

Reason to Breathe

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A Chandler Sisters Novel

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*To my sweet sisters,
who were my first friends
and remain my very dearest friends.*

Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever.

Amen.

1 Peter 4:8–11 NIV

CHAPTER 1

January

A BEAM OF LATE-AFTERNOON SUN CANTED through the mullioned windows of the breakfast room in her parents' house—*Dad's* house now—casting a checkered shadow across the tile. Phylicia Chandler picked up the last addressed envelope from a stack that'd been nearly a foot high when she and her sisters started writing thank-you notes yesterday afternoon. She pushed up the sleeves of her sweater and licked the flap of a pale pink envelope, then pressed the seal with the palm of her hand and passed it to her youngest sister. Britt put the envelope in the “finished” box awaiting a trip to the post office.

“Well, that’s done.” *Finally*. She hated that it had taken them two months to get these thank-you notes written and mailed. But Dad had been uncharacteristically indecisive, and they were all scrambling to catch up with work and everything else in their lives.

She looked past her sisters into the living room where

the Christmas tree still sat—at the end of January—its white lights twinkling even now, thanks to the automatic timer. Dad wouldn't have put up a tree at all if she and her sisters hadn't insisted. But now Phee regretted pushing him, and the tree seemed to mock them, a garish reminder of their first Christmas without Mom.

It wasn't like Dad to leave things undone. Turner Chandler had always prided himself on being a get-'er-done kind of guy, even if it meant delegating. But Dad hadn't been himself for a long time.

Phee blew out a weary sigh.

Britt gave her a questioning look. "You okay, Phee?"

Her "baby" sister had asked her that at least twice in the space of an hour, and Phylicia still wasn't sure of the answer. She took a long swig from her iced-tea glass, the last unbroken piece from a set that had been a wedding gift to their parents more than thirty years ago. "I'm fine. Just ... tired." Her words came out muddled, her tongue thick with the residue of envelope glue.

"So, what do you guys think we should do with the memorial money?" Britt swiveled and put her stockinged feet on the seat of the chair beside her. "Dad said something about planting trees at the Langhorne City Park, but last time I checked they were taking trees *out* of that park."

"Not to mention we have over four thousand dollars." Joanna frowned and placed a hand on the stack of sympathy cards they'd been sorting through for two days now. "That's a lot of trees."

"Do we have to decide right now?" Britt asked. "I think Dad should be in on the decision."

"Britt, if we were waiting on Dad, these thank-you notes still wouldn't be written." Phee went to the other side of the kitchen island and placed the kettle on the burner. A swift *click-click-click* of the gas, and the burner flickered to life. She didn't even like hot tea, but it had become a habit, making tea

for her parents each evening. Now, the kitchen felt foreign without Mom in it—despite the fact that Mom hadn't set foot in this room since last October, too weak by then to get out of bed. "I'm wiped out."

Joanna gave her a wan smile. "It'll be okay, sis. We're all weary. Things will look better tomorrow."

Would they? Joanna, although she was three years younger than Phylicia, had always played the mother hen, and even more so after Mom became ill. The eternal optimist, Joanna had told them the same thing that night two months ago when their mother had taken her last breath after three long years of battling pancreatic cancer.

Phee centered the pot on the burner. While she appreciated Joanna's outlook, and while she *had* felt relief knowing that Mom's struggle was over, that she was finally free from the agonizing pain that had marked her final weeks on earth, Phee still couldn't truthfully say things were better.

Not with Dad off in Florida as of two days ago, leaving the three of them to figure out what the next chapter of their lives would look like. They'd all put their lives on hold to usher Mom into heaven. And Phee had expected they'd spend the next few months dealing with the aftermath of Mom's illness. And with helping their father grieve. Helping Dad figure out what was next for him.

But it was starting to look as if he already knew what was next—as if he were the only one of them who *did* know what was next. Not that he'd shared that information with them. Dad had been vague about ... well, *everything*. About why he had to go out of town and what, exactly, he was doing in Orlando. And about when he would return.

