

PLAY IT AGAIN

by Nancy Mastandrea

She hated these assignments, hated them with a passion. But here she was once again, walking down a desolate alley on her way to yet another meeting with an informant. She knew Vincent always worried about her safety on these treks, so she had warned him to please stay away. After the incident with the Silks, when Vincent had almost been killed, she had vowed to keep him as safe as possible from the evil elements of her world.

Treading through the rough sections of the city at night was eerie. It gave her a most unsettling feeling of impending doom. But this was her job after all, and she was determined to perform her duties to the best of her ability. Hopefully, after this case was over she would get a little bit of a reprieve from tracking down witnesses in the slums of this great city of New York.

She stepped purposefully along the crumbling sidewalks - sidewalks which were obviously neglected by the city work crews. *'They don't want to be in this neighborhood either, even in the daylight,'* she mused. With one hand she clutched at the front of her jacket, trying unsuccessfully to keep the chill of the night air away from her neck. The other hand nervously fingered the small revolver which she really didn't enjoy carrying, but had learned from past experiences was necessary even though Isaac's training was always at her command.

Derelicts of all shapes and sizes lined the sidewalks, some sleeping, some in drunken stupors, others leering and making grotesque noises at her as she passed. But luckily, so far no one had bothered to pay her any real attention. Her uneasiness escalated to the point where she worried that it would summon Vincent to her rescue. Immediately, she pushed these feelings from her mind and replaced them with more pleasant thoughts.

She quickened her pace and kept her eyes straight ahead. It was difficult to see; the lighting was poor. It seemed most of the lights had either been shot out or just plain worn out. She chastised herself for not having brought a flashlight. *'Next time,'* she thought.

When she felt she was near her destination, she began searching the doors for the right address. Once again, she checked the scrap of paper which held the address. *'No, not this one.... Nope, a couple more doors.'* She was paying attention to what was in front of her on the sidewalk; so intent was she in locating the meeting place that she bumped right into an extremely tall, foul smelling man.

Startled, she let out a small half-scream. "Spare change, lady?" he slobbered at her, sending spittle through the air to land unceremoniously on her shoulder.

She took a step back away from his stench, raised her eyes to his and calmly replied, "Sorry, no." But when he didn't yield his position, she added. "Excuse me, I'd like to pass."

She attempted to get around him but to no avail. Whichever way she stepped, he would block her path. Her eyes scanned the surrounding area, searching for cohorts in this game of his. Sensing that this little game was his alone, she felt a bit more confident and gave him a healthy shove into the brick building to her right.

"Oh, so you wanna play, huh, lady?" He grabbed at her waist behind just as a thin black man appeared and violently pushed the human garbage once again into the brick wall.

"Vincent?" Father called softly to his dearly loved son, sensing something was amiss by the faraway look on Vincent's face. He knew that look well. It seemed whenever Catherine was in danger, Vincent could sense it. Usually by this time though, Vincent could be seen running down

tunnel corridors.

"Is everything all right?" he continued, hoping to get some response from the huge but gentle man he had adopted many years ago.

Father put aside the book he was reading and rose from his large winged chair. Grasping his cane, he began hobbling toward his son. He laid a gnarled hand upon Vincent's shoulder, causing his son to snap out of his trance.

"Vincent?"

Vincent stared into his father's clear brown eyes. In his rough silky voice he said, "I felt that Catherine was in danger, but then it passed.... I'm going to retire now, Father. I'll be in my chamber if you need me." He embraced the older man, placing a kiss at his temple. "Goodnight, Father."

"Goodnight, son. Sleep well." He watched as Vincent exited the library chamber before limping back behind the desk to resume his reading.

"Leave her alone," the black man ordered Catherine's attacker. His sad eyes flashed in Catherine's direction. "Go on.... Get outta here!"

But Catherine couldn't move. She remained frozen to the concrete. "Rolley?" she questioned, recognition obvious in her voice.

"Go, Miss. Chandler, please. I'll take care of him. I owe you. Now go!" he shouted.

