

# ENCOUNTER

by Gloria Handley

She had felt it as she entered the dead woman's apartment - a presence, a waft of cold air that should not have been palpable in an apartment sealed during a police investigation. The draft had nothing to do with her entry, the air in the apartment should have been stale and building-warmed. The air that touched her senses was crisp and cold, fresh, as outside air would be. It lasted but a moment, then was gone. But that fleeting touch had been long enough for her keen senses to pick it up, to note its invasive presence.

Diana spun around quickly and shoved the chattering, young, eager-to-please policeman out the door of the elegantly-appointed apartment and into the hallway, cutting him off in mid-sentence. In one smooth movement, she turned back into the room, slapped the light switch off and leaned against the doorway, turning her back and her thoughts on the outside world. She sought to eliminate and override the sexual hopes left by the young officer that hovered expectantly in the air. She wanted none of his emotions to leach into the rooms and interfere with her work.

Quieting herself, Diana stood for several moments reaching out into the shadowy corners, searching for any faint traces of the victim that remained within the dark, silent apartment. It felt as if two specters were present in the rooms - one was faint, but still tangible. The other stronger, immediate, feeling oddly like a protective, watchful and watching presence nearby. After several moments, she moved forward through the darkened room, lightly touching objects that she passed, striving for a sense of the former occupant. She pushed a button on the stereo and the room was filled with the delicate strains of classical piano music.

The apartment had been vacant for almost a year, so the traces of the murdered woman that were left behind were faint. But the essence of the woman still filled the rooms, despite her long absence, and Diana found that almost elusive trail and slowly followed behind the faint, ghostly presence.

## *Flicker*

Something tickled at the back of her skull. She shoved down the feeling that she was being watched. It was not an uncommon feeling and one she frequently encountered, particularly if the victim had died an unpleasant death. Sometimes, when searching out the killer, she felt a nauseous disturbance in the atmosphere, along with the confusion and terror of the victim. There was none of that dark presence within these rooms. It confirmed her belief that the woman had not been attacked and killed within these walls. There was the unmistakable whiff of deep grief and inconsolable sorrow being reeled in, as if to keep it private and protect it from outside intrusion - from discovery! And oddly, there was curiosity with a controlled, underlying anger. Diana felt as if her presence in these rooms was being judged.

A movement out of the corner of her eye.

*Had a shadow drifted across the French doors leading from the small, upraised dining area to the balcony?*

Rising quickly, she crossed the rooms, pushed the doors open and stepped out onto the small private terrace. Quickly scanning the shadows, she saw nothing but white wrought iron furniture, some potted foliage and a few scattered, dormant plants. From the vantage point this balcony offered, the panoramic view of Central Park was fantastic. Leaning on the balustrade, she looked

down.

*'Up seventeen flights without a witness'...* Joe had told her.

*Flicker*

There it was again! The feeling on the back of her neck that someone was near and watching her. The shadowy corners of the small terrace were empty. Without understanding why, she looked upward. Nothing. Yet, she couldn't shake the feeling that up there in the darkness, just out of range of her vision, someone was looking back at her. She shook her head and re-entered the apartment.

As she stood on the top step of the small dining area, looking around the apartment, she remembered that the small familiar *flicker* had been there at the base of her skull the day Joe Maxwell had searched her out, coming to her loft unannounced. He had almost begged her to take the case; hardly the usual image of a hard-nosed assistant DA. But there had been something in his plea that had touched her and brought her momentarily out of the case in which she had been absorbed.

The *flicker* had clung tenaciously just under her hairline all the time he explained about his friend and co-worker, Catherine Chandler. Finding the Chandler murderer had seemed extremely important to him. He hadn't wanted this case to die its usual death because of lack of clues and interest from the authorities.

Diana suspected there had been a stronger connection between this particular co-worker and Joe Maxwell. The tingle at the base of her skull hadn't left until she had stood over that cold metal autopsy table and watched the coroner perform the forensic investigation. Sometime during that cold and exacting examination, Diana had let the psychic contact be made and the connection had closed linking her with Catherine Chandler. The hunt had begun.

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*That had been ... how many weeks ago, Bennett? How many false leads have you followed since then? How many have slapped you in the face and you just couldn't see them?*

Tonight, in frustration, she had gone over them one more time. She stared at her bulletin board, memorizing anew all the seemingly disconnected clues spread out on its bright blue surface, until she could close her eyes and see them all with equal clarity. She had searched the data on her computer until her eyes stung and had finally blurred over in protest. Reluctantly, she had given in and shut it down.

