

Eric Seiley

Warnings We Do Not Heed

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Birthdays Wishes Do Come True

Young Callie Cartwright didn't celebrate her fifteenth birthday because her grandfather forgot. He was at a poker tournament in Reedsville.

"You forgot my birthday," Callie complained.

"I'm sorry, little sprout," Grandpa Joe apologized over the phone. "I don't know what I was thinking booking a trip on your birthday. I should've remembered. It's just, you know, things have been financially tight and I have to go where the money is whenever possible."

"Sure, Grandpa. I understand. I was just sad not to see you. It was my first birthday since getting out is all. And now they have me living in foster care."

"I know, little sprout, I know. I should've been there. But, hey, I tell you what. How about I bring you a nice gift when I come visit. A nice silky ribbon wrapped around ten crisp one hundred dollar bills. How does that sound?"

"Really, Grandpa? A thousand dollars?"

"Oh at least. I'm pretty sure I'm going to win this tournament. And don't tell anyone, but I also laid a few bets on myself with the local sports book in anticipation of winning. The payday's going to be big. So, yeah, one thousand dollars."

"And I can spend it any way I like?"

"Of course."

"Then maybe we can take that thousand dollars and rent an apartment? A two bedroom? That's what I really want. Remember how the judge said I can leave foster care as long as I have a legal guardian. And could live with you as long as you showed an income and an address? You and I could rent an apartment together, Grandpa."

"Rent is pretty expensive out there, little sprout. Easily more than a thousand dollars a month. I don't know if I can afford that."

"Sure, in Waterford Estates and Princeville. But Ramsey Grove is way cheaper. I looked it up. Plus, I promise if I move in with you, you won't regret it. I'll take real good care of you. I'll cook and clean and shop and everything. They taught us how in Home Ec at juvey. And maybe, you can ask the judge for full custody – at least till I turn eighteen. Then I won't ever have to live in foster care again."

"I'm working on that, Callie. That's one of the reasons I'm out here. Trying to put together a nest egg big enough for you and me. Times are tough and all, but I'm trying. But hey, I'm sorry I missed your birthday. Why don't I come pick you up soon and we can drive over to Myrtle Beach like we used to with your Ma, Dad, brother and sister? We can walk the beach looking for seashells and then stop off at Peaches Corner and chow down on some fine blue king crab. Maybe I'll even let you drive home on my lap on the way back. What do you say?"

"I'm a little too big to sit on your lap now, Grandpa. That was a while ago. And I'm not allowed to drive a car till I'm eighteen. Judge's order."

"Oh, right. I guess I forgot."

"But, sure. A trip to Myrtle Beach sounds nice. I'll tell my foster mother. She won't care as long as I'm back by curfew. So, I'll see you on Saturday. Okay?"

"I'll be there with bells on. And a thousand bucks! You'll be rich. We'll have a grand time."

"I'll just be happy to see you."

Young Callie Cartwright didn't celebrate her fifteenth birthday. Nor her sixteenth either. Not in Myrtle Beach. Not walking the beach or a crab feast at Peaches Corner. Because Grandpa Joe didn't show up. He did call sometime later though.

"Hey, little sprout," Grandpa Joe greeted. "Sorry I missed our get together, but I had to jet over to Atlantic City for another tournament. The prize money was insane. We're talking a whole year's salary kind of jackpot. And winning would not only qualify me for the Texas Hold 'em finals in Las Vegas, but also have enough stake money to buy in. So I couldn't pass up the opportunity."

"What happened to Utah? And the thousand dollars, you promised. And looking at apartments."

"I'm sorry about all that, little sprout. Truth is, I didn't win big in Utah like I planned. I was up, but then this local gal came in with pocket deuces and swept the whole table after the boat delivered her another pair over the river. It was brutal! I was fortunate enough to cover expenses and still get out. Then I had to work a bunch of smaller tournies on the way just to get over to Atlantic City. Atlantic City gets me to Vegas."

"Okay. I understand I guess."

"Don't worry, little sprout. It was just a little set back and I was just as disappointed as you were. But if I do well in Las Vegas, and there's no reason I shouldn't, I'll scoot on over to see you and you and I can have a real fine time together."

