

The Widow's Reckoning

The tweeting of bluebirds welcomed the white-suited man to the isolated country house. Its light-yellow paint peeled away in the undeterred sunlight of the empty countryside. On the left side of the house, a small terrace poked out of the second story over a patch of thorny bushes. The porch steps moaned as he approached the door. At its center, it bore a thin envelope slot. After pressing the doorbell, he removed his white cowboy hat and held it over his chest with both hands. A smile crept over his face as the door creaked open.

“Good afternoon, Sister Butterworth.”

A short figure's right hand welcomed him in. Her left hand dabbed her eyes with a floral handkerchief. “Come in, Reverend Copeland.”

He wiped his feet on the doormat and hung his hat in the entryway. “I hope I'm not intruding.”

She waved her handkerchief. “Lord knows what I'd do without the pleasure of these weekly meetings.” As they spoke, the grandfather clock in the corner peeled three times. “You're on time as always.”

“The pleasure's always mine.” Reverend Copeland tugged both sides of his black-stringed bow tie.

“Make yourself at home, you hear?” She walked toward the kitchen in a bright blue dress. “I've whipped up some chocolate chip cookies.”

“You're too kind.” Before leaving the entryway, he noticed an envelope on the floor in front of the door below the mail slot. Groaning, he lowered his knees to grab the envelope and placed it in the pocket of his white suit. He crossed the stiff pink carpeting and sat on the green polka-dotted love seat. Fidgeting his hands, he glanced at the dim fireplace amidst a sea of

diamond wallpaper. Over the mantle hung a stately portrait of a red-haired, smooth-faced Sister Butterworth standing next to a scowling, wheelchaired man with bushy eyebrows and crow's feet. She walked in with a tray of steaming cookies and a jittering tea set. "Fresh out of the oven." As she rested the tray on the coffee table, the window light reflected off her sapphire bracelet.

"That's a mighty fine bracelet you've got on, there," said Reverend Copeland.

"Why, thank you." She stood and adjusted it on her wrist. "I have a large collection of antique jewelry, but I'm ashamed to admit that it's been dwindling lately."

"You don't say?"

"It's the most peculiar thing." She crossed her arms. "I've always taken such good care of them, but over the past few weeks they've been vanishing out of thin air."

"They seem like mighty expensive things to lose."

"I know, I know..." She raised her wrist and ogled her bracelet. "As a matter of fact, I have a sapphire necklace that matches this one, but I'm keeping it somewhere safe and sound. It's my birthstone, you know."

"Ah, yes," said Reverend Copeland. "September?"

Sister Butterworth smiled. "To be honest, they're the only pieces of jewelry I care about anymore – the only ones I owned before I met..." Her eyes gravitated toward the basement door between the kitchen and the living room. Her lips quivered.

Reverend Copeland arose and rested a callused but gentle hand on her shoulder. "Four months ago today, I reckon?"

She cleared her throat. "I reckon." She collapsed into a doily-adorned rocking chair.

He sat on the love seat again across from her. "You don't still blame yourself, do you?"

She pulled her handkerchief out of her pocket and wrung it in her hands. “No matter how ornery he got, I did my wifely duties. I cooked his favorite meals, I dressed him every morning, I drove him to church every Sunday, I...” Her eyes returned to the basement door.

“Be at peace, my child.” Reverend Copeland wore a soft, assuring grin. “God holds nothing against you.” Sister Butterworth smiled again. Reverend Copeland continued. “Everyone at church has been amazed by your strength during this time. You looked so dignified and peaceful at his funeral. Many would see at a gentle woman such as yourself and not expect the inner strength that wells inside of you.”

“Oh, come now.” She dabbed the handkerchief at her eyes again.

“I mean every word! Everyone seems to judge people based on their appearances.” He gasped and pulled out the envelope from his suit pocket. “Oh! I almost forgot to give you this! I found it in the entryway.” He adjusted his spectacles to determine the sender. “It says it’s from Springfield Home Insurance.”

She laughed. “Ah, another one...”

“They haven’t been giving you any trouble lately, have they?”

She shook her head. “Oddly enough, no. Ron may have been stingy with money, but he always made sure that we had good coverage on everything.”

“Everything?”

She nodded and looked around the room. “Even this rickety old place.”

Reverend Copeland smiled. “The Lord provides for His children, I see.”

She smiled. “I reckon He does.” She turned to the fireplace and saw the final spark die. “Oh, silly me. I’ve been meaning to rekindle that fireplace all day.” She rubbed her hands together. “Before we know it, it’ll be colder than all get out!”

He stood up. “Do you need some more firewood from out back?”

She shook her head. “No, I have some in the kitchen. As a matter of fact, what I would really like you to get – since you’re here anyhow – is my matchbox from upstairs to light to fire. It should be right on my dresser.”

“Of course! You just stay right here.”

She rubbed her knees. “Bless your heart.”

Reverend Copeland climbed up the steps and found her bedroom door ajar at the end of the hallway. Next to the terrace door, he saw the matches on an antique mahogany dresser. He ripped open the top drawer to find Sister Butterworth’s jewelry collection in its usual spot. Emerald, ruby, and amethyst rays shimmered in the darkness. He clawed out a sapphire necklace and a few smaller pieces of jewelry – restraining himself to only enough to fit in his suit pockets.

“I didn’t lose my matches too, did I?”

Reverend Copeland spun around and slammed the drawer shut. “Oh, I’m sorry, I...” He looked at the top of the dresser and laughed. “Ah! Silly me. Your matchbox is right where you said it was. How did...I mean, you didn’t need to come all the way up here.”

“On second thought,” said Sister Butterworth, “I need you to check on something else. Could you get on the terrace for a moment?”

“Um...yes, of course.”

She opened the terrace door. “This is why I *really* needed you over today.”

Reverend Copeland stepped out into the lukewarm August air. Sister Butterworth peaked her head out of the doorway and pointed at a weeping willow in her back yard. “Look at that tree over there. What do you see?”

He squinted his eyes. A small bluebird flew out of the sinking branches. Inside a nest, a mother was pushing its babies out. One stubborn bird remained. “Well, would you look at that! Those birds are finally leaving their nest. It being almost September, they should be migrating soon. I reckon those birds have waited too long to take their first flight.”

“I reckon,” said Sister Butterworth, unlatching a terrace support screw from the faded yellow siding. Reverend Copeland shrieked as the terrace fell off the side of the house. Mrs. Butterworth looked down at her desecrated thorn bushes and shut the terrace door. She grabbed the matchbox off her dresser and ran down the stairs.

She faced the portrait over the fireplace. After rolling a match, she ignited the diamond wallpaper around the framed couple. She stayed long enough to watch the flame engulf the scowling wheelchaired man with bushy eyebrows and crow’s feet. On her way out, she grabbed her coat, the home insurance company envelope, and Reverend Copeland’s cowboy hat. She slammed the door behind her and skipped off the creaking porch and onto the cracked sidewalk.

Turning her head back, she noticed the wreckage of her terrace. Approaching it, she found Reverend Copeland strewn across the thorn bushes. As she laid his hat amongst the rubble, a blue light glistened from the inside of his white suit. She dug through its pockets and found her sapphire necklace nestled with other pieces of jewelry. Only taking the necklace, she tucked the box of matches in its place. She clutched the necklace in the same hand that bore the matching sapphire bracelet. When she looked up, the mother bluebird flew away from the weeping willow with her children. Sister Butterworth adorned the necklace around her neck, walked to her car, and drove into the distance. Behind her, a cloud of smoke ascended to the heavens.