

Weekend in New England

Janet Rivenbark

*Yes, the title is from the title of a song recorded by Barry Manilow; the title, not the lyrics of the song, just seemed to fit the story.*

Catherine finished her dinner and took her dishes back to the kitchen where William asked the same question that at least a dozen other tunnel residents had asked while she ate in the dining chamber.

“Any change?”

“Not really. Although Father and Peter say that it appears that he’s now sleeping and isn’t in a coma,” she said wearily.

“You going back now?” asked William.

“No, Father has temporarily banished me. He wants me to rest. I am supposed to go to the guest chamber.” She stacked her dishes and dropped her silverware into the sink.

“Father hasn’t eaten. Can you take him a tray?”

Catherine nodded, and a few minutes later she was on her way back to Father’s study carrying a tray with enough food to feed three people.

She deposited the tray on the table and was on her way out to tell Father that it was there when he limped in.

Before she could say anything, he raised his hand. “Everything is fine. Mary is with him; she is an excellent nurse. She will call me if there is any change,” he assured her.

Catherine pointed to the tray. “William sent you some dinner.”

“Join me for a cup of tea before you retire, my dear?” he asked as he sat down.

Catherine poured them both cups before she sat down. She cradled the heavy mug against her chest, enjoying the fragrance of the Earl Grey tea. William had made a pot of the good stuff.

“You look as exhausted as I feel, Father,” she commented.

“Yes, we both need to get some sleep.” He paused. “I think the worst is over.”

Catherine sighed and sipped her tea. “I hope so; he’s been through so much... I feel responsible for so much of this,” she said in a quiet voice.

Father quickly looked up from his plate. “How so, my dear?”

“I’ve been stupid and selfish. I didn’t realize at first just how much it cost Vincent to come to my rescue; to kill to help me, but once I figured it out, I should have done things differently. But I didn’t, I continued to put myself in dangerous situations, and he is the one who had to pay for it.” She hung her head and stared into her cup. “I am ashamed of myself, and I am truly sorry, Father.”

“He isn’t the only one who has suffered. You have too. You’ve been shot, beaten, drugged, nearly burned alive, almost drowned; and quite often it was when you were trying to help or protect Vincent... Don’t let it upset you too much, Catherine... We are all guilty of using Vincent,” he admitted, much to her surprise. “He is our protector too. He is always the one we send out when there is an intruder or some other threat. We don’t even think twice; the call just goes out over the pipes for Vincent... That will change! He isn’t the only one Below who is capable of protecting the community.”

“The problem is that he is all too willing to risk himself for those he loves and I, for one, found it much too easy to become dependent on that, ” said Catherine.

“Yes, but all of us Below should be as willing to protect the community as he is! He hasn’t been on call for nearly a month now, and we have managed. I am sure that we can continue to manage after he is well.”

Catherine agreed, “I talked to Joe just before you called me to help and I requested to be moved off the active investigations. I won’t be putting myself into dangerous situations any longer. Vincent deserves better!”

Father nodded. “Very commendable, Catherine. I’ve done some soul searching myself. I was looking over some of my old work schedules, and I swear that I always scheduled him to do twice what anyone else was required to do. The only way he ever got any time to himself was when he took off and went to some remote area of our world.” Father shook his head. “He needs more time to himself to do what he enjoys doing.”

“I always thought the heavy work schedule was done to keep him away from me,” said Catherine with a slight smile.

Father laughed outright at that but had the grace to look a little sheepish. “No, I stopped doing that a long time ago. I’ve come to realize that you’re good for Vincent; a real Godsend to us all Below. I’m sorry that I was so adamantly against anything to do with you at first. Like that little trip that you planned. Everyone down here panicked when they thought that Vincent was going away, even if it was just for a few days.”

“I understood, Father,” she assured him.

“I know you did, but that still doesn’t make what we did right.”

Catherine finished her tea, then rose and went to kiss Father on the cheek. “Don’t forget to call me if there is any change,” she reminded him before she left the chamber.

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Weeks later Vincent was relaxing in his chamber. He was stretched out on his bed, book open on his chest, staring at the ceiling.

*Bored, that's what I am*, he thought to himself. *Bored and restless.*

Father still hadn't allowed him to go back to his full work schedule and was insisting that he rest for a few hours every afternoon. Father also told him that he wasn't going to schedule him as he had always done before. He was going to allow Vincent more time for his own pursuits. Vincent had taken on a couple of additional literature and history classes, but that was about all the extras Father had allowed.

He was about to go back to reading when he heard Jamie call out at the entrance to his chamber.

"Are you in, Vincent?"

"Yes, Jamie. Come in." He swung his legs off the bed as she entered.

"I've brought back that book I borrowed," she said, returning it to a shelf.

"Did you enjoy it?"

"Yes, very much," she answered with a grin. I read it to Mouse; he has become a great admirer of Captain Nemo and is drawing up plans to build his own Nautilus."

"Where does he propose to launch this vessel?" asked Vincent, smiling.

Jamie grinned back. "Last I heard it was a toss up between the Mirror Pool and the pool below the falls."

"Perhaps we should find another book to distract him," suggested Vincent. "*The Time Machine* or maybe *War of the Worlds*."

"He could black out the whole city if he tried to build a time machine," exclaimed Jamie, giggling. "I think that *The Hobbit* would probably be safer." She pulled it off Vincent's bookshelf. "May I borrow it?"

"You may," agreed Vincent. He sniffed the air as he walked toward her to sit at his table. "You smell like fresh air and rain. Have you been Above today?"

"Yes, Brooke and I took a group of the smaller children to the playground in the park. It started to rain, and we had to come back. Have you been Above lately?"

"Not since the weekend before last when I visited Catherine; it still felt like winter then."

"The last of that late snowfall has melted, and we even noticed some crocuses blooming today. It was very nice; the breeze was even warmer. You should go for a walk."

"You know Father gets nervous when I go Above."

“Yes, a lot of people do, but that never stopped you before. You shouldn’t stay cooped up down here all the time.” Jamie sat in the chair opposite him. “Too bad you can’t go any farther than the park or Catherine’s. I’m sorry you didn’t get to go to Connecticut with Catherine that time.”

“I thought you were one of those against that trip.”

“I was, but the more I’ve thought about it, the more I’ve realized that I was wrong. We were all wrong. If I had wanted to go somewhere, or anybody else, even Mouse, there would have been no problem. Everyone would have chipped in loaning luggage or clothing for Above, but as soon as you even thought about it, everybody got crazy! We should be ashamed of ourselves. Catherine can be trusted; she would make sure you were safe.” She cocked her head to one side in a gesture unconsciously adopted from Vincent, as she looked at him. “In fact, I think you should ask her to take you up there. After the last few months, you could both use the break!”

“I couldn’t ask that of her,” protested Vincent.

“Why not? She wanted to take you before; she’d probably jump at the chance now. If you don’t ask her, I will!” Jamie grinned at the thought. “Shake the dust of this place off your heels for a little while!”

“It would be nice to be able to walk in the sunshine for a change,” mused Vincent.

“Do it, Vincent,” she urged. “You deserve it!”

Vincent rose and walked from the room with Jamie as she left. “I’ll talk to Father about it, and if he isn’t against it, I’ll talk to Catherine,” he agreed.

Father was going over a supply list as Vincent entered his chamber.

“Vincent, the last time you were in the storage chamber where we keep the repair supplies, did you happen to notice how many bags of cement we had on hand?” he asked.

“I didn’t get an exact count, but it took four of us over an hour to move all of them to higher ground when the store room was threatening to flood,” he said as he helped himself to a cup of tea.

“Then I assume there was probably enough to last us for a while,” Father stated.

“Unless we have to change all of the ways and put up a lot of new walls, we should probably have enough to last us through most of the summer.”

“Good, then that is one less thing I need to have on this list.” He drew a line through an item. “Did you need something, Son?” he asked as he pushed the list aside.

“As a matter of fact, I wanted to speak to you about the possibility of me taking a short trip.”

“A trip? Where? Down to see Narcissa or to the Crystal Cavern?”

“Actually, I was thinking more like Connecticut. I thought perhaps I would ask Catherine if she had the time.”

“Connecticut, hmm? As I remember, that part of New England is quite lovely in the Spring,” was all Father said, surprising Vincent.

“Then it would be all right with you if I went?” he asked with a note of disbelief in his voice.

“Certainly, I know Catherine would take every safeguard. We even spoke of this while you were ill. We were all much too selfish when she suggested it before, especially me. I have to accept that you are an adult and you need to make your own decisions. If you would like to go, then I have no right to try to deprive you of the opportunity.”

Vincent laughed and shook his head in disbelief, “And to think I came in here thinking I would have to argue my case. Thank you, Father.” He set aside his mug and reached for the chess board, “Do you have time for a game before dinner?”

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Later that evening, Vincent surprised Catherine by appearing on her balcony just as she was putting the files she had been working on back into her briefcase.

She quickly pulled on a warm robe and rushed out to greet him with a hug.

“It is only mid-week, to what do I owe the honor of this visit?” She asked happily as they leaned on the wall and looked out over the park.

Vincent turned his head and looked at her. “I was talking to Jamie today, and she mentioned something, and when I talked it over with Father, he seemed to think it was a good idea too.”

“I’m all for a good idea. What is it?”

“Are you going to have any extra time off coming up?”

“Actually I am going to have some extra days off soon. Our section offices are being renovated, and they will be starting it on a Wednesday and won’t be done until the following Tuesday or Wednesday. We are so crowded that we can’t just move our section in with another, so they just told us all to stay home; take some vacation, unless we are scheduled for court. They will be renovating all the offices, one section at a time. Why? Would you like me to come Below? Maybe we could go to the crystal cavern or one of the other places you have told me about.” She added hopefully.

“I was actually wondering if you thought that going to Connecticut would still be possible. I have talked to Father, and he now thinks that it might actually be good for me.”

“That would be wonderful,” Catherine threw her arms around him and hugged him again. “We can do it just like I planned before. I can rent a van, and we can travel after dark. There shouldn’t be anyone up there this early in the season; in fact, we could spend even longer than I planned before. We could make it a long weekend; leave late on Tuesday night and come back on Sunday.” Her eyes

sparkled as she looked up at him. “Just a minute.” She ran into the apartment and came back with a photo album and a flashlight. “I have pictures.”

They sat on the floor of the balcony, and she opened the large album across both their laps. Vincent had been picturing a small cabin, a la Abraham Lincoln, but had to laugh when she showed him photos of a large two story log and fieldstone house with a porch that wrapped all the way around.

“How many rooms does this *cabin* have?” he asked.

“The first floor has one large room called a great room; it is the living room and dining room, and is open to the kitchen. There is also a powder room and the master suite. Then there are four bedrooms and two baths upstairs and a full basement that is used for storage.”

“We could take half the tunnel community with us and still have room left over,” he commented dryly.

“Well, Mother used to like to invite people up, and after she died, Daddy and his friends would go up for poker and fishing weekends. I even took friends up once in a while.” She elbowed Vincent in the ribs. “Quit teasing me,” she joked.

She showed more pictures of the lake and the area around the cabin, assuring Vincent that it was all very private, especially at this time of year.

When they parted later, Vincent was still smiling as he thought of Catherine’s *cabin in the woods*.

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A couple of weeks later on a Tuesday night, Catherine drove to a quiet spot in the park and picked Vincent up. He quickly threw his bag into the back of the van and climbed in, staying low until they were out of the city and on the highway. Then he joined Catherine in the front.

“It’ll only be a little more than an hour from here,” she said as he settled himself in the seat then pulled his hood forward, just in case.

He looked over his shoulder into the back of the van. “What is in all the boxes?” he asked.

“Supplies. Dad always went up about this time of year and restocked. When I checked last year, we needed new sheets, towels, and some other stuff, so I’m taking advantage of having the van to take a load of things up.”

As she drove, she chattered excitedly, telling Vincent more stories about when she had visited the cabin as a child. Before they knew it, she was backing the van up to the steps to the porch.

Thirty minutes later they had efficiently moved all the boxes into the house and put away the perishables.

Catherine glanced at the clock. “Wow, 1:30, we did that in good time; I can finish putting it all away tomorrow. It’s late, and I’m beat.” She pointed at a door on the other side of the room. “You can

take the master suite. It has a private bath and a king size bed.” She picked up her bag and headed for the stairs. “I have my usual room upstairs. Good night, Vincent.”

“Sleep well, Catherine.” He stood and watched her walk up the stairs before picking up his own bag and going into the room she had indicated.

Once in her room, Catherine dropped her bag and sat on the edge of the bed. She had been up since 5am. She’d picked up the van on her way to work, worked all day, skipped lunch, and taken off early enough to stop at the store to pick up perishables and coolers. Then she had recruited Brian and some of his friends to help her carry the other boxes from her apartment to the van. She had hoped to catch a nap before she left, but had found herself treating the boys to pizza in return for their help with loading. Before she knew it, it was time to pick up Vincent.

She was almost too tired to get up and get ready for bed, much less unpack, but she forced herself to do it and when she did crawl into the bed she was asleep almost before her head hit the pillow.

Downstairs, Vincent was exploring the rooms he was using. The king size bed was on one wall, and across the room was a set of French doors that opened out onto the porch. There were drapes pulled across the doors and Vincent walked across to open them. The moonlight was bright, and he could easily see that the view was of the lake down the hill. He left the drapes open but left the sheer curtains underneath closed. The room was furnished in a very comfortable rustic style; the furniture was dark, but the walls were a bright butter yellow. One whole wall was covered with floor to ceiling bookshelves that contained not only books but what appeared to be an odd assortment of keepsakes. The room was larger than his chamber Below, and much less cluttered. There was an easy chair and table close to the shelves, a small desk, night stands, and a chest at the end of the bed.

