

# *Can Erika Salven be Saved? Can Anyone?*

*By Cindy Rae*

*"I see it all perfectly; there are two possible situations - one can either do this or that. My honest opinion and my friendly advice is this: do it or do not do it - you will regret both." Soren Kierkegaard*

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She punched out six of the seven digits she knew by heart, held the phone to her ear, and settled her red, precisely manicured fingernail over the last button. It would connect the call.

It was a three.

*Three to get ready. Lucky three. Past, present and future, three. Yesterday, today, and tomorrow, three.*

*Father, Mother, and child.*

*Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.*

Erika Salven wondered if Joe Maxwell was a religious man. Or if he believed in ghosts.

Or at least, if he believed in monsters.

*Oh, yes. And "Everything goes in threes." That was another one.*

She hung up the phone. *Not yet.* She wasn't ready yet.

It had been more than a year. And she had no idea what she was going to say to him.

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Joe Maxwell flipped a file folder closed. The testimony had gone so-so. The judge was leaning his way. Probably. It was as good as he was going to get on an abuse charge with no corroboration from the spouse, but a good bit of it from the kids. Some of them. *Hell.*

Some days, he hated this job.

Of course his personal life was no great shakes either, he realized. A month into dating his latest consort, she'd decided to go back to her ex-husband.

*Oh, well. Life and work in the DA's office was like that, he mused. You win a few, you lose a lot.* Not that he'd been terrifically attracted to her, mind you. Just that she was a nice woman who knew enough to cheer for the Yankees but was so-so about the Jets. Sigh.

The last woman he'd felt an immediate spark and very strongly about was... *No. Don't go there.*

Not that he was going anywhere else, either.

It was after six, and only Ted was still here, doing pretty much the same thing Joe was. Working late for no money. Sigh, again.

Ted had danced with Catherine Chandler the night Joe had met Erika Salven. Funny. He'd thought himself so enraptured by Erika's auburn-haired beauty that it was a miracle he remembered little details like that.

But of course, Joe was a lawyer. Even people with a degree from Westfield Law School knew how to notice and remember details. It was what he'd been trained to do.

He distinctly remembered the “detail” of feeling himself in handcuffs, as the firm Erika worked for set him up on a bogus drug charge.

Cathy had come to his door by mid-morning, to talk to him. To save his righteously screwed ass.

Then she had saved Erika's.

A pair of assassins had trapped the two women in a stairwell. Cathy had sent the one dressed like a security guard over the side of the rail, and to his lifelong paralysis. Broken back. Oh, well. He had a special cell in Rikers. Turned out trying to kill Erika and Cathy hadn't been his first rodeo.

The other contract killer had simply wound up dead. Again, oh, well, and nobody much cared if a hit man for hire on the payroll of Proctor and Brannigan made it down a flight of stairs with his head turned around backwards. Cassut was dead. That was that. A long trail of dirty money tied him to Evan Brannigan, not to mention the bogus security guard's confession. Open and shut.

Erika's deposition had cleared Joe's name. And sent at least one of her bosses to jail. The Taylor case had gone forward with Joe “carrying the ball” in court, and the conviction had been a resounding one. The mayor himself had called with congratulations.

It was a day that would have made Joe's dad proud, had he lived to see it.

His mom had baked a lasagna, and both his sisters had called from out of state to congratulate him.

Joe had rarely felt less like he'd "won" anything in his life.

The realization hit, and then stayed, that he'd lost more. Much more. Erika Salven had played him. "Like a fiddle," he'd told Cathy.

He wasn't quite sure what he missed more: his old self-confidence (Joe Maxwell, Crime Fighter) or his heart.

It all left something in him that still felt bereft, months after the Taylor conviction.

He hated that he was sometimes unsure about whether or not he ever wanted to see her again.

Hated that while her feelings for him may have been contrived, his definitely were not. *Damn, that was so unfair.*

Hated that he wasn't exactly sure what those feelings were (before the last notes of that tune that got played on that fiddle), turned from a love song into a funeral dirge.

Something inside Joe felt just a little used. Just a little played. Just a little dead.

It bothered him that he wasn't getting past it like he should be.

Most days, he was sure he wanted her to call again just so he could be the one to slam down the phone. *There. I hate you. You lied to me, and I hate you.*

Other days, he just wanted her to call. And had no idea where the conversation would go from there.

It was idiocy, and he hated idiots. Especially when he had the sinking feeling the idiot was him.

Snagging his grey suit coat off the coat tree, he shut his office door and told Ted not to stay too late, knowing it was a worthless bit of advice.

Ted adjusted his glasses and nodded, flipping over another page. It was only the third case of this sort he'd ever brought to trial. He wanted it to go his way. Of course he did. Something about bookmaking. Something... Joe rubbed the nape of his neck, not quite remembering.

He should know what the "something" was, and how it was going. That's what they paid him to do. Know how his office ran, and make sure it was going right.

"Ted, you need any help with that?" Joe asked.

"I got it, Joe." Ted waved him off. "Just making sure I've got where the inconsistencies are in the depositions."

He was a good lawyer. Give him a couple more years and he might even be a great one.

Hell, who could say? Maybe what was left of Proctor and Brannigan (now just "Proctor") would come hire him away someday. Or one of the other firms would.

"Don't stay much later. They ain't paying you overtime, and the judge don't like to see you show up looking ragged. Makes 'em think you've been out all night partying," Joe chided.

"Dee will see to it I get a hot meal, and keep me out of the bars," Ted answered, naming his fiancée.

*Ted is a lucky man*, Joe thought, as the object of his envy went back to work with a highlighting pen.

"Yeah. 'Night. Let me know if you need anything."

"'Night, Joe," Ted answered, clearly still wanting to work.

Joe shut the glass and steel door behind him, wishing for a "Dee" in his own life.

Or at least a decent dog. *No, no dogs.* His lease forbade it.

He yanked down his tie and waited for the elevator. It would probably be empty, unless someone like him was struggling to get home before seven. Edie did that, sometimes. So did Cathy Chandler. Both were home now. Or at least, they should be. Edie had left right on time, Catherine a few minutes after.

Not for the first time, Joe wondered why she'd given up corporate law for this gig. And more, why she stayed.

It was one thing to wake up one morning and decide you'd grown a social conscience. It was quite another to still be nursing it, nearly three years later. He'd thought she would not last a month. Turns out, he'd been wrong.

It felt like he was on a streak for that lately, where women were concerned.

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It was a luncheon that had turned into a forced march, complete with rubber chicken and a bad dessert. The speech had been uninspiring, and it had made up for that by also being tediously long. Sigh. *Joe owes me for this one,* Catherine thought.

And just when she thought it couldn't get any worse...

"Hello, Catherine."

Chanel No. 5 hit her nose just as an all-too-familiar face hit her line of vision.

"Erika. I didn't realize you were back in town." Catherine stared up into eyes that were the brown side of hazel. Shrewd eyes. But warm

ones, too. Erika had been one of the... what had Ted called her? One of the "Young Turks" at Proctor and Brannigan.

*If she was one of the Turks, God help the Ottoman Empire,* Cathy thought.

"I didn't leave town. I just... left the part of it I used to frequent," Erika told her.

*The rich part or the part where you slept with people to try and manipulate them?* Catherine's musings were less than charitable.

But what she said was, "Sometimes a change of scene can do you good."

Erika sat down next to her. *Damn it.*

"I'm leaving in a moment," Cathy stated. "You might want to---"

"How is Joe, Catherine?" She asked it without preamble.

Catherine paused and weighed what to say next carefully. She'd rehearsed this moment a time or two, mentally.

"Don't you think you should ask Joe?" She kept her voice gentle. It would not do to rile Erika.

"Honestly? I'm afraid he might slam the door in my face."

"He might," Catherine allowed. "Then again, he might open it, and want to talk to you. The two of you kind of left the door for that open, as I recall." She reached down for her purse.

"Is he seeing anyone, now?" Erika asked.

"Erika..." Catherine was clearly uncomfortable. "He might be. He was. I honestly don't know. Joe and I aren't close that way. I don't necessarily know about his...affairs."

"And he doesn't know about yours?" Erika asked, keeping her voice courtroom steady.

Warning bells jangled.

"That would be right. Have a nice---"

"Who saved us in that stairwell, Catherine?"

And there it was. Boom. Pull the trigger, hit the little ceramic plate, and watch the pieces scatter.

Catherine kept her poker face firmly in place. "I heard the noises, same as you," Catherine responded, giving it her best "lawyer voice." "I pitched the guard over the rail, and Cassut fell. Lucky for us." She'd rehearsed the sentences word for word.

"Lucky." The redhead knew the sandy-haired woman was lying through her perfect teeth.

"If you see Joe, please tell him I'd like to see him again. I'm working Legal Aid, on McIntyre Street."

*McIntyre Street? That was Rolley territory.* What territory there was, anyway.

Erika laid a vellum card on the table, her intention clear. Pick it up and give it to Joe, or the questions would get a lot more uncomfortable.

Catherine wanted desperately to stay out of Erika Salven's crosshairs. It wasn't so much what she knew. It was what she was capable of finding out. She was a terrific mixture of smart and ruthless, with just enough conscience thrown in to make her a very loose cannon.

Catherine picked up the card, hating being in between Erika and Joe. Vincent could be at risk, here.

"I need to get back to work," was the only assurance she gave.



Erika rose and walked away from the table, content that Joe would at least get her business card before the day was out.

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Joe remembered the night he'd walked Erika all the way to Battery Park. That was the Taj Mahal compared to this. The worst part of McIntyre Street was a few blocks down, yet. But this wasn't the Ritz. She had a bail bondsman for a neighbor. *Convenient*. He knocked on the steel door hard enough for her to hear.

A deadbolt slid back, along with a chain, a standard lock, and a sliding lever. There were bars on the windows. *Nice neighborhood*.

"So. This what 'contrition' looks like?" he asked her, eyeing the cracked masonry. This was a far cry from where she'd been.

The red-head he'd once taken to bed, if not to heart, indicating he was to enter.

"Maybe. They say after contrition comes absolution." She was expecting him. After speaking to Catherine Chandler, she should be.

"Is that what you're hoping for, Erika?" he asked, stepping in. She looked beautiful, even if the neighborhood didn't.

She tensed up a moment, as if she was expecting him to strike her, on the one hand, and hoping he'd hold her, on the other. He did neither.

"It's what we're all hoping for, isn't it, Joe? Confession? Contrition and absolution?" she asked, ushering him through a waiting room into what now passed for her office.

The fax machine looked new. The desk looked old. She opened up a walnut cabinet that held a couple of decanters. At least she still had

some trappings of her days with Proctor and Brannigan. Joe wondered if there was a china tea set around, somewhere.

"Working for Legal Aid isn't absolution, it's penance," Joe told her. She looked a little thinner. The red hair he'd once had his hands full of still fell in a curling cut around her shoulders.

"Maybe I needed penance." She uncapped the crystal decanter.

"Needed to give away my degree for a while," she said. She looked elegant in a dusky green skirt and matching blouse that set off her deep eyes.

"How long?" he asked, letting his hands rest in his pockets, stretching the fabric of his trousers tight.

She splashed liquor into two heavy-bottomed highball glasses. Johnny Walker Red. She remembered he drank it.

"I've been here since... well. Since pretty much the day Evan Brannigan went to jail. I heard about Phillip Taylor, by the way." She handed him his glass, and saluted him with hers. "Congratulations."

"May they rot in the same cell together." Joe saluted back with his glass, but didn't drink. It didn't pay to get drunk around Erika Salven.

She took the tiniest of sips, and rolled the drink between her two palms.

"Cathy Chandler says you dropped by," Joe said.

"I might have bumped into her at a luncheon," Erika ventured.

*Horse shit.* He had been in a room with her for five minutes, and she was already lying. He set the glass down.

"Have a good night, Erika." He moved to leave.

"Yes. I arranged to be there," she said quickly. Then, "Cathy Chandler isn't a perfect person, Joe."



He turned to face her. "And that's not a name you put in your mouth with anything but respect, Erika." His voice was unwavering, and his brown eyes held a warning.

"I'm not saying I don't respect her." At least this time, she sounded honest. "I owe her."

