

# Beauty and the Beast



"Masques"

# BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

“Masques”

ACT ONE

## To Leave Our Safe Places...

By

**C.J. La Belle**



*“I was born on the night of Samhain, when the barrier between the worlds is whisper-thin and when magic, old magic, sings its heady and sweet song to anyone who cares to hear it...”*

*Carolyn MacCullough*



Catherine stood beneath the warm spray of her shower, rinsing the last of the shampoo from her hair. The hot water felt good on her skin. The bathroom was filled with steam.

She kept her eyes closed, simply luxuriating in the thought of having nothing more to do than shower and get dressed. It was Saturday evening, and for once, there was no leather bag of files waiting for her undivided attention. She'd worked at double the pace all morning. Then Joe had generously given all his staff the rest of the holiday weekend off. No one questioned the gift as they all bolted for the doors to the bull-pen.

Catherine sighed as she finally turned off the spray, before opening the shower door, to reach out for a blue bath towel off the rack. She'd just emerged from the cubicle, the towel wrapped discreetly around her, when the doorbell rang.

She knew who it was. Or at the very least, she suspected. "I'm coming..." she called, before quickly wrapping another towel around her head, turban-style.

She was still very wet, as she padded barefoot through her apartment to the front door, clutching her towel at her chest. As the bell rang again, she unlocked the door and opened it as far as the chain would allow. Three young children in Halloween costumes were standing outside with trick-or-treat bags opened invitingly. Catherine smiled, as she slipped off the chain and opened the door a little further.

"Trick-or-treat! Trick-or-treat!" the children shouted in unison.

"Don't you all just look great?" Catherine smiled as she complimented them, before tossing candy into their sacks from a bowl beside the door. "Happy Halloween."

"Thank you!" The two older kids grinned before they ran back down the hall.

The smallest little girl lingered a moment. "Thank you," she said sweetly.

"You're welcome." Catherine watched her turn to run after her fellows.

As the girl scooted down the hallway, Catherine's father arrived, almost bumping into the child. He looked resplendent in a Robert E. Lee Confederate uniform, complete with hat, mustache, and dangling sword.

"Dad... hi." Catherine held her door open to admit him.

"Am I early, are you late, or is that your costume?" her father asked, looking her up and down, quizzically.

Catherine gave his cheek a quick kiss as she shut the door. "Oh, I'm late. I'm sorry, Dad. I lost track of time at the office."

"Well, you never used to lose track of time when you worked for me." Charles smiled, as he teased her.

Catherine returned the favor. “Oh sure, I did... every morning.” She sighed. “If you could just hold the trick-or-treaters at bay, I’m sure I can get dressed in time for us to arrive fashionably late.”

She retreated towards her bedroom as Charles dropped his hat and gloves on the glass coffee table. He attempted to seat himself on one of her dinky sofas to wait, but the scabbard of his mock sword was making the notion awkward.

“A likely story. I figure an hour and a half,” he complained.

His daughter paused to look back at him. “That was the old Cathy. I’ll be ready in fifteen minutes.”

She disappeared into the bedroom, closing the folding doors behind her. Her father tried again to sit down. His saber was still making itself a little awkward, but he rearranged it and finally managed to get comfortable. He didn’t believe a word of his daughter’s statement. He knew he would be here awhile...



Father’s chamber was lit appropriate to the evening. The decorations scattered around it also reflected the events to come. Halloween was as much a part of the world Below as it was the world Above. And no Samhain night would be complete without one – or three – of Father’s Halloween stories. Every child there knew it was true. As did several of the adults.

Seated on the floor, a dozen children from the underground listened intently, as Father told them a tale of mystery and suspense. The children were of various ages, from three to sixteen, and a few were dressed in lovely, homemade costumes. All of them were deeply engrossed. It was a ghost story, so their eyes were wide, and sometimes one of them shivered with delight. Father could always be counted on to tell the best stories.

Jacob leaned forward in his chair, pleased with his audience, and their appreciation of his storytelling skills.

“And from that day forward, John always kept a light burning in his window by night, so that Deirdre might find her way back to him. And in the deepest part of winter, when the snows lay thick against the walls of his cottage and the cold wind came shrieking from the north, he would take down his bow and walk through the forest, calling her name until his voice grew hoarse and his tears froze hard, on his

face. But she never answered, and until his dying day... John... never saw her... again.”

Father settled back, as he concluded the tale. Vincent was leaning on the edge of a table behind him, listening as raptly as the children. He was dressed more formally than usual, as if he had somewhere else to be, on this night of all nights.

Piled on the table beside him, there were four books, all contemporary hardcovers, not leather-bound, as was usual Below. Vincent smiled when the story ended, enjoying the tale as much as the children seemed to.

“It’s sad. That’s a great story!” one of the children exclaimed.

Ellie nodded. “That was a good one.”

Kipper spoke up. “Tell us another one, Father... The one about the Headless Horseman.”

David sat forward eagerly. “Yeah, tell us that one.”

Father shook his head. “You’ve had enough ghosts for one night. Go on, now. Mary told me she needs help to carve up some jack-o-lanterns...”

That had the desired effect. The children rose almost as one, and scurried out of the chamber, each of them eager to get there first.

Vincent looked after them. “Every year, they ask for the same stories. By now they must know them better than you do.”

Father chuckled. “Well, you know, old stories are like old friends... every so often, we need to drop in on them again, just to see how they’re doing.” He smiled fondly. “And anyway, I can remember one certain little boy who would never have let a mere jack-o-lantern deny him a visit to Ichabod Crane.”

They exchanged a smile of shared memory, and then Vincent rose, picking up one of the books from the table beside him. Father’s mood immediately turned serious, as he watched his son balance the brightly covered book in his large hand, considering it closely.

“You’re still determined to go, then?” Father huffed. He watched his son nod. “I wish you’d reconsider.”

Vincent sighed. “Father, surely on this night of all nights, I can walk among them, in safety.”

“Vincent, Vincent... there *is* no safety up there. For you or anyone else,” Jacob flared.

Vincent nodded gravely, acknowledging the sad truth of Father’s statement. His fingers absently brushed against the rest of the books on the table beside him.

“Sometimes we must leave our safe places, Father, and walk empty-handed among our enemies.” He replaced the modern book with care.

“Those are Brigit O’Donnell’s words,” Father accused briskly.

Vincent shrugged. “Those are true words. Words that have opened doors for me... let some light in on the dark places. You know what she’s meant to me.”

“I do, and I also know there’s a danger of confusing the magic with the magician. Sometimes the person is smaller than the work; weaker, more frightened, more human. And I don’t want to see you hurt, or disappointed.”

Vincent brushed the older man’s concerns aside. “Our lives have been so different... and yet, somehow, I feel as though we understand each other. I will not lose this opportunity. I must see her, talk to her...”

Father frowned, shaking his head in helpless surrender. “Well, go, then. If you’re set on it. Obviously, there’s nothing I can do or say, to stop you.”

Vincent didn’t reply, as he collected his cloak from a nearby chair, and started for door.

“Vincent...” Father called after him. “Be careful...”

Vincent returned to him, leaning down to kiss the old man’s bearded cheek. “Don’t worry,” Vincent admonished. He straightened, and quickly left the chamber.

Watching him leave, Father slumped wearily back in his chair. He had done his best and it turned out not to be good enough.

He sighed again as he lay his hand upon the stack of books on the table next to him. He turned his head to stare absently at them, reading the spines silently. They were titled *Too Many Heroes*, *A Terrible Strength*, *Fables and Fantasies*, and *Three Hundred Days*, the book Vincent had so recently handled. All were written by a woman named Brigit O’Donnell...



Charles sat patiently on his daughter's dinky couch in her apartment waiting for her to reappear. He re-adjusted his sword, and tried to get more comfortable, but it was a losing battle in his stiff, starched uniform. The yellow sash belted at his waist kept digging into his flesh. He sighed, trying to readjust his outfit again.

His eyes strayed to the closed bedroom doors, even as he sneaked a quick look at his wristwatch. In the next moment, the folding doors opened and Catherine appeared. She looked stunningly beautiful in a gorgeously styled eighteenth-century ball-gown, with ribbons and long ringlets of silky hair hanging down over one bare shoulder.



Charles's heart leapt with both love and pride. "Whoa! Well, hardly fifteen minutes... but well worth the waiting for. My little girl has changed, hasn't she?" He got off the couch and approached her. "That's a great outfit."

"Isn't it wonderful...?" Catherine completed a cautious turn in front of him, her full skirts flaring and rustling, grandly. "And I'm trying very hard to make you proud of me, Dad."

"Well, you don't know how proud and pleased I am that you let me talk you into this. Since you left the firm, I hardly ever get to see you."

"They keep me pretty busy..." Catherine apologized. "But I've missed you too, Dad."

Charles chuckled warmly. "Now, don't be shy about leaving me to fend for myself. I'm not so old that I don't remember how romantic these affairs can be. A lot of your old friends will be there, tonight."

"Well, it's been too long since we went out together. I'm going to this party to be with *you*."

"You're going to this party to meet Brigit O'Donnell, just like everyone else," her father denied, playfully.

Catherine smiled, admitting she'd been caught. "Well... that too."

Her father reached out and took her hand, squeezing it gently. His voice was slightly choked, as he said, "Have I told you how beautiful you look?" He sighed.

"Sometimes you remind me so much of your mother..."

Deeply touched, Catherine leaned close to cup his bearded cheek. "I miss her too..."

Charles heaved a sigh. "Someday, you'll find someone you can love as much as I loved your mother. We were two of the lucky ones. I have my memories and I have you..."

Catherine wrapped both hands around his arm. "You sure do. Happy Halloween, Dad." She kissed him, gently.

Arm in arm they left her apartment, eager to begin the night ahead. It should be an evening that promised so much...



The costume shop possessed only a modest storefront, its window lettered to read *Moe's Masquerade City Costume Rentals*. The shop – and for that matter, its sole owner – had seen better days and times. Now, it struggled to get by on the big events, such as Halloween.

The sign in the door said *Open*, but an arthritic hand reached up to flip the sign to *Closed* as Moe, the short, balding proprietor, decided there would be no extra business tonight.

It had been busier than he'd expected, a good take, even by October 31<sup>st</sup> standards, and now he was tired and hungry. All he wanted was to total up his cash drawer for the night. Then he'd be free to go upstairs to his cramped apartment, and grab a bite to eat, before sitting down to watch television.

But as he was about to turn the locks, a big, heavy-set man in his late fifties arrived on the doorstep. A folded newspaper was sticking from a pocket of his rumbled raincoat. He snatched the door open into the street, to find a badly startled Moe standing in his way. The door-bell jangled in alarm at such rough treatment.

The shop owner stood his ground. "Sorry, I'm closed."

"I must have a costume," the big man growled, in a broad, Irish accent, thrusting the door back further with his bulk. "If it's money you're wanting, I've got it." With his free hand he pulled a handful of crumpled fifties from the pocket of his raincoat. He seemed determined to push his way past Moe.



The shop owner looked at the notes sadly, remembering his empty stomach, before he stepped aside to admit the customer to the shop. He locked the door behind him.

*After all, money was money... and business was business...*

“Ain’t got much left...” Moe frowned at his inventory, as he joined the customer at the counter. Very little but bare hangers remained on the racks up front; the shop had been picked clean by brisk trade.

He gestured around at his depleted merchandise. “Tomorrow, you come back, you could have your pick. Jesse James, Darth Vader, King Arthur, whatever you want. Closing time on Halloween night...” He shrugged his stooped shoulders in a defeated gesture.

He noted the customer’s furious scowl, and decided not to push him. “Well, maybe I can find something in back. You don’t mind a little frayed, maybe a missing button?”

