

Sharing the Moon

CHAPTER ONE

It was midnight when Derek Woods turned the last page of his novel and sighed. A pang of grief struck him—an emotion he'd felt every so often when he was forced to say goodbye to a society, although imaginary, he'd grown to care for. He savored spending time with anyone at that point in his life, and as a single parent, parting from them was always disheartening. He turned the novel over to re-read the back synopsis when he heard a crash come from across the hall. Alert, he sat upright in bed and listened.

“Charlotte?”

“Daddy!”

Derek had tucked his daughter into bed hours earlier that night, and returned to her room to find her trapped beneath a chest of drawers. He leaped to her side, lifting the small dresser off her torso, and pulled her to her feet. “Jesus, honey! What happened?”

Charlotte climbed into her father's arms and lay her head on his shoulder. “I wanted my water.”

“Oh, no,” he groaned. “Are you alright?”

Charlotte kept her head down and mumbled, “My neck hurts.”

Derek leaned back, placed his finger beneath her chin, and guided her eyes up to his. “Let me see.” Charlotte giggled as he made a funny face, pretending to inspect her. “I think you're the luckiest girl in the whole wide world,” he teased. “I don't see *one* single injury.”

Charlotte smiled. “Okay.”

“No more climbing in the dark, young lady. Understand?” Derek laid her back down on her bed and felt the water seep in-between his toes.

“Okay, Daddy.”

“That's my girl.” Derek retrieved the cup from the floor, paused outside the doorway, and pulled the door closed behind him. “Sleep tight.”

“But—” she called after him, “I'm still thirsty!”

Derek paused, looking at her pink alarm clock. “Alright. I'll be right back.” He adjourned down the hall, returning with a fresh cup of tap water. Charlotte gulped it down as he knelt on the carpet, patting it with a towel. A glow outside her bedroom window caught his attention and he looked up at the dark winter sky. “Well, look at that.”

Charlotte set her cup down on the windowsill and looked over his shoulder. “What?”

“It's a full moon.”

“What's that mean?”

“It means,” he explained, “when the earth is in-between the moon and the sun, it looks *just* like that. If you look at it hard enough, you'll see a sideways rabbit. Look at it real hard. Do you see it?”

Charlotte tilted her head, looking at the moon. “Yes! Does he live there?”

“He sure does,” Derek answered. “He's there every time the moon is full.”

Charlotte squinted. “But... how did he get there?”

Derek eased her back into bed and pulled the covers to her chin. “It's an old Japanese story. Do you want to hear it?”

The blonde little girl nodded with an eager smile.

“Okay. Listen carefully.” Derek huddled up next to her on the bed and raised his hands in the air. “A *long* time ago, the Man on the Moon was looking down at the animals on earth. He saw a fox, a rabbit, and a monkey all sitting around a cozy fire. He wondered which one of them was the kindest animal, so he went down to earth disguised as a beggar to find out. He said to the animals, ‘I am a hungry man. Can you find me something to eat?’ The monkey ran into the forest and returned with a piece of fruit. The fox dove into the lake and returned with a fish. The rabbit sat on its hind legs and said, ‘My friends have brought you wonderful foods. I am unable to bring you anything better, but I am sure you would love the taste of fresh-cooked rabbit!’ They all watched in amazement as the rabbit hopped over to the roaring fire and threw himself in! The monkey, the fox, and the Man on Moon all cried out, ‘Stop!’ The man on the moon said to the monkey, ‘You were kind enough to bring me fruit,’ and he said to the fox, ‘You were kind enough to bring me fish.’ He turned to the rabbit and said, ‘But you were kind enough to give up your life.’ The beggar turned into a strong, glowing man, and said, ‘I am the Man on the Moon, and for your generous heart, you will come and live with me forever.’ The monkey and the fox looked at one another as the rabbit went up into the sky and lived with the man on the moon for *all* eternity.” Derek paused and took in the glow on Charlotte’s face. “And there he is,” he said, pointing to the full moon in the sky. “*Right* there.”

Charlotte scrambled out of bed and pressed her hands against the window. “Can we go up there, too?”

Derek chuckled. “No, we can’t. But we can do something better.” He raised his hand to the window and cupped it beneath the moon. “The moon is in my hand. Can you see?”

Charlotte’s eyes widened. “Yes!”

“Now give me yours.”

Charlotte held up her hand and he guided it beneath his.

“When I count to three, I’ll remove the moon from my hand and place it into yours. Okay?”

Charlotte laughed. “Okay!”

