

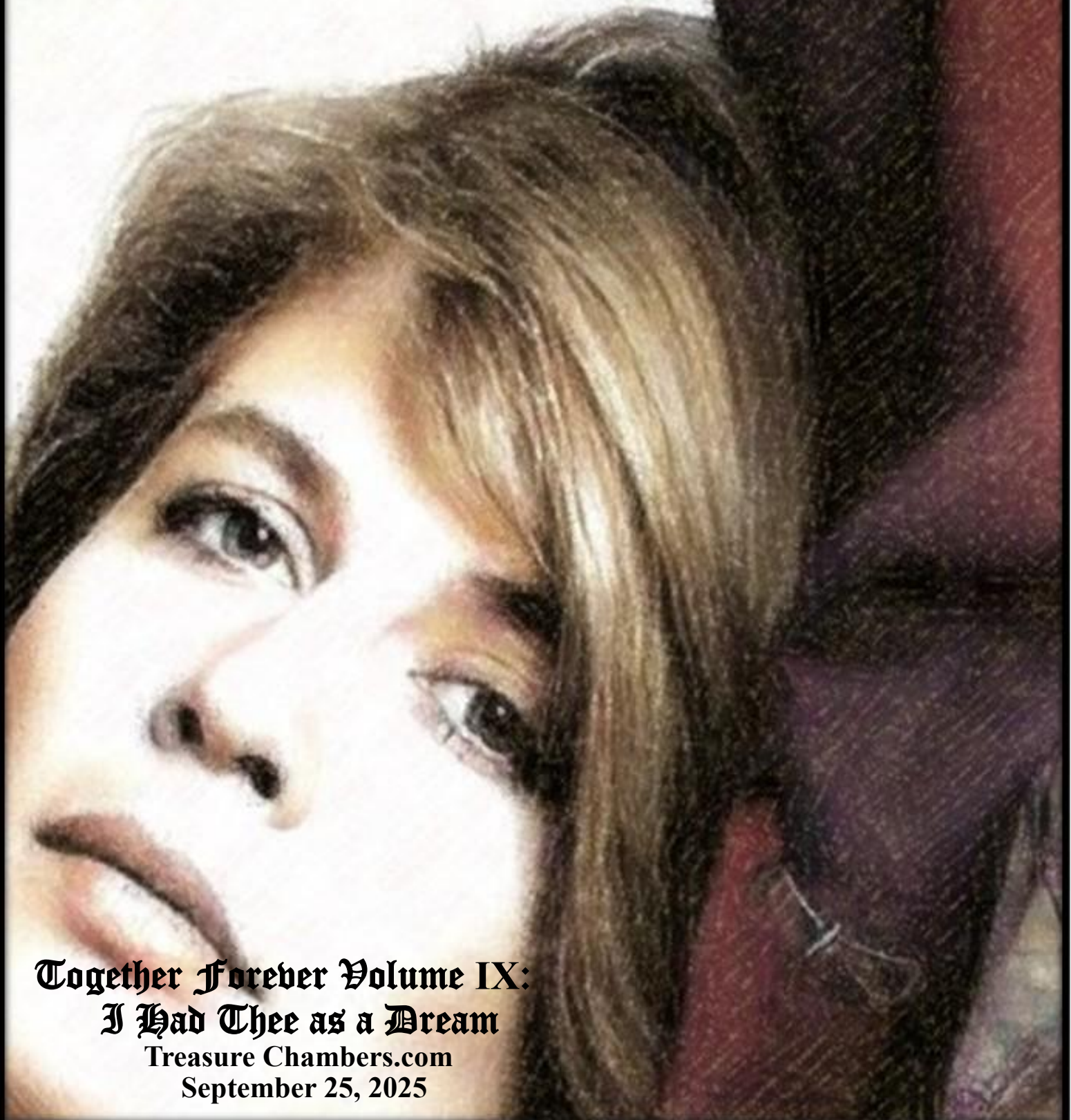


Beauty and the



Beast

38<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 2025



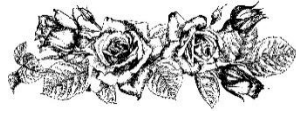
**Together Forever Volume IX:**

**I Had Thee as a Dream**

Treasure Chambers.com

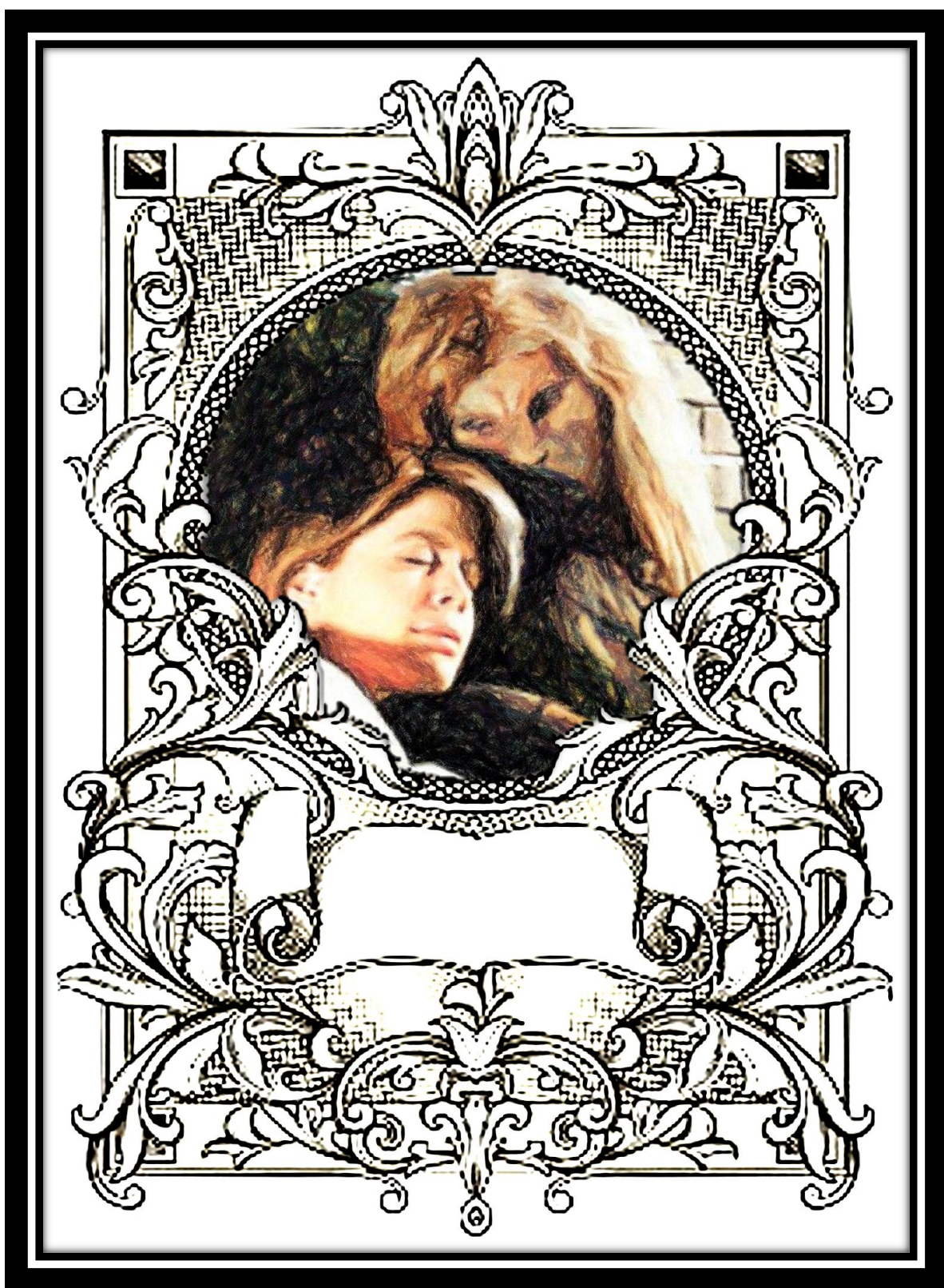
September 25, 2025

## Shakespeare's Sonnet #87



*Farewell, thou art too dear for my possessing,  
And like enough thou knowst thy estimate;  
The charter of thy worth gives thee releasing;  
My bonds in thee are all determinate.  
For how do I hold thee but by thy granting,  
And for that riches where is my deserving?  
The cause of this fair gift in me is wanting,  
And so my patent back again is swerving.  
Thyself thou gav'st, thy own worth then not knowing,  
Or me, to whom thou gav'st it, else mistaking;  
So thy great gift upon misprision growing  
Comes home again, on better judgment making.  
Thus have I had thee as a dream doth flatter,  
In sleep a king, but waking no such matter.*





\*The FREE 2025 Treasure Chambers digital online zine is an amateur publication and is not intended to infringe upon the copyrights of Ron Koslow, Witt/Thomas Productions, CBS or any other holder of “Beauty and the Beast” copyrights or licenses. Our only intention is to have fun.

\*\*We hereby give permission for the readers to print, copy, or share this zine for ***PERSONAL USE ONLY*** and ***NOT*** for sale or resale.

All future rights to original materials herein are reserved to the individual authors and artists who created them. Please contact them individually if you wish to post or use their work in any way.

\*\*\*All art and original work in this publication have been used with permission.

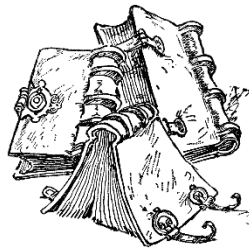


**B**eauty and the **B**east  
38<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 2025

Together Forever  
Volume IX  
I Had Thee as a Dream

TreasureChambers.com  
September 25, 2025

Featuring stories, art, and poetry, inspired  
by the characters created by **Ron Koslow**  
and so beautifully brought to life by  
**Linda Hamilton** and **Ron Perlman**  
from 1987-1990



A Treasure Chambers Publication



---

# Acknowledgements

---



## OnZine Host



Angie

## OnZine Editor



Barbara Anderson



## Contributing Authors

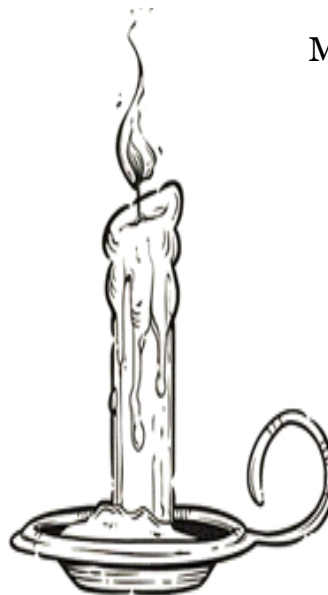


Allison Duggins  
Amanda Hawthorn  
Angie  
Anne Alden-France  
Anon E Mouse  
Barbara Anderson  
Cindy Rae  
CB McWhorter  
Hope  
Janet Rivenbark  
JessicaRae  
Judith Nolan  
Mel  
Michaela Buzsaki Struchova  
PearlAnn SnowStar

## Contributing Artists



Barbara Anderson  
Barbara Gipson  
Judith Nolan  
Lynn Wright  
Michaela Buzsaki Struchova  
Raygan Rains





A black and white promotional image for the TV show "Beauty and the Beast". It features the two main characters: a woman with long, wavy hair in the foreground, looking slightly to the side, and a man with a lion's face in the background, looking directly at the camera. The title "BEAUTY AND THE Beast" is written in a stylized font on the left. At the bottom left, a white banner contains the text "7PM CBS" followed by the CBS eye logo and a large number "2". The CBS logo is also present in the bottom right corner.





## Letter From the Editor



Welcome to the 9<sup>th</sup> annual Treasure Chambers September 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary fanzine. We hope you find as much pleasure reading it as we had creating it. What a lovely tribute it is to this beautiful show, that after 38 years, the Dream of Beauty and the Beast is still going strong.

The proof of that is in the fanfiction, poetry, and art that we keep creating for each other.

Some may say we're crazy for continuing to keep the dream alive after all these years. But as the world we live in becomes more and more out of control, maybe it's a good thing to be just a little bit crazy. Where is the harm, we ask, in having our beloved Tunnel world to escape to every now and then?

I'd like to thank all the 'Dream Keepers' who contributed to this year's zine. We extend a special welcome to first-time contributors to this zine: Amanda Hawthorne, CB McWhorter, Hope, and Raygan Rains. And a special Thank you to Barbara Gipson and Lynn Wright, who always so generously share their art and continue to inspire us with their talents.



Look for the new feature in our zine this year: it's our very own **Beauty and the Beast Plot Bunnies Story Garden**. You will find it near the end of the zine. You may also catch a glimpse of a few stray Plot Bunnies hopping throughout the zine. They might appear with a screen cap, a piece of fan art, a line from a poem, a drabble, or even a paragraph or chapter from an, as yet, unfinished story.

If you catch a glimpse of one, please stop for a moment and see if it intrigues your imagination or tickles your muse. If it does, please consider following your muse down the rabbit hole and turning it into something for next year's zine.

Please note: The word "Dream" appears in this zine 95 times. Can you find them all?



*-Barbara Anderson*



# Table of Contents



**\*Please note:** Blue underscored page numbers in this Table of Contents are hyperlinks for your convenience. There are also hyperlinks at the end of each story and poem that will return you to the Table of Contents.



**Shakespeare's Sonnet #87** *Inside front cover*

|                                    |            |
|------------------------------------|------------|
| <b>Bookplate Art.....</b>          | <b>i</b>   |
| <b>Acknowledgements.....</b>       | <b>iv</b>  |
| <b>Letter From the Editor.....</b> | <b>vi</b>  |
| <b>Table of Contents.....</b>      | <b>vii</b> |
| <b>Art.....</b>                    | <b>x</b>   |



## Classic

|                                                                 |                           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| <b>Digital Art by Barbara Anderson.....</b>                     | <b>1</b>                  |
| <b>I Had Thee as a Dream, poem by Anon E Mouse .....</b>        | <b><a href="#">3</a></b>  |
| <b>First Contact by Barbara Anderson.....</b>                   | <b><a href="#">4</a></b>  |
| <b>Digital Art by Judith Nolan .....</b>                        | <b>5</b>                  |
| <b>Episode Epistles Season One by Angie .....</b>               | <b><a href="#">7</a></b>  |
| <b>Digital Art by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova.....</b>           | <b>11</b>                 |
| <b>Every Angel is Terrifying by Barbara Anderson.....</b>       | <b><a href="#">13</a></b> |
| <b>Digital Art by Michalea Buzsaki Struchova.....</b>           | <b>17</b>                 |
| <b>Shades Of Love by Judith Nolan.....</b>                      | <b><a href="#">19</a></b> |
| <b>I Had Thee as a Dream Acrostic by Anne Alden-France.....</b> | <b><a href="#">24</a></b> |

## Table of Contents (continued)

|                                                                             |                   |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| <b>Digital Art</b> by Judith Nolan.....                                     | <b>25</b>         |
| <b>Shades Of Autumn</b> by Amanda Hawthorn.....                             | <b><u>27</u></b>  |
| <b>Digital Art</b> by Judith Nolan.....                                     | <b>53</b>         |
| <b>Masquerade</b> by Judith Nolan.....                                      | <b><u>55</u></b>  |
| <b>What's It Like?</b> by Barbara Anderson.....                             | <b><u>60</u></b>  |
| <b>Digital Art</b> by Judith Nolan.....                                     | <b>61</b>         |
| <b>Beyond Victory, Beyond Defeat</b> by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova.....     | <b><u>63</u></b>  |
| <b>Digital Art</b> by Judith Nolan.....                                     | <b>75</b>         |
| <b>Episode Epistles Season 2</b> by Angie.....                              | <b><u>77</u></b>  |
| <b>Digital Art</b> by Judith Nolan.....                                     | <b>81</b>         |
| <b>Truth Be Told</b> by Cindy Rae.....                                      | <b><u>83</u></b>  |
| <b>Art</b> by Lynn Wright.....                                              | <b>95, 184</b>    |
| <b>Winslow Sketch</b> by Barb Gipson.....                                   | <b>138</b>        |
| <b>Digital Art</b> by Michalea Buzsaki Struchova.....                       | <b>193</b>        |
| <b>Love Above and Below Drabbles</b> by Judith Nolan.....                   | <b><u>195</u></b> |
| <b>How Curiosity Didn't Kill the Cat</b> by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova..... | <b><u>201</u></b> |
| <b>Digital Art</b> by Michalea Buzsaki Struchova...                         | <b>205, 209</b>   |
| <b>You Can't Cook Dreams for Dinner</b> by Barbara Anderson.....            | <b><u>212</u></b> |
| <b>Digital Art</b> by Judith Nolan.....                                     | <b>213</b>        |
| <b>Echoes in Stone Drabbles</b> by Judith Nolan.....                        | <b><u>215</u></b> |
| <b>Digital Art</b> by Barbara Anderson.....                                 | <b>225</b>        |
| <b>The Price of Genius</b> by Judith Nolan.....                             | <b><u>227</u></b> |
| <b>Roy Dotrice Quote art</b> by Judith Nolan.....                           | <b>233</b>        |
| <b>A Christmas Below</b> by Judith Nolan <b>PG-17</b> .....                 | <b><u>235</u></b> |
| <b>Digital Art</b> by Judith Nolan.....                                     | <b>243</b>        |
| <b>What's Your Story?</b> by JessicaRae.....                                | <b><u>245</u></b> |
| <b>Sonnet of A Lifetime</b> by JessicaRae.....                              | <b><u>256</u></b> |
| <b>Digital Art</b> by Barbara Anderson.....                                 | <b>259</b>        |
| <b>When Mouse Arrived: Journal Entries</b> by JessicaRae.....               | <b><u>261</u></b> |
| <b>The Bandit of Halloween</b> by JessicaRae.....                           | <b><u>265</u></b> |
| <b>Belonging Classic Round Robin 2025</b><br>by Multiple Authors.....       | <b><u>271</u></b> |
| <b>"Feels Like Home" Fan Video</b> by Judith Nolan....                      | <b>316</b>        |



## Table of Contents (continued)



### She Never Died

|                                                             |                   |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| <b>Digital Art</b> by Judith Nolan.....                     | <b>317</b>        |
| <b>Sonnet of Love</b> by JessicaRae.....                    | <b><u>318</u></b> |
| <b>The Bond of Blood and Light</b> by Judith Nolan.....     | <b><u>319</u></b> |
| <b>Catherine and Jacob</b> by Barbara Gipson.....           | <b>325</b>        |
| <b>Mama's Boy</b> by Barbara Anderson.....                  | <b><u>326</u></b> |
| <b>Vincent and Jacob</b> by Barbara Gipson.....             | <b>327</b>        |
| <b>Jacob's Friend Mouse Drabbles</b> by Judith Nolan.....   | <b><u>328</u></b> |
| <b>Digital Art</b> by Judith Nolan.....                     | <b>331</b>        |
| <b>What You Are</b> by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova.....      | <b><u>333</u></b> |
| <b>Digital Art</b> by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova.....       | <b>334</b>        |
| <b>Blessed</b> by Judith Nolan.....                         | <b><u>335</u></b> |
| <b>Digital Art</b> by Judith Nolan.....                     | <b>349</b>        |
| <b>By Loves Design</b> by Amanda Hawthorne <b>SND</b> ..... | <b><u>351</u></b> |
| <b>You And Me</b> by Judith Nolan.....                      | <b><u>370</u></b> |
| <b>"Pretty Woman" Fan Video</b> by Judith Nolan....         | <b>370</b>        |
| <b>Digital Art</b> by Judith Nolan.....                     | <b>371</b>        |
| <b>Cotton Candy</b> by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova.....      | <b><u>373</u></b> |
| <b>Digital Art</b> by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova.....       | <b>375</b>        |
| <b>Severed Bonds</b> by Janet Rivenbark .....               | <b><u>377</u></b> |
| <b>Blueberry Muffin Recipe</b> .....                        | <b><u>456</u></b> |
| <b>Digital Art</b> by Judith Nolan.....                     | <b>457</b>        |
| <b>Going To the Falls</b> by Judith Nolan.....              | <b><u>459</u></b> |
| <b>Digital Art</b> by Judith Nolan.....                     | <b>469</b>        |
| <b>A Light in the Depths</b> by Judith Nolan.....           | <b><u>471</u></b> |
| <b>"Lady In Red" Fan Video</b> by Judith Nolan.....         | <b>476</b>        |
| <b>Mouse's Mischief</b> by Judith Nolan.....                | <b><u>477</u></b> |



## Table of Contents (continued)

### Season 3 and Beyond

|                                                                                                      |                   |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| <b>Digital Art</b> by Raygan Rains.....                                                              | <b>485</b>        |
| <b>Episode Epistles Season 3</b> by Angie.....                                                       | <b><u>487</u></b> |
| <b>Digital Art</b> by Judith Nolan.....                                                              | <b>489</b>        |
| <b>Blessed</b> by Anne Alden-France.....                                                             | <b><u>492</u></b> |
| <b>A Comparison of Epic Proportions</b> by Mel.....                                                  | <b><u>493</u></b> |
| <b>Season 3 Drabbles</b> by Mel.....                                                                 | <b><u>500</u></b> |
| <b>Digital Art</b> by Judith Nolan.....                                                              | <b>503</b>        |
| <b>Everything is Groovy</b> by PearlAnn SnowStar <b>V&amp;C AU</b> .....                             | <b><u>505</u></b> |
| <b>Digital Art</b> by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova.....                                                | <b>537</b>        |
| <b>Scars of the Past Season 3 Round Robin 2025</b><br>by Multiple Authors <b>S3 R Violence</b> ..... | <b><u>539</u></b> |
| <b>Vincent</b> by Barbara Gipson.....                                                                | <b>580</b>        |



### Beauty and the Beast

#### Plot Bunnies Story Garden

|                                                                         |                   |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| <b>Story Garden Art</b> by Judith Nolan.....                            | <b><u>587</u></b> |
| <b>Plot Bunny#1: Angels</b> submitted by Angie.....                     | <b><u>588</u></b> |
| <b>Plot Bunny#2 An Elliot Tale</b> submitted by Judith Nolan.....       | <b><u>589</u></b> |
| <b>Plot Bunny#3 Pincushions</b> submitted by Barbara Anderson.....      | <b><u>592</u></b> |
| <b>Plot Bunny#4 Catherine's Glass Egg Collection</b> by B Anderson..... | <b><u>593</u></b> |
| <b>A Fluffle of Plot Bunnies</b> submitted by multiple fans.....        | <b><u>594</u></b> |



|                                                               |                   |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| <b>I Had Thee As A Dream – Farewell!</b> by Anon E Mouse..... | <b><u>595</u></b> |
| <b>The End</b> by Barbara Anderson.....                       | <b><u>596</u></b> |



I Had  
Thee As  
A  
Dream



Barbara A

By Barbara Anderson





# *I Had Thee As A Dream*



*by Anon E Mouse*

*I had thee as a dream, one time,  
By tunnel-flickered candlelight.  
I had thee as a dream by day,  
And all throughout my sleepless night.*

*I had thee as a waking dream  
And then, more, when as I fell asleep.  
My heart: High as a balcony,  
My love: 'Twas crystal cavern deep.*

*I had thee by the sun and moon,  
(A moon I hold most dear.)  
I met you in a rain swept spring  
And held you fast, throughout the year.*

*I had thee "Once Upon A Time"  
And all its variations.  
I had thee "Happily Ever After."  
I had "Great Expectations."*

*I tell you this... I don't know why.  
For you are but a dream let in.  
A waking, sleeping, fantasy  
And so... Shall We Begin?*





---

# First Contact

by Barbara Anderson

---



Feeling the need to show her appreciation, and to physically connect with this stranger who had been caring for her so tenderly, Catherine reached out to touch him.

Her unexpected gesture gave Vincent no chance to avoid it. Before he knew what was happening, she'd grasped his grotesquely hirsute hand.

He froze, holding his breath.

It was too late.

Shocked by his hair-covered hand, Catherine gasped in surprise, withdrawing her hand as quickly as she had offered it.

*What was that?* she wondered.

He was gone in an instant, mortified by the shame of discovery.

"Vincent?" she called after him.



[\\*Return to Table of Contents](#)





*By Judith Nolan*









---

# Episode Epistles

by Angie  
(in production order)

---



## Prologue

Our series had a tale and thrills  
Poetry, music, lit got nods  
Pure love, yet sultry, gave us chills  
With fantasies of Vincent's bod.

## Season One

**The Pilot** - we all took a look  
At an ancient tale in a new round  
Within minutes we were hooked  
With romance blooming underground

**Children's Story** took us Above  
Where street-wise tunnel children dared  
To save two more in the name of love  
With Vincent and Catherine, now a pair

**Siege** was the other side of dreams  
Catherine found Elliot mystifying  
Then Vincent showed her what that means  
To those in the way of gentrifying

The **Terrible Saviour** on the trains?  
Why did he kill, not scare or maim?  
Catherine's capture wasn't asked,  
Yet he saved Vincent at the last.

**No Way Down** for Vincent hurt  
Friends and enemies were alert  
The Silks found him, but he got free  
Though Howie died, no coward he

**Beast Within** gave us Mitch  
A tunnel person turned to crime  
He challenged Vincent who was which  
But Catherine stopped his death in time

**Masques** gave us spooks and fear  
Vincent above this night saw clear  
Past Irish feuds and fairy tales  
Our couple gave a sunrise hail

**Nor Iron Bars A Cage** counts three  
Vincent drugged, caught and caged  
Desperation, searching, freed  
Catherine reads how love is saved

**Song of Orpheus**, Father's tale  
Margaret, lost love, found again  
A death, but Father freed from jail  
Catherine mused on love's sweet pain

**Dark Spirit** captured with a shell  
Voodoo deaths, hate and fear  
Catherine's fear was Vincent's hell  
He saved her whom he held most dear

**An Impossible Silence**: deaf Laura saw  
A cop crime – she must tell the truth  
The bad guys hid her from the law  
Our couple saved the honest youth

***Shades of Grey***, a cave collapsing  
Vincent, Father trapped in Maze  
Catherine begs Elliot stuff for blasting  
All ends well, his hopes are raised.

***China Moon***: Chinese underworld  
Arranged marriage, threatened lovers  
Tunnels hide her, but terror swirled  
Until Vincent came - then it's over

***The Alchemist***, a man in black  
Tunnel outcast, drugs for gold  
Vincent dosed, love brings him back  
Paracelsus gone - but still below

***Temptation***: Their Anniversary is due  
While Joe seduced might lose career  
His paramour distorts what's true  
While Catherine and Vincent's love is clear

***Promises of Someday*** shows  
Vincent's brother Devin found  
Brotherly love once turned to blows  
Time and the carousel go round.

Mania in ***Down to a Sunless Sea***  
Catherine love was Steven's aim  
He captured her, but it wasn't she  
Who fought him, saving love again.

Gold in tunnels, ***Fever*** showed  
Greed that risked Above's dire fate  
Danger, crooks and violent blows  
Abyss for gold? They donate!



***Everything is Everything*** to one  
A gypsy wants true justice then  
With our couple's help he won  
Gypsies never forget a friend

***To Reign in Hell***, sees Catherine claimed  
For Paracelsus' crazy dream  
He draws Vincent, but fails again  
Our lovers leave him to his schemes

The tale of ***Ozymandias*** is old  
And Elliot's tower is not sublime  
But like the poem, all's brought low  
When Catherine exposes crime

***A Happy Life*** has dreams awake  
Does Fate offer love or more?  
Catherine seeks, while Vincent waits  
In the end their love's restored

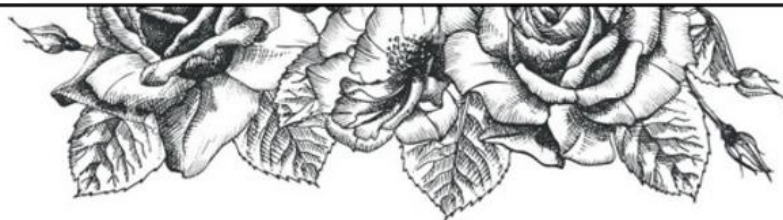




In happy dreams  
I hold you full in night.  
I blush again  
who waking look so wan;  
Brighter than sunniest day  
that ever shone,  
In happy dreams  
your smile makes day of night ...

Christina Rossetti

By Michaela Buzsaki Struchova







---

# Every Angel is Terrifying

by Barbara Anderson

---



*“...For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror  
which we are barely able to endure, and it amazes us so,  
because it serenely disdains to destroy us.*

*Every angel is terrifying.”*

*— Rainer Maria Rilke, Duino Elegies<sup>1</sup>*



*V*incent!”

He heard Catherine call out to him as he fled her sweet embrace.

He stopped, just out of her line of sight. He could feel the fear in her heart at finding herself standing there alone, beneath her apartment building.

And then... he felt her courage as she realized there was only one thing she could do.

So, she turned toward the hazy beam of light and followed it back to her world.

It was a world apart from his. A world where the wealthy and the powerful rule. Vincent knew there was no place for him in *that* world. And he knew from the very night he had brought her Below, that his world of shadows was no fit place for someone like her. He knew she would eventually have to be returned to *her* world... Above.

Leaning his back against the cold, hard tunnel wall, he closed his eyes and replayed the scene he had just fled.

---

<sup>1</sup> Taken from the poem, “Duino Elegies” by Rainer Maria Rilke.





*Catherine had turned to leave, without so much as a 'goodbye,' and then turned back unexpectedly to assure him that his secret was safe with her. He already knew that. He'd known it from the first moment she had trusted him.*

*Then, without warning, she lay her head against him, and rested her delicate hand on his chest, caressing him gently.*



*He was caught off guard. He could feel the warmth of her hand burning through the layers of his clothing and into his soul. No woman had ever touched him like that. No woman had ever dared. She took his breath away, but he felt no trace of fear within her. Only a sweetness he had never imagined.*

*Suddenly filled with the essence of her, Vincent found himself powerless to resist. He felt his arm reaching around her, his large hand resting on her back, drawing her still closer... never wanting the moment to end, yet at*

*the same time knowing that it must. He could feel his heart exulting with joy and shattering to pieces with each passing second.*

*The words of Rilke echoed in Vincent's mind. "For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror... every angel is terrifying..."*

*No, he told himself, not Catherine... she may be an angel, but she is not terrifying... never.*

*Then lifting her head, Catherine sweetly asked, "What can I say to you?"*

*Voices, and the sound of footsteps from Above momentarily broke the spell that held him there. He seized the opportunity to flee from her presence.*



Now alone in the tunnel, Vincent pressed an open hand flat against his chest. He could still feel the warmth of her sweet gesture as it burned itself into his memory. *How is it possible that her warmth could penetrate so deeply?* he wondered.

He breathed deeply, attempting to calm the beat of his racing heart, slow his rapid respiration, and regain control of himself.

