

Before Once Upon a Time Happened...

Judith Nolan



“A story has no beginning or end: arbitrarily one chooses that moment of experience from which to look back or from which to look ahead...”

Graham Greene

“You know, when I was younger, getting invited to all these parties was a big thing for me.” Jay Coolidge shrugged, frowning at the mass of people milling about the exclusive Third Avenue restaurant. “Now, it’s just another excuse to woo the planning commission.” He huffed a rueful laugh. “Frankly, I’d rather be playing golf, but lately my handicap has been pitiful.”

He cocked his head inquiringly at his business partner. “What about you, Charles?”

“Sorry, I never could get the hang of golf,” Charles Chandler replied ruefully, tugging at the black bow tie at his throat. “Or these black-tie events.” He shrugged. “But they serve a purpose.”

“It’s good for business, I’ll say that.” His partner looked back toward the crowd. “But maybe it’s time we began turning these things over to the younger generation. Mark is really keen to take on some of my bigger clients. He has the ambition and drive to

succeed. We both think it's great to have your Catherine working with us. I'm sure she'd enjoy this sort of affair."

"I'm sure she would." Charles nodded quickly.

He was aware that Jay had already noted Catherine's tardiness of late, her increasingly frequent habit of arriving late to work and leaving early, on the flimsiest of excuses. It was as if she preferred to be anywhere but at her new place of employment.

Despite his best efforts, Charles was at a loss to know how to fix the issue. He knew Catherine would make a fine corporate lawyer, if she just applied herself. His late wife would have known what to do, how to amend the situation before it got any worse.

He shook his head. He missed his beloved Carolyn with a fresh shaft of keenly remembered pain.

He had hoped their daughter's recent dating of Tom Gunther would be a step in the right direction. Tom seemed to be everything he could wish for in a future son-in-law... and Charles wasn't getting any younger.

"The younger generation..." Jay remarked sympathetically, watching his good friend's frowning expression. "I'm sure things will turn out for the best. You just have to give her time to find her feet."

"Yes..." Charles expelled his breath in a rush.

"Being a parent is the hardest job in the world..." Jay pressed a hand to his friend's shoulder. "I should know, I've got five kids. In the meantime, there's someone I want you to meet. You remember when we signed up Tom Gunther as our biggest new client last year, and how good it's already been for us? Well, there's another developer who's making an even bigger name for himself in town. He said he's looking to enlarge his representation, if the right firm comes along."

With a lift of his chin, Jay indicated a handsome, younger man, across the room. "This guy's going places, and we'll want to be right there with him. Who knows where it might lead?"

He beckoned to the other man to join them. The younger man immediately crossed the room on quick strides, with the surety of a man who already knew his place in the world, and how to achieve his goals.

Jay introduced them with a wave of his hand. “Mr. Burch, I’d like you to meet my partner at the firm.”

“Elliot Burch,” the younger man announced confidently, extending his hand towards Charles with a quick smile that didn’t reach his watchful grey eyes.

“Charles Chandler.” Charles accepted the gesture, finding the handshake firm and cool, and himself under intense scrutiny. “Jay tells me you’re interested in becoming a client of ours.”

“If you believe in putting in the extra hours I’ll need,” Burch stated brusquely. “I don’t have the time for slackers. There’s so much to be done.” His watchful expression hardened. “No doubt you are aware that I already have a cadre of lawyers working for me. Yet Jay here says I might need one more firm. I won’t consider working with anyone but the best. Are *you* the best?”

Charles studied him for a long moment. He was certainly forthright, and he possessed a dark handsomeness. That alone would open many doors for him.

The younger man withstood his close scrutiny without comment. Everything about him spoke of his confidence and charisma. It was a potent mix.

“I didn’t get where I am today by being counted as merely second best,” Charles finally replied evenly. He glanced at his business partner. “I’m sure we can put together a detailed plan that will suit your needs.”

“Good. Excellent. I have some pending contracts that need urgent attention.” Burch stepped back. “It’s Friday now. I’ll be in your office first thing Monday. Now, if you’ll excuse me...” He was gone again, before Charles could draw breath.

“Quick, isn’t he?” Jay chuckled, lifting two glasses of champagne from the tray of a passing waiter. “But he knows exactly what he wants, and how to get it. I think we’ll be a good fit for him.” He passed one flute to Charles before raising his own. “To the future and our exciting new business...”

The two men clinked their glasses together even as Charles replied wryly, “And to clients who are just a little easier to get along with.”

“The younger generation.” Jay shrugged.

“Maybe I should take up golf after all...” Charles shook his head before swallowing a mouthful of champagne. He watched Elliot Burch circulate purposefully through the crowd, as if he had always belonged in this elite group.

If only Catherine would find she possessed the same sense of drive... Charles compressed his lips, as he contemplated his immediate future. Hal Sherwood would be visiting New York from Atlanta in a few weeks. He knew he could unburden himself to one of his oldest friends.

He hoped Jay was right, and that Catherine would come to enjoy the endless rounds of parties they were required to attend. He wanted to rekindle her interest in corporate law. He needed to make some sense of what was happening with his daughter, and hopefully find a solution, before it was too late, and something more drastic was required.

He sighed, observing Elliot Burch working the room with practiced ease. He looked very much at home.

Charles shook his head. *‘You’re a go-getter, Burch, that’s for sure. I like that. I wonder what my Cathy would think of you? Maybe I should arrange for you to meet my daughter and hope some of your ambition rubs off on her. Perhaps you’d be good for her...’*



“The most important thing is this: to sacrifice what you are now for what you can become tomorrow...”

Shannon Alder