

# One Love, One Lifetime

AND

*“Order your fine horses; be with them at the door. . .”*

On the center of the Broadway stage, Sara Brightman conspired to escape the Paris Opera House (and attendant Phantom) with her lover. From behind a ventilation grill set stage left, eyes watched her every movement, ears strained to hear every note. But they did not belong to Michael Crawford, bent on wreaking his scripted havoc. No, there were other phantoms within the walls of the theater tonight.

Catherine clung to the crude access ladder, marveling to herself that Vincent had done it again. Every time she pitied him for the limits imposed by a life Below, he turned around and surprised her. First, it was his own private tunnel entrance to the New York Public Library. Then it was front row seats to the Central Park concert stage. And now he'd conjured up orchestra level 'seats' on Broadway. In some ways, he had a better standard of living than half the people Above.

She mentioned as much to him when they climbed down to rest their hands during intermission. Vincent cocked his head, unconvinced.

*“We have found ways to enjoy some of the performances given Above, but surely this rough glimpse does not equal, much less surpass, what it must be like to sit out with the rest of the audience, in a comfortable seat, surrounded by your friends.”*

His voice was a little wistful. He had brought Catherine here because she had said how much she wished he had been with her when she went the night before. But he felt miserably afraid that she would find his idea of dinner and a play lacking in comparison to her previous experiences.

Catherine laughed, “No, it doesn't compare.”

Vincent's heart sank, until she continued, “Last night wasn't half as much fun as this.”

*“But. . .”*

*“But nothing, Vincent. Last night, all I heard over intermission was a running commentary on who was seen with whom in the surrounding seats, and the closest thing we had to an intellectual in-depth discussion of the musical was a debate as to whether Andrew Lloyd Weber's extreme popularity made him 'in' or 'out.' Believe me, Vincent, your company, even clinging to a ladder, is infinitely preferable!”*

She paused and then asked in a lighter tone, “Do you like the play?”

*“Very much! But it is quite different than the book.”*

“Really? It seems pretty close to me...”

Catherine cast her mind back to all the Phantom movies she had seen. As far as she could remember, they were all quite similar to what was happening here. And it was just too embarrassing to admit to this highly literate man that she had never read the book.

Never try to fool an empath. Vincent’s voice was a touch too casual as he asked, “Well, what do you think about the fact that the Persian is never mentioned? Or Raoul’s older brother?”

“Raoul had a brother?” Catherine blurted before she could stop herself.

Vincent smiled. “He did figure rather largely in the plot.”

Catherine blushed. “All right, so I never read the book.”

“I could loan it to you,” Vincent offered, and she just had time to assent before the overture for the second act began and it was time to climb the ladder again.

After it was over, they walked back to the main tunnels in companionable silence, hand-in-hand. Vincent kept stealing glances at Catherine, his thoughts and assorted lyrics tumbling together in his mind. How nice it was to be with her, how much he looked forward to their times together and wished they could last forever.

*...you always beside me, to hold me and to hide me. . .*

“Penny for your thoughts,” Catherine murmured.

“I was just thinking about what you said earlier, about our standard of living,” Vincent lied.

“It’s true,” Catherine insisted. “Did you ever realize that your chamber is larger than most Manhattan apartments? And it’s furnished beautifully.”

“The city has been good to us. The people Above throw out many lovely and useful things.” Vincent said vaguely.

*Was it true?* he wondered. Could she possibly think that his world could be good enough to offer her?

Catherine bit her lip and shot a sideways glance at him. Was his eternal self-deprecation going to strike again, blinding him to how much she truly enjoyed what he shared with her? To how much she would like to share more?

*Say you need me with you, here beside you...*

“It’s not just the space and the surroundings,” Catherine said out loud. “It’s the people. The community down here, the way everyone cares for everyone else... that kind of love

is very rare and precious. I have friends Above, people who care about me, but not like this.”

“Indeed, when you put it that way, there is only one thing my world is missing.”

“What?”

“You.” Vincent stopped walking for a moment to pull Catherine into a warm hug.

*Say you love me. You know I do...*

“Will there ever be a chance for us to be together?” Catherine whispered into his vest.

“Someday. Perhaps when I know what I am, when I know that the terrible darkness will not rise again, then perhaps, someday.”

“I know what you are, Vincent. You are the most warm and decent man I have ever known. And if your dark side rises again, I will take care of you, and lead you out of it as I did before. I’m not afraid. To be with you is worth everything. How many times do I have to tell you that before you believe?”

Vincent looked away, silent. Catherine held her breath, waiting for his response. *Oh please, oh please*, she begged the powers that be, let him believe my words just this once!

*... No more talk of darkness, forget these wide-eyed fears...*

“And your work,” Vincent finally said at last. “You do good work Above. You help so many people who need you. I could not ask you to give that up for me. ‘*No love, quoth he, but vanity sets love a task like that,*’” he quoted sadly.

