and soon.

The chairs could wait. She pushed the door open, clutching the bag against her chest and hurried for the house.

It was cooler inside than out, but stickiness pressed against the walls of her small home as if searching for a way in as the air conditioner struggled against the numbing humidity. After looking around for the best place, Grace stopped at the bedroom, leaned over and set

her small package safely in the middle of her bed. Not that it could roll off, it wasn't a living thing, but she still felt better knowing it was far from the edge.

She went back out to the van to get the chair frames, carting them in one by one. Every trip outside made the hot air feel hotter, but once they were all lined up, she nodded, well satisfied. Refinished and with new upholstery, the designer should be pleased at her selections.

The mirror now, that was just for herself. She had no intention of selling it even if she could clean it up. What did the man say again? The silvering was gone? Maybe it was just dirty.

She closed her workshop door, and kicked off her shoes. No sense tracking any more dirt in than she already had. She felt cooler with her bare feet on the floor, where the air conditioning seemed to congregate.

That taken care of, she returned to the bedroom, sat down and pulled the mirror out of the bag. There had to be a silver hallmark somewhere, but under all the tarnish it would be hard to find. Flipping on her bedside table light, Grace tilted the mirror side to side—and there it was. Or rather, there *they* were. Small symbols had been pressed into the mirror's back, each one different. A rectangle with very worn letters. The "A" was clear, and after it an "O" or "D" or "P;" then some man's head, and a letter "S," what might be a cat with a hat, and was that a lion?

It had to be genuine. No one would go through the trouble of putting all those symbols on a mirror unless they meant something.

She leaned back against the headboard and clutched her purchase to her chest. A real antique silver mirror. "If only you could talk," she said, and laughed. "What stories would you tell?"

A box of tissues sat by the bed. Grace pulled one out and started rubbing the dirt off the glass. The wind picked up from outside, predicting a storm, breaking the stifling heat of the past week.

Her hair stirred, caught by the currents of air, and she brushed the blonde strands out of her eyes as she kept rubbing. The breeze stirred again, wafting the hair back into her eyes with more force this time, and she had to hold it in place. Grace froze, her hand still holding her flailing hair.

Wind? Inside? All the windows were closed this morning when she turned the air conditioner on.

An angry gust whirled around her and in a blink whipped her off the bed, holding her suspended for a brief instant, not long enough for her to open her mouth to scream, and then she was sucked into the whirling maelstrom.

The mirror was still clenched in her hand; the carvings dug into her palm. Shapes flew past too quickly to see them, her hair ripped free from the ponytail and slapped curls against her cheeks, her mouth, blocking her vision, clearing it, only to come back again. There was nothing to grab onto as she spun round and round, just the mirror, the only solid object, and she held tighter, feeling it cut into her palm. She tried to scream, to release the cry trapped in her throat, but couldn't suck in any air. Her heart pounded in her chest, her hair flailed around and snapped against her face like sharp stings.

Before she could compose a prayer, Grace hit the floor with a thump that knocked the air out of her lungs. *Air*, she needed *air*, and fought for a breath. After a frightening moment

when her lungs refused to relax, sweet oxygen rushed in. Her eyes were still squeezed shut, and she dared not open them yet, not until all the grit and remnants settled.

For such a violent storm, the air felt clear, smelled clear, no dust sifted past her cheeks or filled her mouth. After her breath steadied, Grace concentrated on any damage to her body before she dared open her eyes. Other than landing hard, nothing hurt, not even her bottom, despite how hard she hit. Her arms didn't hurt, her legs were fine, her shoes were even still on her feet.

At that realization, her eyes popped open. She hadn't been wearing shoes in her house.

Grace stared down past a peach-colored skirt, registering its presence but not ready to analyze that oddity yet, and looked at her feet, and the shoes there.

These were not her shoes. She knew every pair she owned—she didn't have that many—and none of them looked like this, soft flat shoes made from some richly embroidered fabric. She stared down at them as she sat there on the floor and angled her foot to see the underside as best she could. Bending was difficult. Grace craned her neck and peered at what she could see of the shoe bottom. Leather, carefully stitched to the top, and without a heel.

Now for the peach gown that draped her, with a skirt that—she had already discovered—blocked her view of her legs. Wow! A tumbled froth of ruffles and silk. And a frill of ivory lace around her very low neckline.

Very, very low neckline. She never knew she had cleavage like this.

Grace felt the blush rise up her cheeks. She took a surprised breath, only to find out that whatever kept her from bending was wrapped around her torso, cramping her lungs. She ran a hand around her middle, and discovered boning running vertically down her ribs. She had never worn one before, but she knew it was a corset.

So *that* explained why bending was difficult.

