

Big Bay Hunt

WHAT'S THE PASSWORD?

WITH RUBY LIPSTICK ETCHED UPON HER LIPS and the fringe of her satin dress rustling in the summer breeze, Viki Volstead leaned toward the peep hole in a rusty basement door. After whispering a well-guarded password, she gained entrance into her favorite Baltimore speakeasy.

She slinked inside and winked at her Uncle Ritchie, whom everyone called “The Governor.” Her mother’s renegade brother was the boot-legger who kept hooch flowing into forbidden cocktails around the Bay. Even though Prohibition had proclaimed last call to America in January 1920, champagne still spilled from crystal glasses, and waiters hoisted silver trays of shimmering Chesapeake oysters.

The speakeasy’s atmosphere was defiant yet whimsical. Viki watched long pearl necklaces whirling around flappers on the dance floor and caught men in tuxedos discretely filling flasks with amber liquids. Suddenly, the jazz musicians lowered their instruments, and the deafening silence brought the festivities to a standstill as federal Prohibition agents poured into the gin joint.

During the ensuing chaos of the raid, Viki dashed toward a back door that would lead her to a safe escape. Just steps from a clean getaway, Uncle Ritchie stood in her path and pushed a weathered ledger book into her chest. “Hide it where nobody will ever find it!” With a knowing nod, she shoved the ledger into her bodice and hurried home. In the wee hours of the night, she climbed the rickety stairs to the attic and stashed his book in the deepest corner.

Fast Forward 100 Years

In the attic of the Volstead family home, Ginny pulled cobwebs out of her hair and took a break to assess her progress. Months ago, she inherited the old Baltimore rowhouse from her grandmother Viki and was cleaning it out for renovations.

Beneath piles of faded papers and old hats, Ginny noticed a vintage dressing table. She pulled open the top drawer and found a dusty ledger with the initials R.V. on the cover. On each page in an old-fashioned script, her great-great-Uncle Ritchie Volstead had coded words, seemingly random objects and odd images that look like the markings on dollar bills. Nothing made sense.

Over the years, her family told tales about this rum runner uncle, so she wondered if the ledger could be the secret record of his booze delivery route during Prohibition. Ginny carried the ledger downstairs, poured a glass of chardonnay and gave it a closer look. Hours passed, but she could not decipher the code.