

*This is a retelling of the **Beauty and the Beast** episode **Orphans**, from season 2... only this time with a ghostly twist that is woven around and through the original script and transcript. The original episode of **Orphans** was written by Alex Gansa and Howard Gordon. No copyright infringement is intended, only fun.*



*Before us great Death stands
Our fate held close within his quiet hands.
When with proud joy we lift Life's red wine
To drink deep of the mystic shining cup
And ecstasy through all our being leaps—
Death bows his head and weeps.*

“Death,”- Rainer Maria Rilke

Chapter 1

Charles stood next to the desk in his office at Chandler and Coolidge, confused by the commotion going on around him. There were emergency workers kneeling over someone on the floor. Joan and Marilyn were standing close by, looking panicked. People from all over the office were wandering in, craning their necks to get a better view.

“What’s going on here?” he demanded. “Why are you all in my office? What’s happened?”

But no one paid any attention to his questions.

“What... am I invisible?” he demanded a little louder. “What is this all about?” Still, no one in the room responded, or even looked his way. “Am I dreaming?” he wondered aloud.

“This is no dream, Charles. This is *very* real.”

Hearing a familiar, beloved voice, he turned his attention in that direction. There she was, the only woman he’d ever loved, leaning nonchalantly against his desk. His heart skipped a beat as he looked upon her radiant face

“Caroline?” he uttered, smiling in disbelief and overwhelming joy. “What are you doing here?” He shook his head. “Wait... no, this can’t be real. It *must* be a dream. You’ve been gone for a very long time. How else could you be here, except in my dreams?”

She smiled wistfully. “Yes, it *has* been a long time, hasn’t it? Especially for you. But I’ve never really been very far away. If you think about it, I imagine you’ll agree.”

She’s right, he mused, as *she usually was*. He recalled the old days, when she’d won nearly every argument. Nodding, he agreed. “Yes, there have been times when I *could* feel you close.”

“Marilyn looks good,” she remarked, looking toward the melee in the room. “Other than the look of sheer panic on her face. I bet she tried to get you to take better care of yourself.”

“Yes, she’s always harping... Wait, what do you mean, ‘she tried to?’”

“Take a closer look, my dear.” His wife motioned toward the center of the room where the commotion seemed to be directed.

Charles moved closer to see over the back of the medic. He seemed to be performing CPR on someone, who had apparently collapsed in front of his antique mahogany desk.

“It looks like... *is it...?... It’s me!*”

Then shaking his head... “It doesn’t make any sense. That *can’t* be me... I’m standing right here.” He looked questioningly toward his wife... *his dead wife...* the only person in the room who seemed to be able to hear him. “I don’t understand, Caroline. What’s happening?”

“You know I love you, Darling, don’t you?” she asked.

“Of course, I know that, but what—”

She tilted her head and smiled gently. “Think for a moment, Charles. I believe you can reach your own conclusion.”

He looked toward his likeness lying on the floor, and then at his secretary, Joan, and Marilyn Campbell, his longtime assistant who were now openly weeping and holding on to each other.

“Am I...? Are you telling me that I’m... I’M *DEAD?!?!*” he asked as the horror of the realization began to wash over him.

“No.” Caroline shook her head. “Not yet, anyway... but soon. I’ve come here to guide you.” She held out a hand to him, beckoning him to take it.

“Guide me?” he repeated her words. “Guide me where?” he asked suspiciously.

“To the ‘other side,’ of course. Everyone has a guide... and I’m yours.”

“NO!” He moved away from her and exclaimed, “No, I **can’t die!**”

She looked perplexed. “I realize it’s a shock, Charles. It always is when it happens suddenly like this. I promise you that feeling will pass. But I thought you would be happier to see me” she remarked. “I know for a fact you’ve missed me terribly. It’s going to be fine... I promise.”

Charles began to vigorously shake his head. “No, no, no, no, no! Caroline, you don’t understand, I *can’t die!* I CAN’T DIE! Not yet! I’m not ready... *she* still needs me ... **Cathy needs me! She’s** not ready for me to... to... to go!”

Suddenly he felt himself being pulled toward the center of activity in the room.

“He’s back. He’s got a heartbeat,” Charles heard the unfamiliar voice declare.

“Thank Heavens!” Charles heard Joan exclaim.

“He’s breathing on his own, but his pulse is weak and thready. We need to get him to the hospital STAT.” The urgency in the stranger’s voice was unmistakable.

“Is he going to be all right?” someone asked.

Of course, I’ll be all right, Charles tried to say, but for some reason he couldn’t make the words reach his lips. He tried to blink to clear his vision. *I can’t see. Why is everything so dark?* he tried to ask. Still, he couldn’t manage to move or make himself known.

He could hear someone yelling orders. “Please, everyone, move aside! Bring that over here! One, two, three... lift!” Charles felt himself being lifted off the floor. He could hear women crying. Every sound seemed to echo in his head, as if he was in a large cavern. *I must be on a gurney,* he concluded as someone put a blanket over him and began tucking it in.

“It’s going to be fine, Joan. They’ll take good care of him,” he heard Marilyn say.

Good old Marilyn, he thought. *You’re always the stoic, practical one, aren’t you?*

He felt a warm hand grab hold of his, as he was being wheeled out of the office.

“It’s going to be all right, Charles. They’ll take good care of you. I’ll get hold of Cathy and tell her where they’re taking you.”

Charles laughed inwardly. “*Yes, Marilyn, you always do take care of everything.*”

“I don’t think he can hear you, Ma’am.”

“Ridiculous,” she scoffed. “His eyes are open. Of course he can hear me.”

“He’s unresponsive, Ma’am. He doesn’t seem to be aware of us.”

“Well, *I think he can hear me. And I want him to know, I’m here for him.*”

You tell him, Marilyn, Charles laughed to himself. *I learned a long time ago not to argue with you...*



August 1968

“...Cathy is a wonderful girl, Charles...” Marilyn said. “And you are a wonderful father. But you can’t do this alone. Please let me help.”

Charles sat obstinately behind his desk, offended that Marilyn had so little faith in his abilities as a father. “I promised Caroline I would raise her, Marilyn, and I intend to keep that promise.”

*“I know that, but she didn’t expect you to do it **alone**. Why are you so stubborn? Caroline was my friend. I made promises too, you know.”*

Charles looked intently at his long-time assistant. “What promises?”

“Caroline asked me to... to keep an eye... on the two of you. She asked me to be there for Cathy... if she needed me ... especially when the time came for...” She was trying to be delicate, but Charles wasn’t making it easy.

Charles didn’t understand. “When the time came for what?” he asked impatiently. “Did she think I couldn’t do it?”

*“Of course she thought you could do it, Charles. You hung the moon as far as Caroline was concerned. Everybody knew that. But she didn’t expect you to do it alone. Do I have to spell it out? I know you’re a man, but you can’t possibly be **that thick**.”*

His chest puffed out a little, as he declared, “I’ll have you know –”

*“I know, I know,” she interrupted, raising her hand to stop him. “You graduated at the top of your class... yada yada yada...” she said with an unmistakable note of sarcasm. “Well, this may come as a surprise, Charles, but that doesn’t mean you know **everything**. In some ways you are completely hopeless.”*

Charles was exasperated by her boldness. “You have got to be the most impertinent assistant known to man. You know, some people would fire you for a lot less than that.”

Having no intention of backing down, Marilyn stood her ground. “I’m a lot more than your assistant, Charles Chandler, and you know it!”

Charles sighed and threw up his hands.

Marilyn detected he was beginning to relent.

They stared each other down for a few moments.

“What did you mean when you said, ‘when the time came?’” he asked again.

*“I guess I’ll just have to be blunt.” Exasperated, Marilyn began to explain. “Cathy is **almost** twelve, Charles. She’s becoming a young woman. Or haven’t you noticed? She needs someone... someone to take her to purchase a... a training bra and... and feminine hygiene products. Have you done that yet? Has she started menstruating?”*

Charles stood bolt upright, and puffed up his chest again, his eyes wide with mortification. “For Heaven’s sake, Marilyn! How could I possibly know something like that?”

*Marilyn sighed and shook her head. She sympathized with her dear friend and all he had gone through. “You **are** her father. Cathy doesn’t have a mother to guide her through it. Believe me, if she had started menstruating, you would know. Are you ready to deal with that? Has anyone even explained it to her? Or are you going to just let her be frightened when it happens, and think she’s going to die? Because after what the two of you have been through, **that’s exactly** what she will think **and you know it.**”*

Charles collapsed in his leather office chair, looking defeated and terrified.

“What am I going to do, Marilyn? I can’t even begin to... I... I have no idea how to even... I don’t... I don’t know the first thing about any of that. I never even had a sister. Cathy would probably die of embarrassment if I even attempted to broach the subject. I know I would.”

Marilyn smiled a little and nodded. “I do believe that exceptional intelligence of yours is finally beginning to kick in, Charles,” she said. “I’m here. I can help you.”

I promised Caroline that I would. I'll take care of it... that is, if you'll allow me to."

Charles heaved a heavy sigh. He was clearly defeated. "Fine... yes... I would very much appreciate that," he said, nodding slightly. "Thank you, Marilyn," he said, with some contrition.

"I'll pick her up at 11 am on Saturday and take her on a girls only shopping trip, and then to lunch and a movie... and... you're welcome."

As Marilyn started to leave the office, she turned back for a moment.

Charles looked up expectantly. "Yes, Marilyn? What is it?"

She wondered momentarily if she should say any more, and then decided he needed to hear it. "You aren't the only one who lost Caroline, you know," she said softly. "Caroline was one of my dearest friends. I lost her too. You don't have to go through this alone."



That wasn't the only time you stepped up and pulled me out of the fire, was it, Marilyn? he thought.

The gurney stopped momentarily.

"What hospital are you taking him to?" Marilyn asked.

"New York Hospital, Ma'am. It's the closest."

'Ding...' *The elevator's here*, Charles realized, as he heard the doors open.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am, I don't think there's room for you and the rest of us in here."

Marilyn squeezed his hand and spoke reassuringly in his ear. "Don't worry about a thing, Charles. I'll call Cathy." He felt her hand slip out of his, as the gurney entered the elevator. "I'll contact Peter too," he heard her say, as the doors closed.

He was jostled and bumped as they rolled him out of the building and lifted him into the waiting ambulance. The car doors slammed and then sirens blared as they made their way through the Manhattan traffic.

"We're losing him again! Hurry up!" the medic yelled.

Charles found himself sitting on the small bench inside the ambulance, watching himself on the gurney, as the medic began CPR again. He felt strangely calm.

“Come on, man! Don’t die on me. One alligator, two alligator, three alligator,” he muttered, as he pressed down repeatedly on his patient’s chest. “Come on, Mr... BREATHE!” He fit the hand-held ventilator over Charles’ mouth and pumped it a few times.

It’s the strangest thing, being outside of my body, looking on like this, he thought.

“It is strange, isn’t it? In the beginning, anyway.”

Charles turned to see Caroline sitting there beside him. “Can you read my thoughts?” he asked, as if it was perfectly natural to have a conversation with his deceased wife, who had been gone for nearly twenty-one years.

“No,” she replied with a shake of her head. “...but I know you. Besides, your emotions are clearly written all over your face.” She smiled sympathetically. “Are you ready to come with me now?” she asked, holding out her hand to him again.

He shook his head. “I’m sorry, Caroline. I can’t... *not yet*. Not until I know Cathy’s going to be all right.”

He felt something pulling him again.

“Welcome back, Mister. Now stop scaring me like that.” The medic was clearly shaken. “You’re NOT gonna die on my watch. Do you hear me? Keep breathing this time, will ya?”

I’m trying, Charles tried to say. *Believe me, I’m trying.*

Chapter 2

Hours later, Charles stood by a hospital bed, watching himself. There was a tube in his mouth. It was hooked to a machine that seemed to be regulating his breathing. A nearby monitor was keeping track of his heartbeat. An IV was in one arm and something was attached to his finger. He wasn’t sure what he would see if he peeked under the blankets.

“I think I’m getting used to this,” he said, knowing somehow that she was there in the room.

“Yes, I can see that,” she said, stepping up to stand beside him.

“Isn’t that strange?”

“No,” she answered, shaking her head. “Somehow, I don’t think so.”

“Am I alive or dead? I’m a bit confused.”

Caroline shrugged. “You’re somewhere in between, I suppose.”

“Why?”

“Because apparently you aren’t ready to leave yet,” Caroline explained patiently.

They stood there, side by side, listening to the sound of the machines.

“Somehow, I thought you would be happier to see me, Charles,” she remarked. “I realize no one ‘wants’ to die. But I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t your time. I thought you would be more willing to come with me.”

He smiled, and looked lovingly at his wife. “You’re even more beautiful than I remember, Caroline. Being an angel becomes you.”

“Thank you.” She looked at him adoringly and smiled wryly. “But I’m not exactly an angel. I’m more of a guide... like I said before.”

“You were *always* an angel to me, my darling.”

She laughed.

Charles closed his eyes and listened to the music of her laughter. The heart monitor began to speed up noticeably. He smiled broadly. “I always loved to hear you laugh,” he said, as he gazed at the only woman he’d ever loved. “Cathy laughs just like you, you know. Sometimes, she reminds me so much of you.”

“She’s here... nearby... waiting. Do you want to see her?”

“Can I?” He looked over at himself with concern.

Caroline nodded. “Yes. I promise,” she said, perceiving his concern. “It’ll be fine. The machines are doing the work for you now. So, you have a little more freedom.”



Catherine sat alone, waiting for some news from the doctors. They had attempted to make the atmosphere in the family room warm and inviting. Magazines were arranged neatly on the coffee table in front of her, inviting her to pass the time in pleasant reading, but she didn’t see them.

Memories of another waiting room, long ago, filled her mind. The distinct antiseptic smell, and the eerie silence of the hospital, evoked more than a few unpleasant memories. That old feeling of dread, one she thought she’d forgotten, filled her heart and mind. A kindly nurse brought her a dinner tray, but it remained untouched.

Don’t die, Daddy. Please don’t die, she repeated inwardly, with every breath, like a desperate, silent prayer. *Please don’t die. Please don’t die. There are things I*

need to tell you. Things you need to know. It seemed as if she'd been waiting for hours for some news.

"She looks so frightened and alone," Charles observed with a furrowed brow.

"Just like when..."

"When it was me lying in the hospital bed?" Caroline finished his thought.

"Yes." He nodded.

Charles moved closer to his daughter, wanting nothing more than to comfort her and alleviate her fears. "They made her wait in the family room then too. She was so small... and so afraid... so brave. She shouldn't be here alone. Where's Marilyn? Where's Peter? Where's Kay? Someone should be here with her." His irritation was apparent.

"Peter is on his way back from Arizona. He got on the first available flight," Caroline assured him. "Marilyn and Kay are downstairs in the waiting room. Family only are allowed up here."

"That's ridiculous!" he barked. "They *are* family! The only family we have, anyway. She shouldn't have to wait alone!"

Unruffled by his outburst, Caroline informed him of the situation. "Cathy saw them when she arrived. She knows they're down there, but she wants to be up here. She wants to be as close to you as she can be... in case there's news."

A little embarrassed, he apologized. "I'm sorry, Caroline. But I... it's just that... She *shouldn't* be alone. It tears me apart to see her like this."

Caroline stepped closer to her husband and put a comforting hand on his arm. "I know. You're right. It's difficult to stand here, on this side, and watch the people you love suffering. But we can't do anything about that now. She won't be alone once Peter gets here."

"Can we at least stay here, in the room with her?" he asked, still unsure what was possible, or what was allowed.

Caroline nodded.

As they sat near, Catherine felt her fears begin to subside a little, and she dozed off on the couch.

They sat quietly, watching their daughter, as she slept.

"Do you love her?" Caroline asked, breaking the silence.

"Cathy?" Charles asked.

"Kay," Caroline clarified.

He thought for a moment about the woman who had recently begun to be very important to him. “Kay has been... a wonderful friend,” he said thoughtfully. “More than just a friend, I suppose. But love?” He turned the word over in his mind for a moment. “No. You’ve always had my heart, Caroline... *always*. Kay knows that. But the brownstone can be an awfully quiet place for just one person, and Kay is a good person... a dear friend, and good company. Especially since Cathy and I have grown apart.”

“I would understand if you did... love her, Charles,” Caroline assured him. “I didn’t want you to be alone. I wanted you to be happy.”

“I *have* been happy,” he assured her. “Cathy has been the joy of my life. After you...were gone, I was determined to keep the promise I made to you. I tried to make her childhood as happy as I could.”

“You kept that promise, and then some, My Love. You’ve done splendidly. She’s grown into an amazing woman.”

Charles looked at her doubtfully.

“You don’t believe me?” Caroline asked.

He sighed. “I worry about her... maybe more than I should. When she was still at Chandler and Coolidge, I saw her every day. She was always flitting here and there. She had so many friends. There was always a social event somewhere... young men in droves, trying desperately to win her affections. I sometimes wondered if she was too shallow and spoiled. And then after...” He paused and recalled when things began to change.

“After she was attacked?” Caroline offered.

He looked at his wife in disbelief. “You know about that?”

“Yes,” she said with a nod. “I was there, Charles. I saw it happen.”

“You did?” he asked, incredulously. “Then why didn’t you stop it? Why didn’t you protect her?”

“I’m just a spirit, Charles,” she explained. “There’s only so much I can do in this... condition. I *was* able to find someone to help her though.”

“What do you mean?” Charles asked, looking utterly confused.

“It’s hard to explain. But she would have died, Charles.” Caroline was becoming agitated. “It *wasn’t* her time. My daughter’s life wasn’t supposed to end like that!” she insisted. “Bleeding and broken... tossed away, like some piece of... trash!” She stopped to calm herself. “So, I... I guess you could say I... I broke a few rules. But *I didn’t* care. Our daughter needed help, and I was desperate.”

“She has no memory of those days...” he explained. “... of the days when she was missing. The doctors at the hospital said... they said she had been well cared for.”

“Yes, she *was*.” Caroline was a bit calmer.

“You were there, with her?”

“Yes... I never left her side. She was badly injured, and very frightened. I stayed close.”

Charles sighed. “That’s when it began.”

Caroline looked at him quizzically. “When what began?”

“After the attack she... she changed. She was different after that... quiet, reserved, distant... and secretive. I knew she was keeping things from me. I thought if I gave her the space and the time she needed, that the old Cathy would eventually return, but instead... she left the firm to go work at the District Attorney’s office.”

He sat down and watched as Catherine slumbered on the couch. Then he looked up at his wife and sighed. “We began to grow further and further apart. I didn’t know how to stop it. She dropped out of her social set. As far as I can tell, she rarely sees any of her old friends. She hasn’t dated anyone seriously for ages. I thought... *I hoped*... that I would be a grandfather by now... that she would have found someone... someone to love... someone to marry.”

Shaking his head, he continued. “She’s more alone now than ever, I’m afraid. If I die, Caroline, our daughter will be completely alone in the world. How can I leave, knowing that she has no one on this earth to turn to?”

Before Caroline could answer, a nurse entered the room, and both Charles and Caroline stood. “Miss Chandler?” The nurse shook Catherine’s shoulder gently. “Miss Chandler?”

Catherine sat up, a little disoriented.

“Doctor Cherian will see you now,” the nurse informed her. “If you will just follow me.”

Catherine grabbed her coat and purse and accompanied the nurse down the hallway. Charles and Caroline followed close behind.



“Your father has had a massive stroke,” the doctor explained.

“That doesn’t sound good,” Charles said.

“Shhh,” came his wife’s reply.

“An artery gets clogged, which then prevents blood from reaching a particular part of the vascular tree. In this case, the blood vessels that feed the brain. It’s a pseudo coma... loss of all motor function and some sensory function. In other words, he can’t move, and he can’t see you.”

“Is he saying that I... I’m *blind*?” Charles asked with consternation.

Caroline shot him a warning look.

“You mean he’s... *blind*?” Catherine asked, trying to process everything the doctor said.

“Yes, but we believe that he may still be able to hear you and understand what you’re saying.”

“Well, I already knew that!” Charles exclaimed.

“Charles... *PLEASE*,” Caroline pleaded.

“He’s stabilized now,” Dr. Cherian continued. “And we are staying optimistic about some partial recovery.”

“How optimistic?” Charles and Catherine asked in tandem.

“You should prepare yourself for any possibility.” The doctor didn’t sound hopeful.

“He doesn’t sound very optimistic to me,” Charles said, turning to the only person who could see or hear him.

“No, he doesn’t,” Caroline agreed.

Charles and Caroline watched their daughter’s face as she processed all she had been told.

“She’s afraid,” Charles said, stating the obvious.

“Yes, I can see that,” Caroline replied.

“So am I,” he added. “I’m not going to recover from this am I, Caroline?”

Caroline shook her head. “No, Charles, you’re not.”

“You’ve known that from the beginning, haven’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Then, aren’t you going to ask me?”

“Ask you what?”

“If I’m ready to go now?”

“No.” Caroline informed him. “You’ll tell me when you’re ready. Take your time, Charles. I’ll stay with you as long as it takes.”



Catherine sat next to the bed. She spoke softly to him for a while and held his hand in hers for some time, as she tried to come to grips with the very real possibility that she was about to lose him.

She was fighting fatigue and fear at the same time, and after a long day she was beginning to lose the battle. *I’ll just rest my head for a few minutes*, she thought.

She felt a hand on her shoulder and raised her head. “Peter? What time is it? I thought you were in Arizona?”

“It’s after eleven,” he whispered. “Marilyn called me as soon as he was brought to the hospital. I got on the first plane home. I came straight from the airport.”

Catherine stood and embraced her old friend. “Oh, Peter! I’m so glad you’re here! Have you spoken to the doctors?”

“Yes,” Peter said, nodding. “They filled me in on everything. How are *you* doing, Cathy?” he asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. I’m not really sure,” she said. “I’m trying not to fall apart. Mostly scared, I guess.” She looked over at her father. “He looks so helpless lying there.”

“You look exhausted,” Peter said, stating the obvious.

“I was up most of last night preparing for court first thing this morning. I didn’t get the message about Daddy until I got back to the office. I rushed right over here. But they didn’t let me see him until a few hours ago.”

“You need to rest, Cathy. I’ll stay here with him tonight. You go home and get some sleep.”

“No,” she said, stubbornly shaking her head. “I don’t want to leave him. I’m afraid that he’ll...” She couldn’t bring herself to say the words.

“You *need* to rest, Cathy,” Peter insisted in a fatherly tone. “It won’t help him if you drop from exhaustion. Look, these machines are keeping him breathing. He’s being closely monitored. I promise you, if anything changes ... anything at all ... I’ll call you immediately.”

“I *am* very tired,” she said, still resisting.

Peter retrieved her coat and began helping her into it.

Leaning over the side of the bed, Catherine squeezed her father's hand. "I'll be back first thing in the morning, Daddy. I promise," she whispered in his ear. "I love you."

She tousled his hair and kissed his forehead, before finally leaving.

Peter watched Catherine leave and took the seat she had just occupied. He knew it was going to be a long night.

"Well?" Caroline asked.

"Well what?" Charles replied.

"Well, don't you want to go with her?"

"Can I? I mean, won't I... you know... *die*... if I leave the hospital without... uhm... my body?"

Caroline smiled. "I keep forgetting this is all new to you. Peter's right, these machines will keep you alive while we're away." She looked fondly at the mortal body of her husband, and brushed a hand gently across his forehead. She leaned over the side of the bed and lightly kissed his cheek.

Standing next to the bed, watching, he reached up to touch his own diaphanous cheek.

His eyes widened as he remembered...



They stood there, just the two of them, the grief-stricken man and his young daughter, long after the other mourners had left the cemetery, watching the gravediggers shovel the dirt over the flower laden casket. He knew they needed to get back home, where kind friends, neighbors and coworkers would be coming to offer their condolences. Cathy's arms were wrapped tightly around his waist. He almost wondered if she feared he might jump into the grave with his beloved wife. If not for his daughter, he was sure he would at least be contemplating it. But he had made promises to his dying wife, and no matter how much he ached to be with her, he knew his daughter needed him more.

"Do you want to go now, Cathy?" he asked quietly.

She buried her head in his jacket. "No, Daddy. I don't want to leave her here all alone. Can we stay a little longer?"

He tightened his arm around her and held her close. "We can stay as long as you want, Honey," he replied.

They watched until the last shovel full of dirt was placed on the grave, and the grave diggers walked quietly away.

Charles had managed to hold himself together for most of the day, but now, the full impact of what had happened to them began to settle in. A lone tear began to roll down his cheek. He was beginning to fear he was losing his grip on himself, when he felt it.

At that moment, it was as if a gentle hand had reached out to brush the stray lock of hair from his forehead, and he thought he felt something like a kiss on his cheek. His hand went quickly to his face, as if to hold on to that feeling for a fleeting moment.

He noticed Cathy, as she reached up to hold her cheek as well.

Cathy stood up straight and took a deep breath. "I'm ready to go home now, Daddy."



"What are you thinking about, Charles?"

Caroline's question brought him back to the present. He gazed at her with realization, and asked, "This isn't the first time you've done that, is it, Caroline?"

"Done what, My Darling?"

"Kissed me on the cheek, like you did just now."

Smiling mischievously, she said, "I distinctly remember that I used to kiss you quite regularly on your cheek... if memory serves. Surely you haven't forgotten *that*." She smiled again. "You still have that precious lock of hair that never wants to stay in place, don't you?"

"I meant... it's not the first time since you... well... since you... passed away."

"Ohhh." She looked a little sheepish. "Well, I... uhm..."

"What? Is there something you're not telling me?"

"It's just that it... it's sort of against the uhhh... rules... to make contact."

"But you have?"

"Yes," she said, quick to explain. "But only when you *really* needed it. Most of the time I've just been close by, at first anyway, and then I moved a little further away. But in the beginning, you and Cathy were in so much pain that sometimes I... I couldn't help myself. And, anyway, most of the time it was when you were sleeping."

“Should we go now?” she suggested, anxious to change the subject.
Charles followed her obediently.

Chapter 3

As Catherine entered her apartment, she realized she was so tired, she could barely put one foot in front of the other. She quickly changed into her nightclothes and fell into bed. Every nerve, every muscle in her body ached and cried out for blessed slumber, but her mind wouldn't stop spinning. As she finally began to doze off, she kept hearing the words of the doctor.



“He’s had a massive stroke... It’s a pseudo coma... loss of all motor function and some sensory function. He can’t move, and he can’t see you.... You should prepare yourself for any possibility...”

She dreamt that she was talking to Vincent.... *“My life is full of complications.”*

“ ... You’ve sacrificed for our dream” Vincent acknowledged.

“It isn’t a dream, Vincent... it’s real ... and it’s worth it...”

She was sitting in a restaurant with her father, and he was wearing a hospital gown and a large bulbous clown nose, “Don’t laugh, don’t laugh, don’t laugh... Here you go, have some chocolate cake, Cathy. It’ll cure what ails you ...”

“I’m not the one who’s ailing, Daddy, you are,” she informed him.

“Nonsense, Cathy, I’m fine.”

“Daddy, I’m afraid...”

She found herself standing at the edge of an open grave... a white casket covered with pink roses lay still at the bottom. Two old men with shovels began shoveling dirt into the hole.

Are you in or are you out mister, we don’t got all day.

Charles stepped toward the grave but was stopped. Catherine had her arms tightly wrapped around his waist, trying to keep him from jumping in.

It was a nightmare Catherine was familiar with. She had had it regularly throughout the first year after her mother’s death.

