

# TILL I HOLD YOU AGAIN

by Lorraine Cirelli Gupton

*I hear her laughter and raise my eyes in response, searching vainly for something tangible, some visible sign which certainly should accompany such a beautiful sound. Of course, there is none. Even if it were to exist, only my soul would be able to see it. For the briefest instant, her happiness draws my heart out of the depths of this isolation where I am forced to dwell.*

*Why have I come here? She promised to return Below once the party had ended, and yet, I cannot explain my motives.*

*As is his way, Father attempted to talk me out of my venturing Above. A game of chess? He had suggested and his eyes gleamed in anticipation of besting me. For a moment, I rose to the challenge, but then declined his offer to distract me. It has not been much of a contest there past few years, though that fact is something Father will never know.*

*I recall his look of exasperation. Surely a few hours alone, without her, would not kill me, Father had argued. This was true and I conceded to his logic, for debating it would be unreasonable and unfair.*

*Still, why do I feel such an emptiness when she is gone? An even more disturbing question - one Father had proffered countless times - is why I feel the need to torture myself this way?*

*I wanted to see her. I required no other reason. As close as they are to me, those Below will never understand my desperate need to be near her. I know Father and Mary had suspected any nighttime wanderings invariably led me to Catherine's balcony. To watch over her... to know that she was safe and at peace... fulfilled me - then.*

*Yet, here I stand, cloaked by the murky shadows in this deserted alley outside Jenny Aronson's apartment. Through the opened window, the cheerful voices of others are obscured once again as her lilting distills all other sounds. It soothes me, knowing she is able to enjoy herself so freely amongst the people of this world - her world - and is still willing to seek her rightful place in mine. She is loved there also - by Father, Mouse, Jamie, the entire community.*

*By me... always.*

*I risk the possibility of discovery and inch closer to the gaiety permeating the room, wanting with all that I am to join in their celebration. At times, I foolishly believe it is within reach. Then I remember I am different... alien.*

*And I know it can never be.*

*What do I have to give her? Why does she insist on continuing this relationship, one whose limits are so painfully obvious and unchangeable?*

*She loves me. When she professes that love, Catherine expects me to accept it, without reflecting on what it all means. Her life has changed, she insists; she is perfectly content to be a woman of both worlds, although this secret we share will forever separate her from those Above.*

*Someone calls her name and I grow curious, moving closer to peer into the room. Glasses filled with ice tinkle and chime in harmony with the music of some unknown song. Its melody envelopes those dancing in*

*the room and their bodies seem to move of their own accord.*

*Joe Maxwell takes her hand and guides Catherine toward the other couples, hugging her close as they sway in time to the slow, steady beat. I watch them dance with a quiet longing, for I know the bliss of holding her lithsome frame in my arms. I know the pleasure of feeling her pliant curves melt into my less yielding angles. We fit perfectly, two pieces belonging to one miraculous puzzle.*

*And it is a miracle, what we share.*

*Once I believed I was destined to remain alone. Even in my world, my differences set me apart from the others. Oh, they loved and accepted me. Still, I could never accompany them beyond the passages leading into the sunshine. I was forbidden to partake in the simplest of pleasures those Above took for granted.*

*To walk in a sunshower in Central Park - how I still yearn to feel the misty drops of rain feather lightly upon her face. How I long to hear her laughter as we run in the blinding sunlight, or take shelter from a thunderous storm.*

*No more regrets; no more berating my fate. She loves you, my mind whispers back. That is all you will ever need.*

*The music is comforting, almost hypnotic. As they dance, pangs of jealousy never once invade my heart, for I know Joe Maxwell is not and has never been a threat. He whispers something into her ear and I watch, mesmerized, as she steps away and laughs in response. I can almost see her emerald eyes sparkling with delight.*

*"Catherine."*

*Whispering her name brings me a much needed sense of serenity, fills me with an inner strength so I may endure this temporary separation. It promises that I, too, will reap the rewards all men expect to gain in loving a woman such as she.*

*My love for her is endless and as strong as any chain forged in life. She is my truth... my reason for living. Would I be lying if I avowed that, without her, I am nothing?*

*Another man, one I do not know, asks her to dance and she hesitates before accepting the offer. I can almost feel my heart constrict when he pulls her close. Too close, I warn, suppressing the snarl that battles its way to my lips. She is mine. Am I arrogant, I wonder, in daring to make such an allegation? His hand skims her bare back and I clench my fists in fury. If it is arrogance, so be it. It is a truth - she is MINE.*

