

LOST AND FOUND

by Janet Rivenbark

Cleon Manning was the person who found her, but he would be the first to tell you that he wouldn't have been able to do it without Peter Alcott. Peter knew people, and he'd asked questions, and then he'd gone to Cleon with the information he'd gleaned. Cleon had used that information, and what he'd been able to dredge up on his own, to track her down to a remote area of Argentina finally.

When he first met with Cleon Manning, Peter had probably collected more odds and ends of information about Gabriel Novak than any other person or government agency in the world.

For one thing, Peter had Gabriel's last name, the real one. Few people knew that. Gabriel used many surnames but never didn't use Gabriel. It was thought he fancied it gave him a connection with the Archangel.

When Cleon combined what he had with what Peter gave him, he found he had a surprising amount of information. He knew that Gabriel Novak had been born in Croatia to a very poor family during World War II. He had one brother, a few years younger than him. His mother had died when he was barely eight, and his father had given both him and his brother up for "adoption" a few years after that. Novak senior had himself died under questionable circumstances in 1956.

Gabriel and his brother were raised in not much better circumstances than what they'd been born into. The people who "adopted" them had put them to work on a farm, and they'd never really had much of a childhood. They ran away from that farm when Gabriel reached an age where he could take care of them both. They'd somehow managed to return to their hometown, but didn't stay long.

Details of Gabriel's life for the next decade or two were sketchy. Both he and his brother had managed to stay out of the hands of the authorities wherever they went, and they both managed to get educations. That was probably because Gabriel knew how to ingratiate himself with people who had money and would help him. They made it to the United States when Gabriel was in his mid-twenties.

By the time he was thirty, he held a position of some importance in an international crime syndicate. By the time he was forty, he was running it.

The information had also stated that Gabriel had purchased property all over the world, including an estate in Argentina built by a man who had been a trusted associate of Adolf Hitler during World War II. Of all the properties he owned, the one in Argentina probably had the most security and was the hardest to find. The man who built it had left Europe with his family before the end of the war, and had gone to a small German settlement in the middle of nowhere in Argentina. When he'd died, his family had sold the estate to Gabriel.

The authorities knew that Gabriel had left New York sometime after Catherine's disappearance, but no one had any idea where he'd gone. There was no record of his private plane landing anywhere.

Since he wasn't officially a suspect in Catherine's disappearance, there was no legal reason to stop him. There were no witnesses to him arriving at his plane, and for that matter, no one was even sure that Gabriel had been on the plane when it took off. The only people officially on the aircraft were the pilot and co-pilot. There had been no passenger manifest or cargo list.

Even though no one could prove it, everyone involved with the case, including Cleon Manning, was sure that Gabriel was responsible for Catherine's disappearance. They just couldn't prove anything, or say one way or another, if Catherine was even still alive.

Peter knew that Catherine was alive and speculated that she was with Gabriel because Vincent's bond with her had returned. However, all Vincent could tell was that she was alive, somewhere to the south and very far away. Of course, Peter couldn't tell Manning that.

Catherine had been missing for almost six months when Peter walked into Cleon Manning's office and gave him all the information he'd gathered from Joe Maxwell and his other sources.

Peter slid a thick file folder across the desk to Cleon Manning of "Manning Investigations." He'd been surprised at the small office. Manning appeared to be the only person in the office.

"Where did you get my name?" Cleon asked. He didn't exactly advertise.

"A friend in the CIA recommended you. Said you were the best. But from the looks of your office, I'm wondering if you have enough people to handle this," Peter said.

"I have employees," he assured Peter, "and if I need more for any case, I have a pool I hire from." He opened Peter's file and saw Catherine Chandler's name; he was surprised. It was the same woman he'd been trying to find for the last six months for his biggest client, Elliot Burch. He flipped through the papers in the file. There was information there that even he hadn't been able to come up with. His surprise must have shown on his face because Peter started asking questions before Manning could.

"You look surprised," Peter stated.

"I am. This was all over the papers a few months back," he hedged.

"It was, but is there something else?"

"Yeah." Manning looked up at Peter. "I've been on this case for the last six months. Elliot Burch hired me."

"So you already knew all this, and nothing has been done?" Peter was surprised and was obviously starting to get angry.

"No. I had none of this. All I had was what the police and the DA had. Where did you get all this? Most of it's new to me," he said. "I only ask because I want to make sure that it's reliable."

"Some from the DA's office. As you probably know, Joe Maxwell had an extensive file before his boss made him quit the investigation, but he hit a wall when he could start it again. He shared everything he had with me. I also know people. My son-in-law works for the FBI, I have an old friend with the CIA, and he has connections to INTERPOL. Everyone was been very accommodating, once they heard that Catherine is like a daughter to me."

"With what you've just given me, I may have enough to fill in most of the holes in my info. We might be able to get somewhere on this case... finally." Peter could hear what sounded like excitement in Manning's voice.

"I just want to find Catherine and bring her home. The people I know were able to give me this information, but no one has the authority to do anything with it. If they brought it to the attention of their superiors, they could be jeopardizing their jobs, because it wasn't officially a case they were assigned. They all say that they doubt that anyone would be willing to go in with what would amount to a small army, just to rescue one private citizen."

Cleon nodded. "All right. Let me check out some of these leads, and I'll get back to you as soon as I know if I can do anything."

As soon as Dr. Alcott left his office, Cleon grabbed his coat, Alcott's file, and his own file on Catherine Chandler and left. He read through Alcott's file in the cab, and what he read convinced him that they finally had the breaks they needed. He was uptown and striding through Elliot Burch's outer office a short time later.

"He's on the phone, Mr. Manning," the secretary called out, as he opened the door to Burch's office.

"He'll get off for this," he assured her, as he stepped through and closed the door behind him.

"Can I get back to you?" Elliot said into the receiver as he looked up at Cleon's determined face.

The person on the other end must have answered in the affirmative because Elliot hung up and turned toward the tall black man.

"I don't know how he did it," Cleon said as he crossed the room and tossed the two file folders into Elliot's desk.

Elliot picked up the thicker one and deliberately paged through it.

“Where did you get all this?”

“Peter Alcott.”

“Her doctor?”

“Yeah, and apparently, a very determined man.”

“How did he get it?”

Cleon listed all Peter’s contacts and added, “He’s obviously been collecting information since shortly after she disappeared.”

“What can you do with this?” Elliot stood and dropped the files on his desk.

“It fills most of the holes in what I could find: names and places for one. My investigation turned up numerous properties that this Gabriel owns, but it dead-ended at LaGuardia when Gabriel’s plane took off from there a little over five months ago. His pilot filed a flight plan that said they were heading for Houston. But there was no record of them ever landing there, or at any other airport near there, or anywhere east of the Rockies.

“Didn’t you tell me when we talked about this last time that they had fuel that would take them about 2200 miles?” Elliot asked. At Cleon’s nod, he continued. “That could have taken them anywhere east of the Rockies if they headed west, into Northern Canada if they went north, Newfoundland, the Caribbean, even central Mexico.”

“Yeah, but I don’t know many pilots willing to push till the tank is reading empty,” Cleon pointed out. “I checked every airport, controlled and not, even grass strips inside a 2000-mile radius, and I came up with nothing.

“Alcott’s information says that this Gabriel Novak owns an island that I’ve never heard of and probably isn’t even on a map, between Cuba and South America. They could have landed there and refueled. We’d still be at a loss, except that again, they have 2000 miles worth of fuel, and with that, unless they headed back north, there aren’t a lot of places they could have gone within that 2000 mile radius.”

“And that does fit in with Novak owning property in Argentina. They could have refueled in Brazil, then gone on to Argentina.”

“Is there any evidence of that?” Elliot asked.

“Possibly. We know by the tail number of the plane that he left LaGuardia, and one of my contacts found a partial match at a small airport in Brazil. But at the time, I didn’t take it seriously since it was only a partial match. All my other leads were pointing more toward a European destination.”

“Anything else from South America?”

“I think there might be.”

“So we know where she is?”

“Possibly. I want to send someone in to ask some questions and look around before we go in with guns blazing.”

“Let me know as soon as you know something... and keep Alcott in the loop. Did you tell him you were working for me on the same case?”

“I did, and he didn’t act very surprised.”

It took Cleon almost a month, but by the time he talked to Elliot again, he was, as he put it, 99% sure that the woman he had pictures of sitting on a bench on the veranda of the house in the Argentinian jungle was Catherine Chandler. He just needed Elliot’s confirmation.

He handed several enlarged black and white 8x10s to Elliot.

“What do you think? Is it her?”

The woman in the picture was wearing a dark t-shirt and dark pants and was barefoot. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, but her face was turned up to the sunlight, and there was no mistaking that profile. Elliot looked closely at all the photos, but he was sure when he saw the first one.

“It’s her,” he told Cleon. “What’s the plan?”

“I put a man inside; he’s on the gardening crew. He’s struck up a *friendship* with one of the maids, so he’s been inside the house. We know the layout. He’s seen Chandler being brought up from the basement once a week since he’s been there, so he’s pretty sure where she is being kept. He says that there are no guards inside the house, and they are only outside at night, and there aren’t many people on the estate, just the household staff, and a few security guards. They hire a crew from a nearby town to maintain the gardens. We will replace all six gardeners with my people, so it should be easy. When the truck leaves on the afternoon we decide to move; only the driver will be in it, and the other five will have found places to hide. Once everyone is asleep, they’ll go in, secure Chandler, and get out.”

“No guns blazing, huh?” said Elliot with a wry smile.

“Not this time. I think doing it quiet-like might be the better plan.”

“What have you told Alcott?”

“Not much, but I plan to fill him in before we move.”

“Let him know that I’ll be paying all the expenses for this operation. Don’t bill him.”

“What are we going to do with her once we get her back here?” Cleon asked. “Since we will probably be leaving the place intact, she’ll likely still be in danger. She’s going to have to stay out of sight.”

“Talk to Alcott about that. He might know a place. And talk to Cathy when you find her; she might have some ideas.”

Elliot had an idea, too but decided not to go into it with Cleon. Catherine had asked him to keep it a secret.

“You don’t want me to bring her to you?”

“Not unless she wants to come to me, and I doubt she will. I owe her, and this is the least I can do to repay that debt.”

“OK, Boss. You got it.”

“When do you plan for all this to go down?”

“I need to talk to Alcott, but we were thinking the middle of next week. We already have people either in place in the town or on their way there.”

“And how will you get her out of the country?”

“Same way they probably got her in. My people will be there in ones and twos and passing themselves off as tourists. They will implement the plan from the town. There will be another small group waiting for them in the jungle not far from the estate, as a backup. We will have coordinated with the people on the ground, and our plane will land, pick them up and fly them out. I’ve left it to the pilots to plan the refueling stops, but if we get off the ground on Wednesday night as we plan, with refueling, she should be back here by no later than the wee hours of Friday morning.”

“OK, unless she indicates she wants something different, arrange to have her taken straight to Alcott’s house. If no one can figure out how to keep her safe, let me know, and I’ll make arrangements.”

“You sure you don’t want to see her?”

“Only if she asks to see me.”

As soon as Manning got back to his office, he called Peter and arranged to meet him. Peter was surprised at the secrecy Manning was requesting, but he suggested that they meet in his office. Peter rearranged some appointments and freed some time the following afternoon.

When Manning left his office, Peter sent a message Below that he'd be down that evening.

He told Father first.

"Do you want to tell Vincent right away?" Peter asked. "I'd hate to have him disappointed if the plan doesn't work."

"I would too," Father agreed. "But I feel that we have to tell him. He needs to know and prepare himself for whatever happens."

They called Vincent to the study, and Peter relayed all his information again.

"She'll be home Friday morning?" Vincent asked incredulously.

"If everything goes as planned," Peter said. "And Mr. Manning seems to have a lot of faith in the people doing it."

"Then we must prepare," Vincent said, reaching for a pad and pencil on Father's desk. "You said she'll need a safe place to stay until everything is resolved. Below is the best choice for that." He started making a list as they made plans.

