

VANTAGE POINT

By Maryann Wood

RATING: PG 13. LANGUAGE.

CLASSIFICATION: SND

SUMMARY: A take on how things could have happened after the episodes TLBL.

AUTHOR'S NOTES: The story is told through three character's vantage points. For the purposes of this story Elliot did not help Vincent and is still alive. Diana did help Vincent and Jacob escape but did not kill Gabriel in the process. Gabriel is still at large. This story will be told in four parts.

PART THREE: ELLIOT

CHAPTER ONE

Elliot Burch knew he was a powerful man. He had worked his way up from nothing to be one of the richest men in the state of New York. At first it had been all about being an architect. He wanted to build beautiful buildings that would be known world around. He wanted to be sought after. He accomplished all that by thirty years of age. Then it became about building his empire. Every tower, every resort, and every complex was a notch on his belt. He learned how to manipulate people. How to use charitable donations to further his agenda. So, at forty years old he thought he had it all. Wealth, power, women, and respect. He need only snap his fingers and it was his.

Then he met Catherine Chandler.

At the first sight of her, he was smitten. She was so regal and had an air of confidence about her that drew him to her immediately. He'd never forget that night at the art gallery donation gala. Their eyes had met from across the room like some sort of romance novel. He had to know all about her. It was easy to find out. After all, she was the infamous Catherine Chandler. Daughter of Charles Chandler. Ex-girlfriend of Tom Gunther. The woman who had left a prestigious job with her

father's law firm to work for the District Attorney's Office. She had wealth of her own, so he knew she wasn't a gold-digger.

Catherine Chandler had fascinated him from the first moment he set eyes on her. To say it was love at first sight was a little far-fetched, but he knew he wanted her, and he was used to getting what he wanted.

Everything went well at first. He wined and dined her and made romantic overtures that were more embarrassing to him than they were to her. He felt a connection growing between them, but something was holding her back. He didn't know what, or - what it turned out to be - who, had a hold on her heart.

Elliot knew the moment that what he felt for her was love. That was when she walked away from him, walked out of his life. Convinced he was behind the elderly people being forced away from their homes. If he was truthful with himself now, he really was behind it, however unknowingly. What hurt the most was the betrayal and disappointment he saw in her eyes before she left. He had lost her respect. He had lost her.

Then Cathy came back. With the most ridiculous request from her that he had ever heard. Plastic explosives? At first, he thought she was jesting, but the sound of her voice and the look on her face told him otherwise. So, he acquiesced to her request. It wasn't without reward. She promised to be in the next time he called on her, and she was. No matter how forced the reunion was, it gave him a new sense of hope to have her on his arm once again. By giving her what she had asked for, he was able to start chipping away at that wall she had built around herself when it came to him. If there was one thing he was good at, it was taking down walls.

So, Elliot bided his time. He knew Cathy would come to him again. It was inevitable. Little did he know that it would be him going to her for help instead. She did help. Without hesitation. He lost his father that night. Hell, they almost died together. If anything good had come out of that night, it was being able to share his past with her. Telling her how he rose from nothing to build an empire. She accepted him without conditions. She let him kiss her, and it was with that kiss that his love for her had encompassed his whole heart. He would not stop until she was in his arms.

Life, though, had its setbacks. He was on the verge of losing everything he had worked his whole life to build. Then he was approached with an offer. An offer to save his empire by laundering money through his deals with companies. Dirty

money went into his pocket, and he repaid his benefactor with clean money plus whatever he was required to skim off the top. He put his neck on the line with each dirty deal. So, he went from having everyone in his pocket to being in the pocket of the most ruthless man he had ever met. Known to him only as Gabriel.

It was after his dealings with Gabriel started that Cathy went missing. He put whatever men he still had in his corner on finding her, but his efforts were fruitless. She figuratively fell off the face of the planet. Months passed and nothing was found. Gabriel still called on him from time to time, and he had play advocate for him. It was during one of those calls that his first real break in finding Cathy happened.

Gabriel summoned him to one of his buildings one night and, of course, Elliot went immediately. Gabriel needed him to make another shady deal with one of his rivals. Elliot could tell that he was anxious to get this meeting over with. The man was in a hurry.

When the meeting was over and he rose from his seat, Elliot had a glimpse of the monitor behind Gabriel. What he saw almost stopped his heart. It was Cathy, and she looked to be in pain. He quickly looked away, not wanting to let Gabriel think he had seen anything. Surely the man knew of his past relationship with Catherine Chandler. Why he would risk having Elliot see her on the monitor was beyond him, but he wasn't about to squander it. He left quickly and went down to his town car, where his bodyguard and ally, Cleon, was waiting.

"Circle around the building then park across the street from the garage," Elliot told him.

Cleon turned in the driver's seat to look at him. "Why? We usually get you the hell out of here after you deal with that jerk."

"You're not going to believe me, but I saw Cathy in there. She's in trouble. We need to come up with a plan to get her out of there tonight."

"You're right, I don't believe you. If she is, in fact, in there, we're never going to be able to get her out undetected."

"It was Cathy, Cleon. I would recognize her anywhere. To think, all this time Gabriel had her in his grasp. So, we wait. The only way out of the building is through the parking garage."

He made Cleon wait. They'd wait until Gabriel left, then enter the building again to look for Cathy. Hopefully, the man wouldn't have taken her with him.

They didn't have to wait long. An hour later, a helicopter took off from the roof, no doubt holding Gabriel.

Elliot was out of the car in a flash. Tearing through the building, he found the room that looked like the one he had seen Catherine in on the monitor. The amount of blood scared him. There was a trail of it that he followed to the roof. Once there, he saw something he couldn't describe. A man, or some sort of animal, in a dark cloak was carrying Cathy's limp body away down the fire escape.

Elliot quickly made his way back to the stairwell, screaming for Cleon.

"Elliot! What the hell?" Cleon said, meeting him several floors down.

"We need to get outside now!"

Both men burst out onto the street. Elliot frantically looked around, then spotted Catherine and the beast man disappear into an alleyway.

"Get the car! Meet me on the other side of this alleyway!" he ordered, and ran towards the alley before Cleon had a chance to protest.

Elliot caught sight of the two further down. He stuck to the shadows as he tailed them. From what he could tell, Cathy was unaware of what was happening. At the end of the alley, he caught sight of the beast man hugging the walls of the buildings as he made his way down the street.

Elliot saw Cleon and motioned towards the couple, indicating to follow them. He would follow on foot in case the beast man took off down another alleyway. It wasn't long before he realized that they were headed to Cathy's apartment.

A block away from her building, Cleon stopped the car for Elliot to get in. "What is that thing?" he asked as they followed the couple slowly around the rear of the building. It was there they saw the beast man scale up the fire escape to the roof with Catherine clutched in his arms.

"Stay here, Cleon. I'm going to wait outside of her apartment. If he leaves with her, send the doorman up to me. If he's alone, come up."

"Are you sure that's wise? Going up there alone?"

"I'm not losing her. Just do what I pay you for."

With that, Elliot was out the door and around to the front of the building. Minutes later he was standing outside Cathy's apartment, his ear to her door. He couldn't hear anything. He clutched the key to her apartment that he had bought months ago from the superintendent, fighting the urge to burst inside. He didn't know what he was up against, so he stood there for hours.

At six in the morning, Cleon came up through the stairwell. "He left alone" was all he said.

Elliot nodded and inserted his key in the lock. "Please, God," he whispered, and pushed the door open.

They walked into the apartment cautiously. Elliot took a few steps further into the apartment, looking around. Then he saw her through the louvered doors of her bedroom.

She was lying on the bed, impossibly still. His heart broke at the sight of her.