“One... two... three!” Derek pulled his hand away and kept Charlotte’s cupped beneath the moon. “Look at that! You’re holding the moon all by yourself.”

Her hand wiggled. “I am!”

“Don’t drop it.”

“I won’t!”

Derek watched her concentrate and tickled her belly, lowering her onto the bed. “Alright. Back to bed. *For good.*” He tucked her back in and knelt on the floor. “Anytime you’re feeling scared or alone, just remember, you are strong enough to hold the moon all by yourself.”

“And I can share it!”

“Yes, you can. Sharing the moon is a very nice thing to do. Who would have guessed a seven-year-old little girl could be so lucky?”

Charlotte nestled her chin into the covers and smiled. “Night, Daddy.”

“Goodnight, sweetheart.”

Derek returned to his bedroom and lay on his bed. Relaxing, his eyes drifted to the photo resting on his nightstand of his deceased wife, Naomi. He reached for the frame and held her image before him. *How long has it been now, Naomi?* he asked himself. *Three years? When will Charlotte ever stop reminding me of you?* Her smile was just as big as he remembered, and at times, he saw it upon Charlotte’s face. Derek’s heart sank as he set the frame back onto the nightstand and fell asleep on Naomi’s side of the bed.

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Derek was standing at the end of a pier. Years ago, when he had married Naomi, their guests had stood alongside the water and watched as the young couple exchanged their wedding vows. Now, in the midst of his dream, the water below his feet turned from blue, to green, to blue again. Naomi

appeared in her wedding dress with her hair blowing beneath her veil. She walked upon the water, extending an arm out to him. “Derek... I’ve been looking for you.”

The sight of his wife filled his heart. “Naomi! I’m here!” he cried. “Charlotte and I are *both* here!”

“I can’t always see you,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

A flash of light emerged beneath her feet and the water morphed into a field of dried grass. Naomi raised her chin and closed her eyes. “It’s dark here sometimes.”

Derek reached out to her as the field grew bigger and she started to fade. “Don’t go, Naomi! Please! Stay!”

“It’s dark here sometimes,” she repeated. “But I’ll be watching. I’ll always help you, Derek. Always.”

Naomi’s image motioned backward and morphed into a soft yellow light.

“Naomi! Don’t go!” Derek cried, watching her dissipate into a fog and vanish.

The shrill of the alarm clock jolted Derek awake and he swatted it until it stopped. *It was only a dream*, he told himself. *It’s probably just the grief again*. He rubbed his eyes and got up to make Charlotte her favorite breakfast—pancakes topped with bananas and honey. He went into her room and gently nudged her shoulder. “Wake up, honey. Breakfast is ready.”

Charlotte opened her eyes and groaned, “Okay.”

Derek guided a sleepy Charlotte to the kitchen table and poured himself a cup of coffee. “Today is Friday,” he said. “No school tomorrow.”

Charlotte smiled with droopy eyes. “Can we get ice cream?”

Derek sipped his coffee and smiled at her innocent request. *Of course*, he thought. *You’re the best little girl in the whole world*. “We’ll see.”

Charlotte looked at her plate and stabbed her fork into the pancakes. “I dreamed about Mommy.”

Derek lowered his cup, intrigued. “You did?”

“She was standing on the water.”

“Really?” Derek said, setting his mug on the counter. “What else?”

Charlotte shrugged. “Her dress was pretty.”

Derek tilted his head and took a step toward her. “What color was it?”

“White. It blew in the wind.”

*We had the same dream?* he thought. *How can that be?*

Derek wasn’t a spiritual man, nor did he believe in God. To him, the supernatural world was created by the living, and often at their own expense.

“Well, that sounds like a nice dream,” he said. “It’s always nice to get a visit from Mommy. Let’s get you cleaned up for school. Show and Tell today, right?”

“Yes,” she mumbled through a forkful of pancakes. “I’m bringing Glamour Barbie.”

“Then let’s get the two of you dressed and off to school. How about you both wear pink today?”

Charlotte picked up her glass of milk. “Okay.”

Derek shrugged off the strangeness of their similar dreams and got them ready for their day.

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“Hey, Karla? Do you think two people can have the same dream?”

Derek’s co-worker sat at the lunch table in the teacher’s break room, pouring dressing over her salad. She looked over her shoulder as it oozed over the lettuce. “You say somethin’?”

“A dream,” Derek said. He popped his frozen burrito in the microwave and set the timer. “You think two people can have the same one?”

