

This story started out with the deceptively simple question "What happens if Catherine buys a house? What effect does THAT have, (aside for a good excuse for steam) on Vincent and Catherine, and their relationship?"

More than I thought, as it turns out, because things are never as simple and straightforward as you think they're going to be, with those two.

So, Catherine buys a house, but it's not a brownstone. Devin meets his match. (Because it's time for that story to be told, and Cathy needed a good fraud real estate agent.) And Charles The Dragon Man likes ducks. (Who knew?)

I swear that this story started out as one thing and became another. Everyone in it, to some degree or other, is looking for "home," even if it's just the temporary kind.

It changed itself a few times, as stories often will. But on the good side, I liked where it went so much, I forgot my original intentions and just figured I'd go where the muse decided to take me. So, without further ado...

North Haven

By Cindy Rae

Chapter One

Midnight Guest

Home is that place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in. – Robert Frost

"Heyyyy. You all... alright?" Devin asked Catherine, tipsily. He hiccupped, for punctuation, as he leaned on her doorframe.

It was an odd question, considering that Catherine was tucked safely (if not sleepily) in her apartment, as Devin used the white wood frame doorway to keep his swaying body semi-erect.

"Devin?" Catherine replied. It was prohibitively late, she hadn't seen him in over a year, and, oh, yes, the smell of good whiskey all but oozed from his pores.

Devin Wells was drunk.

Stinking drunk. Literally.

"At your ser- ser- service, milady," he offered, drunkenly, trying to affect a slight bow, then thinking the better of it, considering his loss of balance.

Catherine reached out to steady his arm. "I'm fine, thanks. Come in," she invited, wanting to get him out of the hallway before he fell down in it. Or chose her stoop as an ideal place to sleep off what looked to be one hell of a bender.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" she asked, as he staggered into her home.

"Ohhhh, damn. Somebody shrunk your ... your furniture." He looked at her dinky couch, and set his body to aim for it. He was actually afraid he would miss, so he grabbed the arm, and navigated his way carefully onto the overstuffed cushions. Somehow.

Catherine's inquisitive eyebrow remained high.

"Pleasure? No pl-pleasure." He hiccupped again, and covered his mouth. "Not for me, Cathy. Not in N-New York. I can call you 'Cathy.' Can't I? Tha's what... what he calls you, right?"

"That's what *Joe* calls me, if that's the 'he' you're referring to," she told Devin archly, taking him in. *Tan chinos. Leather jacket. White dress shirt, a little rumpled.* She realized she had no idea who he was pretending to be, at the moment. *Maybe an attorney, again, off work. Maybe someone else.* With Devin, there was no telling.

Devin Wells snorted. "We both know tha's not who I meant." He leaned back, the drunk who'd found safe haven for a moment, relaxing as he came down. He tucked himself comfortably into his brown leather jacket, looking for all the world like a turtle, drawing itself into its shell. In a few minutes, he'd be passed out, more than likely.

Good. After he was asleep, Catherine knew she could go through his wallet, and see what scheme he was cooking up this time; what other life he'd been leading, what plans he most likely had.

From the looks of things, "bartender" was at least a vague possibility.

"How's Charles?" she asked, prompting his drooping eyelids to open.

"Fi-fine. Finishing therapy. He's with Pe-Peter Alcott. Peter says h-hello." He dove his hands deeper into his pockets and pulled out a receipt. Bar tab. He eyed it, then returned it to its place.

"One of us needs coffee. I think it's me," Catherine observed, heading for the kitchen. It was just past midnight.

Devin sat up on the sofa, as if he'd just realized something. The jolt of adrenaline temporarily clearing up his slurred speech. "Say, he's not here, is he? Wouldn't that be just hell. I mean swell. Just swell, I mean."

Catherine smiled a little, as she spooned coffee into the maker.

"No, he isn't here," she called from the kitchen. "It's after midnight, Devin."

He rose, shakily. "I know it's after mid ... night, Cathy." he told her, with the patience of a drunk talking to an obtuse sober person. "That's why they cut me off, at the b-bar."

He wove his way into the kitchen and stood behind her, for a moment. He then opened the door to her refrigerator, and liberated a three quarters gone bottle of Riesling from the door.

"So, there goes my theory you were actually *working* at a bar this evening," she replied, not bothering to tell him he couldn't have it. It had been in there since last week. She just hadn't bothered to throw it out, yet. He took a long swallow.

"God, this is awful," he complained, then tipped it up to finish the rest. Whatever he was on a tear about, drinking obviously seemed an integral part of it.

Which was odd, actually, she realized, for Devin.

While the words "Devil may care" (or in this case, "Devin may care") could be all but tattooed across his backside, Catherine realized that con artists of Devin's caliber all had one or two things in common. One was that they rarely actually drank. The concentration required for a convincing long term scam meant a certain

amount of control needed to be maintained. Lies they told had to be remembered. A con artist might "pretend" to drink, as they nursed one all night, or even pretend to be drunk, as they worked on a mark, to get him or her to lower their guard...

But to actually get staggering drunk? That was comparatively rare for Devin Wells, she'd wager.

Catherine supposed she should feel flattered that he'd viewed her apartment as a safe place to land, all things considered. She filled the coffee carafe with water and poured it in, as Devin tried to read the label on the wine he'd just drunk.

He leaned against the counter, peering at it.

"Is this French?" he asked. He tipped the empty bottle up again, trying to get to the last drop.

"Does it matter?" she replied. She folded her arms across herself protectively, as the coffee maker began to make sounds of brewing. She took the empty wine bottle from him before he could heave it at her trashcan and miss, smashing green glass all over her floor.

"So. He still doesn't stay over, regular?" Devin asked, bad grammar notwithstanding.

"Maybe he does and was just busy, tonight," she replied, setting the bottle down into the can, carefully.

"Yeah. And maybe Father takes pictures and sends them to M-Mary." Devin deadpanned, opening the refrigerator door, again.

"Please tell me you ha-have a beer," he requested, swaying a little, with the door.

"Not even a root beer. Why are you here, Devin? Just drop by to inspect my fridge?" she inquired.

"Yes. Yes, that is it." He wavered a little bit more, as he clutched the swinging door. The fact that it could move wasn't helping his balance, any. "I'm the frickin' fridge inspector. You f-failed. No beer."

He belched unpleasantly, and they both smelled half gone over wine. She reached across and shut the refrigerator door for him, before her milk joined the "spoiled" list.

"Man, that was nasty." Devin put his fingers to his lips. "He clearly doesn't love you for your taste in liquor," he informed Catherine, heading back into the living room, as she poured herself a hot cup of coffee.

She was going to need extra sugar to get through the rest of this. She wondered if Vincent was still asleep or not.

When she returned to the living room, Devin was standing near her fireplace, using the mantle for support. His eyes were fixed on the cold hearth. The May temperatures meant there was no need for a fire.

"So. Try any good cases lately?" she asked, referring to the time he'd impersonated a lawyer at her office. *What was your name, then? Jeff. Jeff Radler.*

He turned to face her. Carefully. "Not even any bad ones. It's much easier to im-impersonate a real estate agent than it is a l-l-lawyer. And in New York, the pay is better," he instructed.

Ah. So that's what you've been doing. Showing houses. It keeps your schedule loose, so you can be with Charles, when he needs you.

"I should try to remember that," she replied, "next time I'm short on cash."

He laughed, and it sounded almost painful. "Oh. Funny. The heiress might go... might go broke." He wiped a forehead that had suddenly become a bit sweaty. "My brother is such a... a l-lucky idiot."

Catherine's eyebrow went back up, at his description.

"How is he, by the way? Still p-putting up with the old man?" Devin asked, rubbing his neck, as he weaved his way over and sat back down on her sofa.

"They're both fine, thank you." Catherine answered how Jacob was, without him having to question her about it. Devin's history with Father was a thorny one.

"And Mary is well," she continued. "And Pascal. You heard about Mitch."

"Hard time." Devin shrugged, as he wiped his mouth. "We all get th-that, one way or another."

"So, Charles is doing well with his therapy?" Catherine asked.

"Yeah, he's good. R-really good. He's good. Peter took him up to a fishing cabin, in Maine. He likes ducks."

"Ah."

Devin wiped his mouth again. The raised hand saw the time on his watch. "Oh, crap. It *is* after m-midnight. Gettin' c-close to one." He dropped his arm and leaned his head back on the sofa, closing his eyes, a moment. "It's off-icial. Happy Birthday to me."

Oh. So that's what this is about.

Catherine did some mental math. "Let's see. You're older than Vincent, and he's thirty two. So that makes you what? Thirty five? Thirty six? Catherine guessed.

He opened his eyes and turned his head to look at her, but made no move to rise. "Hey. Don't count higher, on me. I look pretty good. I only have to pretend ... to be thirty six ... when I'm impersonating a doctor with an estab- estab- established private practice. Any younger than that, and it looks... looks sus- suspicious."

"Do tell."

"No, seriously. Residency will kill a guy. N-not to mention in ... interning."

Catherine chuckled. "Considering you've never actually done either one, I can't imagine you complaining."

He leaned forward again, though it looked like it took some effort. "Yeah. Well. Sometimes I have to make up a f-fake birthday, to go with my fake l-life. Tough to keep them straight, s-sometimes." He rubbed his temple. "Got to remember what you put on the ap... the ap... the application." He tapped his skull. "I try not to pick a date too close to when I sign... sign up."

"That sounds wise." Catherine humored him.

He nodded at her sage assessment. "It's em... barrassing when the staff takes you out to ... to celebrate, and the lonely girl buys you a p-present."

"Ah," she said again, noncommittally. "I'd think you'd take advantage of the free drinks and the gifts. What do you usually get?"

Devin was definitely sweating. He scrubbed a hand through his dark hair, which was increasingly damp.

"Last time it was a shirt ... that didn't fit, and a pair of racy un... underwear."

He was starting to shift a little uncomfortably, in the seat. "I think she was h-hoping I'd model both of them. I took the bottle of sc-scotch the chief resident gave me, anyway," he confessed.

His complexion was starting to look positively green. His hand went back up to his mouth.

"Nice to see things haven't changed. Are you about to throw up, Devin?" Catherine asked, realizing he was about to do exactly that.

He nodded and bolted/staggered as she pointed him toward her bathroom. She sipped her coffee sanguinely as she listened to him retch.

Some ten minutes later, he wandered out of her bathroom, looking pale. "I hate you. You know that?" he asked, wiping his mouth with one of her hand towels.

"Considering you just threw up in my toilet, it seems like I'm the one who has reason to be put out," she reasoned. "Aspirin's in the cabinet."

He sounded more sober. And not happy about it. "You just killed a buzz it took me four hours to get. Four hours and forty bucks. That was good whiskey."

She was wholly unaffected. "Next time, try starting at happy hour. It's cheaper."

She rose and tugged his hand, guiding him back into her white-tiled bathroom. She fetched him a clean towel, indicating he'd better wipe the seat, to clean up after himself.

Devin did so, though he spared her an eye roll for her sarcasm. Then he held his temple, and reminded himself not to roll his eyes ever again. He had a headache, coming on. And it was going to be a doozy.

Crap. And he knew he had twenty three hours of this day to get through, still.

He wiped down her fixtures. "This was not my plan," he declared, keeping a hand over his newly tender stomach. He dumped the towel in her hamper and flushed the toilet again, just for good measure.

"You had a plan?" she asked, going back into the living room with him. It looked like she wasn't going to get much sleep, tonight.

He was right behind her, a wrung out washcloth in one hand. "I always have a plan. It's just often a really bad one."

Devin wiped his sweaty neck, as Catherine toyed with the idea of what to do with him, now. She could just kick him out. No, she couldn't. *Darn. Girlfriend obligation. You have to put up with drunk relatives, from time to time.*

"We're in no danger of tampering with that record, at least," she agreed, seating herself again, and taking another sip of her cooling coffee. She thought she should probably offer him some. *No. Not yet. His stomach is probably still too tender.*

She watched him settle himself back down on her couch, this time looking both more bedraggled and more sober. He set the damp rag aside. His hair was askew. But his eyes were clearer.

"My plan, Cathy, ... you did say I could call you... ah, hell, never mind..." He waved one hand at her in a dismissive gesture. "Was to get shit-faced drunk, crash at your place, sleep through every minute of tomorrow - *today* that I possibly could, and *maybe* wake up with only eight or nine more hours of the day left."

"I see."

"Then I could *indeed* start drinking again at happy hour," he saluted her suggestion, "and end the day with either a bang or a whimper, depending on whether or not I got into a fight with somebody, or not." He leaned back and closed his eyes once again.

"Well." She set down the cup and folded her arms once more. "Now. That *is* a plan." She had no comment as to its merits.

"It is. And you and your nasty wine just messed it all up. Damn." He settled himself deeper into her sofa cushions and put his fingers to his forehead, rubbing circles, as he leaned his head back, farther. He wasn't sober, not yet. There was still way too much alcohol in his system. But he was a lot less loaded than he'd staggered into her door being, all things considered.

Catherine viewed him in an interested fashion, like a scientist studying a unique specimen, which Devin certainly was.

"Devin, don't take this the wrong way, but why not just go down to the tunnels and sleep it off? They'd put you in a bed, there," she pointed out.

The brown eyes popped open, just a bit too fast for a man sporting a headache. "On my birthday? Are you crazy?" he asked the ceiling.

"There might be a shirt that fits in it for you," she added, aware that Vincent would likely love to see his older brother, today. *No wonder Vincent was so quiet, earlier. Devin's birthday was close.* She hadn't known.

"Cathy, let's review." He massaged his temples, again. "My birth isn't exactly a cause for celebration."

"Of course it..." She let the impulsive sentence die on her lips.

"Isn't," he finished for her. "Ah. Now she remembers. You're slow tonight, Chandler. Of course, Grace wasn't your problem."

No. No, she wasn't. Grace had been Devin's mother, and Jacob's "problem." And she'd died in childbirth, bearing Jacob's son, Devin.

Oh, Devin. I'm sorry, she thought, feeling a certain kinship with the man who had lost his mother.

"As if I didn't have reason enough to not celebrate my birthday *before* I knew the old man was my father," he said.

Catherine was sympathetic this time, and the sympathy was real. "Vincent told me. Once Father told him. I'm sorry, Devin. I truly am."

Devin leaned forward and rubbed the back of his neck, a world of weariness in the gesture.

"Do you have any idea what it's like to grow up ... knowing you killed your mother on your birthday?" Devin asked.

Catherine shook her head, mutely, knowing that it was at least in part a rhetorical question.

"Hell, it's part of why Vincent and I were close, growing up," Devin reasoned. "Him being a foundling, he always kind of figured that might have been what happened to him, too."

Catherine considered that. *Yes. It would have bound the two of you together. Among other things.*

"That his birth killed his mother... It's a fear Vincent has. One Paracelsus has played on," Catherine replied.

"Yeah. Well, believe me. Being able to cling to a glimmer of doubt on that subject would be a mercy. Not me. I *knew*. Mother: an older woman with a plain face and a nice way about her. Father: ... hell. *Father* was my father. And that I didn't know. Until I finally did."

He shook his head, swearing if he did that again, he'd throw himself off her balcony.

"I'm well over thirty years old. And this shouldn't hurt that much. When you're eleven... twelve... Hell I *left* when I was fifteen, and it didn't hurt this bad."

Catherine kept her voice full of understanding. "We're tougher when we're fifteen. I think we need to be." She pushed the cup she no longer wanted away from her. "Life wears us down some, after," she added, deciding she could finally see her way clear to getting him a coffee of his own.

She returned to the kitchen and poured him a cup. She put extra sugar in it, out of sympathy.

"That it does, Cathy Chandler, that it does," Devin said, when she brought the cup to him. He didn't want it. But knew he should be drinking some.

He eyed her expensive robe, her tasteful apartment.... and the lines that had deepened around her mouth since he'd last talked to her. She tucked her hair behind one ear as she offered him cream, which he declined.

"You still have your scar. Can't they fix that, now?" he asked, eyeing the mark.

She returned to her seat. "You have yours," she replied, nodding toward the three furrows that accented his cheek. "And to answer your question, yes. They can."

Her manicured fingers toyed with turning her cup, but she knew she didn't want to drink any more. *Two of the three people Vincent loves more than anyone else both have scars on their faces*, she realized. It was a stray thought.

"But you keep it," Devin pressed, still assessing her scar.

"It's... important to me," she replied.

Sure. Sure it is. Devin thought.

"It reminds you of him." Devin was no fool, drunk, sober, or in between.

Catherine sighed. "Everything reminds me of him," she answered, taking her fingers off the cup and folding her hands between her legs. "Sunsets, because it means he'll be here, soon." She looked toward her balcony doors. "The park. Music, no matter what kind. Literature, the same. Ballet, and art, and roses, and candlelight. Sunlight, because he can't walk in it, and ice cream, because I had a dream, once. Winterfest, and carousels." She nodded toward Devin, on the last one. "Shakespeare and John Keats."

"Mark Twain and L. Frank Baum," Devin supplied, adding to her list. "Pocket knives and the kites he'll never fly. Mountains he'll never get to climb, and caves inside them he'd be right at home in."

She'd given him her list, he'd continue to give her his: "Rafts built for the Mississippi. The Himalayas, and Monkey Gods, and wondering if they'd have room for *one more* fantastical thing. Greece, and Egypt, and wondering if he's a sphinx, after all. Half man, half lion."

Catherine nodded, completely understanding. "It's kind of ... pervasive, loving him, isn't it?" she commented, sitting across from one of the few people in the world she could talk to, about Vincent.

Pervasive. Yeah. That's the word.

"It overtakes everything else you are, sometimes," Devin responded, thinking back to his own childhood, with Vincent.

Pervasive. Hmmm, he thought.

Devin looked around the apartment, realizing how little of Vincent was there. For a "pervasive" presence, he left very little of himself behind.

Devin scanned the walls, knowing nothing there was done by Vincent's hand, nor about him. Devin knew he'd find Vincent's chambers similarly ... unaffected, by Catherine's presence in his life, even after all this time.

Okay, so... what's going on, here? Devin wondered.

He decided to tell her something personal, to see if he could get her to open up to him, in return.

"Chandler, I have people in my life, sometimes. Not very often, but sometimes... it happens."

Catherine nodded, following his dark eyes, as they trailed around her light walls.

The brown gaze came back to her and pinned her. "I swear to you I have more keepsakes after having picked a woman up for a long weekend than you do, of him, after three years."

Catherine didn't like the tack the conversation had just taken. "That's a harsh thing to say." She frowned at him.

"Is it?" Devin wasn't letting go. "He's got that pouch he wears around his neck. A book of Tennyson he keeps near. A Winterfest program tucked in that, and part of a candle. You?"

She realized that if you substituted the word 'crystal' for 'pouch' they'd have similar mementos. For his book of Tennyson, she had his, of Shakespeare.

"We... don't ... really exchange gifts," she told him, a little defensively.

"Or spit," he clarified. "Don't kid a kidder, Chandler. He doesn't stay here. He's never stayed here, not in a 'stay the night' kind of way."

Devin rose from the couch, knowing the bathroom he'd just thrown up in had nothing of Vincent's in there, either.

"Vincent's situation is... unique. You know that," Catherine replied.

"Not so unique he couldn't stay until three or four in the morning, then sneak back in," Devin volleyed. He peeked through the open doorway to her bedroom. It was as feminine a space as he'd ever seen. There was nothing masculine there, to interrupt that feeling.

"Hell, Chandler, it's what every *other* man in love with a woman does. That's not unique. That's ... it's just what you do, when you can't stand to be away from each other." His dark gaze held her green one.

"Or did I miss that part?" Devin pressed. "Did we already go through that part, that 'stay the night' part, and now we're fixing to move on to 'I'll always care about you, but I really think it's time we see other people' part?" he asked.

Catherine rose from where she was sitting, so he couldn't stand over her. "You know, you're starting to ask questions that are none of your business," she snapped.

"Yeah, and even half-bagged, I'm hitting bullseyes." He picked up the washcloth from the table and wiped down his face. *So, no socks left behind, unable to find the left one, in the morning. God, what archery. I shoot better than Jamie, and it's after one a.m.*

So, what gives?" he asked, holding the cloth to his neck, a moment.

Catherine really didn't know how to answer. Not because it was none of his business, because as she'd just pointed out, it wasn't - and not because she hadn't asked herself the same thing. But simply because for all the time she'd spent thinking about that very question, she had no answer for it, not really.

"I don't know," she confessed, knowing Devin meant neither her nor Vincent any harm, with his probing.

"Either we're stuck, or we're in a comfortable place, the place we're meant to be in." She shrugged. "I guess I'll know in another three years." She picked up their cups and took them into the kitchen. White silk swished, at her ankles.

"Three years more of this and you'll need to take a vow of chastity and join a convent, just to keep from killing him," Devin called after her, realizing how beautiful the night gown she wore was. He bet she had a whole collection of those. Sublimation. Making herself look beautiful for a lover she didn't have. Perhaps would never have, if she stayed with Vincent.

Catherine returned to the room, her expression wary. "Maybe this is just us. Maybe we're comfortable, this way," she stated.

Devin's arms folded across his chest.

"He wasn't comfortable with things like they were back when I first came here. And again, when I came back with Charles. Who wants to see everybody, again, by the way."

"Charles. Now, there's someone we can talk about," Catherine said, desperately wanting to change the subject.

"We already did. He's learning to fish. And you're not changing the subject."

Catherine begged to differ as only a lawyer could. "We're also doing fine, Devin. You're the one with problems." She patted his taut chest as she passed by him. "Happy Birthday, remember?"

"I'd rather focus on you."

"That's avoidance," she replied.

"I'll see your sublimation, and raise you an avoidance," he told her, feeling clever. He knew his head was beginning to clear, if he could play word games.

She cut him a wry look.

"Soooooo." He elongated the vowel, as he took her in. "You going to wait for him forever?" Devin asked.

Put that baldly, Catherine honestly didn't know how to answer. It wasn't a casual subject.

"Until I'm old and grey." She opted for a light answer. Well, probably light, considering it might well end up true. She moved toward the balcony doors, and away from Devin. It seemed safer, somehow.

Devin trailed after her. "Ah. The Jacob Wells school of relationships. Wait until someone is near death to establish one. Careful what you wish for, Chandler. Bet you Vincent has similar plans. You two will get along well, together," he said to her back.

Devin scrubbed his fingers through his thick, dark hair, again, then smoothed it back into some semblance of order. "You know, I just realized this was a bad idea. I think I'll go out for a walk, instead."

She turned and he took in her lovely, lithe, form. She was about to have a worse day than he was, he realized. Because his misery would be over, in a day or so. Maybe. Hers would just keep continuing.

Catherine dismissed him by crossing the room to her bedroom doors, white silk swishing every inch of the way. "Take off the cushions. The couch pulls out. I'm going to bed," she offered, pretending he hadn't just declared he would leave. She knew he didn't really want to. That he wanted a place to crash for the night, and had come up here, looking for one.

She heard him doing as she instructed, on the other side of her bedroom door. She brought him some linens, and bid him good-night.

By the time she'd smoothed out the covers on her bed and hung up her robe, Devin Wells was sound asleep, in her living room. A few minutes later, so was Catherine.

Chapter Two

Midnight Guest, Redux

Be it ever so humble... - John Howard Payne

Devin was gone by the time Catherine arose for work in the morning. There was no note, or other disturbance to her apartment to indicate he'd been there, other than their cold cups of coffee in the sink, and the used washrag in the bathroom. He'd even re-made the bed back into a couch, and refolded the light throw he'd used as a blanket.

At least that was considerate, she mused, as she got ready for her day.

She wondered if he'd snagged breakfast out of her kitchen, and idly concluded that if he had, it was a can of soup, or some frozen french fries, from the freezer. She hadn't gone grocery shopping in a while.

Ah, well. Such is the life of a busy attorney, she concluded, hefting her brief case and heading out. She replayed some of Devin's comments in her head, as she waited for the elevator. Some of them stung. Some didn't.

'Sooooo. You going to wait for him forever?'

'Until I'm old and grey.'

'Ah. The Jacob Wells school of relationships. Wait until someone is near death to establish one. Careful what you wish for, Chandler.'

She brushed it all aside as the elevator doors opened. She stepped inside, and let the normal concerns of being an ADA in New York City engulf her.

"I believe you had a visitor last night." Vincent's voice felt like rich velvet, after the long day. Catherine barely stifled a yawn, as they sat on her balcony, together.

"Mm," she agreed. "He came up after midnight. I gather he went down to the tunnels, today?"

"Through your basement entrance, no less." Vincent replied. "Father was as surprised to see him as I was, though I think he was secretly pleased."

"Are the two of them fighting, yet?" Catherine asked.

Vincent's small smile was also a rueful one. "Some time after lunch. Devin revealed he'd been a bush pilot in Alaska, for a while. Father's reaction was... predictable." Vincent inclined his head, with meaning.

Catherine settled back, easily imagining Jacob's words, and tone. "Let me guess. 'How dare you endanger other people with your reckless choices.'"

"Substitute 'foolhardy' for 'reckless,' and I think you have it verbatim," Vincent remarked. "Of course, Devin pointed out he was risking his *own* life just as much as anyone else's, and had no intention of crashing. I don't think it helped."

Catherine knew that Vincent had always viewed Devin's exploits with a certain wry twist of indulgence.

"Maybe the good news is, he probably won't get in to that kind of trouble impersonating a real estate agent," Catherine opined.

Vincent considered her words. "Real estate? That does not quite sound like Devin."

"At least that's what he told me he was doing. I confess I meant to go through his wallet last night, once he fell asleep. Then I just ended up too sleepy to try, and went to bed."

Vincent liked the sensation of her soft weight, leaning against him. It was a thing she most often did when she was tired. A thing he very much enjoyed. Still, it was his brother who dominated Vincent's thoughts, this evening.

"There is something bothering him, Catherine. But he hasn't said 'what,' yet," Vincent intoned.

So he hadn't told Vincent, either.

"He says his birthday always bothers him," Catherine supplied.

Vincent acknowledged the truth of that. "It always does, or it did, even when we were boys. But it seems that this time, there's more to it than that."

Catherine shrugged, and leaned more heavily against his arm.

"Other than the fact you don't leave your socks behind, I have no idea what," she replied.

Vincent raised an eyebrow at that. "My... socks?" he asked.

Okay. Yes, I'm tired, to have said that, she thought.

"Never mind. It isn't important," she deflected.

"No, but it might explain something about why he wagered I didn't have any earrings in my chambers," Vincent replied.

Catherine stifled another yawn, feeling the energy drain out of her. She'd had five hours sleep and a very hectic work schedule. And they weren't going to solve any of their problems with those things in mind, and Devin's reappearance, between them.

"He's probably avoiding something. But you know Devin. That's a way of life, for him," Catherine said, looking up, to take in her love.

"It is. But he's never come home before. Not for his birthday, especially. Even when we were young... it was not a day he could be easily found."

"Do you think he wants to hammer out Father's relationship with Grace?" Catherine asked. "You know... ask Father how it all happened?"

Vincent shrugged. "Perhaps. They've spoken of it before, some. But with Devin, who can tell?"

Vincent could feel her weariness, inside their bond. After another few minutes, she was fighting to stay awake.

You're tired because you had to put up with him. You give so much. To all of us, he thought.

He enveloped her in a fond embrace, hugged her good night, and, understanding her fatigue, shooed her inside.

"Good-night, Vincent. I'm sorry I'm not better company," she apologized.

Vincent wasn't sure he liked her choice of words. *Is that what we are to each other, now? Company? Surely there is a better word?*

There probably was, but for the life of him, Vincent couldn't come up with it. He gave the problem a mental shrug.

"You are tired, thanks to my brother. Sleep well, Catherine," he bid her.

As she closed the balcony doors over his departure, she swayed a little. She was nearly falling asleep on her feet.

Sleep well, my love, Vincent thought, but didn't say, as she turned out the lights.

--

Catherine's bedside clock flipped over to one thirty in the morning.

And Devin was there again, knocking on her door.

"This can't become a way of life for you, Devin. I have work in the morning," Catherine scolded, drawing the belt of a shimmering blue robe tight.

"I need you to see something," Devin replied, not entering. "Put on some clothes."

Catherine leaned against the doorjamb. "This can't wait until morning?" she asked.

"Technically, it's been morning for an hour and a half. And it really can't," he answered.

Catherine shrugged, then went to do as he asked, rationalizing that at least this time, he was sober.

--

Thirty minutes later, they were in a car, heading away from the congestion of the city. A rented car.

Probably rented under one of Devin's aliases, Catherine thought.

"Who's Jack Fisher?" she asked, eyeing the rental paperwork tucked in the visor.

"I am," he replied, easing past midtown. If there was a virtue of driving at two in the morning, it was that there wasn't much traffic on the roads. Cathy tugged down the visor on the passenger side of the car, inspecting the paperwork that fell into her lap. *Yep. Definitely rented under one of Devin's aliases.*

"Fisher Real Estate." She took the vellum business card that was clipped to the rental contract.

"That's right," he replied.

"This number been working longer than a month?" she asked him.

His dark eyes cut her way, as he gunned the engine at a red light. "As usual, you're focusing on the unimportant, Chandler. You and Father have a lot in common, that way." The light turned green. He pressed the accelerator down, and headed toward one of the bridges.

"Such as?" she prompted, curious.

"What if you'd crashed the plane, Devin? What if the delivery had had complications, Devin? How long has the number been working, Devin?" He shot her another look.

"Devin..."

"The plane landed, the kid is fine, and the number works. Those are the important things," he insisted.

Catherine shrugged. She'd long ago understood Devin Wells wasn't looking to be reformed.

"Your luck's going to run out one day, you know." She tried for logic. "One day, the plane *will* crash."

Maybe it already did, in a way, he thought, but didn't say.

"It's not like that never happens to licensed pilots, Cathy. If it crashes, it crashes." They wound their way through the light bridge traffic, then out of the city. Whatever he wanted her for, it clearly wasn't in Manhattan.

"Instead of worrying about my plane... which I don't have one of, and I'm not currently flying, you might want to worry a little more about yours," he said.

"I'm not flying a plane either," she replied blithely.

"No kidding," was all he answered, cryptically

Catherine only had so much of an idea what he was getting at, and didn't feel like bantering at two a.m. She settled back in her seat.

A two lane blacktop wound north, away from the city. He turned onto it and stayed. The sound of the tires on the road sang an almost comforting song.

"Are you going to tell me where we're going?" she asked, trying not to fall back asleep.

"I'd rather just show you," he replied. "It's not that far, really."

Okay. I'm being driven by Devin, in a rental car under an assumed name. He won't tell me what this is about or where we're going, and neither one of us is flying there... And to think I could be at home, asleep in bed, she mused.

She looked out the window and watched the city buildings change to houses, then to farther spaced out ones of those. Then, it was just trees, for a few minutes. They passed a lone gas station attached to a convenience store, and then more trees.

This had better be worth it, Catherine thought.

True to his word, after a short while, Devin pulled off onto a gravel lane she barely saw, before he turned down it. It was small, and had no signage to indicate it was there. A large stand of bushes and an overhanging oak in bad need of a trimming all but hid the narrow entrance road from view.

Catherine perked up, and looked around. Wherever they were headed, they were obviously close. The lane was, she realized, a long path leading to a driveway. It was one of those properties with a fenced perimeter, and a lot of trees; one that was all but undetectable, from the main road.

"Do you know where we are?" he asked, letting the engine idle as the car lights shone on a huge stand of oak trees.

"Sherwood Forest?" she answered, looking around. Clusters of pines cut off the view of the city, in that direction, though the sky there was still lighter, there.

