

Gloves Off

BRIEF SYNOPSIS: Lavinia lives life at arm's length until an unexpected postcard forces her to let life's possibilities wash over her.

Her first mistake was taking off her gloves.

Lavinia knew better than to chance a gloveless moment, but she'd done it. Somewhere between changing from her travel gloves and into her work gloves, the postcard slipped from her locker to the floor, floating slowly and in a spiral pattern, making a small *shhhh* sound as it landed face down on the tile. And in that instant – unthinking – she'd picked it up.

Everything about her life was measured, precise, calculated, and the minor oversight became the wrinkle in her otherwise scheduled morning. Lavinia “Vinnie” Walker Fairfax, Mineralogist and Curator of Gems and Minerals at the Smithsonian Natural History Museum, didn't have time for the headache that collided with the bright images and flashes of color that accompanied the quick reading of the object. The postcard was not her own. She knew that at once. Dropping the item the moment she realized her mistake wasn't fast enough. She stumbled at the force of images, her knees buckling at the touch of the bench behind her. She sat, startled, and inhaled deeply in an effort to slow her thoughts and regain her composure.

Not surprisingly, no one else was in the locker room, and none of her colleagues saw the distraught look on her face or the pained expression in her eyes. While they didn't *know* her, everyone knew Vinnie preferred being alone: she arrived an hour before each shift, ate an hour before the other curators' scheduled lunch, and often stayed an hour later than her peers. Her relentless work ethic made her a formidable researcher and one of the youngest curators-in-charge in the museum's history at just 33 years old.

Her colleagues recognized hers as a sixth sense, her understanding of stones and gems was unparalleled in the department. Even the Gems and Minerals Emeritus, Richard Sprat, saw this in Vinnie. He'd been on the hiring committee, and when the group convened to review her latest publication in *Science 360* along with her application, he went against the grain – most were nonplussed by her reserved manner, her stilted responses, and her unsettling gaze – and overruled the general consensus to push through Vinnie's hiring. Vinnie *saw* stones, Richard believed.

“Baryte, Bayldonite, Benitoite, Bisbee Blue, Bowenite, Brazilianite...,” Vinnie muttered to herself, her hands resting, though clenched, in her lap. She made it through the cataloguing of gems starting with ‘A,’ and her breathing slowed, along with the flashes of light and scatter of images. By the time she got to “Danburite, Datolite, Diaspore,” she relaxed and pushed herself off of the bench. Vinnie took a step closer to her locker and carefully placed her thin hands into the small, soft cotton gloves she wore when inspecting the gems and minerals at her research table. A glance at the clock made Vinnie realize how much time she'd lost – it was 8:45 – and she knew her colleagues would arrive any minute; she still had several specimens to pull from the “rock

bin” for today’s groupings. Collected, she set her jaw, touched the button at her collar – she’d unfastened it while breathing deeply – and adjusted her glasses on her slim nose. She took one last deep breath, closed her eyes, and exhaled. Her day had started, and there was nothing to do but keep moving forward, despite the stumble with the unfamiliar postcard.

“Yes,” she said, “the postcard.” All of the uncertainty and discomfort she felt earlier were absent from her voice. After pulling her white lab coat over her tailored shirt and knee-length skirt, Vinnie bent over to pick up the postcard that she’d left resting on the floor. It wouldn’t do to put the item back in her locker – what if it slipped again and the same kerfuffle befell her a second time. Without giving it any more appraisal, she slipped the item into the deep pocket of her coat.

Vinnie’s mother, Henrietta Walker Fairfax, had called it “the touch,” and it was something that the women in her family embraced with varying levels of success since the first known reading in 1714 when her great-great-great-grandmother Flora Fairfax left Barbados with her husband, Customs Agent William Fairfax, and moved to Virginia. Her mother said that Flora touched the ground at Belvoir, near the Potomac, and read the Earth; she told William to lay the foundation and the rest would flourish. Flora could read rocks and minerals, while Henrietta had the touch for flesh.

To Lavinia’s dismay, she had a mix of both gifts. She could read objects humanity imbued with meaning, from the threads in a piece of second-hand clothing to the single brush strokes on a painting, from hand-crafted furniture to cast off journals left at bookshops. Even postcards sent from a shore she couldn’t name. Without the gloves, Vinnie’s world was a barrage of flashes. In her earliest memories, her mother had tried to help her control the speed at which the images flooded her mind. It took so much of Vinnie’s effort though, that, in a moment of motherly care, Henrietta gifted her a pair of gloves. “These should help, Lavinia,” she’d said. Vinnie couldn’t tell if it was pity that rounded out the phrase or just her mother’s exhaustion.

Her mother’s touch made hiding things from her nearly impossible; all she had to do was grab Vinnie’s hand or place her palm on Vinnie’s forehead while she slept, and Henrietta knew. Henrietta’s attention was an invasion, and it didn’t take long for Vinnie to shy away from her mother’s hold, to recoil at her touch. Vinnie’s was a forced solitude, for protection from exposure.

