

# Dimensions in Time

by Pat Paone

The lone figure strolled aimlessly through the trees with no particular direction in mind. It was already dusk and he knew he shouldn't be walking alone in Central Park at this hour, but he desperately needed the solitude it offered him. He had grown up in New York, so he knew the park well. He also knew the dangers it could present to those foolish enough to tread its pathways without heed.

"You must be crazy, Perlman," he muttered to himself, but still he continued his solitary ramble, lost in deep thought, oblivious to the gathering gloom, which was slowly closing in around him. He knew that he had been overdoing things for some time, but the many exciting opportunities that had presented themselves had been too good to turn down. The work had been coming in thick and fast, and he reveled in it, especially when he thought back to the early days of his career, when, disappointed and disillusioned, he had turned his back on the whole acting profession for a while, and had resorted to becoming a limousine driver.

Here in New York, he had worked mainly in the theatre, and he'd always loved the tremendous buzz that appearing before a live audience had evoked in him, but he had yearned to broaden his horizons by trying to succeed in the world of film and television.

So Hollywood was the place to be - or so he had thought. But it had been tougher than he'd ever imagined, and even though the experience of being "Mr Mom" to his baby daughter for the first three years of her life had been an enriching one, in so many ways, he would always remember the feelings of frustration and inadequacy he had felt during those early years, when work had been very unpredictable. So when his luck had finally begun to change and things had started to happen for him, he hadn't wanted to turn any of it down.

He smiled to himself as he remembered how close he had come to refusing one of the greatest roles of his career, simply because he didn't want to accept another heavy make-up job after enduring as much as four to five hours of make-up each day for his roles in films like "*Quest For Fire*", and "*The Name of the Rose*".

He had informed his agent that he didn't even want to see a script which involved any more complicated prosthetics, but his agent had ignored his instructions and sent him the script for the pilot of a new television series called "*Beauty and the Beast*."

Ron had been hooked from the first page, and had successfully auditioned for the role of Vincent, never dreaming that the program would go beyond the pilot episode. Yet the series had run for three seasons, winning him several awards and making his name, if not necessarily his face, far more widely known; then numerous television interviews and appearances finally had made his own face more easily recognizable too. He'd even made a record, an album of poetry and classical music from the series, which had been extremely successful. Oh yes, he had a great deal to be grateful to Vincent for. He'd certainly not been unemployed since then.

But now he felt tired, drained. After realizing how much he needed to recharge his batteries, he had come home to New York for a well-deserved vacation. But today all the sounds of this city he loved so much had begun to grate on him, a fact that astounded and dismayed him. Instinctively, he had sought the peace and tranquility he knew this area of the park would offer at this time of day, but the dark clouds of night had begun to gather faster than he had anticipated, and now to top it all, as he resurfaced from his deep reverie, he could see that there was a storm approaching at an alarming

speed.

"Oh great!" he mumbled to himself. "This is all I need!"

He turned to retrace his steps, as the rumbling of thunder moved closer and lightning flashed across the sky above him. There was no rain - yet. Could he make it back before the heavens opened? Strangely, he didn't recognize this part of the park at all. How could that be? He knew the park so well; he'd known it all his life.

He moved quickly through a clump of trees and then stopped in surprise. Ahead of him lay a large clearing, and on the far side, nestling into a grassy hillside, was the large concrete mouth of a drainage tunnel. He stared at it in disbelief. This was something he did recognize - very well - but it should be in Griffith Park in L.A., not here in New York! What the devil was happening here?

A shiver ran down his spine and he had the sudden urge to leave here, fast. He turned in a circle, not quite sure which direction to head in. Suddenly, there was a huge flash of lightning and he heard a tremendous crack as it hit the tree above his head. He looked up in horror to see a large branch hurtling towards him. He started to raise his arms to protect himself when it hit him with a sickening thud. His legs buckled from the force of the blow and he sank to his knees. Everything around him began to spin; he felt dizzy and sick, and long, dark fingers seemed to be wrapping themselves around his brain. He fought desperately to stay conscious.

"Not here," he groaned, trying in vain to get up. "Don't let me pass out here." But even as he struggled, he could feel the darkness enveloping him, and then, he slipped into cool emptiness.....

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Voices. He could hear voices, speaking in hushed tones. He tried to open his eyes, but the effort was too much and he gave up. His head felt too heavy to lift, so he lay still and tried to concentrate on what the voices were saying.

"... possible concussion..." "...no bones broken, thankfully." "... nasty bump on his head...plenty of rest..."

The voices seemed familiar, but he couldn't quite place them, and the concentration was physically hurting his head, so he gave up and gratefully slipped back into the realms of sleep.

When he awoke again, he managed to open his eyes and what he saw amazed him. Rock walls surrounded him; he seemed to be in some sort of cavern. He heard a slight sound and he turned, making his head throb painfully, to see a man in the far corner of the room. The man had his back to him and was totally absorbed in the preparation of something on the counter in front of him.

Now this figure was definitely familiar, even from the back, and he gasped in surprise. "Roy?" he said incredulously.

The figure turned at the sound of his voice. "Ah, you're awake," he said, as he hobbled slowly towards the bed, leaning on a stick for support. "How are you feeling?"

"Lousy, but I think I'll live. Look, Roy, what's going on? I didn't realize we'd begun filming. Did they decide on a feature film or a mini series? I didn't think they'd even confirmed a script yet."

The older man frowned in puzzlement, as he eased himself into a chair beside the bed.

