

One Down and One Up

Two Stories by Nan Dibble

One Down

At the end of the second week after Catherine returned, Diana chalked a mark then continued following the beam of her flashlight down what she hoped would be the last black, crooked passage before the lake. Mouse's directions had been none too precise, and she might already have gone wrong fifteen crossways ago. But she thought she could smell water, and that kept her scuffing patiently along. That... and other things.

She almost walked straight into the water. Backing hastily, she checked the alternatives, then took a bound against, then off, the end of the passage wall, clunking safely onto the smooth, dry shore.

"No wonder nobody ever comes here," she muttered, rancorously rubbing a banged knee. Straightening, she swung the flashlight beam in a vain attempt to locate any roof. Then she panned the beam level, but the horizontal dimensions defeated it too. The cavern was too vast. All she could see were still, black water, and grey rock, and only about a hundred yards of them.

The flashlight would be like a spotlight: she'd be advertising her presence for miles, or however far a clear line-of-sight might go. But she had no least intention of snapping it off, any more than she tried to hush the already soft sounds of her jogging shoes on the smooth, slanted stone.

She knew better than to try to sneak up on him. If he didn't want to be found, he wouldn't be. And if he did... that would tell her something, all by itself.

A week, she would have understood. A week for greetings, adjustments, tentative approaches and retreats, telling each other how horrible it had been, reconnecting, counting baby toes and fingers. That sort of stuff. But more than a week without a visit, an invitation, or a word... and then finding, first crack out of the box, from Father that nobody'd seen him in the last four or five days (it was hard to be certain, since he moved around so much), that sent her alarms into high gear.

She could be making an even bigger fool of herself than usual. It might be no more than Father said — that after prolonged stress, even happy stress, sometimes Vincent had to get off by himself for awhile to get settled, centered again. Maybe that was all it was, and she was being an utter jerk.

If Catherine wasn't upset, setting up in her old digs in the D.A.'s office, reclaiming her high-rise condo, why should Diana be?

Which of course made no difference at all.

If he'd built a fire, she'd know, and back off as gracefully and as fast as she could. If he hadn't, if he'd been hanging around here in the dark for a few days, then she'd know that other thing and know her hunch had led her true.

She'd seen no sign of a fire when a shadow moved and said her name, "Diana," in a voice as resigned as a sigh.

She swung around. Too polite to poke the beam into his face, she could make out only a dark outline.

"Yeah, well, I figured I had an update coming, you know?"

Vincent ignored her blithering, as he always had.

"However did you find me?"

"Yeah, well... will you think less of my detecting skills if I admit this is the third place I tried?"

"And if you hadn't found me here?"

She shrugged, vaguely embarrassed. "Well, you know..."

"I believe I do. Which is why I knew I must greet you. Or you'd continue searching. It's not a place to be wandering alone, Diana."

She shone the beam on her feet, then abruptly clicked it off. "You do."

"But I am different," he commented flatly, in what she considered a real peculiar tone of voice. And there'd been no fire. So she guessed she knew.

"Big deal. Look, if you don't want to talk to me, nobody's making you. But I thought we were friends, anyway. And friends don't gotta go by manners. If you don't come tell me, I come ask."

He ignored the hint, too. He'd always been real good at that.

"Have you enough power to light your return?"

"That's not why I turned it off. I thought maybe the dark was better. I mean, you didn't make a campfire or anything..."

"I see very well without one. I'm—"

"—different, yeah, we been through that. So, yeah, I always carry spare batteries." She patted a jacket pocket. "I'm fine, you don't gotta signal somebody down to guide me out, I can manage. Besides, I chalked my way."

Displaying the chalk as proof, she added, in the most unemphatic, casual tone, "So she won't sleep with you, huh?"

Her eyes were dark-adapting a little: she caught the glint of his eyes as he swung and stared at her. Then that disappeared as his head bent. Then all of him went down, boneless as a puddle — arms across his shoulders. He was crying, of course. Who wouldn't be?

He didn't ask how she knew. He didn't care, she figured. He was still too caught up in the fact of it to feel much beyond himself right now, and he'd already used up all the politeness he had to spare. That was OK. She'd never been much interested in his politeness.

When he finally shut the crying down to occasional wheezes, he got out, "It would be unconscionable to speak of such a thing... with you."

"Says who?"

"It would be an imposition."

That accounts for the extra week, she thought. She said again, "Says who? Look, don't you know by now there's nothing you can't say to me? No matter what it's about? Nothing in this world."

He said, "I thought that, once."

"Then you damn well better think it again, because it's true."

He didn't answer. He sat up straight, not leaning even a little. Taking the hint, she eased off, tucking in all the elbows and edges so she wasn't touching him at all anymore. Now the question was, would he stay or wouldn't he? If he didn't, that was it, because the game was always played on his terms and she'd always known that. She'd always find him, but never hold him unless he was willing to be held.

What he finally said was, "It shouldn't matter."

So he was going to stay. So far, so good.

She retorted, "Like you looking different shouldn't matter. But it does."

"But this isn't a matter of topside ignorance. This is Catherine. And me. And it shouldn't matter."

"Bullshit."

"It's no different than it was, than I've lived with all my life. It shouldn't matter. I should be content. It's everything I wished for. She is returned to me, safe. We can go on now. As we were. We can!" he insisted, as though hearing her unspoken disbelief. Or denying his own.

"Then how come she's having triumphant press conferences at the D.A.'s office and you're way down here being about as miserable as I've ever seen you, which is saying a lot?"

"I'll learn. It's been a long time. I need to learn... or perhaps unlearn... I don't know," he trailed off, and he had to be really distraught not to finish a sentence.

"So what's the bottom line here? Doesn't she love you anymore?"

He shook his head. "She does. She says so. Just as before."

Dianna heard the slight emphasis in says and drew her conclusions. "The bond hasn't come back, huh?"

Again, he shook his head — this time, a slower, heavier motion.

"Father theorizes, after the fact, that it was a bonding mechanism... for partners to be mated. For... creatures of my kind. Which probably are empaths. If there are. Creatures of my kind." Big, deep breath. "He conjectures that after we... When it was replaced by a full joining, it attached itself to the unborn child. I remained unaware of it until the child was developed enough... aware enough... to return it. Shortly before birth. And now, even that is fading. As Jacob grows, needs less immediate, constant care, yet cannot yet shut out all the inappropriate emotions that reach him... It diminishes. So I am losing him too."

"Hey. Hey." When his head finally came around and she figured he might be looking at her, she said, "So romance isn't marriage. Everybody learns that, sooner or later. It's just more dramatic for you because you had no warning, didn't know what to expect, and being you, probably figured it was your fault and if you'd just done something else or something more, it wouldn't have come out that way. So: am I right, or am I right?"

"I'm sure you're always right, Diana." Vincent replied wearily. "Now if you have all the answers you require, perhaps —"

"Not a chance. Not even half a chance. Because a little dose of reality wouldn't have sent you into a tailspin like this. You may be the widest-eyed blazing idealist I've ever known, but I got great respect for your common sense, not to mention your overall smarts. And I'm here to help you sort this all out as best it can be sorted. Sometimes it helps to have somebody else listen, you know?" Before he could deflect her into a discussion of that, she said, "So tell me about the bond. Is it gone gone? Or only semi gone?"

"No... Only diminished to... what is normal for me. Close presence. Touch, especially. And strong feeling. Those reach me... as they always have. Except... during my illness. As with Father. Or anyone. No... particular or constant connection."

That would have been the first week, continually renewing his starved sense of her. Learning what touch could tell him — whatever touch he'd risk, and she'd allow.

Diana had a sudden image of a moth battering itself against the glass that kept it from the flame.

"So: does she love you?" Diana asked, very softly.

"Yes," he replied, even softer. "As before. And it didn't matter to me then. It was enough. I was glad simply at her presence, her company, her acceptance of my love. It was enough."

"But it's not, anymore. Because—"

"But it should be! It's more than I'd ever hoped for — a woman of noble character who yet would love such a thing as I am, and what—"

This time, she was the one who interrupted: by clapping a palm, with a certain blind care, over his mouth. It surprised him enough to stop that particular speech, which she'd never heard spoken aloud in so many words, but felt that she knew by heart all the same. That conviction of personal worthlessness, of apologizing for the mere fact of being, permeated everything he said and did.

Lifting her hand away almost as carefully as she'd set it, Diana said, "I'm not disputing the noble character part. Just the part that takes for granted that you're trash. 'Scuse the interruption, but I'm not gonna listen to that from you or anybody. Never. Sorry about that, but you'll just have to put up with it."

"I'm sorry, Diana," he responded humbly. "I knew it was not a thing I should bring to you. I knew you'd want, and try, to find answers, and there are none. I knew it would only be a sadness and a frustration to you. Because you cannot help. No one can. I must learn... or unlearn... But I don't know how."

She had the feeling that if she just kept after him, didn't give him any space, he'd break down in tears again. Maybe even walk off on her, though that wasn't a likely now. So she hunted around in her mind for a neutral topic (Jacob was out: no longer neutral) and asked, "How's Father been bearing up through all this?"

"Quite well, actually," Vincent replied, as though it surprised him a little, now that he'd come to think about it. But some of that deadly heaviness had come out of his voice, too, so maybe it'd been a good switch. "Better than I, certainly. He... he's delighted, of course, to have Catherine back with us, even though she will continue to work Above, of course. And of course he now hopes and expects—"

"—that everything's finally gonna go back to normal, right? Oh, 'scuse me, I didn't mean to interrupt, but I could just imagine his face, saying that kind of thing, and looking at you very hard while he was saying it so you'd be sure to know who he meant."

"You've come to know us all very well. Yes, that was the expression..." He fell silent, but it felt like a thinking silence to Diana, so she let it alone and waited until he commented, "Father has lived without a partner and celibate virtually his whole adult life. When there was no need, except that he would not impose on me, and require me to keep, restraints he would not abide himself. He once told me so. So that, in that respect, at least, I would not feel myself utterly alone and alien to all of humankind. Yet his is not a monkish nature. After Jacob was returned to us, and Father finally knew, of his own knowledge, that the child was mine, he immediately took advantage of an opportunity to renew an old relationship. You remember Jessica?"

"Distinctly. The photographer."

"Yes. They were... close friends. When I was young. The connection of the two events is inescapable. Therefore, so is the conclusion."

"If the rules had changed for you, then they'd changed for him, too. You both were off the hook."

"But when he found he could not tolerate living Above, and Jessica couldn't tolerate coming Below, he returned to his life as it had been before... much to Mary's disappointment, I might add."

