

## THE LOAN OF A BROWNSTONE

By

Judith Nolan

*"Doubt thou the stars are fire;  
Doubt that the sun doth move;  
Doubt truth to be a liar;  
But never doubt I love..."*

**William Shakespeare**

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Catherine completed her arrangements and turned to walk quickly back across the bullpen of the D.A.'s office. She looked ahead, half expecting the chair beside her desk to now be empty of its most recent inhabitant.

As she'd spent valuable time working things out, she worried that her star witness, a very scared and scarred young woman, would change her mind and run from the office, if she was left alone to dwell on her misfortunes.

She knew Carol Stabler was too unstable and too frightened not to think about running. Catherine sighed. She could privately admit she had once been like the young woman - just trying to get by in New York City and make it through each new day without getting hurt or worse.

*'That was before Vincent came into my life and changed it forever...'*

"Oh, thank goodness..." She breathed a long sigh of relief when she saw Carol was still sitting beside the desk.

But the other woman did look scared and about ready to bolt. She was holding on tightly to her empty Styrofoam coffee cup as she looked around.

"Okay, we're all set," Catherine hurried up to her. "You're not going back to your apartment." She sat down in the chair next to her witness.

Carol stared at her in confusion, her hand trembling. "Where am I going, then? Home with you? Where do you live? Is it far?"

"Ah, no. I'm afraid that's not a very good idea. I'm sure Marty Belmont already knows where I live." Catherine did her best to keep her tone low and reassuring. "A friend of mine is renovating a brownstone in the Village. There's not much in it, but it'll be a lot safer than your place or mine. No one will know you're there."

She leaned closer. "She said the power is on and the phones are working. Someone'll meet you there with a key. When you get inside, be sure to lock yourself in and don't open the door to anyone. Not a single person, okay?"

The other woman swallowed tightly. "Okay..." Now that a decision had been made, she seemed disinclined to move from the brightly lit, crowded office space. She smiled with tight determination. "I'm ready to do this."

"Good girl..." Catherine nodded as she looked up at a clerk who was hovering nearby. "Larry'll give you a ride over. I want you to call me as soon as you get there. I need to know you're safe. I'll come on over with dinner when I'm finished here. We can have a glass of wine together and talk about what's going to happen next."

She tried to make the fraught transition sound as normal as possible. Like two new girlfriends catching up over a shared meal.

Carol's quick-paced breathing hitched as she tried not to cry. "There's no turning back, huh? This is it. My new life." Despite her taut smile, her bottom lip trembled.

"At least, until the trial is over." Catherine shook her head as she leaned an elbow on the partition wall behind them. "You can do this. You know you can. You need to start believing in yourself."

She paused, knowing she had to ask, to make things as clear as she legally could. "Carol, are you truly sure you understand the risks? Don't do this for me. I don't want you to do anything that doesn't feel right. You have to want to change your life."

Carol's shoulders stiffened and the frightened look in her eyes receded slightly. "I'm doing this for me. I'm sick of being the old Carol. The woman that men think they can walk all over and use as they see fit." She held onto her smile as she raised her chin, even if it still trembled.

Catherine nodded her quick approval. "Okay. Then the first step is to get up out of that chair and go with Larry. He'll make sure you get there safely. And remember to lock the door behind you as soon as you get inside and don't open it to anyone. I'll let myself in with my own key."

"Okay..." Carol inhaled a steadying breath as she suddenly stood up and collected her things.

"I'll see you when I get there tonight. And please don't worry." Catherine nodded encouragingly as she watched her witness leave the bullpen, following Larry's lead.

She released her pent-up breath cautiously. There was nothing more to say.

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"I honestly don't know what to say..." Jenny Aronson breathed in a deeply shocked tone. "What is there to say?"

She turned to Catherine and threw her arms around her to hug her tightly. "I'm just so glad that you're okay. That nothing bad happened to you here." They were standing together in the dilapidated and gloomy foyer of the brownstone.

She kissed her friend on the cheek before she drew back, looking at her seriously. "I got *such* a fright when you telephoned me afterwards to tell me all about what happened here. I mean, I was happy to lend you my latest renovation project for a night or two, because you asked me for it. You know I never have a problem with helping you out."

She hitched a ragged sigh. "But this?" She trembled. "Now three bad men and one young innocent woman have been killed here. None of it makes any sense that I can see. But I always had a bad feeling about this townhouse. The first time I viewed it, it gave me the shivers. And then I had a dream about it just last week."

Her lips tightened. "Well, it was more of a nightmare. I just knew something awful was going to happen here and it involved you. I almost called you that day. Wish I had, now. I'll be changing my realtor as soon as I get back to my office. The guy sold me some bad karma and nearly got you killed, Cathy."

"I'm truly sorry, Jen." Catherine put her arm around her friend's shoulders. "I don't know what I can tell you. Someone tipped Belmont off about Carol's whereabouts. Joe's still investigating, and we'll find out who it was."

It had been five days since Carol Stabler's tragic death and the scene of the crime had just been released to its owner. Jen took possession of the keys and insisted on coming right over. Catherine had accompanied her.

