

ONCE UPON ANOTHER TIME

by Janet Rivenbark

PART 1

Diana had overslept and was in a hurry. She rushed out of the subway station onto the cold, wet street and barely missed running down an elderly woman with a walker. She stopped only long enough to apologize and make sure the woman was OK.

She almost ran up the street and into the precinct where she dumped her coat and bag at her desk, grabbed a pad and a pencil and headed toward the Captain's office where he always had his weekly meetings.

"Nice look," one of the secretaries said as Diana threaded her way through people toward the back of the building. Diana was usually oblivious to comments or looks from her co-workers, but she could tell from the tone of voice that the woman had used that she wasn't really offering a compliment.

She slowed a little as she looked down at herself. She was clean. She'd showered that morning. She'd also taken the time to tame her rather wild mane of auburn hair into a long, thick braid that hung down her back. Her clothes matched; she had on tailored brown wool slacks and an off-white wool turtleneck sweater. She caught sight of her shoes. She favored either her old beat-up high-tops or the old black boots. Both were comfortable, and this morning, since she was wearing tailored slacks, she'd decided that the boots suited better than the white high-tops.

Then it dawned on her. It was the middle of April, and she'd dressed more for the temperature than the season. She had on winter clothes.

Why are some women such slaves to fashion and the season rather than the weather? She wondered to herself as she entered the open door of the Captain's office.

"Close it behind you Bennett," Captain Rizzo said, from his seat behind his desk. "You're late."

Diana glanced at the wall clock and then at her watch. They read the same.

"Actually, Cap, you're early. It's only 8:58 by both my watch and your clock. Your meetings are always at 9:00."

The Captain laughed, and the other half a dozen detectives of Unit 210 joined him.

I'm glad he has a sense of humor, she thought as she found a seat on the beat-up sofa.

The meeting lasted the usual 45 minutes and broke up. Diana was leaving as the Captain called her back.

"Got a minute, Bennett?" he asked.

"Sure," she turned around but sat on a chair in front of his desk this time.

“How’s the case going?” he asked. “Anything new?”

Normally they talked about their cases as a group, but Captain Rizzo knew that Diana didn’t like to share with everyone, at least not until she was ready.

“Got a couple new leads and a possible witness. I’ve got some paperwork to do this morning, then I’ll be heading out to see if that witness will talk to me.”

“Be careful. Take a uniform if you think you’ll need backup,” he warned her.

Even though she’d had all the same training as her male counterparts, the Captain was protective of her, sometimes overly so. He’d known her dad when he’d been on the force. They’d been rookies together.

“I don’t think there will be a need. She’s a waitress in a diner. She gets off at 11:00 am and has agreed to meet with me there to talk. It will be broad daylight and in public with plenty of people around. Having a uniform there might be intimidating.”

The Captain looked at her closely.

“You been sleeping?” He knew that she tended to obsess over her cases and often lost sleep when she was working on one.

“That’s the reason I was *almost* late this morning,” she told him with a grin. “I was pulling threads and lost track of time last night. It was late when I finally went to bed, and then I overslept. I’ll have to catch up on my sleep this weekend.”

The Captain knew about Diana’s somewhat unconventional work routine and allowed her to work from home a lot. She could pretty much make her own hours, as long as she showed up for his weekly Friday meetings.

“Don’t push it too hard, Di,” he warned. “Burnout is high in our job, and I don’t want you breaking under the pressure. You’re one of the best I’ve got, and your dad would haunt me.”

“Don’t worry, Cap,” she said as she rose and headed to the door. “I got this.”

“Come to dinner tomorrow,” he called after her. “Denise would love to see you,” he added, referring to his wife.

“Sorry, I can’t,” she told him. “Mark has this teacher thing. He wants me to go with him. I’m supposed to meet him at some restaurant down off Broadway.”

“Some other time then,” he suggested.

The rest of her day was a blur, but she did manage to get back to her loft before dark. She’d picked up a sandwich at the deli down the street, and after she ate, she felt energized and decided to put in a couple more hours on the case. All it needed was a few more things tied up, and she’d be content to let it go until Monday.

Before she knew it, the sun was coming up, and she could hardly hold her eyes open. She finally fell into bed around 8am and was asleep almost before her head hit the pillow.

She slept longer than she’d planned and since she hadn’t set her alarm she was running late again. She called Mark, but he’d already left. She quickly dressed in what she figured should be

appropriate. This time it was a plain black tailored pant suit and an emerald green silk blouse. She kicked aside the comfortable footwear and pulled on her new, highly polished black leather pumps with the 2-inch heels.

This time she was so late she had to take a cab.

It was almost 7:30 pm when she slipped up behind Mark where he was listening to an older man who seemed to be in lecture mode.

“Sorry I’m late,” she whispered as she slipped her arm through his.

“Work?” he whispered back.

“Kinda. I’ll explain later.”

She did explain when they sat down to dinner.

“You were up all night again?” he asked with a frown.

“I was on a roll, and I’ve got some good ideas and some good leads. I should have this thing air tight by the end of next week if my witness comes through. I promise to take some time off then.”

The dinner discussion was more than a little academic and dry. She tried to pay attention and look intelligent, but the conversation was so far removed from what she did every day that, despite sleeping most of the day, Diana found herself stifling yawns and losing track of the talk around her as the evening wore on.

At a little after 10 pm, she leaned in toward Mark.

“How much longer?” she asked.

He looked at her.

“You do look tired. Why don’t you just go on home? This could go on for hours since it’s the weekend and no one has work tomorrow.”

“You’re sure?” she asked, knowing he’d planned on going home with her tonight. “If you want you can just come over later. You’ve got a key.”

“OK,” he agreed. “I’ll see you later.” He dropped a quick kiss on her cheek and watched as she made her way out of the restaurant.

On the street, Diana subdued a shiver. It had been warmer when she left home; a bit warmer than usual for mid-April and she hadn’t worn a coat. After the cold of the previous day it had felt good, but it was damp and chilly again now. She was several blocks from the nearest subway station but decided against a cab.

Don’t need to make that a habit, she thought as she turned and headed towards Broadway. She was only three blocks from the Subway station, her heels weren’t that high, and she was armed. She had one block that was relatively deserted before she hit Broadway. She slid her hand into her bag and grasped the small handgun she carried when she was off duty. It made her feel a little more secure.

But that security was short-lived. Before she’d walked another 20 feet, she was grabbed from behind, and her arms were pinned to her sides, and she couldn’t raise her hands to use the gun that had given her such a feeling of security only seconds ago. A hand came over her mouth as an arm tightened vicelike around her waist. She was dragged into the alley and thrown into a van.

She could tell there were two men in the van in addition to the driver, but it was too dark to see much. There was only a cold hard voice.

“The boss says you need to back off the case you’re working on. *He* don’t like killin’ women, but he don’t got nuthin’ against roughing them up a little. Me... I don’t mind killin’ them... if they need it.”

She thought she was in for a beating but was taken by surprise when she felt a sharp blade slash across her forehead. Warm blood started to flow and stung her eyes. There was almost no pain at first. Then there was what felt like an X being cut into her left cheek. After that, it was nothing but darkness and pain until she finally lost consciousness.

Vincent had felt strangely restless all day. Maybe it was spring fever. He wasn’t sure. Some of the children had gone Above and brought back a few early flowers and green leaves to decorate the classroom. Samantha and little Hannah had insisted that he take a chipped vase with a lone daffodil back to his chamber. That small bit of cheer had looked out of place on his writing table, but he’d left it there.

He’d tried to assuage the restlessness with his usual nightly routine of checking all the sentry posts, but even after that, he’d found himself pacing his chamber. Finally, he gave up, grabbed his cloak and headed Above.

The park was quiet, which was normal. It was closed to the public at night, and it was well after midnight. The park was usually his at this hour. He’d never seen it in the sunshine, but he liked to wander and imagine what it would look like.

He was in a grove of trees on top of a small rise next to one of the streets that ran through the park. The streets that crossed the park weren’t all closed at night, and he was waiting in a spot where the street light was out to make sure the traffic was clear so he could cross. He was listening when he heard a vehicle coming from the east at a high rate of speed.

He stepped back into the darkest shadow as a white van slowed and came to a stop. The sliding door on the side closest to him opened and what looked like a large bundle was thrown out. The doors were slammed closed, and the van sped off.

Almost before as it was gone, Vincent could smell blood. As soon as he considered it safe, he hurried over to what looked like a pile of clothing.

It turned out to be a woman. A woman whose face had been cruelly slashed. He counted seven deep lacerations that were bleeding heavily. She was unconscious, and her skin was cold and clammy. Vincent knew that she was probably going into shock. He quickly assessed the situation. The closest hospital was almost two miles away at the other end of the park. He was much closer to the tunnel threshold he’d just used. From there it was only a fifteen-minute walk to the hospital chamber and Father; less if he ran.

He made the decision and lifted her in his arms and started to jog toward the culvert that hid the threshold. Once inside he stopped only long enough to send a message asking that Father meet him in the hospital chamber.

He arrived at the hospital chamber as Father was limping up from the other direction.

“What is it, Vincent?” he asked. “Have you been hurt?”

“No, Father. It’s not me. I found someone in the park. She’s bleeding heavily.”

“And you brought a stranger here?” Father admonished. “You are endangering all of us by doing that. You should have taken her to the hospital.”

“This was closer, Father. Please, she needs your help.”

Father sighed in resignation. “Then bring her in and put her on the exam table.”

Vincent followed orders and watched as Father did a cursory exam.

“The bleeding is almost stopped, but she has lost a lot of blood and may be in shock,” Father finally told him. “Please run and get Mary. I’ll need her assistance.”

Father was turning to the sink in the corner to wash up as Vincent took off to get Mary.

“What do you need?” Mary asked as she entered the hospital chamber a few minutes later. Vincent followed her and stopped only long enough to remove his cloak and drop it on a chair before he started building a fire in the brazier.

Father was setting out his suture tray and turned to Mary.

“I’ll clean the wounds on her face and make sure that there are no head injuries that we aren’t seeing.” He pointed at Vincent. “You help Mary undress her, so I can make sure there are no other injuries.”

Vincent lifted the young woman as Mary removed clothing. She tsked over the torn sleeve in the well-tailored jacket the woman wore, and she couldn’t help admiring the lovely silk blouse.

“But I’m afraid the blood may have ruined it,” she added as she set it aside. “I’ll have to soak it in cold water when we are done here.”

“Do either of you have any idea who she might be?” asked Father. “And why she would be in the park at this hour?”

“Her clothing is good,” Mary put in, “but I don’t see any designer labels.”

“I found her in the park, Father, but she was dumped there... from a van on the 65th Street Transverse.”

Mary leaned over to father who was meticulously cleaning the wounds on the woman’s face. She whispered, but Vincent’s sharp ears picked up her words.

“I don’t think she was raped,” Mary said. “She was wearing slacks, and they were still buttoned and zipped, and her blouse was even still tucked in the back. Her panties haven’t been disturbed and are clean.”

Mary turned to Vincent.

“Please lift her into a sitting position,” Mary directed. “I want to wash the blood off her neck.”

Vincent did as Mary asked. Father looked up and called a halt.

“Wait, is that? Is it a bruise on her lower back?” he asked.

Vincent looked down, and right at waist level, he saw what Father was talking about.

“No, Father,” he said. “I believe it’s a tattoo... a Celtic Knot to be exact.”

