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## **The Meeting**

by ChicagoTunnelKid

Cathy sat surrounded by stacks of law books on the left and front of her, and case files on the right. She huffed out a breath through her bangs. Her back ached from sitting so much, her eyes were dry from pouring over dusty book pages, and the fingers on her right hand were cramped from taking so many notes.

Out of the corner of her eye, she spied Joe approaching.

“Don’t you dare!” she commanded.

“Dare what?” Joe asked, with exaggerated innocence. “Put these stacks of trial transcripts on your already crowded desk?” He carefully set them atop the case files, figuring they were the flattest surface.

“Joe!” Cathy mustered a glare with all her tired face would allow. “What am I supposed to do with those?”

“Look for the missing key, the inconsistency in Soreno’s testimony that will allow us to nail him. I’m not letting him get away this time!”

“You’ve got me investigating all his past business dealings, legal run-ins, and combing case law for a usable charge already! When am I supposed to get this done?” she spread her hands wide over the paperwork.

“You know the work around here never ends, Cathy. Just do your best. We can’t let this slick weasel slip away again.”

“I’m taking the weekend off, you remember.” She eyed him suspiciously.

“Cathy, this can’t wait!”

“It can and it will. Nancy and Jenny are coming for the weekend, and we three haven’t gotten together in at least a year. I told you about it, and I’m not giving it

up, and for heaven's sake, I need it!" She stared at him as if to bend him to her will.

He threw his hands up in supplication. "Okay, okay! I'm just messing with ya, you can get to these next week. You sure are cute riled up!"

The crumpled ball of paper barely missed his head as he hastily exited, discretion being the better part of valor. She shook her head and smiled. Joe was the big brother she never had, pain in the butt and all.

She also knew the importance of this case and was doing everything she could to help nail Soreno once and for all. But she was looking forward to the "girls only pajama party," as Jenny called it, and wouldn't give that up for anything, even Vincent. She'd told him last night in the few spare moments she had.

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The light tapping on the glass produced the expected results. Catherine opened the balcony doors and ran into his arms. They held each other.

Just the feel of her gave Vincent such pleasure and wonderful memories to think about the next day. He could feel she was tired, but she had sent a note by messenger that she needed to see him. He needed to see her.

"What is it?" he asked. "Your note said 'important I see you!' Are you all right?"

Her head nodded up and down against his chest. A long sigh escaped before she could gather enough voice to speak.

"Vincent, I'm going to be very busy for the next three or four weeks with this important trial, and the only time off I've managed to get, I'm spending with Jenny and Nancy... a girls only pajama party."

He held her slightly away from his chest to see her face.

"A pajama party? What does one do at a pajama party?"

She noticed he said not a word about her schedule or work, not wanting to make her feel guilty about her decision to be with friends. He knew how little she saw her friends anymore. Very few remained, the others preferring more socializing than she was willing to do.

“Basically... drink wine, talk about boys, and eat pizza!” Her face fell. “Or at least, that’s what we used to do. Now we’ll talk about Nancy’s kids and her husband who is gallantly baby-sitting so she can have the weekend off. We’ll commiserate with Jenny about her latest romance, which isn’t working out just like the others before him.”

“And you? What will you talk about?” Vincent asked.

“Mostly, my job.”

“Don’t your friends ask you about the men in your life?” Vincent wondered about that. *What could she say?*

“If they try, I don’t answer, so they know not to ask anymore. Nancy has a very general idea of you, as I told her about our difficult situation of not being able to be together. It was when I went to her place last year, when I needed to make a decision about continuing our relationship.” She looked up at him and smiled.

“And Jenny knows I’m seeing someone. Back when the watcher tried to drown me, she wouldn’t take ‘no’ for an answer on her staying the night with me. I finally had to tell her I wouldn’t be alone just to get her to leave.”

“She was concerned about you, Catherine.”

“I know.” She smiled again. “But all I wanted was to be held in your arms and she wouldn’t leave! It seemed like it took forever. To her credit, she left quickly and didn’t even try to worm information out of me!”

“Does it bother you, Catherine, to not tell your friends about me, to even have to lie about me?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Sometimes. I just want them to know how happy I am and why, but I can’t. They want to know what’s going on with my life, and there’s this big part of it I just can’t share. What little I have shared just makes them more curious.

“These are my best friends from college, Vincent. And, yes, it hurts to be untruthful to them. But you and what we have are more important to me. I would never do anything to put you or Below in jeopardy!”

He pulled her close. “I know you wouldn’t, Catherine. I’ve known that from the beginning.” He paused, thinking. “What if we asked Father for permission to speak

about me to your friends? Perhaps even meet them? Would that ease the tension you feel with your friends?"

"Do you think we could? Would he agree, do you think?" The hopeful look on her face gladdened his heart. He would do his utmost to make this happen – for her.

"How would your friends react?" he deflected her question.

"Knowing both of them, they would be speechless, Nancy longer than Jenny, just because Jenny would be launching into superlatives at the sight of you! Nancy would be quietly taking your measure, to see if you are good enough for me."

She stopped to think about the likely outcomes. "Both would be surprised, and probably even a little concerned for me, but they would accept you, if for no other reason than because I love you."

He stepped away toward the balcony ledge. "What would their concerns be?" Somehow, space away from her made the question easier to ask.

She noted the space. "Probably along the lines of what your intentions are."

He turned and tilted his head in puzzlement.

"My friends, especially Jenny, know all about my girlish hopes and dreams, and would want to know if those would be possible for me."

"What were your girlish dreams?"

"Oh, Jenny and I would play house together... or rather, neighbors, each with a baby and a baby stroller. We'd have coffee together in our tea cups, talking about our babies, and bragging about our husbands, how handsome they were, how successful they were." She grew silent. "The kind of things little girls do together with their dolls."

"Jenny knew that I wanted marriage and children, and that I hoped to find the kind of relationship my parents had."

"How will they react, knowing those dreams aren't possible with me?"

Her head turned sharply to look at him steadily. "Who says they aren't possible?"

He sighed, and his shoulders sagged. This was the one conversation they'd had over and over that never ended differently.

“I know you don’t believe it, Vincent, but I do. I have hope.” The last she spoke softly, more to herself than to him.

