

Claret

By Cindy Rae

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Chapter One

The Last Word

It had been a long job, and a sad one, the emptying of Charles Chandler's Manhattan apartment. And at one point (as such chores are wont to do), it was more than half done, and then abandoned for a while. Progress had been made, of course, and then... stopped.

The refrigerator and freezer had been emptied. Some of the books had been boxed up, and a few of the larger pieces of furniture had been moved to new homes. Donations of clothing had been made to a men's shelter, and more than a few kitchen items had been sent on their way.

After Catherine's initial burst of energy had worn off, so had the list of chores that "had" to be done.

Catherine was coming to realize more and more that life (and death) usually worked out just about that way: not as a "smooth" thing, but something that tended to happen more in fits and starts. As days melded into weeks, and the weeks began to pile into each other, Catherine knew that readying the apartment for its next tenant was a thing couldn't wait much longer, to be finished. Autumn had given way to winter's chill. It was time. Past it, even.

She knew she had no room for most of Charles' belongings. The size of her apartment forbade two sets of everything. A pair of wing chairs had been shipped up to the cabin in Connecticut, along with two boxes of books and another of framed photographs and old mementoes, the flotsam of a life, the sentimental value of many objects now too precious to be parted with.

Much of the furniture and most of the clothes had simply been donated to good causes, or charities Charles Chandler had supported. Catherine knew that was something he would have favored. That, at least, was a thing that comforted her, some.

Rent on Charles' apartment had been paid for the first month after his passing, and then the second. By the time the third month came rolling around, Catherine knew the last few closets needed going through, the desk in her father's study needed to be emptied, his golf clubs and tennis racket needed to be sent over to Peter Alcott, and whatever little else was left behind needed to be sent... somewhere.

It was not a chore Catherine was looking forward to.

But, as Charles Chandler's only heir, she knew she was the one who had to do it. Assigning the job to someone else, even for a handsome sum, risked that something precious might end up in a donation box, or worse, simply thrown away. That could not be borne. Even the idea of it gave Catherine the shivers.

She knew the things that had been special to her father: What his favorite necktie was, and where he kept the silver pen her mother had bought for him the day Chandler and Coolidge had opened. Neither object had much intrinsic value. But to Catherine, both were priceless.

The living room still contained some furniture. That would be dealt with by the movers, due to come in before the end of the week. His bedroom was practically empty, even now.

But it was Charles' study Catherine had avoided, and she knew why. More than the wing chair that he'd sat in to read or watch tv, in the living room, more than the kitchen where he'd seldom cooked, or the dining room table he'd barely eaten at with Kay, her, or anyone else. More even than the bedroom, which had contained his clothes, a photograph of his wife, and whatever jewelry he owned - the study was "Charles," to Catherine.

The study was the room he loved, and the one he'd forbidden a professional decorator to set foot in. Every picture hanging on the wall had been put there by him. Every book settled on every shelf had been placed there by his hands. Framed photographs were scattered about the shelves, along with a heavy glass paperweight and small souvenirs from some of his travels: A bleached conch shell from Aruba. A brown glass bowl, hand blown, from Italy. A tiny bronze replica of the Eiffel Tower.



The leather in the furniture was deep brown, and heavy. So was the wood.

It was a masculine space, and he'd clearly favored it. In some ways, it almost mirrored his office, and as such, was a place he'd often spent his time.

It contained a large desk he either sat behind (or sometimes, like in his office at Chandler and Coolidge, on the edge of), a matching mahogany bookcase full of his law books, a phone, a rolodex, a credenza with some few files in it, a landscape painting which hid a wall safe, more framed photographs of his family, a small closet he used for little besides a London Fog raincoat and an umbrella, and a deeply-tufted leather chair he seemed to prefer to any other in the house.

On nights when Catherine had come to visit him, it was the study that most often contained him. Like her own apartment, it had a decent view of the park, and a small terrace. Unlike it, heavy wood paneled the walls, and an impossibly thick carpet absorbed the sound of a ticking wall clock.

It was a man's room, and it was the one where Charles Chandler obviously felt most at home.

Catherine knew that's why she'd been avoiding it, up to now.

She knew that the desk phone was the one Charles most often called her on, rather than the one in the kitchen or living room. That it was the desk chair he most often sat in, the wide picture window he most often looked out of. His favorite coffee mug sat on the credenza, next to a radio tuned to a classical station. He'd liked to listen to music while he did whatever it was he did in here. He just had.

His checkbook was locked in the top drawer of the desk, and it was here he most often sat to pay bills. The rolodex kept the phone numbers he most often wanted at his fingertips, and Catherine knew a

stack of vacation brochures would be in the bottom left hand drawer of the desk.

Charles had planned his life in this room, both his business life and his personal one. A framed photograph of his daughter smiled at him from the left corner of the desk,



while a family portrait of the three of them, taken when Catherine was five years old, dominated the opposite wall. A regularly-used coffee maker sat on a distant butler (rather than in the kitchen), while a deftly hidden bar contained wine bottles and more hand blown glassware.

Bottles of water and juice sat in a mini fridge. Ones Catherine knew it would be past time to discard.

She entered the room tentatively, feeling her father's presence in here, as she did so. She knew she wasn't feeling his ghost, or the spirit she'd talked with when she'd stayed in the tunnels: Just the remnant energy of a man who'd spent many hours in the room, happier to be here than anywhere else, in the large apartment.

"Hello, Daddy," Catherine said softly, as she closed the door behind her.

Unlike when she'd mourned his passing with Vincent, the room remained silent.

Her father's image beamed at her, from the family portrait on the wall. In it, he'd had one hand around his wife's shoulder, and the other clasping Catherine's own. They were all dressed in their Sunday best, and Caroline Chandler's soft smile had gleamed, next to Charles' proud one. Younger Catherine's grin had been gap-toothed, and enthusiastic.

Looking at it now, Catherine couldn't help but smile back at all of them, a little wistfully. They had been a happy family, then.

And now, there was only Catherine.

"I love you," she said to the image, as she met Charles' proud smile with a weak one of her own. It was a smile she couldn't hold.

"The realtor says we have to be out, if we're going to turn in the keys. I've put it off a while. But I think it's time."

She set a pair of empty cardboard boxes by the door, knowing she might need more. The law book were heavy, and boxes could only be packed "so" full. And the portrait was fairly large. It would have to be wrapped in paper and shipped, or carried down, rather than just tossed into a box.

Catherine scanned the room, and her green eyes went to the desk, then over to the wall safe. Whatever was left in the latter would be small, and easy to put away.

She moved the landscape picture and spun the dial on the safe. Its contents were familiar. It contained only her mother's bridal set, and Charles own wedding ring, placed there by Catherine herself, after his passing. It felt right that the three rings should share the same space. She'd tucked her father's gold wedding band into the same box that had held her mother's diamond engagement ring and wedding band.

The door swung open, the contents just as she'd left them. She'd take them back to her apartment and put them someplace. She didn't like the idea of them sitting in the safe deposit box at the bank, or somewhere no longer close to the only person in the world they meant anything to.

Catherine sighed, and slipped the small, velvet-lined box into her coat pocket.

This is going to be hard, she thought, knowing it was true.

She gently swung the safe closed, and turned toward the piece of furniture she was most dreading going through: the large, mahogany desk.