“I don’t want to stop either. But I could commute. I already do, to see you. I’d keep an apartment as an accommodation address - probably one on a lower floor,” she added wryly. “But I could just stop and change there, and come to you. Come home to you.”

“I don’t...” Vincent gasped, caught between powerful wanting and even more powerful fear.

“It could work. Oh, Vincent, just consider it, please?”

*Say the word, and I will follow you...*

“I need to think,” Vincent said, and bolted.

Catherine thought she knew what that meant. He would go talk to Father, who would sympathize with his yearnings and then put the stamp of patriarchal disapproval upon them. And she and Vincent would be left with an eternity of stolen moments.

She was only half right. Vincent himself was surprised to the core of his being when Father's only comment on the situation was, "Well, it's about time you made an honest woman of her, Vincent," before returning to his perusal of the chessboard.

Father won three games in a row that night.

The next evening Catherine found Vincent waiting on the balcony for her return, carrying an armload of roses.

"They're beautiful, Vincent!" she exclaimed, inviting him in while she found water and vases for them all. "But why so many?"

"In celebration."

"Of...?"

Vincent moved from his seat on the couch, kneeling before her and taking one of her hands in his.

*Say you'll share with me one love, one lifetime...*

"Of our engagement."

Catherine froze. Had she heard that correctly? Had he really...? "Oh, Vincent, she finally gasped. "Oh, yes! Oh, YES!!!"

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*Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments...*

A long time ago, Catherine's father had told her that her grandfather had offered him \$100 and a step ladder to elope with her mother and spare everyone the expense and hassle of a wedding. Catherine was beginning to think that was a pretty sensible plan.

For years she had fantasized about marrying Vincent. But while her imagination had dwelled on the proposal, it had skipped over the actual wedding with only a vague impression of roses, veils, and saying "I Do," before getting into the far more interesting business of picturing the wedding night. Not in her worst nightmares did she dream of the hoard of complications surrounding the simplest of decisions.

The helpers wanted to know the date so that they could plan their calendars. William wanted to know how many people were coming so that he could plan the food. The children wanted to know if they could be in the ceremony. Father wanted to know what sort of service she preferred. And everyone wanted to know what William was cooking.

Catherine wanted to know if Father would offer her \$100 and a shovel to go find a subterranean Justice of the Peace and spare everybody.

When Vincent came to her that night, he found her surrounded by checklists, notes, and wedding books, reading Miss Manner's Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior and snickering over the list of things to argue about before a wedding.

"Have you decided on a date?" Catherine asked after they had hugged hello.

Vincent cocked his head. "When would you like it?"

"Soon!"

He laughed at that, but behind the laughter was more than a little hesitation. "And I would like it soon too, but..."

"What?"

"Father suggests that we wait until Winterfest."

"WHAT??? ! That's months away, Vincent! Haven't we waited long enough already?" Having gotten that outburst out of her system, Catherine sat back and reconsidered.

"Why Winterfest?"

"It is our celebration of the meaning of our friends in our lives. A wedding would be very much in keeping with the theme. Also..." his voice dropped, and he looked away in embarrassment. "So many friends want to be part of the ceremony that it would be unkind to exclude them from our joy. But... we... do not have the resources to host two large gatherings. If," and his eyes tentatively flicked back up to meet hers, "you would agree to wait and be married at Winterfest it would be easier for us."

"Of course I will!" Catherine announced with decision, more than slightly embarrassed about her earlier outburst. The people of the tunnels gave so freely of what they had that it was sometimes hard to remember how little they had to give.

With that in mind, she asked, "Vincent, what do the other people in the tunnels do for their weddings?"

He thought about that for a moment. "It depends on the people involved. Some go Above for a ceremony, or to see a Justice of the Peace. Others arrange for helpers to marry them according to traditional customs, as Henry and Lin did. Some write their own vows and repeat them before Father and their friends."

"Write their own vows..." Catherine repeated pensively. "I've been looking at 'traditional ceremonies,' and none of them seemed entirely... right ...for us. I don't even know what religion you are, if any."

"I've studied a little bit of everything," Vincent commented, neutrally.

“I thought you might say that. You once told me that we are ‘*something has never been.*’ Everything is new for us, Vincent. We shall have to choose our own path and our own customs.”

“And make our own traditions from the best of the past,” Vincent concurred.

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They started with the music. Both of them wanted “*All I ask of You*” from *The Phantom of the Opera*, so that was picked as their first married waltz. Catherine had always wanted “There is Love” played at her wedding, so they decided to play that as the signal to gather for the ceremony. But when Vincent asked Catherine if she wanted to enter to the Wagner wedding march, she had to stop and think.