The customer grimaced. “That doesn’t matter. Just get on with it!”

“All right, all right... *Oy vey...*” Moe shuffled through a curtain into the back in the shop.

The Irishman took the newspaper out of his pocket and glanced down at it as Moe re-emerged, carrying a rather tattered 19th century British army, red coat uniform.

“Here, this will, maybe, fit...” Moe held it out.

“Now what the hell is this?!” A look of absolute fury crossed the customer’s face. He dropped the newspaper on the counter before reaching across with a big, meaty fist, and seized Moe by his shirtfront. “Are you having a bit of fun with me, or something? Is that your game?”

He shook Moe furiously. “Get that damnable rag out my sight and find me something decent!” He threw the costume to the floor and shoved Moe away.

“Okay... okay...” The shopkeeper staggered back against the wall, clutching at the racks to stop himself from falling. He looked up at a clown costume, one of the few costumes left hanging on the racks beside the curtain. He saw that it might fit the large customer. It was oversized, covered with polka dots, with a mask shaped like a plastic clown-face, secured around the head by an elastic band.

He reached up and took it down hurriedly, anxious to get rid of this quarrelsome customer. "Here, here . . . it's too big? Well, there's nothing else. If that doesn't suit you, then take your business elsewhere."

This Irishman held it up against himself. There was definitely room for him, inside it, and anything he decided he needed to carry, like a gun. And the mask would hide his face. "This'll do rightly."

Moe sagged with relief. "The changing booth is there." He indicated a nearby curtain with a trembling hand.

The customer retreated behind the curtain to put on what was for him, a passable disguise. He hung up the costume, before stripping off both his raincoat and suit jacket. He paused to readjust the revolver he carried at his hip, pushing it deeper into the waistband of his trousers. He took the clown suit off the hanger and pulled it on.

He didn't bother to look at himself in the mirror. He had more pressing business than caring about how he looked. He quickly transferred the contents of his coat and trouser pockets into his costume.

Waiting for him to finish dressing, Moe picked up the newspaper the man had left on the counter. The paper was open to a headline item on the society page. *'Masked ball to fete Irish peace activist Brigit O'Donnell.'*



He dropped the newspaper as soon as he heard the man emerging from the changing room, now dressed in the clown outfit with the mask dangling from his fingers.

"That'll be twenty for the rental, and fifty for the deposit. You bring it back by six tomorrow or I got to charge you another day."

The customer sneered as he tossed two crumpled fifties onto the counter. "Keep the money. I'll be keeping the costume."

Carrying his coat and suit jacket folded over his arm, he twisted open the locks and exited the shop, the bell ringing loudly as he shoved the door outwards. It slammed shut behind him, causing a few nearby remnants to lift and move, in the sudden draft of cool night air.

“Thanks for your custom...” Moe shook his head in disgust, as he hurried to relock the door behind the man. Just in case he changed his mind about the clown costume.

He retreated to the counter to ring up the sale and grab the crumpled bills that smelled faintly of whiskey and cigarettes. The folded newspaper still lay beside the notes on the counter. Moe picked it up again, and scanned the headline anew.

“Irish peace activist...” He looked up at the front door of his shop, frowning as he remembered the customer’s rough Irish brogue. “It could be something... Or it could be nothing...” he mused slowly, shaking his head from side to side as he weighed his options.

His empty stomach growled hungrily, and his mouth began to water at the thought of the left-over *latkes* in the fridge upstairs. There was also a nice piece of smoked fish, beside a jar of fresh pickles he’d recently purchased from the seller down the street.

Moe inhaled deeply, his stomach making his mind up for him. “Better you keep out of such dangerous business, Moe Bernstein. You’ll live a lot longer that way.”

He shrugged, dropping the paper in the trash, and began to count out his cash drawer for the night.



The Brennan apartment was situated in an exclusive high-rise on Central Park West. Everything about it was lavish and expensive, and the party venue occupied the entire penthouse level, with an extensive roof garden surrounding it on all sides.

At the entrance to the penthouse, a pair of retro-designed elevators, filled with blue light, were working overtime to ferry the party attendees in a timely fashion. Catherine and her father stepped out of their ornate car into a large cloakroom, to join a long line of eager party-goers, slowly heading towards a short flight of stairs which led to the party floor.

Catherine leaned close to her father. "See, we aren't the only ones who are fashionably late."

"I suppose it could've been worse." Her father smiled, shaking his head. "I always seem to be waiting, for the women in my life."

Both were now wearing masks. Catherine's was a fantastical affair of white feathers and ribbons with several long, thin plumes dancing above her forehead, all styled to look like an owl. Her mask covered all of her face, except her mouth and lower jaw. Her father's was a much simpler affair of yellow plastic that covered only the upper part of his face in a Lone Ranger style.

An extremely proper looking butler, whose face had been done up with blue-green make-up, with false antennae to transform him into an alien, bowed to them solemnly, before accepting the crisp, white invitation offered by Charles. The butler turned to indicate they could proceed up the stairs. The invitation had cleared them for acceptance into this exclusive event.

"May I?" Catherine's father bowed his head formally, as he took Catherine's up-raised hand in old-fashioned style, and escorted her forward up the stairs and along a short hallway. They entered a huge, high-ceilinged room, where the party was in full progress.

The ball was a major function of a very high social set, and as such, everything was extremely upscale. The room was filled with people, the dance floor crowded with costumed socialites, up-and-comers, and the already established. Some danced to the live music, while others chatted, flirted, or ate and drank, on the peripheries. It was an elegant party, and had the ambience of one.

Ornate chandeliers hung from the high ceiling, but the lighting was dim, hazy, and romantic. Across the width of the room, a series of French doors opened onto the extensive roof garden. Scattered Halloween decorations cheerfully marked the holiday, and good champagne sparkled in slender flutes. Nothing had been left to chance or complaint.

A jazz combo was playing from a stage at one end of the room, while uniform-wearing servants, with their faces made up in various exotic ways, circulated with trays of fresh champagne and *hors d'oeuvres*. The guest's costumes tended towards the elaborate, and fanciful. Everyone wore masks or make-up, ranging from colorful face paint, to elaborate headpieces that completely hid their faces.

Catherine and Charles made their way through the throng of partygoers. A waiter approached them, holding out a silver tray laden with glasses of wine.

“Champagne? Madam? Sir?”

“Why not? The night is young.” Charles took two glasses, handing one to Catherine.

“To us,” he toasted, and they clinked their glasses together.

Behind them, a man’s voice demanded to know, “Charles? Is that you... and... surely not Catherine!?”

Their host, John Brennan, was a smiling man of roughly Charles’ age. Costumed as a medieval knight, he reached out to pump Charles’ hand. He then took Catherine’s hand gallantly, and kissed its lace-covered back.

“It’s been too long since we last saw you, my dear.”

He was trailed by a group of Catherine’s old friends, all in various costumes, and holding drinks. They are all taking excitedly about the reason for the party.

“Cathy!”

Catherine heard her name being called and excused herself to go and talk to Marie, a former co-worker from her father’s firm.

“Marie, you look wonderful,” she complimented, referring to both Marie’s costume and the woman herself.

Marie hugged her. “You do, too.” The praise was sincere. “It’s been too long.”

“It has.” Catherine looked beyond her to another of the group. “Hi, Jeff.”

“Hi, Cathy. You meet Brigit yet?” he asked, in a lowered tone of voice.

“No. I just arrived.” She was eager to meet the guest of honor.

“She’s a remarkable woman,” Jeff enthused.

Marie shrugged. “Ravishing is what he really means. Jeff’s taken a tremendous interest in her cause.”

“I can imagine,” Catherine replied, smiling. “Last time I heard, it was still legal to both admire a person, and their cause.”

Someone walked up to them dressed as an electric cowboy. “Did you hear? She sold that book ‘*300 Days*’ to Hollywood.”

Marie shrugged dismissively. “It’s Romeo and Juliet with Irish accents. I don’t see what all the fuss is about.”

Greg, the electric cowboy, looked shocked. “Oh, come on now. I thought it was a terrific story. She’s got guts, you have to give her that.” He shrugged. “This peace thing has gotten her death threats from both sides. Her mother and her husband were both murdered, you know.”

“Her father’s IRA. Wanted for one of those bombings in London.” Jeff shook his head.

John Brennan, with Charles beside him, interrupted the animated conversation. “Cathy, I was going to introduce your father to Brigit. Care to come along?”

“I’d love to.” Catherine took his proffered arm and went to meet the woman of the hour.



Hidden from any chance of being seen, Vincent climbed swiftly on top of an elevator car, gazing up the shaft as he braced himself for the moment it would begin to ascend. He’d entered the adjoining building through its basement level, and rode the car up to the penthouse.

In a matter of minutes, the elevator stopped to unload its passengers on the top floor. Before it descended again, Vincent scrambled lightly off, dropping down to slip, unseen, into the darkness of the roof. He straightened within the broad shadow of the elevator housing, then watched and waited for anyone to discover his uninvited entry onto the rooftop. But there was no-one looking in his direction. The October wind picked its light fingers through his hair. He was high up. Higher even, than Catherine’s balcony.



Satisfied he hadn't been observed, he moved closer to the terrace railing, peering across the narrow divide towards the closed French doors of the Brennan party. From this vantage point, he could see into the interior of the room. He was close now, and determined to meet Brigit O'Donnell, to thank her for her inspiring work. Single-minded in his goal, he was aware of nothing – and no-one else.



John Brennan led Catherine and Charles across the crowded room. Ahead of them, the throng of costumed admirers surrounding the guest of honor suddenly laughed at some witticism. Muttering apologies, Brennan pushed through until a big man costumed as a Viking, stopped Charles.

"Hold up there. Let's have a look here," he growled, in a harsh Irish accent. He indicated the saber at Charles' side. Charles calmly handed it over to him for his inspection.

"I'm terribly sorry, Charles," John Brennan intervened. "Mr. Cavanaugh, here, is one of Brigit's bodyguards."

The burly Irishman looked unapologetic. "Aye, no offense, sir, but there've been threats... Orange men, croppies." He examined the blade. "No edge to it. Very good." Cavanaugh slid the dull sword back into its scabbard. It was clearly a costume piece.

"Croppies, did he say?" Charles looked confused. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"No reason you should...," a woman's sweetly lilting Irish voice replied.

The crowd parted before her, as the guest of honor stepped forward. Even beneath an elaborate owl mask of her own, Charles could tell that Brigit O'Donnell was around thirty, beautiful, sophisticated, and had a playfulness to her eyes and her mouth. Something about the way she stood gave a hint of both the tomboy and the rebel inside her. This was a stubborn, free-spirited, passionate woman, one who had paid a high price, as she'd gone her own way all her life.

Her elegant costume, while different from Catherine's, was enough alike so that the same vague description might be applied to both, and the mask she wore was almost identical to Catherine's, except for its brown tones.

She continued, "It's from an old war... an Irish-Catholic rising against the British and their Protestant allies. The rebels had short cropped hair, you see..."

Catherine studied her closely. "That was what, two hundred years ago?"

Brigit nodded.

"A long time to remember a haircut..." Catherine frowned.

Brigit looked impressed by her knowledge. "We Irish have long memories. My father taught me all the songs about the brave Croppie boys when I was still in the cradle. And every year we'd hear the Orangemen march past, banging their Lambeg drums and singing how they put the Croppies down."

Charles bowed his head gallantly. "I stand instructed... I'm afraid history was never my subject, and most of what I did learn I've managed to forget."

Brigit shook her head, as her tone grew rueful. "Forgetting is a trick that Ulster could stand to learn."

John Brennan interrupted apologetically. "Charles, there's Samantha over there. She'll never forgive me if I don't take you over to say 'hello.'"

Charles sighed. "Duty beckons." He bowed formally to the two women, before following his friend across the room.

