

Catherine's Birthday Roast

by Angie

Life is a great surprise

-Vladimir Nabokov

Catherine's birthday was coming on September 26, so a surprise party was arranged for her. Above, with her best friends and close colleagues invited.

The 'committee' involved in the party was comprised of those who knew her well, and they each agreed to organize one or another of the tasks required to make this a memorable occasion. No one of them knew all the details, and only one knew who was to do what. They had kept the parameters fairly wide, merely agreeing on the date and time, so that there would be surprises not only for the birthday girl, but for all who attended.

The conference room of the DA's office was chosen as the most convenient place, one unlikely to be questioned by the guest of honour after hours. The DA's favourite slave driver would find a way to get her there.

When the big day arrived, the committee got to work, and although the conference room was not visible from Catherine's desk, they were quiet and efficient, and worked with the door closed. When the day's work was done and most of the office staff went home, the rest of the plan got underway. Catherine had been deliberately buried under file folders all day, and suspected nothing when she was invited to the conference room to hear about one of them.

After entering the darkened room and being blasted with a loud 'SURPRISE' that nearly deafened her, and a blaze of coloured lights and decorations, Catherine took a moment to take it all in, and put on a suitable expression when she saw so many friends and colleagues smiling at her.

"You almost gave me a heart attack," she commented wryly, which resulted in gales of laughter.

Catherine expressed her delight, and wore a big smile as she joked with everyone. She was truly astonished that they had gone to so much trouble.

Those who knew the conference room in its usual state and had not been part of the committee, were amazed too. No effort had been spared. One table had been devoted to Catherine herself, with photos from her early years included, as well as later ones. Another table was full of flowers, including dozens of roses – which as some silently said to themselves, not only gave the whole an air of elegance, the scent completely overwhelmed the usual scent of stale coffee and old cigarette ashes. Another table was piled with beautifully wrapped gifts.

A buffet had been set up along one wall and office seating had been placed where convenient for those who needed a place to sit and watch or chat.

Some of the people there knew each other, but others were strangers. Everyone was happy to meet those who loved Catherine and the atmosphere was as party-like as the organizers could

wish. There were some curious looks at two whom none of the others seemed to know - a large and obviously muscular black man, and a young woman in her early 20s. Catherine spent time with both of them, some noticed, and their conversations were in low voices, presumably not to be overheard.

It wouldn't have been a party without speeches, so after everyone had enjoyed the food and drink and was suitably mellow, a call for order was made. In the resulting silence, there was a click and a recorded voice spoke into the room, encouraging everyone to say something about the birthday woman they all knew so well.

Few people recognized that voice, a deep, mellow rasp that immediately got their attention and made the request impossible to refuse. Anyone who had looked at Catherine at that moment, would have seen her eyebrows rise, and then a wide smile light up her face. She quickly extinguished the smile and waited, now as curious as anyone in the room.

The speeches began at a podium provided for the purpose. After some head shakes and signals, the first speaker took the floor and everyone waited expectantly.

Jenny Aronson:

Well, I've known Cathy for a lot of years, and always loved her. But there's no question that she was a social butterfly and marathon shopper. She has a sharp mind, which is why she took up law, but she never wanted to talk about her career. At least not back in those early days.

Everything changed after "that" September. I saw in the papers that she was missing, assumed abducted, I couldn't believe my eyes. Who would want to hurt Cathy? I waited and hoped that she was okay, and when the news hit that she had arrived home, I had to sit down to breathe properly, I was so relieved.

Then I saw the pictures.

I wanted to call her right away, of course, but realized she was probably too stressed to even answer her phone. So I waited some more.

Finally, as I knew she would, she called me. She told me she was scheduled for plastic surgery and would be going to a spa for several weeks to recover. She promised to call when she returned.

She didn't let me get a question in edgewise! It was some time before I talked to her, or saw her again. When I did finally get to see her in person, she was different, quieter. Well, who wouldn't be after an awful experience like that, I told myself. Well, I soon realized that the difference wasn't just because of that. Something fundamental had done an about turn. I didn't know why of course, not for a long time.

