

The Gift

by Sandra Orr

As the bullets sped around her, Diana cursed under her breath. She had realised, shortly after the fireworks began, that for some reason her attackers were more interested in keeping her pinned down than killing her outright; a consideration which had not been extended to her back-up, who lay dead in front of the metal table she had tipped on its side, upgrading its function to that of a shield.

Diana checked her bullets - one left. Chewing her lip she considered; if the individual she suspected was behind this ambush, then perhaps she would best put the bullet through her own head. The thought was dismissed as quickly as it came.

Suddenly, there was a clatter of feet as her pitiful shield was rushed. Her last shot went wild as three men jumped her and she was buried beneath a mound of flesh and coarse cloth.

"Now, now gentlemen, that's hardly polite. Help the lady up." The voice sent an involuntary shudder through Diana.

Freddy!

The bodies clambered off; hands grabbed and unceremoniously hauled her to her feet, roughly pushing her to face her captor. Hoping her face betrayed none of her internal turmoil, Diana identified the man she faced.

"Freddy Krugerman, or should I say Kruger? I hear you've taken a fancy to it."

Putting out a well-manicured hand, Freddy grasped Diana's chin in a hard, painful grip. "Long time no see, Diana. How's policing?"

"Fine." Her answer was curt. Briefly, she wondered how she could ever have believed herself in love with this man. Shrugging mentally, she thought, *College makes for strange bedfellows.*

Shaking her captured head slightly, Freddy continued, as if she had not spoken. "I told you when you chose the police force over me, you would regret it. It was a big mistake to take on this case." He paused, considering, "Notwithstanding the fact you were getting too close, I have a long memory ... women don't leave me. I leave them."

Releasing her chin, Freddy tapped Diana's cheek hard enough to sting. "Now, you're going to tell us everything the police have gathered as evidence and don't expect any help. As you probably noticed, what people there are in this area are great followers of the 'don't get involved' rule." Tapping her cheek once again, Freddy stepped back and motioned to his men, "Persuade her, gentlemen."

* * *

Vincent sat reading, preparing the next day's lessons. Suddenly there was a sense of ... What? Raising his head, Vincent looked around his room ... Nothing, no one. Yet ... Shaking his head, Vincent returned to the books in front of him. Again, the feeling was there, this time stronger, with an added sense of urgency. He felt almost as if something were pulling at him, trying to get him to go somewhere. Closing his eyes, Vincent opened his mind to the presence. His eyes opened wide. It felt like ... *No! It can't be!*

With his denial, the feeling of urgency became stronger. Sighing deeply, Vincent decided he would follow the feeling; he was too tense to concentrate anyway.

Walking through the myriad of tunnels following the presence, Vincent his own concern grow, as suspicion of where this route would lead began to form. Diana had told him she would be investigating a death in one of the East End's more disreputable and dangerous areas. The presence urged him to greater speed and Vincent readily complied, his concern for Diana's well-being now uppermost in his mind.

* * *

Diana's body slumped, held upright by two of her interrogators, whose methods of questioning had rendered her barely conscious. Freddy leaned forward and once again grasped her chin in a hard grip. Although they had not damaged her face on Freddy's order, Diana was so numb from the beating they had given her, she did not feel the painful hold.

Looking carefully at her, Freddy assessed how much further damage they could inflict before she surrendered to death's cold embrace. Satisfied, he stepped back and raised the table to a standing position. His attention on the show before him, Freddy did not notice the dark movement outside the room's window.

"Okay boys, she's alive enough for you to have a little fun." He made a sweeping gesture towards the table. "She's all yours."

Suddenly, the room was filled with the sound of crashing wood and glass and the wild roaring of an angry lion. Freddy never saw what hit him as Vincent's blow sent him flying into the door frame, crushing his skull. His henchmen only had time to drop their burden, before they were claimed by a snarling death.

Chest heaving, Vincent paused, his anger cooling as he surveyed the carnage around him. Spotting Diana's crumpled form he rushed to her side, gently turning her towards him. Tears filled his eyes as he felt her pain. Her breathing rattled, indicating at least one punctured lung ... he couldn't move her.

Looking around, Vincent spotted a blanket in a corner of the room and quickly retrieved it, covering Diana. Brushing her forehead, he murmured, "Hold on, Diana. I'll be right back."

