

Red

by Janet Rivenbark

Catherine had noticed the man sitting on the sidewalk with his back to the building for three days in a row now. He was always in the same spot, wearing the same clothes and in the same position. He had his knees drawn up, his arms wrapped around his legs and his forehead resting on his knees. She could have sworn he hadn't moved in three days. Everyone else seemed not to notice; they hurried by him on their own errands. She'd been guilty of that the previous two days, except that she *had* noticed; he just hadn't really registered.

Now she was worried about him. If he hadn't moved in three days, what was wrong? She approached him.

"Excuse me Sir, are you all right?" she asked, hoping she wouldn't find what she feared.

He twitched, and she sighed in relief. He was alive.

She squatted down in front of him, still a good foot away. "Sir, are you all right?" she repeated.

He raised his head slowly, and she almost gasped. The left side of his face was badly scared, but that wasn't what took her breath away. He looked at her with eyes the same incredible shade of blue as Vincent's. But where Vincent's sparkled with laughter and fun quite a bit of late, this man's were filled with incredible pain.

"What's your name?" she asked.

He shrugged and pointed to his throat and shook his head.

"You can't talk?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Is there a way you can tell me your name? Do you have some kind of identification?" she asked, determined now that she would help him.

He looked puzzled a moment then ran his hand over his head. His hair was a golden red.

It was Catherine's turn to look puzzled. Then it hit her.

"Your name has something to do with your hair?" she guessed.

He nodded.

"Is it Red?" she asked, knowing that a lot of redheads wound up with that nickname.

He almost smiled and nodded again. He started to put his head back down on his knees.

"It is very nice to meet you Red," she said, offering her hand. "My name is Catherine Chandler."

He looked surprised but took her hand firmly. Both his hands were as scared as his face.

"Red, would you like to join me for lunch?" she asked spontaneously.

He held up his hands, palms facing her and shook his head.

"No, really, Red. I insist," she said.

He reached down and into his pocket. When he drew his hand out, he pulled the pocket out inside out, indicating he had no money.

"It will be my treat," she told him. "Come on, there is a place just up the block."

It had been a long time since a pretty girl had wanted to spend time with him. At least time that didn't cost him money and this one wanted to buy him lunch. It was too good an offer to pass up. He rose slowly from his crouch and stood beside her. He waved his right hand, indicating that she should lead the way.

As he rose Catherine was surprised that he was so tall, at least 6'2" and he was broad-shouldered but lean; she didn't know if the latter was because he was fit or just because he didn't eat often. She wondered how she might help him as he followed her to the restaurant.

As they made themselves comfortable in the booth. He removed his coat; she noticed that he was clean, and his clothing was in good shape. So why was he sitting on the street like that?

They ordered. He pointed his choices out on the menu to the waitress, who quickly brought back their drinks.

He brought his open hand up, touching his lips with the fingertips and then swept his hand down palm up.

“You know American Sign Language? That will make things a little easier,” she said with a smile, “and you are welcome.”

He cleared his throat, then spoke.

“I can speak,” he told her in a gruff whispery voice reminiscent of Vincent’s, “but it is difficult.”

“Did whatever scared your face and hands cause damage to your vocal chords?” she asked.

He nodded. “Hand grenade exploded near me. I put my hands up to shield my face. My hands saved my eyes, but a piece of shrapnel messed up my vocal chords.”

“In Viet Nam?” she asked with sudden understanding.

“Yes,” was his short answer.

They sat quietly until the waitress brought their meals and they both began to eat.

“Will it damage your vocal chords more if you talk?” she asked as they ate.

“No, the docs told me that I should talk more, but there has been no one to talk to.”

“Do you have a job, Red?” she asked.

“Did, but they mustered me out,” he told her.

“The military?”

“Army,” he affirmed.

“What did you do in the Army?” she asked.

“Soldier,” he told her. “Not much use for that in the real world.