What no one knew was Gabriel's reason for leaving New York. Things had begun to get a little uncomfortable for him. He took the woman, Catherine Chandler, with him. There was just something about her; he couldn't put his finger on it, but whatever it was, it made him decide to keep her close.

He had a plan for Miss Chandler. She had spirit, he had to give her that, but he planned to break that spirit and bend her to his will, then he'd use her any way he wanted to, at least until he got tired of her.

Catherine had overheard a conversation between the doctor and Gabriel about that plan, so she knew what he was trying to do. It just made her more determined to resist.

She was kept in a cell in the dungeon-like basement of the house. It was dank and dark and smelled. She was given a bucket of cold water to either drink or wash with every few days. She drank most of it but tried to use a little to wash. Her diet consisted of rice and beans and a few vegetables for dinner, and some kind of cooked cereal for breakfast. Sometimes she got a little bit of chicken with her rice and beans.

The only people she talked to were the doctor who came to check on her once a week and the guards. None of them were talkative, but she could discern that everyone around her spoke English, although the accents varied.

After the first few weeks, she was taken upstairs once a week to sit on the veranda in the sun for an hour or two. The windows of the house were often open, and it was then that she overheard conversations going on around her.

She heard Gabriel talking to a man he called either Snow or Brother several times. They spoke of her several times, and Gabriel said that she was suitable for him and that once she was broken to his will, he'd teach her how to please him. It made her skin crawl to hear it.

When Snow asked him what he'd do with her when he tired of her, Gabriel told him that he'd kill her or maybe give her to him; since he knew Snow's taste in women was similar to his. That made her skin crawl even more.

Catherine noticed that Gabriel wasn't a big man. She estimated that he was probably six feet tall, but he wasn't very muscular. She also noticed that no one who worked for him... at least inside the house, was very big; most of the inside staff were women. Even the man he called Snow appeared to be a few inches shorter than him. His guards, who stayed outside except when she was escorted up to the veranda, on the other hand, were always the biggest, most muscular men he could find, but his household staff, his assistant, Jonathan Pope, and even the doctor were all his height or shorter.

Catherine surmised that Gabriel was a bit of a narcissist. Although she had limited knowledge of psychology, it seemed to fit. It was also possible he was compensating for some *shortcomings*. She cringed at the thought and hoped she never found out if that was true. He was overly aggressive and domineering because *he felt* he knew better than anyone. The universe revolved around him and what he wanted. She didn't know and didn't want to find out what it was that he wanted.

Catherine was determined not to let him get to her. She was determined to keep a clear mind and stay in shape no matter what. She exercised in her cell; she did push-ups and sit-ups and even ran in place. She didn't know that Gabriel knew what she was doing; he watched her on surveillance cameras and laughed.

Something else Catherine didn't know was where she was. She'd been drugged when she was moved and didn't know how long it had taken to get where they were. When she was outside on the veranda, all she saw was the manicured European-style garden inside a high wall. The house looked like any ordinary large home anywhere. The few inside staff that she saw were all Spanish-speaking, but that wasn't unusual in New York. But it was a lot warmer and more humid, so she knew that she wasn't in New York, but she didn't think she was far from home. She speculated she was in Florida or another southern state, or maybe Mexico. She didn't know that she was over 5000 miles from her home and that if she did manage to escape the dungeon she was living in, she'd find herself miles from civilization in the middle of a South American jungle.

Catherine had spent over an hour on the veranda enjoying the sun. It was the only time she ever got the stink of the basement out of her nose, and she enjoyed every minute of it. When she was on the veranda, she would often watch the gardeners working, but this time she'd noticed that the gardeners seemed to be watching her. She also saw some new faces among them. She wondered if Gabriel had replaced the gardeners with guards who had been tasked with watching her while they worked.

She shook her head. *I'm getting paranoid.*

It was beginning to look as if it might rain when one of the guards came up to the veranda and told her it was time to go back inside.

When she returned to her cell, she was surprised to find several very beat up and dogeared paperback books on her bed. She'd requested something to read when she'd talked to the man, known only as "Doctor" to her. He'd promised to pass the request along. She'd about given up hope of it being granted. She looked at the books, one was a science fiction novel, and the other two were contemporary romance novels. Not exactly her usual choices, *but beggars can't be choosers*, she told herself.

She chose one, sat on her bed, and started to read. It was surprising how quickly the time passed as she read, and she was startled when the guard arrived with her dinner.

It was as uninteresting as ever. It wasn't exactly bad, but it was just the same thing every night. She poked at it, trying to identify what was in it. There was rice, black beans, and some corn. She tasted it, and it was the same as ever. She tasted onions, some garlic, and some spices, maybe cayenne and cumin. Green onions had been tossed on top, and there was a small piece of cornbread. Tonight, the only difference was a small piece of chicken.

Must be Wednesday... she mused when she saw the chicken ...or Sunday.

At least they didn't give her rice and beans for breakfast. She didn't think she could stomach the slightly spicy dish first thing in the morning. Breakfast usually consisted of thinned-down versions of cooked cereal and weak coffee. Not very substantial, but better than nothing.

She ate, then slid the tray under the cell door so the guard could pick it up later, then went back to her book.

The lights went out at what she estimated was about the same time every night. When they went out that night, she folded down the corner of the page she was on and put the book on the floor before curling up under the musty wool blanket on her bed and going to sleep.

She woke sometime later to strange noises and the feeling that someone was in the room outside her cell. That couldn't be good. She sat up in bed, ready to fight off whoever it was.

There was a click, and she heard the whispered words:

“Got it!”

“Be ready to move,” another voice directed in unaccented English. “...quietly.”

She felt rather than seeing someone enter the cell; she felt a hand on her arm. She tensed up, ready to fight.

“Miss Chandler, you don't know me, but I'm here to help you. Burch sent us.”

“Elliot?” she croaked, she didn't speak often, and her voice showed it.

“Yes, but we don't have time to discuss it now. We need to move before we are discovered. I'll explain it all later. You can trust us.”

“That's what they all say,” she scoffed, but she didn't hesitate. She rose and prepared to follow.

It was dark, and she could barely make out several figures moving around her. Suddenly, she was lifted off her feet, thrown over a shoulder, and carried. It seemed they weren't going to allow her to make a decision. She might be leaping from the frying pan straight into the fire, but she didn't argue. She wasn't set back on her feet again until they were out of the house and on the veranda where she'd spent part of the afternoon.

“Surveillance?” the man she'd spoken to earlier asked. She looked around, and there were five of them. All wore dark clothing and gloves and had something dark smeared on their faces and any other exposed skin.

“All the wires have been cut,” another voice answered.

A third man came up to her and handed her a dark, knit hat.

“Put this on and tuck your hair into it,” he directed when she took it.

She did as she was told, and a few minutes later, she was surrounded, and they were moving again. As they crossed the lawn, she noticed that there was either no moon or that it was overcast. They reached a door in the high garden wall. A few seconds and a little cussing later, it was open, and they were all running across an open field. When Catherine stumbled, each of her arms was grabbed, and she was almost lifted off her feet.

They didn't slow down until they'd reached a wooded area. She was set back on her feet and again addressed by the man who had first spoken to her.

“I'm Barnes,” he told her in a whisper. “We will be moving pretty quickly from here on out, so it's imperative that you stay behind the guy in front of you and don't stray off the path, such as it is. If you start having trouble keeping up, let someone know, and we can carry you, but we'd prefer not to have to do that. We are on the clock here and have to be at a rendezvous point by a set time.”

“Got it,” she said with a nod.

They did move fast, not too fast for her to keep up, but it did get to the point where she concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other before they stopped for a short break.

“Ten minutes,” she heard Barnes tell everyone. “And no lights.”

Catherine gingerly sat on a log and pulled one of her feet into her lap to look at it. There wasn't a lot of light, but she could tell it was bleeding from a long gash on her instep and another on her big toe.

“Why didn't you say something?” Barnes admonished her causing her to jump since she hadn't heard him come up. “Josh, we need a medic over here.”

There was another man in front of her then, and he sat down at her feet and took over the inspection of them.

“I'm sorry I didn't notice you didn't have shoes on,” Barnes apologized. “We would have had time for you to put some on.”

“I don’t have any,” she said, wincing as Josh cleaned the cuts. “I haven’t had shoes since I got here. I figured it was supposed to be a deterrent to trying to escape.”

“How is it?” Barnes asked Josh.

“Not too bad,” he answered. “But we will have to carry her or find her something to put on her feet.

“Here, try these.” A pair of black high-top men’s basketball shoes were handed over the medic’s shoulder.

“They look a little big,” Barnes commented.

A small spool of dark cord was passed over.

“Tie ‘em on with that,” said another voice.

The medic dressed the cuts and scratches, then wrapped elastic bandages around her feet before he helped her put on the shoes and secured them around her ankles with the cord.

“How does that feel?” he asked when he was done.

Catherine stood and walked a few steps.

“Kind of like trying to walk in clown shoes, but it’s better than it was.”

“We won’t be moving quite as fast from here,” Barnes assured her. “Let someone know if you’re having trouble.”

“Mr. Barnes,” she said as he started to turn away. “Just where are we? I thought at first that we were in the woods somewhere, or maybe Florida, but from what I’ve been able to make out in the dark, the vegetation looks decidedly more tropical.”

“No one told you?” he asked.

“No, I guess it might have been another deterrent to me trying to escape. I did notice that most of the house staff that I saw were Hispanic, and some of the guards had German accents. I thought Mexico, maybe, but I really have no idea.”

“We’re in Central Argentina, just east of the foothills of the Andes mountains. We are a few miles from where we started.”

“Argentina?” was all she could say. She couldn’t believe it. Even if she had escaped, she would have probably died in the jungle if they hadn’t caught her and taken her back.

They didn’t move as fast after the rest stop, but they seemed to walk for hours. When they finally stopped, Catherine walked right into the back of the man in front of her.

“I think it’s probably a good thing that we’re here,” he said, as he caught and steadied her.

“Where’s *here*?” Catherine asked, looking around. They were at the edge of a large open field.

“Airstrip,” he told her, then turned away.

She listened as one man used a radio. It took several tries, but he was finally answered. Then a few minutes later, she could hear the drone of airplane engines in the distance. The sound got closer and closer then she saw a plane landing in the distance.

“As soon as the plane stops, standard procedure. Everyone be prepared to move as quickly as possible. Gus,” he pointed at a large man standing a few feet from her. “You carry Chandler.”

The plane was taxiing to a spot several hundred feet from where they stood. The engines didn’t stop, and she could just make out a ramp dropping down from under the tail before Gus grabbed her, threw her over his shoulder, and took off at a run.

Everyone was onboard, and the ramp was raised when the plane started moving again.

Gus deposited her gently onto a webbed bench along one side of the plane's cargo area. The plane turned, taxied, took off, and was in the air for almost five minutes before everyone relaxed and started moving around. Some were scrubbing camouflaging paint off their faces. Catherine looked around and could finally see the faces of her rescuers.

It was then that she saw a tall black man walking toward where she was seated. He was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt and had obviously not been with them on their trek through the jungle.

"I know you," she said, as he sat beside her.

"Cleon Manning," he introduced himself. "I work for Elliot Burch."

"You're responsible for all this?" she asked, indicating the men and the plane.

"For some of it, yes. Barnes is responsible for the planning; the men and the plane belong to his company. But none of us would be here if it wasn't for Dr. Alcott."

"Peter?" Catherine found that hard to believe.

"Yes. He came to me with information that I would have never been able to get."

"How?"

"He says he knows people. He asked questions, got answers, and brought those answers to me. The coincidence was that he didn't know that I was already working on the case for Burch."

"I know his son-in-law Rob is an FBI agent," Catherine told him, "but I didn't know he had other connections."

The medic came over with his medical kit.

"I'd like to take another look at those feet," he told her.

"You were hurt?" Cleon asked with concern.

"It's nothing major," she assured him. "I just didn't have any shoes for the first part of our trip."

The medic thoroughly cleaned and dressed all the cuts and scratches on her feet this time. He handed her a pair of clean white tube socks when he was done bandaging her feet.

