



*The Hollow Men has been a pain in my heart from the first time I saw it.  
Here's to hoping this changes the flow of some lives.*

One night....in a fevered dream.

A long time later he wrapped them both in a pale-pink bath sheet, stroked her bare skin with the thirsty Egyptian cotton. Then when they were dry, he laid her in the middle of her bed and came down beside her, spoon-fashion. With one well-manicured hand he held her flat belly, pressing her against his half-hard phallus, while with the other hand he secured the back of her head to his lightly furred chest. They had been magic together, and it was only their beginning.

"Go to sleep now," he said gruffly. "I want to wake up and find you warm against me, the way we are right now."

With an errant noise from 25 floors below Elliot jolted back to reality. Not that losing Cathy Chandler bothered him, at least not much anymore. The fact that they had never had that honeymoon had stung his pride. It was devastating that his almost wife had admitted her heart was held by another. The thought of this unknown man had earned her love wielded a cat-o'-nine tails against his male ego. He was Elliott Burch, a leader on the NYC scene, a master of urban planning and construction. He's a billionaire and if he read his own press, a very eligible bachelor.

He'd survived his own Father's murder and he come out of that hole in the street shaking his head at the entire incident. Months ago Cathy had needed him and he gave what he could without questions. She promised to take his next call and she had. Sadly the outcome had not been the one he'd hoped. He'd taken a bit of breather out of NYC for a few weeks and perhaps it was the sea mist and the sun that brought his fantasies back to heart.

*Put the lady out of your mind, Burch.* He'd be damned if he'd feel sorry for himself. Forcibly he squelched the painful memories. He had projects on the drawing board, projects of such a scope that he had an excuse not to go back to Cathy's social scenes to face sympathetic stares from their social milieu. He figured most of them had probably grown up with Cathy Chandler and at one time or another; perhaps she had broken more than one heart.

Elliot had sworn off social business commitments after enduring the humiliation, but he wasn't about to swear off women. Since he'd been in the thick of business, recovering from the nixed wedding and his Father's death, he'd trimmed his horns once a week or so with work outs at the Athletic Club. He played sweaty, heart bursting games of handball right up the chain of skilled players and now he hovered at being the Club's 3rd best player. It was the only way he could sleep.

Elliot fingered the invitation, ran a thumb over the heavy laid card stock. It felt like wedding invitation, he dropped it in his lap, would he go to the event? It wasn't his building on display, then again why wouldn't he lend his nod to an emerging firm?

Now, within the month of turning his back on an empty gravestone where his Father's body should have been he was in his limo, dressed for an evening hobnobbing over a sculpture and artist's renditions of a minor office building to be built on the

edge of the business district.

With a nod and a short hand salute the chauffeur pressed the accelerator, drawing the sleek Cadillac away from the curb, leaving Elliot in the night air on the precipice of bolting toward the front door of the reception or heading toward a neighborhood where he could roll up his sleeves and grab a beer and a slice.

The reception drew him in, along a cloud of designer perfumes and after shaves. Men in snappy suits and women with expensive coiffures turned as Elliot entered the marble room. His hands sought a flute from the tray of a passing server, not so much to drink but to hold the cool stem and give his hands something to do. Sometimes these situations made him itch, 'high faluting' his mother would have said.

Then Elliot heard a familiar voice, more than anything a crystal laughter echoing from the other side of the room. Two blond women, the lighter and taller woman facing him, the laughter had come from the woman with the caramel hair. Cathy Chandler.

Elliot drifted, his feet mindlessly leading him along the perimeter of the room, noshing on a bite of this or eavesdropping for golden trade gossip. Then, like hyenas, Dale Mercer and Cameron Benson clipped past Elliot. He knew the little bastards' parents as business men who played fast and loose with women and the darker end of business. As corrupt as he felt he'd been in the past, Mercer and Benson were cut from different cloth, the seemingly bullet proof type.

"Mr. Burch, I'm so glad you made it out tonight!" The fresh faced architect gushed as Elliot walked toward the spread of chilled shrimp. Elliot glanced up from his small plate. Mute, he watched the younger man lunge toward a handshake. Elliot carefully extended his hand and his mind went blank, save for the glimmer off Cathy's caramel hair.

"Oh, you wouldn't remember me, we haven't met. I was---" The eager architect's voice drabbled on. Elliott caught Tom or Tim as his name, was it Tom Edgemore?

Elliot skirted on safe conversation, offering mindful yet benign encouragement. It seemed like thirty minutes to Burch yet the music hadn't changed yet and he knew the orchestral medley of Earth, Wind and Fire's hits wasn't more than about ten or eleven minutes. Giving the guy a perfunctory pat on the shoulder, Elliot stepped away while the orchestra labored to interpret cool jazz.

