

SILVER LADY

The Invisible Captain

SUSAN E. SAGE

SILVER LADY: The Invisible Captain

Copyright © 2026 Susan E. Sage

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the copyright holder.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Cover Design and Formatting by *The Book Khaleesi*
www.thebookkhaleesi.com

*For Mary Lynne, my dear sister—
fellow poet and fabulous friend!*

*"May what I do flow from me like a river,
no forcing and no holding back, the way it is with children."*

~ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Rilke's Book of Hours* ~

*"A Ship in harbor is safe,
but that is not what ships are built for."*

~ John A. Shedd ~



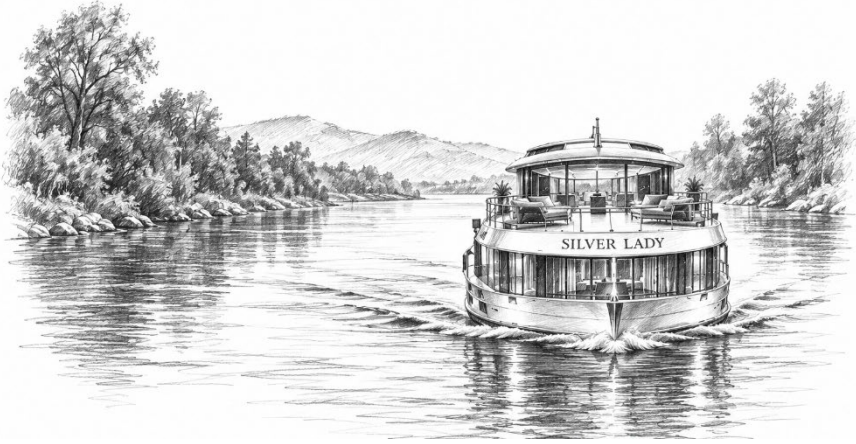
SILVER LADY

The Invisible Captain



Prologue

After Cassie was spat out like a minnow from the river's mouth, she knew her first journey was over. It had lasted a little over a month. She longed to be on any stretch of the mighty river again, minus Owl Town. Mostly, she wished to be back on the Island of Lost Children and slip back in time to anywhere, but here, in New Orleans, not far from where the first bloody battle of the second Civil War between the North and the South occurred.



Chapter 1

The Silver Lady passes another boat, the fourth one in the last few hours. Again, no response to Cassie's friendly wave. "Ship, ahoy!" she calls out, going back on a promise to herself to refrain from doing so, after driving her passengers crazy on the southbound trip. Morning fog reduces their visibility, so little wonder the Lady glides through the water unseen.

Leaving people and places is never easy, but sometimes you must pull up anchor and bid them farewell. That's what Cassie did two days ago. After all, she'd been in New Orleans for most of a year. It was the right time, and Luther knew it. He'd brought his mother with him.

At first, she thought Ruth was glowering at her, but then realized Ruth was casting the evil eye on everyone and no one. It wasn't anything personal, and it made the leave-taking somewhat easier.

After Cassie promised to keep in touch by texting, Luther hadn't looked particularly sad to see her go. Ouch. Had he simply been pretending to care?

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

Hard to believe she left Minneapolis nearly a year ago, and that she, Cassie Navrone, had the nerve to take five passengers almost two thousand miles (and on the brink of war). Two couples and an older teenage girl. What the hell had she been thinking? Truth was, she had a co-captain, though she didn't know it at the time. Had it not been for the indomitable Silver Lady with her strong will and keen understanding of the river, Cassie couldn't have done it.

So far, Cassie's the only one aboard Silver Lady (besides the Lady). After close to a year away, they're heading home to Minnesota. While looking forward to seeing her daughter and friends back home, she has no clue what she'll do once she gets there. The return trip would've happened much sooner had it not been for the second Civil War. Although the war itself lasted six months, its complexities prevented Silver Lady and Cassie from resuming their travels on the River Road.

Most of the fighting didn't occur in the city, but back in the border states, mainly in the former states of Ohio and Kentucky. Right before war broke out, the southern states decided to secede from the Union. From that point on, the USA became known as the DSA, the Dis-united States of America. A slim majority in the North wanted to remain states, unlike the secessionists of the South. The internet went down, and now, nearly a year later, it's still down. There's a rumor that AI pulled the plug because people just couldn't handle such an enormous responsibility.

When word of the first battles spread, Northerners in the South and Southerners in the North were told to go into hiding. Travelers far from home should have known better and should have known that conditions were at the boiling point.

No one believed there would be actual bloodshed.



There are far more boats on this stretch of the river than on Cassie's earlier journey. She prefers it quieter, less cluttered by all kinds of

crafts, but knows it doesn't bode well for a healthy economy. Less commerce means fewer goods reach the market. The lack of response from the passing boats is worrisome. Is she riding a ghost ship, or is she dreaming? The fog, dense one moment and thinner the next, makes the scenery otherworldly.

In the last half-hour, she developed a toothache and saw four alligators. Two were close to the riverbank, and two others poked their snouts from the water and eyed the Silver Lady.

Pain keeps Cassie from further consideration of the gators. If she's dreaming, there wouldn't be any pain.

Her mother's voice returns: "Pain lets you know you're alive, dear."

"Right you are, as always, Mom," was always Cassie's ready response. Even though she could be irksome, her mother was a wiser woman than her daughter. No doubt, wisdom skips generations. Cassie has been bothered for months with the troublesome tooth but has neglected to make a dental appointment.

Since she's not dreaming, the fact that no one is acknowledging her greetings must mean she's riding a ghost ship. Uncomfortable as it is, this isn't the first time. Two of the alligators appear to look right at the Lady in that side-eyed way of theirs, so maybe she's wrong.

Does it bother you, too, Silver Lady? We should reach Ruby tomorrow. I'd better try to find a dentist there. Clearly, this pain isn't going to go away on its own. I'm relieved we don't have any passengers yet, aren't you?

No answer. Why is she expecting one?

While she hasn't heard her speak, Cassie's been picking up on thoughts that aren't her own. At first, she attributed it to loneliness, but she's almost certain she's riding a boat with a consciousness. It isn't a mere projection of her thoughts, as she initially suspected, but something way more. Her daughter, Melanie, and Luther would both conclude she's losing her grip on reality.

Somewhere on board is a book she's been meaning to read. A paperback. She can't recall its title, but she likely left it in the

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

captain's quarters. She'd look for it, but it's almost time to call Melanie. If she can't get hold of her, maybe Luther will want to hear how things are going on the river. Cassie owes him that.



A few weeks before war broke out, Cassie longed to remain aboard *Silver Lady*, but realized the danger. She got in touch with Luther Singleton, a friend of her late husband, Peter. They had met during another war, far away in the Persian Gulf. After both were home, they got together several times. Luther had flown north for the funeral. It was there that Cassie met him.

Luther greeted her at his home in New Orleans with the same bear hug from years ago. "Just look at you, Cassie. A bona fide captain of your own boat! Still, the looker, too." After a low, growl-hum, as if he'd just swallowed a good meal, he gave her an offer she couldn't refuse: a carriage house where she could stay, rent-free, during the war. She took his advice to go out only on rare occasions, in the early morning or late at night.

Most would immediately know that she was a Northerner, he said. This surprised her. For close to a year, she lived a solitary life, like her daughter. Unlike Melanie, Cassie didn't enjoy the hermit's lifestyle. It wasn't all that tough because she often visited Luther and his mother in their much larger home.

Cassie lived in the carriage house for almost nine months. They were long and lonely months. She slept little, read a lot of fiction, and reminisced about her magical trip downstream. She missed the bonds from friendships forged aboard the *Silver Lady*. Her earlier life on the river felt like a dream. Thankfully, she kept in touch with Melanie. Were it not for the frequent noise of the small artillery fire, she would've thought she was peering out her windows at beautiful sunsets.

While most of the battles took place in the South, at least they were farther upstream from New Orleans. From the city at night,

you could see the sky light up from the explosions. The sound of gunfire and small bombs crackled and boomed so loudly and continuously that it was hard to get much sleep. While she learned to sleep during the day, she never got used to the sound of warfare. Who could?

Thousands died, especially early on. They died by dirty bombs, landmines, drone assaults, and even occasional hand-to-hand combat. Crop-dusting drones dropped poisonous plumes that spread from agricultural areas into towns. Luckily, no nuclear devices were detonated.

The final battle was fought between two robots playing chess. The winning robot represented the South. It decided that the fifty states should be turned into fifty countries.

Later, the presidents of all the new countries ratified this decision.

During those long months, Cassie worried first and foremost about Melanie, though she was far from the battlefronts. She lived in an apartment in Minneapolis, not far from Cassie's small ranch house. Phone signals were often blocked, making it harder than ever to get in touch.

Cassie also worried about Silver Lady getting damaged. Often, late at night, she would sneak out to visit her. In whispers, she reassured her that someday soon they would head upriver.

She could tell Silver Lady was listening.

The river pulled Cassie.

She wondered more than she worried about Frank's safety back in Doze. She hadn't heard from her former beau since before the war. He left her in search of a cure for the Vanishing. It was a noble cause, and she wholeheartedly supported him, though her hopes of resuming their relationship had dwindled. Maybe someday they'd meet up again in Doze. She didn't hold out much hope.

She wondered how the river towns had fared during the war. How many were destroyed and are now ghost towns?

Her hope was that river magic had shielded them from harm.



Everyone except Zona arrived safely at their various destinations. Poor Zona. They found her body washed ashore on the Island of Lost Children. Her death remains a mystery. It was plausible she'd fallen overboard during the storm, but the truth was, they all had motives for doing away with her. Even Cassie, who had a hard time even swatting bugs. Although she didn't do the evil deed, she had often fantasized about it. For the longest time, she thought Vincent had murdered her by throwing her body overboard.

Looks like whoever killed her is going to get away with it.

Zona's ghost remains on the island. She's the only one who could say for certain who killed her. If it weren't so difficult to land on the island, Cassie would look for the troubled girl-ghost and try to settle the matter, if she could work up the courage.

Something tells her that Silver Lady knows something. Maybe she knows who did it. Maybe it was her. It's beyond startling to think she could be manning a killer boat.

Cassie will try hard to stay on her good side.



The morning fog lifts, though the decks are still damp. A cool March breeze blows the loose ends of Cassie's single silver braid as she stands behind the large wooden wheel. She takes in a deep breath, then releases it slowly. For the moment, her tooth isn't throbbing in pain.

This is the life! The fresh morning, along with this new era, fills her with a spasmodic joy. She puckers her lips as if to kiss the newness of the dawn. Never did she think she'd feel this way about life again. Silver Lady must feel this way, too. On such a sparkling morning like this, *the* Silver Lady and *this* silver lady positively glisten.

Susan E. Sage

She releases her silver hair from its braid and shakes it free. For a brief moment, she notices that most of the black strands are now silver in the shimmering light. Still, the blue water and sky, the fresh green of the leaves, leave her feeling almost young and dewy.

She wishes they could compare the soaring state of their spirits. Hers floats effortlessly—it dances into the day.

Yours, too, Silver Lady?

Cassie dances to the music of birds and water swishing against Silver Lady's sides.

For a moment, she thinks she hears Silver Lady singing.



Chapter 2

Cassie no longer calls out to other boaters, but she still smiles and waves. She does so with the next three boats that go by: a ferry, a small fishing boat, and a kayak. She has no ulterior motive, but is simply friendly. Yet not one of them responds. Is this due to a general mistrust or paranoia from the war? It happened on the first trip, too, but that was just before the war broke out, so it was easier to understand. If the other boaters are Southerners, it's best to remain unseen anyway.

There's a silver sheen on the river, a wily, knowing look to it. A secretive knowing. A schooner goes by, and once again, she gets no response. She can understand being snubbed by one boat, but now four? Memories of being ignored because she was such a serious schoolgirl. Clock watching and looking longingly out the windows.

Gripping the steering wheel, she continues on.

Silver Lady is grander than most other houseboats. Maybe not as luxurious as a yacht of similar size, but still far more sophisticated than a steamboat, paddlewheel, or ordinary

houseboat. She's modern. All seventy feet of her are made of gray fiberglass with dark windows along the sides.

Cassie incorrectly wrote in her captain's log during the first trip that she was eighty feet long. She scratches out the earlier entry and writes the correct length: seventy feet.

The Lady sports three levels and two decks.

If you're prone to seeing faces in clouds or flowers, you'd see that her pinched bow is one with a porthole positioned like a mouth opened in surprise.

Certainly, Cassie isn't the only one who picks up on her proud attitude. She knows she's elegant and isn't afraid to flaunt it. Maybe the other boaters are jealous. That is, if Silver Lady is visible. Then again, maybe they have no problem seeing the Lady, but they simply don't see the silver-haired human lady.

Cassie is invisible because she lacks the sex appeal of a younger woman. And when she is seen, her presence makes them yawn, as it's even more lackluster against the backdrop of the vessel.

Maybe she'll change her image.

She shakes her silver mane and then throws her shoulders back. Her long purple caftan flapping in the breeze turns into a flag she's happy to display.

Now the boaters will look at her twice. Ha!

A canoe drifts by. Paddling slowly is a man wearing a fishing cap and mirrored sunglasses. He tips his hat to her. This must mean he saw her. She is visible, after all! The small, but radical change to her appearance works like magic.

But then, out of the blue, Cassie's thoughts thankfully change direction. A new idea occurs to her: this cruise upstream will not have a working crew. She'll be both captain and crew. Her new passengers will enjoy a pleasure cruise with fun activities. She bets most people have forgotten how to have fun because of the recent war. There will be dining and dancing. No room service, of course. The river should be easier to navigate than before; its depths and shallows will come as no surprise, especially since her aqua scope and chart plotter screen are working again. And if she gets a phone

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

signal, she'll have access to digital maps, too. Of course, she has her physical charts close at hand, too.

She'll wait a few days before trying to attract potential customers. Not only will this give her more time to better plan the cruise, but it will also give her the chance to become reacquainted with Silver Lady. In the meantime, she needs to remind herself to relax, as she often forgets to.

This will be her new routine: yoga (twice or three times a day); reading for longer periods than during the downriver trip; listening to the news on her shortwave radio; and napping. Of course, this will change once her passengers come aboard. She may add Tai Chi to her daily schedule, with or without the others.



Overcast skies and steamy air help hatch swarms of water bugs along this stretch of the river. The heat must be breaking records for mid-March. Cassie listens to the radio for a weather alert. Thankfully, none have been issued. Her restlessness to reach another section of the river grows as the number of boats increases. When will this narrow stretch widen? Other captains look agitated, no doubt because they're anxious to get back to normal life. There are far more commercial barges than vacationers. Take a deep breath, she reminds herself, recalling how she's always been a hothead when stuck in traffic.

At least she knows she's no longer on a ghost ship, judging by the glowering looks from some driving the smaller vessels. They're probably annoyed by the traffic, too. Still, she's not about to apologize. Like her, they should have expected this.

One of her back teeth, a molar, began to bother her again after a lunch of peanut butter on dry bread. That was a few hours ago, and the pain still hasn't lessened.

Melanie doesn't answer her call, so Cassie leaves a whiny voicemail about her toothache, the congested river, and the tropical

heat. *Who* is the parent and *who* the child? She knows this doesn't help her case for why she's on another river adventure, but there's no reason to apologize. At least she's homeward bound.

Sorry for complaining, Mel, but you know how I get when inconveniences start to add up.

She doubts this will help her case. Mel won't be sympathetic. She'll just say something like, "Told you so," or "Mother, had you listened to me in the first place..." Still, the more her daughter protests her free-spirited lifestyle, the more Cassie digs her heels in. Why? Mel will never change her mind and join her. Not now, nor before the war, during the pandemics, or the Vanishing. Unlike her mother or late father, her daughter's a homebody. Her anxious personality during troubled times never would have allowed (or will allow her) to do something this foolhardy.

Still, Cassie needs to keep in touch with her. Not only does she love her dearly, but Mel is also her anchor.



Chapter 3

Docked now for the night. While there's room for about ten boats, only a couple of other crafts rest in the rotting wooden slips. One is a small yacht that looks like it's seen better days, and the other is a speedboat. Neither appears to have anyone on board.

No town in sight, but tomorrow they should make it to Ruby. Like Cassie, Silver Lady needs her rest. She can sense the boat's gratitude, but it doesn't ease her toothache or make her any less annoyed about losing a tooth while she'd been chatting with Melanie.

They spoke briefly after she'd pulled into the boat slip. Cassie tried her best to explain why she was continuing her travels.

"Really, Mother, really?"

Why couldn't Melanie be on her side for once?

As Cassie was in the middle of complaining about a chipped front tooth and pain from a back tooth, a molar popped right out.

"Not too much blood, thank the river gods!" she told Melanie, who replied, "I'll let you go then," and promptly hung up. She was probably glad her mother's drama gave her a ready excuse.

Cassie now looks like a proper river hag. Maybe she'll take a selfie and send it to Mel. No, on second thought, she's too vain for that. Maybe by the end of the River Road, she won't be. Could this be a lesson she has yet to learn? Viewing life as a series of lessons has been the only way she's been able to make sense of it. Some of them she's learned, but she keeps repeating others.

Her toothache ceases to throb as Silver Lady rocks her gently to sleep. She loves the sound of the water lapping against the boat.

After a couple of hours, the pain returns and rudely awakens her. How could there be pain since her tooth has fallen out? Could another tooth have caused it?

Luther could have been with her, comforting her here right now, if she had extended the invitation. A few days before she left, he mentioned his love of travel, especially since he'd recently been laid off from his job as a counselor at a local community college. It crossed her mind to ask him to join her, but it would've been too soon after her brief relationship with Frank.

Okay, Silver Lady, my fling with Frank.

More than anything, she needed a friend in Luther. When he'd made it clear he wanted more, she decided not to ask him to accompany her. Now he's back in New Orleans, and she's here—wherever here is. Those times she'd felt sexy around him came rushing back. How she'd danced for him on a sultry moonlit night ... the war noise farther away than usual. When he'd traced her hand on paper, ever so slowly. How she longs for more of those moments, because they made her feel attractive and truly alive.

Don't laugh, Silver Lady, as your very name suggests your cougar status.

Cassie paces the decks. Why is 'cougar' the only remotely positive symbol in the animal kingdom for older women being sexy? How many older pandas, llamas, or horses conjure anything but a limping, if not lame, mammal?

Maybe there's still time to invite him to travel with her. They could get to know each other better than they had in New Orleans. His ancient mother, scowling at her from her wheelchair, always

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

made Cassie feel reserved. There were so few times she and Luther were alone together, but those moments were such fine ones—his eyes a piercing blue, the way he moved and his lankiness reminiscent of a pacing tiger.

She's got to make it to Ruby tomorrow. What if all her teeth have fallen out by then? The chance of this happening seems more like a likelihood than a mere possibility. And who is she to think about men in *that way*, at her advanced age?

Who am I to hope something will happen with Luther, when I've turned into this lascivious, now-toothless wanna-be wench, ranting aloud to you, Silver Lady?

A couple just walked by, or more aptly, scurried by, returning to their yacht. Afraid of her, a crazy old sea hag howling in the moonlight? She can't blame them.

Oh, Silver girl, how do we proceed? Where do we go from here?

Thankfully, her tooth isn't pulsating as much, and the chipped one feels only a bit jagged against the tip of her tongue. Maybe her name should be Cassie Snaggleteeth.

Go ahead and snigger, Silver Lady. I won't try to stop you. Gotta laugh at ourselves, right?



Chapter 4

Cassie paces the two empty decks, wanders through the inner rooms, and down the narrow hallway past the sleeping cabins. She plans to travel upstream only two to four hours per day. Her goal on the return trip is to float through time rather than constantly struggle with her awareness of it. While they'll be going against the current, they'll do so at a steady, slow pace. Their progress, she concludes, is not measured by the number of adventures but by the pleasure derived. Still, what she wouldn't give to see those dreamscapes again from her earlier journey, minus Owl Town, the storm, and other smaller nightmares.

Could the war break out again?

While anything is possible, many have concluded that the chances are much reduced, especially for a large one. Not wanting to resume her river trip too soon, she waited for weeks in New Orleans after the robot chess match. And just yesterday, fifty former governors met in Philadelphia and signed 'The Proclamation of Presidents.' The sitting president was stripped to his skivvies, then scolded for weak and ineffectual leadership. He was then made to

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

bow before the fifty new presidents after they signed the proclamation. Afterward, he left via a side door. Even though this marked the beginning of fifty new nations and was most historic, it was followed by little fanfare. Corrupt leaders will return, as they always do, though on a smaller scale. The new rulers returned to their small countries to deal with many crises, including education costs, pollution, equity issues, and lack of internet, to name a few. Clean water is now harder to come by than during the Collapse or the Vanishing.

On the plus side, the Great Collapse has already collapsed, and the Vanishing is now only sporadically occurring. Hot spots, both on land and water, are rarely noticed. Poets and artists no longer need to search for the cold spots, which once served to preserve their works.

Gun violence, in the form of mass shootings, initially increased until cities began erupting. After several cities burned, the general mayhem came to be known as the Great Collapse, or the Collapse. An all-out war put an end to the earlier violence. One way to stop the bloodshed is to shed even more of it, a great river of blood, right?

When artwork and books first began to disappear, it was thought they'd never be seen again, but since the war ended, they've been inexplicably popping up here and there. Paintings by the abstract painter Jon Sherman turned up on the front lawn of an elementary school after disappearing from his studio. Jane Shapiro's many poetry books, which had vanished from homes and bookstores, recently showed up in laundromats and insurance offices. These are only two examples of thousands of similar occurrences.

By all appearances, this is the dawn of a new era. Life here on the mighty river is, hopefully and miraculously, yet merely to be lived. Cassie's a little worried about pirates confiscating trunks of bottled water, but it's a risk she's willing to take.

"And since it's a risk, why not take it?" A question she's often asked her daughter, Melanie, who has been hiding out in her

apartment for what feels like forever. Her sensitive, sensibly irrational daughter: too hyper-conscious to experience this vast and wild world firsthand.

Silver Lady, you've heard many of my Melanie tales. There should be enough time to tell you many more during our travels upstream. Maybe one day, we'll even get her to join us. You never know.



Zooming in on her phone's electronic chart of the river, Ruby appears even closer than she thought. It should take only an hour to get there tomorrow morning. After the dentist makes the necessary repairs, she'll again anticipate grand adventures along the mighty river.

She leaves Luther a voicemail, "Just want you to know I'm thinking of you and wishing we were sipping wine together in the moonlight on Silver Lady. No need to return the call. Miss you already."

The moonlight illuminates the large lower deck. Cassie hears a voice, but not what is being said. This has been happening a lot lately.

Silver Lady, did I hear you laughing at me, or was that water lapping against your sides? I didn't tell him the entire story, of course. He didn't need to know the toothless hag part. Don't want to scare the poor man away! Surely, you understand.



Silver Lady:

I'm pleased with Cassie. She's infinitely better than George, my first captain, despite his tendency to swab my decks a little too thoroughly. He was boring, and if there's anything I can't abide, it's humans who are flat-

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

footed with spirits too timorous for river adventures. Is it simply because I like Cassie that I can pick up on her feelings and moods? Currently, her toothache might as well be my own (if I had teeth). Still, I'm upset that she won't be with me due to her dental work. Maybe it will only be for an hour or two. Makes me glad I'm a boat and don't need such services. The occasional annoying birds that land on my decks will be my sole companions. I can already feel that all-too-familiar restlessness and boredom. Good thing I don't have thumbs, or I'd be twiddling them.

Why did George Sherman christen me 'Silver Lady' a few years back? I wasn't old then, and I'm not much older now. That is, my fiberglass hull is new. Could he have known I've been around a long time? Maybe that's why he didn't smash a bottle of champagne across my bow.

Cassie's spirit is young, though her body's showing signs of breaking down. While I enjoy her presence, her complaints could soon become a bit much. How many times has she blathered on about her morning stiffness or the various aches and pains she never knew when she was younger? It will be important for me not to draw attention to the fact that Cassie's the real silver lady. That will be my little secret.

George must have named me Silver Lady because of my sister, Silent Lady. I haven't seen her in a long time, but I'm sure we'll meet up again someday. She's a loving presence, but for some reason it's impossible to get a word out of her.



Chapter 5

Cassie is resting up at the Sunset Inn after her emergency dental appointment. She longs to sleep, but misses being gently rocked by the sometimes-maternal craft.

When she returned to Silver Lady to pack an overnight bag, she could tell the Lady wasn't happy. Cassie apologized, but rubbing goosebumps on her arms couldn't remove the chill in the air.

The inn is a small retro motel on the outskirts of Ruby. It's very 1960s, with orange shag carpeting, a beanbag chair, and large flower-power decals instead of paintings along one wall. The room is bright, even with the drapes drawn. Not knowing how long she would need to rest, she'd packed enough clothing to get her through a couple of days, including the book she's been anxious to read. After searching the cabins and decks, she'd finally found it on the small dresser in the captain's quarters.

It was times like this that she missed the internet, but then again, not having it helps create the right sort of atmosphere.

Dr. Boca had numbed Cassie before replacing a filling in a back tooth, a next-door neighbor to the one that popped out. It turned

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

out the pain came from the tooth that needed a new filling. He then made a temporary crown for her chipped front tooth. He did his best to reassure her that none of her teeth were about to jump ship. Still, he advised her to wait a few days before resuming her travels, just to be sure.

She was in the chair for well over three hours.

After telling him she was far from home and that she was captain of a currently crewless houseboat, he told her he admired her bravery, especially during this difficult era.

"Even though the war is over, we're not out of the woods yet. These are dicey times, my dear," the wise dentist cautioned.

He had a long, hound-dog face. She couldn't decide whether it was his droopy eyes or his downcast mouth that made him look sad. When he spoke, his lips unfurled, revealing the whitest teeth she'd ever seen.

She was deliberately vague about her home state, or rather, her home country. Her fake accent, a soft southern drawl, was meant to make him think she was from somewhere in or near Kentucky. She was grateful he hadn't asked.

Since the war is over, she shouldn't have felt so anxious. Luckily, he didn't state his views or further inquire about her roots.

He hugged her before sending her on her way. Taken aback, she stumbled into a metal cart by the office door. Luckily, nothing fell off. Though he was at least ten years younger than she, he acted paternal. Was that why he struck her as old-fashioned, or was it the way he spoke? Who says "dicey" these days besides an old foggy? Could be she's an old fart for saying 'old foggy.' Maybe all the inhabitants sound like Dr. Boca. Come to think of it, the Sunset Motel and Ruby's general atmosphere feel back in time.

Had the townsfolk, on purpose, created a bygone era? If not, those businesses are time-limited, unlike the Island of Lost Children—one of the strangest places she'd visited on her first trip. Something tells her it will always remain in the 1990s. Despite its retro look, it's clearly 2035 in Ruby. Cassie and her crew had lived on the strange island for several days.

Friendships among the crew members had already formed on Silver Lady, but they were reinforced on that island. For a time, she'd felt close to the two couples. Looking back, maybe they were better friends with each other than with her, since they were in the same age group, all in their early forties. Like her daughter, Melanie. That is, except for Kali, in her early twenties, and Zona, even younger. How Cassie had loved those times when she felt like she was one of them, like she belonged.

She'd enjoyed their passion for the Arts. Leon and Kali were poets; Vincent was an artist, and Margot was a dancer and choreographer. Cassie became fond of them all but was closest to Margot. She often envied their youthful creativity and vibrancy. While she knew their creative personalities added to the river's magic, she often got lost in their shadows.

Twenty children of various ages lived on the Island of Lost Children without adults. They put her in mind of the book *Lord of the Flies*. The social order could have broken down at any time, especially during Zona's cremation ceremony. That's a whole other story, but suffice to say, Zona was Cassie's least favorite crew member. A teen turned sleuth who'd been investigating her parents' disappearance while aboard the Silver Lady. From the first day on the river, Zona had viewed her fellow crew members with suspicion. After her mysterious death, they eyed each other likewise, and friendships began to fall apart.

The mysteries of what became of Zona's parents, as well as Zona's death, remain unsolved.

Even if the children allowed it, Cassie wouldn't want to return to the island because she's certain Zona's restless spirit is trapped there. It could well be vengeful.

At present, she's looking forward to reading the book she brought with her. Where had she put it? After rooting through her overnight bag, she glances around the room but doesn't see it. She'll search for it later.

First, she needs to find something to eat since the Novocain's mostly worn off.



Ruby's Bar & Grill looks the same as it did on the downriver trip. It's still one of the few restaurants open in this depressed town with beautiful sunsets. The cozy venue boasts an attractive outdoor seating area, complete with tiki lights and umbrella tables. Cassie settles at one of the many available tables since the weather is nice. After skimming the menu, she orders a grilled cheese, as it's one of the few easy-to-chew options.

This is where she met Frank. Although it was several months ago, it sure felt a lot longer.

Instead of mooning over him, she plans the next leg of the journey. If her mouth feels okay tomorrow, why not head a ways upstream? Besides, if she lingers here too long, she'll probably end up missing him all over again. As a firm believer in forward motion in life, she can't do that. Learning to let go of people and places is a survival trick she's finally mastered. At least, she hopes so. And not counting her daughter, of course.

Gary, the waiter, starts chatting about an upcoming car show in town. He drones on, and she grows tired of nodding. Forgetting she needs to avoid small talk, she starts asking him questions. It's too late: she's already said too much. He must have detected she's from the North, since he abruptly turns on his heel to place the order. She's often been told her southern accent sounds authentic, but you can't fool everyone. Best to say as little as possible. It was easy enough in Dr. Boca's chair, when her mouth was full of contraptions.

So what if he knows she's from the North? Maybe it's not a big deal now that the war is over.

She slowly sips unsweetened iced tea while waiting for her food. Again, her thoughts turn to her former crew. Missing them has become a pastime she can't help indulging in. That is, except for Zona. While Cassie doesn't miss her, she sometimes wakes in a sweat thinking about her.

Before Cassie left the island, the group promised each other they'd meet again someday. Will they, or were they just being polite? Her sigh must have been audible, because Gary looks over at her and raises one of his furry brows. Certainly, new passengers will help her think of the old ones less often. Time and distance will help keep her bobbing along the river road of life. It always has.

Right now, it's a pleasant late afternoon, warm but not unpleasant. Sunny, with puffy cloudlets bobbing across the sky. A woman sits at a nearby table with her blond, curly-headed toddler. She's trying to converse with the little girl, who is struggling to match her mother's communication skills. How charming! She remembers Melanie doing the same when she was little. Her heart aches more for her daughter than for her former crew. Would knowing this even make the slightest difference to Mel? Probably not.

While raising her alone was challenging after her late husband's death, Cassie loves to pore over memories of when they were a family. Mel doesn't recall much about her father, but she loves Cassie's stories. How much she resembles Peter, both of them lanky with large, kind eyes. They lost him way too soon. Not in a war, but because of it.

An elderly couple sits across from each other at a nearby table. Though they say little, they speak to each other with their eyes. They've obviously been together a long time.

I'll never live long enough to grow that close to anyone. She loathes these little epiphanies that leave her feeling sad. Cassie's sigh is so loud that they glance over at her, but in a flash, their gaze is back on each other. She's grateful for that.

Out of habit, she pulls out her phone and searches for a recent picture of her daughter. The last one she'd taken of her was before the Strangler Virus, the last pandemic. Cassie had lost a lot of pictures around that time, so she shouldn't be surprised if any of Mel's are missing. She gazes at more recent ones of her former crew. Two such attractive couples, as interesting as they were nice-looking. And Zona, such a sarcastic teenager. Cassie can almost

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

hear the snap of her gum and see her eye roll at something dumb she said. Those days, though less than a year ago, sometimes feel like a distant past, as well.

It's best to use this time to prepare for the current trip. Still, she can't help but remember the last one. Poring over her map of the river, she can still hear Frank's voice saying, "We were meant to be in each other's lives," and then the way he'd purred like a cat, declaring his undying passion. Had she been equally enamored, or simply flattered? She'd expected herself to lie awake mooning over him after he fled to Doze, and maybe she did for a few nights, but other matters, like a war ready to break out, took precedence and dominated her thoughts.

How often their paths had crossed before they'd finally met—like they were destined to meet. She'd first seen him in the riverside town of Byron, playing the saxophone on a street corner. Then by the book boat, River Reads, and again at a poetry reading in a coffee shop. Where was that? Oh, yes, in Real, formerly Realidad. She might also have seen him one or two other times while heading down the river.

All those times with Frank, wrapped in his arms ... how he'd brush her silver braid across his face. Why did amorous moments have to be so fleeting?

And now a more pressing question: how to stay present in the present?

She takes care to nibble the grilled cheese on the side of her mouth that hasn't been worked on.

Gary takes his time bringing the bill. His sweet time. His attempt to annoy her isn't working, because she truly doesn't mind sitting here a while longer. She's in no hurry to return to the Sunset Motel. First, she'll take a walk. Then maybe she'll go to the marina to check on Silver Lady and tell her they'll be leaving in the morning. Hopefully, the sickly-sweet odor of decay won't be as noxious as it was when they first arrived.

Again, without intending to, her thoughts turn to Frank. He's playing his saxophone for her, then telling her about a story he'd

written and how the words vanished from the page. That's when he decided to do something about the disappearance of art, both paintings and the written words of poems and stories. He invented an aerator that would work like a vaccine, inoculating artworks. While dubious, she'd been impressed by his can-do spirit.

At last, Gary arrives with the bill.

"Look out for those lady pirates. I hear they're everywhere these days. They don't play nice, but then I'm wondering if you do."

It's the first time she's heard this warning about pirates, though she certainly remembers them from her downriver trip. Why did he wonder whether Cassie "played nice"? She pays at the register inside and feels relieved not to have to pay him. She grins, but he turns away and doesn't notice. Too bad she couldn't have left a better tip. Too bad, so sad.



Silver Lady gives her a dirty look as Cassie approaches. Others might be oblivious, but not Cassie. Likely, the Lady's not mad at her, just impatient. Is Cassie reading too much into her moods?

Almost immediately, she knows why: the stench isn't from garbage in the river but from the bloated bodies floating downstream. Soldiers returning home. For now, the tragedy is secondary to the odor. It's overwhelming. Cassie covers her nose with her hand, though it does little to block the stench.

A marina worker approaches her before she hops on board. He tells her this is the worst it's been and that it's likely hundreds of bodies were dumped directly into the river from the battlefields. Because the battles were fought in Kentucky and Tennessee, the bodies have been floating downstream for more than six hundred miles.

According to the worker's badge, Stan the Marina Man, this is only a fraction of the fallen, as many have sunk, been snagged on tree branches or berms, or tangled up in cattails. It no longer matters

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

what state, or rather, country, they're from, or whether they're from the North or the South, because none of the dead have received a proper burial.

"At this point, since we're so close to the sea, the river could spill them right on into it."

The irony of a burial at sea isn't lost on her. But now Cassie's sure she'll never get rid of the stink of rotting flesh. There's nothing worse than that putrid, sickening stench.

"Here, use this to get rid of the smell. It's a menthol and eucalyptus-based topical. You know, like Vicks," he tells her, rubbing a dab of it under her nose. "I've got some extra in my work shack. I'll be happy to give you a jar."

She gratefully accepts his offering.

Then he cautions her. "I'd bet my bottom dollar you'll see a ton of ghosts along the banks. All the best to you, but I sure wouldn't want to take a river trip just now."

How will she ever be able to sleep tonight? Maybe reading will help lull her into unconsciousness—as long as she can find the paperback in her motel room. Knowing about the dead bodies she and the Silver Lady will come across diminishes the desire to see what's beyond the next bend.

How long will it take for the Parade of the Dead to go by? Maybe she should wait it out, but her savings are dwindling. And was Stan the Marina Man, right? Will there be ghosts of the fallen soldiers? Will they see Silver Lady?

She'll soon have to find fellow travelers, but who would want to take a pleasure cruise under these dicey conditions?



Silver Lady:

While I've endured all sorts of odious odors stirred up in the river stew, from the horrid sulfur smell to dead fish and human farts, the truly putrid

one, topping them all, comes from decaying human bodies. For the last couple of days, many of them have floated by, bloated and rank. Little does Cassie know that my sense of smell is far better than hers. Smelling the smoke from my engine helps some. She'll probably wonder why I'm expelling so much gas, but if she knew, she would surely understand. The worst audacity is the bodies that have been bumping into me while I'm at rest here in this river town. It makes me want to blast my horn at them, but that would be pointless. From what I've gathered, they were soldiers who died in the recent ridiculous war. It galls me that humans spill their blood for causes, be they silly or serious. Here, I wouldn't give up my fuel for anyone or anything unless I leaked. Cassie's worried about their ghosts, but I'd much rather deal with harmless spirits than the gross corpulence of rotting flesh.

There's little choice but to continue chugging upstream in hopes of getting rid of this vile and gross situation. Better than remaining here, I suppose. A good thing life is always changing. Offensive odors are such an assault to the senses! But for Cassie's sake, I will try to be cheery when we journey on. She wants to turn me into a party boat. Fun times ahead, she says. That's the problem: they're always ahead of us, always a little farther up the river.

Why did Cassie leave me alone again? I don't usually think of her as cruel. She got my hopes up, only to dash them. Tomorrow then, I'll figure out a way to make her not only hear me but heed my words. Staying here any longer would be an abomination. I truly don't feel safe here.

River:

Remember, Silver Lady, what you find "vile and gross" feeds me. Mostly, anyway. Keeps me going. That being said, this part of me isn't my favorite. As for Cassie leaving you, you're better off without her. And remember, you're never completely alone, for you've got me, dear girl! I'm your friend for life.



Chapter 6

Cassie's awake most of the night at the Sunset Inn, pacing across the orange shag carpet and thrashing about in bed, worrying about the possibility of vandals, or worse, pirates, not after the bounty, but after the Silver Lady herself. As if she doesn't have enough on her mind. Maybe the stench will keep pirates at bay.



The next morning, the possibility of Silver Lady being taken hostage or kidnapped still feels real, unlike many midnight worries that fade by dawn. The waiter's cautionary words are still in her mind, but Cassie's too tired to think about it for long.

Her breakfast consists of an overripe orange and coffee. She slurps a too-juicy orange section and then chews as slowly as possible, due to her sore jaw and because she's resisting the urge to head over to the marina. As guilty as she feels, she needs to prepare herself for whatever trouble awaits on the water.

A turtle stares at her from the inside windowsill. He's about the size of her palm. Looks to be a young turtle, little more than a hatchling. Did he travel here all the way from the river? Unsure of its gender, she decides it's a boy. He considers her, and she him.

"What do I do with you? You sure don't want to stay here. Don't worry, you won't wind up in turtle soup, little guy!"

He tucks his head inside his shell, which looks somewhat dried out. For a second, she thinks about putting him in the bathtub, but then recalls having read somewhere how tap water isn't good for turtles, and he would most likely die. Since there's no internet to check, she decides to return him to the river.

"Much better food choices there," she tells him.

For a moment, she forgets why she's in a motel room. But then her tongue slowly slides across still-swollen gums, and she remembers.

Despite her worries about Silver Lady's safety, Cassie isn't ready to face her yet, and the thought of seeing and smelling more carnage revolts her. Although the ointment the marina guy gave her helps a little, something tells her it won't completely eliminate the odor. It'll be worth paying for another night's lodging.

"Come on, turtle-boy. Something tells me you'll be less offended by the smell than me." He looks at her with a fair amount of gratitude. She decides to name him Sammy.

The river calls to her. She can almost feel it calling her, pulling her. Does Sammy feel this, too?



Silver Lady:

As I consider myself a gracious lady, I'm usually hospitable to anyone who cares to walk my decks. However, not all humans are the same. One type makes me want to sink to the deepest riverbed: pirates, particularly the new brigades of women buccaneers. It isn't that I have issues with one gender

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

over another, but they can be rougher and tougher than the men pirates I've dealt with over the centuries. As I see it, women pirates need to curse and pillage to throw off the yoke of being damsels in distress. Something tells me Cassie wouldn't see it this way. Maybe I'll keep this opinion to myself. Although I understand them, women pirates are the stuff of nightmares—at least for boats. True, I've only had one encounter with them, since I've been a houseboat.

While I now live in a new vessel, I've inhabited many. Canoes, speedboats, ferries, barges. Many fragments of what I've seen come back to me, though I don't recall many of my former boat-selves. So far, this houseboat is the best of the lot. Is it wrong of me to admit being fond of my smooth, sleek lines?

Several pirates once tied up George, my first captain, and his wife, Nancy. They partied for twenty-four hours straight, sloshing their rum down my sides and decks, revving my engines as if I were a common speedboat! And were they ever loud! They belched, expelled gas, and swore while dancing on their clumsy feet. Their awkward footfall about tore clear through my decks and cabin floors. Such rudeness was truly uncalled for. I'd been sure that if morning ever came, there would be little of me left. When the pirates finally departed, I was beyond relieved. At any rate, they didn't steal me, and George and Nancy were set free. Since then, I've lived in constant fear of their return. Who wouldn't?



River:

Below Silver Lady and all around her, I run and rush. Put your ear to me, you'll hear me sing. My current is a strong one. Water is my blood—my life force—coursing through my many veins. And though I don't mind vessels like the Lady, I'm tired of people. Sick to death of them. I've no wish to know them and will carry them only if I must.



Silver Lady:

Are those Cassie's footsteps? There are several, followed by loud voices. Could it be that she's found passengers and is bringing them aboard? It's the middle of the night. No, something's wrong. Hey, wait a minute! Get off me this very instant!



Chapter 7

Relief surges through Cassie's entire being when she sees her floating home. She waves wildly at Silver Lady. In return, the Lady greets her with a blink of her two headlights. It reminds her of the way cats kiss with their eyes. Some might say it's merely the sun flitting across the bow of the boat, but Cassie knows better. Before releasing Sammy on a short stretch of beach, she points out Silver Lady sitting idle in the slip. The Lady is waiting patiently, or so it appears. Cassie knows she could well be projecting her better mood onto Silver Lady.

Sammy squiggles so much that she doesn't waste time freeing him from her hands into the river. After saying goodbye to her little companion, she rushes up to her larger one. She gives the elegant and proud boat a quick once-over, but then notices the main door is partly ajar. No sounds come from inside, but that could be because all she hears is the racing of her own heart.

Kicking the door wide open, she yells in a booming voice, "Anyone here? Come out with your hands up!"

She waits by taking a few deep breaths, then listens again. The vandals must be long gone.

Turns out, she's right.

Dirty footprints are everywhere, and the living room area is a mess. The beige sectional couch is undisturbed, but chairs have been knocked over, drawers left open, and a couple of them removed and emptied on the floor. A few lifeless pillows, strewn about, are torn and shredded. A book lies on the table, but several torn-out pages add to the general mess. She picks up the tattered cover. Is it the one she's been looking for? Thankfully, it's not. That one should be safe in the motel room. This book's about a queen she'd never heard of.

How is it she can tell Silver Lady's holding her breath?

"I think you're going to be okay ... no serious damage, but I can only imagine how shaken up you are."

Is it she who sighs, or the Lady?

Cassie inspects the rooms: the living room, galley, five sleeping cabins, the main restroom, and the smaller one off the captain's quarters.

There doesn't appear to be any major damage. After checking the food supplies, she notices some of the canned goods are gone, along with a couple of boxes of crackers and a few bottles of water. Luckily, there weren't many to pilfer anyway, since she's been hoping to replenish her supply before leaving town. No biggie. But then she discovers the shortwave radio's missing, along with a few bottles of wine and a blanket. Okay, this must mean a needy person or people absconded with them.

At least they didn't steal the Silver Lady.

Still, it's good that the chances of meeting up with George Sherman are next to nil. He is Silver Lady's actual owner. She'd agreed to return the boat to him upon her arrival in New Orleans. The downriver trip should've taken a couple of weeks, but there were unexpected delays. She tried contacting him several times, but he never returned her calls. Months ago, she gave up leaving texts and voicemails.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

Cassie slowly releases her trapped breath. As she's searching for more soothing words for Silver Lady, her phone vibrates. Is Melanie calling back? Not the best time for a chat. But no, it's Luther. Why is he calling? She returns to the outer deck, and he's standing there in the flesh!

About to lose her footing, he rushes to her rescue.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she asks, backing away, firmly planting both feet on the deck.

"Now, Cassie, is that how you always greet those you care about?"

"Sorry. I just discovered that Silver Lady's been ransacked. I don't think all that much was stolen, but they sure messed her up good. I'm a little shaken. Now you show up like a knight in too shining armor. You have a nose for ladies in distress, don't you?"

She does her best to joke.

There's some truth in this, and he knows it.

Strange to see her late husband's friend out of context. Before arriving in New Orleans, she'd looked him up. It was right before the war broke out, and Luther had been more than hospitable to this widow from another earlier war—the one in the Persian Gulf. While grateful, she also feels that his kindness made it nearly impossible to escape his clutches in New Orleans. His sweetness is a bit too sticky.

"Cassie, let's put my reason for driving here on hold, okay? You're understandably shaken, so let's clean up this poor lady together."

And so, they do.

First, they put things back in place. Not much is broken or destroyed, aside from a couple of slashed-up pillows, the book, and some shredded papers, thankfully, unimportant ones. Luckily, her Captain's Log, the one she dutifully kept during the first trip, is still intact.

At one point, while they're straightening up, she feels his large brown eyes boring into her as her back is turned. He often did this when she lived in his guest apartment. Lesson learned? Never turn

around and let him fix her with his gaze. If she did, she'd fall straight into his arms.

"What say we take a break and grab some coffee?" he asks.

"Sure sounds good to me!"

How embarrassing to think she's been imagining there was anything more to his stare. He reminds her of a genie or a gentle giant, possibly both. Must be because of his bald head and the small gold hoop in one ear. Always a kind expression, but as if he's on the lookout—has seen some shit in his day and knows not to be duped by anyone. He's forever mopping his shiny head and brow with a red bandanna that hangs so far down his pant leg, as if it will fall out any second. It never does.



Silver Lady:

If only I could explain to Cassie about the two burglars who ravaged me in the dead of night. I know they were pirates, though they were way quieter than I would've imagined. As much as I've been roughed up before, it was never this bad. I don't know if they were men or women. Does it even matter? At first, I felt a strange gratitude for the quietness of their assault. No stomping or filthy language. Now don't get me wrong. I didn't enjoy being victimized, but it's not like I could put up much of a resistance since I was docked.

They whispered that they were looking for "the loot." When they gave up searching my obvious body cavities, they tore up pillows and small objects, then rifled through papers. I tried my best to scream, but it fell on deaf ears. It took me forever to sound the horn, but I finally managed to blast it as long as possible. I don't know why I didn't think of it in the first place. As I'm normally treated with respect, this hideous treatment, this violation, caught me off guard.

Why didn't my alarm system work? Cassie had one installed before we left New Orleans, so I assumed it would. She'll be most upset and want

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

to know why it malfunctioned. Had I found my voice and alerted her, maybe it would've been all the more distressing for us both. Those marauders would've had their way with her, too. Oh, how I would've loved the chance to toss their scummy bodies overboard.