Yes, that was the truth. Cathy had saved her hide in that stairwell.

"I'm just saying... there's more there than what's on the surface, Joe. I don't want you to get hurt."

"You don't...? *You? You* don't?" His voice was incredulous with the anger he'd nursed for too many months. "*You* don't want me to get *hurt*, Erika? Oh. Okay. That is rich. You don't want me to get hurt." But he made no further move toward the door.

Erika held up her hands, knowing she deserved every syllable of it, still trying to make Joe understand without being seen as a jealous bitch.

"I know. I *know*. I deserve that, and worse, I *do*. But you have to *listen*." She wrung her hands a little. Joe remembered the feeling of those amazingly long fingers on his body.

"Catherine Chandler is..." Erika looked to the side. "Something in the stairwell, and I can't even describe it... I heard it, more than saw."

It took him a second to catch up with her sentence. Erika looked like she was fumbling for words on a speech she'd tried to rehearse but wasn't lying about. She was too good a lawyer to be stammering her way through this, whatever it was. And it had to do with Cathy.

"She was holding on to me, keeping my face turned, some." Erika demonstrated by turning her head a little. "I was scared, my hand was up, and my eyes were even shut for some of it. A lot of it." Again, she showed the posture of someone in a defensive position.

"Someone... something in there, with us. Like an animal. But big. In there. Protecting us. I was so stupid, at first I just thought it was all about me. That someone had come to help me. But it wasn't."

Her dialogue was disjointed. Not readily understandable. But Joe did understand. Because he knew Catherine Chandler, had known her for three years. He knew sometimes strange things tended to happen around her.

Joe stopped and stared. "Did you see him?"

"It. It was an 'it,' Joe, and..." Her sharp lawyer's mind realized something, based on his expression. "This has happened before. Around her."

It was no sense lying. Erika Salven could pull the public records on Cathy Chandler's cases as easily as he could. Had.

"He's tall," she described, remembering a flash. "Over six feet. Heavy. I remember feeling him when he jumped down the stairwell to get Cassut. I had a feeling of a black cape, maybe kind of a hood, pulled up?" She made the gesture. "That's all."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing. I don't think he can speak. He... it... roared. Like a lion."

Outside the Bronx Zoo and the movies, Joe felt certain Erika Salven had never heard a lion roar in her life.

"Did Catherine say anything to him? Say a name?"

"No."

"You didn't hear her say 'Vincent'?"

"I said 'no.' Who is Vincent?" she asked.

"Beats me. Some guy she was seeing, at some point. I think he was married, because she never brought him around." Joe repaid honesty with honesty. Carefully. "I only know because she got grabbed for a couple days, and I went through her apartment with a special investigator. What did you see, Erika?"

"This has happened before," she repeated.

"Answer me."

Erika clasped her hands before her. "Joe, be careful around her. Around him. He's dangerous. I didn't see him. I couldn't, not really. My ankle felt half torn off and I was in pain. My head was down and my hair was in the way, and she was holding on to me, and I really thought I was going to die." She shook her head, remembering.

"A... a roaring sound. A dark... something. A cape or a blanket, something black, pulled around him. The light in the stairwell was bad.

I thought she was shielding my head, and I remembered being grateful, thinking, 'Here's this woman who despises me, trying to help me.' But I think she was just trying to keep my eyes turned. Keep me from seeing."

As she told her story, it was obvious that fine some details were coming clear.

"I felt him land. Felt the hard vibration of it, on the metal stairs. I don't know what he was, or where he came from. But in two seconds, a trained killer was dead at our feet, his neck snapped."

"Could have happened when he fell down the stairs." Joe gestured. It was reasonable.

"It didn't." She sounded damn certain.

Her voice continued. "I looked up the autopsy report. Cassut's neck was broken. I think it was that way before he fell. His wrist was snapped. The one he held the gun in." Her meaning was clear. He'd been disarmed, killed, and shoved backward, all in a matter of seconds.

Joe put his hands back in his pants pockets. He regarded her agitated form for several long beats. Joe inhaled, deeply.

"This does not make things square with us, Erika. And she did save your life. Or he did. It. Whatever."

"I know it doesn't, Joe. I'm just... asking you. Please. Be careful around Catherine Chandler. There's more to her than there seems."

"I've known her for three years, Erika, and she's saved my hide more than once, counting from you. I don't know what this is. But I know that I trust her."

Her arms came up to cross her chest. "Maybe that isn't 'trust,' Joe." Now she was jealous. And they both knew it.

"Maybe it isn't. But I've learned to accept things I can count on, without asking a lot of questions, lately." He meant to hurt her with that last one. It felt good to draw a little blood, even if she still fascinated him on some level.

She wasn't even slowing down.

"Isn't that what we're supposed to do, Joe? Ask questions? Figure out why things don't add up? You're taking on an odd stance, for a lawyer."

"Ain't I though." He picked up his Johnny Walker. It had been a while since he'd sipped straight whiskey.

"You want a question from me?" he asked. "How about the one we both know I'm dying to ask, and you're probably going to lie over. Was any of it real? Or was it all fake?" He took a sip. Needed it, for this.

A tear fell from her beautiful and artfully made-up eyes.

"I swear I have had my hand on the phone more times than I can count. I've punched in your number. It ends in a three."

"Home, or office?"

"Yes," she responded, knowing it was true of both numbers, and knowing she'd been about to dial them both, on several occasions, depending on what time of day it was.

"Funny. It never rang." His brown eyes had a sardonic look.

"I know." She let another tear escape. "It did, in my head. Then you hung up when you knew it was me."

He drained the glass, surprising them both, and adjusted his coat, buttoning it.

"It would be the smart thing to do, Erika." His eyes were sad as he said it.

She nodded at that, not trying to deny it. "I just got lost, Joe." She'd said that before, once. "Haven't you ever been lost?"

His voice became almost deceptively soft. "Yeah. I was, once. I was in your bedroom when it happened."

She looked down, not sure just how many ways he meant that. Did he mean she'd been a mistake, and he'd been "lost" to be with her? Or that he felt so much for her that being with her gave him that "lost in your arms" sensation?

"I swear that wasn't faked." She barely whispered it.

His reply was harsh. "So. You swear you came? Good. Because I know I did."

It was unbelievably crude, and hurtful. And it felt good to say it, even though it felt like hell at the same time. He'd bloodied her. Got his pound of flesh.

Like so much else between them, it really didn't make him feel better, even when it felt long overdue.

"I deserved that. I know I did. Whatever you think of me, I promise I've thought worse," she said.

He'd give her this; she could take a punch. It didn't matter. The anger that had been chewing at his insides still simmered.

"I doubt it. You're not a whore, Erika. You made no money off me. There's that, at least. But you don't know what it was like, that next morning, to be sitting in my apartment with my world blown apart, looking at my mug shot in the papers."



He set the empty glass down, just a little too hard. The rim of the glass felt hard against his palm.

She lifted a perfect eyebrow. "Actually, maybe I am a whore. Proctor settled a fat check on me not to sue the whole firm. To just hold Evan Brannigan personally responsible."

He blinked, that she would reveal that. She didn't have to.

"Ah. Good to know. Thanks for clearing up that crime still pays." He was trying not to hate her. Which interfered with the part of him that was trying not to hate both of them, right now.

"I gave most of it to charity," she said. "Used some of it to set up this place." She held her hands out to indicate her palatial digs.

"Did you buy so much as a tube of lipstick with it?" he asked her.

She knew what he was implying. He was asking if she had used any of it for herself.

"I swear I didn't."

He felt the whiskey hitting his stomach. It burned. Hurt and felt good at the same time. That always seemed to happen around her. It was time to go.

"Good night, Erika," he said, flipping the lock and opening the door to the anteroom. "Don't forget to lock up after me. This ain't the greatest neighborhood, and there's no security guard near the door."

Erika crossed to do as he bid her, wondering if he was aware that he'd just expressed concern for her safety, however back-handedly.

"Last time I had one of those, he tried to shoot me," she told him, letting him hear the irony in her voice, just before she shot the deadbolt.

Neither was sure if they would see the other again. Or if they did, where and when that might be.

Joe stepped out onto McIntyre Street, lost in his thoughts.

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"I did something stupid tonight, Pop," Joe confessed to a black and white photo an hour later. He was back in his apartment. His Father's picture, frozen in time, stared back at him. "I fell in love with someone. Someone I don't think I can have."

Brown eyes very like his own stared back at him. The uniform his father wore had been pressed and starched, the crease on his uniform slacks eternally sharp. Mama Maxwell was a stickler for details like that.

"She's complicated. It's complicated." He nudged a corner of the photo upward a hair. That was better.

"I should forget about it, and move on. She has secrets, and I don't know what to do about that. I'm not sure why I can't just... get past it."

He sipped his second drink that night and saluted his father as he felt the emptiness of his apartment.

Beside the photo was his law degree. Westfield. Class of '82. Cum laude. *Good enough to get Phillip Taylor and Evan Brannigan matching jail cells*, he thought with a little pride.

"I'm going to..." He let the sentence drop. He wasn't sure what he was going to do. "I don't know. Maybe she can be saved. Maybe she can't. I'm not sure."

He held his finger to the light switch, preparing to shut everything down for the night.

"I just know that, no matter what this is, I'm going to see it through. Somehow."

The light clicked off, and Joe Maxwell made peace with that resolution.

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*For several months, this remained as a one-off, but like a lot of things, it stayed with me, and something about it just plain wanted to be seen through to its end. So I did. To the kind people who asked for it and encouraged it, here it is, the continuation of "Erika Salven."*

## Can Erika Salven Be Saved? Can Anyone?

### Chapter Two

### Caught Between



*Incidit in scyllam cupiens vitare charybdim -*

“He runs on Scylla, wishing to avoid Charybdis” ~ Latin proverb quoted by Erasmus, among others.

Joe's head ached a little, but he'd had worse. His stomach rebelled at the idea of coffee. It had been a while since his last hangover, and as hangovers went, this one wasn't going to be legendary. A little cotton mouth wasn't going to kill him.

Still, it might be best to avoid him for a few hours, Joe admitted.

He went through the motions of his morning routine in his apartment, after the alarm rang. He showered and shaved, feeling no better but no worse for having done so. The ritual of the electric razor, the mouthwash and getting ready for the day even helped, a little.

Knotting his tie was a familiar thing, and reflexive, as was collecting his keys and his wallet. He kept thoughts of Erika at bay. Now was not the time.

*Always be in the door fifteen minutes before everybody else. They won't know if you've been there just that long, or an hour.* It was advice John Moreno had given him when he'd been hired for his job. It was sound, even if Moreno had turned out to be dirty. Come in at least a little early sometimes a lot early, and stay at least a little late.

Today, however, wasn't going to be that kind of day.

Joe shouldered in through the door right on time, which to him, felt "late." *Crap.* The headache was subsiding, but the stomach acid wasn't. Served him right, and no, he couldn't blame Erika for either his tardiness or his indigestion. She hadn't forced him to knock back straight liquor on an empty stomach after a long night.

He reached the sanctuary of his office and kept his curtains pulled as he blessed the small stack of file folders on his desk. He could look busy, if he had to, without actually having to go anywhere or move around that much.

Six messages from perps' attorneys in his "in" box was probably a good thing. Mouthpieces looking for plea deals more than likely, or sharks scenting the water, to see what he had. Same old dance.

Cathy Chandler came in her pretty much her usual ten minutes late. No big deal. Like him, she wasn't due in court today, and would make it up on the back end, more than likely.

He was knee deep into his fifth phone call when the messenger arrived.

A long manila envelope addressed to him was the only missive the delivery guy had. Joe recognized the hand writing, immediately. Erika.

He closed his door, locked it, and took the envelope to the desk.

It might be a long letter from her, except he knew it wasn't. It might be anything from an apology to a pair of tickets to a Mets game to ... whatever else a woman sent a man she was trying to reconnect with. Sexy underwear. A room key. Racy pictures.

Well, there were pictures, all right. But to call them 'racy' meant you were into some seriously twisted shit.

It was Lawrence Cassut's autopsy report. Somehow, Joe knew it would be.