Instinctively, Vincent knew it was unlikely that he would ever see her again. At the same time, he vowed, their last moment together was a memory he would treasure and cherish... *Always.*

He waited there in the darkness for a long time... still feeling the cacophony of emotions churning within her; fear, panic, relief when she felt safe with someone... and finally, he felt the growing distance as she was taken farther away from him... *probably to a hospital... or a police station,* he surmised.

At length, feeling calmer, Vincent felt strong enough to begin the long walk back to his Tunnel home. As he walked, the words of Rilke continued to repeat themselves over and over in his mind.

*"For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror  
which we are barely able to endure, and it amazes us so,  
because it serenely disdains to destroy us.  
Every angel is terrifying."*



*Yes, Vincent thought, I know only too well how true those words can be.*

As a youth, he had fallen in love with the most beautiful girl in his Tunnel world... and had learned by heartbreaking, even soul-crushing, experience that Rilke was indeed right.

The experience *had* nearly destroyed him.

*But not Catherine, he told himself. Never Catherine.*

Eventually, Vincent found himself standing on the bridge in the Chamber of the Winds. His heart tried valiantly to banish Rilke's cautionary lines from his mind.

*Yes... it is true that even in spite of the scars she will carry, Catherine **is** still beautiful... he admitted to himself ... But there is no terror in her beauty, because her beauty comes from within. And, yes, she has been like an angel to me these last ten days... but she is **not** terrifying... **not her**. Catherine would never 'serenely disdain to destroy' me. Even if I will never see her again, I cannot believe it of her... not Catherine...*

**...Never!**



---

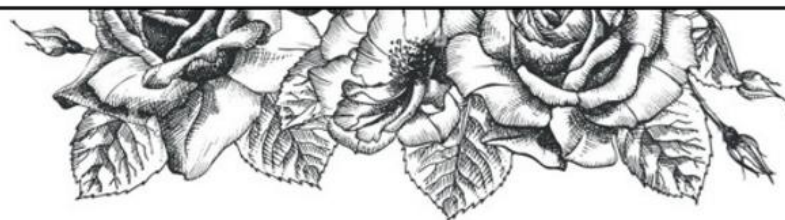
**\*\***Illustrations in this story are digitally altered screencaps provided by the author.





*"As he read,  
I fell in love  
the way you fall asleep:  
slowly, and then all at once."  
- John Green -*

**By Michaela Buzsaki Struchova**









## Shades Of Love

by Judith Nolan



*"The timeless in you is aware of life's timelessness.  
And knows that yesterday is but today's memory.  
And tomorrow is today's dream..."*

**Khalil Gibran**



**C**atherine and Winslow stood by and watched as Mouse finished rigging up the explosives that would rescue Vincent and Father. They didn't move when the tinker turned around.

Mouse frowned at them. "You want to blow up with me? Go on..." He waved one hand at them. "Her, too. Get way back."

Winslow stepped forward. "No, I'll do it. You take her and go on out. I've got this."

"My gizmos. My way. Go." Mouse lifted his chin and denied his words.

Catherine shook her head. "You can't detonate it from the tunnel? It's too dangerous."

Mouse shrugged. "Gotta be here. Signal won't go through solid rock. Go with Winslow. He'll look after you."

"Show me what to do and I'll do it," Catherine offered quickly.

Mouse stared at her. "He's my friend too, Catherine. If you die, Vincent will kill me, anyway. Go now, before it's too late."

Winslow complained, "You're crazy, you know that don't you? You got bats in your belfry."

Mouse shrugged as he stared at him. "If I'm dead, you take care of Arthur."

"Oh, no..." Winslow scowled. "Best you don't get yourself killed, then. I'm not nursemaidin' no damn raccoon." He slapped the tinker on the shoulder. "Take care."

The blacksmith turned to the rest of the group. "Come on then, you lot. Let's go." He waved his arms and herded them all back to take shelter further down the tunnel.

Mouse watched and waited until he was satisfied with the distance. Then he held his breath as he set off the explosives. The blast sent a choking shower of rock and dust rushing through the tunnels to smother everything and anyone in its way.

As soon as they could see, Catherine and Winslow went forward to peer through the dust into the gaping hole that had been left behind. They saw Vincent leaning over Father as he tried to shield him.

"*Vincent!*" Catherine called out as she stumbled through the rubble on the floor.

"Catherine..." Vincent reached for her and hugged her tightly.

"Vincent..." Catherine pulled back and looked down at Father.

"Father is badly hurt," Vincent said as he went down beside the older man.

"Mouse..." Catherine looked around for the tinker. "He stayed behind to set off the explosives..."

"Just a touch too much..." Mouse commented from where he was lying against the tunnel wall in a heap of rubble.

A relieved Winslow reached down and seized him by his clothing. He hauled the smaller man to his feet. "You're the only mouse I've ever known with nine lives!" He crushed him in a bear hug before letting him go to slap him on the back.

Mouse made his way over to where Father was lying. He knelt beside him. "Vincent, Father..." he asked.

Father coughed to clear the dust from his throat. "Mouse, Catherine... I have no words to thank you..." He reached up to touch each of them on the cheek and smiled.

“Come on, you lot...” Winslow encouraged the crowd who were filling the opening in the rock wall. “Let’s rig up a stretcher for Father and get him out of here before any more of this rock comes down on us. We ain’t got time for talkin’.”

“I blew it up good,” Mouse replied. “Stable for now.”

“Yeah...” Winslow shrugged. “Then you can stay here and test out your theory all you want. The old man needs medical attention right away.”

There was a concerted effort to make up a stretcher, and Father suffered the pains of being moved onto it as best he could without complaining. He lay limply, barely seeming to breathe.

Winslow clasped Vincent’s shoulder. “We got this, man. You go on now and take Catherine home. She looks done in. And you can’t do any more for now.”

“Catherine...” Vincent held out his hand for her to take.

She took it before bending down to kiss Father’s dust-smeared brow. “Look after yourself.”

“It doesn’t seem as if I have a choice.” The old man coughed up more dust. He sank back against the stiff canvas of his stretcher and closed his eyes.

Vincent took his love out of the tunnels by the shortest route. As they approached the entry to her basement, they both turned to face one another.

“Catherine...” Vincent whispered.

She stepped closer. “I’ve never been so frightened.”

Vincent nodded. “Your courage saved our lives.”

“I felt like I was losing the best part of myself. I would have done

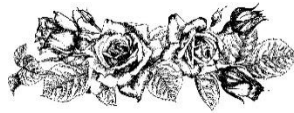




anything.” She looked up into his face. “It wasn’t courage Vincent. It was love...”

She rested her head into his shoulder, and he put his arms around her to draw her closer. They held their embrace for several heartbeats before Catherine pulled away and turned to walk toward the blue-white light of her sub-basement entrance. She disappeared from view as she climbed the steps to the world Above.

Vincent stood in the broken brick entrance and watched her leave him again. Then he shook his head as he turned away and went Below.



The next morning, Catherine rolled over in her bed and opened one eye to stare at the bedside clock. She felt bone-weary and disinclined to get up. But when she saw the time, she knew she must.

She managed to shower in double-quick time and get dressed before eating a slice of toast with jam. She drank from a mug of strong black coffee while she gathered her things for work.

Just as she was about to leave her apartment, the telephone rang. She debated whether she should answer it or leave it to her machine to pick up. She knew Joe would be waiting for her. She decided to leave the call when the machine kicked in.

“Cathy?” Elliot’s impatient tones filled the room. “You said I don’t get an explanation. Well, now I’m asking for one.”

He sighed heavily. “Cathy? Are you there? Come on, pick up. Please...”

“Dammit...” Catherine sighed as she tossed aside her satchel and coat.

She snatched up the receiver. “I’m sorry, Elliot. I asked you to trust me. I can’t tell you more than that.”

“If you remember our conversation yesterday, that’s all I’ve ever asked of you. I called and called, and you’ve never picked up since we parted.”

He stifled his tone of impatience and went for conciliatory. “You said the next time I called, you’d be in.”



“Yes, I did say that,” Catherine responded even as she frowned at her wristwatch.

“Well, I’m calling and asking,” Edward replied. “Are you in?”

“I said I would be,” Catherine countered. “Look, Elliot. I’m already running late for work. Joe will be looking for me by now.”

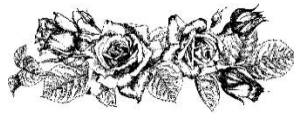
“Caravaggio’s at eight. I’ll make the reservation. We need to talk, Cathy. *Really* talk. I don’t want us to end the way we did before. I want to try again with you. You owe me that much.”

“Caravaggio’s at eight,” Catherine confirmed crisply. “I’ll be there. Goodbye, Elliot.”

“Til tonight,” Elliot told her. “I want to see you, Cathy...”

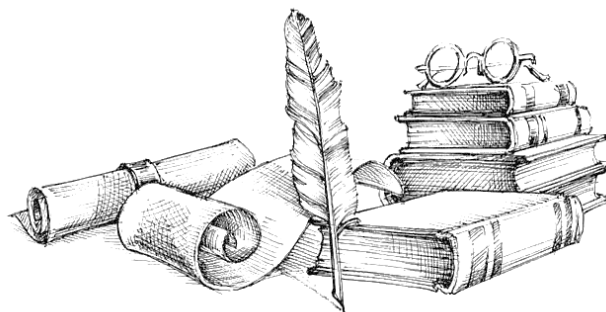
“I know...” Catherine sighed as she dropped the receiver into the holder.

“Why is my life so complicated?” She shook her head as she regathered her things and left her apartment.



*“All life is transitory. A Dream. We all come together in the same place at the end of time. If I don’t see you again here, I will see you in a little while, in the place where no shadows fall...”*

***Ambassador Delenn: Babylon 5***



# *I Had Thee As A Dream Acrostic*

*by Anne Alden-France*



*I*nvictus

*H*appy Life

*A*ttack

*D*iana

*T*unnels

*H*ome

*E*ast Side Deb

*E*lliot

*A*rabesque

*S*piral Staircase

*A*ttorney

*D*evin

*R*olley

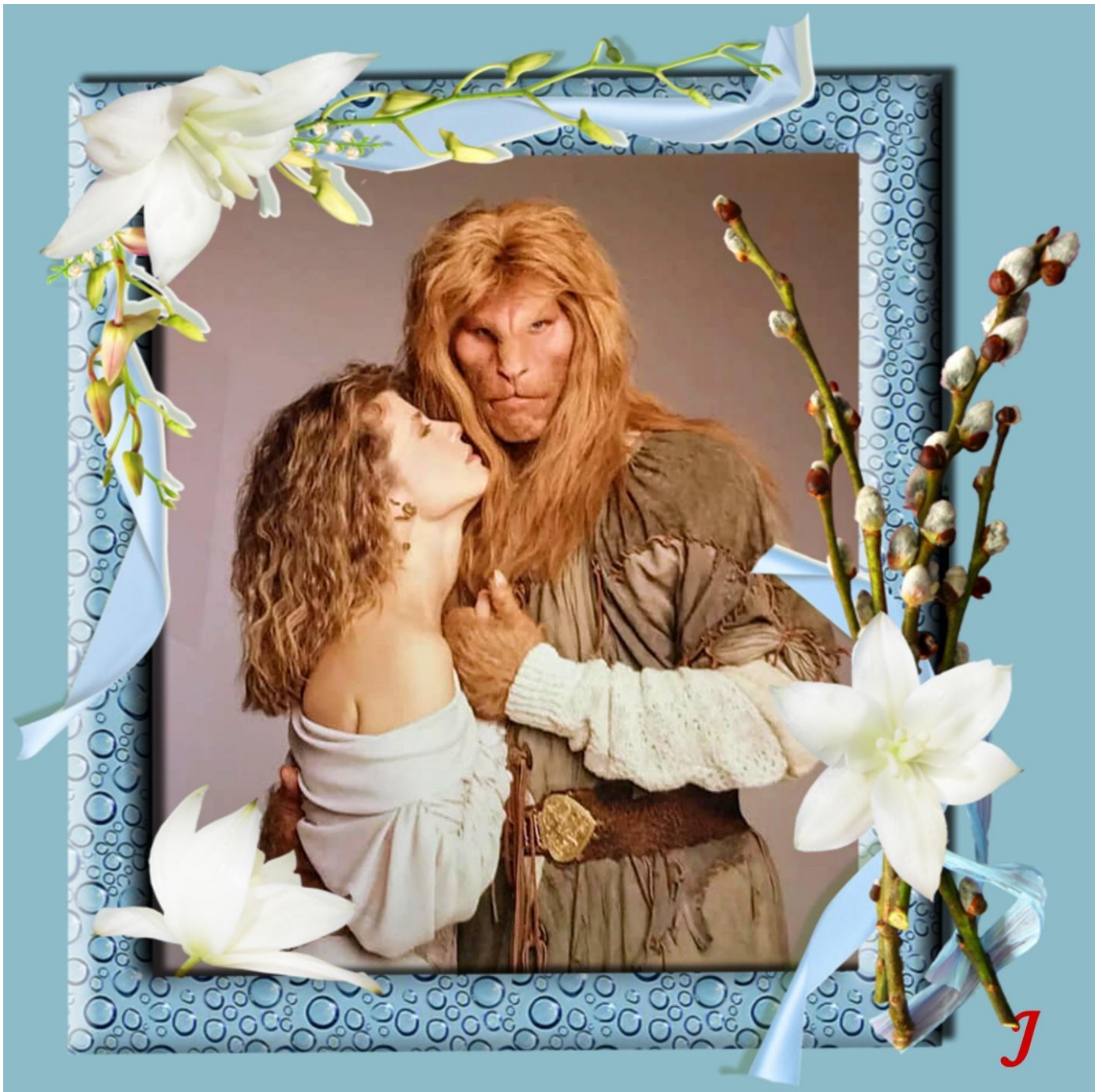
*E*verything is Everything

*A*pril 12th

*M*asques



[\\*Return to Table of Contents](#)



*By Judith Nolan*







**Disclaimer:** *Beauty and The Beast* does not belong to me unfortunately.

**A/N:** *I have taken liberties with the story and timeline in the season 2 episode Orphans.*

*Huge thanks to Kelly and Katrina Relf for reading through this for me.*



**Summary:** *Was it weeks or days since he'd taken his last breath? Catherine couldn't seem to remember anymore. The sun still rose in the sky every morning, yet she had lost all sense of time. Minutes seemed to drag into hours and hours into days... she didn't even know how long she had been sitting here.*



---

## Shades Of Autumn

by Amanda Hawthorn

---



unlight streamed through the open drapes, but Catherine paid no attention. Numbness overtook her body, causing her heart to hurt in a way she hadn't felt in a very long time. Blind to the sunshine and the sounds of the city, Catherine often found herself staring off into a vacant daze. Her dad was gone, his loss bringing devastation in its wake, leaving her feeling like she had no control over her life right now. She thought it would be easier after his funeral, but it just seemed so much harder. Now, as she sat on her couch with her legs pulled up to her chest, she couldn't seem to

breathe. Loss etched deep pain through her body until she struggled to find the strength from day to day.

Was it weeks or days since he'd taken his last breath? Catherine couldn't seem to remember anymore. The sun still rose in the sky every morning, yet she had lost all sense of time. Minutes seemed to drag into hours and hours into days...she didn't even know how long she had been sitting here.

The phone began ringing once more but she closed her eyes against the intrusion. Couldn't these people understand that she didn't want to talk right now? She didn't want to hear sympathetic words when all she wanted to do was scream. The intrusive ringing suddenly stopped, and Catherine slowly opened her eyes again. Glancing up at the clock she saw it was only mid-morning, causing another wave of sadness to wash over her. She wished she could be with Vincent, but he couldn't come to her until nightfall. He was the only part of her life that made sense to her. He was the only one she wanted to be with, and it hurt so much because she couldn't. He would come to her soon, just as he had done every single night since her father's passing. He'd stayed with her until dawn, holding her regardless of whether she wanted to talk or not. She loved him even more because of it, and as much as she fought to banish the irrational thoughts from creeping into her mind, she couldn't shake the fear that she would lose him too...it was almost suffocating.

Anger flashed through her in that moment, bringing with it another wave of shuddering sobs. She was angry at God for taking her father from her. Angry at the world for its hate and fear that would banish the man she loved to live a life out of sight. She wanted him here, and his arms around her. She wanted time to reverse to when her dad was still alive. Hopelessness mixed with despair flooded her senses causing her to fold over herself to weep into her bent knees. Everything felt impossible and tragic. How could she live her life here when her heart and her love were Below.

Sitting upright, Catherine swiped angrily at her face and started to move from the couch. She was so angry at herself and her topsy-turvy emotions. The confident woman she had become over the last two years seemed to have disappeared, leaving behind only a fraction of her in an empty shell. The Catherine Chandler who Vincent had taught to be strong seemed so far

away now, and she didn't know if that version of herself would ever return. The stiffness in her body slowed her movements, a punishment for staying in the same position for far too long. Her stomach rumbled due to days of skipped meals, but the thought of food turned her stomach. Swallowing heavily, Catherine caught sight of her own reflection in the mirror. The



woman looking back at her was unrecognisable, and it shocked her to her very core. She looked drawn and pale. Her usually vibrant hair was limp and dull, and she had dark circles beneath her eyes. How could Vincent bear to look at her like this? She didn't even know who she was anymore. Taking a breath, she rubbed her hands over her face and moved towards the bathroom.

It was mid-afternoon when she looked at the clock again. The telephone had rung several more times since she'd emerged from the shower, every call going unanswered.

Talking about her loss only brought more pain and she knew if she tried to speak, she would crumble into a mass of sobs prompting her caller to pay a visit and she didn't want that. She had managed to eat some toast, even though every morsel felt like she was trying to swallow sand. Deep down she knew this couldn't continue. She felt like she was lost in an alien world. Getting to her feet, she moved towards the closet and snagged her coat from its hanger before slipping it on. She needed to get out of this apartment. Moving swiftly towards her front door, she grabbed her keys from the hook and rushed out of her claustrophobic home.

The sunshine warmed her face once she was outside, but it brought her no respite from her pain. Everywhere she looked, she felt like people were watching her as if they could read her so easily. Was she so transparent? Could they see what she had been through just by looking at her? Her feelings of exposure became heightened, even more so now she was on view for everyone to see. Panic, no matter how unreasonable it was, seemed to



course through her, and she focussed on the one place that could provide her sanctuary to hide herself away.

Catherine made her way towards the park, half walking, half running in her desperation to reach her safe place. Her need heightened with every step, turning to desperation as she ran into the tunnel that led to another world. Tears streamed down her cheeks and tiny sobs robbed her of breath, but she couldn't slow down. She made her way through the tunnel, turning through long-remembered pathways, until she surged forward into the waiting arms of the man she loved.

Her arms tightened around him as she allowed his touch to soothe her shaking body. His body heat seeped into hers, bringing with it a sense of calm that she didn't feel until she was with him. After a few moments of silence, she pulled away and stepped back to look around her, as if the solace she so desperately craved would suddenly appear.

"I had nowhere to go," she told him in a voice that sounded foreign to her own ears. "I tried to find my way, Vincent, but it all feels wrong and I..." she moved towards him again. "I can't go back."

"Catherine," his voice soaked through her senses as he placed comforting hands on her shoulders. "You're grieving. You need time to heal."

"I need to be with *you*," she implored, laying her forehead against his chest briefly before lifting her head to once again look up at him. "I *need* you."

Vincent could feel her pain, the strength of it causing him to tighten his hold around her. His heart hurt when she sank into him and moulded her body to his. How could he deny her this when all he wanted was to hold her and never let her go? He released the breath he didn't realise he'd been holding and pressed his lips into the soft silken of her hair. He couldn't leave her like this, not now, not ever. Loosening his hold, his arms slipped from around her body so he could pull the large gate open that separated their worlds.

"Come," he told her simply, knowing that one single word meant so much more to both of them. He gently guided her through the opening, keeping his hand on one of her shoulders as he pulled the gate closed behind them.

They walked in silence, his arm around her shoulders. She leant into his side, her arm secured around his waist as they slowly made their way

through the tunnels that lead to the world below. Vincent could feel her anguish slowly lifting to be replaced with something akin to serene calmness. The shaking in her body had slowly subsided, and by the way she held onto him, he knew he couldn't ever deny her anything she asked of him.

Catherine felt relief enveloping her when she heard the tapping of the pipes. A feeling of belonging suddenly caused her to sigh with relief. She was at peace here. She was home. She pressed her fingers gently into Vincent's waist and looked up at him with an adoring smile. She loved this beautiful man beside her more than she could simply put into words. She didn't know if he would ever know just how much she craved every part of him, or how much she wanted to be with him every minute of every day. She just *needed* him, always.

Vincent's heart thumped wildly in his chest, answering her desperate calls to him. He felt everything she was feeling, and he wished, with his whole being, that he could be with her every day and night, too. He inclined his head to meet her gaze and smiled despite the sadness that had brought her down here to his world. He also knew the sentries guarding the tunnels would have seen their loving display, but he had no care for how they saw him right now. He loved this beautiful woman beside him, and as he guided her into the empty guest-chamber, releasing his hold on her, he felt the loss instantly.

Catherine looked around the candlelit chamber before she returned her gaze to him. She desperately wanted him to stay with her, but she couldn't seem to form the words. So instead, she offered him a soft smile and moved towards the bed to sit on the edge of the mattress. Disappointment flooded through her, but she tried to quash the feeling before Vincent would feel it. Catherine didn't really know what she'd expected when she came to him here, but she couldn't dispute that she was so very tired. She couldn't even remember the last time she'd managed to sleep more than an hour at a time. Sighing wearily, she brought her hands to her face and rubbed her sore eyes.

Vincent had felt the wave of feelings from her emanating through their bond. He was trying so hard to keep his longing to be with her and his need to comfort her separated, but the line between them had become almost

blurred. She stirred feelings inside him that were easier to control when their time together was limited, but with her so close, knowing she would be sleeping just a short distance away from him brought a new worry to his heart. He was afraid he wouldn't be able to deny her if she needed more from him while she was here. So instead, he took a step away from the bed and smiled despite the overwhelming desire to stay. He was so torn.

"Rest now," he told her, his gentle voice bringing fresh tears to her eyes, making their parting even more difficult. "I will only be a short distance away."

Catherine nodded mutely as a lone tear broke free to trickle down her cheek. She made no move to swipe it away, she just kept her gaze on him, watching sadly as he moved away from her and edged towards the entrance of the chamber. She swallowed heavily against the welling emotion that balled in her throat, helpless against the powerful surge of loss that brought wave after wave of grief along with it. Tears cascaded over her pale cheeks, no matter how desperately she tried to stop them. It was only when he disappeared from the guest chamber completely that she allowed the despair to claim her as she bent over her knees, burying her face in her hands. Her whole body shook as she sobbed for the loss of her father, the loss of Vincent, and the loss of her life.

Vincent could feel his own eyes flood with tears when he heard her. He had stood just outside the chamber, his legs unwilling to move any further away from her. He couldn't bear to leave her alone in her grief and moved swiftly back inside towards her again and sank down beside her on the bed. His arms slipped around her once more as she turned into his chest and clung to him as she cried. Vincent slowly eased them backwards, so they were resting against the pillows. He kept half of his body turned so his feet were still on the ground while she was fully on the mattress, curled against him. Her tears soaked through his shirt, but he didn't care. He knew he would hold her for as long as she needed him to hold her, even if that meant all day and night.

It seemed hours until her tears began to subside. He knew she was exhausted and hadn't been sleeping since her father had become ill in the hospital. Love surged through him as he held her, content to just be beside her holding her within his arms. Leaning over her he placed a soft kiss on

her temple, smoothing her hair aside with his free hand. He could hear her even breathing now as sleep finally claimed her, and he wished he could stay by her side and hold her while she slept, but he knew that wasn't the wisest choice for either of them. Having her so close to him brought so much longing within him, and he knew she was in far too much pain for him to explain to her just how much her presence here affected him. He was afraid for her, *and* for himself...so, reluctantly he gently lifted himself from the bed and stepped away, casting her one last longing look before he left her to sleep.

When Catherine awoke a short time later, she turned to reach for Vincent, but all she found was an empty space where he had been. Her heart sank with loss, not just for her father but for Vincent too, but she pushed it down, knowing that Vincent would feel her turmoil and come back to her. As much as she longed for him to be by her side, she knew he had responsibilities to the people here, and she had to respect that, no matter how sad she felt. She pushed herself upright and wiped her hands across her tired face. Her throat felt so raw through the grief she had endured, and she wondered briefly if she had any more tears left to cry.

A shuffling of feet in the doorway brought her out of her reverie and she turned her head to see Jeffrey holding a jug as he walked slowly towards her. His smile filled her with warmth, and she found herself returning it with one of her own.

"Vincent sent me to ask if you needed anything," he told her. "Do you need anything?"

Catherine looked at the child with fondness and sat up further in the bed. "Thank you, Jeffrey. Maybe some hot water."

She watched silently as he poured water into a basin on top of a small wooden chest of drawers beside the bed. It was when he had finished his task to stand back to smile at her, that she felt her heart jolt.

"I'm sorry about you, Father," Jeffrey told her with sincerity in his eyes, and Catherine found herself marvelling at how mature this young boy had become.

"Thank you," she tried to offer him a small smile as she lifted herself higher to swing her legs over the side of the bed to rest her feet on the floor.



“I’ve lost my parents too,” he told her with a sad sigh. “They died in a car crash when I was a baby.”

Catherine’s eyes raked over the young boy with a new sense of loss, not just for herself, but for him too. She felt such a kinship with him and wanted nothing more than to reach out to him and wrap him in her arms, but before she could speak, he surprised her again when his lips lifted into a wry smile.

“I guess that makes you an orphan too.”

“I guess it does,” Catherine told him, nodding slightly, feeling temporarily lighter. This child had lost so much more than she had, yet here he was, happy and living a life that his parents would no doubt be so proud of.

He nodded and turned to leave but stopped and turned back around to face her before he reached the entrance to the tunnels.

“Vincent is working down in the lower tunnels, but he said I was to fetch him if you needed him. If you want, I could go and get him.”

Part of her wanted to tell him yes. Yes, she *did* need him...she would *always* need him. She also recognised the overwhelming feeling that caused her to ache for his presence. Rawness that came along with the grief gripped onto her and she fought with the urgency to want him close by. It was irrational and it was selfish of her to feel this way. So instead, she swallowed hard at the lump in her throat and returned her gaze to the young boy who was watching her so intently.

“No,” she told him, smiling despite the sadness enveloping her once more. “I’ll be okay. Thank you for asking though.”

“Okay,” he beamed, before turning to head out of her chamber, leaving her alone once more.

Catherine groaned when her limbs protested as she moved forward to stand on shaking legs. Every part of her body seemed to ache as much, if not more than her heart did right now. Taking a deep breath, she stretched, lifting her arms above her head to try and regain some feeling in her stiff muscles. Her bones protested when she lowered her arms, but she ignored the pain. Instead, she moved towards the wash basin and moved her hands into the hot water, scooping some into her closed fingers so she could splash it over her face.

When she had finished washing, she realised that she did feel a little better. Her heart, although still aching with sadness, didn't feel so heavy right now. Reaching down to pull open one of the drawers in the dresser, she saw that there was a change of clothes waiting for her. Smiling, she reached inside to run her fingers over the soft wool before she pulled the garment from the drawer. Lifting it up between her hands, Catherine regarded the long white cardigan with appreciative eyes. It was so soft, and the knitted stitches so fine that it looked like actual cloth. Placing the cardigan onto the bed, she turned back to the drawer to pull out another item of clothing, giving it the same attention as she had the first. She marvelled at the long dress before she quickly began to remove her own clothes so she could slip into the tunnel ones.

When she was done, she regarded her own reflection in the mirror atop the dresser and sighed. She was still pale, but she now resembled someone who lived in this world, and it filled her with a sudden sense of belonging, something she hadn't felt in a long time. Turning away from the mirror, she reached into the drawer to pull out the final items. Sitting back onto the edge of the bed, she pulled on a pair of thick socks and loose fitting leather boots. Standing up again, she looked around the chamber once more, before she made her way out into the tunnels.



Jacob Wells was sitting in his large leather chair when she hovered at the entrance to his chamber. Catherine watched him for a few moments before she stepped over the threshold and moved inside. She felt her heart lift with the sight of him, and she cast him a fond gaze. Over the last few months, he had become more accepting of her relationship with Vincent, and in turn, she had grown to adore him. She watched him silently for a few moments, taking in the serenity of his chamber. She wasn't really sure why she was here when Vincent was not, but whatever the reason, she knew that the kindness and wisdom of the older man would ease some of the aching in her heart.

"Am I disturbing you, Father?" she asked softly before she moved further into his chamber.

Jacob lifted his head from his book and looked at her over his glasses. He smiled warmly and closed the book he'd been reading to place it onto the table beside him before turning towards her.

"Not at all, Catherine. Come," he indicated to the vacant chair opposite him. "Sit."

"Thank you," she told him with a warm smile as she moved towards him and sat into the offered chair. She opened her mouth to ask him if he minded her intrusion, but before she could speak, he reached forward to place his hand over hers.

"I am so sorry to hear of your loss," he said as he squeezed her fingers gently. "I want you to know that you are welcome here for as long as you need."

Catherine swallowed hard and her eyes once more flooded with tears. It was on the tip of her tongue to ask if she could stay forever, but she forced that thought from her mind. Lowering her eyes to their joined hands on the arm of her chair, she took a moment to think of something to say that could express her gratitude to him for being so welcoming, but she couldn't find the right words. Instead, she turned her hand beneath his until they were palm to palm.

"Thank you, Father. You don't know how good it is to hear you say that."

Giving her fingers one last squeeze, Jacob withdrew his hand from hers and sat back further into his chair. He regarded her with the eyes of a father, and in that one moment, he made a silent vow to Charles Chandler that his daughter wouldn't ever be alone.

"How are you, Catherine?"

Catherine was silent for a long moment before she felt strong enough to answer him. Her words came out in a sigh as she spoke, her voice shaking, "I feel...lost, Father... adrift... like I'm stumbling through fog. One moment the pain becomes unbearable, and then it subsides again and for a moment I forget." Lowering her head, she wiped a lone tear away from her face with her fingers before lifting her head once more, her gaze finding his. "And then I remember, and the pain crashes over me like a wave again, and I...it feels like it will never end..."

“That is understandable,” Father nodded when her voice trailed away. “A loss such as this is enough to shatter the strongest of people. Losing a parent, no matter what your age, brings a pain like no other.”

Catherine found herself nodding with his words. The loss and the constant ache were at times, unbearable. She couldn't remember most of what she'd felt with her mother's loss. She had been so young and found it difficult to process what death actually meant. But she wasn't a child anymore.