The beggar lurched forward, attacking Rolley at the knees and spilling them both out into the street. Rolley's head hit the pavement with a solid thud; Catherine cringed. He appeared only dazed, but was unable to defend himself. This was all the time this guy needed to begin pelting the black man's face with his fists. Blow after blow fell upon the semiconscious Rolley. Catherine couldn't stand and watch this kindhearted friend of the world Below get beaten to death. She ran over to the brawling pair and quickly shot her foot directly between the bum's legs, using all the strength she could muster. He rolled onto his side, screaming bloody murder and clutching his private parts. "You bitch....", he bellowed.

Catherine ignored him and leaned over Rolley, firmly grasping his shirt collar. "Rolley, get up.... we have to get out of here." Distress colored her face. Her friend shook his head from side to side to clear it as he allowed Catherine to lift him to his feet. "

You okay?" she asked worriedly. He nodded that he was ready to go on. Together they ran unsteadily down the dark street, leaving the injured man in the gutter still screaming obscenities at them.

Finally they stopped, a safe distance from the recent danger. Both were breathing heavily, gasping for well earned air.

"Rolley, are you sure you're okay?" Catherine asked between breaths. "You were taking quite a beating from that creep. Thanks for coming to my rescue." She squeezed his arm affectionately, peering into the brown depths of his eyes.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm fine. How about you? He didn't hurt you, did he? Vincent would never forgive me if he did," he explained.

"No, he didn't hurt me. I'm fine." An idea came to her and she acted upon it. "Rolley, how about a nice cup of coffee. I think I need one to calm my nerves. The witness I was supposed to meet can just pick a safer spot next time. How about it? Besides, I think I could use an escort out of this neighborhood," she added.

Rolley contemplated her offer for a minute or two before answering. "Yeah, I have to make sure you get home safely."

After making their way unharmed out of the bad section of the city, they came upon a cute little diner that was open 24 hours. They entered and found a booth by the window, turning a few heads as they passed. Neither seemed to notice though.

The waitress, a short round black woman with happy eyes and a sparkling smile, brought them menus. Catherine glanced at Rolley. He appeared not to have eaten in quite some time. But it did look as if he was taking better care of himself. Maybe he was off the drugs.

"I'm starving," she said as she peered over the menu. "Let's get something to eat. Are you hungry, Rolley?" She hoped he'd let her buy him a meal. After all, he deserved it; he had saved her from the derelict. She noticed the hesitation in her companion's manner and added. "I'm buying, order whatever you want."

"Thank you, Miss. Chandler. I haven't eaten in three days."

"Call me Cathy or Catherine, okay, Rolley?"

After the waitress took their orders, Catherine found out through conversation that Rolley indeed had kicked the habit. He'd been clean for six months, but still didn't seem to have any direction in life. He was still living on the streets and couldn't find any work.

He ate like the starving man he was, somewhat embarrassed at the speed at which he consumed his meal.

After they'd both finished eating and Catherine had paid the bill, they walked together into the chilled night air. Catherine pulled her coat tightly around her while she glanced at her companion, who was not dressed anymore warmly than she was, and wondered just how he managed to live the way he did on the streets, especially as the weather turned cold.

"Would you mind walking me home, Rolley?" she inquired sweetly. Then continued, "After what happened, I'd feel safer...."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll walk you. I got nothin' better to do anyway. It's a good way to keep warm, too. You know, keep movin'," Rolley said, as he slowed his pace to accommodate Catherine's shorter legs.

"What kind of work are you looking for? Anything in particular?" she questioned, wondering if maybe there was a way she could help him. "Have you thought about playing piano for a living?"

"No. I couldn't do that. I haven't played since I was small. Since...." His face saddened at the memory of his music teacher.

"I'm sorry for bringing up unpleasant memories, Rolley, but you have such talent. Even though I've never heard you play, Vincent and the others have such praise for your knack for the piano. They told me you could play any song you hear without the music sheets." Rolley didn't answer so she continued. "I have a friend who owns a piano bar. I'm sure I can persuade him to let me use the piano for a little while. Would you play for me?"

Rolley nodded as he spoke. "Only for you because of Vincent, you know. He had so much faith in me and I let him down. I'm trying to straighten myself out, I really am, Miss. Chandler. I want him to be proud of me again some day."