Father looked closer and shook his head. “Why a young woman would choose to do something like this to her body is beyond me,” he said, apparently forgetting about his son’s own foray into body art when he was 18.

“Maybe for the same reasons a young man does it, Father,” Vincent suggested.

Strangely, he’d chosen nearly the same design as the young woman. He had a Celtic Knot on the ball of his right shoulder. He’d chosen it because it meant eternity, although Narcissa had told him that it had magical powers. He liked both ideas. He wondered why this young woman had chosen it.

His was smaller and done in black, but hers was a little larger and was done in green and orange. The circle was green, and the intertwining trifold was orange...

Father obviously caught Vincent’s meaning and chuckled as he indicated that Vincent should lay her down again. When she looked comfortable, Vincent drew a light blanket over her bra and panty clad body.

Mary took over cleaning wounds as Father moved on to examine the rest of her.

“From the look of this bruise on her left side, I’d say she might have some broken ribs... at the very least they are badly bruised. Her right wrist is swelling, but it doesn’t appear that anything is broken. It’s probably just a bad sprain.”

“Has she had a head injury?” Vincent asked. “Is that why she’s unconscious?”

“No, there doesn’t seem to be anything like that. I’d say she’s unconscious more from the shock of the attack and from blood loss. I don’t think it’s enough of a loss to require a transfusion. But I will start a Ringers IV once she is settled; she will have to be watched closely for the next 24 hours.”

When he was done, Father’s sutures might have looked a little rough, but he’d been meticulous making sure that the skin met evenly and that there had been no muscle damage.

“I can’t guarantee that there is no nerve damage,” he said as he finished wrapping the woman’s head in gauze. Her long hair had been a bit of a challenge, but Mary had gathered it into a ponytail on the top of her head, and they had wrapped around it. “The bandages are as much to conceal this place from her as they are to protect the wounds,” he added.

“I’ll take her to my chamber, Father. I’ll look after her,” Vincent said as Mary finished putting a gown on her and they prepared to move her.

“Are you sure? We can put her in the guest chamber, or she can remain here,” Mary reminded him.

“But both are a long walk from Father’s chamber.” He tucked the blanket around the woman and lifted her. “My chamber is easier for Father to get to.”

In a short time, the woman was settled in Vincent’s bed, and she seemed to be resting comfortably. Vincent blew out all the candles in the chamber except for the one on his writing table. He sat there, took out his journal and started to write.

It was after 2 am when Mark finally made it to Diana's loft. He was very quiet. He stripped down to his underwear in the bathroom where he also brushed his teeth. He was more than a little bit tipsy, but he could sleep in on Sunday. He was looking forward to it.

He tiptoed into the bedroom and was in bed before he realized that Diana wasn't there.

He figured she'd fallen asleep on the couch, so he turned on the lamp on the night table and went back out into the living room. A quick survey of the loft told him that she wasn't there. Neither was the purse she'd been carrying earlier in the evening, and her gun wasn't in the drawer where she usually kept it.

She was often called into the precinct in the middle of the night, so he picked up the phone and dialed the number. They knew him and told him that no one had called Diana. That was when he told the desk sergeant that he thought something might have happened to her.

While he waited for the police to arrive, he put his pants and shirt back on. He met the police at the gate when the elevator got to her floor. Since it was Diana who had been reported missing, someone had called her Captain, and he arrived a few minutes later.

Mark wasn't surprised to find out from the detective that since he was her boyfriend, he was a suspect in her disappearance.

"But she was also working on a case," her Captain pointed out to the other detective who had questioned Mark.

"Didn't she interview a witness in a public place on Friday?" the detective asked Captain Rizzo. "Anyone could have seen her and decided she needed to be... warned off."

The detective's words didn't sound very hopeful to Mark, but Captain Rizzo didn't act as if he was worried; he seemed to think that Diana could take care of herself and would show up soon.

Captain Rizzo suggested that Mark stay at Diana's place for a while, just in case she came home. Meanwhile, a notice went out that a police officer was missing.

The press didn't get hold of it until the next morning, and they didn't hesitate to print it. By the afternoon editions everyone reading any of the New York newspapers knew that a female NYPD detective was missing.

The young woman still hadn't woken up when the newspapers made it Below on Sunday afternoon.

"Is that her?" Mouse asked as he shoved the paper under Vincent's nose.

Vincent looked closely at the grainy black and white photo. It didn't show her fiery red hair, but the article mentioned long red hair and blue-green eyes and that she'd been wearing a black suit and a green blouse when she disappeared. It also said that she was 5'7" and weighed around 120 pounds. Everything fit.

"Yes, I believe it is," Vincent said. "At least now we know her name. I'll take this to Father."

"She is a police officer!" Father exclaimed after he read the article. "What have you done, Vincent?"

Vincent understood the implications, but he also knew that he'd done the right thing.

"I'm sorry, Father!" Vincent was as exasperated with Father as Father was with him. "I just couldn't leave her to go into shock and die there in the park. You are the one who taught me to value all life and to help when I can."

That took some of the wind out of Father's sails. He blew out a breath and sat in one of the chairs in front of his desk.

"I know, I know. I'm sorry for shouting at you. It's just that the lives of over a hundred men, women and children depend on this place remaining a secret."

"And it will. I will see to it. Her eyes will remain covered until she can travel. Then we will lead her out and not allow her to uncover her eyes until she is well away from any identifiable entrance to our world."

"See to it that it's that way. And make sure that she sees... or hears as few people as possible. You, me and Mary should be the only ones."

Captain Rizzo called her family, then Mark right after he heard that Diana's purse had been found next to one of the roads through the park. The police officers who went back and investigated it had also found blood on the grass. It had been over 18 hours since anyone had laid eyes on Diana and Captain Rizzo was beginning to worry.

Rizzo drummed his pencil on the desk after he hung up the phone. All the statistics about the first few hours after a kidnapping being crucial and how after 72 hours most law enforcement hoped for the best but expected the worst kept running through his head.

They'd started working the case as soon as Mark had called the station. He'd done his best to reassure Diana's family, but he was having a hard time reassuring himself. At least they knew that she hadn't just decided to disappear. They all knew Diana, and that just wasn't part of her make up.

Diana knew she was awake, but everything hurt, and it took too much effort to move. It was dark so she concentrated on the last thing she could remember.

Men grabbed me and threw me into the back of a truck, she thought. No, it was a van, a white van. There were two men and another one driving. One held me while the other... cut my face.

She started to raise her hand to touch her face when her hands were gently taken and restrained.

"No, don't touch your face. It's bandaged to protect the wounds," someone said in a soft, gravelly voice.

"My eyes?" she whispered, as her hands were released.

"Your eyes were not hurt," answered the voice. "We made sure."

“Then why are they covered?” she asked, a little more forcefully.

“There are cuts near your eyes, and we didn’t want you to touch them. It was easier to just cover your whole face.”

“Am I in a hospital?” She was pretty sure she wasn’t. It didn’t smell like a hospital or sound like one. All she could hear was a constant clanging like the radiators at the precinct did every fall when they first turned on the heat. Just then there was a roar and a vibration.

What was that? she wondered, *an elevated train?*

“No, you’re not in a hospital,” the voice assured her. “You were bleeding, and there wasn’t time to take you all the way to a hospital. I brought you to my home. My father is a doctor.”

“And where is your home? Somewhere there is an elevated train. Queens? Brooklyn?”

“No, this is still Manhattan. That’s the subway you heard.”

That puzzled Diana. This man and his father must live in a basement somewhere. The subways could be anywhere from 80 to 180 feet below street level. Even if she’d just heard one of the shallower lines, they were still pretty far down.

“Are you hungry?” asked the voice.

“Ah, I don’t know... I think so. How long have I been here?”

“I found you early Sunday morning. It’s now Monday afternoon.”

She thought a moment. “So, it’s the 13th?” she asked.

“It is. Can you tell me your name?” He was sure he knew it but wanted to be certain.

“It’s Diana. Diana Bennett. Yours?”

“Vincent. Lie still, and I’ll send Mary to you to help you while I go and get you some lunch.”

Diana listened as he left the room and heard a few minutes later when someone else entered.

“Hello, Diana? Are you still awake?” a soft female voice asked.

“Yes. Are you Mary?”

“Yes. Do you need the bathroom? Do you think you can walk there? Or do you want the bedpan?”

“I can get there. I hate bedpans!”

Mary pulled back the covers and helped Diana swing her feet over the side of the bed. Diana gasped at the pain in her side.

“Sit there for a minute before you try to stand,” Mary told her. “Father said you may have broken ribs.”

Diana followed instructions and sat.

“Are you dizzy at all?”

“No, I think I’ll be OK.”

Mary helped her to stand then guided her about down what felt like a narrow hallway and then to the toilet. The walk hadn’t been long, only about 30 steps, but they had taken a lot of energy. The room was chilly, and it was quiet, except for the noisy plumbing.

Someone should really call a plumber, she thought.

Mary told her where everything was then left her for a few minutes.

When Diana reached for the toilet paper, she was surprised when her hand contacted what felt like stone. It definitely wasn't cinder block or cement.

This was all very odd, to say the least. Diana strained her senses. She concluded that the building or basement she was in must be old. It had a dusty, earthy smell.

Mary must have heard the toilet flush because she was back as soon as Diana stepped away from the toilet.

"Is there somewhere I can wash my hands?" Diana asked.

"I'll bring you a pan and a cloth when we get back," Mary told her.

After the short walk back to where they had started, Mary helped Diana to sit in a large chair and went to fill the promised pan. Diana could feel a table to her left. Mary quickly returned with the pan, and she showed Diana where it was and put a small piece of soap into her hands. Diana washed her hands, then found a cloth in the pan. She squeezed the water out of it and wiped her neck, part of her chest and as far up her arms as she could.

"There was blood on your neck, I cleaned it off. I was able to get the blood out of your blouse, and I repaired a torn seam in your jacket."

"Thank you. How long will I be here?" She still wasn't entirely sure she wasn't being held by the men who had grabbed her.

"As long as it takes you to regain your strength. Father wants to make sure that you are healing and that you have your strength back. He also wants to make sure that you can walk. We are a long walk from anywhere, and right now you don't have the strength."

"Father?"

"It's what we call him. He looks after all of us here. He's our doctor, teacher, leader, and father."

Vincent walked in just as Mary was finishing.

"How do you feel about soup?" he asked.

"It sounds good, but I'm suddenly very tired. I don't know if I can stay awake to eat."

"That's all right, I'll help you."

She was surprised when Vincent gently picked her up and deposited her back in the bed.

No one had picked her up so easily since she was a child. She could tell from where his voice was coming from that he was tall, but he must be some kind of a bodybuilder to lift her that easily.

He pulled the covers up and helped her to settle comfortably.

She'd heard that when a person lost the use of one of his senses, the others would compensate, but she knew it wasn't true. She'd always figured that people just learned to use their senses differently. She was trying to hear the smallest sounds and interpret the slightest odors. Right now, she could smell food.

A few seconds later she felt him sit on the side of the bed.

"First bite," he said as a spoon touched her lower lip.

After several bites, he asked. "Do you like it?"

"It's good soup," she answered. "What kind is it?"

"Lentil. We have a cook here. His name is William. He makes a broth with pieces of ham and bones, then adds the lentils, herbs, onions, celery, and carrots. It's very hearty."

"It's delicious."

Diana managed to eat almost the whole bowl before she reached out to stop his hand.