What do I do with you? She thought, crossing the space. Her feet sank into a deeply shagged tan rug. The desk rivalled the one he had at Chandler and Coolidge, for size.

As furniture, it was too big for her apartment, and there was no place for it at the cabin, unless she gave up one of the few bedrooms, there. She wondered if Peter Alcott might have a place for it, then regretted that she hadn't invited him to come with her to do this. Tentatively, she touched her fingers to the smooth wood. A dozen memories of her father, working in here, came rushing back.

I shouldn't be alone. Not now. Oh, Daddy. I miss you so much.

Catherine moved behind the desk and sat in his chair, feeling like an intruder in the space. The seat cushion sank a little, but even it seemed to know that the wrong person now occupied it. Charles was a heavy man, and would have made far more of an impression than Catherine was doing. She sat at the edge of the chair and began the chore she dreaded: that of emptying the drawers.

The slender top one contained the random things such spaces always contained: scattered paper clips, a stray rubber band, his good pen, and mail that Charles Chandler would never answer. One was an advertisement that screamed “Come back to Aruba!” Another was an ad for the current concert season at the Met. Catherine threw them away, remembering the sad strains of Grieg, as she did so.

It had been their last concert, together, and she hadn’t even been able to sit through all of it.

I’m sorry. I love you, Daddy, she thought.

She went through other drawers, setting aside envelopes and plans for the part of his life Charles Chandler hadn’t gotten to live. The paperwork for his private box at Shea Stadium was here, as were tickets to his courtside seats for the Knicks. Charles had loved sports, and had enjoyed it, to one degree or another, all his life. He’d considered it a pursuit of excellence, and as a corporate lawyer, he’d had more than one business association with franchise owners, and even players, from time to time.

An old camera was tucked in the back of one drawer, devoid of film, along with a pair of theater glasses and a parking pass for the garage at Chandler and Coolidge. A cork from a bottle of wine rolled forward. A pamphlet about the treasures contained in the Louvre was stuffed in the side. Beneath an opened envelope, sat the invitation to Brigit O’Donnell’s party, from over a year ago. It was a drawer for the things he’d sometimes used, or, like the invitation, never would have, again, but things which, for some reason, he’d seemed loath to part with.

Catherine stacked it all on the top of the wide desk, and sometimes smiled at it, a little. The Louvre brochure caught her eye. She didn’t know if he was planning to take Kay to Paris, or if he just liked looking at different brochures, dreaming about the trips he might take. But she

was glad, as Marilyn said, that he'd "slowed down" in the last few years of his life, and enjoyed himself more. She reached down and a few menus came out, most for Italian places, nearby.

"You always loved pasta," Catherine said, to no one now living.

She opened the drawer on her right, thinking to repeat the same process as she had on the left. It was there, in the top drawer, that she found his leather bound legal pad, the one every lawyer kept close by.

"I wonder what you were working on?" she asked it, knowing that the pad would reveal that to her.

She flipped opened the leather cover to see the yellow, mostly pristine page. Just one word stared back at her from the lined paper.

Claret

It was triple underlined, as if to stress its importance, and it was even circled, a thing Charles sometimes did with a word, when he wanted to remember it. Catherine looked at it, wonderingly.

Claret

She traced the word with a thoughtful fingernail. Unlike the pre-printed labels on the mail or the tickets, this was written in Charles' own hand.

As far as she knew, it was the last word he'd *ever* written.

Claret

"It looks like someone ordered a bottle of wine," she commented, smiling at the word. Her father liked good wine, and experimented with different vintages, occasionally. But he preferred whites to reds, and among the reds, a good glass of Port, to anything else.

"I wonder if it ever came?" she mused aloud, crossing to the bar. For some reason, the circled word felt important, like a puzzle she might now solve. One that would make her feel even closer to Charles.

“Let’s see here,” she said, opening the wooden double doors to reveal small wine rack, behind them. She surveyed the contents. “There’s three Rieslings, a Chardonnay, a Chablis, and oh yes, a Port,” she said, holding up the bottle and grinning at her father’s face in the family portrait. “But nothing I’d call ‘Claret.’ I wonder if Peter knows anything about it?”

It was ridiculous to stop the chore to concentrate on such a trivial detail. And in that, Catherine was smart enough to know she was using avoidance as a way to get her through.

I’m not avoiding. I’m investigating, she reasoned.

But as she reached for the desk phone, an almost familiar tapping sound greeted her ears. It was the sound of sharp fingernails on glass, a gentle rapping meant to draw attention, without startling her.

Only one person Catherine ever knew made that sound: Vincent.

“Vincent!” Catherine spun away from the desk and to the balcony door, opening it to let him in. “How are you even here?” she asked.

Vincent slipped inside the room carefully, sliding in like a large shadow. Not for the first time was Catherine aware that her love moved with an almost silent grace; one that belied his size. December air came in with him.

Feeling as you do, where else should I be? he thought.

“Yours is not the only balcony I can reach, Catherine,” he replied easily. He spared the room a glance, as she shut the doors.

“I sensed your sorrow, this evening, and understood its source, once I realized where you were.”

You should have told me. I would have met you earlier.

He embraced her softly, allowing her weight to drop some, in his arms. Vincent knew that she was still grieving the loss of her father, though that, like the emptying of the apartment, it seemed to come in fits and starts, now. She *was* recovering. But days like this one seemed to make it hard.

"I had to come," she replied, clutching the fabric of his patched cape. "It's... it's a chore I have to finish. One no one else should do. He had personal things in this room. I can't just... leave what to do with them to anyone else."

Vincent well understood her sorrow. Going through the personal items of someone who had passed was not an unknown thing for him, either.

"I came to help. Yet I think I felt you... smile?" he asked, setting her back from him, a little.

"At a distraction. Claret," she said, disentangling them and moving back toward the desk. She showed him the tablet. "As far as I know, it's maybe the last word my father ever wrote."

Vincent eyed the legal tablet, and the single word written upon it.

"And this made you smile because...?" he asked quizzically.

"My father loved wine," she explained. "And sometimes brandy. But he rarely liked a red wine. I was going to call Peter and ask if he knew something about it. I know it doesn't really make much sense that I am."

The compassionate look he gave her spoke volumes.

It does. It does, when I know how much you loved your father, Vincent thought, but didn't say.

"I'm sure Peter won't mind the question," Vincent said softly, as Catherine picked up the phone.

A few rings later, Peter answered. And Catherine explained what she'd found.

"Claret?' No, Cathy, I don't know what it would be," Peter replied. "It wasn't a gift to me, if that's what you're asking. I get... I got... Scotch from him, single malt. Jay Coolidge usually got a decent whiskey, and Marilyn was always a bottle of champagne for her birthday. You know that."

Catherine did. "And I was a good Sauvignon blanc. But that's a white wine, not a red." Catherine twined the cord of the phone in her fingers. "It's so funny, Peter. He underlined it three times, and circled it. Like it was important. Could it be one of the bottles of Port? Those are red wines."

She could all but sense the physician shaking his head, on the other end of the line. "Port is Port," he corrected gently. "It's from Portugal alone, and it's usually mixed with brandy. Claret is any number of red wines, mostly a Bordeaux, if I recall our last trip through French wine country, correctly."

"Dad was with you?" Catherine asked.

"Yes, with Kay and Susan. But he seemed more impressed with the Chenin blancs than any of the reds. So was Kay."

