

The Beginning of Everything That Followed...

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“The loneliest moment in someone’s life is when they are watching their whole world fall apart, and all they can do is stare blankly...”

F. Scott Fitzgerald



Catherine Chandler paid the fare before she slid quickly out of a cab, turning to grab her briefcase. She hurried across the plaza towards the General Motors building. A brief glance at her wristwatch confirmed her suspicions. She was late for work, *again*.

She sighed ruefully, as the building’s doorman swung the door open for her. “I know, Robert. You don’t have to tell me.” She smiled disarmingly, waving off what he was about to say as she hastened into the lobby towards the large bank of elevators.

There was a very good reason why she was late this time. Picking out a new dress for her evening tonight had taken much longer than she’d thought possible. But she wasn’t overly worried. Her father was a prominent and wealthy corporate attorney in Manhattan. She worked in his law firm.

Catherine had never had to worry too much about anything in her privileged life. Certainly being late for work wasn’t even on her list of things to be concerned about...

She rode the elevator to the second floor and the doors opened. She stepped out into the sprawling offices of Chandler and Coolidge. She moved through the reception area as if she didn't have a care in the world.

Behind her desk, a receptionist was speaking into a telephone receiver. "No, he's at lunch, sir..."

Catherine breezed past. "Morning..." she called cheerfully.

The older woman wasn't fooled. "Not anymore..." she replied briskly.

Catherine laughed. "Picky, picky..."

As Catherine passed, the receptionist shook her head in disbelief. She returned to her task, speaking once more into the telephone. "Yes sir, thank you..."

Catherine continued down a corridor filled with offices, blithely exchanging greetings. No-one questioned her tardiness.

A passing female colleague admired her chic clothing with an envious stare. "Great look."

Catherine nodded. "Thanks..." She entered her own office only to drop her briefcase onto the chair just inside the door.

She returned to the corridor. A male lawyer gave her a pained look as he walked past. "Cathy, please don't forget the settlement conference at three..."

Give me a break! Catherine allowed a little exasperation to show. She was here *now*, wasn't she? "I'll be there."

As she walked down the twin line of offices, she shed her heavy coat, draping it over her arm. Reaching the end of the hallway, and a set of impressive doors, she opened one to poke her head into her father's outer office.

"Hi, Joan," she greeted her father's receptionist, as she stepped inside.

"Hi." The woman smiled, inclining her head towards the inner doors.

Catherine nodded her thanks as she crossed the vast expanse of expensive carpeting and entered her father's office. Charles Chandler, a handsome man with grey at his temples, was sitting behind a huge desk, talking on the phone. He smiled and waved his daughter in.

“Catherine...,” he greeted her, curiosity alive, in his fine blue eyes.

He didn't need to look at the clock on the wall to know she was late, again. The afternoon sunshine was streaming through the impressive windows behind him, which overlooked 52nd Street.



“Hi, Dad...” Catherine draped her coat over the back of the chair before her father's desk and sat down.

Charles returned his attention briefly to the phone. “Hal, let me call you back...” He hung up before returning his full attention to his daughter. “Hal Sherwood's coming up from Atlanta tonight. Will you have dinner with us?”

Catherine shook her head. “I can't. Tom's having a party for the architects of the new project. Another excuse to wine and dine the planning commission...”

In a weak moment she'd expressed this same opinion to Tom, her current lover. He'd telephoned her this morning to remind her about the party, and hadn't been at all pleased with her flippancy. Tom's harangue that morning had been clear. He needed the evening to be perfect. The venue, the ice sculpture, even how they both appeared, together, as a power couple. It all had to be flawless, right down to the drape of her dress. He had investors he needed to impress.

Charles chuckled ruefully. “I used to be invited to these functions. I should've thought twice before I handed you over to our best client...”

“You make it sound like a horse trade...,” Catherine managed to maintain her light tone. She sighed inwardly. She was thinking of cancelling the evening...

Her father shrugged. “Uhhhh... you could do a lot worse than Tom Gunther...”

“And have,” Catherine acknowledged the truth. The subject was still painful. She’d made some poor relationship decisions in the past.

They both knew it, but they laughed anyway. It eased the sudden tension between them.

Her father shrugged. “Well, how about dinner tomorrow night?”

Catherine rose to her feet. “Well, let me get to my desk, check my calendar...”