He cut the engine, opened the car door, and got out, indicating she was to do the same.

"Welcome to Sherwood, Milady." He bowed slightly and did his best impersonation of Errol Flynn, which even Catherine had to admit wasn't bad.

He gestured to where a dirt path wove through a thick overgrowth. Vines and briars grew in patchy abundance. The place needed tending. Badly.

"Is this some kind of park?" she asked, following him, as he picked his way ahead, carefully.

"Not exactly." He held back a deep hawthorne shrub, and waved her through.

"It's an estate. Or it was, once upon a time," he elaborated.

Once upon a time. How I always used to love those words, Catherine mused sleepily. Every great story starts with 'Once upon a time...'

A pair of dim, carriage-style lamps cast down some illumination, from a pole. It wasn't much light. But it was enough to discern a few things.

A metal sign arched its way across a wrought iron gate that had been obscured by the Hawthorne. Some of the sign's letters were obviously missing, fallen off and lost to time. Catherine could make out the word "North."

"This was an estate?" *A big one? Just north of the city? Okay...*

Devin nodded. "The paperwork on the listing says it actually used to have a name. 'North of Heaven.' I guess the original owner must have loved New York."

"Not well enough to live in it," Catherine concluded, looking up at the metal sign. The first "e" was missing out of the word "Heaven." The word "of" had fallen away, completely. As it was, the sign badly spelled "North Haven."

"A lot of the early developers thought the city would sprawl straight north, rather than ring around Manhattan. They wanted to be close enough to do business, but far enough away not to have to deal with the rabble," Devin explained. He keyed the lock and pushed the creaking gate open, as he ushered her through. "Most of them kept horses, at the time. This one did."

Horses. Really?

That meant a pasture of some kind, or at least a small paddock. Perhaps even a barn, or some form of riding stables, nearby.

"So... it's a big place?" Catherine ventured.

"Bigger than most. By a long shot."

"North Haven it is, then," Catherine read the sign as it now indicated, taking in the area before her. There was no doubt that the property was heavily overgrown. It had a large, unused feel to it.

"There's a house, I take it?" she asked.

"Sure. Can't have an estate without one." Devin replied.

After picking her way forward a few more yards, Catherine saw it.

"Estate" was overstating the property, she felt. Though the land had a definite, sprawling feel to it, the house was boarded up, the porch was rotting, and the left side of the building had been badly damaged by fire.

It's 'Haven' days are long gone, that's for sure, she thought.

Catherine took in the dilapidated view. "Charming. You took me out at two in the morning to show me a fixer-upper?" she asked.

He walked her toward the porch, but didn't go up the damaged steps. Impossibly long windows framed a stately pair of double doors. One of the windows was cracked, diagonally, not the work of vandals so much as of a rotting casement that could no longer hold the weight of the glass.

"Ah, Cathy. What's the first rule of real estate?" he asked, strolling to his left. He was taking her around the side of the building.

She followed him. Carefully. "Buy low, sell high?"

"That's the stock market. By the way, you might want to pick up some Microsoft. I know a guy."

She shook her head at him. "Devin..."

"Location, location, and location," he told her.

She looked around again. *Okay, fine. This didn't have that, either,* she reasoned.

What had once probably been a lavish country home had few virtues left. The land was overgrown. The house was damaged, the porch was an atrocious piece of tumbledown danger. The house was old to begin with, and the fire had clearly ravaged it. Nothing about it had any appeal, for Catherine.

"Devin, I'm not interested in owning a horse. Or a house. And it's a thirty minute drive just to get to the outskirts of town. To the nearest *subway* entrance," she said pointedly.

"To the nearest *entrance*, yes," he replied, continuing to lead her around the side of the house. He headed over to a canting out-building that had probably once been a carriage house. It looked in need of a good bulldozer.

"To the nearest subway *tunnel*..." he let his voice trail off, and stared at her, meaningfully.

Catherine looked back toward the way they'd come.

"This place can't be near the tunnels. We're too far outside the city limits," she insisted.

He shook his dark head, indicating she was wrong. "A lot of the tunnels were built before the rail plans for them even existed. Men who bet they would make a killing, once the city decided it needed the lines. Some of them hit. Some of them missed." He nodded back toward the city, where the lights from Manhattan gave the night sky a soft glow, in that direction.

"So... someone took a chance and built a rail tunnel all the way out here?" she asked.

Devin nodded. "He thought the city would sprawl farther north than it did. Then, something happened."

He took her around the side of the carriage house so she could see the back yard. Moonlight glistened off a lovely pond. Trees tangled their branches together, off to the right, while overgrown bushes blocked the path to his left.

"He came to his senses and bought closer to home?" Catherine asked.

Devin shook his head, again. "Remember the caves past the labyrinth? The ones Jacob swears were dug by Indians? He's right. They were. There's a burial ground about a half mile east of here, and signs of an ancient settlement." He let the import of that sink in.

"So, nobody else is building out this way because..."

"The area is strictly zoned. Protected. Existing buildings can be replaced, but new ones need special permits." He nodded back toward the house. "It's why businesses won't touch it and nobody wants a white elephant."

Catherine looked around. "We can't actually be near the tunnels, from here. We're too far away," Catherine persisted.

"Spoken like someone who's never tried to connect the North side of town with the south side, and not recross the widest part of the river. The line already swings way out, Cathy. You just can't see it, because you're underground, when you travel."

"Are you actually saying this place has tunnel access?" she looked up at the ramshackle building, her eyes wide.

"No." He shook his head. "I'm saying that if I'm reading everything right, the carriage house is sitting about, oh I don't know. Say, three hundred yards off the northernmost passage of the caves, and the caves lead to the rail line some mogul wanted built before the stock market crash. And that leads to the hub. And the hub leads to everyplace. Take a look."

He bid her to follow him back to his car and pulled out a city map. Then a tunnel one, to show where they overlapped. At least in theory.

"The hub is the center. It sprawls out, and was dug on *this* side of the river, to avoid flooding. Manhattan is an island. The farther north you get, the less water you have to deal with. The tunnels that run north off the hub are dry. Father thinks the Indians dug them long ago, as an escape route."

"Lin's grandfather says it was the Tong." Catherine eyed the route. If the map was correct, there was indeed an underground passageway, nearby.

"And Peter thinks it was the Masons. Who cares? It's there, is all we care about. Roads wind, in the city. But if you could run in a straight line, from here, you'd be at your apartment in just under an hour. Or *Vincent* could. But you can't. So you have to drive, because you have to funnel across the bridges, and go through the tolls."

He kept the maps open, so she could see the difference between the tunnel map and the city one.

"Put a rail car on those underground tracks, and you could get here even faster," he added.

She studied the map some more. *I don't need a house. And I certainly don't need one that's falling down.*

An owl hooted, over her head.

She looked back at the ramshackle dwelling and its attendant structures. Nothing looked like it was worth saving, for the money it would cost to rescue it.

"Devin, why are you showing me this place?" Catherine asked.

He rolled up the maps. "To be honest, I'm not sure. It's not the kind of place I normally sell."

Catherine was too tired to point out that the word "normally" hardly applied to him.

"If you're going to impersonate a real estate agent, impersonate the kind that sells only the really expensive stuff. I usually do high-end apartments and penthouse suites. Top tier digs off the park, like your place." He nodded to her, as he tucked the maps inside a tube.

"This came up on the lists. Been sitting here for ages. It's high end because of the amount of land that goes with it." He gestured with the map tube still in his hand.

"How far? Are there other houses, nearby?"

"Nope. You saw what we passed, when we came up. There's a barn, a paddock, and an old bunk house, that way." He pointed toward a stand of pines so thick Catherine knew she couldn't see any building he was describing.

"It's got its own padlocked gate," he continued. "And there's a vine-covered back wall separates this land from the outskirts of the settlement. And like I said, that land is protected. *Nobody* can build on it. That's an advantage, for you."

Catherine stepped forward, taking in the nighttime woods. She had no desire to tramp through them, in the dark. On the other hand...

"There's land for days," Devin continued. "An overgrown riding path goes through those woods. Go through a steel gate and you find where they used to keep the horses. There's an old barn that hasn't been used in years, and a little place that's not much more than a bunkhouse, for the stable hands. And back *that way*," he gestured toward the falling down carriage house "There's a little caretaker's cottage, set back from the pond. Needs a new roof at the very least."

"That's a lot of... real estate," she said, realizing anew how large the place was.

The park. This place feels like the park. With safe places, for Vincent to go, if he needs them. Catherine wondered at it.

Devin watched Catherine, as her green eyes tracked the expanse. He looked up at the dilapidated wreck of a two story building that had once been the main house. An upstairs porch wrapped around it. One that was missing its railing, in several spots.

Balcony. It has an upstairs balcony. One that wraps all the way around the house...

"You'd have to pull down the house. Probably. Start fresh." Devin intruded on her thoughts.

Catherine eyed the sagging lady that had once been a beautiful dwelling. The huge, high windows had once let in the morning light.

"I can smell the ocean," she realized, when the night wind shifted.

"It's about four miles, that way." He nodded east. "Another reason it's sat unsold a while. Too far from the water. Boaters don't want it."

"And you thought I might?" She walked toward the big building as if hypnotized, and made her way cautiously up the dilapidated front porch steps, as Devin swung a flashlight.

"I used to. When I thought you two might be getting serious about each other," he said. "But now, well. I don't think so. You don't need a white elephant, either."

"So you showed this to me because..."

"Because. Just because, Chandler. Because I thought his love life might be going a little better than mine. Turns out neither one of us is doing all that well," he answered, wrangling keys on a ring. In spite of his denials, they were obviously about to look inside.

Catherine lodged a protest. "Devin, just because we're not ... well, just because we're *not*, it doesn't mean we don't love each other."

"Yeah, and the fact that my current girlfriend thinks my name is Jack Fisher and I'm originally from Cincinnati doesn't mean things aren't going great, either," Devin replied, twisting a key in the lock.

"I wanted you to see there was a way," he said, carefully opening the door. The huge hinge gave a groan of protest.

"Not a *great* way, but a way," he qualified, as they entered. The boards creaked, under her feet.

"The part that burned. What was it?" she asked, entering cautiously, behind him.

"Kitchen fire. The wiring was old." His flashlight played around a sorry entryway. Water stained wallpaper hung in tatters. There was a parlor to her right, one with a small stone fireplace.

"This was once a grand place," she said, eyeing a large central staircase. It was the kind Scarlett O'Hara might come sweeping down.

"And Rome was once a global superpower," he said, looking at her, as she took it all in.

Come on, Cathy. Think about it. Think hard, he urged, silently.

"There's an upstairs. Are the stairs safe?" she asked.

"Yeah. Third one from the top's missing, but the rest of them are... well, let's just say they're fine." He couldn't believe she wanted to explore the place, and wasn't sure whether he should put that down to feminine curiosity, or something else. Either way, he knew he was at least a little pleased that she was giving it a look.

It had four bedrooms and an upstairs bath that would need to be replaced from fixtures to floorboards. Two of the bedrooms were huge. And they could both hear the skittering of little vermin feet, as they walked through them.

She toured the rest as well as she could, by flashlight. It had a finished basement that ran not only the length of the house, but under the carriage house, as well. It was huge. She could see why the property had caught Devin's eye.

He put his hand against a concrete wall. "I swear if you lean against this wall, you can feel the vibrations from one of the trains, every hour or so. Barely. And there's no way you should be able to. But I'd know that feeling, anywhere."

He would, having grown up in the tunnels, Catherine thought.

They made their way back up, and outside. Cautiously, considering some of the damage to the existing porch floorboards.

Devin pocketed the ring of keys. "Cathy, it's a rat trap and a fire hazard. It makes no sense for you to buy it. You already have a beautiful place to live. With tunnel access," he added.

Cathy took in the relic they were leaving, her mind working double time. *A finished basement, perfect for a tunnel entrance, one day. Protected land, behind me, so no developers. Hard to find, unless you're looking for it. Woods, and brush, and a pond. Wild land, but close to the tunnels, close to safety, for Vincent. An upstairs porch that's huge, and open to the night sky. Outside the city. Where he could see the stars. The chance to see the sun come up, and not have to go back down...*

"But if we were here, he could watch the sunrise," she said, already thinking, as she made her way back to the car with Devin. Neither one of them needed her to clarify who "he" was.

"Funny. That's exactly what I thought," Devin replied, bundling her back into the car.

--

Catherine couldn't get the thought of the old house out of her head, as she made her way through another day on too little sleep.

Vincent would love it. It would give him the chance to do things he can't, now. And there would be plenty of room for some of the children to come over, sometimes...

She sighed, as she thought it over. *On the other hand... it's very private. It implies... something that he might construe as "pressure." That wouldn't be fair. It wouldn't be right. Vincent would never pressure me that way...*

The price was still prohibitive, mostly because of the size of the land that came with it. Which was to say 'acreage.' It wasn't zoned for farming, it was too close to the city limits for that. Another thing not in its favor. It couldn't be taxed as a cheaper property. It would have to be maintained with at least some heavy equipment. She'd need a riding lawn mower. At least.

All of which Devin had told her on the ride back in to town, the night before.

She'd agreed with all of it, then turned him down. He'd shrugged, noncommittally, as he'd dropped her at her door.

Then, as the day wore on, Catherine found that she couldn't get the images from the old estate out of her head. *North of Heaven. North Haven. Haven. A safe place. Like a home.*

She heard Vincent's voice, from a long ago day, the day she'd first met him. From behind the bandages that had covered her eyes, his voice:

"Safe. You're safe, now."

Would he construe North Haven as a place of "safety?" or something else, something closer to "intimacy?" Something he was much less comfortable with? Catherine wasn't sure, either way.

But she also couldn't get the other ideas she was having out of her head.

We could picnic, there, once the land by the pond is cleared. We could walk through the woods together, any time of day. We could sit on the top deck together and just watch the stars...

Then, her practical side came to the fore. *We already have beautiful places to walk through. And I have a balcony. If we want to have a picnic near the water, we can do it by the Falls...*

The lawyer in her was making a case for walking away from this latest scheme of Devin's. But the lawyer in her also knew how to argue both sides of a case.

They were asking a lot of money for it, too. She couldn't get that out of her head, either.

In the late afternoon, a stack of file folders to one side, she tapped a pen against a legal pad, at her desk.

"Something bothering you, Chandler?" Joe asked, looking at the pile of work at her elbow.

"Just thinking. Ever know anybody who fixed up an old... farmhouse, Joe?"

"Why? You fixing to go all back to nature on me, Cathy? But to answer your question, yes. People with money, well, they do what they want, but... it's a money pit, and both couples ended up moving back into town, outside a year. Said shoveling snow was a bear and then there was this real bear, in upstate. No shopping, no theater, and bad TV reception. You making plans?" He raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"Not quite so far as upstate. More like maybe just out of town. I'd still work here, if that's what you're wondering." She smiled at him.

He let out a breath he wasn't aware he'd been holding. "Radcliffe, you ain't workin' here, now," he quipped, sauntering away from her desk.

Chapter Three

“When Something is Meant to Be.”

Providence is wiser than you, and you may be confident it has suited all things better to your eternal good than you could do had you been left to your own option. - John Flavel

Piling half her job into her brief case and promising to take it home, Catherine wrangled with city traffic for over an hour, before she felt the freedom of the outskirts of town slip under the wheels of her car. This was like the drive to Connecticut. *As a matter of fact, from North Haven, I'm already part way to Daddy's cabin,* she realized. *That was another plus.*

Just when had she started thinking in those terms?

Devin had left her a key, and told her the power company should have the electricity to the house working by noon. One of the requirements of re-listing it, it seemed, was the necessity of having at least limited lights and water.

Catherine slowed down for the turn. Even then, she passed it, and had to back up the car so she could enter the old estate.

That's another plus. It's hard to find, unless you know it's here, she realized, hearing her tires crunch on the gravel. She idled up as far as she could go, then walked through the hawthorne to the house Devin had showed her, only hours before.

In broad daylight, the house was even sadder than it had been at two a.m., she realized. The white paint looked splotchier, the porch looked more rotted, the fire damage looked worse, and the boarded up/broken windows looked more forbidding.

The light switch in the foyer didn't work. But the one in the parlor did. A bare bulb hung down from the ceiling.

The side of the house that was away from the fire revealed some unexpected touches of grace: Redwood floors. A huge, field stone fireplace in what would probably become the living room. Shutters made of red oak, half of which were off the hinges, but still salvageable. There were archways framed in mahogany, if she knew her woods, and she did, thanks to her father's exquisite taste, and love for travel. The banister was teak. So was the huge deck that covered the top floor of the house. It was supposed to have a railing all the way around, but it was missing, in parts.

Again, the high, open space reminded her of her balcony.

He wouldn't feel closed in, up here, Catherine thought, looking out over the tops of the smaller trees. A wrought iron fence and gate divided the land around the house from the land they'd once used for horses. She could make out part of the barn's roof. In the other direction, the caretaker's cottage sat forlornly, tucked into the trees before the weed-choked pond.

A caretaker's cottage. Devin and Charles. People who know. People who understand...

Catherine went back downstairs and looked around some more, taking in the view from each window. What fire hadn't damaged, rot and Mother Nature were reclaiming. The house was a mess. The grounds were a mess. It would take a fortune just to bring it up to code. And another fortune to make it livable.

Perhaps the whole house should just be bulldozed; some of the better wood saved.

That too, was an option.

She wandered through the living room to what must have once been a library. Huge, empty oak shelves dominated most of the wall space, and the natural lighting was fairly good, in here. A padded window seat overlooked the side yard.

Someone had loved books, who'd been here. Catherine thought.

The room felt so empty, so dusty, without them. She sat down carefully on the window seat, half-surprised it supported her weight without caving in.

She watched a raccoon skitter across the lawn, as it made for the carriage house. Then, just at the edge of the copse of trees, she saw it.

"A deer," she breathed, watching a doe step timidly out of the sheltering trees. There was a wild blueberry bush just past the closest row of pines. The leggy animal made her way clear, and began to nibble, timidly. In a moment, she was joined by a fawn.

"Oh, my god." Catherine scooted forward on the window seat, carefully, willing it not to creak. Mother and child nipped contentedly, for a few minutes, then walked quietly back the way they had come.

'There's a field there. You can lie down in it. Sometimes, you can touch a deer.' Vincent had told her of a dream he'd once had, where she'd said those words, words it would take a trip to Connecticut to make true.

Connecticut might be impossible for him. But... but this isn't.

Then, the window seat did creak, and she was called back into the here and now. If she wasn't careful, she'd end up with her knee through the bowed wood. The window had leaked. The seat was taking the damage.

She backed off the seat, carefully, and lifted it, experimentally. The hinges protested the chore, and the bowed wood had trouble swinging upward. Like many window seats, this one could be lifted upwards, and could be used for blanket storage.

No blanket remained, but there was one book left inside it, sitting in the bottom. Something a reader had tucked there, and left behind after the last move; something the movers had missed, when they'd cleaned out the place, last. Something the bank had missed, when it had finally taken the property for back taxes.

Catherine reached in carefully, not wanting to get bitten by anything that crept or crawled. She lifted the book out. It wasn't wet, but it did have a musty smell.

Her green eyes widened, with wonder. "I can't believe it."

Great Expectations, by Charles Dickens, sat in her hands. Moldy. Not a first edition, or even a fifth one. A beautiful, deep green book, a fine copy in its day, perhaps. Lost, more or less, to the passage of time, and humidity.

"Look at you," she said, catching the scent of mold and age. Touching the cover caused her fingertips to come away green. Grabbing the edge of a nearby dust cloth, she wiped at the leather-feeling cover.

It wasn't green. It was off white. Or it had been, once upon a time, back when it was new. Red scrollwork framed a pair of initials.

"No. It can't be. It just can't."

But it was. The initials 'CD' came into view. She realized its twin sat on Vincent's bookshelf, an underground world away.

It's... it looks like Vincent's copy. The first thing he ever read to me... the first thing we ever read to each other, shared with each other.

She carefully flipped open the cover. Inside, it held an inscribed bookplate. "Kate Rivers, Providence, R.I."

Kate. Catherine. Rivers. Wells. Providence. A thing that was meant to be.

Catherine's brain began making connections where there likely weren't any. She glanced out the window, then around the huge room. There was enough shelf space for every one of Vincent's books. And hers. And then some.

Providence. When something is meant to be. I can do this. Vincent doesn't need to know. Not yet. Not until the house is in better shape. Not until I'm ... not until I'm – we're ready.

She raced out of the house and drove back in to town as quickly as she could. She needed to get to a phone. She didn't want to sit and "think it over." She didn't want to "think" at all. She'd already decided.

And she didn't necessarily want Vincent to know anything about it. Yet.

--

Devin, in the meantime, was having his own problems. Problems which made him downright surly, before he checked the messages on his answering machine, and heard Catherine's voice.

"Devin, it's Cathy. Tell the bank it's overpriced. Way overpriced. Tell them you have a buyer for the lot, and tell them it's cash, and as is. If they close by the end of the week, I'll even kick in the full year's taxes. See if that doesn't get the ball rolling. And not a word of this to anyone. Anyone." Her voice held the meaning of Vincent's name. "Not yet." She hung up the phone.

Devin cradled the receiver in his hand, as he looked at the flashing message light, on the recorder.

The next voice was even more welcome, and no less unmistakable, for him.

"Hi, hon. You miss me?" The soft, feminine tones were a welcome sound, to Devin's ear. He did. He did miss her. Deeply.

"The kids are all going insane. It's rained here for two straight days. I think they want you to come over and teach them how to play five card draw, again. I can never remember what beats what."

Her voice softened, the intimate tones a woman made when she was talking to a man. Her man. *"Anyway, I just wanted you to know that I was thinking of you, before the foster care inspector shows up, and I don't have five minutes to myself. Take care, Jack. Hope the commissions are good. And quick. Miss you."*

She hung up the phone just as the recording ran out of time and beeped over her voice.

"I miss you, too," he told the empty room, wishing she could call him by his real name. *I miss you too, Darcy. So much.* He closed his eyes over the unfamiliar ache, in his heart. *And I think I love you. And I have no idea what to do about it.*

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Devin's demeanor did not improve during his next visit Below, and like any good fraud in a foul mood, he took it out on those nearest. In this case, Vincent. After sniping at him for the better part of an hour, both of them had finally had enough.

"You're unhappy. You're troubled. You've been troubled since you arrived," Vincent chided his older brother.

"Yeah. Maybe. But you're the one who's really messed up," Devin insisted, and not for the first time. "Thanks to being here. It's screwed up your life, Vincent. *He's* screwed up your life." It was a theme Devin had warmed to, over the last hour. And with Devin, it was never necessary to ask who "he" was. Father.

"And the only one who's more screwed up than you, here, is me," Devin admitted to his little brother, as the two of them walked across the Whispering Gallery, together.

Intentionally or no, Devin was walking them in the direction of Catherine's new "estate." *Make that Catherine's tumbledown nightmare*, his mind amended, winding his way past the center of the bridge.

"Being here' as you so tactfully put it, has been my only choice, Devin," Vincent reminded him. "Your freedom grants you... more," he added, as carefully as he could.

They stood a moment, and listened to the voices. Above them, a car horn blared. A baby cried, the sound of a newborn wail of entrance. A woman laughed. A Bronx accented man ordered two Cones, with extra cheese.

"Yeah. Well, don't envy me my opportunities," Devin replied, as they strolled to the other side of the bridge. "No matter what they are, it all still boils down to the same thing."

"That we are all... affected, by how we live?" Vincent asked sagely.

Devin gave a short nod. "Right. Affected. At least Catherine *knows*, with you."

"Knows?" Vincent asked. Something was clearly bothering his older brother.

"At least she already knows about this place," Devin clarified, "and loves you anyway. For all the good it does her," he added darkly.

Vincent reached for patience. A thing he realized he'd had to do often, on this visit. "Devin. You've been angry since you arrived here. Angry with Father. Angry with me. With Catherine, even. Can you tell me why?" Vincent asked, as they stepped into the tunnel passageway opposite the bridge.

Devin kept walking, his long-legged saunter covering a decent bit of ground. Vincent was taller than him, now. It was a thing he was still not quite used to. He remembered their mutual childhood, when that was not true, and by several inches.

Not answering, Devin looked toward where the pathway ahead of them veered toward the north. "At a dead run... how long before you could reach the access tunnel for the Old North Rail Line?" he asked Vincent.

"The abandoned one? At a run? Twelve, fifteen minutes from here, perhaps. Why? Do we need to run, Devin?" Vincent was clearly confused.

"You might. Some day." He let the sentence hang, then sat down unexpectedly on the sandy, hard-packed ground. After a moment, he pushed his hands through his thick hair. It was getting overlong, and in need of a cut.

"I met someone, Vincent."

Ah. Vincent joined him on the ground. *So that's what all this is about. You met someone.*

"You're... afraid to show her how you were raised?" Vincent asked.

It was a not uncommon problem for the children of the Tunnels, once they reached adulthood. Many simply fabricated a childhood, and folded their old life into the one they were currently living.

Devin, Vincent realized, could not quite do that. Devin's current "life" was as secret as his childhood one. And he'd led several false "lives" in between. Serially.

"Surely, this has happened, before?" Vincent prompted him.

"Yes. No. Not like this." Devin shook his head and shoved his hands back through his hair, and held them there, at the nape of his neck.

"She thinks I sell real estate. I only met her because she was trying to dodge an eviction notice while she gets the paperwork approved for a different foster care home." Devin told him.

"Foster care?" Vincent asked.

"For special needs kids. They need stuff. Wheelchair ramps and extra wide doors. An empty room for therapy equipment, if you can't set that up in the living room. A special machine that reads blood sugar levels. A fenced yard, maybe. Hell, I don't even know."

"It sounds... complicated," Vincent realized.

"If you're taking care of special kids, it is. And rare. Most places aren't built for it. And the ones that are... well. You wouldn't believe how much a special designation like that makes the property value of an area go down. How many people *don't* want one there, beside their three bedroom, two bath mortgage. Nimby. They call it 'nimby.' It means 'Not in my back yard.'" Devin explained.

Vincent simply listened.

"She... she called my... my office." He skipped lightly over the word. "Someone must have given her my number, and she was hoping I had a new listing. Something she could use. She was hoping I knew of a place, or a friendly landlord, or something. Somewhere. She's... determined. She's got six kids under her care. She's trying to keep them all together."

Vincent took in his brother's very serious expression. Whatever this was, it was bringing him a clouded kind of joy.

"She... sounds like a very special person," Vincent ventured.

Devin inhaled deeply, and let the sigh go. "She's been driven off three properties, before, by landlords who refused to renew her lease. The houses left that the state wants to give her are... I don't know. They're run down. Or in the bad neighborhoods. She's got these kids she takes care of, works herself to death for. The state checks barely cover what they all need."

He let the nape of his neck go, and continued. "Oh, they cover the basics, yeah. But not the extras. Hearing aids for the two hearing-impaired girls. But not the expensive kind, the ones that don't show, because they're about to start puberty, and they're self-conscious about that. No math wiz tutor for the kid who's savant, and functionally a social nightmare. Not the motorized wheelchair for the little girl born with no legs. She's an artist, by the way. Would rather paint than eat."

"It sounds like she would have something in common with Elizabeth," Vincent replied, naming the tunnel's premier mural painter.

"I swear I thought of that. Thought of bundling them all up and just... throwing them down here. Don't think I haven't."

Vincent was reminded of how they'd all met Charles.

Devin shook his head. "But it wouldn't be fair to everybody to take them on and... I can't live here, again, Vincent. It's just too... small, for me. Too underground. Too close to ... him." Devin jerked his head back the way they'd come.

Vincent knew too well the difficulties Devin had, and was still having, with Father.

"Plus there's... uh, the fact she doesn't even know my real name." Devin picked up a loose rock and tossed it back toward the way they'd come.

It's not just your name she doesn't know. It's everything. Isn't it, Devin? Vincent thought.

"That... would be something of an impediment," Vincent agreed.

Devin nodded, and obviously got tired of sitting. Full of a nervous kind of energy, he rose, waited for Vincent to do the same, then headed them in a northerly direction. Vincent had no idea why they were walking this way, nor why he'd mentioned the Old North Rail Line, earlier. This just seemed to be the path Devin wanted to take.

"I sold myself to her as a real estate guy who was trying to help her find a place to land. She thinks my name is Jack Fisher, and I'm being a Good Samaritan, while she stays in the sub-standard housing the state left her with... for as long as that lasts. She's running out of time. And she's at the max number of kids she can take in, legally." Devin tucked his hands into the pockets of his leather bomber jacket, as he described "her" to Vincent.

Vincent didn't need to see the hands balled into fists to feel his brother's frustration, nor his admiration for the woman he spoke of. Both came off Devin in veritable waves.

"She gets up at dawn, and does for them until after sundown. She's no-make-up plain, except she's beautiful. She has this heart that just.... that just..."

"That makes you feel as if anything is possible?" Vincent asked gently.

Devin dropped his head in agreement. For a moment, the brown eyes were closed, and Vincent knew he was remembering something. Something special.

"We made love, once," Devin confessed.

A blonde eyebrow raised.

"And I thought, 'oh, hell, time to start backing away, start making tracks.' Because once that happens, they all start getting really nosy about you, and planning for the future. Wanting to know about your parents, and when they can meet your mom. You know what she did?" Devin asked.

Vincent shook his head, fascinated. Devin had never confessed to having an affair, before. It was a thing most likely to have happened in the twenty years they'd spent apart. And while Devin had told Vincent many stories of those years, he'd not told intimate ones.

"I have no idea," Vincent confessed, because he didn't.

"Nothing," Devin replied, letting the word just drop between them. "She climbed overtop of me at five a.m., so she could go make breakfast. Never said another word about it."

"That is bad?" Vincent asked. He was on very unfamiliar ground.

Devin opened his hands, took them out of his pockets, and let them drop against his sides. "I don't know!" he exploded. "Then her birthday came up. You know how *that* is. They start hinting that they want something. Like, maybe even a ring."

"Do they?" Vincent had no real experience with the steps of this dance. Catherine had never asked for such a thing.

"Most of them do," Devin amended. "Know what she wanted?"

"A ring?" Vincent guessed.

"A new hot water heater. Because the old one was dodgy and the landlord was slow. I told her if she got one, it would probably have to stay with the house she's currently living in. So she just said 'Oh. Never mind, then,' and kept right on going."

Devin rubbed his forehead. Vincent suspected he was getting a headache.

"I take it you didn't get her a present," Vincent told him.

"I did. I bought her a new thermostat, for this ... bus she drives. It's a retrofitted monster, bigger than a van. So it wouldn't keep overheating."

"Very considerate of you."

Devin shook his head. "It's a crap present, and we both know it. But it's what she wanted. What she needed. She thinks I have money, Vincent. Some, anyway." His restless hands went back into the pockets, as they both kept walking.

"Do you think that is why she is with you?" Vincent asked, understanding that "money" was a powerful motivator, in relationships.

"Oh, hell no," Devin shrugged. "I told her about Charles. Told her how much he costs." The dark-haired Wells brother shook his head. "She understood. She gave me soup."

Vincent considered his older brother, thoughtfully. "That does not sound like a master plot, Devin." Vincent offered, as they continued to wind their way northward.

"It isn't. She doesn't want anything. Just... someone to be there. Someone ... *honest*." The last word had to be choked out.

"Ah," Vincent said, slowing his pace until they were both forced to stop walking. "You think she will not love a man named Devin Wells?" Vincent asked.