She recoiled when her hand contacted what felt like fur.

"That's enough," she managed. "I think I need to sleep."

She slid down a little in the bed, and Vincent pulled the cover up to her chin.

She fell asleep with her rational mind telling her that he was wearing a coat or a pair of gloves with fur on them.

The dream was weird... and she knew she was dreaming. She occasionally had lucid dreams where she realized she was asleep and dreaming and sometimes she could control the dream. This time she knew she was dreaming, but she wasn't in any more control than she'd been when what she was dreaming about had actually happened.

The man was holding her down and cutting her face only this time she wasn't unconscious. She felt every time the knife bit into her skin, and it was excruciating.

The men in the van were talking, but she couldn't make out what they were saying, and it was so dark she couldn't make out their faces.

She concentrated on the voices as she tried to block the pain.

One of the voices was asking what they should do with her, and it suggested that they should keep her somewhere until "all of this blows over."

Then there was another voice, a familiar one that was close to her ear. It was repeating over and over that she was safe, that no one would hurt her. She finally realized it was Vincent, as she started to wake up. She expected to find him there, reassuring her, but when she reached out, she was alone.

She pushed up into a sitting position, wincing at the pain. She sat quietly but couldn't hear anything but that infernal banging sound.

"Vincent?" she called quietly.

There was no answer.

"Is anyone here?" she asked.

Still no answer.

Was Vincent really there in the van? she wondered. Was he one of the guys who kidnapped me? Is that why they are keeping my eyes covered? So I won't recognize anyone and put two and two together?

The thought sent a shiver down her spine. She knew that she'd have to be extra vigilant and watch for her chance.

Chance for what, though? Escape?

Captain Rizzo looked up as the door to his office opened, and three people walked in. He knew all three of them: Diana's mother, Anne Bennett, her sister Susan, and Mark. It had been well over a week, and he was surprised that none of them had shown up earlier.

"Has there been any word?"

Rizzo stood and motioned them all to sit. Mark closed the door behind them.

"We're sorry to bother you like this..." Susan began.

"No. No, bother." He walked around to the front of his desk and leaned on the edge as everyone else took chairs. "I really should be keeping in touch better, but there just hasn't been anything to report. I hate to be so straightforward but to be honest, we're stumped."

"Does it have anything to do with the case she was working on?" asked Mark.

"We can't be sure. She interviewed a witness the day before she went missing and we've had a tail on that woman ever since Diana disappeared. If her disappearance had anything to do with the case, I would tend to think that the witness would have disappeared too, but her routine hasn't seemed to have changed. We can't connect anyone she's seen, or been with, to the case."

"So, you are saying that this was random?" asked Susan. As the daughter and sister of police officers, she knew a little. Just enough to scare the daylights out of her.

Rizzo ran his hand through what was left of his hair and shook his head.

"I can't say that either, Susan. If anyone else had disappeared this completely, Diana would be the one I'd put on the case. She's the best I got. She can take little, seemingly totally unrelated bits and pieces, and put them together into a large, cohesive picture. Everyone in the unit is working on this. Everyone is out pounding the pavement. There has to be someone out there who saw something. I'm not stopping until we find her." He stopped because he noticed that Anne was crying.

"Annie, you OK?" he asked going to her side and sitting down next to her.

"No, I'm not OK!" she said adamantly. "My oldest daughter is missing and has been missing for almost 10 days."

"I'm sorry Annie, we're doing the best we can here," Rizzo said, putting his arm around her.

Annie leaned on him. "I know you are Rizz. It's just not knowing. At least with Danny, we knew right away. He was gone, but we knew."

“Annie. It’s not like that this time. I have a gut feeling that we are going to find Di and she’s going to be fine. She’s not gone to join her dad just yet.”

“I hope you’re right, Rizz,” she said patting his chest.

So do I, Annie. So do I.

Diana was sitting on the side of the bed when Vincent entered the chamber.

“You’re feeling better?” he asked as he crossed the room and put a mug of hot tea in her hands. Since the day she’d touched the hair on his hands, and he’d sensed her shock, he’d taken to wearing gloves when he was around her.

She sipped the tea.

“I can get up without help and find my way to the bathroom on my own,” she told him. “I feel my way, and I’ve come to the conclusion that you live in a cave.”

As the days had passed, she’d almost canned her idea that she was still being held by the men who had slashed her, but it was never far from her mind.

Vincent sat down across from her.

“You are more correct than you might imagine. We are below the city, some of our chambers are very deep,” Vincent told her after a moment of consideration.

“I’ve heard rumors. I think anyone who has lived in this city for a while has, but I never believed that any of it was true,” Diana said incredulously.

Vincent pulled off the gloves and tossed them on the table. He really hated the things, but sometimes they were necessary.

He took a breath then started his story. “This is our safe place. There are many here who have no other place to go. The world Above has cast them out. There’s a whole world of tunnels and chambers that most people Above don’t even know exists. If anyone ever knew about this place, it’s been forgotten. But it’s warm, and it’s safe, and we have all the room we need... so we live here, and we try to live as well as we can, and we try to take care of each other. This is our city.”

“What are *you* doing down here?” she asked. “You’re obviously well educated.”

Vincent sighed.

“I was a baby, abandoned, left to die. Someone found me and brought me here, to the man who became my father. He raised me, educated me, and he named me Vincent. That’s where I was found, near St. Vincent’s Hospital.”

“And your father is a doctor, so you had the benefit of his education,” she stated.

Vincent was considering his words carefully, and his next revelation even more so.

“And we have Helpers Above who also help us educate our children.”

“So, I’m assuming that these bandages are as much to keep me from seeing anything here, as they are to cover the wounds,” she said.

Vincent nodded and then remembered that she couldn't see him.

"You are correct. We know that you are a police officer, so Father wanted to be sure that even if you found out where you are, that you wouldn't be able to find your way back."

"But you just told me everything," she pointed out.

"I trust you," he told her. "Father doesn't trust as easily, but I know you can be trusted."

That surprised Diana. Sure, everyone was supposed to be able to trust a cop, but not many, especially people like these, did. But was the story true, or just something made up to throw her off?

"Father noticed a tattoo on your back," he told her, changing the subject. "A Celtic knot."

She chuckled. "Not everyone gets to see that," she told him. "I got it when I was 18, as a tribute to my father. He was a cop and was killed in the line of duty when I was 10. He had a Celtic knot tattoo. He said it was to remind him of his roots. He was born in Belfast."

"I have a tattoo, also," Vincent told her. "And it's a coincidence that I have the same one or at least a Celtic knot."

"Every tattoo has a story," she told him. "What's the story behind yours?"

Vincent smiled at the memory. "When I was a child, we had a Helper, Ben. He was a tattoo artist who had his own shop. I was always fascinated with Ben's body art. There were times when other Helpers or someone from Below got a tattoo, and I watched the process in fascination.

"When I was 14, I told Ben I wanted a tattoo. Ben told me to come back when I was 18, and he'd do it as a birthday gift. He told me to use the next four years to decide on the perfect tattoo and the perfect place for it. I did exactly that. I made an appointment for the evening of my 18th birthday."

Before Vincent could finish the story, the tempo of the tapping sound on the pipes changed. Diana noticed it, then she heard Vincent stand up.

"What is that constant tapping?" she asked.

"Messages," he told her. "There are a lot of pipes that run through the rock below the city. Some are still in use, but a lot of them have been abandoned. We use them as a message system."

Diana listened closely.

"It's not Morse Code," she stated.

"No, but it is derived from that." He tapped something out on the table. It was close to Morse Code but not quite, but she still recognized his name.

"Father has just called me, and I need to see what he wants. I'll return as soon as I can, and then I'll teach you some more."

She heard him leave the room. She was restless and needed to move. She hadn't been this confined in years. Not since she'd broken her leg when she was 15. She stood and started to feel her way around the room. After she'd cracked her shins on the furniture for the third time, she decided the bandages had to go. Maybe this was her chance. The bandages were pinned at the back of her head, and after she'd pulled the safety pin out, she started to unwind.

Father had changed the dressings several times during the time she'd been here, and he'd taken the stitches out a couple of days before. But each time he'd removed the bandages he'd had a bright light shining in her eyes. It had blinded her, and she'd kept her eyes closed for most of the process.

Once she got the bandages off, she blinked and looked around. The room was well lit, but the light didn't hurt her eyes like the lights Father had used, and they acclimated quickly. Mary had told her that she was in Vincent's chamber, and as she gazed around, she was surprised at how comfortable he'd made it. It seemed a little cluttered at first glance, but after a bit of study, she realized that each item likely had meaning and had been placed with care.

OK, so maybe everything he's told me was the God's honest truth, she surmised.

Suddenly, she was seized with the need to know just how much damage had been done to her face. She'd been told repeatedly that her face had been slashed, but Father had assured her that most of the cuts weren't deep and would probably heal well. But she needed to see.

There didn't seem to be any mirrors in the room, though. She finally found an old, cracked hand mirror on a shelf.

She studied her face carefully. The cuts did seem to be healing well, as Father had said. It didn't look like there was any infection and the scabs had even started coming off in spots.

She was totally engrossed when someone behind her spoke her name.

She'd been concentrating on what she was doing so intently that she was startled. She turned with a shriek and threw the only weapon she had, the mirror, at the source of the sound, even as she recognized it as Vincent's voice.

He threw his arm up to block the missile, but it bounced off and managed to hit him on the forehead, leaving a small cut.

He snarled... actually snarled... as they stood staring at each other for a moment. Then he turned and left the chamber.

"Vincent... I'm sorry," she called after him. "You startled me."

She dropped to the bench in the middle of the room... the one she'd walked into almost every time she'd gotten out of bed and started to cover her face with her hands. She quickly pulled her hands back and crossed her arms across her chest.

Don't touch! she admonished herself. *Now I've done it. All he's done is show concern and look after me for the entire time I've been here, and I just hurt his feelings with my reaction. At least I know why he's down here now.* She looked around her again but didn't see her clothes anywhere in the chamber. *It's time I went home,* she decided.

Vincent returned several minutes later. He carried her clothing over his arm, and he carefully placed them on the bench next to her.

"I'm sorry, Vincent," she began as he started to leave the chamber again.

"Sorry for what?" he asked, stopping but not turning back to her.

She sat gazing up at his profile. "Sorry for my reaction; for hurting you."

"It was an honest reaction. Not even as extreme as most people have. Most of the time they run from my presence, screaming in fear."

"That isn't what happened," she insisted. "You startled me. I'm a cop, and I'm always on my guard. If Father or Mary had walked in at that moment and spoken, my reaction would have been the same."

He turned and faced her again, tilting his head to one side and looking at her skeptically.

"I doubt that," he said. But he moved closer and squatted down in front of her. He was surprised when she reached out and touched his cheek.

"This is why you live down here." It wasn't a question, but he felt compelled to answer it.

"If I'd been found by someone Above instead of someone from Below, I'd probably be in a cage somewhere, if I was even still alive."

She nodded. "How...?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I have some ideas; Father and some others have theories. But I doubt I or anyone else will ever know."

They were quiet for a moment, gazing into each other's eyes: blue meeting, blue-green. Then Diana blinked and cleared her throat. She patted the stack of clothing next to her.

"I suppose this means it's time for me to leave."

"It does. You are healed, and you can walk the distance back to a threshold."

"I'm taking Diana home," Vincent announced as he entered Father's study.

"Do you need help?" Father asked, looking up from the ledger he was writing in. "One of the children, perhaps?"

