

CAROLINE

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PROLOGUE

Outside the West Village restaurant where I'd had dinner with an old friend, I unfolded my white cane, said goodnight and set off for the Sheridan Square subway station. As I approached West 4th Street, a woman came to my side and asked, "Can I give you any assistance?" She'd assumed I planned to cross West 4th. Actually, I was going to turn onto it.

Hints of spring had appeared after a long winter. Even a first-time visitor to New York would have detected the atmosphere of relief and renewal. An image came to me of lit street lamps, neon signs and car headlights staring down the night. Defiance was in the air, the kind that says life doesn't have to be as bleak as winter insists.

I took the woman's arm, and we sped along West 4th to my station. She said she was going that way anyway.

I learned she'd come from Kansas to be a graduate student at NYU. She learned I was an environmental lawyer. She was studying the relationship between the actions of statesmen and what they wrote and said before taking on leadership roles. I suspected this was an academic cottage industry spawned by Barack Obama's two autobiographies. It was a world away from the

one I inhabited of clean-up sites, consent decrees, arguments with our counterparts at the Justice Department when they balked at suing a polluter.

I learned her name was Taylor. She learned mine was Nick.

By then, we'd stepped onto the island in the middle of Sheridan Square, site of my subway entrance, but she kept walking, taking a left down Seventh Avenue. Intrigued, I went along with her unannounced detour.

"I suspect I wouldn't make a very good lawyer," she said. "What do you think?"

"What do I think! I think I hardly know you."

"They say you get a sense of someone after two minutes. I believe there's a lot to that. Don't you?"

"I can tell you're articulate. That helps if you want to be a lawyer."

"Words, words. Everyone does words today, even if they can't spell."

"Can you spell?"

"That I can."

"Okay, now you have two qualifications."

"You must make a lot of enemies in your job," she said. "How does that make you feel?"

"I like to think I make converts, but I admit I have a talent for antagonizing people that belies it."

"That tells me you don't know who you are."

"I know I'm a sack of contradictions."

We crossed yet another street. She said, "Are you up for a drink or something? I know a place."

I'd been looking forward to getting home and settling in, but I said, "Let's go."

“Just along here,” she said, turning right.

My office shoes sent cracks against the deserted street’s quiet. She must have been wearing athletic footwear because her steps landed softly. An overhead image came to me of a gray-haired man walking side by side with this young woman. In my image, she was blonde. Well, yeah. It was an image recreated from some movie in my childhood, when I’d had vision. The couple reached a restaurant entrance, paused, turned inside. Then the camera switched off. I became myself again, responding to the maître d’ and sizing up the interior: small, busy but unflustered.

At the table, she slung her coat over the back of her chair. “I have to be careful with money,” she explained. “Tipping to get my coat back is one expense I can do without.”

I was glad I didn’t have to deal with a coat, which I hadn’t worn even though the air was brisk when I’d left my apartment that morning, confident in the promise of a spring day.

As she seated herself diagonally at my side, I said, “I have to tell you I’m kind of full. You met me on my way home from dinner with a friend.”

“They won’t mind. It’s not like there’s competition for tables at this hour. But I haven’t eaten, so I’ll be ordering something. An appetizer. That will do me fine.”

I told the waiter I wanted just a decaf, and he showed no irritation. In my mind, I said I’d leave a good tip whatever we ordered. Maybe he picked it up by extra sensory perception. Sign of a good waiter.

“So,” she said, sounding awkward now that we’d committed ourselves to a conversation, “you don’t seem happy talking about the law.”

I put on a rueful grin. “It’s after hours.”

“Oh, sorry, no more law questions. But let me ask you this. Where I come from, people blame environmentalists for the exodus of jobs out of America. I disagree, but I don’t feel I know enough to have a valid opinion.”

Our coffees arrived, followed quickly by her salad. I took in the tablecloth, the unexceptional silverware, the separation of tables that would let us speak without every word being overheard and decided to air misgivings I rarely admit. After all, it was after hours.

“I know someone in the furniture industry who blames environmental laws for the end of furniture manufacturing in America.”

“Furniture?”

“Think of the chemicals, the intensive use of energy, all that sawdust.”

“But keeping the environment clean creates jobs.”

“I agree. It’s just a harder argument to make. I’m guessing the people you talk to don’t want that kind of change. And if we’re driving out industries like that, it means we’re exporting pollution to countries more desperate than ours.”

“Do you believe that? I mean, if you do, how could you continue doing what you do?”