“I lost my mother when I was very young,” she told him, her voice soft as she spoke. “I only remember parts of how it felt back then. I remember my father coming into my room, crying, and I couldn't understand why. I thought my mom had just gone to the hospital and that she would be home when I woke up. I didn't know she'd been sick for a long time, and I didn't understand that she was gone forever. Losing her hurt both of us, my dad and me. He was so sad all of the time and trying to be so strong for me, but I knew things had changed forever for us.”

“Her loss must have been devastating for both of you. Even more so when it is so sudden,” Father sighed solemnly, nodding slightly.

Catherine sighed heavily as she relived the last week of endless grief. She lifted her watery eyes to his once more, “Losing my dad...it happened so suddenly. I feel like a part of me has been ripped away.”

“I know that feeling too,” Father sighed sadly as his eyes skimmed over her pale features. “My own parents were taken from me when I was barely old enough to understand what was happening. My grandmother raised me for as long as she was able to do so...but she gave me every ounce of love she could.”

“Did you miss them?” She asked. “Did there come a time when you searched for images in your mind that grew harder to reach as time passed?”

“Sometimes,” he nodded. “But my grandmother filled my life with so much joy that I didn't feel the need to remember what I'd lost.”

“I can't remember my mother's voice,” Catherine told him, swallowing hard against the lump in her throat. “I don't want the years to pass and to forget my dad's too.”



“You won’t Catherine,” he promised. “Let your memories of him guide you through the sadness. It will allow you to heal.”

Catherine looked upon him with fondness and swiped at a lone tear that spilled over to trickle over her cheek. “I wish you could have met him. I think you and him would have been really good friends.”

“I wish that too,” he smiled as he reached out to pat her hand with his own before pulling away again. “Peter always speaks fondly of him.”

“Dad wouldn’t have challenged you to a game of chess, though,” she half chuckled, half sobbed. “He wasn’t very good at it. Poker was his game of choice.”

“Poker hmm...I’m sure we would have very much enjoyed each other’s company,” he told her, enjoying the lightness in her smile. “Tell me something about him.”

Sitting further back into her chair, Catherine smiled as memories of him filled her mind. His ability to make her laugh. His endless patience. His love.

“He used to make me laugh,” she smiled as images of her father with a big red clown’s nose sparked so many happy memories. “I think he was trying to fill the void my mother left behind. But no matter how old I was, he used to come to me wearing this ridiculous big red nose and I couldn’t help but laugh as soon as I saw him...I...”

When her voice trailed away, Father regarded her sadly when he saw sorrow fill eyes with tears once more.

“I kept so much hidden from him, even before Vincent came into my life. I never intended for it to happen, but as I got older and went off to college, we drifted apart. I never realised how much time I had allowed to pass. How much time I wasted by focusing on my own life.”

“I’m sure he understood, Catherine. As parents, we watch our children grow, knowing that one day they will go on to lead their own lives that sometimes takes them onto other paths, away from us. But we still love them. We still support them in everything they do...even if we don’t always agree with their choices.” Father thought of his own failings with Vincent. When he’d condemned his act of bringing Catherine below, he had no idea how much all of their lives would change because of this beautiful woman.

“That's what Vincent told me too,” she smiled, her eyes sparkling with love as she spoke. “I wish the first time my dad had met Vincent wasn't when he was in a hospital bed. I wish they could have met long before all of this happened. But I know my dad would have understood why I couldn't introduce him to the man I'm in love with, before then.”

Father felt the tips of his ears burn with her words. He knew she loved his son, but he had tried not to notice how deeply that love was infused within them. He found himself reaching out to her again, his fingers skimming over her damp cheek.

“My dear Catherine, do you remember when Ellie died, and we wrote letters to send to her?”

“Of course,” she nodded, sniffing back tears. “It was beautiful.”

“Maybe you should write to your father, too. I'm sure he would be glad to receive it.”

Catherine leaned her face into his palm as she brought her hand up to cover his. Tears glistened in her eyes as she offered him a watery smile. “I'd really like that, Father.”

Father withdrew his hand from her cheek, allowing his fingertips to skim across hers before he moved further back in his chair once more.

“Well then, if you want the chance to do it here, I'm sure we can arrange it...and maybe some more of our community would like to take the opportunity to send messages to *their* loved ones, too.”

Catherine nodded, smiling despite the tears. She hoped he knew how much she appreciated his gesture. For such a long time she had felt that he'd looked upon her with such disdain. She knew it was because he'd thought she would hurt his son, but she hoped she had put his fears to rest now.

Her eyes caught movement at the entrance to Father's chamber, and she felt her heart jolt when she saw the man she loved enter the room. For a moment she couldn't control the trembling in her legs, but before she could try to stand and greet him, he was there kneeling beside her. His arms came around her and she sank into him, winding her arms around his shoulders in near desperation. They clung together for a long moment before he slowly began to move away. Catherine wanted to cry in protest, but she

loosened her grip on him to allow him to move backward until their eyes met in a heated gaze.

“I am sorry I wasn’t there when you awoke,” he told her softly, seemingly forgetting that Father was still seated in his chair, watching their loving display.

“No...it’s alright,” she nodded, lifting her hand to lay her palm against his rough cheek. “I didn’t want to come here and take you away from your work...”

“*Catherine*,” he spoke her name so softly that she thought she could never grow tired of hearing it. “My place is with *you*. Whatever you need, I will do whatever is in my power to give it to you.”

His words caused the ever-present tears to well in her eyes and she lifted her free hand up to join her other to cradle his face within her palms. Her eyes searched his, begging him to see the love she held inside for him.

“I only need you, Vincent,” she whispered softly, unashamed by the overflowing tears trickling down her ivory skin. “Just you.”

Vincent lifted his hands to cup hers over his face and curled his fingers around hers, pulling them away so he could place a soft kiss into the centre of each of her palms.

“You have me,” he told her in a voice that caused her stomach to flip. Pulling her hands from his, she moved towards him again and buried herself into his embrace once more.

Jacob looked upon the couple with something akin to sorrow. He felt their connection so deeply, and that only brought sadness to his heart. He wished these two amazing people could find a way to have a normal relationship despite his son’s uniqueness. He could no longer deny that he had been wrong when he thought that this relationship would only bring Vincent unhappiness, for he would be absolutely miserable without her.

He cleared his throat when the young couple clung to each other with no signs of letting go. He watched when his son reluctantly moved back to get to his feet, still keeping hold of one of Catherine’s hands as he waited for him to speak. Jacob looked at the pair before him and offered them both an adoring smile. If anyone deserved happiness it was these two, and he knew he would do anything in his power to support their love and what it meant

for all of them. The whole community, himself included, loved Catherine like one of their own... she *was* one of their own. It had just taken him longer to see it.

“I have asked Catherine if she would like to write to her father in the same way we did for Ellie,” he said as he looked up towards his son. “Maybe it could be an opportunity for our community to come together and share their love for Catherine and to other lost loved ones.”

Vincent regarded his father with a new wave of love. He nodded while he squeezed Catherine’s fingers gently. “That is a wonderful idea, Father.”

“I’m sure you could arrange it for her,” Jacob smiled, nodding as he watched Catherine lift her head to smile up at his son adoringly.

Vincent smiled down at his beloved and gave her hand a gentle tug, pulling her to her feet so that she stood beside him. Their eyes held for a long moment, so much love passing between them, until he broke the gaze and turned to offer his father a warm smile.

“Of course, Father.”

Jacob nodded his head and smiled as the couple turned to leave his chamber, but when Catherine pulled Vincent to a halt, he looked up at her wondering what was wrong. His eyes were on her as she moved towards him, pulling Vincent along with her. She smiled as she closed the distance and bent close to him to place a gentle kiss on his cheek before stepping back again.

“Thank you, Father,” she told him softly. “Thank you for everything.”

Jacob felt a wash of emotion surge through him, and he reached up to squeeze her free hand gently before releasing it just as quickly. “You are very welcome my dear Catherine.”

She nodded and offered him another smile before turning away from him to follow Vincent out of the chamber, still holding tightly to his hand.



Catherine could feel the grief lifting slightly as her time with Vincent wore on. She marvelled at the beauty of the waterfalls where they now sat. The breeze from the crashing water gently swirled around them, causing

Catherine to tug the edges of her cardigan closer together. She sat opposite Vincent and felt more content than she had in a very long time. Her heart didn't ache while she was here with him, and she had to wonder if this feeling was something telling her that this is where her life should be now, but she was so unsure of herself and the indecision coursing through her.

"I can feel your turmoil," Vincent told her as he cast his adoring gaze over her. He watched as she turned her head towards him and leant across the rock that separated them.

"I feel so happy here," she told him in a sigh. "Being with you fills me with so much joy, and I..."

Vincent reached for her hand when her voice trailed away, squeezing her fingers. He knew she was unsure about many things right now and he didn't want to add to her uncertainties, but he couldn't *not* voice his thoughts.

"I can feel it in you," he told her, his gaze washing over her. "Your indecision is so loud within you."

"I don't know if I can go back," she told him then, the words falling from her in a sudden burst. "I don't think I *want* to go back."

Vincent's heart soared and he fought with the words he knew she longed to hear, even though he knew their dream had always been an impossible one. He dragged his eyes from her beautiful face to gaze out onto the waterfall as the soft words passed through his lips.

"I don't want you to go back."

Catherine's heart jolted with his words, and she found herself lifting up onto her knees so she could move a little closer. Her movement caused him to turn his head and return his gaze to her, his questioning eyes waiting for her to speak.

"My heart is telling me I want to stay, but...I'm still not sure," she admitted sadly as she watched his calm eyes offer only acceptance. "I don't want to hurt you...and I don't ever want to disappoint you."

Vincent shook his head and grasped her hand in his, ready to tell her that there was no way she could ever disappoint him.

"You could not, Catherine," he told her calmly. "You are a part of this world as much as you are a part of me. Wherever you go, you take me with you. I



live our dream through you, and whether you decide to stay here and live your life, or return above, you will always be a part of this world too...you are a woman of both worlds.”

“But I *want* to be with you,” she sighed, shaking her head in frustration.

“When I first came here with you, I was so sure I wanted to stay, but now...”

“You have to follow your heart, Catherine.”

“What if my heart is here?” she asked, feeling the sting of tears once more.

“My heart is with *you*,” he told her with a warm smile. “You stand for me and our dream. My heart is wherever you are.”

Catherine moved her free hand to enclose over his, encasing it between both of hers. She wanted to tell him that being here with him was everything, and it was in a way, but when she knew there was so much good, she could still do above, her doubts crept slowly into her thoughts.

“Do you think the time will come when we’ll truly be together?”

Vincent pondered her words for a moment and cast her a serene smile.

“Only if and only when we are ready to accept the sacrifices that would come with our dream, and if fear does not play a part in our decisions.”

Lifting her hand from his, Catherine moved her fingers to his face, turning him towards her. She gazed up into his cerulean blue eyes and watched him with so much conviction that he knew he couldn’t turn away.

“I’m not scared,” she told him firmly, holding his gaze as she spoke. “I will never *not* want to be with you...I will never *not* love you...I will never *not* want our dream as badly as you do...and I will never *not* be in love with you.”

Vincent felt his heart burst with her words, and for a moment he was transfixed within her adoring presence. Leaning towards her, he watched with fascination as her eyes slipped closed when he inched even closer, his mouth hovering close to hers. He hesitated for just a second as he tried to gather the courage to give her what they had both wanted for so long. Fear held him motionless; he had never kissed anyone before, and he was so afraid of doing it wrong. Taking a breath, he watched Catherine’s slightly parted lips and banished any doubts. Closing the gap between them to press his lips to hers, sealing their love with a soft, brief kiss. When he pulled

away, Vincent watched as Catherine's eyes fluttered open to look upon him in wonder. Her lips lifted into a smile, and Vincent thought she looked almost angelic. Her soft gaze was filled with love, and the power of it caused his breath to catch in his chest. He never thought he could be worthy of such devotion, but her love made everything feel possible.

Catherine shifted up onto her knees so she could edge closer to him. She glanced down at the rock that was seated between them and found herself wishing it away. For a moment she looked down at the obstacle in annoyance, but before she could manoeuvre around it, she felt Vincent's strong hands cup her waist to lift her over it to land unceremoniously onto his lap. She heard Vincent's sharp intake of breath as she landed, and she suddenly forgot to breathe. Catherine could feel Vincent's body trembling, and she was torn between staying on his lap or scrambling off of him to wait for him to make the next move. When he still hadn't moved, she decided on the latter and tried to change position and ease herself from his legs, but he shocked her by tightening his fingers on her waist, holding her firmly in place.

Their eyes met and held in silent communication, and in that moment, Catherine knew she would need to be the courageous one and continue what he had started. Neither spoke when Catherine slowly wound her arms around his shoulders and rested her forehead against his. Her lips still tingled from his all too brief kiss, and her body shivered with anticipation. Their faces were close enough to feel each other's breath and the intimacy of their position wasn't lost on either of them. Catherine opened her eyes to search his gaze, realising they had never been so close to each other before, not like this. She watched him intently, searching for some kind of indication that he wanted to stop, but when she saw none, she relaxed against him. She could see his blue eyes awash with trepidation, giving her the courage to lift her forehead from his. Her hand shook slightly when she leaned back and reached up to touch his face, trailing her fingertips over his lips.

"Vincent," she breathed. "Please say you are okay with this..."

"Catherine...I..." his words trailed away as she leaned into him, the look in her eyes causing him to gravitate towards her. Her sweet scent assaulted his

senses, and he knew he was unable to resist her when she met him halfway, pressing her lips to his in a feather-light kiss.

The gentle touch was enough to send sparks of fire through her body, and when she pulled back to gauge his reaction, she saw his eyes were closed and his mouth slightly open. Smiling, she leaned in again, closing her lips over his, increasing the pressure just enough to entice a soft moan from him. At first Vincent kept perfectly still, his hands firmly against her waist, but when she deepened the kiss, running her tongue over his bottom lip, he surrendered to her touch and sank into her with a soft groan.

He wound his arms around her; one hand burying itself in her hair while the other roamed her shoulders. Catherine moulded her body to his, desperate to close the distance between them, but when the need to breathe caused a frustrating distraction, she broke away from him with a gasp. Both of them stared at the other with a mixture of shock and absolute joy. Breathing heavily Vincent leaned his forehead against hers and fought to steady his pounding heartbeat. He had no idea that a kiss could feel this way. He had no words to describe what he was feeling right now, so he didn't try to speak. Instead, he held her tightly against him, while he tried to gather his senses and calm his awakening body. Having her so close was a little frightening, especially when he wanted to desperately kiss her again, but he held himself back. She was here because she was grieving, and he had made a promise to her father that he would watch over her. Later, when she was feeling stronger, he would gladly allow her to kiss him again... he would take great joy in it. He could feel her disappointment, so he placated her by placing a kiss against her temple before shifting her, so her head was resting against his chest. No words passed between them, only quiet acceptance that their relationship was changing.

Vincent didn't think it was possible to fall more in love with her than he already was. Their shared kiss had seemed to bring his senses to life as if the power of her lips had caused his whole body to come alive in her arms. She brought feelings out in him that he couldn't possibly put into words, but with those feelings came the ache of sadness knowing he was going to miss her so much when she returned Above. Would he even be able to let her go? The thought of being without her scared him.

Catherine sighed at her place against his chest and held him tighter. She was so incredibly content to be in his arms and feel so loved. He had kissed her, *finally* kissed her, and it had felt wonderful. She was so happy. A sudden feeling of dread washed over her, rapidly cooling the happiness she had been feeling only moments ago. Her father was gone, and here she was smiling and happy. Was it wrong? How could she be happy so soon after he'd died? Guilt welled up inside her, suffocating the happiness until she couldn't feel it anymore. Tears flooded her eyes, and she tightened her hold on the man she loved, clinging onto him so he would keep her from drowning in this endless sea of grief.

Vincent tightened his hold and lowered his lips into the soft strands of her hair. He felt her sadness crying out to him so loudly, not just for her loss, but because she truly felt so undeserving of so much happiness. His own eyes swam with tears as he did the only thing he could do to help her through this. He met her sorrow with love. She needed to hear the words from him, he knew she did, but something inside him prevented him from saying them to her. Maybe *he* was the one who felt undeserving of such a precious gift. He knew he felt the words every time she spoke them aloud to him, and he tried to portray his love in other ways. He hoped she knew... she had to know.

"You fill me with such joy," he told her then, his words disappearing into her hair. "You have given me more than I ever thought I would have in my life."

She was quiet for a long time, and for a moment he thought she might have been asleep, but when she finally spoke, he had to strain to hear her through the pounding of his heartbeat in his ears.

"You give the same to me," she told him, lifting her head from his chest. She loosened her arms and sat back so she could see his eyes. "I feel closer to you than anyone else in my life, and I..."

"What?" he asked softly when her voice trailed away. She remained silent for a few moments as if she were trying to find the right words, so he lifted one of his hands to her face, skimming her soft skin with his fingers.

"Catherine?"

"I love you," she told him then, blurting out the words as she lifted one of her hands to grasp his on her cheek, holding it there while she leaned into

his palm. Tears flooded her eyes when she met his gaze, the silent droplets rolling over her cheeks. "And I feel like I shouldn't be happy...that I'm disrespecting his memory somehow..."

Vincent inhaled sharply at her words, feeling her turmoil so loudly through their bond. Her pain rippled through him, causing his own eyes to fill with emotion. Bringing their joined hands to his lips, he placed a soft kiss on her fingers before giving her a gentle tug, pulling her back against his chest. Releasing her hand, his arms enclosed around her, encasing her within his arms. He could feel her body shaking with sadness, so he pulled her tighter, knowing that the grief she was going through was blending with the love she felt for him too.

"No," he told her while placing kisses against her temple. "No, my love...he loved you."

Catherine sobbed as she wrapped her arms around his back, holding him tighter when the despair replaced the elation of only a short time ago. She shifted from happiness to sorrow so quickly that it left her shaking from the power of it all. Soft shudders wracked her body, and she cried for her father, her mother and for the moments she would lose with Vincent if she decided to return Above. Everything felt hopeless and painful...and it felt like it would never end.

"He would want you to be happy," Vincent told her, pressing kisses into her hair. "He wouldn't deny us our happiness, Catherine...he was your father..."

Catherine clung to him as he rocked them from side to side, pulling her as tightly to him as he could without hurting her. He could feel her sobs waning, the power draining from the sorrow she carried within her. His fingers skimmed over her back and shoulders, hoping to bring her comfort with his touch. He vowed to whoever was listening that he would love her and protect her until he drew his last breath.

Slowly, her sobs began to subside, but she stayed within the circle of his arms. She breathed in deeply, her breath catching on a sob as she turned her head, so her cheek was resting against the woollen sweater covering his chest. She felt like her emotions were on ship, rolling with the crest of a wave. She shifted from happiness to despair in mere moments, but being here with this beautiful man helped to calm the chaos within her heart.





They stayed wrapped around each other for a long moment. Vincent moved his fingers over her back, tracing patterns over the material covering her skin. Neither spoke, both content to take comfort from the other in what was fast becoming their very own sanctuary. He could feel Catherine's limbs becoming heavy and her breathing becoming deeper. His spine protested at being in the same position for so long, but he accepted it gladly, content to know she was finally sleeping. He continued to hold her close and rested his cheek atop her head. He had never felt this close to another person in his life. None of the Shakespeare sonnets came close to what he was feeling right now. He smiled to himself when he realised that maybe Shakespeare didn't know everything after all...

Catherine dreamt she was in her apartment. She could feel the softness of the couch beneath her and the sunlight on her face that was streaming through the open windows. She closed her eyes and revelled in the warm breeze that billowed through her hair, but when she felt the touch of a hand, she opened her eyes and turned to see her father sitting beside her.

“Daddy?” she asked, gasping in a breath before launching herself into his waiting arms. “You’re here...”

“Only for a short time sweetheart,” he told her as he buried his lips into her hair. “I came to say goodbye.”

Catherine shook her head against his chest and tightened her arms around him. She couldn’t let him go now, not when he had only just arrived.

“I came to tell you I understand you so much better now,” he continued.

“...And to tell you I am so happy to know you have finally found love with a man who is worthy of you.”

Catherine sniffed at the emotion stinging her eyes and slowly moved backward so she could look at him. Tears tumbled over her cheeks when she grasped hold of his hand. “Do you understand why I couldn’t tell you?”

“I do,” he told her with a smile. “And I want you to know that I heard everything you said in the hospital...and I heard everything he said too.”

“Are you happy for me, daddy?” she asked softly, tightening her hold on his hand. “I wish you could have got to know him and Father.”

“But I do know them, sweetheart,” he smiled. “I know them through you...I know they love you and that is all I ever wanted for you.”

“I’m glad,” she nodded, smiling despite the tears. “I’m so glad.”

Charles pulled her against him one more time before releasing her just as quickly. He glanced down at his watch and moved to get to his feet.

“I have to be going now...”

“No,” she gasped, surging forward to try to catch his hand before he moved out of her reach. “Dad...”

He turned one last time to offer her a happy smile, and then he was gone. Catherine stared into the empty space he’d left behind and wiped the tears

from her cheek. She felt strangely cathartic right in this moment, and she knew that whatever she decided to do, she was going to be okay.

Vincent could feel her stirring against him and stroked his fingers across her back, easing her into wakefulness. Lowing his head once more, he pressed soft kisses into her hair and felt a sense of peace wash over him.

Catherine slowly opened her eyes and for a moment she had to remember where she was. The sounds around her drifted into her senses, pulling her to the realisation that she was warm and tucked safely in her beloved's arms. His heat seeped into her body, warming her from the inside out, banishing the sadness that had brought her here. Slowly she began to move, sliding her arms from around him to ease herself up to look upon him with tired eyes.

Vincent's fingers lifted to her face to tenderly brush an errant strand of hair from her eyes. He could feel his love overflowing, spilling out and into his touch. He hoped she could feel it as much as he did, and when she leaned her cheek into the palm of his hand, he knew that she could.

"I saw my dad," she told him with a watery smile, bringing her hand up to cover his on her face. "He understood about everything...about you, about us...and he approved."

Her words filled Vincent with happiness as he tilted his head to the side and smiled. "He gave you his blessing."

"Yes, he did," she told him, happiness coursing through her. "He really did."

Taking his hand from her face, she pulled it up to her lips and pressed a soft kiss into his palm before lowering her body back to his again. She nestled her head beneath his chin, allowing his love and his warmth to flow through her. The sadness was still there, lingering like a shadow over her heart, but the love of this beautiful man was filling it with light. She knew she was going to be okay now. Whatever was to come, it would be okay. For now, though, she was content to stay in Vincent's arms, allowing his love to banish every dark place in her heart...



Sometime later, Catherine stood with Vincent, staring at the crackling fire that had taken her letter to her father up in the smoke, its embers swirling up into the darkened sky. She smiled as she watched, knowing that he had given her the approval she needed to go forward in her life. Vincent's arms slipped around her from behind, holding her back firmly against his chest as his gaze followed hers. Catherine smiled as she slipped her hands over his to thread her fingers through his on her stomach, content to be standing here with him. Around them, others in the community had gathered, each placing notes into the fire, not just for Catherine, but for others that had been lost and were sadly missed. No one spoke. Each set of eyes drifted upwards into the star-lit sky, watching the smoke swirling with their messages of love up to the heavens.

The fire had started to burn itself out by the time Catherine and Vincent stepped away from each other. Catherine was now dressed in her normal clothes, the ones from Below now stored safely within Vincent's keeping. Wordlessly, Vincent reached for her hand, noting how the others had long ago left them to go back to their chambers. Catherine clasped his fingers tightly as they walked, keeping her pace as slow as she could. She was in no hurry to leave him, but she knew she had to return to her life Above. She at least had to try to return, for both of them. Then one day she would return to Vincent's world and make it her own. One day...

When they finally reached the entrance below her building, Catherine held onto Vincent's hand a little while longer before she released him, her fingers trailing over his until only their little fingers were linked.

"I'm a little scared," she admitted as she looked towards her basement briefly before turning back to him again.

"I can feel it in you," he nodded, smiling despite the heaviness in his heart. He was going to miss having her so close, especially when she had awakened so many feelings within him.

Catherine watched him with unabashed devotion. Love flowed through her like molten fire, and before he even knew what she was planning, she stepped closer to press her lips against his in a long lingering kiss that left them both breathless. When she stepped backward, but still close enough to touch, she squeezed his hand one last time and smiled.

"I love you, Vincent."

Vincent watched her with so much adoration, so much love. She brought him alive with her touch, and he suddenly wasn't so afraid of the words anymore. He reached for her hand, lifting it to his lips for one last parting kiss before he released her again.

"Be well, my love," he told her softly, taking another step backward.

"And you, Vincent," she replied, equally reluctant to leave him. "Will I see you soon?"

He nodded, smiling at the slight worry in her voice. "You will."

Catherine glanced back at the light leading toward her basement and sighed heavily before she took a step closer toward it. She turned back once more to see him still watching her and smiled, she loved him so much. Lifting her hand, she arranged her fingers into the ASL sign for 'I love you,' nodding tearfully when he offered her the same gesture.

As she turned away from him and disappeared into the light, she knew she was going to be alright. She was a woman of both worlds...and for now, that was who she was.

Catherine Chandler was going to be okay...

**End**



---

\*Illustrations in this story are digitally manipulated screen caps provided by the zine editor





*By Judith Nolan*







# Masquerade

by Judith Nolan

*“Masquerade! Paper faces on parade...  
Masquerade! Hide your face, so the world will  
never find you...”*

## ***Phantom Of the Opera***



Catherine turned beneath the warm spray of her shower as she rinsed the last of the shampoo from her hair. The hot water felt good on her tired skin. The bathroom was filled with steam.

She kept her eyes closed, simply luxuriating in the thought of having nothing more to do than finish her shower and get dressed. It was Friday evening, and the following day was Christmas Eve. She'd worked at double the pace all day under Joe's watchful scowl. He'd been eating those chocolate-covered cheese nuggets again, and his temper was short.

Then, unbelievably, he'd decided to give all his staff the rest of the holiday weekend off. No one questioned the unexpected gift. They all packed up and bolted for the doors to the bullpen before their irascible boss could change his mind.

“Merry Christmas...” He stood watching them with his hands on his hips.

“Thanks, Joe,” Catherine said as she pulled her coat on and grabbed her bag. “I'll owe you.”

“Don't make me regret my generosity come Monday,” he grouched as he retreated to his office.

“I won’t...” Catherine sighed as she finally turned off the spray.

She opened the shower door and reached out for a large bath towel from the rack. She’d just emerged from the cubicle with the towel wrapped around her when the doorbell rang.

She knew who it was. Or at the very least, she suspected. “Hang on, I’m coming...” she called, before quickly wrapping another towel around her wet hair, turban-style.

She was still wet as she padded barefoot through her apartment to the front door, clutching her towel at her chest by its folds. As the bell rang again, she unlocked the door and opened it as far as the chain would allow to view her visitor.

Her father smiled at her. “Good evening, my lady...”

Dressed as an elegant Regency gentleman, he looked resplendent in black and silver. He doffed his black silk opera hat to her as he leaned on a tasselled walking stick.

“Mr. Beau Brummell at your very good service...” A black silk loo mask dangled by its ribbons from his fingers.

“Hi, Dad.” Catherine smiled as she closed the door to unchain it, then held it open to admit him.

“Am I early? Are you late? Or is that your Christmas costume?” her father asked, looking her up and down quizzically. “Suddenly, I feel very overdressed. Maybe I should go home and change into a towelling robe.”

“No, please don’t...” Catherine laughed and gave his cheek a quick kiss as she shut the door. “I’m so late. I’m sorry, Dad. I lost all track of time at the office. Joe was in a mood because he hates to waste time on holidays. He only let us all go an hour ago. I’ve been rushing to get ready for you.”

“Well, you never used to lose track of time when you worked for me.” Charles smiled as he teased her. “You were barely there.”

Catherine chuckled as she returned the favour. “Oh sure, I did. Every morning.”



She sighed. "If you can wait, I'm sure I can get dressed in time for us to arrive at the firm's Christmas party, fashionably late. It wouldn't be the first time we've attended one of your corporate masquerade events together." She retreated towards her bedroom.

"That's a promise I haven't heard before, either..." Charles put his hat down on the glass coffee table and tossed his mask into it.

He seated himself cautiously on one of her dinky sofas to wait. "A likely story. I figure, at least, an hour and a half," he complained.

His daughter paused to look back at him. "Oh, don't worry. That was the old Cathy. I'll be ready to go in thirty minutes. Trust me." She closed the folding bedroom doors behind her.

Her father sat patiently on the dinky couch as the minutes ticked by. He tried to get more comfortable, but it was a losing battle with the confinement of his layered outfit. He sighed, trying to readjust his coat again.

His frowning gaze strayed to the closed bedroom doors, even as he sneaked a quick look at his wristwatch. In the next moment, the folding doors opened, and Catherine appeared. She looked stunningly beautiful in a high-waisted, nineteenth-century evening gown of sapphire silk trimmed at the bodice and wrists with falls of cream lace. Long ringlets of silky hair hung down over one bare shoulder.

She swept him an elegant curtsy. "Miss Jane Austen at your service, Sir." She rose again and smiled. She held up a matching sapphire mask to her eyes, then dropped it to dangle by its ties from her wrist.

Charles's heart leapt with both love and pride. "*Whoa!* Well, that was hardly thirty minutes. But it was well worth the waiting for. My little girl has changed so much, hasn't she? You look so grown-up and so very beautiful. I'll have my work cut out as your father tonight, keeping the men away from schmoozing you."





He got off the couch and approached her. “That’s a great outfit.”

“Isn’t it wonderful?” Catherine completed a cautious turn in front of him. Her elegant skirts flared and rustled grandly. “And I’m trying very hard to make you proud of me, Dad.”

“Well, you don’t know how proud and pleased I am that you let me talk you into this. Since you left the firm, I hardly ever get to see you. I thought you would miss this year’s party like you had to miss last year’s. After you... I mean, when you were...” He swallowed tightly.

“I know, Dad. And it’s all right. I’m really looking forward to it. It’ll be like old times.” Catherine picked up a beaded reticule from the table beside the door. “But I’ve missed you too, Dad.” She slid the reticule’s ribbons over her wrist.

Charles chuckled softly. “Now, don’t worry about leaving me to fend for myself if you get a better offer. I’m not so old that I don’t remember how romantic these affairs can often be. A lot of your old friends will be there tonight. They’re so happy you’re coming with me.”

Catherine shook her head. “Well, it’s been too long since we went out together. I’m going to this party to be with *you*.”

Charles smiled. “You know, when you were little, and your mother and I were going out to one of these fancy dress-up affairs, you used to escape her care and come to find me. You would hug my knees and demand that you be allowed to dress up and go too. I tried to say you were too small. But nothing would change your mind until I agreed to dance with you.”

His gaze grew misty. “You would stand on the toes of my shoes, and we would waltz around the room. Those memories are very precious to me.”

“I remember those times...” Catherine replied. “They were magical.”