Random words worked toward his ears as he 'circulated' he'd smile and turn those dimples of his on the matrons and the pretty maidens all in a row. "Elliot? Elliot Burch?" he turned toward the Southern accent, his own bright eyes flashing.

"Georgia Samson, you are a vision", Elliot brushed cheeks with the petite redhead. She was pearls and chiffon in stilettos. Deep coral nails trailed from the back of his neck along his strong jaw. Did he blush? He felt he had. There was something so decisively demonstrative in this Southern transplant.

"I'm the vision? No one has seen you in a blue moon. Dear, where have you hidden yourself?" She gushed as she lingered and when he didn't immediately drop their initial embrace she moved closer encircling him in her heady scent. Elliot's lips grazed her ear and he shuddered as he caught the taste of balsam and resins aplenty, all steeped in incense and a honey-tea that reminded him of tobacco. He succumbed momentarily to the comfort of her zaftig figure and her sweet devotion. Widowed at 32, Georgia Delano Samson played with old family money and her hints had always been that she wanted to play along with Elliot because they would have held equal footing.

The bass of his voice brought a sensual smile to her bowed lips, "humn" she cooed as he searched for a 'moment' between them. Was she all fluff and meringue or was she his 'possibility'?

"Georgia, your beautiful head would spin if I were to tell you exactly where I've been." He hadn't lied as he pivoted to keep an eye on the jackals, Dale Mercer and Cameron Benson, encroaching on Cathy Chandler.

Between their two worlds a pot churned, stirred by the upstarts Dale and Cameron. Elliot observed Cathy's lips move in terse words, her brows exhibiting her cross emotions. Time slowed as Elliot tried to extricate himself from Georgia's attentions, his feet mired in good manners as he saw the tension radiating from Cathy's direction.

"Walk with me, Georgia." Elliot's invitation drew the woman along as he walked. Her arm snaked around the back of his waist, he was easy to hold, easier to enjoy. Elliot saw Cathy head up the escalator and from his perspective he saw the delinquents at the top of the escalator. Elliot headed to the elevator.

Pressing the button, Georgia playfully giggled. "Are we going to get playful?"

Elliot smiled, those dimples lying at his intent. Within the elevator he pressed the next floor's button and one a few floors above.

"You keep yourself warm. If I don't join you in ten, I owe you dinner." With a pivot Elliot pressed her toward the back of the elevator and rapidly stepped backward as the doors closed in front of him. Georgia chirped at his leaving yet settled back thinking of the promise of dinner.

Elliot felt the world's eyes on his back, had he moved too far too fast? The air thickened as he arrived beside Cathy Chandler.

Cameron Benson jerked his chin at Elliot's arrival, "Dale, look who it is." Cameron sneered toward Elliot, as if it would push Cathy's defender back.

Dale smirked, "Now you wouldn't be the one who keeps late hours would you?"

Elliot's eyes went fierce, "My hours are none of your concern, unless you meddle with Ms. Chandler. You meddle with her, you aggravate me."

"Ooh." The bad boy snickered, and shook insolently. "And we wouldn't want to piss off Mister Elliott – I - screwed-the-pooch – on- a – building Burch, would I?"

The air went electric between them, although barely seen by the crowd below. "You, boys, need to back off my friend. You want a target, come after me." With each step toward the playboys Elliot stood taller, "Leave the lady.... Alone."

Whether it was because they didn't get the thrill they'd imagined or Elliot had inflicted a small curse on their lots, they turned, satisfied they'd cowered the lady lawyer who'd put a high heeled shoe in their rape and slash games.

"Are they who I think they are?" Elliot drew Cathy to a brighter corner of the mezzanine, "Were they threatening you?"

Cathy's posture stiffened at his questions, she felt the cold trickle of nervous sweat stain her pale dress. She shook her head, denying her fear.

"They did, Cathy, what had you gotten yourself into?" he caught her shoulders just as she grimaced and hid her face in her hands. "Talk to me, Cathy. After all we've been through?" Elliot gently pulled her hands away from her face.

The limo circled the city. He'd offered her whiskey but she'd declined. As Cathy unburdened herself she held the crystal tumbler of sparkling water and ran the lime around the rim.

*Miles of words had been spoken* and Elliot had to ask, he lowered his head, giving her a bit of privacy to answer, "Is it him, Cathy?"

She had spent the evening burying all of these feelings from Vincent. "Him?"

"The man --- you love." Elliot's voice trembled with those words.

