

A Winterfest Visit

by Rhonda Collins

Vincent was writing in his journal when he heard the slap of leather on rock—the sound of running footsteps—long before Zach appeared, breathing heavily from a long run. The young man bent over, hands on knees as he caught his breath, and Vincent waited until Zach could speak again. "The message must be important for you to run all the way." He held out his hand for the crumpled envelope the boy held.

Taking a deep breath, Zach relinquished the missive. "Sorry. Mr. Liu said it came this morning, and it's...Vincent! It's from Devin!"

Rising suddenly, almost overturning the heavy chair, Vincent stared at the front of the envelope. "Devin?"

"Open it, Vincent! What does he have to say?"

"A moment, Zach...please," Vincent murmured, as he slit the envelope open with a nail and unfolded the letter.

Vincent,

I heard about Cathy. I'm coming home for a visit and should be there by Winterfest. Tell Dad for me, okay?

I'm sorry, Vincent. More than I can say.

Love,

Devin

"What is it, Vincent," Zach asked.

"It seems Devin is coming home for Winterfest." At Zach's expression, Vincent warned, "Not a word, Zach. Understand? Not one word. At least not before I tell Father."

"Sure. Okay," Zach answered, though he seemed a little let down.

"I'm certain Father will be glad to let you spread the word once he knows...but for now...."

"I won't say a word, Vincent. I promise.

"Good."

After Zach left, Vincent headed toward Father's study to break the news. As was usual, he found Father deeply absorbed in some dusty tome whose title was obscured by years of dirt and mildew.

Father looked up and removed his glasses. "Vincent! You should see what I've found in that last box of books Wendell brought us...."

"Later, Father. I have news."

"News? Good news, I hope."

"The best news." He handed Father the note from Devin and smiled as he saw the light in the old man's eyes.

"You're right, Vincent. The best news possible. And for Winterfest!"

Diana looked critically at her reflection and pushed at stray strands of hair that had escaped her braid. She looked down at her dress and smoothed it. She felt overdressed. She'd found the dress at one of the vintage dress shops in the Village, and she had to admit it made her feel...if not quite "ladylike", then at least a bit more feminine than she usually did. Thankfully the dress was long enough to cover her boots. For the hundredth time that afternoon, she wished she had a full-length mirror. "I just hope I can at least fit in down there." Digging in the closet, she pulled out Grandma Bennett's shawl. It was delicately woven silk shot through with silver thread. Throwing it around her shoulders she went back to the mirror. It looked magnificent against the blue-green velvet of the dress.

She couldn't believe how nervous she was. "This is silly, Bennett," she told herself sternly as she stared at her reflection. "It's not like this is the first time you've been down there since the Naming Ceremony." No, it wasn't the first time; Diana had been Below numerous times since they'd rescued Jacob Wells from Gregory, and the tunnel patriarch's attitude toward her had mellowed considerably. Diana poked at more stray hairs and said, "Yeah, that's it. It's not different at all." She laughed a bit ruefully. "Go ahead. Lie to yourself. You don't get dressed up for just anybody."

When the knock came on the clerestory window in the loft, she hurried up to the roof to meet Vincent.

After embracing his son, Jacob Wells led him to the nursery to meet his nephew. Devin stood over the crib where the toddler slept, a look of bemused amazement on his face. "I never thought...never imagined...." Devin murmured. "How could Vincent, with all his differences, produce such a perfect child?"

Jacob cleared his throat and removed his glasses. "If you're thinking that the child isn't his... you're wrong. I'm afraid that was *my* first thought...that Catherine had betrayed him, but I was wrong, Devin. Wrong to even suspect it for a moment. Vincent has a *bond* with the child. He could sense Jacob's heartbeat before the birth."

Devin visibly shook himself, still not quite believing. "I didn't know Cathy of course, outside of that short time I was here. She seemed decent and loving as well as beautiful." He shook himself and ran a hand through his hair. "What a horrible end. How unbelievably terrible a thing to have happen."

"I cannot imagine what she must have gone through. It was almost more than I could handle just going through it with Vincent." Father shook his head. "I was so afraid for him, Devin. I was not sure he would survive her loss."

Devin tried to lighten the mood just a little. "So. Where *is* the proud father? I expected him to be here."

Jacob drew his son away from the sleeping child. "He has gone Above to bring a special guest Below for Winterfest. A new Helper. A...woman."

Devin's eyebrow rose in query. "A *woman*?"

Father looked a little uncertain and shrugged. "It is not what you think, Devin. Diana is a police detective who helped Vincent find young Jacob. She killed the man who murdered Catherine." He led Devin over to sit across from him at his chessboard. "Since then, she has also saved *my* life."