“But as for Jenny and Nancy, I think they won’t question that, once I’ve made it clear that it isn’t open for discussion.”

They both were silent, lost in their own thoughts.

“It’s not easy, Vincent, either way... staying silent with my friends, or telling them.” She came closer to him. “But I will say this, I would love to have someone to share all the wonderful things about you with and about Below. Someone who understands my life well enough to know what having you in it has done for me. And that’s Nancy and Jenny.”

“I’ll talk to Father. It’s also a matter that will have to go to Council.”

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Thinking back on their evening, Cathy wasn’t sure it was a good idea to ask Father. She and Father had their limits, and this was a big thing to ask. She wasn’t sure their relationship capital could withstand the withdrawal.

Anyway, those concerns were far in the future, and she had work to do. She got busy and was able to finish her overview of business transactions just in time to stop at a local deli to pick up a collection of food and wine for the weekend. They would call out for pizza.

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Vincent waited until he and Father were alone for a chess game the afternoon after seeing Catherine. He was determined to do this for her... request semi-Helper status for her friends, so that she would finally have someone on her side of the river. However, Father was a stickler for their most basic rule... *don’t talk about Below to anyone.*

He pondered the chessboard and made his move. He was actually considering throwing a game to make Father happy. He scowled because Father would see through that strategy.

“What’s making you scowl, Vincent?”

“Nothing.” He stayed silent.

“Out with it, Vincent or this game will suffer. And I suffer enough when playing you.”

Vincent moved a rook and sat back. “How do you do that, Father? Know when someone has something difficult, they wish to discuss?”

“Experience of age, I guess.” He looked up at Vincent. “So, what is so difficult for you to speak to me about? Is it my decision not to allow Jamie on security teams?”

Vincent shook his head. “That will be a topic for another evening, Father. Tonight is about Catherine.”

Father sat back, removed his glasses, and rubbed his right eye. “Of course it is. What was I thinking?”

“Sarcasm doesn’t become you, Father.”

Father waved his glasses at Vincent as he spoke. “No, no, you’re right. Go on then and tell me what is bothering you about Catherine.”

“I want Catherine’s two friends, Nancy and Jenny, to know about me, about Below, so that Catherine can talk with them about her life. You’ve heard her mention them before.”

“Vincent, the more people Above who know about us Below, the more danger our community faces.”

“I know that Father, perhaps better than anyone. But Catherine deserves to have confidants Above, friends to whom she can take concerns and problems, without having to talk in such vague generalities as to be meaningless.”

“How often does she have these concerns and problems? It seems a bit much for an occasional issue to break secrecy.”

“Frequency is not the issue here.” Vincent asserted. “She has no one, Father.”

Father pushed back his chair and stood, grabbing the back of it.

“What about Peter? Or Lin? She can talk to them.” Father looked satisfied that he had solved the problem neatly.

“They are not the same as lifelong friends. Peter is more like a father to her and Lin she barely knows, only since she attended their wedding.” Vincent sat as a

contained bundle of energy that didn't bode well for Father. "Don't you trust Catherine? Has she not shown herself trustworthy, time and again?"

"Of course, Vincent. It's not Catherine who worries me. I don't know these friends of hers."

"Trust her taste in friends then, Father. Jenny works for a book publisher."

Vincent watched Father's head come up at that news. A potential source of books might be advantageous.

Vincent continued layering his argument. "And I believe Nancy is a photographer, which would be handy here in our world, to provide pictures for us all to enjoy, which she could develop here, in private."

"We have Elizabeth's tunnels to record images," Father retorted.

"It's not the same. And what if some of the children who grow up and leave would like to have a picture of their loved ones to take with them? This Nancy could do discretely and make sure confidences are kept."

Father was thinking. There was some merit to this idea. He wished he'd had a picture of Devin after he left, to remember his son by.

Vincent had a further thought. "Nancy might also make a visual map of our tunnels. That would surely be a help to new members."

Father pressed his hand with his eyeglasses against his pursed lips, a man in thought. He broke his reverie. "I suppose seeing dangerous areas would help little ones more easily learn to avoid them."

Vincent nodded. He was becoming hopeful.

"Should we send around some of the Helpers Above to check out this Jenny and Nancy?"

Vincent was pleased that Father seemed to be coming around to the idea. "Jenny would be no problem, but Nancy lives out in Westport so such a trip might prove... difficult."

Jacob gave a slight shake of his head and exhaled. "I don't know, Vincent. The more I am thinking about it, the less I like it. I just don't like having more people knowing about us when there is no need."

At this, Vincent's coiled energy unleashed, he stood abruptly, his chair teetering behind him, and leaned his fists upon the table. "There is a need. Catherine is one of us, and it is *her* need. It is a real need to her. And because it is her need, it becomes mine as well. I must insist on this, Father."

Father had learned when not to press Vincent past a point that he wasn't willing to go. This was such a time. He would have to hope for the best.

"I'll present it at the next Council meeting for a vote."

Vincent saw the decision slipping away in tunnel bureaucracy, with Father's lukewarm endorsement leading to endless discussions and postponed votes.

"You'll *inform* them about the new probationary Helpers at the next Council meeting, Father. I intend to meet her friends tomorrow night."

Father's raised eyebrow followed him out. The next council meeting was sure to be interesting. Father said a quick prayer to keep them safe with this new arrangement.

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After a bout of nonstop gabbing, it was very late Friday, or technically very early Saturday, before the exhausted women retired to bed. Catherine and Jenny slept in her bed and Nancy on the sofa bed. It was midafternoon before the three women stirred. They sat at the dining table munching on toast with fruit and some leftover pizza as three bleary sets of eyes gazed unfocused over mugs of coffee.

Cathy was pouring a second cup for each of them when Jenny asked Nancy how her husband, Paul, was managing with the kids.

"He's probably ready to throw in the towel, but he knows how much this weekend means to me... *us*."

That word hung among them like an anvil, waiting to drop.

"What's going on, Nance?" Cathy couldn't believe anything could come between the couple.

She shrugged. "I don't know. We've just become more like roommates than husband and wife. Neither of us has been happy. So, when Jenny called about this weekend, I jumped at the chance to get away, and Paul agreed, figuring we both



needed some space.” She looked intently at the piece of toast she wasn’t eating. “I ran away from home.” She smiled wanly.

