

How Curiosity Didn't Kill The Cat

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova



The shrill sound of his alarm clock ripped through the quiet early Sunday morning. Isaac Stubbs groaned and groped for the clock in an attempt to kill its piercing beeping – successfully, and he turned to his back, covering his face with his arm. He sighed.

“Why do I always forget to turn you off for Sunday?” he spoke with annoyance, inwardly cursing his forgetfulness.

Sundays were the only proper resting days for the renowned self-defence teacher, and despite always being woken up at 6.45 in the morning, he always gladly went back to slumber, enjoying a lie-in. However, his brain was wide awake that morning, immediately recalling the events from the previous night.

He had no idea what he was letting himself into when Catherine Chandler called him and asked for his help. She sounded desperate, talking about a missing person she needed to

find as soon as possible. He liked Catherine; she was one of his favourite students, and he would have never turned her down. Or would he? Isaac thought for a moment, pondering if he would have reacted differently had he known who the person was. Or *what...*

He glimpsed the face only for a few seconds before Catherine insisted he leave, but his head was buzzing with the image embedded in his memory.

Isaac was not a man of prejudice; considering his own descent, it would have been not only illogical, but also hypocritical. And yet, he had to wonder what was hiding behind those peculiar features, and how their owner and Catherine had crossed paths. Cathy obviously felt safe in his presence; that much was clear from the way she didn't hesitate to embrace him as if he were her dearest friend who had risen from the dead. And from the brief moment Isaac saw and heard this almost otherworldly creature, he couldn't help but feel enthralled by the vision and the voice.

Isaac kicked the duvet aside and decided it was time for his morning coffee. He made it to the small kitchen and mechanically filled the kettle with water before putting it on the stove. After he put two heaped teaspoons of instant coffee into his mug (he had been thinking of getting a filter coffee machine for years, but never had the time to buy one), he looked absently out of the kitchen window.

Catherine said she owed him her life, he thought, but how? Could she have meant the day she was attacked and left to die in Central Park?

It had to be at night, Isaac decided. Someone with such a face would surely find it difficult to walk in the streets without causing a stir at least. Where did he live? What did he do to survive? What was he to Cathy?

He shook his head. Whatever the truth, it was none of his business. His friend trusted him enough to ask for his help, so there was nothing he would do to break their friendship and mutual respect. And yet, that unfathomable face stood before his mind's eye like a stubborn question mark, a riddle waiting to be solved.

The hissing of the kettle brought him back to the present. He filled his mug with the hot liquid, stirred the coffee, the pleasant aroma of the steaming drink already reviving his spirit. He put a small pan on the stove, heated it up, and cracked two eggs into it. Grabbing two slices of bread and popping them into his ancient toaster, Isaac tried to focus on preparing his breakfast and enjoying the fact that he had a whole day for himself. He missed his twelve-year-old daughter, with whom he would usually spend every other Saturday night and Sunday. However, his daughter was on vacation in Los Angeles with her mother and her new stepfather. Isaac snorted, shaking his head in disdain.

The furthest you ever took them was to Cape May...

It wasn't for the lack of love, interest, or money; his self-defence centre had been a

success right from its opening. However, the long hours Isaac put in to keep it running took an expensive toll – his wife realised she wanted more than just an occasional husband, and filed for divorce. It didn't take her long to find a new one either, a college teacher who not only swept her from her feet, but also had way more time to spend with her and the girl. Isaac wasn't even surprised when he heard the news. At least he could spend time with Jessie fortnightly, he consoled himself.

I bet I would score some points if I told her what I saw last night! He chuckled, then reprimanded himself for even thinking of using someone else's misfortune for his own benefit.

"Damn!" he cursed, noticing the eggs on the pan had almost turned to charcoal. He pulled the smoking pan away from the ring and ran water over it.

"Thank God I still didn't have time to fix the smoke alarm," he mumbled, imagining his grumpy neighbour upstairs banging on his front door.

Another sound caught his interest, though – the ringing of his phone. Still busy with the unsalvageable morning meal, he let it go to the answering machine.

"Hi, Isaac, it's me, Catherine... Sorry for calling so early, I just thought I could get you some breakfast, the least I can do for you after..."

Isaac waited with bated breath for the next words, his hands frozen over the sink. He heard a nervous sigh before Catherine's soft voice continued.

"Could you meet me at the Carousel in Central Park in about an hour? Even if you don't hear this immediately... I can't stay long, but I'll wait there until 10.30... Thanks."

Isaac barely heard the last few words, for he quickly turned off the stove and hurried back to his bedroom to get dressed.

One thought occupied his mind: Breakfast might be saved after all.

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Catherine Chandler was anxiously pacing there and back, not far from the Central Park carousel. A handful of parents with their children were already there, enjoying their early morning fun.

The February morning air was crisp, biting her cheeks, as she was blowing some heat on her hands; when leaving home last night, she forgot to take her gloves. Her mind drifted to the Tunnels, deep below the bustling New York City, the city that never sleeps. She knitted her brows, doing her utmost to reach that unusual bond binding her to the man to

whom she willingly tied her fate.

