

HOUSE OF MIRRORS AND WAX

BY CINDY RÆ



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"Vincent!"

Catherine's voice. She was screaming his name, as he collapsed. It was the last thing he remembered hearing, in his life.

The last thing.

Why, then, was he hearing the carousel, now?

Grass. Grass and not stone, not dirt, under his body. He knew the difference.

Vincent opened his eyes, his head feeling heavy. The smell of wet, middle-of-the-night dew was soaking his cape. He was in the park. The park, at night. And it was deserted.

The lay of the land told him he was near the drainage tunnel, yet he didn't see it. The entrance to his home was gone, though the rest of the area looked much the same.

Wary blue eyes looked around. It felt like the earliest part of spring. The time when the ground was cold, and still apt to freeze from a late frost.

Had it been spring when he forced himself into the cave? He didn't remember.

Vincent rose, moving toward the sound of the carousel. He headed across the park cautiously, until the noise grew louder.

There it was.

The carousel was running, turning around and lit... and empty. The horses were all eerily frozen, rather than moving up and down, as they spun. The music had a harsh, tinny, sound.



It's broken, Vincent thought.

The children won't be able to play on it, now, he realized, taking in the scene, as he stood.

Then, behind the now eerie carousel, a memory. Or the shadow of one.

A building that wasn't a building. For a "house" that would never be part of a town.

A travelling carnival had come by, one night, the trucks all parked and prepared for the show. Tents had been pitched. Displays had been set up.

One was a Wax Museum that had claimed to rival Madame Tussaud's. Pictures of Lon Chaney as the Phantom, and one of him as the Hunchback graced the silk banners on either side of the entrance. Vincent remembered it.

How long ago was this? Vincent struggled to recall this memory from his youth. He'd gone up Above to see the moon, sneaking out with Devin.

He looked up, now, and could find neither moon nor stars.

That's because I'm not looking at the sky, not really. I'm in the cave. I'm... dying.

The garishly painted tent flapped a little, in an unseen breeze, calling Vincent's attention back to it.

Devin had snuck inside, but Vincent had been too afraid to go. He'd asked Devin about it, later.

"It's lame. It's got a werewolf and a Frankenstein, and a Dracula that doesn't even look like Bela Lugosi. They're not even real wax. Just some store dummies with bad lighting," Devin had told him.

"It's got some of those funny mirrors, near the exit. Just bent foil to distort your image. No big deal."

Vincent had agreed that it was "no big deal." But he also secretly wished he had gone to see it, himself. He suspected the reason Devin had discouraged him (aside from obvious concerns for his safety) was because of the Hall of Mirrors.

Devin knew Vincent was starting to avoid them, even then.

The carousel slowed down, and Vincent had the feeling of stones on his feet as he walked across the grass.

Slow. Slower.

The carousel ground to a stop. Then the lights went out, and the discordant music ceased.

The lights of the wax museum lit up, at least on the shadowed entrance. So did several other "exhibits."

Vincent moved across the greensward, drawing closer to the travelling carnival of his youth. His feet felt lighter, as he stepped, yet

conversely, still heavy, as well. He was aware that meant he was leaving his body behind, somehow.

He remembered the red and white striped banners on the 'Fun House' and the purple flapping pennants of the sword swallower's tent. Vincent remembered looking at the pictures for what felt like hours, after it closed. It all looked so... magical, so enticing.

The House of Mirrors and Wax loomed, the letters looking like dripping candles, the images recalling a bygone time.

Vincent remembered a carnival barker that wasn't there, now. A man in a top hat who invited you in, declaring the life-like quality of the images, the fame of the displays. He'd described Lon Chaney's career in detail, and Boris Karloff's.

Vincent stared at the pictures painted onto huge swatches of canvas, flanking the doorway. An inexpertly painted wolf-man bared his fangs at the moon, and a mummy shuffled, with outstretched arms.

Then, like the carousel, the other displays went dark, save for the one he was facing.

Vincent looked around. There was nowhere else to go, and no other destinations obvious, to him. It looked as if he was finally about to fulfill one of the wishes of his youth; to go inside the carnival tent and see the show.

There was no one else here, either at the carnival or in the park. There also seemed to be no way down to the tunnels. The round entrance he often used was still missing.

That was all right.

Something in Vincent knew it would be. The tunnels were "home." It was a place he no longer had a use for.

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Vincent looked back toward the park, wanting to see it for perhaps the last time. Central Park. Him, and the park, and the night. How often had the three of them spent time in each other's company? He'd seen the moon here, smelled the first hint of jasmine here, found Catherine here, the night she'd been mutilated by a madman.

He and the park had been constant companions since his earliest memory.