Devin sat, spellbound, as Jacob related the events of the past months.

When Diana came through the door onto the roof, Vincent's breath caught in his throat. She looked... *incredible*. Soft light from inside the apartment created a halo around her. He'd known she was beautiful, however, this...this *vision* was unexpected. He was speechless.

Diana ducked her head, tilting it to the side in query. "You okay? Vincent?"

Recovering himself, Vincent found his voice. "Yes," he said quietly, "I am...quite well. You... look lovely, Diana. The color is perfect for you."

The blush that rose to Diana's cheeks almost stole Vincent's voice again. He managed to continue. "I regret that I must meet you Below at the threshold, but I will be honored to accompany you to Winterfest."

Diana waved away his apology, seeming as uncomfortable as he was himself. "I'll meet you down there in...oh...ten minutes?" With a smile, she turned and went back inside the apartment and closed the door.

Taking a deep breath to collect himself, Vincent began the descent down her building.

Diana was cold as she hurried down the alley. Grandma's shawl wasn't really heavy enough to protect her against the bitter cold, and she clenched her teeth to keep them from chattering. She knew she'd be down in the tunnels, soon, and the steam pipes would warm the air to a tolerable temperature. When she saw the shadow of Vincent's bulk ahead, she shivered, and not from the cold. Just the thought of him was enough to warm her up a few degrees all by itself. As she approached, he held out his hand, and she took it.

"Be careful, Diana. The ladder could be difficult with you...dressed as you are. I will go first and help you down."

No problem, Diana thought, trembling a little at the thought of his hands on her. As she started down the ladder, she couldn't help starting just a bit when she felt those hands around her waist, lifting her the rest of the way.

"You're shivering!" Vincent exclaimed. "I'm sorry. It is so bitterly cold out there. I didn't think..." With a swift, smooth motion, he removed his cloak and wrapped it around her, careful not to disturb her hair.

Once she was swathed in the voluminous cloak, he took her hand and led her along. He seemed excited, now, and absolutely garrulous...at least for *him*.

"We had a wonderful surprise, Diana! Devin—my brother—is to be here at Winterfest! He sent a letter!" Vincent proceeded to tell her about Devin, and how he had left the tunnels when he was fourteen, and only returned twice, since. Both times in the past few years. As she listened to Vincent's excited narrative, Diana could only marvel and couldn't help smiling. *So this is what he's like when he's really happy!* She didn't care if Devin was an axe murderer or a saint. Anybody who could make Vincent this happy was Number One with *her*. It even took her mind off the upcoming celebration and her worries about fitting in.

By the time Vincent and Diana reached the Great Hall, everyone was waiting for them. He apologized for being late, opened the doors, and led everyone in.

As according to custom, no candles were lit until everyone was seated and had been given their Winterfest candle: he barely had time to nod at Devin before they'd all taken their seats. It bothered him a bit that Father seated Diana on his right side. He realized, though, that if Father was to pass the candle to him, and he to Devin, Diana would *have* to be on Father's other side.

Father began the ceremony solemnly, "The world above us is cold and gray..." and lit his own candle, which was a tiny, wavering spark in the dark.

As the ceremony continued, passing first to Vincent, then to Devin, on his left, he could see Diana's eyes shining in wonder. He smiled at her as the ceremony continued, knowing that she would hold the last candle. By the time her candle was lit, Vincent could see the shimmer of unshed tears in her eyes.

Once all candles were lit, everyone joined in the process of lighting the candles in the vast chandeliers and raising them. Vincent lit the fires in the several iron woodstoves set around the Hall, then joined Diana, who was visiting with Father and Devin.

"Diana. I see you have been introduced to my wayward brother," he commented.

Devin turned and they greeted one another properly, with enthusiastic hugs. "Vincent! God, it's great to see you! Congratulations on the baby! He's beautiful! How'd a great, ugly lout like you end up with such a good-looking kid?"

As always, the very thought of Catherine brought Vincent both joy and pain in equal measure. With a little difficulty, he attempted to keep the tone light. "He had a beautiful mother," he answered quietly, with a smile.

Vincent saw Diana's look of concern and smiled at her. "You must not be concerned, Diana. Believe me...I am well." He took a deep breath and told both of them, "I regret that I cannot spend all my time with you, but there are many Helpers here who are anxious to meet Jacob. Father promised for me that I would show him off tonight, so...if you will excuse me for a while, I will retrieve him from Brooke and do that."

After Vincent left them, Father also excused himself, leaving Devin and Diana alone beside the table, where William was putting out a feast. They both smiled awkwardly at one another, and Devin told her, "Guess it's just us chickens, huh?"