She glanced up at the array of empty vases on the counter that, until she'd taken it upon herself to clean them out yesterday, had held funeral flowers. So many arrangements had been sent to the house after Mom's passing that they'd overwhelmed the air with their cloying scent. One bright turquoise-colored

vase caught her eye. Ironically, Phee had chosen the pretty vase herself and arranged the flowers at her job at Langhorne Blooms. None of the other hospice workers had sent flowers, and Phee had thought it a bit too ... *personal* at the time. Especially the way the young nurse, Karleen Tramberly, had signed the card with “My heart and soul go out to you.” *Soul?* That seemed a little over the top. But then, Phee had been surprised by how overly sensitive she’d become since losing Mom.

Still, Phee couldn’t shake the suspicion that *she* was with Dad. A woman she and her sisters had met only a handful of times during those last weeks, but who’d seemed on awfully close terms with Dad. Karleen actually lived in Orlando but was originally from Cape Girardeau and was filling in for the director of the hospice organization in Cape. Karleen had been nothing but helpful and warm, even attending Mom’s funeral service, which had surprised Phee.

And maybe that was all the woman was to Dad—a kind nurse who’d taken good care of his beloved wife. But looking back, something had struck Phee as ... *off* from the very beginning. She hadn’t dared voice her concerns to her sisters yet. And she wouldn’t. Not unless there turned out to be something to her hunch.

But hospice nurse or not, *something* was going on with Dad. And it wasn’t good. Not only had he met with Karleen Tramberly twice—that she knew of—in the two months since the funeral, but what man left his daughters to tie up all the loose ends so soon after his beloved wife’s funeral?

She and her sisters had written every last thank-you note, yet he’d left them hanging about what to do with the memorial money, and as far as she knew, he’d done nothing about ordering Mom’s headstone. Dad had dropped the ball big-time.

On Thursday, Phee had taken yet another day off from the flower shop to drive Dad to St. Louis to catch a flight to Orlando. With so many things still undone. And even though he’d said the trip was for business, Dad had seemed almost ...

excited to leave town. The construction company he contracted for had sent him to Florida a few times over the years, so maybe the trip was legit. But according to Dad's own complaints, with all the work he'd missed while Mom was dying, he was so far behind on projects here in Missouri that he had no business leaving town.

Joanna scraped her chair back on the Italian tile and carried her coffee cup and Phee's iced-tea glass to the sink. "No, we don't have to decide right now."

"About what?" Britt looked confused.

"The memorial," Phee said. "Isn't that what we were talking about? Dad is leaving it up to us what to do with the money."

"We can talk more tomorrow." Joanna tamped down an already neat stack of thank-you notes. "Are you guys staying here again tonight?"

"Like I have a choice," Britt said. "Please don't leave me here alone, you guys."

After Dad flew out on Thursday, the three of them had spent the last two nights here in Langhorne, in the house where they'd grown up, in the bedroom they'd shared, with its three twin beds lined up like with Goldilocks's three bears.

Britt had left college in the middle of the semester and moved home to Langhorne when Mom could no longer take care of the house. And although Phee and Joanna had apartments in Cape Girardeau, more often than not the past few months, they'd all spent their nights here too. Phee had thought she'd find it comforting to be here with her sisters after the funeral, but instead—probably because Dad *wasn't* here—the house had just seemed sad ... and a little creepy.

Phee ran a hand through the tangles in her hair—hair that was a shade darker than its usual tawny brown because it was in desperate need of shampooing. "I really need to go home tonight. My plants haven't been watered in eons and I ... I just have stuff I need to do."

Joanna riffled the stack of thank-you notes. "You want

to come home with me, Britt? I really need to go back to my apartment too. And I think Ginger is out of town this weekend. You can have her bed.”

Joanna’s suggestion made Phee feel guilty she hadn’t offered first. Unlike Joanna, Phee didn’t have a roommate to inconvenience.

“I guess I will.” Britt shrugged, moving the box of stamped envelopes off the table. “I’m sure not staying here by myself.”

“You’re not scared, are you?” Phee did not want Britt moving in with her. Her studio apartment was a one-woman setup, and Britt wasn’t exactly the easiest houseguest to entertain. At least not for an introvert like Phee.

“Not scared,” her sister said. “Just not crazy about being here alone right now.”