“You just getting in?” Her father struggled to appear surprised. He stood from his chair.

Catherine sensed his underlying criticism. “Had a late night, had some errands to run today...” She shrugged defensively. “Sue me...”

Her father hitched one hip onto the corner of his desk. “Well, it’s a little late for that. I should’ve sued you when you were five. What’s up with you? You don’t enjoy the work? You don’t find it stimulating...?”

His loving daughter chose her next words with care. She had no wish to hurt him.

“When I think of corporate law, ‘*stimulating*’ is not a word that immediately pops into mind.”

Charles looked confused. “But, when you put your mind to it, you’re a fine corporate lawyer.”

Catherine leaned close to kiss his smooth cheek. “No, Dad, I’m the daughter of a fine corporate lawyer...” She smiled apologetically at him before collecting her coat and turning away to walk out of the office, closing the door behind her.

“What’s with you, Cathy?” Her father sat for some time, looking after her. His question went unanswered. “I wish I knew what to do, for the best.”

He sighed and shook his head, before rising to his feet. Returning to his chair, he re-engaged with the heavy workload, made all the more impossible by his daughter’s lack of drive to succeed...





Punctuality was a word Tom Gunther lived by. He demanded it of his employees and he expected nothing less from Catherine. He would arrive at her apartment sharply at eight o'clock, and assume she'd be waiting for him. Which, of course, she was.

Catherine sighed, as she walked out the front entrance of her building, into the cool of the evening. The doorman saluted her as he held the door open. She smiled at him as she walked past, even as she battled with the rising desire to turn around and go back to her apartment and lock the door behind her.

Some strange sense of restlessness ruffled her studied composure. It was almost as if something was trying to tell her the evening would end in disaster.

She shrugged the sensation aside. She was no coward, and tonight was important to Tom. She would do her best to make the party a success. Their relationship appeared to have reached some kind of stalemate, which neither party seemed willing, or able, to break.

Catherine couldn't quite put her finger on the reason for her reluctance. She knew she wanted to go back upstairs though. Maybe her apartment was the one place where she could be herself. Tom had a habit of taking over and reorganizing any space he inhabited for too long.

His newly-acquired townhouse in Greenwich Village was to be gutted of all its quaint charm and turned into an ultra-modern shadow of its former self. Tom had proudly showed it off to Catherine, who hadn't liked any of his plans. But she'd smiled and nodded when it was required.

They'd been lovers for the past five months, and Catherine couldn't fault Tom's attentiveness to her needs. Holiday trips and expensive gifts had been showered upon her. But they'd all come with attachments. Tom's gifts were like the riders in a corporate contract. They always seemed designed to make her do more than she wanted to, with him. She shook away the thought, and tried to focus on the evening in front of her.

One thing at a time, Cathy, she chided herself. *It's a party. It's not brain surgery...*

She pasted a smile on, as Tom's limousine drew up smoothly before her. Her date sat watching her from the back seat, as the driver got out to open the door for Catherine.

"You're looking lovely tonight," Tom commented, as she slid in beside him. He reached to push open the lapels of her evening coat. "I like it. Great choice of dress."

"Thank you," Catherine acknowledged the compliment softly.

Tom sat back, seeming well-satisfied with her. Catherine studied him through the sweep of her lowered lashes. He was a good-looking, dark-haired man ten years her senior. In any crowd he stood out, and enjoyed the attention. He always dressed immaculately, wearing his high-end clothes well on his tall, muscular frame. He'd made his considerable fortune in the fiery cauldron of the New York real estate market, and let no-one forget it.

He smoothed the length of the maroon material draped around her neck. He moved closer, his whisky-scented breath warm and heavy on her cheek. He lowered his voice. "But you'll look even better out of it..." He smiled in anticipation. "I have big plans for us, after tonight..."

"What sort of plans?" Catherine carefully moved aside, placing her purse between them on the seat.

Tom sat back and shrugged, seeming not to notice her reticence. "Let's just say that after tonight, I think we've earned a holiday. Somewhere exotic. You'll like it."

"I see..." *There it is...* Catherine sighed inwardly. His assumption that what was enjoyable for Tom, she would go along with, to keep him happy.

Their last holiday together had been nothing more than a thinly-disguised, fact-finding mission, looking at expanding the Gunther empire into the warmer climes of the

Caribbean's wealthy resort scene. Catherine had not enjoyed it. She'd seen little of him. His time had been spent in meetings, or running to catch a plane to assess another resort location.

