

TAKE ME HOME

Janet Rivenbark

Devin was back in the tunnels, at least for the time being. Charles had surprised him with the news that he wanted to go back to New York and the tunnels. More surprisingly, he'd already written Father asking permission, and the council granted it. He only told Devin after the fact.

Charles knew about the relationship between Devin and his father, and he didn't want Father or anyone else Below to think that Devin was shirking the responsibility he'd taken on when he'd taken Charles under his wing.

After they left the tunnels that February in 1989, they had stayed in Philadelphia long enough for Devin to earn money to buy a used Winnebago, then they'd been off on their adventure. They had traveled all over the country, seeing all the things that Charles had always wanted to see.

Devin had quickly learned that Charles wasn't mentally slow in any way, just uneducated and painfully shy. He'd attended school until about the third grade. He'd learned to read and had always read voraciously, using the books and magazines to expand his world. During the long drives with Devin, he'd used the time to expand those horizons even more. Learning all he could learn about the next destination they were heading to.

They'd stayed in a small town in southwestern Texas for the winter and Devin had written a letter to Vincent to give him their address and tell him that they'd be there until spring. A week later they'd received the letter informing them of Catherine's death, and of the son Vincent had brought home after a harrowing struggle.

Not long after that, they'd received a letter from Catherine's lawyer, informing them that she'd set up a trust for Charles. It was intended for his medical care and living expenses if necessary. Devin Wells had been named the trustee of the account.

The following spring they'd hit the road again, working their way across New Mexico, Arizona and finally reaching California, where they headed north on the Pacific Coast Highway. They had continued up the coast through Oregon and Washington before they headed back east. They had stopped halfway across Montana and Devin was working to make money to buy new tires for the camper when Charles had written to Father and received his answer. He didn't tell Devin until they were back on the road again, a month later.

In some ways, Devin had been surprised at Charles' announcement, but not so surprised in other ways. Although Charles was enjoying the trip and all the sights he

was seeing, he didn't enjoy the way some people reacted to his appearance. He'd begun to wear ordinary clothing. Mary had been able to find some things Below before they'd left and Devin had made some trips to "big and tall" stores along their route, but those clothes didn't disguise his deformities. With more freedom, Charles had taken to walking and getting more exercise, and he'd managed to lose a little weight, but that just seemed to make the tumors stand out more.

Devin had made him another hood out of a pillowcase, but they'd encountered places where wearing a mask or a hood that covered the face was against the law, except on Halloween or on private property. That was when they'd put their heads together and designed a cloak similar to Vincent's. It had a deep hood that Charles could retreat into when the need arose.

When Charles told Devin that he wanted to go back to the tunnels, Devin had plotted their route to get them there around the end of August. They had continued across North Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin and into the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. They crossed into Canada at Sault St. Marie and continued across Ontario to cross back into the US at Niagara Falls. They reached New York City the next day.

The tunnel residents had already prepared a chamber for Charles, and Devin had temporarily moved into the guest chamber. Their first evening there found Devin in Vincent's chamber.

He had to hand it to his little brother; he was a fantastic dad and the little boy he'd produced with Catherine's help, was not only smart but the best-looking baby he'd ever seen... He didn't think he was at all biased in that opinion.

The baby, Jacob, was almost a year old. Vincent knew the child's birthdate, it was the same as the date of Catherine's death, and even though he had no plans to stay in the tunnels permanently, Devin had decided to hang around for a while. He knew that the first anniversary of Catherine's death wasn't going to be an easy day for Vincent, and he also thought he should probably hang around for a while to make sure that Charles settled in all right. He might even stay until the following spring. It had been years since his last Winterfest, and it would be nice to spend the rest of the winter holidays with family for a change.

"So what do you plan to do?" asked Vincent after he settled Jacob in his crib and went back to his chair by the table.

"I don't think I could stand to be down here 24/7," Devin said truthfully. "I think I'll go up and see if I can find a job of some kind. Maybe something outdoors so I can get my daily dose of vitamin D."

"One of our young men works for the organization that maintains Central Park," Vincent told him. "Perhaps something like that."

“Yeah, that would work. Or maybe one of the other parks, or the zoo. I even worked as a groundskeeper at Tiger Stadium in Detroit for one summer. I can do that. Or a gardener.’

“You have many skills,” Vincent commented.

“I do that... Don’t tell Pop, but one of the personas I assumed was that of a Psychiatric Counselor. I think I learned more about people doing that than I did at any other job I did. I think I did it longer than most too. Almost a year. If I were ever to go to school to really learn a profession, that would be my choice... So, little brother, if you need to talk, remember I’m here, and I plan to stay a while this time.”

Vincent looked at his brother and smiled for the first time since Devin had arrived.

“Thank you, Devin, I’ll keep the offer in mind. Father does tend to be a little clinical, and everyone else Below just avoids any subject that they think might cause me pain. I’ve passed the point where all I can think of is joining Catherine. I passed that once I brought Jacob home. He’s my son, and he needs me. He needs me to tell him about his mother, and he’s the proof of something that Catherine always believed and that Father always doubted.”

“What’s that?” asked Devin.

“That I am a man, human. Peter has run all kinds of tests, and other than the Bond that I have with him, Jacob is perfectly normal. He has my blood type, but he looks more and more like Catherine every day. There will be nothing to keep him from taking his place Above someday.”

Devin was very surprised at what he heard from Vincent.

“Peter made sure he has a birth certificate. To the world Above he will be Jacob Charles Chandler. Catherine is on the document as his mother and his father as Vincent Wells. Catherine had the foresight to rewrite her Will as soon as she found out she was pregnant. In fact, the only person who knew of her pregnancy was her father’s law partner. She wrote it out and took it to him, and he turned it into a legal document. She signed it the day before she disappeared. Other than the small trust she set up for Charles and another for this community, she left everything to her child. And everyone knew she had a child before she died. The Will was processed, and Peter is in control of the estate.”

Devin had to admit that Vincent seemed to be adjusting as well as could be expected. He went through the stages of grief that he’d learned while he was working as a counselor, and he had to admit that Vincent seemed to have reached the Acceptance stage. It was just the general apathy he sensed in him that had him worried.

The next morning at breakfast Devin snagged the classified section of the newspaper from Father and started circling job possibilities. He curbed his natural inclinations and stuck to the jobs that were within his actual skill set.

He stopped at a phone booth and called a Helper to get permission to use his address when he filled out employment applications, and once that was obtained, he began his quest. He'd filled out applications at two places not far from the building that housed the DA's office and decided to stop at a little diner just down the street from it for some lunch.

He was taking his first bite of a BLT when he heard a familiar voice call his name... well, one of his names.

"Well, if it isn't Jeff Radler?"

He looked up to see Joe Maxwell standing next to the table.

"Well, that's not exactly right," Maxwell corrected himself. "What did Cathy tell me? You were a fraud, but a good fraud and your real name is Wells."

Devin swallowed his bite of sandwich, only half chewed and smiled weakly up at Joe. Joe was smiling, so Devin took that as a good sign.

"Yeah, well Chandler was a good investigator, and she had a gut feeling. She went with her gut and was able to dig up a few things. She offered me an out because she knows my family; I took it."

Joe took the seat across the table from Devin. A waitress hurried over; he gave her an order, and when she was gone he directed his attention back to Devin.

"Don't worry; she explained it to me. And to tell the truth, if I were to try to do anything, I'd have to admit that I screwed up, and that wouldn't look good for my bid to be elected DA this fall."

"I heard about everything," Devin told him. "That had to have been rough... all of it. Losing a friend like Chandler, and finding that someone you looked up to, someone you were close to, wasn't all that you thought he was."

"Well, I guess we weren't as close as I thought we were," said Joe, sourly.

The waitress came over, set a burger and fries and a soft drink in front of Joe and left.

"So, what are you doing in town?" asked Joe, as he reached for his burger.

"Brought a friend back to the City and I've decided to stay for a while. I'm looking for a job."

Joe looked thoughtful. "What do you do?"

That made Devin laugh. “What do you need? Knife thrower, truck driver, safari guide, New Zealand sheep rancher, wrangler, doctor, lawyer... can’t say I’ve ever been an Indian chief...”

“How about a private investigator?” asked Joe with a grin.

“Now that was one legitimate job I had. I didn’t need any special training for that one, just a license. I had my own business in Houston for a while. Wound up having to leave it all because the husband of a client didn’t appreciate the dirt I dug up on him.”

“Client?” Joe asked with raised eyebrows.

“Yeah, it was legit. The majority of work most PI’s do is divorce-related, and the client hired me to get the proof that her husband was having an affair. She got more than she bargained for. Not only was he having an affair, but he was running an *escort service* out the upper floors of the pest control business he had. Bug killing downstairs, but he was making a killing out of the brothel he was running on the top three floors of the building. He got ticked when she confronted him with the evidence of both his indiscretions. She told him she wanted a divorce and that she’d turn the evidence of the illegal brothel over to the police if he didn’t give her a good settlement. Better than good actually. She wanted him to hand over the pest control business and most of their jointly held property. He could keep the other business, but he had to move it out of the building.”

“How did he find out that you were the one who got the evidence on him?”

“His wife told him. I left town a short time later. I hope she got what she wanted.”

Joe looked thoughtful.

“I know you don’t have a license here, but I might have something you can do for me. Can you come up to my office this afternoon about two?”

“Sure. I’m up for anything as long as it pays. Can you fill me in?”

“It will pay,” Joe assured him, “but I don’t want to talk about it right now and not here. I want to talk somewhere a bit more private.” Joe quickly finished his burger, leaving most of the fries. He slapped some money on the table and stood. “You know where to find me. I’ll see you at two. I’ve got an important meeting in 15 minutes.”

Devin finished his lunch, left a generous tip for the waitress then paid his and Joe’s bills and left. He spent an hour in a used bookstore in the next block where he bought a couple of books for Charles and one for Vincent before he walked the short distance back to Joe’s office. He presented himself to Joe’s secretary a few minutes before 2 pm.

“Of course, Mr. Wells. Have a seat. Mr. Maxwell is on the phone right now, but he’ll be out as soon as he’s done.”

She looked at him as if she thought he looked familiar, but he was sure the informal, slightly scruffy clothing and several days' growth of beard threw her off.

It was almost ten past when Joe finally came out.

"Sorry I kept you waiting," he said as he showed Devin into the office that had once been John Moreno's. "It's kind of hard to get the mayor off the phone once he's on a roll."

Devin made himself comfortable in the chair in front of the desk as Joe sat down behind it. He waited patiently as Joe reached into a drawer and pulled out a manila envelope.

He opened it and spread the contents on his cluttered desk.

"What's all that?" Devin asked.

Joe selected an 8"x10" black and white photo from the contents and handed it to Devin. He didn't say anything as Devin studied the photo.

It was obviously taken with a telephoto lens, and it was a bit grainy. It was of a woman in profile, standing at the railing of a small balcony on the side of an apartment building.

"You got a magnifying glass?" he asked.

Joe reached into his desk and pulled one out. He handed it to Devin who used it to study the woman. She had her hair pulled back, and her profile was very clearly visible against the dark siding of the building.

"Either Chandler has a twin or..." he hesitated to say it.

"Or that is her." Joe finished for him.

"Where did this come from?" Devin asked.

"That's quite the story. Cathy and I have a mutual friend in LA. Gina Barrett. She heard the news about Cathy and called me. She was broken up about it. But then, not long after I talked to her, she called me again. She said she was on her way back home to LA, after spending the Thanksgiving weekend with friends in San Diego, she stopped to get gas and said she saw someone who looked familiar. She didn't think and walked up and spoke to her. The woman turned around, and Gina would have sworn it was Cathy. She said she could have accepted that it was just someone who looked like Cathy, except that there was a flash of recognition in the woman's eyes before she took off. Gina said that the woman even had a scar on her face right in front of her left ear. Gina caught part of the plate on the car the woman jumped into, but she didn't get all of it."

