

Jan Feb 2010

Victoriana

“Sounds silly like something out of Dickens,” Valerie rolled her eyes and looked at each of the people seated at the table. “We can’t just get married!” The girls were giggling madly over the thought of the very proper tutor that Valerie stiffened herself into at their house married to their dad.

Peter began to feel his full blush ebbing as he realized Valerie was turning him down on his proposal. He looked down at his protruding middle-aged belly and found himself too old and too fat for the very young, trim Valerie Goode. Yet it was a good proposal, he reasoned, and was not offered lightly. He squinted at the young woman who held a stern hand on his very silly daughters. Her eyes flashed a warning to both of them as she brushed back her bangs from her eyes. It was a nervous habit he’d finally noticed when he walked alone with her late last week as the girls ran ahead. He made her nervous; that was some small victory.

Isabelle at eight was far blither and quick to mock them than six year-old Emily. Emily broke up into giggles as Isabelle began singing, “Daddy and Val, sitting in a tree!” They both shook their blond heads in mirth over the embarrassment of the adults.

The matriarch of the group looked confused as always as she fiddled with her napkin and reordered the silverware next to the plate in exact inches taught at finishing school seventy years ago. Aunt Jenny spoke up, “Have you discussed your business? I would certainly like to eat before six!” Her old eyes, now a filmy grey, looked at each of them in confusion. When her gaze landed on Valerie, they lit up, “You look so beautiful, darling. Of course you can just get married! That’s what your uncle and I did. I was nineteen and upside down in love. Just like the two of you,” the old woman was constantly mistaking Valerie for Peter’s wife who had only been dead six months. “Sweetheart, are you making dinner tonight?” Valerie’s heart ached every time the old woman actually called her “Jill.”

Valerie stood suddenly and tried to steady her nerves by addressing the old woman, “Miss Jenny, I’ll get you some tea now. It’s only four and your guests are coming at six. Dinner isn’t until later after I leave.” The old woman was constantly setting the table with the good china and silverware and asking about a dinner party. Just yesterday, Valerie had made her tea and scones to satisfy the sentimental desire to see the old woman smile and to still the giggling of the little girls. Miss Jenny had instructed them on proper deportment at tea, and Valerie insisted the girls sober up and pay attention. She had growled out that they couldn’t act like little heathens forever as Peter Mumford’s children.

Peter followed her into the kitchen and leaned on the counter as Valerie put on the kettle for tea and took bread, butter and jam out to make a quick tea sandwich for the old lady. Valerie was embarrassed as he watched her and rubbed his whiskers that felt rough after even a short day at work. He’d come home early to pack and make his proposal but hadn’t taken time to even look in the mirror since dawn. He’d loosened his tie and unbuttoned his top buttons to exercise his frustration after making his daft proposal.

Valerie shook her head, "Mr. Mumford, I don't want you to mistake me for ungrateful. I appreciate your offer, and I know you are trying to take care of the girls, Miss Jenny and me, but marriage? Sir, I can't imagine us married, or anyone believing it." As he glanced down at his fat middle again, she dismissed his worries, "I'm a nobody from nowhere. People would say I trapped you or something."

Valerie glanced in his direction when he made a little sound like pain. The look on his face told her plainly that she was someone to him. She turned to face him and straightened her back, "I'll stay and take care of them; if you want me to . . . I'm sure we can come up with a plan." She was hesitant and back to biting her lip. He now made her very nervous when they were alone.

He was absorbed in how the fading light from the kitchen windows made her hair a richer shade of brown with red touches like the sky that night. Her eyes were a wide, changeable green with a fleck of amber.

"Red skies at night," he thought. It would be a clear day for the flight tomorrow. He was troubled by the trip planned for him to straighten out a new branch in Germany. He'd actually requested that his junior officer take the trip for him because lately Aunt Jenny seemed daffier and the girls wanted him for every little need. Though Jill hadn't been around too often because she used to travel for the company, she had still been their mother, and now she was gone. Every little sense in him worried over the trip that seemed so ill-timed.

Peter shook his head, "I need someone here with power of attorney. I need someone who will protect the three of them if need be. You have a level head; I trust your judgment. I will be in Europe for a few weeks, perhaps a month. Please do this for the girls, Val. We can have it annulled when I return if you don't want to continue with us." He came to stand behind her and hold her gently, "You didn't reject me totally last week." His mouth brushed her neck below her ear. Valerie closed her eyes but moved away from him as the kettle boiled.

"This is business, Mr. Mumford. I told you last week not to get it mixed up. I was a bit drunk," Valerie was still bemused over the man's passionate advances after the girls and Jenny had been put to bed. They'd shared a glass or two of wine because she decided to stay the night due to the driving rain that had settled on the peninsula. After nearly falling asleep over the second glass, she woke to him holding her close and kissing her with a building ardency. She had allowed the kissing to continue for many minutes as she woke. As soon as she realized she was responding, she stood and stumbled up the stairs to the guest room. He'd rapped gently to come in after a few moments, but she had feigned sleep and failed to open the door.