For the first time since the—dream? hallucination? Whatever this was—began, Grace shifted her attention from herself to her surroundings, and her mouth dropped open.

Instead of a tornado-ravaged house, she was in the most enormous room she had ever seen. The floor beneath her was wide planks of genuine hardwood, dark as opposed to the blonde oak laminate she had at home. Some kind of shimmery blue wallpaper glistened on the walls, a bright contrast to the heaviness of the floor.

A dark wood four-poster bed rested against the wall she faced and ran lengthwise along her left. A blue canopy hung from the tall frame. A matching blue comforter had been spread on the mattress with what appeared to be careful smoothness. A white bedskirt dusted the floor.

Visible beyond the bed, tall, narrow windows marked an outside wall. Heavy blue curtains that surely were velvet hung from nearly the ceiling to the floor.

She twisted around to see the wall behind her, an armoire, a real dark wood antique armoire almost as long as her bedroom at home, stood against the wall with room to spare. Beyond it, a small, elegant fireplace of a white stone carved with vines and vases had been built into the wall. From the smoke stains on the matching white mantle, it was well-used.

Between the fireplace and the windows, a folding screen of ruffled fabric on a wooden frame didn't quite cover an item she recognized. A strange shaped chair with a small footrest and no back. She didn't have to go over and look to know it was an antique commode. The top opened to become the missing back, and no doubt if she wanted to lift it,

she would find a porcelain bowl inside. That object had come from her own mind, for she had seen items just like it in many a flea market and auction.

It was better than a bedpan, but not by much.

As she stared from the armoire to the fireplace to the commode to the windows and back to the bed at her side, something tugged on her scalp, an unexpected weight and tightness. Grace reached up to check her head, half expecting to find blood from whatever was pulling at her scalp, afraid there might be an injury that would help explain her fantasy presence in this lovely place.

As her fingers slid into her hair, she gave another start. What on earth? Unusual hairpins were stuck all over, holding an intricate style in place. Braids wove through the curls, and her fingertips slid along what felt like ribbons worked into the plaits.

This she *had* to see. Perhaps if she saw it, she would know whether it was real or a figment of her imagination, a hallucination caused by some injury her mind would not, dared not, recognize yet.

A whisper of fear crept through. Her body could be broken and covered with debris, her imagination the only defense it had. Searchers might not find her for days. When would the pain of her injuries seep through this lovely layer of protection?

She clung to the vision like a lifeline. The real world would break through soon enough, and what it would bring terrified her.

Where was the mirror? She remembered having it in her hand, and looked around the floor at her side, then patted through the disturbing layers of fabric on her legs. Nothing. Had she dropped it along the way?

It took a bit of a struggle to get to her feet, and fear crept through again, her heart thumping, chills prickling her arms. What was happening outside this hallucination? In this world, her legs wobbled but they held, and the gown settled in place.

That pinching around her chest wasn't just the corset, but the high-waisted style, with a ribbon that tied just under her breasts. The skirt went clear to the floor.

She was grateful the vision still held, holding bandages and broken bones, shattered walls and collapsed roof, at bay.

Her fingers slid along the fabric, enjoying the smooth silk. The gown wasn't as full as it had seemed, being narrow in front, but the weight of gathers in the back gave the gown the sense of being broader than it was. A ruffle that viewed from above looked a foot wide, noticeable but not overwhelming, ran around the bottom.

As she twisted from side to side, trying to take in this new fantasy as the rich fabric swished around her feet and the fuller back skirt tugged at her mid-back, Grace pulled her mind away from the gown and back to that missing mirror. It was the key, the last thing she touched before the world went mad. If she found it, her mind would know where everything else was, the door, the bed, the closet.

For now, before reality came crashing back in, bills and work and cleaning and cooking—and hospitals?—Grace intended to absorb all she could.

She looked to the right, the only wall she hadn't examined yet. A large, paneled dark wood door out of the same wood as the floor, the bed, and the armoire, more of that shimmering wallpaper, and a gilt dressing table with a large oval mirror hanging on a bracket. A large china pitcher in a bowl, something very familiar to anyone who prowled flea markets and antique sales, sat on a large dressing table, and next to that, a small pouch beside a little tin.

She didn't want to snoop, but after all, this was only a dream. Grace let the scene play out and picked up the pouch. It was oddly bulky. Opening it, Grace tugged at the cloth just inside. Other objects tumbled about at the movement. The fabric unfolded and unfolded with each pull on the edge until the last of it slid out. Nothing fancy, just a rough square of silk.

Why silk? Ah, well, she was never one to turn away silk in any form.

She set the silk aside and turned back to the pouch. A round-ish opaque ball clinked out onto the table, lumpy and strangely colored. She picked it up and rubbed her fingers across it, then took a whiff. It didn't smell like anything she recognized, but it felt like . . . soap?