Running out to the street, Vincent quickly found the police car Diana and her fellow officer had come in. It was locked. Not wasting any time, Vincent smashed the window, quickly unlocked the door and leaned in. Reaching for the radio, he gave silent thanks to Mouse's 'taking' of a police radio several years ago. He hoped he remembered how to use it. Pushing a button, Vincent was relieved to hear the dispatcher on the other end. Reporting that two officers were down, one dead, the other nearly, Vincent gave the location then returned quickly to Diana's side. Her face was grey and she trembled with shock. Vincent spoke soothingly, trying to give comfort.

After what seemed like hours, he heard distant sirens. Bending closer to Diana, he murmured, "Help is on the way. I must go soon. I'm sorry."

Diana's eyes opened, she tried to speak. At first nothing, then, "Vincent, I don't think ... I love you." Closing her eyes, she sighed deeply and stopped breathing. Alarmed, Vincent felt for her pulse; finding none, his tears fell as he pulled the blanket over her head.

Realising the rescue squad was almost at its destination, Vincent sorrowfully turned towards the window. A sound from behind returned him quickly to Diana's side. Pulling back the blanket, Vincent moved to check her pulse once more, but a step outside the door sent him running out the window and into the night.

* * *

Father quietly approached to where Vincent sat, cuddling two year old Jacob. The toddler had been having trouble sleeping ever since the night his father had gone to Diana's aid.

Clearing his throat to gain Vincent's attention, Father reported. "Peter's sent word ... she's still critical, but believed to be out of danger."

"Thank goodness." The relief in Vincent's voice was clear. "Is she allowed visitors yet?"

Father raised his eyebrows. "Vincent!" He kept his verbal explosion quiet for the sleeping child's sake. "Surely you're not considering ..."

"No, Father ... Calm yourself." Vincent smiled at him. "The hospital is a modern one ... no windows open. No, I was thinking a few of the others, perhaps Jamie, Sarah or even Mouse, could visit her."

"Hmmm, not a bad idea. Perhaps I'll even venture Above, to carry both our hopes for her speedy recovery."

"Thank you, Father." Vincent looked down, shifting his hold on his son.

"How is he ... sleeping any better?"

"Only when I hold him." Vincent paused. "Father, I ..." Father looked questioningly at his son. "We haven't discussed how I came to find Diana ..." He paused again.

"No, we didn't. I just assumed you had arranged to meet her and when she was late ..." Father stopped as Vincent shook his head.

"No, no that's not why ..." Pausing, Vincent took a deep breath, trying to find the words to explain, without sounding as if he had taken leave of his senses. Finally, "I was preparing for the next day's classes when I felt ... I'm not sure what, a presence ... sense of ... I don't know. I almost thought it was Catherine calling to me." At Father's start, Vincent smiled, understanding and apology in his eyes. "It definitely had a feel of Catherine. It was pulling at me ... wouldn't leave me alone, so I decided to see where it would have me go. As I followed, it soon became apparent that it was leading me to an exit near where Diana had said was the scene of her latest case. The rest you know."

"Hmmm, yes. Have you ... have you sensed this presence since?"

Shaking his head, Vincent sighed, tears coming to his eyes. Lowering his head he continued, his voice soft. "No. Before I always had a sense of her, a feeling she was near, especially those times when the loss of her threatened to overwhelm me ... but since that night, nothing ... nothing except Jacob's dreams."

Father started. "Jacob's dreams?"

"Yes." Vincent carefully lifted a hand and wiped at his tears. "Jacob dreams of his mother. She is in pain, but promises when the pain is gone, she will come back." Shaking his head as he tucked his arm around his son once more, Vincent sighed. "If only ..."

"Vincent," Father's voice was hesitant. "How can you know?"

"When we are both asleep, I share his dreams sometimes ... This particular one has occurred several times and I believe this to be the dream that so disturbs Jacob's rest. In fact, Father, I am not sure who is truly dreaming, Jacob or I. He seems to sleep soundly enough when I am awake."

Father snorted. "Sounds like something from Narcissa's realm of reality."

"Perhaps. In either case it is time someone checked on her. If the dreams continue, I'll see her in a few days."

"Very well. Now I had best go and finish preparing my lessons for tomorrow." Bending to kiss Vincent's forehead, Father lightly brushed Jacob's head and left the chamber.

Smiling slightly, Vincent watched as the children left his chamber, hurrying to their rooms to clean up for lunch. A larger form, paused just outside the entrance, then continued forward. Vincent rose to greet Father as he entered, leaning heavily on the smooth, curved handle of the cane that was part of his 'up-top' dress.