Peter sighed, "I am sorry about last week and this evening. You deserve better than my inexperienced fumbling or some rushed affair, but I need a wife right now, you need a permanent home, and the girls like you. I am confident that if something happens to me, you will take care of them. That's all I ask." He placed one hand on her upper arm and squeezed, "Please help me, Valerie." He took note of her reddened cheeks and neck; she was either angered or embarrassed.

“When would all this happen?” Valerie was tempted thinking of the mess at the apartment she was in the middle of packing to move home with her brother and his wife. She’d been abandoned by her roommate for a job in another state, and the neighborhood was ridiculously expensive. Mr. Mumford had offered a small suite in his house, but he had promptly begun to get too friendly, too fast. Valerie had no illusions about older, single men with young children. They were trouble coming and usually were willing to overlook her plain face and not too stunning figure. A girl was a girl, after all.

Her brother was condescending about Valerie’s options. When she refused to date a man whom he introduced her to at a company party, he said she was too picky. Val tried to make it clear she turned the guy down because the man tried to grope her right on the dance floor. It had been Peter Mumford who insisted the man leave her alone and later offered a ride back to her apartment when he left early. Little Emily had called in the midst of a crying jag, and he spoke to the babysitter as he followed Val’s directions back to her place. Before he dropped her off, Peter had asked her if she knew anything about little girls and had made her laugh with an account of his two rambunctious daughters. She gave him her phone number and said she wouldn’t mind sitting for them. She really wanted him to ask her out to dinner or for an outing with his family but felt too nervous to offer.

Peter Mumford called her to babysit for the next stuffy company function and returned early to find her helping both girls work on school projects. He’d shucked off his formal jacket, rolled up his sleeves and joined them. When she discovered he was the chief financial officer for her brother’s firm, Valerie had been surprised. Before he asked her to become his daughters’ tutor, she reflected, she’d just thought he was a gentle, funny man who was far more interesting than any younger man she’d met in an age. Once she found out how wealthy and connected he was; it surprised her that he had noticed her to start—even if it was only to ask her to become a tutor and babysitter.

The day Peter proposed, Aunt Jenny clenched it when Val entered the room with the teapot and the plate arranged like afternoon tea. She smiled and said to Peter who followed closely, “Peter, I love your new wife Valerie. She is a sweet girl who you should strive to deserve.” Valerie looked at Aunt Jenny for a long moment and then sighed in resignation.

When he came behind Valerie to squeeze her gently and give her a kiss on the cheek, Peter spoke to Aunt Jenny, but he made Val shiver with his words at her ear, “I will endeavor to do just that, Aunt Jenny. I am so glad you approve.”

Peter had a quiet ceremony planned for the dinner party that evening with the parish priest. Valerie was touched that he ordered her a dress in orchid like she’d seen at a fitting with his oldest daughter last spring and invited her brother, sister-in-law and closest friends along with his. There was a beautiful ring with a large diamond flanked by emeralds—he said for her eyes. When she blushed at not having a gift for him, Peter held her close and solemnly kissed her. “There, you have given me what I most wanted, my young friend.”

When the dinner guests left, his lawyer took documents giving Valerie Goode Mumford control of the family accounts and Peter’s power of attorney if she needed to invoke it. Peter kept her up late

reviewing every file, every account number and access code from his private ledgers. He shared all keys and secret hiding places, even where the children hid their found objects.

When they fell into bed, there was no lust, just the urge to see the thing done to fruition. She stroked his hair as he fell asleep to snore beside her and wondered why this middle-aged, portly man touched her and made her so willing to suit his needs. He was kind and generous, pleasant to talk to about all sorts of odd topics, and unerringly even with his pair of giggling little girls. She watched her husband sleep in utter peace and concluded that he was a very good man whom she should endeavor to please.

She woke to his kisses and smiled as she turned toward him early that morning. He whispered, "Love," before she covered his mouth with hers to keep him from trite expressions made just to please her. In the ebbing darkness, he was more forthright and demanding, and she found herself responding to the powerful man tucked inside his sedate, tamed exterior. When he slept again, her name was on his sigh. He held her so closely there was no mistaking his enamored state with his "young friend" as he often called her. Valerie examined his face and touched his chest with her lips. A warm ache invaded and filled her.

The civil ceremony at the courthouse early that morning was quick with only Valerie's brother and wife in attendance. When they parted on the wide, marble steps five minutes after the ceremony so he could rush to the airport and catch up with his luggage for the trip, he squeezed her close and whispered, "I love you for doing this, Valerie. Give yourself time to adjust and then enjoy it. Stop struggling, my young friend." He noticed her faltering smile and added, "You are Mrs. Mumford now. Do what you dreamed of as my wife. Spend some money on yourself, on those charities of yours or throw a party." He nodded and guided her down the last of the steps to her brother, "I'll call as soon as I'm settled."

That was the end of Peter for six months. In her mind, Valerie often stood on those marble courthouse steps and wondered over his odd inclination to leave everything in his life so tidy. She would replay his words and wonder how he knew he must give her carte blanche over his little family, their sprawling house and rich bank accounts. There was only one brief call to say that he had landed and that the company needed him to take an early flight to Turkey the next morning. After that call, Peter Mumford fell off the map.

