

Letters with Locks

By Cynthia Meisinger

Charlotte adjusted the strap of her purse hesitantly, she felt the wind blow gently through her hair as she looked at the Antique store Jamie had brought her to. At least, she felt as if she was looking up, antique stores had that kind of power. Old things brought into the lives of new people, old stories merging with modern.

But just as soon as the power of the store washed over her, it retreated like the water on the shore of the sea. And she followed with a laugh as Jamie excitedly pulled her hand, practically dragging her into the store. Today was their last day of summer vacation together, Jamie's family was leaving for their house in Florida for the summer. Leaving her, alone, in homely Minnesota. Jamie had promised to make today special, and so far he had succeeded.

He practically bounced around the Antique Store. Charlotte on the other hand slowly worked her way through the store, her fingers lingering on long-forgotten objects that she believed once were held dearly by someone now wrinkled and gray. A wistful smile made its way onto her face as she looked at an old and cracked porcelain doll, but Jamie's voice shattered her reverie, "Lottie! Look at what I found!"

Jamie's voice seemed to break through purposeful silence, and Charlotte flinched but made her way over to look. At Jamie's feet was an old and worn suitcase, or, that's what it looked like. But when Jamie energetically unbuckled the top and opened it, a tidy little stationery set was revealed. Charlotte immediately fell to her knees, an excited gasp escaping her lips.

Charlotte looked over the two sets of stationery, it was still full, which surprised her, who wouldn't use such a treasure? There were dark feather pens, small ink bottles, envelopes, aging paper, and even seal stamps with black wax. Charlotte turned to Jamie and said excitedly, "We have to get this!"

A smile grew on Jamie's face, he couldn't say no to Charlotte when she got excited like this. So he hefted the heavy stationery set up and walked it to register. He paid, giving a sly look

at Charlotte who wasn't paying attention. It was hard for him to treat her, she always denied his gentlemanly offers to pay for things. He smiled slightly to himself, satisfied with getting away with this. But his smile quickly disappeared when he saw the price.

He gave another look at Charlotte, she was worth this ridiculously expensive price and more. He gave his credit card to the man at the register and swallowed hard. He was going to get yelled at for spending so much money, but he would survive.

As Charlotte and Jamie walked out of the store, Charlotte's face lit up with an idea. She started to bounce as she walked beside him, her energy practically glowing from the tips of her hair to the edge of her shoes. Jamie smiled as she immediately began talking.

"We should write each other letters over the Summer with this stationery set. It would be fun!" Charlotte was excited again, her eyes practically sparkled as she looked at him hopefully. Jamie couldn't say no, not even if he wanted to. His smile widened because he thought it was a good idea too. "Let's do it."

The next morning Jamie left for Florida until mid-August. Charlotte didn't get to see him before he left, but both were okay with that. They had said their goodbyes the night before. And although they knew they would miss each other, they believed that their love for each other could survive a couple of months of separation.

Jamie looked out the plane window, they were above the clouds now. All he could see was the blue sky, and the endless clouds all around. They almost appeared to be a lumpy and overly plush ground. They were a fantasy land, he wanted to picture himself walking on them. But as he thought of the wonder of that experience, he thought of the letter he stayed up late writing for Charlotte the night before.

He had taken out his stationery set and started writing something right away. Jamie didn't think he was the best writer, but he wanted to write something special for Charlotte. So he wrote a story, one of the life he wanted to give her. For Jamie wasn't like most boys his age. He was tender at heart, and treasured Charlotte so dearly, he felt no shame in loving her openly.

He made Charlotte a princess, living in a grand castle. She had everything she wanted in their Kingdom. She would spend hours in the Garden he made for her, she would love the people they ruled over, and her love and kindness would brighten the Kingdom.

Jamie fiddled with the necklace he found inside his half of the stationery set. He hadn't asked Charlotte if she had one. He was afraid her half didn't have one. So he didn't say anything. But he found the key to be like a reminder. Whenever he felt its cool metal against his skin, he thought of Charlotte. He felt that having a reminder while so far away from her would make him feel better.

Charlotte, who was miles below him, was wearing her own necklace. She had almost asked him if he had his own, but she too was afraid he might not have one. So she stayed silent.

A few days later, Charlotte's Mother brought in the mail and gave her a letter. Charlotte hadn't written her letter yet, she wanted to, but she was almost scared to upset the tidy stationery set she had set up so nicely in her room. She looked at the letter curiously, the wax seal catching her attention.

The black wax was stamped in the shape of a lock. Her hand immediately moved to rest over the necklace. The key finally made sense. It really was a part of the set. She smiled softly to herself and pulled the key to the lock to pretend to open it. She admired the creativity of it all. But as the key came near the wax seal, it changed, and suddenly it was real. Charlotte gasped silently as the key slid into the letter, just as it would in any other case.

She looked at it from all angles, shocked. She couldn't make sense of it, she didn't understand how it worked. But after a few moments, she bit her bottom lip and turned the key.

And as soon as she did so, the world around her faded.