Joe rubbed the fingers of his right hand across his closed mouth, as he looked. He knew Erika had seen these and figured out something; knew they were part of why she was edgy, about Catherine.

For a minute, Joe considered simply sealing the mess up, and either tossing it in the circular file, messengering it back to her, or just shoving it at the bottom of a stack, somewhere. For a minute.

But he didn't.

'Cassut, Lawrence G, W/M 48 y/o DOB ...'

Joe glanced over the vitals and skipped to the end.

*Cause of Death: Spinal shock - Spinal cord transected between C3 and C4. Death: Instantaneous.*

It went on to list blood alcohol and toxicology, (he was clean) and the multiple injuries pursuant to the fall. He'd hit his head, scraped his left cheek, and fractured his left shoulder on the way down. Injuries consistent with a guy taking a header, down a flight of stairs.

Or a dead man, being thrown down one, face first.

Joe glanced at the pictures of the dead assassin's face, then flipped the through some of the other snapshots until he narrowed his focus exactly where Erika had wanted it: on his wrist. Specifically, his right one.

He'd broken that, as well, of course. Like the shoulder.

Except ... no. Not like the shoulder.

It was the kind of thing they'd have looked for in a homicide investigation. But this hadn't been one of those. Cassut was an open and shut case, so he was fodder for the new kids at the morgue. The less experienced Medical Examiners. Maybe even an intern.

And even the intern had seen it.

*Injuries consistent with fall down a flight of metal stairs. Bruising on right wrist indicates struggle. Left hand print pattern, presumably*

*large male. Left scapula fracture. Left cheek bone fracture. Multiple scrapes, inc. left knee and ankle...*

A white piece of Erika's stationery fluttered to his desk.

*He didn't asphyxiate* was all it said.

No. He didn't.

And he should have.

A broken neck was a tricky thing. As many quadriplegics could tell you, it wasn't always even fatal.

And when it was, the victim usually died from asphyxiation. It was the common way for that to happen, depending on where the break was. The victim might even last a couple minutes, under those circumstances.

But Cassut hadn't died of asphyxiation. He hadn't been laboring to breathe at the bottom of that stairwell, gasping while his brain struggled to figure out why his nervous system was no longer sending clear signals to draw in air, after a lifetime of handling that chore just fine.

Cassut had died because his spinal cord had either been cut, (No. There was no knife wound, or anything to indicate a garrote style trauma to the neck), or...

Bluntly put, his head had been twisted so far around, and with such a force, his spinal cord had been half torn away, inside his vertebrae.

Twisted by something very strong.

Obviously, not by Catherine Chandler. And certainly not by Erika.

Was it possible that the fall had done it?

Given Catherine's (and even Erika's, to some extent) statement, it must have.

Except it hadn't.

If you looked, you saw it. The fractures were all on the left side of his body. He'd fallen that way, and taken damage from it.

Except for his right wrist.

If Lawrence Cassut was like most of the people on the planet, he was right handed. He'd have held a gun in that hand. The gun he'd been found with. The gun he'd pointed at Catherine and Erika.

Right before something had crushed the bones in his right wrist, snapped his neck, and tossed him dead, down the stairs.

*It's big. It roars like a lion, Joe.* Erika's description from last night stayed with him.

Joe re-read the description again. Cathy Chandler was also like most people on the planet. She was right handed. And according to Erika, Cathy had been holding her, "shielding" her from the events in the stairwell. Keeping her head turned. There was no way she had struggled with Cassut, and Erika hadn't, either...

*No. Dammit, no.*

He closed the file, stuck it back in the envelope, and once again prepared to throw it in the garbage. He owed Catherine Chandler. *Owed her.* Owed her and owed her big. Over this very case. She'd saved his ass. Hell, she'd even saved Erika's.

Even Erika agreed that Catherine had thrown the bogus security guard over the side of the railing. Both of them had stated they were in the hallway together, when Cassut fell. No one had looked at the autopsy



report too closely because there was no reason to. There was no doubt Cassut had died terrorizing two women. Open and shut.

Except it wasn't.

A knock at Joe's office door reminded him he was still at work. He looked up through the frosted glass, and knew he was looking at Cathy Chandler's opaque form. She tried the knob. Locked.

He put Erika's envelope under several others on his desk and went to open the door.

"Hey." She handed him a file folder. "Manetti's lawyer says he'll cop to second degree arson if we let him count time served and don't ask for the maximum. What do you think?"

Joe walked back to his desk, leaned against it, and stood silently a moment, taking her in.

She looked a little nervous.

*No, no she didn't. He was imagining it, projecting.* She looked like normal Cathy. Normal Radcliffe. Dressed in a camel pair of slacks and a matching jacket, with a white blouse underneath. Geometric earrings framed her face. Her manicured hand held the knob of his door. She looked like old money. She always looked like old money.

"Joe?" Cathy's voice prompted. Her green eyes darted, a little. *Son of a bitch.* Yes, she was nervous. Around him. Because she figured he'd gone to see Erika, last night, and she wasn't sure what had been said, between them.

*Ah, hell.*

"Tell him 'no.'" Joe instructed. "Manetti's guilty of first degree, and he sent his boss to the hospital. And I don't feel like turning a blind eye to anybody, today."

His look spoke volumes, and Catherine held it, a moment, before she dropped it.

*So Erika told him. Now what?* Catherine thought.

"I'll let him know," Cathy said, turning to get back to her desk and to escape Joe's brown gaze.

"Cathy." Joe's voice stopped her.

His brown eyes wanted to know something his mouth wasn't ready to ask. So he said what he had to say, speaking volumes as he did it. "Tell Manetti's lawyer I'm going to press to the max. I don't like it when people try to use the system to slide by with something. Tell him not to call, again."

Catherine nodded, aware the message was for her, as well. Or it could be.

"I'll let him know," she repeated, leaving as quickly as she could.

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"Next time you send me a love letter, seal it with a kiss." He tossed the autopsy report onto Erika's credenza. McIntyre Street was turning into a regular thing for him. The neighborhood was slightly less objectionable by daylight. Slightly.

She folded her arms across her chest as he entered her office. It was a defensive posture, and one she hadn't guarded against. *Bad lawyer. Bad.*

She knew it, too, and he saw her mentally make the correction. Slowly, the arms came down.

"I take it you saw the same things I did." She didn't bother to ask if he'd opened it and looked. She knew he had.

His dark eyes watched her steadily but he said nothing. Lawyer's trick. Cop's trick. Most people rush to fill in silences, and what they say is nervous. Might be a lie, might be the truth, but it's a nervous lie or truth. Easily verifiable.

She was too smart to fall for it. She gave him stare for stare. And he could tell she was itching to bring her arms back up.

"If you think you're going to use me to crucify Cathy Chandler for saving your ass and my career... Lady, you got another one coming."

"Joe, I'm not using you."

His voice became very, very even. "That would be a first, then."

"Joe, the one has nothing to do with the other. Something killed Lawrence Cassut. And it wasn't a fall down the stairs."

Logic. Erika's betrayal of him, Evan Brannigan's utter obliteration of him had nothing to do with the fact that Catherine was hiding something, had been hiding something, for quite a while. Years, maybe. Logic. He hated Erika's.

"Erika, if you want to sit outside her apartment to see who comes and goes, be my guest. Just don't expect anybody to come bail you out when she charges you with stalking," he advised.

Her frown was expected. Her next sentence wasn't. She inhaled deeply, before she let it go.

"I had about sixty grand, in student loan and other debts. My mom is in a very expensive nursing home. Evan Brannigan told me he was hearing good things about me, and that I was very talented. Like an absolute idiot, I believed I'd stood out for my courtroom skills."

She walked around the desk to put it between them, needing both the distance and defensive blockade of the furniture. To say she was feeling uncomfortable was an understatement, given her actions and body language. Joe watched her sit in the chair as she lobbed the non-sequiter his way. She plucked a pen from its holder and idly tapped it on the blotter as she waited for the words to sink in.

The change of subject actually caught Joe off guard. *Careful*. He took a moment to frame his reply.

"Tell me every syllable of what he told you to do with me. Was there one dollar figure for just dating me, and another to sleep with me? Or was that a given?"

She shook her head, sending the gold hoops in her ears to dancing.

"Oh, Joe. Men like Evan Brannigan manipulate so much better than that. He told me to meet you. That was all. Said he didn't know much about you, and he wanted me to size up the man who was coming after Phillip Taylor." She dropped the pen. Now the arms did come up, crossing herself across the chest. She did not like remembering she'd been used any more than he did.

"So you did," he prompted.

"I told him you were smart, principled, and you weren't the kind to be bought off." Her gaze was utterly steady. She was telling the truth. And it didn't much matter, at this point.

Joe let the comment settle. If she thought a weak compliment was going to square things between them...

"No to the first and yes, to the rest," he replied after a pause. "If I'd been smart, I'd have steered clear of you the minute you told me where you worked," he offered by way of explanation. He did not want to reveal to her that the possibility of working for Proctor and Brannigan had tempted him - that she had tempted him. So he didn't. He watched Erika sort through her memories.

"I just... he'd been talking about heading up a new division, said he needed somebody with ... let's see how he put it: 'A sharp mind and good people skills. A go-getter.' I was knee deep into it before I realized what he was using me for. I couldn't just tell you. I was afraid I'd lose you."

She shook her head. "I know that was selfish. He said if you couldn't be bought, maybe you could be slowed down. I learned about Cassut being on the payroll. Figured out what he was. I swear to you I had no idea he was going to plant drugs in your car. None. It was the only argument Evan Brannigan and I ever had; it was why he was sending Cassut after me."

"Do not make it sound like Cassut came after you because you were about to defend me. You're the one that set me up."

"No." She shook her head at that. God, that red hair. It was only a few shades lighter than the hair on her...

"I was with you because of you. I'm guilty of that. I met you because Evan Brannigan told me to, yes. But I was with you because of *you*." Her eyes begged him to believe her.

"You knew he was using you."

"I was almost glad to be used, Joe!" She raised her voice and stood up from the chair. "I thought, 'okay, yes, this started out wrong, but

Phillip Taylor is going to go away in a couple months, one way or the other; all I have to do is sit tight, and ride it out.'"

"And never tell me."

"I admit that I was never going to say that Evan Brannigan told me to meet you. Yes. I admit that." She was admitting the truth, but it was a truth they both knew.

"Erika, I don't know what's worse, here. The fact that you played me, or the fact that you think it was dating."

"I did not... know... about... the drugs... until... after." She spaced each word out for emphasis, and tapped the desk with a red lacquered nail. He didn't reply to that, one way or the other. She took in a deep breath.

"By the time I knew I was in way too deep, that I was now a loose end for Evan Brannigan, I called Catherine Chandler to tell her I was in trouble. She came to my office. I was trying to come clean about all of it. She was going to take me someplace safe. Someplace I could give a statement."

"And then all the rest of it happened," Joe supplied.

"Yes. All the rest of it. Whatever happened in the stairwell. Whoever it is that comes to save Catherine Chandler when she's in trouble. And I gave the statement to the cops, clearing your name, implicating Evan Brannigan. And we said good-bye."

"And we said good-bye," he repeated. He paused for a few beats.

They stood for a quiet moment like two tired marathon runners, knowing the race wasn't half done.

He eyed the damning envelope on her credenza.

"Nothing good is going to come of this, Erika." He buttoned his coat and checked his collar before he turned to go back out onto the street.

"Nothing good."

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## Can Erika Salven Be Saved? Can Anyone?

### Chapter 3

### Tenuous Lines

Love sees sharply. Hatred sees even more sharply. But jealousy sees the sharpest of all, because it is both love and hate at the same time. –

Arab proverb

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He was throwing darts against the wall. Hard. Very. Joe didn't like waiting for a shoe to drop.

The next envelope, when it came by the same courier, did not surprise him. Nor, come to think of it, did the contents, since he already knew most of it.

The speed with which it came did, as did the certain connection of some very particular dots.

Newspaper articles, mostly. None more than three years old, starting in the month of April, 1987. Catherine's "missing time" and her reappearance. Her photo from the NYPD database, her face covered with stitches. And her claim that she remembered nothing.