"Aren't you excited about tonight?" Tom reached to grasp her hand. "You don't look excited. I need you with me. We are so good, when we're together."

"Of course, yes." Catherine brightened, summoning her best smile, one that didn't quite reach her eyes. "I know how much you value my support."

"Good. I'm pleased." Tom patted her hand. He paid no attention to the wavering of her smile, or the sudden tenseness of her slender body. "Maybe, after the party, we could go back to your place. For once...?"

"Maybe..." Catherine's reply was non-committal. She removed her hand from his grasp and tucked it safely into the folds of her evening coat.

She turned her attention to the car window. The darkened cityscape flew past her eyes, but she didn't see anything, through the sudden mist of unshed tears.

I don't know why I feel like crying. I'm wearing a designer gown, riding in a limousine, going to a big party. Tom is handsome, and Dad likes him. He's rich. He spends money on me, well, on us both. And this will all be over in a few hours. Just hang on...



The private party filled the elegant restaurant with chatter and laughter, and the perfumed *bonhomie* of the very well-heeled, determined to enjoy themselves. The wine and food were both in endless supply, the host attentive, and the April night was still young.

On a large table in the middle of the huge room, stood a tall architectural ice model of a skyscraper and commercial complex. It was boldly displayed with presumptive authority. It fairly shouted, *'Look at me!'*

Which was the whole intention of the night. Those who were interested enough to stop and look, marvelled at the structure, trying to calculate the cost. Its creator, who stood nearby, watched the assemblage with cool calculation, and looked well-satisfied with the turn-out of moneyed investors. As always, the party was a means to an end. For that matter, for him, most things were just that.

Attentive to his would-be partners, while being seen to work the room, Tom took careful stock of the crowded party. He'd left nothing to chance. He didn't make a move without a plan - and a spreadsheet detailing potential risks.

Here tonight, he was in his natural environment. People seemed to swirl around him, drawn by his aura of power, and a confident smile that never quite reached his dark eyes. Many women watched him with ill-concealed avarice, trying to attract his attention.

Tom had it all, and yet... A quick frown shadowed his watchful eyes. What was it that Cathy had said when he'd phoned her about the party?

'Yet another excuse to wine and dine the planning commission...'

But this wasn't an *'excuse'*, it was an opportunity. Excuses were for weak men, men without drive, or focus. Tom knew he wasn't one of those. Opportunities were for go-getters, and up-and-comers. Tom counted himself firmly in that category.

Still, her comment had rankled with him. Cathy was a spoiled little rich girl, and sometimes, it showed. She had neither his drive, nor his focus. They both knew she hated her job, and did it as little as possible. But she did have a sterling pedigree, and for that, he was willing to ignore her shortcomings. Or at least, he was willing to ignore some of them.

“Sometimes, her mouth’s too smart for her own good.” He sighed brusquely. Her casual flippancy was beginning to annoy him.

She’d been too quiet on the drive over, making him begin to rethink his plans for her. Maybe he *was* making a huge mistake, after all. The thought had already occurred to him.

Sometimes she showed a rebellious streak he was coming to detest. It was almost as if she was laughing at him, and all he held dear. For some reason he couldn’t fathom, she appeared to be holding him at arm’s length. She didn’t want to share her most intimate thoughts or feelings with him. *And what’s with this idea she wouldn’t allow him inside her apartment? Like she has something to hide?*

But her wealthy father’s connections were worth cultivating. And Catherine *was* very easy on the eye. He could overlook her faults, given the right incentives. It was beyond time he settled down. Once they were married, Catherine could be taught to mind her place, and her tongue...

But where is she now? “Not beside me, that’s obvious,” he muttered, through his teeth.

As he approached the tabled construction once more, a potential investor posed a searching question and Gunther nodded quickly. “Well, they can’t get it quite right in the sculpture, but um, it gives you a pretty good idea of the way it’s going to be. We’re very pleased. I’m sure you’ll find that the overages are money well spent.”

He shrugged quickly, moving away before the man could pose another awkward question he didn’t want to answer. His temper was threatening to get the better of him. He walked through the restaurant, his dark gaze searching for the woman he’d brought to the party. Once more, she is MIA, and he was becoming deeply irritated with her lack of attention to *his* needs.