"Guess so," Diana responded. She'd noticed the scars on Devin's cheek the moment she saw him; there was no mistaking the origin. She lifted an eyebrow and queried, "Sibling rivalry?"

Devin grinned and touched his cheek. "Yeah. We fought. He won." Obviously it was long in the past and didn't bother him. "Would you like something to drink? I hear William makes two kinds of punch—one that's just punch and another that will curl your hair."

Diana grinned back, liking Devin already. "I could use a little hair curling, come to think of it."

While Devin fetched their punch, Diana watched Vincent as he proudly showed off his son. He seemed...okay, but that didn't keep her from worrying. She knew holidays were always the worst times after losing someone you loved.

"How's he handling Cathy's death?"

Diana startled at Devin's question. She hadn't heard him come up behind her. "Um...better, now. It was bad for a long time. Having Jacob helps."

"I want to thank you. For helping him find the baby. For killing that bastard who killed Cathy. For everything you've done for him. Father says he really doesn't think Vincent would have survived without you there."

Embarrassed, Diana just shrugged. "Right place, right time," she said dismissively.

"If you say so." He handed her one of the cups.

Diana took a sip and the kick brought tears to her eyes. "Whoa! I think after this one, I'd better stick with the kiddie stuff."

Devin laughed at her then turned to watch the musicians. He seemed to notice that Vincent had disappeared. As Brooke wandered by, Devin asked her if she'd seen him.

"He just went to put Jacob to bed. Livvy is watching the kids right now, and I'll go down in a while to spell her. He'll be back soon."

As Brooke walked away, Diana tried to draw him into conversation. "I can't imagine you and him as kids, down here. What was it like?"

He shrugged. "Don't know what to tell you. I never grew up anyplace else, so it just seemed normal to me." He was quiet a long moment, then added, "It was always hard, trying to include Vincent in things we did. Being older, I already did a lot of things he couldn't, and he always wanted to tag along. He was a great kid, though." He shook his head. "I just have such a hard time imagining him as a father." He took a sip of William's brew. "Whoa. He wasn't kidding when he said to watch out for this stuff!"

"He's a great father, you know," Diana told Devin.. "I've never seen a father love his kid more." She looked down at her toes. "Little Jacob is all he has left of Cathy. I don't know if he'll ever... get past... losing her."

Diana could feel Devin's eyes on her. He asked softly, "And what about you? Are you okay with that?"

She jerked her head up to meet Devin's gaze. "What do you mean?"

"You love him...and right now, he's not really seeing you."

"That obvious?" Diana asked, glumly.

"To me. Maybe to a few others. I think Father knows, though he's trying *not* to know."

Diana didn't answer at first, uncomfortable with talking to anyone, much less a total stranger about how she felt about Vincent. *Especially* since that stranger was Vincent's brother! "Um... can we not talk about this, and pretend you and everyone else are blind?"

Devin pointed at the table. "Sure. Guess we should get our plates...it'll help offset the kick of the punch."

They filled their plates, made small talk with a few people, then Devin began telling Diana stories about things he and Vincent had done as kids.

"...and when Father came through the chamber door, I was standing in the middle of the room, trying to look innocent, and Vincent was hanging by the chandelier just above Father's head. It didn't last long, though, because while I was getting chewed out, the candle wax from the candles, which were tilting precariously, started dripping over the sides and landing on Father's head. He yelled when the hot wax burned him, Vincent let go and fell on top of him, and I ran like hell!

Diana was laughing so hard her sides hurt. When she could get her breath and stop laughing, she wiped her eyes and pointed across the Hall to where Vincent was heading toward them. "I can't *wait* until Jacob starts getting into things!"

When Vincent entered the Great Hall, he immediately looked for Diana and Devin. He heard Diana's laughter before he saw her, and barely recognized it as hers. He'd never heard her laugh like that before. When he saw her and Devin standing so close together and laughing together, he felt a flash of what could only be described as jealousy. He stopped a moment and watched them, considering his feelings. *Why should I feel jealous?* The thought made him uncomfortable. He cared for Diana a great deal, and he knew she cared for him. It still did not seem right: she was not Catherine. He should not be feeling this way.

Slowly, he continued across the Hall, stopping to greet a few friends and moving on. As he approached the pair, Diana turned and saw him.

"Vincent! Oh, I'm so glad you're back! Devin has been regaling me with tales of your childhood!" She shook a finger at him and mock-scolded him. "You were a *wicked* little ruffian!"