Then, sometime in his youth, the carnival had come, and set up near the carousel. Come, stayed a few days, and gone. Left him behind, like Devin, and Mitch, and Laura, and so many others had.

Like Catherine, even, in a way, every time she returned to her world, leaving his, leaving him.

Ah, well. There was no cruelty in it. They had to leave. She had to leave.

Well, not this time. Not now.

He had left her, this time. He was keenly aware of it, as he turned his back on the park and stepped inside the "house," which was really no more than a semi-truck cordoned off to look like a series of rooms and passageways, on the inside. A sad looking hunchback of Notre Dame held aloft a store mannequin, garishly dressed like a gypsy.

"A poor man's Esmerelda, don't you think?"

No. Not that voice. Not him. Not...

"Paracelsus."

"But of course. After all, I told you that you were mine, at the end. And now you are."

John Pater stepped out of the shadows to Vincent's left. He looked imperious, in black. A spot of blood at the corner of his mouth was the only thing that betrayed the fact that he was dead, by Vincent's hand.

Paracelsus dabbed his lip with a snowy white handkerchief, inspected it, and returned it to his breast pocket.

"What is this place?" Vincent asked, knowing he wasn't really at a carnival. It couldn't be, all things considered.

"Don't you know? Isn't it yours?" Vincent's nemesis dripped sarcasm. He inspected the fading paint on the canvas flaps designed to make the truck look more "tent like."

"Seems to be a little carnival. A place between fantasy and reality." He spread his hands wide, one of which held the cane Vincent knew contained a knife.

"Or simply, 'A place between,' if you like. Paracelsus dropped his arms.

"'A place between' what and what?" Vincent asked, afraid he already knew.

"Oh, the usual, I suspect. The place between the dream and the dreamer. Or the nightmare, and the nightmare giver. The place between illusion and solid ground. The place between the magician's trick, and the secret to how it's done. The place where old whores take off their clothes on the one hand, while children throw baseballs hoping to win a stuffed animal, on the other. The place where the pictures are grandiose," he gestured to the wolf man, "but the reality

is somewhat... less." He gestured toward Esmerelda. Lifeless, mannequin eyes stared back at them both.

Paracelsus gave her a dismissive sniff, inspected his nails, a moment, then shot Vincent a levelling glare. "It's the place between fantasy and fact; the place between life and death, of course."

Something in his voice sounded deeply satisfied to see Vincent there. And they both knew the last answer was the truest one.

"Life and death aren't fantasies, Paracelsus."

"Oh, good." John said silkily. "I'm not dead then, not rotting in the catacombs."

The both knew John was just that.

"I'll just get up off the table in Father's study and walk off, then, shall I?" John asked him, seething with malice.

"You deserved to die," Vincent retorted.

John's tone changed to one of near boredom. "Oh, Vincent, *everyone* deserves to die. *You* did. *You are*, as a matter of fact."

"I am dying," Vincent confirmed.

"Of course you are. Back in the cave. Your heart has been stopped for several long seconds now. Feeling it, yet?"

Vincent felt a kind of numbness, a tingling, in his fingertips.

"Yes," he said. "I'll be dead in a minute, then."

"A minute, an hour. Time feels different, here. Time enough for all your regrets."

Vincent's glare matched Paracelsus'. "You aren't one of them." His tone was as uncompromising as his tormentor's.

Paracelsus gave him an evil smile. "Of course I am, dear boy. It's why I'm here." John gestured farther inside the exhibit. "Care to take the tour?"

Vincent stepped closer to the badly realized image of the hunchback. A mask had been fitted over a bald, store dummy's head.

"Cheap mannequins in old clothes." Vincent handled the white shirt of the hunched figure. It had been stuffed with newspaper, on the back.

"Yes. Cheap mannequins in old clothes, pretending to be real people. Much like that little paradise Jacob set you up in, yes?"

Vincent said nothing to that. He still wasn't sure what this was about.

John walked down a prescribed path, garish displays on either side. A vampire threatened a scantily clad co-ed. A witch stirred a battered cauldron, preparing to drop in a human hand.

"Come, come, places to go, bad dollies to see. You *did* want to go here, so *badly*, when you were a boy," John directed.

Vincent didn't follow John farther in, but he clearly didn't need to. In a twinkling, they were in a much larger room. Fun house "mirrors" distorted the walls. A variety of "wax" figures dominated the scenery. Some were the tawdry imitations of actors he'd seen in the outer room. Some were better. John stood to one side, admiring a green skinned Frankenstein. It was not a bad likeness of Boris Karloff, in the role.

"**FRANKENSTEIN**" read a cheap sign.

