



SECOND CHANCES

Janet Rivenbark

Catherine walked into Joe's office and the smell of his lunch hit her like a brick wall. It positively reeked and her already rebellious stomach gave a lurch.

"What *are* you eating?" she asked, stopping just inside the door. She was trying to stay as far away from the source of the smell as possible.

"Liverwurst with onions and brown mustard on German rye. Why?"

"Are you sure it hasn't gone bad?" She waved her hand in front of her face and swallowed.

He sniffed the sandwich then looked up at her. "Smells fine to me. I thought you liked liverwurst."

"I do, but not when it smells like that." She backed up another step, so that she was standing just outside his office door.

“Did you come here for a reason or just to criticize my lunch choice?” he asked with a grin.

“I just hope you have some breath mints if you have any important appointments this afternoon... I came to remind you that I’m leaving early for my doctor’s appointment.”

“I’ve got it on my calendar.” He waved at the desk pad that was his calendar and also the place he wrote down notes and odd doodles. Then he looked at her more closely, noting the pale skin and dark circles under her eyes. “You OK, Radcliffe? You have been looking a little peaked lately.”

“I think so. I’m just tired. I think all those weeks when I was working during the day and helping to look after my friend at night have finally caught up with me. My meals have been hit and miss and I’m probably anemic again. Peter will give me some vitamins and tell me to quit skipping meals. I’ll catch up on my sleep this weekend and I’ll be right as rain by Monday,” she assured him.

“I hope so, I can’t afford for my best investigator to get sick.”

“Thank you Joe, and I love you too.”

She grinned as she turned and hurried back to her desk. She straightened it, put the files she was working on in her desk drawer, picked up her things and made her way out of the office. She had just enough time to make it to Peter’s office.

An hour and a half later she was sitting in the easy chair in front of Peter’s desk as he sat behind it going through the record of her exam.

“You are a little anemic,” he said as he wrote something on his prescription pad, “but that’s not unusual in your condition.”

“In my condition, what do you mean?” she asked, puzzled.

“Isn’t that why you are here?” he asked. Now he was puzzled. They hadn’t spoken and she’d only seen his nurse.

“I came because I’m tired all the time. I stumble home from the office, and am in bed before the sun goes down, I’m still tired when I wake up and I’m queasy most of the time. I can’t eat most of the day, but I’m ravenous by dinner. I haven’t felt this bad since I had mono when I was in college.”

“I thought you were spending your evenings Below.”

She could tell he was stalling for time, as he sifted through the papers in her file. She wondered what was wrong and she was beginning to get a little nervous.

“Not for the last couple weeks. I took about a week off during and right after Vincent’s illness. Then when I went back to work, I was spending the nights on a cot in his chamber. Once he was up and around, I was only Below in the evenings and on weekends. Lately, since he’s almost back to normal, I’ve only been going down on the weekends. I guess it’s no wonder I’m exhausted.”

“So when was your last period?” he asked.

Catherine looked puzzled, then pulled her planner out of her briefcase and started leafing through the pages.

Peter watched as her brow furrowed.

“The second week in May. It’s been six weeks. I was supposed to start on June 3rd. It’s July 7th. I’m almost two months late. I’ve been so busy I didn’t even notice. It could be stress...” Her eyes went round as she looked across the desk at Peter. “You don’t think I’m...” she paused.

“Oh, I know you are. It’s one of the standard tests we do on all young women who come to us reporting the symptoms you did.”

“Pregnant?” she finished, stunned.

“About a month?” he asked.

She looked back at her planner. “Six weeks,” she provided.

“You know the date of conception?” he asked a little surprised.

“It’s hard not to, when it only happened that one time.”

“Then, keeping that in mind, you should be due the second week in February.”

Peter could tell that Catherine was completely floored by his news.

“Are you OK, Cathy?” he asked.

She shook her head and smiled at him. “Yeah, I think so. I just can’t believe it.”

“Believe it,” he said with a chuckle. “I assume Vincent is the father?”

She nodded. “And I’m not really sure how I’m going to tell him this. He’s recovered his memory, most of it, but he doesn’t remember much about while he was sick. He says he only has some vague memories. Just flashes mostly. Other than that, he remembers

only a little of the time from when he decided to come Above until he woke up in his chamber almost a week later. Father keeps assuring him that it will come back.”

“But it hasn’t. I remember the first time this happened, right after Lisa left. It took him several months before he got it all back. It’s only been six weeks so far. He’s older this time. It might take longer or he might not get it all back at all.”

She closed her planner and sat back. “I’ve got a lot to think about,” she said as she dropped the planner back into her bag. “I assume that prescription is for pre-natal vitamins.”

He handed two prescriptions to her. “It is and the other one is an extra iron supplement. Before you leave, I want you to set up an appointment for next week. I want to do a complete OB work up. We will be seeing a lot of each other between now and February.” He winked at her.

She smiled at him a bit wanly, then stood.

Peter came around the desk and hugged her. “Just remember, I’m here for you. If you need anything, don’t hesitate to call me.”

“I know you go Below every Sunday for dinner and chess. You will keep this to yourself for now, won’t you?” she asked as he walked her to the door of his office.

“Of course. I won’t discuss it with anyone until you let me know that everyone involved has been informed.”

“Thanks, Peter.” She stretched up on her toes and kissed him on the cheek. “Why do I have a feeling that Vincent isn’t going to take this well?”

“He’ll come around,” Peter assured her. “That man is a pushover for kids.”

Catherine was inclined to agree with Peter. She was pretty sure that it might be a little difficult for Vincent to swallow to begin with, but he did love children and one of his own would just be all that much better. At least, it was in her opinion.

By the time she got home her appetite had returned and she went to the phone and ordered from her favorite deli even before she changed her clothes and put on her pajamas.

While she ate she made a list; the more she wrote the more she thought of that had to be added to the list. She filled one page of a legal pad and was halfway through a

second before she was finished. The first thing on her list was 'Talk to Vincent.' Next to it she wrote: 'Saturday, July 8.' Tomorrow.

Catherine slept in the next morning. In fact, she slept the clock around. She'd gone to bed around 9 pm and it was almost 10 am when she woke up. She felt better than she had in several weeks. Even the queasiness was absent. She hadn't been drinking coffee for the last couple weeks; the mere thought just made her stomach churn, so she went to the kitchen and made a pot of tea and decided to get adventurous with some raisin toast. She even put a little butter on it.

While she waited for the tea to steep she went back into the living room and got her note pad. She had the thread of an idea. She flipped over the two pages she'd filled the night before and tossed it and a pencil on the small table in the corner of her kitchen. When she was settled in her chair with her breakfast she picked up the pencil and wrote the word BOND across the top of the page.

Vincent was still worried about the absence of the Bond. Worried that it had somehow served its purpose or that his illness had caused some irreparable damage of some sort. She'd assured him over and over that it would come back, and even if it didn't it wasn't *that* important. Even Father had tried to reassure him.

She sipped tea and nibbled on her toast as she made some notations.

Bond

Things to ask Vincent:

Was the Bond gone when Vincent first came to my apartment when he was sick?

If he doesn't know, ask him when he first noticed it was gone.

Possible reasons the Bond has disappeared:

Vincent has been recovering from a serious illness, and is in no condition to have to deal with my emotions or any emergencies that might arise and the Bond is compensating for that.

It's a kind of protective mode that will keep him from experiencing the discomforts of pregnancy (morning sickness, etc.,) labor and child birth.

It has something to do with the "other" part of himself that seems to have disappeared or is, at least, dormant for now.

She added the last point more as a hunch or an afterthought, she really had no idea. The only thing she really knew about the Bond was that it wasn't a two-way street. And least not completely. She did have some sense of him, but that was all, just a sense that told her that he was alive. That hadn't disappeared. It was still there, and that was one of the reasons she was so sure that his side of the Bond would return at some point.

She hadn't really written much, but it was succinct and to the point. She couldn't very well take her lists with her when she went Below, although it did help to write everything down. She left them on her desk when she went to dress.

She took her time, expecting the nausea to return, but it didn't. Before she'd left Peter's office the nurse had given her a stack of pamphlets and a book. She read the pamphlet on morning sickness before she'd gone to bed. It said that about half of pregnant women suffer from both nausea and vomiting, one quarter have nausea alone, and one quarter luck out altogether and have nothing. The nausea usually starts around 6 weeks of pregnancy, but it can begin as early as 4 weeks. It tends to get worse over the next month or so, but it usually disappears by the end of the first trimester. Some women continue to have morning sickness over the course of the entire pregnancy.

As far as she could tell it had started for her at something more like two weeks. She remembered her dad telling her that her mom hadn't had any, and Nancy had told her that she'd been sick the entire nine months with her first, but hadn't had any with her second.

I guess every woman and every pregnancy is different, she mused as she dried off after her shower.

She glanced at the full length mirror on the back of the bathroom door as she hung up her towel. She knew that her body probably wouldn't be showing any signs yet, but she just had to look. She turned sideways and studied her reflection.

"I'll be damned," she said out loud as her hand went to the slight roundness of her abdomen that hadn't been there a few weeks before.

She had noticed that her skirts and slacks had been feeling a little tight for the last couple weeks, but she'd attributed that to being bloated from the almost constant nausea. Then she looked closer at her breasts. The nipples and areolas were definitely darker and the breasts themselves looked a little bigger.

“No wonder my bras have felt a little tight,” she said as she walked into her bedroom to dress.

She debated what to wear. She had a pair of navy blue cotton pants with elastic and a drawstring in the waist. She put those on then reached for a light summer sweater. She grabbed a light jacket then opened her jewelry box for her watch. Her crystal necklace had been missing since Vincent was sick, but she couldn't remember the last place she'd had it. She knew she'd been wearing it when she came home that night and found him on her floor, but everything ran together after that. She'd been all over the living room, looking under furniture. She'd gone through the clothes hamper and all the drawers in the bathroom and her bedroom.

After Vincent left, she had showered, changed clothes and gone out, but she didn't remember if she'd taken the necklace off at some point or if she'd put it back on.

She hadn't mentioned that it was missing to Vincent, because she didn't want to upset him. She'd thought about asking Mouse if he'd retrace their route to and from the chamber where he'd found Vincent and look for it, but she hadn't gotten around to it yet.

When she climbed down the ladder half an hour later she was smiling to herself.

She was surprised when Vincent met her only a few hundred yards past the first sentry post.

“How did you get here so fast?” she asked as she leaned back after a hug.

He could see the hope in her eyes, and smiled at her sadly.

“No, the Bond isn't back. I've been trying to get more exercise for the last week so I've been walking. I just happened to be close when I heard the sentry announce that you were on your way.”

“It doesn't matter about the Bond,” she rushed to assure him as they turned and started walking. “What does matter is that you're feeling well enough to walk this far. What does Father say?”

“He doesn't want me doing any real work yet,” he said as he ducked his head self-consciously, “but he's allowing me to go back to teaching and sitting on the council. I've also been spending time in the nursery almost every day. Father has ordered me to nap from two to four every afternoon, but I've been sneaking out and going there. Makes me feel like a delinquent teenager again.”

“You were never a delinquent,” she argued with a grin.

“No, but I wasn’t always the model son Father seems to remember. I got quite good at making my bed look like I was asleep in it while I was sneaking out to wander in the park. I had a lot of trouble sleeping after I was sick that first time.”

“Are you having any trouble this time?” she asked.

“Not as long as I don’t nap in the afternoon,” he said with a chuckle.

“I was wondering... When did you first notice that the Bond had disappeared?” she asked after they’d walked a little.

“I was reading my journals about a week after I woke up, and there was a detailed description of the Bond. I searched myself and it wasn’t there.”

“Do you remember if it was still there at any time while you were in my apartment? I know you were sick, but I was just wondering.”

He stopped and she could tell he was searching his memory. “I have a vague memory of reaching your balcony that first night. I knew you weren’t home before I got halfway there, but I was inclined to disbelieve anything at that point, even the Bond.”

“How about that last morning, when you first woke up.”

“It was still there. I remember checking just to make sure that you were occupied before I went into the bathroom and took off my clothes to bathe. I’m surprised I didn’t hear you when you came in to get my clothes and leave that robe.”

“You were occupied in the shower. I know how good a hot shower can feel after you’ve been sick, and you made it easy by leaving all your clothes in a pile right in front of the door.”

They walked for a time in silence, then Catherine decided that there was no time like the present.

“Is there a place we can go to talk privately?” she asked.

“My chamber?” he suggested.

“Your chamber is usually pretty busy.”

“Not lately. Cullen helped me hang a rug over the door. It’s something that Mouse made that actually works. There is a rod in the bottom that hooks into a bracket down at floor level, and when it’s unhooked, I just pull a cord and there is a system that pulls it up in layers and it stores just above the door. I think Father called it a Roman shade.”

“Ingenious! Why didn’t someone think of that before?”

“Mouse said he did, but he never had a reason to build one. We were in a council meeting and Mary asked if there was some way to put a door on the entrance to the nursery. She wanted one of those Dutch doors where you can close the bottom and leave the top open. Some of the smaller children have been wandering off and she thought that if she had a door, she could keep them in the chamber. Cullen said he’d work on it, and that was when Mouse told us about his idea. It wouldn’t work for the nursery, but I asked him to install one for me to test. It works so well that he’s had requests for several more.”

“Then it looks like your chamber it is. It’s warmer there than some other places.”

When they arrived it was warm, and Catherine took off her jacket and hung it next to Vincent’s cloak on the rack.

“Are you well, Catherine?” he asked once they were in the better light of his chamber. “You look a little pale.”

“I’ve just had a bit of an upset stomach this week.”

“Are you feeling better?” he asked with concern.

“Much. I actually got a good night’s sleep last night, about 12 hours, and I felt a lot better when I got up this morning.” She went and sat on his bed while he let down the rug and latched it at the bottom. “How about you?”

“I feel fine,” he said as he sat in the chair at the table. “I just can’t seem to convince Father of that.”

“He’s your Father, and that is what they do, they worry. I know mine did.”

“I’ve recovered a bit more of my memory. Only a few things; most of which I’d rather not remember. I remember destroying your living room... actually, I don’t remember all of it, I remember seeing it that last day I was there. The door from the balcony to your living room was gone, and so was the door from the living room into your bedroom.”

“Cullen came up and made repairs. I hope you’re not superstitious, because you also broke a mirror, not to mention a glass curio cabinet and a glass coffee table.”

He groaned at her words.

“I’m sorry Catherine...” he started.

"I'm not," she said with a smile. "Those were things that came from the decorator my dad hired. The curio cabinet and the coffee table weren't really my style; too modern. And I never did like the mirror on the wall right next to the balcony doors. Cullen hung new doors while you were recuperating Below and I put a painting of my mother where the mirror used to be. It was one that Daddy had over the fireplace at his place. I replaced the coffee table with a wooden one and I found a curio cabinet that looks better in that room than the old one did. And since it's larger, there is more room for my collections."

"But I destroyed your things," he pointed out.

"And that is just it... they were *things* and not important. I'm happy that you came to me and that you trusted me. Those *things* were replaced. You can't be."

"Kipper said there was blood on the carpet?"

"Kipper has a big mouth," she said with a laugh. "Yes, you cut your hand. I'm not sure on what, but there was blood on the wall where the mirror was. I got it off the wall and out of the carpet."

"It didn't stain; ruin the carpet? I know your carpet is a light color."

"Peter told me to try peroxide. I had a bottle in the bathroom. I soaked the stains with it and it came right out. I was amazed." She didn't tell him that there had also been blood on one of the sofas, the blanket she'd covered him with, and his and her clothes.

"How has work been?" he asked. "It seems like forever since I saw you last."

"I'm sorry I haven't been down all week. I've been playing catch up at work. I worked on the 4th instead of taking it off. It was so quiet in the office. I got piles of work done. I'm finally caught up."

"Seems that is something else I'm responsible for," he said as he slouched in his chair and stared at his hands.

"No it's not! It was my choice to be here. Father and Mary were doing just fine without my help. They had plenty of volunteers, but I was determined to be here. When you left my place that evening, I was so sure that you were going to be OK, then I got home I found that note from Father. I guess, after that, I was a little paranoid about leaving you for fear that while I was gone you'd get worse again. I had to be here, for me just as much as for you."

“I’m grateful you were. Every time I opened my eyes you were right there beside me, reading to me, sometimes asleep on the cot or on the bed next to me. But you were always there. I didn’t know your name, but I knew who you were.” He looked up at her and smiled. “What was it you wanted to talk about?”

She took a deep breath and looked up at him.

“Do you remember anything else about the time you spent at my place?” she asked. Her tone puzzled him.

“Not much. I barely remember getting there. I’m surprised I waited for it to get dark. I do remember that I had a line of poetry stuck in my head, but I wasn’t sure who had written it. If I’d been in my right mind I would have known it was Dylan Thomas, but in the state I was in, I guess I was lucky to know my own name. I finally found the book I wanted, and I felt that I just *had* to tell you.” He picked up a battered book and handed it to her. “You weren’t home and I remember thinking that I wouldn’t be able to hold on much longer, and I was angry. I remember flinging that book into the night off your balcony and after that, there are only fragments until I woke in your bed to hear you reciting the very words I’d wanted to tell you.”

Catherine looked at the book. The cover was separating from the bound pages and there were water stains.

“How did you get it back?”

“Father sent Zach up to your apartment with that note. On his way back he saw a book in the gutter on the park side of the street in front of your building. He couldn’t stand to leave it so he picked it up and stuck it in his pocket. He didn’t even think about it until days later when he was going through his clothes before putting them in the laundry basket. He found the book. When he opened it, he was surprised to see Father’s name on the bookplate on the inside cover. He took it to Father, who remembered giving it to me. He set it aside and just found it the other day. Then he brought it back to me. When I saw it, it triggered the memory I just told you.”

“It’s just a little worse for its adventure,” she observed. “It’s not a first edition, but it was printed in 1939, it can likely be repaired. My friend Jenny probably knows someone who can do it.”

Vincent held his hand out and she gave him the book. “No, I think I’ll keep it as it is. We both went through a lot.” He got up and took the book to the shelf where he fitted it into an empty spot.

“What do you remember of the rest of the day after you woke up,” she asked when he was seated again.

“I think I went back to sleep, and when I woke again, you were up and moving around the room. When you saw that I was awake you came over and put your hand on my forehead and asked me how I felt. When I said I felt better, you asked me if I thought I could eat something.”

“You said you were hungry, but that you’d like to take a shower first. I think that is what convinced me that the worst was over.”

“I could smell myself,” he said. “I would have had to have been dead not to notice that... Then while I was in the shower, you stole my clothes.”

She laughed at that. “I didn’t steal them, I took them and washed them. I left you a robe.”

“That fit. I wondered about that.”

“It was supposed to have been a gift at some later date; Christmas or your birthday. I saw it in a store and had to get it for you. I meant to bring it down to you after you left, but I keep forgetting it.”

“Did I tell you then that I enjoyed having breakfast with you? It was delicious.”

“It’s hard to mess up scrambled eggs, bacon and toast, but I can cook a few things. That’s one of them. You didn’t say much while you ate and by the time you were finished you were tired again.”

“And I went back to bed. That was something that I’d never experienced before. You had changed the bed linens and the sheets were so soft and they smelled so good, and since you’d stolen my clothes...” he gave her another shy smile, “I had to sleep nude. I don’t think I’ve ever been quite that comfortable in a bed before. I slept soundly for the rest of the day, and when I woke, you were lying next to me, on top of the covers, sound asleep. Those three days were probably the start of your sleep deprivation. Anyway, I got up and found my clean clothing neatly folded on your vanity chair. I dressed and when you woke I was standing at the door to the balcony waiting for it to get dark enough to go home.”

“You knew that the worst wasn’t over, didn’t you?”

“I felt it, but you thought it might be, and I wanted to believe that it was. I just wanted to get back Below in case I was right. I also felt as if I could sleep for a week.”

You did sleep for a week, or almost, but there was just a little more excitement before that... Do you remember anything between the time you went back to bed and when you woke up?"

"No. I was asleep all day... wasn't I?" She could see the fear creeping into his eyes. "Did something happen?"

She took a deep breath and looked at him. She smiled a little. "You could say that." The expression on his face had her reaching for his hands. "It's OK! It wasn't bad. I just need for you to know, and I want you to listen until I'm done."

He nodded slowly. She could feel the tension in his hands.

"It wasn't bad, Vincent. In fact it was wonderful." She hesitated, searching for words. She didn't want it to sound like a romance novel, but she also didn't want to get too clinical.

"After you went back to bed, I straightened up. I vacuumed the carpet again to make sure all the glass was out of it. I made sure the blanket that was covering the balcony door in the living room was well secured. That was when I cleaned the blood out of the carpet. Then I decided I needed a shower. I hadn't bathed in three days either. I showered, but I'd forgotten to take clothes into the bathroom. I put on my robe and was getting clothes out of a drawer when you woke up. I actually felt you looking at me before you spoke. I turned to you and when you saw that I had a pair of jeans in my hand, you said. 'Catherine, you're exhausted. You should sleep too.' I put the jeans back in the drawer and pulled out a nightgown, but by the time I had it on and slipped into the bed you were sound asleep again." When she paused, Vincent looked at her and she let go of his hands as he sat back.

"It's all right that you slept next to me. You did it a few times here while I was ill. It was actually quite comforting," he told her.

"It was for me too and it was that time. I went right to sleep. You were right, I was exhausted. I woke a few hours later and while we slept, we'd gravitated toward each other. I was on my left side facing the French doors and you were cuddled up against my back with your arm around my waist."

Vincent looked a little upset by that revelation. She noticed that his hands were clenched into fists where they rested on the arms of his chairs.

"It was actually a wonderful way to wake up, Vincent. You were nuzzling my neck... and you kissed me there." Now she was afraid to look at him. She closed her eyes. "And you were aroused..." She took a deep breath. "Vincent, we made love." She heard him

gasp, but she rushed on. "It was wonderful, Vincent. The most beautiful experience of my life. It just seemed to happen so naturally. It was just so right."

"Did I hurt you?" he asked through clenched teeth.

She looked at him then. She could see the pain in his eyes. "Didn't you hear what I just said? I said it was wonderful, the most beautiful experience of my life. No, you didn't hurt me. You couldn't, I don't think the Bond would allow it."

"I don't remember," he whispered. "I should remember something like that."

"Peter said that the last time it took a couple of months for everything to come back. It will come back this time too. I know it will." She couldn't believe the pain this was causing him. "Vincent, I love you. That was something that I had been wanting for ages. I realized that one of the reasons you didn't want to go there, was that you were afraid that you might hurt me. That day, I honestly thought that you'd initiated it because you knew you were weaker than normal, and thought it might be a good time. I welcomed you, Vincent."

He turned away from her and rested his head in his hands. She didn't know if he was more upset because he'd made love to her, or because he couldn't remember doing it.

She hesitated to tell him the rest, but she knew that she had to.

"Vincent, there's more," she said.

"More? What more could there be?" he ground out.

"I'm pregnant," she said in almost a whisper.

At those words his head snapped up, but she couldn't read his eyes this time.

He stared at her for several long minutes.

"Pregnant?" he asked. "Are you sure?"

"I saw Peter yesterday. I didn't even think about that. I just knew that I haven't been feeling well and that I was exhausted all the time."

"That means you're what... Six weeks?" His voice was so soft she could barely hear it.

"Yes." She still couldn't read his reaction.

"It's still early, there's still time," he said without looking at her.

"Time for what?" she asked.

He didn't answer her right away.

“To terminate it. Peter can do it. He’ll understand,” he finally said.

She was so shocked that it took her a few seconds to find her voice.

“You want me to have an abortion?” she gasped. “No, Vincent! Never! I’m all for a woman’s right to choose, but I’m choosing to have this baby.” She put her hands protectively over her stomach. “Our baby... your son or daughter. Conceived in love!”

Vincent was on his feet pacing the chamber. She figured she was lucky he was staying instead of taking off like he often did when stressed.

“But what kind of a child? What if it is like me?” he asked, finally looking at her. “I know the kind of life it would have. I’ve lived it! No, this can’t happen.”

“It has happened, Vincent. It’s done and I won’t undo it. And what has been so awful about your life? You’ve lived it among people who loved you and have always taken care of you, just as you love them and take care of them. Even if this baby does look like you, it will have you as a guide, a father. You’ll be there to help it through the hard spots. And it will have me too. It will have the advantages of both Above and Below, whether it’s like you or like me, or even a combination of us both.”

He stopped pacing long enough to look at her. “I can’t do this,” he told her.

She was beginning to get angry. As far as she was concerned, he was being uncharacteristically selfish.

“What’s for you to do?” she asked a bit sarcastically. “Seems to me that I’m the one who’s going to be doing all the work here. I’m the one with morning sickness. I’m the one who is exhausted all the time. I’ll be the one who will be getting as big as a house and waddling everywhere. I’m the one who’s going to have to carry this baby for nine months, then push it out during God knows how many hours of labor. That’s probably why the Bond disappeared. It’s gone so you’ll be protected from all that.”

“All the more reason for you to terminate the pregnancy!”

“I won’t. I love this baby. I *will* have it. I don’t need you to do that. You did your part, you made sure the sperm got to where it needed to be. The rest is up to me.”

She was on her feet and when she stepped in front of him he stopped pacing.

When he grasped her arms she thought he was going to pull her close and apologize for being stupid, but instead he just stared into her eyes for a moment before he spoke again.

“I won’t do this, Catherine. If you choose to go through with this, then I wash my hands of it. I swore that I would never even take the chance of this happening. I will not be responsible for another being going through life looking like this.” He let go of her arms and gestured to himself. “I can’t, Catherine.”

With that, he turned and left the chamber, leaving a stunned Catherine standing next to his table.

She’d expected an extreme reaction, but never in her wildest dreams did she expect him to react like this.

She felt as if her heart was breaking. She dropped into his chair. It took several minutes to compose herself. Then she got up, took her coat from the rack by the door and left for home. She met several people along the way. They greeted her and smiled and she spoke and smiled back. She congratulated herself that none of them realized that anything was wrong, but she wouldn’t, for the life of her, have been able to tell anyone who she’d seen or what any of them had said.

She managed to reach her apartment before she broke down.

A few hours later she called Peter. He was out and she left a message on his machine.

“Peter, it’s Cathy. I talked to Vincent. He didn’t take the news well. I’m not even sure if he’s planning to tell Father. As far as I am concerned you can tell him when you see him. I’ll talk to you later.”

Catherine forced herself to eat dinner. Afterward, she got out her list. She checked off the first item then added another half page of things she had to do in preparation for the baby. She hoped that Vincent would come around, in fact, she was pretty sure he would, but just in case he didn’t, she needed to be prepared.

She was startled out of her depressed stupor the next evening when there was a knock on her door. She was surprised to see Peter when she looked through the peep hole.

She opened the door to let him in and was even more surprised at his comment after he hugged her.

“I talked to the stubborn son of a bitch.”

She almost smiled.

“Are you talking about Vincent or Father?” she asked as they walked around the sofa and sat.

“Vincent. I always knew he was obstinate, but I never thought he was unreasonable. He told me what he asked you to do. He actually thinks that is the best thing for all concerned. He’s angry that you won’t even consider it.”

“I was stunned too,” she admitted, “and the more I think about it, the more I realize that he’s probably not going to give in on this. At first I was sure he would come to his senses after he had some time, but now I think I’m on my own.”

“Are you sure?” Peter asked. “He loves you. I don’t see how he can’t love his own child.”

“Me either, Peter... but I once read a magazine article that said it’s hard for a man to think of an unborn child as something tangible. Some come around when the woman starts to look pregnant, and most eventually come around by the time the child is born, but quite often it just doesn’t sink in until they can actually hold the baby. It’s really hard to take in the fact that it’s Vincent we are talking about, but then it is just one more piece of proof that he’s only human.” She gave him a weak smile. “I think everyone is convinced of that except him. Did you talk to Father?”

“I did and I don’t know what has surprised him more: the fact that you are actually pregnant, or Vincent’s reaction to it. He said he’d talk to him, but even he’s not sure if he’ll get anywhere... You said you were on your own, so what are you planning?”

“Well, I was wondering if you’d agree to a home birth?” she asked.

“Considering the circumstances, I was actually going to suggest it myself. Although we will have to keep our options open, in case of complications.”

“I realize that, but just in case this baby does look like Vincent, I want to be in a secure location so it can be protected.”

“I’ll work on that,” he promised. “You want to do it here?” He looked around considering the comparatively thin apartment walls.

“Actually, no. I’m going to need more room after the baby is born, so I’ll be moving. Daddy had a place that he’d just finished renovating. I saw it just before Vincent got sick and I was trying to figure out what to do with it. I was thinking about the possibility of living there even before all this happened. There is even some furniture in it. Daddy was planning to ask Kay to marry him and I think he was looking at it as their future home. It’s close to here and to Kay’s kids. And an added bonus, it’s only a couple blocks from your house.”

“I remember that. Charles told me about it right after he bought it. He took me there while he was having the work done. It’s big! You sure you need that much room?”

“Well, if the baby looks like Vincent, it’s going to have to have a safe place to live. If I had some small two-bedroom apartment it would be too confining. That house has four floors, a finished basement, a roof garden and a walled back yard. I love the master suite on the top floor. I can use the small sitting room as a nursery. When the baby is old enough I’ll move it down to the third floor and put in a baby monitor.”

“You’ve put some thought into this,” he commented.

“I’ve done nothing but since I came home yesterday. Daddy had a housekeeper’s suite in the basement, and I thought that we could set that up for the birth. The house shares inside walls with neighbors, and I wouldn’t want to disturb anyone. The basement would work better.”

“I’ll take a look at it and start setting it up. How are you going to explain the pregnancy to your friends?”

“I’m not. I’m just going to drop out of sight for a while. I’m going to tell Joe that I’m quitting my job for health reasons. Then when I start to show, I’ll tell everyone that I’m going somewhere like one of those health resorts in the Southwest for a while. I’ll stay in touch with everyone, then after the baby is born I’ll ‘come home.’ If the baby doesn’t look like Vincent, I’ll just tell everyone that I’d anticipated a difficult pregnancy and had gone to a place that specialized in that. I’d lied to keep everyone from worrying. If the baby looks like Vincent, I’ll get on with my life, but it will just be much quieter. I’ll work it out.”

“When do you plan to move?”

“As soon as possible. I want to do it while I can still climb the stairs and do some of the work myself.”

“Just remember that the first trimester is the most critical. Take it easy and get plenty of rest and for goodness sake, eat!”

“I can assure you that I’ve eaten more in the last two days than I normally do in a week. When I got up yesterday, there was no more nausea, and I’ve been ravenously hungry since I came back from Below.”

“That’s unusual, the morning sickness usually lasts most of the first trimester.”

“Well, mine started almost a month ago, and I never actually threw up. Maybe it had as much to do with stress as it did with being pregnant,” she suggested.

“Maybe, but we also have to keep in mind who the father is, so even the smallest things could mean something. If there is anything, and I mean anything out of the ordinary, I want you to call me. Even if it’s the middle of the night.”

“Yes, Peter,” she said and patted his hand. “I was wondering if Father wants to be involved in this process.”

“As of right now, he just wants me to keep him abreast of developments, with your permission, of course.”

“That’s fine with me.”

“And, since you want a home birth, I’d like to ask Jacob and Mary to assist. If everything goes well, Jacob and I can sit back and drink tea while Mary handles it all.”

“Of course. It will be nice to have friends there.”

After Peter left, Father went straight to Vincent’s chamber.

“We have to talk,” he announced as he walked into the chamber.

Vincent looked up from the book he was trying to read and gestured to the chair on the other side of the table.

“I thought it might be too much to expect for Peter not to speak to you. Make yourself comfortable, Father.” Vincent closed his book and set it aside.

“What do you plan to do?” Father asked.

“I don’t think that is a legitimate question, Father. Catherine has already made that decision, and she’s obviously in control in this situation.”

“Peter said that you asked Catherine to terminate the pregnancy.”

“I did. In my opinion, it would be the best decision for all concerned. I would think that you would agree.”

Father sighed. “I always thought that you were quite possibly a hybrid creature of some kind, but hybrids are generally sterile. I was obviously wrong. I also thought that you would never be able to participate in any kind of normal relationship with a woman, but I was obviously wrong about that too... I WAS WRONG, VINCENT! You have proven me wrong, you and Catherine. I think that you should do what is right, step up and be there for Catherine. Both she and that child are going to need you.”

“You are preaching again, but you didn’t practice what you preach. What about Devin, Father?”

“You won’t allow that I might have learned from my mistakes?” Father asked.

“It’s not open to discussion, Father.” Vincent broke in. “Yes, you probably learned, but this is different. I’m not what Catherine needs. She needs someone who can be with her Above, in the open, among her friends. I can’t do that. Once her child is born, she will see that. She will move on and her child will have the father it needs.”

“And if the child is like you?”

“That is a bridge that will be crossed when it is arrived at. Catherine has the means to provide for any child... normal or like me. She is a strong woman.”

“It doesn’t matter how strong a person is, we all need someone occasionally,” Father announced. He rose and started for the door. He turned as he reached it. “I know that the way I raised you probably influenced your decision, but I hope you rethink this. In my opinion, what you are doing is wrong. I don’t love you any less, but I still think you are wrong.”

Catherine took pains with her appearance on Monday, not because she wanted to look good, but because she wanted to keep up that ‘peaked’ look that Joe had commented on.

She put her makeup on as she usually did, but she skipped the blush. She smudged the eyeliner on her lower lids to accentuate the dark circles she still had. She used a pale lipstick. She brushed out her hair, then pulled it back into a pony tail, and she wore a gray suit. She’d never looked good in gray. She felt better than she had in over a month, but now she actually looked worse. Exactly what she was hoping for.

She got to the office a little early. After leaving her things on her desk, she headed for Joe’s office.

“You got a minute, Joe?” she asked when she reached the door.

“Always for you, Rad...” he looked up, and he stopped in mid-word. “Damn girl. What happened to you? You don’t look so good.”

“That’s what I want to talk to you about, Joe.”

“Bad news from the doc?” he asked.

“Not that bad, at least not as long as I follow my doctor’s orders.” She walked in and sat on the sofa across from his desk.

“And what would those orders be?”

“He wants me to take some time off.” When Joe started to speak she held up her hand. “I know you can’t afford to keep me on the payroll for what could be an extended period of time, so I’ll be resigning. I can give you half days for two or three weeks to train my replacement, but I need to be out of here by the first of August.”

“Don’t do this to me, Cathy!”

“I’m sorry, Joe, but it can’t be helped. I might even have to leave town. I’m looking into one of those health resorts out west.”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Peter isn’t really sure. I’ve been anemic off and on for years.” That much was true, but it was due more to her bad eating habits than anything else. She’d overcome it in the last few years by eating better and taking supplements. “Lately, it’s gotten worse and nothing seems to be working. Peter insists that I need to take some time off so I can concentrate on my health. I’m just lucky that I can afford to do that.”

“It’s gonna hurt, but you’ve got anything you need Radcliffe. You know that. Do you think you might come back once you get a handle on this?”

“I don’t know, Joe. It’s been a rough couple of years and I’m sure that contributed to whatever this is. I’ve been shot, beaten up, kidnapped, and almost drowned. I’ll make a decision about work when I’m better.”

“You’ll stay in touch?”

“Of course I will. You’ve been a good friend, Joe.”

Joe got up and moved to the front of his desk where he sat on the edge.

“Be straight with me, Radcliffe, just how serious is this?”

“Serious enough, Joe, but like I said, if I follow my doctor’s orders, and I intend to do that, I will be fine.” She stood and patted Joe on the shoulder. “You’ll just have to abuse another rookie in the future.”

