Save Me a Ride on the Carousel…

Judith Nolan

"But no matter their carousel colours, the horses all go at the same speed as they circle round and round. They start together. They finish together. Nobody is first and nobody is last. Everyone is equal when you ride the carousel…

Sharon Langley

Central Park was chilly and dark. It was past midnight, and the moon was in hiding behind the broken clouds. There was a keen sense of the possible dangers, hidden in the wind-rustled trees, and the multitude of shifting shadows they cast over the grass.

Snow would be falling soon, as winter slowly enveloped the city. Then there would be too much danger in exposing this entrance to the world Below, by leaving tell-tale tracks through the snow.

But winter wasn't here, yet… For the group of whispering children gathered at the drainage tunnel entrance to the park, the darkness held a wonderland of endless possibilities. Their innate sense of caution kept them motionless, watching and waiting for their opportunity to hurry out into the night.

Tonight, they were being extra cautious, because of the newcomer in their midst. They were all aware of the huge risks they were taking in even bringing Vincent

with them to the surface. But their leader was confident in his abilities to keep them all safe from any dangers.

Devin pushed his way forward through the group, to stand beside his unusual-looking brother.

“What do you think, Vincent? Is it safe?”

Concerned blue eyes, darkened by the night, tracked anxiously to his.

“What do *you* think, Devin?”

“I say there’s no time like the present. We can’t hide here all night.” The older boy laughed.

“Father better not find out, or else he’ll tan all our hides,” the youngest child in the group complained, stamping his feet to keep out the cold.

“If no-on tattles, then he won’t find out,” Devin told the boy. “Don’t come, if you’re chicken.”

“*Hey!* I’m no chicken, and I ain’t a squealer,” the other boy replied, highly offended by the unwelcome slight. “I was just sayin’. He don’t like letting Vincent out of his sight. Vincent don’t ever get to go Above, not like the rest of us.”

“It’s all right.” Vincent reached to clasp the smaller boy’s hunched shoulder. “Devin says this will be a piece of cake. I want to go out there. I want to see.”

“I’m taking my little brother out to ride the carousel. Where’s the harm?” Devin threw up his hands at the group of children.

They all mumbled their agreement, eager to be moving again. Devin reached out to pull the hood of Vincent’s ragged cloak up and over his brother’s bright hair, concealing his face.

“Come on, before someone realises we’re not in our beds. We got some ground to cover. We’re gonna make this a night to remember.”

As a group, the children checked to see if the coast was clear before they hurried from the entrance, making sure Vincent remained in the middle of them. Even though he was younger, he was almost as tall as Devin, who was running interference in the front of the kids.

They made it across a small wooden bridge and to the darkened carousel, without incident. Vincent pulled up short, to stare in wonder at the size of the attraction he’d come to see. The other kids barrelled into him, and there were muffled cries of consternation as they tumbled away from him. But he didn’t notice them as he stared, open-mouthed.

“Keep it down, you lot!” Devin waved his hand at them, silencing the chatter. “We gotta get Vincent at least one ride before we’re spotted. Come on!”

He climbed the picket fence surrounding the carousel, with the group of children eagerly following him. Vincent jumped the fence quickly, not wanting to be left behind.

“You gonna turn it on for us, Devin?” one girl asked, breathlessly. “We gonna ride, tonight?”

“We’re gonna ride.” Devin nodded. “Vincent’s gotta see it going. I promised him that.”

The children all nodded happily, before scattering to their favourite mounts. Devin took his younger brother’s arm.

“You gotta pick one.” He indicated the vacant horses. “Then that one’s yours, for always.”

“Always…” Vincent whispered, looking around at all his options. Each one seemed more impressive than the last, and there were so many to choose from. In the end he settled for a silver horse with a blond mane and tail.

“Good choice.” Devin grinned as he slapped him on the shoulder. “Now get on. I’m gonna start her up.”

Devin dropped down into the centre of the carousel, settling his hands on the controls. He watched Vincent jump nimbly onto the silver horse. All the children were set, eagerly waiting for their treat to begin.

Devin had long since mastered the controls, on other illicit night visits to the attraction, with his little group of ardent followers. He had a keen eye for mechanical things, and it was simple to operate. He flipped a switch and all the lights came on, before he engaged the first of the gears. The calliope music began to play.

Soon, the horses were moving, the children laughing as they rode up and down, and around. Vincent hung onto his pole, laughing with all the rest. His hood had fallen back, and his hair streamed out behind him. His face was a picture of wonderment. Devin grinned, as his little brother passed him again and again.