Charles tried to extricate himself from his daughter’s arms. “Cathy, I have to go now. You need to let me go.”

“NO, Daddy, I need you! Please don’t go!” she pleaded.

He turned to her, and she let go of him for just a moment. “You don’t need me anymore Cathy. It’s time for me to go.”

“No, Daddy please, there something I need to tell you.”

“I’m sorry, Cathy, I have to go now, your mother’s waiting for me. Don’t forget, I love you.”

Before she could reach him again, he stepped away from her and jumped into the open grave. “Daddy!” she called.

He looked up at her and smiled. Waving to her from the grave, he said, “I love you, Cathy. Have a happy life!” as the gravediggers continued to shovel the dirt over him.



Catherine woke up in a cold sweat. “Daddy!” she called out. Breathing heavily, she realized it was only a dream. She switched on the light and went into the bathroom to splash cold water on her face.



“Why are we out here on the balcony?” Charles asked, wanting to be closer to his daughter.

“Cathy’s apartment is small, Charles.” Caroline explained. “And she’s a grown woman. We need to give her some privacy. I thought we could enjoy the view while we keep watch over her. It’s going to be difficult for her in the coming days. She needs to rest.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s true.”

Charles looked out at the New York City skyline he had always loved. “It is a lovely view, isn’t it, Caroline?”

“It’s beautiful tonight,” she agreed, joining him at the edge of the balcony. “The city that never truly sleeps.”

“It can be dangerous too,” he reminded her, thinking of what had happened to their daughter during one of those nights.

“Yes. Darkness *can* be an ugly, frightening thing,” she said, remembering the terrifying night her daughter was attacked, and others since. “But it can be unexpectedly beautiful too. Some find safety and solace in the darkness.”

“What do you mean?”

A light inside the apartment switched on. They turned their attention momentarily to their daughter’s bedroom.

“She can’t sleep,” Charles surmised.

“No,” Caroline corrected. “She can’t stop thinking... dreaming. She’s afraid she’s losing you. She’s remembering how painful it was to lose me.”

“What can we do for her?”

“Nothing, really,” she replied simply. “Just stay close until...”

There was a soft thud on the opposite side of the balcony.

“...until *he* gets here.”

“Until who gets here?” Just as Charles was asking, he saw the hulking, cloaked figure move in the shadows. He instinctively backed away from the horrifying vision.

“Caroline... who is that?” Charles asked in horror. “*What* is that... that thing? Is it Death? Has he come for me? You said I didn’t have to go until I was ready... I’m not ready...”

“Calm down, Charles. He isn’t ‘death’ and he *isn’t here* for you...”

Charles observed his wife was calm, and unaffected by the appearance of the monster that stood before them. “Then why is he here?”

“He’s here for Cathy,” she said, calmly.

“For Cathy? NO! No! What can we do?”

“CHARLES! Stop! Everything is fine. Just wait.”



It didn’t matter how tired Catherine was, she knew she wouldn’t sleep now. She slipped on a pair of warm slippers, grabbed a sweater from her closet, and stepped out onto the balcony to breathe the brisk March air.

The lights of the city always had a way of calming her nerves. She let her hands rest on the cement ledge of the balcony as the night breeze cooled the skin on her flushed face.

“Catherine,” he whispered.

She turned in the direction of the shadow, as Vincent stepped into the dim light.



“Vincent!” she breathed as she flew into his open arms.

“I have felt your turmoil all day,” he whispered. “I’m so sorry. Peter sent us word as soon as he could. I’m here, Catherine, I’m here.”

Without speaking, Catherine buried herself deeper into Vincent’s cloak, and let the pain, the worry, and the aching of the day drain into him, as he let his strength pour into her.

Charles stood motionless, mesmerized and confused by the scene that was playing out before him. He

was too stunned to speak.

“Tell me, Catherine,” Vincent whispered into her hair.

Catherine pulled away from him a little, feeling much better. “I was in court all morning. When I finally got to the office, Joe was waiting for me with the news. I rushed to the hospital as fast as I could. I waited for hours, but the doctor didn’t have any news until this evening. Daddy’s had a stroke. He’s paralyzed and blind. The doctor said I should prepare for any possibility. I’m afraid to even think about... *the worst possibility*... but I could hear it in his voice... It isn’t good... Vincent, I’m so afraid.”

She buried herself again in the comfort of his arms.

“I’m here, Catherine. I’m here. *Always*,” he whispered into her hair, as he embraced her tightly.

She stepped back and smiled sadly. “Such a ‘father’s’ word,” she said, with just a hint of a smile. “Always.”

“What is it?” Vincent asked. “What are you thinking?”

She tilted her head a little, as she recalled her father... “Something he did when I was little.” Then, smiling a little more, she continued. “He made me laugh, that’s all.”

She looked up at Vincent as if she had just found a lost treasure, and was about to share it with him. “Whenever I was upset... he’d make me laugh.”

Vincent waited, feeling her aching ease a little, as sweet memories washed over her.

“He’d come to the door... and I would be crying on the bed. Already a part of me would start to smile. I would try not to, but I couldn’t help it, and he would say in this deep voice, ‘Don’t laugh, don’t laugh.’”

Vincent was amused, as he pictured the scene her words painted for him. He could almost see the heartbroken little girl, and her loving father.

“And he’d come in, and I would try not to look,” she continued. “But I would look anyway. And there he was, with this enormous red clown’s nose.” She couldn’t help but laugh at the sweetness of the memory.

“See, Caroline,” Charles said, turning to his wife. “I told you ... she laughs just like you.”

Vincent joined in the laughter. He was grateful that Catherine had such sweet memories.

“I don’t even know where he got it,” Catherine realized, smiling wistfully.

“It’s a wonderful memory to have,” Vincent said.

Recalling her childhood made Catherine feel as if her father was standing right there beside her. It warmed her and made her sad at the same time.

“I wish we had stayed that close,” Charles said with more than a twinge of regret.

Catherine sighed. “I wish we’d stayed that close,” she whispered, frowning her brow.

“It wasn’t all her fault,” Charles admitted. “I should have tried harder to... to be there for her, but I was always working. I guess I just got in a habit...”

“You told me before of the growing distance between you,” Vincent said, prompting Catherine to speak about her feelings of regret.

She nodded. “We got in a habit. There were things I didn’t want to tell him.”

“You can tell me now, Cathy. I’m standing right here,” Charles declared, hoping that somehow she could hear him.

“And there were things you *couldn’t* tell him, Catherine,” Vincent reminded her. “There’s still time.”

Taking her again in his arms, he asked, “Would you like me to come to the hospital? We could tell him together.”

“But how? How could we manage it?” she asked, looking up at him hopefully. “I’m not sure he can even hear me.”

“I *can* hear you, Cathy!” Charles declared. “And I promise I *will* listen.”



“I found a way into the hospital when you were shot,” Vincent explained. “You can speak to Peter in the morning. Perhaps he can help us.”

Vincent’s words gave her strength. She knew it was a great risk for him to enter a place so public in her world. “Thank you, Vincent.”

“But now, it’s very late, and you must rest. I can feel how exhausted you are. Do you think you can sleep now?”

“I can try.”

Vincent held her a little longer and kissed the top of her head.

Catherine was reluctant to part from him, even as she felt that the fatigue was winning. Finally stepping back, she said, “I’ll talk to Peter and get word to you tomorrow.”

“Very well, Catherine. Good night. Sleep well,” he whispered.

“Good night, Vincent,” she said, reluctantly parting from him.

The look on his daughter's face told Charles that she desperately wished he would stay with her. And the look on Vincent's extraordinary face told Charles that this strange man desperately wished he could too.

Vincent lingered on the balcony, until he was sure she was asleep. "Sleep well, Catherine," he whispered again, and then silently made his way up to the roof.

"Who is *he*, Caroline?" Charles asked, turning to his wife. "What is he?"

"His name is Vincent," she answered simply.

"I've been standing here long enough to know *that*..." Charles replied with exasperation. "I mean, *who is he*? How is it that such a man, if that's even what he is, is in her life? And why didn't I know anything about him?" Charles paused and looked toward the roof where the incredible being had disappeared. "I knew Cathy was keeping things from me, but I never imagined..."

"How could you ever imagine someone like him?" Caroline asked, smiling. "I will tell you this... *He* is the man our daughter loves."

Looking into the apartment, Charles shook his head. "I thought she trusted me... I thought she knew she could tell me anything."

Caroline tilted her head to one side, dubiously. "If our daughter *had* told you... if she had introduced Vincent to you as the man she loved... would you have approved?" Caroline asked with more than a hint of skepticism.

Charles considered the scene that he had just witnessed. "He clearly loves her... and there is no doubt that *she* loves him. I've never seen her look that way at... at *anyone*. She looks at him the same way you used to look at me. And when he speaks her name, it sounds like..."

"Like a prayer?" Caroline suggested. "Like he worships the ground she walks on?"

"Yes," Charles said, nodding. "That's it, exactly."

"The same way you always said my name." Caroline said, smiling lovingly at her husband.

He looked at his beautiful, young, wife and wondered how he had managed to live so many years without her. "Yes," he said, smiling at her adoringly. "The *very* same way."

"But would you have approved?" Caroline asked, pressing the issue.

He considered for a moment, and finally admitted, "Probably not... What does someone like him have to offer her? From the looks of him he's destitute... and he *clearly* can't even show his face in public. What kind of a life could he possibly

give her? Where would they live? In a cave somewhere? I've never seen a man like him. He *is*... a... a man... *isn't he?*" Charles asked, still unsure.

"Of course, he's a man," she scoffed. "What else would he be?"

Charles shook his head in doubt. "I've never seen *any* man that looked like... like *that*," he declared, gesturing toward the roof where Vincent had disappeared.

"Ahhhh, my darling Charles... There are more things in Heaven and earth, than are dreamt of in *your* philosophy," she quoted.

"I'm beginning to see that," he acknowledged. "He's terrifying and... and..."

"... and magnificent?" Caroline suggested.

Charles looked surprised at the love of his life. "So, you *do* approve?"

Caroline smiled broadly at her handsome husband. "I more than approve, Charles. I had a hand in bringing them together."

He looked even more surprised at that. "How?" he wondered.

"All in good time, Charles, all in good time. First, I believe there are some things our daughter wishes to tell you herself."

Changing the subject, she asked, "Are you ready to go back to the hospital or would you prefer to stay here? It's your choice."

"I don't want her to be alone..." he declared. "Can we stay here... close to her?"

Caroline nodded... and turned toward the city view. "I thought you would choose that."

They stood side by side watching the city lights, as their daughter slept.

Chapter 4

The next morning, Charles and Caroline accompanied Catherine, as she headed for the hospital. Peter greeted Catherine as she entered her father's hospital room. He put his arms lovingly around his goddaughter. "Did you get any sleep, Cathy?" he asked, thoroughly scrutinizing her.

Catherine smiled wanly. "Yes, a little."

Peter looked at her doubtfully.

"Really, Peter, I promise, I *did* get some sleep. Vincent came for a little while and we talked. I was able to sleep for a few hours after that."

Peter nodded. "I sent word Below just after you left, so they would know what was happening. I'm glad he was able to be there for you."

“What does he mean when he says he sent word ‘Below?’” Charles asked. “Below what?”

“Be patient, Charles. It will all eventually make sense,” Caroline assured him.

Catherine leaned over the railing of the bed and slipped her hand into her father’s. “Good morning, Daddy.”

Both parents stopped talking and turned their attention to their daughter.

“How are you doing today?” Catherine asked, as she brushed back a lock of his hair and kissed him sweetly on the cheek.

Charles reached up to touch his cheek. “I’m going to miss her, Caroline. Is she going to be all right?”

“I know some things, Charles, but I don’t know everything... especially about the future. The future isn’t set, you know. What I *do* know is that our daughter is strong. And she has many people who love her.”

“What people? Peter? Peter’s older than I am. Who knows how long he will live?”

“Trust me, Charles, she has *many* wonderful friends. They will help her through it.”

Charles looked doubtful. “Cathy has never spoken to me of these so called, ‘wonderful friends.’ Where are they? I’m not aware of them.”

“All in good time, Charles. In the coming days you’ll have a much better understanding of everything.”

“How is he this morning, Peter?” Catherine asked, hoping for some encouraging news.

“There hasn’t been any change since last night,” Peter said, shaking his head.

“Doctor Cherian will come in to speak with you as soon as he finishes his rounds.”

“Can’t you tell me anything?” she pleaded.

Peter’s tone was guarded. “It’s best if you speak with his doctor.”



“Your father has shown no sign of improvement since he was admitted yesterday,” Doctor Cherian explained.

“What does that mean?” Catherine asked.

“With strokes this severe,” he continued, “the first twenty-four hours are critical. The fact that there has been no observable improvement... isn’t a good sign. His

prognosis going forward is not... *hopeful*. He's unable to breathe on his own. He shows no response to stimuli. The longer he's like this, the more his chances for recovery will diminish."

"What are the options?" Catherine asked, willing to pursue any treatment there might be. "Are there any experimental treatments you could try? Money is no object," she added desperately.

Dr. Cherian shook his head. "Your father is receiving the best care there is. We've done all we can do. Of course, we could keep him alive like this for some time. But the possibility of fluid building up in his lungs would increase his chances for developing pneumonia. We would eventually need to insert a feeding tube. He could be cared for in a facility for people who are in a... uhm... vegetative state. Lack of mobility is a problem. He would eventually develop bedsores. Those can be difficult to keep free of infection. His quality of life would be... well, it wouldn't be good.

"Miss Chandler, are you the person who is responsible for making the decisions for your father in the event that he... is unable to make those decisions himself?"

"Yes, it's just the two of us," she replied, feeling as if a great weight was pressing on her chest.

Peter put his arm protectively around her shoulder. "I'm here for as long as you need me, Cathy."

"You don't have to make any decisions right away," the doctor explained. "But in the coming days, you will need to seriously consider... whether you wish to keep him on this type of life support or to—"

Catherine nodded. "Yes... yes... I understand. Thank you, Doctor." She didn't want to hear any more.

"Yes... well... if you have any questions... Just let the charge nurse know, or Dr. Alcott can contact me directly."

Catherine only nodded her acknowledgement of his words. She could feel herself trembling and knew she would probably have collapsed if it hadn't been for Peter's strong arm around her.

As the door closed behind the doctor, Catherine turned into Peter's arms and wept into his suit jacket. After a couple of minutes, she lifted her head and took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Peter," she said at length.

"There's nothing to be sorry for, Cathy," Peter said as he fished a clean handkerchief out of his inside jacket pocket, and quietly began wiping her tears. She took the hankie from him and blew loudly into it.

“Peter, I... I have a huge favor to ask of you.”

“Anything, Cathy. What is it?”

“It’s about Vincent... I’ve kept him a secret from Daddy. I want to introduce Vincent to him before it’s... too late.”

Peter was confused. “You mean... bring Vincent here? But Charles is in a—”

“—a pseudo coma... I know...” she said, nodding. “But yesterday Dr. Cherian told me he might be able to hear and understand everything we say. And Vincent offered to come if we can find a way.”

Charles turned to his wife. “How is it that Peter knows about this Vincent person, and I don’t? Cathy confides in *him*, and not in *me*? Did Peter introduce them to each other? How could he keep something like that from me?”

“Now, Charles,” Caroline scolded gently. “You’re jumping to conclusions. You know Peter would never do that.”

“Then why does *he* know about this... this, Vincent, and *I don’t*?”

“Peter has known Vincent since he was an infant,” Caroline answered. “But he has only known that Vincent and Catherine were... *involved*... for a very short time. Believe me, it was a shock to him as well. He didn’t have any idea they even knew each other until a couple of months ago.”

Charles paced back and forth, clearly agitated. “Then why did he keep it a secret from me after he found out? He’s my oldest and dearest friend. Cathy has been keeping secrets from me, and Peter helped her!”

“Charles Chandler!” Caroline said loudly, as she scowled at her husband.

“What?!” Charles asked just as loudly.

Caroline put her hands on her hips, a sign that Charles recognized. She was about to give him a piece of her mind, and if history was any indication, he was sure he wasn’t going to like it.

“Need I remind you, Charles that *YOU* have been keeping secrets about your precarious health from our daughter for four years? Not only that... *you* swore Peter to secrecy too!”

Charles was stunned. He hadn’t imagined she knew about that. “Well,” he retorted defensively, still not ready to back down. “If I recall, *you* kept your illness a secret from Cathy too.” he pointed his finger in her direction to drive the point home.

Caroline gasped. The look on her face told Charles he had made a terrible miscalculation with his argument.

“Are you *seriously* comparing what I did over twenty years ago to *this*? Our daughter was only a child, Charles. Should I have asked a nine-year-old girl to bear the weight of that burden any longer than she had to?”

Charles didn't reply. He was instantly ashamed he had even attempted to defend himself in such a way.

“She *isn't a child* anymore, Charles,” Caroline continued. “Cathy *deserved* to know the truth.”

Caroline sighed sympathetically and softened her tone. “Charles... I'm asking you to at least consider that perhaps if Cathy had known, she might have made an effort to spend more time with you. Perhaps if you had trusted *her* with *your* secrets, she might have trusted *you* with *hers*.”

“So, this is all my fault?” he asked, feeling defeated.

“No, My Darling.” Her voice had become gentle again.

One thing Charles had always loved about his wife was the fact that she could never stay angry at him for very long.

“It most certainly *is not* your fault,” she assured him. “There is no fault here. Not yours, not Cathy's, and certainly not Peter's.”

“Then what?” he asked, looking at her hopefully.

“You and Cathy made choices... choices you *both* believed were right at the time. And now you both have to live with those choices... well... *she* has to live with those choices... and you...well you know what I mean.”

He smiled sadly. “Yes, Caroline... I *do* know what you mean. The choices were made... and it's too late to unmake them.”

“Yes, at least for you... but Cathy is going to try. There are things she wants you to know before it's too late. And Peter is going to help her.”

“And you're telling me that Peter *actually* approves of her relationship with this... this *man... this... Vincent*?”

“Peter has known and loved them *both*... all of their lives,” Caroline informed him. “How could he not approve?”



Catherine sat with her father throughout the day, watching and praying for even the slightest sign of improvement. As morning gave way to afternoon, she became

accustomed to the strange, rhythmic music of the machines that were keeping her father alive.

For Charles, the sound of the machines only rankled him and made him anxious. The constant swooshing sound of oxygen being forced into his lungs, the beeping machine that confirmed his heart was still beating, only reminded him that he was neither dead nor truly alive, but hovering somewhere in between.

And even though he was grateful to be spending time with his beloved wife, he was becoming increasingly aware that there was an awkwardness between them that came of being separated for more than twenty years. The more he looked upon his strikingly beautiful, young wife, the more he became aware that he looked like the 60-year-old man that he was.

“Tell me, Caroline,” he began, hoping to fill the increasingly agonizing silence between them. “You told me you aren’t an angel. How is that possible? I find it hard to imagine that there can possibly be anyone more worthy of that than you.”

Caroline laughed. “Charles... My Love... you always did know just the right thing to say to make me feel special.”

Charles looked at her with a boyish grin. “That’s because *you are*... the ‘special-est’... as Cathy used to say.”

She laughed even harder. “Oh my!” she declared. “I had forgotten that. Yes, Cathy did have her own way of expressing herself, didn’t she?”

They smiled wistfully at the memory of the happy little family they had once been.

But Charles realized she was dodging his question. He intended to get an answer. “You didn’t answer my question, Caroline. How is it that God hasn’t made you an angel?”

She looked at him, sheepishly. “I suppose it’s because to become an angel, one would have to actually present themselves at the ‘Pearly Gates’... so, to speak.”

“And you didn’t do that?” he asked, clearly perplexed. “*Why?*”

She looked at him adoringly. “Do you remember I told you I broke a few rules?”

“Yes,” he replied simply.

“Well, I... I’ve broken more than a few.”

“Caroline Rose Chandler!” Charles pretended to be shocked. “What do you mean? What did you do?”

Caroline couldn't help but smile. She had missed the way they bantered with one another. "Do you remember once when I told you that if your love could keep me alive, that I would live forever?"

Charles nodded, recalling the things she had said to comfort him as she lay dying. "I do remember that. It wasn't long before we lost you... before you died."

She nodded, knowing that it was painful for him to recall those difficult days. "Well, that's kind of what happened. I couldn't bear to leave you both... especially in the beginning. I loved you too much to move very far away. Your grief was beyond anything I had imagined. So, when my mother and your mother came to guide me, I..." She stopped, recalling the consternation her stubborn refusal had caused.

"You refused to go?" he asked, finishing her sentence.

"Yes." She nodded. "We aren't supposed to stay here after we... you know... *pass*. At least not for very long. But Charles, no one in Heaven or on earth had ever loved me the way you and Cathy did. You were in so much pain that I... I couldn't bear to leave you alone with it. I was in pain as well. So, I stayed close by. After a while I did have to move farther away... so that you could move on with your lives... but I still insisted that I had to stay here... in New York. So, 'The Powers That Be,' decided if I wasn't going to leave, then they would give me something to do while I waited."

"Something to do? You mean... they gave you a *job*?"

"Yes, I guess you could say that." She nodded. "They made me a... well... I'm sort of a... a local helper... a protector... and sometimes a guide."

"Like you are for me now?"

"Sort of... you see, there are some people... lost souls they call them... who are all alone... they have no one to help them... no one who loves them... no one to come for them... so I give them help when they need it. I show them the way."

"You mean you help dead people find their way to Heaven?"

"Sometimes..." she said with a nod. "... but not always. Sometimes they're just broken people who have been cast off by the world... and I guide them to a place... a safe place... where they'll be cared for."

Charles looked confused. "What kind of place are you talking about?"

"There are secret places in the city, Charles. Places where broken people can be protected from the harsh realities of this world. Places where they can... heal. I guide them to... 'helpers'... to people who will show them kindness and love, and care for them, until they become strong again."

Charles smiled. “That sounds like my Caroline. I should have known that you would end up doing something like that. After all, isn’t that what you did when you were alive? You fought for the defenseless, always standing up for the underdogs.”

“But there was a stipulation, Charles.”

“A stipulation? What does that mean?”

“I was given this job... permitted to stay here... only until it’s... *your time*... until *you*... cross over.”

“You mean until I die?”

“Yes... until *you*... die. You’re the last person I’m going to guide. After that I have to go onward. It’s what I agreed to.”

“You mean... we will be separated again?” he asked, alarmed at the very idea.

“Only if that is what you want. If you want to come with me, you can. It’s up to you. You still have your free will.” Caroline’s voice faltered a little. “If... if you don’t want to come with me... you don’t have to.”

Charles grew silent, as he tried to process all that Caroline had told him. It had taken him twenty years to get used to living without her, and in a mere twenty-four hours... *I can’t imagine being separated from her again*, he admitted to himself.

Then looking at his daughter, who had been his only reason for living after the death of his wife... *How can I leave her?* he wondered, knowing that he could only choose to stay with one of them.



As the afternoon gave way to evening, the room grew slowly dimmer. Catherine didn’t seem to notice, or if she did, she didn’t care. Either way, she didn’t bother turning on the lights. She just sat there, by her father’s side. She squeezed his hand from time to time to let him know she was there... and hoped that he might respond by squeezing back. She was so intent on watching her father that she didn’t move or even acknowledge when Peter slipped into the room.

He placed a deli sandwich and a can of Diet Coke on the tray table next to Charles’ bed. “I brought you a little something. Have you eaten anything today?” he asked, suspecting that she probably hadn’t.

“They brought me a tray at lunchtime,” she answered evasively.

“Nice trick, counselor,” he said softly. “But that’s not what I asked you.”

She looked up guiltily and sighed. “Fine,” she said, with exasperation. “No, I haven’t eaten. You’re as bad as Daddy. He always knows when I’m skirting the truth.”

Charles chuffed at that. “Well, apparently I didn’t know *everything*,” he muttered under his breath.

“What did you say?” she asked, looking at Peter.

Charles and Caroline looked at each other in surprise.

Peter smiled. “That’s what made him a great lawyer, *and* a great father. Charles had excellent instincts. Believe me he tried those tricks with me too. I’ve never had a patient who was better at avoiding difficult questions than he was.”

Catherine looked at him as if something had just occurred to her. “Peter, this stroke, it... it didn’t come as a surprise to you, did it?”

Peter looked uncomfortable.

“Peter... *please*...” she pleaded. “Was Daddy keeping something from me?”

Peter sighed. “I suppose at this point... it doesn’t matter.”

“What?” she asked desperately.

“Charles had a couple of mini strokes awhile back,” he told her. “They weren’t serious, and he recovered quickly. But they frightened him... *as they should have*. They were a warning. He’s been on blood thinners and a strict diet ever since.”

“How long ago?” she asked, wondering if this was something she had missed because of their growing distance of late.

“About four years,” he admitted.

She looked at her father. *So, you’ve been keeping secrets from me too*, she thought.

“I tried to get him to slow down.” Peter looked over at his old friend. “Heaven knows he could afford to retire. But you know Charles.”

“Yes, I do know Daddy.” She looked at her father. “He *really* loves his work.”

“Maybe a little too much,” Caroline added.

“I encouraged him to tell you, Cathy,” Peter explained. “Really, I did. But as his doctor I—”

“I don’t blame you, Peter.” Catherine tried to smile at her godfather. “I *know* you did everything you could.”

Catherine turned her attention again to her father, holding his lifeless hand against her cheek. Pain and regret were clearly written on her face.

“I’m sorry, Cathy.” Charles pleaded, even though he knew she couldn’t hear him. “Please forgive me.”

“I’m sorry, Daddy. I hope you can forgive me,” Catherine said.

“What’s *she* apologizing for?” Charles asked, turning to Caroline. Before Caroline could respond, Catherine answered as if she *had* heard him.

“Maybe if I had been around more, you would have confided in me.”

“I don’t think so, Cathy,” Peter disagreed. “Charles was stubborn... and he didn’t want you to worry.”

“But Peter... maybe if I hadn’t left the law firm... maybe if I had—”

“No, Cathy! That *isn’t* what I wanted!” Charles said loudly.

Peter put up his hand to stop her. “Cathy! That is exactly what he *didn’t* want. He *wanted* you to live your life. Of course, he missed you and he was disappointed that you chose a different career path. But he was so proud of you and all that you had overcome.”

“It’s true, Cathy. I was!” Charles exclaimed.

“He was?” Catherine looked up at Peter, hopefully. “Really?”

Caroline looked at her husband. “Didn’t you ever tell her that?”

Charles shook his head. “I meant to... *really*... I did... but I thought there was time. I didn’t know I was going to... to...”

“Expire?” Caroline suggested, with a hint of sarcasm. “Croak? Kick the bucket? Give up the ghost... shuffle off your mortal coil?”

Charles was stunned. He looked at his beloved wife to see that she was trying not to laugh. “You find this situation... *funny*?” he asked.

“I’m sorry, Charles,” she said with clearly feigned contrition. “It’s just that... I’ve been dead for so long that I’ve learned a few things. And one of them is that most people don’t have any idea they are going to die... or if they do... they refuse to think about it until it’s too late.”

“Too late” Charles said introspectively. “Too late to say the things... they wanted to say... or do the things they wanted to do.”

“Exactly,” Caroline agreed. “I was lucky.”

“Lucky? How did you come to that conclusion?” he asked. “You were robbed, Caroline... *we*... were robbed. You died far too young. And the pain you suffered was terrible. I wouldn’t call *that* lucky.”