Joe reached out, pulled her into his arms and hugged her tight.

“It won’t be the same around here without you, you know that,” he said as she returned his hug.

“You’ll do fine,” she assured him. “Now...” she took a deep breath, “I’ve got an official letter of resignation for John. And like I said. I’ll work half days until the end of the month. That should give me time to clear my desk and hand off any ongoing cases. If you hire someone to replace me before I leave I’ll do my best to train them. If you don’t mind, I’d like to work afternoons, noon to five. Mornings have been a little rough lately.” She wasn’t sure if the morning sickness would come back, but she didn’t want to take any chances. “I’ll be leaving about one today.”

“Whatever you want, Cathy. I’ll call a meeting of the investigations crew this afternoon and fill everyone in. I’ll divide your cases among them and have each one spend some time with you to familiarize them with the files.”

The rest of the month flew by and when Catherine walked into the office on her last day of work, they surprised her with a party. Not much work got done that last day, and Catherine left feeling a little guilty about the lies she’d told Joe. She knew that it had been necessary, at least for now, but it didn’t make her feel much better about it. She hoped that a year from now she’d be able to come tell everyone the real reason for leaving and introduce them to her new son or daughter.

The move from her apartment wasn’t as difficult as she’d anticipated. She debated telling friends about it, but then she decided to tell everyone she was going out of town. It would make it look more like she’d left temporarily if she kept the apartment so she just moved her personal stuff out and locked it up. She promised to keep everyone informed and to call so she didn’t anticipate a lot of letter writing.

She was able to move into the new house by the middle of August and when she left her apartment she only had a couple suitcases. Everything else had been sent over to the house earlier. Instead of taking her to the airport, the cab dropped her in front of her new home.

Catherine had been watching her ever expanding waistline. She’d been worried that someone at the office would suspect what was going on before her last day.

By the end of July, when she left the DA’s office, she was only a little more than two months; she shouldn’t have really been showing yet, but even Peter said that she looked more like four months along. He thought she might be having twins. He’d done

an ultrasound, and said that there was only one, but the fetus actually appeared to be closer to four months, and he was able to tell her it was a boy.

“Well, he is Vincent’s son,” she said as they both looked at the images.

“He is. And something tells me that we’d better have that basement room ready early, just in case.”

At her three-month checkup, Peter said she looked closer to five months along. He did another ultrasound and this time they were able to see more details.

“There’s a good profile if his face,” he said as he pointed to the monitor. “It doesn’t look like he has much of his father’s bone structure.” There was a technician in the room doing the actual ultrasound, so he had to be careful what he said. He also pointed to the hand visible on the monitor, but didn’t say anything. He pushed a button on the machine and it whirred. “I think we’ve got some good pictures. Finish up and I’ll see you in my office when you’re ready.”

When Catherine walked into the office a little while later, Peter was studying the printed picture of the ultrasound. He held it out to her.

“No, give it to Vincent next time you see him. Tell him the same thing you told me.”

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely. I’m not going to let him forget us.”

“I doubt that he could do that, even if he wanted to.”

“Do you have an adjusted due date?” she asked as she made herself comfortable in a chair.

“I’m just guessing here, but from the accelerated rate of growth, I’m thinking somewhere around the beginning of December. We’ll have a better idea as the time gets closer.”

Catherine took out her planner and noted the date.

“Looks like I’ll need to get my Christmas shopping done early this year.”

When she got home that afternoon she went straight up to her bedroom and changed clothes. Her father had put in an elevator, but she was determined to use the stairs as much as possible, for the exercise.

She headed back downstairs to the kitchen to fix herself some lunch and was shocked to find Mouse standing at the counter tinkering with one of his gadgets.

“Good grief, you startled me, Mouse. What are you doing here?”

“Visit. And bringing this,” he told her succinctly.

“Well, it’s lovely to see you, but what is that?”

“Phone. Peter told Mouse that you were having a baby and that Father and Mary were going to help. Mouse decided to fix something so you can let Father know when he is needed.”

She stepped around him and got a better look at what he was fiddling with. It looked like an old-fashioned phone sitting on top of a bulky, metal box, and it was all encased in olive drab canvas.

“What kind of phone is that?” she asked.

“Cullen called it a field phone. Like the Army uses. Mouse strung a wire from Father’s study to your kitchen. Got one of these at both ends. You pick up the phone part, then crank this little wheel and it rings in Father’s study. Father can call you the same way.”

“From Father’s study to here. How?”

“Opened threshold in your basement. Peter told me where you live, and I started looking at the maps. Old utility access tunnel runs under the street right by your basement. Put in false wall, looks just like the rest of the wall. It’s right next to your washing machine. If you want to open it, all you have to do is pull the new pipe that’s next to the one the washing machine drains into.”

When did you do all this?” she asked incredulously.

“Started before you moved in. Finished it last night, but it was late. Didn’t want to wake you up to show you then. Figured I could show you when I brought the phone.”

Catherine eyed the phone sitting on the end of the counter closest to the basement door. The wire ran neatly down the side of the counter in the corner and around the doorjamb at the floor. She hoped the rest of it was just as neat. She wouldn’t want to trip on it. It looked out of place, but she had to admit that it was a good idea.

“OK, so show me the threshold and how to open it.”

She followed Mouse down the stairs and across to the front of the house where the laundry room was. The basement walls were cement block that had been plastered over to give it a nicer finish. Whoever had done the plasterwork had indented a line from the ceiling down to the floor every three feet. The dryer was in the corner and the washer was right next to it. A long counter had been built next to that. Catherine noticed that

there was a new pipe next to the washing machine's drain, and the counter had been cut and hinged. Mouse showed her how to pull the pipe toward her and a three-foot-wide section of the wall swung open into the tunnel behind the wall. Mouse lifted the counter and let it lay flat on the counter next to it.

"That's ingenious, Mouse," she said with a shake of her head. "Is there a way to open it from the other side?"

"Piece that looks like part of the house foundation. Just push it up. Just have to stand to one side so door doesn't hit you."

"This will be great when Father and Mary come up. And it will help out if I want to send things Below. Thank you, Mouse."

Mouse grinned. "Make it easier for Vincent to visit too," he informed her.

"Well, Vincent isn't visiting me anymore, Mouse."

"Catherine's mad at Vincent?"

"A little, but he's also mad at me."

Mouse was obviously having trouble with that concept.

"But Vincent loves Catherine. He told Mouse. Said that it was the beginning of a new life and the end of his aloneness."

"It was for me too, Mouse, but we disagreed on something extremely important, and we just can't seem to fix it." She didn't even know if Vincent wanted to fix it, but then his fix for the situation was not in the realm of her possibilities. "So, does Father know about this?" She gestured at the door.

"Father told Mouse to do it," he told her.

"Good, I wouldn't want you to get into trouble. How about the route, is it clearly marked?"

"You turn left on the other side of this door. No other tunnels for a long way. Then first tunnel you reach, turn right to go to dining chamber, turn left to go to Study. Easy."

Mouse was gone as soon as he was sure Catherine knew how to use the phone and the door. The door swung closed behind him and she went back up to the kitchen to fix her lunch.

Vincent was back to doing all his normal duties, but where he used to go above to visit Catherine or wander the city after his nightly patrol, his wandering was now done Below. He would frequently wander lost in thought; lost in his memories or more often wracking his brain trying to remember the things he'd forgotten. After hours of walking he'd finally force himself to awareness of his surroundings and head for home.

He was very surprised one night when he found himself at the mouth of the cave where Catherine had saved his life. He started to turn around and head home when something compelled him to enter. In the confusion of getting him out of the cave and back home, someone had left a lantern. There was still oil in it so he lit it and used it to light his way.

The cavern was just as he remembered it. And he did remember at least that much. He didn't know what had gone on there, how he'd gotten there or how he'd gotten back to his chamber, but he did remember being inside the chamber. He remembered the little alcove over to one side, and he remembered crouching there, waiting to die. Hoping, in his more lucid moments, that he'd die before he hurt someone.

He set the lantern down in the middle of the chamber and went to sit in that alcove now. But try as he might, nothing came to him. Not one memory of anything other than just being here, and being very distressed. In fact, being here now was making his head hurt and his eyes burn. He sniffed. There was a strange odor in the air. He couldn't identify it, but it was probably what was bothering him now. It might have influenced him then. He rose and reached for the lantern. He staggered a bit and kicked the lantern. It hit something when it slid a few inches across the floor. He bent to see what it was. He sifted the sand through his fingers and they came up with a gold chain with a shining crystal suspended from it. Catherine's crystal. She'd never mentioned losing it. He stared at it for a moment; almost dropped it back into the sand, but he put it in his pocket and made his way slowly back to his chamber.

Once Catherine was settled in her new home, the days crawled by. There was just so much shopping for the baby she could do from catalogs. She didn't go out much; she didn't want to run into anyone she knew.

She didn't listen to music often because most of it reminded her of Vincent. She started reading more modern novels because they weren't the books she and Vincent had read together. She watched TV and movies on tape because that was something she and Vincent didn't do together. She went out of her way not to do things that reminded her of Vincent, but no matter what, she carried one reminder with her all the time.

At night she lay in bed, rubbed her belly and talked to the baby there. She tried out different names and eventually settled on Jacob Charles Chandler. She'd thought about Charles Jacob, but disliked the nicknames that Charles often got shortened to. Her dad had never been called Chuck and only his family ever called him Charlie. Jacob was a good, solid name, and Jake wasn't bad as a shortened version.

She would lay there and tell Jacob about his father. She told him that she hoped that he would meet him some day.

One day in the middle of November Mouse paid another visit. This time he was carrying a large parcel, wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. It was taller than he was, but obviously not very heavy.

"What's that?" she asked him after he'd carefully carried it up the basement stairs and leaned it against the wall in the kitchen.

"Painting. The one of you and Vincent that was hanging in Vincent's chamber. He took it down, wrapped it and took it to a storage chamber. Mouse was afraid that mice might get it, or it would get wet... that chamber flooded last spring. Brought it to you to keep it safe."

"Kristopher's painting?" She was shocked that he'd taken it down. "Of course I'll keep it here. In fact, there's a wall in my bedroom where I can hang it. I've been looking for a full-length mirror to put there, but this will be even better."

"Got tools?" asked Mouse.

"What do you need?" she asked going to a drawer and opening it.

"Hammer, nail," he answered.

"How about a heavy duty picture hanger and a screw driver?" She opened a drawer and took out what she'd mentioned.

"Will work." He picked up the painting and gestured for her to lead the way.

She led him up to the top floor and pointed out the wall. Mouse patted several pockets and found a metal tape measure. He unwrapped the painting and took some measurements. After he pushed a wooden chair over to the wall he stood on it and started tapping on the wall. He seemed happy with what he found and screwed the hanger into the wall. He tugged on it several times, satisfying himself that it was solid.

He stepped off the chair, pushed it to one side then lifted the painting and hung it on the hanger. It was perfectly centered on the wall. He straightened it and stepped back.

“Looks good,” he announced. “Better than Vincent’s wall.”

Catherine had to admit that it did look good. Too good, but it would be a good way to introduce her son to his father. She also noticed that she’d inadvertently matched the predominant color in her bedspread to the color of the dress in the painting. She’d fallen in love with the bedspread when she’d seen it in a shop window over a year ago. It was a handmade patchwork quilt, made out of pieces of velvet. The edging and backing was the same color velvet as the dress. The pillow shams were also backed and edged with the same fabric. It had been one of a kind and it was a king sized quilt. She’d never used it in her apartment because her bed was only a queen. She’d themed the whole master bedroom around that quilt with the drapes, upholstery, carpet and even the walls picking up colors from it. The room was designed to be relaxing and pleasing and the painting fit as if she’d always intended it to be there.

Father and Mary made their first visit the Saturday after Thanksgiving. Peter had visited several times, and Mouse had been there twice, but she hadn’t had any other visitors. She was happy to see them.

Catherine had just come into the kitchen to make herself some tea and a snack when they tapped on the door from the basement. She greeted them with hugs and tried to get them to go into the living room while she prepared the tea, but Father made himself comfortable at the kitchen table while Mary helped her.

“Catherine, my dear. We are not special guests. We are your friends and we don’t need any special treatment,” Father said as he sat down.

Catherine laughed. “I haven’t had many guests since I moved in here,” she admitted. “I’m even glad to see Mouse when he rushes through like a hurricane.”

“Have you been out at all, Catherine,” Mary asked.

“A little. I walk around the neighborhood for exercise; I just try keep to places where I won’t run into anyone I know. I’ve done a little shopping for the baby, and while the weather was still warm I spent time out in the yard in the back. I had a little garden. And there is a roof garden too. There’s a miniature atrium up there, so I can even go up when the weather is cold. But I’ve spent a lot of time here in the house.”

“It’s good that you’re getting exercise,” Mary commented. “That’s a mistake a lot of women make. As soon as they find out they are pregnant they sit down and take it easy for the next nine months. As long as you were active before, it’s good to keep exercising while you’re pregnant, just with less intensity. When the muscles are toned, it makes for and easier labor.”

“Peter told me that, and he’s kept me stocked on reading materiel, but I don’t know if that was the best idea. Now I know all the things that could go wrong.”

“No delivery is ever perfect,” Mary conceded as she carried the teapot to the table, “but true complications aren’t that common.”

“What about all the caesarean sections that are done?” asked Catherine as she followed with the cups and set them out.

Mary poured tea for everyone as Catherine sat down.

“Lazy doctors,” commented Father with a snort, as he picked up the cup in front of him.

“I wouldn’t say that,” said Mary. “Some may be unnecessary, but most of them are because of true emergencies.”

“Were you always a midwife, Mary?” Catherine asked.

“Not exactly, there really wasn’t any such thing, at least not professionally when I went to nursing school. My first assignment when I went to work was in Labor and Delivery assisting the doctors, and I stayed... at least, until circumstances changed and I found my way Below.”

“And she’s been a godsend,” put in Father. “She learned a lot of new techniques Above, and she’s taught me. I never delivered a baby until I came below. I observed some births while I was an intern and later when I was a resident I assisted a few times. I knew I wanted to go into medical research, so I didn’t spend much time or effort on the clinical side, except for surgery. I had a general knowledge, but not the practical.”

“You seem to have picked up a lot of the practical since,” Catherine commented.

“By necessity, I assure you. I had a lot of help from Peter in the beginning, and speaking of Peter, he tells us that your new due date is the first week in December.”

Catherine nodded. “It seems this little one,” she patted her stomach, “is in a hurry.”

“How are you feeling?” asked Mary as she reached over and put her hands on the sides of Catherine’s stomach.

“Tired, I can’t seem to sleep more than a couple hours at a time. I wake up, go use the bathroom, walk around a little then go back to bed and sleep a couple more hours. My back hurts all the time. Peter says I’m doing well with my weight. I’ve gained about 28 pounds, and it all seems to be right here.” She patted her belly again. “My face doesn’t seem to be any fuller, although my ankles are usually swollen by the end of the day.”

“That’s normal,” Mary commented. “If you have a sudden weight gain of more than five pounds you should call Peter or one of us.”

“Peter told me the same thing.”

“Good, and since your date is so close, I’m going to come up next weekend and stay with you.”

“It will be nice to have company,” Catherine told her. “There are two guest rooms, you can take your pick.”

They talked a little more about the preparations and the room in the basement. When they were quiet for a few moments, Catherine asked the question that had been nagging at her for months.

“What did Vincent tell you?” she asked.

Father sighed. “Not much at first. After Peter spoke to him I talked to him. Then he went off by himself for a few days. Not as far off as he usually goes, just to one of the way stations a few levels down. Peter told me everything, at least everything that he knew. When Vincent came back we talked again. I told him that he was being stupid and selfish, but he insisted that he’d never wanted this and that he wasn’t going to have anything to do with bringing another being like himself into this world. You insisted on doing this and he washed his hands of it. I will admit that I feel at least partly responsible.”

“Don’t blame yourself, Father.” Catherine was tired and they could hear it in her voice. “You only did what you did because you love him. You were trying to protect him, and besides, Peter told me that both of you never dreamed that anything like this would ever happen.”

“Yes, but I didn’t have to quite so graphic with my warnings.”

“Did Peter give him that ultrasound picture? It shows that this baby doesn’t seem to share much of Vincent’s physical appearance. We can’t tell about hair until he’s born, or teeth until they come in. Were Vincent’s baby teeth like his permanent ones?”

“You mean the longer canines? Yes, they were a little, but not as long as the permanent ones.”

“How is he?” she asked.

“Fully recovered. He’s gone back to all his normal activities, but I don’t believe he’s been Above. He limits his nocturnal wanderings to walking the perimeter of the inhabited tunnels.”

“He knows I’ve moved?”

“Yes, he knows. It was Mouse who told him.” Father chuckled at the memory. “Mouse was working on opening the threshold, and he was doing his best to keep it a secret. He’d come to me every evening and give me a status report. One evening he was on his way to my study when he ran into Vincent. Mouse had been working all day. He’d just finished the opening from the tunnel into your basement and he was covered with cement dust. Vincent asked him what he was doing, suspecting that he might be doing something he wasn’t supposed to, and Mouse blurted out that he was opening a new threshold. He realized that he shouldn’t have said that, and ran off. Vincent followed him to my study. He overheard Mouse telling me that he’d seen Vincent and accidentally told him about your threshold. He used your name. Vincent had closed the threshold below your apartment building, and he thought that Mouse might have reopened that. He demanded to know why, and Mouse told him that I’d told him to do it. That we needed a way to get to your house because we were going to help with the baby. I told him the whole story.”

“So he knows where I am?”

“He did the final safety checks on the tunnel and the door.”

Catherine was disappointed. She’d been telling herself that maybe, just maybe, the reason he hadn’t come to her was that he didn’t know where she was and without the Bond, he couldn’t find her. But he’d known where she was since she moved in.

“Are you all right, my dear?” asked Mary, leaning forward and taking her hand.

“I’ll survive,” she said with a shrug. “Just another hope crushed. I’m getting used to it.”

Mary and Father rose to leave and Catherine walked to the door to the basement with them.

“You don’t need to go downstairs with us,” Mary told her. “You’re tired and you just need to go to bed. I’ll see you next weekend. I’ll probably be here on Saturday afternoon. If

you need us or anything before then you just use that contraption that Mouse installed and call us.”

“I will.” Catherine hugged Mary then Father. “Thank you for coming.”

“You just take care of yourself... and my grandson!” Father told her. “Get some rest.”

Catherine didn’t go right to bed. She was tired, but she knew that sleep wouldn’t be easy. She washed the cups and the teapot, then walked through the house making sure the doors were all locked, then she climbed the stairs to her room. She hesitated for a moment then grabbed the sweater that hung by the stairs to the roof and climbed the last flight to the roof.

It was a clear night. She leaned on the wall and looked up at the sky. She identified a few constellations and stood, trying to clear her mind, until the cold got to her and she went back inside.

Sleep didn’t come easily, and when it did, it didn’t last long.

Mary arrived on Saturday afternoon, just as she’d promised. Geoffrey was with her, carrying her bag. She found Catherine in the middle of baking cookies and cleaning the kitchen.

“I had a surge of energy and decided to take advantage of it. “I cleaned the bathrooms and the kitchen, I’ve got laundry going, and I thought that homemade cookies sounded good. What do you think?”

“I think you’re nesting,” said Mary with a light laugh.

“Nesting?”

“Yes, it usually happens just before the baby turns and drops. I suspect that you’ll go into labor before the middle of the week.”

Mary was right. Catherine went to bed with a backache on Monday night. She’d had a backache for months, but this was worse. She woke up early Tuesday morning thirsty and went down to the kitchen to get some juice. Her water broke as she was standing at the kitchen counter pouring the juice.

She wasn’t sure what to do at first, she glanced at the clock, it was almost six, and Mary was probably already up. She knew that she wouldn’t have to go up and wake her. She

dropped a bunch of paper towels on the puddle and went to the laundry room where she pulled off the wet nightgown and found a towel and dried herself off. She grabbed a clean gown from the stack of clean laundry and pulled it on, then she went out to use the field phone to call Father. She was on the other phone talking to Peter when Mary came down.

As soon as Mary walked into the kitchen, she knew what was happening. When Catherine hung up the phone she turned to Mary.

“Peter said he’ll be here in about an hour, and Father is on his way. He said he’d stop in the kitchen and bring breakfast for everyone.”

Mary made Catherine sit down while she cleaned up. Then she made a pot of tea and joined her at the table.

“Why did you decide to set up the birthing room in the basement?” she asked as she joined Catherine at the table.

“This house shares walls with the houses on both sides. They are supposed to be fire walls, and I haven’t heard anything from the neighbors on either side, but I just want to make sure that they didn’t hear me, just in case I get... loud. I would hate to have them call the police to report a screaming woman, and have the police break in here in the middle of everything.”

“That makes sense,” agreed Mary. “Have you had any contractions?”

“A little,” Catherine told her. “Feels like mild menstrual cramps and it’s almost constant.”

“We can take our time. You finish your tea and relax. We’ll all get some breakfast, then we can go downstairs and see how things are progressing.”

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

“You’re up,” father said, stating the obvious.

“As are you,” said Vincent, noticing that Father was carrying his battered medical bag.

“I am. Catherine called. Her water just broke; she’s in labor. Your son will be born soon. Would you like to be with her for the event?”

“We’ve been over this, Father.” Vincent rose and went to his bureau and started pulling out clothes for the day. “Catherine... they are both better off without me.”

“But if the child is like you?”

“Peter said that it doesn’t look like there is much chance of that, and if it did happen, Catherine is quite capable of handling anything.”

Father shook his head. “I still think you should be there.”

“I doubt that Catherine would welcome my presence at this point.”

“Well, if you change your mind, you know where I am. I will probably be there all day. This is a first child so it could take some time.”

Father turned and started to leave, then turned back to Vincent.

“Have you ever considered what it means if the child isn’t like you?” he asked.

“He’s lucky?” Vincent said in a slightly sarcastic tone.

Father ignored the tone.

“I’m serious, Vincent!”

“So am I! What are *you* trying to say?”

“I’m trying to say that if this child is not like you, it proves that I was wrong... The less like you, he is, the more *human* you are. I know I always told you that only *part of you is a man*, but as time goes by I’m beginning to agree with Catherine: You are the best part of what it is to be human. I honestly do not understand why you are acting like this.”

Father didn’t wait for Vincent to comment. He turned and left the chamber. Vincent stood for a moment then tossed his jeans on the bed and dropped into his chair. He was up because something had awakened him about thirty minutes before Father came in. He wasn’t sure what it was. At first he thought someone was outside his chamber pounding on something, but once he was completely awake he realized it was coming from inside him. It was like a heartbeat, but it wasn’t his. At first he thought it might be Catherine’s, but it didn’t seem right. It felt different from the Bond he’d had with her. It was only the heartbeat and nothing else. Sometimes it seemed to be louder and faster, but most of the time it was just steady and much faster than what he’d been used to sensing from Catherine.

He finally gave up trying to figure it out and got dressed. He had a class in two hours, and he still needed to get some breakfast and go over the chapters for today.

As far as Catherine was concerned things were progressing at a snail’s pace. The morning passed. The contractions did get stronger, and more frequent, but nothing

unbearable. She sat in the chair in the room, she got up and walked up and down the hall outside, she drank water, tea and juice, but by two in the afternoon she was tired and wanted it to be done. Mary said that it would be a while yet.

“Why don’t you try to take a nap?” Mary suggested. “I’ll be right here if you need me.” Father and Peter had gone upstairs to get some lunch and she just knew that they were probably playing chess.

Catherine dozed off, and Mary heard a sound in the hall outside and thinking it was Peter or Father, went to give them an update.

She was surprised to see Vincent standing inside the door from the tunnel.

She hurried to him.

“It’s about time you showed up!” she whispered when she reached his side. “Better late than never, I always say.”

“I just came to find out how she is. Father stopped in my chamber on his way here and told me.”

“She is doing just fine, but she’d be doing much better if she had a good coach,” Mary hinted broadly, “or someone with warm hands to rub her back.”

“I can’t, Mary. I just want to know that she’s all right.”

Mary sighed. “So far so good. She’s progressing normally. She’s resting now. Her contractions are fairly close together, but they aren’t very strong yet. I expect they will strengthen soon, and that your son will be born before eight this evening.”

“Catherine’s son, Mary,” he corrected. “He’s her son.”

He turned and walked away from her, but he didn’t leave the basement. When she went back into the room, she pushed the door almost closed, but she could still hear him pacing back and forth in the hallway.

When Peter and Father came back down an hour later she heard them speaking quietly to Vincent.

Catherine heard Mary speaking to Vincent, and she’d heard his answer. It hurt, but it was about what she expected. To be honest she hadn’t even expected him to come anywhere near her ever again. She didn’t mention to anyone what she knew that Vincent was there, and no one mentioned to her that he was.

Catherine's contractions were starting to get stronger and more frequent when Lena entered the basement from the tunnels. She didn't speak to Vincent as she passed him, but the look she gave him said a lot. She hadn't spoken to him unless necessary since she'd found out about Catherine.

She went into the room and closed the door behind her. She was there to help. She'd been apprenticing with Mary for almost a year.

Catherine's son was born at 6:47 pm, a little more than 12 hours after her water broke. He weighed 5 pounds 15 ounces, and was 18½ inches long. Lena tended to the baby, giving Catherine a play by play as she gave him his first bath, and Mary tended to Catherine. Both Father and Peter joked that they hadn't even been needed.

Vincent, who was still in the hall, slid down the wall, and rested his forehead on his drawn up knees. He could hear what Lena was saying, and he heard Father and Peter's verdict as they examined the newborn. Finally, he heard Catherine's voice when her son was finally given back to her. She hadn't made a sound through the whole process.

Father and Peter left the room a little while later.

Father leaned over and put his hand on Vincent's shoulder.

"Are you all right?" he whispered.

Vincent looked up and Father saw tears on his face. "I'm fine. Are you leaving?"

"No, not yet. Peter and I will stay for a while."

"How is she?"

"She's fine," Peter assured him. "She's tired, naturally, but she will be up and about in a few hours, no doubt."

Vincent just nodded then watched the two men go up the basement stairs to the kitchen then he put his head back down on his knees.

He didn't think he could move. Now he was calm again he probed the feeling, the Bond that had been building all day. He could still feel something like a heartbeat, but it wasn't Catherine's; it was much faster. It must be the baby's.

When Mary left the room she stopped and asked the same question that Father had, and he gave her the same answer.

“Lena is going to stay with her while I go up and get something to eat and take a nap. We will take turns sitting with her until morning... that is, unless you want to take over.”

He didn't speak, he just shook his head.

Mary sighed and left him.

He was still sitting like that later when Lena came out of the room carrying a bundle. He thought at first she was taking a load of laundry down the hall to the washing machine, but she stopped in front of him.

“Would you like to hold your son?” she asked. She didn't wait for an answer, she just leaned down and put the bundle into his lap. His arms instinctively came up. She turned and went back into the room, leaving him sitting on the floor with his legs stretched out in front of him and the quiet bundle in his lap.

He pushed the corner of the receiving blanket away from the baby's face and was surprised to see that he was awake. They stared at each other for several minutes. His face was perfect. There was no way to tell what color his eyes would be, and his mouth and nose were perfect miniatures of Catherine's. Then Vincent began a closer inspection. He peeled back more of the blanket to find the baby's hands. The fingers that wrapped around his were long, but his nails looked normal. He pulled the blanket away from his feet and found ordinary baby feet.

He drew his legs up a little and turned the baby so that he stretched out along his thighs. He continued to look. His ears were normal, nothing like his, and there wasn't a bit of extra hair on his body anywhere. There wasn't even much hair on his head, but what there was, was reddish gold. That was the only resemblance that he could find to himself.

He wrapped the baby back up in his blankets and lifted him so that he rested against his shoulder. He kissed the soft cheek and let his tears fall. He was normal, he could live Above and no one would ever know who his father was.

His tears had dried when Lena came back into the hall.

“She'll be awake soon, and he's going to be hungry,” she said.

Vincent stood and handed the baby back to her.

“Did she say what she named him?” he asked.

“No, but she asked Father if she could bring him Below for a naming ceremony. I guess we will find out then.”

She turned to go.

“Thank you, Lena,” he called after her.

When she turned back to speak, he was gone and the door from the tunnel, which had stood open all day, was closing.

Vincent went back to his chamber and dropped into the chair at the table. He automatically reached for his journal, but when he opened it and uncapped the pen, he had no words.

He was still sitting there several hours later when Father walked in. Vincent still hadn't written anything.

Father wasn't in any mood to mince words.

“I was surprised to see you at Catherine's earlier, but I was disappointed that you stayed in the hall. Catherine could have used your support.”

“I had to be there,” he admitted, “but she didn't need me. I am nothing but a reminder.”

“What do you think that beautiful baby boy is, if not a reminder?” Father retorted. “A reminder of the love she has for you, the love you two share.”

“You need to put that in the past tense, Father... the love we *shared*. It's no longer part of that equation.”

“I swear you are one of the most obstinate...” His voice trailed off and Father just shook his head and walked out. “No matter what, I consider that child my grandson, and I hope that you don't think that I'm going to forgo seeing him and spending time with him just to spare your feelings,” he shot back over his shoulder.

It was Vincent's turn to shake his head, just before he picked up his journal and threw it across the chamber.

Catherine had plenty of help over the next few weeks. She went back to her bedroom the next day, and Jacob was installed in a bassinet in her room. She had everything she needed there. And when she went downstairs during the day, he was with her in a portable crib.

Father suggested that the naming ceremony be in the afternoon before Winterfest and Catherine agreed. A few Helpers came early for the ceremony, but it was mostly her friends Below who gathered in Father's Study.

Vincent was conspicuous by his absence. No one knew that he was standing in the shadows on the upper level. No one but Catherine.

“It has been said that the child is the meaning of this life. Today, we celebrate the child. This new life that has been brought into our world. We welcome the child with love, that he may be able to love; we welcome the child with gifts, that he may learn generosity; and we welcome the child with a name...” Father looked at Catherine as she stood beside him.

“His name is Jacob Charles, after his grandfathers,” she said as she looked up toward a shadow on the upper level. “And just so that he doesn’t become Baby Jacob, and remain that until he’s forty... I intend to call him Jake.” She turned toward Father and smiled as everyone else laughed.

“I’m sorry, but I just had to add that. My dad had a nephew who was named after him. Since Daddy’s family called him Charlie, his nephew became Charlie Boy. He hates it and I didn’t want Jake to suffer a similar fate.

Father laughed too. “Very few people call me by my given name,” he reminded her. “They usually have to say it more than once to get my attention.”

There was a small reception after the ceremony and Jake spent the next hour being passed from one woman to the next.

“Will you be staying for Winterfest?” Mary asked her. “You can leave Jacob in the nursery.”

“No, I don’t think so Mary.” She smiled wearily at Mary. “This little guy is demanding and I must feed him every four hours. I haven’t been getting a lot of sleep at night because of that.”

“I understand.”

Mary hugged her then called several of the children over to her.

“Catherine needs help carrying her bag and all the gifts home. You help her then come right back here; William has some things that need to be taken down to the Great Hall.”

Kipper, Geoffrey, Samantha, and Eric helped Catherine get everything back to her kitchen and were rewarded with a bag of fruit to take back with them.

“If you need a babysitter,” Samantha called back over her shoulder as they descended the stairs, “I’m available.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Catherine called after her.

After the children carried everything up to the nursery for her, Catherine set about unwrapping everything. There was a beautiful handmade quilt from Mary. It was big enough that it could be used on a twin bed once Jake was big enough to use one. Catherine folded it over the end of the crib. Father had given a stack of picture books. William had written out all his homemade baby food recipes in a notebook. Most of the gifts were typical baby gifts, but just the tunnel versions. There were even babysitting vouchers from Brooke and Jamie. She carefully made a list of the gifts so she could write *Thank You* notes later. The last package she opened didn't have a tag and she wasn't sure who it was from, but as soon as she opened it she knew.

Vincent had given his son one of his most prized possessions: a toy carousel he'd had since he was a child. Catherine had only seen it once or twice when Vincent had been hunting for something in a chest he kept in his chamber. She been able to tell by the way he'd handled it that it meant a lot to him.

Catherine and Jacob settled into a routine and when Peter came over for Christmas dinner he and Catherine laid out a plan for the next few years.

"I did all the blood tests that I told you about," he told her as he handed her several sheets of paper. "He's a perfectly normal baby, with a few minor differences. His blood type is the same as Vincent's."

"I never thought of that. Is there something unusual about Vincent's blood?"

"Yes and no. We ascertained years ago that Vincent's blood is O+, but with a few differences. All those notes that you brought back from that professor who kidnapped him a couple years ago just backed up our findings. His blood is more highly oxygenated for one thing. You are A+. Jake is O+, but he shares a few other characteristics with Vincent."

"So, if Vincent needed a transfusion, he could only get O+, right?"

"That's right. Type O+ is the universal donor, but they can only get type O+, but because Vincent is Below and it would be difficult for even me to get whole blood for him, Jacob stocks some of Vincent's own blood, just in case. It can't be stored much longer than a month, so Father takes a pint every 30 days. He also types everyone Below who agrees to it. That way if anyone needs a transfusion, he knows who is compatible."

"Are you saying that we're going to have to do the same thing for Jake?" she asked.

“I don’t think so. I don’t really anticipate any problems if he should ever need blood in an emergency. I’m more concerned at the moment about the normal childhood immunizations. I see to it that all the children Below get their shots and we were going to do the same thing for Vincent, but he had a reaction to the first one we gave him, and we didn’t continue with them. Now, he’s got an immune system that won’t stop. He’s never caught anything like the flu or a cold, or any of the other things that go around. He wasn’t vaccinated against plague, but he cared for the sick right along with you and Father who had both been vaccinated, and he didn’t get sick. I don’t think he’s even had so much as an upset stomach, not even when he was a child. So he obviously didn’t need the immunizations. Hopefully, Jake will take after his father in that respect.”

“OK, so we won’t do the shots. What about when he starts school and I have to have proof that he’s had them?”

“We’ve got five years to figure that out,” Peter said with a smile. “I can just say that he had them and give you the paperwork, or we can say that he has allergies and can’t take them. We will have to play this by ear.”

“Or I could home school,” she suggested.

“Like I said, you don’t have to make that decision now. For now, when you bring him in to the office, we will do all the usual things, we will just skip the shots.”

“What if he does get sick? Vincent told me that a lot of the drugs in Father’s arsenal don’t work on him.”

“That is mostly the pain killers and sedatives. We have to be careful what we use. I’ll admit to having bought a Veterinary Manual years ago, just in case. But Vincent seems to be immune to even diseases that would affect felines. He helped nurse a Helper’s cat through distemper when he was about twelve. Father was worried, but he didn’t catch it, so we decided then that it wasn’t an issue. The manual has been helpful when choosing drugs though. He hasn’t had much of an issue with infection, but we know what antibiotics work best on him if they are needed. We’ve also found a sedative that works. Father keeps some on hand. I’ll just use what we’ve learned from Vincent as a guide when it comes to Jake.”

After New Year’s Catherine called Jenny to tell her that she was *back in town*.

“So how are you feeling?” Jenny asked.

“Actually quite well, and I have a confession to make.”

“What, you weren’t at some health resort, but you were on an extended honeymoon?” Jenny asked with a laugh.

“And just who did I marry, Miss Psychic?” Catherine asked her.

“Damned if I know. Elliot Burch maybe?”

It was Catherine’s turn to laugh.