Cleon approached her first and checked for a pulse. He then frowned at his friend and shook his head no.

"No," Elliot mumbled, tears streaming down his cheeks. "No, she can't be." He ran to the side of the bed and lifted her up in his arms, shaking her. "Cathy, wake up. You're not doing this to me."

She remained unresponsive in his arms.

She was still warm. Unusually warm for someone who was supposed to be dead.

He pulled her mouth close to his ear and listened. "Please, God," he prayed again quietly, unable to stop crying. "Please don't take her from me." After a long pause, he felt it. A slight outflow of breath.

"She's not dead, Cleon. I felt her breathe. Call Doctor Rollins now. She's not dead yet. I can hear her breathing."

"Elliot, she has no pulse."

"Check again then, and call the damn doctor! She's alive, but if we don't get her help, she won't be for long."

With a sigh, Cleon approached them and pressed his fingers back against Catherine's neck. It only took a beat when he looked up at Elliot, amazed.

“God, Elliot, you’re right. Lay her down on the floor. Start CPR on her to keep her heart going.”

Doctor Rollins was there within a half hour. After a quick examination, he pointed out the needle marks and could only assume it was an overdose. “I’m going to give her a dose of Naloxone. It counteracts opioid overdoses.”

“Gabriel tried to kill her, Cleon!” Elliot cried, holding Catherine in his arms and kissing her face. “What happens if he finds out she’s alive? He’ll try again. We need to hide her away.”

The doctor worked on her all morning until she was stable. “She’s given birth recently. Do either of you know where the baby is?” he asked.

“Oh, Cathy,” Elliot said, kneeling down next to the bed, holding onto her hand.

“No. This is how we found her,” Cleon said, answering for them both.

Elliot had to think. Gabriel must have taken the baby. That’s where all the blood came from. Cathy had just given birth and then was left there to die alone. If Gabriel found out she was still alive, he’d send someone to finish the job. There had to be a way to make Gabriel believe that he had succeeded in killing her.

“We have to make everyone think that she’s dead,” Elliot began. “Doctor Rollins, you’re a coroner when you’re on duty. Cleon, call our contacts with the EMTs. Make sure when the 911 call comes that they respond to it. Tell them to declare her DOA. You, Dr. Rollins, make it official. Have them take her to the morgue on 27th Street. I’ll handle it from there. I’ll have a million dollars wired into your account by the end of the day if you make this happen. Stay with her until she gets to the morgue. Don’t let anyone else touch her.”

“Elliot, this is ridiculous. The place will be swarming with police and detectives. There’ll be an investigation, and…” Cleon began to say before Elliot interrupted him.

“What’s ridiculous is you thinking I’m going to abandon her to Gabriel’s plans. It’s Cathy. You know what she means to me. You know I’d do anything for her. Call Greg Hudes. Tell him to take charge of the scene. Money will be wired to him as well. Make this happen, Cleon. Money is no concern. I have hidden accounts. You know this. Everyone who helps us will have a large amount of money wired to them if I have Cathy in my arms at the end of the day.”

“Mr. Burch,” Dr. Rollins interrupted. “She may not make it still. An overdose like this could have serious complications.”

“Then you’ll have to do everything in your power to make sure that she survives. Get her safely to the morgue and then you’ll be released from further responsibility. I’ll take care of it from there.”

“If you insist on doing this, Mr. Burch, we’ll have to act now. She needs medical attention. I have a client in the building a few floors down. Make the call. I’ll just happen to be in the building already and I can be a first responder. I make no promises though. There will be police and detectives all around here. It will be a murder investigation.”

“Do whatever you have to do to get her to the morgue. Page Cleon when you’re on route. We’ll be ready for your arrival.”

The doctor nodded and gathered his equipment. “Make the call now. I’ll be downstairs visiting my client,” he said, then left the two men alone in the apartment.

“Make the calls, Cleon. Call from the pay phone downstairs. We don’t need them tracing the call to her apartment. I’ll meet you downstairs in a minute. We have to get things ready for when Catherine arrives at the morgue.”

Cleon nodded at his friend and left Elliot alone with Catherine. Once he was gone, Elliot gently stroked the hair away from her face. “It’s going to be okay, Cathy,” he whispered to her. “I’m going to take care of you. You’re going to be fine. I just need you to hold on a bit longer. Okay? I love you, Cathy.”

He kissed her softly on the lips then laid her hand down on the bed. With one final look, Elliot quickly left the apartment, locking it behind him.

Police were arriving when he got to the lobby. Cleon had made the call. He passed Detective Huges, who gave a confirmation nod. Things were in motion.

He left the building and got into the waiting town car. “27th Street morgue, Cleon,” he said as they pulled away from the curb. “It’s time to call in another favour.”

CHAPTER TWO

Elliot realized that, when everything was said and done, it turned out it was relatively easy to fake a person's death. If you had the money, you could make anything happen. A phone call here, a cheque handed over there. The pathologist needed a medical indiscretion taken care of, and there were no shortages of Jane Does in New York City.

By the end of the day, Cathy lay in a private clinic and Elliot sat by her side. She still hadn't woken up but was breathing on her own.

The doctor stood next to the bed, explaining his primary diagnosis. "She reacts to pain stimulus and her pupils react to light. Which is a good sign. It rules out brain death. I'd need to have more tests performed to give you a better diagnosis," the doctor told him.

He had them perform any test that was needed to help her.

Elliot held his head in his hands when the doctor came back with the results a day later. She was in a toxic-metabolic coma combined with extreme trauma.

"It's not exactly a coma, more of a minimal conscious state. She is showing some signs of awareness. Only time will tell when she may wake up, though," the clinic doctor explained. "With the overdose and the trauma she experienced, it's her body's way of healing itself. Don't give up hope. Talk to her. Make sure she knows that she has someone who loves her waiting for her."

Elliot did just that.

He stayed at her side for a week. Holding her hand. Telling her how much he loved her, and that if she would just wake up, he'd take her away somewhere safe. Somewhere no one would find her or hurt her again.

"I'll buy us a boat, Cathy," Elliot said, kissing the palm of her hand. "We'll sail across the Atlantic. We'll go north, towards Norway. We'll see the Northern Lights, the whales. Then, each night, when you find the cold too much, I'll hold you tightly in my arms and keep you warm and safe. It will be magical, Cathy; you just need to wake up."

He stared down at her face, looking for any sort of reaction, but saw none.

He sighed and pressed the palm of her hand against his face and closed his eyes. He smelled a faint scent at her wrist which he could only describe as *Cathy*. He tried to fight the tears that threatened to fall but failed, and he wiped them away with his free hand as he continued to talk to her.

“Please, Cathy, I need you to wake up. Gab...that man summoned me again. He needs me to go and take care of some business for him. I can’t refuse him. Not with you in this condition. If he gets any indication that you’re alive and that I’m responsible for it, he’ll kill us both. I don’t care about me, but you, Cathy, you are my world, and I swear I’ll allow no harm to come to you again.”

Elliot stayed by Catherine’s side for hours more. He smiled politely at nursing as they came in regularly to check her vitals. Cleon had had everyone screened that would provide her care, but he still watched their every move. Time wasn’t on his side. If he didn’t report to Gabriel in the next 24 hours, he might as well just call the man up and tell him he had Cathy and where they were. The bastard was ruthless and didn’t care about excuses or explanations. You did what he demanded or you died.

Cleon came in after the sun had gone down. He looked troubled. He walked up to the bed and briefly looked at Catherine. “How’s she doing?” he asked softly.

“Vitals are good but no change. The doctor said it’s just a waiting game now. He’s optimistic that she will wake up but it could be days or weeks.” Elliot paused. He didn’t want to contemplate that the doctor had said it could also be years before she woke.