“You know,” Catherine mused, “I never understood how an opera selection became a traditional wedding song.”

Vincent was surprised. “I always thought that the words were a beautiful blessing.”

Catherine was surprised in her turn. “Here comes the bride, all dressed in white, a blessing?” she asked incredulously.

“That is NOT the proper translation of the German,” Vincent said with some asperity.

Off Catherine’s disbelieving look, he recited the real lyrics of the aria. It took only two lines to convince Catherine that not only was it a blessing, it was a blessing she very much wanted sung.

“We can teach it to the children,” she decided. “They keep asking me if they can be part of the ceremony.”

“And me,” Vincent said ruefully. “In every single class, at every single meal, whenever they meet me in the halls, the first thing they ask is ‘Can I be in the wedding? Please, please, pleeeeeease?’” He drew the words out in the perfect imitation of a six-year-old and Catherine dissolved in laughter.

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The children weren’t the only ones Below who wanted to help with the nuptials. It was easy for some people, Mary mused. Cullen could carve something, Mouse could build something, William could cook something. But herself... outside of childkeeping, Mary’s talents were meager. She could sew, but that didn’t seem to be enough, not unless - not unless Catherine wanted help with her wedding gown. It was assumed that Catherine would want to wear her mother’s gown, but perhaps Mary could help with alterations? Accordingly, Mary put Sara in charge of the child contingent for the afternoon and headed Above for the first time in years.

At the same time that Mary wiped sweaty palms on her best apron and braved entering the high-rise, Catherine was contemplating her mother’s dress. It had yellowed, but a

good cleaner could fix that. It was also missing a few seed pearls, but a good seamstress could fix that. But it was also completely the wrong size, and nothing short of drastic surgery could fix that.

Thoughts of corsets, quick weight-loss diets, and rib removal were scattered at the knock on the door. Catherine clawed her way quickly out of the swathing of satin, (think of the questions if one of her friends found her in a wedding dress!!) yanked on a robe, and ran for the door.

“Mary!” she gasped in surprise. “I never expected to see you here!”

The older woman dredged up a small smile. “I never quite expected to be here. But I wanted to offer my services if you needed help with your wedding dress.”

“You are the answer to a prayer,” Catherine told her earnestly, pulling her into the apartment.

It didn’t take Mary long to announce that the wedding dress wasn’t salvageable. “Look, there’s no seam allowance that can be let out in the bust,” she told Catherine sadly, showing her the seams. “It’s been lined and boned, and dresses like this aren’t forgiving about being altered.”

“Perhaps I can use the cloth?” Catherine asked in a small, disappointed voice.

Mary bit her lip, but the truth must be told. “It’s too yellowed, dear. I’ve seen dresses like this get thrown away too many times and nothing could bleach them white again.” The crushed look on Catherine’s face made her want to cry. “I’m sorry, dear, I’m so sorry. But no one could fix this dress for you.”

Catherine buried her face in her hands for a moment, while Mary awkwardly patted her shoulder. “Daddy always said he meant to get that dress properly stored,” Catherine said into her fingers. But then she pulled herself together and raised her head. “All right,” she said, taking a deep breath. “I’ll just salvage some of the buttons or something for luck.”

Mary admired her resolve. And it gave her an inspiration.

“Catherine,” she said tentatively. “Would you consider letting us make you a gown? We’d consider it an honor if you would.”

Catherine stared blankly at her for a moment, visions of being married in a patched and ragged dress made of moving quilts dancing through her mind. But the images dissolved instantly in a flash of shame. Whatever Mary and the other women made, they would make with love in every stitch. Bloomingdale’s best couldn’t compare with that.

“Mary,” she said, equally gravely. “I would be the one who is honored.”

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Vincent met Catherine in the Public Library that night. Their search for the perfect wedding traditions had rapidly outgrown the meager offerings of their personal libraries, so they were now hunting further afield.

“It says here that there are certain African tribes that feel that the marriage should not be consummated for a month after the wedding,” Vincent commented, paging through a reference book.

Keep reading!” Catherine hissed, and he did, bending into the book to hide his smile.

A few chapters later, Catherine remarked “You will be relieved to know that according to the rules of courtly love in the 12th century, ‘marriage is no excuse for not loving.’”

“Yes,” Vincent replied, “but I think you'll find that another rule is: ‘when made public, love rarely endures.’”

“Do you mean to tell me that you’ve memorized the rules of courtly love?” she demanded, putting her book down to face him.

Vincent refused to look up at her so she couldn’t be sure if that was the corner of a smile she saw or not, as he replied, “You may have inspired me in that direction.”

“They have a thirteenth-century love poem in here. Listen: ‘*Woman should gather roses ere Time’s ceaseless foot o’ertaketh her, For if too long she make delay, her chance of love may pass away.*’ That’s not very romantic!”