“No Jenny, I didn’t get married. I was out of town, and it was for my health...” She’d decided to keep up that part of the story. “... but not the reasons I told everyone. I was pregnant, and there were a few complications, so I went somewhere that specializes in difficult pregnancies.”

The other end of the line was silent.

“Jenn, are you still there?”

“Are you OK? And the baby?”

“We are both fine. They took exceptionally good care of us and we came through it like champs. No complications and a relatively easy labor and delivery. Only twelve or so hours.”

“I don’t know what to say.” She could tell from Jenny’s voice that she was stunned. Speechlessness was something that Jenny didn’t often suffer from.

“Say you’ll come visit! I want to introduce you to my son.”

“Absolutely! Is this evening too soon?”

“No, come for dinner and I’ll order Chinese.”

“OK, I’ll see you in a few hours.”

“Wait, don’t hang up! I forgot to tell you that I moved. I had it all taken care of while I was gone.” She gave the address to Jenny. “I’ll see you later.”

Catherine had just finished feeding Jake and had put him in the portable crib in the kitchen when the doorbell rang. It was the delivery boy from Henry Pei’s restaurant and while she was paying him Jenny walked up. She took half the bags and followed Catherine to the kitchen. They put down their packages and Jenny pulled her best friend into a fierce hug.

“I know we sometimes go months without seeing each other, but I really missed you this time! Just knowing that you were out of town bothered me.”

“I missed you too Jenn.” As she said it she realized that she really had. “I wish I’d taken you into my confidence before I left. It would have been nice to have someone to talk to about it.”

“Speaking of which, why didn’t you tell anyone you were pregnant. When I spoke to Joe he said you’d told him the same thing you told me, that you had to take care of a health issue.”

Catherine waved Jenny into a chair, then proceeded to set the table and set out the food as she talked.

“My son’s father has some... genetic issues,” she explained. “He was worried that he would pass that on to any child he might father, and he tried to talk me into an abortion. When I refused, he was upset, and we stopped seeing each other. Those genetic issues were my reason for wanting to have the best obstetric care available, and the fact that his father and I weren’t seeing each other any longer was my reason for looking to get out of town for a while.” She sat down across from Jenny. “It all turned out. Jacob is fine, perfectly normal and healthy.”

“So you and his father will be getting back together?” Jenny asked.

“Not likely,” Catherine answered. “This is something that Vincent never wanted. He took great pains and went to great lengths never to father a child.”

“So that’s his name... What happened? Did the condom break?”

“Nothing quite so normal. Vincent had sworn to never have sex, but he hadn’t counted on ever meeting someone and falling in love, much less having her fall in love with him.”

“What is he, a priest?”

“No, but he did live rather like a monk. He takes care of everyone around him, but he never paid much attention to his own needs. He’d been sick, and I guess his will power was at a low ebb or something. It just... happened. I was happy about it, but after he recovered from his illness he didn’t even remember that it happened.”

“Oh God, now that had to have taken the wind out of your sails a bit.”

“I’d kind of decided to ignore it, then I found out that I was pregnant. I had to tell him. That was when he told me that he wanted me to terminate the pregnancy and I refused. I haven’t seen him since.”

Jenny noticed the tears gathering in her friend’s eyes.

“Sounds to me like he’s not worth crying over,” she commented.

“He is, but I’ve shed enough tears. I’ve got Jake and he’s what is important now.” She got up and went to the small crib and picked up her sleeping son. She carried him back to Jenny who held out her arms for him.

“This is Jacob Charles Chandler.”

“Come meet Aunt Jenny, *mein kleiner Junge*.”

Catherine smiled at Jenny’s habit of slipping into the German she’d learned from her maternal grandmother when she got emotional.

Their dinner had cooled by the time Jenny finally relinquished Jake back to his mother. Catherine warmed everything in the microwave then they sat down to eat.

“OK, so I know where you got the Charles, but where did Jacob come from?” Jenny asked.

“His other grandfather.”

“Why not give him Charles for a first name?”

Catherine explained her reasons and Jenny had to laugh.

“Charlie Boy? Poor guy. How old is he?”

“Over fifty, and most of the family still refers to Daddy as Charlie, and his nephew as Charlie Boy.”

“You’re sure that *Vincent’s* family won’t give him some silly nickname?”

“They aren’t big on nicknames in that family, but since one of their friend’s named her daughter Catherine, and she was beginning to become known as Baby Catherine, I was afraid that the same thing would happen to Jake, so I made sure I told everyone that I would be calling him Jake.”

“Surely Baby Catherine’s mother doesn’t call her that.”

“No, she calls her Catie.”

Their conversation continued through the evening, with only time out to tend to Jake’s needs: feeding, clean diaper, snuggles and kisses.

Jenny left around eleven, with promises to visit again soon.

Catherine’s next hurdle was Nancy. She called her early the next morning and Nancy was on the train down from Westport the following Sunday.

Elliot was out of town, so Catherine opted to send him a formal birth announcement when she sent them out to her other friends.

Joe was the last on her list. Not because he mattered least, but because she knew that he'd be the most surprised, and possibly upset.

She called him, and told him that she was back home. After he asked about her health, he joked and asked when she was coming back to work. She ignored the question and invited him over to visit. She gave him her new address and he promised he'd be there on Saturday.

She answered the door with Jacob in her arms when Joe arrived.

"You babysitting, Radcliffe?" he asked as he hugged her awkwardly around the baby.

"No Joe. This is Jacob. He was my reason for quitting work and dropping out of sight for a while."

Joe looked confused for a moment, then it hit him and he sat down on the sofa rather abruptly.

"He's yours?" he asked.

"Yes. He was born on December 5th."

"That guy you told me about?" he asked.

"Yes, that guy's name is Vincent."

"Is he here with you?"

"No Joe, he's not." She went on to tell him the same story that she'd told Jenny and Nancy.

"That sorry..."

"It's OK, Joe. Believe me, I've called him a few names in the last few months too. But his fears were legitimate. There was a possibility that Jacob could have inherited some very... limiting... traits from him. He didn't, but that is beside the point. I understand where he was coming from, but I didn't agree with his solution. We parted company over that. It hurt, it still does, but it all turned out well. Jacob is healthy, and we are going to be just fine."

She'd expected Joe to be protective and his reaction to Vincent's behavior hadn't been that much of a surprise.

Joe had nieces, several of them, so he was no stranger to babies and he was soon sitting with Jacob in his arms telling him how he was going to take him to baseball games, and football games, and hockey games. None of those silly, girly games like soccer. He had Catherine laughing more heartily than she had in a long time, and when he left a couple hours later, her mental outlook was better than it had been in months.

When Joe called her a few days later and invited her to dinner with his family at his mom's on Sunday she was surprised.

"Dinner with your family, Joe? I don't know. I don't have a babysitter..."

"You don't need a babysitter. Mom's house is kid friendly. She's got three granddaughters under the age of six. Everyone will love meeting Jake."

"I haven't been out with him yet, at least not any place but the doctor's office."

"Look, I've still got the baby seat for my car that I used for all three of my nieces, I'll pick you up at one. Mom serves dinner at three."

"All right, Joe. It's been a while since I've been out in polite company," she said with a laugh. "What should I wear?"

"Casual. Whatever you're comfortable in."

Catherine wasn't sure if this was a good idea. She hoped that this wasn't anything more than a friendly gesture.

Joe arrived at Catherine's a few minutes before one. She'd just finished packing everything she needed into the diaper bag. She let Joe in and went to the closet for her coat.

"I never realized how much gear is needed to take a 3 month old on a short trip."

Joe picked the bag. He was surprised by the weight.

"What have you got in here?"

"Diapers, wipes, powder, diaper rash cream, extra clothes, a blanket, burp cloths..."

"Giant economy sizes of everything and his whole wardrobe, from the way it feels. You go get Jake and I'll take this out to the car. I'm double parked and there's only so much that the DA's office sticker lets me get away with."

Catherine got Jake from the crib in the living room and followed Joe out to the street. While Joe was putting Jake into the car seat and buckling him in she went back for her purse and to lock the door.

She watched as Joe secured the last buckle.

“I guess I should get one of those,” she said as she climbed into the front seat and Joe closed the door behind her.

“You don’t have one? What do you do in the car?”

“I don’t currently have one. I sold mine last summer and haven’t replaced it yet. The times I’ve taken Jake out to the doctor’s office I took a cab.”

“You need one. It’s even handy when you go inside somewhere, because you can leave him in it and you won’t have to hold him the whole time.”

Joe’s Mom lived on Long Island. It took a little while to get there, but traffic was light and Jake slept all the way.

In the excitement of getting Jake and all his things into the house Catherine heard all the names of the people she was meeting, but she wasn’t sure who they went with. After she took off her coat she turned to the person holding Jake and was surprised to see it was Jenny.

“Jenn, what are you doing here?”

Jenny looked at Joe.

“You didn’t tell her?” she asked him.

“You saw her before I did. Why didn’t you tell her?” he asked with a grin.

“Tell me what?”

“Joe called me right after you left. You’d left a couple things in your desk and he wanted to know if I had any idea where he should send them. I didn’t, but I said I’d come by and pick them up. We went to lunch that day...”

“And dinner the following Friday night.”

“And they’ve been dating ever since,” finished one of Joe’s sisters.

“Why didn’t either of you tell me? That’s wonderful!” She hugged Jenny. “Thank God, I was worried that he was asking me here because he was interested in me!” she whispered into Jenny’s ear.

That made Jenny laugh. "He's not all that bad, Cath," she whispered back. "In fact, I think I kinda like him. He might be a keeper."

Catherine eventually got all the names sorted out. Joe's mom was Angela. Joe was the oldest, and his sisters were two and five years younger than him. The oldest was Elise after his father's mother and the younger was Giada after his mother's mother. Elise's husband was Ben and their two daughters were five-year-old Ana and three-year-old Tia. Giada was married to Andrew and their daughter was one-year-old Lindsey.

Dinner was an interesting affair. Angela appeared to be prepared. She had a long table in her dining room with chairs at the ends and benches on the sides, and there was a definite seating arrangement. Joe sat at one end with Jenny on his right and Catherine on his left. Elise and Ben sat on the right bench with Tia between them and Ana between Elise and Angela who sat at the other end of the table. Giada and Andrew sat on the side with Catherine with Lindsey in a high chair between Giada and Angela. Jacob slept soundly in a baby seat on the floor where Catherine could see him.

Everyone sat down, even the children were quiet. They all joined hands and Angela said grace. As soon as the Amen echoed around the table chaos prevailed. There were at least four different conversations going on, parents trying to help children with their food. Bowls and platters were passed and Catherine tried to sample everything. It all looked and smelled delicious. She recognized everything except one casserole that was made with potatoes, turnips, leeks, herbs and meat. It smelled good but she couldn't identify the meat.

"What is this, Joe? It's delicious," she asked.

"Dad called it stovies with lamb. Grandma Maxwell taught Mom how to make it."

"Isn't that Scottish?" she asked, puzzled.

"Yeah, you didn't know that dad was a born in Scotland? He came here with his parents when he was just a baby."

"I thought you were Italian," she said with a laugh.

"I am, at least my mom is. Mom and Dad met when they were going to a Catholic elementary school. They didn't see much of each other once they started high school since Mom went to an all-girls school and Dad went to an all-boys school. They saw each other at church and at dances that were sponsored by their schools, and that was about it. Dad was drafted almost as soon as he graduated from high school, and mom went to secretarial school. They started writing while he was gone and when he came

home two years later he asked her to marry him. Mom's family thought it was too quick, so they insisted on a long engagement. Over the next year dad went to the Police Academy, joined the NYPD and had a decent job by the time Mom's family decided that he'd do. They were both 21 when they got married. I was born five years later, then Elise and finally Giada."

"Your mom was still young when your dad died. She never remarried."

"She always said that she did it right the first time and that she'd never find anyone who would measure up to Cameron Maxwell, and she wouldn't settle for second best."

Catherine looked down the table at the smiling woman at the other end. She understood completely. She was angry at Vincent for the way he'd reacted to her pregnancy, but she still loved him and considered him the only man for her. Maybe someday someone would come along, but she didn't see it happening any time soon.

The afternoon went quickly and before she knew it, it was dark and everyone was leaving. Angela wanted Joe to stay and help her with a small repair so Jenny drove Catherine home. There were no open parking spots and Jenny let her out at the curb.

"I'll call you and we'll go to lunch," Jenny said as Catherine lifted Jake out of the car seat.

"And you'll have to fill me in about you and Joe!" Catherine insisted.

"Do you have a babysitter?"

"I've got a few prospects," she said, remembering the baby sitting vouchers and offers. Samantha was too young, but maybe she and Brooke?

Jake's first year sailed by. Before Catherine knew it, they were celebrating his first birthday. She was planning a small party and had almost decided to have two, so she could invite people from both Above and Below. She was talking to Mary about it when Mary suggested that the people from Below who would come all had some Above clothes.

"And it would be nice to finally meet your friends Joe and Jenny," she said.

"You're sure?"

"Certainly. We'll just show up half an hour before your other friends, and no one will be wiser."

A week later on the Saturday after Jake's birthday, when people from Below started appearing out of the basement, she was surprised to see that they would have fit in just about anywhere. Father wore black slacks, a dark gray turtleneck sweater and a corduroy jacket complete with leather patches on the elbows. Mary a plain burgundy suit, but she'd worn the pretty pink silk blouse that Catherine had given her. The children all looked like any kids. The only one who showed up in his regular clothes was Mouse. But Catherine explained him away as her eccentric handyman.

Jake was enjoying being the center of attention. He was walking and toddled from one to another of his friends. He starting to talk and really was a little ahead of other one year olds, but sometimes he lisped a little. He had a full mouth of teeth complete with the two slightly longer canines. He babbled gleefully all afternoon.

Everyone gathered in the kitchen to watch Jake blow out his candles and cut his cake and the birthday boy was loving it. He and Catherine had been practicing all week on blowing out the candle without spitting all over the cake, but just to be on the safe side she put a large wax candle shaped like the number 1 in a candle holder in front of the cake and moved the cake back far enough to be out of range.

By the time Jake was done with his small piece of cake and scoop of ice cream he was wearing more of it than he'd eaten.

Joe and Jenny were leaving and Catherine walked them to the door to say goodbye. Father and Mary were in the hall putting on coats. They left right behind Jenny and Joe.

After they were all gone, Catherine turned to Peter who was standing behind her.

"Where are Father and Mary going?" she asked.

"Out to dinner... alone. I gave Jacob one of my credit cards and they are going over to that Italian place a few blocks from here. Oh, and I gave them my key to your house so they can get back Below without having to walk far. I hope that's OK."

"No, it's fine. Is there something going on?"

Peter grinned. "Hopefully there will be. Those two have worked so closely together for so long and I don't think they even realize sometimes that the other is the opposite sex."

"Maybe Father doesn't, but Mary does. I've seen the way she looks at him."

"Then I'm not the only one. I'm glad I wasn't imagining it. I took a chance last week when I was Below and said something about how Mary was a lovely woman, and I

wondered if she'd be interested in dinner and a show Above. I had no intention of asking her out, but I wanted to light a fire under Jacob."

"Did it work?"

"He blustered a bit, then said that Mary had never shown an interest in going Above."

"Then I asked him if he'd ever asked her. He admitted that he'd never even considered it. And if he had, he had no personal money to take her out. That was when I offered my credit card. He hemmed and hawed for a few minutes then said that he'd ask her. He told me tonight that since they were already Above and dressed appropriately, they'd decided that tonight would be a good night. I suggested the Italian Restaurant and called and made them a reservation. I know the owner and told him that I was sending a friend over with my credit card, so there would be no questions."

"I hope they have a good time," said Catherine as they went back to the kitchen to see to her guests needs.

Catherine was in the living room reading when Jacob and Mary came in later. She heard them laughing as they entered the living room. She smiled.

"Catherine, we didn't know you were still up. You weren't waiting up for us were you?" asked Father.

"No, it's still early. Not even ten yet. I was just reading. And I left you some cake to take back with you. It's on the counter."

"Oh, I can't even think of any more food," said Mary with a girlish giggle.

Catherine raised her eyebrows.

"I think we've both had a bit too much wine," commented Father. "And thank you for the cake. You did keep some for yourself, didn't you?"

"A little. There's a couple pieces left."

She got up and walked to the kitchen with them.

"Oh Catherine! It's been years since I've eaten in a restaurant. I'd forgotten how nice it could be. And the food was so good. I had a pasta dish that was wonderful and the tiramisu we had for desert was divine!"

"I've been to that place with Peter a few times," Catherine agreed. "The tiramisu is the best I've ever had."

Once she'd seen Father and Mary through the basement door she went to put the chain on and make sure the front door was locked before she went up to bed.

Jake was a bright little boy. Before she knew it he was asking hundreds of questions every day. Sometimes she could answer, and sometimes she couldn't.

One evening when he was three, they were going through their nightly ritual of reading aloud. She was reading a book that someone had given him. It was about a dad who snored.

"Does my daddy snore?" he asked her after he'd made her demonstrate what snoring was.

"No, he doesn't," she said after a second of surprised silence. He'd never asked about his father before. He'd been into her room and had seen the painting and recognized her, but he hadn't asked about the man in the painting until just a few months ago. He'd asked who it was, and she'd told him. He hadn't said anything else. Now suddenly he asked a question about his father.

"How do you know?"

"Well, he was sick once, and I helped take care of him. He slept a lot, and I was there, so I know he doesn't snore."

"Do you snore?" he asked.

"I don't know. I've never been awake to hear, but Aunt Jenny and I shared a room in college and she never complained. Maybe you should ask her next time you see her."

"OK," he said and sat back waiting for her to go on with the story. Obviously he was satisfied with the answer.

One morning, a few months later, she woke to find him sitting on the end of her bed staring at the painting.

"Is Daddy wearing a mask?" he asked. He'd worn a mask a few weeks before on Halloween.

"No, that's how he looks," she said warily.

"Why?"

She remembered asking a similar question right after she'd first seen him.

“No one knows, Sweetheart. He has some ideas, and so do Grandpa and Uncle Peter, but no one really knows.”

“Doesn’t Grandpa know? Isn’t he Daddy’s daddy?”

“Well, yes he is, but Grandpa is your daddy’s adopted father. That means that no one knows who his mommy and daddy are and Grandpa took him and raised him like he was his own son. Grandpa has another son, Uncle Devin. Do you remember me telling you about him?”

Jake nodded vigorously. “Does he look like daddy?” he asked.

“No, he looks a lot like Grandpa because Grandpa is his real father.”

She hoped that she hadn’t just confused him with the complicated relationships, but Jake seemed to understand more than the average three-year-old.

It took Joe three years to convince Jenny to marry him. The night he asked her Jenny called Catherine.

“So what did you say?” Catherine asked after Jenny told her about Joe’s proposal.

“I said I’d think about it?” Jenny answered uncertainly.

“You’d think about it? Have you lost your mind?” asked Catherine when she got done laughing. “Aside from some of his eating habits, Joe is a great guy and he’s perfect for you. I don’t know why I never thought to try to fix you up with him when you first met him.”

“What’s wrong with his eating habits?” Jenny asked. “What does he eat?”

“Nothing too weird,” Catherine assured her. “He has, or at least he had a thing for chocolate cheese nuggets, but he doesn’t eat deep fried crickets or chocolate covered ants if that’s what you mean.”

“Chocolate cheese nuggets? Where does he get those?”

“I have no idea, but we’re getting off the subject. Why didn’t you say yes? You know you want to.”

“Am I that obvious?”

“As transparent as glass,” Catherine told her. “You love him. Hang up the phone and call him and tell him yes. Better yet, it’s still early, go over to his place and tell him in person.”

“Really? I mean, you worked for him. You had to have seen him in all kind of situations. Is he really as perfect as he seems?”

Catherine had to laugh again. “I wouldn’t call him perfect, but he is one of the good guys. I’m surprised he’s stayed single this long. He really does have a good heart, Jenn. He’ll be a wonderful husband, if you can overlook his occasional obsessive behavior when he’s working on a case that he really cares about. And he’ll be a great dad too. Just look at how he is with his nieces and Jake. You’ve been dating the man for three years, you should have noticed a few things by now.”

Jenny giggled and Catherine joined her.

“Besides that, nitwit. You should grab on to him with both hands and not let go! Do you hear me?”

“I hear you and I will obey! I think I just needed to hear it from you. I’ve been pretty much on my own since I was 18, and it’s a little scary to think about giving up my freedom.”

“I don’t think you’ll be giving up your freedom, Jenn. More like sharing it with the right person. Joe won’t clip your wings.”

“Thanks Cathy. I’m going to call Joe right now. Good night.”

“Night Jenn.”

Catherine was smiling when she hung up the phone. She was happy for both her friends, but it reminded her of just how alone she was.

Her days were filled with Jake, but the evenings, after she put him to bed, were quiet, too quiet, and too long and lonely.

She walked into her bedroom and the phone started ringing again.

“Hello?” She expected to hear Jenny’s voice again, but instead it was Joe.

“I didn’t wake you did I?” he asked hesitantly.

“I answered after only one ring, what do you think?” She sat on the side of the bed.

“Oh yeah, and you don’t sound like you just woke up.”

“So what’s up, Joe?” She knew, but didn’t want him to know she’d already spoken to Jenny.

“I asked Jenny to marry me tonight,” he blurted out.

“What did she say?”

“She said she had to think about it. Why did she say that?”

“Maybe because she’d like to think about it,” suggested Catherine.

“But I thought she loved me. Do you think she’d have to think about it if she did?”

“Knowing Jenn as well as I do, yes. She’s been taking care of herself since she started college. She’s worked since she was fifteen. She’s self-sufficient and independent. I’d be surprised if she *didn’t* say she had to think about it. It doesn’t mean she doesn’t love you, Joe.”

“I hope you’re right, ‘cause I’m crazy about her and the idea of living the rest of my life without her is driving me nuts. You don’t think she’s worried that I’d want her to quit her job and start having babies right away do you?”

“I don’t think so, but you’ve seen her with your nieces and Jake. She’s good with kids and she loves them. She’s got several nieces and nephews of her own and she all but raised her two younger siblings.”

“Thanks Radcliffe,” he said with a sigh.

“For what?”

“For talking me down. I was worried, but now that you’ve pointed it out. I think you’re right.”

Catherine remembered that Jenny had said she was going to call Joe. She didn’t want her to get a busy signal and chicken out, so she hurried Joe off the phone.

“Joe, I think I hear Jake. I’ve got to go. Good luck, and I’m sure it will turn out the way you want it too. Good night.”

Joe said good night and hung up and Catherine replaced her handset and flopped back on the bed.

The wedding was in February. Catherine was Jenny’s Maid of Honor and Greg Hughes was Joe’s Best Man. It was a simple ceremony with only family and a few friends attending, but the party afterward made up for it. It stretched on into the wee hours, but Catherine left when Jake started to look like he would fall asleep if he sat down.

“You’re leaving so early, Cathy?” asked Jenny.

“It’s way past Jake’s bedtime, and mine too for that matter,” she said with a wry grin.

“What time is it?”

“Almost midnight.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake. I was supposed to throw my bouquet at 10 and we were supposed to be out of here by 11. If you leave now, you won’t catch my flowers.”

“There are plenty of single women here for that particular tradition,” Catherine protested. Jenny stepped back several steps.

“Think fast,” she said and tossed her flowers at Catherine.

Catherine automatically put her hands up and caught them.

“What was that supposed to be?” she asked.

“The bouquet toss. I wanted you to catch them, so now you have. Now all we have to do is find you a boyfriend.”

“Been there and done that, Jenn. It isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

The two women hugged and Catherine went off to collect her son and their coats. She ran into Greg Hughes as they were leaving the building.

“You’re leaving early, Greg,” she observed.

“Early shift in the morning. You got your car?”

“No, I’ll get a cab.”

“Let me take you home. The little guy is going to be out like a light as soon as you get him in a car, and it will be difficult to carry him.”

“You don’t mind?” she asked.

“Not at all. You’re only a couple blocks out of my way. You wait here and I’ll go get the car.”

Catherine waited with Jake leaning on her legs. Greg was right, Jake was going to be asleep before they even pulled away from the curb.

When they got to her house, Greg carried Jake up to the house and waited while Catherine unlocked the door.

“Thanks Greg. I can take him from here.” She held out her arms.

“You sure. He’s heavy for his size.”

“I’m used to him. And I’ve got an elevator so I won’t have to climb the stairs with him.”

Greg transferred Jake.

“It was good to see you again, Cathy,” he said as he turned to go back to his car.

“Thanks Greg. It was good to see you too.”

She carried Jake into the house and kicked the door closed. She managed to get the dead bolt turned, but would have to come back to take care of the rest.

Once Jake was stripped down to his underwear and tucked into bed Catherine headed down the stairs to lock the door. She made herself a cup of tea and carried it back upstairs to her room. She sipped it as she changed and washed her face. She brushed her teeth, rinsed the tea cup and set it on the table by the door to take downstairs in the morning. She noticed the bridal bouquet that Jenny had tossed to her earlier. They weren't real flowers. Jenny had a friend who ran a flower shop that sold nothing but silk flowers. They were so perfect that it was hard to tell they weren't the real thing. There was an empty crystal vase on the corner of her dressing table. She set the bouquet in it, where she could see it.

She loved the crystal vase, it had been her grandmother's, then her mother's, and it looked perfect there on the dressing table, but she always felt a little twinge when she looked at it. It always made her think of the crystal necklace Vincent had given her that had been missing since his illness. She wondered if she would be wearing it if she hadn't lost it. She wondered if Vincent still wore his rose.

Peter had been semi-retired for the last two years. He only went to the office three days a week, didn't deliver babies, and had given up rounds at the hospital. He'd also begun taking long vacations two or three times a year. He was gradually turning everything over to his two, younger, partners.

He always had Thanksgiving dinner with Catherine and Jake, then, right after Jake's birthday he'd head to Santa Fe to spend Christmas with his daughter and her family. He usually came back to New York in February. He stayed until the end of June then went back to Santa Fe for his grand children's birthdays; one at the end of June and the other in the middle of July. He'd stay about six weeks.

Catherine cooked a small turkey for Thanksgiving, but she had all the trimmings.

“I said that I wasn't going to eat that much this year, but when I walked in and smelled it, I couldn't help myself. That was delicious, Cathy.” Peter sat back in his chair and reached for the cup of coffee next to his empty dessert plate.

“Mommy makes good punkin pie,” Jake agreed.

“How about the apple?” Catherine asked her son, who had just finished a small piece of each with ice cream and whipped cream. He’d been a bottomless pit for the last month and she was sure he’d grown at least two inches taller.

“It’s good too, but I like the punkin best,” he told her.

“If I sit here I’m not going to have the energy to clean up and put away the leftovers.” Catherine got up and started toward the kitchen.

“Can I help?” Peter asked.

“No, just enjoy your coffee. I just want to finish loading the dishwasher and put the rest of the leftovers in the refrigerator. It won’t take long. Jake wants to watch a special on TV at seven and it’s already after six.”

It only took a few minutes to put away the leftovers, then she went back into the dining room to get the dessert dishes.

She was putting the plates and silverware in the dishwasher when she heard the sound of breaking glass, followed by a thud and Jacob’s cry. Peter reached him before she did, and when she did all she could see was blood.

“Get me a couple clean dish towels,” Peter ordered as he lifted Jake and carried him into the kitchen.

Catherine didn’t think, she just did as he asked, then watched as he folded one towel into a pad and pressed it to a long gash on Jake’s right arm. He elevated the arm and the wrapped the other dish towel around it and tied it.

“That’s going to need stitches,” he stated quietly.

“Should I call EMS?” she asked as she stroked her son’s hair. Jake was whimpering but looked more scared than pained.

“No, EMS would take 20 minutes to get here and at least that much longer to get to the closest hospital ER. Then you’ll have to wait. It will take less than 10 minutes to get to the hospital chamber below. He’s bleeding pretty heavily and I don’t want to take that extra time.”

She nodded and started to pick Jake up.

“No, I’ll carry him you lead the way.”

She did just that, opening doors as she went.

“Do you remember your pipe code?” Peter asked as they approached some pipes sticking up out of the floor.

“I think so. Why?”

“Send a message and ask Father to meet us in the hospital chamber.”

She stopped and using the metal rod that was propped next to the pipe she quickly tapped out a message.

Father, meet Peter in hospital chamber ASAP. Emergency.

She waited long enough to hear the acknowledgement then she sprinted until she caught up with Peter just before he reached the hospital chamber. Father and Mary arrived as Peter was putting Jake down on one of the tables.

She stood at the head of the table stroking Jake’s hair and whispering reassurances while Peter explained the injury. Then he and Father washed up while Mary prepared what they needed.

Catherine watched intently and could have sworn she felt every stitch even though Jake barely even whimpered. They used a local anesthetic, but it still had to have hurt.

The cut was deep and long and Jake had lost what looked like a lot of blood, but no major blood vessels had been cut.

“I don’t think he’ll need a transfusion. It’s good that you brought him here so quickly,” Father said. “It won’t hurt to start an IV just to get some more fluids into him. Catherine, I’ve never asked before, but does he appear to heal quickly, like Vincent?”

She nodded. “Yes he does. The few times that he’s fallen and scraped his hands or knees, he was almost completely healed in a couple days.”

“Good, then I’m sure he won’t need a transfusion as long as we can get plenty of fluids in him with the IV and by mouth. We’ll keep him here tonight and keep an eye on him. You can take him home tomorrow. Just keep him quiet for a couple days.”

Peter looked down at their patient.

“He appears to have dozed off.” He moved to one side while Mary moved in to start the IV.

“I’m done,” she announced a few minutes later. Do you want to leave him here or move him to one of the beds?

Before anyone could answer, they were all distracted by the sound of someone running up the corridor toward them.

“Is everything all right?” Vincent stepped into the chamber as he spoke. He stopped short when he saw who was there. He looked troubled.

“I felt his fear then his pain. A few minutes later I heard the message. I had to come.” His eyes met Catherine’s from where he stood just inside the entrance.

Father and Peter backed away and slipped out of the room.

“The Bond. You’ve got a Bond with him?” Catherine asked. She moved to Jake’s right side as Vincent moved to his left.

“Yes. It started the day he was born,” Vincent admitted.

“And you still stayed away from him. I don’t understand.”

“I could feel him. I knew he was all right and that he didn’t need me.”

He tore his eyes away from Catherine and looked down at the child he hadn’t seen since he was only hours old. He was surprised see him looking back, and even more surprised when he felt small, strong fingers wrap around his hand.

“Daddy?” Jake asked.

“Yes, Jacob,” Vincent answered hesitantly.

Vincent looked at Catherine with a question in his eyes.

“He knows you. I couldn’t let him go through his life not knowing who his father is. He’s seen the painting. I answer questions when he has them.”

“Daddy, did you come because I got hurt?” Jake asked.

“Yes, I did. I heard the message on the pipes and I came.”

“I didn’t cry... not much, but it hurt.” Jake was obviously proud of that.

“You were very brave,” Vincent acknowledged. “Do you think you’d be more comfortable in a bed?”

“This *is* kinda hard.”

Vincent carefully lifted Jake as Catherine moved the IV pole. He went to the cot where Catherine pulled back the blankets. She watched as Vincent removed Jake’s shoes then pulled the blankets up and leaned down to kiss the boy’s forehead.

“Now go to sleep,” he told him.

“Will you be here when I wake up?”

“I’ll be here,” Vincent promised.

Jake closed his eyes and soon his even breathing told them that he was asleep.

“He’s a big boy,” Vincent observed.

“He takes after his father,” she told him.

“I need to bathe and change. I was helping William clean the kitchen. If you’ll stay here until I come back. I can stay with him and let you get some rest.”

She was surprised by the offer, and agreed.

When he came back, she told him that she’d just lay down on one of the other cots. He nodded as she went to the other side of the chamber and made herself comfortable.

Vincent sat and watched the two most important people in his life as they slept: his son and his son’s mother. He didn’t feel as if he had the right to call Catherine anything else. Lover? Not really, it had only happened that one time, and he couldn’t even remember that. The love of his life? Yes, she was that, but he doubted that he’d ever have the opportunity or the right to prove that to her. Not now.

He pulled his journal and a pen out of his pocket and began to write.

I saw Catherine again tonight; I’m looking at her now, but to paraphrase Tolstoy: “I try not to look long at her, as if she were the sun, yet I see her, like the sun, even without looking. She hurts my eyes and my heart to look at her.” She is beautiful. More beautiful than the last time I saw her. Motherhood agrees with her.

And my son! Dare I call him my son? She has done all the work, just as she said she would. She has raised him alone since his birth and she is doing a wonderful job.

Yet, in spite of what I did; what I asked of her, she has allowed me into Jacob’s life. He knew me when he saw me, and he wasn’t afraid. She has told him about me, and shown him Kristopher’s painting. She could have told him how I didn’t want him, and how I walked out on her when she found that she was pregnant, but she didn’t. She told him only the good. What did I do to deserve that kind of consideration?

Catherine woke later to the sound of Vincent’s voice... he was reading *The Velveteen Rabbit* to Jake. Jake was awake and every once in a while he’d interrupt with a question. Vincent would answer it patiently then go back to the story.

After a few minutes Catherine sat up and stretched.

“What time is it?” she asked.

“A little after midnight.”

“I slept a lot longer than I thought I would.”

“A reaction to the stress.”

“Comes with motherhood I guess,” she said. “Thank you for letting me rest.” She looked down at Jake. “How long have you been awake?”

“Not long. Daddy said that *The Velveteen Rabbit* is one of your favorites. How come you didn’t read it to me?”

She was surprised by the question.

“Well, when I moved before you were born, I packed up all my books and never got around to unpacking them. There were just so many other books that we were enjoying together.”

“Actually Catherine,” Vincent held the book out to her. “This is your copy. You left it and I didn’t realize that I had it until almost a year after you were here last. I was going through my books and didn’t recognize it. Then I opened it and found your name written in green crayon on the inside of the front cover. I meant to give it to Peter or Mouse to give to you, but kept forgetting.”

“Oh... My mother gave me this. Thank you for returning it.”

“I’m sorry I took so long.”

There was an awkward silence which Catherine finally broke.

“Thank you for letting me nap. I can take over now and you can get some sleep.”

Catherine settled into a chair on the other side of Jake.

Vincent took the hint that she wanted to be alone with her son and stood.

“There are other books,” Vincent pointed at the nightstand. “Father checked on him just a little while ago and he said he’d be back between six and seven in the morning. If you need anything, please don’t hesitate to call me or Father.”

He leaned over and kissed Jake on the forehead, then whispered something in his ear that made Jake smile.

He was gone without another word and Catherine was surprised at how relieved she was that he was gone.

“Daddy’s funny,” said Jake.

“Funny, ha-ha, or funny odd?” she asked, knowing he’d understand.

“Ha-ha. He was telling me stories about him and Uncle Devin. They used to do a lot of fun stuff.”

She had to smile at that. “I’ve heard some of those stories. They might sound like fun, but they are probably one of the reasons Grandpa has gray hair. Now I think it’s time for you to go to sleep. Do you have to go to the bathroom first?”

“No, Daddy took me when I woke up.”

“OK Sweetie, then good night. Sleep tight. I’ll be right here when you wake up.”

He accepted that. She noticed as he snuggled down onto his left side that the IV had been removed. Father must have been satisfied with his fluid intake.

She watched him sleep for a few minutes, then leaned over to look at the stack of books on the nightstand. There was another children’s book, and two collections of short stories. She picked one up, opened it and started to read.

At some point, she must have dozed off again because the next thing she realized she heard her son speak.

“Shh, Mama’s asleep.”

She raised her head and yawned.

