

The Cradle of the Night

by Toni Lichtenstein Bogolub

Chapter 1

He'd always known it would end like this; lying broken on the cold ground, his life leaking away into the darkness. It was only a matter of time. The cold had invaded his body, driving out the pain, so all that bothered him was the loneliness. But that was something he knew too; all his life, the secrecy, the aloneness. Nearby there was a rustle of clothing, footsteps, and soft voices in conversation. He was too weak to even call out.

The footsteps grew louder and louder; he heard branches rattle as they were casually pushed aside. At the edge of his vision he saw the hem of a long cotton dress and handmade brown leather boots, coming closer as he watched. Unable to turn his head, he could not see their owner, nor why she hadn't spotted him.

The boots approached; the toe of one caught on his own boot, and a startled cry ended with a thump.

"You all right, Honey?" someone called.

"Yes, of c—" Her voice broke off as she saw what she'd tripped over. "Rebecca, Samantha - get Vincent!"

"What is it?"

"Just get him - now, please!"

He heard hurrying footsteps retreat, then the boots came back into his field of vision. Their owner dropped to her knees, swore quietly, then sat on the ground, heedless of the cold and dirt.

Gently, she raised his head and rested it against her thigh. A rush of gratitude washed over him. At least he wasn't alone. He knew the sight he presented: bloody, all in black, a mask hiding his eyes. But she didn't even seem to notice.

"Don't worry; help is coming." She unclasped the cloak she wore, and tucked it over him.

"My name is Honey," she went on. "Sorry I tripped over you."

She wore gloves with the fingers cut off, he noticed, as she smoothed the tangled hair back from his face. Her fingers were cold against his skin, but the touch brought him comfort.

He tried to tell her his name, but his mouth wouldn't obey him. She leaned over to look at him, and he saw her for the first time.

Her face was round, and she wore glasses. Her hair was a mop of vaguely blonde curls that frizzled all over her head. The blue eyes behind her glasses were slightly unfocused, and looked dreamy.

"Hush; don't try to talk." She read the effort in his face. "Help is coming."

It didn't really matter to him any more. If this was the end, at least he wasn't alone.

She looked down at him, then slid her fingers under the edge of his black mask and slipped it from his face. She looked at him, memorizing the features before her. She suddenly realized she had lapsed into silence again.

"Well, I guess I should go on talking. That's always what they do in books," she said, half to herself. She paused, then murmured, "I suppose this isn't the time to discuss world politics." The flash of

humor reached him in a way nothing else had; for the first time, he considered that he might live.

“How about Tennyson?” She closed her eyes for a moment, arraying the words before her. As if reading from an invisible page, she began,

“It little profits that an idle king,

By this still hearth, among these barren crags,

Matched by an aged wife, I meet and dole

Unequal laws unto a savage race...”

The stanzas of “Ulysses” flowed over him. It seemed an odd choice; but it fit him, fit his life. Then running footsteps caught her attention.

“Vincent!” She didn’t raise her voice, but spoke in a normal tone. She knew he would hear.

A great black cloak swirled into view; the woman called Honey said urgently, “He’s badly hurt, Vincent. We must get him to Father.”

He had the impression of a huge caped form looming over him. It made him feel comfortable. Things were starting to go gray before him; the last thing he saw, as his vision failed, were the two faces leaning over him - one Honey’s, one that seemed to belong to a lion.

Chapter II

Oddly enough, what next roused him was the sound of breaking glass. There was a sense of familiarity to the voices, as though he’d been hearing them for some time — but he couldn’t put a name to either one. He knew somehow that he was underground; that was familiar too.

“Sorry, Father.” That was a woman’s voice, full of chagrin.

“It’s all right, Honey.” That was a man — English, probably older. “We can replace a glass. Just be careful; don’t—” His warning was cut off by a cry of “Ouch!” from the woman he’d called Honey. “—cut yourself,” he finished drily. Honey was a name, not an endearment; that much he could remember.

The woman’s voice was coming from the floor. Logical; she would be cleaning up the broken glass.

He heard an awkward step then; uneven, with a note of wood tapping on stone. The man used a cane, and he was coming around toward the side Honey’s voice came from. He spoke again; his tone was of loving but exasperated tolerance.

“Honey, you cannot clean up broken glass while reading a book.”

“But Father, it’s so fascinating, and Gould is such a wonderful writer!” Honey’s words were tumbling over each other, like floodwaters spilling over a dam. He heard paper rustle; someone was handling a book. “Have you ever heard of his theory of punctuated equilibrium? It says that evolution isn’t a continuous process, but takes place in isolated populations over relatively short periods—”

The man’s voice interrupted, gentle but firm, “Finish cleaning up the glass first, then tell me.”

“Yes, Father.” There was that chagrin again. He heard only clinking glass-on-glass for a moment. He decided to try to open his eyes then.

A stone ceiling was the first thing he saw. This was definitely a cave. His gaze traveled down the walls, and encountered the owner of the man’s voice. An older man, as he’d suspected; brown beard

and hair shot with gray, dressed in a style that looked more medieval than current. The man's gaze was fixed on the floor, next to his bed.

He tried to turn his head; it seemed like an impossible task. He must have made some small noise, for the other man's gaze flew over to him.

"Ah, with us at last!" The bearded man came to the bedside, and, in the manner of physicians everywhere, took his pulse.

From beside the bed a mop of frizzled blonde hair appeared, beneath which was a face he knew he'd seen before; but he wasn't sure where. The woman - she had to be in her early twenties, he estimated - stood a pace back from the bed and waited as the man she'd called Father finished his doctor's routine.

"How are you feeling, young man?" Father asked.

"Alive." It was a faint whisper, but he was pleased to be able to speak at all.

"You're a very lucky man. If you weren't in such superb physical condition, you wouldn't be here today." There was no reply from the man on the bed. Father continued, "Is your name Gray? You were barely conscious when we asked; I believe that's what you said."

For a second, something like panic moved through the deep brown eyes. Then it was damped, as though it had never been. In the same fading whisper, he forced out, "Don't— remember. Sounds familiar."

"Don't worry about a loss of memory." Father's voice held the bedside reassurance of the caring physician. "It will come back to you. Your body has survived a great insult; give it time, time to heal."

"Thirsty," Gray whispered.

"Honey, could you get a clean glass?" Gray remembered the tinkling crash and the conversation he had overheard.

"Yes, Father." He noted that her face flamed red as she went to replace the item she had broken.

She returned quickly with the glass full of water, and handed it to Father. In the process, she spilled easily a quarter of it on the older man, who merely sighed, blotted a few of the wetter spots, and then skillfully raised Gray and helped him drink. The effort involved exhausted him, restating the seriousness of his wounds.

Father resettled the younger man on the bed. "What you need to do now is rest. With time, you will regain your strength, and your memory. I am certain of it."

He started to leave, then turned back to the young woman. "I'll send Mary round right away, Honey."

"Yes, Father." Her voice was quiet, a resigned defeat and pain striking something within Gray strongly.

Father obviously heard the same tone. He went to the plump little blonde, and put his hands on her shoulders. "Oh, Honey." He gave her a hug, then said, "You saved his life. If you hadn't found him, he would have died."

"I tripped over him, Father. Not exactly heroics." She was blushing again, but there was such weary defeat in her tone. Gray wished he could reassure her somehow; for what he wasn't sure.

Father leaned down and retrieved a battered paperback volume, which had its front cover torn off. He put it into Honey's hand. "Why don't you read to Gray, Honey?"

She accepted the book, her fingers automatically caressing the paper. The gesture endeared her to Gray even further; she so obviously loved the written word. She looked quizzically at the man in the bed.

“There’s one in here I think you’ll like. It’s not exactly bedside reading, but here goes...”