Moving to prepare tea, Vincent asked over his shoulder as Father took a chair, "How did your visit to the hospital go?"

"Harrowing!"

Moving to stand in front of his father, Vincent, eyes filled with concern, asked, "How so? Is anything ..."

Reaching out and grasping his son's hand, Father shook his head. "No, Diana's fine ... She's off the critical list, but is still terribly weak. The pain killers made it difficult for her to stay awake long enough to even greet us. No, the difficulty was ..." Pausing, Father shook his head again. "Joe Maxwell came in, just as we were leaving. He recognised me, started to question me ... fortunately he was called away to the phone and I was able to make good my escape."

Pausing once again, Father looked up at Vincent. "I'm sorry, Vincent, but it's too dangerous for us to continue to visit Diana. Mr Maxwell recognised even Jamie as being someone connected to Catherine."

At Vincent's start, Father squeezed his hand slightly. "He must have seen those pictures you told me Diana had taken of those attending Catherine's funeral. I was able to tell her we would be unable to make further visits." Father suddenly chuckled and at Vincent's look of curiosity, explained. "I think, in spite of the medication, she understood what I was saying and why. She gave a very definite 'Damn!', before she fell asleep." Releasing his son's hand, Father settled back into the chair and Vincent went to prepare the tea.

Returning bearing two mugs, Vincent sat with his father and for a few minutes the two enjoyed a companionable silence as they drank their tea. Placing his cup down, Vincent leaned forward and asked, "Father, are you certain Diana said 'damn'?" his voice perturbed.

"Yes, Vincent. The rest of her speech was pretty slurred from the drugs, but that word was quite clear. Why?"

Leaning back, Vincent sighed. "It's probably nothing, but ... In the two years that I have known her, I have never heard Diana swear." Seeing his father's eyebrows raised in silent query, Vincent continued. "When she is annoyed or angry, Diana simply clenches her jaw and compresses her lips, as if she wants to swear, but refuses to do so." Leaning his head back to rest on the chair, Vincent closed his eyes. "Catherine's favourite word when she was upset was 'damn'." Tears escaped his closed eyelids and Father reached over to clasp his hand, offering what comfort he could.

Joe Maxwell was startled when Diana's sister ran from her room in tears. Shaking her head, she ran past him, quickly disappearing. Concerned, Joe hurried into Diana's room. She lay quiescent, looking exhausted.

Turning her head at the sound of footsteps, Diana greeted him with a quiet, "Hi, Joe.

Joe had to smile. It was the first time she had managed to say something without sounding drunk. Remembering the scene he had just witnessed however, quickly brought his concern to the fore.

"Diana, what happened? I just saw ..."

"I know, Joe. It's an arduous state. One I'm not even sure I would believe ... except that I'm experiencing it." Sighing deeply, Diana continued trying to talk over the yawn that refused to be stifled. "I'm sorry, Joe ... I'm too tired to talk right now ..."

"Okay, okay ... glad to know you're up to talking, even if it's only for a short time." Moving to the door, Joe turned back to look at a sleeping Diana. Something was wrong, something he couldn't quite put his finger on. Shaking his head he left the room.

It wasn't until he was back in the office that it hit him. Diana's speech pattern was different ... and somewhere she had lost her New York accent. In fact she had almost sounded like ... Nah, he thought. Get real, Maxwell. You just imagined it. Shaking his head, Joe turned to the mound of messages that had piled up while he had been out.

* * *

"Diana!"

Father started awake as he heard Vincent's anguished roar-cry. Scrambling up from his bed, he grabbed his robe and slippers and hastily moved to Vincent's chamber. On entering, he found Vincent sitting up, tears flowing down his cheeks.

"Diana." The name was a whisper on Vincent's lips.

"Vincent, what is it? A nightmare?" Father's questions tumbled out as he approached his son's bed.

Turning to look at his father, Vincent wiped away the tears, shaking his head. "I don't know ... I ..." Sighing he fell back against his pillow, attempting a small smile for his father's sake. "Thank goodness I agreed to Jacob's sleeping in the nursery this week, or I would be disturbing his sleep as well."

Sitting on the edge of Vincent's bed, Father asked, "Do you want to talk about it?"

"I don't know ... Yes, I think I do." Pausing, Vincent closed his eyes as he organised his thoughts, attempting to remember the dream's sequence. Then, opening his eyes he leaned forward and wrapping his arms around his bent knees, he described his dream.