"I think she will not love a man named Devin Wells who told her his name was Jack Fisher, and that he was a licensed real estate agent," Devin said glumly.

I see. It's not just about what you can't say. It's about the things you already said.

"So you think she will not want to see you again because you lied." *Now I understand. No wonder you're so ... upset.*

Devin leaned heavily against the wall, and nodded. His next words surprised both of them.

"I never wanted to be you more, in my life," Devin realized. He warmed to the idea. "Honestly. You know she loves you for you. Knows she loves you, this place and... all of it." He took one hand out of his pocket and gestured to the granite ceiling over their heads.

Vincent gently shook his own head, causing waves of soft blonde hair to move, over his padded vest. "If you have been reduced to wanting to be me, Devin," Vincent replied, a touch of brotherly humor in his voice, "then the situation is truly dire."

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They walked to the northernmost sweep of the pathway, before it began to wind back to the east and south. Devin was noncommittal much of the way back, and monosyllabic, in his responses to Vincent. When they wandered back into the room they used to share as boys, Devin simply flopped on the bed.

"You going to see her tonight?" Devin asked his brother.

"Catherine? No." Vincent shook his head. "Sam needs his medicine. He's expecting me, this evening."

"Mitch's dad? You're crazy for tending that old man, Vincent. Let one of the others do it. Let Jaime or Kipper go Above."

Vincent tugged on his cape, indicating it was time to leave for the appointed errand. "The area is ... unsafe. It is not for the children to do. Besides, Sam is a good man. You can't hold Mitch against him, Devin," Vincent told him.

"I guess if you don't, I can't." Devin acknowledged, fingering his cheek. Mitch's false accusation of Vincent was what led to the scar on Devin's face. Mitch had told Father about Devin's pocket knife. Devin had thought it was Vincent. The two had fought. Devin had lost.

For Vincent's portion, Mitch had shot Catherine in the back, as she'd tried to escape him. Knowing she was alive was the only thing that had kept Mitch that way. Devin knew the story.

"I will not be back until late," Vincent said, tucking supplies into a bag for Sam. Sam liked the New York Times, even if it wasn't the most recent edition. He liked working the crossword puzzle.

"Try not to visit Catherine at two in the morning," Vincent warned his brother, in a friendly tone which was still sincere.

"I'll do my best," Devin replied.

As Vincent made his way out of the chamber, Devin reflected on the secret he was keeping. *Secrets*, he amended, realizing it was a plural.

Devin rose from the huge bed. "If you're going to pick a woman to come clean about your problems with, might as well pick the one you haven't slept with," Devin said to himself, deciding he needed to see Catherine, yet again.

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"I think the idea of helping out special needs kids is a noble one," Catherine said, looking at a map of "her" land. The bank closing was the day after tomorrow.

"Cathy, that's not why I came here. Not why I told you about my... situation," Devin said.

She wasn't to be put off. "But you did, so now I know. And I still think it's noble."

"So do I. So... when do we tell Vincent that you're dabbling in real estate?" Devin asked.

Catherine frowned. "Not now. Not until after it's all built. Rebuilt. Maybe."

"Care to tell Uncle Devin why?" Devin asked, not believing she was considering half of what she was considering.

"I really don't. There's a wrought iron fence and a gate between the lot the house sits on and the horse paddock. I guess that could stay..."

"You have to tell him," Devin insisted to Catherine. Beyond her windows, the New York sun was well set. At least it was only two or three hours after sundown. Positively early, for Devin. And he'd been there for a while, arguing with her. Almost since Vincent had gone to see Sam Denton.

Catherine eyed the stack of paperwork the bank had sent over. The wheels were in motion.

"Nope. A foster home, you say?" Catherine took Devin in, as he stood once again, taking up the center of her living room. *Devin, you're full of surprises*, she realized, as he'd confessed to her much of what he'd told Vincent.

"It's *my* problem. Well, technically it's Darcy's problem, but --"

"There's plenty of land behind the carriage house, you know. For that matter, there *is* the carriage house." Catherine realized she was in a very generous mood. "Maybe it's not that bad. Maybe it could be renovated. Or one of the outbuildings. The ... what did you call it? The bunk house? That's far enough away. I don't want anyone besides you staying *too* close to the house."

"Then the carriage house is a definite 'no.'" Devin said, astonished he was having this conversation with Catherine.

"The barn's a possibility, and it's in better shape than the carriage house. I want Vincent to feel comfortable." She was checking off a mental list, as she checked off an actual one.

"Catherine. I didn't set you up so you could pay a fortune for a house, so you can put in a foster home on the grounds. One you don't give a damn about." He glared at her. She was mixing apples and oranges. His problems with hers.

"Besides, you don't have the facilities to care for six special needs kids." he stated.

"Oh, ye of little faith," Catherine replied, thumbing through a catalogue of wallpaper samples. Her table was covered with decorating magazines.

I can't believe you. You're really going to do this. And you're not going to tell Vincent about any of it.

"Cathy. You can't just buy a house and not tell him about it! Closing is at three, by the way, and the bank manager says you play hardball."

"He sounded nice on the phone. And I didn't play hardball, you did. Charles could have his own room, if you stay in the cottage. And chickens. Does he like chickens?" She peeked over the book of wallpaper samples. Whatever this was for her, it seemed like she was having fun.

"He likes ducks. And it's not zoned for farming. Remember?"

"Ooh, there's the pond. We could have ducks. And maybe sneak the chickens in. Can we get it rezoned?"

"Considering you're talking about making a foster home out of a bunkhouse and a barn, I can't see why not." Devin rolled his eyes.

"Not the main house. That, I want restored."

"Anything else, Santa?" he asked.

"The barn might be just the place for therapy equipment."

"It would take a lot to bring it all up to code. Half of it was for horses," Devin reminded her.

"Vincent loves horses. Well, at least the carousel kind," she said, making another connection.

"That he does. You're serious about this."

She circled a wall paper sample she liked, then frowned at it. "Maybe not paper. Maybe I'll just paint. What do you think?" she asked, holding up a selection of paint samples.

"I think you've lost your mind. And when he finds out I helped, we'll both be in the soup."

"We'll just have to make sure he doesn't find out, then. Not until it's ready."

"You're talking about keeping something from him for months, Cathy," Devin reasoned.

Maybe not that long. We'll see. "I like that path, through the woods. It leads around and back to the pond... eventually."

"And the paddock." He realized it was useless to resist either her desire for secrecy or her enthusiasm.

"There's already a road into it. They used it for the horse trailers. But it will need to be redone, Cathy. It's overgrown weeds, now."

"Everything new, and a therapeutic gym for the kids who need that," Catherine said, warming to the idea. *North Haven. It could be a good place. It could do good for many people. Not just Vincent and I. There's more than enough room. We could still have our privacy... if he wants that.*

"You're going to have to tell this Darcy woman about your life, Devin. You know that, don't you?" Catherine nudged. She fanned out a selection of blue paint samples.

Yeah. I do. Devin thought, watching her. She set the blue ones aside and fanned the beige ones.

"You're deflecting," he accused.

"I'll see your deflecting and raise you an obfuscating. Objection overruled," she stated sanguinely.

"So... You're not telling him because..." He tried to lead her. "And don't tell me I'm leading the witness," he added, well aware that he was.

Catherine pretended to be busy with the plethora of items before her.

Because I don't want him to feel pressured by my decision. If I make it sound like I did this to help sick kids, who can argue with that?

"I swear I can't pick out a replacement wallpaper for the parlor. Do you think they still sell the original one, somewhere?" she replied, not answering his question.

"Go with the paint. This *is* going to cost you a fortune, Catherine. And you can't just buy a house and not tell him!"

She closed the magazine, tucking the wall paper samples and paint swatches inside it. "Devin, as Joe Maxwell said, that's the difference between having money and not having money." She tossed the whole thing aside.

"People who have money can do what they want."

Chapter Four

Building A Haven

Some people look for a beautiful place. Others make a place beautiful. – Hazrat Inayat Khan

It took only a day or two after the closing for Devin to remember that Catherine counted Elliot Burch as one of her friends. By the weekend, men in hardhats with heavy equipment were pulling off the burned section of the house, clearing the land, rocking in existing pathways to the various buildings on the property, and taking out the weeds that choked the pond.

Catherine was having a new driveway poured. And blueberry bushes planted close to a picture window, which was being reframed, and replaced.

The house looked like it was crawling with ants. Ants in hard hats, making time and a half.

"You've been on a hell of a spending spree. Want to tell me how many more permits we'll have to file?" Devin asked, watching the activity. A truck with a load of lumber crept by, kicking up dust.

She didn't miss the use of the plural pronoun. "Many as we need. I thought this was your idea to begin with," she replied, eyeing the progress with a satisfied expression. A driver approached her with a clipboard, which she signed.

"Thank you." She gave him a smile. He nodded his hard hat and went about his business. Two men carrying fresh window glass stepped between them, intent on making repairs.

"It was. But like I told you, I have lousy ideas," Devin said.

Fresh cut oak boards started coming off the back of the truck. The pair had to step aside or be in the way. Devin realized they were for the cottage roof, as the workmen headed in that direction. Cathy approved of all the industry she saw. She knew in a few days, she'd start approving of the results.

"This is crazy, Cathy," Devin said. Never had he seen so many people working on one place. It looked like Elliot had sent half the crew responsible for working on a high rise.

"Devin, I've got money," Catherine explained, as if an explanation of that was necessary. "My mother had money. My Father made more of it, lots more. There's a foundation set up in his name that Elliot Burch donates to every year, not to mention our old law partners." She stepped between a pair of saw horses and grinned at the fieldstone path that ran down to what was now "her pond."

"The Margaret Chase Trust is administered through there, too..." She picked her way down what was now a lovely, foot-friendly path. One Charles would have no trouble navigating. "There's money set aside for college, for the Tunnel children. But other than that... She always wanted to help special needs kids. Father told me."

So you're on a spending spree because people died, and left you even more stinking rich? Devin thought.

"Some years we have to figure out what to do with all the money. It's not that there isn't a need. It's just that it's honestly tough to figure out which charity should get what," she said, realizing how much she was going to like being here, if even only "sometimes."

"It's a nice problem to have." She picked her way down the path. "But it isn't going to make one dream I have come true." She sighed. "So it might as well make somebody else's."

Is that what rich girls spend money on? Dreams? Devin wondered.

"But you wanted to buy the house before you ever found out about my problem. Found out about Darcy. Found out about her kids. That means you bought it for..." He looked around, and dropped his voice low. "... for Vincent," he said, as loudly as he dared.

Catherine nodded at that, and watched, as the burned section of the kitchen was torn away and loaded into large refuse bins.

"I don't deny that. I... I wanted it so ... so there'd be a *choice*, Devin. That's all. Just a *choice*, for him. If he wants to watch the sunset from the roof, fine, he can watch the sunset from the roof. Take a walk by the pond in broad daylight. Watch the sun rise. Walk in the woods... in the daytime."

She was picturing it. He knew she was.

"What about Darcy's kids? They're strangers."

"The land is big, and it's got the woods, between us, and the dividing wall. The gate will keep us separated, and Vincent will still have lots of room. If Charles and you lodge in the cabin, that's no problem. Both of you know about him, so if you see him from time to time, it's not a big deal. Heck, he'd probably enjoy spending time with you."

"I still don't get it." Devin shrugged. "If it's *for* him, why not just tell him?" he asked.

Catherine slowed down. When she came to a stop, Devin realized how deep her hesitation ran. "Because... because he might view it the wrong way," Catherine confessed. A shadow of ... something... crossed her green eyes.

"What the hell way is that?" Devin could not decipher her.

"Like I'm putting pressure on him to... do something." She had the good grace to blush.

Aha. So that's why she won't...ah, hell.

"And you're not doing that yet, I take it," Devin replied, confirming what he already had guessed.

She shook her head. "I'm not. *We're*... not. If what we are now is all we ever are to each other, then what we are now is all we ever are to each other. I can't force him and I won't beg him. Not because I have too much pride, mind you, but because, in a way... I've tried. So make that, 'I won't beg him some more.'"

Clearly, she and Vincent had discussed this, at least tangentially. Devin kept his eyes on her, steadily.

"My brother is an idiot," he concluded.

Catherine put a restraining hand on his arm. "Don't. That's not fair. He once told me... well, when he loses control, when he's... protected me, sometimes, he's still in there. That it feels like being used. Being... ridden, by something. Something... he can't control." She dropped her voice at the description.

Devin stood perfectly still, listening. This was a part of Vincent's life he knew literally nothing about.

"And Vincent... lives his life by control. At least, his adult life," Devin confirmed.

Catherine nodded. "I'm not going to back him in to a corner on it. So as far as he's concerned, you found me a house, I liked it, we talked about the possibility of moving some kids in with Darcy, on the other end of the property, and that sounded good."

"You don't think he might want some input, on this?" Devin watched the remains of her destroyed kitchen getting scooped up by a giant pair of pincers. To one side, a frame for the new wall was already getting hammered together.

She dropped her gaze.

"Devin, I don't know what he wants," she admitted. "Some days, when I'm at my darkest, I'm not even sure if he wants me, any more. Not like he used to."

Whoa.

She shook her head, "No, that's not fair, either. He loves me. He does want me. Just... just not ... not in the way I thought... hoped... he would. Someday."

Devin took in her forlorn expression. The sorrow in her words was a hard and palpable thing.

She took in a deep breath, then forced the look on her face to brighten. "I know he loves me, but he has no idea what to do about that, or if he has to do anything at all. And so here we are."

"So it means this place stays a big secret?" Devin asked.

Catherine nodded. "I think so. For a while. I... I stayed with him a while after my father died. But I had to go back. I just had to."

"What does that have to do with any of this?" Devin asked.

Catherine watched the pinchers drop their load. It made a loud, banging noise.

Out with the old, in with the new, she thought. Maybe... we just all need a fresh start.

"It's just... I don't want him to think I rejected him, but maybe, deep down, he does. We don't talk about my living there, anymore. And I know he can't live in my apartment..."

The words trailed away as her green eyes tracked farther up, to watch a workman take measurements on the missing railings of the deck that encircled the top floor of the house. She stepped closer, while still trying to stay out of the way.

"Hey! I want as open a railing as you can make it! I don't want to block anything, from up there!" Catherine called to him.

"Yes ma'am!" the workman replied, jotting down numbers on a pad.

Catherine turned back to Devin. "I just know I love him, and my money isn't doing anything else, so it might as well do this. If it makes a few other people happy, well, that's more than it's making happy, now."

"I haven't told Darcy about the chance to stay here. I haven't told her... anything. But I plan to. I... I have to. At the very least, I have to tell her I'm not what she thinks I am."

"That's a risk. One you have to take," Catherine said.

"She might not come here. She might tell me to kiss her ass," the realtor known as Jack Fisher commented.

"I know you're not looking forward to telling her the truth. Or at least... as much of the truth as you can... I wish you luck, Devin," Catherine's tone was deeply sincere.

"I'm going to have to call her, tonight. Tell her we need to get together, in a couple days. Once I do... it... it might not go well."

"Well. That will leave you and I with a big piece of land and a falling down house, then, won't it?" Catherine returned.

A bulldozer was knocking down the ramshackle porch, on his left. To his right, two men were walking out with the remnants of a soiled and tattered rug, from the hallway.

"Comin' through!" One of the workmen shouted. Five more came, behind him, tool boxes at the ready. They had a kitchen to rebuild.

It was going to be a busy week.

Chapter Five

There's No Such Thing as a "Good Fraud."

The ache for home lives in all of us. The place where we can go as we are and not be questioned.

– Maya Angelou

--

It was indeed a busy week. And the seventh night of that, as it worked out, didn't go very well for either brother.

Nine P.M. found Devin sitting in the same bar he'd left to see Catherine, on his birthday. To say that things with Darcy "hadn't gone well" was understating it. To say she ejected him from her life and told him she never wanted to see him again, wasn't.

The conversation had started out innocently enough.

"Explain what you mean by 'I know a rich woman with money to burn and land we can use.' Darcy Taylor had asked Devin. Who was still 'Jack,' as far as she was concerned. He'd told her he had a confession to make. He'd not told her so much more. Yet.

"It's true. Her name is Catherine Chandler. She's... I worked with her. A long time ago," he answered.

"Oh. So, she's in real estate? Like you?" Darcy's doe-brown eyes were inquisitive.

"Darcy... about that..."

Devin tapped the polished wooden counter with a short nail, and nudged his glass forward. "Hit me again," he ordered.

The bartender complied, giving him a stare that told him he remembered Devin, from the last time he'd been there. Amber liquid splashed to near the top of the glass.

"Why don't you finish that one up, go buy a dozen red roses, and tell her you're sorry?" the bartender asked, taking a five dollar bill out of Devin's change.

"It's not closing time. You can't kick me out, yet," Devin replied, contemplating his glass.

"Still. Flowers wouldn't be a bad idea."

"What makes you think it's a woman?" Devin asked conversationally. He downed the drink. It burned, going down. Not quite as bad as the sight of Darcy's hurt, betrayed face burned, but it was close.

"You got the look," the barkeep replied, refilling the glass before he was asked.

"Yeah. I guess I do," Devin conceded.

Charles, back from his time spent with Peter Alcott, had sat on a stool, bidden into silence. Devin knew this was going to be a long talk. One Charles probably shouldn't take part in.

"Charles. Would you mind going in with the other kids... I mean, the kids, and watch tv for a little while? I think cartoons are on."

"Okay, Dev." Charles smiled affably, and ambled off.

"He calls you Devin, or Dev. I meant to ask before. Is that your middle name?" Darcy asked.

'Lie. Just lie. Go with it.' Devin thought.

"No," he answered. 'Here we go.'

Devin drained the whiskey, thumped the glass back down on the bar and pointed to it, again, Experience told the bartender that the dark haired man with the scar on his face wasn't going anywhere. Leastways, not

yet. He had change from a twenty on the bar, and the twenty had brothers, in his wallet. Bartenders made their money noticing such things, and this one had been at it a while.

"I guess you see that look a lot," Devin said, putting a buck in the brandy glass tip jar.

"Yeah. I'm Kevin." He stuck out his hand, which Devin shook.

"Jack Fisher," Devin lied, realizing how often he did that, and how easy it was. *No wonder she hates me.*

"There's a decent florist on the corner. Got me out of a jam more than once, Jack," Kevin replied, wiping down the counter. The crowd was thinning out, as the evening wore on. In an hour, the after-theater crowd would start pouring in.

"What if I told you this woman had no use whatsoever for flowers, and would probably consider them an insult, or at least a waste of good money?" Devin asked, turning the glass in a contemplative circle, with his hand.

"Chocolate? Nice card?" Kevin ran the list.

"No, and no. But thanks, anyway." Devin glared at his glass, dourly.

Darcy had drawn her brows together.

"Jack ... or... whatever... I know people keep secrets from each other. Is this the part where you tell me you have a wife stashed, somewhere?"

Devin knew that Darcy was no fool. She was clearly bracing for an impact.

"No." He pulled out a kitchen chair.

"This is the part where I tell you the landlord has confirmed he won't renew your lease under any circumstances, and you don't have long to get out. And my real name isn't Jack Fisher. It's Devin Wells. And I'm not a real estate agent, well, at least not the ... the regular kind. And ... other stuff..."

Darcy's look of disbelief had done nothing but grow, and grow. Her brown eyes had darted, grappling with which admission she was supposed to handle, first.

"That bad? Plenty of fish in the sea." Kevin consoled, as a leggy blonde sauntered in the door.

Devin barely spared her a glance, instead thinking of a feisty brunette, with doe-colored eyes. One who hated him, right now.

"No, there aren't," he replied. Darcy's response to his revelation that his real name was Devin Wells was vivid. And entirely expected. She'd nearly thrown something at him. Nearly.

"You... you lied to me? Why? What... what possible reason could you have for doing that? Make me understand. Make me understand why I'm not throwing a serial liar out of my kitchen, right now."

Words rose in his throat. Then, they stayed there. The Tunnels. Vincent. Father, and dozens of other people who didn't want to be found, and in Vincent's case, couldn't be.

"There are things I can't tell you. I'm not the only one involved, here, Darcy."

"You think that makes this better?" She'd been close to tears. Angry ones. "This is... it's a sick game you're playing."

"You sure?" Kevin asked, nodding the blonde's way. "Hey, Annette."

"Hey, Kev." She sat a few empty stools down. Far away to give Devin room, and close enough to let him know she might be interested.

In other times, he might have been tempted. The commission from Catherine Chandler's new house was burning a hole in his pocket, and Annette looked 30ish, pretty, and single.

But this wasn't other times. This was now. And Devin felt the hole in his heart, not the wad in his pocket. He pushed the glass aside, knowing he wasn't going to drink it. But he also realized that until the caretaker's cottage on Catherine's property was livable, he had nowhere else to go. Charles was staying at Peter's place, with the promise that it wouldn't be more than a couple of days. He didn't want to go back to the Tunnels.

Darcy's parting shot rang in his ears:

"You say 'trust me' when it's you who doesn't trust? Who does that? Do you know how... fake that sounds? How much like a... a fraud? Jack... Devin... I cared about you. I really did. But right now, I have kids who need me and they don't need you, need this."

"Darcy... it's not like you're thinking. I'm good at what I do. I'm--"

"There's no such thing as a good fraud!" she'd shouted. "Now get out!"

The look on her face was one he knew he was going to take to his grave. He'd given her a few hours, then tried to call. At first, he got the answering machine. Then, she'd unplugged the phone.

Kevin set Annette up with a vodka martini.

"I'm sure," Devin replied glumly, to no one in particular.

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Vincent, as it turned out, wasn't going to have a much better evening than Devin was.

It had started innocuously enough. Afternoon classes had given way to a light dinner. Out of sheer habit, he'd gone to check on Mouse. The tinker had seemed very busy, lately, but not inclined to linger and talk.

Vincent had found him loading small pieces of oak into a canvas bag. When Vincent had asked what they were for, Mouse's answer had been a blithe one. "Not much. Catherine's new house. Can't tell you the way. Secret! Cullen says!"

Catherine's new... what? Vincent had been startled, by the revelation. His mind scrambled for an explanation

"Do you mean her father's old apartment?" Vincent asked, knowing that the Manhattan luxury apartment was big, but not a "house," by definition.

"Nope," Mouse answered, tugging the drawstring on the bag so it opened, farther. "House. Catherine's. New one. But must be old, too. Bad stairs." Mouse tucked a carpenter's measuring tape into one of the many pockets of his jacket.

Catherine's... She's been outside the city limits, lately, for her work. Well outside... Vincent just assumed she'd been interviewing a witness, or... something. Something associated with her job.

"What do you mean, 'Catherine's new house?'" Vincent's voice was uncompromising, as he stared at his young friend.

Mouse missed Vincent's sudden change of tone.

"Bought it. With money. Big one. Out past the gallery, past the old caves. Up to the north edge. Past the old rail line. Nobody uses it. You can hear the trains. Whoa woo!" Mouse said, smiling. "Secret, from there. Mouse knows the way!"

He continued picking among the pieces of a shattered bookshelf, finding the best ones for Cullen to cut down to size. "Need good ones. Cullen says no bending. For the stairs."

Catherine has... stairs?

"Mouse, how do you know this?" Vincent demanded. *He's wrong. He must be wrong. A misunderstanding. This is Mouse, after all.*

"Mouse knows. Mouse hears things. Saw papers. Saw Devin. Saw Cullen. Bringing the big saw. Can't get much past Mouse."

"Apparently, you can't," Vincent replied, processing. Though apparently you could get a good deal past Vincent, when he was taking care of Sam Denton, and teaching composition to his students.

"Does anyone else know?" Vincent asked.

"Nah. Pascal maybe. Something about a map of the Old North Rail Line, and the old caves, and how close her basement is."

The Old North Rail Line. Devin. Vincent remembered their walk.

"Secret way. Somebody built the tracks. Left them," Mouse continued. He held up a decent sized piece of oak and examined it. "Maybe a few hundred yards from there to Catherine's place. Maybe less. Cullen says take a while to dig. Easier just to go up top. Make a manhole cover, like on the street."

Vincent was visibly staggered. *The Old North Rail Line. Devin. A... a house? Someplace near the abandoned parts of the subway lines that were never finished?*

"Pascal pulled the maps to... to see how close the old line is to... to something Catherine is involved with?" He was beyond confused.

"Yep. Still need to dig. Might get to use my digging machine!" Mouse looked proud, as he tucked another board into the bag. "Hole would still be on her land. In her woods, maybe." He tossed an unsatisfactory board aside.

"Catherine owns... woods?" Vincent was still trying to catch up.

"Woods. Trees. Like the park, Vincent," Mouse said, as if he had to define the word "woods" to his very large friend. "Even has a pond. Ducks. Maybe geese. Geese are loud."

"Yes. Geese are loud. Can you take me there, Mouse?" Vincent asked, thoroughly confused.

"Nope." Mouse told him. "Cullen said don't tell anybody. Access tunnel, off the main line. Doesn't go anywhere. Secret way. *Very secret.* Big trouble, if I tell. 'Don't tell anybody about this, Mouse,'" Mouse said, imitating Cullen.

Ah.

So when Cullen had told Mouse not to tell about the *path*, there, *he'd* neglected to also instruct him not to tell about the *house*, assuming it would be a given. How like Mouse to split that hair.

The Old North Rail Line. It runs past the river. Out of the city. Devin asked me about it. Wanted to know how fast I could run...

"Where are you taking the wood?" Vincent asked. "Is that secret, too?"

Mouse considered, a moment. "Nah. Saul's shop. Using his van. Cullen says it needs new shocks."

"No doubt it does." Vincent said stonily. *Catherine... has bought a house? And... woods?*

Vincent stalked through the tunnels to Saul's basement entrance, as fast as his very long stride would carry him.

Chapter Six

All We Are

I believe that consistently we need to look for good ... while heaven comes closer when we acknowledge it.
- Madeleine L'Engle

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Not bad, for a week's work, Catherine mused. A contractor had been in and had agreed with her about simply hauling away the remains of the front porch, without trying to replace it. It had been an add-on affair from the 1960's, and just having it gone made the place look better. Elliot's men had put in all the new window glass, and new frames where cracked panes used to be, and fresh window casings where rot used to be. The new kitchen gleamed, and was taking in new appliances. A new kitchen side door was half glass, and would let in the morning light, once morning came. It had a side stoop that led to the yard, and the blueberry bushes. Catherine was pleased.

She'd written Elliot a very large check.

He'd sent it back, in little pieces.

She'd sent him a very good bottle of wine.

He'd sent her back a note saying 'To be drunk only when you are with me.'

Catherine smiled, and had laid the note on the parlor mantle. They were in a good place with each other. He was seeing a European supermodel. His business was thriving, again. Stosh Kazmarek had done good.

She planned on using his men for other work. She'd already decided to renovate the barn into a therapeutic gym, and to update the modest house previously occupied by the estate's stable hands.

She'd have to make sure Elliot accepted an advance, instead. *Fool me once*, Catherine thought, happy the plans were already being drawn up.

The room she was standing in had been stripped of the tattered wallpaper, and though the bare walls looked unattractive, at the moment, they looked like they had potential. Potential for something good to happen to them. The thought buoyed Catherine's spirits a little more. Outside, nighttime crickets were making their song known.

She heard Saul's van pull up into her new front yard. She knew the sound of the squeaky old Econoline van. Cullen had promised to fix her missing stair, and to deliver and help set up her kitchen countertops. The cabinets were already in place, thanks to Elliot's men.

Ironically, the kitchen was now the newest room in the house, owing to the damage from the fire. The windows were huge and cheerful, and there was an open space in the middle of the floor, begging for a large kitchen table.

She went outside to see if she could help Cullen unload the countertop. It was definitely a two person job. She wondered if he'd brought Devin with him.

That was when she discovered that the woodcarver had brought one of the Wells brothers, at least.

When she came out to the front door, Vincent was simply standing in front of her house, staring upward.

Her eyes darted to Cullen, who looked understandably nervous. Which was to say he'd been trapped in a van with bad shock absorbers, and with Vincent, for the last forty minutes. He looked none too happy about being interrogated.

"Hi. Um... Surprise," Catherine tried, seeing the deeply unhappy look on Vincent's face.

"It is indeed," Vincent told her, pulling wide the doors of the van. He shot her a confused look that said he was clearly not pleased, as he helped Cullen carry in the new countertop. It was a marble, scavenged from an old hotel. Cullen had told her about it, and how he'd wanted it gone. Catherine, delighted at the thought of having something from the Tunnels become a part of the house, had asked for it.

It was heavy. The two men took it into the house and settled it on the cabinets that had been waiting for it. Elliot's men would seal it down, some time tomorrow.

"You should include Kanin on your scheme, once he is released. He works well with stone," Vincent commented succinctly, as Cullen and he shoved the large marble slab back against the wall.

"I guess I'll head back now. Saul will want the van back." Cullen sounded relieved, very relieved to be leaving, even though he hadn't repaired the step. Catherine handed him two twenties for gas and the use of the van, understanding his desire to be gone.

"Please make sure he knows I said 'thank you,' Cullen," Catherine instructed.

Cullen nodded. Then wondered if he was supposed to wait for Vincent, as well.

"You may go, Cullen," Vincent told him, simply. The wood carver dropped the canvas bag of wood and did so.

Catherine watched her love as he stood stock still in the kitchen, eyes wandering over the new appliances. Not to mention the new walls.

"You should have seen the place, before. Especially this part. There was a fire," Catherine ventured.

"Indeed." Vincent seemed to like using that spare word, right now, and leaving it pregnant with meaning.

She decided to take the bull by the horns, or in this case, the lion by the mane.

"I take it you have some sort of problem with it," Catherine said, in her most challenging tone.

Vincent's eyes travelled along to where the new ceiling met the new wall. "Catherine. I admit I do not understand. Is this not the sort of decision people... discuss?" He seemed actually hurt. Which made her feel sorry for him, which made her feel more defensive.

She said the one thing she probably shouldn't have said, and she knew it: "It's my money. I can do with it as I please."

In all their time together, the words "my money" had almost never escaped her lips. And never in this context.

"So it is." His voice was deceptively soft.

She turned, not sure why they were arguing, or felt like they were. *I was going to tell you. Just... not this way. It's not ready, yet. I'm not ready.* Part of her felt very close to tears.

"You should have had Cullen drive you back. It's safer in the van. We don't have tunnel access, yet," she informed him.

He said nothing to that.

"Perhaps I will stay and work on the house, a while," he replied, making his way from the kitchen doorway over to the banister. "This is teak," he stated. His tone was admiring. For some reason, that helped her frame of mind. She watched, as he ran his fingers over the beautiful, smooth wood.

"The upper deck is, too," she said carefully. "The... the family that built this place made their money in shipping, once upon a time."

He nodded, trailing a hand up the railing, noticing the step Cullen had intended to replace. Blue eyes trailed around the room.

The walls had been scraped bare of a fading paper, and they waited for something new. Some of the windows still had the manufacturer's stickers on them. *Also new.*

He stopped half way up the staircase, turned, and sat down on them, just beneath the broken part. He waited for his love to join him, as she climbed the stairs.

"Catherine?" he asked, holding out his hands. She took them, then sat by his side on the long step.

"Can you help me to understand?" he requested.

"I... I didn't do anything wrong, and it wasn't done out of anger. Or... frustration." She tried to explain it as best she could. She took a deep breath, and dove in.

"Devin told me about this place. The more I thought about it, the more I began to understand, well, at first it seemed like it was just too big a job to take on. I have the apartment. But I came back to see it in the daytime, and... well, there was a family of deer that somehow managed to live right on the property. Probably they just came in through the Federal lands that run to the back of the area."