"Filming? Script? I'm sorry but I don't know what you are talking about. And why are you calling me Roy? Who is Roy? Do you think you know me? My name is Jacob, Jacob Wells."

"Oh, come on, Roy, cut it out. My head hurts like hell and I'm in no mood for jokes, even one as elaborate as this. You could have picked a better time for it."

The older man looked concerned. It was obvious this stranger thought he knew him and he was

getting distressed over what he thought was a charade. Jacob was at a loss; he didn't want to upset the man further, so he tried a different approach.

"Tell me your name," he said gently.

This seemed to frustrate the other man still further. Oh, I see," he said, sarcastically. "I'm the one with the head injury, but you're the one whose developed amnesia all of a sudden. After all the years we've known each other, you suddenly don't remember my name?"

"Humour me - please."

Ron sighed. He felt too ill and too tired to argue any more; let Roy have his joke. "Okay, have it your own way. It's Ron, remember? Ron Perlman."

Before Jacob could reply, a woman appeared at the chamber entrance, and Ron immediately sat up, causing his head to spin violently.

"Ellen! Thank God you're here," he said with obvious relief. "Can you please make Roy understand that I feel too lousy to appreciate his jokes right now?"

The woman approached the bed slowly, confusion written all over her face. She looked at Jacob, but he just raised his eyebrows and shrugged. Turning to the man in the bed, she smiled warmly and spoke in a kindly manner.

"Listen... um..."

"Ron," Jacob offered helpfully.

She nodded gratefully and started again.

"Listen, Ron," she said gently. "You look so tired, why don't you sleep for a while and then we'll talk again when you feel more rested. How's your head?"

"Awful," he mumbled with a low sigh. "I feel as if there's a herd of elephants stampeding in there."

"Then sleep is what you need right now." The woman settled the worn patchwork quilt more snugly around his shoulders. "We'll talk more later. Come, Father."

With one final look of puzzlement and concern, Jacob followed her out. Ron was more confused than ever, but he was too tired to think any more, so he just closed his eyes and slept. On awakening, he felt much better, and the pain in his head had eased considerably. He turned his head and found himself looking up into the kind features of the woman he had spoken to earlier.

"Ellen?" he said, hopefully, but his hopes vanished as he watched her shake her head.

"No, my name is Mary. Why do you think my name is Ellen, and why do you insist on calling Father Roy?" she asked.

"Because you are both very dear friends of mine - you know you are," Ron insisted stubbornly. "Look, I know I've played my fair share of jokes on both of you in the past, and I can understand you wanting to get even, but couldn't you have waited until I felt a little less groggy so that I could appreciate it all?"

Mary saw the pleading look in his eyes, and sighed. At that moment Father entered the chamber and gave her a questioning look. She shook her head slightly and turned back to the bemused man lying before her.

"Ron," she said, in a quiet and patient voice. "Please listen to me and try to believe what I'm telling you, because it really is the truth. You were hurt in the park, and you were brought here to our community so we could try to help you."

She paused and glanced towards Father.

The older man frowned worriedly, but his voice was firm as he issued a cautious warning.

"Before you are told anything more, Ron, we must ask for your complete cooperation. You must

never reveal to anyone what you've seen or heard here. The lives of a great many people depend on our being able to trust you."

Ron sighed and rolled his eyes, wincing at the wave of dizziness that followed. "Yeah, sure. I promise. You can trust me." They were really taking this one to the limits!

With another quick glance at Father, Mary took a deep breath and continued their story.

"We have never heard of Ellen or Roy. My name is Mary, and I've lived here, in our home, for many years. I never go into the city and I've never seen you before. This person standing beside me is Jacob Wells. He is a doctor and also the head of our community. He is more widely known as Father to the people here."

Ron shook his head in despair. Why were they doing this? Had they lost their minds? How could Ellen say she had never seen him before when they had worked together for three years? After all it was he who had got the bump on the head. Maybe this wasn't a joke after all! Maybe - then a slow smile spread across his face as a sudden thought struck him. Of course! Why hadn't he thought of it before?

"Where's Vincent?" he asked solemnly, although there was a definite twinkle in his eyes now.

Ron couldn't help smiling as Father's face blanched and Mary's mouth dropped open in surprise. Now he had them. Let's see you get around this, he thought. Hurriedly, they moved away from the bed, but he could hear their muffled whispers.

"How does he know about Vincent?"

"Maybe he regained consciousness briefly while Vincent was bringing him down?"

"But how would he know Vincent's name?"

"I don't know! Maybe he overheard it somehow!"

They both turned back to the bed. "How do you know about Vincent?" Father asked.

"Because I know him," Ron replied. "In fact, I'd say I know him better than anyone."

This certainly seemed to puzzle them. They looked at each other as if neither of them knew what to say next.

"I'd like to see Vincent: Is he around?" Ron asked, pressing his advantage. He knew he had the upper hand now, and he was beginning to enjoy himself, especially as he was feeling a lot better.

"Do you know what Vincent looks like?" Father asked anxiously.

"Of course," Ron answered. "Please ask him to come in, I'd really like to see him."

Father and Mary exchanged worried glances, then Father sighed and turned towards the chamber exit.

"I'll see what I can do," he said, as he hobbled out. Mary gave Ron a nervous smile and sat down in a chair to wait.

Ron settled back against his pillows, wondering how Roy would handle this. Obviously, he couldn't bring Vincent in, so perhaps now this silly charade would end and he could concentrate on recovering after his accident. Then they could get on with the filming, though for the life of him he couldn't remember signing the contract for this project. He didn't even remember it getting the green light to go ahead. That bump on the head must have been worse than he thought; he'd better take it easy for a day or two.