Catherine jotted down an address on a matchbook cover and handed it to him. "Meet me there tomorrow at 6:30. The place doesn't open till 9:00, so we should have plenty of time, okay?"

"Yeah, okay."

They had reached her apartment building finally and as Catherine turned to go inside, she got a good feeling about Rolley. Once she would have thought he wouldn't have shown, but this time was different. She knew he would be there.

"Goodnight, Rolley. Thanks again for rescuing me. See you tomorrow."

"Goodnight, Miss. Chandler," he answered as he proceeded on his way. She watched until he was

out of view before she went into the building.

"Sorry, Joe, but I ran into a problem trying to get to our witness last night. Luckily not all street people are the same. There are a few nice ones out there. I'll have to try to arrange another meeting, in a safer place."

She explained to her boss the incident of the previous night, leaving out a few details but generally giving him the meat of the episode.

Joe ran his fingers through his hair. "I can't afford to lose you, kiddo. You be careful."

She smiled sweetly at his concern for her. "I will, Joe. Don't worry. I'll pick a very safe place this time."

Joe picked his rump up off the corner of her desk and walked towards the door. "Now back to work, Radcliffe. There's plenty of it!" he said smugly, as he left her office.

Catherine rifled through her purse for her address book, and the phone number for Kevin Cotter, the club owner she knew. Actually, she had met the man through Vincent. Kevin was one of the many Helpers to the world Below. She picked up the phone and dialed.

When she heard the pleasant male voice at the end of the phone line, she spoke into the receiver. "Kevin? It's Catherine Chandler."

"Cathy, it's so nice to hear from you. How are you.... and Vincent? I haven't seen either of you in quite some time now."

"We're both fine, Kevin. Thanks. I have a couple of favors I need to ask of you."

"Shoot."

She explained to him about Rolley, and her need to find a safe place to meet a witness. He agreed to both favors and planned to meet her at 5:30 at the '*Blue Note*.' Her next step was to convince the witness to meet her there. With only a small amount of persuasion, he also agreed to the meeting place.

When she arrived at the '*Blue Note*,' Kevin greeted her happily. He was an extremely handsome man in his late thirties, someone in whom she could have become interested if she wasn't already in love with Vincent.

Her witness showed up right on time and was ushered in through the back entrance. The statement he gave her was just what they needed to tie up all the loose ends of the Pintarelli case. Joe would be pleased.

Six-thirty came and went. No Rolley. She felt she couldn't have been wrong about him. He seemed so sincere. At seven-fifteen she and Kevin heard a gentle rapping at the front door.

"Rolley, I was worried you wouldn't come. Is everything all right?" Catherine asked.

"Sorry.... I wasn't gonna come, but then I figured I couldn't let you down too," Rolley said apologetically.

"Rolley, I want you to meet Kevin Cotter, the owner of the '*Blue Note*.'" The two men nodded greetings to each other. "As soon as you're ready, Kevin will leave us alone, so it'll be just you and me like I promised, okay?"

"I'm ready, Miss. Chandler," he replied, as he spotted the baby grand piano across the room and began moving towards it. Kevin excused himself, but hid in the prearranged spot to hear Rolley play.

Rolley played and played, seemingly in his own little world, as if Catherine wasn't even in the room. Kevin couldn't believe his ears. This young man was a genius with his fingers, just the person he needed to work for him.

Kevin entered the room applauding enthusiastically as Rolley was just finishing a piece. "Bravo! Bravo! Sorry to intrude, but I have to open this place soon. But the little bit I heard was fantastic. Is there any possibility that I could steal you away from your current employer to work for me, Rolley? You're just what this place needs." He played his part convincingly.

Rolley sat there, stunned. All eyes were on him for his reaction. Slowly his head nodded in affirmation, but before he could voice his answer, Catherine jumped in. "Well, as his lawyer, friend and agent, I can work out the details, but I insist on four hour sessions and a two week advance." Kevin smiled conspiratorially at her and nodded his agreement. "Does that sound fair to you, Rolley?" She turned to him and winked.

"Yeah...." A broad smile lit his face.