She had quit her dad's law office, signed on with the DA and the next thing I know, she's tracking down criminals and putting herself in danger for real! I mean, what happened to her was traumatic, but most people would want a quiet life after that!

Not our Cathy! She got into the news, became the new face of the DA's office and didn't bat an eye when Elliot Burch set his cap for her. And she turned him down!

I mean ... was this really Cathy? Had she been supplanted by an android or something? I was beginning to wonder if I'd read too many bad first novels and manuscripts.

Oh, she was still the caring, compassionate woman I knew, but there was something both harder and softer about her that I couldn't account for. She looked into the distance more, answered my

questions more slowly... and she refused to admit to anything. Nothing I could do would get her to 'fess up!

Well, as I said, I did eventually learn the truth, but she made me wait for it. Of course, there were good reasons.

Do I miss the old Cathy? No. This new Cathy ... I still think of her as that, despite the fact that it's been some time ... well, I love her even more. How could I not?

I did worry about her love life, often, but she assured me it was just fine – when she had time for it. I didn't doubt that, as she glowed whenever she spoke of it. I've never met the man who gave her that shine, but I'm sure he was special.

Some women have all the luck!

Joe Maxwell:

Morino suggested I try her out when she came to the office for an interview. I looked at her sitting outside his office, looking around, trying to look sincere, and I wondered what the heck he saw that I didn't.

Well, I have never had much association with her class of lady, and I had no idea what she thought she was doing, but I figured I'd soon find out. Yeah, I had read about her assault, but those were not exactly uncommon in New York. She got the coverage because she was high society – while thousands of others ended up dead and forgotten without even an inch of new copy, except in the obits. Not her fault, of course, but it did make me a little cynical.

I did what Morino said and threw the works at her. She came in on time, left late, whittled away at the tower of files I kept putting on her desk, did her research, found the evidence - and we got convictions.

Morino was impressed, I was impressed, hell, even New Yorkers were impressed!

Yeah, I admit it, I liked her and would not have minded being more than a boss, but hey, relationships in an office are a bad idea. I just kept giving her work, ragging her a little on her lack of street smarts, and called her Radcliffe. She never got annoyed at me, not for that anyhow. She's a good sport.

Cathy, though she has called me a friend, never gave me a chance. Always going out with someone with culture, money, whatever. I was just her tormentor!

Yet, even as I watched all this, I could sense that there was a lot she wasn't telling me. After all, what young beautiful woman wanted to do a lot of overtime at her desk in our dingy office? It wasn't normal! Then when the men ceased to call and she started to look a little tired, I worried about her. Burn-out wasn't unknown in the DA's office. Sometimes she seemed obsessed.

But, I told myself, we ALL work hard, and it's endless. There are always criminals, always people taking advantage of other people, no matter what level of society they inhabit. Our job was to stand up for the ones who didn't have the means to do so, to bring the real bad asses to justice. And we did that, although we never kidded ourselves that we were getting more than the tip of the iceberg.

We handled dozens of cases in a month, but there were hundreds we couldn't do, that we didn't have the soldiers for, or one of the parties got nailed through the regular justice system, or died. Yeah, that last happened more often than we'd like. Radcliffe experienced all that frustration, along with the satisfaction of occasionally convincing the courts to impose justice.

Yet I never heard her complain. She worked as hard as any of us and just kept plugging away. Occasionally, she got into trouble in her investigations, and that was something I tried to get her to

avoid, but she did it anyway, got injured, got stressed, had to take some time off to recuperate, or just take a break. I always gave it to her when she asked, even if I made the obligatory complaint - because she deserved a break.

I never knew anything about her personal life, because she chose not to talk about it. What could I say in any case? What do I know? My personal life was probably a lot less interesting than hers, except on that one occasion, and we know how that ended. Just my luck.

Working for the DA is not something that brings the ladies knocking on your door. I mean, who wants their picture in the paper because they're dating someone who works for the taxpayer? Like we shouldn't have a life?!