Catherine sighed. "Okay. Well... thanks, Peter. I guess it will just have to remain a puzzle... for now."

They said their good-byes and she hung up the phone.

"I take it Peter was no help?" Vincent asked, able to discern as much from hearing half of the conversation.

"I'm afraid not."

She frowned at the still-open tablet. The blue ink seemed to glow at her, prompting her to continue to search. "I hate to give up. I really do think it's the last thing he may have written, Vincent." She looked up at him. "It would have made sense. It's on the top page, and he always came in here, in the evenings."

Vincent settled his great hands on her shoulders, reassuringly. "Perhaps it isn't a wine, then. Perhaps... a name? A restaurant, or a street address?"

Catherine's expression brightened, loving him for trying to help her. "His rolodex is on the desk and here's his address book. Let's start looking," she replied, aware that none of this was getting the room packed.

The search was quick, and unfortunately for Catherine, fruitless.

"There is nothing here by that name," Vincent said, running a long finger down the pages of Charles' address book. He smiled, slightly, when he saw Peter Alcott's familiar address, and again, when he noted some of the more exotic names and phone numbers. There were places listed in Paris, and in London, and one even in New Zealand.

"Are you checking for streets, as well as names?" Catherine asked, coming up empty with the rolodex.

"I am," he replied, scanning. "The closest word to it is 'Claridge's' in London."

"That's the hotel. He liked to stay there, sometimes. I doubt that has anything to do with it." Catherine's slim shoulders gave a shrug of regret.

Vincent closed the address book and set it on the corner of the desk. "There is a building by that name in the old Chelsea district. It is undergoing renovation, I think."

“Oh! I’ve heard of it!” Catherine replied, grabbing the phone book and flipping to the page. “Do you think maybe he was looking to buy there? Or invest?”

Vincent shrugged his caped shoulders. Of the two of them, she obviously knew Charles Chandler’s financial habits far better than he did. “I have no idea. But there are several listings under that word, in the directory,” he looked over her shoulder at the thin page of printed names and addresses.

Catherine agreed. “A bar, a restaurant, some shops... this was an artist’s community.” She frowned, at that. “I can’t think of anything he’d want there. It’s not an area he even favored.”

“Your father did not collect... art?” Vincent asked, as Catherine tore the pages from the phone book and folded them into her pocket. Likely connection or no, Vincent had a feeling he knew where his love was going to spend her day, tomorrow.

She shook her head. “He collected fishing lures for when he went out on the lake, some baseball memorabilia thanks to having a private box at the stadium, and he liked to travel, especially in the last year, according to his secretary, Marilyn. But art? No. He liked it, but he didn’t collect it. Professional designers did Chandler and Coolidge, and he had an interior decorator for this place, except for this room. He *liked* art well enough, but didn’t feel a strong urge to own much, as far as I know.”

Vincent accepted her answer.

“I just... wish I knew what it was about,” Catherine said.

“Then I’m sure you’ll find it,” he replied, respecting her skills as a detective too much to think anything else.

Catherine gave Vincent a strong hug, grateful for his steady presence. He wrapped his arms loosely around her slender frame and drew her to him, again.

"This last week has been difficult for you. You're tired," he said, standing in the calm of the huge room with her. He willed his own sense of quiet peace to wash over her. When she relaxed against him a little, he knew it was starting to work.

"I am. Sometimes... I don't think I am. Then it just all sort of ... catches up with me." She looked at the open bar, at the bottles of wine that would need to be put in the boxes. Wine Charles Chandler had never gotten the chance to drink.

"I know he's gone. There are days when I still cry for it, a little. But... it's better, Vincent. Not *good*, not yet, but it is better."

Which one of us are you trying to convince? he wondered. *Perhaps... we wait until you're stronger? You've endured so much, Catherine...*

"This... chore you face. Is this a thing that *must* be done? By you?" he nudged.

Catherine shrugged, but didn't move away. "The apartment has to be rented. I can put it off by paying the rent for another month, but... but in the end, that won't change anything. It still needs to be done. It's been kind of... hanging over my head, I guess. Once it's done... I can stop worrying about it, I think." She squeezed his waist and then stepped back from him.

"Marilyn went through his office at work. Peter went with me to open the safe deposit box at the bank, and to the attorney's. I already had most of his clothes donated, and some of the other things. The kitchen cabinets are empty.

“But this is *my* responsibility. There are... personal things in here. Things I don’t want to see get accidentally thrown into a charity box. Things I’d... things I’d like to keep, if I can,” she said, stepping over to a wide shelf and stroking the back of one of Charles’ leather-bound hardbacks.

Vincent nodded, determined to help her. He stepped over and took a handful of books off the shelf and gently placed them into the box she’d brought.

“I can help you put the things in boxes. But when it comes to taking them down to your car...” Vincent said, letting the sentence trail.

Catherine shrugged, again, understanding. “Aside from this room and the foyer closet, there really isn’t much left. I can have the furniture put into a storage unit, if I need to. Just until I can figure out what to do.”

Vincent inclined his head, agreeing that that might be the best course of action. In spite of the “need” for doing such things, Vincent wasn’t sure Catherine was ready to do this. Carefully, he placed the shell in the box with the books. It reminded him of the one she’d sent him from California, only larger. He handled it like the precious memento that it was, wondering if this shell, too, had some story to tell.

You are seeing parts of his life. Vincent mused. Parts you knew about. Perhaps even parts you didn’t. The details that make up a life, that made up the last part of his last days. He glanced up to where she was. Be careful, Catherine. There is sorrow for you, here. Sorrow, among his treasures.

She wandered back to the desk, again, and turned a small, rectangular pad toward herself.

“His desk calendar is still turned to that last day,” she said, unable to keep the sadness from her voice. “There’s a list of phone calls he meant to make, on the pad by the phone. Some are check marked. That means he made them. The others... aren’t. His dry cleaners. Jay Coolidge. Marilyn. Some chore he didn’t get to, on a day he never got to finish.”

She stared down at it all. “It’s like time just... stopped, in this room. Like it’s still... that day,” she said, echoing Vincent’s thoughts, a little. There was sorrow here; sorrow, and a sense of loss. She knew that’s why she’d been avoiding the room.

She sighed and chafed her arms, a little, feeling the cold, in spite of the warmth in the room.

“He liked this room. It’s where he liked to be.”

Vincent’s sharp gaze travelled the walls, as he came to stand near her.

“It reminds me of an office, similar to what he must have had at his work,” he observed.

Yes. You got it. Exactly.

“It is,” she answered. “When he was building up Chandler and Coolidge, *this* is the room I always found him in.” She shook her head, and caressed the legal pad with the word “Claret” on it.

“The thing was, he *liked* contract law,” she said, as if she couldn’t believe it. “Corporate deals, helping people set up a new business, or collect on a promise. Helping people... *make* something, build something, make it work for them.”

She shook her head again, and her soft hair moved across her shoulders. “It wasn’t for me, but... but it made him happy.” She smiled a little, as she looked at the word on the yellow paper, again.

“And now... Claret,” she said, holding it up to him.

He smiled a little in return, as he regarded the word, and the question it presented to her.

You like wondering about this. It gives you ... a connection to him. And something else to think about. But you're also tired, and this now seems like one more thing you have to do. You're using it to distract yourself from sadness.

There's no sin in that, my Catherine. There's no good way to say 'good-bye' to someone you loved so much.