She opened it, checked the index, turned to the proper page, and began, “ ‘Phyletic Size Decrease in Hershey Bars. The solace of my youth was a miserable concoction of something sweet and gooey, liberally studded with peanuts and surrounded by chocolate— real chocolate, at least. It was called “Whizz” and it cost a nickel.’ ”

Gray let his eyes fall shut. If he’d been strong enough, he would have laughed out loud as she read to him about “Cope’s law of phyletic size decrease” as it applied to the evolution and future of the Hershey bar. The delight in her voice, the rich enjoyment of the gentle satire on both marketing and statistics, soothed him. He suddenly felt warm and cozy, in a way he’d almost forgotten he could feel; at home and happy. Somewhere in the forest of “statistical evidence” she read with such enjoyment, he slipped into sleep.

Chapter III

Father had been right. With rest, his strength returned, but not, at first, his memory. He met Vincent, heard his story, met Vincent’s Catherine on one of her many visits Below. He talked to Mary, Father, anyone who was willing to spend some time with him. The Council had given him the right to stay, and he joined the community gratefully, aware on some level that he had never been a full member of a society before.

Honey came to read to him every day as he recovered. They began to talk, and when he started to be mobile, she walked with him for as long as he could manage. Something inside him, some small voice whipped him into working out his body as soon as he could sit up.

By the time Gray had been Below for six months, with the ease of long practice, he had worked into an hour-long program, one that had others of the Tunnel dwellers gaping as he retrained his muscles to their former peak. As he recovered, he searched for jobs to do, ways to be useful; idleness did not suit him, leisure time was a puzzlement.

One day, about four months after his introduction to the world Below, when out mapping tunnels with Mouse and Kipper, he came to a section of corridor that was open on one side, a vertical drop of forty feet to the broken ground below. A section of the path, twelve to fourteen feet, was missing as well. The three halted; Mouse started to mutter to himself. Gray had eyed the gap, taken a few steps back, and launched himself across, taking a single aerial somersault in the process, before landing quite solidly on the far side. He beckoned for Mouse to toss him the rope ladder, set up a makeshift bridge, then proceeded casually on with the survey. He didn’t seem to feel he’d done anything out of the ordinary. That story had spread through the community by nightfall.

There were soon a number of others to join it. Gray’s upper body strength nearly equalled Vincent’s; his balance, his gymnastic ability became a legend. More than once Kipper, Jeffrey, and the others had besieged him, begging him to “teach them how to do that!” That became another of his responsibilities Below - teacher.

After the evening meal, each night, he found himself looking for Honey. He’d become used to seeing her every day, in the hospital chamber. Since he’d found his own chamber, he’d missed her; this was the time of day he had nothing else that had to be done.

She was always in some corner of the vast stone dining room, an open book in front of her, as she absently guided the food into her mouth. Many times he stood behind her, watching her read and eat, utterly oblivious to the rest of the universe. But when he touched her shoulder, or called her name, her smile of welcome warmed him. It seemed to be a necessity to his day; the smile, the far reaching

discussions or book sharings as they walked beneath the moon or through the underground world for hours before saying goodnight. He became adept at anticipating what almost invisible obstacle would trip her, and preventing the fall with a judicious word or quick motion.

On nights of concerts, of play readings, it seemed so natural to go with her; they would discuss the evening's performance, and drift through scientific discoveries and Greek literature, world politics and Shakespeare. She was his friend; his good friend. His best friend, he thought after a while. Someone he could talk to, someone he could trust.

One evening, when he scanned the room to locate her, she was nowhere to be found. He looked again; no Honey. Father entered the chamber, and went straight to him.

"Looking for Honey, Gray?" When he nodded, the patriarch said, "She tripped and sprained her ankle and twisted her knee. Nothing serious; just typical Honey. I've asked Mary to bring her dinner in her chamber."

"Look, I can take it. Tell Mary not to bother."

"Certainly, Gray."

"Father - has she always been so - so -"

"Accident prone? Yes, Gray; there is a small physical basis for it that I know of, although most of it seems innate."

"Physical basis, Father?"

"Vincent first found her about seven years ago, on a sub-zero night, on a park bench. She never told us where she came from; Vincent believes she was living in the public library for some time before he found her, and somehow was evicted that night. By the time he came across her, her fingers and toes were frostbitten; severely enough to leave some residual nerve damage."

"How horrible." Gray shuddered at the thought of his friend, who always seemed like a child to him, even younger and alone, shivering on a park bench.

"Yes, Gray; I agree." The patriarch seemed to read his thoughts. He shook his head at the cruelty of the world Above, then left Gray to pursue his dinner.

When Gray had told William he needed dinner for Honey, and why, the cook had sighed and begun putting together a tray.

"Again, huh? Well, I guess it was about time."

"About time, William?"

"Oh, Honey does this three or four times a year; it's been quite a while since the last time. Before you came Below, it was; nothing to worry about; a few days and she's getting around again."

William handed him the finished tray.

Gray thanked him and descended to Honey's chamber, on a remote level, well away from other chambers. When he peered in, he saw her stretched on top of her black velour quilt, wearing a long white flannel nightdress. The bandaged ankle rested on a pillow as she lay on her back, a book held open at arm's length.

"Anybody home?" he called as he entered.

She sat up and lowered her book. "Gray! Father said he was going to send Mary—"

"Why make her come all the way down here when I was coming this way anyway?" He brought her dinner in, started to set the food onto the table.

"You didn't have to come, Gray," Honey said earnestly. "It's no big deal; I do this all the time." Her cheeks flushed red in embarrassment even as she spoke.

"It's no problem, Honey. What are friends for?" He pulled one of the comfortable chairs over to the table, then moved a low table to serve as a rest for the injured leg. He went to the bed, slipped his arms beneath her knees and around her shoulders, and lifted her easily into his arms.

Honey's face turned even redder. "No, Gray, I'm too heavy!" she protested, her voice low with mortification.

"Nonsense," he said. In truth, he was a little surprised. The shapeless layered clothes made her look heavier than the weight in his arms. He smiled down at her, and noticed for the first time the way the neck of her gown revealed the swell of her breasts. It was quite obvious Honey was the only thing underneath the white flannel. He caught his breath; in the space of an instant, his body was aflame.

It surprised him. He was a normal male; since he'd started to recover, he enjoyed looking at, and fantasizing about, the women he saw. His thoughts had aroused him a number of times; although never to flames before. But Honey - she didn't seem his type. She was his best friend; a pal like Mouse, like Pascal. He liked his women dark, slender and strong; not vaguely blonde, and soft, and small, and warm, and - he stopped his train of thought decisively.

He brought her to the table, and set her down in the chair, then seated himself opposite her. He tried to distract her - and himself - with chatter as she picked at the food William had sent.

He watched her not eat, and broke off his meaningless conversation. "Not hungry tonight?"

"Not really, Gray." Her voice had fallen to almost a whisper.

He looked at her closely. Most of the blush of embarrassment was gone, but there was a drawn quality about her face. He watched her for a moment, then asked gently, "Are you in pain, Honey?"

"A little," she answered reluctantly. He came to her side again, and lifted her as easily as before. He could feel the tension within her, compounded of embarrassment and denial of pain. "Relax. You'll only make it worse if you fight it."

Tentatively she leaned her head against his shoulder. "Good; that's it, let yourself go limp," he encouraged. He knew he should turn to take her back to the bed, but he found himself strangely reluctant to release her. She followed his instructions with a sigh, and the warm soft weight of her against his chest sent a shock of arousal all the way through him.

He castigated himself for his unnatural behavior, and resolutely turned to lay her back across the bed. The sight of the black velour quilt didn't help; he suddenly had a vision of her sprawled naked across it, creamy skin pale against the napped darkness. His arms tightened reflexively, holding her against him, enjoying the feel of her even through the intervening layers of clothing.

"Gray—?" Her voice was husky as she whispered his name. For the first time since he'd realized the state of his body, he looked into her eyes. He saw a smouldering heat had replaced the unfocused dreaminess; her breathing was rapid and her skin flushed. Still holding her in his arms, he bent his head to taste her lips.

