

# OF RABBITS, FATHERS, HORSES AND LOVE

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When Vincent woke up that early morning, his first thought went to Catherine. In fact, every first thought of each morning belonged to her, ever since he had known her. But that morning, it was a bit different. He looked down on the still-sleeping figure of his beloved resting peacefully on his chest and his arms embraced her even tighter.

*We have his blessing, Catherine, now we can truly be happy...*

## PREVIOUS EVENING

"There you are! I've been looking for you everywhere," Catherine exclaimed joyfully entering the chambers Cullen used as his workshop.

Her words belonged to the man she loved the most in the world and who suddenly straightened himself up from whatever he was doing, trying to hide it behind his back in the least suspicious way.

"Catherine..." he breathed. "I was---"

"Vincent was helping me with some woodwork for new chambers furniture," Cullen jumped quickly to his friend's help.

"Yes," Vincent said gratefully, with relief. "I thought you were about to spend some time with Rebecca teaching you making candles..."

"And I did, but we finished a bit early as she had planned on visiting with Mary before dinner, so we'll continue tomorrow," Catherine smiled and joy was radiating from her, as she had really enjoyed her first lesson.

"I see," Vincent nodded with a little smile seeing her glow from contentment. "I have just finished, so we can leave Cullen to his work now, Catherine."

As he was about to walk away from his spot, Cullen seamlessly moved to take his place and smiled at the young woman at the workshop entrance.

"Great, we can pick up Jacob from the nursery together," Catherine smiled and said goodbye to Cullen, before looking at Vincent waiting for him to join her.

Vincent turned to Cullen, his face out of Catherine's view, put his hand on his friend's shoulder and spoke with a conspirational look in his eyes.

"Thank you, Cullen, we can continue tomorrow morning."

"Sure, I'll be here right after breakfast," came the reply, accompanied by a bemused grin.

Vincent chuckled silently and walked over to Catherine, taking her hand and when they both left. Cullen laughed quietly before he directed his look to the object he had hid from Catherine just a moment ago.

*He's truly great with wood, but then come to think of it, he's great with everything...*

After Vincent and Catherine picked up their almost one-year-old son from the nursery chamber, had their dinner with others in the dining hall, then returned to their home chamber, they sat down

on their big bed and played with Jacob a bit. It would soon be his bedtime, so they wanted to use every remaining minute of their little miracle's day to spend it with him.

How blessed they felt for these moments! Vincent could never tire of their evening routine - watching the little boy cling to his mother's arms and look fascinated at his father reading his bedtime story, transfixed by Vincent's deep gravelly soothing voice.

That evening was no exception. This time, it was *The Velveteen Rabbit* in Vincent's hands, a book Catherine used to read with her own father as a child, and which he loved so much.

She remembered clearly the day she had returned to the Tunnels, after her kidnapping and near death, She had asked Vincent to bring a few items from her apartment, mostly keepsakes from him she was keeping in a box in her wardrobe, plus a few books (Diana returned them to her apartment once she got acquainted with Vincent).

He went there one night, and she could still remember clearly the tears that sprang into her eyes, when despite her not mentioning it before, the last book she took out of his satchel was *The Velveteen Rabbit*, kept as a memory of her father. Catherine totally forgot she had kept it in her wardrobe too, wanting to preserve it, as it was older than herself. She forgot, but he knew. Vincent had always known what was dear to her and the fact that he remembered everything she ever told him, made him reunite this little worn out book with her, too.

Catherine looked over at her husband and her eyes glistened when she heard him read "What is REAL?"... The memory of her reading the exact part on her father's funeral brought a sudden melancholy into her heart.

*I wish you would have really known him, daddy, not just from the few words in the hospital, but truly known him... He is such a beautiful soul, such a wonderful father to your grandson, such a wonderful husband to your daughter....*

Vincent felt when her mood changed and looked up without stopping reading. He knew the story by heart anyway...

Catherine smiled at him and nodded, acknowledging she was fine. His eyes gently caressed her face and she felt a warm wave of love wash over her.

No, this would never go away, their connection. Their passion and endless love for each other was there to stay for all times, like a beacon of hope for all those who have ever been lost...

Little Jacob was slowly drifting away. His ocean blue eyes, inherited from his father, were slowly closing and Vincent could not only see but also feel the boy falling asleep through their bond, while he was still smiling. He saw Catherine tenderly kiss the top of their son's blonde-haired head. He stopped reading and smiled at the image in front of him, something he had never thought would be his own. *Blessed....*

After they had put the already sleeping Jacob into his crib, they laid down onto their large bed, cuddling close.

"I love it when you read to Jacob," Catherine said while resting her head on his chest, her hand intertwined with his. "The same peace that goes through me when you read to me, seems to be going through him when you read. I imagine it's like listening to an angel talking..."