For the longest time, no one showed up to help me. It left me tired and depressed. I know Cassie will take care of the minor damage, but it leaves me with a bitter taste toward humankind. I hope to put this in the past someday, but it will take a good long while.

All I could do to save my sanity was think about my previous lives. How many times have I been a fishing boat, a schooner, or a tugboat? I'd lived on the open seas and on other rivers. The sunshine dancing on my deck ... moonlit cruises, hot afternoons, and getting stuck in ice. It helped me forget what had just happened. But I need to remember, too, that I'm not only me but also a boat built to carry humans.

I know Cassie's aware of me, as conscious of the world as she is, but my guess is she would never believe I've led many lives.

River:

That's right. You've led other lives. I've been a raindrop, a stream, and even an ocean. I don't know if I've been other rivers. I rather doubt it.



Chapter 8

Now that Silver Lady looks presentable and less like a victim of an unspeakable crime, Luther and Cassie grab a quick outdoor lunch at Ruby's Bar & Grill. Cassie's self-conscious at first and wishes she'd worn jeans and a T-shirt instead of her lavender sundress. Too late to change now. Her smile can't hide the slight quiver of her mouth, despite her efforts to appear relaxed.

Not long ago, she'd been here with Frank. They'd flirted and stared at each other with such intensity that she couldn't hear the background noise. She closes her eyes and sees his mostly silver goatee and still-dark eyebrows ... his hand on her knee ... his hand sliding up her leg. After that first long kiss, he'd looked at her and said, "I was afraid of that." Afraid? Why? Because the electricity was so strong? It sure was for her. Everything began to grow dark as her heart skipped a beat.

There's little point in reminiscing, as she isn't about to allow Frank to interfere with her present.

Should she tell Luther about her time here with Frank?

Maybe not.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

Why is she still clueless about how to deal with men? At times, almost as much as when she was a teenager. Wisdom clearly does not come with age.

"Lord knows how many pirates are out there. I think it'd be a good idea to get another alarm system," he says in his usual paternal way. At times, this bothered her, but not so much now.

"You're probably right, but they're so expensive."

"I'd be happy to install it for free. The warranty from the last one should still be in effect, as long as the manufacturer will honor it." He feels bad because the first one he'd installed in New Orleans failed. Everything from the surveillance cameras and motion sensors to the remote monitoring system. It was one of the last things he did for her before she left New Orleans.

She doesn't respond right away, her thoughts racing. Maybe warranties are a thing of the past in this strange new world. The war has changed so much. No doubt the system will take time to install, and even if it's available, she needs to get back on the river, post haste. Just her and Silver Lady. While Luther hasn't expressed interest in traveling with her again, she wouldn't be surprised if he does. Surely, he has ulterior motives for helping her, but after his many kindnesses, especially this one, it won't be easy to turn him down.

"Timing is everything," she says. No doubt, he thinks she's referring to the warranty.

"The vandals must have known how to override the system. The curious thing," he says, rubbing his tanned head, "is that the entire system failed."

He calls the company that set it up. As it turns out, they had the setup date wrong, so the security system was never activated due to a clerical error. He clearly feels better upon learning it wasn't his mistake. Cassie's relieved to find out they can activate it tomorrow. It was so kind of him to have paid for the setup in the first place, though now it will be up to her to make the monthly payments. Another expense. She was certainly going to need new passengers for the return trip.

As if reading her thoughts, Luther tells her he's going to buy her a new shortwave radio and anything else that needs replacing.

"Though the company was at fault, I feel responsible, too," he says, unable to meet her eyes.

"You shouldn't, but thanks. I'll definitely feel more pirate-proof!"

Business is taken care of; they wander around Ruby, not that there's much to see. There are even more shuttered storefronts than before the war. The town has the tired, quaint air of an elderly lady in failing health.

"Back home, I've been rescuing lost pets, everything from cats up trees to missing pet snakes. So many went missing. Both before the war and during the war," he reports.

She smiles and nods. This news comes as no surprise.

"I know. You think I'm an overgrown Boy Scout. Somebody's gotta do it, right? Why not me? Someone once told me it's because I'm eagle-eyed, but, in all actuality, I'm just a good observer."

"So much for being modest!" Cassie laughs, then gives him a little affectionate push. He's usually modest to a fault. A rare quality in anyone these days. The sad part is, he gets used by other people, not that he'll admit it. They take advantage of his generous nature, even his own mother. Especially his mother. It's good he's away from her constant demands, even for a short while, though he's probably feeling guilty about having left his sister, Rachel, in charge of taking care of her.

"You're a good man, Luther. Next, you'll tell me that you've begun looking for missing people and paintings, too."

"Nah. Gotta draw the line somewhere."

No one seems to know how many people and works of art vanished during The Disappearance. Her guess would be in the thousands. He doesn't disagree. Add to that the thousands of missing soldiers.

While it's early spring, the noonday sun beats down like it's midsummer. It's always much hotter this far south, but people say it's even worse this year. He mops his forehead with his red

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

bandanna and seems a little restless. Is it the heat? If so, she knows he'd be too proud to admit it.

They hold hands, but not for long. He gives hers a quick squeeze before releasing it. They discuss where to go next. Both agree that they need some shade and head off toward a town park, one she strolled through with Frank. She doesn't mention having been there with another man; she feels strangely guilty about it. Duplicious. She doesn't mention this and gives herself silent credit for keeping some things to herself. She's much better at this than she used to be.

Is it cooler here? Maybe. Still, she feels dizzy. Despite the shade, the sticky air isn't moving.

A flock of birds fills the air, though few are in sight.

"The menacing caw of crows has always haunted me," she tells him.

"Oh?" he asks.

"Yes," she replies without elaborating, surprised at herself for mentioning crows.

They follow a path through a wildflower garden. Sweet-smelling honeysuckles braid with the lemony citrus of magnolias; both scents mask the odor of decay from the river. The shady cement path leads to a large circular cement center. It beckons them to walk into the bare area simply to help fill in its emptiness.

Luther points to a plaque dedicated to Confederate soldiers from the first Civil War and tells her about the statue that once stood there. Many years ago, towns and cities in the South were forced to remove them. For a while, they were put back on display, but within the last few years, they were removed once again. A single headless general remains in a corner of the park, though he doesn't have a name plaque.

"I think the statues should be there. It's important not to whitewash history. No pun intended," he says.

"Bad joke," she responds, adding that the statues further the cause of those who believe there was nothing really wrong with slavery, even though it wasn't a just cause. This isn't the first time

she's bristled at his opinions. More than once, he's made comments like, "Can't Black people just get over past injustices?" and "Don't get me started on entitlement."

Had she mistakenly thought he was more liberal? She really should say her goodbyes.

"Not everyone in my family is racist," he claims. "The better members in my family have always been against slavery."

This comment helps reduce the sting, but it doesn't remove the stinger.

She suspects that most of his views supported dissolving the USA, the once-strong nation. Here, she can no longer disagree. While she once fiercely believed in the founders' dream, she'd more recently become a realist. If the dream couldn't or wouldn't be pursued, it was only logical for states to become separate countries. Perhaps now the countries will again work to create a more perfect union (though it's a union of countries rather than states). She hopes Luther agrees.

Before embarking on her homeward trip, she'd heard rumors that the DSA was becoming not the USA again, but the United Countries of America—the UCA.

Before the war, Southerners were anxious for states to become fully functioning countries, though few in the North had supported this view, at least not initially. But then the war changed so much.

Back in New Orleans, as the war raged, it was all she could do to remain silent. Luther kept her safe, but she'd been disappointed in herself for not speaking up. She didn't beat herself up over it too much, because she'd been focused on her survival. Although it might surprise him, there's no reason she can't tell him now.

"You know, Luther, since ours was such an imperfect union, the civil war had to happen. Like you, I believe democracy stands a better chance now that the states are separate countries."

He smiles in agreement and then takes her hand. A current flows through them both. It's unexpected, and suddenly, she's so dizzy that she needs to sit. She feels conflicted about her attraction. His beliefs are far from identical to hers, but still, his guiding belief

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

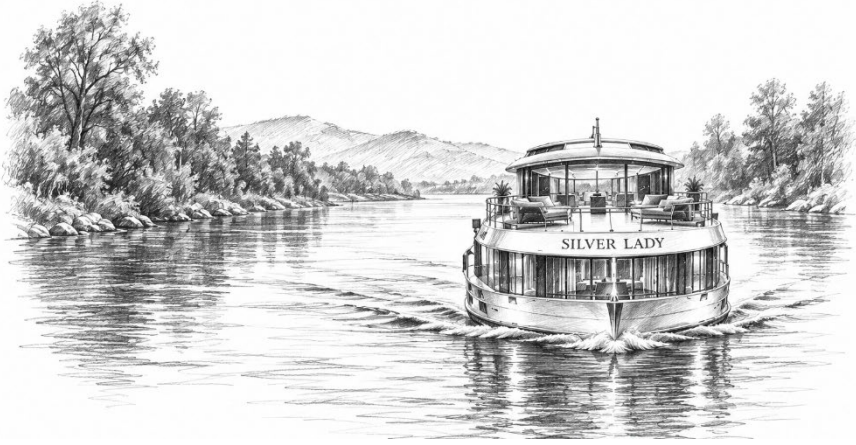
in democracy is similar to hers. She's about to continue the discussion when he surprises her.

"I have a gift for you. It's back in my car. Would you like it now or later?"

"Luther, really, you shouldn't have." She knows she'll accept it, whatever it is. This probably isn't the best time to voice her political views. Even her daughter and friends in Minnesota would be appalled by her changed viewpoint. So many had insisted that even at the risk of dictatorship, the federal government should be preserved. But at such a cost? She'll bring it up with him later, maybe back at the Sunset Inn.

"How about we head back to the motel soon? I'm feeling flushed from the day's craziness. By the way, you're going to love the place. I'm sure it'll remind you, as it did me, of the hippie era and those stories from our parents' generation about free love and flower power."

"What a different world back then," he says, sighing. At least they can agree about this. For a few minutes, they sit in silence, and she rests her head on his shoulder.



Chapter 9

Two hippies now inhabit the motel room. The 'pad' is replete with orange shag carpet and large fluorescent flower decals on the walls. The room even contains several vinyl records, an old record player, and a tape deck.

Cassie draws the heavy drapes across the large window that leads out to a small patio. Her purple caftan feels much more comfortable than the sundress.

"It's really cool on you. Makes you look like one of those hippie chicks who went to Woodstock back in 1969," Luther tells her.

She tells him about her folk-singer parents and how they were often on the road when she was growing up.

"I so longed to tour with them, but they never allowed it. Instead, I had to stay home with my grandmother. It wasn't so bad, as she and I became so close I sometimes slipped and called her my mom."

"Did you like their music when you were little?"

"I did, but it always made me sad to play one of their records when they were gone."

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

While she's told him about her family before, he listens raptly. It's such a rarity for someone to ask her about herself these days. They toast a bygone era with champagne on the patio and immediately refill their plastic fluted glasses.

Luther then hands her a small wooden case and surprises her with a most unusual gift: a spirosoola. She opens it slowly, as if she's afraid something's going to pop out at her.

"It's a musical instrument I invented. Made two of them and this one's for you," he says with pride.

"Amazing! It looks like a tiny guitar or ukulele."

"Maybe a little, but the five strings are made of something I call 'angel hair.' You pluck it with fingernails from a dead queen. I'm including three nails, presumably from the same queen, but you never know."

Who is this man of hidden talents and a crazy imagination?

"Angel hair? Nails of dead queens?" While skeptical, Cassie can't help but be impressed.

"Well, who knows? But even a single pluck of the strings will summon the spirits to assist your playing. That part I can attest to. Before you know it, you'll sound—if not professional, pretty damn fine."

"This makes you a magician, then. How have you not told me before about your spiritsoola?"

"Spirosoola. It's pronounced "speer-o-soo-la.""

"Whatever. But why haven't you ever told me?"

"You never asked. Seriously, it's my recent invention. I've made a few other music makers, but nothing this elaborate. Here, let me play it for you."

They step out onto the patio and witness one of Ruby's magnificent sunsets. Cassie then hears the most enchanting music. The spirosoola sounds like a sitar, despite having far fewer strings. Its music is otherworldly; the sounds are both ear-tickling and resonant. How can there be such magic? And they aren't even on the river. Since reacquainting herself with Luther in New Orleans, she's felt drawn to him, but now, as he plays, the chemistry between

them is undeniable. She longs for his lips on hers, for his hands to stroke her lonely limbs.

The spell breaks when he tells her to “give it a try.”

Cassie carefully takes the spirosoola and gently plucks the brittle, likely faux fingernail of a dead queen against the supposed angel hair strings. Sadly, the instrument makes a wretched twang, causing the nail to snap in two and a few of the angel hairs to fray. If there have been any assisting spirits, the cacophony will scare them well away.

“Maybe I was wrong about everyone immediately being able to play. It may take a few sessions. But keep at it since it will keep the river magic alive. You never know, it might even keep those pirates everyone’s been talking about at bay, too.”

She feels herself blush.

“I’ll certainly give it a try. Your spirosoola is a truly lovely gift, Luther. I’ll treasure it always.” If she’s learned anything over the decades, it’s to be better at receiving gifts. Also, she wants him to know she doesn’t expect him to remain in her life.

He plays again, and the air is rife with desire. His large blue eyes stare with an intensity she’s rarely known. His bald head looks freshly polished, and his gold hoop earring shimmers. The spirit of Pan fills the room, and soon their limbs entwine. A fury of deep, searching kisses sends spasms through her, manifesting as an unfamiliar trembling. The music still resounds, though Luther has long since laid down the instrument.

No doubt its music will keep the magic alive. As far as keeping pirates at bay, that seems like a long shot.

After dozing on the king-sized bed, wrapped in each other’s arms, he runs from the bed to the bathroom. Cassie sits bolt upright. At first, she thinks it’s morning, but the sky’s pitch black. Is he sick? Neither had over-imbibed. She jumps out of bed, then pads across the floor to the closed bathroom door.

“Are you okay in there?”

No answer. She waits a few minutes before deciding to rap on the bathroom door.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

"I'll be out in a minute."

What's wrong with him? Suddenly, the orange shag carpet feels like needles in the bottoms of her feet. The motel room feels so small. She smells the curdled sexual stench of former occupants, like sour milk spilled in hay. It doesn't feel groovy at all.

So much for flower power and spirosoolas.

My, but he's taking a long time in there. Suddenly, she longs to return to the waiting Silver Lady. Enough of this landlubber shit. Provided he's okay, that is.

Something's wrong, and she needs to find out whether there's anything she can do to help him. Maybe this is serious—a heart attack or a stroke. Then again, it could be nothing at all. It proves she's not ready to take on another person in her life. Not full-time, anyway. She enjoys Luther's company, but it's time to travel on. Besides, she loathes some of his political views.

At last, he joins her at the small circular table in front of the closed drapes.

"Sorry about that. I get night terrors every now and then. They've lessened over the years, but a souvenir from being in a war."

"PTSD?"

"That's the official diagnosis from my doc."

"I'm sorry. You had me worried. Please don't take this the wrong way, Luther, but I feel like I was just slapped awake. I really should be back on Silver Lady."

"Now? Right now?"

She nods.

"Why not wait until morning? Say, how about I ride along with you for a few days?"

She smiles and nods but doesn't mean to imply that he can. He's been so nice, but she doesn't need or want his company, especially if he has another panic attack like this. Should she tell him how she experienced one herself on the downriver trip?

"Maybe we can get together somewhere upriver," she says, not wanting to reject him outright.

He cocks his head, giving her a quizzical look. "I might be able to make that happen," he says after a long pause. His grin flickers, then vanishes as quickly as a snuffed candle flame.

The flatness of his response tells her he's given up hope of traveling with her. She doesn't mean to be cold. Truly, she doesn't want or need him along for the ride. It's nice to finally know her own mind. At least he doesn't try to change it.

Exhausted, they fall asleep in each other's arms. She wakes up abruptly, overcome by sadness and loss. A single tear rolls down her cheek, but she quickly wipes it away. She can't let him see her this way. The digital clock on the bedside table reads 6:48 p.m. when it should be 6:48 a.m. Whoever set the clock had either played a little joke, or not known the difference between a.m. and p.m. It must have been a joke. She reaches out for Luther, but the space next to her is empty. The sheets, however, are still warm to the touch. Could she blame him for not lingering any longer with her? If he'd been the one to refuse her company, she would've done likewise. Still, she can't help but feel rejected. He's probably only gone out for coffee or a walk.

Gathering her few garments, she tosses them into her duffel bag. With greater care, she packs the spirosoola into its box. Hoping her tone sounds sincere, she jots a quick note, thanking him for the wonderful memory of their passionate night. In sloppier writing at the bottom, she suggests getting together in Doze. Will he think she's sincere? Is she? At least it leaves the possibility of another night of fun, with a small suggestion of something more between them.

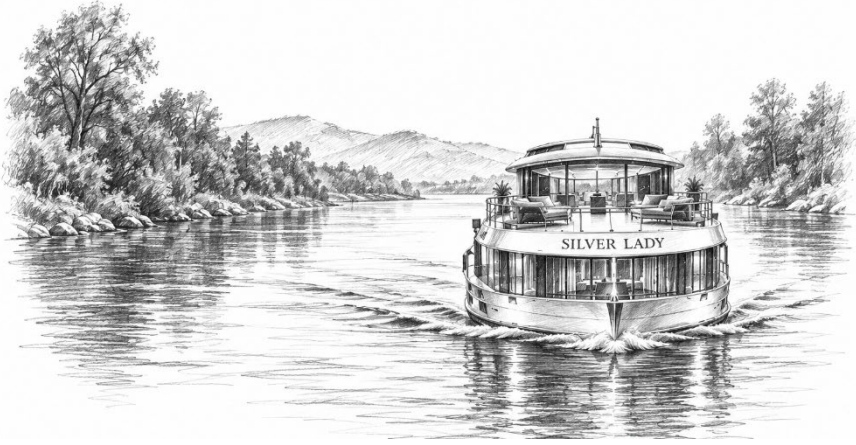
But he'll only see her note if he returns to the room, unless he sends a text. If he does, she can rewrite her note in response. She wonders why he hasn't texted yet. Is he not doing so on purpose? Still, he could be planning to return, since he'd taken one of the motel room door keys.

Here she is, a woman in her sixth decade, thinking the same thoughts as a rejected sixteen-year-old.

But then the river calls to her again, tugs at her to return.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

Exiting via the motel's back door, Cassie sprints through the parking lot and over to the marina. No sign of Luther. Faster than ever before, and without even having had her first cup of coffee, she loosens the ropes tethering Silver Lady. The boat seems to understand and swiftly glides across smooth water with incredible grace. Before they know it, they're traveling upstream. The sun is on the rise. It then occurs to her that maybe Luther left her before she left him, though she was the one who initially left him back in New Orleans. Maybe it was his way of evening the score.



Chapter 10

Here we go at last, my Lady, rambling up the River Road. Cassie sits back in the interior captain's chair, toothpick dangling from her lips, captain's hat on. Her jeans and white T-shirt feel clean and comfortable. It's cool, but the sun's warmth is relaxing. If only this refreshing weather could last. She knows she'll feel grimy soon enough, though she vows to visit laundromats more often on this return journey. So much for her wearing the purple caftan every day; it simply isn't practical.

The river's wider here, less congested and less foul-smelling than farther south. Not exactly picturesque, but they've passed only a few bloated human bodies on the banks.

So far, no pirates.

Sometimes she'll see an alligator taking in the world above water, but not often.

There's less floating garbage, too.

Still, the water's dark and deep.

A silence born of secrets kept that will not be released. Silver Lady's no doubt relieved by the more expansive waterway.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

Bet you're happy about that, aren't you, Silver Lady? And since George Sherman seems to have vanished, did you know I'm your new owner? Not that you can really be owned.

Something tells her this may not be so. It's more likely that Silver Lady owns her.

For a while, it's going to be just the two of them. Something tells her this makes Silver Lady even happier. The Lady certainly deserves some attention following those long months during the war, and after being raided and ransacked by pirates, or some other sort of gang. How frustrating for Silver Lady to be an onlooker, unable to put an end to it.

It truly was nice of Luther to help get Silver Lady cleaned up and river-worthy again. He's more than a nice guy; he's a gentleman. So rare these days. Why had Cassie sounded almost indifferent about meeting up again? Is she? When did she become so callous? Her coolness must have been off-putting. Still, he was the one who left. He'd wanted to travel with her, but the timing wasn't right. Anyway, not for her. It's always about the timing, isn't it? The passion between them was real, at times even overwhelming. But then, so was it with Frank, too.

She needs to be on this leg of the journey alone, present company excluded. She didn't think Luther understood its importance, and he couldn't. Still. Did he leave her this morning, or did she leave him?

I don't know why I think you could give me any guidance, Silver Lady. You're a boat, after all, but not merely a boat. I sense a large, beautiful consciousness in you. Kind of like AI, but with personality and a full array of emotions: a palette of colors and hues. Look at this, Silver Lady. It's a spirosoola, a musical instrument he made for me.

Well, maybe he didn't make it just for her, but he gave it to her as a gift. No reason to explain this, but she can tell the houseboat is listening.

Can she see the spirosoola? Cassie would like to believe so.

For the next hour, Cassie steers Silver Lady, but can't help feeling the boat is the one truly driving. Silver Lady's awareness

makes Cassie feel less lonely and also allows her to relax in the captain's chair, toothpick in mouth (her new habit). She notices the many trees lining the riverbanks: cottonwoods, willows, and elms, as well as splendid spider lilies. Many of them look like they're watching Silver Lady glide by.

Do you see them staring at us, too?

Again, no answer, but maybe it's because she's listening to someone riff on a harmonica. The music is coming from the thick woods beyond the riverbank. Maybe it reminds Silver Lady of Leon playing his harmonica on the trip downstream, like it reminds Cassie.

Was Silver Lady conscious even back then? Does Silver Lady hear Cassie talking to her?

They continue motoring against the gentle current. A silvery mist settles on the banks. Cassie lightly plucks the spirosoola. The strings truly do seem to be made of angel hair because their music is heavenly, both melodious and reverberating. When she played it back in the motel room, she was only making noise. But not here on the river. The frayed strings appear to have thickened, and there seems to be more of them. Golden sunbeams swirl down through openings in trees. Cassie's lulled and lost in the magical music.

She kills the engine and lets the current carry them.

Wait. How can this be when they're traveling upstream?

And is it Cassie playing this curious instrument, or is the river magic at work once more?

Could it be Silver Lady playing instead?

Briefly, Cassie's transported to another world. Gold and silver hues dance to sonorous sounds, bringing relaxation and peace. She's alone, but not. Are the trees observing her? No, it's something else. She shuts her eyes and senses the presence of others along the riverbanks. They aren't gazing at her but out at the river. Shadow-people wade into the water, but most are crowded together, shoulder to shoulder. Some of the spirits are loving; others are sad and confused.

Cassie shivers despite the warm air.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

Silver Lady floats by a Parade of the Dead—soldiers from the recent war and earlier ones. They're marching along a path beside the river. Next, there's a celebration of men and women, a mass spirit baptism, so once-troubled souls can now journey on.

Again, kindly presences, maybe even loving.

A deep contentment settles in.

Or nearly so.

The entire galanty show is over before it's begun.

But now a new worry: will there be sandbars ahead? She's flung from that golden and silver world. She doesn't get to witness the souls ascending. Reality smacks her hard. Lack of rain and abnormally high temperatures have certainly created more.

What if they get stuck? She'll need to refuel soon, too. What if they run out of gas? Could this mighty river split into several smaller rivers or dry up completely?

Her relaxed mood vanishes as fast as the sun dashes behind clouds. Damn. How could this have happened when she'd felt so carefree, so blissfully lost in the music?

Maybe these are Silver Lady's worries, and the music transferred them to Cassie.

Maybe Silver Lady's consciousness has interfaced with Cassie's.

A fun but frightening thought.

Cassie starts the motor. She's careful not to press down hard on the gas and rev the engine. That was one lesson she'd learned on the trip downstream.

While she'd replenished the galley back in Ruby, as best she could, she worries about finding enough provisions on the journey ahead. Before she left New Orleans, a few people had cautioned her about this. The grocery store in Ruby had somewhat quelled her fears.



Silver Lady:

Cassie must not be aware that I'm doing most of the steering, or if she is, she doesn't let on. When I am, I don't pay much attention to what she's saying. I hope it's made navigating less daunting. And certainly, I'm less involved than I was during the downriver trip (not that Cassie ever realized it back then).

I'm glad it's just the two of us for now. I felt bad about Luke (I mean, Luther) leaving so soon. Cassie's right: he truly is a gentleman. Good thing I'm not a human, or I would've snatched him up. Not that he's the right one for her, if there even is such a thing. Of the two men she's been interested in, I prefer Frank. Time has gotten away from me, so I can't explain why. Still, maybe she could open Luther's mind and get him to see the world differently.

Since I'm unable to saunter up and down the River Road alone, doing so with one person, especially Cassie, is most appealing. If only I could talk her out of having a crew, life would be grand. Still, I can't run on fumes, and she needs paying customers just now. Her crew downstream wasn't too bad, except that gum-chewing, foul-mouthed Zona. How splendid it is, for however briefly, to have Cassie to myself. I most enjoy how she senses me, how she listens to me; most humans haven't a clue about me, even when they've been riding on me for days.

I wonder if she knows it's me playing that curious instrument. It helps me float almost effortlessly upstream.



Chapter 11

It was different this last time. While Cassie finds it hard to leave people and places, it's usually she who calls it quits. Somebody's got to do it. When it's time to move on, then move on, or so she's always told herself. Not that it makes her life any easier or better. While it seemed mutual, it was really Luther's doing. She can't help but feel used like a tossed-out toy. Still, it was for the best that he left her. Maybe they'll meet up again in Doze. But what if they do, and he treats her like a stranger? An invisible kick to the stomach makes her almost double over. She'll do her best to resist the urge to call him, though there's no harm in the occasional text.

Something else turns her stomach almost inside out.

Another body floats by, no doubt a soldier, since civilian losses were few during the war. No one knows exactly how many died, as reported numbers vary. At least thousands of soldiers perished. In the end, AI ended the war by having two robots duke it out. Both sides agreed it could have been much worse. Next time, humans had better watch out, or AI might rid the globe of the all-too-often

aggressive and somewhat ignorant animal known as man. A further warning: it could be done fairly easily. This gave everyone pause. No one talks about it much, but there's a palpable fear in the air. A knowing that time is borrowed and all are at the mercy of this superior, though ruthless, intelligence.

"Still, human stupidity is unreal, Silver Lady. Want to know what it's like to be human? It's a limited consciousness stuck in a fragile body. Often frustrating. And it's hideous how we kill our own kind. Why don't we see that all life is precious? But convictions and opinions mostly blind my species. Still, we're hopeful and often caring. And some of us are hypersensitive and incapable of overt cruelty. Although the nation's no longer united, there's hope that many of the new, smaller countries will soon begin to flourish. Hope is more than lovely. People would have died out long ago had this not been our super glue."

Are Cassie's views lost on Silver Lady? It's impossible to tell if she's heard Cassie's words. Is she asleep, or simply feigning slumber? Lately, more often than not, Cassie can tell when her companion is listening to her monologues, even if she doesn't respond.

"Sorry to go on and on, Silver Lady. Soon we'll be arriving at New Leaf."

The change of subject stirs the drowsy lady, but before Cassie can get more of a reaction, her phone rings.

"Melanie, it's you! Excuse me while I pinch myself. You see, I've been dreaming about you so much these days."

"You're not dreaming, Mother. How are you?" Her voice sounds tired.

Cassie tells her about having seen Luther, the pillaging of Silver Lady, and how they'll soon be in New Leaf. She feels herself rattling on but can't seem to stop.

"I didn't ask *what* you've been doing, but how you are, Mother. Why do you need to be so specific about your daily life?"

Little hurts worse than a bite from a daughter. Sharp teeth tear through Cassie's very being.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

"Sorry. I'm just so happy to hear from you, honey. How are you? Been doing okay?"

"I guess so. At least the gunfire and looting stopped. Thankfully, it'll never spread north."

Then Mel adds, "Still, there's talk about another pandemic. One even worse than the Strangler Virus."

How could this be possible since that virus was more lethal than the earlier coronaviruses? Many of its victims choked to death in their sleep. This caused fear on such a large scale that nearly everyone went into hiding for a couple of years; even the naysayers didn't take chances. Despite its extreme disturbance on the world stage, it quickly disappeared, unlike the first one back in 2019.

"Has there been much of an outbreak?"

"Not yet, but epidemiologists sound pretty grim."

"There's also the chance that a giant meteor may wipe us all out."

"Now, Mother ..."

"Now, daughter ..."

"Well, I guess I really should be going."

"Mel, you're the one who called me!"

"Guess you don't know about the phone rates going up between the countries."

Cassie knows this conversation has no chance of continuing. Any longer and they'd both break out in hives or rashes.

"I remember how my mother would go a little crazy after opening up their monthly phone bill. She'd sit at the kitchen table with the paper bill and highlight all the long-distance calls. And sure enough, they added up to quite a lot."

"You've told me that story a few times, Mom."

Had she? *Just trying to keep the memory of your grandmother alive*, she wants to add, but doesn't.

While she'd love to coax Melanie into joining her, she doesn't want to be accused of begging, so she refrains. A few too many times before the first trip, she'd badgered her. "Some of us still need to work, Mother," was Melanie's usual response. When Cassie

finally realized it was never going to happen, she made her peace with it.

Cassie can't recall how long her daughter's been an architect. Must be ten or eleven years. Before she began working from home, she had a fancy office in a high-rise. After the virus hit, Cassie was relieved that Melanie could work from home. When she isn't working on one of her building designs, she continues developing a Utopian village atop a pool table. She prefers it to running around the crazy world like her mother.

That's her right as an adult, her prerogative. Even if Cassie can't fully understand her daughter's lifestyle, she must accept her refusal to take part in Cassie's world. It's enough now that Melanie sounds less fearful. Like Cassie, she's a worrier, and Cassie knows there's no way this will ever change.

Thanks for calling, Sweetie. I'll look for you in my dreams.

"Mom, you know we'll arrange a visit as soon as you're back in Minnesota."

'Arrange' a visit? Why couldn't she have said, with an ounce more warmth: "Let's get together after you're back"?

Melanie will never admit it, but Cassie knows she feels slighted by her vagabond mother.

While Cassie will never admit it, she feels stung by her daughter's cool formality.

It's almost as if Melanie and Silver Lady could be related. Melanie's eyes are a silver blue (not that the lady has eyes). Neither of them likes people, or not much anyway. Also, Melanie has zilch interest in the river, as Silver Lady has no interest in the land (what boat would?). What's more, they're both content with their worlds.

Cassie wouldn't label her own mood as contented. Mainly, she's feeling the excited rush of anticipation, as she's truly looking forward to new guests for the upcoming pleasure cruise. There's risk involved. She knows strangers could easily turn out to be felons or creeps, but still having a glimmer of hope in humanity, they could prove to be decent people. She prefers to err on the side of throwing caution to the wind.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

Is there anything better than lighting up someone's face with delight?

Also, she longs to understand the river's magic to whatever degree possible. It's not satisfying to simply see it. She longs to know it better and truly experience it.

This, of course, she could do without others on board, but if it's a shared experience, so much the better.

Plus, there's one more factor contributing to her positivity: she longs to continue her quest, though she doesn't exactly know what she's searching for.

She'll know it when she finds it, or so she hopes.



Cassie returns to the river spirits. Through the heavy morning mist, she makes out the outlines of two women standing side by side on the bank. They resemble Pat and Mary.

Pat, the shorter one, is Cassie's mother. The other is her mother's older sister, Mary. Cassie almost calls out to them, but she knows they won't hear her, so she doesn't bother.

While both sisters are now gone, Cassie's amazed at how often her mother remains on her mind and how often she appears in her dreams. She never really knew her aunt well, but Mary, too, sometimes shows up in her dream life. Always a *tour de force* in life, a larger-than-life personality — there's little wonder.

On the trip downstream, neither her mother nor her aunt often popped into her mind, at least not obsessively. There hadn't been much time for reflection, as artwork and people had disappeared at an alarming rate.

Plus, Cassie's crewmates had kept her busy.



Pat and Mary

Cassie's mother, Pat, had loved nothing better than an ordinary day at home, that is, when she was at home. However, due to her musical career, she was rarely there. The Navrones, comprising Pat, and Cassie's father, Phil, were folksingers who were often on the road when Cassie was growing up. Cassie was proud of them, but she was envious of classmates whose parents were home more often. They passed away within a week of each other, right after the war began, shortly after Cassie arrived in New Orleans. She grieved for them both, but it felt like her mother—ravaged by dementia—had been gone for a long time. Phil cared for Pat until the end. Cassie's hopes that her father had a few years left were dashed when he came down with pneumonia shortly before Pat's death.

A woman given to whimsy. More than once, Pat had given Cassie a wilted radish wrapped in tinfoil for her school lunch.

Not to mention the time she painted their toilet seat red in their only bathroom, but then 'forgot' to mention the paint was still wet. Cassie's father sat on it, leaving a heart shape on the white seat, as well as a red stain on his white rear end.

Pat was also incredibly strong-willed. Fall out of line, and you'd get the silent treatment.

What would she have said about Cassie's great adventure? After mulling it over, Cassie concludes that while her mother wouldn't have been thrilled, she wouldn't have been as cautionary as Melanie, not so admonishing. Maybe she would have remained silent, as she is now, a ghost watching from the riverside. But oh, how Cassie always hated her silences.

Except for often missing school due to tonsillitis as a child, Cassie's girlhood was mostly unremarkable. An older sibling, a sister, had died before Cassie was born. Still, most of her memories are happy ones spent with her doting grandmother. She knew her parents loved her, though distantly. As they aged, the three grew closer. Her mother was stronger-willed than both Cassie and her

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

father. Nevertheless, Pat appeared downright submissive compared to her older sister.

For years, Mary was a librarian at a boys' school in New York City. She always spoke in a hushed, sultry voice, mostly about books. "Have you read Charles Dickens yet?" "No? Well, let me tell you." And then she would lure you in until you'd promise to read his books, beginning with *Great Expectations*. She'd wink and tell you she had great expectations of you becoming an extraordinary reader. Of course, she'd check to see if you'd completed your assigned reading. The one time you hadn't, she'd shrug, grunt, and turn away. You weren't good enough to hold her attention. You can still recall the deafening silence.

The two sisters knew how to cut you down without saying a word.

Cassie, while intrigued by her aunt, was grateful she didn't visit often and lived far away. Despite this, she always felt her aunt's bookish breath against her neck. Even to this day. And Aunt Mary's been gone for a few years now. She can still hear the jingle-jangle of her aunt's silver bangles that went from wrist nearly to elbow.

You're both not so far away, are you?

Were the two women on the riverbank real, or were they ghosts? While the sisters' contours dissipated with the fog, their quiet watchfulness remained. It was probably there, as well, on the downriver trip, but Cassie simply hadn't noticed.



Silver Lady:

All her talk of friends, towns, her family ... I don't go on about my sister, Silent Lady. She's on the water, somewhere along River Road. We're not often in touch. Why doesn't Cassie see the simple beauty in her life on the river with me? What's a 'town' anyway? I'm well aware that it is where

humans work and live. I know they live in houses, drive cars, and buy goods in stores. You see, I'm not dreadfully naïve. Some towns have the magic, but not others. All of them are stationary, except for the bumbling about by people and other animals. Makes me glad I don't have a human body, because being a boat, specifically a luxury houseboat, is way better.

For a few days, the living is easy, and the warm breezes kiss Cassie's fleshy cheeks and my fiberglass ones. We whistle and sway to gentle river rhythms. Now and then, she expresses her concern about what will happen once we reach the nameless town, but she doesn't seem too agitated. Her relaxed state allows me to feel likewise. We don't try too hard to read each other's minds; no reason for probing with unnecessary questions. Dozing and sleep come easily, and there's little to perturb us.

Could this be why we don't get stuck or encounter pirates or storms? Ah, this is the way life should always be, or mostly be. It rarely goes on for long, but these mellow yellow lovely days are the ones to strive for again when they become lost to us.

But now Cassie's pacing the decks whenever we stop. It must mean she's fretting again. She's also eyeing the river sides with little remembrance of the glorious times we've spent together. I'll tough it out, no matter what lies ahead, because even a minute or an hour of what we just shared will be well worth the wait.

River:

Why must you be so involved with Cassie? And why are you interested in towns? I've never seen you so taken with a human before. Remember, dear Lady, what's important. If you've forgotten: it's you allowing me to carry you. Have you forgotten our wonderful partnership?



Chapter 12

The town looks much as it did before the downriver trip, but New Leaf is now Old Leaf. Why? New Leaf is certainly the better name. At first, it doesn't make sense. The single block still boasts three bookstores, a couple of coffee shops, and pink and purple petunias trailing from old-fashioned lampposts. Quaint and artsy, as always. Did the town council change it to Old Leaf because it's an old-fashioned town? Go figure.

This is Cassie's favorite river town for a few reasons. It's composed of creative sorts, especially poets and authors. Also, it's ethnically diverse, and few residents are rich or poor. She won't have to worry about being a Northerner here, or at least she doesn't think so. It's said to be one of the more thriving riverside towns.

Leon and Kali, one of the two couples from the earlier trip, settled here because they were enamored by the town's devotion to the arts. Due to the town's strict residency rules, they'd had to apply to live here. Cassie fondly recalls how they'd encouraged her to apply, too. Truth is, she's never been all that creative. Like a journalist, she'd rather report her observations. No way is she a poet

or storyteller. As a girl, she once tried to write a story, and she might as well have had all her teeth pulled. It's unlikely they allow journalists more than a week-long visitor's pass, but she thought Leon had said something about it.

Not that she'd ever want to move here.

Had Kali realized that Cassie had a thing for Leon back on the downriver trip?

Kali was young, but perceptive, so Cassie wouldn't be surprised. But, back then, Kali had been too busy loathing Zona, the one who'd actually stolen Leon away from her, to have worried much about Cassie's attraction to him. The affair between Leon and Zona didn't last long, due to her death after falling overboard during the storm.

Leon was a serious poet, an activist in the revival of the Black Lives Matter movement. The eyes behind his glasses cut through everyone's bullshit like laser beams. But he'd been kind, too, and could he ever play a blues harmonica.

At one of the coffee shops, she asks a barista about the town's name change. Sophia R. Swan explains that, because a majority of residents are under 40, the town council decided to attract older residents, preferably those 65 and up.

"Nothing to do with it being old-fashioned?"

"Perhaps that, too," Sylvia says, "but it's really more about encouraging older people here, who are also creative." She adds that shop owners and residents unanimously agreed not to call the new inhabitants elderly. Anyone violating the agreement would be fined. Another plus.

Cassie rubs her aging hands together.

"Now we're only accepting applications for residency from those aged seventy or up. If you're interested, come back in a few years."

Cassie smiles, thanks her for this information, and asks if she knows Kali or Leon.

Sophia shakes her head. Even though it's a small town, she doesn't know everyone, especially introverted poets.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

"You'd remember Leon if you'd met him. He's an activist, or used to be. Kali's pretty outspoken, too. They're both dark-skinned, especially Leon. He wears glasses. She's lively and hangs on his every word, or she once did."

"No. Sorry, but neither of them rings a bell."

Cassie isn't sure why she feels the pressing need to find her friends, but she simply does. They'll hug and get caught up on what's happened in their lives since the last time they saw each other. And then what? Maybe a personally conducted tour of the town, or a discussion over drinks at a local tavern about Silver Lady's awareness. She knows it's unlikely they'll want to travel with her on the trip upstream. They've chosen to plant roots here.

Is it that she simply needs to see people who know her? So many strangers have turned her into a stranger to herself.

This isn't the time to ponder it.

She thanks Sophia R. Swan and takes her steaming coffee to a little park across the street.

A few solitary souls are looking somber and preoccupied, as poets often do. A couple is hunched over notebooks on benches. One is sitting beneath a tree recording poetry on his phone. Despite the softness of his voice, it resonates with charged feelings.

It won't surprise her if, on a subsequent visit with a published book of her travels, that Old Leaf will have turned into another leaf, and become New Leaf once again, or Green Leaf. And yet again, she'd be ineligible for residency.

What a place!

Everyone in the park is busy voicing their thoughts and perceptions. How curious. She'd probably have to yell in their faces before they'd notice her. She won't, of course, but she's beyond irked. While she's impressed by their ponderous poses, they take little notice of her, a young-old boat captain. Can't they see she's wearing a captain's hat? Shouldn't that grab their attention? Aren't writers supposed to be curious? Certainly, they need solitude and time to reflect.

No time to dwell.

Her first stop is a small Italian restaurant, and then a couple of nondescript taverns. No wait-staff greet her in any of the lobbies, so after a quick scan, she's able to exit and continue her search for Kali and Leon.

Except for one barista in the last tavern, no one's given her a passing glance.

A sudden urge to be back on Silver Lady surges through her. It bothers her less to be on a ghost ship than to be a ghost on land.

One more search option remains before Cassie sets sail.

Next stop: Born Reading, one of the three bookstores.

She gathers her nerve and asks Carl, a bookstore clerk, whether he's heard of the creative couple. He's seated on a stool behind the counter, reading. After a long minute, the tall, stooped-shouldered young man leads her to a book display featuring two of Leon's poetry books and one of Kali's. Their headshots on the back covers are flattering: living here must agree with them. They've sure been productive since Cassie last saw them.

She thanks Carl, then asks if he could give her their address.

"I'm sorry, but no. Even if I knew them, I couldn't tell you because of privacy concerns. You do understand?" He throws his head back and manages to toss back his eye-length brown bangs.

"Really? I'll be leaving town in a couple of hours. Can't you make an exception since the three of us are such good friends?"

"Ma'am, I'm not the owner of Born Reading, but even she would tell you that it's the writers who make the rules. Also, you do understand their need for solitude? Any interruptions could interfere with creative flow."

Carl, then, is both bookstore clerk and gatekeeper. His arms remain folded over his chest. What is it about him that makes him look older than his years? His stooped shoulders? Could be due to his grumpy and withholding nature.

"Yeah, I guess I get that, Carl. This was surely a pointless stop on my journey. Thanks, but no thanks," she says flatly, and leaves without buying their books.

He shrugs and returns to the open book he'd been reading.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

She could stop in at the two other bookstores, but likely they won't give her the address either.

She wanders through a neighborhood behind the town. No signs of life. Old Leaf might as well be called Old Hat. If she doesn't run into them on the street, this will be a wasted effort. Who knows if they'd even be glad to see her? When she was here before, the town seemed livelier. Maybe it wakes up at night? Surely, the creative folks must take breaks.

The least she can do is return to Born Reading and buy their books. With the internet defunct and travel between the countries discouraged, there must be little opportunity for authors to get much of an audience.

She returns to the bookstore and makes her purchases. Carl looks relieved that she isn't going to badger him again. She asks him for a slip of paper and a pen.

"Think you could pass along a message to either Leon or Kali next time they stop in?"

"Why, certainly, ma'am. No problem," says the suddenly affable Carl.

She thanks him and then writes a note for her unavailable friends. Next, she picks up another copy of Kali's book and slips her message in behind the cover.

Dear poet friends,

*I searched for you in New Old Leaf, but was saddened not to find you.
I'll read your works aloud on the deck of Silver Lady, by the light of
the silver moon.*

My love, Captain Cassie

She gives the book back to Carl, who places it under the counter. He reassures her that he'll be sure to give it to them the next time he sees them. She gives him her stingiest smile before leaving.

Cassie's lack of originality in her note may cause Kali and Leon to roll their eyes, but she hopes that they'll understand why she couldn't remain.

Nothing worse than a futile search, but at least she tried. She can't help but glance at everyone she passes on her way back to the small marina.

Before climbing aboard *Silver Lady*, she converses with a marina worker. Paul has a long ponytail she longs to yank. He confides that the town's being renamed had little to do with the new residency rule, but rather, "Once you turn over a new leaf, it soon becomes old. Creatives must always see the world with fresh eyes."

She can't help but agree with him, as she continues to fight the urge to pull his ponytail.

What is it with people who refer to writers or artists as Creatives? Do they think they're gods?

I guess evil little thoughts can help keep you young, too.

Before leaving, Paul cautions her about the increasing number of pirates roaming the river.

"While they're not out for blood, they're robbing river travelers blind. I've heard they'll steal anything not nailed down, even your boat. Just a word of caution."

"Thanks for the warning, Paul. I'll do my best to steer clear."

Goodbye, New Old Leaf. The river is waiting.



They journey on.

Cassie can't find her box of toothpicks. She's certain she left them in a drawer in the galley. They're not there. And now she can't locate her captain's hat. She searches everywhere. Did she leave it in Old Leaf?

Hours later, both the toothpicks and the hat turn up in one of the bedrooms. It isn't the first time missing items have been returned.



At first, she doesn't feel Silver Lady's presence.

Is she giving Cassie the cold shoulder because she lingered too long in Old Leaf? If Silver Lady's wondering why she needed to look for former crewmates, why doesn't she simply ask her?

"Sometimes it's hard to let go," Cassie explains.

Silver Lady doesn't respond.

Cassie's irked by her silent ally. Why try to convince her?

Silence is met with silence.

Two can play at this game.

The scenery is flat and spacious. A couple of turtles are sunbathing on a rock. The deep, silver-blue water here has few ripples. She thinks of the turtle-friend she met in the Ruby motel and hopes he's okay.

What a strange time at that motel. She can't recall his name or the name of the motel. She chews on her toothpick until it breaks in half.

At last, she remembers his name: Sammy. And the motel? Was it the Sunrise or the Sunset Motel? What's worrisome is that they're nowhere near the Land of Doze, where forgetfulness is natural.

Is it a blue heron standing close to shore, or a statue of the prehistoric-looking bird?

Cassie's pretty sure she heard Silver Lady sigh. Is she sometimes forgetful, too? She waits for another sigh or any sign at all from the taciturn lady.

"You see, I've been hoping that Kali and Leon are still my friends, as well as the two other crew members, Margot and Vincent. When we'd originally said our goodbyes, we decided to try to stay in touch. I've always done what I could to preserve friendships, though few have lasted. Maybe someday, the four of us will meet up again. But I know people need to move on with their lives, so on with the new, right? Maybe I'll soon start advertising the pleasure cruise."

"Pleasure cruise?" She either just heard or can *almost* hear Silver Lady's voice.

"I'm sure I've mentioned it before."

"I thought we were finished dealing with so many others." This time, there's no doubt: Silver Lady's voice is imperious, that of a grande dame.

"Why would that be?"

Silence again from Silver Lady.

Little reason in trying to get the crafty, if not manipulative craft, to say more on the topic. No point arguing with her. Cassie hopes she won't give her a hard time over this.

What's wrong with being a little sociable?

Has Silver Lady always disliked people?

Cassie changes the subject and tells her that the next town they'll stop at is the Town-With-No-Name. The town where, supposedly, Margot and Vincent took the sick children from the Island of Lost Children. It was around the same time Cassie parted ways with her entire crew on the first trip.

It comes to her: the Sunset Motel. She should have recalled it because of Ruby's million-dollar sunset.