"It is something out of a Dickens' novel!" Valerie squeezed her eyes shut and willed away tears that were threatening again. She had made so many deals with God that she wouldn't have been surprised to find the devil at the door when she opened it. There had been a phone call from the Turkish ambassador's secretary that one of their diplomats would call that day. They wanted to know when the children would be gone and if the old woman ever napped. She rubbed her damp palms on her thighs and hovered near the front door waiting for the next caller now that everything was ready. Her stomach quivered with apprehension.

There were so many times that she was convinced some man walking up to the house had been Peter. At first there had been representatives from Peter's company that turned out to be negotiating some touchy contracts with agents from the Turkish and Iranian governments. Then agents from the CIA came to call and riffle through the Mumford's computer and personal files while she watched. Her brother told her they had seized company documents and urged her to check for missing paperwork. There hadn't been anything missing or mysterious. When the news reporters started coming, there was one who she mistook for Peter at first glance a number of times. When she spotted the tall, portly man with thick blond hair, her heart would beat faster. Most of the time, he was hoping for a sound bite or a glimpse of the little girls whom she protected fiercely. After recording the same plea for her husband's safe return, the famous reporter left dissatisfied by Valerie's less than photogenic on-camera persona.

The man who approached the house months later as she watched from the window, left a dark car with a large, nasty-looking man at the wheel in the driveway. The visitor was dark-skinned and ring-eyed like the last man from the Turkish Embassy whom she'd met in a park at his request.

That first dark man had questioned her about Peter's business interests and her brother's position with the firm. He'd been insistent that she knew something that she knew she did not. When she became confused and asked him what he was insinuating with his questions, he'd broken off the interview quickly, "You are lovely and innocent, Mrs. Mumford. Forget your husband and get on with your life. I believe he left well funded. . . ." He stumbled to rephrase, "You are now very comfortable." He had stopped talking because her face had flushed with anger.

Valerie had followed the man as he exited the park and had written his license plates down. The car was not registered to the Turkish Embassy, and the Capitol police refused to help her. They said it was a State Department matter.

That information sent her off in another direction entirely. She had barraged everyone from the president's office to her brother's firm about Peter's location, destination in Turkey and business there. She blanketed the embassies and governments of all three countries and odd foreign offices with pictures and requests for Peter Mumford's return. In between, she balanced daily life to shield the little girls who were prone to crying for their father in the middle of the night and acting ghost-like during the day. Val cosseted Aunt Jenny's requests for attention and conversation. She barely kept them on an even keel, and yet she did.

After the interview with the dark man in the park, Valerie searched and examined every picture the girls and Aunt Jenny could find of Peter in the house. At first the pictures were for the investigation, then as the leads dried up to nothing, she looked for some clue to why he'd have disappeared or been taken. For days, she looked at backgrounds, suits, gestures—anything including his expressions as he looked at his children and his first wife Jill. Jill had been a very pretty blond who glowed in all the pictures. Finally the breakthrough came when Aunt Jenny tapped one with her finger and said, "That was taken at a party we had outside. It was beautiful the day she left him." Jenny cried a bit, "She broke his heart for her thirty-fifth birthday."

Puzzled, Valerie had asked very gently, "Jenny, I thought Jill died in an accident? Jill didn't just leave him, did she?" There was a little sob of sorrow welling inside her for Peter who looked at his pretty wife with such adoration in each shot. He'd been thinner and looked younger with his whole focus on her or on his little girls.

Jenny just shook her head, "No, Valerie. She told him during the party that she was leaving him for a man he'd invited there. There's a picture of them together here somewhere. I took it myself." She shuffled through them with trembling, unsure fingers and stopped as Valerie quieted, "There it is." Valerie had found the picture of the pretty blond speaking to the dark man from that odd meeting in the park; she sat frozen staring at it. She squinted at the photograph and remembered the dark man's soft words of advice; she puzzled over Peter's unease over the business trip and the man from the park's comment that she was an "innocent."

Jenny uttered, "That's him." Jenny shook her head, "She packed a bag and went with that man. There was an accident about a week later. Peter was so devastated." Jenny shook her head but brightened, "Then he found you. Valerie, I think he was in love with you the first time you came to watch the girls. He said you were so lovely and innocent."

Valerie's head spun as Jenny repeated the same word, "innocent" that the man in the park had used. She looked carefully at the picture and knew he was the same man she'd met. She called the Turkish Embassy and demanded they find her husband in whatever swill hole they were keeping him in with trumped up charges. She threatened enough secretaries to receive a visit from the FBI. Her brother called the next day and told her to stop asking questions because he was getting pressure at work. With the picture and the license plate number, Valerie knew she was close to something serious. One thing she figured she could depend on was that her Peter was another innocent just like her.