Cathy stood and scooped her up in a hug. Jenny completed the circle behind her. The women stayed connected just soaking in friendship and caring. Finally, they drew apart. Kleenexes were handed out all around as they retook their seats.

“I didn’t mean to end our fun weekend,” Nancy said ruefully.

“Hey, that’s what we are all here for... for each other!” Jenny pronounced.

“Besides, things aren’t going great for me either, with George.”

“Not you, too, Jenny!” Cathy teased. Seriously, she asked, “What’s happening, honey?”

“Same old story. He’s in it for fun and I’m looking for family.” She fidgeted with her napkin. “Where are all the good, unmarried, non-momma’s boy, Jewish guys?”

That got all three of them laughing. “Are you sure you want that, Jen? Look at me, I have it, and I’m questioning why at the moment.” Nancy said quietly.

“You mentioned that you and Paul had had some sticky times when I visited you last year,” Catherine recalled. “It seemed then that you had worked them out.”

“I don’t know. Maybe we’re just both stuck in a rut. There is so much going on with his work, the kids, it’s just so easy to forget to take care of us.”

Cathy looked at Jenny, and they both looked at Nancy. “Tell you what. Jen and I will take the kids one weekend, and you and Paul can go away and just be together.”

“You guys would do that?” Nancy looked hopeful.

“You know we would,” Jenny affirmed. “We’ll spoil them rotten and return them to you. What could it hurt?”

“I’ll take you guys up on that!” A relieved smile appeared on Nancy’s face. Hope had returned.

“We must remember to check our calendars before anybody leaves, ladies. This will be done!” Cathy finished with her hand raised in a pledge. Hugs ensued all around.

One problem solved, at least each of them hoped it was. On to the next!

“So... Cathy.” Nancy began. “What about that guy Vincent you mentioned last year? Are you still seeing him?”

“Vincent? What Vincent?” Jenny asked. “Wait a minute, how come she knows and I don’t! I live in the same city, for Pete’s sake!”

“She told me about him when she came up for your birthday last year. She was kind of questioning the relationship.” Nancy explained.

“You two realize I am in the room, don’t you?” Cathy asked.

Each of the women grabbed one of Cathy’s hands and together, moved to the couches. Jenny sat with Catherine and Nancy sat opposite.

“So, spill, Cath,” Jenny commanded.

“I, um, really would rather keep this to myself.” She squirmed a bit, knowing this would not go over well with Jenny.

“I’m sorry, Cathy, I didn’t know I wasn’t to say anything, I thought Jenny knew all about it.” Nancy looked contrite.

“No, that’s all right, Nancy. You couldn’t have known. I didn’t say anything to you about keeping it quiet. It’s just a part of my life I like to keep private.”

“But you expect to know all about our lives,” Jenny pointed out.

“I don’t know if ‘expect’ is the word, when you volunteer the information so readily, Jenny!” Catherine mildly rebuked her.

Cathy sighed, knowing she was stuck. “Okay, look, it’s just that I really can’t tell you much about Vincent because I made a promise not to talk about him.”

“Why? Is he some gangster? That’s it! He’s mobbed up, isn’t he?” Jenny’s imagination ran off with her.

“I’m a Deputy Assistant DA, Jenny. I’d hardly be involved with someone in the mob,” Cathy pointed out.

“True.” Jenny thought a moment. “Witness protection, then?”

“If I were dating someone in witness protection, I wouldn’t know about it, Jenny, as they aren’t allowed to tell anyone.”

Jenny looked at Nancy. “I’m out, your turn.”

Nancy shrugged.

“Look, I can’t get into specifics, but I can tell you that I love him with all my heart. He’s the best thing that ever happened to me. He makes me better just being with him, and I do the same for him. He’s kind, intelligent, compassionate...” Catherine got a faraway look in her eyes, and both women heard the softening of her voice as she described the relationship.

“He sounds too good to be true,” Jenny commented.

Catherine had the grace to blush. “Yes, in many ways, he does. But he is real. And he loves me.” She shrugged at the last words, as if she couldn’t believe it herself, and her eyes teared.

“Oh, honey, I didn’t mean to make you cry!” Jenny hugged Cathy, in apology.

“You didn’t,” sniffed Cathy. “It’s just... I really wish I could tell you guys more about him.” She grew very silent. She looked over to her balcony door as if gazing across the city. “I wish you could both meet him, but you never will.”

Both women looked at each other with alarm. “What do you mean, *we never will*?” Nancy sat on the coffee table to be closer. “Surely, someday we will meet Mr. Perfect!” She tried to interject some humor.

“Yes, you can’t keep him from us forever,” Jenny chimed in.

“It’s not my choice,” Catherine explained. “It’s his.”

At this, to forestall even more questions, Catherine announced it was time to order pizza, and the conversation was successfully derailed. Cathy called in for pepperoni, sausage, no anchovies (much to Jenny’s dismay), mushroom, and onion. The women got up from the couches to prepare the table and get drinks. Barely a few minutes wait went by, and Cathy buzzed up the delivery guy. With one look at three women in bathrobes as he transferred the pizza to their hands, the delivery guy beat a hasty retreat with a nice tip in his pocket.

Silence reigned as the women ate. Nothing like New York pizza to satisfy one’s hunger. Only a few pieces remained when all three groaned to a halt.

“I’m going to have to run every day next week instead of my usual three, just to burn off these calories,” Cathy complained.

“I’ll burn them off just running after the kids,” Nancy commented.

“I’ll just starve myself for a few days,” Jenny supplied. The other two women looked at each other... “Not!” they said in unison. Laughter rang out and felt good, a perfect end of the meal.

“Don’t think we forgot, Cath,” Jenny said, as they all recovered from laughing.

Cathy looked perplexed. “Forgot what?”

“Your mystery guy, Vincent,” Jenny reminded her.

Cathy sighed. Jenny had the memory of an elephant. “Well, it will have to wait until I get back from the bathroom. You guys can clean up while I’m gone. See how I get myself out of cleanup detail?” she smirked at them as she left for the bathroom.