She opened her mouth softly beneath his, and put her arms around his neck, pulling him closer. He felt the flame of desire run through him almost unbearably; in a moment, he'd laid her on the bed and was beside her, kissing her neck, stroking her. Both of them were lost together in a world of fire and pleasure, heretofore totally unsuspected.

When coherency returned, he found himself sprawled beside her, his head pillowed on her shoulder. He moved to kiss her gently on the mouth, in wordless thank you and benediction.

"Gray -?" Her voice was tentative, a little frightened of what had happened. In reply, he kissed her forehead, then her eyelids, then softly claimed her mouth once more. She tasted as sweet as her name. The fires he had thought were banked roared once more, and desire and flame engulfed them again.

The cold and a shaking sensation woke him. The temperature here Below was not suitable for unclothed sleep. Honey still slumbered, but her skin was goose-bumped and rough. Small shivers shook her.

Gray eased the quilt from under them, and covered her tenderly. For a moment he thought he should dress and leave, then he looked back to watch Honey sleep. She looked so vulnerable, and so tempting. He shivered a little against the cold, then made his decision. Lifting one side of the quilt, he slid under, just close enough to touch her, then lay back and fell asleep again.

He awakened again to a delicious sensation; something warm and soft rested against his side. Honey was leaning on him, exploring his body; her hand tangled gently in his hair, then lightly caressed the side of his face, pausing to touch his lips within their surroundings of black curling beard. She trailed her fingers down his neck, and stroked over his shoulder and ribs, her fingers just barely touching his skin. He feigned sleep, curious to see what she would do next.

She hesitated for an instant, then her hand ran across his waist and hip, down the outside of his leg toward the knee. It was increasing hard for Gray to lay unmoving; and portions of his anatomy were not equal to the task at all. The combination of her skin against one side, and her caress on the other, was driving him mad. Her featherlight stroke down his leg stopped; she couldn't reach any further. Her hand wandered inward, across his thigh.

That was it; he groaned, and turned toward her. There was mischief in her eyes; she whispered, "I didn't mean to wake you."

His mouth possessed hers for a long sweet moment, then he murmured against her neck, "If you wake me up like this, you can do it any time you want."

There was a small silence, then Gray very deliberately looked into her eyes. Her gaze locked to his, things she had kept hidden for months shining for the first time in the light. He knew then how foolish he'd been, not to have seen before. Among all the women in the world - and beyond - she was the one for him.

The realization added to the excitement building within him. He kissed her forehead, then looked back into her eyes and said "I love you, Honey."

She searched his face, unable to believe. He kissed her mouth then, a lingering, tender kiss, then repeated the words against her lips. He didn't need to hear an answer; without conceit, he had read it in her eyes. All he wanted was to be sure she knew he told the truth.

She looked back into his brown eyes, searching for the truth she didn't dare believe. He stayed still, waiting, loving her, until he saw her expression light with wonder. Then he moved to cover her, to seal his pledge with his passion.

As Gray held her in the calm after their storms, he became aware of stiffly tensed muscles in her thigh, as it rested along his. With a start, he remembered why he had come to her chamber in the first place.

He sat up, running his hands along the tightened muscles in her calf and thigh, above her injured ankle and knee.

"I'm sorry, Honey; I forgot." He felt for the pressure points, and began a massage as gentle as he could make it, while still having the effect he intended.

As he'd known she would, she gasped a little and bit her lip; tension had to be broken up, and that was usually painful. He continued to work skillfully, watching her face to know when he had to pause, to let her rest for a moment before he continued. Finally, he was satisfied that he'd done as much as he could at one time. He would be sure to work the tension out again, as often as needed. He leaned down and kissed her thigh softly, then propped the bandaged ankle back on its long-lost pillow.

He could see the relief on Honey's face; he positioned himself next to her, very careful not to disturb the freshly-eased muscles. He rested his head on her shoulder.

Her eyelids were sinking shut again; it was still within the wee hours, despite their many activities since dinner. "Where did you learn to do that, Gray?" she asked drowsily.

He kissed her again, a good-night kiss. "In another life, Honey," he whispered over her now-sleeping form. "In another life."

Chapter IV

Mary came to the entrance to Honey's chamber, bringing a tray set with breakfast. This was an old routine; when confined to her chamber, Honey often stayed up reading far into the night and slept in the morning. Mary always came in as silently as she could, leaving the meal quietly if Honey was not awake.

She listened for a moment, outside the entrance. There was only silence within; she tiptoed inside, to put the tray on the table.

She frowned; most of last night's meal was still spread there. Father had told her Gray brought Honey dinner; perhaps he hadn't stayed long enough to clear it away. She edged her tray onto the table, pushing the old dishes to one side as quietly as she could. Then she glanced over at the bed.

If she'd still been holding the tray, she would have dropped it. Honey was there, still asleep; but Gray lay beside her, beneath the black quilt, obviously unclothed, leaning on his elbow with his head resting on his hand. His brown eyes looked back at her, dancing with a mischief she'd never seen in him before. He raised his finger to his lips, and glanced down at the sleeping woman by his side.

Mary blushed as red as Honey always did, and hastily fled the chamber. But she carried with her the warmth of his eyes, as they rested on Honey.

Chapter V

"Good! It's about time that young man came to his senses!" Father's expression was filled with quiet satisfaction.

"You expected this, Father?" Mary was incredulous. She'd thought it the most unlikely pairing she'd ever seen, but Father had not so much as blinked an eye at her hesitant description of the scene she had encountered.

In Mary's mind, Honey was still a child; the brilliant, clumsy girl with the encyclopedic memory that Vincent had carried in seven years ago. It seemed like just last week she and Father had been exclaiming over the frostbite that touched Honey's fingers and feet, only yesterday when Mary had comforted a tearful sixteen-year-old who could not find a job for herself Below.

"Rebecca told me not come back, Mary," she had sobbed, leaning against the older woman. "She's right; I know I ruined everything again. It'll take her a week to get everything straightened up; I heard her tell Cullen so. There's just not anything I can do."

Mary had held her and let her cry, feeling the girl's pain, but not knowing what to say. It was true; accidents seemed to follow in Honey's wake. This was her fifth try; William had banned her from the kitchen after the third accidental fire in the first week she helped him. Pascal said no one had ever caught on to the pipe codes as quickly as Honey, and when she was paying attention, she could translate as well as he - but her mind wandered, so that she missed numbers of messages, and nothing could seem to keep her focused on the task at hand for the hours required.

And so it went - she was too shy and easily intimidated to be a good teacher, too clumsy to help with skilled or delicate work, too lost in her inner world to concentrate on the outer world for long periods. She did short spells of relieving Pascal's assistants or the pipemaster himself. She tutored especially bright kids, she functioned as a walking reference source for those Below. But each task she was able to do seemed so small to her, in comparison to others' work. She searched for a calling, to be the candlemaker, the cook - or in training. Finally there was nothing left to try and Mary held her, and tried to comfort her.

"Mary, Honey is twenty-two years old. She is an adult." Father understood Mary's concern, and tried to allay it.

"Yes, but she's so vulnerable, Father. Gray is so— so —" She searched for a word to describe the power and attraction, physical and mental, of the man.

"Gray is vulnerable too, Mary. Something in his past haunts him. I think he and Honey will find strength in each other."

"If you think so, Father—" Mary's hesitancy proclaimed her doubt of his wisdom in this instance. Shy little plump Honey didn't seem like a woman to hold the attention of a man of such obvious attractions.

"Sometimes a man like Gray needs someone to protect and care for, Mary. And even a strong and powerful man needs to be loved." Vincent's image moved unseen through both minds. "For what it's worth, Mary, I believe that they will be very good for each other."

"I hope so, Father."

Chapter VI

"Let me take that, Honey." Gray skillfully and quickly lifted the ceramic pitcher, and handed the woman a pile of linens. "That's too heavy for you; take this."

She understood what he was doing despite his words; but she smiled at him through the blush that spread unwillingly over her cheeks.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Gray?" Her voice was shy; she still couldn't believe what was happening.

