

The Fountain Garden

Five days before my father's funeral, the mortuary's number flashed on my phone as I rummaged through my closet, pretending it mattered to find a work-appropriate outfit that didn't need ironing. A bass voice rumbled: "Ms. Silva? Howard Greenwood calling from Greenwood Memorial Gardens. Are you available this morning? It's urgent that we speak in person."

Urgent? In person? My brain whirred through the logistics. Rush hour traffic would be gridlocked on the Bay Bridge to the mortuary in Oakland. Hopefully, my 9 a.m. townhouse tour can be rescheduled. I needed that commission. I'd maxed my credit limit on the "Platinum Memorial Services" package for Dad. "All right," I sighed into the phone, "I'll be there."

An hour later, I sat in the softly lit office, tapping my foot on the beige carpet, praying that this meeting wasn't about my credit card.

Mr. Greenwood ("Please call me Howard") folded his hands on the glossy desk between us and cleared his throat. "I regret to inform you that a . . . ah, an identification issue occurred when we received your father from the hospice facility."

My fingernails dug into the chair's padded armrests. "What do you mean. . . an identification issue?"

"Our intake registry displayed two arrivals with similar names." Perspiration popped along his hairline. "I'm sorry to say. . . our technicians conducted a cremation."

Time stopped, then snapped back into motion. The room tilted around me in a nauseating spin.

Howard's voice bubbled as if from under water: "I sincerely apologize for this unfortunate occurrence. We will refund your payment for the casket. If you proceed with interment, all costs will be waived." His leather chair creaked as he swiveled toward the

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credenza behind him, lifted a bronze urn, and placed it on the desk. “This is our premium funerary model. Your father. . . is here.”

“My father is. . . *there*?” I gasped. “No, that’s not. . . the funeral is. . . it’s an open casket service. *How did this happen?*”

He droned something about “irregular” and “so very sorry.” My body quaked with an intensity that clattered my teeth.

Dad didn’t want to be burned and bottled. We had never discussed it, but I was sure it wasn’t what he wanted. I ached to see him resting on white satin, wearing the charcoal-gray suit that complemented his silver hair. I ached to kiss his cheek. And I ached to lunge across the desk and throttle Howard Greenwood with his perfectly knotted tie. I needed to find a lawyer with unrelenting bloodlust to sue this negligent mortician into oblivion.

Fuming, I leaped to my feet, seized the urn, and stomped out of the office and into the harsh daylight of the parking lot. Inside my car, I laid the urn gently on the passenger seat and squeezed my eyes shut to stanch scalding tears.

A violent tapping sound intruded. My eyes snapped open. Howard Greenwood stood outside the car window, knuckles hammering the glass. “Please wait, Ms. Silva. I have something to show you.”

My jaw tightened. *What could this awful man have to show me?* An impulse surged inside me to ignore him and drive away. I gripped the steering wheel, then unclenched my hands and dropped them onto my lap. *Driving off without a word would be brutally unkind.* Exhaling hard to tamp down my fury, I nodded and mouthed a silent “okay.”

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I followed him across the parking lot, through a green metal gate, and along a winding gravel path, until we passed beneath a vine-covered iron arch crowned with scrolled letters: *FOUNTAIN GARDEN*. A few feet inside the entrance, Howard paused.

The garden opened into a spacious circle, bordered by boxwood hedges, canopied by slender trees. Four wooden benches with gracefully arching backs rested at intervals around the inner curve. Between the benches, white roses bloomed in carved stone planters. At the garden's center, a round granite fountain featured an alabaster angel. Her wings, wrapped low and tight around her body, dipped into the water at her feet like a ship's prow. Green lily pads floated serenely in the basin lined with sapphire-blue tiles, shimmering in the sunlight.

Howard motioned toward the nearest bench before seating himself at the opposite end. We sat without speaking. I glared at him, side-eyeing. The fountain gurgled and rippled to the birdsong from the trees. My outrage simmered. I resented my appreciation for the beauty and tranquility of this secluded space. *The garden is lovely, but I'm still going to sue you out of business.* Then he broke the silence—

“Your father loved it here.”

My face flushed with heat. How dare he claim to know anything about my father?

Before I could demand an explanation, he continued: “I wasn't sure if he was the man I remembered, so I checked our records. Two years ago, Carlos Silva made funeral arrangements for his wife, Marisa.”

“My mother,” I murmured.

He nodded. “I found him here one day. He said he didn't want to think of his wife in the cold, dark ground. He wanted to think of her in a beautiful place, with sunlight shining on water. For about a year, he visited several times a month. We'd sit and talk.”

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I shook my head, stunned. Whenever I asked Dad to visit Mom's grave with me, he always found a reason to stay home. If I'd known his feelings, maybe his refusals wouldn't have wounded me so deeply. I needed to know more. "What did he talk about?"

Howard settled back on the bench. "He talked about growing up near the ocean in Oaxaca, coming to the U.S., joining the Navy. Being at sea reminded him of home. He considered reenlisting, but then he met your mother."