"Those will probably be more comfortable than those shoes you had on," he said as she took them.

Cleon continued his story while the medic worked.

"I started out working for Burch, but it wasn't until Alcott came to me with additional information that I was able to get anywhere. Burch has instructed me to take you straight to Dr. Alcott when we land. We have relayed information back to New York that we have you. Once we know our flight plan, we'll be able to let him know when you'll arrive."

"Elliot isn't going to be there?"

"No, he said he owes you and that this is the least he can do to repay a debt, but he will get involved if you don't have a safe place to go. We're concerned that Gabriel will be looking for you."

"I have a place I can go," she assured him. "No one will find me. Peter won't be in danger, will he?"

"I doubt it. I don't think anyone would connect him to this, and as long as you aren't staying with him, he should be OK. But I'll have some of my people keep an eye on him for a while. We will likely arrive at his place in the middle of the night. We will move quickly and keep you out of sight as much as possible."

She put the socks on as Cleon pulled out a blanket for her. There were about twenty airline-style seats in the small plane, and the back was cleared to carry cargo. The men had dumped their gear in bins in the back. Cleon indicated two vacant seats.

"You can rest there if you like. Are you hungry? We have some box lunches and some fresh fruit. I'll get you something."

Catherine walked gingerly to the seat and curled up under the blanket. Cleon came back with some food and hot coffee a few minutes later.

The first landing to refuel woke her. She had no idea how long she'd been asleep or where they were, but she didn't care. She made her way to the back to what one of the men had called a "comfort pallet." There was a toilet but no water to wash. The medic offered her some paper towels, a bottle of water, and some baby powder when she asked. She gratefully accepted them and went back into the cubical and washed as well as possible. She felt a little better when she went back to her seat as they started to taxi to take off again.

Catherine didn't go right to sleep this time. The fact that she was going home had finally started to sink in. It was all too real to be a dream, or at least that is what she hoped. She wondered if the bond had returned, and Vincent knew she was on her way. But she was sure that Peter had told him.

She dozed a little and chatted with Cleon and some of the other men. She ate some more of the food Cleon had given her.

The flight seemed to take forever, but she sighed with relief when she was told they were getting ready to land at LaGuardia. She really was going home.

That was how Catherine came to be standing impatiently next to Peter as he opened the threshold in his basement.

"You said that the bond returned?" she asked as he moved some boxes.

"Yes, not long after you disappeared. That was how we knew you were no longer in the city and that you were still alive. I sent a message Below as soon as Mr. Manning let me know when you'd be here."

"Then Vincent is probably on the other side of that door?" she asked anxiously.

Peter pushed a lever, and the shelves swung out from the door.

"Very likely."

He pushed the door wider and waved her through.

Feet be damned; she didn't hesitate; she was rushing headlong into Vincent's arms before they could draw a breath.

Peter exchanged glances with Vincent over Catherine's head before he pulled the door closed, edged around them in the tight space, and headed for the study to fill Father in on the latest developments.

Vincent had been driving everyone Below crazy since Peter had sent the message that Catherine was on her way. He'd made sure the guest chamber was ready, but he couldn't sit still. He paced in the classroom as he taught; he paced in the study while talking to Father. He could barely sit still long enough to eat a meal. He hadn't slept more than a few hours in the last few days.

A few days before, when Peter had told him that she'd been found and that someone was going to rescue her in a few days, he'd also told Vincent that she'd need a safe place to stay, until they knew whether or not her kidnapper would come after her. Vincent had insisted that Below was the best place.

He didn't think to ask Father but told him after Peter left.

"Peter says that there could be some danger that she might be followed here?" Father asked with concern.

"No, not followed, but someone might be sent to look for her, but Peter will be the only one who knows where she is. Elliot, his investigator, and the men on their team are the only ones who know that she's been found and returned to New York. Only Elliot and the investigator know that Peter knows where she will be. We will all be safe, Father. If there is any threat, Catherine and I will go somewhere else."

Father hadn't been enthusiastic, but he was glad that Catherine was safe and coming home.

Vincent had felt it all day as she got closer, and his sense of the Bond was so fine-tuned that he'd even known when she landed at LaGuardia.

"She's landed," he announced to Father and Mary, as he stopped in the study on his way to Peter's threshold.

"Give her my love," Mary called after him as he turned and left.

He'd known when she got to Peter's and felt her impatience as Peter opened the threshold. He was just as impatient.

He was only a few feet from his side of the door, and Catherine had covered that short distance in a bound and was in his arms.

"I've missed you so much!" she whispered. "I almost gave up hope of ever seeing you again."

"And I missed you," Vincent told her. "I never gave up hope. I would never give up hope as long as I knew you lived."

He held her as close as he could; and didn't want to let go.

Catherine didn't want to let go of him either. She was afraid she'd wake up and find out she was dreaming again. It had felt surreal, ever since the strange men had burst into her cell and told her she was going home. Even though she didn't know any of them, and there was always the possibility that she was going from bad to worse, she'd gone with them. They were all American, and anything was better than what Gabriel had put her through or planned for her.

Vincent was suddenly aware of her pain.

"Your feet? What's wrong with your feet?" he asked as he pushed her far enough away to see her face.

"It's not serious. I haven't had shoes in ages. We were in the jungle, and no one realized, not even me, that I was barefoot until we stopped for a short rest about an hour after we left the house where I was being held."

Vincent picked her up and started walking back toward the hub.

"I can walk," she protested, although being held like this was divine.

"Maybe so, but not without pain. You should stay off your feet as much as possible until either I or Father have a chance to look at them."

"They don't need a doctor, just a little first aid. The medic tended them on the plane. Once I've bathed, I'm sure I can take care of them... You are taking me someplace I can bathe, aren't you?" Suddenly, that was almost as important to her as being with Vincent, but not quite.

"I am. Mary prepared the guest chamber for you, and you'll find everything you need there. Peter even managed to spirit some of your clothes out of your apartment for you."

"Soaking in a hot pool sounds wonderful right now. I just wish I didn't have to let go of you to do it," she said as they entered the guest chamber.

Vincent crossed the chamber and sat in the rocking chair. He kept her in his arms, pulling her close.

"We can stay like this for a little longer," he whispered.

"Yes, please. I dreamed of being held by you, but I always woke up to find I was still on a straw mattress in that dirty, smelly cell." She pulled herself closer.

"I dreamed of holding you but would wake to find I only held a pillow in my arms."

"I talked to Cleon a little on the plane, but he didn't explain how he found me, except to say that Peter was a huge help," she said after a little while.

"Peter proved to be a very effective information gatherer. He knows people who know other people. I didn't pay much attention to what he told us, after he told us that they knew where you were and that someone was going to bring you home."

She hugged him tighter and would have been content to spend the rest of the night right there if her own odor hadn't wafted up to her.

"I haven't done much more than wash with cold water since I've been gone. And my hair is positively disgusting. I wouldn't be surprised if I had lice. I know I smell."

Vincent took a quick sniff of her neck. "You smell like Catherine and... baby powder."

"That's probably from what the guy on the plane gave me, but I would like to bathe."

"If you like, I can check your hair to ensure you don't have lice. We do it all the time for the children here Below, and Father has something to treat it if you do."

She agreed, and Vincent carried her to a chair next to a reading lamp. He turned on the lamp and brought over several more candles. He used his claws to section her hair and started inspecting it close to the scalp. It was surprisingly relaxing. He took his time, and as he worked, he could feel that she didn't want to let him out of her sight, but she also wanted to bathe. When he was done with her hair, he could pronounce her bug free.

"Would you like to bathe first or eat?" he asked when he was done.

"Bathe, please, but I don't want to let go of you."

Vincent picked up a basket, put it in her hands, and then picked her up again.

"If you like, I can stay with you while you bathe." He felt the same way but didn't want to intrude.

"I'd love that, but are you sure?" She was surprised by his offer

"The chamber isn't brightly lit. I'll turn away while you are undressing and getting into the water. Your modesty will be preserved."

And your sensibilities will be too, she wanted to say but kept it to herself.

He carried her to the bathing chamber and set her down next to a bench. When he knew she was steady on her feet, he turned his back and waited.

She went through the basket and was relieved that everything she'd left when she'd stayed Below before was still there. It included a razor, a pumice stone, a nail brush, nail clippers, shampoo, conditioner, soap, and body lotion. She quickly stripped off her clothes and bandages and dropped them on the floor.

The hot water stung her feet, but even that subsided with the pleasure of being immersed in the soothing liquid. She found a bench along the pool wall and settled onto it. The water came up to her chin.

"You can turn around now," she called.

Vincent turned, and even though he was facing her, he only glanced at her quickly.

"What do you want to do with these?" he asked, indicating the pile of clothes beside the pool.

"Burn them? Throw them in the Abyss? I don't ever want to see them again, and I doubt they're worth trying to salvage."

Vincent picked up the clothing and dropped them into the trash next to the door. He salvaged the ace bandages from her feet.

Catherine just sat and soaked for several minutes while Vincent busied himself moving the basket and a stack of towels closer to the pool. He finally sat on the bench but was still pointedly not looking at her.

"I took daily bathing for granted before," she told him. "I won't ever do that again."

"I sympathize," he agreed. "When I'm off exploring or surveying, I try to plan my routes to stop at pools at least every couple of days."

"I got creative with my one bucket of cold water," she said with a chuckle. "And I learned just how much to use and how much to save to drink. But I never felt clean. I like my scented soap and shampoo."

So do I, Vincent thought with a slight smile.

Eventually, she dunked to wet her hair. It was so dirty that it took lathering and rinsing three times to get any bubbles. She soaped it up a fourth time just because it felt so good. She applied the conditioner to her hair and then went to work on her body. She scrubbed and then gingerly applied the pumice stone to her feet and elbows.

Vincent kept up a light conversation while she worked. He told her what the children had been doing, but she didn't say much. There wasn't a lot that she wanted to share.

Next, she used the clippers in the basket to clip her toenails and fingernails. She had to twist herself into a pretzel to get her feet above water but not her whole body. She didn't want to give Vincent any reason to leave. She finally slid back into the pool and scrubbed her hands and nails with the nail brush.

When she was ready to get out, Vincent stood and turned his back to her again.

"Do you need any help?" he asked.

"Ah, I have towels, but no robe," she told him.

"I'll be right back." He left in a hurry.

She went up the steps until the water was about hip deep. She picked up one towel and wrapped it around her wet hair. She picked up another towel and climbed the rest of the way out of the pool. The stone floor caused a few twinges of pain, but her feet felt much better overall. She quickly dried off and reached for the body lotion; she wouldn't forego this step. She rubbed the lotion everywhere she could reach, then wrapped the oversized towel around her.

She'd just finished brushing her teeth when he returned.

"May I come in?" he called out.

"Yes, I'm decent."

He looked nervous when he entered. He had her blue satin robe from home. He handed it to her and turned his back again.

"Let me know when you're ready. I want to look at your feet."

"I feel like a new person!" she told him as she went to sit on the bench. "You can turn around now."

He squatted down in front of her, took her right foot in his hand, and inspected it closely. There were several minor cuts and scratches, but none were very deep. There was a bruise on her heel and another on the top of her foot. Her left foot hadn't fared quite as well. There was one deep laceration on her instep and another on her big toe, in addition to a lot of small scrapes and bruises.

He prodded the cut on her instep gingerly.

"Is that painful?" he asked.

"I can feel it, but it's not too bad. What really hurts is my other heel. How does it all look?"

"Everything is clean. When we get back to your chamber, I'll put some antibiotic ointment on the deeper cuts and bandage them. They should heal quickly enough. The bruised heel will probably give you more pain over the long term." He stood and looked down at her. "Are you hungry now?"

She picked up the bottle of lotion and started to stand, but he swept her up into his arms again and carried her back to the guest chamber.

While he tended her feet, she combed out her hair. Thanks to the conditioner, that proved to be an easier job than she expected.

"Will you allow me to leave you long enough to go get you something to eat?" he asked, when he was done bandaging her feet. He stood and smiled down at her.

“I think I can,” she said with a return smile. “You said Peter brought some of my clothes. Did he bring any of my nightgowns?”