“A lot of cops are ex-military,” she told him, “and security guards.”

“But not many people like to look at a face like this.”

“It isn’t that bad, Red,” she said. “Surely that hasn’t kept you from finding a job.”

“Not at first. They said they were going to keep me in the Army. It took a couple years of surgeries and therapy to get my hands and voice to working again, and I worked for another few years in the armory at Fort Drum, but they retired me on a medical in 1976.

I get a little disability, but it isn't enough to live on. I hung around Watertown for a few years, doing odd jobs, then I came here. Worked construction for a while."

"Where's home?" she asked.

"Small town in Washington state," he told her, "but there is no one left there. Family is all gone."

He sounded intelligent. She guessed that he could probably go back to school using his GI Bill. That was how Joe had done it.

"How long were you in the Army?" she asked.

"Seven years total. Was drafted in 1969."

Catherine was listening, but she was also thinking. She remembered Franklin, the janitor on their floor at the DA's office mentioning that his boss was looking for some additional people. And she also knew that the maintenance man's job in her apartment building was open at the moment, and it included a small efficiency apartment in the basement.

"Are you good at fixing things, Red?" she asked.

"You learn all kinds of things in the Army," he told her. "I can fix most anything mechanical, I'm pretty good with electrical, and can even do a little carpentry. Not to mention take apart and put together, in my sleep, nearly any small arms the Army uses.

"I might be able to recommend you for a job," she told him, "if you are interested. Actually, there are two that I know of, but the one I have in mind includes a place to live. It is just that you must be on call nearly all the time."

"Sounds like the Army," he told her. "What is it?"

"Maintenance man in the building I live in. I'll have to check to see if it is still open. Is there a way I can get in touch with you?"

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a beat up card. He slid it across the table to her.

"This is the shelter where I've been sleeping. They don't let us receive calls there, but I can use the phone to make a local call."

She reached into her purse and pulled out one of her business cards and a pen. She turned it over and wrote her home number on the back.

"Call me at this number around eight tonight if you can."

He took the card from her and looked at it.

“Assistant District Attorney?” he observed. “Why are you doing this, Miss Chandler?”

“Because you need a little help,” she told him honestly. “A wise man I know told me that we should help people when we can, and accept help when we need it. You’ve given a lot for this country, and they have obviously failed you. Maybe I can help out where they couldn’t.”

When they parted in front of the restaurant thirty minutes later, she had a distinct feeling that he didn’t really believe that she would do anything. But she was determined that she would. When she got back to the office, she found Franklin and asked about the job. He told her that there were actually three openings.

“Looking for a part-time job, Miss Chandler?” he joked.

“Someone I know is,” Catherine told him with a laugh. “He’s a Viet Nam Vet with a partial disability. It doesn’t keep him from working, but there is some disfigurement, and from what he told me, it has put some people off, and he hasn’t been able to find work.”

“We favor Vets,” Franklin told her. “They have a good work ethic, and good looks aren’t a prerequisite for this job.” He wrote a number on a scrap of paper. “Tell him to call this number.”

“Thanks, Franklin,” she told him. “I’m checking on a job in my building, too. He also needs a place to live, and that one includes a small apartment in the basement.”

“Let me know,” Franklin said with a wave as he moved off down the hall.

“Thanks again,” she called after him then headed back to her desk and to work.

For the first time in several days, she actually left the office on time, and traffic wasn’t bad, so she got home earlier than usual.

“You’re home early today,” commented George, the assistant building manager, as she entered the lobby. He was at the desk while the doorman took his dinner break

“Shh, don’t tell anyone,” she joked. “They might notice that I escaped.”

George laughed as she stopped in front of his desk.

“I was wondering if that maintenance man position is still open?” she said.

“As a matter of fact, it is. We have been having a hard time filling it because we need someone who can live here and be on call after hours in addition to doing all the regular maintenance during the day.”