“Your day has been long. Why not go home? Rest?” he said, in his most cajoling voice. He took the pad gently from her nerveless fingers.

“This will all be here, tomorrow, and perhaps the puzzle of the word will reveal itself, then,” he nudged.

Rest. Sleep. Yes. I can tackle it all again tomorrow, when I'm fresh. I'll contact Marilyn. She might know.

Catherine looked up at the portrait on the wall and sighed. She really hadn't made much headway, in here. What little had been packed had mostly been done by Vincent.

“Okay. But I'm taking that with me,” she said, indicating the large, beautiful, framed photograph of Charles Chandler and his young family.

Yes. Good.

“Of course,” Vincent replied, moving to help her take it off the wall.

Chapter Two

Search



Catherine gave up her lunch break (and then some) on Monday, chasing the word “Claret” to a set of apartments down in the Chelsea district. She showed Charles Chandler’s picture to the building manager, to several store clerks in the area, and to a few liquor store owners. Most had the same thing to say: That they’d never seen her father, but that he looked like a nice, distinguished gentleman. One likely to leave an impression, if he’d been by.

Footsore and hungry, Catherine returned to her desk late, caught a look from Joe, labored hard to catch up, and went home with five cases in her bag. It was just that kind of day.

Tuesday came, and she found herself in Marilyn’s apartment, after work, having coffee. She explained her search, and why.

“So... do you have any ideas? Any at all? Anything you can think of might help, Marilyn. You probably knew what was going on with him

more than anyone else. I mean, in a day-to-day kind of way,” Catherine said. She offered the yellow paper to the other woman.

Marilyn took it, glanced down and smiled, much as Catherine had, at seeing Charles’ familiar handwriting.

“Oh, circled and underlined. That’s a hint,” Marilyn said, gently tracing the letters with an impeccably manicured forefinger, much as Catherine had done. She gave the yellow paper a wistful look before she handed it back to Catherine.

“Is it?” Catherine asked, fascinated.

“Mm-hmm. You had to know your father. He wrote in kind of a code. Circled and underlined was what he did only rarely. It meant it was very important to him, and he wanted to remember it.”

“Well, I mean, I figured it meant *something*...”

Marilyn lifted a soft, brown eyebrow. “Cathy, I watched that man keep a desk calendar and make legal notes for *years*. He wrote things down. The lawyer in him was too sharp not to. He double underlined some things, like the percentages on a contract extension. He put boxes around dates, appointments he needed to add to the calendar. He put clients’ names in yellow highlighter. But circled and underlined? That was big.”

Very important. Big.

“How so?” Catherine asked, curious.

Marilyn warmed their cups from a white porcelain pot, and shrugged.

“Circled and underlined was the sticking point in a contract. On his calendar, circled and underlined was your birthday, and even mine, but never just a partner’s meeting or a business lunch. Circled and underlined was when he and Hal Sherwood went to Shea Stadium

together for a playoff game, or the Halloween you and he went to the costume party for Brigit O'Donnell," she replied. "That night got three underlines, too."

Catherine smiled. How well Charles' secretary had known him.

"So... it's a big deal?"

Marilyn nodded. "That's was what circled and underlined meant. It meant it was important to him, that it was on his mind. Something he was looking forward to, and didn't want to forget." She smiled a little, at the note in Catherine's hand.

"Something that was going to make him happy, even," she concluded.

Something important. Something that was going to make him happy...

Marilyn looked down into her cup, and Catherine caught the wistfulness in her expression. They were both still mourning her father, and each in their own way, both still missing him.

The older woman took a sip of coffee then returned the cup to the saucer carefully, so that the cup wouldn't make a clinking sound. Years of working among the wealthy and powerful had honed her manners to impeccable perfection.

"I'm glad you showed it to me. I'm glad he had something he was looking forward to, Catherine," Marilyn said, willing her voice to remain steady.

Catherine reached across the table and squeezed the other woman's hand.

"Marilyn, it feels like this is something I've just got to understand. I've searched. I've been through his drawers, his rolodex, his appointment book... I even went across town to an apartment complex, just because it was named 'Claret.'"

She let that sink in.

"I'm one step away from calling everyone in the phone book with that last name, sounding like a crazy woman." Catherine put her hand up to her ear in the imitation of someone making a phone call. "'Hello? Mr. Claret? Mr. uh, James Claret? Did you know my father?'" she asked.

Marilyn shook her head, a little. "I don't think it's a person's name, Cathy, if that helps. He always wrote first and last down, especially when he was making notes. If it was a name, it would have been something like "John Claret," or even "Claret Jones."

"Maybe they were close. So he didn't have to," Catherine reasoned.

Marilyn's expression told Catherine she doubted it.

"Maybe, but even close friends were still two names, when he wrote them down." She ticked names off on her fingers. "Hal Sherwood. Peter Alcott. Bill Danforth. Saul Aronson," she said, listing her father's closest friends. "He knew so many people, it's how he kept everything straight. Even Mark was Mark Coolidge, just to avoid any confusion."

"Something from work? Could "Claret" be a business name, perhaps? The name of a company, or a CEO?"

Marilyn shook her head, again. "I think if it was a person he was dealing with at work, or the name of a firm, I'd have heard it at the office. I'm sure I never did... never have," she replied.

Catherine sighed. "That leaves wine, I suppose."

"I suppose so," Marilyn agreed, at a loss for how to help, further.

"I take it you checked his wine rack?"

"I did. Not a thing."

Marilyn studied the beautiful young woman across from her, not liking the shadowy circles under Catherine's eyes, ones concealer was doing little to hide.

It's been a long day for you, hasn't it, honey? They're all long now, I suppose.

Her voice dropped to its most gentle tone. "Cathy... maybe you're making a little too much of this. It was just a word scribbled on a page, you know? Maybe it's just enough to know he thought about it, and... leave it at that?"

Catherine sipped her coffee, and considered.

"I've thought the same thing, some. But... well, I don't know. It's like... Maybe it's on my mind because he didn't get to talk to me before he... before he passed," Catherine said, stumbling over the word. "The stroke was... so sudden, and he couldn't talk, and..." She studied the contents of her cup, before she looked up.

"It's like it's his last word. And I have no idea what it means," Catherine explained.

Marilyn's head gave a sympathetic tilt to one side. "You told me you were at peace with things, last time we talked. Are you still?" she asked.

Catherine nodded, remembering the odd dream-visit she'd had from her father while she'd been in Vincent's care.

"Don't laugh..."

The thought of her father wearing a red clown nose couldn't help but make her smile.

"I am at peace with it. I'm not... upset. But I admit I'm more than a little curious. I want to dig a little more, before I just give up. It feels like..."

Oh, I don't know," Catherine said helplessly, looking around the tastefully appointed living room.

"It's like... like there's something undone. Like you said, like it was something that was important to him, but I don't know what, or why. It's been a mystery."

Marilyn grinned at that.

"Charles Chandler, Man of Mystery. He'd have liked that," she said. "It would have tickled the part of him that liked to read Sir Arthur Conan Doyle."

Yes. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. How he kept his calendar. How he kept everything organized, in his life. You knew him better than anyone, didn't you, Marilyn? Catherine thought. *The two of you... so close...*

Catherine ventured out on what was for her, thin ice. "Marilyn... speaking of mysteries... I know he was seeing Kay, and sometimes there were other women he dated, here and there, but... did you... well, I mean, did you ever..." Catherine stumbled over how to complete the sentence.

