

The Golden Sassafras
#8-Genre: Mystery/Suspense, 1,042 words
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A proud RGV native, Cheri grew up across Central and South America. She is an avid traveler and a lifelong lover of words. She has chased them across pages and silver screens, taking in their beauty and wisdom, then releasing them to soar and (hopefully) inspire others. Her Ph.D. in Spanish Literature encouraged her to chase words even further – across languages and cultures. Life has introduced her to a living kaleidoscope of characters, and she loves to bring her experiences with culture and quirks into her writing and seminars. In her spare time, she is an unrepentant daydreamer, an eternal student, a devoted bookworm, a fanatic of shoes and chocolate, a well-trained servant to two dogs, and a seeker of adventures.

The door closed behind her. Mary wished it separated her from the nightmare of the past 48 hours. Now it was here, the dreaded return to the room where Sylvia's blood silently screamed up at her from the stained tiles.

Sgt. Martina Schaffer, the 28-year-old, blonde, oh-so-attractive partner of Detective Vargas, had insisted Mary join them at the station for questioning not a full 10 minutes after the doctor pronounced Sylvia's death. Mary had nodded, numb, as they walked her through the process; Sylvia would spend the night in the morgue and the funeral home would take the body.

But she's not a body! Mary had screamed internally. *She's Sylvia! She's a brain and a heart and a foodie. A girlfriend to Zach and a daughter to Tomás and Linda. My best friend...*

The numbness had persisted throughout her interrogation. Whenever Detective Vargas, Sebastian, as he insisted, would give her a reassuring touch or a shoulder when she cried, Schaffer would push harder, clearly annoyed. Much to Schaffer's chagrin, Sylvia's death had been deemed a terrible accident and it was now over.

Mary's heart ached for her Mom right now. Mom would have thrown her that cheeky grin and dusted off an old mantra, probably the one she had said after Grandpa's accident, "Hold on to every faded piece of him. Memories are the flickering lights God sends into the darkness of loss." It was also what she told Mary just before she flatlined.

Death was supposed to stay out *there*, outside her doors and in newspaper stories. It was not supposed to waltz into her home, haunting her with its essence when she passed the picture table or looked at her own hands.

Sylvia, why did you come to see me in the first place? We never had a chance to....

Clouds of grief parted for a moment as Mary's pattern-solving brain latched onto the question. Sylvia had been obsessed with etiquette—even to the point that she made sure to knock on Mary and Elly's dorm room door before opening it and flashing her Hook-'Em-Horns during their UT days. It wasn't like her to come over without calling first.

Mary played back the moment. Sylvia had exclaimed "Let me in!" Had she noticed a slight trepidation in her friend's voice?

Oh, Sylvee, what did you need from me?

Across the room, her TV announced the latest in virus news--an Australian virologist's research on local plants may have led to a breakthrough. Normally, Mary was a sucker for an

Aussie accent, but she had a bigger puzzle to focus on now.

Why didn't you call? You always call. Unless....

The sickening realization of the past few weeks evaporated her mental fog. After the death of Jackie, her boss, the college had promoted Mary to head of Medical Student Recruitment. Overwhelmed, she eventually blocked all incoming contact.

Oh, no.

Mary tapped her phone out of airplane mode and cringed at its incessant beeping, informing her of hundreds of missed messages. Sylvia *had* tried to contact her.

“Where r u?” texts clogged her screen, escalating in intensity.

“Mary, we need to talk.”

“Mary, I think he's after me!”

“Mary, HE's HERE!”

“Mary, I need you. I'm scared. I think he's coming for you now.”

And, finally, *“Mary, you have to GET RID OF THE FLOWER! It's the only way!”*

The phone slipped through her fingers as Mary recoiled in horror. What did Sylvia mean? What “he” was after her? What could she *do* about it?

It came to her in a flash. Hadn't Sylvia walked in with a handbag? The police's cursory search hadn't turned it up. Could it still be in her foyer? Sylvia hadn't made it beyond the entryway.

Sure enough, a quick search behind the bushy ficuses in her entryway produced Sylvia's latest Kate Spade acquisition. Mary emptied its contents onto the tile.

She could not contain her shock when she picked up a brochure for the Golden Sassy Hotel in San Antonio.

We cancelled the reservations! Why would she even carry this around?

Mary opened the brochure to reveal a receipt for a week-long stay at the hotel, a stay which had ended the day of Sylvia's first terrified text.

Back in their college days, Mary, Sylvia, Elly, and Jing Liu had chosen the hotel on a spring break whim. Its original name was The Golden Sassafras, for the flower native of the owner's hometown of Queensland, Australia. He had given them a framed, pressed Golden Sassafras to share.

Each year they met for their annual spring break at the Sassy, each one keeping the flower for a year. When Elly and Jing Liu moved to California to pursue an internship at Dr. Anthony Fauci's San Francisco office, Mary and Sylvia struggled to keep the tradition alive. The flower had hung in Mary's living room for the past seven years.

The brochure held another leaflet, a flyer for a lecture by one Dr. Michael Rothschild. The man in the picture was strikingly handsome. His gray bouffant hairstyle and cocky smile seemed familiar.

The TV newscaster was still interviewing the Australian researcher when Mary looked up to see the face from Sylvia's flyer. The same Dr. Michael Rothschild was suddenly in the spotlight for discovering the Golden Sassafras plant could have a role in ending this virus. She had seen him elsewhere too--but where?

Mary was startled by the overjoyed voice of Mrs. Vargas at the door.

“Mary, open up! Remember how Michael was going to come after the virus was over?”

Well he's here now! And he's excited to meet you."

A pang of terror shot through her. Dr. Michael Rothschild was Mrs. Vargas's long-lost boyfriend, Michael! His picture sat next to Ronnie's on her neighbor's piano. There were just too many coincidences mounting up... Something felt *wrong*.

The flower! Sylvia had said to get rid of the Golden Sassafras. Mary had an intuitive flash it had to happen *now*.

Before she could move, the doorknob turned. A sliver of sunlight pierced the dim entry. It was as ominous as the man with the velvety Australian accent, walking in uninvited.

"Hello Mary. I've waited so long for this moment. It's such a pleasure to *finally* meet you."