He nodded at her description, trying to keep up with her.

"And then I found a book, in the window seat. And it was Great Expectations." She rose and tugged on his hand, taking him down the stairs and leading him into the room that was destined to be a library, again. "It's even the same edition as yours."

"Ours. The same edition as ours," Vincent corrected, as he followed her into the room, heading for the one and only book that sat on a shelf. It still smelled faintly of mold, but she'd obviously cleaned it, and saddle soaped the cover. The white leather gleamed, on the wooden shelf.

He opened the cover, reading the bookplate.

"Kate Rivers. Providence." He read. His eyes met hers, over the cover of the book.

"You do get it, don't you?" she asked.

"Kate is a nickname for Catherine. Rivers and Wells are both water names. Providence is where you were once going to move to, before I was caught by Gould, and you changed your mind."

"And you said Providence is...is..." She bit her lip, unable to continue.

"When something is meant to be," he finished for her, replacing the book on the shelf. His unusual hand stroked the smooth wood. Oak. Blonde oak. Another good scrubbing and a coat of lemon oil, and it would gleam.

"I know it's an absurd reason to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars," Catherine admitted. "But it just seemed like, well, it seemed like the universe was yelling at me to buy the house. I... I know it's barely livable. But --"

"Catherine, I do not question your right to buy any house you wish. And I would be the last one to disagree when the 'universe' comes shouting." His voice was calm. "I simply don't understand why you would not include me in your plans. I had to find out through Mouse. Who thinks the only secret he has to keep is the way past the Old North Rail Line, and that it's close by," he informed her.

"Which means everybody will know, by now." Catherine rolled her eyes, walking back into the kitchen. It seemed like a less intimate space, and for whatever reason, Catherine felt she needed that, right now.

"I knew it was only a matter of time. I... I hoped to be a little farther along with the repairs, that's all. And Devin and I are still wrangling about whether or not there's going to be a renovated house on the adjoining property. One for special needs children."

"Am I... am I to know these children?" he asked, confused. "Or is it your wish that I not be a ... be a part of this place?" He said the last with difficulty.

Catherine realized how badly she'd erred, here. "Oh, no, Vincent, I could never leave you out!" she was quick to insist, though of course they'd all done just that.

"It's just... Devin says he's looked everywhere for a place for this woman named Darcy, and I thought, well, there's so much room, here, and Charles could even come... and, I don't know, I guess dreams just kind of run in to each other, out here. It's part of the magic of the place."

"He told me about her. From what I understand, things are... complicated," Vincent said, adding nothing more.

Aren't we all? Catherine mused.

Vincent stood back and looked around the large room, again, trying to take in all that lay beyond it.

"I did not know this was a thing you wanted, Catherine." Never in the years they'd been together had she mentioned such a thing.

She shook her head. "I didn't think I did, either, until Devin brought me here," she said, knowing that made her sound flighty.

"Do you intend to sell your apartment?" Vincent asked. The thought was almost painful for him, right now. It was his only link to her.

"No!" She shook her head, vehemently. *Lord, what must he be thinking?* "I know that that's part of why all of this is so... it doesn't make sense."

She dropped her gaze, not liking the look of confusion she kept seeing on his face. "I keep going back and forth about that, and I swear I was going to talk to you about it. For right now, no. This place isn't livable, anyway, and the apartment is paid for. It was a graduation present from my father. And the only place we've ever been together, so..."

"You would not use the money to help pay for this house?" he asked, remaining confused.

She shrugged. "I know it sounds excessive to own two places, but, well, when my Father died, he had a midtown apartment, a big house in the country that belonged to my mom's people, a fishing cabin in Connecticut, and even a small villa in the South of France. I sold all but the cabin. The price of the villa alone was... staggering."

She never discussed money with him, for the most part, either having been too well bred to do so, or too conscious of his lack of money to want to raise what could be a difficult subject, between them.

"Yet, you did not want me to know, about this ... home you are making?" Vincent asked again.

Her eyes met his, and for the first time, he saw doubt, or at the very least uncertainty, hovering, there.

"Vincent, I... since I've started thinking about this place... I mean... really thinking about it... I don't know what it's going to be. I think it's probably going to be good for Charles, for Devin. And good that people like Darcy's kids might have a place to be. But for myself..." Her voice trailed off, some.

"I don't know. Half the time I picture myself spending the rest of my life here by myself, being like some crazy old lady, with a house full of cats." She shook her head at the image. Then, she sighed.

"I wanted it to be a place you could come, if you wanted to. We always struggled about the idea of my moving Below, so, I thought... maybe you might like to come here. Sometimes."

He looked around some more, clearly having no idea if he wanted that. The entire idea was too new.

"On the other hand, I didn't want this place to be some big... pressure cooker, where you had to feel obligated to, well, play house, for lack of a better term." She shrugged.

He was still a few sentences behind her. "You picture your life as old and alone? With cats?" He was stuck on the description. *What is it you picture the other half of the time, Catherine? You, with dogs?*

She lifted her shoulders, again. "Cats and lots of friends from the Tunnels." She amended her earlier words.

"More and more, I consider it a possibility of sorts, I suppose. I know the idea of me living in the tunnels gives us both pause, and you can't live in my apartment, the access is too public, there are hundreds of people in that building..."

"Yet, you wouldn't tell me about this home because..."

The green eyes were still full of hesitation, but they met his, candidly. "Because I figure it's a real possibility that you'll do as you do now. Come visit, sometimes, briefly. Invite me down Below for Winterfest, or a concert, occasionally. It's all right if our relationship doesn't change. I suppose that's what I've been trying to say."

She brushed the marble countertop, with her fingertips. Clearly, he needed something to do with his hands. Hands that had become restless, at her description.

"We are where we are. Wherever that is. This place is something *I'm* doing. It opens up the potential for you to visit more often, and even come in the daytime ... if that's what you want, once some sort of access tunnel is completed."

"And Devin? He knew of this?"

Catherine knew she didn't want to throw the other Wells brother under the bus.

"Any arrangement I make with Devin would likely be temporary. You know he's always been a rolling stone. Maybe some of the tunnel children could come, sometimes. Play in the yard, run in the woods around the house. See the deer, and climb some trees. Pop popcorn and watch a movie..."

She put her hand up to her forehead. "I don't know, Vincent. I'm kind of figuring all this out as I go. I just know it feels right. Providence."

"And in 'Providence,'" he chose his words slowly, "You do not wish that we were somehow... more with each other?"

Now it was her turn to be careful.

"I wish for whatever makes you happy. Whatever makes you... unafraid." Her green eyes were pools of understanding. And a certain amount of resignation.

"You answered a question about what you want with an answer about what I want. That wasn't what I asked, Catherine." He began seeing the place with new eyes. It had once been a rich man's retreat. Something more than a country home, and less than an overblown mansion. In spite of the damage the property had endured, he sensed a solid framework around them, and a solid foundation, beneath his feet.

There's too much room here for one person. So you'll fill the adjacent property with strangers? In a city of millions, it struck him how alone that made her sound.

"I can't want something that you reject, Vincent, something that justifiably worries you, even leaves you terrified. I know what it is to feel victimized by someone else, something else," she said, referring to her own attack. "I won't do that to you. Won't push you to make you feel that way. I can't. It would be cruel. I love you too much for that."

"So we will go on as we are? As... a certain kind of... friends?" Vincent suddenly felt the need to clarify, and he hated the words he was forced to use.

"I think we know we've always been more than friends," she replied.

Yes. We are. Of course we are.

Aren't we?

He let the question hang unanswered, internally.

"Is there a place you can sleep?" he asked, content to let her words settle, for now.

Thank god we got the revelation that I've bought a house out of the way, finally, she mused.

"Two of the four bedrooms upstairs are almost livable. One has a huge sleigh bed and a new mattress in it. The old one was hosting a family of squirrels." She smiled at him, gamely.

"That must have been... interesting." It was the only description he could come up with, on short notice.

"The other bedroom just has an air mattress thrown down in it, but it's clean. I used it the first night I stayed here."

You... stayed here? "And when was that?" he asked.

Uh-oh. "Um. About a week ago. You'd gone to take supplies down to Narcissa."

She'd been busy, he'd give her that.

He remembered the times during the last week that he'd felt her tension, through the bond, and sometimes her exhaustion, but those feelings were common to her work day, so he'd thought nothing of it. He couldn't read her mind. He could only know what she'd been feeling.

"I've put in for time off. I'm taking some time to move some of my Dad's things out of storage. The Villa sold with the furniture, of course, but his apartment had a bunch of stuff in it."

So Charles Chandler's things would become part of this place. Another dream to weave into the others, for her.

"Have you had dinner?" she asked. "It's just peanut butter and jelly, I'm afraid. The appliances have been in for a few days, I just haven't had time to go to the market."

"You should let Saul send you some things, next time Cullen uses the van. Or accept something from Henry, or Lin. Or William." He inclined his head, as she slapped dinner together between two pieces of bread. She wasn't hungry. But she was unsettled. Like him, she wanted something to do with her hands.

"It might be a faster way to get a quart of milk up here. You know the nearest gas station with a convenience store attached to it is nearly three miles away?" she told him.

"I saw it as Cullen drove me up. Do you mind if I ... look around, Catherine?" he asked her.

"Mind? Of course not." *After all, I want it to be your home, too. If you want it.*

Perhaps she hadn't been very clear about that, in her rush to tell him this was a "no pressure zone."

Vincent left her in the kitchen as he explored her latest... adventure. He tread carefully across her upstairs floors.

Fighting criminals might be easier than getting the upstairs bathroom restored, he mused. A pipe leak had slowly but surely eroded the main bathroom floor to the point where it was unstable. The weight of the claw footed tub would have to be removed, the flooring redone, and the sink, where the leak had started, removed from the bowed wall.

If the house had a saving grace, it was that the roof had been solid, and prohibitively expensive. Water had not run down the inside walls and destroyed the structure, utterly. Just some damage around a few of the windows where the casing had rotted, or a broken window had allowed the weather to come in.

From one of the usable bedrooms, he looked through the upstairs window. He could see the remains of her front porch stacked to one side, waiting to be taken away. He wondered if Catherine would replace it with a new one, or simply leave the wide flagstone steps that had clearly been part of the original house.

He pictured her as she had described herself. In her eighties, sitting in a rocking chair somewhere, while a bevy of cats prowled around her ankles. He didn't like the image.

He stalked his way down from his second floor, all the way into her basement.

It was a huge space, and blessedly, dry. The furnace would need to be hooked up, or replaced, before she wintered here. There was an obvious place for a washing machine and dryer, though of course none was there, at present. An old, rusting chest freezer sat unplugged, waiting to be removed. The appliances sat behind a door to one side. The rest of the room was a grand, open space. The concrete walls were a soft, grey color.

Vincent pictured the children giving plays here, or concerts. The stone walls made it acoustically viable. And a little reminiscent of home.

He made his way back upstairs, while Catherine unpacked a box of dishes into an overhead cabinet. He scanned her parlor, then went back up to the bedrooms and confirmed what she'd said. From the master bedroom, a pair of doors that looked like they belonged on her terrace, beckoned. Gauzy curtains hung on a new, gleaming rod.

What's this? he wondered, approaching the doorway. It looked both familiar, yet couldn't be.

He put his hands on brass doorknobs, barely needing to turn one to nudge them open. The hinge on the right squeaked, a little. He worked it back and forth, hearing the sound, knowing it was a small thing. Something he could fix.

He then pushed both doors open wide – and opened the way to splendor.

The deck was weathered teak, just as she'd said. The space was flat and wide, and it ran all the way around the house. It was larger than her balcony. Much larger. It gave him a feeling of great space.

A starshot heaven was over his head, as a soft, crescent moon dragged itself across the sky, tripping its bottom over the tallest of her pine trees.

Her pine trees. He thought. Then, something more fanciful came to him. *Her night sky. Her moon. Her... paradise.*

In the distance, overtop of her grandfather oaks, he could catch a glint of only some of the tallest skyscrapers in New York, the tops of the buildings twinkling, as if the sky had been brought to earth.

But above his upturned head, the deep indigo sky showed glittering treasure, far enough away from the city lights to reveal a hundred stars. More than he could see from her balcony. More, he realized, than he'd ever seen in his life, a consequence of being born and raised in (or under) one of the largest metropolises on Earth.

He realized that the stars faded, as he faced the city, with its lightening sky, so he faced the opposite direction, instead, and walked around the broad deck to the other side of the house, the one that faced away from New York City. The sky over his head looked darker, here, and the many stars more vibrant.

All the bedrooms had access to this wide, flat, open space, which encircled the roof. A battered railing had given way on one side. But the view from that side was nothing less than spectacular.

Forest rolled out before him, both property that belonged to her, and the protected land that belonged to the state. Unblocked by skyscrapers, it appeared to go on for miles. Walking through the densely forested space would be like being in the park where the deeply clustered trees took away the view of the city, even though it was still there.

A deep, green place, like the park. The feeling that it goes on, for miles...

Vincent knew that your eye could fool you, down among the Central park greensward, that the area was large, but that the paths were winding ones, to give the impression of greater size.

But this...

This was far more open, and when you included the paddock, and the Federal lands, much larger. *Freedom. There is freedom, in there,* Vincent mused. It was the first word that came to his head, to describe it.

Again, a stand of oak as tall as the house eventually cut him off from the view. A duck pond shimmered lazily, to one side, a different shade of blue than the darkened sky. He wondered if there would be a moon glade on the water, this evening, at some point, then realized the crescent moon wouldn't have enough light to do that.

Some other time, he thought

He inhaled, deeply, and the scent of pine and spruce filled his nose, along with the water smell of the pond. When the wind shifted, he smelled salt, and the tang of the ocean.

Catherine was right. This place is... magic.

The broad deck felt sturdy beneath his feet, and he had the impression of being on a ship, albeit one at anchor.

Sail away with me. It was a fanciful thought. *We'll find our way home by starlight, the way the ancient sailors did.*

Heaven twinkled, overhead.

Something startled, in the woods to his left, and he lowered his gaze, trying to pierce the source of the sound, and failing. He had no sense of danger, no thought of peril. *It was probably one of her deer,* he mused, unaware he'd just used the possessive pronoun.

He felt his big body relax, as his night-visioned eyes adjusted to the different shades of darkness. He could picture Catherine up here, sitting, as she often did on her balcony, and looking up at the stars.

He paced his way around the open space, coming back to the master bedroom doors. The roof was amazing. It was a place meant for lovers. A place meant to take a woman in your arms and kiss her breathless, then senseless, then lay her down on a soft quilt and make love to her, with the starlight in her eyes.

Or in mine.

He shook the image away, lest it tempt him into utter stillness.

Vincent breathed in once more, the pine-laden air. There was movement, again, in her woods, as the nocturnal creatures set to rousing. An owl called, and the leathery wings of a nearby bat fluttered.

Behind him, he sensed a much larger creature. And a far more feminine one.

"Have you seen this place? At night?" he asked, aware she was behind him, not wanting her to approach the edge, in the dark.

Her voice was as soft as his. It was as though they were in a great cathedral. "The first night I stayed here. Amazing, isn't it? I thought the place would feel sad, like it was full of ghosts, maybe. Instead, I felt... this."

Air. Open air. Air that went on for miles. Not like her balcony in the city, enclosed on three sides. Larger. Far more open.

A poetic thought crossed his mind. *We are standing next to heaven, but for want of a decent ladder.*

"Second star to the left, and straight on 'til morning." Catherine quoted the way to Never Neverland.

He gave her a small smile, as he nodded back toward her bedroom. "Somewhere in that house, there's a wardrobe that leads to Narnia," he replied.

"As soon as the tunnel access is completed, we'll have a way to Middle Earth." She smiled, in return.

"Everyplace South of Oz, and North of Shangri La." He remembered all the places he and Devin had visited, as children.

A wispy cloud shifted its way across the moon, covered it, then passed on, revealing the silvery crescent, once again. It seemed to settle over the pond, content to look down and smile, as it tried to find its own reflection.

She stepped beside him, enjoying just being near him.

He turned toward her, slightly, unable to take his eyes off the view. "It's too beautiful, Catherine. It hurts my eyes to look at it." His voice was solemn.

Catherine knew any money she'd spent was worth it for this moment, alone. A spangled sky glimmered over his shoulder, and the soft crescent moon seemed to make him smile back at it, helpless to do anything else.

"I've seen the moon before," he said, after a long, still moment. "And from a rooftop. Why does it look so different, from here?"

She kept her voice just above a whisper. "We're away from the city lights, at least a little. The night sky is darker, out here. You're not fighting the other buildings for the view. And the trees. It's like looking off into wilderness," she told him, leaning next to him.

"I feel it, too," she confided.

He turned her for the kiss they both knew was coming. *It would be sacrilege*, he thought, *not to kiss her, here.* He brushed her lips, gently, with his. After a moment, he felt her mouth open.

'Yes!' and 'No!' both screamed in his brain at the same time, until, sensing his inner conflict, she felt him end the kiss reluctantly, and softly set her back from him, keeping a hand on her arm, so she would not stray too close to the edge of the deck.

"There is glory, here," he intoned.

She wasn't sure if he was talking about the view of the sky, the wealth of land, the kiss, or something else.

A noise she didn't recognize... a loon? ... made a sound, from the direction of the pond.

"It feels right, to be here. That's all I think I know," she replied.

She wanted to leave him alone with it, so he could take it in freely, as she had done, that first night. Trailing her hands through his, she stepped back, meaning to leave him to his privacy.

This is all new to you. I want you to like it. To feel ... connected to it. Like I did. It's okay if you don't. But I... I want you to.

"Catherine...," he said.

"It's all right. I'll be downstairs." She closed the window paned doors gently, behind her.

He stood and looked a long while from the same spot, after she went indoors.

Chapter Seven

A Touch of Longing

*"We look before and after, and pine for what is not;
Our sincerest laughter, with some pain is fraught." – Percy Bysshe Shelley*

--

Days passed. Catherine, for her part, was mostly at North Haven, though her time off was running out. That meant she would be back at work.

And for Devin's part, Darcy Taylor was neither returning his calls nor answering the front door, when he knocked. He'd written her a long letter. It had come back marked "Return to Sender." In pieces.

On the whole, neither Wells brother was doing well with the fairer sex, at the moment. Back in the tunnels, they both sat in Vincent's chambers, talking. Vincent, while acknowledging the beauty of Catherine's new home, or at least the potential for that, was still trying to fathom Catherine's motives.

"She is... different, when she's there, when she's at her new house. At peace, yet... roiled. Happy, yet... unsure. Different, yet... I don't know. Even our bond cannot tell me what this is." Vincent sighed. "I am trying to discern her, Devin," he confessed.

"I take it that's not something you've had to do, very often," Devin replied.

Vincent shook his head. "Our bond... it tells me much. Usually."

"But not this time?" Devin asked.

"Weeks had passed before I even realized she'd bought it. Weeks."

How could I have been blind to such a thing? Such a... huge thing?

"Women can be... pretty effective at letting you know only so much," Devin replied, knowing the same thing could be said of himself.

"That's... just it. I think she's told me more about what this... this new home *isn't*, than what it *is*. I know she wants it, that she feels ... drawn to it. I just... I'm not sure why." *Did we not have a place to be together? More than one of those?*

"You don't like being unsure. Not when it comes to her," Devin said.

"I admit I do not," Vincent replied. "This... this place. Something about it... calls her. Even as she's unsure." *Maybe that's because you never longed for home, before, Devin thought. Adventure, or travel, or other places, yes. Home? No.*

Devin realized that for all his brother's experiences, he'd never been homesick a day in his life.

The elder Wells brother shrugged. "She's probably just waiting for something to happen. Or maybe she got tired of that, so she decided to *make* something happen. I don't know what else you want me to tell you," Devin said, as they both sat across Vincent's writing desk from each other.

"Yet, you were part of this," Vincent said, hoping that meant Devin could shed some light on this stunning development, between Vincent and his love.

"She's got money. She used it." Devin held his hands up, in a simplistic gesture.

"Yes. But this is not a beautiful gown, or a first edition Tennyson, or... anything else. This is much... bigger. This house. Parts of it are... beautiful. Parts are decayed. But... Why? Why *this*? Why now? Aside from meaning well for others... Do you know?" Vincent asked his brother.

For that answer, Devin had to lean forward. Had to face Vincent as close to eye level as the two of them could get. Vincent sat in his big chair. Devin templed his hands and leaned in.

"You aren't going to like it, Vincent," Devin told him.

"I already don't like it, Devin." Vincent bit back, certain of very few things at the moment, but positive something was wrong, very wrong, between himself and Catherine. The more time that passed, the more he felt it.

"She's... in a place. Close to an edge. I don't think even she realizes how close," Devin said, implying he knew more about Catherine's motives than perhaps she did, herself.

"What is this... edge, you speak of?" Vincent wondered. He thought of the balcony outside her bedroom. The teak one.

Devin took a deep breath, knowing how much Vincent wasn't going to like what he had to say.

"Somewhere... deep down...In a place maybe she doesn't even look at, too closely... she thinks that this is it. What you're destined to be to each other. Maybe even that you're all but done. That it's all done but the shouting, or the tearful goodbye, or ... however you two decide to end it, before you decide to be 'just friends.'"

"No!" Vincent shot up from the chair.

"I know you don't want to hear that, and I don't want to say it. And I could be wrong." Devin got up and walked around the desk, fingered Vincent's first edition Tennyson, then shelved it.

"But I don't think I am," he concluded.

Devin watched Vincent take in his words. He could all but hear the wheels turning, in his younger brother's agile mind.

An old woman with cats. Again, the image came to Vincent, half bidden. *Damn. Oh, damn, and damn and damn.*

"No." He breathed it, and knew Devin was right, at the same time.

But they'd shared an amazing kiss, on her wide, open deck. *Didn't that count, for something? Or was that just some... prelude, to good-bye? Surely not?...* Vincent's mind spun, with the possibility.

"She doesn't think it's over right this second. Not today, of course, and not tomorrow. Maybe not even next month or next year. Or who knows? Five years from now? More? But done. All that it ever is, and is ever going to be, it already is. Or already has been," Devin stated.

The image of an old woman with tabbys twining around her feet came to Vincent again, unbidden. He hated it, and pushed it aside.

Devin shrugged and moved away. His brother needed room. Quite a bit of it, right now.

"That... that can't be," Vincent stated. Firmly.

Devin seemed to change the subject. "You know, I've sold a few houses. Couples starting out. The moon in their eyes. Couples selling off the big place, now that the kids are grown, looking for something that doesn't have an upstairs, because he's got a bum hip. Sometimes... sometimes you see something else."

"What?" Vincent asked. "What do you see, Devin?" Devin knew far more about this part of life than Vincent did, and both of them knew it.

Devin shrugged his leather jacket clad shoulders. "You see this couple getting a place together. Leaving something behind, some... bad memories, some hard times. Infidelity, maybe. Maybe something else. Sometimes, they buy this big monstrosity, like if maybe they get enough square footage, they can get far enough away from each other so... so that they can still keep it together, somehow. I know that sounds weird, but that's the case. And you know it's going to fail, and the house is going to end up part of a nasty divorce, but... there it is."

"That is not Catherine and I," Vincent said, with conviction.

"No, no it isn't," Devin agreed. "At least, not for the reasons those couples usually had. Usually, one of them's had an affair. They're trying for a fresh start, a 'do-over.' Like we used to do when we were kids, and somebody messed up the game."

Devin sighed, and Vincent watched him gather his thoughts.

"I crashed in on her on my birthday. Then I came back, the next night, and showed her the house. At first she said 'no.' Then she slept on it. See, I thought something... something else, when I showed it to her. I thought you two were, well, a couple. And might like some privacy, away from the old man."

"We *are*, as you so tactfully put it, 'a couple.'" Vincent's voice held a warning.

"Yeah. You are."

Devin added nothing more, and in that silence, Vincent heard his condemnation. He and Catherine were a couple. Just as they were. With all they lacked, and Vincent knew they lacked much, had felt all they lacked, often, and they were a couple. Just as they were.

'I think maybe I'll just be an old woman with cats, here.'

"That place can be a haven - or a tomb for her, Vincent. For both of you." Devin stated.

"Darcy will move her children in there? On the property?"

Devin looked away toward the stone wall, misery in his expression. "Darcy has let me know in no uncertain terms that I am free to rot in hell," Devin informed him. "But that doesn't mean Cathy's going to rescind her invitation for Charles and I to live there, at least. Or at least to come visit, regularly. She says the caretaker's cottage is ready. That we're free to use it, if we like."

That bit of good news was clearly doing nothing for his brother's current state of mind. Vincent couldn't recall ever seeing Devin look this sad.

"I'm sorry, Devin." Vincent sympathized.

Devin's glum expression matched his mood. "That makes two of us."

"Peter says Charles is much improved, on his reading. Perhaps being with him again will help your heart to heal," Vincent consoled.

Devin highly doubted it.

Chapter Eight

Darcy and Company

*This is just a stop on the way to where I'm going.
I'm not afraid because I know this is my
Temporary home. - Carrie Underwood*

Three days later, Catherine heard the rattling bus roll up, before she ever saw it. It was old, and belching smoke. Still yellow. School colors, one of the smaller busses the city or a church group used, to ferry a dozen or so people back and forth. A peeling paint job indicated that whatever words had originally been painted on the side, they'd been covered with mismatched paint. A wheelchair lift was on the back. A luggage rack of sorts had been welded to the roof. It was piled with a mismatched assortment of belongings.

The brakes hissed, as the doors swung open.

Coming out of the house, Devin heard it, too.

"Darcy?" His voice was awestruck, as the engine on the old vehicle sputtered, and cut.

Catherine watched a very small brunette descend the steps. Six small faces were pressed against the glass of the windows, on one side. Catherine waved at them, a bit. Three waved back, shyly. One boy gave her a deadly scowl.

"Darce?" Devin stood on the Catherine's newly paved circular drive.

Darcy walked right past him and over to Catherine. "If you're Catherine Chandler, I'm Darcy Taylor." Darcy told Catherine, extending her hand and utterly ignoring Devin.

"I am Catherine Chandler. Devin's told me about you." Catherine extended her own hand. The two women shook, warmly.

"Yeah. Well, he talks a lot, but you can learn not to trust it." She jabbed the spear in a little, continuing to make eye contact with Catherine, as the two women shook hands.

"You can't pretend I'm not here, Darcy," Devin informed her.

Charles came around from the corner of the carriage house, obviously having heard the bus.

"Hi, kids!" he waved. Two more hands went up.

"My business is with this lady, and you can still go to hell," Darcy told Devin. She turned back to Catherine.

"Miss Chandler, right now I have a bus load of kids who need--"

"No." Devin held Darcy's elbows, gently, and turned her. "That is not how this is going to work, Darcy. Speak to me. Not her."

Darcy's eyes shot back and forth between Devin and Catherine, for a moment. Catherine, uncomfortable at being in the middle of their quarrel, wisely kept her own council. Finally, Darcy's brown, and very hurt eyes went to Devin.

"I have a bunch of kids who slept in the bus, last night. The place they had arranged for us was emergency shelter, but not fit for a dog to live in. The bathroom door isn't wide enough for Cammie's chair and I am not sticking her back on the ground like where she came from. I think the people next door to it are addicts. There won't be a home ready for all of them for two weeks, and if I can't get a decent roof over their heads tonight, foster care is going to start parsing them out. Breaking us up," she told him in a rush. "And I think three of them need to use the bathroom," she tacked on.

Catherine's practical side came to the fore. "I have a downstairs bathroom. It's just a commode and a sink, but you're welcome to it," Catherine told her guest, indicating the front entrance. "The front steps are sound. But I'm afraid I don't have a wheelchair ramp."

"I can carry Cammie." Devin told no one in particular, as he waved the more ambulatory children down off the bus. A pair of tow-headed twin girls came off the steps, signing to each other, a language Laura probably would have recognized. One of the older boys, the same one that had scowled at Catherine, was now clearly doing that to Devin. Two of the younger children, a boy and a girl, were elated to see him. The older one likely knew more of his parting with Darcy than the younger ones did.

"My dad is the President. You have to treat us right," declared the younger boy, to Catherine. He had huge blue eyes.

"Bradley!" Darcy rolled her eyes and reached for patience. "We've talked about this: The truth. No matter what."

The boy blushed and offered Catherine what passed for an apology, for him. "Hi. My name is Bradley," Bradley said, looking down.

He had a mop of red hair and copious freckles. Catherine took him in, while the other, dark-haired boy came off the bus and continued to scowl at the two of them.

"My name is Catherine," she replied warmly. She offered Bradley her hand, which he shook.

"I don't shake hands," warned the other boy. Dark eyebrows knit together, under an equally dark mop of unruly hair.

"Robbie!" This time, it was one of the girls who corrected him.

"Well, I don't, Hailey!" Robbie insisted. His scowl remained in place.

"Then we won't do that unless you want to," Catherine said smoothly.

Hailey shouldered an insulated medical bag, and shook Catherine's hand, politely. Her tan braid swung to her shoulder blades. "I'm Hailey. That's Sheila and Lily," Hailey said, introducing the other two girls. "They don't talk, except with their hands."

"I have a friend who does that," Catherine replied, thinking again of Laura. She signed "Hello."

"Hailey, how's your sugar?" Darcy asked.

"M'okay," she replied, placing a protective arm across the bag.

Ah. Insulin, Catherine thought. My. This woman has her hands full.

In a moment, Devin emerged from the bus with a child who was held erect by virtue of a back brace. Her legs were missing, below the knee. A pale yellow dress covered her stumps, and a soft sweater encased arms that looked thin, and weak, to Catherine. Cammie. Sandy blonde hair. Brown eyes. Her slender arms were around Devin's neck, trustingly.

"This way," Catherine guided them all inside.

When the business at hand had been taken care of, Catherine settled them all at a huge dining room table, with lemonade and cookies. Except for Hailey, who couldn't have lemonade because she was a severe diabetic, and Bradley, who insisted he wasn't thirsty, and wondered aloud if he would be flying in his private airplane, later.

Darcy was almost too tired to correct him, again. Almost.

As they sat, Charles with them, Catherine glimpsed a little of what it was Darcy went through each day as she cared for them. All of them had needs. Bradley's smile was almost constant, even though he liked to tell whoppers. Hailey, nine years old and petite, had to take her blood sugar, almost on the hour. Robbie was thirteen-year-old boy with what he called "anger management issues," and he still hadn't stopped scowling.

He dug a plastic green dinosaur out of his pocket and sat it on the table, while he ate. Catherine noticed he looked at it, often.

The two deaf sisters spoke using sign language, under the table to each other, even though Darcy chided them to "use your voices." And then there was Cammie, who obviously needed a lot of care.

They were all quite the mixed bag.

"Our foster mom says you're rich," Robbie stated bluntly, to Catherine. "That true?" His voice held a challenge in it, even though there was nothing to fight.

"It might be. Why?" Catherine asked him, pouring lemonade into a glass and setting it before him.

"Because she said Jack... Devin told her, but he lies, so she can't trust him."

Catherine weighed how to answer. "Devin has his moments, Robbie," Catherine replied, sorting out the names.

Devin came in with Cammie's empty wheelchair, and set it near her seat.

"Cathy. I need to speak with Darcy a moment. Can you watch Cammie and the rest, for a minute? Behave, monsters." He signed it as he said it. Sheila and Lily giggled at that. They liked being called 'monsters.' They growled at him. He growled softly back, as Catherine nodded. He tugged Darcy from the room.

