

## **Keys to the Heart**

**By Patricia Crisafulli**

Octavia Schmidt dug through her purse as if it were an archeological site yielding treasures of the past, and came up with a grocery receipt so crinkled it looked to be half-disintegrated and a handful of pieces of a ballpoint pen that she had to reassemble on the spot. On a second dive into the unknown she came up with the spring that made the pen click, good as new.

“Four o’clock at the dealership,” Oscar told her. “Should I call you to remind you?”

Octavia brushed a tangle of blond hair out of her eyes and gave him an assured smile. “It’s written down. I’ll be there.”

“But how are you going to find that note?” Oscar nodded over the breakfast table toward the curl of paper.

“Don’t need to.” Octavia let the scrap fall back into her purse. “All I need to do is write it down and it’s etched in here.” She tapped her forehead with her index finger.

Oscar glanced at his watch and rose to put his coffee cup in the sink where it would probably sit until that evening when he loaded the dishwasher after they ate dinner. Octavia followed him toward the front door, noticing the growing stack of newspapers and junk mail on the table in the foyer and a pile of books, including at least

two that should have been returned to the library. One of these days, she half-promised, half-scolded herself.

“What time?” he repeated, with a smirk.

“Four o’clock. Dealership. I got it.” Octavia kissed him quickly and glanced over her shoulder, her mind already going to the studio in the basement where her body would soon follow. Wet clay and a potter’s wheel would absorb her for hours, producing cups and vases and bowls that she fired and glazed and painted, and which brought a pretty penny on consignment at her friend Pauline’s store, The Peppercorn. She was good at it, thankfully, since she was so miserable at everything else.

Pottery and loving Oscar; her two passions.

A ball of fur brushed her ankles, affectionately insistent in demands for attention.

“Bond, James Bond,” Octavia whispered as she stooped to pick up the cat and buried her face against his silky black coat with white accents at the neck, paws, and face.

They named the cat James Bond because they were double O’s—Oscar and Octavia, and for good measure they had gotten married on the seventh. It was their private joke that no one else appreciated, but the very thought of it made her grateful all over again that she had both Oscar and the cat in her life.

Downstairs in the studio, on the other side of the basement that housed a washing machine and dryer—both under-utilized given the mound of laundry on the floor—Octavia pulled on a clay-encrusted smock and set to work, kneading, pulling, shaping. As the wheel spun her mind took flight, remembering how it was a bowl that had brought them together. She had been late—no surprise there—to meet Pauline at The Peppercorn and was carrying her newest creation: a wide, low bowl in robin’s egg blue. Oscar in his

brown UPS uniform had been wheeling an empty dolly around the corner when she clipped it with her foot and went flying. The bowl shattered on the sidewalk and she fell into his arms. Feeling the strength of his grip and the clear honesty of his gaze, she forgot about the bowl. Oscar had followed her to her car, helped her unload the rest of her stuff, and carried it the store. Both in their thirties, they had married six months later, and now it was four years after that.

The cylinder of clay rolled over and flopped on itself, the victim of too much daydreaming. Octavia stopped the wheel, reshaped the mound, and started again. Only a fateful accident could have brought them together: the scatter-brained artist who was chronically late and the UPS man for whom on-time delivery meant job security and a way of life.

All day Octavia reminded herself that she had to be at the car dealership at four o'clock. Oscar was getting off work early in order to speak with the service manager about the new car, which had started to act up. She would meet him there in the pottery-mobile, as she called her old hatchback that she used to haul clay to the studio and finished work to The Peppercorn. When she stopped for a bite to eat at one o'clock, she told herself not to be late. Refilling her coffee mug at two she logged another reminder. At three-ten, she warned herself that she should stop now and get cleaned up. But the crimp in the lip of a pitcher was not falling into line the way she wanted, and Octavia reworked it six times before it was right.

The phone rang but she ignored it, letting the machine take messages. Probably just telemarketers anyway, she told herself.

At four fifty-five she came out of her creative fog, pleased with her work. Running upstairs to check the time—a clock in the studio distracted her too much—Octavia stopped dead in the kitchen. The four messages on the machine were from Oscar, waiting at the dealership. The last message said he had called someone from work to bring him home since he had no idea where she was.