Where was Linda, he wondered? Was she a part of this elaborate joke? These sets were pretty impressive, too. The previous ones had been very realistic, but these were incredible, and with no cameras in sight you could be forgiven for believing you really were in the tunnels beneath New York City. Not that he'd ever seen the real thing, but this was just as he'd imagined them to be; perhaps

slightly better than he'd imagined them to be!

A movement at the chamber entrance interrupted his musings. Ron couldn't resist a huge grin as Roy appeared, looking extremely uncertain, as well he might. He entered slowly, and then stood aside to allow the tall, impressive figure behind him to come forward. Ron's smile froze on his face. Blue eyes met blue eyes and then Ron felt the whole room begin to swim around him. This was impossible! It just could not be! He closed his eyes and blinked hard, but when he opened them, nothing had changed. He was face to face with...Vincent!

As he watched Vincent approach the bed cautiously, Ron slumped back against the pillows.

His face was ashen and he kept muttering, "It's not possible, it's not possible," in a low voice.

"Father?" Vincent said anxiously, turning towards the older man with a look of grave concern. "I thought you said he was prepared for the way I look."

"He said he was," Father insisted. "He said he knows you better than anyone does."

"Well, surely that must have seemed suspect in itself," Vincent argued. "Who could know me better than you, apart from Catherine? Certainly not a stranger!"

Father shrugged in defeat. "He asked for you by name, Vincent. He said he knows you and he asked me to bring you here."

Vincent turned back to Ron, who was staring up at him with slightly glazed eyes as if he could not believe what he was seeing.

"Please don't be afraid," Vincent spoke softly. "I mean you no harm." Ron shook his head in a bemused manner.

"I'm not afraid of you. I just can't believe that you're standing here in front of me, as large as life. It's not possible."

"Why is it not possible?" Vincent asked in a puzzled tone.

"Because you don't exist. You can't exist in reality, except through me. I am you."

After this declaration, all three people standing at the bedside gaped at Ron incredulously.

"It must be the bump on the head," Father muttered quietly. "He's got concussion. He's delirious."

Vincent and Mary nodded in agreement; it seemed the most logical answer to such a dramatic statement.

"I'm not delirious," Ron insisted angrily, glaring up at them. The shock was wearing off slightly now, and curiosity was beginning to take over as he continued to stare at Vincent, although he still half-expected him to disappear into thin air.

"Vincent... um... could you... come a bit closer?" he asked.

Vincent slowly moved forward as Father and Mary stepped back to give him room. Ron just gazed up at him for several long seconds before finally raising his hand towards Vincent's face. Vincent stiffened and took a step back.

"Please?" Ron asked. "It's important to me."

Vincent did not respond immediately; he stood very still as if he were weighing the situation. Then the plea in Ron's eyes helped him reach a decision, and he moved forward once more. Ron reached up and carefully touched Vincent's face, still somehow expecting to encounter the feel of the latex and make-up he knew so well, but a look of sheer wonder crossed his features as his fingers touched real skin - real, warm, living tissue. It was amazing!

Then he turned his attention to Vincent's hands, taking them in his and bringing them up for closer inspection. Vincent stiffened once more, but did not pull away. Ron examined the clawed fingertips and again felt the texture of real skin beneath the heavily tufted hair which covered the backs of

Vincent's hands. He noted the smooth warmth of Vincent's palms, marred only by a few small calluses here and there, obviously the result of the real toil Ron had only simulated in his role as Vincent. These definitely were not gloves, nor were the hands made-up to look this way. It was all genuine, and at last Ron faced the realization that this Vincent was the real thing, however fantastic that would seem. He dropped back wearily against his pillows once more, his mind spinning.

"Do I pass the test?" Vincent inquired, feeling more anxious about the pallor of Ron's complexion and the dark circles under his eyes, than he did about the examination he'd just undergone.

Ron nodded. "Most definitely," he replied. "Though I still find it almost impossible to believe." Looking up at Father and Mary, he said, "You weren't lying to me or playing a joke, were you? You really are who you say you are - Father and Mary, not Roy and Ellen."

Father and Mary both nodded silently, relieved that at last he believed what they had been trying to tell him.

Ron sighed, and stared up at the low rock ceiling above him as he tried to collect his thoughts. "Does Catherine really exist, too?" he asked.

Vincent's head snapped up immediately. "How do you know about Catherine?" he demanded.

Ron gave a tired smile. "So she does exist. This gets more and more incredible. What about Pascal and Mouse and William?"

The three people before him looked at each other in amazement, then Vincent turned back to Ron.

"We have been honest with you and answered your questions to the best of our ability," he said, drawing up a chair as he spoke. "Now I think it's your turn to answer some of ours. What did you mean when you said I could only exist through you, and that you were me? Also, how do you know so much about us?"

When Ron had finished explaining about the television series "*Beauty and the Beast*", feeling very embarrassed by what the title insinuated, his rapt audience of three were as incredulous and disbelieving as he had been at the sight of Vincent.

"How can this happen?" Father said anxiously. "How could they know about us?"

"They don't know about you," Ron reassured him. "It's all fiction, fantasy, for people's entertainment. They wouldn't dream that you actually exist. Just as I didn't believe it at first." With a wry grin he added, "I still find it hard to believe, even while you sit here in front of me."

While he was talking, Ron noticed Vincent watching him intently.

"What is it, Vincent?" he asked, seeing the curiosity in his eyes.