PTSD, according to her psychologist, and the guy who interviewed her. And no further statements, from Catherine. A Dr. Sanderle had run interference, some, while he was fixing her face. Or maybe he just wanted to do that without worrying about what the cops wanted.

Other items slid out of the large business envelope. Joe Maxwell almost expected to see the ones Erika had located. The times Catherine had been nearby when "things" just seemed to happen. An ex-cop of a mob enforcer dead from a fall out a window to the street. Three goons dead with him, and Cathy there, saying her and a bunch of old people had all fought the attackers off. Plausible, yes. Likely? No.

The savaging of the men who had killed Carol Stabler, a woman tied to Cathy's assault. Pictures of the slash marks on the bodies, and one with a crushed trachea. Other cases. Public records. Coroner's records, which Erika could get access to. Working legal aid gave her access to county records, with nobody much caring why she wanted those. Old clippings about the subway slasher, ones Joe was very familiar with.



There was also a note about how she couldn't get to Stephen Bass to question him, but was aware that "something had happened." She couldn't pull his medical records, but she could pull EMS dispatches. Bass had been back in Cathy's life right before his breakdown.

Another case file. The dead stalker Cathy had picked up, and more slash marks, a trunk ripped off a sedan, and Cathy again, with no memory of how it had happened since she was unconscious at the time. The simple note written on office stationery, in Erika's precise penmanship; "Is Cathy Chandler strong enough to do this?"

Four days. It had been four days since he'd seen her, and in that time, Erika had been busy.

And there was more she didn't know about, which Joe did. Not everything that might be connected to Cathy was a matter of public record.

Cathy had checked on Lisa Campbell, for instance, during her deposition against Alain Taggart.

Two of Taggart's men had been found dead, earlier that week. Bodyguards for Lisa, Joe had assumed their death was Taggart's way of showing his displeasure with the men who had lost Lisa.

That might still be true.

On the other hand...

There were mornings when Cathy showed up in long sleeves and high necklines, walking a little stiff, as if she'd pulled a muscle or something, the night before. The week Lisa Campbell had given her statement, he swore Cathy had been nursing a sore jaw, and hiding a bruise with foundation.

Since it wasn't a pattern, he thought nothing of it, and believed her any time she said she'd picked up a stray bruise or strained something training with Isaac Stubbs, or even working for Joe. He knew she worked out hard, and he knew she took risks when she was on a case. Had been near her sometimes, when things went bad. Had even served time in a hospital himself, once or twice, for this job.

He didn't think she was an abused girlfriend, and he knew that this could be a tough line of work, sometimes, especially the way Cathy did it. She was willing to wear a wire, willing to go the distance, willing to put herself in harm's way. Willing to see anything through to the end.

There was no reason not to accept Catherine's explanations. Except...

The night she'd been shot in the back, four men had been found dead in the warehouse district. Necks snapped. Slash marks that looked like a box cutter, but were too concentric. Animal claws, but not unless a bear had got loose from the zoo. No witnesses, and nobody really much cared if a bunch of mob thugs killed each other over who took the last beer, or whatever.

But the marks had indeed looked like the ones on the men who had killed Carol Stabler. Erika didn't even know about Mitch Denton's thugs. There was nothing to connect them to Cathy, except for Joe's memory of the connection. Joe had thought little of it, at the time, but like any good lawyer, had filed disparate pieces of information in his brain, not really seeing a pattern.

Jason Walker was still listed as a "missing person of interest" in the subway slasher case. The incidents had stopped just as he'd vanished, so again, open and shut in the sense that until somebody found Walker, there was nothing more to be done.

Except Cathy had sworn she knew it was him, right before he turned up missing. Erika didn't know about that, either.

Nor did Erika know the little Joe had discovered in Catherine's apartment, when he'd had to go through it with a special investigator the week Catherine had been kidnapped by a maniac. Joe knew nothing more than what Diana Bennet had found: a name signed to a handmade invitation Cathy had tucked behind a picture. The invitation was to something called Winterfest. The name was "Vincent." A book of old poetry sat next to it. Shakespeare's sonnets. The inscription inside matched the signature on the invitation, and again it was signed. Vincent.

He had no idea if that was significant. He knew Cathy had been involved with some guy named Tom Gunther, with Elliot Burch, and that she'd said she had to leave on time some evenings because she said she had a date, sometimes. She rarely gave details about her personal life. She'd been close to Edie, and the girlfriend from college, Jenny. Joe assumed she was off doing whatever rich women did, mostly.

Since she'd been found after the time Gabriel had grabbed her, it hadn't mattered. John Moreno had died, along with Gabriel. Gunshot wounds, for the both of them.

And the door where they'd held Cathy had been ripped off its hinges.

New York was a very big town, and often a strange one. Joe almost idly wondered how much Cathy had been involved in that he, Joe didn't know about. She missed work sometimes, and sometimes unexpectedly. Joe had even kidded her, once. "Another sick aunt?"

They both knew she didn't have an aunt. Cathy Chandler was an only child of only children. She was worth a fortune, and she didn't need

this job, it was true. But she didn't have a living relative to her name, not since her Father had died. Yet sometimes, she needed to rush out of here like her hair was on fire.

Her personal life was her personal business, Joe reasoned, and if she needed time now and then to square something away, then that was her business, too.

Joe shrugged, not quite sure what he was going to do, if he was going to do anything. Should he warn Cathy about all of this? Yes. Should he warn Erika off? Also, yes.

Was he going to do either of those things, or even both of them? Probably.

But he was going to figure out a few things, first.

*Never go into a courtroom with shaky evidence, a bad witness, and no idea what you were going to say. And if you get stuck with the first two, never, ever get stuck with the last one.*

That was Lawyering 101, and Mama Maxwell's baby boy Joe was no fool. Even Westfield Law School taught you the basics, at least. Sometimes those were all you needed.

Something was going on with Catherine, and Erika was on her tail.

He snagged his coat off the coat tree. He had a feeling that if he picked a certain spot for lunch, he'd see a certain redhead before dessert.

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The thing about being right when you didn't want to be, was it was damn annoying. He'd been all but set up to come here, by Erika's envelope. That stunk of being played, and he didn't like that

instinctively, especially from her. He pushed aside his annoyance, however, since he was going to use the meeting as well as she was.

"Enjoying the lasagna?" Erika asked, as she stood, waiting to be invited to sit at his table.

"Yeah. It's as good as it ever was," he indicated the chair opposite him.

In the brief time they'd dated, they'd eaten here. Twice. She sat, smoothing her dark blue skirt under her terrific legs as she did so.

"I take it you got my envelope." Well, at least they weren't going to pretend their meeting each other here was a coincidence. That was a relief, at least.

"I take it you phoned the courier to make sure I did. What kind of game are you playing, Erika?" he asked, wondering how much she would tell him.

"I think that's a question for Cathy Chandler, don't you?" Erika signaled the waiter. "I'll have a cup of coffee and ... two cannoli," she said, indicating the two of them.

"Two coffees and one cannoli," Joe corrected. It was a subtle way of taking control of the situation. She let him have it.

"So? What did you think?" she asked.

"I think Cathy Chandler is in the same dangerous business I'm in, Erika."

"So the body count doesn't alarm you?"

"Says the woman who used to work corporate law." His humor was sardonic. "What's the matter, Erika? No body count at Proctor and Brannigan? Outside of security guards and hit men, and, well. Whoever Philip Taylor offed. Oh, and you, but for the grace of Cathy Chandler." His point was obvious.

Erika sat back and folded her arms. Defensive posture, again. My they were getting good at those, with each other, Joe thought.

"So you're protecting her." Erika raised an eyebrow and tried unsuccessfully to hide the fact that she didn't like it.

"I'd prefer to think of it as being unwilling to screw over a friend to suit someone who had me in handcuffs, one night."

"I see." Erika loosened her grip on her elbows. She knew better than to sit that way, and had to stop doing it around him. It revealed too much.

"Erika, did you ever stop to think that if you're right, this might not be a can of worms you want open?" He wiped his mouth and set his napkin on the table, indicating he was done with the meal.

"Meaning?" The eyebrow stayed arched.

Joe leaned a little closer over the table. "Meaning if there's somebody dangerous out there protecting Cathy Chandler, he just might be glad to see you on a slab."

The eyebrow came down. "Are you concerned for my safety, Joe?" She tilted her head in that way she had. A way he'd found very attractive, once. He wasn't so sure, now. A patterned blue blouse matched the jacket that matched her skirt. The color suited her. So did the pose.

"I'm a DA. They pay me to be concerned for people's safety," he said, leaning back in the chair.

"I see," she said for the second time.

"Out of sheer curiosity... If I asked you to back off on whatever this was, would you?" he asked, accepting the cup of coffee the waiter brought. She poured cream into hers, and stirred it slowly, but pushed

the dessert aside. She waited for the server to leave before she spoke again.

"Are you asking me to back off because you're in love with her?" *Ah, right to the topic of interest; that was Erika.*

He poured sugar into his cup, but didn't touch the spoon. He chose his next words with great care.

"Maybe I'm afraid you'll get caught in a situation you can't handle. Maybe I do care whether or not something happens to you."

There. Not an overplayed hand. If he'd told her he loved her, she'd have known something was up, and smelled a lie.

Whether it was one or wasn't one didn't concern Joe, right now. Her reaction did. He wasn't sure which one of the two women he was trying to save, just then. Probably both of them, and maybe from each other. It felt like all three of them were all hanging by very tenuous lines.

"Are you asking?" she asked.

"If I did." Two lawyers playing word games with each other. How irritating. It was like watching two prizefighters circle each other and not throw a punch. Her response was almost expected.

"I don't know. I might." *Ah, the noncommittal reply. How likely that she'd give one.*

He'd gotten everything out of her he was going to, and they both knew it. After a moment, he stood and tossed a twenty on the table. "Have a nice day, Erika."

He purposely did not look back, as he left the restaurant.

# *Can Erika Salven Be Saved? Can Anyone?*

## *Chapter 4*

### *When I Have Fears*

*Do you not see how necessary a world of pains and troubles is to school an intelligence and make it a soul? John Keats*



The next morning, a manila envelope sat on Catherine's desk when she returned from court, along with a note from Joe to see him in his office.

"What in the hell is this?" Catherine asked, holding the contents of Erika's last courier drop, the one he'd leafed through, yesterday. One of Cathy's hands held the envelope. The other was full of the newspaper clippings about herself and her old cases.



"That? It's the tip of the iceberg, wouldn't you say?" Joe asked.

Cathy's eyes were big, and she was scared. And she'd stormed right in, as Joe knew she would. She hadn't given herself time to think up a plan or a "cool" response. This was her gut reaction, and Joe knew it.

In an hour, she'd have thought up something more restrained.

Something like "Is your girlfriend fixated on me, Joe?" or "Is Erika the new President of my fan club, Joe?" Something off-hand, so she could fish for what he knew.

But not this way. This way, he was getting her honest response.

"I have no idea what you mean," Cathy evaded.

*Aw, Cathy. Such a predictable lie. And a bad one.*

"You know who those came from," he said.

She was scrambling. Adrenaline was pumping, and she was trying to think.

"Erika Salven?" She said the name like a question, but she knew. He'd give a lot to know what the two women had said to each other the day Erika had handed Cathy her business card.

"One and the same. She says somebody in the stairwell with the two of you killed Cassut."

"I already gave my statement about that." She shoved the papers back into the envelope.

"Why don't you tell me again, Cathy?"

Her stormy eyes flew to his, away from the re-stuffed envelope. "Am I being accused of something, Joe?"

He leaned back, and gave her a moment.

"Not by me," he said with almost courtroom calm.

Catherine was about to realize she should have waited to go into his office, he knew. But she wasn't quite there yet.

"I don't like your ex-girlfriend sticking her nose into my life. It's an invasion of privacy."

"It's public record, not private. Which means she doesn't know the half of it."

Catherine's voice got almost dangerously cool.

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

*Ah, there it was.* She'd forced herself under control. In a second, she'd leave, and regroup. It's what he would do, if their positions were reversed.

He desperately wanted her to turn to him before that happened. Wanted her to reach out to him, to ask for his help.