"The kitchen stoop. Just the kitchen stoop, Darcy. You can hear them if they start to knife her, or anything," Devin said.

The brunette woman followed him around the table, but didn't leave the room with him. She was clearly unhappy with everything, but pleased to have at least one disaster contained, for the moment.

"My business is with her, not with you. I need to ask for a place to stay. But you're not involved with this, Ja-Devin." Darcy's voice was firm, and brooked no discussion.

"You're welcome to stay here. But I'm afraid the bedrooms aren't quite habitable, yet," Catherine said. "There's a finished basement, if you have bedding. And an air mattress I can have brought down. We can get some rented cots brought in, if that's okay." Catherine offered generously.

I'm going to need to call Elliot, see if he can send a few more men over. Looks like I've got a barn and a bunk house to renovate, after all.

There were tears of relief in the brunette's eyes. "You have no idea how much that would mean. Some of my kids don't like sleeping in cars... they're always afraid it's going to thunder, when they're in the bus...I know that makes no sense, it's just... some of them had to stay outside, sometimes."

Catherine nodded, sympathy in her eyes for the children at the table.

"We can do better than that, I think." She was using her professional voice. The one she knew soothed rattled clients. "And there's a tv in the room that... well, I don't know quite what to call it, yet. It used to be a parlor."

"And ducks. By the pond." Charles chimed in.

"No pond trips without grown ups!" Devin and Darcy both said it, and signed it, together.

Three of the children were already starting to yawn. Clearly, they were tired.

Devin looked at his love. His worried, tired, frightened love.

"You. Me. On the stoop. Now. Or everybody here is going to see me get down on my knees, Darcy." Devin tugged her hand, again.

Darcy followed, simply too tired to resist.

They went out the kitchen door to a back stoop. The new door closed softly behind them, and Devin took in the late afternoon air as he took in the decidedly ruffled, yet to Devin, gorgeously exhausted woman before him.

She stood on the back stoop with him, her arms folded in the most defensive posture Devin had ever seen.

"No. Just... no, Jack. Devin." She rolled her eyes. "I cannot believe I slept with you, thinking your name was Jack."

Devin rubbed a hand across a face that was the definition of weary.

"Hey, don't knock Jack Fisher. He sold this place. And two apartments, last week, and the commissions are going to go a long way toward getting therapy equipment in here, no matter what Cathy Chandler's checkbook says."

"Don't." Her tears were real, and they were angry. "Don't even joke about it, Devin." She was trying to get used to calling him that.

"It's not a joke. I swear. Darcy. Please. On my knees, please," he said, dropping to them. He tugged her hand down, so she had to sit on the top step, next to him.

"I know this is crap," he stated. "But I swear everything I told you about how I feel was true, and I swear making love with you was the most ... beautiful thing I've ever done."

He reached for her cheek but she flinched from him. He dropped his hand, and continued.

"I would have told you then, but I needed to be Jack Fisher a couple more months. Just to raise the money I – we needed. Devin Wells is broke."

She gave him a stubborn frown, processing what he was trying to tell her.

He rose to his feet, walked two steps down, then threw up his hands. "And another broke dependent was really not what you needed." He held the same hands out, palms up, in a supplicant's posture.

Her voice was firm, as she rose to face him. "I don't need a liar. And I don't need a con artist." She wasn't budging an inch.

"I never conned you," he replied, standing firm. Then, he held up his hand at her upcoming protest.

"I never *took* from you. Never used you for a job, or a place to stay, or money," he clarified. "The people I pull out of my bag of tricks, the ones I pretend to be a few weeks or months at a time, there's a *reason* for it, Darcy. Hell, you think I *planned* on falling in love with you? With them?" he asked, gesturing back toward the house, and the children it contained.

"You took my heart," she stated, despair in her voice. "And I don't have time for this. I need to *find* someplace. Someplace some landlord can't kick up out of. Someplace *safe*," she said, listing her constant concern, showing how major it was, compared to the minor burden of her heart breaking.

"I know." he wrapped his arms around her. "I know, baby." He felt her stiffen, felt her muscles tighten, in her small frame. She pushed her arms outward, to break his hold. He held on still, relaxing his grip only a little.

"Please," he asked. "Please, Darcy, Please. I'm begging you. Begging. One chance. Just one. Gamble on me one time. I swear I'll make it pay off for you. For Cammie and Bradley and Robbie and Sheila and the rest of those kids. I swear I will, or I'll die trying. And I'll never lie to you, again." He set his hands on her shoulders as he kissed the top of her head, feeling her tears fall, feeling her pain and fear become absorbed into his rangy frame.

"Devin... I just--"

"Please, angel. Please," he kept repeating. "You don't have to let me touch you again." He took the hands off her shoulders. "You can keep me on a leash, and throw me scraps. Just... don't tell me there's no hope, okay?" he asked. "Just... don't tell me that. It's the one thing you tell the kids they've got piles of. Even when everything is bad. Don't take mine away. Please."

She pushed him back a little, wiping her tear stained face.

"You're just one of those guys who always knows the right thing to say." She said it miserably, and he felt her relenting, in spite of her words.

"I am. To my teeth, I am. But I swear it's the truth that I love you and I want to help you love those kids."

She wiped the tears off one side of her face, and kept one hand on her cheek.

"I swear, I don't know what to believe, anymore."

His brown eyes were utterly sincere. "Believe I love you. No. You know what? That's too much to ask, right now. Don't believe it. Just watch. Watch me for the next few months, a year. Three years," he said, naming the length of time Vincent and Catherine had been together.

"You'll see it's true. You will."

"I'm desperate, or I would not be here." She stated it unequivocally.

He gave his head a rueful shake. "Angel, we are all desperate in this house or we wouldn't be here. And you don't even know all of it, yet."

"I shudder to ask."

That's just it. You can't ask. Because I can't tell you. Not everything.

"Don't. It doesn't matter, not right now. One step at a time." Devin knew he did what good frauds do best. He was compartmentalizing. *One step. One step at a time. One step toward home.*

He kissed her forehead, daring to take no further liberty with her.

"Come on. Let me give you a proper introduction to the mistress of the manse," Devin told her, ushering her back inside the house to properly meet Catherine. "She's the best ADA in Manhattan."

"It's quite the home she's got under construction, here," Darcy observed.

"You haven't seen half of it. There's a caretaker's cottage, a barn, a bunkhouse, old riding trails through the woods... it's a big place."

"How did you meet her?" Darcy asked. It was a perfectly normal question.

Devin held the door open for her, and tried not to miss a beat. "Uh... you really don't want to know that," he concluded, knowing he had an uphill climb ahead of him.

--

The children were installed on foldaway beds dropped off by a rental company, and Catherine finally had the pantry properly stocked, knowing her guests would stay in the house for a week and more, at the least.

Elliot's workmen set about renovating the barn, and expanding what used to be quarters for a pair of stable hands, as Peter Alcott submitted ideas for a renovations, and some therapy equipment.

Charles and Devin stayed in the cottage, while Darcy and the six charges under her care slept in the basement. The next day, the children were overjoyed at having the free run of the property.

As unexpected developments went, it kept Vincent away. It was a thing that couldn't be helped.

Chapter Nine

Home Again

People embrace the familiar, and much of what was familiar was also dear to me. – Susan Marsh

--

Catherine stretched and yawned, happy to be in her apartment for the evening, and away from the sounds of sawing, hammering, and the occasionally rowdy kids. She liked them all, though she found Robbie impossible to get close to, by his own choice.

Being home felt good. The quiet of the comfortable, familiar space felt almost unusual, considering how much time she was spending at the new house. Her apartment now seemed like “a world away from the world.”

Make that another one of those, she thought wryly, considering the huge domain Vincent called home. *A world away from the world that's away from the world?* She wondered idly how many more times she could keep adding onto the phrase.

She sat at the dinette table with her files, resisting the urge to work while sitting up in bed. She knew if she did that, she'd just slide down the pillows and fall asleep anyway, and there were only a few things she needed to catch up on, to feel like she'd be ready for tomorrow.

By the time she capped her pen and stuffed her briefcase with tomorrow's cases, her mantle clock chimed nine-thirty. Not late, not yet at least, but late considering the way she'd been dividing her time between work, her apartment, and North Haven. Elliot had sent still another work crew out. Devin (or Jack Fisher) had handled all the permits they needed to get Darcy's kids settled in the “right” kind of accommodations. Movers had arrived with at least some furniture from her father's apartment. The library with only one book now had more of those.

It's all coming along, she thought, hoping it was. She wasn't quite sure.

For one thing, the state inspectors all thought Darcy was still staying in the temporary shelter. That lie was bound to catch up with them, sooner or later. Darcy was clearly praying for “later,” on that one.

“I know it doesn't seem like it. But like we are, right now, we *fit*. We're a family,” she'd explained to Catherine.

Catherine had thought of the myriad people that lived with Vincent, how they too, were a family.

“I think I understand. How will you keep them all together, ultimately?” Catherine had asked.

Darcy had shrugged at that. “Ultimately... we won't. Lily and Sheila are waiting on an aunt to come get them. It's okay if we're split up because something *good* happens. Just not because something *bad* happens, she explained.

Catherine felt she understood. Still, it was all a lot to handle.

Darcy still seemed unsure of Devin, and Bradley still liked to tell tall tales. Cammie's prosthetic limbs were too heavy for her atrophied leg muscles to move, and she needed more therapy equipment than they had on order. Peter was looking into it. Also into getting Hailey an insulin pump.

The state sent Darcy money for some of it. But there were other things they all wanted.

Devin insisted on paying for some of it. If it was a way to absolve himself with Darcy or something else, Catherine didn't know.

He and Charles were comfortably settled in at the caretaker's cottage. It was a cozy fit, but Charles seemed to like smaller spaces more than large ones, possibly owing to the years he'd spent confined to a cage. He liked being with the children, and he liked reading, walking near the pond, and talking about the time he'd caught a fish, with Peter Alcott. He seemed happy. That was all that mattered, for now.

Catherine had gone from thinking of the property as being just her and Vincent's, to being one that was going to accommodate quite a few people, at least temporarily. Since the house was separated from the new

construction by an already existing fence, there was no problem, there, but it still seemed like Catherine was juggling many concerns, all at once.

Bit off a little more than I can chew, maybe? I think I know how Darcy feels, every day, she thought, reaching to turn off the dining table lamp, so she could go to bed.

Catherine's feet padded softly, as she made her way across the darkened room.

And then of course, there's Vincent.

Vincent, and his reaction to what now almost seemed like a hare-brained scheme: The buying of a house, one outside the city limits, yet one that (potentially at least) had tunnel access, even though it was of the distant kind. Essentially, she was dumping a lot of money (in spite of Elliot's largesse) into something she already had: a place to live.

When Vincent looks at it... does he see waste? Or does he see... something else? She wasn't sure. While he didn't question her right to do it, that didn't mean he thought it was a good idea.

I bought it for you. For us. For... whatever, Catherine thought.

She sighed, heavily, the fatigue of the day wearing her down. *It's too big a job. Maybe... maybe I just don't know, anymore.*

Vincent had shared her wonder, at the place. And from there, he seemed... cautious, for lack of any other word.

He'd come back only one more time. Cullen had wanted to check the other stairs on her staircase for damage. He'd declared two more could use replacing, and Vincent had helped him with the measurements. Elliot's people had all gone home for the day and Darcy's kids were in the city, overnight, mostly for medical tests or other appointments. As foster children, some were trying to reunite with relatives, Catherine knew. For others, there was no such hope.

Catherine sighed again. *It will all look brighter in the morning,* she thought, feeling too "jumbled" right now, to make sense of anything. At least tomorrow was Thursday.

The apartment was dark, and she was halfway to the louvered doors of her bedroom when she heard a familiar tapping, on the windowpanes of her balcony. She turned.

Vincent. Of course. He sensed I was here. It felt good to see his beloved form, outlined by the moon.

Fatigue banished, she went to him, and flung the doors open wide. The two of them here were on their usual ground.

"I sensed you were home. It felt... good, to feel you here," he said, as she slipped outside with him. "But I also sense that you are ... weary from your day?"

She was, but as it so often did, seeing him revitalized her. He was a shot of adrenaline that never ceased to give her some energy.

"It's nothing," she demurred. "I'm glad you're here." She stepped farther out onto the balcony with him. This felt familiar, and the familiarity of it felt good. The new house, for all its space, wasn't a place they'd made memories in, together. The balcony was.

"Your day was... long?" he asked.

She nodded. "Let's just say I wouldn't mind a few continuances. Five new cases hit my desk. Along with... well, along with all the other things I've had to deal with, lately."

The house. Darcy. Devin. And am I one of those... things? Those things you feel you must 'deal with,' must appease? He knew she was being drawn in many directions at once. And he knew he was one of those "directions."

"Work will settle down. The heat makes some people crazy."

He listened to her words, uncommenting, for a moment. Catherine then broke the silence, between them.

"Vincent, I've had time to think, and... and I ... I know you felt... betrayed or something... by my purchase of the house, without telling you. I can only tell you now that's the last thing I wanted you to feel. The last thing either Devin *or* I wanted you to feel."

This isn't about me, Catherine. I know you think it is. But I think it may be more about you.

He held his arms wide, and she went into them, grateful for the familiarity of it. "And how is the house?" Vincent asked.

"Full of disabled kids, while outbuildings are getting turned into usable space. In the main house, the upstairs bathroom is done. Three of the upstairs bedrooms are more livable. I've moved the boys up into one of them. Cammie does better on a fold out bed in the parlor, so she can get to the bathroom down there. Hailey bunks with her. They giggle, a lot. It's a sweet thing to hear. Darcy is still down in the basement with the other girls. Everybody's on a cot, or fold out bed. Darcy says that would be okay with the state inspector... for now. Peter's ordered some of the therapy equipment. It'll get set up in the barn. Charles seems happy. It's all getting done."

"It sounds like you have ... much, to contend with."

She smiled, a little. "I have help. Elliot's men are in charge of the construction, and Darcy takes care of the kids. Devin is there, often."

"I've seen him," Vincent said, breathing her in. It didn't matter what they were talking about. As long as they were talking. And doing it here, in their special place. "And I've seen him look better," Vincent added.

Catherine agreed with that. "He's... He's really in love with this woman – Darcy. She used to be a nurse practitioner. She takes such good care of those kids, Vincent. Her and Devin... It turns out they met each other –"

"While he was pretending to be someone else," Vincent finished for her, letting her know he knew the story. "I can only guess at her reaction."

"You don't have to guess hard," Catherine said, disengaging them, as they both turned toward the park.

"I take it she was... unhappy," Vincent ventured.

"I guess I never thought about it before. How hard it is for people in your world to... to form relationships with those Above. With people who don't know, I mean."

Perhaps that's because our relationship happened the way it did, he mused.

"Such difficulties are... compounded, for Devin," Vincent said, understanding it to be true.

"Because he's a good fraud," Catherine said.

"Yes. Because of that." *And because of me. Because I am his brother. Much of what Devin cannot say has to do with me, Catherine.*

Catherine tried to explain things from Darcy's point of view. "In Devin's case, it's not just about what he can't say. It's about what he can. He told her he doesn't really have a real estate license. Many people would call what he does dishonest, Vincent."

Vincent shrugged. "I suppose," he replied.

She couldn't help but smile a little at his acceptance of how Devin chose to live his life. "But you don't think of it that way. You're very... indulgent of him."

Perhaps because I knew him when we were boys. When all the games of 'Let's pretend' were benign, and helped me. When Devin's dreams included me.

"I admit that I am. Does it surprise you?" he answered.

"In a way, it does. I know how you value the truth," she replied.

"As do you. But Father once told me that there is a truth beyond knowledge. If that truth is love, then I love Devin. And I know there is no malice, in his heart. He doesn't pretend to be someone else because he's a petty man, or an evil one, Catherine... though I admit it perhaps makes it hard for him to remember who 'Devin Wells' is."

Catherine considered that. "I think he's finding that out, with Darcy. It would be a shame if they didn't work out, if that's the case," she replied. "She's a good woman, Vincent. I never see her rest. She's... she's devoted to those children."

"Devin says they are all very ... special. That they have great needs. Needs which Darcy provides, with the help she manages to garner for them."

Catherine nodded. "She does. It's part of how she met him. She was looking for a cheap house she could rent. One that could accommodate Cammie's wheelchair, among other things. It's a shame so many children are... abandoned, one way or another." She squeezed his arm, knowing he was such a one.

"It is indeed. It's how Laura came to us, among others."

Catherine nodded at that. *And you*, she thought, but didn't say.

"Your home is a miracle, Vincent," Catherine said, leaning against him. "I wish everyone could find such a place."

He enfolded her with the edges of his cape, and felt her welcome weight, against him. "It sounds as if the home you are building is a miracle, as well," he replied. "For the helpless ones; ones who need it most."

She shrugged, and felt her fatigue returning, by degrees. "I didn't originally plan for it to be anything more than a house. But there's more land than I'll use, and it's a way to help."

"You have a generous heart, Catherine."

She stayed nested against him. "I learned it from you."

He shook his head, a gesture she couldn't see, thanks to her facing the park. "It cannot be learned. Only encouraged. Will the children be there much longer?" he asked. They both knew their presence in the main house was keeping him away.

Catherine honestly didn't know the answer to that. Mostly because Darcy didn't seem to, either. "Some will. Maybe not, for the others. The two deaf girls have an aunt who's applied for custody. If the court approves, it could happen. Darcy says that usually means they'll send her another child. Or, with the lower head count, that it will be easier for them to find her a house closer to the city. But they still need special accommodations

for Cammie, and her chair. Wide hallways. Low sinks. That sort of thing. Things that are hard to find, sometimes.”

“It sounds like Darcy moves... often. And has different children, as well.”

“She says once every year or two has been the average, on the moves. With the kids... each one is a different story. Robbie doesn’t seem to have anyone. Bradley has a father he makes up. I don’t know. Anyway, I think you’ll have a few weeks to get the passageway off the North Edge Rail Line closer to my basement, if that’s what you’re wondering,” she replied, realizing her eyelids were starting to droop.

It was. And in a way, it wasn’t. “Catherine... Devin is... unhappy, with how things are, between he and Darcy. Very unhappy. I thought you should know. If she can’t bring herself to truly accept his apology, accept him... I think his heart will be broken.”

And the last time that happened, he took off and didn’t come home for twenty years, Catherine realized.

She roused. “I think that’s something they’ll just have to work out between them,” she replied. “With any luck, they will.”

Perhaps. But I don’t see how, when Devin cannot be entirely honest with the woman he loves, Vincent mused.

“It is a problem. One Devin faces perhaps more than others.”

“Why ‘more than others?’” she asked.

Vincent shrugged, and the motion lifted the cape, on his broad shoulders. “Because Devin cannot give Darcy what she craves: the gift of honesty. He cannot share with her where he was raised, or how, or by whom. Cannot help her to understand the ‘why’ of why he lives his life as he does. Such a thing would be... dangerous, for us.”

Catherine considered that. “She’s a good woman, but she feels betrayed, that her faith was misplaced. I won’t lie to you, Vincent. She’s very angry with him, right now.”

She was. Catherine knew she was. And on the other end of the equation sat Vincent’s world, and everyone in it. “You mustn’t risk it, Vincent. Devin mustn’t.” Catherine’s tone grew alarmed.

Vincent shook his head. “He won’t. He’s forbidden to. For all the rules Devin is inclined to break, he won’t break that one.”

“He did when he brought down Charles,” Catherine pointed out.

The great head shook again. “Darcy is not a disabled woman, fleeing abuse. Charles was.”

So, Darcy has no need of the Tunnels. It wasn’t like it was with Eric and Ellie, or Charles... or me.

Catherine sighed. “If he can’t be honest with her at some point... I don’t know where that leaves them, Vincent. I’ll be honest about that. He doesn’t dare lie to her. Not after what’s already happened, between them.”

“And he doesn’t dare tell her the truth.” Vincent sighed.

What will he do? Will he stay there? Make a home with Charles? Will that be enough to build a bridge to Darcy? Vincent wasn’t sure. And his love, for all her wisdom, had answers for none of it.

Catherine’s gentle weight sagged against his, heavily. She was exhausted. He knew that meant it was time for him to leave her. “You’re beyond tired. Will you be at the house, later?”

“Not tomorrow. I owe Joe an honest day’s work,” she replied, stifling a yawn.

He kissed her forehead, in a tender farewell. "Then I will see you soon," he replied, watching her go inside.

On the journey home, his thoughts were filled with his brother, his love, and himself. Catherine had bought an incredible property, with an amazing house.

Could it be a home for them? For us? For Charles, and the children who need it? Could North Haven be that, for all of them, somehow?

Vincent had to admit he had no idea.

Chapter 10

Robbie

Home should be an anchor, a port in a storm, a refuge, a happy place in which to dwell, a place where we are loved, and where we can love. – Marvin J. Ashton

"Charles likes it here," Robbie said, playing with his odd lot of belongings, on the floor.

"He seems to," Darcy agreed, sitting there with him.

"Devin says Charles cut his foot when he went fishing with Dr. Alcott. That he'll maybe have a scar." Robbie's tone of voice told her how impressive he thought that was.

"If he does, don't stare at it. You know the rules, Rob."

Robbie did. It was in Darcy's welcoming speech, to every new resident of the group.

We're all different. We just are. And some of us are different in different ways. Some on the outside. Some on the inside. Don't stare, no matter what. It makes people feel sad, sometimes.

"If Charles has a scar and Devin has a scar, they'll match. That's all," Robbie said, sliding a Hulk figurine across the hardwood floor. Darcy watched him, with interest.

"I guess so," she supplied, wanting to keep the conversation going. Getting Robbie to express himself, verbally had sometimes been a challenge. One that had landed him in some less than ideal places.

He changed the subject back to his favorite topic: Himself. "When I was bad. When I got mad and broke the glasses in the kitchen. You didn't send me back to Shelbyville," Robbie observed, moving the race car from a discarded Monopoly game across the floor. Not too far. There was an invisible line that connected it to his other toys, in his mind.

"No. But I made you clean up the mess. And it's 'send' me back," Darcy corrected him.

"But you didn't. You gave me another chance. Even though I messed up, some more."

Darcy sighed, knowing where this was going. "Robbie, you're a kid, and we both know you have ... lessons to learn about how to express yourself, appropriately. And you're doing great. Devin is an adult. And he lied to me."

Robbie seemed to consider that. Barely. "Bradley lies."

"He's working on it," Darcy countered.

"Couldn't Devin work on it, too?" Robbie asked.

Darcy picked up a green army man and set it near the race car. Not too far away from the other toys. She knew better.

"Rob, listen. I know you liked him. I liked him, too."

Liked. Past tense. Okay.

Robbie knew what that meant. "Nah. He was just okay." Robbie shrugged. His inability to form attachments with people was another of his hallmarks. Attachments to objects was another story.

"Just... curious, is all. Seems like everybody gets a second chance with you. And a third one. And a fourth one. If they need it."

"Four is pushing it." She moved the plastic army man over, aware it couldn't go outside a certain perimeter, without making him upset.

"Cammie gets more than four. You have to carry her all the time."

"Cammie can't walk. That's not her fault, Robbie. Can I have the dinosaur?"

"Kay," he said, handing it to her. There was a time when he wouldn't have. Trust. He was learning it. He knew she'd return it to him.

Good. Good boy. "Thanks."

"So... we going to just stay here?" he asked.

He's checking to see how stable his environment is. Not surprising, considering.

She knew she had to answer him honestly, that nothing else would do. "Long as I can keep delaying the county inspector. I'm not sure if half the house is even up to code, yet."

Robbie nodded at that. 'Don't get too attached' was the implicit warning.

"Maybe the new dorms in the bunkhouse will be finished, soon," she said, not sure which one of them she was trying to convince. It was at least somewhat likely that the state would find her a smaller place, and send at least some of the children to other caregivers. Robbie knew as much, even as he knew Darcy was fighting it. This was far from his first rodeo.

He moved a Jack of Clubs playing card over near the race car, then sat the car on top of it. "If some of us have to go. You going to pick me?" Robbie asked.

Okay. Got it. That's what's on his mind. He doesn't want to be given away, again, Darcy thought.

Tears sprang to Darcy's eyes. She disguised them with a rapid blink. "Nope. We're all going to stay together," she told him, her voice sounding rough. *Now which one of us is lying?*

"But if we can't. I'm not as bad off as Cammie. Or Hailey, when her sugar gets real bad."

"So you think I should send back Cammie?" Darcy asked, purposely making sure there was no censure in her voice. She moved the dinosaur, then returned him to his spot.

Robbie lifted his hand off a red, chipped-paint fire truck. "No. I meant you should send me. Cammie needs you more. I'd do okay. Always have."

Darcy's hand stopped what it was doing. He'd just committed "empathic connection." To a human being. The thing three psychologists had told her he all but could not do. Would maybe never do. And he'd just done it. She let go of the toy, grabbed his thirteen year old frame, and hugged him, tight.

"We're not splitting up. You hear me? Not you, or Bradley or Sheila or Hailey or anybody." He didn't return the hug. Couldn't. But he didn't fight her, either. Again, that was progress. That he'd put the needs of anyone else before his own was nothing short of stunning.

She ended the hug, knowing he didn't like to be held for too long, when he allowed that at all.

"Kay. But you should give Devin another chance," Robbie said.

The topic of their conversation stood in the bedroom doorway, watching - and forbidding there to be tears in his eyes. He figured Cammie would go to bat for him, and maybe the other girls. But Robbie?

"We'll have to make sure I deserve one," Devin said, entering the room. "Did all your stuff make it up from the basement, okay?"

Robbie nodded, and a mop of brown bangs fell into his eyes, as he mentally counted his scattered belongings. They went with him everywhere he went. Always.

Devin shot Darcy a look that told her he'd seen what just happened, and recognized the significance of it.

This place. Maybe it is magic. Who knows?

"Cool," Devin answered Robbie, sitting down on the floor with them. "Can I be the race car?"

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In the weeks that followed, Devin swore he'd never seen a structure go up so fast. A locked, private gate separated what to the casual eye, looked like a pristinely restored barn, on the property. It now had plenty of room for therapy equipment. The small house that had been for stable hands had been enlarged, and a screened porch added. Concrete was drying in the sun, making wide walking paths between the house and the barn, a necessity, for anyone in a wheel chair.

Catherine seemed unfazed by any mention of cost, and the house now had two long wings for bedrooms, and wheelchair ramps. Catherine swore one day there would be a small swimming pool added to the facility, but Darcy wasn't so sure that was a good idea, all things considered.

Darcy kept Devin at a distance, and during construction, at least, Vincent had to stay away. Catherine continued to divide her time off between her apartment and the North Haven. She applied for formal paperwork, to have the buildings inspected, and considered a therapeutic facility. Peter Alcott listed himself as the on-call physician. Thanks to a long stand of oak and pine, and the dividing fence, her new house was now well-separated from the other property.

Structurally, at least, it all seemed to be working out.

Emotionally, Devin wasn't so sure.

For Darcy, there was still the city inspectors to contend with. As a care facility, they weren't up and running yet. And sleeping in an old house that was technically still being brought up to code was hardly a winning proposition for them all, legally. She was dodging calls from her supervisor and making sure all the kids kept their medical appointments. Each passing day brought her time. She knew that the one thing in her favor was that her kids were all hard to place, elsewhere. She hoped that would be enough.

And always, in the back of her mind, there was Devin. She knew he was waiting for something. From her.

Devin had been around, helping with the kids, and just generally trying to work himself back into her good graces. The children had stayed in the big house until the dorms were ready to pass final inspection.

Devin, in jeans and a denim jacket, had worked closely with Catherine's contractor, measuring out the widths of the wider door frames, setting up the wheelchair ramps and hand rails, and a host of other things children with disabilities often needed.

Charles, for his part, was content to stay near the cottage, or in the main house with the kids, either reading to the children or helping Cammie learn to walk on her new legs, in Catherine's parlor.

Their lives were busy, unsettled, and for Catherine, at least, fulfilling, in a certain way. It was good to see her money doing great things, good to be at the center of it all, rather than simply writing a check and being assured that the money had done some good.

I need to do this more often, she thought, as what had once been a barn and stable area became something more. *Maybe not this involved, but... involved.*

She smiled at the progress everyone was making. In every way it could, Devin's "white elephant" was starting to feel like a home.

Home is where the heart is, she thought, watching Charles feed the ducks, down by the pond. He liked the fact that they followed him, sometimes, as if they were looking for another home, even after they'd already found one.

All around them, the humid summer air felt pregnant, and waiting. Waiting for something to happen, but they knew not what.

Chapter Eleven

The Good Fraud

The fraud delights my soul. – William Saroyan

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The day Darcy saw Devin in a white dress shirt and tie, she knew something was wrong.

The "good fraud" was back.

"I came to tell you... I can't watch the kids this afternoon. I'm going to be out. Just for a while," he said.

They both knew what he was going to do. Or at least that while he did it, he'd no longer be using the name "Devin Wells."

"You said you wouldn't lie to me," Darcy charged.

He looked nonplussed. "I didn't. I just told you I'd be out, today. That's the truth."

They both knew there was more to it than that.

Darcy took him in. "I keep... being stupid. Hoping there's a way, with you. Guess not."

"Darcy, I-

"You don't want to be near me, right now," she interrupted, setting up Robbie's nightstand. Robbie had a firm case of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and had to have his certain set of objects nearby, within hand's reach of where he slept, or there would be no sleep at all, for any of them, come nightfall.

"I do. You don't know how much. Be mad at me. Give it all you got. Just... don't shut me out," Devin pleaded. *I have to. Don't you see?*

"I *am* mad at you. And that's a quaint understatement for it." She set the green army man next to the Hulk figurine, then the playing card. The race car from the monopoly game was next, then a Matchbox fire truck. Devin knew the order.

"Darcy. I had to do it this way. I have to."

"Jack. Do you have any idea how often I've heard that phrase? By people... some of them kids... excusing their bad behavior?"

He blew out a stream of air, exasperated with her. "It's not that black and white."

"Oh. Not Jack. Devin. Or is *that* name a fake, too?" Her disdain for his excuses was clear.

He paused a moment. "I swear what happened wasn't."

Her hands stopped moving, for a moment. He'd cut to the heart of her pain. She blinked her eyes against it. *Are you so sure? I used to be. It was... amazing. Loving. Sweet. You were... incredibly gentle. So was I. Where did that go? Why did it have to?*

But she knew why things had changed, between them. And the white dress shirt he was currently wearing was part of it. *You lied to me. And I don't even know why. Now, you're off to lie to someone else.*

She bit her bottom lip, and said nothing. Inhaling deeply, she returned to her task, arranging the toys in a straight line, like Robbie liked them.

One thing at a time. Handle the things you can control, she thought. It was a mantra that had gotten her through, thus far. For years.

"Do you know how much I *don't* need a fraud, right now? Especially a very good one?" she asked.

He begged her to give him some leeway. "Darcy, if you could just understand. I had to. I really did. If you only understood how... limited my life was, before."

"Limited!" She spun around and faced him. Her eyes snapped brown fire, and he knew in an instant, that it was the wrong word to use.

"Cammie. *Cammie* has *limits*. She's stuck in that damn chair, and always will be, if she can't learn to walk. Lose this," She held up Robbie's green plastic dinosaur that had come from a child's playset - "and Robbie will walk the floors until his panic finally knocks him unconscious. Hailey fights to stay alive, every day. Sheila and Lily have limits. Bradley has limits. You?" Her voice was cutting. Severe.

"You just have a good con."

He couldn't disagree with her. He *did* have a good con. Several of those, as a matter of fact.