“I think so. Everything is in the armoire.” He pointed across the room. “I shouldn’t be long. William said he left some things that won’t take long to prepare.”

Vincent left, and she stood and limped to the armoire. Peter, bless him, had brought underwear, jeans, shirts, jackets, and several nightgowns. She picked the blue one that matched the robe and put it on. She tried the slippers he’d brought, but with the bandages, they were too tight and hurt. She looked through the armoire and found socks in a drawer. She got a pair of those to put on over the bandages on her feet.

Quite the stunning look, she thought as she admired the white cotton socks sticking out from under the hem of the blue satin nightgown.

As Vincent walked toward the kitchen, he was concentrating on Catherine and what she was feeling, and he almost ran Father over.

“I’m surprised you are still up,” Vincent said, steadying Father.

“Peter just left,” Father said. “How’s Catherine?”

“She’s as well as can be expected. She’s very thin, too thin. And she has some injuries to her feet. She bathed, and I dressed the injuries. I’m going to get her something to eat.”

“Is there anything serious?”

“I don’t think so. She’s in some pain from cuts and bruises on her feet, but it’s nothing major.”

“How did they happen?” Father was curious.

“She said she hasn’t had shoes for quite some time. They had to trek through the jungle to escape. The rescue team had a medic who tended them.”

“Then I trust that you will take good care of her. Call me if you need me. I’m going back to bed.”

They parted, and Vincent continued to the kitchen. He found what William had left, and, in a few minutes, he was scrambling eggs, cooking bacon, and making toast.

When he got back to the guest chamber with the tray, Catherine was sitting in bed with the pillows behind her. She looked tired but happy.

He set the tray across her lap and then sat next to her legs on the other side.

“Did you bring some for yourself, or is all this for me,” she asked, as she eyed the laden tray.

“Eat as much as you like. I had dinner, but I can probably help you a little bit.”

Catherine ate... and ate... and savored every bite. She shared a little with Vincent, but it was very little. He was happy to see her eat so well.

When she was done, he moved the tray to the table. Now that she was well fed, she could hardly keep her eyes open.

“Sleep, Catherine. You need to rest. All this will still be here when you wake.” He’d sensed her trepidation.

“You’re sure?” she asked as she pulled off her robe. He took it from her and laid it over the foot of the bed.

“As sure as I can be. If this is a dream, I don’t want to wake either.” He moved a chair to the side of the bed.

“I’ll stay until you are asleep.”

She smiled sleepily and reached out to him. He took her hand and held it until it relaxed and almost slipped from his. He tucked it under the blanket. He blew out a few candles and put another piece of wood on the brazier before picking up the tray and leaving her.

He had just settled into bed about an hour later when he felt her become restless. It quickly built into terror and panic, and he was on his feet, rushing down the tunnel to her. He knew it was a nightmare, but he didn't want her to face even that alone anymore.

She was sitting up in bed crying and trembling when he appeared.

"It was happening again," she said as he sat on the bed and pulled her into his arms, "and I couldn't do anything to stop it."

"What was happening?"

"The kidnapping. Even though I knew what would happen, I couldn't do anything differently, and I couldn't make it stop." She buried her face in his chest and clutched at his shirt with both hands.

"You didn't tell me how it happened," he said. "Maybe if you tell me and we share the burden, it won't have so much power over you."

She was very quiet for several moments, and he thought she wasn't going to tell him anything.

"It was John," she said suddenly.

"John?" The only John he knew was John Pater, Paracelsus, but he was dead, and she didn't use his given name. Only Father did.

"My boss. John Moreno." Her voice was flat.

"The District Attorney?"

She nodded. "I must have been getting too close in my investigation. That book must have had something in it."

"What book?"

"A small black, leather-bound notebook. It was full of figures and what might have been words, but it was all in code. I couldn't break it; I gave it to Elliot and asked him if he had someone who could break it. I don't know if he did; I was kidnapped before I had a chance to get back to him."

"You didn't talk to anyone about this on your trip back?" he asked.

"I didn't think about it. I was just so happy that I was out of that awful place and on my way home."

"I think someone must have broken the code. I still have the newspapers, you can read them if you like, but a short time after you were kidnapped, it was reported that John Moreno had been arrested. The charges were numerous, but kidnapping wasn't among them.

"Moreno named a man he called Gabriel but said he didn't know if that was his first or last name. He said no one knew. Peter had a hunch about this Gabriel and started asking questions.

"At the same time Moreno was arrested, many others were also arrested. People in all positions city-wide: city government, the courts, police department, finance, even a couple of charitable organizations. The papers said that the corruption was widespread but that the police had moved on all of them at once and that it was all based on information that Joe Maxwell had received from someone. He had investigated, based on the information, and found that it was correct."

"So, Moreno is in jail. I'll probably have to testify."

"I doubt it."

"Why?"

"Moreno was found dead two days after he was arrested. He was out on bail and at home. When he didn't show up for a meeting with his lawyer, someone went to the house and found Moreno hanging in the foyer. There was evidence that his hands had been tied, but there was no rope present. The Medical Examiner said that the bruises on his wrists could have been from the handcuffs that the police used when they arrested him and later when they'd taken him to court for his arraignment. It was ruled a suicide, but many people questioned that

conclusion, including Moreno's family. We have a Helper who works in the morgue, and he said that the bruises looked fresh to him, not a couple of days old."

"He was working for Gabriel Novak," Catherine said. "Novak probably had him killed so he wouldn't have the opportunity to talk. I'd like to say he got what he deserved, but I can't hate him that much. I sympathize with his family. I wish he'd had a chance to testify. I'm sure he would have been offered a deal, a lighter sentence for his testimony." She sagged against Vincent. "God, I'm tired!"

He tried to get her to lie down again.

"You need to rest," he said as she clung to him.

"Will you stay with me? Hold me while I sleep. If I have another nightmare, I don't want to wake alone again."

Vincent closed his eyes and sighed. There was nothing he wanted to do more than stay and hold her while she slept, to keep her safe, even if it was only from her nightmares.

She could see him warring with himself as he made the decision.

"Are you warm enough?" he asked her.

She nodded and then guided him back to her request. "Will you stay?"

"I will," he surprised her by saying.

She moved over in the bed and made room for him. He toed off his slippers and slid under the covers next to her. She made herself comfortable, using his shoulder as a pillow as he tucked the blankets around her."

"Now, sleep. I'll be here."

There were no more nightmares that night.

Mary was surprised at the sight that met her eyes when she bustled into the chamber with a tray containing a teapot and a cup just before eleven the next morning.

"I should have brought two cups," she mumbled to herself as she set the tray on the table and started to back out.

"No need," whispered Vincent. "I'll wait for lunch." He smiled at her and held up his hand, asking for her silence.

Mary nodded and smiled back, then left.

Vincent woke Catherine gently.

She yawned and stretched. She smiled when she opened her eyes and found him looking down at her.

"It wasn't a dream."

"No, it's very real." He nodded toward the table. "Mary left you some tea. It's almost lunchtime. I'll leave you to dress and come back to take you to lunch.

She sat up and looked around.

"What time *is* it?"

"Almost eleven."

"What time was it when we went to bed?"

"You went to sleep the first time about three, but you only slept a short time. I think it was after four when we went to sleep again."

He swung his legs out of the bed and put on his slippers.

"Take your time getting dressed. I'll be back to take you to lunch in about an hour. Is that all right?"

She nodded, but he could feel that she didn't want him to leave.

"I have to go back to my chamber," he told her. "All my clothes are there, and so is my toothbrush."

She smiled at his attempt at humor.

"I know. Will we be able to spend the rest of the day together?"

"Yes, I'm not on any work rosters for the immediate future. Father won't put me on any until I tell him to."

"OK, then... you go on, and I'll get dressed. The sooner you go, the sooner you'll be back."

"How are your feet this morning? Will you be able to make it to the bathing chamber by yourself?"

"They're sore, but I'll be OK." She stood to prove her point. She was reaching for her robe as Vincent left.

He was back forty minutes later, just as she was trying to decide whether she'd be able to wear her tennis shoes or not.

"Perhaps with thin socks," he suggested.

He got the socks from the armoire for her, and she put them on. The shoes were far from comfortable, but she couldn't go barefoot. She took a few tentative steps.

"I think that will work," she told him.

Their walk to the dining chamber was slow, but she did it all on her own. When they arrived, Vincent seated her at a table and went to get their food.

"What would you like to do this afternoon?" Vincent asked as they left the dining chamber about an hour later.

"I'm still tired," she told him as she limped along next to him. "But I would like to stop and see Father before I go back to the guest chamber. It's on the way."

They made the turn into the study and found both Father and Mary. Vincent helped Catherine down the steps, and Mary rushed over to hug her.

"Are you sure your feet are all right?" Father asked after Catherine was seated.

"Vincent took care of them last night..." Catherine started.

"And I'll change the bandages and have another look as soon as she's back in the guest chamber," Vincent finished for her.

"Well, you couldn't ask for a better doctor," Father assured her.

"It's wonderful to have you back," Mary told her with a pat on her hand. "How long do you think you'll be staying with us?"

"I'm not sure..." said Catherine, her voice trailing off.

"That depends on how long she needs us to keep her safe," Vincent added.

"When I talked to Peter last night, he said that the private detective he hired was also employed by Elliot Burch. Peter thinks that now that they know where this Gabriel is, they will be able to keep an eye on him. They hope that he will think that Catherine is too high profile to go after a second time," Father told them. "But no one wants to take any chances. But at least her building has security for when she can go home."

Catherine was chewing her lip and looking worried. "I don't know," she said, looking from Father and then to Vincent. "The building may have security, but Vincent can get in and out easily without being seen. I was kidnapped from there when Paracelsus took me, and the apartment was entered several times. I think I'd rather sell it and move to someplace more secure."

“What were you thinking?” Asked Vincent.

“A house maybe?” she said tentatively. “Something with a threshold if I can find it. It would make it safer for anyone coming Above and reduce the risk of me being seen when I come Below.”

“Are there any houses with thresholds, Father?” Vincent asked.

“There are many houses built early this century and before that have some kind of access. A lot of those thresholds were used extensively during Prohibition. You can check the maps. The thresholds that are open and in use are marked in red, and the ones that exist but have been blocked are in blue. Maybe Peter could check to see if any of the places with thresholds that could be reopened are suitable.”

“I guess I couldn’t really sell my place or buy anything else until after I can let everyone know I’m home,” Catherine added.

“But that doesn’t mean you can’t plan,” said Mary. “It will give you something to do and look forward to.”

Later, when they were about to leave, Vincent asked her if she’d like to look at the maps.

“No, I think I’ll do that later. Right now, I’m just tired, and I want to take a nap.”

She stumbled going up the stairs, and Vincent swept her up into his arms and carried her to the guest chamber. He was concerned that she didn’t protest.

Catherine spent most of the following week in the guest chamber, only coming out for meals. And she didn’t want to let Vincent out of her sight, so he spent most of his time with her, even when she was napping. He even stayed with her every night until she fell asleep.

One day, people were popping in to talk to him, and he answered several messages on the pipes. And it finally dawned on Catherine that she was keeping him from his regular duties.

“I’m sorry, Vincent,” she said when the fourth person left the chamber.

“Sorry for what?”

“For keeping you from your life. I’m being ridiculous. You need to get back to doing what you need to do. You can’t babysit me the whole time I’m down here.”

“Are you sure?” he asked. “Father did ask me when I’d be taking my classes back again. He said that the children don’t like his teaching style as much as mine.”

“I’m sure there is plenty to keep me busy here.” She waved at the stack of books on her nightstand. “And maybe I could join you in the classroom once in a while. I might learn something.”

“Or you could help me teach,” he suggested.

“I don’t know about that,” she said with a shrug.

“I’ll tell Father that I’ll be back in the classroom tomorrow morning. You’ll know where to find me if you need me.”