"You said it took them four hours each day to make you look like me?" Vincent asked curiously. Ron nodded his head, wondering how Vincent would react to this.

Vincent sat in silence for several minutes digesting this information; then with a low chuckle he said, "I wonder how many hours it would take them to make me look like you?"

They all laughed at this remark, and Father was relieved that Vincent didn't seem to be too hurt or upset by what he had heard so far. With a short respite for lunch, they all talked well into the afternoon, until Father insisted that his patient needed rest and quiet. Ron gratefully followed the order and once he was left alone, he fell asleep almost immediately.

He awoke to find Vincent sitting beside the bed, reading a book. There was no one else in the chamber.

Glancing up to find Ron awake, Vincent closed the book carefully.

"How do you feel?" he enquired solicitously.

"Much better, thanks," Ron replied, easing himself up into a sitting position. "I obviously needed the

rest more than I realized."

Vincent nodded. "You had a serious bump on the head."

"Did you see it happen?" Ron asked.

Again Vincent nodded his head. "Yes, I was just inside the culvert watching the storm. I was very surprised to see someone in that area of the park so late in the evening. Darkness was closing in rapidly."

"Yes, it was pretty stupid," agreed Ron. "So you saw the branch hit me and knock me out, and you brought me down here?"

"There was nothing else I could have done," Vincent answered. "You were hurt, unconscious. You needed attention immediately. I could not leave you there to possibly die in the storm."

"Thank you. You probably saved my life." Ron's gratitude was genuine.

"I'm very glad I did, especially under the circumstances," Vincent responded with a half smile, staring at Ron's features with a curiosity he could not disguise. "Father says he can actually see a resemblance between us, mainly in the eyes and the shape of the jaw line. And we are of similar build, I suppose, but your voice is nothing like mine."

"I didn't use my normal voice when I was in character," Ron replied, this time using his "Vincent voice". Vincent's eyes widened in surprise.

"That did sound like me," he said, with admiration. "But how would you know how my voice would sound?"

"I didn't," Ron replied truthfully. "The voice just came when I auditioned for the role. I don't even know how really. It was just there, and it seemed right."

"And it was right," Vincent verified. "This is all very disconcerting."

"You can say that again," Ron agreed wholeheartedly.

Just then a soft voice calling at the chamber entrance gave them both a start.

"Catherine." Vincent exclaimed, rising quickly to his feet. "Come inside, Catherine," he called, as he turned to greet her.

Ron could not suppress a gasp as Catherine entered the chamber, even though he knew what to expect by this time. To him, this was Linda, but he knew it could not be. The absolute incredibility of this situation hit him all over again as he watched Vincent take Catherine's hand and lead her over to the bedside to be introduced. The look that passed between them touched his heart. They obviously were so very much in love.

As Catherine knew nothing about what had transpired that day, the whole story had to be told again from the beginning. Ron noted that Catherine bristled with indignation when she heard the title of the television series. Though she said nothing, but she clasped Vincent's hand more tightly in hers as he sat closely by her side.

"I don't understand any of this, Vincent," Catherine gave him a puzzled frown, and then turned her attention to Ron. "You say that you know Father and Mary as Ellen and Roy, your actor friends, and that Vincent is simply a fictional character portrayed by you in a television series?"

Ron nodded. "I know it's hard to believe, but it's true."

"But how can this be?" Catherine exclaimed incredulously.

"I have heard about different dimensions in time," Vincent mused thoughtfully. "Narcissa has spoken of it. About parallel planes of existence on different levels of time."

Turning to Ron, he continued, "Ron, you said you were amazed to see the drainage culvert in Central Park, because to your knowledge as a New Yorker, it has never existed there, and yet that drainage

culvert has always been a part of our Central Park, has it not, Catherine?"

Catherine nodded in agreement. "Yes, always. It's our own private gateway to the park, isn't it?" She smiled up at Vincent, who nodded and squeezed her hand gently in response.

They talked for several hours after supper, until Vincent noticed that Ron's eyes were beginning to close.

"We should go now, Catherine," he said, rising to his feet. "Ron looks very tired. He needs to rest."

Catherine nodded and rose from her seat. Ron could see that she seemed quite eager to leave, and he guessed that these two people wanted to spend some time alone together before Catherine returned Above. They said their goodnights and left him in peace. Ron wanted to think over everything that had happened that day, but no sooner had he settled back against the pillows than he was asleep.

Ron improved steadily over the next few days, and he was soon well enough to take short walks, which allowed him to see part of this incredible world that Jacob Wells and his community truly had created beneath the streets of the city. He spent a great deal of his time with Vincent, talking and learning about Vincent's life in the tunnels. He also talked about his own life, growing up in New York City, and about his family back in L.A. He tried not to think about the fact that he didn't quite know, at this moment in time, how the devil he was ever going to get back to them, or to the New York City where he belonged. And somehow, the only explanation that seemed possible now was that his home actually existed. It was almost beyond his belief. All he had were questions without answers, so for now he decided to live from day to day, hoping that the fates would be kind to him and show him a way home.

He had been in the tunnels nearly a week and had almost completely recovered. Catherine had come Below several evenings and even though Ron spent a part of the time in their company, he always made an excuse to leave them, so that they could spend some time alone together. Ron learned that Vincent and Catherine's real life relationship had run on very similar lines to the way it had run in the series, which was an uncanny coincidence. Even the way Vincent had found her, hurt and bleeding in the park was the same, as was the way he'd brought her Below to heal. It seemed eerie listening to Vincent telling stories he already knew.