“*Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, Old Time is still a-flying, And that same bloom that smiles today, tomorrow will be dying,*” Vincent vacantly replied, pulling another book off the stack next to him.

“This one is all about marriage as a social institution,” Catherine sighed. “Not one word on actual ceremonies.”

“So is this one,” Vincent said tiredly. They took up new books and began reading again.

“Oh, here’s something,” Catherine read out loud: “It was the tradition at this time for the bride and bridesmaids to be dressed identically, with veils over their features, so that evil demons would become confused as to their target.”

“I doubt that the women will be able to find the material for more than one dress,” Vincent replied, turning a page.

“How is that dress coming along?” Catherine fished. “Mary asked me to let it be a surprise, so I don’t know a thing about it.”

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“Ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine, two dollars,” Mary counted carefully. “Adding this to what Brooke has made selling potpourri, and what Laura donated from her salary, we have six dollars.”

“I have another four,” Jamie offered. “Henry and Lin paid me for babysitting their kid during the last concert down here.”

“And I have five more,” Rebecca announced, adding it to the pot. “I sold some candles to a boutique.”

“You need that money for supplies!” Sara protested.

Rebecca shrugged. “I can always find supplies. But we’re not going to simply ‘find’ the material for Catherine’s dress!”

Mary gnawed on her lip. “Fifteen dollars isn’t very much.”

Amanda, the venerable operator of the tunnel’s only sewing machine, cackled reassuringly. “Don’t worry, dears. The Lord will provide.”

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Catherine was having One of Those Days at work. The Culhane deposition was two hours overdue, Joe was nagging her, and her phone would simply not shut up. Too tired to care about business polish or basic politeness, Catherine snatched up the handset and snapped “What?” into the receiver.

“I can tell you ‘re having a wonderful time,” Jenny’s merry voice responded.

“Oh, Jen, today has been just impossible!” Cathy complained.

“What you need is a change of pace, and so do I. If I look at this stupid Viking book one more minute, I’m going to throw all the proofs out the window. What say you take a mental health break and meet me at Au Bon Pain for lunch?”

“That sounds wonderful,” Catherine breathed. “I could use a break.”

The next time Joe came swarming out of his office demanding an update on the work, he found the Culhane deposition in a neat pile on Catherine’s desk, topped with a sign saying “Out to lunch.”

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The subterranean seamstress fabric-buying expedition was having an equally discouraging day. It had been a long time since Amanda had gone Above, and she was horrified at the prices of the simplest of muslins, much less the cost of satin.

“This isn’t even good, thick cloth,” she complained to Sara, rubbing the corner of a watered nylon between her fingers. “Bridal satin used to be three times as heavy as this. This wouldn’t even make a good scarf!”

“We could barely afford enough to make a scarf,” Sara replied, checking the sticker at the end of the bolt. “I’ve had restaurant meals that cost less than a yard of this stuff!”

“It’s not even real silk!” Amanda gasped.

“It blows your mind, doesn’t it?” came a conversational voice from behind. “I’ve been sewing for three years now, and drugs would be a cheaper hobby. Nice costumes, by the way.”

“Uhhh, thank you,” Sara stammered to the young woman who came around the end of the aisle.

“What do you sew?” Amanda asked, trying to be polite as she edged away.

“Costumes, of course. I’m a member of the local guild. Hey, have you tried the mill-end shop? Carole found the perfect velvet for her Tudor court gown there last week for only \$2 a yard.”

That halted Amanda’s slow creep in the opposite direction. “What mill-end shop?”

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“And you wouldn’t believe the social customs!” Jenny said, spearing a shrimp. “Take weddings for instance. The groom has to answer all the bride’s parents’ questions concerning his fitness as a mate in public! And the bride has to ask permission to be married into the family right there at the altar. Can you imagine how embarrassing that could get?”

Catherine was suddenly a great deal more interested than she ever thought she could be in Norse rituals. “Tell me more,” she asked, leaning intently over her fruit salad.

“Okay. First, they need precisely eight attendants. . .”

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The mill-end shop was a little hole in the wall in an unfashionable part of town. Bolts and rolls and folded lengths of fabric were jumbled every which way, and Amanda wandered through the crooked rows, overwhelmed by the profusion until Sara called her back.

“Look at this!” Sara whispered excitedly. “It’s perfect!” She was holding the corner of a heavy white cloth. As it moved, odd shadows rippled across it and were gone. Closer inspection showed that the surface was patterned with white roses.

There wasn't a person in the tunnels who didn't know what Vincent had in the pouch that never left his neck, where it came from, and what it meant to him. What better wedding dress than one made of cloth covered with Catherine's talisman?

"We can't afford it," Amanda whispered fearfully. Sara slowly reached for the tag at the end of the roll.