Grace looked from the silk to the soap and back again, and said aloud, "A washcloth!" It had probably started out as a handkerchief and been relegated to this lowly job.

The only other item in the pouch confused her. A tiny sponge, not big enough for washing.

Next to those things a silver tray, and hiding behind the scalloped edge was—yes!—her vanity hand mirror. Together with a matching brush and comb. A matching set when she only bought the mirror.

They looked brand new, even the mirror. No missing teeth in the comb, or bristles heading every which direction in the brush, and most decidedly not made of plastic. No, these pieces were also of silver, and carved exactly like the mirror.

A chill of a different kind shivered up her spine, and goosebumps mottled her arms.

The room had been comfortable just a moment ago.

Was she cold? Was rain pummeling her broken self in that other world?

Grace leaned over and picked the mirror up, enjoying the weight of the gown with her movement, the faint pulling of the gathered fabric hanging down the back. It was in perfect condition, the glass clear, the handle clean and gleaming. She stared at the reflection in the oval glass and immediately recognized what she saw.

The same reflection she had seen at the flea market, the one she had wanted another look at—herself in the gown she now wore.

Her hand started to shake, and she set the vanity mirror back down, sank onto the chair in front of the dressing table and looked into the larger mirror.

The gown was in fact as low-cut as that partial look in the mirror indicated, and she clapped a hand over her billowing breasts so she could concentrate on the rest without embarrassing herself. Her hair drew her attention away from her cleavage, pinned into layers of curls and tiny braids. The ribbons in her hair matched the gown so perfectly it must be from the same bolt of fabric.

She had purchased several costume patterns thinking someday she would make them, even though she didn't know where she could wear anything so obviously from another era.

Whatever the cause of this world she found herself in, it was a lovely dream. Her lips curved and so did the ones in the mirror.

There was so much more to see in this world she had conjured. Grace slipped around the bed and over to the window, pulled back the curtain enough to see, and peeked outside. No cars. In fact, not only no cars, but no pavement. At least, not as asphalt.

It must have been all those antiques that set her brain on this path.

An unpaved driveway, marred with shallow, thin ruts, ran in a half-circle outside her window, edged on the far side with a tall white wooden fence, the bars running lengthwise. The fence abruptly ended in a pruned hedge that formed the other side of the fence and

headed away from her out of her view. A path led on the outside of the hedge, going into a thin woods.

Off to the far right, inside the fence and hedge, she saw dark shapes, shifting and moving only to stop again. Horses grazing in a field?

“Binoculars would be helpful,” she muttered, wondering if they would appear as soon as she mentioned the need. Things like that happened in a dream. This fantasy did not cooperate.

A very human whistle cut the air. Instead of rescuers breaking through her lovely escape, one of the dark shapes she stared at, identifiable now as a magnificent horse, turned and galloped, coming closer until it disappeared behind what was visible from the window’s edge.

She shifted and tried from another angle. Carriages lined the packed dirt drive, all pulled close to a building that was a sort of garage. Inside the building, hiding in shadows, she thought she saw more carriages. *Carriages!* Grace giggled with a bit of hysteria, imagining them dropped into a parking lot in Minneapolis.

A man came around the side of one of the carriages, and Grace ducked further behind the curtain, leaving the slimmest gap to peek. The man carried a bucket with a rag draped over the edge. Grace watched as he began washing the near side of the carriage, such a normal activity with such a bizarre twist. Carriage washing? His clothes were unlike anything she was used to, breeches that fastened under the knee and wooden clogs that even from this distance had seen plenty of use. He didn’t pull out a cell phone, there was no radio nearby, no music coming from anywhere.

Another man dressed much the same led a horse into view and eased the big animal into place between two bars coming out of the next carriage in line. The two men appeared to be bantering back and forth. The new man harnessed the animal with the skill of one who did this on a regular basis.

No wires, no poles, no car exhaust. In fact, the air smelled wonderful—except for the tang of manure, but even that had a freshness to it, untainted by anything else lying over it. Ruts in the drive, yes, but no wider than a bike tire would leave.

Grace let the curtain fall closed, backed up, and sank down on the bed. Any moment now she would wake up and chalk this whole scenario down to that tornado on top of too much heat. But the dress was silky beneath her fingers, the corset snug around her middle, and she could feel the pull of the fancy curls pinned on her head.

She pinched herself, just out of curiosity. The pinch hurt. Did that mean this was real, that her senses weren’t lying?

Nearby, and close, much too close, a door opened. Grace froze, still touching the pinched spot. This was *her* dream. Nobody else was supposed to be in it. She turned to face the door that led . . . where?