But it wasn't until Vincent spoke about his illness that Ron got a very uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. He had joined Vincent in his chamber one evening after supper, and the conversation had turned to Catherine, as it so often did. Ron smiled inwardly as he watched Vincent's expression soften immediately at the mention of Catherine's name.

"You love her very much, don't you?" he ventured.

Vincent's reply was immediate. "She is my life. Without her there is nothing, and but for Catherine, I would not be here today." Vincent lowered his gaze and sighed heavily. Ron sat silently waiting; he knew instinctively that Vincent would continue. "She came into that dark place... alone. She brought me back. I was lost even to myself, but Catherine found me, and brought me home."

Vincent leaned his head back and closed his eyes as one small tear escaped to trickle down his cheek. "She... she... did that... for me," he said, hoarsely.

"Because she obviously loves you as much as you love her," Ron said softly, feeling a lump form in his own throat. "You two seem destined to be together."

Vincent opened his eyes and looked at Ron earnestly. "I wish I could be certain of that." His voice filled with unspoken doubts. "I could want for nothing more. Before my illness I would never allow myself to believe that such a thing could even be a possibility for me... for us..."

"And now?" Ron prompted.



Vincent shook his head in confusion. "There are so many obstacles; so many things that..."

"...That shouldn't matter," Ron cut in, remembering all the debates, all the arguments between actors, writers and producers over this subject, when they were making the series. "You only have one life, Vincent, and this is it. You can either grab your chances and live it to the full, or just let it pass you by and then spend bitter years full of regrets. If you love each other, you can overcome the obstacles, all the obstacles, as long as you're together."

Ron's words were spoken with complete conviction and Vincent heard the truth in them. He inhaled deeply and then expelled his breath slowly. "You sound as if you know what you're talking about, but you make it all sound so easy, my friend," he said, with a sigh.

"No, I didn't say it would be easy," Ron corrected him. "But nothing worth having ever is. By the way, where is the lady under discussion? I thought you were expecting her this evening?"

"Yes, I was, but it seems that her boss, Joe Maxwell, is critically ill in hospital after a terrible accident, an explosion of some sort, I believe."

Ron suddenly felt cold shivers running down his spine. "Oh my God!" he cried, sitting bolt upright in his chair. "I should have worked this out. I should have guessed! Vincent... what year is it?"

Vincent looked at Ron as if he had taken leave of his senses. "What?" he asked, seeming totally puzzled by this sudden change of behavior.

"The date... the year... what year is it, right now?"

"It's 1989, of course," Vincent replied, concerned by Ron's very sober expression.

Ron sprang to his feet. "Vincent, you have to get Catherine down here right away! Can you get in touch with her?"

"Well...yes," Vincent said in bewilderment, "but I'm not sure I should bother her when her boss is - "

"Vincent!" Ron cut in desperately. "This is a matter of life or death - Catherine's life or death! You have to get her down here to safety as soon as possible - right now!"

He was relieved to see that his words had hit home at last, as Vincent gave a brief nod and dashed from the chamber to get a message to Catherine immediately. Ron sank down into the nearest chair, running his fingers through his thick, curly hair in agitation. His heart was hammering in his chest and he felt as if he'd just run the marathon. He was cursing himself for not working things out sooner; for not recognizing the signs before this. Please let him be in time, he prayed silently. Please don't let him lose her. He doesn't deserve that; neither of them deserves that after all they've been through.

Unable to face being alone with his thoughts, Ron made his way to Father's study. He guessed that Vincent would go to the threshold to wait for Catherine, and besides, Father needed to know about this too... just in case. Father's face turned ashen when Ron told him what he dreaded would happen if Catherine was not brought Below in time.

"Oh, dear God!" he exclaimed, clutching at the corner of his desk for support. "If anything happened to Catherine, I don't think Vincent could survive it. Especially after all he's been through."

The waiting seemed like an eternity, although it was probably less than a couple of hours. Finally they heard footsteps approaching. Vincent entered the chamber, closely followed by a rather mystified Catherine. Ron, Father, and Mary, who had also joined the vigil, all breathed a huge sigh of relief.

Father stepped forward and gathered Catherine into a big hug. "Thank heavens you're safe, dear Catherine," he said, gazing down at her fondly.

"Well, thank you, Father... but safe from what?" Catherine asked, with a puzzled frown. "I was simply sitting at Joe's bedside in the hospital when Jamie arrived with a message from Vincent, asking me to come Below at once. Yet Vincent doesn't seem able to tell me why he summoned me so urgently." She cast a mystified glance in Vincent's direction.

"I think perhaps Ron had better answer that," Father replied, and all eyes turned to Ron, who cleared his throat. After all the uproar he had caused, he hoped he was right after all.

"Catherine, did Joe Maxwell say anything to you about a book tonight?" he asked.

Catherine's eyes widened in surprise, and she nodded. "Why yes, I have it here. How did you know?"

"In the same way as he knows virtually everything else about us, I would imagine," Vincent cut in. "Because that television series seems to have run parallel to our lives somehow."

"No, not parallel, Vincent," Ron corrected. "The series had gone way ahead... and that's something we can all be thankful for." He brushed his hand across his forehead distractedly as he paused to gather his thoughts.

"I still can't believe all this is really happening," he muttered, as the full realization of what they'd just managed to avoid suddenly hit him. He looked directly at Catherine, determined to make her understand the severity of the situation.

"To be totally blunt, Catherine, if you go back up there, that book will cost you your life."