Yet, Radcliffe obviously did have a life outside of the office, although darned if I understood what kind it was, for a long time. What guy would wait until midnight for whatever hour or two she had left before hitting the sack.

She was often tired, and she lost weight, all signs of overwork. I think she was motivated to work hard, and I do think the man in her life - I knew there was one, because she told me - was helping her cope.

Otherwise, what could I do? No one was forcing her to do this stuff. She didn't have to work. She was wealthy and her father was a partner in a prestigious law firm that handled mostly corporate accounts. The kind of job everyone who graduated from law school hoped to end up in.

Except Radcliffe didn't. She never explained, but I think after the mugging, she saw things differently and wanted to do more than shuffle papers for wealthy corporations. Can't say I blame her. I chose this office too, but mostly because my chances of hitting the big time in a law office were remote. I didn't have the social connections.

Give the DA's office credit for not being a testing ground for wannabe crusaders. Moreno could spot them a mile off. He was right about Cathy, for sure.

John Moreno:

Yeah, I know Joe thought I was crazy when I hired Catherine Chandler. Maybe he hadn't really read the newspaper articles about her mugging. Maybe he really did think she wasn't up to the job.

I looked at her outside the office and saw something, something hard and relentless - and determined - about her jawline. This one, I thought, was not someone who gave up on life because it clobbered her.

Oh I knew her background, that she didn't have to work for us, or anyone really. She had a good law degree from Radcliffe, that was something she must have worked hard for, so I was impressed. This was someone who put in the effort where it mattered. Who cared what her bank balance was?

Joe did what I told him and threw it all at her. She came out aces, retired a lot of cases we had been avoiding for lack of resources, got convictions, worked at least as hard as the rest of us, and kept doing it, week after week, month after month. There was no doubt we wanted her after the trial period, and I made sure she got a raise too. People should be recognized for the work they do.

I know Joe didn't give her any breaks, he never does. That's not how this office works. If you can't stand the heat, you don't work here long, or you burn out and end up in a nice quiet law firm doing divorces.

I watched her and saw what she did, and talked to Joe on occasion, made sure he wasn't treating her any different to anyone else, and he swore he wasn't. I couldn't be standing over him or her,

but it did worry me that she was out on the street investigating criminals, instead of using the phone and our office to do interviews. She paid for that with injuries - but it didn't stop her.

I did wonder what motivated her, but how do you ask that? She said nothing about her private life. All we knew is what showed up in the papers and that brief fling with Elliot Burch, who we knew here in the DA's office for quite different reasons. We knew all the big developers, because they used every sneaky trick in the book to get around the law.

That scene he brought to the office would have been funny if it had been anyone else. Joe and I just shook our heads and kept on investigating. We didn't let Chandler do anything on related cases after that, because we couldn't have the appearance of bias. But later, she exposed him as he was lobbying for a new tower in a depressed part of the city. Depressed to his eyes, that is. The people there felt differently, as they always do. Chandler did a great job. Burch lost that one.

It wasn't the first or the last time she beat the odds.

Elliot Burch:

Of course I wanted to date Catherine Chandler! I had worked my way to the top of the developer heap in the Big Apple, but I knew it wouldn't take much for someone to remember my humble origins. I never quite forgot myself, and if I did, my father was there to remind me.

Catherine represented what I could never be – born to money and accepted at the highest levels of society because of that. She didn't have to wonder what her place was. Her father ensured she got the best of everything.

I had to be a philanthropist on a large scale and donate to the arts to get that class of money to notice me. Catherine just swam through it, getting mentioned by social columnists and attracting men who regarded her beauty as an adjunct to her wealth. Because she was wealthy - in a way that no one like me every could be, no matter what my bank balance was – effortless, accepted, never a wrong step.

When I saw her at the art benefit, I recognized her from newspaper articles, of course. I knew she had been dating one of the up and coming 3-piece suits in corporate law and finance. I had met the man and didn't like him, but that wasn't my concern.