"Did I ever tell him I loved him?" Marilyn asked, making it easy on the woman she'd known since she was a child. "Or ask him if I thought he could ever love me?" Marilyn finished for her.

The older woman folded her hands in her lap, almost primly.

Catherine blushed at the words.

"You don't have to answer that if you don't want to," Catherine said, knowing she'd just embarrassed both of them, a little.

Marilyn shrugged, unfazed. "Catherine... it's so hard to explain. Such different times... I was a war widow with a young son, and I needed to land on my feet. He was dealing with losing your mother, and the grief

was still very new, for him. The first day I came to work there, I remember thinking that your father was one of the handsomest, most kind, most dapper man I'd ever seen. Sad, and trying not to be. Generous, with me. Generous with you. How could I not be at least a little in love?" she replied.

"You took me school shopping that year. I remember," Catherine prompted.

"And the housekeeper took you the year after. Then you and Jenny Aronson went with her mom. It took a village, Cathy."

Marilyn's face had a soft smile on it, the kind that meant she was looking back on two decades of time.

"But... no. I never said anything." She unfolded her hands and pushed the cup and saucer away, done with the drink. "Your father was grieving, then, and you could still see the love he had for your mother. I needed the security of a steady paycheck, and I didn't want to mess that up. He needed a good secretary, not a romantic partner. And so, that's what I was to him," she said, making something fairly complicated sound almost deceptively simple.

For a moment, Marilyn contemplated the view out the window, then she returned her kind, steady gaze to Catherine.

"When I told him my son Jimmy needed braces, he raised my salary by enough to cover it. When Jay Coolidge brought Mark in, he asked me what I thought, and how best to handle it. We were friends, Catherine, by the time all the years went by. Good friends... but just friends."

"Neither one of you ever married again," Catherine observed.

"Perhaps we never needed to. Now Jimmy's all grown, and so are you. He's going to make me a grandmother next year. Did I tell you?"

Marilyn asked, deliberately changing the subject.

Catherine's smile brightened. "No! You're kidding! He and Celia are expecting?"

"Come May, if it all goes right. I'm sure it will."

Catherine drained her cup and rose, glad she'd taken the time to come and talk to Marilyn in person, rather than just call her on the phone.

"I'm happy for you," Catherine stated sincerely.

"I'd like to have reason to be happy for *you*," Marilyn replied, rising as well. She sighed. "It will get better, honey. For both of us."

It will. I know it will, Catherine thought, believing it.

"He loved you too, you know. In his way," Catherine said.

Marilyn hugged her, and gave her a squeeze for good measure. "He loved *you*. He counted on me. It was enough. We respected each other. And in a good way."

Catherine kept her arms around the woman who had taken her to buy her back-to-school clothes, and a few record albums for a now long-gone phonograph.

"I want you to be happy, Marilyn. Will you go down for a visit? To Jimmy and Celia's?"

"Better," Marilyn replied, stepping back to put a little distance between them. She tugged at the hem of the soft, tan sweater she wore. Her skirt matched it. "I put in my retirement paperwork. It's just not the same without your father there. I'm moving closer to Jim, and I want to be on babysitting duty."

She stepped closer to a framed photograph of her son. Tall and red-haired, Catherine assumed he looked like his father.

"Come for a visit?" Marilyn invited. "We'll be in North Carolina."

Catherine picked up her purse and looked into the kind eyes of the woman who had been her father's secretary and friend, for many years. She hadn't helped with "Claret." But she had helped Charles, for most of Catherine's life.

"I wouldn't miss it," Catherine stated. "You'll have to send me a postcard."

Marilyn smiled. It was a sincere one. "That I'll do. And if I figure out what 'Claret' is, I'll call you," she promised.

Catherine knew it was a promise she would keep, if she could.

"Call me anyway," Catherine replied, "Just because."

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Chapter Three

Coming up Empty



“Claret?’ No, Miss Chandler, it doesn’t ring a bell. Though you know Mr. Chandler,” Charles’ housekeeper said into the phone. “I’d dust and do the vacuuming either before he came home or when he was in the office. We mostly chatted when I came to pick up my check.”

Catherine adjusted the telephone on her shoulder. “Darn. You were my last hope, Angela,” Catherine said. Angela Beckham had kept house for Charles Chandler for many years.

Angela was apologetic. “I’m sorry. Maybe if you could give me more of a hint? I miss him so much, Miss Chandler. I know I was just an employee, but ...”

“Angela, that’s silly. With my father, no one was ‘just an employee.’” Catherine chided gently. “You know he thought the world of you. I was just hoping... Did he have any wine delivered to the apartment? Anything you recall? I didn’t find anything...” Catherine prompted.

She could feel the older woman searching her memory.

“Wine? No. No, nothing like that, not for ages. The last time I remember liquor being delivered was the bottle of scotch he usually sends Dr. Alcott, for his birthday.”

Catherine heard Angela sniff, the memories of working for Charles Chandler clearly making her a little weepy. “That was weeks ago,” Angela added, her voice trembling, just a bit.

It was. And clearly, this conversation was doing little to solve the mystery of “Claret,” but it was doing much, to agitate her father’s former housekeeper.

“He... he was always so good to me, Miss. To me and my family. Sent Deannie a postcard from Paris, he did, just so she’d have a stamp to add to her collection.”

“He was like that.” Catherine hugged the phone to her ear. “I know you miss him, Angela. I do, too.”

This is... exhausting. Talking to other people who loved him. And it's not helping...

“There will never be another one like him. Oh! Paris! That reminds me! There was a delivery!” Angela declared. “But it wasn’t for liquor. Too light. A long rectangle box, and fairly big. It came just as I was leaving. I put it on the top shelf in the foyer closet, and left Mr. Chandler a note about it.”

Catherine sat up, in the chair. “When was this?” Catherine asked. She’d seen no such package in the apartment, or among Charles’ things.

“Couldn’t have been a day or more before... before...” Angela began to choke up, and Catherine could hear the tears in her voice.

“...before he passed, Miss. I’m so sorry.”

Catherine closed her eyes over the sympathy. “I know. I know you are. I’m sorry to bring all this up, Angela, truly. I was just chasing down a silly lead. One I thought might be important, for some reason. He wrote ‘Claret’ on a piece of paper, and I just wanted to know what it was, that’s all.”

“Did you try Miss Kay?” Angela ventured.

Yes. She cried, too.

“I did. And the Aronsons. And Peter Alcott. More. They all said they had no clue. I just... I wanted to make sure I’d covered all the bases.”

Angela sniffed loudly, again, and blew her nose. “I understand. Of course you’d want to know. I just... if I remember anything, I can give you a call?” she asked.

"You can give me a call anytime," Catherine replied gently, signing off and softly hanging up the phone.

As the plastic receiver was returned to its cradle, Catherine stared at it, for a long minute.

I'm being ridiculous. And I'm probably just upsetting everyone who knew him. If it was truly something important, someone would have known about it.

Catherine sighed, and let the idea of tracking down the mysterious word go. Angela was the last person she could think of that might be able to help her.

Everyone else had drawn a blank, and Kay had actually burst into tears, at the conversation. The normally jovial Hal Sherwood had choked up, and Catherine had heard him blowing his nose into the voluminous white handkerchief he was never without, over long distance. Jay Coolidge had grown somber, and the Aronsons were upset that they were of no help.