The man took a moment to lean over and kiss her, his free arm encircling both Honey and the pile of sheets and blankets. He looked down into her eyes, and repeated, for the third time that day, "There is absolutely nothing in this world that I want to do more. You know I wanted to do it two months ago."

He continued the inventory of his possessions, selecting what to move down into Honey's chamber and what to give away.

She leaned against him then, hiding her face in his shoulder. The warmth and nearness of her touched him in a primal way; he stopped to embrace her, and leaned down to kiss her again.

"Well, almost nothing," he murmured against her lips, then deepened the kiss.

She responded eagerly, but Gray broke it off, putting her firmly away from him. He looked into her

eyes, reflecting the flames of his own, and whispered, "Later, Honey."

It was a physical pain to step away from her, but there were things to be done yet. He changed the subject, trying to distract both their minds.

"What do you think of that essay on the uncertainty principle?" Together they were reading through Father's library; for both of them, much of it was a voyage of rediscovery.

"Hoftstadter explains it very well; that's about the closest I've ever come to really understanding quantum mechanics." Honey was immediately absorbed, as he knew she would be. "But the uncertainty principle itself still throws me a bit; so much of modern physics seems to rely on belief systems rather than physical evidence."

Gray took the devil's advocate position, citing experimental results. As usual, she attacked his posture with vigor. They were deep in very enjoyable debate as they started their fifth journey between Gray's old chamber and the one they were to share.

Chapter VII

Carrying the final items from Gray's now-abandoned chamber, still arguing light-heartedly about quantum mechanics, Gray and Honey arrived at what had been Honey's chamber. Just outside the door, Gray stopped, and put down the objects he had been carrying. He emptied Honey's arms as well, then swung her up, cradling her against him.

"Let's make it official," he said teasingly, and carried her in.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, and behind her glasses, tears welled up in her eyes. Gray looked down into her face, and his expression was filled with a tender concern that would have allayed all of Mary's fears.

"What's the matter, Honey?"

She sniffled, and hid her face against his neck. Her breath tickled him as she whispered, "I can't believe this."

"Believe it, Honey." He stood in entryway to the chamber, still holding her. "Look at me." There was a note of command in his voice that she had never heard before.

Shyly she complied, her wet blue eyes meeting his warm brown ones.

"Listen to me, Honey— I'll tell you again, and for the rest of my life, but you must believe me. I love you. I will always love you. Forever." As he kissed her, there nestled against him, it was like that first night; the night he had finally known his heart.

As always, the taste of her, the feel of her, had aroused him, even before their kiss. And she responded so eagerly, so openly to him; sometimes it was all he could do not to take her in the dining hall, or outside Father's chamber, she stirred him so deeply. Now there was no reason to hold back; on the contrary, what better way to begin their life together?

He carried her into the chamber, and laid her against the black quilt. Just the sight of that soft expanse of darkness brought erotic memories to the forefront; he loved to see her just as he had that first night, unclothed against the velvet backdrop. His breath already came harsh and hot; he could feel the heat flowing from Honey as well, and see the soft flush of sensuality had already touched her face.

He lay her gently down, and removed her cloak. Her vest, tunic, and dress followed, as his hands moved reverently, tenderly, over her. She was not idle either; his garments joined hers on the floor.

He was determined to show her the truth of his words. But her caresses were fogging his thoughts -

she pulled him onto the crushed softness of the velour, then pressed his shoulders back until he lay flat. This was another side of her he had discovered; her shy reticence disappeared in matters of love. He was not in the least surprised when she took the initiative, moving over him, touching and stroking, pressing her softness to him at every available point. This time the urgency had touched Honey; she fairly attacked him, demanding all that he could give.

As Gray more-than-willingly complied, cooperating utterly with her, the joy of his new life filled him. He could not imagine ever in his life feeling happier than he was at that moment.

Chapter VIII

Carrying a sputtering torch, eyes glazed and weary, Gray followed Father's maps by rote. He'd copied these particular ones months ago, knowing that one day he would make this journey. He made his way through unused tunnels and dusty sewer pipes. It was a long way; but eventually he reached the connection he knew was there, where the map ended and his memories began.

The catacombs here were well-worked, well-lit. He put down his torch. A distant sound of machines replaced the clanging and tapping he had grown so accustomed to. It had been years since he'd been in this great, many-layered cavern. He looked around, cataloguing changes and improvements since last he'd stood beneath Wayne Manor.

As he walked the tunnels, he waited for what he knew would happen next. Sure enough, before he'd been within the confines of this cave for ten minutes a great form presented itself before him, black cape looming ominously all around. The impression was of a great man-bat. The figure studied him from behind the black mask that covered two-thirds of his face.

Gray knew what the other saw; the black beard, the hair that curled along his collar, the black cloak Mary had made for him, more like Vincent's than his old cape, or the cape of the man before him. It was not the face he'd worn last time he was here. Nonetheless - the irony of it amused Gray, in a bitter way. Recognized by a petty bank robber, who'd never seen him out of costume; while the man who'd been his father and mentor for more than ten years stared at him, unknowing.

"Hello, Bruce." Gray spoke quietly.

The great black figure suddenly lost its menacing pose; the black mask was pushed from its face.

"Dick? Is that really you?"

"Yes, it's me. They - I'm called Gray now."

"It's - so good to see you, Dick. When I first heard Nightwing was missing, I was afraid -"

"That they'd gotten me this time?" 'They' were the forces of evil; the endless lines of foes he had struggled against since the murder of his parents, so many, many years ago. His circus days were a dream now; the realities of his life had made such carefree times seem dim and unreal. Batman and the Teen Titans; one fight after another, the never-ending struggle for "truth, justice..."

"What's the matter, Dick?" Bruce Wayne had never been the most sensitive of men. Too much of his psyche was devoted to his craft - the obliteration of criminals, revenge sharpened to an art. But the bitterness within his old ward could not be missed.

"Why, Bruce? Why do we do what we do? Do we think it makes a difference?" He had been rehearsing words, speeches, since he set out from the world Below. "No matter how hard we try, there's always more crime; there are always more people who want to hurt, to steal, to kill. And then they strike out at those who least deserve it."

His voice had become progressively harsher and harsher as he spoke. The vision before his eyes was terrible.

“Dick -” his old friend gripped his shoulders. “Tell me what’s happened.” Bruce lead him through the old familiar labyrinths, to the stairway up to the house.

Gray was shaking with the force of his emotions. He went blindly with Bruce, only the lifetime of trust between them keeping his rage and pain at bay.

Alfred, the butler, met them at the head of the stairs. “Master Wayne,” he began, then he saw the figure who walked beside his employer. There was a glimpse of familiarity, but no recognition as he surveyed the growth of black beard, the simple layers of clothing covered by the black cloak.

“Alfred, get some tea,” Bruce Wayne directed, seating Gray at the table in the kitchen. He shed his costume and sat opposite him in silence.

“That’s Father’s answer to everything too,” Gray muttered. “Tea. Solves the world’s problems.”

Bruce waited in silence until the tea was before them. Alfred, as he served, kept stealing sidelong glances at the apparition seated across the table. The puzzlement as he strove to place this vaguely familiar face was visible only in his eyes, as befitted a butler.

“Tell me. Where have you been? What’s happened to you?” Bruce was exercising skills that had decayed over the years. Some of it was coming back to him, slowly; Jason and Tim were both such different people than Dick was.

“I was dying, Bruce.” The words hung in the air. “Just the way I always thought I would; alone, in the dark, on the ground; shot by some small-time criminal, and left to die. Don’t you think that’s how you’re going to go too?” he challenged his mentor. He went on without waiting for an answer. “Then she tripped over me. Literally. She nearly fell right on me.”

“Who?”

“Honey. That’s her name. She had her nose in a book, and she tripped over me.”

“Then what?” Bruce was only encouraging him to talk, to exorcise some of the emotion that had plainly overwhelmed him.