"60-inch wide cotton jacquard. \$1.00 a yard." it read.

The storekeeper was just setting out a basket of lace as the two women lugged the bolt up to the register. While he was measuring the fabric out for them, Amanda gave in to her curiosity and poked through the basket. She found a stunning floral and scallop edge design and held it up for Sara's approval. Sara nodded, but mouthed "How much?" A good question. Amanda couldn't find a price tag of any kind.

"Er, excuse me, how much are these?" she asked as the storekeeper was about to ring up the sale.

"Hm... Oh, all that stuff's a closeout. How 'bout I give it to you for a dollar for five yards?"

"I think that'll do," Sara squeaked.

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"It's perfect, it's absolutely perfect!" Catherine breathed. "Vincent, we have to do this for our wedding. Of course, we'll have to change the traditional questions somewhat. . ."

"Yes, it would be a bit awkward to discuss my prowess in battle and my status as a freeman at my nuptials," Vincent agreed. "But the content of the ritual is precisely what we've been looking for. Who will stand for you?"

The question took the wind out of her sails. "Peter, I guess."

"This does not make you happy," Vincent commented carefully.

Catherine sighed heavily. "Dad would have been so happy... it's hard to think of someone in his place. Except Joe." Vincent tensed slightly.

"We cannot risk..." he began, but Catherine touched her fingers to his lips to silence him.

"I know, Vincent," she said softly. "But Joe's done so much for me since Daddy died. He's so protective... he wants to take care of me. She smiled in sudden reminiscence. "Did you know that he kicked my door down once? He was afraid something nefarious was going on because I didn't answer his knock."

Vincent cocked his head. "Was there something?"

“Yes,” Catherine whispered. “That was when the watcher...” her voice trailed off, and Vincent did not pursue the subject. After a moment Catherine sighed again, then looked at him and tried to smile. It was a pretty unconvincing performance for someone who could read her heart. “I just wish sometimes that I could invite Joe to our wedding.”

Now it was Vincent’s turn to look away in sorrow. “We must protect our secret,” he murmured. “I too, wish that your friends did not have to be cut off from your happiness, but...”

Catherine shook off the mood. “It’s all right,” she told him. “I have you. I’ve told you before that our love is worth...”

“Everything,” Vincent finished for her and smiled.

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Narcissa stood calmly in the shadows of the sweatshop wall, waiting. It was trash night in the garment district, and yards and yards of unsold odds and ends were piled by the dumpster, free for the taking. And there were plenty of people coming to take. Narcissa knew some of them; girls of the tunnels, who sometimes came to visit her. They pawed through the bags for clothing and useful scraps, keeping a weather eye on the bag ladies engaged in the same occupation. The tunnel dwellers and the local itinerants had an uneasy truce regarding first rights to the pickings, and no one wanted to start a fight.

And there was the occasional Village person as well, come in the night for some slumming and trashing. But they usually did not stay long or take much. The bag ladies made no bones about their resentment for “rich folks” who took the rightful possessions of the honest homeless.

Narcissa listened to them gabble and waited. She needed something, she did. She knew it was there, but she could not hear it calling to her over the clattering voices of the others. So she waited until the night grew darker and the others left for their beds and boxes and tunnels. Then she came out and ran her withered hands through the materials left behind. Her eyes were not good, but she knew she’d be able to feel what she was looking for. Satin ribbon slid cool across her skin. But when she held it, feeling it with those senses that took the place of her sight, it felt earthy, warm, rich. Brown. Not the color she wanted. The next one was hot and passionate. Red. She pushed it aside and reached deeper. So many colors, so many voices! Here was more satin, but it was serene and remote, Narcissa nudged the pale blue trim away. Here - ah, here it was! The ribbon in her hands spoke of newness, growth, tender new beginnings. This was the right color to make the right magic. Narcissa wound as much green ribbon as she could find in a ball. Green was good juju for a wedding gown. It brought a healthy start to the new life ahead.

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“Mouse, do you have any gold wire left?” Vincent asked. Of all the denizens Below, Mouse might best have some precious metal he could spare. After all, he didn’t care

what the intrinsic worth of anything was, being concerned only with what he could turn it into.

“Some. Not much. Why?”

“I wish to make Catherine a wedding ring.”

“Okay, good! Okay, fine!”

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Elizabeth was penciling dress sketches for Mary and Amanda when Samantha ran in. “Look what I have!” she shouted, dropping several small bouquets of flowers on the table.

“Roses!” Mary cried. “Where did you get all these silk roses?”

“From that candy maker on 15th Street. He puts these on top of his boxes of premium chocolate, but he said I could have some for running some errands for him. He said he’d never seen a kid who wanted to work for flowers instead of candy.”

