

Verity Finds the Portal

September 2017

Verity Pettigrew drove straight through the small town of Milford before she remembered to take out her phone. Five minutes more and she'd have missed her last chance to call her boyfriend before she went offline for the next couple of days. Michael wouldn't like being forgotten. The certain knowledge of how he'd express his displeasure sent a tingly rush of dread and lust through her.

Pulling over to the side of the road, she took out her phone and speed-dialed him. She turned the engine off as she waited for him to answer.

"Babe." Michael's deep voice boomed out of the hands-free speaker. "Where are you?"

Verity pictured him sitting in his corner office with the view over the Pike Street Market and the Seattle Harbor. He'd be wearing a white shirt with French cuffs and a silk tie. The jacket of his custom-made suit would be carefully hung on a wooden hanger on the back of the door. If he could see the scruffy jeans and t-shirt she wore, he'd shake his head with disapproval.

"About half an hour from home," she said.

"Home? You're calling that old shack home?"

"It's going to be the best home I've ever had." She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. She didn't want to get into this argument again. Michael lived in a brand-new condo on the water near Seattle's university district. He thought old buildings were nice to look at and a disaster to own.

The year before, Verity and her twin sister Felicity learned that they'd inherited a derelict farm in the Methow Valley. The more he insisted they should sell, the more determined Verity became to prove him wrong.

After many bewildering months, probate was finally settled and the house transferred to Verity and Felicity. Since then, Verity had been out to the property several times, talking to contractors, arranging to have the most urgent repairs and upgrading done. Felicity and their younger sister Hope were joining Verity that afternoon. The three of them would spend the week working on their place, them and an army of skilled trades people.

To Verity's astonishment, Michael had offered to join them the following weekend and pitch in for the tidy up. Verity sensed that he was humoring her with his offer but she accepted it anyway. He'd didn't know yet that she and Felicity had plans of their own, plans that didn't necessarily include him.

They were going to restore the old farmhouse. They'd build some cottages, buy some horses and set up a country retreat where people could get away from it all. She could see the cottages clearly, set out in a half circle around the main house. Lissie, as Felicity was known to her nearest and dearest, and Verity would welcome people from all over the world to their high-end resort.

But, before any of that could happen, they had to make the house livable.

"I'm sure it will be just lovely," Michael said without conviction. In a more interested voice, he added, "Did you pack sunscreen?"

"Yes, of course." Verity suppressed a sigh.

"And you've got enough drinking water for the rest of the week in case the pump fails?"

“Why would it? But yes, I’ve got several four-gallon blocks.”

He murmured his approval. “Food?”

“Michael! I’m a grown woman. I know I have to eat. If I’m desperate I can drive back to town. I’m going to a remote farmhouse, not to another planet.” She spoke through clenched teeth.

“Watch your tone, please.” His voice was gentle but strict.

Verity swallowed as a hungry warmth spread up from her crotch. Some kids had helicopter parents. She had a helicopter boyfriend. Michael was protective and loving, always looking out for her well-being. They’d met a year after her parents had died, a year that for her had been filled with endless visits to an attorney’s office and innumerable decisions about herself, her two sisters, and their future. Michael was the only man she’d ever met who’d been more decisive and opinionated than she was.

He was a dominant, old-fashioned kind of man who invited her on dates where her only responsibility was to be ready on time, dressed for the occasion, and on her best behavior. That last requirement was underscored on their third date. Michael missed a shot when they were playing pool. As Verity cleared the table and won ten dollars off him, she teased him about being beaten by a girl. When he told her enough was enough, to let it go, she couldn’t resist a last, sarcastic barb.

Without preamble or warning, he marched her out of the bar to a dark corner of the parking lot where he lifted her skirt and smacked her bottom hard, more times than she had the presence of mind to count. To her surprise, Verity discovered that being spanked freed a lot of her inhibitions. That night when he asked her to stay over, she said yes for the first time. When they made love, she reached a high that she didn’t know existed before Michael.