Suddenly she was in what appeared to be a castle, and Jamie was there too. She ran to him surprised, he smiled at her, looking very handsome in what looked like some medieval clothes. She noticed her clothes were different too, they matched his. Charlotte started to ask Jamie what was going on, he seemed calm and sure here. He told her that this was a world he wanted for her. Where she had everything she wanted. Charlotte looked through the stunning Gardens, met the people of the Kingdom, and loved all of it. It was grand and beautiful and everything seemed to glow with the vibrancy of life. They spent hours roaming the palace grounds, finding endless things to enjoy. Then suddenly Jamie turned to her, and he said, "I love you Charlotte, yours truly, Jamie."

The world around her vanished, and Charlotte found herself standing in her kitchen with Jamie's letter now unfolded in her hands. At the very bottom of the page written in Jamie's messy handwriting was, "I love you Charlotte, yours truly, Jamie."

Charlotte felt her breath coming quickly in and out. Her mind was bewildered, mixed, and confused. It wasn't sure what to make of what had just happened. She put the letter back in the envelope, but it was just an ordinary letter now. She was left thinking that it was just her imagination, she must be crazy. That made more sense than what was happening.

But either way, she ran to her room and started writing a letter for Jamie. She filled it with everything she would've loved to experience with Jamie. They visited grand places, they walked on water, they flew in the sky, she put extraordinary experiences on paper. She didn't care that if this all was indeed a dream Jamie would be met with confusion. She was taking the chance that it was real. She wanted to give Jamie adventure.

Almost a week later, Jamie got a letter in Florida. He smiled softly just like Charlotte and pretended to put his key in the lock. His surprise was practically identical to hers, but he twisted the key, his curiosity getting the best of him. His world fell away, and immediately he was transported to the edge of the ocean.

Charlotte was there, she looked stunning in a white dress, her hair falling down her back softly. She smiled at him, her eyes sparkling with unknown knowledge, and she stepped out on the water. Jamie watched as her feet remained on the surface, how was she doing that? She extended her arm, the smile on her face shining so brightly it shouldn't have been humanly possible. He took her hand and she led him onto the water. His feet remained above the surface as well. He laughed and pulled Charlotte out farther with him.

Slowly the scene changed and they were flying, then they were in large meadows, towering mountains, grand waterfalls, and never-ending deserts. Then suddenly Charlotte turned to him, her shining eyes somehow calm, "I hope you had fun Jamie, always and forever yours, Charlotte."

The world fell away, and Jamie was back in Florida. He dropped the papers in his hands and stared at them for a long period of time from where they lay on the ground. He was shocked beyond belief. That was magic, it had to be. He had a magic stationery set, they had a magic stationery set. He picked up the papers and ran inside his house.

Jamie sat down and began writing, he wrote as fast as he could. Putting his own dreams on the very pages. He wanted them to be real for Charlotte. He knew that if she wrote such adventures in her letter, then she had already experienced the Kingdom he made for her. He wanted to create so much more for her. So he did.

Charlotte and Jamie would exchange the letters back and forth. They never ran out of ideas, there was always something to find, somewhere to go. But the letters made them forget really about the other. Their lives outside of each other became distant. The other didn't know what was really happening in the other's life. Charlotte never wrote to Jamie about her sick Grandma who was dying. Jamie never told Charlotte about the fights his parents were starting to have. They didn't tell each other about the things they did, the places they really did go, or what was really happening. The letters world consumed them.

But it all came crashing down when Charlotte's Grandma died. Jamie came back to Minnesota the next day. Charlotte wasn't at the airport, she wasn't anywhere to surprise him. He drove to her house, and when he got there he found Charlotte and her family a wreck. Charlotte's face was puffy and red, she looked awful. The girl in the letters flashed in Jamie's eyes, he barely recognized Charlotte in this real state. Jamie himself didn't look well. His parents had been arguing with each other more and more. He hadn't gotten any sleep for almost two days now. Dark rings formed under his eyes, and he looked tired and sick. Charlotte didn't see the handsome and beaming Jamie from their letters.

They looked at each other and were withdrawn, they barely knew the other anymore. But as they stood looking at each other. The truth dawned on both of them. They had been so caught up in an imaginary world, they had forgotten about the real one. They hugged each other tightly, and this hug was different than any they shared in their letters. It was much more raw and true.

As time wore on, Jamie and Charlotte put the stationery sets away. They focused on what was really happening in their lives. Charlotte started to spend more time with her family and made a little space in honor of her Grandma in her room. Jamie talked with his parents, and even though they were talking about divorcing, they were more mindful not only of each other but of Jamie's space as well.

They decided to live in the moment. They recognized that dreams and the worlds they created were beautiful and fantastical. But the world they lived in was real and true and entirely

present. The letters taught them to live for and in each moment. Although the world that Jamie and Charlotte chose to live in wasn't as full of wonder, they loved it even more because it was real. It was open for them to share, and what they liked most, was that it wasn't locked away with a key.