Brigit smiled at Catherine. "I like your mask. I wrote a story about an owl-woman once. Just a little fable, for children."

Catherine was grateful for the opening, and her praise was genuine. "For children of all ages. I found it just last year, and loved it."

Brigit looked intrigued. "Did you now? It's not easy to find, that one..."

Catherine kept her expression carefully neutral. "It was given to me by a friend, a very special friend. You have a real gift. I only wish you wrote more children's stories."

"I wish I could..." Brigit sighed. "But there are darker things than ghosts in Ireland now, and you can't hear the fairy music for the gunfire. Which is another way of saying, I'm not the innocent I was then."

Her soft brown Irish eyes met Catherine's green ones, and Brigit sighed regretfully.





Outside in the roof garden, the chill October wind was increasing, slightly, and the garden looked deserted, almost forlorn. Past the stone parapet overgrown with ivy, the city lights and the steel roof of the adjoining building gleamed in the darkness.

Vincent moved swiftly over the rooftop, and leapt across the short distance between the two buildings, landing with cat-like grace atop the parapet. He stepped down into the roof garden, immediately finding shelter beneath a potted broad-leafed palm tree. Music and laughter from the party drifted across the garden.

Vincent stood tentatively, with the wind snapping at his cloak, knowing that he was about to cross over into another world. He inhaled deeply, bracing himself for such an intrusion. *Surely on a night such as this...*

Braced, he strode through the garden towards the penthouse and its French doors. He touched the doorknob, hesitated just a moment, then he opened the door wide. The concentrated sound of music and conversation grew much louder, assaulting his senses, sending him back one step.



“I love the work. For the first time in my life, I feel —” Catherine broke off, as a sudden draft of cold air struck her, unawares.

She saw Brigit shiver as the blast of coldness hit them both. Catherine looked up towards the French doors that gave access to the roof garden. One of them stood open, and someone was standing in the aperture, looking around at the rowdy gathering with curiosity written large across his unique features.

She drew an unwary breath, as she saw someone who could not possibly be attending the party. The width of the ballroom was between them, but for an instant she saw Vincent clearly, standing framed in the open doorway. Two costumed dancers moved past her, momentarily blocking her view, and then they were gone. The doors were closed again and Vincent was nowhere in sight.

Catherine stood still, unable to quite believe what she’d just seen.

“Catherine? What’s wrong?” Brigit asked, concerned.

Catherine shook her head. “Nothing, I... I thought I saw someone I know. Please, excuse me...”

“Of course.” Brigit smiled politely as Catherine started across the dance floor.

The party was dimly-lit and crowded, costumed dancers swirling all around her, waiters crisscrossing her path with laden trays. She fought her way through with a sense of increasing urgency, as she was jostled and blocked. Unfamiliar, costumed faces loomed up at her out of the crowd, offering her drinks, canapes and invitations to dance.

As she struggled across the floor, she glimpsed a swirl of a black cloak. Then there was a flash of long, blond hair. But each time she made progress toward it, the apparition was gone as swiftly as it appeared. Then she saw a man in a hooded cloak standing by one of the tables.

“Vincent...?” Catherine rushed up behind him, reaching out to tap his broad shoulder.

“Who’s Vincent?” The man turned, his white-painted face alive with curiosity.

“Well, hello, beautiful...” He was dressed as Dracula. “But my name’s Steve,” he lisped around a set of fake, white fangs tipped with red. He lifted his arms wide in bold invitation. “Say, you wanna dance?”

Catherine turned away from him without replying. She renewed her search. Finally she reached the French doors, looking around in confusion.

“Vincent...?”

There was no sign of him. Catherine flung open the doors and stepped out into the chill of the roof garden.

She moved through the garden, calling out softly. “Vincent...?” Her frustration began to mount. She knew she had seen him, it had not been her imagination.

“Vincent!” she called more loudly, daring to say his name in a public place.

She waited, listening, looking around, but there was no answer beyond the sigh of the chill October wind. *Vincent? It... it was you! I... I know I didn't imagine it...*





## ACT TWO

### **Spirits of the Underworld...**

*The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed..."*

*Carl Gustav Jung*

Vincent moved slowly around the periphery of the party, taking in all the sights, sounds and smells that were assaulting his senses. He was ill-at-ease and discomfited. He'd never experienced anything remotely like this in his world Below. Expensive perfumes and colognes lingered, and wafted through the room, while the smells of fresh canapes sailed by his sensitive nose.

Yet there was a certain fascination in his eyes, as well. He was taking it all in with a wonder that was almost child-like in its innocence, and a wariness that was all too adult. He almost bumped into a glowing skeleton, which was decorating the bandstand.

As he continued around the room, a waiter approached him, carrying a tray, covered with a mound of caviar and an array of tiny pancakes. The man proffered the tray towards him.

“Caviar, sir?”

Vincent stared at the array of *hors d'oeuvres* in fascination.

The waiter tried to prompt him. “It’s Beluga, sir.”

Vincent was awe-struck. “From Russia...”

He made no move to take any of the caviar, continuing to look at the silver tray with fascination, until the moment a woman in a brown owl mask danced past, waltzing in the arms of a burly man dressed as a Viking raider.

Vincent looked up, his attention distracted, as he followed her with his eyes. She danced lightly in the arms of such a big man. She seemed to sense Vincent’s close observation, and turned her head to watch him in the same way.

Confused by her intensely considering stare, Vincent looked away. Beside him, the waiter heaved a frustrated sigh and departed, seeking a better audience for his expensive treats.

Brigit tried to keep track of the large man in the black cloak, as she was whirled around the floor by her energetic partner. Thomas Cavanaugh was many things, but he was not a good dancer. However, what he lacked in grace, he made up for in enthusiasm, and Brigit had not had the heart to refuse his invitation to take the floor.

She turned her head again, seeking the mysterious man in the voluminous black cloak. His blue eyes had been strangely compelling. But all she saw were several Draculas and a sprinkling of Zorros. None of them had the same impressive dimensions of the man she sought.

When the music stopped, Brigit turned to look around the room, as Thomas led her off the dance floor. His big body stiffened when she resisted him.

“What is it? Trouble?” He glared around the party with suspicious eyes.

In the same moment, Brigit saw Vincent again, and she sensed something extraordinary about him. *You’re an old soul in a younger man’s body, aren’t you?*

“No, Thomas. It’s all right.” She raised a shoulder at his suspicions. “Oh, go on with you now. This is a party. Not every man who looks at me is wanting to lay me in my grave.”

“Brigit O’Donnell, we’ve talked about this before...,” Cavanaugh warned grimly. “I’m here to protect you. You’re to stay by me, and not go wandering off, again.”

“Ah, Thomas, you worry too much. I’ll be fine. Go an’ fetch yourself a drink now, and leave me be. I’ve a mind to mingle.” Brigit avoided the bodyguard’s outstretched hand, seeking to detain her.

She walked quickly away from him, ignoring his protests. She hurried straight to where Vincent was standing close to the edge of the party, half hidden in the shadow of a large potted palm.

Vincent watched her approach. He bowed his head in acknowledgment, when she stopped in front of him.

“Brigit O’Donnell...” His low voice caressed her name.

Brigit nodded, studying him with undisguised awe. “Herself.”

“I didn’t mean to interrupt your dancing.” Vincent looked contrite. “I’m sorry.”

“No need. A little disturbance is good for the soul.” Brigit shook her head. “An act of mercy. Thomas is a good friend and a brave man, but a dancer, he’s not.” She stared up at him, clearly fascinated. “What extraordinary make-up...! You look as though you might have ridden with Cuchulainn, or sailed with Theseus.”

Self-conscious, Vincent turned slightly away, shadowing his features as he adjusted his hood. His snatched glance back at her held a wealth of sadness.

“Only in my dreams... and sometimes in books like yours. Your writing has helped me through some dark times. You’ve touched me, made me think. I just wanted to tell you... to thank you.”

“Come, thank me outside, before I die from all the smoke and noise in here.” Brigit smiled as she offered Vincent her hand. She was clearly captured by the deep sincerity in his voice. “I’ve a mind to see more of your city.”

Vincent hesitated for a long moment, discomfited and unsettled by this easy acceptance. Finally, when she tilted her head at him, he reached out to enclose her small hand lightly in his gloved palm. He allowed Brigit to hurry him towards the garden doors, the party crowd parting before her as the pair made good their escape.

Catherine had just come inside through another door, her detailed search of the garden fruitless. For an instant, she was almost certain that she was chasing an illusion. Then she saw Vincent and Brigit at the precise instant their hands met and clasped. She watched their hurried departure in disbelief. Seeing Brigit with Vincent was a sight that stalled her breath. *It can’t be. I can’t be seeing this!*

Determined to get to the bottom of what exactly Vincent thought he was doing here, putting himself in such awful peril, she started to go after them. But she had barely gone two steps when, suddenly, a large hand came down on her left shoulder.



Frustrated at the delay, she turned towards her assailant, determined to refuse all offers of food, dancing, or whatever else the man might have in mind. A tall, sandy-haired stranger stood behind her, wearing a pirate's costume.

A black eye patch served as his mask, a ragged short cape hung to his waist, and on his belt is a large curved knife sheath, very piratical, studded with phony costume gems.

He leaned closer to her face, trying to see beneath her mask. "Masks make life so interesting. Under those feathers, you might be anyone -- a childhood friend, an old lover... help me now, am I getting warm?"

Catherine smiled politely at his antics, no way to avoid speaking to him without appearing rude. "I'm afraid not..."

"A famous writer, then?" He called her attention back to him, as she made to leave his company.

Catherine shook her head. "You're getting colder."

The man grinned. "Oh-oh. Have I just tripped over my sword again? The butler's the real pirate... I slipped him a ten-spot to tell me what the guest of honor was wearing."

"Well, I don't think you'll be getting a refund. Brigit is also wearing an owl mask."

The pirate shrugged. "Consider it money well spent. I'm Donald Pratt." He held out his hand.

Catherine took it lightly. "Catherine Chandler..."

"Catherine Chandler, shall I run up the Jolly Roger and steal you away for this dance?"

Catherine hesitated, glancing back over her shoulder, but Vincent and Brigit were out of sight now. She turned back to Donald, confused, and forced an uncertain smile. "Why not?"

Donald looked very pleased with himself. He hurried her out onto the dance floor before she could change her mind. A few minutes spent dancing with a beautiful owl woman couldn't hurt. Then he would continue his search for his real target...



The night wind still sighed among the plants and fixtures of the roof garden. Brigit leaned against the parapet as they talked, the wind ruffling through her hair, as she looked out over the city.

Vincent had moved a few steps away from her. He could still hear the music from inside, but now it was mingled with city sounds from the streets below.

Brigit took a deep breath of the cool, night air. "The night has a special magic to it, don't you think? This night, especially."

"Halloween?" Vincent questioned softly. He moved slowly to stand beside her, looking out over the city.

"In the old religion, they called it Samhain," Brigit mused. "The night when the walls between the worlds grew thin, and spirits of the underworld walk the earth. A night of masks and balefires, when anything is possible and nothing is quite as it seems..."

She glanced up at Vincent. "Your city..." She removed her mask, holding it dangling by its strings. "Has its own magic as well. The lights, the towers... listen to it..."

They shared a moment of silence, as they heard all the traffic noises of the city far below. Horns, music, a police siren in the distance, footsteps, and people talking as they hurried along.

Brigit sighed sadly, as she thought of her home. "In Derry, the night has a darker music... bombs, gunfire... the screams of dying men..."



“Yet you always return. The whole world is open to you... you could choose to live anywhere.” It was a thing Vincent knew he could never do, and had always envied, on some level.