Her father reached out and took her hand, squeezing it gently. His voice became choked as he said, “I know I told you how beautiful you look...”

He sighed. “But at times like this, you remind me so much of your mother...”

Deeply moved, Catherine leaned close to touch his cheek. “I miss her too...”

Charles heaved a sigh. “Someday, you’ll find someone you can love as much as I loved your mother. We were two of the lucky ones. Now, I have my memories, and I have you to remind me at times like this...”

Catherine wrapped both hands around his upper arm. “You sure do. Merry Christmas, Dad.” She leaned her cheek against his shoulder.

“Merry Christmas, my dear...” Her father looked away quickly as he wiped one finger across his eyes. He picked up the mask and tied it over his eyes before he donned the hat.

Catherine pulled on a long pair of evening gloves before she picked up a full-length black silk cloak from a nearby chair. She held it out for him to take. Charles draped it around her shoulders, then Catherine tied the black silk cords beneath her chin.

“Come on...” she said as she slipped her hand through the crook of his arm. “Let’s go and dance like we used to.”

They left the apartment, eager to begin the celebratory night ahead. It would be an evening that promised so much...



*“If conversation was the lyrics, laughter was the music, making time spent together a melody that could be replayed over and over without getting stale...”*

**Nicholas Sparks**





# What's It Like?

by Barbara Anderson



What's it like... being rich?" Jamie asked while sorting buttons in Mary's sewing room.

"What do you mean?" Catherine replied, squinting at the needle she was trying to thread.

"I mean... how does it... feel?"

Catherine thought for a moment. "I suppose it depends on what you mean by 'rich.' It means different things to different people."

Jamie was confused. "It does?"

Catherine smiled, reflecting how drastically the meaning had shifted for her since she met Vincent.

"Before I met Vincent... and all of you, I thought I *was* rich. Now, I'm keenly aware of how poor I truly was."





*By Judith Nolan*







# Beyond Victory, Beyond Defeat

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova

1.

LAURA

**A**nother Monday, another day stuck here, selling papers and pretending I am a part of the great big world. Working during the days, fulfilling my Helper's duties at weekends. Mr. Wise has been good to me; I have to give him that... But even after seven months, it's still not working... I still don't feel like I belong, quite the opposite, I feel like a bird's egg that had been put in the wrong nest...



When I was leaving the Tunnels, I was scared and excited at the same time. I didn't know what the world Above would offer me, but I was thrilled to open a new page and see everything I had only read and dreamed about down Below. All the colours, scents, sights, people... I may not have been born with the gift of hearing, but all my other senses work perfectly like a Swiss clock! Not that I have ever seen one, a working one, that is, apart

from the broken wristwatch Mouse found on some trash site.

After Vincent saved me from that horrible man who tried to kill me, I didn't have much faith in New York Above at first. Then he and Catherine told me that evil exists everywhere, Above and Below, but that there is even more goodness and beauty in both places. We only have to open our hearts and minds to accept and appreciate it. And so, I did leave the Tunnels after all, like many children do once they grow up there. There are many of those who decide to stay Below, but I've always felt that I was missing something down there.

My parents abandoned me in Central Park when I was barely four, probably because they couldn't cope with an imperfect child. I couldn't speak, or sign. Every interaction I had had until then was one of rejection or pity. I didn't know what love was, for all I got was indifference. One of the Helpers found me sitting near the Carousel that evening and brought me to the Tunnels. He's a policeman and kept checking the missing children lists for a few weeks, but no one ever reported me missing. So, I stayed Below.

I was frightened at first. The closed, narrow, and mostly dark spaces confused me. However, Father, Rebecca and Mary, in fact, everyone else were always very kind to me. They brought one of the Helpers, a sign language teacher, to teach me sign. Once I could express myself, everything seemed much easier. Vincent always said I learned to sign much quicker than he did...

Vincent... I miss him; I wish he were here... I wish he would tell me that this feeling of uncertainty in my heart is just temporary, and that I will find my place in this world and love it one day. It just takes some time... He was my teacher, my closest and kindest friend, and someone I always looked up to. Even when I saw him for the first time, only a few weeks after I was brought to the Tunnels, I don't remember being scared of his face. Maybe because for the first time in my life, I saw someone else who was different from others, just like me...

Vincent... What should I do? I want to fit in here, but I am suffocating...

*"Stop daydreaming, Laura. We have newspapers to sell,"* Mr. Wise signs to me, bringing me back to my senses. I sign my reassuring reply to him and turn back to my duties.

That tall, young man at the end of the newsstand... He's watching me... but not in an uncomfortable way. Mr. Wise is selling a magazine to someone, so I have to serve the young man. I approach him and catch myself observing his face for a moment -- it's a good, kind, handsome face, with warm and gentle dark eyes that smile at me...

*"I'll take this one, please,"* he signs... He signs!! Oh, I can't believe it!

*"Are you all right?"* he asks me, probably because I'm staring at him with my mouth half-open. He's still smiling though...

*"I'm fine, thank you,"* I quickly sign back to him, barely managing to prevent my hands from shaking. I feel the blood rising to my cheeks, and I smile nervously back at him. *"That's thirty-five cents, please."*

He takes a few coins out of his jeans pocket and passes them to me, then folds his *Times* and puts it under his arm. He's still smiling at me, and I don't know why I suddenly feel so hot... Maybe it's the tenderness of his gaze or the way he seems not wanting to leave, maybe because no man has ever looked at me that way...

*"Are you here every day?"* he asks suddenly, and I find myself nodding like in a trance. My grin must look funny because he chuckles, then smiles even more widely, revealing his perfectly white teeth. There is definitely something warm in his eyes, like the candles that used to fill my room in the Tunnels...

*"Then, I'll see you again,"* he says, and I smile in return. He slowly turns to leave, then stops and looks back at me. *"I'm Jerry,"* he signs.

*"Laura,"* I reveal my name to him and can't stop smiling. The coins in my hand feel like hot embers for some reason.

*"Till tomorrow then, Laura..."*

I barely manage to react when he turns for good this time, crosses the road, and disappears out of my sight.

*"The customers, Laura,"* Mr. Wise points out to me more insistently. I turn my attention to a middle-aged and impatient man in a funny hat and sell him his daily newspaper.

More people come and go, and I serve them as well as I can. Still, the heat from my cheeks hasn't disappeared, and my head can't forget that face and that name: Jerry...



## 2. VINCENT

I enter the large study quietly as always; I have no wish to interrupt Father's regular reading of his medical journals abruptly. Peter has been truly generous in supplying him, and I know how much staying in touch with his former profession means to Father. It is the only reminder of his past that he happily dwells on, not only for practical reasons and the advantage of everyone living in the Tunnels.

He notices my presence and acknowledges it by closing the magazine in his hands and taking off his spectacles.

"Vincent," he says, with that warm, joyful smile that has greeted me so often in my life. "Is it time for our chess game yet?" He glances at his pocket watch, knitting his brows.

"Not yet, Father," I say, smiling too.



He regards my face, the frown on his forehead an unmistakable sign of his deep focus. "Is something the matter?" he inquires.

I walk over and join him at the table he has been reading at.

"Laura has run away... She hasn't been seen in four days."

My words shake him more than even I expected. "Why?" he breathes, his voice filled with genuine incomprehension and sorrow.

I shake my head before replying. "I'm not sure. Gregory said she had been restless and unhappy with the work for some time now. She had some bad

experiences with people being rude to her because she didn't react quickly enough, due to not hearing them. It seemed to have upset her greatly. The same happened on the day she ran off."

Father sighs and absently runs his hand through his grey hair. "I sensed she might have problems adapting to the world Above. As I have experienced on my own, it is a fast world, where patience is more often an unknown term, and someone like Laura needs a lot of patience."

"She is a very bright girl," I say, then correct myself, "*woman*."

"A very young woman," Father remarks.

"Still, a woman, facing a world she had never known. There are surely feelings within her that add to her confusion."

Father seems more worried by the minute. He frowns again. "Do you think she... ran away with... someone?"

"I don't know," I answer truthfully. "But anything is possible. Gregory said a young man comes to the newsstand every day to get his newspaper, but mainly to talk to Laura. He uses sign language as well. They started meeting after work as well."

"I guess that's why she has missed out on her duties as a Helper recently." Father shakes his head. I recall his face every time someone told him our friend hadn't shown up with supplies as agreed.

"Laura knows our lives depend on the support of all the Helpers. I'm sure she will see her reason in the end. If she found someone who she feels understands her and makes her happy, who are we to judge her? She had suffered enough since the day she was born."

Father looks deep into my eyes, mulling over my words. "Let's hope you are right," he says then. "Mainly, let's hope she's all right."

I nod. "*Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul - and sings the tune without words - and never stops at all.*"<sup>2</sup>

Father finally smiles, and he covers my hand with his. "It will never cease to amaze me how you do it."

"Do what?" I ask.

---

<sup>2</sup> Emily Dickinson: *Hope Is The Thing With Feathers*



“Make me believe that everything is going to be all right.”

I can't suppress a smile as well, but I don't speak; there is no need to. I slowly rise from my chair.

“I will be back soon for our chess game,” I reassure him, as if giving him a more pleasant way out of the sad topic, even though we both know it will only be a temporary one.

“Yes... I'm looking forward to it,” Father replies with a quick smile, then a grey cloud settles on his face again.

“I'll have the children check a few areas while they're out,” I say, feeling his worry, mirroring mine. “Perhaps someone will see her somewhere.”

Father nods and smiles gratefully, reaching for his spectacles once more.

“Thank you,” he says before disappearing into his magazine again.

I smile at the image, so dear to my heart, then I take my leave.

I walk the Tunnels as I have hundreds of times before, but I cannot focus on their warm, dim glow nor the shades of brown and grey of their walls. My mind is on Laura...

I see her as a child, still barely ten years old, collecting every piece of shiny stone or shard, admiring their colours and shapes, putting them together into the most creative and striking images. I remember all her clocks, scattered around her chamber, with all their ticking, creating a peculiar myriad of sounds night and day... I see her glowing face when she found the first one on a scavenger hunt with Mouse. She was so happy...

Where is she? Is she well? Did we let her out of her safe nest too early, not prepared enough, and uncertain? Have we failed her somehow, so much that she refuses to seek our help? Father was right; she is only nineteen years old and still so fragile... I realise my questions might remain unanswered for some time, perhaps forever (I shudder at that thought).

No... I'm certain that if she needed a sanctuary, she would return to us, knowing she would surely find it here. After all, this is still her home... Yes, I must hold on to hope and its wings, the hope that never stops at all...



**3.**

**JERRY**



God, forgive me, but I can't keep it inside any more... I don't want her to get hurt; she's so precious, the most precious thing I have ever had in my life...

Laura, I wish I had the strength to tell you the truth! I should have told you right from the start, even before I found out you knew the members of this damned gang! I want to tell you so badly, but how? How to tell someone you love you've been

pretending to be someone you're not? How should I tell you that I am not deaf, and most of all, that the reason why I became a member of this community was to spy and gather evidence on Lincoln? How could I have known you were one of them, too?

I should never have let you leave your safe place. You had a job, a home... What do you have now? A pretence life with someone who is everything Lincoln orders you to hate...

I felt the restlessness, rage, and confusion in you from the moment we met. Despite it all, there was also sweetness, kindness, and gentleness as well, shining from you, just like that charming curiosity that never leaves you. All the time, you have been angry with the world that condemns you. You think you have found a community where you can be yourself and live without the judgement of the people outside of it. But how? How can you find peace among violence and acceptance among self-proclaimed division? This world is full of prejudices. I know it for my parents *were* deaf, and they too had to find their way in it. However, Lincoln's community is not free of them either. Why is it that people can't sit down and talk about their

differences instead of throwing knives or shooting at each other? Sticks and stones may indeed break my bones, but words will never hurt me...

When I was assigned to this mission, I could not have predicted that you would cross my path. Even less could I have predicted that I would fall in love with you so deeply and hopelessly that I'm afraid to mess it up just because I'm terrified Lincoln or someone else from the gang might hurt you... I wish I could tell you I didn't want any of this to happen, but I will also never regret meeting you, despite the circumstances, for it's the best thing that ever happened to me in the twenty-five years of my life...

Being a detective is not an easy job, and I'm still only a beginner, learning something new every day. But the one thing no one can teach you there is how to stay impersonal when so many times, your heart and humanity can't just step aside and make way for duty. This is the first time in my career I've been really struggling with it, for on one hand, I want to do my job properly and bring justice to those who deserve it, but on the other hand, I'm afraid of the personal loss it might cost me, even more, the physical harm and emotional blow you might suffer from it...

Do you remember our first date, Laura? I took you to that cosy little café round the corner near your work... We had burgers with fries and a milkshake, and suddenly, you started laughing... with that almost soundless but sweetest laugh I can imagine, making your whole face light up like a hundred candles, you said I had a milkshake moustache. I smiled and took another sip of my shake, making the moustache even bigger. Then I crossed my eyes and made a funny face. You laughed even more, and at that moment, I never wanted to do anything else but make you laugh for the rest of my life... I wanted to wipe the shake away, but your small hand stopped me and took the napkin from my hand. Slowly, very slowly, you erased all traces of my earlier silliness, while still smiling. I couldn't focus on anything but your eyes, large, warm, and dark, sparkling like diamonds in the night, and your full lips, inviting, tempting...

I had loving parents – God rest their souls, for they died too young - and I've met some great people in my life, but no one has ever shown me so much tenderness, care and love as you do, Laura... You have become the

reason why I want to live and breathe every day as if it were the last thing in my life. We have only known each other for three months, but you have given my life a real purpose. I have seen you in good and bad: in times when you were joyful and carefree, in others when you were giving, gentle and considerate, and in those when you let loose your anger and hate at the world that has treated you unjustly. I hate seeing you in pain, and it's tearing me even more to know that *I* will add to your pain once you find out the truth...

Will you be able to forgive me? Will you understand that despite hiding my true identity, I have never lied to you about my feelings for you and that I am my true self only when I'm with you? In your innocence and genuine nature, in your love, I have found my happiness, and you have become my soul mate...

Catherine says I can't come near you because of the danger I pose to you... But how? I can't remain silent... I need to get you out of that deceiving and toxic den, and take you far away where no one could harm you, and we could live free and happy!

Will you come with me? Can we escape the threat looming over us? Can I tear you away from the community, which you say you finally fit in, although you do anything but? Is that the right thing to do? I don't know... I only know one thing: I will not rest easily until I try at least, whatever the danger...



**4.**

**CATHERINE**

That was close... *really* close. What if Vincent appeared just a moment after he did? Laura would be dead now, and Jerry probably too. Oh, Laura... How much she had suffered already! How were any of us to know what would lie ahead of her when she left the Tunnels last year?

I guess she had to learn her lesson the hard way; maybe we all have to. She thought the world was against her and that by joining a deaf community and building a wall around herself, letting only Jerry into her private sphere, she would find safety, understanding, and happiness. Now she knows that we can't be guided only by first impressions. We must face our problems and let in those who love us, because they just might show us the side of the story we need to hear.

"Thank you," Jerry says quietly, lifting his hand from the hospital bed and reaching for mine.

"Thank Laura," I reply, with a knowing smile. "The police came because of her."

I can't tell him she rushed to Gregory only to get Vincent's help. Mercifully, the boy was probably too beaten and sore to look up and spot him. Would he even believe me that a fantastical being came to his and Laura's rescue, risking his exposure and life again?

He turns his face to her – she's sitting by his other side, watching him with worried eyes, and I'm sure I can see guilt in them too.

"Thank you," Jerry whispers and slowly signs at the same time.

Laura smiles, a tear running down her shaken face. She grabs his hand and presses it to her cheek as if afraid he might disappear from her sight. All the anger and resentment from his -what she saw as -betrayal seems gone from her; she looks so fragile, like a frightened bird that flew through a big storm and managed to survive only by sheer will.

I silently retreat from the bedside, respectfully giving them privacy. I was pretty harsh on Jerry just yesterday, but remembering his sincere words about what Laura means to him and seeing the genuine love and devotion in his eyes as he regards her, I cannot help but feel sorry for him. I have known him only for a few months, but I know that his heart is pure and honest. He didn't plan this scenario, but like so many unpredictable events in our lives, it happened. I should know about it very well... And maybe it was meant to happen. Maybe these two souls, each lonely in their own way,



were meant to cross paths and find themselves in each other. Exactly like Vincent and I did...

"I'll see you later, Jerry," I say quietly, feeling bad for interrupting such a tender moment between them. "We'll need your statement."

"I'll try to write everything down... before you come," he says with some effort, affected by the painkillers.

"No rush," I counter, shaking my head, then smiling. "Get better first."

I nod and smile at both of them, intending to leave, but before I open the room's door, I feel Laura's hand reaching for my arm. I turn around and see her sign something to Jerry.

"She wants me to translate," Jerry says, watching her.

"What is it, Laura?" I ask, genuinely curious.

She looks at me before signing again, not leaving my eyes.

"Please... thank him for me," Jerry says again. His voice suggests he's a little confused, but he doesn't inquire further. Maybe he thinks she means Gregory. "And tell him I'm sorry," he adds, her last words.

I smile at Laura, seeing the anxiety in her eyes. I don't need an explanation, for I know exactly who she means and how she feels.

"You can tell him yourself tomorrow," I encourage her and lightly squeeze her arm.

Finally, she smiles as well and lets me go. After one last glance at Jerry, I leave them alone.



As I walk down the hospital corridors, I feel tired, and yet I can't stop thinking. So much has happened so quickly... When I saw Laura at the break-in that night, all I could think of was, *Where did we go wrong?* I know Vincent has been worried; his sense of responsibility overpowering his rational thinking. But no matter how much we love someone, we are not responsible for all their actions. Laura made her choice and had to pay with a distressing experience to learn from it.

Still, her choice somehow brought Jerry into her life, and that's the beauty of it. It seems that darkness is always followed by light, no matter how much we suffer.

I smile, my thoughts travelling to Vincent again.

*I found my light in you, Vincent, never to fear darkness again.*

The thought puts a spring into my step, my feet inevitably carrying me to the one destination I long to be right now. It's late, but my mind is set on the Tunnels. I need to tell Vincent that Laura is and will be all right, that everything is going to turn out all right in the end. Life is not always a walk in the park, but sometimes, it blesses us with the most beautiful roses...



*“Holding anger is a poison...It eats you from inside...  
We think that by hating someone we hurt them...  
But hatred is a curved blade...and the harm we do to others...  
we also do to ourselves.”*

- Mitch Albom: The Five People You Meet In Heaven -

---

\*\* Illustrations were provided by the author.



By Judith Nolan









---

## Episode Epistles

by Angie  
(in production order)

---



### *Season Two*

**Remember Love** is a fevered dream  
Our hero rails and doubts his worth  
Without his love, true Hell is seen  
When he wakes she's there to sooth

**Ashes Ashes**, plague and sorrow  
The fate of the world below is dire  
Yet they will cope and then tomorrow  
Send love messages in fire

In **Chamber Music**, classic scores  
Of hope and love, a talent gone  
Rolley meets Vincent just once more  
But cannot change - the drugs have won

**God Bless the Child**, a woman births  
But Vincent will not be seduced  
She then returns to what she's worth  
Her child redeems her, shows her truth

**Dead of Winter**, Winterfest glows  
Paracelsus' plot is grim  
A death, Narcissa knifed - all shows  
The tunnel folk are strong and win



***A Fair and Perfect Knight***, was sad  
When he followed Catherine down  
His busy dad was not all bad  
He loved his son when he was found

***Sticks and Stones***: A deaf gang's crimes  
Laura finds a man she loves  
Though law and love may not combine  
Yet in the end she stays Above

***Labyrinths*** saw Michael hope  
His estranged father could be seen  
Catherine and Vincent helped him cope  
With the rebuff of unfilial spleen

Devin brings a man in ***Brothers***  
Who, like Vincent, is always 'other'  
Yet we're shown a man who needs  
A life his brother can concede

***A Gentle Rain***, a child is killed  
The mother can't forget her grief  
Kanin's conscience can't be stilled  
Catherine helps both find relief

***Orphans***: Death of Catherine's dad  
In despair she goes below  
Vincent gave the love he had  
Catherine returns to the world she knows

***The Outsiders*** gang is deadly mad  
But tunnel folk give helping hand  
When killing starts the choice is sad  
Vincent's Beast destroys the clan

***When the Bluebird Sings*** its song  
Fantasy's a twice-told tale  
Kristopher leads them both along  
To find his paintings for a sale

In ***Arabesque*** a teenage crush  
Returns to challenge Vincent's awe  
Her deception all too soon is flushed  
Catherine gives her strength and law

***The Watcher***, is he mad or clown?  
Bold obsession, ramps up fear  
Until he captures her to drown  
Vincent's rescue makes love clear

***A Distant Shore*** is Catherine's trip  
To LA solving murder scheme  
Music and myth together slip  
On a lonely beach we see the dream

In ***Trial*** we see abuse revealed  
But courtrooms rarely see the truth  
Jury doubt Catherine's appeal  
No winners here, without the proof

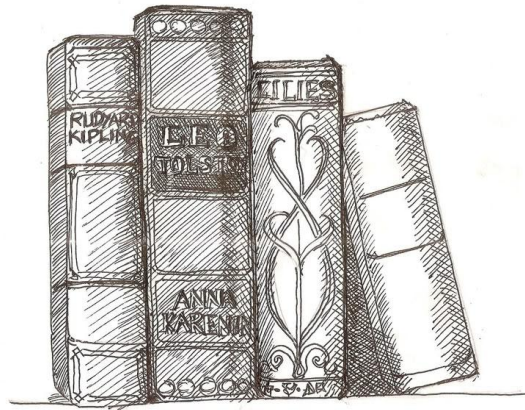
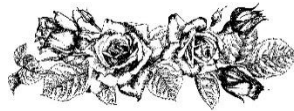
***A Kingdom by the Sea*** is rough  
Explosions, death, and harbour fight  
Though Elliot and Catherine are tough  
It's Vincent saves them both this night

***The Hollow Men*** are rich and jaded  
The law sees death, but perps evaded  
This career ends as our two avow  
When will it end? asks Vincent now

***What Rough Beast***, as Vincent waits  
A reporter starts a darker clause  
Tunnels threatened, Catherine's bait  
One nightmare ends, but not the cause

***Ceremony of Innocence*** shows  
How madness comes and reason goes  
Vincent the target, Father fears  
Who was that man? And then it's clear

***The Rest is Silence***, Vincent's mad  
Paracelsus left his mark  
Vincent leaves, his friends are sad  
But Catherine follows in the dark





By Judith Nolan









---

# Truth Be Told

---



by Cindy Rae

## Chapter One

### *Deadly Missive*



--

The

note in Father's hands was as brutal as it was brief:

*Devin Wells (along with all of his aliases) might die today. I just wanted you to know. You may (or may not) wish to collect him.*

Father immediately rose from his chair. No signature was needed. The sharp script was familiar, and it made Jacob Wells' blood run cold.

*John. John Pater. Paracelsus.*

There was an address to go with the threat. An Above address, to a very public place. Father turned the business card over. Paracelsus' evenly spaced letters all but commanded Jacob's obedience.

*You'll find him here. You might want to hurry. Of course, that is entirely up to you.*

"Father? What is it?" Pascal asked as Jacob Wells clutched the vellum rectangle.

“Paracelsus. And Vincent is too far away to be of help,” Father replied. His mind was racing.

Father didn’t need to check his pocket watch to know it was broad daylight outside. Or that the address on the card was far away from tunnel access.

*What are you planning, John? What... twisted scheme is this?*

Jacob searched for options as quickly as his physician’s mind would allow. *Vincent is below the pipes. He took supplies to Narcissa, then said he wanted to explore some. Not due back for nearly a week yet.*

“Vincent’s below the pipes. Too far away to even get a message to. And too far away... anyway,” Pascal said.

“Do you think Paracelsus knew that?” Father asked.

Pascal could only give a shrug. “All I know is the sentries haven’t seen him. Not for months on end. More.”

*No, no, they haven’t. And if Devin was taken, it was a thing done Above, not Below. Paracelsus has no way to know that Vincent is gone. Maybe. Perhaps he does.*

Suddenly, Jacob wasn’t sure. He rubbed a gloved finger across his forehead, trying to think.

*Wait. No, John doesn’t know. Vincent left suddenly and on impulse. So, if this was a trap meant for Vincent...*

“Father?” Pascal asked again. The old man wasn’t sure what direction to give. But his expression told the tunnel pipe master all it needed to for the level of desperation this was. This was trouble. And it was trouble of the worst kind.

Jacob offered Pascal the note and the card. Pascal’s face, a face that had never spent time in the sun, grew paler still, if that was possible.

“Paracelsus... has Devin?” Pascal now matched Jacob for worry. “We haven’t heard from Devin in a while. But he’s in trouble? What do we do, Father?”

Father tried to calm his pounding heartbeat. “I... we need help. This... it might be a trap. But... but there’s no time to know.”

Jacob, normally steady in a crisis, was unsure how to proceed. He didn’t doubt the threat, however.

But how to deal with the Alchemist and whatever his latest scheme was?

*Is Devin already dead?* Father’s heart refused to believe it. *Is this some... sick game John is playing?*

Was he, Jacob, supposed to go Above to find out?

“Father... whatever this is... we don’t have much time,” Pascal prompted.

Pascal was right. The emergency room physician in Jacob snapped into action with familiar speed. Decisions had to be made. Now.

The first decision was to know what tools you needed in a crisis. Jacob knew he needed access to a world he avoided like the worst of plagues, and someone capable of moving through that world fluidly and possibly... armed.

“I need someone from Above who can go into a public place and search it, without question,” he realized. “And... possibly be armed.”

There was one person who fit that description completely.

“Catherine.” Pascal produced the name at the exact moment Jacob thought it.

Jacob nodded.

“Pascal, put out an all-call on the pipes. We need to get a message to Catherine. And we haven’t a moment to lose.”



Catherine’s day had begun well enough. She was barely late to work and smart enough to know she didn’t dare be late to court. She’d gathered her case files and driven herself downtown to the courthouse, not trusting the vagaries of being able to get a cab to get her there on time.

She'd spoken with a judge. She'd filed the motions she'd needed to. She'd spared a thought or two for Vincent as she'd walked back out into the shimmering New York day.

*Gone two days, and I miss you like it's been a dozen. Hurry home, Vincent,* she urged, then tamped down on the notion. She didn't want him cutting his trip to Narcissa's short just because their bond was sending him longing messages.

She cleared the courthouse's stone steps and was aiming for where her car was parked when she saw a very familiar... and very agitated face.

"Catherine! Hey! Catherine! Stop!"

Benny the bicycle messenger intercepted the beautiful attorney at the curb. And "intercepted" was quite literally the appropriate term. The speedy Tunnel helper nearly ran Catherine down as he skidded to a halt before her.

"Benny? What's wrong? No 'Hiya, Gorgeous?'" Catherine asked, knowing it must be bad if the normally jovial Benny was this direct. He was panting and out of breath. He'd clearly pedaled very fast to reach her.

Benny shook his head. "Father says... says it's really important... Life and death," he gasped, clawing through the contents of his messenger bag. His face was red, and he was sweating.

"Read this! Quick!" Benny ordered, thrusting a note from Father into her hands. Paracelsus' message was enclosed, also.

Opening the envelope Benny handed her, Catherine scanned the pages quickly, then looked back up at her friend. "He's right. Benny, this is bad. Do you know where this building is?" she asked, showing him the address.

Benny took the card. "Jay Medical Building? On 3<sup>rd</sup>? I think so. It's one of those new office buildings. Just opened up about two weeks ago. Haven't had any deliveries there, yet."

Catherine fished out her car keys, all thoughts of filing paperwork with her office abandoned. "I'm going there now," she declared.

*I just wish Vincent could be here.* She glanced at a sun that was still mid-morning high. *You planned this well, Paracelsus. Even if Vincent were*

*near, he couldn't help with this. Not without risking being seen. Perhaps you meant to draw Father out.*

"Father... he wanted me to tell you... maybe you shouldn't go. He thinks it might be a trap, Catherine," Benny advised.

Catherine yanked open the door to her sedan. "I'm almost positive he's right. The question is, who does Paracelsus think he's going to catch?"

Benny had no answer for her. And as startling as the last few minutes had been, for Catherine, they became more so as Winslow crossed the street and stepped over to Catherine's car.

"You ain't going without some kind of backup," Winslow stated firmly. His tattered tunnel clothing attracted a few stares. But since this was New York, it only attracted so many.

"Winslow?!" Catherine asked, hardly believing her good fortune that he was here. He looked out of place outside the Tunnels. But there was no one Catherine would rather have helping her than the big, strong, black man.

"We gotta go," Winslow said grimly, getting in on the passenger side of the car as he waved Benny away. "Meet us there soon as you can," he instructed the courier.

The bike messenger nodded and pedaled off. Given his skill and his ability to take shortcuts, it was likely that he would be at the crosstown address before they were.

"It must be bad if you're here," Catherine said, knowing Vincent couldn't be. She jammed her key in the ignition.

"It's Paracelsus. It's always bad," Winslow replied, barely managing to get his seatbelt fastened before Catherine peeled away from the curb. He shut his eyes and grabbed onto the dash.

"This is the part where I tell you I hate cars," Winslow said, as Catherine navigated the busy Manhattan traffic.

"Ever been in one?" she asked, gunning it through a yellow light. It turned red right as they cleared the intersection.



“My father was from Detroit,” he replied, as if that answered the question. Considering he’d just named the car manufacturing capital of the United States, perhaps he had.

Catherine changed lanes and nearly clipped a yellow taxi. The driver honked at her and gave her a middle finger salute.

“How long ago did Father get this message?” Catherine asked, referring to what was obviously some sort of ransom note, but for the fact that there was no ransom. Paracelsus wasn’t asking for money. Or gold. That in itself was strange.

“Less than an hour. Pascal put out an all-call. Benny answered: said he thought he knew where you might be. Watch it!”

Winslow braced himself as Catherine sandwiched herself between a Mercedes and a green Toyota junker. She ignored the protest of the latter and cursed the red light that was holding her still.

“When was the last time anybody saw Devin?” Catherine asked.

Winslow shrugged. “Months ago. Close to a year, probably. You know how Devin is.”

Catherine did indeed.

“Are we sure Paracelsus even has him?” Catherine asked.

Winslow nodded. “Pretty sure. He sent along a lock of Devin’s hair, and a woven bracelet he used to wear.”

Catherine took in that grim pronouncement as she impatiently waited for the light to change. “Come on... come on! We should call the police, Winslow.”

“Yeah. But we ain’t gonna.”

Catherine knew he was right. They weren’t going to. The last thing Catherine wanted was John Pater in a conference room with a detective. And her, having to explain how they knew each other.

And if Paracelsus was holding Devin, Devin was one of the only people who lived Above who could not go to the police, even if he were freed. Whatever

identification he was using at present simply wouldn't hold up to scrutiny. There were drawbacks to living outside the law. Devin could hardly press charges, even if he lived to tell the tale.