“She got me help; some of the best people it’s ever been my privilege to meet. They didn’t recognize me, Bruce; they had no idea who I was, where I was from. All they knew was that I needed help. When Vincent asked what my name was, I guess I was trying to say ‘Dick Grayson’; but all that came out was ‘Gray’.”

Alfred was unable to stifle a sound of surprise and recognition, but Gray didn’t hear him, so involved was he with his story. “I was out of it for at least a week. When I woke up, I couldn’t remember anything - my name, my past were gone. So they took ‘Gray’ in, and healed him, and gave him a place to stay; a home.” He stopped for a moment, struggling to organize what he wanted to say, the pain that ate at his soul.

“Honey - she was always around, trying to help, talking to me. You never in your life saw such a klutz, Bruce.” The two men watching noted the change in his manner as he spoke his memories. He was gentler, the anger lost in the remembered wonder. “I think she could trip over smoke. And she was always drifting into a dreamworld. There was more going on inside her head than in the entire city of New York. I think she’d read most of the New York Public Library; Vincent told me she’d lived there for a while before she came Below.”

“Dick - you’ve mentioned Vincent a couple of times. Who is he?”

“It’s a long story, Bruce; too long for now. Maybe later...” Gray’s thoughts returned to Honey. “Bruce, I lived with Starfire for a couple of years; you knew that. I’ve dated some of the most glamorous women in world. The millionaire playboy’s ward was always game worth hunting.”

Bruce nodded.

“Honey is a short, near-sighted, plump blonde with fuzzy hair. She’s a little shy. Accidents happen

around her. Father says she's a carrier of entropy."

Bruce made mental notes - questions to ask when the floodtide of words from his former ward dried to a trickle.

Gray went on, "She's also the most wonderful woman I've ever met. Her curiosity, her questing mind; ..." His voice trailed off. Some things were private; between Honey and himself.

"Tell me, Dick. You've been gone for nearly a year. I'd given up hope..."

For the first time Gray realized there were those in the world Above who had mourned him. But he could not dwell on that now; his own pain was still too raw, his guilt overwhelming.

"I told you my memory was gone, at first. It returned slowly; after a few months, I'd pretty well remembered it all. But I was so happy there; happy in a way I'd never been before. A part of the community; just me, no secrets - a respected voice. I found Honey there. And then - you would have appreciated the irony, Bruce," he went on, his voice hardening as the full tide of recollection returned.

"It was the same guy who'd left me to die. We used to walk in the park a lot, Honey and I - he recognized me, even without Nightwing's mask, even like this. He determined to dispose of me once and for all. Unfortunately, his booby trap went off about ten seconds too soon."

Agonies of grief and despair roughened his tone. "We were walking in the moonlight; I was about to finally do it, Bruce - ask her to marry me. She said she had something to tell me. Then conscientious citizen Dick Grayson reared his head. I saw some trash on the ground; I stopped to pick it up. Honey took a couple of steps, turned around to wait for me; then there was an explosion."

He stopped for a moment, reliving those split seconds. "If I'd been beside her, I'd have taken the brunt of it. As it was - the force of the blast knocked me out for a few minutes. There was already a crowd when I came to; I got to her, and held her; then an ambulance came."

Gray seemed to have forgotten he was speaking aloud to a rapt audience of two. "At least they put us in together. She was so still; there was blood matting her hair." He swallowed as he saw again the sight of her torn flesh.

"One of Father's friends is a doctor; I had them call him." He remembered lying in the emergency room cubicle, a temporary dressing covering his forehead, begging each intern or nurse who passed for news of Honey. Their voices were kind and gentle; his terror grew with each evasive reply.

At last Peter Alcott, clad in surgical scrubs, entered. Gray sat up, ignoring the wave of dizziness that swept through him. "Honey - how is she?"

"It doesn't look good." Peter was always direct. Gray silently blessed him for it; anything was better than not knowing. "She's lost a lot of blood; her lung was pierced by the shrapnel. There are some spinal injuries, too; if she lives, she may not walk." Peter put his hand on Gray's shoulder. His tone softened; this time he hesitated before continuing, "Did you know she was eight weeks pregnant?"

That was too much to assimilate; he nearly passed out. Peter supported him as he regained some equilibrium. "Even if she lives, Gray, she'll lose the baby. If it doesn't happen spontaneously, we should take it."

"Do whatever you have to. Just save Honey." Gray's whisper was stark in the overlit cubicle.

"We'll try our best. I've sent word Below, to Father. I'm going to admit you for the night, just for observation."

"Can I see her?"

"She's in surgery now, Gray. I'll let you know as soon as I know anything."

"Please; I want to see her, as soon as I can."

"As soon as she can be seen; I promise." Peter stepped out into the emergency room corridor. He

summoned the nurse. "Admit him for observation. Gray -"

"Gray Dixon." Even the play on his name couldn't distract him.

"I have all the insurance papers at my office," Peter continued, but Gray interrupted, "Have all the bills sent to the Gotham Bank and Trust." He gave them an account number; the trust Bruce had settled on him at age 21. "For both of us. They'll be taken care of." He looked at his friend. "Nothing but the best for Honey, Peter. If anything money can buy can help her, it'll be paid for."

Peter nodded. People came Below for so many reasons; it was plain Gray had remembered his former life, but chosen not to return to it.

He returned to the present, and sat in silence for a moment. Finally Alfred asked gently, "What happened then, Master Dick?"

"I don't know, Alfred." Gray's whispered words startled the other two. "How can I go on if she dies? And it's my fault; if she'd never met me, she would have been safe..."

Bruce noted then the row of small stitches, well hidden by his tousled hair. "When did this happen, Dick?"

"What time is it; what day?"

"It's five o'clock on Wednesday, Master Dick." Alfred recognized now that the younger man was still in shock; physical injury played into his state as well.

"Last night; about 10:15. Peter kept his word; I saw Honey in the recovery room, every kind of monitor and machine hooked up to her. They were surprised she'd made it through the surgery; not much chance, everyone kept saying." He buried his face in his hands.

"Damn it, then what are you doing here?" Bruce's voice was harsh and accusing. It was the only thing that could have brought Gray out of his grief. "What hospital is she at?"

"Lenox Hill."

The older man stood, seized his arm, and pulled him out of the chair. "Come on." He half-dragged the dazed Gray to Bruce Wayne's car, and seated him in the passenger seat. Bruce took the wheel, and they set off for Lenox Hill Hospital.

Chapter IX

Bruce led the way to the ICU waiting room. He pushed Gray in through the door, and paused for a moment outside.

Cathy Chandler was seated on one of the hard plastic chairs. She sprang to her feet. "Gray! We were so worried!" She gave him a quick hug.

Gray's eyes were blank, his tone flat. "How is she?"

"She's still holding on, Gray. Come on, let's go see her."

"Is she awake?" A little feeling crept into his voice.

"Not yet." Cathy hated to dash his hopes. She started through the door.

Bruce was hovering outside in the hallway. Cathy saw him as they emerged from the little room.

"Bruce? Bruce Wayne?"

"Cathy Chandler! Small world, isn't it? I haven't seen you since that reception Burch threw for his art donation."

“What are you doing here?” She continued her walk toward the Intensive Care Unit, trailing an unresisting Gray by the hand.

“I’m - an old friend of Gray’s.” Bruce didn’t know what to reveal. His habitual caution kept the information to an absolute minimum.

“I used to be Bruce’s ward,” Gray murmured, his voice still flat. “My name before was Dick Grayson.”

Cathy thought she understood a little then. She knew how easy it was for wealth and position to take over a life. She remembered the stages of her own breaking away from her father’s domination. It was hard to picture anyone dominating the tough, competent Gray she knew; but perhaps he’d been different before. Then they reached the double doors to the IC unit.

Cathy lead Gray through. Bruce remained outside. “I told the nurses you were her husband,” she whispered to him. “IC rules say immediate family only. I’m her sister.”