This is doing more harm than good. Daddy would tell me that's a good sign that it's time to stop.

Charles had been well liked, and often, much-loved. His passing was still too fresh, to those who knew him well. Chasing down a random word wasn't helping anyone with their grief. And it wasn't getting his apartment packed, a chore she'd gotten a little further with, last night. She'd emptied the rest of the contents of his desk, and finished with the bookshelves. Movers would come for the remaining furniture. She was making progress. It just felt slow.

"I think I'm going to have to take this under advisement, Daddy," Catherine whispered to the plastic of the silent phone. "It's just upsetting everyone. I know you understand. I love you."

She looked at her desk calendar. Like her father, she kept important dates in boxes. She had one coming up.

“The closing on the apartment is the day after tomorrow. I only have a few more things to see to. We all miss you, Daddy,” she said to his memory.

“I better go make sure it’s ready.”

Shouldering her purse, she returned to Charles’ Manhattan apartment for what she knew would be the last time.

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The drive over was a welcome distraction. But when Catherine put her key in the lock, even that sound had a hollow feel, as if the door was telegraphing the current state of the apartment. The heavy door swung inward, soundlessly. A formerly slight squeak had been oiled.

The space, once so full of Charles Chandler, was now all but barren.

The movers had come, and taken away what little furniture had remained. The television was gone, and the big sofa Charles had sat on when he was watching a ball game. The shelves, the books, the coffee table... it was all gone. The living room carpet smelled of fresh shampoo, and the wood smelled of lemon polish. A short step ladder sat to one side of the room, the now-gone workmen in the midst of putting up new vertical blinds on all the windows, a chore that would be complete by tomorrow. The light fixtures gleamed. The place was getting ready for its last inspection, before it was returned.

Catherine walked into the empty space, the space that had still contained something of Charles Chandler, before. Gone were the mementos and photographs, the magazines and the newspapers that had been still sitting on a side table, the day he’d died. Gone were the slippers he favored on Sunday, and the wooden bowl where he’d kept

his keys, and his loose change. Gone was the side table he'd used to catch the mail, and the larger one he'd taken his meals on.

There was a difference between placing an order to have the furniture removed, and now actually seeing the results of that. A difference between calling a service to make the apartment "move in ready" and realizing the front door no longer squeaked, and the unpaneled walls all sported a fresh coat of neutral paint.

If Catherine had thought the place was empty when it no longer contained Charles, the apartment was now cavernous, by comparison. Cavernous, and personality-less.

She could all but hear an echo, as she walked through the empty dining area, and into the vacant kitchen. Only the hum of the refrigerator kept her company.

Gone. He's gone. All of it. Gone...

Catherine moved through the empty space, feeling like she could hear her own heart beating, loud, inside her chest.

Empty. It feels so... empty. So wrong, somehow.

She walked into his bedroom, still not mentally ready to see how barren it was, without the big four poster that used to dominate it, and the huge wardrobe that Catherine joked was barely big enough to hold her father's collection of neckties. The closets were empty, save for a few wooden hangers that still dangled. Catherine took them down.

No sense leaving something for someone else to have to do, she thought.

The windows sparkled from a fresh cleaning, and the nail holes in the wall that had sported photographs, Charles' law degree, or other memorabilia had been patched and painted. A loose knob on the

medicine chest in his bathroom had been replaced, as had a cracked tile on the bathroom floor. Everything gleamed.

It all looked so... unlived in.

The door to the study sat ajar. Catherine approached it, carefully. Like the entryway door, a gentle push sent it swinging noiselessly inward.

The large room Charles had used as an office was now a barren place, the huge desk gone to storage, the other things either in boxes at Catherine's, or given to charity. The room felt both open and cold, in spite of heat coming from the radiator, and the orange glow from the setting December sun, coming through the balcony windows.

Someone will move in here. Someone will make it a home, Catherine thought, trying to cheer herself a little, with the knowledge. There was not so much more to know.

She looked down at the carpet, still able to discern where the desk had sat, despite the rug cleaners' best efforts. The heavy piece of furniture had left a slight depression, in the deeply tufted fabric.

Catherine smiled at the thought that Charles Chandler's presence in this place couldn't be erased entirely, in spite of everyone's best efforts.

"Give 'em hell, Daddy," Catherine whispered, bending to rub her fingers along the deep groove left by the weight of the wood. It made her feel better.

She rose after a moment, and sighed. And then, she remembered what Angela had said.

A package. From Paris.

She left the familiar room. *Some shirts, probably, with matching ties, if I know Daddy. A package Angela said she put in the foyer closet. Daddy*

would have opened it and put whatever it was away, of course. He had time to. But just in case...

Catherine retraced her steps to the foyer closet, the one where Charles traditionally kept things like his winter coat, his umbrella, and in the bottom, his golf clubs. As entryway closets went, it was a small space, not meant to store much beyond the usual. As the first closet you found when you entered the apartment, Catherine had emptied it, before.

She opened the door.

The space looked empty.

The short metal rod normally used to hang clothes was barren of anything, and Catherine knew she'd given Charles' golf clubs and his tennis racket to Peter Alcott. The clothes had gone in a charity box, and the contents of his briefcase had gone back to Chandler and Coolidge, with Catherine keeping the case.

Catherine reached up and put her hand on the shelf above the rod, the one where Charles usually put the briefcase. She felt nothing. Nothing, but flat, empty shelf. One she couldn't see, thanks to her short stature.

"I want to be sure," she said aloud, looking around for something to stand on. She dragged over the short step ladder the workmen had left, and climbed up.

There was a grey box on the shelf. And it had been pushed far to the back.

Probably thanks to being nudged there by his briefcase? Catherine thought.

“Hello. What are you?” she said aloud, reaching in. She tugged the box forward. It had a little weight to it, but not much. As Angela had said, it was doubtful that it contained wine.

As she tugged the box farther out of its hiding place, she noticed a familiar name on the side, and smiled, “Marie’s! Oh, Daddy. You bought yourself something nice.” She climbed down from the short step ladder, the long box in hand. “Marie’s was your favorite.”

Tres Marie’s was famous for dressing its well-heeled clientele. Charles owned more than one custom-tailored suit, ordered from the exclusive – and very expensive little shop, and years ago, Catherine’s graduation gown, complete with hand-sewn jet beadwork, had come from there.

The tape that held the lid to the box had been cut, indicating that whatever was inside, Charles had already inspected it. Catherine lifted the lid gently, and saw a wealth of white tissue paper covering up the contents of the box.

On top of the tissue paper was an envelope. One addressed to her, in Charles Chandler’s precise, flowing script – ~ ‘*For Catherine*’ ~ it said.

“Oh... Daddy...” Catherine sighed.

With trembling fingers, Catherine opened the envelope.

My Beautiful Daughter, the message began.

Catherine fought back tears.

For years, I’ve bought things from Marie’s. Shirts, slacks, jackets... even the occasional tie you insist I need no more of. But this time, I bought something for you. The last time I was in Paris, Marie showed me sketches of an idea she had for a beautiful gown, and I knew it would be perfect for you, just for you. I thought it would make a lovely

present, and I'm way past the time when I resist indulging my whims, especially when it comes to you. It made me happy to do it.

I love you, Cathy. I always will.

