

The Next Chapter
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By Lynn Chamberlain

Mary gazed into the full-length mirror and slightly twisted to the right to see the white satin buttons which ran from the nape of her neck to her lower back. She adjusted the delicate white Chantilly lace and admired the shimmering satin against her curvaceous trim figure. Grace, her face etched from illness and aging, painstakingly made her way over and stood by Mary's side. She adjusted the opaque veil which hung down in soft folds from the top of Mary's brunette locks past her shoulders. The women shared a smile as they looked at their reflections in the mirror.

"I wish your mother was here to see you," Grace gushed.

Mary nodded, "I still can't believe I didn't need to alter her wedding dress. It fits perfect. She's here you know, in this dress."

"John will adore it. You're a vision of loveliness," Grace gave Mary's shoulder a loving hug. "I'm glad to still be here. I didn't bounce back from having COVID, even with the antibodies you gave me. I won't be here much longer."

Mary turned to Grace and gave her a gentle kiss on the cheek, "Enough. We've shared a lot since the pandemic ended."

Suddenly, the sound of laughter filled the room as Sylvia, Ellie, and Sam entered, wearing identical, golden-yellow, floral, tea-length gowns. The three women stopped talking, and silence filled the room as they froze in place.

Tears were in Sylvia's eyes. "Mary, you're gorgeous! I can't believe all of us are here to see you get married."

"Not everyone," Mary's eyes glistened. Everyone in the room stood in silence for a moment. Who would have guessed the five seeds hidden behind the picture would have been such a catalyst? The women found themselves lost in their own memories of their extraordinary adventure.

Mary, Ellie, and Sylvia thought about Jing Liu, who died years earlier from COVID-19. They still thought of her as one of their college sisters, even though Jing had betrayed their trust years ago when she joined Apophis with Michael Rothchild, and attempted to steal the Golden Sassafras seeds.

The search for seeds helped reunite mother and daughter. Grace remembered how she feared Michael would harm her children and had been devastated when Apophis had taken Sam, but was finally able to kidnap her from them. She protected Ronnie, but placed Sam in her uncle's care, where he sheltered and helped raise her at the Golden Sassy Hotel. Michael eventually found and recruited her anyway. Sam disavowed her father when she discovered he was responsible for killing her beloved uncle. Grace and John were partners in a covert operation to apprehend and stop Apophis. Grace was surprised to learn John and Mary used to date and that the search would rekindle the relationship.

Mary remembered those haunting words, "Get rid of the flower!" They finally figured out the flower wasn't the key for finding the vaccine. The cure was in the roots. Those five seeds made it possible for Old Man to cultivate enough of the Golden Sassafras trees to share with all of the world's researchers to find a vaccine. Michael's plans were thwarted and the entire world had access to the vaccine and the pandemic came to a screeching halt. Michael and his demons disappeared and everyone hoped to never cross paths with him again.

THUD!

The loud noise coming from the closet brought the women back into the present. Immediately, the closet door flew open and Forest made an entrance, flamboyant as always. Ronnie was next, looking handsome in a tux and holding the hands of two grinning children. Grace's face beamed with excitement as she saw them. She opened her arms and the children ran into them.

"Grandma!" they shouted as they jumped.

"What took you so long, brother?" Sam asked Ronnie, hugging him. "Forest has been good for you. You look much better."

"I feel better. Forest may be younger than me, but it takes him forever to get ready. He's such a diva." Ronnie rolled his eyes in exasperation.

"I heard that," Forest replied, promenading over, "One has to look ones best for time travel. Especially coming back to the past for a wedding."

"I'm glad the adoption went through and we could bring the children," said Ronnie. "Plus, I needed to see mom one more time."

"Mom is content to see you settled down, healthy, with a family," Sam smiled. "Me too."

Ronnie quietly whispered to Sam. "You know, Forest could have cured mom."

“What?” Sam furrowed her brow, “Why didn’t he?”

“Forest told me about the original remaining Gondwanaland Sassafras seed which was hidden in a small box. If mom had eaten it, it would have cured her. But, that one seed had the potential to save innumerable lives. Mom couldn’t be that selfish,” he explained.

“That sounds like mom.”

The three looked over at Grace as she lovingly played with both grandchildren.

“Hey everyone!” a male voice called out from the doorway. “Time to get this wedding started.”

Mary turned towards the voice, “You heard my dad, everyone to their places.” She took her father’s arm and he escorted her out.

The simple ceremony was held at sunset on Old Man’s farm beneath the boughs of the Golden Sassafras. At the reception, nature spirits entertained the guests with enchanting music and song. John was impressive in his full military uniform and Mary was breathtakingly radiant.

At the end of the evening, Old Man stood up to make a toast. All eyes were on him. Mary and John stood arm in arm alongside him.

“We are here to celebrate a wedding” Old Man began, “but it’s more than that. This is a story of how people were united in the midst of a pandemic, how families and friends bonded together in times of turmoil, how the world came together to do the right thing. Our journeys are ongoing and we will prevail and persevere over the challenges we will face. Blessings upon all of us as we embrace new beginnings.

“ Everyone, human and magical, has shown us love *will* save us in the end!”

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Lynn Wynen-Chamberlain is a retired teacher from St. Louis, MO and now calls Texas her home away from home. She received her Business degree from University of Maryland, worked in Aerospace for fourteen years, then she received her Masters Degree in Education and taught for seventeen years, next an MFA in writing from Lindenwood University and a writing career. Currently, she keeps busy by writing, taking care of her family, spending time outside, visiting friends, or traveling