"Him?" Her voice was a zephyr.

"Cathy, this isn't Elliot Burch, this is Stosh talking -- cut the crap. Yeah. You took me into the bowels of New York. You needed equipment only my engineers' use. Somebody important in your life makes their home beneath these streets, just the right place to move like smoke." Elliot leaned back on the seat opposite Cathy, affording her the privacy he folded his hands behind his head and stared at the pin points of city lights through the limo's moon roof.

Her chin thrust forward, her shoulders squared. "It's not my story to tell, Elliot."

"If it were a story that would be a horse of a different color, but it's the God's honest truth. I'm no Sherlock, but whoever carried my Father was strong as a bull. Whoever made those sounds below, well I haven't a man with a set of pipes like that and I've been in roughneck bars all over Louisiana and Texas."

Now Elliot's electric eyes pierced her resolve. Silently a single tear rolled down her cheek as she fought to maintain her stoicism.

Elliot sat up and poured a bracing splash of whiskey into two tumblers, "It's not your secret to tell, yet I'm going to make some statements. If I'm right, I'll know."

Cathy shook her head at the drink and pulled her feet up under her, minimizing her presence.

Elliot's lips rested on the edge of the crystal, he sipped and washed the amber liquid around his mouth before he swallowed and spoke, "I think your friend saw these degenerates kill."

Her eyes snapped to the limo window, her breath hitched. *1 for me*, Elliot thought.

The limo rumbled over a length of pot holed street, or was Cathy beginning to tremble? "If he could walk into a courtroom he would."

Her chin dropped and waves of hair hid her profile, Elliott pressed onward. "He's deeply principled and it tears him up to leave this burden on a court system with no eyewitness."

"Stop it, Elliot!" her hands flew upward in annoyance, she covered her face but he could see her eyes regarding him, calculating what his next words would be.

His voice dropped and he measured the atmosphere between them, "I can't, Cathy. I can't because in some strange way I love him because he brings you such happiness. I look at you speaking of him and see the love you share" he sat thinking, *I wish I could be that man.*

Her brows knit in apprehension, how did Elliot know?

Her soft words were almost a cry, "Why, Elliot, why?"

"Don't ask why, Cathy. Please listen to me and consider my words judiciously."

At her nod, Elliot continued. "Have your friend write down his statement. Let me memorize that statement, let me walk into court and testify on his behalf."

The blare of a car horn emphasized her reaction, "That's absurd, it's perjury. You'll be caught and they'll walk away laughing at all of us."

"It's an oath by proxy" Elliot's raised hand emphasized his interest, "It's not absurd. I owe the both of you this much."

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When the limo stopped in front of Cathy's park side building she had blotted her eyes and recovered her acuity. She counted the people on the sidewalk as she buried more of her guilt gone wild. It was late; she walked briskly vexed that Vincent could be stalking the men who haunted her tonight.

Emotions muted, Vincent held only his anger and suspicion at the murdering young men. As the young men cruised the seedier side of town Vincent seemed in tune to their intent. Bounding through his underworld he came above to see the cruel fantasy of the darker headed felon and the blond he'd pushed against an alley wall.

Vincent's incendiary emotions contained, he watched the degenerate's hands rake the girl's throat. Her spirit withered under lascivious hands and her mortality came into view, until a husky command from the shadows pushed air into her crying lungs.

The perfect storm of failure brewed, the girl was lost to them. The hooded Specter had appeared again with a robust threat. Where was Chandler finding these people? WHAT would it take to stifle her? They had few choices.

Vincent seethed. Nothing his Catherine could say brought him relief. Because he couldn't sit in a court room and take an oath to give testimony this evening's attempted crime would occur as often as they felt they could play their deadly games. He paced before her, aware of her wracked soul. Tonight the pacing accelerated his frustration, it brought him no peace.

Catherine's voice trembled; she felt the air crackle with Vincent's frustration. Her heart was torn by him rebuffing her embrace. A bow of tension played over their separate and aching heart strings.

Catherine recognized his detachment from her. It had been coming; she had felt him pulling away from her. Not so much with words, but she hadn't been welcomed past the barred tunnel entrance, Vincent had arrived and come to her side of the bars, closing it and leaning his broad weight back against it. She took her position across from him, watching the love of her life deconstruct.

Days burned away and the brash young men pulled one brazen trick after another, finally rifling through Cathy's desk – Joe's ire drew her into his office.

Joe's face colored crimson, "This nonsense ends, now." His finger jabbed emphatically on his desk as he leaned over it, then he shook the files from her desk top. "I'm thinking you need to take some leave. Try to be less visible, convince that friend of yours to lay low. Does he know how to lay low, Radcliff?" Joe's voice rumbled low, livid to the core.