Jenny and Nancy cleared the table, putting glasses in the dishwasher and wrapping the leftover pizza. They continued the conversation as they worked.

“What do you think is going on?” Jenny asked. “What did she tell you about him last year?”

“Just that she was having trouble accepting that they can never be together. I guess it’s kind of a long-distance type relationship or something. I don’t know. But it was tearing her up, wanting to be with him, knowing she couldn’t be. She was trying to figure out where she stood on the relationship.”

“Long-distance?” Jenny asked. “Where on earth would she have met him? I don’t think she’s left the city for a couple of years.”

“You’re right, other than to Westport, I don’t think she’s made any trips.” Nancy grew thoughtful.

The two continued to speculate as they waited for Cathy to return.

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It was dark in the bedroom, as evening had fallen and there was little moon on this night. She went into the bathroom and looked at her reflection. *I’m getting too old for these pajama parties*, she thought. *Time to face the music, Chandler. You’ve got to come up with something to satisfy Jenny.*

After splashing her face with cold water, Cathy made her way out of the bathroom. She heard light tapping against the window. Checking to be sure her guests were occupied, she quickly opened the door and moved through it, closing it quietly behind her.

“Vincent, what are you doing here? I told you about our girl’s weekend. Nancy and Jenny are inside!”

“I know. I want to meet them.”

Catherine stood, stunned mute.

“Father knows all about it. It’s approved. I can meet them.”

Still no reaction.

“If you want me to, that is.”

Finally, Catherine shook her head as if to wake up as it sunk in that Vincent would get to meet her friends. “Of course I want you to!” She stopped. “Are you sure you want to?”

He nodded. She threw herself into his arms. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!!!” The profusion of thanks was uttered into his vest, but Vincent heard it and smiled. Nothing made him happier than to make her happy.

She pulled back and took his hand. “Okay. Come into my bedroom and let me prepare them. Then you can come out.”

Stealthily, the two made it back into the bedroom without anyone becoming the wiser.

Cathy went into the living room. The two friends were back on the couch.

“You know, Cathy, we both just want your happiness.” Jenny began.

“I know.” Cathy sat down. “I’ve been thinking about it, and maybe I can tell you more about Vincent.”

She had their attention! They both sat up like expectant pups anticipating a treat.

Catherine took a deep breath. “You know those ten days I was missing, after my assault?”

They nodded in unison.

“Vincent was the one who found me in the park and saved my life.”

“Oh, how romantic!” Jenny said to Nancy, conveniently forgetting the trauma Cathy went through and focusing on the gallantry of Vincent. “Shh!” was Nancy’s reply. Both saw Cathy take a deep breath before proceeding.

“Before I go any further, I need you both to promise me that nothing you hear or see, will ever leave this room. You *must* keep all of this secret, or I can’t go on.”

Jenny looked at Nancy. Both caught the word “see” and wondered what it could mean. Both said in chorus, “I promise!” Cathy looked at each of them in turn, and satisfied they meant it, continued.

“I was bleeding profusely; there wasn’t time to get me to a hospital, so Vincent took me to his home.” She stopped and nervously picked at the sash of her robe. She continued.

“Vincent doesn’t live like you two, or me. And when I say he’s like no one you ever met before, I mean that. But he’s so much more than any man I’ve ever known.”

“How does he live then?” Nancy asked.

“He lives below New York City.” She stopped to let that sink in.

Two pairs of eyes looked at her, blinking, as if to clear their sight.

“Below ground?” Jenny squeaked.

Cathy nodded. “There is a whole secret community of people who live a full and rich life, simply, but with love and caring, all... underground.”

“So, Vincent’s a ... homeless dude?” Jenny asked hesitantly.

“No. His *home* is Below. And his life is full of purpose. He teaches literature and other subjects to the children who live there. He protects the community. He works with his hands. He draws. I think the best description is that he’s a ‘Renaissance’ man.”

Nancy took in her words and finally spoke. “But why does he live below? Why do these people live below?”

“Many people struggle Above, for a variety of reasons. Children are abused and neglected, but they are loved and cared for Below. Adults who society rejected for

ignorant reasons, find purpose and respect Below and contribute to the wellbeing of everyone. They rely on each other; they help each other.

“You must never tell anyone else what I have told you,” Cathy repeated. “These people depend on secrecy for their protection, for if people knew, they would probably, in the name of progress, go down and throw them out. And Vincent would have nowhere to go.”

“Why not?” Nancy was genuinely puzzled.

“Because... Vincent is very different, not just in the ways I’ve described.” She took a deep breath and exhaled, before continuing. “Not just in where in lives, but in how he looks. He’s beautiful to me, but to others, especially seeing him for the first time, he can be alarming or... off-putting.” She watched both her friends carefully. She felt warmth suffuse her from Vincent hearing her describe him as beautiful.

“Is he disfigured?” Jenny asked.

“Not exactly. He has a unique look. He was found discarded by a dumpster as a baby.” Her two friends grimaced at her description of abandonment. “The leader of this community raised Vincent Below. Because he was so different from other children, the leader knew there would be no chance of adoption. He raised him to be kind, caring, and intelligent. And once you know Vincent’s heart, you will see how beautiful he truly is.”

“Cathy, he saved your life! He’s okay by me regardless of how he looks,” Jenny reassured her friend.

“It’s not the looks that count, anyway,” Nancy offered. “You say he has a good heart, that’s all I need to hear.”

Cathy smiled at her wonderful, accepting friends. She couldn’t wait for them to meet him!

“He’s here to meet you. He knew how much I wanted to be able to tell you both about how happy we are together, so he got permission from the leader to tell you. Do you really want to meet him?”

Catherine wasn’t sure after her lengthy explanation that they would.

“Yes, of course!” they both said. “But how do you know he’s here? I haven’t heard anyone knock.” Nancy was puzzled.

Catherine was pretty sure they were speaking out of loyalty to her, but it touched her that they would do this for her.

“He comes up a more private way,” was all she said in explanation.

She stood up, went into the bedroom, and brought Vincent out to stand by the fireplace.

He was wearing his best pants, shirt, and vest, proof to Catherine that he wanted to make a good impression. His cape hung about him, his hood around his head. He slowly lifted his arms up and brought down the hood. He stood before the two seated women and took Catherine’s left hand in his right. They stood united, to meet Nancy and Jenny.