Catherine wasn’t sleeping well. There were no more nightmares, but there might have been if she’d actually been sleeping. She’d doze for an hour or two, then would be awake for two or three, just re-running the last year’s events repeatedly in her mind. When she finally fell asleep again, it seemed like only minutes before it was time to get up and go to breakfast. She thought she was blocking it from Vincent pretty well since he didn’t come running to her or mention it during the day.

But she wasn’t. He was aware of every one of her waking minutes, and although he didn’t know what she was thinking, he did know how it made her feel. He didn’t bring it up because he thought she would eventually when she wanted to talk about it. He did speak to Father about it.

“She’s been through a lot,” Father said. “The whole year has been one trauma after another. Her father’s death, her job, your illness, then she was kidnapped and held for months. It will take time.”

“She’s not sleeping well at night, but then she wants to nap during the day... Isn’t that a symptom of depression?” Vincent asked.

“It can be, but even though I’m not a psychiatrist, I know that there are different kinds of depression, different reasons for being depressed. As I said, she’s been through a lot and has reason to be depressed. Try to get her to talk to you. If she won’t talk to you, maybe she’ll talk to Peter or me.”

It was another week before Catherine decided to look at the maps. Peter was visiting, and he joined her, Vincent, and Father around the large table in the center of the study.

Peter pointed at one block that had several thresholds marked in blue.

“This is just around the corner from my house,” he said. “This is the block that some developer bought a couple of years ago. He renovated all the row houses. He was meticulous about keeping to the original style... I think they were built in the early 1900s. It has been as much a restoration as a renovation. The last time I passed, all of them were for sale.”

“But even if they are what I’m looking for, I can’t buy anything right now,” Catherine said. “Officially, I’m not here, and I can’t risk exposing that I am. I can’t risk anyone finding out where I am. That wouldn’t just jeopardize me but everyone who lives here.”

“But if I look at them and maybe get some pictures to show you and you decide that one of them is suitable, I could buy it, and then you could buy it from me later,” suggested Peter.

“I couldn’t ask that of you,” Catherine said automatically.

“You’re not asking,” he told her with a smile. “I’m volunteering.” Before she could protest again, he added. “Just tell me what you’re looking for, and I’ll take a look. It can’t hurt.”

Catherine didn’t seem very enthusiastic, but she thought for a moment and then started listing things.

“Well, I’d like a large kitchen with room to eat, but I’d also like a dining room. I’d like a foyer, so the front door doesn’t open right into the living room. There should be at least three extra bedrooms in addition to the master. And it would be nice if the master had an attached bath and was on a separate floor from the other bedrooms. There would have to be at least two guest baths near the guest rooms and at least a half-bath or powder room on the first floor.”

“Do you want a room on the first floor for an office or library?” Peter asked as he jotted down what she was saying.

“No, that’s why I want three extra bedrooms. I’d use one as an office.”

“How about the basement?” he asked.

“Finished, and it would be nice if there is an apartment with a separate entrance.”

“And yard?”

“I never thought of that. Maybe something big enough to have a patio and a few flower beds or pots.”

“See, that wasn’t too painful,” Peter teased. “Tomorrow is Saturday. I’ll check to see if any of the places are still available. There are usually brochures. I’ll pick up a few and bring them to you.”

Catherine and Vincent left, and when they were gone, Peter turned to Father.

“I see what you mean.”

“She’s just not been herself,” said Father. “She’s just drifting. I’ve hardly seen her smile since the first day she was back, and I haven’t heard her laugh once. She’s not interested in doing anything. If she’s pushed, she will take part in something, but she just sits in her chamber most of the time. And when she does that, she is usually

by herself, although Vincent says she hardly wants to let him out of her sight. He slept in the guest chamber on a cot because she didn't want to be without him for the first few nights.

"She doesn't seem to have any energy. Vincent says that she's exhausted just walking to the dining chamber and back; she doesn't sleep well at night, but she wants to nap for several hours during the day. And she was very thin when she came back. Vincent said that she ate well the first day or two, but since then, he's had to coax her to eat, and she hasn't seemed to have gained back any of the weight she lost."

"Sounds like classic depression to me," said Peter. "I'd like to rule out any real illness. She was living in less than optimum conditions for months. I would just have you do the check-up, but if you can get her up to my office, I can do labs at the same time. It might be easier."

"I'll see if Vincent can talk her into it," agreed Father.

"Good. Let me know, and I'll arrange to meet her at my office after hours. That way, Vincent can come with her."

Vincent had convinced Catherine to attend a children's concert on Sunday afternoon. They were walking back to the guest chamber when he brought up a visit to Peter's office.

"But I'm fine, Vincent," she argued. "I'm just worn out. I went months without decent food, and I was under a lot of stress..."

"But you were in a jungle, and you were living in squalor by your own admission. Peter just wants to make sure that you didn't pick up any tropical bugs or parasites. Not just for your health, but everyone here below, especially the children." Vincent threw in the latter, knowing how she felt about the children.

"I guess you're right," she finally agreed. "When does he want to see me?"

"He said that all we would have to do is let him know, and he'd arrange to have you come in."

"Am I going to have to go Above for it? What if someone on his staff mentions that they've seen me," she asked worriedly.

"He said he'd see you after hours. That way, the office will be empty, and I'll be able to go with you."

That seemed to relieve some of the stress, and Catherine relaxed. "OK, let him know, and if it's all right, we can do it tomorrow."

Peter sent back a message that he'd see her at nine the following evening. And since it was November and cold, Vincent didn't rely on his cloak and hood. The ski mask, down jacket, jeans, and boots he wore brought a genuine smile to Catherine's face.

"You could go into the park at noon in that getup, and no one would notice," she commented, as they left the alley where the manhole they'd used was located.

"Maybe we should try it when it snows," he suggested. "I haven't made snow angels since I was ten."

Peter greeted them at his office door and laughed outright at what Vincent was wearing.

"Looks like Halloween isn't the only time you can walk the city's streets without being noticed," he commented.

Over the next hour, Vincent sat in the waiting room and read old magazines while Peter poked and prodded Catherine. When they were done, he joined them in Peter's office.

"Well, as far as I can tell without having the lab results, you seem to be healthy," he pronounced. "Your blood pressure is a little low, but not dangerously so. And you are down fourteen pounds since your last checkup, and you were too skinny then! But I think that eating more and drinking more liquids will probably cure both the blood pressure and the weight."

“I just haven’t been that hungry,” Catherine told him.

“That is common when you’ve been on starvation rations for as long as you were. Start slow - small meals, with snacks every few hours in between. Nothing specific, except to keep it healthy, but if you start to crave something, eat it if it’s available. If you can’t get it Below, let me know, and I’ll send it down.”

“Chocolate,” Catherine said. “I dreamed about it while I was gone.”

“Why didn’t you say something,” asked Vincent. “Chocolate is something that we usually have Below.”

Catherine shrugged. “It just didn’t seem to be that important.”

As Catherine and Vincent were bundling up to go back outside into the cold, Peter told her that he’d let her know the lab results as soon as he got them.

“Did Peter say anything about the houses he said he would look at for you?” Vincent asked when they were back Below and relaxing in the guest chamber.

“As a matter of fact, he did,” she reached for her coat, pulled out a couple of brochures, and handed them to him.

“Have you looked at these?” he asked, as he opened the first one.

“Not yet. I’ll do it later,” she said, as she picked up her nightgown and robe and headed out to the bathing chamber.

There were three brochures, and as far as Vincent could tell, there was one that had everything that Catherine had said she wanted.

When Catherine came back from the bathing chamber, Vincent handed her the brochure.

“This sound’s almost as if it was built to your specifications,” he said. “It’s got one more bedroom than you said you wanted, but everything else is there. It’s a corner lot, so you’d have more natural light, and it has over 5,000 square feet.”

Catherine looked at the brochure, and she had to admit that Vincent was right. It was almost as if the contractor had renovated it for her. She surprised Vincent with her next question.

“Do you think Peter would mind taking me to look at it?”

“You could go by yourself,” Vincent suggested. He thought it might be an excellent first step for Catherine, “... in disguise.”

“I don’t know,” Catherine hedged.

“You could go up through Peter’s threshold,” he said. “It’s only a short walk from his house.”

“I’ll think about it,” she promised, but Vincent wondered if she would do it.

He was surprised the following day when Catherine announced that she would go up to take a look at the house in the brochure.

“Is that safe?” asked Father.

“Vincent suggested a disguise, so I’m going to try not to look like me,” she assured him. “I’ll bundle up and put on some big sunglasses. No one will recognize me.”

“I’ll go with you as far as Peter’s,” Vincent told her.

When Catherine got to Peter’s, she called the realtor listed in the brochure. She was happy to find out that he could meet her at the house as soon as she could get there.

When she left Peter's house, she was sure that even her best friend Jenny wouldn't have recognized her if they'd run into each other. She'd covered her hair with a knit hat and put on oversized round sunglasses. The borrowed coat was at least two sizes too big and went down to her ankles.

As she followed the realtor through the house and listened to his description of the renovation, she had to admit that Vincent was right. It was the perfect place. She looked out into the yard, it was small, but there was a cement patio and even a small garage that opened into the alley on the back. The house was a bit larger than she'd wanted but perfect in every other way. When she asked the price, she was certain it was a good choice. She even liked the way it had been staged.

"I'm not looking for myself," she told the realtor, keeping to her cover. "I'll pass the information on to my *employer*. He will be in touch if he decides he wants it." She hesitated before she spoke again. "Would it be possible to purchase the furnishings?" she asked.

"You'd be surprised how many people ask that, especially if they are coming from out of town." He named a figure that sounded about right to her.

She handed the realtor one of Peter's cards before she left.

Back at the house, she greeted Vincent with a smile.

"It's perfect. Even the price is good. The Realtor said that it's been on the market for a little while and that they'd just lowered the price. They will even sell it furnished. I'll leave a note for Peter."

Peter came Below late the next afternoon to give Catherine an update.

"The paperwork is being taken care of, and an inspection is being done," he told her. "The sale should be final by the end of the week."

"Thank you, Peter." Catherine hugged him, and it was the first genuine smile and enthusiasm that they'd seen in a long time. "Just as soon as I'm able to resume life Above, I'll buy it from you."

"In the meantime," Vincent said. "We can check the old threshold and make sure it's open and safe to use. Then you can decide what you want to keep from your apartment." He hoped that having something like that to keep her busy would put some color back in her face and sparkle back in her eyes. She hadn't had any more nightmares, but she just didn't seem to be happy.

"And to that end," she surprised everyone by saying. "I think I will have to arrange to meet with Elliot somewhere. I don't want to call him, but if I could send him a note or something." She looked at Peter. "Maybe I could meet with him at your house?"

"Of course. What do you want to talk to him about?"

"Well, I'd like to talk to him about the the man who kidnapped me. I need to get him to pass everything on to Joe, then someone might be able to make some headway on this case, and I might be able to get back to living my life." She looked from Father to Vincent. "Please don't misunderstand; I love being here, and I'm grateful for the shelter you've given me... again, but I'm not doing anything here. I'm not moving ahead. I'm just drifting, and that just isn't me."

"You want to go back to work?" asked Father.

"You know, I honestly don't know about that," she said. "Probably, but I need to talk to Joe and figure out what I can do that won't put me in so much danger. Resigning is always an option."

"I can get a message to Mr. Burch," Peter said. "I'll let you know when he can meet with you."

Two days later, Catherine got a note from Peter. Elliot would meet her at Peter's on Saturday afternoon at 2:00.

Catherine was there early, and Vincent was with her. He waited in the kitchen while Catherine went out to talk to Elliot.

Elliot was standing in the living room talking to Peter when Catherine got there.

“Cathy!” Elliot caught her hands and pulled her in for a quick hug. “I’m so glad you are OK.”

“Thanks to you, from what I hear,” she said.

“And what Dr. Alcott had. I just provided the muscle,” he told her.

“And I’d like to talk to you about some of that,” Catherine said as Peter left the room and they sat down.

“What is it?”

“Have you shared any of what you and Peter found out with Joe?”

“I returned the book to him once the code was broken, but I haven’t contacted him since.”

“You figured you could get the job done faster and easier without official interference,” she mused.