The carousel continued in motion, the music playing, and all the children cheering, as Devin operated the controls skilfully, setting the speed ever higher.

Vincent hung on, as he went faster than he ever thought possible. He was used to running, but he knew the horse beneath him was moving faster than he could sprint. But he didn’t care. He didn’t think about getting into trouble with Father when they

returned to the tunnels. He didn't care about anything, but the wind in his face and the breath-taking sensation of endless speed.

"Faster!" he shouted over the blaring music. "Make it go faster, Devin!"

"You got it, little brother!" Devin grinned, as he increased the speed again.

To Vincent's watering eyes, the colours surrounding him began to blur and run into each other. The music pounded against his senses. He started to feel dizzy and more than a bit sick, but he swallowed tightly against the urge to throw up, and hung on.

He never wanted this night and this magic horse to ever stop…

Suddenly, a mounted policeman rode up to the fence. He leaned over, glaring into the brightly-lit carousel and shouted.

"Hey, what's going on in there?"

There was sudden consternation among the children. They'd all been enjoying themselves, and hadn't thought to post a look-out, to watch for just such an intrusion on their fun. No-one had seen him, or heard him approach.

"Go!" one shouted, tumbling off his horse, before climbing the fence on the opposite side to the policeman.

"Hurry up!" the smallest child shouted, as he managed to hurry over the fence, following the others.

"Get out of here!" Devin waved his hands wildly, as he brought the carousel to a shuddering halt, with a grinding of the gears. "You know what to do! I'll take care of the rest!" He flicked off the lights, taking them into darkness once more.

Anxious to protect Vincent from being seen, the children ran in all directions, scattering through the trees, hotly pursued by the policeman, who suddenly found himself with too many trails to follow. He pulled up, trying to decide which child to chase.

The kids didn't stop to look back, as they ran across the small wooden bridge, heading for the drainage tunnel. Behind them, Devin pulled Vincent from his horse, keeping the central column between them, and their pursuer. Devin ducked his head around, scouting to see if their way was clear.

"Come on." He grabbed his brother's arm, dragging Vincent after him, up and over the fence. They ran away from the mounted cop, taking a path that led them behind him, and towards the stream.

They splashed into the cold water, as the other children headed into the drainage tunnel. The policeman was falling further and further behind. His horse couldn't keep up with the scattering children.

"This way…" Devin led Vincent unerringly down the stream and up the bank, making it to the tunnel, just as the last child vanished into the dank, concrete darkness.

Pushing Vincent before him, Devin was the last one to enter the tunnel. He paused to look back, but he saw nothing. He breathed a sigh of relief, as he followed the rest of his gang down into the tunnel's junction.

"That was fun!" a child declared, as he operated the lever, rolling back the steel door.

"That was too close for comfort," a more serious head declared. "Vincent could've gotten caught. Father would've killed us!"

"But he wasn't," Devin countered. "And he isn't gonna find out, if nobody carries any tales to Father. Right?"

"Like we said," one boy replied stoutly. "None of us are tattles. Besides…" He grinned. "We talk, and there's no more carousel rides. Right, Vincent?"

"Yes…" Vincent nodded seriously. "We can never tell Father about any of this."

His heart quailed at how close they'd come to discovery, but the adrenaline of the ride was still coursing through his blood, making him feel like he could do anything. Be anything… and he loved this new feeling, more than anything. He wanted to go back to the carousel…

Discovery turned out to be inevitable. The very next night, Devin was summoned to Father's chamber. He entered cautiously, not knowing what to expect, but he suspected he'd been ratted out.

The chamber was filled with the light of a dozen candles, and a deep sense of simmering anger. It fairly crackled in the air. Devin stopped in front of the old man's desk, his chin angled defiantly, even as she shuffled his boots on the faded Persian rug. He figured someone must have tattled, and he had a fair idea who it was. He couldn't wait to escape, to exact his revenge.

From the darkness of his bed chamber, Father approached him, wagging a finger in his face.

“You were completely irresponsible! You’re the oldest of the boys; the others all listen. Vincent looks up to you. Now, maybe you don’t care what happens to you, but what about him? Hmm? Supposing he had been hurt, or caught up there? You risked his life! And for what? So that you could have a ride on a merry-go-round?”

“It wasn’t like that!” Devin attempted to defend himself. “I didn’t think – ”

“There’s the problem in a nutshell!” Father shouted. “You don’t think of anyone, but yourself! Your own needs. Vincent is a very vulnerable child, and you took advantage.”