“I was lucky because I had time to come to terms with it... I had years to see the things I wanted to see, to do the things I wanted to do, and to say the things I wanted to say. I learned early on to treasure every touch, every laugh, every kiss...” her voice trailed off as she recalled the sweetness of her life as Mrs. Charles Chandler. “I died with only one regret.”

“What was that?”

She looked at him adoringly. “That it separated me from the two people I loved more than life itself.”

Charles turned, as he realized someone else had entered the room. “He’s here,” Charles whispered, as he turned his attention to the great hulking shadow in the corner of the room.

“Yes, of course he’s here,” Caroline replied. “He promised Cathy that he would find a way.”

“But how? Isn’t it dangerous?” Charles asked wondering how long Vincent had been standing there, and how he had managed to enter the room undetected. “If someone sees him... I can only imagine...”

“Yes, it *is* dangerous for him,” Caroline agreed. “I have seen how people react when they see him for the first time... but he loves our daughter, Charles. He would risk anything to be here to support her.”

“He must,” Charles acknowledged, still unsure of how he felt about his only daughter being in a relationship with such a creature.

“She loves him too, Charles... with all her heart.”

“I don’t know, I... this is too much for me to take in... that our daughter is in love with a man like him.”

“A man like him,” Caroline repeated, smiling indulgently. “You mean a man who loves our daughter more than anything?” she asked gently.

Catherine sat next to her father with his lifeless hand clasped lovingly in both of hers. “I’m trying to understand your side of all this,” she began. “And I don’t even know if you can understand me.”

“I can understand you, Cathy. I’m ready to listen,” Charles declared coming closer to the bed.

“...but I hope you can,” Catherine continued tearfully. “Because I want you to know that *I love you*... and I’m here for you.” She quickly wiped the tears from her eyes.

“Daddy, I want you to know that I’m okay. A lot of things have changed for me in the last two years. Even if sometimes you didn’t understand those changes, you always trusted me. Remember when you said that what Mom wanted was for me to have a happy life?”

“Yes, I remember, Honey,” he replied.

“Well, that’s a complicated thing. But *I am* happy, Daddy, I really am. It’s just that there’s been a part of me that I haven’t been able to show you.” She glanced in Vincent’s direction.

“See, I haven’t been alone. There’s been someone in my life. His name is Vincent. When I had the accident, it was Vincent who saved my life. Those days that I was missing, they weren’t lost or forgotten. I was with *him*, healing, and learning things about myself I might never have known.”

Vincent stood in the corner of the room protected by the shadows and the safety of his cloak, listening to the love of his life tell her father the things she had longed to tell him many times before.

“But Vincent was a secret I couldn’t share, not even with you,” Catherine explained.

Vincent stepped out of the shadows and approached the bedside. He was nervous to present himself to Catherine’s father, even though he knew that Charles Chandler was probably unaware of him. As Catherine tenderly stroked her father’s cheek, Vincent glanced at her, and she nodded ever so slightly. He slowly folded back the hood of his cloak, and exposed his leonine face to Charles’ sightless eyes.

“I realize that to you, I am a stranger,” he began. “And that



was not your choice. But what Catherine and I share has taken great courage... especially for Catherine. She has sacrificed much in order to live a life of generosity, and of love.”

Catherine was quick to add. “But, Daddy, I’ve gotten so much back! I *had* to change. I had to find my own strengths... and Vincent has helped me to do that.”

“She is strong,” Charles whispered. “Stronger than I ever imagined.”

“Yes, she certainly is,” Caroline agreed, her eyes shining with love and pride at the woman her daughter had become.

Vincent came closer and sat next to the bed. “Please know *this*: that I will protect Catherine, watch over her and love her, ’til my last breath.”

“He really means that, doesn’t he, Caroline?” Charles asked.

Without taking her eyes off her daughter’s face, Caroline answered with assurance. “He means every word. Vincent has already protected her from many things. He would give his very life to save hers. And she has taken great risks to protect him, as well.”

Catherine felt suddenly relieved, as if a great burden had been lifted. It was a weight she had carried for so long that she had almost forgotten how heavy it was. And yet, the moment it was removed she took a deep breath, and the guilt of her secret was lifted from her heart.

She gently lifted Charles’ limp and lifeless hand to her cheek, the hand that had lovingly cared for her all of her life. The hand that had always wiped away her tears, wiped away her tears for one last time.

Peter approached Catherine, and placed his hand on her shoulder. “It’s time, Catherine,” he whispered. “Vincent needs to leave. It isn’t safe for him to stay here any longer.”

Without releasing her father’s hand, Catherine looked up at Vincent, as tears quietly slipped down her cheeks. “Thank you, Vincent.”

Her heartfelt words pierced Vincent’s heart. He sighed heavily. *She is in such anguish*, he thought, *and I am powerless to do anything else for her.*

“I will see you soon,” he said. “Be well, Catherine.”

With that, he turned and disappeared behind the fluttering curtain.

“They really do love each other, don’t they?” Charles asked as he watched Vincent disappear behind the curtain and slide the window shut behind him.

“Yes.” Caroline nodded. “You are beginning to understand.”

“So many things are beginning to make sense to me now.”

“They love each other deeply and completely, the way we did.”

“Still do?” he asked, wondering if she could still love him when he looked so old, and she was still so young and beautiful.

“Yes, My Darling... I *still* do. But I had to overcome my fears to let myself love you. Do you remember?”

Charles smiled, recalling their difficult beginning.

“His fears are much deeper than mine ever were,” Caroline said.

“What exactly is it he fears?” Charles asked. “Ripping her to shreds with those hands?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “That is one of them.”

“Mine too,” he acknowledged.

“Vincent actually has very gentle hands, despite what they look like,” Caroline assured him. “Yes, they can, *and have*, done great harm. But always in defense of those he loves. Never out of evil. He is a good man. He has a good heart. He would never harm our daughter.”

“And what about Cathy? Does she fear he will hurt her?”

Caroline laughed. “No. Our daughter is fearless. Her love for him has overcome any fear she might have ever felt.”

Charles looked intently at his wife. “So, you really approve of this... this relationship?”

“Yes, I do,” Caroline answered with conviction. “He said, he would watch over her and love her to his last breath. I believe he will.”

“So, what does that mean? To you? To me?”

“It means you can let go now, Charles. She *won't* be alone. That's why you are hanging on isn't it, because you don't want to leave her alone in the world? Now you know that won't happen.”

Peter stood at the foot of Charles' bed. “Have you made your decision, Cathy?”

Still clutching her father's hand, she looked up with tear filled eyes. Her face seemed to crumple a little, as she tried to speak. “Oh, Peter. I don't know if I can do it.”

Peter pulled a chair up close to her and sat down. “Cathy,” he said softly. “You need to ask yourself if he would want to be kept alive *like this*.”

Catherine looked longingly at her father, paralyzed, helpless, and blind. She pressed his hand against her face again, searching for any sign from him that he was aware of her at all. But there was nothing but the sound of his heart monitor and the rhythm of the machine that was forcing air and oxygen in and out of his lungs.

“It’s time, Charles,” Caroline said. “You have a choice to make.”

“Time?” Charles looked quizzically at his wife. “Now? Are you sure?”

Caroline looked slightly annoyed. “Peter is asking our daughter if she has made up her mind about you. Do you really want her to make this decision for you? Do you want her to carry the guilt of having been the one who turned off these machines and ended your life? Do you want her to always be haunted by the possibility that she made the *wrong* choice?”

“NO!” He shook his head emphatically. “No, I don’t want that!”

“Then it’s time for you to take my hand and end this... so *she* won’t have to.”

“But Caroline,” he pleaded. “I’m *not* ready. You said I didn’t have to go until I was ready.”

“I... I sort of... lied.” Caroline sighed. “I’m sorry, Charles. I was trying to give you time to... to get used to the idea. But the truth is, My Darling, no one who is loved as much as she loves you, is ever *truly* ready.”

Charles couldn’t take his eyes off of the grief-stricken face of his daughter. “Look at her, Caroline. I don’t want to leave her in such pain.”

“I know... and I understand. *Truly, I do,*” Caroline responded sympathetically. “I felt the same way when I was the one lying in the hospital bed. But Charles, this pain... this grief... that both of you are feeling... it’s the other side of love. And if it brings you any comfort... her grief will keep you close to her, at least for a little while.”

Charles looked at her hopefully. “It will? For how long?”

Caroline smiled reassuringly. “For as long as it takes for her to begin to heal.”

“What will happen after that?” he asked.

“Then you... then *both of us*... will have to move further away.”

For a moment, Charles considered what she told him and then nodded. “I understand now,” he said, as reached for Caroline’s outstretched hand.

“You’re right, Peter,” Catherine said. “He wouldn’t want to be kept alive like *this*.” Catherine took a deep breath and nodded in resolve. “I’ll sign the papers now, if you would please tell the duty nurse.”

As Peter turned toward the door, Charles' heart stopped beating and the alarms on the heart monitor began to go off. It was only seconds before a doctor, an intern and three nurses appeared at the door with a crash cart. They stopped short as Peter held up his hand and shook his head.

"Miss Chandler?" the doctor asked. "Is this what you want?"

Catherine looked up, with tears streaming down her face. "Yes," she managed to say with a sob. "Yes... it's for the best."

The nurses approached his bed and silently began to remove the tubes and machinery that had been keeping him alive, while the doctor recorded the time of death in Charles' medical records.

Peter reverently closed Charles' eyes and then squeezed his dear friend's hand. "Goodbye, old friend," he said, as he choked back his emotions. "I'll take care of Cathy, I promise."

Lowering the side of the bed, Catherine leaned over and brushed a stray lock of her father's hair one more time. "I love you, Daddy," she whispered through her tears. She kissed his cheek again and embraced him one last time.

"I love you too, honey," Charles responded.

"Are you ready to go, Cathy?" Peter asked, thinking how lost she looked. For a moment he could have sworn she looked just like the ten-year-old girl who had watched her mother die twenty years before.



"Would it be all right... if I... sit with him for a little while longer?" she pleaded.

"You can stay as long as you need to, sweetheart," he said. Placing his hand on her shoulder, Peter leaned over and kissed the top of her head. "I'll be right outside if you need me."

As he stepped into the hall, Peter could hear her weeping.

In the tunnels beneath the hospital, Vincent waited, knowing that he could do no more to help Catherine. Nevertheless, he felt compelled to stay close by, hoping that somehow, he could

send her some of his strength through the Bond they shared. He knew the instant that Charles Chandler died, as great waves of Catherine's anguish began to wash over him. It was so powerful that he leaned against the wall and slid to the floor. "Catherine, Catherine," he whispered over and over, weeping for her pain.

Chapter 5

For the next two days, Catherine moved as if she was in a dream. Along with her grief, she felt numb, as she went through the necessary steps that follow the death of a loved one.

Keeping the promise he made to Charles, Peter was by her side through every step of the funeral arrangements, and all the other details that needed to be attended to.

It was Peter who made sure the obituary honoring his old friend was placed prominently in the New York Daily, the Wall Street Journal, and the local Society pages.

After all, Charles was a well-known and respected member of New York Society circles and came from a prominent New England family. A funeral for someone like Charles Chandler would be no small affair.



The day of the funeral, Charles and Caroline stood outside the church, watching as a somber stream of people made their way to the church entrance.

Charles looked up. The steeple looked picturesque surrounded by clear blue skies and billowing white clouds.

"It's a beautiful day," Caroline remarked.

"For a funeral." Charles added, with a faraway look on his face.

Caroline looked curiously at her husband. "Do you mean your funeral, Dear?"

"No," he replied with a shake of his head. "I was thinking about *yours*. It was overcast and drizzling that day."

"Yes, I remember," Caroline whispered.

Charles gave her a sideways glance. *How strange that sounds*, he thought. *That she remembers her own funeral...but then, here I am attending mine.*

"The rain that day made it feel as if Heaven itself was mourning your death," he remarked. "I thought it was fitting, somehow."

“And what do you think of the sunshine today?” she asked.

He looked at her thoughtfully and smiled wistfully. “I thought I would never see you again. But here you are after all these years, just as beautiful as I remembered. Maybe this is fitting, too.”

Presently, the hearse arrived followed by a limousine. Catherine stepped out of the car followed closely by Peter. The pall bearers somberly carried the casket into the church.

Charles noted how pale and tired his daughter looked. “But what about *Cathy’s* pain?” Charles sighed. “Where’s the sunshine for her?” He was worried about their only daughter and how she would cope with losing him.

“Her pain comes from love, Charles,” Caroline gently reminded him. “These separations... they are a necessary part of this life. That same love that is causing her such pain today is the very thing that will help *her* to heal as well. And it isn’t forever, you know. We will all be together again, one day.”

She sounds so sure of that, Charles thought. *I wonder...* “When will that be, Caroline?” he asked.

Caroline smiled and looked in her daughter’s direction. “When she has lived her life, My Darling... when she has fulfilled her destiny.”

“Her destiny? What is her destiny?” he asked, wondering what kind of a future she could have with a man like Vincent.

Caroline smiled. “To have happy life, of course. To love and be loved. To have her dreams come true.” Before he could reply, she held out her hand. “Shall we go in?”

Entering the sanctuary, Charles was surprised to see that it was filled to capacity with people, some of whom he hadn’t seen for several years. There were large bouquets, sprays, and wreaths of flowers adorning every conceivable corner and space, along the walls and around the casket.

They followed Catherine and Peter to the front pew and sat next to their beloved daughter.

“Good grief! Are you sure this is a funeral?” Charles exclaimed, as he looked around. “Between some of the hats these women are wearing and all of these flowers it looks more like I’ve won the Kentucky Derby!”

Caroline stifled a chuckle. “Charles! Shhh!”

Charles couldn’t help it. “Why should I shhh? It’s not like any of them can hear me? *Can they?*”

“I suppose they can’t,” she replied, still grinning. “But you should show some respect for the dead.”

“Show some respect? But I’m the one who’s dead!”

Peter looked over to see Catherine smiling to herself. He leaned over and whispered. “What’s making you smile, Cathy?”

She looked around and then leaned over to whisper back. “I was just thinking of Daddy and how he might react to all of this.”

“What do you mean?” Peter asked.

“Well, just look around, Peter. Between some of the hats these ladies are wearing and all of these flowers it looks more like he’s won the Kentucky Derby than a funeral.”

Peter looked around, and chuckled. “I think that’s exactly how he would react.”

Charles turned to Caroline in shock. “I thought they couldn’t hear me?”

Caroline shrugged. “I forgot how sensitive Cathy always was. She seems to be aware of us to some degree.”

Charles tried his best to endure the prayers, the sermon and the choir performance. He struggled to sit still. He had never liked funerals, and this one was no different.

“For Heaven’s sake, Charles. You’re squirming like a child with too much starch in his pants,” Caroline observed. “You haven’t attended church much these past years have you?”

“It’s pretty obvious, is it?” Charles huffed as he replied. “No, I haven’t. I suppose I never really forgave God for taking you from me,” he admitted.

Then he turned to her in earnest. “Do you think *He* (Charles pointed to the ceiling and looked Heavenward) will hold *that* against me?”

Caroline laughed and shook her head. “I wouldn’t worry too much, My Darling. You are a good man. I’m sure that will count for something. I suppose it’s too late to do anything about it now, anyway.”

They turned their attention to their daughter as she stood and approached the podium.

Catherine stood for a moment, surveying the large crowd of people who had come to pay their last respects to her father. It brought her comfort to know that he had so many friends. Then looking in Peter’s direction, she could swear she saw her father sitting on the same pew, beaming up at her with pride.

That's not possible, she thought.

For a split second, Charles saw Catherine's furrowed brow as she seemed to focus directly on him. "She can see me, Caroline!" he exclaimed. "I swear she just looked straight at me!"

Caroline shook her head. "That's not possible. It's your imagination, dear," Caroline assured him.

My mind is playing tricks on me, Catherine concluded. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Imagination or not, the idea that her father was there gave her the strength to proceed.

"My Father made strong friends," Catherine began, her voice trembled with emotion. "And it means a lot to me that so many of you could come today. I thought for a long time about what I could say up here. But everything I thought of seemed small and insubstantial next to the man that my father was. So, what I'd like to do is to read to you a part of a story that I know he loved."

She unfolded the pages she had been holding in her hands. "It's a story about two toys. A new toy - a rabbit, and an old, worn-out toy - a skin horse."

She paused and took another breath, as she recalled the precious memories of the many times her father had read the beloved story to her.

"What is real?" asked the rabbit one day when they were lying side by side. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

*"Real isn't how you are made," said the skin horse. "It's a thing that happens to you when a child loves you for a long, long time. Not just to play with, but really loves. Then you become real..."*¹

Charles leaned a little toward his wife and whispered, "I used to read that to her all the time after we lost you. She never seemed to tire of it. It seemed to comfort her somehow."

"Yes," Caroline nodded. "I remember."

"You remember?" Charles looked at her sideways. "Are you saying you were there?"

¹ The Velveteen Rabbit, Book by Margery Williams and S. D. Schindler Originally published: 1922

“Of course, I was there.” she smiled, and looked at him curiously. “I thought you knew that. Not long after I passed, you told Cathy that as long as she remembered how much she loved me, and how much I loved her, that I would never be more than a heartbeat away.”

“Yes... but I... I... I didn’t really *know* that,” he admitted. “I was just—”

“... saying that to make her feel better?” she said, finishing his sentence.

He nodded, grateful that she understood. “I didn’t know if it was true... I only *hoped* that it was. I was trying to comfort her... and trying to comfort myself, I suppose.”

“Well...” she smiled at him adoringly. “It *was* true.” She turned her attention back to her daughter.

“Does it hurt?” asked the rabbit.

“Sometimes,” said the skin horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are real, you don’t mind being hurt.”

“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up?” the rabbit asked, “or bit by bit?”

“It doesn’t happen all at once,” said the skin horse. “You become. It takes a long time.

That’s why it doesn’t often happen to people who break easily or have sharp edges or have to be carefully kept.”

The words of the beloved story seemed to play in Catherine’s mind, as she stood in the receiving line to accept hugs and words of condolence from her father’s friends, and to thank them all for coming. Then at the graveside, it almost felt as if she could hear her father’s voice reading the story.

It doesn’t happen all at once, she thought, you become. It takes a long time. Catherine looked around at all the people who came to honor her father. You became real to all of these people, Daddy. Something caught in her throat. You’ll always be real to me.

As the graveside service ended, one by one the mourners filed passed the casket and dropped flowers into the grave as one last tribute to their friend and colleague, Charles Chandler. Flowers filled the freshly dug grave, and many paused a moment, before walking to their cars.

Eventually Catherine found herself standing there alone, but she couldn't seem to pull herself away.

Around her, the chairs were being folded and stacked into the bed of a pickup truck. And a few men in overalls and light denim jackets began to shovel dirt into the grave.

She was recalling another funeral nearly twenty-one years before. It was cloudy and drizzling, as she and her father stood on almost this exact spot, and watched as her mother's grave was filled with earth.

Peter lightly touched her elbow. "Do you mind if I stay here with you?" he asked her.

Catherine looked up and smiled wanly. "I thought I was all alone."

"You aren't alone, Cathy," he assured, putting his arm around her shoulders, drawing her close. "I would never let that happen."

"Thank you, Peter," she said as she rested her head on his shoulder. "I don't know how I would have gotten through this without you."

"Dear, dear Peter," Caroline said. "What would any of us have done without *him*?"

"Indeed," Charles agreed. "He certainly does live up to his name, doesn't he? Peter was my rock in those days after we lost you." Charles huffed a little and shook his head. "And yet, he was racked with guilt that he couldn't save you."

"Yes, I know," Caroline said with a sigh. "I think my death was the thing that taught him that doctors aren't gods. He tried to protect me my whole life, but he finally learned that he couldn't protect me from everything. It took him a long time to forgive himself."²

"And now he's a rock for Cathy," Charles said softly.

When the grave was finally filled, Catherine turned to Peter. "I'm ready to go now."

As Catherine and Peter walked arm and arm to the waiting limousine, Charles and Caroline followed close behind.



² You can learn more about the relationship between Peter and Caroline by reading "Secrets and Promises," by Barbara Anderson posted on Treasure Chambers.

<https://treasurechambers.com/FanFiction/Barbara/BarbaraSecrets%20and%20Promises.pdf>

That night, Catherine stood alone on her balcony looking out at the city lights. She was profoundly grateful that the long, torturous day was finally over.

Charles and Caroline stood nearby. “She looks so tired and...” Charles began.

“... and sad,” Caroline said, finishing his sentence as she used to do.



“Yes... she looks so sad,” he agreed.

If Catherine closed her eyes, she could almost imagine that her father was standing there beside her.

As the evening breeze cooled her flushed face, she let it carry her back to a sweet memory.

It was only a short time after her mother’s death. She recalled her father sitting in an overstuffed chair in her bedroom, as he read aloud from a well-used volume of *The Velveteen Rabbit*.



‘Generally, by the time you are real, most of your hair has been loved off and your eyes drop out, and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.’

Looking up at the sound of his daughter’s laughter, Charles asked, “And just what is so funny, young lady?”

Still smiling she said, “I was just trying to imagine you, Daddy... you know... with most of your hair loved off.”

He chuckled. “Will you still love me, Cathy, when my eyes drop out and I’m old and ugly?”

She jumped off of the bed and into his arms. With her arms wrapped tightly around his neck she declared, “I’ll love you for always, Daddy. I promise. You could never be ugly to me.” She kissed him on the cheek and squirmed into the small space next to him in the overstuffed chair and he continued to read....³

‘I suppose you are real?’ said the Rabbit. And then he wished he had not said it, for he thought the Skin Horse might be sensitive. But the Skin Horse only smiled.

‘The Boy’s Uncle made me Real,’ he said. ‘That was a great many years ago; but once you are Real you can’t become unreal again. It lasts for always.’



Catherine sighed and smiled wistfully. “Once you are real, you can’t become unreal again,” she whispered to the city lights. “I’ll love you for *always*, Daddy. I promise.”

“I’ll love you for always too, Sweetheart,” Charles said, as he lightly kissed her cheek.

As another cool breeze brushed her face, Catherine imagined she could hear her father say, “I’ll love you for always too, Sweetheart.” She raised her hand to capture what felt like a light kiss on her cheek.

“Good night, Daddy,” Catherine said, as she went inside and turned out the bedroom light.

Caroline turned to her husband. She had a look of concern on her face as she spoke. “She seems to be aware of us. We are going to have to keep our distance.”

“Why?” he asked, not wanting that to happen.

“Because we aren’t supposed to make contact,” she answered earnestly.

“But you told me that there have been times when you—”

“Yes, *I did*,” she said, cutting him off. “But I *shouldn’t* have. I understand that now.”

“Well, I *don’t* understand,” he said, shaking his head. “Why can’t we comfort our daughter when she is in so much pain?”

³³ This is an excerpt from the fan fiction story, **Once You Are Real**, by the author.

<https://treasurechambers.com/FanFiction/Barbara/BarbaraOnce%20You%20Are%20Real.pdf>

“*Because...* she has to find comfort from *the living*, Charles” Caroline insisted. “She has to let go of us and move forward. She must learn that life goes on. We can’t be an active part of her life, not anymore.”

“But, Caroline, she *needs* us.”

Caroline knew she had to find a way to make him understand. “After I died... there were times...” she began. “... when you were in such pain that I couldn’t help myself... like you when you kissed Cathy’s cheek just then. And then other times... when you were afraid you were failing as a father, and I tried to encourage you by coming to you in your dreams.

“Perhaps if...” She turned away from him to look out at the city lights. “Perhaps if I had kept my distance... obeyed the rules... if I had let you go, perhaps you would have been able to find someone... you wouldn’t have been so... alone all these years. I’m sorry, Charles.”

Charles joined her, looking out at the city that he had once called home. “I *didn’t want* you to keep your distance, Caroline,” he said gently. “I didn’t want to let go of what we had. Your love was the most real thing I have ever known.” He turned and looked at the beautiful woman who had made his life complete. “You may have died... but the love *never* did. The love we shared was still just as real to me as it ever was.

“There’s no need for you to be sorry, Sweet Caroline,” he said tenderly.

Caroline closed her eyes and let his words flow through her. She had always loved it when he called her that.

“Yes, that *is* true,” she said, nodding in agreement. “Our love never changed.”

A look of doubt, like a shadow, crossed his face.

“What is it, Charles? What’s wrong?” Caroline asked.

“It’s just that you... you’re still... young and beautiful... just like I remember.”

“Is that a problem?” she asked, suddenly self-conscious.

“Do you think that you... can you still love me... when I... I look like *this*?” he asked.

“What do you mean?” she asked. “You look just fine to me.”

“But I... I’m old and... and ugly.”

Caroline smiled and reached up to touch his face. “*This* is the face of the man I love. The *only* man I have *ever* loved. You could never be ugly to me, Charles. Don’t you remember what the Skin Horse said, My Darling? Once you are real, you *can’t* be ugly, except to people who don’t understand. Once you are real...”

The expression on his face was one of wonder. "...it lasts... for always..." he whispered.

Caroline slipped into his arms and kissed his ephemeral cheek. "Yes, My Love... it lasts for *always*."

As they watched the city skyline, Charles finally had the courage to ask, "How long do we have?"

"Have?" Caroline unsure of what he meant.

"Before we have to leave her... now that the funeral is over."

"Don't worry, Dear, we have a little time," she explained. "We're allowed to stay close to loved ones in the beginning as they work their way through the stages of grief."

"Stages of grief?" he asked. "What are those?"

"It varies from person to person, but generally shock and denial are the first emotions. Cathy began going through that when you were in the hospital. She's still trying to accept that it's real. But now that the funeral is over, the numbness is beginning to wear off, and the reality of it all is beginning to set in. Pain and guilt generally follow. That's the stage she's moving into now."

"Guilt? Guilt for what?"

"She's questioning the choices she made... regretting things that were left unsaid... wondering if there was something she could have done to prevent your death. Perhaps if she had stayed at the firm, she would have seen some sign and would have taken you to the hospital sooner."

"That's ridiculous."

"Yes, it is." Caroline nodded. "But think back, Dear. Do you remember the guilt you felt after my death?"

"Yes... I... I thought that perhaps if I hadn't been working so much, I might have seen something... gotten you into chemo sooner..."

"Yes. You and Peter both." She looked thoughtful, as she recalled the memory.

"As I was dying, I felt so loved by both of you. But I ached at the pain you were going through. Even Cathy, as young as she was, wondered if something she had done... or something she hadn't done contributed to my death. It isn't rational... but it still happens."

"And what's the next stage?"

"Anger..."

“Anger at me?”

“No, not at you, really... anger at the pain. The pain builds up and needs to be released. It’s a natural reaction. It’s like a pressure cooker. At some point she *will* blow. It will be good for us to be close by.”

Chapter 6

Despite her utter exhaustion, Catherine slept fitfully. She was wide awake before dawn, despite the fatigue that ached in every muscle of her body. She finally decided to dress and head for the law offices of Chandler and Coolidge. There were some things she needed to do, and she knew that putting it off wouldn’t make it easier.

Maybe it will help me get through this, she hoped.

As Catherine got out of the taxi at the General Motors building, she stopped and looked up at the imposing fifty story skyscraper. *The ivory tower I grew up in,* she mused. And, in fact, that was exactly what it was. Many of her childhood memories were tied to this place.