Could I convince Catherine that I admired her for what she was doing at that time, in the DA's office of all places? My reputation as a wealthy bachelor might get her interest, but it would take more than looks to be her friend.

I knew she had survived a terrible mugging, and was missing for 10 days. She had been close-mouthed about where she had been and immediately had plastic surgery on her face to deal with the knife cuts. Wherever she had been, they had taken care of her.

More than that, *she* had changed. Oh she still appeared at some prestigious functions, but rarely, and it was obvious she was working hard, long nights in the DA's office. Her work, she told me, was relentless, but she made it plain it was almost a calling for her. I admired that.

What I didn't know was that she had a high moral standard for men she befriended. She apparently walked out of an event she had attended with the lawyer when he accused her of not being enough of an ornament (I heard this from someone who had overheard him) – and her leaving alone led to the assault. No one could forgive him for that, or blame her for her exit.

Meanwhile, I was doing what I do best, acquiring land for my next big city beautification project, one that would turn a bunch of old brick buildings into a modern community.

I tried to explain it to her, but she had met some of the old people who were being offered money and help to re-locate. I didn't know – okay, I didn't question – the men I hired to convince them to accept my offer and move. I should have. I know how men like that work – but how was I to know she would take this as a personal challenge and investigate? She literally blew apart my project with her revelations.

Then when almost the same thing happened when I proposed my tower, I was shocked. She found out something I was sure had been well hidden. She was intelligent and relentless, and she didn't let friendship get in the way of justice.

Both times, she cost me – a lot – in money, reputation, prestige.

Did I blame her? Of course not. She was doing her job – but I learned something too. If I wanted Catherine Chandler as a friend, I'd better not try to hide anything and I'd better not flirt with the law.

Whatever she is doing now, with whomever she is in love, I know without a doubt that if I had behaved differently, I would likely not have lost her. I know she enjoyed my company, and I felt we were destined to be a couple. That stings.

Dr Peter Alcott:

I've probably known Catherine longer than anyone, having delivered her, but even her father would say that there are times he doesn't understand about her. As a parent myself, I understand that completely. Our children are not us, and they will not always choose a career we think they should, nor behave as we would like.

As Catherine's doctor, I can't reveal any secrets, of course, but I have watched her grow up, along with my own daughter, and have always regarded her as a person of integrity, even before she joined the DA's office, where that requirement put her in danger.

Sometimes it takes a momentous event before we find ourselves, get pointed in the right direction. In Catherine's case, that came suddenly on an evening when she left a social function.

As the daughter of a well-known lawyer and part of a society that values money and status, that event, an assault that left her badly cut and bruised, did not make her retreat into herself, just the opposite. It made her look at her life to that point and realize she was not happy being a socialite and corporate lawyer.

She wanted to do something useful, and her experience and training made her want to help others for whom the law was not always there. The DA's office threw her in the deep end and she worked to become a valued member of their investigating team. I read the newspapers, and she made headlines on more than one occasion.

Personally, I wondered if what she was doing was a good idea. Of course, it was laudable work, but I know how hard that work can be. I'm not unknown in the DA's office myself, as a medical consultant on crimes that should never happen, but I never expected Cathy to be one of those who brought perps to justice.

I don't see her often, but I do keep in touch with her - and her father who is a family friend. So when she asks to see me, I know it must be important.

The decision she made to join the DA was not made lightly – I'm sure of that. I know from her father that she wasn't very happy in his corporate law office. I suppose it was inevitable that something would force her to look inward.

That night changed everything, as she told me later. Cathy refused to continue her friendship with her boyfriend, the one whose actions had driven her to leave the function. She found someone else, who inspired her to be the best she could be and encouraged her and supported her. She told me this and I understood then what had changed her.

I know Cathy and know she is capable of deep empathy. I never heard her say a bad thing about anyone, and I know she didn't confine herself completely to her social class. But did she really know what she was getting into in the DA's office? She had never had any experience with criminals, or their victims.