Vincent moved from the bedroom into a bathroom that took his breath away. This was no cabin in the woods where the inhabitants came to *rough it*. The shower was large with a bench all the way around three sides and numerous shower heads. There was also a large tub and a double sink.

Shaking his head and smiling, Vincent went back into the bedroom to unpack and get ready for bed.

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The next morning, Vincent realized that the French door in his room faced roughly east because the rising sun woke him before 7:00am. He tried to roll over and go back to sleep, but the idea of getting outside into the sunshine kept him awake, so he rose and dressed for the day. He enjoyed the huge shower and was considering staying longer when the water started to cool, and he had to get out.

He carried the kitchen supply boxes into the kitchen and started unloading them into the pantry. He noticed a TV on the counter and turned it on and listened to the morning news and weather report while he made a pot of tea.

It was almost 9:00am he sensed Catherine waking, and he went to the counter and turned on the coffee pot he had set up earlier, then he began to prepare breakfast. By the time Catherine stumbled down the stairs in her bathrobe, the coffee was made, and Vincent met her at the bottom of the stairs with a mug.

“You are too good to me!” exclaimed Catherine after her first sip. “You are the guest; I’m supposed to be spoiling you.”

Vincent chuckled as he turned to go back into the kitchen. “You can take your turn tomorrow,” he assured her. “Breakfast is almost ready.”

Catherine followed Vincent into the kitchen where he was removing a plate of bacon from the oven where it was keeping warm. He served the scrambled eggs, and removed toast from the toaster, put it on a plate that he placed on the table as if he did it every day.

“I didn’t realize you were so good in the kitchen,” she observed nibbling on a piece of bacon while she waited for Vincent to seat himself across from her.

“I worked with William in the kitchen more than a few times while I was growing up, although his kitchen isn’t quite as modern as this one.”

As they were eating, it started to rain.

“Darn!” exclaimed Catherine, “I hope it doesn’t do this all weekend!”

“I had the television on earlier, and the weather report said that there would be intermittent showers today, but that there would be sunshine and higher than normal temperatures tomorrow through Monday.”

Catherine spent the morning organizing and putting away the things she’d brought while Vincent read. After lunch, the rain had stopped, so they took a chance and went for a walk along the lakefront, but they hadn’t gone far when they had to make a mad dash back to the house when the sky opened up. They were both soaked to the skin and half frozen by the time they made it back.

After hot showers, they spent the rest of the day reading by the fire.

Thursday was their third anniversary, and it dawned bright and sunny. After a late breakfast, Catherine brought a picnic basket up from the basement and started packing it with the goodies from the pantry.

Vincent went to his room and came back with a large foil wrapped package.

“What’s that?” asked Catherine.

“I raided William’s kitchen before I left and found some cookies, chocolate chip, and oatmeal raisin,” he said as he added the package to the basket.

“Umm! Both my favorites,” said Catherine with a grin.

“What are we having for lunch?”

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“I made some roast beef sandwiches, with homemade bread from my favorite bakery; there is juice, and a bottle of wine, some fruit, several cheeses, chips, and crackers.”

Vincent picked up the basket to test its weight. “You pack lunches like William.”

Catherine smiled. “Plenty for lunch and snacks. The sunshine and fresh air will give us an appetite. ”

The glen that Catherine had told Vincent about was only a short walk from the house, but it felt like they were miles from anywhere; even the lake wouldn't be visible in the summer when the surrounding trees were fully leafed out.

After finding a sunny spot, they spread a plastic ground sheet because of the damp ground and then their blanket and cushions. They started out talking then moved on to reading, which Vincent finally gave up on. He put down his book and just lay there listening and enjoying the sunshine.

The sounds were so different from what he was used to. Below the incessant tapping on pipes and the sound of the subway were always in the background. On some of the lower levels, away from the trains and pipes, there was the constant drip of water, lower still it was almost total silence.

Here he could hear birds singing, the wind in the trees, a few insects buzzing, and the lapping of the lake at its banks not far away. He swore he could almost hear the sunshine.

As he lay there, he noticed what sounded like something walking very slowly through the woods not far from them. It sounded like small, delicate feet taking a step or two then stopping, then a few more steps.

“Catherine,” he said softly. “It sounds like something is coming through the woods.” He slowly rolled over onto his stomach and pointed off toward the woods behind Catherine. “From that direction.”

Catherine turned to look in the direction that he was pointing and as they watched a doe and a fawn young enough to still be wobbly on its feet stepped out of the woods and into the sunshine. They watched as the animals made their way across the corner of the clearing and back into the woods.

“Just like when I was little,” whispered Catherine. “I don't believe it. They didn't even notice us.” She looked down at Vincent, and he was smiling up at her. “I'm so glad you got to see that.”

A little while later Catherine looked up from her book to see Vincent watching her.

She smiled. “Is it lunch time?” she asked, reaching for the basket.

“Probably, but I was just thinking how lovely you look with the sun shining on your hair.”

Catherine surprised both of them by blushing as she started pulling things out of the basket.

While they were eating, Vincent brought up the subject of Catherine's work at the DA's office.

“You haven't told me much about the work you've been doing. Are you enjoying it?”

“It’s worthwhile, but I wouldn’t say that I’m really enjoying it,” she said with a wry smile. “The domestic violence division is not a happy place.”

“Why is that, Catherine?”

“It gets frustrating, that’s all. We work to build a case, have everything we need to put some guy away, and then the wife refuses to testify because he has apologized and promised that it will never happen again.” She shook her head. “We had one about a month ago; we had a court date, then the wife called and said that she wouldn’t testify; she was going to give him another chance. Less than a week later, neighbors called in a disturbance report for their address. It wound up a homicide investigation. He’d killed her and both their kids. There hasn’t been a trace of him since.”

Vincent put down his sandwich and reached for her hand. “Do you have any successes?” he asked.

“Sure, when we do get to court, we almost always get a conviction, but it’s the getting to court that is the hard part. Most of these women love the men who are beating them up; abusing them and their children. They think that they can change them. I can talk until I’m purple, but no matter what kind of statistics I quote, I just can’t seem to convince them that these guys just don’t change.”

“I’ve seen it too,” agreed Vincent. “We’ve had many of these women wind up with us Below. Some stay, but most go back, and some go back to the men who abused them or into new relationships that are just as abusive. It is hard to understand.”

They spent the rest of the afternoon enjoying the surprisingly warm sunshine, and when it started to get chilly, they packed up and headed back to the cabin.

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Catherine had planned a nice dinner to celebrate their anniversary. She was going to cook it all herself, but Vincent insisted on helping out. He was in the kitchen making the salad when she came back from changing.

Vincent’s eyes went immediately to the crystal that she wore around her neck. She usually wore it, but it wasn’t always visible. Now it hung against the cream colored sweater that matched her cream slacks. Vincent had cleaned up and changed clothes too. He had on black jeans and was wearing a dark blue turtleneck sweater that Catherine had given him for his birthday. He was as well covered as ever, just not as many layers. She also noticed that he was not wearing his boots, just his socks. He followed her line of sight and saw her looking at his feet.

“They were damp from tramping through the woods,” he offered as an explanation.

Catherine looked down at her own attractive, but far from comfortable shoes and spontaneously toed them off and kicked them under the kitchen table. “Might as well be comfy too,” she explained.

They worked together to prepare the simple meal, and when the dining table was set, Vincent held Catherine’s chair and seated her before he took his seat across from her.

He lifted his wine glass and touched it gently to hers. "Happy Anniversary, Catherine."

Catherine smiled. "Happy Anniversary to you too, Vincent."

After a sip of wine, he reached over to window seat near the dining table and picked up a box about six inches square. "I have a gift for you, Catherine." He took her hand and placed the box in it.

"It's heavy," she commented as she set it on the table and removed the lid. She pulled out a layer of tissue paper and lifted out a geode about the size of half a baseball. The cut side had been polished, and the candlelight reflected off the tiny crystals inside it. Catherine laughed with delight. "It is like a miniature crystal cavern!"

"Someday I will take you to see the real thing," promised Vincent.

"I'll hold you to that," she said. "Maybe sooner than you think."

Catherine picked up her package from a chair nearby. "I have something for you too."

Vincent took the package from her. It was about a foot square and at least three inches thick.

"Feels like a book," he commented as he sliced through the tissue with one of his nails.

The tissue fell away to reveal the dust cover of a book with a photograph of a mountain range. The title of the book was '*South of Oz and North of Shangri-La*' and the author was Devin Wells.

"I got a call from Jenny a few months ago, and she said that she had a new author. He'd told her that I had recommended her to him. At first, I was stumped until she told me his name. She said he had some wonderful stories and fantastic photographs to go with them. The book won't be in bookstores for a few more weeks, but Jenny sent me an advance copy."

Catherine watched as Vincent opened the book and looked at random pictures and read a few paragraphs.

She reached across the table and flipped pages back to the dedication page.

"You need to see this," was all she said.

*"This book is for my brother, Vincent."* was all it said.

Vincent looked up with tears in his eyes. "He never said anything."

"Has he been in touch?" she asked.

"Yes, we've had letters about once a month, from all over the world, but he never said anything about this."

“Well, I might be giving away a secret, but the book is supposed to be in the bookstores on May 1<sup>st</sup>, and Jenny says that she has scheduled him to be in town for a book signing. She was trying to book him a hotel, and he told her not to worry about it, that he had a place to stay. So I assume that he is planning to stay Below.”

“I won’t tell Father. I will let it be a surprise.” He looked down at the book again and ran his hand over the cover. “And thank you for this. It is a wonderful gift.”

“You’ll really have to thank Devin when he arrives,” she said with a smile. “Now I suggest that we eat before all our hard work gets cold.”

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After dinner, Vincent helped Catherine clear the table then went to the living room to start the fire and turn on the music as Catherine loaded the dishwasher.

Vincent lit the candles Catherine had put out earlier and recreated their private music chamber under the band shell in the park by piling pillows and cushions against the sofa on the floor in front of the fireplace.

Catherine came out of the kitchen carrying two glasses and an open bottle of wine to find Vincent stretched out on the floor in front of the fire. The evening was chilly, and the fire in the fireplace was welcome. It created a very comfortable, inviting atmosphere.

She sat down at his right side, poured some wine and handed him a glass.

They both leaned back on the cushions, toasting their toes near the fire, sipping their wine and enjoying the music.

They were only touching at the shoulder until Vincent reached down and took Catherine’s hand and meshed his fingers with hers. She rested her glass on the floor next to her and closed her eyes.

After a short time, she rolled over onto her side and rested her chin on Vincent’s shoulder.

“Thank you, Vincent,” she said, softly.

Vincent rolled his head over to look at her. “What are you thanking me for, Catherine? I should be thanking you, for sharing all this.” He waved the hand holding the glass to indicate everything around them.

“I’m thanking you for coming with me; for giving us this time.”

He smiled and untangled his fingers from hers and slipped his arm around her; he pressed a kiss to her forehead, “Thank you for agreeing when I asked for a second chance.”

Catherine scooted a little closer and nestled her head on his shoulder, her wine forgotten on the rug behind her.

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A little while later, Vincent finished his wine and set the glass aside. He placed his left hand over Catherine's hand where it rested on his chest over the pouch that was under his sweater.

Catherine had been thinking on and off all day about kissing him. But she hadn't put a lot of thought into it for fear that he would pick up on it and find a way to avoid it. Now, when she was to the point where she could put the sketchy plan into action, she wavered for a moment, which was probably the only reason she got away with it.

She shifted as if to find a more comfortable position then she swiftly bobbed up and placed a quick and slightly open-mouthed kiss on his lips. His eyes popped open, and he looked her right in the eyes before she started to pull back.

She didn't have a chance to move before his hand was at the back of her head holding her in place as he kissed her back in a leisurely fashion. Her surprise was so great she wasn't quite sure what to do for a few seconds, then pleasure took over, and she closed her eyes to savor the feeling. Who knew when it might happen again?

Deepening the kiss, Vincent eased her over onto her back and ran his left hand down to rest on her hip as his leg moved up to rest across her thighs. Catherine could tell that he was becoming aroused and he wasn't trying to hide it. She hadn't even noticed that she'd wrapped both her arms around his neck and was holding on as if she would never let go.

By the time they had to come up for air, they were both breathing heavily with hearts pounding. That was when Vincent came to his senses and gently unwound Catherine's arms from his neck and sat up. Catherine could tell he was working to get his feelings and body under control and she grabbed his sleeve as if to keep him from running away.

"Don't worry, Catherine," he assured her "I'm not going anywhere."

"Please don't start apologizing, Vincent." She sat up and rubbed her hand up and down his arm. "I'm the one who should apologize; I ambushed you."

He surprised her by chuckling. "That is one way of putting it." He looked back at her over his shoulder and then put his hand over hers where she clutched his sweater. "You've been planning that all day, haven't you?" he asked.

She looked down at the rug for a moment before she looked into his eyes. "Yes. I've been thinking about it off and on all day. Trying to come up with a way I could work it into the evening. I'm sorry; it was a little devious."

Vincent let go of her hand and turned around to face her. "What if it had gone further than a kiss, Catherine?" he asked.

Catherine was surprised at the question, but it deserved an honest answer.

"Well, I would have allowed things to go as far as you wanted them to." She was studying the pattern of the carpet, avoiding his eyes. "You know what I want, but I'm willing to go at your speed... most of the time." She looked up, and there was a twinkle in her eyes. "It's just that

sometimes, I feel that you need a little nudge, just to remind you what direction we are supposed to be moving in.”