Octavia crumpled on the spot, hugging her knees into her chest and waiting for Oscar to come in the door and tell her what she had always feared: that he didn't really love her and didn't want to live with someone so selfishly disorganized. All the clay pots in the world couldn't make up for the fact that she didn't cook, was a horrible housekeeper, and forgot to feed James Bond half the time. (Luckily, Oscar checked the food and water dishes on his way out the door each morning.) She was useless.

The key scraped in the door and the hall light snapped on. "Octavia? Are you here?"

She didn't answer.

"Octavia?" Oscar's voice was louder behind her. "Octavia—what's wrong? Are you sick? Did you fall?"

He was at her side, kneeling on the floor where she sat. "No, I'm fine. Just stupid and lazy and selfish."

"What happened? I tried to call you..."

"I didn't pick up the phone. I was working on a pitcher and didn't want to be disturbed. I forgot all about you and the car dealer and four o'clock." Octavia turned away and wiped her dripping nose on her sleeve. "You shouldn't be here with me, Oscar. I'm bad for you."

Oscar pulled her upright and wrapped his arms around her. “You aren’t very good at remembering things, but you sure do know how to love me.”

“Really? How do I do that? By forgetting everything? By never cleaning up this place? If you didn’t do half the stuff around here, we’d starve to death in a dump. Do you remember what my old apartment was like?”

Oscar ran his hands over his thinning hair. “You’re too hard on yourself.”

Octavia studied him, knowing that he wasn’t what anyone would call handsome. He looked older than thirty-eight, and when he was younger had suffered from bad skin which age and time had finally calmed and smoothed a bit. He was hard-working and dependable, and loved her for reasons she couldn’t fathom.

“Things are going to change, Oscar,” Octavia said in a tone that chilled even her. “They have to.”

The next morning, Octavia forced herself out of bed at six, instead of lounging until seven while Oscar made his own coffee and breakfast. There would be no studio today, she told herself; duty called. After Oscar left with a kiss and yet another promise that he wasn’t mad, Octavia started on the kitchen. She filled and emptied the dishwasher twice, while hauling out moldy leftovers and shriveled produce from the refrigerator. James Bond circled her in fascination as she wiped down the countertops and then scrubbed the floor.

Hauling the recycling bin into the foyer, she sorted through the junk mail, opened a bill that was supposed to have been paid two weeks before, and set aside the library books. The washing machine hummed downstairs with load after load of sheets, towels,

underwear, t-shirts, socks, and jeans. At five o'clock, she mailed the bill at the post office, returned the books to the library and paid the overdue fines, and picked up a meal to go, which she could keep warm in the oven.

Opening the back door, Octavia was struck by the smell of the house, all lemony fresh, which turned her stomach. It was her mother's house: a joyless and punitive place where no mess was tolerated despite the fact that Octavia had been one of four children. Growing up in that environment she had vowed never to subject herself to it again. The pendulum, however, had swung too far the other way.

At six-thirty, Oscar came home. Hearing the stamp of his boots in the back room, Octavia prepared to be praised for all the hard work, even though the upstairs was still a wreck other than a freshly made bed. "Octavia?" he called out.

"In here," she replied as she straightened the throw on the old sofa in the front room and picked up one of James Bond's toys from the floor and set it in his kitty bed.

"What are you doing?" Oscar's arms dangled at his sides and his face was crisscrossed with worry lines.

"I cleaned all day—kitchen, dining room, foyer, living room. Laundry. Refrigerator." Octavia let her hands rise up in triumph and fall with a slap of defeat against her legs.

"But what about the studio?" Oscar set his hat and gloves down on the coffee table, then scooped them back up again.

"No studio for me until this place is shipshape. I don't know how you stand it." Octavia paced across the room and picked up a magazine from the floor next to Oscar's armchair.

“I don’t mind a little mess, Octavia. I know housekeeping isn’t your specialty.”

“Ha! That’s putting it mildly.” Octavia led the way back into the kitchen. “I picked up dinner tonight. I suppose I should have cooked, but I didn’t have time to get to the grocery store.”

Oscar went upstairs to change his clothes and joined her at the table a few moments later.