Diana wondered if it's been just her nasty, cynical ears, or if there'd been the faintest edge of dry, resigned amusement in his comment. Just as a push to keep him rolling, she said, "I bet."

She thought his head lifted staring out into the blackness that to him was half-sight, distances she could only guess at.

"Father seemed... almost relieved. It would have been a great change for him, after all. And returning Above would have had... ramifications. He would have found it difficult to... to split his energies and his care between the worlds Below and Above. And his hope that I would rise to the occasion, and lead the community, were at least premature. Without your help..." He didn't feel like finishing that thought either and retreated to more impersonal ground. "He felt he had to come back. And I confess I'm glad he did. I would have missed him most dreadfully. He's been... he's been the only one who hasn't left."

His head bent again: back to desolation.

Diana said, "But the bottom line is, he's stepped back into the role of monk/priest, and doesn't think there's any reason you can't do it too, just as easily. Or does he even know there's a problem?"

A headshake. "Father and I... do not speak of such things."

"So, he thinks you should be delighted with the status quo, Catherine thinks everything's great, and even you're beating yourself up for not living up to your ideals, which says a hell of a lot about romance but not a whole lot about sex, am I right?"

That was blunter than she'd ever been to him, but she thought it was time. Probably past time. Better, probably, if it had come from somebody else. Preferably a man, at that.

She added, "Can't you talk to some man about this? Somebody you trust, feel comfortable saying things to?"

"Mouse?" he countered. "Pascal, the most monkish of us all? Once, Winslow..."

She'd never heard the name, but the way he said it made her conclude that person was no longer an option. "So what about your brother? Didn't you tell me you had a brother?"

He sighed. "With luck, we might see him in another twenty years. He stays nowhere long. And... I don't think it's something I could entrust to a letter. A reply would be dubious. And... we never really came to know one another as adults."

"He still thinks you're a kid. Too. And the whole problem is that you're not."

A slow, heavy nod, and another sigh. "You speak slightly of my ideals. But I must follow them. They're my best guide to... good behavior."

"Good human behavior, you mean, right?"

"That, and Father's instruction, and what I observe in those around me, are all I have to judge by. And I wish so very much to do well..."

"I know you do, Babe." She took his hand: she couldn't keep herself from it. Damn, it hurt, how bad he hurt, and how well he always meant, and it damn well wasn't fair!

He didn't pull his hand away, or pry her fingers off. She felt him looking at her. After awhile he said, "It's not right to inflict my problems on you."

"Why quit now?" she quipped, then regretted it because it was too near the truth and sounded too much like a complaint. "Never mind, scratch that. Just a dumb joke. What's right or wrong for me isn't your judgment to make. Going off and shutting me out would hurt worse, though you'll have to take my word for it. My hurt's my business. If you pick up on it, that's just tough. And if you pick up on some of the rest of it, too, then that's just double tough. I can't rearrange myself to make life easy for you. Or for anybody. Never could. Never will. Comes with the package, take it or leave it. People with big ears sometimes hear stuff they don't like, don't want to know. Too bad."

"It's nothing I haven't known for a long time now. And what I notice most is the kindness. The limitless, ferocious kindness that never lets go and gives no quarter. It's one of the first and strongest things I ever knew of you."

"Then you gotta know, whatever the problem is here, I'm on your side. Sure, I'm glad Catherine's OK, and everything. But if you're hurting, that's what's important to me. So even if there's nothing to be done about it, tell me. Is it you? What you are?"

Slowly, quietly, he responded, "I used to think that. Assumed it, actually. When... we were new to one another, Catherine and I. I had fought so long against... the rages, and what went with the rages. You know."

"I knew all that must be shut away if I was to live, as I must, isolated and yet among a community, in a civilized community where rage and other promptings must be formally controlled, regulated, supervised... Where no violence must be done, except in defense. Where no violence must even be desired... because the consequences would be so great, so intolerable..."

"So you never let yourself get truly angry at anyone. Ever. Or ever—"

"Yes. And the one time that impulse escaped my control, it almost meant my death. Before I could again shut it away, and be as I had been before... As I must do again now, somehow. But I don't know how I am to do it."

"Before, you doubted everything. That it was physically possible. That anybody would accept you, much less want you... that way. That you could ever hope for anything as normal a girlfriend, much less a lover or a wife. Hoping for what you can never have just means being miserable all the time."

He hung his head. "And yet... I did hope. I didn't seem able to help it. Though with the years, it grew easier... and yet harder. Because instead of peace, surrendering hope meant... despair. And then... I found Catherine." He took a sharp, long breath. "I don't believe I've told you, because I've never told anyone. Some know the fact of it, but not what it meant to me. After she returned home to complete her healing, for eight months Catherine gave us no sign. No message. No greeting of any sort. Though she knew perfectly well that there was a threshold in her basement – a way into the tunnels. She could have rapped on the pipes: she knew we listened. She could have left a note, too large to be missed by a patrolling sentry. There were many ways. But she did nothing. At last I went to her. I ... had to. Father was very angry – at first, and for a long time. But the bond had formed. I felt her continually with me and yet as the time passed, I could have no expectation of ever being in her company again, and ... I could not do otherwise."

"Sure, I understand. I really do. I know from mountains and Mohammed. But that left you in a one down position to begin with."

"One... down?"

"As opposed to one up. Top dog. Boss in a relationship."

"If you say that, you do not understand. It has never been a question of who was 'boss' between Catherine and me."

"Sure, it's nice to think so, and a lot of times the lead is situational. Boss in one context is follower in another. But there's still the boss and the follower, even if who wears the hats changes from time to time. Who called the shots of when you met?"

"Except for special events Below, formal invitation, it was Catherine. But our possibilities were so much more constricted than those of... other couples. I could not go Above in daylight hours, and she needed her rest."

"Granted. But the fact remains, she called the shots. Who called the shots on your visiting at her place – when and how long?"

"If you mean her balcony –"

"No: I mean her condo."

"I suppose I did," Vincent responded, which surprised Diana. "She invited me in a number of times. But I could not accept that invitation."

"What – never?"

"Once. To protect her. Once in madness. And then once again... when I took her home. When... I believed her dead. Never... socially."

"Why?"

"She trusted me. She believed I would not impose on her trust in... that more private setting. I didn't believe I could continue to be worthy of that trust. The balcony presented... less of a temptation. And now, she trusts me again. And I wish to heaven she did not!"

Diana let the echoes of that outburst die down in the cavern before she said anything more. "So is it you?"

"She trusted me to be... safe for her. And I did try to be. All the poets... almost all... name as the highest form of love that which seeks no return, that which is spiritual, not carnal, free of the baser animal impulses –"

"Blake," she said. "Donne. Whitman." She'd done her homework, hunting ammunition.

"There are exceptions," he admitted. "But books with explicit sexual content – and I have read a few – are still termed 'dirty,' and an unhealthy or excessive interest in the subject is deemed prurient. The consensus is none the less strong for the exceptions. Gandhi was a truly great and noble man who abstained from sensual pleasure to help him concentrate on spiritual matters he deemed of far greater importance, eliminating a powerful distraction. Voluptuaries are everywhere condemned as self-indulgent. Nowhere are prostitutes held in high esteem. Self-denial, in matters of the flesh, is everywhere praised. Chaste relationships are deemed 'pure' and of greater worth than those of sensual indulgence. I do not draw my ideals idly or at random, Diana."

"Never said you did."

"But you find them outlandish."

"Only because nobody even tries to live by them anymore. You might as well tell me you were a druid, or building shrines to Odin."

"That others do wrong doesn't make it right. I try to do the best I can, as best I know. What else am I to do?"

She held his hand a little harder. "That's all any of us can do. But it gets harder when you're coming down with fits of base animal impulses and nobody, not even you, will sanction them. Me, I like St. Augustine."

Trust him to know a quote. Any quote. "'Lord, give me chastity. But not yet.' Yes, I suppose... But now is when I do need it. And the poets and philosophers I admire bid me be content." His hand stirred aimlessly within hers. "But I am not. I feel excluded. Rejected. As though there is no longer any hope."

"Back to the original question, if you'll listen to me this time: is it you?"

"I'm... less certain of that than I was. I've been thinking, here... and I've come to think... she was drawn to me because she considered me safe. Because she believed that, considering our differences, any relationship that wasn't platonic was utterly out of the question. The prospect simply would never arise. In being courted by Elliot, she had no least suspicion I would be jealous or hurt, or that even her loving that man would make any difference to what we were to one another. How could

it not make a difference? But she didn't imagine it could. And that she couldn't even imagine it... told me all I could bear to know."

"One down again. You weren't even in the running, in the boyfriend department."

"Stronger, she once said, than friendship or love. Which I must assume meant *not* friendship or love. I truly never knew what she meant. I didn't care. It was love to me. I wished so not to... frighten her... as I'd once frightened someone else. To do nothing to hurt or offend her in any way. Nothing but what would please her. And what pleased her—"

"—was to be safe, and out of the dating market. So, double safe. Attached, but with no commitments except on her terms. One up all the time, calling all the shots."

"I began... to grow more hopeful. Bolder. She encouraged me. Told me, many times, that I deserved... everything. What was I to think? And yet, when I would reach out... in any but the ways that had become customary between us, I would feel her distress. And a sadness. And a disappointment. Many things. But not gladness. Not... welcome. And so I would draw back and believe I had misunderstood her somehow. I doubt it was anything she had thought out, decided. It was merely... not what she wanted. With me. Or perhaps at all – with anyone. But she hadn't fully realized or accepted that, and so gave me contradictory signals. She said once... she wished I had kissed her, rather than receiving that kiss from Elliot. I assume she believed it at the time. But she kissed me only once, in thanks, chastely, and then quickly left me to wonder what it meant. It meant thanks. Nothing more. But I would not believe that, so I looked for all the signs she wished greater closeness and tried to ignore or set aside the much clearer and more consistent indications, in all her emotions, all her reactions, that just the opposite was the case."

"Must have confused the hell out of you," Diana commented.

"It drove me mad," Vincent replied steadily, grimly. "I was quite mad for a time. Far too dangerous to be near. Though you discount it, I am dangerous when not in full control of myself. I absented myself from the community. I believed, insofar as I was capable of believing anything in that state, that I would die. And then she came to me..."

"And gave you everything you'd wanted when you were in no condition to enjoy it."

"I must assume it was a great sacrifice on her part. I don't know. I still remember nothing of it. Only the fact of Jacob persuades me of what passed between us. And her own word, of course."