He stretched out on his side facing her again. “And that was your idea of a little nudge; I take it.”

She nodded, hesitantly.

He closed his eyes and rolled over onto his back with a sigh; there was a slight smile on his lips. He put his right arm out in an invitation. “Next time, don’t ambush me,” he suggested. “Give me a warning.”

“Yes, Vincent,” she said with a smug smile as she settled back against his shoulder and relaxed.

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The rest of the long weekend went well and the good weather held. They hiked a little, staying away from the other houses in the area, even though Catherine’s caretaker had assured her that none of them were occupied at the moment, and ate picnic lunches each day. The only other wildlife they saw were squirrels and birds, and a raccoon that was bent on raiding the garbage can by the kitchen door. By the time they were ready to leave on Sunday, they were both relaxed and rested. Catherine felt that they were on the right track in their relationship, and Vincent seemed to be much more at ease with the direction it was taking. They reluctantly packed up the van and headed back to the city late Sunday night.

As she drove, she glanced over at Vincent who was watching the dark countryside as they moved through it.

”So, what are we going to do about kissing, Vincent?” asked Catherine, striking up a conversation.

“What do you mean?” He looked over at her.

“Well, we did kiss the other night, and you did it rather well, I might add; we can’t go back and pretend it didn’t happen.” She paused then rushed on. “I was wondering if I had kissing privileges now.” She glanced sideways at him then back at the road.

“Kissing privileges?” He sounded incredulous.

“Well, what would you call it?” she asked, successfully stifling a giggle.

“You have a point, Catherine.” He paused to think for a moment. “Well, I guess a kiss on parting would be appropriate.”

Catherine couldn’t see his face in the dark and wondered if he was smiling; it sounded as if he might be.

“How about a greeting kiss when we meet?” she negotiated.

“I think that can be managed.” Now she was sure he was smiling.

“Any other times allowed?”

He thought for a few moments. “Special occasions? Birthdays, holidays, anniversaries,” he suggested, getting into it.

“That would work for me,” she agreed. “So we have greeting and parting, and special occasions. I’m assuming that these are all on the lips?”

“By all means!” he agreed with enthusiasm.

“Now, how long are these kisses allowed to last?” she asked after a short pause.

“How long?” He sounded hesitant again.

“Yes, how long? Just a peck, or do I get 5 seconds or 10 seconds or 15 seconds or longer? Or will the occasion dictate the duration.”

Now Vincent was laughing outright. “Oh, I think the occasion should definitely dictate the duration.”

“Like our Anniversary Kiss. That was the perfect duration for an Anniversary Kiss, I would think.”

“Yes, Catherine, that was perfect,” he agreed softly.

She glanced over at him again; he had turned to face her, drawn one leg up on the bench seat and was watching her with a look that warmed her whole body; she decided to push her luck a little.

“What kind of kisses, Vincent?” She asked softly.

“What kind?”

“Chaste with closed lips, or French. That is where...”

“I know what it is, Catherine,” he interrupted.

“Yes, I know, you demonstrated that the other night,” she almost whispered.

“I think we should let the occasion dictate that also,” he suggested.

She could tell she was beginning to embarrass him, so she picked up the light bantering tone she had started out with. “Would you like me to put all this in writing, so we can have a signed agreement?” she asked, falling into lawyer mode.

“No, I don’t think we need to get that formal. I think we can just shake on it.”

He offered his hand, and she put hers in it, expecting an ordinary handshake. She got the handshake, but then he turned her hand over and pressed a soft kiss to the palm, before releasing it.

She jerked the steering wheel a little in surprise but recovered quickly. She looked over at him to see him watching her with an innocent smile that was overshadowed by the mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

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Two weeks later, Catherine and Vincent were sorting books in Father's study when an intruder alert went out over the pipes. Vincent just looked up cocking his head to listen then went back to work.

"What is it?" she asked.

Someone in the tunnel off the park culvert; dark haired, carrying a duffel bag. He knew how to get in and seems to know where he is going, so the assumption is that he is known to us. The sentry doesn't recognize him but is watching him. Cullen is on his way to meet him.

"It might be Devin," she suggested.

"I was thinking the same thing," he agreed. "Cullen will let us know."

A few minutes later, a message came over the pipes from Cullen asking Vincent to meet him at the main tunnel intersection. Vincent grabbed Catherine's hand and pulled her along with him as he hurried off to meet Cullen.

Sure enough, their speculations were correct, and when they arrived at the intersection, Cullen was there with Devin. When Devin saw them, he dropped his bag and rushed to hug Vincent.

"So, how've you been, little brother?" he asked.

"Very well, Devin. And you?" Vincent returned the hug, nearly lifting Devin off his feet.

"Better now that I'm here. There is something about this hole in the ground." He grinned at Vincent after they released each other. He leaned over and kissed Catherine on the cheek. "How are you, Chandler?" he asked.

"Never better, Devin," she said with a smile.

Vincent picked up Devin's duffel bag and thanked Cullen. "I think there is a guest chamber prepared that you can use." He led the way off down the tunnel.

"How's the old man?" asked Devin.

"Father is well. He will be happy to see you. How long can you stay?"

"Actually, if no one minds, I thought I might hang around for a while this time. A few weeks, maybe a month?" He sounded a little hesitant, but relaxed when Vincent looked at him with a big smile.

"Father will be thrilled to hear that," said Catherine. "He misses you," she added.

They arrived at the guest chamber, and Vincent dropped Devin's duffel on the bed.

Devin went over, opened it and pulled out a copy of the book that Catherine had given Vincent.

"A little bird told me that you already have a copy of this," he said to Catherine.

"Yes, I gave it to Vincent," nodded Catherine.

"Thank you, Devin," added Vincent.

"Anything for you, little brother." The two men embraced again. "This one is for Father," he added after they separated.

They found Father in his chamber drinking tea and reading. He looked up in surprise, removing his glasses when he heard Devin's voice.

"How's it going, Pops?" he asked cheerfully.

"Very well, Devin. It is wonderful to see you." The older man pulled, the younger one into his arms for a quick hug. "This is a very nice surprise. What brings you to New York?"

"Actually, this does."

He held the large book out to Father, who took it with a question in his eyes. He sat back down put his glasses back on and looked at it as he placed it on the table. A smile lit his face as he read the title and the author's name.

"This is yours?" he asked.

"Yep, thought I would try doing something that I actually have the legitimate skills for."

"And you used your real name."

"Yes, I found out from Peter that he actually filed a birth certificate for me when I was born, so I decided to become a real person, and use it. I destroyed all the fake documents I had, and now I officially have a New York state drivers' license, a passport, and a social security number, all as Devin Wells." He looked around at the others in the room.

Catherine laughed and hugged him. "Welcome to the real world, Devin," she said with a smile.

"Yeah, I even paid taxes last year."

They all gathered around Father as he paged through the book.

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Later that evening, after Catherine had returned Above and nearly everyone Below was asleep, Vincent and Devin were in William's kitchen snacking on cookies and milk.

“I used to dream about these cookies,” commented Devin as he dunked one in milk then hurried it to his mouth.

“I’m surprised you haven’t come up with a way to market them,” said Vincent, nibbling on his cookie.

“It isn’t like I didn’t try,” admitted Devin. “The last time I was here I tried to talk William into giving me the recipe, but he refused. He said he would leave it to me in his will.”

Vincent chuckled. “He gave it to Catherine, and she has made a few batches. They were good, but she swears he left something out because they don’t taste quite the same.”

“Now how does Chandler rate? William has known me nearly all my life, and he gives *her* the recipe?”

“That is probably the very reason,” suggested Vincent, then they both laughed.

“Speaking of Chandler,” said Devin, looking at his brother, speculatively. “How are you two doing?”

“Very well, Devin. Why do you ask?” Vincent pushed his empty glass aside, sat back in his chair and crossed his arms.

“Just wondering. Is Father still preaching against a serious relationship?”

“Devin, Father is just being a parent. He worries.”

“Too much if you ask me. You are a grown man, seems to me that you should be allowed to make your own decisions when it comes to having a woman in your life,” said Devin.

“I do make my own decisions!” insisted Vincent.

“Sure, you do, but those decisions are based on everything that the old man has taught you, not necessarily on what your heart tells you,” Devin looked up, anticipating an argument and he wasn’t disappointed.

“But most of what Father taught me is valid. You bear the scars to prove it,” Vincent pointed out.

Devin touched the scars on his cheek. “And Pascal has a scar on his hand where he cut himself with my pocket knife, Winslow had a scar where Rebecca ran into him with her ice skates and left a 4-inch gash, Livvy has a scar where Pascal knocked over a kerosene lamp and nearly set her on fire. Damn, Vincent, kids do stupid stuff, like striking out in anger. And believe me, no one knows better that you had every right to be angry at me. You were only ten or eleven at the time; no one would expect you to have the kind of self-control you have now.”

“That may be, but what about Lisa?”

“I wasn’t here then, but from what you told me and what Father said about it, it sounded to me like Lisa was teasing you. From the way she was acting, I’m not surprised that you believed that she would welcome your touch. She may have even thought she would until it happened. It really isn’t that unusual for teenagers to accidentally hurt each other when they are learning about themselves and their bodies.” Devin grinned when a memory hit him. “Did Rebecca ever tell you about the time I kissed her?”

“You kissed Rebecca?” Vincent asked in surprise.

“Oh yes. It was just before I took off; I still had the bandage on my cheek where you scratched me. We were both 14. I heard Rebecca telling Livvy that she thought that I was cute. That was when I decided that I wanted Rebecca to be my girlfriend. I took her for a walk to the falls and was planning to ask her there. I got a little over excited and got the cart before the horse, so to speak, and tried to kiss her before I asked. She got upset at me and pushed me away. I fell into the water; she thought I was going to drown, so she jumped in after me. We bumped heads under the water, she bit her tongue and was bleeding like a stuck pig, my bandage came off, and my cheek started bleeding again. We both scraped ourselves up pretty badly getting out of the water. We were a mess. Rather than brave Father, we went to Mary to get patched up. She said we looked as if we’d been through a meat grinder. Rebecca told her that she’d lost her balance and fallen into the water and then I jumped in after her. Mary agreed that she wouldn’t tell Father. Rebecca thought it was pretty funny, actually. Needless to say, it was several years before I attempted to kiss another girl.”

“But you made up for lost time, I believe,” said Vincent with a laugh.

“Well, I tried. But we were talking about you and Chandler. Have you even kissed the woman yet?”

“As a matter of fact, I have. We spent a few days at her place up in Connecticut over our anniversary.”

“All that privacy and that is all, only a kiss?”

“Everything has to start somewhere,” pointed out Vincent.

Devin shook his head. “Just that once?” asked Devin.

“No, Catherine and I talked about it, and we agreed that there are times when a kiss is appropriate, that is when we indulge.” Vincent gave Devin a slightly smug look.

“Indulge? You make it sound like chocolate or fried food,” said Devin with a loud laugh.

Vincent rose, picked up their used glasses and carried them over to the sink where he rinsed them and set them on the drainer before he spoke again.

“It really isn’t any of your business,” he finally said a little stiffly, with his back still to Devin.

Devin, sorry for his intrusion, rose and walked over to Vincent. “You’re right, Vincent. I’m sorry. I’m just worried about you. I’m afraid that you will succeed in pushing Catherine way. She’s a wonderful woman. Hell, when I first met her, before I knew she was your girl, I was lookin’ real

hard. Probably would have gone after her, except I got the impression that Joe Maxwell was interested. I didn't want to take a chance on ticking off a new boss before I'd been on the job more than a few minutes."

The two men turned and exited the dining chamber and had walked all the way back to the guest chamber that Devin was using before either of them spoke again.

"I came very close to succeeding in pushing her away," admitted Vincent. "But Catherine is a very persistent woman. She refused to go, and then did a little pushing of her own." Vincent sat in an easy chair as Devin settled on the side of his bed.

"Dad did tell me that she helped him and Mary care for you when you were recovering."

Vincent nodded. "Father said that they couldn't get her to leave me for very long. And every time I woke she was sitting next to my bed, watching my every move. She helped me recover my memory, and counseled me to be patient when our Bond looked like it was gone forever. She even went to Joe and told him that she needed to be taken out of the investigations unit and put on a desk job. She did that so that I wouldn't worry about her."

"Like I said, she's a great lady. You're lucky to have her in your life."

"Yes, I am," agreed Vincent thoughtfully.

They sat silently for a few more minutes then Vincent rose to go.

"Good night, little brother," said Devin as Vincent left.

"Good night, Devin."

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The next day, Catherine came back to her desk after a meeting with a witness to find Devin sitting in her chair talking to Rita.

"Devin?" She looked from Rita to Devin then back to Rita.

Devin jumped up and offered Catherine her own chair.

"Ms. Escobar was just keeping me company while I waited for you," he said as Catherine circled around behind her desk to sit.

Rita handed her a stack of files, "Here are the files you asked for," she leaned in closer to whisper to Catherine. "He's cute, Girlfriend. New fella?"

Catherine rolled her eyes and shook her head in answer to Rita's question. "Thanks, Rita. I'll talk to you later." She turned to Devin with a smile. "So, what are you doing here? Come to check out the old stompin' grounds?"

## WEEKEND IN NEW ENGLAND

“Oh sure, Chandler. I worked here all of, what, three days?” he said with a grin. “Actually I came to take you to lunch, if the slave-driving boss,” he looked up to see Joe heading toward them, “is going to let you take a lunch break.”

Catherine looked from Joe to Devin and dropped into her chair, smiling to herself.

“Radler,” Joe approached with his hand out. “Good to see you. Slummin’?”

“Actually, I’m in town on business and thought I’d drop in and see who I could entice into going to lunch with me,” said Devin, shaking Joe’s hand.