“I must have dozed off.” She leaned over and picked up the book that she’d dropped on the floor, then she looked up to see Vincent standing there with a breakfast tray.

“I sure hope you brought some coffee,” she said as she stood and stretched.

He settled the tray across Jake’s legs, the picked up a mug and held it out to Catherine.

“I wouldn’t dare not to,” he told her.

She took the mug and sipped.

“Mmm, thank you.”

“When did you doze off,” he asked.

She picked up the book and looked at it. “It couldn’t have been very long, I finished the book and I remember hearing the 5 am time hack on the pipes.”

"It's just a little after six," Vincent told her. "Father should be there in a few minutes."

Jake was almost done with his breakfast when Father came in. He shoed Catherine and Vincent out to go get a proper breakfast while he checked Jake.

"I don't think I really want anything right now," she said as they stepped out of the chamber, "but I really would like to speak to you in private, if that's OK?"

"Of course." He didn't take her to his chamber, as she had expected, but to Father's study.

"This is private this early," he told her as he indicated that she should take a seat.

She sat and he sat across from her.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's about Jake. I honestly didn't think that he'd ever meet you, or at least I didn't think it would happen until he was older, but now that it's happened, I don't think we can stuff that particular cat back into the bag." She didn't intend it to come out that way, but it had, and Vincent hadn't flinched, so she continued. "He's going to want to get to know you. And he can be trusted to keep a secret. I don't know if he realizes where he is, or how he got here, but he does know that there are certain things about his father that he can't share with anyone. He'll be five in a little over a week, but he has the understanding of an older child."

"He does know where he is. Last night he asked me why you went through the basement to get here, and I gave him a simple explanation. I explained that it was a secret place, and that he couldn't tell anyone, and he understood completely. We talked a little about why I've stayed away. I tried to make sure he knows that it's not his fault, and I think he understood that too."

"Do you think you'll want to spend time with him?"

"Catherine, I don't think it would be a good idea to let him get too attached to me or to this place." Catherine started to protest and he held up his hand. "Please hear me out... I still believe what I said almost six years ago. He's lucky that he isn't like me. He can live Above with you. He can go to a regular school, have a career, do all the things that would have been denied him if he'd been like me."

"But he is like you, Vincent," she protested. "More than you'd think just looking at him. On the outside he's like me, but on the inside he's like you. He's stronger than the average five-year-old, and although he was a normal size when he was born, he's now

bigger than most of the kids his age. Peter said that he looks more like a seven-year-old. He's definitely taller than the other five year olds. If he keeps growing like he has been, he'll be taller than me by the time he's nine, maybe before. He's already lost quite a few of his baby teeth, except for his molars. Father said that you matured quickly up to puberty. Then you slowed down, and you were almost sixteen before puberty started changing your body."

"Yes, I was quite skinny until I was sixteen, then within a year, I suddenly started to become more muscular and I grew several more inches."

"The point I'm trying to make is, that Jake can *pass* Uptop, he will probably be able to do most anything he wants. I don't know about sports in school; he's stronger than other boys his age. That could cause problems. He'll be able to go to college, but I worry that if he has a physical by anyone but Peter or Father, someone might find something different. Something besides his very good vision, hearing, sense of smell, slight higher than average oxygen levels in his blood, and slightly denser bones."

"So I could still ruin his life," Vincent observed with a pained look.

"No, that's not likely! He's with people who love him and who he loves. It just might make it easier for him to understand if he had the guidance of someone who has a better understanding, that's all."

"Catherine, how do you think he's going to feel a few years from now, when he wants to play baseball or football in school and you tell him maybe he shouldn't because he inherited a few strange abnormalities from his father, and if anyone finds out about them he might have to explain them. Or doctors might want to study him and try to figure out why he is as he is."

"There is no way that you are going to make me feel guilty for not terminating that pregnancy when you wanted me to! I love my son and I loved him from the instant that Peter told me I was pregnant. I am not sorry I have him. If you don't love him and don't want to have anything to do with him, then just say so. Don't make excuses; it's not like you."

"That isn't what I'm trying to do! All I'm saying is that there will come a time when he's not going to thank me for being his father. Perhaps it would be better if I continued to stay out of his life. He may have his feelings hurt by it now, but it's bound to work out for the better when he's older."

“Whatever you say!” She stood, disgusted with Vincent right now. When she’d first seen him the previous evening, she’d felt a thrill run through her body. He was still the same, or at least she’d thought he was, but somewhere along the line over the last years he’d lost his sympathy for others; his empathy. She wondered if he treated everyone like this. She didn’t say anything else, just quickly left the study and made her way back to the hospital chamber.

“So, when can we go home?” she asked with forced cheerfulness when she entered.

“Anytime you want to,” Father told her. “He’s finished his breakfast, and all his vitals are normal. He’s healing well. I would like to take a look at it on Sunday. I might take the stitches out then.”

“Could you come up to the house to do that?” she asked. She stepped close to Father and continued in a whisper. “I don’t want him to see too much of the tunnels. Kind of out of sight, out of mind. I don’t want him to let something slip accidentally.”

“Of course Catherine.” He sensed that things hadn’t gone well between her and his son. And he was sure he’d have a few choice words to say to Vincent later. “I’ll have one of the children lead you back to your threshold.”

Catherine managed to keep Jake quiet for the next couple days, but that didn’t make him talk less. By Sunday, she wanted to scream. Every other word out of his mouth was ‘Daddy’ or ‘my father’. She’d done all the work of raising him and taking care of him and less than 24 hours in Vincent’s presence and all he could talk about was his father.

Father took the stitches out when he visited on Sunday afternoon.

“It really is amazing how quickly he heals. Is he still taking the antibiotics Peter prescribed?” he asked as they watched Jake going up the stairs to play in his room.

“Yes, Peter said to take them for a few days after the stitches came out.”

“That’s good advice... Vincent told me about your conversation.”

“I’d rather not talk about it,” she told him. “I was disappointed with him when I first told him that I was pregnant. I don’t know why I expected him to act any different now. I guess I hoped that he’d make an effort for Jake, but I was wrong. I just don’t get it Father, he loves children so much, but he can’t seem to find room in his heart for his own son. I know he didn’t want him, but... I don’t know, Father, it just hurts.”

"I know Catherine. I'm watching this now and I'm seeing what I did to Devin. Devin was lucky that he didn't know at the time that I was his father and that I was rejecting him. Jacob doesn't see it yet, but when he does, it's going to hurt. All we can do is love him and try to make up for Vincent's neglect."

"Well, at least Vincent is acknowledging that he's Jake's father. I just wish he'd do something more than that. There will also be a time when Jake has all kinds of questions and I'm not going to be able to answer them." What Father had said, piqued her curiosity. "Can I ask you a question about what you just said?"

"Certainly Catherine," he looked dubious.

"I've always wondered why you didn't acknowledge Devin. That has always bugged the daylight out of me. How would the same man who'd gotten himself black balled and nearly deported because he had the courage of his convictions and did the right thing, have any reason for not acknowledging his son?"

"Stupidity?" he suggested with a sad smile. "It's really difficult for me to put such nebulous reasons into words... Grace didn't tell me that she was pregnant for quite a while. She said that she hadn't realized it at first. We weren't actually *living together*. We were still in the upper tunnels at the time and the temperatures there are more dependent on the temperatures Above. In the winter we sometimes shared our blankets for warmth. Grace was a sweet woman, very giving, and wise in her own way. When she told me that she was pregnant, I was shocked, not at her, but at me, an educated man, a medical doctor and I hadn't even considered the possibility that something like that could result from our... *encounter*. I blustered and she quickly said that it was possible that the baby wasn't mine. Even then I was sure she hadn't been with anyone else, but I grabbed onto that possibility with both hands. It did allow me to stay more or less detached. I dredged up everything that I remembered about obstetrics and gave her the best care that I could for the rest of her pregnancy and during her labor and delivery, but I couldn't save her. If she'd been in a hospital Above, they probably would have saved her, but I couldn't."

Father stared off into the distance, remembering. He looked sad.

"Then there's a possibility that Devin isn't your son?" she asked.

"No, he's my son. As I said, I knew she hadn't been with anyone else. She didn't trust easily, and she trusted me. She'd gone from an abusive family to an abusive husband. That was how she wound up where she was. She finally gave up and left her husband. She couldn't go back to her family. She felt that the streets were safer than either of

those places. Devin looks just like my father. I've got some old pictures somewhere. I'll have to find them and show you sometime."

"Did you name him?" she asked.

"No, Grace did. Before he was born, she told me that her maiden name was Devin. When she left her husband, she was sure that he'd probably divorced her, so when she needed a last name, she used Devin. She wanted that name given to her child, as a first name. Even then, we didn't pay much attention to surnames. She said that if she had a boy, and she was sure it would be, then Devin should be his name, and if it was a girl, she thought Devina had a nice ring to it."

"You know, he's using Devin Wells now," she said.

"No, I didn't, but it makes sense. I ran into Peter, Above, only a week before Devin was born. He started his residency when I was Chief Resident and we became friends. He became one of our first Helpers. He insisted from the beginning that it would be a good idea to register the births of all the children born Below, just in case any of them decided they wanted to live Above when they grew up, or if the parents moved back. When he asked me what to put on Devin's birth certificate I told him that I was Devin's father and to give him my name. He was the only one who knew."

"Before he left with Charles that last time, Devin told me that Peter had given him a copy of his birth certificate when he came down to examine Charles the last time they were in town. We stay in touch because I told him that if Charles needed anything to contact me and I'd cover it. He's had a few medical expenses over the last few years, not a lot, but Devin has called me a few times. He's been told by several different doctors that the best medical care for Charles' medical issues is right here in New York City, so they've been working their way back over the last year."

"He did say something to that effect in his last letter," Father told her.

"You never did say why you didn't acknowledge him to everyone here."

"When Grace realized that she wasn't going to live to see him grow up, she told me she wanted him to be known as *her* son. Something that she'd done right, all by herself. A few of the people knew what her last name was. That was where the idea of a naming ceremony came from. It's evolved from the first one for Devin. When Grace died, I handed Devin over to one of the other women of our group who was already nursing her own child. I saw him from time to time, and made sure he was provided for, but he

stayed with her until he was almost a year old. She brought him back to me when she decided to take her child and go back to the world Above.

“By then, we’d found the lower tunnels, were we now live, and we’d moved there. Sarah had commandeered one of the chambers that we found was easy to keep warm and she was using it as a nursery for the three babies we had at the time. One was hers and the other two had been found abandoned in the Park. I took Devin to her and she gladly took him. It just became a habit to allow others to look after him while I went about the business of helping to build and guide our group. John and Anna were with us then, had been since shortly after Devin’s birth.

“Devin was three when he came back to me, at least for the nights. He was sleeping in a chamber off what became the study, and I was getting used to the idea that I had a son. I was planning to tell him when he got a little older and I thought he’d understand. Then Anna found Vincent, and I became more than a little obsessed with him. At first he was a medical anomaly. John insisted he was probably an experiment gone awry, maybe a cross between a feline and a primate. Even he never voiced the opinion that someone might be experimenting with human/animal hybrids. He was quite all right with allowing Vincent to stay with me, mostly because he cried so incessantly in the beginning. Once he quit crying, it was quite apparent that he was intelligent, in fact, he progressed pretty much as Jacob has been. After that, there just never seemed to be an appropriate time to tell Devin that he was my son. Vincent had begun to call me Father, as had some of the other children. Devin seemed to go out of his way to avoid calling me that.”

“I hope you two manage to work through this,” she said. “I didn’t think much of his con artist ways when I first figured out what was going on, but he’s kind of grown on me.” She laughed. “Kind of like mold... but I do think that he’ll be an interesting uncle for Jake.”

“Just as long as Jacob doesn’t decide he wants to be like him,” added Father.

“Absolutely, but Devin has mended his ways, and Jacob could have worse role models.”

Catherine and Jake had a quiet Christmas. She had several visitors from Below, but none of them was Vincent. Jake only asked once why his Daddy didn’t come to visit.

“Well, Sweetie,” she began after bit of thought. “He’s a busy man. He’s the strongest out of all the men where he lives, and he has to do a lot of work that the others can’t do; like lifting heavy stuff. And he’s a teacher and has classes.”

“He has to take care of all the kids where he is?” Jake asked.

“That’s part of it,” she agreed.

“I guess they need him more than I do, since I have you.”

He went back to the coloring book and they never mentioned the subject again. That alone made Catherine’s heart ache. Jake was experiencing disillusionment too early.

Catherine hadn’t decided if or when she would go back to work but one of the requirements of maintaining her license to practice law was that she complete a specific number of continuing legal education credits every two years. She had been taking classes and seminars at Columbia since the previous summer and was attending the last seminar at the end of January when she noticed that Luz Corrales was taking the same class. She wondered if Luz was still running her neighborhood law clinic. When she ran into Luz as they left the lecture hall on the edge of campus she figured it might be a good time to find out.

“So how’s the world treating you?” asked Luz as they stopped just inside the doors to button up their coats and pull on gloves.

“Pretty well,” Catherine answered. “How about you?”

“I stay busy,” said Luz as they pushed through the door into the frigid afternoon. “It’s days liked this that I almost wish my folks had never left sunny San Juan. God, it’s cold!”

“Let’s go for coffee,” suggested Catherine, on a whim. “There’s a place less than a block from here that has great pastries.” Brooke and Samantha were babysitting Jake, and a little more time wouldn’t make a difference.

“Sure. Got to be better than walking all the way to the bus on an empty stomach in this weather.”

They hurried along the sidewalk and barely spoke again until they were seated at a small table inside the warm coffee shop. Catherine had tea and a scone, and Luz had coffee and a piece of warm apple pie.

“OK, so what’s up Chandler,” asked Luz after she swallowed her first bite of pie and washed it down with coffee. “Got another case my people are messing up?”

Catherine smiled. "You always did have a way about you, Luz... I left the DA's office about six years ago."

"I kind of noticed that you haven't been in the papers lately. In fact, the last thing I read about you was that your dad had died. I was sorry to hear that." Luz's voice softened. Catherine knew that she was close to her parents.

"I left the DA's office shortly after my father died."

"Did you go back to your dad's firm?"

"No, actually I haven't been working. I have a son. He just turned five a couple months ago."

"Burch's?" Luz asked.

"Why does everyone always ask that?" asked Catherine with a laugh. "No, Elliot is not the father and I haven't seen him in years. I was seeing someone else, but he's not in the picture any longer. Jake will be starting school soon, and I was thinking about going back to work part time. I know I was doing some good at the DA's office, but the hours there are not compatible with being a single mother. Are you still running your neighborhood law clinic?"

"Yeah, actually we got a couple grants, and we've moved up, into slightly nicer offices, larger place. If you're looking for a job, I can't afford to pay what you'd cost."

"Actually, I was thinking about volunteering two or three days a week."

Luz's face lit up with the biggest smile Catherine had ever seen on it. "You work for me? For free? You're hired! When do you want to start?"

Catherine had to laugh. "When do you need me?" she asked.

"Um... Last week? Seriously, you're not pulling my leg. You really want to do this?"

"Yes, I do! Right now I need something where I can make my own hours. I could go back to Chandler & Coolidge, but if I was bored before, it would only be worse now. With you, I know I'll be doing something worthwhile, and I probably won't have time to be bored. What kind of work do you do?"

"A little bit of everything. Some courtroom work, but mostly we help people deal with pissy landlords, small lawsuits, divorce, custody, wills, contracts, setting up small businesses. We have two paid clerks who do nothing but help people fill out forms. It's not boring; no two clients are alike, and I think I've seen it all since I started working there."

“You’re the director now? I think I saw that in the newspaper.”

“For almost three years now. We are able to pay half a dozen employees: me, two clerks, two lawyers and a secretary. We have six more volunteers who do filing and typing and run errands. We could really use another lawyer, but we can’t afford to pay one.”

“Then this should work for both of us. I don’t want to work full time; maybe just 18 or 20 hours a week, and I can afford to work as a volunteer. So when would you like me to start?”

“How about next Wednesday? We have a staff meeting scheduled for 9am. Come then and I’ll introduce you to everyone and show you around afterward. And if you need daycare there is one right next door. They take drop offs and some of our clients use them while they are in our office for appointments.” She handed Catherine one of her cards with the address.

That set the tone. Catherine showed up at 8:30 and checked out the daycare. It was clean and bright and the people working there seemed to be interested in their charges. She filled out paper work and paid for the first week while she watched Jake interact with the other children. He hadn’t had a lot of opportunities to be with other children. This would be good for him.

After the staff meeting she and Luz talked and they agreed that Catherine would work Wednesdays through Fridays, six hours a day, from 9am to 3pm, it would mesh perfectly with Jake’s school hours when school started. She could drop him off at school, go to work then pick him up on her way home on the days she worked.

Catherine had been working with Luz for several months when Luz came into the tiny office Catherine had been allotted.

“I have huge favor to ask of you, Cathy,” she said as she dropped into the client chair in front of Catherine’s desk.

“Ask away.”

“I just saw a client. A couple, they are here asking for help in getting their daughter out of jail. She was picked up for prostitution and her bail has been set ridiculously high because they are trying to get her to rat out her pimp.”

“By ‘they’ you mean...?”

“Cops, DA.”

“And you want me to do what?”

“Well, if what her folks are saying is true, the girl wasn’t turning tricks voluntarily. She’s been missing for several months. She was only fifteen when she disappeared. She was on her way home from school... Catholic school... and she just never made it home. The parents reported her missing, but the cops treated it as a runaway and made it a low priority. The parents started their own search. They’ve handed out flyers with her picture. That was how they found out that she’s been working as a prostitute. The mom told me that her daughter wanted to be a nun, there is no way that she would be doing this willingly. They tracked her down and had a lot of information, that they were going to take to the police, but then they got a call from CPS that their daughter was in custody. They haven’t been allowed to talk to her yet, but they have talked to a social worker who was on the case. Although CPS was initially involved because the girl is barely sixteen, the DA has decided to handle her as an adult.”

Luz handed a file to Catherine. She opened it and saw that Joe’s name was sprinkled liberally through it.

“I take it that you want me to talk to Joe about this.”

“If you still know him and are willing.”

“I know him. He’s married to my best friend, Jenny Aaronson and I as maid of honor at their wedding. Can I get on the record as...” She glanced at the file. “... Anita’s lawyer?”

“As soon as I can make the call. That’s the only good thing about them treating her as an adult. We can get someone in to talk to her.”

“I want to talk to her first, get her story. Then I’ll go talk to Joe.” She tapped the file. “I’ll take this home with me tonight and look it over then go straight to the detention center tomorrow morning.

Since she wasn’t going to the office on Thursday, she asked Brooke to babysit instead of taking Jake to the daycare.

“I won’t be at the office until this afternoon, but if you need me I just got this.” She held up a gray object a little longer than her hand.

“What is it?” asked Brooke.

“It’s a mobile phone. Peter suggested I get one for security. I left the number on the pad next to the phone in the kitchen. It works pretty well. If I’m not available, it will go to an automated answering service so just leave a message. I’ll call you back as soon as I can.”

“Don’t show that to Mouse,” Brooke warned as Catherine was leaving. “He’ll try to find one he can *take* and then see if he can make it better.”

“Oh, God forbid. Father would never forgive me!”

Catherine took a cab to the detention center and was shown into an interview room with a girl who looked much younger than her sixteen years. She was a pretty girl, who looked not more than thirteen. She had a bruise on one cheek and a lost look in her eyes.

Catherine sat down across the table from the girl and extended her hand after she set down her briefcase.

“Hello, Anita. My name is Cathy Chandler. I’m a lawyer. Your parents sent me to see if I can help you.”

Anita didn’t take her hand, but looked at her incredulously.

“My parents? You must be mistaken. They won’t want to have anything to do with me, not after what I’ve done.”

“No Anita. You are the one who is mistaken. They’ve been looking for you since you went missing, even when the police wouldn’t help them, they worked on their own. They had almost tracked you down when they got the call from CPS that the police had you in custody.”

“They must be so ashamed of what I’ve done,” she started to cry.

“They know you weren’t doing it of your own free will. That is why I hired me. They want you home or wherever you feel safe.” She handed the girl a tissue. “But to make that happen, I need to know exactly what happened to you.”

It took Anita a little while to get started, but when she finally did, it was as if she couldn’t tell it fast enough. Catherine got it all on tape.

After she left Anita, Catherine walked a couple blocks to a café that had tables outside on the sidewalk. She sat down and after she ordered, she pulled out her cell phone and dialed Luz’s private number.

“And?” Luz prompted after Catherine told her that she’d just talked to Anita.

“To put it in a nutshell, she was a sex slave, Luz. Two guys grabbed her as she was walking home from school one day last September. They stuffed her in the back of a van. They tied her up and drove for hours. When they finally stopped, she had no idea where she was. She was kept in a small dark room for a while. She’s not sure how long. She was drugged most of the time, and she said she was sure she was raped while she was drugged, but she doesn’t remember it. Then an older man, maybe 45 or 50 started coming in several times a day and just talking to her. Basically brainwashing her. Telling her that her parents wouldn’t want her anymore now that she was tarnished, no longer a virgin. She said that he told her his name was Jorge, but that she should call him Daddy from then on, since he’d be taking care of her just like her daddy. He had other girls in the house and he told one of the older ones to teach Anita what she needed to know. She found out later that it was only a little more than a week between the time that she was kidnapped and when Jorge drove her to her first ‘appointment.’ Some of the girls were there willingly, but out of the ten that he had living in the house with him and one older woman, four of them had been snatched off the street like her. I got the whole story on tape; you can listen to it later. I’m heading over to the DA’s office as soon as I finish lunch.”

“I was honestly afraid that she might not talk to you, Cathy,” Luz said. “I’m surprised she opened up to you. She wouldn’t even talk to the social worker.”

“Everyone else, including the social worker, is on the other side, Luz. She’s begun to identify with the lowlife who kidnapped her. She’s protecting him. I mean it’s obvious, from the way she talked about him, that she hates and fears him, but she is still protecting him. I told her I was there to help her, and she chose to trust me. I didn’t question it, I just went with it and got as much as I could.”

“I hope you have just as good luck with Maxwell.”

“Me too. He and I butted heads a lot when I worked with him, but he’s not an unreasonable man.”

Catherine reminded herself of that as she walked into Joe’s office an hour later.

“Cathy! It’s great to see you. Jenn was just saying the other night that it’s been a while since you and Jake were over to the house.” He hugged her and stood back. “You want to come back to work for me?” he asked hopefully.

She smiled and shook her head. "Sorry, not this time. Actually I already have a job. It's a volunteer position with Luz Corrales' at the Neighborhood Law Clinic."

Joe was surprised by that.

"I have a bad feeling that you're not here on a social visit."

"You're right. I'm here to talk to you about Anita Ortiz."

Joe waved at a chair.

"Have a seat... You her lawyer?" he asked once she was settled.

"On the record, yes. I talked to her this morning. What are you planning?"

"You've probably figured out by now that we are holding her in an attempt to get information out of her."

"Why her and not the other girls?"

"As far as we could determine, she was the one who'd been with Jorge Alveda the least amount of time; the one most likely to talk."

"And she was the youngest and is scared to death of the man. She's afraid that if she talks to the police that he'll kill her and her whole family. He told her over and over that if she ran away from him or did anything to cross him, that is what he'd do."

"And she's gullible enough to believe him?"

"Joe, she's only 16; 15 when she was kidnapped. She's just a child. She's scared half to death about all of this. She's been raped, abused, beaten and God knows what. This is a girl who wanted to be a nun. She thinks that not even God loves her now because of what she's done. And the sad part is that she didn't choose to do any of it."

"But we need the information she has," Joe told her. "We're aware of what Alveda has been doing, and that he's been doing it for years. In addition to his stable of prostitutes he is peddling underage girls and he sells drugs. He uses drugs to keep his girls in line. We were surprised that this Anita was clean when we picked her up."

"She said he kept her drugged for the first few days, but that she hasn't had anything since. She did notice that some of the other girls were using."

"She's just lucky. She must have been cooperating." Joe looked at her with an arched eyebrow.

“Out of fear, Joe. It’s as effective as any drug in controlling people. Before I left Anita, I asked her if she’d be willing to talk to you if I was with her. She wanted assurances that she and her family would be safe.”

“We can do that!” Joe told her. “I’d like to talk to her this afternoon if you can do it.”

“Just you and me, OK? She told me that every time someone has been there questioning her, there were half a dozen intimidating people in the room. You have to remember that she’s just a scared little girl.”

“Can we take a stenographer?” he asked.

“How about a tape recorder? She let me tape our conversation when I talked to her his morning.”

“I guess the tape can be transcribed. As soon as we pick up Alveda, we can release her, but she’ll have to agree to testify.”

“I think we can guarantee that. I know a young woman who was in a similar position once. I think that she can convince Anita that there is a way to have a good life after something like this.”

While Joe got his things together and went to tell Moreno that he was going to be out of the office for the rest of the afternoon, Catherine called Brooke to tell her that she’d be late.

“How late?” asked Brooke.

“I’m not sure. Can you take Jake Below with you and get him some dinner?”

“Sure, and if you aren’t home yet I’ll see to that he gets a bath and goes to bed.”

“Thank you, Brooke. You are a jewel.”

“Baby sitter,” she explained to Joe when he came back into his office.

Joe got his statement from Anita and he called the judge from the phone at the detention center to request arrest and search warrants for Jorge Alveda and his house. He wanted to be in on the arrest with Greg Hughes, so he and Catherine parted in front of the building.

“Thanks Cathy. As usual you cracked the nut we couldn’t even dent. Are you sure you don’t want to come back and work for us?”

“Positive, Joe. Today is the perfect example of the reason why... I’m supposed to work three days a week, six hours a day. It’s almost 6, I’ve been at it since 8, when I was only supposed to work from 9am to 3pm. I’ve put in ten hours today. I’ve already worked 16 hours this week, and I’m only supposed to work 18 total. Whenever I get involved in a legal matter with you, it always runs into overtime. I want time to be a mom too, not just a lawyer.”

“I get you. Same reason Jenn’s now working from home most of the time. She’s still editing but she does it around the kids, and between loads of laundry.”

“She’s lucky. Say ‘hi’ for me and kiss the girls. Tell Jenny that I’ll call her this weekend and we’ll see if we can come up with a time that she and I can hang out, just us, like we used to.”

“That means I get to babysit,” he didn’t look all that thrilled at the prospect.

“I can bring Jake over and then it will be two against two,” she suggested as she hugged him.

“That just might work!”

Catherine went next door to pick Jake up at the daycare on the Friday before Father’s day. The woman who ran the daycare called her over as soon as she came in.

“Ms. Chandler, I wanted to give you a heads up about Jake,” she said as Catherine walked up.

“About what?” She turned and looked at her son who was helping to build a Lego castle on the large table in the back of the room.

“We made Fathers’ Day cards today, and Amanda didn’t know that Jake’s father isn’t in the picture, and instead of giving him something else to do, he made a card too.”

“That’s all right,” Catherine assured her. “He knows his father, and we might be able to mail him the card. It’s no big deal.”

“Well, Amanda thought that the way he drew his father was, well, different.”

“Oh?” Catherine hoped that Jake hadn’t been as detail oriented as he usually was.

The woman handed Catherine the piece of folded construction paper. Across the top were the words: *To my Daddy*, and under them was a drawing of two people; one tall and one small. The tall one was turned sideways to the viewer. He wore boots, blue

jeans and a blue work shirt. He was looking down at the smaller figure. His long hair hung forward and covered his face, and his hands were in his pockets. The shorter figure was dressed as Jake was today in blue shorts, red sneakers and a red t-shirt. The smaller figure's hair was the same color as that of the taller figure who stood looking down at him. Catherine had to smile. Jake had quite effectively kept his father's identity a secret.

"What's wrong with it?" she asked.

"Most of the other children drew their father facing front, and if they drew themselves in they were usually holding hands with their father. Amanda is studying to be an elementary school art teacher and she thinks that Jake might just have a little artistic talent."

"I guess we will just have to explore that," Catherine said with a smile.

"I hope you do. Is his father artistic? Perhaps a musician? Amanda was speculating from the way Jake drew him that he might be a musician, and that was why he's not around."

Catherine frowned. She was a little touchy about her privacy. The woman was obviously fishing for information, and it felt like an invasion.

"I really don't think that's any of Amanda's business. If either of you want to know something, I suggest that you just ask me... Excuse me."

She went across the room for Jake and they left.

"Mom, can I give the Fathers' Day card to Daddy?" he asked her when they were settled in the cab.

"I don't know. We'll have to see if we can send a message and have someone pick it up." She could send it to him care of Peter, she supposed. "But he may not get it in time for Fathers' Day."

"We could just take it to him," he suggested logically. "It only takes a few minutes to walk there."

Obviously, he hadn't forgotten his few trips Below.

"We'll see," she told him.

He brought it up several more times that evening and on Saturday.

When she examined her motives after Jake had gone to bed on Saturday, she realized that she didn't want to take the card to Vincent because she wasn't sure how she'd deal with seeing him again.

She'd had hopes that he'd want to spend more time with Jake after he'd met him at Thanksgiving, but Jake hadn't seen him once in the months since. Jake had mentioned that Vincent hadn't been at dinner the time Brooke had taken him Below. She didn't know who was more disappointed, her or Jake. She was used to it, but Jake had been hurt.

She didn't want to ruin Jake's Fathers' Day, so she decided to take him Below the next morning.

When he came downstairs to breakfast the next morning, she told him that they would take the card to Vincent once he'd eaten and dressed. He was so excited he hardly finished his breakfast. He ran back upstairs and was back in only a few minutes.

"Did you brush your teeth?" she asked as she ran her fingers through his hair and tried to make it lay down. It was curly and the same texture and color as Vincent's, and when it started to get long it was hard to control.

"Yes. Can we go now?" He held the card and was almost hopping back and forth from one foot to the other in his excitement.

"Let me find my shoes." She slipped on the tennis shoes she'd left by the back door, then picked up a flashlight and took sweaters off the rack and handed Jake his.

"It's summer," he said.

"Not Below," she told him. "It's always cool there."

He put on the sweater and followed her into the basement. She pulled the pipe and Jake watched as the door swung open. She lifted the hinged piece of counter and laid it back on the stationary side. Jake followed her through.

"You know how to get there?" he asked.

"It's simple, and someone marked it on the wall." She flashed her light on the chalked arrows as they passed them.

After only a few minutes on the steep downward sloping path, they came to the intersection. There were torches and candles burning here and Catherine turned off her flashlight. They quickly reached Father's study and Catherine waved Jake through the door ahead of her.

Father looked up from the book he was reading and smiled.

“Jacob, Catherine! What a pleasant surprise!”

“Happy Fathers’ Day, Grandpa,” Jake called as he ran across the chamber.

“I hope we’re not disturbing you,” Catherine said as she followed at a more sedate pace.

“You could never be a disturbance. You know that I feel that I don’t see this young man nearly often enough.” He lifted Jake into his lap. “My, but you’ve grown! You’re getting heavy.”

“Mama says I feel like a ton of bricks,” Jake reported.

“Well, I don’t know if you’re quite that heavy yet, but I’m sure that you are heavier than you were the last time I saw you. So to what do I owe this honor?”

“I made a card for my daddy.” Jacob waved the piece of gray construction paper.

“Is Vincent around?” asked Catherine.

“I’m sorry,” Father directed his words at Jake. “He’s gone to survey one of the lower levels. It’s not that far away, but the pipes haven’t been extended to that area yet. I’m not sure when to expect him back. These trips usually last several days and he’s only been gone since yesterday morning.”

Jake looked disappointed, almost to the point of tears.

“We can leave the card for him, Jake,” Catherine rushed to point out.

“But I wanted to give it to him myself.” Jake was seldom sulky, but she knew this was important to him.

“I know, Sweetie, but he’s not here, and you heard Grandpa say that he isn’t sure when he will be back. If you leave the card, I’m sure Grandpa will make sure he gets it.”

“I have an even better idea. Why don’t you get your mother to show you where your father’s chamber is, and you can leave it for him there. He’ll be sure to see it as soon as he gets back.”

“Can we?” Jake asked.

Catherine nodded and held her hand out for his. “Come on, I know a shortcut.”

He jumped down from Father’s lap and ran to Catherine. She took his hand and led him down a short tunnel, through the small bathing chamber that Father and Vincent shared and into Vincent’s chamber.

At first she thought it hadn't changed; except that it was less cluttered, but then she started noticing differences. There was a different table in the center; it was larger, and there was room for Vincent's chair and three or four more. She looked around and then it dawned on her that the bed was missing. The stained glass window was still in place but instead of a bed underneath it, there was an old leather sofa. She smiled when she saw it. It was the one that had been in her dad's home office since she was a little girl. She'd napped on it more times than she could count. When she'd emptied the penthouse after his death she'd sent a lot of clothes and furniture Below.

Jake was all over the chamber. He wasn't touching anything, but he was looking at everything. She watched him as she took in the changes.

"Mama, is this Daddy's bedroom?" he called from behind a screen right next to the tunnel they'd just stepped out of.

She rounded the screen and stepped behind Jake.

"Looks like it, Honey." The chamber was almost as large as the other one and the pieces of furniture that were missing from the original chamber were here: his bed, the old smaller writing table, a couple armoires and an upholstered bench. There was also the leather easy chair that matched the sofa in front, some lamps and a small bookshelf.

"Can I leave the card on his bed?" Jake asked.

"He might not see it right away," Catherine warned.

"But he'll see it before he goes to bed."

Jake crossed the floor to the bed. He opened the card and stood it up on the bed. As Catherine looked closer she noticed that the bed was a new one, or, at least, new to Vincent. The old one had been a small double bed, but this one looked like it must be a king. Much more suitable for a man Vincent's size.

"Do you think that's OK, Mama?" Jake asked.

"That will be fine. He can't miss it there," she told him. She suddenly felt like she had to get out of there. "Come on. Let's go back and visit with Grandpa for a while."

They stayed for lunch, and went home early in the afternoon. Jake was fascinated with everything. The other children told him about the stuff they did and he went home with stars in his eyes, convinced that his father lived in a magical place.

“Do you think Daddy got my card?” Jake asked later as Catherine put away the book they’d been reading.

“If he’s home, I’m sure he has,” she told him. “If he’s not home, he’ll find it when he gets back.”

“Do you think he’ll like it?”

“I’m sure he will, Honey.” She tucked the blankets around him and kissed him on the cheek. “Now you go to sleep.”

“I’m not sleepy.” Jake had never been one to fight going to bed, but he’d been keyed up since they returned from delivering his card to Vincent. Or at least to Vincent’s chamber. She knew that Jake hoped that Vincent would acknowledge the card in some way; really hoped he’d come up for a visit, but after their encounter the previous Thanksgiving, Catherine had her doubts.

“Then humor me,” she suggested. “Close your eyes and lay still.”

He did as she suggested and it didn’t take long for him to fall asleep.

Catherine went up to her bedroom to get ready for bed. She changed, but it was still early, so she put on her robe and went back down to the living room to watch some TV before she went to bed.

She gave up on TV about an hour later and was reading when she thought she heard the basement door in the kitchen.

She was halfway to the kitchen when Vincent stepped into the room.

“I’m sorry.” He sounded a little out of breath. “I know it’s late, but I wanted to thank Jake for the card.”

Catherine debated whether or not to wake Jake, but she knew he’d be upset if he found out that Vincent had been there and she hadn’t.

“He’s asleep, but go on up. He’d never forgive me if I didn’t let you see him. He’s on the second floor. Turn right at the top of the stairs, it’s the first room. The door is ajar.”

“Thank you, Catherine,” he said and sprinted up the stairs.