After the death of her mother Catherine had come to her father’s office every day after school to do her homework. She would study and read books, and then they would take a taxi and pick up take-out before going home together. Sometimes they would walk home, since the office was only a short, seven-minute walk from their townhouse on East 61st Street. Many times, she had fallen asleep on the long leather couch in his office when he had to work late. On several occasions Catherine had heard her father’s partner, Jay Coolidge, encourage Charles to hire a nanny for her, but Charles would have none of it. He always said that he had made promises to his dying wife that he intended to honor.

After she went to boarding school as a teenager, Catherine worked part-time, during the summers in the mail room, to earn her own money, but mostly to keep from dying of boredom as she waited for her father to finish working. Charles thought it was good experience for her and Catherine thought it was fun getting to know everyone in the office, feeling a part of something that was so much bigger than herself.

As a law student Catherine interned for her father's assistant, Marilyn Campbell. Over the years some of the people here had become almost like family.

After law school it seemed perfectly natural to slip into a job as a junior associate in the law firm. It was what her father expected, it was the easy career path, and Catherine was naturally good at it. She had been a fixture at Chandler and Coolidge her entire life. But she soon discovered she lacked the passion that her father had for corporate law. She found the work grating, and repetitive. Although she easily met and sometimes exceeded the expectations of all the junior associates, Catherine set her own hours. She rarely came to the office before 10 am and sometimes didn't show up before noon. There were even times when she would take impromptu vacations with her friends without letting anyone in the office know. She was aware that her coworkers assumed she was lazy because she wasn't smart enough to do the work. The truth was that she was lazy because she was bored. Working at Chandler and Coolidge had become more of a hobby for a pampered, rich princess than an actual job. At the time, it was a role she didn't mind playing. Even though no one in the office had the courage to complain about her poor work ethic, she knew what they thought about her. But it didn't matter to her, as long as she still managed to do her work. After all, she thought, I'm the boss's daughter. What's he going to do, fire me?



As Catherine stood there looking up at the building, she barely recognized that young woman anymore. Truth be told, she was actually embarrassed at the self-centered, shallow person she had once been.

A passerby on the street bumped into her, bringing her back to the present. Catherine took a deep breath and walked into the building to face what had to be done.

Her parents followed close behind.

As Catherine got off the elevator on the 47th floor, and proceeded past the reception desk, she saw that work was already in full swing, even though it wasn't even 8am. It seemed odd to her that everything appeared to be humming along as usual, when everything in her world was turned upside down.

Charles had the same impression. "Huh! It's like nothing's happened," Charles remarked.

“Of course, it is, dear,” Caroline replied. “For all of them, life goes on. They still have bills to pay and responsibilities to live up to.”

“I guess they do,” he agreed.

“Miss Chandler?” the receptionist called. “Is that you?”

Catherine stopped and turned back to face the desk. Her mouth turned up a little in a faint smile. “Hi, Martha. It’s good to see you.”

The receptionist looked flustered and uncomfortable. “Is... is there something I can... help you with, Miss Chandler?”

Being addressed so formally by someone who had known her since she was a child was disconcerting. Catherine smiled awkwardly and replied, “Well, for starters, you can call me Cathy.”

“Is there something I can help you with... uhm... Cathy?” Martha asked, clearly uncomfortable.

“You’re acting strange, Martha,” Charles said, stating the obvious.

The bustle in the office came to a halt, and the halls became suddenly silent. Catherine looked around to see that everyone was looking at her as if she was an alien from outer space.

“Why is everyone looking at her like that?” he asked.

“Do you have an appointment with Mr. Coolidge?” Martha asked.

“An appointment?” Charles asked. “It’s Cathy... she doesn’t need an appointment! What’s going on here?”

“She can’t hear you, Charles,” Caroline gently reminded him.

Catherine turned her attention back to the receptionist. “An appointment? With Mr. Coolidge?” Shaking her head, she answered. “No... no I’m not here to see Jay... I’m here to pack up my father’s office.”

With that, she turned toward her father’s corner office at the end of the hall. Catherine felt all eyes upon her as she walked down the long hallway past her former coworkers and colleagues, who seemed to have nothing better to do than gawk at her. She could feel her cheeks beginning to burn.

“Hi, Cathy.”

Catherine stopped and looked up to see an old friend of her father’s, and a respected colleague smiling at her.

“Hi, Larry,” she said, returning the welcome greeting. She tilted her head toward the direction from which she had come. “Why is everyone staring at me like that?” she asked.

He shot a disapproving glance to a few people nearby and quipped. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe it’s because none of them have ever seen you in the office this early in the morning.”

Catherine laughed at that, despite her sorrow, and gave him a hug. “You always did know how to make me laugh, didn’t you?”

With those few words, the spell was broken, and everyone returned to minding their own business. That and perhaps because Larry shot some dirty looks at some of the people nearby.

Charles chuckled. “Good old Larry. At least *he’s* acting normal. Leave it to him to rescue our daughter. He always did have a soft spot for her.”

Dear Larry, Catherine thought. Always watching out for me, she recalled. You always used to remind me of client meetings so I wouldn’t forget.

“I’m so sorry about your father,” he said sympathetically. “Charles was a true friend ever since our college days. This place won’t be the same without him. It was a lovely service yesterday.”

“Thank you so much for being there, Larry. I know that would have meant a lot to him.” Catherine hugged him again and turned to resume walking,

Larry called out to her. “If you need anything, just let me know.”

“Thanks, Larry, I will,” she called back, even though she knew she probably wouldn’t.

As she entered her father’s outer office, his personal secretary looked surprised.

“Hi, Joan,” Catherine said, stopping at her desk. “Would you please call down to the mail room and ask Manny to send up some boxes and packing materials so I can pack up my father’s personal belongings?”

“Boxes and packing materials?” Joan repeated. “You’re going to pack it up... *yourself?*”

“Yes, I am.” Catherine turned and entered the office.

“Miss Chandler, you can’t just walk in...” Joan called after her, but it was too late. Catherine was already gone.

As she entered her father’s office, Catherine was surprised to find it was occupied by a man sitting comfortably behind her father’s desk as if he owned the place.

“What is *he* doing in here?” Charles demanded angrily. “And why are his big feet on top of *my* desk?!?!?”

“*Mark?*” Catherine asked. “What are *you* doing in here?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Coolidge,” Joan said from behind her. “Miss Chandler came in before I had a chance to—”

“It’s fine, Miss Matthews,” Mark said imperiously holding up his hand. “I can take care of this.” He waved her off like she was nothing more than an irritant.

“Y-yes, Mr. Coolidge,” Joan answered as she slunk out of the room.

As Catherine watched Joan’s strange behavior, she was completely confused by what had just played out before her eyes. *What is happening here?* she wondered.

“I DEMAND TO KNOW WHAT IS GOING ON IN MY OFFICE!!!!” Charles bellowed, as he watched his longtime receptionist cower and slink out of the room.

“Charles!” Caroline exclaimed, in an effort to get his attention.

“WHAT?” he responded loudly.

“Charles.” Her voice was soft but firm. “*This* is no longer *your* office. *That* is no longer *your* desk,” she said pointing in that general direction. “We are *only* observers here.”

“But look at what —”

“Charles... *I know...* I understand what you’re feeling. *Really*, I do. But these things are meaningless to you now. We are here for our daughter. The only thing that matters is *her*.”

“But he... and she’s not...” Charles blustered.

“Trust me, Charles, our daughter is perfectly capable of handling this.”

“*Mister Coolidge?*” Catherine asked in disbelief, as she turned her attention to Mark. “Is *that* what they’re calling you now?”

Mark smiled, seemingly not detecting her mocking tone. “Well, *that* is my name,” he affirmed smugly.

Catherine nodded, unaffected by his arrogant demeanor. “Yes, I suppose it is,” she agreed. “Would you care to explain why you’re in *my* father’s office with *your* feet on *his* desk?”

Mark slowly removed his feet from the desk and sat up straight. He cleared his throat, straightened his tie, and looked up at her with an air of superiority. “I beg

to differ with you, Cathy, but you're sadly mistaken. This is *my* desk now, and this is *my* office... or it will be, as soon as I get rid of some of this junk. Your father no longer has any need for it... and we both know that *you* don't work here anymore. Of course, I'll have to redecorate... but this desk is definitely going to stay. By the way, do you know where he kept the key to this drawer? I can't get it open, and I don't want to damage the lock."

Catherine walked further into the room, slowly setting her leather briefcase and purse on the teak conference table her mother had ordered from Indonesia as a gift for Charles not long after he founded his own law firm.

Standing in front of the desk, she addressed Mark, over-enunciating each syllable of his name, and speaking slowly, so that he could understand her every word. "I'll have you know, *Mis-ter Coolidge*, that it's *you* who are sadly mistaken. This is *my father's* office. *His* name is still on the door. And as for *this* desk, it was given to *my* grandfather when he passed the bar exam. It sat in *his* office when he served as a Federal Judge. He passed it on to *my* father when *he* passed the bar exam. And it most... *certainly... is... not... yours!*"

"Prove it!" Mark countered. "Do you have a bill of sale?" He laughed derisively. "Can you produce some documentation that establishes *your* ownership?"

"Why that little—" Charles began to move in the direction of the desk.

"Charles!" Caroline yelled. "Let Cathy handle this."

Catherine had never liked Jay Coolidge's stuck-up son. He had always overestimated his own intelligence, his skill as a lawyer, and his prowess as a man. Catherine could clearly see his personality hadn't improved since she'd left Chandler and Coolidge. Her patience was quickly wearing thin.

"You might not be aware of this, Mark," she said with unusual calmness. "But I work for The District Attorney's Office now."

Mark smiled, as he looked down his unusually long nose. "Oh yes, Cathy, I am *very aware* of *that* embarrassing little fact." He laughed derisively. "Princess Catherine Chandler, reduced to serving the huddled masses... My, my, my... how the mighty have fallen. Your father must have been positively mortified to see that you had sunk that low."

Caroline gasped in horror. "The nerve!" she said loudly.

Charles lunged forward menacingly. "Why that stuck up, little—"

"NO, Charles!" Caroline jumped in front of him holding up her arms to stop him. "Let Cathy handle this!" she insisted loudly.

Charles stopped short, with a shocked expression on his face.

Attempting to control her temper, Catherine clenched both fists. She wanted nothing more than to reach across the desk and put her father's favorite letter opener through one of Mark Coolidge's beady little eyes.

"Mark," she said, taking a deep breath to steady herself. "I strongly suggest you get out of this office, before I call the police and have you arrested for attempted theft."

Though she spoke softly, her left eyebrow arched menacingly. And there was a fire in her eyes that told Mark he might have gone too far.

He stood up and puffed out his chest in a Neanderthal attempt to gain the upper hand. At 6'2" he knew most people in the office, especially the women, were intimidated by him because of his height. Well... that and the fact that his father was half owner in the firm and could fire them on a whim. Catherine Chandler, however, was not one of them, despite the fact that she barely reached 5'6" with her shoes on.

"You need to calm down, Cathy," he said, with a condescending smirk. "You're becoming irrational."

Charles and Caroline gasped and stepped back.

"He's a complete and utter fool," Charles said. "Doesn't he know never to tell an angry woman to 'calm down?'"

"Oh dear," Caroline said. "I believe Cathy has definitely moved on to the anger stage."

Catherine noticed the corner of Mark's mouth twitch a little. She had sparred with enough attorneys to know that his false bravado was a sign he was on the defensive. So, she played her hand expertly.

Coming around to Marks' side of the desk, she reached down and touched an engraved walnut desk plate that bore her father's name,

CHARLES W. CHANDLER
ATTORNEY AT LAW

This is pretty solid and would fit easily in my hand, she surmised, as she stroked the nameplate for a moment. "Mark?" she asked demurely. "Did you know that I took self-defense classes after I was attacked a couple of years ago?"

The question threw Mark off balance. *What's she playing at now*, he wondered. "So what?" he replied.

She smiled and looked directly at him. “Oh, I didn’t learn any of that... ‘oriental’ stuff,” she said remembering the day she’d met Isaac. “No Kung Fu, no egg fu young,” she quoted her mentor and friend.

She’s babbling, Mark thought. *She isn’t making any sense*. He was beginning to think Catherine had lost her mind, and it was making him nervous.

Catherine calmly continued. “My teacher taught me what he called, ‘New York City street fighting’... *mean and dirty*,” she said nodding her head. She inched a little closer to him, and he began to back away. “Did you know... that you can *actually* kill a man with high heeled shoe?” she asked, smiling. “Do you want me to show you?” She began to bend over as if she was going to remove one of her imported Italian leather pumps.

Charles and Caroline were both mesmerized, as they watched their daughter in silence.

“No... no... that’s okay, Cathy. I believe you,” Mark answered, as he backed up a little more.

She thoughtfully stroked the surface of a bronze Samurai statue her father had brought back from a trip to Japan. “Isaac taught me how to see any ordinary, everyday object as a potential weapon,” she said. “For self-defense, *of course*,” she added with emphasis. Then reaching over to pick up her father’s favorite letter opener she smiled deviously and casually pointed it in Mark’s direction. “Even something as innocent looking as a—”

Mark moved quickly around to the other side of the desk to put some distance between them “Cathy...” he said pointing his finger at her accusingly. I know you’ve always been a little flighty, but now you’re just scary. I know you’ve had a rough week... *you know* ... with your dad dying and all... but seriously... *You need help!*” He moved toward the door.

“That’s right, *Mister Coolidge...!*” she said loudly, as she pointed the letter opener in his general direction. “It’s time for you to leave! And if I find one single scratch on my father’s desk, I’ll sue you for damages!”

Feeling the need to have the last word, Mark stood at the open door and declared, “I’m only leaving because it’s clear to me that you’re having some kind of breakdown,” he yelled back. “But you haven’t heard the end of this!”

He slammed the door behind him before she had a chance to say anything else.

As soon as the door closed, Catherine collapsed into her father’s executive leather desk chair. Exhausted and trembling, she rested her head against the back of the chair and closed her eyes.

“Ha ha ha ha!” Charles laughed loudly and clapped his hands. “Bravo! Bravo, Cathy! That’s my girl!”

Caroline laughed at his unrestrained enthusiasm.

“How did you know?” he asked his wife. “How did you know she could handle that jerk?”

“Wasn’t she wonderful?” Caroline laughed anew, as she looked at her daughter with unadulterated pride. “I never get tired of seeing her in action.”

“Seeing her in action?” Charles asked. “You mean... she’s done this before?”

“Don’t you know about the work she does?” Caroline was clearly surprised that he didn’t.

“I know she works for the District Attorney’s office... but we never really talked about it.”

“Apparently you aren’t aware of this, Charles, but *our* daughter is a force to be reckoned with. She’s determined, tenacious, and fearless when it comes to prosecuting criminals and fighting for their innocent victims. Mark Coolidge never had a chance.”

Caroline looked proudly at her daughter. “Charles, our daughter... is a warrior.”

“I had no idea,” he said with admiration, as he looked at his daughter with new eyes.

As Catherine breathed deeply, she slowly regained some of her composure. Feeling calmer, she opened her eyes and reached out to rest her hand on the desk. The wood felt warm to the touch. She smiled as she remembered the man who had used it for so many years.

She knew the history and provenance of the desk by heart: It had been made by skilled craftsmen in the late 1800’s, in the style of George II. The desk was a stunning piece, made of mahogany, with elaborate scrollwork, and unparalleled ornate marquetry of burr walnut and satinwood. The craftsmanship was second to none. The top had a beautifully carved edge with a hand dyed red leather writing surface, framed all around with gold tool. It had an elaborate arched knee-hole with majestic lions carved on either side and matching carved lions standing proudly at each corner of the desk.

Lions had long been a hallmark of the Chandler family. According to family legend, they had been a part of the family crest since the days of William the Conqueror, a symbol to remind them of their proud heritage and the noble virtues their family stood for, namely: leadership, integrity, honor, strength, loyalty, and courage.



*Daddy always treasured this desk, Catherine recalled. She knew the story well: It was one of a kind, specially commissioned by her great grandfather, Charles Frederick Chandler. He had passed it to her grandfather, Matthew James Chandler when he had passed the bar exam. For years it had graced his office as he served as a Federal Judge in Connecticut. Charles had received it as a gift from his father when *he* passed the bar exam. And being an only child, Catherine had always known that one day, it would be passed down to her.*

She picked up the letter opener, now laying on the desk, and smiled at a long-ago memory.



“Cathy... where are you?” she heard her father call, his voice tinged with worry.

Crawling out from under his large mahogany desk, she hid both hands behind her back.

Charles could tell immediately that she had been up to something.

“Cathy? What are you hiding behind your back?”

She slowly produced a gold-plated letter opener that she had found on his desk, and held it out to him.

He took it from her outstretched hand. “And just what were you doing with this?”

Even at the tender age of five, Catherine Rose Chandler knew better than to lie. But she was reticent to answer him.

“Cathy?” he prompted.

“I was drawing a picture,” she finally admitted.

“Can you show me?” he asked.

*She pointed under his desk where she often liked to play. When he looked under the desk, Charles discovered that his daughter had lovingly carved a stick figure of a man wearing a necktie, standing next to small stick figure girl into the wood of his antique mahogany desk. Underneath the picture she had carefully carved the words, *Cathy loves Daddy!**

“What have you done?!?” he asked in horror.

Unfazed by her father’s shock, she smiled and said, “I made it for you, Daddy.” Her face glowed with love for her father and the gift she had carefully created for him. “So you won’t miss me when I go to first grade.”

Then seeing the horror on his face, her smile slowly faded. “Did I do something bad, Daddy?” she asked with a quiver in her voice.

His anger quickly dissipated when Charles saw the look on his daughter’s face. He sat on the floor under the desk and leaned against it like a deflated balloon. Then taking his daughter in his arms he kissed the top of her head.

“No, Pumpkin, you didn’t do anything bad. Your picture is beautiful.”

“Really?” she asked, looking up hopefully.

“Really,” he gently confirmed. “But can you do me a favor?”

“What?”

“Next time you want to draw me a picture, can you please use paper?”

“Why?”

Charles took a deep breath and chose his words carefully. “Well, this is a very special desk, and if you did this to someone else’s desk, they might get really mad. They might even sue you.”

“What’s that?” she asked innocently.

“They might be mad and make you give them all of your money to get it fixed,” he explained.

Her eyes widened and her voice became serious. “Are you gonna sue me, Daddy?” she asked breathlessly.

Charles looked thoughtful and tilted his head to one side. “Do you have any money?” he asked, teasing her.

“Only my pony money,” she answered with a little concern. Her parents had declined her request of a pony for her birthday, so she had begun saving her own money, determined to buy one for herself.

“Your pony money,” he repeated, scratching his chin. “How much is that?”

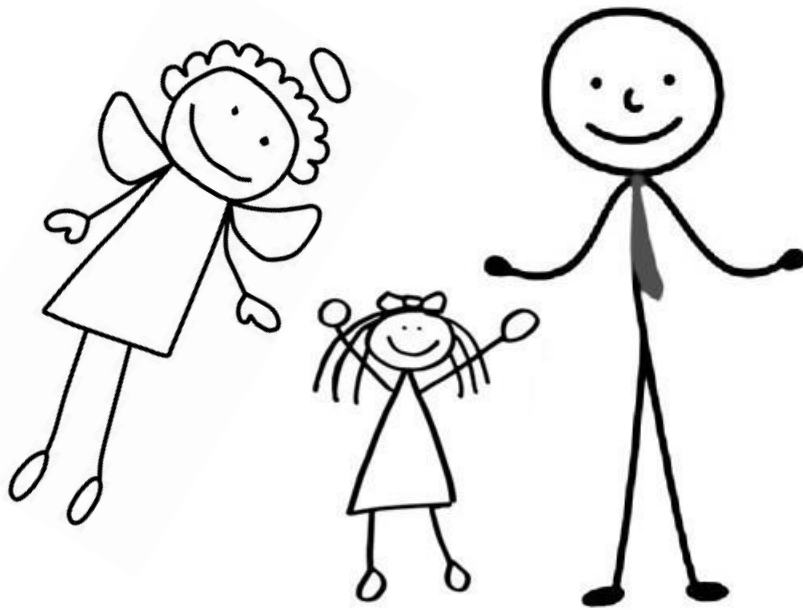
“Six dollars and fifty-two cents,” she answered with a concerned frown.

Charles tried to repress a smile, knowing it was important to impress upon her the seriousness of what she had done.

“How about this,” he offered. “If you promise **never ever** to carve pictures into this or any other desk, for the rest of your life, then I won’t sue you. How’s that?”

Catherine breathed a sigh of relief and threw her arms around her father’s neck. “I promise, Daddy! I’ll never ever draw a picture on your desk ever again!”

Five years later, not long after her mother’s death, Catherine had broken that promise and carved a stick figure of her angel mother watching over the two of them. Charles hadn’t caught her in the act but knowing she had broken her promise, Catherine left a tattered envelope on his desk that contained over two hundred dollars. It was clearly labeled in a childish hand, “*Cathy’s Pony Money*”



Cathy loves Daddy!

Charles had never had it repaired. He had come to treasure the reminder of his daughter's love for him. And every now and again he would joke that he should have sued her over it when she was five. It had become an affectionate private joke between them.



As soon as the boxes and packing supplies arrived, Catherine began removing her father's law books from the shelves and carefully packing them in boxes. She planned to add them to her father's extensive home library.

With each book, Catherine felt increasingly as if she was dismantling her father's dream. They represented all that her father had built over a lifetime. They stood for all that he had hoped to pass along to her. Waves of guilt began to wash over her. She put aside her task and walked over to the window behind her father's desk.

How Daddy loved to stand at the window and look out on the city, she recalled.

"I'm sorry, Daddy," she said aloud as she stood at the window, looking out on the city below. "I'm sorry I let you down. I wish I could go back and do some things differently."

"Is that the bargaining stage you spoke of?" Charles asked his wife.

Caroline nodded. "Yes, she's progressing through the stages quickly."

"Is that a good thing?" he asked.

"I believe it is. Sometimes people get stuck in one stage or another and never get through it. We *can't* let that happen to Cathy. She has to keep moving through, no matter how painful it becomes."

"Are you saying she isn't through the worst yet?" he asked, alarmed at the thought.

"No..." Caroline explained. She looked at her daughter, concern clearly written on her face. "The worst is yet to come. We have to stay near to guide her through it."

"Then that's what we'll do, together," he said,

Then turning to the window, he said, "You know, I used to love standing here looking out on the city," Charles said. "It made me feel so... so..." He searched for the right word.

"So powerful?" Caroline suggested. "So successful? So dominant? So imperial? So—"

“Okay... okay...” he said, trying not to laugh. “Yes... all of those things.” his smile faded. “But mostly it made me feel... safe.”

“Safe?” Caroline was intrigued by that choice of words.

He nodded. “Yes, it made me feel like... as long as we were up here nothing out there could touch us... or hurt us. I know it sounds silly, but I felt that way right up until the day that...” His voice faded.

“Until the day that Cathy got hurt.” Caroline said, finishing his sentence. “Until that day?”

“Yes,” he admitted. “Those days she was missing, I stood here looking out at the city, and all I felt was powerless, impotent, and weak. I looked around this office at all of my so-called treasures and I realized how meaningless... how worthless all of these things were... without *her*. You and Cathy were my only true treasures... the only things that were ever really worth having. I had already lost you... and I was so afraid that—”

A knock on the door brought them back to the present.

Catherine turned to see Joan, standing just inside the door.

“Miss Chandler,” she said.

“Yes, Joan?” Catherine answered.

“Mr. Coolidge and his son would like to meet with you in the conference room.”

“Both of them? I know I need to meet with Jay, but why would I need to meet with Mark?” she asked, clearly confused.

Joan looked a little uncomfortable. “Well... in light of your father’s uhm... death... Mark has been promoted to partner. Mr. Coolidge officially announced it yesterday morning.”

“He can’t do that!” Charles exclaimed angrily. “Not without *my* approval! And I would never approve of making that sniveling, overrated, brat a... *a dog catcher*... let alone a full partner!”

“Charles,” Caroline reminded him. “*You’re dead*... remember? You *can’t* give your approval for *anything*.”

“Oh... yes,” he answered sheepishly. “I keep forgetting.”

“They sure didn’t waste any time,” Charles remarked, a little put out at the idea of being so easily replaced. “Jay didn’t even wait until I was cold in my grave.”

Catherine only nodded at the news. *They sure didn’t waste any time*, she thought. Finding it somehow unsettling that her father had been so quickly

replaced, and by Mark Coolidge, no less. He's the least capable lawyer in the entire firm.

Catherine realized that she would be at a disadvantage in the conference room, even if Mark was a lightweight. *I know I'll still be outnumbered in here*, she acknowledged to herself. *But here in Dad's office, somehow it feels like he's still here with me.*

"Joan, would you please get Jay on the phone for me?" she requested.

"Yes, Miss Chandler," Joan said, as she turned to leave.

"And Joan?"

"Yes, Miss Chandler?" Joan answered.

"Would you *please* call me Cathy?" she requested. "You're a treasured member of the Chandler and Coolidge family. You used to help me with my homework when I was in middle school. I've always been Cathy and I *always will be.*"

"Thank you, Cathy..." Joan smiled and relaxed visibly. "... and I'm really sorry about your father."

Catherine nodded and tried to smile. Emotions were close to the surface. "Thank you for that, Joan. I am too."

After a few minutes, Joan's voice came over the intercom. "Jay Coolidge is on line three."

Picking up the phone and pressing the third button, Catherine spoke first. "Hi Jay, Joan tells me you would like to meet with me?"

"Yes... yes if that would be all right with you. I'm between meetings, at the moment, and could meet with you in the conference room in ten minutes or so."

He sounds nervous, Catherine observed. *Mark must have told him what happened earlier.*

"There are some legal matters that need to be resolved. The sooner the better, don't you agree?" Jay asked, without giving her a chance to respond. "Since you're here in the office, we could take care of it today."

"Yes, I understand, Jay," she replied, choosing her words carefully. "But today, I'm here to deal with my father's personal effects. If you insist on meeting with me, there's a perfectly good conference table here in Dad's office. If it's all the same to you, I would prefer to have the meeting here."

"Uhm... yes... I suppose that would be fine," Jay acquiesced. "We'll be there in just a few minutes."

“That’s my girl!” Charles said. “Make them meet you on *your* turf. I taught her well, didn’t I, Caroline?”

“She’s a chip off the old block, My Darling,” Caroline replied smiling.

Chapter 7

Catherine sat at the head of the table, the position her father always took. After her earlier encounter with Mark, she wanted to make sure they both knew she was the one in control of the meeting.

She invited Mark to sit, but he opted to stand. Taking a position behind his father, he stood imperiously looking over them both. It was clear he trying to show that he, and not his father, was in control.

“What is Mark doing?” Charles asked. “Does he realize he looks like an idiot standing there like that?”

“Your father and I drafted this after you left the firm,” Jay explained. “He wanted... uh... well, we both wanted to protect your option to return.”

“I knew she wasn’t coming back.” Charles explained to his wife. “But I wanted to make sure she had leverage, in case anything ever happened to me.

As Catherine examined the papers Jay had presented to her, Charles leaned over to get a closer look.

He leaned over Catherine’s shoulder to look at the proposal. “Wait a minute,” he said, squinting at the small print. “This is not what we agreed to.” He looked at his partner suspiciously. “Just what are you trying to pull here, Jay?” he asked accusingly.

As Catherine scrutinized the paperwork, she realized that she was in no state of mind to make any important decisions. “It’s not a decision I’m prepared to make right now.” Catherine said without looking up.

“That’s my girl,” Charles touted proudly. “She knows something isn’t right.”

“Of course,” Jay said nervously.