"Cathy. Whatever this is. We're friends. I'll stick by you with it. I promise you. But you have to tell me." *Come on, Cathy. Trust me to help you.*

She dropped the envelope on a side table and moved for the door, leaving right on cue. And she broke his heart, a little, by not having faith in him.

"I'll tell you to tell your ex-girlfriend to get a new hobby. I don't like being the one she's got. And if she doesn't leave me alone, I'll look into having her disbarred. It might not happen, but it won't look good on her shiny record, the next time she tries to get a job somewhere." She slammed the door on her way out.

He watched her distorted image through the glass as she picked up her handbag and headed straight out the office door, indicating firmly that she was done for the day.

Joe grabbed a dart off his desk and nailed the board.

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Vincent pulled Catherine off the ladder almost the moment her foot hit the third rung. She turned and clutched handfuls of his shirt, and she half-sobbed into it, her story told between broken gasps. Fear was crawling in her veins like poison. He could all but smell it coming off of her.

Her voice was shaky. "I don't know what to do. I think I handled it all wrong. I should have waited before I stormed into Joe's office. I should have thought!"

"It would make no difference, Catherine. It would change none of the facts this woman has," Vincent replied.

She was panicked, and those weren't the words that would soothe.

"I don't know what to do!" she repeated. Catherine was fighting for a control she could no longer find. "I don't know what to say, to Joe, to her, to anyone!"

Vincent stood still and absorbed her fear.

"Catherine, do you think this is an evil woman?"

"I think she is capable of evil things! She got Joe arrested!"

"Yet she came forward to clear his name."

"After you saved her life in that stairwell. That ungrateful..."

"It is you I was saving, and we always knew the risks."

It was the wrong thing to say, and the moment the words were out of his mouth, Vincent could have bitten off his tongue with his fangs.

"I should never have gone to her office that night, alone. I was just afraid she wouldn't confess what she did to a uniform or to someone else. That Brannigan would get to her when she wasn't as afraid as she was then. That he'd charm her into playing along, then kill her later. I just gambled they wouldn't do anything with a witness present, and it ended up risking you."

"She did not see me, and still has no clear idea what happened."

Catherine shook her head. "That isn't quite true. She knows someone was there with us and that I'm hiding it. She's trying to dig up all my past cases and going through the public records."

"You have done nothing wrong."

"No. But there are things that point to you, that point to this world. God, if she could get ahold of Elliot Burch for five minutes, he might be convinced to show her the dock entrance to the tunnels."

"That entrance was sealed the day after you used it."

"But he knows it was there, Vincent! I'm scared."

She grabbed him hard, and he felt her fear swell inside her again. "I'm not going to lose you," she swore. "I can't."

His enfolding arms tightened around her, letting her feel his strength.

"Tell me what you want me to do."

Catherine let her panic flow, then struggled for a plan. It would kill her to say he could never see her again. But it would keep him safe. Yet... to never see each other again? Could she live that way?

She could if it meant his survival, out of a cage. If she had to, she could. If it kept him alive. Kept everyone Below safe. And she should never use her basement entrance again, never. Erika might already be watching her apartment, somehow, might already be having her followed...

Catherine was caroming off the extremes for a solution.

He felt the warring emotions inside her, aware he was the cause.

"I should stay away from your balcony for a while," he said, trying to soothe her. She was concerned for his safety. Very well, then. He would address those fears.

"Lord. What if she's been following me? You came to the balcony a few nights ago..." Catherine struggled to remember if it was the day she'd met Erika or the day before. Or the day after. It was important, and her mind couldn't function.

"If she had pictures of me, she'd have shown them to Joe. Besides, would it be legal for her to be spying on you?"

Catherine willed her lawyer's brain to function. "No. Maybe. I don't know!" She struggled for the right answer, knowing that to be wrong about anything would mean disaster. "Not without a warrant or probably cause... and I don't think she'd step over the line of the law and risk being disbarred," Catherine reasoned. "She's smart, and she thinks she's clever, as well. Right now she thinks she can get me by staying inside the law."

*Right now, I'd say she has.* Vincent thought, but didn't say it.

"Of the two of them, your friend Joe knows far more," Vincent said.

He did. As he'd told her in his office, the newspaper clippings were the tip of the iceberg. Things were being tied to Catherine now which

never had been, before, in Joe's mind. He was not an idiot. It's just that New York was a big city with a high crime rate. Many crimes went unsolved. The murders Paracelsus had committed, for instance. Which also would lead to the tunnel world, and thus to Vincent, if they were ever solved.

"I don't know what Joe knows. I stormed out before he could say anything. If I go back fishing now, he'll know it's just to try and find out what he's hiding. Oh, Vincent. I wish I knew what to do! My first instinct is to run. To move down here and never go back up." The turmoil inside her was a palpable thing.

"And your second instinct?"

"To know I can't do the first one. Joe would know something was up, if I did that."

"Catherine... you've said before that Joe Maxwell is a good man. Might it not be time to... risk telling him?"

"No." She was adamant. "No, he's all wrapped up with Erika, and she's feeding him doubts, and poison."

*And the truth*, Vincent added mentally.

"I need to go back up," she concluded. *One step at a time*. Her mind warred with the rest of her. She would take one step at a time. Go back up and act normal. "You know you can't see me for a while," she added.

Vincent liked neither her conclusion nor the raging turmoil boiling through their bond.



Hearing the words and knowing they were true wasn't making that any easier, for either of them. He regretted what he was, again, in that moment. He was so often the “why” of why they couldn't be together.

"I will bear it for as long as I can." The words were softly spoken.

"Take care, Catherine."

"I'll send you a note when it's safe. Through Benny. But don't send me any. Not unless it's an emergency. Joe might be watching me. Very closely."

Ah, there it was. The paranoia that set in for everyone keeping a secret. Had they come this far to be derailed by a virtual stranger? One they'd both helped?

"Catherine, I do not like this. For you or for me."

"I know."

She hugged him hard, and he felt the tears again, on his shirt.

"Be well, Vincent."

It was one of the first ways she'd ever said goodbye to him. Would it be the last?

"Be well, my beautiful Catherine," he told her. There were no tears in his eyes. He would hold them back, for her sake.

When he knew she was well clear of the basement, he moved back toward the hub.

Halfway there, he leaned against the uneven stone walls and roared his despair into the empty dark.

--

The night Joe Maxwell kissed Catherine Chandler had been a long time coming. And now it was here.



The kiss was neither in Joe's plans nor his prospects as he knocked on the door to her apartment. But ten minutes inside and the tension in the room was like a living thing, between them. She wouldn't trust him. She just wouldn't, with whatever this was.

He was following her around the room as he talked. They'd been verbally sparring for nearly a quarter of an hour, much the same way he and Erika had earlier. Then they began openly arguing. He knew she was hiding something. He told her as much. Someone was



protecting her. Someone who always seemed near, seemed to know when she was in trouble.

She was about to throw him out, as politely as her debutante training would let her. Or at least ask him to leave to see if he would go.

Perversely, Joe knew that was why he wanted to stay.

Wanted to stay, and something... more. Something dangerously more.

*Sugar and spice, and everything nice? Is that what you're made of, Cathy Chandler?*

She was about to make "seeing him to the door" suggestions.

And suddenly he was more than just irritated that she didn't trust him. He was furious about it. He loved her. *Oh, hell.* And he knew it wouldn't work, and he knew there was no future in it, that it could never be. That they were from two different worlds, and if that wasn't bad enough, he was her *boss*, for God's sake.

But he'd be willing to take a bullet for her. She could at least tell him what in hell this was all about...

He knew he was about to blow his life apart again, as she started to make "I'm tired and you should go" noises. And he knew immediately, and in a very visceral place, that he wanted her to make noises of a different kind.

Unable to call his hand back, he reached out and held her neck by the nape, then took her mouth with his, knowing it was a mistake almost as soon as his fingertips touched her skin.

She was not going to belong to him. She was never going to belong to him.

*Because she already belonged to somebody else.* He felt it the minute his mouth closed over hers.

He could taste it in her mouth even as he felt it in every line of her body. He knew he was about to get slapped, and deserved it.

Angry about it, about all of it, he let his mouth have hers for as long as he dared, knowing his disgust with himself would be entire, almost as entire as his anger with her, with Erika, with all of them.

*Not sugar. Not even spice.* Something darker. Something more human than the ideal he'd concocted of her. And far less human, in a way. He sensed it, and felt it with every courtroom instinct he possessed, and every male one as well, now brought to the fore. No, not sugar and spice. Something far more primal. Something that could get his neck snapped, get his throat torn out.

Something owned her. And she owned it right back.

Joe tasted it, all of it. All of that, and something inside her that was, even now, both beyond furious and struggling, struggling to contain it. He'd loved her for too long not to feel all of it.

He let her go and expected her hand to strike his cheek. But it was too slow, and they both knew it. He held her wrist as he watched her eyes focus. Maybe she wasn't in love with the Westfield idiot, Joe Maxwell; right now she didn't even like him. But it had been a long time since a willing man had put his mouth on hers, and that was in her slow reaction, too.

"It's all right. It won't happen again." She was off balance, and he needed that, and used it. "Who is he, Cathy? Is it Vincent?"

Her other hand came up hard and fast, and this one, he let fly.

*Stay away. Stay away. Do not come in that door!* Cathy's mind screamed to Vincent. "Get out!" Her voice held her fury.

"I take it that's a 'yes.'"

*I'm all right. I'm all right. It's just a kiss. I'm handling it.* She tried to send the words to Vincent, even though she knew they didn't communicate in "words" through the bond.

And it was not "just a kiss." It was a disaster.

Joe stepped away from her, knowing that giving her room was the strategically correct thing to do, now.

"Erika knows, Cathy. And she ain't lettin' it go."

"No." Catherine's eyes were bright with rage and a healthy dose of fear. She was definitely protecting this man Erika knew about. Joe's heart broke again, more than a little, at that.

For Cathy, it was very hard to have two conversations at once - the one in her head with Vincent, and the very important one she had to have with Joe, right now.

"You can say 'no' to me 'til the cows come home, Radcliffe. I'm not the one hunting for him, believe it or not."

"You have to get her away from this, Joe." Cathy knew it was a useless plea. "You have to."

"Why? So he can hurt you some more? Oh, Cathy. I think after what just happened, we both know that's not what I'm going to do." He had to keep his hand on her without keeping his hand actually *on* her. Had to keep pushing.

"God *damn* you! I *helped* you, Joe. When she had your life ripped to shreds, I helped you. It was me." *Calm. Calm. She had to calm.*

*Vincent sensed emotions, not words.* And right now she was somewhere between livid and desperate. She had to tone herself down.

Joe saw the struggle inside her, and wondered at it. Some internal pressure was all but boiling her from the inside. She was angry at him, yes. He had to make her that way, so she would talk. But she was desperate, too. Desperate to keep "Vincent" a secret.

She tried to inject reason into her voice. "He's never hurt me a day in his life. Never, Joe. He never would."

Was that a slip, or just a measure of how frantic she was, that she'd admitted his existence in her life? Maybe both. But whoever "Vincent" was, he wasn't making love to her, either. Joe wasn't exactly sure how he knew that, from the kiss. He just knew. If there was a comfort to be had, anywhere, it was in that, for him.

"Swear to me he's never laid a hand on you. Swear to me that the scar on your face has nothing to do with him."

"I swear. I swear, Joe."

Joe weighed that, getting control of his breathing. She wasn't the only one who'd been affected by the kiss, one way or the other.

"He killed Cassut." Joe stated it, baldly.

Catherine knew she had to be very, very careful here. A lie would doom her. Doom them both. All.

"Yes." There. It was on the table. Joe knew killing Cassut was self-defense. Even Erika didn't argue that.

Joe blinked a second at that. *Oh, bloody hell.* Now that he had her confession, he wasn't sure he wanted it. This might be easier if they just kept lying to each other. Why not? Everybody else was.

"But you don't want that known." He held her gaze hard, letting the lawyer in him take over. Catherine realized why his case percentages were so high. That look could intimidate a mob enforcer. Hell, she'd seen it do just that.

Catherine breathed in deeply, knowing Vincent was likely near, but keeping himself back. *Slow down. Get centered.* She steadied her nerves.