John Pater had chosen his victim well.

"Do you think... do you think he'd actually... hurt Devin?" Catherine asked. The light changed. The car jumped forward. Almost literally.

Winslow gritted his teeth as Catherine swerved. "I don't know. He might. It would be a way to hurt Father, maybe. Or Vincent,"

Catherine nodded as she made a hard left. Horns blared at them. Catherine, for her part, just ignored them and pressed on.

"Sounds right," she agreed. "But... if hurting Devin is the play... why send the note? You know Paracelsus. He'd just as soon kill someone as look at them." She hated to sound so fatalistic regarding Devin, but they both knew she was right. Also, that she was about to rear-end a station wagon.

Winslow's big feet pressed against the floorboard, searching for a brake that wasn't there. "I don't know, Catherine," he answered.

She rode the station wagon's bumper. And apparently, she wasn't going to stop doing that.

"That man is crazy. And the last time he tangled with Vincent probably made him crazier," Winslow answered.

*Catherine knows what she's doing. She has to, or she wouldn't be doing it.* The thought gave Winslow some comfort.

"I got a hammer tucked inside my vest. Just in case we need to fight our way clear," he said.

She nodded in reply, then turned left at the next intersection and watched the Jay Building come into view. Winslow breathed a sigh of relief at not being right on top of another car. Catherine's next words made his relief short-lived:

"I have a gun in the glove box. Just in case you're right," she said grimly.

She parked the car and reached across him to flip the glove box open and remove its potentially lethal contents. They were both as armed as they were going to be.

She knew that Vincent, wherever he was, was now sensing her extreme alarm. It didn't matter. He was just too far away to help.

*If you've hurt Devin, I'll make you pay, Paracelsus. And if I don't, we both know Vincent will.*



## **Chapter Two**

### *The Alchemist*



--

Catherine and Winslow quickly took in the scene. It was, as Benny had said, just an office building. A fairly new one, with just-put-in-landscaping and wet paint on some of the signage. New tenants were moving in, as other professional-looking people went in and out through a set of revolving doors. Nothing about it looked remarkable.

Nothing at all. It was so... *normal* a scene, it was off-putting.

*And it's broad daylight. This isn't like Paracelsus. It isn't like him at all,* Catherine thought, eyeing the bright white building.

That worried her. And it worried her almost as much as everything else she knew at the moment, which wasn't much.

"This doesn't feel like Paracelsus," Catherine said.

"Maybe that's the point," Winslow replied, following her lead.

“Benny says it just opened.”

“Keep people from knowing who should be here... and who shouldn’t be,” Winslow surmised.

He was right. A new building would have a new doorman, new receptionists, new building security guards... everything someone like Paracelsus would need to move about, either unnoticed or unchallenged.

“Smart,” Catherine allowed, wishing Paracelsus wasn’t.

She approached the Jay building again, amazed at how “normal” everything looked. Benny pedaled by, letting her know he was near. Catherine gave him a nod and a subtle motion that he should keep on going. She didn’t want to reveal that she knew him to anyone who might be watching.

“Do you think we’re being watched?” she asked Winslow.

The big man shrugged. “Could be.”

Like with so much else, neither of them had any way of knowing for sure.

She waited another moment, then waved Winslow over to a nearby tree. “Stay here. I want to check out the exterior. If I get in trouble, come running.”

“Yeah. Keep your hand on your gun, Catherine,” the big man advised, slipping behind a nearby oak.

Catherine stood a few feet away from him, scanning the building, as Winslow did the same. Nothing looked alarming. Or even particularly interesting.

“This isn’t getting us anywhere. Any sign of Devin?” she stage-whispered to Winslow, who remained concealed.

Winslow shook his dark head. “Nope. But... wait. Check out the old man sitting on the bench over by the big planter. Not too far from the door. Black coat and glasses. Hat, pulled low.”

Catherine looked. “You’re kidding me.”

The man turned and scanned the street. Even from a distance, Catherine could tell that the long, lean figure was indeed that of John Pater.

"I don't know what I'm walking into," Catherine told her companion.

"Never do with Paracelsus," Winslow replied, staying right where he was.

"Benny will be back around."

"He's no match for him."

"So, you are?" Winslow asked almost idly.

Catherine began to walk forward. "Tell Benny to tail him if he leaves. But for God's sake, stay back."

"Catherine!" Winslow hissed. "Something happens to you, Vincent's gonna kill me!"

"One murder at a time," was all Catherine replied as she advanced down a long sidewalk flanked by new shrubs. Winslow held his position, not knowing what else he could do.

Paracelsus was seated almost casually near the building, looking as if nothing were amiss. Catherine walked purposefully up, and he registered her presence with a sardonic lift of an eyebrow from behind dark, round glasses.

"Ah, Miss Chandler. So, *you* are who Father turns to these days to deal with me? How... unexpected."

Catherine could feel it as his hard eyes raked her slender form. She had the distinct impression she'd just been cut.

Paracelsus adjusted his hat and drew up a scarf that hid the worst of the damage to his burned face. "Well. It's not as if Jacob could send Vincent, now is it?" The Alchemist's voice was a silken purr as his gloved hand gestured to the afternoon sun, illuminating the day.

The new building was far away from any way Vincent might reach it, especially at eleven-thirty in the morning.

Catherine listened, gleaning information from his every word.

*So... we're here because Vincent can't be. Not here. Not now.*



"You may be lucky in that," she retorted, careful not to step too close to him. "I might *not* kill you. Vincent certainly would," she said, between clenched teeth.

Paracelsus seemed unimpressed, as he removed his glasses and polished them on the end of his scarf. "Such bravado. And how is the beast these days?"

The part of the scarf that was covering his face slipped down as he applied one fringed end to the dark lens. If anything, Paracelsus was looking more monstrous than Vincent these days. Though his dark hat was low and his neck scarf high, the burns which scarred the left side of his face had left pink, raw skin, and a left eye that couldn't completely close, so it looked rheumy. Catherine knew the gloves that covered his hands were not for the spring temperatures, and that the scarring there was probably even worse.

But his voice was the same: Deep. Insinuating. Seductive. In control, and hard. Deadly hard. He sounded like venom poured over a bed of rusty nails.

"Well, I expect," Paracelsus answered his own question as he returned the glasses to his nose. "I wonder what such a monster would think of this excellent day? Such a blue sky. Do you think he misses 'blue'? Do monsters miss color?"

They both knew Vincent would think nothing of the beautiful day, one way or the other. He wasn't able to. Such was the nature of his confinement.

Catherine didn't reply as she watched Benny park the bike, then pretend to look busily through his bag. He blended with the crowd around them, doing nothing to draw attention to himself.

She knew enough of Paracelsus to know she should not reveal her whole hand when it came to who was and wasn't here with her. Her eyes stayed focused on the Alchemist.

"Vincent is no monster. Where is Devin?" She eyed the five floors of the new office building. People went in and out, paying scant attention to them. This was indeed a very public place, for whatever John was up to.

"But of *course* he's a monster. It's my *favorite part* of him." Paracelsus chose to address her first sentence rather than her second one.

"And soon he will have to face that fact, Miss Chandler. We must *all* face the *truth* of ourselves, after all, don't you agree?" Paracelsus leaned forward on his cane, another necessity of his, thanks to the fire he had been involved in during his last meeting with Vincent. Catherine was no fool. She knew it contained a knife.

"You hurt Vincent in any way, and it's not Vincent you'll have to deal with," Catherine threatened, meaning every word. "I swear I'm the one who will put you away. One way or the other," Catherine vowed.

"Hurt him? My own dear son?" John Pater's hand went to his heart in a gesture of mock affection. "Oh, no, you don't *begin* to understand. I don't want to *harm* him. I want to *free* him. *Free* him so he can be what he really is."

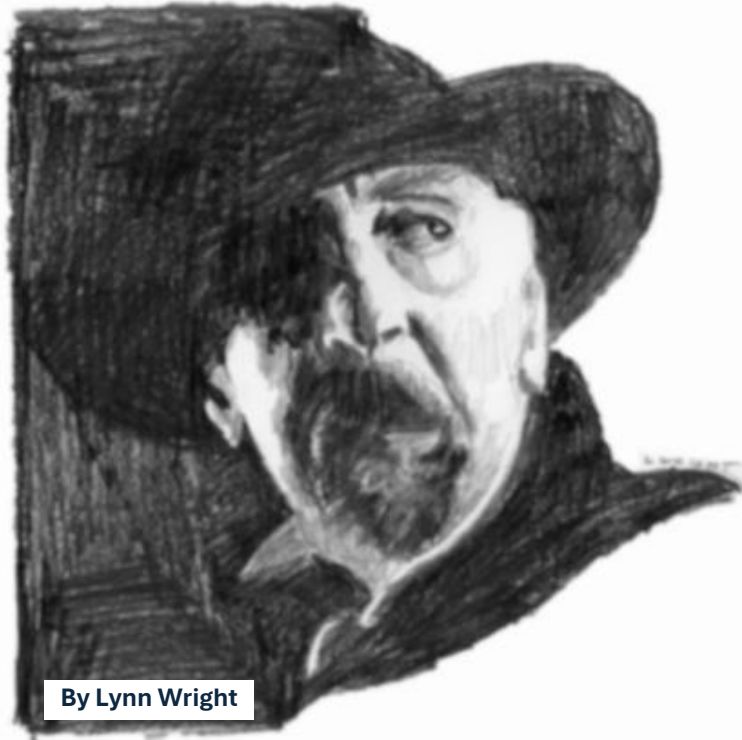
"Devin... Wells." Catherine repeated, her hand reaching subtly for her gun. Paracelsus was unimpressed by the gesture. "You aren't going to shoot an old man on a public street in broad daylight, Miss Chandler," he intoned easily, negating her threat.

He sighed then, as if growing bored of this game. *Does this simple shrew think I haven't covered every eventuality? And every eventuality after that?*

He rose from the bench seat, and Catherine stepped back, giving him room. From behind the tree, Winslow fought the urge to break cover and bolt to her side. Benny stepped subtly closer but still stayed back.

Paracelsus nodded toward the office building. "Fifth floor, North corner office. You may wish to hurry before he... exsanguinates. Will you take him to the tunnels directly, do you think?... Or... call an ambulance?"

"I'm all for doing the opposite of whatever it is you want," Catherine said, brushing past the evil old man. She had the information she wanted. Or at least she had whatever it was Paracelsus wanted her to know. *What is his game?*



"No choice you make will matter," the Alchemist called to her back. "No choice will save him. He's with himself now."

Paracelsus then shrugged and walked off down the sidewalk, out of the shade of the newly planted trees and into the afternoon sun. Benny mounted his bike and slowly pedaled after him.

Winslow watched them go, then lost sight of them

when Paracelsus turned a corner.

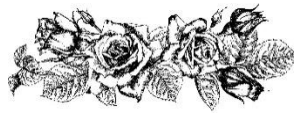
He caught up with Catherine as she approached the building's revolving door.

"I could go after him. Hold him, maybe," Winslow said, nodding in the direction Paracelsus had gone in.

"Too public -he's right about that." Catherine replied, shortly. She lengthened her stride as she pushed her way through the door. "He said Devin might exsanguinate."

"What does that mean?" Winslow asked, following in behind her.

"It means bleed to death," Catherine replied grimly.



### Chapter Three

Devin



--

"This stinks of a trap," Winslow said as they moved through the lobby. Winslow garnered a few stares. Catherine got none.

"It really does," she agreed. "But then, there's not much choice, is there?"

Catherine remembered Devin's bracelet, the one Paracelsus had dropped in an envelope and sent to Father. *He's here, all right. I don't think Paracelsus would lie about that.*

She would find out. She went directly to the elevators, Winslow close at her heels.

If there was a place that could look less like the dark, stony rooms where Paracelsus had grown his drugs, this was it. White walls met overhead lighting on the one hand, and beige carpet quieted the sound of their feet on the other. A variety of people moved through the space, most looking like they did so with purpose. Business executives mixed in with contractors, janitors, and medical professionals wearing scrubs, all of whom navigated their way through the clean, brightly lit lobby, some of them sparing Winslow another glance, thanks to his patchwork clothing.

*Fifth floor, north corner office.* Catherine jammed the call button on the elevator *Hold on, Devin. Whatever he's done, I'm coming.*

"Catherine... look," Winslow said, nodding up, toward a mounted security camera.

Catherine nodded.

There were similar cameras spaced around the lobby and near the doors. A pair of workmen were installing more, near a stairwell.

*Another reason Vincent wouldn't dare come here, she thought.*

"Fifth floor, north corner office," she said to Winslow, who desperately wished he was smaller at that moment. He tried to act naturally.

Catherine silently prayed that Devin was still alive. She didn't know how Vincent would handle the grief, if he wasn't.

"Paracelsus tell you that?" Winslow confirmed.

Catherine simply nodded as the elevator doors hissed open.

A man in a grey pinstripe suit hurried by them. He clutched a leather briefcase in his hand.

"Why here?" Winslow asked, confused. "You're right that this place doesn't feel like Paracelsus."

"Why does that man do anything?" Catherine boarded the car and made room for Winslow, then jammed the 'close' button before they ended up with company.

"They were setting up cameras in the lobby," Catherine said. "Most aren't on, yet. But some of them were."

Winslow nodded. "It's like Paracelsus didn't even care that they might get his picture," Winslow said.

"I don't think he does," Catherine replied.

"Come on. Come on." Winslow shifted from side to side, impatiently. The car was moving much too slow for his liking.

"One of the floors is a set of medical suites. John fancies himself something of a doctor, an alchemist. Maybe that has something to do with this," Catherine mused, as they rose. She watched the numbers track. Third floor. Fourth floor.

"Maybe," Winslow agreed, feeling the car slow down.

Catherine hoped it wouldn't be necessary to flash her ID to anyone to gain access to where they wanted to go. She hoped the elevator hadn't been sabotaged and was about to drop. She also hoped a bomb wasn't about to go off somewhere. With Paracelsus, you never knew.

The car jerked to a stop, the metal doors slid open, and they both stepped out into a deserted reception area. There was a wide desk, but no one behind it. The floor had a vacant feel, the other offices below it having been rented sooner.

As the elevator doors hissed closed behind them, Catherine looked up and down a nearly empty hallway to see a janitor running a buffer over new linoleum. Catherine watched him go in the opposite direction from them.

“It feels... empty,” Winslow observed.

“Not rented yet,” Catherine opined. “Since the building is new. The lower floors filled first.”

“Smart,” Winslow realized. There were cardboard boxes set to one side of the reception desk, waiting to be unpacked. Most looked like they held office furniture, judging by the pictures.

“Paracelsus said that Devin was ‘with himself.’ Whatever that means,” Catherine said, edging her way down the hall.

*It looks so... normal,* Catherine thought.

But of course, it couldn’t be. Not if Paracelsus was involved. This was more of the Alchemist’s love for artifice. Things ‘looked’ normal when they weren’t. *Like when he’d impersonated Lou at Winterfest.*

The janitor and his buffer got into a freight elevator at the other end of the hall and left the pair to their own devices.

Motioning for Winslow to stay back, Catherine drew her gun and made her way to the door to the north corner office, expecting to need Winslow's strength to kick it in.

*Vincent. I wish you were with me.*

And on the other hand, she was glad he wasn't there. This place was impossible for him.

In its way, for Vincent, it was more dangerous than Paracelsus was.

*Fifth floor, north corner office. This is it.* The varnished brown door was plain and unmarked. The hair on the back of Catherine’s neck rose.



Winslow stayed a few steps behind her, uncomfortable with everything that was going on. He drew the hammer from his vest.

Catherine pointed the gun up to the ceiling as she took in the unmarked door. "I'm going to go in. Stay right here. I don't know what's about to happen. But I don't want anybody coming up behind me."

Winslow nodded. "Careful, Catherine."

Catherine put her palm against the door, not sure what to expect.

And then, she was surprised.

She was surprised that the door swung inward, easily, on a noiseless hinge. It wasn't even locked.

*What the...*

The space looked as though it had been rented only a day or so before, which it had been. No personal items graced the antiseptic room. No pictures hung on the wall. No trash filled the trash can. No phone line was connected.

Devin Wells, clad only grey fleece, was indeed there. He lay in the pristinely clean office, strapped to an examination table. And he was indeed bleeding. Slowly.

Devin's left wrist had been cut, and he was bleeding onto the linoleum floor. An intravenous tube delivered some vile-looking clear liquid into his other arm. He was barely conscious, but restrained, so he couldn't stop the bleeding in his left arm. Paracelsus' cruelty knew no bounds. Devin Wells would have been aware he was going to die, thanks to the beating of his own heart.

"Devin!" Catherine went forward as quickly as she dared. No traps were sprung, and nothing detonated. Paracelsus seemed to want someone to find Devin, with time to spare.

Catherine barely glanced at the small, well-lit space. It was nothing like the Tunnels. Nothing was hidden here. Indeed, there was no place to hide it. She holstered her gun.

“Stay where you are,” she ordered Winslow as she ran up to help Devin. It was a great room to end up trapped in. She left the door open, and Winslow standing just outside it.

There was a roll of gauze sitting just beyond Devin’s reach. Paracelsus had a sick sense of humor.

“Devin? Devin, can you hear me?” His closed eyes fluttered open.

*I... I’ve got to stop the bleeding.*

Catherine grabbed the gauze and bandaged his wrist as she tried to assess his damage.

“Devin? Hey, Devin, can you hear me? Do you know who I am?” As carefully as she could, she took the needle out of his arm. Whatever was in the IV bag, it was nearly empty.

*What were you giving him, Paracelsus?* she wondered.

Devin’s brown eyes searched the room and found her face. “Heyyyy Chandler,” his sleepy voice greeted her.

“He’s alive. Thank God,” Winslow said, from the doorway. “All clear, far as I can tell,” he told Catherine. She nodded.

“Devin. What in God’s name did he do to you?” Catherine asked.

“Don’t know, but it feels damn good,” the young man replied.

Catherine didn’t like this. Not a thing about it. His fingernails looked blue. Pale blue. *Blood loss? It could be... but... but it’s just a bad cut. As bad as it looks, there’s really not enough blood here, for that,* Catherine thought.

“We need to get him to a hospital,” Winslow declared, taking a few steps into the room. If Devin needed to be carried out, Catherine wasn’t going to be able to manage that.

“Kay,” Devin agreed, trying to sit up. “I don’t have shoes,” he noted.

*Something’s wrong. Something is very wrong. Paracelsus loves traps,* Catherine thought. There was nothing in the room. Nothing except Devin.

"Winslow, stay back. Stay away from him. Something is very wrong here," Catherine ordered.

"You think?" Winslow asked wryly but obeyed. He stepped back near the door, guarding their exit, ensuring that Paracelsus or someone sent by him would not return, making prisoners of them all.

Catherine inspected Devin's wounds, confirming that the cut on his wrist wasn't deep. He might indeed have bled to death over time, but it would have taken hours.

"How bad is it?" Winslow asked.

"Ow," Devin said, inspecting his new white bandage.

"He's conscious, and he knows me. Not as bad as it should be. This doesn't make sense," Catherine said.

"It's for the drama," Devin supplied, leaning forward to sniff Catherine's hair. "You smell good."

*For the drama. Did Paracelsus tell you that? Or did you decide it?*

Catherine wondered, stuffing the IV bag into the plastic trash can bag. They would try to get it tested.

"Here," she handed the bag to Winslow. "We're going to give this to Father to take a look at."

"Made me sleepy," Devin supplied, rubbing the wrist that had the needle stick. "Do I smell good?" he wondered aloud.

Catherine did her best to take him in. She put a hand to his forehead. He felt warm. Very.

*Shouldn't someone who's lost blood feel cold?* She thought that sounded right.

"Maybe we got here just in time," she said hopefully.

"Time is funny. Tick, tock. Tick, tock." Devin imitated a clock and bobbed his head side to side for emphasis.

"He sounds drunk," Winslow observed.

“The bag probably has a sedative in it,” Catherine guessed, trying to examine him. He was sweating, and his hair was sticking to his head.

“Devin? Did Paracelsus tell you anything else?” she asked.

His fingernails remained tinged with blue. Again, Catherine wondered if that was from blood loss, but as with everything else here, that didn’t seem right. She’d been present at enough crime scenes to know that while the smear of blood on the floor was alarming, it was hardly life-threatening.

Devin leaned forward and smelled her hair again.

“Devin, focus! Do you know what he gave you? Did Paracelsus tell you? Did he say you needed to go to a hospital?”

“Shot. He gave me a shot.” Devin replied, wavering as he tried to steady himself.

“He clearly sedated you.”

“Not with that,” he indicated the bag in Winslow’s hand with an expansive wave of his hand. “Shot,” he repeated, indicating an angry bruise near his shoulder.

Winslow looked back down the way they’d come. “Cathy... we need to get him out of here. Before anybody else comes up. Before we get to answer *a lot* of questions,” Winslow stated, eying the freight elevator over the one that went to the lobby. He didn’t like how exposed they all were.

Catherine agreed with him.

“We’re going to go,” she said to Devin. “Can you walk?”

“Surrre,” he slurred. Catherine put his arm around her shoulder. Winslow was right. It was like trying to help somebody who’d had one too many at the bar.

“I got shot,” Devin repeated, again indicating an angry red welt at his shoulder. “You dress nice,” he complimented Catherine, teetering to the left.

Catherine had no reply to that, as she tried to straighten him up.

“It’s the sedative. I’ve seen folks worse. He should be able to shake it off, once we get him some help,” Winslow declared. Catherine agreed.

“We’re going to attract some attention, getting him out of here,” she worried.

“Least he’s alive to attract it,” Winslow declared.

For Devin’s part, at least he was conscious, and steadying himself, thanks to Catherine. “I can handle it. I was once a... a tour guide, in Australia. I got bit by a snake. Thought I was a gonner.”

*This is surreal*, Catherine thought.

“Can we call an ambulance for him?” Winslow asked. “Make up a story?”

Catherine considered the idea, then rejected it.

“So, they can run toxicology and ask him a million questions he can’t answer?” she replied. “Come here and start looking? Remember, there are cameras in the lobby, and probably some in the halls.” Catherine knew their image was on those. And Devin’s. And for that matter, John Pater’s. All people who couldn’t answer any of the questions that would come, without ultimately leading the police to the Tunnels.

“We need a doctor, then,” Winslow said. “We have to get him down Below, to Father, Catherine.”

*‘Will you take him right to the Tunnels, do you think?’*

Catherine’s smooth brow furrowed. “Paracelsus asked me that. I think... I think maybe that’s the idea, here,” Catherine replied grimly.

Winslow considered that, then couldn’t help but agree. “So... that’s what Paracelsus probably wants us to do, you think?” Winslow asked. He was catching up to her, mentally. “He sent the note to Father, after all. They’ll be waiting to find out what’s happened.”

Catherine nodded. *Bring Devin Below. Yes. Yes, that’s what Paracelsus wants.*

“And Paracelsus will *expect* us to bring Devin down. He’s hurt, but... on the other hand, he’s not in the kind of danger where we’d rush him to a hospital.” Catherine was trying to reason her way through this.

“Really nice,” Devin said again, looking her up and down. They ignored him, for the moment. He dropped his head and studied his feet as he wiggled his toes. Which were also blue-ish.

“Ain’t nobody here a doctor. And we know he needs one,” Winslow stated the obvious.

She met Winslow’s dark eyes over Devin’s lowered head. “I think... I’m almost sure Paracelsus wanted us to take him Below. I’m for doing anything else,” Catherine said.

"Can't we just... dump him outside an ER somewhere?" Winslow asked.

“In broad daylight?” Catherine replied.

"Can't go to a hospital," Devin said, leaning his head to one side. "I was a doctor, once. I delivered a baby. They named him after me." He smiled at the memory. "Harvey. They named him 'Harvey.' I was Harvey, once upon a time..."

“In this state, he’s likely to tell them anything,” Catherine realized. *This seems like more than just a sedative. He’s sweating like mad. And his nails are still blue.*

Winslow made a decision. “We need to move. Before either that janitor comes back or somebody else comes to unpack those boxes. We can go down through the freight elevator. Avoid the lobby. Maybe the cameras,” Winslow said. Catherine blessed him for his quick thinking.

"You smell really, *really* good." Devin sniffed at Catherine again. "No wonder he likes you. I wonder how little Harvey’s doing?"

Catherine shrugged him off. His eyes were dilated from the drugs, but not extremely so. His pulse seemed like it was growing stronger, now, and the bleeding at his wrist had stopped. And other than an injection mark and the needle stick from the IV, he seemed undamaged, as far as Catherine could tell.



“I don’t like this, Winslow,” Catherine warned, steadying Devin’s arm around her shoulder.

“Ain’t none of us like this,” Winslow answered.

“I have ten toes,” Devin supplied, unhelpfully. “This little piggie went to market...”

*Were we just lucky that we got here in time?* Catherine wondered. *Did Paracelsus intend to kill Devin by letting him bleed out, and simply get the timing wrong? But that makes no sense.*

It was unlike the brilliant madman to miscalculate so badly. And whatever else Paracelsus was, he was never sloppy.

*What is all this about?* Catherine asked herself for what felt like the tenth time.

“The cut on his wrist looks like a suicide attempt,” Catherine said. “A hospital would toss him into the psych ward.”

They walked forward, permanently shutting the door on the idea of taking Devin to a regular hospital.

“No.” Devin clearly didn’t favor that idea.

*Score one for you, Paracelsus. No hospital. But no tunnels, either, because that's what you want.* Catherine thought.

“For however much it helped us, Paracelsus seemed a little surprised to see me here,” Catherine said.

Winslow nodded at that. “Maybe he thought Eli, or one of the other Helpers would come.”

“Eli... who lives near the tunnels and would take Devin there. I don’t like any of this.”

“Yeah.”

“Go down ahead of me. If anybody comes, wave me back,” Catherine instructed, helping Devin to move forward.

Devin came with her unsteadily, but remaining on his feet. Winslow preceded them down the hall, making sure they had clear progress.

*Lucky, lucky. We've been lucky, so far,* Catherine thought.

The fact that the Alchemist had summoned them to get Devin wasn't lost on her. But John also had no way of knowing who would come, had no way of knowing she'd be in the mix.

*If Helpers alone had come in response to the note, they'd likely bring Devin Below.* Again, that seemed like that was just what Paracelsus had wanted.

She caught up with Winslow.

"He... he *wanted* us to get Devin," Catherine said.

"Well, we got him," Winslow replied, moving as fast as he dared.

*Paracelsus sets traps, and we all know this is one,* Catherine reasoned.

"Steady," Winslow warned, getting them around a corner. "Just up ahead."

*He either sets a trap or... or Devin is the trap,* Catherine thought.

"Winslow... we'll take him to my place." Catherine made the decision.

Paracelsus surely could not account for that, and her basement had access to the tunnels, if they needed it.

"His name was Harvey," Devin said again, talking about the baby who had been named for him.

Winslow shot Catherine a look. "I swear, it's like he's drunk."

"Stay back from him," Catherine warned. "There's something just so *wrong* about all of this, Winslow. Something about it... Devin is the key to it."

"I hear you." Winslow didn't like anything about the situation, either.

"Harvey. Cute little guy. Blue eyes. Not like me," Devin said to no one in particular.

Catherine shook her head. "I don't know what this is, but until I do, I figure we're all in a lot of trouble here. Devin. Think! Do you have any idea what Paracelsus shot you up with? Did he say?"

Devin actually chuckled. "He said he was finally going to make an honest man out of me," Devin staggered, just a little, and leaned against the wall, a moment.

*There it was, some reference to 'honesty,' again,* Catherine thought.

"Yeah. Well. You can be an honest man at my place."

"That's nice. Great place. Great view. You have a great ass, by the way."

Winslow's head snapped around at that one. So did Catherine's.

"What in the hell?" the big black man asked.

Catherine exchanged looks with her friend.

"I don't know. I really don't. It's like he has to say whatever he's thinking. No filter. Nothing," she answered.

"Does a sedative make a person say stuff like that?" Winslow asked.

Catherine wasn't sure. She'd heard of stories about people who said unexpected things, but they probably weren't ambulatory at the time.

"I... I don't know," she confessed. Devin, for his part, looked unrepentant. And like he was looking at Catherine's backside.

"Eyes up, Mister," she ordered.

"Catherine," Winslow warned. "Being alone with him right now might be a very, very bad idea." He blessed that the freight elevator was in view, at the end of the hallway.

Devin seemed to agree. "Yes. I'm bad. I'm a bad, bad man." The good fraud shook his head, sadly. The motion made him dizzy.

*Best not to do that anymore,* he thought.

"Hey. You beat my butt once when we were kids," he said to Winslow.

"More than once," Winslow responded. "And you had it coming. Mostly."

Catherine did not have the luxury of considering the pros and cons of her decision at length. Winslow was right. Lunchtime was already more than half over. Foot traffic was about to come pouring back into the building.

The boxes were probably about to be unpacked. They needed to get out of here.

"My place. I don't think we have a choice. Whatever this is, he can go through it there. If it gets too hairy, I can tie him up, myself," Catherine said, cementing the decision in her mind.

"Sounds fun." Devin cheered, not helping his case.

"He *seems* harmless, at least," Winslow said doubtfully. He pressed the call button on the freight elevator.

"Not me. I'm a bad man. I'm a bad, bad man," Devin said again. This time, he sounded actually depressed about it.

He eyed Catherine. "You're bad for him, too. Like me," he told her.

"Shut up, Devin." She tightened her grip on his arm and waited for the elevator. When it arrived, Winslow bundled them all in and pushed the button. "This should empty out into a loading area. Maybe around the side of the building, or in back, if we're lucky."

Catherine nodded as Devin leaned against the wall. "I don't have any shoes," he lamented, again, looking at Winslow's boots. His toenails were still an interesting shade of azure. Winslow shot Catherine another look.

"I don't know. One step at a time," was all Catherine said, keeping them as far away from the big man as she could. The elevator doors slid open.

Winslow was right. They were in a loading bay. A big semi sat, mostly empty, and a smaller van was locked up, parked to one side. It was halfway through lunchtime, and the area was devoid of people, for the moment.

"Follow right after me," Winslow ordered.

Catherine grabbed her charge by the arm and tugged him along. Devin remained barefoot, padding unsteadily across the concrete. There was nothing they could do about that, as they all reached the landscaped grass, then Catherine's car.

Once there, Catherine warned Winslow away.

“Go tell Father what’s happened. Tell him I’m I’ll keep him at my place, until he’s better.”

Winslow would have none of it. “You drive. If he pulls anything, I’ll knock him out. Not for the first time.” Winslow shot Devin a warning glance as Catherine shoved him inside the car. Winslow climbed into the back seat, keeping an eye on Devin, in the front, as Catherine drove.