Jenny’s mouth dropped. Nancy’s eye’s widened.

“Holy smoke!” said Jenny.

Nancy’s mouth moved, but no sound came out.

“Vincent, this is Jenny, and that’s Nancy. Guys, this... is Vincent.”

Despite her trepidation, Catherine couldn’t help beaming, as she introduced Vincent. Nancy looked at Jenny, who looked back at her.

“It’s written all over your face, Chandler. You’re in love!” Jenny clapped her hands as she stood and rushed over to Vincent. She couldn’t help staring a few moments more, close up, before offering her hand. Vincent let go of Catherine’s to grasp Jenny’s. Nancy was behind her and stuck her hand out around Jenny.

His clasp of their hands was warm and measured. “It is an honor to meet Catherine’s friends. She speaks highly of you both. I assure you, I mean you no harm, despite what you may think of my looks... although, you seem to be handling my introduction quite well.”

Vincent looked at Catherine. “Your friends are everything you said they were.”

“Thank you,” Catherine beamed. “I have good taste in friends.”

Again, heads turned to each other, mouths open, before Nancy spoke. “Cathy, you didn’t tell us he had the sexiest voice in the city!”



Both ladies returned to the couch and gave the other to Vincent and Catherine. Jenny was actually fanning herself with her hand. She mouthed to Catherine in an aside, “He’s a hunk!”

“I’m sure you ladies have questions, now that you’ve met me. I’d like to answer them if I can. I want you to be comfortable with me, so that Catherine can freely share this part of her life with you.”

Nancy went first. “Do you love... Catherine?” Nancy had caught the difference in names Vincent used.

*Interesting question*, thought Catherine. She expected one about Vincent.

“With all my heart.” He looked at Catherine with love shining in his eyes.

“Who are you, or why are you, or what?” Jenny was having trouble stating her question.

Vincent brought his gaze back to Jenny. “That is one question I can’t answer. I don’t know. I just know that I am alive, and I live the best I can. As Catherine mentioned, if it weren’t for our community Below, I would have nowhere to be, for others Above would fear me or wish to experiment upon me or worse.”

He stopped a moment. “As it is, I can only visit Catherine in the dead of night so that others don’t see me.”

“Or I visit him Below,” Catherine interjected.

“So that’s why I haven’t seen much of you these last two years.” Jenny figured.

Catherine smiled. “Every chance I get, I go Below.”

“Which brings me to *the* question,” Jenny intoned. Catherine cringed, waiting.

“Just what are your intentions toward my friend?” Jenny demanded. Nancy perked up for the answer.

Vincent was holding Catherine’s hand. He raised it for a kiss, causing both women to melt, and said, “Our dream is to one day be together. How, or even if, that can be, we don’t yet know. But I promise you that I will love and protect her till the day I die, as I told her father.”

“Your father knew??” Jenny squealed.

“Not exactly,” Catherine calmed her. “When he had his stroke, Vincent came to his room late at night to introduce himself, since I hadn’t been able to speak about him to my father.”

Vincent explained. “Our community survives by secrecy. We take in new members very carefully so that anyone who has a true need and is willing to abide by our codes can become a part. But no one must know or our home will be destroyed.”

Both women nodded in understanding.

Vincent continued. “We have a few people Above we call Helpers, who help us when we can not provide for ourselves. We work very hard at being self-sustaining, but sometimes food supplies run short, or we need medicines, and our Helpers come to our aid. Some day in the future, you both may become Helpers if that is something you might wish to do and are proven trustworthy. We take nothing for granted. Your contributions would be valued in our community.”

“What could I do that would help?” Nancy asked.

“Catherine mentioned you do photography.” Nancy nodded. “You could take pictures for us if you would be willing to develop them Below and leave the negatives with us. You would have your own dark room for the developing.”

Nancy perked up at that thought. She’d wanted to get active again in photography, but space and adaptations for a darkroom were a sore spot with Paul.

“That’s a wonderful idea!” Catherine said. “Nancy, would that interest you? You should see some the of caverns Below. They are simply breathtaking! You could get some fantastic shots!”

“Sure! I could do that!” In her mind, she thought wistfully, *Cathy, you have no idea how much I would love to do some photography.*

“What about me?” Jenny was feeling left out.

“You work for a publisher, Jen, perhaps you have some misprints or excess inventory of books that could get ‘lost’ Below?” Catherine suggested, using “air quotes” as she spoke.

Jenny brightened. “Yes, in fact, we just had a printing error on some children’s books I could give you to take Below! When can I bring them down to you?”

“You are very generous. The children will be thrilled.” Vincent smiled, and Jenny melted.

“Let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves,” Catherine warned. “I’m afraid you guys are on probation for a while. They do take this very seriously... the secrecy.”

“We hear you,” Nancy said. “I promise, not a word to anyone, not even Paul.”

“Me, too!” Jenny added. “I promise to tell no one.”

Vincent stood. “From what Catherine has told me about pajama parties, you ladies will be wanting to talk about Catherine and me, so it’s best I leave you to it.” He took first Nancy’s hand, then Jenny’s, as he said, “It was a pleasure to meet you both. I hope we can meet again, soon.”

“Oh, yes! Nice to meet you, too, Vincent!” Jenny gushed. Nancy elbowed her in her side. “It was a pleasure, Vincent,” she managed with more decorum.

“Catherine, if you would see me out?” She took his hand and rose from her seat and followed him into the bedroom. Both friends were confused by this. They heard the balcony door open and shut. Curious-er...

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Nancy whispered to Jenny, “Quick...what do you really think about Vincent?”

Jenny looked momentarily surprised. “Well, he is different, I’ll give you that. But it’s clear they are both crazy about each other.”

“He seemed very protective of her, watching our reaction very carefully.”

“Did he? I was too busy looking into those killer blue eyes of his.” Jenny sighed.

“He’s not really human, is he?” Nancy was processing what she saw of Vincent.

“Still, there seems to be a lot that is human, or human-like in him.”

“So what?” Jenny asked. “He seems nice, he loves Cathy, and she loves him. The rest is for them to work out.” Life was much simpler for Jenny. Besides, several visions she had of Cathy were now explained, and in a way that made Jenny very relieved.