“They’re lovely,” Amanda breathed, touching the tip of a tiny white bud. She turned to Elizabeth for confirmation, but the artist was already bent over a sketch, murmuring “...one at the throat with a jabot of lace, one at each corner of the dagging, tied with bows of that ribbon Narcissa brought...”

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Catherine was waiting on the balcony when Vincent arrived. She was dressed in black pants and a white blouse, and she had a tea towel draped over one bent arm.

She kissed him hello, but cut off his curious query by stepping back and announcing, “In celebration of having finally finished writing our wedding liturgy, I am inviting you to dinner at the most exclusive restaurant in New York.”

Vincent’s eyes were beginning to sparkle. “I see.”

“Welcome to Chez Chandler, Mr. Right. Please come in: we’ve reserved a table by the picture window for you.”

Smiling, Vincent followed tamely into her apartment. It was lit exclusively by candles; soft Mozart played in the background, and the most tantalizing scents were drifting in from the kitchen.

“What is on the menu for tonight?” he asked as he was seated.

Catherine dropped a small curtsy. “We have for your dining pleasure herbed lamb, fresh-baked bread, baked potato, and broccoli fanfare.”

“Broccoli fanfare?” Vincent queried of her retreating back.

At the door to the kitchen Catherine shrugged. “That’s what’s written on the box.”

“Oh.”

Catherine soon returned bearing a wine glass, which she almost dropped at the sound of a loud knock on the door.

Vincent leapt up, heading for the balcony, but Catherine caught a fistful of his sleeve as he ran by. “Get in the bathroom!” she hissed. “People can see your shadow on the balcony!” She shoved him in the right direction and he darted in.

The knock repeated, even louder. “Cathy?” someone shouted from outside. “Are you in there? Answer me!”

“I’m coming, Joe!” Catherine yelled a little too loudly, hoping that her voice would mask the sound of the bathroom door shutting. She lunged at the door and opened it, just as her boss was raising his fist to knock again.

“Whew, Radcliffe, you had me worried there for a moment. I knew you were going to be home tonight, but when you didn’t answer...”

Catherine shrugged and smiled. “You caught me at an awkward moment. What do you need, Joe?”

“It’s the Glenn case. It’s been moved up to Monday, so I need you to get on the depositions right away.”

“First thing tomorrow,” Catherine promised, reaching for the paperwork he was pulling from his briefcase.

“Hey, Radcliffe, are you sure you’re okay? It’s not like you to keep a man standing in the hall like the... oops.” Catherine had stepped to one side to put the folders down, and Joe got his first glimpse at the table. “Looks like you have other plans for the night. Hope I haven’t interrupted something.”

“Not yet, Joe,” Catherine lied through a smile.

“Pity,” her boss grinned back. “I’d like to meet the guy who could inspire you to such heights. Is that cut glass?”

“OUT, Joe!” Catherine had to laugh at his irrepressibility, but she could hardly leave Vincent to languish in the shower while Joe satisfied his curiosity over her table settings. She put a hand on Joe’s chest and pushed him backward into the hall. “I’ll get to this stuff first thing tomorrow.”

“Tell me all about him tomorrow!” he insisted as the door swung shut in his face.

Catherine leaned against the door and smiled weakly as Vincent tentatively emerged from the bathroom.

“He certainly is-- protective,” Vincent said with amusement, heading back to his seat at the table. Catherine laughed ruefully and stepped away from the door to hug him in apology for the interruption.

Which is how Joe found them when he reopened the door a second later.

“Radcliffe, I forgot-- CATHY! WHAT THE HELL IS THAT??!”

Vincent and Catherine leapt away from each other guiltily. Joe lunged between them, grabbing her by the shoulder and thrusting her behind him. “Cathy! Run, call 911! I’ll hold it off!”

Vincent backed up and eyed him warily. He didn’t want to hurt Joe, but if he were to attack... Catherine, on the other hand, grabbed the initiative as well as a double handful of Joe, forcing him to stop advancing. “Joe, wait a minute, please, wait a minute, it’s not what you think...”

“Then what the hell is it?” Joe shouted back at her. “If this weirdo didn’t break into your apartment, then - oh, my God.” His arms went suddenly slack in her hands, and he sat abruptly on the couch. “Oh, my God. This is what you’ve been hiding, isn’t it? This is why you never talk about your personal life, isn’t it? Isn’t it??” His voice was rising almost to panic as he accused her. “Is THAT who you go to when you disappear? Cathy, I need some answers here!”

Catherine sighed and sat down on the couch next to him.

“It’s a long story, Joe. But you must understand how important Vincent is to me...”

She told him everything, starting with the attack in the park. When she was finished, Joe was a little calmer, although he never took his eyes from the corner where Vincent stood motionless.

“You killed the men who came after her in the Mayfair Escort case,” Joe stated. It was not a question.