Moments later, he found Catherine sitting at a far table, talking to a defeated looking woman she obviously knew. Tom knew her, too. *Eve. Loser. What in hell is Cathy doing wasting time with her?* He arrived at the table in time to hear the woman’s mumbled confession.

“He told me just to pretend like he was dead...”

Catherine sighed. “I’m sorry, Eve... Things’ll turn around.”

Tom rolled his eyes, even as he leaned close to Catherine. “How you doing? You all right?”

Catherine glanced up at him. “Fine,” she commented evenly. “Eve and I haven’t seen each other since college...” She quickly returned her attention to her table companion.

The other woman grimaced after swallowing a mouthful of her cocktail. “We were just catching up...”

Tom barely acknowledged her. He didn’t remember inviting her to the party, but he knew her type, even as he knew her. Drinker. Whiner. Only so bright, and not as well connected as Catherine was. Neither Eve nor her soon to be ex-husband were of any use to him, with the planning commission. Or anything else.

“Good...,” he replied soothingly, trying to draw Catherine away from the table. He placed a possessive hand in the small of her back, and leaned closer. “I need to talk to you...”

Catherine stiffened, but allowed him to direct her. She rose and nodded to the other woman. “Would you excuse us for a minute...?”

Tom drew her into a nearby alcove below the grand staircase. He moved closer, lowering his voice to demand, “What’s with you?” His tone brimmed with irritation.

Catherine drew back. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you’ve been sitting over there listening to her blubber, half the night...”

Catherine sighed roughly. “She’s going through a rough time. She and I used to be good friends...”

Tom managed to hold his rising temper. “I know her. She’s a lush. She was married to a lush,” he sneered. “She’s a complete loser.”

Catherine’s fine green eyes darkened with displeasure. “You’re very compassionate...”

Tom completely misread her. “Come on, stick with me. There’s someone I want you to meet...” He looked around the room, searching for a distraction.

Catherine sighed. “Oh, Tom, I’m just not into it tonight. I’m sorry...”

Tom’s thin veneer of urbanity began to slip. “I thought I could count on you...” He sounded like a petulant child.

Catherine's lips tightened. "You can..."

Tom's eyes narrowed. "Maybe I expect too much..."



Catherine huffed her displeasure. "This is a party. It's not... brain surgery."

Tom could feel critical eyes in the room watching them, making judgments. *If the man couldn't control his woman, what else isn't he in charge of...?* "I really don't have time for this, now..." he snarled.

He became aware of the casual attention of a young blond woman, slowly descending the staircase behind them. He wasn't in the mood for an audience.

He saw Catherine's eyes snap with displeasure. She obviously didn't care if they were being overhead or observed. "Frankly, I don't like being told who I can talk to...", she muttered.

"Then show better judgement!"

Catherine's hold on her temper finally snapped. "*Fine!* I think I'll call it a night..."

Tom leaned closer. She was *not* going to humiliate him. Not here, not now. "*That's* not an option..." He would bring her to heel, no matter the cost.

Unintimidated, Catherine backed away. "Oh, it's not?" She returned to fetch her purse from her seat at the table, where she'd been sitting with her old friend. "Eve, I'm sorry. I'm going to have to call you tomorrow."

She turned and walked away, without a backward glance at Tom. He watched her for several moments, before shrugging as he turned back to his guests. He managed to smile and shake his head, as he noted how many people had been watching their heated exchange. They'd kept their voices suitably low, even if the disagreement had been a

biting one. He'd have to excuse her absence, if anyone asked about it, plead that she had a headache, or something.

Of course, I could always tell an even bigger lie: that she has an early meeting at work, and she wants to be sharp for it, he thought uncharitably, knowing better than to let his mood show, on his face.

“Okay, now where were we?” he asked, with feigned heartiness, as if he didn't care that he'd just been stood up.

He approached the table laden with food and picked up a plate. From the corner of his eye he noted the blond woman who'd recently overheard the terse conversation as she'd descended the staircase. She was standing further along the table, watching him through her lowered lashes, like she was waiting for him to speak to her.