"There is nothing I can tell you, Joe. I am sorry for that. I truly am. But there is nothing."

Joe sat on the arm of her dinky sofa, forcing himself to look relaxed.

"That's all right. You don't have to. I'll tell you. And bear in mind, this isn't just me talking, Cathy. It's Erika."

He put his fingers up, touching the index to the thumb.

"One. Cassut was killed in a way that had nothing to do with a fall down the stairs. His wrist was crushed by a large man who is very strong, and likely left-handed. So strong he managed to leave indentations in Cassut's arm, through the fabric of his coat. With scratch marks on the arm which *might* have been caused by his wristwatch as he fell, but which weren't. The bruises are consistent with where fingers would be, on the grip." He made a loose fist with his left hand, indicating "gripping" something in the air, in front of him.

Catherine's face drained of color. Her pupils were dilated.

Two," Joe ticked off and continued, watching every nervous twitch of her eyes. She couldn't stop the adrenaline that was slamming through her system.

"His neck was snapped by someone turning his head around. Fast. Hard. Someone likely taller, heavier, and, as we've discussed, a good bit stronger. Cassut was a full-grown man who killed people for a living. He knew how to fight back, and he was armed. He just never had the chance. Which means he was killed by someone who's done this before. Quickly, and with no hesitation."

He watched Catherine take in the diatribe, her silence a damning thing. "Erika estimates it was only a few seconds between when she felt the vibration of his jump, and when she heard Cassut fall. They didn't struggle. He was just dead, so he dropped. This was not your boy's first dance, Cathy. And if I know that, Erika does." He paused to let the words have their impact.

"She wants your case files. All of them," he tacked on.

"She can't have them." Catherine shook her head. Panic was close.

"She doesn't need them. The men who killed Carol Stabler are a matter of public record, and they're in the paper. So is Stephen Bass, and a few others, here and there. If she could get in to see Stephen, she'd have been there already. Lucky for you, he's violent, to go with his insanity. No visitors, and he's tranked up on Thorazine. Doctor's orders."

Catherine's face dropped as she recognized how many times Vincent had helped her, and had to leave the evidence behind as a matter of public record or, even worse, as a matter of newspaper accounts.

"The subway vigilante. Was it him?" Joe asked.

"No. It was Jason Walker."

"Jason Walker, who is missing?" Joe raised an eyebrow. "Do you see why I already don't like this guy, Cathy?"

"He's helped you, too, Joe. Even when you didn't know it. When that hallucinogenic drug stopped hitting the streets, that was him, scaring off the supplier." Catherine knew she was risking much, but knew she had to. She decided another confession was needed. "The night the pipe bomb blew apart the building the street gang was in... he got me out. Got me clear. He took most of the damage when the bomb went off. He tried to save Shake."

Joe watched her eyes, and knew she was telling the truth.

"Let him come in then. If he's never done anything wrong, let him come in, tell his side. Let him give a statement."

She shook her head and hooked her hair behind her ear. The one with the scar. "That is never going to happen, Joe. He can't," Catherine said, knowing she was revealing much too much, but also knowing she had no choice. The evidence wasn't going to go away.

"He's dangerous, Cathy."

"When that organic narcotic was all over the street. When people were dying, and the mayor wanted heads to roll... It was him that stopped it, Joe," she repeated. "He stopped the man responsible. Fifty people had died. At least fifty more would have."

"You can't do that kind of math, Cathy. It doesn't work that way, the justice system doesn't. You know it doesn't. Why can't he testify?"

Cathy snapped her mouth shut, and kept her beautiful jaw tight. She was fighting for control, and knew she had to get it. He watched her

draw in a deep breath. There. She was settling herself, or trying to. She lowered her voice.

"Please stop asking me questions, Joe. I'm begging you. As a friend."

So. She was going to try and trade on their friendship now? Now that trying to trade on the fact that she'd helped him, the fact that this guy had somehow helped the city, didn't work?

"Three." His thumb hit his ring finger. He kept counting as if he'd never stopped. "The guys who attacked Carol Stabler died with multiple slash and puncture wounds to the chest and neck. Near as I can tell, that was the first time that kind of thing happened around you. Again. It's in the papers, Radcliffe. She doesn't need a warrant."

She. He was still talking about Erika, and what she knew.

"Slashed. Gouged. One with a crushed trachea. The others bled out from having their throats slashed, or internal trauma." He watched her carefully while the information registered and sank in. Not just what her Vincent had done, but the fact that Erika knew it, too.

"I don't think I like your boyfriend, Cathy," Joe stated.

"It is not required that you like me. It is required that you leave Catherine in peace." The voice came in from a terrace door Joe swore was closed a moment before.

And the disaster was complete.

Catherine, bless her, still tried to save things.

"Go!" She slammed off the closest table lamp, though the one near Joe was still on. The room was more shadowed as she ordered away the dark, hooded figure standing on her balcony. She stepped between the hugest cloaked man Joe had ever seen, and Joe.



The man Joe was certain was Vincent was standing in the terrace doorway, the breezeless curtains slack and still, between them. Catherine was clearly half-panicked.

*Go? Where? Over the side of her terrace?* Joe wondered. And Catherine was clearly acting as if this were a normal thing for him. For them.

"Go! Go, go, go!" She was trying to push him back, push him back into the deeper shadows of her patio. Joe wondered how long he'd been standing there, and how much he'd heard. Joe would have bet his life that the big man hadn't been there for the kiss. Joe figured he might be bleeding to death, right now, if he had been.

"No. Catherine.... no." Gently. Very gently. Carefully, as if he were handling porcelain, he removed her hands from his massive chest, from where they'd been trying to push him backward.

"Vincent, no. You can't!" He didn't move. She turned around to face Joe. There were tears in her eyes and fear in her voice.

"Please go away. I do beg you. Go away, Joe."

The huge tears fell, and Joe hated himself for them. Whatever this stranger was, she was utterly protective of him.

"Catherine." The voice inside the hood resonated with depth. "You have said this is a good man. Perhaps it is time."

She turned back to him. "No. No, it isn't. He's half in love with a woman who would destroy you, and I'm not sure that he wouldn't, anyway. Please go, Vincent. Please."

"I'd say it's a little late for that." Joe spoke for the first time since Vincent's appearance, rising from the arm of the sofa. He noticed that Vincent had not entered the room. Also that Cathy was still trying to

block the doorway, trying to shield him with her small body. A man Vincent's size could move her like she was a rag doll. So far, he hadn't.

The fall of his dark hood kept his features hidden. Gloves hid his hands. Joe was utterly positive he would see some amazing nails on those, if the gloves were removed. Either that, or there was one hell of a triple-bladed knife in that cape of his.

Joe's quick mind ran an assessment. There were heavy boots on his feet. Work boots, and they'd seen some wear. The hint of corduroy on his legs. Patches at the knees. A looped kind of sewing. Like yarn, through leather. His belt was wide, the kind a weightlifter used to ease the strain on his lower back as he picked up a heavy load. Some kind of padded vest. His white shirt looked ragged at the cuffs, and tied, rather than buttoned. Like something from a discard pile.

"She protects you?" Joe asked without preamble.

"Yes. She protects me. And you." His voice was soft to go with the low. A steady baritone, to match his size.

Catherine dropped her head so that it rested against his chest, and kept hold of the folds of his cape, and the vest he wore underneath.

"And you are Vincent?" Joe asked, keeping his distance, sensing it was the thing to do. Cathy had stopped struggling, at least.

"Yes. I am Vincent."

"Did you have anything to do with that scar on her face, Vincent?"

Joe's eyes were piercing. He did not like that his opponent's eyes were shadowed. Or that he was six and a half feet tall.

"Yes." The answer shocked him. The follow-up shocked him even more. "I sewed it together, the night it happened. The night a man from your world did it to her."

From his world? *And just what world was this man from?* Joe wondered.

Catherine sobbed, and laid one hand flat against Vincent's broad chest, touching both cape and vest together. "Please go," she begged weakly.

Joe wasn't sure which of the two of them she was talking to anymore. Probably both.

Joe eased away from the couch and turned the table lamp back on, though its light didn't do much to illuminate the terrace. He got an impression of long hair. Blonde with a hint of red, maybe. From inside the hood, it was hard to tell, but a few strands peeked out from where it fastened.

They stood there, a bit like two wary antagonists, assessing each other, while Catherine wept in between them.

Joe's voice was steady. "There is a woman who knows about you. Two now, actually, though the first one doesn't care." Joe named Diana Bennett. Oh, what she would think about this. He was going to have to call her and tell her she was slipping. For all she'd divined, she hadn't figured on this.

"And the second one?" Vincent asked.

"The second one is very sure you protect Catherine, and that I'm in love with her. You might want to watch out for redheads, by the way. Just a piece of advice." Both Diana and Erika were redheads.

"I do not think I need your advice. But I do require your silence. I am no enemy to you, in spite of what just happened here."

"She tastes good." It was meant to provoke. It did.

Vincent growled, actually growled, and stepped forward into the room. Set Catherine to the side by her shoulders, gently but firmly. Joe knew a lick of fear, but simply stood, seeing what was about to happen.

"No!" Catherine shouted. "He's baiting you! Vincent!" Cathy shot Joe a glance of hate, which speared him. Keeping her body between them, she held her love's arms. Vincent stopped, realizing he'd been duped into both coming in, and revealing he had a temper.

*Definitely a blondish red color on the hair*, though Joe could determine nothing else. The deep hood of the cape kept his face in shadow. His shoulders looked even broader, in the dim light.

Joe settled himself back against the arm of the couch again, and put his hands in his pockets, assessing.

He was in love with her. Vincent was. Not that he, Joe, wasn't. But Vincent was. Protectively, and obsessively. Joe Maxwell knew a thing or three about obsession. And the look Catherine had just shot Joe's way would stay with him a long time. Fair enough.

"He kills for you." Joe said it to Catherine and he did not state it like a question. Cassut was, as Joe had mentioned, the tip of the iceberg. If Erika knew that for sure, she'd go batshit.

Vincent remained where he stood, letting the tension drain out of his frame while Catherine spoke for him.

"When he has to, yes. To protect me. He's never hurt anyone innocent, Joe."

Vincent wasn't sure about that, remembering Devin and Lisa. But he knew this wasn't about that, and was wise enough to keep his own counsel. And wise enough to keep back from the glow cast by the lamp.

"And he can't testify. Something about the way you look, I take it?" No one wore a hood drawn up and long gloves who had no secrets to keep.

Joe saw the hood nod, the barest hint of a firm chin in the movement. Nothing definable. Cathy turned around to face Joe fully, her back to Vincent again, keeping her hands back against his thighs as if she would still push him from the room if she could. She was trying to keep him back out of the pool of light. She was clearly trying to protect him. She would die trying to protect him, if she had to. That much was obvious.

Joe got the idea that if he crossed the room to pull that hood back, she'd be on him like a cat, even before Vincent could snap his neck and heave him off the balcony.

It had certainly turned into an interesting night.

"You met her about..." Joe did some mental math, "Three years ago, right?"

"Don't answer that." Catherine's voice was firm.

"Yes. Three years. The night she was attacked." Vincent ignored her. If they were to salvage this, he would have to be honest with Joe. Joe who, like him, had fallen in love with Catherine.

Joe suddenly had a feeling he knew where she'd been for ten days in April. Or at least, who she'd been with.

"Are you a doctor?" Joe asked. He'd mentioned sewing her face together.

"Sometimes. When I can be." Vincent would not mention Father, nor anyone else from his world, to this man. Not until they knew what they were up against. If Joe Maxwell wanted to call the police, he

would already be dialing the phone, Vincent reasoned. Or at least, he hoped that was right.

"And what are you the rest of the time?" Joe asked him.

"Whatever I must be. Whatever I must be, for Catherine."

She closed her eyes, and Joe actually could see the love between them. The air around them practically shimmered with it. Whatever this was, no matter how insane it was, there was no doubt they both felt it.

And no doubt in Joe's mind that he and Cathy were never going to be anything more than friends, if he could even salvage that.

"I am sorry." The baritone voice inside the hood was full of sympathy. It surprised Joe. "I know what it is to love Catherine, and know that it cannot be. It is ... painful."