Touched by her words, Vincent kissed the top of her head and almost whispered.

"I know only one voice and face of an angel, and it's right here in my arms..."

Looking up to him with her bright green eyes and a beaming smile.

"Then we must both be in Heaven," Catherine flashed one of her loving smiles at him and her lips landed on his in a gentle but heartfelt kiss.

Hours later, Vincent woke up in the middle of the night. Catherine was laying content in his arms, his warmth always bringing her comfort and sound sleep. He smiled into the semi-darkness and breathed in the smell of her hair, closing his eyes in bliss.

*This truly is Heaven...*

For a moment, he tried to go back to sleep, but when it didn't come, he gently disengaged from Catherine's arms and raised himself up from the bed. He pulled the quilted blanket higher up over her and with a smile walked over to the crib where their son lay.

Little Jacob was happily slumbering, the smile on his cute little face told Vincent he must have been dreaming about something lovely. *Probably about your mother*, he thought, and withheld a chuckle. His thumb tenderly stroke the boy's little hand and his eyes were full of a wonder and love he never believed would even exist in his life. A father's love for his child.

Vincent finally moved away from the crib passing one of the few still-lit candles, put his sleeping shirt, pants and boots on and grabbed his cloak. After casting one more loving look at the sleeping form of his wife, he walked out of the chamber.

Often when he couldn't sleep, he would wander around the tunnels, thinking about events that happened to him, looking for answers to difficult questions, or dream about what the future would hold for him. His thoughts were changing with the years.

Before he met Catherine, he used to contemplate his loneliness; after he met her, the impossible dream of having her in his life forever. When he realised she loved him, he used to thank whoever was up there for sending her to him and loving *him*, the creature of the darkness. When she was kidnapped and later when he thought her dead, his mind was full of dark thoughts, agonising longing, and regrets of unfulfilled dreams, both his and hers. Sleep was almost non-existent for him back then. Had it not been for the desperate search for little Jacob in those last two months, his terrible longing for Catherine would have probably ended in something worse than just crying his eyes out every night...

When Catherine was returned to him and they found Jacob, sleep returned as well, and his nightly walks were not so frequent, yet when they occurred, they were always blissful ones, just like the one that night.

Vincent enjoyed the stillness in the tunnels, the gentle golden light of the torches on the walls lining his way in the Home Tunnels. Smiles never left his unique face, for he thought how truly blessed he was, with his own beautiful family.

When he reached the Mirror Pool, he looked into the water and saw the glittering stars reflected in its surface. It was as if someone had sprinkled the pool with fairy dust. *So beautiful, and so far away...*

"Indeed, you would need quite some time to travel to even one of those."

Vincent's head turned quickly in direction from where the voice came. His eyes widened in a shock and he gasped quietly.

"Am I dreaming?" he breathed.

"That depends on whether you're thinking about Cathy. I know you are not. That is very real, I assure you."

The figure the voice belonged to walked a few steps to get closer to Vincent, who stood still, almost dumbstruck. The man in the dark grey suit and tie in front of him was smiling and there was a familiar warmth in his eyes that made Vincent shiver a bit.

"And the reason I know is because I know my daughter."

Charles Chandler stretched out his hand offering a handshake to the man who married his only child and whose existence he'd only found out about on his death bed more than two years ago.

Vincent slowly and carefully accepted the offered hand and felt a surprisingly warm and genuine squeeze.

"How can this be?" he shook his head in disbelief.

"You believed in Kristopher, so you shouldn't be so surprised, Vincent," his deceased father-in-law chuckled, released his hand and walked closer to the pool.

"Oh, by the way, he says the place you picked for his painting is perfect."

Finally, the tension left Vincent's face and his features relaxed, letting out a quiet laugh at the mention of Kristopher's words.

*Of course, it's perfect. It's on the wall right opposite our bed's headboard.*

Then he finally found some proper words. "I apologise, it's just... You surprised me, but... I am truly happy to see you."

Charles diverted his look from the starry pool to Vincent's eyes.

*It's as if the sky has given up two of its stars and given them to him... he thought.*

"It's quite all right. Cathy's reaction was not much different from yours when I came to see her back then." He smiled and his eyes had a wistful expression for a few seconds. But then he shrugged it off.

"She misses you very much," Vincent said with a knowing look.

"I know," Charles replied with a warm smile. "I can feel it all the time... It's strange, your body leaves the Earth, but all your emotions, your feelings, your memories, they stay with you, even the feelings of your near ones. It makes you feel sad but also.... happy all at the same time."

"Love always make you feel that way," Vincent said calmly.

His look was fixed on Charles and the older man suddenly looked at him with great respect, admiring his presence and wisdom.