She had spent the next few hours recounting in her mind everything from the time she had entered Catherine Chandler's apartment up to the present. Many of her impressions had made no sense. A few had surprised her. Others, like the faceless presence, she still puzzled over.

*That presence.* She had felt it the strongest the first night she had entered Catherine's apartment. She wasn't quite certain exactly when she had started calling the woman by her first name or began carrying on out-loud conversations with her. *'My God, Bennett. I believe you half expect to get answers from her!'* What surprised Diana most was that sometimes she did.

But there were other things that still puzzled her. That waft of cold air that shouldn't have been present in an unopened apartment - an apartment routinely sealed during a police investigation. During that first night in Catherine's apartment, she had searched through an old trunk and found, among other objects, an old book of Shakespeare's sonnets inscribed with the name of someone named *'Vincent'*. A white feather owl mask and a doll carefully wrapped in a tiny blanket. The doll ... she liked the notion that a socialite would keep a doll among her mementoes. It told something of the woman who had kept her childhood treasure. Diana had discovered a liking for Catherine Chandler that had not been there before.

*'With love's light wings did I o'er perch these walls. Vincent.'*

The numerous clues relating to the elusive Vincent - including where they had been found - only added to the mystery. All of them had surfaced only in Catherine Chandler's apartment; the inscribed book of Shakespeare's sonnets with the elegantly handwritten inscription and his solitary "V" signature; the small, framed, obviously handmade, children's invitation - again with Vincent's signature and the cryptic message.

*The children are giving a concert tonight. Meet me Below at the threshold. Vincent.'*

That had been a real puzzler. *Below at the threshold. What threshold? Below Catherine's apartment building? In the basement? Why? What kind of boyfriend would ask his lady love to meet him in such a bizarre-sounding location?*

Then there had been the missing book on Catherine's nightstand. *Where had it disappeared to?*

All of the clues regarding Vincent had appeared in Catherine Chandler's apartment. Except for one; that hunk of busted concrete she had found in the debris of what appeared to be the recently blasted open tunnel entryway; the cloying, acrid smell of gun powder still hung in the air. *Coincidence Unrelated to the mysterious Vincent?* Diana didn't think so.

*Vincent?* No one she questioned seemed to have ever met or heard of him. Catherine Chandler apparently had never talked to *anyone* about him. Which was a mystery in itself. The female of the human species felt compelled to confide in at least one girlfriend about the man, or men, in her life. Catherine Chandler apparently had not.

Then there had been the unmistakable feeling of being watched. Not once, but twice. The first time had been upon her initial visit to Catherine's apartment, then once again in the jagged, subterranean doorway in her basement. That *flicker* at the base of her skull had been so strong, she felt as if someone had tapped her on the shoulder. She had turned, half expecting to see someone. No one had been there - that she could see.

Her next foray took her to the City Clerk's office to find maps and information about the tunnels and subway systems underneath the city. The elderly clerk had smilingly informed her that there were hundreds of miles of *'unexplored tunnels down there - below the city'*. That little piece of information began her spelunking excursions. It also began the rift between herself and her boyfriend, Mark.

When she had returned the following night to Catherine's basement to explore the area further, she had been stopped at the first turn. Diana had a practiced eye and a good memory for detail. There was the musty-damp odor of wet concrete or plaster. Then, she saw it. The newly constructed brick basement wall. *That* certainly had not been there the preceding evening. Someone had come after her first exploratory visit and sealed over a previously passable entryway.

Diana shivered with the realization that someone had been watching her. Maybe, that same someone was watching her now. It was on her last spelunking sojourn that she had discovered that enigmatic hunk of broken concrete with the name *Vincent'* scratched into it. *Another coincidence?*

"Vincent," she had called out softly. "Where are you?"

When she opened herself up to them, Diana received impressions either from direct contact with people or by touching their belongings. But since she considered it an invasion of privacy to linger or analyze those impressions, and unless she were trying to pick up particularly clear impressions, such as when she was working on a case, she could ignore them; relegating an intrusive annoyance to mere background noise.

But one quiet evening in her loft, while tending Catherine Chandler's newly-rescued rosebush,

Diana had been startled by the overpowering impression of peril and death. Vincent's name had flashed through her mind along with a surge of pain, an image of blood and an almost audible mewling cry of desperation. Then it passed and she was left with the disquieting impression that certain aspects of the case had taken a chilling turn in a different direction.

