

Surprise! Surprise!
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Racing up the stairs after slamming her bedroom door to keep Zues and Gidget confined, Mary bolted into Sylvia's room. Halting in her tracks, she found Sylvia sitting on the side of her bed, fingers to her mouth, frantically signaling Mary to silence. They both listened intently as Sylvia urgently pointed upward towards the ceiling.

"Someone's up there." Mary could barely hear Sylvia's whisper.

Stealthily they crept down the hall and headed up the stairs to the attic, Mary grabbing her bat along the way. When the stairs creaked beneath them, they finished the final few steps in a flurry, yelling wildly as if scaring a snake.

Bumping into each other as they came to an abrupt stop, they stared, mouths dropping open.

"Hello, ladies," said the gray-haired woman, a sweet, innocent smile on her lips, eyes as hard as stone.

"Mrs. Vargas!" Their words came simultaneously.

"What are you doing here?" Mary choked as she spoke.

"We have some talking to do. It's best we make some coffee." Her voice and manner were not that of the little ole' lady from across the street. These new traits made her appear stronger, confident, definitively in-charge.

Ensuring all curtains were drawn and with only the bulb over the stove casting light, they sat in silence, staring at each other as the coffee brewed. Mary and Sylvia felt as if Mrs. Vargas was sizing them up before she came to a decision. Her eyes seemed to penetrate to their souls, her mouth set in a grim line. This woman had a story to tell.

"Ok, ladies, I am forced to reveal myself. You, unfortunately, have become much too involved in this whole plot. I work for a private intelligence agency coordinating with the governments of the world and have been for over 25 years, which is one reason you see me on electronics so much. The name is not important and best you not know. We have been following Michael and his team for the last 11 months. His insidious alliance with your college friends and his possible collusion with a wide-spread market for fake COVID-19 vaccines has forced me to come forth. However, what we speak of here remains here."

"What about the rest of those helping us, Henry, Aronia, Twix and Forest?" Mary wasn't about to trust Mrs. Vargas and leave everyone else behind.

"Who are they?" Mrs. Vargas seemed surprised she didn't know all the players.

Catching her up quickly didn't seem to assuage the elder lady. Perhaps her agency background didn't give her the ability to believe in nature spirits and time travel, yet she could not dismiss the two women's story.

"How in the world did you get in the attic?" Mary changed the direction of the conversation, wanting time to think.

“When this house was for sale before you purchased it, I had the opportunity to tour it and found a secret passage into the attic. When you told Michael you thought you left the Golden Sassafras there I knew I had to find it before he did. He and those two college buddies of yours have been looking for it for months.” Mary and Sylvia grimaced as she spoke of whom they had thought were their good friends.

“Why now? We’re both here!” Sylvia was still suspicious, thinking Mrs. Vargas a rather stupid spy.

“It’s quite logical. I knew you would be asleep, or probably, and would not hear me. The dogs would be a problem but it was time to come clean to you. If you did wake up, I would just tell you my story. If not, I’d find the Golden Sassafras and find another time to talk to you.”

Silence descended again as they absorbed what they had heard.

“But what do *you* think Michael has been up to?” The two women asked Mrs. Vargas in unison.

“Our belief is that Michael and his crew were going to try and pass the Golden Sassafras like an old-time snake oil remedy for the COVID-19. People are so caught up in fear they’ll believe anything that might save them.”

“Wait!” Mary almost shouted. “Why did Sylvia text me, Get Rid of the Flower! It’s the only way!?”

Mrs. Vargas looked perplexed and took a deep swallow of the rich, black, organic coffee.

“Yes! and why was ‘He’ coming after Sylvia next?” Sylvia’s head nodded vigorously at Mary’s questions.

“I was terrified,” Sylvia confided. “I was sure I was going to get killed and I didn’t know what I knew except my mother had made me go up to the Hotel Sassy and San Antonio for Michael’s lecture on the Golden Sassafras.”

“We knew that,” Mrs. Vargas confided. “We had one of our new team on your trail. He’s from here and knows the layout.”

“Mrs. Vargas ...” Mary was stopped by the older woman.

“You can stop calling me that now, ladies. My name is Grace. Just call me that.”

“Doesn’t sound very spy-y,” laughed Sylvia.

“Can’t help it. It’s the real thing. Now lets get on with how you can help. Tell me everything you know about this case.”

“It’s a case?” Again with the unison. “We’re on a case?”

“Yes. To keep you both safe I’m bringing in the newest member of my team. Let me go signal him to come in. Wait here.”

Her footsteps were firm and quick as she walked to the front door. They heard her open it and an owl hooted into the darkness. Within moments they heard two sets of footsteps walking back down the hall. Following Grace into the kitchen was a tall, handsome man in a military uniform.

Taking one look, Mary gasped. Standing before her, after all those years, was John

Daniels, not a Pfc. any longer. She didn't know if she should be mad or glad. Was the letter a ruse to get him in the door? Or was it real? Her answer came quickly as she looked into his chocolate brown eyes, which held nothing but love. Though he instantly felt home at last, lost in Mary's hazel eyes, he could see they also held doubt, mistrust.

Would he be able to break through her barriers for her to again trust him? Want him? Love him?

He wouldn't find out right now for the pounding on the front door brought them all back to reality.

Roda Hilenski Grubb's full time writing career started late in life. Writing for a newspaper for 10 years, she left to write books. Her first books, *Rocksann Finds God* and *Everelle's Quest, an Isle of Foote novel*, were self-published. Now passionate about helping writers grow in their craft, she launched RGV Writers' Connection. Starting the *Let's Write A Story* project to entertain readers during the quarantine, she hopes people learn more about different story genres and perhaps, inspire others to begin writing their own stories.