Vincent... How are you?

Her hands went up to her temples, and she squeezed her eyes shut.

Argh, it's no use! I don't have the gift that Vincent has...

Frustrated, Catherine took a deep breath, trying to focus on the reason why she was standing in the cold Above, instead of keeping watch over Vincent by his bed. She had only left it less than two hours ago, but already felt restless.

What if he needed her? He had a few nightmares throughout the night, and Catherine did everything she could to chase them away, holding his hand and wiping his feverish forehead with a wet cloth. Both she and Father knew that his recovery would take time, and she was set on being present as much as possible throughout it. If it meant working in the office during the day and watching over Vincent at evenings and nights, then so be it; there was nothing she wouldn't do for him, as nothing else was more important to her.

However, there was no way she could postpone or ignore the conversation with Isaac, even though she trusted him completely to remain silent about what he had witnessed the night before. Vincent agreed with her, and only one question remained: *How much* could she reveal to him?

"How did you know I've just burned my fried eggs?" A familiar, cheerful voice made her turn around.

"Isaac...", Catherine said with a relieved smile. She wasn't sure before how their first meeting since the extraordinary events they experienced together would be, but her instinct was correct - there was no hint of awkwardness transpiring from her former self-defence teacher, only the kind and easy-going expression on his face. It was undeniable, though, that there was something more, however hard Isaac tried to hide it – curiosity.

"Cathy," he replied and hugged her. "Please, tell me we can get some breakfast... I'm starving."

She laughed, the constant stress, marked by the tension in her muscles, easing a little.

"Sure," she said. "As I said, my treat."

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"Damn, this was excellent," Isaac stated and leaned back against his chair, patting his belly.

They were sitting in a quiet café Catherine led them to after they talked things through on their walk through Central Park. She didn't tell her friend all the details about the world Below, only the few necessary ones, about Vincent having been found and looked after by a man living underground with him, and some other people.

While Catherine was talking (always very conscious of the environment and potential listeners), Isaac was deeply focused on her every word, silently pondering the implications of everything he had heard. All he did after Catherine finished her narrative was nod several times and then suddenly change the expression on his face and say, "I think I need a second portion."

"I'm glad I'm not the only one who enjoys it here," his former student remarked, laughing.

Isaac grinned. "In some strange way, it makes sense."

Catherine was nonplussed. "Meaning...?"

"Meaning you are a gorgeous, young, and successful high-society woman."

"Not exactly anymore," she corrected him, chuckling.

"Yeah, I know, but you know what I mean," her friend said. "So something *had* to happen to you to test your real worth. And he is the outcome of your transformation.

Catherine pondered his words before speaking. "Maybe, but you have one thing wrong. He is the *reason* for my transformation. I found myself because of him."

Isaac smiled knowingly, and his eyes lingered on hers, his facial expression a deeply focused one again.

"It will take some digesting," he said finally, and his tone revealed to Catherine he wasn't talking about food. Her smile faded a little.

"I know... but I hope you can manage anyway.... *quietly*. His safety... his *life* depends on it," she added, whispering.

The self-defence master briefly lowered his eyes, before looking up again – to her relief, a genuine, warm smile lit up his face.

"You have put your trust in me, Cathy, and you know I would never do anything to prove I am unworthy of it." He leaned a bit forward and whispered, "Will I ever see him again?"

Catherine watched the childlike awe on his face and couldn't suppress a little laugh. Of course, she knew he was trustworthy. She knew that right from the start when he took her under his wing with honesty, care, and encouragement, and now, she found it almost

incredible she had had even the slightest doubt about his possible reaction.

“I don’t know,” she said then truthfully, with a shrug. “It doesn’t depend on me.”

Isaac straightened himself up on his chair again, nodding. “Well, you can be sure of one thing: if you ever need help again, you know where to look for it.”

Catherine’s beaming smile and glistening eyes were her only response. For Isaac, it was more than enough.



THREE MONTHS LATER

It was past ten in the evening as Vincent leisurely made his way through the in-darkness-obscured alleys of Manhattan, enjoying the relative freedom provided by the merciful disguise of his long, dark cloak, flailing around him like bat’s wings. The streets were less busy than usual at this time of night, probably caused by the sudden, brief return of winter in the early spring city. The thermometer plummeted to numbers much more regular in January than in late March.

Vincent didn’t mind the chilly bite of the air at all. The cold gave him extra protection on top of the darkness, so he could wander off deeper into the city. Always vigilant though, he had just eyed the area around him, before returning to one of the hidden tunnel entrances, when his sensitive ears caught some noise coming from around the corner. He jumped deeper into the shadow and, with gingerly, silent steps of a wild cat, he walked in that direction.

The sounds were getting louder and clearer, and Vincent recognised voices – two teenagers cornered a man in his late forties, harassing him.