Frequently since then, she’d deliberately provoked him to get that sort of attention. He didn’t hesitate to turn her over his knee and light her bottom on fire if he thought she deserved it. Sometimes the spankings were playful. Sometimes they were discipline, plain and simple. Either way, his loving comfort afterward always added to the heat factor. Verity had accepted this aspect of their intimate life without telling anyone about it. She’d made Michael promise to keep it secret too.

Ever since that early date, she’d learned to recognize when she was stepping over the line. She changed her tone of voice, making it bright and cheerful. “I’m looking forward to seeing you on Friday. Do you think you’ll be able to get away early?”

“Nothing will stop me,” he said. “If you need anything you can’t get in Milford, I’ll pick it up on my way there.” His voice was low, concerned, reminding her how much he cared for her.

“I miss you already,” she said, reaching for the ignition.

“Miss you too.”

A moment passed when neither of them said a thing. Then Michael cleared his throat. “Make sure you don’t let that crazy sister of yours convince you that you want to live out there. Your place is here in the city. With me.”

They blew kisses to each other before Verity disconnected the call.

Yeah. Sure. How could she have forgotten something so simple? And on his terms, she thought, easing the big F350 truck back onto the road.

Turning the stereo up loud, she joined the traffic heading northeast. She sang along with one song after another but kept wishing she’d added Beyoncé’s *Put a Ring On It* to her playlist. She needed to play that one for Michael sometime.

He was good at saying things like: she belonged with him, he needed her, he wanted her. Occasionally, since they started going together when Verity was a senior at college, he’d even said

he loved her. Here it was four years down the road and he still hadn't popped the question. Because of that, she'd refused to live with him. Why did he have to be old-fashioned in every way but the one that counted the most?

He was one of the reasons she wanted to get away from the city. She needed to be on her own for a while. She wanted to see if she could live without him, while giving him a taste of not always having her around.

Dear, beloved (if only they'd known her!) Great-aunt Alice Amanda Ferris had willed more than the house and a thousand overgrown acres to her and Lissie. She'd also left them a big bank account that they were going to use to restore the property.

Michael didn't know they'd inherited cash too. Lissie made Verity promise not to tell him. Lissie insisted it was time for Verity to test Michael's commitment to her, starting now. Verity also hadn't told Michael that she had no intention of going back to Seattle with him next week. He'd find that out soon enough.

It was a half hour's drive from Milford to the edge of the property. When they'd driven up from Seattle to see it before the title had passed to them, they'd spent an hour driving back and forth before they'd spotted the overgrown entrance. Vines strangled the arch of the gate and blackberry bushes choked the rutted road to the house. Michael wasn't dressed for rough work; he'd sat and watched as the sisters cleared away enough of the jungle to get onto the goat track to the house. Driving that rough road had tested the endurance of Verity's ten-year-old Subaru. As soon as Verity and Lissie got back to the city, they bought themselves beefy off-road trucks. They had serious work to do, lots of building materials to haul around. A family sedan was out of the question.

Verity put the truck into four-wheel drive, walking the tires through the bumps and dips of the dirt track that didn't so much resemble a driveway or road as it did an obstacle course. The road contractor who was due to start work tomorrow said it wasn't as bad as it looked. It had a strong, deep subgrade. All it needed was some remedial work with a good road base laid over the top. Still, Verity drove slowly, avoiding potholes and easing through culverts. The long, slow crawl to the house gave her a chance to take in her surroundings.

Turning off the stereo, she put down all the windows and listened. Silence, punctuated by an occasional crow cawing in the forest, surrounded her. A hint of fall's earthy scent already rode the oxygen-rich air. This was a magical place that she feared Michael would never enjoy. He was a city person through and through. When she stepped out on the balcony at his condo, the constant roar of the traffic on the nearby roads and the noise of the boats on the harbor deafened her. He claimed that was the sound of industry, of humanity, of progress. Verity thought she could live with just a little less humanity.

She parked in front of the house and jumped out of the truck. Stopping for a minute she listened. Yes, she could hear the creek, the one that delivered fresh water twelve months of the year. That was a sound she never heard in the city.