Of course, the townhouse now looked as if nothing terrible had happened there. Jen had paid for the top clean-up crew in the city to erase every trace of the bloody chaos that had been made. But now the ground floor smelled of enzyme cleaners and hydrogen peroxide. The strong aroma had made both women catch their breaths as soon as they stepped inside.

Catherine frowned at the staircase and then the small hallway to the basement. She felt deeply grateful that all of Isaac's hard training had kicked in when Belmont attacked. The foyer was where the most destruction had been done to him and his men. That was the only area that had yet to be rectified. No amount of cleaning could solve the stark issues there.

"It'll be all right..." Catherine hugged her good friend closer and tried to keep her gaze away from the wreckage of the smashed door that led down into the basement from the foyer. Down there, was the ragged hole Vincent had smashed through the brickwork when he'd rescued her from Belmont and his intention to kill her.

Jen pointed toward the open doorway with one accusing finger. "And what the heck did that? And who made that great hole in the brickwork down there? The police told me all about it. They said the door looked like an elephant had run through it."

She shook her head. "So many questions without any answers. It's just like being trapped inside one of my best-selling crime novels. Lieutenant Herman said those three men killed that sad, young woman upstairs and then they were all mauled by a lion or some big cat that came up from beneath the city."

She withdrew her horrified eyes from the devastation and frowned at Catherine.

"I'll never feel safe on the subway again. I mean, I know you like being thrust into dangerous situations with bad men. But I prefer to read about crimes like this, not be a part of one. I won't sleep for a week after this."

She drew her woollen coat closer around her body against the creeping chill of the drafty townhouse.

"This place feels bad now. The vibes are all over the place. I was project managing it and I had such plans too. But not anymore. I'm putting it back on the market. My new realtor will have to do his best to gloss over the worst of the circumstances. I'll have to accept a hit on the price, though."

"Well, I've been given permission to fix that door and brick up the hole in the basement," Catherine tried again to make amends. "Let me do that for you, at least. Please, Jen. I... may know someone who is skilled in repairing this kind of

old brickwork. I promise that hole down there won't be detectable once he's finished."

She inhaled quickly. "I'll pay for everything, of course. Just give me your keys and you don't have to come back here once we leave. I'll take care of it all. Afterwards, let's phone Nancy up in Westport and ask when we can go up for a long weekend. It's time the Radcliffe girls got together again."

Her friend frowned as she considered her closely. "Now, that's about the best idea I've heard in months. But, right this minute, I'm going to need a very stiff drink. Or maybe two."

She shook her head slowly. "And I guess you're never gonna tell me what really went on here that night. Or who did punch that hole clean through three layers of brick and broke down a solid wood door to rescue you from those bad men? Cause, I'm sure it was a *him* and not an *it*."

She raised one forefinger and waved it knowingly. "Now that would make a great crime novel. Lieutenant Herman said there are some pretty strange things going on in this city. And it looks like there's some even stranger things going on underneath it..."

She shivered again and turned toward the front door. "Come on. Let's you and I get out of here and find a wine bar. There's a bottle of a great white that has our names written all over it."

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"How are you feeling now?" Vincent asked Catherine gently, as he held her close. "I'm very sorry you had to see that."

They stood together on her balcony. Somewhere a clock chimed midnight.

"There was no other way. I know that," Catherine whispered into his vest. "Belmont wasn't going to stop until I was dead, like Carol."

"I'm so glad you understand..." Vincent sighed deeply. "I could wish it could have been any other way, but --"

"No, Vincent..." Catherine pulled back to seize his forearms with both hands and shake him. "There wasn't any other way. We both know that. Someone told Belmont where Carol was hiding from him. I'm going to find that person and

make them pay. I'm only glad Isaac's training kept me alive until you could reach me."

"Then we shall leave talking about it for another day," Vincent replied gently. "You should be resting now. You've had another very long day."

"I am... tired," Catherine admitted, taking his hands in hers. "But first, I need to ask you something. A favour."

"Please, ask," Vincent encouraged her. "If it is within my power to make it so, then it shall be."

"Thank you." Catherine nodded. "The... hole in the brownstone's basement wall that leads into the tunnels. It needs to be sealed up again. The police are already investigating and if –"

"If they got too far down the tunnels then they will become a danger to us. Tomorrow is Saturday, so no workmen will arrive to discover us. I will get the supplies I need and send four of my people up to the upper levels tomorrow morning. I'll meet you below in the basement at nine o'clock and guide you to the tunnel. It shouldn't take long."

"Do you mean I may finally get to meet some more of the people who live down there with you? I only know Mary and Father."

"I think it's about time..." Vincent smiled as he cupped her cheek in his warm palm. "Mouse and Winslow work fast and they're discreet. James and Edward will work from the townhouse side. They will complete what needs to be done and leave discreetly when the coast is clear."

"I have the house keys. Jen gave them to me. I'll get them for you in a minute." Catherine moved her cheek against his skin, loving his gentle touch. "I'll bring some hot coffee and see you Below tomorrow morning."