"Darcy. I love you."

She covered her ears. "Stop. Just please, stop. Go do what you have to do. But... stop."

Anger and frustration rode him. He yanked her hands down. "Just because you don't want to hear it right now, doesn't mean it isn't true. And it's no more convenient for me than it is for you, lady, so don't..." He

closed his mouth over the rest. *Temper. Don't ever lose it, with her. You'll say things you can't take back. Things you can never take back. Endanger everyone. Vincent.*

He took a few steps away and then turned back to her. She'd gone back to fussing over Robbie's belongings. *How do I tell you why I am like I am without telling you... why I am like I am?* He had no answer for the question that had dogged him for weeks.

He sighed, knowing he had to give her something. Something that made sense. "I have to. It's about the money, sure. But it's not just about that."

She looked up from a chore she was only pretending to finish. "Fine. Tell me why. Why do you 'have to'? Where did you grow up? Who did this to you? Did someone lie to you, all the time? Make you think that was normal? Why are you like this?"

She was too smart to know that his childhood didn't play a part in this. He continued to stare at her, helplessly.

"I... I can't. There are other people besides me, involved," he finished weakly.

Her anger wouldn't let her be, though. "There always are. Usually, it's a wife and kids stashed someplace, while some guy goes off to 'find' himself. Ask Cammie, or Hailey, how that works out. For everyone who gets left behind."

Devin shot her a firm look. "That is not me. You know it isn't."

She met his gaze, her own brown eyes incredulous, at his words.

"What makes you think I know anything, right now, except I need to go set up Cammie's chair for her? Go on, Devin. Go be a *good* fraud. I've got people to take care of. Real ones, who know *who* they are, and what a lousy hand they've been dealt."

Without another word, Darcy shot from the room. She was down the stairs and gone before Devin could even think of how to call her back.

His pager beeped. He had to go. There was a mortgage closing he needed to be at. Even a good fraud had a schedule to keep.

From her position in the master bedroom, and unknown to either one of them, Catherine had heard every word.

Chapter Twelve

The Treasure of Forgotten Places

Old places fire the internal weather of our pasts. – Siri Hustvedt

--

Mouse was pulling pieces of metal out of an old box spring mattress when Catherine found him, Below.

"Mouse, I need your help. I came to see Vincent, but he's not in his Chambers. Mary said you might know?"

The young man smiled, as he clipped a section of wire free. "Sure. Mouse knows. Vincent is my friend. Catherine, too."

Catherine gave him a smile.

"I'm afraid it's important. Can I... interrupt what you're doing? Can you take me to him? Mary said he might be past the pipes," she said, noticing the small pile of heavy metal coils to Mouse's right. She had no idea what he was going to use them for.

Mouse tucked his wire cutters in one of the many pockets of his patchwork green coat and left the rest of the project where it was. "Past the pipes. Only a little. Okay, good, okay, fine! Need Vincent? He's in the north tunnels. The one close to your house. Making it longer. Mouse didn't tell you about the passageway! Kept it a secret!"

Catherine nodded, eager to accept the tinker's help. "He's all the way up near my new place?" Catherine asked. It would be quite the walk to reach him there, on foot.

"Yup," Mouse supplied, joining her. He guided her through the tunnels in what Catherine assumed was a mostly northerly direction. Down Below, it was hard for her to tell.

"We can go fast," Mouse confided. "Mouse helped. Rail car. All busted, before. Works now, thanks to Mouse. Vincent asked." He made an up and down pumping motion, with his hands.

Catherine tried to translate him. "You mean... a handcar? You restored an old handcar to help Vincent reach my property? To reach North Haven?" she clarified.

"Whoo-who!" Mouse replied, tugging on an imaginary rope. "Old one. Left down here a long time. Found it. *Found*. Didn't steal. Just sitting there. Nobody used it. Had to fix the wheels. Works now!" The smile he gave her was luminous.

"I... Devin said there was a way to get there. Something about an Old North passageway?"

"Rail line," Mouse corrected. "Goes a long ways. Then... wall. Stopped building. Father says market crashed, but makes no sense. No market, there. Train crashed, maybe. Long time ago."

Catherine translated his language. *So, a railroad magnate built a train line north of the city, but went out of business thanks to the stock market crash, Catherine thought. It's like Devin said.* She wondered how far the abandoned project actually went.

Mouse picked up the pace, and in no time they were past the hub. He selected one of the myriad passageways, until he and Catherine were both boarding an old iron hand car.

"Got to pump hard. Both hands!" Mouse enthused, climbing on board.

Catherine took a firm hold of the handle and marveled at the unexpected adventures she often had, Below. *It's the 20th century. And I'm about to use something common to a hundred years ago. More, maybe,* she mused.

"This is quite the museum piece," she observed, giving the handle a push. Mouse, intent on his own effort, said nothing to that.

Getting going was slow, but after a few minutes, Catherine found she was sailing along down an abandoned subway track at a pretty fair clip.

"This is actually kind of fun," Catherine said, not minding the effort a bit.

The subtle wind created by their passage was tousling Mouse's already tousled hair. "Told you! Want to get one for Father," he beamed. "Make some tracks. Go straight into his Chambers. Mouse will build it!"

Catherine chuckled at the notion of a set of tracks leading to Father's Chambers, complete with a hand car. "Better check with him, first," she advised.

"Won't be a surprise if I do," Mouse replied, looking over his shoulder at an upcoming bend, in the tracks.

This is the way Vincent will come to see me... if they manage to extend the tunnel to under my property, she realized. He must be working on it.

"This place... It still amazes me," Catherine said, not sure if Mouse could hear her, over the sound of clacking wheels. They both leaned a little, into the turn.

Then, Vincent's home amazed her a little more. Some fifteen minutes into their journey, the space around her opened up, and the roof over her head became arched, and ornate. Catherine slowed down, forgetting to help pump the handle.

"Mouse... what... what is this place?" Catherine asked, awestruck by it. Dusty, and long-forgotten, it was still a beautiful, almost opulent room, with the subway tracks still running through it, to one side.

Mouse looked up. "Father says rich man made it. Was supposed to be part of the subways. Big part. Subway station, lots of people. Never got done. Never got... used." Mouse shrugged, still working to move them along.

Over her head, dusty pendulum lights hung from the ceiling, surprising her by being lit.

"There's power, down here?"

Mouse nodded. "Runs all the way to the end of the line. Nobody remembers. Just there," he replied.

Catherine noticed he was struggling to move the car by himself, and increased her efforts.

No matter what I think I know about this world, it surprises me, every time, Catherine realized. I bet Vincent loved this place, when he found it.

In a few minutes, they were through the section that would never open as a station, and back into the rail tunnel itself.

Ahead of her, she could hear the sound of industry. Two voices echoed, off the stones. Both were familiar. Catherine recognized the low, steady tones of Vincent's voice, even though she couldn't quite make out what he was saying. The sound of rocks being put into a dumping box reached her ears.

Sounds like he's working hard, Catherine thought.

A few minutes later, she found that he was doing just that.

Vincent and Cullen had been hammering out what was to become an access tunnel, and they'd just cleared the area of the day's efforts. After exchanging pleasantries, Cullen and Mouse loaded up the stones and returned on the hand car, leaving Vincent alone with Catherine.

"I want to show you. The work is going well," Vincent said, gesturing to the space. But sensations through their bond told him that Catherine probably hadn't come all this way to talk about the increasingly deep tunnel, in front of them. One Vincent had been chiseling out with heavy hammers, pickaxes, and raw muscle.

"I... I'm glad of it. Truly," Catherine said, stopping to admire the effort that digging out a pathway to her place took. Where the subway tracks had ended, a raw, open passageway now stood, one that was running straight to what she knew was her place.

You've been busy, she thought, admiring how much work it must have taken to get this far. The tracks were over a hundred yards, behind her. "Will it take much longer?" she asked.

Vincent looked up, his blue eyes piercing the rock over their heads, as if he could see beyond them. "I believe we are almost to the edge of your property."

Our. It's our property. Or it means nothing, and helps no one, Catherine thought.

"It's *our* home, Vincent. Yours and mine. Or it isn't anyone's," Catherine corrected softly.

Vincent set down the heavy hammer he'd been working with. "I understand Charles might have something to say about that," he deflected. "Devin tells me he's very fond of the pond."

She knew that for all she could offer Vincent, he'd never be comfortable considering himself the "owner" of property. Books, he was comfortable with, or his cape, a decent pen, or other small trinkets made by hand. But something that large... no.

Maybe I made a mistake after all, Catherine thought. Perhaps Devin was right all along. Maybe I should have talked this over with him, first. Given him time to say "no," if he wanted to.

She let the change of subject go by.

"Charles has given names to all the ducks. And Devin is who I need to talk to you about," Catherine nudged, seating herself on the closest boulder and encouraging him to do the same.

He offered her his hands, which she gently took into her own.

"Vincent, I... I'm at a crossroads. And I don't know what to do, don't know the right way. On the one hand... I think we have to help Devin. Somehow." Her brow knotted into a line of worry. "On the other hand, if we do... the danger is no less than it ever was."

She looked to the rocky, uneven wall, and then up at him. "Vincent... One moves either toward love or away from it. You told me that."

"Because there is no other direction," Vincent replied, remembering his words. "You fear that Devin is...?"

"Not Devin. Darcy. She's moving away from him, moving away from love. She doesn't want to. But he can't tell her what he knows. She mistrusts him for it. He's promised never to lie to her, again. As far as I know, he hasn't. But that doesn't mean he can tell her the truth, either."

"You feel this means he will lose his love?" Vincent asked, tugging her to her feet. They had a long walk back.

"I'm all but certain of it," she said, following along with him. She related the exchange she'd overheard, between Devin and Darcy.

"She is... confused, Catherine. Her heart may see her right, in time." It was all the encouragement he knew to give her. Ultimately, the decision as to what to do next rested with his brother, not with him.

Catherine wasn't sure. She also wasn't sure she should tell Vincent, that.

"Perhaps," she said, unconvinced.

Vincent could sense her lack of confidence. "Yet you do not believe it is so?" Vincent asked.

Catherine thought for a long minute, and shrugged. "She's a... an amazing woman. She works so hard, with those kids. Her heart is so... full. I can see why Devin was drawn to her. But she... she was falling in love with a real estate agent who was also helping a special needs person. In her head, I'm sure Darcy thought they had a lot in common."

“Charles is still a person who requires care. And Devin is still responsible for that care,” Vincent pointed out. Catherine glanced over at her love. “Today, he had to go close on a sale. She saw him slip into his ‘Jack Fisher’ persona, again. I think it rattled her.”

Vincent thought about that, and walked with her a while, until they entered the abandoned, yet still beautiful section of the tunnels, the one that had been destined to be a subway stop for a line that had never been finished. He sensed Catherine’s immediate delight with it.

“You saw this place? When you came in?” Vincent asked, running his hands along the richly patterned tile walls.

“I did. I was... amazed at it. It’s beautiful. A rich man’s dream, for an investment that never paid off,” she said.

Not for him. But perhaps for us, he mused. “Not all our ... ‘investments’ do that, Catherine,” Vincent replied, returning them to the subject of his younger brother. “Devin’s may not. Not this time.”

“I know,” Catherine admitted. “But... If you could have heard Devin’s voice, Vincent. He loves her. And he’s starting to fight it. Because I think he thinks he has to.”

“Then Devin, too, moves away from love,” Vincent realized, picking up the pace, a little. “If what you say is true, we cannot let that stand.”

Catherine remained uncertain, for all her encouragement. “I just don’t know the right thing to do, or say. Charles knows he can’t tell Darcy anything about this place. And Devin refuses to. But I can’t help feeling ... I don’t know. I don’t want to risk you, or anyone else. I do know that.”

Sometimes we must leave our safe places, and walk empty handed amongst our enemies, Vincent thought, but didn’t say.

He glanced to one side of the wall. “The window in my room. It came from here. Did you know?” Vincent asked.

Catherine was surprised. “No! I never dreamed...” Catherine stared at the beautiful room with new eyes.

“It was Devin who found it. Leaning against a wall. I suppose it was meant for a doorway. One to the surface.”

“A door that never got built,” Catherine realized, looking at the tiled walls around them.

His subtle look was a contented one. “There will be one, now.” *And I will stand on your rooftop, again, and count the stars with you. And then, perhaps, the morning clouds.*

She chuckled, a little. “Even though it leads only to my basement?”

“Even though. Catherine, this situation with Devin... do you think Darcy will leave him? Entirely?”

Catherine considered. “For now, no. The state doesn’t have a place for that many kids, at least not until an aunt who’s stepped up takes custody of two of the girls. Darcy’s been preparing them for it. They’re very excited.”

“The hearing impaired ones?” he asked. Clearly, Devin had been keeping him apprised.

Catherine nodded. “It took them a long time to find the aunt. She’s a free-lance journalist, working in Taiwan.”

“Sounds... adventurous.” *And like something Devin would try,* Vincent mused.

"She's already flown in, and petitioned the court. After that's settled ... well. Pretty much any three bedroom house will fit the remaining two girls, the two boys – Robbie is a handful – and Darcy. As long as it's something Cammie can get around in."

"How much time?" Vincent asked.

Catherine hooked her arm in Vincent's as they continued to stroll. It felt good to walk with him. She realized how little they'd done that, lately. "A few more days. A week, maybe."

Then we have a week to decide, Vincent concluded, placing a possessive hand over hers. He was glad she'd come. It felt good to be beside her.

You give to us all and take too little for yourself, he mused, helping her pick her way over the tracks.

"You should ask Mouse to build you another handcar," Catherine said, enjoying just being with him.

"Perhaps I will," he replied. "Or perhaps I'll simply keep the one, and let its absence give me an excuse to walk with you."

He gave her a nudging smile, one she couldn't help but return.

I don't think I'd mind that one bit, she thought.

--

Later that week, Catherine found she had another small journey to take: This one, to family court. And though she was happy to do it, it also made her a little sad.

'Sadness,' however, was the last thing the two young girls in front of her were feeling.

Sheila and Lily were excited. Awed by the courthouse, they were chattering away, silently, with their fingers. Beside them, their aunt beamed, signing back to them that they should 'hush,' and listen to the judge, as she asked questions of the adults present. Judge Fairchild* had already 'talked' to the girls.

Catherine watched, as Darcy outlined the care the girls would need. Arrangements were made for them to attend a special school, in the fall. Judge Fairchild was satisfied. Custody of the two young girls was being transferred, formally.

"Miss Taylor. As state representative for the children, I take it you are in agreement with these proceedings?" the judge asked formally. Such things would become a matter of public record.

"Yes, Your Honor. Child Services has no objections. Or even misgivings. Miss Fields is their aunt, and she loves them," Darcy answered.

The judge turned her sharp focus on the aunt. "Miss Fields, as a person... well aware of people with special needs, I take it you are prepared to accept responsibility for these two... lovely young minors?" the judge asked, signing the word 'lovely' to the girls. They giggled.

"I am, your honor. I only wish I'd known earlier," the girls' aunt replied.

"You can communicate with the girls? No problem, there?"

"My mother and sister both used sign," she replied, signing it as she said it, so the girls could follow along.

Judge Fairchild shuffled the papers in front of her, and tapped them into a neat stack.

"ADA Chandler, you seem to be making a habit of appearing in front of me. And do you have anything to add?"

"No, your honor. Other than Miss Taylor has taken excellent care of the children. I trust her judgment."

"And how is Mr. Charles doing, if you don't mind my asking?" the judge queried.

Judge Fairchild knew of Charles the Dragon man. She'd arranged for Devin to have legal custody of him.

Catherine smiled. "Very well. He's considering swimming lessons."

The judge chuckled at that. "If he pursues that with the same enthusiasm he showed for... dancing, I believe it was? I have no doubt he'll be successful."

Catherine nodded her agreement.

"Very good," the judge continued, signing the top form. "Well, then. Given the testimony before me, it is the opinion of this court that custody of the two minor children, Sheila Elaine Grant and Lily Stephanie Grant, be transferred from the State, and granted to their maternal aunt, Donna Elizabeth Fields."

Judge Fairchild smiled at the beaming group, before her. They were a happy crowd. Not all custody transfers were this... strifeless.

"It is so ordered," the Judge said, bringing her gavel down. Lily was fascinated, by the gesture.

'Hammer?' she signed to Darcy.

'It means we're done,' Darcy replied, grinning broadly.

Once they were outside the courtroom, all the women hugged, with the girls in the middle.

'Be good,' Darcy signed. *'I'll come visit, next week. Talk more.'*

"Oh-kaay," Lily agreed, in the breathy tones of someone just learning to speak.

"Love... you," Sheila said, giving Catherine and Darcy a squeeze. "And Aun-tie." Her aunt Donna smiled at them both.

"We're a family, now." She both said it and signed it, as well as she was able. "And you will have to teach... to teach me... some of your signs."

The two girls beamed. This was what every foster child hoped for. A 'forever' home. To be taken in by relatives, or even, sometimes, strangers.

"Families... are... love." Lily spoke slowly, as she signed it.

"Yes. Yes, they are," Catherine agreed, helping the happy group exit the Federal building.

A few minutes later, the girls were off with their aunt, as Catherine and Darcy stood on the busy New York sidewalk.

"Hey, thanks for coming. Your boss was sweet, to let you have the afternoon off," Darcy said.

"I'll tell Joe you said that." Catherine smiled.

"It must be hard to let them go," she observed. Darcy's eyes were a little bright, with unshed tears. She smiled through them.

"They always take a little bit of your heart, but... nah. It isn't. Not when you know they're going to a good place. I'd have fought like hell, otherwise."

Catherine didn't doubt it.

"Donna seems like an amazing lady. Just... hard to reach, there, for a while," Catherine replied. She knew the details of how the girls had landed in foster care. A sudden accident had taken the lives of the girls' parents. From there, it had taken some time to locate their only living relative.

"It happens that way, sometimes. In a way, that's what Bradley is hoping for." Darcy's thoughtful expression told Catherine she knew that wasn't in the cards.

"Well. The president is a busy man," Catherine jibed gently.

"So is the quarterback for the New York Jets," Darcy replied. "And one of the astronauts on the space station. And he's actually getting better, about telling the truth. You should have seen him when I first got him. He used to lie about... well, absolutely everything. Now, we've got it narrowed down, at least. He mostly only lies about the father who abandoned him. He's in jail, right now, and it's probably for the best if he stays there. He's a cruel man. And Bradley's therapist says he's getting better."

"I'm sure he is. They're all... amazing children, Darcy."

Darcy smiled, and Catherine fell in step beside her, as New York and its busy population swelled, all around them.

"Darcy... I know it's none of my business, but... but Devin's very special, too," Catherine said.

The smile dimmed, immediately. "I used to think he was." The stubborn set of Darcy's chin told Catherine all she needed to know.

Was. Past tense. She's still angry. Or just... confused, about why Devin is like he is.

"If I asked you to tell me what secret he's keeping... if I asked if you even knew... could you tell me?" Darcy asked. They had arrived at Catherine's parked car.

Uh-oh. Catherine realized her well-meaning comment was about to cause her some trouble.

Catherine's expression could also tell a tale. "I... It's just... I know that Devin's life is a... a complicated one, Darcy. But that doesn't mean he's a bad person. He's not. I promise you--"

"I'll take that as a 'no.'" Darcy interrupted. She had no use for being shined on, or told how "great" Devin was. She had Bradley for that, if she wanted it.

"I... I'm sorry, Darcy. I truly am," Catherine said, at a loss to explain further.

Darcy shrugged. The other woman wasn't about to be satisfied. Not with anything less than the truth. "It's okay, Miss Chandler. I appreciate the ride into town. The bus is a bitch to park, in the city. But unless you're about to tell me why Devin has to lie about who he is, and can't begin to tell the truth about who he used to be, then... then I'd rather not discuss it. If it's all the same to you."

"I respect your decision," Catherine replied, unlocking the car doors.

You're a tough nut to crack.

"I just ask that you remember... he has his reasons." Catherine tried.

Darcy shrugged again, as both the women buckled themselves into the car.

"Everybody's got those. Say, can we go by a five and dime? Hailey wants some hair clips and the lunch box Robbie uses to carry his stuff around in is getting pretty ratty."

"Sure," Catherine replied, effectively shut down from the subject of Devin Wells. "After that, we can have lunch, if you like. My treat."

"You're on."

--

**Author's note: Judge Fairchild first appeared in an earlier fan fiction of mine, [Dragon's Waltz](#).*

Chapter Thirteen

The Adventure of Revelation

Some adventures lead us to our Destiny – C.S. Lewis

“I’m sorry, Devin. I tried,” Catherine said, later. “I admit, not that hard, considering. Darcy shut me down pretty fast.”

They were walking by the pond. Charles’ ducks were parading happily, nearby.

“She’s got a talent for that. I thought we were getting somewhere, but ever since she saw me in a dress shirt and tie... frostbite,” Devin replied.

Catherine paused to admire the picture Charles made, sitting happily at the water’s edge. Several of the ducklings were paddling excitedly his way.

“She doesn’t understand, and no one can tell her. What will you do?” Catherine asked.

Devin shrugged, knowing he had to face what was likely to come. “Not much I can do. As Vincent would say, ‘either her heart trusts, or it doesn’t.’” He picked up a small rock and tried to skip it across the surface of the water. It sank like the stone it was.

“Devin... you might have to tell her,” Catherine put the idea forward.

“Nope,” Devin replied. “Cathy... it’s drilled into our heads. You know the reasons. Hell, it’s bad enough she knows I’m a fraud. Get her mad enough and she could have the cops on me.”

Catherine’s eyes widened. “You don’t... you don’t think she would do that.”

Devin shook his head in the negative. “Nah. She doesn’t hate me. She’s just... just learning not to love me, anymore,” he said sadly. *We’re imploding. And I have no idea how to stop it.*

“I told Vincent I never wanted to be him more in my life,” Devin revealed.

Catherine picked up a stone, and brushed off the sand. It was nice and flat. “What did he say to that?” she asked, curious.

“Something about me being in a bad spot if it had come to that.”

She threw the stone. It took three hops before the water claimed it.

“Hey! Who taught you to throw?” he asked.

Catherine grinned, just a little. Her green eyes held a distant memory. “My dad. There was a lake, in Connecticut. Huge. Makes the pond look like a bathtub.” She tossed in another stone, this one not doing quite as well. “Of course, it’s luck, as much as skill,” she allowed.

Devin eyed Charles, as he tossed bread out on the water. It was feeding time, for the ducks.

You’ve come a long way from a cage and an alcoholic brother who used to beat you, Devin thought.

“Most things are, Cathy Chandler. Most things are,” he opined.

“Vincent says the tunnel is coming along. That the false door is already in,” he observed. *Just because my love life stinks doesn’t mean yours has to,* he thought.

"He finished it this afternoon, while Darcy and I were at the courthouse, together," Catherine replied. "He says he wants to widen the last few feet of the passageway, but I'm reachable, now."

"That's a good thing," Devin stated.

Catherine agreed that it was. North Haven hadn't made everyone happy. But Charles was delighted with the place, and Darcy and what was left of her young charges were safe, and well. Cammie's thigh muscles were getting the therapy they needed. There was real hope that she would walk, one day. All that had to count for something.

"Devin... if I never thanked you for steering me toward this place... thank you. It's ... I'm not sure what it will mean, for Vincent and me. But it's been good, overall."

Devin took in the amazing view. The thick stand of trees and shrubs that separated the main house from the paddock and barn were denser than the ones that grew in the park. He knew his brother would like it, here, if he ever gave it a chance.

"I want him to have choices, that's all." Devin said.

"I think that's all any of us want," Catherine returned. A communing moment passed, between them.

I know you love him, Devin's eyes said the words.

I know you do, too, Catherine silently replied.

Devin let the moment go and then sighed heavily. "Speaking of choices, ah, Jeff Radler needs to make an appearance. I've got to file some paperwork, downtown."

Catherine gave him an interested look. "For Jack Fisher? Real estate is a tricky business."

"Something like that," Devin replied.

Catherine could tell the thought of putting on a three piece suit and slicking his hair back was giving him no joy.

"Are you... are you going to tell Darcy?" Catherine asked.

"I have to. When she pulled up, I promised her. No more lies."

"So you're telling the truth about lying... that you're pulling a fraud," Catherine observed.

"I know it sounds weird to you. But that was the deal, and I'm doing my best to live up to it," Devin stated.

You have your own sense of nobility, I'll give you that, Catherine thought, fearing what that might cost him.

"Devin... Darcy might... she might never forgive you, for this," Catherine worried.

"I know," he replied. "But... it's something I have to do."

--

The next day, Devin dreaded seeing Darcy. He also knew he had no choice. He followed her down the stairs to the now empty basement. It seemed strangely quiet there, now that the twins were truly gone. Their rented beds were folded up to one side, awaiting pickup.

Devin's good loafers padded almost silently after Darcy, as she descended the stairs.

"The twins are settled? You called?" Devin asked, as the woman he loved, but was losing, lugged a pile of laundry down to the basement. The washing machine for the renovated bunk house wasn't due for delivery until next week.

"Yeah. They are. Sheila talked on the phone. Her first time. The aunt is okay. I mean, she's nice. Sheila and Lily are good." She piled towels into the machine.

"You... okay, letting them go? I know you loved them," Devin said sympathetically.

She cut him a sidelong glance. "Getting the kids placed is one of the best parts of my job. And letting go of what you love... well, let's just say that gets easier with practice." She poured soap in. And they both knew she was talking about more than the girls.

"Okay, then," he said, not knowing what else to say.

"So... are we going to pretend you're not standing there in a Brooks Brothers suit?" Darcy asked. "Because I'm not as good at pretending as you are."

Devin caught the bitter edge of hurt in her voice.

"There's something I need to do. It won't take long." He knew he was trying to salvage an unsalvageable situation.

"Good to know... Jack," she said, giving the knob on the washer a hard twist.

"It's ah... it's Jeff, actually. This time."

Her eyes grew wide. "So you... you're being someone *else*? Do you just have a thing for names that start with 'J'?"

He put his hands in his pants pockets and shifted, uncomfortably. He'd told her he was a fraud. But he'd never quite told her the extent of it.

"Derek Saunders is an Aussie tour guide. Harvey Levin is a doctor. I delivered a baby, once," he replied, both letting her know that all his aliases did not start with 'J' and there were a few more than she knew.

Darcy threw up her hands. "Good to know... I guess. You better get going, Devin. Whoever you are." She picked up the empty laundry basket and was about to shoulder past him. He blocked her way, just a little.

Devin blew out a steady stream of frustrated air, not willing to let her go without a fight.

Make that another one of those, he thought.

"Dammit, Darcy... I *told* you to come here. Gave you the map to it. That has to count for *something*. I helped you. I'll always help you."

Darcy scoffed at him. "Catherine Chandler's money is doing that more than yours. And *you* talked her into this place. Does she know it was a con, yet?" In spite of the harshness of her words, Devin knew she was holding back a tear. She was as frustrated as he was. Maybe more so.

Devin shook his head at the size of this disaster. "Catherine knows what I am. Better than most. Only you know me better."

"Knowing you and seeing you naked are two different things." Now a tear did fall.

"Don't. Don't make it sound like it was something cheap."

She tossed the empty laundry basket down.

"Jack...Devin... Jeff... Jesus, I swear I am not going to get used to calling you a different name every other time I see you! I ... It wasn't something cheap for *me*. But I got *tricked*, and used. And from the looks of things, you're about to go do it again, to someone else, for some other reason. So don't expect me to say 'thank you' for that. Not right now."

"Darcy." He tried to take her in his arms, and felt her resisting. "You are the most beautiful, most stubborn, brave, *pig-headed* woman I have ever met. I know you have no reason to believe in me. But I beg you to understand there are reasons why I'm not Devin Wells, all the time. There are people I had to protect. Just like you do."

Darcy tried to fathom him. "Charles. I know about him. Hell, Devin, *he's* part of why I thought you were an okay guy." She gestured to the open air, in the direction where she knew Charles and the children were all out sitting on the lawn, right now.

"I know you come with baggage," she told him, one battle scarred veteran to another. *Tell me. Please, tell me,* her brown eyes implored.

"Charles is...," Devin was about to say "the tip of the iceberg," but knew she was in no way ready to meet Vincent, not yet. That revelation would have to come slowly, if it came at all, when he could be sure that in her anger, she wouldn't react badly. Right now, she was half ready to shoot him, or see him thrown in jail, or walk out on him and never look back, at the least. He knew that if she wasn't so desperate, she'd probably have done at least one, if not the others, before this.

"Charles is my responsibility." He redirected his comment. "And like you, he met me under a different name. It doesn't mean I love him less. Or that he doesn't love me."

She broke away from him, at that. "Devin. Whatever need this is you have to be other people.... it's sick. My kids don't need 'sick,' right now. And neither do I. Things are hard enough as they are."

No. Don't. Don't say we're through, Darcy. Please, don't.

Devin shook his head, and begged for understanding. "I'm not sick. Desperate, I'll give you. Never more so than right now.

Because I know I'm losing you.

"Darcy. Please. I know you hate me right now. But please. Just... don't shut me out. Not completely. You have to trust me that there were... that there *are*, reasons."

She folded her arms. "Fine. Tell me what they are."

He stood before her, half helpless. "I can't. Not yet."

He could all but see her shutting down, shutting off, turning him out. It felt like the night he'd left Vincent behind, thinking he might never see his brother, again. His heart ached. He could actually feel a hole, forming in it.

Darcy wasn't backing down. She had no reason to. He saw the resignation, the decision, in her eyes. "Fine. Then we're thr—" She never finished the sentence.

"I am his reason. One of them." The voice. *That* voice, from just inside the room. Vincent was standing near the far wall, wearing his cloak, the hood pulled very low. His hands were hidden in the folds of his cape.

Devin stood between Darcy and the Vincent, and put a hand out on the laundry room doorway, to block her progress into the larger room.

"No. She's not ready, yet." Devin didn't half turn. "Go away. Get out of here."

Where... where in the world did you come from? Darcy thought. She'd heard no one come down the stairs.

"No, Devin." The cloaked figure stepped forward, slowly, into the room. "What I am has cost you enough. I will not cost you this."

"It's not just you," Devin said, sounding very much like Father.

What in the hell is Devin talking about? And who is he talking to? Darcy thought, shifting to try to see. Devin's arm barred her, further.

"I said 'It's not just you.' Go!" Devin said, when he was aware that Vincent wasn't following his directions.

"No. But it *is* me. You know it is," Vincent replied.

The others could find a different home, if they had to. Perhaps. We both know I cannot.

Darcy listened to them argue, fascinated. She couldn't see much past Devin's protective stance, other than to know she was now in the presence of a giant of a man. A man not unlike Charles, in some ways. But this man stood far more erect, and was almost kingly, in stature. He didn't have the off-balance, rolling walk that punctuated Charles' unsteady progress. His voice was soft, yet warm, like melted wax. He was broad, tall, and... utterly hidden from her gaze, thanks to the hooded cloak he wore.

Are you... another man like Charles? Darcy thought. It was all she could conclude, but even that made no sense. *But... why would Devin hide you from me?*

Davin denied Vincent's charge. "What you are stopped costing me a long time ago. It's been my choice for a lot of years, Vincent."

Darcy had the feeling she was seeing a very old argument, between the two men.

"Fair enough," the honeyed voice said, from beneath the folds of the hood. "Darcy. I have no wish to frighten you," he told her.

Darcy stepped to one side, trying to get around Devin, Devin, who still refused to let her pass.