“This your first time in a car?” Devin asked Winslow, who didn’t answer.

Devin kept up his running commentary, as Catherine sped down the busy New York streets: “I like cars. Not all cars. Just the good ones. You never learn how to drive when you’re in the Tunnels. But once you’re out? Man. I had an old Fiat when I was in Africa. How do you suppose it got there? Do you think somebody drove it? Or did they just ship it in, one part at a time?”

Catherine and Winslow exchanged glances in the rear-view mirror. Winslow rolled his expressive brown eyes.

“Africa was hot,” Devin continued. “But there was a lot of shade. Sometimes, that reminded me of the Tunnels, because the shadows were so deep. I like to make shadow puppets. Want to see a duck?” He held his hand up in the appropriate gesture.

“I swear it’s like he’s drunk... or high,” Winslow said.

“I like ducks. Do you think Vincent likes ducks? No... Vincent likes horses,” Devin jabbered, showing no signs of slowing down, on the free association ride he was on.

“It is,” Catherine agreed, gunning it through a yellow light. Well, almost yellow.

“It was a pain in the ass, being his brother. You have no idea,” Devin continued.

“Do tell,” Winslow replied sardonically.

Catherine slowed down. Getting a ticket would be the last thing she needed, right now, with no way to explain the odd assemblage in her car.

She wove her way through traffic at a more measured pace, Devin chattering at them all the while. About his adventures, about Vincent, and Father, and the Tunnels. About the smell of Catherine's hair, the display on her car's dashboard. About whatever came into his mind, at the moment.

They reached Catherine's neighborhood, Devin all the while making one inane comment after another, about the people on the street, then Winslow's crusty personality, or Catherine's build, again. The last earned him another rebuke from Winslow.

Whatever popped into his mind seemed to come right out of his mouth.

"He's talkin' nonstop. But... if you listen to him... he ain't lying about anything... It's like a truth serum." Winslow opined, as Devin shouted to a woman walking her dog, that the two of them looked alike.

The Afghan hound and the leggy blonde turned their heads, quizzical expressions following Catherine's blue compact.

Catherine considered that. "You're right. He's saying... everything he thinks, right when he thinks it," she replied.

"And like I said, he ain't lying. Just... unvarnished with the truth," Winslow observed.

Catherine nodded. "That means we *really* can't contact take him to a hospital, or the authorities. He might say anything, like this," she said, turning into her parking garage.

Winslow nodded at that. Devin knew many truths that needed to stay secret. They all did.

"Father is my father. Ain't that a kick? The old man is my old man. Like I needed another reason to stay away..." Devin readjusted Catherine's rearview mirror. "Do you think I'll start to look like him, in thirty years?"

"He's definitely saying whatever pops into his head," Catherine agreed. "Last thing we'd need is him telling 'Let me tell you where I grew up' stories. Especially to a cop... or a doctor."

"Or a psychiatrist," Winslow agreed. "Paracelsus... he'd have known. He'd have realized."



Catherine nodded.

"You have green eyes," Devin observed, talking to Catherine. "But they're not true green. They're like a grey-green. Is that a color?" Devin asked.

Catherine ignored him as she pulled into her parking spot. "Why take Devin?" she asked Winslow. "Isn't Vincent the one Paracelsus is after? Or Father, even?" Catherine wondered aloud.

"Beats me," Winslow shrugged, as she cut the engine and pocketed her keys. Catherine walked around the front of the car and got Devin out, then rolled up a window he'd previously kept insisting on rolling down.

"Said, I was 'easy prey.'" Devin supplied the answer. "Alone, up top. Not protected by the Tunnels, or Vincent, or Helpers... or you." The last was directed at Catherine. His voice had a self-pitying edge. "Easy mark. Sucks."

Whether Paracelsus had told Devin that, or Devin had figured it out on his own, made no difference.

"He has a point," Winslow observed, following Catherine and Devin as they made for the elevator.

*He does*, Catherine realized. Of all of them, the con man was the easiest target, once he'd been spotted. Devin lived his life as a fraud, and it was a solo act.

*He might be hard for the police to catch*, Catherine thought wryly, *but Paracelsus was another story. And of course, Devin is the one person Jacob would absolutely come for. Maybe even by himself.*

"If he's gone for a day or two, nobody would miss him. He moves around a lot. No friends," Winslow observed, seeing the Alchemist's logic.

Catherine hit the call button.

*It's been my day for elevators*, Winslow mused. They were not a thing he normally used, for obvious reasons.

“I thought you were my friend,” Devin pouted at Winslow. “You and Mitch. Okay, maybe not Mitch, so much. ‘Mitch so much.’ That sounds funny. Betcha can’t say it three times, fast.”

“I bet you can’t either,” Winslow replied, relieved, as the elevator doors opened.

As bets went, Winslow was correct. That didn’t stop Devin from trying, however, at least a few times, as they rode up to Catherine’s apartment.

“Mitch, so much. Mitch so mush. Mish so... Damn,” Devin said, allowing himself to be led.

“He’s harmless, but... stupid,” Winslow stated bluntly, as they approached her door.

“I can hear you. And you’re fat.” Devin shot back.

Winslow glared, and Catherine couldn’t help but agree with Winslow’s assessment. Devin was indeed stupid if he thought he could insult the other man.

“We’re here, and he’s safe. That’s the important thing,” Catherine declared, letting them all into her apartment.

Catherine called work and left a message that she wouldn’t be in for a few days. She had a small pile of ‘use or lose’ time on the books, thanks to two weeks spent on a change of venue case. She said she was taking it and hung up the phone. If it caused Joe to have an aneurysm, she’d deal with that later.

“Still working for Maxwell?” Devin asked, eavesdropping on her call.

“I think he’d tell you that depends on what day it is,” Catherine replied. The blueish tint on his nails looked no better. She didn’t like that. And he was now sweating profusely. On the sweatshirt he was wearing, his armpits sported dark patches, and his sleeve was sodden from where he’d tried to wipe his forehead.

Catherine dialed Peter Alcott’s number, only to be told he was out of the country.

“No luck?” Winslow asked, standing in her doorway. He’d never seen the inside of her apartment before.

“He’s visiting Susan in London. Not scheduled back for a few days. I left a message. It’s the best I can do.”

“We could still take him to see Father,” Winslow offered.

Catherine shook her head at the idea, as Devin began to rearrange her egg collection on her étagère.

“Somehow, I still think that’s what Paracelsus wants. For him to go Below. For Father to tend him. It’s why he sent the note, for one.”

“Can’t argue with you, there.”

Devin piped up. “That’d be a first. Eggs? Why? Did you want to be a chicken?” He set down an expensive crystal one Jenny had gifted to her. Hard.

“Why don’t we get you a place to sit and a glass of water?” Catherine asked, gently moving him away from the shelves.

“I could bring Father here,” Winslow offered.

Catherine considered it. “What if Devin’s contagious?”

“Then we’ve both already got it. Maybe. I don’t think ‘drunk’ is contagious.”

“This isn’t from one too many beers,” she said, holding up Devin’s hand so Winslow could confirm the color of his nails.

Winslow had to allow the merits of that argument. Also, that Catherine had been the one closest to Devin throughout this adventure. Also, Catherine had touched him, whereas Winslow, purposefully, had not.

“Maybe it’s best if you handle him with gloves on, Catherine.”

Perhaps it was. But for all practical intents and purposes, it was too late for that, now. She’d touched Devin bare handed since she’d removed the needle from his arm and taken his temperature. Much less when she’d helped him down the hall. It was late March; cool, yet, but not cold enough for gloves.

“You’ve been close to him, too,” Catherine warned.

“Not as close as you. I can bunk out Below, in your threshold, until we’re sure we’re both okay.”

“She’s okay. You’re fat. And I’m a bad, bad man,” Devin interjected, tugging at his shirt. He was still sweating through the heavy fabric as he bent over to inspect the knobs on her stereo. He twisted a couple of them. “Do you have any Grateful Dead?” he asked.

Catherine ignored him. “If this is as bad as he gets, I can handle it. Go let Father take a look at that bag. Tell him to be sure he wears medical gloves. And make sure Benny’s okay.”

Winslow nodded. “We’ll send out a message on the pipes. Post sentries in the park, to make sure nobody bothers you.”

Neither one of them trusted John Pater, and they didn’t know what he might do next.

“Tell all the Helpers to be extra-vigilant. If he grabbed Devin, he might go after someone else.”

Winslow nodded. “I’ll tap out a message to Vincent too, soon as he’ll get it. He’s Below the pipes, but probably rushing to get back, considering,” he said, acknowledging the Bond.

“Sounds like a plan, then,” Catherine said, staying where she was. She would have liked to have hugged the big man in thanks, but knew that was ill-advised.

“You feel sick?” Winslow asked, watching Devin spin the radio dial wildly across a dozen different stations.

“No. You?” Catherine asked.

“Not a thing.”

“I’m not sick. I’m in touch with my true self,” Devin said over his shoulder. “And my true self hates opera.” He hit the eject button and made a Frisbee out of the music CD Catherine had in the player.

“There goes ‘La Boheme,’” Catherine said, retrieving it. “Hopefully, I’ve just got to stay with him until he... what? He sobers up?”

“Sounds right. What if he... you know... gets worse?”

Catherine eyed their charge. “Calculated risk. If anything, he’s not staggering, like he was. Maybe he’s getting better already?”

Neither one of them were fool enough to think that was likely. Winslow’s expression told her as much. He then studied the locks on her door.



“Winslow... lock it behind you,” she said, tossing him her keys.

“That deadbolt only works on the key,” he said, eying the door. If he locked it from the other side, Catherine would be effectively trapped inside her apartment with Devin.

“I know. Joe Maxwell had it installed after I picked up a stalker. It’s the best they make.”

“I picked up a girl in Dublin once. She had the reddest hair,” Devin said. He moved over towards her balcony. “When Irish eyes are smilin’...” He sang off-key.

“If he gets the best of me, I don’t want him getting loose or leading a parade of cops down to the Tunnels,” Catherine explained. “Calculated risk.”

“I’ll be back soon. Promise,” Winslow vowed, doing as she asked him.

Catherine turned back to her sweating charge, who apparently had forgotten the rest of the words to the song.

*That might be a mercy, considering.*

“So... what do we do with you for the next few hours?” she wondered, as Devin threw her window curtains open and closed.



**Chapter Four**

*The Deep Places*



--

Vincent had delivered a few supplies to Narcissa.

Then, he'd travelled downward.

The deep places below the pipes had always held a certain allure for Vincent. For one thing, they made his home feel more expansive, more mysterious, and less confining. For another, exploring the low reaches of the world satisfied his innate curiosity. He could explore only so many places in the world Above, and almost never during the daytime. But down here...

Down here... he was no longer certain if it was "day" or "night" he was now experiencing. The time of day, evident from the view at the Great Falls, the grate in the concert chamber, the drainage tunnel, or from the chatter along the pipes, was absent here.

And while many found not knowing what time it was to be a disconcerting thing, Vincent, for his part, had never felt that way. To him, it was simply "now." And "now," he was simply "here."

He knew by the subtle fatigue of his muscles that he'd put in a long day to get here, and he was pleased that he'd come. The cavern he now found himself in glittered softly with bioluminescence on the walls. A calcium deposit flowed whitely down one wall, looking like a great, frozen waterfall. The water that helped to create it had left an icy cold ribbon, flowing not far from Vincent's booted feet, and the remnant stream made a tinkling song, as it rambled over the stones nearby

Vincent liked its song.



*Peace. Peace, in the stillness.*

Wherever he was right now, a river, or at least a branch of one, was running through it, while above him, a ceiling that was at least fifty feet high soared away, up past where his lantern could send light.

It was a cavernous space. And yet, for all that, it felt somehow intimate.

He'd spread out his bedroll and used extra clothes as a pillow for his back. He breathed in the room, and let the newness of it, the barely tinkling water song of it, fill his ears, his lungs, and his heart.

*The wonder of a new place, newly discovered. The solitude of it. And...*

He breathed in again, and then again, feeling every muscle and nerve ending he owned relax, as he did so.

*Peace in the stillness...*

The subtly glittering walls made it look like it was almost perpetual evening, in here, and Vincent was pleased at how firelight made them shine. Patches of the wall to his right downright shimmered, either from salt, various mineral deposits or crystalline ones.

*Crystal...*

Crystal reminded him of the gift he'd given to Catherine for their anniversary. As it always did, the thought of her had the power to bring a ghost of a smile to Vincent's unusual lips.

*Catherine... I wish you could see this place. I wish I had brought you to it...*

He sighed at the thought, knowing that it was not to be. He was a good day and a half travel past Narcissa's, and Narcissa's home was no easy place to reach to begin with. He and Catherine together would need at least three days to reach this place, then more to come back, since going down was always easier than the climb back up. He knew she couldn't take a week off of work—or her other obligations—just to go exploring some of the farther reaches of his world with him.

*Perhaps someday...*

He let the thought drift away, not wanting to focus on all the ways their lives didn't "fit" together. Time, for Catherine, was built around clocks and wristwatches, schedules and routines, then a work week that slid into a (usually) two-day weekend. Her life was full of alarm clocks and the morning rush hour, court dates and motions filed. Her days sometimes started earlier, and then often ran late, as she gave him every minute she could spare.

And of course, he did the same for her.

But tunnel time was different. Work projects were mapped out and assigned, to be sure, but everything seemed to go at a very different pace. Breakfast was served when William declared it "ready," and fifteen minutes one way or the other wasn't going to make a difference, for that. People ate when they were hungry, worked when there was work to be done, slept when they were tired, foraged, read, painted, built things, conversed, played chess, or cards, or created, as they pleased.

It was a different way to live, and to some degree, it had shaped the man Vincent had become. When Vincent had told Father he was going to go exploring, the old man had done little more than hand him a book of Keats for the journey and wish him well.

Vincent set the book aside, however, extracted a large sketchpad from his rucksack and began to draw a map to this place, one he'd be sure to give to Pascal when he returned. The pathway to this chamber had been fairly easy to reach, and there were only a few places that had required a leap across. A tumbledown section of loose rock had required him to climb over, but nothing about the journey had been particularly arduous, other than its length.

*Catherine... I miss you...*

He flipped the page and began to sketch the room with an untutored, yet natural talent. The calcium deposit and the little stream took shape, along with the scattered boulders and low entryway. He even drew a quick impression of himself, sitting on his bedroll, for scale, as much as anything else.

His pencil hovered. And for a reason he couldn't name, he sketched a feminine figure beside him. Her face was turned toward him, as if she was listening to something he'd just said. The soft, familiar fall of her hair hid most of her face from view, but anyone who knew Catherine would recognize the set of her jawline and the outline of her soft lips.

Vincent regarded the scene he'd just created and erased the original position of his hand. He placed the book in it, to indicate he'd been sharing it with his love. The change made him smile again.

He tore the page from the sketch pad and folded it carefully, as he tucked it into his cape pocket.

Vincent sighed again.

And then... he didn't.

He didn't because he drew in his breath sharply, as the bond sent a warning tingle down his spine.

*Catherine... trouble?*

He stood and focused on the sensation. She wasn't in pain, and she wasn't in danger, wasn't afraid for her life. But she was... something. Something not ordinary. And not good.

She was intent and on edge. Focused on something. Hard. Something she didn't like. Something that was making her nervous, for lack of a better word.

Sometimes, Vincent knew she was like this when she was in a courtroom. When her job required her full attention, and a life was hanging in the balance.

But this didn't feel like that.

*Catherine... you're afraid for someone... but not for yourself...*

It was the closest he could come to deciphering whatever this was.

The feeling persisted and grew stronger. Much.

*Is this... what? Something from your work? A nightmare?* For the first time, Vincent cursed that he had no idea what time it was.

Waves of apprehension flooded their bond. Vincent knew his sojourn here was over. He had to get back to her. And he knew he was going to do it at speed.

He had food and supplies to take him all the way back to the Tunnels. But he knew he would be able to travel much faster if he went lighter.

He pulled a length of rope out of the rucksack and wrapped it around his waist, knowing he'd need it for the places where he had to climb. He threw the bare minimum he'd need into his pockets and tried to send Catherine his reassurance.

*Hold on. Hold on, my love. Whatever it is, I'm coming.*



## **Chapter Five**

### *Untethered*



--

Catherine squeezed the excess water out of a washcloth. The cooling rag wasn't for her. It was for Devin. Devin, who was sometimes Jeff Radler, or Harvey the Doctor, or Derek Saunders, Australian tour guide, or any number of other people.

And he had stories for every single one of them.

Devin, whose voice, right now, was droning through the open kitchen doorway. Droning nonstop. Since almost the moment he'd entered her apartment.

“Being a pilot was terrifying. But hey, I landed the plane, right? That’s all anybody should *really* care about, you know?”

He reappeared, shirtless, thanks to the sweat having soaked it, an hour ago. Catherine had given up trying to keep him fully dressed.

She inspected him as he inspected her coffee mugs.

“But it was great. Really. What a view. Bet the old man never saw such a one. The old man... damn.” He shook his head. His dark hair was plastered to it.

“And then there was Mitch Denton. Oh, he was a piece of work. And of course, Vincent...”

Catherine brought Devin the wet rag. And from the sweaty, bedraggled looks of him, he badly needed it.

“Here, Devin,” she said gently, applying the cloth to the back of his neck. Heat was radiating from his skin.

"You think it's a treat being his brother?" Devin asked, as if she hadn't just offered him help. "Oh, lady, you don't know."

A half-naked Devin nearly spat the word “brother,” as he sat down on one of Catherine’s kitchen chairs. His head went into his hands. His sweaty head. He was actually dripping on her tile floor.

“You just don’t know,” he repeated.

“I’m sure I don’t,” she replied, non-combatively.

Catherine was just grateful it was his bare top half she was looking at, rather than the bottom. Perspiration ran off Devin’s young form. That, and the smell of pestilence. He’d been like this for hours. Many of them.

*Damn you, Paracelsus,* Catherine thought.

"He always wanted to tag along, always in the... way," Devin elaborated, shaking his head as he tried to clear it. He sat up and looked at Catherine, then past her, to the apartment he'd been in for what now felt like forever, to both of them.

Catherine lifted the wash rag from the back of Devin's neck and handed it to him. He wiped his chest with it. The dark hair there was already lying flat, from perspiration.

"Followed like a dog you couldn't bring to heel," Devin continued. The elder Wells brother made a sweeping motion with his hand, one that nearly tipped over the glass of water on the table beside him. He then brought the washcloth back and buried his face in it for a moment, and breathed through it. Sometimes, the cold cloth over his face seemed to help. Sometimes.

Devin lowered the rag. "I don't like dogs. Well, maybe some of them are okay. They always look at me like they know I'm a fraud, you know?"

*And the conversation roulette continues,* Catherine thought.

"I suppose they do," she replied.

Devin wiped his forehead, the sweat mingling with the water to make his dark hair look even darker. He swept it back from his forehead, the moisture keeping it in place. The scar on his cheek looked whiter and more stark. His dark eyes looked huge, in his handsome face.

"So, I let him come with me," Devin continued, returning the subject to Vincent. "I tried to include him. Sometimes I even made up games and adventures just for him, and you know what that got me?"

Catherine had a feeling that this, like many other questions Devin had posed in the last few hours, was fairly rhetorical. She was right.

"Father, down my throat with that cane of his. 'You're endangering him Devin,'" The shirtless man sitting in her chair mocked Father's serious tone. "Too reckless, Devin. So irresponsible, Devin."

Catherine realized how much like Jacob his eldest son could sound when he tried. His intonation was dead on.

"Oh, and my personal favorite." Devin Wells paused for effect: "Wait for it ... 'Why can't you be more like Vincent?'"

He continued to sit there in his sweatpants, scrubbing his hands through his hair, then on the legs of the fleece. The skin beneath his nails was still



faintly blue in color. And Catherine knew that Devin didn't mean half of what he said. Not now.

"I hated him sometimes. Sometimes, hell. I hated both of them."

"It can't have been easy for you," Catherine replied coolly, retrieving the washcloth and taking it to the sink for another dunking. He was still too warm and wouldn't keep a shirt on because of it. Even the pants were soaked at both the waistband and thigh.

*This illness will run its course. It will. It has to. He can't keep this up. Not indefinitely,* Catherine thought, as she brought back the oft-used rag. She sponged his forehead, then turned the cloth over to its cool side, and laid it across the back of his neck, again.

"You need to drink, Devin." She put the glass of water into his hands. Hands which shook, slightly.

She felt the skin at his temple, checking his fever. Not burning up, as he'd insisted he was several minutes ago, but still too hot by half. She wondered if she could get him into her shower, or even if that was a good idea, considering.

Devin took a sip of water and clattered the glass back onto the table. He drew in several long, deep breaths, trying to feel better.

"I loved Australia. Did I ever tell you? I hate casserole. William made it all the time. Jesus. I want to be in Alaska, right now."

Catherine wasn't sure if that was for the cold climate or for the scenery. She had no time to even ask.

"Lisa... she was never going to stay. My mother died the day I was born. Vincent... he never told Father about my pocketknife." He shook his dark head, rue in the gesture. Perhaps, for everything. And more, besides.

The dark head dipped low, then snapped up. "That was Mitch. Mitch told Father about the knife. I blamed Vincent. God, the things I didn't know, until I did. I hated him."

Catherine wasn't sure which "him" Devin was talking about. And by this time, she knew better than to ask.

“It’s going to be okay. We’ll get through this, Devin.” Catherine wasn’t entirely sure which one of them she was trying to convince.

“Joe Maxwell watches you when you aren’t looking. Just one of the many things I noticed that you obviously didn’t. You don’t have any pets. Oh. Well. Maybe you do. We’re not sure what to call Vincent, are we?” Devin prattled. He shot up off the chair, went into her living room, and began to pace in her apartment.

Catherine followed him. She had no other choice.

“He’s got a thing for you,” Devin said, not clarifying whether he meant Joe or Vincent. Catherine didn’t ask.

“A big thing. You’re gonna have to deal with that someday. I never had a big thing. Not with anybody. Maybe I can’t. Maybe I’m not able to. Maybe I’m... broken, inside. Maybe that’s why I move around so much, so I don’t have to face it.”

He turned toward her mantle, then away from it. “I hate casserole. Did I say that already?”

Catherine sighed. “You might have,” she replied.

Devin paced some more. It was ugly, this loss of inhibition, this need to say immediately what one was thinking. And even though he’d been enduring it for hours – they both had – it showed no signs of slowing down.

Catherine, for her part, was still effectively trapped with a man who had unexpectedly become her patient. Winslow and she had passed messages back and forth, through her still-locked door. Father’s instructions had been firm. Fever often marked contagion, though this could be drugs, rather than disease.

They didn’t dare let anyone else near, while Catherine alone tried to help Devin.

*Keep him hydrated. Monitor how much he eats and sleeps. If his temperature suddenly spikes, you may need to call an ambulance, after all.*

Jacob's directions had been sparse. They still didn't know whether or not Devin was contagious, or even how bad things could get.

*Damn you, Paracelsus,* Catherine thought again. It was an impotent thought, but it made her feel a little better to mentally condemn the man who had wrought this.

"They must have been having a sale on neutral colors the day they did your apartment," Devin jibed, utterly changing the subject. Again.

Catherine had no answer to that. Like everything else Devin had been saying, answers weren't strictly required.

Catherine realized that Paracelsus had done his work well. The concoction he'd created had been designed to lower inhibitions and speed up impulses. She didn't need a lab report to know that. Paracelsus himself had said as much, and the results were plain enough to see.

*Well, he said he'd make an honest man out of you. I guess this is the result. Near as I can tell, you're not lying. You're just... untethered. To anything,* Catherine thought.

*Untethered.* The word made Catherine realize something.

*If... if Vincent was exposed to this... what would he... His dark side. It would release his dark side. Maybe. Is that what Paracelsus wanted? For Vincent to become violent? To... hurt everyone?*

She eyed her charge, who was inspecting her egg collection again.

"Devin, think. When Paracelsus had you. Did he say anything about Vincent? Anything? Anything at all?"

"You should get a dog. Or maybe a cat," Devin replied. Then, he chuckled at his own joke. "Oh. You already kinda got one of those, huh?" He turned away from the eggs and went straight to the objects on her mantle.

"Devin! I need you to focus!" Catherine snapped.

But he didn't focus. Didn't, because he couldn't. He started to pace from her fireplace to her balcony doors.

“Here, kitty, kitty,” Devin said. Then: “I notice you don’t subscribe to any magazines. Not even *Vogue*. Or *Cosmopolitan*. What’s the matter, Catherine? No urge to read up on the latest makeup trends? Or bedroom ones?”

*I’m not going to get any straight answers out of him. Not yet, at least,* Catherine realized.

“No urge to know how the other half... well, make that the other ninety percent of the world lives?” Devin pressed.

“Pass,” Catherine retorted, shooting him a wry look. She was past tired of this.

Whether Devin was being used as a carrier of an illness or if he himself was the message, Catherine didn't know. Certainly, the drug would have had devastating effects on Vincent, one way or the other.

*Maybe I don’t need to worry about what he said to Devin. After all, I know what he said to me,* Catherine reasoned.

*"We must all face the truth of ourselves. Don't you agree?"* Paracelsus' honeyed, malignant voice dripped in her brain as she continued to watch Vincent’s only brother stand with his back to her, facing her balcony doors.

*Vincent. This is about Vincent. Somehow. Devin... Devin is collateral damage.* The more Catherine thought about it, the more she was sure she was right.

Devin, for his part, stepped to one side and busied himself with turning a lamp on and off, for no reason she could name.

*Was it really only this afternoon when I saw you, Paracelsus?* Catherine thought wearily. It felt like a lifetime ago. The westering sun was sending gold shafts of light through her windows. The sun was setting.

“They have an airport,” Devin non-sequitured, switching the lamp off again. “You have a gold card, don’t you? We could go anywhere, Chandler. Ever done that? Step on a plane as one person, and step off as another?”

“No. I—”

"It's liberating," he interrupted. "Very. Whatever's behind you? You leave it there. It's in the past. The past is passed," he quipped.

"That's nice. Drink," she ordered, bringing him the glass of water again.

He looked at it like he was seeing it for the first time.

"Thanks," he replied, taking it from her.

He emptied the glass in long swallows, his throat working the liquid down. He handed her the empty glass, then stroked a day's growth of beard on his chin. The stubble on his face gave him a decidedly rakish air.

"People are impossible," he declared. "They need too much. That's why I'm never having kids," he stated. His brown eyes stared hard at her, indicating he expected a reply.

*And for our next round of conversation roulette...* she thought.

"I'm... I'm sure you'll make the decision that's right for you," she said weakly. She was getting tired of trying to calm him and cool him down. Physically tired of it.

"Don't." Devin cut the air with his hand again. He caught the lampshade, and it quivered from the impact. She was really going to have to move some of the breakables.

"Don't patronize me," he scolded.

*To be honest? It's the only strategy I've got at this point,* she thought, but knew better than to say.

He strode over to her mantle, again, doing what was, by now, a familiar circuit of her living room. "Don't act like a cheap psychiatrist. Don't act like him, like Father." He wasn't violent. But he was... agitated, for lack of a better word.

Again, Catherine thought of the effect something like this might have on Vincent. It wouldn't be good.

Her beautiful eyes followed Devin, but Catherine continued to hold her peace. She didn't want to argue with him. She was trying to get his temperature down, not drive it up.

Devin breathed hard for a minute, then seemed to gather himself and seated himself on her small sofa. He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them, and seemed to study her carpet.

"I'm sorry, Chandler. It comes and goes."

*At least he sounds more like himself, for a moment.* Catherine thought, daring to hope.

That, too, came and went, however. He'd done it before.

"I know, Devin. Hang in there," Catherine commiserated.

Devin rested his head in his hands, the picture of misery. "My brain... it's on fire. When... when is this nightmare going to end?"

"I don't know. We'll get through it," Catherine promised.

Yet, it had been a long day, with little end in sight. Devin had barely slept, a brief nap that had lasted only a handful of minutes.

Consequently, Catherine hadn't been able to rest, either.

*Wind down. Go to sleep. Longer, this time. Please.*

But he didn't look like he was about to sleep. He looked like he had all day, like this was just another lull between his storms.

"Am I going to be like this the rest of my life? My miserable damn life?" he asked.

Catherine honestly didn't know. Finding Devin alive had been a miracle in itself. Curing him? Catherine had utterly no idea how to do that, and neither did anyone else, at the moment.

Jacob was still trying to determine – carefully – what was in the bag Winslow had brought him. Until he did, they were simply doing whatever they could.

Or make that, Catherine was.

*Quarantine. My idea, and here we are,* she thought.

Devin lifted his head and rocked in the chair a moment, not liking to be still. He got up, walked to her balcony doors a moment, then veered toward a small table too, and sat down yet again.

“The sun’s going down. Ever been to a Mets game? At night? They’re pretty good. Unless you’re a Yankees fan,” he chattered.

Catherine sighed, both mentally and physically.

“The lights are on... everywhere. Huge. Blinding. It... It’s the exact opposite of the Tunnels.”

Once again, Catherine didn’t bother to reply. He didn’t seem to need her to. He simply seemed like someone who was on an amphetamine cocktail.

*Amphetamines. Of course, it would be a drug. It’s Paracelsus,* Catherine mused.

But unlike the street drug John Pater had previously cultivated, Devin didn’t seem to be hallucinating. He wasn’t seeing things that weren’t there. He chattered a lot, often uncontrollably, then calmed, then started it all again. He was sweating hard, and his heart sometimes pounded. He was manic... yet lucid.

“I’ll get you another glass of water,” Catherine said, going to the tap in her kitchen.

She watched the water fill the glass, needing the break from being in the same room with Devin.

*Well... at least your life doesn’t seem to be in danger, though to be fair, the jury’s probably still out on that, too,* she thought, shutting off the faucet.

Catherine still didn’t like the blue color under his nails. She knew it meant a lack of oxygen for him.

Father wasn’t sure how they should treat that, either. He’d had something to say about that, as well.

*“I’d say give him oxygen, but perhaps that’s precisely what John wants us to do. Perhaps that’s what makes this more virulent.”*



Catherine could only agree that the most obvious course of treatment was likely the wrong one when it came to Paracelsus.

She reentered the living room to find Devin where she'd left him. She set the glass down as he studied his hands, cracked his knuckles, and sighed deeply. Then he got up and began adjusting the knobs on her stereo, without turning it on.

Catherine realized that though he was often unguarded in what he said, like a drunken man, his speech wasn't slurred, and his desire to move around was pronounced. He wasn't staggering or falling down. He was just... wild, for lack of a better term.

He went back to her lampshade and straightened it.

"Nice," he replied, pleased with his handiwork. Then: "Winslow doesn't like me."

"That... that's not true, Devin," Catherine defended.

"He brought Father's note. 'No real idea what to do.' Ever think he just wants me to die? It's not like he ever wanted me, Catherine."