"She is right, in every way, you know? I've been watching you through the years, ever since I found out about you, and Cathy is absolutely right - you are truly... a remarkable, young man.'

Vincent lowered his eyes a bit shyly.

"I am just what and who I am..." He looked up at Charles again. "I am the man who had loved your daughter from the first day she laid her eyes on me and accepted, and started loving me the way no one else had ever done before. I've loved her through her supposed death and will love her even beyond the day my body will be laid to rest."

The eyes of the older man got misty.

"I know that, and I'm glad she found you, because I couldn't have found any one more worthy of her than you...."

Vincent smiled and his blue eyes glistened with gratitude.

"Those words mean more to me than you'll ever know..." he said quietly. "Before I found Catherine, I only existed, side by side with people who loved me and who I loved - but she made me *real*, never to become unreal again."

Charles smiled and studied his face for a few moments. Strangely, Vincent didn't find it awkward. He was used to it from children, especially the new ones arriving to the tunnels, but with adults, it usually made him uncomfortable. However, the deep searching look of his father-in-law was not disturbing to him at all, for it wasn't intrusive. It was full of silent admiration. And after all, the man had the right to see better whom his daughter had chosen to spend the rest of her life with.

"I'm sorry, it's not that I want to stare at you," Charles Chandler apologised.

"It's all right, I'm used to it," Vincent replied, with an understanding smile. "You don't get to see anyone like me every day."

"No, that's quite right. Anyone who would possess such grace and beauty inside and out, with such honest eyes, which couldn't tell a lie even if they wanted to."

Those were the last words Vincent expected, and seeing his expression, Charles chuckled.

"I told you I've been watching you. I told Cathy back then that I understood why she couldn't tell me about you before. I wouldn't have understood. In my own blind perception of what I thought would be best for her, I forgot to see the most important thing - to find out what *she* thought was the best for her. I would never have understood why she loves you with my old eyes. It took her breaking free of my influence, and my own realisation that I had to trust her, that made me understand. And trust me, Vincent, I *do* understand it now."

Vincent's eyes didn't leave the older man's face when he spoke. "And do you... approve?"

His voice was steady but there was a silent plea in the question. He knew from Catherine that Charles Chandler accepted their love - but acceptance and approval can be two different things, sometimes.

Charles turned his eyes from the pool to Vincent again. "That's why I'm here, son."

Vincent felt a chill running down his spine. *Son...*

Charles smiled at him, stepped closer and took his large clawed hands in his.

"How could I not approve of a man who saved my dear girl's life in every possible way one can imagine... made her stronger, braver and happier than anyone else ever had, and who gifted me with the most beautiful grandson one could ever wish for?"

Vincent's eyes filled with tears and he swallowed hard, lost for words when Charles continued.

"You may look different, Vincent, you may have a dark side too, but for all that it's worth you are more human than anyone I've ever known in my life, apart from Cathy and her mother. I don't only approve, I bless the moment when your paths have crossed, no matter how horrible and painful the occasion was."

Vincent couldn't hold back the tears any more.

"You made a promise at my death bed, son. I hold you to that promise, now and forever.... Love and take care of them both."

"You have my word," Vincent replied firmly. "Now and forever."

"Good.... By the way, you are truly magnificent with wood," Charles winked at him stunning the younger man for a moment.

With those words, Charles embraced his son-in-law tightly, and after one last look and smile at him, he walked away into darkness. The last thing Vincent heard from Charles Chandler were two words echoing in the chamber he had just left.

*"Remember love..."*

When Vincent told Catherine about his encounter with Charles Chandler, in what he wasn't sure was a dream or reality, her eyes welled up along with a happy smile on her face.

"I'm so happy he knows who you truly are, Vincent.... So many times I wished he would have got to know you closer, to truly see why there couldn't be anyone else for me, ever..."

Vincent held her close and smiled into her hair.

"Trust me, Catherine, he does now... And we have his blessing with us for the rest of our lives."

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New York woke up into a beautiful sunny late May morning. Central Park was blooming. The pigeons were sunbathing on and around the benches, joggers were running along their usual routes, mothers strolling with their children on their usual morning walks.

Several layers underneath them, someone was having their own beautiful morning. Catherine and Vincent were about to celebrate little Jacob's first birthday.

The tunnel inhabitants were excited, for although the parents didn't wish for any big celebration party, they welcomed the idea of a get-together and meal with their friends and children. Everyone wanted to wish the tunnels' 'miracle' (as they lovingly referred to Jacob) all the best. And they did indeed.

William's lunch was exquisite (he expressively refused Catherine's wish to help with catering saying the Helpers wanted to provide the special food as their grateful contribution). Friends spent some wonderful hours of talking, remembering the good as well as some bad times, and little Jacob basked in the attention from the children and adults alike.