Catherine stared at him in shock and Vincent immediately placed a protective arm around her, drawing her close to his side. "What... what do you mean, Ron?" she stammered, still trying to take in the implication of his words.

"That book, which I believe is in code?" he looked at Catherine for confirmation of this, and she nodded her head. "That book contains valuable and highly confidential information about a very powerful man. And we are talking about an extremely powerful man here, - someone capable of controlling the District Attorney of Manhattan."

"No, not Moreno!" Catherine exclaimed. "I don't believe it!"

"Believe it." Ron retorted. "It's true I'm afraid, and what's more, he would let you die for this book, Catherine. You really have to stay here right now, where it's safe." He saw the lingering uncertainty in her eyes. "After all," he continued meaningfully, "you have something else to consider now, don't you?"

Catherine's head snapped up at this remark. "You know about that, too?" she whispered.

Ron shrugged and nodded. "I think perhaps you and Vincent need to go somewhere a little more private to talk, don't you?"

"What's going on now?" Father asked, in an exasperated tone.

Catherine smiled nervously. "I'm sorry, Father, but I need to talk to Vincent alone first." Turning to look up at Vincent she said, "Can we go to your chamber please, Vincent?"

"Of course, Catherine," Vincent responded immediately.

He turned towards Ron. "What can I say to you? Thank you is such an inadequate expression for what you've done tonight. You have saved Catherine's life..." After a short pause he added softly "... and mine, too."

Ron smiled warmly. "Well, I wouldn't have been able to do any of it if you hadn't saved me up there. One good turn deserves another," he quipped.

He felt quite light-hearted now that he knew Catherine was safe. He'd turned it around; he'd turned the whole thing around. So now, hopefully there might be a happy ending after all. Ron went to bed that night feeling very pleased with himself, though just before drifting into sleep he did wonder what Vincent's reaction to Catherine's news would be.

Vincent's voice called from the chamber entrance, waking Ron from long hours of sleep. "May I come in?"

"Yeah, sure," Ron replied, easing himself up against the pillows. The excitement of the previous

evening had left him exhausted and he had slept later than he had intended.

"Where's Catherine?" he asked anxiously.

"She's with Father." Vincent drew up a chair and sat beside the bed. "They're writing a message to Peter, as Catherine will need various items from her apartment. Then we must make a decision regarding that book. We cannot just ignore it. It should be delivered safely into the right hands. But not by Catherine," he added firmly.

"I expect you'll find a way." Ron suspected that this was not the main reason for Vincent's visit, so he sat quietly waiting.

"You knew before I did." Vincent said softly, after several moments of silence.

"About Catherine's pregnancy?"

"Yes."

"Only because everything so far seems to have followed the same pattern as the series," Ron pointed out. "Which means I knew about it before it actually happened here," he added, with an amused smile.

Seeing Vincent's obvious embarrassment over this particular subject, and realizing that just as in the series, he probably didn't remember the event in question, Ron decided to pass over it. "So, how do you feel about the prospect of becoming a father?" Ron asked, guessing that Vincent's emotions were in turmoil right now.

Vincent sighed and shook his head in a bemused fashion, his expression a mixture of wonder and disbelief.

"It is difficult to find the words," Vincent replied, rising to his feet and beginning to pace around the chamber.

"Try," Ron prompted gently.

Vincent stopped in the centre of the floor, raising his hands before him in a gesture of confusion, and then slowly letting them drop to his sides once more.

"Elated... terrified... incredulous... I... I feel so light-headed, as if... as if I were walking in a dream."

Vincent's eyes met Ron's, and what Ron saw in those eyes tore at his heart.

"But if this is a dream," Vincent continued, his voice very soft now. "I don't ever want to awaken. Catherine is carrying a child... my child. And what is more, she seems to be delighted by the prospect, and says she wants nothing more than to be at my side and to raise our child here, in my world." Vincent sank down into the chair at Ron's bedside once more.

"You do believe her?" Ron asked tentatively.

Vincent leaned his head back and nodded slowly. "Yes, I believe her. Catherine has asked, even begged me on more than one occasion, to allow her to come and live Below... to try. But as much as it would have given me the greatest joy to have Catherine so close, I always felt her life should be lived Above... in the sunshine, and that it would be selfish of me to agree to her request."

Vincent paused for several long seconds before continuing. "But most of all, I refused her because of my own fear." There was a slight tremble in his voice as he spoke. "I did not feel that I could ever be the... man... she wanted... needed me to be. I did not believe I could give her the happiness she deserves."

"And now?" Ron asked.

Vincent sat up straighter in the chair, squaring his shoulders resolutely. "Now, the circumstances have changed," he said firmly. "Catherine is carrying my child, and she has made me believe that being with me is all that truly matters to her. Right or wrong, I want her here at my side, where I can keep

her safe from harm, where I can protect her and take care of her... and love her until my last breath," he added in a whisper.

Ron nodded in understanding. "It's only natural to want to be with the people you love," he said meaningfully, and Vincent looked at him immediately.

"You're wondering about your own future, and the people that you love," he said in sudden comprehension.

Ron's face grew solemn. "I miss my family very much," he replied softly. "And I have no idea how to get back to them."

Vincent placed a comforting hand on Ron's shoulder. "I'm deeply sorry for my unforgivable oversight, but with all that has occurred within the past twenty-four hours I neglected to tell you that I've spoken with Narcissa about the possibility of returning you to your own time."

Ron's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "You have? What did she say?" he asked eagerly.