Catherine was surprised. She hadn’t really expected him, and she wondered what it meant. Was he ready to accept being a father, or was this just a polite call to say thank you?

She went back to the couch and sat. She tried to go back to her book, but she was distracted. She wondered what they were saying to each other.

It was almost an hour later when Vincent came back downstairs. He was carrying his cloak and he looked a little perturbed.

“I never expected that; I’ve never received a Fathers’ Day card before.”

“How many other children do you have?” The words were out before she had time to think.

His head snapped up and their eyes met. Catherine closed hers and sighed.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that to sound like it did. I guess I’m getting sarcastic in my old age.” She stood. “Make yourself comfortable. I’ll make some tea.” She was surprised when he actually sat down.

In the kitchen she put the kettle on the burner and turned on the flame. She went through the procedure on autopilot. When the water boiled, she filled the teapot then picked up two mugs in one hand, the teapot in the other and carried them out to the living room.

Vincent had thrown his cloak over the back of the sofa he was sitting on. His legs were stretched out in front of him and his head was back.

“I didn’t see the card when I first got back. I was in a hurry to bathe and join Father for dinner. I just rushed in and tossed my cloak on the bed. Father asked me if I’d seen it. I found it when I went back after dinner. I would have been here sooner, except it seemed like everyone I met had something extremely important they had to tell me. I’m sorry I woke him.”

“Was he glad to see you?” she asked.

“Yes, he was.” He lifted his head and looked at her. “He said that he knew I’d come.”

“Then it’s good that you woke him. He’s talked about nothing else since he brought that card home from school on Friday.”

“I thought school was out for the summer.”

“It is, it’s actually a day care. I work six hours a day three days a week, and I drop him off at the day care next door to the office.”

“What did I ever do to deserve the faith he has in me?”

Catherine had to smile at that one. Vincent had disappointed her, but she'd tried not to pass her disillusionment on to her son, so when she told him about his father, she only told him the positive stuff.

"You've just been you. I've been telling him about you since before he was born. I wanted him to know who you are, what you are really like. He's got Peter, Father, and *Uncle Joe* as positive male role models, but nothing is ever quite as good as a father, even if he's not around. I might have painted a rather rosy picture, but I didn't want him to think badly of you."

Catherine was almost glad that the Bond was gone. She was able to hide her pounding heart. She leaned down and poured tea into the two mugs. She slid one across the coffee table toward him.

"Why would you do that, after what I did?" he asked.

"Because, no matter what your attitude has been, you're still his father, and I still think that you're the best example for him."

Vincent was agitated, she could tell he wanted to get up and pace, but he stayed in the chair. He leaned forward and rested his head in his hands, hiding his face from her.

"I don't deserve it," he said, his voice muffled by his hands.

Catherine sat and watched for a moment before she put down her cup and moved to sit on the coffee table in front of him. She almost reached out for his hands, but pulled her hands back at the last minute.

"You probably don't," she agreed, "but we made that little boy. We loved each other and we made him. I've felt a little guilty about it, myself. I've questioned. Did I take advantage of you in your weakened state? Should I have said 'no' instead of wholeheartedly falling into your arms? I don't know, but I do know that I wanted it to happen, had for a long time. Maybe I was wrong, but we have a son, and I love him. And I would do it all over again if I knew that I would get him. I knew that a mother's love was different from any other love I've experienced, but I didn't realize how different until I held him in my arms. I can't really be angry at you; you gave him to me. So, there was no way I could paint you in a bad light to him. He needed to know what kind of man his father was... is. Father has told him stories about you as a child, and I've told him about things that happened while I knew you. How you took in Eric and Ellie, and Lena and little Cathy. How you saved my life more than once."

She stopped and took a breath.

“Vincent, will you look at me? Please?”

He reluctantly lifted his head and looked at her.

“Why?” he questioned.

She wasn't sure what he was asking, but she had several answers.

“Why do I want you to look at me? Because I want to see your face; I want to know that you are getting what I'm saying. Why did I do it? Make you into a hero to our son? Because every child deserves that. My dad was my hero. He could always make everything right, he could do anything he set his mind to. He was Superman, Batman and the Phantom all rolled into one. I loved him. Maybe I'm an idiot, maybe it's the dumbest thing I've ever done. I tried to stay angry. I've tried to convince myself that you weren't worth it, but I knew that you were and I couldn't bring myself to tell our son anything bad. I don't like what you did, and I don't know why you did it, but I know that you must have *thought* that you had a good reason.”

Vincent's eyes softened and he nodded slightly.

“I thought then that I did,” he admitted. “When you told me that you were pregnant, it just didn't sink in right away. I didn't remember the act that caused it. I'd been so determined not to make love to you for so many reasons. One was not to father a child who might be like me. For a split second I doubted you, but I knew that was wrong. I knew you too well.

“I remember studying Gregor Mendal's experiments with pea plants and I knew the possibilities and at first I was serious about an abortion, but when you refused, I was actually relieved... But I saw it as a way to finally push you away, and back into the world Above where you belong. I thought that if I was insistent enough you would eventually do what I wanted you to... not the abortion, but distancing yourself from me... what I *knew* was right for you.” He drew in a deep breath. “Catherine,” he whispered, “I'm sorry for all the pain I caused you. I know it's not much, but I am so sorry. I beg your forgiveness.”

“No need to beg,” she told him. “I forgave you long ago.” She stood and moved to the end of the couch and sat down. She wasn't sure what this conversation meant, but she felt that she'd best keep her distance.

“Is it too much to ask to be allowed to spend some time with Jacob?” he asked.

She smiled. "Of course not. I've been wishing for that since he was born. Just say when and how much." It wasn't exactly what she wanted, but she knew she had to put Jake first.

"You said that you work six hours a day three days a week. Would you allow him to spend that time with me instead of the daycare? I could come here."

"Wouldn't that interfere with what you do Below?" she asked.

"What hours do you work?"

"Nine to three on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. I usually leave here around 8:30. Jake goes with me because the day care is right next door to the office. We're usually home by 3:30 unless we stop somewhere."

"I can arrange my time," Vincent told her. "I assume that it will only be until school starts again in the fall."

"Vincent, you can't be his dad for the next three months then turn it off and go back to the way it was," she warned.

"No! No, you misunderstand. We keep to the same school schedule Below as the school system here Above does. When Jake starts school in September, I will be going back to teaching Below. I'm not going anywhere. I'll still spend time with him, maybe in the evenings or on weekends and holidays."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean that to sound so accusatory."

"Considering the way things have been up to this point, I can't blame you..." He turned so he could see her face. "I know I can't make up for not being around for the first five years of his life. Not to him or to you, but I told him when I was upstairs earlier, I want to do better from now on. I won't repeat my mistakes. You've done a wonderful job with him, and I don't want to undo anything you've been doing, I just want to be there, possibly share the responsibility, if you'll let me."

"I will, Vincent. For now, if you want to come up here and spend the day with him when I'm at work, you are welcome to. Do you think it would be too much to expect him to keep quiet about the tunnels? I haven't taken him Below much because of the need for secrecy. We try to teach our children not to lie, but would it be asking him to lie if we tell him he can't talk about anything Below?"

"I understand what you mean. With the children living Below, they just don't go Above unsupervised until they are old enough to understand, but Jacob would be spending

time in both worlds. He's intelligent, Catherine. He understands the need for secrecy. Look at the picture of me that he drew on the card. There was no way for anyone to tell that there was anything different about me. My hair covered my face and my hands were in my pockets."

"I noticed that. The teacher even commented on the way he'd drawn it."

"Would you allow me to take him Below?" he asked.

"Of course. You and Father have a way of impressing the need for secrecy on even the youngest Below. I'll let you handle that, and I'll just support it."

"Thank you." She could hear the heartfelt gratitude in his voice.

He glanced at the clock on the mantle.

"It's getting late," he observed. "I should go."

He finished his tea in a gulp and stood.

Catherine picked up his cloak and handed it to him then followed him to the basement stairs.

"Do you think Mouse could come up with some way to lock the threshold door on this side that would still allow access from the other side?" she asked as they descended the stairs into the basement.

"Why?" Vincent asked.

"Jake is one of those kids who watches everything and he doesn't miss much. I've been careful not to let him see me or anyone else open and close the door down here, but I didn't think this morning and he saw me open it. I'm just worried that he might get adventurous and head down on his own to visit you or Father."

"I'll talk to Mouse," he promised. "Perhaps he can change it to something like he's got on the other side. That would, at least, be out of Jacob's reach."

"As long as he doesn't climb on something to get to it. He's a good climber. A couple months ago I had a bad headache, and I told him that I wanted him to play quietly in his room while I laid down for a little while. I took some pills, then went to my bedroom. I had the baby monitor on in his room and I could hear him playing. I dozed off and a little while later Jake woke me, he had the bottle of my pills in one hand and a plastic tumbler of water in the other and he was telling me to take my pills so my headache would go away. I've always been careful with medication and it's always been stored on the top shelf in the medicine cabinet. That little monkey climbed up on the toilet seat, to the

back of the toilet to the counter. He could reach the top shelf of the medicine cabinet from there. I went out and bought a lock box the next day and now everything is locked up.”

Vincent almost laughed. “Talk to Father,” he suggested. “You can trade stories. From the way he tells it, it’s challenging raising an intelligent *and* athletic child. He makes it sound like I gave him every one of his gray hairs.”

“You did things like that?”

“Oh yes... He’s got one good story about how he left me playing with my blocks in the middle of the study floor. He stepped out into the corridor to speak to someone. He wasn’t gone for more than a few minutes, but when he came back I was gone. He checked everywhere, but then he heard me giggling and looked up. I was sitting on the top of one of the bookshelves.”

“Oh my God! How did you get up there?”

“He hadn’t realized that the bookshelves were arraigned like stair steps. I’d pulled a chair over to the buffet cabinet and used it to climb up. From there the next one was only about eight inches higher. Each piece of furniture was only a little higher than the one before it. By the time I reached the top I was close to eight feet off the floor. I guess I’d seen something up there, or maybe I just wanted to climb. I did like to climb when I was little.”

“How old were you?”

“About three, maybe four. I don’t remember doing it, but I do remember looking down at Father on the floor and laughing because I was taller than him for a change.”

“I bet he was beside himself.”

“He didn’t know whether to make me sit still and go get help to get me down, or to tell me to come down the same way I’d gone up. He finally told me to come down, right away, and I did. But I chose to climb down the front of the bookshelf. I was lucky that all of them had been anchored to the wall.”

“If Jake did something like that, I swear I’d have a stroke.”

Vincent smiled. “Your concerns are warranted and noted. I’ll talk to Mouse first chance I get and see if he can come up with something.”

Jake was in heaven the next few months. He got to spend time with his father and during the time that he wasn't with Vincent he told Catherine all about what they had done. At least one of the days that they were together each week, Vincent took Jake Below. They explored and he got to see all the wonders Below that were within an hour's walk.

The week before his school was supposed to start, Catherine took Jake shopping for his uniforms and to get a haircut. Jake was not happy with the idea of getting a haircut.

"But I want to keep it long like Daddy," he protested as they walked into the barber shop where she'd always taken him.

"That's too long for you, Jake. It needs to be shorter."

"But I want it long."

Jake was usually a cooperative child, even his terrible twos hadn't been all that terrible.

"Honey, you are going to be starting school next week and your school has rules. One of them is that you wear the uniforms that we just bought and another is that boys have to keep their hair short. Shoulder length just wouldn't be allowed. I know we let it grow over the summer, but now you have to get it cut to at least above your collar. It doesn't have to be as short as it used to be." She'd always kept it short because it was easier for her.

Jake wasn't happy, but he let the barber cut it to Catherine's specifications.

"There you go kiddo. What do you think?" asked the barber as he turned the chair so Jake could see his reflection.

"It's OK," he said without enthusiasm.

Catherine made it up to him with lunch at his favorite place followed by ice cream cones.

Catherine was finishing cleaning the kitchen after dinner when she heard a tap at the basement door. She opened it and was surprised to see both Vincent and Mouse.

"Came to fix the door," Mouse announced then turned around and went back down the stairs.

"I didn't get him up here earlier. With Jake spending so much time with me I didn't think the door would be a worry," Vincent explained as Catherine closed the door behind him and motioned him toward the table. She made a pot of tea while he talked.

"He said that he can make it work like the latch on the other side."

"Thank you." She joined him at the table with the teapot and mugs.

This had become almost a ritual with them. On the days he spent with Jake, they always ended his visit with tea, always with the table between them.

"Jake starts school on Tuesday?" he asked.

"Yes. It's a good school. It doesn't have a kindergarten, so he's starting 1st Grade, since he'll be 6 in December. They had an entrance exam and an interview... for an elementary school, but it's supposed to be excellent and it's been highly recommended by several people I know."

"You're sure that it won't be too restrictive?" Vincent asked. He'd heard about the uniforms.

"I don't think it will. It's modeled on British schools. There are sports and lots of activities in addition to academics. They have music and art programs, they play soccer and baseball, and they focus on the basics up to sixth grade. He will learn reading, writing, math, basic science, and history. They have a high school too, but I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. It's hard to believe that he's almost six."

"Children grow so fast and I missed so much of his childhood. I'm grateful that you've allowed me to try to make up for that."

"Do classes start Below on Tuesday too?" she asked.

"Yes. I'm teaching the usual literature and history to the older students, and I've taken over Father's beginning science class for the younger ones this year."

"Who teaches the other subjects?" she asked.

"We teach both practical and academic subjects. William teaches a cooking class once a week to the children who are twelve and above. Mary teaches a basic sewing class to the same age group. Both classes are mandatory for both the girls and the boys."

"That's a good idea. The private school I went to didn't have any home economics classes. If it hadn't been for Daddy's housekeeper, I would never have learned what little I knew about cooking, and Jenny taught me how to sew enough so that I can replace a button or fix a seam or a hem."

“Everyone should know how to do those things,” he agreed. “Father still teaches the beginning math classes. William incorporates fractions into his cooking classes. Cullen teaches algebra and geometry, and we have a helper who is a retired teacher who comes below two afternoons a week and teaches higher math for the students who are interested.”

“What about things like civics, social studies, or a foreign language?”

“Father speaks Latin, he studied it in medical school. There are several Helpers who speak other languages. If one of the children is interested in learning, they talk to the Helper and set it up privately. Not all of them are interested, and if they never leave the tunnels it’s not really necessary. I work some foreign language into my classes, and I try to work civics and social studies into my history and literature classes. I’ve got a couple lesson plans that are fairly comprehensive. When we study Shakespeare, we also take a look at the history of his period including the government and social structures.”

“Sounds well rounded. I hope Jake gets that good an education.”

“I’m sure he will. He’s a smart boy and he has you for his mother.”

“What kind of a schedule have you worked out for him?”

“That was my main reason for coming up. What is your schedule?”

“The school he’ll be going to is just a couple blocks from here. I’ll walk him to school on the days I don’t work, and drive him on the days I do and when the weather is bad. I’ve adjusted my work schedule to accommodate his school. I’ll pick him up after school.”

“What do you plan to do if you are going to be late?”

“I’ll try not to let that happen, but I’ve set up a system with Brooke. If I know ahead of time, I’ll let her know the night before and she will walk to the school to pick him up and stay with him until I get home. If it’s a last minute thing, I’ve made arrangements with Long. I’ll call him and he’ll send his son Edward Below to tell Brooke. I’ll also call the school and tell them that whomever is picking him up might be late.

“I’ve given the school a list of people who are allowed to pick him up. Brooke is one of them and Peter has helped her get an ID for that purpose. Joe and Jenny are on the list, and so is Peter. I’ve also given them the names of people who they are allowed to give information to on the phone. You are one of those people. I told them that you are his father and that your name is Vincent Wells. I know you don’t use that name, but they required a last name.”

“Thank you, Catherine. I appreciate that. I may never use it, but it’s good to know I can if I need to. I’ve been thinking about when I’ll be able to see Jacob without disrupting his schedule too much... What do you think of the idea of him coming Below on Friday after school or after dinner, and staying until Saturday afternoon or Sunday morning once or twice a month?”

The suggestion shocked her. She hadn’t spent much time away from Jake since he’d been born. Vincent saw it in her eyes.

“I know you’ve seldom been separated from him, but I promise to take good care of him.” He smiled slightly.

“I know you will, it’s just that... hell, I work hard not to be over protective. This is a chance to put some of those ideas into practice, but can we start with him going Below on Saturday morning and coming home after dinner on Saturday evening? We can do that a few weeks then work up to him spending the night. OK?”

Vincent nodded. “I thought perhaps it would give you the opportunity to spend time with friends, perhaps go on a date.”

The latter shocked her. She hadn’t told him how she felt, but the last thing she expected was for him to start pushing her at other men again. She covered her disappointment by agreeing to some of it.

“Jenny and I have been talking about a girls’ night. Letting Joe take care of their twin girls and me getting a babysitter and the two of us going out to dinner and maybe a show or a movie, then spending the night in a hotel. But the idea of a hotel just doesn’t sound as comfortable as home. I think it would be more fun to do it here.”

“It would be the perfect opportunity.”

“Give me a month,” she said.

“Daddy!” Jake had been upstairs getting ready for bed, he’d begun to insist he could bathe himself, and she’d been letting him several nights a week, although she usually checked on him at least once.

Jake ran into the room and jumped into Vincent’s lap.

“I didn’t know you were coming.”

“I came to talk to your mother about times for us to visit now that you’ll be going back to school.”

“Goody! When?”

“We’ve only covered part of it. I was about to ask if it would be all right for me to come up a couple nights a week after dinner to put you to bed and say goodnight.

“Yes!” Jake shouted.

“A little quieter, Jake, please. And of course, anytime. I keep our schedule on the calendar next to the phone.” She pointed out the wall phone. “You can check that to make sure that our schedules don’t clash, and if you come up and we’re not here, you can usually look at the calendar to see where we are and about when we will be home.”

“May I tell him about our weekend arrangement?” Vincent asked.

“Yes, of course.”

“Your mother has agreed to allow you to come below a couple Saturdays a month and spend the day with me and your grandfather.”

“Does it start this Saturday?”

“Well, you’ll be seeing your father this week, since school doesn’t start until next week, but if he wants you to go on Saturday, it’s fine with me.”

“Daddy?”

“Yes, of course. You know you are always welcome.” Vincent looked at the clock. “Isn’t it your bedtime?”

“Mom, can I stay up later, since Daddy’s here?”

“If it’s all right with your mother, I can read to you tonight and put you to bed.”

Catherine nodded and the next thing she knew she was being deserted as Jake pulled his father out of the kitchen and up to his room.

She finished cleaning the kitchen and went upstairs to get ready for bed herself. She showered and put on her night gown and robe and went up to the roof for some fresh air.

The view here, only five stories up wasn’t as good as it had been from her apartment balcony, but it was still nice. She couldn’t see the park, but she had a good view of the sky. She had often stretched out on a chaise lounge and watched the stars. She was considering buying a telescope and introducing Jake to astronomy. The brick wall around the roof was about waist high, but the previous owner had built an eight-foot privacy fence on the inside of that wall, except for where it overlooked the back yard.

With no taller buildings anywhere near, it was enough to muffle the city sounds and turn this into her own private little oasis.

She pulled the back up on the chaise and sat. She closed her eyes and was startled what seemed like only a few minutes later by the sound of Vincent's voice.

"May I join you?" he asked.

"Sure," she tried to hide the fact that her heart had started to pound with a noncommittal reply.

"Jake told me that you sometimes come up here. It's very nice." He sat on the other chaise.

"Daddy bought this place and renovated it before he died. He was planning to move in here with Kay. But he didn't do anything to the roof. His notes said that this was already here and it was one of the reasons he decided to buy the house."

"The whole house is secure and self-contained. Jake showed me the backyard and I was surprised to see that it is walled."

"I like that. I had some playground equipment installed, and I actually feel safe allowing Jake to play outside by himself in the yard. It's not huge, but it's big enough for him to play and me to have a little garden."

"The house is large," he observed.

"It does have a lot of square footage with the four floors, finished basement and the roof, but it has what I've always wanted: an office at home and room for guests. The master suite takes the whole top floor. Jake is just below me and I still have a baby monitor in his room. I thought about making the top floor sitting room into a bedroom for him so we could both be on the same floor, but I decided that eventually he's going to get to an age where he won't like sharing a bathroom with his mother. There is another bedroom on his floor, but he only has to share a bathroom if there are guests using the other bedroom. The main guest room is on the second floor, and the other bedroom there is the one I use for my home office."

"And you've got the suite in the basement."

"It's supposed to be a housekeeper's suite, but with just Jake and I, I don't really need help."

Vincent rose to his feet and looked down at her.

“You’ve got work in the morning so I should go and let you get to bed. Goodnight Catherine.” And he was gone before she had time to respond. She’d had the feeling that he’d come up to say something else, but had changed his mind for some reason. She wondered what it was.

As Vincent walked back to his chamber his hand went to his chest where he could feel the leather bag that held his rose. The bag had also contained Catherine’s crystal necklace since he’d found it in the cavern below the catacombs. He’d decided to give it back to her, but each time he’d come close he’d changed his mind... chickened out, as some of the children would say.

It was her necklace and he knew that she had once cherished it. He thought that she might like to have it back, but he wasn’t sure how to go about giving it to her. He didn’t want her to think that he expected anything in return. He just wanted her to know that he was returning something that belonged to her, like the book.

But if he was honest with himself, he did want something in return, but he didn’t know how to ask for it or if he even deserved it... for that matter he wasn’t even sure exactly what he wanted. She’d generously allowed him to become a part of his son’s life. He knew that he wanted more than that. Did he really want to be a part of her life too? He already was, in a way, since he’d started spending time with Jacob, but he wanted more... he just didn’t know how much more he dared ask for.

Their schedule worked well, and by October, Catherine had worked up to allowing Jake to go Below with Vincent on Friday afternoon, before dinner, although he was still coming home on Saturday evening after dinner.

She and Jenny had their girls’ night, and Catherine explained that Jake was having a sleep over with his father.

“So he’s back in town?” Jenny questioned as she sat at the kitchen table and watched Catherine scoop coffee ice cream with chocolate chips into bowls. They’d eaten at a nice restaurant then had gone to a movie and eaten popcorn, but ice cream was traditional and they had to have it.

“He never actually left town, he just dropped out of my life. We just happened to run into him, and it seems he’s had a change of heart, at least where Jake is concerned, so they are getting to know each other. Jake adores him.”

“Is he worth that adoration?” asked Jenny as Catherine set the bowl in front of her and joined her at the table.

“Yes, he is.” She didn’t have to think about that answer. “He’s apologized to me for trying to talk me into an abortion. He’s willing to be a father; he and Jake get along and most importantly, he actually enjoys spending time with Jake. I’ve never said anything bad to Jake about his father; I’ve only told him the positive stuff. It’s just that I didn’t like him very much for a while.”

“Are you two back together?”

“No. Like I said, he’s apologized to me, and said he was wrong to ask that of me, but that’s as far as it goes.” She was hesitant to tell Jenny that she still loved him, but Jenny wasn’t stupid.

“But you still love him, right?”

“Yes,” she admitted with a sigh.

“Is he worth that kind of pain?”

“Strangely enough, it’s not that painful. I guess I’m willing to take whatever I can get and if he’s willing to be a father to Jake, but not willing to be more than a friend to me, I’m willing to accept that.”

“But you shouldn’t be willing to settle for that, Cath. You deserve to be loved, and to have someone in your life who appreciates you, for you, not just for Jake.”

“I am loved, Jenny. I have Jake, and he’s the best thing that ever happened to me.”

They finally got off that subject and Jenny started telling her about her girls’ latest achievements.

Jake spent his Halloween with the children Below. As far as Catherine was concerned it was safer than allowing him to go door to door through their neighborhood shouting ‘trick or treat’ even with her with him. He seemed to have a lot of fun, and he enjoyed listening to Vincent read *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. Catherine enjoyed it too.

The children didn't really trick or treat Below. They went from chamber to chamber where they were invited in and the occupant would tell them a story or have a game for them to play or give them treats.

Father had the lights low in the study and he told a scary story, Vincent read his story, Mary handed out homemade fudge, Jamie taught them a new game, Mouse had decorated his chamber with half a dozen of his lightning in a jar machines and let the children play with them.

The last stop was the dining chamber where William had a table of snacks set up and Sebastian was on a raised dais doing magic tricks.

Before the end of the evening almost everyone wound up in the dining chamber.

"Can I stay Below, tonight Mom?" Jake asked.

"I'm sorry, Honey. You've got school tomorrow. You'll be back on Friday night."

"Aw, Mom!"

"Don't 'Aw, Mom,' me. It's nearly your bedtime and we should be going." Mary was gathering the younger children and was shooing them off to bed. "It's a good thing that all this got started early."

"We try to do it so everyone can participate," said Vincent as he walked up behind her.

"But Mom, the party is still going on."

"Not for the kids your age. Mary is taking them all off to bed and I think that's a good cue for us to go too."

"Would you like me to walk back with you," Vincent asked, forestalling the stubborn outbreak that was about to happen.

"OK." Jake wasn't enthusiastic about leaving, but at least he was cooperating.

Vincent and Catherine walked side by side while Jake scampered on ahead of him.

"This was fun," she told him. "Thank you for inviting Jake down. He had more fun on Halloween this year than he has had any other year. It's not very exciting dressing up in a costume and being driven to Peter's and Jenny and Joe's."

"You didn't want to stay Above and hand out candy to your trick or treaters?" he asked.

"No, not really. The last two years we didn't get many in our neighborhood."

They reached the threshold and Vincent reached up and pushed the lever and the door swung open.

“Will you come up and read to me, Daddy?” asked Jake before he stepped into the basement.

“You’re going to need a bath tonight, young man,” Catherine reminded him.

“Can I take a shower, Mom?”

“You may.” Jake was dressed as Captain Hook. Catherine had talked to a friend who had worked in a costume shop and had managed to obtain a child sized hook. The story book that had the picture of Captain Hook had shown him with the hook replacing his left hand, and Jake had started out with the hook covering his left hand, but he was left handed like his father and it had caused some problems. She’d seen him switch the hook from one hand to the other several times through the evening. Right now he was Captain Hook sans the hook. He’d wanted her to be Peter pan, but she’d declined to go in costume.

“What did you do with your hook?” she asked, when she noticed.

Vincent pulled it out of his cloak and handed it to her. “I can assist with the shower, if you like,” he offered.

Catherine took the prop as Jake agreed and dashed off with Vincent following. She closed the threshold and followed them up to the kitchen, turning off lights as she went.

Catherine caught up and stopped Jake long enough to remove the large nose she’d stuck over his with spirit gum. His nose was a little red and she hoped that he wasn’t having a reaction to the adhesive. He’d never been allergic to anything.

“Wash your face well, and get off the rest of that make up. And come back down here to kiss me goodnight.”

After saying he would, Jake left.

“I’ll make sure he gets clean,” said Vincent before he followed Jake upstairs.

Jake ran back downstairs to say good night and Catherine was glad to see that the redness around his nose had faded. He kissed her goodnight and then ran back up the stairs.

Catherine was in the living room with her feet up on the sofa sipping tea when Vincent came back down.

“He was more tired than he was willing to admit. The story he picked was a short one, and he fell asleep only a few pages in.”

"I hope he's not hard to get up in the morning," she said. "Help yourself." She indicated the teapot on the coffee table. "It's herbal."

Vincent poured a cup and sat down on the same sofa Catherine was on.

"It feels like it should be later, but it's only a little after eight," he commented.

"That's the joy of starting the party early," she commented.

"I remember another Halloween party that didn't start early and ran very, very late," he said.

It was the first time he'd made any reference to anything that had happened during their relationship before. She smiled at the memory. "It was nice watching the sunrise with you."

"That an interesting evening," he commented

"The first part or the last part?"

"The first part and the last part were the most pleasant, the middle was the interesting part."

"It certainly was. I'm glad I haven't had any more run-ins with the IRA."

"It's strange, but I got the distinct feeling that Brigit saw right through my *costume*."

"How so?"

"Just what she said about me sailing with Theseus or riding with Cuchulain. Both mythical beings. It was as if she knew she was looking at my real face."

"It's hard to say with Brigit. We've kept in touch and when I told her about Jake, she asked if he looked like me or his father."

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her that he was like both of us. That he has your eyes and hair and is probably going to be tall like you."

"He's got your jaw and mouth," Vincent commented.

"I sent her pictures. She's written another book and is planning a trip to the states next year when it comes out. She'll be promoting the book and will be traveling all over the country, but I invited her to stay here while she's in New York."

"Did she say what the book was about?" he asked.

“It’s a novelized version of a story of some of the people she knows. She said that it’s not as tragic as *300 Days*, in fact it’s quite amusing at times. She promised me an advance copy. I’ll loan it to you.”

“Thank you.”

They sat quietly for a while, sipping tea and listening to the music playing on the stereo.

“I love...” Catherine began.

“Would you...” Vincent began at the same time.

They both laughed.

“Go on,” Catherine prompted.

“No, you go. Ladies first, as Father taught me.

“I was just going to say that I love the way you do Halloween Below. It’s all about the children. It’s nice to see something done exclusively for them to enjoy.”

“The adults enjoy it too, but what they enjoy is entertaining the children.”

“What were you going to say?”

“I was just going to ask you if you’d like to come Below for dinner on Saturday evening before Jacob goes home. Father said that he’s invited you numerous times, but you’ve never accepted. I assume that your reason was that you didn’t want to see me. I’m sorry that Father was deprived of your company and Jacob’s because of that. Now that we are... friends again, and we aren’t trying to keep the tunnels a secret from Jacob, I thought you might agree to come Below a little more often.”

“I think I can make it on Saturday,” she said with a smile. “I’m getting used to having a little time to myself when Jake is Below with you, but it does get a little lonely.”

Saturday night just happened to be birthday night. William always made cupcakes on the first Saturday of every month and the people who had birthdays in that month got a cupcake with a candle in it. There was always a lot of laughter and teasing. No one knew Mouse’s birthday, or even exactly how old he was, but they celebrated what he called his “Finding Day” in November.

When he blew out his candle, Jamie kissed him on the cheek and he blushed bright red, which caused a lot of laughter.

“Mouse gave me something,” Jake announced when the laughter died down.

“What did he give you,” asked Catherine as she looked across the table at Vincent.

“It’s cool!” Jake announced. “It has purple lightening in it.”

“Mouse made him a plasma globe like the one he made for me,” Vincent told her. “Jake said something about wishing he wasn’t too old for a nightlight and Mouse said he had the coolest nightlight ever.”

“That would be a good nightlight,” Catherine agreed. She turned to Jake. “Who told you that you were too old for a night light?”

“One of my teachers.”

“What business is it of theirs?” Catherine demanded. “I still keep a nightlight on in the bathroom at night. It’s just enough to find my way there and back to bed when I have to get up in the middle of the night. I’m not too old for a nightlight.”

Vincent was surprised by the sudden change in Catherine. She was positively fierce when defending her son.

Catherine was pleased at the way things were turning out for her son and his father. Vincent would pick Jake up on Friday afternoon before dinner and bring him back on Saturday after dinner, or sometimes Sunday morning, a couple weekends a month. Jake looked forward to those weekends with Vincent.

It was March and it had been a snowy winter. The temperatures were warming up and the snow was melting... quickly. Vincent and most of the men Below were kept hopping tending to leaky storm drains and water seeping through even to the levels were they were living, in some cases.

Vincent had to disappoint Jake two weekends in a row, and Jake wasn’t happy about it.

“He can’t help it, Honey,” Catherine told him. “This happens almost every spring, it’s just worse this year. The snow is melting and the water has to go somewhere. They have a lot of leaks that they have to patch. He promises that you can stay with him several days on your Easter break in April.”

“But that’s a whole month!”

“I know, but it’s the best he can do right now. If you want, we can go Below and have dinner with Grandpa sometime.”

Jake nodded. “OK, but I miss Daddy.”

Catherine hugged him. “I know Sweetie, but all the work will be done soon and you’ll see him.”

Catherine had to stay a little late at work on Friday, and she sent a message to Brooke asking her to pick Jake up at school. When they got back to the house, Brooke called her.

“Do you know how long you’ll be?” she asked.

“About another hour. How’s Jake?”

“Disappointed. Vincent won’t be back until late tonight, and sent word to tell Jake he’ll see him tomorrow around lunch time. He was really counting on seeing Vincent tonight, he has a paper from school that he wants to show him. He’s very proud of it.”

“Well, I’ll be home soon. Maybe I can distract him when I get there. In the meantime, there is left over pot roast and vegetables in the refrigerator. You two can have that for dinner if I’m not home by six.”

Catherine went back to her strategy session with Luz. A grant that they’d been hoping to get had fallen through and they were going to have to look for another office because they couldn’t afford the rent where they were. They’d exhausted all the ideas, and now it was Catherine’s turn.

“I have an idea,” she said as she went back into their conference room.

“I’m glad you do, I’m all out,” said Luz. “I’m so tired of this. Seems like every couple of years something like this happens and we have to move and each move is to a lower rung in the ladder.”

“Before my dad died, he bought a lot of investment property. I still have a couple of the buildings, and one is only a couple blocks from here. It’s an older building, used to be a small warehouse, but somewhere along the line, it was made into offices. The first floor, almost 4000 square feet, has been vacant for about a month. The management company that handles the rentals said that it’s been repainted and cleaned. It’s yours for the law clinic for as long as you need it.”

“How much is the rent?” Luz asked.

“Nothing. It’s my donation.”

“You already donate time. Now you’re going to give us offices for nothing?”

“You’ll pay for utilities, but that will only be electricity and phones. There’s a boiler in the basement that heats the whole building. And there is no central air, but you can put units in the windows.”

“You sure about this Cathy?” Luz asked.

“Positive Luz. We do a lot of good and I don’t want to see that stop just because we don’t have an office to work out of.”

“When can we move in?”

“Whenever you want.” She wrote an address and a phone number on a piece of paper and handed it to Luz. “I’ll call the management people and let them know and you can go over and pick up the keys anytime. Let me know when you plan to move. I know someone with a truck who can help.”

She called the management company before she left the office and set everything up.

When she walked into the house a little while later, she was met by a tearful Brooke.

“I can’t find him anywhere,” she said. “The front door and the back door were both locked from the inside. I’ve searched the house from the roof to here. I was just starting this floor when I heard you.”

“Jake?” asked Catherine.

Brooke nodded.

“Have you been to the basement yet?”

“No...” she picked up on Catherine’s thought. “You think he’s gone Below to meet Vincent?”

“Probably. He knows he’s not supposed to go Below without me or another adult, and we had Mouse fix the latch so it is out of his reach, but he’s a good climber, I wouldn’t be surprised.”

Catherine wasn’t too worried, just concerned. Jake was a smart boy and he’d made the trip from their threshold to the main chambers many times.

Brooke raced off to check and Catherine followed at a slower pace.

The threshold door was open and the counter hadn't even been moved. Jake had just gone under it.

Brooke flipped the counter over and raced down the corridor to the first pipes. She sent a message and when it was acknowledged, she went back to Catherine.

"I let them know and Pascal said that he'd ask Father if Jake is with him, if he isn't he'll send out a general message to let everyone know to keep an eye out for him."

They were up in the kitchen a few minutes later after searching the first floor when Geoffrey came up to let them know that the entire route from Catherine's to the study had been searched and Jake hadn't been found. No one had seen him.

"You don't think he went the other way when he got to the tunnel do you?" Catherine asked. "Do you know where it goes?"

"As far as I know, it dead ends about two hundred feet past your threshold," Geoffrey told her. "I'll go check."