“Whatever you decide, though, doesn’t affect your entitlement,” Mark said smugly. “Basically, you’re due continuing and uncollected fees, but only on those cases in which Charles was *actively* involved.”

“What did you say?” Charles asked angrily. “I’m the majority owner of this firm. Cathy is owed continuing and uncollected fees on every single account we currently have, and any accounts going forward, since she now owns 60% of this business!”

“Rather than a prolonged payment schedule,” Jay explained. “Mark and I discussed the possibility of offering you a lump sum settlement.”

“You’re going along with this, Jay?” Charles demanded in disbelief. “I thought you were my friend! I thought I could trust you!”

“I thought he was a friend too,” Caroline said, clearly disappointed.

“The fact is...” Mark said condescendingly. “Your father’s participation has been pretty limited over the past few years.”

“What?!?!” Charles yelled. “I built this firm from nothing before you were even born, you little weasel! I’ve put my blood, sweat, and tears into this law firm for the last thirty-five years, you snot-nosed, overrated, upstart!”

“Mark!” Jay said in an attempt to reign in his errant son.

“I’m just being honest, Dad,” Mark responded, defensively.

Ignoring his son, Jay continued “We’ve come up with a range of figures which I think are quite substantial. But it’s certainly open to discussion.”

Charles looked closer at the range of figures Jay was referring to. “You’ve got to be kidding,” Charles said in disgust. “It had better be up for discussion! These figures are an utter insult. Do you seriously think Cathy is dumb enough to fall for this?”

Turning to his wife, Charles said, “I actually feel sick. Is that even possible since I’m dead?” He shook his head and sighed. “I always thought of Jay as a friend. Can you stab someone in the back when they’re already dead? Because that’s what this feels like.”

Then turning to Catherine, he whispered in her ear, “Don’t sign anything today, Cathy. You need time to look over these with a fine-tooth comb.”

“That’s fine, Jay.” Catherine said, ignoring Mark. She shook her head. “Right now, I’m not feeling very open to discussion.”

Jay did a poor job of hiding his disappointment. Without another word, he collected his things and left abruptly.

Mark lingered a moment longer. He seemed to be trying to think of something to say. *A parting insult perhaps?* Catherine would never know. Finding it difficult to even make eye contact with her, Mark finally turned and followed his father in silence.

Catherine was relieved when they finally left. *Something isn’t right, I just can’t put my finger on it,* she thought as she chewed her bottom lip. *One thing I do know is that I’m in no state of mind right now to be signing anything.*

Putting the papers in her briefcase, Catherine picked up a stack of newspapers and spread them across her father's desk.

Sitting behind the desk, she looked around. A faint hint of Charles' favorite aftershave lingered on his chair and in the room. It felt almost as if he had just stepped out of the office for a moment. *Maybe if I just sit here and close my eyes for a minute, he'll come walking in, she thought. And I'll realize this was all just a bad...* Catherine shook her head, bringing herself back to reality. *Don't be stupid. He's not coming back... he's never... coming back.*

She had work to do and decided to get to it. She reached for a treasured picture of her mother. It had been taken about a year before Caroline's death and had held a place of honor on Charles' desk ever since. As Catherine gazed at her mother's smiling face, mingled with her own reflection in the glass, she sighed, recalling how many times her father had told her how much she reminded him of her.



Gently stroking the image with her thumb, she whispered. "I miss you, Mother. Have you and Dad found each other again? I hope you have."

Charles looked at Caroline and smiled. "Yes, we have, Cathy."

Catherine laid the picture down gently, and lovingly wrapped it in newspaper. A wave of sadness washed over her. *This is so hard*, she realized. *I'm dismantling my father's life with each thing I pack away. It's like I'm erasing all of his dreams.*

A knock on the office door broke the spell. Catherine looked up at the sound to see her old friend enter the room.

"Marilyn!" she exclaimed as she rushed into Marilyn's open arms.

Marilyn had been Charles' assistant since Catherine's earliest memory. She had also been a dear friend of her mother's. Catherine remembered how it was Marilyn who had taken her to buy her first bra, and had explained some very personal facts of life to her. What could have been a difficult and embarrassing situation with her father, had turned to a treasured friendship.

"Marilyn!" Caroline exclaimed at the sight of her friend.

Catherine greeted Marilyn with a hug and kissed her. Then standing back from one another, Marilyn held Catherine by the shoulders.

"How are you?" Marilyn asked.

"I'm all right." Catherine lied, trying to muster a smile.

"No, she isn't," Charles and Caroline said at the same time.

Marilyn looked at her doubtfully.

"*Really*," Catherine insisted unconvincingly. "How about you?"

Marilyn sighed and shook her head. "I'm not sure yet. It's hard to imagine this place without him."

"Jay and Mark certainly don't have that problem," Charles noted, still miffed.

"I know." Catherine took Marilyn's hands in hers. "Mark doesn't seem to have the same problem," Catherine stated.

"Mark... is a very young man," Marilyn stated, trying to be gracious. "He has his own ideas."

"He sure does!" Charles said in disgust. "Ideas about moving into my office! Well, he better keep his sticky fingers off my desk, or I'll haunt him until he's too terrified to set one dirty foot in here!"

"He said that Daddy hadn't been very active in the practice lately." Catherine told Marilyn, repeating Mark's insensitive dig.

"That's nonsense!" Marilyn scoffed, dismissing any such notion.

“You don’t need to lie for me, Marilyn,” Charles said. “That particular detail happens to be the truth.”

Catherine wasn’t convinced. “Marilyn, come on, you can be honest with me,” she pressed.

Marilyn finally acquiesced. “Cathy, even when you were here, your father was letting go of some of the responsibility.”

Catherine nodded as she digested the news. “So that I could take over,” she suggested, knowing it was true.

“I suppose,” Marilyn admitted.

Catherine’s lips trembled as her eyes filled with tears. “And, when I left...”

Charles was quick to reply. “When you left you made me realize that there was more to life than what happens between the walls of this office,” he said. “You had to follow your own path, Cathy. I’m sorry I never told you that.”

Marilyn sighed. “When you left, I think your father’s priorities changed. But he respected your decision, Cathy. I think your honesty helped him realize that corporate law wasn’t everything.”

Charles laughed. “Heaven knows, Marilyn has been telling me that for years!”

“I’d been trying to do that for twenty-five years,” Marilyn echoed. “He *lived*. He took time for the things that he loved: travel, the theater, old friends, *you*. You *really were* his world.”

At Marilyn’s kind words, Catherine could no longer control the emotions that had been close to the surface all morning. Marilyn held out her arms and let Catherine cry on her shoulder as long as she needed to.

“I’m sorry, Marilyn,” Catherine said, coming up for air. “I didn’t mean to fall apart like that.”

“Oh, Cathy, don’t be sorry,” Marilyn insisted, her voice filled with compassion. “You’ve had a hard week, *the worst*, and you’ve been so strong.” Marilyn looked around the room at all that still needed to be packed away. “Why don’t you go home and try to get some rest, and *I’ll* finish packing these things.”

“Oh, Marilyn... I couldn’t ask you to—”

“You *aren’t* asking... *I’m offering*. And I *won’t* take no for an answer,” Marilyn insisted. “After all we’ve been through together this is one last thing I can do for Charles, as well as for you. I’ll have everything packed up and delivered to wherever you want.”

Catherine nodded reluctantly. But she had to admit, if only to herself, that she was relieved to have the burden lifted from her shoulders. “But what about the furniture?” she asked. “Daddy’s desk and everything else?”

“Everything in this office, including the furniture, belonged to your father, NOT to this law firm. And I’ll make sure Mark Coolidge doesn’t lay one sticky little finger on any of it! I don’t care if you give it to Goodwill or light a bonfire with it, as long as Mark doesn’t get it.”

Charles laughed. “I could always count on Marilyn!”

“She’s still as dear as she always was,” Caroline agreed. “I’ve missed her too.”

Catherine smiled through her tears. “Thank you.” She hugged her dear friend again. “Would you please have the desk and all of the boxes delivered to the house? I’ll give you the key.”

“And the rest?”

“I think I would like to have it placed in storage, for now. I’ll decide what to do with it later.”

Catherine walked over to the desk and picked up the picture of her mother. She couldn’t bear the thought of packing it in a box, so she slipped it into her leather briefcase. Looking over the desk, she picked up the letter opener and her father’s wooden name plate and wedged them into her briefcase as well.

“What’s she doing?” Charles asked.

“She’s picking a few things.... to keep close,” Caroline explained, “things that represent us. She’s trying to keep us close.”

As Catherine picked up her briefcase she turned once again to her friend.

“Marilyn, may I ask one more favor of you?”

“Anything, Dear.”

“Would it be possible for you to get me copies of the firm’s financials for the past few years or so? I want to know as much as I can before I sign any of these papers Jay has given me.”

“That’s no trouble at all, Cathy.” Smiling, Marilyn walked over to Charles’ desk and pulled a key out of her pocket. Unlocking the bottom drawer, she handed Catherine a large yellow envelope. “Your father has kept this in his desk ever since you left the firm. He said to give this to you if anything ever happened to him. He said you would know what to do with it.”

“We made a great team, didn’t we, Marilyn?” Charles asked. “I’m sure going to miss you.”

“She was always a loyal friend,” Caroline said. “And she did a wonderful job keeping an eye on the two of you for me.”

They followed Catherine as she left the office.

As Catherine walked to the elevator, there were no stares from her former coworkers. Everyone was too busy with the business of the day. It was strange to her how normal it all seemed, when Catherine wasn't sure if anything would ever feel normal again.



Leaning against the backseat of the cab Catherine couldn't remember a time when she had felt so physically and emotionally exhausted. She closed her eyes for a moment and breathed deeply, attempting to regain some sense of control over herself.

As the taxi moved at a snail's pace in the late morning traffic, Catherine looked up to see a man who looked exactly like her father, sitting in the backseat of the taxi moving toward her in the oncoming traffic. Her heart seemed to stop at the sight of him. She couldn't believe her eyes. *Maybe this really has been a terrible dream*, she thought desperately. As the taxi came closer, she realized she was mistaken. It was *not* him. It was just a distinguished looking middle-aged stranger.

Catherine looked away, a little frightened that she was beginning to hallucinate. *What's wrong with me?* she wondered. *Pull yourself together! I must be more exhausted than I realized. I just need to rest.*

Charles and Caroline were sitting in the taxi on either side of their daughter. He was concerned for her and the strain she was under.

“What just happened, Caroline?” he asked, concerned by the reaction his daughter had just had at the sight of a stranger.

“A part of her is still looking for *you*, Charles. Her heart and her mind haven't fully accepted what's happened... that you're really gone, and she'll never see you again.”

“Is that normal? Is she all right?”

“Yes, it is normal... but she's far from all right.” Caroline replied. “Acceptance is the *last* step in the grieving process. She won't reach that for a while yet... and she won't be all right until she does.”

“What is the next step?” he asked.

“Well, if she continues progressing this quickly, it will be depression... and I believe it will begin soon.”



Back in her apartment, Catherine changed into more comfortable clothes. She had no intention of going out again despite the fact that her cupboards were bare. She hadn't felt much like eating for days anyway.

The briefcase with the legal documents Jay Coolidge had given her to sign was lying on top of her table. *I should look at them*, she mused. But she was too tired to move. She just wanted to curl up on her couch and not think about anything for a while.

“I'm worried, Caroline,” Charles said as he watched her from the couch across from their daughter. “She doesn't look good. She doesn't look good at all.”

Caroline shook her head. “I agree, dear,” she replied. “She's beginning to sink into depression.”

“That's good then... right?” he asked hopefully. “You did say it's the next stage.”

“I *did* say that... but it's the most critical and dangerous stage. We have to be vigilant and stay close.”

Catherine had just begun to doze when there was a knock on the door.

Looking through the peep hole, she was pleasantly surprised.

“Cathy,” Joe said, as she opened the door.

“Joe!” Cathy greeted him warmly and opened the door wider.

Jeeze! She looks terrible, Joe thought. He stood there and cleared his throat nervously. “Hi!” he said, trying to think of what to say next. “I took an early lunch. Thought I'd stop by and see how you're doing.” *And by the way you look... you're not so good*, he noted inwardly.

“Oh. Come in,” she said, opening the door even wider.

Joe walked in and looked around the room, clearly impressed by her fancy uptown digs.

“Who is this?” Charles asked.

“This is Joe Maxwell, Cathy's boss,” Caroline explained.

Charles scrutinized the man who stood before him. “Is that *all* he is?” he asked curiously.

Caroline smiled. “He’s a friend. I’m sure if Cathy gave him any encouragement it would probably be more.”

“That’s what I thought,” Charles replied. “But she’s never been interested, I take it?”

Caroline shook her head. “No... she was already in love with Vincent when she met Joe... even if she didn’t know it yet.”

Charles looked at him sympathetically. “Poor guy, he never had a chance, did he?”

“You want something to drink?” Catherine offered, wondering why she felt so awkward. *It’s Joe for Heaven’s sake*, she told herself. *Why does he feel like a stranger?*

“No. No thanks, I’m fine,” Joe said, not wanting to impose on her, especially under the circumstances. *Good grief*, he thought. *Why am I acting like such an idiot?*

Catherine motioned toward her couches. “At least sit down.”

“Yeah, okay. For a minute,” Joe said. Accepting her gracious offer, Joe sat down on one of the smallest couches he had ever seen.

As they sat facing each other they struggled for something to say to fill the awkward silence.

“So,” Joe finally spoke. “How are you doing?” *Her father just died, you idiot. How do you think she’s doing?* he asked, inwardly berating himself.

“Better,” she lied.

Still grasping at straws, he said, “Escobar tells me you’re coming back to work tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Charles was surprised. “I don’t think you’re ready for that, Cathy.”

Catherine nodded. “I think the work will be good for me,” she said unconvincingly.

Joe looked at her disapprovingly.

Catherine shook her head and shrugged. “What else am I supposed to do?” *I can’t just sit here and wallow in this pain*, she thought rebelliously. *I have to keep busy, so I don’t have to think about it.*

“Tell her she can’t come back yet, Joe,” Charles pleaded. “Tell her she isn’t ready! Tell her she needs more time to—”

Leaving his seat, Joe approached the couch and sat next to Catherine. *I need to make her understand*, he thought, *but I need to tread lightly.*

“Look, Cathy,” he began, “I’m no psychiatrist, but experience teaches us things that books just can’t. When my father died... it... it goes a lot deeper than you think. It takes a long time to get your head straight, a lot longer than three days.”

“Exactly!” Charles added. “Listen to Joe, Honey. He knows what he’s talking about.”

Catherine knew Joe meant well. She even acknowledged to herself that he might be right. *But what else is there to do?* she asked herself. *I need to keep busy, so I won’t have to think about...*

“I don’t know,” she said with a heavy sigh. “I don’t know what I want to do. I just don’t know.”

After Joe left, Charles turned to his wife. “She doesn’t actually believe she can just go to work tomorrow and pretend that everything is normal... does she?”

“I don’t think she believes that,” Caroline sighed and looked toward the bedroom where her broken-hearted daughter was resting. “She just doesn’t know what to do with the pain.”

“What can we do to help her?” he asked, desperately hoping for an answer.

Caroline slipped into her husband’s arms, realizing that he needed help too. “We stay close, My Darling,” she said. “You’ll know how to help her, when the time is right.”

“You sound very sure of that,” he said, wishing he had a portion of her confidence.

Slipping into his arms, Caroline reached up and pushed back a stray lock of his hair. “I *am* confident. Trust me, Charles. You *will* know when the time is right.”

Chapter 8

True to her word, Catherine got up the next morning and dressed for work, despite the persistent physical and emotional fatigue that she couldn’t seem to shake. Her feet felt like blocks of cement as she dragged herself through her morning routine.

“I can’t believe she’s actually going back to work,” Charles lamented as he sat next to her in the taxi. “Just look at her, Caroline. She looks like she hasn’t slept in a week.”

“Well, she hasn’t... not much anyway,” Caroline agreed. “But she has to find her own way through this. All we can do is stay close.”

Stepping out of the taxi in front of the Criminal Courts Building, Catherine’s chest felt tight as a wave of panic washed over her. *It takes a long time to get your head straight, a lot longer than three days*, she heard Joe’s voice say. She took a deep breath. *What else am I supposed to do?* she asked herself.

When the elevator finally reached the eleventh floor, she walked slowly toward the District Attorney’s office. She froze as soon as she opened the door. She looked around to see that the office was buzzing with activity like every other morning at the office. Everyone was going about their business; phones were ringing, and people were rushing here and there. She could see Joe sitting in his office, up to his elbows in case files and depositions.

Everything was moving along as if nothing had changed... as if the world hadn’t shifted on its axis.

How is it possible that life is going on as before for everyone else, she wondered, *when my world is spinning out of control?* It was as if no one there could see the gaping hole in her, where her parents used to be. That’s when she realized, they couldn’t. No one here knew or even cared that she was sinking in quicksand of pain, or that she was drowning as waves of anguish washed over her too fast for her to catch her breath.

I can’t breathe... I need air... Catherine thought in a panic. She turned and ran to the elevator, pounding hard on the button. *C’mon, c’mon, c’mon*, she thought impatiently. Unable to wait any longer, she ran to the stairs as if the devil himself was chasing her.

“What’s happening to her?” Charles asked, as they entered the stairwell.

“It’s all crashing down on her, Charles,” Caroline explained. “She’s frantic with pain.”

“What can we do? What can we do?” he demanded.

“Just keep up with her...” Caroline instructed. “... no matter what. You take one side, and I’ll take the other. We must make sure she doesn’t come to any harm while she’s in this state. If it looks like she’s headed for danger... call her name, so she will turn the other way.”

“And she will be able to hear us?” he asked unsure of what was even possible.

“Sometimes people can hear... sometimes they can’t. We just have to try.”

When Catherine finally got outside, she was frantic. She leaned up against the wall and took in great gulps of air, as busy strangers walked by on their way to wherever it was, they needed to be.

Catherine looked around at all the people as they rushed past, and realized she was drifting, alone in the sea of humanity that bustled around her. *It's like I'm invisible... like I don't even exist*, she thought. *There is no one left who cares if I live or die.*

She began walking without knowing, or really caring, where she was going. She walked past The Tombs and headed in the direction of the Village. She walked to the East River.

“What’s she looking for, Caroline?” Charles asked as Catherine stood watching the cargo ships making their way up and down the river.

“She’s lost more than her father, Charles. When she lost you, she lost her anchor,” Caroline explained.

“Her anchor?” Charles asked. “I don’t understand.”

“Don’t you realize what you were to her?” Caroline asked. “You were the one thing in her life that has always been constant. You’re the foundation she built her life on. You were the one she knew would always be there when she needed you... and now...”

“I was?” he asked. “But we had drifted apart.”

“It didn’t matter, my darling. She may have drifted, but she was still tethered to you. Now she’s...” Worry was clear on Caroline’s face as she watched her daughter.

“Now she’s been set adrift.” He was beginning to understand. “Her foundation has been ripped out from under her,” he said, as Catherine turned and began walking again.

Shortly after noon, Charles called to her, “Look, Cathy! It’s the Empire State Building. Do you remember when we all went there?”

Catherine looked up and realized she was standing in front of the Empire State Building. A distant memory of being at the top with her parents came to mind.



Charles put a quarter into the coin operated binoculars and held Catherine up so she could try to find their neighborhood from that great height.

“I can see Central Park!” the young girl declared, laughing as the wind tousled her hair.

Afterward they ate hotdogs from the vendor on the corner. Her mother wiped mustard from her face.



I haven't thought of that in years, Catherine realized. But it's only a fading memory. There is nothing left of them here or anywhere else, she thought. I'm alone now.

She felt the need to keep moving, to keep searching for something, anything that would tether her to this world and keep her from drowning in the ocean of pain in which she now found herself. She walked along 34th street until she reached the Hudson River, searching desperately for something that connected her to the business of life swirling around her. She walked all day, but as the hours passed, she felt no fatigue or even the passage of time.

Eventually she found herself standing on the corner of West 59th Street and 5th Avenue.

The sun was low in the sky as Catherine approached the Pulitzer Fountain. It was a landmark she recognized immediately... after all, she had seen it nearly every day of her life. She looked up as she stood on the corner. To her right was the General Motors Building that housed the offices of Chandler & Coolidge. She looked up longingly, wanting desperately to run into the building, up to her father's office, and into his loving arms.

She shook her head. *He isn't there anymore*, she reminded herself. *His office is empty now. He's never coming back. He'll never hold you in his arms again. There's nothing for you up there anymore.*

The grief of that knowledge washed over her again. She felt as if she was being crushed under the weight of it.

She looked around desperately searching for something to hold onto. Just ahead was the southeast corner of Central Park.

“Go to Vincent, Cathy,” her mother prompted. “He's waiting for you. He **will** comfort you.”

Catherine looked toward the park. *Vincent!* she thought. She stifled a sob as she remembered there was someone who waited for her there. *I need Vincent!* It was all she could do to wait for the traffic light to change so she could cross the street and head in the direction of the familiar park entrance to his Tunnel home.

“Where are we going now?” Charles asked.

“She’s going to find comfort from the living,” Caroline answered. “She going to Vincent.”

“To Vincent? How does she know he’s in the park?” he asked, as they followed her across the street.

“Just keep up, Charles. I’ll explain later,” Caroline directed.

By the time Catherine entered the park she was almost running. She followed the footpath that ran along East Drive. As she exited Inscope Arch, the Wollman Ice Rink was to her left and the Central Park Zoo to her right. Both held a myriad of memories... good times with her parents as well as childhood friends. But they were all in the past. All those friends had moved on, and her parents were dead. *There is nothing left for me here*, she thought. She continued on, with her parents close behind. She was in a hurry... she cut across the grass and headed for the 65th Street footpath that led to the carousel. *I’m coming, Vincent*, she said to herself. *Please be there. I need you. Please be there.* By the time she crossed 65th Street she was running. Her coat and her hair flew behind her as she ran across Sheep’s Meadow and across the wooden bridge that led to the familiar culvert. She was frantic by the time she entered the drainage tunnel. “Please be here,” she whispered under her breath, as she made her way deeper into the tunnel’s darkness.

“Where are we going?” Charles demanded, wondering why in the world his daughter would be headed into the sewer.

“Just follow me, Charles,” Caroline instructed him. “It will soon make sense to you, I promise.”

As Catherine reached the end of the tunnel, Vincent was waiting with open arms. He had felt her turmoil all day and when she was close, he made sure to be there for her.

Catherine fell into Vincent’s arms, and he held her close.



Finally raising her head, she backed away from him and began pacing the dusty floor. “I had nowhere to go,” she said breathlessly. She looked toward the light at the end of the tunnel she had just entered, as if she were being pursued.

Vincent could hear the desperation in her voice. Her pain burned through him.

“You’re here now,” he whispered.

“I’ve been walking everywhere,” she explained, the desperation and pain clear in her voice. Still pacing, she continued, “Like I’m looking for something. I don’t know.”

She’s completely lost in her pain. How can I help her? he wondered. “Catherine, what you’re looking for is inside you,” he said, trying to guide her through it.

“I’m losing... myself,” she said, as she looked again down the tunnel she had just come from. The thought of returning back to her world was more than she could bear. *I don’t have the strength to live there anymore,* she realized. *How can I make him understand that?* she asked herself. “I can’t go back there,” she said desperately.

“Catherine...” Vincent whispered. Her pain was so overwhelming he could barely breathe. *How can I explain to her that I can't help her here? That it isn't safe for either of us for her to come Below.*

“There's *nothing* for me there,” she insisted. “I *tried*. That life isn't mine anymore.”

Vincent looked at her sympathetically. “Give yourself the time to mourn.”

“I need to be with *you*. I *need* you,” she implored. “*I need you!*”

How can I turn her away? he asked himself. How can I deny her the shelter... the comfort... she so desperately needs?

Vincent drew Catherine to him, holding her tight.

“Come,” he whispered. Then keeping her safely cocooned under one arm, he opened the gate and led her into the inner tunnels.

As he closed the portal, he paused a moment and picked up a stone. He quickly tapped the message, “Bringing Catherine down. Mary, please prepare the guest chamber.”

Chapter 9

Charles and Caroline stood alone in the now empty tunnel, staring at the closed entrance their daughter had just disappeared into.

Trying not to panic, Charles turned to his wife. “What is happening, Caroline? Where is he taking her?”

“He's taking her home... with him... where she can begin to heal.” Caroline said calmly.

Stunned by her lack of concern, Charles was becoming quickly agitated. “You say that as if it's perfectly normal for our daughter to be running around in the sewers of New York! Wait... *is this* normal? Is *this* part of the secret she's been keeping from me?”

Unruffled by her husband's apparent panic attack, Caroline replied. “Would you like to see for yourself, Charles? Would you like to see the life your daughter is choosing?”

“How can we? They're gone... and the door is closed.”

“Trust me, my darling, being a ghost does have some advantages,” she replied, holding out her hand.

Taking her hand, together they stepped through the threshold beneath the park.

Safely on the other side, Caroline explained, “This isn’t a sewer. It’s an access tunnel. Miles and miles of these tunnels crisscross the entire city. Sewer pipes do run through some of them, but there are pipes for many other things too: electrical lines, phone lines, abandoned pneumatic mailing tubes, and much more.”

“And Vincent... *lives* here?” Charles asked.

“He lives farther down. It’s a secret place, where he is safe from the dangers he would surely face out there... in the city.”

“Shouldn’t we try to catch up with them?” he asked, still concerned about Catherine’s welfare.

“Cathy is in good hands now. We don’t need to be quite as close.”

“How is it that you know so much about this place?” Charles wanted to know.

“Remember, I told you that I was given a job as a helper and a guide for lost souls, because I refused to leave you?”

“Yes.”

“Well, this is one of the hidden places in the city that I have guided some of those people to. It’s a place where many people come to heal from the wounds they’ve received out there in the world.”

“And you discovered Vincent here?”

“Yes.”

“He’s different than the others.”

“That’s obvious.”

“I’m not speaking of his appearance. Vincent is more sensitive... empathic, I suppose. He could sense me... sometimes he could even hear my voice.”

“The night he found Cathy bleeding in the park... it was me who led him to her.”

“And he saved her life?”

“Yes... I was desperate. I led him to her. He found her and brought her here, and his father tended to her wounds.”

“His father?” This information shocked Charles. “Are you saying there are more... *like him*? Down here beneath the city?”

“No.” Caroline smiled and shook her head. “Vincent is unique... one of a kind, it seems. But the people who live here are family to each other.”

Caroline could have taken Charles the short way to the home Tunnels, they were spirits after all, they could have just passed through the ancient bedrock that served as the foundation for the city above. But Caroline wanted him to see the world Below as Catherine saw it.

She enjoyed the look of wonder on his face as they descended the spiral staircase. As they wound their way through the cement pipes, the bricked tunnels, and into the deeper rough rock walled tunnels. He was surprised to see sconces on the wall to light their way to the home Tunnels.



As Vincent and Catherine reached the guest chamber, Mary was nearly finished preparing the room.

Mary didn't hesitate to take Catherine into her arms. "Welcome Catherine, dear." Then taking Catherine's face in her hands, she looked deeply into her eyes. "Oh, Catherine, I'm so sorry for your loss."

Catherine breathed a sigh of relief at Mary's warm welcome. *Finally*, she thought. *Someone who sees me*. Instantly she knew she had come to the right place.

"Thank you, Mary," she said. "You have no idea how much that means to me."