Cathy blinked; this could be the end of her job. If their threats were carried out she'd be dishonored, disbarred or dead. The thrall of living underground called to her. It would be easy to run and let them take over, just not that easy. Without lucid thought, she caught the files from Joe's hands and headed toward her desk under the office's prying eyes.

"*I'm going to start drinking,*" Catherine thought as she guided her car into the parking space under her coop. Dejectedly she rode the elevator to the lobby to pick up her mail and there was Elliot Burch looking out of place in the empty lobby. "Elliot?" She hadn't expected him after her emotional outbursts over the miles of NYC.

"I didn't mean to intrude, Cathy. I thought I could buy some of your time with dinner?" He held up two bags of fragrant Asian food.

Tired, she smiled sadly, "No intrusion, Elliot." She swallowed her sadness and led him to the elevator silently they roared both only staring at the bags of food. With a curious look over her shoulder before she unlocked her front door Cathy wondered, "Why tonight?" She toed the door open and Elliot carefully followed and closed the door behind him.

In the certain feminine stillness of her small flat Elliot searched for any evidence of the man in her life. No photos, not so much as a Sport's Illustrated were evident. With a quick step Cathy headed the kitchen where she dug for plates. Elliot used the time to case her book shelf. There the book of sonnets was horizontal over shorter books. He pulled it out with a discreet look over his shoulder and saw the inscription the elegant script. Elliot slipped it back in place and skidded quickly toward her table.

They opened cartons and feeling too unfamiliar to peck out of shared cartons they dished bits of each carton to sample each of the dishes he'd brought. With a tense silence their biting and chewing seemed overwhelming, each of them watching from under half lidded eyes. Conversation ran over the bumps of her day, the incorrigible stunt the delinquents had pulled at Cathy's office. Why not pose the question Elliot came to pose? Wiping his lips carefully, Elliot folded the napkin and nervously drummed his fingers on his thighs under the table.

"Did you discuss my offer?" Time ticked tautly.

Cathy busied herself; her finger drew slowly over her scar, leaning into the pressure, into the numbness of the sensation. She wished him away; she wished it all had been a depraved nightmare. With no food left to consume the mantle clock announced

the delay of her answer, her eyes told a truth beyond speech.

Rolling his mental dice, Elliot made the frank statement, "Your friend saw the murder." The moment dragged with no music or commercial to measure the time. "It's tearing you up that these insolent criminals do this over and over and your--- friend --- can't do a thing."

With a jerk of the chair she was up and in the kitchen, her plate in the sink while she scrubbed it furiously. He let her feel trapped, he figured he'd let her bounce from safe place to place. If he made her onerously angry she'd ask him to leave. He could trust that.

"This isn't going to work unless you talk to me Cathy. I can tell it stings, have you mentioned my offer to him?"

Unable to face him, to admit her answer she stood at her kitchen sink. "Yes, Elliot. Yes, I have."

"And his answer?" Elliot had to give her space.

"He's told me what he saw, it was brutal. He thought about the ramifications, he's worried that we'll be penalized and they'll go free."

"The longer he waits the more women may die. They've followed you to work, what if they show up on your doorstep?" Elliot pushed back the chair and rose, pointing to her front door although she wasn't there to see his stridency.

"He realizes that, he's not ignorant." She snapped at him

"I never said he was. From the looks of his reading material he's quite the opposite."

Cathy's eyes flew across the room to the one thing connecting her to Vincent. Her grim lips spoke silently to Elliot. "Cathy, let me stop this."

"You, you stop this?" Now she was involuntarily annoyed. "Need a cape and tights much, Elliot?" Elliot lowered his voice a register, "Evidently from the paper I wear a hood"

Cathy took three long steps and slapped Elliot's face.

"You could never be the man he is if you lived an eon!" She drew back at his shock and watched the bloom of her handprint across his face.

Hundreds of feet below them Vincent felt a taut bow ride a nerve down his back. Stunned by his suddenly feeling Catherine's extreme emotion he paused, reading the sensation. He'd been embroiled in tracking the ruffians; he'd left her night after night alone. Vincent caught his cape from the chair and whipped it around his shoulders. The flux and flow of her emotions drew him closer. The night's damp streets muffled his soft booted feet as they ate up the damp pavement.

"Cathy, I've had a good life across this city. But I've done some selfish things; I didn't check my appetite and my world turned to dust. I won't get that back by testifying."

"And you still want to chance it?"

"Yes."