"Please, don't build up your hopes too high," Vincent warned. Seeing the immediate disappointment in Ron's eyes, he quickly added, "But there is hope, and there is a possibility that you may be able to return."

Ron's expression brightened at this news. "So what did Narcissa say?" he repeated enthusiastically.

Vincent gave one of his small half-smiles. "Narcissa often speaks in riddles," he said wryly. "But it seems that your best opportunity of returning is by the same way you arrived."

Ron looked at him in concern. "What, by getting hit on the head again?" he asked, warily.

Vincent laughed outright at this remark and shook his head at once. "No, of course not," he replied, chuckling at the thought. "You must wait for another thunder storm, and then return to the exact location where your accident occurred. Narcissa believes that you were standing at some form of gateway between the dimensions of time when the lightning struck. The branch breaking off and hitting you was a very unlucky coincidence, but it had nothing to do with bringing you into our time. The lightning somehow opened the gateway, and you literally fell through it."

Ron's face displayed utter amazement as he digested what Vincent had just told him. This all seemed too incredible for words. Gateways to other worlds? Different dimensions in time? It all seemed so ridiculous and totally inconceivable - and yet he was here, in a place that had been conjured up from Ron Koslow's imagination, but was now somehow a solid reality. He was face to face with a very real Vincent. So, was anything really impossible after all?

Two days later, Ron sat hunched over the chessboard opposite Father, after succumbing to the old man's persistent offers to teach him the game. He was completely absorbed in debating his next move, when Vincent entered the chamber and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"There's a storm approaching," he said, urgently. "You should go and prepare yourself at once."

Ron stared up at Vincent, and his heart suddenly began to pound. He turned back to Jacob Wells. "I'm sorry, Father, but it seems I may have to leave our game unfinished."

Father nodded in understanding. "I shall miss you, but I wish you luck in finding your way back."

Ron thanked him and hurried off to the guest chamber he had been using during his stay. The fact that he and Vincent were of such similar height and build had meant that Ron had been able to wear some of Vincent's garments while he had been in the tunnels, but now he put on his own clothes, in readiness for what he hoped would be his return trip home.

Saying goodbye to everyone was hard. Mary had tears in her eyes, and Catherine hugged him tightly.

"There are no words to thank you for what you have done for us, especially for me." Catherine's voice was filled with emotion as she held Ron's hands in hers. "We will never forget you."

"And I will never forget you... any of you." Ron replied, squeezing her fingers gently. "You take care of

that little guy in there," he added, glancing down at Catherine's still flat abdomen.

Catherine's eyes widened in surprise as she stepped back and slipped her arm around Vincent's waist. "A boy? Is it going to be a boy?" she whispered, turning from Ron to Vincent in wonder.

Vincent's face seemed to glow with pride as he drew Catherine close against his side, oblivious to the fact that the whole community was gathered there.

"It might be." Ron gave a mysterious smile. "You'll have to wait and see." Then he turned to Vincent. "Hadn't we better be going now?"

Vincent nodded and reluctantly released Catherine from his embrace. "I won't be gone too long," he said, squeezing her hand gently before turning towards the chamber exit.

Ron paused for a moment to look fondly at the group of people gathered before him. He desperately wanted to get home to his family, but he also knew that he would miss this kind, caring community, and he felt sad having to say goodbye to them.

"Thanks for everything," he said hoarsely, feeling the lump rising in his throat. "It's been great getting to know you all, and I'm going to miss you."

Seeing the tears well up in Catherine's eyes, he quickly turned, raising his hand in silent salute as he followed Vincent from the chamber.

The storm was reaching its full glory as they arrived at the park exit, and lightning streaked across the darkening sky. Looking out across the clearing, Vincent pointed to a large tree with a forked trunk.

"That's the tree you were standing beneath," he said, drawing Ron's attention to the spot. "The branch which knocked you unconscious is still lying there. You must stand in that exact location, beside the fallen branch."

Ron nodded, and once more they stood facing each other, probably for the last time. "I owe you everything," Vincent's voice was rough with emotion. "My future - and Catherine's - might have been very different if it were not for you."

Ron shook his head in denial. "You saved my life," he said adamantly. "It is I who owe you everything."

Vincent smiled in defeat. "Then perhaps we saved each other. I will miss you, my friend." He drew Ron into his embrace and hugged him tightly, then stepping back he said: "Go now, before the storm passes, or it will be too late. Good luck, safe journey."

Ron nodded and strode resolutely across the clearing to where the fallen branch lay. When he arrived at the spot he stood waiting nervously, not knowing what was supposed to happen. As he turned, he could just make out Vincent's outline at the mouth of the culvert, and he raised his hand in a wave.

Suddenly, there was an enormous flash that seemed to illuminate the whole clearing. Ron gasped as it enveloped him in its brilliance, and then he seemed to be floating in a sea of white light. His eyelids grew heavy and he drifted into a peaceful sleep...

\* \* \*

Voices. Once more he could hear voices. But this time his head didn't ache and he had no trouble at all in opening his eyes. He seemed to be in a hospital room with a young nurse hovering over him anxiously, while a doctor stood just behind her.

"Ah, so you're awake," the nurse said in obvious relief. "How do you feel?"

Ron considered this question for a moment before answering. "Fine," he said in surprise. "I feel fine."

What am I doing here?"

"A jogger found you unconscious in the park," the doctor explained, as he took Ron's wrist to check his pulse. "He said there was a large branch lying beside you, so we assumed it had hit you and knocked you out, but apart from a recently healed wound at the back of your head, we can find no real injury to substantiate this assumption. It's very puzzling. Do you remember anything?"