"Please, Grandpa. I need you to come here soon. My foster mother told me I'll be moving to another home soon. She loves me and all, but says there isn't enough room anymore now that I'm older. And if no other foster families pick me up, I'll have to transfer to State Foster Care. But I was thinking, maybe when you finish in Las Vegas, you can come get me and we can look into getting that apartment together?"

"Why that'd be nice. I'll do my best to get there. And maybe, when I do, we can go to the cemetery and pay our respects to the family too. Have you been to your mother and father's grave recently? Cleaned the weeds from your brother's grave or laid fresh flowers on your sister's?"

"No."

"Too busy?"

"No. It's just...well, I'm having a hard time visiting them. It's very triggering when I think about going, so my therapist says I don't need to. And that it's okay if I don't till I'm ready."

"I see."

Callie didn't like visiting her family's grave site even though it was less than two miles from where she currently lived. She hated seeing the tombstones, each inscribed with the same date of death – June 16th, 2022 – knowing that meant her family was dead and she was alive. It was like a giant indictment.

"But, I'll go if you take me. Then we can look at apartments after."

"I'll see what my tournament schedule is like. There are a lot of pre-determined dates already set up, but I should have a weekend free coming up soon."

Grandpa Joe didn't appear that weekend. Or the next. But he did call Callie before her next birthday.

"Sorry, little sprout. Las Vegas was a grind, but necessary. And I did meet a nice lady from Florida who runs several big tournaments down in Sumter County each year and wants me to come down. Not only that, but she also wants to make me her partner."

"Well, I guess I'm happy for you, Grandpa. But I need you here. I just received my final notice this week that I'll be transferred to the State Foster Care facility over in Mountings by my seventeenth birthday."

"I see."

"Please, Grandpa, I really don't want to go there. They say it's worse than prison and I'll have to stay till I turn eighteen. But, maybe when you go to Florida, you can come get me and take me with you? I think the judge might allow me to move if you take legal custody."

"Oh, little sprout, I'd love to. But my lady friend says lives in a senior community that doesn't allow residents who aren't seniors to live here. And I don't have enough of a nest egg to start fresh yet. You can visit though. I'm sure she'd allow that. Why, I'll talk to my friend about flying you down for a nice visit. What do you say to that?"

"Please, Grandpa Joe. We're family and I really need your help. I don't want to go to the State Facility. It feels like a punishment."

"No, little sprout. No one's trying to punish you."

"Then why do I have to move to the State Facility. Why can't you come get me and we can get an apartment together? It won't take much money to get started."

"I hear you, little sprout. But there are considerations."

"Is it cause of what happened? You said you forgave me for that when I went to juvey. You said you believed me that it was all an accident and that I never intentionally meant to hurt anyone. I spent two years in juvenile detention paying for that mistake. Now I'm out and have to live in a state facility instead of with you cause you won't come get me."

"I understand, little sprout. And I have forgiven you. I know you didn't mean to set fire to the house that night. But the truth is, when the house burned down, insurance refused to pay out because they said the fire had been intentionally set. Which cancelled the policy coverage. And then the hospital bills trying to save your mom and dad added up. Followed by funeral costs to bury your brother and sister, and then your mom and dad a month later, wiped out the rest of my retirement savings. I kept that from you while you were in detention, to spare you, but the reality of the situation is I'm broke and haven't recovered. I'm doing my best."

"I know you lost a lot, Grandpa. And I'm really sorry about that. I am. I tell my therapist every week how guilty I feel. And how sorry I am about what happened. How I'd give anything just to be given a second chance to start over again. To get out of foster care and live with you. Please, Grandpa."

"I hear you. Let me talk to my friend and I'll let you know."

"Please do, Grandpa."

Grandpa Joe didn't call back. Not for several months. Long after Callie had been removed from her small foster home and sent to live at the State Foster Care Institute in Creekwood outside Mounting.

But he did remember to call before Callie's next birthday.

"Hi, little sprout, happy birthday. How are you?"

"Screw you, Grandpa."