Cleon nodded but looked away, his foot tapping nervously.

Elliot knew from Cleon’s body language that he needed to say something but didn’t want to. “What is it, Cleon? Just get it over with and tell me.”

Cleon sighed and looked back up. “Gabriel had you paged again. He’s expecting you tomorrow evening. If you don’t go, you know what will happen. I’ve been looking into more long-term possibilities. I found a facility outside of Albany, it’s called Meadow Brook. An old colleague works there now. Richard Fallon. He and I use to run some ops but he got a little greedy. Needless to say, he had to find other work. Anyways, he can be trusted to keep her whereabouts safe. Of course, for a price.”

“Are you sure this man can be trusted? I can’t just leave her with anyone. I need to know that she’ll be well taken care of.”

“Yes, Elliot. He’s tough. He’ll make sure that she’s safe. I can arrange for only a handful of people to oversee her care. The fewer people who know she’s there, the better. You go deal with Gabriel and I’ll see that she gets there safely. You’ll be able to see her again soon. Bring her gifts, things she likes.”

Elliot looked back down at Catherine. She looked so peaceful and beautiful. He didn’t want to leave her but knew he had no choice. If he was going to protect her, he had to look the devil in the face and lie.

“Arrange it then, Cleon. Promise me you won’t leave her until I get there. I need to see this place and talk with your people before I make any final decisions.”

“Of course. I’ll arrange transportation for tomorrow afternoon. Stay with her tonight. I have someone posted outside the room if you need anything.”

Elliot nodded and waved Cleon off. He wanted to be alone with her. At least for a little while.

He stroked the hair away from her face and smiled. “Cleon found you someplace safe to stay,” he whispered. “A place where they’ll take care of you while I’m away. You’ll get the best possible treatment. No expense will be spared.”

He stared down at her for several minutes before removing his shoes and climbing into the bed next to her. He pulled her close and tucked her head under his chin, cradling her in his arms.

“I love you, Cathy.”

Elliot closed his eyes and let the soft sound of her breathing lull him to sleep.

CHAPTER THREE

Elliot sat outside Gabriel’s office on Wall Street. A newspaper was in his lap. On the front page was a story about Cathy and her funeral, held today. It was one of the hardest things he ever had to do - attend the funeral of the woman he loved.

He was amazed at the amount of people who attended. People from all walks of life were there. A few he recognized, most he didn't. She touched so many with her warmth and compassion.

He did feel a tinge of guilt. All these people were grieving her loss while she lay alive and unaware of what was happening in her absence, but it was necessary. No one could know she was alive. It was the only way to protect her.

Elliot tossed the paper in the waste basket next to him then looked down at his watch. He was waiting for the paperwork he needed to go to Los Angeles. Gabriel had insisted on seeing him before he left. Elliot was trying to control his anger. He didn't know how he was going to face the man, knowing what he had done to Catherine. His first instinct was to kill the man. But the likelihood of getting close enough to accomplish that was next to none. Plus, he had Catherine to think of. Going after Gabriel would ensure his own demise. What would happen to her then? So, he had to pull himself together and put a mask of indifference on and show no emotion.

"Mr. Burch, Gabriel will see you now."

Elliot looked up and saw a young man holding the office door open for him. 'All right, Elliot, game time' he thought to himself as he rose from his seat and walked into the devil's den.

Gabriel sat in a high-back chair behind a large mahogany desk. The office was dimly lit, making it hard to make out the expression on the man's face.

"Elliot, glad you could make it. Have a seat," Gabriel said, motioning towards a chair in front of the desk.

Elliot obeyed and sat down, keeping a stoic look on his face.

Gabriel pushed a folder towards Elliot, an indication for him to take it. "I need you to go to L.A. and take care of some complications that have arisen in my shipping company there. It's a little different from what I usually ask of you but I've had some recent developments in my personal affairs that require my attention."

'I bet you have, you bastard,' Elliot thought.

"I'll get right on this. Don't worry. I'll take care of it. I wish you the best you're your personal affairs."

“Yes, yes. Just a minor nuisance. You know how it is: you think you’ve eliminated the problem, only to find out a week later that it festered into something else. I always get what I want in the end though. What about you, Elliot? Was there ever anything, or perhaps anyone, you wanted but couldn’t manage to obtain? Oh well, right? Perhaps your loss was someone else’s gain.”

Elliot clenched his fists at Gabriel’s words. He was talking about Catherine. Gabriel would have had his background searched and would know of everything that happened in his life, including his short love affair with Cathy. The man was throwing it in his face, relishing the fact that he was responsible for Cathy’s supposed death.

Using all the restraint he had, he simply nodded his head. He didn’t trust himself to speak. He wanted to throttle the man. He wanted to scream out, “You didn’t kill her, you bastard. She’s stronger than you. She survived. By God, you’ll pay for what you did to her.”

“Well, Elliot, I need to be off. I have things to attend to. I trust you’ll take care of this matter efficiently. Send word once it’s finished. Don’t stray far though. I anticipate needing your assistance again soon. That will be all.”

Elliot stood and left without another word, knowing he was dismissed. He barely kept his composure intact until he got in the back seat of his town car and ordered Cleon to pull away. Then he let out a scream of rage and threw the envelope to the floor.

“He was taunting me with it, Cleon,” Elliot seethed. “The son of a bitch was basically throwing it in my face that he was responsible for Cathy. I wanted to kill him. I wanted to rip that smug look off his face.”

“Did he suspect anything?” Cleon asked, looking at Elliot in the rearview mirror.

“No. I don’t think... No, he didn’t. I wouldn’t be here right now if he did. He’s sending me to L.A.”

“When do you leave?”

Elliot grabbed the envelope off the floor and opened it. A plane ticket for this evening was inside, along with Gabriel’s instructions on what he needed done.

“My flight leaves in two hours. I don’t have time to see Cathy to Albany. Drop me off at my penthouse then go take care of her for me, please. Make sure she’s

comfortable and taken care of. Get her some comfortable clothes and some classical music that they can play for her. She loves the classical. Tell her I'll be with her as soon as I can. Please make sure she's safe, Cleon. Notify me if anything changes."

"Are you sure you'll be okay on your own? I'll send Brad with you."

Elliot stared out the window and waved his hand indifferently. Nothing mattered except for Cathy. He needed to start planning his escape from Gabriel. The longer he worked as one of his "errand boys" the more danger he posed for Cathy. He had money in offshore accounts but needed to ensure that when he and Cathy disappeared, no one would find them.

When they arrived at his building, Cleon escorted him up to the penthouse and then left him to go fill Brad in on the day's plans.

Elliot went to his bedroom and started to pack for what could be a long trip. When finished, he zipped up his suitcase and carry-on.

Before he left the room, he went to the bedside table and pulled out a small envelope. Opening it, he smiled at the contents. It was pictures of him and Catherine taken by reporters on their few dates. He had paid a good price for a couple of five by seven pictures of them. Some were worn from handling. Cathy looked stunning on his arm. It was where she was meant to be.

He placed the pictures back in the envelope and tucked it carefully in his carry-on. He didn't travel anywhere without those pictures. Sighing, he slung the bag over his shoulder and grabbed the suitcase, leaving the room. He'd do Gabriel's dirty work for now. All the while planning revenge on the man. Yes. In the end he would make sure Gabriel paid for what he had done to Cathy and, with any hope, Cathy herself would be able to look the bastard in the eye and seek her own revenge.

Cleon send him regular updates that Catherine was receiving the best care money could buy. She was still in her coma but was receiving therapy to ensure her muscles didn't seize up. All of her needs were being met.