"No Father. She's already taken off her bandages. I'll guide her myself."

"She's seen you?" Father was shocked. "Are you sure she can be trusted?"

"She can be trusted, Father," Vincent rushed to reassure the older man. "I can feel it."

"I don't know, Vincent. People do some daft things when they are frightened."

"She's not frightened," Vincent told him. "I can feel that very little actually frightens her. She often asks questions. I suppose it has a lot to do with her job as a police detective, but she doesn't scare easily."

"Her reaction to you?" Father asked.

"It wasn't fear. I did startle her, but after that, all I could feel was curiosity and compassion."

"You can sense her empathically?" Father was surprised. He knew his son had the ability to sense some people on the empathic level, but it usually took long association for him to establish that kind of a connection. And then it was only when he was near that person; in the same room.

"Yes, and it's strange, but I don't have to be close to her to sense her," he shook his head. He was as puzzled by this ability as anyone.

"So, you are going to guide her out without covering her eyes?" Father asked skeptically.

"I am, but I'm going to take her out by a circuitous route," Vincent told him. "I hope to confuse her, but also show her some of what we have here Below; some of the people who live here and why they need to be protected."

"I'll trust your judgment," Father said, but Vincent could tell he still wasn't entirely convinced. "But we will change some of the ways after she's gone, just to be sure."

“As you wish, Father,” Vincent acceded with a nod. “Now, I think she’s ready to go; I won’t be long.”

Diana had a lot to take in as they walked. She had the feeling he was taking the long way, but she didn’t comment on that. She was surprised that there were so many people living Below, as Vincent called it. Enough to populate a small village. Many were situated in chambers that were clustered in one area around what appeared to be a central core. But quite a few were in shallower tunnels and chambers.

“They are the more transient population,” Vincent told her when she asked. “These people,” he nodded toward a family group that was gathered around a fire pit, “probably won’t stay here. Their need is only temporary. They may even have jobs Above and are just using this place as a temporary resting place before they move on to wherever they need to go.

“The people who live at the lower levels that we just left, are there permanently... Well, maybe not permanently,” he corrected, “but for longer periods. I don’t see Father or Mary ever wanting to go back Above to live. Or William or Mouse.”

“Mouse?” it was a name she hadn’t heard before.

“A young man, maybe 19 or 20. He’s been with us since he was 7 or 8 years old. Before that he lived on the fringes, taking the bits and pieces we discarded or dropped, like a mouse.”

“A feral child?” she asked incredulously.

“Somewhat. Mouse had very few words, didn’t know his name and Father estimated that he’d been abandoned at maybe 3 or 4 years old. Somehow, he managed to find his way Below. He probably followed someone.”

“But why would some one abandon a child?” She could have bitten her tongue; Vincent had been abandoned.

“That is a question we ask every time we take in another foundling,” he told her. “But we have many Below. Laura is deaf, and we suppose that her parents either couldn’t take care of her or didn’t want a child who was less than perfect. Geoffrey’s parents died, and he had no one to go to. Child Protective Services took him and put him in a group home, but he wasn’t successful. He was never adopted. He wandered off one day while they were on a field trip and found his way to us. Kipper has been with us since he was a baby. Someone left him on a park bench and just walked away. Samantha came Below with her mother, but her mother died, and Samantha stayed.”

“They find a *home* here with you,” Diana commented.

“Whereas, if they were Above, they would just be *in the system*.”

“And I’ve seen what that system can do to children, she added.

“Father says that Mouse may be autistic,” Vincent continued. “If he’d remained Above, with proper care and education, he’d likely be very high functioning. He is a prodigy; a savant. He can take anything apart and put it back together. He repairs things that most people would throw away, in fact, that’s where most of what he repairs comes from. He finds things in the garbage and on the curb, brings them Below and gives them a second life. And he’s an inventor of sorts.”

“Are you sure this is the best place for him?” Diana asked. “You said yourself that if he’d stayed Above with the proper care and education...”

“But would he have received either of those things? It’s obvious that no one missed him. I don’t remember ever seeing anything in the papers about a missing child around the time that we surmised that he’d gone missing. He doesn’t remember anything about the time before. Nothing of a home or family. We are now his home and his family.”

By the time they reached what looked like a dead end, Diana’s head was spinning with what she’d seen and heard as they walked.

She looked around.

“Where are we?” she asked.

Vincent pointed to the wall where there was a ladder set into the bricks and then up at an old wooden door set into the brick wall at the top.

“This leads to the basement of your building,” he told her.

She looked around again. “The sewer?” she asked.

“No, this isn’t the sewer, it’s a utility tunnel.” He indicated the conduit on one wall and the pipes on the opposite. “For the electric company and water.”

She nodded and put her hand on Vincent’s arm.

“Thank you...” she began.

“Do you have a way to get into your apartment?” he asked, interrupting and moving away from her toward the ladder.

“Come to think of it... No. I could call someone. I guess I could go across the street to one of the businesses and ask to use their phone. Do you know what time it is?”

“It’s after 9 pm,” Vincent told her. “Are those businesses still open?”

She shook her head. “And right now, I’m the only tenant in the building. The other apartments are still being renovated, and no one is in them.”

“You are on the top floor, aren’t you?” Vincent asked.

“Yes, why?”

“Can you pick a lock?”

“I’m a cop, what do you think?” she asked with a smile. It hurt to smile, but it was worth the effort.

“Does your elevator go to the roof?”

“No, but there’s a stair that does.”

“You can go up to the roof and then pick the lock on the door to your apartment from the roof,” he told her.

“How do you know...?” she started to ask.

“Once we knew who you were, I came here to check on things. There was a man in the apartment. One with dark, curly hair, and he seemed to be dropping off some mail and cleaning out the refrigerator.”

“That was probably Mark.” At Vincent’s questioning look she added. “My boyfriend.”

Vincent nodded then went to the ladder. He climbed up and pushed the door open then climbed into the basement. He helped Diana up, then closed the door.

She led him to the stairs, and they started up.

“It’s a good thing the other apartments aren’t occupied,” Diana said.

They climbed up seven stories to the roof, where Vincent handed Diana a lock pick set.

“Use these often?” she asked as she started to work.

“Actually, I’ve never used them,” he told her. “Mouse *found* them and gave them to me. I’ve just carried them since.”

The lock clicked, and Diana turned the handle and pushed the door open.

“Will you come in?” she invited. She was strangely reluctant to let him go.

“I can’t,” Vincent told her. “I told Father I wouldn’t be long. I’ve already taken longer than I expected.”

Diana put her hand on his arm again. “I don’t know how to thank you, Vincent. You saved my life... And I want you to know that your secret is safe with me. I won’t tell anyone.”

“I know. I’ve trusted you from the beginning,” he briefly put his hand over hers on his arm, then he turned. He backed away and was over the wall and down the fire escape before she moved. She reached the top of the fire escape just in time to see him disappear around the corner of her building.

PART 2

Diana slammed down the phone. She was so mad she felt like she could chew nails and spit tacks.

“They must think I’m some kind of a moron!” she said out loud.

She’d spent over an hour on the phone with the insurance company that morning, only to get the same answer she’d gotten the half a dozen other times she’d talked to them. *Cosmetic surgery* wasn’t covered by the NYPD group policy. Her next call had been to the PD Personnel office. They had informed her that any injury incurred while on duty, or as the result of police business was covered in full by their insurance. They had even referred her to the section of the paperwork she had that stated that. So, she’d called the insurance company back, and they had countered that in their opinion, her injuries were not a result of her police duties since they had happened when she was clearly off duty.

She had bounced back and forth between the insurance company and the Personnel office several times over the past three days. And she still hadn’t gotten anywhere.

It’s not that she was vain, far from it. But when she’d joined her family at her mom’s house for dinner the previous Sunday, she’d frightened her nieces and nephews. Her youngest niece, Alexandra, had even cried and refused to look at her. She couldn’t go through life looking like this.

True, the redness in the scars would eventually fade. It was already starting to. But it would never fade enough to be unnoticeable.

She picked up the phone and dialed Captain Rizzo's number. His assistant answered.

"Hi Edie," she said in the most pleasant voice she could conjure. "This is Bennett. Is Captain Rizzo free?"

"Sure Diana. Just a minute."

She listened to the clicks as she was put on hold. Then the phone rang once and was picked up.

"Hi Di," Captain Rizzo said. "You ready to come back to work yet?"

"Anytime, Cap... but I've got a problem."

"What's up?" There was concern in his voice.

"You've seen my face... That's what's up. I've been talking to the insurance company, and they tell me that in their opinion the injuries weren't the result of my police duty, they won't cover the cost of plastic surgery to fix it. I've talked to Personnel, and all they do is tell me that it *is* covered because the PD accepts that it was as a result of my police duty, but no one there is willing to talk directly to the insurance company.

"Cap, I scared my nieces and nephews at dinner on Sunday. I can't spend the rest of my life like this. I'm not vain, but I don't like what I see in the mirror... or the looks of pity I get from people when I do go out."

Rizzo was quiet for a few moments.

"Cap... you still there?" she finally asked.

"Yeah. Sorry I was thinking. Let me make a few calls; see if I can call in a few favors. I'll get back to you."

She hung up and leaned back in her desk chair. She looked around the loft. She'd let things slide in the two weeks since she'd been back. She got up and started straightening. She was putting the last clean glass into the cabinet almost two hours later when the phone rang.

She answered.

"Bennett."

"Di, can I have your permission to put your picture in the papers?" Rizzo asked.

"Why?"

She hated it when she wound up in the papers.

"I made some calls; I even called the mayor's office, but no one is willing to go out on a limb for you. So I think we are going to have to shame them into it."

"How?" she was still leery.

"I know a guy at the Times, and he's willing to do a story and his editor is even willing to put it on the front page, below the fold, but they both think it would carry more weight if they had pictures. Before and after the slashing."

"And why would this do any good?"

"If we can get the public behind you, then that might put some pressure on the Mayor or the Commissioner to do something. It's worth a try."

"In the meantime, I become the target for pity?" She hated the idea.

“No. I’d call it more like *righteous indignation*,” he argued. “Look Di. I agree with you. You need to have this surgery, but that kind of surgery is expensive. It would take you years to save up for it or to pay it off if you could find someone willing to loan you the money to have it done. Let’s lean on some people and see if we get anywhere.”

She sighed. She was tired of the arguing. “OK. Go ahead,” she finally agreed. “Let me know how it goes.”

She didn’t buy a paper over the next few days. She didn’t want to see herself on the front page, even if it was below the fold. Because of that, she didn’t know that several other city papers had picked up the story, and that the people of the city were up in arms that some bureaucrat at an insurance company was making decisions that would condemn a beautiful young woman to spend the rest of her life looking like Frankenstein’s Monster... Those were one of the paper’s words, no one else’s.

She got a call from Captain Rizzo on Friday.

“It worked Di,” he said. She could tell from his tone of voice that he was very pleased with himself.

“It did?”

“Sure did. You have an appointment with a Dr. Sanderle at 11 am on Monday. He’s one of the top plastic surgeons in the city... hell, he’s one of the best in the country. When he saw the story in the paper, he called and volunteered his services. He’s worked a deal with the insurance company. He will do the surgery free of charge, and the insurance company will cover all the other costs.”

Diana was stunned. For once in her life she was speechless.

“Thanks, Cap,” she finally managed.

“You just get this fixed!” he ordered. “I need you back on the job!”