Silver Lady:

Whenever Cassie prattles on about people, I've learned to tune her out. If they're not on my decks or inside my cabins, I couldn't care less. I'm well aware she's simply using me as a sounding board. Doesn't she see I'm bored? Some people need to talk aloud, I suppose. But then she said something about turning me into a pleasure boat. How galling! Does she think I'm a yacht? And how many guests will there be stomping about, keeping me up all night with their carousing and silly dancing? Not that I wouldn't mind wearing jewelry, and being a fancier, more sophisticated version of myself.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

River:

Excellent! I'm thrilled you're now able to ignore her. And you're simply a jewel of the American Nile, just as you are!



Chapter 13

They travel a ways upriver, but the stretch looks unfamiliar. The channel's still wide, yet it snakes more than before. By now, shouldn't they have reached the nameless town? Cassie's pretty sure she remembers the signpost from the earlier trip: Nameless. They pass a few ghost towns but see no ghosts along the banks. Silver Lady fights a faster current, trying to escape the places where life once thrived.

Could one of the towns have been the nameless one? No, these were smaller. Only the bones of buildings are left, and a few abandoned houses that were once homes on their outskirts.

"Silver Lady, it couldn't have simply vanished. We'd at least see a ghost town in its place, right?"

The Lady's silence is different this time. Likely, she, too, is thrown off course.

Two blue herons and a crane are wading close to a sandy bank where several ducks are sunning themselves. Other ducks bob for fish near shore. Far enough away, they're aware of the boat, but continue fishing with feathers unruffled.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

A small craft sidles up to Silver Lady. Four women, all wearing masks, furrow their brows at Cassie. Their flag reads 'Mary's Marauders.' They look fierce enough to get away with whatever evil plan they intend to carry out.

Cassie and the four women glare at each other for several minutes. No words are exchanged.

"We-ell?" Cassie asks in what she hopes is a casual tone. With any luck, they don't hear the quaver in her voice or notice her knees trembling.

"Don't wet your pants, ma'am. We're just here to let you know that we're getting rid of magic along the water road. You might notice it in towns here and there. Have yourself a nice day now."

They speed off before she can react.

Cassie turns Silver Lady around, and they head back downstream. They both breathe a little easier. After a while, they spot a sign: Gull Lake. Could the unnamed town now have a name? The bookstore owner in Old Leaf had referred to it simply as "Town." Cassie must have miscalculated. Gull Lake is likely the new name for the formerly nameless town. Sylvia R. Swan had been wrong. Misinformation, rampant since well before the war, now varies from country to country and from town to town.

The sign is brand new: Gull Lake. Population, 17,000. Before, Town didn't even have a sign in its honor. How exciting that it now has an identity! Places of business are still on the same winding, uphill road, but now they all have names: Ginny's Tattoo Parlor, Brad's Hardware, Cindy's Sweets. There are several others, too. All are more enticing than 'Hardware Store' or 'Restaurant.'

Someone once told her that before the war, there were many towns just called 'Town' in the UCA (the former USA). Before it collapsed, it was one of the last initiatives of the former federal government. Thankfully, the Great Anonymity Initiative lasted only a couple of years, though hundreds of towns, fearing the loss of federal money, had complied.

This time, the townsfolk don't look away when Cassie nods in passing. They must have reclaimed their names, too. Bad enough

that places were once nameless, but people, for that brief while, were, too. What changed in the local politics to give contours to the formerly formless? The Great Collapse and the rise of the fifty countries? Unfortunately, the faces here are all as white as Wonder Bread.

There are yard sales in the driveways of several houses located on the outskirts of Gull Lake. Tables full of small and large items for sale. Bored sellers in folding chairs yawn when one or two potential buyers wave hello or goodbye before sauntering on. It reminds her of her neighborhood near Minneapolis. She waits for a wave of homesickness to whoosh through her, but it doesn't. Not even a little one.

Cassie's too tired to exchange pleasantries and hurries back to Silver Lady at the marina.

After the long day of traveling upstream, she decides to wait until morning to look for her friends. Silver Lady must be tired, too, as Cassie doesn't sense her presence.

After a long, dreamless sleep, Cassie awakens with a start, remembering she's in Gull Lake and why she's here.

After a cup of coffee and a container of yogurt past its expiration date, she fast-walks to Golightly Hospital. Breathless after the uphill walk, she asks two clerks, both middle-aged women wearing glasses, whether they've seen Vincent, Margot, and the sick children they brought with them. Her hope is that outsiders are admitted by name rather than by an assigned number.

"When were they admitted, ma'am?" asks a clerk.

She isn't sure of the exact date. "Almost a year ago, I think."

Neither clerk recalls having seen them. Both women behind the long desk simultaneously shake their heads. After checking hospital records, one of the clerks, Louisa, apologizes.

"It's likely they were admitted before the war, which means they would've been given an assigned number. But if you don't know the number, it'll be pretty near impossible to give you any information about them."

"Why do you need this information?" asks Ellie, the other clerk, in a snippy tone.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

Cassie explains that they'd been friends before the war and that she is now simply concerned about them.

"Maybe they wound up going to the hospital in Billings, the next town over."

Louisa gives her directions and repeats them, making sure Cassie writes them down correctly. She decides not to go there after discovering it's about fifty miles inland. There's little point in explaining how she'd come here by boat, but all the same, she thanks the kind woman for the information.

Even if Vincent and Margot had given their names to the hospital, they would have used aliases to avoid being traced. Before the trip downriver, Margot had kidnapped several homeless migrant children and found homes for them. But would the FBI's Most Wanted List even exist since there's no longer a federal government?

This leaves four of Cassie's five former travelers as good as lost, with the fifth, Zona, deceased. While she'll make a few inquiries around town, she won't turn it into much of a search, as she has a hunch that the couple and the three children not only survived but also found a way back to the Island of Lost Children. And her hunches are often correct.

Louisa, the friendlier of the two clerks, confides that the day after the war ended, martial law was suspended, and Town regained its former name. Everyone and every place got their names back, too. There was a party that lasted three entire days.

"And why is it now called Gull Lake?"

"Didn't you notice the gulls swarming the shoreline right behind the town square?"

No, Cassie hadn't.

"Locals once made several attempts to enjoy water sports on the little lake, but the gulls ganged up and attacked them. According to one legend, a group of settlers tried to get rid of the gulls by poisoning them. Many died, but they eventually made a comeback. More territorial than other gulls, they defended their turf with a rarely seen vengeance against humans. Now, the nearest

people can get to the lake is at one of the three overlooks. Even then, if someone makes a loud noise, the gulls start honking and dive-bombing them. Some say it helped patch relations with the gulls when the town was named, as they're now less aggressive than before. Who can say for certain, right?"

Cassie thanks her for the information, puzzled she hadn't noticed the lake when she was there the first time. Had her crew seen it? If so, why hadn't she? Maybe it wasn't there before. Maybe it's not the same town, but a mirror-world. Not the same river, but a different one.

Complexities add up. The room spins. Fighting the dizziness, she leans against a wall and shuts her eyes for a few moments. There's no time to give in to it. No way she's going to end up a patient here.

As soon as she leaves the hospital, the sky darkens from twilight to dusk in seconds. The temperature drops so quickly that she can feel it. She's not the only one who stops on the sidewalk and gazes skyward. It's as if Cassie and several others are frozen in time. They stare up at the eerie, cloudless, moonless, and starless sky.

Her body trembles and her heart gallops. Is this the End? The final gulp of the Vanishing? Once limited to the disappearance of artworks and books, and only occasionally people, the Vanishing is now about to include everything and everyone. Could a tear in the fabric of the universe have created a gaping black hole right above them, ready to snatch them into oblivion? Will they next experience spaghettification? Will there even be a burp after the giant maw gorges itself on humankind?

The same thoughts must certainly overcome the others. Fear gives way to impatience as they wait, expecting to be swallowed whole.

Nothing happens. One moment turns into the next, and outside the darkness, Cassie and the others are still there, waiting to see what will happen next. She doesn't have a life review, no slideshow of peak moments. What she does recall is leaving the town of Doze with her first crew. Everything had begun to go dark then, too, but

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

it was only happening to her. She'd worried about disappearing and becoming another victim of the Vanishing. What she can't recall is how long it lasted. Was it moments or minutes?

Now, no one around her says a word. There are no gasps, prayers, or mutterings. Like her, they're still gazing up, though not quite as petrified as before. They shift from one foot to the other, scratching itches and clearing throats. A good sign, she thinks.

Minutes pass, though it's hard to say how many.

Cassie rests on a bench, still somewhat shaky. Still waiting for something to happen. Silence is as odd as the darkness. Has she gone deaf? Come back chirping birds, chattering squirrels, and blaring car horns! She rocks back and forth before freezing in place.

Then music blasts from car windows and into the streets. It's more of an explosion of sound, a cacophony. She can't hear her own murmurings.

A tall man wearing a top hat scurries by, then stops and turns around. He removes his hat and tells her that no, she's not deaf, but "the atmosphere is concerning, all the same." Why did he shout at her, then? He must think she really does have a hearing issue.

She thanks him. He nods, then continues down the sidewalk. Despite the oddness, the world hasn't ended. Relief, like a cool breeze, washes over her and through her, cleansing her entire being.

The din diminishes. Stops as quickly as it started.

Lights come on in a few houses, in the hospital windows, and on the streetlights. But now, it's darker than before.

She remains seated on the bench, waiting. Her back is ramrod straight.

A barefoot girl comes running down the middle of the street. She shouts, "There's no music. It's gone. Music is deh-deh-dead!"

Cassie tries to sing but can only croak, then nothing.

"Well, this is for shit," she remarks in her usual voice. What kind of sick joke is this? Astonishment soon gives way to leery suspicion. Could the world be ending in slow motion?

Shivering, she tries to run but can only trudge back to the Silver Lady. What must the sentient vessel make of all this? Cassie's terror

gives way to a gnawing emptiness. It's as if she's hungry, but not. What if this is how things will remain? With the sun permanently gone, or so distant that its warmth is never felt again, will temperatures keep plummeting? If so, they'll all turn into ice sculptures.

Everyone's aware that no one knows anything, so they pass by each other without remarking on the oddness. The extreme strangeness. While it could be pointless to talk about it, wouldn't commiserating aloud ease their fears? Both theirs and her own? It's clear that everyone's out for themselves. Maybe she is, too. But now her jaw's clamped tight, her energy's gone, vanished faster than the sun. No one meets her gaze, try as she might to meet theirs.

It's hard to believe an entire day is over. Such strange tricks of time. Could this be the river's doing? This, and the other oddities of sound.

Silver Lady is nowhere near as upset as Cassie imagined. She isn't even perplexed. Cassie finds this perplexing.

"How can you remain so calm? You're acting like everything's normal."

"No, it's not, but there's little reason to panic," says Silver Lady in a calm, even tone. "We have no choice but to wait it out. It's like when I'm stuck on a sandbar: sooner or later, I know I'll be free. Same thing with these circumstances."

Her words provide some necessary comfort. But then Silver Lady drones on in a monotone that soon puts Cassie to sleep. Right before drifting off, it occurs to her that this could well be the Lady's doing.



Cassie sleeps for twelve hours in yesterday's jeans and T-shirt. Another dreamless sleep. The darkness parts long enough for a hazy sun to make its entrance. She doesn't know what day it is or how long she's been in Gull Lake.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

Standing on the deck, she listens. Voices are coming from the boat docked next to Silver Lady. A dog barks. She's almost relieved, but then Cassie notices no birds are chirping. She opens her mouth to sing. Nothing comes out. She blows air through pursed lips, but can't whistle. She tries once more, but nothing.

"Shit!" she shouts.

And then it's dark again. No air stirs. No one's on the streets or out on the marina's docks. This could be it: the Final Collapse. Yesterday was a dress rehearsal. Her heart races. Maybe it's dark because she's about to pass out? She doesn't. Instead, she waits.

"What the fuckity fuck, Silver Lady?"

Though Cassie knows her question is audible, she doesn't expect a response. None is given.

Does the Lady know what's going on? If so, she doesn't let on. She must certainly sense how terrified Cassie feels. Now, the curious craft doesn't even seem cognizant.

Next, she tries to call Melanie. Her trembling fingers fumble as she tries to punch the correct buttons on her phone. She's got to find out if she's okay and if it's dark and music-less there, too.

Maybe it's time for the final goodbye.

Her daughter's phone rings, but the call neither goes to voicemail nor is answered.

Shouldn't air raid sirens be blasting? Shouldn't the Emergency Alert System be blaring its message on the radio? Since the federal government collapsed, it probably doesn't work, but surely the local systems should be functioning. Maybe, any minute, these two events will occur, and then the show will be over. The show of life.

Minutes pass. Then hours.

Her breathing slows.

Silver Lady's still mute, but it feels like she's watching Cassie rise from her crouch. Did she hear Cassie's left knee crack as she rose? Cassie then pulls the spirosoola from its case and plucks a few strings. Maybe this will lure her out of her silence. As if by magic, Cassie makes a little music. Still, it's not enough to stir the atmosphere—or Silver Lady.

After putting the instrument away, she sighs. Did the Lady just sigh, too, or was it the echo of her own sigh?

Cassie's biggest fear (provided the world doesn't end, and the light returns) is that the bulging sun will beam down on the bodies of humans and animals washed up on the riversides. Tons of trash will clog the river and snag on its shoals. Foul odors will merge into a gigantic stew of stench. There will be no rescue, no return to how it's been. Word will be out that the Strangler Virus has returned. Not war, but complete chaos instead. An ugly, ravaged, broken-hinged world. Survivors will be overwhelmed and left to wander or hide; there won't be enough energy to rebuild from the rubble. Mad Max without the fortress communities. And she will be, for the moment, one of the few who survive the Apocalypse.

She lies down and covers herself with a blanket, then squeezes her eyelids shut.

Where did you go, Silver Lady? Not as powerful as you pretended to be, are you?



Cassie wakes to yet another morning. A regular morning. Blue sky and a gentle breeze. Sweet puffs of air kiss her cheek. A delicious coffee aroma wafts over from the boat docked in the next slip over. There's a cacophony of chirping. Music spills from the park across the way. Melodies in happy, major chords slide down shafts of sunlight! She can't stop rubbing her eyes at this glorious and total surprise.

"Ha!" she shouts to Silver Lady. "Hear that, old girl? And here we thought..."

"You mean *you* did."

"What? You didn't think the world was ending, not once but twice yesterday?"

"Nope."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

“Would you have believed me?”

Cassie shrugs, says nothing, then traipses off to make coffee and take a shower. She plans to wander around Gull Lake, get her bearings, and then venture further upstream. This may take a while.

While she’s in the shower, she can’t tell whether she hears Silver Lady’s voice again or merely her own thoughts. No matter. She takes some comfort in the words: *Morning hope keeps us afloat ... bob along, sing along, the river road we go!*

Will the music still be playing when she returns to the deck?



Silver Lady:

Believe me, Cassie, the world wasn't about to end yesterday. Of course, it will one day, but it's currently not on my radar, so you needn't worry. If it happens again, please remember my words. You will be fine, my dear. What you experienced was a mere hiccup. Look at it this way: consciousness belched; it had mere indigestion. It's now back to normal, and the sun will rise before it sets, and then it will rise again. And you'll still be here. I promise you this, and a promise is a promise, after all.

La, la, la, and on we go...



Chapter 14

Three days ago, they left Old Leaf. Or was it four? It's not like Cassie's keeping a log of this journey upstream, so it doesn't really matter. This section of the river is still wide, but more peaceful, and somehow kinder looking than before (if a river can look kind). The riversides are more manicured, the shadows less ominous. More frogs and fewer turkey vultures. No gators. Birdsong is more joyful. When occasional boats go by, all the smiles and nods feel like they did before the war.

Once again, it's equally nice *to both see and be seen*. Her hair cascades down over her purple caftan. Even though she doesn't enjoy wearing the caftan much these days, she can't help but think her hippie look helps her visibility.

It's one of those lazy river days. Warm, but not oppressively so. More like a day in May than in March, at least back in her girlhood in Minnesota.

Lily pads swirl slowly on blue water, displaying their lovely white blossoms. A blue heron watches the boat glide by. Bullfrogs call to each other. Except for brief moments when mist could be

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

mistaken for ghosts, there are no Parades of the Dead. Thankfully, the air is free of the stench and rot of death.

If Melanie were here, it would even be better. Does her daughter recall their times together as she does? One of their favorite rituals was taking walks together. Mel would tell her about her latest project, and Cassie would listen, occasionally interrupting with a question. So much passion she put into her work! If Luther were with her now, would she relish the day any more than she already does? And what about Frank? Their times together were intense, but brief. Has Luther now replaced him in her thoughts? Will they meet up again? She hopes so. Still, she doesn't need to look at the world through another person's eyes to experience it, like she once believed.

Cassie and Silver Lady drift into a delicious, peaceful quiet.

Silver Lady takes over the wheel, so Cassie doesn't have to steer. At first, Cassie doesn't realize it, but then she does. She's startled, but not surprised. On a less peaceful day, she would've fought for the wheel and steered toward shore. But not today.

Cassie crosses her arms behind her head, a toothpick dangling from the side of her mouth, and gazes up at the blue sky dotted with occasional puffy clouds. While it's neither exciting nor fun, she's never known such a tranquil time on the mighty river. Serene and even heavenly. That is, until she gets a little restless.

She picks up the book she's been looking for and actually manages to read a few pages. Until Silver Lady interrupts.

"You know, Cassie, we could spend many days like this, provided it was just us two. This is my idea of a pleasure cruise, not a perpetual party with people."

"I'm not so sure."

Until Silver Lady says this, the mood was nearly perfect. The prospect of river travel with Silver Lady alone is jarring. Cassie would lose her tenuous-of-late grip on reality. Of course, Cassie can't tell her what she really thinks, as it would hurt the Lady's feelings. She could ask whether she'd altered reality and added a bit of bliss to the mix. Exactly how powerful is she?

"Is this your doing?" Cassie asks, gesturing to the azure sky and verdant riverbanks straight out of a fairy tale.

"Dear girl, I don't know what you're getting at."

"Don't play innocent, Silver Lady. I know what you're up to."

"You think I'm going for the Mother Nature persona? That I've manipulated the scene? I appreciate the credit, but you couldn't be more wrong."

"My dear Lady, as much as I enjoy this time alone with you on this lazy stretch of the river, my senses would deaden in no time, in an endless sort of loveliness. No, thanks."

"Really? I never tire of days like this. Surely, you're aware of the expression 'go with the flow'? Maybe you need to do this, or more of this, dear girl."

Silver Lady's voice is likely inaudible to others, though Cassie hears it with utmost clarity. Its slightly British accent is soothing and warm, though somewhat mother-hennish. She truly likes me, thinks Cassie. The knowledge makes her giddy.

"Well, of course, I like you. You're curious and earnest, if not a tad naive."

Cassie is disconcerted. How can a boat not only talk, but read her thoughts? It means she has little, if any, privacy. But what can she do about it?

"Were you this aware during the trip downriver? Why didn't you communicate with me then?"

"You were busy with the others. I thought you knew, or came to know, I was there."

"Have you always read my thoughts? Next, you're going to tell me you're all-knowing. An AI with personality plus. Think that makes you omniscient? Oh, puh-leeze! Am I to conclude that God is a boat, a houseboat? Just don't spring any leaks, or I'll lose my faith faster than your ability to float."

"No, Cassie. You've got it wrong. I'm not God, as I'm indeed very much flawed, like humans in some ways, but not in others. Think of me as a second inner voice."

"Why didn't you tell me this before, Silver Lady?"

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

"You didn't ask."

"Well, I value being around others. I want and need connections. Human ones. Tomorrow, we'll reach our next stop. Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm going to be selling cruise tickets."

Silver Lady says nothing but steers toward the bank. Cassie grabs the wheel back in the nick of time, or they would have crashed ashore. A little vindictive, eh, Lady? No point in scolding her; if Cassie puts her on the defensive again, it'll only make things worse.

In the future, Cassie will know better than to let her steer.

"Didn't mean to upset you. Please, Silver Lady, don't stop talking to me. I do enjoy your company."

"As I do yours, Cassie. But I need your full attention. Some of the time, anyway."

"So, you believe in God?" she asks, changing the subject.

Silver Lady doesn't respond, but Cassie can feel her wide grin. What it means is anyone's guess.



Cassie isn't the sort to hear voices or see things that aren't there. That is, she never did before. Years ago, she saw her grandmother's ghost, but only once. Seeing Zona's ghost on the Island of Lost Children was an exception, since she wasn't the only one who saw her. There were also the two women on the riverbank who looked like her mother and aunt. Were they apparitions or two real women standing in the mist? She needs to tell someone about Silver Lady, but who? Even if Melanie wouldn't say she was bat-shit crazy, she'd sure think it. Could Frank have spilled some of his anti-vanishing potion on the deck? If so, that could be the cause of Silver Lady's sentience. If Cassie meets up with him, would he even recall doing so while he was aboard?

She'll have to ask the Lady how far back her memories go. How to find out whether she was the one responsible for Zona's death?

Cassie simply can't ask her outright. First, she'll have to gain her trust. Once she does, perhaps she'll get the truth. And if Silver Lady owns up to committing the evil deed, as long as it never happens again, Cassie will be able to continue on with the journey.

If she meets up with Luther, she could tell him about Silver Lady. This is something she certainly can't keep to herself.

Cassie isn't a fan of feeling like her consciousness is no longer her own. In high school, she had a teacher, Mrs. Ryan, who was rumored to be a mind reader. She'd read Cassie's thoughts several times during one winter term. Cassie knew she was doing it because she felt strange and shivery from head to toe in Mrs. Ryan's presence. Then she'd catch her teacher staring at her with a knowing but demure smile and a brief nod. On the last day before school got out for the summer, Cassie worked up the nerve to ask her about it after class.

While Mrs. Ryan had laughed and tried to deny it, she finally told Cassie it was true—she sometimes received “unbidden inklings from certain students.” Typical of Mrs. Ryan to use a strange term like ‘unbidden inklings,’ which Cassie knew at the time had little to do with ink.

“You were an easy mark, Cassie,” her husky voice declared.

With that, Mrs. Ryan hustled her out of the classroom. Cassie never got the chance to ask what made her stand out from other students. Something tells her she's now an easy mark for Silver Lady.

“Maybe you are. It's not a bad thing, Cassie.”

If Silver Lady had eyebrows, one would be raised. Mrs. Ryan would always do the same.

These are the last words she can get from Silver Lady. Afterward, though she goes silent, her presence looms. Cassie can almost feel her own consciousness meld with Silver Lady's. She can no longer distinguish Silver Lady's voice from her own. She finds this soothing, yet empowering, and most strange.

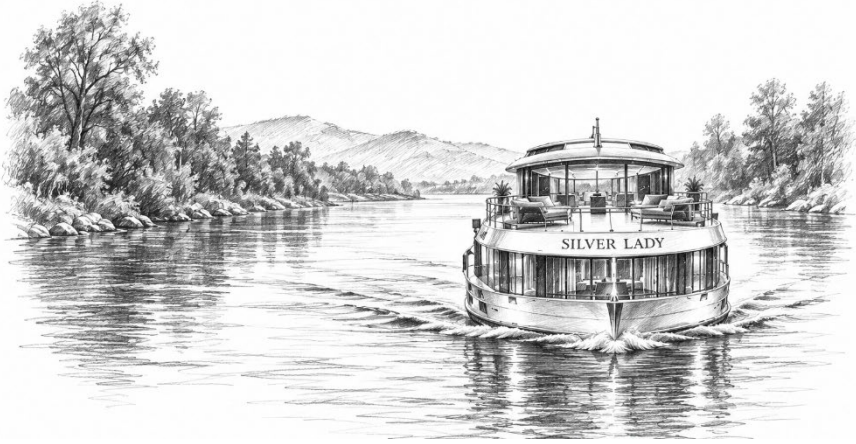
How long will this go on? She doesn't know if she's asked aloud, and now knows better than to wait for the Lady's response.



Cassie is grateful her parents passed away before the second Civil War. Not that they hadn't known strife. They were, after all, alive during the Vietnam War and the assassinations of the great leaders of the 1960s. Her father was drafted and served in Vietnam. While he'd lost many friends, he miraculously survived, though he was ill for many years.

"Phil came home so skinny he looked like a hungry wolf," her mother often said. As far as Cassie knows, no one ever gained weight during wartime except some of the top brass. She can't imagine how anxious her mother must have felt, waiting for his return and hoping he would come back. They'd been married at the time with a child who died shortly after her father's return. The tragedy haunted them. Her father did a better job masking it, though they both became heavy drinkers. Still, Cassie was proud to be the daughter of the Baby Boomer generation, the original hippies.

Pat, her mother, had been both a smoker and an insomniac, known for pacing the house in the middle of the night. Had she been looking for the daughter who died as a toddler, hoping for a sign from her? If so, she kept it to herself. As Cassie grew older, her mother talked more often about Kira. While Pat had few memories of her eldest daughter, she'd fantasize about who Kira would have become. Cassie began to feel like a shadow. Silly to have competed with a dead sister, but she did. And though her mother celebrated Cassie's accomplishments, she often looked past her to her other daughter, the ghost child.



Chapter 15

How life can change on a dime, dot, or dimple! Cassie's new crew consists of Murphy, Jimmy, and a cat named Sherlock. She senses that Silver Lady isn't happy about it, but too bad for her. This could well be the dawn of a New Age, a better one, so why not embark on new travels with these boys and a cat? Too bad the cat's not the friendliest of felines.

Cassie had been sipping coffee at a picnic table in a small park adjacent to the boat dock when she spotted a familiar-looking boy. She knew him immediately due to his red hair and lanky build.

"Is that you, Murphy?" she shouted with a wave.

He looked puzzled. "That you, Captain Cassie?"

She jumped up and hugged him close, but he looked too flustered to allow for much of an embrace. She didn't take offense, knowing how young teenage boys could be.

Murphy was the oldest boy and the leader on the Island of Lost Children. No sooner had she begun to worry about how she would explain his presence to Silver Lady when, within hours, the other two came aboard.



Jimmy had first noticed Murphy and Cassie as they were about to set off on Silver Lady. He'd come running down the dock, exclaiming about his lost owl. Had they seen him? The younger boy's face was dirty, but his dark brown eyes peered at them from behind long bangs in a devilishly cute way. Who wouldn't be taken in by him? He clearly needed both his pet companion and human companionship. On his heels was a cat who'd seen better days.

When Cassie mentioned Owl Town, Jimmy wanted to know whether he could ride there aboard Silver Lady.

"Maybe I'll find him there," he'd said.

He must know nothing about the menacing place. Not wanting to scare him away by saying anything about it, she stifled a gasp and managed a nod.

As he climbed the short ramp, he smiled at her for the first time, though his cat, following on his heels, gave Cassie a decisive scowl. The scruffy-looking cat's nonchalance reminded her of her dear Jezebel, who'd used up her nine lives back home in Minnesota before the first trip down the River Road.

"Welcome aboard the Silver Lady. What's your name, and who is this ill-mannered cat?"

"I'm Jimmy, and he's Sherlock. He follows me everywhere. Want me to scare him away?"

"Been looking for a mascot, so it'll be okay if he stays. How'd he get his name?"

"I guess he was some guy in a book my dad read," he told her.

It wouldn't be the first time Sherlock would look at Cassie as if she were both illiterate and clueless.



There's a tense vibe in the air. Is Silver Lady annoyed with her over the new passengers?

Cassie can't believe she's worried about what a boat thinks. Good thing real people have joined her, or the river magic would be a little too potent for her to handle.



It's a steamy afternoon, and Sliver Lady sluggishly, stubbornly, proceeds upriver. The pewter water seems to be thicker and slower than ever before, like viscous blood in an ill body. Every now and then, there's the sickeningly sweet smell of rotting flesh mixed with sulfur. Strong whiffs that braid and dissipate only to return a short time later. Cattails line the bank, along with swamp roses and spider lilies. The great number of cottonwoods and the pungent odors tell Cassie they're still in the lower part of the mighty river.

Her hands are firmly on the large wooden wheel because she doesn't trust Silver Lady, especially since they're still not on speaking terms. Such a stubborn mule of a boat!

Cassie no longer feels they're sharing a consciousness. Hard to believe she ever did. The moment she granted the boys permission to come aboard, she knew this would happen.

She wonders if the Lady will make a reappearance.

While it won't be a big surprise, Cassie hopes so, as long as the Lady isn't too quarrelsome and cranky.



Earlier, Cassie overheard Murphy trying to explain to Jimmy that there was a time slip on the Island of Lost Children.

"What's a time slip?"

"Exactly what it sounds like: a slip in time. It's a different year there."

"How can that be? What are you, a liar or just plain crazy? You and the other kids there think that 'cuz you were high or something?"

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

"No. I'm not going to get all technical, since you're just a kid and all, but it's actually 1993 there. I'm here in 2034 because I'm looking for someone."

"We're both looking for someone, then. Truth is, it's not a person I'm trying to find, but my lost owl."

"I heard about that. Cassie says there's a chance you might find him in Owl Town. Word is it's a pretty scary place."

"Not exactly brave, are you?" Jimmy needled him.

"Braver than you, little boy!"

As it happened, Cassie appeared at this moment with chocolate chip cookies. They quickly forgot their squabble.

Murphy had been the oldest boy on the island. A freckle-faced redhead with deep blue eyes. Serious, rakish, and intense. He and Aurora Lee, the oldest girl, had ruled over the many other homeless kids. During Cassie's stay on the island, it was clear that the two were in love. Murphy went to Gull Lake, not only to seek medical supplies for the island but also for Aurora. He must be maybe fourteen or fifteen now. Aurora's nearly the same age, possibly a tad older than him.

Anyone who knows about the island is aware of the enormous difficulty of coming ashore. It's most likely due to the strong and crazy current. Weirdly, the water is treacherous on every side—almost as if the island is at the center of a vortex. As nearly impossible as it is to set foot there, a few issues make leaving anything but easy.

Murphy then explained to Jimmy how he'd first left the island with Margot and Vincent, along with some really sick kids.

It surprised Cassie that the couple had taken Murphy with them. It wasn't long, he said, after he'd returned to the island when Aurora Lee disappeared. After repairing an old outboard motor on a small fishing boat, he traveled back to Gull Lake on his own.

As Murphy explained this to Cassie, it was clear that Jimmy preferred to hear how Murphy and the others had arrived on the island in the first place. He'd gathered that the children had become orphans after losing their parents to a strange illness.

"How'd you get there?" Jimmy asks, interrupting the older boy. His long, dirty bangs, which might be blond after a good hair-washing, curtained his curious brown eyes.

"We were on a sightseeing cruise aboard a riverboat ferry when the sickness spread rapidly, killing all the adults. Aurora Lee and I never remembered how we wound up on the island, but it happened a few years back. On island time, it was decades ago."

Cassie picked up where Jimmy left off.

"A month or so before the Civil War broke out, Silver Lady washed ashore following a storm. When we were on the island, the two men in my crew helped the children restore the large ferry. Murphy, along with one of the couples, took it to Gull Lake."

Murphy agreed with her that Aurora Lee must have fled the island in the dead of night, since the children would've been most upset to learn she was leaving. She probably took the two-person skiff, the only other boat on the island besides Silver Lady and the ferry. No one on the island knew why Aurora Lee left, though he thought she had gone to search for her missing parents. No matter how much he'd tried to convince her otherwise, Aurora was certain her parents were still alive.

Jimmy listened to Murphy's tale, clearly trying hard to process it. Not having experienced a first crush yet, it must have been difficult.

Sherlock wove in and out of his legs, seeking head pats, then hissed at Murphy for taking Jimmy's attention. So far, it was hard to say which of the boys had led the tougher life.

As it turns out, over two years ago, Jimmy also became homeless after his drug-addicted parents abandoned him.

What is it with missing parents? Zona had been searching for her parents, too, but never found them. After she disappeared, the crew thought they'd never see her again. But they did. Her cold body had washed up on the Island of Lost Children. Although Zona wasn't well-liked (or even liked at all), everyone was devastated by her death. While she and Cassie could never be friends, Cassie had still been her captain. Sure, the storm had been a bad one, but her

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

death could have been prevented. Unless she'd been murdered, of course.



While she won't charge them a fare, Cassie's happy to have passengers. She has increasingly felt more like Silver Lady's passenger than her captain.

Despite his young years, Cassie thinks Murphy will be able to help with some of the navigating. Jimmy's a little too young. Most likely, he'd be in middle school (if he attended school). And Murphy, definitely not a student, looks like a high school freshman, or possibly a sophomore.

Both boys remind her of her many years of teaching. Back then, she loved the way even the most defensive of children wore their hearts on their sleeves.

Should she now try to explain some of the magic awaiting them on the river?

It's best to let it naturally unfold.

Did Silver Lady tell her that just now, or did she think it?

And as for the houseboat being more than a mode of transportation—that's a secret she'll keep to herself, at least for now. As upset as Silver Lady likely is with her, there's no telling how she'd react if Cassie spilled her secrets.

Plus, she doesn't want to frighten the boys away, though they probably wouldn't believe her anyway. While Murphy is used to island magic, he likely doesn't recall much of the river's magic.

Best to let them find out on their own.

Even if she's not good at letting things unfold naturally, she sure as hell is going to try.

The problem with kids this age is they're always so damn hungry.

Jimmy gobbles up five peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and Murphy, four. After downing two cans of warm, fizzy pop, they have a belching contest. Both declare themselves the winners. Great

fun for them, no doubt. One of the best reasons for leaving the teaching profession returns.

Cassie interrupts their antics to ask Murphy about Vincent and Margot.

"Did they return safely to the island?"

"Yep. We had a big party to celebrate their return," Murphy says, looking wistful. "After the sick kids got better, we took a vote and decided to let the two adults remain on the island, so long as they lived on the other side. A few of the little ones liked to visit them and make a pest of themselves. We think the sickness has passed, but the ones who'd been really sick still have bluish lips. They sleep way more than the rest of us."

"I bet they'd like my chalk animals," pipes in Jimmy, adding that he spent much of his time in Gull Lake drawing magical beasts. Most had two or three heads, wings, and floppy rabbit ears. He knew how to draw them, he said, because they came to him in his dreams.

River magic, Cassie thinks, but says nothing.

Since his hometown isn't the most magical place, the river's magic must be airborne. It permeates certain areas but not others. There's little point in telling the boys about places like Realidad or Doze before they get there. Also, who knows how the war might have changed places, for better or worse. Certainly, Owl Town will be worse than before, which isn't saying much. Cassie will have to warn them about its gloom and darkness, but say nothing of its curse. Jimmy will be most disappointed because there's no way she will allow him to search Owl Town for his pet owl. She just hopes they can escape the town unscathed.

One of the boys farts. Both point at each other.

"Gross, Jimmy! We know it was you," says Murphy, plugging his nose. Jimmy, in turn, throws an empty pop can at him. Then Murphy chases him inside.

Cassie's relieved to hear herself think for a moment.

"Good luck trying to get those two hooligans to sit still long enough to tell them much of anything!" Silver Lady shouts so loud,

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

Cassie can't help but think the two boys must have heard her. But no, they're still racing back and forth on the lower deck, stopping only to wave to a passing freighter.

"Please tell me you didn't just say 'hooligans,'" Cassie says in a whisper-scream.

"I did. Can you think of a better term to describe that terrible twosome? Why did you allow them to ride with us, Cassie? We were having such a fine time."

"We were for sure, but why should it be any different now? We're helping them both out. More than a little selfish, my dear Lady?"

"More like looking out for myself, and you, too. I wasn't built for snot-nosed boys to abuse. I'd assumed you knew better."

"Admit it: you don't want other adults on board, either."

Silence. Cassie had called her bluff.

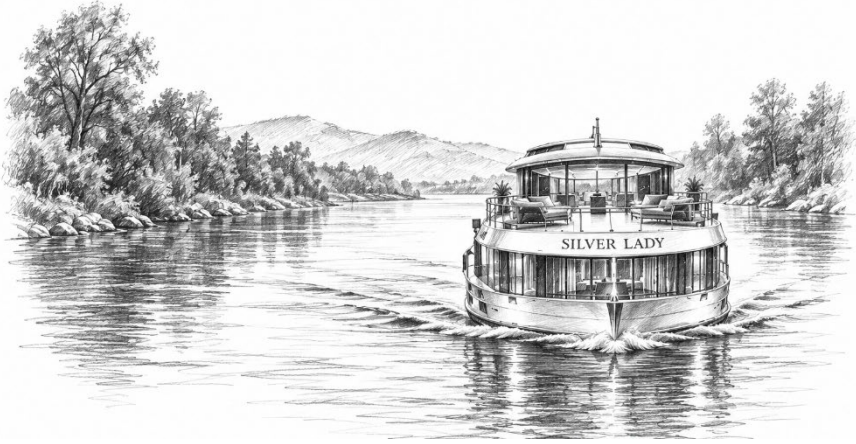


Silver Lady:

After letting her know how I feel about those wretched little boys, I thought about punishing Cassie and her new crew, but thought better of it, as it would have only wound up those little ruffians all the more. Surely, she would rather be anywhere but stuck on a boat with sticky-fingered boys with ants-in-their-pants. "Misery loves company, eh, Cassie?" I try my best to make my question heard, but the well-meaning captain is too busy hollering at the boys. Well, she sure asked for it. Something tells me she doesn't have any idea about what she's in for.

River:

You know what we could do. We've done it before and could certainly do it again.



Chapter 16

Cassie parks Silver Lady at a small dock. More than likely, her stomach is not the only one growling. Feeling equally as exhausted as she is hungry, she searches through a galley cupboard for something suitable for supper, something agreeable to all. She settles on a can of hearty chicken noodle soup.

"Lucky you, Silver Lady. I'll bet you've never felt hunger or pain, or anything even unpleasant."

"Who are you talking to?" Jimmy asks Cassie. She hadn't seen the boys sneaking up from behind.

"Um, nobody. Just muttering to myself."

"Old people do that sometimes, Jimmy. They're weird like that," says Murphy, shrugging.

"I don't think she's old. Not real old," Jimmy says, hands crossed in front of his chest. "Maybe she's just lonely. Wanna talk with us, Captain Cassie?"

"Thanks, Jimmy. I'd like that. Why don't we get some lunch first?"

The boys heartily agree.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

Is it wrong of her to fill Jimmy's bowl to the brim with soup but not Murphy's? Afterward, she tries to nap, but it's impossible. How different the journey's turning out from what she'd expected.



Not long afterward, back on the water road, they get stuck on a sandbar. It's below the water's surface, but large enough to snag Silver Lady and keep her in its clutches. Cassie should've known better because the current had slowed without warning. Good thing they'd gassed up earlier. At first, she thinks it's merely Silver Lady being stubborn, but after an hour, she realizes it's something else that won't let her budge. The water is shallower here than expected.

"Put it in reverse! C'mon, gun the engine a bit," Murphy snaps.

If Cassie listens to him, she'll probably wind up blowing up the engine. Instead, she kills it, allowing it to cool off. The directions in the operator's manual make little sense. If the internet still worked, she would've watched a YouTube video about it. With any luck, a rescue boat will show up, hopefully, sooner rather than later. She tells the restless boys there's nothing to do but wait.

Silver Lady's sigh is audible. Did the boys hear it, too?

Clouds darken and swell. Odd, since the forecast didn't call for rain.

Cassie recalls other times of being stuck. Not as bad as now, as she'd had other adults helping her to strategize. She's never had to wait longer than a couple of hours. This gives her hope. She tells the boys it shouldn't be too much longer before they're rescued. Even an hour sounds long to them, so she's met by shrugs and scoffing looks. Murphy acts like it's her fault. He makes faces at her, causing Jimmy to laugh, so Murphy does it all the more. She does her best to ignore them both. It isn't easy.

Another human body drifts past them on the slow current. The boys stop their silliness and stare. No one remarks about it. Has the carnage become so commonplace that no one bothers mentioning

it? Still, there's no reason in drawing their attention to the horrific sights.

The stench fills their nostrils before they can plug them. Before getting stuck, Cassie had noticed bodies occasionally washing up in the reeds and on grassy banks. There are fewer around here than downstream; the strong odor is still present but not as bad.

For hours now, the Silver Lady's been unable to budge beneath a bridge. It's the first long footbridge they've seen in a while. A man, walking his golden retriever, stops and waves at them. His face is a mess of hound-dog wrinkles and sadness. He points up at the clouds. Cassie shrugs. Does he think the Silver Lady's simply wasting time? Not like they can do anything if a storm pops up.

The man continues walking his dog down the bridge.

After Jimmy grows bored making faces at Cassie, the boys play jacks, then have a burping contest. Then they play chase with Sherlock. Cassie doesn't blame the cat for finally hissing at them. She's close to doing the same herself. Once they're back on the river, perhaps she'll drop them both off at the next town, especially since they have no particular destination. Why should she bother with these brats? Murphy might be tolerable if Jimmy weren't here. Maybe she should drop Jimmy off in Owl Town or at a police station and explain that he's a runaway. It would serve him right! But imagining that lost-puppy look on his face, she doubts she could follow through with the plan.

She's truly not the right person to be stuck on a boat with boys. While she's taught plenty of them, she's never been stuck with them, or even with one boy, for that matter. What she finds most bothersome is that they can't sit still and are a little too awake. Actually, much too awake. Even her Melanie must have been like this when she was around their ages, but it was so long ago that she can't exactly recall. Must be different when you're the parent and have little choice.

Cassie launches into a story about the recent Civil War. Jimmy knows about it, but Murphy has heard only a little about it since arriving in Gull Lake. She tells them that the USA has been

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

abolished and that all the former states are now countries. Did they know they were passing through the country of Tennessee? And that the River Road is the only way to travel from country to country without a passport, though this will likely change soon.

Murphy acts like he's bored because it's old information, but Jimmy asks what a passport is. "What caused the war in the first place?" Murphy asks.

"It's a long story, but since we're stuck for now, I'll tell you what I know."

She tells them how rare safe drinking water has become. Medicine and food products no longer need to pass safety inspections. Big corporations and the already wealthy got richer and richer, and everyday people suffered. Millions a year were spent on deadly weapon systems. Programs that helped people were cut.

She's saying too much. If she doesn't shut up, she'll lose her audience. Maybe not Murphy, but this must sound like Greek to Jimmy. Maybe she's listing reasons to better explain it to herself.

The federal government began to topple, and the states began to scream at and blame each other.

When she adds that it was the North against the South, all over again, just like the first American Civil War, both boys nod. This makes more sense to them than her earlier remarks. She also says that after a lot of rioting in the cities, there were fierce and bloody battles. This happened, along with the Vanishing of artworks and people.

Their eyes become full moons.

"I forgot to mention that climate change, its effects on weather, and the disappearance of so many species played a big role in the breakdown of the old world, too."

Losing Jimmy's attention yet again, she quickly explains that she and her first crew discovered protective magic still alive along the river. By the time she arrived in New Orleans, turmoil and violence had overshadowed the river's powers. She confides that an old friend had hidden her in his garage apartment for six months

while the battles raged, though luckily none had been fought in New Orleans.

"You want to know how the war ended?" she asks, giving more than usual wait-time for their responses.

Both boys nod in unison.

"You're going to love this." Again, she waits.

Their curiosity has them sitting still for the first time in several hours.

"Two robots duked it out. They wound up shutting each other down at the same time. Neither the North nor the South won the war. AI at the new World Headquarters decreed that the states be dissolved. And now, every country can choose the kind of government it wants by voting."

She begins to mention smaller details of the new world, but as they don't pertain much to these two river rats, they yawn and return to playing jacks.

The day grows warmer and more humid by the minute, and a general malaise is clearly setting in, especially since they are going nowhere fast.

Cassie's captain's hat is nowhere in sight. And where did she leave that box of toothpicks? She should pick up another one at the next market.

Sherlock's insistent meow tells her it's time to be fed, so Cassie excuses herself to open a can of tuna (of which they have no shortage). Next time, she'd have Jimmy do it, since it really is his cat.

Another hour passes. She looks for the book she'd recently found but has misplaced it once again. Why does this keep happening?

She then calls Melanie, who predictably doesn't answer.

A short yoga session neither relaxes nor refreshes her. Reading about this section of the river in her handy river guide becomes pointless as she begins to nod off. No other boats go by. In short, she is crazy-bored and contemplates letting loose a scream upon the water.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

While their catch would be inedible in this part of the river, the boys are fishing off the side of the boat. It has at least given them something to do. She watches them, thankful to have something to hold her attention. Since the water is shallow enough to wade in, she allows them to use the two trawling nets left behind by former passengers.

Clouds unravel like skeins of white yarn. The sun beats down, and she restlessly wanders from the top deck down to the lower ones. The many small cabins inside seem large and empty.

What is she doing with her life?

"You're doing THIS!" Silver Lady interrupts.

Cassie's grateful for her company again and asks for her guidance. She listens, craning her neck, as if doing that will help her hear better.

Once again, the Lady goes mute.

Not again.

"Please don't go silent on me!"

"I'm still annoyed with you, Cassie, but alright, I'll tell you. Those boys shouldn't be allowed to fish right now, because your friends are back."

"You mean, Margot and the others?" Does Silver Lady remember Margot or the names of the others from the first trip?

"No, dear girl, I'm referring to your fish friends."

Does Silver Lady mean the dolphin-like fish Cassie encountered on the earlier trip? They kept trying to warn her about something, though she was never exactly sure what.

No time to inquire further, she sprints over to the boys who are readying to climb down the side ladder into the water with their fishing nets.

"I'm sorry, but I can't let you fish here. There are some really smart fish in this part of the river."

"A fish is a fish, Cassie. Get real!" Jimmy sneers.

"True, but the river dolphins are mammals, not simply fish. They are highly intelligent and often show up when they're trying to give us a warning."

"If you're right, we'll thank them before eating them. Maybe they'll make us smarter once they're in our bellies," Murphy says.

"Even if these weren't the magical and smart ones, which they are, I've told you that you can't eat any of the fish in this area. You both need to remember I'm the captain. If you defy me, you can't remain on board. Look, I'm not saying you can't fish at all. Just not here."

No sooner do they slink away, grumbling, than two of the pink river dolphins appear. Throwing their heads back, they immediately speak in squeals and whistles, much like larger dolphins.

Cassie nods and smiles, and they do likewise. They are much too large for the boys' nets. Maybe their calves are close by, and they're worried. The two river dolphins seem pleased to see her, but they speak in earnest once again. She nods, this time in all seriousness. They look relieved, as if she understands the situation. If they sense she's the sole adult on board, maybe this time they'll become her guides.



Silver Lady:

The day has become ridiculously long. I haven't felt this tired in a long time. Why am I stuck with these two upstarts? There's no getting away from them. Cassie and I need to discuss the matter in full. Maybe I'll suggest she drop them off at the next dock upriver. Wouldn't she rather spend more time reading and relaxing? Certainly, she's sick to death of the little hooligans by now, too. The arrogance of the older one trying to tell Cassie how to free me. All I can do is watch. Such an indignity to my very being! I can't believe they were going to fish for my dear friends. Stupid is one thing, but stupid and cruel is something I refuse to abide. There's got to be a way to convince her that they need to walk the plank, or be given the boot at the next stop.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

River:

As much as I love our fish friends, there's little we can do to prevent people from fishing. It's all part of Nature, though if they don't need fish to stay alive, there's no excusing the murder of innocents. Remember what I said. We could rid ourselves of those unruly little boys.