"You're among people who care, I hope you know that," Mary assured her. "Now you get settled in. I'm going to the kitchen to get you a tray. You look as if you haven't eaten in ages."

Catherine looked around the room to see that it was fully furnished. Two matching armchairs and a small round table made a cozy reading nook near the chamber entrance. A queen size bed, with a cedar chest at the foot, was covered with a homespun quilt and fluffy pillows just waiting for her. Rugs covered every inch of the floor and hung on the walls, making it feel warm and inviting. Homemade candles were lit, illuminating every corner of the chamber.

Returning quickly with a tray of food, Mary explained, "Now, I've put fresh linens and blankets on the bed for you, dear." Then turning to the dresser, she opened the top drawer. "There are fresh night clothes for you in here. If you need anything else, we will work that out in the morning. You look like you could use a good night's rest."

After Mary left, Catherine sat on the bed looking up at Vincent as he stood in front of her. She wasn't sure what to say next.

"So sudden a loss," he said. "You had no time to prepare"

Catherine nodded. “The pain... it goes through me and then subsides.”

Yes, he thought. *It goes through me also. But I must not burden her with that.* “I can feel it in you,” he said.

“I know you can,” she said. *I’m sorry, Vincent, she thought. I don’t want to cause you pain. But I don’t know how to make it stop.*

“It’s late,” Vincent said. “You should sleep.”

“I am... tired,” she agreed. *I can’t actually remember when I last slept through the night.*

Vincent stepped a little closer to her. “You’re sure you’ll be all right?”

“I’m sure,” she said, nodding. *I finally feel safe.*

The air itself seemed filled with electricity. A voice inside told him, *You need to go. It isn’t safe.* It took all of Vincent’s strength to tear himself away. Finally, he turned to go.

“Vincent!” Catherine called him back, wanting nothing more than for him to hold her in his arms and make the pain disappear.

Vincent turned back at her behest, knowing that whatever she might ask of him, he would give... despite his fears. *How can I deny her? he asked himself... when she is in such pain.*

The need was written clearly on her face, but Catherine couldn’t bring herself to say the words, *just hold me.* She could feel his love for her, but she could also clearly see the fear in his eyes.

Finally turning from him, she released her hold. “Goodnight,” she said simply.

“Goodnight,” he echoed, relieved to be free of her pull.

Yet as he walked the tunnel to his own chamber he was filled with guilt. He knew the pain she was feeling and how much she needed comfort at this terrible time, and at the same time, he knew he could not give her what she needed. *It’s too dangerous,* he concluded.

As Catherine gazed after him, she felt ashamed of her weakness, and wondered if she was asking too much of Vincent by taking refuge in the Tunnels.

She quietly prepared for bed and snuffed out most of the candles in the room, before climbing into bed.

Chapter 10

Vincent slept restlessly. The fears he was able to suppress during his waking hours often played out in his dreams. Past experience and his recurring nightmares warned him that there were some things he could never have, some lines he must never cross, no matter how much he dreamed of a life without limits. *That's all they can ever be*, he often reminded himself, *dreams*.

Breathing heavily, Vincent sat upright as a woman's blood curdling scream pierced his nightmare, waking him with its terror. The terror increased as he looked at his hands, now dripping with blood. He closed his eyes tight against the terrifying vision.

When he opened them again, his hands were clean, the vision was gone. He released a heavy sigh of relief that the nightmare was over, and began pacing the dimly lit chamber, in an effort to drive memories of it from him.

Finally calm, Vincent sat at his writing desk and opened his journal, knowing that sleep had fled.

It was only a short time before he looked up to see Father standing in the entrance of his chamber, concern clear on his face.

Father approached his son "How's Catherine?" He was worried that her presence in the Tunnels was dangerous for Vincent, as well as for everyone else.

Vincent looked up, knowing instinctively what Father was thinking, "Sleeping," he answered simply.

Father approached Vincent. He placed his hand on his son's arm. "Vincent, I know how difficult this is for you," he said, attempting to broach his concerns and show his support at the same time.

Vincent nodded. "To have her so close."

"Yes," Father replied, sitting next to him. "How long will she be staying?" he asked tentatively.

"As long as she needs," Vincent answered, his voice filled with compassion for the woman he loved.

"I see," was all Father could think of to say.

He didn't need to say anything more. Vincent knew Jacob's fears because they closely mirrored his own.

"Catherine knows how much her presence here affects me," Vincent assured.

"Does she?" Father wasn't so sure. "What have you told her?"

“Nothing,” Vincent responded.

“Perhaps you should,” Father suggested, hoping that the knowledge of Vincent’s past struggles would convince her to leave, if only for her own safety.

“What should I tell her that won’t frighten her?” Vincent demanded. “She’s already in enough pain.” *I will not burden her with my demons as well*, he inwardly promised.

Father found it difficult to express to Vincent how much he feared for the well-being of his extraordinary son. “Before... there was the safety of distance between you. But now—”

“She comes here in grief,” Vincent reminded him. “Whatever she needs, whatever sacrifice I must make, I will make... to be there for Catherine,” he insisted.

Father sighed. He knew how deeply Vincent loved her, but he was also painfully aware of the delicate balance that Vincent was. He feared what might happen if that balance was lost. “Vincent, I’m afraid for you,” he finally said, “... afraid for *both* of you.”

“Father—”

“I fear,” Father interjected. “... that whether Catherine stays or leaves, it’s going to cause you both deep sorrow.”

Father reached to cover Vincent’s hand with his own, silently giving him his support. *I must be here for my son*, he pledged to himself, *whatever happens*.



Caroline and Charles eventually found their way to Catherine’s chamber and made themselves comfortable in the two armchairs near the chamber entrance. As the hours passed, they could see that Catherine was restless.

“She isn’t sleeping well at all,” Charles observed. “She should be exhausted after all the walking she did today.”

“Yes,” Caroline agreed.

“Where is Vincent?” he asked. “I thought she came here so that he could comfort her.”

“He’s near,” Caroline said. “Trust me he knows what she needs, more than anyone else.”

“What makes you think that?” Charles was clearly dubious.

“They have a connection... something I don’t fully understand... but Vincent can feel what she is feeling,” she tried to explain. “That’s why he was waiting there in the tunnel under the park. He could feel her need, and he knew she was coming to him.”

Charles was silent as he processed this new information. “So...” he began. “... you’re telling me they are joined in some spiritual or psychic way? As if they are...”

“Soul mates?” she suggested.

As morning drew near, Catherine finally stopped tossing and turning and fell into a deep sleep.

It wasn’t long before Vincent entered the room quietly. He placed clean clothing on top of the cedar chest and relit the candles, so Catherine wouldn’t be frightened if she woke in the dark. As he left, he picked up the tray that Mary had left for her, noting that it was untouched. It was only a short time before he returned with a delicate china tea service and left it on her nightstand.

“Sleep well, Catherine,” he whispered.

Chapter 11

Catherine woke early, a little disoriented. Turning over in bed, she looked around and smiled as she realized where she was. As she surveyed the room, she saw that someone had already been there, leaving a lovely china tea service on her nightstand. They had also taken the time to relight the candles in her room.

Geoffrey timidly entered the guest chamber carrying a kettle. “Good morning,” he said tentatively.

“Good morning, Geoffrey,” Catherine answered, smiling at the shy boy.

“Who is this?” Charles asked.

“That’s Geoffrey, one of the Tunnel children,” Caroline said, as if she knew him well.

Approaching the bed where Catherine lay, Geoffrey told her, “Vincent wanted me to ask you if you needed anything... do you need anything?”

“You mean there are more? Why are children living down here? Shouldn’t he be in school?”

“Listen and learn, dear,” was Caroline’s patient reply.

“Maybe some hot water?” Catherine said, lifting the lid of the tea set.

“Where is Vincent?” she asked as the boy carefully poured the water.

“He’s down in the lower Tunnels... working on the new chambers,” Geoffrey informed her. “He said if you need him that I should go get him.”

“No, no, I’m fine,” Catherine said quickly. *The last thing I want to do is disrupt the normal rhythm of things. It’s enough to just be here with people who care about me,* she thought.

Having finished his errand, Geoffrey continued to stand in front of her, as if he wanted to say something.

“What is it?” Catherine prompted him.

“I’m sorry about your father,” he said sadly.

Catherine felt something squeeze her heart at his sweet gesture. “Me too,” she replied.

“Do you miss him?” he asked, unaware that he was treading where few adults would have the courage to go.

“Very much,” Catherine answered.

“I never knew my parents,” Geoffrey confided. “But I miss ‘em anyway. Do you still have a mother?” he asked, hoping that she did.

Catherine shook her head and smiled sadly. “She died when I was ten. When I was *your* age,” she said, realizing despite his maturity, Geoffrey was still very young.

The boy smiled a little. “I guess that makes you an orphan too.”

“I guess so,” she said with a sad smile, sorry that Geoffrey knew firsthand what she was going through.

“It’s okay,” he said, compassionately.

They smiled at each other realizing that there was a bond of understanding through their shared experience.

As Geoffrey left the chamber, Charles turned to his wife. “How do children end up living down here? Doesn’t anyone miss them? Shouldn’t they be in the care of the authorities?”

“Some of the children here are born here, and live here with their parents,” Caroline explained. “But most of them are orphans, like Geoffrey. He *was* in the hands of the authorities. He was abused and neglected by those authorities. He is one of the ‘lost souls’ I was telling you about... the ones I helped guide here.

Believe me, he is loved here... all the children are. And they are well educated. You'll see."



After a refreshing cup of tea, Catherine rose and discovered that someone had left fresh tunnel clothing for her. She was grateful to have clean clothes and appreciated the gentle thoughtfulness of whoever it was.

She ventured out of her chamber and down the shadowy tunnels. From time-to-time familiar Tunnel friends would wave or timidly smile at her. For the most part they left her to herself, which she appreciated.

"She seems better already, doesn't she?" Charles asked

"Yes, she does," Caroline replied. "This is exactly where she needs to be..."

"Who are these strange people who seem to know her?" He asked, intrigued by not only the people, but their singular mode of dress.

"They are friends who care for her and understand what she's going through," Caroline answered.

Catherine's wanderings eventually led them to the wooden bridge in the Whispering Gallery. She stood there for a time, listening to the sounds of her world as they filtered down to her from above. As she listened to the waking world above her, she only felt emptiness. It was a world she no longer felt a part of.

"What is this place?" Charles asked as he looked around in awe. "Where do those voices come from?"

"They call this the Whispering Gallery." Caroline smiled. "Those are the sounds of the city that filter down here, carried on the wind."

"And what's down there?" he asked, as he looked into the darkness below him.

"They call that 'the Abyss.' Be careful, dear, you know what they say about the Abyss, don't you?"

"... if thou gaze long into an Abyss, the Abyss will also gaze into thee,⁴" he quoted with a laugh. "I promise, I'll be careful, dear."

Further meandering eventually led Catherine to the Chamber of the Falls. It was one of her favorite places... one of the few places in the Tunnel world where the sunlight filtered through in abundance. Water from Above also found its way

⁴ Quote by Nietzsche

through the large fissures in the ancient bedrock of Manhattan Schist and Fordham Gneiss to fall into the underground river that flowed far below her. The crudely handmade sheepskin coat that had been left for her, kept out the late winter chill.

Catherine recalled spending several lovely Saturday afternoons here, as Vincent read to her in the misty light, serenaded by the music of the nameless falls.

Sitting on an outcropping of rock, she closed her eyes. The peace of the place filled her as she breathed deeply of the crisp morning air that swirled around her.

Charles too, was affected by the place. He stood in awe at the magnificence of the view before him.

Opening her eyes, Catherine looked up to discover Vincent, leaning against the wall watching her. Her heart skipped a beat at the unexpected sight of the man she loved.

“How long have you been standing there?” she asked with a smile.

Vincent couldn't help but smile in return. “I only just arrived,” he whispered. “You looked so peaceful... I didn't want to disturb you.”

Vincent lowered himself to sit beside her. They looked into each other's eyes and for a moment, the sweetness of their love was a healing balm to both.

As they watched the falls, it was Catherine who finally broke the silence. “You know, my most intense memory of him is an imagined one...” she said.

“Your father?” Vincent asked. “Tell me.”

“After mother died... when they had taken her away... I went into their room. A chair was pulled up close to the bed...” She looked at the waterfall and sighed. Then turning back to Vincent, she continued. “I imagine *him* sitting there, resting his head beside her on the pillow, as they said their last goodbyes.”

“Oh, Charles,” Caroline sighed. “Did you know about that?”

He shook his head. “No... she never spoke of it. But then we never really spoke a lot about your death. I suppose it was just too difficult for both of us.”

Catherine looked away again, overwhelmed by the loss of them. In that moment she realized she had never told anyone about that before. Not even Jen or Nancy. *Will I ever be able to think of them without feeling this terrible pain?* she wondered.

Sensing Catherine's heartache, Vincent attempted to change the subject.

“Was the guest chamber comfortable?” he asked. “Did you sleep well?”

“I hardly slept at all,” she admitted with a shake of her head.

I hope my nightmares were not the cause her restless sleep, he silently hoped.

“I suppose I did sleep an hour or so,” she added. “... I didn’t see who lit the candles in my chamber and leave these clothes for me.”

“Geoffrey said you were awake very early,” he said, not wanting her to suspect that he was the one who had been in her chamber as she slept.

“He was very sweet,” Catherine said, remembering anew the boy’s kind condolences.

“And Mary said she saw you in the passage near the Whispering Gallery,” Vincent added.

Cathy smiled at him warmly. “They’re watching me for you, aren’t they?”

“Not just for me,” he answered. “You’re part of all of us now. People are concerned...”

Yes, she realized, they are concerned... because they know my pain. They see me, and they understand.

“I spent the entire morning by myself... and somehow, I didn’t feel alone.” Now she knew why.

Charles and Caroline looked at each other. “She wasn’t alone,” Charles said.

“We’ve been with her the whole time.”

“You’re not alone, here,” Vincent assured Catherine.

“It’s strange,” she said looking up at him.

He studied her expression, unsure what she meant. “What?” he asked.

“Being here... makes me realize what I’ve been missing all along. The chance to be with you.” she explained.

“I wasn’t sure if this time would ever come,” she continued. “... if I would ever be so certain... but you know it’s always been a dream.”

Vincent looked down, afraid to believe what she was trying to say. Afraid to acknowledge the impossible dream that he knew could never be.

“For both of us,” he finally admitted in a barely audible whisper.

“*I want to stay,*” she insisted, in case she hadn’t been clear enough.

Sighing heavily, Vincent shook his head. “Catherine –” he began, attempting to refuse her impossible wish.

“*You know me, Vincent,*” Catherine interrupted. “*You know* what I’m feeling. I want to live in your world. I don’t want to go back.”

Vincent’s eyes were a storm of conflicting emotions... as he was utterly overwhelmed by her sincerity and her love. Despite himself, he realized he was losing the fears that had guided him for so long and responding to the deepest dream of his heart.

“I don’t want you to go back,” he finally admitted against his better judgement.



Charles lingered at the falls as Vincent and Catherine walked away hand in hand.

“Charles?” Caroline asked. “Do you want to follow them?”

“She seems to be in good hands,” he said thoughtfully.

“What are you thinking, Dear?” Caroline probed.

Staring at the falls as the sunlight filtered through the mist, he whispered, “This place is... astounding. I can understand why she wants to stay. Do you think she really will?”

“I don’t know,” Caroline answered. “But if it makes her happy, does it really matter?”

Charles put his arm around his wife and drew her close. “Yesterday, I would have said ‘yes’ ... to think of my daughter living in a hole in the ground beneath the city like a mole person.” He sighed. “But this place is a haven. I can feel such peace here. And if she had told me about Vincent when I was... alive, I’m sure I would have...” His voice trailed off.

“You would have had a stroke?” Caroline suggested.

Charles laughed and nodded. “Yes, I’m certain that is exactly what I would have done. But I’ve never seen her so completely in love. And he worships the ground she walks on. What they have is...” His voice trailed off again.

“What Charles... what is it that they have?” she asked.

He looked lovingly into her eyes. “It’s the kind of love that only happens once in a lifetime... and that’s only if you’re *very* lucky. We were two of the lucky ones, Sweet Caroline.”

She smiled and nodded. “Yes, my love, *we were,*” she whispered.

“How could we wish for less for our daughter?” he asked.

Chapter 12

As the days passed, Catherine found herself feeling more and more comfortable with Vincent's family. Not wanting to be a burden, she insisted that she be included in the day-to-day duties that they all shared. Since she wasn't sleeping well, she began helping William in the kitchen before breakfast. Mary began teaching her how to sew. Even Father enlisted her help to organize the stacks of books that were piled around the library chamber. Catherine was grateful to be busy during her waking hours. The work took her mind off the grief and regrets that plagued her in the quiet hours of the night.

"I'm worried about her," Caroline said one afternoon as they watched her working in the community library.

Taking his eyes away from the incredible collection of books that Father had accumulated over the years, Charles asked, "You're worried? Why? She seems to be doing better every day."

"She's busier every day, Charles, *not better*," Caroline replied, correcting him. "There's a difference. She's using work to avoid dealing with her grief."

"How can you tell?"

"Because she still isn't sleeping well. She even calls out for you in her sleep." Caroline looked at her daughter as she organized the books. "If she's not progressing, Charles, she may become stuck at this step, and she will never get over your loss," Caroline explained. "She needs to keep moving through it."

"What can we do about it?" Charles asked.

"I'm not sure," she said. "Until I am, we must stay close, and continue watching over her."



"I forgot how great it feels to do physical work," Catherine said to William one afternoon, while helping a group of Tunnel denizens bring a load of food from a downtown food market.

"Hmph!" William huffed at her enthusiasm. "Ten years and a hundred pounds ago, maybe!"

Just then, Geoffrey snagged an apple out of the crate William was carrying.

"Hey!" William protested.

"I'll start cutting up the stuff for the soup, okay?" Geoffrey said, before running off with the pilfered apple.

William's face turned almost as red as the apples he was carrying. "Get back here!" he bellowed. "We're not done with this yet!" But it was too late, the boy was already out of sight.

Catherine smiled as she watched Geoffrey disappear around a bend in the tunnel ahead of them. Her smile suddenly faded, as she caught a glimpse of her father carrying one of the crates. She stopped walking and stood, frozen in wonder. Her sudden hesitation caused a traffic jam in the tunnel behind her.

"Hey, what's the hold up?" someone yelled from behind.

"Catherine?" William asked. "You okay? You look like you just saw a ghost. Is your crate too heavy?"

Catherine looked up at William but didn't speak. Then looking ahead again, she realized that it wasn't her father after all. It was just a white-haired, older Tunnel dweller.

"I'm sorry," she muttered. Embarrassed and befuddled at the same time, she resumed walking.



That evening Charles and Caroline sat across from each other in a shadowy corner of the Dining Chamber, watching the organized chaos of the community.

"She saw me this afternoon, Caroline," Charles insisted. "I'm sure of it."

Caroline shook her head. "I'm sure you're mistaken, Charles. People can't see the dead when they're fully awake. It just *doesn't* happen."

"I know she saw me at the funeral. And you told me, Vincent has heard you... sensed you," Charles reminded her.

"That's different," she explained. "He's more sensitive than most people, and even *he* can't see me." She looked at her daughter across the room. "So, I doubt that Cathy..." Her voice trailed off as she realized that Catherine was looking straight at them.

Seeing the expression on his wife's face change, he turned to see what had drawn her attention.



As Vincent and Catherine sat together eating dinner, Vincent watched Catherine pick at her food and push it around her plate. He had felt her emotions ebb and

flow for several days as the waves of grief washed over her and then receded. He had hoped she was moving through the sadness, but as he observed her, he knew that wasn't the case.

"How was your day, Catherine?" he asked, hoping to draw her out of her malaise.

Only half hearing him, she looked up. "Hmmm?" she asked.

"Mary was wondering if you might be able to help her in the nursery tomorrow morning after breakfast," he informed her.

Looking in Mary's direction, Catherine smiled at the idea of spending time with the Tunnel matron. Her smile quickly faded when she spotted her father sitting at a small table at the far end of the room chatting with someone who was hidden in the shadows.

Charles suddenly stopped chatting and turned to look at Catherine.

I can't believe it, she thought. There he is again. It really is him.

"Catherine?" Vincent asked, concerned by the pallor of her face. "Are you ill?"

Catherine was beyond hearing. She stood and walked across the dining chamber until she was in front of the table where she was convinced her father was sitting.

Catching up with her, Vincent touched her arm.

She looked up at Vincent, her eyes filled with wonder. "Look!" she said, pointing to the table. Then realizing there was no one there, Catherine suddenly felt very foolish. She looked around as she realized that the general chatter in the room had gone silent and everyone was staring at her.

Just as she was beginning to think she would die of embarrassment, Mouse jumped up and stood before her.

"Not hungry, Catherine? Not gonna finish dinner?"

"Uhm... no, Mouse. I... I'm not hungry," she managed to say.

"Can Mouse have it... for Arthur?" The young man asked, rubbing his hands together. "Arthur loves roasted potatoes and gravy..." Then tilting his head to one side, he said, "Well... Arthur loves everything."

People around them laughed at Mouse's candor, and the chatter in the room resumed as everyone seemed to lose interest.

"What's so funny?" Mouse asked innocently.

Catherine tried to smile. "Yes, Mouse," she answered kindly. "Of course, you may have it."

“Okay good, okay fine. Thanks, Catherine!” Mouse said excitedly as he hurried to retrieve her deserted meal.

Although inwardly Vincent was concerned for Catherine, he offered her his arm as if nothing had occurred.

Smiling gratefully, Catherine put her arm in his as he escorted her from the chamber, and away from scrutiny.

“Would you like me to read to you this evening?” he asked, as they walked away from the dining chamber. “Or we could go to the Mirror Pool and watch the stars.”

Looking up at him, Catherine smiled wanly. “Star gazing sounds lovely, but I’m sorry, Vincent, tonight I... I’m very tired,” she said, not being entirely truthful. “I haven’t been sleeping well. I think I’ll just go to bed early. Would it be all right if we do it another night?”

“You’re not sleeping well? Is your bed uncomfortable? Is your chamber too cold? If it is, I can—”

“No... no,” she said, interrupting him. “My chamber is... *perfect*. I couldn’t ask for anything more. Everyone has been so kind.”

“If there is anything I can do,” he said, his voice full of love. “Please, tell me.”

“Vincent,” Catherine said, placing her hand over his heart. “You’re doing more than you know... *really*. I’d just prefer to call it an early night.”

“Very well,” Vincent nodded. “But if you need anything... *anything at all*, I will be in my chamber. Sleep well, Catherine.”

Catherine watched him go, then entering her chamber, she prepared for bed. Despite her exhaustion, sleep was elusive. She kept recalling the places she had seen her father since his death: the funeral, the taxi, the tunnel that afternoon, and now the dining chamber. Not to mention the time she thought she felt him kiss her cheek. Questions plagued her. *What’s the matter with me?* she wondered. *Is it normal to have hallucinations of the dead? Or am I losing my grip?*

After some time, she finally fell into a restless slumber.



Charles and Caroline followed Vincent and Catherine at a distance as they left the dining hall.

“Do you believe me now?” he asked his wife.

“I don’t understand it,” she said, thoroughly confused. “I’ve never seen that happen. The only time you could ever see me was...”

“Was when? Caroline... please! You’re the expert here. This is all new to me.”

Caroline thought for a moment. “After my death... I discovered that there was a short window of time when you were somewhere between sleep and wakefulness when you could see me, and I could talk to you.”

Charles thought back for a moment to those difficult days, weeks and years, after he lost his wife. “There was one time, I remember vividly. I nodded off at my desk, and I dreamed you came to me, and we talked. I think Cathy was at a party with her friends.”

Caroline smiled. “Yes... it was Halloween. You were so worried that you weren’t doing a good job raising her.”

“Yes.” Charles said. “Are you saying that it wasn’t a dream ... that it was real?”

“It was *both*,” she said, only confusing him more. “It was a dream, *and* it was real. It’s something that I was warned not to do. But I missed you both so much, that I...”

“You broke the rules?” he suggested.

She looked at him sheepishly. “Mostly I... *bent* the rules. But yes, I did break a few rules over the years.” She sighed. “Actually... more than a few. But I don’t understand what’s happening between you and Cathy now. You aren’t bending *or* breaking any rules and yet she still sees you... when she’s fully conscious. Even the times you saw me... it was because *I wanted* you to see me?”

As they arrived at the entrance to Catherine’s chamber, they heard Vincent’s voice.

“Sleep well, Catherine” he said softly.

It was only a moment before he passed them as he walked to his own chamber.

“If he can feel what she’s feeling, Caroline, then why doesn’t he stay and comfort her?” Charles asked.

“I’m sure Vincent has his reasons,” Caroline answered.

Vincent stopped short and turned back thinking he heard someone say his name. He walked slowly back to the chamber entrance, stopping just in front of Charles and Caroline.

Caroline brought a finger to her lips, instructing Charles to be quiet.

“Who’s there?” Vincent said to the shadows. “Who said my name?” When he received no answer but the tapping on the pipes and the distant sound of the subway above him, he surmised that he must have imagined it, and turned to leave.

Charles didn’t speak until he was sure Vincent was gone. “You were right, he *can* hear you.”

“Yes, we must be careful,” she instructed.

“But we still don’t know why Catherine can see *me*,” Charles reminded Caroline.

She nodded. “I know there are some people who can’t leave because they have unfinished business.” She sighed, and continued, “And sometimes people are prevented from moving on because their loved ones can’t get over their grief. Perhaps this is a case in which both things are happening,” she speculated.

“I know Cathy is still in pain. Her grief is definitely keeping you close... but what about you, Charles? Do *you* have unfinished business with *her*?”

Charles thought for a moment. “The envelope!” he exclaimed. “Could that be it?”

“Envelope?” Caroline asked. “What envelope?”

“The envelope that Marilyn gave her the day she went to my office to pack up my things! I made Marilyn promise to give it to Cathy in case anything ever... you know... happened to me. We saw her give it to Cathy, but I’m sure I haven’t seen it since.”

“What’s in that envelope that could be so important?” Caroline asked.

Charles sighed. “The company financial statements, business contracts and... and a letter.”

“And this letter... is it important?”

Charles nodded. “There are things... things that I said in the letter... things I wanted to say... things I *should* have said to her in person. The night Cathy brought Vincent to the hospital, she was able to tell me things... make things right between us... before I died.” Shaking his head, he continued, “But *I couldn’t* do that, Caroline. It was too late for me.”

“And you believe that the letter in that envelope could do that?” Caroline asked.

Charles nodded again. “Yes.”

“All right then,” she said with determination. “Where is this envelope now? Do you know?”

Charles thought for a moment. “The last time I saw it, she was putting it into her briefcase.”

“She never took it out,” Caroline said, thinking out loud. “She grabbed her briefcase off the table the morning she went back to work... and she still had it with her when she came down to the Tunnels. So, it must be *here* somewhere.”

“What are you thinking?” Charles asked her.

Caroline smiled. “I’m going to remind her... *encourage her*... to open the envelope.”

“How are you going to do that without making contact?” he asked, remembering what she had told him.

“I’m going to bend the rules,” she said simply.

Charles looked astonished.

“Just a little, Charles... sometimes it’s necessary, and I believe *this* is one of those times,” she insisted. “... for *both* of you.”

He followed her as she entered Catherine’s chamber. Most of the candles had been snuffed out, so he sat in the armchair, to watch his wife from the shadows.