Joe blinked at that. Mercy, from this ... man?

"Yeah. It hurts," Joe said softly, as if the object of their conversation wasn't right in the room. "And I'm not half in love with Erika." That was for Cathy's benefit, and he glanced at her as he said it. "I might have been at one time, though," he admitted.

Joe sighed, returning his attention to the titan in the room. "Someone has helped you. She's maybe helped you for the last three years. But you're not three years old, Vincent." Joe's eyes were weary as he beheld the man who was probably responsible for half a dozen homicides, or more, in his city, as he tried to think of the questions they would ask him if they caught him.

"There is no one but me," Vincent responded. He was as stubborn as Catherine.

And that wasn't even a good lie. He'd definitely had help to survive.

"You're quite the seamstress, then." Joe eyed his patchwork ensemble, his meaning clear. Then...

*The cape. Something about ... Ahhh.* Now he recognized it. Joe slapped himself, mentally, for being slow. Catherine had been wearing it the night someone had pulled her from the lake, with water in her lungs. He'd even commented about it, while she'd sat wrapped in it, sipping tea. So, Vincent had saved her then, too.

"I can speak of no one but myself," Vincent amended his earlier statement.

"Do they all show up for Winterfest?" Joe remembered the word from the program.

"Don't answer that," Catherine snapped. "He's fishing, Vincent. It's an attorney's trick. For the love of God, would you just..."

"I withdraw the question, you're honor." Joe stood, keeping his hands in his pockets so that he looked non-threatening.

"Cathy, I'm not going to hurt you. And I'm not going to hurt him. At least, I don't think I am. It just hurts that you didn't trust me, and still don't." He stepped away from them, a little, then scraped his dark hair back with his fingers and interlocked them at the back of his head a moment, taking in the unreal scene before him. Catherine hadn't separated herself from Vincent by so much as a fraction of an inch.

"I can't risk him," Cathy answered, all her love in her reply. "I *can't*, Joe. The fact that I love him is risk enough."

Joe watched the giant's hands settle on her shoulders, watched her reach up to touch them. She was a wreck, and he was steadying her, or trying to.

"He pulled you out of that lake. You were wearing his cape when I got there." It wasn't an accusation. Just a statement of fact.

Catherine nodded.

"When Elliot Burch wanted that apartment building..." he let his voice trail.

"Yes. Then, too. They were armed. They had kicked in the doors and the old people were scared."

"Yeah. I always wondered how a group of geriatrics armed with canes and candlesticks stood off a mob boss and his goon squad." *Ah, damn it, Cathy.* "Don't tell me anything more."

Joe Maxwell. Crime fighter. Left his cape at home. He bet this creature seldom did that. Joe paused a long time, picking his way through a minefield of options. Some sort of understanding passed between the three of them. Vincent held himself very still, holding her. Tears tracked down Catherine's cheeks, as she leaned into him, exhausted but still knowing there was a fight in the room.

The next time Joe sighed, Vincent and Catherine both heard the beginnings of capitulation inherent in the sound.

"You know that I'm supposed to arrest him. That the fact I'm not even dialing the phone makes me complicit." He was speaking to Catherine now, and ignoring the behemoth that stood at her back. This man wasn't going to hurt him. He might not like him, but he wasn't going to hurt him. Joe knew that. Somehow.

If for no other reason than they both knew what it was to suffer for how they felt about Catherine.

Cathy's voice still held a pleading note. She would abase herself for this creature's sake. "I know I've used this word all night, and it's



gotten me nowhere. But I beg you to leave this alone, Joe. Forget this night, like it never happened. All of it. You will and I will." She swiped her wet cheeks with an unsteady palm. She was bargaining again, letting him know she would forget the stupid kiss if he would, amazingly, forget everything after.

Joe weighed and measured. Then decided. At least for now.

"Keep your hood up. I do not want to see you." Joe's tone was beyond firm, his lawyer's mind doing backflips right now. He hadn't "seen" Vincent. Couldn't pick him out of a lineup. In essence, he knew very little more, right now, than he ever had. He knew Catherine had been involved with a man named Vincent. He knew Catherine's attackers, both the ones with Erika and elsewhere, had met hard ends.

He had only the friendship he'd just damaged with Cathy to protect.

"He needs to be in a cage, Cathy. Maybe." Joe played Devil's advocate. "Erika would want at least that."

Catherine's green eyes barely held back the panic. "He can't be, Joe. He can't. He wouldn't survive it. Not for a week. Not for a day, maybe." Tears coursed down her cheeks, again. "If they attack him, he'll die fighting. If they lock him up..." She shook her head. "You have no idea how impossible it's all been."

The weight of it, all of it, poured out in front of her, and onto her carpeted floor.

*Impossible. Yeah. No kidding.*

Ah, god, and there it was. Not an offer of a deal, or a bargain for forgiveness. A plea for mercy. Her heart was as desperate as Joe's was. And as the huge being's standing behind her was.

Joe looked over to her end table. An old book sat inside a slip case. Ancient treasure. The Sonnets of William Shakespeare, sitting next to the picture of her Father that held the Winterfest program in secret, behind the photograph.

"Show me the book you have in your pocket right now," Joe gambled, but he didn't think it was much of one.

"What?" Catherine blinked. Vincent simply inclined his head, slightly.

Joe held his hand out to Vincent. "C'mon. Give it. The book. You do have a book, don't you?"

Slowly, Vincent pulled open his cape and reached inside for the contents of the inner, deep pocket. A battered volume came forth. Plain. Worn. Often read, and often returned to its shelf. Thirty years old at least, judging by the wear to the cover. Maybe more. Tattered. Bug-chewed on the corner. Either it had been rescued from the trash, or it had been around a long, long time.

Joe bet this being in patchwork pants with a cast-off book didn't have a dime to his name. Whatever it was he used Cathy for, it wasn't for money. And it wasn't for sex.

Vincent extended the book to him, his gloved hand now within the circle of light. Joe reached out as far as he could without moving forward, and took it. There was no dust jacket, of course, and the cover was plain brown canvas. He looked at the faded print on the binding.

"Byron," Joe read the author. "Selected works." He kept the book closed, and set the corner of the binding to his temple. With a halting pace, he began quoting:

"She walks in beauty, like the night  
Of cloudless... cloudless climes and starry skies;  
And all that's best of... of dark and bright..."

His voice trailed off, as he struggled with the words. "I'm sorry. You want to help me out here? I think I forgot."

*What was this? Some sort of insane test?* Catherine wondered. But of course it was.

Vincent's honeyed voice caressed the words. Joe knew this huge creature had made love to Catherine with that voice, if he'd made love to her with no other part of himself.

"And all that's best of dark and bright  
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:  
Thus mellowed to that tender light  
Which heaven to gaudy day denies."

Vincent finished the verse for him.

Joe bet Vincent could quote all the rest of it by heart, if he wanted to.

"Never was a big fan of Byron, myself." He extended the volume back to Vincent.

"Who did you like?" Vincent asked, taking it.

"John Keats."

Catherine couldn't believe they were having this conversation.

*"Endymion, or Ode on a Grecian Urn?"* Vincent asked.

"Beats me. I lied about liking him." Joe shrugged, intentionally allowing himself to look bad.

"But... you knew Byron." The voice inside the cape was soft. Seductive, in its way, and at least a little confused at being lied to.

Catherine was right. Whatever he was, they'd eat him alive, in a prison.

"You'd be amazed what a man will commit to memory when he thinks it will get him laid in college, Vincent. Not that that's your motivation. And guys who can quote him? They don't do so good in jail."

Joe stepped away from them, content to make himself sound like an utter cad, which both Vincent and Catherine knew he wasn't. For the first time, Catherine realized Joe would keep their secret, if he could.

"I suppose it's too much to ask you to run interference with Erika," Catherine ventured.

"Way... way too much." Joe picked his coat up off the back of her couch.

He breathed in deeply as he shrugged into the dark leather jacket. "I never saw him," the District Attorney of the city of New York declared. "And we never had this conversation. And I will see you at work on Monday morning, counselor." Joe eyed Catherine meaningfully.

She nodded, watching Joe flip the lapels of his jacket. Joe watched Vincent watch her. She was clearly his touchstone, clearly all he cared about, here. Catherine's eyes were closed, her hand on his gloved one, as it had returned to her shoulder.

Joe knew it would take time to repair the damage he'd done by kissing her, the damage he'd done by forcing this confrontation.

Of all that had happened in the last hour, that was the one thing he wanted to take with him, tonight. That though it would take time, it

could be fixed. It could be. Cathy was the forgiving sort. Hell, for Vincent, Joe was willing to bet she'd forgive anything.

That both rankled and it soothed. He wanted to look at neither emotion too closely right now.

"Monday morning," Catherine confirmed, not moving away from her love.

Joe stared at the amazing couple. It was like the room they stood in was filling with their shared emotions, she loved him so hard. And he returned it. For all the things they didn't have, they had that.

"Yeah. Monday. And Vincent?" Joe watched as the gloved hands which would never hurt Catherine, but that had killed her assailants, softly gripped her shoulders.

"Yes?" Vincent asked. The shadow inside the cape moved, barely.

"And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,  
That I shall never look upon thee more,  
Never have relish in the faery power  
Of unreflecting love;--then on the shore  
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think  
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink."

"Now *that* is Keats," Joe concluded.



He let the door click shut behind him on the way out.

Catherine looked at the closed door, then up at Vincent. "What was that?" she asked.

"It's from *When I have Fears*," Vincent told her, feeling the weight of Byron swing back inside his pocket.

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## Can Erika Salven Be Saved? Can Anyone?

### Chapter 5

### The Quality of Mercy

*The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven,  
upon the place beneath. It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes...- William  
Shakespeare*



"So. 'If you can't be with the one you love, honey, love the one you're with?'" Erika quoted the words without accusation, but not without curiosity.

She was lying in her bed next to him, naked. The sex had been angry, between them.

"You're not a substitute for Cathy Chandler, if that's what you're asking," Joe told her, realizing it was true. Also realizing he was a little surprised, by that. He'd *meant* her to be a substitute for Cathy, when he'd started. Had meant her to be.

Somehow, in between his first orgasm, and her lack of any at all, it had become something else.

"You let me use you," Joe realized, sliding into his work slacks and briefs. "Why?"

"Because you were angry, and I own at least part of that. You were owed."

She rose from the bed but did not reach for her robe. He watched the sight of her naked backside as she padded across the floor to a table where she kept a decanter. She always kept liquor around, he realized,

yet she didn't seem to have a problem with it. A tool, then? Was he about to be plied, and pumped for information?

*Fair enough. He'd pumped her long enough,* he thought crudely, aware that the thought was just that. Crude. Something about being around her brought out that side of him.

"Is this the part where you tell me to lay off Cathy Chandler? Ask me nicely?" She turned her head as she poured brandy into a set of snifters. Courvoisier. Her drink, not his. Her hands shook a little. The decanter rattled against the thinner glass. Maybe she did really need the drink.

He stood, and took the proffered glass she extended, standing back a bit. The evidence of how they'd spent the last hour was still smeared between her legs. Not to mention between his, inside his briefs.

"No..." He drew the word out, slowly. "I think this is the part where I tell you I can't see you again, Erika." He took a sip of the brandy, as she did.

"Mm. Not going to fall on your sword for her? Not that it isn't a very nice sword." She gave as good as she got when it came to crude. He realized not for the first time how little he really knew about her background. Part of her was Cathy's people. Part of her was his. She was too, too fascinating, for him. She walked back to the bed and sat on the rumpled side, holding her drink. Her red hair was a tousled mane, around her face.

"I like you, Erika," he said, aware that word had been "love," once upon a time, or close to it. "But I don't like me when I'm with you." He sat back on the bed beside her.

They clinked glasses, as she took a sip. "Ah. Now that is the one thing we firmly have in common, Joe. I don't think I've liked me a day when



I've been with you, either. Though at first, the reasons for that were understandable." They had been. She'd been using him for her career's sake. They were past that, at least.

She sipped again and held the liquor in her mouth. Breathed in, and savored. Swallowed.

Courvoisier. Napoleon's brandy. Another man good at lost causes. "To lost causes," She toasted, holding up the glass.