*My heart skips a beat as she turns her head toward the window. She cannot see me; it is too dark and I am well-hidden. Just the same, our eyes seem to catch. We are connected, bonded, and I sometimes forget she can sense my emotions when they are so close to the surface.*

*As they are now.*

*I quickly look away, ashamed. Why am I here? Why am I risking exposure - riskling everything - I ask myself again. Is she silently asking the same question?*

*I chance another glimpse inside the room and see a look of surprise register inside the gray-green hue of her eyes. It is replaced by wonder and then, irrepressible love.*

*Without explanation, she struggles from her partner's grasp. His smile fades, his face darkening into a mask of disappointment and shattered hopes. I smile victoriously. She is mine, I reiterate.*

*Her steps are hurried, but cautious, as she approached the open window, and begins to panic in the mistaken belief I may leave before she can reach me.*

*"Vincent!"*

*She whispers my name, waiting expectantly for the response she knows will surely follow. I reveal myself and her smile warms my heart. In truth, it brightens the gloomy aura normally attributed to such a dark, dank passageway.*

*She reaches out to me... I take her hand and bring it to my lips... her sigh of happiness washes over me, renews me... heals me.*

*Suddenly, I realize that was all I needed; to touch her. I can now withstand the ensuing hours until her return. I can play chess with Father and receive some small measure of enjoyment in beating him, yet again. I can peruse each and every tome on my bookshelf until my eyes grow heavy, knowing when I blow out the last candle and crawl into my bed, I will not be alone for long.*

*She will come back to me.*

*I release her hand and slip into the concealing blackness, no longer distressed by the prospect of leaving her.*

*"Vincent, wait."*

*It is as if those words physically restrains me and I am unable to move. I face her again and am greeted with nothing but an empty space and the sounds of merriment inside. A sudden dread overwhelms me. Was it just my imagination? Was she really there or....*

*Forgetting for a moment where I am - what I am - I reach up and grip the window sill so forcefully, my claws leave gouges in its carefully painted surface. Marks of desperation which undoubtedly will last until the day the edifice no longer stands.*

*"Vincent?"*

*I whirl and find her next to me. How? Could it be in my frantic state, I was unaware she was coming to me? No, it was more than that; I feared she had changed my mind. Feared, as I always do, that she will find someone else on one of these many visits Above. Someone who will convince her she was wrong to choose a life with me; one who will show her all she's forsaken in daring to love me. Someone with the power to grant all her unspoken wishes... the dreams she has forever buried because she knows I am unable to fulfill them.*

*She tilts her head and her hair catches the lamplight seeping into the alleyway. It sparkles as if alive in colors of red, brown and gold. Her eyes follow suit.*

*So beautiful... she has let her hair grow, not so much because she likes it this way; but because I desired it. Now, the shoulder-length tresses are held captive by a small clip, but only after she had asked me if I thought it appropriate. Even though I could not accompany her to this reception, she still seeks my approval.*

*Should I have allowed her to leave my sight looking so radiant - so ravishing - knowing that other men would find her just as entrancing? I scan the crowd inside until my eyes rest upon the man whose heart she has just broken.*

*She follows my gaze.*

*"Were you worried?"*

*It pains her to think I may have suspected an interest on her part.*

*"No," I lie. In truth, I always worry.*

*"I love you, Vincent."*

*Our lips meet in what begins as the gentlest of caresses, but soon flares out of control. It is always this way when we kiss. My need to be reassured is too great, at times. However, she never feels any resentment with what I demand. She always answers that need with an eagerness I found all the more bewildering.*

*Suddenly, I do not want her here - I do not want to share her! I do not want... Fear rises in me - fear that she will not want to return to our life Below. Fear that .....*

*"Just a few more hours, Vincent. I promise."*

*I sense the uncertainty of her feelings - she is enjoying her time spent Above, but her heart is impatient to return Below... to be with me. With those few words, my fears are eased.*

*"Yes, my love," I reply, kissing her once more.*

*We embrace before parting. She takes a moment to prepare herself to begin the charade again, to assume the role she's been given by those Above. Catherine Chandler; prosperous, unattached, dedicated investigator for the District Attorney's Office. It is a facade created by her world, something we both understand exists.*

*She smiles at me before returning to the chaos of that world, and I return her smile as I leave to join those Below in the now appreciated solitude of my world. Perhaps I have placed too much importance on the time she spends Above, away from me.*

*After all, it will only be a short while, I remind myself, until I hold her in my arms once again.*

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