"It's really the pits, having people making enormous sacrifices for you, isn't it?"

"She never spoke of it. Never, in the weeks afterward. All was as before. Except that the bond was lost, and I didn't know why. Probably she didn't either, although she may have suspected since she alone knew... what had happened in that cave. Something had been broken between us, in any case. And I was distraught about it. And then, before any of that could be resolved, she was gone. But you must not speak or think any ill of her sacrifice. Without it, I surely would have died. Which, I must assume, is why she did it. In extremity. As a last resort. Truly, out of love. But not out of passion, any more than 'the Kiss of Life,' so-called, is a kiss in anything but name..."

"The pity is, that it had to be a sacrifice at all."

"I didn't know it was... until I reached out to her again, in hope, soon after her return, thinking matters must have altered between us, because of Jacob, or, because of withdrawal, the same profound disappointment as before. Stronger, if anything. Revulsion, I was holding her. I felt it, as clearly as though there were yet a bond between us. It struck like a blow. I had not been mistaken."

"What did you do?"

"We turned away... and spoke of other things. I cannot bear many more blows like that, Diana. I am ill-defended against them. Yet I love her still. But the hope... that hope... is finally dead."

“So let’s get practical here. Even supposing you could go back to being a priest/eunuch/monk whatever, which is highly dubious at this point – it’s damn near impossible to get that particular genie back in the bottle, once it’s out – could you put up with the consequences?”

“What are the consequences, as you visualize them?” Vincent responded cautiously.

“Being her very most favorite buddy... and pet. And never asking to be more. Could you live with that?”

“I never thought to be even that... to any woman.”

“Ever isn’t now. Could you stand it *now*? Maybe you could. There’s people who seem to get along like that just fine. Elsa Lanchester and Charles Laughton, each as gay as a tree full of monkeys, got married and had a hell of a good relationship, by all accounts. Lots of good times, lots of laughs. Loved the daylights out of each other. Just no sex. With each other, anyhow. And there’s always Heloise and Abelard, and –”

“Lovers who never met, except by correspondence. You’ve been researching.”

“Yeah, well. It happened to come up.”

“I will pose you the contrary question, Diana. You know you have become dearer to me than any other woman, save Catherine herself. And I know, though you have never said it, your attachment for me... is beyond the ordinary. It’s been impossible to mistake. You have given, and given, and asked no return at all. You are giving now, even though, if you succeed, it will put yet a greater distance between us. Exactly the selfless behavior my poets so commend. Let me ask it of you, and I truly want to know the answer. If you were certain there could never be anything more than this between us, would you end the disappointment and pain you must sometimes feel and separate yourself? For you must know it would be the prudent thing to do. You must have known that for a long time now. I also am uncomfortable with those who make great sacrifices. Though I admire them.”

“Yeah, well.” Diana took her hand back.

She hadn’t expected a therapeutic talk to take this direction. But it was a fair question. Just blunter than normal, especially from him. He was so damned considerate, nearly all the time, she often wanted to punch him out, or hug him hard, or something like that, just to get one unconsidered reaction. That was, of course, when he wasn’t wrecking furniture or tearing somebody messily apart, which was also very much in his repertoire, as she had good reason to know.

She didn’t really know how much there was, between those two extremes. Not much, he’d contend. Almost everything, she firmly believed it on faith. Hope, maybe. The same kind of hope that, even blind and undirected, had kept him going for so long.

What would she do if that hope were truly gone?

“It’s easy to theorize,” she said finally. “First, I’m gonna duck a little and throw it back at you. Then, if you still want me to, I’ll take a crack at it. It comes down to the difference between can’t and won’t. If Catherine had come back, say, paralyzed or in some other condition that made it literally impossible for you to get together—”

“For instance?”

“For instance bisected at the waist, I don’t know – just pretend a minute, OK?”

“I don’t like imagining that.”

“Just pretend one second more, OK? The question is, would the problem seem to you then the same way it does now?”

She thought he’d folded his hands over his knee, in that strange, prim way he had of controlling them.

Eventually, he said, “No. I think not. I would not wonder, even for a moment, if it was my own lack, my own difference. That choice would have been taken from us. A sadness, but less than that of her condition itself. I could attend her, and be content to be whatever we could be, and be glad to be of service to her. Everything would have changed then. Everything would have to be discovered anew. But as it is, only I have changed. And that’s not enough. I take your point, I think. I still,” he added, “wish to hear your answer.”

Yeah, OK. So if some big rock fell on you, disabled neck-down, I’d come visit you till you were sick of me, years and years, not for charity but because you’re great company and I like how you think. Even Steven Hawking got married. Twice, I think it is. Neck down and neck up. Lou Gehrig’s disease. Something. Guy can’t even talk.”

“I’ve read one of his books. The *Brief History of Time*.”

“I figured. And that Irish guy, Christie something, who paints with his feet. Married a couple of his nurses. One, anyhow. So there’s things besides sex keeping people together.” She wrapped both arms tight around her and shivered. “And imagining you like that is so awful I don’t even want to think about it anymore, OK?” Leaving out can’t, all I can truly say is, try me. What I believe is that... this fits. This is right. This is what I belong to be doing. Which is worrying about how you’re doing. I couldn’t stop if I tried. Can’t even stand an extra seven days of not knowing how you’re doing, when I had every damn reason to believe you were happy as a clam at high tide. It might be sensible to do something else. I don’t know. Don’t really care. This is all I can do. And it’s what I want to do. What you make of it doesn’t really signify, sorry. It’s what I do that I gotta account for, make sense of. And this makes sense to me. So even if I make a damn nuisance of myself, which I probably do already, I’m in for the duration. Always have been.”

She could really have used a hug at that point, but she didn’t get one. Instead, he said softly. “I don’t deserve such faith.”

“Doesn’t it get through to you? You deserve everything, and I know precisely what I mean by that, and so, by God, do you. But it’s not a matter of deserving. It’s... more like making sense of the world. And without you, nothing makes a scrap of sense at all. With you, it mostly does. That’s just how it is. None of it is up to you at all, so you don’t have to feel obliged. It’s no sacrifice. It’s absolutely what I want to be doing.”

“Would it matter to you,” he asked, “if Catherine and I were together again?”

“Matter? Of course it will matter! It’ll hurt like goddam hell, and if it’s what’s gonna make you happy, I’ll move several moderate-sized skyscrapers to help you get it. *You said if*,” she suddenly realized.

“If you are capable of facing such a prospect, why do I find it so impossible to resign myself to it?”

She dragged herself out of her retroactive fog of astonishment. “Because... because in some ways, I’ve already been there, done that. Compared to you, I’ve been a grownup a long time. Fifteen years, or thereabouts. I’ve got a good-sized file in my head labeled SEX and it’s got contents, and probably a lot of useless baggage and a fair amount of nonsense and plain stupid stuff. But it’s there. I have it. You just found you got a file like that, and it’s so empty it aches. Pretty near all the time, by what you’re telling me. Can’t quit banging against the glass.”

“Like a moth.”

It always startled her how quick he picked up on some hints, considering how oblivious he was to others.

She nodded, then went on, “Everybody wants you to go back to what you were, because it was easier for them. Likely easier for you, too, if you could do it. But there’s a good chance, I gotta warn you, that you can’t. Because now you don’t have just hope: you have knowledge. You know it’s possible... only not with Catherine, it seems like. Not can’t – *won’t*.”

“Or perhaps only shouldn’t. Perhaps a passionless life is best, and all else is madness and delusion. A mere appetite, better denied.”

“Are you seriously gonna put down the strongest drive any species has – to reproduce, to *survive* as a species – as crude bestial promptings the very best people shouldn’t feel at all, or shouldn’t give in to, if they do?”

“It can be argued. And has been.”

“Yeah: by the time-honored voices of sour grapes!”

He sighed. “Diana. There are many instinctual responses which, however natural, must be denied if one is to live harmoniously in one’s community. However much the moth desires the flame, it would be his death to achieve that desire. Many would commend Catherine’s sense that ... that sort of intimacy is inherently repellent. Lust remains on the list of deadly sins, that kill the soul. St. Paul approved even marriage only grudgingly—”

“Yeah: Better to marry than to burn. ‘In hell,’ my priest always added. But St. Paul wasn’t such a dingbat prude as all that. I always thought he meant burning in the regular way. Wanting real bad. Needing and not having. Marriage is for the preservation of chastity, if you been reading the same books I have. So chastity doesn’t mean no sex: it means socially acceptable sex, generally with one partner at a time in our culture, but within the agreed structures of a given society. Not much polygamy going on Below that I’ve noticed...?”

“No. Nor polyandry, either.”

She was almost certain she’d gotten a smile out of him with that. “Polyandry?”

“A wife with multiple husbands Though I don’t know that Father or the community would particularly object, since all the participants would presumably be known. Family, as it were. As it happens, the question has never arisen. We’ve had some bigamous couples, one or another of them having a living spouse Above. We usually decided to consider them informally divorced, on the legal grounds of desertion, though it was uncomfortable and irregular at times.”

“So chastity is pretty much what you make of it. If you make anything of it all. Tell me – is Catherine a candidate for sainthood anytime soon?”

Maybe another slight smile. “I do love her; but no. Not anytime soon.”

“Even saints gotta rule out all the other possibilities. Not everybody who hears voices has a direct line to God. Nine thousand, nine hundred, ninety-nine of them are just bats. Except for the occasional Catholic and High Church Victorian bluenose matron badmouthing what she ain’t got none of herself, short of sainthood, feeling that sex is repulsive, when you really love your prospective partner, is generally considered a handicap, not a higher plane of being. A failure of normal function, normal emotion. A clinical dysfunction, with a name. Maybe treatable. Maybe if Catherine knew how unhappy you are, she’d be willing to see somebody about—”

“She knows. Now, she knows. That’s what makes her sad. Because she believed better of me than this... Diana, I’m not a saint either, nor ever likely to be. Not even one such as St. Augustine.”

“You know, somehow, I’d never thought of you in that context.”

“Somehow, I’d suspected you hadn’t.” She was startled to feel her hand taken and firmly enfolded. Vincent went on, “Make no sacrifices for me. But see me through this time. Please. At least that long, promise me you won’t leave.”

“No,” she said, and felt her hand as abruptly released. “No promises. Some things, you just gotta take on faith.”

He was messing around with something. When the match flared, she realized he was lighting a candle stub.

"I'm remiss," he apologized, not like it was really bothering him a lot. "It must be very dark for you here."