“Oh, I’ve thought of leaving... but Derry’s my home. Whatever else I might be, I’m still a Bogside girl. Me father’s daughter, and me husband Ian’s widow.”

Vincent studied her face. “When you wrote of Ian in ‘300 Days’, I felt as though I knew him. You made him live again, with your words.”

When Brigit looked up at him, he instinctively turned his head away so his features were hidden. But he’d seen she had tears in her eyes, along with a fierce, stubborn smile on her lips.

“I know. Aye, he’s dead, but I will not forget him, or let him be forgotten. It’s been two years since he got into that car, and an hour hasn’t passed that I haven’t spoken of him... written of him... thought of him.”

Vincent shifted uncomfortably. “I don’t want to awaken painful memories...”

Brigit’s smile tightened. “Oh, it hurts, it hurts... but it’s such a... sweet pain...” She inhaled, releasing a long, steady breath.

*How exceptional you are*, Vincent thought, realizing Father was wrong. If anything, Brigit O’Donnell was more extraordinary in person than Vincent had ever imagined.

“Ian and I were born six blocks apart... and yet, in different worlds.” Vincent knew she saw Derry, as she looked out at New York’s city lights. “A stiff-necked Orangeman and a Croppy girl from Bogside, we were. Daft enough to fall in love, but not so big a pair of fools to think that he could live in my world, or me in his. So we tried to create a new world that we could share together... Well, you know how that ended.”

*I do. And I’m lying if I say it’s not a thing I fear, for Catherine and myself. We too, need to build a new world, for ourselves. If we can.*

“Yes,” he replied simply, acknowledging her loss. “And I know you built a bridge together, you and him. Your work, and his, it will help to heal your people. The Ian you wrote of would think that as good a memorial as any man could want,” Vincent replied compassionately.

Her smile had a bitter edge, as she replied, “Sure, and he’d better, for it’s the only sort he’s likely to get. Every time I raise a gravestone over his poor, sweet head, some bastard knocks it to pieces... even the dead are spared none of the hate...”



Brigit turned, resting her arms on the parapet, gazing out over the city in silence for a moment.

“It could have been me, you know.” Her voice dropped low. “And there are times I wish it had been.”

She tried to blink away her own melancholy, and ‘see’ the panorama before her. Her voice softened to a whisper as she recited, *“She is far from the land where her young hero sleeps...”*

Overcome with emotion and memory, she could not go on. But Vincent remembered the poem, and he picked up the recitation where she’d left off. *“And lovers are round her, sighing. But coldly she turns from their gaze, and weeps, for her heart in his grave is lying.”*

He stepped closer, as he continued, his deep voice loving every syllable. *“She sings the wild song of her dear native plains, every note which he lov’d awaking. Ah! Little they think who delight in her strains...”* He paused to look at her meaningfully. *“How the heart of the minstrel is breaking...”*

Brigit had turned back to face him as he gave her the last line, and she silently mouthed the last few words along with him. She was deeply touched, and when he was done, she smiled sadly. “Thank you...”



She moved to lay a hand on his forearm. She felt him tense, and heard his breath draw in sharply, but he didn’t try to resist. “Will ya be likin’ to tell me your name? Or do I have to guess at it?”

“My name...?” The mysterious man with the lion’s face mask exhaled slowly.

“Vincent...” he breathed, at last.

“Vincent...” Brigit mused. “Ah, the conqueror, the hero warrior...” She smiled. “It all fits,” she said, cryptically.

“Does it?” Vincent raised his brows at her.

“Aye... Maybe more than you will ever know.” Brigit gave the arm she still held a gentle shake before she let him go. Her dark eyes looked brilliant in the moonlight, and decidedly wicked.

Vincent watched her closely. She seemed to be hatching some new scheme, judging by the sudden smile that curved her lips. His heart began to pound with anticipation. What more could this magical night hold for him, and this mysterious woman who seemed to instinctively know more about his reality than he cared to admit?



The burly Irishman who'd rented the clown suit from Moe, hurried from the elevator and into the party lobby. The mask now covered his rough features. As he walked up the stairs, he was stopped by the superior butler.

“Your invitation, sir.” The butler extended his hand.

“Invitation?” The clown patted at his costume, appearing to search for it. “I have it here somewhere. Damn, you know I think I must have lost it somewhere, but I did have one, I swear.”

The butler raised his chin. “I’m afraid I can’t admit you without an invitation, sir.”

“I’m telling you I was invited! Are you calling me a liar now?”

The butler stared him down. “Mr. Brennan’s instructions were quite firm. Perhaps I should summon him?”

The clown backed up, not wishing to draw further attention to himself. “No, no, I just remembered where I left it, the very place. I’ll go and get it and then I’ll be back.” He backed away, with obvious alarm.

The butler bowed his head. “Very good, sir.”

“Let’s go, ladies.” Behind them, the elevator car had just arrived with a new load of party goers. A man stepped out, dressed as King Henry VIII, accompanied by a large bevy of scantily-costumed beauties.

The clown backed away almost into the car, and then quickly insinuated himself among the women. He sneaked past the butler, who was suddenly very busy trying to collect the many invitations flashed at him by the giggling entourage. The clown

hurried up the stairs and into the ballroom, mingling with the huge crowd, as he looked around.

Thomas Cavanaugh was standing by the bar, not far from the doors to the antechamber. He'd heard the clown's raised voice, and he recognized the sound of the Irish accent. At once, he slammed down his mug of beer, and moved toward the doors.

As he slipped into the party venue, the clown nearly collided with Thomas, as the bodyguard burst into the anteroom, shoving past his intended target to grab Henry VIII by his ermine collar.

"Hold it!" Thomas swung him around.

"What's the meaning of this?" Henry demanded to know, in a thick New York accent.

"Sorry, sir. An honest mistake. I thought you were someone else." The bodyguard quickly released him, with a look of disgust. The women exchanged amazed glances, with each other.

"I guess he thinks he's really a Viking," one of them whispered to the others.



Donald Pratt smiled, as he danced with Catherine. She was beautiful, and a good dancer. He was happy for the moment to indulge himself with a little fantasy. But his lovely partner looked anything but happy to be in his company. She seemed distracted, almost pensive, and unresponsive to his attempts at small talk, as she allowed him to guide her steps.

"A penny for your thoughts..." he offered, slightly annoyed by her continued silence. "Or maybe you'd prefer a tax free municipal bond?" He frowned when she didn't reply. "Hey, I can't be that bad of a dancer."

Catherine returned her wandering attention to Donald and gave him a wan smile. "You're not. I'm sorry. I'm not very good company at the moment, I realize."

"I'll be the judge of that," he replied, deciding to be gallant. *I need to stall. Stall for time, until I find her,* he thought.

The song ended and Donald led Catherine off the dance floor, snaring two brimming champagne glasses from a passing waiter. He handed one to her. Catherine accepted it, even as she glanced back over her shoulder.

Donald frowned at her continued distraction. "He's a lucky rogue, whoever the hell you're looking for..."

Catherine realized she'd been caught in an unforgivable social *faux pas*. "I'm sorry. I'll try to be a bit more sociable."

In the same moment, her father appeared, seemingly pleased to see Catherine in the company of a gentleman.

Charles smiled at her, playfully. "Don't I know you from somewhere?" His smile widened as Catherine played along with a sweet smile of her own.

"Perhaps," she replied coyly.

"Having a good time, Clementine? Who might this be?" Charles asked.

Catherine giggled. "I'm sorry. Donald Pratt, this is my father, Charles Chandler."

Charles looked surprised. "Donald Pratt? Not... not *the* Donald Pratt of Bender, Sax and Pratt?"

The pirate man looked momentarily at a loss, but recovered quickly. "Actually, yes."

Charles looked impressed. "I never dreamed you were so young. Al Prasker, one of my partners, is still nursing his wounds over the licking you gave him over the Scott case."

He glanced at his daughter. "Oh Catherine, be careful. This one is not as harmless as he seems. How do you two happen to know each other?"

"Actually, we don't, but... ah... I am trying to rectify that," Donald intervened smoothly.

Charles beamed at them both. This evening was getting better and better. He'd been unsure Catherine would even agree to accompany him to the party. Now she seemed happy, and in the company of one of New York's best, up-and-coming young lawyers. After the disaster of her failed relationship with Tom Gunther, and her brief dalliance with Elliot Burch, Charles had almost given up hope she would settle down with anyone suitable.

He took a glass of champagne from a nearby waiter and silently saluted the young couple. He began to hope he might just get some grandchildren, after all. Before he was too old to enjoy them.

He watched Catherine over the rim of his glass, and his fledgling hopes took a worrisome downturn, as he saw her eyes move across the crowd, while Donald Pratt was trying to ask her for another dance. Charles watched her frown, moving her shoulder as if the young lawyer at her side was becoming a nuisance. As if her mind, and concentration, was on another man, entirely.

*Oh, well...* Charles's heart sank. He sighed, then sipped his champagne as he turned his attention to the room, trying to see exactly who his daughter was looking for...



Outside in the roof garden, Brigit and Vincent walked together through the cool night air. They did not touch again, but there was a closeness between them.

Brigit felt the energy emanating from the street below. It caused her to recall something about her father. "Me father used to tell me of New York, when I was just a little girl. He came here a dozen times, never quite legally, of course... raising money for the cause, collecting for the widows and the orphans... and for the weapons, to make more of them. He always promised that one day he'd take me with him, across the ocean..." She sighed sadly. "One day..."

"He never did?" Vincent asked.

Brigit shook her head. "Me father cast me out. Three years ago, it was. My wedding day. He came to the church, called me a traitor and an Orangeman's whore. I've not seen him since." She raised one shoulder. "By rights, I ought to hate him."

Vincent moved fractionally closer to her. His tone was sure. "There's no hate in you... only grief."

"Aye... How can you hate the man who taught you what love meant?" She shivered visibly, in the wind.

Vincent was immediately attentive. "Are you cold? Perhaps we should go back inside..."

Brigit looked up at him. "Cold? No. Why, it's naught but a brisk fall evening." Her wondering look turned back to mischievous. "But I'd borrow your cloak, if you're willing to lend it."

“My cloak?” Vincent asked, in surprise.

Brigit shrugged. “Thomas and the others, they’d give their lives for me, and I love ’em for it. But sometimes, I want nothing so much as to get away from them for a few hours.”

“They only want to keep you safe.” Vincent was struck by the sudden similarities in their situations. And how like his own father he suddenly sounded. He shook his head in disbelief.

Brigit sighed. “I’m sick unto death of safety. I look at that city out there, and I want to touch it, to walk its streets and meet its people, and listen to its music. I want to see all the things my father told me of... and I can’t. Can you imagine how that feels?”

Vincent knew how it felt very well. “Yes...,” he agreed softly.

“To hell with the risks!” Brigit grinned up at him. “Sometimes we must leave our safe places, Vincent, and walk empty-handed among our enemies.”

Vincent heard the echo of his own words to Father, as he’d quoted Brigit to him before he’d left the tunnels. Responding to them, he smiled slowly, before unfastening his cloak and whipping its folds about Brigit’s bare shoulders. She looked drowned in it, but very happy that he wished to help her escape her confines, and explore the city he loved so well.

They smiled at each other, two willing conspirators on a mission to elude those who would gainsay their thirst for adventure...



A cloaked, hooded figure re-entered the party through the French doors, alone. It was Brigit, hidden in the voluminous folds of Vincent’s cloak. She clutched it around her as she moved quickly through the costumed crowds, toward the door.

Meanwhile, out on the roof, Vincent leapt from the parapet across to the next roof, then clambered down a ladder before descending a series of fire escapes towards the alleyway behind the building.

Situated again at the bar, Thomas Cavanaugh scowled morosely. Despite her assurances, it’d been too long since he’d clapped eyes on his charge. When he hovered, she didn’t like it, and let her displeasure be known. But when he didn’t hover...

