

Last Words

The day was bleak with no intention of bringing any sunshine. Just a quiet sky in the middle of a typical humid Midwest summer. The crows could be heard cawing in the distance while a slight roar of thunder shook the Earth's floor. A perfect representation of the day at hand.

Savannah stood alone in a sea of familiar faces outside of an old white brick funeral home. Shaking the hands of strangers, she smiled feebly to responses of condolences. Their words that fell on deaf ears while Savannah's focus seemed to turn to white noise as if she was standing outside of herself watching the solemn commotion at hand. The look in each person's eyes reminded her of home, yet many of whom she'd never met until that moment. From across the building she saw her uncle approaching her. As he grabbed her and hugged her tight Savannah felt her knees tremble and go weak. The sight of his face made her break. He looked so much like her father; his kind eyes, face full and round, tall, a deep raspy voice, and a head full of grey wavy hair. There was so much that she wanted to say to him, but it wasn't him. It was only his face. Savannah nodded meekly as if to say to her uncle that she would be fine for she hoped, in time, that she would be.

The past few weeks were starting to weigh heavy on Savannah's shoulders as she has tried her best to stay strong for her mother, but all emotions bubbled to the surface as she said her final goodbyes to her father. His body laid still in a coffin. A backdrop of photos of her father and young her showed memories that were so blurred. She couldn't believe that she would never again see the man who shaped her into the woman she had become. She watched as her family reminisced and joked about old times. She couldn't bring herself to join in on the joyful conversations. The idea of smiling seemed foreign to her in that moment. How could she smile when her entire world has shattered? Fond memories aside she just wanted to be alone with her thoughts and try to make it through the day and the next and so on. All Savannah wanted was to fast forward to a day when she'd no longer feel like she was crumbling from the inside out.

Near a staircase inside, Savannah saw a tall man-like figure dressed in all black staring back at her. She looked around to see if anyone else noticed him. No one else even glanced in his direction. His face was visible, but she couldn't see any distinct features, but there was something about him that drew her in. He stood ever so still watching her. Savannah slowly moved in closer, drowning out all the voices around her, only to hear a low hum that seemed to whisper coolly in her ear. As she moved in closer it looked as if the figure was growing taller, eventually towering over her as she got within a few feet. Savannah searched his face and still couldn't make out any facial features. Where his eyes should have been were sunken and his aura very dark. When she moved nearer he nodded and proceeded to head down the staircase towards the funeral home's basement. Savannah surveyed the room to see if everyone was still oblivious to the strange dark figure. As before no one seemed to acknowledge his existence. Curiosity got the best of her and she reluctantly followed him down the stairs. He stood at the end of a dark hallway. There was a light shining on a door just to his left. He pointed to the door

which said *Morgue*. Savannah slowly approached and stared up at him with both the look of fear and intrigue.

“Why do you want me to go in there?” She asked.

“You have questions of him, don’t you?” He replied with a quiet yet deep hissing voice.

Savannah observed that when he spoke his lips did not move. Despite that her fear started to subside and her curiosity took its place.

“M-my father?” She stammered.

The figure nodded.

“But I can’t ask him anything. I wish I could. He’s gone now.” A lone tear streamed down her face.

“My dear, you can, but I must first ask you a few questions before I allow you to do so.”

Savannah nodded eagerly.

“Are your questions from your heart?” The voice hissed, surprisingly quieter.

“Yes,” She answered, her voice trembling.

“Is your mind open?” He asked.

“Y-yes,” said Savannah, quite unsure for she didn’t know what would be on the other side of the door.

“Do you seek closure?” He asked

Savannah started to weep and inhaled deeply. “Yes.”

“And lastly, will you continue to honor his name?” He asked stooping to see her eye to eye, stopping just inches from Savannah’s face, staring as if he was waiting for a lie to escape her lips.

She gasped. “Until my last breath.”

The door slowly creaked open and the tall man walked further into the darkness of the hall, not uttering another word. Savannah stood alone in the doorway, frozen. She took a deep breath and pushed the door back further studying the room before fully entering. Savannah didn’t know what was in store for her. There was a faint light in the center of the room that flickered. This room was almost completely empty apart from a chair that sat in the center underneath the flickering light. The air inside was thick and something about the emptiness made Savannah’s breath quicken.

Not knowing what to expect she whispered quietly as her eyes quickly searched every inch of the small room. “H-hello? Hi?”