Tonight, she had wanted to separate herself from the Chandler case in an attempt to gain new perspectives. She selected a book from her modest library and curled up on the davenport. She decided it was time to take a few quiet moments and lose herself, drift far away from the puzzles and dead end clues glaring at her from off her bulletin board wall. She would let her mind become immersed in the thoughts and rhythms of a past age. Her random choice, however, proved to be the key to unlocking the clue to all of her unanswered questions about Vincent.

" '.... all paths lead but to the grave'...."

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*The beast to the beast is calling  
And the mind bends down to wail  
Like the stealthy lord of the jungle  
The man calls to his mate  
The beast to the beast is calling  
They rush through the twilight sweet  
But the mind is a wary hunter  
He will not let them meet*

*Why had that long-forgotten poem traversed the pathways of her brain tonight?*

But the images that impinged insistently upon her mind's eye, these past weeks of investigating the Catherine Chandler murder, were impossible to believe.

Too frequently, she had heard or read the same phrase in a report - *victim slashed.... deep slashes.... like an animal attack*. In searching through old files that the victim had been involved in, those words kept cropping up. The attacks had started about eight months after Catherine began working for the District Attorney's office.

The unknown visage of the mysterious Vincent obviously had been influenced by the oft-repeated phrase *like an animal*. That particular likeness became most vivid whenever she touched Catherine's rosebush. The first time such an image had flashed through her mind was when she found the bush on Catherine terrace and her thumb had brushed the cut place on the stem. She had felt a sudden burst of passion between two people - one with an animal-like face. The second time, she had been trimming that same bush where it sat at the end of her couch in her loft. The dead leaves had triggered the impression of impending death. The overwhelming sensation of pain and weakness had startled her. Into her mind's eye had come the impression of an iron gate and blood-soaked clothing. And, once again, that animal-like face.

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*Was the elusive Vincent the animal? In his love for Catherine, had he attacked and torn apart those multiple victims whose murders had never been solved - whose attacker had never been found?*

Diana's rational mind told her it was impossible. No human being could have inflicted those wounds unless he had used the claw-like implements of the martial arts practitioner. She had even followed up such an idea without conclusive results. She wondered now if her cemetery vigil would prove to

be another dead end.

*You've been sitting out here in the cold too long, Bennett. Your brain is beginning to chill down -as well as certain other parts of your anatomy'.*

She grimaced and silently cursed herself for not taking time to put on heavier clothing.

*Of course, the company hasn't exactly been stimulating - haven't contributed much to the conversations you've been having with yourself. But, then, dead folks aren't very conversive.*

She shivered. Even her thermal underwear and heavy jacket couldn't keep out the chill of the night air.

*What crazy notion prompted you to come here, of all places, to sit in the dark, in a cemetery, like some school child doing a dare? Well, it may not be a total loss, it's almost midnight and you are in a prime position to get firsthand experience as to whether the populace rises at the stroke of....*

She shifted into a more comfortable position on the concrete bench. The coldness and unforgiving hardness of the stone bench beneath her buttocks was leaching through her many layers of clothing and her cold rump was beginning to complain.

*It's been a long haul, Bennett. Maybe tonight you'll luck out. Maybe tonight will be the payoff. Maybe the mysterious Vincent will show himself. Why hadn't she thought of him coming to Catherine's grave before?*

He loved her. It was only natural that he would come to the grave of his lover. Diana wondered which one of those faces on her wall would be his. She had studied all the unidentified faces - all the strangers with no names; none seemed to fit the scanty information she had compiled on the elusive Vincent.

She looked up at the star-encrusted midnight sky, unable to see the comet that was scheduled to be up there, somewhere. With all the lights of the city obscuring the view, that would be one miracle she would be unable to experience. Deprived of one, she prayed for another miracle to happen tonight. *'You have about as much chance of seeing one tonight as the other, old girl'* she argued with herself. But tenacity kept her where she was. She had learned, early on, to endure any discomfort in her line of work in order to accomplish her primary goal of finding the criminal, the victim, or a piece of information that would bring about the goal of bringing a case to its conclusion. This one, however, appeared far from over.

Thanks to her random choice of reading material, she had finally figured out the one place Vincent would be most apt to put in an appearance, now - if she herself could hold out. It was already getting to be a long night. And, she had no assurance that he would even show up. She shuddered at the thought that maybe he had already been here. One thing was certain, she needed to keep her mind awake and alert, out of habit, her body would follow suit. She concentrated on the feel of the rough bark of the tree along her spine, that should help keep her awake.