The visit to Dr. Sanderle’s office on Monday went great. He showed her pictures of some of his previous cases, and she was impressed. He scheduled her for first thing Thursday morning. Her mom and her sister went to the hospital with her on Wednesday afternoon. And they were back the next morning before they came to take her to the OR.

“Anything you want after you are out of surgery, Sis?” her sister Susan asked.

“Coffee!” Diana told her adamantly. “I didn’t get any breakfast this morning and no coffee.” She’d already been given some drugs, and she was feeling a little loopy, and once she got on the subject of coffee, she wasn’t going to be diverted soon.

“How does anyone even get out of bed in the morning without at least the promise of coffee?”

“You know that the coffee they serve here in the hospital is decaf,” Susan said when she could get a word in.

“They shouldn’t even be allowed to call that coffee!” Diana said adamantly, as two orderlies and a nurse showed up with the gurney to take her to the OR.

Diana was quiet while she transferred from the bed to the gurney, but she was back on the subject of coffee as the gurney was wheeled out of the room.

“I like it strong and black!” floated down the hall to Diana’s amused sister and mother.

After surgery, Dr. Sanderle insisted on seeing her in his office every week for the next two months. She planned her life around those visits.

She was back on the job within a month, but she worked from home until Dr. Sanderle pronounced her healed.

Captain Rizzo looked up from the file on his desk as Diana walked into his office. He grinned.

“Good to see you back in the saddle, Bennett,” he said. “Have a seat.”

“It’s good to be back, Cap,” she said with an answering smile as she sat.

“Your docs say it’s OK for you to be back?”

“Yep, and I checked in with the department doc, and he signed off too.”

“Yeah, but *he* was going to order you back to duty less than a week after you came back the first time,” Rizzo pointed out.

“He said the scars gave me character,” Diana said wryly. “When he and the insurance company docs said that it was purely cosmetic surgery, I was ready to strangle someone,” she added with a frown.

“Bureaucrats!” Captain Rizzo mumbled under his breath.

“But between you and the people of this city, they were forced to cover most of the costs. I’m grateful!”

“It still makes me mad to think that they would have left you with those scars for the rest of your life, especially when they were inflicted as a direct result of the case you were working on at the time.”

“It’s done, Cap,” she pointed out emphatically. “What you got for me?”

Rizzo looked intently at her. “You sure you don’t remember anything about what happened?”

“Nothing I haven’t already told you,” she said looking him in the eye. One thing she’d learned from attending Catholic school was how to lie convincingly. Putting one over on the nuns hadn’t been easy.

“Three guys in an older model white panel van grabbed me. I eventually passed out, and they dumped me somewhere. I don’t know where, but I assumed it was outside the city, but you tell me that my purse and some blood was found in the park, so I’m not sure. When I woke up, I was in some kind of a commune or at least a small community on a farm. I only saw three people the entire time I was there. They seemed harmless enough, so I told them who I was and where I lived. I asked them to contact you, but they seemed a little wary of the police.”

“That explains why you were out of touch for so long,” Rizzo commented.

“Yeah, I would have called someone, but I don’t think they even had a phone... At first, they thought I had broken ribs so their medic, I think he was an EMT or a military medic, thought it wise to keep me immobile. Once it was ascertained that my ribs were only bruised, they decided that it was safe for me to move around, but I had to wait until they had a truck coming into the city before I could come back.

“The day they brought me back, we left in the morning, and I didn’t get back to my place until after 9 pm. We made several stops along the way, but I had my eyes covered for most of the trip. They didn’t take the blindfold off until we were crossing the George Washington Bridge.”

She’d concocted a pretty good story. One that she was sure would point everyone in an entirely different direction to what had actually happened.

“We’ve checked all over the area west of the City within an eight or nine-hour drive, and we haven’t been able to find any sort of farm or community that fits your description,” he confessed. “You got any idea what kind of truck they used to bring you back to the city?”

“Why?” she asked. “They didn’t do anything wrong. They helped me; probably saved my life. The man who treated me said I was going into shock from blood loss when they found me.”

“They held you for 10 days. They could be charged.”

“Not if I can help it,” she said adamantly. She’d convinced everyone that she was fuzzy on the time table. “For the first few days, I was out of it and wasn’t able to tell them who I was. They did get some newspapers, and they did see the picture in the paper, but at first, didn’t even connect the picture with me. When they did, I hadn’t been conscious for very long, and they didn’t want to start questioning me. They took care of me, Cap. Excellent care. And as soon as they could, they brought me home. Sure, if I could have, I would have at least let someone know I was OK, but I couldn’t do that without risking them.”

“What kind of risk?” Captain Rizzo asked.

“I don’t know, but they were very concerned when they found out I’m a cop. I promised them that I’d keep any secrets of theirs that I might find out, and they made sure by not allowing me to see much outside of the room I was in. They treated me well and gave me medicines they could probably ill-afford to use on a stranger. I don’t think they were doing anything illegal, I think it had more to do with the fact that I was a cop, and someone might think they had something to do with what had happened to me.”

“All right. I guess I have to accept that, but the detective in me is still dying to know all the facts.”

Diana laughed. “And you think I’m not? Believe me, I’m still looking too, and if I find anything out, you’ll be the first to know, but it will have to be *off the record*. I did tell them that I would protect them in any way I could... So...” She took a deep breath. “What have you got for me?”

Rizzo handed her a file. “This one has made the rounds of the unit, and no one has anything.”

“What about the case I was on when I was kidnapped?” she asked, taking the file but not opening it.

“I went to your place and picked up your files. We talked to your witness again. She made a formal statement, and agreed to testify. The principals are in jail, no bail, awaiting trial. And I know what you said the guy who cut you up said, but we haven’t been able to connect any other thugs with the guys we arrested. They appeared to be freelance.”

“Mind if I look into it?” she asked.

“Just as long as you can do that and work on the case I just gave you. We really need you on that one, Di.”

“You got it, Captain. Contrary to popular belief, I can walk and chew gum at the same time. It’s just that I usually prefer not to. This,” she said holding up the file, “will be my priority.”

She hadn’t seen much of Mark over the summer. He’d gone to Europe to escort a group of high school exchange students to Hamburg, and he’d taken advantage of the opportunity to travel a little on his own. He’d gotten back only a week before school started and he’d been busy with that since. He’d invited her to dinner but had asked her to meet him at the restaurant, since he would be coming straight from a parent/teacher conference.

Diana had been trying to figure out how to let him down easily, ever since they’d made the date.

Last spring, before she was assaulted, they’d been talking marriage. Well, he’d been talking marriage, she’d been thinking more along the lines of him moving in with her. Now she wasn’t so sure. She figured that if she was really in love with him, she would have missed him more while he was gone over the summer. He seemed to have missed her. She got lots of postcards and several letters, but none of them could be construed as *love letters*. Anyone else reading them would have thought she was getting letters from a good friend, or maybe even her brother.

They really needed to talk, but she was at a loss as to how to introduce the subject. Should she do it over dinner, or wait for dessert, or maybe invite him back to her place afterward where they could talk in private?

Mark saved her the effort. There hadn’t been any real opportunity over dinner, but as they were having tiramisu and coffee for dessert, he broached the subject.

“Remember how we were talking about getting married or at least living together last spring before you were hurt?” he asked as he sipped his coffee.

“Even I couldn’t forget something that important,” she told him.

“Well, I’ve been thinking. We couldn’t really agree whether or not to move into your place or mine...”

“Agreement wasn’t the issue,” she interrupted. “You hate my loft, and your apartment is too small. I wouldn’t have a place to work, and the walls are too thin.”

“Exactly,” he agreed. “But I’ve been looking. I combined what we each pay for rent and have found several two-bedroom apartments that we could afford. You could use the second bedroom as an office.”

“I don’t get any say in this?” she asked, trying to keep the anger out of her voice.

“Hey, I was only looking. I didn’t sign any leases. I just wanted to know if it was feasible before I presented it to you as an option.”

“But I have a three-year lease on my place, and I’m less than one year into it,” she protested.

“You can sublet it to someone.”

She shook her head. “To tell the truth, Mark. I was going to bring this subject up tonight too, only I was thinking along different lines.”

“You want to get married?” he asked eagerly.

Diana vigorously shook her head; regretful she might have given him the wrong idea.

“No. I’m sorry. I was thinking that maybe we should take a break. I mean, you were gone most of the summer and, maybe it was because I was so busy with the surgery, healing, and my family, but... I didn’t miss you as much as I probably should have.”

She folded her napkin and placed it carefully on the table. “You deserve more than that. You should have a woman who can give you 100% of her attention. With me, you are lucky to get a quarter of that, especially when I’m working on a case.”

The disappointment on Mark’s face shocked her. She hadn’t thought that he was that much in love.

“But you won’t be like that all the time,” he insisted. “You’ve only been a detective for two years. Once you are established on the force, you can slow down some and take it a little easier. Once we start having kids, you’ll have to.”

“You’re already thinking kids?” she almost shouted. “I’m not even sure I *want* kids.”

“But you’re so good with your nieces and nephews,” he pointed out.

“Yeah, and they’re my nieces and nephews. They’re somebody else’s kids. I can give them back when I get tired of them, and I don’t have to worry about what to do about them when I’m caught up in a case.” She stopped and took a breath. It was now or never. Time for a clean break.

“Look, Mark. I’m the daughter of a cop. I lived with the uncertainty. Every time we’d hear about a cop getting shot, we’d all hold our breath until we heard my dad’s key in the lock, or he called. And when it finally was him, and his partner showed up at our door with their sergeant, it nearly killed my mom. I don’t know that I’d want to put any kid, or you for that matter, through that. I don’t know if it’s a matter of not loving you enough or loving you too much to do that to you.”

That much at least was true. She knew she loved him, but the degree was up for debate.

“But I’m willing,” he told her sincerely. “I love you.”

“But you don’t know what it’s like.”

“I do know. I was the one who reported you missing last spring!” Mark’s raised voice brought a few looks from the other diners. Even the waiter started toward their table until Mark waved him off.

Diana started to run her hands through her hair like she always did when she was agitated but realized in time where she was. The neat chignon she’d put so much time into earlier was saved.

“I know, Mark. But can you imagine going through that all the time? My dad joined the force in 1954, when he was 20, right after he got out of the Army. He married my mom when he’d been on the force less than a year. My brother was born a year later. I can remember every time we waited to hear whether or not he was safe after something happened. I can’t tell you how many times that happened. Between that and raising four kids, it’s no wonder my mom’s hair is white when she’s only 53.

She picked up her purse, opened it and pulled out the leather folder that held her badge. She opened it, pulled out her badge and handed it to Mark.

“Wearing that is almost like wearing a target on your chest,” she stated flatly.

“Then why do you do it?” he asked. He took the folder from her, carefully replaced the badge and handed it back to her.

“Because it’s what I am. It’s in my blood. Being a uniformed cop was great, but this...” she tapped the ID that identified her as a detective, “... this is what I was made for.”

“I know what you do is important,” he protested. “I know you love it. I get it, Di.”

“No, I don’t really think you do. It’s not just catching the bad guys and putting them away. It’s the process. This is something that I do well, and I seem to do it better than a lot. I have a knack for getting inside people’s heads. I don’t know how I do it, I just do it. And I don’t think that I can do that and give you and children the attention that you deserve. I doubt I’ll ever marry, much less have children.”