The day’s cataloguing – she was working with a collection from the Olorgesailie basin in the southern Kenya rift valley, items from the Middle Stone Age nearly 1.2 million years old – required her full attention. Working with gems, minerals, and rocks was a comfort. Unlike Flora, Vinnie couldn’t read the Earth or its minerals. She had to coax meaning from carbon dating and archeological notes. But as she worked through the stones, noting

their pigments, divots, and smooth surfaces, she caught her mind travelling back to the postcard resting in her pocket. The blue sky of the day the missive was sent. The quick thunderstorm that brewed as it was placed in the postbox. So far away in time.

“Are you okay, Vinnie?” A touch on her shoulder.

Startled, Vinnie bumped her head against the lamp at her table. “What?” Her glasses dropped to the end of her nose, and she pushed them back up with her gloved hand before looking at the speaker. Sorena Soralos stood near Vinnie’s station, her head tilted slightly, a look of concern. “Oh, yes, I’m fine. Just reaching a stopping point, actually.” Vinnie took a step back, forcing Sorena’s hand to fall away. Through the thin fabric of her lab coat, Vinnie could feel the energy of Sorena’s hand linger, the snapping and pulsing all too palpable. She wasn’t reading Sorena’s touch, she could just *feel* it.

“You’ve got that thousand-yard stare. I thought something was wrong.” Sorena smiled and Vinnie made an effort to smile in response to Sorena’s kindness. Sorena was Vinnie’s reverse: personable, the woman who remembered everyone’s birthday, her warm green eyes lit with joy and the laugh lines to match. Vinnie chanced a glance at the clock. She’d worked through her lunch despite the distraction weighing down her pocket and her thoughts. Sorena followed her gaze.

“Have you had lunch?” Sorena asked. Before Vinnie could demur, Sorena filled the slowly growing silence. “I was just getting ready to head to the café. I thought I’d stay here today. I checked visitor counts, and they look unseasonably low, so I might chance it. Join me?”

The postcard’s images raced through Vinnie’s mind as Sorena spoke: waves, laughter, a shock of cold water. The laughter – two voices carried on the wind – resonated in her mind’s eye, and Vinnie found herself nodding an ascent to Sorena’s invitation. “Yes,” she said in a faint whisper. Then “Yes,” more confidently. “I could use a bite to eat. Let me just clean up and change out of my coat. Five minutes?”

“Excellent,” Sorena’s response was nearing on giddy, her smile electric. “I’ll be at my table. Just grab me when you’re ready.” Her hand brushed Vinnie’s sleeve momentarily, and then she turned on her heel and headed down the expansive Gems and Minerals lab. Vinnie watched as she walked away, Sorena’s lab coat flaring with the celerity in her step.

The two women – two of a handful in the department – had worked together for three years, but their interactions had been limited to work-based functions: staff meetings, conversations about grant proposals,

OSHA regulation updates and dressings-down. Vinnie knew Sorena worked in experimental geology, her most recent research dealt with carbon fluxes and the magma present in Earth's oceans. At department lunches and museum galas Vinnie begrudgingly attended, Sorena navigated to Vinnie's space and charmed her into joining others. Sorena carried conversations when trustees and potential contributors inquired about forthcoming projects and publications, but made room for Vinnie to add details about her own research. Whereas Sorena was effusive, Vinnie was reserved, but the two had a harmony that Vinnie felt vibrate in her bones. Today's brief touches all but confirmed the energy of their past interactions.

Again Vinnie found herself at her locker, though this time she opened it slowly, half expecting another surprise. Today already had so many unexpected occurrences – not unwelcomed, necessarily. She fingered the postcard in her pocket, a talisman. Again Vinnie heard the laughter. Again she saw the beach, its light sands gleaming in the sun. Whoever sent the postcard had known joy. Vinnie's fingers itched to know more, to *feel* more. Earlier the images had come unbidden, but now she sought them out.

Slowly, Vinnie unbuttoned the tiny clasp of the glove at her wrist. She took a deep breath, centering herself. The second clasp stuck, and Vinnie, already craving the postcard, nearly wrenched the clasp from its threads. Her hands free, Vinnie braced herself before plunging her fingers into her pocket. The flood of images raced to her: the beach, the waves, the sand, the sunshine. This time, however, Vinnie was ready. She sorted things, willing them to slow into coherence. No longer confined to her pocket, Vinnie perused the image of the card itself: a pier peopled with couples in the foreground, the clear ocean in the background, sails speckling the sea, full sun, a garish *Wish You Were Here* written in the top left. Vinnie felt the card's edges and tasted the salt of ocean air in her mouth. The corner worn and crumpled, she felt the clouds gather, an image incongruent with the pictorial scene. Vinnie allowed her fingers to trace the sails, to caress the waves that licked the beach.

She thought of Sorena and of the lunch they would share. The picture on the card at a distance, the images in her mind so intimate. Vinnie steadied her breathing and turned the card over. There, in faded ink and a looping, languorous hand was written six, short words.

You know the answer is yes.