



Chapter 9

WHAT IN THE WORLD DID SHE think would happen? Kathryn twisted and untwisted her handkerchief, glancing at the fountain, out at the street, and back to the fountain again.

She heard the lawnmower start up. The sound grew louder as the tractor made it to the corner of the mansion; then it grew faint and was soon lost in the city noises. “Dear God, please keep Ed safe even though he’s doing something crazy,” she said under her breath.

Wasn’t she doing something just as crazy sitting here by a fountain, wondering whether she could become a young girl by washing her face in the water? She looked so normal: an old woman sitting in the garden of an assisted-living home. But yesterday had not been normal at all, unless it had been a dream. She had become a little girl again for a few hours—or had she? Could it happen again? Doubt and hope swirled in her mind, like cool and warm water currents whirling around the feet of a wader in the shallows of a lake.

She noticed a figure walking past the gate. Wasn't that Ben, the nice gentleman she and Jasmine had met yesterday by the coffee shop? She squinted. Yes, it was! Straining to focus, she watched as he strode out of sight, hidden first by the vine on the iron fence and then by the brick wall.

She entertained a momentary fantasy of staying the little girl she had become yesterday, growing up and marrying a handsome young man like Ben. That fleeting fantasy, she later conjectured, prompted what happened next.

Still twisting her handkerchief, Kathryn became conscious of the sound of the fountain—no louder than a moment ago, but she noticed it as she hadn't before. Had it increased in volume? Perhaps the flow of water had grown greater for some reason. The sound seemed to beckon her, and some force within her prompted her to move toward the water spilling from the last tier into the basin of the fountain.

She hesitated a moment, then shoved her handkerchief under the stream. Lifting it to her face, she wiped the cool cloth from cheek to cheek, from forehead to chin, over and over again.

Her face began to tingle, and it wasn't from the cold water touching her skin. Though her eyes were closed, she saw sparkles of light. The tingling moved down her body and yesterday's sensation of vibrant energy flowing from head to toe gave her a wonderful sense of exhilaration. It was happening again! Then it stopped suddenly.

Kathryn sat there holding the handkerchief against her face, breathing deeply. She lowered the handkerchief and

looked at her hands. They were young hands—not her old bony arthritic hands, but not the child's hands she had expected. They were the hands of a young woman. She glanced at her feet resting on the wheelchair footrests; they weren't an old lady's feet, nor was she wearing her familiar orthopedic shoes. The legs were slim, the skin unblemished, the feet wearing a pair of stylish dress flats like Ruth's grown daughter wore when she stopped by to visit.

Kathryn got up from the chair with ease. Moments later she was staring at herself in the garden mirror: herself as she had looked sixty years ago! Her hair was long and dark, not the white hair set in a perm that had been hers moments ago. She slid her hands slowly down the blouse she was wearing, then down her hips, feeling a slender, firm body. And she found she was wearing a skirt. Her clothing wasn't the kind she had worn as a young woman. The shoes and outfit were contemporary in style.

It took little thought for Kathryn to decide what to do. She ran back to the fountain and hid the wheelchair as she had the day before, found the stick in the leaves and moved it into position, and then slipped through the gate. She walked briskly down the sidewalk toward the coffee shop where she was sure Ben was heading. It felt so good to walk fast, in long strides!

Kathryn's excitement at seeing Ben slowly turned to apprehension as she neared the coffee shop. What was she going to do? Once she got to the coffee shop, then what? Oh, no! She stopped, realizing that she had no purse and no money. She wouldn't even be able to buy a cup of coffee!

What would she do in the shop—just stand there? She took a deep breath and started walking again. She was almost there, so she'd have to think of something fast.

The lawnmower! She had forgotten about Ed! There sat the lawnmower, parked on the sidewalk in front of the coffee shop. She was relieved that he had made it, but her relief quickly turned to anxiety. Would he recognize her? But then why should he? Ed only knew her as an old woman. She had looked very different when she was young.

She paused in front of the coffee shop. She had no idea what to do next, other than to walk on in. Looking through the large window, she could see the furnishings inside, and people. There was Ben—he was sitting at a table with his back to the wall, reading a newspaper. At any moment he might glance up and look out the window. She couldn't just stand out there; he might see her gawking at him. Taking a deep breath, she entered the coffee shop.