“I’m not saying that against Vincent, Jenny. Just trying to figure out who, or what, he is. I’ve never seen anyone like him before.”

“Me neither. Shh! She’ll be coming back soon!”

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Catherine looped her arm through Vincent’s as they stepped out onto the balcony. Vincent turned, facing Catherine.

“I had no idea you would be here tonight, Vincent, let alone wanting to meet my friends. How did you pull that off so quickly with Father?”

“You might say I made him an offer he couldn’t refuse.” He smiled as he used one of Catherine’s favorite film references. “I told him the decision was for me, not him. I wanted it and would have it.”

“I’m afraid I didn’t do you justice in your introduction, though. I wasn’t as prepared as I might have been, if I had known.” She looked crestfallen. “I’m sure they are discussing you while we are out here.”

“No doubt.” Vincent tilted his head. “I am a lot to... absorb, Catherine.”

That he kept a sense of humor about himself was one of the many reasons she loved him so.

“Still, I think it was easier all the way around to introduce you to both of them together. And I still have a day together with them to answer their questions and help them come to terms with my life as it is now.”

“I’m sorry that your life has to be so complicated, Catherine, because you dare to love me.”

“No, Vincent, I wasn’t complaining, just happy that I will have two very good friends that I can talk to, honestly, from now on. I wouldn’t trade a ‘normal’ life for you, whatever normal is! You have given me so much. I am so loved by you in so many ways. And I love you so deeply that I am so thankful that fate brought us together despite the tragic manner it used.”

She pulled him into a tight hug. Moments later, Vincent stepped back.

“You should get back to your guests.”

She smiled. “Thank you, Vincent.” He began to move toward the balcony wall when she pulled him to her and kissed him, lingeringly. That was proper thanks for

what he had done for her. And it would feed her dreams for months to come.

“Thank you, Vincent,” she whispered reverently.

“Be well,” he replied. And with that, he was gone. Catherine hugged herself as she prepared to go back inside and face the music she knew must be playing.

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Both women looked up with innocent expressions when Cathy came into the room. Cathy wasn't fooled.

“Okay, spill. What do you really think? You both were on your best behavior. You could be a walking ad for civil department.” She stopped abruptly.

“Wait. Hold that thought. I think this situation requires wine, a lot of wine.” She went to the kitchen and came back carrying a tray with two bottles of wine and three glasses.

Jenny looked up. “Where's my bottle?” she teased.

“Don't worry, Jenny. I have plenty in reserve for even you!” Cathy teased back.

Catherine sat down on the couch opposite of her two friends. Each chose their wine and Catherine poured.

“I think a toast is in order.” Nancy raised her glass, the other two women followed.

“To Catherine: a truer friend we couldn't find who trusts us so much. May we prove worthy of that trust.”

“Here, here!” Jenny seconded. They all drank.

“My turn,” Catherine raised her glass. “To good friends who always have your back.” They all sipped again.

“Last but not least,” offered Jenny. “May our boobs stay perky, our asses small, and our bank accounts large!”

The three broke out in laughter and companionably drank. They were starting on their third glass, when Nancy finally broke the ice.

“I notice he calls you Catherine, and you seem different, somehow, when you are with him.” Nancy was the observant friend.

“Yes, he always has.” She shrugged. “From him, I like it. It’s like I get a chance to be a different person, a better person when I’m with him.” She paused. “Catherine just fits, somehow.”

“But it’s still ‘Cathy’ with you two nuts,” she joked.

“Does Vincent have any clue how sexy he is?” Jenny was enamored.

“No,” Catherine said stoically. “Honestly, he’s one of the most obtuse men I’ve ever met when it comes to relationships and his effect on the opposite sex.”

“Have you two, um, well, you know...” “Jenny had the grace to look uncomfortable, asking.

“No. We haven’t made love.” Catherine met the question head on. “It’s not because I don’t want to, it’s Vincent. He is so cautious because of his differences.” Cathy looked down at her hands.

“Tell me you’ve at least seen him without his shirt on? He looks like his muscles have muscles!” Nancy appreciated good form, being a photographer.

“Yeah, is he as hairy on his chest as his hands?” Jenny wanted to know. Personally, she favored a hairy chest.

Cathy shook her head and shrugged.

“Oh, girl, we’ve got work to do!” Jenny proclaimed. “Operation Shirt Off commences!” Giggling erupted at the thought. Jenny rattled off ways for Catherine to get Vincent out of his shirt. Nancy embellished them, each getting wilder than the last. The last involved starting a fire and having Vincent rip off his doused shirt to put it out.

“The man wears layers. If he takes his shirt off, there are three more layers underneath!” Cathy groaned.

At this statement, the two women looked at each other, took another sip of wine, and said this was going to require more cunning than originally thought.

“There’s a part of all this you don’t know yet.”

Everyone sat mute as they waited to hear what Cathy was silently composing.

“I don’t know if you noticed the nails on his fingers.” She looked at her friends. Both of them shrugged and shook their heads. “They are quite long, and sharp. And on more than one occasion, he’s used them to save my life.”

“What are you saying?” Nancy asked cautiously.

“Vincent has had to kill bad men, bad people, for my sake, and for the sake of the community Below.”

She gauged their reaction.

“Every time he has to kill, it takes something from him that costs him dearly. He feels obligated to be the protector Below because there is nowhere else for him to live. And I hate that he feels he has to protect me that way, too.”

“How often has he had to do that?” Jenny asked.

“He saved me from Belmont’s men; from the watcher; from Stephen Bass, to name a few.”

“Oh, Cathy! We had no idea. We could have lost you several times over.” Jenny was aghast. She shuddered because of her dreams of the watcher, and her knowing Stephen.

“I’m trying to ease out of investigations to reduce that side of danger in my life. But regardless, Vincent will be there whenever I need him. We’re connected by a... bond... in which we can sense what the other is feeling.” She paused. “Vincent is much better at it than I am. So, whenever he senses my fear, he comes to protect me, to fight for me.”

“Wait.” Jenny sat up. “You’re saying Vincent knows what you are feeling?”

Cathy nodded.