All the verbal jockeying had left them worn. Her face blotchy from her tears. "Let me brew a pot of decaf, there's a legal pad in the center drawer. We'll get started."

Vincent's heart set a rapid beat as he rode the elevator cables to the building's roof. With haste he dropped to the balcony to see Catherine's apartment brightly lit. His hand grasped the knob as Elliot Burch approached the dinette table.

Vincent froze. With a soft retreat he fell into shadow and pulled his hood further forward. Dropping to a crouch he became the darkness, listening to their conversation, measuring the emotions in the small apartment.

Vincent hadn't believed Elliot would actually take his place in a court of law. Yet, on the other side of the French doors Catherine was playing the role of tough interrogator as Elliot's hand wrote furiously on the legal pad. Vincent's heart twisted that she could lob the searing questions at Elliott. She paced the living area as she fiercely examined 'the witness'. Could this all be this simple? In what reality would this charade succeed?

Elliot sat upright, steely eyed and unflinching. Catherine had remembered Vincent's tortured testimony of each emotional fact of the attack, from the sound of their voices to the color of the getaway car. With each 'practice' Elliot grew into the troubled spectator of a senseless murder. Perhaps he replayed his Father's death in a fiery explosion to channel the necessary gravitas.

Vincent watched as Catherine and Elliot focused on his testimony for hours. His jealousy waned as he appreciated the responsibilities they assumed for him. All track of time was lost in the mock trial and as the sky lightened Vincent shook to wake, he saw Elliot's head down on his folded arms muffling the man's light rhythmic snoring and Catherine stretched on the short sofa, asleep. Risking everything Vincent quietly opened the door to the bedroom and lightly tred to pull back the comforter and top sheet, releasing the blessed fragrance of her soap and perfume to arouse his senses. Fluffing her pillow he drew it to his face and her cachet stirred his sanity. Stepping silently to the living room he scooped her in his arms and gently lowered her to the sheets. "Thank-you, more than you know, my Catherine." And within a flash he drew the louvered doors shut and left the way he entered.

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Within the security of his chamber Vincent balanced a leather-bound book in his lap, he couldn't sleep, nor could he concentrate to read. He'd spent the night in silence, watching the woman he loved more than life build a confabulation with Elliot Burch. In an hour or so the Tunnels would come alive with hungry people gathering for breakfast. Work crews would gather and head toward their tasks. Wishing it would wash the night away Vincent gathered fresh clothing and a new bath sheet. He would soak for 'breakfast' and bring a piece of fruit to eat while his students gave their recitations. It would be a long day.

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Braced for the meeting, Elliot tied his best Windsor knot as he stared into the vanity mirror. He had shaved with a steady hand, grateful that he hadn't started the day with bloodletting. Elliot was sure there would be some variable of bloodletting before the day was done. He was making his way to the DA's office to give his statement in the case of the Central Park murder.

Joe leaned over Catherine's desk, "You ready for your buddy's visit, Radcliffe?"

Placidly she sat back, "Joe, you know it's not my case." Joe pursed his lips as his eyes narrowed, yet withheld any comment. With a slow shift of her paperwork she studiously returned to the case on her desk. She had recused herself from working on the case to reduce the chance of the personal lawsuits from the parents.

The buzz of the office conversations increased with the ticking minutes. A few moments before 3 pm the elevator opened and the majority of the women's heads turned to watch the approaching and passing physique of Elliot Burch. With some aplomb Cathy Chandler retained her head down posture over her work, sneaking glances under her eyelashes as she heard his light footfalls. Neither acknowledged each other during the trip in or out. The double wooden doors had stayed closed and when she saw the large hand sweep to 5:00pm she closed the folder and locked them into the file drawers. Without a second thought she gathered her purse and slid into her coat. The offices emptied into the elevators and she headed toward home.

Wrapped in her bathrobe with a mug of soup she watched the 6 O'clock news. While showering she'd given the 3 minute sound bite some stressful thought, now in the flash of reporter's cameras Elliot was their solemn witness. She blinked at how earnestly he could commit perjury for a man he'd never met. Was she grateful or fearful?

Finishing her soup, the phone interrupted her walk back from the kitchen. "Hello?"

"I looked alright, didn't I?" Elliot's breath seemed short as he began his news, "Warrants have been issued and they're to be in custody by midnight."

"Really? Joe's really moving on this." Cathy stood awkwardly, could the boy's families have tapped her phone? Perhaps it would be better to meet? "Why don't you bring some dessert and I'll brew some decaf?" and with that the night's course was set.

While she slipped into a velour track set and slippers she felt a calming wave flow over her heart. Within seconds Vincent's broad shadow appeared at her bedroom's French doors. "Vincent, have you heard the news?" her voice left her trembling lips as their arms drew each other close.