"Okay then. Let's find you a place to stay so you don't have to travel so far to work," Catherine began.

Kevin interrupted. "I have a room for rent upstairs if you're interested, not fancy but comfortable." All the necessary arrangements were made and it looked to Catherine as if Rolley was on his way to having his happy life.

That night after a soothing shower as Catherine was preparing herself a light dinner, she heard the familiar tapping on the French doors. '*Vincent....*' Her heart soared as she opened the doors and saw the man of her dreams standing there.

"Catherine....," he whispered longingly as she eased into his embrace.

She brushed her cheek against the soft suede vest that covered his broad chest. "Vincent, I've missed you...." Taking his huge hands into her own small ones, she led him into her apartment. "I was fixing myself a bite to eat. Would you care to join me?"

"Yes, Catherine," he responded, as he settled comfortably into a chair in the living room.

As she bustled around the kitchen, she began humming a tune that Rolley had played. "Vincent? Would you put on some music please?" she called into the other room. Within minutes Vivaldi could be heard floating through the apartment.

After they'd eaten their meal in comfortable silence, Vincent moved to collect the dirtied dishes.

"Leave them, Vincent. I'll take care of them later when you're gone," she instructed sweetly. Patting the cushion beside her, she invited him to sit next to her. "I'd like to come Below on Saturday. I have a surprise for you," she said excitedly.

"I'd like that, Catherine. I'm sure Father will be pleased to see you as well. But what is this about a surprise? Won't you tell me?" he implored.

"Then it wouldn't be a surprise, now would it, Vincent?" she murmured, as she snuggled against him.

"I suppose not, Catherine," he replied dejectedly. She had aroused his curiosity.

Shortly thereafter, it was time for the lovers to part. "Catherine, when are you coming Below on Saturday?" Vincent whispered into her ear, adding a tiny nibble to his love. "For lunch possibly.... or maybe a little afternoon snack....?"

Catherine placed a loving kiss on the end of his nose. "Ummmm.... the afternoon delight sounds promising. I should get there around 2:00, okay?" she said in a most seductive voice.

"Ummmm.... sounds wonderful. Goodnight, my love." He lowered his head until their lips met in a fiery kiss. Then he was gone.

As Catherine prepared for her venture Below she thought about the surprise she had planned for her beloved. She dressed casually and curled her hair to fall gently about her face. Just the right

amount of makeup and a touch of her favorite cologne and she was very pleased with the reflection that smiled back at her from the full length mirror.

As she descended into the world she called her second home, she felt Vincent's massive hands clutch at her tiny waist. He picked her off the ladder and placed her on her feet in front of him. *'My, he looks handsome!'* His fingers immediately pushed the curls away from her face as he brushed her cheek with the furry tops of his fingers.

"Catherine.... you are so beautiful. I am so fortunate...." His mouth captured hers as his strong arms encircled her waist. She brought her arms around his neck and hung on, feeling the exquisite texture of his mane between her fingers.

"You're mighty handsome yourself," she replied, trying to dispel some of the mounting sexual tension.

"Come," he suggested, as he took her small hand to lead her through the tunnels. They strolled at a leisurely pace, catching each other up on the happenings of the past few days. Before they knew it, they were in Father's chamber.

"Catherine, so nice to see you, my dear. Care to join me in a cup of tea? You too, Vincent, of course." He chuckled.

After they'd settled themselves around the small table, Vincent spoke. "Father, Catherine has a surprise for me this evening. Maybe you can persuade her to tell you what it is."

"I'm sure, son, when Catherine is ready, she will tell you. Do you want to spoil your own surprise?" Father chided as he winked at Catherine. Vincent hung his head like a scolded child, his long golden mane hiding his leonine features.

"It's not such a big deal," Catherine began. "I heard from Kevin Cotter the other day and he invited us to the club tonight. Sorry, Vincent.... I didn't mean to keep you in suspense for so long."

"Kevin.... It has been some time since we've seen him. That will be wonderful. Thank you, Catherine." Vincent was somewhat relieved that it was a simple surprise and not one of Catherine's more elaborate schemes.