“I don’t blame you. This house seems a lot bigger without ... them.” Joanna looked around the room as if seeing it for the first time. “I still do *not* get why Dad had to go to Florida so soon after—”

Phee’s phone trilled Dad’s ringtone. “Speak of the devil ...” She touched Accept. “Hey, Dad. How’s it going?”

“It’s going. How about there? Everything all right?” His voice didn’t reveal his mood the way it usually did.

“I guess. We just finished the thank-you notes.” She hoped he felt at least a little guilt for leaving the job to them.

“So, the girls are there?”

“Right here. Let me put you on speakerphone.” She punched the speaker icon and laid the phone on the edge of the table.

“Hi, Dad,” Joanna said.

“Hi, Daddy,” Britt chimed, coming to huddle around the phone with them.

“Hey, girlies. I was hoping I’d catch you all together.”

Melvin, Mom’s fat black-and-white tuxedo cat, chose that moment to hop up on the table and purr into the phone.

The sisters laughed, and Melvin put his tail in the air

and performed a pirouette on the polished stage, eating up their attention.

“Melvin! You know you’re not supposed to be on the table.” Phee lifted the sixteen-pound cat and returned him to the floor.

“How’s ol’ Melvin doing?” Dad’s voice filled the room.

“He’s good. I think he misses you.” Phee stroked the cat with her stockinged foot.

“When are you coming back?” Britt pouted.

“Yeah, Dad. I’m getting a drama queen for a roommate until you get back, so any speed at all would be appreciated.” Joanna gave Britt the stink-eye.

“Britt,” Dad scolded. “Don’t tell me you’re still scared to stay there by yourself.”

“Okay, I won’t tell you.” Britt elbowed Joanna, jockeying for a spot closer to the phone. “Don’t worry . . . I’ll come by every day to feed Melvin. He’ll be well taken care of.”

Dad laughed. “That ol’ boy could probably afford to miss a few days of kibble.”

“When *are* you coming back, Dad?” Phee sensed he was dodging their question.

After an overlong pause, Dad cleared his throat. “You, um . . . you girls might want to sit down.”

The three of them exchanged curious looks.

“We *are* sitting down. What’s going on, Dad?” Phee tried to keep her voice upbeat, but she braced her elbows on the table.

“Actually, I’m going to be staying here in Florida—”

“Staying? How much longer, Daddy?” Britt had put on that infernal smile she always wore when she talked to her “daddy.”

This time the silence on Dad’s end went on so long, Phee thought they’d lost the connection. But finally, he spoke. “Girls, I’m going to stay . . . a while. Indefinitely actually. I’ve taken an apartment here.”

“Taken? You mean like *rented*?” Phee scooted her chair closer to the table, as if by accosting the phone, she could change his mind. “Dad? What is going on?”

“I can’t explain everything right now.” His voice sounded odd. “I’m still fleshing out some details. You girls don’t know this, but ... I’ve been working on a deal down here for a while.”

“A deal? What is the nature of this deal exactly?” Joanna kicked into lawyer mode. She worked as an administrative assistant for an attorney in town, but she’d actually just started law school in Columbia when Mom was diagnosed. Like Britt, Jo had quit school and moved back to Cape at the end of her first semester. Her career might have been temporarily derailed, but that didn’t stop her from speaking like a full-blown attorney.

“I’m going to be putting the house on the market.”

Dad’s announcement brought them all to their feet. “What?”

“This house? *Our* house?” Britt’s voice went squeaky. “When were you going to tell me this? What am *I* supposed to do?”

“Now, Britt, calm down. All of you just take a breath and let me explain.”

Again, the three exchanged looks, but this time it was worry Phee saw reflected in her sisters’ blue eyes. Eyes that matched her own. Like Mom’s. Phee went to the sink, retrieved her iced-tea glass, and took a sip. The liquid was lukewarm and diluted.

“First of all, I want you girls to know that you’ll be taken care of. The house is paid off, so once it’s sold—even after the hospital and funeral expenses—we’ll—*I’ll* be fine. Mom barely touched her inheritance from Grandma Clayton, and she wanted you girls to have it. You’ll each have a share deposited in the bank. It should be there by the middle of February, if not before. Britt, it’ll be enough for you to rent a nice apartment until you find a job—unless one of your sisters wants a roommate.”