"Hey, what's with the attitude? I know I haven't talked to you in a while, but I've been busy helping my lady friend with her business. Things are going well too and we're talking about moving to a bigger place. So there'll be room for you to visit."

"I don't care. They sent me to this really horrible place and I've been stuck here for nearly a year! I hate it! Especially knowing the only reason I'm here is because you wouldn't agree to be my legal guardian. I told you this place is a prison. So, why didn't you come get me? You're supposed to be my family!"

Grandpa Joe finally dropped his guard. "Family? What do you know about family, you selfish little shit?! You want the truth? You want to know why I won't take you in? Because you killed *my* entire family playing with matches. You should've been declared an arsonist and tried as an adult. Sent to prison for the rest of your life. I wasn't fooled by your act. Never have been."

"Grandpa, that fire wasn't my fault. It was an accident! I never meant to set the house on fire."

"And yet you did."

"Not on purpose. My therapist said I have a compulsive condition. I even take meds for it now. It wasn't my fault. Plus, she doesn't think I could've stopped myself even if I wanted to back then. She said it might've been...*inevitable*."

"Bullshit. You didn't have to do it. You could've stopped. We all told you to. That there was no reason for you to set fires. But you were a stubborn, selfish, self-pitying child. Always whining about not getting as much as your brother and sister. Always setting little fires just because something upset you. Like being told something you didn't want to hear. But we tried. We all tried! We kept matches away from you, watched over you, loved you. But nothing worked. Because you were selfish and just wouldn't listen."

"Please, Grandpa! It wasn't my fault. It wasn't. But, I'm listening now. I'm better. Please come and get me. I'll listen from now on, I promise."

"How could I trust you after what you did? You took everything I held dear and burned it up like it was nothing. And now you want me to forget all that and get an apartment with you?"

"No, Grandpa. I'm not like that anymore. I've changed. I have. I'm a good person now. I'm going to therapy and taking my meds and I don't play with matches anymore. Please, Grandpa, don't leave me stuck in here any longer. Give me a chance."

“As far as I’m concerned, you’ve used up all your chances. You’re just going to have to lie in the bed you created till you turn eighteen. After that, I don’t care what you do. My family has passed away and I can’t pretend anymore. God forgive me, but I can’t. You’re not my family and I never want to see you again.”

Callie cried when Grandpa Joe hung up – about everything. But mostly because she felt alone and sorry for herself. But Callie decided right then and there that she’d never celebrate any more birthdays, not with Grandpa Joe or anyone else, until she was able to celebrate with her own family, on her own terms, in her own way, with her own family. Who would always want to be there for her whenever she needed them. Always and forever!

True to her word, Callie didn’t celebrate her next birthday -- not even when she was released from Crestwood State Foster Care Institute and set free on her own. She found a small studio apartment for herself in Ramsey Grove, found a job working as a waitress at a local diner for decent pay, and a found nice boyfriend who worked as a line cook at the same place.

Little Callie Cartwright didn’t plan on celebrating her nineteenth birthday either. At least, that’s not how she saw it when she flew to Florida to visit her Grandpa Joe on that day.

After midnight, in the early morning hours, Callie landed at Leesburg International airport and caught a bus to the Villages where Grandpa Joe’s condo was. It didn’t take much time to set things up the way she planned, mainly because she’d been practicing for a few years and there were plenty of gas stations open at 3am within walking distance. But still, when striking the match – Callie’s face briefly illuminated by the glow – her excitement felt like a celebration.

Later, standing just beyond the barricades watching the dozen or so firemen fight the blazing fire, trying to keep the inferno from jumping condo buildings, Callie briefly wondered if Grandpa Joe had woken at any point to feel the pain of fire -- and if that pain was similar to what her mother and father, brother and sister, might’ve felt. Possible, but probably not. She’d only used a match then. She knew so much more about the forensics of fire science now. And was sure, dousing the interior of her grandfather’s condo with diesel before lighting the match, much more effective. Her fires had become so much more focused and controlled.

Still, watching the firemen, shielding her face slightly from the heat, Young Callie Cartwright accepted the truth. This was a birthday celebration. And smiled.

The End.