"Henry had the television on in the back room. Elliot did well. It takes a man of your world to take the courts on." Catherine felt his clawed hands combing through her hair. His breath steamed slightly in the balcony's air with a sweet, smoky crispness. Left to her own devices, she would devour this man, if Vincent would only allow it, if Elliot wasn't headed toward her in fifteen or so minutes.

Vincent felt her quake within his arms and he jerked back from her. "Catherine, excuse my brash advance." She grasped at his clothes layered forearms and shook her head to seek the truth in his eyes.

"Vincent, there's no ground for apologies – I loved your hands in my hair, or wherever they touch me." She gave him her best sly smile and then pulled him to the bench at the foot of her bed. Recalcitrantly he followed her and kneeled before her. "You saw Elliot on TV; he's on his way here right now." Catherine's hands flew to his shoulders, although their delicate touch could not have kept him before her. It was the look in her eyes that kept him entranced. "I want you to meet him; I want him to hear the passion in your words."

"This may be the thing that drives him back from testifying. What if my appearance egregiously offends him?" Vincent drew his hood up from his shoulders; his body language shrunk his grand posture.

"Vincent," his love caught his face in her hands. Delicately her thumbs brushed at the fine, soft hairs that glistened gold, "If he isn't afraid of losing everything with perjury then your mythic appearance should be of no consequence." Now she drew his leonine face toward her and embraced his shoulders. With her own loving grace she swept back the ebony hood and kissed the top of his head. She felt his breath catch as his face pressed the ivory velour of her jacket. Reflexively her knees opened in invitation to come closer. Reservations left both of them as the embraced each other with gentle whimpers admitting their

desires.

"Then, I'll steel my courage to meet Elliot." Rising from the floor Vincent's habit of pacing took him back and forth across her bedroom's doorway. "You, Catherine, have a tempting habit of enticing me to new endeavors." His furred hands were behind his slim waist, his shoulders held back broadly. Protectively Catherine stood before him and preened at his windblown hair. With silent permission she unclasped his cloak and carefully folded and placed it on the bench.

"Elliot is bringing dessert; help me brew some decaf, OK?" She stood in the dimly living room, realizing Vincent was a stranger in a strange land. Their kitchen discussion ranged from where he wanted to stand when they first met (Vincent wanted to stand behind the louvered doors to speak with Elliot first) to the subject of Catherine escorting Elliot through his subterranean world (Vincent did not want to be specific about where under NYC he lived.)

Before Vincent could address his place in her life there was a gentleman's knock on the front door. With relaxed hands over Vincent's pounding heart she whispered, "I love you," and ran for the door. Once Vincent had drawn the bedroom doors closed Catherine opened her front door. "Elliot, come in!"

"I hoped to surprise you; I found a great cheesecake with fresh strawberry topping." Elliot held up the string wrapped white box and made himself at home heading toward the kitchen.

"We'll be even then. I have what I believe is a pleasant surprise for you too." The mood in the room was unreadable to Elliot. He saw the blush across her cheeks and sadly knew he hadn't caused that.

Untying the string and opening the cheesecake he spied the three plates and mugs. "Someone joining us?" Elliot called from the kitchen jovially.

Catherine slid a chair to face the sofa, "Yes, he arrived right after you called and I wanted him to stay and meet you." These words brought Elliot out to the living room without the refreshments.

"He? Him?" His first words were animated, then he spoke the name, "Vincent?" his voice was reverent, inviting a surprising response-

Vincent's voice filled the small apartment, "Yes, Mr. Burch. Vincent, the person you called Catherine's mystery man." The profound depth of the voice from the bedroom caused the hairs on Elliot's forearm to prickle. Cold sweat beaded down his back.

Elliot eyed Catherine and the closed louvered doors, "Will you come out and join us, Vincent?"

"My appearance is quite singular, Mr. Burch. I don't want to shock you."

"Call me Elliot."

"I wanted to thank you, Elliot, for what you're doing." The resignation wore heavily in his tone.

"I'm happy to do it - - - for the both of you." Elliot's eyes peered, seeking the form behind the voice.

"I should be going, Catherine." Vincent's words sought to divorce himself from the evening although his heart wanted to cross the living room and see Elliot Burch for himself.

"Really, Vincent? Could you see staying for perhaps a cup of coffee, a slice of cheesecake?" She didn't think of how self-conscious Vincent was eating with family. The melancholy music of her voice plucked at his heartstrings. Would he deny her the normalcy of companions enjoying dessert together?