He nodded numbly. “Cathy - the baby -”

“They want to wait until she’s a little stronger.” She squeezed his hand. “Gray, Peter told me her chances improve with every minute that passes.”

“You mean they didn’t expect her to survive this long.” His years in the hero business had taught him well the language of critical care.

“But she has, Gray.” Cathy tried to give him hope. At that moment, they reached their destination.

The raw pain on Gray’s face tore at Cathy’s heart. She wished for Vincent, to comfort her, to speak his soft words to Gray. But there was no way for him to be present now; she had to stand for him, to try to fill his shoes.

Gray stared at the bed. Honey was surrounded by softly beeping machines, tracing heart rate, breathing, IV drip - the minutae of her survival. Her hair was bedraggled and rough; black bruises surrounded her eyes.

“Honey?” Tears trembled in his voice.

Cathy stepped back and turned away, to allow whatever privacy was possible in an ICU.

Gray touched Honey’s hand gingerly, then held it between his own. He bent his head, touched his lips to the familiar soft skin. Salt tears were left behind when he looked up.

“Oh, God, Honey, don’t leave me!” It was an anguished groan. “I can’t live without you. You die, I die.”

In a book, she would have opened her eyes then; but this was life, inconvenient and poorly-timed. There was no change. Gray bowed his head back to rest on her hand, and remained unmoving.

Cathy thought her heart would break. She put her hand on Gray’s shoulder, but he didn’t seem to be aware of her at all. She stepped outside the ICU, to speak to Bruce Wayne; but he was nowhere in sight. Puzzled, she returned to Honey and Gray.

“Gray - your friend is gone.” Cathy wasn’t sure he’d heard her; she didn’t want to repeat the news. But Gray had heard.

For the first time in two days, something other than despair and grief coursed through Gray’s veins. He felt a great grim satisfaction. Bruce was gone; he knew that before long, the villain who had done this to his Honey would not be at large anymore. The Batman always came through.

Chapter X

It was late night; Cathy was away, grabbing a bite to eat. Gray still sat in the machine-filled room, silent, his hand covering Honey’s. No one had bothered him, tried to make him leave; he almost

wished someone would try. Years of action still held sway over him; he wanted to do something, even if it was just refuse to be sent away. Besides, he understood their protocols too well. If anyone had thought Honey was going to recover, there would have been at least an attempt to enforce the rules, to limit his time to a visitor's brief moments. But the nurses only glanced pityingly at him as they took their TPR's and noted machine readings.

He bent his head to rest it on her hand again. The touch of her skin against his face brought him a little comfort, illusory though it may be. He felt sick and dizzy and weak and frightened.

Suddenly, he remembered his first experience with Honey; as he lay on the ground, his life slipping away. The comfort of her touch, the way she raised his head to rest it on her thigh, rushed through him. How could he do less for her now, the woman he loved, than she had for a complete stranger on the ground in Central Park?

He had to hold her again. If she was going to die, she would die in his arms; she would know, somewhere inside, that he loved her. He could give her that.

Quickly, he pulled off his boots, set them on the floor at the edge of the bed. Slipping in amidst the wires and tubing, he stretched himself beside her, and very gently put his arms around her. He checked his position again to be sure all the machinery still functioned smoothly. Then he lay his head on the pillow beside hers, the edges of her frizzy curls just brushing against his face.

For a moment, Gray could almost imagine that they were back in their chamber, perhaps having just finished a stimulating discussion of science or politics - or a session of lovemaking. His injuries, the stress, and the recumbent position combined; his eyes slid closed without his being aware of it. Back beside his Honey where he belonged, the former costumed hero relaxed into sleep.

Chapter XI

"Gray." It was a vaguely familiar voice; not one he knew well. It reached in and started his return to consciousness, though. "Gray, please wake up."

Even before he opened his eyes, he knew he was not at home, in his chamber. Strange sounds, an unfamiliar bed— suddenly the past two days rushed over him. He was alert instantly.

The voice belonged to Peter Alcott. "Gray—"

Gray's eyes opened. He turned his head first to the body he could feel next to him; Honey. "Gray, I need you to move for just a moment." Peter touched his shoulder. "We need to do some technical support; blood drawing, monitor checking, that sort of thing. It would be better if you left for a minute."

The younger man started to protest. Peter cut him off. "Gray, you are probably the best medicine for Honey that we have. No one will keep you away from her. If you want, you can stay right here the entire time; but medical procedures can be disturbing. I just thought—"

Gray swung his legs over the side of the bed, stood, then moved to stand in the corner of the tiny cubicle. "I'm not leaving here, Peter. Not until I know for sure..."

"She's much better. As I told you, you're powerful medicine, Gray. She's not out of danger yet, but I can see quite a bit of improvement."

Gray looked toward the still figure of his love, still surrounded by gently beeping and clicking machines. Her hair had not improved; additional colors were appearing within the bruises on her face. Her eyes were still closed, but something about her confirmed Peter's words.

He wanted to hold her; the need was so powerful he took a step toward her. But he restrained himself, to allow the nurses and doctor to work. Peter had promised— in just a minute, her body would be in his arms again, and he would feel the spark of life within her, feed it with his warmth, with

his presence. He knew Peter was right; Honey was healing because he was there. It made him feel ten feet tall, and yet small and humble; she had such faith in him, even in unconsciousness.

"I won't let anything ever hurt you again," he vowed under his breath. "I don't think I could stand it."

Chapter XII

Three Weeks Later

"Father, have you seen Gray?" Vincent stood in the arched doorway to Father's chamber.

"No, Vincent. He's probably Above, at the hospital."

"I spoke with Catherine a little while ago; she came by to tell me Peter was looking for him." Vincent paused, and added softly, "Today was the day they took the child. Catherine said all went well, and Gray was there with Honey, but then he vanished. That was hours ago."

Compassion and understanding came to Father's expression. "Have you tried their chamber, Vincent?"

"Yes; I've tried nearly everywhere except the waterfall chamber. He told me once they picnicked there often."

"It can't have been an easy day for him." It was understatement of the most major kind.

"I'll go to the waterfall chamber now. I've alerted Pascal; he'll relay a message if anyone sees him."

"Tell him that we all grieve with them, Vincent."

"I will, Father." He strode away down the tunnel.

It was a solid journey, but Vincent's long stride made it pass quickly. He tried to put himself into Gray's place, to empathize with his feelings. As he pictured Catherine in Honey's position, it was as if something had seized his heart and crushed it. Gray was a sensitive man; he was undoubtedly suffering, and it seemed to be in his nature to suffer solitarily. Only Honey had been able to reach him.

He reached his destination, and stepped out onto the ledge overlooking the high, misty falls. The roar of the falling water filled his ears, but he heard another sound as well. He turned and saw Gray.

The other man stood facing the stone wall. Vincent saw tears rolling down his face, and noted Gray's teeth were drawing blood from his lower lip. As he watched, Gray curled his hands into fists, and slammed each one into the wall, with the full force of his shoulder behind it.

Vincent winced. His own dark rage often prompted him to such actions, and he knew the pain that tore at Gray's hands, and shuddered up his arms. Before the other man could swing again, Vincent stepped between him and the wall.

"Move, Vincent." Gray's voice was thick, but commanding.

"This is not the way, Gray."

"MOVE, Vincent."

Vincent took Gray's hands into his own, and lifted them for their owner's inspection. The knuckles were torn and bleeding, bruises already puffing the skin on his fingers. "Think about Honey, Gray. Would she want you to do this?"

"Oh, God, Vincent, I was thinking about her." The other man collapsed to a huddled sitting position, pulling his torn hands free of Vincent's hold, and hiding his face in them. "They took the baby today, Vincent. Did you know that?"

“Yes, Gray.” Vincent seated himself on the cold stone ledge facing the other man; his gentle reply went unheard. Gray’s eyes were unfocused, seeing the events of the past day. “I was with her; I couldn’t let her go through that alone.” Vincent nodded; he would have wanted to be with Catherine in such a circumstance, if there was any way he could.