Pleasure washed over him as he thought of Devin sharing stories with Diana. He tried to present an impassive façade. "Not at all, Diana. I had a wicked older brother who led me into sin."

As Vincent joined them, sharing in the stories, and listening to Diana's own stories of incidents from her childhood, he felt a great peace come over him. The music was playing, and he looked to the shadows, imagining yet again he and Catherine dancing to their own music. For the first time when remembering times with her, he felt more joy than grief. He glanced around the Hall with its festive decorations and listened to the cheerful talk...saw the children playing, and found himself looking forward to when Jacob would be old enough to join in.

As if Diana had read his thoughts, she told him, "I'll bet Jacob is going to give you *and* Father fits."

He smiled at her, and at Devin. "Most likely he will. I am...looking forward to it."

The three spent the last part of the festival talking. Father joined them and added his own stories, and Mary after that.

Much later, as the celebration was winding down, Diana excused herself to go speak with Jamie and Mouse and to tell everyone goodbye. As he watched her walk away, Devin addressed him quietly. "You know, Vincent, your bond with Cathy was unique; most people never really find that special someone who is just right for them. You did."

When Vincent started to answer, Devin continued. "All I can say is, you're one of the luckiest men I've ever known."

Aghast, Vincent gasped out, "I *lost* her, Devin! How is that '*lucky*'?"

Devin's eyes met his. "Because you *had* her. You had each other. And now...you have Diana. Vincent, how is it that an ugly mug like you manages to get two gorgeous women to fall in love with him?"

Ignoring Devin's joking slur at his appearance, Vincent could only stare for a moment. "Diana does not...."

"Diana loves you, you idiot!" Devin was in his face, forcing a confrontation while trying to keep his voice down. "Do you think Cathy would want you to rot down here in these caverns by yourself? Alone for the rest of your life? She'd want you to be *happy*...she'd want her son to grow up with you *being* happy."

Vincent looked away, then murmured, "Perhaps. But...."

"No buts, Vincent. How do you feel about her?"

Devin had always been determined to force Vincent to ignore his limitations. Vincent smiled a little, thinking of all their adventures. Finally, he looked back up to meet his brother's gaze. "I *do* care about her. A great deal." He shrugged. "It is so soon after losing Catherine. Everything is...confused. Difficult."

Diana was coming back, and Devin smiled at him, then clapped him on the back. "Don't wait too long, Vincent. Just remember that if you're lucky enough to find love a second time, you'd be an idiot not to take the chance."

Diana approached, and Devin took her hand and kissed it. "I am off to bed, m'lady. It was a pleasure."

Obviously flustered, Diana reclaimed her hand, and responded, "Yeah. Me, too."

Vincent stood with Diana, watching Devin wend his way through the remaining celebrants. "Well," Diana said, finally, "...your brother is certainly unique."

His mouth twitching in an involuntary smile, he answered, "It appears to run in the family." She poked him in the ribs and grinned.

Devin looked back from the opposite side of the Great Hall, just in time to see Diana poke Vincent, and see him smile. Pushing his hands into his pockets, he left the hall and whistled as he headed back to Vincent's chamber.

Vincent walked Diana back to her Loft. They moved through the dimly lit corridors in almost silent companionship, though Vincent was very aware of her warmth, her scent...and her amazing beauty. Somehow, though, her beauty and even the desire he felt for her—which only tonight he'd truly realized—did not make him uneasy, as it had with Catherine at times when they were together. He wasn't at all sure why this was the case, but he was grateful it was so.

As they reached the exit from the tunnels, he looked down at her and took her hand in his. "I am glad you came, Diana. To share this with me. I have not enjoyed myself as much for a very long time."

"It was great, Vincent. I really enjoyed meeting Devin, too. I love listening to stories about when you were growing up." She gave him a wide smile. "It was like a huge family reunion—kind of like a Bennett family reunion, without Uncle Connor getting drunk." She hesitated. "I...I haven't had that much fun in a long time, either. Thank you for asking me."

Tentatively, he reached out and brushed a stray tendril of hair back and ventured a compliment. "You are very lovely, Diana. Inside *and* outside." The look in her eyes encouraged him. He would *not* waste the time in self-doubt and senseless worry that had so delayed his relationship with Catherine. Devin was right. Catherine would want for him to be happy. He lowered his head...very slowly...and gave her a soft kiss. She returned it—reaching up to caress his hair.

The kiss was brief, but for all that, Vincent's heart was racing. Her eyes were like jewels in the lamplight. "I do not know what the future holds, Diana. I only know I would like...very much... for you to be a part of mine."

The smile she gave him before she moved into his arms told him all he needed to know.

THE END