"How did you get this picture?"

"I didn't want to believe Gina, not really. I'd seen Cathy's body. She was dead. I would have sworn that on a stack of Bibles. And I told Gina that. I told her that it was just wishful thinking. But she wasn't willing to let it go. She hired a PI and gave him what she

had, which consisted of the location she'd seen the woman, the partial Nevada plate number, the make of the car and a photo of Cathy that had been taken of the two of them when Cathy took Gina sight-seeing when she was here.

"Long story short... He used some connections to get a list of addresses connected to the partial and was able to narrow it down to an address in Las Vegas. He headed to Vegas and spent about a week there. He staked out the house but didn't have any luck until he started following anyone who left the house.

"He followed one time, and the guy went to a casino. He followed him inside and to a Blackjack table. The dealer at that table was the woman in the picture Gina had given him. She had darker hair and was wearing glasses, but he was sure it was the same woman. He shifted his focus to her and followed her home that night, and that's where he got that picture."

Devin looked at him.

"So, what do you want me to do?" he asked.

"Be my eyes and legs. I can't just drop everything here and head to Vegas. I need to be here and be visible. If that *is* Cathy, she's got to be hiding; there has to be a good reason for her to leave everything here, her life, her friends, not to mention a sizable fortune, to live in Vegas in a small efficiency apartment on the sleazy side of town, while she's working as a dealer in one of the smaller casinos."

"Hiding in plain sight?" Devin asked.

"That idea did cross my mind," said Joe. "A cop who worked the case is now with the FBI, and she told me that the Bureau sometimes does it like that. They set people up with a new life, a new identity, in a new place, and they don't stay on them 24/7, they just don't have the manpower. If they are sure that the person understands the need to stay hidden, they only check on them every once in a while."

"Who was the guy at the house the investigator staked out at first?"

"He's pretty sure that the man is FBI. Maybe one of their undercover guys. One time when he was tailing him, he met another man in a park and on a whim he followed the second guy. He was driving a car with a government plate, and he went back to the Federal Building."

"Would they have a reason to keep her in protective custody, or I guess this is more like some protection plan?" Devin asked.

"Yeah, I think so. Although that Gabriel guy was killed when we raided his compound on Staten Island, quite a few of his people escaped. And there is plenty of evidence that his crime machine is still up and running. As long there is someone who would consider Cathy a threat, her life would be in danger."

"So what makes you think that Cathy won't run if she sees me?"

“She knows you.”

“She knew that Gina too, and she ran from her.”

“It’s just a feeling,” Joe told him. He picked up all the stuff he’d dumped out of the envelope, stacked it on top of the envelope and handed it all to Devin. “By the way, what’s your first name, and is Wells really your name?”

“It is. My mother’s name was Grace Devin, and she wanted me to have her name, so I was named Devin... Devin Wells.”

He briefly glanced through what Joe had handed him, then he put it all back in the envelope, stood and turned toward the door.

“I know a guy... Helped when we raided Gabriel’s place. His name was Wells.”

“Yeah, Jacob Wells, my father.”

“So that’s the family that Cathy knew when she helped you out?”

Devin could tell that Joe was fishing and starting to add things up. He knew that Joe wouldn’t leave it alone until he had answers.

“She knew my family,” Devin said, carefully.

“So... who’s Vincent?”

Devin considered before he answered.

“Vincent is my brother.”

“Was he Cathy’s boyfriend? Is that how she knew your family?”

“You could say that.” Devin was trying to look relaxed. The slap of the envelope against his leg was the only thing that showed any agitation.

“You know she had a baby right before she died, right? What did your brother have to do with that? When I think of Catherine’s child in the hands of those people... people as warped as Gabriel...”

“Vincent is the father,” Devin interrupted, then he watched Joe, judging just how much to tell him. He tried to turn the tables somewhat. “Your friend with the FBI... I’m assuming that’s Diana Bennett. You know that she knows Vincent.” It was a statement, not a question.

“I suspected as much,” Joe told him.

“I can’t tell you everything, but I will tell you that Catherine’s son is safe. He’s with his father. Detective Bennett saw to that.”

Joe looked relieved.

“OK, I won’t ask any more questions,” Joe surprised Devin by saying.

“That’s good, but I’ve got a couple for you.”

“Shoot.”

“You want me to find out if this woman,” he lifted the envelope, “is Catherine Chandler. If she is, what do you want me to do?”

“Bring her home!”

“But, you just told me that her life could be in danger if she came back here. How can I be sure that you and Moreno weren’t in cahoots? How do I know that you don’t want her back here so you can get rid of her?”

The look on Joe’s face convinced Devin, but he let Joe sweat for a little longer.

“I guess there’s not a lot I can do to convince you, except that I nearly trashed my career to continue searching for her. Moreno suspended me because I wouldn’t give it up.”

“It could have been for show,” Devin pointed out.

Joe shook his head and shrugged. “What can I say. I loved Cathy, she was a good friend, and I wanted to see justice done, but if she’s alive, she deserves to at least know that her child is OK.”

“If I find out that this is her, will you allow her to make that decision? If she wants to come back here to be with Vincent and their son, I’ll bring her back, but I’m going to take her to Vincent. I’ll let you know what’s going on, but I won’t expose her to danger. If I take her to Vincent, she’ll be safe. No one would even think to look for her there.”

“I imagine that the reason the Feds have her under protection is that they want her to testify or, at least, identify people. Would she be available for that?”

“That would be entirely up to her.”

“Fair enough.”

Joe handed him another envelope. This one was letter size and was rather thick.

“What’s this?” Devin asked.

“Expense money.”

“Your money?”

“Yes... I can’t very well ask for a couple thousand out of petty cash to continue the search for a dead woman.”

“I’ll spend it carefully,” Devin promised. “And if this turns out to be Catherine, I’m sure she will reimburse you.”

“Not a problem,” Joe assured him. “It will be worth every penny. And when you get back, no matter what the outcome is, I’ll pay you for your time.”

Devin had his hand on the door handle when Joe stopped him again.

“Are you going to tell anyone about this?”

Devin shook his head. “I don’t think so. My brother was devastated when Catherine died. About the only thing that kept him going was his son. I don’t want to have him hoping that she’s alive and then find out that it was a mistake.”

Devin headed back Below where he dropped both the envelopes off in the guest chamber he was using before he joined Father, Vincent, Charles and Jacob in the study.

He paused at the top of the short stairway to take in the scene. It looked every idyllic and domestic and made him hope all the more that the woman in Las Vegas was Catherine and that he’d be able to bring her home. He descended the steps and stopped to watch as his nephew let go of his father’s hands and walked across the three feet of open space to his grandfather.

Catherine should be here for these milestones, he told himself.

Devin strode across the chamber and picked up the giggling child.

“Goodness, but you are growing so fast! You’re going to be 21 before we all know it.”

They were at dinner when Devin decided to tell everyone he was going to be away for a while.

“Where are you going?” Vincent asked.

“Florida,” he lied. “I ran into an old friend who was looking for someone to take his folks new pick-up truck and trailer down to their property on the Gulf. They will fly down after I get there and have everything set up.”

“How will you get home?” asked Father.

“I’ll fly, my friend gave me enough money for expenses and the plane ticket back. He’ll pay me for the job when I get back.”

“Is this all legal?” asked Father.

Devin looked at him and laughed. “I guess I deserve that, considering my history... Yes, Father. It is all very legal and above board. Not every job I did was fraudulent. People do things like this all the time. When I lived in Detroit, I drove new cars to their owners in

other states a couple of times. They would special order sports cars and luxury cars straight from the factory.”

“How long to you expect to be gone?” Charles asked.

“I’m not sure... Probably more than a week, but less than two. I expect it will take me two or three days to get there; it just depends on the weather and the traffic. Then I’ll have to hang around and make sure everything is set up and working properly when his folks show up. I won’t leave until they’re settled.”

Devin didn’t expect to be gone more than a week, but he wanted to make sure he had plenty of cushion. He wanted to see this woman in person and make sure she was Catherine before he approached her, and he wasn’t sure exactly where would be the better place. Those were all decisions to be made once he was in Vegas.

“When are you leaving?” asked Vincent.

“Sometime day after tomorrow,” he told him. “The earlier, the better... In fact, I need to go Above this evening and make some calls. Does Peter still keep that phone in his basement?”

“He does. Do you want company?”

“Nah, Bro. When I’m done with the calls, I’ve got to run up to my friend’s place and get the maps, the address of where I’m taking the trailer to, and the keys to the truck. I’ll probably be gone a couple of hours, and that’s your prime time with Jacob.”

Vincent nodded agreement.

Devin did have calls to make, but they were to the airline to make a reservation and an inexpensive but reasonably good hotel that he knew of in Las Vegas.

Luckily Peter wasn’t home, so he didn’t have to make excuses.

Devin’s flight left JFK at 8am two days later. He’d taken the time to study the material in the manila envelope Joe had given him. He’d all but memorized it. He had it with him, but he doubted that he’d have to refer to it. He landed just before 11, Las Vegas time. He took the time to grab some lunch in the airport, then found his way to the car rental kiosk. He’d been to Las Vegas many times, so he knew his way around almost as well as the people who lived there. He was settled into the clean but inexpensive hotel room by late afternoon.

The hotel was in the perfect location. The casino where the woman, he didn’t want to call her Catherine yet, worked, was within walking distance. And it was only a short drive to the apartment building where she lived. All this information had been gathered some time before, and he hoped that she hadn’t decided to move on.

Devin had been growing his beard since the day before he'd talked to Joe. He figured that since he was going to be hanging out close to this woman, he should have some disguise. A beard and sunglasses had worked well in the past. He was lucky that his beard grew fast. It had gotten to the point where it was enough to cover the scars on his cheek. He debated whether or not he should head over to the casino right away or wait; then he decided that he should, at least, find out what the working hours were.

He strolled over and stopped outside to speak to the security guard who was at the door.

"Hi," he said in his friendliest manner. "I was wondering if it was too late to put in an employment application."

The guard was an older man and seemed friendly enough.

"Sorry son, the employment office closes at four, but be back here tomorrow morning at eight, and you can apply. What do you do?"

"Most anything. I worked as a Blackjack dealer in Reno, I've been a croupier, and a boxman at the craps table, but I really prefer the cards. Especially Blackjack. What kind of shifts do the employees work here?"

"Everyone works a nine-hour shift. They work four hours, get an hour lunch, then they work another four hours."

"Do you happen to know the shift times?"

"The morning shift is 4am to 1pm; swing is noon to 9pm and night shift is 8pm to 5am."

"Wow, those are great hours, are they permanent or do they rotate?"

"It's up to the employees as long as there are always enough to cover each shift. They work it out with their floor supervisor."

"I'll definitely be back in the morning to put in an application, but I think I'll go in now and try my luck before I become an employee and can't gamble here." He grinned at the guard and walked into the casino.

Since it was only 6 pm, he knew that the dealers at the Blackjack tables had been there since noon and would be relieved between 8 and 9 pm. He'd hang around for the shift change, and if he didn't see her here tonight, he'd come back in the morning before noon. If it wasn't her day off, he'd know pretty quickly what her hours were.

He wandered through the crowded rooms. The casino advertised ten blackjack tables. He quickly located all of them. He wandered from table to table, stopping to watch the games and occasionally stopping to play the slots. He was aware that all casinos had closed circuit surveillance, and he didn't want to look suspicious. She wasn't at any of the tables, so he went to the restaurant and settled in to have dinner and make sure it lasted until a little after 9.