“I’d love to, Jeff, but I have a lunch meeting with Moreno. Looks like it’ll be just you and Radcliffe here.”

Devin grinned, “Sorry to hear that. Maybe next time I’m passing through.”

“Have fun, Radcliffe.” Joe turned with a wave and headed out to Moreno’s office.

Catherine was laughing when Devin turned to her. “So, are we on for lunch?” he asked

“Wouldn’t miss it.” She grabbed her purse and jacket, linked her arm with Devin’s and let him escort her to the elevator.

A few minutes later they were seated across from each other in a small restaurant not far from Catherine’s office. They made small talk until after the waitress served their meals. After a bite of her salad, Catherine looked over at Devin.

“So, why are we having lunch?” she asked.

“I have to have a reason, other than wanting to have lunch with a beautiful woman?” he asked with a smile.

“Ok, so maybe I’m underestimating you, but there is a reason, right?”

“Yes, actually, I’m here to talk about my brother.” He noticed that Catherine tensed and sat up a little straighter at his words. “Don’t worry Chandler. I’m on your side. In fact, I think even the old man is on your side now. You shouldn’t have had to, but I think you have proven yourself to him. Now, all we have to do is convince Vincent.”

“What do you mean?” Now she was intrigued.

“I had a little talk with my brother last night, and he told me that you two, occasionally *‘indulge’* in a kiss.” He looked at her with one eyebrow raised. “What’s with that, Chandler?”

“I don’t think I understand.”

“What I mean is, is that all?”

“Not that it is any of your business...”

Devin hesitated a moment. “That is what Vincent said.” He grinned. “Don’t you talk to your girlfriends about this kind of stuff?”

“Sometimes,” she conceded. “I did talk to my friend Nancy last year.”

“OK, then think of me as one of your girlfriends, and talk to me.”

Catherine broke into giggles. “Devin, you would look funny in a dress, but since I’m sure you are only concerned with what is best for Vincent; what would you like to know?”

“Well, like I said before, he told me that you occasionally *‘indulge’* in a kiss. My God, Cathy, is that all? It’s been over three years!”

Catherine leaned back and heaved a sigh. “Devin, it’s a step in the right direction, what else can I say? It’s what Vincent is comfortable with.”

“I’m going to have to have another talk with my little brother.”

“No, Devin!”

“What do you mean? Don’t you want more?” he asked.

“Yes, but it has to be his idea. He has to come to that decision on his own. He has to realize that all his fears are groundless.” Catherine’s eyes were threatening to tear up.

Devin patted her hand where it rested on the table. “I get it. I guess it takes more than a little while to get over being told all your life that you need to be extra careful and that you are different, probably too different.”

Catherine nodded. “I have always wondered exactly what Father said to Vincent over the years.”

“It was mostly just warnings to be careful around the other children, even when he was smaller than us, he was stronger. Not all of it came from Father, though. You know how kids can be; always quick to notice and point out differences. Even if they didn’t make fun of Vincent’s differences, they did notice, and he noticed them noticing. By the time I left, he had quit swimming with the other children and had started wearing clothing that covered him from Adam’s apple to toes. I wasn’t here for the Lisa incident, but from what I heard from him and a few others, Father used that as proof that all he’d been telling Vincent through the years was true. And Vincent believed him.

“Although it isn’t all his fault, I do blame Father for some of Vincent’s hang ups. Every time Vincent did something that was a little different, Father would point it out and tell him that it was unacceptable behavior.”

He paused and looked at Catherine who was watching him closely. She could tell that he was trying to decide whether or not to tell her something.

“Did you know that Vincent can purr?” he asked.

“Purr? No, I’ve never heard it,” she said, clearly fascinated with the idea.

“At least he used to be able to. He did it a lot when he was little; just like a cat, when he was happy and contented and also when he was upset about something and needed comfort. We shared the chamber and bed he uses now, and it was very soothing. When he was about five or six, Father started telling him that he shouldn’t do it, and over the next year or so he quit.”

“I guess I can understand Father,” Catherine mused. “Any parent wants his child to fit in and be accepted by his peers, but to try to quash the things that make a person unique; that bothers me.”

“Dad knew he couldn’t change the way Vincent looked, so I suppose he felt he had to do as much as he could to make him behave in an ordinary way. He made sure that Vincent’s education was impeccable, and he has good manners, and his speech is cultured. It was all an attempt to mold Vincent into a person that would be acceptable anywhere if it wasn’t for the way he looks.”

Catherine nodded. “Even though we may not agree with some of Father’s reasons for what he did; what he did helped make Vincent who he is, and it was all done out of love.”

“Exactly!” agreed Devin. After some thought, he added. “So, I’m not allowed to give my little brother any advice on how to conduct his love life, huh?”

“Absolutely not! We are making progress, and for now, that is good enough!” said Catherine with a smile. “Really, Devin, I appreciate your concern, but it will happen, even without your intervention.” She hesitated, then as if she’d just come up with an idea, she spoke again. “I was wondering if you would be free for dinner sometime while you are here.”

“Sure, where would you like to take me?” he asked with a grin.

“Nowhere actually, but I just had an idea. Vincent has only been inside my apartment a handful of times. I’m not sure why he is so hesitant, maybe it is just too private or maybe just too me. He was OK up at the cabin, and I thought for sure I’d be able to get him to come off the balcony once we got home, but he still won’t come inside; maybe if I invite both of you to dinner, he might find it easier to relax.”

“Sounds like a plan, why don’t I talk to him and find a good time for both of us, and then we can talk about it when you come Below next time.”

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The dinner was planned for the next Friday. Catherine managed to get off work on time for a change and stopped at her favorite deli and picked up a few things including a scrumptious cheesecake.

She had just put the salad on the table and was getting ready to check the roast in the oven when there was a knock at the door. She went to let Devin in as she heard Vincent’s boots scuff on the

cement of the balcony. It was a warm May evening, and she'd left the doors open and placed the table in front of them.

She waved Devin to a seat on one of the loveseats and went to take Vincent's hand and draw him into the room.

"You two sit down; I've just got to check the roast. I'll be right back." She rushed back into the kitchen.

Devin removed his light jacket and held his hand out for Vincent's cloak.

When Catherine came back into the room carrying a tray with a bottle of wine, glasses and a plate of appetizers Vincent was standing in front of her new glass curio cabinet.

"I see you replaced the cabinet," he commented.

"I didn't realize you remembered," she said as Devin took the tray from her and placed it on the coffee table.

"How could I not?" he turned to face her with an embarrassed smile. "I made a terrible mess!"

"It was only stuff," she reminded him. "Things aren't as important as people. You were ill; I was glad you were here where I could take care of you." She took his hand and tugged him toward the loveseats where Devin was pouring the wine. "Come on and sit down. Dinner will be a few minutes yet."

Over the next couple of hours, even Vincent relaxed. He and Devin pooled their memories to tell Catherine some hilarious stories of their childhood adventures. By the time they were settled in the living room after dinner Devin was telling equally interesting stories of his adventures after he left the tunnels. Catherine had never seen Vincent laugh as much as he had in the last few hours. The two of them sat together on one of the loveseats across from Devin, and Vincent even had one arm stretched across the back of the small sofa, and his hand rested on Catherine's shoulder. A first for him. He was as relaxed as she had ever seen him and Catherine was sure that in the future he wouldn't be so hesitant about entering her apartment.

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Devin did stay a whole month, as he had said he would. And during that time he only argued with Father one time, and they made that up within hours. And as he had promised, he didn't try to give Vincent any more advice on how to conduct his love life.

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It was a Friday afternoon, early in June; Catherine had been out of the office taking a deposition. Joe caught her just as she was hurrying back to her desk. He handed her a note.

"Rita had to go home early; she asked me to make sure you got this note." He handed her a pink *'While you were out'* slip. "A contractor?" he asked speculatively.

“Oh, good! I was hoping to hear from him. Thanks, Joe,” she pointedly ignored his implied question and hurried to her desk to call the number on the slip.

After a few minutes on hold, a slightly accented masculine voice came on the line. “Miss Chandler. It is finally done. I’m sorry it took us so long, and I’m grateful for your patience.”

“Mr. D’Amico, I really wasn’t in any hurry, and you had no control over what happened,” she reassured him.

“But I’m still grateful. When can you take a look at it and sign the final papers?”

“Are you free this afternoon, around 4pm?” she asked.

“That is perfect. I’ll make it my last stop on my way home. I’ll see you there.”

She hung up and looked up to see Joe leaning on the front of her desk.

“Hot date? Isn’t 4 in the afternoon a bit early?” he asked.

“Joe, you sure can be nosy!” she said pointedly. When he didn’t show any signs of moving she sighed, then broke down and told him. “I’m looking at a house.”

“A house? You moving?”

“It is one of the properties that Dad left me. I sold just about everything else, but this place was being renovated, so I decided to wait. It’s just a couple blocks off 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, almost directly across the park from where I live. It was four small apartments, but Dad was having it returned to its original plan. It is a four story row house, built in the 1890’s. Dad hired D’Amico Restorations to do the work. They have finished, and Mr. D’Amico wants me to look it over and sign the paperwork. It looks fantastic from the outside, but I’ve only seen the inside once when Mr. D’Amico showed me what Dad had hired them to do. I had them continue the work; I figured it would be easier to sell if it was complete. But after looking at Dad’s plans, I’ve been thinking that I just might consider living there. There is nearly 4 times the space that I have in my apartment, not to mention a full basement for storage.”

“What would you do with all the space?” he asked.

“Enjoy it!” she laughed. “Now I’d better get to work if I want to leave here on time to meet Mr. D’Amico at 4:00.”

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Catherine paid the cabbie and left the cab in front of her row house just as Mr. D’Amico pulled up in his company truck.

He introduced her to his teenaged son, Giuseppe Jr. “We call him Joey,” he told her as they climbed the steps to the front door, “But he prefers Joe.”

Joe unlocked the front door and handed the keys to his father, Catherine smiled at him as he held the door for her. “I work with a Joe,” she told him as she walked past him. “He’s 35, and his mother still calls him Joey.”

“I guess there’s no hope, then,” he said with a pained smile.

“Not as far as your family is concerned,” she agreed.

Mr. D’Amico was obviously proud of his company’s work, and justly so. He had transformed the building from a series of tiny, dreary, apartments into a lovely home. Catherine was amazed at the transformation. He took her through the house to the yard in back and started his tour there.

“The yard is small, but you will be able to do a lot with it. My brother-in-law is the landscaper. He didn’t do much. The foundation plantings were past saving, so he dug everything out and replaced it all. The grass is all new sod. He put in some basic shrubs but left plenty of room for you to plant whatever you like. That 12-foot wall goes all the way around the yard. We were surprised to find out that it was original to the house and was built with the same brick that was used on the house. It was unusual for that kind of a wall to be built then. It is reinforced and is still sound, so we didn’t do much to it except replace some mortar in a few places.”

He led her to the screened porch that spanned the width of the back of the house. “The porch needed a complete restoration. It was original to the house, so we kept the design of the new one as close as possible to the original. A few changes had to be made to bring it up to code, but none of that is visible, except for the gutters and downspouts.”

In the kitchen, he pointed out the refinished bead board wainscoting and molding. All the woodwork, wainscoting, stairs and hardwood floors in the house had been refinished and where it was too far gone to refinish had been painstakingly replaced and stained to match the original dark oak. It glowed warmly wherever she looked.

The floor in the kitchen had been a terrible linoleum of undetermined color when Mr. D’Amico’s crew had started. It was one of the few places she had departed from the original design of the house. She had opted for a glazed terracotta tile in the kitchen, pantry and laundry room.

Everywhere she turned she saw beauty.

The bathrooms were the only modern rooms in the house. The downstairs powder room had modern fixtures, but they were made to look like they were straight out of the late 1800’s. The bathrooms on the second and third floors were utilitarian but still designed to compliment the architecture of the house. The bathroom in the master suite on the third floor was straight out of a spa. The walls were Italian marble all the way to the ceiling, the same tile on the floors and in the shower and tub alcoves. The shower itself was the twin of the one in the master suite of the cabin in Connecticut, so Catherine knew that it was her father’s idea. The tub was a huge Jacuzzi, and the toilet was in its own little private niche. A huge mirror covered one wall and there as a long counter with double sinks. There was plenty of room for linen storage. In fact, that was something that Catherine noticed; D’Amico’s carpenter had built in cabinets and storage in nearly every room, and it all blended perfectly with the original woodwork.

The whole top floor was the master suite, so there was room for a large walk-in closet between the bedroom and the bathroom.

“So, Miss Chandler, are you happy with what we have done?” asked Mr. D’Amico.

Catherine was more than happy; she was ecstatic. It was beautiful, and before the tour was halfway complete, she had made the decision that she was going to live in this beautiful house.

“Mr. D’Amico I am amazed. I saw the before pictures, and you have worked a miracle! It is beautiful. I doubt that I will be able to part with it now that I have seen it.” Thinking ahead, she asked another question. “What about the basement?”

Mr. D’Amico led her down four flights of stairs to the small, low-ceilinged basement. “It isn’t much,” he pointed out. “We did install a new heating and air conditioning system, and the basement was rewired along with the rest of the house. It appears to be a good dry basement, there was no evidence that there has ever been any flooding or leaks, so it will be good for storage. It isn’t cool enough to store wine unless you put in a special cooler for it.”

Catherine had been walking around the room while he talked. Behind the gas furnace, she found a metal door. It was about five feet high and two feet wide; it was locked with a rusty padlock. “What’s this?” she called out to him.