"It's not the name of the monster. It's the name of the doctor." Paracelsus corrected the sign.

"I don't want to be here." Vincent told him.

"Of course you do, Vincent. It's your vision." John raised his arms and gestured broadly.

Vincent maintained a stoic silence.

"What, you don't like this area?" he asked. "Very well, then. Let's show you something more... personal."

The room "jumped" again.

A wax figure of a man drawing back in horror was frozen in time, in front of him. Vincent approached it, the figure on his knees, his arm half-raised to cover his face. It was life-like, and not one of the dime-store mannequins.

It was also familiar. *But who...?*

And then, Vincent knew.

It was Stephen Bass. Stephen, just as Vincent remembered him, the moment before Vincent had raked his abdomen.

Another light came on, illuminating a previous pool of dark. A barely remembered figure huddled there. A stocky man in a bomber jacket. One of Mitch's men. Vincent had savaged him.

A third pool of light illuminated its grisly bounty. There was Micah, from the Outsiders, his body broken and limp from being slammed into the tunnel walls... repeatedly.

Not far from him, Devin sat on a set of stone steps, cradling his bloody cheek.

Still another image was of Father, half ripped open on a table, his mask/face pulled away to reveal John's.

Vincent averted his eyes.

"Stop it." Vincent ordered.

Paracelsus was calm. "I'm not... 'doing it,' my son. You are."

"Don't *call* me that." Vincent punctuated the sentence with an unmistakable growl.

"Oh, Vincent. *You* don't get to tell me what to do. Not anymore. What are you going to do? *Kill me again?*" That voice. That malevolent, despised voice.

"Why them?" Vincent hated that he had to ask John anything.

"How do I know?" John shrugged his thin shoulders. "They're your regrets."

His regrets. Stephen. Ill, insane Stephen. Stephen who'd made him jealous, even though he detested having to admit that. Stephen, who was a pathetic figure, but who had made the unpardonable mistake of frightening Catherine. Not to mention the unpardonable mistake of being her lover, when they were young.

Mitch's thug. A great big fool of a man whom Vincent didn't even know. But then, that was the point. He didn't know him. Vincent knew he'd been hunting Mitch for shooting Catherine, and killing anything that was in his way. This man whose name he didn't even know, had been in his way. Until the moment he died, and then he wasn't.

Catherine hadn't even been nearby. She was already being operated on in the hospital. Vincent had tracked them down to make Mitch pay for shooting her. Mitch had been holed up in a warehouse, with his men.

They'd been afraid of him. Almost as afraid of him, as they'd been of Mitch.

It hadn't saved them. Any of them.

Micah. About killing Micah, the hideously bloodthirsty leader of the Outsiders who had invaded his home, he had no regrets.

Except he did.

Catherine's voice. "No. Stop... Stop!" as he'd slammed the homicidal sociopath into the stones, over and over, just for the pleasure of hearing his bones break.

As often as she'd seen him kill or injure, that was the first time she'd seen him... enjoy it.

Then the wild boy had shot Vincent with Catherine's gun, but even then, Vincent had been unable to accept any solace.

He'd sent Catherine away, when she'd tried to offer comfort.

"There are dark places in all of us... I love you." She'd said it to him. And he'd said nothing back. Nothing apart from...

"Leave. Please."

And Devin. Devin, his brother. Devin, who carried the rake of Vincent's claws across his otherwise handsome face, to this day.

It had been an accident.

Except for the part of Vincent that knew that wasn't quite true.

"You meant to strike him. He had it coming," Paracelsus said, as Vincent beheld the sight of his terrified older brother.

For a moment, he was afraid I was going to kill him.

Vincent had willed himself not to remember that instant, that look, in Devin's eyes. Now he could remember little else.

Vincent felt pins and needles in his fingers and toes. Oxygen debt. His dying body was starting to cry out, for air.

He shifted his eyes away from Devin, and onto the figure of John, dying on the table.

"I don't think I regret killing you," Vincent told the lifeless wax figure of Paracelsus.

"Oh, but it wasn't me you thought you were swinging at, was it?" the real Paracelsus (*or whatever this was*) told him, holding up the mask of Father's face that had dangled in the mannequin's hand.

"Some of Tamara's best work, surely." Jacob's slack features with empty eyes stared back at Vincent.

"Still tasting the copper on your tongue, boy?" John asked.

"Yes," Vincent answered, the feeling of cold in his fingertips getting worse. Spreading.

"I had her make one of you, you know. Of course, she had to work from memory more than anything else, but I think she captured it, don't you? I even had copies made."

Darkness parted, as a harsh beam of stage light shone down.