The dark man who flashed his identification at her door was dressed like a gentleman, so Valerie invited him into the dining room for tea. Aunt Jenny was back to nervously setting it every morning and including fresh flowers. It might look pretentious, but the china chosen and the alignment of the silverware was an important reading of her mental state for the day. This morning Jenny had chosen the yellow and gold china from France that she'd returned home with after a long trip with her husband Charlie in 1955. It was a tricky set of china, Valerie reflected, because it looked fine but was actually quite inexpensive. Jenny had purchased it thinking she would have a whole passel of children who had never materialized. It was china of pretense and thin trust.

Valerie poured the man tea and offered a plate of cookies. "This is very civilized, Mrs. Mumford. I didn't know how you might receive me after the tone of your phone calls. Thank you," he nodded. His eyes took in the careful flowers and the old, seemingly delicate plates. He noticed the trembling in Valerie's hands as she poured and offered the plate. The poor girl was frightened, he concluded.

Valerie glanced toward the door, "Should we ask your driver in?" She put on her nervousness by wringing her napkin in her lap.

The man smiled only slightly, "No, he is fasting today." He examined her carefully and found only a frightened, young woman who was out of her league.

"Are you fasting?" Val glanced at her slightly protruding belly. She'd realized she was pregnant just as Peter's complete disappearance had become evident. She glanced at the top of her belly again to distract him into sipping at the tea.

"I am not a religious man. Do you believe in God, Mrs. Mumford?" he sipped at his tea delicately and let his eyes glitter over her. He thought she was prettier in person than she was on the security photographs shepherding the little girls to school just that morning. He had another of them in the park with a fragile old woman leaning on her arm.

Valerie sat a little forward and slid a photograph Peter Mumford toward him, "I believe that I want my husband back. I believe that your government knows where he is, and his family must recover him." She took a half-breath and played her part, "Peter is an innocent, unlike his former wife Jill." She gave the man a copy of the picture from the party. She swallowed, "That man with Jill Mumford met me in the Natural History Garden not a month ago and said he was from your embassy. Jill Mumford went with him a year ago and was found dead a week later." Her eyes glittered over sharing this information. Valerie added quietly, "I have just been warned by the FBI that I should stop investigating Jill Mumford's death." She cradled the tea cup, sipped and swallowed obvious panic. When her hands reached for the teapot this time and poured for him, he drank the cup politely and felt completely at ease with this frightened child waiting on him.

The man opposite her sat back in his chair and tapped the table to look at her benevolently, "How do you know I am from the Turkish Embassy? I could be here to make you disappear like the other Mrs. Mumford," he was being playful with the gullible, sweet pregnant girl in the guise of Mrs. Peter Mumford. He was surprised that she laughed and poured him another tiny cup of tea.

From a corner of the room, Aunt Jenny emerged from where she hovered previously unseen and commented, "Because we ran the tags this time, Mr. Abdullah Said. What's wrong there, sir?"

Abdullah Said rocked forward on his feet as he stood. Valerie smiled sweetly and hushed both of them, "Keep your voices down, dears. Mr. Said, your driver is napping." She moved over to the diplomat who grasped at consciousness and held out his hand to her. She took his hand and squeezed as she guided him back into his seat with the other hand at his shoulder, "We mean you no harm. I just want my husband back, sir. Tell me where to search." She quickly moved the china out of his way as his head snapped forward, and he slumped onto the table.

When Abdullah Said woke next, his secretary was nudging his foot and calling for him to rise. The day had ended, and a new one had begun with no reports filed. He lay sprawled on the couch in his office with his shoes removed. There was a blanket over his legs and a deli bag on the coffee table. It looked as if he had worked through the evening.

The secretary was curious: how had the interview with the young American gone yesterday? No one had seen him return, and the driver had taken the rest of the day on personal leave. Said struggled to his feet and ordered the secretary out of the room. He splashed his face in the sink and crossed to his computer to alert the authorities in Turkey. There was a sour, powdery film on his tongue and his throat felt dried to a husk.

Mysteriously the internet and phone lines were down, and it seemed everyone at the main embassy office had taken the morning off. Said felt his thick, woolen head and looked at his tongue in the mirror. Whatever the American had used was potent. His assistant returned in a state of alarm; there had been a massive explosion in the capital city in Turkey; most of the prison and attached government offices there had been destroyed.

Valerie didn't try to explain anything to Isabelle and Emily, and the girls were so trusting of her since their father's disappearance that they packed light bags and threw them into the trunk of the car. Valerie had spent the entire afternoon on the phone with her brother and the other operatives who pulled Peter out of the dark hole he'd been housed in as bargaining leverage and promptly forgotten. While she spoke to her brother, she packed the china that Jenny loved so much and loaded it in the rental van.

She viewed the agent they sent her suspiciously and checked her car for bombs, cut brake lines and compromised carburetors. He laughed and told her they wouldn't kill her or the children, but Aunt Jenny was another matter. The old woman had cost them one of their best undercover agents when she identified Jill's contact at the birthday party. Valerie just packed and watched for the children's safe return from school, felt her swollen belly and prayed for Peter. She looked around the lovely house they'd close up for a while and thought, "Good riddance."