Devin was approaching a dangerous level of self-pity.

"It's... It's not like that. You know Father. It's always... complicated, with him."

Devin snorted at her answer. "He likes you about as much as he likes me. Remember that, Catherine. He loves Vincent. More than anyone."

Catherine had no idea what to say to that, or even if it would be wise to respond at all.

Devin, for his part, paced the room again and once more examined her egg collection.

"If you bought real ones, you could eat them, instead." He picked up one Jenny had given her for Christmas, then set it down. A bit hard.

*I really need to move all the breakables,* Catherine thought ruefully.

"If you had a rope, we could climb down off your balcony," Devin stated, walking toward its doorway again.

Then he became distracted by the decorations on her mantle. Twisted horns caught his eye.

“I used to climb in Australia. Derek Saunders, at yer service, mate,” he said, affecting an accent. “Did you say you have a gold card? If you do, we can go to Australia.”

Catherine could do nothing but watch him burn off energy. After a moment, he stalked into her bedroom, lay down on her bed, and closed his eyes, though his fingers drummed impatiently on her bedspread. She followed him in. The brown eyes opened.

“Why do you like silk more than cotton?” he asked, for no reason she could name.

*Stop. Please, just stop. Vincent, I need you,* she thought.

She sighed again as Devin rolled on his side, clearly not expecting an answer to that question, either. He looked damp and uncomfortable. She thought he was better, sometimes, and alternated that with thinking he was worse. If the last several hours were any indication, she knew he might sleep briefly. Very briefly.

He closed his eyes again, trying to do so now. Catherine prayed for the peace of it.

*That’s it. Sleep. Sleep, Devin. Maybe when you wake up, things will be better.*

Catherine doubted that, as he twitched, on the bedspread.

If he slept, when he woke up, she knew it would all begin again. The pacing, the restless fidgeting, the handling her things, and the constant, unrestrained urge to say whatever thought popped into his fertile brain. He’d stick to no subject for very long. He truly couldn’t. Emotionally, he was a swinging pendulum.

Devin breathed in deeply, sighed, and remained still.

The eyes stayed closed. For one minute. For two.

Catherine tiptoed over to the bedside chair and sat down, taking a moment to rest. It was getting close to six o'clock. If the last few hours were any indication, Devin wouldn't nap for long, nor would he feel rested, for having done so. Whatever Paracelsus had given him wouldn't let him.

Catherine tried, for what felt like the hundredth time, to remember what she could only now call "the bright side."

*He's not in pain. He's not seeing things that aren't there. He's not aggressive, he's not trying to leave, at least not by running out of the apartment. He doesn't seem afraid. He's messy but not breaking things. He's sweating, but I've got the cold compresses and drinking water for that. He's not hungry. He's not violent. He just... can't... stop.*

There was no filter on him, and no real sense of self-worth. He couldn't stay focused on one thought for long. Stories about his childhood were interspersed with stories from his adulthood, from tales of his travels. And from regrets spawned on those, interspersed with the victories. There was no order to it. Any of it.

*"I delivered a baby once. They named him Harvey. I almost fell in love in Alaska. Or maybe it was with Alaska. She had brown hair. Have you ever seen Mt. McKinley? Do you like the circus? I don't. I used to think they were wonderful, but after you work in one a few years... And elephants? They smell. Have you ever ridden an elephant? I did. In India. It's hot in India. Do you think the elephants in India want to go to Alaska? I told you I delivered a baby, right? They named him after me. Do you like babies?"*

His voice... the voice that had been going nonstop all day, echoed in her ears. She rubbed her tired face.

*Hang in there,* Catherine thought, determined to do so.

Devin twitched in his sleep but stayed down. Catherine sighed and wondered if she should try to cover him with a sheet, then decided against it.

*I'll have to get you to drink some more when you wake up. Father says keeping you hydrated is important. That maybe it's a way to flush whatever this is out of your system,* she thought.

*Then: Don't give up, Devin. Vincent needs you. Maybe you never found love. But I know it found you. Vincent loves you. And he'll never forgive me if...*

Devin's hand trembled on the white sheet. His fingernails still looked blue, but... maybe they were just a little lighter?

She wasn't sure.

Like with so much else, she just didn't know.

The restless hand moved a little more, then stilled again.

*Oh, Devin, she thought. What are we going to do?*

She stared at her uneasy patient. The stubble on his chin was making him that much warmer, and the scar on his cheek shone whitely. He looked like a ruffian. Or a pirate.

*Devin. Come on. You're tough. You're adaptable. Pull through this. You're young. You're strong. I know you can do it. And Vincent will never forgive me if... if you don't.*

She pulled up the sheet after all and carefully covered Devin's sleeping form, not sure if it was the right thing to do or not.

*I don't even know if this is right. I don't know anything. But I know I've got to try,* she reasoned.

Catherine's mind went back to how this had all begun for her, with Benny intercepting her outside the courthouse.

*Was it really just earlier today? Today, and forever ago?*

She looked out toward the view of the balcony, through her bedroom sheers. "Oh, Vincent. I miss you," she whispered. "I miss you so much. But I don't think you should be here. I think... this is a trap. And somehow, it was meant for you."

She tried to not call out to him through their bond.

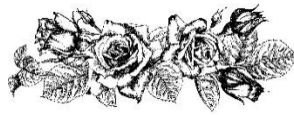
*Don't... don't come here. Stay away. You have to stay away,* she thought.

She willed herself to be calm.

*Fear. I mustn't feel fear*, she told herself. She knew that in a way, it would cut her off from Vincent, that it would quiet the bond between them. She knew that because she'd done it before, when Paracelsus had grabbed her and held her Below. Far Below.

She tried to send Vincent the impression that she was all right, even though she knew the entire situation was bizarre.

*I'm safe. I'm just tired. And I'm not afraid*, she thought, willing her love to feel it, as well.



## **Chapter Six**

### *The Nighttime Hours*



--

Devin shot up from the bed less than half an hour later, tossing the sheet aside. "Hot. It's hot in here."

Catherine felt his forehead. He was still warm, but not dangerously so. He wouldn't sit still for a regular thermometer, so Catherine used one of the strips she kept in her medicine chest.

What it told her wasn't good, but neither was it alarming.

*Just around a hundred. Not ideal, but not dangerous*, Catherine judged.

"You still have a fever," Catherine said, not telling Devin anything he didn't know.

“Air. I feel like I need fresh air. And water,” Devin complained. He slapped the louvered bedroom doors aside as he made his way back into her living room.

Catherine brought him yet another glass of water. He gulped it down, then wiped his mouth with the back of his wrist.

Devin scanned the room. “Looks like you lost the lottery. Winslow gone?” he asked.

*At least he seems more lucid,* Catherine thought.

“He’s close by,” she answered.

Devin simply nodded at that.

“It’s dark out. Where did the sun go?” he asked, as if it was a serious question.

“Where it usually does,” Catherine answered, indicating a nearby clock.

Devin simply nodded at that.

“How’d you get through law school?” he ping-ponged. “Daddy’s money buy a bar exam?” He picked up a photograph from her end table and turned it over in his hands.

Catherine was mildly insulted. “Nobody can buy a bar exam.”

He shot her a look. His pupils were wide. And the color under his nails was still alarming her.

“Sure,” he said, indicating he thought the opposite.

“Well... it can buy a tutor,” she conceded. “I had a bad habit of skipping class so I could go shopping, once upon a time.”

*Keep him talking. Let him work through this, whatever it is,* she thought.

Devin nodded, trying to focus on her words, as he sat down on her sofa.

“What did you buy?” He wasn’t really interested. But he couldn’t keep himself from asking it.

Catherine shrugged. “Just stuff. Clothes, mostly.”

He barely registered her reply as he leaned over and scrubbed his hands through his damp hair, sending it askew. He tried to remain seated, then he gave up. He bolted off the couch and knocked over the picture he'd barely managed to return to the table.

"Being a tour guide is easier than being a lawyer," he confided. "Just drive the jeep, and don't hit a dingo."

*Okay, not better.* Catherine rescued the downed photograph and put it on the mantle instead, figuring it might be safer there.

She gave him more water, wishing she dared to give him aspirin. He wiped his palms down his pant legs repeatedly.

"Everybody likes clothes. Except nudists. Why would anybody want to be a lawyer?" he asked, seeming to forget that he had impersonated one himself.

"Law is a bit of a struggle, I grant you. But Jeff Radler did okay," she replied, watching him as he rearranged a few things on her mantle.

"Who?" For a moment, he looked confused. Then he set down an expensive trinket. It rattled a little as it found the mantle. His hands weren't entirely steady. "Oh yeah. That. Good old Jeff. How's Joe Maxwell? Still got a thing for you?"

Catherine created distance between them. "You mentioned that before."

"Did I?" He clearly didn't remember.

"Joe and I are just friends, and he does not, as you so inelegantly put it, 'have a thing for me.'"

Devin scoffed. "Says she who knows nothing."

"He was dating a redhead. They were very serious." She retrieved his shirt from her bedroom floor and set it on the arm of the couch, where he could reach it, hoping he'd put it on, but pretty sure he wouldn't.

He didn't.

"Redheads? I like redheads. Ireland has redheads. I bet you'd look great as one. I was a lifeguard once at a nude beach. Best July *ever*. There was this one redhead in Sydney. Actually, she was more of a strawberry blonde..."



Catherine sighed. Deeply.

“Devin... I can’t. You... you’ve got to stop this.”

But he didn’t. Because he couldn’t.

It went on. And on. Catherine realized that it wasn’t so much a matter of keeping him talking, it was trying to shut him up that was the challenge. Or at least keep him still.

He refused all offers of food but kept drinking the water. At one point, he shouldered in and out of the shirt, then kept it on, when he declared he felt a chill. He turned on her stereo, then turned it off again. He babbled about life as a bush pilot, then as a doctor, again, then inspected her yearbook – for ten seconds.

*This is just never going to end*, Catherine thought.

And end it didn’t. Devin remained physically restless, wanted little to do with standing still, nor being silent. He inspected her things, leaving her little in the way of privacy. His commentary was much as it had been. Too personal, unguarded, and ill-mannered.

He was self-pitying, sometimes. But he was just as likely to blame others for any plight he’d suffered. He continued to bring up Father, Vincent, Mitch Denton, Winslow... and other names she didn’t even recognize.

Two hours later, he had rummaged through the contents of her bookshelves twice. ("Proust? Seriously, Catherine? Marcel damn Proust?") her bathroom, ("Loofah is an overpriced word for ‘sponge.’") Her music cassettes ("I never wanted to hear another violin concerto ever again, after the Tunnels.") and whatever else caught his eye.

Catherine, for her part, simply prayed for patience. *Is it really only nine-thirty?* she thought, realizing that for all she’d been through – they’d both been through, it was still early, comparatively.

Devin tried to sit, but for the most part, he remained up and walking, perspiring lightly, keeping up a running commentary.

If anything, to Catherine, it seemed like he was getting worse, rather than better, though she had to admit that her waning patience was probably to blame for that.

Devin rifled through her underwear drawer. "I bet the big boy likes this," he commented over a silk peignoir set with matching panties.

"Put it back," Catherine replied wearily, not bothering to chastise him for what was now a series of offenses.

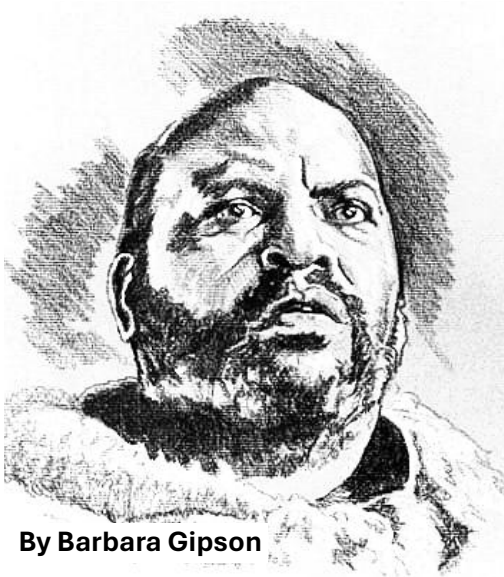
Devin did so.

"Did I ever tell you what Vincent and I did at Winterfest, when he was about seven?" Devin asked.

Catherine honestly couldn't remember if he had.

There was a knock on the door. Catherine blessed it for its interruption.

"Catherine, it's me, Winslow," Winslow said through the wood.



Catherine frantically undid the locks and threw it open.

"Tell me something good, Winslow," Catherine begged. Behind her, Devin had moved into the kitchen, where he was busily emptying the contents of her silverware drawer. Neither of them was sure why.

"Father says what was in the bag really was just a sedative, meant to keep him quiet when he was on the table."

"So, it's whatever Paracelsus shot him up with before that's causing this," Catherine reasoned. "Because believe me, he's nothing like 'sedate,'" she said.

"He still like he was?" Winslow asked, watching Devin emerge from the kitchen holding a cheese grater – and then return with it.

“Yes. He’s slept a couple of times, but only for a few minutes each time. He won’t eat, but he’s drunk a lot of water.” She leaned against the door frame while Winslow stood back from her.

“You look tired,” Winslow said.

Catherine knew she had to rally. She couldn’t accept Winslow’s help, even if he was willing to give it.

“I’m... I’m okay. How long... how long do you think it will take Vincent to get here?” she dared to ask.

Winslow considered. “Three days if it was you or me. Less, for Vincent. He knows you need him, Catherine.”

She did. And she knew she didn’t dare to.

“When he... when he reaches the pipes... tell him to stay away. He’s got to, Winslow. Whatever this is...” She nodded back toward the kitchen,

“Whatever this is... I think it was meant for Vincent.”

“Devin seems... harmless, at least,” Winslow observed.

In the kitchen, something clattered to the floor.

Catherine nodded.

“He is... and he isn’t. He always says what he’s thinking, but... sometimes it’s... well, sometimes it’s very personal.”

“Like it was at the Jay building? And in the car?”

Catherine nodded. “He says exactly what he thinks. And not all of it is... flattering, Winslow. He blames Father. And Mitch. And sometimes... even Vincent.”

Winslow nodded. “I’ll tell Father there’s been no change, then,” Winslow said.

“Can I... get you anything? More stew, from William?” Winslow asked, feeling helpless. He’d brought the food on a previous trip.

Devin, for his part, strode out of the kitchen, a potato masher in his hand. “En garde!” he told Winslow, pointing it like a sword. His other hand arced up, in a fencer’s posture.

“He didn’t touch what you brought earlier,” Catherine replied.

Devin tossed the kitchen tool onto her couch. “She doesn’t have any magazines,” he told Winslow, as if that was important. He sat on her dinky sofa. “Or pets.”

“He’s... harmless, just... exhausting,” Catherine said.

“He’ll stop soon. He’ll have to,” Winslow reasoned.

Catherine prayed he was right.

“Father’s sure we can’t give him something to help him sleep?” Catherine asked, hoping against hope they could do just that.

Winslow shook his head. “Said we have no idea what it would do. Might make his heart stop. Or race. Or something,” Winslow replied.

Catherine nodded at that.

“At one point... when he was lying down to sleep... I thought his nails looked better. But now... now I think I just imagined it.”

“I’ll tell Father,” Winslow said, knowing there was nothing else he could do.

Catherine nodded and let him go, waiting until she heard the key in the deadbolt before she returned to her charge.

*Here comes round seventeen*, she thought, dreading it.

She was right to.

After a few more hours, Catherine longed to give Devin a sedative, whether it went against medical advice or not.

His cycle of waking, raiding drawers and closets, talking, becoming exhausted, and sleeping at least a little, went on, and on. He had no appetite. He just rifled through the contents of her refrigerator for something to do.

All night long and into the early morning hours.

*When will this end?* she thought.

Like all the other questions, she knew she had no answer.



## **Chapter Seven**

### *Contagion*



--

*Catherine's Apartment, 4:00 p.m.*

"You two don't sleep together, do you?" Devin's voice jumped onto another tangent. The last one had been about baseball. The one before about a woman he had liked, during his last sham life. The one before had been a fairly long recitation of his various jobs and identities over the last year. Something else before that. Oh, and yes, he confirmed again that he liked her posterior.

Catherine was exhausted.

Devin, however, was not. And he praised her backside once again, to prove it.

But he made no sexual move toward her, regardless of how often he complimented her form. It was as if he couldn't focus on that, or any other thought, long enough to follow up on it.

Either that, or he had no sincere interest in it. In any of it.

At first, she'd talked to him. But by now, she mostly tried not to respond to his ramblings. Saving what energy she had left seemed the wisest course. Besides, he seemed not to require an answer, one way or the other.

"Of course you don't sleep together," Devin continued, back to his topic of her sex life, as he answered his own question. "Not my big brother. Look at this place, all white and shiny. Nothing of him in here." Devin's voice hammered at her. "Nice job. He's made a very nice nun of you, Catherine."

A scarlet flush claimed her face.

Devin felt perversely satisfied at seeing it. He'd been taking shots at her for hours and had finally hit a mark.

"Does he kiss you, even? Of course not. Not my selfish bastard of a brother."

*One of you is*, Catherine thought, putting the uncharitable thought down to her exhaustion.

"Vincent is the utter opposite of selfish," she snapped. It was the first time in quite a while she'd risen to his bait.

"R-iiiiight." Devin snorted, wiping his hands again on his pants. "So, *you're* the one in charge of how often you two kiss, how often you do the nasty. Surrre." He rolled his eyes as he rolled his r's and flipped a satin housecoat sleeve at her from where it hung in the open closet.

The intimate gown seemed to mock her lack of a physical relationship. Or at least it was doing that about as well as Devin currently was. Catherine gave it – and him – a withering glance.

She had tried shutting the closet doors to keep him out of her things, but he just reopened them. After three attempts, she'd just let it stay open.

Ransacking her closet wasn't hurting anyone, after all, and right now, that's what he was still focused on.

"Pretty gowns. Pretty robes. All for... what?" he asked.

Catherine rubbed her forehead. A headache was coming on. *He's staying on the same subject. That's new... isn't it?* she thought. *Does that mean he's... getting better?*

She didn't know the answer to that, and for some reason, that was starting to irritate her more and more. *Has he been at the thermostat again? It feels warm in here...*

"He'll cost you, Catherine. And the longer you stay, the more it will be." He stared at her things a moment longer, then threw the closet door closed, himself. "It will cost, and cost. Why do you think I left?"

Catherine's eyes narrowed, and her breathing grew shallow. She felt warm from the effort of having to put up with him all this time.

"Probably because you're a selfish basta-" Catherine's hand flew to her mouth.

*Oh no.* Her expression grew stricken. She had been about to call Devin Wells a bastard, and they both knew it. A word she was well aware of, but had never used, in all her country-club, genteel-upbringing life. Even if the word was technically correct, regarding Devin.

"I've got it," she said into the palm covering her mouth. "Whatever it is you've got, I have it." Her palms began to itch and sweat. Were her nails slightly blue? She went to the vanity to check her reflection. She looked flushed.

"Damn it!" *I didn't outwit Paracelsus by bringing Devin here. I played right into his plans.*

But for the distance separating her from the tunnels, a distance Paracelsus could know nothing about at the moment, Devin (or she) would have infected everyone in the tunnels as well, by now. It had been more than a day since she'd saved Devin. A day, and then some. More than enough time to spread disaster.

"I'm hot. I'm hot, but it's late in the day. I should be feeling cool, but I'm hot." She put a palm to her forehead. "I'm sweating. Damn it!"

"I'm sorry, Chandler." Devin's voice pierced her awareness.

Catherine no longer felt tired. If anything, she felt as if she were coming out of her skin.

"Damn you and damn you're sorry!" she railed at him, her temper right at the surface. *It had been a mistake to bring him here. A mistake to tend him, so unprotected. A mistake to be exposed to him, this long. Did Winslow have it yet? Did anyone else?*



She had tended Devin's bloody wrist and wiped his sweaty brow. Though she had washed her hands, she had it, whatever "it" was. She could feel it, like warm alcohol, beginning to run through her veins.

*Oh, no. No, please...*

She couldn't concentrate. *Should I try to call Peter again? Do I go take a shower? Drink lots of water? Send a message? Daddy. I miss... I miss my Dad. I... I miss my Mom. Oh, God...*

For the first time, she understood just what Devin Wells, fraud extraordinaire, had been going through.

She tried to focus on her present predicament and found that her lawyer-sharp mind careened into the past.

*Why didn't I try harder at school? Why did my Mother die? Jenny. Jenny has always been my friend, but she gave Steven my number. What a disaster that was...*

She gripped the back of the chair. Hard. "Devin. Devin, I've got it. I don't... I don't know what to do," she said.

Devin, for his part, could only watch her as she paced the room. She turned to the balcony doors.

"Vincent. Oh, please. Vincent should come. He... he'll know what to do. He always knows what to do. Even if sometimes... even if..." She let the thought trail off, unfinished.

She looked out the window to the balcony where the rose bush was in bloom. She desperately hoped Vincent would come once the sun set.

*Vincent. I... Vincent. Winslow said... what was it? What did he say? That... that Vincent had reached the lowest pipes? That he'd sent word, though he was still far away. That... something... I can't remember... Think, dammit, THINK!*

Catherine completely ignored Devin as she struggled mightily to concentrate.

*Vincent... on his way... was that right? It was, wasn't it?*

But that had been hours ago. *Hadn't it?*

She looked at the clock. *It was four. Now it's five. Five o'clock. Is it really five o'clock? Where has the day gone?*

She hoped Vincent would come. Then she clamped down on the thought. *"No. No, Vincent! Stay away! Stay far away!"*

She sat in the same spot Devin had occupied, her head in her hands. *It wasn't so bad, yet. Not yet. I still have some control.* She knew she needed to think.

She whirled around and then paced. She thought about calling a Helper to ask them to relay a message to the Tunnels. Then she realized she would have Winslow to do that, next time he checked in on her.

*My... My mother died. I was too young. I was late to work the day of Tom's party, the night I was attacked. I had to pick up my dress. It was important to Tom. I think I was falling in love with Elliott Burch, but I knew I shouldn't. Champagne at the office. Benny... Benny rides a bicycle. What color was the bicycle I used to have when I was a kid? Was it red? No. No, it was a blue one. Nancy had a red one, but Jenny's was black, and it had a little bell. Or was it the other way around? We'd park our bikes, and everyone would watch me as I climbed up in the trees...*

Nothing made sense, and nothing stayed for long.

She tore apart her desk, looking for a phone number, then picked up and hung up the receiver, sure she had done what she'd intended, yet not quite sure what that had been. Had she made a call? She wasn't sure.

*I have to call in to work. Tell them I can't come in. Another sick aunt. Joe will be livid.*

She stared at the phone, unsure of what to do.

*I... I did call in before, didn't I?*

But like everything else, she had no idea if that was true.

*What will tomorrow be?* she wondered, losing the thought.

She shrugged at the phone, deciding it was an unimportant thing, since Vincent never called her on it. She looked around her apartment.

*Why don't I have more plants in this room?* It suddenly felt like a vital question. *Vincent would like more plants. Look how often he prowls the park.*

“I need more plants,” she declared.

“Africa has plants,” Devin answered.

Devin still wandered through the rooms, this time taking pleasure in emptying a few of her kitchen cabinets. She jiggled her locked front door, then left it to rearrange the items on her mantle. Neither of them tried to leave the apartment. It required too much focus to devise a plan of escape.

Like him, Catherine went through her own things, not sure of what she was looking for, just sure she needed to move. Devin made comments at her. She shot some back and ignored others.

“I think Mitch Denton is going to end up dead someday. And I’m never going to get to ride the carousel again,” he said, tossing a stray butter knife across her counter.

“Pink is in, but I look better in peach. And put that back,” she ordered.

“Why?”

“I don’t know.” She put her hand to her forehead, again, a futile gesture, trying to steady herself. “My mother said we should eat on the good china. I think that was the day she found out she was sick.”

Devin put some of the silverware away, then left the chore incomplete. Catherine went back into the living room and pulled a book off the shelf. Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*. She knew it was important. She even knew why. She just couldn’t focus long enough to read one of them.

“Vincent... Vincent gave me this,” she said, clutching the small volume as if it were a lifeline.

“I gave him a book for Winterfest, one year. *Great Expectations*. I think he liked it,” Devin said.

*Great Expectations* had been the book Vincent had read to her when they’d first met. The one she’d finished, the first night he’d ever come to her balcony.

“I... I promise you he did,” Catherine said, unaware until that moment that it had been Devin who’d given Vincent the book.

“No... no shadow of... no shadow of... I can’t remember,” Catherine struggled, trying to quote the last chapter.

“It doesn’t matter, then,” Devin replied.

“Of course it matters!” Catherine snapped, furious with him. Then: “Why are you a fraud?” she asked.

He simply shrugged. “Once you start, it’s hard to stop,” he replied. “Did I ever tell you about Alaska? I saw a moose my first day. A real moose. They have a certain smell...”

She and Devin were each incapable of holding a focused conversation for long. Different ideas kept crowding in, moving aside the others. It was like going mad, but aware of it, on some level.

*I love Vincent. So much. Too much, sometimes. Maybe. How much is too much? I need to water the rose bush. One red, one white. I didn’t kill it with my gardening. Vincent kissed my finger when I pricked it on a thorn. I wonder if my blood is what made the roses red?*

*Stop! Stop it!*

Catherine shook herself, hard, mentally.

*This is like how Vincent feels when the Other surfaces,* Catherine thought, in a lucid moment. Followed by: *Why don’t I paint the living room yellow?*

Devin, meanwhile, was splashing water on his face from her kitchen sink.

Catherine was cognizant enough to be aware that she didn’t like what she was feeling. Though none of the emotions were “wrong,” they were altogether unfiltered and hitting her like an avalanche crashing down a mountainside.

A picture of her father made her nearly burst into tears. A Winterfest program made her long for the festival, but sorry she had gone at the same time. She remembered Lou. Then promptly forgot why she’d thought of him. Her life had changed so much since Vincent. She loved him so deeply, she was going to burst with it. She hated that they could not be together very often, that their romance was so often cobbled together with stolen moments, rather than lingering hours. It made her want to scream.

Her rational mind struggled to sort it all. *It’s... It’s like being really drunk. Like a toxin, of some sort. Some kind of inhibition breaker,* her brain reasoned. Then:

*Why did Daddy leave me?*

*Stop. Think. What works like a truth serum, but isn't a truth serum?*

This wasn't that, though that was its most obvious first effect. This was a no-holds-barred assault on her ability to reason.

*Is Jenny prettier than me? Does everyone think so when we're together? Stop it! I can't... I can't reason. Brigit was beautiful. Nancy has a beautiful house, a beautiful life... Does Luz remember I don't buy my priorities with a credit card? Oh, Vincent...*

And in a moment of clarity, the drug's purpose became clear to Catherine.

*Vincent's ability to reason is all that keeps him in check from the dark forces that threaten to consume him, sometimes. And-- Ahhhhhh.*

*"No choice you make will matter. No choice will save him."*

"Devin. Listen to me. It wasn't you, Paracelsus said that about. It was Vincent."

"What?" Devin asked, drying his face on one of her kitchen towels.

"Vincent. 'No choice you make will matter. No choice will save him.' Paracelsus wanted Vincent to get this."

"Yeah. Maybe," Devin agreed.

*Joe is half in love with me. No! Joe is my boss. I don't want to think about that. Daddy loved me. Vincent loves me. My mother... my mother loved me... and she died. Would I look better if my hair was lighter? How can I be thinking that?! I was never good in law school. Tom... hated me. He told me he loved me once, but that was a lie. Westport is far away. A happy life. Buddy has a crush on me. Nancy Tucker used to take pictures. There was a camera in her bag. A Nikon. What's her husband's name? Why can I remember that the camera was a Nikon, but I can't remember Nancy's husband's name? The Subway Slasher... it wasn't Vincent. Where did Red go after Jason Walker disappeared? I want ice cream. No. No, I want ice water. No, no, I want tea. But I don't. Does Joe think I have nice legs? Does Vincent? When is the Children's concert? Is it next Tuesday? Or is that Mary's birthday? Edie didn't return my call last week. Is Edie okay? Why did -*

Catherine put her hands over her ears, trying to drown out the internal noise.

“This... this was for Vincent,” she gasped out.

“I said, ‘maybe,’” Devin replied.

“Stop arguing with me! You’re not the victim! You’re the carrier.”

Catherine stared at him as his brown eyes met her green ones.

*You... you’re the bait. But you’re not the target. It was Vincent. Paracelsus meant this hell for Vincent. Unable to reach him. He infected you.*

“I was supposed to... to take you to Father. Supposed to take you Below,” Catherine said to Devin, struggling to hold on to the thought.

“You could have taken me to a hospital,” he reasoned.

She wasn’t about to discuss why that had not been possible, again. “Yes, but you were... you were bleeding. And sweating. I... I touched your skin, and... Do you... Do you think Jenny is prettier than me?”

“I have no idea. I don’t know Jenny. Wait... does she tend bar in Edinburgh?”

Catherine shook her head and struggled to remember the thread of the original conversation.

“What’s this do?” Devin asked, holding up a melon baller he’d fished out of her kitchen drawer. Nancy Tucker had sent her one.

“It magically transforms you into a suburban housewife with two kids. And a husband,” she said, feeling brilliant. “In Westport,” she tacked on.

“Cool,” Devin replied, eying the metal contraption. He returned to the kitchen. Catherine found him emptying out her silverware drawer. Again.

She took a moment to imagine a life in Westport.

*The house is small, but charming. There’s a big backyard. And... Wait. Wait... no, think. Think!*

*Paracelsus. You have to think of Paracelsus. Now!*

She focused exclusively on his image. Visions of Westport melted, and the Alchemist’s piercing gaze held her attention.

*You know he wanted something. Paracelsus always wants something...*

*Paracelsus... he invented a thing, a bio-toxin, something... and decided to use Devin to deliver it.*

Westport tried to come back. A garden with a trellis beckoned.

*No! Paracelsus. To Devin. To...*

*Any... Any rescuer would bring it into the Tunnels, to Father, and eventually to...*

*To Vincent.*

Catherine held her head in her hands, a gesture that looked familiar on Devin.

*Devin's right. It comes and goes. A lot. And hard.*

"We can't go to the Tunnels. We can't go anywhere. We're contagious," Catherine told Devin.

"You say tomato, I say contagious," Devin replied, chuckling at his own turn of phrase. He shut the drawer and fetched himself a glass of water from her tap.

"Vincent. Paracelsus meant to infect Vincent," Catherine said, as Devin's throat worked, swallowing more water from a glass.

"Yeah. That figures," Devin said. Perhaps he was just as aware of that as she was. "And even if he's immune to it, we aren't," Devin observed.

*We... aren't. But Vincent sometimes is... but we... aren't.*

Catherine's mind tried to process Devin's realization. If Vincent were resistant to whatever this was (and with Vincent, who knew the answer to that one?), it would help him, but only so much.