“You know me too well,” he said with a laugh. “You want me to let Maxwell know?”

“Yes. I’d like to contact Joe and let him know that I’m OK, and I’d like to see Gabriel Novak put away.” The intensity in her tone startled Elliot and Vincent, who was listening from the next room.

“I’ll see that he gets the file by messenger the first thing Monday,” he told her. “When are you going to talk to him?”

“I’ll call him Monday,” she told him. “I’ll give him time to get your file.”

“Are you staying here?” he asked. “Should I put someone on watching this place?”

“No, I’m not here. I just thought this would be a better place to meet you. This way, I’m not giving anything away to anyone. But the sooner someone tracks down Novak, the quicker I can get back to my life.”

Catherine suddenly seemed energized. Peter had been able to assure everyone that she was healthy if a little anemic. He gave her some vitamins and told her to eat.

She was doing her best to follow her doctor’s orders; she was eating.

“But I’m always exhausted by the time I go to bed,” she told Vincent on Sunday night as he walked her back to her chamber.

“You haven’t been sleeping that well,” he pointed out.

“You knew that? I thought I was managing to keep that from you.”

“I don’t require much sleep,” he told her. “So, I’m up later and earlier than everyone else. I’m aware of when you are awake.”

“It hasn’t been keeping you awake?” she asked hesitantly.

“No. I just know that you are awake if I am, that’s all. Father suggested that maybe part of your problem has been the fact that you’ve been spending so much time Below. You said that when you were being held, you were in the basement, but they let you out into the sunshine once a week. You haven’t been doing that here. And a vitamin D deficiency is known to cause sleep problems and depression.”

“Maybe I should start using the threshold in the new house to go up and spend some time in the sun,” she suggested.

“That and Peter said that there is extra vitamin D in the vitamins he gave you.”

“And William has been making me drink milk at every meal. Everyone is looking after me.”

“It’s because we all love you,” Vincent told her. They’d reached her chamber, and he pulled her into his arms for a hug. “But since you’ve been busy today, maybe you will sleep better tonight. What time do you want to go up to call Joe?”

“Early. He used to get to the office about 8:00, but I read that he had been appointed interim DA; he’s probably getting there earlier.”

“I’ll call for you at 6:00,” Vincent suggested. “That will give us plenty of time for breakfast, and we will get to Peter’s early. What are you going to tell him?”

Catherine shrugged as she backed away from Vincent.

“That I’m home. I’m well. And that the whole story is in the file Elliott sent him. I should probably set up a way he can communicate with me if he needs to.”

“You can tell him that he can pass a message to the man who delivers the sandwiches to your office. All he has to do is write your first name on it, and you will get it.”

As soon as Catherine identified herself to Joe on the phone, he started firing questions at her. He’d had time to skim through the file Elliot had sent, and he had a million questions.

“It should all be in the file, Joe,” she finally managed to get in. “I just wanted you to know that I’m all right and in a safe place. As soon as I can, I’ll set up a face-to-face meeting. I’ll let you know. In the meantime, if you need to get in touch, just give a note to the sandwich guy. Put my name on it, and it will get to me.”

“The sandwich guy?” Joe asked. “He knows where you are, but you won’t tell me?” It sounded like he didn’t like that idea.

“No, he doesn’t know where I am,” she lied. “But he can get the note to someone who can give it to someone who does know.”

“Only in New York,” Joe muttered. “But at least I know that you are okay... You *are* okay?” he added.

“I’ve been better,” she admitted, “but I’m working on it.”

“Good... good. Do you know everything that happened here after you disappeared?”

“I do. Someone saved all the newspapers for me, and I’ve been able to get caught up. I really have to go, Joe,” she added before he started talking again. “I’ve got to get back to where I’m staying. Take care and let me know if you need anything from me.”

“You take care,” she heard him say before she wedged in a “goodbye” and hung up.

“How did it go?” asked Vincent, who’d waited in the tunnel on the other side of Peter’s threshold while she was on the phone.

“I think he was relieved to hear from me. And I think I will be hearing from him. He will probably want to talk in depth about what is in that file that Elliot sent him. I just don’t know where I could meet with him. I don’t want to ask him to come to Peter’s; it could raise some red flags and endanger Peter.”

“We’ll come up with something,” Vincent promised.

Two days later, Peter showed up and handed her the contract for the house.

“I told them I was buying it for my daughter, who would have everything put in her name when she got back from her world tour.”

That made Catherine laugh.

“It’s good to hear you laugh,” Peter told her.

“I guess things are starting to come together, and I’m starting to feel more like Catherine,” she told him.

“Making the mortgage payments on the house won’t put you in a bind, will it?” she asked with concern.

“No, I’m comfortable with them. I could probably easily live on a lot less than I make, since I don’t do much that costs money these days. Plane tickets to Santa Fe and gifts for Susan, her husband, and the grandkids are my biggest extravagances.”

“I hope I can let everyone know that I’m back soon. Did you talk to someone about a security system for the house?”

“I did, and they will get back to me with a price sometime early next week.”

“I want to have it installed before moving in,” she told him. “I’ve imposed on their hospitality Below long enough. I’m going to have to start letting people know I’m back. I’ll have to work on a plan for that with Vincent and probably Joe.”

“At least it will give you something to work on for now,” Peter told her with a smile. “It will be nice to have you back and everything back to normal.”

“I agree. I love having so much time Below with Vincent, but I need to get back to a normal life.”

“I wondered if you’ve considered seeing a counselor once things get back to normal?” Peter asked.

“I thought about it,” she told him honestly. “But the last time I did that, it didn’t go well. There was so much I couldn’t talk about, and those were the issues that I needed help with.”

“But now, you’d be able to talk about the kidnapping and everything that went along with that. Your main problem is not your relationship with Vincent and the secrets you have to keep to protect him and everyone else Below.”

Catherine was thoughtful before she spoke again. “Do you know someone you can suggest?” she asked. “Dr. Grafton was all right, but I think I’d rather talk to a woman.”

“Do you prefer whether you see a psychiatrist or a psychologist?” he asked, feeling that they might be moving in the right direction.

“How about a psychologist this time?” she said. “One of the first things Dr. Grafton did was suggest medication, and I’d rather deal with the problems before I resort to that.”

“Sometimes medication is needed if only to get you over the hump.”

“I know, but I don’t think that is where I’m at with this. Too bad there isn’t someone who is both a mental health professional and a Helper,” she said with a small laugh.

“As a matter of fact,” Peter said with a grin. “I’ll get back to you. I’ll have to see if Maude is still seeing patients.”

“Maude?” Catherine asked.

“Maude Melnyk. She’s a psychologist. She’s retired, but she does still see a few patients.”

“At least if there is somehow my connections Below come into play, I’ll be able to talk about it. How did she become a Helper?”

“You can ask her for the whole story, but from what I heard, when she first came here from Eastern Europe, she ran out of money and almost wound up on the streets before she was able to get certified and licensed to practice here. She was taken in Below, and Father and I helped her get licensed to open a practice. She stayed with my wife and me for a little while until she got reestablished Above.”

Catherine stayed busy over the next couple of weeks, and before she could make an appointment to see Maude, she got a note from Joe asking if they could meet somewhere. She gave him the address of her new place and told him she’d meet him there. She used the newly opened threshold and arrived a few minutes before him.

When she answered the door, Joe was grinning like the Cheshire cat and had a file folder in his hand.

“Nice place. Whose is it?” he asked after they were seated in the living room.

“Mine,” she told him. “Or at least it will be once I buy it from Peter.” She glanced at the folder in his hands and raised her eyebrows. “You had something you wanted to tell me?”

He handed her the folder. “Take a look for yourself,” he directed.

She paged through the folder.

“He’s back in New York?” she asked. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. Once I got the file from Burch, we got someone to keep an eye on everything going on at the place in Argentina. We knew when he left there and when he landed at LaGuardia. We have pictures of him leaving the plane.” He pointed to the photos she was holding. “And once you assure me that we have the right guy, we will move.”

She looked at the photos; the light was good and whoever had taken them had a telephoto lens.

“It’s him,” she told Joe, and I recognize a few other faces too, but I don’t have names for all of them.”

“OK, point them out for me, just so I’m sure.”

She turned the photo around, put it on the coffee table, and pointed people out. “This is Novak, in the gray suit. The man next to him with the white hair is someone I heard called Snow. The guards called him an assassin, and he may be Novak’s brother. This man...” She pointed at a man in a dark suit carrying a briefcase, “is some kind of an assistant or maybe an accountant. I’m not sure. I don’t know his name, and I only saw him a couple of times. And this man...” She pointed at a man dressed in a turtle neck and sports jacket. “... is a doctor. Or at least that is what they called him. I saw him about once a week, and he would talk to me a little bit, check my vitals, but I never asked his name.” She looked up at Joe. “You know where Novak is?”

“He was followed,” Joe told her. “He’s at his estate on Staten Island. It’s been under surveillance since he arrived yesterday afternoon.

“They all went with him?”

“Looks like it.”

“What’s the next move?” she asked.

“Since I have your identification, we will be moving on the house with the first light tomorrow morning... I was wondering. You want to be there?”

Catherine was tempted, and she hesitated before answering.

“I’m tempted, Joe. It could be the closure I need, but I don’t know if I can handle it. I just might be more than a hindrance than a help.”

“Then how about meeting us when we book all of them. You can identify them for us. And seeing them in cuffs might make you feel better.” Joe was beginning to realize just how traumatic the last months had been for her.

“I think I can do that,” she agreed. “It can be my first official appearance back in the real world. Just give me a time and place.”

“Well, we’ll move about dawn, and if everything goes according to plan, we should be at Central Booking by 9:00 at the latest. Can you meet us there?”

“I’ll be there.”

Vincent was a little worried when she told him what she was planning to do, but relieved she’d declined to be in on the actual arrest.

“You sure you want to go by yourself?” he asked her, as she picked out something to wear. She wanted her look to be as far as possible from the way she’d looked while she was Gabriel’s prisoner.

“I’ll take a cab,” she told him. “And I won’t be alone while I’m there. Joe will be there.” She held up a dark teal suit and an off-white silk blouse. “What do you think?” she asked. “The suit was a bit small before; it should fit now. I even have some shoes and a bag to use.” She reached for a pair of 4-inch heels.”

Vincent almost laughed. “Your feet are going to hurt when you get back.”

“Yeah, but I need the extra height to bolster my confidence,” she told him with a grin.

Catherine was up the next morning hours before she had to leave. She carefully applied makeup and put her hair into a French braid. She arrived at Central Booking almost an hour before Joe told her they would likely be there. But it all must have gone very well because Joe, too many uniformed police to count, and Greg Hughes walked in escorting almost a dozen prisoners in various states of dishevelment. They looked like they’d all been dragged out of bed.

Catherine stood as everyone trooped past her, and Gabriel saw her as soon as he walked in the door.

If looks could kill, Catherine thought.

“We missed one,” Joe said as she fell into step beside him.

“Snow,” she agreed. “Any idea where he is.”

“No one saw him leave the house. He could have left last night, and our surveillance just missed it. We have a crew over there now, searching to make sure that there are no hidden rooms. We’ll see if we can get any information from this bunch, and we will be on the lookout for him.”

Catherine stayed several hours, helping Joe with the processing and statements.

“So you back on the payroll, Radcliffe?” he asked when they left just before noon.

“Looks like it,” she said with a smile. “But can we wait a bit longer before making it official and I come to the office? I’ve got a few things to do.”

By the time she visited Maude, she was feeling much better. She was still having the occasional bad dreams, but they were becoming fewer and less traumatic.

Maude was seeing her patients in the living room of her Brooklyn home. And it was more like a friendly visit than a therapy session. By the time Catherine left after the first visit, she felt as if she’d known Maude for years. They’d laughed and cried together during the hour and a half.

“So, when would you like to come again?” Maude asked as they walked to her door together.

“I feel I could visit every day because you’ve made me so comfortable,” Catherine told her sincerely. “But how about two weeks? The security system on my house is done, and I’m ready for the world Above to know that I’m home. So I’ll be moving and going back to work. I’m going to be busy.”