Elliot returned from L.A. after three months. He reported to Gabriel upon his return. He found the man with a particularly bad wound on the left side of his face. He was extremely ill-tempered and angry.

Elliot stood in front of Gabriel's desk and listened as the man reprimanded him for taking so long to complete the task that was assigned to him. How hard was it to launder two hundred million dollars? How come it had taken so long to make three people who worked closely with the senator, who were trying to double-cross Gabriel, disappear?

Elliot kept his head down, apologized when needed, and promised better results in the future. He knew better than to say anything else.

The money promised to him was wired into his personal account and he was dismissed until he was needed again.

Elliot didn't bother going home first. He ordered Brad to take him straight to Albany to see Cathy. They arrived late in the afternoon and Elliot was brought to a large room with a bay window. He fought back tears as he approached the bed and sat down. She looked like she was sleeping. It seemed that with a simple stroke of a finger against her cheek she would awaken and smile up at him with those beautiful green eyes. He took her hand and kissed her knuckles then placed a gentle kiss on her lips, hoping for anything, but she remained unresponsive.

"I'm back, Cathy," he whispered to her. "Cleon found you this wonderful place. You have a beautiful view of the grounds and, from what it looks like, you'll have the morning sun shining through your window. I'm going to talk with the people here. I'll make sure that they take good care of you. I'll be away from time to time. I have to keep up appearances back in New York. But I promise you I'll visit you whenever I can. I'm going to bring some of your favourite books. I'll make sure someone reads to you daily. They'll play your favourite music. You'll want for nothing. All you have to do is concentrate on coming back to me. You're strong. I know you can do it, Cathy. I love you. I need you back with me, okay?"

He searched her face for any sign of movement but saw none. He placed her hand back down and stood. He needed to talk to the people who were overseeing her care. He wanted to make sure they understood the importance of keeping her stay at this facility secret. He would pay handsomely to all involved.

He found Cleon and another man outside of the room.

"This is Richard Fallon, an old colleague and friend. He's the one I told you about earlier," Cleon said, introducing the man next to him.

"Mr. Burch," Fallon responded, holding out his hand to shake Elliot's.

“I need to speak with you in private about the care of this woman,” Elliot said, shaking the man’s hand.

“Of course, Mr. Burch. If you follow me, we can speak in one of the therapy rooms. We won’t be disturbed there.”

Fallon led both men down the halls and into a white room with no windows. A single table with two chairs were the only furniture in the room. Cleon remained at the door as Elliot and Fallon sat down at the table.

“Mr. Fallon, I know Cleon told you this months ago when she was brought in, but I need to re-emphasize what I require of you when it comes to the care of Catherine Chandler,” Elliot began. “It is imperative that no one leaks that she is here. That’s why she’s registered under a different name: Catherine Geller. As Cleon set it up, I want it continued: only the same handful of people should oversee her care.

“Cleon has advised you about the account that was set up in your name and how to access it. Twenty-five thousand dollars is being deposited every month, plus an additional five thousand for all her needs, as you know. I trust this has been adequate for your and your colleagues’ skills and discretion. You’ve been giving them to Cleon, but now that I’m back in New York, I’ll expect weekly progress reports directly to me.

“When she does wake up, if I’m not here, I need you to help her understand that the Catherine Chandler she was does not exist anymore, that the Catherine Chandler she was is dead. It is important that she starts to believe this. Her safety depends on it.

“Don’t mention my name to her. I need to be the one that lets her know that it was me taking care of her. That it was me protecting her.”

“Of course, sir,” Fallon said, nodding. “I promise that she will continue to receive only the best care while she is with us.”

“Ensure that you do. Also, I’ve had some personal items left in her room. You’ve been playing her the music she likes? Have had someone read to her? Not left her alone in her room very long? She needs to feel every day that someone is caring for her. I’ll visit as much as possible now that I’m back, but I need to keep a low profile so as not to alert anyone of her presence.”

He nodded. "She's in good hands, Mr. Burch. I have just the right handful of people assisting me with her care. She's being well taken care of. I've seen to it myself."

Elliot nodded once and rose from his seat. He shook Fallon's hand again and left the room to return to Cathy.

She was in the same position he left her in. His sleeping beauty. Once again he laid down next to her and pulled her into his arms, whispering sweet nothings into her ear. He stayed with her like that well into the night before Cleon came and told him he was being summoned once again.

Elliot swore under his breath and nodded. What did the bastard want now? He had just returned and now he was needed again. "Give me a few minutes with her, I'll be right out," he told Cleon, who shook his head and closed the door again.

"I have to leave you again, Cathy. I'm sorry. I'll be back as soon as I can. You're safe here. I've made sure of it. Stay strong for me, my love."

He gently kissed her and rose from the bed. He brushed a stray hair away from her face then left the room. Cleon and Fallon were waiting outside for him. "Take care of her, Mr. Fallon," Elliot said, looking at Catherine through the door. "If anything should happen to her in my absence, I look to you for an explanation."

Without waiting for a response, Elliot stormed off, closely followed by Cleon.

CHAPTER FOUR

Life carried on for the next few years. With each year that passed, Elliot felt himself falling more and more into despair. He was close to the point of taking Catherine, regardless of the state she was in, and leaving. At least they'd be together.

Gabriel had Elliot running all over the world, taking care of dirty business deals, individuals who double-crossed Gabriel, and basic scut work. He saw less and less of Catherine. He hadn't even had a chance to work on one of his buildings. Everything he did was for Gabriel.

Each night, though, no matter where he was in the world, he'd lay in bed and pray that he would receive word that Cathy had awakened from her coma. His dreams were always the same. He dreamt of himself rushing to be with her. They would see each other from opposite ends of the hall. When their eyes met, Cathy would break out in the most beautiful smile and then run into his arms. He would sweep her off her feet and twirl her around in circles. Then he would kiss her passionately. They would whisper words of love in each other's ears. Then he would take her far away where no one would find them. It was those dreams that kept him going.

Then a day came when Gabriel announced to his syndicate, Elliot included, that they would be traveling to Russia. Gabriel and his Russian affiliate wanted to merge business and strengthen powers. It was a business deal that would require everyone's attention. They would be gone for an indefinite period. Elliot barely had time to rush and see Catherine once more before he had to board Gabriel's private jet. As he lay, holding her once more, something in his heart told him not to leave. That he should stay with her. It was impossible though.

He instructed Mr. Fallon to send the updates to one of his trusted men, who would in turn send them to Elliot himself. It carried on that way for eight months when one day Cleon handed him a short telegram. It was an old school way of communicating but it proved to be one of the safest ways.

It was past midnight and Elliot was in his hotel suite, sitting near the lounge windows, sipping on a brandy. Cleon walked in and handed him the sealed telegram. "This just came for you," he said, handing the envelope over.

Elliot glanced at the envelope, thinking it was just another one of his overseers from New York reporting in. Then he saw the initials R.F. and knew it was about Cathy. He set his brandy down and grabbed the envelope, ripping into it. Any news about Cathy brightened his day, no matter what it was.

He had to read the few short sentences a few times before the words registered.

C.G. awake. Stop. No complications. Stop. Helping her to learn new life. Stop. Message when coming back. Stop.

A huge smile broke out across Elliot's face as he read the telegram over and over. He looked up at Cleon, tears brimming in his eyes. "She's awake, Cleon. She's come back to me," he whispered, unable to keep the happiness out of his voice.

“It’s wonderful news, Elliot. I was beginning to think that it was never going to happen. She’s a fighter, that one.”

Elliot stood and started pacing. His thoughts were frantic. ‘Cathy’s awake,’ he thought to himself. ‘She has to be confused. Scared. She needs me.’