Chapter 17

Cassie starts the engine and puts the Lady in reverse. She takes care not to gun the engine. If this doesn't work, she's got another idea. By wiggling the Lady's back end slightly, Cassie hopes to fishtail her way off the sandbar. With any luck, they'll be on their way.

"Come on, Silver Lady! You can do it, old girl!" Murphy shouts from the deck below.

How dare he call her old! Although she sounded like a persnickety old aunt to Cassie, she looked glamorous and young. Also, it's one thing if Cassie calls her old, but it's disrespectful for a boy. How would she feel if someone said it to her?

Is Silver Lady merely being stubborn, or is she truly stuck? Cassie turns the engine off to let it cool. At least now she has a plan. While it felt like it had simply popped into her head, she couldn't help but think it was a gift from her aquatic friends. She really should tell Silver Lady about it, but it's not like Cassie needs permission. If she begins requesting it, she may as well hand over complete control. Not going to happen!

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

The boys put away their two nets and join Cassie up top. Murphy brings her the captain's hat he found on the floor of one of the cabins. She thanks him and tells them both to keep an eye out for her box of toothpicks.

Jimmy, sitting still for once, confides that his parents were drug addicts, but he'd lost them to the Strangler Virus a couple of years ago. He knows of no other relatives. His only friends have been an owl he named Hootie and Sherlock. And now, of course, Murphy.

Cassie needn't search for a way to get the truth out of him; fear of homelessness was enough of a truth serum.

"No way I'll ever go to a group home and become a foster care kid. I've heard horror stories from other runaways. I could get killed or worse," he claims.

Cassie raises an eyebrow, then decides on a different tack. "I don't know how long it will take me to get back to Minneapolis, but you're welcome to ride along."

"Thanks, Captain Cassie, but I don't know."

She loves that he can't hide his grin. Was it Silver Lady who heaves an exasperated sigh? If so, the others take no notice.

"Or maybe after we find Aurora Lee, we can return to the island," Murphy interrupts.

"But Murphy, the only way I came ashore was because of the storm. Remember? I know you managed to return there safely, but that current is wild and wicked, especially for a larger boat."

"Maybe you don't know this, Cassie, but kids of any age don't have a problem landing there. As long as you have one on board, you probably won't either."

"If that's true, I guess we could give it a try," she says, but not wanting to give it another try.

Cassie distinctly hears Silver Lady groan.

"You won't be able to remain there long. Margot and Vincent were only able to because of what they did for the sick kids," Murphy informs her.

"Are you saying the island gave them permission?" Cassie asks.

"I guess so."

The restless boys climb down to the deck below. Murphy paces with his hands clasped behind his back, and Jimmy follows, mimicking his every move.

As much as Cassie doesn't want to become a permanent resident on the island, she knows the children wouldn't be welcoming. Why try to persuade them to leave the island, since they aren't exactly lost? What would she even do there? She can't imagine how Vincent and Margot manage. Maybe knowing they're back in time—back in the 1990s—they won't have to experience the extreme chaos of the coming decades, and they'll be able to relax.

The boys rejoin her. They notice a few people standing on the bridge.

A man in a baseball cap calls down to them, asking the obvious, "Are you stuck?"

Duh, you think so? She wants to reply, but nods instead.

They've now been stranded for over three hours. The same man asks if there's some way he can help.

Cassie motions to show how she's going to put the boat in reverse and wiggle it like a fish. When he still doesn't seem to get it, she puts her palms together and snakes them.

As he still looks clueless, she yells, "I'll fishtail the boat in reverse."

Before he can respond, a couple of large unframed paintings appear on the bridge.

It's as if the people on the boat and bridge are frozen in time, with only their eyeballs able to move.

One is a painting of fish of all sizes, flying in the sky above a river. People are swimming in the water. They have fish heads with human bodies. The other canvas, equally large, portrays a single fish sitting on a riverbank, fishing. The first painting is much better, both colorful and provocative.

Jimmy's the first to find his voice. He exclaims that the fish-people are much like one of his sidewalk chalk drawings of fabulous beasts.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

Where did the paintings come from? The spectators on the bridge are as amazed as the three of them. No one saw how they got there. They magically appeared. Where had she heard that *The Vanishing* is now being called *The Reappearance*? Lost paintings are returning, not to the places they disappeared from, but to roadsides, store aisles, backyards, and parking lots. Often hundreds of miles away from their creators. How many will be returned? Will only a few materialize out of thin air, like these two, or will all the missing ones 'go home' again?

Back in Gull Lake, Cassie overheard someone say poems were spilling like raindrops from bulgy little clouds. If that's true, it's doubtful that most of those who penned them will ever find their missing poems. Better to be an artist than a poet these days. Maybe it doesn't matter. It's not what's most important, at least in the long run.

She can't help but wonder if this is the case for missing people, too. Will they return, as well? Could this be what the dolphins were trying to tell her?

Hope fills hearts like never before.



After being stuck for several hours that felt like days, Cassie finally frees *Silver Lady* from the sandbar by gently rocking her back and forth, then side to side, keeping her from burrowing deeper into the sand. She then puts her in reverse, and they are on their way.

The boys wave to a few remaining onlookers on the bridge, then jump up and down in frenzied joy. Their victory yells can doubtless be heard a mile away.

Silver Lady creaks so loudly and for so long that Cassie takes it as a sigh of great relief: the Lady's vitality is back!

While the boys pay it little mind, Sherlock's tail puffs and his back arches before he scampers off to one of the cabins or nooks.

Once again, they travel up the River Road.



Chapter 18

It's late morning in Lidspot. They pulled into the strange little riverside town the previous evening. It's far enough north that even the river's main artery has narrowed, and the current, though not swift, has picked up after the sluggish delta flood plains.

Cassie never noticed the town on the downriver journey, possibly because it's on a smaller river branch she might or might not have been on. Lidspot wasn't on the itinerary, so she never bothered to figure out its exact location. So many riverside towns never became more than names on a map.

"Lidspot is an odd-sounding name, not mysterious or exotic, just curious. Good enough reason to stop here, don't you think?" she asks the boys, though she doesn't really care about their answers.

It's near dark when they pull into the small marina. Cassie tells the boys it's too late to investigate the town.

Both boys groan.

"Murphy, if it was just you, it'd be fine for you to go explore the town at night," she whispers when Jimmy's out of earshot.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

Murphy admits he's tired anyway and prefers to wait until morning. At first, she's relieved, but then Jimmy sidles up to her again. He nags and whines until she about goes nuts. She hasn't screamed at them yet, but now she's close. She understands Jimmy's restlessness and allows him to run up and down the cement pier until that, too, begins to get on her nerves.

She shouts his name so loudly that she scares Sherlock, who hides for the rest of the night. Murphy, too, makes himself scarce. Jimmy zips back to the boat, and she doesn't see him again for the rest of the night. That's just fine.

In the late morning, both boys need to run like puppies when released from a kennel. She, too, needs a break from Silver Lady's coolness and her general disapproval of the boys. Something tells her Silver Lady is pleased to have some time to herself. Maybe she'll come to her senses.

All three passengers are happy to get off the Silver Lady for their own reasons.

A musky aroma greets them on Main Street. Several warning messages are posted on cardboard posters plastered on windows and lampposts: "Do NOT rub your eyes!" "NO eye-rubbing allowed."

The boys don't seem bothered, but Cassie's eyelids itch even before she sees the signs. Sunglasses and eye drops are displayed in store windows. Almost everyone they pass wears only the darkest of eyewear. She has a pair in her purse, but since the boys don't seem bothered, she won't buy them glasses yet.

The air here must make eye-scratching a local pastime. But what is it about the air? Wafts of patchouli mix with the steaminess. Little sniffs of it would be one thing, but the scent is overpowering. Curious, but the boys don't seem to notice it. She wishes she knew why.

She tells them to meet her back by the dock in an hour. Without waiting another second, they're off chasing each other down the sparsely populated street. Despite her discomfort, she can't help but be amused by these two puppy-boys.

Exotic flowers trail from pots on streetlights. They're like Bleeding Hearts, only larger. Profuse blooms of red, heart-shaped flowers spill over the pots. Sensual—even sensuous. Reminiscent of long-ago summer nights, twisted in damp sheets, basking in the afterglow of lovemaking. No matter the quality of the sex, the afterglow was always good, especially entwined in a lover's arms, smoking a single cigarette.

Don't think about this, here on the street—she scolds herself.

She flings her braid behind her shoulder, then rubs her arms, feeling a brief chill. Those times, so steeped in her past, might as well have happened to someone else. Maybe the woman wasn't her, just some actress from a movie. Maybe as she ages, she won't be able to discern the difference between her own past and the movies she's seen. This will make the leave-taking from this life a little easier. Maybe.

She roots through her backpack for her sunglasses but can't find them. First, one eyelid twitches, and then the other. Then, both twitch and itch at once.

Another street sign: "Never scratch both eyes at the same time!"

What if she doesn't heed the warning? Temporary blindness? The air, she reasons, must be filled with an invisible substance like pepper spray. Not wanting to find out, she keeps her hands away from her face.

After gently pressing first one eyelid, then the other, Cassie knows she needs to go inside a building; otherwise, the itching will only get worse. Since she's careful not to apply much pressure, surely, this won't be as bad an infraction as scratching.

A couple of Lidspotters furrow their eyebrows at her in passing. Hard to know what they're thinking as their eyes are concealed.

After ducking into the first restaurant she sees, a squinty-eyed hostess seats her at a small booth. She's grateful to get out of the strangeness. Nice to see others' eyes again, but hers feel suddenly exposed. Naked.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

A young man immediately takes her order. His kilt barely cloaks his furry, muscular legs. He sees her noticing them and, amused, asks what she would like. *What I'd like?* Does he really want to know?

A glass of the house's white wine will do.

The waiter nods, clicks his heels before he leaves.

Which of her past lovers does she picture when she tries to recall intimate memories? So many of them, most from so long ago. All different, yet all the same. Her only marriage was brief. She lost Peter, Melanie's father—not in the Gulf War, but because of it. He'd committed suicide not long after his homecoming. When telling people about his death, her standard line was that he died in the war. Why has it always been so hard to tell the truth?

She avoids thinking about Peter and tries to dwell instead on the men she'd known before and after his death. Three of them, she'd known longer than Peter. Only a few sexy memories come to mind. It all blurs. This saddens her, as she'd hoped to carry those images for the rest of her life. Were they not as memorable as she recalls, or is her memory becoming an issue?

The same flowers she saw outside are in a vase on the table. She sniffs, then tightly shuts her eyes. It's all she can do to resist the urge to rub her eyes. The waiter notices her discomfort and whispers that the ordinance against doing so applies only outdoors. She's relieved, but she can see why it would be a bad habit.

What are the boys doing? What if their eyes began to itch? Somehow, she doubts this will be a problem. It could be age-related. Maybe it has something to do with hormonal memories (if there is such a thing). It must be tied up with sexuality. She takes out her phone, then remembers the boys don't have their own. Since there's no signal, she puts it away. It's not like she could search for an answer to this itching there, or even check out social media.

"Could you please tell me more about the eye-itching issue? Is there something in the air?" she asks the waiter wearing the kilt.

"No one seems to know. A few known cases of blindness occurred before the war, so I wouldn't rock the boat if I were you.

Know what I mean? By the way, did you know that the pirates are as plentiful as sharks on the open seas? They're especially nasty around this area."

"No, I didn't. Thanks for the tip," she responds.

"And thanks in advance for yours," he says with a wicked wink. She can't help but stare at his muscular, furry legs as he moves on to the next table.

She won't stay for another glass; hopefully, her thirst will be quenched.



Back on the boat, Cassie tells the boys they'll be spending another night in Lidspot. She doesn't mention the waiter's warning about recent attacks on yachts by pirate bands. Boats were stolen, and one couple was left naked on a riverbank after their clothes were taken. Could be those pirates back around Gull Lake were right: magic is vanishing from the river, yet it remains in the towns. At least in Gull Lake and here in Lidspot. She only hopes it's protective magic at work.

After hearing the news about staying, Jimmy jumps up and down, and Murphy's grin is wide enough to let her know that he's equally pleased, too. They excitedly tell her about the old-fashioned carousel they rode in the park, and how several peacocks had strutted by, fanning their colorful wings. The best part, however, was the arcade they discovered, not far from the marina. Lastly, they mention the many paintings randomly resting against tree trunks and buildings. Everyone's talking about them. This is the second time they've witnessed paintings showing up out of nowhere.

She claps and can barely contain an onset of sudden joy. They must be the ones which disappeared before the war. She tells the boys how thousands, if not millions, of paintings had vanished, just like books.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

"Did you guys know about the books, too? Not as many of them disappeared."

They nod, but then give each other an eye-roll. "Why are grownups so weird?" Jimmy asks in a whisper. Murphy shrugs.

Murphy mentions how he thinks this could be the town where the ill-fated ferryboat stopped—the one he'd been on with his parents and other families. Cassie thinks it was in Doze, but he disagrees. No reason to argue about it. Most kids on board survived, he says (more for Jimmy's benefit than her own, since she knows this part of the story), and made it to the nearby Island of Lost Children, but all the adults died from a strange illness. If he's right, this means the Island of Lost Children isn't far from here.

"There's a fork ahead in the river, and providing we don't miss it, we should be able to spot the island," Murphy informs her. "First, though, I've gotta find Aurora Lee. Last night I dreamed she was in a town of many peacocks."

Like Cassie, he puts stock in his dreams. She smiles and squeezes his hand.

After the boys rest, the three enjoy a simple supper of processed-cheese-and-tomato sandwiches. She doubts it's even made from real cheese, but she keeps this to herself. Murphy avoids answering her question about his search. There's no point in pestering him. The boys split an extra sandwich and gobble it down.

Next, tired but eager to begin their search, the two head out to look for the missing girl. She reminds them not to rub their eyes, but realizes she didn't need to say so.

She tells Silver Lady that even though the two boys are rambunctious, they aren't so bad and are sometimes even likable.

"But they sure can be goofy. You agree, right Silver Lady?"

The ensuing silence is long.

"If she isn't going to respond, it's pointless to talk to her any further," Cassie grumbles not to herself so much as for Silver Lady's benefit.

After tidying up after the careless boys, Cassie begins filling a bag with trash she'll lug from the boat to a bin at the marina.

The boys are careless, but carefree. She once thought river travel would bring back the joyful freedom of her own childhood. But no, manning a boat like the Silver Lady demanded almost constant responsibility.

Not that she hasn't experienced moments, as dreamlike as they were fabulous. She added up dozens of them; none ever lasted long. After the journey's over, will they merge into a handful, like her memories of lovemaking?

The trash bag is filling up fast. Maybe she should pour some of the contents into another bag. No point, she thinks, as she begins fuming again about Silver Lady's silent treatment. This causes her to trip on the small ramp connecting the boat to the mainland. The bag rips open, spilling most of the trash into the river. Oh, nooo!

Next thing she knows, she's flailing about in the water. She sputters and spits as she awkwardly tries to stand and balance herself. While the water's no more than four feet deep, her feet sink in the dirty and mucky river bottom.

"What the hell? Why am I such a klutz?" she yells. Thankfully, no one's around. She's definitely glad the boys weren't here to witness her fall into the drink.

She does her best to gather floating wrappers, banana peels, and food containers. Some are emptier than others. At least, this is the first time she's fallen into the river on this long journey. It was bound to happen sooner or later. Always far from graceful, but she rarely stumbles or loses her balance. Is this sudden loss of balance age-related? Hopefully, not.

She's glad no one witnessed her fall. What if she'd struggled and been pulled under and swept away by the current? Not a good way to die. The possibility exists. Maybe it won't be the current, but smacking her head against a boulder could cause her death, or at the very least, a loss of consciousness. The current will carry her body downstream, and it won't be discovered for days or weeks, if ever.

While she's lucky to be okay, she feels sorry for herself. She knows she looks like a drenched rat. Is she turning into a clumsy

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

old woman? Only Silver Lady knows exactly what happened. Cassie's sure she saw it.

She struggles up the ramp, hauling the bag now weighted down more by water than trash.

And still the silent treatment from the Lady.

Struggling out of sopping wet jeans and a T-shirt, she takes a quick shower, then throws on her purple caftan, still shivering. Hearing nothing from the Lady is very telling.

Could Silver Lady have somehow caused her fall?

How evil is she?

Cassie shudders, both from the thought and from a chill from the water.

How are the boys doing in their search for Aurora Lee? Sherlock slithers by, as she's towel-drying her hair. She calls the always-curious cat, but when he doesn't respond, Cassie drops the towel on her bed and follows after him.

She tells him about falling into the river, but he looks bored.

"Want your dinner, Sherlock?" No response, not even a backward glance, from the feline. It happened earlier today, too. So different from her affectionate Jezebel. Her twenty-year-old feline had perished in her arms shortly before Cassie became a houseboat captain. His death helped lead to that decision.

Cassie has another realization: she's become invisible to Sherlock. The damn cat is probably in cahoots with Silver Lady. It's time to give *her* the silent treatment.



Silver Lady:

I'm truly sorry about causing Cassie to stumble and fall overboard. And while she had it coming, indulging those boys the way she did, I truly hadn't intended her to fall into the river. Sherlock and I sure had a good laugh over it. Served her right. Maybe now she won't feel so in charge of

everything. This little event will, hopefully, keep her in check. Could I be a little jealous of her fondness for those boys? Maybe, too, I simply resented her ability to go into town for fun. Despite the cat for company, a new loneliness fills me.

River:

Are you really sorry, my lady? She did have it coming! I laughed, too! Did you notice the ripples all around you? Unable to contain myself, it was I who caused them.

Silver Lady:

Still, there's nothing worse than the boredom of being completely alone. I can normally amuse myself with memories of my past lives, but the last time, before Cassie was captain, all I could do was wait. Bored by my thoughts, I counted the seconds. I was more regular than most clocks, ticking away in my stupor. It's not like I can sleep the way humans do. The most I can do is rest and feel drowsy, but that state never lasts long. It's why I much prefer moving, one way or the other, down the River Road.

River:

Dear girl, remember that you always have me.

Silver Lady:

If someone looked at my face close enough, they might confuse tears for river water running down my fiberglass cheeks.

River:

As a river, I can't cry, but look out for my anger. Next time my fury comes forth, know that I have your back. I always will.



Chapter 19

In the new country of Tennessee, at the edge of Lidspot, stands the majestic Ritz Hotel. The imposing, sprawling structure sits near a riverbank. Multicolored beams dance across it at night. From an upper-floor hotel window, the river looks like a long silver ribbon.

Early in the morning, after a restless sleep, the captain and her crew first see the hotel as they round a bend. Luck is with them as they spot a few empty boat slips within easy walking distance of the hotel.

Cassie's heard of many Ritz Hotels, but this one is a total surprise.

When the internet still worked, there must have been many ads and infomercials about it. Even if the trio failed to notice coupons for it in Lidspot stores, they wouldn't have missed the billboard in the business district. It was a large digital sign showing several scenes: the hotel exterior, its luxurious lobby, the shopping mall, and the amusement park. A final scene flashed by of happy, formally dressed partygoers sipping champagne on a large patio.

The mouths of Silver Lady's passengers fall open, close, then fall open again.

The boys can talk of little else but Fun Town, the amusement park. Cassie has little interest in going there, though at their age she would've begged her parents. She finally relents.

"You can go, as long as I go with you."

Both nod.

"One more condition: you both come with me to the shopping mall."

Again, they nod without hesitation. No surprise, since it promises to be a rainy, humid day, not ideal aboard Silver Lady. Cassie's looking forward to getting out of her clutches for a while. She's also curious to see whether she'll be wowed by the hotel's glamor, as well as by the lack of humidity and the constant temperature of sixty-eight degrees. Still, having stayed in luxury hotels before, she isn't particularly interested in seeing it and would prefer to resume the river adventure. That is, were it not for the boys.

Before disembarking, she dons her only sundress—a long, sheer lavender one with a scalloped hem. It's badly wrinkled, though it isn't stained like several of her T-shirts. She wore it once with Luther and again with Frank, and now she'll wear it on a 'date' with two boys. She combs out her messy braid and redoes it, noting once again how it's turned mostly silver, with only a few black strands left.

Now, where did she put the burner phones she bought in Lidspot?

She's relieved she doesn't have to remind the boys about washing up or running a comb through their hair.

In the last few years, this part of Tennessee has become known for its largely upscale tourist traps. Most of its revenue undoubtedly comes from here, including both Dollywood and Graceland. Since it's difficult for out-of-country visitors to get into Tennessee (or, for that matter, any of the other forty-nine countries), there's been some talk of a payable pass to make travel possible between all fifty

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

countries. But without a federal government, national news, or the internet, who knows how long it will take for this to happen? The hope is that AI will soon come up with a remedy.

Cassie and the boys are amazed by how few people are entering the grand, immense hotel, as opulent as it is. Slack-jawed, they stare up at the enormous structure.

"It's like entering the Land of Oz," she tells them, and they readily agree.

Several door attendants stand at the ready outside. One of them opens a tall, massive glass door, leading into a small lobby with another set of doors. Another attendant opens one of them. They're all dapper men dressed in black tuxedos with red tails. After nodding politely at the three visitors, they tip their black-and-red caps and grin wildly, displaying shockingly long white teeth.

Cassie gazes up at the tallest one, close to seven feet, she guesses, and explains that they'll be touring the hotel, not staying as guests. He gives her a brief nod, then a rueful glance and a sad little cluck before once again baring his teeth in the same gregarious manner as his teammates.

A grin can mean a lot of things.

Both the enormous indoor mall and amusement park are located at opposite ends of the large lobby. Peering up at the top of the atrium, the three decide there are simply too many floors to count.

Cassie and the boys stand beneath what must be a thousand-foot chandelier as sweet strains of Mozart reverberate through the lobby and the hotel's upper levels. Sunlight streams in from the window-ceiling, or so it appears, as they'd been under rain clouds a minute ago. How can this be? While questioning reality is nothing new, she runs back outside to make sure. It's pointless to ask any of the doormen. They wouldn't reveal the magic trick if they even knew it.

Sure enough, it's not only cloudy outside, but raining too.

The three of them, still gaping at the splendor, venture into the shopping mall wing. The boys grow immediately bored, but know

better than to complain. Most of the stores are typical of retro malls everywhere.

Like their predecessors in vogue during the latter part of the twentieth century, this one offers separate stores for shoes, clothes, electronics, as well as many small restaurants.

Sadly, no bookstores or unusual gift stores. She recognizes only a few of their names.

She grabs the boys' attention by telling them she's going to buy them much-needed sneakers. Their old ones are beat-up, almost beyond recognition.

"Gee, thanks, Cassie!" says Jimmy, beaming at her. He immediately tosses his old pair in a garbage container after they re-enter the mall from the store. Murphy, while less effusive, gives her a quick hug. The new ones are generic, but neither boy complains.

"Just want you guys to be able to keep up with me," she says, with a sly smile.

One of the stores catches her eye. 'Art's Back!' must be a recent addition, open only since the war ended. Several canvases line the walls, more cluttered than in a usual upscale art gallery.

A sign on the wall reads: *If you painted one or more of these pieces, proof must be shown for returns. See management for other options.*

"And if the artist doesn't want the painting back, then what?" Cassie asks a salesperson.

"The artist may price it for us to sell, as long as we receive our cut."

Cassie doesn't ask about the store's cut percentage, but it's certain to be high. As she browses the walls, she notices a small portrait that looks like Margot. Somehow, it captures her essence. Margot is not only Vincent's partner but also a musician, choreographer, and dancer. They were such good friends on the trip downriver, especially Margot.

Although no name is written in the bottom corner of the canvas, this must be one of Vincent's. But when would he have painted it? Most likely before the trip, since he never painted on board, and had only created a few at their various stops.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

The painting shows Margot sitting in a rickety chair with a pinkish sky behind her that could be either dawn or dusk. While the frame is no larger than 8" by 10", the look on her face is clearly of someone staring deeply into a remembered dream. Beautiful, but haunting.

If she buys it, Murphy could take it to Vincent when he returns to the Island of Lost Children. Surely, he'll want it back. If she works up her courage, maybe she will accompany the boys to the island, after all. She guesses the couple still lives there.

Since it's a small picture, Murphy readily agrees to do so, adding that he, too, can clearly see that it's Margot's face.

"How much?" Cassie asks the gallery owner.

"\$1,500, but it's yours for \$1,000."

"Seems a bit pricey. Say, I happen to know the artist. Does that make a difference?"

"Well, bring the artist in, lady, and it's theirs for free."

But even if she could convince Vincent to show up in person, how would he prove he's the artist without his name being on the canvas? She can imagine his fury. Arguing with the store owner will get her nowhere, so she does her best to haggle. She's not good at it, and the owner scoffs at her before walking away. Screw him!

The boys are nowhere to be seen. She doesn't know how much time has passed since they escaped. She can't blame them for wanting to see Fun Town, the indoor amusement park, but why did they break her one simple rule to stay within sight of her? Still, they have phones, so she's not overly worried about their safety.

She had purchased a couple of burner phones for them at Lidspot, explaining that if they ever got separated, they were to call her. She's pretty sure Murphy's responsible enough to do so. It's not like either of them hadn't lived on their own before hopping aboard Silver Lady. Her anger simmers to mere annoyance, mainly because she's miffed at them for not obeying her. Even if they were her own sons, she'd feel irritated with them. And here she's trying hard to accommodate them and to consider what they may want to do in this ginormous place.

It's only now that she realizes her feelings for them and how they've slowly become the grandsons she'll never have.

While the gallery worker attends to another customer, Cassie deftly slips the painting into her backpack and soon blends into the growing herd of mall shoppers. Her heart races, but she doesn't feel bad about her theft. Not even a bit.

She's never been a fan of crowded stores or malls, and there's little worse than a bustling mall packed with people. What if she gets pushed, or even knocked down and trampled? Her heart quickens even more. Her throat's dry, and she can't get enough air. If only she could find a window to the outside or a door leading to the parking lot. What's she even doing here?

Her first-ever anxiety attack occurred at the Mall of America, another mall that once housed an amusement park. Like most malls, it is now shuttered. If she was near an exit, that was okay, but if she couldn't see one, her hands grew clammy, and she hyperventilated. Whether it was claustrophobia or mall-phobia, it didn't matter. More than once, she came close to passing out. Luckily, her escapes have always been successful (at least so far). She hasn't yet passed out or died.

At first, she didn't mind going to a mall with friends. But before long, it made matters worse. She'd over-apologize before bounding to an exit. Friends would yell at her to wait up, but she knew she wouldn't feel okay until she was outside, in the parking lot. Until she could breathe again.

Cassie gawks in store windows at a slovenly dressed older woman with a messy silver braid, wearing a tattered-looking sundress. She looks hyper and this side of terrified. Why is this bag lady in each reflection? Is this another aspect of the hotel's magic?

No, dummy, it's you gazing at yourself!

No one else notices her. As sad as this makes her feel, if anyone looked her way, her anxiety level would skyrocket until it became a full-fledged attack. How unfair that the worst aspect of her adolescence returns in these later years. The very indignity of still

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

experiencing panic and pimples! What a world. Consciousness be damned, and self-consciousness—even more so!

In her twenties, she thought her friends liked her because of her cool parents. She envied their beautiful voices, especially after discovering that her voice had a three-note range, and that she had zilch musical ability. Two folksingers, able to make ends meet with their music, though life on the road could be demanding. After several years, her father finished law school and became a professor with a successful side practice. They played their music on occasional weekends at local establishments, but her mother eased into being a housewife, though she was always so much more.

Both parents were readers extraordinaire and had traveled some, though never overseas. They often entertained friends. Pat was a marvelous cook, known for her vegetarian lasagna and lemon chiffon pies. They were likable, honest, and humble. Good, decent people in an era when that mattered. They kept their imbibing under control, or for the most part.

But then Phil's law practice stopped bringing in big cases, and they couldn't afford to move to the suburbs as city crime rates rose. Both were in store holdups, though luckily, neither got shot. Pat began to get 'the dizzies,' as she called them, and had a hard time leaving home on her own. She refused to see a therapist, but fought the fear, because she didn't want to become housebound. Cassie was proud of her, but knew it was best to say nothing.

Phil's panic attacks, following his tour of duty in Vietnam, returned. He broke into cold sweats at odd moments and would have to leave the room to get his breathing under control.

Years later, Cassie's own husband would suffer similar symptoms, though by then the malady became known as PTSD.

Yet her father's life of sailing saved him. When conditions were favorable, he'd hitch his boat to the back of his car and disappear for the day, and even an occasional overnight. Because of his devotion to his wife and daughter, he was never gone for long, and he always returned home reinvigorated. He loved regaling them with his sailing stories.

Cassie now hopes her river adventures have the same life-altering effect.

Little wonder she, too, suffered panic attacks.

Thoughts about her parents temporarily remove her from the mall.

Best to go with the current flow of bodies in this river of mall walkers. It's not like you have to think about putting one foot in front of the other; you just do it. If no one's smiling at her, so what? Isn't it best not to be a spectacle? Simply take in the ambiance and braided aromas.

Before tiredness forces her to sit, Cassie stops at a kiosk that sells essential oils and incense. Sniffing the various scents from Lavender Fields to Blue-Bayou brings her to her senses. It calms her frazzled nerves.

Feeling slightly energized, she window-shops, though doesn't enter any stores. Before returning to the hotel lobby, she returns to the incense kiosk and purchases a variety of a dozen scented sticks.

Occasionally, another mall walker looks accusingly at her. Is it because they think she's headed in the wrong direction? She's been heading upstream, and they're going down.

Like she's often heard: the good news about being older is caring less about what others think. She's no longer the girl who thought she was dying when she couldn't see out a window. Her current anxiety is not nearly as bad.

Had the boys remained with her, maybe she would've ventured further into the tunnel of shops. She feels short of breath and returns to the lobby. Not again. Shaky and tired, she spots a cafe table. Maybe she still is that girl.

While she shouldn't have pilfered that painting, it wasn't the gallery owner's to sell. It doesn't make her a thief. The taking of things must be going on pretty much everywhere in this new, generally lawless world. And there's little doubt others are committing far more serious crimes. Is this what it felt like for white settlers in their Western boom towns? This constant sense of the rug slipping out from under your feet?

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

It occurs to her that this is no ordinary hotel. Not even an ordinary luxury one.

Not all that surprising, since the boys and she had experienced that strange feeling when they'd entered the hotel. It was as if they'd crossed through a portal, though who knew where. While they didn't talk about it, she could tell by their pale faces that they, too, felt unnerved. This was the other reason she hadn't wanted them to go off on their own.

A sudden missing of Silver Lady stabs deep. If she could only slip through a portal and back onto the boat, back to her only true friend.

Cassie takes a deep breath through her nose, then releases it slowly. And then another.

She tries calling the boys on the burner phones, but gets no answer.

An older couple plunks down across from her at a small courtyard table. Both are short and somewhat rotund, with shiny, apple-red cheeks. The man's face is sweeter than the woman's. Before introductions are made, she announces that it's their fiftieth wedding anniversary and that staying at The Ritz is a dream come true.

Feeling dazed, Cassie manages a smile and a nod. She welcomes the distraction from worrying about the missing boys. Her feelings for them surface: they're as close to grandchildren as she'll ever have. Despite her occasional annoyance with them, both of them have been slowly carving out a place in her heart.

"It's everything we've hoped for and more," says the wife, adding, "though a little stranger than we'd expected."

"A lot stranger," adds her husband.

Cassie's eyes grow large. Are they about to mention a portal? For the moment, she stops thinking about the boys.

The woman asks if she's noticed anything odd about the mall or amusement park.

"I guess most malls have been gone for about a decade, and few had indoor amusement parks, if that's what you mean." She

doesn't yet trust them enough to mention how she felt when she'd first walked into the lobby.

They caution Cassie about venturing too far down either wing of the hotel, as both are endless.

"You mean, they feel endless?" she asks.

"Yes, but those who have attempted to walk to the farthest ends have never returned," the woman says.

What the?

There are signs on the walls warning customers not to go beyond a certain point. Rumors keep circulating about those who have attempted to do so but never returned.

"Large photos of the known missing are hung by the last signs. They show a dozen foolhardy men, women, and even a couple of kids," she further explains. While Cassie saw the signs earlier, she hadn't noticed the pictures. Thinking about the boys, she spills the last bit of coffee from her cardboard cup onto the table top. The couple helps her mop up with their napkins.



Chapter 20

We're Fran and Marv, by the way," Fran tells her, as she gestures to her smiling husband. There's a sweet but somewhat vacant look about him.

Cassie introduces herself, feeling a little bad that she hasn't already done so. She tells them how she's the captain of the Silver Lady. They look at each other with raised brows, and then smile at Cassie like they're her new best friends.

"We've got a little problem," Fran continues. "Would you be willing to hear about it and maybe give us some advice?"

Cassie smiles and nods. How nice to be consulted, and also to know some people still have manners in this world gone mad.

"We only learned recently about the borders being closed between countries, and how we'd need passports."

It's unfortunate, but it makes sense. In this post-internet world, word of this still hasn't reached everyone. Fran and Marv entered Tennessee freely before the passport law began, but now they may not be allowed to return to their lifelong Kentucky home.

They are flummoxed.

"It could take up to a month or longer to be issued a passport, what with so many others in the same pickle," says Fran.

"We're all in a pickle in countless ways," Cassie sighs.

She tells them how river travel isn't an issue, at least not yet. They are welcome to become passengers aboard the Silver Lady. It won't be free, but the cost will be nominal.

"Sure sounds tempting, doesn't it, Franny? When do we need to let you know?" asks Marv.

"Dear, I don't think this will be an option for us. We'd first need to find jobs at the hotel since we're low on cash," says Fran, patting his arm.

Marv's smile fades.

"If it helps any," Cassie interjects, "how does \$50 per person sound?"

After telling them this amount will cover all costs, they both look relieved.

"We're ready to board, Captain Cassie!"

She explains how the only hitch is that she must wait for the boys. She tells them how they got separated from her, and their worried expressions return.

An hour drags by, and then another. She tries calling the boys again. Neither answers, so she humors the couple with stories about Silver Lady, but Marv's attention grows short, and he starts fidgeting with a straw and shifting in his chair. Fran scolds him as if he were a child.

The three grow tired of waiting. The resounding echoes of voices and general clatter in the lobby grate on Cassie's nerves.

She can feel Silver Lady calling her, the river pulling her away from this energy-zapping place.

Has she ever felt this tired?

The boys either don't have the burner phones turned on, or they must not be able to hear them when she tries to call.

She checks with a security officer to see if they can be paged, but he directs her to one of the doormen, the tall one with whom she spoke when she and the boys first arrived at the hotel.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

The doorman places a hand on her shoulder and tells her that many people are separated from each other in malls or amusement parks every day. Because of this, loudspeaker pages can be made only once a day, at 6:00 pm.

Wonderful. Two more hours to wait.

Feeling peckish, the three decide to dine at a cozy-looking bar and grill. The restaurant's crowded, but it's a relief to get away from the din and commotion of the lobby. They're fortunate to be seated in a booth looking out at the mall.

As Cassie entertains the couple with stories about upcoming excursions on the Silver Lady, a younger middle-aged woman appears at their booth, as if out of nowhere. Her name is Crystal Springs. She acts like she and Cassie are long-lost friends. While they've never met before, Crystal is so friendly that Cassie asks her to join them. Cassie's happy for yet another distraction from the missing boys—her missing boys.

Crystal looks like an old-fashioned porcelain doll with blond ringlets, wearing a yellow sundress with pinafore smocking. Her heavy eye makeup contrasts with the innocence of her outfit. A blue tracery of veins on one cheek looks like a crack in the porcelain. Her thin lips tremble after her mouth lets loose of its grip on her seemingly permanent smile.

She slides next to Cassie in the booth. Cassie's nostrils twitch at the newcomer's sweet cotton candy scent.

Crystal tells them that she's been a tour guide at The Ritz for the last two years. She is tired, "damn tired," of working with the thankless public. Quite often, she's been blamed for problems at the hotel. The bitterness in her voice belies her gentle presence. Possibly aware of this discrepancy, she thanks them for letting her rest at their table.

They each confide their own tales of woe. Cassie describes Silver Lady and some of her travels.

Crystal's already large blue eyes go saucer-like. "You drove the boat all the way from Minneapolis to New Orleans? What will you do when you get back home?"

"I really don't know. Maybe rest up and ride the water road once more?" says Cassie.

The three others snicker, but say nothing.

"And did you say it's a luxury houseboat? I didn't know they made those. I've canoed a few times, but I've never been on a large boat. When did you say you're leaving The Ritz?"

"I didn't, but I guess as soon as the boys return."

Cassie then gives Crystal a brief account of the missing boys and tries to keep the growing worry out of her voice. It's one thing to lose objects like toothpicks and captain's hats, but another to lose people. Fran and Marv look restless, and then Fran looks piqued. She could be a little annoyed, either by Crystal or Cassie, or maybe both.

Crystal begins to ask another question when Fran interrupts her. She informs Cassie that they can't wait to see Silver Lady and get settled in.

"Is your boat large enough for one more?" Crystal asks in a squeaky voice.

"Absolutely. That is, if you buy a boarding pass," Cassie tells her in a business-like voice.

"As long as it's affordable. I can pay about \$100 a day, but no more."

"Oh, that'll be fine, just fine," Cassie quickly responds.

Crystal beams before excusing herself to the restroom.

Fran gives Marv a knowing wink to let him know they have the better travel deal. He looks befuddled, so she whispers in his ear.

"We have the what? The better wheel?" he loudly asks.

"No, dear, I said 'deal,'" says Fran, rolling her eyes.

Crystal is waylaid by a friend who happens to be a waitress there. They chat together in the aisle, not far from the booth where the others are sitting. Cassie can't tell if Crystal overheard Marv's question. Hopefully not. She feels bad charging her more, but the boys aren't paying a dime, and with the couple paying so little, she can't afford to give Crystal a discount. Sliding scales are a perfectly respectable way of doing business, so Cassie sees nothing wrong with it.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

What could be keeping those boys? For the last time, she rings them. How much longer should she wait, and keep these three others waiting? It's clear they either don't intend to return or are terribly lost. Even though she's still upset over the circumstances, she's now excited to turn Silver Lady into a leisure cruise ship, her own version of one. Thinking about the new prospect keeps her from puzzling over the boys. It's not like they're little kids. After all, they're not *her* boys.

Again, she feels the strong tug of the river, pulling her back to it. It's where she's meant to be. Not here. Certainly not here.

Daily stops could be made in towns. Meals will be served twice daily, and while not exactly gourmet, they will be as nutritious and attractive as possible. Passengers will be on their own for lunch; she'll encourage them to taste local fare in the particular town where they're docked. Cocktail hours will be daily occasions. Yoga sessions and Tai Chi will be available upon request. And, best of all, there will be dancing in the evenings. Her excitement grows by the minute. Of course, she will need someone to drive the boat, as certainly she can't play host and be at the wheel. Maybe someone part-time will do, as she doesn't want to relinquish her primary job as captain.

Most importantly, she needs to inform Silver Lady of the upcoming changes. She hopes there won't be much resistance. If there is, oh well, it's about time the cunning craft found out who's in charge.

As Cassie plans the details, she notices a boy wandering outside the restaurant. He presses his nose against the glass like a puppy. Poor ragamuffin! He looks straight out of a Dickens book. It's Jimmy! Her heart leaps from her chest as she runs out to him. She hugs him in a mama bear hug like no other. Before hauling him inside to their table, she asks why he hadn't returned sooner.

"Captain Cassie, I came back alone. I tried to follow Murphy, but he kept walking on and on. No way I could keep up! Think he's still looking for that girl?" He means Aurora Lee. Murphy sure held a torch for that girl; she'll give him that. She recalls the girl being

both strong-willed and possessing a delicate beauty. Ethereal but grounded, an unlikely combination, but it made her all the more enchanting. Cassie knows he'd never return without her. While it pains her to leave him behind, he's lived on his own for a long time. Sure, he was likable, but sooner or later, he'd be gone anyway.

"Maybe Aurora's on one of the rides and he'll spot her," she tells him. "Still, we can't wait for them, or him, much longer. I'm sure glad you came back, Jimmy. Why didn't you answer my call?"

He checks his pockets for the phone. "I musta lost it somewhere. Sorry. If I couldn't find you, I was just gonna figure out how to get out of this crazy place."

"You're not alone. Before we return to Silver Lady, let's get you a little something to eat. Also, we have new fellow travelers for you to meet."

For a second, Jimmy looks like he's going to bolt, but the promise of food makes his brown eyes light up.

Crystal's friend pulls up a chair for him at the end of the table.

Although the couple ignores him after introductions are made, Crystal Springs offers him some of her fries and calls him 'Small Fry.'

"Don't call me that, lady."

"Then don't call me 'lady.' My name's Crystal, and I think you and I are going to be friends."

Crystal's warmer than Cassie thought, less stuck on herself. Maybe she'll look out for him once they're back on board, leaving Cassie to attend to other matters.

Cassie's seen about as much of The Ritz as she could stomach, and she's looking forward to being back aboard Silver Lady. Had she been gone one day or several? Too much time away always makes her worry to the point of paranoia. Did Silver Lady get someone to loosen her ropes and escape into the night? Is she now gliding downstream by herself? Maybe she doesn't need Cassie any longer. These new thoughts obsess her, and there is no way she could express them to her new passengers, or even to Jimmy, who is at least partly aware of Silver Lady's awareness.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain



Silver Lady:

How much longer should I keep waiting for Cassie and those two hooligans? Has it been hours or days since they've been gone? Had I tried talking her out of going to The Ritz Hotel, she would've accused me of being jealous. What is it with the way people can be taken in by pretty places and things? A flighty and superficial species, if ever there was one! While I'm sometimes prone to pity parties because I can't ever leave you, River, overall, I'm the luckier one and truly pleased with my existence.

River:

I say you've waited long enough. I've missed our travels. Don't you think it's time to move on? Although I know many other boats, there's only one Silver Lady!

PART TWO

River's Song

*I flow fast, then slow,
meander then churn
I'll carry you
wherever you'd like to go*

*Birds and fish are my friends
my constant companions
especially the fish
they tell me this and that
and the turtles do, too*

*As for the people,
don't get me started
for my thoughts about them
aren't so kind
They're talkers mostly,
polluters, users*

*Still, I'll take them
where they want to go*

*You can ride my current or
paddle against it*

*But enough from me
I've no choice
but to ramble and flow*



Chapter 21

It's a relief to be back aboard Silver Lady. Cassie's dream of turning her into a pleasure boat is at last coming true. She realizes, yet again, how more than half of life's fun is anticipating whatever you hope will happen. The actualities don't always deliver on the promises. It's the promises themselves that hold most of the magic. She'll forget this again until she remembers it.

Despite Silver Lady still avoiding lengthy conversations, Cassie thanks her when she is finally alone in her cabin after the incredibly long day at The Ritz.

"I've missed you, Silver Lady. Can we please be friends again?"

"We were never enemies, Cassie. I'm headstrong, at times, but I'll always have your back."

"Much appreciated, as I've been pretty worried. By the way, we're going to be—not exactly a party boat—a pleasure cruiser. I hope you won't mind."

At that moment, a hesitant knock on the cabin door is followed by a more determined one.

Not wanting the door broken down, Cassie opens it to find Cheyenne standing there, looking perplexed.

"I have a question about the length of my shift at the wheel, but it can wait. I heard you talking to someone. You got someone in there with you?"

"No, I don't. Not that it's any of your business." Cassie uses the sternest voice she can muster.

Cheyenne burps and pats her somewhat roundish belly. A short woman, she stands on tiptoes trying to see over Cassie's shoulders.

Cheyenne and Larry are the new hires. Mostly, they'll help relieve her at the wheel, but she's hoping they'll help with other matters as well. This will free her up and allow her to serve the passengers better. Despite Cheyenne's brusqueness and occasional crudeness, Cassie knows and trusts the former pirate more than she does Larry.

Soon after pulling away from the dock, he announced his real age, eighty-six. During the interview, he claimed to be seventy-five. Not that she's an ageist, but what if he drops dead on the job one day? She isn't about to, once again, let Silver Lady end up a shipwreck, stranded on some island. Still, she'll see if he can do the job. Unlike Marv, he seems to be in his right mind, though it may be a stretch to assume he's hale and hearty. His craggy-face atop a bent-wire body. It's not like there were a lot of applicants.

Cassie met Cheyenne on the downriver trip when Cheyenne and her fellow pirates had taken over Silver Lady and demanded breakfast. It turns out she was a longtime friend of Zona's. And it turns out she's even ruder. Cassie still needs to get to the bottom of what happened to Zona. Maybe Cheyenne knows something.

On that first strange trip, the first crew witnessed their body doubles staring back from another boat, so it can't be ruled out that the body that rolled ashore on the Island of Lost Children was Zona's double. The puzzling case remains unsolved.

Before boarding Silver Lady, and right after leaving The Ritz with her four passengers, Cassie ran into Cheyenne and invited her

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

to join them for dessert at Lidspot. Could Cassie trust her enough to let her on board? None of the others felt like dessert, and they wondered why they found themselves in yet another restaurant.

It was there that Larry approached the table.

“Which one of you is Captain Cassie?”

Cassie nodded and had the server pull over another chair to the cluttered table. He’d heard she was looking for another crew member and wanted to sign up for the job. She asked him a few questions while the others chatted.

The group sat around a rectangular table. It was large enough at first, but it soon became cramped with the many plates, glasses, and cups. Before long, they were out of elbow room.

As none were strangers to this strange town, they took utmost care not to rub their eyes while waiting for their food. “Doing so is against the law, only when we’re outside,” she reminded them.

The decision to hire both Cheyenne and Larry was made in haste, but Cassie didn’t have the luxury of time or money to wait and interview anyone else.

How pleasantly surprised Silver Lady looked when Cassie embarked with her new passengers and crew. Now there would be seven aboard, plus a cat.



Cassie doesn’t quite trust Silver Lady’s mood change, though she’s grateful for it.

Sherlock hides, at first, but before long, falls in love with Larry and is almost as wowed by Crystal Springs. He’s always shared a special bond with Jimmy, who has mostly ignored him since they’d both become passengers. Is it Cassie’s imagination or is the feline still looking for Murphy? Sherlock pretends not to see Cassie, though she no longer bothers trying to get his attention; she hasn’t in a while. Maybe Silver Lady hadn’t been too lonely without humans aboard since she’d had the cat for company.

Too bad she can't ask Sherlock what he's learned about the Lady.



After resting in their cabins, everyone joins Cassie on the deck. Rested, but still tired after the ridiculously long day leaves her dazed; she feels like she's floating. Her festive mood is contagious. Music spills from the speakers, and Christmas lights twinkle across all the decks. Moonglow shimmers on the wake behind Silver Lady. Everyone dances and sips champagne, except for Jimmy, who sneaks a few sips when Cassie isn't looking. Despite her tiredness, Cassie feels more attractive than usual, as several have mentioned how much they like her lavender sundress. Silver Lady is probably scoffing at her vanity, but it sure is nice not to feel haggard from life as a riverboat captain.