"That's OK. I can see what I need to. But keep the candle," she added hastily, when he glanced up at her inquiringly. The candle, she was prepared to take as a good sign. That he was at least capable of thinking about somebody, something, besides how miserable he was himself.

The small light picked out certain points of metal – his shirt ties, the utterly useless pocket studs of his quilted vest, and his belt buckle, which had always looked to her like part of a bridle for a hippo or something. Ostentatiously large, considering how little there was to hold in: no flab on the man, not anywhere. Probably symbolic, she'd guessed. Massive, high-tensile restraint at the waist. It could strike him like that. It would have been wearing it lower that would have been ostentatious. And appropriate. She thought of it as his chastity belt.

He settled back onto his heels, still looking at her. by the up-slanting, flickering light, his face was drawn and exhausted, but composed.

"By your own formulation, you must be one down. Is that fair to you?"

She began shaking her head emphatically before he'd finished. "Nope. Not one down."

"Why?"

"Because I draw the lines of what I'll put up with and what I won't. As long as I do that, I'm boss of my own life. I'm calling the shots – making the choices."

He tilted his head, the way he did – thinking about it, she supposed.

"I've always known there were certain things beyond changing. My appearance," he explained, with a slight downward gesture at himself. "The separation between the worlds Above and Below. The beauty I find in music, and in poetry... and in other things. The day. The night. The absolutes of my existence. They merely are. there is no choice about such things. The choice is in what one does about them. One cannot be 'one down' to the dark. Or to a symphony. Or one up, either. I've never believed my appreciation affected the rising of the moon one whit. So I must believe you are right. Some things, one must accept as merely given, and do what one may... We cannot be other than what we are. But we must each try to do the best we can with that, that we can."

"This got a point to it somewhere?"

"Do you... do you truly believe it is not me – the way I am - that's the cause of Catherine's... reluctance?"

Even by candlelight, she could tell his face had gone about two shades darker: blushing.

"I can't answer for Catherine. There's people who think Robert Redford – he's a movie star – is smarmy. Repulsively pretty. Maybe not a huge majority, but they're there. Hell, I've seen published letters from women who claim to find some actor named Daniel Benzali sexy. Bald, fifties, fat, face on him like a sulky balloon, teeny little accountant's eyes like some nasty Commissar –" Catching Vincent's blank, waiting expression, she hurried on. "What I mean is, there's truly no second guessing how one person looks to another. You wouldn't think Steven Hawking or the foot-painter would be real hot items, either, but *they* each found somebody who thinks they make the day light up. I can only answer for me. And if you're in serious doubt about *that*. I *really* been going about this all wrong."

"This isn't a matter for joking."

"I know. Sorry. Except that I figure it would screw your head up real bad right now. If you so much as wiggled the least little finger in that direction, I would definitely not try to beat you off with a stick or run screaming to the nearest cop. There: that good enough for you?"

His reaction was to bend his head, not look at her, and say, "Please."

He needed reassurance so goddam bad, he'd even come right out and beg for it. That was plain enough. What she couldn't figure out was why.

Comfortable understatement plainly wasn't going to do it. Nor generalizations and blather about total strangers. OK, then: down and dirty, like they said in poker.

Diana hitched herself close against his ear, she said. "So, how about if I tell you a few of the things I'd really like to do with you?" And then she whispered. And then she quit whispering and just imagined. Recollected actually. From several of her more satisfactory dreams. With all the emotions that went with them. So he couldn't help but feel them, unless he shut her out entirely. Which he did sometimes. But not now, she was somehow certain. So she gave it to him straight. He'd asked for it.

This close, she could tell when his breathing changed.

She had some sympathy. Right now, he was all raw nerves, desperation, and hormones. More would have been mean – like teasing a teenager. So urgent... and so pathologically hypersensitive. When he tensed with a jerk, like somebody had just kicked him someplace very personal, she eased up at once, sitting back, smiling at him, willing to laugh about her dumb, improbable, erotic fantasies and let it go at that. Or willing to say nothing at all.

He was staring at her with eyes dilated just about black, despite the candlelight. Maybe she'd shocked him. Maybe it had been a real dumb idea. Maybe she should apologize.

Before she could make up her mind, he murmured hoarsely, "Theory is all very well..." Then he leaned forward, very fast, and kissed her hard. And she was never, ever going to let a chance like this go by. She damn well kissed him back, grabbing two handfuls of hair for anchors, knuckles into the back of his neck, thumbs practically hooking his ears, and she hadn't really planned on breathing again this century anyhow. She damn well gave as good as she got, and he let up before she did, resting his forehead against hers., pulling in quick, shaky breaths like he'd just run fifty miles or so. Or thirty years or so. Her breathing wasn't too steady, either. Scratch the imagined teenager.

Pretty good for desperation.

She'd have settled for a lot of things. But not for desperation. So she didn't ask if he'd like some more proof, or if that taste of what could be was enough to keep him steady for now.

He muttered, "There was Lena. But that was gratitude. And she mistook it."

Diana nudged him with her forehead. Lifting his head, he blinked at her. Then his clouded eyes cleared. She waited, sure he was going to apologize, which would be awful.

But he had some fundamental manners, even though he didn't know the rules. He only said, "You don't find me distasteful."

It wasn't a question. So she didn't answer it. Instead, she asked, "You gonna tell me what you were scared of?" Because she figured out part of it: he was gathering ammunition. But she still didn't know why. And then she did. "No matter what you do, she'll say it's you. Because if it's her with the problem, she's permanently one down. She'd say it's you. And believe it. And dammit you can't let her make you believe that again! Vincent, you can't!"

"No. But it will be so hard..." He bent his head again, wearily. This time, onto her shoulder.

"And I'm still not promising. I don't do promises. I just do. If that was a bribe, it wasn't nearly enough for even a down payment."

He made a noise slightly like a laugh. "Perhaps. I'm sure of so little anymore. Perhaps what you imply also was a reason. But for me, that is the only true knowing. I have very little left by the way of faith, either."

"Then trust what you know. What you feel. Not what somebody claimed people ought to feel, two hundred or two thousand years ago. Take my word for it: you'd make a lousy monk, and you're real

low on my sainthood list. Some other lists, though, you're right at the top. You may be an acquired taste, but then again, so am I. So is most everybody. *Definitely* not disgusting. Never doubt that. Not even for a second!"

She still held two fistfuls of his hair. She shook them, rocking his head, for emphasis. When he just looked at her in placid bemusement, she let go the hair and rested her wrists on his shoulders, hands hanging loose.

"You're telling me," he remarked, dubiously and carefully, "that I must follow my heart."

"Yeah. Exactly. I guess. There something funny about that?" she demanded, trying to read his face. "Something dumb?"

"Nothing dumb. I can only say to you again that I don't know what will happen. Or what will become of us. Any of us. All I know now is that I will leave this place with a heart much lighter than when I came."

Leaning, he blew out the candle and then moved again, becoming no more than a guessed-at, towering blur to her freshly blinded eyes. His hand came to hers and lifted her.

"Come," he said. "I'll take you home."

It wasn't a question. So she guessed it didn't need any answer.

One Up

When the elevator doors opened, Diana chickened out. She stood so long that the doors closed again. After a buzz dropped her to six and then to the lobby in the company of strangers who looked at her oddly when she didn't get off, she punched the button for the roof, banged out the metal door, and paced awhile among the vent pipes and air conditioner housings.

It was a terrible idea. She'd probably make things worse or leave a humiliating mess for Vincent to deal with. What business did she have, thinking she could get between and have it be anything but a disaster? Hadn't a dozen instances of being asked for advice by one or another side of a couple on the outs, giving it, and then having both of them madder at her than they were at each other – hadn't that taught her anything?

Scuffling to the parapet, she thought, *So what? What if I do lay an egg? At least it'll be a damn big egg, too big to ignore, keep walking around. Maybe then they'll have to talk about it anyhow. The hell with it. The hell with it.*

She slammed back through the door, slapped the elevator button, and marched out on eighteen the second the doors parted for her.

"Hi," she said to the peephole when a voice inside cautiously said, "Yes?" in response to her leaning on the buzzer. Putting on her best, inoffensive smile, she added, "Diana Bennett. You recall? Vincent introduced me."

The chains got pulled, the door opened, and she was dragged inside in what must be record time, as if to prevent her from saying anything else incriminating out in the public (but empty) corridor. But hell, there were a couple thousand Vincents in Manhattan, and Diana had never made a big deal of avoiding the name – except around Maxwell, of course. And she didn't see all that much of Maxwell anymore, anyhow. So no need to treat the mere name like a state secret, burn before reading, gulp the arsenic pill before They torture it out of you sort of deal.

Turning from shutting the door, Catherine said warmly, "Of course. Hello," in a way that still conveyed a question about what the hell Diana was doing here anyway.

Surprisingly, Catherine was in sweats (pink, with discreet lace edging – Diana's were Army grey) and sneaks, with a pink paisley bandanna twisted into a headband to keep her longish, light brown hair away from her face.

The briefest glance at the condo told why: cardboard boxes everywhere, sealed or opened and lying on their sides with miscellaneous stuff mounded out on the floor; rolled rugs; a table on its side against one wall and the chairs stacked beside it; bigger furniture ranked along the back wall, except for two little beige couches doing a nose-to-nose in front of the fireplace.

Improvising on the spot, Diana commented, "Looks like you could use a hand with this. And I'm a certified helper." Diana pushed up her sleeves. "What's first – the rugs, right? Get the back half down, anyhow. Then move everything, get the front down. Which one goes out here?"

Down on her knees next to the stack of rugs, talking over her shoulder without fully looking around, Diana didn't leave much room for argument, and she didn't get any. And toting, then unrolling, the smallest carpet, the one that went in the bedroom, was all the ice-breaker they needed.

The big double bed was already up and made, and a few clothes hung in the open closet, Diana noticed. Some cosmetics, a brush and comb, on the back of the bathroom sink. The minimum.

Wiping an arm across her forehead, Catherine remarked. "It's all been too much. It's taken this long for me to work up the courage to tackle the rest of it."

Patting the rug's corner flat, Diana sat back on her heels. "You could have hired some movers, something. So I guess you didn't want to."

Catherine shook her head – an agreement. "They're *my* things. I want to put them back myself. Guess it's important to me to take back control of my own life. Dumb, huh?"

She smiled – a really warm, engaging grin. A little embarrassed, a little self-mocking.

Much to Diana's surprise, she found herself liking the living woman, whereas she'd felt only the usual sadness and pity toward the supposed-dead one.