Thomas sighed. He was sure now, Brigit had done one of her disappearing acts, again. He cursed the fact she'd decided to only bring herself with her tonight, reducing the number of professional eyes that could watch over her. His two colleagues were cooling their heels back at the hotel, drinking and playing poker, no doubt.

"God preserve me patience from all women!" He drained the mug of beer in his hand and slapped it down, before stalking towards the French doors, worried about Brigit. Coming towards him, a cloaked, hooded figure started a little, before passing within a foot of him, as they hurried in opposite directions.

Intent on his own difficult passage through the crowd, and his ultimate objective, Cavanaugh failed to make the connection, and stormed by without a second glance. His elusive charge had often expressed a wish to see more of whatever American city they found themselves in. He'd listened to her expressing the sentiment more than once, on this trip. She'd given him the slip before now, in both L.A. and Chicago.

He was brutally aware Brigit couldn't see the dangers hidden behind the fairy lights of any big city. Dangers Thomas knew only too well.

He went out through the French doors and searched the garden thoroughly, but came up empty. He returned through another set of doors. He was alarmed now.

"Where are you, *dammit*?!" He looked over the party, but to no avail.



Busy with disengaging herself from Donald Pratt's unwanted attentions, Catherine saw Brigit heading toward the elevators, and she recognized Vincent's cloak. Something was very wrong here.

She turned to Donald, who had just secured her another glass of champagne. "Excuse me..." She handed him her drink, before she rushed after the cloaked figure.

"Hey! What the...!" Donald was startled.

Further inside the room, the clown watched their hurried departures and he figured something was up. He hurried out after them, roughly elbowing a couple of people aside, in his haste.

Out in the lobby, Brigit made it into an arriving car. Catherine rushed to the closing doors.

“Wait!”

Brigit turned, clutching the cloak close around her. She smiled, putting a silencing finger to her lips. Donald rushed up behind Catherine just as the doors closed.

“Ah... Brigit O’Donnell, right?” he demanded to know.

Catherine frowned. “Something very strange is going on...” The second elevator arrived, its door chiming as it opened.

Behind her, a large man dressed as a clown hurried across the lobby and entered the other elevator. Catherine glanced at him. “Could you hold that for me for just a minute?”



The clown man completely ignored her and pushed the down button, as she turned to Donald.

“Look, Donald, I’m very sorry. I don’t mean to be rude, but this is very –”

She looked back when she heard the doors closing. In frustration she banged her fists on the wall.

“Dammit!”

“Whoa! Whoa! Whoa! There’s no problem.” Donald lifted his eye patch so he could see better. “We pirates... uh... we... we... we can run stairs. Come on.”

Together, they rushed towards the stairwell door. Catherine untied and abandoned her feathered mask, leaving it dangling by its strings on the first railing. The need for such things was over.





Truly concerned now, Thomas Cavanaugh sought out the man whose daughter had been the last one he'd seen talking with Brigit. He found Charles propping up the bar, drinking whiskey with an old friend.

"Catherine...?" Charles Chandler frowned. He'd been enjoying himself, having discarded his hat and sword. He'd also removed his mask, pushing it into the broad yellow sash belted at his waist.

He raised his eyebrows at the worried bodyguard. "She was here a few minutes ago, talking with Donald Pratt. I left her in good hands." He cast his eyes around the party, but failed to find either of them. He wondered if that was a good sign, or a bad one.

He shrugged. "Maybe they've just stepped outside for some air." He turned back to Thomas. "I wouldn't worry. If Catherine has managed to ditch Pratt in favor of your charge, she will be well cared for. Maybe Brigit charmed my daughter into slipping out with her. Or the other way around. Either way, I'm sure they're fine. Two beautiful young women having a time of it on this magic night. Catherine will bring her back safe to you."

"But I'm responsible for Brigit!" Thomas growled. "You don't understand!"

"She *is* your responsibility, not mine." Charles raised his shoulders. "But I do understand, more than you know. I've learned through bitter experience, that if my Cathy doesn't want to be found, she won't be. You can trust her to look after Brigit for a few hours. She was born and raised in this city, after all. She well knows both its dangers, and its beauties. She'll keep her out of the bad neighborhoods, take her around to see the sights. They might even take in a show."

He raised a hand to the barman. "Two more whiskies, barkeep, and whatever my friend here is drinking." He looked back at Thomas.

"I'll take a whiskey, too. But make sure it's Irish," the bodyguard grumbled, knowing his options were limited, until Brigit chose to reappear.

Then, he would have a few choice words to say. The bartender set them up, and moved away, discreetly. Thomas leaned his elbows on the bar-top and scowled into his drink, feeling helpless and ill-used.





Central Park was across the street from the apartment building. The doorman opened the door for some newly arrived guests, and held it wide as Brigit made her exit, clutching Vincent's cloak at the neck. She paused on the sidewalk, looking around.

"Are you ready?" Vincent stepped out of the shadows.

"Where shall we start?" Brigit smiled at him as she leaned closer.

"I think the park will be the safest place, away from prying eyes." Vincent indicated the darkened trees. Brigit nodded, and allowed herself to be swiftly led.

Together they crossed the street and entered the park. Close on their heels, the clown hurried from the building, saw them walking into the trees, and he quickly followed.

Catherine and Donald, bringing up the rear, finally made it to the ground floor. They were a bit out of breath as they emerged from the doorway.

Catherine hurried to the doorman. "Did you notice a red-haired woman wearing a long, black cloak?"

The doorman nodded. "Yeah. Sure. A looker like that, I'd have to be dead not to notice. She met this big, blond guy in a cat mask. They looked like they were good friends."

Catherine looked left and right. "Which way did they go?" she asked.

The doorman shrugged. "They come, they go... I'm supposed to remember?"

Donald pulled out his wallet, peeled off a couple of bills and slapped them into the doorman's ready palm.

"Now that I recall, they walked off into the park... north, I think..."

*The park. Of course,* Catherine thought. “I have to go after them.” She turned to Donald. “I can’t explain, it’s a... a personal thing. Look, I appreciate your help, but there’s no need for you to leave the party.”

“Do you hear me complaining? Besides, what would your father think if I let you go walking in the park alone?”

“No, really. I’ll be fine.”

“Hasn’t anybody ever warned you about things that go bump in the night?”

“Donald, I...”

He held out a hand. “While we’re talking, they’re getting away.”

Frustrated with his efforts not to be left behind, but with no more time to waste arguing, she took his hand and they hurried together across the street...



## ACT THREE

### Promises to Keep...

*“The most painful thing is losing yourself in the process of loving someone too much, and forgetting that you are special too...”*

*Ernest Hemingway*

Vincent and Brigit walked slowly along the shore of the Central Park reservoir. Moonlight reflected off the water beside them, and an air of melancholy hung over Vincent.

Brigit smiled up at him. “I’m beholden to you, Vincent. You cannot know what this means to me...” She saw him smile. “Or perhaps you can at that.” She paused, and then asked, “Will you be telling me of her, then?”

They stopped walking and Brigit turned to face him.

Vincent looked surprised. “Of who?”

“Your lady. The one who’s breaking your heart. Do you think I’m blind?” They began to walk again. “You didn’t come to me just to say you liked my books. Something about Ian and me struck close to home.”

Vincent looked away from her. He struggled visibly as he tried to decide what to tell her. Finally, with great difficulty, he began to speak.

“She brings me... such joy... and such pain... as I have never known. I have no place in her world, and she has none in mine. Our bond endangers everything. People I love, secrets I am sworn to keep, the beliefs I’ve lived by...”

Brigit sent him a look of pure sympathy. “Aye, that sounds like Ian and myself, sure enough. They don’t understand, do they? The way me father raged...”

“Yet you went on, despite everything...”

“Oh, yes, we went on... until he died for it.” She glanced at his pensive face. “Are you asking me for counsel, then?” They stopped, and faced each other again.

Brigit squared her shoulders, and spoke sincerely, if sadly:

“Forget you ever knew her, and both of you will be happier. If you want what’s best for her, take care you never see her again. If Ian and I had never met, he might still be alive.”

Vincent had read too much of her story to accept the words at face value. “You wrote that the price of your love had been high, but you would pay it willingly until the end of your days. That you would change nothing, regret nothing...”

Brigit frowned. “That’s damned unfair, you quoting my own words back at me, after I gave you all that good advice!” Then she smiled, sad and sweet. “Your brain tells you all the sensible things to do, but the heart knows nothing about sense. And the heart is as stubborn as the Irish...”

Vincent was about to reply, when he suddenly heard a nearby footfall and looked up, sharply. Someone was coming and their stealth suggested they were not friendly.

“What is it?” Brigit asked, alarmed.

The simmering tension in Vincent’s long frame told her it was nothing good.



The burly Irishman dressed as a clown left the roadway, and moved stealthily through the undergrowth, towards the lagoon. His revolver was clutched in his beefy hand, and he moved from shadow to shadow, crouching, concealing himself behind trees and rocks, listening to Brigit and Vincent talking. As he got closer, the sound of their voices grew steadily louder.

Secure in the knowledge he was close to his intended target, he pressed himself up against the side of a large tree. He listened again for their voices, but heard only silence. Something was wrong. Spinning, he whirled around the trunk of the tree, gun in hand, and ran smack into Vincent, as he stepped out from behind the other side of the tree.

Vincent’s face was contorted into a ferocious snarl. Startled, the clown brought up the gun to fire. Vincent roared and attacked. The gun discharged, even as it was sent spinning from the Irishman’s grasp. Vincent seized hold of the man by the front of his outfit and threw him back against the tree. The burly man’s head connected with the heavy trunk with a thud, and he fell, unconscious, to the ground.

Close to the action, Donald and Catherine reacted to the sound of the gunshot and Vincent's roars. As they turned the corner, they saw a man lying on the ground, and they rushed to his side.

"What the hell...?" Donald exclaimed. He went down on his knees over the clown.

"Is he...?" Catherine moved closer, very much fearing the worst. She knew what those roars could portend.

Donald opened one of the clown's closed eyes, and checked his pulse. "Out cold, but he'll live. Maybe a concussion. Someone sure hit him hard."

But Catherine wasn't listening. She had seen Vincent. He was standing beneath a great tree several feet away, his form draped by the shadows and he was wearing his cloak. As she watched, Brigit stepped out of the foliage to stand beside him. She looked shaken. Staring at the scene, she crossed herself.



For a moment fraught with meaning, Catherine and Vincent stared at each other across a divide too wide for either of them to cross. Forced to make a decision, Vincent tore his eyes away from Catherine with difficulty, realizing he must leave, much as he might wish otherwise. There would soon be police, and doctors to deal with, questions to answer, and he had none of them. He could not stay.

He gave Catherine one last, heartfelt look, before he turned, and melted away into the shadows. Brigit watched him leave, before turning to the others.

Catherine stood forlorn, watching with dismay as Vincent vanished. She called after him softly. "Vincent..."

But he was already gone. Catherine turned away, confused and heartsick. Brigit looked from Catherine to the spot where Vincent had stood, and back again. Clearly, she grasped the situation.

She moved toward them, as Donald rose to his feet. "Brigit O'Donnell, I presume. Where'd the other guy go?"

Brigit was looking at Catherine. "He had promises to keep." She touched the other woman's arm, gently. "But I'm thinking he'd rather have stayed..."

Catherine looked up, giving Brigit a grateful smile, as she tried to regain control of the situation. They shared a look of complete understanding.

"Brigit, are you all right? What happened, here?"

"I'm fine... but it's not for want of this man trying." She leaned over the clown's unconscious form, reached down, and pulled off his plastic clown mask. Brigit stared when she saw his rough features. She reacted strongly, surprised and dismayed.