“Peter told me general anesthesia would be too dangerous for her; she was going to be awake. He gave her something, and he told me I ought to leave. He said she probably wouldn’t remember what happened later.” He lifted his head, and looked into Vincent’s eyes. “But she’d remember being alone, Vincent.” His voice fell off to an almost-unconscious whisper. “You always remember being alone.”

Vincent nodded. Somehow, Gray’s life had given him many of the same experiences Vincent’s unique physiology had given the lion man. His empathy was so sharp he almost experienced the other’s man’s pain.

“We went into the operating room; I took her hand. She turned to me; she looked right at me, and she said ‘Don’t let them do this, Gray. Please don’t let them do this.’ She begged me, Vincent; over and over, pleading with me not to let them take the baby.” Tears were pouring from his eyes; his tale was punctuated by rasping sobs that forced their way from his heart.

“Peter told me it was the drugs talking; he kept saying she wouldn’t remember any of it. But I’ll remember, Vincent; I’ll never forget.” Gray turned his head, stared into the distance, ashamed of the signs of weakness he had been taught a man did not show. “Over and over she begged me, ‘Don’t let them do it, Gray. Don’t let them take our baby.’ ”

Vincent put his arm across Gray’s shoulders. The smaller man’s voice was harsh with pain. “I kept telling her we’d have other children, but I couldn’t live without her; there was no choice, no choice! She knew when it happened; she gripped my hand, and turned her face away from me.” Gray had to stop speaking; he couldn’t continue. Vincent waited compassionately as he fought through his pain.

“She never looked back at me, Vincent. I sat with her for another hour, until she fell asleep, and she never once looked at me.” Gray’s voice was raw with his agony and guilt.

“Gray, Honey never felt she deserved you. She does not know how worthwhile she is. She is too aware of what she is not.”

“That’s ridiculous, Vincent.” Gray knew his Honey’s worth - his life, and everything he could possibly give would not be the equal of what she was to him.

“I know. But she has always felt this way. She feels an inferior in our world, because she thinks there is nothing she contributes.”

Gray made a sound of disdain. “She’s worth twice what anyone else is, including me.”

“You and I and Father know her worth; she does not. Father told me she was so delighted when he confirmed her pregnancy; she felt she could give you something, something very special.”

“All I want is my Honey back.”

“Gray, I am sure Peter was right; it was only the medication speaking. People cannot be held responsible for their actions in those cases.” He recalled guiltily his own experience, with Paracelsus’ drug. “She will probably remember nothing, as you were told.”

“Why is it always people like Honey who suffer, Vincent? She’s a true innocent, guilty of nothing. Why Honey, why not me? It should have been me.”

“Perhaps, Gray.” Vincent tried to reach the younger man with an unexpected answer. “But it was not.” He paused for a moment. “She needs you. She loves you, Gray; with all of her soul and being.”

“I know, Vincent.” Gray’s voice was hushed now, a harsh whisper against the roar of the water. “How can I ever be worthy of a love like that?”

“By loving her back, with all of your soul and being.” Vincent helped Gray to his feet, and started on the route back to the upper levels and the world Above. “Go to her, Gray; I am sure she needs you very much right now.”

The other man nodded, wincing as his bruised hand accidentally brushed the wall, and followed his wise friend through the labyrinth of tunnels. Now if Vincent would just listen to his own advice...

Chapter XIII

Cathy sat at Honey’s bedside, feeling helpless and sad. Honey hadn’t moved or spoken since she’d been returned to her room, from the recovery room, some five hours ago. She just lay still, staring at the ceiling. Occasionally a tear ran down her cheek and fell to the pillow.

Cathy had tried reassuring her, but she wasn’t even sure that Honey heard her voice. Over and over she wished for Vincent to come, even though she knew it was impossible. He would be able to reach her; or at least he would be able to find Gray.

Peter had told her about the occurrences within the operating room. Cathy had nearly cried herself, just to think of Honey’s plea; and her pity for Gray, having to listen to her, unable to help, unable to act, nearly overwhelmed her.

“Honey, Peter says you’re going to recover completely. It’ll take time, but there’s no reason you and Gray can’t have other children, later...”

Honey shuddered, as though someone had struck her. The shudder apparently hurt, for a small sound of pain escaped her lips, without her volition.

“Cathy—” Honey’s voice was harsh and dry.

Cathy offered her water from a glass with a straw; she took a sip, then pointed to her glasses, on the table at the bedside. Cathy slipped them onto Honey’s face. The other woman blinked as everything came into focus, then nodded her head in thanks.

“Cathy, why would Gray want a woman like me? He’s so smart, so handsome. Why does he want me? I’m not surprised he’s not here now.” She paused. While Cathy searched for words, ways to reassure her, Honey continued, “The baby— was something I could give to him. It was something so special, so precious; I love him so much, Cathy. The baby was a way to show him, how much he—” The little blonde could not go on. The tears were running down her face; her eyes were red, and she sniffled.

“Honey, you’ve got to stop this!” A stern masculine voice came from the doorway. Gray, one hand bound in a plaster cast, stepped into the room. It had taken Peter two hours for X-rays and to set the broken bones in that hand; the other was only very badly bruised.

Gray stood just inside the room, looked across to Honey, as the tears ran down her cheeks. He loved her so much, but she had to stop feeling so unworthy. His irritation, spurred by the pain that came from his hands, was quite clear in his face and his voice.

“I love you, Honey; all of you. Not what you can give me, not what other people think of you; not even what you think of you, but the person that my Honey is. That person is the only woman for me. I will love our children, because they’re yours and mine and because they’re children; but you are my life, Honey.”

He finally entered the room. Honey’s eyes had been fastened onto his face; as he neared the bed, she saw the cast for the first time.

“Gray, what happened?” Fear and dismay were in her voice; it was easier to bear pain herself than see the man she loved suffer.

“Nothing, Honey; I tripped, in the waterfall chamber.” He smiled at her. “You don’t have a corner on the clumsiness market, you know.”

Cathy made a stealthy escape then. She’d retreated into a corner when Gray entered, trying to become invisible, to let the moment between the two lovers take its course without the distraction of another person. At last, she was able to slip away, and move out to the now-familiar waiting room.

The irritation left Gray’s eyes and voice. “Honey, this is an odd place, but— I had something I wanted to ask you, before all of this.” His gesture included the entire hospital, the ‘accident’, the past three weeks. He sat on the edge of the bed. He wanted to touch her, but hesitated to reveal the state of his other hand.

Her eyes were slightly unfocused. Most of the bruising had faded, but there was still a hint of discoloration behind her lenses. Gray smiled again; the dreaminess that was so much a part of her had reappeared.

“Honey, one day soon I want you to meet someone; the man who raised me. I want to tell you about who— I was, before. I’m not sure I should ask you until you know those things.” He stopped himself again. How could he ask her to share his life when she didn’t know who he’d been, the things that he’d done?

Something like impishness twinkled in the depths of her eyes. “If you mean you’re going to tell me you’re Nightwing, I know that already.” The expression of absolute astonishment that crossed his face seemed to delight her.

“How— when—” Gray stopped for a moment, to gather his scattered wits. “How long have you known?”

“Let’s see—”

Gray was astonished to see that his shy, uncertain little Honey, who had so lately been weeping that she was unworthy of him, was teasing unmercifully. “We met on November 18; it’s now November 21—that makes it one year and three days.”

From the first; she had known from the beginning. “Honey, if you knew all the time, why didn’t you tell me, when I didn’t know?” It was the first thing that popped into his head.

“Father told me you’d remember who you were. He said that it was probably a trauma-induced amnesia, and your mind was taking a rest. He was quite certain you’d remember when you were ready to. And I could see you remembering, as the days went on. So—” she blushed and looked away from him.

Something inside Gray rejoiced; the blush, the little uncertainty mixed with a precise recitation of the facts— that was the woman he loved. She was recovering; she was coming back, his beloved Honey!