And there he was. Several times. A cloaked and hooded figure, fangs bared in a silent scream, a claw raised, over Stephen Bass. Another, in a similar pose, over Mitch's man, a third throwing Micah into the wall, mouth open and roaring. A fourth showing the moment he'd struck Devin's cheek, as a child, and a fifth revealed his hands dug clean into "Father's" abdomen.

Blood began to seep, from the victims.

"My favorite is over there." John told him, pausing to wipe his mouth, again. The spot of blood kept returning.

Vincent didn't want to go, but he couldn't help but see. It was him. He knew his own mane, his own back, when he saw it. Dressed in his cloak, again, the hood down, his hand raised to strike. He could not see the victim until he stepped around his own huge form.

Catherine. She was on the ground, looking up at him, in horror. One hand was propping her up, the other was raised in a protective gesture, across her face. Her eyes were terrified, and his were predatory. Her blouse was undone at the top, and he was clearly about to kill her.

"This never happened." Vincent was furious.

"No. But you were afraid of it, weren't you? Especially the last few days. Is the music still 'swooping and soaring,' in your mind, Vincent? Still hearing that last bit of song? Still hearing their screams, in your mind?"

"Yes! *Yes!* Yes, I hear it, all right!?" he rounded on his tormentor. "I hear *all* of them. I hear *you*. I hear Devin. I hear Stephen Bass and the madwoman, Lizzie. I *hear* them!"

He was being driven mad, again. *That seems so unfair.*

Paracelsus could either read his thoughts or his expression. "Of course it isn't fair. This is dying Vincent, not jurisprudence. Death is rarely fair. Mine wasn't."

Vincent wasn't so sure about that.

He felt something against his chest. Brought his hand up to touch it. His rose was still there, tucked inside the pouch. But he felt something more.

Hands. Hers. Her hands, on his chest. He'd know their shape, anywhere.

"She's touching me."

"Is she? How tender. Trying to bring you back, do you suppose?"

"She mustn't." Vincent closed his eyes against the pain of torment.

"It's better this way. Better for her. Safer."

"But of course," Paracelsus told him, smiling. "Stay dead, then. You can, if you want to."

"I do," Vincent said, knowing it was why he'd dropped to the stones in the cave, in the first place. He'd lost his mind. Nearly struck her. Better dead than...

He felt her palm flatten over his heart. She was pushing.

He willed it to do no good.

He turned away from the figures that reminded him of what he was. None of them were a lie, except perhaps the last one. And he wasn't so sure about it.

"Where do we go after this?" Vincent asked it almost idly.

"Dear boy, how do I know? Wherever it is, I have a feeling it is a far different place for me, than it is for you."

Vincent had little doubt that was true.

"I don't want to go back," he maintained.

"Don't then. You'll be dead soon. You said it, yourself."

Yet, Paracelsus was here, and there had to be a reason for that. Something he was supposed to understand, however backhandedly.

"But I could go back, if I wanted?" Vincent asked.

Paracelsus nearly snorted. "So ignorant. I gave you credit for better understanding."

John circled Catherine's form, and tapped her shoulder with his homicidal cane. "My dear *fool*, you snatched *her* from a place just like this."

Had he? He doubted it.

John moved away. Vincent didn't like it when he stood too near Catherine, even if it was only her image.

"Only in her mind, it was far more pleasant. Her mother was standing there, if you recall."

Vincent remembered. It was the night the Watcher had taken her, and she'd drowned in the trunk of a car. He'd pulled her body from the half-submerged vehicle, and... snatched her back from her fate.

"I don't want her to bring me back," Vincent said stubbornly.

"She won't be able to, then." John's dark eyes pinned him. Vincent rubbed a circle, on his chest. He could still feel her hands there, working. Trying to make him warm. Trying to force his heart to beat, force ... life... back into his veins.

Oh, Catherine, no. Give up. It's better this way, he thought.

"It's certainly better for me. Or it will be, after a while." came a familiar voice.

Vincent looked up.

And into the assessing eyes of Elliot Burch.

"What are you doing here? What is he doing here?" Vincent asked Paracelsus.

"You ask as if I should know. This is your nightmare. A rival, perhaps?" John inquired archly.

A rival. Yes. One Catherine had lost a piece of her heart to, once upon a time. Elliot. Elliot, who was everything Vincent never would be, never could be.

"Elliot." Vincent said his name, as the handsome man in the London Fog overcoat stepped forward.

"Vincent."

Here, at least, Elliot knew his name.

"You have to take care of her." Vincent told the king in her world.

"I plan on it," Elliot confirmed, holding Vincent's blue gaze steadily, with his own.

"No, I mean truly take care of her. Love her."