Caroline sat on the side of Catherine’s bed as her daughter tossed and turned in her sleep. When Catherine turned toward her, Caroline reached out and stroked the hair on Catherine’s forehead. It seemed to calm her.

“Cathy, Honey?” she said. “I need to tell you something. Can you hear me?”

“Mmmmm,” Catherine responded.

“Marilyn gave you an envelope from your father’s desk... do you remember?”

“Mmmm, hmmm,” Catherine responded.

“Your father left something for you... something he wants you to see. It’s still in your briefcase. You need to open it. Can you do that, Honey?”

Catherine nodded in her sleep.

Caroline stroked her daughter’s cheek. “I love you, Sweetheart,” she whispered.

Catherine smiled. “Love you too, Mom,” she mumbled and turned away.

Caroline sighed, and returned to Charles, sitting in the armchair next to his.

“What now?” Charles asked.

“Now, we wait.”

It was only a few minutes before Catherine sat up in bed, frustrated that she once again awake. *What's wrong with me?* she asked herself. *I've never been so tired. Why can't I sleep? I'm afraid I'm losing my mind.*

Then she heard the echo of a dream. *Your father left something for you... something he wants you to see... it's still in your briefcase... it's still in your briefcase...*

"In my briefcase," she repeated out loud. "What's in my briefcase?"

Catherine went to the cedar chest at the end of the bed and stood in front of it. Shortly after her arrival Below she had stowed her purse with her identification, her briefcase, and her topsider clothing there. They were things that were only necessary in her life Above, reminders of a life she'd left behind, a life she didn't want to be reminded of.

The words came to her mind again. *Your Father left something for you... it's still in your briefcase.*

Slowly she lifted the lid of the chest and stood staring at the things she had brought from her world. The faint smell of her favorite perfume reminded her of the life she'd left behind. She grabbed the briefcase and quickly shut the lid of the cedar chest. Then sitting on the bed, she stared at it, seemingly afraid to open it. The few candles that were still lit at the side of the bed cast ghostly shadows around the room.

What am I afraid of? she asked inwardly. *This is ridiculous. Just look!* Finally, she opened the briefcase, and immediately saw the large yellow envelope that Marilyn had given her. "*Your father has kept this in his desk ever since you left the firm,*" she had said. "*He said to give this to you if anything ever happened to him. He said you would know what to do with it.*"

Removing the envelope from the satchel, Catherine couldn't believe she had forgotten all about it. She opened it and removed a sheaf of documents with an envelope paper- clipped to the front. *Catherine Rose Chandler* was written across the front in her father's hand.

"Daddy," she whispered as she stroked the name written in his hand.

Her hands shook as she opened it and read by the dim light of her bedside candles.

Dear Cathy,

If you are reading this letter, I am already gone. I left Marilyn instructions to give this envelope to you if I ever became incapacitated or in the event of my death.

You will find enclosed, the most current quarterly financial statements for Chandler & Coolidge. You're going to need them.

I've also enclosed contracts that Jay and I had drawn up to protect your option to return to the firm, if that is your wish. However, in the event that you choose not to return, I've also provided you with contracts for the sale of your 60% share of the firm to Jay.

The terms of these contracts are non-negotiable, Cathy. Do not let Jay tell you otherwise. This offer is firm! Because Jay has been a trusted friend and colleague for so long, I made this offer very generous for him. Do not accept anything less than I have stipulated here.

I hope you know, Cathy, how much I love you, and how proud I am of you. If I didn't tell you that before my death, I hope you can forgive me.

It's true that I was disappointed when you left Chandler & Coolidge, but I realize now what courage it took for you to do so, to strike out on your own, and follow your own path. What you have overcome in the last two years has shown me how strong you truly are.

I don't want you to spend one minute feeling guilty about selling my share in the company, Sweetheart. Don't get me wrong, Chandler & Coolidge was my dream, a dream I spent a lifetime building. But now that I'm gone, I don't need it anymore. I don't expect you to carry on in my place, or to keep it as some kind of memorial to honor my memory. I want you to use the money to make your dreams come true. This is the only gift I have left to give you.

I hope you know that your mother and you are, and always have been, my best, my grandest dream. And like your mother, above all else, I want for you to have a happy life. Please remember that even though I'm gone, I will love you for always. . .

. . . even after all your hair has been loved off and your eyes drop out.

*Always, your loving father,
Charles W. Chandler*

Catherine could barely read the last words of the letter through her tears. She began to put the sheaf of papers back into the envelope when she realized there was something else inside. Reaching in, she pulled out a shabby envelope that was brittle and yellowed with age. Turning it over in her hand, she gasped when she saw the childish writing on the front that said,

“Cathys Pony Money”

With shaking hands, she opened the envelope and discovered a stack of small bills with a note that read...

<p style="text-align: center;">Bill of Sale</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Date <u>September 16, 1968</u></p> <p>I the undersigned seller <u>Charles W. Chandler</u></p> <p>for the sum of \$ <u>232.75</u></p> <p>have sold to the undersigned buyer <u>Catherine Rose Chandler</u></p> <p>the following property: <u>1 Antique Mahogany Desk w/ Hand carved Lions and a Red Leather Top</u></p> <p style="text-align: center;">PAID IN FULL</p>
--

Printed at the bottom in large red letters were the words “PAID IN FULL”

“Daddy,” Catherine sobbed. “Daddy!” she called out. The tidal wave of emotions she had tried to suppress since Charles’ death came crashing over her. The pain, the love, and the deep sorrow was so overwhelming, she felt herself being swept away by it.

Railing against the pain, she picked up the briefcase and threw it across the room. She screamed in pain as she flung all the papers and contracts over the side of the

bed. Then sinking into the pillows and cushions at the head of the bed, she curled herself into a ball, heaving great sobs and weeping uncontrollably.

Both Charles and Caroline stood by watching in horror.

“What happened?” Charles asked in desperation. “This isn’t what I wanted. What can we do?”

“I’m sorry...” Caroline said. “I should have known! This is all my fault. Wait here with her, Charles. I’m going to get Vincent.”

“What should I do?” he asked desperately.

“Nothing!” she exclaimed. “Don’t do *anything!* Just watch her and make sure she doesn’t hurt herself... But DON’T speak to her, and DON’T touch her. I’ve already done enough harm!”

This is why we’re told not to interfere! This is why there are rules! Caroline thought as she berated herself.

She had only gone a short distance before Vincent rushed past her, headed for Catherine’s chamber.



After bidding Catherine good night Vincent headed to his chamber. He continued to worry about Catherine.

She came to me for comfort, he acknowledged to himself. *And I have kept a part of myself from her. My weakness and inability to help her shames me,* he thought. *I don’t know what to do.*

He tried to read, but every book, every poem, reminded him of the times he read them to Catherine. He knew she was sleeping restlessly. The grief of losing her father was with her every waking moment. *Even in her sleep, the sadness plagues her,* he realized.

Vincent finally put his book down in frustration. He paced the floor, wrestling with his desire to help the woman he loved, and the fear that kept them always apart. *She needs me,* he concluded. *And I need to find a way to give her what she needs.*

Finally sitting down, he began to write in his journal...

Our world sleeps and she is near. Strange and wonderful and sad, this feeling rising in me like a tide. To have all I ever dreamed of so close and yet to know that...

He sighed heavily, as he thought of the conflict that was his struggle, always.

All I know is that she is here and that I must live for her, surround her easily, guide her out of suffering. While she is here, I must live moment by moment for her.

Vincent looked up from his journal as he felt her awaken. It was only minutes before the pain exploded within him. It was beyond anything he had felt in her before.

She needs me, he realized... she needs me now!

Her pain was so all-consuming that he forgot every fear that had distanced him from her. Helping her through this anguish was his only concern as he ran through the otherwise quiet tunnels to be by her side, passing Caroline on the way. Before Vincent reached the entrance to the guest chamber, he could hear her shuddering sobs.

Entering the room, the sight of her in such pain drove away any remnant of the fear of being close to her.

He rushed to her side. Then sitting on the edge of the bed he took her in his arms and drew her close.



Catherine welcomed his embrace and buried her face in his chest and held onto him as if she would drown if he let go.

Feeling her desperate need, Vincent wrapped his arms even tighter around her.

“Just cry,” Vincent whispered as he enveloped her in his protective embrace. He felt the pain washing through her and over her. She sobbed in great gulps as if she were drowning in sorrow. The sound of the pain ripping her apart was so powerful it frightened him. *How could anyone suffer such pain and live*, he wondered.

As Caroline returned, she signaled for Charles to follow her out of the chamber.

“Why are we leaving her now?” he asked. “She needs us,” he insisted.

“No, Charles,” Caroline replied, shaking her head. “She doesn’t need *us*. She needs *him*.”

As soon as they reached the outer Tunnel, Caroline began pacing back and forth and muttering under her breath.

“What went wrong in there, Caroline?” Charles asked. “What happened to her?”

Caroline stopped for a moment and looked at him guiltily. "It's all my fault."

"What do you mean? How is this *your* fault?"

"I've been warned time and time again not to do that... not to interfere or make contact." Throwing her arms up in despair, she continued berating herself as she paced. "You would think after all these years, I might have learned. But I just can't seem to follow the rules."

"I don't understand these rules, Caroline. Why aren't we supposed to make contact?"

She stopped pacing and faced him. "Because... sometimes it backfires... like that!" she said, pointing to the entrance of Catherine's chamber, where her sobs could still be heard.

"Are you saying that... *this* has happened before?" Charles asked.

Caroline nodded. "Last year... on the anniversary of my death..." her voice trailed off as she recalled her failure. "I only wanted to give her a sweet memory... a dream of happy times... to get her through the day." She sighed, her spirit heavy with regret. "Instead, it... it..."

"... it sent her into a tailspin," Charles said, recalling the tears Catherine had shed on his shoulder. "You did that?" His voice was gentle.

Caroline looked up at him curiously. "You aren't angry?"

Charles gave her a sympathetic grin. "I know you, Sweet Caroline. What you did... was done out of love."

"It doesn't matter... it blew up in my face. I've only managed to cause her more pain."

Charles reached for her and took her in his arms. "It does matter, My Love. When you love... you love all the way. I know that... and Cathy knows that. You haven't caused her more pain... you just brought it to the surface."

Caroline stepped back from him so she could see his face. "What do you mean... I brought it to the surface?"

"After you died, I think Cathy was afraid to let me see her pain. She buried it deep within herself. Yes, there were a few times when she couldn't hide it, but most of the time she pretended that she was fine. I know that now. I think she was trying to be strong for me. That's a lot to ask of anyone, but she was only ten years old. Last year was the first time in all those years that she was able to let it all out. I was so relieved when she called me and cried on my shoulder."

"Do you really think it helped?" Caroline asked.

Charles nodded. “I *really* do. We had been growing apart for some time. But that brought us together again... at least for a little while.”

“And what about now... what I just caused?” she asked, looking toward Catherine’s chamber entrance. “The pain is tearing her apart. *I did that!*”

Charles looked in the direction of Catherine’s chamber. “I know it’s terrible to see her in such pain... but maybe *this* was necessary too. Maybe this will help her move forward.”

Caroline sighed and reached for his hand. “I hope you’re right, Charles. I hope you’re right.”



For hours Vincent held Catherine, safely in his arms. He gently stroked her hair, rubbed her back, and whispered comforting words, assuring her that he was there for her. Finally, the storm of grief passed, and Catherine fell asleep from sheer exhaustion in the safety and comfort of Vincent’s arms. He continued holding her for a long time, listening to her ragged breathing.



By Vickey Brickle-Mackey

It wasn't until her breathing finally became even and deep that he realized she was sleeping peacefully for the first time since her father's death. It was a relief, but he also realized how exhausted he was as well. *How I wish I could stay here and sleep with you in my arms*, he thought. *For your face to be the first thing I would see as I awaken in the morning*. Then realizing the danger in his train of thought... *I can't stay here*, he acknowledged to himself. *As much as I've dreamt of Catherine sleeping in my arms... it still isn't safe... for either of us*.

When Catherine rolled over in her sleep, Vincent carefully pulled his arm free. He tenderly brushed the hair away from her eyes. *She's even beautiful in her sleep*, he thought. He stood up slowly, and watched over her for a moment, making sure she was still asleep.

"Sleep well, Catherine," he whispered before returning to his chamber.

He exited the room, passing by Charles and Caroline in the outer tunnel. Caroline put one finger to her lips until he was well out of their range, before they re-entered the chamber and took their usual place in the armchairs.

"The crisis has passed. She's finally sleeping peacefully," Caroline whispered with relief..

"Mmmm," was Charles' only response.

"Do you remember how quiet the house used to get after she went to sleep?" she asked, smiling wistfully as she looked over at their daughter. "She was like a little tornado all day long, and then at night, she would sleep like a perfect angel."

When Charles didn't answer, she turned toward him. "What are you thinking, Charles?"

"You said there was a... a window of time between sleep and wakefulness when you used to come to me."

"Yes... but I—"

"I need to speak with Cathy. Do you think I could do that... when she begins to wake up?"

"What?" Caroline asked incredulously. "Did you see what just happened... what a mess I made?"

"But, Caroline, you told me that sometimes people... spirits... can't move on because they have unfinished business."

"Yes, I did... but—" Caroline was clearly hesitant.

“Caroline, *I* have unfinished business with our daughter. There are things I need to tell her... things I think would help her... and me... to move on. But I need your help.”

“But Charles...”

“*Please*, Caroline,” he begged. “Just this one time. I’m begging you... please show me what to do.”

Caroline was conflicted. *It’s one thing for me to break the rules*, she thought. *But teaching other people to break them is something else again*. Then looking at the expression of expectation... of desperation on Charles’ face, she couldn’t bring herself to say no.

“JUST ONE TIME... *right?*”

“One time... right,” he agreed, nodding vigorously and, and hoping she wouldn’t change her mind.

“And, Charles... you can’t stay long... three or four minutes at the most... and then you *have to leave*... promise me.”

“Scout’s Honor,” he said, holding up three fingers.

She couldn’t help but smile and shake her head. “You, Mr. Chandler... are incorrigible.”

Charles chuckled and then his expression became serious. “Have I ever told you how much I love you, Sweet Caroline?”

She closed her eyes, and let his words distill into her soul. A serene smile spread across her face. “Every day in a million different ways,” she said. “I love you too, My Darling.”

They heard Catherine begin to stir.

Charles looked at Caroline in panic. “Oh, no! Hurry and tell me what I’m supposed to do.”

Caroline stood up and bent over Charles. Kissing him on the cheek, she whispered in his ear. “You’ll know what to do, Charles. But remember... only a few minutes. I’ll wait for you outside.”

“You’re leaving me alone?” he asked, his eyes wide with fear.

“Trust me... you’ll know... what to do when the time is right,” she whispered.

“Check your jacket pocket,” she said before walking away inwardly praying that it wouldn’t backfire, and all would go well.

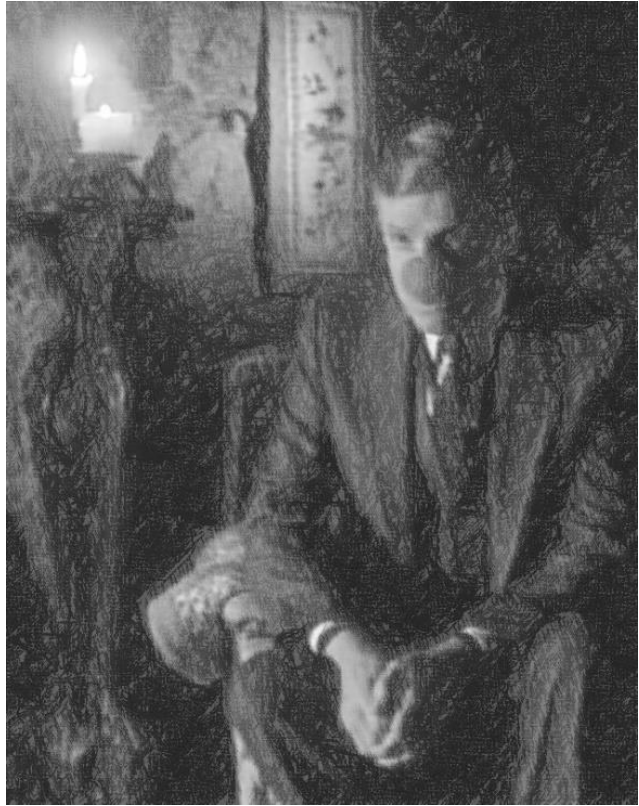
As Charles watched her disappear, he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled something out. “I can’t believe it,” he said to himself. “You are amazing, Caroline... absolutely amazing.”

Catherine stirred again.

“Vincent?” she called, reaching out for the comfort of his arms. Half awake, she sat up, realizing that he had left her there alone.

“Don’t laugh,” a deep voice said from somewhere in the room. “Don’t laugh! Don’t laugh... Don’t laugh...”

Catherine squinted and looked around. She was stunned to see her father sitting in an armchair, wearing a large red clown’s nose.



“*Daddy?*” she asked in disbelief.

Charles slowly removed the nose and grimaced. “Never worked much after you were thirteen anyway.”

Slowly she realized it really was him. She didn’t know how, but there was no doubt that her father was sitting there, it was just as plain as the red nose on his face.

“I have missed you *so much*,” she said, smiling sadly through her tears.

Charles sighed. “I’ve missed you too.”

“These last few days, I’ve felt your presence so strongly,” she told him.

Charles nodded. “I’ve been near. That’s what grief is,” he explained. “Soon, I’ll move farther away.”

“No...” Catherine pleaded.

“Don’t worry. It’s all right.” He assured her, wanting so desperately to comfort her. “It’s necessary. And I understand so much more about you now. What you have is a rare thing.”

“With Vincent?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“I wish I could have told you sooner,” she said, her voice filled with regret.

“You had to wait until I was old enough!” he said jokingly, hoping to make her smile.

“Did you understand?” Catherine asked, hoping that he had.

“I understood everything *he* said,” Charles assured her. “... and I understood everything *you* said,”

“I just wanted you to know how much I love him... and how much I love *you*.”

Charles nodded. “Your love made it easier for me to let go.”

“Do you think I’m doing the right thing?” she asked, desperately wanting his approval.

How can I tell her, he wondered, that I trust her to make her own choices and to choose her own path?

After a moment of consideration, he began, “Do you remember after we lost your mother?” Charles asked. “You always wanted to go into the park.”



Catherine nodded and smiled at the sweet memory. “I wanted to climb trees.”

“Almost every Saturday, and I used to watch you. And sometimes you would be *very* bold, and you would climb very high and then you would look down on me.”

“You were always *smiling*,” Catherine recalled.

“But I’ll tell you a secret,” Charles admitted. “Inside, my heart was pounding so much. I wanted to cry out two words, but I did not... *Don’t fall!*”

Catherine laughed through her tears.

That’s good, Charles thought. She needs to laugh again.

“I was so worried about you,” Charles continued. “and so proud of you at the same time.” He shook his head and smiled at the memory of those sweet and difficult days. “You wanted to climb trees... and *somehow* I knew *I had* to let you. I had to *trust* you. And never once did you go out so far that the branches

would break or stay up too long in the cold. Then, when you were ready, you *always* came back down.”

Looking down at his watch, he grimaced, remembering that he had promised Caroline he would only stay a few minutes. “And I’ve stayed too long,” he said as he stood to leave.

“Dad, please!” Catherine pleaded, not yet ready to say goodbye.

“I can’t,” Charles insisted. “Goodbye, Cathy.” *Please let my words bring her peace*, he silently prayed as he turned his back and walked out of the chamber. He knew he must exit quickly before he lost the will to leave.

“Dad?” Catherine called to him, but it was too late. He was gone, and something inside told Catherine that he was gone for good. Trying to stifle a cry, she lay back down.

Chapter 13

Catherine stirred in her sleep. Waking up she saw that the room was now dark. The candles had all burned down. She sat up and looked toward the armchair to see that it was now empty, and the candles in that that corner were dark as well. Only the candles in the outer tunnel still offered a little bit of light to the room.

Was it just a dream? she wondered. *If it was... it was like no dream I’ve ever had.* She saw her briefcase and its contents strewn about the floor.

Daddy, she thought with a sigh. *There’s something I need to take care of for you, isn’t there? But to do that, I need to go back.*

Swinging her legs over the side of the bed, she put her boots on. Still in her night clothes, she walked out of the guest chamber. The Tunnels were hushed and the quiet on the pipes told her that it was still early.

Charles and Caroline followed Catherine at a safe distance, knowing that it was no longer necessary to stay close.

“May I ask you a question?” Charles asked.

“What is it, Dear?”

“Why didn’t you stay with me... when I spoke with Cathy? I’m sure she would have loved to see you one more time.”

Caroline responded thoughtfully. “Yes... perhaps...”

Charles stopped walking, sensing a sorrow in his beloved. “What is it?”

As he looked at her, it appeared as if there were tears in her eyes. *Can a ghost cry?* he wondered. “Sweet Caroline?” he asked with concern.

“I’m sorry,” she said, dashing an errant tear away with the back of her hand. “I wanted to stay... *really* I did. But I couldn’t.”

“I don’t understand. Why not?”

“Because Cathy has already come to terms with losing me,” she explained. “It would only have opened those old wounds... for both of us. And *that* just wouldn’t do, *would it?*”

She tried to smile, but Charles understood. Taking her in his arms he kissed the top of her head. “And maybe some old wounds for you, Sweet Caroline?”

She nodded. Looking up at him she wondered how she had managed to be apart from him for so many years.

After a moment they began following Catherine again.

As Catherine walked, she felt something stirring within her. It felt as if her soul was emerging from a terrible, interminable darkness as she wandered through the deserted halls of Vincent’s tunnel home. She took a deep breath and realized that the oppressive cloud of pain and sorrow that had hung over her for weeks had finally lifted.

After some time, she found herself near the Central Park portal. She smiled and opened the gate.

Catherine stepped out of the tunnel. The sky was just beginning to lighten as the sun slowly rose over Manhattan. The birds were singing, announcing the arrival of a new day. She stood there for a long time looking up at the sky, basking in the morning sun. *Is it me?* she wondered, *or is the sky bluer than I remember?*

“It’s going to be a beautiful day,” Caroline observed.

“Indeed,” Charles agreed. “It looks like spring will be arriving a little early this year.”

Catherine breathed deeply again, drinking in the earthy scents of burgeoning spring. *I’ve always loved New York City in the Spring*, she recalled. *It will only be a short time before the ice cream vendors will be back in the park and the carousel in the park will be running.* Her spirit could feel her old life and the world Above calling her back.

For the first time in a week, she wondered how Joe was doing with all the cases he’d been buried the last time she’d seen him. *And Jen*, she thought. *I haven’t*

spoken to her since my father's funeral. She must be beside herself wondering where I've gone. Or maybe her dreams have already shown her.



At the same time Catherine's heart yearned to stay with the man she loved, and the people who had become a second family to her. *How can I tell Vincent I want to return Above when I begged him to let me stay with him Below?*

"What do you think she'll do, Caroline?" Charles asked as they watched her.

"I'm not sure, My Darling," Caroline said. "It doesn't really matter, as long as she's happy."

What am I going to do? Catherine wondered, knowing she needed to choose, and that either choice would cause pain, not only to herself but to others.

Hearing a distant car horn and the voices of early joggers in the park, she realized she couldn't stay there any longer. She took one more deep breath of fresh air and turned to go back to Vincent's world.



Still in her night clothes, Catherine continued to wander the Tunnels until she found herself again in the Chamber of the Falls. *A perfect place to think*, she realized as she sat on the ground and leaned her back against her favorite outcropping of stone.

She gasped as the angle of the morning sun shining through the mist created rainbows floating in the air. *This place only becomes more beautiful*, she thought... *the more I see of it*.

“It takes your breath away, doesn’t it?” She heard Vincent whisper in reverent awe.

Catherine’s heart skipped a beat as she turned to see him nearby, as if he had materialized from the mist.

“The rainbow mist is rare,” he said. “And very difficult to catch. You have to arrive here at just the right time. It only lasts for a few minutes,” he said, taking a seat on the rock and turning his attention to the natural phenomenon.

They sat together in silence, watching until the last of the rainbows finally faded away.

“What is it, Catherine? What are you thinking?” Vincent asked when the rainbow had disappeared.

Catherine turned away from watching the waterfall and looked up at him as he leaned on one arm on his stone perch.

“I spoke with my father this morning... after you left my chamber,” she explained, realizing how strange it sounded.

“Your father?” Vincent asked, trying to understand what she was telling him.

“You mean you saw him in your dreams?”

Catherine thought for a moment. “Maybe that’s what it was, but... but it *wasn’t* like a dream. *He was there*... talking to me,” she said with conviction.

“Giving you his blessing,” he suggested.

“Yes!” she said, smiling at the sweet memory of it. “He... he understood... about our secret. He understood... *everything*. I could feel his trust. Whatever I do now, it’s okay.”

“You found peace with him.” Vincent said, the storm that had raged within her was now calm. But he felt something else too.

Catherine nodded and smiled. “Yes.”

“But not yet with yourself,” he prompted. Along with that peace, Vincent could also feel a conflict within her. He suspected he knew what it was, but he also

knew that Catherine needed to make her own decisions without any influence from him.

“I’m... I’m not sure,” she said reluctantly. *How can I tell him that I must leave? she asked herself... when I want so desperately to stay here with him?*

“Don’t ever be afraid of the truth,” Vincent said, encouraging her to tell him what he already knew.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” she said with a furrowed brow. “I don’t *ever* want to disappoint you.”

“By returning Above?” Vincent asked.

I should have known that he already knew, she thought. She sighed. “I feel like I’ve failed,” she said sorrowfully.

Vincent looked at her, understanding the conflict within her. “Catherine...” he finally said. “Every moment that we share... is a triumph and a *gift*. And every one of those moments is a lifetime... *complete*. There is no failure. It doesn’t mean our dream can never be. It just means that now is not the right time. You came here to grieve and to begin to heal. But now, your destiny is to be in both worlds. You are a woman of *both* worlds. That is who you are.”

He wasn’t yet ready to explain to her that a part of him was relieved. Or that he still believed that they were both safer if they were not living in such close proximity to each other.

“But my heart is here,” Catherine insisted.

Vincent knew she was speaking the truth. “And my heart is with you,” he said. “Wherever you are, wherever you go, *you take me*. You stand for me. *For us*. For our dream. *You carry our light*. That, too, is your destiny.”

Yes, she thought, *what he says is true. But how will we ever be able to be together,* she wondered, *if I continue to live Above?* She looked to Vincent. “Do you think that someday... Will we *ever* be together?” she asked, hoping he knew the answer. “*Truly* together?”

Looking away, Vincent wondered how he could answer her question when he didn’t know the answer himself. He finally decided to speak of the obstacles they still had to overcome. Obstacles he wasn’t sure they ever would.

“Only if... and when... we understand how great the sacrifice and how large the fears and are able to move through them.”

Fears? She repeated inwardly. *What does he think I’m afraid of?*

Catherine reached up, gently touching his chin turning his face so she could look into his eyes. “I’m *not* scared,” she said, with conviction.

She believes that, he told himself. But there are times when I feel the fear so clearly within her... and yet I can also feel her love and how much she wants to be with me. But this is not a time to point that out. Right now, she needs me to give her hope.

Taking her hand from his chin, Vincent held it gently in his own and pressed it against his heart. *I know that Catherine will stay if I only ask.* He thought. *But I cannot tie her to my world of darkness when I know she needs the warmth of the sun to thrive.*

“Catherine, we are something that has *never* been, and our journey is one that *none* have ever taken,” he said, choosing his words carefully. “We are just now setting out. We must go with courage, and we *must* go with care.”

