

VIGNETTES

Beginnings

- by Judith Nolan ©

"I hope that real love and truth are stronger in the end than any evil or misfortune in the world."

Charles Dickens

Catherine...

"What did they do?" Catherine's nervous fingers worried at the bandages covering her face. "My eyes!" A voice replied from beyond the smothering darkness. His voice. A voice she could never forget, even if she lived to be a hundred years old. And yet they'd first met barely five minutes before. It was then he'd told her she was safe, she was safe, now. After what had happened to her, it made no sense at all, but still...

"Your eyes were not hurt," the voice said quietly. "We made sure... Rest now."

Rest... Catherine moved disconsolately against the stabbing agony of her battered body. In pain, confused and disorientated, rest was the last thing on her mind. She wanted to understand, make some kind of sense of it all.

She turned her head as she heard the soft movements of his garments drawing away from her and she knew he was leaving her alone in the terrifying darkness. She wanted to reach out to him, beg him to hold her, not caring about dignity or what was proper; or what her father would say if he could see her now! She set her teeth, smothering a scream, a desperate plea for him to stay, but she managed to suppress the impulse.

She shuddered, struggling to understand what had happened to her. Had there been a place, a time, where she could have stepped out of this madness? Remained safe, tucked up in her own bed, in her apartment, oblivious to the seamier and degraded side of city living? A world where people were hurt and mutilated simply for the enjoyment of seeing them suffer.

She had been hurt for no other reason than she had been mistaken for someone else. Catherine frowned, trying to remember. A woman called Carol... that was the name. Catherine's ragged breath hitched with pain and confusion.

Of course she should have stayed with Tom at the party, put up with his sour humour over Eve's need for comfort and she would have remained uninjured. She would still have been emotionally trapped in a slowly disintegrating relationship she couldn't see a way to escape from, but safe. There was that word again, that illusion of security she'd always relied upon.

Despite his faults Tom was good to her. And her father liked him. That had to count for something, didn't it? She liked the feeling of safety being Charles Chandler's daughter afforded her. She'd enjoyed it all her life. And now it had all been stripped away, leaving her naked and exposed; vulnerable to a thousand unvoiced fears.

With her eyes bandaged the disturbing visions were inescapable. Always it was a dark alley and rough

hands grabbing at her, tossing her bodily into a van without any regard for how much they bruised her soft flesh. And the knife...bright and shining, mesmerizing, as the man waved it back and forth before her frightened eyes, telling her she would remember him always...every time she looked in the mirror... She wished she could remember what had happened to her after that. It was all so fuzzy in her mind. She knew she was no longer in the van, she could sense that. She now rested on something unmoving, soft and solid. She was covered with blankets and her head rested on soft pillows.

But where she was and what was this unfamiliar place she had found herself in, she could only guess at. Sounds echoed to her, the odd tapping noise that never ceased. The dull pounding was giving her a headache. Trains rattled back and forth, somewhere far above her. She guessed she was in Brooklyn or Queens, the only boroughs which had overhead trains. Beyond that she drew a blank.

She could smell earth and dampness, candle wax and kerosene. She could hear the crackling of a fire somewhere close at hand. But there was no background noise of cars, or televisions, no radio chatter. No constant sound of people hurrying about their daily lives that had always underscored her consciousness like a heartbeat. Crazy as it may seem, had she somehow slipped into another dimension?

And what did they want with her? What did he want with her, the elusive owner of that voice, with its warm, beautiful timbre and soft lisp of impediment? He was the only link to her past and her future. He was the bridge. Had he brought her here, to wherever this was? If so, could he take her back again? Back to her father, back to her life. Back to everything she knew and cared about. Back to that elusive sense of cushioned safety that had betrayed her so utterly? Her lawyer's mind gnawed incessantly at the problem.

'Rest,' he had said. 'Rest now'. Was that the secret? Give up the struggle to remain conscious and drift away, then perhaps this would all become nothing more than a bad dream, some nightmare from which she will soon awake. Her eyes, struggling against the confinement of the bandages drifted shut and she sighed.

But that voice...his voice...went with her into the darkness. Trembling on the edge of sleep she thought she heard it again, promising someone he would watch over her. The softly spoken assurance wrapped around her senses and cocooned her, whispering to her inner ear that it would be all right. That he would keep watch over her...always... He would never let her fall...

"No one will hurt you. You're safe here..." he'd said, and she believed him, as she had believed nothing else in her life before. Finally she slipped willingly over the edge of consciousness into sleep...she was safe now...

END