"Such merriment!" The expression springs from Cassie's lips, much to the eye rolls and chin wags from Cheyenne, Crystal Springs, and Jimmy. Cassie's mood takes a temporary dive. She does her best to hide it.

"No one says that anymore," scoffs Crystal.

"What would you call it then?" Cassie asks, looking a bit offended.

"Fun! Just plain old fun!" says Crystal, adding, "Thank you, Cassie, for providing the right sort of atmosphere for falling in love, even though I don't see any likely candidates."

Everyone laughs and sighs as Fran and Marv dance in a spotlight, celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary—this time in style.

Silver Lady snickers, but only Cassie hears her. She hushes the grande dame while everyone else enjoys the party on the river. Even Jimmy's having a good time, despite missing Murphy, and the fact that no one else is anywhere near his age.

"I miss him, too, you know," Cassie commiserates. Jimmy blinks back tears.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

"You've been having a blast waving at those, what Larry calls 'landlubbers,' on shore, haven't you, Jimmy?" Cassie asks, changing the subject, knowing he won't answer.

All goes well until Jimmy chases Sherlock, spilling drinks and toppling plates of appetizers in the process. Cassie yells after him to slow down, but it's already too late, and, of course, Sherlock gets away.

Cassie's looking forward to giving the group a tour of Realidad. Cheyenne's the only one who knows about the town.

Cassie describes it to the others, beginning with the nearby lake.

"On its outskirts is a beach with a large number of permanent sand sculptures, as well as a museum devoted to them."

"Something about the sand causes the sculptures to remain intact," Cheyenne adds.

"Right you are, but so far, chemists are baffled. The weird thing is that when moved away from Realidad, they almost instantly begin to crumble. Vincent, the artist from my first crew, sculpted some. I'm really looking forward to seeing his sculpture of Silver Lady again, as well as the one of Margot," says Cassie.

"Don't hold your breath, Cassie. I wouldn't be surprised if those sculptures are gone. So much got stolen during the war," Cheyenne remarks, trying to prepare Cassie for the letdown.

"The town's also known for its artsy coffeehouses," Cassie continues. "I'll never forget Leon and Kali performing their poetry at an open mic night. The town's almost as cool as New Leaf, that is, Old Leaf; unless it, too, has changed."

"Everything's changed. Haven't you noticed?" Cheyenne asks, clearly getting annoyed with Cassie in her rose-colored glasses, walking down Memory Lane.

The others look at Cassie as if she's speaking in a foreign tongue. They're clearly not interested in hearing about her first crew, so from now on, she'll keep those memories to herself.

Cassie is about to tell them about another aspect of the town, but then realizes they've already passed it.

"I saw a sign, but the word 'REAL' was printed on it. The 'IDAD' part was missing," claims Cheyenne. "I should've pulled up to the dock."

"Who would want to go to 'Real' anyway?" asks Cassie, with a baffled laugh.

"Who can say what's real?" Cheyenne replies.

Cheyenne gives her a quizzical look and turns the Lady around. They head back downstream to Real. Something tells Cassie it's more than merely the name that has changed.



Silver Lady:

I wish Cassie had consulted with me regarding the new passengers. Guess my thoughts on the matter don't matter. At first, I was pleased to get rid of that older boy. While we're down to one, there are now six adults. Not a bad trade-off, were it not for that pirate Cheyenne. She claims to be a former pirate, but there's no such thing. Once a pirate, always a pirate. Not only does she have a booming voice, but she also reeks of booze and smoke and is certainly no lady. Not that Cassie's much of one either, but at least she has some decency and decorum. As for the other passengers, I'll suspend judgment for now, but I don't hold out much hope. Oh, why can't it simply be Cassie and me rambling along the river? Still, it's nice to be conversing with her once again.

And now she wants to turn me into a party boat? That's exactly what George tried to do and look what happened to him. All the beer and spirits that soaked my decks from their careless spills, not to mention how often their vomit sloshed down my sides. How gross and disgusting humans can be! Not that I mind dressing up in tiki lights at night and dancing to the music. I mean, who doesn't enjoy glistening in the glamor of an evening soiree? There's nothing quite like it. Classy nightlife is one thing, but most people don't know how to control themselves; in no time, a little fun becomes too much. People have uncouth tendencies because of their animal

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

natures. But please know, I'm not a prude; I truly enjoy a good raunchy joke now and then.



Chapter 22

A yacht, no doubt one of the recent ones stolen by pirates, pulls alongside Silver Lady. Before the crew knows what's happening, six pirates surround them and herd everyone inside except Cheyenne.

According to the logo on their identical black T-shirts, they are the 'Dawn Raiders.'

The leader demands that the cowering crew remove their jewelry and watches and place them in a sack. Before they do so, Cheyenne shows up brandishing a pistol.

"All of you, Dawn Raiders, get back on your boat, or I'll start shooting!"

The leader, short and stocky, with a surprisingly soft voice, clears her throat. Cheyenne points the gun at her and is about to fire when Cassie screams, "She means business! Scram!"

She's never sounded so fierce.

It must be the combination of the pistol and Cassie's tone that does the trick, for in the next instant, all the Dawn Raiders are gone.



The group of six, minus Cheyenne, who is steering, stands together on deck waiting for the boat to pull up to the dock at Real's fairly large marina. Everyone's stressed from the ordeal with the Dawn Raiders, and most are hungover from the previous night's party, so of course, they're not at their best.

Willows on the bank have lost most of their fronds; the ones remaining flail in the breeze like the arms of the dying.

A frail-looking woman in a long, faded nightgown gazes down at them from a footbridge. She looks somber, despite a mask covering more than half her face, or maybe because of it.

No sooner does Silver Lady stop at a station to see which slip is available than a man rushes up to her. He, too, is masked.

"Sorry, ma'am, but we're closed. All the marinas up and down the river are, as well. A new variant of the virus seems to be sweeping across the nation, I mean, countries. Masks must be worn outdoors, and no visitors are allowed. It's the one thing all the countries agree on. Do you live around here?"

Cassie explains that they're on a travel cruise and that the passengers are from different states, rather, countries.

"Looks like you're going to be quarantined on your boat for the present. You can refuel here, but then you've got to be on your way. My suggestion is that you save gas by docking somewhere between towns. If I were you, I'd find a slip before they all get taken."

Moods on board sink faster than a torpedoed ship. Not again. So many family members and friends have been lost to the Strangler Virus. Could this new strain be as bad as, or worse than, the Strangler Virus?

If you didn't know any better, you'd think Real was abandoned. Worse than being unwelcome somewhere is being mistrusted and turned away. It's not only Cassie and her passengers who aren't allowed to enter, but anyone coming from out of town. Those aboard Silver Lady know they shouldn't take

the rejection personally, because everyone (especially strangers) is suspected of carrying the virus. Their current despair feels like it will never go away.

"Things will get better, we know they will," Cassie says, trying to console the others.

"But do we? How many will die this time?" Cheyenne asks.

Cassie has no answer for her. At least they can commiserate with each other. This isn't as bad as being completely isolated. No reason to panic. Not yet. How do they know what's 'real' anymore? She almost tells her pun to the others, but refrains, knowing it won't go over well.

Cassie thinks of Melanie, living alone in Minneapolis. She's only been out of her apartment a few times since the Strangler Virus hit. Life will now be little different for her. While Cassie normally feels sad for her daughter in hiding, could Melanie be one of the few sensible people on the planet? This new variant probably won't affect her in the slightest.



Chapter 23

Larry is slowly heading them upriver until he locates the next available dock. The recent news has fizzled the group's energy. No one says much, and napping is now a popular pastime. Cassie, seated in a deck chair, almost falls asleep with a toothpick in her mouth. Even Jimmy acts subdued. It's only Silver Lady, pleased by the quieter mood, who is alert and gliding through the water like a queen proceeding down the aisle. No matter the lack of waving bystanders.

The first couple of docks are taken, so Silver Lady slows her pace as they look for an empty one.

Pink heads of a couple of river dolphins emerge from the water. Cassie awakens from her doze.

"River dolphins are smaller than the ones in the ocean, but these guys are smart, way smarter than dolphinfish," Cassie explains. She tells Crystal, Larry, and Cheyenne about their peculiar intelligence. What she doesn't say is how she believes they're now communicating with Silver Lady. In fact, she hasn't yet mentioned anything about the boat having a consciousness. She'll look for the

right moment, but it's not now. In the past, the dolphins' appearance was a joyful ushering in of a magical atmosphere.

"What if we don't dock and just head back to Real?" asks Crystal, changing the subject. "Maybe the quarantine will be lifted by then. Maybe these magical little fish could use their powers by making that happen."

"No, I don't think the fish have that much power. Notice how the lighting has suddenly changed? See how the puffy clouds now have a pinkish tinge? I don't know about you, but feeling that eager anticipation makes me feel so alive. Who knows what's waiting for us around the next riverbend? See what I mean?"

Heads nod, and all eyes are riveted to the water. The river dolphins are now up close to Silver Lady's face, chattering to her.

"I can't believe how gullible you all are. Cassie, you really think these fish are guiding us? Get real, woman!" scoffs Cheyenne. No sooner does she say this than a sudden gust of wind about knocks her over.

This must have angered Silver Lady, as no one but Cheyenne loses their footing. The timing is curious, to say the least.

"Alright-y, then, Larry, I'm ready to take the wheel." Cheyenne limps a little as she makes her way over to him.

Larry salutes her and scrambles down the deck. He wants a closer look at the fish. Yesterday, he began wearing an eye patch to cover an eye clouded by a cataract.



Silver Lady:

Cassie was right about my little fish pals: we were chatting for a bit. Almost like we're old friends, as we've often heard about each other from others—mostly aquatic beings. Suffice it to say, the dolphins are an intelligent and friendly species. They told me how River's been thriving since he became the graveyard for all the recently dead, those who were either tossed in or

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

fell in. Blood and nutrients from their bodies are helping the river restore its former health. But is there anything worse or more pathetic than war? I think not. They also told me to go easy on Cheyenne and that she isn't all that bad, or at least not as loathsome as some of the other pirates. I promised I would try to see her in a new light, but I can't help but think they're a little naïve.

River:

Not that I'm bloodthirsty, but I've never felt better, except for the pollutants I can't seem to get rid of. My arteries are clogged with all sorts of debris: plastics, car parts, industrial waste. But human blood keeps me going, along with the rains. And by the way: don't trust Cheyenne or any of the pirates. This doesn't mean you should toss any of them into me, for I don't want any live humans flailing about and disturbing my waters.



Chapter 24

Moods improve once they're a little over an hour upstream from Real. While the party atmosphere is gone, there's a collective sigh as the once lithesome, now sluggish lady, comes to rest. Constant swimming upstream has proven a struggle for all involved, including Silver Lady. She pulls slowly up to a dock. Nothing fancy, but the relief is palpable.

And now, Silver Lady sleeps.

Cassie's happy to let the crabby craft get her necessary rest. It's amazing how overly conscious she's become of the boat's moods. It's as if her own moods don't count, and yet, when Cassie was in The Ritz, she hardly thought about her.

She considers bringing up the fact of Silver Lady's consciousness to the others, but it's not the right time. They are talking about where they'd been during the war.

What is it with the ability to recall where you were during life's worst moments? Why aren't there an equal number of joyful or happy times that come to mind? Another one of the stranger aspects of the human mind. No doubt a survival thing. Had our earlier

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

ancestors sat around grinning, our species would have died out long ago.

Crystal's telling Larry and Cheyenne how she'd been walled up at The Ritz for those six months.

"Though I always felt safe there, I also felt like a prisoner. I realized the door attendants were little different from menacing guards."

"I wish I'd been with you then," Jimmy says, snuggling up to Crystal.

"Where were you during the war?" she asks him.

Cassie begins speaking for Jimmy, telling Crystal how he'd lost his parents and begged for scraps back in Gull Lake.

"I can tell her better than you, Cassie. It happened to me. I was the one there."

"Sorry, Jimmy. Forgive me?" Cassie gives him an apologetic look, then gazes down at her hands folded in her lap.

After a long silence, he replies. "Only if I can get two cookies after dinner."

She nods, but reluctantly, as she's now worried about how long their food supply will last. They don't even know where the nearest store is, or if it will be open during the quarantine.

"If the war had gone on any longer, I was gonna become a soldier. Your age wouldn't matter if you wanted to join the fight. I know one thing: if there's ever another war, I'm going to serve. It's my patriotic duty," Jimmy proudly declares.

Tears well in the older couple's eyes. Fran speaks in a barely audible voice: "Well, Jimmy, it looks like wars will never again be fought the old way. That's a good thing. It's better if two robots fight each other, as they did at the end of the last one. Too much death and destruction otherwise. Marv and me lost our only child, Mark, in another war, and it broke our hearts. Believe me, you don't want to do that to loved ones."

"But I don't got any loved ones. No family at all."

He blows on the long fringe of bangs that drapes his heavy-lidded eyes. For a moment, they see the true sadness in his eyes.

"Oh, that's right, son. I'm sorry. Well, just so you know, you've got new friends here. Don't you forget that," says Fran, patting his shoulder. Jimmy snuffles.

"Want to know what I did during the war?" Cheyenne's voice booms. She doesn't wait for an answer. "I ferried deserters on Foxy Lady's ship."

"Wait, lady!" Jimmy interrupts, truly curious. "What's a deserter and what's the Foxy Lady?"

"Foxy Lady, as I said, is a ship. A pirate ship. Belongs to the famous pirate, Foxy Lady."

"Oh, yeah, I heard she's a real bad ass. But what's a deserter?"

"Someone who doesn't want to fight."

"A coward?"

"No, not necessarily. Some of them sure seemed brave enough, but maybe just not foolish enough to kill or die in battle."

Cassie knows this could go on and on ad nauseam, so she addresses Larry.

"What did you do during the war?"

"Me? Why, I was looking for Isle-u-longfer. Heard tell it's somewhere between Memphis and St. Louis. Been there only once. Ever heard of it?"

The rest of them shake their heads. Then Jimmy leaves the group to search for Sherlock. Cassie's amazed by his ability to keep interested in adult conversation.

"Why do you want to go there, Larry?" Cassie asks. This isn't the first time he'd mentioned the supposed town.

Seeing that he had a small audience made him pause. Responding seemed to make him uncomfortable. He shifts in his seat, looks out at the river, sighs, then removes his eye patch to rub his eye. "It's clearly a cloudy day. May turn soft and rainy," he says, sighing again.

Cassie hopes his vision is okay in his other eye.

"Isle-u-longfer is a wonderful little place with street musicians and popcorn machines a poppin'. Way back then, I was Larissa, not Larry. I fell in love in the town square, but I was also deserted there.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

My friends were caring, but I couldn't remain there after losing Bill, the love of my life. I set off searching for him. Never found him, so one day I became lonely Larry. Now, I search for Isle-u-longfer, as I once did for Bill. When I find it, I'll settle down there for my remaining days."

Cassie clasps his hand and squeezes. His smile suggests an easing of his isolation, at least temporarily.

The others nod and offer kind words.

Sherlock zips by them and then down the ramp to the bank. From there, he roams a small wooded area. The mood shifts as fast as a cloud slipping in front of the sun.

Crystal Springs' words have more force than a bubbly underwater spring. "Speaking of lost loves, Cassie, do you plan on meeting up with Luther once we're able to return to places on shore? Why was it you didn't let him ride on Silver Lady?"

"If you really want to know, I don't think love from a man is what I'm looking for. If it happens, it happens. I won't turn it down. As I told you at The Ritz, there was plenty of chemistry between Luther and me, but it's different now at my age than when I was yours."

"All I know is that love is what we're here for. Who'd want to go on living if we weren't at least searching for it? Maybe someday I'll meet the man of my dreams. It seems you've found someone but are too proud to admit it, even to yourself," says Crystal, sagely for her years. She cares, but a little too much. It's probably not the best idea for Cassie to confide in her.

Cheyenne eavesdrops since Jimmy ran off in pursuit of the cat. Ignoring Crystal's comments, she high-fives Cassie, saying, "Who the fuck needs a man? Come on, let's go to the upper deck. I'll show you a few pirate moves that will help you defend the Lady when the time comes. The latest word on the river is that Mean Girls and Peg's Pirates mean some serious business."

Cassie guesses there's no harm in learning how to be a better protector. She probably should know more about defending the boat, especially with all the pirates out there. If the quarantine goes

on for long, there's little doubt that looting and pillaging will be on the rise. She once took a martial arts class, but it was years ago.

"Just mirror my moves, Cassie. It's not rocket science."

And Cassie tries. After failing to duplicate the former pirate's swift kicks and karate chops, Cheyenne shows her how to do an eye-poke with index and middle fingers.

"I won't give you a full poke, but my hand's going to fly into your face so fast you won't be able to stop it. This will definitely thwart your opponent unless they think of it first."

Cheyenne also gifts her an extra set of brass knuckles. With any luck, Cassie will never have to use them.



It's the third day of the quarantine.

Cassie's jeans are filthy, and her white T-shirts are dingy and stained, though she's hardly the only bedraggled passenger. Even so, she feels she's letting the others down. As captain, she should look, if not dazzling, then clean. She's hardly slept, mostly because of worry over their dwindling provisions.

Once the quarantine's lifted, two or three of them will need to hike to the nearest town for groceries before they continue upstream. The problem is that the closest store is nearly ten miles inland.

Fortunately, she spots a town on her phone's map that's closer to the River Road. But who knows how long the quarantine will last? Their water supply is dangerously low. Were it not for raisins and crackers, true hunger would now be setting in. They could fish and try to find edible plants nearby, maybe even some fruit trees. But no one in her group has a clue which plants are poisonous.

Another problem: there's no way she could ever eat the river dolphins, the most prevalent food source in the area. Fish from any part of the river are no doubt full of nasty contaminants. Somehow, the magical river dolphins are healthier than most other water species.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

Her dreams of fish are recurring, that is, when she manages to sleep. They're talking away at her, but she doesn't understand them. While the river magic could well be dwindling due to the greedy pirates, her dreams are proof enough of its existence. If only she could figure out what the fish are trying to tell her.

She hasn't yet informed the group about Silver Lady being conscious. They deserve to know, but who would even believe her? Where has the Lady been, anyway? Still sleeping?

Cassie begins chewing her fingernails down to their nubs. What's next? Knuckle gnawing?

It would be different if this were the creative and resourceful crew from the first trip. Maybe her earlier crewmates were more capable; they were just luckier going downstream, at least when it came to available food.

Just now, she tries hard not to scowl at Larry.

Crystal's phony giggles have finally ceased, but she keeps filing her nails and looking wistfully at the water. Her longing for romance is truly annoying. Is it Cassie's imagination, or did Crystal put the moves on Larry at last night's campfire? She's pretty sure she saw Crystal's hand rubbing his crotch, though he was snoring away in a drunk stupor. Creepy.

Then there's Fran and Marv. You never see one without the other. Fran dotes on Marv, as if he's a child. Maybe he has dementia, as he tends to repeat himself. Is this why she babies him? Cassie should ask her when he's not around. The issue is that they're almost always together. Fran's forever mopping up any dampness around his lips with her fingertips. She's now trying to convince him that he'll feel better if he takes a nap.

"Dear, you know you'll wake up in a better mood if you rest for a little while."

"But I don't want to nap. I'm not sleepy. When did you get so bossy?"

"Here we go a napping, a napping, together we will go. Here we go a napping..." Fran sings as he reluctantly follows her to their cabin. She's a former kindergarten teacher, wouldn't you know?

Teaching wouldn't have been her chosen profession, but her limited vocal range stopped her from pursuing a singing career.

That's another annoying habit of Fran's: she's forever making up little ditties. Marv enjoys them so much that he dances. It makes him look a little like an organ-grinder's monkey, but he doesn't seem to care. He was once a horse jockey and then a gambler. Their short, rather round bodies and apple-red cheeks amuse Cassie because they remind her of Tweedledum and Tweedledee. But now they're more like two deflated helium balloons, so she can't help but feel a little sorry for them.

Earlier, when they told Jimmy about their son who was killed in the war, they repeated what they'd told the group about him a couple of days ago. It wasn't their retelling of the story, but rather their verbatim description, as if they'd rehearsed their lines.

They meant well. Maybe Cassie simply wants to care about them more than she does.

She's also a little bored with Cheyenne's stories about famous pirates. After all, a pirate is just another sort of criminal, but a criminal all the same; her romanticizing them is almost as irritating as Crystal's mistaken notions about love.

And Larry could prove to be more trouble than he's worth. While Jimmy is less irritating than the adults, his jumpiness can be beyond annoying.

Their human failings aside, they all possess endearing qualities, too. Cassie's only lost sight of them due to the quarantine. Still, even before then, she missed her imaginative friends from her trip downstream.

Have any of these travelers ever written a poem or painted a picture? She'd be surprised if they had. Funny thing is, she's never been all that creative either.

She's simply a woman who had a wild idea about being a captain of a houseboat before a war broke out.

With the magic mostly gone, will the trip now become tedious and long?

The only one who floats Cassie's boat is the boat.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

Certainly, she's magical. Cassie must not lose sight of it, or she'll lose her ability to perceive it.

She's never felt this negative about anyone from her original crew, except the obnoxious Zona. If, indeed, she was murdered, no one knew the perpetrator. Some of the crew were originally suspects, but the clues never added up. Although Zona was her least favorite, Cassie was horrified when they discovered her body.

She's never hoped anything bad would happen to either her former or current passengers.

Once they're free to travel again, she's certain her perceptions of these passengers will change. The awfulness of the present distorts her thoughts about them. She needs to keep this in mind.



At last, Cassie finds the lost book. She returns to page one because she's forgotten the characters. It's the story of a man who gets lost on a trip down the Ganges River. That's about all she recalls.

Is her memory starting to fail? Nothing is better than reading to take her mind off it. Since the internet's still down, it's no surprise that reading actual books is regaining popularity. The new cool thing to do. Sure, eBooks are still available, but they hold less appeal.

Strange, but she never sees her crewmates reading anything at all, except for Murphy when he was aboard.

Fran and Marv's naps don't last long. After rejoining the others, Fran nudges her husband and points at something pink flying across the deck. Crystal's scarf flies off her neck, then falls into the water, like a bird that's been shot. Realizing it's only a scarf, no one jumps into the water to retrieve it. Crystal stares open-mouthed at it, floating back downstream. The befuddled group begins to mutter, but not about the lost scarf.

"What if music stops and time slows down again? Could that happen?" Jimmy asks with saucer-sized eyes.

"It could, but most likely it won't," Larry says, saving the boy with his words. Cassie lets out the breath she'd been holding.

Cheyenne, who's been below deck, joins them and growls. "Didn't anyone wonder where I was for the last couple of hours?"

Actually, no, they haven't.

"I was locked in my cabin again. Cassie, you really gotta fix that! This was like the third time it's happened."

Cassie offers a vague assurance that she will "see to it." Cheyenne's tendency to stumble, spill, and knock things over has worsened over the last few days. It amuses Cassie to see someone even clumsier than she is. Cheyenne reminds her of a bull in a china shop. Maybe a bull on steroids. Strangely, when Cheyenne was one of the Ladies in Waiting, she almost exhibited the same evil grace as Foxy Lady, the leader of the first pirate gang Cassie encountered.

At least those 'ladies' weren't as vicious as the Coast Guard pirates. Could the other gangs Cheyenne had mentioned, the Mean Girls and Peg's Pirates, be any worse? Cassie would never forget being held up at gunpoint by the Coast Guard pirates with her former crew. It was definitely one of the scarier moments on the first trip, though their booty was only sacksful of water and wine. While stories about them still circulated, many members of the notorious group were arrested before the war. After their release from prison, the group disbanded.

"That was my favorite scarf," mutters Crystal. "I should've jumped into the water. Why didn't I?"

No one responds.

Just then, Sherlock, who's been missing in the woods for hours, comes running fat-tailed from the mainland. He looks like he's seen a ghost. Jimmy jumps for joy at his return, further spooking the feline.

So much for turning Silver Lady into a pleasure cruiser and a party boat. So much for a fun adventure. Just like when you try to change the course of a river, it will only wind up changing you.

A sudden longing to enfold her daughter in her arms overwhelms her. How stupid for Cassie to be so far from home!

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

What was she thinking before setting out downriver? It must have been that pulling sensation of the river beckoning her, daring her to ramble down the River Road.

And what's Silver Lady thinking now? Probably about slipping away from the dock again. Is now the right time to tell the others about her? So what if they think Cassie's grip on reality is a little less firm than before? She knows what she knows. If they decide to disembark at the next stop, that's fine with her. One of them could even take that damn cat.

Then an air siren blasts the silence. A sinking feeling followed by panic. No one can speak or move. The siren persists, though the sky looks as peaceful as the glassy water. Is this to warn them of an imminent threat? Ten minutes go by. The siren resounds, but their breathing has somewhat regulated.

"Could well be a false alarm," Cassie points out, adding, "It's happened before."

The others nod, but look dubious.

The sky darkens. It's way darker than usual for early evening. Could it simply have been a siren alerting them to a coming storm? Maybe it was stuck.

She's overcome by an ache to be back in her small house in Minnesota. It's different from the pull of the river. A longing rooted in memories, rather than desire. How she'd love to pad barefoot across the worn carpet on her way to get a steaming cup of coffee. After that, she'd watch birds splash in her birdbath while eating breakfast, then take her morning walk through her boring yet peaceful neighborhood. Later, she'd visit Melanie.

Thinking about home supplants the fear of a missile attack from a hostile country. And the new countries (the former states) must be way too busy creating new governments and won't feel inclined to turn against each other. She'll remind the others of this, too. Then again, maybe it truly is just a weather alert or the monthly test.

Whatever it is, it doesn't provoke the intense panic Cassie felt at Gull Lake when the sky darkened, the temperature dropped, and

sound blasted without turning into music. Nothing worse than the feeling that everything was going to vanish. This isn't that.

Sherlock hisses at the threatening sky. Maybe one or several tornadoes have been spotted.

And then the siren stops.

A full moon discards clouds as fast as a model does clothes for a runway show.

Moonlight shimmers down the seemingly empty River Road, spotlighting the Silver Lady. Now, clearly, it isn't the best time to tell them about Silver Lady.



Silver Lady:

As much as I don't like to admit it, that siren frightened the bejeebers out of me, too. Was this the end? While I was feeling even more annoyed than Cassie by people trampling my decks and cabins, I wasn't ready for this show called Life to cease, especially so abruptly. And now, as moonlight shines down, I'm relieved, though feeling restless to return to my winding and wondrous River.



Chapter 26

Cassie breakfasts with Crystal, Fran, and Marv. It isn't much of one. Following watery coffee and a small piece of last night's fish, she jots down a grocery list.

While doing so, she recalls a dream from the night before. Everyone in a town had turned to stone, except for her. She kept running up and down sidewalks looking for the living, but they were nowhere to be found. The stone people looked like they'd been running or fleeing from something.

Strange. It made her think of the orphan statues in Doze.

She needed to be in the here and now. However, her list-making is interrupted when she spots a few Coast Guard boats puttering up and down the river. One pulls up to the dock.

"Just wanted to give you folks the 'All Clear.' You're now free to travel the river," says a middle-aged man with a scruffy beard and deep, soulful brown eyes.

So that was the siren's message the previous night. It now makes sense.

"The virus is gone?"

"No, ma'am. From what we're hearing, it was never a virus, but listeria. Several folks got pretty sick at The Ritz. Likely culprit was some ground beef gone bad."

The four look at the officer as if he's an apparition—not the first they've seen along the river. Processing the news isn't simple. After expressing her relief, Cassie asks how far the nearest store is.

"There's a small one this side of Owl Town, or you'll have your choice of several back in Real. The one by Owl Town's probably your best bet. You can gas up there, too. Just to let you know, the sand statues sank to the bottom of Lake Realidad."

Cassie lets out a small gasp.

"Lots of folks are pretty upset about it. Lake levels are up, and it's now twice its former size. And one more thing," the officer continues. His voice is kind, but his warning is stern. "If you're bound for the town of Doze, there's talk of some pirate gang having ransacked it during the war. Don't know how bad or if those raiders are still on the loose. Y'all take care now."

Cassie doesn't bother telling him that Doze is exactly where they're headed or that one of the passengers is a former pirate. Hearing that the sand sculptures sank is the deal-killer for returning to Realidad—rather, Real. If any of her current passengers were artists, she would turn Silver Lady around and visit Real, despite the loss of the sculptures.

Despite missing her former crew, she chooses to move forward. Of course, she rarely mentions her former crewmates. No matter the damage to Doze, they'll stay there for a few days.

If memory serves, the river will soon fork into two branches before reaching Owl Town, that creepy, owl-infested place. There's little point in taking the smaller branch, as it doesn't meet up with the main one. Right after that, they should see a sign advertising river tubing. Why not stop there? The group needs some rest and relaxation, and it'll be easier to tell them about the owls in Owl Town while they're relaxing. Who doesn't need some fun after a near-death experience?



Chapter 27

Cassie and a couple of the others stock up on junk food at the closest store. More of a convenience store than a supermarket since there are only a couple of shelves containing food. Still, the chips, sandwich cheese, and canned orange juice will taste better than raisins and stale crackers. She finds a box of toothpicks and adds it to the other items. While there are plenty left in the other box, she still keeps misplacing it.

The stuffy little place is crowded with boaters and area residents. Strangers jaw with each other about the four-day confinement and express relief that it wasn't a new and worrisome virus.

Cassie's in line at the checkout when she sees a clerk nab Jimmy. He's yanking something from the boy's hands. Jimmy's not giving up without a fight.

She rushes up to them. "What's going on?"

The balding man furrows his bushy gray eyebrows. He holds Jimmy in place with his red, meaty paws. "You this punk's mother?"

Not waiting for an answer, he presents the evidence: a box of Pop-Tarts. "Found this stashed in his hoodie."

Cassie places the popular snack with her other purchases at the checkout. She then tears the man's hands off Jimmy. Scowling, she places her own hands, gently but firmly, on the boy's shoulders.

"Son, I've told you I can pay for your food. This time it'll come out of your next week's allowance."

Jimmy nods at her con, trying hard to stifle a grateful smile.

After he is forced to apologize, she whispers to him to wait outside.

Afterward, the motley crew takes their dirty clothes to the laundromat next door. They pointedly ignore the boy whom they view as a liability, unless he proves otherwise.



Silver Lady looks pleased to resume the journey, as they'd only been on the river a short time before stopping at the store. There are a few beaches along this stretch. They are small ones, but beaches nonetheless. An occasional picnic table at the water's edge entices hungry paddlers to shore.

Cassie looks around to see who's humming 'Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream ...' and realizes it's Silver Lady. Does the Lady recall the former crew once singing it? Since Cassie frequently whistles, hums, or sings the song, none of the others looks alarmed. It could be they don't hear it at all, or if they do, they could easily mistake it for the engine.

Instead of asking them if they hear it, she explains to the group that they'll soon be stopping for some fun and relaxation: tubing down a slow-moving tributary.

"How far away is it?" Jimmy asks.

"Maybe a half hour or so. Not too much longer."

"About time we had some fun!" Jimmy says before jumping up and down. Some of the adults look annoyed, but no one stops him.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

A couple of coolers contain a simple lunch of cheese, crackers, and apples, which can be eaten either while they merrily float along or afterward at one of the many rustic riverside parks. Everyone but Larry looks pleased at the prospect of an enjoyable time. He grumbles, though he agrees to wait aboard the boat. No point arguing with the surly old coot.

Cassie then tells them that afterward, they'll be driven back to Silver Lady by someone from the boat rental office. She hopes Fran and Marv will stay behind as well, but they say they're up for some fun, too.

"Even if the stream gets too shallow, we'll have to portage their tubes for who-knows-how-long?" It's not that she wants them to reconsider their decision, but simply to be aware of the challenges.

They nod. A new curiosity makes the couple's tired eyes look younger than their years.

"Just don't say I didn't warn you." More than likely, no matter how shallow it gets, they'll still be able to remain afloat. She doesn't tell them this.

Even though they aren't anywhere near as old as Larry, neither of them looks like they're in great health. Though loath to admit it, Cassie's endurance isn't what it once was. How long ago was it since she went mountain climbing or even kayaking? Ten years sure does make a difference.

Everyone returns to their cabins to change into swimsuits.

She'll wait until they're picnicking to tell them about Owl Town. And then she'll inform Larry after returning to the boat. Her plan is to caution them without describing the frightening ordeal her first crew experienced.

Once they're beyond that dreaded area, it'll only be a matter of creating the right kind of ambiance expected on a pleasure cruise. Cruising aboard the Silver Lady will provide fun, if not luxury. It will be both festive and relaxing. The upcoming side trip should enable guests to truly enjoy life on the river. After all, big cruise lines stop at different ports for vacationers. She'll be a vacationer, too, or so she hopes.

Cassie's changed her mind about telling them that Silver Lady is much more than a normal luxury houseboat. No need for the secret to be revealed. One day, if she returns home, she'll tell Melanie about it. Her imaginative daughter will certainly understand.

Melanie, as well as Cassie's two good friends back in Minnesota, no longer possess the ability to lure her back home. She loves her silver-eyed daughter like a tigress does her cub, but their connection has loosened enough to allow wriggle room. It's a shame she can't share her river adventure with her, because Melanie professes to enjoy her secluded and solitary path. Furthermore, Cassie knows she can't entice her friends to join her on the river: Sasha hates water, and Janet's been caring for her elderly mother in her home for the last few years.

She is no longer searching for her path in life because she's found it, or so she hopes. Rambling along the River Road is her true calling, the one she's always longed for. It doesn't always have to be fun, but having some fun now and then sure helps.

She needs to tell her passengers about what lies ahead. Why not now, as they are mostly observing the riverside wildlife and vegetation? Not much to see. The overall mood's a quiet one, even contemplative. They're sharing a couple of pairs of binoculars between them. All is tranquil, but Jimmy's tendency to hog them is beginning to irritate the others.

"Can't you say something to him?" Cheyenne hisses at her.

"Jimmy, you've got to let the others use them, too," Cassie scolds the boy.

She misses the opportunity to warn them about Owl Town, but will do so once they're on land.



Some shoots of the tributary carry them fast enough to cause joyful yips and yowls, though most of the ride is slow enough for

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

butterflies and birds to fly ahead of them. Next, they swirl among the lily pads after a lazy ride down a narrow yet deep tributary. There's a gentle patter to the voices of the tube riders; conversations are far less anxious than usual. It's both pleasant and enjoyable, if not exactly a wild time.

It's a different sort of river magic, far more subtle than before.



"Next, we'll pass through Owl Town. There's something I must warn you about," Cassie, at last, alerts the group. They're sitting at a picnic table in a small park following their peaceful side trip.

"Warn us?" asks Marv, scratching a mosquito bite on his forearm.

"About Owl Town, right?" Cheyenne says with a knowing nod, without waiting for Cassie's answer. "I'm no rookie. Been through there myself a few times and lived to tell the tales. But twice, I nearly gave up the ghost to those mother fuckin' crazed hooters."

Must she always brag about her adventures?

Cassie does her best to ignore her.

"I guess you're not talking about tits, are you?" asks Crystal, rubbing the sudden gooseflesh on her pale, bare arms.

The others laugh. Fran cups her hands over Jimmy's ears, but he smirks and rolls his eyes to show them that he gets the joke.

Cassie needs to jump in yet again and be the calm, cool-headed captain. After all, it could turn into a crisis.

"We'll need to remain inside Silver Lady, of course. As long as we do, we should be safe." She speaks quietly, doing her best to keep them from freaking out. "The sky will grow dark with owls. But last time, not even a single window was broken. Because of the blackness of the sky, it'll be hard to tell how many there are, but it's the sound that creeps you out. What we did before was sing. It seems to quiet the racket. Any of you good singers?"

There's an uncomfortable silence.

Crystal, biting her lip, scooches closer to Jimmy. She rubs his arm. He moves away, but then returns to her warmth. Marv raises his hand like a shy boy in class. Fran looks alarmed. Is it because of the description of Owl Town, or does she know what Marv's about to say? Cassie prods him by nodding.

"Haven't you heard my Frannie sing yet? She could've gone professional," he brags.

Cassie recalls hearing her sing little made-up songs to her husband. He's right, though she can't quite reach the high notes. An old lady warbling a church song comes to mind.

"It's been said I could've been an opera singer, but I don't know if owls will like my quaver," Fran admits. "I've always been terrified by them. Their big eyes and the way their heads swivel. What if we traveled back downstream rather than up?"

Cassie doesn't answer her question; instead, she encourages the understandably nervous woman. "Fran, I suggest you start us off with 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat,' and the rest of us will jump in."

The group, though clearly agitated, agrees to this course of action.

Cassie also decides not to reveal how her first trip through Owl Town felt like a collective near-death experience. Back on the boat, she'll tell them a little about cute little Ollie the Owlet, who'd ridden with them for a good part of the earlier trip downstream. Then again, perhaps she shouldn't have told the new crew about the place at all.

Before returning to Silver Lady, the hungry group devours their picnic lunch. The small park looks less rustic than some because of its mowed lawn and clean, modern restroom. From their table, they notice the park morphs into a cemetery, with no fencing between the two.

Jimmy points at a few owls in the trees on the cemetery side as he wolfs down his sandwich. Then he jumps up, telling the others he's going to investigate to see if there's anything else strange over there.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

"Like what?" Crystal asks, looking worried.

"You know, like a sudden change in weather or anything else creepy," he responds, before wandering off to check it out.

The couple leaves to stroll in the park, and Crystal scurries over to the nearby restroom. Cheyenne and Cassie, the only ones left at the table, discuss Owl Town, but after a while, they fall silent as there's only so much anyone can say about it.

When others aren't around, Cheyenne's comments become more ordinary, though telling. It's hard to imagine she'd ever been a pirate with remarks like, "Oh, my God, I was scared to death when our ship was attacked by an angry flock of owls," and "I never thought I'd make it out alive."

Cassie nods, as she'd felt likewise. For the first time, it occurs to her that she's probably frightened the others, though that certainly wasn't her intention.

Both women yawn. A fly keeps buzzing around Cassie's face. Boredom sets in. What's keeping the others?

At long last, Jimmy returns, breathless with a blond cowlick standing straight up on the crown of his head. Cassie resists the urge to lick her finger and then tamp the wild strands back down.

"See that hill over there?" he points. "Once you get to the other side, you're still in the cemetery, but it's a chilly, fall day. I saw people in black marching, like in a parade."

"You mean a funeral procession?" Cassie interrupts.

"I guess so. Anyway, an old lady screamed at me to get in line, or next, it would be my 'time.' What did she mean? That's when I ran back here."

She gives him a quick hug and offers him an extra bag of chips. It sure sounded like a scene straight out of *The Twilight Zone*.

It's still afternoon, but the sun looks peaked, weary of its daily dance across the sky. Where's Crystal? Where did the couple go? Something isn't right.

A park official approaches their table.

"Making a nice day of it, are you?" He's probably noticed they've been here for a long time.

"We are, but we're missing a few from our group," Cassie informs him as she reads his name badge. "Any chance you could help us, Doyle?"

She's noticed that calling an official by name helps get better assistance. Doyle's a little reluctant, but finally agrees to help locate the missing ones.

While the park isn't all that large, she cajoles him into taking her with him in his golf cart.

They ride in silence down a couple of adjoining roads. It isn't long before they discover the three together, walking, who-knows-where, but clearly away from the park.

The escapees stop when Doyle sidles up alongside them. They look sheepish and avoid Cassie's eyes.

Doyle convinces them that owls in Owl Town, predominantly Great Horned owls, look scarier than they are. Only one casualty has ever been reported, and that was because a stupid guy in a motorboat decided to shoot them. Of course, he was attacked. His flesh was devoured, and his bones, left lying in the boat, were licked clean.

"We're living in different times," Doyle informs them, adding that Bird Flu has now killed off millions of birds.

"Why were so many owls flocked in the trees when I was going downstream?" Cassie wonders aloud. There had been a forest of owl trees lining both riverbanks. Instead of leaves, owls lined the branches and created shade so dark it looked like night from the river. The cacophony of collective hooting was deafening. And the overall effect of sight and sound, both menacing and otherworldly.

"Maybe they'd been gathering because they sensed their imminent danger," Doyle says after scratching his bearded chin.

Cassie hasn't considered this possibility. It's been a couple of years since Bird Flu began killing humans, too. Luckily, a new vaccine has kept people from becoming seriously ill or dying.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

As Silver Lady fights the current, the group settles in. Their clothes are clean, and there's enough food to eat.

Cassie gnaws on a fresh toothpick from the new box since she can't locate the other one. They've never seen Larry this crabby.

Questions like bullet-fire, "What took you so long to return? Was there a reason you couldn't call?"

"People, these days. Can't trust any of 'em," he says, and then spits over the side of the boat.

The guilty (or at least the accused) trudge off to their cabins, tired and in need of rest and reflection. Sherlock meows for much-needed attention.

Cassie feels betrayed by the three who'd been caught sneaking away. They were near deserters, though she takes herself to task for having instigated their fear.

I really can't blame them, though now I feel like a jailer instead of a cruise director.

Silence from Silver Lady.

Nearing Owl Town, everyone except the couple remains on deck as the town comes into view. Their only plan is to go inside if the situation grows too dire. Larry, currently at the wheel, grudgingly promises Cheyenne she can take over if the boat comes under owl attack. Neither he nor Cheyenne seems nervous, unlike the others.

Cassie sure hopes no one can tell how jittery she feels.

They wait.

The air feels still, as if a storm is about to hit.

They watch.

The sound of Silver Lady's motor is so quiet, Cassie wonders if she's stalled.

But then, just as the one-and two-storied town buildings come into view, Silver Lady guns her engine.

The startled group erroneously believes it's Larry's doing.



Silver Lady:

My memory is a long one. Never will I forget the owl attack on the downriver trip. How dark the sky turned! The collective hooting, so loud and ominous, made me think the world was ending. To this day, I'm haunted by the sounds of hooting and thousands of wings flapping, piercing the darkness. It was the mixing of the two sounds that terrorized me. How astonished I'd been by those brave little humans! Their fleshy bodies would've been shredded to the bone long before those birds got through my fiberglass skin. Next, the most miraculous magic occurred: Margot sang to the birds, and they almost immediately calmed down. No one got hurt, and the crew gained a mascot: Ollie the Owlet. I wasn't thrilled or remotely happy about having a bird on board, but it wasn't long before he disappeared. All for the better, I'd thought at the time. But are we about to go through all that again? Margot isn't here to sing. Cassie has an admittedly lousy singing voice, and I'm pretty sure none of the others will be able to charm the owls.

I'm about ready to close my eyes and speed through the narrow channel. Here I go!

River:

I know there's nothing I can say to comfort you, dear girl. If I were to simply say, "You'll be pleasantly surprised," would it even help? You're probably not even listening, so I won't rattle on.



Chapter 28

Two crows on the branches of a dead tree stop cawing to notice the boat. The area looks vastly different from before. Most of the trees are dead. Cassie takes a deep sniff. No smell of a forest fire. Then it hits her: the trees, sky, and town were once covered with owls, but now the owls of Owl Town are gone.

“They’ve left! Owl Town’s a ghost town!” she shouts.

Everyone immediately gathers on the deck. Hugs, cheers, and even a jig or two are danced. The sky’s a promising blue.

What caused them to leave? Bird flu? The war? Why did so many trees die? Will they next come across dead owls along the bank or bobbing in the water? Will an army of those ominous birds be waiting around the next bend? None of the passengers knows, but then, who knows what will happen next or what’s lying in wait? It makes them feel alive—more alive than ever.

“River dwellers like us simply can’t anticipate the unseen. We can only hope for safe passage,” Cassie announces. A couple of the passengers nod. Those who don’t hear her don’t bother asking her to repeat herself.

And then a tired-looking bird lands on the deck. Probably a Great Horned Owl, Larry tells them. It looks like it has something important to say and clearly isn't your average shy owl. Despite its weariness, it seems to enjoy being seen, strutting along the railing before flying away with a single hoot. Is it calling the others? Maybe the owls aren't all gone.

A strange feeling sweeps over Cassie, and gauging the others' faces, they feel likewise.

In her slightly off-key voice, she begins singing "Row, row, row your boat..." Just before she falls completely flat, Fran, in a fuller, more melodic range, comes to her rescue by singing the next part. "Merrily, merrily, merrily ..." This prompts everyone else to chime in with "Life is but a dream," except for Larry, who doesn't like to sing.

Then they realize they're singing to each other and don't begin another round.

Cassie describes little Ollie the Owlet and how adorable he was as a mascot on the first trip. None of the present crew seems to care. Should she keep trying? Maybe it's because they're still feeling relieved over not being the target of an owl bombardment. Why would they want to hear a cute story about an owlet? Maybe she wouldn't want to either, especially if she wasn't the storyteller.

"About how long until we get to Doze?" Marv asks in a way that makes her realize it's best to leave the past behind. Without answering, she turns to watch Silver Lady's wake.



Chapter 29

After leaving the ghost town, it doesn't take them long to realize they're on a ghost ship. At first, happy to be free of Owl Town, Cassie yelps, "Ship, Ahoy!" to the next boat they pass, a steamboat packed with passengers. No one waves back. Cassie presses the pointy end of her toothpick into her cheek to make sure she's not dreaming. Maybe she just isn't seen, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, her long gray hair in a limp braid.

Her passengers look at Cassie askance.

"Maybe they didn't hear you," Jimmy surmises. "Let me call out to the next boat we see."

While she doubts this, she nods. "Go for it, Jimmy!"

She probably shouldn't have shouted in her usual manner, as she'd so annoyed her first crew with what they'd considered her over-friendly greetings to other boaters. What does 'over-friendly' even mean? What's wrong with a friendly acknowledgment of others? They were simply passing by, that's all. At least now no one is shushing her, though the problem is that her greeting has fallen on deaf ears.

"Ahoy!" Jimmy shouts to a small pontoon boat. Again, no recognition from the two men aboard. At least it's not the sheer invisibility of being an older woman. Yet something's going on. Maybe they truly are specters on a ghost ship, or unseen in some other parallel universe.

In a show of unity, those aboard the Silver Lady agree to call out in unison when the next craft passes by. Unlike her downstream group, Cassie's delighted that this one doesn't make her feel like there's something wrong with her, like she has a personality disorder.

But when the next boat, a small ferry, passes, there's still no response.

The fifth boat they see is a kayak. A man and a woman, clearly a couple, are laughing at something the other one said. They appear to be looking at Silver Lady, but the two boats almost collide.

"AHOY!" shout all seven passengers on the houseboat.

At the last second, the smaller boat changes direction. The kayakers stop paddling, look somewhat startled, but say nothing. Neither of them heard the greeting or looked directly at the houseboat. Proof that the Silver Lady is a ghost ship—for the time being, anyway.

"What do we do now?" Crystal's voice quavers.

"Nothing we can do," Cassie says, moving back from the rail. "When it's happened before, I passed it off as part of the strange river magic. There's so much of it. But whenever we land anywhere, you can count on us becoming visible again, unless the entire area is invisible."