He turned towards her, assessing his options. She was pretty enough, and he was currently minus a date. *Maybe Cathy's leaving isn't so bad, after all...*



Vincent sat at his chamber's table with a book of Pablo Neruda's *Love Sonnets* open in his hand. Slowly, he traced the lines he softly repeated, *“I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where. I love you simply, without problems or pride: I love you in this way because I do not know any other way of loving but this, in which there is no I or you, so intimate that your hand upon my chest is my hand, so intimate that when I fall asleep your eyes close...”*

Powerful words that numbed Vincent's soul, and brought sorrow to his heart. He sighed. Only yesterday he'd taken his concerns to Father, hoping for some kind of comfort. But Jacob had only commented that such longings for what he could never have could only bring his son pain and unhappiness.

Vincent had wanted to shout back, *‘If that's my only choice, then I'll be unhappy!’*

But, of course, he had not. Instead he'd retreated to his chamber to brood once more on the cruel hand life had dealt him. He had wanted to shout that maybe Father would have been better advised to let Vincent die as a baby, than suffer as he did now. But he hadn't said that, either, knowing how much pain he would have caused the old man,

who was only trying to do his best for his unusual son under the most trying of circumstances...



“*Men...!*” Catherine muttered, as she collected her evening coat. “Why do they always have to be so obstinate?”

She shook her head as she walked briskly across the restaurant’s lobby and out the gated entrance into the Third Avenue evening. The April night had grown chill, and she was glad of the coat. Though the calendar insisted it was near the middle of the month, it was the kind of New York night where spring still felt very far away.

She was angry and upset, and had no real idea of where she was going. On the one hand, she could just go home to her apartment, and call it a night. On the other hand, she knew she’d turned down an invitation from her father, this evening. He would still be busy hosting his dinner with Hal Sherwood, comfortably talking over old times.

Their masculine banter wouldn’t do anything to dispel her strange sense of disquiet. Catherine felt she’d had enough of the male ego for one night. She felt suffocated beneath the weight of male expectations.

Men... She sighed. She knew she didn’t much care for Tom’s horrible opinions of people like Eve, who didn’t conform to his point of view on life. He had already made that plain on several occasions. Yet, still she stayed with him...

He might be my father’s best client, but as a human being... She shrugged, assessing her options. Or the lack of them...

It was still early, but all she could think of was to go home and indulge in a long shower, and a good book. Her lips twisted as she contemplated the idea of the book her best friend, Jenny Aronson had recently passed on to her.

Jenny had laughed, blithely declaring it would do wonders for Catherine’s somewhat confused love-life. What could it hurt? *Love Sonnets* by Pablo Neruda. Remembering the title, Catherine shook her head in despair. Reading love poetry was the last thing she wanted to do tonight. Not when for her, real love seemed so far away.

What must it like to be truly loved? she wondered. To feel like part of someone else? Like when you're sleepy, it's their eyes that close? The corners of her mouth turned down with sadness.

Lost in her musings, she paused at the curb, looking up and down the street. She'd arrived at the party in Tom's stretch limousine, another sign of his need to impress people who mattered to him. *Can't go home the same way I got here, that's for sure,* Catherine mused.

Deciding that walking through Manhattan at this time of night was not the best idea, she hurried towards the street corner to hail a cab. Seeing one approaching, she raised her hand and waved. *"Taxi...!"*

Too late. The cab drove past, the driver not even seeing her waving furiously at him. Catherine muttered, *"Great..."*

From behind her, a thickset man in a bomber jacket sauntered up, as if he'd been passing by and had seen her distress. She frowned at him, but he seemed harmless enough.

He smiled, flashing bad dental work, but his eyes seemed kind. "Say, you're, ah, you're not having very much luck. I'll get one for you... I'm an expert." He stepped off the curb and raised an arm towards a far-away cab. *"Yo! Taxi!"*

Catherine watched his fruitless antics with barely concealed impatience. None of the distant taxis he waved at could possibly see him. *Maybe I should just give him a tip for his trouble, and walk, after all...*

She was about to reach for her purse, as the man returned to her side, looking defeated. Before she could thank him, he circled her, crowding her from behind, seizing her elbow in a vice-like grip. Suddenly, a white van pulled around the corner, the side door sliding open as it came to a halt beside them.

Catherine's erstwhile helper shoved her roughly towards the van door. "Hey Carol, are you going home alone, tonight?"

He didn't give her any time to reply. She tried to twist away, but a pair of muscular arms reached out from within the van, grabbing her and violently yanking her forward,

into the vehicle. The thickset man jumped in, and the door slammed shut as the van accelerated back into the evening traffic.