Elliot's tone was almost nonchalant. "I've always loved her. Loved her since the first. I told her I loved her. Long before you did," Elliot accused.

The young king had little mercy. At least not where Vincent was concerned. Vincent didn't expect any.

He dropped his head, properly chastised.

"You must... tend to her." Vincent tried to explain it in a way Elliot would understand.

"Like I said, I plan on it." Though they weren't discussing sex, Vincent had the feeling Elliot had just put that on the table.

"No, not just..." Vincent struggled for words with this man who could be sometimes so like him, and yet, so not.

"Catherine is strong," Vincent tried again. "Stronger than she knows. But she is delicate, too. You must take care of her. Make sure she doesn't push too hard, or accept limits that aren't hers, limits she can overcome. Look after her."

"How about she looks after me, and between the two of us, we'll work it out? I'll keep her safe, Vincent," Elliot assured him.

Vincent knew he meant it. All of it.

Vincent also knew that Elliot was a well of need Catherine could never fill.

"You're one to talk, when it comes to limits, and needs," Elliot chided him. But he hadn't said it. He'd merely thought it. Of course, in here, his thoughts and words were one and the same.

"Look, I don't mean to be rude," Elliot shrugged affably, "but you were never her only choice. And her life does play out differently with me, or with Stephen Bass, or Gunther, than it does with you. Life is like that. We are our choices. You made yours." Elliot shrugged his expensively clad shoulders and turned to go.

"He's not going to treat her well." Vincent told no one. Which was to say he told Paracelsus.

Elliot heard, and took exception to that comment.

Turning back, he said, "Nonsense. I'm going to give her everything she could possibly want." He was backing away, into the dark.

"That's not what I..."

But the image of Elliot was gone.

John seemed downright gleeful, in his disdain. "Well, well. So this was the fair Miss Chandler suitor? How awkward for you," Paracelsus was sarcastic.

*Would she turn to Elliot, really, after he was gone? Or was it just what his mind had always feared? That some day, Elliot Burch would be her fate, that the man who built skyscrapers would finally change enough, finally *be* enough, to earn her love, again?*

"As the young man said. Not to be rude, but since you've decided it isn't going to be you that makes love to her, what difference does it make? Do you expect her to simply be alone? That's not unlikely, either, by the way."

"Of course I do not want that." Vincent was vehement. "I've always told Catherine that her life was..."

"I know, I know, 'waiting to be lived, and experienced. And that it would be unfulfilled, if she came Below,' et cetera ad infinitum, ad nauseum. You hypocrite." The last words were biting, even for Paracelsus.

Vincent's head came up sharply. "I am not a hypocrite." The words were angry.

John Pater's voice was oily. "Ah, so you *weren't* upset when Michael kissed her. Or Elliot. You *weren't* annoyed that Joe Maxwell was falling in love with her." It was a statement, not a question.

Paracelsus let the words sink in.

"Wouldn't any of them have been a fine candidate, for her happy life?" he asked. "Vincent, *Devin* could have given her more than you could, and he's a fraud."

"A fraud." Vincent repeated the word.

"Yes. Fraud. Fraud. A well-crafted lie meant to fool and deceive others, preferably for a long period of time," Paracelsus defined.

"Devin. Me. You," the alchemist punctuated.

It was on the tip of Vincent's tongue to deny it, but he knew it was true, at least in some particulars. He'd kept them apart, sometimes, throwing reason (and at least some of his fears) in their way, at times.

It wasn't that he wanted things that way. It was that he truly felt there was no other choice, sometimes.

"She should have gone to Providence," Paracelsus stated coldly.

Vincent shut his eyes against that remembered pain. "She should have," he agreed sadly. If she had, they would have ended there. If she had, her life would have been better, and she wouldn't be kneeling in the dirt, now.

Kneeling, and doing something useless.

Vincent's chest hurt. And not from anything Catherine was doing.

"But she didn't leave," the Alchemist persisted. "Her apartment was in boxes, and you got caught by a pair of academics. It would have saved me *so* much trouble if you had just died in your cell, that day. A great *deal* of trouble," Paracelsus tacked on, as if his level of inconvenience was somehow paramount, here.

"But I didn't," Vincent remembered. "She saved me. And by the time it was done, the job had been given to someone else."

"Pity."

Vincent's mind turned both backward and inward.

"And then the rock slide. She saved me then," Vincent added. "Saved Jacob and I both. She even used Elliot to do it. How that must have galled all of you." Vincent felt a little strength for this argument, and a little satisfaction, in that. Even as his left arm began to feel numb.

"And she told you she loved you. Or, let me see if I have this right. She told you that it wasn't friendship that saved you. 'It was love.'"