Honey continued, “So, I didn’t tell you right away - and then there didn’t seem to be any way for me to tell you I knew. I guess I just figured if you wanted me to know, you’d tell me.”

“And I do, and I am, Honey.” His voice was husky with emotion. “There’s so much I need to tell you, about my life— before—”

“There’s nothing you need to tell me, Gray. Your life before is not your life now. If you don’t want to, you don’t have to say a thing.”

“Honey, I want you to know everything about me. Before, now and into the future, all the way. I want you to know why I love— and hate— the circus, and what I was like when I was a boy— and I want to know all the things that make your eyes light up and the things that make you turn away in disgust. Honey, I love you.”

He’d thought it would be hard to ask her, but the words seemed to burst from him like a running river. “Honey, marry me. I want my ring on your finger, and you with me for the rest of my life. Please,

Honey—” He reached for her with his un-cast hand, heedless of the bruises and scrapes. Taking her hand very gently, he looked at her, propped on her pillows, not strong enough to sit alone— still bandaged and bound, pale and weak. “Please, Honey, be my wife.” He looked into her eyes then. He knew her answer, probably even before he asked; but the sheer delight and love he saw was his reward for the effort.

“Oh, Gray.” It was a sigh of complete happiness. She closed her eyes, overwhelmed.

“Well?” He wanted her to say it.

“Yes, Gray; yes, yes, yes!”

He leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. Then he yawned. “Sorry, Honey; Peter gave me a painkiller, and—” He yawned again.

With an effort, Honey eased over toward the other side of the bed, close to the siderail. Gray glanced down at his boots, and then at his hands. He shook his head, shrugged, sat down, and stretched himself out beside her. The boots he carefully kept atop the sheet, while covering them both with the remainder.

Honey flattened the bed with her control; Gray laid his plastered hand along the pillow above her head, and cradled her to him with the other. She moved again, just a little, to touch him; then she closed her eyes. It was only moments until she slept. Gray chided himself sleepily for overtaxing her strength when she was still so weak; somewhere in the middle of his self-induced scolding, he slipped into sleep as well.

Epilogue

Gray smiled to himself, looking around the assembly gathered in the salon. The room was really too big for the eight or ten guests, but Bruce always liked to use this room for personal celebrations.

Alfred brought in another tray of hors d’oeuvres. Gray went over to him. “You’re supposed to be a guest today, Alfred. Celebrate with me.”

“Oh, I do. Congratulations, Master Dick.” Alfred was as inscrutable as ever, but his eyes shone with Gray’s joy.

Honey had set both Bruce and Alfred back when Gray brought her to Wayne Manor from the hospital. It had seemed the logical choice to him - the Tunnels were cold and damp, without modern conveniences. It was the life he and Honey had chosen, but for the first days of her recovery, could it hurt to surround her with luxury, hot and cold running servants, television, central heating? As soon as Peter would allow it, he’d whisked his love to his old home, with Father’s grudging approval. At first she slept most of the time. Gray’s broken hand exempted him from duties Below as well, and he had spent hours just sitting beside her, reading to her when she was awake, reading to himself while she slept.

As his hands healed and she slowly regained her strength, his sense of duty forced him back to his adopted world, to tend to the never-ending chores and work required to maintain their way of life. He could not even tell Bruce and Alfred where he went. Suspicions could not be allowed to become facts. Gray tried to split himself in two, and spend all of his time both working Below and with Honey. That was when she’d decisively won over Bruce and Alfred. The timid, tangled, frizzy woman had laid down the law to her fraying lover, with flourishes from Newton’s Laws of Motion, the Big Bang theory, and Ecclesiastes. Bruce had been an unwitting eavesdropper to the loving scolding she dealt, in which she forebade Gray to come to her during the week.

When Bruce related this scene to Alfred, in the darkness just before the Batman’s patrols were to

begin, the butler had replied, “And Master Bruce, she cried herself to sleep once he’d left.”

After that, she could do no wrong in their eyes. And the first time Bruce found her asleep in his library, resting on an open book, he had begun to see more of the things that endeared her to Gray. So when his ward had made this request of him, it had been with great delight that Bruce had arranged a wedding reception for those few friends of his world who really knew who Dick Grayson was.

Barbara Gordon and Honey were deeply involved in a conversation on Russian politics. The light flashed from Honey’s glasses as she gestured; across the room, Gray lost track of the conversation he was having with Wally West to watch her. His friend smiled, and shook his head. There was no question Nightwing was stricken. He grinned across the room at Drusilla Prince, who was chatting with Aqualad. She nodded to him, pleased to see such a foreign look on Dick’s face—a look of true and utter contentment.

Gray excused himself to Wally, and wandered over to his new bride. He laid a loving hand on her shoulder, and the joy that blazed from her eyes at his presence nearly blinded Barbara. Honey drew him down to a chair beside her, and began to fill him in on the discussion she and Batgirl were having. Bruce stood alone, across the room, watching his former ward. This was everything he could have wanted for Dick; why was there a quiet note of envy? He knew without regret who he was, and would, he knew, always be. He smothered that tiny voice within, and simply rejoiced at the happiness of his first son. Dick had found peace and dreams, and his happily ever after. There was nothing more to wish for.

THE END

Attributions - Cradle of the Night

1. “Ulysses”, Alfred Lord Tennyson
2. “Phyletic Size Decrease in Hershey Bars”, Hen’s Teeth and Horse’s Toes, by Stephen Jay Gould. p. 313

THAT IS THE STORY AS I SUBMITTED IT TO CrosSignals. THE EPILOGUE ABOVE IS UTTERLY SUITED TO THAT 'ZINE. THIS, HOWEVER, IS THE FIRST “EPILOGUE ENDING” I WROTE. I KIND OF LIKE IT BETTER, CHARACTER-WISE.

One Year Later

Gray’s strong arm kept Honey from falling, again. She leaned against him gratefully, regaining her never-certain balance. Inwardly he shook his head in worried amusement. He’d always been a little concerned about letting her run around alone— as he’d told Bruce, she could trip over smoke. But now, with only two months until the birth of their child, he was almost afraid to let her get out of bed.

“Honey, please—” He wanted to admonish her, but knew it would do no good. There wasn’t anything she could do; that was just Honey. He held her a little more tightly, his arm around the back of her waist, his hand resting lightly against the bulge that was their child.

Honey was blushing again. “I’m sorry, Gray.” Once, he had given her the lecture he resisted now; she was still apologizing, and it had been a couple of months. Beneath his hand, he felt the baby move within her. Each time he felt their child stir, wonder, awe, and the most overpowering love swamped him.

He leaned over and kissed her. “I love you, Honey.” As always, he wanted in the most primitive way to show her how much he wanted her, needed her. Still steadying her, he started their stroll again,

toward their chamber.

“Oh, Gray.” She looked down at the expanse of her belly. As with all things, Honey was awkwardly pregnant - off balance, uncomfortable, and very large.

Father had reassured him, saying some women just bore pregnancy badly. “It has nothing to do with the health of the child; and probably not much to do with the ultimate health of the mother, Gray. It’s pure Honey, too.”

Gray had to agree. He wished there were some way he could have carried the child. He knew instinctively his body would have borne up better, and he would have had an easier time than what he was watching his beloved wife endure.

“Just two more months, Honey.” That was frightening too. How could he guide her through the rigors of childbirth when just the discomforts of her pregnancy broke his heart?

They had arrived at their chamber. Gray did not release her until she was sitting on the bed. With a sigh, she leaned back onto the piled-up pillows; Gray helped her swing her legs up onto the bed, and then lay beside her.

His hands began a tour of her familiar yet changing body; it was a delight, a stirring of body and soul so powerful he could barely stand it. She still responded to him with amazing passion. It was not very long before they were together, moving in the rhythm as old as the human race, with the promise of new life adding an edge of wonder to what was already an act of beauty. The moment of her pleasure sent ripples across her gravid belly; as Gray’s mind whited out with the fury of his own release, he knew the future would always be as full of love as the present.

END