"Who the *'hell'* is Vincent?" Diana muttered in frustration to herself and the surrounding darkness.

Leaning her head back, she rested it against the tree and began to mentally retrace her steps from the time she had first entered Catherine Chandler's apartment.

Without warning, the city-lit night sky surrounding the cemetery went black. Momentarily startled, Diana looked up, then smiled broadly. Now clearly visible was the once-in-a-lifetime view of that great mysterious, mist-enshrouded body moving silently through the immeasurable blackness of space. Its passage visibly marked by the glow of its long, flowing, icy tail.

*Well, she decided. That is worth the discomfort I've endured these past hours.*

A movement in her peripheral vision jerked Diana out of her reverie. She watched as a tall, shrouded figure lurched drunkenly out of the darkness. The bulky outline fit none of the male forms

that had been present at Catherine Chandler's funeral. As Diana watched, he reached out and touched the headstone, tottered unsteadily for a moment, then collapsed with a quiet thud across the grave.

Rising from the stone bench, Diana cautiously approached the formless black heap. She stared down at the large, crumpled figure at her feet.

*Vincent? Or a drunk who had accidentally stumbled this far to fall, coincidentally, across Catherine Chandler's grave?*

Frowning, Diana knelt down and grasping a handful of heavy fabric managed, with some little effort, to roll the man over onto his back.

All the crazy clues that filled the case, the wild improbabilities, the impossible descriptions, all of the unanswered questions concerning the mysterious Vincent, let alone those imagined by her up to that point in time, became startlingly clear. For the first time since starting on the case and searching for the intangible Vincent, Diana relaxed. His appearance was beyond anything she could have imagined. Her brain exploded with the realization of who, and what, she had found.

Now she was faced with a whole new ballgame. She understood with exquisite clarity *why* Catherine Chandler had kept Vincent such a closely-guarded secret, and why no one who knew Catherine had ever heard of him. A split second later, Diana realized that she, too, would join with Catherine in keeping that secret. She would decipher later what it was she felt through that first brief empathic contact when she had touched him. But it contributed to her life-changing decision. That *flicker* at the base of her skull nova'd.

He was badly injured, possibly dying. She could smell death all around him, swallowing his life force as she watched. Instinctively, she knew she couldn't take him to a hospital. The only safe place was her loft. If he didn't die before she got him there. From his size, she knew she wouldn't be able to move him alone. With that second instantaneous decision, her life was locked inextricably with his.

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When he regained consciousness in her loft, he seemed surprised to find himself alive. When he finally accepted her trust, he reluctantly began to tell her about his life with Catherine. But once the gates opened, he seemed unable to stop the flow of words and emotions that came with the telling. The pain of those memories, and the wonder of the love he and Catherine shared, touched Diana like no other story she could have imagined. In a way, she envied them. For theirs was a love that survived unbelievable adversities.

He disappeared from her loft that same evening. Not quite two weeks later, she made the decision to find him and sought him out, going back to that blasted out drain-tunnel opening where she had found the concrete slab etched with his name.

She found more answers that night than she wanted. In saving her life, he revealed the truth of all those clawed and eviscerated victims. She saw firsthand the primal fury that drove him to protect those he cared about. But, when she offered it, he turned his back on her proposal of help and the accompanying offer of her friendship.

"Remember me as you would a dream," he had ordered her.

Impossible! Even had she been willing to comply with his demand, circumstances prevented it. The least of which was her involvement in trying to solve the murder of Catherine Chandler. Her job still tied her to that link with him. And she had joined in sisterhood with Catherine in keeping Vincent's secret safe and hidden from the outside world.

Despite Vincent's apparent desire to avoid contact with her, the threads of their lives had been

woven tighter by the conjoined search for Vincent's son. Gabriel, who had kidnapped Catherine and subsequently ordered her death, had ordered Diana's abduction as well. She was to deliver a message to Vincent.

*His infant son was dying.*

Vincent knew the encounter would result in his capture, but his son's life was at stake. And despite Diana's pleading with him not to give himself up, he carried out the rendezvous. Gabriel at last held both father and son under his power.

With the child's life in the balance, and because he was a man who didn't like to lose, Gabriel reluctantly had allowed Vincent to see and hold his son for the first time. That brief encounter saved the infant's life. It cost Gabriel his. In attempting to murder Vincent's child, he fatally dismissed the strength of the psychic bond between father and son. Gabriel unwittingly imbued Vincent with the strength to free himself from the high-voltage, electrically charged, iron-barred cage to rescue his son. It had been Diana herself who, with only one thought in mind - that of saving Vincent and his son, had unhesitatingly used Catherine's gun and taken Gabriel's life.