Valerie insisted that Abdullah escaped implication in the explosion or the accompanying security breach. She'd questioned him with Aunt Jenny and a CIA agent listening and texting to the team they'd slipped into position. She kept her hand on his heart and listened with her face close to his as he babbled nonsense about her beautiful green eyes and her guileless husband. When he gave up the floor and section where foreigners might be kept, she let her mouth touch his temple. She'd patted his chest and told him he was a very good friend. She whispered that he should believe in Allah and begin to pray for forgiveness.

Said's driver was found by the Capitol police with a prostitute a few days later. The girl he'd been kept by said he promised to marry her and insisted on a huge sum of money for her silence when Abdullah arrived in person to retrieve him. She kissed the big man tenderly as he stumbled in the doorway trying to shake off the drugs he'd ingested. The girl had winked at Said and pressed her cell number into the driver's hand, "Val said you were an innocent, and I swear she was right." Abdullah shook himself all over when he heard her giggle as she shut the door in their faces. Valerie Mumford, her daughters and the fragile aunt were gone without a trace from the Mumford's vacant property.

Valerie sent Abdullah Said a letter after she recovered the shell of her husband and closed him up in a house she found investigating safety for herself and his family after he disappeared. The letter was brief,

My dear man,

Thank you for visiting me that day. It speaks well of you that you came unarmed. You told me that day that you were not a religious man. While you were under my influence, you prayed the Koran, and I felt you needed forgiveness especially after you gave me what I needed. God loves you. As one innocent to another, He loves you and you should forgive yourself.

Your young friend,

Valerie Goode Mumford

Peter rested in the half dark afraid to open his eyes to the damp cell where he'd waited for months. He had been betrayed by over-brimming, American confidence in his own benevolence as he'd bulldozed through the wild, colorful airport after a rough plane landing on his second day abroad. He hardly glimpsed the real city before the police hustled him away for questioning, before the men in dark suits tossed him into a hellish place.

The prison had been dark, gray and subject to perpetual rainfall from moisture running down the moldy walls. Everything on the upper floors was slicked with green moss. The walls and floors on his level oozed green to a slimy black. It crawled with worms, beetles and thick cockroaches. He thought of the cockroaches and began to feel wretched again. Sucking the moisture from the slime and eating the large insects he could catch had helped him survive for the last few weeks when he was sure they had forgotten him.

He had reviewed every scene from his life in that cell. He memorized his little girls' faces and little crazy conversations, days in the park, mornings reading in bed before and after Jill's death. Sometimes their faces were hazy as if he had rubbed at their features on worn photographs; other moment brought them into the moldy, rank cell with him to whisper worries into his ears. He sometimes set the dinner table for tea with Aunt Jennie and had long conversations with her about his mother and father. He could not remember anything without Jenny or her husband Charlie in the background at parties. They were so much in love that he'd always felt envious. They sang silly songs and danced close all evening in his thoughts.

He replayed Jill leaving him as he gave her the ridiculous ring he'd offered Valerie for the wedding. Jill had pressed it back into his hand with tears in her eyes. She had told him she was going away with their friend Kardash Assize and that she wanted a divorce. Peter let his heart break a thousand times during the six months he waited for rescue, escape or some distraction. Eventually he saw it happen like a film caught in a loop, and he decided to turn the camera on his little girls playing in

the garden when it happened. He practiced placing the ring in his voluminous pockets and running to them like a circus clown.

With thoughts of them, he would waltz in his lovely Valerie. During his real life, he had cautioned himself over the attraction to this new, mysterious girl when his own wife had betrayed him so publicly before her accident. He'd been a "person of interest" during her accident investigation, and he had borne that scrutiny alone. Questioning everything during the acres of time in the cell, he imagined Valerie as counterfeit as his former wife. It was all too convenient to rescue her from the lewd approaches of the drunken man at the company party. Her brother was much too caustic about her chances and options. She was too kind to Peter as he made his lurching, clumsy moves on her.

Valerie seemed so fresh and young that he hadn't noticed her sly joy at his interest in her immediately. He remembered her smile in the half light their only morning together and realized she met him willingly and with some surprising passion. During the time in the dank prison, she became a lure he rushed toward and burned himself like a moth to the flame. He knew in his heart that she didn't imprison him, but it slowly became a fact after six long months of brainwashing that version into his mind. Valerie and Jill were in league and fooled him over and over with their unaffected loveliness. With his eyes closed, he imagined strangling Valerie and finding the jailor's key, so he could escape.

And suddenly after an eternity of waiting and stewing in anger, he was freed. A burst of explosives, and he was being rushed out of the cell; he saw the startled faces of men and women who had been incarcerated longer, and he leapt over a number of bodies on the way back to the daylight. The rush of noise and light had confused him, so he'd hyperventilated in the back of a cargo van tilting and swaying through the crowded streets. As soon as they arrived at an airstrip, he'd been asked no fewer than ten times if he was Peter Mumford. His anger climbed out of the confusion and they administered a sedative. He slept through the trip to Germany where he was debriefed, examined and cleaned up; then the processing began to return him to his family. He learned to hide his anger which had crowded out any grateful feelings. When he landed at Dover to begin another bout of debriefing, he bit his inner lips until they were raw. If Jill hadn't been dead, he'd have hunted her down.