“Like gettin’ married?” she asked.

“Jesus, Karla. Really?”

“What do you mean then? Like when you’re sleepin’?”

“Yes,” he answered.

“You smokin’ crack, Derek?” Karla took a bite of her salad. She was an overweight, single woman who always ate healthy, but never lost any weight. She pressed the bridge of her glasses upward and reached for the magazine on the table. “You need to start dating. You’ve got too much free time on your hands to think about shit.”

The microwave beeped and Derek removed his burrito. “Date? Are you kidding me? Date who?”

”Oh, I don’t know,” she smirked. “A mirror?”

“Funny,” Derek mocked, taking the seat beside her.

Karla rolled her eyes at her co-worker of ten years. “You know, for being widowed in your forties, it surprises me you haven’t started dating again.”

“Well, just because I’m extremely handsome and single doesn’t mean I have to rush into anything.”

She pointed a forkful of lettuce at him. “You’re *so* conceited.”

“And you’re just mad because I don’t like you.”

“Well, I don’t like *you*, either. Besides, you’re too skinny.” Karla looked down at his burrito and took a bite of her salad. “You eat like shit, too. Bless Naomi’s heart for dealing with you all those years.”

Derek had insisted upon no special treatment after Naomi’s fatal aneurysm, and he appreciated Karla for honoring his request with just the right amount of sass.

“I’ll date if you date,” he said.

Karla turned the page in the magazine, revisiting the subject. “What kind of dream was it?”

“Naomi came to see me in her wedding dress.”

“So?” she asked. “Why is that strange?”

“Because Charlotte dreamed it, too.”

Karla looked up at him. “You and Charlotte had the *same* dream? The *same* night?”

“Yes, everything from the same dress to us both seeing her standing on a lake.”

“Huh.”

“Yeah,” he said, sensing her skepticism. “What do you make of it?”

Well, it’s *interesting*, I’ll give you that. Maybe the two of you are on the same level of grieving. It’s been what? Two years?”

“Three.”

“Maybe Charlotte has some sort of connection to the afterlife. Kids are quite susceptible to that kind of stuff, you know.”

“I don’t think that’s it.”

She looked at him surprised. “You don’t think kids have a connection to the afterlife?”

“Karla, I don’t think *anyone* has a connection to the afterlife.”

“You’re wrong about that,” she argued.

“How so?”

“You’re telling me you’ve never had any kind of spiritual encounter?”

Derek shrugged. “Not that I can think of.”

Karla jabbed at her salad. “You’ve been working with kids for ten years and you’ve never seen any of them have a connection to the spiritual world?”

“Come on,” he replied. “Of course not.”

“Well, *I* have.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” she answered. “Some of my students have told me they’ve dreamed about their deceased grandparents or saw angels in their bedroom. None of yours ever shared anything like that with you?”

Derek shook his head. “No.”

“You need to read some books.”

“Books on what? Crazy people who think the supernatural is real?”

Karla smiled. “You know, that sounds like a great title.”

Derek bit into his burrito and jumped when the hot cheese clung to his chin. “Fuck!”

Karla raised an eyebrow. “That’s the lord punishing you for being a non-believer.”

“Well,” he said, plucking the cheese off his skin. “Maybe if I write him a check, I’ll be saved.”

“Think what you want, but kids are newcomers to this world. Where ever they came from, they haven’t been gone long.” Karla looked back down at the magazine. “It’s not uncommon for them to talk to the ones they left behind.”

“Jesus.”

“Him, too.”

“Kids can talk to Jesus?”

“Derek, anyone can talk to Jesus.”

“Isn’t that called praying, *Karla*?”

“You need to read some Edgar Cayce books, *Derek*.” She looked back down at his burrito and rolled her eyes. “I’ll pray for you.”

Derek took another bite and mumbled through his clamped teeth, “Please do.”

“Guess what I heard?” Patty said, entering the break room. The second-grade teacher made her way to the coffee pot and poured herself a cup. “Daniel Martin’s parents are getting a divorce.”

“Jeez, Patty,” Derek replied without looking up. “Let the ink dry first.”

“Don’t be jealous,” Patty teased.

“He’s never gonna ask you out,” Karla said, gesturing back and forth between Patty and Derek. “Why don’t the two of *you* just cut the bullshit and date each other?”

Before Derek could reply, the voice of their principal, Scott, came from the doorway. “Hey, Derek? Charlotte is in the nurse’s office. Tina said she came in during recess.”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong, she’s just asleep. I guess she couldn’t keep her eyes open.”