"Maybe," Diana said frankly, "you'd really sooner not have me messing with it but are too polite to say so?"

Another head-shake. "No, that's Vincent, not me." Unexpectedly, they were both grinning then. Catherine went on, "My manners are really awful – not like his. I appreciate the help. I was nearly ready to give up. Now, maybe there's a chance of getting this place in some kind of shape before I run out of steam again. How about if we tackle the kitchen stuff next, with a bribe of coffee when we find the pot and some cups?"

"You got a deal."

While Diana sat on the kitchen floor next to successive boxes, handling plates, bowls, and bouquets of silverware up for Catherine to put away, Catherine remarked, "I've been making do with instant and hating myself every minute for being so lazy, not getting everything unpacked. But I just couldn't face it, at first. Just the essentials. Bought a toothbrush, some shampoo, a towel." Swinging open another cabinet, Catherine shrugged.

"Camping out. Yeah!" Diana was holding out the plastic stand of a Mr. Coffee. Catherine snatched it, gleefully slammed the plug in a socket, and started hunting for the rest of the coffee makings. "Or maybe you like tea? I'm sorry, I don't have any –"

Almost, Diana said back to her, *That's Vincent, not me*, but restrained herself. Because there was a very pointed reason why Catherine wouldn't have any tea in her apartment: Vincent never came in to be offered any. *Not social*, echoed in Diana's mind.

"A confirmed coffee addict," she responded. "The stronger and blacker, the better."

"A reward for our hard labor," Catherine declared lightly, sipping hers, sitting cross-legged on the floor.

There was a thereness about her. She was never incidental. As though a light or an invisible camera was somehow always focused on her, to make her the center of whatever space she occupied. *Charisma*, Diana thought, trying out the word. *Self-assurance*, she thought, trying out another. *Confident. Complete....*

"If I had a nickel for every cup of tea I've drunk out of politeness," Catherine went on, and grinned ruefully, leaving Diana to draw the obvious conclusion.

"Yeah, I've had a few myself."

"Vincent," said Catherine, with an expression so intent it was almost fierce. Then she looked over at Diana sharply, smiling like sunshine. "*Vincent*: I can say it! Vincent! Vincent! Vincent! And his formality, and his dear silences, and his shyness, and the way he smiles with his eyes, and – everything! I can really say it! Because you already know, and I can say it to you. Do you have any idea what a relief that is, Diana? How long I've wanted to do that, and couldn't?"

"There are other helpers," Diana commented, a little uncomfortable with the blaze of jubilation, that seemed to declare Diana had given some great gift.

"Sure: Peter Alcott, who delivered me," Catherine replied with a dismissive tilt of her hand. "Or old Mr. Long? Do they strike you as the sort of people one runs to with one's girlish vaporings?"

"Not hardly. Assuming I knew a girlish vaporizing if it bit me on the ass."

Catherine made a face at her. Actually scrunched up her nose, scowled and made a really repulsive, silly face. Diana nearly choked on a swallow of coffee. Whatever she'd expected from the reported Park Avenue princess, it hadn't been this. It was so goddam... *unladylike!*

And yet it wasn't. It was just as right as anything else Catherine did, because she did it, and it was impossible that Catherine Chandler could lose the least ounce of dignity, even by the most blatant silliness. Not by airs or pinkie-extended formal manners, but by the absolute conviction that whatever she did was appropriate and seemly, did Catherine's privileged upbringing show itself, Diana thought. Catherine might sometimes be mistaken, but never deeply ashamed, wish-you-were-dead wrong, the way Diana often was. Or if Catherine ever was, she'd never, never concede it, admit it. The possibility simply didn't exist.

Permanently, perpetually one up on – so much so that no pains need be taken to maintain some created image. The ingrained assumption of superiority was just there – bone-deep, beyond questioning.

Diana thought she might be beginning to understand.

She thought, "*A woman of noble character.*" And so goddam sure of it that nobody can even come close to shaking her in that conviction. And the trouble is, now, this once, she's so wrong that Vincent's practically bleeding from the eyes with the hurt of it and she doesn't have a clue. And what chance do I have of making her see that? Much less admitting to it and doing anything about it?

Struck by pity and sadness, Diana stuck her nose in her mug and kept still until Catherine announced cheerfully, "Break time's over. If you're still willing?"

Hopping up, Catherine grabbed a stack of cups waiting on the counter. So Diana leaned into the box to collect the stack of saucers.

"Royal Doulton," she remarked, holding them up carefully so they couldn't tip. "Nice."

"A matched set," Catherine agreed, handling them like dime-store crockery, as though from the awareness that she could replace the whole shebang anytime she felt like it. "Complete place setting

for sixteen, including finger bowls, in case I decided to invite the Mets to supper. And heaven forfend I serve them hot dogs off mismatched china. Like the kind they serve supper in, every night, Below. I used to be such a jerk.”

“Come again?” said Diana, deeply startled.

“Nice of you to be surprised, but it’s all too true. With the people I used to know in college, I’ve barely lived it down yet. ‘Majoring in fashion law,’ is one of the kindest ways it’s been described. A genuine card-carrying, empty-headed twerp.” Catherine shrugged, seeming, and worst, fondly amused at her past self. “Everybody seemed to approve of me that way. It was expected. And if I was miserable and worthless, not even I knew it. Until...”

“Until Vincent,” Diana guessed.

“No. Until something really awful happened and I thought I’d lost any chance of being that person anymore. Ugly. Slashed, thrown away. When the magic circle of privilege and security I’d taken for granted all my life stopped working. And *then* Vincent.”

Catherine nodded soberly as though she’d been trying the formulation out on herself and was satisfied it fit. “*Then* Vincent. He rescued me, not just from death, but from life. That life. He made me see how unimportant and trivial it had been – how the only thing that mattered was making a difference to other people. Helping them. But it took that... horror... to make me able to see it. Believe it. After that, everything was different.” Lifting her head, Catherine looked at Diana – a steady, level look like Vincent’s, that seemed to see all the way down, as deep as you went. Diana tended to blather whenever she found Vincent looking at her like that. From Catherine, the effect was even more disquieting because Diana knew there was so much Catherine didn’t see and wouldn’t like much if she did. Catherine said, “You rescued him like that, didn’t you? He would have died, except for you.”

“I guess he would. The one way or the other. At least I thought so. Anyway, it’s no big deal. I had to.”

“Somebody had a gun to your head? He startles people, at first meeting. Me, I threw a headlight reflector at him. But I bet you didn’t even blink.”

Diana folded her arms tight. “I already knew... he was different. Just didn’t know what particular flavor the difference came in. Knew about the claws, of course. From... what was left. The photos. So that, I knew. And the rest – well, it didn’t matter. I was too busy trying to figure how to get him out of there, get him home, without getting caught. I had more important stuff on my mind than... the rest of it.”

“Yeah,” said Catherine softly. “That’s what I thought. You were a true friend, right from the start. Had your priorities straight. Me, I took... longer.”

“Eight months,” Diana blurted, thoughtless from tension, and then wanted to bite her tongue off.

Catherine’s eyes drifted. She didn’t seem offended. “Yes, I suppose. I had to get my own life in order before I could think of sharing it with anybody else. At least make a start. On my own terms. Not worrying about what anybody else might think of it. Of me. Not even him... I hoped he’d approve, though. I dreamed, sometimes, he’d feel I was doing the right thing... And then he came. So I didn’t have to dream anymore. I knew. Diana, has anybody thanked you for saving his life?”

Diana made a face. “For other things – till I wish to hell they’d quit. Not for that, actually. Not that I recall. Don’t say anything, though, or he’ll start in. Things are bad enough without that.”

“Bad enough?” Catherine repeated, inviting confidences Diana had no intention whatever of giving.

“It’s been rough for him. Still is, in some ways. It’ll take awhile to get it all sorted out.” Diana stuck her face in the carton seeking something else to hand off.

Is this where I say it? Are we chummy enough yet for me to say something like, Look, sister, fair warning: whoever sleeps with him gets to keep him because that’s how he is?

Taking a safer course, she clutched some silverware. Surfacing, holding up the offering, she added, "Like you, I expect. Take awhile to face tackling all the changes." She waved vaguely at the boxes. "Not up to more than the minimum, the essentials, just yet. That you're alive. Back. That... you've had a child together."

"Yes. Yes, that's going to take some adjusting to," Catherine commented, then poked head and shoulders into a low cupboard as abruptly as Diana had ducked into the box. So Diana put the silverware away herself, having seen what drawer it lived in.

By common consent, they kept to neutral talk while putting the rest of the kitchen to rights. That Diana had only one sister but a huge extended family of uncles, aunts, cousins, whereas Catherine was an only and now an orphan, to boot; that Catherine planned to concentrate on trial work now, leave the street stuff to the grunts and the newbies who were generally assigned it anyway, in the ordinary way the office was run.

"I have the seniority for that now," Catherine remarked as though half expecting an argument, a suggestion that she'd pulled strings, claimed privilege to get that change of assignment.

Which of course she had. But it was a privilege she'd earned, strings she'd woven with Maxwell over the years in the D.A.'s office. Just like Diana had earned her place with the 210, her right to choose which cases she took on. Same thing. Diana wasn't about to criticize.

"Bet he's relieved about that," Diana commented.

"He was," agreed Catherine, then did a double-take. "Oh, I thought you meant Joe. I suppose he will be. Vincent. When I tell him." Again subtly defensive, she added, "He's been somewhere, the last few days. And it's been so hectic, the red tape and paperwork of getting myself declared legally alive and everything..."

"Yeah, I guess," said Diana, thinking, *Been somewhere. Yeah. So she didn't do it for him, or because he asked her. And she didn't tell him beforehand that she was planning on it. She thought I meant Maxwell. Whole separate deal. Why is it a whole separate deal?*

No bond, her hunch told her. And then she was horrified to realize she'd said it out loud. Catherine's face told her.

"I suppose that's part of it," Catherine commented steadily, pushing a wing of hair back from her cheek. "That it's up to me now to create my own security. I can't depend... on anyone else to do it for me. Should never have expected them to. When it comes to that, I'm on my own." Catherine's expression had turned meditative... and downright grim. She looked ten years older.

Is that why she pushes him off – to punish him for not rescuing her from that creep, Gabriel?"