“Diana!” Mark watched helplessly as Diana put her badge back in her purse, stood, put on her jacket and slung the strap of her bag over her shoulder. She leaned down and kissed him on the cheek.

“It’s really better this way,” she told him before she turned and left the restaurant.

She quickly hailed a cab before he had time to settle the bill and follow her. She felt like a coward, running out on him that way, but she really did feel as if it was all for the best.

Her neighborhood was quiet when she got there. But then, that wasn’t unusual. She unlocked the downstairs door and let herself into the building. She’d always been careful, but since the assault the previous spring she was doubly vigilant. The bright light in the ceiling fixture showed that the hall was empty. She locked up behind her and pushed the button for the elevator.

This building had been a small factory. Her landlord had told her that it had housed several different types of manufacturing over the years, from shoes to ties. The last had been furniture. The ground floor had housed a showroom for the furniture that had been built on the levels above.

The owner was now turning the rest of the building into small loft apartments of about 600 square feet each. He had already divided the top floor into two larger apartments. Diana had seen the one on the front of the building and fallen in love, but he seemed to be having trouble renting the other apartment on that floor. Diana didn’t mind, in fact, she was dreading the day she’d have to share the building with other tenants, but until that day, she was enjoying her solitude.

She opened the elevator door and entered her apartment. After making sure everything was securely locked up, she took off her coat and hung it up.

She still hadn’t looked at the file that Captain Rizzo had given her, but she was tired and wanted a shower.

The hot water felt good, and she was debating on whether or not to look at the file before she went to bed. She’d left it laying on her bed and was eyeing it as she put on her pajamas and robe. If she looked at it, there was a good chance she’d wind up pulling an all-nighter making notes and setting up her board.

She was just picking up the file to take it out to her desk when she heard a noise. It sounded like it came from the living room. She dropped the folder, reached for her purse and pulled her gun out. She turned off the bedroom light and peeked out into the living area. There was only one light on in the entry near the elevator, but she could see through into the living room. It appeared to be empty. Then she saw it... a shadow. She analyzed the angle of the light and decided that the shadow was coming from the roof. She had skylights, and the moon was bright enough for anyone on the roof to cast a shadow into the living room.

Who the hell? she wondered.

There had been workmen up on the roof during the day a few times recently, but never at night, and since there were no other tenants in the building, she momentarily considered calling the police, but then decided that it could be her landlord. He stopped by to check on things occasionally, and he might have chosen to come by after the workmen had left. It was dark, but it wasn't that late.

Just then she heard the noise again. It sounded like someone was tapping on her skylight.

She made her way around to the door to the roof, keeping to the shadows as she went. She crept up the stairs and opened the door as quietly as she could.

"I'm sorry I startled you, Diana," came a familiar voice. "I just meant to leave this for you." Vincent was standing in the moonlight holding a small box out to her. "I heard you moving around and thought I'd let you know it was me."



Then she realized that the tapping she's heard was Vincent tapping out his name on the skylight.

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize..." She reached back inside the door and put her gun down on a window ledge. Then she turned and crossed the roof to where Vincent was standing. She was smiling.

"It's wonderful to see you!" she exclaimed. "How have you been?"

"I've been well."

She stepped out of the shadow and into the moonlight, and he gasped when he saw her face. "Your face..."

"Yeah! Isn't it amazing what a plastic surgeon can do these days? It was a bit of a struggle, but the insurance company finally decided that since I was injured as the result of the case I was working on, they would spring for at least part of the cost. It was all over the papers. I'm surprised you didn't see it."

"Our newspaper deliveries Below are rather sporadic," he told her with a slight smile. "Father will be delighted to hear that it all turned out so well. He was worried that the scars might affect your career."

"It might have made me a bit more intimidating," Diana said with a grin, "but to tell the truth, I'd much rather not walk around scaring little children. I made my one-year old niece, Alexandra, cry when she saw me not long after I came home." She hesitated, wondering if she'd just put her foot in it. "She's such an empathic little girl," she added. She took his hand and tugged him toward the door to her apartment. "Come inside?"

"I didn't mean to stay and bother you," he told her. "I was only going to leave this." He handed her the box.

"It's no bother," she said, taking the package. "Surely you can stay a little longer. As you can see," she nodded around her at the roof, "I spend a lot of time up here. There isn't much of a view, except there." She pointed straight up.

Vincent looked around. There as a bench, a couple of lawn chairs and a telescope.

"Don't the city lights make it difficult to use that?" he asked indicating the telescope.

"Sometimes, but I can still see the big stuff. I like to look at the moon when it's full."

She went over and sat down on the bench. She patted the surface beside her. When he was seated, she looked at the box. It was wrapped in brown paper and tied with twine.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“Just some of the tea you liked when you were Below. I forgot to tell you where it came from, so there’s a business card in the box with the tea.”

“Thank you. How is everyone Below?” she asked.

“They are well. When Mary found out I was bringing you the tea, she said to give you her love. She will be pleased to hear that you were able to have the scars... repaired.”

“They call it revision. So, I guess I’ve had my face revised,” she said as she leaned back on the wall behind her. “You know, I’d almost begun to wonder if maybe I dreamed it all... I always did have a good imagination.”

Vincent chuckled. “That is the way I sometimes feel when I come Above - but my dream is to see it all in the daylight.”

“You should come up sometime early in the morning and spend the day,” Diana suggested. “You could at least see something from here. My apartment is on the 7th floor, and since this was an industrial building, the ceilings were originally 16 feet. This roof is over a hundred feet off the ground, and all the buildings within a couple blocks of it are shorter. You could safely spend time here during the day if you wanted.”

Vincent looked surprised at the offer.

“I wouldn’t disturb you? Don’t you often work from home?”

“It might keep me from obsessing over whatever case I’m working on, and I might even remember to eat,” she told him with a smile.

“Besides, when I’m concentrating on something, I’m pretty oblivious to what is going on around me. The building could fall down, and I *might* notice it. That’s one of the reasons Captain Rizzo lets me work from home. All the detectives work in one big room. Most detectives work with partners, and partners desks are placed so that they face each other. The pairs of desks are isolated from each other by movable walls, mostly for privacy and to try to quiet things down a bit. My desk is by itself against a wall, and it drives the other detectives crazy because I won’t sit around and shoot the shit with them or discuss the case I’m working on. I’m the only woman in the 210, and my work style is so different from everyone else’s.”

“But you get results,” he observed.

“And how would you know that?” she asked.

“We have a Helper who is an Administrative officer in your precinct. I asked.”

“So, he knows where I was during the time I was missing?” she asked apprehensively.

“He does, but he can be trusted. He’s been a Helper all his adult life, and his parents were Helpers before him. Some of the first,” he assured her.

“Yeah, well, I concocted quite a story for my Captain, and I would hate for him to find out I lied to him.”

“What did you tell him?”

She told him the story she’d told Captain Rizzo.

“Creative,” he said with a slight smile.

It was getting late when Vincent suddenly looked closely at her.

"You're tired," he said. "We've talked too much I've kept you up too late."

"What makes you say that?" She glanced at her watch. "It's not even 2 am yet. I often stay up much later than this."

"I can feel it. You are exhausted."

"You can feel it?" she asked curiously.

Vincent looked away, then back at her.

"I have this... ability," he told her. "Sometimes, when I'm with someone I can feel what they are feeling."

"You're an empath!" she exclaimed.

"Yes. You've heard of it?" he asked, surprised.

"Yes. When I was going to college I didn't just study law enforcement, I had a double major and was also studying psychology. And we also included some psi abilities. We had some good debates on whether or not they were real or just symptoms of some kind of psychosis."

"And what was your opinion?"

"I had to come in on the side of it being real, since some of those abilities seem to run in my family."

"They do? What abilities?"

"Mom said that her grandmother was a bit of an empath, but she could also tell what was wrong if someone was sick. Dad's mother had the sight."

"The sight?"

"For her, it was usually the ability to see the future. Hers usually came in dreams. She kept a notebook beside her bed and wrote down every dream she could remember, and she often foresaw things that happened later, but sometimes she would see an event from someone's past or something that was happening in a different place at the time she dreamed it."

"And you?" he asked. "Did you inherit any of those abilities?"

Diana inspected her nails before she looked up at him.

"Have you ever heard of psychometry?" she asked.

"Yes. It's the ability to discover something about an event or person by touching objects associated with them. You can do that?"

"Sometimes... I get impressions. And I can also pick up impressions from a place. It's not very reliable and can be very vague, but I have used it in my detective work, and it has been known to point me in the right direction."

"That is interesting. Do you practice to try to make it more reliable?"

"I have, but sometimes it's hard to find things to work with. What about you? How far does your ability go?"

"Normally, I can only pick up on the feelings of people I'm in the same room with. There have been occasions when I've picked up at a distance what someone was feeling, but it's only been with

people I'm very close to. I was very close to another boy who lived Below. He was like a brother, and once when he broke his arm, I felt his pain even though he was up in the Park and I was Below."

"And just now you felt that I am tired?"

"With you, it seems to work differently," he explained. "It is not as fleeting. I started feeling it while you were Below, and I was caring for you. I thought at first that it was just because I was spending so much time with you, but since you left, the connection has remained, and I've been able to feel what you were feeling the whole time."

"Everything?" she asked, incredulously.

"Almost as if they were my own feelings," he confirmed. "I had to learn to put it in the back of my mind so that I wouldn't feel as if I was constantly invading your privacy."

"Wow! That's amazing." She wasn't sure what to say. She believed that things like that were possible, but she'd never encountered it before. She wondered if it had anything to do with his physical differences.

"It's a good thing you can't read my mind," she added with a grin.

It is? Vincent wondered. I'm sure that it would be interesting.

They talked for a little longer, and by that time, Diana was really yawning, and Vincent insisted that it was time for him to go.

Diana never did get around to going over that file that night. She scanned it over breakfast the next morning and was finishing it at her desk at the precinct when Captain Rizzo stopped at her desk.

"So, you wanna take it, Di?" he asked.

Diana looked up at him with a smile.

"It sounds like an interesting case, Cap," she said. "Right up my alley. Can I get the physical evidence and hold onto it for a while?"

"Sure, go ahead. It's a cold case. No one was ever able to find anything, and no one has done anything on it for over a year."

She nodded. "And what about my case? You said my purse was found in the park, but all I got back was my wallet and badge. Can I get the rest of it?"

"Yeah. Since the purse was a smooth leather, we were hoping we'd get some prints off it, but the only good ones we found were yours. You can have it too."

Vincent had told her about how he'd found her in the park, but he hadn't seen her purse. When she heard the PD had it, she was hoping to get it back and that she might get an impression from it.

"What about my gun? Was it ever found?"

"As a matter of fact, it was. I forgot to tell you. While you were in the hospital, it was used in an armed robbery, and it was dropped at the scene. We bagged it, and when the detective checked the numbers, he found that it was your personal weapon. Do you want it back?"

“No, you’ll have to hold it until you find a perp; besides, I like that new Glock I got. The clip holds more rounds, and it’s small. But I would like to have a look at the old one, if it’s OK.”

Rizzo knew a little about Diana’s psychometry abilities but seldom mentioned it. If he did, he usually referred to it at her *superpower*.

“Help yourself.”

Diana put all the plastic evidence bags on her desk an hour later. It was surprisingly quiet in the big room. Most of the detectives were out working on cases.