Ron shifted uncomfortably and shook his head. "Nothing beyond the fact that I was caught in a storm in Central Park," he replied, not looking the doctor directly in the eye. "If you can't find anything wrong with me, can I go home now?"

The doctor frowned and stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Not just yet," he said, looking down at the chart in his hand. "I'd like to run a few tests and keep you overnight for observation, but you should be able to go home in the morning if the tests all check out. Is there anyone you want us to contact?"

Glancing down at the date on his watch, Ron gasped in surprise. It was only a few hours since he had taken his stroll in the park! He hadn't even been away seven hours, let alone seven days.

"Mr Perlman?" the doctor prompted.

Ron looked up at him in confusion.

"Is there someone you'd like us to contact?" he repeated.

Ron shook his head. "Uh, no... no thanks, my family is back in L.A. They're coming in this weekend, so I'd rather not worry them unnecessarily."

The doctor nodded. "Okay, we'll leave you to rest for a while, and then run those tests later." He was already turning towards the door as he continued, "If you need anything just buzz." The nurse indicated the buzzer beside the bed, and followed the doctor out.

Ron slumped back against the pillows. A dream... it had all been a dream. He had been knocked unconscious by a falling branch, and a jogger had found him and called for help. During the time he had been unconscious, he had dreamed about being in the tunnels, meeting Vincent, helping him find his happy life with Catherine. That business about different dimensions in time had all been a part of his over-active subconscious mind.

In a way it was a relief to realize the truth, and yet he felt strangely disappointed. It had all seemed so real, and Vincent and he had become such good friends. He had been proud of the fact that he had helped to save Catherine's life, and had left the tunnels knowing that she was safely where she belonged - with the man she loved. Ron sighed and closed his eyes; he suddenly felt very tired.

He was allowed to go home the following day, and he tried to put all memories of the dream behind him and get on with his well-earned rest. There were several things that still bothered him though, and he mulled them over in his mind. The fact that he distinctly remembered noticing the drainage culvert in the park before the branch fell on him; the fact that he didn't have a concussion when he was admitted to the hospital and he'd had no pain in his head when he had awoken, even though the branch had hit him with such tremendous force; and most of all there was such an enormous difference in his state of mind, from the way he had felt when he had entered the park only yesterday afternoon. Then he'd felt exhausted and totally drained, but now he seemed completely rested and so at peace with himself. Could an overnight stay in a hospital achieve such amazing results?

Ron decided to satisfy his own curiosity and risk walking alone in the park once again, taking the exact route to the clearing where he had seen the tunnel entrance. But this time everything was as it should be; this was the park he had known all his life, and there was no sign of the clearing or the drainage culvert. Sighing and shaking his head at his own foolishness, Ron put the whole episode behind him and began to look forward to the arrival of his family that coming weekend. He obviously needed this vacation more than he realized, and soon he'd be returning to L.A. where the relaxed way of life would be helpful for his state of mind, too.

Several months later, Ron was back in New York, but this time it was for work. He had been offered a

challenging role in a Broadway play, and he was both nervous and excited at the prospect. It felt good to be working in his hometown again. Rehearsals didn't begin for a couple of days yet, but he wanted to get settled in and see a few friends before the hard work began. As he crossed the street to his apartment, Ron spotted one of his neighbors walking towards him.

"Hi, Ron, hope you're not heading for the park tonight," he teased. "According to the weatherman, there's a humdinger of a storm heading this way."

Ron laughed and shook his head. "Nope, I'm gonna to be safely ensconced behind closed doors tonight," he said firmly. "I'll leave the park to the joggers and the muggers."

\* \* \*

Ron stood at his window watching the brilliant display of forked lightning that streaked across the night sky. It was a truly spectacular sight. His mind wandered back to the accident that had befallen him in the park on his last visit to New York, and the incredible dream that had followed it. Shrugging away the memories, he switched on the TV and settled down to relax.

Hours later he awoke with a start. What....? Where was he? For a second he was totally disorientated, then he realized he'd fallen asleep in front of the television and it was now 4 AM. He pondered on whether it was worth going to bed at all, but decided his cramped, stiff limbs needed a bit more comfort for a couple of hours.

As he walked towards the bedroom, he caught sight of an envelope that had been pushed under his door. He picked it up and turned it over; his name was written across the front in elegant script. Slitting it open curiously, Ron withdrew a folded sheet of notepaper and began to scan the contents. His mouth dropped open in disbelief as he read the words written there.

*My Dear Friend,*

*Our son was born just a few short hours ago, and my heart overflows with such joy, and with so much love for this tiny miracle, who sleeps peacefully in his mother's arms just a few feet away.*

*My son. He is so perfect in every way, and so unbelievably beautiful. His features resemble Catherine's rather than my own, and for this I am extremely grateful, as he will not be held back from the world Above, as I have been. But his eyes, and his coloring are mine, making him a part of us both, yet giving him the freedom of both worlds; something I have always been denied. But I have so much more than I ever dreamed of; my happiness is complete, and I will love and cherish them both until my last breath.*

*No words can ever express my gratitude to you, my dear friend. Without your timely intervention, fate may have led me along a very different path, one which is far too devastating to dwell upon.*

*I am happy that you succeeded in returning to your own family. You have been sorely missed, but you are where you belong, and that is as it should be. We shall probably never meet again, but we will hold you in our hearts always.*

*Be Well, Be Happy,*

*Vincent.*

END