When he discovered that Valerie had moved his things into a new dark bedroom of a safe house back in America, he was suspicious. As Valerie tried to break through his new reserve, she had no way of knowing that she was the enemy. She tried to tell him that the old house was too well-known to the media, that his position at the company was being recreated for him to allow more time at home, and that he was safe under her care for now. He hissed once and said, "Safe with you?" He reflected that she had started to dress like Jill now that she was a rich man's wife. He looked at her slightly protruding abdomen and asked a number of times, "We were together twice? It seems impossible, Valerie." Sometimes he could not recall her name at all.

After a particularly violent dream during his second week home, Peter opened his eyes and all control vanished. He looked over to see Valerie asleep and unconsciously curled into him and let a spasm of violence wash over his body. He imagined his hands on her throat in the dream. He couldn't bring his hands up to touch her lest he crush her.

She woke to him frowning at her and tried to open her arms to him. "Get out of my bed," was all he could choke out at her. She blinked at him and should have been shocked but rolled out of bed like a shot. They'd warned her about post traumatic stress; she'd cautioned herself that he barely knew her; she was in awe of the handsome stranger with the burning eyes. Her Peter Mumford had been hidden under a middle-aged paunch grown from a comfortable life. This Peter Mumford was a new man who did not necessarily need or want her. He was the same tender man with his daughters and his Aunt Jenny, but his anger and irritation settled on Valerie.

Peter winced at the daylight once she left the room quickly. Another child was arriving soon and needed his attention. His little daughters hardly knew him, and Aunt Jenny just rubbed her hands together when she spoke to him like she couldn't stay warm. Jenny poured him coffee that morning and said, "Valerie is innocent, Peter. Please don't hurt her." Something uncanny in the old woman spied the damaged mind of her once gentle nephew. With her half-blind eyes, Jenny saw the glances he gave Valerie that revealed his distrust and verging hatred.

When he looked in the mirror, a gaunt, young man looked back with none of Peter Mumford's old gregarious nature. He'd been replaced by some stranger. Valerie hugged him and kissed his cheek and neck as he'd once tried to lure her with caresses. "I want my Peter back. I want my Mr. Mumford who I've missed so much. We need you back when you're ready, dear friend." She stopped after he shrugged her off the second time. Over dinner, he told her the girls needed a new, full-time tutor. He asked her quietly to leave him alone to adjust. In tears, she moved her things out of their bedroom. She watched him tremble with irritation when she came near him. Valerie withdrew all touches and finally words.

She cried by herself for a few nights and decided that perhaps it was time for her to go home. Valerie took stock in the few things she brought with her from the apartment and was surprised that she could pack in twenty minutes. Valerie touched the place where the child stirred and felt sorry that it was so unwelcomed by him. She left him a short note asking for the annulment on a morning when the sky was red and foreboding with storms. She thought it was the right weather to move back to her brother's until she found a job. She thought that after the child came, she would be able to think without hormones wrecking her common sense. She contacted the lawyer and had him destroy the power of attorney. She asked for a formal separation to be filed.

Peter read the little note, picked up the flashy ring and shook his head at losing the child she carried from their brief marriage and the one night together. He walked through the entire house Valerie had chosen to hide and unpack their lives searching for his old self. He rose early, shaved carefully, and tried to begin to heal.

When Abdullah spotted the young woman in the park reading at lunch time, he was too intrigued to turn away. He walked past her twice before he dared to sit next to her. She glanced over to him and smiled, "Have you found Allah, Mr. Abdullah Said?" She looked nearly ready for the child to spring from her, and yet she must have another month or more before the birth.

He nodded and rocked slightly as if he prayed for a moment. He looked at her sideways, “My lovely, innocent Valerie, where is your beloved husband?” His voice was rich and low with cadence of prayer. He looked carefully at his unlikely friend with warm brown eyes. He looked around for the eyes that most likely watched them. She was so alone and exposed.

She shook her head, “I told him it was a piece of Victoriana right at the very beginning—like a Dickens’ novel full of tragedy. He can’t even look at me now but to think of that damp cell.” Her eyes narrowed and looked at children playing in the distance, “Mr. Abdullah, he is so thin and young; he is barely the man I knew and married. I did what I could and kept them all safe while he was gone. Now it is safer for me that we are apart.” She sighed and looked at her hands clasped in her lap. Her hands felt better without the large ring. She had faith in time and happenstance like meeting some kind, pudgy man at a dance you didn’t even want to attend.

Mr. Abdullah extended his hand to clasp hers and squeeze her fingers. “My dear, in case you haven’t heard—my driver? He married that girl you gave him to for safe keeping. Maybe your love will return to you the same way.” He was surprised at how thick his throat became thinking of her alone.

She nodded, “God willing, sir.” She closed her eyes and lifted her face to the sun.