Later he made the circuit of the room several times again, but he didn't see her, so he left and walked back to his hotel.

The next morning, he was up early and at the casino by 9. This particular casino advertised an all you can eat buffet breakfast that was served until 11, and he wasn't surprised to see that it was almost as crowded as it had been the night before.

He'd taken pains to dress differently this morning, and he used a different route through the casino as he checked the tables. No need to draw attention to himself and get thrown out. Casino security was notoriously paranoid.

He quickly noticed that all but two of the dealers were men this morning. The woman at the table closest to him was a tall, very fair skinned blond. Definitely not the woman he was looking for. As he made his way to the table closest to the restaurant, he stopped. It was the woman in the photograph; that was certain. But oddly enough, he couldn't be sure that it was Chandler. She was the right size, but the darker hair threw him. The large dark rimmed glasses didn't help.

He didn't want to take the chance of being recognized, but he had to get closer to hear her voice. There were several people waiting for seats around her table, so he stepped up behind a rather large man and acted like he was waiting too.

Her eyes constantly scanned the players and often dropped back to those who were waiting. She would bestow the occasional slight smile, then go back to her job. She didn't say much, only the occasional "Nice hit," or "Good luck," or a well-placed "Sorry," when someone lost. She also said "good-bye" and welcomed new players, but he wasn't close enough to hear her well over the noise in the room.

He noticed when the slot machine on the end of the row directly behind her became empty, and he hurried over to it. He was close enough to hear the occasional word, and he watched her as closely as possible. She didn't move a lot, and the black slacks and white long sleeved dress shirts that all the employees wore were so completely different from anything he'd ever seen her in that it kept him guessing.

He won a few small jackpots but he eventually ran out of tokens for the machines, and he decided to give it up for the day. As he was passing the restaurant on his way out, the scent of food drew him in. He'd grab some lunch before he left.

He was surprised a little while later when the two female dealers walked into the dining room and took seats in the booth right next to his. The woman who might be Catherine sat with her back to him. He couldn't stare too much because he didn't want the tall blond to notice.

"So you really don't mind trading with Allison?" the blond asked.

"Are you kidding? I've never been a morning person and this getting up at 2:30 in the morning to be at work by 4:00 has been killing me. I know that the new people always

get that shift, so I'm thankful to be offered the opportunity to change after such a short time. Noon to 9 is much more my style. Why does Allison want the early shift?"

"New boyfriend. He works that shift, and she wants to be off the same hours he is."

"OK, I'll stop in the office on the way out and tell them that I'm OK with swapping with her, and I guess I'll be relieving you tomorrow around noon."

Devin paid for his lunch and left the restaurant. On his way out, he'd casually glanced over at the table where the two women were sitting. The brunette had taken off her glasses and looked up at him as he was looking her way. He was close enough to see her eyes and they were the right color, and the voice was close, but there was no scar on the left side of her face.

The missing scar threw him. Gina had said that the scar had been there when she'd seen her. Hair color was easy to change, scars could be surgically reduced, she'd already had several taken care of, and a person could get glasses whether they actually needed them or not. Her height was about right, and so was her eye color. He knew he was going to have to go to her apartment and talk to her.

He headed back to the hotel where he shaved the beard. He knew that if that woman was Catherine Chandler, she wouldn't be able to cover her reaction to him showing up at her door looking like the Devin she knew

An hour later he parked his rental car in a visitor space in the lot behind the apartment building where she lived. The investigator had figured out that her apartment number was 410. He went in, noting that there was no security and the lobby door had been propped open with a brick. The elevator was out of order, so he took the stairs up to the 4th floor. It was the top floor, and she was on the end, farthest from the elevator.

He heard music playing inside the apartment when he knocked. Classical piano music. Definitely Chandler's musical taste. He noted that the peephole in the door was at his eye level. That was good, at least for him. Chandler would need a stool if she wanted to use it.

"I'll be right there," a voice called out. And a few seconds later he heard the deadbolt slide back. She left the chain on and opened the door to see who it was.

The look of shock on her face convinced him. She started to close the door, but he managed to wedge it open with his foot.

"Chandler, you have to let me in so we can talk!"

"Go away!" she hissed.

"No! Let me in. I need to know what's going on."

There was a moment of hesitation. "You'll have to move your foot so I can get the chain off," she said.

“If you slam the door, I swear I’ll shout the whole building down, and everyone will know who you are.”

“I won’t shut it, just move your foot!”

He moved his foot. She closed the door a couple of inches, and he heard the chain slide off. She opened the door and waved him through.

She locked the door behind him.

“What? I don’t even get a hug?” he asked, turning to her and holding his arms open.

He was surprised when she walked into his arms and hugged him as if she would never let go. He was even more surprised when he heard her crying.

“Hey, Cathy. It’s OK. I’m here to help.” He led her over to the sofa, and they sat down. He pulled a tissue from the box on the table and handed it to her. She took it and scrubbed her face.

“How did you find me? How did you even know to look for me?”

“Some woman named Gina saw you, and she called Joe. When Joe wouldn’t believe her, she took the initiative and hired a private investigator. He got the information, and she sent that to Joe. It was enough to make Joe wonder.”

“But how come you’re here?”

He explained why he’d taken Charles back to New York and his chance meeting with Joe.

She was sitting staring at her hands when Devin reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet.

“I have something for you.” He handed her a small photograph.

She looked at it, and it took a moment for her to realize what she was seeing.

“This is…” she looked up at him with fresh tears starting.

“Jacob Charles Chandler. Baby Jacob to almost everyone Below. He’s been with Vincent since he was a little over a month old.”

She broke down again. “The FBI wasn’t able to tell me anything about him. They said that Gabriel was dead, and there was evidence that there had been a baby in the house, in fact, Gabriel’s body was found in the nursery, but they hadn’t found the baby. I was so scared that he’d done something to him.”

“It’s a long, complicated story, and I’ll let Vincent tell you all the details, but basically, Jake was sick, and Vincent allowed himself to be taken prisoner so he could be there for his son. He was still there when a task force raided Gabriel’s compound on Staten Island. There was a detective on the case, Diana Bennett. She’d met Vincent, and she

knew he was being held in the house, so she used the tunnels to get to him first. She found Vincent confronting Gabriel in the nursery. Gabriel had been getting ready to smother Jake with a pillow. Diana sent Vincent and the baby out through the tunnel entrance in the basement, and she stayed behind. She killed Gabriel. She said it happened in a struggle, but I very much doubt that... She killed him with your gun, which she got from Father.”

Catherine looked stunned. “How did you find all this out?”

“Vincent. He told me everything he knew, and he’d got a lot of it from Detective Bennett.”

She finally dried her eyes and took a deep breath.

“You know, your coming here could be dangerous.”

“For you or me?”

“Both, either, I don’t know, but the FBI insists that even though Gabriel is dead his organization is still alive and well, and if they knew I was alive and might be able to identify anyone, they would shut me up one way or another. They also insist that if I were to go to a friend and ask for help, I could be endangering them too.”

“Come back to New York with me. We go back in the dead of night; you go Below, and no one will be the wiser. Not even the FBI will know where you are. No one would know where to look for you.”

“That all sounds so very tempting,” she told him, “but I can’t do it. I can’t do anything that might endanger Vincent and Jacob or any of the people Below.

“OK, if you don’t go to the tunnels, then let Joe put you in a safe house.”

“I can’t do that either. It’s a matter of jurisdiction, and the FBI takes precedence in this case, and Joe would be obligated to turn me over to them.”

“What if he didn’t?”

“If they knew that he knew where I was, it would be the end of his career; not just as the DA, but as a lawyer. He wouldn’t even be allowed to work as a law clerk.”

“I’m still leaning toward you going Below and waiting for it all to blow over. We can let Joe know that you’re safe, but he doesn’t have to know where you are. He can let the FBI know what he knows, and they can contact you through him if they need you.”

She stared off into space for several minutes, then let out a huge sigh.

“I can’t Devin. I can’t endanger everyone like that.”

Devin flopped back against the back of the sofa in exasperation.

“Geez, you and Vincent, you really are made for each other. Each willing to give up everything for the other... You know, he considered killing himself.” At her stricken look, he rushed on. “But he remembered what you said about a child, and he started to put some of the things he’d been feeling together, and he decided that he had to stay alive at least until he found the child.”

“He has a Bond with Jacob?”

“Not like the one he had with you, but he does.”

“And the one with me didn’t come back?”

“He thinks you’re dead. If it did, he would probably think it was Jake. Look, can I, at least, tell Vincent and Joe that you’re alive and OK?”

“And that I won’t come home? That would be painful, Devin. Vincent thinks I’m dead. It would be cruel to tell him I’m alive, but oh, by the way, she’s not planning to come back to New York. It’s better that I’m the only one hurting.”

“Believe me; the hurt is not exclusive. Vincent hurts every day; he dreams about you every night. This past week was the first time I’ve seen him since Charles and I left the tunnels, but he’s just not himself. He’s trying, and he makes an effort for Jake and the other children. He’s going through the motions, but he’s not living. The only thing I’ve seen him enjoy has been Jake. Father is worried about him. He eats only enough to keep going, and he’s sleeping even less than he normally does. Father keeps hoping that he’ll turn a corner and wake up one day, and the pain will have turned into nothing more than a dull ache, but it hasn’t happened yet.

“When Charles told me that he wanted to go back to the tunnels I planned our trip so that we’d be sure to be there on Jake’s first birthday, which also just happens to be the first anniversary of your *death*.”

“It’s good that you want to be there for him.” Her face had taken on a stoic look, not unlike the expression Vincent wore most of the time these days.

“Is this living Chandler?” he asked, gesturing to the drab apartment.

“No, but it’s something to do until the FBI releases me from this purgatory.”

“And how long is that going to be?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know, and neither do they.”

“So you stay here, work in a casino, stand on your feet the whole time, get varicose veins, and you miss all those great baby things that Jake does.” He decided to use his ace in the hole. “You know, he walked for the first a couple days ago. He walked from Vincent to Father. It was a good three feet. That picture,” he tapped the hand she was holding it in, “was taken about a month ago, and he’s already grown out of the pants he has on in the picture. He’s gonna be tall like his Daddy.”

He could tell she was hungry for the information, but he could also see that the words hurt.

He pulled a pen and pad out of his pocket and wrote the name of the hotel, the phone number, and his room number. He tore out the page and handed it to her.

“This is where I’m staying,” he told her. “I’ll hang around for a couple more days. Give me a call if you change your mind.”

He got up and walked out. Down in the car, he pounded the steering wheel in frustration. All he could do was hope that she did change her mind. In the meantime, he’d try to come up with a Plan B.

Catherine stared at the photo in her hand. Her son... hers and Vincent’s. He had grown so much, and he was a true blend of her and Vincent. His hair was the color of Vincent’s, but his eyes looked like hers. He was going to have her skin tones and bone structure, but he was going to be tall. His legs already looked long.

After Devin left, she made her grocery list and straightened the apartment. Not that there was much to do in a just under 500 square foot efficiency. The best part was the tiny balcony. It faced east and was just big enough for the beat up lawn chair and a wooden crate that served as a table. She often stood on it staring out into space. But she didn’t see the desert before her but pictured the view from her balcony in New York.

The neighborhood wasn’t fantastic, but at least there wasn’t a knifing or a shooting every other night, and although the apartment was small, it was comfortably furnished. It had everything she needed, and the Murphy folded up into a cabinet on the wall. There as a wheeled unit that sat in front of it that was supposed to hold a TV, but Catherine wasn’t much of a TV watcher, so she only had a small one on the end of the bar that separated the living area from the kitchen. The wheeled unit held her radio and tape player combo and her books. She’d managed to accumulate a surprising number of them in a short time. In fact, she’d probably spent more on books than she did on clothes.