It was a brave move, and so like her. She never let anything stand in the way of what she wanted. Nevertheless, she puts everything she has into it, so I had to admire her for that, even though it often put her in danger, and even resulted in some injuries I had to help her deal with. She never expressed any regret.

As a friend and as her doctor, I can tell you one thing - she is one tough lady!

Edie:

I was ready to detest Miss Catherine Chandler, after she was hired. I didn't know anything about her, of course, but I knew her type. High society gal. What on earth was she doing in this office? Well, I found out fairly quickly of course, and that changed everything.

That photo taken when she was found shocked even me, and I look at a lot of awful photos every day. But to see her then, and then look at her as she stood by my computer asking for help, well, that rendered me speechless – briefly. I admit I can run off at the mouth. Comes of sitting in front of a computer screen all day and being able to do nothing but swear at it. I try not to let the stuff I find bother me – but some days it's hard.

She had guts, Cathy, and didn't even try to deny what she had been before I called up that awful photo. I felt about 2 inches tall, and wished I could sink into the floor.

But she brushed it off. She was all business and that was in the past, she said. So I understood a little more about her then, that she was not just there for show. She wanted to work – and boy did she make me work! She made me want to help her, something no one else ever did. She worked hard too – I hear the gossip and she was showing up a lot of the long-timers.

Sorry Joe – you're a great guy, but your wishes are more of a command. Cathy knew how to ask – why once I even helped her get access to records down the vaults! I had to pretend interest in the sad little man sitting at his sad little desk, while she rifled the files and found what she wanted. And he called me once to invite me out too. Too sad. Why don't the good lookers ever call me?

So she and I became a kind of team, but she never took advantage. I always knew she wouldn't ask unless it was urgent, but even then I couldn't always do it right away. She never argued.

And what did I get for all this – a sandwich from the machine, maybe a lunch in between two appointments, a frantic gobble in the lunch room. But that was fine. How could I argue with her? She was getting results, even I could see that. She had become Joe Maxwell's go-to person when he wanted something, like yesterday.

Most surprising to me was that she wasn't a snob. She never mentioned her social life, and it rarely intruded, except when a certain millionaire invaded our office with a gourmet lunch cart, including waiter. That was something else, for sure - and I know Cathy was embarrassed. I mean, wow, who would do that? That was one time I was glad I was Harlem instead of the Heights.

But on a private note, Cathy had a male friend, I had no doubt. That time she was going to leave us and take a job in Rhode Island, I went to see her to say goodbye. There was a look on her face

when I showed her that newspaper clipping about something weird in the park. Her balcony overlooks it, of course, but that wasn't it.

I knew it was a man, but never did find out the connection then, or for a long time.

She was quiet about her private life, and that was fine too, even though I did try to get her to 'fess up. She always laughed it off. She worked hard and deserved a good man. He must be something special, so of course, I'm envious, But hey, I can hope to learn more one day!

Isaac Stubbs:

Catherine came to me for coaching on self-defense.

She'd had a bad experience. I didn't have to ask what because I could see the fine lines of the scars on her face. I recognized her right away, too. I read the newspapers and a society lady getting cut up like that made the news.

I wasn't sure she was up to what she wanted to do, working as she did in an office, where exercise is usually no more than pushing a button for coffee. But she surprised me. She did the half hour of intense exercises I insisted upon every session and sweated like everyone does. I know she hurt after those early sessions, and she could sure give me a workout too. But she kept coming back for more!

She was small and didn't carry any extra weight, but that weight had to have more muscle. I told her that. Tricks don't matter if you haven't got the steel too.

She was a fast study and good on her feet, but I told her she needed to eat more than crackers and vending machine crap. She promised to do that, and I think did for a while, at least while she was training with me.

Being so much bigger, I could have thrown her across the room, but I did what I do and taught her street fighting, the only thing that would save her against thugs who didn't follow the rules. I don't know if she ever needed what I taught her, but it obviously gave her some self-respect. Not even sure she could have used it when she was attacked that way, but the fact that she didn't let it define her life got my respect.