Peter Mumford did not come back to himself for another month. The girls and Aunt Jenny became the key to unlocking the happier man he’d sealed away while toughening up his resistance to boredom, starvation and despair. The girls were too effervescent to cease their prattling and giggling for very long. He and Aunt Jenny hosted tea party after tea party for the girls and their friends from the neighborhood. Valerie had chosen a smaller house in a real neighborhood full of children and wide, spreading lawns designed for tag and ball games. Their house had a basketball hoop that enticed most of the third graders Isabelle attracted after she became comfortable at the new school. Emily found a carefully-constructed tree house in the back yard to hide in and play quietly with her dolls.

One evening as he taught Isabelle and a friend how to judge the angle of a shot, he noticed a car driving by slowly and stared at the apparition of Valerie out for a ride with a dark-skinned man. He shivered in the twilight and wondered how she was faring. When he called for her at her brother’s that evening, the man who answered said that Valerie wasn’t in and wouldn’t be back for a few days. When Peter persisted in finding out her location, the line went dead. No one picked up when he tried to call again.

That night he dreamed he was sucking the slime off his fingers to ease his thirst in the cell. When he scraped a deep pocket running with beetles and little white worms, he broke through to a window. Pulling apart the veil of green he saw Valerie under a small waterfall. She was trapped there for all time with the water rushing over her glinting green and wet on her skin. When he reached through to touch her, she broke apart in slivers. He woke crying and reached for her before he remembered that he had driven Valerie away.

Peter returned to work so that he had a reason to get dressed in the morning and shave off his blond whiskers. He walked into the office on the first day and was startled by the applause from his whole department. Valerie's brother took him patiently through changes that had occurred in his absence. After all the reports and changes were accounted for, Peter asked quietly, "How is Valerie?"

The man who had always seemed so stiff and proper backed away as Peter asked about his sister. Robert Goode failed to answer and shook his head, "Please don't ask today, sir. I'm happy that you're back." Robert's eyes fell to the floor.

Peter had looked at him intently and tapped his finger in unaccustomed impatience. Among all the faces revealed as men pulled off masks during the transport away from the prison, Peter remembered Robert Goode. Peter growled, "You were there when they found me, weren't you? It's all a blur, Robert. Why were you there?" There seemed to be confederates everywhere.

Robert looked down at the tops of his shoes and shook his head, "Because Valerie told me to go and get you. She told me not to come back unless I found you. She was going to go public with everything she uncovered if we didn't bring you home." His voice fell to a hush because they were speaking in such a public place. Peter's eyebrows rose because in their former relationship, Robert had never seemed more than a distant guardian for his little sister.

"Us? Who the hell are you?" Peter had lost his patience with all of them. "Why was I taken?" He was so angry, he thought about snapping Robert's neck when the man had never been anything but cordial and compliant. Peter Mumford was angry at the lack of control, the mystery and the distrust that filled him now when he spoke to anyone other than Aunt Jenny or his little girls.

Robert shut the door and sat heavily in a chair, "You were taken because they thought they had captured an agent not an accountant," his voice contained scorn. He sighed, "The company is a front for the CIA. I am an agent, sir. I hadn't been in the field for many years when you were taken. It was unexpected." He kneaded the joints in his fingers in the effort to control the urge to punch Mumford hard just to wake him up.

Peter shook his head, "What is Valerie? Some kind of spy? I knew all that innocence was contrived! God, I'm such an idiot!" Peter had a flash of Jill and Valerie merged into one conniving creature.

Robert shook his head, "Val said you blame her for some reason. I couldn't believe it when my wife called to say she'd come home to us." Robert shook his head and clenched his fists, "If it weren't for Valerie and her bumbling, innocent insistence, you'd still be sitting there in that moldy wet place eating God knows what until you went insane. She and your Aunt Jenny uncovered a double agent, kidnapped a Turkish diplomat and his driver before we paid her any mind. We sent in an extrication team because she was about to blow the lid off the whole thing." Robert shook his head again, "It's a wonder I haven't been asked to resign. Your escape nearly became an international incident." The younger man looked miserable.

Realization hit Peter and winded him, “She didn’t know any of this before I was taken, did she?” Peter felt thrust into a new prison of hurt over Valerie wherever she was, pregnant, unloved and rejected.

Robert shook his head, “When she got into your car after the dance that first night you met, and you took her home, I nearly had a heart attack.” He sighed and shook his head, “Mr. Mumford, even my wife still thinks I am an accountant. Jill was an operative, but she was a more active.” Robert unclenched his hands slowly as he understood Peter’s confusion between the two women. If one woman could betray you, then the other woman must have the capacity to betray the same way.

“Did Jill mean to leave us like that?” Peter had to ask with the way he mixed up the two women in his mind.

Robert shook his head but shrugged all the same, “I think she was trying to protect her family. She seemed taken with Azzide, but that could have been an act. Her accident threw everyone into turmoil. That’s how all the sloppiness occurred. They never should have thought you were the contact when it was Jill who had handled the Turks. That’s how you ended up in that cell. We were informed that contact had been made.”