She decided to speak up for herself. "I have seen some fairly... injured people, in my life, Vincent," she said, using the name Devin had unwittingly given her. "Fire victims, birth defects, disease. Acid, once, on a teenage girl's face. She committed suicide, because of it. It takes courage to live, sometimes." She looked under Devin's blocking arm. The big man moved forward, a little more. Darcy noticed that heavy work boots encased his feet.

"That it does," he said, understanding immediately why Devin was drawn to this worn down spitfire of a woman. There were wells of strength, inside her.

"And that is what you try to give to your children. The strength of your acceptance. Of your love. Do not be afraid. I promise I pose no threat to them. Or you."

Davin was firm. "Vincent. No. She *isn't* ready. She hates me, right now." He looked at his love. Who wasn't looking at him, like he wanted her to. She was looking at Vincent. Vincent, who was now only about ten feet away from her.

"No, she doesn't," Vincent said.

"Yes. She does." Darcy spared Devin a withering look.

"See?"

"She is angry, Devin," Vincent replied. "Because she is confused, and she fights her confusion with anger. It is the only weapon she has, right now. Do not begrudge her." He took another step closer.

"You shouldn't do this." Devin warned. Darcy stood where she was, still held, though ineffectively, by Devin's blocking arm.

"It is the only way her confusion can stop. That she might learn to forgive you," Vincent told them both, slowly raising his hands to his hood.

His hands. Once removed from the folds of his cloak, Darcy could see them. Large. Furred. Heavy nails, on the end of the fingers, that looked pointed, and potentially deadly.

What in god's name? Some kind of costume? Darcy thought, as the hands grasped the edges of his hood. Before her, she felt Devin tense, though he said nothing.

Then, the hood slowly drew back, and she saw. The amazing, leonine face that was too intricate, too strange to be a mask, or makeup; the broad muzzle, and the cleft upper lip. The impossibly high cheekbones, and the arched eyebrows. She noted the fur on his wrists, as the cape dropped away, a bit.

He's... he's covered with it. Everywhere, she realized.

"I am what Devin has protected. Part of why he cannot be other than what he ... devises." Vincent told her, stepping cautiously toward her.

Blue. His eyes are blue, Darcy thought, reduced to simple sentences, for the moment.

Devin's arm dropped. There was no sense in keeping it where it was, now. Darcy stepped forward. She reached a hand up, knowing it was rude to do so. She clenched her fingers, before they made contact with Vincent's face, knowing it was the worst kind of intrusion to touch a person who did not give permission. It was the rule of her household, that that not happen. Darcy let her hand drop, though she couldn't stop herself from staring.

"Do you... live with Charles and Devin, too?" she asked, astonished that Devin had managed to hide this huge, singular man, all this time. Her brown eyes could not stop taking in Vincent's unique features. This was not "disease." She knew what deformity looked like, when caused by illness, genetic or otherwise. This was not injury. His skin looked healthy, and unscarred. His face was even beautiful, in its incredible way. This was... something else. *Mutation, or ... experiment?* Her brain was scrambling for a word she knew she didn't have.

Whatever he was, he was meant to be this way. His face, though unique to say the least, was perfectly symmetrical. Health wise, he seemed to be suffering no ill effects of his... condition. If anything, he radiated strength.

"No. I do not live with Charles and Devin," Vincent answered.

She stared at his mouth as he spoke. *Dear God, he had fangs.*

"I live... somewhere else. Somewhere not so far from here, as it turns out. It is where Devin was raised."

"Vincent, stop." It was Devin's command, but it was a weak one.

Vincent raised his hand, to cut his brother off. Darcy thought the gesture looked strangely regal, from him.

"Darcy... I am the secret they all keep."

"They?" She could not take her eyes off his face, even though she knew staring was rude. That, too, was a rule, among the children she tended.

We're all different. We just are. And some of us are different in different ways. Some on the outside. Some on the inside. Don't stare, no matter what. It makes people feel sad, sometimes.

She knew what she preached. And at the moment, she couldn't help herself.

The large being before her stood patiently, and allowed himself to be inspected. His blue eyes were a strange mix of steady, and uncertain. He was taking a gamble, here, and they all knew it.

Darcy recognized that look. It was the look her kids always had whenever someone new met them. The look that begged for acceptance, but needed defiance, just in case.

"You... you said 'they,'" Darcy prompted. *Surely there are not... more like you?*

"My family," Vincent replied. "Devin was raised like my ... brother."

She looked between the two of them. The scars on Devin's face made a terrible kind of sense, now.

"There are... more of you? Like you?" she asked Vincent.

"No." He shook his great head, subtly. "There is only me." There was a world of loneliness, in the pronouncement. "But we *are* a family, of sorts. We all... need protection, in some way. Like your children, only... different." He let Darcy take it all in, slowly. Or at least, as slowly as he could.

Darcy looked between the two men. *Devin... and you. Raised together. Like... brothers. With other people who need to... need to hide.* She was struggling to put all the pieces together.

"We are why Devin could have no past of his own," Vincent clarified. "We are a promise he was honor-bound to keep."

"My God," Darcy breathed, slowly starting to assimilate what this man was telling her, with the little Devin had told her, since his confession.

"I promise I am no harm to you or those you love. I teach children, where I live," Vincent offered the information, hoping it would help to win her over.

You do? Darcy was amazed, anew. *Teach them what?*

The question must have showed on her face. "Literature and composition," he supplied. His smile was a subtle one. *And you are not screaming with fright. Very good,* he thought.

She nodded, speechless, for a moment, understanding enough, for now. She looked at Devin, who was casting wary glances between the two of them. Then, she looked back at Vincent.

"The... the woman who owns this house... Cathy Chandler. She knows about you?" Darcy remembered their awkward conversation in front of the courthouse.

"Yes," Vincent admitted.

Darcy looked back toward Devin. "Did you tell him to pretend to be a real estate agent? To tell me his name was Jack Fisher?" she asked the cloaked figure before her.

Devin would give her this; she wasn't afraid of Vincent.

"No," Vincent replied.

Darcy drew herself up to her full height, which was a good foot shorter than Vincent. "Fine, then. We understand each other," she concluded. "Please tell Miss Chandler I cannot thank her enough, for what she is doing, for us. For me and my kids." Darcy said, walking by him to go up the stairs.

It was a rare day that the sight of Vincent was not so overwhelming it required only a brief conversation. The door over their heads slammed shut.

"Damn, she's hard-hearted," Devin told his brother.

"She is broken-hearted. There is a difference, Devin," Vincent corrected. *Give her time. She's had a shock, even though she's dealing with it, well. Give her time, brother. You have that. And she needs it.*

"I didn't mean to lie. I swear. I was... being Jack Fisher when I met her. It's part of *why* I even met her. Some robo-call from the city, requesting any information on large properties."

Vincent nodded. "Because of the lie... because she fell in love with you... now she questions her own judgment, her own ability to reason, to sort good people from bad. You've shaken her faith in herself, Devin. It is a faith she needs, to function; to feel like she can protect the children."

Devin blinked, as he saw the situation Vincent described. "If it takes forever, I swear I will get her to believe, again."

"In Jack Fisher? Or Devin Wells?" Vincent asked, ready to retreat. Devin didn't answer.

"Thank you for trying, at least." Devin told him.

Vincent gave Devin a fond look. "From what I understand, that is what brothers are for," he replied.

Chapter Fourteen

As We Reconcile Ourselves to Fate

He who has calmly reconciled himself to fate... can look fortune in the face. ~ Boethius

"You took a terrible chance," Catherine scolded Vincent, later. They were in his Chambers.

"I did. It seemed... warranted," Vincent replied, plucking books off his shelves. He was placing some of them in a box. Catherine had a good idea where they were headed: the library. Their library. The one that had convinced her to buy the house, in a way.

"Maybe it wasn't so warranted. Vincent, I don't like this, the risk...," Catherine replied, chafing her arms against tunnel air that suddenly seemed chill.

Vincent tucked a book of Mark Twain's short stories into the box.

"That sounds like Father." He continued with his chore.

"Who isn't always wrong," Catherine insisted.

Vincent stopped what he was doing for a moment and gave her a long look. He didn't need the bond to see that she was worried.

"After I left... Darcy spoke with you?" If trouble was coming, he needed to know.

Catherine shook her head. "No. She just kept giving me... long looks, over dinner. When we were done eating, she bundled the kids off to the dorms. I don't think I'll see her. Not until she's ready to talk. It was Devin who told me. As soon as the kids were out of earshot."

Catherine paced the cramped space. "Vincent... what if she tells someone? What if she thinks she has to?"

Vincent couldn't foresee such an outcome. "That is not who Darcy is. Give her a chance, Catherine. It's all she wants. An *honest* chance, so she can make an honest choice."

Catherine looked at her beloved, as he unconcernedly piled Kipling onto Twain. *What if you're wrong? What if this time, we trusted too much?*

"We... we can't keep doing this. One day... we'll push our luck too far, Vincent."

Vincent took her in. She was more than 'nervous.' She was almost scared.

If fear is gripping you this strongly, perhaps we never pushed it far enough. Have faith, Catherine. Faith in Darcy. Faith in us.

He stopped his chore, and stepped in her way, taking her gently by the elbows. "What would you have me do? Cost Devin what might be his one chance at love?" he asked.

"I just... Devin is Devin. He'll find a way. He can take care of himself."

And you think I cannot? Or is it you, you think I cannot take care of? You buy a house and you're still not sure it's a home, for all your fine improvements. We can fix that. I can fix that.

"Our happiness cannot be bought at his expense. Or at anyone's. You know it's true, Catherine." He pulled her in, and gently embraced her, his large hand making slow circles, on the small of her back. After a moment, he felt her relax.

"I know you're right. It's just... if buying this house plays a hand in costing you your safety..." she let the thought trail off, unfinished.

"Sometimes, we must leave our safe places," he said easily. *And go where the roof meets the stars.* "Don't give in to fear. And let Darcy work through hers."

He gave her a squeeze. "Being with Devin is no small challenge." There was a touch of humor, in his voice.

She looked up into the blue eyes that owned her soul. There was so much faith in them, she felt she could drown in it.

I love you. You know I do.

Between them, their Bond plucked a string. He couldn't "hear" the words. But he could feel them. Distinctly.

I know you do, he replied silently. *No more than I love you.*

He blinked, and looked away. "Should I take Byron? Or leave him here?" Vincent asked, turning her attention to the task at hand. He knew it was just a way to distract her. But he also knew she needed it.

Byron? Catherine thought. Inwardly, she sighed. *Okay, then. Not life and death, maybe, for you. Byron. I don't know how you do this. I swear I don't.*

"Byron is... very romantic," she replied, struggling for words, as she tried to let her brain shift gears.

"Indeed." *'She walks in beauty, like the night...'* Vincent thought, remembering thinking it the night she'd walked away from him, covered with rain.

"Leave him here," Catherine decided. "After all, you'll still want something to bring to my balcony." She gave him a weak smile.

He slid the slim volume back in its home, on the shelf.

As you will, my love. As you will.

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"The washer and dryer are in. The dirt road to the main highway has been widened. I'd say we're self-sufficient, here. I shouldn't need to go up to the big house, any longer," Darcy said to Devin, a few days later. They were setting up therapy equipment for Cammie, in the converted barn. A set of parallel bars would help her learn to walk. Hopefully.

"Calling where Cathy lives the same thing as you'd call a prison, would, well, let's just say she'd think that was funny," Devin replied, turning a wrench on a bolt. It had been three days since the revelation of meeting Vincent. This was the first time Devin had had a chance to talk to her, away from the children. All of whom were in the city, at various appointments.

"I figure there's going to be a padlock on that gate, between us," Darcy ventured. "You know. In case... in case Vincent comes over to see Catherine." She held the bar steady, while he worked.

Devin shot her a look. "Yeah. Probably. He's good at hiding, anyway." He gave the wrench another twist. "That should do it."

Darcy let go. "I'm sure he is. I just... I wouldn't want him scaring any of the kids, or having them... embarrass him, with their reaction. Do you think they could meet him? One day?"

Devin shrugged. "Vincent seems to have a special thing with kids. It's the adults he usually worries about, reaction-wise." His glance held meaning. Darcy understood.

"I'd... I'd never hurt him, Devin. If that's what all of you are worried about."

Devin let out a breath he didn't remember he'd been holding. "I'd say the notion has kept Catherine up a few nights," he replied. He didn't reveal if he himself had shared those feelings.

Darcy crossed her arms in front of her torso, a self-protective gesture Devin recognized.

"Just because I was mad at you, doesn't mean I was ever going to take it out on him. Give me some credit, Devin."

"I do. I do give you credit." *Was mad? Did you say... was?*

"I've... I've been thinking... a lot... about all you told me." She didn't know what else to say. So she said that.

"After all the lies I told... the truth is the thing that sounds so unbelievable," Devin replied.

"I just need... time, Devin. To take it all in." *That you were raised by... by gypsies, who live... somewhere. With Vincent. And it all caused you to be like you are. Or... maybe not "caused." Maybe "helped" is the right word.*

Devin took in the afternoon's work. Heavy pads covered the floor, to absorb any falls. A small cycling machine was sitting in a box, waiting to be unpacked. It would be used to strengthen Cammie's leg muscles. At the other end of the barn, a basketball hoop had been set up for Robbie.

Devin's brown eyes tracked back to his love. "I just need you," Devin replied.

"And If I don't agree to that? Does Catherine Chandler close her great big checkbook, and Cammie's new chair gets sent back?" Darcy hated that she had to ask it. But she had to know.

The wrench Devin was holding hit the toolbox. Hard. "Catherine can do any god-damned thing she wants with her checkbook." He was insulted at her implication. "It makes no difference to me, and not a bit of it has come from me. I wanted her to buy this place for Vincent, not for you," he told her hotly.

Arms still crossed, Darcy didn't budge.

I need to know what's at stake, here. Don't treat me like it's a stupid question.

"The two needs just... happened to coincide," Devin concluded.

"That's deceptively convenient," Darcy observed. "What does Catherine say, about all this?"

"The last thing I think she said was 'the carriage house has structural damage, according to the inspector, and needs to be pulled down.' I think it clears her way to the view of the pond, anyway, so she doesn't mind. About you? Not a damn thing."

"She's paying to have the therapy equipment brought in. And all the renovations for the bunkhouse." Darcy turned and opened the door. Across the way sat what they all called a bunkhouse, but was now an updated home, with added wings, widened doors, a large porch, and new appliances. Darcy made her way to it. Devin trailed after her as she stepped up on the porch. New lumber creaked under her feet.

"The bedrooms can be used for when the Tunnel kids come over, sometimes. Or even after you leave, which you're probably going to do, one day. The county won't let you stay out here forever."

He exhaled in a slow stream, letting it take some of his frustration with it. "And all that is not what I want to talk about, with you."

She sat down on the porch step, and he sat beside her.

"Devin..." Darcy let a lone tear escape. "I miss you so much. I remember thinking, 'Hey, there's this great guy, and he knows all about working with deaf kids, and difficult kids, and he's great with the boys, and the girls, and he's not creepy, and he even helps Charles, so hey. Match made in heaven, right?'"

Right. He didn't say it out loud.

But she shook her head.

"But it was just a lie. I hate those, Devin." She shook her head, again. "You should have stopped me. That night. Should have told me 'no.' Made up some excuse. Don't tell me you couldn't think of one."

"That night?" He scooted closer to her, sharing the memory of the first and only night they'd been able to make love. Cammie was at the hospital overnight, getting fitted for her new prosthetics. Robbie was trying out a weekend at a boy's camp. Bradley was zonked out, with music headphones over his ears. The house was quiet.

That night. You were so beautiful. And I reached for you. And felt... something I've never felt, with anyone.

Devin's voice became low, and intimate. "Not for the entire world, or a soul I'm not sure I still have, would I have told you 'no,' that night. You felt like coming home, Darcy. To a home I've never had, and never knew I missed. I was in love with you before then. I was amazed by you, after."

"Don't. Don't sweet talk me." Tears streaked down her small face. "I don't have the heart for it."

"You're beautiful, and I love you."

"I'm overwhelmed by kids who need me. But I'm lonely, and I'm an easy mark. I'm not stupid, Devin."

His instincts told him she wanted to capitulate to him. She just wasn't sure how to do that, considering all that had happened, between them. He kept his voice steady.

"You can't think I'm serving time here because I'm trying to con you, Darcy? How? Hell, I gave up every dime of commission I've made the last three months, including the one on this place. What do you think bought Bradley's new headphones, or Hailey's Walkman? Charles has needs too, you know. And Vincent? Dear god, you know about Vincent! Nobody knows about him, outside the few people he considers family, and our helpers. And of course, Catherine."

She blinked, hard, taking his words in. She had few illusions about herself. She was a woman who had accepted the burden of special needs kids, and she was still pushing every legal boundary there was, to keep them with her, to keep them a family. Her nursing background was half all that was holding them together.

That, and Devin. And by extension, Catherine. And Vincent.

There was something about North Haven. Something she couldn't name, and couldn't deny.

Robbie was thriving here. He'd even let Hailey touch his things, the first child he'd ever allowed to do that. Had gone a whole day without counting them, without arranging them, without needing to. He'd taken Cammie to the pond to sit with her legs in the water, helping her gently, to be a part of it all. The other kids had gone swimming. Devin had kept her clinging to his back, making sure she'd "won" every race. Her face had been overjoyed, and she'd slept like a stone, that night, rather than awoken three or four times with the phantom pains that often plagued her. Bradley had spent the entire day not telling one whopper. Hailey had laughed until she'd been worn out from it, enjoying herself so much she'd forgotten to check her blood sugar. She knew she hadn't need to. She'd felt fine.

This place. North Haven. There's just something about it, Darcy thought.

"It must have been... incredible, growing up as Vincent's brother," Darcy said.

"Incredible. Yeah. That's a word for it," Devin agreed. He slid his hand into hers. "I think he gave me more than I ever gave him."

"Do you think Vincent would agree with that?" Darcy asked sagely.

Devin shrugged. "Probably not."

She squeezed his hand. "He loves you. He wouldn't have risked himself, otherwise."

"Yeah. I know."

"I love you, too." she whispered. "It's just going to take me time to believe, again."

Exhaling on a sigh, Devin squeezed her hand in return and let her feel him near. *Thank you. Thank God, and thank you.*

He raised her hand to his lips and kissed its back. "Take all the time you need. A hundred years, if you want. I'll still be here, waiting. Well, maybe not a hundred years. I'm not that young. Maybe fifty."

"Sixty. Maybe Seventy. You're in decent shape, for an old guy," she allowed, reaching out a finger to catch him under the chin.

"I need to be, to keep up with all of you," he said, turning towards her for a closer embrace. She let it happen.

"I... I'm thinking about adopting Robbie. Just so you know," she said, throwing the comment in there as if it was no big thing, rather than the life-changing decision they both knew it was.

Part of Devin was surprised by that. Except for the part of him that wasn't. "Hailey and Bradley too? And Cammie?" Devin asked.

Darcy shook her head. "Hailey's doctor loves her to death. She's already approaching her husband about starting the paperwork for a formal adoption. Bradley's dad is never getting out of jail. But that doesn't mean he'll agree to an adoption. But that doesn't mean Bradley can't stay with me... with us, for as long as he likes."

"And Cammie?" Devin asked, knowing that she was the neediest of the four remaining children in Darcy's care.

"I'd take her on tomorrow, if they'd let me." Darcy replied.

"Then... they should let you," Devin said. *And I'd help you. But I'd never pass a background check. Getting custody of Charles was crazy enough.*

“Does that mean we can’t be together?” she asked.

Devin breathed in, deeply, the scent of the dark pines that surrounded them filling his nose. “Nothing means that. Not one thing means that. Not ever,” he said, swearing it was true. “No matter how many kids you want, Darcy. I’ll help you take them on. Any way I can,” he qualified.

Darcy let go of a bundle of tension she wasn’t aware she’d been holding.

“You will? I mean... I still might want to have my own, someday.”

“I will,” he said, liking that they were marriage words.

She sighed. Somewhere inside her, “hope” was springing to life, again.

“Devin... You didn’t lie to me. After I got here. You said you wouldn’t, and you didn’t,” she said, resting her head against his chest. It felt so good. *You might be a fraud. But you’re an honest fraud*, she thought. *And considering Vincent, that might just be the least remarkable thing about you.*

“I know what I am. I know it’s... odd. But I love you. And I will do all I can for you. I swear,” Devin said, planting a kiss on her crown, in a gesture that was so ‘Vincent-like’, it was remarkable.

“Even when you were afraid it would cost us, you told the truth,” Darcy said. Trust. She was learning to rebuild it.

“I didn’t, did I?” he replied softly, keeping his head down, so he could smell her hair. The familiar scent of her shampoo filled his nose. It felt like it had been forever, for that.

She stayed right where she was. “Do you think... do you think I could meet them all, someday? Your family? It’s okay if you say ‘no,’” she added hastily.

You’ve got to meet them. Father’s going to have to marry us, for one thing, Devin thought, already making plans, but knowing it was too soon to share them. *At least you won’t be surprised by the best man.*

“Right now, I’m starting to think anything is possible,” he replied easily, reaching for her lovely face. He tipped up her chin for his kiss.

Her lips met his, hesitantly, at first, and then, fully, and full of need. Devin answered in kind.

Starving. I’m starving for you, he thought.

He knew he should pull back, shouldn’t rush her. Then he felt her fingers, gently unbuttoning his shirt.

We’re... we’re going to make love, again. Oh, Darcy, thank you. Thank you for this, he thought.

“Darcy... I have a very important question to ask you,” he whispered, when the kiss broke.

“What’s that?” she asked, tugging his shirt free of his waistband.

“Is there a lock on that bedroom door?”

--

“Devin tells me that he and Darcy have... reconciled,” Vincent told Catherine, a day later. They were standing on her balcony, again.

“They did. Darcy seems happier, now,” Catherine replied. “And Bradley is going to spend time with a couple who are looking to adopt. Hailey, too. I think things will work out. For everyone.”

“If that happens, do you think Darcy will return to the city?” Vincent asked.

Catherine shrugged. "I think she'll have to. Maybe. School starts in a week. Still, I like having her over there. It saves me wondering who's peeking over the fence," she said. The night wind was playing with her hair.

Vincent considered her words. "It seems you may have gone to great effort and expense for... only so much, if she leaves."

Catherine shrugged, again. "The therapy equipment is there for Cammie, so she still might come out. Darcy living there was always only going to be a temporary thing. But she'll come to see Devin. And I've told her she's always welcome to bring her kids out, for a visit."

Perhaps it will be so, then, Vincent mused.

"But the Tunnel children can come, once she finds an apartment back in the city. If they want to. Or if she wants to. I'm learning to go with the flow a little, here." Vincent could hear the smile in her voice.

The tunnel children. Darcy's children. Devin. Charles. Me. You touch so many lives, Catherine.

"What about Devin and Charles?" Vincent asked. "Will they... remain here?"

"I think they'll stay in the caretaker's cottage, at least for a while. Charles likes it, here, for one thing. And if Darcy *does* stay, well... Devin will want to be close by."

Indeed he will.

"Then... this is a good thing you have done. For everyone," Vincent observed. *You found them all a home. What a miracle you are, Catherine.*

Catherine took in his huge form. *Yes. For everyone else. But... not for us?*

Though he'd come to see her several times, it had still been only in the evening, and only on weekends, since she was in the city during the week, thanks to her work.

"I... I know you had... intentions. Would it ... grieve you if I told you that... as beautiful as your woods are... I can't quite picture myself walking through those trees in broad daylight?" he asked.

Her smile was subtle. "I think I can. But... it doesn't matter. I wanted the *choice* to be there, Vincent. For you. For us, if we want it. Just that."

Choice. Yes. What an amazing thing to have. And one you said you had too much of, sometimes.

Catherine felt her heart sink a little, though, at his assertion. *You can't... picture yourself there. All I've done is picture you there. You're more comfortable, here. I understand, Vincent. For all the books you moved in, all the risks you took. I know you love this place.*

Vincent, for his part, said nothing, as Catherine's wheels continued to spin.

I overreached. For stargazing, we have my balcony. Or for that matter, the mirror pool, or anywhere, in the park. If you wants to go walking in the woods, you have that. Maybe I didn't really offer you anything you didn't already have, she thought.

"You gave people a home who needed it. Offered them safety, and security. That is no small thing, Catherine," he said. "Even if for some of them, 'home' was a temporary thing."

Yes. Yes, I did. But what did I offer you? And does that even matter, if you didn't want it?

She decided he wasn't the only one who could change a subject. "More of my dad's books arrived, and some of the furniture. I'm having it set up in the basement, for now."

"It sounds... comfortable."

Catherine thought of the wide, brown leather, deeply tufted couch and two chairs. They no longer looked as if they occupied a Manhattan high rise. But they didn't look exactly out of place, either.

"I'm finding a home for most of it. If nothing else, the house has saved me storage fees."

You've spent a great deal to avoid... storage payments, then, Vincent thought, but didn't say.

"Devin was boxing up some things, in my Chambers. Nothing much. Just a few book he left behind," Vincent said.

Catherine smiled at that. "At first, the house was a beehive of activity. Now, it's positively peaceful, by comparison. There's an... I don't know. Like an ebb and flow to the place. I like it."

Then so do I, Vincent thought, but didn't say. He eased himself behind her and wrapped her in his cape, as his arms came around her.

"Your days have been long," he said, enjoying the gentle weight of her, leaning back against him.

"Long, but well spent," she replied, looking out at the cityscape, before her.

If we were at North Haven, right now, we could be counting stars, Vincent thought. Catherine wasn't the only person there who could keep a thought to herself.

"Will you... come up? To North Haven, I mean. Next weekend, maybe?" she asked. He could hear the tentativeness of the question, in her voice.

"If that is your wish," he replied, knowing that the invitation was both a simple one and not. "Should I bring something? Keats, perhaps?"

"If you like," she returned. She was still facing outward, but he could hear the nervous smile in her voice.

"You could... you could come before the sun sets. If you want to," she tacked on hastily. "The deer like to nibble on the bushes right before the sun goes down." She felt the momentary tension in his frame, at the suggestion.

"Perhaps it's best I wait until after," he said, not wanting to explain that for all the fine privacy she'd bought for them, the thought of walking where he could be seen, in daylight, was an instinctive dread he'd carried with him all his life.

Baby steps, Catherine thought. *Baby steps. Don't push him for more than he's ready for. Just don't.*

"I'll make sure all my cases are done, then, so I don't have any work to take home over the weekend," she replied easily, smoothing over any awkwardness her suggestion might have caused.

Chapter 15

North of Heaven

Life takes you to unexpected places. Love brings you home. – Melissa McClone

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A dusky evening was spread across the city. To the north of that, the moon had barely cleared the horizon before Vincent was at North Haven.

Work had made a liar of Catherine, but the late setting of the summer sun was on her side, when it came to that. Though the ticking clock on the mantle claimed an hour well past work time, she was still pouring over case files, as daylight slipped from the room, and evening entered. Vincent found her in the “parlor,” a room she was rapidly claiming as an office.

He stood in the doorway and watched her for a few moments, while she worked. The chore she often ascribed to her apartment’s small dining room table, or even her bed, was now being handled comfortably from a desk and chair that had once belonged in Charles Chandler’s study. The old wood gleamed with a fresh coat of polish, and Vincent detected the faint smell of lemon oil as he stood there, watching his love.

Catherine was frowning, slightly, as she studied the papers in front of her.

Still, the various documents were spread out, rather than stacked haphazardly atop her mattress, and Catherine looked comfortable, checking off an item here and there, as she worked.

You give so much. To everyone. I wonder, Catherine... what is it you take for yourself? Vincent thought.

“I thought you were going to leave your work at your office,” Vincent said softly.

Catherine startled a little, when she looked up.

I’m not used to you just... entering a room. You always knocked, on my balcony.

She capped her pen and left the papers where they were. “Guilty. A bunch of work came in right at the end of the day. I thought I’d ... wade through it, some, as long as I had the time.”

Vincent extended his hand to her, as she rose from the chair.

Should I have... knocked? Not entered until you came down to open the basement door? he wondered.

“I’m glad you’re here.” Her smile told him everything he needed to know, as she crossed to him.

You don’t knock to enter your own home. That’s what this is, she thought.

“Did I... startle you?” He wanted confirmation that he was welcome, no matter what.

“Only in the best possible way,” she confirmed. She slid her hand into his.

“Shall we go up?” she invited. “It should be a beautiful night.”

It will be. Even without seeing it, I know it will be. He nodded subtly, in agreement.

Vincent let her go, and watched her proceed, ahead of him. It had been weeks since he’d last been to the upper floors, and there were improvements, everywhere. The old wall paper had come down and been replaced by a fresh, open-looking coat of off-white paint. The once “dark” rooms now seemed cheerful and inviting, and the light color framed the darker wood to full advantage.

New light fixtures gleamed. A bronze statue that had once graced Charles Chandler’s apartment sat on a side table, near the teak banister Vincent remembered admiring the night he’d first seen the place. The rooms had an open, airy feel, and subtle touches of a quiet kind of elegance were increasingly apparent, everywhere. A Queen Anne side table held a large, porcelain bowl. A wide mirror made the entryway look even larger, and more full of light. In a way, Catherine’s wealth and upbringing were on display, here. It was a lovely, comfortable space.

You made a home, here. And not just for yourself, he realized, thinking of the children she’d taken in, ones who were now comfortably ensconced on the other side of her property; and of Charles, who needed to be away from most people, yet not isolated from them.

A home for anyone who needs it. Woman of both worlds... you still amaze me. I suppose you always will.

He glanced at her gauzy drapes, and felt an immediate connection with them.

"It looks... beautiful in here," he said, liking the sheer curtains hanging at the windows, simply because they reminded him of her apartment.

His compliment pleased her. "The basement still needs some doing. I thought maybe... you'd like a hand in that?" she said.

I don't want to leave you out of this. I truly don't. I was thinking of tan colors and lots of places for candles, something that reminds you of the Tunnels. But I want you to decide, too.

Vincent couldn't picture himself picking through paint samples or trying to "decorate" a room. Tunnel dwellers lived with what came their way. His own rooms were a testament to that.

"I'm sure whatever is chosen will be fine," he said diplomatically, as they ascended the staircase he'd first sat with her on, when he'd asked her why she'd bought this place.

Catherine's heart sank a little, at his words. From behind her, Vincent felt her emotions shift, but had no real explanation as to "why."

They went up the wide staircase that no longer creaked, nor had a missing step. At the top, Vincent glanced inside her newly finished upstairs bathroom, noting a huge, claw-footed tub and chrome taps. A newly laid parquet floor gleamed at him.

Elliot's people did well.

He wondered, briefly if the king in her world would ever see this little palace his efforts had helped to restore.

"They had to pull the carriage house down. But I think you just might like what that caused," Catherine said, her mood brightening. A bit of a secretive smile danced around her lips.

They moved through her bedroom. A huge wooden sleigh bed dominated the space. When she opened the balcony doors to the summer night, a great mixture of woody smells warred for dominance in Vincent's sensitive nose.

The park. It's like the park... only more so.

Away from the worst of the exhaust fumes of the city, the place Vincent had dubbed "Catherine's Woods" now gave up their fragrant bounty, to the summer night.

As the sky continued to darken, the smell of fresh pine mixed with no small amount of spruce, underlying a deep, earthy smell from newly turned earth. The carriage house was indeed gone, and where it once stood, the ground was turned, looking expectant, and dark.

"I thought we could have a bit of a garden, there," Catherine said. "Maybe even take some cuttings from our rose bush? Give them a try?"