She didn’t have much need for clothes. They all fit into the armoire at the end of the sofa. The casino *uniform* was black dress slacks, plain white cotton/polyester long sleeved dress shirts, with a black men’s style tie. She had three pairs of pants, half a dozen shirts, two ties and one pair of comfortable black oxford style shoes. She had enough underwear to see her through one week at work, two pairs of jeans, an assortment of tops, from t-shirts to sweaters, a lightweight jacket, a pair of athletic shoes, and a pair of sandals. She didn’t own a purse; she carried a backpack because it had room for an extra set of clothes in case she needed them, her wallet, a book and anything else she might need. She wore t-shirts and cotton shorts to bed. She didn’t even have a robe.

She had a washer and dryer in the kitchen. She took one load out of the dryer and folded it, then transferred the second load from the washer to the dryer. When she was done, she picked up her list and headed out for the short walk to the supermarket.

Anything to keep her mind off Vincent. But once she was in the supermarket, everything she saw reminded her of Vincent or their son. She was taking a box of tea off a shelf and knocked a box of Earl Gray off. Vincent loved Earl Gray. She was getting a box of tissues, and they were right next to the toddler diapers. She was buying canned soup and remembered the delicious soup Vincent had fed her when she'd been recovering Below the first time. She eventually found everything on her list, and it all fit into two grocery bags, which was about the limit of what she could carry back to the apartment.

She didn't have a car; the FBI didn't seem to think one was necessary. She was on the bus route, and it ran the times she needed. Besides, the FBI probably thought she'd be less likely to take off if she didn't have her own transportation. And she didn't have a phone either. Probably something else the FBI didn't want her to have.

She didn't go to bed until after 10. She didn't have to be at work until noon, so she didn't want to wake up at dawn. She passed the time trying to read; then she wrote a few lines in her journal, but the words didn't come easy.

She slept well but dreamed of Vincent. She hadn't dreamed of him in months. She woke the next morning feeling very out of sorts. It was an old-fashioned way to put it, but it was the perfect description of how she felt.

She caught the bus at 11:15 and took a seat in the front. She got to the casino with plenty of time to stop by the office and pick up her schedule. She had the next two days off.

She was very distracted and had to force her attention to the cards and the people in front of her. She took her dinner break, and when she was paying for her meal, she found the scrap of paper Devin had given her. She didn't even remember putting it in her wallet. She almost wadded it up and tossed it in the trash can, but then found herself putting it back in the side pocket of the backpack.

After her shift was over and she was on the bus, she pulled the cord as they passed the hotel where Devin was staying.

As she got off the bus, she felt almost as if someone else was in charge of her body. She found Devin's room and knocked on the door. There was a small amount of light showing from around the curtains, but no one answered. She thought that he might have gone out. She knocked again, a little louder and the door was pulled open.

They stood staring at each other for a moment.

"Devin..." she was crying again. She hadn't cried this much in months. "Take me home."

He grabbed her arm and pulled her into the room. He didn't have any tissues, so he handed her a clean washcloth. Then he squatted down in front of her.

"You're sure?" he asked. He didn't want to ask, but he had to.

"Yes, absolutely! It's like you said... this isn't living. I don't know anyone here. No one I love is here. And I can go Below, and no one would ever have to know where I am."

"If the cops manage to reel in the rest of Gabriel's guys, don't you want to testify?"

"Yes, but I'll figure out a way."

He got up and went to sit on the side of the bed across from her.

"We're going to have to think this through," he said as he picked up a sheet of paper. "There's a morning flight, direct to New York," he said then looked thoughtful. "But maybe we shouldn't do it that way. We might not want to leave a trail if someone starts looking for you."

"How?"

"We could play it by ear... I have a rental car, and I've got an open-ended contract. I'll just call the company and tell them that I've decided to go on a little road trip. We could drive to another city and fly out of there." He reached over and picked up his briefcase. He set it on the bed next to him and opened it, then stunned Catherine by pulling up a false bottom. She could see several passports from different countries, and a stack of IDs and credit cards. "I knew there was some reason I held on to these." He chose an ID out of the stack and held it up.

"Harvey Stuart?" she read, but the picture was his.

"That's Dr. Harvey Stuart," he told her.

"OK, I don't even want to know. Just tell me what you want me to do."

"Is there a rear exit at the casino?"

"Yes, it's through the kitchen. The door is in the alley behind the building. The kitchen staff goes out there to smoke, and sometimes other staff members use the area."

"No one would think it was odd if you went out there?"

"No, I've gone out on break with others occasionally, even though I don't smoke."

"When you go to work tomorrow go in the front door of the casino and go straight through and out the back. I'll pick you up in the alley. We will leave from there. That way if someone is watching you, they will think you are just going to work."

"I'm not on the schedule for tomorrow."

"That's even better. When were you supposed to go back to work?"

“I have two days off.”

“Then we will be back in the tunnels before anyone even knows you’re missing!” He pointed at the backpack at her feet. “What do you carry in that?” he asked.

She told him, and he nodded.

“Tomorrow put in clothing that is suitable for travel but make sure it’s something that the wife of a doctor would wear. We’ll have to have a story for the airlines. We won’t have much in the way of luggage, just my suitcase, your backpack and the briefcase. If anyone asks, we were just on a short trip and are heading home, but you somehow lost your purse, so you don’t have ID. I’ll just tell them that you are Mrs. Harvey Stuart, so you really shouldn’t need any. What first name do you want to use?”

“Mary,” she said without thought.

That made Devin laugh. “Mary Stuart, indeed,” he said. “Put anything else in the backpack that you want to take with you, but don’t make it obviously larger or heavier than what you usually carry. You don’t want to call attention to yourself.”

Her head was spinning, and she was almost afraid to speak.

“I-is that all?” her voice broke.

“That’s all you have to do, just be behind the casino and I’ll pick you up there. I’ve flown by the seat of my pants before; I can do it again. We will make this work. Now...” He stood. “You should probably head back to your place. You don’t want to raise suspicion if you are being watched.”

She rose and turned toward the door.

“You got a way to get home?” he asked.

“The bus. The stop is right across from the hotel. It runs all night.”

“How long will you have to wait?”

She looked at her watch. “Not long, if I hurry. Fifteen minutes if I miss it.”

He hugged her at the door and let her out. He stood in the window and watched her cross the parking lot and the street. He stood there until the bus picked her up less than five minutes later.

Catherine had butterflies the size of robins in her stomach all the way back to her apartment. Once she locked herself inside, she started moving around the apartment picking up items that she had acquired. There was nothing of value. She dumped the contents of the backpack on the coffee table and sorted through it. She had a wallet, with an ID in it, but like Devin’s, it was false. The name was Candice Parker. The age

was right, but the birthdate was wrong she took the money and the photo of Jacob out and put them in an inside pocket of the backpack. She stood up straight and took a deep breath as she dropped the wallet with the ID into the trash can.

“I’m not Candice Parker, I’m Catherine Chandler,” she said out loud.

She took her best black work slacks out of the drawer and folded them over the back of a chair. She added the best white work shirt she had. She pulled off the tie she was wearing and dropped it on top. She added underwear and socks. She went to the one closet in the place and took out the black blazer she had. It was made out of the same fabric as all her black work pants. Paired with work slacks, she could look almost dressed up. She carefully folded the blazer and put it in the backpack. After adding some extra underwear, she looked over the few personal items she had. She took a couple of books off the shelf and a heavy glass paperweight and decided that there was really nothing else that she needed.

She took a nice long bath and went to bed, even though she knew she probably wouldn’t sleep.

She finally dozed off but woke every hour during the night. She gave up and got up a few minutes before her alarm was set to go off.

Once she was dressed in her work clothes, she added a few toiletries to her backpack. As she left the apartment, she took one last look around, to make sure she hadn’t forgotten anything. She noticed the two journals on the night stand.

I can’t leave those; she told herself as she grabbed them and stuck them in the bag.

Like any work day, she caught the bus. It let her out up the block from the casino. She walked in the front door, but instead of turning to go up the stairs to the employee lounge, she headed straight through the lobby into the restaurant. She was relieved that no one was at the register as she went behind the counter and into the kitchen. It was lunchtime, so everyone was busy but not so busy that the head cook didn’t see her.

“Miss Candy!” he called after her.

“Yes, Kevin?” She turned to him with a smile.

“You eat lunch yet?”

“I had a late breakfast, and it should hold me until my dinner break.” She didn’t want anyone to remember her going through the kitchen, but it looked like it was too late now.

“You girls. You’re all too skinny!” he told her as he started putting things into a carry-out container. “Don’t you know that men like a woman they can hang onto?” He held the container out to her. “Take it. You can eat it on your first break.”

She’d often thought that Kevin reminded her of a darker skinned version of William and never more than now.

She took the container and thanked him. From the weight of it, there was enough for three people in it. When she got outside one of the bus boys was smoking. Catherine could see a car at the end of the alley, but if it was Devin, he was probably waiting until she was alone.

She made some idle small talk with the bus boy until he finished his cigarette and went back inside. The car immediately drove up, and the passenger door swung open.

She got in and held her breath until Devin turned out of the alley and onto the main road.

“You know, I was worried that you might change your mind,” he told her.

“Not this time. I’ve thought about doing something like this almost since I got here, but I think that’s one of the reasons that the FBI found me a job that made just enough money to pay the rent, eat and buy necessities. There was never enough left over to save any appreciable amount. I figured it out once. With the little bit I had left over every month, it would take me close to two years to save enough for a bus ticket, and that didn’t even include money to eat on during the trip.”

“Speaking of food, what’s that?” he nodded at the container.

“Kevin, the cook, he thinks I’m too skinny. Every time I go into the kitchen, he gives me food, and if he’s cooking when I eat in the restaurant, he always puts extra on my plate. He reminds me of William.”

She peeked under the lid and laughed. “We won’t have to stop to eat,” she told him. “There’s a huge sandwich in here and two chocolate eclairs. Kevin knows I love his chocolate eclairs.”

She set the container on the floor then lifted her backpack over the seat into the back. She shifted into a more comfortable position and buckled her seatbelt just as Devin hit the highway.

She glanced up at a road sign. They were heading south.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“Phoenix. It’s about a five-hour drive. We are booked on a 9pm flight. Even with the hour difference in time, we should make it with plenty of time.”

“Direct from Phoenix to New York?” she asked.

“No, it’s to Atlanta where we have a layover, then to New York. We land at JFK around 10 tomorrow morning.”

“I’m glad that no one will know that I’m gone until I don’t show up for work day after tomorrow,” she said. “How will we get Below?”

“Peter’s. He’s out of town right now. He’s at Susan’s for one of the grand kid’s birthdays.”

“And he leaves a key hidden,” she said.

“Yeah, you’ve known him all your life too. I forgot.”

“He started hiding that key because Susan always forgot hers. He got tired of coming home from work and finding her doing her homework on the front stoop while she waited for him.”

They talked for a while then shared the sandwich and the eclairs. Two hours into the drive, Catherine was yawning.

“Didn’t get much sleep last night, huh?” asked Devin.

“Not really. I woke up every hour to look at the clock.”

“Why don’t you take a nap. The seat reclines. There’s a lever on the side.”

“Will you be OK?” she asked.

“I’m used to this. I might turn the radio on and sing rather loudly and off key, I hope that won’t disturb you.”

“I doubt I’ll sleep anyway,” she said with another yawn.

She reclined the seat and was sound asleep before they’d gone another five miles.

The next thing she knew, Devin was patting her hand and telling her that they were at the Phoenix airport.