"Brigit... what's wrong? Do you know him?" Catherine asked.

"Oh, him and his sort, I've known them all my life. Michael McPhee, his name is. He's one of the boys, a good IRA man."

Donald reacted with a tight, quirky smile. It was there and then gone again.

"As long as you're all right now. We'll call the police," Catherine reassured Brigit.

Donald put out a detaining hand. "No need. Actually, I can handle it from here, thank you."

"You?" Catherine gasped in surprise.

Donald gave a sheepish smile. "I'm afraid I wasn't quite, ah, honest with you, Catherine."

He reached under his pirate costume, to pull out a wallet, flipping it open for Catherine's inspection.

One side displayed a badge, the facing half a photo ID with Donald's face and the Interpol name and insignia.

"Interpol?" Catherine frowned.

Donald closed the wallet again, shrugging apologetically. "I thought your father was about to blow my cover for a moment there, back at the party, with all that lawyer talk."

He looked at Brigit. “My apologies, Mrs. O’Donnell. We’d received a tip that an attempt would be made on your life, and I was supposed to stay close to you. Unfortunately, I, ah, hooked up with the wrong owl...”

Brigit shot the pair an agreeable grin. “It’s perfectly all right. All owls look alike by night.”

Donald searched around, finding Michael McPhee’s pistol. Untying the bandanna from around his head, he used it to pick up the gun, and wrapped it, carefully.

“Evidence. Got to be thorough. I’ll drop you both back at the party. No reason everyone’s Halloween needs to be ruined.”

Catherine was quick to deny him. “Oh, no. I’ll see it through. As long as the masks are coming off, I’m with the District Attorney’s office.”

He looked taken aback. “Are you? This is a night for surprises. Well, if you’ll keep an eye on sleeping beauty here, I’ll bring my car around.”

He walked quickly away, leaving the two women with the unconscious clown.



Vincent walked alone through the darkness, his face grave and melancholy. There were a lot of people in the park tonight, far more than usual. Their presence made it feel crowded, an unfamiliar sensation, for the night-time park.

Vincent heard voices ahead of him – laughter and footsteps, and for a moment, old habits took hold. He stopped, stepping back warily into the shadows, as he pulled his hood up over his hair. Then he realized what night it was. After a brief hesitation, he stepped out again, and walked forward slowly. Unlike almost every other night of his life, the presence of strangers posed no threat to him. As he’d told Father, on this night of all nights, he felt that he could walk among them, unmolested.

He strode down a footpath into a large, grassy clearing in the park. A huge, roaring bonfire burned in its center, surrounded by costumed people talking, laughing, drinking and dancing as an old man dressed as a grasshopper fiddled from atop a large rock.

Vincent stared at the fire and the people, the flames throwing flickering light across his features. A couple of the dancers noticed him, and approached, laughing and dancing around him. Their invitation was clear: *Come join us.*



He frowned at their disguises, knowing only his 'mask' was real. One of the people, a sexy young woman done up as an elf, seized his hand as she tried to draw him into the circle, to join in the good times, but he resisted. He had no place here, no part in this fellowship – without Catherine, this easy acceptance was hollow, and sadly, meaningless.

Finally, the elf woman shrugged, letting him go, before she ran off back to the others. Vincent walked away from the fire. People were coming and going all around him, all of them in costume. A man dressed as a hamburger pedaled past on a bicycle, and nodded to him gravely.

When Vincent approached the drainage pipe that opened into the underground, he found a mime performing in front of a small group of costumed people. Vincent began to edge around them. The mime barred his way, beginning to pantomime around him, making Vincent a part of his performance. For a brief moment Vincent allowed it, then he bared his fangs and gave the mime a terrifying, ferocious snarl.

The startled mime scrambled back out of the way, and tripped over his own feet. Vincent swept past him, into the darkness of the drainage pipe, as the crowd of people applauded the unusual performance. *It's all theater, he thought. Beautiful theater, some... but theater, just the same.* He wanted the reality of walking with Catherine, and knew he couldn't have it. Joy and sorrow. Sometimes, it seems as if their lives were framed by it. *No wonder I understand Brigit O'Donnell so well, and she me,* Vincent mused.

Hurrying down the pipe, Vincent opened the secret door to the underworld. Briefly, he paused, listening, as faint and far-off, he could hear the sound of music – the fiddler at the balefire, echoing over the hills. Vincent smiled a swift, sad smile, before stepping through the door, closing it behind him. When the secret door slid shut, the distant music was cut off, sharply. He lowered his head and began his descent back into the dark world he knew all too well...



Situated on Fifth Avenue, the tall, brick apartment building possessed an excellent view over the park. Inside one darkened apartment, high on the twentieth floor, a small dog lay on the carpet, his head resting on his crossed paws as he watched his mistress. She wasn't paying him any attention, because she was too involved with what was going on far below her apartment window.

Classical piano music played softly in the background as Anna Lausch turned her telescope back and forth across the park-scape, looking for adventure, or anything new to pique her jaded curiosity.

She was a fussily-dressed, elderly woman from another era. In her seventy-five years she'd seen enough of life to dismiss most of its modern fripperies. Twelve years ago, the telescope had been an unexpected bequest from a deceased friend, who'd lived in the apartment below hers. Anna had once marveled at it, but had been initially wary when it had been left to her in Clara's will.

However, it hadn't been long before she'd become addicted to the secretive nature of her new hobby. She sat by a large, ornate desk that held the telescope, pointing it out the open window. Cool night air ruffled the brocade curtains, and plucked at the frilly lace collar of her blouse. She shivered more with delight, than cold. She pulled her woolen scarf closer around her thin neck with one hand.



"This is always much better than any movie, Winnie," she told her patient pet. "I'm amazed at all there is to see out there. And no-one knows I'm in here." She giggled like an excited child, pressing her eye closer to the lens. "Remember the day I saw Greta Garbo walking in the park, just like an ordinary person? We did well that day, didn't we?" She glanced down at her pet, passing one hand quickly over his head.

Being directly addressed caused the dog to raise his ears and wag his tail. But he soon saw his mistress wasn't interested in him. She'd gone back to looking through the telescope. He sighed, his pragmatic mind on much more mundane things such as sleep.

Anna panned the telescope across the park, pausing for a moment to watch the flaring balefire, and its many dancing attendees.

"I can see all over the park. So many interesting people out there, on this night of nights. I look down on all of them and they don't know it." She studied the old man, dressed as a grasshopper, playing the fiddle on top of a large rock.

Then something new caught her attention. She swiveled the telescope as a tall, large man came into view, walking alone through the park. His steps dragged and he seemed to be carrying a great weight on his broad shoulders. He paused in the moving shadows near the balefire, seeming to hesitate to join in the frivolities. A pretty girl dressed as an elf danced up to him, taking his hand as she tried to entice him into the crowd, but he resisted her advances. The elf-girl soon left him to re-join her like-minded fellows around the fire.

As Anna watched, the man turned his head, his attention fixed on something further away. Anna frowned, wondering what he was looking at. She couldn't quite see his face, hidden as it was within the deep shadows of his hood. Long, blonde hair riffled in the wind outside the shelter of the hood and danced around the shoulders of his voluminous black cloak.

"Will you look at him, Winnie," Anna marveled. "That's one of the best outfits I've ever seen. He looks like something out a fable, or a storybook."

Her magnified attention followed him as he broke away from the balefire group and hurried on, towards a large drainage tunnel in the distance. A man miming a show for a group of stragglers stood in the tunnel entrance, and added the cloaked man to his act as he approached. But the man was having none of it, and Anna was startled by the flash of white fangs as he snarled a warning at the mime, who tripped over his own feet and fell backwards in a heap.

The mysterious man turned his back on the park, and its denizens, and vanished into the darkness of the pipe, leaving behind a startled audience, who applauded his realistic act. The mime regained his feet and bowed to the crowd with an expansive gesture, as if his fall had all been a part of his performance. Then he, too, stared down the tunnel and its vanished occupant.

"Well, I'll be..." Anna withdrew her eye from the lenses. "What did you think of that, Winnie? The night is truly full of mystery."

The dog wagged his tail and sighed again, wondering when his mistress was going to get up and come to bed. He could hardly keep his eyes open, and he longed to settle next to her, into the deep, smothering comfort of the wide mattress.



Donald Pratt drove, Brigit beside him in the front, while Catherine shared the back seat with the unconscious Michael. She leaned against him, holding him upright, as

they moved down a major avenue, weaving in and out of the traffic. Michael began to moan. Brigit looked back.

“He’s coming to,” Catherine observed.

Donald’s eyes flicked quickly to the rear-view mirror, as he turned the wheel hand-over-hand. They drove down a series of dark side streets, turning several times.

“Oh, God... where...?” Michael winced, touching his head. “My head hurts somethin’ fierce.”

“You ought to be grateful it’s still attached to your shoulders, Michael McPhee,” Brigit said roundly.

Michael groaned. “Ah, don’t be taking that tone with me, woman. You know I’d never harm you. Damn it, it was Sean sent me.”

Brigit tone was cold and angry. “And am I supposed to care? He made it quite clear to me, he does not have a daughter.”

The big man softened his tone. “He’s dying, girl...,” Michael groaned. He saw her shocked look. “There’s not much time left him. He wants to see you again, he sent me to you.”

“Aye that he did... with a gun in your hand!” Brigit accused tearfully. “My own flesh and blood... What did I ever do to make him hate me so?”

Listening to this terse exchange, Donald’s face became grim and dangerous. He looked as if he wanted to comment, but changed his mind at the last moment.

Michael groaned. “You’ve got it all wrong, lass. It wasn’t you I was after. It was that fella that was with you. The fella in the black hood and lion head.”

“What? Vincent?” Catherine asked in a shocked tone.

Brigit lifted a denying shoulder. “He was a friend...”

“A murdering Orangeman was what he was!” Michael spat back. “We had the word, girl. It’s Sean they’re after, but they have no love for you. I was to keep you safe, to bring you secretly, to your father.”

Catherine was looking around at the street they were driving down. “Wait a minute, we’re supposed to be headed downtown. This isn’t—”

Donald abruptly turned the car hard, down a dark street and into a parking garage, causing his passengers to grab anything they could to keep from being thrown

around. The moment the car came to a stop, Donald turned around, a gun in his hand.

When he spoke, his carefully cultivated Americanisms had been replaced by a distinctly Irish accent.

“The best thing about Croppies, they’re as stupid as they are ugly.”

He got out of the car, herding his three passengers out, holding them at gunpoint. He backed them up against the wall. Michael was groggy and unsteady, and Brigit helped to support him.

Catherine faced their attacker. “Don’t do it, Donald. Put down the gun. Don’t let this get out of hand.”

“It got out of hand a long time ago.” Donald focused his attention on Michael. “Do you remember William Harland?”

“A lying, murdering, Orange bastard he was,” Michael spat back.

“You and your lads, you didn’t even have the courage to face him when you gunned him down. You waited ‘til he was good and drunk, then you caught him leaving the pub.”

Michael shrugged. “It’s no more than he’d done to better men than him.”

Catherine tried to intervene again. “All right, stop it, both of you. Donald, you don’t need to do this. Turn him over to the police. He’ll pay for his crime.”

“Aye, he’ll pay for it sure enough,” Donald sneered. The gun stayed steady.

Brigit sighed. “It’s no use, Catherine. You can’t talk sense to them, to any of them.” She glanced at Michael. “It’s like a sickness now, and there’s not a drop of human decency left in the lot of them.”

Donald rounded on her. “Shut up! I’ve heard enough of your damn pious speeches!” He turned back to glare at Michael. “Empty your pockets.”

Defiant, Michael made no move to comply. Donald cocked the hammer on the pistol with a sharp, distinct click.