“I met someone today that might be able to do the job, and the live-in part won’t be a problem; he needs a place to stay.”

“It doesn’t pay a lot, but it does have benefits,” George told her.

“He is a Veteran, getting a small disability pension,” she said. “He said that he learned to fix a lot of things in the Army.”

“I was in the Army. Tell him to call me in the morning,” George told her. “We’ll set up an interview.”

“You?” she asked, surprised.

“Yeah, Mario left me in charge while he is on vacation,” said George referring to the building manager.

“OK, I’ll do that. He is supposed to call me tonight.”

Catherine was sitting on her couch reading when the phone rang promptly at 8PM.

Red seemed surprised when she told him she had two job leads for him. She gave him both the numbers but stressed the maintenance position in her building because of the apartment in the basement.

“Thanks, Miss Chandler,” Red said for at least the sixth time.

“Don’t worry about it,” she told him. “Do you need bus or subway fare, or money for a taxi?”

“No, thank you. I can get subway tokens here at the shelter in the morning.”

“OK, well, good luck. Let me know if neither of those works out, and I’ll see what else I can come up with.

Catherine noticed that Red wasn’t in his usual place on the sidewalk next to the building when she went out to lunch the next day and she was pleased to see the close-cropped red head bent over some charts with George the next afternoon when she walked into the lobby after work.

“Hi George,” she called out. “Red, it is great to see you here.”

“Hi, Miss Chandler,” he said with a smile. “I’m happy to be here.”

She talked with the two men for a few minutes as she waited for the elevator, then she said goodbye and went up to her apartment.

The next few months went well for Red. He was a good fit, quiet and efficient. The tenants and owners all loved him. A few of the elderly ladies all but adopted him and, as he confided in Catherine, he was going to get fat on all the goodies they were always pressing on him. He even smiled now and then, although Catherine noticed that the smiles never seemed to reach his eyes.

Catherine was getting ready to go to the Mayor's annual dinner when she dropped one of her mother's diamond earrings, and it went down the bathroom sink drain. Under normal circumstances, she would have removed the trap herself and fished the stud out, but she'd just had her nails done that afternoon, specifically for this dinner, and she was dressed in a formal gown and wearing three-inch heels. Not suitable apparel for working on the plumbing. So she called Red. He was at her door in five minutes, toolbox in hand.

"What's the problem, Miss Chandler?" he asked.

He had the earring out and the pipes put back together before she could blink. She was grateful that the water hadn't been running or she could have lost the earring forever.

She was at the door thanking Red when Joe arrived in the elevator.

"Well, hello Radcliffe," he said in an admiring tone, as he got off the elevator and approached.

Red stepped in front of her and blocked Joe from getting any closer than six feet.

"This guy OK, Miss Chandler?" he asked.

Catherine laughed. "Depends, but most days he's passable," she joked. "Red, this is Joe Maxwell, Deputy DA and my mentor at the DA's office. Joe, this is Red, Maintenance Man Extraordinaire and earring rescuer."

The two men eyed each other as they shook hands.

"Good evening, Mr. Maxwell. Miss Chandler, just call anytime you need anything." Red left via the stairs.

"Quite a watchdog you got there, Radcliffe," said Joe as he followed Catherine into her apartment. "Kind of reminds me of a bulldog; just about as ugly as one too."

"From what he's told me, a hand grenade exploded kind of up close and a bit too personal when he was in Viet Nam in 1970. Once you get to know him, the scars kind of fade."

He helped her with her coat, and they left for the dinner.

When she returned three hours later the lobby of her building looked like something akin to Times Square on New Year's Eve. There were people all over the place she recognized the Tran's and Mrs. Schuler from ten. Several people were shouting; she could identify at least three different languages. George was next to the security desk wringing his hands.

"What's going on, George?" she asked.

"I'm not sure exactly, something about Red."

"What about Red," she asked. "Where is he?"