She’d taken off her tie earlier, now she took the blazer out of the backpack and put it on. They stopped at the restrooms just inside the terminal, and when they emerged they both looked refreshed, Catherine was wearing makeup, and she’d put her hair up in a bun.

She smiled at Devin’s look of surprise.

“You said to look like a doctor’s wife. These are the best clothes I have. I haven’t had a decent hair cut in over a year, so it looks better like this.”

He smiled and took her hand as they walked through the terminal to the airline desk.

Devin checked his bag, and there were no questions asked when he showed his ID, checked them both in and got their tickets and boarding passes.

“Our flight isn’t until 9,” he said as they walked toward the gates. “Do you want to get some dinner while we wait?”

“I could eat something,” she told him.

They had a light dinner and then made their way to their gate at a leisurely pace.

When they boarded the plane, Catherine was surprised to see they were in First Class. She raised her eyebrows at Devin.

“Like I said,” he whispered as he helped her put her bag in the overhead compartment. “I’m a doctor.”

She slid past him into the window seat, and he sat down beside her. “Besides, if someone does start looking, trying to figure out where you went, they aren’t going to be looking for Mary Stuart, traveling with her husband Dr. Harvey Stuart in first class on a flight from Phoenix to Atlanta.”

Shortly after the plane was in the air, they were offered snacks and drinks. Devin asked for coffee, and Catherine asked for a glass of wine.

“Maybe it will relax me,” she explained. “I feel like I’m going to crawl right out of my skin.”

Jacob was an early riser, some days even earlier than Vincent, but most of the time he would sit in his crib and play with his toes and fingers or watch the mobile that hung over his head.

This morning, several days after Devin’s departure, Vincent woke to find his son standing by the side of his bed, pulling his hair.

“Up, Dada! Up,” he demanded once he knew he had his father’s attention.

Vincent sat up and looked down at his son. He picked him up and put him on the bed next to him.

“How did you...” he glanced across the chamber at the crib. It was the same as it always was except that Jacob’s blanket and his stuffed bear were piled in one corner; he’d obviously climbed out.

Vincent sighed and rolled his eyes ceilingward. He knew that he wouldn’t be getting any real rest until he figured out a way to keep the child in his crib. He’d have to consult with Mary on that dilemma.

Now that Jacob was sitting on the bed he was quiet. Vincent looked down to see him staring at Kristopher’s painting that hung on the wall.

Jacob pointed.

“Dada!” he announced.

“That’s right, Jacob,” Vincent affirmed. “That’s Daddy.”

“Mam, mam, mam,” he repeated over and over.

“... and your mother.” It was the first time Jacob had said that.

Over the last few days, since he'd started to walk, he'd just taken off, both literally and figuratively. Since those first few tentative steps from him to Father, Jacob hadn't stopped. He'd progressed to running... everywhere... literally overnight. His language skills had increased exponentially too. They'd begun to think he was going to be the strong silent type, but it appeared that he'd just been absorbing what was going on around him. He'd shocked them with a surprising number of words and concepts. He'd gone from “Dada,” “up,” “go,” “hi” and “bye” to stringing words together in short sentences that made sense.

“Are you ready for some breakfast?” Vincent asked him as he pushed the blankets back and moved to the side of the bed.

“Beffess!” Jacob repeated, then patted his tummy. “Jacob hungry!”

Vincent picked Jacob up and headed to the bathing chamber to start their morning routine.

Once Jacob was dressed, it proved a little difficult to get him to sit still long enough so that Vincent could dress.

“Go Gampa!” Jacob announced as he headed for the entrance of the chamber.

“No, Jacob! Wait for me. We'll go when I'm finished dressing.” He'd have to speak to Cullen or Mouse about a door for his chamber, and maybe one to the tunnel leading to the bathing chamber.

He pulled on his boots and was reaching for his shirt when Jacob decided he'd waited long enough and left the chamber at a dead run. Not even bothering to put on the shirt he was carrying, Vincent ran after him. He caught up with him just in time to keep him from tumbling down the short stairs from the ledge in Father's study.

Father looked up as Vincent tucked his son under his arm like a sack of potatoes and descended the steps.

“Perhaps I should see about having a railing installed along the edge of that ledge, and a gate of some kind at the top of the steps.”

Vincent set Jacob on the floor, and he headed straight for the spiral stairs to the upper level. Vincent grabbed him again and handed him to Father.

“And a gate for the other stairs too while you're at it,” he said as he dropped into the chair in front of Father's desk.

“Aren't you a little chilly running around the tunnels half dressed?” Father asked, pointedly arching a brow at him.

“Modesty has taken a back seat to safety over the last few days,” Vincent informed him, as he pulled the knit shirt over his head and stood to tuck it into his jeans. “Jacob and I are here to ask you if you’d like to go to breakfast with us.”

“Beffess Gampa!” Jacob repeated after his father.

“Isn’t it rather early, even for you?” he asked taking his pocket watch out and looking at it. “It’s not even six yet.”

“I know Father, but this one...” He bent and picked up Jacob and set him on his shoulders. “...woke me up and announced that he was hungry. We’re going to breakfast. Would you like to accompany us?”

Father rose and picked up his cane.

“I believe I will.”

They were sitting at the table a little while later. Jacob was eating pieces of scrambled egg and working on mastering his two-handed sippy cup technique while Father and Vincent discussed the plan for the day ahead.

Father glanced over at Jacob just in time to see him succeed in prying the lid off the sippy cup. Vincent didn’t miss a beat, catching the cup before it was overturned and replacing the lid.

“You’re very good at that,” Father commented in an amused tone. “Not many fathers develop the *eyes in the backs of their heads*, that most mothers have.”

“Not many fathers are in charge of the primary care of their children either. I’ve always had great respect for Mary, but that respect is growing by leaps and bounds lately. How many times has she done this?”

“Dozens,” Father told him with a chuckle. “I do recall that you were much like Jacob when you were his age. Wait until he starts to climb.”

“I think that has already happened,” Vincent told him with a tired sigh. “I woke this morning to find Jacob next to my bed.”

Father laughed outright at that. “Good luck my dear boy,” he said as his laughter died down. “And to think I never actually cast the parent’s curse on you while you were growing up.”

“And what is that, Father?”

“May you grow up and have children just like you!”

Vincent smiled at that. “I’ve heard both Olivia and Lena say that to their children.”

Jacob got both their attentions, and that of most of the other people in the dining chamber, by waving his arms and shouting “Mam, mam, mam!” at the top of his voice.

Mary was laughing when she came over and picked Jacob up out of the high chair.

“I can see that this young man is quite the handful this morning,” she said as she settled Jacob on her hip. “Why don’t I take him back to the nursery for a while so you can both finish your breakfast in peace.”

Jacob had obviously just understood every word Mary had said. He turned and lunged out of her arms and toward his father. He was yelling “NO! NO! Jacob stay Dada! Go Mama!”

Vincent caught his son and turned him to sit on his lap.

“I don’t think he’s interested this morning, Mary, but thank you.”

Mary leaned down and kissed Jacob on the cheek then patted Vincent’s shoulder.

“Bring him to the nursery when he’s ready for his nap. I’ll watch him.”

Vincent nodded his thanks to Mary then turned to his son.

“We can’t spend the whole day in our chamber staring at the painting, Jacob. We have work to do.”

“No! UP!” Jacob insisted as he pointed up to the ceiling. “I keem! UP!”

“It’s too early for ice cream,” Vincent insisted. “Maybe after lunch.”

Father was laughing again. “Maybe you shouldn’t have shown him the freezer in Peter’s basement.”

“It’s not funny, Father! He’s as fast as a scared mouse and as slippery as a greased pig. I need to talk to someone about getting a door installed on my chamber...” He stood and tucked Jacob under his arm. “... right now,” he added as Jacob started to squirm.

When they reached the tunnel outside the dining chamber, Vincent lifted Jacob up to sit on his shoulders. Jacob patted the top of his father’s head and giggled merrily as they made their way through the tunnels to Cullen’s workshop.

It only took a few minutes for Vincent to make his request, then they were headed back toward the study. When they reached the area that was like a hub of a wheel where spokes headed off in five different directions Jacob started to squirm and yell again. Vincent was getting ready to turn to his right and into the tunnel there, but Jacob was pointing to the tunnel to the left.

“NO! NO! Go up! Mam, mam, mam!” he shouted.

Vincent stopped and swung the boy off his shoulders and set him on his feet. He squatted down in front of him.

“Not right now, Jacob. We have to see your Grandfather. We have work to do with him.”

“NO! NO! Go up!” Jacob insisted.

“Not right now, Jacob!” Vincent said firmly. “We will go after lunch and see if Peter has any ice cream in his freezer.”

Jacob gave a huge, theatrical sigh, and sat down in the sand in the middle of the chamber. Vincent gave his own sigh, picked him up and continued on his way to the study.

When he got there, he noted that Father had contrived a way to block both sets of stairs and the other two openings in the chamber.

“That ought to keep him in here with us while we work,” he said as Vincent set Jacob down on the carpet and pulled out the box of toys that was kept there.

“Even so, I think I’ll sit so I can keep an eye on him.”

He pulled the chair around to the side of the table so he could face where Jacob was contentedly, at least for the moment, stacking blocks.

The rest of the morning passed quietly with no more outbursts from Jacob. Vincent and Father were both starting to relax.

So much so that when Vincent had to go back to his chamber for something, he didn’t replace the chair that Father had used to block the stairs.

Father looked up as Vincent reentered the chamber a few minutes later, and they both noticed that Jacob was gone at the same moment.

Vincent turned and dashed out of the chamber and up the tunnel toward the hub. When he reached it, several people pointed toward the tunnel that would eventually lead to Peter’s.

“I’m sorry, Vincent,” Lena called after him. “I tried to catch him, but he was just too fast!”

Catherine yawned and stretched just as the flight attendant stopped and asked Devin if they wanted anything.

He declined and looked at her. She shook her head.

“I had the strangest dream,” she said when the flight attendant left.

“What about?”

“Ice cream,” she said as she straightened her blouse. “When Mitch shot me that time, and Vincent took me to the hospital. He managed to get into the ICU to see me. He told me later that a Helper worked there and arranged it. I was dreaming that he and I were walking down Fifth Avenue, and he stopped and bought me ice cream from a vendor. I was dreaming almost the same thing just now.”

“How was it different?”

“Jacob was with us.”

“Why don’t you go back and see if you can catch that dream,” he suggested. “We still have a few hours in the air, and I have a feeling it’s going to be a long day.”

She pulled the light blanket back up over her shoulders and tried to get comfortable in the reclined seat.

She dozed off and on but was aware of everything that went on around her. Devin didn’t wake her again until the plane came to a stop at the gate.

“Welcome home, Sleeping Beauty,” he said.

Catherine glanced out the window and smiled.

“We’re here,” she said in surprise.

“And you’d better hurry and get yourself together; we will be getting off the plane in a few minutes.”

Catherine reached for the things she’d tucked into the seat pocket in front of her and put on her *disguise*. She tied the scarf over her head, tucking it in neatly Audrey Hepburn style, then donned the dark glasses.

“How’s that?” she whispered as they stood.

Devin looked at her and smiled. She put on her blazer as he pulled her bag out of the overhead compartment and handed it to her, then picked up his briefcase.

They walked in silence side by side, following the crowd to the baggage claim. When they reached it, Catherine turned to Devin.

“While you’re getting the bag I think I’ll go over to the ladies,” she told him.

It had been a long time since the previous morning, and her teeth were beginning to feel like they were growing fuzz. She stopped in a stall first then made her way to a sink on the far end of the counter. People were coming and going, but no one was paying any attention to her. She took off her blazer, the glasses, and scarf took her hair down and brushed it out. Then she washed her face and brushed her teeth. She didn’t bother putting any makeup back on, just rubbed in some moisturizer and added a little bit of tinted lip gloss. The scarf and glasses went back on and then the blazer to cover the hair that was hanging out under the tucked edge of the scarf.