Brigit looked frightened. “Michael, do as he says!”

With a murderous look, Michael took the contents of his pockets out, throwing everything on the ground in front of him. A rain of crumpled bills, loose coins, matchbooks, and other loose items cascaded down around his clown shoes. Among

the items was a hotel room key, attached to an oversized, embossed plastic key ring.

Donald stared at it with an air of quiet satisfaction. "My name is Jamie Harland. William was my brother. There were three of them that killed him. I got the first one a year ago and Michael McPhee here... you're the second. You might say you're sort of a bonus. But it was the other one I was hoping she'd lead me to."

Catherine stepped forward. "Your brother is dead! You won't bring him back with murder!"

"I'm no murderer! This is an execution! For Ulster, and Billy!" Jamie shouted. He shot Michael down without another word.

"No! No!" Brigit screamed, as Michael fell face down on the ground. Jamie leaned down to pick up the key to the hotel room.

"Damn you to hell!" Brigit railed at him.

She turned to Catherine and began to cry on her shoulder. Jamie pointed the gun at them both. "We're going for a ride." He waved the gun at Catherine, indicating the car. "You... drive! Get going!"

"Where are you taking us?"

"To pay a visit to a gentleman by the name of Sean O'Reilly. Who, I'm thinking, might be stayin' at a certain hotel. And ill too, it seems. Ah, but maybe a visit from his loving daughter will cheer him up."



Vincent retreated to his chamber to sit in his chair, brooding. Father limped in to stand at the chamber entrance for a moment, watching him. Vincent slumped deeper into his chair as Father entered. Vincent looked up, silently.

Father sighed. "Lana said that you'd returned. Am I disturbing you?"

Vincent shook his head. Father sat down beside him. "Well, did you find Brigit?"

Vincent's face was solemn. "Yes, and so did a man with a gun. She's given so much to her land and her people... beauty, courage, wisdom, all she had to give... and in return, she has gotten violence and grief and pain. How can they hate her so?"

Father took Vincent's hand and squeezed it. He remembered all too well the insane hatreds of the world above.

"Sometimes, during my first few years in the tunnels, I would lie awake at night, wondering if I'd done the right thing. Was I building a better, saner place down here, I asked myself, or just running from the evil above? I was full of such anger. I wanted to avenge all the wrongs I'd suffered."

"And yet you never went back up to stay..."

"No, if I had, I think my anger would have consumed me. *Too long a sacrifice...*"

Vincent finished the quote. "*Can make a stone of the heart...*"

Suddenly, he sensed something. He reacted with alarm, sitting bolt upright in his chair.

"What's wrong?" Father asked, in alarm.

"Catherine...", Vincent whispered, jumping to his feet and pulling his discarded cloak onto his shoulders.

Father shook his head with acceptance. The closeness of the moment had melted the last of his resistance.

"Go to her, then. Go on. It's Halloween, isn't it? And... you're not a child any more..."

They exchanged a quick nod of shared understanding before Vincent left his chamber, running...





## **ACT FOUR**

### **A Single Night...**

*“To be fully seen by somebody, then, and be loved anyhow – this is a human offering that can border on miraculous...”*

*Elizabeth Gilbert*

Sean O’Reilly, Brigit’s father, occupied one of two beds in a cluttered, seedy hotel room. He was in his sixties, a big man with a strong face, but he looked bloated and weak, and in pain. His hair was plastered to his forehead by sweat, and periodically he was overcome by fits of coughing.

Sean was a sick, dying man, hanging on stubbornly, but fading fast. He was sitting up in bed, wearing an old sleeveless undershirt and a three day stubble, the tangled bedclothes crumpled around his waist. The window was open to the cold night air, curtains blowing in the wind. Outside, the red neon lights of a bar across the street flashed on and off, through the ironwork of the fire escape outside his room.



A water tumbler and a bottle of Irish whiskey occupied the bedside table. Sean was pouring himself a glass when he heard the door being unlocked. He paused in the act of pouring the liquor.

“Michael?” he called, uncertainly.

A key grated in the lock. The door swung open, and Brigit walked slowly through. She saw her father and hesitated, overcome with emotion. Then she was roughly shoved into the room from behind. She stumbled and fell to her knees by her father’s bedside. Jamie walked into the room behind her, gun in hand, holding Catherine roughly by the arm, and forcing her ahead of him. He kicked the door shut, and pushed Catherine away from him, over toward the bedside table.

Brigit looked up into Sean’s face. Trembling, he set the glass down and they embraced. It was an emotional reunion, but hardly the sort either dreamed of.

“Brigit...,” Sean breathed.

Jamie sneered. “Very touching. Brings a tear to me eye, it does.”

Sean glared at him, weak but defiant. “And who the hell might you be? Where’s Michael?”

“Burning in hell, old man, where you’ll be joining him, soon.”

Catherine tried to intervene, and beg for some kind of reprieve, for Brigit’s father.

“Jamie, look at him. He’s just a sick, old man.”

Sean reared up in the bed. “I’m still strong enough to spit on the likes of him! Go on, do your worst! I’m dying anyway.” His defiant laugh disintegrated into a fit of coughing. Catherine hurried to hold up the glass for him to drink.

Jamie sneered. “Oh, you’ll die soon enough. But not until you’ve seen your daughter die, before you.”

Both Catherine and Sean reacted with horror at the awful threat.

“No, no, never... never,” Sean tried to bargain. “It’s me you want, not her. Show mercy.”

“I’ll show her the same mercy you showed Billy.”

Jamie cocked the trigger back on his pistol, and advanced on Brigit. Catherine threw the drink in his face and tried to fight with him for control of the gun. The weapon flipped onto the bed where Sean was able to grab it. He fired it in the air. Jamie stood still, his eyes on the weapon in the old man’s shaking hand.

“Back off... now!” Sean yelled. “I maybe dying, but at least I’ll take one more murdering Orangeman with me before I go...”

Furious, Brigit moved to stand in front of Jamie, preventing her father from shooting him. “Father, no!”

“I’m sorry, girl, but it’s got to be done. He’s no better than his brother... murdering scum. It was his sort killed your mother.”

Brigit faced him. “Yes, and it was your sort that killed Ian.”

“Get out of my way!” Sean waved the gun.

Brigit stood her ground. “It has to stop!”

Sean was infuriated. “Do what I tell you, girl! I’m your father!”

“Are you now? Well, that’s news to me! Go on, if you’re so bound and determined to kill him. What’s one more body! Think what a fine hero I’ll be once I’m dead. Go on... what are you waiting for? I’m nothing to you!” She saw him hesitate. “Well, go on! What are you waiting for? I’m nothing to you, a traitor, an Orangeman’s whore. Go on... *shoot!*”

Sean slowly lowered the gun. Jamie saw his chance and drew a dagger from the side of his boot. He stepped forward and grabbed Brigit from behind, threatening her with a knife to her throat. “Come on, Brigit darlin’, we’re leaving this party.”

He dragged her slowly backwards towards the door. Unseen by anyone in the room, the flashing neon light dimly illuminated a dark figure, hovering on the fire escape.

“I’ll find you again, old man,” Jamie threatened grimly, as he edged towards the door, dragging Brigit with him.

Then, everything happened in a blur.

Vincent came in through the window and ripped the knife from Jamie’s slackened grasp. He threw the attacker into the door and out into the hall.

“Brigit....,” Sean called after his daughter.

Vincent turned and was gone back through the window in an instant. Brigit hurried to sit beside her father.

“Brigit...,” the old man whispered again. They hugged each other.

Catherine knelt beside Jamie, checking him. He was unconscious, but alive.

She looked up towards the window, to where Vincent peered through the wind-tossed curtains. Catherine gave him a look of deep gratitude, nodding that they'd be all right. Vincent returned her look, and then he was gone...

Catherine turned, looking towards the bed, where Brigit and her father were still holding each other, years of hard feelings and pain melting away, leaving only the love of a father and daughter... warm, strong, and unconditional...

Catherine was moved by this reunion. She returned her gaze out into the night, knowing who was responsible...



An ambulance pulled up to the front of the Claremont Arms hotel. Two uniformed police officers brought a bloody Jamie out past Catherine and Brigit, putting him into the blue and white cruiser waiting at the curb. Catherine turned to look up at the roof of the building. Vincent was there, looking down at her. She smiled up at him and then turned her attention to Brigit.



"I can arrange for you to stay with your father at the hospital, if you like."

"Thank you...," Brigit nodded gratefully.

"Brigit, you know that..."

Brigit interrupted on a sigh. "There are warrants out on the man, and he must be arrested? Yes, I've lived with that since I was six years old. We won't have much time together, not even... three hundred days. But we must take what we're given, three hundred days, a few months..."

"Or a single night...," Catherine finished for her.

Brigit smiled at her and the two women embraced in complete understanding. Brigit entered a police car, and the door closed behind her.

Catherine again turned to look up at the roof, but Vincent was no longer there. She lowered her eyes, disappointed. He had to leave. *There were too many cops around, too much commotion. But still...* She began to walk back in the general direction of midtown, knowing she needed to catch a cab. She hadn't walked more than a few yards when suddenly, Vincent was there, standing right in front of her. Her heart leaped. She couldn't help it.

"Will she...?" he asked softly, looking the way the departing police car had gone.

"She'll be all right," Catherine comforted.

Vincent sighed. "Good." He turned to leave.

Catherine went after him. "No, don't leave!"

Vincent gave her an inquiring look.



Catherine was nervous, insecure, and very vulnerable, but determined to say it.

"She told me that this is a special night, Samhain, when the walls..."

Vincent turned back to her. "When the walls between the worlds grow thin... and spirits of the underworld walk the earth..."

Catherine enthusiasm was infectious. "Vincent, we can't waste it..."

He gazed at her for a long moment, his face closed. Then he nodded, as his expression broke into the warmest, gentlest, most radiant smile Catherine had ever seen.

She sagged with relief. She gave him an answering smile and took his arm, her fingers spreading wide over powerful muscles to hold as much of him as she could...





They saw the city together for the first time. From Broadway to Times Square, Rockefeller Center, the Guggenheim, St. Patrick's Cathedral, the Empire State Building and the Statue of Liberty. A hansom cab ride and a ferry ride took them places Vincent had never before seen, and some he had, though not this way.

The sights were spectacular, and in the truest sense of the word. New York was no ordinary city, and it was home to no ordinary monuments. The architecture was grandiose, the contents inside some of the buildings, priceless.

Many of the museums and other places were closed, thanks to the incredible lateness of the hour, but still, Vincent could walk there at street level, and look up, and admire what was there to be impressed by.

It was his city. But from a vantage point he seldom experienced, at least not here, in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral, or on the steps of the Guggenheim, or amid the boisterous street crowd at they strolled along the city streets in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Natural History.

The crowd was jovial and boisterous, and he felt just what Catherine had wanted him to feel, and probably what the winsome elf-girl had wanted him to feel, hours earlier: she wanted him to feel like he was a part of it all – and so he was.

They were both footsore by the time she steered him back down Fifth Avenue, near the park, and he knew the long, sumptuous and sometimes dangerous night was now drawing to a close. It had been a feast for his senses; all of them.

Yet, there was still a little time left.

Catherine fished some coins from a hidden pocket in her gown, and pressed them into his gloved palm. Quizzically, Vincent lifted a blonde eyebrow at her. She nodded toward a street vendor.

*“He’s selling ice cream.” She smiled, and Vincent didn’t need her to explain. ‘We were walking down Fifth Avenue. The sky was so blue... You bought me ice cream. And no one looked twice.’*

The sky wasn’t blue, as it had been in her dream. But they were indeed walking down Fifth Avenue. And no one was looking twice. Vincent returned her smile, but also returned her few coins, fishing out what little he owned from his own pocket. *If this dream is going to come true for her, it must be me who is buying it, not her,* he reasoned, offering the money to the vendor.