“I’m proud of the work we’ve done as an agency and my own small part in it. But are the results all positive?” I shrugged. “No collective human activity does unmitigated good.”

“You’re a pessimist. I took you for a hopeful person.”

“During those first two minutes?”

“Exactly.”

“I take it you’re an optimist.”

“See, you can tell lots of things about someone you’ve just met. What else do you know about me?”

I doubted the wisdom of answering, but I went ahead anyway. “You have strong opinions, but you listen to others.”

“That’s true.”

“You’re a kind person.”

“I try.”

“All that sounds rather basic to me,” I said. “I thought this two minutes of yours was about something more subtle—more nuanced, as people say today.”

“I can tell certain things about you that might or might not be subtle or nuanced.”

I almost groaned. I had no desire to expose myself either to analysis or teasing. “Okay, like what?”

“From the quality of your suit and tie, I know you’re comfortably off. Oh, forgive me. That’s a visual thing.”

“That’s the first time you’ve sounded disingenuous, Sherlock. What is the feminine for Sherlock, by the way? Do you know?”

She ignored my frivolity. “I was apologizing for mentioning something you can’t share.”

“How do you know I can’t share?”

“Okay, I guess I don’t know. I mean, you can know what you’re wearing, of course, but I don’t see how you can know what I am.”

“Outside you were wearing a trim coat, not a windbreaker or something else I’d expect from a student.”

She sighed audibly. “You’re better at this two minutes thing than me.”

“I doubt it. Go on, visual or otherwise, say what else you’ve picked up. You’re dying to tell me.”

“Have I annoyed you? I’m sorry.”

“Maybe you hit a sore point. My problem, not yours.”

She touched my hand. A fleeting gesture, gone almost before I’d noticed.

“I sense you’re lonely,” she said.

I did one of those heaving sighs that lifts the shoulders. “Maybe we’d better stop there.”

She turned the subject to herself. “Would you say I’m lonely?”

I waxed ironic. “After all, you’re an attractive young woman with an hour or two to spare for a man twice her age.”

She answered with a halting, “Ye-es.” Then she said, “What makes you say I’m attractive?”

“You act on impulse and live in the moment.”

“You know me better than I know myself.”

How pleased I used to be when a woman said these words. It might be early on in a relationship, during sex, when I’d shown her things about her body she hadn’t known before.

“I know you hardly at all,” I said, keeping *double entendre* out of my voice.

“So you said. But I’m finding it fascinating how much you can know. I’ve never spent any time with someone who can’t see. It made me a little scared.”

“And tonight you decided to face up to the scare.”

“If you want to put it that way.”

I could have said, then how would you put it, but I knew about acting on impulse. I doubted Taylor had seen me in the street and said to herself, time to get over that phobia. Her explanation had probably come to mind as we meandered around the West Village.

“So, Taylor, are you about to say I have super-developed perception?”

“The way you say it, I’d better not.”

That brought a smile to my face, as her voice betrayed it had to hers.

I said, “I don’t suppose you’re up for some wine. I feel we should pay a little more rent for this table, and it looks like we’re not leaving soon.”

“Love some. How about a half carafe of the house red or white?”

We settled on the red, which arrived with the same promptness and courtesy as before.

“Don’t you think we’re all freaks?” she said, after a sip of wine.

Her word put me off, but it did get to the heart of the question. “It depends on how you define ‘freak.’ But if we all are, it doesn’t change anything.”

“If we admitted it, wouldn’t it make us more tolerant?”

“Tolerant maybe. But I tolerate a lot of people I don’t like.”

“That surprises me.”

“I don’t mean I hate people.” Then my inner trickster piped up. “I mean, given a choice between stopping in the street to talk to someone and getting home, I usually choose home.”

She called me on it. “Tonight you didn’t.”

Having made the mistake of trying to hide my amusement behind a sip of wine, I spluttered into the glass. But I recovered with what I considered aplomb. “I decided it was high time I overcame my fear of talking to women who accost me in the street.”

“Touché,” she said, bumping my glass with hers. “So, women ‘accost’ you, as you say, all the time?”

“You’d be surprised.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“Truthfully, people of all ages and genders offer help.”

“Hope for humanity,” she said.

“Depends on how the help is offered.”

“Did I do it right?”

“Perfectly. You gave me a choice. You didn’t grab my arm. You didn’t ask a stupid question like, ‘Do you know where you’re going?’”

“Why is that a stupid question?”

“Would I be out and about if I didn’t know where I was going?”

“You must experience a lot of stupidity.”