He came around the furnace and looked at it. “We aren’t sure. At first, we thought it might connect with the neighbor’s basement, but it’s on the front side of the house. It wasn’t on any of the original plans, and we didn’t break the lock to look.”

Catherine shrugged nonchalantly and walked back toward the stairs to the kitchen. “I guess it’s something I can check out later.”

Back up in the kitchen, Mr. D’Amico spread the papers and contracts out on the counter for Catherine to sign. They were the same ones she had signed months ago when she had authorized the continuing of the project after her father’s death, so she had no need to read them again. She skimmed them, to acquaint herself, then happily signed off on everything and handed over the final check. Mr. D’Amico signed and promised that he would send her copies first thing in the morning. He handed over his set of keys then realized that it was unlikely that she’d get a cab in this quiet neighborhood, so he offered her a ride to her apartment. She accepted, and a short time later he pulled up in front of her building. She thanked him again and headed for her apartment.

An idea had been forming in her head since she’d fallen in love with the house. Once in her apartment, she quickly changed into more casual clothes and her running shoes and then grabbing her jacket and keys made her way to the basement threshold. She’d been doing her best to block the Bond from Vincent so he wouldn’t know she was coming Below and decide to come and meet her. At the first sentry post, she stopped and asked the sentry to send a message asking if Mouse would meet her at the bridge in the Whispering Gallery. She knew that Vincent would hear the message, and hoped that he wouldn’t also decide to meet her.

Mouse responded quickly to the request and said he would meet her. She knew the way and got there just as Mouse arrived.

“Catherine need’s Mouse’s help?” he asked.

“As a matter of fact I do,” she said with a smile. “First of all, do you know where Vincent is?”

“You need Vincent? Why did you call for Mouse?” he was confused.

“No, I don’t need Vincent, I just want to make sure he doesn’t show up unexpectedly.”

“Oh, Mouse understands,” he grinned. “A surprise for Vincent.”

“Exactly, Mouse, or at least I hope so. Do you know where he is?”

“Went looking for Narcissa this morning. Taking her supplies; goes about once a month. He won’t be back until late.”

“Good, so we won’t have to worry.” She smiled at Mouse conspiratorially. “Do you have bolt cutters, Mouse?”

“Bolt cutters. Did you find something? Something to take?”

“No Mouse. We aren’t going foraging. I have a house; Vincent doesn’t know about it yet. It is over a couple blocks off fifth, and there is a door in the basement wall. It is padlocked, and I was wondering what is behind that door.”

“It’s your house, so it’s OK to cut the lock off,” stated Mouse. “Might lead Below,” he exclaimed with sudden insight.

“Exactly what I was thinking,” she agreed. “So, do you have bolt cutters?”

“Mouse has extra strong, super duper bolt cutters,” he darted off back down the tunnel. “Wait here, be right back,” he called back over his shoulder.

True to his word, Mouse returned about ten minutes later. He carried the largest set of bolt cutters Catherine had ever seen; they were more than half his height and a map.

He handed her the map. “Show Mouse where your house is.”

Catherine pointed it out on the map. Mouse studied it for a moment. “Tunnels go all over that area. Father calls it a ‘rabbit warren.’ There is a tunnel entrance here,” he pointed to a spot about a block from the house “in the basement of Mr. Proctor’s store. He knows Father. Won’t mind if we use his threshold.”

He moved off down the tunnel, beckoning Catherine to follow.

About twenty minutes later, after many turns, Catherine was sure they were hopelessly lost. Mouse made one more turn that took them into a small cave with a door in the back wall. He pushed the door open into what looked like an old well. Narrow steps spiraled up the walls for about 30 feet to another door. Mouse opened that door, and they stepped into what Catherine thought was a small dark room. It turned out to be an alcove from one end of the storage room in a basement.

They could hear someone moving around in the other part of the basement. Mouse held his finger to his lips and indicated that Catherine should wait. He moved quietly to a spot where he could see into the rest of the storage room. It was obviously safe because he beckoned for Catherine to follow as he called out to the other person.

They exchanged a few words then Mouse and Catherine were escorted up into the main store, then out to the street. Mouse knew where he was going, even though it took Catherine a few moments to get her bearings. Within minutes they were in the basement that Catherine had left earlier in the day.

Mouse cut the rusty lock off without any fanfare. The hinges of the metal door were rusty, and the loud screech set Catherine's teeth on edge.

Mouse pulled out a flashlight and peered into the darkness on the other side of the door.

"What do you see?" she asked.

"Not much. Ladder goes down the wall like under your apartment building, about ten feet." He swung himself out and started down the ladder. "You coming?" he looked up at her and asked.

"Yes, of course!" she answered nervously. She waited for him to get down a few feet, then swung herself out and followed him.

The ladder led to the bottom of a shaft that was about eight feet square. Directly across from the bottom of the ladder was a rough opening. Catherine quickly followed as Mouse scampered through it. He stopped once he was through and pointed his flashlight first one way then the other.

"Man made tunnel," he announced. "Old brick. About 15 feet below street level. Might be an old storm drain." He turned to his right and started walking.

"Why are you going that way?" she called after him.

"Your house is on the north side of the street; the door was under the front wall of the house facing south. Right is west back towards the park," he stated.

"I guess that makes sense," she scrambled to follow him. As he walked, every ten feet or so he would draw an arrow on the right-hand wall with the piece of chalk he had in his pocket.

He had an uncanny sense of direction; almost as good as Vincent's. It was only a few minutes before they moved out of the brick tunnel into tunnels of natural stone. They walked only a few more minutes, descending almost the whole time and Catherine started hearing the familiar tapping on pipes. About five minutes more and they reached tunnels lit by torches and Mouse was able to put away his flashlight.

“It only took us about 10 minutes to reach here,” she told Mouse. “Where is here, by the way?”

Mouse pointed to the tunnel directly across from them. “That tunnel leads to the dining chamber, about five minutes.” He turned and wrote ‘**Catherine**’ on the wall next to the opening they had just exited.

“Want to be able to find it again next time,” he stated. “Catherine staying for dinner?”

“I think I will,” and she gladly followed him. As they walked, she tried to impress upon him the need to keep the house and the threshold a secret for now. She told him that she would let him know when he could start talking about it.

She was eating and talking to Mary when Vincent sat down next to her with his dinner.

Catherine smiled at him, “I thought you weren’t expected back until later.”

“Narcissa, wasn’t in her chamber, so I didn’t stay to talk this time,” he explained.

“Nothing is wrong, is it?” asked Mary.

“No, she left a note. She always knows when I’m going to visit. She said that she had gone foraging, and wouldn’t be back until late tomorrow.

“I worry about her being so far away from everyone,” commented Mary.

“I do too,” agreed Vincent, “but she insists that she has to be alone to do what she does.” He turned to Catherine. “I wasn’t expecting to see you this evening.”

“I had a favor to ask of Mouse, and I need to talk to Father for a few minutes. I seemed to arrive just in time for dinner, so Mouse brought me.”

Father had walked up behind her with his dinner just in time to hear Catherine’s answer.

“What was it you wanted to speak to me about, my dear?” he asked as he sat down on the other side of her.

“Well, it is kind of a private matter,” she said softly, as she leaned closer to him.

“Ah, well, come to my study after dinner, and we will talk.”

The conversation ebbed and flowed around the table as everyone discussed the happenings of the day. Catherine was unusually quiet and introspective, and Vincent commented on it as they walked toward Father’s study after dinner.

“I’ve just had a few things on my mind. I need to talk to Father first; then I’ll fill you in on everything that is going on.”

They reached the study. “I’ll leave you to your talk with Father while I go get cleaned up.” No one was in sight in the tunnel, so Vincent leaned down and kissed her lightly. She was smiling to herself as she entered Father’s chamber. Vincent was keeping his end of the bargain as far as the kisses were concerned, but it was always strictly private.

Father had left the dining chamber earlier and was sitting at his desk with one of his ever present lists when Catherine entered.

“So what was this private matter you needed to speak to me about?” he asked.

Catherine could hear just a little hesitation in his voice, and she smiled reassuringly as she seated herself in the easy chair across the desk from him.

“Nothing earth shattering, Father. I just had some news that I wanted to share, and a favor to ask. The news is that I’m going to be moving.”

“Moving, when did this come about?” he asked.

“Actually, only this afternoon. When my father died, he left a lot of investment properties. I’ve sold most of them. One was a row house off of 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue across the park from my apartment. It was in the middle of being renovated, so I decided to finish the project before I sold it. I think he was thinking of asking the woman he was dating to marry him and I think the house was intended for them. The work has just been finished, and it is absolutely lovely! I fell in love with it while I was going through it with the contractor. I don’t often make decisions of this magnitude that quickly, but it just felt right. And after what I found this afternoon, I know it was the right decision.”

“What did you find?” he prompted.

“The house is accessible from the tunnels. It is probably about a twenty-minute walk from here. There is a door in the basement. I found it while I was doing my walk through. It was padlocked, and Mr. D’Amico said that they didn’t want to break the lock, so they hadn’t checked it out. After I finished, I came and got Mouse, and we went back to the house with some bolt cutters. It was almost as if he knew exactly where he was as soon as we got to the bottom of the ladder. He led me straight back here with no problems.”

“That is an interesting find,” said Father, smiling. “And I think I don’t really have to ask what the favor is.”

“Probably not. I just wanted to make sure that it would be OK for me to use that threshold once I move into the house.”

“Well, officially, it will have to go to the council, but quite a few of our Helpers have access to some kind of private threshold, so I don’t think that it will be a problem. It would be much safer for Vincent to visit you once you’ve moved,” he observed.

“My thoughts exactly!” she said. “Being a row house there are only windows on the front and the back of the house, and the yard in back has a twelve-foot high brick wall around it, and there are several trees. It is very well shielded. And there is a screened in porch on the back of the house. As

long as the windows on the front of the house are kept covered it will be as secure as Fort Knox for him. I wanted to talk to you first before I told Vincent.”

“Tell me what?” asked Vincent as he entered the chamber. He had bathed in record time and was still a little damp in spots.

Father and Catherine looked at each other and grinned conspiratorially.

“Maybe you should just show him, Catherine,” Father suggested, much to her surprise.

“Maybe I should. Do you have a flashlight I can borrow, Father?”

“On the shelf by the door.”

“Thanks,” she took Vincent’s hand and led him out the door, grabbing the flashlight as she passed it.

“Where are we going, Catherine?” he asked as they walked steadily away from the main tunnels.

“It’s a surprise,” she said with a mischievous grin.

They had reached the intersection where Mouse had written **‘Catherine’** on the wall, and Catherine didn’t hesitate in taking the tunnel.

“Why is your name on the wall back there?” he asked after they had walked for a few minutes.

“Mouse wrote it,” she said.

They reached the unlighted part of the tunnels, and she switched on the flashlight and kept it trained on the left-hand wall as they walked along.

Vincent could tell that he wasn’t going to get any answers out of her. The Bond was radiating excitement and mischief, so he just gave up and followed her lead. They didn’t walk much longer before she turned left, into a room. She crossed to a rusty ladder set into the wall and began to climb, expecting Vincent to follow.

“Wait, Catherine,” he called. “It is very old and rusty, are you sure it is sound?”

“Yes, Mouse and I were on it earlier today. It held us; I think it should hold you.”

She was about halfway up when Vincent put his foot on the first rung, then hesitated.

“Where are we going, Catherine?”

“Above.”

He stepped back from the ladder and looked up at her. “Above, but it is still early, hardly dark yet, and I didn’t bring my cloak.”

“She stopped and looked down at him. “Maybe I should qualify that,” she said. “It’s Above, but it is inside a house. It’s safe.” She finished her climb then disappeared through a hole about 10 feet up.

Vincent stood at the bottom of the ladder staring up after her. The upper half of her body reappeared, and she smiled down at him and waved.

“Are you coming?” she called.

Vincent sighed and started to climb. At the top of the ladder, he found the hole and climbed through. Catherine was waiting for him, and there was barely room for both of them in the narrow space behind the furnace.

Catherine closed the squeaky door, then grabbed Vincent’s hand again and led him to the stairs.

“What is this place?” he asked.

“The basement of a house,” she wasn’t giving anything away, not even through the Bond.

“Whose house?” They had reached the top of the stairs, and she pushed open the door and turned on the overhead light; he followed her into the kitchen.

“She turned around and grinned at him. The word “*ours*” was on the tip of her tongue, but instead, she said “Mine!”

“Your house? You bought a house?” he looked around the unfurnished kitchen.

“Not exactly. It is one of the properties that Daddy left me.” She went on to tell him the same story she’d already related to Joe and Father.

“You’re going to live here?” he asked.

“I think so. It is a wonderful place and the access to the tunnels makes it perfect. Father said that he doesn’t think the council will have a problem with the new threshold.” She tugged on the hand she was still holding. “Come on. Let me show you around.”

She led him through the house, describing her plans as she went.

“It has this great kitchen; it’s huge, which is good since there isn’t a formal dining room.” She pointed out the large pantry, and the laundry room then led the way to the living room. “This is a good sized room, and it has a fireplace. The hall goes down one side of the house and leads back to the laundry room, so I won’t have to go all the way through the living room and kitchen with the dirty laundry. There is a powder room under the stairs.” He followed her up the stairs to the second floor. “This floor has a family room, bedroom, and a bath, but I was thinking that I would use the family room more like an at home office since two walls are lined with bookshelves. The other bedroom would do for a guest room.” Another set of stairs took them to the third floor. “There are two more bedrooms and a bath on this floor,” she was pushing open doors as she spoke, and Vincent obligingly looked at everything and commented on the beautiful woodwork.

“What is that door?” he asked pointing down the hall.