"Oh, Daddy," Catherine repeated, letting the tears fall. When her vision cleared enough, she continued reading:

Now, I can never remember the names of colors. To an old man like me, blue is blue and purple is purple. All these fancy names like "azure" and "aubergine," they're just too silly for the lawyer in me, so before I forget, I want you to know I had Marie repeat the name of this particular shade, just so I could write it down, just so I could tell it to you...

--

Chapter Four

A Study In Claret



Vincent raced to Catherine's apartment. The bond had been sending him strong signals since early evening, and he all but willed the setting

sun to finish going down, so he could reach his love. He knew she'd been at her father's apartment, and was now home. He knew she wasn't in danger. But she wasn't... she wasn't anything else he could name, either.

He didn't know what to think. By turns, Catherine had been wistful, touched, sad, wry, surprised, and... he had no word for what she now was. "Stunned" came closest, though he wasn't sure that was right. He only knew she was all but willing him to her, to her apartment. And so he came.

The park was busy, and the crowded evening strollers made his progress slow. Carolers were singing Christmas tunes, and hoping for the first soft blanket of snow.

Vincent concealed himself because he had to, and willed the ambling New Yorkers along.

Nothing about Catherine told him things were "urgent." But on the other hand, the fact that he had no clear word for what she was feeling made Vincent all the more anxious to reach her.

He ended up pinned in a stand of oak, while a young couple had an argument in front of him, then trapped again, amidst some pines, while a group of skateboarders used the concrete pathway to practice tricks.

Frustration at not being able to move faster wore on him. *I'm coming, Catherine. I swear I am. And then perhaps you can explain to me what it is you're feeling?*

An hour and more past when he'd *wanted* to be there, he climbed to her balcony as quickly as his great strength would bear him to go, skipping several rungs on the fire escape ladder to attain his goal. He expected to find her already on her terrace, waiting for him, and was surprised to see that she wasn't.

Whatever this was about, clearly he was going to have to come inside her apartment, to see it.

The door unlocked, he carefully stepped inside. A single lamp lit the space, struggling to push the shadows back.

"Catherine?" he called, piercing the low light of the room with eyes accustomed to tunnel lighting. A long, grey box sat on her dining table. The space was strewn with white tissue paper.

There was no answer, yet he knew she was here. He felt her presence. *Perhaps she's stepped back out onto the balcony from her bedroom*, he thought, turning to retrace his steps.

"Vincent?" He heard her voice, from behind him. It trembled, a little. "I... I found it. That is... I found 'Claret.'"

He spun around, and in the dim light of the lamp, he could see her, as she emerged through her bedroom doors.

And he could see claret. Yards of it, in fact.

Her hair was down, and slightly tousled, from having put on the dress. Her sandy bangs looked wispy, and side-swept. Her green eyes looked cat-proud, and beautiful, in an almost feline way.

She looked so... so *familiar*, it nearly made his heart ache. After all, it was an image of her he'd been seeing for months on end.

"Claret," he whispered, reverence in the sound. "Of course."

In the dim light of the room, she stepped closer, the soft rustle of expensive velvet making an elegant sound, as it moved across her carpet. The long, familiar gown had a slight train.

"It... it wasn't a place. Or a person. Or a company, or a wine..." she said, still moving toward him. Long, tapered sleeves covered part of the back of her hands, past the wrist.

“It was a color,” he concluded for her. She could hear the veneration in his voice.

“Yes,” she said simply. Catherine’s white, bare shoulders gleamed softly in the lamplight, the bodice of the gown hugging her form like it had been made for her, just for her.

Which of course, it had.

The familiarity of it, of the vision she presented, made Vincent’s heart skip a beat. Catherine Chandler looked as if she’d stepped out of a painting by Kristopher Gentian, and into his life.

“The dress in the portrait.” He said it so softly, and with such awe, he wasn’t even sure she’d heard him.



“Yes. A portrait... my father never saw. He ordered this dress. He had it *made* for me, Vincent... in Paris. It came from Paris.”

Vincent stepped toward her and looked over her shoulder to the open cardboard box that was still on her dining room table. The name “Tres Marie’s” was written in fancy black letters, on the side of the box. A red and blue stamped postmark was inked across the top right corner, and another one, a black one, was stamped over that.

You came a long way. A long way, to reach us, he thought.

“My father... he wanted to give me a special gift. Marie’s was where he had a gown made for me, the summer I graduated from law school. Before I started working at Chandler and Coolidge. Before... everything.” Her voice held more than a touch of awe.

She looked down at the deep red gown. “I guess they kept my measurements,” she said, as if that were the important thing.

The dress Vincent had gone to sleep seeing her in, gleamed back at him, the red velvet picking up light and shadow, in its elegant folds. It shifted as she moved. She was a vision.

You are... incredible. In so many ways, he thought.

Vincent thought that Catherine looked even lovelier in the dress now than she did in the painting, if that was possible. For all of Kristopher’s considerable talent, he’d captured her image, but not “her.”

The living woman stood before Vincent, confused, and full of wonder, both awestruck and uncertain, and more beautiful than any fantasy image any artist could ever conceive.

She took a deep breath, and the velvet across her breasts rose and fell, with the gesture. Her skin looked luminous, against the deep wine color, and her lovely eyes were searching his, trying to find some kind of understanding.

“He ordered it. One of a kind. From Marie’s. For me.”

Watching her, Vincent realized his brain was slow to process what she was saying.

Charles Chandler ordered a dress to be made. In Paris. A red dress. This dress. A dress her father never saw, in a portrait he never beheld, painted by a... a spirit none of us is even sure is real. And he wrote down the name of a color, so that Catherine, and Catherine alone, would find it.

And so "Claret" is--

"He wrote me a letter, and tucked it in the box," Catherine said, interrupting Vincent's train of thought. "He said he kept forgetting what they called the color, and wanted to remember. He knew it was a wine, and thought "Burgundy," but knew that was wrong. So he called the shop and asked Marie, and she said... 'Claret.' She told him ... 'Claret.'"

And he wrote the word down. And circled it, and underlined it, to help him remember. To help him... gift it to you, joyously. Vincent's heart swelled, at the thought. *Oh, Catherine...*

"It's just... it's just red," she finished. She ran a soft hand over even softer fabric, as if she couldn't quite believe that the dress was real, in spite of the fact that she was wearing it.

"I would say it is much more than 'just red,' Catherine," Vincent replied, awed by the magic of it. That a dressmaker in France had created a gown that was the twin of the one in the Gentian portrait, and at Charles Chandler's urging...

There's magic in us, Catherine. In us and all around us. How can we ever doubt it? Ever?

"How did... how *could* my father know that this was the dress in the portrait?" Catherine asked.

“Or perhaps the more wondrous question: How did Kristopher know to paint you in a dress that hadn’t been created, yet?” Vincent asked, just as amazed as she was.

The riddle of it spun, in Catherine’s brain.

“I... It’s... impossible. Isn’t it?” she asked.

It was. And considering all that they were, perhaps it wasn’t. Vincent closed his eyes a moment, and let his understanding go.

Yes. Impossible. Absolutely impossible. Like we are impossible. Like either everything in life is a miracle, or nothing is.

“Perhaps... Magic... exists. All around us. With us. In us,” he said. *What a great comfort it is, to believe that’s true.*

“I... I don’t know what to think,” she confessed.