But this somehow wasn't the time to say It, or anything that would lead so directly to It. It would have been better, Diana now thought, to have blurted it out the first second she got in the door, a stranger. Said, *At bottom, he's a simple guy: just wants somebody to let him love them up one side and down the other, every way he can. Just like fifty million other ordinary joes who love somebody till they're half crazy with it. No different. So why the hell can't you just lean back and goddam let him?*

But she couldn't say it now. Dianna had gotten too close or not close enough – somewhere in the between place where you could talk frankly about a lot of personal stuff... just not about the extremely personal stuff that really mattered. It somehow wasn't possible. Like Vincent, with Father. It just wasn't possible anymore.

She said, "How about we tackle the big rug next? Can't do much of anything until that's down."

"Good idea," said Catherine, seeming as relieved as Diana to go back to work.

The glass-topped oval table and its chairs went up on the raised area in front of the dark balcony doors. With them out of the way, enough of the living room floor was clear to manhandle the roll of carpet down to the foot of the stairs and then unroll it as far as the couches in the middle of the room.

"Up and over?" Diana proposed, sitting on her heels to judge how far they'd have to lift.

"Get the roll smaller," Catherine decided, bending to shove at one end of the nearest couch. So Diana got up and started shoving the other end. It wasn't too hard: the legs slid pretty smoothly on the bare floor, once they got it started. When the couch was as far as they could get it, up against the desk and the glass-fronted entertainment center against the far wall, they flopped down on it, legs stretched, puffing.

"One down, one to go," Catherine observed, not moving.

"In a minute. I never learned the Zen of couch moving. All focused and everything. Yell to center your *ya* or *wah* or whatever the hell it is." Diana slapped away floating wisps of hair. The braid was coming undone. It always did.

Catherine smiled. "No chop-sockey garbage. That's what Isaac would say. He taught me street fighting. I should look him up again sometime." She swung a foot idly. "That was what was worst about it, you know? Being imprisoned that way. That nothing I did could make any difference. The helplessness. After the first few days, I wasn't being tortured or anything like that. Treated pretty well, considering. Enough to eat, shelter, medical care... Just left alone. To ripen. Spill my guts a different way."

Though the tone was quiet, reflective, the words themselves were violently harsh; and the imagined glimmer of charm, or whatever it was, was wholly gone. The inner light had gone out. Diana sat very still.

Like somebody summarizing case notes, Catherine said, "It was like being in that van. Month after month after month. They didn't do anything to me. But I knew they could. Anything. Any time at all, for any reason they pleased, and there'd be nothing I could do about it. Helpless. They didn't intend to hurt me. After awhile I realized they didn't care anything about me at all. The man in charge, I never saw him. Not until the last."

"Gabriel."

"Was that his name?" Catherine responded indifferently. "I never knew. Only the voice. Sometimes when the doctor was examining me, the voice would come over the speaker, asking questions: *She*, that flat voice would say. *Her*. Never talking to me, I didn't matter. Didn't have a name. *The Vessel*, the voice said a couple of times, and he was talking about me. Like some big fat pot. I didn't matter at all – only what the vessel held. Toward the end, if they'd left the door open, it wouldn't have made any difference – I couldn't even have *run*. I could barely walk, I was so huge. I thought I'd have longer. Nine months, at least. But it was sooner. Because it was his, I imagine. But I thought I'd have longer – I wasn't ready." Catherine meditated a minute or two, swinging a sneakered foot.

Then she commented, almost casually. "That's not going to happen ever again."

Listening, Diana wondered exactly what Catherine was prohibiting by personal fiat – another captivity... or another pregnancy, apparently experienced mainly as another facet of being trapped, helpless, choiceless. Out of control. De-personalized into a vessel that no longer held any light.

"All my life," Catherine continued with a vague gesture, "they've done that to me. Built me a comfortable prison and expected me to stay in it. And for a long time, I did. Didn't even recognize it as a prison. My dad loved me, so he protected me. And that was the prison, and I lived in it. And bursting out of one prison, I'd fall right into another. Somebody who wanted to control me, tell me what to do, who to be. Stephen. Henry. Mike. Tom Gunther. Elliot Burch. Right up to the monster with the video screen and the voice. That time, I knew it was a prison. Every minute. So maybe I'll be a little smarter, the next time. At least I intend to try, believe me."

She pulled a little tense, unconvincing smile as if hoping to take some of the edge off what she'd said.

Carefully, Diana asked, "Have you talked to anybody about this?" and Catherine rolled her head around on the couch back, looking wearily amused.

"Who would you suggest: Peter Alcott? Mr. Long?" Catherine's tone again dismissed those possibilities. "Because it all turns on the child. And therefore on Vincent. And that makes it impossible. I tried talking to a psychologist once. Or was he a psychiatrist? I forget. Anyway, I realized soon enough it was no use because the only things I really wanted to say were the things I couldn't say. That's been the price. Anyway, now I've told you." Catherine commented cordially, as if that should settle everything.

"How about Father?" Diana persisted, but Catherine shook her head. "Or hell, how about Vincent?"

"Never," Catherine shot back. "He wouldn't listen. He'd only... take it personally. I'll deal with it. Myself."

"Look," said Diana uncomfortably, "it's getting late, I should go –"

She knew now she was never going to say it. It'd been a stupid idea from the start. Catherine had her own take on the matter and it didn't include high-minded poets or ascetic philosophers. It was a question of control. Rekindling the inner light and keeping it going no matter who came to batter against the glass. Get her own life, her own place in order – *her* order, *her* choices, *her* things, exactly where she wanted them and no compromises wanted or maybe even possible. Like before: the eight months. That seemed to be her pattern. A fundamental survival mechanism, regrouping after trauma. It was damn near impossible to talk somebody out of that. Likely nobody had any business even trying.

"You don't get out of couch moving that easily," Catherine retorted gaily, bouncing to her feet. "The bribe is supper. You like take-out Chinese?" She headed toward an answering machine and phone packed in a box. Receiver tucked into her shoulder, Catherine punched the number from memory, remarking to Diana, "That's my answer to all social awkwardness – take-out Chinese. Yes," she said to whoever answered, "I'd like to order for delivery, please." Naming items, Catherine's eyes checked for Diana's agreement, not that Diana really cared.

She felt awful. Hopeless.

That was when the tap came on the glass of the balcony doors.

Phone still in hand, Catherine immediately swung around. An unexpectedly revealing sequence of emotions flashed across her face. First, comprehension, gladness, welcome, that let Diana know what, or rather who, that tap announced. And before Diana'd had the chance to take in the potential awfulness of *that*, Catherine's glance swung ruefully around the stacked furniture, the still opened boxes: recognizing that the place was a mess. Then a sigh, eyes cast downward as she reached to set down the phone, because it didn't matter if the place was a mess because Vincent wasn't coming in. He never came in.

And Diana found herself springing to her feet and beating Catherine to the French doors behind the glass-topped table, yanking them wide, and seizing Vincent's wrist, lifted for another hesitant tap.

"Great," she announced, turning and starting back into the room, still batted onto his wrist. "Great timing, babe: just in time for the furniture. Just what we needed!"

Of course he didn't move with her pull, so she was hauled up short, not as surprised as she let on, by his immobile, braced weight. His eyes, when she swung back to face him, were wide and somewhere between frightened and questioning. She set her hands on her hips, then changed her mind and folded her arms, staring right back at him.

"You are not gonna get out of this, Vincent. You aren't gonna have a nice social visit out on the balcony when there's all this heavy junk to be put away. I mean," she added, glancing back at Catherine, "it's nice junk, and all, but it weighs a young ton and we're never gonna get done tonight at this rate, right?"

And while Catherine looked on, blankly bemused and skeptical, Diana reached out and took another good hold on him – his upper arm, this time – and gave him another yank, just as though she didn't know he never came in, that this apartment was *The Forbidden*. Just as though she had no least question he was going to come help with the heavy stuff, like any civil male co-opted into such a situation by what were at least *friends*, goddam it! Like any normal guy.

If she made a goddam fool of herself, what the hell, she'd *tried*, and *somebody* had to break this wretched stalemate—

And Vincent took one hesitant step in response to her pull, and then another, and was inside.

Just as though she'd expected nothing else, Diana kept hauling and once the reflexive, habitual refusal had cracked, he kept coming: carefully avoiding the glass-topped table, carefully watching the few broad stairs when he came to them. But coming, because she'd pretty much made it goddamned impossible for him to do anything else, and there was a singing triumph in her that he'd do for her what he'd never done for Catherine.

That wasn't what was important. But it was there.

"We were just up to the hard part," Diana announced, letting go without looking at him, waving at the couches. "Gotta lift those suckers over the part of the rug that's not down yet. You take that end. Catherine, where do you want them to end up?"

They were looking at each other, Vincent and Catherine, and Diana couldn't read either of their faces. She was making a thundering fool of herself! She should never have intruded never have insisted, she was only making it worse –

"Where they used to be," Catherine told Vincent, who nodded and went obediently to the end of the couch Diana's wave had designated as his. Hastily, Diana scrambled to the other end, and Catherine assigned herself to getting as much as possible of the rug out of the way as they lifted it crookedly over what remained of the roll. In no time at all, the couches were in place, making a sort of corner angle by the fireplace.

Diana rocked back on her heels from smoothing out rug wrinkles. "Great," she said, with fierce, determined heartiness that dared anybody to argue. "Now we can tackle getting that dressing table and stuff into the bedroom. Vincent, you get the mirror: I'm scared I'll drop it, and wouldn't that be a mess?"

She barged over to the last remaining huddle of furniture to check out the dressing table, that it didn't have any drawers open that could fall out or catch on anything, or like that.

Vincent came to stand behind her. She could feel him there. She checked more drawers.

He said, "Diana, how is it that you're here?"

She glanced up at him wildly, trying to think of some acceptable excuse, but didn't have to because Catherine said at once, "She volunteered to help me settle in. Wasn't that nice of her?"

Diana wasn't sure she wanted to understand the expression in Vincent's eyes. Wary, maybe... and even suspicious. Almost certainly wanting to know what she'd said to Catherine about what had passed between them this morning at the lake.

Setting hands on her knees, Diana stared right back at him, intending to convey without words, *What kind of jerk do you think I am? I didn't say word one about it, buster – It's all just simple if you'll let it be.*

And apparently, he took enough of her reassurance to turn aside and find a good way to hold the big, heavy mirror that would attach to the back of the dresser, lift it (facing outward – away from him – she noticed) and walk away with it, slow, steady paces into the Utterly Forbidden: Catherine's bedroom. He knew just where it should go. Diana would have bet he could have drawn as good a map as she could, having memorized every single detail of the place early in the investigation.