"I think he's gone up to the roof. I'm not sure what happened. Mr. Tran, on ten called down about a stopped up drain and Red went up to fix it. Mrs. Tran said that their eleven-year-old daughter Xuan answered the door and Red just went crazy. He started yelling something about *Gooks*. It scared Xuan, and she slammed the door in his face. He pounded on it a few times, yelling all the while, then he went tearing up the stairs. Someone on your floor said he went up to the roof.

All Catherine could think of was flashbacks... she knew he'd been seeing someone at the VA Hospital... and the possibility of him jumping off the roof while he wasn't in his right mind.

She headed for the elevator where she pushed the button for the top floor then she took the access stairs to the roof.

She found Red sitting against the outside roof wall much as she had first seen him sitting against the wall of the building she worked in.

"Red, are you OK," she asked as she gingerly sat down next to him, mindless of her gown.

"Flashback," he told her without lifting his head. "First one since I've been seeing the shrink at the VA hospital."

"Do you want to tell me about it?" she asked quietly.

"Not much to tell. The grenade that nearly blew my head off... it was thrown by a little Vietnamese girl... "

"And when Xuan Tran answered the door it was a trigger," she finished for him.

“Yes. If I’d known that the Tran’s were Vietnamese, it would have been OK. I would have been prepared, but I didn’t hear the name right, I thought George said Fran. He was on my left side, and I can’t hear out of that ear very well. I thought it was a woman with the first name Fran and that I’d just missed the last name.”

“It will be OK,” she assured him, patting his arm. “Mrs. Tran was upset, but I heard Mr. Tran explaining to her. I think he understands what happened. If you could apologize, I think it will work out.”

“Do you think they can wait until morning?” he asked her uncertainly. “I don’t think I can face them just yet.”

“I’ll go down with you, and I’ll talk to Mario. I’m sure they will accept that.”

She rode to the basement with him and made sure he made it to his apartment OK then she went back up and talked to Mario and then the Tran’s.

Mr. Tran had also fought in his homeland and been wounded, he understood, and he assured Catherine that he would explain it to his wife.

Mario was less forgiving, but she managed to convince him that it wouldn’t happen again. He agreed to give Red another chance.

Catherine saw Red several times over the next month, she made a point to call him up to her apartment or seek him out, and it didn’t appear that things were going well. He had apologized to the Tran’s, had even made a point of speaking directly to Xuan and apologizing to her. The incident hadn’t seemed to put off most of the other residents, but she could tell that something was still bothering him.

The light switch on her living room wall had started going “zzzt” every time she flipped it, so she thought it was probably time to call Red to check it out.

“It’s just a loose connection,” he called to her after he took off the switch plate. “Will you flip the breaker to turn it off?”

She flipped the switch in the breaker box. She prepared glasses of iced tea as she waited for him to tell her to turn the breaker back on.

“That’s it,” he called back to her a few minutes later. She noticed how, over the months, his voice had gotten stronger, but it still had the gruff whispery quality. After she turned the breaker back on she picked up the glasses and headed out to the living room.

“Take a break, Red?” she asked, offering him the glass.

“Thanks,” he said taking the glass then sitting when she waved him to the couch.

“How’s it going?” she asked.

“Not good. I haven’t had any more flashbacks since the incident with Xuan, but the nightmares are back. The doc at the VA has given me sleeping pills, but they don’t seem to help.”

“I’ve noticed that you look tired a lot,” she told him.

“Been going to bed late and getting up early,” he told her. “Sometimes it helps to avoid the nightmares.”

“And your doctor hasn’t been able to help? Are you seeing a psychiatrist?”

“Yeah, it’s a shrink, but he has hundreds of patients. I figured it out... he sees at least fifteen, sixteen people a day, and only has about thirty minutes with each. That can’t be enough time to help anyone.”

“I agree. Have you thought about seeing a civilian doctor?” she asked.