“I need to get back to her. I need to come up with an excuse to leave that won’t rouse suspicion. She must be so scared. I hope your man Fallon is helping her adjust. Cathy needs me. I need to get home. We need to leave as soon as possible.”

“Hold up, Elliot. Calm down,” Cleon said, holding up his hands in a calming gesture. “We just can’t pick up and leave here. No matter what excuse you come up with. Gabriel won’t have it. You know this. Business should be closing up within the next week or two. China just signed the deal. With them on board, everyone should follow suit. Fallon will send updates, and you should be home by the month’s end. Then you can take her on your boat or whatever other romantic notion you have fantasied about and disappear.”

Elliot nodded but continued to pace. Two weeks. He could last out another two weeks. Then he and Cathy would leave. A smile came to his face. They’d forget everything and everyone and just disappear. They’d live out their lives in their own private paradise. Together.

CHAPTER FIVE

It was the most agonizing fourteen days of Elliot’s life. Sitting in a chair behind the board room table, listening to drug lords, illegal weapons manufacturers, some of the worst human beings you would ever meet, make shady deals. Listening to them talk as if they ruled the world. When in fact, if Elliot was honest with himself, they did.

Finally, the books were closed. Ledgers were filled out and handshakes were exchanged. Elliot sat on his own private jet, heading back to New York, having told Gabriel that he needed to meet up with contractors and construction site overseers about a building he was about to start on in a month. Just after the 4th of July celebrations. A building that he promised the top three floors of to Gabriel for his personal use.

Everything was ready for when he landed. A limo would be waiting at the airport filled with his personal possessions that he couldn't leave behind and everything Cathy would need when they left. Clothes, jewelry, soaps, and cosmetics. Everything a woman of her calibre would require.

When they landed, the limo was waiting on the tarmac as planned. Customs was easily bypassed, and within fifteen minutes of landing, the limo was on Interstate 787 headed towards Albany. Heading towards Cathy.

Elliot tried to sleep on the two-and-a-half-hour drive but found himself too excited. Cathy would be in his arms in less than three hours. He would hear her soft voice whispering words of love in his ear. He would be able to look into her seafoam green eyes but, most of all, he would be able to feel the pressure of her lips as she kissed him. Yes, this was going to be one of the happiest days of his life.

His excitement grew as they passed the gates that read "Meadow Brook Rehabilitation Centre". The limo pulled up to the building that housed Cathy. Elliot got out, followed by Cleon.

A panicked-looking Fallon greeted them at the front entrance. "Mr. Burch, Cleon. Welcome back. I hope you both had a pleasant trip," he said, his voice shaking.

Elliot simply nodded and walked past the man, into the building. "Is she in her room?" he asked. Not waiting for an answer, he started to make his way down the hall.

"Cleon, Mr. Burch, there's something we need to discuss first" Fallon said as he rushed down the hall, trying to follow them.

"Take care of it, Cleon," was all Elliot said as he walked up to the door of the room where he had left Cathy in all those years ago. He paused before going in to straighten his tie and run his fingers through his hair. Then, with a smile that reached his ears, Elliot opened the door.

Shock slammed into his chest at what he found inside. The room that was supposed to be Cathy's private bedroom was filled with tables and chairs, with assorted games and crafts covering them. A few staff members and patients looked up at him when he opened the door. Elliot swiftly turned around and found a nervous Fallon standing in the hall. "What's this?" Elliot asked, pointing toward the room. "Where is she? What happen to her room?"

“Mr. Burch, please. We had to relocate her to a regular room. We needed the space. We need to talk. There’s been some unexpected complications the last couple of days.”

“What complications? Where is she? Bring me to her room now!”

Fallon looked at Cleon for help but the man gave none.

“Take me to her room now!” Elliot demanded, his patience wearing thin.

Fallon simply nodded. He turned and led the two men down the hall to a room near the end of the hall. He fumbled with the keys as he tried to unlock the door. Once unlocked, Elliot pushed past him, expecting to see Cathy on the other side. What he saw robbed him of this breath.

The room was impossibly small, with only a bed and bedside table. Glass littered the floor from a broken window. What was most shocking to him was the two bars missing from the window. It looked like they were torn right from the concrete.

“What the hell happen in here?” Elliot asked, looking around the room. None of her things were here. No books, no music player. Then he noticed the restraints attached to her bed. His fingers brushed them before he looked up at Fallon, the anger building in him.

“Why are there restraints on her bed? Where the hell is she?”

“Mr. Burch, please,” Fallon tried again. “If you would just come with me to the conference room, I can explain everything.”

“You’ll explain everything now! I’ll only asked this one more time, where is she?!”

“She escaped the night before last. A man. A huge man, I didn’t see his face properly, ripped the bars out and took her. They ran off together. We have video surveillance footage from the outside. You can’t see him very well, but Cathy went with him without a struggle.”

“Show me.”

Fallon led both men down the hall to the nursing station. He motioned towards a television with a built-in VCR. “The tape is ready to play, Mr. Burch.”

Elliot pressed ‘play’ and put both hands on the counter and leaned close to the television. The video camera was positioned at the corner of the building, a few feet away from Cathy’s window. At first, all there was on the screen was the black

and white video footage of the side of the building. Then a large man approached the window that he could only assume to be Cathy's. He stood there for a few minutes then suddenly smashed the window and started to pull on the bars behind it. Floodlights came on and started to scan the grounds around him. Elliot still could only see an impossibly large man in a hooded cloak. At that moment, he knew. It was the same man he saw carrying Catherine away from Gabriel's building four years ago. The same man or beast he saw on the video footage they found in the building.

Suddenly, the hooded man pulled two bars away with his bare hands, stunning Elliot. Cathy appeared then as the man pulled her through the window and into his arms. He didn't pay attention to the way she fiercely gripped the man that held her. All he saw was her face, that was thankfully pointed towards the camera.

"Cathy," he whispered, tears forming in his eyes at the sight of her. She looked so small. Smaller than he remembered. He only saw her for an instant before she and the man ran off into the dark, away from the camera's view.

Elliot rewound the tape and paused it on the image of Cathy's face. He touched the screen with tentative fingers. She was awake and so beautiful. He stared at her image for long minutes before ejecting the tape and slipping it into his coat pocket. Then he turned toward Fallon, the anger building him.

"I want to know everything. What happened when she woke? What kind of treatment was she receiving? Why were there damn restraints on her bed?"

"If you follow me to the conference room, I can tell you what you want to know."

"No! You'll tell me now!" Elliot screamed. "She ran from here for a reason, and I need to know why."

"Elliot," Cleon said, stepping forward. "You need to calm down."

Elliot looked up at Cleon, his anger almost boiling over. "Calm down? Calm down?! Cathy's gone with who knows what. What happen here that caused her to run? She was supposed to be taken care of."

He turned to Fallon. The man looked scared to death. "I paid you to make sure she received the best care possible. What did you do to her?"

“Just what you instructed, Mr. Burch. Make her believe that Catherine Chandler was dead. It was difficult. She was stubborn and refused to cooperate. We had to take certain measures.”

“Certain measures? What the hell does that mean?”

“He tortured her.”

Elliot and Cleon looked up as another man approached.

“Cooper, shut up,” Fallon said between his teeth, the panic evident in his voice.

Cooper slowly walked up to Elliot with his head down. “I was responsible for her physical therapy, Mr. Burch. She was doing well, weak, but she was starting to get around on her own. Mr. Fallon was taking care of her mental well-being.”

“Shut up, Cooper!” Fallon repeated, stepping up to the man.

Cleon pushed him back.

Elliot grabbed Cooper’s arm and dragged him down the hall. “What’s your name?” he asked the man.