“And a lot of thoughtfulness.”

“So you are an optimist.”

Her knee touched mine. It stayed.

“I’m not lonely in the traditional sense,” she said, turning her question back on herself.

“But I don’t seem able to settle down with one person. That’s a form of loneliness, don’t you think?”

“How old are you, Taylor?”

“Twenty-six.”

“I was the same at your age. I mean, I found it unsettling to keep starting and ending relationships. But I also found it exciting.”

“Exciting? I don’t know.”

“I’d long felt insecure about women’s feelings for me. All of a sudden, that changed. I’m guessing you’ve never had doubts about your attractiveness.”

“In middle school and maybe into high school. Good grades didn’t make for popularity.”

“Just that?”

“Okay, and I was flat-chested till later than most girls. Funny how you don’t want anyone to notice at that age, but if you don’t have breasts, you feel lacking. And I do mean lacking. It feels like a moral failing. But it’s weird that I can’t settle on one person. It means I do cruel things without meaning or wanting to.”

“Like what?”

“Leading guys on.”

“Sure you aren’t still in high school?”

“You’re saying I’m immature. But I don’t lead guys on to make them crazy. I get really, really involved in someone, but then something or someone else takes over.”

“It’s good you know you have the power to hurt.”

“I don’t understand.”

“There are people who think no one cares enough about them to be hurt by what they do.” She couldn’t know how hard-earned that knowledge was.

“Oh, I know people care.”

“Well, if settling down with someone is something you hope for, it should happen. If it’s only an ideal you’ve picked up second-hand, who knows?”

“I don’t even know if I’m into women or men.”

I made a sound of exasperation.

“What’s wrong?”

“Aren’t you being a tad too faddish? Surely you know which way you swing by now.”

“Which way I swing? Now who sounds like a teenager!”

“Only because you think like one.”

I sensed her knee’s touch get lighter. Then to my relief, she laughed.

“I suppose I don’t see a long-term relationship with a woman in my future,” she said. Her knee’s pressure returned.

“Process of elimination. A start.”

The half carafe yielded two smaller glasses. When she’d poured, I said, “I should be going soon. Tomorrow is another long day.”

“And I’ve got a bunch of studying to do. I’ll get our waiter’s attention.” As she spoke, her voice moved to the side, which told me she was gesturing for the check. Then she said, “I guess loneliness is on my mind because I worry that if I’m not in a relationship after the youthful bloom has gone, I might find myself alone and left behind. In Jane Austen’s day, a woman who wasn’t married by my age had poor prospects.”

“In Jane Austen’s day, you had to follow the map laid out for you. It’s sad when anyone today has unerringly followed the course mapped out for them.”

“How did you avoid doing that?”

“Ah, one benefit of disability. No good maps. You’ve made sure you won’t follow someone else’s map, either.”

“How did I do that?”

“By coming to New York from Kansas, for one thing. For another, by plucking a stranger like me out of thin air and sharing these two hours with him.”

The check arrived. I thought about splitting it, letting her know I recognized her as equal, but our finances weren’t. She graciously consented to my paying the bill on condition I let her cover the tip. I hoped she honored my unspoken promise to the waiter.

“Taylor, I’m curious about the appearance of the woman I’ve been having this conversation with. Tell me something about yourself.”

“So, you didn’t learn everything about me those first two minutes.”

“I already told you so.”

She proved to be “a Midwest farmer’s daughter,” as she put it. “Fair hair, blue eyes. Also, um, pointed chin, small nose. I have an unsightly bump on the bridge of my nose. One day when I’m rich, I’ll have a plastic surgeon fix it.”

Seeing me start, she said, “You disapprove of plastic surgery?”

I pushed down a memory for later. “Not at all. Cosmetics matter.”

I touched her hair. When she turned her face toward me, I brushed my thumb against her cheek, a physicality to remember her by.

Outside I saw the folly of having opted against wearing a coat that morning. The air had turned colder, sharpened by a night wind off the Hudson.

This time we stopped on reaching the steps down to my station. I considered giving her my business card or asking for her number. I did neither. I’d bragged to her that I’d followed my own map. In doing so, I’d done harm. As Taylor said about herself, I hadn’t meant to, but it didn’t free me from culpability. At least I’d learned a lesson or two, and one was to let this brief intersection of our lives stand on its own.

She, too, avoided the false hope of “Let’s get together again.” Instead, saying, “Thank you for a lovely time,” she kissed my cheek and walked away, back down Seventh Avenue.

Turning to the subway steps, I could at last give in to memories.