“Huh,” Derek mumbled. “I can’t imagine why.”

“She was yawning a lot earlier,” Patty said. “I didn’t think it was anything too concerning.”

“Well, *you* spend most of the day with her,” Derek replied. “You know I trust your judgment.”

“The day is almost over,” Scott said. “She can spend the rest of it in the nurse’s office.”

“Yeah, okay,” Derek hummed. “Thanks.”

Derek was saddened that his family was back in Vermont—too far to help him out in such matters. With only him and Charlotte living in Maine, a move he and Naomi had both agreed upon, their little family often had their lone struggles.

“She’s probably exhausted from all that telepathy,” Karla said.

“I think your mouth is exhausted from all that rambling,” Derek replied.

“And you tell *us* to date?” Patty said. “Please.”

Derek took another bite of his burrito then wrapped it up in tin foil. “The both of you can keep dreaming. I’ve got a beautiful young lady in distress who needs me, and I’m off to make her smile.” He stood, left the break room, and went to the nurse’s office to find Charlotte asleep on a cot.

“She’s been there for a while,” Tina told him. “Why is she so tired today?”

“I don’t know,” Derek answered. He glanced at a photo of Tina with her husband in Peru, then placed his hand on his daughter’s shoulder and nudged her awake. “Charlotte?”

Charlotte batted her eyes and looked up at him. “Where are we?”

“You’re in the nurse’s office. You fell asleep.”

“I’m so tired,” she moaned.

“Open your eyes, honey. You need to wake up.” Charlotte struggled to look at her father as he pulled her to her feet. “Maybe you’re getting sick.”

“No fever,” Tina said. “She might be having a growth spurt.”

I bet that’s it, Derek thought. “Alright, let’s try to get you back to class.”

Derek guided Charlotte toward the door and looked at Tina, noting her blonde hair was pinned up. Loose strands draped around her face and the scent of her perfume filled the small office. “We’ll get out of your way.”

“Anytime is fine,” she replied. “You know that.”

Derek led his daughter to her empty classroom and retrieved her lunchbox from the shelf. “You can eat in here, okay?” he said, opening her lunchbox. “I’ll sit with you until the bell rings.”

Charlotte looked at him with sleepy eyes. “I dreamed about Mommy again.”

“You did?”

“She doesn’t like the water,” she stated, opening her crackers.

Derek glanced outside the window, watching the students play at recess. “Why’s that?”

“She said it’s dark sometimes.”

“She did?”

Charlotte popped a fish-shaped cracker into her mouth. “Her face was green.”

Derek turned back to her. “Green from the water?”

“Green like a zombie.”

A zombie? he wondered. “It’s okay, honey. Mommy is safe and happy in heaven. We talked about that, remember?”

“Yes,” Charlotte replied, popping another cracker into her mouth. “She said she wants you to move the bag.”

Derek’s heart skipped. “What?”

“The bag. Mommy said, ‘Tell Daddy to move the bag.’”

Derek’s eyelids became heavy and he tried not to look alarmed. “Mommy told you *that* in your dream?”

Charlotte shrugged, reaching for her juice box. “Yeah.”

“Did she say anything else?”

“No.”

Derek looked around the empty classroom, grateful it was just the two of them. “Okay, that’s enough for now. Go ahead and eat your lunch.” He watched her pick up half of her sandwich and take a bite. The lunch recess was nearly over and he checked the time, hoping she could make it through the rest of the day without nodding off.

“You’re awake,” Patty said, entering her second-grade classroom. She took a seat at her desk and lifted a Cup-of-Soup to her lips, blowing on a forkful of noodles.

“And we’re hoping she stays that way,” Derek replied. He turned to his daughter. “Try to keep your eyes open until three o’clock. Do you think you can you do that?”

Charlotte nodded. “Yes.”

“I have to go back to my classroom,” he said. “And early bed time tonight—no complaining.”

Charlotte slouched, sucking her straw. “Okay.”

Derek kissed the top of her head and stopped at Patty's desk on his way out. "Let me know if this continues."

"I wouldn't worry about it too much, Derek. Kids need more sleep when they grow."

"I know. She's been dreaming about her mom lately. I'm just not too sure what to make of it."

"Everyone grieves differently," Patty reminded him. "I'm sure she just misses her mother."

Derek nodded. "I'm sure that's it, too. Thanks."

The bell rang and Derek stepped outside Charlotte's classroom, leaned against the wall, and lowered his face into his hands.