“John Cooper, sir. Like I said, I was taking care of Cathy’s physical therapy. She was getting better. Fallon, though, he’s an evil man. He would take her to a room and restrain her to a chair. He would continuously scream at her that Catherine Chandler is dead. Over and over again, until she finally repeated the words. He would hit her when she didn’t cooperate. It went on that way for months. She started talking to herself, or at least that’s what it seemed like. I think she was just trying to cope with what was happening to her. He would restrain her to the bed when she did that. I’m sorry, sir. I wanted to stop it but...” Cooper stopped talking and backed up a few steps.

Elliot closed his eyes and clenched his fists at Cooper’s revelation. He was losing control. He felt the anger boiling up and was unable to stop it. This was not what he wanted. He wanted Cathy to come to an understanding that it was best if people thought she was dead. To protect her. Then when he showed up, she would come to him, relieved that she still had someone in the world who loved her.

Elliot looked up at Fallon. In a blind rage, he stormed across the hall and punched Fallon in the face with everything he had in him. Fallon fell to the ground from the blow. Elliot fell on top of him and rained punches on the man’s face.

“You son of a bitch! I didn’t tell you to torture her. I didn’t give you permission to place your hands on her.”

Cleon tried to pull him off but couldn’t. All Elliot could see was red. He continued to hit Fallon until his own hand felt like it was broken. When he finally stood, Fallon remained motionless.

“Take care of this filth, Cleon,” he said, taking a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiping blood off of his hand. He looked back up at Cooper and indicated he should come forward. “Show me the direction they ran off.”

Cooper led Elliot outside and across the field to the gate that led to the forest path. “We thought they ran through the woods but the patrols didn’t spot them on the other side. It’s just a small, wooded area for strolling.”

Elliot stood on the other side of the fence, looking around. He started to walk along the fence line, towards the parking lot. As he neared the parking lot, he noticed footprint indents in the grass around the storm grate. In the surveillance video, it was raining the night Cathy escaped, making the ground muddy. It would be easy to leave tracks.

A nagging feeling in the back of his head made him bend down and open the grate. Was it just four years ago that Catherine led him through under ground tunnels when they were escaping the men that were trying to kill him? It was suspicious how she knew her way around the underground. Making him promise not to tell about the hidden passages.

“Wait for me here,” he told Cooper, then started to descend the ladder. Once at the bottom, he looked around, the daylight from above illuminating the passageway before him. Looking at the ground, he noticed two sets of footprints in the dirt. One similar to the footprint outside of the grate, and the other much smaller. He squatted down to examine them. The smaller of the two looked to be about a size six. Cathy’s shoe size. He stood and followed the footprints as far as the daylight would allow him to see.

Everything seemed to come together at once in his mind. Cathy’s urgent request for plastic explosives. Her agreement to marry him if he stopped the construction of his tower. The tower that would have dug deep into the earth, possibly affecting the tunnels she led him through. Her secretiveness about why she asked for all those things. She was protecting someone who resided in those tunnels. That person

somehow found out where she was and came for her. How they knew she was even alive was beyond him, let alone awake from her coma.

It didn't matter anymore. He knew where she was. Where she was hiding. Nothing was going to stop him from getting her back. With a final look around, Elliot turned and climbed back up to the surface.

CHAPTER SIX

When he returned to New York, Elliot immediately began preparations to scope out the drainage tunnel in Central Park. He studied the pictures taken at the site and came to the conclusion with Cleon that it would be easier if they could somehow draw Catherine out rather than go into the tunnels, where they would be on an uneven playing ground. So, they started to watch the tunnel. Watching anyone who happened to come and go from it. Surprisingly, a good amount of people, mostly children, came and went. All were dressed in the same style of patchwork clothing.

Elliot had to return to work with Cleon in tow to keep up appearances. They assigned two of Cleon's best men, Brad and Michael, to take pictures of anyone who accessed the tunnels. Gabriel called on him a few times for mundane tasks, nothing that took him out of the city, thankfully.

A few days later, Brad brought an envelope filled with glossy black and white photos for Elliot to look over. "Any sign of her?" was the first question Elliot asked before opening the folder.

"No, sir. Between us, Michael and I have kept the tunnel under twenty-four-hour surveillance. Though there is something that might interest you there."

Elliot flipped through each photo, glancing at it briefly before moving on to the next. A few people looked familiar. Maybe people he'd seen at her funeral. There were a good amount of people who attended that were dressed in the same patchwork clothes.

He then came across a photo that was tagged. It felt like his heart stopped at the sight of it. A small boy, no older than four years old. He was playing with other children in the park. It was the boy's face that shocked him. He was the spitting image of Catherine. His nose, his lips, the shape of his face screamed Cathy.

“Do you have a copy of this photo in colour?” Elliot asked, not taking his eyes off the photo.

Brad slid a copy across the desk to him.

His hair was the same shade as Catherine’s and his eyes the same colour of green. He could be looking into her eyes and wouldn’t know the difference. This boy was definitely Cathy’s son.

“He comes out to play in the park often. Always with the same children and adults. They usually play out there for an hour then go get ice cream. They must enter through another way, because they don’t return to the tunnel after they leave.”

“Have you followed them to see where they may be re-entering the tunnels?”

“Alleyways mostly, sir. We lose track of them after that.”

Elliot smiled down at the picture. If anything good came out of this mess, it was that Cathy got to be reunited with her son. But he couldn’t let that impact his need to get her back. He would deal with any ramifications when they came.

“Keep this boy in your sights whenever he is out. This is her son. Chances are she’ll eventually be with him at some point,” he said, pushing the black and white photos back to Brad but keeping the coloured one with him.

“Mr. Manning, would you like us to start infiltration? Michael has been walking his dog in the park while the children are playing. They like to come up and pet the dog. He’s starting to develop a good rapport with them. He could start talking with the adults, small talk, you know. Start fishing for information while the fish are still biting,” Brad asked as he gathered the photos back into the envelope.

“Yes, I think Mr. Burch would be in agreement. Isn’t that right, Mr. Burch?” Cleon said, standing at Elliot’s side.

Elliot simply nodded. He was too busy staring at the photo of Cathy’s son. The boy looked so much like her, it was uncanny.

“Good work, Brad, thank you. Begin the next time you see them out. I want reports every four hours,” Cleon answered for the both of them.

“Cleon, look at him. He’s Cathy’s little miniature. I need her back with me, Cleon, and if we can get the boy, I want him, too. She’d never forgive me if I left him

behind. It's bad enough I have to explain to her about her treatment at that facility, if I took her away from her son, she'd be lost to me."

"Elliot, that could complicate things drastically. It's one thing to grab her, but the boy...they'd be well-watched."

"We'll make it happen. Isn't that what you're good at, Cleon? Making the impossible happen?"

Cleon shook his head and left the room without saying anything.

Elliot barely noticed him go. He was too enthralled with the picture in front of him. His visions of his and Cathy's future started to alter slightly. He still pictured them on a boat, sailing north. Now, though, it included him teaching the boy in the picture to fish. Cathy sat in a lounge chair nearby, wrapped in a blanket, smiling at them. They were a family. Him, Cathy, and their son. He closed his eyes and smiled at the image in his head. It was going to be perfect.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Elliot managed to come to the park and see the boy playing for himself one time. He wanted so badly to approach the boy, but knew that the adults watching him would recognize him.

Michael had continued walking his dog each time the children were out playing. It didn't take long for him to start talking with the adults. They were all friendly people. It was decided for Michael to try and find a mole. Talk to the adults and feel them out. See if one of them was willing to leak some information.