She sighed deeply as she went back into his arms. "But, for now..."

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"Hey! Watch out for the way you're slapping that mortar around," Winslow complained as he jumped back out of the reach of Mouse's over-enthusiastic trowelling.

"Wasn't doing nothing that didn't need doin'," Mouse replied in an offended tone as he deftly cemented another brick in the wall and reached for the next. "You're gettin' too slow, old man. You can't keep up."

"Who're you calling old, you little pipsqueak?" Winslow muttered, as he redoubled his efforts into a brick-laying race to be the first to finish the next course.

The two of them jostled each other for room in the confined space as they worked from the tunnel side on completing the triple brick repairs to the large hole. Being smaller, Mouse could duck under his larger friend's arm.

As soon as they arrived at the site, Vincent quickly introduced Catherine to the others. James and Edward were two tall, silent men who were already working from the townhouse side. They quietly declined her offer of hot coffee and would soon be walled up on the other side.

None of them wished to waste time lingering this close to the surface and possible discovery by nosy neighbours. Mouse shuffled his feet and was silent as he peered shyly through his bangs at Catherine, while Winslow shook her out-stretched hand with hearty *bonhomie*.

They had already replaced the old-fashioned door to the basement with one Mouse had salvaged from another, unoccupied building site where the workers had left for the weekend.

"Taking, not stealing," he replied defensively to Catherine's raised eyebrows and questioning look. "Needed a door. Found one just lying out there."

"Keep working, you two," Vincent ordered in a low voice as he cleared away more of the broken bricks. "You could be heard this close to the surface. We need to get this done in case someone comes."

Catherine had been helping him with stacking the broken bricks against the tunnel wall. Now she was standing to one side, pouring hot coffee from a thermos into cups for all of them.

"That Lieutenant Herman worries me," she said softly, as she handed out the hot beverage. "He's already been coming around and asking questions I can't answer. Joe wants to know what I know. They've opened an investigation into Belmont and his henchmen."

"All you can do is keep stalling Herman," Vincent replied, as he accepted his coffee with a nod of thanks. "Once we're done here, we'll come back tomorrow with more supplies and brick up this whole section. Then we'll add false walls

and rock falls to make it all look as if it's been abandoned for years. Then they won't be able to get too far or too close."

"I can only hope that will finally satisfy him," Catherine replied as she drank her coffee. "I keep telling him I don't know anything."

She welcomed the warmth of the brew in the chill of the tunnel. "I'll need to make it up to Jenny. She'll be making a loss when she sells this place. I'm going to take her away to Westport as soon as Nancy says she's free to visit."

"I'm truly sorry, Catherine..." Vincent paused in his renewed labours to draw her close and hug her tightly. "But Belmont wasn't going to be stopped any other way."

"I know that..." Catherine sighed into the soft warmth of his grey vest. "I feel so sorry for Carol. She didn't deserve to die like that. She was trying to turn her life around. She had everything to live for."

"Then we will honour her memory by doing our best to save more lost young women like her," her love replied, as he kissed her hair. "Lady May always has room for more waifs and strays. I will go and see her."

Catherine drew back to frown up at him. "Lady May? Who's that?"

"We're finally done," Mouse interrupted. "Looks good as new." He frowned. "Well, old, anyway." He shrugged as he hooked a thumb at the repaired tunnel wall.

Edward and James appeared silently out of the shadows. They were carrying leather bags of tools.

"It looked good from our side." Edward nodded as he handed Catherine the house keys. "It will stand for another hundred years."

He glanced at Vincent before they both turned and disappeared back into the darkness. They made almost no sound as they walked away.

"Well, I guess that's that..." Winslow nudged his workmate with one elbow to the smaller man's ribs. "Come on, then. Get moving and pick up your tools, Mouse. Enough with the chattering. I swear I can smell William's pot roast and fried potatoes from here. And ain't nobody gonna get in my way of getting my share. After all this bricking up work, I'm starving."

He placed his large hand on Vincent's shoulder. "You coming?" he asked with a lop-sided grin. "Or you staying awhile?"

His thoughtful gaze shifted to Catherine. "I say, bring your lady along with you if you want. She looks like she could do with some feeding up. There's always room for one more in William's dining room. It's about time we all got to meet her properly."

He chuckled as he turned away to shepherd Mouse ahead of him and they both walked away down the tunnel carrying their burdens as they continued to argue with each other. Their voices echoed hollowly in the darkness.

"Shall we?" Vincent offered softly, sweeping his arm out in a courtly arc. "If you wish to, that is. Or shall I guide you back Above?"

"After watching all of you men work so hard, I think I could manage to eat a little pot roast," Catherine answered him with a shy smile, as she repacked her carry bag. "And I would love to meet more of your friends."

"Come along then. Or there won't be anything left if Winslow gets there first..." Vincent slung a companionable arm around her shoulders and they turned to walk down the tunnel as they laughed quietly together.

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*"Nobody has ever measured, not even poets, how much the heart can hold..."*

***Zelda Fitzgerald***