Paracelsus quoting Catherine seemed like a profanity, to Vincent. But he knew the avaricious old maniac was telling the truth.

"She did. She did say that." Vincent had replayed that moment in his head a thousand times.

"And you said exactly... what, in return?" John inquired.

The shame of it cut deep. Vincent hung his head as he massaged a cooling bicep. "Nothing. I said nothing."

"And when you pulled her from the water? Snatched her back from her mother's arms, what did she say, when she was there, on the grass, stinking of pond water?" Vincent's tormentor asked.

"She said... 'I love you.'" The arm was getting worse, and his right hand was feeling beyond cold.

"And you said?"

"Stop it," he commanded, remembering he'd said nothing, merely held her close. *But I did say the words. I did say them, eventually.*

"I told her I loved her."

"Yes. Yesterday. During a sane moment, in the middle of a breakdown. Good show." John's derision was thick.

"Unless you count the time you argued with her about Michael, and told her that 'you of all people knew what it was to love her,' I believe you actually told Lena you loved Catherine, before you told Catherine herself. Now isn't that ironic, considering Lena is a whore?"

"Catherine knows that I loved her. She doesn't need me to--"

"And a good thing, too." Paracelsus raised his cane, and pointed it, accusatorily. "You held the words like a greedy treasure you refused to part with. Until you thought you were going to die, and you knew there was no hope." The words were damning him.

Vincent sank to his knees, guiltily.

"She needed to find a life away from mine."

"You *howled*, every time she tried."

Vincent sobbed at that, shaking his head in denial, yet knowing it was true. Whether she'd tried to go to Providence, or to Elliot, or to Nancy Tucker's, he'd mourned the losing of her in a deep, raw place, and screamed for it. Every time.

It was a place he could still feel even now, even dying. Perhaps especially now. *What leave-taking would be more permanent than this one?* he thought.

He felt something across his mouth. Her. Her lips, touching his. Her hand was under his jaw. The cold stone of the floor felt hard, against his back. He knew he was still there, still laying on it.

"What did you risk by telling her you loved her?" Paracelsus interrogated.

Vincent was ashamed, to admit it. "That she would leave, anyway," Vincent said, the honesty of it tearing at him. "That in the end, loving her, or even her loving me would make no difference, as to our outcome."

"So love might not conquer all, in the end? That must have been a bitter pill to swallow, considering the pap Jacob raised you with."

"Stop it."

"You wanted her to leave," John accused.

"No. That, I never did." Vincent shook his maned head.

"You told her she was destined to. Some of the first words you told her were 'find another.'" There was no more mercy in Paracelsus than there had been in Elliot.

"Yes," Vincent agreed. He stopped making the motion of denial, with his head. "That I did. But I changed. We changed."

"Until someone kissed, her, someone loved her. Then you remembered the fear, again."

Vincent knew that much was true. Fat tears of regret fell down his cheeks.

How much longer must I endure this? He thought. How long is the moment between heartbeats? And mine isn't even doing that...

"You thought about it... feared it... even as time went on. You never stopped being afraid of it. Not really."

We must face our fears, and move through them.

His own words came back to haunt.

"So you're safe from that pain, now." Paracelsus concluded.

Vincent nodded a lowered head. The pain in his chest was spreading. He wondered if he had a bloody mouth, like Paracelsus. Such an odd thought, now.

The grave is a fine, safe place, Father. But we live. So we bleed.

"It won't be long, now." Paracelsus told him.

Indeed it wouldn't. He could feel her tears, her desperation.

"Not long until you cede her to Elliot. Or Joe Maxwell, or some other village idiot."

"Vincent, please. Please don't leave me." Catherine's voice, echoed in the room. She'd pushed the sound through. Desperate.

"Ignore it. They say that hearing is the last thing to go."

"Not without me." He could hear her the catch of tears, in her beloved voice. *"Not without me! Please... I love you."* Her mouth. Her mouth on his, again. A world of despair, in her pleas.

Vincent's head came up. There. She'd said the words. Again.

I have to answer her. I have to, this time.

"I have to answer her. I have to. This time. I have to say it back. Do something. Tell her, so she knows."

"You can't," John observed with cool detachment.

"I have to." Vincent became agitated, became almost frantic, knowing he'd lingered here a dangerously long time. He forced his leg muscles to work, to bring him up from his kneeling position, on the floor.

He stood shakily, and turned around for the exit.

He began to move, talking as he went: "For all the times she said it, and I never did. I should have told her every day. I will tell her every day," he vowed.

"It's too late!" John insisted, as moved to block the door, raising the cane to strike.