Ironically, it wasn't one of the park adults where they found their informant. Elliot found an older man in Washington Square Park dressed in the same patchwork clothing with a three-card-monte booth set up. He didn't recognize the man from Cathy's funeral. After playing a few games, hiding his grin at the way the man cheated, the man showed no sign of knowing who Elliot was.

Elliot started to make small talk. "What's your name, sir?" Elliot asked, laying another five dollars down on the man's table.

"Bill Hudson. Everyone calls me Hudson, though."

“Nice to meet you. I’m Edward Barns,” Elliot said, the lie sliding easily off his tongue. Elliot held out his hand for the man to shake.

He lost the game and threw down another five-dollar bill. “Do you set up your booth in Central Park ever?” Elliot asked, watching the man’s face rather than the cards the man dealt.

“Occasionally. I try to move around a bit. You know. New people, wanting to try their luck.”

“You must see a lot of comings and goings.”

Hudson nodded, not willing to answer the question outright.

Elliot new he had to tread lightly. Feel the man out before coming on too strong. He’d step back for now.

“Well, Hudson, I think I’ve lost enough for today. I usually take a jog through Central Park around noon. If I see you there, I may just try to win my money back.”

Hudson looked up at him, smiling. Another person step up to try their luck at the game and took Hudson’s attention away from Elliot, who used it as a chance to walk away.

The next day, Elliot jogged around the Central Park Conservancy area. He wore an old jogging suit and baseball cap. Clothing he usually would never be seen dead in, but he needed to blend in. There, he found Hudson, swindling tourists with his antics.

He approached the man’s booth and conveniently lost another fifty dollars. He continued to do this for a few days, building a relationship with Hudson, coming to realize the man was desperate for money.

He also watched the man from afar. Each time a person with the same clothing, or from the same community as Elliot began to realize and approach him about cheating, he became irritated, defensive. Elliot knew then he had picked the right man.

A week later, Elliot sat down in front of Hudson's table and played a few rounds before beginning to talk. "I may have a business proposition for you, Hudson," he said, picking the wrong card.

"And what might that be?" Hudson asked, playing with the cards in front of him.

"Information. You just might have information that the man I work for wants and is willing to pay to get."

With those words, Elliot sat five hundred dollars on the table in front of him. Hudson looked up at him then back down at the money; he picked it up and examined the hundred-dollar bills.

"That's for being willing to listen to what I have to say," Elliot said, then took another wad of money out, a thousand dollars in one-hundred-dollar bills, and laid it on the table. "That will be for answering a few questions for me. There is more where that came from. It all depends on what you're able to tell me." Elliot took a wad of money out from inside his jacket. He knew it to be five thousand dollars.

Hudson's eyes lit up at the sight of the money.

Elliot smiled and placed the money back in his jacket. Yes. This was definitely the man who would give him information about Catherine Chandler.

"What do you want to know?" Hudson asked, eyeing the thousand dollars in front of him.

"I see people dressed the same as you around the park. I take it you belong to the same community?"

Hudson nodded. "Yes. We help each other out. Share resources."

"And whereabouts is this community located?"

Elliot watched the expression on Hudson's face turn from joy at the sight of the money to anxious with worry. He was about to respond when Elliot held his hand up and stopped him.

"Before you say anything, I know you live in the tunnels below the city. My objective is not to disturb that community. I have no ill intentions towards you or them. My employer just wants to know about one person in particular. A young woman who recently came to stay with you."

He watched Hudson hesitate. The man looked at the money then back up at him.
“What do you want to know about her?”

“First, let’s make sure we’re talking about the same person. The woman in question is very important to my employer.” Elliot removed the money and once again counted out another five hundred dollars, tossing it on the table.

“Catherine. You’re talking about Catherine. She’s the only person who’s come to the tunnels in the last few months. What do you want to know about her?”

He knew Cathy. Elliot felt a tug at his heart. “Yes, Catherine Chandler. She’s very important to my employer. He’s just worried about her welfare.”

“Well, you can tell him she’s fine. Walks in and gets all the special treatment because of who she knows. Barely has to lift a finger. Annoying, really.”

Elliot nodded. Hudson didn’t seem to care for Catherine. He could seriously use this information to his advantage.

“I see a lot of people from your community out in the park and around the city but never her. Is she not able to come out?”

“No, I guess she’s afraid. Was hurt in a bad way. Still, she should have to pull her weight. I do. I get stuck with the mundane, disgusting jobs while princess gets to stay in Vincent’s chambers. Vincent the protector. No one dare defy Vincent.”

Elliot nodded but Hudson’s words troubled him. What was wrong with Cathy? How was she hurt, and who was Vincent? Was he the man they saw in the video footage from the warehouse and the hospital surveillance? He needed to know more but knew he couldn’t press the man just yet.

“Thank you for the information, Hudson, I’m sure my employer will appreciate it. I’d like to stay in touch with you. Perhaps you can supply updates on her condition. I’d like to meet with you every other day. Here. I promise that you will be compensated for your troubles. But we need to keep our correspondence confidential. No one can know you’re speaking with me.”

He removed another two hundred dollars from his pocket and placed it on the table. He watched Hudson grab up the money, counting it, smiling gleefully.

“Yes, I’d be happy to help any way I can. Tell your employer thank you. Don’t worry about me telling anyone. I’d be in a world of trouble myself for talking to you about Below.”

“I’m glad we have an understanding.”

Elliot left Hudson sitting there, counting the money. He made his way through the park and to his town car, where Cleon was waiting for him.

“You find out anything useful?” Cleon asked as he pulled the car away from the curb.

“Yes. He said Catherine was hurt but didn’t elaborate. He talked about a man named Vincent. About him being her protector. I’m thinking he’s the one we saw in all of the video footage. He said that she was staying in his chambers, whatever that means. I couldn’t press him just yet. He seems to have a dislike for her that we could possibly use in our favour. She’s down there though. I know that for certain now. He says she’s afraid to come out. Probably afraid she’d be recognized. Now all we have to do is figure out a way to get her to come out.”

They pulled up to Elliot’s office building and made their way inside. Once inside his office, Elliot sat behind his desk and starting filtering through his mail.

Cleon sat across from him, staring at him.

After five minutes, Elliot tossed his mail down and looked up at him. “What is it?” he asked, annoyed.

“I’ve been thinking about a way that we can get Cathy to come out of the tunnels. I may have an idea but it’s dependent on how well this man Hudson is trusted by those close to Cathy.”

“What’s this idea you have?”

“Fourth of July fireworks are coming up in two weeks. This means big crowds. If this man Hudson can convince Cathy and those close to her that she’d be safe and he’d stay by her side, she and her son could attend the viewing. There are bound to be other people in their community going. They wouldn’t want her to leave the park, so we’d have to set up a grab close by and create a diversion. We’ll grab her during the pandemonium.”

“What type of diversion are you thinking of?”

“A flash-bang grenade.”

Elliot balked at the idea. “A grenade? Have you lost your mind?”

“It’s non-lethal. It’s usually used for hostage situations, crowd control. Temporarily disorients people without causing harm.”

Still not convinced of the plan, Elliot was about to dismiss him when Cleon continued.

“It will force people to run. No damage. In fact, I’ll have Michael dressed as a policeman. He’ll be the one to detonate the grenade. Just enough to scare people, causing a panic. We use the panic to our advantage and have Hudson lead her towards us. We grab her. We’ll take care of the finer details as soon as we know Hudson can ensure her attendance.”

“And where exactly do you plan on releasing this grenade?”

“I’ve scouted the area. There’s a playground in Central Park near 5th Avenue and East 67th. Michael will stay in the area and detonate the grenade at the Infantry Memorial that’s close to the park. Hudson will lead Cathy south, away from the chaos, where we’ll be waiting with transportation.”