“I have medical insurance now,” he told her, “but it doesn’t cover stuff that I was diagnosed with before, at least not for a year.”

“I know a good psychiatrist,” she told him, remembering Dr. Grafton. “I would be willing to pay for it if it would help.”

“I couldn’t do that,” he told her. “The doc at the VA has set it up for me to see a social worker who will be able to spend more time with me. I just hope I don’t explode again like I did. I would hate to hurt someone.”

Over the next couple of months, Red continued to go downhill, and he wound up losing the job. He told Catherine before he left and said he was going back to the shelter where he had been before. She talked to Franklin, but the positions on the janitorial crew had been filled.

Then she got an idea.

“Why didn’t I think of this before?” she wondered out loud as she tied her Reeboks in preparation for heading Below.

Vincent sensed that she was on her way, and met her at her threshold. After a hug, he drew back and looked at her.

“What is bothering you, Catherine?” he asked before they turned and started walking.

“Remember that man I told you about... Red? The one that I helped get a job a few months ago?”

“Yes.”

“He lost the job. He’s a Viet Nam Vet, and I guess his problem is ‘shell shock’ or ‘battle fatigue’...”

“PTSD,” Vincent offered.

“What?” she asked.

“PTSD, that is what they call it now. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. It causes all kinds of problems. Some are mild with only occasional nightmares, but it goes all the way up to and including something akin to Paranoid Schizophrenia.”

“You sound like you’ve done some research.”

“When you first told me about this ‘Red,’ I was concerned. I wanted to know more to make sure that he didn’t become a threat to you,” he admitted.

“If you’d met him, you wouldn’t be concerned,” she assured him. “He is such a gentle man, he reminds me of you in that way, among others. I think that is part of his conflict. His Army training is so completely at odds with the way he was brought up, and with his personality. It has caused a huge conflict. He can’t seem to justify the things that happened in Nam with what he was taught as being right and wrong.”

“Sounds very familiar,” said Vincent in an ironic tone.

“And that is exactly why I’m here to talk to you and Father. I would like to recommend to Red that he seek sanctuary here Below with all of you. I think that you, in particular, might have some insight into his problems and can help him deal with them.”

She went on to explain everything that had happened and by the time they reached Father’s study she had completely won Vincent over to her side. An emergency meeting of the Council was called, and Catherine was given permission to tell Red about the community and ask him if he would like to join them.

The next morning Catherine went right to Joe’s office as soon as she got to work.

“Joe, I need the afternoon off,” she told him.

Joe gave up asking her long ago why she needed time off, he just said yes or no. This time he was happy to be able to say yes. She thanked him, happy that she didn't have to lie about her reasons.

She left the office at noon and went looking for Red. She found him in his old spot against the foundation of the building.

"Come on Red," she said looking down at him. "We are going to get some lunch."

He looked up at her, squinting against the light. She was struck again at just how blue his eyes were.

"That isn't necessary, Miss Chandler," he told her.

"No, it isn't, but I want you to come with me. I need to talk to you about something."

She grabbed his hand and tugged until he stood. She noticed that this time he had a duffel bag with him. He must have accumulated a few possessions while he worked in her building.

She urged him to the curb where she hailed a cab.

She told the cabbie to let them out on the corner of the block her building was on, and Red looked at Catherine in disbelief.

"Your place?" he asked.

"Don't worry," she told him with a wink, "I'm not planning any indecent proposals, it is just that what I need to talk to you about is private and that is the most private place I can come up with on short notice."

She paid the cabbie, and they exited the cab then she led him down the side street to the alley, and they entered the building through the service entrance. They took the service elevator up to her floor. When they got off, she checked to make sure that there was no one around before she led him to her apartment and unlocked the door.

"Make yourself comfortable," she said waving toward the couch. "I ordered from the deli up the block before I left the office and asked them to deliver it at 1 PM, so lunch should be here in a few minutes."

"Why did we come up the service elevator?" he asked, suspiciously.