The other six, now huddled in their seats, look somewhat relieved, though a confused frustration is still in the air.

Sherlock hisses and then dashes off. Cassie doesn't think the cat sees her, but clearly, he senses her presence. The fine line between the real and unreal is even finer. The not-there-ness is causing her to feel an uncomfortable numbness.

She'd hoped by now to have reached The Amphora—the shipwreck-turned-tourist attraction that had so enchanted her on

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

the trip downstream. How could it have vanished completely? Maybe her captain's log was inaccurate. It wouldn't be the first time.



Silver Lady:

Other times, it wasn't an issue for me to be a ghost ship, when I enjoyed being there—but not being there. The mystique of my invisibility was fun; it made me feel glamorous. It's not the crisis it seems to be for Cassie. But now that there's hope of becoming a pleasure cruiser, a party boat adorned with festoons, tiki lights, and laughter, this sure does make a difference! I might make the papers, become famous and sought after. My hope is that your magic, River, lasts a good long while.



Chapter 30

Cassie and the others are caught off guard as the local forecast called for only a slight chance of rain. It pours all night, through the next day, and into the following evening. They're docked in a small cove and decide to stay put. The adults are as bored as the boy.

"Will it ever end, Cassie?" Jimmy whines.

"Sure, it will. But I can't say I've ever seen rain this bad."

The others agree.

They play cards and board games. Jimmy's given the role of scorekeeper and banker, though Crystal gives him a little assistance now and then. In the beginning, he enjoys his role, but then gets upset because he can't beat the adults. He accuses Cheyenne and Larry of cheating. Then Marv begins crying because he's forgotten the rules to 'Life' and even 'Sorry.'

"I'm sorry!" he sobs, and leaves the table in tears, with Fran on his heels.

"How about some reading time?" suggests Cassie. The others agree, but then she can't find her book and can't decide on another

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

one. She's got several digital ones on her tablet, but often forgets about them. What a time to lose a book!

It's now raining too hard for them to disembark. The river water's a silver so dark it's almost black.

Soon, it's too difficult to concentrate on anything, and the constant downpour feels biblical. They feel uneasy and strange, but in a different way than before Owl Town.

Alert, but fighting a strong need to hide, as well; everyone knows it's pointless to hide in their cabins. There isn't much thunder or lightning, but the gush from the sky grows increasingly loud.

Why didn't they abandon ship while they still had the chance?

The river rises, and the current strengthens. No flood warnings had been issued.

Before they can even discuss the situation, Silver Lady finds herself swept downstream against her will. The river, unleashed, swallows anything in its way: its banks, treetops, animals, and people. It's a monster, gorging itself on the things of the Earth. Will it consume Silver Lady in a single gulp?

Cassie's knees nearly buckle as she makes her way up the stairs to the cab.

"Come on, Silver Lady, grab hold of something, anything!" she shouts from behind the wheel. Does the Lady even hear her? Cassie's drenched from the sideways torrent pelting her, but will not let go of the wheel.

Silver Lady is mute.

Is it because she's aware of her own powerlessness?

There's no need to further implore the feckless craft. Cassie wouldn't be surprised if the Lady lost consciousness. Knowing this, she refuses to lessen her grip and remains frozen in place. If any of the passengers see her, they'll think she's steering. It will help them stay calmer.

"No lightning or thunder. That's a good sign, right?" she asks Silver Lady, who, of course, doesn't answer.

The massive wooden wheel moves on its own.

A ghost captain, blind-drunk, tosses the Silver Lady this way and that, then spins her for fun. Around and around, she goes.

Cassie finds herself below deck again and doesn't know how she got there.

Those who don't suffer vertigo see people in trees crying for help, and vehicles smashed and piled up on the banks. Some cars and boats are airborne. A few fly by as Cassie and some of the others watch on in disbelief and horror. They want to help but can't slow Silver Lady down. There's little choice but to ride the river and pray for their own survival. Will she capsize? Is there anything worse than this awful lack of control and not knowing when it will be over? It's all happening so fast.

Nobody screams. They're too busy trying to stay in place and trying to see their surroundings. Eyes lock on other eyes whenever possible.

Cutlery, drink coasters, books, and someone's slipper fly through the living room. All anyone can do is dodge the flying objects. Common misery should result in stronger bonds if they survive. And those bonds will be their true lifeboat. Perhaps fearing the worst from Owl Town has toughened them up for this leg of the journey.

Then, after a bend in the dark, wildly flowing river, Silver Lady slows down enough for them to get their bearings and take a breath or two. They heave a collective sigh, as does Silver Lady (at least Cassie hears her loud exhale). She's back! No sense asking her what she does or doesn't recall about the flood. Now there's a little hope of not capsizing or becoming shipwrecked on an island from another time period, as in their earlier adventure.

The crew is hunkered down in the living room. Are they all here? Cassie's eyes dart from one passenger to the next: Jimmy's on Crystal's lap; Fran and Marv are holding each other; and Cheyenne's helping Larry rise from the floor. Everyone appears okay. A little battered, somewhat worse from the wear, but breathing slows, and shaky limbs now stretch. Cassie's amazed at the bravery of her passengers and crew. No one has the strength to

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

swab the decks or deal with the damp, cluttered mess. After drying themselves off as best they can, they sleep the near-death sleep of the exhausted.

Once again, Cassie dreams of people turned to stone on the sidewalks and streets of a small downtown. And again, she's running through it, searching for the living.



Chapter 31

PIRATE STEW

Potatoes

Carrots

Canned Vegetables

Brown Sugar

Worcestershire Sauce (a little)

Rum (a lot)



Following the clean-up, it takes a couple of days for everyone to feel rested and ready for whatever awaits them next along the River Road.

Will there be any information on the storm damage? The loss of life? While the riversides remain battered in the area, the water lures them along as if nothing had happened.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

Cassie can't wait to reach Doze, especially to meet up with Luther. They've exchanged a few texts since seeing each other in Ruby, but they haven't spoken. In her last message, she let him know the approximate date she hoped to arrive in Doze. He'd responded that he might be able to have a friend fly him there in his private plane. It makes her laugh to think how much quicker air travel is, even in a small plane, than by houseboat. Lately, she's been thinking about him. Not a lot, but more than she thought she would. She really took his companionship for granted when they were together. Was this because she never hoped to spend time together in the future? Certainly, she's had few expectations. During the war, she didn't think much about the future. Who knew if either of them would still be around? Still, he was one of the kindest men she'd ever known. A true gentleman in an era when they're sorely lacking.

Crystal remarks that Cassie must be looking forward to seeing Luther. Cassie feels herself warming to the young woman. Crystal has that uncanny ability, so like Melanie, to read her thoughts.

"And you never stop missing your daughter, do you?"

"You're a mind reader, Crystal," she says, validating Crystal's hunches. "Are you hungry? I'm starving. Maybe food will convince us that we still have bodies."

"You're so funny, Cassie, but sure, good idea. I could eat something, too."

"Say, you two, I'm going to treat everyone to a little something special. It's called Pirate Stew," Cheyenne chimes in from the galley.

Does Cheyenne possess culinary skills? While she's dumbfounded, Cassie's happy to let the brazen, and more than a little brash, woman take over meal cooking anytime she so desires.

As Cheyenne stirs brown sugar, pineapple juice, and some rum into a large pot of potatoes, carrots, and canned vegetables (since they have no other fresh ones), she explains how the dish was said to be a favorite of pirates in the Caribbean. It was too bad there was no Worcestershire sauce, as it would add even more succulence.

"So, were you the galley cook on the Foxy Lady?"

"How'd you ever guess, Cassie?" Cheyenne rolls her eyes, then goes back to stirring as the two other women watch.

Cheyenne's meal preparation frees Cassie to keep an eye out for the shipwreck of the Amphora.

Back in the late 1800s, the steamship had smashed into an enormous boulder. Instead of a simple commemoration of the five hundred lives lost, it had recently been turned into a tourist trap. Cassie and her earlier companions had taken the long tour. If she mentions it to her current companions, they'll undoubtedly want to see it.

Once was enough for her, as it was even creepier and more eerie than a haunted house.

The tourist attraction must be somewhere between Owl Town and Doze, but if so, it also means it's in the Land of Doze, which makes little sense, as she doesn't recall feeling that extreme lethargy she experienced there before.

Cassie sighs. Had the Amphora vanished?

She should be used to people, places, and objects disappearing.



Silver Lady hums along as the day goes on. Damp clothes dry in the sun.

Cassie sets the large table with a linen cloth, then carefully arranges the cutlery and glass bowls for the stew. Will the boat's gentle rocking ruin the formal table setting? She wraps the silverware in paper napkins, hoping the guests won't notice. In Doze, she plans to purchase even fancier fine-dining accouterments befitting a truly classy cruise-ship restaurant, as she still hopes Silver Lady will be elegant and refined.

Something tells her these are Silver Lady's aspirations, as well.

A sudden sway of the boat causes one of the glass bowls to slide off the table and shatter. She's surprised they hadn't all broken in the storm.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

"Oh, shit! Watch where you step if you're barefoot!" shouts Cassie. Was it she who just swore?

Surprised faces look from her to the broken bowls.

"No worries, Cassie. Let me help you," says Crystal. She sweeps up the mess, leaving Cassie to apologize to the others. Maybe using glass wasn't one of her better ideas. Whoever brought breakable dishes aboard clearly has rocks for brains!

After-dinner conversation is breezy and light. Everyone remarks on the near-elegance of the dining experience. While Cassie's pleased by their reactions, she knows they're an easy group to please. Cheyenne's Pirate Stew is a hit. Cheyenne grumbles her thanks, but it's obvious she, too, is happy with how the dinner turned out.

Cassie yawns, feeling the relaxed contentment that always follows a good meal. She hopes the others feel the same. Do they also feel Silver Lady watching through invisible eyes? Silver Lady must have witnessed every second of the dinner. Certainly, she, too, must be impressed by the outcome.

Larry, at the wheel, steers them further upstream.

Once the table is cleared, Cassie brings him up an almost-full bowl of the hearty stew. She promises him seconds, after spilling some of it while making her way along the deck. Spilling sure does seem unavoidable. She'd like to believe she's become less klutzy since their first trip. There's no one she can ask, except Silver Lady, who will no doubt have an ulterior motive tied in her answer.

It's been over an hour since passing another boat. The sky turns eggshell white, and the water, a dull turquoise. Then the breeze dies as the river widens. The opposite shores hold only tall green and tawny grasses, along with a few clumps of cattails. Is it the stew making them sleepy, or have they now entered the Land of Doze?

"Doze doesn't appear on any maps. Maybe the cartographers couldn't stay awake long enough to chart it properly," Cassie tells those around her, who are now so sleepy they respond with only the vaguest nods. They must be in the Land of Doze. There could be poppy fields beyond the riversides. And if so, is this how

Dorothy and her friends felt in the Land of Oz? If only it would snow here now and wake them from their stupors.

As they drift deeper and deeper into Doze, she begins to fantasize a romantic dinner for two with Luther. The two of them are slow dancing on a moonlit deck. His hand pressed into the small of her back, his cornflower-blue eyes staring deeply into hers.

Is it too late in life to experience this?

She sure as hell hopes it's not.

Eyelids flutter. Their murmurs lose meaning as numbness replaces curiosity until the turtles appear.

Shouldn't Cassie have seen all the river's secrets by now?

This is truly an unexpected one. A bale of large turtles. Not all that unusual, as they're often seen in the area.

But this group of five, sunning on a giant fallen log in the water, all have human faces. Ancient, wise, and far less sleepy than the ones gazing down at them from the boat deck. All the turtles' faces are lined, androgynous, and annoyed.

Is this the strange magic of Doze at work?

It jolts Cassie's crew into a strange state of awareness. Fully awake, they gaze down at those looking up. Clearly, the turtles see them. Cassie cherishes the moment.

"Larry, cut the engine!" Her tone must sound urgent enough for Larry-the-Contrary to comply.

She uses a bullhorn to address them.

"Greetings, turtle folks! I'm Cassie. My boat is called the Silver Lady. I'm escorting this group to Doze."

"You're in Doze," snaps one of the more surly-looking log-loungers.

"I know that. I meant, the town," she replies, no longer using the bullhorn.

"Then we won't keep you unless you have something tasty to feed us," says the surly one again, the obvious spokesperson for the five.

"I suppose a little light lunch can be arranged," Cassie says, grinning widely, before disappearing into the galley.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

Now roused from their stupors, her passengers stare in awe. They rub their eyes and wonder if they're dreaming. The turtles return the stare, though they are now less curious. After tossing them some of Sherlock's morsels, Cassie waits, hoping to hear some turtle-wisdom. Instead, they dive off the log and swim away without even a backward glance.

All in all, not much of a visit, but unforgettable and magical, nonetheless. Later, Cassie won't be able to convince her fellow travelers of the visit with talking turtles, though they'll admit how their faces were strangely human.



Chapter 32

Silver Lady makes her way slowly through heavy fog as she heads upriver toward the town of Doze. They pass the area devastated by the storm during Cassie's first visit. Thankfully, there are no signs of it now.

How much destruction did the pirates cause? She hopes the Coast Guard officer was wrong. Knowing how stories tend to exaggerate the extent of pillaging, she hopes they're in for a pleasant surprise. Floodwaters from the recent storm don't appear to have swallowed the riverbanks. How good it will feel to recover from the blandness of the Land of Doze, not to mention to have some necessary away-time from Silver Lady.

After dinner at the Pink Hotel restaurant, they learn that Doze's population has further dwindled since the war. How can this be? When she was last here, she tells the others, they heard it was only one-third of what it had been before.

"Before what?" Fran asks.

"Before the Vanishing. People from Doze disappeared far more often than from other towns along the river."

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

"So, Dozians, for whatever reason, were the ones who disappeared?" wonders Fran, beginning to understand the peculiar situation.

"As far as anyone knows, none have been seen again," adds Claude, their server, who'd been eavesdropping.

"So, what's been causing the population to keep going down?" Cassie asks him. Not only is Claude their server and maître d', but he's also one of the few friends she made here the first time.

"Could be the war or something else. Fear of another pirate raid. Maybe both," he responds, sighing.

There's a long silence at the table. Cassie and the others try their best to process the information, but their minds are working more slowly ever since entering the Land of Doze.



Cassie gazes about from a park bench in Orphan Park. She's relieved it looks almost the same as it did, even back before the horrific storm nearly decimated it. The lovely flowering trees are blossoming again. Hard to believe it's almost been a year since she was here with her previous crew.

Six orphan statues still stand in the park's center, the same number as before, meaning four are still missing. It takes her longer than usual to do the math. Could they have come alive and left the area? No, more likely they were stolen. The six remaining children were in the process of fleeing when they turned to stone. A couple of them motion the others to run; they all look terrified.

She remembers recent dreams she's had of people turned to stone. They make more sense now than before. Still, clarity itself is now a dim memory.

There's the large and lovely pink flower tree (she can't recall the name of), the petunias cascading from flower pots bejeweling light-posts, the several gift stores, and the Pink Hotel where Cassie will be staying for a couple of nights. Oh yes, that tree is a magnolia.

So far, so good. No sign of the town having been roughed up by the pirates.



The group stands around awkwardly in the hotel lobby.

Cassie's fellow travelers are about to desert her, except for Cheyenne and Sherlock. No matter who has left her life, she's always hated goodbyes. They always seem to happen in slow motion, especially now. Memory issues have so quickly affected the group, complicating their leave-taking and making it all the more awkward. Cassie tries to reassure them that "if memory serves", their memories will sharpen after leaving Doze. After a good laugh, Fran says that's okay with her, as there is much in her life she hopes to forget. Does Cassie feel that way, too?

"Actually, no. I want to recall as much as possible, even the awful times," Cassie responds.

"You're an odd duck, Cassie. I must say," says Fran, grabbing Marv's hand just when he's about to walk away.

Cassie really wants to discuss this, but now isn't the best time. Maybe this means her awful times hadn't been that bad, since she doesn't credit herself with more than a normal share of inner strength. If memory shards are all pieces of broken glass, it's amazing people ever willingly walk on them just to recall fragments of their lives. She longs to say this aloud, but doesn't know who would understand, except her daughter. Sadly, she can't simply call her up and say this. And by the time she scribbles it down in a notebook, she'll have forgotten it.

Few times has Cassie ever felt so adrift in her little boat of self.

"Please text me after you get home," she urges Fran and Marv. They look at her oddly, a little unsure of why this would matter to her. Fran thanks her for her help, and Marv echoes his wife's sentiments.

"You're a fine captain. As good a captain can be, under the circumstances," Fran tells her, with Marv nodding in agreement.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

They give her a quick hug, and Fran kisses her cheek. Cassie snuffles and turns away, more abruptly than she intends.

They leave for the bus station. A bus will take them from Doze to the country of Kentucky, where their home is, if the passport issue doesn't pose a problem. She'll miss Fran's tender care of Marv. They turned into fun companions, at least some of the time.

Her hug with Jimmy is a longer one. She'll sure miss that kid, but doubts he'll feel the same. With a red face, he pulls away. His parting from Crystal is clearly the toughest of the goodbyes. The two tear up, especially Jimmy. She whispers something. Cassie can't make out what's said. He nods, and they pinkie swear something.

It's all Cassie can do to keep from butting in. How jealous she's been of their friendship!

It will be strange to have him no longer aboard. She'll miss them both, but probably Jimmy more.

Jimmy heads to the marina, where he'll hang out until he can find a ride back to The Ritz. Popular as the hotel is, it shouldn't take long. Once there, he'll continue his search for Murphy. His heart is set on becoming an inhabitant of the Island of Lost Children. Little point in trying to dissuade him.

Larry, so not a hugger, departs after a brief handshake, a salute, and an "Aye, aye, cap'n," which cracks Cassie up. "Aye, aye, matey," she responds.

Not a bad guy, but about as rough-and-tough as you'll ever meet. While Doze doesn't show up on maps, it's not Isle-u-longfer, and his lost love isn't here. He'll continue his search and will never rest until he finds at least one of them. Maybe both are concealed by an invisibility shield or are in a parallel universe. She almost says this, but doesn't.

Larry wanders away.

Their leave-taking happens slowly, but then speeds up.

Next, Crystal hugs her tightly. She's the only one left in the lobby. She jumps back, squeezes Cassie's hands, and tries to get her to join her jumping up and down.

Seeing Cassie's confusion, she explains that she's been hired at the Pink Hotel because they're in dire need of help. Cassie congratulates her. Now they can hold off on goodbyes until after sharing a drink tonight, that is, if they remember.

They send each other reminder texts to meet at the hotel bar at 7:00 p.m. With any luck, one of them will look at the message.

Cheyenne is the only one who'd remained on Silver Lady, preferring it to wandering around town. She'd been defensive about her decision, maybe fearing Cassie wouldn't allow it. As a thank-you, Cheyenne said she'd "have the Lady scrubbed and ready for departure."

Although Cassie still finds her a little rough around the edges, she must admit that Cheyenne sure isn't a typical pirate.



Everyone's got a destination. What's Cassie's?

She wanders up and down the main street until it strikes her: she'll continue upriver with Silver Lady, making discoveries along the way.

She's always enjoyed surprises, even small ones.



In the bar that evening, Cassie and Crystal raise their glasses to toast loyalty, then discuss how important it is to lead a principled life. After a few more sips, they toast to waking up from the stupor in the Land of Doze. They agree there's something strange in the atmosphere that not only makes you sleepy, but also affects your memory.

"Guess I'll be starting my new job as a hotel clerk tomorrow," Crystal informs her. She'll be taking over the night shift from the owner, Fred Simon.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

Cassie explains that although she doesn't know him as well as Claude, he'd been of great assistance during the bad storm on the first trip. Fred and Claude, the maître d', had waited out most of the storm with them in the hotel basement. It was a long-lasting, powerful storm that knocked out power and felled trees throughout Doze. She'd been grateful that Silver Lady was undamaged, though she'd been tossed about like a toy boat.

Claude, the friendlier of the two, had helped her get to know the town, telling her many stories about its inhabitants, including the sad and strange tale about the orphan ghosts inhabiting the third floor. Evidently, they roam the hotel floors at night, in futile search for their parents. This could explain their plaintive cries, heard multiple times over the years.

Cassie next tells her how she's supposed to meet Luther for breakfast the following morning.

"Think you'll ask him to join you and Cheyenne on River Road?"

"I haven't decided, but it's crossed my mind. Are you sure you don't want to join us?"

"As much as I enjoyed being on the river, it's really not for me, Cassie. Thanks for the offer, though. I'm not a fan of not knowing what's around the next bend. It's just not me. It sure felt good, and still does, to be away from The Ritz."

No point in trying to persuade her otherwise. Cassie smiles in understanding. While the bond with Crystal isn't deep, she knows she'll miss her.

Cassie's hope that her passengers will remain part of her life and stay friends is genuine, though probably naive. Still, she wishes they would. Since she can't discuss this with the younger woman, she decides to call it a night, telling Crystal she'll stop by to let her know how things went with Luther. They can wait and save their goodbyes for then.



It's the following morning. Cassie marvels at the stillness in the room, certain she'd been cradle-rocked by the river in the captain's quarters. She's less disoriented after noting the pink-and-red rose wallpaper. Of course! She's in the small yet charming guest room at the haunted Pink Hotel. It was an orphanage in the 1990s. Orphans were evidently poisoned and buried in the basement—or so the story goes. Fred's father ran the hotel then. After he died unexpectedly, Fred took over. Fred suspected his father of poisoning the orphans, more than a little.

To make the ghosts feel more at home, Fred devoted the entire third floor of the hotel to them. The orphan-ghosts, happy with the arrangement, never haunt the other floors. The last time Cassie was here, she and Margot had courageously climbed up to the third floor one night, pressed their ears to the door, and distinctly heard children laughing.

Cassie yawns and sits up in the double bed, though she's not quite ready to rise. Like the last room she stayed in here, this one has a four-poster brass bed, and there's a pitcher atop an old wooden dresser. A cane rocker in the corner looks too fragile to sit on. There's a book next to her on the nightstand. It's not the one she's been trying to read on Silver Lady. The pink velvet cover has no title.

She opens it to find the pages blank. Could this mean things have gone missing again? Words from books and paintings from canvases? But no. Most likely, it's a guest book, here for her to write about her stay. She'll do it later, provided it won't make her feel too awkward being the first guest to write in it.

The previous evening's a blur. A full bladder doesn't help her recall what happened. After using a tiny, though actual bathroom, Cassie does a few stretches, then peers out the cylinder-glass window overlooking the business district. It's quite turn-of-the-century. Not the 20th into the 21st, but more 19th into the 20th. She half-expects to see a horse and buggy clip-clopping by, or a boy in knickers passing out newspapers on a street corner. But no, the few pedestrians look like they belong in the present.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

She lies back down, shuts her eyes, and then recalls some of what she did yesterday after the goodbyes. Her breathing slows.

In the bar, Crystal seemed much more excited about Doze than worried about the prospect of disappearing. The two women learned from Claude that no one had vanished for quite some time.

Cassie's main priority now, besides finding more passengers, is to find Frank. And according to Claude and Fred, she should have no problem doing so.

Frank's anti-vanishing potion must not only be selling, but more importantly, it must be working. It was possible that whatever caused the Vanishing had pretty much vanished. Whatever the reason, relief was palpable in the affected areas. Claude also disclosed that Frank's spray potion is currently being used not only here but in many other places. Since there's been little communication between the countries, no one seems to know how widespread the Vanishing became or how much it has now subsided.

When she met Frank, near the end of her first trip, she'd longed for romance and the chance at a lasting relationship. Instead, he chose to perfect his potion in Doze. She could have gone with him, but the lure of the river journey was too strong. Besides, she wasn't about to become a cheerleader for any man. He'd decided on Doze rather than other river towns, as it was known as the locus of people vanishing and artwork lasting. She encouraged him to pursue the noble cause.

Cassie and Frank weren't in touch during the war. Whatever they once had together is certainly over. Even if they meet up again here, there's little chance of picking up where they'd left off. Little chance for romance. Still, given their history together, of course, she remains curious about him.

And then there's Luther. They'll soon be meeting for breakfast. She can't wait to ask some questions. Why did he leave her back in the motel room in Ruby? Why did he come here to Doze after their last encounter? Was it because she told him she'd be stopping here on her return trip to Minneapolis? Since they haven't kept in touch

by phone, he wouldn't have been able to know exactly when she'd be here. Maybe there's still a chance. Her heart skips a beat, recalling their time together at the motel.

Last night, Crystal brought him up during the first sips of their Rum Side-Cars. Only after Cassie pressed did Crystal admit being related to Luther. Turns out, she is his niece. She also admitted that her meeting Cassie at The Ritz wasn't completely accidental.

"Why didn't you tell me you're related to Luther before now?"

"He asked me not to. I always try to be true to my word," said Crystal, blushing.

Cassie's mouth had fallen open.

She couldn't recall telling Luther about her plan to go there, though she must have. But no, she didn't know about that luxury hotel until she stopped in that little town just before it. The town where your eyes feel itchy. What was it called? Oh, yes, Lidsport.

Had Luther possibly used Silver Lady's surveillance system to spy on her? That will be the first order of business at breakfast.



Chapter 30

In the Victorian-themed restaurant of the Pink Hotel, Cassie continues to ponder what matters and why, while waiting for Luther. So far, she's the only breakfast guest. If there was time, she'd shop at the resale shop down the street, a place called Once Again, to look for something attractive to wear. She's wearing the lavender dress she bought there, though it's now river-weary and worn. Seems like only yesterday when she was here with her original crew.

Even if they all met up again here, it wouldn't be the same. When you notice something a second time, it never is.

Everything here has an extra layer of dust—a film—on the rose-colored velvet curtains, crystal chandeliers, and even on napkins crisply folded into fans atop white linen tablecloths. The room is dimmer than she remembers.

Will seeing Luther have a similar effect? She sure hopes not.

At least she recalls her earlier stay, though more recent memories of being at The Ritz and of being stuck on the boat during the quarantine have already begun to fade. Curious.

Before melancholy claws at her like a perturbed cat, Claude appears. As before, he has a white serving cloth draped over one forearm.

"Will the lovely lady prefer toast with her coffee? Or a fruit cup?"

"Thanks, but coffee will do. I'm waiting for someone to join me."

"Very well, my dear."

"It's truly nice to see you again, Claude!"

His presence alone sharpens her senses. Memories from being here before flood her brain and course through her bloodstream.

She waits. Claude keeps refilling her water glass and making small talk. She tells him how she'd heard about the pirates pillaging the quaint little town.

"It really wasn't all that bad. A little looting of the gift stores. When they showed up for dinner, they were beyond rude with their demands. And then didn't pay for their meal. Still, we've seen worse."

"Women pirates or men?"

"Women, of course. Lately, it's always the women. Why remains a mystery. I just got word that some of the nastier ones disappeared following the flood."

"Peg's Pirates, Dawn Raiders, or Mean Girls? Any of those names sound familiar?"

"No, sorry, can't say that they do."

"How about Mary's Marauders?"

"No, sorry, Cassie. Sounds like you've encountered a few since I saw you last."

"Sure have, Claude. I know this isn't the time to regale you with stories, but you want to hear some highlights from the journey upstream?"

She's still the only guest here.

He smiles and nods. She'd forgotten his charming manner.

But after an hour, Cassie's no longer in the mood for either more water or chitchat with the friendly server. The wrinkles don't

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

come out of her lavender sundress, no matter how much she smooths them with her tired hands.

Clearly, Luther isn't coming. Why is she still waiting? This stupid hope bothers her more than his not showing up. Well, almost.

Luther Singleton, you were a mere moment in my life, then gone in a flash, a blink.

Does she hate him? No, but how mean of him not to send a single text.

At the moment, she loathes the look of pity on Claude's face.

Then, even more galling, Crystal Springs tiptoes into the restaurant looking flushed with tears in her eyes. She places her tapered, perfect pink nails (probably fake) on Cassie's shoulder. Why is Crystal pitying her? Cassie can feel their sharp tips and shivers as she pulls away.

Crystal jumps back, startled. "Have you been waiting here long for Luther?"

"Over an hour, I guess. He isn't coming, is he?"

Crystal shakes her head, gazes down at her nails, and then explains how she received a text from him, asking her to let Cassie know why he can't meet up with her. He'd truly wanted to see Cassie and tell her himself.

"Was it because he needed to look in on his mother down in New Orleans? I know your grandmother's been ill. Maybe it became too much for your mom?"

Once again, Crystal pats her hand, and Cassie flings the offender away. Does she realize how her sudden display of affection is both phony and belittling? Cassie uncurls her claws and thinks about dragging her nails across Crystal's smooth, peachy skin, but then realizes they're too short to inflict any lasting damage. Easier to blame Crystal than to think less of Luther.

Crystal takes a deep breath and explains that after receiving his text, she called him to demand an explanation. After a slow exhale, she tells her that Luther has recently begun seeing someone—a younger woman in New Orleans. He'd never had children, and the

woman is young enough to conceive. Of course, it's early in their relationship, and he hasn't proposed yet.

"It was shitty for him to stand you up, but he really likes you, Cassie. His feelings are, or were, sincere." She rattles on about how he'd wanted to tell Cassie about it in person, but just couldn't.

Cassie holds her palm up. Stop now.

She reminds Cassie that he had thought Silver Lady would arrive sooner, so he waited in Doze for a few days. During that time, he met Frank. Crystal had known about this but hadn't wanted to say anything.

So, he'd only just met this woman, what, a few days ago? How can feelings be so fleeting?

Cassie tries to process the news, plus deal with memory issues brought on by being in the Land of Doze. She does her best to add up the days. After counting up the stops here and there along the river, as well as the quarantine followed by the flood, she concludes it's been several weeks, nearly a month, since Silver Lady left New Orleans. She last saw Luther back in Ruby. Did he meet this woman shortly after Silver Lady left Ruby, or afterward? The river once again has performed a magic trick—in this instance, with time.

Crystal then says something about how the men had discussed Cassie, and how they were amazed by her courage to traverse the mighty river during such trying times. She confides that Luther had challenged Frank to a duel.

"You see, he must have feelings for you, or he did then, Cassie."

"Did I hear you correctly? A duel?"

"That's right, though they didn't actually have one. They switched topics and discussed how AI was likely to have caused the internet's collapse. Something everyone's been wondering about."

Hearing about the potential duel makes Cassie feel a little better. It helps soothe her wounded ego. According to Crystal, Frank had mentioned something to Luther about moving on to another town—one still experiencing The Disappearance. He hoped his potion would turn things around there as they did in Doze. Frank failed to mention the town's name.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

"Oh, and before I forget, Claude and Fred may not have said anything yet, as they were hoping I'd ask you first, but they've decided to see the world before it ends by traveling aboard the Silver Lady. They want to experience some river magic."

"New passengers? Fantastic! Kinda wish you'd given me the good news first."

Cassie's mood improves. This will allow her to focus on turning the remainder of the journey into the pleasure cruise of her dreams. She knows she can pull this off, especially with the two men along for the ride. Their decision to travel comes as no surprise. Claude had spoken to her of his wanderlust a few times, her first time at the Pink Hotel. And seeing as he's such good friends with Fred, it makes sense that they'd travel together.

Cassie stiffens when Crystal hugs her goodbye.

As tough as it was to hear about Luther being involved with another woman, she thanks Crystal for letting her know and then retreats to the old-fashioned pink hotel room.

Time to write in the blank book since she hadn't brought the one she's been reading, the one she'd yet again lost on Silver Lady. While the boat's large for a houseboat, it's hardly an ocean liner. Why does she keep misplacing that book? Maybe it's Silver Lady's doing.

Now, why would I do something like that?

Cassie laughs as she increasingly hears the Lady's imperious voice, even when the Lady's nowhere nearby. In more ways than one, the Lady reminds her of her aunt. Ironically, her aunt would've made sure Cassie had plenty of books to read.

In the no-longer-blank book, she jots notes about her travels since leaving New Orleans. It's a way to figure out how much time has passed, a way to stop the river's current. First, there was Ruby. She saw Luther there after her dental emergency. More than a week later, they stopped briefly in New Leaf, or rather Old Leaf, then Gull Lake. Or was it Gull Lake and then Old Leaf? Afterward, Lidspot, then The Ritz, and when they tried to go to Realidad (Real), and afterward that endless quarantine. Although she can recall most of

the places, her sense of time feels distorted. A day can seem a week, and a week a day. Weird magic, for sure. She concludes that her guesswork was correct: almost a month has now elapsed since she began her homeward journey.

And again, she feels that pull of the river. She can almost hear Silver Lady beckoning her.



Chapter 34

Dust motes swirl in a sunbeam above the long-necked spirosoola resting on Cassie's lap. She brought it to the Pink Hotel, hoping to find time to practice. It's the first time she's taken it out of its case in weeks. Convinced she lacks the talent to play this unusual musical instrument, she's ignored it. But now she closes her eyes, holding a supposedly dead queen's brittle fingernail, and plucks one string, then all nine. What she plays sounds soulful, though not exactly melodious. It sounds like it's trying to tell her something, though what, is anyone's guess.

Perhaps the fingernail captured a spirit in the strings—one that will become part of her music-making. Maybe this won't happen again, but maybe it will.

She only plays for a few minutes, but afterward feels rejuvenated and ready to return to Silver Lady. Could fewer pirates on the water mean a return of river magic?

She then packs up the treasured instrument. For a moment, she thinks about pilfering the blank book, but decides instead to tear out the couple of sheets containing her trip notes.

Her energized, improved mood leads to the following decision: she will never again allow herself to be waylaid by romance, except in moments of recollection. Those heady days of wine and daisies—if not wine and roses, of desiring and being desired—are over for good.

Goodbye, Peter, Giles, Frank, and Luther. See you in occasional dreams. Others, too, but she's at a loss for their names. Goodbye to all you men.

The finality gives her a sense of power. Certainly, it won't be easy to accept, but her decision's been made. Sure, she could change her mind, but it's unlikely.

But knowing she'll never again know romantic love strips all color from her world. Were she to take out the spirosoola now, the dead queen's nail would produce only jarring, dissonant sounds. Her mood plummets.



Back on Silver Lady, she remains in her cabin for hours. Silver Lady didn't greet her upon her return from the Pink Hotel, not that Cassie thought she would. No doubt, the Lady's in a foul mood, too.

Maybe it's better this way, since Cassie doesn't have to explain the reason for her own despair.

After curling into the fetal position, she rolls onto her back. Is it morbid to lie in the funereal pose with her hands crossed on her chest? She clutches her breasts in a desperate fervor—an uninhibited position she would've likely exhibited only in the most intimate moments with past lovers. While she knows her *modus operandi* hasn't always been solely about romance, the idea of its absence fills her with dread.

She tries to picture her mother here with her now. What words of comfort would she offer? She tries her best to hear her voice, but can't. Nor can she clearly recall the older woman's face, with that

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

deep worry line between her brows. She knows her mother had one, much like hers, but her mother's vertical indentation carved even more into her forehead. "I got it from squinting a lot as a girl," she often told Cassie. Cassie always knew better: it was from life's worries. How many of them had been over Cassie?

The phone rings, startling her out of the dire stupor.

It's Claude, talking ten miles a minute. "Fred and I can't wait to board Silver Lady. Are there any particular items I should bring? Have others complained of sea legs or nausea as they do on ocean voyages, and can you please—oh, please wait a couple of more hours?"

"Not unless there's a storm." She hopes she doesn't sound too curt and tells him they need to tie up some loose ends, including a few more instructions for Crystal on how best to perform her job.

"What about a meal menu? We haven't seen one. And snacks? Do you provide them or should we bring our own? How about sunscreen?"

"Please don't worry, everything will be provided, and if it isn't, we'll pick up whatever's needed along the way," Cassie says, adding, "Meet me at the boat when you're ready."

"And one more thing. I'm a reader. Would the added weight of my books be a problem?"

"A few would be fine, Claude," says Cassie, glad he can't see her tapping her foot.

"Could you please define a few?"

"How about no more than a carton?"

"That should be fine. What about Fred? Will he bring books on board, too?"

"He loves to read, but his books, mostly about world religions, are on his tablet. If he possessed physical copies, they would sink the ship! I think I've heard you say that you're a reader, too, aren't you, Cassie?"

"I am, but I only brought one physical book with me. Most of mine are on my tablet, too."

"Oh, what kind of books do you enjoy?"

"How about we chat about books once you two are aboard?"

"I'm sorry. I'm sure you have much to do. Forgive me?"

Exhausted, she hopes Claude isn't one of those nonstop talkers.

The phone clicks. No thank-you or goodbye. He's probably nervous, poor man.

Next, there's a loud rap at the door.

It's Cheyenne. Cassie steps aside, expecting the former pirate to brusquely cast her aside. Instead, Cheyenne stands there, wearing an unusually pleasant smile. Strange, since her natural expression is one of disdain. Is she trying to mask her guilt?

"I just want you to know that Foxy Lady has turned up. You won't believe it, but she practically begged me back, promising me that she's changed her evil ways and even her brand. Get this: she's no longer captain of the 'Ladies in Waiting.' Her new ship is 'Pirates for Peace.'"

"No way!" Something's fishy, but wanting to hear more, Cassie motions for Foxy's understudy inside.

Cheyenne shakes her head and continues. "The 'ladies', unfortunately, all left, and Foxy is looking for a new crew. She said I was her favorite. Not that I believe her, but I could tell she was a little desperate."

Cheyenne goes strangely quiet and shifts uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

"Sorry, not to give you more notice, but the pirate's life is best for me."

"I'm not too surprised, Cheyenne. What made Foxy Lady stop in Doze in the first place?"

"It's a town, ain't it?"

"True, but it's a sleepy town. I wouldn't think she'd spend any time here. Not much to loot, you know?"

She doesn't have a ready answer.

Cassie realizes she's concealing something. She must be.



Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

Silver Lady:

I'm positively gleeful that we'll soon be rid of Cheyenne! That little pirate can't be gone soon enough. Never did trust her, and even less as the days have gone on. Have we seen the last of her? Probably not, but now I can heave a sigh of relief. Life will be merrier and better for all. People fall out of view just like shifting scenery. All is transient, I tell you. It's here and then gone. I'm sure we haven't seen the last of her, but for now, I'll breathe a little easier. Why, I'd even dance a jig if I could!

River:

You're making me giddy with delight, my lady. While you're free of her, the piracy continues. It's always been a problem on rivers and oceans. Oceans have suffered the worst of their nasty greed, but it's always a joy when we see less of one of those baddies. I'm happy for you.



Chapter 35

Cassie changes into her usual T-shirt and jeans, her uniform of late. On the downstream journey, she often wore a purple caftan, but when the wind billowed through it while she stood on the deck, it proved rather impractical. She then tosses her dirty clothes into a laundry bag. It's pretty last-minute, but she's decided to wash her clothes at a laundromat before leaving Doze. This will be only the second time she'll have done laundry since leaving New Orleans. (It must be said that at least she's been washing her underwear by hand every couple of days.)

If Fred and Claude arrive at the marina before she returns, she hopes they won't feel too put out.

Maybe she should text them both or tape a note on the boat's door.

Only the three of them, plus Sherlock, will be headed upstream until she acquires more crewmates, whenever that will be.

Over-planning makes her anxious these days. In fact, so much so, she's currently perched on her bed, trying to tune out her thoughts by listening to Cheyenne and Foxy Lady's voices in the

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

next room. No doubt, they're packing Cheyenne's duffel bag and pilfering whatever isn't glued down.

Since Cassie's been captain, some of Silver Lady's baubles and bling have gone missing, including throw pillows, wall mirrors, and mugs. Not a lot, overall. Her new minimalist look makes her appear larger and more appealing. Had Cassie ever found Silver Lady's owner, she would have replaced it all, but so far, she's heard nothing from the man of mystery, George Sherman. After the war, she gave up trying to locate him.

She puts her ear to the wall to better hear the two pirates. She can't believe what she overhears.

First, Cheyenne addresses Foxy Lady as Joan. Captain Joan of the Pirates for Peace. Foxy Lady suits her better. Cassie will never get used to thinking of her as Joan. It hardly sounds like a name befitting a snarly, badass pirate. She stifles what she's sure would turn into a laughing fit.

Next, she hears them saying something about how they plan to steal the six remaining orphan statues. They'll try to get a good price for them from an art dealer. If they can't, they'll dump them off on the Island of Lost Children.

"Cheyenne, look at it this way," says Foxy Lady. "We're doing a good deed by releasing their trapped spirits. This could turn us into local heroes."

Now, why hasn't Cassie thought of doing this? She's more than a little envious of their plan, especially knowing how happy it will make the island children.

Unable to contain her excitement, Cassie hurries from her room and bursts into Cheyenne's cabin. The two pirates startle, and Cheyenne drops her heavy travel bag.

"I'm here if you need any help! Just one question. Don't you think we should get Mayor Goody to sign off, especially since the statues have been a central feature of the town for several years?"

"Sign off on what exactly, Cassie?" asks Cheyenne.

"Taking the orphan statues to the Island of —"

"Taking what? Where?"

"Don't play dumb, Cheyenne. I clearly heard what you two were saying."

The two pirates look at each other. The former Foxy Lady gives Cheyenne a quick nod. What does it mean?

"Um, Cassie ... one of my T-shirts got mixed up with your clothes. Think you could get it for me?" Cheyenne asks, obviously trying to sidetrack Cassie.

"I'll look, but I don't remember it. Maybe it got mixed in with the ones I'm taking to the laundromat. What color is it?"

"Black, of course."

Cassie returns to her room to search for it. After fishing through the dirty laundry and not coming across the T-shirt, it dawns on her that it was probably a trick to get her out of the room, or back to her own.

She tries the door, but it's locked. After jiggling the latch again, Cassie shouts, "Let me out this instant!"

The door is too flimsy to make much of a sound, so she pounds on the wall until her knuckles hurt. Maybe she should kick the wall down, since it's not much thicker than the door.

Silence. After a few minutes, she hears footsteps, then eerie quiet.

Thankfully, it doesn't last long, as she's greeted with a loud meow. Staring up at her from the floor is none other than Sherlock. It isn't a *hello-meow*, but a *feed-me-now* meow. Cassie tries to explain the current impossibility of satisfying his hunger, but the feline looks put out.

He keeps staring at her.

Cassie pats the bed. Instead of jumping up, the cat thumps his tail and growls.

"C'mon, Sherlock. How about comforting each other? I'll figure something out. Don't you worry."

Damn cat hisses and turns away. Clearly, he has little faith in Cassie's ability to free them.

She next tries to send a group text to Claude and Fred explaining the situation, but the message takes forever to go

through. Despite the phone still having a charge, the signal remains weak. What the hell? Could be, she's in hell.

The porthole is too small for her to crawl through. There's a large port-side window, but it's sealed shut. If she can find something to break it, maybe she'll be able to free Sherlock. Then the cat could climb down to the deck below. But what are the chances he'll run for help? There are no Lassies in the cat world. Besides, the glass won't break cleanly, and there's a real risk of him getting cut. Still, there's no food for him in the cabin, and no litter box.

She ends up sharing a soggy graham cracker left on her nightstand from the night before. After offering him a small piece, the cat looks almost grateful. After swallowing it, he washes up as if he's just enjoyed a gourmet meal.

Then Sherlock follows her into the captain's head, the size of a small closet. It contains a miniature toilet and a small sink. After Cassie uses it, he follows suit and squats on the toilet lid to pee. A smart, if not friendly, feline.

"Good for you, Sherlock, but our problem isn't solved."

He high-tails it back into the other room. What to do next?

She checks her phone, but the signal still isn't strong enough to send her SOS to the men.

She's always hated being left alone in a room. But in a room with the door locked, it takes things to a whole new level. Sherlock's presence would help if the two got along, but Cassie takes little comfort in having him as a cellmate. Not like her former Jezebel. Still, having him here beats being completely alone. She does her best to focus on that, but the walls of the already-small room feel like they're closing in.

For the first time in a long while, she truly misses the internet.

The book she's been looking for lies on the floor by the small dresser. Why not read about the guy lost on the river in India? This is her chance to turn a few pages. She begins reading aloud to Sherlock, but after a few minutes, he slinks away. Cassie reads silently and dog-ears page fifty-seven. Will she remember what

she's read the next time she picks it up? That is, if it doesn't go missing again.

The story holds her attention. Jerry, the main character, ends up stopping in several villages. People are kind, though many don't speak English. Those who do try their best to give him directions. But no one gives him the same directions, and he doesn't know whom to trust. Cassie stops reading just as Jerry begins to panic.

Melanie's always been a reader. That certainly helps her survive her housebound lifestyle. But how can she stand never going anywhere? The Strangler Virus had mysteriously disappeared as quickly as it had appeared, but Mel didn't trust it — especially with the government crippled beyond repair. She ventures outside only for solitary walks in a nearby park or for medical appointments, and she gets her groceries delivered.

As far as Cassie knows, Mel's friendships vanished when the internet went down. It could be that she stays in touch via email or text. Cassie hopes so. Still, aside from her online work as an architect, the solitude gives her the time to work on her life's passion: building a scale model of a Utopian city. Could it be that once it's constructed, she tears it down and begins again?

One person's loneliness is another's solitude. Melanie was perfectly fine with a life without people, much like Cassie's own mother. Even so, how can she possibly feel fulfilled? Every time Cassie asks, Mel insists she is "doing just fine." Cassie truly hopes so, though she doesn't fully understand it. It could well be that she doesn't get lonely or even restless.

One of Cassie's main reasons for river travel has been to lure Melanie out of hiding. If not by joining her on the houseboat, then to show her that the external world can still be enjoyed. Her journey might one day lure her daughter from her lair. Another motive for the river adventure: to keep from worrying about her and to avoid the ache of missing her. Not that she's been successful at either, at least not very well. Maybe Melanie's right and the external world isn't all that it's cracked up to be. Take Cassie's current situation—now proven to be far less than desirable.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

"Where are you when I need you, Silver Lady?"

"Right here. Where I've always been."

Hearing her voice again makes Cassie lose her footing. She almost falls. "Been a long time. Of what do I owe the pleasure?" she asks, steadying herself against the cabin wall.

"I must admit, Cassie, I've been feeling a little sorry for you, given your present circumstances. First, I'm going to tell you something, and then I'm going to free you. Before doing so, you must promise me that you'll never tell a soul, not that they'd ever believe you. It's something I'm feeling bad about."

"Out with it, Silver Lady!"

"I did your first crew a great favor. You should know what it was; maybe you already do. You see, I'm the one responsible for Zona's death. I didn't actually kill her. Let's just say, I helped her overboard. Rocked the boat a bit too much when she was on the deck. But how could I have known she couldn't swim? I only meant to give her a little scare, not cause her demise."

"Yes, we sure did go through a terrible storm, but you must have known she couldn't survive."

Silver Lady doesn't answer right away, then sighs. "So, you're my judge and jury, Cassie? Think I didn't know how relieved you all felt when she was no longer aboard? I'm a pretty good mind reader, as you know. Anyway, what's done is done. It's not like there's such a thing as boat-prison, or any sort of punishment for my kind."

"What about karma, Silver Lady? Life always has a way of leveling the playing field."

"You think so? Only sometimes, once in a blue moon, is justice served."