“So, what about when you get revved up and ready to go, if you get my meaning?” Jenny winked exaggeratedly.

“We always get your meaning, Jenny,” Nancy said.

“It’s hard to get too revved up when all you do is hug or hold hands.” Cathy took a gulp of wine. This conversation was certainly getting personal. “Of course, at night, my dreams are a whole ‘nother thing!”

“Whoooo! I bet they are!” Nancy fanned herself. “I remember some juicy dreams before Paul and I became intimate.” She thought for a moment. “Do you think Vincent can feel you through your dreams?”

“God, I hope not!” Catherine pleaded.

“What about you? Do you ever feel Vincent is sexually frustrated?” Jenny got right to it.

“There are times,” Catherine started, “when we’ve been reading together, me nestled against him, and he’ll suddenly move away and stand up.” She was thoughtful. She took another sip of wine as the truth hit her. “He says it was to stretch his legs, but that wasn’t it.” She took a deep breath. “Simply put, he can’t be too close to me for very long,” she smiled, “before he changes his position.”

“Well, isn’t *that* interesting!” said Jenny.

“It’s frustrating and depressing!” Cathy barked. She tipped her glass up and emptied it. She leaned forward and poured another. Both friends looked at each other.

“I’d say you’ve got it bad,” Nancy pointed out. “Have you and he talked about this at all?”

“There’s a part I haven’t told you.” Cathy took another sip of wine and thought that there probably wasn’t enough wine to cover this explanation. Both women had looks on their faces that said, “There’s more? Like what else could there be?”

“Vincent is so aware of his differences, that he thinks he can’t be in a relationship with a woman. Actually, his father reinforces that thought.”

“He has a father?” Nancy asked.

“The man who raised him after they found him. He’s a physician and knows Vincent probably better than I do, at least medically speaking. I think he questions Vincent’s capacity to deal with strong emotion.

“You see, when Vincent saves me, he becomes almost... animalistic, like a beast. Instincts in him take over, and he snarls, growls, and uses his strength and his nails, until he vanquishes his opponent.”

“By ‘vanquish,’ you mean he... kills them?” Nancy asked.



Cathy nodded. "I've seen him when it happens. It's like he ... loses himself."

Both women's eyes were wide at this description. Catherine went on.

"So, Father questions what his instincts might do if Vincent was to act on his passion for me." Catherine sighed. "And I can't convince Vincent that he would in no way hurt me. He's had opportunities before and has never, ever, hurt me."

"Oh, honey, I'm so sorry." Jenny came to sit beside her. "Surely, with patience, he'll come around."

"That's not the only reason."

"There's more?" Jenny could hardly believe it.

"Vincent thinks I make too many sacrifices to be with him. That I give up too much of the life I'm used to. If we were to be intimate, then in his mind, the next step is that he asks me to give up my life, and live Below with him. And he won't do it."

She looked at her two dear friends. "My friends were one of those sacrifices, but now, I can have you back in my life, my whole life. Maybe there's hope that on that score, at least, he will budge a bit."

"Would you live Below, with him?" Nancy asked.

"I don't know if I could, at least, not fulltime. I tried it after my father died. I had a hard time dealing with his death, and Vincent helped me through it. I went Below for several days. I thought I wanted to stay there."

"Obviously, you didn't," Nancy said.

"No. Vincent keeps saying I'm a woman of both worlds, that I have a life Above I can't ignore. Yet, I also have a life Below, with friends and Vincent." She paused thoughtfully. "So, no, I guess I couldn't live Below full time."

Nancy reached across for her friend's left hand and held it as she asked the next question.

"What do you want from this relationship, Cathy? You told me in Westport you used to dream of kids, the house with the picket fence, and that now you weren't so sure." Nancy looked at her. "Is it because you can't have that with Vincent? But do you still want it?"

Nancy gave her hand a squeeze before releasing it.

“That’s a tough question, Nancy, because I do want it... not the house with the picket fence, obviously, but I do want to belong to Vincent and he to me. I want to have his children, if it would be possible. I want a life together like you have with Paul.”

“So?” Jenny asked. “Do you get enough out of the relationship if what you want can never happen?”

Wow. Jenny really went for it. She took another long sip of wine, a fact that didn’t escape the notice of her two best friends. “That’s the question that drove me to Westport,” Cathy admitted quietly.

“What do you get out of the relationship?” Jenny asked.

“Everything. He gives me everything. I’ve never felt so completely loved, so accepted and supported. He helps me grow and change, in ways that I’ve always wanted and never knew I could.” Her face softened, and her voice became almost a whisper. “He gives me everything.”

She sat up straighter and looked at her friends. Resolution was pulled around her like a cloak.

“So, I take it day by day, and hope that someday, Vincent will see our love as I do, with a future that is together and full of happiness.”

“If anyone could make that happen, my money is on you, Cathy!” Jenny took Cathy’s hand in hers and gave it a squeeze.

“It’s clear how much you love him.” Nancy stood and came over to squeeze in on the other side of Cathy. “And Vincent clearly loves you. His eyes shone every time he looked at you. And he was certainly taking our measure, making sure you were going to be okay with us.”

Catherine smiled and shrugged slightly.

“I can’t believe you’ve had to carry this yourself for so long, Cath!” Jenny was indignant for her friend. “To have someone, yet not have him... I can’t imagine what you must deal with coming to terms with that.”

“But based on all my failed relationships, Cathy, you seem to have the real thing here. You have to keep fighting for it! At least now, you don’t have to fight alone. You’ve got us!”

Nancy nodded. “I think all you can do is be patient.” Nancy offered. “You’ve heard this before, but it’s still true: Follow your heart. It seems to have done right by you so far.”

“You have no idea how much I love you guys!” Cathy hugged first Nancy, then Jenny. “I am so relieved that you know about Vincent. And that I can talk to you about him.”

“We’re here when you need us,” Jenny vowed. “Besides, now you’ve got us on your side. How can Vincent last against the three of us? She smiled broadly. “Face it, the man is toast!”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” said Nancy, “if the first time we get to come Below is for your wedding. Now, that’s an occasion I would love to photograph!”

“Hey, are there any more hunks living Below? Maybe I’ve been looking in the wrong place all these years.” Jenny considered the possibility. After all, her best friend had found love Below. Why couldn’t she?