Dad never spoke about his life in Mexico, or anything that came before Mom. She told me he'd grown up poor in a small fishing village, and that he'd crossed the border as a boy, alone. Whatever memories had survived were ones he refused to share. It felt unbelievable that he would unearth his past and reveal it to a stranger. "What else did he say?"

"He said he fell for your mother at first sight," Howard smiled. "She was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen, until you were born."

Tears pricked my eyes. Dad never said things like that. I wished he had. *If only I could talk with him again. There was so much I wanted to know.* I shifted uncomfortably on the hardwood bench. Silent minutes later, I asked: "Did he tell you about. . . the car crash?"

"Yes." Howard sighed. "Yes, he did." His tone softened. "He knew how close you were to your mother. Her passing was so sudden. He didn't know how to talk to you about it."

I couldn't stand to hear any more. The words spilled out: "Why didn't he ask *me* to sit with him here? We could have talked, we—" I choked on my regret.

"Ms. Silva, I've seen families go through every stage of grief. Some people keep their feelings private to spare their loved ones. I believe your father didn't want to burden you with his sadness." Howard's deep voice radiated sympathy.

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Did Dad find comfort in this man's presence? Is that why he felt safe confiding in him? I dabbed my eyes. "Tell me more about my father."

Howard brightened. "He enjoyed working for the shipping company at the port, loading their container ships. He dreamed of going to sea on one of those ships, visiting ports around the world."

I'd never known what my father dreamed of, or if he dreamed at all. The mournful truth caught in my throat, tight enough to make me swallow hard.

Dad's co-workers at Mayer International Shipping had overwhelmed me with flowers, food, and cards. Yesterday, a handwritten letter arrived from the company's CEO, Victoria Mayer. Her glowing sentiments swelled my heart. I stashed the letter in my handbag to keep the precious memories close.

"The last time I saw your father, he was excited. He said he invited you on a Caribbean cruise." Howard leaned toward me. "Taking that trip with him must be a wonderful memory."

My insides churned with guilt. I had declined Dad's invitation. I was over-scheduled and stressed, cramming for my real estate license exams, working nights and weekends in a realty office, and picking up seasonal daytime shifts at Macy's. "We'll go after the holidays," I'd promised. Two weeks after Christmas, they found the cancer. Eight months later, he was gone. I thought if I gave him a beautiful funeral, it would ease my remorse. And now. . .

Howard interrupted my thoughts: "Ms. Silva, I want to say again how sorry I am. I know I can't make it right. But I can provide a dignified, personalized memorial service at no cost to you. Any arrangements you'd like. Just tell me—" His voice cracked. "Just tell me what I can do for your father." He covered his mouth with a shaking hand.

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For the first time since we entered the garden, I turned my head and looked at him directly—his wilted posture, his pained expression. Slowly, the realization settled in: *This man cared. This man cared about my father.* I wanted to hold onto my anger, but my head throbbed with the pressure. And how was it changing anything to cling to these feelings? Exhausted, I forced myself to let it go, bit by bit. Tension ebbed from my shoulders. “Howard,” I began with effort, “thank you. . . for your kindness to my father. . . for listening.”

The thinnest smile inched across his face. “Your father did his share of listening, too. More than his share.”

And my father cared about this man. A light breeze cooled my neck, wafting curling brown leaves into the fountain. *I’m glad that Dad had someone to talk to; I’m only sorry that it wasn’t me.* My phone pinged: a meeting reminder. I shouldered my handbag and stood, my mind made up, my decision settled. “I’ll call you tomorrow. We’ll talk about Dad’s service.”

Howard rose from the bench, his eyes glistening. “Thank you, Ms. Silva.” He offered his hand.

I accepted, matching his firm grip. “Please call me Laurie.”

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I hurried to my car and scrambled behind the wheel. There, resting on the passenger seat, was the bronze urn. *Oh, Dad.* Fresh tears streaked my cheeks. But these tears didn’t burn with grief and shame; these tears were cooling, like the breeze in the garden. *What was it Howard said about why Dad loved the fountain garden?* He said that Dad didn’t want the cold, dark ground; Dad wanted sunlight shining on water. Now I knew.

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I pulled the envelope from my handbag—the letter from Victoria Mayer, with her private number and an invitation to call anytime. *I can't make it right. But I can do this—*

I reached for my phone.

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That evening, I drove to the Port of Oakland to meet with the captain of the Mayer International ship *Reliant*. The ship was departing at midnight, headed for oceans and continents around the world. I will entrust my father to the captain, and he will ensure that Dad disembarks at every port. When the *Reliant* reaches its farthest destination, the urn will be transferred to another ship's captain. Dad's travels will continue until the urn returns to me—empty.

As I approached the terminal, the height of the massive ship soared skyward into a blazing sunset above an endless blue horizon. My breath hitched in my throat.

“Bon voyage, Dad,” I whispered, as the last golden rays melted into the beckoning sea.