Joanna shot Phee a scowl that said, *Over my dead body*. Phee returned the look. They loved their baby sister, but Britt was high maintenance and a little spoiled—a truth even

Britt herself didn't dispute, demonstrated by the fact that two months after Mom's death, she still hadn't started looking for a job. Yes, she kept house and cooked for Dad ... well, if Dad sold the house, Britt wouldn't have even that excuse any longer.

"What about your house, Dad?" Phee picked up the phone and spoke directly into it, as if that might change his mind. "Why would you sell this house? What will you do when you come back?"

He cleared his throat loudly. "You girls *are* sitting down?"

They exchanged glances again, and Britt slid back into her chair.

"Dad? What's this all about? When *are* you coming back?" Phee was starting to get a bad feeling about this. She glanced over to the hutch where a framed photograph of Mom and Dad perched—a picture from happier days, before cancer devastated all their lives.

Dad's sigh filled the room. "I'm not sure I'll *be* coming back, girls. Not to stay. And even if I did, I don't want to rattle around in that house. There are too many memories there. Too much history."

"Exactly. *Our* history." Joanna put her hands on her hips, looking defiant. Except for the tears brimming in her eyes.

"Can you all hear me?"

Something about Dad's tone caused Phee to grab her sisters' hands. She and Joanna took their seats again, straining toward the phone.

"What is going on?" Phee asked again.

"If you girls want to use Mom's inheritance money to buy the house together, there would be enough that your payment—divided by three—would be as cheap as any apartment. And I'd cut you a nice deal." His laughter sounded forced.

"That's not even funny, Dad." Phee's voice came out in a squeak.

He ignored her and continued. "Seriously though, I hope you'll think that through carefully. Owning the house together

could be a bit of a mess once you all start getting married. And you know the house is old. It has some issues that might be pretty pricey to fix down the road. I don't think it would be the wisest plan to try to keep the house. But I'll pay you girls to get it ready to list. Quinn can handle the details."

Quinn Mitchell had worked for their dad for as long as Phee could remember. He was a nice man, and she trusted him. But that didn't mean she liked Dad's plan any better than she had five minutes ago.

"Are you still there?" Dad raised his voice as if they had a bad connection. "Quinn should be getting in touch with you in a day or two, Phee, and he can walk you girls through everything."

"He already knows about you selling?" The hurt in Joanna's voice was thick.

Phee suspected it was because Dad had made Phee—the eldest daughter—the contact person for Quinn instead of *law student* Joanna.

"How long have you known you were going to sell out from under us?" Britt asked.

Phee shared her sisters' irritation—shock, really. And yet she couldn't help but be a little relieved that the house was all it was. Still, she had a feeling there was something Dad wasn't telling them. In all the times he'd traveled to Florida for work, he'd never once mentioned relocating there. Certainly not since Mom had gotten sick.

"You girls take whatever you want from the house ... except I'm having my desk and the den furniture shipped down here, and I'd like the Sandzen paintings. You girls will get them when I'm gone, of course, but I'd like to have them in the new place."

"Place?" Britt's voice turned breathy. "You already have a *place* there?"

"I told you I've rented an apartment."

"How long have you been planning this, Dad? And

why are we just now finding out about it?” Joanna spoke in a whisper, but she threw a look at Britt and Phee that said she was wondering if she was the last to know.

But they shook their heads and shrugged, equally clueless. It was so unlike Dad to up and do something like this without a word to them.

Phee reached for her glass and took a sip of watered-down tea before speaking woodenly into the phone. “Can’t you at least come home long enough to help with the house? What ... what’s going on in Florida that’s keeping you there?”

The three of them sat like statues, bent over the phone, waiting for him to reply.

After what seemed like an eternity, Dad finally spoke. “I really didn’t intend on you finding out this way. I ... I was going to break the news in person next time I came back, but I suppose this is as good a time as any.” He sucked in a breath that was audible over the miles. “I’m getting married, girls.”

The glass—Mom and Dad’s last wedding glass—slipped from Phee’s grip and shattered on the tile floor.