Devin was waiting right outside when she exited.

Again they didn’t speak until they were in the backseat of a taxi and Devin had given Peter’s address to the driver.

“I didn’t take the time to clean up and brush my teeth,” he teased, “but then I don’t expect to be kissing anyone in the next hour either.”

She laughed at that. “I doubt that he’ll kiss me,” she told him. “The one time I kissed him, he looked totally shocked.”

“...But... correct me if I’m wrong, don’t you two have a child together?”

She laughed again. “That was a bit of an anomaly,” she informed him. “It only happened that one time and he wasn’t himself. The last time I saw him, he didn’t even remember.”

“Yeah, he did tell me that... but there were kisses?”

“Of course, there were kisses,” she could feel herself blushing furiously. “And I have no intention of discussing this further with you.” She turned and watched as the familiar scenery passed the window.

“I think he’ll kiss you,” Devin insisted after a moment.

“It would surprise me,” she said without looking at him.

“Wanna bet on it?”

“Devin.”

“Five dollars, he kisses you.”

“Devin!”

They traveled in silence the rest of the trip.

They arrived at Peter’s, and Devin paid the driver while Catherine went up the stairs and extracted the hidden key from between the door sill and the bricks. She had the door unlocked when Devin reached her.

He took the key from her and replaced it, then closed and locked the door behind them. He turned just in time to see Catherine shedding the scarf and glasses and stuffing them into her backpack as she headed up the hall to the door to the basement.

“Not in a hurry are you, Chandler?” he called after her.

She didn’t hesitate but was halfway down the stairs when he caught up with her.

“I’m sorry Devin, it’s just that only a few days ago, this looked like it would never happen and now that it’s so close... he’s... they’re so close; I can’t seem to contain myself.”

He stepped around her and went to the back of the basement and tripped the lever that swung the wine rack away from the wall. He pointed at the opening. “After you.”

She passed him in a flash. They were only a few feet into the tunnel when they both heard voices echoing toward them.

“Mam, Mam, Mam...” called a child’s voice.

“Jacob Charles, you come back here this instant!” a more adult voice called out.

Devin started to laugh, and Catherine froze as a small figure rounded the corner, plowed into her and wrapped itself around her legs, all the while, babbling, “Mam, Mam, Mam...”

Catherine dropped to her knees and gathered her son into her arms.

Vincent rounded the corner only seconds behind Jacob, and Devin was the first person he saw.

“Where did he go?” he gasped when he saw his brother.

Devin turned and pointed down. Catherine’s dark suit had blended so well with the gloom of the tunnel that Vincent didn’t see her until she rose to her feet with Jacob in her arms. He didn’t realize who it was until she rushed into his arms and threw the arm not holding Jacob around his neck.

“Catherine?” he gasped when he realized who he was holding. He pulled her tighter against him as he stumbled back against the wall.

“Vincent! Oh, Vincent! I missed you so much.”

Vincent was speechless. He’d held her as she died. He’d seen her take her last breath; yet here she was, in his arms, warm, living and breathing.

“How can this be?” he managed to gasp out. He tucked his arm around her to help her support Jacob; then he used his free hand to tilt her face up so he could see her. As their eyes met, the Bond suddenly sprang to life. It was her; it really was her! He barely noticed the darker hair, the thinner cheeks and the pale skin, all he could see were her eyes and her smile.

They gazed at each other raptly for several moments then he bent his head and kissed her.

They were both startled by the cheering and applause coming from behind them.

“Devin, what are you doing?” Vincent asked tightly, as Catherine buried her face against his chest.

“I just won a bet. Pay up, Chandler.”

“We didn’t shake on it, Devin,” she said, not moving away from Vincent.

“Just a technicality.”

Keeping his arm around Catherine and Jacob, Vincent turned and headed back toward the hub. When they reached a spot wide enough, Devin slid around them.

“How about I go ahead and prepare the old man,” he suggested. “You want to come, Jake?”

“NO!” he said emphatically. “Mam, Mam, Mam...”

Devin turned with a laugh and left them. Vincent stopped and looked down at Jacob.

“He knew,” he said incredulously. “He knew that you were coming home, and I thought it was just the ice cream.”

“Ice cream?” she questioned. “I fell asleep on the plane on the flight here from Atlanta, and I was dreaming about ice cream. It was the same dream I had that other time; only Jacob was with us this time.”

“You shared a dream?”

“Maybe.” She rubbed her cheek across the top of Jacob’s head, and Jacob clung tighter.

“It’s OK baby,” she whispered to him. “No one is going to take you away from me ever again.”

“And no one is going to take you away from me,” Vincent whispered to her, just before he kissed her again.

“Hi Pops!” said Devin as he swung down the steps and dropped his bags. “How’s it hangin’?”

Father looked up, startled. “... Hanging?” he questioned while Devin laughed. “Do you happen to know if Vincent caught Jacob? He disappeared out of here a few minutes ago. Vincent went to look for him, but Jacob is very fast only to have been walking for a few days.”

“Yeah, I saw that. The way he came flying around that corner. Reminded me of Vincent when he was little.”

“I was saying just the same thing this morning. Jacob is very much like his father when he was that age.”

Father just noticed that his son was wearing a business suit, and it surprised him.

“What are you dressed up for?” he asked.

“Nothing,” he said with a wave of his hand. “Just playing a part... kind of for old time’s sake. I just came ahead to tell you something. I wasn’t delivering a camping trailer to Florida for an old friend. I was doing something else.”

Father took that and the words about playing a part put them together, and whatever conclusion he came to made him groan.

"I certainly hope that you weren't up to something illegal," he said in a warning tone.

"No, I told you before that it wasn't, it just wasn't what I said I was doing. I was checking some leads for Joe Maxwell."

"The District Attorney?"

"The same. You do remember that I know him; I worked for him for a few days."

"Of course, I remember... I'm not senile! You weren't..." Father began.

"No, he knows I'm not a lawyer. Catherine told him everything after I left. He hired me as a private investigator. I did actually do that, legitimately for a while. I still have a valid license in Texas."

"So what did you do?"

"I went to Vegas and found someone for him."

"Who, pray tell?"

He had Father's attention now, but at that moment Vincent entered the chamber, and he still had one arm around Catherine, who was carrying Jacob.

"Mam, Mam, Mam!" Jacob yelled loudly as he squirmed to get down.

Catherine let him down, and he jumped down the stairs. Devin steadied his landing then he dashed across the floor to his grandfather.

"Gampa, it's Mama!" he tugged on Father's hand, even grabbed his cane and held it out to him. "Come on; it's Mama!"

Father wasn't paying a lot of attention to his grandson; he was too busy staring at the woman his younger son was kissing passionately.

"Hey Chandler, if you don't cut it out, you're doing to owe me more than a five spot." He heard a threatening growl from Vincent, but he ignored it. "I'd tell you two to *get a room*, but there are people here waiting for an explanation."

Vincent finally relinquished Catherine's lips, but he didn't let go of her. They descended the stairs together, and he led her to a settee and pulled her down to sit beside him.

"Catherine, is that really you?" Father asked.

Devin picked his nephew up then sat in the chair Vincent had been using earlier. Jacob settled back, content to watch the interactions among the adults around him.

"Up until just a day or so ago, I had doubts myself," Catherine told Father. "But for the first time in over a year, I finally feel like myself again. Like I'm whole." She looked from Vincent to her son and smiled.

"Are you all right?"

“Mostly,” she told Father. “There was an infection because I didn’t get the proper care after Jacob was born. There’s scar tissue; I might have trouble conceiving, if I should choose to have more children.” She glanced up at Vincent, almost apologetically. “But other than that, I’m physically healthy.”

Vincent ran his finger over the spot where the scar had been.

“What about this?”

“It was part of my *disguise*. I had it removed.”

“What happened?”

“I didn’t have the whole story for a long time,” she told them, “but I managed to put it all together from the bits and pieces different people have given me. The FBI told Dr. Marks, the Medical Examiner, that they wanted one of their people present for the autopsy. Their person was a doctor, and when Dr. Marks found out, he requested that she do it and allow him to observe, since he knew me. She agreed and was doing the preliminary exam when she saw me twitch. As you know...” she looked at Father, “... that kind of movement isn’t all that unusual in a corpse. Residual electrical activity, cooling of the body, muscle contractions, any number of things can cause that, but she said she was obligated to make sure that that’s all it was. She checked for a pulse and found one. It was slow, but there. I was also breathing, and my body was warmer than it should have been. She called Dr. Marks over, and he verified what she’d found, so they shifted from autopsy mode to resuscitation.”

“Dr. Marks was about to call for an ambulance when she stopped him. She told me later that she told him that someone had wanted me dead, and if that person found out that I was still alive, they would probably go to great lengths to make sure I was dead. I regained consciousness in the morgue while the doctor was making arrangements to have me moved to a private hospital. I was in that hospital for almost a week; then they moved me to a military hospital in Southern California where I was for about another week.”

“A Helper, she’s a police officer, said that she was present for the autopsy. Who did they bury?” asked Vincent.

“I asked them the same thing, and all they told me was that there was a ‘Jane Doe’ at some federal facility who resembled me. They swapped her for me, and that was the autopsy the Helper must have been there for.”

“It must have been a strong resemblance,” Father commented.

“A lot can be done with wax and makeup,” she said. “Jenny and Joe were told that damage had occurred during the autopsy, so the mortician had done the best he could to restore the face.”

“Did anyone else see the body?” Devin asked.

“No, as far as I know, it was only Detective Bennett, Miss Aronson, and Mr. Maxwell. Diana didn’t know you; she’d only seen a few pictures.”

“I’m surprised that someone as observant as Diana Bennett, didn’t catch on,” said Catherine.

“You know Diana Bennett?” Father asked in surprise.

“No, but I know *of* her. She’s good. You have to be to get assigned to the Special Crimes Unit.”

“It might have been because she didn’t know you, and she might have been off at the time because she’d just come off a case that didn’t have a very good outcome,” Vincent explained. “How did you learn all this?”

“Most of it from the FBI doctor. Some from the other agents who were around. The doctor stayed with me until they moved me to a safe house on a ranch south of San Diego. I was there for several weeks until they were sure that everyone believed I was dead. They got word that Gabriel was dead, and I thought they would send me home, but all they did was decide to invent a new persona for me and allow me a little more freedom.

“It took some time, but they eventually set me up with an apartment and a job in Las Vegas. I was on my way there when someone I knew saw me in a gas station. I was afraid to tell the agent I was with about it. I was afraid that he’d take me straight back to the ranch, and I’d never have a chance to get away. I thought that being in Las Vegas would give me the chance to make a plan to get away and come home.

“I met with the agent who was assigned to me every couple weeks. It felt more like I was meeting with my parole officer. Every time I saw him, he went out of his way to make sure I understood how much danger I’d be in if I tried to come back here... and how much danger I’d be putting any friends I contacted in.” She paused.

“Yeah, they had her pretty well convinced,” Devin put in. “More like brainwashed.”

Catherine nodded. “So much so that I’d just about given up hope. On top of that, the job they’d set me up in gave me just enough money to pay my utilities, rent and eat and little else. They gave me an extra allowance to buy some clothes, and I was able to get a book now and then, but there was nothing left over to put aside so I could even think of something like a bus ticket.”

“I had to talk her into leaving,” Devin said.

“I had given up hope.” She moved closer to Vincent and slipped her arms around his waist.

“You’re exhausted,” he observed.

“I didn’t think I was until all the tension released. Now I feel as if I couldn’t lift my hand.”