“That is the door to the stairs to the master suite,” she opened it and started up that stairs.

Vincent hesitated then almost reluctantly followed her.

“At the top, if you go left you to into the bathroom, straight ahead is the walk in closet and to the right is the bedroom. There is a pull-down stairs in the closet that is access to the attic.”

“The house has so much room, what will you do with it all?” he asked.

She had ideas, but decided now was not the time to broach that subject, but she did answer.

“Guest rooms are always nice. People can come to stay, Nancy and her family can stay with me when they come to the city. If children from Below come up to start college like Michael did, now I’ll have a room they can stay in until they move into the dorm. I’ll probably spend most of my time downstairs, and it will be nice to have an office at home where I can spread out all the stuff I bring home to work on. I won’t be taking it to bed with me...” She turned to look at him. “There is something else I want to show you.”

He followed her back down to the first floor and into the kitchen. She crossed the room and opened the back door.

“Come on,” she said. “It’s safe; it’s a screened porch.”

Once he was on the porch, he looked around and nodded his approval. “It is very nice, Catherine.”

“I’ll probably put a small table and some chairs out here. And some wicker furniture, maybe a sofa or a glider and some chairs, but this is what I really wanted to show you.” She opened the screen door and started down the steps to the yard. She turned holding the door for him.

“It’s all right,” she assured him again. “The yard is small, but there are several trees, and the brick wall is twelve feet high all around. There is a gate into the alley, but I’ll put a lock on it before I move in. This would be a lovely place for you, Vincent. A place where you can come Above and be safe. I know that it isn’t like wandering the woods up in Connecticut, but you will be able to come out here anytime, day or night,” she smiled a bit mischievously, “And a place where I can play in the dirt.”

“Play in the dirt?”

“Plant a garden; flowers. I can plant my rose; it will do much better here than in a pot. In fact, climbing roses on the wall will smell lovely when they are all in bloom.”

“You’ve put some thought into this, Catherine. It sounds like you have a plan,” he said with a smile.

“It seemed to spring into my head full grown,” she admitted, “and the more I talk about it, the more ideas I get.”

Catherine watched Vincent for a moment as he stood thinking.

“What do *you* think of the idea? You haven’t said much. Will you come to visit; will you come more often? Stay for a while, have lunch or dinner with me?”

Vincent shocked Catherine and took her breath away when he reached out and pulled her into his arms and held her tightly.

“Yes, Catherine!” he said, kissing her ear lightly through her hair. “It is a wonderful idea! A little overwhelming, perhaps, but the answer to a dream. I just don’t want to get too attached to it until I know it is real.”

“It is real, Vincent. There is nothing to stop me from moving, now that I know what you think of the idea.”

They sat on the steps from the porch; Catherine leaned against Vincent.

“We will have to get Mouse to oil the hinges on that door in the basement. The sound could wake the dead,” commented Vincent.

“It hurts my ears, I can only imagine what it does to you,” said Catherine.

Vincent put his arm around her as they looked out over the yard and after a few moments, he pulled her into an embrace. “I can feel your excitement,” he said as he looked down at her. “How quickly do you think you will be making this move?”

“Probably gradually over the next month. I’m going to need a lot of furniture.”

Vincent nodded. “Yes, what you have will come nowhere near filling this place.”

“And the style won’t suit this house. I’ll probably replace it all. Maybe the old stuff can be used Below. It is good quality.”

“Thank you, Catherine; I’m sure it will be put to use. What about your apartment?”

“Maybe Jenny would like to buy it; or if she can’t afford to buy, maybe she’d like to rent it. She has always loved it, especially the view of the park. And it is close to her job.”

“And the two of you will be closer to each other,” observed Vincent. “You might be able to get together more often.”

“Now that is a thought; I might use that point as an incentive for her to move.” Catherine was thoughtful for a moment; then she looked at Vincent with a twinkle. “Do you think the community would like to have a Helper who works for a major publishing house?”

Vincent smiled back as he caught her thought. “I can’t speak for the whole community, but I’m sure Father would be thrilled. I can put that possibility before the council if you like.”

“Please! If I’m allowed to let Jenny in on the secret, I’m sure she would love to be a Helper. She is always talking about all the books that they wind up sending to the recycler because the print is just a little skewed, or a binding is the wrong color.

She hugged him, and they quickly locked up and returned Below to Father’s chamber to tell him the news.

Catherine told Father the rest of her plan, and then brought up the possibility of being allowed to tell Jenny about the tunnels and asking her if she would like to be a Helper.

Father laughed at Catherine’s blatant use of the books as a bribe and then assured her that Vincent would be on the agenda to bring up both the new threshold and allowing her to tell Jenny about the tunnels.

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Late on the evening after the council meeting, Catherine was sitting in her living room, with the French doors open to the balcony. She had a book in her lap, but she’d given up trying to read; her mind kept straying to the possibilities presented by the house. She heard Vincent’s footsteps before she turned to see him step across the doorsill into the living room. He shed his cloak and dropped it across the back of a chair on his way to join Catherine on the sofa. She turned her face toward his for his kiss but was careful to keep it from escalating.

He sat beside her, smiling as he took her hand.

“All your requests have been granted,” he stated.

She squealed and hugged him. “Great. I was thinking about how to go about it. And I thought that I would tell Jenny about the move first and then offer her the apartment. Then tell her about the tunnels, the people and then you. We can save asking her to be a Helper for last after she’s been Below and met everyone.”

Vincent nodded, “That is a sound plan.”

Catherine turned, so she was facing Vincent. She tucked her feet up under her and made herself comfortable. She took his hand in hers and rubbed her cheek on the back of it. “I took a big step today,” she announced.

“I could feel that you were anxious about something. What was it, Catherine?” He turned his hand and cupped her cheek.

“I took Joe to lunch and broke it to him that I would like to go part time. I explained my reasons for wanting to work fewer hours. I thought he was going to have a stroke at first, but I think I left him with an understanding of my reasons.”

“And what are your reasons, Catherine?” He was plainly puzzled.

“I want more time to do pro bono work, or at least help people who are living on a budget. That is one of the reasons I want an office at home. Helpers are always asking for legal advice. I already give a lot of free advice, but if I’m not working full-time at the DA’s office, then I will have more time and will be able to give more help.”

“A commendable ambition,” he said, “but are you sure that it is what you want to do?”

“Yes, Vincent. I want to work directly with the people who need it. There have been so many times over the last three years when all I’ve had to do is read something for a Helper, and I was able to put their minds at ease. Do you remember when Mr. Schwartz was being audited by the IRS? He got a letter from them, and although he speaks very good English, it isn’t his first language, and he was terribly confused. He thought he was going to have to pay something like \$40,000 in back taxes. I read the letter, and all he had to do was go down to the IRS office and show them the originals of some receipts he had sent them copies of when he filed his taxes. He called, made an appointment, showed them the receipts, and they wound up cutting him a check for \$1800.”

“I can see the satisfaction in that. So what did Joe say to your proposal?”

“Like I said, I thought he was going to have a stroke. He argued that he couldn’t afford to lose his best attorney. I told him that flattery would get him absolutely nowhere, I also said that if I couldn’t go to part time, then I would have to quit, but then I had a stroke of genius.

Vincent laughed at her turn of phrase. “And what was that?”

“I told him that if I quit, I would still work for the DA’s office as a volunteer doing research and other things that I could do outside the office or from home. Things like writing briefs, and taking depositions. Joe finally gave up and talked to Moreno. John said that the DA’s office doesn’t use part-timers, it’s against city policy, but there is precedence for volunteers, so as of two weeks from today, I will be happily unemployed,” she said with a grin.

Vincent looked worried and asked again, “Are you sure that is what you want?”

“Absolutely, Vincent. I’ll still practice law, but I will do it strictly low cost or pro bono for Helpers, and a few hours a week for the DA’s office,” said Catherine with conviction.

“I hope you don’t get bored,” said Vincent as he looked into her eyes.

Catherine held his gaze for a few moments. “I doubt that I will, Vincent. I can always find something to do Below,” she said as he finally lowered his eyes, realizing the possible double meaning of Catherine’s words.

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Catherine invited Jenny over for dinner on Friday night.

They hugged when Catherine met her at the door. “Your parents weren’t expecting you for dinner tonight, where they?” she asked as Jenny followed her into the kitchen.

“No, they are out of town. Gone to visit Aunt Leah. Why do you think I’m here?” she asked with a grin. “The only time I eat decently is Shabbat dinner on Friday nights at home. I had to find a good meal somewhere.”

“I cheated,” admitted Catherine. “I stopped and picked up chicken, but I did make my own salad, and dressing. And there is ice cream for dessert.”

Jenny laughed “Still better than what I would have had at my place. I think I have a can of tomato soup, a couple stale bagels, and a quart of lime sherbet. I’ve been working so much I haven’t eaten more than breakfast there in over a month.” She helped Catherine carry dinner to the table. “This is sumptuous compared to what I have been eating.”

As they ate, they talked about friends and caught up as Catherine waited for the best opening to tell Jenny her plans. Finally, when they were on the sofa drinking the last of the wine, Catherine decided that the best way to start would be to just say it.

“Jenny, I asked you to dinner tonight to tell you some things.”

Jenny took a sip of her wine before she spoke.

“What’s up Cath? This sounds serious.”

“It is, but it is also very good, and it is hard to know just where to start... First of all, Daddy left me a house just off of 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. It is newly renovated, and I will be moving into it in a couple of weeks; just as soon as I finish furnishing it.”

“A house. Wow! I can’t wait to see it.” She looked around the room. “What are you going to do with this place?” she asked.

“That is where you come in. How would you like to either buy or rent it? I know that you’ve always liked it, loved the view and that it is very close to your office, and I’ll just be across the park, instead of across town. I wanted to offer it to you before I listed it with a realtor.”

“I don’t know Cath,” she said hesitantly. “I’m sure I couldn’t afford it, even if I only rented.” She shook her head sadly.

“Jenny, you’re my best friend. If you want the place, we can work it out. If you want to rent you can have it for what it costs me in taxes, maintenance, and co-op fees, if you want to buy it I’ll sell it to you for what Dad paid for it when he bought it ten years ago. There is no hurry, take a look at your finances and budget and let me know whenever you can.”

Jenny threw her arms around her friend and hugged her fiercely. “You have a deal, Cath,” she exclaimed. “I’ve been saving for a down payment and recently talked to a mortgage banker. I know what your Dad paid for this place, and I can afford that, even with the taxes and co-op fees.”

They talked excitedly for a while about when Catherine would be moving and how Jenny wanted to decorate. Then Jenny suddenly leveled a look at Catherine. “There’s something else, isn’t there?”

Catherine nodded.

“And it’s about a man!” stated Jenny. “I’ve been dreaming about you with a man. I haven’t seen him clearly, but he dresses kind of strangely and has long reddish blond hair. In my dreams, I’ve heard snatches of Shakespeare being recited in this fantastic voice. Are you in love with an actor, Cathy?”

Catherine grinned and shook her head. “Jenny, you are amazing. He isn’t an actor, but you don’t know how close you are with everything else.”

“Is he going to be moving in with you?” she asked.

“Oh, don’t I wish! No, but hopefully we will be able to spend more time together after I move. Jenny, this is such a long story, so I hope you have a few hours.”

“I have all night if necessary!”

“It could take that long; depends on how much I decide to tell you tonight.”

“You had better tell it all, lady! I won’t settle for any less.”

“OK, in that case, I’ll go back to the very beginning.” She did just that and told Jenny about being found in the park, slashed and bleeding heavily, and how a wonderful man named Vincent and his father had taken care of her for the next ten days. She told Jenny about the tunnels under the City, and then about the community and the people and the network of Helpers. It took over an hour to give her every detail.

“That is all fantastic, Cath. It sounds like a regular fairy tale, but what you haven’t told me anything about is ‘the man,’ the one in my dreams; the one you are obviously madly in love with.”

“It’s Vincent,” said Cathy with a dreamy smile.

“The guy who found you; is he Italian?” asked Jenny.

“Not exactly.”

“What do you mean, not exactly?”

“Just that. He doesn’t know his ancestry; he is adopted. He was found outside St. Vincent’s Hospital by one of the other tunnel residents and taken to Jacob Wells, the man everyone Below calls Father. He was probably less than a day old at the time, and he was sick. Father is a doctor, and he took care of him, and he survived. Eventually, Father adopted him; not a legal adoption, but they are as close as any father and son that I’ve ever known. Father’s natural son is Devin Wells. He’s a few years older than Vincent; they were raised as brothers.”

“That’s the Vincent he dedicated his book to?”

“Yes, they were very close growing up.”

“So why does he continue to live in this place; why doesn’t he come up and join the rat race?” Jenny asked jokingly.

“He can’t, Jenn. If he was to be seen Above, I don’t know what would happen, but it wouldn’t be pleasant, especially not for Vincent.”

“Why?”

“Vincent is different. I don’t want to go into details right now, but suffice it to say that he is different enough that the only time he ever comes Above and mingles with the general population of the city is on Halloween. I think he is beautiful; so do most of the people who know him, but most people who don’t know him would be frightened out of their wits.”

Jenny raised an eyebrow at that, but all she said was, “So, when do I get to meet him?”

“That is up to Vincent, but I will talk to him. In the meanwhile, there are a few other things. First of all, I have permission to invite you Below. If Vincent is up to it when you visit; you will meet him then. And when you visit Below, Father is probably going to ask you to be a Helper. That was my idea. I told him that you often have access to books that aren’t up to your company’s standards but are still readable and usable. They would be especially interested in textbooks and medical texts.”