He borrowed her flashlight and was back in a few minutes.

"Nothing. The sand on the tunnel floor hasn't been disturbed. There are no footprints."

Catherine and Brooke went to Father's study with Geoffrey and found Father there laying out a search plan.

"We'll start with the center of the hub and search every nook and cranny," he directed. "A child can fit into places we would never dream of getting into. Search everything and work your way out." He turned to Catherine and patted her hand, then he looked at Brooke. "You're sure he's not in the house?"

"I looked everywhere, in the closets, under the beds, on the roof... wait, when we saw the threshold door open we didn't look in the basement."

"Geoffrey, go back and check the basement." Father directed.

Geoffrey left with the others who were heading out to search, and Father and Catherine settled down to listen for the reports on the pipes.

A few minutes later Vincent entered the chamber. He'd been running since he heard Brooke's first message.

"Have you found him yet," he asked.

Everyone shook their heads.

Catherine was on her feet and in front of him before he could move. She was beginning to get just a little panicked, and she was having a hard time controlling it.

“Can you feel him? Can you find him like you used to do with me?” she demanded.

“The Bond isn’t the same as it was with you. I can feel him and he feels close, but it’s not directional like it was with you. And it doesn’t help that he’s not frightened, in fact... I think he’s asleep.”

“Not unconscious?” asked Father.

“No, that has a different feel. Unconsciousness is more... empty. Sleep has dreams.” He turned to Catherine and grasped her upper arms. “I’ll find him” he promised her. He turned and was gone as quickly as he’d appeared.

They sat and waited. Catherine was agitated. She wished she was out looking with everyone else, but she knew that she wasn’t as familiar with the tunnels as the people who lived here and she’d likely wind up being the next one lost and they’d have to look for her.

Mary came in with a tray of tea and snacks. Catherine managed a cup of tea, but didn’t eat anything.

Pascal had ordered an all quiet on the pipes except for reports from the searchers, but the reports were sporadic; no one was having any luck.

Vincent knew the tunnels better than anyone and he knew all the hiding places in this main area. And it was probably a good thing, because his mind was not on what he was doing. He knew that Jacob was all right; as he’d said, it felt like the child was asleep, so as he headed out to the perimeter to work his way back to the study he allowed his mind to wander. He’d touched Catherine for the first time in years, and when he’d touched her he’d almost been overcome with his sense of her. She was walking a thin line, threatening to topple over into complete panic at any moment, but she was controlling it. He’d wanted to pull her into his arms and reassure her that Jacob was all right, but he’d released her and backed away as soon as he’d assured her that he’d find their son.

He stopped at a set of pipes and tapped a message that he was starting his search.

It was nearly nine and most of the searchers had straggled back in with nothing to report. Every once in a while someone would get an idea and rush out to check some place. Catherine was beside herself. She knew the labyrinth of tunnels Below. She'd been lost a couple times herself. She hoped that Jake had kept to the lighted tunnels since she didn't think he had a flashlight.

Vincent had gone out to the perimeter and was slowly spiraling back toward the center checking every place he'd taken Jake to on their explorations and every other place he could think of. Every ten or fifteen minutes they'd hear a message from him:

FATHER... NOTHING... V

They heard it so often that even Catherine began to recognize it. It was the only thing they were hearing and when the gap between messages became longer than it had been, it was noticeable. Fifteen minutes passed, then twenty, twenty-five. Catherine was on her feet pacing.

"I'm sure it's all right, Catherine." Father tried to be reassuring. "I doubt that Jacob could have gotten past the sentries, and we are covering the inside of the circle. There are areas even close in that don't have pipe access. He's probably going through one of those, and if he's being thorough, it could take longer between messages."

They were alone in the study. Mary had taken the younger children to bed, and Father had sent everyone else out not long after. Catherine stopped in the middle of the chamber with her arms wrapped around herself. She turned and faced Father.

"If something has happened to him... I don't think I can take that Father."

"It's all right, Catherine... He's all right." Vincent's voice came from behind her.

She swung around and Vincent was standing there with Jake, who was yawning and rubbing his eyes sleepily, in his arms. She shot across the chamber and Vincent put Jake into her arms.

Catherine all but collapsed into a chair, cradling her son in her arms.

Jake looked at his mother, over at his Father then back at Catherine.

"I was asleep, Mama," he explained as if it told the whole story.

"Where did you find him?" Father asked.

"In my chamber, asleep on my bed. I ran into Brooke who told me that he had something that he wanted to show me. He talked about it all the way back home after school and he was disappointed that he wouldn't be able to come below tonight. She'd

sent him up to his room to change his clothes while she went to the kitchen to make him a snack. He took longer than she thought he should, so she went up to check on him and he wasn't in his room. She started looking for him and calling, but she couldn't find him. She searched the house from top to bottom and had just reached the first floor when Catherine came home. Brooke had no idea how he managed to get past her without her seeing him."

Vincent went over to where Catherine was sitting with Jake and squatted down.

"Jacob, how did you get past Brooke?"

Jake looked a little scared.

"I sneaked," he said in a quiet voice. "I went to the elevator, and went down to the basement."

"You have an elevator?" Vincent looked at Catherine.

"Daddy put it in. I hardly ever use it and Jake isn't supposed to use it without me."

"Seems to me that Jacob has done quite a few things today that he wasn't supposed to."

Jake looked at his father then up at his mother.

"I'm sorry Mama. I just wanted to come and wait for Daddy so I could show him my spelling test. I got all of the words right, even the extra ones." He pulled a much folded and rather grubby sheet of paper out of his pocket and held it up. She saw 130% written across the top. That meant that he'd gotten all ten spelling words and three extra ones right.

"You couldn't have waited until I got home?" she asked. "I'm just as interested in your spelling test. I helped you study for it."

"But I wanted to show Daddy."

"I was going to see you tomorrow Jacob."

Jake knew he was in trouble. He'd broken the rules, and this was the first time he's seen his father this stern.

"I'm sorry Mama," he said contritely.

"I know you are, Jake, but you did something wrong, very wrong. You had everyone worried and you could have been hurt."

"Are you going to spank me?" he asked.

“Spank you? Where did you get that idea?” she glanced at Father and Vincent, hoping that they didn’t think she spanked Jake.

“From Phillip at school. He says his daddy spanks him.”

“Well, some people believe in spanking, but I don’t, but I do believe in consequences. What do you think your punishment should be?” She looked down at her son and could tell he was thinking furiously.

“Ah... No chocolate pudding for a month?”

She almost laughed at that.

“We don’t eat chocolate pudding,” she pointed out. “Got another idea?”

He shook his head. “But I really like chocolate pudding,” he told her.

“How about no stories before bed for the next two weeks?” she asked.

“But I really like the stories too.”

“It wouldn’t be much of a punishment if I said you wouldn’t get any steamed cabbage for the next two weeks, now would it?”

“Yuk! I hate steamed cabbage,” he said, making a face.

“I think I’ve made my point,” she said. “Now I think it’s time to get you home, fed and to bed.”

As she was setting him on his feet William bustled into the chamber with a tray.

“I heard the message that Jake had been found and I thought he might be hungry.” He started setting dishes out on the table. There was enough food to feed a whole room full of people, not just one hungry little boy.

Catherine thanked William, pulled a chair out for Jake and started filling a plate for him. She looked up at Vincent and rolled her eyes when she saw the dish of chocolate pudding.

“It’s homemade,” Vincent told her. “I need to go bathe, but if you’ll wait, I’d like to walk you both home.”

She nodded then joined Jake at the table. Father joined them. Catherine poured more tea for herself and Father and they helped themselves to sandwiches off the plate William had left.

Jake was just finishing off the dish of chocolate pudding when Vincent came back. Catherine almost did a double take. He was wearing what looked like soft leather moccasins, jeans and a t-shirt covered by a denim work shirt. No sweater, vest or cloak. "Where's your cloak, Daddy?" Jake asked as they all left the study together after saying goodnight to Father.

"There was mud on it from the work I was doing. I hung it to dry so I can clean it off later."

They reached Catherine's kitchen. Someone had come back and cleaned up the snack that Brooke had made for Jake. Whoever it was had left the light on over the stairs from the basement, over the kitchen sink and in the stairwell.

"Jake, I want you to go up to your room and get ready for bed. Don't forget to wash your face and hands and brush your teeth."

"Yes, Mama." Jake was a lot more subdued than usual.

"Do you mind if I go up with him?" asked Vincent. "I'd like to talk to him."

"That's fine, just no story."

Vincent followed Jake up the stairs. Catherine checked all the doors to make sure they were locked, and when she went up to her room she heard voices from Jake's room. It sounded like a serious conversation was going on.

Catherine went on to her room where she took off her clothes and put on pajamas and her robe. She was in the bathroom washing her face when the reaction started to set in. Her hands were shaking so hard she could hardly hold the washcloth. She quickly headed downstairs, thinking that tonight just might be the night to open the bottle of brandy Jenny had given her. She found a brandy snifter in the china cabinet, poured herself a little, then made her way back to her bedroom. After a moment she went up to the roof. She was sitting on the wicker sofa when Vincent came up the stairs.

"I thought I would find you up here." He noticed her hands shaking as she used both of them to raise the glass to her mouth. He sat down beside her. "Are you all right?"

"I will be," she said with a nervous laugh. "I was doing a pretty good job of holding it all together up until a few minutes ago. But now," she held her left hand out and it was shaking like a leaf in the wind. "I thought this might help." She held up the glass.

Vincent took it and sniffed. "Smells pretty potent. What is it?"

“Just brandy, I thought I needed something to steady me so I could go say good night to Jake.”

“Jake is already asleep, but then it might not be a good idea to go kiss him good night smelling of liquor.”

He handed the glass back to her and she took another sip and closed her eyes, willing herself to relax as it slipped warmly down her throat.

“You’re probably right... as usual. But I’m a good mother 99.9% of the time. I deserve to cut loose once in a while, and after tonight, this is my once in a while.

They were sitting shoulder to shoulder and she was surprised when he slipped his arm around her and pulled her closer.

“You don’t have to do it all alone anymore,” he reminded her. “I know I can’t make up for everything, but I’m here now.”

“I know,” she whispered, “and I was so grateful to have you there looking for him tonight. In fact, that was probably the only reason I managed to hold it together.” She leaned against him. When he’d touched her earlier, Below, it had been the first time he’d touched her since his reappearance. Now the combination of the brandy and his arm was finally relaxing her and calming her trembling. She felt a little foolish for resorting to liquor.

“It’s been warmer than usual the last few days,” he observed, “but it’s supposed to be almost freezing tonight. Perhaps we should go in.”

He helped her up and followed her down the stairs to the hall.

“Are you going back to the worksite?” she asked as they reached her bedroom door.

“No, we were done. The only thing left was clean up. The rest of the crew is probably home by now.”

“Will you stay?” she asked, laying her hand on his chest. “You can use the guest room that connects with Jake’s or the one in the basement. He’ll be thrilled if you’re here in the morning.” She knew she was asking as much for herself as she was for Jake, and she suspected that Vincent knew it too.

He hesitated a moment before answering.

“I’ll stay,” he told her before he pulled her into his arms and held her for a moment. She felt him drop a kiss on the top of her head before he let her go. The hug hadn’t lasted long enough as far as she was concerned, she could have stayed there all night.

She watched him descend the stairs, then turned and went into her room. She poured the last of the brandy down the drain, brushed her teeth, took off her robe and crawled into bed.

Vincent headed down to the basement, after a quick trip out to the pipes to let Father know he was staying, he went back to the rooms in the basement. Since Jacob's birth Catherine had redecorated the suite and it was now a very comfortable guest suite. The rooms were large and the furniture was large, dark and masculine. The sitting room had a kitchenette with a small refrigerator, two burner stove, microwave and a sink. Vincent made himself a cup of tea before he sat down to contemplate the previous few hours.

When he'd found Catherine on the roof he'd had more than one reason for hugging her. Yes, he'd wanted to hold her and comfort her, but he'd also wanted to verify what he thought he'd felt when he touched her earlier. It was still there and it had been just as overwhelming, but he'd held her longer this time. Her feelings had been such a jumble: relief, fear, he assumed it was of what could have happened, and something else that he couldn't really name. It was as if she felt like she'd come home. Was that because he was holding her in his arms, or because she was home and her son was safe? He wished it was the former, but thought it was more likely the latter.

When Catherine woke the next morning it was to the scent of freshly brewed coffee. She opened her eyes to see Vincent and Jacob standing in the bedroom door.

"We brought coffee, Mama," Jacob announced as he bounced onto her bed.

"I can smell that," she said as she hugged him.

Vincent approached and handed her the cup. She glanced at the window.

"Is it raining?" she asked.

"Heavily," he told her.

"What is that going to do Below?"

"Our repairs should hold. *Someone* saw to it that brand new materials were delivered to the warehouse so we didn't have to patch and make do this time. We were able to make a real repair."

Catherine blushed and was suddenly greatly interested in her coffee.

“Um, well... that’s good. Father told me that it was getting soggy in places, and that Mary found mold growing in the corner of the nursery.”

“That’s been taken care of too. *Someone* else or maybe it was the same person, sent down professional cleaning solutions to take care of the mold.”

Jake had propped himself up on his mother’s pillows and was watching the conversation between his parents.

“Can I turn on the TV, Mama?” he asked.

Catherine opened the night table drawer, pulled out the remote and handed it to Jake who pushed a button and turned on a TV that was sitting in an armoire against the far wall. He pushed another button several more times until he found the channel he wanted then he settled back to watch his Saturday morning cartoons.

“Does he do this every Saturday?” asked Vincent.

“He didn’t used to, but we’ve been doing it the last couple weeks when you’ve been busy. We usually watch some cartoons, he’s especially fond of the super heroes, then we go down and eat breakfast and watch some more cartoons on the TV in the kitchen. On Sunday we read the funny papers in bed then go down and have breakfast.

“You can sit over here, Daddy,” Jake said as he scooted closer to his mother and patted the bed on his left side. “There’s lots of pillows.”

“I don’t think I should,” protested Vincent. “I could go and fix breakfast...”

“We’ll be at least an hour,” Catherine told him. “You might as well join us.” She glanced down at Jake. She couldn’t help smiling. She’d noticed that Vincent hadn’t put *all* his clothes back on this morning. He was in stocking feet, jeans, no belt, and he’d left off his denim shirt and only had on his long sleeved t-shirt, although the sleeves had been pushed up well above his wrists.

Vincent circled the bed and sat gingerly on the other side of Jake. Before anyone knew what was happening, Jake had curled into Vincent’s side and they were both engrossed in the animated characters on the screen. Every time there was a commercial, Jake would fill Vincent in on a little more of the story.

They didn’t even miss her when she got up and went into the bathroom to wash her face and brush her teeth. She put on her robe and went downstairs to fix breakfast. She knew Jake would be down as soon as the program was over.

She made French toast and bacon and had just put everything on the table when they came into the kitchen.

“See, I told you she’d have breakfast ready,” Jake told Vincent as they entered the room. Jake climbed into his chair.

“He has me well trained,” she told Vincent as she pulled out her chair.

“Have I been taking this away from you every weekend that he stays with me?” he asked as he joined them.

“No. Even before he started spending time with you, we only did this once in a while. The cartoons are only on Saturday morning. It’s about the only time I let him watch TV. There are a few other things that are worthwhile. Things like Sesame Street or Mr. Rogers and he watches those once in a while. I try to get him to eat a good breakfast every morning, but about the only time that there’s time to sit down at the table and eat breakfast together is Saturdays, Sundays and other days off school. Even on the days I don’t work, mornings are always a bit hectic around here.”

“Mama doesn’t like to get up in the morning,” Jake observed.

“If I wouldn’t stay up so late at night reading, I might not have a problem with it,” she retorted with a laugh.

Vincent watched the exchange between mother and son and had to smile. Catherine was such a natural. He should have known even before Jacob. She’d always had a good relationship with the children Below, especially Geoffrey and Eric.

When breakfast was done, Catherine sent Jake up to his room to get dressed.

“Are you still willing to let Jake go back with me?” asked Vincent as he carried dishes to the counter while she loaded the dishwasher.

“If you want to. I know you’ve been away for several days. If you need to catch up on anything, I’m sure he’ll understand.”

“No, I don’t want to disappoint him any more than I already have, but I was worried that you might think it was too much of a reward after bad behavior.”

“Well, it was related, but I’ve already handed down my punishment. I don’t want to go adding more on now.”

He nodded. “I was planning to take him down to the great hall this weekend and show him the tapestries. If you like I can bring him home tonight.”

“You don’t have to,” she said as she closed the dishwasher and turned it on. “If you planned for him to spend the night, that’s fine.”

She hadn’t been back to Vincent’s chamber since the previous June, but she knew, from Jake’s stories that Vincent had put a twin bed for Jake against the wall in his chamber.

“Will he need anything?” she asked.

“No, he has everything he needs Below. He always wants to change into tunnel clothes as soon as he gets there.”

Within the hour, Catherine was alone in the house. She sat for a time, sipping coffee, then she got up and went to dress to start her day. There was laundry to do and a house to clean. Not to mention the hug to think about. After so long it had been one of the last things she’d expected from Vincent. But she had been badly shaken by Jake’s disappearance and he didn’t need a Bond to see it.

When Jake got home on Sunday he spent all of the afternoon and a good part of the evening telling her all about what he’d seen.

“Daddy said that the tapestries have been there for years and years,” he told her as he was getting ready for bed. “The man who put them up found them in a little room next to the great hall, and no one knows how long they were there, or where they came from.”

She didn’t shush him, she let him talk, hoping he’d get it all out of his system before school the next day. She didn’t fear that he’d tell someone, he understood the need for secrecy, but accidents happened.

Catherine was cleaning up the dinner dishes a couple weeks later when she heard a tap on the basement door.

“Come in,” she called out and was surprised when Vincent walked into the kitchen. She glanced at the clock on the microwave. It was after 10.

“Jake is already asleep,” she told him as she closed the dishwasher and pressed the button to turn it on.

“I know. That’s why I’m here late. I wanted to ask if he could accompany the children Below on a camping trip, but I didn’t want him to know about it, in case you don’t want him to go.”

“As long as you’ll be there, I don’t see any reason he shouldn’t go,” she told him.

“This is a trip that has been planned by Jamie, Mouse and Zach. I won’t be going. They want to take some of the younger children, ages 5 through 10, on a short trip. There will be about 15 on the trip. Each of the younger children will be assigned to one of the older ones. It was Geoffrey who suggested that Jacob might like to go. They will only go as far as the mirror pool the first night. They will camp there, and do some stargazing, then the next day, they will hike to a shallow pool that is fed by one of the warm springs. They can swim and play in the water and will camp there that night, then come home the third day.”

Catherine looked worried. “I thought you took the children on all these overnight trips.”

“I usually do, but we’ve all been working on plans for the other’s Below to share in the responsibilities. I still take the older children on the longer trips, to the deeper chambers, but others have taken over the shorter ones. Jamie, Mouse and Zach have done this before. At no point will they ever be more than a 2½ hour walk from the main chambers. If there is any kind of an emergency, any one of the adults could make it to them in short time. I’m sure he would enjoy it,” he added.

“I’m sure he would too, but that’s a long walk for a little boy.”

“It’s not really that far,” Vincent pointed out. “They won’t be doing it all at once. They will be stopping for regular breaks. As I said, the organizers of this have done it before... several times.”

She sighed and dropped into one of the kitchen chairs. “I don’t know...” she began.

“They will never be out of reach of the pipes.”

“It’s just that... well, I trust you... don’t get me wrong, I trust Jamie and Zach too...”

“But Mouse?” Vincent asked.

“That’s part of it,” she conceded.

“Mouse has matured a lot in the last few years. He’s realized that impulse control is part of being an adult and he does very well with the children. He even teaches some of the applied science classes. He shows the children how things work and they love it.”

She looked up at him. “You’re sure?” she asked.

“Positive. Geoffrey will be Jacob’s *buddy* for the trip and he will keep a close eye on him.”

“All right.” She got up and went to the calendar on the wall next to the phone. “What days will this be?”

“This coming Friday and Saturday nights. They will leave on Friday, as soon as Jacob gets Below. They will have their dinner at the mirror pool and spend the night there. On Saturday morning after breakfast they will walk to the other pool. They will spend the rest of the day and the night there then they will head back to the main chambers after breakfast on Sunday. I can bring him back up to you after lunch on Sunday.”

She blocked it out on the calendar and turned to him. “I guess I’ll just have to come up with a way fill the time he’s gone,” she said.

Jake was beside himself with excitement over the camping trip. He talked of nothing else at home for the rest of the week. When she picked him up at school on Friday, he was in a hurry to get home. He was worried that they’d leave him if he was late.

“You don’t have to worry about that,” she assured him. “Your father told me that they’d wait for you. Geoffrey will probably be waiting for you when we get to the house.”

Geoffrey was waiting, and Jake was ready to rush off as soon as they got inside.

“You can’t go yet,” she told him. “You’ve got to go upstairs and change your clothes, and get the backpack you packed last night. If you leave that you’ll wind up sleeping on the ground with no blanket.”

The day after Vincent had told her about the camping trip, she’d gone out and bought Jake a kid sized sleeping bag and pad to go under it. She’d added a few other essentials, and the night before they’d packed it all in his backpack and made sure it wasn’t too heavy for him to carry.

He raced up the stairs.

“He’s really excited about this, isn’t he,” commented Geoffrey.

“He’s talked about nothing else since I told him,” she said with a laugh.

“I remember my first camping trip... I was a little older than Jake. I’d only been Below about a year. We went to the same places that we are going this time, but it seemed like a huge adventure. I thought he’d like it.”

“I hope he does,” she said as she filled the canteen with water from the tap. “He’s never spent the night without either me or Vincent. I hope he does OK.”

“I’m sure he will,” said Vincent as he walked into the kitchen from the basement. He was carrying a picnic basket that he set on the counter.

Jake picked that moment to come clattering down the stairs and into the kitchen. Catherine managed to stop him long enough to get his jacket zipped up and the canteen attached to his pack. Vincent helped him get his pack on and Catherine coerced a kiss out of him.

“Have fun and be careful,” she called out as Jake followed Geoffrey out of the kitchen and down the stairs. She turned to Vincent. “I guess having a threshold in your basement is about as good as having an entrance to Narnia through a wardrobe.”

Vincent laughed and shook his head. “At least to a child.”

Catherine caught her breath and looked down at her feet. Another first, or at least the first time she’d seen it in a long time. Vincent had actually laughed, not as full a laugh as she’d seen that night in their music chamber when it had started to rain, but he had laughed. She realized that only a few people had made her laugh during that same time.

“So, what’s in the basket?” she asked to get her mind off where her thoughts were going.

“You said that you might need a way to fill your time while Jacob is gone this weekend. I thought one of William’s sumptuous dinners might fill some time.”

“I was wondering what I’d eat for dinner tonight. I hate cooking for one and there aren’t that many leftovers in the ‘fridge right now. I was thinking I might have to resort to that pint of chocolate chip ice cream in the freezer.”

“For dinner?” he asked, obviously horrified at the thought.

“It’s a girl thing,” she assured him, “and I don’t do it often. It’s just that ice cream or chocolate can cure most anything and if you combine the two it works even better. When Jenny and I were in college, we always had ice cream for dinner on stressful days; especially exam days, or after a date that hadn’t gone well.”

Vincent started taking covered dishes out of the basket and setting them on the table. Catherine got plates and silverware and set the table then brought over two wine glasses and a $\frac{3}{4}$ full bottle of white wine and set them down.

“Wine?” he questioned. “I don’t think William’s plain fare quite warrants wine.”

“William’s fare might be plain, but it’s up to the standards of any top notch restaurant in this city! If I didn’t know that I’d probably be dooming everyone Below to substandard cooking, I’d try to hire him away from you... besides, I opened this yesterday and only had a little out of it. Wine doesn’t keep well once it’s opened. We should drink it before it goes bad.”

“Whatever you say,” Vincent agreed. He pulled out a chair and held it for her, then took the one across the table from her.

After dinner he helped her clear the table and put away the leftovers. She divided the rest of the wine between their glasses and handed his to him.

“What have you planned for the rest of your evening?” he asked.

“I thought I’d curl up in bed with a good book,” she told him.

He smiled at her.

“Then I will leave you to it.” He left his wine sitting on the table and was gone before she could think to call him back.

Catherine didn’t get it. He’d brought dinner, and it had been very nice, even a bit romantic, then suddenly he was gone.

Vincent was halfway back to his chamber when he stopped and realized that he was running.

“What am I running from?” he asked aloud. He slowed down and when he came to the junction. He took the turn that would take him to the Falls. He needed time.

He sat for a long time tossing pebbles off the cliff into the river below. If anyone had asked him why he’d taken dinner to Catherine tonight, he would have told them that he was just being nice; trying to distract her from Jacob being on the camping trip, but he knew that he’d hoped to create a romantic atmosphere. He’d hoped that maybe she’d want to sit on the sofa afterward and listen to music or maybe watch something on her TV. Frankly, he wanted an excuse to get close to her.

He’d hugged her the evening after they brought Jake back from Below, and it had surprised both of them. When he touched her he found that her feelings were coming in loud and clear, just like old times, but when he’d let her go, they were gone again. He’d hoped to get close enough tonight to know if she still had feelings for him. But before

he'd given himself a chance to do that, he'd panicked and run. He was tempted to go back but it had been over an hour and he was sure she was probably asleep by now.

His walk back to the main hub took longer than his run from Catherine's earlier. He'd left a book in the study and he stopped to pick it up.

Father looked up from the book he was reading.

"How was your dinner with Catherine?"

"It was very nice," Vincent said as he picked up the book and turned to leave.

"I'm surprised you're back so early. It's not even 9 yet."

Vincent turned abruptly, went back and dropped into a chair across from Father.

"I left Catherine's over an hour ago," he admitted.

"That was barely enough time to eat," Father observed. "Why so early? Did she ask you to leave?"

"No, but when I asked her what she had planned for the evening she said that she planned to curl up in bed with a good book."

"And you left because of that? In my day that is what a young woman did when she didn't have anything better to do."

Vincent leaned his head on the back of the chair and stared at the ceiling.

"I... I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to ask to stay a while."

"You didn't used to have that problem."

"No, I didn't, but I knew what she was feeling then. I knew that I was welcome, now, after what I did to her, how I hurt her and without the Bond... I don't know. I have no idea. She might only be putting up with me because of Jake."

"I doubt that's the case," Father rushed to assure him. He didn't want to tell Vincent anything that Catherine had confided in him, but he also didn't want Vincent to back out and give it up completely.

"I didn't really know how much I depended on our Bond before. I missed it when I realized it was gone, but I knew her better then. I'm not sure that I know her that well anymore."

"I don't think she's changed that much."

“You’ve had more contact with her over the last six years, so I guess you should know,” Vincent admitted.

“Don’t give up, Vincent. Don’t do what I did. I was so defeated that I was sure that Margaret couldn’t possibly love me and I backed away. It was almost forty years before I got my second chance.”

Vincent wasn’t sure that he agreed with Father, but one thing he did agree with him about was that if he didn’t at least try, he’d never know.

Catherine had been trying to come up with a way she could do something for the people Below. They had all been so helpful and supportive for so long. She was already doing a few things, anonymously, but she wanted to do more. Something fun.

Jenny was pregnant and the Maxwell’s were quickly out growing their two-bedroom apartment. Joe was putting in the usual long hours at work, so Catherine was helping Jenny do the prescreening of potential places.

They spent a whole afternoon looking at the houses on Jenny’s list. Only a couple of them were a good fit and Jenny planned to take Joe to see them the next day. They took a cab to Jenny’s. Catherine was prepared to head home, when Jenny asked her in.

“Come on in for coffee, or tea, or a beer, whatever. The girls are with the sitter and Joe won’t be home until later.”

“The girls are with the sitter? How are *they* going to get home?” asked Catherine as she followed Jenny into the lobby.

“Amanda took them to a play group this afternoon and she’ll drop them off on her way home and that won’t be for another hour.”

“Lucky you, but then I can’t complain either. I’ve got a good babysitter too. I’ve been thinking that I might just hire her as a nanny if I go back to work full time.”

“So, what’s your poison?” asked Jenny when they reached the apartment.”

“How about some tea?” Catherine asked as she took off her coat and dropped it over the back of the sofa.

“No more coffee all day?” asked Jenny.

Catherine followed her to the kitchen and pulled out a chair at the table.

“Not any more... You forget, I don’t work for your husband anymore and I don’t have to burn the candle at both ends.”

“Or the midnight oil,” added Jenny with a laugh. “That is why we are looking for a place that has something he can use as an office. He’s up to all hours almost every night.”

“That was why I could never really complain about the hours when I worked in the DA’s office,” Catherine confided. “He never asked anything of any of us that he wasn’t willing to do himself.”

When the tea was done Jenny joined her at the table.

“Oh, it’s nice to sit down,” she said with a sigh. “I may only be six months, and I feel like I’m as big as a house, but at least it isn’t twins this time.”

“I remember the feeling.” Catherine laughed. “I don’t think I saw my feet for the last month.”

They sipped their tea then Jenny changed the subject.

“So, is Jake enjoying having his dad around?”

“He’s loving it. Sometimes it makes me feel a little redundant. He spends the weekend with Vincent a couple times a month and that is all I hear about when he comes home.”

“Kind of makes you feel like you do all the hard work and he is the one who provides all the fun, sometimes, doesn’t it?” When Catherine looked surprised. Jenny laughed. “It happens in every family. I’m home with the girls all day. I’m the one who dispenses the first aid, breaks up the arguments, disciplines and when Joe gets home he gets to play with them, read them a story and put them to bed. Doesn’t seem quite fair.”

“You’ve got that right,” agreed Catherine.

“How about you and Jake’s daddy? How’s that going?”

“Fine. We are getting along; we’re civil. At least we are on the same page about discipline, school, that sort of thing.”

“I’m not talking about parenting, although that is important, I’m talking about you... the two of you.”

“I’m not sure there is a *two of us*, as least not in the context of anything but Jake’s parents.

“Hon, I know you’d like to think that this isn’t about unfinished business, but deep inside you know it is; at least partially. If this was only about Jake’s relationship with his father,

I doubt that you'd give the fact that Jake obviously adores the man a second thought. You never did bad mouth Vincent to Jake and it seems important to you that they have a good relationship." Her voice grew husky. "What's going on between you two is about as real and as deep and complicated as it gets."

Catherine's shoulders slumped. "I'm that transparent? I don't want to love him," she whispered. "There's really no point. It won't work. I'm sure he doesn't want it and even if he did, I don't think I could ever trust him to make that commitment."

Suddenly Jenny looked and sounded just like her Aunt Leah. "Hey, life is about second chances. You can't choose love, Kiddo. It kind of chooses you and it just happens. And most of the time, it doesn't make *any* sense." She shrugged. "Look at Joe and me. Who would've ever imagined we'd end up together? I'm Jewish, he's Italian, Scottish *and* Catholic. Love isn't logical and it's almost always inconvenient." Jenny paused to sip her tea. "I know you like to pretend you're tough, but you're not. You're scared. It was easy to pretend you didn't care when Vincent was out of sight, but now that he's here it's harder. Isn't it?"

Catherine nodded.

"I know the idea of giving it another try scares the daylights out of you. And I don't blame you." Jenny turned to face her. "If you think Vincent is afraid of commitment you could distance yourself, but I don't believe you want to."

"I don't think that Vincent is *afraid* of commitment. He's certainly made a commitment to Jake. If anyone is afraid of anything, it's me. I'm afraid I'll get hurt again."

Jenny set down her mug and squeezed Catherine's hand as she said, "Are you?"

Instead of answering, Catherine countered with a question of her own. "If he loves me, why did he send me away? Why would he even think I'd be willing to get an abortion?"

Jenny shrugged. "I can't answer that. I don't know the man." She tapped her index finger on her temple. "Use your brain. Figure it out."

Catherine shoved her mug aside, causing some of the tea to slop onto the table. She stood and was almost glaring at Jenny. "What do you think I've been doing for all this time? If I knew the answer..." Catherine paused. She did know the answer.

Jenny stood and faced Catherine.

"Please. I'd never do anything to hurt you. You know that. I'm only trying to get you to look at things a bit differently."

Catherine stopped and took a couple of deep, calming breaths.

“I know. It’s just that all this is confusing. I’d resigned myself to Vincent not being around; to being a single parent, then suddenly he’s back in my life. I’m just not sure how far that goes. He’s been very nice to me. He had arranged a sleep over for Jake and he showed up that night with dinner, and it was all going very well, but then he just left.” She walked into the living room and picked up her coat. “I know you are trying to help, but I don’t believe Vincent’s thoughts or feelings are aligning with mine. I think he’s honestly interested in Jake and wants to be a part of *his* life, but I don’t think I’m included in that equation, except as Jake’s mother.”

“I don’t know him, but I can’t believe that he’d do something like show up at the house with dinner when he knew that Jake wasn’t there. I think there has to be something more. You just don’t give your heart that easily. Even when you were with Bass, you kept your wits about you and didn’t let your feelings blind you to him. And if Vincent doesn’t love you, then I think he’s positively delusional.”

Catherine had to smile at her friend’s blind faith in her. She turned and hugged Jenny.

“Thanks for being on my side,” she whispered. “I’ll think about what you said.”

Once Catherine got home she managed to put the discussion between her and Jenny out of her mind. Jake distracted her and by the time he went to bed she was able to think about the places they’d looked at that afternoon. One of the ones that Jenny liked the best was a brownstone that had a movie room on the top floor. It was only a few blocks from her home, but that wasn’t the reason she reviewed the place in her head. A few days later she was in Father’s study with an idea.

“Your note said you wanted to talk to me about a gift you’d like to give our community?” he began.

“Yes. I’ve been trying to come up with something for quite some time, and when I was looking at houses with my friend Jenny I saw the perfect thing.”

Father looked doubtful. “What could you have seen in a home Above that we could use down here?”

“A movie theater... well, kind of.” She laughed nervously and held up her hands when Father started to speak. “The room in the house was rather elaborate, but I was thinking along the lines of something simpler. There are some pretty big TV’s available. Pair one of those with a VCR and you have a small movie theater.”

Father looked thoughtful for a moment. "And where would we put such a thing?" he asked.

"It would have to be a chamber that would hold more than just a few people... I was thinking that the dining chamber might work. I've noticed that you have electricity in there."

"Wouldn't it be expensive?"

"The TV would be the most expensive part of it, since it would have to be one of the larger ones available. I'd want to make sure that it and the VCR were both good units, so they'd be reliable. My dad had a lot of movies on VHS tapes. I've got them stored in my basement. It would be a great start for your movie library, and you can rent or borrow any other ones you'd like to see."

"It would be a good way to introduce our children to some of the better classics like *Casablanca*, some of the old musicals."

"I loved to watch Gene Kelly movies," Catherine put in. "I always wished I could dance like that."

"You're sure it wouldn't be a major expense?"

"I'm positive, Father, and I'd really like to do this."

"I'll put it up for a vote at the next council meeting," he promised.

Catherine was pretty sure that Father was leaning toward a "yes" vote, and she was almost positive that everyone else would like the idea too, so she didn't wait until she heard from him, she ordered everything the next day. It was already in her basement when she heard from him. Cullen took some measurements and within a week he had a cabinet built to store everything.

Opening night of what several Below had dubbed *The Tunnel Theater* was the Friday before Thanksgiving. The council had spent several days trying to pick a movie for the first showing, but they couldn't agree. Catherine finally suggested *Forrest Gump* from her own tape library. Naturally Catherine was invited.