“Yes,” Vincent whispered from his corner.

“And all those other guys, and the Peeping Tom. You killed him and ripped the car apart. It was your cape she had on when I got there.”

“Yes.”

“I should haul you in, you know that.”

“I did what I had to, to protect Catherine. I think you understand that.”

“And now you want to marry her.”

“Yes.”

“And you love him, Cathy?”

“Very much.”

Joe’s expression was grim. He suddenly jumped up from the sofa and advanced on Vincent, who pressed himself deeper into the corner.

“Then I only have one thing to say to you,” he announced, waving a finger under Vincent’s nose. “YOU TAKE GOOD CARE OF HER!”

Behind them, Catherine closed her eyes in thankful relief. “He already does,” she said fervently. “He already does.”

“It has not been easy for her,” Vincent was assuring Joe, “to keep such a secret from one she cares about so much. Catherine has told me of what you have done for her. I owe you a debt for your concern.”

“Yeah,” Joe didn’t sound completely convinced. “And it sounds like I owe you for getting to meet her in the first place. Hey,” he asked, sniffing the air, “is something burning?”

“Dinner!” Catherine gasped, and bolted into the kitchen. She was almost afraid to leave the two men alone together, but it would be even more awkward to have to explain Vincent to the firemen, too...

The lamb was a little more well-done than Catherine had originally planned, and the bread was distinctly Cajun-blackened at the corners. Plus Vincent ever-so-subtly dug all the red peppers out of his ‘broccoli fanfare’ and buried them discreetly under his potato skin, where Catherine found them the next day as she cleaned up. But looking back on it, Catherine decided that it was one of the most satisfying meals she had ever had, They invited Joe to stay and join them, and by the end of the meal his distrust had been replaced with a hesitant enthusiasm for the tunnel world.

Father was philosophical about Vincent’s petition to accept Joe as a full-fledged helper.

“Catherine has brought so many new people down here that we should put revolving doors on all the entrances,” he grumped. But Vincent could tell that he was only objecting for form’s sake, for once Joe had accepted the tunnels he had proved to be an invaluable assistant. And he threw himself into the wedding preparations with as much anticipation as if he were the one getting married.

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Winterfest was in full swing. The candle-lighting had been performed, the food served, and now various people were clearing away a space for the altar to be set up. Catherine looked at Vincent and smiled. Soon the musicians would start playing “There is Love,”



and it would be time for her to duck into the curtained area on one balcony where her dress awaited. It seemed as though she couldn't wait another second.

*He is now to be among you, at the calling of your hearts. . .*

The simple ballad began, and Catherine's mouth went dry, her palms got wet, and she suddenly had to fight the urge to start running and not stop until she reached Kansas. She threw a stricken glance to Vincent, who looked equally unready now that the moment had come. Fortunately, Father and Mary were coming to lend their steadying influences, and take them to their respective dressing rooms.

"I'm terrified and I don't know why!" Catherine blurted in a whisper as Mary took her hand and led her away.

Mary smiled and patted her shoulder. "Everyone gets cold feet at the last second, dear. It's perfectly normal."

Jamie was waiting by the curtained-off door. She held it open while Mary went inside. When Catherine followed, she found the older woman holding up a stunning vision of a white rose dress for her inspection.

It had a high collar of green satin overlaid with white lace, that dipped to a V in the front, the point buried in a lace jabot topped with a small spray of white silk roses. The front was decorated with a semi-circle of pintucks, outlined with a thin green ribbon, also overlaid with white lace. The sleeves were full and flowing down to tight cuffs of the same green and white combination as the collar. The skirt swung in a loose circle and was decorated with a chevron of green ribbon and white lace, with a spray of white roses tacked to every point of the dagging. Two bands of wide green ribbon overlaid with lace and one band of narrow green ribbon with white fancy-stitching trimmed the skirt just above a double row of eyelet ruffle with a rose pattern embroidered on it. Catherine expected to see that the dress fastened with small glass buttons with tiny red roses inside, for those had come off her mother's gown. But the ivory rose that pinned the tight green belt was a surprise.

"Mary, it's a beautiful dress!" Catherine exclaimed, and Mary blushed with pleasure. "Where did you get that pin? It's exquisite!"

"Joe donated it," Jamie said, as she set the floral headband with its lace veil on her head. "He said it came from his mother's gown."

"What???" Catherine gasped, but before she could ask further questions, she heard the music change to Lohengrin. Mary gave her hands a reassuring squeeze and led Catherine back down the steps as the children began to sing.

*... enter this space where there await you blessings above...*

Vincent appeared across the hall from his own curtained dressing room. The women had made him a new shirt out of the same material as her gown, and it, too, had a lace

jabot topped with white silk roses. He had on his good black vest, and new pants, and carried a single red rose.