"I was standing in front of a very bright light. How I got there and how long I had been waiting, I don't know. A form came out of the light and I saw it was Diana. She came to me and smiled ... She seemed very happy and shy at the same time. She started to speak to me, thanking me for trying to save her life; that she meant what she said about loving me, but the link which was being forged between us was not strong enough to give her the strength to stay. She also asked me to thank Catherine for bringing me to her aid and not to blame her for what has occurred ... it could not have happened without her full blessing."

Vincent paused, shaking his head before he continued. "Then she reached up and kissed me, saying Catherine's love made it impossible for her to leave Jacob and I - and that her love was just strong enough to leave me to the one I was bound to. She smiled at me and told me to remember what had occurred could in no way be blamed on Catherine. That only the knowledge I would lose both of them convinced her to accept the gift Diana offered. Then she turned and walked into the light."

His story told, Vincent fell back once again into his pillows.

"You have no idea at all what she was talking about?"

"No, Father." Tears began to flow once again. "Except that it sounded ... felt as if Diana was saying good-bye. That I would never see her again." Wiping away his tears, confused blue eyes looked into concerned grey. "What do these dreams mean, Father? Diana's all right isn't she? There has been nothing else since Peter's last report?"

"No. His note stated she would be released next week if she continues to progress as she has. He promised to notify us of any changes." Father paused, smiling briefly. "He was scheduled to play another golf game with her doctor yesterday. I'm certain if there was a change, he would have sent word,"

Sighing, Father reached over and clasped his son's hand. "I wish I could help you more, Vincent, but ..."

Vincent smiled at his father and sitting up, reached over to pull him into a hug. "You have, Father. Just by listening you have helped." Pulling back and settling once again on his pillows, Vincent spoke, his voice contemplative.

"I think I had better make that much delayed visit to Narcissa. Would you mind looking after Jacob tomorrow?"

Father tried to look insulted. "Vincent, you hurt me to the quick. To even think I might not want to look after my very own rambunctious two year old grandson! What a thought!" Father paused as Vincent chuckled at his sally, then, "You know I would dearly love to look after him." Getting up from the bed, Father looked down on his son, stifling a yawn.

"Sleep well, Vincent. I'll have William put together some food stuffs for your journey first thing tomorrow."

"Thank you, Father ... Good night and, sweet dreams."

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Vincent found Narcissa in her chambers, muttering over her bowls as she mixed a number of concoctions.

"Vincent." Her cheery greeting, as always, caught him by surprise. He wondered, not for the first time, how she knew, when she did not see him and the winds outside her chambers covered any sound he might make.

"What brings you here, child? You should be at home rejoicing as the spirits of the light do, for the wondrous thing that has occurred."

"What wondrous thing, Narcissa? What makes the spirits and yourself, rejoice so?"

"Listen to your dreams, child ... Do not seek the living amongst the dead, nor the dead amongst the living. Come, sit and have tea with me."

Vincent sighed, resisting the impulse to demand she speak more dearly. It would be a futile request, Narcissa would tell him no more. Sitting, he pondered what she had told him as she moved about making the tea.

Later, as he was about to leave, Narcissa put her hands on his chest and told him, "Remember child, it is as the bright one told you. Do not blame Cath'rine. Had she not taken the gift offered, both would have been lost to you. Now go, your son exhausts his gran'father." Patting his shoulder, Narcissa chuckled as she turned once again to her bowls.

Shaking his head, Vincent left, returning to report to Father that Narcissa was well and her answers, in the tradition of all oracles and seers, were spoken in riddles.

* * *

Joe paced the width of his office, nervously pulling at the elastic band in his hand, as he awaited Dr Alcott's arrival. He was having some serious doubts regarding what he was about to request of the good doctor. *But, I've got to know for sure ... I know it's not just my imagination. She only looks like Diana, but inside she's ...*

A knock on his door had Joe opening it to greet Peter Alcott.

"Come in, Dr Alcott. I'm sorry I had to disturb ..."

"Nonsense, Mr Maxwell, I'm glad to help in any way I can. Although I'm not certain ..."

Motioning for Peter to sit, Joe moved to rest against the corner of his desk, facing him. "I know and I'm not sure just how to explain this." Pausing, Joe took a deep breath, then plunged in. "Do you know one of our police officers, a Diana Bennett?"

"No. I know of her, the story of her beating was in the papers and one of my golf partners is her doctor, but I've never met her personally." Peter's puzzlement at the question was evident in both his voice and expression. He knew a lot more about Diana than what the papers had told, but he truly had never met the woman and, at the moment, was glad he had not done so. He never did like lying outright.