"I don't get out to see movies very often, unless it's a children's movie, so I'm looking forward to seeing *Forrest Gump* tonight," she said as she and Vincent entered the dining chamber. "I've had this for a while, but haven't watched it yet."

"*Forrest Gump*?" Vincent had obviously never heard of it. He hadn't heard of many movies so he hadn't bothered to vote.

No one was in the dining chamber yet so she picked up the tape and read the description to him.

"Tom Hanks and Robin Wright star in this romantic comedy. Forrest is a simple man with a low I.Q. and good intentions, running through childhood with his best and only friend, Jenny Curran (Robin Wright). His mama (Sally Field) teaches him the ways of life and leaves him to choose his destiny. When Forrest joins the Army for service in Vietnam, he finds new friends Dan and Bubba, wins medals, creates a famous shrimp fishing fleet, inspires people to jog, starts a ping-pong craze, creates the smiley, writes bumper stickers and songs, donates to people and meets the president several times. However, this is all irrelevant to Forrest, who can only think of his childhood sweetheart, Jenny. In the end, all Forrest wants is to prove that anyone can love anyone."

What do you think?"

"I've never heard of it, but it sounds interesting," he said as he sat on one of the benches that were arranged in a semi-circle in front of the TV.

The rest of the audience started arriving and soon they were all laughing and crying over Forrest's interesting life.

The younger children hadn't been included in the evening's entertainment so Catherine went to the nursery to collect Jake when the movie was over.

"But Mom... I don't wanna go home." Jake really enjoyed his time Below whether he got to spend it with Vincent or not.

"You'll be back on Sunday," she told him.

He wasn't all that thrilled to be leaving, but since he knew that Vincent was walking back with them and could probably be talked into staying for a little while, he followed his mother out of the chamber.

Jake was so familiar with the route that Catherine and Vincent allowed him to lead while they walked behind and talked.

"Forrest's mother was a wise woman," mused Vincent.

"Life is like a box of chocolates," Catherine quoted.

"Yes, and she didn't put any limits on Forrest, although it was obvious that he was *different*."

“Jenny didn’t put any limits on him either, not really. She just loved him, her course took a few detours, but in the end she did love him.”

Neither of them spoke until they reached Catherine’s.

Vincent let Jake talk him into going up with them.

“Thirty minutes, Jake,” Catherine called after him. “You’re already up past your bedtime.”

“But it’s Friday Mom, and it’s only 9:30. I don’t have to get up early tomorrow.”

“I can tell time, Jacob,” she said while she tried to hide her smile,” and read the calendar. “9:00 is your weekend bedtime. Another thirty minutes will make it 10:00.”

“OK.” He headed up the stairs with Vincent following.

Catherine went to the kitchen and made a pot of herbal tea. She was sitting on the sofa when Vincent came down a little after ten.

“Is he asleep?” she asked as he sat on the other end of the sofa.

“In spite of himself,” he said with a smile. He was determined to stay awake, but he didn’t last long after he got to bed. He didn’t even ask for a story. He just told me about the games they played while we were watching the movie.”

“He gets more independent and stubborn all the time,” she commented. “He’s smart and I can’t get away with using ‘because I said so’ anymore. I have to have a legitimate reason.”

Vincent looked at her, and when their eyes met a little thrill went through her. Vincent smiled slightly and patted the sofa next to him.

She hesitated, not sure what he had in mind, but after a moment she moved over a little, leaving about a foot of space between them.

“He questions the rules. Would it be considered an insult if I was to say that he’s a lot like his mother in that way?” he asked.

“I could say that he’s a lot like his *father*, in that way,” she countered.

Vincent nodded slightly. “Touché,” he said. “He does embody traits from both of us.”

After a moment, Vincent caught her hand, brought it up to his mouth and kissed her fingers.

“Was there a particular reason you recommended that movie?”

“I didn’t suggest that movie on purpose.” She was suddenly nervous. “I mean I did, but I wasn’t even sure what it was about, except for what I’d read on the box. Jenny and Joe told me that it was good and that I should watch it. They know I like Tom Hanks and this was only one of several that they recommended. It was just the first one I saw in the store.”

“Shh!” He placed his finger against her lips. “It was a good movie. I enjoyed it... I had every intention of apologizing tonight; groveling if I must; even before the movie, it just made it easier, I think... I want to try again... if you want to. I love you, Catherine. I know I didn’t act like it, but I was confused and just foolish enough to think that my feelings; my ideas were the only valid ones. I’m so thankful now that you didn’t do as I asked.”

“If he had been like you?” she asked warily.

“As you pointed out, he is like me, in a lot of ways, and I can be of guidance in those things, but he also has you, and can have a life Above. The best of both worlds, as they say.”

“But if he had been like you?” she repeated.

“I wouldn’t love him any less,” he assured her.

He could see her relax a little at those words. He tugged her hand, then slipped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her into his chest. She went stiffly.

“Catherine?” he asked when he realized she wasn’t coming as eagerly into his arms as she used to.

“This is just too easy,” she whispered, as she grasped his shirt. “How can I be sure that it won’t all explode in my face again?”

He looked contrite at her comment. “I would say that you have my word, but I don’t know how much that is worth right now. I know that it will take time to regain your trust.”

“You said that whatever happened, whatever came you loved me,” she said after a long pause.

“I never stopped loving you. I know I failed you, but I never stopped loving you.”

“You didn’t just *fail* me. You had certain ideas, standards that you held yourself to. You *failed* yourself. You never promised that you’d be there if I got pregnant. You didn’t remember doing anything that would cause a pregnancy. I’m not sure what your reasons were for not making love to me earlier, but I suspect that it was because of

what happened with Lisa. Peter told me that he and Father thought you were likely sterile, so the idea of fathering a child was probably in the realm of *very unlikely* in your mind.”

“Don’t make excuses for me, Catherine. My behavior was reprehensible and irresponsible.”

“I’m not making excuses... well, maybe I am. I don’t know, but you did have your reasons and those reasons were valid.”

“You said that I kissed you first.” He pointed out as he drew back a little to look down at her.

“You did, but I didn’t have to go along, even though it was something I wanted. I thought that you’d changed your mind. Maybe I unconsciously took advantage of you in your weakened state. I could have stopped you. I probably should have stopped you since I knew how you felt about it.”

“So you are telling me that you share in the responsibility?”

“Yes, of course I do, and I’ve felt that way from the beginning. You didn’t force me, but when I realized you didn’t remember it, I knew that you might think you had. That was why I told you that we made love before I told you I was pregnant. I knew that we’d have to get over that hump first. I knew that you probably wouldn’t be happy about either the love making or the pregnancy when I told you, but I knew that it couldn’t be put off. I just didn’t expect your reaction to the news to be so extreme, and so totally out of character.”

He was quiet for a moment before speaking again.

“I told you what Paracelsus said when he was masquerading as Father.”

“Do you mean the story about your birth? You know that wasn’t true.”

“I do now, and even then common sense told me that it was lies, but it was still there. I should also have known that it wasn’t Father I was talking to. I think on some level, I did. Paracelsus might have been a master of disguise, but the one thing he didn’t think of was my sense of smell. The man I was talking to, just didn’t smell like Father. Part of me registered that and knew it wasn’t Father. I think that was the only reason I was able to kill him. But the fog I was in due to my illness, his story of my birth seemed to make some kind of sick sense. It was still in the back of my mind, and the instant you told me you were pregnant, that was all I could see. The idea horrified me, and I just couldn’t let that happen.” His arms tightened around her but she still didn’t relax.

“That’s why you were there the day Jake was born?”

“You knew? Did someone tell you?”

“No one had to. I heard someone pacing in the hall. I wanted to call out to you, but I didn’t. I heard you talking to Mary and then to Father and Peter. Later I was just dozing when Lena took Jake out to you.”

“I didn’t know your hearing was so good,” he commented.

“It isn’t, but while I was carrying Jake, and for a short time after he was born, I seemed to be gifted with some enhanced senses. I’d heard that a pregnant woman’s sense of smell is better, but mine was ridiculous. I was on my balcony one day just before I moved and I could smell the hot dogs a vendor was selling eighteen floors down and a block up. And I heard the elevator every time it went up or down the shaft.”

“Have you noticed that Jacob has any enhanced senses?” Vincent asked.

“Peter tested him,” she told him with a smile. “He has good night vision, but not as good as yours. He has excellent hearing, and his sense of smell is good too. He can recognize my perfume rooms away. He freaked out the daycare workers a few times when he told them I was coming and I showed up less than a minute later.”

“He said he still uses a night light.”

“He says that he liked the night light because everything looks *spooky* without it.”

As they talked about Jake, Catherine gradually relaxed, in spite of still having some questions.

She pushed herself away a little and looked at Vincent.

“I really need some time,” she told him. “This a lot to take in. I’ve been on my own for so long, I need adjustment time.” She stood and looked down at Vincent. “Do you mind?”

“Of course not!” He stood too. “God knows you always gave me plenty of time.”

She headed toward the hall, but turned before she got there, but before she could speak Vincent held up his hand.

“Jake asked me to stay tonight, and I told him I would if it was all right with you, but I understand if you want me to leave.” He picked up his cloak from where he’d left it earlier.

“No, that’s OK. You can stay. You’re always welcome.”

He nodded. “I’ll be in the basement. Good night. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to use the room next to Jake’s?” she asked.

“No, I’m more comfortable in the basement. If I leave the door to the tunnels open I can just hear the pipes, and if I’m needed I’m easy to find.”

She nodded. “OK, good night.” She was halfway up the first flight of stairs when she turned again. “We’ll talk tomorrow,” she promised.

Catherine woke to the sound of blood curdling screams coming from the baby monitor that she still kept in Jake’s room. She hit the floor running and didn’t even take time for slippers or robe. She reached Jake’s room only steps ahead of Vincent.

Jake was still asleep, but he was sitting up in bed screaming and crying. “NO! Go away! Go away!”

Catherine sat on the side of the bed and took her son by the shoulders. Vincent followed her in and sat on the other side.

“Jake,” she said quietly. “Wake up, Sweetie. You’re dreaming. You need to wake up.” She gave him a slight shake that caused him to take a deep breath and open his eyes.

“Mama?”

“Yes, Honey. It’s me. You were having a bad dream. Are you awake?”

Jake blinked owlishly a few times, then yawned. “Uh huh,” he sounded doubtful, as he looked from one parent to the other.

“Do you remember what you were dreaming?” asked Vincent.

Jake shook his head and his brow furrowed, making him look a lot like Vincent.

“Don’t worry about it,” Catherine assured him as she let go of his arms and brushed his hair off his forehead. “It’s OK. Do you think you can go back to sleep?”

Vincent noticed that her hand was shaking a bit and covered it with his when she rested it on Jake’s blanket.

“I think so... Can Daddy stay until I go to sleep?”

She glanced over at Vincent, then back at her son. “Sure, Honey. If he wants to.”

“Of course, I’ll stay.”

Catherine stood and Vincent straightened the blankets and tucked them securely around Jake.

Catherine pushed down the slight feeling of jealousy, she wasn't even sure that it was jealousy, and made herself leave.

She went back to her room, but after five minutes in bed she got back up, put on her slippers and robe and went up to the roof.

She wasn't really surprised when Vincent joined her about ten minutes later.

"Has that happened before?" he asked as he joined her at the wall on the back of the house.

"Yes, but not often. That's the first time in about six months. Peter says it's fairly normal for kids to have night terrors. I had them. They usually occur in younger children but it's not that unusual for older kids to have them. Mine lasted until I was about Jake's age." She turned and looked at him. "Did you hear him all the way down in the basement?"

"No, the Bond woke me. I felt his terror. It wasn't the first time. I felt it happen before, but I guess the distance tempered it. This time, I was so close that I didn't even think before I jumped out of bed and ran upstairs."

"That's one of the reasons I've left the baby monitor in his room. With us on different floors, I'm afraid that I wouldn't hear him if he had a nightmare or was sick and needed me."

"Has that ever happened? Getting sick in the middle of the night, I mean."

"Come to think of it, no. I used to throw up at the drop of a hat when I was little, but he hasn't since he was less than a year old."

Vincent put his arm around her and pulled her closer. It was chilly, and he was radiating heat even though he was only wearing pajama bottoms and a long sleeved t-shirt.

"I'm glad I was here. Now I know how to handle it if it should happen when he's Below."

She leaned her head on his shoulder. "I'm glad you were too. It can be unnerving. I always have a hard time getting back to sleep afterward." She chuckled. "He recovers much quicker than I do, and usually doesn't even remember it the next day."

His arm tightened and she felt him nuzzle her hair. She loved the feel, but still had doubts.

"Vincent?"

She leaned back to look up at him.

"Yes, Catherine?"

“I need you to be honest with me. Are you doing this for Jake, because you think that a child is better off with both parents?”

Vincent looked surprised for a moment, then troubled.

“I’ll admit that I think it would be better for Jacob for us to be together, but that isn’t my only reason for wanting to be near you, not even my primary one. Some of my reasons are purely selfish. I’m asking you for another chance... for me... and I hope for you too. Jacob would benefit, I think, and I hope you agree and that you want it too.”

Catherine was quiet for so long that Vincent started to worry.

“Catherine?”

“Yes!”

“Yes?”

“Yes, I want this, but I need time.”

It wasn’t the first time she’d said that. He had time, and he was going to give her all the time she needed, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t going to try to convince her.

She allowed him to pull her into his arms and this time, she returned his embrace.

“Are you all right?” Vincent asked Catherine, after a while.

“Yes...” she murmured, unconsciously moving closer. He looked down at her and tenderly stroked away the tendrils of hair that had fallen over her eyes. Her eyes fluttered open to see him gazing at her. He gently raised her face towards his and hesitantly placed a soft kiss on her lips.

Feeling Catherine’s apprehension, Vincent pulled back.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

Catherine smiled and hastily tried to explain.

“No, don’t apologize,” she told him. “It’s just that... I don’t know. I’m surprised, I guess. When I got up this morning, I never dreamed...” she looked at him and smiled. “I think I’m in shock. A good kind of shock, but shock nonetheless.”

“We can take our time and get used to it,” he suggested.

“Yes, but right now, all I want to do is stand here with you.”

She relaxed back into his embrace and after a few moments, Vincent suggested that she was getting chilled and that they should go back inside.

He led her down the stairs to the sitting room on the same floor with her bedroom.

They settled on the sofa in front of the gas fireplace. They didn't speak, and after a while, Catherine felt Vincent drop a kiss on top of her head. That usually marked the end of their evenings before, and she sighed in resignation.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"I just had the feeling that you were going to suggest that it was time for you to go, and I was disappointed."

"I wasn't going to do that, but I was going to ask a favor."

"What kind of a favor?"

"A kiss? Or more accurately... teach me to kiss?"

She sat back and looked at him.

"You're serious?" she asked.

"Yes. I kiss a lot of people... Father, Mary, Jacob, the children, but it's not the same kind of kiss. I want to know how you like to be kissed."

"Just do what you feel," she suggested.

"But I really have no idea..." he began, but before he could finish, she'd captured his face between her hands and was pressing her lips to his.

He was still for several moments as she explored his lips, nipping and kissing. Every once in a while her tongue would brush over a spot, but when she found the cleft in his upper lip, his gasp opened his mouth and her tongue found its way inside. Cautiously, he began to imitate what she was doing, and within minutes he was taking over. He lifted her into his lap to get a better angle.

His kisses were delicious. She didn't want to stop, even when she grew short on air and had to breathe. Sensing her slight distress, he broke the kiss and pulled her close.

"You learn fast," she gasped out as she hugged him close. "I'd forgotten how pleasurable necking on the couch could be."

"Necking? Is that what we are doing?" he asked with a slight smile.

"Yes, and I wouldn't be averse to a little *petting*." She hoped he understood the term.

Vincent laughed at that.

“One step at a time, Catherine,” he told her before brushing his lips across hers again. “I have to get my kissing technique perfected first.”

His mouth came down and he was kissing her again.

They cuddled and kissed and talked off and on for the next hour or so, until Catherine actually dozed off in one of the lulls. Vincent didn't want to wake her, and he almost left her there on the couch, but then he decided that she'd be more comfortable in her bed, so he carefully picked her up and carried her to her room.

She woke as he lowered her to the bed.

“I need to take off my robe, she said then yawned.

“You were smiling in your sleep,” he said as he bent to remove her slippers. “Was it a good dream?”

“I wasn't dreaming,” she said.

“Good night, Catherine,” he whispered as he bent to kiss her.

She grabbed his hand as he turned to go.

“Thank you for staying,” she said as he turned back to look at her.

“Of course.”

“I've just found you again, and I'm glad you're here and close by, but I'd really like you to stay here with me. It's a king size bed, there's plenty of room...”

“Perhaps we shouldn't rush things,” he suggested.

“I was just suggesting sleep,” she said with a smirk.

“I know, but... you asked for time.”

“I get it. I won't push you.” She smiled up at him then raised up and kissed him. “Good night. We *will* talk in the morning.”

Morning came much too early for Catherine's taste, even though it was an hour later than Jake usually woke her.

“It's time to get up, Mommy,” she heard Jake's voice telling her as she swam up out of her dreams. “Daddy cooked breakfast and he said we could go on a picnic Below later if it's OK with you.”

Catherine sat up and stretched then swung her legs over the side of the bed and opened her arms for a hug.

“Good morning. How long have you been up?” she asked.

“Not long,” he told her, but she could see that he’d been up long enough to dress and she could smell minty toothpaste.

“OK, go back down and tell your daddy that I’ll be right there.”

He ran off and she could follow his progress from the noise he made running down the stairs.

When she joined them in the kitchen Vincent was just setting the last of a sumptuous breakfast on the table. He held her chair for her and surprised her with a light kiss before he went around the table and sat across from her.

Jake’s eyes grew large when he saw that.

“You kissed Mommy,” he announced with a grin.

“I did,” agreed Vincent as he passed a platter of eggs and bacon to Catherine.

“Why?”

“Why do you think?”

“I dunno.” He was suddenly shy and looking at his plate as Catherine served him.

“Why do you kiss her?”

“Because I love her?”

“I kissed her for the same reason.” Vincent looked across the table at Catherine and smiled.

Catherine was loving this exchange between father and son.

“Are you gonna live with us?” Jake asked, getting right to the point.

“Where did that come from, Jake?” asked Catherine.

“Olivia and Kanin love each other and they live together, and so do Rebecca and Pascal.”

Catherine’s eyes flew to Vincent’s. “I didn’t know Rebecca and Pascal. When did that happen?” she asked.

“A couple years ago, but to get back to Jake’s question...” He looked back at Jake. “I can’t live here, Jake. I have responsibilities Below, but I do hope to be spending more time with you and your mother.”

“You can stay any time you want to,” Catherine suggested. “You said that you sleep in the basement because you can hear the pipes from there and it makes you easy to find. If you used one of the upstairs rooms we might be able to set up something. I’m sure that Mouse could *invent* something.”

Catherine went looking for Mouse while Vincent and Jake went to the kitchen to pack their picnic lunch when they were Below later in the morning.

“Mouse, I need your help with something,” she announced when she found him in his chamber tinkering with one of his gadgets.

“Sure Catherine. What do you need?” he asked with a grin.

Catherine felt something pawing at her shoe and looked down to see a young raccoon and a kitten.

She bent down to pick up the kitten and the raccoon insisted on being picked up too.

“Where’s Arthur?” she asked looking around as she cuddled the two animals who were obviously best friends.

“Sleeping. Bernice and George wore him out playing.”

“Bernice and George.” Catherine had to laugh at Mouse’s choice of names. “Which is which?”

“Kitten is George and Bernice is the raccoon.”

If the kitten was male that might work out, but if the raccoon was a female Catherine could foresee an all-out war between William and the animal kingdom when Arthur and Bernice became parents, which was very likely to happen.

“Cute,” was all Catherine said as she cradled the kitten and rubbed its tummy and the raccoon climbed up and made itself at home on her shoulder.

“Father says that I’ll have to get them *fixed* if I’m going to keep them,” Mouse said with a scowl. “But I don’t think they’re broken.”

Catherine had to laugh at that. "Don't worry about it, Mouse," she told him. "I know someone who can take care of it. I'll call and make appointments for them." She wasn't sure about keeping raccoons as pets in the city, she'd have to look up the statutes.

"OK good," he grinned. "What do you need help with?"

"I need a way hear messages in my house. The ones on the pipes. I was wondering if you could come up with something.

"What do you need it for?" he asked, his brow furrowing in concentration.

"Vincent wants to spend more time with Jake, but he doesn't want to be too far from the pipes in case someone needs him."

"Could maybe use a microphone," he suggested.

"A microphone?"

"Did it for another Helper. Pipes run to his basement, but he couldn't hear messages upstairs. Needed a way to get sound into the house. Put a microphone on the pipe, and ran a wire to a speaker in the house. He can even turn it off if he needs to."

"That sounds easier than I thought it would be."

"Pretty easy. Just need the stuff to do it."

"Make me a list and I'll get it," she told him.

He quickly wrote out a list and gave it to her.

"You sure you need all this just to run a mic and a speaker or two?" she asked suspiciously when she saw the list.

"A few extras... just in case," he said innocently.

Later when the three of them were settled in the chamber of the falls for their picnic, she told Vincent what she'd asked Mouse to do.

"Now the only decision to be made is where do you want the speaker," she said as she handed a piece of fruit to Jake.

"You could put it in my room," Jake suggested.

"But it would keep you awake," Catherine said. "It should be wherever your father is going to be spending most of his time when he's with us."

"Mama's room?" Jake asked innocently.

Catherine sputtered and Vincent laughed.

“I’m pretty sure that Mouse might be able to put in more than one speaker,” he said. “We could put one in your mother’s room in case she ever has to listen for a message, and one in the room in the basement, one in the kitchen, and maybe even one in your room, Jacob. That way you could learn pipe code.”

They didn’t talk about the speaker again until later when Jake had gone to join the other children in the study to listen to Father read stories.

“The only problem with the speaker system,” Catherine was saying as they walked into Vincent’s chamber, “is that there is no way to send a message back. You could hear one sent to you, but then you’d have to go back out into the tunnel to respond.”

“If a response is necessary,” he said as he went around the darkened chamber lighting candles. The last thing he did was put wood in the brazier and restart the fire. “If it is I could just go out into the tunnel to send it.

“Aren’t the nearest pipes to my threshold a good twenty feet away?” she asked.

“Yes, and it’s a dead end pipe, so not all the message traffic can be heard on it. About the only messages sent on it would be directly from the pipe chamber. Everything would have to be relayed from there.”

“And you can hear it from the room in the basement?”

“I can, but only if the tunnel door and the bedroom door are open. I doubt that anyone else would be able to hear it, except possibly Jacob. Mouse’s idea of a speaker system is a good one. Especially with the ON/OFF switch. It’s worked well for another Helper.”

“Then I think that multiple speakers would be a good idea; my room, the kitchen, the basement and Jake’s room. It would be a good idea for him to learn pipe code. Don’t you have a class Below?”

“Yes. Every Saturday morning in the pipe chamber. Pascal and Zach take turns teaching it.”

“I think it would be a good idea for Jake to start attending it,” she told him. “Then once I get this for Mouse and he gets everything installed we will be in business.”

Vincent took the list from her and read it.

“Are you sure this is what he needs?” he asked. “I don’t see where he’d have a use for PVC pipe glue, pipe strapping and 20 feet of ¾ inch PVC pipe for this project.”

“Maybe he wants to run the wire in the pipe to protect it,” she suggested with a knowing smile.

“No, he has flexible conduit and fittings here for that. This sounds more like what he needs to run the new pipes for the shower he’s installing in the bathing chamber that Father and I use.”

She had to laugh. “It’s OK. I kind of figured that he was padding his list. It’s for you and Father. Isn’t there a hardware store that’s owned by a Helper?”

“Yes.” He wrote a phone number on the bottom of the list and handed it back to her to her. “Ask for Paul and order by phone. He’ll deliver.”

Catherine relaxed on the sofa and rubbed her hand over the worn leather.

“I love that you’re using Daddy’s furniture,” she said when Vincent joined her.

“This was your father’s?” He was obviously surprised. “I didn’t know.”

“Yes. I’ve always loved it, but I didn’t have a place for it when I cleared out Daddy’s penthouse after he died.”

“When I decided to open the rear chamber I needed more seating in here. I found this and a matching chair in one of the storage rooms. It’s a large couch and is a perfect fit.”

“Daddy bought it second hand before I was born,” she told him. “It was in his first office when he was just starting out. When he and Jay opened the new offices they used it in the waiting room for a while, but when they could afford to redecorate he didn’t want to get rid of it so he took it home and put it in his office there. He always had it in his home office after that. I spent a good bit of my childhood on it, reading or napping.”

“It’s got quite a history,” he said. “I cleaned it with saddle soap when I first moved it in and I give it a rub with a conditioner every few months.”

“It looks better than it did the last time I saw it. I’m glad you’re using it.”

“I’m glad I found it and have been able to give it a new purpose.” He laughed and stretched his arms along the back of the sofa. “I’ve napped on it a few times, myself. I’ve got the matching chair in my bedchamber.”

She slid across the smooth leather and cuddled into his side and he dropped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her closer.

“It’s a good necking couch too,” she said as she slipped her arms around his waist. “I caught my mom and dad a few times and Daddy caught me and a boy once when I was sixteen.”

“Do you think we can get away with it without being caught?”

“Is your chamber still like Grand Central?” She drew back a little and looked at him.

“Why do you think I finally opened the rear chamber?” He chuckled. “My students were always stopping in at all hours dropping things off or picking up books. I may not need a lot of sleep, but when I do sleep it’s nice to be able to do it in private and without being awakened every hour. Father has always had a habit of walking in without announcing himself most of the time.”

“And you can keep him out of your bedchamber?”

“He has his bedchamber separate from the study and everyone always calls out before going in, even I do, and for some reason, since I moved into the rear chamber, he announces himself and asks permission to enter it. I didn’t even have to ask. Everyone is following his example.”

“Good, then I can take a nap undisturbed?” She asked.

“If you like. Didn’t you sleep well last night?”

“Before or after Jake’s nightmare?” she asked. “Not really. It took a while to get to sleep the first time, and I woke up several times the second time.”

“Then be my guest,” he said, rising and pulling her to her feet.

He led her into the rear chamber. She took off her shoes, and stripped down to her jeans and t-shirt, then he tucked her into bed, much like he’d done the night before.

When he turned to go, she called him back.

“Join me?” she asked, scooting over and pulling the blankets back.

She watched as he thought about it, and this time he decided to stay. He stripped down to his jeans and t-shirt too, then sat on the side of the side of the bed and pulled off his boots before he climbed in. Catherine covered a smile as she cuddled close.

“There is something I’ve been wondering,” she said after a few minutes.

“What’s that?”

“The Bond. You said that you have a Bond with Jake, but it isn’t like ours was.”

“I can feel him, I know when he’s awake, asleep, hungry... the basic things. I’ve occasionally felt his bad dreams or when he’s been hurt, but I can’t really tell where he is, just that he’s close or some distance away,” he explained.

“And our Bond? It never came back?”

“It has to an extent,” he admitted. “The last few days I’ve noticed that I can feel what you feel, when I’m touching you. But it’s not like it was.”

“It’s something,” she said as she snuggled closer. “I wish I had that much with you.” She yawned and he pulled her closer. Catherine rested her head on his shoulder.

“Hmmm,” she hummed, feeling the tension seep from her body as Vincent began massaging the back of her neck lightly with his fingertips. After a few moments, he shifted so he could reach her better. He moved his fingers into her hair. It was always soft and silky, and she’d started wearing it longer. He enjoyed the feel of it slipping through his fingers, almost as much as Catherine enjoyed having him touch her.

“That feels so good,” she murmured drowsily, as she nuzzled and kissed his jaw.

Seeing Catherine react so positively to his touch, Vincent couldn't resist kissing her.

Recognizing that some of his shyness was slipping away, Catherine encouraged Vincent by sweeping her tongue across his lower lip.

Vincent moved down to Catherine's neck, enjoying her gasps as he sought out the sensitive spots with his tongue.

Catherine's t-shirt wasn't tucked in and it wasn't much of a barrier as he slipped his hands under it and stroked her back. He could feel her breasts pressed against his chest, and he knew when she went from enjoying his touch to arousal. He hadn't told the whole truth about the Bond. The stronger her feelings, the stronger they were communicated to him when he was touching her. Now he didn't need her quickened heartbeat and breathing to know what she was feeling. He slipped his hand further up her back.

“You have such soft skin,” he whispered, marveling at the feel of the skin beneath his fingers. “And you smell so good...” Vincent continued, nuzzling into the crook of Catherine's neck.

Arching her back to get closer to him, Catherine couldn't stop the slight trembling as sensation swept through her body.

“You smell good too,” she whispered. “I’ve missed it.”

“Catherine, wait,” Vincent said suddenly sitting up.

“Yes?” she answered, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Someone is in the outer chamber,” he said just as they heard Jake’s voice.

“Mama, Daddy?”

Vincent swung his legs off the side of the bed and reached back to tuck the covers around Catherine.

“In here, Jacob.”

Jake scampered into the room.

“Whatcha doin’?” he asked as he bounced across the room and jumped onto the bed.

“We were going to take a nap,” said Catherine with a wry grin as she caught Vincent’s eye. “Did you enjoy the story?”

“Grandpa started reading *Huckleberry Finn*.”

“I was going to go talk to Cullen about a work detail on Monday. Would you like to go with me?” Vincent offered.

Vincent pulled on his boots and put his shirt back on. They left the chamber as Jake started telling Vincent his version of the Mark Twain’s classic.

Catherine flopped back on the bed, and almost growled in frustration, but a moment later she found herself laughing. If she wanted to get Vincent alone for their talk and whatever else, it looked like she was going to have to invite him up to her house and send Jake off to spend the night Below... and it should probably be done *before* Mouse got the speaker system installed.

“Mary, may I ask a favor?” asked Catherine from the door of the nursery.

Mary looked up from the baby she was changing and smiled.

“Of course, Catherine. What is it?”

“May Jacob stay Below tonight?”

Mary looked puzzled. “Isn’t he staying with Vincent?”

“Not tonight, but I was hoping to get a chance to... um... talk to Vincent tonight, and I thought it might be easier if Jake was somewhere else. He’s been enjoying his time Below today and I know that he’ll be thrilled to stay Below. He always loves sleeping in

the dormitory with the other boys.” She leaned over and tickled the foot of the little girl Mary had just finished dressing.

“Where did she come from? She’s adorable.”

“We found her abandoned in the Park. We have no idea why. She’s healthy and well cared for; about three months old. She was wearing expensive baby clothing. We thought at first it might have been a kidnapping gone bad and have had Helpers looking and checking, but we haven’t found anything.” She picked up the little girl and handed her to Catherine along with the baby bottle.

Catherine sat in the rocker and started to feed her.

“I haven’t seen anything in the paper about a kidnapping, but if you like, I’ll ask around. I’ve still got some friends in the police department.”

“Can you do that without saying that you’ve seen her?”

“I can. I’ll just say that I saw something in the paper and was curious. I’ll let you know.”

“Then please do. If she has been taken from a loving family, then we want her to go back to them, but if she was just abandoned for no good reason, she has found a loving family with us.”

Catherine was burping the baby when Vincent found her half an hour later.

“I see you’ve met our little Brigid.”

“Brigid?”

“We allowed the children who found her in the park to name her, and they had just finished one of Brigid O’Donnell’s children’s stories and were arguing over the names of the characters in the book. Samantha suggested that she be named after the author, rather than one of the fictional characters. So she became Brigid.”

Catherine gave Brigid back to Mary then turned to Vincent and smiled. “I was thinking about ordering delivery for dinner tonight.” She linked her arm with his and guided him out into the corridor.

“I’ll get Jacob and we can go back.”

“I’ve arranged for Jake to stay Below tonight. We never did get our chance to talk.”

Vincent looked down at her and smiled. “I left him with Father.”

When they told Jake he was going to stay Below and sleep in the dormitory he was ecstatic and Father was hiding a smile when they left.

Catherine stood next to the phone in the kitchen and looked at the menus she had tacked to the cork board beside it.

“So, what do you want for dinner,” she asked. “I can order, from a deli, Henry Pei’s restaurant, Italian, Pizza, diner food. There’s even a steakhouse not far from here that delivers.”

He was standing behind her and looking at the menus over the top of her head.

“Do you use these often?” he asked.

“Once a week, usually Friday if Jake isn’t Below with you, and on Monday if he is, I let Jake plan dinner from these menus. He enjoys it and he learns a little responsibility. Just like on weekends I let him pick his own clothes.”

“That would explain the purple t-shirt, blue jeans, green sneakers, and yellow sweatshirt he was wearing when he came Below last week. Father said that it made his eyes hurt.”

“More like making his eyes bleed,” she said with a laugh. “I’m just grateful that he wears uniforms to school. Daddy let me pick my own clothes one day a week when I was Jake’s age, but he was smarter than me. He made sure that the only things that were *clean* and hanging in my closet were things that could reasonably go together, but I still managed to come up with some pretty strange outfits.”

“I wish I could see that.”

“There are pictures,” she told him. “I’ll have to see if I can find them. The school used to take group pictures of the class along with individual pictures. Daddy didn’t know that it was picture day and he let me dress myself. I was about eight. I looked OK in the individual pictures, but they were only head and shoulders. The group photo had me in the front row because I’m short. I was wearing a shirt and a sweater, both green, but two different shades that didn’t go very well together. I had on my black and white striped Pippi Longstocking tights and my bright pink rain boots... I’d forgotten my shoes, so I spent the day in my boots.”

“Now I understand where our son got his fashion sense,” he commented before pointing at an item on one of the menus. “That sounds good.”

After dinner Catherine was at the sink rinsing dishes and Vincent was putting them in the dishwasher. When the last dish was loaded, Vincent stepped up behind her and

slipped his arms around her waist and leaned down to nuzzle her neck. He was surprised to feel her stiffen in his arms rather than relax as he'd expected.

"Is something wrong, Catherine," he asked as he released her and let her turn around.

"I did want to talk," she told him.

"But this afternoon..."

"Yes... this afternoon. That was wonderful, and I guess I did invite it when I asked you to stay. I was thrilled that you are so much more open to that part of a relationship, but I really do need to talk to you." She looked doubtful and Vincent could see something in her eyes that he couldn't quite decipher.

"I'm sorry," he began. "I honestly didn't realize that you really did want to talk." He looked a little embarrassed. "I thought that was just an excuse... to..."

Catherine had to smile.

"You mean an excuse to get you up here and make love to you until the sun comes up?" He ducked his head and used the old gesture of hiding behind his hair that she hadn't seen a lot of since he'd returned to her life. She reached out and turned his face toward her with her hand on his cheek. "Maybe later... Right now. I need to ask some questions and get a few things off my chest."

"Of course, Catherine." He sounded like the old reticent Vincent and she wanted to kick herself. She took his hand and led him out into the living room.

When they were seated, him on the sofa and her in the chair, she searched for a place to start.

"Last night, when I asked you to stay, I really was just asking for the comfort of having you there beside me," she began. "And this afternoon, it started that way, but then, well, let's just say that I would have happily made love with you with no regrets afterward... or at least not many."

"What regrets would you have had?" he asked.

"Only that we didn't talk first. I haven't said the words yet," she told him.

He knew what she meant.

"You said them years ago, before I ever had the courage to say them," he pointed out.

"But you need to know... all of it. There was a time, many times, after you sent me away that I tried to be angry at you, tried hate you. The times I watched my friends get

married and start their happy lives, when I saw them living their happy lives. I was so resentful at times.”