Then don’t think. Don’t even try. Just feel it, Catherine. It’s all right if you do. Your father would have wanted it that way, I think.

“I think that dress is beautiful. As are you,” Vincent replied, holding out his arms for a longed-for embrace.

She stepped into them, and he felt the elegant, expensive fabric crush just a little, beneath his hands.

“Beautiful... and perfect,” he added, loving her with all his heart. He brushed a soft kiss across the crown of her head.

She stepped back and inhaled deeply, once again. The motion caused her breasts to lift a little, again, in the perfectly tailored, off-the-shoulder dress.

Vincent mentally addressed her gown. *I don’t know if Marie designed you or Kristopher did, but whoever is responsible, you’re made to make a man think of things he shouldn’t, to wish for things he can’t have...*

The thought drifted away.

“Vincent...”

He looked back into the only eyes that had ever owned his soul. “Yes?”

“I... I want something. Please.”

“Anything,” he answered, aware that his voice was just a touch hoarse.

“I’ve been thinking all evening, and I ... I... no matter what, no matter how the dress came to be ... I want to get married in it. Whenever you say, but I want *this* to be my wedding gown. Not something white, or something with a veil. Just this. Just this,” she repeated. “In my father’s last gift to me, I want to marry you.”

Vincent’s heart exploded. “You want...” once again, his brain was struggling to keep up with the facts that were presented to him.

“I do,” she said, using marriage words. “I want to marry you. And I want to do it... in Claret.”

Vincent kept her hands in his, and squeezed them, gently. “I think that can be arranged,” he replied solemnly.

“It... it would mean something,” she pressed. “Many things, I suppose. My head spins from it, when I try to think about it all.”

I know. I know it does. It’s all right, Catherine. Your father loved you. He left you a beautiful gift. Perhaps that’s the important thing. Perhaps that’s all you truly need to know.

“It... it would mean so *much*,” Catherine insisted.

Vincent considered her words. *Yes. Yes it would. More than either of us thought. More than even I thought, a moment ago.*

“It would mean that Kristopher’s portrait is... more than just a portrait, for one thing,” Vincent intoned.

Her green eyes searched his blue ones. "Painted over a year ago. Or in oils, years ago... but it... it couldn't be."

"It couldn't be. And yet it is," Vincent replied, simply.

Catherine's brow furrowed, following the thought down. *Kristopher... It wasn't just a picture of us. Just some... some random portrait... As fantastic as it was even then... it's even more so...*

She was catching up to him. "It... it would mean... that Kristopher's painting, the one that shouldn't even be possible... that's our wedding portrait. It was always meant to be our wedding portrait. Isn't it?"

Catherine asked. Her heart filled, with the love of understanding.

Vincent nodded. "And perhaps Kristopher knew all along," Vincent replied, lowering his forehead so that it touched hers. "I'm glad your father had a hand in it. Even if he didn't realize he did."

Catherine closed her eyes, both struggling with all that implied, and strangely, at peace with it. "My father couldn't have known. He couldn't have."

Vincent disagreed, gently. "We are surrounded by enchantments, Catherine. In wondrous bits of magic, large and small. And sometimes... sometimes, you can't help but believe in them."

He slid his hands up her arms to the elbows, just for the pleasure of feeling the velvety texture that covered them.

Beautiful Catherine. A bride. My bride. Soon.

"Just so we're clear... I just asked you to marry me," Catherine stated.

He didn't miss a beat. "And, just so we are clear, I accepted."

"You'll need red gloves." She remembered the portrait.

"I already have them."

“And your cape.”

And a dark night, with a touch of mist. And a look of love on your face so deep it humbles me.

“And my bride. I have it, Catherine. I have it all,” he said, knowing it was true, and in more ways than one.

Catherine’s brow furrowed, some. “If my father hadn’t written it down, I never would have called Angela. I never would have looked. Funny thing is, I swear that closet was cleaned out. I looked in it myself, before. When I was giving away Daddy’s things.”

Vincent knew there might be a ghost to blame, for that.

“You did not see the box?” he asked.

Catherine shrugged, struggling to hold onto some sense of reality. “It was on the top shelf, kind of shoved toward the back. I must have missed it. But... why would Angela put a box back so far you couldn’t see it? Even Daddy’s briefcase wouldn’t have pushed it back *that* far.”

Perhaps it was more of Kristopher’s mischief, to hide it from you.

Perhaps Angela is another name for Angel, and those too, are among us. Perhaps spirits are real, and they sometimes walk among us.

Perhaps many things. Perhaps nothing. I love you, Catherine. And I believe in it. I believe in all of it. I believe we are wondrous, and that life is good.

I don’t know the ‘why’s’ of all things. And right now, I don’t even think I need to.

“Perhaps it’s best if we don’t ask too many questions, and just accept the gift we’ve been given,” he whispered into her soft bangs.

She lifted her head. “I think you’re right,” she replied, accepting his gentle kiss.

When it broke, her loving gaze could not be dimmed.

“When?” she asked, not allowing an inch of space between them.

“When shall we be married, Vincent?”

His blood was running high, and the kiss had left him a taste of her promise.

“An hour from now, if I can get Father out of bed, and finding his book of ceremonies,” he answered sincerely.

She smiled at him, and her cheeks warmed, and pinked a little, at odds with the beautiful claret-colored gown she wore. Her soft laugh captivated him.

He tugged her out to the wintry air of the balcony, knowing the chill would cool her fevered skin, and his, as well. It felt good. He stood behind her and wrapped her in his arms, aware that the pose mimicked the one in the portrait. The distant sound of carolers singing in the park reached his sensitive ears.

“They’re singing for us. Glory Hallelujah, and Amen,” he said, leaning down to whisper in her ear.

“They are,” she agreed, catching the faint, slightly tinkling sound of distant voices and silvery bells. It reminded her of the music she’d danced to last year, with him, at Winterfest.

“An hour from now,” he pressed. “No, wait. Winterfest. Does the week give you enough time to prepare?”

She settled her back against him, familiarity and possession in every inch of the gesture. His right arm drew across her collar bone, while the left one cradled her arm. She knew they both now looked very close to their likeness in the incredible portrait. She remembered that there

was a gauzy atmosphere to the background. One that wasn't present, right now.

"It does," she replied, looking out at the park. The park where he'd first found her. The park where she knew he'd take her strolling, the night she became his wife.

"I have my parents' wedding rings," she said. "I took them out of my dad's safe. I wanted to keep them near. I wasn't sure why. Now... I am," she said.

They will be near. Forever, now, he thought.

"A rose. I want you to have a rose. A red one. A... claret one," he corrected himself. "I'll get it," he said, knowing he would.

She'd leave him to that.

"I'll need to get a decent pair of boots, for when we go walking," she replied contentedly. "I happen to know there's going to be just a touch of mist, that night."

"You don't say." She could hear the smile in his voice.

That's it. That's it, Catherine. Accept it. Accept the magic in us. We are glorious.

"Oh. I definitely do," she proclaimed, giving his arm a squeeze.



And so there was.



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The rose in Kristopher's portrait of Vincent and Catherine may have magically appeared there at a later date. (A ghost who can create an oil painting in no time can certainly touch it up a bit, as he wishes.)

And it may have been influenced by Judith Nolan, who has also been known to touch things up a bit, from time to time.

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No matter where you are in your own fairy tale, I wish you love, ~ Cindy