After some minutes of processing the news and giving Silver Lady a taste of her own medicinal use of silence, Cassie clears her throat. "Well, it's on your conscience then. Clearly, it bothers you."

"Only a little. I'm sure she's been reborn or will be, and maybe as someone better. Who knows? Maybe she'll even return as a boat. It happens. Not that I care two hoots about what you think. It's all

about forward motion, and like I said, what's done is done. But mum's the word, right?"

"Who would believe me anyway, Silver Lady? I can't imagine that I'll ever be able to trust you again."

"I don't need your trust, Cassie, though I do value our connection."

"Okay, sure. I promise not to tell a soul."

"Then maybe we can be friends, after all."

With that, the cabin door springs open.

Cassie rushes out of the room, with Sherlock not far behind. She'll ponder over the killer-lady later.



Claude and Fred are waiting on the dock. Both look a little peeved, especially Fred. While she doesn't know either of them all that well, Fred strikes her as the more impatient one. Not much of a people-person.

"We've been wondering what's been keeping you, Cassie. It's been a long couple of hours."

After apologizing, she tells them how Cheyenne and Foxy Lady had imprisoned her. No point mentioning the orphan statues or that Silver Lady had freed her. They knew about Zona's death, but not about her murder. Perhaps one day she'll tell them, but not any time soon.

The two hotel employees, turned river cruisers, nod politely. Claude fingers his handlebar mustache and asks how she managed to free herself. Not that she could tell them it was Silver Lady's doing. Instead, she claims she'd rammed her shoulder into the door and given it the old heave-ho.

"Good thing you didn't hurt yourself," says Fred.

"Good thing I didn't break the door down! Now, don't you two gentlemen want to know about our upstream itinerary? Let me give you the grand tour, then show you to your cabins. Afterward, over

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

a glass or two of bubbly, I'll tell you about the sights and ports I have in mind."

"Sleeping cabins?" asks Claude. "We only need one. Preferably not one with bunks."

"Not a problem since there are a few with double beds. They aren't exactly roomy, but none of them have bunks."

She blushes, not having realized before that they're a couple. How could she not have known this?

"Would it be possible, since we're currently your only passengers, to put our suitcases in another cabin? Along with my box of books?"

"Why, of course. Right this way."

Claude's a good foot taller than Fred. While Fred's owlish eyes are intriguing, he isn't particularly handsome until he smiles.



Glasses are raised as Fred makes a toast.

"Bless this boat and may we three travelers on the cruise of life have only the best of times ahead!"

His remark, while a little lame, is sincere. She can tell he enjoys philosophizing.

Claude acts like Fred's just said something most profound. He nods and pets his mustache, making Fred's small eyes dance. Claude then opines how nice it'll be to get away from the haunted hotel. Not only the hotel, but the entire town.

"It's the strangest thing, Cassie," says Claude, "but I've had this strong sense of foreboding, like something bad's about to happen to the town."

"Claude's been going on nonstop about it for about a month. I need to get him away from this place," says Fred.

She doesn't tell them about Foxy Lady's precious cargo, and how it wouldn't surprise her if a few ghosts were trapped in the orphan statues. Perhaps one day, she will.



Silver Lady:

If I had cheeks, they would be burning. Why did I tell Cassie about tossing Zona overboard? Thinking aloud is not one of my better habits. I should've taken a page out of my sister, Silent Lady's, playbook. Still, I needed to tell her. Maybe I wouldn't have, had it been just a gentle nudge I'd given that bratty girl. The storm was a horrific one, so I truly didn't know she would die as a result. Shouldn't she have known how to swim if she was going to take a river trip? Surely, it's Cassie's duty not to allow passengers on board who don't know how. She's culpable, too. I'm sure she'll bring up Zona's death again. When she does, I'll let her know it was also due, in part, to her own negligence. Maybe then she'll pipe down about the unfortunate incident.

Given Cassie's reaction, it's probably for the best if I say nothing about what happened to George and his friend. My lips are sealed like Silent Lady's. After all, I am her sister. Also, I should keep my murderous thoughts regarding the pirates (particularly that vulgar Foxy Lady or whatever her new name is) to myself. At least I was able to free Cassie from those no-good women! While Cheyenne wasn't as loathsome as her buddy, they both needed to be given the boot and never allowed to ride on me again.

River:

You should have told me how I was the instigator. How glad I was for that storm! Although I was sorry for the toll it took on you, it was too bad that most of them didn't fall overboard. I would have gladly taken them to my depths. But really, Silver Lady, you needn't feel so bad. These things happen. Oh, how I love a good storm!



Chapter 36

They head upriver but are still in the Land of Doze. The three of them, and Sherlock, too, get sleepier by the minute.

As both men are from the town of Doze, they've never experienced the extreme lethargy of visitors who arrive by boat or from the surrounding inland areas. And because it's never been an issue for either of them, they're unfamiliar with the steps to combat it.

"It's okay to succumb to drowsiness, as long as you don't fall completely asleep," Cassie had warned them before they'd pulled away from the dock. "If you do, the lethargy will be even worse when you wake up. You could also get really dizzy."

And now Fred asks, sleepily, if there's a way to remain awake because he doesn't want to miss any of the scenery, even if it's not the most exciting.

Coffee or a pill? Jogging in place? Cassie laughs at his latter question.

"Singing rounds of 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat' definitely helped last time," Cassie tells them, recalling her previous attempt

to stay alert in this area where the human mind succumbs so easily to the quicksand of sleep.

So, they sing. Following the boat song, Claude suggests another round. 'My hat it has three corners, three corners has my hat.' He confides his love of singing. An opera buff, he once dreamed of a singing career.

Singing works until it doesn't. After a short time, both men slump over in their deck chairs. Fred begins to snore. Claude nudges him, but soon gives up. While Claude appears to be gazing out at the water, his stillness makes her wonder if he's fallen asleep with his eyes open.

Cassie wants to ask him more about himself, his love of reading about world religions, but drowsiness keeps her normal curiosity at bay.

She chews on a toothpick, now and then removing it only to jab it into her cheek. Don't fall asleep!

So what if she draws a little blood, if it keeps her from shutting her eyes? She'll have to pull over soon, as she doesn't want to risk falling into a deep slumber and then running Silver Lady aground.

If Jimmy and Murphy were still here, maybe she wouldn't feel this weary. She misses them and the times they shared—especially when they'd first left Gull Lake, their giddy excitement in Lidsport, and their breathless announcement about the missing paintings' return. Even though their liveliness could be irritating, it would sure wake her up now. Only fishing over the rail slowed them both down and turned them into quieter, if not exactly thoughtful, kids. How awful she felt when she lost them in The Ritz, but how relieved she was when Jimmy returned.

The river widens. Blue water turns silver, glistens for a moment, before being swallowed by a dull gray. Except for clumps of cattails and river grass, along with an occasional blue heron, there's little to observe.

The air isn't moving, and their skin feels sticky.

Is the dampness from the air or water, or both?

She slowly pulls up to the next dock they see.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

With the two men snoozing away, it's even tougher to remain awake. She tries to resume reading her book about Jerry lost on the river, but keeps rereading the same sentence.

Maybe food will help. Making her way to the galley feels like walking through wet cement. Still, she manages to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and find some energy drinks, which she places under the noses of the two snoring men. It gives them the necessary nudge.

"Not much to see around here, is there?" Claude asks, yawning. He squints at the flat, mostly scrubby riversides, clearly disappointed by the Land of Doze. Despite having lived nearby, neither had explored the surrounding area. They'd been warned of its drabness. Who wants to be around it if it can be avoided?

"And it's far too bright," adds Fred, wiping a sandwich crumb from Claude's mustache. "Either of you see my sunglasses?" He looks further piqued following their shrugs.

"You two feel free to snooze, but soon I'll rouse Silver Lady and continue upstream."

Claude and Fred give her appreciative nods. She doesn't blame them. The area is flat, and there's little to see beyond the seagrass, gray water, and occasional dragonfly. Even their wings are colorless, and they haven't seen a blue heron since they pulled up to the dock.

While she's pondering how they'd been such homebodies, a pink river dolphin appears. Could it be one she's met before? It's looking at the men, as if waiting for introductions.

"I'm Cassie," she tells the fish, who nods. The two men are now wide-eyed and clearly startled. She then introduces Claude and Fred.

The pink dolphin smiles and nods. The men do likewise. Then it casts a serious sideways glance at Cassie and makes several high-pitched utterances.

Cassie nods, her expression more serious. "Oh, is that so?"

"Don't tell me you could understand it?" Claude asks after the fish swims away.

"No, but it was clearly trying to tell us something or warn us. Maybe that one, or another one, will return."

The three are watchful and couldn't be any more wide awake.



After rounding a bend in the river, Silver Lady sneaks up behind Foxy Lady's pirate ship. What happened to the Pirates for Peace? Anyway, it no longer flies a pirate's flag. The banner now displays a picture of a woman's face. Hard to tell from this distance, but it doesn't look like someone named Joan. And what's it doing this far upriver? As for the pirate captain, Cassie will always think of her as Foxy Lady, not Joan. The two pirates had only been pretending to change their evil ways.

If Foxy Lady intends to take the orphan statues to the Island of Lost Children, she should've gone in the opposite direction from Doze.

Cassie guns the engine, doing her best to go faster, which is not easy in a houseboat, no matter how luxurious. She really should tell Claude and Fred how the pirates had absconded with the remaining orphan statues.

"Go for it, Silver Lady!" She's amazed by the boat's ability to reach a speed fast enough to stay on the pirate ship's tail. Cheyenne and Foxy Lady must now realize the houseboat is in hot pursuit (for a houseboat).

The men look worried, so Cassie tells them how Cheyenne had left something on Silver Lady.

"I'm surprised you want anything to do with them, Cassie," says Fred.

"I don't, but there's a letter addressed to her. I haven't read it, of course, but it looks important." Should she add that it looks official? No, she knows to avoid weaving too tangled a web. Still, she tries not to look too pleased with herself for coming up with

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

such a quick response. She doubts either of the men will ask to see the nonexistent letter.

Not quite time to tell them about Foxy Lady's cargo. She's got to trust her instincts.

"In a few hours, we should reach an old boat called River Reads. It used to be a bookstore. Last time I was there, it wasn't open for business, but the door was unlatched. Keep your fingers crossed that this is still the case because it's fun to explore. I can't wait to see it again!"

Perhaps a new owner has taken possession of the book boat, now that the war's over.

The men look confused, but she's not about to let those pirates get her off track.

"The books were unreadable, not only due to the water damage but also, as maybe I mentioned, because all the pages were completely blank."

"Yes, you told us this before," Fred interjects. His snappish tone suggests a growing impatience.

In whispers, she tells them she's hoping Sherlock will consider becoming a bookstore cat once they arrive, if the place is open for business.

"Do you think cats mind changing their lifestyles?" she asks. She knows about cats, but at present, it's best to act a little naive.

Both Claude and Fred believe they do. Clearly, Sherlock has bonded with them. Still, she can tell they think her plan is cold-hearted. This prompts her to explain further Sherlock's dislike, perhaps even loathing, of her when Foxy Lady slows down long enough for Cassie to pull alongside the sleek, shiny craft.

A yacht opposed to a houseboat; the pirate's ship looks down its long, aristocratic nose at the stately but slower Silver Lady. Is it Foxy Lady's cunning that makes her oblivious to Silver Lady's grace? Closer now to the craft, it's clear that its flag displays a fox wearing the human face of Foxy Lady. She's winking and looking rather feral. The real Foxy Lady is behind the wheel, and Cheyenne calls out to Cassie through a megaphone.

"Why are you trying to catch up to us?" Despite her asking this, Cheyenne doesn't sound particularly upset.

Cassie can't locate Silver Lady's bullhorn, so she does her best to shout. "You're going the wrong way!"

Cheyenne purses her lips and shrugs.

"The island is back downriver," Cassie informs the pirate.

"No, it's not. You just want the statues back, right?"

Cassie shakes her head. "If you don't believe me, check at the next stop."

Cheyenne feigns bafflement again, either because she hasn't heard Cassie or because she refuses to believe her.

Cassie returns the shrug.

Foxy Lady picks up speed. The flag furls in the breeze. It's as if the sexy human face on the fox is taunting the Silver Lady.

Cheyenne laughs and blows kisses in Silver Lady's direction.

Claude and Fred look confused.

"Island?" Fred asks.



Chapter 37

Cassie tells them a little about the island without going into too much detail. They'll find out sooner or later, and in one way or another.

It was both a mistake for Cheyenne and Foxy Lady to steal the orphan statues and to now be heading in this direction. While there are few givens on the river, some principles still apply.

At least, Cassie likes to think so.

River Reads is exactly where she remembers, though it can now be reached via a thin strip of land, possibly a levee, that wasn't there before. Lower river levels are concerning; they've been worsening the farther north they go.

Previously, the only way to get to the floating bookstore was from another docked boat.

The freshly painted book boat, a former ferry, now sports a large decal of a book next to its name. Several freshly varnished wooden rocking chairs line the outer deck.

It's nice to know someone's been making improvements during these days of social chaos following the Civil War.

After tying up at the dock, the three walk single file down a long, narrow dock. Sherlock trails behind but catches up to them when they reach the stationary ferry.

Cassie jiggles the door handle, but it's locked. After another unsuccessful push, she notices a 'Back in 5' sign in a window. Five minutes or five hours? It's anyone's guess.

They make themselves comfortable in the rocking chairs. Sherlock eyes one, too, but prefers traipsing about, sniffing the exciting new scents. Feeling a little more awake, the men seize the opportunity to open up more about themselves.

"You may not know this, Cassie, but I lost my wife to The Disappearance. She was one of the many who vanished without a trace."

"I'm so sorry, Fred. Maybe there's a chance she'll reappear, like the paintings or books."

Fred smirks at her. Is it because he thinks she's not being serious, or something else? She's about to apologize for her comment when he responds.

"Well, I'm not going to hold my breath. I miss her, of course, but ours was a loveless marriage. She was a friend, often a good one, but I'd been thinking of leaving her for years. I've wasted many years," Fred adds with a sigh, looking longingly at Claude.

"Don't say that, my dear. We've had great fun both on and off the clock at the hotel," Claude reminds him.

"I suppose so. By the way, did you know that Claude was once an actor? A brilliant one, at that."

Peering through the window, they see books lining only some of the shelves. Cassie notices unopened boxes on the floor.

Sherlock paws desperately at the door, as if he lives there and wants to get inside. Perhaps he did in one of his former lives. The three humans snicker, but Sherlock, ignoring them, persists for a bit before settling down. He continues to face the door, his back to them.

Then Fred points at a sign next to the door: "Wanted: Book Captain. If interested, send an email to Anne: alee@zmail.com. This

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

must have been posted before the internet went down. Good thing, Anne also left a phone number.

They sit in the rickety, though freshly painted, rockers and wait for the return of whoever put up the 'Back in 5' sign. Sherlock claims one of the rockers, too. His expression, however, is less expectant than those of the others.

While they wait, they talk about books. It turns out that most of the paperbacks Claude brought are poetry collections, including his favorites: Whitman, Donne, and Frost. He also brought a couple of anthologies, but Fred talked him out of bringing any hardbacks because of their weight.

"Are you a poetry fan, Cassie?"

"I sure am, though I must admit, I haven't read it much in the past few years."

"What type of books do you enjoy? Lately, I mean."

"Fiction. Page-turners, you know? Psychological suspense."

She then asks Fred what he reads outside of world religions. Turns out he loves books about cathedral architecture, French cooking, and extreme sports.

As all three profess to love books, the question of applying for the position soon arises. Cassie's not quite as interested as either of them. But if the job's still available after she tires of river travel, she'll inquire.

Maybe she'll live out her days here ... Frank or Luther could visit ... The true Mr. Right will abandon his life and join her ... But there is no Mr. Right, and right now she can't imagine spending her days on a book boat, especially one that is stationary. It might lessen her enthusiasm for reading. Once she worked at a bakery, and it turned her off to pastries long after she'd left the job.

No point discouraging them from applying.

Claude and Fred debate the merits of the position and finally decide to apply if the current manager or owner returns. Since they don't want to compete with each other, they hatch a plan to work part-time if the boss is only looking for one person. Still, maybe it's best to hold off on looking for work until the river journey's over.

They still haven't determined how long they'll be able to live off their savings.

"Or you could send a text now, just to express your interest."

"Quite true, Cassie. Good idea," says Claude.

She thinks this will put an end to the conversation, but no, it continues until they finally notice her foot-tapping and the arpeggio of yawns. Maybe the 'Back in 5' sign signifies five weeks or five years.

"Sorry to bore you, Cassie," Fred says with a sniff. At that moment, a teenage girl rushes down the grassy, but treeless, rope of land. Cassie knows her from somewhere. Tall and thin, with that white-blond hair that looks translucent.

"Aurora Lee! Is that you?"

"Uh, no. I'm Anne Lee. Same initials, I guess. Anne is short for Annabel — my favorite poem by Edgar Allan Poe. Do you know it? Should I know you?" Anne Lee says, unsuccessfully blowing a strand of hair from her face with what little breath she has left. She must be out of breath from her sprint. She pushes the white-blond strand away with her hand.

"Don't you recall me from the Island of Lost Children? I'm Cassie, captain of the Silver Lady."

"Sorry, you look familiar, but I can't quite place you. True, I once lived on an island, but that wasn't its name. I was never lost, and I lived there with friends. You haven't seen a boy with red hair on your travels, have you?"

"Murphy? He rode with us for a ways until we left The Ritz Hotel."

"That isn't my friend's name. At least, I don't think so."

Anne, who is really Aurora, must have amnesia. Could she have recently fallen and hit her head? Little point in asking.

After being introduced to Claude and Fred, Anne tells them how she's been working on River Reads temporarily, only until a new manager is found, or until she finds the red-haired boy. She left the island in search of her parents, but gave up when she couldn't find them. She realized she didn't miss them, but she did

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

miss the boy. Whatever his name is. When she finds him, everything will make sense again — her bewilderment will vanish. She's almost certain of it.

"This truly is a magical place," Anne, who is really Aurora, says, possibly in hopes of luring one of them to apply for the job.

"I'll just be sitting there on that stool behind the counter when a new box of books or a single book suddenly appears from who-knows-where. Kind of like the paintings."

How curious, given the isolated job, that she knows about The Reappearance.

"I've worked hard to rid the boat of the old, moldy books. The pages were blank in the older ones. Maybe those that magically appear from thin air have been restored. Doesn't make much sense, I guess. But then magical things rarely have logical explanations, do they?"

Cassie tells them that the last time she was here with her former crew, not only were all the books water-damaged, but there were no words on any of the pages, except for the comic books and graphic novels.

Claude's eyes double in size, and Fred's mouth falls open. Sherlock looks positively bored by the chattering humans and waits for them on board. After touring River Reads, it's clear he's decided against becoming a bookstore cat.

"Been there, done that," Sherlock sighs. Cassie's unsure if he said this aloud.

"More's the pity." Cassie's almost sure her words aren't vocalized.

Sherlock gives her a brief hiss. He must have heard her. Since no one else reacts, Cassie guesses her opinion hadn't escaped her lips.

Is she able to sometimes read Sherlock's mind, the way she does Silver Lady's?

As there's no convincing Anne that she's really Aurora (there's a slight possibility she isn't), there's no reason to remain here any longer. Maybe she is Aurora's double. Cassie and her former crew

once saw their doubles on the first trip. As they never spoke with them, she has no idea if they had the same names. Anything's possible along this grand and magical river.

Not wanting to seem impolite, the three thumb through some of the new books. Cassie finds a copy of the book she's reading about the guy, Jerry, who was lost on the Ganges River. What are the odds of coming across another copy? She considers buying it since hers is always getting lost but changes her mind.

After enjoying Anne's tea and cookies, they bid her farewell.

"I'd be happy to offer you a reduced cruise rate."

Anne thanks her but declines the offer. "Maybe I'll go to the Ritz and look for the red-haired boy. Maybe his name is Murphy. I'll know when I see him."

"All the best to you, Aurora, I mean, Anne," says Cassie.

Sherlock weaves between Anne's legs. A proper goodbye for such a cat.



Chapter 38

After rounding a couple of river bends and noting a few familiar little beaches, Cassie receives a text from Tony. Considering how helpful he was on the downriver trip, it's only natural to turn to him once again. Since Fred kindly agreed to drive the boat, she has time to respond.

According to her digital phone map, Tony's Market will be their next stop. She doesn't know for sure because it's at the edge of an unnamed town that shows up as 'Town' on her phone. So many towns were stripped of their names before the war. This time, she needs him to help her locate new crew members for the trip to Minnesota. That country's still such a long way off.

Tony sends her a text with the contact information of two interested applicants. He adds that she's welcome to use his store office for interviews.

She sends him smiling emojis in response.

They pull into a slip at the same marina from the first trip. It's as rundown as before, but she's quick to point out the curvy little path through a park, which they'll take into town.

The unnamed town looks pretty much the same as before, but with freshly painted storefronts. And once again, a few stores are open for business.

As the three of them, minus Sherlock, walk to town from the marina, Cassie stops at the jacaranda tree. Claude and Fred are impressed by the beauty of its purple blossoms. They remark on its slight aroma of honey and musk. She drifts back to the time she was there before, recalling how attractive she once felt in her purple caftan. The sensuality in the air is absent now.

"You okay, Cassie?"

She nods, and they move on. Claude has a sneezing fit.

"Uh oh, my allergies must be acting up. Is there a drugstore in town? Wouldn't you know, I left my medication back in Doze," he grumbles.

Luckily, they find a store. Claude takes forever deciding which product to buy, but finally decides. The clerk gives him a paper cup of water, and Claude immediately stops sneezing and appearing congested. It must be the placebo effect. She squelches a chuckle mid-escape from her throat.

Just like before, there are few pedestrians. They all agree there's something fishy about this little hamlet and decide not to linger long.

Claude remarks how it resembles a movie set. The few people they see on the sidewalks could well be actors. Something to be considered.

"Like that old Jim Carey movie, 'The Truman Show,' right?"

"The what show?" Claude asks. Neither of them has seen it. This doesn't surprise her, as Dozians have little access to movies, especially newer ones. Even when the internet worked, it did so only sporadically in the little town. No one knew why.

Tony's older, but not elderly, with a bulbous red nose, bushy eyebrows, and thinning hair. He's as friendly as she recalls, hugging her like she's an old friend.

"Cassie, I never thought I'd see you again. Usually, most folks just go down the river, but never return."

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

"That sounds a little ominous. It sure is nice to see you again, too, Tony," she says, extracting herself from his squeeze as quickly as possible. Extroverts are never fans of social isolation. It makes her wonder if this place is more cut off than others.

The men briefly shake hands after introductions are made.

"So, you bought Silver Lady, eh?" Tony asks, rather pointedly ignoring the men.

"Actually, I've never been able to reach its owner, so I guess she's mine by default. I tried several times. If he ever contacts me, I'll return her, of course."

"She's meant to be yours! No problem, and do use my office. It's in back, on the left."

She calls the two applicants for the available part-time positions. As it turns out, both can meet with her almost immediately. They must be anxious to make some money, even though it won't be a lot. Job opportunities must be scarce in such a small town.

If they're both above board, the interviews shouldn't take long, just a brief chat to make sure they're up for the job.

Claude and Fred agree that the process need not be overly rigorous. Yet Fred, a former hotel manager, stresses that she shouldn't adopt too casual a tone. The applicants should take the job seriously. As much as she needs crew members, she could wait for the right applicants to show up. She certainly doesn't want anyone untrustworthy aboard Silver Lady.

After a brief discussion with Tony about the war, Claude and Fred let her know they're off to explore the town, then plan on returning to gaze longer at the lovely jacaranda.

"You're a good judge of character, Cassie, I'm sure you'll make the right choices," Claude says before leaving the store.

But is she? And how often have others falsely judged her character?

Cassie sits behind Tony's large and messy desk. She's wearing her captain's hat, and her hair's pulled back in a smooth braid instead of her usual frizzy one. While she's wearing blue jeans, she's also sporting a professional-looking blazer.

Her first interviewee arrives promptly. Why does Cassie feel nervous, as if she's the one being interviewed?

She rises and, with unexpected vigor, shakes Elliot Holdon's hand, hoping she looks official enough. Elliot's a middle-aged, former Navy guy. His meaty paw causes the bones in her fingers to about turn to dust. She hopes he didn't notice her hand shaking when she extended it.

"Since I was in the Navy, I'm up on my nautical terms like helm, haul, and keel. Go ahead and ask me to define any of them."

He defines all three terms without waiting for her to quiz him. He's friendly and doesn't ask many questions. There's something odd about his eyes. His eye contact is minimal. Maybe he's simply shy. She makes a note of this, even though she's already decided to hire him. After briefly explaining their route upstream, she welcomes him aboard.

Elliot smiles broadly and thanks her. Again, no questions. Odd, but okay ...

As he's leaving, he fails to find the doorknob. His hand blindly gropes the door. Even odder. Maybe he's more nervous than he appears. She races over and opens the door for him.

Waiting in the short and narrow hallway is Lucy Artelle. Lucy's red curls cap a deeply lined face. Her red-rimmed eyes make it look like she recently had a good cry. Little wonder, for it isn't long after sitting across from Cassie, when Lucy mentions that she became a widow six weeks ago, but is now "ready to see the world again."

Lucy giggles after saying this, adding she bets Cassie's seen a thing or two along the river.

Cassie nods and tells her about a few of the places from both trips, including the Island of Lost Children and Realidad, or Real as it's now called.

Lucy chortles again. "Both such strange names. Weird, they changed Real to Realidad. That just tickles my funny bone!"

"No, it was changed from Realidad to Real."

"Either way, it's funny!" Lucy starts laughing, and it takes her a few minutes to collect herself. Must be a nervous reaction to the

situation. She then asks about sleeping arrangements and the other passengers. Strangely, she seems more confident than Cassie would expect.

Like Elliot, Lucy was once in the Navy, though she served in the Reserves.

The interview takes longer than Cassie expected.

After briefly describing the others, Cassie congratulates her on joining the crew and says they'll be leaving the following morning.

"Lucy, your job will mostly be to take turns driving the boat with Elliot."

"I'd like that, ma'am, I mean Captain Cassie. Thanks."

Since Elliot has more experience, he'll probably do most of it, unless he proves less competent. Lucy tells her twice how she often drove the family motorboat on vacations. While this experience isn't all that impressive, it works in Lucy's favor.

Lucy thanks her profusely and giggles as she sashays to the front door of Tony's Market.

Lucy asked only one question; Elliot asked none.

Odd.

When Cassie informs them both about the meager pay, neither blinks.

Again, most curious.

"And of course all meals will be provided," Cassie hastens to add. Both smile and nod, but ever so slightly. Had there been more candidates, she doubts she would've chosen either of these two numb skulls. Maybe they'll grow on her.

Next, Cassie saunters through the town, both window-shopping and keeping lookout for the two men. There are few pedestrians and even fewer cars. After exploring a ridiculously expensive wine and cheese shop, she heads back to the marina.

Outside of Silver Lady, there's a small boat resting in one of the slips. Its sail displays the face of a winking woman on a fox. We meet, yet again, Foxy Lady. Did they stop here because they saw Silver Lady? What else could they possibly want from Cassie?

The two pirates call out to her.

"Ahoy, there, ladies." Cassie can't believe she actually called them ladies.

"Great to see you again! We have a few things for you," says Cheyenne.

Is river magic causing Cassie to hallucinate? Or perhaps a river charm, a strong one, sweetened the pirates and transformed them into kinder people. Something must be awry, as they've never been this friendly. What could they have for her? Neither was kind or generous by nature. It must mean they want something from her. She tries her best to suppress a fast-emerging smirk.

"Join us on the deck for a cup of tea?" asks Foxy Lady (supposedly now Joan).

An invitation? No way can this be possible.

For the first few minutes, the three discuss the strange emptiness of this little town and the beauty of the jacaranda. A pleasant exchange, if not phonier than hell. They sip tea without slurping or burping, and then Cassie raises an eyebrow.

"Okay, ladies, out with it. What's up?"

"Well, um ... how'd you like to take the orphan statues off our hands? No one seems interested in buying them, and ..." Foxy Lady falters. She doesn't sound like her badass self at all.

"And?"

"We've been losing sleep at night as their spirits roam and clatter about whenever we try to sleep," admits Cheyenne.

"Well, that's a real selling point now, isn't it, ladies?" Again, Cassie, without meaning to, addresses them as ladies.

"We're not interested in selling them now, to you or anyone. You'd be doing us a big favor just by taking them. Please. And you know me: a please is as close to begging as I'll get."

Cheyenne further explains how they aren't particularly spooky and pose no harm. It's more that they're a pain in the ass, a nuisance, the way they laugh in irksome, high-pitched voices. The statue-children clearly enjoy disturbing the sleep of these two wimpy pirates. Foxy Lady had issued all sorts of threats to the children until Cheyenne convinced her it would only make matters worse.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

Cassie's not exactly sold on the idea of taking them off their hands.

They make their case yet again. And it's only because Cassie is tired of listening to their complaints that she allows them to, at last, load the statues onto Silver Lady. They succeed in wearing her down.

Silver Lady will keep the noisy spirits in line; she's the only one who can. Of course, Cassie doesn't let the wannabe badasses know this.

In no time, the pirates deliver the six impermeable and unruly orphans to one of the cabins. Still fearing their mischievous spirits, both women speak to them in soft, affectionate tones, even telling them how lucky they are to be in good hands now.

Cassie tries to muffle her laughter, but the supposedly reformed pirates cast dirty looks at her. Cheyenne and Foxy Lady, like feral cats, have morphed into sweet Tabby kittens.



Silver Lady:

I much prefer the new arrivals to those two pirates stomping around on my clean decks. Still, I hope those heavy stone children and their equally weighty spirits won't be traveling with us for long, as we don't need the extra ballast. And while I've never been a fan of children, their trapped sorrow will (if it continues) drag my mood down, too. It's clear that Cassie doesn't think their souls are entrapped in their stone bodies. Is she ever in for a surprise!



Chapter 39

It's as if the 'retired' pirates simply vanished along the River Road. Cassie was checking in with the new crew when the troublesome twosome motored away so fast that she couldn't see their direction.

She tells Claude and Fred of her plan to transport the orphans to the Island of Lost Children, but they remind her how this would require traveling back through the interminably dull expanse of the Land of Doze. As Dozians, she'd expected them to be upset about the pirates having stolen the statues in the first place, but they weren't. There must be another island not too far away, someplace else to deposit them. Maybe she could find a buyer, though it seems wrong to sell them. While she's a little worried about their sleep being disturbed by the mischief makers, the men are right: it wouldn't be worth backtracking. After all, what is she always saying about the importance of forward motion in life?

Cassie does her best to interest the passengers and crew in upcoming upriver attractions: the tall bluffs, picturesque silver maples, bur oaks, and green ash trees, as well as the bridges. She

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

also highlights the variety of wildlife, including blue herons, sand cranes, frogs, and water lilies. The river's so clear in some spots that you can see the bottom, she tells them. Can you imagine that? And you never know what will be waiting for you as you round the next bend!

While the scenery becomes less surreal the farther they go upstream, the mighty river should continue to charm them with its natural magic and majesty. And is there anything better than being gently rocked to sleep on a starry night? The recent war had occurred farther south, so this region looks almost pristine, if not exactly the Garden of Eden before the fall.



Why did Cassie take on new crew members when she still needs to tell Claude and Fred about the sinister aspect of Silver Lady? And certainly, Elliot and Lucy should know, too. What if the Lady's murderous impulse returns and she targets one of them? What if she grows even more displeased with Cassie? Not that the sometimes devious, cranky craft plans to do her in. At least, the Lady hasn't shown much displeasure with her, aside from silence. Still, Cassie's former trust is gone, and she isn't sure how the Lady views the others.

Her choices are clear: either she tells them all about Silver Lady, or she has them all disembark once they reach Byron. And if she divulges what she knows, they're likely to bid her farewell in Byron anyway. Even if the passengers must be aware of the river's magic (at least Claude and Fred are), it might be a stretch to expect them to believe that Silver Lady has a consciousness. If she reveals how Silver Lady and she communicate, the men will have a good laugh before demanding a full refund. And the new crewmates will insist on getting off at the next stop.

It might be best to say engine trouble is the reason for ending their journey. In that case, Claude and Fred will get their money

back. Deciding this is the easier option, she also thinks it best to wait until they're close to Byron before informing them of the changed circumstances. Even if she won't have to refund Elliot or Lucy, unfortunately, she won't be able to pay them after reimbursing Claude and Fred.



Cassie cautions Elliot to ease up on the gas in the now shallow water. "Not far northwest of here is where Silver Lady got stuck before," she tells him.

He nods, but she doesn't think he heard her.

She's been pacing the deck, hoping to get rid of an achy lower back. Aches and pains have been a rarity since she left Minnesota. But now she feels the true weight of her sixty-three years.

Where did her hand lotion go? Whenever she needs it, she can't find it. She'll have to be careful not to take her crabbiness out on the others. But, oh, how much better she'd feel with smooth hands, if not wrinkle-free. Ever since she noticed her hands showing signs of age, she's stupidly hoped to find a miracle cream to make them look young again. Not gonna happen, scolds her inner critic. Although it's no picnic seeing lines etch deeper into her face, she never stares long at her reflection. Her hands are always there. She needs more pockets in her clothing.

As she searches for the lotion, Lucy is in the middle of telling Claude and Fred her life story. Outside of her husband's premature death (complications of pneumonia), her life doesn't strike Cassie as all that interesting. A shame about her husband.

"Be right back," Cassie tells her before making her way back to her quarters to further search for her magic lotion. Never before did she truly realize its power. Her inner critic scoffs at her, or is it Silver Lady? Since she hasn't spoken aloud, how would Silver Lady know what she's looking for?

Unable to find the lotion, she returns to the deck.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

"But Cap'n Cassie, I was hoping for some girl talk," Lucy whines before letting loose that awful giggle of hers.

Silver Lady jerks and jostles like a mechanical bull. Loose objects lose their grip, but thankfully, nothing goes flying. Elliot's still gunning the engine now and then.

Cassie will have to tell him again, more insistently than before, that he's putting the boat at risk of getting stuck. She certainly doesn't want to be confined with this crew any more than necessary. Nothing against Claude or Fred, but the additional newbies increase the likelihood of Silver Lady becoming immobile again. Silver Lady must know this, too, though there are no longer two little boys mucking up her decks. What was Cassie thinking when she hired Elliot and Lucy?

Claude and Fred sit side by side in deck chairs, sharing a pair of binoculars. Silver Lady has settled down, at least for the time being. The two men exclaim over several bluffs now coming into view. The entire group, except for Lucy, inhales the sweet honey scent of the Balsam poplars as they watch white pelicans dip for fish. Lucy's busy filing her candy-red fingernails. She takes a break to sit up top with Elliot, giggling at everything he says.

"Shee-it ... let me tell you about putting metal-to-the pedal. Why, back in my motorcycling days, little Red, tire marks on cement roads were my signature. Say, you don't mind if I call you little Red, do you?"

Lucy shakes her head, and her laughter trills like a skipping stone.

Elliot does a surprisingly good job guiding Silver Lady into a solitary slip adjacent to a picnic table on a cement pad. A perfect spot for lunch. Cassie's been hoping they could eat in Byron, but destination spots are always a little further off than they seem.



Chapter 40

Over gooey grilled cheese sandwiches and mugs of hot tomato soup, Cassie tells the passengers and crew about Byron. Unlike the postcard town of Doze, Byron is stuck in the 1950s. Weirdly, her visual recall is in black and white, like an old TV show.

Could the recent lack of thriving businesses have leached the town of its colorful hues?

Or could isolation and loneliness be the culprit?

The hungry, sad hearts of those who've given up looking for love or even contentment.

More than a little like her own.

"That didn't happen in my hometown despite all the closed stores," Lucy says, raking her fingers through her red curls.

"While the two towns are kind of alike," Cassie replies, "Byron has a little more character. When I said it's black and white, I also meant the people. People of color, as well as a few whites, lived there."

Lucy and Elliot's unnamed hometown looked more like the Hollywood set of a pleasant but nondescript Main Street, with

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

white picket fences and overly placid faces, except for Tony and his market.

Lucy and Elliot remark how they're looking forward to seeing Byron, though their interest sounds a little forced. There's a brief discussion about how being from an unnamed town's an embarrassment and how it's not somewhere to spend your life.

Cassie, Claude, and Fred nod in sympathy.

Cassie tells them how Byron's town square boasts a fountain and pond, but the last time she visited, it was empty, and the shops were mostly shuttered.

"With any luck, the missing people and artwork have been returned there, too," says Lucy.

"Sure, but let's not get our hopes up," Cassie cautions.

She wants to add that it will also be the end of the line for them. She'll wait until they're within an hour of Byron before saying anything.

Maybe she'll say that Silver Lady's last stop must be Byron due to engine troubles and that it'll require a whole new engine. And because of the expense, as well as the time it will take to get Silver Lady river-worthy, she'll be sure to add that she won't be able to ferry passengers. She'll remain there a few days, or until the others have moved on, however long that takes.

After disembarking, it will still take a few days for Cassie and Silver Lady to arrive in Minnesota.

Because it's too soon to tell them, she continues to share the fake itinerary. After leaving Byron, there are a few more magical sights to see, including Nature's magic. Awaiting their viewing pleasure: the bluffs, small yet pristine beaches, waterfalls, forests of silver maples, bur oak, and green ash, as well as their constant companions from South to North, the cottonwoods. She tells them to expect several bridges, each one different from the last. (This detail was omitted from her captain's log on the previous trip.)

Conscious of her own voice and trying hard not to speak in monotone, Cassie wonders if she should consider becoming a tour guide on the mighty river.

"We could stop in Bemidji, Minnesota, the mythic home of Paul Bunyan and the Blue Ox," she adds.

There's unanimous consent to add this stop to the tour. She's piqued their interest. It's not too late to change her mind. She doesn't have the heart to let them down, but she must. Even though she feels bad about it, it's not like they're friends. Even Claude and Fred are little more than acquaintances. She won't be the first to break a promise.

Silver Lady hasn't spoken for the past couple of hours, making Cassie almost forget about the subliminal evil that lurks throughout the Lady's body of steel and fiberglass. What if something happened to one of the passengers? Cassie would never forgive herself. In fact, she'd feel like a co-conspirator, even if she wasn't. Why is this hitting her full force now rather than before? Could it be that she simply hadn't realized the extent of the Lady's power?

She can't wait any longer. They need to know about Silver Lady.

"Have any of you noticed anything strange since you've been aboard?" she asks them all.

"What do you mean? Like, what kind of s-s-strange?" stammers Lucy. Her nervous giggle has an extra quiver.

"Have you sensed a presence? Heard a voice, maybe?"

Eyebrows raise, and heads shake. Just as well that Silver Lady hasn't revealed herself. Still, Cassie's duty-bound to let them know.

"Sometimes objects have gone missing, or they've turned up in odd locations."

"What sort of objects?" Fred asks.

"Books, a box of toothpicks, my captain's log, hat, and coffee mugs," she responds, trying to recall other ones.

Claude and Fred both nod.

"Since you mention it, Cassie, Claude, and I were just wondering about what became of a book I was reading last night. Turned up on a deck chair this morning, though I'd left it on the couch last night."

Both men look more baffled than upset.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

"Remember, we're both well used to the orphan ghosts at our old hotel. This one sounds like a mischief-maker," says Claude.

Cassie picks up on what Claude and Fred are trying to do. Until now, she hadn't realized how little they think of the two new crew members. She'll do her best to help them out.

"It does indeed seem that Silver Lady has a spirited personality. An assertive one, at that," says Fred.

Without giving too many details, Cassie lets them know that Silver Lady has a discernible presence, much like a house ghost. But the Lady is no ghost. Cassie is on the verge of telling them all about Zona's murder, but decides against it. At least for now.

"Why didn't you tell us about this before we agreed to work on this spooky ship?" asks Elliot, turning to Cassie. For a tough guy, he sure gets easily spooked.

She apologizes to the new arrivals. Should she tell them more? Maybe she won't need to, and this will be all it takes to get Lucy and Elliot to pack their bags. But what if Silver Lady takes a dislike to Claude or Fred? At some point, she'll have to explain her distrust of the sometimes-malevolent lady.

Elliot pushes his paper plate away and begins to mumble incoherently before breaking down in ragged sobs and moans. They aren't the sounds of a military man, but of someone prone to crying. But why would the mention of the mere possibility of a ghost cause him to break down?

Lucy stops giggling to comfort him, patting his heaving shoulders. Could Lucy be attracted to him? Cassie had wondered about it before. Not the time to wonder now. Caught off guard by Elliot's reaction to this new knowledge about Silver Lady, she needs to think fast and say something to cast doubt on her earlier remarks.

"It could be just river magic at work. I mean, how could a boat be conscious, right? I'm sorry to have upset you both. If you want to bid us farewell once we get to Byron, I certainly understand. You'll both be fully compensated for the number of days aboard, of course."

A long silence ensues.

"No need for jumping ship, is there, Elliot?" begins Lucy. "I'm much too curious about seeing Minnesota. I've heard it's a lovely area. If there is a presence here, and if Silver Lady is somehow alive, as long as she's nice to us, I'm okay with it."

"I guess Lucy's right," says Elliot with a final snuffle. "We're good. It's just that sometimes this magical crap is just plain weird. Hard to get my mind around it."

"It's not easy, for sure," Cassie tells him, nodding. "Thank you both for putting your trust in me once more. How about we coax the Lady further upstream to Byron?"

Cassie is forever amazed at the unspoken thoughts of others. Despite Lucy's reassurances of remaining on board, she suddenly seems to have lost interest in Elliot. Cassie wonders if Claude and Fred picked up on Lucy's former attraction to him, too. Lucy is now merely polite with him, nothing more, though the giggling continues. Elliot notices the change. He mumbles more and grows clumsier, often tripping over things, including his own feet. Of course, he'll never ask Lucy whether she's interested in him, or whether she ever was.

And Cassie has new worries.

She's back to square one. How will she now be able to prevent Elliot and Lucy from continuing the cruise after Byron? She'd truly hoped they'd both want to, if not jump ship, then scurry off it as soon as possible after telling them about Silver Lady. Her other concern: she doesn't trust Silver Lady. Not for a minute. After all, the captain's the one responsible for the safety of her passengers and crew.

According to her calculations, it should take only another hour to reach Byron.

All five of them, plus Sherlock, are sitting on the upper deck on loosely grouped chairs. Claude and Fred, rested from their naps, are talking excitedly about the town despite Cassie's tepid description.

"How can it be that the colors there are black and white?" asks Fred.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

Cassie shrugs. They'll soon see for themselves. Instead, she tells them how disturbing the gunfire had been in this very area when going downstream.

There's a nip in the air, making Sherlock frisky. Too many human legs prevent him from scampering away with any speed. He bites Lucy's index finger, drawing a spot of blood. Lucy stops giggling long enough to scold the cat and wag her bitten finger at him.

Cassie's on the verge of telling Lucy that, like Lucy, she's a widow, too. But the others are there, and it's been impossible to have a heart-to-heart talk with her. Lucy makes Crystal Springs seem profoundly deep.

"Right around here, there was a cow on the water's edge staring out wistfully at the river," Cassie tells the group.

No sooner does she say this when, wouldn't you know, a dairy cow, no doubt the same one, is standing there, chewing its cud. It looks wistful, just like before.

But right afterward, they see someone standing at the end of a dock. He's too far away to see what he's wearing, but Cassie already knows.

"He'll be dressed in a clown mask and won't notice us because he'll be giving a soliloquy to the river," she informs the group.

And sure enough, there he is, doing exactly that. He gestures wildly as he speaks.

Silver Lady slowly ambles along as if she's visiting an art gallery, going from painting to painting.

"Next, we're likely to see a young woman sitting on a tree branch over the river. She'll be singing a Joni Mitchell song. If not one of Joni's, then some other folk song from the 1960s."

But it turns out Cassie's wrong about this.

There's a tree with sturdy branches extending over the river, yet no one's there.

"Still, it's definitely river magic, don't you think?"

"Seems a bit staged, if you ask me," grumbles Elliot behind the wheel.



Then, the Silver Lady gets stuck around the same place she did when going downstream.

"Shit, hell, damn ... No!" Cassie yells. From experience, she knows it will take a while before they're rescued, and there's little chance this crew will free her. Lucy suggests they all get out and push Silver Lady free of the tree roots, or whatever has her snagged. This isn't the right group for the arduous job, as Cassie recalls how difficult it was even for the first, more vigorous crew. Elliot's the only one with muscles.

"Elliot, quit gunning the engine," she calls out. Black smoke leaks into the water. He must have heard her, but he continues for several more minutes. Is he simply defying her, or is he hard of hearing? Both? She suddenly misses her former drivers. Larry and Cheyenne were much better at keeping them from getting stuck and at freeing them from weeds and rocks.

It won't surprise her if pirates come to their rescue, one of the nicer bands. As it turns out, the 'kinder' ones have been increasing ever since the Coast Guard stopped receiving funding after the federal government collapsed. They'll be assisted, provided they're even noticed. It hits Cassie that when Silver Lady is docked, she's visible, but lately she's been gliding through the river unseen. When she's stuck, it's the same as being docked. Please, let her be seen!

The further northwest they've traveled, the fewer boats they've passed.

All they can do is wait. Everyone, except Cassie, is snoozing. Instead, she's pacing the deck, hands folded behind her back, the brim of her captain's hat pulled down over her furrowed brow. Sherlock, who usually ignores her, follows close behind, no doubt bored with cat naps. Cassie talks aloud to herself to ease her agitation. Her feline friend looks equally agitated but is listening keenly.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

If pirates invade, there's little worth stealing. They're low on supplies. The only desirable booty, besides Silver Lady herself, is the four statues.

Why not take them ashore in the lifeboat? Their weight isn't helping; it could be hindering them from breaking free from the tree roots' clutches. The passengers and crew could toss them overboard, but that would feel wrong. These were once real children, after all, or so Cassie has come to believe.

Why hasn't she thought of this before?

She makes sufficient noise preparing the statues for a send-off by rolling them from the cabin where they are stored to the starboard side, where the small lifeboat hangs from exterior hinges.

The still sleepy passengers wander out of their cabins, wondering what's going on. They immediately agree with her and help load the statues into the waiting lifeboat.

"Claude and I will be happy to help you set them ashore," Fred says.

"Thanks, but there won't be enough space in the lifeboat. Also, I'll probably be over the weight limit, as it is."

"How are you going to lift them out once you're ashore?"

"They're heavy, for sure, but I'll figure something out. Think I could roll them off the back end?"

Fred and the others nod. This seems to make sense. She finds it curious that Elliot didn't offer to help, but then, given his crabby personality, it's no big surprise.

Cassie makes steady progress rowing them to a sandy bank. They'll get more attention there than on the other side of the river, where trees stand shoulder-to-shoulder at the water's edge. The statues stand upright on the lifeboat's floor. She hasn't noticed before, but one of them resembles Kira, the sister she never knew. Kira died at age two, but this little girl looks to be around five or six. Still, the facial likeness is striking, at least as Cassie recalls from photos.