They remained in Father's chamber for the entire afternoon, to the mild dismay of the two lovers who kept eyeing each other from the opposite sides of the table. After dinner, they were rewarded with a couple of hours alone together in Vincent's chamber.

They made it to the underground entrance of the *'Blue Note'* right on time. Kevin was there to greet them and had a table set up in the basement to accommodate all three of them.

"Vincent, it's been a long time. How have you been?" Kevin asked warmly.

"Very well, Kevin. Yourself?"

"Oh, fine.... fine. The reason I wanted both of you here tonight is because I found a new pianist. He's terrific! I know how much you two love music. He should be starting soon. Have a listen while I get us some drinks." Kevin vanished up the stairs and left the couple alone in the candlelit room.

The basement room they were in was located directly below the piano, so when the music started, it was almost like being in the same room. Vincent allowed the music to take over his mind as he sat back in his chair and closed his eyes.

Kevin returned carrying a tray with three wine glasses and a bottle of Dom Perignon. "I thought we could all enjoy a nice bottle of wine," he said jovially. "I know you don't care for the hard stuff, Vincent. Care to join me?"

When Vincent opened his eyes, he saw two pairs of eyes focused on him. "Kevin.... the music is extraordinary. Can he play anything?"

"I haven't really tested him but I think so. Do you have a request in mind?"

Vincent thought a moment. " *'The Moonlight Sonata'...*" His mind flashed back to Rolley; he was determined to compare this talent to that of the young boy from his past.

"Well, pal. That's a lovely song, but I don't think for this crowd. I'll have him play it after his obligations to the customers are fulfilled. Deal?"

The hours melted away pleasantly while the three old friends caught up on each other's lives. Kevin excused himself to close up and to ask Rolley to stay late and play one more song for a special friend. He agreed gladly. His long slender fingers hung momentarily above the ivory keys before the beautiful notes came cascading out into the air.

Kevin had convinced Vincent to sneak upstairs to see his new pianist firsthand. Of course he would be hidden in the shadows so as not to startle the young man. As the trio climbed the stairs, the wondrous strains of the sonata bombarded Vincent's memory. No one could play this song so beautifully except... As he peeked out from the basement door, everything fell into place - Catherine's surprise, Kevin's invitation and Beethoven's sonata, all added up to one thing. His old friend Rolley was here, sitting there at the baby grand, playing for him; obviously Rolley was not in on the charade. Sensing no one else in the club, Vincent silently inched forward. He stood mere feet from the piano and listened.

When the music ended, Rolley's ears were filled with applause. He gazed around the dimly lit room to smile at his audience until his eyes fell upon the tall, cloaked figure to his left. Admiration shone on Vincent's face as he applauded.

"Vincent!" This time Rolley stepped toward the gentle man instead of running from him. They hugged each other tightly, once again at peace with each other.

"Vincent, I'm so glad you came."

"I always knew you could do it, Rolley. But until Catherine explained that you had to do it in your own time, I didn't understand. I do now and I'm very happy for you.... and proud."

"Thanks, Vincent. I know I can't change the past and it still hurts sometimes. Just knowin' you and Cathy had faith in me helped."

"You still play beautifully, Rolley; even better. And I hope you'll come Below to play for us.... you know you're always welcome. We're still your family and we all love you very much."

"I'd like that, Vincent. Just say the word and I'm there. I miss having a family."

"Tomorrow then...."

As Catherine and Vincent made their leisurely way through the tunnels back toward the hub, Vincent could feel his love's happiness strumming through the bond.

"Catherine, are you happy that you deceived me?" he questioned, with an amused tone to his voice.

"What do you mean, Vincent?" she asked. She felt she had done something wonderful.

"I thought this time I had finally won when you told me of my little surprise, but you outsmarted me again. I shall be on guard next time," he chuckled. "Seriously though, you did a wonderful thing for Rolley and for me. Thank you, Catherine. I love you."

"Vincent, you deserve all the wonderful things in the world. I'm just glad that I can make a few of your dreams come true. No one deserves that more than you do."

Her arms wound around his neck, as on tiptoes she kissed his unique mouth. "I love you, Vincent.... with all that I am. Let's go home."

END