All of that ended many months ago. All was well. Or should have been.

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Frequently, she had been wondering what new encounters were ahead for them both, and that now familiar warning tickle was at the base of Diana's skull again. She had come to recognize it as some portent having to do with Vincent. She turned and looked upward toward the slanted panes of the clerestory window. She could barely make out his massive, shrouded form standing just beyond the darkness-backed, pane of glass. Had she not known what to look for, or more accurately *sense* there, she would never have detected his presence. Perhaps, she had reasoned many times, it was his *presence* and not his *physical self* that she had come to sense and recognize.

She signaled for him to come in. Yes, she smiled inwardly, at least that had changed over the time since he had first *escaped* her loft. In recent weeks, Vincent had started voluntarily entering her loft. It had taken him a long time before he willingly stepped across the threshold of the rooftop door, come down the stairs and entered her loft with any degree of comfort. But of late, she had noticed that he seemed more relaxed, more willing to be in an enclosed space Above with her. Her feelings about him, the love she felt for him, had not diminished since the first time she recognized them for what they were. He had been the one to hold himself aloof and distant. Diana was intelligent enough not to push herself upon him, to give the impression that she wanted to supplant herself into Catherine's place.

*If you chase him, old girl, he will run faster than a frightened deer,* she frequently cautioned herself. *Be patient. He may someday notice that you are a girl and react accordingly.*

There was a subtle difference about him tonight. He moved quietly across the room toward her like a big, sensual cat. He stopped directly in front of her, his nearness causing her head to tilt backward in order to look up at him. His eyes held hers in one of those long and searching, almost unblinking gazes only Vincent could do. The kind that made her feel as if he were looking directly into the core of her being. Even the way he looked at her was different.

*Be still my hopeful heart,* she cautioned herself. She couldn't have said why, but she felt as if he had come tonight prepared to give her more of himself than he had ever done, without reservation. She held her breath as he leaned down and gently fitted his mouth to her, and that tickle at the base of her skull double-nova'd.

Only their lips met, their bodies remained a breath away from touching. The kiss was featherlight upon her mouth. Its tentative questioning stirred her more than if he had pressed his lips

demanding upon her. Within the extreme gentleness of that kiss was the promise of power known and held in leash.

*I am yours, it said to her. And if you will have me, then....*

She would, and her lips opened beneath his, accepting both the promise and any challenge he freely offered to her. After a long moment, he lifted his head and his eyes smiled gently down at her. The pleased inner emotion not quite reaching his lips, until a moment later.

"For so long, I have feared to even think about doing that."

Quite an admission from someone who evoked the image of self-assurance and never hesitated to battle when the occasion arose. But this was different. This kind of intimacy opened one up to the unknown.

"I am pleased you were feeling a bit braver than usual," Diana whispered, still breathless and afraid to move lest the intimacy of the moment change. "I am happy that you decided to erase that fear from your heart, by trusting mine."

A long, deep breath and then he was gathering her in his arms.

"Diana, I love you." The tenderness in his voice was overwhelming. Diana leaned her cheek against the rough quilted fabric of his vest, feeling his warmth and the strength of his arms about her.

"I love you too." Her arms wrapped around his waist and held him tightly to her. They stood locked together for a while, testing their newly-exposed emotions. Then Vincent drew back slightly and studied Diana for a long questioning moment. Her hand moved around his body to slide up along his massive chest, coming to rest against his bristled cheek. The answer he had apparently hoped for must have appeared there in her eyes. He bent to kiss her once again. There was nothing tentative in the kiss, nor the response either gave.

Diana discovered something else that night about him. As a lover, Vincent simply gave her all of himself, without reservation. Lying close together in her bed, which suddenly seemed oddly narrow, yet managed to cradle them both quite cozily, he spoke quietly against her forehead, his words echoing her own whirling emotions.

"Your love is a gift and a wonder to me. To know that I can please you - that your body can rouse to mine. I hadn't thought such a thing possible nor so exquisitely beautiful."

Gently, he turned her away from him and fitted himself to her back, so they lay nestled together. Nothing fate could design for them could outshine this particularly special encounter. Diana snuggled backward against the hard, naked outline of his body and smiled to herself, content to the extreme.

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