“Heya Mac, a cone for the pretty lady?” The vendor was already scooping vanilla into a cone, and wrapping it with a napkin.

Vincent simply nodded and made the trade. It smelled good, a cold, welcome treat after a long night of sight-seeing.

“Thank you,” he said, taking the cone, then offering it to Catherine. Her smile was luminous.

“Great costume. Both of yas,” the ice cream seller replied, revealing a Bronx accent.

“Thank you,” Catherine echoed. “For more than you know.”

The vendor smiled and tipped a low cap. He turned to his next customer, the large man in a cat mask and his lady all but forgotten, as a white-faced, red-fanged Count Dracula came up to do some business.

“The park entrance is right over there,” Catherine said, nodding the way, as they strolled. She tasted her treat, and her smile couldn’t dim. “This is the best ice cream I’ve ever had. I swear. You have to share it with me.”

He shook his head, at first, but upon her insistence, he tried some. “It’s certainly the coldest.” He gave her a small smile. The falling temperatures of the October night – Now technically a November morning – weren’t going to change that, much.

“Have you ever had it? Is this your first time?” she asked.

For a moment, he was actually tempted to lie, just so she could think it was his first experience with the frozen confection. He shook his head.

“Pascal’s father used to make it by hand, in a huge tub. A ... machine, with a crank on the side.” He imitated a small, circular motion with one hand. Catherine nodded, indicating she understood.

“He’d pour salt on the ice a helper had provided...” He smiled at the boyhood memory. “We would take turns doing the work, and the ice cream was our reward. I was fascinated that the salt was needed. But we... didn’t do it often,” he qualified. “It was a treat for the children, on the first day of summer. But I’ve never had it so late in the year, before,” he added, letting her know that this was indeed a special occasion.

“My father had a machine like that,” she marveled. “It was up at his lake house, in Connecticut. It seemed out of place anywhere else. We would go up on Labor Day weekend and cook out. He’d always bring out the big tub, and assemble it together. So it was part of my summers, too.”

She smiled that they shared this small connection, among the other, much larger one they also shared. Tired though she was, she was happy they hadn’t let the opportunity to spend the evening together pass them by. She continued to eat her ice cream, though she noticed he didn’t ask for more.

They were walking along the fence that led to the park. He opened the gate for her, and ushered her inside. *And so now our revels are ended. Or at least they’re ending,* he thought regretfully, watching her as she took in more of the cone. By the time they reached the pond, the sweet treat was gone.

“I haven’t thought about my father making me hand-cranked ice cream in years.” She smiled. “Thank you, Vincent. It was an... amazing night. We didn’t waste it.”

“Indeed we didn’t. I think Brigit would be pleased.” *Even if she also advised against it,* he amended silently. He gestured toward a long bench, knowing they’d need the room, if she were to sit. Her incredible dress took up a good bit of space.

“I think she would, as well,” Catherine agreed, arraying her skirts deftly. She sat like a woman born to the dress she was wearing.

*Of course she does. A true lady would do no less,* Vincent mused, wondering how many elaborate gowns she’d had to don, in her life, and how many had come so interestingly... accessorized. He settled himself beside her, as they watched a setting moon trail a white path of light on the dark water. It was a waxing gibbous, and a bright one, thanks to the clear night.

“I used to watch the moon on the lake,” Catherine confided. “So funny. I think I’ve almost never seen it from here.”



She wouldn't have. They were some distance from her apartment, and the park had a notorious reputation, at night. Vincent wondered idly if the bonfire revelers were still there, or if they'd given up their pursuits long ago. He'd find out after he took her to her apartment building. He'd have to cross back to where the dancers and party-goers had been, near the drainage tunnel.

And he'd have to do that sometime soon, if the lowering moon was any indication. They were running out of night.

*A few moments more. We can steal a few moments more,* he thought. "I think I've seen the moon from here more times than I can count," he confided, relaxing comfortably with her, on the bench. "The light is so beautiful. Especially when the moon is full. Of course, I usually don't sit on a bench to take in the view," he added, watching as a pair of youths dressed in Dodgers uniforms strolled by, chatting avidly.

He waited for them to pass, which they did, barely sparing the unique couple a glance.

"I usually watch from that stand of pines over there," he nodded to the trees which regularly sheltered him. "In spring, the smell of the pine needles is... intoxicating. Then in winter, the branches are laden with snow, and the water is often frozen."

She saw it as he described it, in her mind's eye. The park on a winter night. It sounded lovely. And not far off, timewise. *Will you take me back here?* She thought. *Back here, in December, or January?*

"Of course, you can't see the moon in the water, once it freezes over," he added. "But still, it's beautiful. I just wish..."

He let the sentence trail, and then shook his head to clear it. "Nothing. The night has been perfect."



“What? What do you wish, Vincent?” Catherine asked, pouncing on the word. She knew he rarely spoke of any unfulfilled desires.

“Nothing. I’ve seen things I’ve never seen, this night. Been places I’ve never been. And ridden in a carriage, with an actual horse.” His smile remained, a calm, yet happy one. “Accompanied by the most beautiful woman in New York. No man has a right to ask for anything more.”

“But I’m asking,” she prompted, picking up his gloved hand. “Please. Please finish your sentence. I’d like to know. You knew my dream. Tell me one of yours?” she prodded gently.

He gave her a long look, and then a confession.

“The water is too far away from the drainage culvert. I can’t travel the distance without being seen, once sunrise comes.” He looked back toward the little lake. “For as beautiful as the moonlight is, I always wondered what the sunlight would look like, shining on the water.” He tried to see it with his inner eye, but realized he couldn’t. It was an image that just wouldn’t come. “To watch it rise, see the colors change, as it happens. Not just here. But somewhere... huge. Somewhere where the water leads to the ocean, to... everywhere.”

Catherine realized she’d shown him landmarks she thought he would enjoy. But what he really wanted to see was just the sunrise on the water. Her mind was working fast. “You mean somewhere... like the harbor?”

He saw the ambitious look in her eye. She got up, and held out her hand.

“Catherine... we can’t.”

She wouldn’t hear it. “The Brooklyn Bridge is at the southern tip of the island. If we hurry, we can be there for sunrise,” she said, tugging him to his feet. “Vincent, think of it. Sunrise on the water. Water that leads to everywhere. We can do this. We can have this dream. We just have to believe. And hurry.”

“Do you truly think we can...?” He could all but smell the approaching dawn.

Her tone was adamant. “You’ve given me so much. So very much. Tonight, you made a dream of mine come true. Let me do the same for you.”

She was only tugging him for the first few steps. After that, she was struggling to keep up with his long stride. *We can make it if we hurry.* It was in every line of his long frame.

His mind was racing, even as he shortened his steps, so Catherine could keep up, in her long skirt. *The river. The river at sunrise. And the harbor, beyond. Catherine's face, bathed in the morning light, as the sun reflects off the water...* His mind could barely grasp the notion of it. And the image went from simply a 'dream' to a desperate want.

*Yes. Let me have this. Let us have it. Just this, and I swear I'll ask for nothing more...*



Anna Lausch played her telescope across the park in the early dawn light. Despite Winnie's continued efforts to get her to retire to bed, she was having too much fun to sleep.

"Just one more pass," she reassured her pet, leaning down to give him a quick pat. "It's almost over for another year. I want to see it all."

Winnie raised his head and regarded her dubiously. Breakfast was now on his mind, and he needed to go out for his daily walk. He sighed, and dropped his head onto his paws.

Anna resettled her eye into the lens and scanned the park. Swift movements caught her attention, and she gasped as she recognized a familiar shape. It was the tall, hooded man from earlier in the evening, walking quickly away from her.

But now he'd acquired a beautiful companion. A young woman dressed in a gorgeous, eighteenth-century costume, with long ringlets of curling hair falling over one naked shoulder. It seemed Halloween wasn't quite over, after all.

Anna observed them closely, ignoring Winnie's rumbling complaints. The couple were walking together like old friends, close, but not quite touching. They hurried across the park, as if they were eager to get somewhere else, in the shortest possible time.

Anna marveled at the size of the man next to his petite acquaintance. He'd dropped his hood to his shoulders, but she could only see the back of his wild mane of long blonde hair. There was an air about him, a sense that he cared deeply for the young woman beside him, but did not know how to openly express his feelings by touching her.

Anna panned closer, trying to see the woman's face, but she kept her head turned away as she spoke eagerly to the man, urging him on, it seemed, even though she was already struggling to keep up with his much longer strides in her long skirts.

As quickly as they appeared, they were gone, heading through the trees towards the end of the island. Anna lowered her telescope and stared after them. She had the distinct feeling she'd just seen something extraordinary, but she had no idea why...



Vincent and Catherine walked closely together down a littered, but deserted street very late in the dawn. There was an ease between them, an acceptance on this night of masks and illusions, for a few short hours, they were able to taste a life they may never know.

They'd stood at the tip of Manhattan Island, and watched the sky change from black to grey, over, New York Harbor. Then they'd strolled back, arm in arm, as the new dawn breathed life into the city they both called 'home.'

The huge stone arches of the Brooklyn Bridge dominated the background, as Catherine and Vincent sat together on a bench near the river. The sky was a dark pre-dawn blue, just starting to lighten, a truly magic hour. The great span of the bridge, stretching away over the river, was still festooned with lights, and early-morning traffic.

But Catherine and Vincent had eyes only for each other. They sat watching the sun rise.

*Gold. The sun on the water is gold. No... not gold. Not quite that color. I don't think there's a name for it. Vincent turned to his love. Your eyes at dawn are the same color as the water, where it's closest to shore. And I don't think I have a name for that color, either.* He marveled at this truth.

"I've lived here all my life, and yet, it's as though I've never seen this city until tonight," Vincent marveled.

Catherine inhaled the dawn, and felt it bring its peace, into her body. "You've seen so much of the violence and hatred of my world. I wanted you to know there's beauty as well."

Vincent gazed at her lovingly. "Oh, I know that. Ever since the night I found you, Catherine."

They leaned closer to one another, lost in each other's eyes. She smiled, lifting her face to his. They seemed enchanted, mythic lovers of the Samhain night. For a fleeting second, it seemed that they might actually kiss, but just as Vincent began to move, there came the sound of pounding footsteps.

The magic was shattered. They looked up, breaking apart, slightly.

A balding, pudgy man in jogging clothes passed by, doing his morning run. He heaved into view, saw Vincent, and slammed to a halt in front of them.

"*What the...!* Geez! You gave me a real scare. Hey man, Halloween was yesterday."

The jogger moved on, but he'd broken the spell. Vincent stood, drawing the hood of his cloak about his head, concealing his face from casual view. *It is time. Past it. Thank you, Catherine. Thank you for this gift.*

Catherine went to reach for him, but then she checked the motion. Somehow, with the rising of the sun, the distance between them was back. *He has return Below. He has to. It's the only way he can be safe.* She knew it was true. They both did.

"I must go." Vincent raised both arms in defeat.

Catherine nodded, wordless, but accepting. She and Vincent exchanged one last, fond look before he turned from her and made his way home.

She turned to watch him, smiling, then turned back to watch the sunrise. She looked out at the Brooklyn Bridge while dawn light filled the sky. She was weary, but content, after the long, enchanted night.

She sat for a moment, pensive, wistful, replaying every precious memory in her head. Then she hugged herself, and smiled a slow, sweet smile. *It was a night for dreams. And ours came true. On the night where the walls between the worlds grew thin...*





*“If conversation was the lyrics, laughter was the music, making time spent together a melody that could be replayed over and over without getting stale...”*

*Nicholas Sparks*