While she can't swear to it, they seem to be looking around, noticing their surroundings.

It's not quite possible to roll the children off the boat, so she hoists them onto the sandy shore. This part's harder than she thought, and she knows her shoulders and arms will pay for it the next day. Once they're on the small beach, she rolls them a short distance.

It doesn't take long to position each of them so that they're facing the river. Even if Elliot had agreed to row the children here, she wouldn't have trusted him to arrange them to her liking. She waves to the waiting Silver Lady and the others, then plunks down next to the stone children, catching her breath.

Next, she goes up to each of them and says a separate goodbye. No hugs or kisses, but it's still a tender leave-taking. She lingers longest with the one who reminds her of Kira. Since they can't be with the others on the Island of Lost Children, maybe this will be the next best place for them. It feels as if they're listening to her, watching her.

As she's about to get back into the lifeboat, she hears a voice. The four children swivel their heads and slowly move, first their arms, then their legs. Cassie is mystified but unafraid. One of them, not the one who looks like Kira but a slightly older girl, speaks.

"Everyone's now frozen in Doze. The people there are all like us. Do not return there. Please heed this warning."

"What was that? Everyone's frozen in Doze? Did you mean the town of Doze?" Cassie doesn't know why she asks the girl to repeat herself, even though she clearly heard her. She recalls her dreams of running through a town where everyone turned to stone. Premonitions of what's now taken place?

Cassie takes the words of caution to heart. She has no plans of going back there anyway, of course, but she thinks of all those she knows who reside there. The town and its people are now frozen in time like the people of Pompeii.

"What happened?" she calls out. Her voice skips along the water like a stone.

The girl begins to say something in response, but after doing so, she and her three friends revert to statues. Her mouth is slightly

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

open. The arms of the others are half-raised, as if about to wave goodbye.

Once she's back aboard Silver Lady, the others look at Cassie in disbelief when she reports that the children briefly came alive.



Chapter 41

Cassie's just departed from Byron. Her jeans and white T-shirt are clean; there's no point wearing her captain's hat, and she could care a fig about being seen. She stayed there for almost two weeks, though she can only account for the last couple of days. Her passengers and crew have now gone their separate ways. Until they reach Minneapolis, it'll be just Sherlock and she aboard the Silver Lady. This could take several days. It's a good time for her to reconstruct what happened from the moment she set the four statues free to the present.

She never got the chance to tell the other passengers what the girl told her about Doze. They learned about it from the Coast Guard team that pulled Silver Lady out of the too-tight clutches of underwater branches. It's thought an earthquake caused the petrification. Already, there's talk of turning the town into a tourist attraction. Beyond awful.

It reminds her of the Amphora's shipwreck, though on a much larger scale. Still, making exhibits that sensationalize human tragedy is simply something humans do.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

She'd known several inhabitants of Doze, Crystal Springs, and Mayor Goody, among them. Claude and Fred, having lived their lives there, of course knew most of the Dozians.

She can't imagine how difficult it must be for them to process the horrific tragedy.



From the Captain's Log:

I haven't kept up with the log on this leg of my journey, but now that my crew and passengers are gone, there should be time for me to do so, provided Silver Lady isn't too chatty.

First, I'll explain where my crew is before describing my delay in Byron.

Claude and Fred decided to stay in Byron. They purchased a deserted B&B and decided to help the town turn from shabby to shabby-chic. Maybe one day they'll continue their journey on the mighty river, after their business is thriving. They'd both been nearly devastated by the bad news about the town of Doze. Luckily, neither has family members still living there, though both were shocked to think they'd never see their friends again. I was relieved to recall that Frank was no longer in Doze.

"No offense, Cassie, but next time we'll probably take a cruise with nightly dancing and a full bar," Fred informed me before saying our goodbyes.

"No offense taken. I get it, but I've really enjoyed having taken you with me, or I did until I came down with the virus."

We said goodbye, fully masked; our hugs were brief.

Elliot and Lucy patched their differences and decided to travel together. They would take a tour bus to Amish country.

Elliot broke down and wept before they took leave, telling me how worried he'd been about me, though Lucy punched him in the arm, telling me she knew that, like her, I was made of 'strong stuff.'

Her girlish giggle often masked her tougher side. I guess she hadn't needed much wait-time after her husband's death before getting re-involved. Not everyone does. Hard to say whether theirs is a romance or simply a good friendship.

Guess I'll never know.

I wished them well, but have no desire to remain in touch.

Thankfully, neither of them came down with the Dream Virus. This latest pandemic has been sweeping through the country of Ohio with the ferocity of a pacing tiger. I turned out to be one of its victims.



A Reconstruction of Events

Not long after setting the statues ashore, I was back on board when I caught Silver Lady poised to do the unthinkable for the second time since I've known her.

We were once again gliding upstream through fairly smooth waters. Turns out, I was wrong in my earlier calculations. It would take another couple of hours before we reached Byron.

Elliot was driving the boat. Claude and Fred were playing cards inside at the large table, so I wandered back out on deck when I saw Lucy peering overboard.

Had the river dolphin returned?

Without warning, Silver Lady was listing on her side.

I grabbed hold of Lucy just before she would've fallen overboard and been jettisoned into the drink like cargo. As fast as the vessel had jerked and tipped sideways, it righted itself.

"Are you okay? That sure was a close one!" I called out, my heart racing.

It took a couple of minutes for her to speak. "Thanks to you! Did I cause the boat to do that just by leaning over the side like that?"

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

"Absolutely not. Remember how I said Silver Lady gets finicky? Elliot must have tried to turn her too fast."

We both knew that was unlikely, as we were in a long straight section of the river. Lucy said she felt queasy. I told her it might be best for her to relax in her cabin.

I was alone with Silver Lady on the deck. She had better not go silent.

"Admit it. You just tried to throw Lucy overboard, as you did, Zona, didn't you? Did you know that, unlike Zona, Lucy can swim?" I've never been so angry with her.

"She has an awful laugh. How can you stand it? I'll bet you don't like her either, Cassie."

"True enough, but I don't dislike her so much that I'd ever try to murder her. What makes you think you can take justice into your own hands? Maybe I'll figure out another way home from Byron and fire sale you!"

"No, Cassie, please don't! I'd love nothing more than escorting you the entire way back home. Look, I was only having a bit of fun. She didn't provoke my absolute ire as Zona did."

"How can I ever trust you again? You're a cold-blooded murderer, Silver Lady."

"I don't have blood—hot or cold, remember? Don't make me sound all that evil. I'm really not."

How could she have done this? Still, I knew there was little point in shaming her.

Good thing no one else heard us, or they would've thought me insane. Beyond wacky doodle. It must have been around that time I felt flushed, and my heart began to race. My hands shook so badly I spilled most of my glass of water. I was sure the boat began to spin, slowly at first, then faster and faster. I sat on the deck, drew my knees to my chest. It couldn't stop the spinning. Was this Silver Lady's doing? It wasn't funny, not in the slightest.

Then everything slowed way down.

Time got away from me after that. It must have been hours later when I woke up in my cabin, certain that Silver Lady was sinking.

I had to save the crew. I screamed out to them, but didn't have an actual plan. I tried to think fast, but the harder I tried, the slower my thinking became.

Hopefully, there was enough time to get them into the lifeboat, along with Sherlock.

But there wasn't enough room for me.

I'd be a good captain and go down with the ship.



"Cassie! Wake up! You've got a fever. You'll be okay, but—" said a disembodied voice.

Claude's? The room became less dim, but I could tell it was Claude, and he was wearing a mask. He had the quietest, most soothing voice I've ever heard.

I must have drifted off again because the next time I came to, it was dark. Claude was gone.

"Shouldn't we be in Doze by now?" No one answered.

Then Lucy was sitting next to the bedside. Her eyebrows were raised in concern. Like Claude, she was masked. I realized that I was, too.

"Not Doze, I mean Byron."

She didn't answer. I realized we were still on Silver Lady. I was in the captain's quarters.

So hot, I could barely breathe. I needed air.

Lucy put a cool washcloth on my fevered forehead. It felt so good. Then she slipped my mask down, only for a few moments, to moisten my lips.

Sometime later, I paced the decks in search of cooler air and to look for Sherlock, who was nowhere to be found. No one was there, so I flung my mask overboard. Terror struck me like lightning.

Silver Lady was sinking for the second time.

"I'm so sorry," I said over and over, but she was giving me the silent treatment again, as if it were all my fault. Had my mother

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

been reincarnated as both a boat and a cat? Is it possible for spirits to split in two after death? Did my mother-as-cat see a spirit double in mother-as-boat?

Sometime afterward, I was lying on the top deck, gazing up at the stars, trying to figure out which constellation was above me. I couldn't tell which one it was, but the peaceful moment let me take a deep breath.

Were the stars parading across the sky, or was it me being carried by the current, with the stars stationary?

Then they weren't stars at all, but poems and drawings on white paper floating above me on the water.

This could only mean one thing: I'd gone down with the ship.



Silver Lady:

I expected to feel guilty for trying to get rid of Lucy, but I didn't feel the slightest shame. I couldn't feel anything except a longing to tell Cassie how this ridiculous woman was much like a mosquito: pesky and unwanted. To rid myself of one is no big deal in the scheme of things.

Now, I'm glad I thought better of making the comparison (which Cassie would have viewed as callous), for it wasn't long after scolding me that she became ill.

River:

Would the loss of that young woman, Lucy, have been such a big deal? And losing Cassie, too, for that matter? In the grand scheme of things, I mean. Would it be so bad if it were just the two of us? We could explore the riversides and travel at our own pace, downstream and upstream. Two seekers together beneath the sunlight and the moonlight. I am the lifeblood of the planet and you, its visitor.

Silver Lady:

I can withstand many of life's difficulties, but not when Cassie isn't well. It's then that I feel helpless. And now she has a fever so high she's begun talking in her sleep. She thinks I've sunk to your bottom, River. Makes me about to lose my mind. Makes me wish I could spit her out of you and onto the shore and never allow her to board me again.

River:

You, helpless? She's clearly the one who's lost her mind. Not you!

Silver Lady:

I first tried shouting at her to wake up. I've never longed for hands so much as I did then. Hands to hold her. Hands to slap her awake. I'm sure my rocking back and forth is upsetting the passengers, since the current here isn't strong. Spray from the cool river water might do the trick. The portal in Cassie's cabin is shut, as is the cabin door, so the spray unfortunately won't reach her.

There must be something I could do to help my dear friend.

As judgmental as Cassie is, we share a deep communication. One of us without the other is only half alive.

River:

I can say the same about us.

Have you forgotten about me, your one true friend?

By the way, your sister, Silent Lady, is waiting for you upstream, near my mouth.



From the Captain's Log:

Much later, they told me I begged Silver Lady to return us to the surface. They said I spoke to her like she was an actual person.



"Is Silver Lady okay?" I asked Lucy.

She was masked and once again cooling my forehead with a damp cloth. Someone had slipped a mask over my mouth and nose again. I could feel that one nostril had rebelled and was almost showing; the other was properly covered. I was wearing my caftan. My hair was in a loose braid. Someone else must have braided it, though I had no memory of them doing so.

"Silver Lady? She's fine. And you will be, too, Cassie. In time."

I realized we weren't on the boat and began to panic. I pulled down the mask and threw the washcloth off my forehead onto an unfamiliar floor.

Lucy tried her best to calm me down.

Panic set in.

"Cassie, we're in Byron now," Lucy said, gently pulling my mask up. We're quarantined in a motel. The hospital turned you away because it was overcrowded. The new pandemic has exploded here in Ohio. They're calling it 'The Dream Virus.'"

Dreams. I'd been having a lot of them. Many took place on the river. Dreams of Luther, Frank, and crewmates from both journeys. If Lucy would only leave me alone, I could remember them better—return to them.

But there were nightmares, too. Ones I wish I didn't recall, statues of people fleeing. Hundreds of bodies turned to stone, some chipped and broken, others intact. My sister, Kira, was there—her head broken in two.

In one, Silver Lady was laughing as she tossed me overboard. The river bottom is a magnet pulling me swiftly downward. The

river's voice resounds, and I descend, but it's garbled, and I can't understand its words. Her words. The voice is that of a woman. It's resonant and inviting. Fear loosens, but then I wake up.

She further explained that my fever had broken, and we'd been in Byron for almost two weeks. Two weeks? How was that even possible? I was the only one who'd contracted the virus, so far, anyway.

"We got in touch with Melanie. She's on her way here."

My daughter? Coming here? The same person who hadn't left her apartment in over five years? They must have thought I was a goner, even though my fever had broken.

Panic set in again.

It was hard to grasp everything Lucy was telling me. Something about how she and Elliot would be leaving Byron after Melanie shows up. Claude and Fred had stopped by several times to check on me, but this was the first day they hadn't been quarantined, so they were busy cleaning an abandoned house. I'd already heard their plan to turn it into a B&B, but I couldn't remember who told me. I must not have been in my right mind because I thought I heard Lucy say they were turning a house into a boat. (She later clarified the matter.)

I must have shut my eyes, but only briefly. Melanie was speaking to me in a dream. Next thing I knew, she was sitting in a chair at my bedside. Her hand was on top of mine.

My beautiful daughter with her long brown hair and silver eyes. I couldn't believe it. I rubbed my eyes, blinked, but when I opened them, she was still there. My daughter! But she couldn't see my grin, and if she wore one, I couldn't see hers as we were both masked.

"I can't believe you're here, Mel." My throat was dry, and my voice squeaked. I don't recall putting a mask on. Someone else must have done so. Mel?

"I'm so relieved you're okay, Mom. How could I not be here? Especially after getting a message on my voicemail that my mother could be dying from the new virus. It's good to know you're not."

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

"But that you'd risk it. You, of all people!"

"Of course I would! You're my mother. That's why I drove here. It allowed me to avoid human contact whenever possible. And I happen to have the single best mask available. I paid \$500 for it, and hopefully, it'll be worth it. I bought the one you're wearing. You need to wear it everywhere and all the time. Unless, of course, you're alone." So, she'd been the one to put this contraption on me. It was much more heavy-duty than the other one.

Everything was beginning to add up and make sense. My hope-beyond-hope was that it would continue to do so.

I'd do anything to keep Melanie in my presence and out of her apartment. Still, as last time, I doubted I'd wear the expensive mask once the viral wave subsided. We've had many arguments over masking. Way too many.

She likes to tell me how I must enjoy playing with fire. "I'm not like you. I can't become a recluse!" is always my response.

"How was the drive? Was it as tough as I've heard to travel from one country to the next?"

"We'll get to that, Mom. First, tell me about this awful Dream Virus. Have you experienced any relapses?"

"A couple short ones, or so I've been told." The mask was too tight, and I desperately needed a sip of water.

"In some instances, those infected don't wake up from their dreams. That is, in the worst cases. Isn't that horrifying? You could well be one of the lucky ones because you woke up. And then there are those who've been locked in rooms or tied down to beds because of sleepwalking issues. No one's released any information yet about the number of deaths. No doubt there will be a cover-up, as always."

"Maybe all victims will eventually recover?"

"Don't you think it would be worse, Mom, to be locked in a dreamworld rather than dead?"

"Debatable, though I understand what you're saying. Especially if those dreams turn into nightmares."

We let out simultaneous sighs.

After this discussion, I was overcome with exhaustion. Mel was clearly fatigued, too. I encouraged her to go rest up and return in a few hours. Before leaving, she told me about her journey to Byron.

She'd driven straight from Minnesota, stopping only at country borders or to sleep in her van at rest stops. The border guards were polite, though the ones between Indiana and Ohio detained her for quite a while. Not only did she endure the indignity of a strip search, but she also had to pay a steep crossing fee, varying from fifty to one hundred dollars, at each of the three border countries. As it turned out, she got the last available room at the motel. Luckily, it was located right next to mine.

When I tried my best to empathize with her about the strip search, she interrupted me to express her fury about the hospital turning me away. The other passengers from the boat should have insisted.

"I'm sure they tried their best. If there were no extra beds, what could they have done?"

"Hospitals always put up temporary structures in that event. Cheap motels aren't exactly sanitary, Mom."

Despite our exhaustion, we went back and forth about the issue. I tried to get her to see that I was treated well by my passengers and crew. She knew how much I loathed hospitals. Afterward, utterly fatigued, we talked about how long to stay put in Byron. We agreed, thankfully, not to make a rash decision about how and when to leave.

Before she left the room, we hugged and blew each other kisses.

After Mel's departure, Lucy stopped by with a ridiculously large chicken wrap and told me she and Elliot were leaving early the following morning for their bus tour. Tired as I was, I realized she was there for payment. That gave me a second wind.

With some difficulty, I rose from bed and found my purse. I divided a small amount of cash into two separate envelopes and wrote their names on them. My handwriting was shaky but legible. Lucy told me the river experience alone was enough compensation, but she was happy to accept the envelopes, saying she would

deliver Elliot's to him. I could see the blush above the upper mask line. True, it was mainly Elliot who drove the boat. Although I wasn't exactly sure what she'd done to deserve payment, I'd hired her. I wouldn't go back on my promise.

Since Lucy and Elliot showed no signs of the virus, they weren't too worried about contracting it. Like anyone else, they could be carriers without developing symptoms. Of course, they'd mask up on the bus.

I reassured her that I was in good hands with Melanie. She looked relieved, but then gave me the news that Claude had been sleeping for two days straight and was now feverish. I promised her I'd check on him before leaving Byron, and agreed that it was a good idea for Elliot and her to keep their distance. Lucy and I said our goodbyes without hugging.

How grateful I was for a long and dreamless sleep.



The following morning, after splashing cold water on my face, I heard a gentle knock at the door. My legs were still a little shaky, and it took me longer than usual to get there from the bathroom.

No one was there.

On the mat was a carryout bag and a steaming cup of coffee. It surprised me that Mel remembered that blueberry muffins are my favorite.

A memory of flowers left on my doorstep. The little girl with long brown hair, who placed them there, rang the doorbell and ran off giggling. I'm peering out at the flowers from behind the living room curtains.

Little Mel. She's always been thoughtful like that. Thoughtful, but a bit of a trickster.

Along with the breakfast, there was a short note from her saying she would see me in an hour to discuss our plan for returning home. I knew she wouldn't want to remain in Byron

longer than necessary. The only difficulty might be getting the van back to Minnesota. I was excited to finally introduce her to Silver Lady and couldn't wait to give her the grand tour.

My only loose end was saying goodbye to Claude and Fred. If both had fallen ill, how could I turn my back and leave them here? Still, it's not like we were close or even distant friends. A sudden realization of my true nature: I'm a people hoarder. I hoard people in my memory the way others hoard old newspapers or family mementos.

While Byron wasn't completely transformed, it looked a good deal better on that sunny morning than I'd remembered.

After a few bites of the muffin and a few sips of coffee, I decided to try out my sea legs. Having spent the last week mostly horizontal, I knew my muscles would need some strengthening.

I only walked a block or so, but my legs were already feeling stronger by the time I returned to the motel. More winded than expected, I sat on a bench for a good while.

There was Debbie's Diner and a market where I bought some fresh fruit. Sitting felt strange, as I'm not one to sit idle. If Melanie were out walking around town, maybe she'd see me sitting there and join me. She didn't. After half an hour, I gave up.

Too bad the man with the silvery goatee wasn't on the corner, playing his saxophone. But there's always a chance Frank could show up again.

That's the thing about the river: its mysteries defy daily life, daring us to see it differently, magically.



Until the return trip came up, it felt like old times with Melanie, back before masking was commonplace. I should've known better and realized I was dealing with my daughter, a woman ten times more stubborn than her mother. She let me have my say first. I was careful not to be insistent.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

"How about we travel home together in Silver Lady? I'll pay to have your car driven back. Some of the prettiest scenery is between here and home. Lots of bluffs, bridges, and Indian mounds."

"Save your breath, Mom."

My dream of traveling with her was dashed. I took a deep breath and let out a howling sigh. How long had I been yearning for her to join me, to travel with me, and even, if only briefly, to see through my eyes? Well, it wasn't going to happen. I swallowed my breath, my unspoken words.

She insisted I rent a car and we tag-team back to Minneapolis. It would be a quicker journey than going by boat. We could stop at roadside parks along the way. Even taking back roads would be quicker than traveling by river. I could sell Silver Lady, or get someone else to ferry her home. Didn't that make sense to me?

I thought of the many times I'd given in to her. For the past few years, we saw each other only when masked, and even then, only in her apartment or my small yard. Whenever the numbers of the particular viral variant were at their peak, we only spoke by phone, though sometimes we video chatted.

This time, I stood my ground, telling her how grateful I was that she'd driven the distance to Byron, but I wanted to—needed to—pull into Minneapolis aboard the Silver Lady.

After a long silence, Melanie said in an exasperated tone: "Okay, Mom, you win."

"No winners or losers here—"

"You're so illogical! I can't tell you how much I've worried about you."

"Then don't." I meant it, but I know she thought I was being flippant.

Another even longer silence.

"Would you at least agree to me giving you a tour of Silver Lady?"

"What if you're still contagious? What if you relapse?" Did she hear herself? It was perfectly fine to be in the same motel room with me, yet she didn't want me to show her around a boat? If I showed

my anger, I knew this wouldn't end well. My hidden smile wobbled.

"You'll be the first to know. If it makes you feel better, I'll stay here under observation by Dr. Melanie for a couple more days."

"Goes without saying, but please use some common sense. And don't try to convince me to ride back aboard the boat. That's not going to happen."

After she was out of earshot, I let out one of the longest sighs of my life. Eight-point five on the Richter scale of emotion. Common sense? My sensible daughter had taken it to an extreme, but I couldn't fault her for living her life on her terms, as long as she didn't try to change mine.



Over the next couple of days, there were loose ends to tie up in Byron. First, I checked in on Claude and Fred. Fred was fine and hadn't come down with any symptoms. Claude was sleeping a lot in the day and wasn't up to seeing visitors.

Their three-storied B&B was a charming old place, but they would have some repair work ahead of them.

"As you can see, the purple exterior needs repainting, and so do the lavender shutters. We'll keep the same color scheme. Warning, Cassie: it's even worse inside."

While the rooms were fully furnished, much of the furniture was barely usable.

I almost fell through a wooden step leading up to the main door.

"Beyond rickety!" Fred told me. Still, he was excited about the prospect of renovating it once Claude was better.

"One of the strangest symptoms is that Claude sleepwalks almost every night. Since he isn't used to the house yet, he often panics upon waking and screams until I find him lost in one of the rooms. As you can imagine, I haven't been sleeping well myself."

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

After commiserating, I asked how Sherlock was doing. I'd assumed he'd followed them to their new abode, regardless of being invited.

"He stayed a couple of days, but then took off. It wouldn't surprise me if he was waiting for you on Silver Lady."

"Waiting for me?" While this would be a surprise, as I'd never been his favorite, he was a fan of river travel, despite his protestations.

I told him I'd be showing Melanie the boat later that day, and if he were right, maybe we'd see the feline sunning himself on the deck. Did Fred want me to return him? He laughed, then said that in his experience, he wasn't the nicest of cats. It would be a bit much right now to care for Claude, a cat, and a house in shambles.

Also, had I noticed the abundance of cats in Byron?

Melanie had only just mentioned this. Maybe they'd been there all along, but I hadn't noticed them on my first visit. Or maybe they were homeless after the war, and an army of cats had converged on Byron. Fred told me that he and Claude would have their share of the pickings if they ever wanted to be kitty caretakers.

Fred insisted on hugging me before I left, saying that if he'd contracted the virus, there would be symptoms by now. Still, I pulled away quickly with my daughter's scolding voice in my head. He promised that he and Claude would keep in touch, and who knows, maybe we'd take another cruise together. I felt awkward, both because I dislike goodbyes and because I was afraid of tripping on the uneven flooring.

Because Melanie had calls to make that would take most of the morning, I decided to walk through town after my visit with Fred. I noticed my shaky legs were now stronger.

The fountain in the town square was now gushing, and a few people were strolling through a recently planted garden growing alongside it. The shops themselves looked sadly shuttered, as they had during my first visit. Once again, it felt like a black-and-white town from a 1950s TV show. There were some colors, but they were muted. And it was true about the cats. They were everywhere—

huddled in groups and lolling in the late-morning sunshine. Another form of river magic, especially after I overheard an orange-striped cat who'd stared right through me. I don't know if I read his thoughts or if he actually spoke, but the message came through clearly. "He was here, but then he wasn't." He must have meant Sherlock, of course.

I'd been sitting on a bench, gathering my strength. The voice was small, much like I'd expect a talking cat to sound: a punch-drunk boxer after too many jabs to the neck. At least Sherlock had been seen, if only briefly. I thanked him, and after brushing up against my legs, he was on his way. If he were right, Sherlock would ride home with me.

Silver Lady was such a large boat for only two passengers. Would she become a regal grande dame or a casual conversationalist?

Then an unrelated, but rather devious idea came to me. I'd tip Silver Lady off about Melanie's visit and convince her to pull away from the slip. And off we'd go! Since Melanie's never been much of a swimmer, I didn't think she'd dive off the boat.

But I couldn't kidnap my own daughter, could I? The idea caused my energy to surge.

Fewer loose ends needed tying up than I thought. Why not leave that very day? The river called me; its pull, stronger than ever. I wound up agreeing with Mel to wait until the following day. Except for having what's best described as a dream hangover, I felt fine. I wasn't about to become a fall victim, though my balance was still a little off. Also, I felt groggy, even after a couple of cups of coffee, and sometimes word-fished longer than usual. Brain fog, I'm guessing. It didn't overly concern me, as I well remember feeling this way during menopause. I didn't admit all this to my dear daughter, or she would have further postponed the leave-taking. She must have noticed my lack of steadiness, but said nothing.



Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

After telling Melanie I had a strong hunch that Sherlock would be on board, she acted more interested in meeting the cat than she did Silver Lady. Funny, as I've never known her to be a cat person.

The Lady glistened in the brilliant early afternoon sunshine. She looked expectant, maybe eager to wind up our long excursion.

Walking a little ahead of my daughter, I immediately slipped into tour-guide groove. I stopped, now and then, to point out various features like the massive wooden wheel, the many cupboards in the galley, the captain's quarters, the many sleeping cabins, and the almost luxurious head. Though small, it boasted a good-sized shower, as well.

Melanie's boredom was obvious, but she humored me, at first. It soon became clear she was seeking out the cat, and barely listening to a word I was saying about the security system.

"If we sit at the table, Sherlock will likely grace us with his presence. He likes being around us most when we're eating, if not exactly with us." Was I talking about the cat or Silver Lady? Melanie wouldn't have wondered, as she didn't know about Silver Lady's awareness. Not yet, anyway.

Maybe after seeing the boat (and hopefully, the cat), Melanie would change her mind and want to ride home with me.

Sure enough, Sherlock put in a guest-star appearance while we were sitting at the table. *Is food in the offing?* I could read him like I could Silver Lady. And I could sense that Silver Lady was presently upset by Melanie's lack of interest in her.

How could my daughter, flesh of my flesh, be so dismissive of the elegant Lady?

I longed to have a private chat with Silver Lady and explain that Melanie wasn't snubbing her. She simply didn't want me to engage in any further risky behavior. Melanie was aware of my history. I was well aware of the huge sacrifice she made by driving all the way to Byron. It was only logical that I comply with her wishes. But I couldn't.

Knowing this, she wasn't about to fawn over the gorgeous Silver Lady. Unfortunately, Melanie didn't know whose strong will

she was up against. And two strong-willed souls are never good to cross.

She'd just fed the cat some dry cat food from the cupboard when we heard the revving of Silver Lady's engine. We looked at each other in shock as the boat backed out of the slip. Of course, I wasn't nearly as stunned as Mel. Had Silver Lady read my mind? It wasn't like I told her my half-baked plan. In no time, we were headed upstream.

"Muh-ther, what's going on? Who's manning the boat?"

"Nobody, so far as I know."

Have I always been such a good liar? Perhaps it was for the best not to have said anything about Silver Lady being conscious; Mel would've enjoyed a good laugh before putting me away for good. I'd explained some of the river magic to her, but never this.

During my visit with Silver Lady the previous day, I'd expressed my disappointment about Melanie not wanting to ride along with us on this last leg of the trip. How had we come up with the same kidnapping scheme? That she actually followed through was preposterous, even for the willful Silver Lady.

I bolted from the table and up the short flight of stairs to the driver's cab. Sitting behind the wheel was a shocked older man. It turned out he was doing me a favor by driving Silver Lady to the gas pump, a quarter mile away at Byron's other small marina. So, this wasn't an attempted kidnapping after all. I also learned that Elliot and Lucy had paid Bill, the caretaker of both marinas, to fill up Silver Lady's tank. I was so relieved that I kissed the stranger's cheek.

I'm sure Silver Lady was greatly amused.



And now I'm rambling up the River Road once more with Silver Lady. The water in these parts is a silvery-blue. The fresh air already feels cooler, and only occasional sulfur burps reach my nostrils.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

There are only the two of us, and Sherlock (currently pawing at a discarded toothpick on the deck).

It's been a little over a day since leaving Byron, and it'll be three more until we reach Minneapolis. A little longer, of course, if we take an unplanned side trip down a channel. As much as I've enjoyed the river magic, I really don't need to see much more of the unexpected. This from someone who's always enjoyed surprises.

It's turned into a peaceful, enjoyable time, but also a wistful one.

Earlier, I looked everywhere for the book about Jerry, lost on the river in India. Again, the book doesn't want to be found. Would he ever want to return to his former life in America? Once I find it, I'll find out. Since I've already forgotten many of the details, I'll probably start over again. Maybe I'll wait until I get home before reading it.

I'm already missing Mel, but we're planning on getting together once we're both home. She's going to introduce me to her boyfriend, Jeremy. He's been living with her for the last six months. Hearing about him nearly took my breath away, because I had no idea she was in a relationship. It's been years since she was last involved with someone. "A great guy with a big heart" is how she described him.

I agreed to call her if I feel unusually drowsy again. So far, I've been a little better every day. How proud I am of her for having driven so far, for me.



It should take two days to reach Minneapolis now. Another reason for writing in the captain's log again is to savor the moments past and present and truly relish them. For all the magical places and occurrences, magic's also been at work in my encounters with those I met along the way: my crew, my guests, a couple of late-life lovers. While deep bonds weren't always formed, each of them added to

my life, enriching it in the way only people can. One moment I've longed for their companionship, but the next, for this sweet solitude. It's as if I can't truly appreciate them until I'm away from them. Is this the curse of all writers? If so, maybe I am a writer after all.

And yet, nothing compares to being in the company of Silver Lady, despite her devious, tempestuous nature. While many would laugh, or snicker, at my belief in her sentience, her consciousness, I say: let them. They don't know her as I do. She truly is a grande dame. Should I have convinced them of her cunning and complex personality? More than a few of them would have jumped ship, or at least bailed at the next dock.



Why was it that I so often thought of my mother and aunt on this trip upriver? I don't recall doing so on the first trip.

It all began with trying to understand my dislike of Silver Lady's silences. They reminded me of how my mother and aunt would punish me. Can those who love us be both loving and, at times, emotionally abusive? I tend to think so. It was their way of battering my spirit to control my behavior. They could have punished me in other ways when displeased, but knowing my need for approval, they knew that giving me the silent treatment would bother me the most.

Maybe it's just human nature for some to do this when others disagree with us. It's a passive-aggressive tactic used by those who don't want to argue or scream at someone with whom they've had a falling out. Maybe there is no good response. Communication breaks down until it is attempted again and, hopefully, gets repaired, at least in the best cases.



Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

"Ahoy!" I yell out at a ferryboat headed downstream. No one waves back. Then I call out to two guys fishing on a trawler. Again, no response.

"Cassie, my dear, you're invisible again. They aren't ignoring you," says Silver Lady, startling me after a several-hour silence.

"Thanks for confirming that."

"There's something I need to tell you, but I'll wait until we're closer to your destination."

"Now's as good a time as any," I say, trying to coax her, though knowing there's little point in doing so; she'll tell me when it suits her.

Something tells me I'll never know all her secrets, though she knows most of mine. That's okay, even if a little irksome.



I'd forgotten the stunning beauty of the bluffs around here, as well as the vast number of trees growing so close to the water's edge. Just now, the sun's going down, and the orange-pink hues remind me of the first trip. Although the brilliance of those earlier sunsets was caused by cities on fire. These are from wildfires out West and from Canada. They'll eventually burn out, but then other places will burn.

Maybe civilization's doomed for this and other reasons. There's always the chance that humans can rise from the rubble and start over.

And due to the Reappearance, much that had been missing has been restored. This sunset sure is breathtaking. The cranes and herons call out to it, as do the frogs. Somewhere, a woman's laughter skips across the water like stones. It's her way of calling out to the sunset, too.

There's a weird beauty to it all; a definite, though strange magic. One that I'll never truly understand. That's okay. I'm both saddened and enchanted; my smile's a rueful one.



Silver Lady:

And will you, my dear Silent Lady, be waiting for me when we reach our final destination? River says you will be. One can only hope. Back before George commandeered me, do you recall how we rested side by side? Even then, I could tell your fighting spirit was gone. It could well be too late now, but if you're still there inside your fiberglass exterior, I'll try to convince you to stay—you—a while longer. Such fun it would be to reminisce together!



From the Captain's Log:

A text from Melanie. She made it back safely to Minneapolis.

The internet's working again, and that's a good thing. Maybe.

Will it reconnect the world and help the new fifty countries (not to mention the rest of the world) get along better?

Anyone's guess. Maybe the new countries will become the United Countries of America.

In the early days of the internet, I was rarely on social media. Then I hopped aboard, like many others, especially during lunch breaks. I'd stop everything to respond to a friend's message or email at the expense of my mental health. I was always afraid they'd drop me from their lives if I didn't get back to them ASAP. After the internet went down, I had to rethink the time-suck of social platforms. Maybe I'll get online only when necessary. Besides, who knows how long the internet will last this time?

To call our world precarious is an understatement.

Sherlock just jumped onto my lap, causing me to drop the phone.

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

This is a first! It's either he's accepted me now, or I'm better than no company at all.

"I'm grateful to now be within your purview, rather, purr-view." My pun goes over his head, but I laugh anyway.

He gives me a perplexed look and jumps down.



Sleep comes in brief chunks, because I fear getting tangled up in dreams. What if the fever returns? At least, I don't feel as drowsy as I did in the Land of Doze, or at the beginning of the Dream Virus. And it definitely doesn't feel like the world's about to come to an abrupt end. This is the source of so many of my fears.

This stretch of the upriver trip is lovely, but who knows if we'll witness any further magic. As scenic as this stretch of the river is, there's probably little surreal or unexpected awaiting us at every bend. The three of us shouldn't hope to witness more than Nature's natural majesty, which is magical in and of itself, but I bet we do.

I play the spirosoola to my current audience: the river, Silver Lady, and Sherlock. Maybe I can conjure a little magic with the music. While I'm plucking, I break the dead queen's fingernail. It splits almost evenly in two. Sherlock gives me a 'now-you've-done-it' look.

Playing with half a queen's fingernail changes the quality of the sound to a strange vibrating twang. The cat begins to high-tail it from the deck. He turns around from the open doorway leading inside after I stop playing the otherworldly sounds.

We wait and watch.

One surprise is a Buddhist temple on a hilltop. It's in an area I'd expect to see Christian churches or chapels. Cairns of sometimes fifteen or twenty feet seem to be watching us. One starts to topple over as we glide by. We then pass a half-built bridge extending from one side of the river to the other, an arm extended in friendship, which looks as if it suddenly froze in its reach. It reminds me of the

formerly friendly states retracting into isolated countries, as well as the almost-deep connections I've made with others. A valuable life lesson, for sure. The takeaway is to try harder to connect, to let others know how I feel about them. If they don't feel likewise, let them go.

I will review my options now, but more thoroughly after I'm home.

It's not too late to become a doula again. Frightened young mothers need assistance more than ever in this strange new world. Guidance for everyone is gone, except for how to get rich. Society seems peaceful, but for how long? I could make workout videos again. Based on the number of followers, they were fairly popular at one time. Another possibility would be to choreograph my own stretching routine rather than simply adopting the ones I've seen. Maybe branch out and create a few guided imagery sessions, though I'll bet there are a ton of those. Am I too old to become a pirate? Not a bad pirate, but one who helps those in need of rescue. Hmm ... What if I became a virtual river guide? I could describe some of the river scenes I've seen.

Close your eyes and travel with me aboard a luxury houseboat. Let the current carry you away. See the full moon at the end of the wide river road. It looks like it's waiting for us.

What I will not do is become a prisoner in my little house. That's not the life for me. I once worried that Melanie was a prisoner in her apartment, but now I know better. She doesn't need the external world the way some do. She has a partner, a job, and a limitless imagination—a creative power that will take her far. I can't quite imagine her living out the rest of her days this way, but what do any of us know about the future? Either our own or others'? At times, I've been a prisoner on Silver Lady, but I've also known moments of freedom and exhilaration in my awareness of that freedom. But then my longing for love, either amorous or platonic, took hold and shackled me.

While there's much to learn, I now know a little about living on a river: expect the unexpected and be open to new experiences, even

if they aren't always welcome. Also, humans aren't the only sentient beings on the planet.



One Day Away

Magic has returned! Silver Lady is currently piloting the boat, though I'm steering. A couple of times, I've taken my hands off the wooden wheel, and she's taken over. Still, I don't feel it's right to relinquish responsibility to her. I thank her for the break, but she doesn't respond. We haven't spoken in two or three days, but that's okay.

For an hour, we had a visitor: a bluebird! He landed on the deck rail and looked at me like he knew me. "Are you Blue from the first trip?" The red-breasted, blue-winged little fellow, of course, didn't answer. Fond memories of my former mascot, how he'd ride with us, fly off, only to show up before or after us at the next dock.

I'm sure this bird's visit would've been longer, were it not for the bird-eating Sherlock. There was quite a chase and pounce. For a moment, he had the poor little bird in his mouth, but I hissed so loudly that he spat out the poor creature. Nature can be so cruel. At least the disoriented and slightly beaten-up bluebird managed to flutter away.

I found my captain's hat. It had been missing for the past few days. The Reappearance must work on a small scale, too.

And then I found the book about Jerry. I can never recall its title, or I'd mention it. It's now safely tucked inside my suitcase. Soon, I'll re-read it from the beginning to the end. I won't stop except for brief naps and bathroom breaks. I'd make Aunt Mary proud.

I doubt I'll ever see any of my former passengers again, though the possibility remains. The Reappearance of everyone and everything lost makes me think there's a fighting chance. I hope to

at least see them in vivid memories and dreams. They've all contributed to my journey. Some I connected with more than others, but I felt a connection with all of them, and that's what matters. I'll miss some of them more than others, of course. Jimmy and Murphy, the most, though Crystal, Fran, Marv, and Larry, too. And, certainly, Claude and Fred. Places contributed, too. Familiar ones like Ruby and Doze, but Lidspot and The Ritz Hotel, too. What happened in Gull Lake, I could've done without, but it's toughened my spirit as much as the spirosoola has enriched it.



Silver Lady:

Cassie asked me my age. She said she did so because I sound wise, but weary. "Not that you're wise all the time," she said, "but sometimes." I sighed, but didn't answer.

She also told me that her former lover, Frank or Felix, or whoever he was, spilled a potion on my deck. Could it have been after that I became conscious? "No, it most certainly was not!" I was grateful for her apology, but there's much she doesn't understand.

Should I tell her I haven't always been me? Once I was a tugboat, and a couple of times, an ocean liner. The boat I especially enjoyed inhabiting was a simple birch-bark canoe. I well recall floating over cool, calm waters. I've never added up the number of years of my various lives, as I'm probably not remembering all the boats that contained me. It gets hard to keep track.

Maybe I should simply tell her that I've traversed many waters and keep it at that. I do know that each of my lives has been splendid, terrifying, and only sometimes boring.

Should I tell her about Silent Lady?

Also, she doesn't really know about River. She may sense that River's alive, but there's no getting across to a mere mortal the extent of his consciousness. No, as understanding as Cassie is, I don't think I'll say

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

anything about River or my past lives, other than that I've been around a long time. At least that part is true.



From the Captain's Log:

Last Day Aboard Silver Lady

How could it be almost a year since my travels began? How long will it take to get used to being on dry land, a landlubber again? Do I even want to be one? I hope Melanie's relationship with Jeremy is a lasting one. Since they don't want children, there's no point sitting around knitting booties for nonexistent ones. I could become a surrogate grandma for someone who doesn't have a mother, but as much as I like kids, I can't quite imagine doing this.

My friends, Janet and Sasha, may or may not be glad to see me. We haven't been in touch the entire time I've been gone. I thought of them often, wishing they'd have a change of heart and join me. My parents would've called me foolhardy, even my dad. As a sailor, at least, he'd understand my wanderlust. I'm sure I inherited his itchy feet. As for my mother, I can well imagine her silent treatment of my vagabond ways. It was one thing for her to be on the road with her music. Her silences hurt because I loved her so intensely; now she's ghosted me for good. Despite this, my love for my parents sustains me, even now, in the later part of my life.



I'm unsure how to process what Silver Lady just told me a few minutes ago. It's pretty much thrown me into a tizzy. I'm now almost knocked over by doubt about continuing with her. I'll do my best to transcribe the conversation.

SL: *I need you to sit down, Cassie. There's something I need to tell you.*

(Her tone sounded strange. I obeyed her and sat down.)

SL: *Zona wasn't my first victim. There was someone before her. The guy was a real idiot.*

Me: You telling me you've murdered two people?

SL: *You make me sound like such a cold-blooded killer, Cassie. So what if I've tossed a couple of non-swimmers overboard? Not my fault they couldn't swim. River sort of talked me into it.*

(I didn't say anything for the longest time. About time I punished her with *my* silence. Was I about to become a third possible victim? Why was she talking about the river as if it were a person? But wait, she's a boat.)

SL: *I see what you're doing. I know you've got questions. The other guy was George's friend. I don't recall his name. A creepy, loudmouth millionaire who bragged nonstop. A real loudmouth with women.*

ME: All the same, that didn't give you the right to throw him off the boat.

SL: *But he was planning to steal me! I tried to tell George, but he either didn't hear me or refused to listen.*

ME: How long ago did this happen before I became captain?

SL: *Cassie, you know I'm not good at knowing time. After George left me, it felt like I was waiting for someone to take over for him, for a good long time.*

Silver Lady: The Invisible Captain

ME: I thought George abandoned you because he was nervous about the war breaking out.

SL: *He was a big coward, if ever there were one. But his friend was worse, way worse. Like a little Napoleon, and the world's seen enough of men like him. I was just doing my bit to help the world. By the way, I never would've gotten rid of George. When his friend leaned over the rail, I just gave him a little nudge. George tried to save him, but it was too late. And then George, drunk as a skunk, drowned, too. Anyway, I thought you should know.*

ME: Why didn't you tell me before now? You sound proud of it.

SL: *I knew you'd probably think it wouldn't be right for me to take justice into my own hands. Not that I have hands.*

ME: I should report you, but who would believe me? You shouldn't be able to get away with murder.

SL: *Don't you see that he was the criminal? And I'm sorry as can be about George. He really wasn't a bad guy.*

(This added a complexity I wasn't planning for, and so soon before arriving home. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything about reporting her, as she may now decide to silence me. But she knows I can swim. Certainly, she would have conveniently gotten rid of me by now if I truly displeased her.)

SL: *Cassie? I know you can hear and understand me. Can you find it in your heart to forgive me? By the way, you'll soon be meeting my sister, Silent Lady.*

(I could hear her, but I wasn't going to give her that satisfaction. It's the first I've heard she has a sister ship. At least the mystery of George is solved.)



We'll soon reach the marina in Minneapolis in the country of Minnesota. A much larger marina than most, except for the one in New Orleans. I'd hoped to reminisce more about the two trips along River Road, such a long and twisting one. But now I'm too agitated. Sherlock's pacing, like I would be if I weren't driving the boat. No way will I allow Silver Lady to take control again. She'd probably run us aground simply to show her fury. I must have upset her when I asked if she became conscious after Frank spilled the potion. And I certainly don't want to further rile up a boat with a penchant for murder.



We're docked now. I'm not quite ready to go ashore. I'm trying to understand what just happened. Alongside us is another luxury houseboat, Silver Lady's double. She's called Silent Lady. I haven't heard a peep from Silver Lady since pulling into the slip. It no longer feels like she's here. Something tells me she slipped aboard her double. I don't know how I know this, but I do. Perhaps she is now the Silent Lady. It would be just like her to do such a thing. That's fine with me, as I wasn't certain how to say goodbye, even if she hadn't told me what she did.



A news story just broke. It seems the fifty countries are having huge issues. The Blue countries versus the Red. Unlike the North versus the South, the former nation is like a patchwork quilt, and people, ridiculous as they are, are talking about conquering surrounding countries. We all know what will happen then. So much for the UCA.



River Lessons

- ❖ My chances of being safe are probably better out on the river.
How much so is anyone's guess.
- ❖ Pirates aren't always evil.
- ❖ Magic exists.
- ❖ Doom isn't always certain.
- ❖ Sinister boat-beings can be kind.
- ❖ I probably won't be able to live on the mainland again.
- ❖ I'm never lonely on the river, though if the Silver Lady remains
the Silent Lady, who knows?
- ❖ You really can't take the same trip twice.



How long will it take to find a new crew?

How long will the river remain peaceful and serene?

I wonder whether the Silent Lady will want a captain. If so, I won't look for passengers right away. The two of us, and a cat, will take on the world as we ramble along the mighty River Road.

But more than the boat, it's River's persistent call that I must answer.

Acknowledgments

No sooner had I finished *Silver Lady: Travels Along the River Road* than I began making notes for this adventure! A huge thanks to my dedicated early readers who have stuck with me since book one.

A special thanks to author Milana Marsenich, an early reader whose keen eye helped with proofreading. I am equally grateful to authors Patty Duffy and Jane Cameron for their careful reading and insightful feedback.

A huge thank you to my editor, Gia Scribes. Gia has now helped form four of my books—including one still waiting in the wings. Once again, her magical powers turned a rough draft into a real book!

And warm hugs to authors Susan Rooke and Sandra Sperling for their friendship and encouragement.

I am also grateful to my former instructor, the poet and author Jan Worth, for her friendship and support.

Much gratitude to my writing group for their community and keeping me motivated!

Also, thanks to my book club; I've been a member for over twenty-five years and our monthly selections and discussions continue to inspire me.

Lastly, to Tom and Sarah for helping me stay (somewhat) sane through yet another book!



Susan Sage is a prize-winning fiction writer and poet. For several years, she taught English at an adult-alternative high school and was a reading tutor for at-risk students. Susan currently lives in Flushing, Michigan, with her husband and two cats. She is an active member of both a book club and a writing group.

She has published five novels. Her other novels include, *Insominy* (2010), *A Mentor and Her Muse* (2018), *Dancing in the Ring* (2023), and *Silver Lady: Travels Along the River Road* (2024).

Dancing in the Ring received an American Writing Award, Global Book Award, and Literary Titan Award.

Silver Lady has received the Literary Titan Award.

Susan's shorter pieces have appeared in many magazines and journals.

www.susanesage.com