Good for you! she thought, gazing at his back disappearing through the louvered doors. *Goddam good for you, taking it a step at a time, letting us play out the game of visiting boyfriend, normal guy helping out – not all the terror and the blood sweat just at the thought of doing what you're doing, being where you are. Letting it just be simple, uncharged, the terrible past grounded out into the everyday, ordinary present like I'm the lightning rod that drains off all the stalemate, all the impossibilities...*

He came back, standing between the folded-back louvered doors, waiting for further instructions.

Brushing a negligent hand through her hair, Catherine drawled, "*Babe?*" And Diana felt her face going absolutely incandescent.

"Pardon my New York mouth," she mumbled, heartily wishing that familiar endearment hadn't gotten past her teeth. "I –"

"The dressing table next, I assume?" Vincent put in, deflecting her babble, calmly waiting for Catherine's answer. Requiring it, by his waiting silence. Nobody could be still as commandingly as Vincent could when he wanted to.

Protecting me, Diana realized, with astonishment. *Protecting ME from awkwardness, embarrassment, because that's who he is. What he does. Absolutely and always. And that's what Catherine no longer needs or can tolerate from him. Or from anybody. And so that's the name of this game.*

She felt practically punched in the gut, seeing in that moment how it all fit. She probably was gaping like a moron.

"Sure, *babe*," responded Catherine cheerfully, with a wicked edge of a grin at Vincent. Teasing. Easily. As though it meant nothing and she was glad it meant nothing: as if it was a relief that another potential charge had dissipated, gone into the ground. Kneeling down beside Diana, Catherine asked, "What do you think – should we take the drawers out first?"

"They should be all right if we don't tip it. Let's try it first that way, anyhow."

"Okay. Shouldn't be too bad: the legs have rollers."

"Let's go for it, then."

They wheeled the dresser into place near the closet, and Vincent saw to getting the mirror in place and attached before they pushed it the rest of the way against the wall. They'd just finished with the chest of drawers (its drawers had to be removed and hand carried: it was too top heavy otherwise) when the doorbell sounded.

Vincent froze, head lifted. As Catherine swung by to get her purse, Diana explained, "Supper. Chinese take-out. Probably enough for three."

He settled, still listening and alert, still listening and alert but no longer alarmed. Against the safely distant doorway exchanges between Catherine and the delivery person, Vincent looked around.

"Diana. Why are you doing this?"

"Because it needs doing and somebody's got to, and I'm the only one who will. There: that satisfy you?"

"Why are you angry at me?"

“Is that what it seems like?”

He nodded.

“And you still have the guts to come right out and ask me?” she challenged.

Smiling faintly, he nodded again.

“Why?” she demanded.

“Because...,” he began, and then his eyes went distant.

“What?”

He bent his head a little. “Because I’m not afraid of the answer.”

Catherine passed by with the sack then and gave a head-jerk (her hands being fully occupied) to summon them out to the glass-topped table where they found her opening a series of take-out containers and lining them up next to a stack of Royal Doulton plates.

“Forks,” Diana decided, and went off to the drawer where she now knew tableware was kept. As she returned with a handful of forks and serving spoons, she saw how tensely Vincent was standing, looking down at the food. Or maybe at the chairs. Steel, probably, but delicate-looking: as though: as though they might break with a heavy person’s weight. Diana promptly plopped herself down on the top step. “Pass me one of everything,” she requested, holding up the spoons and the extra forks so Catherine could take them.

Vincent slowly settled onto a step a little way distant. After a minute, he commented, “I’ve already had supper. And you weren’t expecting... company. Please: enjoy your meal.”

There was something in his manner, his voice, that told Diana something was wrong that he was trying to pass over, but she didn’t know what.

“Doesn’t he like Chinese?” she asked Catherine, who looked around from dishing rice onto plates. Two plates.

“I haven’t the foggiest,” Catherine said, then asked Vincent, “Do you?”

“I’ve already eaten.”

Diana watched them both, trying to puzzle it out. She figured if she really made a noise about it, she could make him join them – just as she made him come in. But proving it, making him do it, would just be a power trip and actually pretty unkind, considering how plainly he didn’t want to. But he would, if she required it of him. However much he hated it.

Just knowing that was enough, she decided. She didn’t have to prove it – that in this, too, she could be one up on Catherine if she wanted to. That wasn’t what this was about. But it was still nice, knowing it. She bent to the plate Catherine passed her and was aware of Vincent relaxing when he was sure she was going to let the matter rest.

Holding a piled plate and chopsticks in a practiced V, Catherine started to sit down cross-legged on the rug, facing them both, then immediately set her plate aside and jumped up again.

“There’s probably still coffee left, if that’s okay?” she asked Diana. Then her eyes slid uneasily to Vincent. “But no tea, I’m sorry, I haven’t had a chance to really stock up at the store...”

Vincent shook his head, and Catherine seemed relieved to find her social lapse of being so certain she’d never need tea because he’d never come in, had been so easily dismissed.

While Catherine was in the kitchen getting coffee and fresh cups, Vincent pointed to Diana’s plate.

“What’s that?”

“That? It’s a fortune cookie. It’s dessert, sort of, with some dumb message inside, like ‘*You are going to meet a tall blonde stranger and—*,’” She muffled the rest of that with a mouthful of very good moo goo gai pan.

“May I see?” the large, furred, clawed hand hovered.

Diana swallowed hastily. “Sure, take it.”

The fingers dipped and delicately removed the folded cookie from her plate. Vincent was examining it when Catherine returned, put a cup on the bottom step by Diana, then settled herself where she’d been before.

“It’s a fortune cookie,” Catherine explained, watching him carefully turn and study it.

“I know. Diana told me. I’ve heard of them.” He looked at Diana. “Would you like to find out your fortune for yourself, or may I discover it for you?”

“It’s your cookie, babe —” Diana bit her lip when they both looked at her like two amused cats. She busied herself with her food. “Take the cookie, take the fortune. Never liked ‘em much anyhow. The cookies or the fortunes. Tasteless. In all senses of the word.” She wondered what in the world had gotten into him.

He cracked the cookie at the fold, just as if he knew what he was doing, and removed the tiny strip of paper with clawed forefinger and thumb. So serious. So intent. He offered the strip to her, but she waved it off. He smoothed the strip down against his knee. Then he recited, “Your wishes will come true, but not as you expect.”

Putting the flat of his hand onto strip and knee, he added, “Brooke has volunteered to care for Jacob during the day. She’s fascinated with young children. And it helps take her mind off her own loss... Stephen; and the plans they had together.”

There was a charged silence in which Diana realized that was the first word that had been said about the baby. That Vincent had brought it up because Catherine hadn’t. The silence demanded a response, a comment. Diana bent her head and hunched her shoulders to sit smaller, chewing with great intentness.

Vincent continued, “Of course, Mary keeps the day nursery, and it would not do to seem to slight her. To give one child... special consideration. So Brooke assists Mary, with the youngest children as her charge. Anything beyond that... is merely our understanding. Mine, and Brooke’s. Mary has consented to the arrangement. Father approves. So that’s how it’s been arranged.”

Catherine was being informed, not consulted. And a glance Diana couldn’t resist, at Catherine’s face, told her Catherine caught the nuances: she was staring at Vincent, who wasn’t looking back. Catherine’s face was stiff and unhappy. Then Catherine lowered her eyes, bent and turned her head so that a wing of hair partly concealed her profile — something she’d probably picked up from Vincent, who did that a lot. The chopsticks selected and delivered a sliver of food.

“It sounds like a good arrangement.”

Vincent nodded. “Jamie’s help has diminished the number of security patrols I must see to personally. When I am teaching or similarly occupied in my chamber, or Father’s, I can keep Jacob with me. And most nights. On those occasions I am away during the night, there is the night nursery. Mary assures me that one more sleeping charge constitutes no additional trouble worth mentioning. So... that’s how it’s been arranged.”

Finally, at the last, stress showed in his calm, unemphatic voice — announcing the arrangements that absolved Catherine of all parental duties and requested her blessing on none of them.

For all his politeness, Vincent knew how to go straight for the bone when he wanted to. And Diana thought that this was his equivalent of saying It – what, in fact, he'd come to say, before he'd had any thought of finding Diana here.

"Yes," said Catherine softly. "I understand." The chopsticks selected, rose, descended. "I start back at the office on Monday."

"I thought you probably would," Vincent responded.

*Tell him! Diana's mind blurted. Tell him about switching to trial duty, not being out on the streets tracking down snitches anymore! No more midnight depositions! Tell him, dammit!**

But Catherine said only, "I'll come when I can. Weekends, mostly. It's going to be pretty hectic for awhile. There's such a lot to catch up on."

"Yes," said Vincent.

Diana found it hard to sort all the implications of that brief exchange. It took so much for granted, unspoken. Dismissed so many possibilities. As if the furniture-moving had left any doubt. Catherine wasn't going to move Below. Jacob wasn't going to live above, except maybe for occasional visits. Catherine was surrendering all responsibility and rights concerning their child. Vincent was the one who'd make "arrangements." Maybe he'd inform her about them from time to time. But neither invite nor require her consent about them. Any more than Catherine meant to ask his consent about *her* personal arrangements. Or, plainly, even inform him of them until they were already in place. Until she was ready to tell him.

Catherine, Diana thought, didn't look happy about it. But she wasn't arguing. What she looked, when that shielded profile lifted, was relieved.

"I'm glad," Catherine mentioned, with a small smile, "you finally decided to come in. See? It's not so scary, is it?"

"No," Vincent agreed, vaguely looking around at the apartment, Catherine's things mostly back in place, where she wanted them – where they used to be. Back to normal. "Not frightening at all... now. I'm glad I chanced to come when I could be of help."

"Maybe next time," Catherine suggested, "you'll come right in without needing to be dragged."

Vincent gave her an opaque look. Then his eyes moved slowly to Diana and stayed there. One of those long, still looks that generally made Diana feel she ought to duck, hide, disappear into the floor.

"Perhaps," he said.

His hand moved, and the forgotten little strip of fortune-cookie paper drifted to the floor. The both reached for it at the same time. Instead of withdrawing his hand, letting her get the scrap, his hand closed around Diana's. Hard. They were sitting right there on the step, right in front of Catherine, holding hands. Suddenly Diana could find no air to breathe. She tried to swallow the current mouthful and choked on it. Started coughing. Had to be pounded firmly on the back and her shoulders held until she could get her airway clear. It was Vincent holding her shoulders, an arm around her back, regarding her solicitously. Sitting right next to her now on the step, hip against hip, thigh against thigh, and all she could manage was astonished wheezes, intensely aware of his closeness, the smoke-and-candle scent of his clothes – of him; the warmth of being tilted to lean back against his chest, his hair brushing her forehead as his free hand collected her coffee cup from the floor.