As the vehicle cruised up Third Avenue, Catherine struggled with her assailant and a heavily tattooed punk in the back of the darkened van. *This can't be happening...!* She squealed and screamed, fighting to get free of the terrifying situation.

Undeterred, her assailants slammed her against the hard floor, trying to knock the fight out of her. She landed heavily on bare metal, bruising her back and ribs. But still, she fought.

The thickset man held her down, as he leaned closer, his fetid breath washing over her. "Shush, shush, shush, shush, shush, shush, shush, yeah that's a girl, that's a girl, shush, that's a girl...you know what happens to little girls with big mouths...huh?"

The tattooed punk giggled cruelly. "You're gonna find out..."

His companion nodded. "Hey, Carol. You've got to remember to keep your mouth shut from now on..."

Striving to disarm the terrifying situation with logic, the only weapon she had available, Catherine stammered, "My name... isn't Carol."

The man barked, "*Shut up!*"

Pinning Catherine roughly to the hard, metal floor of the van, her assailant leaned even closer. "You're gonna remember - every time you look in the mirror."

He pulled a straight razor from his hip pocket. Realising his intent, Catherine began to fight with all her remaining strength... "*Help!*"

The punk restrained her hands, holding her down easily, giggling in anticipation.

All Catherine could see was the razor, as it was raised towards her unprotected face...



"Vincent...?" Father limped into his son's chamber, carrying his chess set beneath his arm. "Mouse said you're going Above tonight, but I thought, perhaps we might divert ourselves with a game or two. It's been weeks since we've played."

“Weeks since you’ve had the opportunity to try and beat me...?” Vincent inclined his leonine head at his parent’s obvious disappointment. “You thought you might try and divert me from leaving the tunnels, tonight.”

“You know how I fear for your safety, Up There.” Father sighed, placing the wooden box down on Vincent’s writing table. “Ignorance breeds fear. You cannot deny I am right. There are so many dangers...”

“No, I cannot deny your words, Father.” Vincent crossed the chamber towards the old man, pulling his great cloak onto his shoulders as he moved.

He curled one strong hand around his parent’s neck, drawing him close to kiss his furrowed brow. “But you cannot deny me the freedom to roam as I choose. The night is my friend. It shelters me from prying eyes. I am safe there, in the shadows.”

“There is no shelter or safety up there in that city!” Father retorted heartily. “But, I do understand your need to deny me.” He gripped his son’s hand as he released him. “I am sorry for what I said the other day. But, if you care for me at all, take Mouse with you. Or Cullen, or Winslow. At least, that way, I will sleep easier, knowing you’re not out there, all alone.”

“No, Father...” Vincent sighed roughly. “I believe it was L.M. Montgomery who once said, “*And if you couldn’t be loved, the next best thing was to be let alone...*”

“But you *are* loved, Vincent. Surely you know that? Why must you be constantly putting yourself in danger? For what? Some ill-conceived sense of adventure? Some dream of another life that will never come true?”

“Who’s to say what will come true, and what won’t, for any life? I know that *you* love me, Father. I’ve always known it, and yet...” He shrugged eloquently.

“And yet... Oh, my beloved boy...” Father grasped his arm, holding it tightly. “We’ve talked of this before. You know my views. For what they’re worth. Some things cannot be, no matter how much we wish them to be so.”

“I know...” Vincent’s chin sank to his chest. “But still...”

“You crave a connection with someone of your own...” Father nodded bleakly, his mouth pulled tight with despair. “The simplest, most basic human need...”

They both knew it was true. And they both knew how unlikely it was, for Vincent.

“And yet...,” Vincent said again, raising his eyes to stare at the old man.

Jacob said his next words softly, a world of regret in them. “Wishing will never make it so, Vincent.” *If it could it would have, long ago. For I have had that wish for you, and so many others, so many times...*

Father laid out the bare truth, as only he could. “That is an immutable fact, however you may rail against it...”

In that moment they both remembered Lisa, but neither dared voice her name.

Vincent arranged his cloak more comfortably. “I must go Above. If only to watch others love... and to dream... just a little. Even you would not deny me that one small gift?”