“Yes! Yes to it all. I would love to go meet everyone and see this fairy tale realm, and I would love to be a Helper. I’ll even see if I can get specific books that they might need,” she took a deep breath and hugged Catherine. “And tell Vincent that I would really like to meet the man who finally swept Catherine Chandler off her feet, and put stars in her eyes.”

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Arrangements were made and a time was set for Jenny’s first visit Below. A couple of weeks after Catherine’s revelations they met in the lobby of the apartment building and Catherine took her to the basement threshold. Geoffrey met them at the bottom of the ladder and led them to Father’s study.

“Wow! This is really something,” exclaimed Jenny as they finally reached the main hub of the community. “I wouldn’t have imagined that there would be so many people.”

“People are finishing up work for the day, just like Above, and heading back to their chambers.” Catherine turned to Geoffrey. “Thanks, Geoffrey, we can find our way from here.”

“Why did we need a guide?” asked Jenny as she continued to follow Catherine.

“The ways change periodically. It is a security measure. Places, like private homes owned by Helpers that have thresholds, don’t change unless the house is sold, but thresholds in public places are always apt to be discovered accidentally, so every now and then, false walls will be put up, and other changes will be made.”

They had just turned out of a large tunnel and into a smaller one when a young man with tousled blond hair rushed up to Catherine and fairly bounced around in front of her.

“Catherine. Good, you’re here. Door is done. Rust is gone. Painted it to keep it from rusting again. No more squeaks and screeches.”

“Thank you, Mouse.” She reached out and grabbed his sleeve as he started to rush off. “Wait, Mouse. This is my friend, Jenny. Jenn, this is Mouse.”

Mouse quit bouncing long enough to look at Jenny, then he grinned and stuck his hand out. Jenny grinned back and shook hands with him. Then he dropped her hand and darted off without a word.

Jenny looked at Catherine but didn’t ask the question that Catherine knew she wanted to ask.

“Mouse was pretty much a feral child when Vincent found him. He lived on the fringes of this community, and survived much like a mouse does; that is where he got his name. He still isn’t completely civilized, I doubt that he will ever be, but he is a genius when it comes to building things. Many of the gadgets they use here Below are his inventions.”

They had reached Father’s study, and Catherine led Jenny through the entrance. Jenny stopped just inside the door to gaze around at all the books on shelves and in stacks. “Are you sure they need more books?” she asked, as she followed Catherine down the steps.

“This is only some of them, but many of these are sadly outdated. Catherine and Vincent have started sorting and moving some to a new chamber that we are turning into a community library,” said Father as he rose from his chair to welcome the two women.

“Jenny, this is Jacob Wells, Father to just about everyone here; Father, this is my friend Jennifer Aronson.” The two shook hands then Father invited them to sit.

“Zack will be here shortly with the tea tray. Vincent just returned from working on one of the lower levels. He said he would bathe and be here as soon as he can.”

The three sat and talked until Zack arrived with the tea, then Catherine poured cups for everyone. They were discussing Devin’s book when Catherine looked up to see Vincent standing just inside the door. He had taken the time to dress in something besides work clothes: black jeans, and low boots, his ruffled shirt, and a black leather vest. She noticed that he wasn’t wearing his gloves as he often did when meeting new people. She rose and crossed the chamber to take his hand and pull him toward the table. Jenny turned to see where Catherine was going, and when she saw Vincent, her jaw dropped.

Catherine had no doubt that Jenny’s reaction would be good, she was just interested to see how it would manifest. Before they reached the table, Jenny was on her feet, staring, slack-jawed. She recovered quickly and reached out to take Vincent’s hands, not even looking at them.

“You are amazing!” she exclaimed. “I never thought I would see the day when Catherine Chandler fell head over heels for a guy. She was always the one who managed to remain cool and aloof, while the rest of us made fools of ourselves.” She dropped his hands and pulled him into a hug.

“Congratulations on breaking down that particular wall,” she said out loud. As she hugged him, she whispered into his ear. “She’s my best friend, like a sister; you take good care of her, big guy!” She stepped back and took his hands again.

Vincent was surprised by Jenny’s reaction. The physical contact enhanced his empathic ability, and he was stunned to realize that Jenny’s reaction was completely genuine. Both he and Catherine were blushing, and Father was laughing as everyone resumed their seats.

Vincent ducked his head a little as he accepted a cup of tea from Catherine. “Thank you... I think,” he said to Jenny with a slight smile.

Jenny managed not to stare, but Vincent’s appearance fascinated her.

At one point while the four of them talked, a young blond woman carrying a child rushed into the room. She greeted everyone then turned to Vincent.

“Vincent, can you keep little Cathy for a few minutes. I’m supposed to be helping William with dinner, and Mary is tied up bathing one of the other children.”

Vincent held his arms out to the little one who willingly went to him. “Certainly, Lena. We love spending time with her.”

“Mary said she would come and get her when she finishes what she is doing. Thank you so much.” She rushed out again.

“Cathy?” asked Jenny.

“Yes, Catherine helped Lena, and when her child arrived, she named her Catherine. We call her Cathy, or little Catherine to keep from confusing everyone,” explained Vincent.

Jenny watched as little Cathy reached up and started patting Vincent’s cheeks. Then she grabbed hands full of his hair and pulled him down and planted a sloppy baby kiss on his mouth. Everyone laughed as Jenny silently wished she could touch his cheek like that, if only just assure herself that he was real.

Finished with Vincent, Cathy turned toward Catherine and all but launched herself from Vincent’s arms into hers. Once in Catherine’s lap, she settled back to study the adults who were seated around the table. Catherine picked a gingersnap up off the plate, broke it into quarters and handed a piece to Cathy who took it eagerly and started to devour it.

The adults continued their conversation until Mary came in to collect Cathy. Father invited Jenny to stay for dinner, but they declined; Catherine wanted to take Jenny to the new house. Vincent said he would lead them.

“You’ll miss dinner,” commented Jenny, as they walked along.

“That won’t be a problem. William tolerates my forays into his kitchen for snacks. I’ve been doing it since I was a boy when I just couldn’t seem to get enough to eat. He told me that it was fine, as long as I didn’t eat what he had planned for the menu the next day and I cleaned up after myself.”

“I wish my mother had been as understanding,” sighed Jenny. “She had a strictly Kosher kitchen, scrupulously clean and no one was allowed in it after it was cleaned up after dinner.”

“So that is why there were always cookies under your bed when we were in college,” exclaimed Catherine.

“Self-preservation!” Jenny laughed. “I was in the habit of stopping at the little grocery on the corner two or three times a week, to keep my stash replenished. From the time I was about 10, I kept a metal box under my bed. My Uncle Morrie decorated it and gave it to me to keep my ‘treasures’ in. He had intended it to hold things like my diary, and keepsakes. It even had a lock. I didn’t waste the space on that stuff; I kept food in it: cookies, fruit, candy, anything that would keep and that wasn’t Kosher.”

“You had something against Kosher?” asked Vincent.

“Only that I was the only Jewish kid I knew, and most of what all my Gentile friends ate was forbidden. You know how kids are.”

The conversation continued in that vein until they reached the door into the chamber with the ladder. Catherine walked in and was surprised to find that the ladder had been replaced with narrow wooden stairs with a rail.

“Who did this?” she asked.

“Cullen and I have been working on it for the last week. We thought that it would be safer than the ladder. It was rusting and probably wouldn’t be sound for much longer.”

Catherine hugged Vincent and thanked him. Then Vincent produced several keys from his pocket and handed them to Catherine. “Mouse forgot to give these to you when he saw you earlier. We decided that since this tunnel is so close to the surface that you should probably keep the door locked, so Cullen installed a lock.”

Catherine took the keys then handed two back to Vincent. “One for you and one to keep in Father’s chamber for emergencies,” she said. “There are four more, so I’ll hide one out here in the tunnel somewhere, keep one on a nail next to the door inside and put one on my key ring.” She handed the last one to Jenny. “I have a set of house keys for you too.”

Vincent nodded and pocketed the two she had given him. They climbed the steps, and she unlocked the door. She’d expected an argument about him accepting a key to her home; maybe she was making headway after all.

After Catherine unlocked the door, Vincent reached in and switched on the light. “Mouse added a light switch too,” he pointed out.

## WEEKEND IN NEW ENGLAND

“Thoughtful,” mused Catherine, knowing that Vincent had probably suggested it.

During the previous two weeks, Catherine had spent every free minute shopping for furniture; most of it had been delivered and was unpacked and in the proper rooms, but not arranged. She had spent an entire day buying furnishings for the master bedroom. The tour was pretty quick. Jenny promised to come the following Saturday to help arrange things and make the house livable.

“Thank you for the offering to help,” said Catherine as they were picking their way through the clutter in the living room.

“I have an ulterior motive,” said Jenny with a grin. “The sooner you get this place straightened out, the sooner you can move then the sooner I can move into your place.”

“It will be your place at the end of the month,” Catherine reminded her. “That is why I’m trying to get out before then, so you will have time to redecorate and get moved in, then you can sublet your place.”

“When do you plan to move?” asked Vincent after they’d said good-bye to Jenny at the front door.

“I’ve been packing in my spare time for a couple weeks; it’s hard to believe that there is so much stuff in that little apartment. I can probably move on Monday after Jenny, and I get the house settled.” They walked back into the living room and sat on the sofa there. It was still covered with plastic and Catherine was immediately reminded of a visit to her great Aunt Maggie’s house when she was a child. “I’ve been having a hard time finding movers who are willing to move so little and then only to the other side of the park. Everybody wants the big jobs. Most have told me that I will have to wait at least six weeks. I’ve gone through half the movers in the phone book.”

“We can move you, Catherine,” Vincent assured her. “I forgot to tell you, I’ve talked to Stan Gorky. He is a Helper and owns a storage warehouse. He said we could use a couple of his trucks. We can use one to move your things over here, and use the other to take the furniture that you are sending Below over to Abe’s Hardware where it will be lowered on his freight elevator. Everyone Below is looking forward to your move, and there have been many volunteers to help. As Mary says ‘Many hands make light work.’”

“That is so thoughtful, Vincent. Tell everyone ‘thank you,’ and we will do it on Monday unless something happens to change it.”

They went back down to the basement then out into the tunnel, where Vincent ceremoniously used his key to lock the door from the tunnel side.

When they got to the point where they would have turned aside to go toward Catherine’s apartment building Vincent stopped and studied her closely.

“You’re hungry,” he stated.

“A little, I skipped lunch today because I was out buying linens for the new house. I’ll get something when I get home.” She turned and started in that direction.

## WEEKEND IN NEW ENGLAND

Vincent took her hand and pulled her toward the tunnel that led to the dining chamber.

“There was roast beef for dinner tonight, and there is probably plenty left for sandwiches. And I smelled bread baking earlier today,” he said back over his shoulder as he walked briskly toward the dining chamber. “Won’t you join me?”

The promise of food made Catherine’s stomach rumble, and they both laughed. “I guess that is as good an answer as any.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Catherine was at the new house early on Saturday. She was making coffee when Jenny showed up with a bag of bagels and fixings from the deli up the street. They ate a substantial breakfast and then got to work. Vincent, Kanin, Cullen, Geoffrey and Zack showed up about an hour later, and after that, the work went much faster. The job that Catherine had expected to take the whole weekend was done before dark that evening.

Jenny left promising to return the next morning to help make beds, hang curtains, and put away the new things that had been delivered to the house. Sunday turned out to be a repeat of Saturday when Mary arrived with Olivia, Rebecca, and Jamie. The six women efficiently bustled from room to room and were done before lunch time.

Mary herded everyone, including Catherine and Jenny Below to the dining chamber for a good lunch.

“I love your kitchen!” Livvie was exclaiming as Vincent and Kanin joined them at the table. Livvy had spent the majority of the morning arranging things in the cabinets and pantry.

“I love the way you’ve set up that little table on the screened in porch just outside the kitchen door,” said Rebecca. “It is the perfect place to have a nice leisurely breakfast in the morning. It gets just enough of the morning sun.”

“I think that it is cool that you picked a kitchen table that is a trestle table with benches just like we have here,” pointed out Jamie. “You must be planning to have company often; you can easily seat 10 people at that table!”

“Now all you’ll have to do is learn how to cook!” pointed out Jenny, with a grin.

“I can cook!” argued Catherine.

“OK, you can cook. How many dishes is it?” Jenny held up her hand and started counting. “Pot roast, omelets, steak, baked potatoes--if there is a microwave handy, salad--you do make a tasty vinaigrette dressing, toast, and oatmeal.” She held up eight fingers.

Even Vincent hid a smile at Catherine’s chagrined look.

“I have cookbooks,” she retorted, “and my grandmother always said that if you can read you can cook.”

A group of children came in just in time to hear the end of the conversation. Samantha came over to the table and sat beside Catherine. "I can cook, Catherine," she put in.

Catherine hugged her. "You can. What do you cook?"

"Tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches," they girl announced proudly.

"Looks like lunch is taken care of." Vincent couldn't resist teasing a little too.

"And Catherine has breakfast and dinner covered," put in Kanin. "At least you won't starve to death."

"I have a secret weapon," announced Catherine with a sly look.

"What's that?" asked Jenny.

"The telephone!"

"The telephone?" several people said together.

"To call for delivery!" said both Catherine and Samantha in unison, they turned to each other, high-fived, and collapsed in giggles.

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that evening, Catherine was at her apartment packing up the last of the things in the kitchen when she heard Vincent land lightly on the balcony. She stopped long enough to wash her hands and dry them then went out to find Vincent leaning on the balcony wall looking out over the park.

"I'm going to miss this balcony," he said as Catherine came up beside him.

"Me too. Jenny said that you can come and visit it anytime you want," she told him.

"It won't be the same without you," he pointed out.