“Look, guys, I told you I don’t have much money on me, if that’s what you want,” the man said calmly. “If you want it, it’s yours, but I’m sure it would be better for you if you earned it in a more decent way than robbing an ageing man on his way back from work.”

“Of course, we want the money!” a boy of not more than eighteen years shouted, clad all in denim and black leather with a sea of silver buckles. He held his head high, his whole body oozing threat, albeit a not exactly convincing one. Vincent spotted his lifted arm, pointed against the cornered man – the hand held a small knife.

“And anything valuable!” his friend added, another teenager, looking almost identical; it appeared the boys were brothers.

“Money is all I have,” the older man replied, still surprisingly calm. It seemed he had

been in a similar situation before. He raised his eyebrows, seemingly resigned. “If you want it, get it yourself.”

“Get on with *it!* Now!” the first boy exclaimed, his knife dangerously close to the man’s face.

The man lifted his arms, still inviting the rascals to help themselves, but just as the boy with the knife lost his nerve and wanted to attack the man.

Vincent, who just stepped out of the shadow to intervene, saw the man suddenly block his attacker, with unexpected speed and ease. He sent the boy down to the ground unconscious with two more expertly executed self-defence moves, kicking the knife out of his hand and not giving him the slightest chance to retaliate. However, right after, he felt surprisingly strong hands close around his neck, as the second teenager threw himself on his back.

For the second time that night, he felt the steel-cold presence of a knife at his face. He struggled with the boy’s grip for a few seconds, and just as he was about to perform another defence move, he heard a soft growl behind them. It was barely audible, but his neck was suddenly free, and he heard a thud. He did a quick U-turn and gasped, not so much at the sight of the other teenager lying on the ground unmoving, but by the apparition standing calmly above him – a tall figure veiled in a black cloak from head to toe. His mouth went wide open as the figure stepped closer to him, the light of a street lamp gradually revealing his face...

“It’s *you*...!” the man breathed in awe, his lips curling into an incredulous smile.

“Hello, Isaac,” Vincent’s soft, gravelly baritone made the self-defence teacher relive that brief moment from a few months ago. The magic of that sound hit him immediately.

“How... I mean... How did you know who I was?” Isaac asked, knitting his brows. The only time they fleetingly crossed paths, the maned man was practically blind.

Vincent’s small smile softened his animal features. “Catherine,” he replied. “She showed me the newspaper clipping last month.”

Isaac laughed. “And to imagine I hated being photographed at that event!” he exclaimed, remembering the occasion. His club competed in a regional self-defence contest – and won. The photograph showed the team with their proud, although slightly out-of-place-looking couch.

“I know it’s a good promotion for my business, but I’ve never liked the press attention. I just wanna do my job and help people. My face wasn’t made for the whole world to stare at it.”

Seeing the flash of sadness in Vincent’s deep-set eyes, Isaac understood the

inappropriateness of his remark. He was still stunned at this surreal encounter and transfixed by the extraordinary face before him, but he didn't wish to cause the man who helped him any discomfort. It was time to change the topic. He looked down at the boy at Vincent's feet.

"Is he...?"

"He'll wake up soon," Vincent replied, correctly guessing Isaac's train of thought.

The self-defence master was intelligent enough to realise there was extraordinary strength beneath the majestic exterior.

"He's unharmed." He glanced at the other boy lying at Isaac's feet. "Catherine was right. You are a brilliant teacher."

Isaac chuckled. "It's kind of a necessity around here, as you see."

"More often than I would like," Vincent added sorrowfully.

The sound of a police car passing by on the main street interrupted the moment of pondering between them.

"You'd better get going," Isaac remarked, his eyes glancing toward the main street, "before someone walks by... and before these two wake up."

Vincent nodded, then outstretched his gloved hand. Isaac felt a wave of inexplicable thrill wash over him before he accepted it, impressed by its strong grip.

"Thank you," Vincent said softly, with genuine gratitude. "For helping Catherine, not just while looking for me."

"Some people are worth it," Isaac said, with a knowing smile.

The two men released each other's hands, and Vincent, as quietly and inconspicuously as he came, disappeared in the shadows.

Isaac's eyes followed him and remained at the spot where he vanished out of sight. All the questions he would have asked Vincent – the most intriguing one being how come he happened to stroll the New York City night streets so unafraid – remained forgotten and irrelevant in his realisation of how much courage it must have cost Vincent to reveal himself like this. Now he could at least partly understand the appeal this man had on Catherine, apart from owing him her life. He sincerely hoped they would meet again sometime, preferably under more pleasant circumstances.

Isaac was quickly brought back to reality by the renewed sound of the police siren nearby. The quiet moan of one of the boys, still lying on the pavement but slowly waking

up, made him realise it was time to leave this place. He pulled up the lapels on his jacket and started walking home.

As he was taking long strides, he dug his hands deep into his pockets to keep them warm. It crossed his mind that sometimes it wasn't bad to work longer hours on Fridays...



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