There was a short silence where Elliot and Catherine exchanged hopeful smiles and then they heard his curiosity in 2 whispered words, "Cheese cake?"

Elliot's words dripped with enticement, "With fresh strawberry topping, real whipped crème, made today." Elliot covered his emerging smile as Catherine stifled a giggle. "If you won't join us, I'll leave the lion's share for you and Catherine to share later." Elliot stood ready to return to the kitchen when Catherine dropped her chin and covered her mouth. Perhaps the man had a weight problem, Elliot guesstimated? Elliot stopped in his tracks and turned, his arms folded over his chest.

With a somewhat more jovial tone Vincent replied, "That would be most unfair for me to commandeer the balance of your dessert. If you're ready to meet I'd be honored to join you."

Catherine eased toward the doors and turned to face Elliot, sliding the doors slowly she stepped to one side. "Vincent, this is Elliot Burch."

The distance between them was no more than 12 feet, although the dawning reality of Vincent's size and features crept slowly to Elliot's unbelieving eyes. He perceived Vincent's height and mass of golden hair. Weighing their broad differences he had to know this man to see what flipped Cathy Chandler's switch.

With Vincent's first step forward into the living room the light played over the angles and planes of his sculpted face and Elliot's breathe caught. With a palm to his forehead he pursed his lips and shook his head, nervously he slipped a finger into his shirt collar and pointed a finger toward Catherine, "You stood there and let me say 'the lion's share' and you didn't blink. You smiled, but didn't blink." Elliot took steps toward the couple and clapped his hands together nervously, "I had no idea when I said that. Would you excuse my blunder?"

Elliot's hand hung in space for a beat until Vincent felt Catherine's gentle nudge. For a silent moment their eyes met before the two men shook hands. As their hands parted Catherine couldn't gauge whether the tension began or ended. The two men sat, watchful of each other, divvying up the area of the small round table leaving a small segment for their hostess. Catherine brought the round tray to let her guests choose their serving then returned with the mugs and coffee service.

Catherine and Elliot bantered points of his testimony as Vincent snuck discrete bites of the fresh strawberries. He savored this delicacy as he valued time together with Catherine, even sharing her with company. "You understand, everything we've talked about, the places I took you, Elliot, these are the secrets that keep Vincent alive." The tone of Catherine's voice had never conveyed so much truth.

As Catherine went to clear the table Elliot made a request, "Would it be possible to speak with Vincent alone?" Elliot's simple words churned the cheesecake in Vincent's stomach.

The two men exchanged looks Catherine had never seen over a dining table, each man, unreadable in his own way. She nodded and excused herself in the kitchen as she heard chairs scrape the marble floor and the louvered doors open and close. She flipped on the kitchen radio, a gift from her Father and tuned in classical music louder than usual.

Of course Vincent prepared to pace, captive in Catherine's bedroom he was captivated by her scent. He watched Elliot's ease at walking about Catherine's boudoir; Vincent shook his head at the thought of Elliot being familiar with the pastel bedroom. What did this man have to say to him? Possible questions flew at him as caressed the leather pouch containing Catherine's rose.

Elliot drew a deep breath and remained standing, facing the French doors. "I suppose it's easier to say this without looking at you." Then Elliot turned and thrust his thumbs into his belt at his hips. "I want to be the man Cathy thinks I am; so I need to face you to say this."

Vincent's world began to implode, a cavern with sand walls opened as the grit slid down into an abyss. Had Elliot come to ask Vincent to release Catherine's heart? Inwardly Vincent locked his knees and folded his arms over his broad chest, hopefully securing them from striking back.

Elliot wiped at his face and returned to his stance, "There are - - so any things I wanted to know about you from the start." Vincent's stoic façade held. "I brought her lobster at work, for lunch. I tell you I pulled out the stops for her." Elliot ran a thumb over his bottom lip. "She was unreachable." Then Elliot's pacing began. "I kept getting rebuffed. Not avoided, just stonewalled." He ran a graceful hand through his shoulder length hair, ruffling the well-kept look he had earlier. "Then she comes unglued, asking for mining tools and her response was the next time I called she'd answer." Elliot shook his head as his voice rose, "I dragged her into that situation with my Father and I've regretted that every day. But, you were there weren't you?" Now he stopped his pacing in front of Vincent, about a foot back from this unknown entity.

With a slight nod, "I was involved." Vincent admitted, still bracing for Elliot's coupe d'état.

"When I saw what Cathy went through with those boorish delinquents I knew I had to repay her for what she tried to do for me." Now the pacing began again, "I knew she loved the witness and regardless of any of his other strengths or graces he was powerless to appear. I owe you; I owe her your oath by proxy."