A dark smoky human-like figure began to form, seated upon the chair. It caught her by surprise and she yelped, but something about the figure quickly put her at ease. She moved in closer and walked around the figure. Savannah looked for any hint of recognition, but there were no facial features, clothing, or anything that gave the figure a specific identity. Savannah circled the chair again. All she could tell was that the figure was built like a man trapped in a cloud of black smoke. The figure sat up straight. He didn’t have a face, but she could feel eyes on her. Savannah gasped almost choking on her breath.

“I didn’t mean to scare you,” the man said.

Savannah's heart melted and tears streamed down her face as she recognized the voice.

“Daddy?”

The dark figure reached out to wipe away her tears. “I’ve watched you struggle since I left, and I was given permission to give you one last conversation. I’m so sorry, sweetie. I can’t stay long.”

Still overcome with emotion Savannah was only able to mutter one word. “Why?” She knelt in front of him on the concrete floor as if she were a child again.

“Sweetie, your questions have to go deeper than that. Of all the ‘why’s’ in the world there are those that belong only to you. Claim them and speak them,” her father said.

Savannah inhaled deeply remembering what the tall figure told her before. Her questions had to come from her heart. There were so many questions and so many things she wanted to say to him that she wanted to make sure he knew and never forgot. This was a one in a million opportunity and she didn’t want to waste one second.

“Daddy, why did you have to go so soon? We didn’t have enough time.”

He chuckled softly. “It would never be enough time, but I assure you that my time here was finished. Now it’s time for you to take over. I’m passing the torch onto you. All the knowledge I gave to you I want you to take that farther. I know that you have that in you because I’m the one who planted the seed. Now you can grow wild and free. Accomplish all that I never could and all that you dream of.”

She exhaled sharply. “Dad, I don’t know if I can. I can’t if you’re not here.”

“You’re my daughter. You can, and you will.” He lifted her chin.

Savannah nodded. "I'll try, daddy."

Savannah's mind raced to think of another question to ask him while she still had the time. "Why didn't you fight harder? Why didn't you tell me?" The look of hurt stretched across her face.

Her father had battled many illnesses over the past few years, but the one that brought him to his knees was cancer. By the time he was diagnosed he had no more fight left. He had become an empty shell of his former self. Savannah and her mother hadn't even known about the cancer until going through his medical papers after his death.

"I didn't want to burden you or your mother. You both had already been through so much with me you didn't need anything else to worry about. I was just so tired by then, Van. I didn't want to keep going. I couldn't find it in me to do it. One day I prayed on it. I prayed for you and your mother to find your way and your strength without me." He sighed.

"You're my dad. When it comes to your life there is no burden," She exclaimed.

"I know that, sweetheart, but what's done is done. I'm no longer in pain. The pain day to day was so unbearable. You saw that, Van."

"I could've helped you." Savannah paused searching for more questions. "I saw you a few hours before and I can't even remember if I told you I loved you. Out of all the days that day I was too busy to say it."

He placed her hand in his. "It didn't need to be said. I felt it. I still feel it." He squeezed her hand. "Funny thing is that when I took my last breath I knew that you would be okay. Before then that's what worried me was if you'd be alright. I was so scared but knowing that you would

be okay made it easier. That's the only reason why I could let go." He took a deep breath and a moment before speaking again. "I love you. You tell your mother that I love her and to be happy. I want you both to be happy."

Savannah's eyebrows furrowed as she held back more tears. "Daddy, who's going to walk me down the aisle? My kids will only know you from stories. You left before I could make you proud. All the moments ahead that you won't be there for. What do I do?" Her gaze fell to the floor at his feet.

"Van, I will be by your side through it all. I will walk you down the aisle in spirit. I will be on stage with you when you grab your degree, and I will be there to see my grandchildren. I will not be there physically, but know that I will never leave your side."

She sat there in silence feeling his energy getting weaker. Before she could say another word the light hanging from the ceiling flickered and became dim. He was gone. Savannah's chest heaved as she tried to grasp her breath, but a sound never left her lips. A pain that cut deep to the root. She buried her head in her hands on the seat of the chair. That was finally it. She would never see her father again. The room became cold and quiet. The door slowly swung open. Savannah collected her thoughts before walking back out into the world. This new world where her father did not exist. When she reached the top of the staircase she noticed that nothing had stopped. Family and friends were still caught up in conversation, not even realizing she had been away. Her mother strolled alone silently through the crowd of family, looking lost and defeated. Savannah walked up and took her hand and squeezed it. They only had each other now. The road ahead would be long and rocky, but Savannah knew that everything was going to be okay just as her father said. Life from there on would be very different, but it would be okay, and she

believed that. She smiled at her mother through the tears and desperate to grasp that last moment she lost with her father she spoke, "I love you, mom."