Joe eyed the Doctor, uncertain of how to continue, then: "Would you come to the hospital with me today to meet her?"

"I'm not ..." Peter was thoroughly confused by both the question and Joe's apparent unease.

"Doctor, I'm ... Diana will be released tomorrow, but the woman leaving that hospital is not the officer I've worked with over the past two years."

"Well surely not ... after such a traumatic experience, but wouldn't a psychia - "

Joe jumped in. "You don't understand. I know all about trauma, but I've never heard where trauma changed a person's speech pattern, even their accent and body language, particularly to that of someone you never knew personally." Joe paused. "I'm telling you, doctor, she's not Diana any more. I'd swear she is ..." Shaking his head, Joe looked at Peter. "No, I want you to meet her. Her reaction to you will at least tell me whether it's my imagination or not. Will you come?"

His curiosity in full swing, Peter responded. "Yes, of course. When do you want to leave?"

"How about right now?" Joe asked, as he pushed away from his desk.

"That will be fine." Rising, Peter joined Joe and they left for the hospital.

Upon arrival, the two men were surprised to learn that Ms Bennett had checked herself out of the hospital about an hour earlier. On confirming their identities, the nurse stated Ms Bennett had left two letters, one for each of them.

At her statement, a surprised Peter queried Joe, "Did Ms Bennett know you were bringing me to see her?"

"No, at least ... I almost said your name when I mentioned dropping by with someone else. I thought I caught myself, but ..."

Looking down at the envelope in his hand, Peter frowned ... The handwriting was familiar, although he could not remember when he had last seen it. "Well, I suppose we had best see what she has written."

Nodding, Joe followed him to the waiting area. As they walked both men tore open their letters and began to read. The two came to a sudden stop and looked at each other, shock apparent on their faces. They now recognised the writing ... and the signature. Feeling shaky, both took seats and sat staring.

* * *

The person responsible for their state of mind had taken a taxi to Central Park. She was certain the tunnel pathways had been changed since her last visit, so she would need a guide. The pleasant weather made it a surety she would find some of the tunnel children playing in the park.

Walking over the familiar ground, she spotted Eric and Kipper. How they had grown! Moving towards them, she was spotted by Eric, who yelled out his greeting and ran to meet her. Greetings were exchanged and she told them she intended to visit Vincent. Both boys offered to escort her and the

three of them made their way to Father's study.

On entering, they discovered the chamber to be empty and after ensuring their guest would amuse herself reading until either Vincent or Father came, the boys went off to other ventures.

After wandering around the room, basking in warm memories, she moved onto Vincent's chamber, where she repeated her wanderings. Spotting *Great Expectations* on the book shelf in back of Vincent's bed, she clambered over to pull it from the shelf; then, rearranging pillows, settled back and began to read, keeping an ear peeled for familiar footsteps.

Six chapters later, she heard what she had been listening for, Vincent's footsteps. No matter how long they were apart, she would always know his step. Shifting slightly, she turned to face the chamber entrance as Vincent entered, carrying a young child.

"Diana!" Vincent's surprise was evident. "How are you? I thought ..." Sensing a 'difference' in his unexpected guest, he stopped, suddenly feeling shy. He was startled by his visitor's delighted and very different laugh ... *What?*

"Hello, Vincent. I'm fine, although I must admit to experiencing an extraordinary adventure." As she spoke, Vincent was aware of ... her laugh, her speech ... It's not Diana, it's ... Jacob's sudden demand to be put down, distracted him. Moving further into his chamber, he placed his son on the floor and was surprised when he ran directly to Diana, calling out, "Momma, Momma, you came back like you promised!"

Moving towards his guest, who was enthusiastically cuddling his son, Vincent apologised, "I'm sorry, Diana, he has been having dreams and ..."

Vincent stopped as she raised joy filled, tearful eyes. "Oh, Vincent, don't you know?"

Reaching out to touch him, Vincent was shocked when she grasped his hand and the bond was re-established with ...

"Catherine!" Afraid to believe, Vincent squeezed her hand slightly, closing his eyes, letting his mind feel more clearly what he felt. Opening his eyes he stared, disbelief warring with the hope that this was truth, that somehow Catherine was returned to him.

Looking down at her, Vincent silently questioned. A whispered, "Yes, it is me," had him clasping both the woman and his son close and they both cried in their joy, while a puzzled Jacob patted their heads.