“A toast! A toast!” Jenny grabbed Nancy’s glass and handed it to her and picked up her own. Cathy dutifully picked up hers.

“To Cathy’s wedding! An event that is only a question of when.” Jenny smiled.

As Catherine sipped, she said a silent prayer: *let this be true!* Catherine sat among her good friends, slightly inebriated, but clear-headed enough to feel Vincent’s love through the Bond and to appreciate the gift she was given: To be able to be truthful with Jenny and Nancy. No more needing to remember what she told whom. And someone she could rely on to be in her corner when her difficult life became too much. She didn’t realize how much she missed that until tonight.

She suspected Vincent did what he did as an escape valve as much for him as for her. *Little did he know*, she thought. She smiled to herself. *My friends are very loyal and very creative. Where there’s a will, there’s a way. I supply the will, and those crazy friends of mine will supply the way. Vincent, Jenny was right. You are toast!*

The three women finally made it to bed in the wee hours of Sunday morning.

That evening, more wine appeared, as Cathy raided her reserve, and with it, karaoke started with Cathy singing “Hey Paula,” only she changed ‘Paula’ to ‘Nancy.’

Nancy joined in, of course, on the line “Hey, hey, Paul, I want to marry you too.” Jenny provided kissy face sounds in the background.

The burning question that Jenny wanted answered was, “Who Put the Bop in the Bop Shoo Bop Shoo Bop.” Jenny’s false bass had all three sprawled on the floor, in tears of laughter.

The other two decided to pick the song for Cathy. They chose, “My Guy.” Cathy gamely sang the lyrics.\* *How perfect this is!* She thought. *And for them to pick this song means they truly understood what Vincent means to me.* Her heart swelled with happiness.

It was probably about that time that Vincent felt a warm rush of love and happiness from Catherine and wondered what those three were up to at that time of night. It underscored to him that he had made the right decision: there was a lightness to her being that wasn’t there before, and she was happy. He returned to his slumbers pleased with himself.

By the time the gruesome threesome finally woke up, showered, and dealt with their respective hangovers, it was time for the party to break up.

“Wait!” Cathy wailed. “We forgot to check our calendars. We promised Nancy and Paul a weekend retreat, remember?”

“That’s right, we did.” Jenny foraged for her daybook in the carpetbag she called a purse. Nancy took out hers, and soon the weekend was circled on everyone’s calendar. Cathy made a mental note to warn Joe way in advance that the weekend was off limits.

Cathy looked at her two friends and teared up. The three fell into a group hug. “I love you guys,” Cathy stated.

“Back at you, Chandler,” Jenny responded. “Same here,” Nancy followed. They vowed not to let a year go by before getting together again.

\*\*

Monday morning, Cathy dashed through her apartment, slipping into her suit jacket and shoes simultaneously, trying in vain to get to the office on time. She wasn't far off.

She stored her satchel after taking out the relevant papers, and sat down, ready to address the assault on the testimony files, as Joe had asked. She hummed as she began, a sort of close resemblance to the tune of "My Guy." Joe appeared in front of her.

"Wild weekend, eh Radcliffe?" he smirked, noting the rings under her eyes that she couldn't quite camouflage. "Humming? I don't think I've ever heard you hum before. If you were any good, I might know what song you were humming!"

Cathy thought back over the weekend, over the momentous decision Vincent had made that allowed her to introduce him to her two friends. She broke into her widest grin. "Yep, a great and wild weekend, and that's all I'm going to say about it. Don't you have work to do?"

Joe silently considered his options: press for more information, which he would likely not get, or surrender gracefully, and be happy that his friend was so happy. He wisely chose the latter, saluting her with two fingers to his temple, and ambled off saying, "I need that testimony review by end of day today, Pavarotti!"

*Nope*, she thought. *He's not going to ruin my mood*. She gave a mental hug to Vincent through the Bond and got to work.

Jenny called later to thank her for the weekend, and to tell her she really did like Vincent. "Promise me we'll do lunch later this week? She asked. "We've got a lot of planning to do, you know."

"What planning?" Cathy asked.

"You know," she paused. "Operation Toast!" Cathy could swear she heard the wink Jenny gave.

"Aronson, you're incorrigible! I promise we'll do lunch this week!" She hung up the phone, happy to be reminded that her friends were in support of her dreams.

## The End ... *or is it?*

Thanks to Cindy Rae for her editing and advice!

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“Hey Paula” song and lyrics by Paul and Paula

“Who Put the Bop in the Bop Shoo Bop Shoo Bop” song and lyrics by Gerry Goffin and Barry Mann.

### **\*My Guy**

*\*Nothing you could say could tear me away from my guy,*

*(My guy)*

*Nothing you could do 'cause I'm stuck like glue to my guy.*

*(My guy)*

*I'm sticking to my guy like a stamp to a letter,*

*Like birds of a feather we stick together,*

*I'm tellin' you from the start I can't be torn apart from my guy.*

*Nothing you could do could make me be untrue to my guy,*

*(My guy)*

*Nothing you could buy could make me tell a lie to my guy.*

*(My guy)*

*I gave my guy my word of honor to be faithful, and I'm gonna,*

*You best be believing I won't be deceiving my guy.*

*As a matter of opinion I think he's tops,*

*My opinion is he's the cream of the crop;*

*As a matter of taste to be exact he's my ideal as a matter of fact.*

*No muscle-bound man could take my hand from my guy.*

*(My guy)*

*No handsome face could ever take the place of my guy.*

*(My guy)*

*He may not be a movie star, but when it comes to bein' happy we are.*

*There's not a man today who could take me away from my guy.*

*No muscle-bound man could take my hand from my guy.*

*(My guy)*

*No handsome face could ever take the place of my guy.*

*(My guy)*

*He may not be a movie star, but when it comes to bein' happy we are.*

*There's not a man today who could take me away from my guy.*

*(What you say, Tell me more)*

*No muscle-bound man could take my hand from my guy.*

*(My guy)*

*No handsome face could ever take the place of my guy.*

*(My guy)*

*He may not be a movie star, but when it comes to bein' happy we are.*

*Songwriters*

*Robinson Jr., William*

*Published by*

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