“I can’t take you to my chamber. Cullen is installing a door, and Devin is in the guest chamber.”

“Take her down to the new guest chamber,” suggested Father. “Mary was just in to tell me that they finished furnishing it. I was going to ask you to go down and look at it later.”

Both Catherine and Vincent looked over to where Jacob had fallen asleep on Devin’s lap.

“Devin, would you please take Jacob to the nursery. Mary said she’d watch him this afternoon.”

Vincent rose with Catherine in his arms and was gone before either Devin or Father could speak.

Father sighed and shook his head. “It’s a miracle,” was all he said.

Devin could only agree.

“As much as I like being this close to you, you can put me down. I can walk,” Catherine told him when they reached the tunnel outside the study.

He stopped and looked down at her. “You said you were tired.”

“I am, but it’s not that bad. I like being held by you, but I really can walk.”

She sensed a bit of reluctance when he set her on her feet, and she smiled. He kept hold of her hand as they walked. He led her down a level and into an area that didn’t look familiar.

“This is all new, isn’t it?”

“Yes, we were surprised to find chambers this close to the main community. Currently, there are four usable chambers, but the only one that has been furnished is the one we will use as an additional guest chamber. There’s no one else down here yet, but there are some older teens who will be ready for private chambers soon, so I imagine they won’t be vacant long.”

They reached the new guest chamber, and he led her in and to the bed where she sat down and dropped the backpack next to her. He lit several candles then sat down beside her and pulled her into his arms.

He held her tightly for a long time, as if he was afraid if he let her go she’d disappear again. He finally pulled back a little and looked down at her.

“I’m sorry. You’re tired, and I’m not letting you rest.” He started to rise.

“No, please don’t go.” She reached out and grabbed his hand.

"I was only going to let the privacy curtain down and start a fire in the brazier," he assured her with a smile.

"You won't leave? You'll stay with me?"

"I don't want to let you out of my sight yet either, Catherine."

She let him go. He was lighting the fire when he looked over at her.

"Are you hungry? It's lunch time; I can get us something."

"Maybe a little," she admitted. She hadn't eaten much since dinner the night before.

"Did you bring clothes with you?"

"Not much." She gestured to the backpack. "I couldn't carry very much without drawing attention to myself."

He walked over to the armoire and opened it. "It looks like Mary has stocked this chamber like she does the other guest chambers." He pointed to an opening opposite the entrance. "There is a small bathing chamber through there. Mouse installed a shower since there was no pool. I'll get us some lunch and you can... relax."

He was gone before Catherine had a chance to speak. She shook her head, then rose to see what was available.

She picked out a warm nightgown, found some slippers and a robe and carried them to the bed where she retrieved her toothbrush and a few other necessities from the bag.

She was back in the bed chamber a short time later feeling much refreshed, and a lot hungrier. She was surprised that Vincent wasn't back yet.

She dumped everything out of the backpack and started sorting through it. She set the book she'd bought with Vincent in mind on the nightstand with the glass paperweight. She carried a pair of jeans, a sweater, and some underwear to the armoire and put them in a drawer, then put everything else back in the bag, and set it in the armoire. She had just come back to the bed when Vincent ducked under the privacy curtain.

"I'm sorry I took so long. I stopped in the nursery to check on Jacob and let Mary know to take him to Father if he should get out of hand when he wakes."

"Does he do that often? Get out of hand, I mean?"

"No, he's normally a very good child, but he just started walking a few days ago, and he's been hell on wheels ever since."

Catherine had to laugh at Vincent's description.

"He certainly is walking well, for only being on his feet for a few days."

He was setting out their meal from the tray and stopped to look at her.

“Father said that I did the same thing; going straight from toddling to running.”

“You’re doing a wonderful job,” she said as she approached the table. She was surprised when he moved around to the other side, putting the table between them.

She took a seat. “All this looks wonderful. I’ve missed William’s cooking, especially his cookies and muffins. I know when he sees me he’s going to tell me I’m too skinny.”

Vincent took the chair on the other side of the table. They both helped themselves to what they wanted and ate in silence.

By the time they were done, Catherine was ready for a nap. She went to the bed as Vincent cleared the table and set the tray outside the chamber.

He went to sit on the side of the bed next to her.

“I need to apologize, Catherine,” he began.

“Apologize for what?” she asked when he hesitated. When he didn’t answer, she prodded a bit.

“Have you taken up with another woman?” she asked.

He looked up at her, shocked and shook his head.

“A man?”

“Of course not. It’s nothing like that. It’s just that... I took liberties earlier. I shouldn’t have done that...”

“You mean kissing me?” she almost laughed but didn’t. “I think I was kissing you back,”

“Yes... well.”

“Please, Vincent. I can’t go back to square one. I need to be with you; I need Jacob. I need us to be a family. That’s the only thing that has gotten me through the last year... the hope that we would eventually all be together. I was on the verge of giving up hope when Devin found me. I don’t ever want to feel like that again.”

“But Catherine... I don’t remember any of what happened.”

“I do, and I can tell you... if you want me to.”

“Later,” he told her as he pulled her into his arms and kissed the top of her head. “I’ve dreamed... but this is better. You’re real. I agree, I don’t ever want to feel again what I’ve been feeling for the last year. Jacob was the only thing that kept me going. It was a very dark time; I don’t even want to think about it.”

“I’m so sorry you had to go through all that alone. We will figure this all out, and I won’t leave you again. I promise.”

She stifled a yawn against his chest.

“You need to get some rest,” he urged.

“Will you stay?” she asked.

He began to pull a chair over next to the bed.

“No, lay down here with me. I’ve dreamed many times of sleeping and waking in your arms. I want to make that dream come true.”

She was surprised when he didn’t hesitate. He put out most of the candles then went around to the other side of the bed where he took off his boots and slipped under the covers with her.

She snuggled down next to him and put her head on his shoulder. She rubbed her hand across his chest.

“What is this?” she asked, plucking at his shirt.

“A shirt?” he didn’t understand her question.

“No, I mean you don’t have on three or four layers. Just your shirt and jeans, not even a belt.”

“I dressed in rather a hurry this morning. Jacob woke me very early, earlier than usual. He kept pointing at the painting in my chamber and talking about you. Today was the first time I heard him call you Mama. It’s like he somehow knew that you were on your way back. At one point he started talking about ice cream, and I thought he wanted to go to Peter’s and get ice cream from the freezer in the basement. He must have some sense of you.”

“A Bond? You mean like we had? Does he have one with you?”

“Yes, he does. That is how I found you the day he was born.”

Catherine looked up at him.

“Tomorrow is Jacob’s birthday. I made it back in time for his first birthday.”

Vincent pulled her closer and drew in a long, shaky breath. “And it’s going to be a much better day than I had originally thought it would be,” he whispered.

Catherine fell asleep quickly, but Vincent didn’t sleep.

He said a prayer of thanks for her return and allowed his mind to wander. She’d been right before when she said William would think she was too skinny. She was a lot thinner than she’d been before. He’d noticed how light she felt when he’d picked her up. He lay holding her, wondering what they would do next. It was probably too much to hope for that she’d stay Below with him permanently. He didn’t know the whole story, but he knew they’d figure it out.

Catherine woke, and for a moment, she didn't know where she was. Then the sound of the pipes penetrated her sleepy haze, and she smiled. She was home, finally. Everyone was safe, and she was home. There would be a lot of decisions to make over the coming days, but she didn't have to do it all on her own any longer.

"Did you sleep well?" Vincent asked. She'd turned in her sleep, and her back was nestled warmly against his front.

"Very. How long did I sleep?"

"Not very long. It's not dinner time yet. I just heard a message on the pipes that Jacob is with Father. The younger children have story time before dinner and Jacob has enjoyed joining them for the last few months."

"Has he been behaving?"

"I think so. I haven't felt anything unusual from him, and there have been no frantic calls for me to rescue anyone from him."

Catherine rose and went to the armoire for the clothing she'd left there.

"I feel better. I'll get dressed, and we can join the children."

While she was out of the chamber, Vincent made the bed and was sitting on the side of it with the book she'd brought in his hands when she came back in.

"Is this yours?" he asked when she came out.

"Yes, I bought it at a used bookstore. I thought of you when I saw it. You said you threw your copy of the Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas off my balcony, so I brought it for you. The paperweight is for Father. The colors and patterns reminded me of the kaleidoscope Mouse made him."

"Thank you." He opened his arms, and she walked into them. They held each other for several long moments.

"I feel like I should pinch myself," she told him. "I keep thinking this is too good to be true."

"I know what you mean." His arms tightened.

"There were times when I felt like I just wanted to scream from frustration. I didn't know where our son was, and the FBI couldn't tell me anything. All they could say was that there was no sign of any children at any of the places that Gabriel's people were known to have gone. I identified a nurse who was with them. They found her, but there was no child and she couldn't or wouldn't tell them anything. I had a feeling, and I kept telling myself that he was safe with you, but I was so scared that Gabriel had done something to him. I'm so glad to find out that I was right, and he was with you. You don't know what a relief that is... I'm just sad that I missed his whole first year."

“But you’ll have all the rest of his years,” Vincent assured her.

When they entered the study a few minutes later, neither one of them was prepared for the riot that Catherine’s appearance caused. Father wasn’t doing the reading; it was Devin, and he was giving a very animated reading of Huckleberry Finn. When word got out about Devin reading, several of the older children and even a few adults had joined the group in the study.

Jacob saw his parents enter the study and jumped up with a shout of “It’s my Mama!” as he ran across the chamber and threw himself at her. She squatted down to catch him and wound up on her back with Jacob sitting on her stomach. He leaned down and started covering her face with sloppy baby kisses. She was enjoying every second of it and laughing harder than she had in ages.

Vincent was finally able to lift Jacob off her and help her to her feet in time for her to be mobbed by several other children. Eric, Geoffrey, and Samantha were all trying to get close to her.

Samantha looked up at Vincent. “You didn’t tell anyone she was coming back.”

“I didn’t know, Samantha. Devin brought her home this morning.”

“Who else knows?”

“Just everyone here, Father and I think, Mary.”

“Can I go tell Pascal to tell everyone?” she asked.

Vincent took down at Catherine, who had moved to the settee. “I was planning on waiting until dinner,” he told Samantha, “but if you like, you can tell Elizabeth, I’m sure she’ll want to add the event to her gallery.”

Samantha took a moment to hug Catherine; then she was gone. Eric had climbed to the settee beside Catherine, and Geoffrey was sitting on the other side. Vincent would have to pull up a chair if he wanted to sit down. He put Jacob on his mother’s lap and went to get a chair.

She hugged Eric then Geoffrey.

“Vincent said you were dead,” Geoffrey said accusingly when Vincent came back with the chair.

“Vincent thought I was,” she told both the boys. “But I wasn’t. Some people took me away to keep me safe.”

There was a repeat of the mob scene in the dining chamber at dinner where Vincent related an abbreviated version of the story Catherine had told them earlier.

Cullen came over, and after welcoming Catherine home, he turned to Vincent.

“Looks like I got the door installed just in time,” he said with a wink. “When do you want to get to work on that storage chamber conversion?”

“I think next week will be soon enough for that,” Vincent answered. “And thank you for the door.”

“No problem. I’ve had it for a while; was just waiting for a good time. I didn’t have enough wood to put a door at the entrance to the bathing chamber, but I did have an old elevator gate that I was able to adapt. It will fold up against the wall when you want to leave it open, and when it’s closed, there’s a latch, just a big gate hook really, about five feet up that Jacob won’t be able to reach.”

Later, in the study, Devin brought up the question of what to do about Joe.

“Since he’s the one who financed this little boondoggle, I feel like I owe him an explanation.”