Jacob took in his huge son, knowing it was useless to argue, and that no attempt at diversion would work. “Very well, I can see your mind is made up. It’s getting late...” He frowned. “If you *are* going, then you’d better make a start.” With one gloved finger, he pushed the chess box towards his son, in one last, vain attempt to dissuade him. “Of course, you can still change your mind, you know...”

“I will return Below, before the dawn appears,” Vincent whispered sadly. “You have my word on that. And please, try not to worry, Father. You will only give yourself an ulcer. I can take care of myself.”

“That is not what I’m afraid of...” Jacob watched his son’s broad figure leaving the chamber, his heavy boots making no sound, in the tunnel beyond.

How much longer, before these... fruitless forays cost you, my son? In spirit, if not in skin? Jacob wondered. How much longer before you simply... lose all hope, and the best part of you dies? It’s a cruel city, Vincent. So much crueler than even you know...

After Vincent had gone from his sight, he turned back to the chess set. “How can I not worry, when you are everything to me, and more...?”

He gathered the chess set, holding it cradled in his free arm. Leaning heavily on his walking stick, he went in search of company, and a game. He knew he would not sleep until the pipes told him of his son’s return to the safety of the tunnels...



As it entered Central Park from the 96th St. drive-through, the van slowed down just enough as the side door slid open. Catherine's body and purse were flung from the still-moving vehicle, out onto a clearing beside the road. Accelerating once more, the van sped off into the dark night.

Catherine lay unconscious, nearing death. Sprawled in a heap, she was unaware of the temperature dropping even further. Soon, hypothermia and blood loss would finish off what her cruel assailants had started. Then, Catherine Chandler, East-side debutante, corporate lawyer, and only child of a very wealthy man, would become yet another statistic, in the life of a city that didn't care. In the dark, deserted park, where there was no one to help her...



But then, seemingly out of nowhere, a strong shadow fell across her limp body, and a patchwork-cloaked figure bent over her. Completely unaware, Catherine was scooped up, as if she were a mere child, and carried into the swirling mist creeping across the park's landscape.

The broadly powerful figure carried her body into a nearby drainage tunnel, and disappeared below the park. With Catherine draped over his shoulder, the cloaked figure descended a ladder into a steam tunnel. With the ease of long practice, he moved to a part of the elaborate network of tunnels and caverns which ran deep below Manhattan.

He carried her down a passageway and into a lower level of connecting chambers. Steam escaped from the pipes. The stone walls ran with sweat. An occasional bare bulb threw eerie shadows down the tunnel. Somewhere, overhead, a train thundered past, stirring uncounted echoes.

The cloaked figure ignored it all. He moved quickly and surely along a narrow ledge, and then down another ladder, deeper into the smothering darkness...



Catherine lay nestled in a bed that felt like nothing else she had even known. Barely aware, she sensed the bed was soft and yielding, seeming to cradle all her agonies, all her anguish, concentrating the anvil pounding of her blinding headache.

Suddenly she became aware her head and face were bandaged, her eyes covered. She came fully awake with a terrified start. “No..! No!”

Somewhere beside her a man spoke. “You’re safe. You’re safe, now...” His voice sounded like rough velvet, warm and incredibly soft.

Catherine had to strain to hear him. She fought for sanity. *This isn’t... this can’t be happening to me... it must be a dream... a nightmare...*

“Where... am I?”

“No-one will hurt you. You’re safe here...”

Trapped within her pain and agony, she was aware that his was the kindest, gentlest voice she’d ever heard... mentally, she reached to touch it... and him...

“H-hospital?”

“No, but you’re going to be all right...”

“Why aren’t I in a hospital?” *Nothing will ever be all right again!* She wanted to scream at the top of her lungs. But she couldn’t. Her throat was too choked with scalding tears...

“There was no time, you were bleeding...”

Catherine’s voice trembled, in fear and alarm. “What did they do?” She put a hand to the bandages over her eyes. “*My eyes...!*”

“Your eyes were not hurt. We made sure... Rest now...”

His voice was softly reassuring, and strangely beautiful, with a slight impediment she couldn't identify. In all her terror, Catherine clung to it like the lifeline it was, wrapping herself in its warmth. It bid her to sleep, and to try not to be afraid.

And though she didn't know how she could be or do either one, she drifted away. Back to that newly-discovered place where she felt no pain, and her whole world had not fallen apart so completely...



“Though nobody can go back and make a new beginning... Anyone can start over and make a new ending...”

Chico Xavier