Elliot had reservations about the plan but it was all they had. As long as they could make sure Cathy would leave the tunnels, it was good enough. He already had a boat being remodeled for their use. It was much smaller than the yachts he was used to but the boat had two bedrooms below, a small kitchen and living area above. Best of all, he would be able to sail it on his own, ensuring that he, Cathy and now her son would be able to hide away from the world. Just the three of them. They’d still make their way up north toward Norway. Like he planned all along.

“I’ll see Hudson the day after tomorrow. I’ll discuss it with him. Make him an offer he can’t refuse. Start coordinating to make this plan of yours work.”

Cleon rose and left the office. Elliot watched him go then pulled out a picture of Cathy and the one of her son. He turned his chair towards the windows that lined his corner office. The afternoon sun shined through, casting a beautiful light on the two pictures he held in his hands. The love of his life and her son. He would do anything for them. It was crazy how much he felt for the boy when he had never even met him yet. Just knowing he was Cathy’s made him want to protect the boy as much as his mother. ‘Soon, Cathy,’ he thought. ‘Soon we’ll all be together.’

CHAPTER EIGHT

Elliot met up with Hudson in their usual spot and explained to the man the plan Cleon had come up with. He offered him a substantial amount of money if he could ensure Cathy's presence.

A week before the 4th of July, Hudson returned with good news. Vincent, Cathy's protector, as Hudson called him, encouraged her to go Above with her son and enjoy the fireworks. Hudson would be her personal bodyguard while Above.

"There would be others from Below around," Hudson told him. "But many of the other children will be there, as well, so everyone will be preoccupied watching them."

Elliot smiled at the man and patted him on the back. This was exactly what he wanted to hear. "Excellent, Hudson, you certainly are earning your pay," he told the man, and handed him a thick envelope. "Five thousand dollars, Mr. Hudson. You will receive another forty-five thousand plus a car once Catherine is with me. I will give you the keys and directions to where you can pick up your payment."

"No worries, Edward," Hudson said, using the name Elliot had given him. "If plans change and she doesn't end up going, I'll personally bring you to a place Below where you can grab her. I promise you, you'll have her one way or another."

"Let's hope our original plan works. I don't like it when things don't go according to plan. I expect the people who work for me to follow through," Elliot said, hiding his threat within his words. If Cathy wasn't with him before the end of the night on the 4th, well, everyone would know the lengths he would go to in order to have her.

The 4th of July was upon them. The boat was behind in remodeling, so Elliot had a safehouse set up in the Bronx, close to where the boat was docked. He didn't like the fact that they had to stay in New York but he needed to stick to his plan.

Hudson sent word that the group of people that would be bringing the children to view the fireworks that night would be viewing from the pond area. Hudson would make sure that he, Catherine, and her son would stay back farther, at the playground they chose, so she'd be safer.

As evening fell, everything was put in place. Cleon had arranged for a few men to be dressed as police officers patrolling both the playground area and the pond area. They were leaving nothing to chance and wanted to make sure that there would be minimal interference once the grenade went off.

Elliot and Cleon were set up in a utility van along the path near the playground. Hudson was supposed to bring Catherine and her son to the park at quarter to nine that evening. That way, the boy could play at the park for a short while before the fireworks show started.

Elliot scanned the area from inside the van with high-power binoculars, looking for any sign of them. At ten to nine, he began to get nervous. Many children and adults were around, but there was no sign of Cathy.

At 8:52pm, his patience was wearing thin. He was about to bolt from the van when he caught sight of Hudson. Then he saw her. Cathy. She was walking a pace behind him, holding her son's hand. His Cathy. Alive. Awake. Beautiful.

She wore a dark green cloak with a hood. The hood was pulled up but he could still see her face. Once near the playground, he watched her squat down to talk to the boy, the hood falling to her shoulders. She was thinner than he remembered and pale, but still stunning.

His arms ached to hold her.

She whispered something to the boy, who smiled then ran off towards the playground. She stood and said something to Hudson, who smiled and nodded.

Elliot used the binoculars to zoom in on her face. She looked extremely nervous and ill at ease. She was on guard; her eyes scanned the area, looking for anything out of place. Hudson said something to her that made her face relax slightly then he led her over to a nearby bench and sat down. That was when Hudson looked towards the van and wiped his brow. The sign that said all was ready.

Cleon communicated with his men through the earpieces they wore, putting everyone on standby. He gave everyone last-minute instructions then moved to the back of the van.

"We'll wait till after the fireworks start. That way people will be distracted and not notice anything till the grenade goes off. Relax, Elliot. It's going to be fine."

Elliot looked over his shoulder and watched him for a minute as he prepared the back for when they grabbed Cathy and her son. When Elliot saw him take out rope, he sprang from his seat and pulled it out of his hands.

"We're not restraining her. There is no way I will allow you to do that."

“We may have to. She’s going to struggle. You know this. I have to drive the van. How are you going to hold her and the boy down by yourself?”

“I have a mild sedative I’m going to inject her with if I have to. I’m not restraining her, Cleon. It’s bad enough they did that to her at that facility you sent her to, I’m not putting her through that again.”

Elliot looked down at his watch. The fireworks were scheduled to begin in five minutes. He looked out the van window at Catherine. She was pushing her son on a swing. Hudson was standing guard next to her but he was staring at Michael near the memorial. A small crowd of about forty people had assembled to watch the fireworks from that section of the park. The view was obstructed but you would be able to see the higher ones in the sky.

Elliot glanced around the interior of the van. Cleon had everything in place. Blankets. A soft pallet. Water. A first aid kit in case of any injuries.

The sound of the first fireworks going off startled both men in the van. “Stand by, gentlemen,” Cleon said into their earpieces. “We go in t minus ten.”

Catherine held Jacob in her arms as they stood in the park and looked up at the sky.

“Look, Mother, we can see the high ones from here,” Jacob said, pointing to the sky and the bright explosions of light and colour.

“I see them, sweetheart, it’s beautiful,” she answered, pulling him close and wrapping her cloak around them both.

She smiled for Jacob but felt the anxiety start to build inside her as the crowd grew around them. She knew how much this meant to her son, her taking him Above to see the fireworks display, however at a distance. She was thankful that Hudson had agreed to accompany them, knowing the dangers it may have posed to him. She glanced around the park at the people. No one seemed to be paying any mind to them, and there were police officers in the area, but it did little to ease her. Her heart pounded painfully in her chest and she felt slightly lightheaded. ‘Calm down, Chandler,’ she said to herself. ‘Pull yourself together. Don’t ruin this for Jacob.’

She then felt a slight warm sensation fill her. Vincent. Vincent was nearby. Probably directly below them in the tunnels, if her sense of him was accurate. Though there was no direct tunnel access near this part of the park, just knowing he was with them

brought a comfort to her. He had encouraged her to go out tonight. To enjoy this moment with Jacob.

Jacob continued to comment and point whenever fireworks were visible above the tree line. Catherine took a few deep breaths and looked up to the sky, determined to enjoy this moment with her son. It was when she felt herself finally start to relax that there was a bright flash of light accompanied by a deafening blast. It caused her ears to ring loudly and her vision to swim. She barely heard Jacob cry out and cover his ears. Her only concrete thought was to hold on to him.

The crowd started to surge as people panicked, trying to find their families and get away from whatever had caused the explosion. She felt Hudson grab her arms and start to push her forward, hopefully to safety. It wasn't until she found herself and Jacob standing in front of an open van door that she realized her mistake.

She turned back to look at Hudson, knowing he had betrayed them. The man refused to look at her. She felt a prick in her neck and a dizzy sensation. Then she felt nothing as she lost consciousness on the van floor.

COMING SOON

PART FOUR: THE FINAL ACT