"Well, if you take me up on the offer I'm going to make, then we will leave right from here. If they'd seen you enter the building, they would expect to see you leave, if they didn't, they would wonder. They might think that I'm holding you captive up here."

That had the desired effect, and he chuckled.

“Just what are you up to, Miss Chandler?” he asked, but he relaxed and took off his coat; she knew he’d be willing to listen.

“I know of a place that you can go, where they will be willing to help you with your problems, and where your skills, both as a soldier and a handyman will be useful and welcome,” she told him as the doorbell rang.

She left him to mull that over as she went to get their lunch. She brought it back and put it on the table then went into the kitchen for napkins and drinks.

He unpacked everything and had it on the tiny dining table when she returned.

They both sat, and he asked his first question.

“Is it some kind of a commune in the country?”

“Something along those lines,” she told him, “but it isn’t in the country.”

Over the next half hour or so she gave him a brief rundown on the community Below. He was amazed at the extent of what was happening under the city. Like everyone on the streets, he’d heard that some people took refuge in the storm drains and utility tunnels under the city, but he thought that was the extent of it. He was fascinated to hear that the tunnels and natural caverns went hundreds, perhaps thousands of feet below the surface.

“Wow, and you say that they’d be willing to allow me to live with them?”

“As long as you are willing to keep the secret, and be a productive member of their society,” she assured him.

“What’s the catch?” he asked, after a moment of thought.

“No catch,” she said with a laugh, but there is one thing you should know.”

“I knew there had to be a catch,” he said.

“I told you that everyone Below is there for a reason, most keep their reasons to themselves, and they aren’t pressed to tell anyone, but all those people could live Above, and most of them have at one time or another, just like you... but there is one who is there because there is nowhere else for him to go. Although he is an intelligent, educated, gentle man, he would never fit in Above. He would be ridiculed at the very least or caged and studied at the worst. Actually, you and he have a lot in common.”

“He’s disfigured?” Red guessed.

“Some would consider him to be,” she told him with a smile, “but I and most who know him don’t. I think he is the most beautiful human being, inside and out, in the world.”

“And you are in love with him,” Red stated.

“It’s that obvious?” she said with a laugh.

“The way you light up when you talk about him is the giveaway. I thought for a while that it might be that Maxwell guy who held your affections, but now I know it isn’t him.”

“No, the man in my life, for my whole life, is Vincent.”

“So what does he look like?” asked Red, curious now.

“He is hard to describe, but let’s just say that you will know him when you see him.”

“OK, so when do we leave?”

“You want to go?” she asked, surprised that he hadn’t taken more convincing.

“The way you lay it out, it sounds like the ideal place. I’d be a fool to pass up this opportunity.”

After lunch, they cleaned up and headed to the basement in the elevator.

“The basement?” he asked as they stepped off the elevator.

“The sub-basement, actually,” she told him as she moved the boxes out from in front of the access door.

“As the maintenance man I should have known this was here,” he told her as she opened the door and waved him through.

“All that is down there is access to the water, sewer and electrical for the building,” she told him, “and the entrance to another world.”

She followed him down the ladder, arranging the boxes and closing the door before she descended.

She knew that Vincent was there, waiting just outside the opening in the brick wall.

“Vincent?” she called out.

“I’m here, Catherine,” he said quietly.

“Come and meet my friend, Red,” she said.

Vincent stepped into the dim light of the sub-basement. Unexpectedly he wasn't wearing his cloak or his gloves.

Red looked at him only a second or two before he stuck his hand out and stepped forward.

"Hello Vincent, Miss Chandler has told me a lot about you," he said. "She was right, I would know you anywhere."

Vincent smiled slightly and took the man's hand. They shook hands and as blue eyes met blue eyes an immediate bond was formed. Not the kind of Bond that he had with Catherine, but the kind of bond that forms between two men who have known death and destruction and who are striving to be healed.

END