We even became friends, and I helped her out once or twice. For all her bravery, she didn't know much about gangs or the rough parts of town - not that it stopped her. I was happy to be there when she asked, although there wasn't much I could do but be a bodyguard. That was enough for the criminal element. They know their patches very well.

Yeah, I'm known in those parts and no one messes with me.

Charles Chandler:

My daughter has always been stubborn, although she only showed that when it was very important. I think she got this from my side of the family. My wife was always more of a calming influence on both of us, forcing us to re-think before we jumped.

Of course, she never had to worry about money and she has many friends and attends those social occasions she decides are important.

I could wish, and have, that she hadn't allowed Tom Gunther to talk her into that party that night. I didn't know until later what had happened, what had made her leave, and when I did find out, from her, I held in my anger to him. I never mentioned Catherine in his presence again, and refused to discuss his ambitions.

As it happened, she gave him the boot, in no uncertain terms, terms he figured he could change - but he didn't know Catherine as I did. Once her mind was made up, he was out, for good.

I was disappointed, of course, that she didn't wish to follow in my footsteps in corporate law, a place I would happily have handed to her, in fact had been encouraging. She told me she didn't find it exciting, and was often late into the office. But the work she did, she did well, so she was more than competent and never lazy.

Her applying for and then being accepted into the DA's office was a shock. Unlike her, I had some idea of the cases she was likely to have to deal with. How would she manage, I wondered? How would she cope with meeting the victims of these people on their own ground? Lawyers have to be unbiased, and fair, no matter how difficult that is. Criminals give no one any breaks, but the law has to be better than that, or we'd have none.

Well, I need not have worried. Wherever she had been those 10 days she was missing, she was certainly well-cared for. She had found herself, her mission. As a victim herself, she could relate to others, and did.

I heard that they piled the work on her. She never complained, never made excuses, and often worked into the night. I know because she was seldom home and even when she was, she was too tired to go out in the evening. It was difficult to find a time when we could even have lunch. Still, she came with me to charity benefits when she could, although I could sense that her mind was really elsewhere. These things didn't have the charm they used to, perhaps because she no longer cared for that kind of social event, or what people thought of her.

She was motivated, she told me, to bring the criminals to justice. She also realized that what she did was never going to be enough, that there were far more cases than she would be able to deal with. Her response was to dive in and just do it, just as she used to climb that tree she loved in the Park. That she made a difference was all the reward she wanted.

Brooke:

My name is Brooke, and I was invited here by Dr Alcott, a friend.

I met Catherine when she was unconscious, bruised, with her face badly slashed. She was brought to my community by one of us, who had found her and rushed her to our doctor, knowing she was near death.

We bathed her, cleaned and stitched her wounds and put her to bed. Her face was bandaged, except for her mouth. Her eyes weren't harmed, luckily, but we thought it best not to traumatize her with strange surroundings until she was better able to cope.

We cared for her for 10 days, those days she was missing and which she has not explained, at our request.

Catherine stayed with us under unusual circumstances, ones we rarely encounter and for her, we broke some rules we live by. The world outside our community is a violent one and we do not usually try to rescue victims. But she was in dire need, and we are not without compassion, so we helped her.

It was well done. We learned that she is a person of integrity and she has never betrayed the trust we gave her.

So what are we? We are a private, secret community, of people at risk, who have lost a great deal, but who have found a home where they are not judged and can contribute and live happy lives.

You don't know about our place because only a few trusted people do. That's how we are able to be what we are. The world outside our community would not give us any peace, if they knew more.

We are a community deliberately apart - off the grid and below the radar. We are protected by walls and do what work is necessary to keep our home safe, clean and warm and ensure everyone is fed and clothed. We often scavenge from what the rest of the world discards, but we are not tramps.

We rely on a network of helpers to provide us with much of what we need to live as we do, and they too are sworn to secrecy. They are welcome in our community should they need assistance or a place to stay.

Our children are educated to the best standard we can deliver, with teachers who respect each one's ability and who have learned from those among us who are educated and willing. We have a large library and many excellent people with skills.