"But you and I will have that whole back yard at the house. I know the view isn't as good as this one, but we can still see the stars and the moon, and you will even be able to go out there in the daylight."

"Not quite the same," he pointed out as he put his arm around her and pulled her close to his side.

Catherine was suddenly distressed, and Vincent felt it acutely through the Bond.

"I'm sorry, Vincent. I didn't realize that this place meant so much to you."

Vincent hurried to correct her misconception. He put both arms around her and cradled her close to his chest. "No Catherine. That is not what I meant. This place is special because you are here;

because it is a part of your world that we can share in reasonable safety. If I'm looking for a view of the city, there are any number of buildings that I can go to the top of; I've been doing it for years." He looked down at her as she tipped her head back to look up at him. "Your home will be special for the same reason. That you picked it, with my safety in mind is just icing on the cake. You've worked so hard."

He moved both hands to the sides of her head and guided her lips to his for a short, sweet kiss.

"I love you, Vincent. Any way that I can make it possible for us to safely be together more and for longer periods of time is worth any amount of work." She slid her arms around his waist and hugged him tightly.

"I know you didn't do this just for me, but you could have just moved to a larger apartment, possibly in the same building. You wouldn't have had to furnish a whole house, only one or two additional rooms."

"But Vincent," she looked up at him, and her face was glowing, "this has actually been a lot of fun, not just hard work. "I've never decorated my own place before. When I was little, my mother decorated my room. I didn't change it much after she died because it was a reflection of her. When I lived with my father, he always had interior designers do the places we lived in. When he bought this apartment for me, he had an interior designer decorate it. I didn't have any say in it. I only added a few things of my own. I have thoroughly enjoyed being able to make that house into what I hope will be a comfortable home for my guests and me, and hopefully, a place that you will be comfortable in too."

"I'm sure I will be. I noticed that the sofas are substantial enough for even me to be at ease."

He left a short time later promising to meet her at the house the next morning.

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Kanin and Cullen arrived promptly at 6am the next morning with two trucks and half a dozen men from Below. They emptied the apartment in record time. All Catherine had to do was stand on the curb and tell them which truck each item went into.

Cullen handed the last box up to the man on the back of one of the trucks.

"You might want to go up and take one last look around to make sure we haven't missed anything," he said as he stepped back up on the curb.

"I'll do that. Is there room in the truck for me to ride over to the house with you?"

"There is, I'll wait on you."

Catherine made one last trip up the elevator, to apartment 21E; the next time she did this the name on the directory downstairs would be **J. Aronson**.

## WEEKEND IN NEW ENGLAND

She started in the bathroom and worked her way through the whole place, opening cabinets and looking behind things; it was stripped bare, the French doors looked naked. She had arranged for professional cleaners to come in and clean the place. Jenny was keeping the carpets and the appliances, but she was going to have the whole place painted. Then the following week the same crew was going to help Jenny move from her old place to her new one. Sometimes it was good to know people in low places.

Kanin walked inside from the Balcony with the potted rosebush on a dolly.

“This thing weighs a ton!” he commented as he eased the dolly down the step and rolled it across the living room. “It’s a good thing the truck has a lift gate, or we would never get it inside.”

Catherine giggled as she followed him out of the apartment and locked the door. “I can see you wheeling that thing all the way across the park. It is going to be a real job getting it up the front steps at the house.”

“Too bad Vincent can’t come out to help us. But I think we can make it with one pushing and one pulling.”

It was only a little after 9am when Catherine and Cullen arrived at the new house. They found that most of the moving crew that had melted away after they finished loading the trucks had reappeared there, and they were all gathered around the large table in the kitchen and Vincent was serving them coffee, tea, pastries, and muffins.

He handed Catherine a large mug of hot coffee and a blueberry muffin as she and Cullen walked into the kitchen.

“Thank you! This is wonderful. I didn’t get anything this morning because I’d already packed everything.”

“William thought we might need sustenance, so he packed up all this and sent it up a little while ago. He’s promised to send lunch as soon after 12:00 as he can.”

When the food was gone, everyone went back to work, and again, all Catherine had to do was direct traffic telling people where to put things. The boxes had been clearly marked, and it didn’t take any longer to get the truck unloaded than it did to load it. They were just finishing up when lunch arrived carried by Mary, Olivia, Rebecca, Jamie, Lena, and Samantha.

Lunch was served, everyone ate heartily, then the men, except for Vincent, left and the ladies got to work. They worked in teams of two, each team taking a room and unpacking and putting away the things in that room, then moving on to the next room when they finished. A few hours later they had finished unpacking everything that had taken Catherine a month of spare time to pack. She was amazed. It looked like she’d been living in the house forever. Vincent had broken down all the boxes and bagged up all the packing materials, and they were all in the basement near the threshold waiting to be taken Below to be reused.

Catherine felt grubby and grungy and ready for a shower, but everyone insisted that she just wash her face and hands and join them Below for dinner.

The group of women walked along with Catherine in the middle and Vincent trailing along behind with a bemused smile on his face.

They arrived at the dining chamber and were surrounded by at least a dozen other people, mostly women, who wanted to know how everything had gone. It was over an hour before Catherine was able to extricate herself from everyone and escape with Vincent.

They were caught in the corridor by a group of children who were on their way to rehearse a play. It took another hour to get away from the children because they had to have Vincent's advice on how to do several scenes.

It was after 9pm when they left the children.

“Will you come back to the house and stay a little while?” she asked as they walked along.

“If you would like me too. I would like to see everything now that it is all done. I didn't get a chance to this afternoon. Olivia kept me occupied in the kitchen.”

They arrived at the house, and Catherine gave him a quick guided tour and then told him to wander as he wished while she took a shower.

Twenty minutes later, she pulled a simple white cotton nightgown over her head and put on a moss green cotton robe, and went in search of Vincent. She found him in her office on the second floor. He was sitting in the easy chair reading.

“What are you reading, Vincent?” she asked as she entered.

Without looking up from the book, Vincent read:

*When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,  
I all alone beweep my outcast state  
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries  
And look upon myself and curse my fate,  
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,  
Featured like him, like him with friends possess'd,  
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,  
With what I most enjoy contented least;  
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,  
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,  
Like to the lark at break of day arising  
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;  
For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings  
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.*

He looked up from the book and smiled. “That is what I'm feeling right now, Catherine. I think on thee, and everything you've done for me, everything you mean to me comes flooding in, and suddenly, I wouldn't change a thing.”

His words brought tears to her eyes. Seeing them, he opened his arms, and she flew into them; settling onto his lap and snuggling into his arms as he closed them around her.

When she'd bought this large leather chair for her office, she'd pictured Vincent sitting in it, reading just as she'd found him. She hadn't taken the fantasy as far as them cuddling in it, but was happy to find that it was big enough to accommodate both of them.

\* \* \* \* \*

A couple of months passed. Catherine found that it didn't take her long to get used to not having to wake up to the alarm clock, but she also found that unless she'd had a late night the night before she always woke early. Waking this crisp fall morning was a particular joy.

"It must have something to do with enjoying what I'm doing and looking forward to the day," she said to herself as she put her breakfast dishes in the dishwasher, then put on her jacket and reached for her backpack and keys and headed Below.

She stopped in Father's Study and dropped off some current medical journals from Peter then went on to the classroom she was using to teach her Civics class. Vincent came in as she was hanging up her jacket.

The classroom was empty, so she was treated to a hug and a toe-warming kiss.

"Umm." She reluctantly stepped back and looked up at him. "Aren't we in a good mood this morning?"

"Yes, we are." He smiled; he wasn't just referring to his own mood.

"Why is that?" She asked as she moved her books to the desk at the front of the chamber.

"Might have something to do with the fact that I've been invited to dinner at the home of a beautiful woman tonight," he said in a low tone.

She looked up quickly and in surprise. "Why, Vincent; I do believe that you are flirting with me," she said with a smile.

She was about to move back across the chamber to hug him when the sounds of her students in the corridor outside stopped her. Vincent nodded at her and smiled. "I'll see you at lunch Catherine," he promised as he left.

Later that afternoon, Catherine was busy in her kitchen. She loved this kitchen so much she'd invested in some new cookbooks and had discovered she had a talent for cooking. She'd even managed to get William to give her some pared down versions of some of his recipes. For tonight she'd planned a simple meal of a salad and a hearty Provence style Burgundy beef with French bread. Vincent had said he would bring the dessert. The dish had been simmering away in her crock pot for several hours and the whole house smelled delicious.

## WEEKEND IN NEW ENGLAND

With Vincent due in about an hour, she made a quick trip upstairs to her bedroom to shower and change. She'd chosen comfortable flat shoes, a full black skirt with a matching, slightly off the shoulder sweater that showed off her crystal. Her only other jewelry was small gold hoops in her ears. A little makeup and light perfume and she was back in the kitchen setting the table when Vincent came up the stairs from the basement carrying a dish.

"It smells good in here!" He exclaimed as he set the dish on the counter. "You are getting as good as William."

Catherine crossed the room to greet Vincent; she raised up on her toes to kiss him on the cheek. "I haven't mastered bread yet," she admitted. "I tried again last week, and the loaves I wound up with could have been used as bricks the next time you need to put up a wall Below."

Vincent chuckled, "Perhaps you should join William on one of his bread baking days if you are so determined to bake your own."

"I think I just want to prove that I can," admitted Catherine as she carried the tureen containing their dinner to the table.

They enjoyed their dinner, and after dessert, they moved to the living room with cups of tea. Vincent put another log on the fire, and they sat on the large sofa in front of it listening to music on the stereo and enjoying each other's company.

Catherine pulled her feet up under her skirt and cuddled into Vincent's side as he settled into the corner of the sofa, put his stockinged feet on the coffee table and put his arm around her. They were a picture of domestic bliss.

"I never dreamed that I would ever have access to a life like this," commented Vincent at a pause in the music.

"It is only what you deserve!" stated Catherine. "The only time you really get a chance to get away from everyone is when you take off to some deserted cavern miles from the rest of the community or when you come up here. I don't know about you, but I really value my privacy and the opportunity to hole up somewhere, even if it is only for an hour, and be by myself. That is one of the reasons I gave you a key to the door in the basement. You don't have to wait for me to be here to come up and watch a film or listen to music. I've even thought about offering you one of the bedrooms on the third floor so that you could come and stay up here anytime you want, even if I'm not here." She added the last to make it as non-threatening as possible.

"Thank you, Catherine. I appreciate the thought, but how would anyone reach me if something happened while I was up here for an extended period, or even just overnight?"

Catherine sat up and looked at him. "They could send a runner. I hid a key in the tunnel at the bottom of the stairs; half the community knows where it is, and there is another in Father's chamber. It would take only minutes for someone to get here to alert you, and it would take you even less time to get back to the hub. I'm also planning to get Mouse to install a doorbell Below that will ring in the kitchen for anyone who doesn't have access to a key. He could probably even install

a telegraph key in Father's study and run wires to here, and you could even get messages here even without the pipes."

Vincent looked at Catherine. "You've put some thought into this," he said.

"Actually, I was dropping off some tools in Mouse's chamber last week, and I saw a couple of telegraph keys on a shelf just gathering dust. It gave me the idea." She settled back into her comfy spot against Vincent's shoulder.

"Your brain is starting to work like his," said Vincent with a laugh.

Catherine tipped her head back to look up at him, and when he looked down at her, she grinned and winked.

Vincent moved to place a light kiss on her laughing mouth. It started out lightly but soon progressed to a much more passionate place.

Vincent turned her and pulled her across his lap as he continued to kiss her. He soon moved to the previously unexplored territory of her neck and shoulders that were bared by her top. She closed her eyes and savored the sensation of his mouth on her skin, then she scooted up a little and pulled his face lower and closer to her breasts.

Vincent had noticed earlier that it didn't look as if Catherine was wearing a bra, and now he confirmed that, as his mouth skimmed lightly across the tops of her breasts and his left hand moved to cup one to bring it closer to his mouth. He breathed deeply, taking in the smell of her perfume that mingled with the scent that was uniquely Catherine to make an intoxicating blend.

Catherine's hands had found their way under his sweater, and she was making her own leisurely discovery of his upper body.

Their mutual exploration went on for several minutes before Catherine finally lost all semblance of control and rose to her feet, tugging Vincent's hand to get him to follow her.

They were halfway to the stairs when she spoke. "Vincent, please come upstairs."

Vincent suddenly had a look as if he'd just woke up. "Upstairs?" he asked.

"To my bedroom..." She tugged him a step closer to the stairs.

Vincent stopped as if he'd just realized what was going on. He took a deep breath and stepped back. "I'm sorry Catherine," he said. "I didn't mean to mislead you. We can't... I can't..."

Catherine dropped his hand and put her own hands over her face, and took a deep breath of her own. "No, Vincent; I'm sorry. I got carried away. I shouldn't have made such a suggestion."

Vincent moved back to her side and took her into his embrace. "We both got carried away, Catherine... Come back into the living room." He led her back to the sofa where she sat at one end with her back up against the arm as if she needed to stay as far away from him as possible.

## WEEKEND IN NEW ENGLAND

She smiled sadly at him. “Will we ever get to that point, Vincent?” she asked.

Vincent looked her in the eye and smiled. “Yes Catherine, we will.”

She was stunned by his response and just stared at him for a moment.

Vincent reached out and took her hand. “I was wondering if it would be possible to make another trip to Connecticut.”

“When?” asked Catherine, rather breathlessly.

“Soon, Catherine,” he said as he brought her hand to his mouth and kissed her palm. The way he looked at her she’d only seen once before when she had pricked her finger on a rose thorn, and he had kissed away the hurt. “Very soon.”