In the true spirit of the tunnels, he got only handmade gifts. Mary had knitted a lovely new jumper, Rebecca made a lavender-scented candles set (for a peaceful sleep), William baked a few toddler-friendly cookies, Cullen carved a little toy train, Olivia gave him a soft cotton shirt with a J embroidered on its pocket. Father passed onto his grandson his old copy of J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, already looking forward to reading it with him. Some of the older children presented Wells junior with simple handmade toys, which they played with when they were younger, passing them gratefully on to the beloved boy.

Finally, it was the parent's turn to present their son with a gift each. Catherine cuddled Jacob closer and kissed him on the cheek, a beaming smile appearing on her face.

"Happy birthday, darling... We love you, forever and always, never forget that..."

Vincent observed her with a smile as she took something fluffy out of a bag laying on the floor next to her.

"Your grandpa gave this to me when I was little just like you, sweetheart...."

She held out a little slightly worn-out stuffed lion and passed it into Jacob's little hands.

"He told me, that lions are symbols of courage and strength and that whenever I feel afraid and weak, this lion will be my guardian angel. He will protect me and love me forever as long as I love and protect him."

As Jacob eagerly grabbed the little animal, Catherine looked up lovingly at Vincent who stood next to her and his son and his eyes told her how poignant those words were to him.

"I want you to have him, for I don't need him any more. I have found my own guardian angel..." She smiled and looked up at Vincent again.

Vincent's eyes were burning and he wasn't sure he could love her any more. He knelt to their sides, embracing both of them as if his life depended on it.

*Love and take care of them I shall, now and forever...*

"Daddy!" little Jacob shouted and pointed his little finger at the toy lion in excitement.

Almost everyone around them froze. Catherine looked in awe at her husband, her eyes welling up.

"Jacob..." Vincent's eyes were full of tears when he whispered his son's name. "Yes... I will love and protect you forever, my son..." He hugged the boy with all his being, though gentle as well, while he looked over Jacob's little shoulder at Catherine.

"His first proper word," she whispered with a loving smile. "And it's the perfect one...."

Vincent rose, still holding little Jacob in his arms and pulling Catherine with him putting his arm around her shoulders.

Their friends and the children around them were all smiling and feeling as if some beautiful magic descended upon the beloved family. After all they'd been through, they were here, together, stronger than ever, a miracle that was never even supposed to be in first place...

Father quickly wiped away a tear, hoping no one saw him.

"It's all right to be happy for them, Father," Mary whispered leaning towards him slightly.

The tunnel patriarch smiled shyly and entwined his arm with Mary's.

"There is one more present waiting for Jacob, I believe," Vincent voice broke the happy silence.

He walked with Jacob towards Cullen who stood nearby next to something bulky, covered with a white linen sheet. Catherine followed him curious to see what gift Vincent had prepared for their birthday-boy.

"Happy birthday, Jacob," Vincent whispered gazing lovingly at his son, who was staring into his father's eyes with the same intensity, a radiant smile brightening up his rosy cheeks.

"May this gift bring you as much joy as you bring joy to me and your mother, every day of our lives."

Vincent nodded his thanks to Cullen and pulled the sheet off revealing a beautiful little rocking horse carved out of light brown, stained wood. It was precisely polished and had an ornamental style capital letter J carved at the top of one of the back legs.

"Oh, Vincent!" Catherine gasped in enchantment, the others followed her.

Little Jacob obviously shared their excitement as he giggled and stretched his arms towards the lovingly handmade toy.

Vincent sat his son gently down on the horse, supporting him on his back and pushed the horse a little bit setting him into a rocking motion. The boy's laughter resounded in the chamber, like the most cheerful music made by angels.

Cullen couldn't contain his pride in his pupil and spoke.

"Vincent carved the horse all by himself. It took him about a month but I have never seen a more eager and strong-willed worker. I dare say, he almost puts me into shame," he chuckled.

Catherine exhaled loudly shaking her head in awe, a wide smile never leaving her face as her eyes glistened. She remembered the moment she had caught Vincent in Cullen's workshop by surprise. It all made sense now - he had wanted to keep the surprise, even from her. He had never failed to enchant her time and time again.

*How I love you, Vincent...*

The one she was thinking of raised his eyes from his son and looked at her softly, his eyes like two bright diamonds twinkling in the light of the ever-present candles, gently caressing her own misted eyes. No words were needed between them, As always, their eyes spoke for them, their hearts joined by the bond sang their silent song of love, wonder and joy.

And when their most precious gift sitting on the rocking horse laughed and tightly embraced the horse's neck with his little arms, they both knew that with love, all things were possible indeed.

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