"It isn't. It's never too late!" Vincent shouted, running past the cruel man who had tormented him in either life. He heard the hiss of the cane as it came down, and miraculously, missed his back.

Vincent began running. Running through the night drenched park, on feet that felt as if they were tied to boulders. He had the vague sensation that Paracelsus was chasing him, the knife raised to end his life. He still heard Catherine crying, still felt her tears. His hands were like blocks of ice. His arms felt like lead weights.

It was becoming hard to run. He realized his feet had gone numb, inside his boots.

"I love you." Her voice, still. More distant, now. Fainter.

The sensation of her arm, cradling his neck. She'd been trying to breathe for him, trying to force air into his lungs. His chest hurt, again.

"Breathe. Please breathe. I can't do this without you. I love you." She was squeezing his jaw, as he ran. Across the park, past the carousel. In the direction of the tunnel entrance, though he knew there was none.

"Where is it? Where?!" He shouted, as he cast about, hopelessly, searching for the entrance.

It should be here. But it wasn't. It wasn't anywhere.

John Pater was no longer behind him. But nothing was before him.

Should I try another way? Have I waited too long? Her apartment building. There was tunnel access in her basement.

He turned toward the direction of her apartment, though he knew it was too far away. Much too far. He'd never make it, in time.

Still, he made for it.

The familiar direction of travel gave him a different urge, a different instinct. *I have to reach her balcony. Just her balcony. If I can just reach that. Just get to her. Just tell her. Tell her I love her, that I always had, that I never wanted her to leave, and that I was so afraid she would, that she'd have to, or choose to, in the end...*

He knew he had to traverse the impossible distance, on feet he could no longer feel, and at a stumbling gait that was ensuring his failure.

The balcony. It was the bridge between their two worlds.

He was panting, yet there seemed to be no air in his lungs. His chest burned. He knew he would never make it across the park in time.

Paracelsus had said time moved strangely, here. Now he felt it was speeding up. He knew it. He felt it. Pain seared up his calves. And then it didn't, as they too, went numb.

"No. Catherine, no." There was only rolling, grassy hills, before him, and greensward. *Locked out. Trapped Above. No way up and no way down.*

No way to reach her.

He tried to run, tried to walk, even, but he dropped to his knees, unable to do either. Chest compressions. She was doing them, on

him. Had been, all along. He felt it, now. His heart was not responding.

Throwing back his head, he screamed his despair to the moonless night.

"Aaaaagghh!" He howled it, desperate.

Chest heaving, he dropped his head. "I love you," he said it, wishing she could hear it, knowing she couldn't. "I love you, Catherine. I always loved you. From the first night. Always."

It was a mournful declaration, said to the grass, said to his hands on his bent knees.

"Vincent." A soft voice. A soft, feminine voice. Not Catherine's.

Vincent looked up. And into beautiful eyes so familiar his unbeating heart broke a little more.

"Ellie?" He could not believe she was standing there. Standing in her white tunnel gown, the one she'd insisted she wasn't a child in, the day she fell ill. Essentially, she'd been correct. At the tender age of fourteen, Ellie hadn't been a child. She was also as old as she would ever become, in his world.

"This way. You have to come this way." she held out her elfin hand. Vincent stared at it. Then took it. From somewhere, he found the strength to stand.

"You have to hurry. We don't have much time," Ellie declared, keeping his hand in hers. Her skin felt warm, to his ice. She looked... beautiful.

"Catherine is crying," Ellie told him.

"I know," he said. "But I can't find the way down. Or up. The way back to her."

"It isn't about a door. It isn't far. It's hard to remember, sometimes, when you've given up," she said. She tugged him forward to where he thought the tunnel entrance should be, but wasn't.

"I should go to her balcony," he insisted, aware he was arguing with her.

"No. You should go to the first place your souls kissed. The place she ran back to you, and found you again, after you'd been apart. Come." She kept tugging, and Vincent had no choice but to follow.

"Ellie. How can you be here?"

"Questions. You always asked questions. I don't know." Her slippered feet fairly flew over the damp ground. "Catherine sang to me. A lullaby her mom used to sing. She was the last thing I remember, too," Ellie answered, pulling him still further.

Vincent followed her, unable to do anything else. Vaguely, he was aware that the touch of her ghostly hand was giving him what small measure of strength it could.

There was nothing in front of them. Just the rolling hill and a scrabbling ground. Then... there it was. Every step was agony, but he could see it, before him. The round tunnel entrance, a trail of water gently shimmering its way along, before it. Ellie didn't take him toward it. But she took him near it.

This was the place. The place where she'd run into his arms, on a night that felt too long ago.

What we have is worth everything.