Octavia’s household purge, as she called it, lasted all week. With each clean surface she felt mildly vindicated, but never for very long. Her mother’s scowl reflected in every mirror wiped clean of smudges and in the shiny stainless of the pots and pans. The roar of the vacuum and the slosh of the bucket drowned out the chorus of self-condemnation.

Each time she went downstairs to the laundry room, Octavia cast a longing glance toward her studio. She thought of the potter’s wheel that had been idle since that fateful Monday, and vowed not to return until all was put to rights. Even when Pauline called from The Peppercorn to tell her one of her bigger pieces had sold Octavia fought the urge to celebrate at the wheel. “I’m taking a short break,” she explained. “I should have some new pieces for you in a week or two.”

When Pauline asked if she had been sick, Octavia assured her that everything was fine. “Just need to do some other things around here.”

On Friday night, she made a passable chicken dish from a recipe on the back of a can of mushroom soup. Oscar had three helpings, and even James Bond seemed to like the morsel she put in his dish.

Oscar was off on Saturday and tried to coax her into the studio, but Octavia insisted that they go to Costco and buy paper towels and toilet paper in bulk so they wouldn't have to worry about running out, which they did on a regular basis. Sunday was Valentine's Day, and Octavia attempted to make chocolate brownies from scratch, which were a little gluey in the middle but Oscar said he liked them that way.

On her hands and knees in the closet in the bedroom upstairs, Octavia didn't hear Oscar approach. "Just a second," she called over her shoulder as she deposited a rumpled piece of clothing into the rag-bag pile.

"No more waiting. You need to see something."

Getting to her feet, Octavia wondered what was wrong. Oscar wouldn't give any hints as he led her by the hand down the stairs to the first floor, past the kitchen where a dozen red roses stood in a glass vase on the counter. "For me?" she gasped.

"Yes, but you can enjoy them in a moment."

Oscar's tug kept her in motion toward the basement stairs. James Bond scampered down the steps ahead of them.

Had she forgotten laundry in the washing machine? Maybe she had shrunk one of his UPS uniforms or put in bleach instead of detergent.

Oscar headed toward the back of the basement where her studio was, around a corner and behind the stairs. As she approached, Octavia could see the far wall of cement blocks had been painted rosy pink, her favorite color, and the cobwebs had been cleared from the ground-level window. Her clay was wrapped tightly in plastic in the big storage bin, and her wheel was right as she left it. But everything else had been straightened and swept. On her work table was one pink rose.

“Oh, Oscar, it’s wonderful. I can’t believe you did this for me!” Octavia gasped.

“That’s not all,” he continued. Pulling a drop cloth off a far table, he unveiled a portable phone in its own charger. “You can turn off the ringer if you want, but if you might be expecting an important call…”

“Like from you,” she interrupted with a giggle.

“Then you can leave it on,” he continued. “And one more thing. If you hate it, I’ll take it down. But maybe it will help.”

Oscar removed an empty carton from one of the shelves, revealing something on the wall: a clock, shaped like a key. “It doesn’t ring, chime, clang, or buzz—none of those things that you hate. But it does tell time, which might come in handy.”

“Oh, Oscar, it’s perfect. I do need a dose of reality down here, but just a little one.” Octavia hugged him tightly, and then loosened her embrace to look at the clock more closely. “It’s quirky, too, just like me. I couldn’t stand one of the round-face things—too much like school.”

“Do you know why it’s a key?” Oscar rocked up on his toes and then set his heels down. “It’s the key to my heart. So if you ever wonder where I want you to spend your time, it’s right here.”

“Really?” Octavia whispered, her throat full of lumps. “You don’t like the house?”

“Oh, I think the house looks great, but you shouldn’t spend all your time doing that. You’re an artist, Octavia. I love telling people that my wife makes pottery. One of the guys from work bought that bowl you made—the one with the seashell pattern. He went to The Peppercorn after I told him about it.”

Octavia interrupted his explanation with a kiss. She held onto him with the deepest of gratitude for running into her that day, for smashing the robin's egg blue bowl that was a sacrifice made to love, and carrying her boxes as if each held a treasure. As she stood with her arms around Oscar, she felt James Bond's passing caress as he circled them one, twice, and a three times for luck.