The first bag she opened contained her purse. It was a small, black leather shoulder bag. She took it out and opened it and found that it still held a small pack of tissues, a ring with three keys and her makeup bag with a compact, a lipstick, and a lip gloss.

She closed the purse then sat back in her chair and held it with both hands. She closed her eyes and waited. A few seconds later she saw a few fleeting images flash before her mind’s eye. One of them triggered a memory. One of the men who had grabbed her had a tattoo. She could picture it. It was a coiled snake with the coils going up the back of his wrist. There were other, smaller tattoos around it, but it was the snake that had caught her attention. It was so dark; it looked new.



She dropped the purse into the large tote she carried and reached for her pad to make some notes. She found herself sketching the tattoo. Those junior high school art classes came in handy upon occasion.

The next thing she took out and held was her personal weapon. All it did was give her a vague, uneasy feeling, so she dropped it back in the evidence bag.

She dumped the evidence bags for the case that Captain Rizzo had given her, but she got no impressions from them.

Captain Rizzo had said it was a cold case and that no one had done anything on it for over a year. She had a feeling it was going to be interesting.

Before she left the building a little while later, she stopped in Captain Rizzo’s office.

“Cap,” she said as she took the chair in front of his desk. “I did remember something while I was going over the file from my case. One of the guys had a tattoo.” She handed the sketch she’d made across the desk to him. “It was new looking.”

“I’ll circulate this and see if anyone else has reported anything like it on any other cases.” He told her.

“Maybe check with tattoo shops. We might find the artist,” she suggested.

“I’ll pass that on.” He promised. “And if you come up with anything else, let me know. I know how those memories can just pop up.”

"I will." She patted her tote. "I've got the file you gave me. I'll go over everything in detail at home and see if I can come up with anything," she promised.

Martin Belmont, of the Mayfair Law Firm, looked up from the file on his desk when his secretary showed a man into the office.

"Mr. Manconi," she announced and closed the door behind her as she left.

He didn't like having his *associates* from his *other business* visiting him in this office, but sometimes it just couldn't be avoided. His secretary was oblivious and thought that they were clients. He was a criminal lawyer, and most of his clients were less than reputable.

"What did you find out about Avila and Foley, Ralph?" he asked.

"No bail," Ralph told him. Foley's been charged with the murder of Stan Gettner and Avila has been charged with conspiracy to commit murder."

"On whose word?"

"An eyewitness. That waitress, Carol Stabler," Ralph told him.

"Do you think there is any danger of Avila and Foley talking?" Belmont asked.

"If they think they can save their own skin, yeah," Ralph said emphatically.

"Then take care of it. You know who to call."

"Got it, boss," Ralph said. "And Stabler?"

"Once Avila and Foley are out of the picture, she won't be a threat. She doesn't know anything but what she saw."

"We can lean on her," Ralph told him.

"Wasted effort, and then she would have seen someone else in our organization. Leave her alone unless you think she knows more than we think she knows!" He looked Ralph in the eye to emphasize his words.

"We got a bug in her apartment," Ralph volunteered.

"Who authorized that?" Belmont demanded.

"You told us to keep an eye on her and with Avila and Foley out of the picture we're short. Van Gelder said he was a building inspector and the building manager let him *inspect* every apartment. Her place is a studio, so it was easy to bug. Van Gelder put it in the ceiling light when he was inspecting the electrical. Works great, we can hear everything that goes on in her place."

"Where is the receiver placed?" Belmont asked.

"It's in a van parked in the alley behind her building. It records, so I don't have to have a man there 24/7."

"OK, continue with that until I tell you otherwise," Belmont told him. "And what about the other matter?"

“The cop?” Ralph asked. At Belmont’s nod, he continued. “We been keeping an eye on her. She hasn’t been working since we... ah... rearranged her face, but she went back to work this week. There’s another cop working the Gettner case, but since it’s pretty much in the bag, no one is really doing much. At least not in the PD. The DA is probably working on it.”

“And how about the *Bennett* case,” Belmont asked sarcastically. “I would think that it would still be active and open.”

“Yeah, but as far as I can tell, no one is on it. Maybe now that she’s back, Bennett will take it.”

“She might, but keep your ear to the ground, and in the meantime continue to keep an eye on her too,” Belmont said.

“You got it, boss.”

Diana called the DA’s office and talked to the ADA who had been tasked with doing the legwork on The Gettner case. She’d gotten his permission to talk to Carol Stabler again. She didn’t really need his permission, since it was about a different, but related case, but it was a professional courtesy. It was always good to stay in the DA’s good graces.

She also called Captain Rizzo to tell him what she wanted to do. He had reluctantly agreed after she told him that she would pass anything that she found out, on to the detective working her case.

Diana stopped at the diner where Carol worked and was told that she’d taken a few days off because she had a cold, so she went to Carol’s apartment.

Diana knocked on the door of apartment 442, and a few seconds later she heard a muffled voice.

“Who is it?”

“It’s Detective Diana Bennett, Miss Stabler. I’d like to talk to you.”

“I thought the cops already got everything I know,” Carol replied.

“This is a different case,” Diana told her.

The door cracked open, and a red-nosed watery-eyed Carol Stabler peered out at her.

“I haven’t witnessed any other crimes lately,” she said with a half-smile.

When Diana had talked to Carol the first time, they’d seemed to hit it off, and that came through now.

“This is related,” Diana said with a chuckle, “but it’s not directly about the other case.”

Carol opened the door to let Diana in.

“Just don’t get too close,” she warned. “I wouldn’t wish this miserable cold on my worst enemy.”

They walked into the main room where Diana seated herself on a chair, and Carol sat on the end of the sofa several feet away from her.

“You probably heard that I was kidnapped, and my face was slashed,” Diana said after they’d exchanged greetings.

“Yeah, it was all over the papers. They said it had something to do with a case you were working on.”

“It did. I think it was what I talked to you about. The guys who kidnapped me warned me off. I’m assuming it was the Gettner case since it was the only one I was working on at the time.”

“So, what do you want from me?” Carol asked.

“I just wanted to know if you know anyone else, or might have seen anyone else around the night that Gettner was killed.”

“You mean other than the two who killed him?”

“Yeah, other than them.”

“Were they the ones who grabbed you?” Carol asked.

“No, what gave you that idea?”

“Nothing, really. I just kinda figured it might be them when I saw in the papers that they thought your kidnapping was related to a case you were working on.”

Diana pulled out her copy of the Gettner file and flipped through it until she found what she wanted.

“You said that Avila and Foley were in the diner at least three or four times a week. Did you ever see them there with someone else?”

“A couple times, and it was a couple different guys.”

“Did you hear a name, or can you describe them?”

“One of them was there several times. He was kinda short and carried probably a few more pounds than he should. They called him Ralph, but that was all I heard.”

“Anyone else?”

“Yeah, but I don’t have a name. He was there just before Gettner was killed. He was kind of scrawny and skuzzy looking. He had a bandage on his hand that covered the back of his hand and part of his lower arm. I accidentally bumped it with the water pitcher and apologized because I thought he had some kind of an injury and I didn’t want to hurt him. He said it was OK, it was just a new tattoo, and he was supposed to keep it covered for the first 24 hours. He had a lot of other ink, so I guess that was just one more.”

“Do you remember which hand it was?” Diana asked.

Carol closed her eyes, picturing what she’d seen.

“Ah... he was sitting in the left side of the booth on the outside, so it was his right hand.”

“Any name associated with him?”

“No, but I think Avila called him LV, but that was all I heard.”

“Do you think you could pick either one of those other two out of a mug shot book or a lineup?”

“I think so, but I feel so rotten right now that I don’t want to go anywhere,” Carol protested.

“Don’t worry about that. I want to sit down with the books and see if I can come up with anything. If I can come up with some pictures, I’ll bring them to you. It might take a few days, though. If we don’t get anything that way, then you can come down to the office and take a look.”

“Maybe I’ll be feeling better by then, but to tell the truth, I feel so rotten now that I’m sure I’d have to get better just to die.”

They both laughed.

“I know what you mean. I hate summer colds, they seem to hang on forever.” Diana put the file back in her bag and stood. “I’ll get out of your hair,” she told Carol. “You get some rest, and I hope you feel better soon. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Do you really mean that, or are you just being nice?” Carol asked sceptically as they reached the door.

“I mean it!” Diana said with a grin. “Do you need some cold medicine picked up, food?”

“Actually, I could use a few things.” She went into the kitchen and scribbled a few lines on a pad. She ripped the sheet off and took it back to Diana. “If it wouldn’t be too much trouble. Let me give you some money.”

“Pay me when I get back with it. I might be a couple of hours. I want to go back and start on those mug shots. I might have something to show you when I come back.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Carol said with a smile. “I’ll see you then.”

Diana went back to the precinct and did just as she said she was going to. She started with known associates of Avila and Foley, and she came up with a name that fit the initials that Carol had given her. The name was Lyle Van Gelder, and he looked familiar. In the section that listed identifying marks, there was a long list of tattoos and their locations on his body. But there were none on the back of his right hand or lower right arm. The last arrest, when the file would have been updated, was almost a year ago, so if the tattoo had been new, it wouldn’t have been listed. She made a copy of that photo and decided to call it a day.

There were only a few things on Carol’s list, and Diana stopped at a small grocery between the subway station and Carol’s apartment building.

When she reached Carol’s door, she shifted the bag to her left arm and knocked. There was no answer, so she knocked again. She thought she heard a sound from the other side of the door, so she put her ear against the door. There was definitely something moving in there.

She knocked again, and this time she called out.

“Carol, it’s me, Diana, I got the stuff you wanted. Open the door.”

She heard more movement, but no one answered.

She debated going to find the building manager, but if Carol was sick and down or unconscious those minutes might make a big difference. She tried the handle but it was locked so she set the bag down on the floor to the side of the door and pulled out her lock picks. She soon had the door unlocked.

As a precaution, she drew her gun out of the shoulder holster she wore on duty. She turned the door handle quietly and pushed the door open a crack. The room looked empty, but then she heard a groan. Hoping she wasn’t walking in on Carol and a boyfriend, she pushed the door open with her toe and moved to where she could see the whole room. She swept it with her weapon out in front, following her line of sight. She saw Carol on the floor in front of the windows and rushed over to her.

She holstered her gun and knelt on the floor next to Carol, who had a cut on her forehead and a trickle of blood coming from the corner of her mouth. Diana leaned down for a closer look, assuming that Carol had fallen.

Carol's eyes opened, and she mouthed the words, "They're in the bathroom," before she passed out again.

It only took a second for that to register and Diana was rising and reaching for her gun, but her arms were pinned before she could reach it. It was strangely reminiscent of the time she was grabbed and thrown into the van. She looked down and saw the familiar snake tattoo. She'd eat her shoe if it wasn't Lyle Van Gelder.

How did they know? She wondered as she twisted and managed to slam her elbow into the gut of the man holding her.

He "ooffed" and his arms loosened enough for her to squirm free. She managed to draw her gun again and was holding it on Van Gelder when another man burst out of the bathroom. Carol had said "they" she reminded herself.

"Drop it!" the other man said. She glanced over to see that he was pointing a gun at her. She recognized him too; the voice as much as the face. The guy in the back of the van, the one with the knife.

"No, you drop it!" Diana said. "Or I'll shoot your buddy here."

"You're a cop, and you won't shoot," the guy said.

"I will if I have to. My dad was a cop, and one thing he taught me was to shoot first, if I thought my life was in danger, and face the consequences later."