“I agree,” said Catherine, “but we have to come up with something so that we keep Joe out of hot water with the FBI, and you out of hot water with him.”

“I could tell him that when we got back to the city, you just rode off into the sunset with the Big Vin, here and that you are living happily ever after,” Devin suggested.

“But you told me that you told him Vincent is your brother, so Joe is going to find it hard to believe that you wouldn’t have any idea where he was.”

“That’s true... you got any ideas?”

“I was thinking that I’d write a letter to Joe. I’ll write it as if I haven’t yet reconnected with Vincent and Jacob yet. I’ll tell him that you’ve told me where Vincent is waiting for me and that I’m going to meet him and then we will be leaving for a safe place. A place that you know nothing about.”

“But you’re supposed to be available to testify or identify people at some point,” Devin pointed out.

“I’ll tell him that I’ll call him once in a while just to check in, see if they need anything from me and to let him know that I’m OK.”

“I’m going to play devil’s advocate here, but what if the FBI tries to trace a call?”

“I’ll call from a different public phone every time, and I won’t stay on the line long enough for them to trace it.”

Devin nodded. "It could work," he agreed, "but are you willing to stay down here for an indefinite time?"

Catherine looked over at Vincent, who was holding Jacob. "Yes, I am, Devin. I'm finally with my family; I'm whole again. I'll stay down here however long it takes." She shifted her gaze to Father. "If I'm allowed, that is."

"I was just going to ask you... You said that the agents impressed upon you the fact that if you came back here, you would be in danger and that anyone you went to for help would also be in danger. How much stock to you put in those warnings?"

"Not a lot," she admitted. "Not now that I'm out of that environment. Maybe if I was Above and letting everyone know I was back and where I was, but I'm not. I'm here, and very few people know this place exists. I doubt that anyone in Gabriel's organization would even dream of a place like this."

She watched as Father's eyes went to Vincent.

"That might not be the case, Catherine," Vincent said. "One of Gabriel's people found his way Below. He was looking for me. I'm not sure how he found me, if he followed me, or if he found out some other way. I don't know if anyone else knows about us, if this man told anyone, or if he was given the information by someone within Gabriel's organization. He came Below; he tried to kill me. He did kill Stephen and Old Sam, and he nearly killed Brooke."

"What happened?" asked Catherine, barely breathing.

"He's dead," was all Vincent had to say about it.

"Has there been anyone else?" she asked.

"No one. We increased the number of sentries and doubled the patrols, and there hasn't been so much as an accidental intruder."

"Maybe I *shouldn't* stay then," she said in a whisper.

"Regardless of where you go, if they know of this place, then they are going to come here," said Devin.

"Yes, and at least if you are here, we have the opportunity to defend you. We know this place, a stranger wouldn't," Vincent put in.

Catherine looked across the chamber at Father.

Father had seen his son's suffering. He couldn't snatch away the one chance he had at living happily ever after.

"I agree," he surprised her by saying. "This is the safest place for you. Mr. Maxwell doesn't know about this place, and I think it's likely that the man who came here looking for Vincent last year came by himself, and he didn't have an opportunity to send any

word back to his employer. If he had, I think that we would have been invaded again in much larger numbers within a short time after Gabriel discovered his employee's death."

Catherine gave a sigh of relief.

"Then I suggest that you get to work on that letter," said Devin. "I'll take it to him tomorrow."

She nodded. "I'll go back to the guest chamber and get right on it." She rose.

Vincent also stood and followed her out of the chamber.

"Do you have a moment?" he asked.

"Of course."

"Let's put Jacob to bed then we can talk in my chamber.

The door was thick oak set into a wooden frame. Catherine was happy to see it and the latch that allowed it to be locked from the inside.

Jacob was already asleep, and it only took a few minutes to get him into his pajamas and put him in the crib.

"What was it you wanted to talk about?" she asked Vincent when Jacob was down for the night.

"I was wondering... are you planning to stay in the guest chamber?" he asked.

"I suppose so. Why do you ask?"

"I took the liberty of moving your things in here, and I asked Mary to bring some clothes for you." He went over and opened the armoire door. "She brought your things, the clothing that Peter sent Below when he closed your apartment."

She crossed the room to stand next to him, and she put her hand on his arm.

"You want me to stay here with you?" she asked quietly.

He turned to look at her. "Yes, Catherine, I do. Very much."

She went into his arms and hugged him tightly.

"And I want to stay here very much."

It took over an hour to write the very carefully worded letter to Joe. Vincent took it to Devin.

"Are you going to ask her to move in with you?" Devin asked as Vincent was turning to leave.

Vincent stopped but didn't turn around.

"I already have," he said quietly.

Devin was on his feet, pounding his brother on the back.

"Good for you, little brother. I knew you had it in you!"

"Devin please!" Vincent turned to look at Devin. "Father said that you asked him how it was hanging, earlier? He wanted to know what it meant. What on earth did you mean, asking him that?"

"I guess I was rather full of myself at that moment. What did you tell him?"

"I told him what it meant, but that it's actually a friendly greeting between two men."

"And what did he say?"

"Not very much. He sputtered a bit, then walked away mumbling something about modern slang."

Both Vincent and Devin burst into laughter.

"Seriously, Vincent. I'm happy for you."

"You assume that she agreed to move in with me."

"I know she did. We didn't talk a whole lot on the way here, but almost every time she started a conversation your name was usually one of the first three words. If it wasn't yours, it was Jacob's. She loves you!"

"And I love her. I never thought to ever have her back. Thank you for making it possible."

"Don't thank me. Thank Maxwell and that Gina woman in California."

"If I ever have the opportunity, I will."

Catherine was puttering around the chamber when Vincent returned. She'd already bathed and was wearing a nightgown and robe.

"I think Mary had everything I owned," she commented when Vincent entered the chamber.

"What do you mean? He asked as he walked across the chamber and almost fell over a dressing table that now sat against the wall between Kristopher's painting and the tunnel to the bathing chamber. "I guess I see what you mean."

"Mouse and Cullen were moving that in when I came back from bathing, and a few minutes later they arrived with my curio cabinet and my collection." She opened the

armoire door and pulled out a business suit. “And there are quite a few pieces in here that I don’t think I’m going to have any use for, at least for a while. I’ll go through it all tomorrow and pull out what I want to store somewhere else.”

“I see she brought everything,” he said resting his hand on top of her jewelry box.

“Everything. Right down to the makeup that I kept in the dressing table drawers... but there’s something I need to tell you. I didn’t think of it until just now. My crystal. I misplaced it somewhere. I noticed it before I was kidnapped. I was never able to find it. I don’t think it was anywhere in the apartment. I went through everything and looked under all the furniture, even the appliances. I’m so sorry!”

Vincent’s hand went to his chest, and he reached inside his shirt to pull out the leather pouch he always wore around his neck. He opened it and dumped the contents out into his hand. She saw the rose she’d given him and her crystal.

“Where did you find it?” she asked, crossing the chamber to stand in front of him.

“In the cavern where you saved my life. The chain was broken. I repaired it.” He slipped it over her head, and her hand cupped the pendant reverently.

“Thank you!” She stretched up on her toes and kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you. I thought it was gone forever.”

He turned back to the dresser and started pulling nightclothes out. Then he stopped and turned back to her.

“Catherine. I need to ask one question.”

“What?”

“When we... when we conceived Jacob...”

“You mean when we made love?” she interrupted.

“Yes. Where did it happen?”

She was puzzled at the question at first. Then it dawned on her.

“It wasn’t in the cavern. It happened at my place.”

“Then I wasn’t violent; I didn’t force you?”

She went to him and hugged him.

“Is that why you were worried? No, it didn’t happen like that. In the cavern, when you saw me you did charge at me. It was as if you saw me as some kind of danger, but you collapsed before you got to me. That’s probably when the necklace chain broke. I tried to catch you or to at least break your fall. You stopped breathing, and your heart wasn’t beating. I did CPR, and when you started breathing again, I called out to Father. That is all that happened there. When we made love at my place, you were exactly as I always

thought you would be. You were gentle and loving, and that memory is one of the things that sustained me all during my captivity and then the last year while they kept me away from you.

He pulled her into his arms and held her tight for a long moment.

“I feared...”

“I’m sorry I didn’t realize that as a possibility,” she said. “I would have set your mind at ease about it earlier.”

Vincent went to bathe and get ready for bed, and Catherine continued straightening the chamber. She was sitting in the chair reading when Vincent reappeared. She was surprised to see him wearing only cotton pajama bottoms and a t-shirt.

“That’s a change too,” she said nodding at the way he was dressed.

“I started keeping the chamber warmer for Jacob, and found that my other nightclothes were too warm.”

He picked up his book and climbed into the bed. A few minutes later Catherine put out most of the lights in the chamber, took off her robe and joined him.

She didn’t have to wait long for him to put down his book, blow out the candle and snuggle down next to her.

“Where was all my stuff stored?” she asked.

“In a small chamber on the level above here. Not far from Mary’s chamber.”

“I’m surprised that it hadn’t all been redistributed,” she commented. “Especially the clothes.”

“I asked them not to, at least for a while. When things got especially bad, I would go and sit there, among your things. All your furniture is there, and it smelled like you. It helped me keep you alive in my heart.”

Catherine slipped her arms around him and pulled herself closer.

“I’m glad you had, at least, that. I didn’t have anything but my memories... but I knew *you* were alive. I wanted so badly to contact you somehow. I thought about writing a letter and sending it to you through Peter. I even thought of calling Peter and asking him about our son and telling him to tell you I was alive. I knew I wasn’t being watched all the time, but I never knew when I was being watched. I was afraid to do anything that would jeopardize the little bit of freedom I did have.”

“None of that matters,” he whispered. “It’s all over, and you’re here now.” He leaned closer and kissed her. She relaxed and opened to him, sliding her arms up around his neck. He deepened the kiss, dipping into her mouth with his tongue and tasting her.

Catherine pulled herself closer and was thrilled when she felt the evidence of his desire pressed intimately against her. She groaned when he pulled his mouth from hers and started kissing his way down her neck. She wrapped her leg up over his hip and pulled herself even closer.

Then suddenly he stopped.

“Stop, Catherine!” he whispered.

“What? No! Please don’t stop!”

“We have to... Jacob.”

“We can be quiet,” she urged, as she tried to rub against him.

“No... he’s awake, and he’s standing in his crib watching us.”

Catherine groaned, then twisted around to look across the chamber. Jacob grinned, bounced up and down and waved.

“Hi baby,” she said weakly, then looked back at Vincent.

“What can we do?”

“You heard Cullen mention the storage chamber off this chamber earlier?” She nodded. “I’ve been planning to turn it into a nursery for Jacob. It’s large enough, and it just needs a few things done once it’s empty. The floor and a few spots on the walls need to be smoothed, and a few niches need to be carved, and it needs a thorough cleaning.”

“How long?”

“Maybe a week, once I get started.”

“How soon can you start?”

“I can probably start tomorrow.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Just keep an eye on Jacob,” he said with a chuckle. “I’ve already talked to Cullen. He and Mouse want to help. It should speed things along. I’ll talk to them tomorrow. Now I suggest that you try to get some sleep.” He leaned up and looked at his son who was grinning at him from across the chamber. “Lay down and go to sleep Jacob.”

Jacob complied, and after a few minutes, his even breathing told them that he was asleep.

“Are you sure that we can’t just be quiet?” she whispered.

“He’s a light sleeper,” Vincent whispered back.

Catherine groaned again. “I may burst into flames from frustration before the week is out.”

Vincent deftly turned Catherine to her other side and nestled snugly behind her. He pressed his lower body against hers.

“You aren’t the only one who burns, Catherine,” he whispered into her ear before he kissed the back of her neck.

END