Roses. Our. Our roses. He didn't miss the plural. "Our" was a word Catherine had been using a lot, lately.

The thought of a rose garden full of red and white blossoms captivated his thoughts. Yes. He could see it in his mind's eye. A row of low, thorny shrubs, dotted with red and white blooms.

The springtime air would smell...decadent. He wondered how long such a project would take.

It might take years.

He had the thought and then dismissed the time as unimportant. *But we have that. We have years. We have them... now.*

What Catherine had done here began to take on a new meaning, for him.

Years. Many of them. The gift of this place. The gift of... a home.

Though Vincent knew he was no more a gardener than he was an interior decorator, the idea of coaxing several rose bushes into abundance had great appeal.

“Yes,” he said, answering her aloud. “We should... we should start right away.” Vincent’s mind scrambled for the “how” of that. “Mr. Lee... he is an expert gardener. Something he sells in his store helps the plants to grow. I will ask him, tomorrow.”

He inhaled, deeply, trying to smell rose bushes that weren’t there... Yet.

Catherine saw his reaction, and it lifted her spirits. She could tell by the look on his face that he was picturing a rose garden, where the open and expectant earth now lay.

“You don’t think I’ll kill it with my gardening?” Catherine smiled.

He returned her look. “I think the roses on your balcony thrive under your care. You were right. They like the morning sun.”

And I’d like to see their descendants... with you. Mostly at night. But perhaps... sometimes, in the morning. The thought startled him, a little. But not as much as he knew it once would have.

A stray thought entered in: *The rosebush... our rosebush, too, will know your new home.*

The thought cheered him, for reasons he couldn’t quite name. The sky drew darker still, as evening changed to night.

“Roses it is, then,” Catherine said, tugging him farther out onto the night strewn deck. An open railing encircled them.

See? It’s a little like my balcony, but so much more open to the sky. The minute I saw it, I knew I could picture you up here, she thought. Vincent followed her, powerless to do anything less. Beyond the tilled earth where the carriage house had once stood, a truly enchanting view glistened before him.

The pond. It looks so ... different. So... open, to the air. More mysterious. So much larger, so much... lovelier, now, Vincent thought.

And so it did.

The dark water glittered, a moonlit path running almost straight down its oblong middle. A cluster of pines shielded Devin’s cabin from his eyes, but it gave Vincent comfort to know it was there.

Home for my brother. Home for me. Vincent soaked in the ambience of that feeling. It felt familiar. The familiarity of childhood, mixed with the comfort of “now.” Now, with Catherine in his life.

The low cry of a water bird pierced the stillness, and Vincent heard the rustling of nighttime wings. Absent the carriage house, the full smell of the water reached him, making him think of boats, and fish, and something more fanciful. *Mermaids, perhaps.*

“There’s a Lorelei in there,” he said, liking the image.

“We’ll have to convince her we’re friendly,” Catherine said, linking her arm through his. Vincent felt her pleasure at his enjoyment, even as he felt his own.

"I think she already knows," he replied, liking the idea of a siren who was beholden to them. "She thanks you for making it so she can see more of the sky," he whispered.

Catherine was moved. "She's very welcome," she whispered back.

He eased his arm from her grasp and wrapped it around her shoulder, instead. "The deer will come out to drink. Later, perhaps," Vincent predicted, keeping watch on the almost impossibly beautiful view.

Catherine leaned her head lightly against his chest, nestling in the place beneath his arm. This felt familiar. This felt right. They stood this way, sometimes, on her balcony.

"I think they will," Catherine agreed. "Last week I saw a raccoon trying to catch a fish off the near bank. He looked so determined. It reminded me of Arthur." There was delight in her voice, as she said it.

"I think Arthur would be as enchanted by this place as everyone else seems to be," Vincent replied, including himself in that number.

Catherine sighed a contented sigh. "It feels like we're a hundred miles away from the city,"

It does. It truly does. Even though we aren't. Several long minutes passed.

"Come see the other side. You can still see the pond, but the trees are deeper, going into the federal lands. The man at the gas station says he sees foxes, sometimes."

Catherine disentangled them and led him around the wide, open deck.

She was right. Even from her balcony, Vincent swore he'd never seen a tree line so large, or so deep. Huge oaks punctuated the landscape, and the smell of late apple blossoms tinged the air.

"There are apple trees?" he asked.

Catherine nodded, but then shrugged. "I guess they don't call New York 'The Big Apple' for nothing. But they aren't mine. They must be on the government lands, beyond the wall."

Vincent smiled at her, a conspiratorial exchange he felt was worthy of one of his and Devin's escapades. "A wall is just a thing to be scaled, Catherine. Especially in fall, when the apples will be ready."

The look on his face was utterly priceless. Catherine was mesmerized by him. He was making plans. Plans to steal apples, for her. She pictured him climbing up to the deck, a basket of ripe fruit slung over one arm. He'd have a book of poetry tucked into the deep pocket of his cape. He'd settle her on the deck, the basket between them, and he'd open the book's pages, and...

Oh, Vincent.

"I can't wait," she breathed, willing it to happen. In an instant, she understood Vincent's patience with Devin's mischief. *You do it to please the people you love*, she realized. *Just like he does. Sometimes.*

Vincent felt her pleasure. *Come October, we'll be apple thieves, my Catherine. Just you wait*, he thought.

Vincent purposely kept to the side of the house away from the city and all its myriad lights and distractions, willing himself to wish it away, if just for this night. The lush, apple blossom fragrance filled his imagination.

Just you wait, he repeated mentally.

A dark heaven deepened, over his head, changing from dark blue to indigo.

"The stars are coming out," Vincent said, watching the twinkling lights do just that.

Catherine tugged him over and sat on a blanket she'd already spread there.

"I thought you'd like to watch them with me. I swear I'll never get tired of this view," she said, staring up at it with him.

He accepted her invitation to sit, and gazed heavenward, as some of his oldest friends came into view.

They're so clear, here. So much brighter than in the city. Vincent couldn't help but marvel at that, again.

"There's Cassiopeia." He pointed upward, and Catherine nodded, at the familiar, W-shaped constellation.

"The first time I saw her, I was with Father. Wait. No. No, not Father. I was with Devin, that first time."

Catherine knew his memory about such things was prodigious. "Where were you?" she asked.

"By the mirror pool... at first," Vincent said, the last two words letting her know they hadn't stayed there for long.

"Did Father know you'd snuck out?" Catherine asked, a smile in her voice.

"He may have," Vincent's voice had a soft touch of memory to it. "But I don't think so. Devin was very... clever."

He is that. Without him, I'm sure I never would have found this place.

Catherine leaned farther back and made a pillow of her hands, folding them behind her head as she looked up.

"I think I was at the lake with dad, the first time I saw constellations I could name. My mother had bought me a book of them, and we sat up half the night, trying to name the stars." Her voice also held the soft touch of a long-ago memory.

"The memory of that is a treasure, then. As was the book," Vincent said, taking his eyes off a starshot heaven to take in a far more lovely view.

Catherine looked relaxed and beautiful, as her green eyes tracked the stars over their heads. "I still have both. The book is in the downstairs library, sitting between an old book of mythology and *The Velveteen Rabbit*," she replied, not quite aware of his scrutiny, for a moment.

"The songs from our childhood. They have power over us," Vincent observed, extending his arm to draw her closer, once again.

"The times we felt safe," Catherine agreed, letting herself be pulled toward him.

He stroked a long finger down her scarred cheek. "That safety... what an illusion it was. For you. For me."

She admitted it was true. Her childhood sense of "safety" had been shattered by her mother's passing. For him, he'd likely barely had any.

"Sometimes we must leave our safe places." She smiled as she said it.

I know I'm about to leave mine, he thought, tipping her chin up for a longed-for kiss.

It was a soft kiss, not so dissimilar to the few others they'd shared. And yet... it was nothing like any of them. When it broke, he pulled her more closely against him, and set his lips near her ear.

"Let me make love to you. Please, Catherine. Let me make love to you, here," he whispered it, eyes closed, holding her body against his.

She drew back to look into his sapphire eyes. "You're not afraid?" she asked.

"I think I'm more afraid of what will happen if I don't," he told her, raw honesty in his voice.

"Please." He kissed the crown of her head. "Help me to it. If this is home, then... this is home. Our home. Please."

She felt the reaction he was having, inside his patchwork trousers.

"I love you," she told him, unfastening every button and tie she could find, trying not to seem too anxious, all the while praying he wouldn't change his mind.

"I swear I love you," he answered, knowing he should be unbuttoning her blouse as she was undoing his shirt. He should be unbuttoning her blouse, shouldn't he?

Apparently not, as she tugged open just the top three buttons, then pulled the whole thing over her head. She rose to her knees and took him with her. She pushed his shirt and vest to the deck, then stood, and kicked out of her shoes.

"Stop," he told her, rising to stand with her.

Her heart sank.

Then, it flew. Almost literally.

He picked her up and held her high.

"I want to look at you. In the moonlight. With the smell of water and apple blossoms on your skin." He brought his mouth across her abdomen in a searing string of kisses, stopping to drink from her navel.

"Vincent..." Her breath was hoarse, to his sensitive ears. He smiled into her skin.

Yes, my Catherine?

He turned her in a circle, so that the moonlight played a game with light and shadow, on her bare shoulders.

"Vincent." Her voice was a little stronger. She cradled his head against her body as he kissed beneath her breasts.

"I feel like I'm going to fall," she said, knowing he'd never let her.

"Do you?" he asked, bringing her slowly down against his broad, muscular torso, so she could feel more steady, so she could feel more... him. He was covered with hair. It was blonde silk, against her skin.

"I don't think you'll fall," he whispered, aware he was bringing her very close to his erection. "I think we're both ... soaring."

Her face was level with his, and he took her mouth in a lover's kiss, open, and dueling her tongue with his.

She tugged on his lower lip with hers, and traced his fangs slowly, acknowledging their presence, acknowledging his differences, showing him that they excited her, rather than repelled her. She felt him step out of his unlaced boots, and plant his feet wide, to make him feel even more stable, to her. Her palms brushed across his impossibly wide shoulders.

She was tracing his upper lip with her tongue, planting soft, nibbling kisses there as she'd done against his lower one, when she brushed across the soft skin at his cleft, and felt his immediate reaction.

Hard. Now. The words screamed in his brain as he purposely drew her firmly, along his sex. His breathing changed from controlled to panting, in an instant, and he had to set her down as he went immediately to his knees.

Sensitive. He's sensitive, there, Catherine realized. All this time, and she'd never known.

"I know. It's all right," she soothed. Her arms remained around him, buried in the length of his hair.

We are one. We are one, here. Welcome home, she thought, unable to speak for continuing to trail warm kisses across his face.

He cupped her bottom and rubbed her brazenly, against him. Soft growls of pleasure came from his throat as he instinctively thrust his hips forward, almost starting a rhythm.

"There?" she asked him, holding his face as she set the tip of her tongue dangerously close to the cleft.

He nodded, his breathing suddenly too heavy for speech. His eyes were a mix between glazed, and a little unholy.

There. You have no idea. Catherine...

"Right there?" She whispered it, knowing the havoc she was about to cause, as she dipped her tongue inside the folds and worried the silken valley, in between.

The growl grew to a snarl, and one hand tugged hard, at her waistband, while the other kept her fast, against him.

She knew he'd shred their clothing in another minute, so she quickly shoved her slacks down as he simply undid his. He brought their bodies back together, hard, hating the loss of contact the momentary interruption caused. He kissed her, open mouthed, his tongue licking her upper lip, begging. The skin of her buttocks was bare, under his hands, and her sex was against his, wetting him.

He shook, as her tongue returned to the sensitive spot, and he barely had time to settle her down on her back before his weeping penis brushed her damp curls, insistently. His great hands captured her head as she pushed his patched pants further down, freeing his sex, completely. He was aware he should be helping her, helping her undress him. But for the world, he couldn't convince his hands to release her head as she nipped and worried at his upper lip.

"Stop." It was more a breath than a word, and this time she knew he was nowhere near calling a halt.

"Too much?" she asked.

He could only nod, as he felt her simply draw up her feet, and push his pants down his legs with them. His erection was soft steel, between her legs, and it made both of them ache.

"Too... incredible." His eyes were closed tight, against every burgeoning sensation. The feeling of a night breeze, on his back was a heretofore unknown delight. The brush of her springy pubic curls against his was carnal heaven. The warmth of her belly was an invitation to lay with her, the dampness of her sex, an unmistakable invitation and acceptance of him. Her hair in his hands felt like silk, under his fingertips. The blue satin quilt felt like slick water, against the skin of his forearms, and feet. His hips began to rock, setting rhythm, again, before his sex had found purchase.

Catherine. Make it happen. Bring me home. Truly home. It has to be by your choice. It has to be.

Desire held him fast, and honor held him hard, as both warred with what he needed, right now.

"Shhh. It's all right," she repeated. She knew she would have to do this part, for him. Knew he needed her to be the one to join them, in the end.

He eased back just enough to allow her hand to find him, and exhaled in a *woosh*, as he felt her fingers grasp. She guided him in, just barely. Released him, and returned her hands to his shoulder blades.

Perfect. You feel perfect, she thought.

"It's what we were meant for. You have to know that, now," she said.

He did, and the bond between them told him as much. Told him that, and more. Her desire matched his. Utterly. And he wasn't the only one who knew how to growl.

The soft, feminine sounds against his neck were demands, and Vincent knew them as such.

I am yours. You are mine. We belong here. Together. She might as well have been shouting it.

Flying. He'd felt like flying, when he'd held her above him. Flying. Soaring. Holding her aloft, on her roof. Above the roof. Her back nearer heaven. Her feet off the ground. *Flying. Flying with her.* The sensation of not quite knowing where the ground was.

Flying. Falling... down.

The deck felt substantial, beneath his arms, and so did she, as she thrashed a little, beneath him. She was young, and strong, and feminine. And it called him to a place he'd never been, either physically or mentally.

If holding her aloft had been "flying," this was the opposite; the polar opposite. As he felt his sex ease forward inside her, this felt like something ancient, something of the earth, something every man on the planet knows he is made for, from the first minute he achieves it.

Earth. Not sky. Earth. A furrowed row. Dark. Seed.

His seed, hot and longing to burst, for planting. She wasn't "sky" any more. She was "earth."

Terra. The Latin word came to his fevered brain, and he had no idea why, only that the ancient language sounded more right, for this.

He slid home to a dark, welcoming place he would never see, inside her, and never forget how it felt, dozens of years from now. She mewled, a sound of acceptance, and love, and completion.

Her scent was in his nose, along with the night and the pine and the leaf fall and the water. The smell of apple blossoms reminded him of Eve, and just how ancient this dance was. *Earth.* He knew that Catherine was warm with it, even though the thought made no sense.

A moment ago he'd held her suspended, weightless. Now he felt anchored, and bound, and like an offering was called for.

He knew there was only one "gift" he had to give, here. A gift of seed. His gift.

His hips made a digging motion, and she cried out with pleasure, feeling the deep, low thrust of him, as her channel widened, then deepened. There had been no one in her bed since before the night she'd met him, and Vincent, for all his untutored inexperience, knew it, now.

We were both virgins, in a way. It was a fleeting thought. He shook with reaction, feeling her fingers dig at his back.

She was not in pain. Not asking him to stop. He could feel it in every muscle of her lithe, strong body. Her palms were flat and coaxing, against his back, until he thrust; then, her fingers curled, again, pleasure bidding them to do that.

Reaction. Yes. You're drowning in it. I love you.

Her legs lifted higher, her feet clasping at the ankles, holding him in. He continued to cradle her head, as he heard her soft, mewling sounds against his neck turn to gasps of pleasure.

For all his untutored experience, he knew what was about to happen to her even as she did. He felt the sensual burst of heat, as warmth soak her channel. Her climax caused his.

He moved inside her, spasming, feeling the soft darkness within her implode, grasping him, as he shuddered. *Too much.* It felt like too much, again. The moon on his back, and the satin under his testes, and his sex... *Heatspent.*

A word he never knew, a compound his fevered brain concocted, as he rode through the final, shuddering echo of his first orgasm. It had been fast. And it had taken forever, at the same time.

The darkness behind his closed eyelids was starshot, a scene he knew rivaled the one above his head.

Heatspent, and North of Heaven. Are you looking at the stars, Catherine? Are you? I am...

Her hands on his shoulder blades continued to hold him close.

Still. Still. He couldn't be still, though he kept trying. The urge to rock, the urge to stay deep, to feel her squeeze, to feel her push, kept owning him. It was there, like a siren's song, whispering seductively, in his ear.

Over. It's over.

But it wasn't, not really, and he knew it.

No. Not over. Beginning. We are only just starting out.

Catherine willed herself to relax, to hold his sex inside her as it grew flaccid. She dropped her hips and opened her legs further, as he cradled her head in his hands. He nuzzled her neck, unspeaking, as he simply floated again, drifted, and sailed.

Water. Water, this time.

Now it was like being on a raft, on a boat.

Water, beneath you. Floating on top of it. Feeling it, all along your body, like silk.

Or like satin.

The white skin of her breasts beckoned to him, and he worshipped the dusky-tipped flesh until moments later, he felt himself begin to harden again, inside her.

He groaned, and his hand slapped the flat of the deck as he began to move again, the pleasure now a familiar sensation, along his phallus. He withdrew, nearly. Teased. Played. Aroused her until she was thrashing again, beneath him. The third time he tried to hold himself away from her, she rose up from below and nipped his neck with her teeth, threatening.

"No," she commanded, wrapping her legs hard, around his waist. Her queenly order was understood, and he gave her his length as she licked his neck, in approval.

Cassiopeia does more than sit in her chair.

It was a random thought, and he had no idea where it had come from.

He was learning the feel of Catherine, not just inside, but all along the length of her body. There was so much to learn, to know, and to absorb, here: The squeeze of her thighs, the pressure of the balls of her feet, the tightening of the muscles of her stomach, the way she tried to elongate her spine, when she needed to shift.

I have you ... lover. I have you. The new word felt strange, inside his mind.

He learned a language without words, and he was enveloped in it, speaking it with her, learning its nuance, and its subtleties, and its fluency. He could hear her body speaking to his, with every cell, and every nerve ending.

Move. Stop. Stay. More... The instinct for that, and more, more than just the words themselves.

He had an odd thought. *This is not the bond. This is... what is made, between two people when they are truly in love. This is ... lovemaking.*

He moved her jawline back and forth, kissing under her chin until she made a sound that was halfway to a purr. She liked him inside, deep inside, barely pulling back, and when he did, he had to return, quickly, again. He was learning her. Feeling the depth of her, tasting her with his sex, as surely as he was tasting her with his mouth.

Then she began to shift, and change. He knew what she was reaching for. Again.

Yes. Yes, lover. Yes, my lover. Yes. He wasn't sure which one of them was thinking it, louder, or simply if both of them were, at the same time.

Vincent felt as if his world was being torn asunder, even as it was being remade.

Holding him close, a furrow of tension formed between Catherine's brows, a soft indent of concentration, as she adjusted to him. He felt her inside as her muscles began, at first, to flutter.

And then began to squeeze.

Rocking him, holding him, showing him with her legs, with her hands, how she wanted him to move, or even whether she wanted him to move at all, she began a series of rhythmic pulses along his sex that had her twisting with pleasure, as he held his weight slightly aloft. She had him gasping with need and surprise, as her feminine core milked his hardness, a second time.

Mine. You are mine. She might as well have been shouting it, as she claimed him for her own.

He'd begun by making love to her. She was now making love to him.

Vincent, for all his desire, could feel the difference, and something inside him utterly reveled at it.

Yes. Yeesssssss, his mind sang, the sibilant sound making itself known through his teeth. *Take what you want, what you caused, what you made. It is all yours, Catherine, my Catherine. All for you. I swear I will not come before you do... I swear...!!*

Catherine bucked her hips, and moaned, utterly unfamiliar with this kind of loving, other partners having either had no instinct for it, or patience for it. It felt exquisite. Like being in the dominant position, while still being in the passive one.

Vincent's mind raced. *Dichotomy, again. Sky and earth. Water and land. Dominant and submissive.* Vincent rocked his hips at the perfect time, then kept himself still, at others.

Catherine's hand squeezed his buttock at her burst of wetness, and she felt herself drench the two of them, as she began a series of thunderous climaxes, against his sex.

"God," she moaned, stretching her torso as the third one hit her. Then the fourth. He was hard. So hard. So much to hold, here, with everything inside her. She was taking him. She knew it. Selfishly and ruthlessly, with a kind of feminine wantonness that made slaves of kings and princes of beggars.

Vincent gloried in her. *I knew there was love between us. But this is... passion. It has no other name.*

He felt the muscular pull and thrust of her, felt her hips as they worked, felt her muscles as they squeezed, and pulsed, and sent wave after wave of pleasure through her, then through him. For a while, she seemed tireless, and he seemed transfixed, as each time she completed, he felt virile, soothed, and vindicated.

You are mine. My mate. All that you take is yours. Everything.

"Take everything," he whispered against the scarred flesh, just before her ear.

"Everything?" she panted.

"Everything." He insisted, using the same words he had the night she'd come running back to him, from Westport.

Her eyes flew open, remembering the time: It had been the night of their first kiss; and in a way, a prologue to this very moment.

He was making love to her. She was making love to him. Powerfully. He was a man. Her man. And she was loving him like one.

"Yes," she whispered.

One final thrust from her and her neck arched, strain and pleasure in the motion. He felt her release, felt it wipe years of questions, of doubts, both his and hers, away.

He spiraled down with her, loving every sensation he could feel.

The quilt beneath them was sodden. She was panting. Exhausted. Drenched. Cooling, yet still roused, from having him still buried, inside her.

"One more?" he asked her, finally starting to move. She shook her head. She couldn't. She'd stopped counting, ten minutes ago. Back when they'd started coming closer together.

"Just one?" He purred it, pulling back, distinctly. Her feminine muscles reacted, clenching at nothing.

"Mm." a sound of protest, against his neck.

"Just one more? For me?" he asked, still moving within her, but not giving her the full length of his sex. Her channel was heat drenched, and lax from it, the muscles worked to completion, to satiation.

He smiled with male satisfaction as he felt her body try to re-set itself, for him, as the change in tempo, in motion, brought about an answering response, from her.

Remembering their first time, he dropped his hips low, and pushed deep. The "digging" motion, again, the one that had brought her to climax, the first time.

Her head thrashed from side to side, and this time he felt her plant her feet, on the floorboards, straining.

"I can't." she said, eyes closed. "I already...."

"Shhh." he told her, feeling her build, slowly. "You can. You can. Be with me," he purred, blessing every book on this subject Peter Alcott or Devin had ever slipped him. He slid his hand between their bodies, and, careful of his nails, set the pad of his thumb against what he hoped he could find. *There. Right there.* There at the top of her cleft, the place his penis had brushed, the place that had made her jump, back when they both still wore clothes.

Braced on one arm, his hand between them, he felt her reaction, and it was immediate. Head to one side, her body bowed, and tautened. She was aroused, again. Aroused, and loving him.

He took his hand away and thrust, and she screamed her last completion to the night air as he gave over to the strength of his back, and dropping his head, let his hips finally take him where his entire body had been screaming to go. Not separate bursts this time, but one... long... hard... climax.

It felt ripped from him, as he shuddered inside her, the sweat at her neck mingling with the salt of his tears. And hers. There were streaks from them, leading from the corners of her closed eyes.

Falling. Down. Done. The instinct for the words was unmistakable.

Then, *Move.*

He had to move off of her, before his weight crushed her into the uncompromising hardness of the deck.

He eased down and a little to the side, as the sensation of night breeze swirled around them, then slowed, then enveloped him.

I love you. I love... this place. Everything.

He slept. He didn't sleep. He didn't know what this was, this feeling of bliss and satiation. It was like the feeling before dawn, the drifting feeling between waking and sleeping, the sensation he sometimes got before one good dream changed itself, and eased into another.

Heatspent.

He heard her heartbeat, beneath his ear. He was using her breast as a pillow.

"Too heavy," he mumbled, trying to move.

"Shhh. Just right." She drew her leg up and held his back, and brought her arm around, to cradle his head.

Oh. He paused for a long moment, before the sweet, near-blissful sensation that had been enveloping him finally presented him with a name.

Home. This is... home. His mind toyed with the word, weighed it, and knew it to be true. He could think of no other word to describe his incredible feeling of contentment, of belonging.

Home. Home isn't an apartment building, or a tunnel, or a place. Home is a person.

And her name... is Catherine.

Vincent stretched, and settled, and remained right where he was.

He dozed, or whatever this was, a few moments more. Or maybe it was longer. Time seemed somehow to be immeasurable, here. Had he just climaxed a few minutes ago, or had it been an hour ago? He had no idea.

His sex ached with pleasure. His testicles felt empty, and loose, and... sated. He felt himself growing heavier, on her, felt her begin to shift, uncomfortably, in spite of her words.

He groaned, with the effort it took to rouse, easing himself further down her body. She didn't stop him. But she did hold him, as he stopped to nestle his head against her stomach.

"Mmmm." She approved, stretching a leg he'd held captive. She drew her foot up, over the hard hill of his rump, to nestle against the small of his back. It was a proprietary gesture. She rubbed his back with the ball of her foot.

He'd give her a hundred years to stop that.

"You made love to me," he said, rising up beside her, in wonder.

Her green eyes opened, and focused. "Mmm-hmm," she replied, seeming incapable of coherent speech, at the moment.

"Not just 'with' me. 'To' me" he repeated.

They both knew what he was talking about.

Catherine's eyes shone with lambent pleasure.

"I know," she whispered, loving the look in his blue eyes.

"In every dream I ever dared have of this... I never thought that, Catherine." He moved up and kissed her forehead. Her bangs were still damp. "Thank you," he said, meaning it wholeheartedly, as he adjusted to one side.

She smiled at him, suddenly feeling a little shy.

"I promise you, it felt... selfish, when I was doing it," she confessed, trying to convey how it felt to take her own pleasure at his patience.

He whispered back his reply: "It was a beautiful gift, and it made me feel..." He looked to the side, searching... "Powerful," was all he could say.

"Me, too," she answered, loving him as she caressed his cheek. "It made me feel powerful, too."

He kissed the tip of her nose.

"Followed by wet and cold," she teased him, patting the soaked quilt. She drew his hand down to the clear evidence of the way they'd spent the last hour.

"There are reasons for starting this in a bed, I see. With a towel." He chuckled.

He did? That was him, Vincent, teasing her, Catherine, about sex?

Perhaps that's the freedom 'home' gives you, he thought. Or perhaps that was just what sex, what intimacy gives you. Vincent had to admit he had no idea. And for the moment, he was in no condition to explore the question any further.

He struggled to regain his feet, loving the unsteady feel of his passion-spent legs.

"Damn," Catherine swore mildly. "Reason rears its ugly head." She rose as he did, taking his proffered hand. A hand she'd often seen, but that now looked different, attached to the splendor that was his nude whole. She realized how perfectly formed he was, everywhere. How each part of him seamlessly... flowed, into the other: Arms, chest, stomach, thighs... He was silken-haired and golden, from the top of his head to the length of his calves. He was a fantasy, made flesh. Her fantasy.

Vincent, for his part, was doing some admiring of his own.

"Just to let you know, I wouldn't trade one minute of what just happened. Not one second of it," he confided, as if they were co-conspirators of some kind.

"Neither would I," she replied, kissing him softly. When they broke apart, she began stooping for at least some of their clothes. She shrugged into her blouse.

"I don't see your vest," she said, managing to locate his shirt and pants.

"I think I accidentally kicked it through the railing," he confessed sheepishly, realizing what that sensation against his foot must have been.

"Well," she giggled, shouldering her way into her blouse. "That's gonna give Devin something to talk about, in the morning. Or the workmen, come Monday."

His low laugh sent shivers up her spine as he tugged her by the hand into the huge bedroom.

Catherine took in the space, realizing she'd made a small mistake.

"I just realized. I should have had them set up the bed so the foot is facing the deck. I had it set up sideways, like in my apartment," she realized. Set the other way, they could both lay against the pillows, watching the constellations, as they marched across the night sky.

"I'll fix it tomorrow," he told her, pulling back the covers on the bed. She had indeed arranged the room similarly to the bedroom in her apartment.

Catherine shook her head. "It weighs a thousand pounds. It took four men to..."

"Tomorrow," he repeated, pulling her down onto the soft, feather-top mattress. "I'll take care of it."

She sank and sighed, cuddled warm, against him. He tugged off her blouse, and brought her skin against his firm, hirsute chest.

"This feels like home," she said, loving the sound of his strong, steady heartbeat, beneath her ear.

"You have no idea how much I feel the same," he replied. "Thank you for the incredible gift of this place. For helping Devin. For... everything," he said, meaning it with all his heart.

No. Thank you, she thought.

"You're welcome," she said simply, planting a kiss where her cheek lay. She returned to the spot, sighing in sheer contentment.

"We can watch the sun come up, together," she said, loving the idea.

"We can," he agreed, wondering if the soft light of a dawning sun would look the same in her hair here, as it had done down by the river, their first Halloween together.

It seems as I'll find out, he thought, happy in the knowledge. A few minutes passed.

"Catherine?" he asked.

"Hmm?" She was falling asleep.

"If I wake up in the middle of the night... can we... well, again?" he asked.

"Again? After that? You're insatiable," she chided gently, kissing his chest.

There was a long silence, as she began to drift.

His voice reached her ear, again. "So... can we?" he asked again, his voice sounding like a little boy who wanted a toy.

She chuckled into his skin, and dropped low on his torso, pouncing there.

"Not satisfied? There are ways to take care of that, you know." She bracketed his frame and kissed the skin beneath his ribs, making sure he understood her intentions.

"No, not now, I can't." He pulled her upward, his mind racing at what she'd just implied. "I'm... satisfied. Believe me. More than," he reassured her, feeling just that.

She settled back down against him.

A minute later:

"I was just wondering if ... later... are you... sore, Catherine?" He had no idea about protocol, here, and was endearingly worried. And curious. And at least a *little* insatiable, owing to the novelty of it all.

Catherine had to remind herself that he roughly fifteen years to catch up on, experience-wise.

"I'm not sore, but if I am, there are ways to take care of that, too," she said, kissing his muzzle playfully.

His blue eyes shone with interest. *There are?* He might as well have said it aloud.

"Tell me." It was the oft-heard request, sounding completely different, this time.

Catherine gave him a smiling, knowing look that was part Eve, part Cassiopeia, and all Catherine. Her breathy voice dropped to a sultry tone. "If you wake up and I'm still asleep, just start kissing the back of my neck... okay?" she said helpfully, giving him some sense of control.

He thought of all the times he'd stood with her on her balcony, her standing in front of him, the back of her neck just inches from his lips.

Did you want that, then? Or is it only now that you...

He had no answer for the question, and wasn't about to ask it. Whatever the past was, it was just that: in the past.

"All right," he replied. He wanted to ask her if he was being a pest, and then decided he sounded awkward enough, for one evening.

"Vincent?" she asked.

"Yes?" he answered, rubbing her arm as she nestled against him, again.

"If I wake up in the middle of the night and *you're* asleep..." She waited until he looked down at her.

"Where would you like me to start kissing you?" she asked.

He caught her jaw under his thumb as he turned her head to meet his gaze fully, loving her more than his life.

"Anywhere... you... want." He spaced the words out deliberately, letting her know by the fire in his eyes that there was no way they were going to sleep through the night.

--

They didn't.

**

*Home is not where you are born;
home is where all your attempts
to escape cease. – Naguib Mahfouz*

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