"Drink some," he directed.

While he held the cup, she managed to slurp a little and get it past the blockage in her throat. He waited until she'd swallowed, then raised the cup again. She obediently drank.

"Now," he said, letting her sit straight, and as she figured that was it, end of impersonal first aid, he cracked one of the two halves of fortune cookie shell and held it in front of her face. For her to eat it

from his fingers. No expression... but his eyes were smiling a little, quite aware of her discomfiture. Leaving her no option – just as she'd left him none about coming in. And his eyes said he knew it, and knew she knew it. And figured turn-about was fair play.

Calling the tune, that he required she dance to. Consciously and deliberately one upping her – and confident that she'd play along. *Not afraid of the answer.*

There was nothing else to do. She shut her eyes, opened her mouth, and let him feed her the piece of cookie. It was warm from his hands. It crunched. She felt she was going to cry or explode. She chewed it small enough to swallow. The cup was back, waiting. She sipped a little, thinking in undiminished astonishment.

He's goddam flirting with me! Right in front of her! What the hell does he think he's doing? What the hell does he expect me to do?

"Better?" Vincent inquired blandly, setting the cup down but not otherwise moving. Still right next to her.

"Are you OK?" Catherine chimed in.

Diana bobbed her head. The recovered twist of paper was still clutched in her fingers. She pulled it flat. It said, *When journeying by water, steer by the stars.* She blinked at it stupidly for a second. Then she crumpled it and stuck it hastily into a pocket.

Every breath he took, she felt. As he must be feeling hers. And whatever else she was feeling, this close. Touching. It was so unlike him. *He's sitting by me for a reason,* she thought.

Vincent folded his hands tightly between his knees. He sat that way for a minute. Then he said, like asking about what they should move next, "Catherine, will you marry me?"

Diana stopped breathing again. This time, though, she didn't choke. She sat very still. Letting it be between the two of them. As it had to be.

Catherine looked startled right down to her toes. Her mouth tightened, and that was the answer. Setting the chopsticks and plate aside, Catherine knelt forward, reached out a hand, and placed it on his knee, looking up into his face, blinking fast. Anxious. Unhappy. Wanting not to hurt.

"Must you ask?"

"I feel I must."

"Then I suppose I have to answer. I suppose... My dear love, no. It's impossible. There will never be anyone else who'll be to me what you are. But – no. That, we cannot be to one another. The world won't let us." Catherine lifted her other hand – a gesture of helplessness. "I thought... I believed you knew that. Always knew that."

"Perhaps I did," Vincent responded in a soft, hoarse voice. "I know it's what Father has always believed. And dreaded. That someday, I would come to the end of the possibilities."

"Yes," said Catherine. "I know. But we have so *much*, Vincent! So much more than most people dream of already! You mustn't blame yourself."

"I don't," Vincent replied, and Catherine was surprised, slowly withdrawing her hand, sitting back, obviously having expected a different response. Vincent added, "You being what you are... and I, what I am. It's not possible."

Catherine was nodding. "But it's not your fault—you never asked to be born different—"

"I find," Vincent interrupted quietly. "I am more ordinary than I imagine anyone supposed."

Diana thought, *She's doing it! Claiming it's all him – how he is. And he's not backing down. Hot damn!* She leaned against him a little harder, to help give him the courage of her convictions. Which

was why he'd contrived to sit so close, she was now certain. Without her there, without that new angle in the habitual dynamic between himself and Catherine, he couldn't have said it.

Because he was no longer afraid of the answer. That's what he'd been telling her, and realizing for himself before. That was when he'd decided to say it. All of it. Impassively spelling out the limits they would live within, hereafter – he and Catherine. And Jacob. *And me*, Diana realized, with enough of a shock that Vincent tilted his head and looked at her inquiringly, though she'd made no sound nor moved a muscle.

"It's all right," Vincent said – to Catherine again. "And if it should happen... that our circumstances change, we will not change. Should you find someone Above... to be a part of. It will make no difference to what we are to one another."

Almost, it was a question. Almost, she could believe he was really talking about Catherine, rather than himself.

Catherine smiled. "No. Of course not! Not that it's likely, of course. I'm not exactly eager to start dating again, let me tell you! Much less get married – to anybody – or start a family. My life is complicated enough as it is!"

Start? Diana thought indignantly. *Start? What's Jacob, then – and end? An accident?*

Then she immediately thought, *Jacob's slipped her mind. She's simply forgotten him. He doesn't count.*

If Vincent was thinking the same thing, he gave no sign. "Of course. I understand that better now." He stirred, unfisting his hands pulling his boot heels in against the step. "Now, if the heavy labor is done, I believe I must go." Rising, he stood waiting for permission to leave.

"Not social," Diana muttered, and got a sidelong glance down from the top of that blond tower.

Catherine jumped to her feet, blurting hostess *of course* and trailing him to the balcony doors – still worried, Diana thought, that he'd be upset about what had passed between them; trying to reassure herself he wasn't going to go and mope on some rooftop like a gargoyle, at having his proposal turned down so decisively, with no need for consideration. Catherine didn't want him hurt. But she damn well didn't want to marry him either – which they all knew, now. Which maybe was all that mattered.

Shutting the balcony doors, Catherine turned and set her back against them. She puffed out a breath. Then seemed to notice Diana, sitting so still on the step, on the far side of the glass table.

"Well," Catherine remarked, "that could have been worse. *Lots* worse. I've been dreading something like that, to tell the truth. But... it seemed... He seemed..."

"He'll get over it," Diana commented offhandedly.

"I guess he's had some practice. While I was away. Time to become a little more independent. Accept things. I'm glad you were here, though – that would have been... hard to get through, otherwise. It helps, sometimes, to have an audience. I hope you weren't too—"

"Yeah, I guess." Diana got up and looked around. She'd decided against begging off too soon – that would have been too obvious. She could be generous with her time, she thought. She had time now – all the time in the world. "So – What's next? Finish up the kitchen, or start on the knick-knacks?"

Catherine brushed back her hair and absently adjusted her headband. "*Knick-knacks?*" she inquired, mock-haughty.

"Whatever." Diana smiled and shrugged.

Catherine opted for shoving the entertainment center into place, locating the box of CDs, records, and tapes, and putting them all in their appropriate cubbyholes or shelves. When the plug was put in, the receiver came on, filling the place with classical music. Looking around, Catherine slapped a

button. The receiver switched over to an “easy-listening” station. Wallpaper music. Catherine hummed along, cheerfully pitching little pillows onto the couches like somebody shooting baskets. Afterward, she went and straightened them, setting each at exactly the angle she wanted against the couch backs or the armrests.

Another cup of coffee and a box of heavy, waterless cookware, unstained by use, put away before Diana figured she could gracefully call it a night and take her leave. They wandered together to the door, Catherine hoping she’d visit again – soon. Outside, Diana heard the chains being reset and the deadbolts snapped home as she went in lengthening strides to the elevator.

When the doors slid open, she slapped the top button hard.

Reaching the top, she slid out at speed, hit the roof door, dashed up the short flight of steps, and slammed the door at the top back against the bricks. And plunged directly into Vincent’s arms.

“I couldn’t just leave—,” she blurted, face tight against his neck.

“I knew you’d come,” he was saying at the same time, holding on hard. He took a step, and she stepped with him, not going anyplace, just around in a circle – like a dance. Like a dream.

“Oh, babe,” she said. “Oh, babe. I thought you were gonna tell her. I was scared to death you’d think you had to tell her.”

“It’s not necessary. She’ll see. Eventually. No need. And she’ll be reconciled to it. To us. Perhaps even relieved.”

“Gonna give her a hell of a shock, though.” She gazed up at him anxiously. “When she notices.”

“It can’t be helped. She has chosen her way. Set the limits. Not I. The consequences of those limits... No need to say anything. Let her *be* one up, if her pride requires it.

“Saving face, you mean.”

They did another little dance turn, around and around, his cloak billowing and blowing.

Vincent said, “This is all the *up* that matters to me. Nowhere is higher than this. I am so blessed. Except for you –”

“Leave it. Don’t gotta say it. Leave –”

His mouth on hers stopped all the talk quite effectively, for quite a long time.

She’d never been happier in her life.

Patting the soft, fine fur of his jaw, she said distractedly. “You fibber.”

“What?”

“You fibbed. About the fortune. From the cookie.”

“I told the truth. All the truth that matters.”

“Yeah. I guess you did, at that. ‘Steer by the stars’ – that’s good advice, too, I guess. But I’m not planning to go anyplace by water anytime soon.”

Conversation stopped again for awhile – exuberantly. Passionately.

Trying to catch her breath, laughing, Diana inquired dryly. “Just how much reassurance did you have in mind, babe?”

He opened his mouth, then closed it. She could see the stars reflected in his eyes. After a minute, he said, “None. All.”

Sobering, studying his face, she asked, “Do you think this is the right time? There’s such a thing as rebound. I wouldn’t want –”

"I think now is precisely the right time. If you won't promise to stay with me – either – I must offer you an inducement. Not to take long ocean voyages. Not ... to go away."

"Oh, babe, don't you know that's never going to happen?"

"You cannot imagine... how I hope it will not."

"And do you really think a bribe's gonna do it? *Inducements?*"

"I –," he began, and then bent his face against her head. His breaths shook him. He said. "*Please*. Call it what you will. But please."

Sometime, he'd learn he didn't have to beg. But begging was OK too, for now: she figured he really meant it. No other considerations she need take into account, warn him against, hold herself back from. No ghosts hovering at his shoulder, demanding a rite of exorcism.

"Sometimes, you really need somebody close, who loves you."

He nodded several times.

She asked, "Can you hold out as far as my place?"

"If I must." Lifting his head, he chuckled at the scandalized look he found on her face.

She punched his arm lightly. "Bet I beat you there."

"Bet you don't."

He was off toward the building parapet. Diana wheeled to the roof door and started pounding down again.

She didn't live on the subway line. And she knew shortcuts. So she hit the roof of her loft at least a minute before Vincent's big dark outline swung over the top of the fire escape.

"I win," she announced, the second before she was swung again into the dance of embrace.

Vincent wisely said nothing. Or the answer his mouth made didn't consist of words, which was probably just as well. She didn't quite melt into a puddle there on the roof. They made it downstairs and as far as the couch before the necessary minimum of clothing had been discarded. The rest got removed afterward, during more leisurely intervals. There was time.

END