“No!” Devin rounded on him. “That’s not it, at all! He’s always wanted to ride the carousel, just once. Where’s the harm in that?”

“You simply do not see the hurt you can cause, do you? You go blithely through life with blinders on. Well, sometimes there are consequences for your actions!” Father wagged his finger at the boy again. “Go on! Get out of here, before I do something I’ll regret. I’ll think on what your punishment should be. But no more rides in the park, for anyone. Do you hear me?”

“I hear you!” Devin hurried up the short flight of steps to the tunnel level, eager to escape. “But, just for the record, I’ve never see my little brother so happy.”

He ran before Father could reply. He went in search of Vincent, his whole body burning with humiliation. No-one wanted to understand he was only trying to help.

He found his brother in the Chamber of the Winds. Devin stopped on the stair, glaring down at him. “I told you not to tell the old man!”

“I did not!” Vincent defended himself stoutly. His cheeks were smeared with tears.

“You did so!” Devin began to descend the stone steps, as he made his accusations.

Vincent stood still on the landing below him, as he shook his head emphatically. “I did not! It wasn’t me!”

Devin stabbed one stiff finger in hot accusation. “*Liar*! It was so you! It’s always you! I hate you! I hate you, I hate you!”

He pushed Vincent, but Vincent pushed back, causing Devin to fall backwards onto the stone step. Angry and hurt, Devin jumped up and punched Vincent solidly in the face.

Vincent touched a disbelieving finger to his nose and his hand came away, bloodied. As he stared at the blood, a growl rose in his throat. Suddenly, some strange, uncontrollable emotion tore through him. His right arm flew back and his clawed hand delivered a slashing blow to Devin’s left cheek.

Devin fell back onto the steps, deeply shocked, with three bloody lines burning on his skin. Blood began to flow, staining first his collar, then his shirt, as he lay there, stunned into awed silence.

Vincent stood over him, growling, with one hand raised high, to strike again. But he managed to stop the blow, when he saw the fear flickering in the other boy's eyes. He was deeply shocked by the damage he'd so easily wrought. He felt as if he'd been torn apart, limb from limb. Every muscles and sinew in his right arm, ached.

"It *wasn't* me," he said again, his young voice breaking, choked with tears. "I could never do that."

He stared at the bloody ruin he'd caused, and his heart quailed. "I *would* never do that," he whispered.

Chastened, he held out his clean, left hand, and drew his brother to his feet. "Come on, we'd better go see Father about your face. Then he can yell at both of us."

"I'm used to him always yelling at me." Devin pulled a rag from the pocket of his jeans and pressed it to his bleeding cheek. "But you're gonna find it a whole new experience."

"Yeah…" Vincent frowned. "I am, aren't I?" He stopped in his tracks, looking confused. "I don't ever remember him yelling at me, about anything."

"Don't ever change, little brother." Devin clasped his shoulder, before pushing him up the stairs before him. "How else will I recognise you?"

Vincent turned, his frightened eyes sliding to the damage he'd caused, before darting away. He swiped a hand across his face, trying to remove the evidence of his tears, and smearing blood from his battered nose.

He drew a shuddering breath and expelled it. "We gotta have to find out who tattled on us."

"Yeah, and we're just the boys to cause someone some damage." Devin tried to relieve the frightened confusion he saw in his brother's eyes.

His cheek smarted, and burned like the dickens. But he couldn't allow his pain to show. Vincent already looked guilty enough at having caused it. He hoped the injury wasn't too severe, and Father could fix it up right.

"I don't really hate you, Vincent. I never could, no matter what. Sometimes I just get all het up and say things I don't mean. You do know that?"

"Yeah. I know that." Vincent nodded jerkily, understanding what Devin was trying to say. He felt relieved, knowing he'd been forgiven.

Devin did his best to grin through the pain of his cheek, even though it pulled against the torn muscles. “You’ll always save me a ride on the carousel. Right, Vincent?”

“Of course. Always...” Vincent nodded quickly, as they made their way slowly towards Father’s chamber, and their inevitable punishment for fighting.

But first, Father would take care of Devin’s face. Vincent prayed the old man could make it right again.

He sighed, wiping his damp eyes on his shirt sleeve, as he steeled himself for the encounter. It was going to be a long and difficult night…

“I’ve visited many places, some of them quote exotic and far away. But I always returned to myself…”

Dejan Stojanvic