Some of us, like myself, go to university or college, others leave our community to take jobs or provide assistance to helpers. Some will stay apart. Everyone makes that decision without pressure. Some stay and others leave.

I myself, inspired by my experience with Catherine and our doctor, chose to take a nursing degree and return to our community to help.

I cannot answer the questions you must have. I volunteered to come to this party because we love Catherine too, and felt we should be here to celebrate. We want her to know that she is more than just a helper. She is one of us.

She has told us that her experience with us changed her, but I believe it was inevitable. Catherine is a woman of deep feelings and has always been ready to help us, however she can. That is not something that happens by coincidence or accident – it is something deep inside that was always there, but perhaps had not had the opportunity to be used.

She is a good woman, a kind woman, and our children love her. She is honest and trustworthy – all talents I am sure she is using in her job with the DA too.

We live a different life to that of Catherine, or indeed anyone else in this room. We do not judge, nor make demands, or require any particular kind of belief, beyond that necessary to the well-being of all of us.

Someday, some of you may discover more about our community, but we do not ask it, or for your support. It will happen naturally, or not at all. We ask you to respect that. It means our survival.

Thank you.

Catherine Chandler's response:

Well, it's certainly wonderful to have all of you here, where I never expected to see you. The DA's office can rarely have entertained such a number of New York's finest citizens!

And best of all, none of you are going to appear on my desk in file folder- or at least I hope not!

You have all been too kind, given me too much credit for being what you claim. I think I would be exactly where I am by now, perhaps a year or two later, that's all. Things could not have continued as they were. Something would have forced me to look at myself – and yes, I too wish it had been less traumatic.

While I don't deny that my assault changed my life, it did so because I had time, while I recovered, to examine what my life to that point had been. I was almost as bad as Edie had painted me – doing

my bit for charity and then going shopping. However, to be fair, I did donate my share, with my father, to causes I cared about.

I did shop, but not always for myself. While my closet does have some nice clothing, it isn't overflowing. I worked, and after I started working for the DA, a lot of that clothing just gathers dust.

In any case, Joe Maxwell my slave driver, rarely lets me go home at an hour when I could go anywhere else, and certainly there's no time for shopping. Most of the time my refrigerator is bare! I had to shop in all-nighters, so rarely had anything I could offer a guest, even if I had time for one.

The clothes I have are years old, but I don't care anymore. So I wear the same thing twice to some evening do – take me or leave me. I don't have time for all that nonsense now.

What I wear to the office is rarely what one would call the latest 'fashion'. I have to wear practical clothing. Lawyers are not known for their style, and I think that's a good thing.

So what can I say to you all? Well, one thing I can say for sure is that I will be taking a different job in the DA's office soon. I agree that putting myself in danger was not very clever – but how else was I going to deal with some of the cases? I knew the police department didn't have the resources and I really wanted to prove I could cut the mustard.

That was then, this is now. I will still be working on the files, as I always have, but now I will be preparing the paperwork for trials. I've talked this over with Joe and DA Moreno, and they've agreed.

It's wonderful to see Brooke here, and I have no doubt who sent her, but that too shall remain secret for now. Suffice it to say that the community she belongs to has been an inspiration, often. It's members care deeply for each other, and the children are valued and encouraged. Their life is often hard, but they manage because they work together, support each other, really care for each other. I'm happy to give what help I can. They don't like me to do too much, but I've found ways to ensure they never lack anything important.

I'm very grateful to them, not only for saving my life, but for forcing me to ask myself why I had waited so long to change my life, and how to do it. Being in a quiet place, cared for and healing, I was able to think, really consider, perhaps for the first time in my life. That was their best gift to me.

But look at all of you in this room! You are all the reason I am what I am now. Each of you gave me encouragement and support, made me laugh, gave me the courage to continue, or just gave me a hug when it was needed. These are gifts that lasts for more than just one day a year.

Thank you all for coming to my birthday party, for being friends with me. If I'm ever judged by the friends I keep, I have no fears. Each of you is wonderful.

I love you all!!

END