Jamie handed Catherine a single white rose just as she scampered out of the way, leaving Mary to bring Catherine to the circle of waiting friends and helpers.

*Champion of virtue, enter before; Champion of beauty, enter before...*

Catherine and Vincent joined the circle, and Father stepped into the middle to join Joe, who had already taken his place. As the last note died away, Vincent stepped into the circle to face Joe and began the litany.

"I bid thee greeting, Joe Maxwell," he said, following the Norse form. "I would this day make Catherine, your ward, my wife."

Joe cleared his throat noisily. "Now tell me, Vincent, here before these folk, do you love her?"

"With all my heart."

"If I agree to this marriage, will you take good care of her?"

"The best I can. All I have to offer will be hers."

Joe smiled. "See that you do." He turned to Catherine and broke off from the script for a moment. "And if doesn't, you come tell me, right?"

"Right," Catherine agreed with a smile, as laughter rippled through the circle.

Joe took a deep breath and returned to his written lines. "Then to thee, Vincent, I present Catherine to be thy bride."

Catherine swallowed hard and entered the circle to stand before Father. He looked sternly at her, his hands crossed over his cane.

"I bid thee welcome, Father," she said faintly, "and would ask this day to be accepted into the tunnels and your family as Vincent, your son, becomes my husband."

Father suddenly smiled reassuringly and held both hands out to her. "I greet you and your guardian with love," he proclaimed, his voice ringing firmly throughout the hall, "and gladly welcome you both into these tunnels!"

He pulled her forward and kissed her cheek as the watchers cheered. "Bless you both," he whispered into her ear before he released her and stepped aside.

Master Po was waiting by a table that held a vase of white, red, and minuet roses, delicate blooms of white that shaded to brilliant red at the tip of each petal.

“We gather here to celebrate love,” the Master announced. “Vincent, Catherine, come forward. Stand before this company, and give your vows to one another.”

The couple came forward, and Master PO intoned, “Catherine, do you take Vincent freely to be your husband? To share one board, to share one bed, bonded in spirit and heart? To build with him a hearth and home in wealth and want, in weal and woe, while life and love do last? Is it your wish to become one with this man?”

“Yes, I do!” Catherine declared.

“Vincent, do you take Catherine freely to be your wife? To share one board, to share one bed, bonded in spirit and heart? To build with her a hearth and home in wealth and want, in weal and woe, while life and love do last? Is it your wish to become one with this woman?”

“Yes, it is,” Vincent responded.

“By what sign shall you show your bond to the world?” Po asked.

Vincent pulled something from his vest pocket. “I bring gold, born of fire. The yellow sun of Above, the silver glow of Below, the red fire of our love, linked together in an unending circle, as a token of our joining.”

He held the ring up, three strands of colored gold braided tightly together. He smiled down at Catherine and she smiled radiantly back, lifting her left hand for him.

Vincent gently fit the ring over the tip of her thumb. “As I have loved you from the beginning...” over the tip of her pointer finger, “as I love you now...” over the tip of her index finger “as I will love you to the end of time...” Finally, the ring slid coolly down the length of her ring finger. “So I give this token of our bond and our love to you.”

Catherine left her hand upraised, and Vincent placed his hand against it. Master Po placed a minuet rose between their palms, then lifted a cord of multicolored braided ribbon.

“Red for love,” he intoned, wrapping it once around their hands. “Green for new beginnings,” and it looped around again. “Brown for hearth and home, white for joy and happiness.” He twisted the ends and then handed one end to Catherine and one to Vincent. “What has been joined here let no one put asunder.”

“So mote it be,” Catherine and Vincent said together. And tied the knot.

The great hall rang with applause and cheers as the married couple set the cord and rose down and turned to face them. Then the children abruptly remembered that they had one more song to sing, and launched into a slightly breathless version of “All I Ask of You,” as Vincent took his wife into his arms and began to dance.

*Anywhere you go, let me go too...*

Catherine pulled her husband close and kissed him thoroughly.

*Love me, that's all I ask of you!*

The rest of the evening was a whirl of dancing, kissing the bride, and congratulations. It was very far into the night when Father caught the guests of honor sneaking out of the hall.

"Leaving so soon?" he teased.

Catherine blushed and looked down, and Vincent ducked his head. "We have one last thing we must do," he informed his parent softly.

"You what?" Then he noticed that they had changed from their wedding clothes, and had their warmest coats. "You 're not going Above, are you?"

"For just a moment," Catherine told him earnestly. "It's something we have to do, something very important."

"Be careful!" Father advised. "Don't let anyone see you!"

They were very careful indeed, and left no traces of their passing. Which is why the next morning the groundskeeper could not explain how a bouquet of red, white and particolored roses came to be found on Charles Chandler's grave, bravely blooming in the dead of winter.