Robert swallowed nearly choking over a lump in his throat; he had treated his sister with such hardness even when she moved into his house in her heartbroken condition. “While we fooled around with diplomatic moves through the State Department and began negotiations like you were a hostage, Valerie stirred up a hornet’s nest. I had to order her a team to help her smuggle Abdullah Said back into his embassy past all kinds of sentries. We even blocked the satellite and internet with scramblers to make it look like he’d come back to work after their meeting. Azzide helped her kidnap him and his driver. No matter his involvement with Jill, Kardash is part of the reason you have been returned.” He ground his eyes with the heels of his hands and thought of Valerie’s crushed spirits when she arrived at his home two months ago.

Robert’s own wife had railed at him and cried brokenly yesterday evening as she tried to discover where Val had wandered off. She had disappeared with little more than a change of clothes and her purse. Even her car was parked in front of the house. When the young man they had over for dinner that night answered the phone for her and spoke with such authority, she’d become instantly suspicious.

Under constant surveillance until the last week, Valerie had disappeared and so close to her due date and in such a volatile state. Just yesterday, he’d uncovered her collection of Valium and Percocet from well-meaning doctors. He would not be surprised to find her overdosed or wrists slashed in the next few days. She’d been profoundly depressed for weeks and nervous to the point of paranoia. Losing Peter Mumford had pushed her over some fine edge.

Peter asked for the second time, “Where is Valerie? I need to speak to her.”

Robert Goode looked up out of the depths of dark thoughts and couldn't bite back a direct hit, "Gone, sir. You wanted her gone, and I believe she has given you that wish. I have no idea. I am waiting for her body to surface because whomever took her has made no demands. It will probably be a few days. Perhaps we will recover the child." Robert was accustomed to hard things that the innocents in the world could not grasp. He stood up with tears in his eyes and left Peter with those dark thoughts.

Abdullah Said had found God. He prayed from the Koran and listened to the young woman in the next room give birth. He visited her between contractions when they covered her so he could mop up her tears and perspiration with a cool cloth. He told her that God loved her even when she begged to die. He hushed her and kissed her hands.

They had spoken many times in the park after Peter's rescue. Abdullah found her quieter but calm and intelligent. She looked him in the eyes like his wife had never done. Even swollen with the child, he found her attractive and daydreamed about keeping her after the child was born. He envisioned a little apartment for her off DuPont Circle where he could walk to visit her and rest in her arms. Once he dared to kiss her fingers and tell her that their destinies were entwined because she had brought him back to Allah and had kept him safe when any other woman would have let him die.

She stroked his hand and told him she hadn't had such a dangerous man as her friend since Peter Mumford. She finally acknowledged that Peter had probably been thinking of killing her every night since his return, and she had been so blinded with gratitude that she hadn't known. The thought that she could never return to him drove her into deep despair. Before Abdullah offered her sanctuary just after the order to kidnap and kill her circulated, Valerie had considered numerous forms of suicide.

When Abdullah printed Peter Mumford's name on the birth certificate, his face split in a smile. He felt like he'd become a grandfather again and kissed Valerie's cheek as she lay sleeping in the sheet strewn bed. She slept poorly and asked to die in her sleep again.

Valerie had fallen asleep hoping that the relentless bleeding as the afterbirth passed meant she would die while she lost consciousness. Valerie dreamed of the parade of virgins promised to the young soldiers of Jihad and saw herself among them. When the nurse Abdullah hired held the baby to suck at Valerie's breast, Valerie murmured that she was afraid and said, "Peter?" The nurse told her that the baby would make her uterus contract and begin to heal itself. Valerie woke for a moment to cradle the baby to her and began to cry again as her milk let down.

Abdullah listened to her cry, heard the snatches of her dreams, and felt guilty for wanting to keep her from her husband. The man might be a weakling who groveled and pleaded for freedom, ate the crawling things to his jailor's amusement and then turned on the angel who freed him, but the poor man had suffered intolerably in ignorance. Near dawn he called Peter Mumford and asked him how he felt about Valerie Goode.

Peter was startled from deep sleep, "Val? I love Valerie. Where is she?" Stretching into wakefulness, he was sure of his feelings and horrified of his treatment of her in such a fragile state.

The man's voice was deep and musically foreign, "You would walk through flames for her?"

Peter nodded in the dark, "Flames of hatred, ice in my veins, the rain of troubles and thorns of distrust." Poetry seemed appropriate in the middle of the night.

Abdullah Said sighed and examined the young woman who slept off the birth with the child still nursing beside her. She was lovely, bare and innocent. "I told her she was one of the forty virgins of heaven promised to me. You must protect her and love her, young man."

Peter shook himself awake, "Are you at the Turkish Embassy? Is that you, Said?"

The line went dead, so he left his bed to toss on some clothes and run to the car. When she woke that morning, Peter Mumford was asleep beside her in the makeshift birthing room inside the fanciful Turkish Embassy. Somehow she was wrapped tight in his arms with the baby ready for another feeding. She made eye contact with Abdullah who watched her from the doorway and smiled vaguely in her baby haze. She whispered, "Praised be, Allah."

His voice was velvet, "Remember you are mine, my sweet friend. In another life or time, Valerie." Val nodded ready to agree to anything if Peter could remember loving her in this one.