Maude handed her a card.

“Well, just remember that I’m only a phone call away if things get overwhelming. And although I know you don’t want to go the medication route, I’ll work with Peter if you should need anything to sleep.”

Catherine took the card and was surprised when Maude hugged her.

“I’m so glad to finally meet ‘Vincent’s Catherine,’” she said. “I just wish it had been under better circumstances, like Winterfest.”

Catherine hadn’t lied. The following two weeks were busy.

The first thing she did was call Jenny and Nancy to let them know she was all right and back in town. She gave them her new address and promised that they would have a girl's weekend soon and she would explain everything then.

Then she called Joe and told him he could announce that she was back. She arranged to meet him at his office the following Monday.

Then she moved. She let the manager in her building know she was back and that she would be moving and selling her apartment.

The move turned out to be the easiest part of all of it. Her apartment was so small, there was only a little to move to the new place. Her bedroom furniture went into one of the unfurnished guestrooms, her dressing table went to the master bedroom, her living room furniture went into the basement, and the kitchen was packed up and sent to the new place. It took her less than half a day to do. With the help of a couple of the men from Below and a Helper who was a mover, everything was done by the end of the day.

She was settled in by the time she went to see Joe.

The problem was that she still hadn't gained back much weight, and the only thing that came close to fitting was the teal suit, and it was a little large. Sweats and athletic shoes weren't a good choice.

"What are you going to do?" asked Vincent, who was helping her with a few things at her new house.

She'd tried on several suits and declared that *nothing fit!*

"Since I'm not actually *applying* for a job, and this isn't a business meeting, I suppose I can be more casual." She pulled a light blue, long-sleeved wrap dress out of the closet and held it up. "This was always a bit small, and since it wraps, I can make it work. If I wear it with this..." She held up a dark blue blazer. "I should be all right. At least all my shoes still fit."

That was the first night Catherine spent in her new house. And Vincent seemed to have more misgivings about it than she did.

"I have the security system," she assured him. "If anything happens, it will set off an audible alarm here in the house, and the company that monitors it will call me to verify that it's not a false alarm. If it's not, or I don't answer, they call the police."

"And I'll know too," he said, almost to himself.

"Yes, the bond will let you know. I'll be fine. I've been talking to Maude, and I feel much better and ready for this. I don't have nearly the anxiety I had when I first returned. She's taught me how to overcome the panic attacks. I can walk down the street without looking over my shoulder every few steps. And the key to not being depressed is not dwelling on what happened and staying busy. Going back to work will go a long way in that."

"If you are sure," Vincent said.

Catherine stepped into his arms and hugged him.

"I'm sure."

She walked him to the threshold, where they exchanged another hug, and he left.

Catherine went back upstairs to get ready for bed. She was meeting Joe in his office at eight the next morning.

Vincent had no intention of telling her that he planned to spend the night in her basement.

After he knew that she'd gone back up to her bedroom, he quietly opened the threshold door, made himself comfortable on one of the sofas in the basement, and pulled out a book. He didn't leave until the sun came up the following day, and he heard Catherine in the kitchen.

Catherine took one last look at herself in the mirror before leaving to meet Joe.

If I'm going back to work, she mused, I'm either going to have to gain some weight or buy a whole new wardrobe.

A couple of years ago, the idea of shopping for a new wardrobe would have had her on cloud nine, but now? It was just a bother.

Just a few things until I gain some weight, she thought, as she went down the stairs.

When she reached the DA's office, she almost wished she'd timed her visit for before or after hours. Rita met her in the hall and hugged her so hard she thought her ribs would crack. Edie was right behind her.

"When did you get back?" she asked Edie as she pulled out of that hug.

"A couple of months after you disappeared. We'll talk later. This time I think I owe you a lunch." Edie winked.

Catherine finally made it to Joe's office, the one with **Joseph Maxwell, District Attorney**, on the glass panel. She received several more hugs and greetings as she crossed the office.

There she was subjected to another rib-cracking hug.

"So, when are you coming back?" he demanded, after they were both seated. Catherine was amused to see that he'd moved the old beat-up leather couch from his old office into this one.

"That's what I wanted to talk about; I have a few stipulations," she told him.

"Shoot," he said.

"It can't be dangerous. I'll do anything, but I don't want to be out there risking my life anymore. I've had enough of that."

"I agree," said Joe. "I feel responsible for what happened to you. If I hadn't asked you to take that notebook, you would have been fine; you wouldn't have been a target if you hadn't had it."

"If I hadn't told John that I had it, I wouldn't have been a target," she pointed out.

"But it was logical for you to tell him," Joe argued. "He was your boss, and you trusted him... we both trusted him."

Joe looked so miserable that she had to lean over and hug him.

"I know it's been hard on you," she said. "You knew John so much longer than I did."

"He did a lot for me. A degree from Westfield Law School, earned by taking night classes, isn't the same as his Harvard Law degree. I wasn't anywhere near the top of my class, but he took a chance on me."

"And now you're the DA," she pointed out.

"Only for the next two years," he said.

"Aren't you going to run?" she asked.

"Of course, I will run, but that's no guarantee I'll be elected," he pointed out. "There are people in this city who aren't happy that I was the one who brought Moreno down. They see it as disloyal."

"But I'm sure that the majority of the voters see that you are fighting corruption!"

"Okay, we aren't going to argue this right now. At least I know I have your vote when we get to that point," he said with a grin. "Now, about you. I'm offering you the position of Deputy DA for Investigations. Strictly a desk job, hours aren't too bad, you'll have a staff of six, four attorneys, one law clerk, and Rita."

Catherine didn't have to think about that one too long.

"I'll take it," she said, holding out her hand.

He took it and shook it, then pulled her into another hug.

"Welcome back, Radcliffe. Now come to lunch with me. You need to eat something; you're way too skinny."

He pulled her to her feet and headed to the door.

If Joe has his way, I'll be back to my normal weight, and maybe more, by the end of the month, she thought later as she sat in the back of a cab and had to put some effort into not groaning. He'd plied her with a salad, a glass of wine, lasagna that he swore was almost as good as his mother's, with tiramisu and coffee for dessert.

She was surprised to find Vincent waiting for her in her kitchen when she got home.

"How was your meeting?" he asked after a hug.

"Very good," she said as she filled the electric kettle to make tea. "I've got a desk job."

"Were you demoted?" he asked in surprise.

She had to laugh. "No, it was a promotion. I've got Joe's old job, Deputy for Investigations. No legwork, very little interaction with the public. I get to spend my day in a private office with a door, in a building with security. And I get to tell other people what to do."

That made Vincent smile.

"That sounds wonderful!" he said, and she could hear the relief in his voice. "When do you start?"

"A week from today. That will give me some time to get some clothes that fit." She'd resigned herself to shopping; maybe Jenny would like to go with her. "And see some people before I get mired down in work again."

Jenny was able to take Wednesday afternoon off work. They met for lunch, then went shopping. Jenny was surprised at Catherine's lack of enthusiasm for the task.

"Who are you, and what did you do with my friend Cathy?" she asked after Catherine had finally decided on three suits, two pairs of tailored slacks, several blouses, and two pairs of low-heeled pumps.

"Cathy's priorities have changed," Catherine told her with a laugh as she paid for her purchases. "She's decided that life is too short to walk through it with sore feet."

"We will deliver the items that need alterations on Friday," the clerk told her, as she handed back her credit card.

They left the store carrying a few bags and hailed a cab to take them back to Catherine's house.

"I'm glad I'm finally going to see your new place," Jenny said as they went up the steps, and Catherine unlocked the door.

Catherine closed the door, then turned and punched a code into to keypad next to the door.

"Security system?" Jenny asked.

Catherine nodded. "After what happened, I needed something to make me feel safe. My building had security, but I was kidnapped from there, and the place was broken into more than once. This just seemed a better way to go." She motioned toward the stairs. "Come on; I'll take these upstairs, then I'll give you the nickel tour."

Vincent knew that Catherine had gone to lunch with her friend Jenny and then planned to go shopping for clothes for work. He wanted to surprise her with a treat. He knew she was home; he'd felt her arrive as he'd made his way through the tunnels to her basement.

He entered the kitchen, tossed his cloak over the back of a chair, and set the parcel he carried on the counter.

Tea and some of William's apple spice muffins will be a nice afternoon treat while she tells me about her visit with her friend and her shopping.

A few minutes later, he was pouring the hot water into the teapot when he heard her on the stairs, but he was surprised to hear two voices, and before he had a chance to put down the pot and cups, grab his cloak and run, they were in the kitchen.

Catherine was surprised to see Vincent in the middle of her kitchen holding a teapot and two cups when she and Jenny entered.

“Vincent,” she gasped, stepping in front of Jenny to block her view.

“Perhaps we will be needing another cup,” he said as calmly as he could, his blue eyes meeting brown as Jenny looked at him over Catherine’s shoulder.

“So, this is Vincent,” Jenny said. Catherine looked back at her. “Nancy told me his name when I told her about my dreams.”

Catherine was amazed that Jenny didn’t seem more surprised at Vincent’s appearance.

Vincent put the teapot and cups on the table, then turned to get another cup and the plate of muffins.

Jenny and Catherine were pulling out chairs when he joined them. Jenny’s eyes hadn’t left him the whole time. Once they were all seated, she looked at Catherine.

“I knew there was something... different,” she said. “But you know my dreams. They aren’t always real clear.”

“You have *dreams*?” Vincent asked.

Catherine poured the tea and let Jenny and Vincent talk.

“Yeah, sometimes I seem to know things that are going on. Sometimes they seem to tell the future. They aren’t always clear,” she said.

“You dreamed of me?”

“I think so,” Jenny affirmed. “They were always with Cathy. She would be talking to someone who had their back to me or was standing in the shadow. But the person was big enough to be you, and she would often hug him, and it would look like she was being enveloped in wings.”

Vincent pointed at his cloak on the back of the fourth chair. “Or a cloak?” he asked.

“That could be it,” she said with a smile. “Now, I think I understand more than I have over the last few years. It makes a lot more sense.”

Vincent and Catherine exchanged looks.

“What makes more sense?” asked Catherine.

“Why you were so secretive. I assume that not just anyone knows Vincent, and that he must live somewhere off the beaten path... Unless you’ve moved in here with Cathy, that’s the reason for her move.”

“Off the beaten path is a good way to describe it,” said Vincent, who offered Jenny a muffin. “And, no, I haven’t moved in with Catherine.”

Jenny took a muffin, and after one bite, she actually moaned.

“God, that’s good! Where did these come from? I need to open an account with that bakery.”

“No bakery,” Catherine told her. “There is a cook where Vincent lives, and he’s fantastic!”

“I’ll say,” Jenny said through another mouthful. “Is he married?”

Catherine laughed, and Vincent just looked confused.

“The way to Jenny’s heart is through her stomach. She’s always said she wanted to marry a man who cooks,” she told him. “Can I tell her?”

“I know you trust her, so go ahead. I’ll deal with any fallout from Father and the Council later.”

Catherine turned to Jenny.

“What I’m going to tell you needs to be kept a strict secret. You can’t talk about it with anyone but me, or someone else I’ve told you is safe to talk about it with,” Catherine said seriously.

“Sounds like the lead into a Mission Impossible episode... but yeah, contrary to popular belief, I can keep my mouth shut.”

At that, Catherine launched into a description of the community Below, their history, and Vincent’s story.

“Wow! How long have they been there?” Jenny asked.

“Nearly forty years,” Vincent told her.

“And you’re what they call *a Helper*?” Jenny asked Catherine.

“Yes. There are Helpers all over the city. Peter was one of the first.”

“Peter Alcott? Your doctor? And you never knew until just a few years ago?”

“Yes, and I was very surprised to find out he was a Helper. There was an emergency Below, and I was helping out and met him to pick up supplies.”

“Yes, he said he never dreamed that she was the Catherine everyone Below was talking about,” Vincent told her. “Peter and Father have known each other since before Father was Below. Father was Chief Resident when Peter was just starting his residency program.”

“And you have *a gift* too?” Jenny asked.