Craning her neck, she looked up at the second floor. Soon the roof and windows would all be replaced, bringing the house into the twenty-first century. Admiring the solid construction that had stood the test of time, she clasped her hands behind her back. Her single blonde braid was so long it brushed her hands at the base of her spine. Michael loved her long hair. Memories of how he fisted his hands in it when he kissed her quickened her heart rate. Michael knew how to kiss. She shook her head, throwing off all thoughts of him for the moment.

Forcing herself back to the present, she went through what she knew about the place. It was built in 1883, but had been upgraded several times since then. The last people had lived in it

in the 1980s. Abandoned for over twenty years, it was still standing, a testament to how well built it was. A roofer from Milford was coming the next day to quote on replacing the old wooden shingles with a new metal roof.

Verity squinted, envisioning an inviting clutch of cottages nestled in the woods around the house. They'd be placed far enough apart that every guest would have complete privacy but close enough to make visiting easy for family groups. She and Lissie had decided they'd clear an acre close to the house and the creek. They'd chosen a spot with the most southerly exposure, currently covered by a small wood. It would be their vegetable patch. Verity wandered in that direction, anticipating how the garden would look next summer. It was already September, and too late to plant anything this year.

She froze in her tracks. There was a building in the middle of the dense wood, a building she hadn't seen before. She peered through the trees and bushes again. It was still there, as big as life. She grinned. Their inheritance just got better. Trotting down the hill, her cowboy boots setting up puffs of dust in the soft fall sunlight, she imagined Lissie's face when she brought her down here. Better still, she imagined the face of their younger sister and only other sibling, Hope, who was coming with Lissie this afternoon. Great-aunt Alice had lost contact with the twins' parents after they were born, so Hope hadn't been named in Alice's will. Verity and Lissie promised to give Hope a one-third share of the farm when she finished college.

Hope was horse-mad, had been since she was little. Both of the twins feared Hope wouldn't finish school if she had the chance to spend all day every day with horses. Their promise was a bribe: Hope had to finish some level of college or trade school before they'd make her part owner.

If she realized there was already had a barn suitable for housing feed, tack, and maybe a pony or two, she'd never want to go back to school. Verity grinned as she anticipated her younger sister's happiness and frustration.

The front door of the barn creaked open when Verity pushed it gently. In the hay loft, there was the flutter of wings and a bird flew out of a broken window. The barn was spacious with four stalls for horses and a large open area that was empty except for a wooden bench and two old stirrup leathers, one with a rusty stirrup, hanging on a hook on the wall.

The floor of the barn was packed dirt and it smelled dry, with a slight scent of hay still and—maybe Verity's nose was playing tricks on her—horse manure. She opened the door of each of the large box stalls, admiring the design. They were big enough for the horses to get away from each other but had low enough walls that the animals could touch each other and talk if they wanted to.

The door to the fourth stall was stuck. She pushed it once. Nothing. Again. Nothing. She kicked it as hard as she could. It shuddered and groaned but remained closed.

"Right," Verity said. "You want to play tough? You don't know who you're messing with."

Fighting a migraine that had been playing at the edge of her head all morning, she walked around the outside of the barn, stomping down the tall grass that grew to the edge of the building. Even though she knew she should get back to the house and unpack her truck, she hoped to find a crowbar or something to pry open the rusted hardware on that last stall door. Back where she'd started, she almost tripped over a sledgehammer. It was entangled in vines. Verity slipped the Swiss Army Knife out of her pocket and crudely hacked them away. By the time she'd freed the heavy old tool, she'd muttered every profanity she knew at least twice. Maybe this dream was going to be a bit harder than she had counted on.

She hefted the hammer over her shoulder before immediately letting it drop. The thing weighed a ton. Stopping in front of the stuck stall door, she swung the sledgehammer back and

forth, gradually gaining momentum. She aimed it at the stall door. The split second before the metal hit the wood, a deafening crack filled the barn. The stall door opened inward. Verity staggered, tripped, and fell.

She fell for the longest time before she hit the ground with a solid thump.

When she opened her eyes, a handsome cowboy in dusty, old-fashioned clothes stood in front of her, holding out his hand. She placed her hand in his before the world spun again. The next minute, he was gone and Verity slipped back into darkness.