'And you'll risk all of who you are for me?' Vincent's chin dropped for a moment, then rose to meet Elliot's eyes.

Elliot had a penitent's zeal, "Cathy did, you did, don't you see it's the right thing for me to do?" the magnate began to move out of Vincent's personal space.

Vincent's breath began to normalize. "This is what you wanted to tell me?"

Elliot spun on his heel, and threw his hands up in frustration, "Actually I had to see you. I had to meet the man who captivated this woman who stole my heart from the first moment I saw her."

Vincent's throat constricted, his eyes darkened as they followed Elliott's movement.

"You know I heard she was on the guest list for that gallery the night we met. I had watched her come back from the slashing and I knew she had overcome so much. I thought because I was plain old Stosh and then I became Elliot Burch that we'd have sort of parallel paths." The air whined at an ultra-high frequency, each of the men's eyes narrowed at Burch's words.

"I felt you kiss her." Vincent's confession stopped Elliot in his steps. "We have an empathic bond. I felt her heart open for you and it drove a knife into me."

Elliot watched Vincent hold the leather pouch, wondering about its contents. "I had no idea, Vincent. Did you know she's never kissed me back? I should have read her better "

"She is easy to love." Vincent's throat released his appraisal softly.

"No matter what I tried to show her, you need to know this." Elliot drew open the French doors and gestured to welcome Vincent to the balcony. Leaning on the wall with one hand Elliot pointed into the New York skyline. "In sailing there is a term, the Center of Effort." His finger held still for a moment as Vincent joined him. "Vincent, that is defined as the single point on a sail where all the forces of the wind come together to drive a yacht forward, which with a little effort easily interpolates to your own definition." Elliot stepped away from Vincent and turned, bringing his pointing finger toward Vincent's heart, and then



his hand flattened to rest over the leather pouch. “You, sir, are her sweet spot; you are her center of buoyancy, her center of affection.”

Hearing Elliot’s words his heart soared. Vincent’s smile widened to reveal the menacing fangs he’d always hidden. At this moment he felt parity with this man, all of Shakespeare’s sonnets were left wanting for this moment.

“If Burch Industries, or I can do anything for you or your family do not hesitate to contact me that is, of course, if they don’t crack me and throw me into Attica.” As the night had progressed Elliot had perspired and acquired a wrinkled look. He pivoted to return to the bedroom and caught his reflection and pulled himself together and turned to Vincent extending his hand, “Friend?”

Vincent saw the man’s manicured hands and regarded his own work-calloused and furred hand. Pressing his hand into Elliot’s he shook confidently. Elliot’s other hand covered Vincent’s and they stood in silent understanding for a beat.

Without further words the men each pressed open a door and realized Catherine had sought seclusion in the kitchen.

“Cathy, I’m going – I wanted to thank you for your hospitality.” Elliot called over Rhapsody in Blue from the radio. It suddenly went silent and a perplexed Cathy entered the living room.

“Well you brought dessert! Thanks, Elliot” she saw his extended arms and cleverly evaded them to shake his hand. He understood perfectly and made a graceful good-bye.

Closing the door and chaining it, Catherine turned and leaned against her front door. “Well, did you see any of that coming?” She shook her head and strolled toward Vincent, now at the French doors. “You weren’t heading home yet. Were you?” She stopped at the love seat, hoping he’d join her.

There was the man she loved above all other men, she hung waiting for his words. “It’s late; I thought perhaps you needed your sleep. It’s Thursday and I was going to invite you down for the weekend.” Feeling her magnetism, his soft booted foot dropped one step, then another step toward her. His arms extended and she collided with him falling onto the furniture with mutual sighs.

“I love you, Catherine.” There he’d said it out loud, with her balanced on his knee, “These pains I felt throughout your relationship with Elliot, they were messages to me. Meeting him, tonight, I listened to the messages.” Her arms wrapped around his broad shoulders, her face buried under a wealth of red gold hair. Now it was a comfort to hold her, to feel her strumming heart so close to his thundering heartbeat.

“What were they telling you, Vincent?” She smiled secretly at the sight of his ear and the chords of his vulnerable neck, her words washed him with her warmth.

Deceptively gentle clawed fingers combed through her hair to meet her gaze, “To love you.” The pad of his thumb traveled to the sensitive hollow just above the back of Catherine’s neck, visualizing them as lovers.

“Vincent, I know you love me.” Her delicate finger traced his jaw.

Their eyes met in understanding. “Oh, love me. You mean *love me*. Yes.... I would enjoy deciphering that message together.”



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