“You had every right to be, Catherine. I treated you terribly. I kept telling myself that I was doing it for you, but it wasn’t entirely true. My reasons were very selfish on some levels... In the beginning, our beginning, I kept thinking about how it would affect *me* if you were hurt or if I were to hurt you, especially if we were making love. Then after it happened, and you were obviously unharmed and very happy about it, I felt I had to have a reason to keep it from happening again; to push you away so I fell back on Paracelsus’ lies. Even though, by then I knew that it was all lies it still preyed on my mind.

“My logical mind was telling me that none of it could possibly be true, but I used it and even though I was glad that you were refusing to terminate the pregnancy, I still used it as a way to push you away into the life I thought you needed. With the Bond gone, I was able to tell myself that I wasn’t hurting you as much as you were likely to be hurt later when you realized you’d made a mistake by linking your life with mine.”

“And now?”

“Now I know differently. I’ve watched you since then, not up close, but through the eyes of others Below who spent time with you, and you always remained steadfast. You didn’t even date. I knew every time Elliot Burch was back in the city and I saw where he was always out with a beautiful woman on his arm, but that beautiful woman was never you. If you went out at all it was with your friend Jenny, or you went up to Westport to visit your friend Nancy.

“Meeting Jacob when he had his accident was the push I needed. Even when I told you that I thought you were both better off without me; I didn’t really mean it. I didn’t need a Bond to tell me how it made you feel. It was in your face. I saw the anger and the hurt. It was then that I began to think that maybe, just maybe I was wrong.

“Quite early in this I had a conversation with Father. I discounted what he said and ignored it at the time, but it kept coming back, and over the last few months I’ve replayed it over and over in my mind.”

“What did he say?”

“He told me that he’d been wrong in his original evaluation of our relationship. He stressed that he’d been wrong, and he was trying to get me to realize how wrong I was and that I shouldn’t be basing any decisions on his original opinion.”

“But you didn’t listen.”

“No, sadly I didn’t. Not then. After Jacob was born, I would occasionally have a sense of you. I’d had a sense of Jacob from his birth, a little before, really, but every once in a while, I would feel you, and... you were happy. I told myself that you didn’t need me. That everything Father, and Mary and all the others told me wasn’t true. You were getting on with your life. I wouldn’t allow myself to consider that maybe what I was feeling was being *relayed* or *enhanced* in some way by the link I have with Jacob and that naturally you’d likely be happy when you were with him; I just chose to think it was the way it was all the time.”

“You’re right. I did have times when I was happy. Mostly in the beginning about the only thing that could make me happy was Jake. Later, I started spending time with friends and working, and I would go hours without thinking of you.” She smiled a little sadly and shrugged. “But then, at some point, it would all come rushing back and it would hit me. I remember one time I was down near the Criminal Courts building, taking care of some kind of business... I don’t even remember what it was now. I’d left Jake with Brooke, and was in a hurry to get home before I got caught in rush hour traffic. I hailed a cab and out of habit gave my old address. I caught myself almost as soon as it was out of my mouth, and gave the correct address, but then for no good reason I burst into tears. I know that poor cab driver thought I’d lost my mind. He kept looking in the rearview mirror and checking on me.” She looked at him and shook her head. “We’re quite the pair, aren’t we?”

“It might be helpful if we were both on the same page, as Father would say,” he agreed.

“We’ve been on the same page,” she corrected him, “often, but never at the same time.” She sighed. “I want to move toward love, but there’s still a little piece of me that is wondering if I should trust you.”

He felt a thrill go through him when she came so close to saying she loved him, but it was stopped dead when she said she wondered if she could trust him.

“What is you feel you can’t trust,” he asked.

“I don’t know... you’ve pushed me away so many times. You’ve told me that I should be with someone... anyone else, but you’ve always pulled me back in some way, then when you pushed me away again, it hurt that much more.”

He’d known that she was hurting, but hadn’t actually felt it and that had made it possible to ignore it.

“Catherine, will you sit next to me?” he asked.

“Why?”

“I want to hold you, I want to feel what you felt and I want you to feel what I feel now.”
He opened his arms.

She stared at him for a moment then moved from the chair to the couch, but didn’t move into his arms right away.

“How is holding me going to let me feel what you feel?” she asked skeptically. “The Bond doesn’t go both ways.”

“It does to an extent,” he admitted. “You were able to feel something as early as the time I was taken by that gang and you definitely felt something when Father and I were trapped in the Maze. I was grateful both those times that you’d felt my distress and came to my aid, but I was worried that you might feel other things... the things I wanted to keep private. The rages, the frustration... the arousal. So I did much as you did when Paracelsus took you prisoner. I did my best to block those feelings, to not feel them. I knew that you wanted to have a part of the Bond, that you wanted to be able to feel what I was feeling, but I just couldn’t allow it, not when I couldn’t control those feelings.”

“Oh Vincent.” She went into his arms and snuggled into his chest. “We *are* a mess!”

He surprised her by pulling his shirt out of his pants and taking her hand and placing it on his skin. He moved his own hand up under her shirt and rested it on her back. She felt him take a deep breath and relax.

As soon as they were in skin to skin contact he was bombarded with myriad of feelings from her. But first and foremost was confusion. She wasn’t sure what was going on.

“Close your eyes and relax,” he told her. “Try to blank your mind.”

She did as he told her, but she’d always had trouble shutting down. She’d never been able to meditate because of that, but the sound of his heart beating slowly and steadily under her ear helped. She concentrated on that. Suddenly it was as if she’d been immersed in a bathtub... no a swimming pool of... she wasn’t sure what it was, but it felt good. It was light, and warm and soft and she felt loved, and protected. And it felt like forever. She relaxed and snuggled closer.

“Umm, that’s nice,” she murmured.

Vincent smiled. He could sense her better than he had in years. He'd begun by concentrating on her heartbeat too, and he'd been drawn in. He could feel her love, and her curiosity.

"Have you been blocking it all this time?" she asked, without moving.

"No, in the beginning, I think it needed strong feelings from me for you to sense me," he explained.

"And that was why I didn't feel anything when Dr. Hughes took you. You were sedated most of the time."

Yes, and I also think that if you are touching me, touching my skin, you can feel more. Am I correct?"

"I think you are. The skin to skin seems to help. You know, while you were sick and I stayed with you... I only slept if I could do it while touching you. Either holding your hand while I slept on the cot next to your bed, or with my hand on your shoulder or chest if I was on the bed next to you. I guess I realized it somehow even then."

"Can you feel what I'm feeling?" he asked.

"Yes, but I can't describe it. All I know is that I feel loved."

"You are Catherine. Forever."

"Always," she prompted.

"Yes, always."

They sat like that for a long time before Catherine sat up and looked at him.

"Will you stay tonight?"

"You want me to?"

"Yes. I'm not asking for anything you're not ready to give, but I am asking for your presence. I want to sleep in your arms. I need that."

"Yes Catherine."

He rose and held his hand out to her, but before they got to the stairs he stopped.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I have my things in the bedroom in the basement."

"Your things?"

"Ah... my toothbrush and the pajamas I wore the other night."

“OK, then why don’t you go get them and I’ll meet you upstairs.”

She headed upstairs and was thinking that she was really glad that he couldn’t sense her when they weren’t touching, because she was scared to death that he’d get to the basement and just keep walking until he got to his chamber.

She really began to worry when he didn’t appear in a few minutes. She went about her own nightly routine, washing her face, brushing her teeth, and selecting a nightgown from the drawer that held all her pretty, feminine nightwear; the gowns she hadn’t worn in years. She had just slipped one over her head and was reaching for her robe when she noticed the clear plastic box on the top shelf of her closet. The robe she’d given Vincent to wear at her place. She’d washed it a couple times, then moved it to the plastic box for storage. Even though he’d only worn it that one time, she still couldn’t part with it.

She pulled it out of the box and was carrying it out of the closet when Vincent appeared in the bedroom door. He was wearing pajama bottoms and a t-shirt.

“I decided I’d just change down there,” he told her.

“I see that. I was kind of worried you’d changed your mind and left,” she told him, deciding honesty was called for. She held the robe out to him.

“Is this the one you gave me... before?” he asked.

She nodded, “I thought that as long as you’re going to stay, you might like to have it. I’m glad you decided to stay.”

He dropped the robe on a chair then approached and took her into his arms. “I want to stay as much as you want me here.”

He lowered his head and kissed her.

Catherine slid her hands up his chest then slipped her arms around his neck. The kiss deepened and they were both out of breath by the time he pulled away.

“How far are we willing to take this?” he asked, looking down at her.

“How far are *you* willing to go?” she countered.

“You said that you wanted to sleep in my arms...”

“But if you want more; if you want to pick up where we left off this afternoon, that’s fine too.”

“If you want me to stop at any time, you’ll tell me?”

“I will and the same thing goes for you. If you get overwhelmed and want to slow down or stop, just say so.”

Nodding, he pulled her closer and she slid her arms around his neck and pulled him down for another kiss. Relishing the feel of his large, warm hands slowly exploring her body, Catherine let Vincent go at his own speed. He caressed her through the gown, then moved his hands to her breasts.

She didn't stop him so Vincent slipped his fingers under the straps of the gown and pulled it away from her upper body.

Catherine moved her hands up to cover his.

“Slow down,” she whispered. “Take your time. We have plenty of it, now.”

“I'm sorry,” he replied nervously. “I didn't mean to rush.”

He'd seemed so self-assured only a moment ago, now he was hesitant again.

“Don't apologize!” Catherine rushed to reassure him.

He bent down to kiss her on the forehead. “I do want you so very much and I love you so very much.”

Catherine flushed at his words. “We have all night and longer and we're not likely to be disturbed here.”

Feeling Vincent relax a bit, Catherine slowly moved her hands down to her sides and the straps of the gown slid down her arms. It stayed around her waist as she let Vincent continue his gentle exploration.

“You are perfect,” he told her. He slowly lowered his head and brushed his lips across the top of one breast. The feel of his lips on her and his hair brushing her bare skin made Catherine bite her bottom lip and fight to keep her soft cries of pleasure silent.

Vincent's lips left her breast and he bent and picked her up. It was only a few steps to the bed.

“Don't hold back,” he whispered as he set her on her feet next to the bed. “I can feel what you are feeling. I can't believe how good I can make you feel,” He nuzzled her cheek.

Vincent's smoky, musky scent, his hair tickling her chest, the feel of him lightly touching her breasts, made the long buried longings stir.

“Can I take the rest of this off?” she asked, gesturing to the gown that was still around her waist.

Vincent stood back and watched as the gown slipped down her body leaving only her silk panties.

Vincent slowly scanned her body; she was pure perfection, her skin was creamy and flawless.

“You're beautiful,” he whispered.

“I have stretch marks,” Catherine replied, skimming her fingers over her hips. “Jake grew fast.”

Vincent bent and kissed first one hip then the other.

“Marks of courage; they prove how strong you are.”

He lifted her onto the bed, and followed her.

She lay back and tried to relax. He bent over her to hungrily kiss her neck and face.

Oh my god, Catherine thought, feeling Vincent move down past her breasts, kissing down to her navel then all the way back up to her breasts. Catherine gripped the sheet tightly in one hand. The other tangled in his hair.

Vincent's hand closed over the hand gripping the sheets and he looked up at her.

“What's wrong?” he asked as he moved back up her body and paused to prop himself up on one arm to look directly at her.

Catherine hesitated.

“I love you,” he told her, looking down at her and meshing his fingers with hers.

“I know,” she replied honestly, giving his hand a gentle squeeze. She hadn't said it yet. She didn't know why she was so hesitant.

He removed his hand from Catherine's and stroked it over her stomach.

Vincent had the benefit of the Bond as long as he was touching her, but for all intents and purposes this was his first time. He knew he would have to go slow. All he wanted was to please her.

“Touch me, Vincent?” she asked, her body tense as she waited for him to move his hand.

Knowing what she was expecting, yet still nervous, Vincent bent and kissed her again, then ghosted his fingers over her breasts and down to her stomach. Catherine took a deep breath, trying to contain her delight.

In her delight at Vincent's touch Catherine didn't pay attention to how he was touching her until she realized his hand had slowly traveled between her legs, and was rubbing her lightly through her panties. Inhaling sharply when his fingers glided over her, she was unable to control her movements.

"Is that all right?" he asked, hesitantly.

"Yes!" she hissed softly, trying to contain everything that was slowly building inside her. Vincent understood; her movements and the way she pushed back into his hand revealed everything.

"Vincent, take my panties off please... touch me," Catherine said suddenly, her desire evident in her voice as the throbbing ache grew.

"Are you certain?" he asked.

"Yes, please!" she moaned.

Catherine raised her hips as Vincent knelt to slip her panties off. After she was nude, Vincent pushed Catherine's thighs further apart and let his lips travel up her inner thigh, kissing and licking, arousing her even more.

Her body trembled beneath his kisses and she couldn't contain the moans that were escaping from her lips.

Looking up, Vincent could see her pleasure in her face. It just reinforced what he felt in the Bond.

"Am I doing it right?" Vincent asked, pausing after a nibble at the soft flesh of her inner thigh.

"Oh, yes!" Catherine moaned breathlessly.

He moved his hand back to her center and found the little nub with his thumb. He slowly began to massage it.

"Vincent!" she moaned helplessly, unable to keep her body from shaking.

"Yes, Catherine, let go," Vincent encouraged softly. He could feel her need to climax.

He had worried about touching her so intimately, concerned about his sharp nails, but he seemed to have found a method of pleasuring her that didn't put the delicate tissue

in danger. He continued to massage her with one hand as he reached for her breast with the other one.

“Vincent, Vincent, oh my!” Catherine panted in a raspy voice, her hand still wrapped tightly in the sheets.

The feeling of her mounting pleasure was almost too much for Vincent. Her excitement was cresting at such a fast rate that it almost frightened him. He never dreamed he could give her such pleasure.

Vincent glanced up. Catherine's head was thrown back, her chest was heaving and her stomach muscles were tensing and relaxing with each stroke of his thumb. Her moans turned into cries of pleasure.

Her pleasure mounted and she squeezed her eyes shut tightly, feeling the pressure building. Just when she thought she couldn't take it any longer she erupted. She moaned and shook so violently she practically vibrated.

Vincent sensed when his attentions became too much for her over sensitive flesh. He stopped his caresses and moved up beside her to pull her into his arms. Her body went limp and she collapsed against him. Catherine curled her trembling body into his as she fought to catch her breath, totally spent from her climax.

Vincent was still nearly fully dressed. His erection almost painful, and the cotton pajama bottoms did nothing to disguise the fact. Taking her advice from earlier about rushing he turned her onto her side. He curled behind her and wrapped his arm around her waist. He held her close to him until her body finally relaxed.

“Are you all right?” he asked after a few minutes.

“Yes,” she replied weakly, half mumbling into the pillow.

“It's all right; rest for now,” Vincent told her gently.

Too exhausted and overwhelmed by what had happened to argue with him, Catherine relaxed and fell asleep in his arms.

A few hours later, Vincent woke and gazed at the woman who was snuggled contentedly in his arms. He stroked her hair out of her face and pressed a kiss onto her forehead. Catherine's eyes fluttered open and she gazed into his eyes. There was a momentary confusion, then she smiled at him, closed her eyes and moved her lips to his.

Vincent returned her kisses until she strained against him. He was aroused and uncomfortable again before he knew it. He gently disentangled himself from her and pulled off his pajama bottoms and t-shirt.

“Touch me,” Vincent whispered moving closer to her.

“I thought you’d never ask,” she said as she took him in her hands. Vincent's expression was one of indescribable pleasure at her delicate touch. She ran her fingers over the smooth skin.

“Not too much?” she asked, wrapping her hand around him.

Shaking his head hesitantly, Vincent tried to relax and enjoy her touch. Only in his most secret fantasies had he ever imagined anything like this. She watched as conflicting emotions played across his face.

“I want you inside me, Vincent,” she whispered.

Vincent gently pulled from her grasp and hesitantly stretched out on top of her. His hips pushing her thighs apart, Vincent positioned himself, letting the head of his erection brush against her wetness.

Feeling her body trembling against him, Vincent dipped his head to kiss her.

“Catherine,” he gently coaxed, turning her head so he could see her eyes.

“Please don’t stop,” she gasped.

“Not now,” he assured her. “Not ever.”

Catherine wrapped her arms around Vincent's broad shoulders, finally giving him all her trust.

Supporting himself on his elbows, Vincent positioned himself and gently began pressing forward. Catherine's body reflexively tensed beneath him. It had been years. Vincent sensed some discomfort and alarmed, he stopped.

“Do you want me to stop?” he asked, keeping still.

“No...” she answered, burying her face in his warm chest.

“We can stop,” he started to move away; he was shaking now too.

“No!” she said again, but more emphatically this time. She clutched his arms so he wouldn't move. “I'll be fine. It's just been a long time, and... well... you are rather well endowed. Just go slowly.”

"I'll go slow," he promised. He wasn't surprised by her stubbornness. He kissed and caressed her until he felt her relax.

Catherine had to consciously relax, but she winced as she felt him pushing forward again. She took deep breaths and tried to remember how to block the Bond, just in case.

Vincent murmured softly, and kissed her forehead. He could tell she was holding back, but he trusted her to know what she was doing. He shifted so he could hold her face between his hands and before she realized what was happening she felt him slowly push into her body until she completely surrounded him.

Vincent held himself absolutely still, letting Catherine's body adjust to the invasion, listening to what the Bond was telling him. In her surprise, she'd lost her grip on it and it had come flooding back.

He was alarmed when he saw tears leaking from under her eyelids.

"Are you all right," he asked, wiping away her tears with his thumb, then kissing away what was left. "Are you uncomfortable?" He knew she wasn't in pain.

"I'm fine," she said looking up into his eyes. There was no pain, just a feeling of fullness and the sudden urge to move.

"The tears?"

"Happiness," she assured him with a smile.

Closing her eyes, Catherine moaned softly as Vincent began moving in a gentle, steady rhythm. Vincent groaned in pleasure, hoping that he wouldn't climax too soon.

Just when Catherine was used to the slow gentle rhythm, Vincent increased his speed. The slight discomfort had turned into a deep, delicious pleasure.

"Vincent!" she moaned, focusing on the feel of him. Vincent looked down at Catherine's flushed, heaving chest. She fought to breathe through the sensations sweeping through her body.

"Relax and let it happen," Vincent urged, coaxing away the damp curls that had fallen across Catherine's face.

Drawing her arms down from around his neck, Vincent pushed them to rest on the pillows above her head and slid his hands into hers. Feeling her squeeze his hands in response, Vincent increased his speed again. Even though he lacked experience, he more than made up for it with his use of the Bond to know what she was feeling. He was

amazed by the way she responded to his lovemaking. He felt her body react in a totally new manner, she started moving her hips to meet his.

Catherine was focused on only one thing now. It almost felt too good; she needed him to keep moving. If he stopped, she thought she would surely die.

“Vincent!” she cried out. Her trembling body was covered in a fine sheen of sweat, and she couldn’t stop moaning his name.

The look of pleasure on Catherine’s face brought an unfamiliar satisfaction to Vincent. Capturing her lips with his, he felt her breathing and moans becoming more erratic.

“Vincent! Yes, please don’t stop!” she moaned when he broke the kiss. Her eyes were squeezed shut tightly, her nails almost digging into the palms of his hands. Whimpering in pleasure, Catherine suddenly pulled free of his hands and grabbed his shoulders, urging him to go faster.

“Let go, Vincent,” she gasped. “I won’t break!”

As Vincent did as she asked, he felt her finally climax, stronger and more profound than the first one earlier in the evening. Her body trembled violently beneath him and she gasped for air as her body succumbed to the most intense orgasm of her life.

Hearing Catherine’s cries of pleasure and feeling her body’s reaction, Vincent was unable to hold back any longer. “Catherine!” he groaned, his body trembling as he erupted deep inside her.

Still feeling light headed from her climax, Catherine could feel him pulsating deep inside her as he climaxed. Her mind cleared as she fought to catch her breath. She couldn’t wrap her mind around what had just happened.

After their breathing returned to normal, Vincent withdrew from Catherine’s warm body. Lying on his back, he pulled her into his embrace. Still overcome with the feelings inside her, Catherine began to cry softly, desperately trying to hide her face from Vincent.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, still not completely trusting the Bond. He gently turned Catherine in his arms to face him. When she still didn’t answer, Vincent continued to gently prod.

“Do you regret this?” he queried.

“No...” she replied, sniffing. “I’m fine, this is just a dream I’d almost given up on... I’m OK, really.”

Thankful for the Bond that would help Vincent understand, she was grateful when he just nodded and began running his hands through her hair.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked.

Catherine smiled to herself. “No! It was just a little uncomfortable at first. It passed quickly. I might be a little sore in the morning, but it will be nothing a nice warm bath won’t fix.”

“Sleep,” he urged her. “Get some rest, you’re tired.”

Catherine relaxed and her breathing became deeper and more even. Vincent thought she’d gone to sleep when he felt her struggle back to wakefulness. She snuggled closer and her arms tightened around him.

“I love you, Vincent,” she whispered before she allowed herself to sleep.

Vincent heard the words and the memories flooded back. He remembered the first time. The time when Jacob was conceived. He remembered making love to Catherine as the sunlight streamed through the French doors and warmed their bed. She’d told him she loved him then, too.

When Vincent woke the next morning, he was alone, but the faint smell of coffee drifting up from the kitchen told him where Catherine was. The Bond told him that she was happy, and he smiled.

He stretched then rolled to his side to look at Kristopher’s painting. It had been a night of revelations, and he didn’t know what affected him more. Catherine still loved him and wanted him and he’d made love to her and he’d pleased her... more than once. And the Bond! He searched it and it seemed as strong as it had ever been. It told him that Catherine was hungry, but for food this time.

He rose and went into the bathroom where he found that Catherine had put out a new toothbrush for him and a clean towel hung on the towel bar next to her slightly damp one. He turned on the shower, stepped in and let the hot water wash over his body.

In the kitchen, Catherine heard the slight rattle of the pipes that told her that the shower had been turned on upstairs. She smiled and got up to start breakfast. She’d put out eggs and bacon earlier when she’d made coffee. Now she put the bacon on a baking sheet and put it in the preheated oven.

The table was set and she was spooning eggs onto plates when Vincent entered the kitchen. She pretended not to notice him until he stepped up close behind her and lowered his head to kiss the top of her head.

“Good morning,” he said in a low voice.

“You just made it,” she said as she glanced at the clock. She put down the pan and turned around. “It’s almost noon. I sent a message and asked Pascal to let Father know we’d be down after lunch.”

Vincent smiled and dipped his head lower to kiss her. He intended it to be a slight peck, but as she wound her arms around his neck and pressed against him, it deepened.

“The eggs are getting cold,” he said when he finally lifted his head.

“But we are certainly getting warm,” she added.

He backed away, seemingly unconcerned about how his pajamas didn’t disguise anything. Even the robe didn’t help. She turned to pick up their plates and carry them to the table.

“Tea in the pot,” she said as he took his seat. “Do you want anything else?”

“We can talk about that after breakfast,” he surprised her by saying.

She grinned and sat down. “I like this new side of you that I’m seeing!”

They ate in silence. Catherine could tell that Vincent was lost in thought.

“A penny,” she offered after a few moments.

He looked up and smiled. “I think it’s probably worth at least a nickel.”

“I think there’s some change in the drawer under the phone, so what has you so deep in thought?”

“The Bond. It seems to have returned.”

She smiled, then a shadow passed across her face. “Can you still feel Jake?”

He nodded. “He’s still here too.” He placed his hand over his heart.

“It must be getting crowded in there,” she commented, but she was relieved that he hadn’t lost his Bond with his son.

“There’s plenty of room,” he assured her. He hesitated then continued. “... and I remember.”

“Remember?” Then her face lit up and she smiled. “You mean the first time we made love?”

“And it was exactly as you told me. It was beautiful... and over the last few years I’ve also recovered more of what happened in the cavern. Some of it is a bit foggy and it’s still a little out of sequence, but I remember seeing you coming into the cavern.” His eyes were unfocused as he stared over her shoulder and out the window into the yard. “I had been fighting the other part of myself, and when I looked up and saw you coming toward me, he was behind you. I’d seen him like that before, in your apartment, but that time he was leering at you and reaching for you. In the cavern it was different. He was just looking at you with something like longing in his eyes, but I still felt that he was a threat and that was why I came at you.”

“You weren’t charging me?” she asked incredulously.

“No, I was hallucinating, but I knew you. I thought I was saving you from *him*.” He looked uncomfortable reliving it, but she let him go on.

“You called my name and he came rushing at me. It was like he merged with me and that was when I collapsed.”

“He tried to kill you?” she was puzzled.

He shrugged. “I don’t think so,” he admitted. “But he hasn’t made a reappearance since that day. Do you remember me telling you how peaceful I felt after my illness?” She nodded and he continued. “It was as if that part of me was no longer there; the dark part. But over the last few years, I’ve come to realize that it’s more as if I came to terms with that part of myself. At that moment in the cave when I saw him behind you, I realized that both parts of me loved you, and that it was the dark part of myself that I was able to call on for the extra strength, or speed or even the ability to use the Bond to find you. Maybe that was why the Bond disappeared. That dark half of me was so deeply buried that some of the abilities that it gave me were buried too.”

“And now? With the Bond back, does that mean that part is starting to surface again?” she asked apprehensively. “I don’t want you to have to go through all that again. It was too hard on you; it almost killed you.”

“I don’t think it’s anything that we need to worry about,” he rushed to reassure her. “Like I said, it’s like I came to terms with the things about myself that I didn’t like; that frightened me. That is what it was. I’ve always tried to hide away the things about myself that didn’t seem entirely human. I think Father inadvertently started it. When I

was little, I didn't have as much hair as I do now. The skin on my face was completely bare. Father did everything he could to make me look as *normal* as possible. He kept my nails clipped short, my hair was a lot shorter. So that gave me the impression early that anything that was different, or about that *other* part of me, the part that was stronger, faster, had better hearing and eyesight, and could roar was *wrong* and needed to be suppressed. It started getting worse when I was twelve or thirteen, just before Devin left, all of those things that were *different* became more pronounced. I know Father only did it because he loved me and because he wanted me to be accepted by everyone, but..."

"... but it's a rather negative way to raise a child." She put in when he hesitated.

"That and it was contradictory and confusing later when I was called on to use those things that I was trying to suppress to protect the people I love."

"That would be hard for anyone to understand, much less a child," she agreed.

"Exactly. That is why I didn't want to interfere with what you are doing with Jacob. You are aware of his differences, as small as they are, but I've never heard you say anything to him about any of it. Not even in warning."

"I think I kind of subconsciously realized where Father had gone a little wrong with you, and I didn't want to make those same mistakes. Jake is stronger than the other kids his age, and he can run faster, see better and hear better, but I've tried not to point it out to him. Sure, I'll warn him to be gentle with a small animal, or a younger child, but it's only the warning that I'd give to any child. I've never pointed out any of his differences. Not that any of them are that obvious."

Catherine was sitting back, sipping her coffee and watching Vincent.

"What is it?" he asked when he noticed her gaze.

She smiled and shrugged. "I was just thinking how lucky I am to be getting a second chance."

"I'm the lucky one. You're giving me the second chance, with both you and our son, that I only dreamed to having."

Catherine rose and started gathering their dishes and loading the dishwasher. When she turned back to the table Vincent was surprised to see tears in her eyes. He was on his feet at once.

"What is it?" he asked, pulling her into his arms.

She shook her head and buried her face in his t-shirt, and he was surprised when he heard her chuckle.

“I’m turning into a real wuss,” she complained as she wiped the tears from her cheeks with her hands. “I was determined not to cry nearly the whole time we were apart. And I was pretty successful; I usually only succumbed when I was alone; in the shower, mostly, but I’ve really been making up for it lately.”

“Go ahead and cry... I hear it’s good for you,” he told her with a smile. “It’s cathartic, and by no means does it mean you are a wuss. I was reading an article in one of Father’s medical journals and it said that it relieves stress, removes toxins and may even lower blood pressure.”

That made her laugh. “Now you sound like Father... or Peter.”

He moved back to his chair and pulled her down onto his lap and they sat like that for several minutes.

“What are we going to tell Jacob?” he asked.

“That kind of depends on how we plan to do this,” she told him. “I know you can’t exactly move in here, not with your responsibilities Below.”

“If Mouse gets the relay installed, I can spend more time here. If you will allow it, I thought I might maintain my chamber Below for nights when I’ve worked late. I’ll still teach and work with the repair crews that need me. I’ll spend my days Below.”

She slid her arms around his neck and hugged him.

“If I allow it? Hell, I’m likely to demand it. I think we should just be honest with Jake and tell him that we’ve worked out our differences and you will be living with us at least part of the time.”

“If you will say, most of the time, then I will agree to that,” he said and kissed her.

They were both getting overheated when they finally broke the kiss.

“And if we don’t stop this,” she said as she stood and tugged him to his feet, “we won’t be heading Below until after dinner.” She gave him a gentle push toward the basement. “You go and get dressed and I’ll go upstairs and get dressed. “You can bring whatever you need back with you when we come back this evening. I’ll make room in the closet upstairs, and you can use the drawers in the armoire. I’ve never put anything in them.”

They passed Jamie who told them that the children were in the study with Father. She smiled when she saw that they were holding hands.

When they walked into the study a few minutes later, Jake was watching the entrance as if he expected them. He jumped up and threw himself at his mother, wrapping his arms around her knees. She glanced up at Vincent as she bent down and returned the child's hug.

"I missed you too," she said. "Did you have a good time?"

"Uh huh! We had Sloppy Joe's for dinner last night, and pancakes for breakfast, and Geoffrey and Kipper took us exploring, and Mary taught us how to braid rags to make a rug. We had macaroni and cheese for lunch, then Grandpa told us that he'd teach us all to play checkers. I love it when I get to sleep over. Did you and Daddy have a sleep over? Did you have fun?"

Catherine turned bright red, Vincent almost choked and Father laughed out loud.

"Well, yes we did, Jacob," Vincent answered. "Your mother and I talked and we worked a few things out and we'd like to talk to you about it."

Jake looked at Father who waved him on. "Go ahead, Jacob. We can continue our lesson later."

Catherine and Jake left the chamber as Vincent turned back to Father.

"I want to talk to you later, Father," he said.

"You just go ahead. I understand. Enjoy your family. I'll be here when you need me."

Catherine was sitting on the sofa and Jake was on a chair in front of her. Vincent joined Catherine when he arrived. He was surprised when he sensed apprehension from the boy.

"It's all right, Jacob," he began. "What we want to talk about is good. You can relax."

"At least we feel it is," added Catherine.

Vincent turned to Catherine.

"I think everyone is going to think it is." He turned back to Jake.

"What did you and Mama talk about?"

"We talked about us; your mother and me and you."

"And we have some ideas that we want to run by you," Catherine added.

Jake didn't speak, he just waited for one of them to go on.

"What would you think if I moved in with you and your mother?" Vincent asked.

He didn't have to wait long for the answer.

"Really? Like you'd be there all of the time? You could use the room next door to me."

"Well, I think the arrangements would be a little different," Catherine rushed to explain.

"He will probably share my room most of the time."

Jake's brow furrowed, making his look more like Vincent. "But you've only got one bed."

"But it's a very big bed," she reminded him. "And most parents usually sleep together."

Jake thought about that for a moment.

"You're gonna get married?" he asked.

Catherine didn't answer, she just looked at her hands. Vincent sputtered uncertainly for a moment.

"We hadn't actually talked about that," he admitted. "What do you think?"

"Well, most of my friends' moms and dads are married."

"Then..." Vincent hesitated for a moment before he looked his son in the eye. "May I have your permission to ask your mother to marry me?"

Jake was surprised by the request. No adult had ever asked his permission to do anything. He nodded enthusiastically.

"Yeah! Sure! Especially if it means you'll live with us forever and ever... Like in the fairy tales. It'll be 'happily ever after.'"

Vincent surprised them both by turning and going down on one knee in front of Catherine.

"Would you do me the honor..."

She didn't even give him the chance to finish. She threw herself into his arms as she shouted. "Yes, yes, yes!"

Jake jumped up and danced around them, clapping his hands and laughing before he darted out of the chamber shouting. "Mama and Daddy are going to get married!"

The wedding had been planned in record time. Catherine and Vincent hadn't wanted a big celebration. They'd suggested that the ceremony be performed by a Helper who was a minister and it would take place in the Study. Father could be Vincent's best man and Mary would be Catherine's maid of honor and anyone Below who wanted was to be invited to attend. They planned for it to take place two weeks from Vincent's proposal.

But by the time the day arrived, it had grown to the Tunnel equivalent of a royal wedding.

It had been moved to the Great Hall and everyone Below wanted to be there, and at least half of their Helpers attended also. Even Narcissa and Elizabeth were there.

Peter gave Catherine away, and she was not only attended by Mary, but by Olivia, Rebecca, Lena and Jamie. Baby Catherine, who was a year older than Jake, was the flower girl and Jake was promoted to Groomsman, while Olivia and Kanin's youngest, Samuel, was the ring bearer. Devin got wind of what was going on and he arrived two days before the event and became one of the groomsmen along with Charles.

The party was still going on when Catherine and Vincent snuck out and made their way back to his chamber.

"You're sure no one will disturb us here?" she asked dubiously as Vincent helped slid the zipper of her dress down her back.

"They wouldn't dare!" he said with a laugh, "but just in case I had Cullen put a latch on the door to the bedchamber." He went over and demonstrated the simple latch that would lock the door from the inside.

Catherine slid the gown down and stepped out of it. Vincent handed her the hanger and she hung it and hung the hanger on the front of the armoire.

"Just when did we lose control of all this?" she asked as she pulled on a robe and went to sit in front of the dressing table Vincent had installed in the chamber for her.

Vincent went to stand behind her and began to help her take down her hair.

"I think that happened about the time our son ran out of the chamber shouting that his mother and father were going to get married."

She laughed and leaned back against him as his hands dropped from her hair to her shoulders.

"You're probably right about that. I got the distinct feeling every time we sat down to talk about plans with someone that they were just nodding and smiling and humoring us."

Over the previous two weeks, Vincent had become a lot more at ease with his own body and she watched in the mirror as he moved away from her and started taking off his wedding finery, folding it neatly and putting it away. When he'd put on the dark blue silk pajama bottoms she'd given him as a wedding present he moved back to stand behind her.

"The last two weeks have been a little like a dream," she said as she rose and turned toward him.

"I've wanted to ask someone to pinch me several times, especially in the last few days, but I was afraid that Devin would take me up on it and leave me back and blue."

The two of you together are so much fun," she told him as she slid her arms around his torso and snuggled close. "I feel like I'm getting a glimpse of your childhood."

Vincent just laughed and shook his head.

"Did he really call you Fuzzbutt?"

"He did. Just before he left I was just starting to get more body hair. It was more like a layer of soft fuzz to begin with. He started calling me that when he first noticed it and it stuck until he left. I'd all but forgotten it until he returned."

He leaned down and captured her lips.

"Can we change the subject?" he asked when they pulled away from either other.

"Whatever would you like to talk about?" she asked with a twinkle.

"Umm, perhaps words aren't necessary for the moment." He bent and captured her lips again.

Later, they never even noticed when Jacob and Luke entered the outer chamber to pick up a book that Father had promised to read to everyone that evening.

"So you're going to live Below now?" asked Luke as Jake crossed the chamber to get the book.

"Nope. Mama said that Daddy will be living with us in our house, but we'll be coming down here because this is our other home and he works here. She said that sometimes we'll come Below for vacations and we'll go exploring with Daddy. I can't wait!"

END