Everything.

A fine mist covered the ground. Just as it had, then.

"Ellie. Thank you. Eric... Eric misses you, very much."

"Then tell him I'm all right, and I knew he loved me. Tell him I'm fine, Vincent. And I'll be here, when he needs me to be. Tell Catherine to sing "Sleep, My Pretty One" to him. It's okay if it's made up."

She tugged him over to near where he'd been the night Catherine had come back from Connecticut. The night she'd felt sure, and felt strong, and he'd felt... safe. For perhaps the first time, together.

Safe. You're safe, now. They were the first words he'd ever given her.

"I will." Vincent vowed, stopping to hold her, close. She was still so tiny. So young.

"Go on. Tell him to be good, and mind Father." The tunnel entrance began to grow dim. He was running out of time, and he knew it. He wanted to say more to Ellie as he staggered forward, but realized he simply didn't have the strength. He forced his legs to move, and reached the place just past the entrance, where he'd stood, waiting for Catherine.

He was both panting and unable to breathe, thanks to the tightness in his chest.

He knew somehow that Ellie was no longer there, could no longer help him. She'd given all she could, to bring him here. The rest was up to him.

He staggered into position, and stood, willing himself to keep his feet, despite the loss of feeling in his legs. He'd been standing, when she'd come back for him. Standing, when she'd crashed into him with the

force of a locomotive, and the strength of every conviction she still held dear.

He saw her.

Dimly, in the foggy distance, and running like a haste-driven shadow, she was coming.

Coming for him.

He watched her come, knowing her soul was desperately searching for his, desperately trying to reach him.

She was running fast. He knew it would make it. Just as she had, that long-ago night.

She drew closer, and Vincent held out leaden arms, waiting for the soft impact of her, waiting to feel her soul move through his, waiting to feel her launch herself to him, and through him.

Again.

She ran without slowing, her arms as outstretched as his were, only hers were higher. She was reaching for him.

When the feeling came, it knocked him backward, knocked him over. He let himself fall, knowing it would be all right.

It was. He felt the grass of the park shift and change, Felt the hard, stony ground underneath his back, again, knowing that was right.

From grass to stone. Yes. That was right.

There was hardpack against his legs, and against his back. His legs were cold. And wet. He was lying partially on damp ground. He remembered it, now, when he fell.

"I love you." Her voice. Her true voice. So sad.

He felt her despair through their bond, as he felt her mouth on his. Not breathing for him. Not trying to do that, any more. Her hand on his face. Her arm under his head. She was... kissing him.

Kissing him. Him. The man with a face like a beast and a mouth full of fangs. A cleft, riven lip, and a muzzle for a nose. She was kissing him, and her whole heart was in it. He felt the warmth of her breath, of her mouth, of her tongue, even, as it tried to coax his lips open.

He felt the tightness in his chest lessen, the lead in his arms fall away. Her mouth moved over his.

And softly, subtly, his began to move under hers.

He felt the pressure of her kiss more and more, as he returned it. He tasted salt on his lips, from her tears. Felt her arm as it cradled him, cradled him close to her breast.

He wasn't near the tunnel entrance, any more. He was in the cavern. The stones were digging into his back, and Catherine, beautiful Catherine, transcendently brave Catherine, was kissing him, and he was kissing her, in return.

Somewhere, he knew not where, he knew two souls were doing exactly the same thing.

Catherine felt the life come back to him. She almost didn't dare stop the kiss, so afraid was she that he would slip back away from her. But she knew he needed to breathe, so she lifted her head, holding him tight, holding him close.

"I love you," he rasped, the moment he opened his eyes. "I love you so much, Catherine."

He'd returned her words. He'd said it back. He'd gotten the chance.

He felt dirty and heavy and impossibly old. But he'd replied to her declaration of love, this time, the only way he could, the only way that made any sense.

"Oh, Vincent." She was scared, and full of her love for him, and he could feel both emotions through the bond.

"I love you... Catherine," he repeated, feeling sleep try to pull him down, again. Sleep, not death.

"I know you do. You don't have to say it. I always knew, Vincent." She shifted her arm so that she could hold his head more gently.

I'll tell you every day. I'll never let another sunset come, or another dawn, that I don't say it. Never.

"Not without me," she said simply, rocking him.

"Never... without you. Love ... you," he trailed, feeling the comfort of the words as they drifted away from him.

Safe. You're safe, now.

He felt her reassuring squeeze. Heard other footsteps coming. Felt himself being lifted clear of the stone ground, of the dampness.

It would be all right. Now, they had all the time in the world.

No matter where you are, when the walls between the worlds grow thin, I wish you love, ~ Cindy