Catherine nodded, feeling the hope in Vincent’s words for both of them.

“Have you had breakfast?” he asked.

“No... not yet,” she said, her voice still somber.

He smiled. “Neither have I. Would you do me the honor of sharing one more meal with me before you leave?”

“I would love to,” she responded, with a smile. “But I’m in no rush to leave, Vincent. I promised Father I would help him sort the books in his library today, perhaps you could help me.”

“Spend the day surrounded by books?” he asked facetiously. “I believe I can make room in my schedule. But sorting Father’s books is a project that will take a lot more than one day, I’m afraid.”

Catherine smiled. “Well then... I suppose I’ll have to come back to work on it in my spare time until it’s finished... *that is...* if you don’t mind.”

Vincent stood and held out his hand to her. “You don’t need a reason to come here, Catherine. You’re always welcome. You’re one of us now.”



“Acceptance,” Charles said to himself, after Catherine and Vincent left.

“What did you say, dear?” Caroline asked.

Turning to her, he repeated. “Acceptance... it’s the last step in the grieving process. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “That’s what I said.”

“So that’s good, then... She’s reached that point,” he said thoughtfully.

“What’s wrong, Charles?” Caroline asked gently.

He closed his eyes and listened to the sound of the falls. “Do you remember when Cathy was little, and we would take her to the house in Connecticut?”

“Yes... those were sweet days,” Caroline said.

Charles smiled. “I remember when the wind would blow in the trees, and the night sounds would frighten her. So, I would take her out in the backyard, and teach her to dance to the music in the wind.”

“I remember,” Caroline said, smiling as she recalled how he taught their daughter to love the night sounds in the countryside. “You didn’t just teach Cathy to dance to the music in the wind, Charles... You taught her how to be brave. You taught her to face her fears.”

“I had a wonderful life, Caroline,” he said looking at her with unmitigated love. “You and Cathy made it that way.”

“It isn’t over, My Darling,” she replied, slipping easily into his arms. “You’ve only moved on to a new adventure.”

“What’s going to happen now?” he asked, wondering what kind of adventure she was speaking of.

Caroline laughed softly and shook her head. “I don’t know. I’ve been waiting for you all this time... so we could find out together.”



“Are you ready?” Vincent asked that evening as he entered the guest chamber.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Catherine was once again dressed in her Topsider clothing. They felt comfortable and strange at the same time. Her briefcase and her purse were sitting expectantly on the cedar chest, ready to return to the world Above.

Catherine had carefully folded the Tunnel clothing that had been provided for her and was holding the beribboned night dress in her lap.

Feeling Catherine’s inner turmoil, Vincent approached and sat beside her. He waited, knowing that she would speak when she was ready.

Gently stroking the soft fabric in her hand, she said, “This is lovely. Did Mary make it?”

“I believe she did,” Vincent answered. “Tell me,” he prompted.

“I never thanked her for sharing her clothes with me... I... I... should do something for her... to show her my appreciation.”

“Catherine, Mary gave you those clothes from the generosity of her heart. She didn’t expect anything in return. She knew you appreciated them. Is there something else?” he asked.

“I was just wondering... if ... if you could hold on to them for me...” she asked haltingly. “You know... so that one day... when I return...”

Vincent smiled softly. He realized that Catherine felt the need to have them here in his keeping, as a token that one day their dream would come true.

He placed his hand over hers and looked into her eyes. “I understand,” he said with a nod. “I will put them in a safe place for you. And whenever you need them, just let me know.”

She nodded. *Well, that’s it then*, she thought. *There’s no more putting this off.* She stood and handed him the clothes, put her purse over her shoulder, and picked up her briefcase.

They walked past his chamber to drop off the Tunnel clothing and then Vincent steered her through the hub so that she could say goodbye to her friends. Mouse seemed especially affected by her departure.

He stood in front of her, hanging his head. “Going away, Catherine? Going home?”

With a consoling hand on his shoulder, she spoke tenderly to the young man. “Yes, Mouse, I am going back Above... but *this* is home.”

He looked up at her sheepishly. “Come back some time?” he asked.

“How about a week from Saturday?” she replied.

Mouse’s face lit up and he smiled broadly. “OKAY GOOD! OKAY FINE! Week from Saturday? Promise?”

Catherine laughed. “I promise,” she said.

With that, Vincent took her hand and they walked away.

Charles and Caroline followed at a distance. They wanted to be sure Vincent would not hear them.

“I will miss this place and the time we’ve spent here,” Charles said as they walked. “It’s been a time of revelation.”

“It is a wonder, isn’t it?” Caroline said.

Vincent and Catherine meandered slowly and silently in the direction of the threshold beneath her apartment building. Neither was in a hurry to reach their destination or to face the inevitable parting that would occur there. And yet both knew that the parting was necessary, at least for now.

Eventually reaching the opening in the bricks that led back to her world, Catherine turned to face Vincent.

“I’m... I’m a little scared,” she said, surprised at the realization.

“I know,” Vincent replied, feeling the trepidation within her.

“Isn’t that strange?” she asked, wondering why she would be frightened to return to the world she had lived in her entire life.

“No,” Vincent answered simply. He suspected she feared the pain that had driven her Below might be waiting for her up there. At the same time, he felt her determination to face it.

With nothing more to say, Catherine reached out for Vincent and put her arms around him. His embrace gave her the strength she needed to face her fear.

Letting go, she smiled, and turned to go back to her world.

Vincent stood watching her disappear into the soft, dusty beam of light, when she stopped. *Has she forgotten something?* he wondered, as he watched her turn and walk toward him again. Before he could ask, she stepped close to him and kissed him tenderly on the lips.

“Thank you, Vincent,” she said, before turning and walking back into the dusty light that shone from the world above.

Vincent was frozen to the spot long after she had disappeared. He was stunned by her gesture. He had long dreamt of what it might be like for her lips to kiss his own. He closed his eyes and tried to seal the memory of her kiss in his mind. It was more than he had ever hoped, for Catherine’s lips to touch his so sweetly.

He had much to ponder, as he turned and made his way back to his Tunnel home.

“Catherine has returned to her life,” Charles said. “What does that mean for us?” he asked.

Caroline smiled. “I think you know as well as I do. Our time here is short. I suppose it means we must cherish each moment we have left. But Cathy has some of your unfinished business to take care of yet. I believe there is still a little time.”

“Will someone come for us?” he asked.

“Yes, someone will come,” she explained.

“Do you know who?”

“No.” She smiled sympathetically, realizing he was a little bit apprehensive. “It’s usually, one... maybe more, of the people who were the most important in your life. Who would *you* like it to be?”

Charles thought for a moment. “Other than you, My Love... my parents... or Matthew. Do you think it might be him?”

“Your brother?” she asked. “I suppose it could be. I know you always missed him so.”

“He was my older brother,” Charles said wistfully. “He was my hero... bigger than life for a fifteen-year-old boy. When he went off to war... it never occurred to me that he wouldn’t come home. I supposed I never really got over his death.” Charles nodded. “Yes... I would really love to see him again.”

Caroline smiled. “I’m sure you will. But for now... is there someplace you would like to go? We could take a walk in Central Park. We could walk down 5th Avenue. We could even go to the top of the Empire State Building. We can go anywhere you want.”

“*Anywhere* I want?” he asked.

“Anywhere,” she assured him.

“Can we go home?”

“Home?” Caroline asked, surprised by his request. “You mean... to the house... on East 61st Street?”

“Yes,” he confirmed.

I should have known, she thought. Smiling, she held out her hand, and led him into the light. “Why don’t we take a shortcut through the park?” she suggested.

“As long as I’m with you, Sweet Caroline, I don’t care how we get there.”

Chapter 14

Early the next morning Catherine stood once again staring up at the General Motors building at 767 Fifth Avenue. She was dressed smartly in a feminine white blouse and a flouncy, suede skirt. Fond memories of her father washed over her, but they were no longer tinged by pain.

“She looks good today,” Charles remarked.

“Yes, she’s got the bounce back in her step,” Caroline agreed. “She’s at peace.”

“Yes, that’s what it is,” he agreed as they followed Catherine into the building.

As Catherine entered the conference room, she noted that Jay was seated at the head of the table, and Mark was seated just to his right.

“Good Grief!” Charles exclaimed. “What is that upstart doing here?”

“Now, Charles,” Caroline said gently. “You must remember this isn’t your life anymore. Things change.”

Jay stood. “Welcome back, Cathy,” he said, reaching to shake her hand. “Why don’t you take a seat?” He motioned to the chair on his left.

“Thank you, Jay,” she answered, graciously accepting his hand.

“Mark,” she said, nodding at him as he sat in his chair looking as smug as usual.

Catherine put her briefcase down, removed two files, and put them down on the table in front of her. Taking her seat, she calmly folded her hands over them, knowing she had the attention of both males in the room. She didn’t speak, knowing it would force either Jay or Mark to do so.

“I take it, you’ve made a decision regarding the things we spoke about last time?” Jay asked, with a nervous grin.

“Look at him, Caroline. He’s already squirming,” Charles noted.

Catherine smiled at Jay, but didn’t reply, as she took her seat. She folded her hands on top of the files in front of her and considered how to begin.

“Com’on Cathy,” Mark said impatiently. “We don’t have all day.”

Catherine looked up at him. “If you have more pressing business, Mark, you’re welcome to leave. The business I have here is with Jay.”

Mark leaned forward. “You may not be aware of this, Cathy,” he said, his voice dripping with disdain. “But *I’m* a full partner now. *You* don’t even work here. So any business you have with my father, you have with *me*.”

Catherine sat up a little straighter and cleared her throat. “I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad news, Mark, but you most definitely are NOT a partner in this firm. To make partner at Chandler & Coolidge...” she flashed him a sympathetic grin. “... it has be approved by both *Chandler* **and** *Coolidge*.”

“You tell ’im, Cathy!” Charles said.

Chuckling derisively, Mark looked at her as if she was out of her mind. “And how’s that supposed to happen? Is your father coming back from the grave?” he mocked.

“Shut up, Mark!” Jay demanded.

“Oh dear,” Caroline said, “Jay is certainly on edge this morning isn’t he?”

“What, Dad?” Mark asked. “Can’t you see, she’s crazy?”

“What did he call her?” Charles asked, moving toward Mark threateningly.

“Charles,” Caroline said firmly, getting his attention. “There’s no need to upset yourself. Our daughter has this well in hand. Just observe,” she directed him.

“You’re welcome to stay, Mark,” Jay said, “But only if you can keep your mouth shut.”

Mark looked completely confused, but complied. He leaned back in his chair, rocking on it’s back two legs, and sulking, like a petulant child.

Jay could tell by Catherine’s demeanor that she was not the vulnerable, grieving daughter he had met with just over a week ago. He looked warily at the folders in front of her.

“Are those beads of sweat on Jay’s forehead?” Charles asked. “He’s nervous.”

Are those beads of sweat on Jay’s forehead? Cathy wondered, knowing she had the high ground.

“So, I’m assuming... uhm... since you’re here Cathy, that you’ve made a decision,” Jay said again.

Catherine nodded and slid one of the file folders toward him.

He smiled with satisfaction, as he opened the folder. The smile slowly faded as he looked through the papers. Then looking up at her, he said, “I don’t understand... you haven’t signed anything.”

“That’s right, Jay,” Catherine said with a nod. “There are a few things we need to clear up... *you know*... before I sign anything.”

“What exactly is it that isn’t clear?” he asked.

Catherine opened the folder in front of her, and removed a contract that at first glance, looked like a duplicate of the one in front of Jay. “*This* is the contract my father left me... you know, the one protecting my option to return to the firm.”

She slid it towards Jay, noticing there was even more sweat on his forehead. “If you compare the contract my father gave me to the one you gave me, I think you will see some significant differences. Do you care to explain that to me?”

Jay cleared his throat nervously and loosened his necktie. “Well... I... Uhm...”

Catherine removed another document from the folder. “The second offer you made... I believe you said that I was due continuing and uncollected fees, but only on those cases that my father was actively involved with... is that right?”

“Come on,” Mark exclaimed in frustration. “Can we just move this along?”

“Mark!” Jay said, clearly agitated. “Just be quiet!”

Then turning to Catherine, he asked, “What question do you have?”

“It’s just that Daddy made sure I received the most current and comprehensive financials on the firm and a break down of the structure of the company.” She noticed Jay’s face turn two shades paler. “It’s not something Dad and I ever really discussed... truthfully, it wasn’t something that really interested me... but apparently there’s a reason it’s called Chandler and Coolidge... and not Coolidge and Chandler... isn’t that right, Jay?”

There was a long, awkward silence.

Charles couldn’t help but chuckle. “I do believe Jay’s ulcer is acting up. He’s looking a little green.”

“Now, Charles,” Caroline said, trying not to laugh at how much he was enjoying his former partner’s discomfort.

It was Mark who finally spoke. “What are you getting at, Cathy?” he asked. His patience was clearly wearing thin.

“I’ll say this slowly, Mark, so you can understand,” Catherine said, “*My father* owned the majority of this firm. Which means that not only am *I* owed continuing and uncollected fees on all the cases my father was actively involved in... I am owed continuing and uncollected fees on *every* single account this firm currently has and will have in perpetuity. At least as long as *I* own the majority of this lawfirm. And what do you know? *That* makes *me* the ‘Chandler’ in Chandler and Coolidge... And as long as that’s the case, *you, Mis-ter Coo-lidge*, will *never* be a partner in this firm.”

“Yes!” Charles said, pounding his fist on the table. “HA HA!”

Caroline couldn’t decide which she was enjoying more; watching Catherine in action, or watching her husband’s pride as he watched his daughter in action.

Mark stood up... his face as red as a beet. Pointing his finger in Catherine’s direction, he yelled, “You *can’t* do that! You have no right! Who do you think you are... some princess who can just waltz in here and tell us what to do?”

Jay stood up. “**Mark!**” he yelled.

Mark stopped and turned on his father. “Don’t tell me you’re just going to sit here and let this... this—”

“SHUT UP, MARK!”

Mark stopped short and looked dumbfounded at his father.

“You... need... to... leave...” Jay said, with forced calm, pointing toward the door. “NOW!”

Mark kicked his chair in back of him, knocking it over, and stalked out of the room, slamming the door hard as he left.

“Hahahahahahaha.” Charles couldn’t contain his laughter. “I don’t know the last time I’ve had this much fun,” he said.

Looking embarrassed and incredibly uncomfortable, Jay adjusted his necktie and sat back down.

Catherine seemed completely unaffected by the scene and waited calmly for Jay to pull himself together.

“Just look at her, darling,” Caroline said with pride. “She’s absolutely unflappable!”

“I always knew she would make a fine corporate lawyer... she’s absolutely brilliant!” Charles said with pride.

“What is it you want, Cathy?” Jay finally asked quietly as he nervously fidgeted with the corner of the file in front of him.

Catherine took a long breath and let it out. Looking him in the eye, she spoke softly, “You know... my father considered you a trusted friend, Jay. How could you do this to him after all these years?”

Jay looked away, nervously chewing his bottom lip. He found it difficult to look directly into her eyes.

“What made you think, you could *actually* get away with cheating me out of something my father spent his life building? Did you really think I was *that* stupid? Or did you just think you could take advantage of my state of mind while I was grieving?”

Jay shook his head. “I don’t know... Mark made so much sense when he suggested it... I realize now how wrong I was to go along with it.”

Catherine smiled sardonically at his lame explanation. “And yet, you were still going to go through with it when I walked in here today... weren’t you?”

Jay had no response except to hang his head even further.

“Do you realize that if I brought this to the Bar Association, you and Mark could both be disbarred? Possibly even indicted?”

Jay looked stricken, as he realized she had the power to destroy him. “What do you want from me?” he asked, shaking visibly.

“I’m not here to blackmail you, Jay. I’m only here to take care of my father’s unfinished business,” she said, with a note of sadness. “As you know... as much as I loved my father, I have no interest in corporate law. He gave me his blessing to offer his share of the firm to you, at a price that is *more* than fair.”

She held out the offer Charles had drafted, and Jay took it from her.

“Of course, if you decline,” she said. “I won’t hesitate to leave my job at the District Attorney’s office and come back to the firm as the *senior* partner. And I promise you, Jay, I *will* be auditing every single account this firm has had in the last ten years. If you and Mark were willing to swindle me, I can only wonder what you’ve been doing to our clients. I won’t have my father’s good name destroyed by the two of you.”

“I promise you,” Jay insisted. “I have *never* cheated any of our clients,”

“What about Mark?” she asked. “Can you say the same for him?”

Jay declined to answer. Looking down at the offer Catherine had handed him. “Are you willing to entertain a counter offer?” he asked.

“Don’t do it, honey,” Charles said. “That offer is much better than he deserves.”

Catherine shook her head. “Dad made the terms *very* generous because he considered you a friend, Jay. He said they were non-negotiable. Believe me, I wouldn’t be so generous. I’m just glad he died before he knew the truth about you.”

“Well, I know now,” Charles said, sadly. “Stick to your guns, Cathy.”

“I promise you, Cathy, I considered Charles a friend as well,” Jay said. “I’ll accept the offer, and... thank you... for not using my lapse in judgement to destroy me.”

“Lapse in judgement?” Charles chuffed. “Is that what they call it these days?”

“Don’t insult my intelligence, Jay,” Catherine said, barely able to contain her disdain for her father’s former partner. “We both know it was more than a ‘lapse.’ The only reason I’m not pursuing this, is out of respect for my father’s memory.”

Jay looked completely beaten and contrite. Taking a pen out of his jacket pocket, Jay signed the offer and handed it back to Catherine.

“Thank you, Jay,” she said putting the file back in her briefcase. “I’ll have this expedited and contact you next week about finalizing the transfer of ownership,” she said curtly. Gathering up both folders, she put them safely in her briefcase.

As they stood up, Jay extended his hand to her. She couldn't bring herself to accept it, so she just turned and walked out of the office. As she walked down the hall toward the reception desk, she held her head high and nodded to each of her former co-workers who were loitering in the hall, wondering what had happened behind the closed conference room doors.

It wasn't until Catherine was alone in the elevator that she took a deep breath and started laughing. "How was I, Daddy?" she asked to no one. "I hope you're happy."

Charles and Caroline laughed along with her. "You were wonderful, sweetheart! Absolutely wonderful!" he said.

Catherine knew he wasn't really there, but she was sure he would have approved, and that knowledge gave her strength.



"Flagging down the first taxi, Catherine and her parents got in.

"Where are we going now?" Charles asked.

"Where to, lady?" the driver asked.

"100 Centre Street, please," she said.

"Criminal Courts Building?" he asked.

"That's right," she confirmed.

"It looks like you're going to get a chance to see Cathy in her element, Charles," Caroline said.

"I suppose it's about time," Charles said, laughing. "I can't wait."

As she stepped out of the taxi, Catherine looked up at the Criminal Courts Building and took a deep breath. "You were right, Joe," she said with a nod. "I'm ready now."

She walked with determination into the building, flanked on either side by her parents.

In the elevator, Charles remarked, "This is much better than the last time we were here."

Smiling, Caroline nodded. "Indeed," was all she said.

As Catherine opened the door to the District Attorney's offices, she was greeted almost immediately by Rita Escobar.

“Welcome back, Cathy!” she said, throwing her arms around her coworker. “How are you?” Rita asked, looking intently at her friend.

Catherine smiled and nodded. “I’m doing much better now,” she assured her. “Thank you. I need to talk to Joe, is he in the office?”

Rita’s eyes widened. She turned her head in the direction of his office. “He’s in all right. He’s been a complete bear ever since you disappeared. Enter at your own risk!”

Catherine laughed. “Thanks for the warning, Rita,” she said as she headed for her desk. Setting her briefcase down next to her desk and stowing her purse in a desk drawer, Catherine noted how clean it looked without the usual mountain of files on it. However, she did see a neat stack of condolence cards from her coworkers. She looked up to see several people looking at her. She smiled at them and mouthed the words, ‘Thank you’ to them.

I guess I was wrong, she thought, to believe no one cared.

Taking a deep breath, she braced herself to face Joe.

As she entered his office Catherine could see that Joe was up to his neck in case files. He was so preoccupied he didn’t even notice her come into the room.

“Hi, Joe,” Catherine said cheerfully, as she entered Joe’s office.

A look of surprise on Joe’s face was quickly replaced by intense relief and joy. “Cathy! Where were you?” In a moment his relief was replaced with anger. “I mean, where the *hell* have you been?”

Charles laughed. “He better be careful or he’s going to get whiplash,” he said.

Catherine smiled. “Thanks for worrying.”

Joe sighed, and his anger was quickly drowned out by overwhelming relief.

“I’m ready to come back to work,” Cathy told him.

“You sure?” he asked. He was willing to give her as much time as she needed.

“I’m sure,” she insisted convincingly.

Joe studied her momentarily. “Okay,” he said, smiling.

“Okay,” she replied, smiling back at him. She turned on her heel and went back to work.

By the end of the day, the familiar stack of case files was back on her desk.

“Is the workload always this crazy for her?” Charles asked his wife.

“No,” Caroline answered with a shake of her head. “I think Joe is going easy on her, her first day back.”

“What? And she traded a cushy window office on the 47th floor to work like a slave here?” He shook his head. “Wow!”

“This is where she belongs, Charles,” Caroline explained. “She really loves helping people.”

“She’s her mother’s daughter,” Charles said with pride.

“No, my dear,” Caroline disagreed as she watched her daughter. “Cathy appears to have gotten the best from both of us. She’s got your passion for the law and for the work.”

Charles smiled with satisfaction. “And your sense of justice and compassion for the helpless and the downtrodden.”

“I’d say we did pretty good, Mister Chandler,” she said.

“Yes, we did, Mrs. Chandler,” he replied, putting his arm around her.



As the day waned, the office emptied except for a few people still sitting at their desks buried in work.

“Still at it, Cathy?” Joe asked, as he peered over the stack of files.

Without looking up she replied, “I have a lot of catching up to do, Joe.”

He reached over and snatched the pencil out of her hand.

“Hey!” Catherine protested.

“I’m watching you, Chandler,” he said sternly. “You’ve been through a lot in the few weeks, and I’m going to make sure you ease back into this.”

Catherine scrutinized him. “And just what does that mean?” she asked.

“It means, you’re done for the day, and I’m not going to allow you to take any more files home for the weekend than you can stuff into that briefcase.”

“Who are you?” she asked. “And what have you done with Joe Maxwell?”

He laughed at that. “I’ll tell you what. You call it a day, and I’ll go grab my jacket and take you out for lasagna.”

“It’s a deal!” she said enthusiastically.

As they walked out of the office together, Joe said, “And while we’re eating, you can explain to me where you’ve been for the last week. I was worried sick about you, Kiddo. I even went over to your apartment with the cops to check on you.”

“I’m sorry I worried you, Joe,” she said sincerely. “You’re a good friend.”

“Ouch!” Charles winced as they all got into the elevator. “Oh, Joe... Joe,” he said sympathetically. “You poor mook.”



The next morning Catherine woke early. It was Saturday and one look through her sheer curtains told her it would be a glorious spring day. Despite the files she had brought home from work, she could feel the park calling to her as she stepped out onto the balcony and breathed deeply of the crisp morning air. *I can work later*, she thought. *There’s something I have to do first.*

Heeding the call, she headed toward Central Park. She could almost feel Vincent walking beside her as she recalled his gentle words. *“Wherever you are, wherever you go, you take me. You stand for me... for us... for our dream. You carry our light.”*

Catherine walked through the park with a spring in her step. She had a feeling of excitement that made her feel like a child going on an adventure. As she reached a particular tree, she smiled broadly and placed her open palm on the trunk.

Hello, she thought. *I’ve missed you, old friend.*

She looked straight up into its lofty welcoming branches. It seemed to beckon her to climb up for a visit as she had long ago. Lifting one foot very high, Catherine hoisted herself onto the lowest branch and began her ascent.

She was careful not to climb too high or step onto any branches that might break. As she carefully avoided a long-abandoned bird’s nest, she recalled a springtime when she had discovered a similar nest that contained three small blue eggs. *I wonder if this one was made by one of their descendants*, she wondered. Finally finding the perfect perch, she sat down and wedged herself comfortably into the branches.

Then reclining against the sturdy tree trunk, she looked around, thoroughly enjoying her birds-eye view of the park. Catherine smiled broadly and looked up to the blue sky. “Don’t worry, Daddy. I won’t fall. I won’t fall.”



Charles and Caroline stood hand in hand at the bottom of the tree looking up at their daughter.

“Just look at her, Charles,” Caroline said. “Our little girl... so strong... so brave.”

“I told you she takes after her mother,” he replied, looking at his wife adoringly.

Caroline laughed. “Her father is pretty amazing too.”

“Do you think she’ll be all right now?” he asked.

Caroline considered his question momentarily. “The future isn’t set, Charles. No life is without its own unique struggles and tragedies. But I am sure of one thing, whatever happens... whatever comes... she will face it with courage and with grace,” Caroline assured him.

He looked at her with wonder. “How did I do it?” he asked. “How did I ever manage to live without you all these years?”

Caroline smiled. “Our daughter needed you, that’s how. But you’re not alone anymore, Charles. And neither am I... as long as we have each other.”

“Yes... we do have each other.”

“It’s time, you two,” a voice behind them said.

Turning around they were greeted by people they knew.

“Mother! Dad!” Charles said with joy. A young man in a military uniform stepped forward. “Matthew! Is it really you?”

Charles’ brother came closer. “It’s really me, little brother. Are you ready to go now?”

Charles looked up one more time to his daughter.

“She’ll be fine, Charles,” his father said. “She comes from strong stock.”

“I must say, Caroline,” Charles’ father said, “You have done a splendid job guiding Charles through his grief.”

Caroline smiled. “Thank you.”

Charles was confused. “What do you mean, Dad? It was Cathy we were guiding through the stages...” He stopped and looked at his beautiful wife. *Shock and denial*, he thought. *Then pain and guilt*. He considered the stages of grief she had told him about, and realized that he had been moving through them as well.

He looked lovingly into the eyes of his beloved. “You were guiding me too, weren’t you, Sweet Caroline? You kept me so busy with Cathy that I didn’t even realize it.”

“You and Cathy are the two most important people I’ve ever guided,” she said, stepping into his arms. “I needed both of you to find your way through it. She has reached the final step, and now you must too.”

“Acceptance,” he said.

“Yes, acceptance.”

“She’s been waiting for you for a long time, son. Are the two of you finally ready to come with us?”

Charles put his arm around her. “Wherever she goes, I go.”



*Have courage for the great sorrows, and
patience for the small ones, and when you have
accomplished your tasks, go to sleep in peace.
- Victor Hugo*

Things I learned while writing this story include:

1. The offices of Chandler and Coolidge were located in the General Motors building at 767 Fifth Avenue, at the southeast corner of Central Park in NYC. (According to the pilot script.)
2. The photo of Catherine's mother in her father's office was taken only a year before her mother's death.
3. According to the original script, Catherine attended the same boarding school as her mother.
4. Marilyn Campbell was not Charles Chandler's secretary, as I always thought. She was his long time assistant for at least 25 years according to Marilyn herself. Charles' secretary was named Joan.
5. "The Tombs" aka The Manhattan Detention Complex is 1/10 of a mile or a 3 minute walk from the Manhattan District Attorney's Office. (according to Google Maps)

1. Digitally altered screen captures were provided by author.