"But if you shoot him, I'll shoot you and then where will you be, pretty lady?" he asked sarcastically.

"But your buddy will still be dead, whether I am or not."

Diana had been trying to divide her attention between the two men, but there was a sound from the bathroom, and her eyes grew wide as she saw Vincent creeping up behind the man with the gun. That took her attention off Van Gelder and gave him the opportunity to swing out. Diana stepped back to avoid being hit.

Vincent reached the other man at the same moment, and she heard a very distinct crack as he snapped the man's neck. Van Gelder started to turn, but Diana took advantage of that movement to hit him on the side of his head with the butt of her weapon, and he crumpled to the floor as her gun flew out of her hand.

Diana noticed in a detached sort of way that Vincent had his hood up and pulled forward and that he was wearing gloves.

Without any real thought, Diana was on Van Gelder and had pulled his hands behind him, and she had her knee in the small of his back.

"Get my gun and my purse," she called out. "There are cuffs in the purse. Give them to me."

The handcuffs were handed over her shoulder. She took them, put them on Van Gelder and used them to haul him up and shove him into a chair. He was out cold and slumped over in the chair.

Then she turned to Vincent and took the gun from him and holstered it before she went back to check on Carol. She checked her pulse; it was strong, and her breathing was regular.

“Vincent, you have to get out of here. I have to call the police and get an ambulance for Carol.”

“What about him?” Vincent asked, pointing at the dead man on the floor. Vincent looked stunned and shaken.

“I’ll take care of it. I’ll come up with a story. Now go. Meet me at my place later.”

Vincent left through the window in the bathroom, as she was picking up the phone. She reported the incident then squatted down next to Carol, who was starting to come around.

“What happened?” asked Carol as she sat up and looked around the room. Nothing was disturbed, but she did notice the body on the floor in front of the bathroom and the other man, unconscious in the chair.

“I should ask you that,” Diana said.

“Like an idiot, I answered the door before checking,” Carol told her. “He said he was making a delivery and I just opened the door. They rushed in and started threatening me. Said they knew I’d been talking to you. They said something about bugging my apartment. It was both the men from the diner that I told you about earlier. The short guy hit me, and I stumbled and fell, I hit my head on the radiator as I went down.”

Carol got up and moved to the couch.

“Is he OK?” she asked nodding toward the body on the floor.

“No, I don’t think so. I think his neck is broken,” Diana told him.

“How did that happen?”

“Did you see or hear anything?” Diana asked.

“Not after I saw you bending over me. I think I passed out.”

“It happened so fast, I’m not sure if I can get it in the right order,” Diana told Carol. She was going to have to come up with a story, so she might as well try it out on Carol. Luckily, Van Gelder hadn’t seen much if anything. “When I bent down to check on you, someone grabbed me from behind and spun around. Tattoo guy over there was standing in front of me and I just kind of lifted myself off the floor and kicked him in the stomach with both feet. That knocked him down and the guy holding me stumbled. I managed to get my arms free, and I reached up and grabbed him by the head, leaned forward and flipped him over my shoulder. It’s one of those moves they teach in the self-defense classes, but I never realized it could kill someone.”

“Oh, my!” was all Carol had time to say before the police and EMTs started to arrive.

An hour later it was quiet again. Carol had declined a ride to the hospital in the ambulance

“You said that they mentioned bugging your apartment?” Diana asked.

“Yeah, and when he said it the guy looked up at the light fixture in the ceiling,” Carol told her.

Diana pulled a chair over under the light and climbed up. When she had the globe unscrewed she handed it to Carol. She didn’t see anything.

“That has been burned out so long that I forgot I even had it. Would you mind replacing the bulb while you are up there?”

“Sure.” Diana removed the bulb while Carol went to get the spare. “Well, look what we have here,” she said when she had a clear view under the bulb. She removed a latex glove from her pocket, put it

on and removed a small disk from under the bulb. She climbed off the chair and held it up to Carol could see it. "You got a sandwich bag?"

Carol went and got a bag and Diana put the disk in it and put it on the counter.

She replaced the bulb, but the globe back on and then helped Carol put away the groceries she'd brought.

"So that is what a bug looks like," Carol said as she watched Diana put it in her purse.

"It's one of the designs."

"I'm glad you came back when you did," Carol told Diana. "I heard one of those guys say that they were going to have to get rid of me because I was talking to you."

"I'm glad too." Diana looked around the room. "Are you sure you'll be OK here alone?" she asked. "You could come home with me or go to a hotel."

"I'll be fine. Before that nice Captain Rizzo left, he told me that he'd make sure that I had around the clock protection until this case is resolved."

Diana nodded. She was still a little stunned herself. She had to go back to the office and talk to Rizzo before she went home. She hoped Vincent was waiting for her at her place and that he was OK.

She finally left Carol's and headed back to the office.

As she crossed the open space of the office, she was met with handshakes, pats on the back and even a few hugs. She just waved them off with a weak smile as she headed to Captain Rizzo's office. It was how they handled it when one of their fellow officers had to use deadly force. It was their way of letting her know that they understood.

"You OK, Bennett?" Captain Rizzo asked as she dropped into the chair in front of his desk.

"I'll do," she told him. "That's not a first," she reminded him, referring to a shooting when she was still a rookie. She'd aimed to wound, but the perp had zipped at the wrong moment, and she'd hit him square in the chest.

"I know, but it's never easy. The PD shrink is at your disposal," he reminded her.

Since she hadn't actually killed the man, she didn't really think she'd need the shrink, but she'd likely make an appointment for appearance's sake. But she wondered about Vincent. She wondered if her psychology courses from college would be of any help.

Do they have a Helper who was a psychiatrist, psychologist or a counselor? she wondered.

"I know that guy wasn't that big, but you can't weigh more than about 120. How did you manage it?" Rizzo asked.

"All those classes at the Academy and you know what they teach in grammar school about using levers, and I guess adrenalin. You know how they say adrenalin can increase a person's strength as much as three or four times what it normally would be." She pulled the bag out of her purse and handed it to Rizzo. "Carol remembered that one of the guys said something about bugging her apartment and I found this. It was in the ceiling light."

"I'll see that Forensics gets it," he said. "You look dead on your feet."

"I am," she agreed as she stood. "And all I want is my bed. I'll be here in the morning. Tell the people from internal affairs that I'll talk to them then if they need me."

When Diana finally made it back to her loft, it was after 10 pm. She'd worried about Vincent the whole time she'd been at the precinct and on the subway on the way home. Would he be waiting for her or would she have to go looking for him? And she would go looking for him! She hoped he realized that.

She didn't stop any longer than it took to drop her things on the couch before making her way to the stairs that led to the roof.

She looked around as she stepped out and closed the door, but she didn't see him at first. Then she saw him, a darker shadow hidden in the shadow of the wall. He was sitting with his legs drawn up and his head resting on his knees.

"You OK?" she asked as she dropped to her knees in front of him.

There was a long pause before he lifted his head and answered.

"I will be," he told her.

She moved to sit beside him, shoulder to shoulder, barely touching.

"That the first time for you?" she asked.

"Yes," was the monosyllabic answer.

"I really know what you're going through, Babe," she said quietly. "I've been there."

Vincent raised his head and turned it so he could see her.

"Babe?" he queried.

She gave a short bark of a laugh.

"Yeah, Babe. It's just me. If I like you, I call you Babe. Get used to it."

He seemed to consider that then spoke again.

"You've killed someone?" he asked.

Vincent felt her internal wince at the question. He also sensed that she didn't like talking about it, but knew that she would, to help him.

"Yeah, when I was still a rookie. My partner and I responded to a domestic call. When we got there, it looked like the woman was trying to get away from him. She was in the hall outside their apartment, and she tripped just as my partner and I reached the top of the stairs. The guy was on top of her, stabbing her with a big kitchen knife. My partner and I both yelled at him several times to stop, but he didn't. I was in front, so I fired. I was aiming to wound him, but he turned just as I pulled the trigger and I hit him square in the middle of his chest. It went right through his heart and severed his spinal cord. I don't think I quit puking until the EMTs arrived."

"How old were you?" he asked.

"Twenty-one. I had two years of college and Police Academy training, and none of it prepared me."

"How could anything?" he asked.

She shrugged then leaned toward him.

"I don't think anything can. My dad was a cop, and I remember one time when he came home from work, and my oldest brother asked him if he'd killed any bad guys that day. I thought my dad was going to explode. He sat all four of us down on the couch. My brothers were teens, I was 9, and my

sister was 7. He must have gone on for an hour about the value of human life, no matter if the person was a good guy or a bad guy. None of us ever forgot it, and I think it might be the reason that no one else decided to follow in his footsteps.”

He was quiet for several minutes before he spoke again.

“I didn’t think it would be so easy,” he said.

“Easy?”

“That the bones in the neck would break that easily. I thought they were stronger.”

“I’ve taken self-defense classes, and we were told that ounce for ounce healthy bone is stronger than steel, but then in the same breath, the instructor said that some smaller bones can be broken with as little as 25 pounds of pressure. The skill comes in knowing the difference. But breaking his neck doesn’t necessarily mean that any bones broke. The twisting motion moves the vertebrae in the neck, and that severs the spinal cord.”

He nodded. “I should know that…”

“Yeah, your Father is a doctor… But look. If you need to talk, I’m here. I had the benefit of the department shrink, but that’s out for you. You got any helpers who are in that field?”

He shook his head. “Father had some psychiatry training. He has basic knowledge, but I think he’s the last person I need to talk to about this.”

“Yeah, you really need someone who’s not that close.”

He drew in a deep breath and let it out, then he looked at her again. Her eyes had become acclimated to the dark, and she could make out his face. He looked like he was in physical pain.

“I didn’t think. Were you hurt?” she asked.

“No. You or the other woman?”

“No, I’m fine. Carol was a little banged up, but she wouldn’t go to the hospital. She’ll be fine.”

He stood and reached out to help her up. He didn’t release her hand once she was on her feet.

“How did you know?” It had just dawned on her.

“The connection I have with you. I could feel that you were in trouble. It led me to you.”

“It does that?”

“I didn’t realize it before, but yes.”

“OK, you got to promise me that you won’t come charging in every time you get that feeling.” She grabbed his arm for emphasis. “I’m a cop, it happens, and it could be dangerous to you.”

“I’ll try,” he told her, “but it seemed almost instinctive. I was halfway there before I realized what I was doing.”

“Please try.” She was almost begging. She knew that it would be dangerous for him to be found Above and she didn’t want that to happen.

“I will,” he promised. “I should go now. I left unexpectedly, and Father will be worried.”

“You’ll be OK?” she asked, searching his face.

“I think so. I have friends Below I can talk to. They’ve helped me through adversity before.”

He started toward the edge of the roof and the fire escape, and she stopped him. The state he was in she was afraid he wouldn't be as observant as he usually was and that he might be seen.

"Use the elevator," she said as she tugged him toward the door to her loft.

He didn't resist, just went where she guided him. When they reached the basement, she went down the ladder into the tunnel with him.

"Remember, I'm here if you need to talk," she repeated. "I work from home a lot, and I'm home most evenings. Come anytime."

"I wouldn't want to impose on you..." he began.

"No imposition at all," she rushed to assure him. "You're my friend, Vincent, and friends are always welcome."

He nodded tiredly and turned. She stood and watched until she saw him turn the corner several hundred feet down the tunnel. She wondered if he'd take her up on her offer and if she'd ever see him again.

END