“Gift?” Vincent questioned.

“This empathic thing Cathy mentioned.”

“Oh, yes. Father has called it a gift a few times too, but there have also been times when he’s cursed it.”

“He cursed it when it made Vincent come to my aid when I needed it,” Catherine put in.

“Your knight in shining armor?”

“A knight in a dark cloak, and who sticks to the shadows,” Vincent corrected.

“Yes, but you were there when I needed you,” Catherine added.

“As you were for me on more than one occasion,” Vincent reminded her.

“So, where does one apply to be a Helper?” Jenny asked, looking from one to the other.

Vincent laughed. “There is no application process. Sometimes it’s someone who has lived Below then went back Above, or a friend we make; or like Catherine, someone we help who wants to return the favor.”

“How about someone with a powerful bribe?” she asked with a grin.

“A bribe?” Vincent was puzzled.

“Books... the publisher I work for has textbook and children’s books divisions. Cathy said you have kids Below and that you teach them. Maybe you could use some textbooks?”

“We can always use textbooks,” Vincent told her. “We try to reflect what is taught in the public schools Above so that our children can go Above and fit in if they decide to go on to college or jobs.”

“Then we will have to talk,” she promised.

They talked until late. Catherine ordered dinner from Henry Pei’s restaurant. They ate and continued to talk.

By the time she left, Jenny had a long list of books, textbooks, and other printed materials that were needed Below.

“Oh my,” Catherine said, leaning into Vincent’s hug after Jenny left. “I thought I would have a stroke when I saw you standing in the kitchen and knew that Jenny was right behind me.”

“I don’t know why I didn’t realize that you weren’t alone. I can usually tell when you are with someone.”

“Maybe her abilities mask her or something,” she suggested.

“It’s possible. She might be susceptible to outside influences and learned to shield herself without realizing it. That might explain why her abilities only seem to manifest when she is asleep and not able to shield.”

“You’ve done some research on this,” she said, as they walked back to the kitchen.

“When I started noticing it happening, when I was about 16, I wanted to know as much about it as possible.”

Catherine felt pretty good as she left for work the following Monday. She had on clothing that fit and that she was pretty sure looked good. It was cold and crisp, and she was sure it would snow soon, so she’d pulled out one of her cashmere sweaters in a cheerful butter yellow. It went well with the navy-blue suit.

When she walked into the bullpen a little later, she was met with a standing ovation and lots of hugs.

“Don’t let that go to your head, Radcliffe,” Joe said a few minutes later, when he walked into his old office to find her setting up her coffee pot. “You brought your own coffee?”

“I refuse to drink any more of that sludge that passes for coffee in this office,” she retorted.

She’d also brought bottled water, a few soft drinks, and some snacks that she put into the small fridge Joe had left in the office.

“You had this fridge; I don’t understand why you never got a coffee pot,” she said as she closed the fridge and turned to him.

“Had to have a place to keep the chocolate cheese nuggets.”

“Ugh! Are you still eating those things? I swear it sounds awful. I like chocolate, and I like cheese, but not together.”

“You never asked me exactly what kind of cheese they were,” he pointed out.

“I can’t think of any cheese that would go well with chocolate,” she insisted.

“I bet you’d like these,” he insisted.

“Where in the world do you get them?”

“There’s a bakery up the block from my place. But I have to get there early before they sell out.”

“And they actually sell out? They must not make many,” she scoffed.

“They make hundreds,” he told her. “You should try them the next time I bring some in.”

“No thank you,” she said, as she started pulling some other things out of her bag.

“You don’t like cheesecake?” he asked. “I thought everyone liked cheesecake.”

“Cheesecake? That isn’t what you said,” she retorted.

“They make cheesecake in a large square pan, freeze it, cut it up and dip it in chocolate.”

Catherine shook the coffee mug she’d just pulled out of her bag at him. “You didn’t say it was *cheesecake*,” she said.

“I told you what the bakery calls them,” he told her with a grin before he left. At the door, he turned back.

“Staff meeting at 10:00.”

Catherine spent most of the morning figuring out the new job. After lunch, she talked to the staff of her department.

“How was your first day?” Vincent asked when she walked into the kitchen just before 6:00.

She laughed and sniffed the air, then hugged him. “It was exhausting but productive. And it’s even better now. Did you bring me dinner?”

“I did. I knew you were tired and thought you might not eat if you had to fix something for yourself, so I raided William’s kitchen and brought you some of his leftover pot roast from Sunday dinner.”

“It smells wonderful, and I’m starving.”

“Did you eat lunch?”

“Yes, but it was just a sandwich off the cart. Give me a minute to change, and I’ll be right back.”

The rest of the week went smoothly. On Friday, Joe declared her a *natural* as she settled back into the office routine.

“I don’t know about a *natural*, but this is so much better than doing the legwork myself. I like delegating,” she said with a grin.

“I noticed that you haven’t sent Colleen out to do anything outside the office,” Joe said.

“Colleen is good at talking to people,” Catherine told him, “so I’m keeping her in the office, at least for now. I’ll probably send her out on some of the more routine stuff; the safer stuff...” She gave Joe a meaningful look, and he didn’t meet her eyes and even looked uncomfortable. “...besides, she’s really good at talking to abuse victims. Her mom was a victim of spousal abuse, and she knows the questions to ask and what to say.”

“Better than you?” Joe asked.

“Much. She even got two women who I just knew would never press charges, to agree to press charges *and* testify. I plan to keep her on those cases whenever possible. I’m just glad you gave me one woman on my team.”

It was Friday of Catherine’s third week back at work. She’d settled into a routine pretty quickly. In the office by 8:00 every morning, out by 6:00 every afternoon. Sometimes she worked while eating lunch at her desk but had left to eat at the diner up the street a few times.

She had met Edie at the diner for lunch that day, and they had finally caught up.

She was on her way back to her office with Joe after a staff meeting when Rita stopped her.

“There’s a gentleman in your office,” she said. “He doesn’t have an appointment, but he said that it was very important that he talk to you. He showed me one of your cards and said it wouldn’t take long. You didn’t have anything else on your schedule, so I sent him to your office.”

“Thanks, Rita.” She and Joe started toward the open office door.

“Oh, and the card he had was one of your old ones,” Rita added.

The man stood and turned as soon as Catherine reached the door, and she stopped in her tracks. She recognized him. That white hair was hard to miss.

Below, Vincent was in the middle of a literature class when he felt a sudden spike of fear from Catherine. It quickly escalated, then just as suddenly settled back to almost normal.

A near miss on the street maybe, he thought. Everyone knows that New York cabbies were infamous for the way they drive.

His attention back on the class and what Samantha was reading, he was able to correct her pronunciation of a word.

In the DAs office, Catherine watched as the man's right hand went under his suit jacket, and as he pulled out a gun, she turned and pushed Joe out of the way and shouted.

"He's got a gun. Get down!"

She and Joe hit the floor as the shot echoed through the bullpen. Then she watched in shock as Joe bounced right back up to his feet and tackled the guy before he could get a better aim and get off a second shot. The gun was knocked from his hand, and Catharine scrambled after it. As soon as she had it, she was on her feet and had it pointed at the man's head.

It had all taken only seconds.

"Rita, is everyone all right?" she asked, never taking her eyes off the man.

"People are fine," Rita verified. "Filing cabinet didn't fare so well."

"All right, call the police if someone hasn't already."

Joe rolled the man over onto his stomach and used his own tie to hogtie him while they waited for the police.

"What's your name?" Joe demanded, poking the guy with his toe. "What were you trying to prove?"

He didn't answer, and Catherine filled it in.

"That's Snow," she supplied.

"This is the guy from the list?" Joe asked. "The only one who wasn't accounted for?"

"Now he's accounted for," Catherine said, as several uniformed police and Greg Hughes rushed through the door, guns drawn.

Questions were asked, and less than half an hour later, Snow was hauled out the door, and he still hadn't said a word.

Joe walked over and hugged Catherine.

"I think you're back, kiddo," he said, then he looked at her. "Are you okay?"

"I'll live," she said, with a nervous chuckle. "You did pretty well yourself, District Attorney Maxwell."

"Still remember some of my Army and Police Academy training," he said. "We make a good team."

"I'm just glad no one was hurt. But it was disturbing to see him here," she said as they walked into her office. "I only saw him a couple of times in Argentina, but the guards talked about him. They were in awe of him. They called him an *assassin's assassin*. He has been making hits, mostly for Gabriel, for over twenty years and had never been caught or even suspected. He never leaves evidence behind. Why would he come right here to the office when he could have easily taken me out on the street and gotten lost in the crowd?"

"Maybe he wanted to be caught?" Joe suggested.

Catherine looked up and nodded. "You need to tell the police to keep him away from the other prisoners, especially anyone associated with this case."

"Good call, Radcliffe," he said, turning to leave. "I'll get right on it." At her door, he turned and winked at her. "I thought I was the DA. Now I'm taking orders from you?"

"Take it as a suggestion," she said with a tight smile. "And if you don't mind. I think I'm going to take the rest of the day off. Nabbing criminals kinda takes it out of a girl." She reached for her purse and suit jacket.

The reaction started to set in about the time she got into the back of the cab. She was glad she hadn't decided to drive that day.

By the time she exited the cab in front of her house, she was sweating and almost gasping for breath. She recognized it as a full-blown panic attack but couldn't seem to get her breathing under control.

Vincent dismissed his class and noticed that Catherine was leaving the DAs office. After a few minutes, he could feel her agitation building and knew she was going home. He left the classroom and headed straight for the threshold in her basement.

He reached her kitchen just in time to hear her key in the lock, and he was standing in the hall when she turned from relocking the door and setting the alarm.

At the sight of Vincent, Catherine let go of the control she was trying to hold on to. She threw herself into his arms and just shook.

Vincent swept her up into his arms and went into the living room, where he sat on the couch and held her.

"Breathe slowly, Catherine," he whispered. "Concentrate on each breath. In and out, slowly."

He spoke as slowly and calmly as he could, and he started breathing like he told her to. Soon, she was breathing with him, stopped shaking, and began to relax.

When he could feel that the panic was subsiding, he asked her what had happened.

She told him in as few words as possible.

Catherine went Below for dinner that night, and when she went home on Saturday afternoon, her phone was ringing. It was Joe.

"Where you been, Radcliffe. I've been trying to call you for hours," he sounded frazzled.

"I'm sorry if I worried you; I spent the night with a friend. Yesterday was hard to handle."

"I know of some people it was harder on," Joe said cryptically.

"What happened?"

"All the main players in the Gabriel Novak case were found dead in their cells this morning."

"What? How did that happen?"

"I have no idea. I let the people at the Tombs know to keep them separated and keep that Snow guy away from all the others, but something happened. That doctor, the guy you identified as an assistant, Pope, and Gabriel Novak had all had their throats slit, and Snow had ripped up a blanket and hung himself."

"How in the world..." Catherine was at a loss.

"I don't know, but I think that Snow's arrival at the jail was maybe a signal. No one knows how the other three wound up with their throats slit. Whoever did it had to have had access to the cells, but none of the other prisoners heard or saw anything unusual. And there were no signs of struggle. There was no way that Snow got out of his cell, so it had to be someone else. It's just all so weird."

"That word doesn't do it justice," Catherine told him. "Maybe there was a pact. They agreed that they wouldn't talk, but the only way to guarantee that was to make sure they all died."

"It all makes me think that there is someone out there that Novak was taking orders from, and those people weren't taking any chances and had them all killed. There was one link, Novak, Snow, and Pope all wore rings made in the same design. We've got people researching it. Maybe we will learn something."

"What does the ring look like?" she asked.

"Silver, I think, and what looks like a black onyx stone. I don't recognize the stone shape as anything special."

I'm sorry you couldn't find out more," Catherine told Joe, "but I'll have to admit that I'm glad that neither Novak nor Snow are a threat any longer. Maybe I can get back to a normal life now."

"You should know better, Radcliffe," Joe said with a laugh.

"What do you mean?" Catherine asked.

"This is New York... Normal doesn't exist here... at least not in our line of work."

END