Later, when they were more composed, Catherine sat wrapped in Vincent's warm embrace, holding her son in one arm, while her other hand was held, fingers entwined, in Vincent's firm clasp. Looking at his quiescent, contented son, he shook his head.

"If I had any doubts, Jacob's quiet acceptance would quell them." Pausing, Vincent sighed before continuing. "Narcissa was right. My dreams and Jacob's, spoke true." At Catherine's puzzled gaze, he continued. "From the night Diana was assaulted, I shared Jacob's dream of you telling him you would be home soon, and about two weeks ago I had a dream of Diana telling me not to blame you for accepting the gift offered. Now I understand what she meant. She would have died no matter what, but she offered your spirit the chance to live again, in her body. She told me if you had not accepted the gift, I would have lost you both."

Pausing again, Vincent looked into her eyes. "Do you remember anything of your spiritual existence?"

Shaking her head, Catherine responded, smiling tremulously as tears threatened to fall again. "No ... All I remember is dying in your arms and then waking up in the hospital, hurting all over. I was puzzled by the staff calling me Ms Bennett. The only thing I could think of, when I could think through the painkillers, was that I had not died, but had been unconscious only and possibly in the witness protection program under an assumed name. It was only when I saw my hair that I realised it might possibly be something else."

At Vincent's puzzled look, she explained. "Hair colour can be changed easily enough, but not texture." Pausing, shaking her head, she squeezed Vincent's hand before continuing. "When I finally saw my face ... well, it was quite a shock, but ..." Smiling up at Vincent, Catherine continued, "It brought back the memory of a dream I had. I thought it had been an hallucination caused by the drugs, but when I saw my face, I began to believe it was more."

Catherine sighed and snuggled deeper into Vincent's embrace, before continuing. "Diana came to me as well, sometime after I had seen 'my' hair and before I saw my face. She thanked me for bringing you to her rescue, that I was not to blame for her death and although she loved you, there was no bond between the two of you to help keep her spirit from moving on. She told me when she had lifted from her body, her spirit had seen mine, crying at her side and on brief consideration, she had pushed my spirit into her body, insisting I stay, to be with you and our child. It was the only way you would not lose us both. That if I could bear the physical pain for the time it took her body to heal, the reward would be happiness for all."

Pausing, Catherine sniffed, raising her eyes to his. "She gave us so much." Shaking her head slightly, "Anyway, I had plenty of time to accustom myself to my new body. There's nothing like confinement in a hospital to give one time to think. I decided to accept the situation and take advantage of my second chance and come back to where I belonged." Pausing once again, she shifted her hand, turning it to clasp and raise Vincent's to her lips, kissing the open palm. "With you."

"Catherine, I ..." Vincent moved to gather her closer. "I can't lose you again. It took losing you two years ago to make me realise what a fool I was where you were concerned." Leaning back slightly, his voice took on a slightly derisive tone. "Although it took Gabriel's machinations, during my attempts to recover our son, to help me understand and gain control over my 'beast'. I no longer fear harming you."

"Good."

Snuggling closer to Vincent, her movement disturbed their son, who told his mother he wanted down, "Now!"

Laughing, Catherine released him and he walked over to a small stack of books placed at Justice's feet. Picking up one, he carried it over to the bed and, climbing up settled on his stomach to read.

Chuckling, Vincent turned to Catherine stating, "I just realised, you haven't been formally introduced to your son yet." As she nodded, Vincent reached over to touch Jacob's shoulder. "Jacob, introduce yourself to your mother."

Puzzled at this strange adult request, but willing, Jacob responded, enunciating clearly, "Jacob Charles Chandler-Wells." He then returned to concentrate on the book before him.

Catherine's delighted laughter echoed around the chamber. Leaning over, she kissed Jacob. "Such a mouthful and you said it so well."

Vincent chuckled. "He is talking well for his age. Father claims he is as precocious as I was."

Snuggling back into Vincent's arms, Catherine lifted her face and answering the unspoken request, Vincent kissed her. They were interrupted by the sound of hurrying feet, coming to a sudden stop at the entrance to the chamber. Looking over, they saw Father and Peter standing, surprise holding them frozen.

Diana/Catherine smiled widely and her cheerful, "Hello, Father, Peter," had them both gaping at her.

Vincent, glancing first at the woman he held in his arms, then over to the two men, stated quietly, happily, "Father ... Peter ... Catherine has come home!"

END