"I will drink to that." Joe agreed, clinking again. He took a long sip. So did she. It burned, and left the tip of his tongue a little numb. Erika Salven drank only the best. He'd give her that, anyway.

"I take it you told her I was coming? Oh, and I mean that in a completely different way, by the way." Erika asked.

"Since the day after you sent me the clippings. She wasn't surprised. And amazingly, I am not in love with her. I thought I was, once. I think I just figured out I wasn't. Hm. Go figure." He took another drink, tipped his head back, and let it burn a trail down his throat. Of all the conversations he'd ever had in bed with a naked woman, this was the strangest.

"And you're not in love with me," she tacked on, checking.

"No. I think I was once, maybe. The beginnings of it, at least. But... no." They both knew what was to blame for that.

"But you could be, maybe. Again. Someday. Some great and distant day," she added.

She supplied him with a piece of face-saving flattery, for both of them. He was supposed to take it, and finish getting dressed.

"I could be." He took her glass away from her, realizing it was at least partly true, and set it down. "I don't want to be, but that's just it. I could be. I don't like that, about myself."

He'd given her far more honesty than she'd asked for, or expected.

"And I'm not in love with you," she returned, realizing that much of the last few weeks had been more about what she thought she owed him, as about anything else. "But I could be. But I can't see myself forever apologizing for how we started, Joe. And I know I would have to do that, with you."

He nodded, realizing she was right. She would. It wasn't in her to wear a hair shirt and eat crow for the rest of her life because she was sorry. So there they were.

She reached a decision. The only one that made sense for her, now. Chasing Catherine Chandler's truth, whatever that was, would do her no good. Cathy's secrets were Cathy's problem, and suddenly, Erika really didn't give a damn about those or what they caused. Those were Cathy's problems, too. Whatever they were, Joe now knew about them, and wouldn't likely get himself killed by them. That was enough. It would have to be, considering.

"I'm closing up the office, on McIntyre. I think maybe it's time I just moved on," she said, confirming that she was indeed tired of her self-imposed penance. She'd done it long enough. It would fix nothing between them. And it would solve nothing for her.

She'd needed, truly needed, to punish herself for what she'd done to Joe. She'd done that. It was time.



"You are an interesting lady, Erika," he kissed her, then gently cupped her breast in a gesture he knew she liked. He'd paid very little attention to them, before.

"Oh, I am," she purred, feeling herself rouse as his thumb traced a design across her nipple. She helped him slip his pants back off. "I'm very interesting, Joe." She let them both just...go, as she held his head close. She let herself relax enough so he could rouse her further, as he tasted her breast.

This time would not be about using, or about anger, or about betrayal, or about protecting a friend, or restoring his shredded ego. This time would be about "good-bye." And about why that would have to be, for now.

He knew he would be gentle, and make it last as long as he could, knowing this was their end. So would she. And when it was over, as it inevitably would be, they would finally have no regrets between them; at least no deep ones. Not like before. Not the kind that left scars, left you hurting, left you hating yourself.

He nudged her back on her bed, settling his weight between her waiting legs, surprised at the strength of his erection.

He didn't wish she was Cathy. But it surprised him to want her this badly, considering part of him wished she wasn't Erika, either. He wished for someone else. Someone new. Someone he could love, who could return it. Something like the feeling Catherine had for Vincent. Something that could last, could be felt deeply, could be held as true, as soul-making.

The realization shook him.

So he made love to her as if she were that person, that nebulous person who could love him with all she had and all she was. Someone he could love in return, with gentleness, and care, and a fierce devotion. Someone he could take to his bed and to his heart, with no secrets between them, no damnations, and no heartaches.

He loved a ghost.

But at least this time, she came.

She came because it was too exquisite, and it was a taste of what she'd be missing, now that this was their end. He was considerate. He was slow. He felt her, and changed his rhythm to match hers, then moved her to his. He cradled her breast because he knew she liked it, and kept his mouth on her nipple the first time she orgasmed, and he stayed long enough to trigger her second one.

She knew she wasn't a substitute for Catherine Chandler. But she was a substitute for someone he couldn't have, yet. She felt his breathing shift, against her neck, as his own time drew close. He was both wanting it and fighting it. The thrusts were deep, and sharp. He was enjoying, on the one hand, and dreading that it would be over, on the other. He wasn't making love to *her*. But he wasn't making love to anyone else he knew, either.

Somehow, they both knew.

It was enough. It was better than she could have hoped for, the day she'd given Cathy Chandler her card. And if all she could be to him now was a reminder that love was still possible, she could be that. She owed him that much. And she owed it to herself.

"Shhhh." She reached down, grabbing his muscular buttocks as he labored. She knew he liked it. Knew it would send him over to where he was afraid he might not be able to go, this time.

"That's it," she encouraged, stroking him with her palm, before she squeezed again. "That's it. Just like that. Like that. Let it feel good, Joe... It's all right."

It was. She knew. He knew she knew. It was all right.

She brought him over to his completion, feeling his pulse inside her as his hands twined full of her hair. It wasn't love, for him or for her. But it was forgiveness, for both of them.

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## *Epilogue*

### *Dwight Gooden Knew Everything*



*If you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there. –  
Lewis Carroll*

"Morning, Radcliffe." Joe greeted her as she came in five minutes late, as usual. She nodded as she struggled with her briefcase.

"Early this morning," he told her. She shot him a look.

"Traffic was bad," she replied. This was normal conversation. Normal conversation, for them. Especially on a Monday.

"This is New York, Radcliffe. The traffic is always bad." Again. Nothing that hadn't been said between them, before. He followed her as she hung up her coat, but kept some distance.

Is this how they put themselves back together, with each other? Pretended nothing was wrong? Acted like nothing had happened? He was willing to give anything a try.

"There's a parole hearing on Burton coming up this morning. Considering what a big fan of his you are, I thought you might want to take it."

Devry Burton had beaten several women, some of them prostitutes, some of them just women unlucky enough to be in his way - to a bloody pulp. But he'd never killed any of them, and on the books at least, it had been his first time in jail.

"Do you think they should let him out?" she asked. Joe blinked at the question.

"I think he enjoys beating women. I think he likes to hurt people. I think people like that belong in a cage, Radcliffe."

"But not everyone belongs there." Her eyes met his, and held.

"No. No, Cathy. Not everyone belongs there." His brown eyes matched her gaze. She was a good woman. Wrapped up in something way over her head, but a good woman. Gradually, he would have to earn her trust, again. Someday, he would get her to tell him more. Hopefully a lot more. Some great and distant day.

But today was not that day.

"There's a bond hearing on Fairfax, at ten. I've got that one. You okay to break down some depositions for me, then go out to the Bronx and take a statement? There's an eye witness to a holdup coming in to the precinct there, but it's a woman, and they say she's shy. They thought maybe a woman's influence might help...

He rattled off her share of the day's assignments, and she listened to him, watching. He was different. Changed, yes, but more... whole, somehow, than he'd been in a long time.

"Oh. And free legal aid just went begging on McIntyre Street. Some of those cases might head back our way."

"McIntyre Street?" But that was... Erika was gone? Or going, at least?

"She mentioned Chicago. I have no idea," was all Joe gave, for an answer. He looked back at his legal pad for the day's business.

"Are you all right, Joe?" Catherine asked, before he could continue running down the list of jobs for the day.

"Yeah. Yeah. I'm okay, Cathy. I'm not great yet, but you know us Mets fans. There's always hope for next season."

She kept her voice gentle.

"I hear spring training starts next week. The new crop of ... players," she didn't know what to call the rookies -- "Looks good. You never know. Might be a diamond in the rough, there."

God Bless her, she was trying to talk sports, with him. And combine it with philosophy. They would be all right.

"Could be." He worked his tongue behind his teeth, a little. "Might be some good draft picks, in there." He bet she couldn't name so much as one player on the team.

"I think so," she lied smoothly, knowing he knew she was. "Some of those boys looked pretty strong. Of course, nobody's Dwight Gooden." Saints and angels, she had looked somebody up.

"Considering we've already got him, I guess we don't need another one," Joe told her. Then, softly. "Sometimes... a pitcher gets in trouble, though. And needs a little break."

He was offering to listen, if she wanted to tell him, some day. She'd said it was hard. On that, he believed her.

"I guess it helps to be able to count on your friends." She dropped her eyes.

"I know I count on mine. Too much, sometimes." Joe stepped back, giving her space. Letting her know he understood, and wouldn't push. But that he thanked her for all that she'd been to him, since they started.

"Well. Even Dwight Gooden has an off game. Or even a dry spell. Pitching is hard work, sometimes. It takes a lot out of you." She was speaking for both of them. He knew she was. And she was all right.



Whatever this was, she was all right. Especially now that Erika was out of the picture.

He gave her a gentle smile, a bit of the “old Joe” still in there, and coming back. Whatever had been eating him alive for the last year, it had been dealt with. She was grateful for that, at least.

"I'll have this done by nine thirty," she said, holding up the folder containing the parole information on Devry Burton.

"I had a feeling you would, Chandler." Not the teasing and slightly dismissive “Radcliffe,” and not the more intimate “Cathy.” “Chandler.” A name he called her when things were all right between them, professionally as well as otherwise.

"I had a feeling you would."



---fin---



## Afterword



*Many thanks to those who stayed with me this far. This was an unusual one to write, inasmuch as it involved Vincent and Catherine, yet was told largely through Joe Maxwell's eyes, rather than anyone else's.*

*One day, I re-watched Temptation and realized some of the things in that episode which wouldn't quite let me go. The fact that Erika had been in the stairwell with Catherine and Vincent. Her personality, and what that might mean, for them. The way things between Joe and Erika never really got resolved. Then later, the intimation that Joe was in love with Catherine, on some sort of romantic level.*

*Somehow, it just seemed like some of those dangling threads wanted to be sorted out, and this is what came of it. Joe was hurting, and it wasn't healing like it should. Erika was dangerous, and smart enough to cause trouble. But she had to be someone Joe had fallen for, once. And someone he couldn't quite forget, after. So she comes back in not as a slick liar, but just the opposite. A slick truth teller, and worse, a*

*truth diviner. She's figured out a few things. And it's that truth that threatens all of them, on some level.*

*The confrontation scene between Joe and Cathy had to happen so the confrontation between Joe and Vincent could be sparked. The last scene between Joe and Erika had to happen, so everybody could finally move on to, well, wherever it is they were all meant to move on to.*

*They had been lovers of one sort -where nothing much was real- in Temptation. That had to have been hard on Joe, because we know his feelings were real, even if little else was. Feelings don't behave like we want them to. And Joe got stuck with that, and it had no way to fix itself.*

*They are lovers of a very different sort, by the end of this. There's no fantasy left for them to have.*

*about each other. It's not going to work. But at least this time Joe knows that, and Erika knows he knows. There are no recriminations left, for either of them, so now they can heal, and move on. There's a symmetry to that I think they both needed.*

*I like the character of Joe very much, and tried to 'keep him real' while I forced him to deal with some seriously tough moments. He loves Cathy. But she doesn't 'trust' him with her secret. He's aware Erika is still 'using' him, in a way, but also knows she isn't lying. He's also aware they both owe Catherine, and Catherine is aware that Vincent is now at risk, and Vincent is aware that all of it may come crashing down, or not, based on how Joe Maxwell reacts to him...*

*Once you start exploring the after-effects of "Temptation," it takes you to some almost inevitable places.*

*Whew! It was a lot of balls to keep in the air. I hope I did any of it justice, and committed no offense on the trip.*

*At some point, I have to believe that Joe Maxwell is going to find the love of his life, the 'ghost' he's wishing for, find a special love like the one he saw between Vincent and Catherine. I don't know who she is, or how their love story will play out, but once I do, if the muse comes singing, you know I'll love to write it, and share. Others have told his story ably. I hope I can too, some day.*

*In the meantime, I very much thank all those who have cared for the character Jay Acavone brought to life. Jay gave him such a marvelous mix of street smarts, toughness, and vulnerability. It was a pleasure to write for him as he walked across this particular patch of ground.*

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*No matter where you are in your own fairy tale, I wish you love.~ Cindy*