

# “Dear One”

## Excerpt

"Hm?" Charlie Worth said the first two times his grandson, Oliver, asked him about the credit card bill. If he feigned deafness indefinitely, Oliver might give up and leave him alone. Although such a thing had never happened before.

"Grandfather."

A chair scraped on the kitchen floor. Charlie kept his binoculars focused on the insipid view, three floors below, of a flock of geese and an old lady pushing a walker around one of the bean-shaped lakes at The Lakes at Cartamack, Vibrant Living for Active Seniors.

"Grandfather," Oliver said at his elbow.

Charlie gave up. "What?"

"What's this?"

He squinted. Maybe he could feign blindness.

"Here." Oliver tapped a line on the bill. "Must be a mistake. It says you spent over four hours on the phone this month to an 800 number, something called 'M. Romanescu.' For a total of \$780.39."

Stalling, Charlie pulled back his lips, trying to mimic his grandson's amused, incredulous smile. "M. Romanescu. M. Romanescu." He said that a few more times, then fell back on "Hm."

Gradually Oliver stopped smiling. At the moment his eyes went wide with shock, Charlie realized what he was thinking.

"It's not phone sex!"

"Of course not. Of course not." Oliver actually blushed—Charlie hadn't seen that happen in twenty years. It diverted him until Oliver said, "What is it, then?"

Charlie opened and closed his mouth. This wasn't going to go over well. He got that cornered-kindergartener feeling Oliver was so good at provoking. "Hey, you're the one always telling me to get

out more, do this, do that, mingle with the peeps." The best defense was a good offense. "And look what happens when I do—the third degree!" He retreated to the kitchen.

"Grandfather," Oliver said, following. Who called his grandfather "Grandfather"? Nobody but Oliver. "This is one 800 number. One peep. Who or what is M. Romanescu?"

"You hungry? I got doughnuts."

"Who is M—"

"Romy, her name's Romy, and she's a friend of mine, okay?" He started rummaging in the pantry. "Chocolate, I got glazed, I got sprinkles . . ."

"Romy?"

"Madame Romanescu to you. We could split a cruller." He heard a thump—Oliver falling back against the counter.

"A psychic. My God. A telephone psychic."

"What? I can't have a friend? We talk, that's all. She tells me things."

"I bet she does."

"Real things. Stuff she couldn't know!"

Oliver made the pained face that always made Charlie, who was seventy-seven, feel like seven. "We talked about this, Grandfather. We agreed. You said you'd stick to the new budget—no more shopping channel, no catalogs, no online poker."

"This is different. I'm being sociable."

"You're being—" Oliver pinched the bridge of his nose, making a big show of summoning patience. "I know it's been rough on you the last couple of years. Losing Nana, moving here—"

"Shoulda stayed where I was. Perfectly good house, should never've listened to you. Should never've . . ." He trailed off, didn't say "given you my goddamn power of attorney." He'd lose that argument, but only because Oliver didn't play fair. He liked to bring up things that ought to be water under the dam, couple of unfortunate little financial incidents, could happen to anybody. Water under the dam.

"You haven't given this place a chance," Oliver was saying in his tolerant voice. "All the activities they've got here—"

"I hate activities."

"—and golf, you haven't even tried your new clubs."

"I hate golf."

"You don't. You used to love golf."

"Used to. Now I hate it." He stuffed a doughnut hole in his mouth.

"Look," Oliver said, glancing at his expensive wristwatch. Always with the schedule. He started cleaning up the bills, the Medicare and Social Security forms, all the stuff he brought over once a month for Charlie to sign. Or explain. "I have to go, Grandfather, I'm sorry, I've got a thing this evening, but before—"

"A party!" Charlie pounced. "Some job you got. Wish I had that job." That always got to him. He was some kind of big-deal energy lobbyist on Capital Hill, but all he did was go to cocktail parties—or so Charlie liked to tell him.

"But before I go, I want you to promise me you'll quit calling this psychic. I mean it, Grandfather. This has to stop. You know better."

"What? What do I know better?"

"That it's bogus. A scam. These people prey on the elderly, the—well, frankly, the gullible. It's what they do."

"Romy's not like that."

"Promise me."

"Or what, you'll cut off my allowance?" He would, too. He'd done it before. "You don't take after me," Charlie said testily. "I don't know who you take after. Nobody in the family I can think of. I think it's very likely you were adopted."

Oliver just looked at him.

"All right. All right. Christ almighty, what a wet blanket. Talk about a killjoy."

"Sticks and stones," Oliver said, smiling again. He got his suit coat off the back of the chair, where he'd put it so it wouldn't wrinkle. The fact that he was wearing a suit hadn't tipped Charlie off that he had somewhere else to go this afternoon, because Oliver always wore a suit. He probably took a shower in his suit. He put all the papers in his snazzy briefcase, the briefcase under his arm, and threw his other arm across Charlie's shoulders, presumably to show there were no hard feelings. "You know," he said, oh so casually as they walked to the front door, "they've got a full-time staff person here at Cartamack—I saw it in the newsletter. Somebody, counselor type, you could talk to. If you, you know,

wanted to."

A shrink? Oliver wanted him to see a shrink? Charlie said, "Hm?" pretending not to hear, and Oliver didn't follow up. Hard to say which of them was gladder to drop the subject. Worth men didn't go to shrinks.

Although, come to think of it, Oliver might've gone to one after the accident, for all Charlie knew. How many years ago was that, five? Okay, Worth men didn't go to shrinks and talk about it.

Oliver paused, as he usually did, to look at Charlie's collection of western bronzes on the glass shelves by the door. He picked up his favorite—the biggest, heaviest one, four mustangs in full gallop. Charlie picked up his own favorite—a cowboy whipping his muscle-bound horse with his hat, hair blowing back in a realistic headwind. Thirty years ago, he and Oliver used to roll around on the living room rug in Charlie's house, making up complicated games about posses and ambushes, cattle drives and gold rushes. Love of a mythical Old West was main the thing they'd had in common in those days. Probably still was.

Even now, just holding the heavy horses had the effect of putting them back in favor with each other. "Got any shirts for the cleaners?" Oliver asked, and Charlie said no, not this week, thanks. They talked about Charlie's 401K and whether he ought to renew his AARP membership. They exchanged their traditional manly, one-armed hug, and Charlie thought it went on a second or two longer than usual.

Then Oliver ruined everything by saying, "So we're clear about this psychic, right, Grandfather? No more of that. I'm holding you to your promise."

"Oh, hold this," Charlie said, and closed the door on him.

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