She lifted her head, a head that already felt weary. "But that means... even if he doesn't get it... everyone... everyone else would," Catherine stated.

"Oh. Wouldn't *that* be a party?" Devin said sardonically.

It would, and of the worst kind. The others Below would be in a state of constantly telling Vincent everything they thought of him, as well as what they thought of each other. Catherine shuddered, in a rare, stable moment. One she knew she was probably pressing the boundaries of.

"They're not bad people," she said of the Tunnel dwellers. *Surely, there was hope?*

"I'm a bad, bad man," Devin mourned, as if she'd pressed the button on that comment.



No, they weren't bad people. But she knew that they would pile all of their resentments toward the Topside world, and God knew what else, upon Vincent's shoulders. They'd resent him. Even Devin had done that while under the influence of the drug.

*"I hated him. I hated both of them."*

They were words that would be said aloud. And there would be a lot of those.

*Vincent... Lena would probably throw herself at him again. Catherine hated the thought of that. But... but he'll reject her. Again. Then she'll be in a fury. Olivia... Olivia hates me. She blames me for Kanin. And Vincent. She blames Vincent for telling him to go... Cullen stabbed Mouse. Mouse was given the Silence for stealing... even Vincent had to agree...*

Her thoughts became unmoored, as they jumped from person to person, in the tunnel world. Every one of them had a reason to be there. Every one of them had a grievance, of sorts.

And sometimes, they had those with each other.

Or Vincent.

They all would become unhinged, and they would all tell him of all their secret dislikes and fears, just as Devin had done.

*Was Vincent not the reason they were in danger of exposure, at times? Was this poison not meant for him? Even though he protected them from danger, from harm, do some of them secretly think that he's just a... a freak, seeking asylum? Would he lose his temper and kill one of them, one day, with his great claws? How much of what had happened to Lisa Campbell had been his fault? Vincent himself is afraid of hurting them when he loses control... The Tunnels. So beautiful at Winterfest. So... hard, other times. The cave-in. My god. I nearly lost him....*

Catherine held her head in her hands, again, struggling to shut off the noise that consumed her, inside.

*Everyone Below. Like this. My poor Vincent. At the mercy of dozens of maniacs, simultaneously.*

He would flee from them in sorrow and despair. His abandonment, pain, and desolation would finally be complete.

*No! No!*

Or his rage would kill them, if he were affected, or worse, goaded into a fight by the wilder side of his nature.

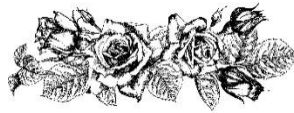
*He could... he could destroy them. All of them. Then he'd destroy himself from the guilt.*

"Paracelsus... one way or the other... no matter what... he would... obliterate the Tunnels. And he'd use Vincent to do it."

It was a crashing, ugly thing to understand.

*His revenge... so terribly sweet, using Devin as the one son who would destroy the other son, who would then destroy all the other people Jacob loved.*

Catherine was horrified. For all of them.



## **Chapter 8**

### *The Longest Day*



--

Someone was knocking at the door. Had been, for at least a full minute, waiting for some kind of verbal response. Neither Catherine nor Devin had realized it.

Winslow used the key and opened her apartment door. Catherine seemed to forget how the lock worked.

"Winslow, you're... you're here. Please... please tell me you're not sick."

It took only a moment for the big black man to understand that he wasn't, but she was.

He took one step forward, meaning to help, then took two back.

*Distance. Stay back. Well back.*

"Catherine. Your nails. Look."

She did. And even though she expected to see it, it still seemed to surprise her.

They were definitely tinged an interesting shade of blue.

"Blue. They're blue. Like Devin's. Stay away. It's like plague," she said.

"Not plague. Poison." Winslow could see her distress. "Catherine... hang on. Father's trying to figure out what to do. And Vincent is close. Getting closer every minute. Should be here by... tomorrow, sometime."

Everyone knew who 'he' was.

Catherine shook her head, making her sweat-soaked tresses fly. "He can't... he can't come. Not here. Tell him, Winslow. And tell him I love him more than Lena ever could. Can you do that for me?"

Her lovely eyes were pleading pools.

"Sure. Sure Catherine. I..."

"What do we do?" Devin interjected. "Winslow... we're barely holding it together."

"Let it run its course,' Father says. Nothing this strong can last for long. Sounds right."

Devin rolled his brown eyes in disgust. "Oh, like he knows. You're no brain trust, down there. Stick to pounding stone."

It was Devin's voice. But Catherine had been thinking it, too, uncharitably.

*Lena. No, Brigit. Brigit O'Donnell. He loves her, too, in a way. Or Lisa...*

"Win...Winslow's right." Catherine realized, fighting for lucidity. "You had the symptoms right away, but they got worse when the fever climbed. At first, I thought you were sick all along, but I think that was the sedative he gave you, masking the symptoms. Stupid. We were all so stupid."

"Mostly you," Devin agreed. Then, "Oh, hell, Chandler, I'm sorry, again. How many times am I going to say that?"

If they had taken Devin to Father, Jacob would have touched his son. That was likely Paracelsus' plan all along. But, he realized, this would work just as well. Catherine would touch Devin, then touch Vincent. It was only the fact that Vincent had been deep in the Tunnels that had saved him from exposure, and only Catherine's insistence that Devin stay with her that saved the Tunnels.

*Now, who would save the two of us?*

"How long does this last?" she asked Devin, realizing they had no idea.

"I've been asking that since yesterday," he replied.

"If it's bacterial, antibiotics would treat it." Catherine hoped.

"It's viral then. You know Paracelsus," responded Devin.

"If it's viral, I'd have it." Winslow chimed in. They had quite forgotten he was standing there.

"Maybe you're immune," Devin opined.

"Maybe you're an idiot," Cathy shot at him. He ignored her.

Her mind clicked again, like a television changing stations. "I miss my mother. She died way too young." Then..."Good God, what am I doing with all these clothes?" she gestured to the ones Devin had carried into her living room. "Fixing to open a department store? How many pairs of black pumps does one woman need?" She threw a few pairs in the garbage, pleased with the resulting free space in the shoe rack.

"You have a nice ass, too," she told Devin.

*Okay. Inhibitions lowered, too. Check. What were they talking about?*

Fortunately, Winslow still knew.

"Stay here and try not to do anything stupid. I'll be back as soon as I can."

He locked the door behind him and raced to the tunnels.

Devin shook his head. *Vincent will kill me if he thinks I hurt you, Catherine... and whether Father likes it or not, you're Vincent's touchstone. He needs you like he needs air to breathe... He's different. Better, since you came into his life. He's even... happier, in some ways. Calmer. Like he's found his center. He's more at peace. He loves you, and -*

Devin paused. That was the first time he had been able to hold more than a fleeting thought in his head. He looked at his nails. Still blue, but definitely lighter.

"Catherine, drink," Devin said, hurrying to the kitchen sink. "You were right all along. You need to drink to get the poison out, to help you sweat."

"Sweat is what causes it, you idiot," she tossed a photo album she'd been thumbing through back on the table.

He shook his head. Damp tendrils of hair flew. "No, sweat is what *carries* it. The virus is what *causes* it. It's just a... a hyped up truth serum. You need to drink and get the fever down."

She took the glass. "Can I have aspirin?" It was said in the voice of a child asking for a treat.

Devin shook his head, understanding why she hadn't given him any.

"I don't know. I have a feeling the answer might be 'no.' Paracelsus wouldn't have wanted anything to interfere with the toxin. It might have a nasty effect, mixed with something else."

"I want aspirin," she pouted. Then: "I want Vincent. I'm sorry, Devin, but I don't love you." She bounced from topic to topic. "I want my shoes back." She set the glass down and went to dig her discards out of the garbage.

"These make me look tall and he's so tall," she said dreamily. She eyed the spiky heels. "I like it when I'm taller, next to him," she crooned, returning the leather pumps to their place in her shoe rack. A pair of flat brown sandals hit the garbage can with a thump in exchange.

Devin picked up the water glass and chased her down. She was a constantly moving target.

"Drink," Devin insisted, forcing water to her lips much the same as she had done for him.

*Will I catch it again, tending her?* He doubted it. That wasn't much, but it was all he had to go on. He guided her over to the sofa.

"But there's... so much I need to do," she said.

He remembered that feeling. That "must go through everything" feeling. He'd ransacked her apartment, pursuing it.

"I know. It's... It's okay, Cathy. Just sit. I'll stay with you."

She looked at the couch. Suddenly, Catherine felt tired, so tired from all the mental acrobatics.

*Time to rest.* She tucked herself onto one of her 'dinky' couches.

Outside the window, she watched as the late springtime weather turned rainy. *Typical New York.*

She forced her eyes closed. She wasn't sure if she slept or not.

After a while, Winslow returned empty-handed, but vastly relieved to see Devin looking better and Catherine resting fitfully on the sofa. Devin's nails were definitely improving.

"Father says if it's desperate, we can try some antibiotics, but that they likely won't work. He says Paracelsus is too devious and probably cultured an antibiotic-resistant strain as a carrier. Also, that our bodies should be able to fight this thing off, given time."

"What are the odds it's fatal?" Devin asked, becoming more lucid by the minute.

Winslow looked at him sympathetically as Devin pulled a blanket over Catherine.

"I don't think they're that good. Paracelsus can't rule us all if we're dead," Winslow reasoned.

Devin nodded, indicating that he agreed.

"I really do hate that old son-of-a-bitch," Devin said. He glanced up at Winslow. "That's not the drugs, talking. That's me."

Winslow tilted his dark head toward Catherine. "She gonna be okay?"

Devin considered her twitching form.

"If it runs its course through her the way it did through me, I'm in for a long day and a night, and more. If that's the worst of it, and nobody else turns up with symptoms, we'll have gotten through this lucky."

"Will we?" Vincent's voice came from the direction of the balcony doors.

It was barely twilight. He'd clearly travelled hard. And he had risked much, coming here this early.

*Father must be having a fit.* That knowledge mollified Devin some.

"You were supposed to keep him away," Devin told Winslow.

"Yeah. You see how good he listens," Winslow shot back, aware it wasn't illness causing him to be sharp with Devin.

Devin faced the open balcony door squarely. "Vincent, I know you love her, but you *can't* come in here." Devin's voice was a lash of caution.

*But Catherine is ill. She needs me.*

He felt it as well as knew it by what his eyes told him. *My God, her fingernails are turning blue.*

Vincent took a step forward, and Devin intercepted him, not touching him, but clearly blocking his way.

"You can't, Vincent. Whatever this poison is... I think Paracelsus meant it for you."

"Or all of you," Vincent concluded, still watching, but fighting the urge to come farther in.

Devin shook his head in the negative. "Vincent... *don't*. For the love of God, don't." Devin said, knowing there was nothing he could really do if Vincent decided to ignore him.

"If you do... everything we've been through is for nothing. I mean it," Devin said.

Blue eyes looked past his brother to the woman he loved. "Her mind... it's on fire. A dozen thoughts, all running through her head, fighting for dominance. I can feel it."

"I know you can," Devin replied. He still didn't move.

Vincent, after a long moment, took a step back. "Paracelsus has much to answer for. Again." The ice in Vincent's voice made Devin glad he was not John Pater.

"Yeah. It's kind of his MO," Devin replied, returning to Catherine's side. She was starting to thrash.

"He will suffer for this attack upon Catherine. And you." *Suffer*. Devin marked the word. Not just 'pay ' or even 'die.' Suffer.



*Are we already too late to keep you from being exposed?* Such talk was not like Vincent.

"We can help her. *I* can help her, the way she helped me," Devin said, purposely changing the subject. "A few hours from this time tomorrow, and the worst of it will be past. Trust me, little brother."

Devin took a deep breath, one of the first he'd taken in more than a day, he realized. Constant talking had kept him from breathing deeply.

Vincent could 'hear' Catherine's riotous thoughts from the couch, through their bond. Sleep would be no respite for her. And she would rouse soon. If she saw him, what then?

"I do not like... keeping my distance," Vincent stated.

"I'd say Paracelsus is kind of counting on that, wouldn't you?" Winslow asked.

The point was well made.

"I will be near," Vincent said firmly. "On the balcony, or near the basement entrance, on the roof... near."

His voice was hard as steel. He would not be removed, but he would be cautious. Devin was relieved at this reasonable statement. Vincent's voice brooked absolutely no argument.

"And I cannot promise to stay away," he added. *If she gets worse...*

Devin shook his dark, sweat-slicked head. "You have to. Vincent, you absolutely must. This thing is an ugly trap, and it was designed to trap you."

"Perhaps I can—"

"You can't," Devin said shortly. "And... none of us can restrain you, once you're exposed. Remember that."

It was true. And it was a truth Vincent knew he couldn't deny.

Devin turned his gaze back to a sleeping Catherine. Her eyes were starting to flutter open, and she was kicking off the blanket.

"She's coming around," Winslow cautioned.

"Yeah. For the next few hours, she's going to say a lot of things she doesn't mean," Devin warned Vincent.

"And a lot of things she perhaps does," concluded the tall warrior-poet in the doorway.

Catherine tried to keep her eyes closed, but she rolled over on the couch, her mind giving her no rest.

For Vincent, it felt... uncomfortable, inside their bond.

Devin crossed to the balcony, careful to keep his distance.

"I've got her. Stay as close as you want, just... don't come in. Not where she can see you. She'll run to you. If she touches you... all bets are off."

Vincent closed his eyes over the pain of that.

*Catherine... Catherine touching me... In the beginning. At the portal to her stairwell. At the place where I killed the men who assaulted her... She... leaned against me. She took my hand, and I was lost.*

Behind them, Catherine was rousing. Visibly. "Devin?" she called. "I... I hear voices. Do... do we have... ice cream?"

"Go," was all Devin had time to say before Vincent stepped farther back, and he shut the doors to the balcony, drawing the interior curtains closed.

When the door clicked shut, Catherine shot up off the couch.

"I like chocolate. But it used to give me pimples." Catherine's voice sounded like she had never dozed.

"Really?" Devin offered conversationally, turning toward her.

"I'll tell Father you're better." Winslow absented himself yet again, for the last time.

"Yes. Do you like chocolate, Devin? Such a funny name, Devin. Like Devil. Why do you think Father named you that?"

"Because the devil has a sense of humor, to stick me with Cathy Chandler on a speed rush, right now," Devin said wryly.

"Cathy. My Mom called me that. Elliot called me that. Vincent doesn't like Elliot."

"Do tell." Devin eyed the doorway, wondering if he was still there, figuring he was. *Could he hear? With those ears, of course, he could.*

"Elliot is handsome. But not as handsome as Vincent."

"Oh?" This was getting interesting.

"And he has money. I don't think that matters, do you?"

"It does when you don't have any," answered Devin, for both of the brothers.

"Any what? I want ice cream. Do we have chocolate?"

Devin scrubbed his face with his hands, feeling like he hadn't slept in a week.

"Let's find out," he volleyed.

"I like chocolate. But I liked a boy in high school, too. I didn't study very hard in law school. Because I already knew I'd go to Chandler and Coolidge. Jay Coolidge plays golf. Badly, according to Marilyn. Do you play golf? My Mom played tennis. I climbed trees..."

And so it went, for much of the night.

Devin tried to get her to drink water, and she mostly complied. He even put her, fully dressed, into the shower, once, though she kept climbing out and trying to peel out of her sweaty clothing. That was a disaster, and he was relieved when she finally consented to wear one of her long robes.

Remembering his own state of half-dress for the last two days, he decided that a wet Catherine Chandler swathed in a peach silk robe was better than nothing. But not much.

Each time she slept, Vincent tapped softly on the door, just wanting to stand in the doorway and look at her. He was suffering, and not from the cool March air that was now heavy with the promise of more rain. He wanted to go to her badly. Only the knowledge of the consequences, and the understanding that Devin was tending her kept him back.

The constant noise in her brain made his tired. She leapt from topic to topic, from feeling to feeling, unfettered by anything.

*This is madness. This is the very definition of it,* Vincent thought.

It was. And Catherine was its hapless victim. For hours, Vincent stayed on her balcony, wet and dry, and listened to her talk.

She missed her parents. She loved him. She enjoyed her job, but only sometimes. It felt good to stand up for people. She loved him more. She was terrified that he would leave her. She wanted new shoes. She dug her sandals out of the garbage, then threw them back in, again.

She wondered how the two of them would make their lives fit together, despairing that they ever would. She felt hot. She felt exhausted. She thought Devin looked sexy, but it was the wrong kind of sexy, whatever that meant. She was jealous that Lena would try to take Vincent away, again. She felt hot again. She was sticky from the sweat. She wanted another shower. No, she didn't. She felt exhausted, some more.

Devin, for all his own exhaustion, stuck right with her.

Sunrise began its subtle greying of the sky. Vincent could smell a wet, approaching dawn. He had to return to the world Below. He cursed his life and his fate, that he would have to leave her thus. And not for the first time, he envied his brother, Devin.

*I will wait out the day at our threshold. I will return when the sky turns grey. Hold on, Catherine. Hold on, my love.*

He removed himself from her balcony, but stayed at the threshold to her apartment, not far from where Winslow had bunked out just hours before.

*Every time you climb down to me... it's like an angel, descending,* Vincent thought, clutching the cool metal rung.

It made him feel closer to her, in spite of their new distance; a distance he found helped not at all, with the turmoil Catherine was sending through their bond.

She slept briefly, and it all started again. Memories of childhood tumbled themselves together and bled into memories of yesterday. She suffered the loss of her mother again. Then she rummaged through her closet and her vanity.

She rarely stopped talking. The hours bled into each other.

Through the bond, Vincent received a kind of static buzz. Her last clear thought to him had been one where she had been anxious for him to hurry to her side, then immediately changed her mind and told him to stay away. After that, it had become increasingly garbled, as though she could hold on to no one anchoring thought or feeling.

Vincent realized how this evil poison was meant for him and the devastating effect it would have. For the people in his life, it was terrible, but apparently not deadly. But for him? ...

Vincent knew only too well what his deepest thoughts and feelings were, and how... primal some of those could be. Like any living being, he had regrets, resentments, desires and sorrows.

But he was not the same as any other living being, and he knew it.

Unleashed, any or all of his emotions, desires, or regrets could be disastrous. For everyone. Including him.

*Catherine. I love you. I love you... always.*

He sat on the sandy ground and tried to send her his strength through their bond.

*I'm here. I'm here for you. I swear I am.*

The day passed in varying degrees of agony for all of them. Devin, realizing this was now his third day with almost no real sleep, was exhausted, but knew he had the day and the evening to go.

Vincent, for his part, hadn't slept so much more.

Time, for him, was a dragging thing, while Catherine was burning through it.

Winslow and Father both came to speak to Vincent, but he mostly ignored them. They couldn't help, and the cacophony in Catherine's brain was making it hard to concentrate.

Finally, evening came, and Vincent felt he could return to Catherine's balcony.

Inside her apartment, Devin was expecting him.

*Stay back, little brother,* Devin thought, watching dusk turn to dark.

“Devin... Is it dark enough, yet?” Catherine asked behind him. They both knew what she meant by “dark enough.”

“Yeah,” Devin replied, knowing there were now probably three of them in attendance, rather than two.

“I used to be afraid of the dark. My Mom gave me a rose and a birthday candle.”

She crossed to the balcony doors, Devin on her heels.

“You need a jacket,” he said, forgetting for a moment how hot the fever was making her.

She ignored him and threw the doors wide.

Empty. The balcony was empty of any living thing save her rose bush and a potted fern.

“I just... I used to be afraid of the dark. I’m not, now,” she said, looking around. “Vincent?” she called softly.

But this, like every other instinct she’d been following, was short-lived. She turned around and went back inside.

“Where did you put my melon baller?” she asked Devin, who was thankful that she had returned indoors.

Devin saw a swish of dark cape.

“It’s uh, in the kitchen. I think,” he answered, ushering her in that direction.

*Stay away from her, Vincent. She’s poison for you, right now. Even though she doesn’t mean to be,* Devin thought.

Catherine went out on the balcony twice more to look for Vincent. The second time, she forbade Devin to close the doors, in spite of the chill in the air.

A few minutes later, he did, anyway.

Vincent sat crouched on the roof above, miserable. He wanted to be on the balcony, *their* balcony, closer to her, willing her to feel that he was near, that he was loving her.

*I’m here, Catherine. I’m here. I swear I am close to you, that I will always be... close to you....*

He tried to send her that impression through their bond, but knew he'd failed. Paracelsus' pestilence was just too strong.

He felt so helpless.

Inside, Devin tried getting Catherine to eat, but like him, she had had no appetite for real food. She drank, mostly obediently, and she talked of how much she loved Vincent. She occasionally ate a spoonful of chocolate ice cream out of the container, then returned it to the freezer.

She talked about her father, her job, her life before, and how difficult it all was, sometimes.

At her most hopeless, she talked of her fears of losing Vincent. But then, she would bounce to some other topic, just as Devin himself had done. She'd discuss her friends, the Helpers, or her law studies, ("I seriously considered a career in fashion law, Devin. I was so flighty, before Vincent.")

Winterfest, various people down Below, Vincent, her privileged childhood, Father, ("He tries to like me but sometimes, he didn't, because Vincent did.") and Vincent. (Did she still love him? She still did.)

Devin realized (as he watched her sort through all her handbags) that he'd given her a travelogue of his life, because in a way, that was the most important thing to him. She was giving him a lecture on how much she loved his brother for the same reason.

*It's that. It's just that it's all mixed in with so many other things,* he thought.

By the time a crescent moon began to rise, he knew very well how she'd felt while she was tending him, as well as how she felt right now.

She was run ragged. Tired from not enough sleep. Happy, some, then sad. Depressed by all of it, the length and breadth and weight of her life.

He knew it both because he remembered it, as he had experienced the illness, and because after so long with so little rest, he was feeling it, some, himself.

Catherine wasn't walking around as much and had taken to moving her vanity bench so it faced the balcony doors. Still wrapped in the peach silk robe, she sat on the padded seat like an expectant bride, waiting for Vincent.



"He always comes to me at night," she said.

She smiled at the closed doors, then got up to make sure they were unlocked. They weren't, thanks to Devin. She fixed that. He couldn't stop her. He gave up on trying to lock them again.

"Nighttime. Always at night. Of course, you know that." Catherine said it cheerfully, but her eyes were beginning to show concern. She hadn't seen *him* yet.

"What was it like, being his brother?" Catherine bounced the topic, some. *We didn't cover that when I was sick?* Devin thought, barely remembering that they had.

"Exhausting," Devin answered, both for Catherine's benefit and Vincent's, sure he could hear, though not yet be seen by her.

"I'm hot," she said, leaping from the bench. It was cool in the room.

"So hot," she complained, going into her bathroom. Devin followed as she turned on the shower taps.

Another abortive attempt at a shower ended in partial failure. She'd jumped in, still clothed, but then jumped right back out.

This, like everything else, seemed to be a task she could start, but not complete.

She dried herself haphazardly and returned to the same spot on the bench, wearing the same robe that had seen her through last night and much of the day.

Her hair was wet, and the robe clung in spots.

*Just a few hours more*, Devin tried to encourage himself. They would make it. After which, he promised himself a soft bed for a week. He sat at the foot of hers, wishing he dared to spread out on it.

"Exhausting," she echoed, as if she'd asked the question only a moment ago.

"Being in love with him... is like that too, sometimes." Her voice sounded sad.

*Uh oh. Here it comes.* Devin thought. *Recrimination time.*

He knew that every resentment she'd ever had, no matter how minor, was about to boil to the surface and feel like a major one. Devin remembered his

own tirade over hurts long since mended, deemed inconsequential, or simply accepted.

*Better have thick skin, little brother,* Devin thought.

"You said it was like I was a nun." She kept her eyes fixed on the doors.

*I did? I did. I really did.* He knew he really needed to kick himself for that one.

"Yeah, about that. I—"

"I don't like it," she interrupted. She picked at the embroidery on her sleeve. "But it's the only way for him, and I love him, so I'm stuck for it."

*Oh, Lord.* Devin thought. *This is not going to be fun.*

Catherine sighed and kicked her legs back and forth under the bench seat, like a child waiting in a dentist's office.

"And you said I had a nice ass." She smiled at him.

*Oh, good. More conversation roulette that's going to get me punched in the mouth.*

"I know. Sorry, Catherine."

"I wish he thought so." She looked toward the empty doorway. *Shouldn't someone be there? Oh, yes. Vincent.*

"I wish he thought enough to... enough to..."

Devin really didn't want her to finish that sentence. Then, on the other hand, maybe that's exactly what she should do, even if Vincent was listening. Especially if he was listening.

"I wasn't very good at sex," she confided, as if they were girlfriends.

Devin rolled his eyes and clamped his hand on his forehead. *Okay. This nightmare really isn't going to end.*

"Kill me now," he said.

"Tom was kind of blah about it. Then impatient after I was attacked. Stephen was just... strange. Demanding, and I was never pleased. I'm not sure he was, either."

*Okay. Any open hole they could both step into, here.*

"I think Jenny has a crush on my boss. Isn't that nice?"

It was nothing short of marvelous, and he told her so, desperately hoping she'd stick to that topic. Of course, she didn't.

"In the end, it won't matter."

Devin prayed she was still talking about Jenny and Joe.

She wasn't.

"He's just... not going to be able to love me enough to overcome what he's afraid of."

A tear slid down her cheek. "It happens." She sounded resigned to it.

She rose and pushed the unlocked door open, then and Devin half-expected to see Vincent there, grateful that he wasn't, knowing that Catherine was still too warm, still contagious.

She came back into the bedroom and went through her apartment, clicking off all the lights for no reason either of them could name. When she was done, she returned to the bench seat and cried almost silently as she sat in the dark.

This time, Devin swung one leg over the bench and down beside her.

"It's all right, Catherine. It will be over soon." He meant her illness. She keened at the words.

"I know. I know it will. He's... h-he's going to s-stop coming, one day."

*Okay, that's not what I meant by 'over.'* "Cathy—"

"He'll say it's for the best." She shook her head, negating it. "He says that now. Says I have to find someone else, sometimes. That my life... has to take me somewhere else, eventually. I think he doesn't mean it. And then... part of me thinks he does... He d-doesn't know how much it hurts me when he says th-that... Even if... even if he's..."

She was overcome for a moment and couldn't finish. Then: "Even if he's right." She sobbed the last.

He held her close and rubbed her back. "Easy. Easy, Cathy. It's okay. Or it will be."

She hiccupped a sob and her voice wavered, some. "Or we'll... we'll have some... some terrible fight about why he won't touch me, or why our lives never seem to fit..."

She shook her head again, and her damp hair swung with it. She cried like a broken child as Devin wrapped her in his arms.

*Oh, damn it.*

"He tells me I should have to follow my own life's path, and it's away from him, and I can... I can feel it like a knife... in my chest."

The sobs wracked her slender frame, now. She was simply too small, too slight a creature to contain this much sorrow. She refused to give up facing the balcony, clinging to the sight of the rustling sheers, for hope. She shut her eyes against the pain of that hope.

"Hope... hurts, Devin," she sobbed.

"I know," he said simply, because he did. Devin wrapped his arms so that she could stay facing outward, with him beside her, holding her in a fast embrace.

She liked his shoulders, even though they were the wrong ones.

*Wrong. Everything is wrong. Everything!*

And she wept for that, too.

Devin held on, absorbing her sobs like the blows they were. Her body was shaking, as Catherine cried out all the sorrow, all the fear, and all the emptiness of her broken heart.

*Stay back, Vincent. Don't you dare come in here,* Devin thought, trying to keep one eye on the doorway and one on Catherine.

Catherine gasped for breath, then said the most damning thing she possibly could:

"We're... we're not going to make it."

She tried to hold her hand to her mouth to stop the crying, but she couldn't, and her shoulders shook with the pain of that sentence. Her head moved in the negative, over and over.

"Not going to make it. Not going to... make it." She repeated it, again and again.

"Shhhhh. Cathy, shhhhh," Devin comforted, holding onto her. She was wearing herself out. In that sense, this was a storm she was passing through.

Vincent stood well back from the doors, in deep shadow. The blade of each word felt as if it were thrusting into his body.

He was silently taking in a scene that tore at his heart.

Through her bedroom sheers, he could see that his brother was giving Catherine the comfort that should have come from him. Her head was bent to the side, her hair wet from the shower, her face wet from tears. She was a study in defeat. Devin held her tightly, his own head dropped, in shared remorse and exhaustion.

"It's okay, Cathy. It's okay." One arm held her across the front to clasp her shoulder, the other at her waist. Her body shook, wracked with sobs. Devin tried to absorb it all.

*Damn you, Vincent. This isn't just the drug. This is her reality, too,* he thought.

"My brother is an idiot, sometimes." Devin lifted his head, sure he was staring right at Vincent, through the doorway, though he couldn't see him for the shadows. "And he loves you, very, very much."

Catherine sobbed some more at that, then quieted, slowly. She had no more strength either to rage, to mourn, or to chatter. She mumbled against his chest, half-incoherent ramblings. "Sleep. I wish I could sleep. I wish we had more ice cream. I could dream, if I had more ice cream."

*No. Sleep. Sleep.* She wanted sleep. Ice cream and sleep went together for her, a reference to a long-ago dream Devin had no way of knowing about.

"He bought me ice cream. The sky was so blue... And no one looked twice."

Vincent, for his part, remembered her description of her dream. She'd been shot by Mitch Denton. Vincent had gone to her hospital bed against all sense of caution or self-preservation.

*"I had a dream. The sky was so blue... You bought me ice cream. And no one looked twice."*

"Then it was a good dream," Vincent whispered, remembering what he'd said at the time.

"We... we were together. He bought me ice cream. And... no one looked twice," Catherine repeated.

"Sure. Sure, he did, Cathy," Devin replied, knowing Vincent had done no such thing. *A little delusion to go with your brand of crazy, Cathy?* Devin thought.

"Sleep," she whispered, sagging against him further. Her weight dropped. Relieved, Devin lifted her easily from the bench and carried her to the bed, silently commanding Vincent to not interfere.

Laying her down, he watched her eyes drift shut, and he realized how much their relationship had changed, over the last couple days. She had gone from being 'Chandler' to being 'Cathy.' He tugged the rumpled bedspread up so it covered her, at least partially.

*You are a special one. It doesn't take a genius to see that.*

He wasn't in love with her, but he could see why Vincent was.

He felt, as much as saw, Vincent standing at his back.

"You shouldn't be in here," Devin said softly.

"I know," Vincent replied.

"All the way in the apartment? There isn't some kind of... rule against that, anyway?" Devin asked, really uninterested in the answer.

"She is sleeping at last. I will leave before she wakes." Vincent gazed at his love with tenderness and concern.

Devin turned, facing his younger brother. "I don't mean just tonight, Vincent."

Devin was tired. Too tired to know better than to pick a fight with Vincent. Or to choose his words carefully.

"Our life is... complicated," Vincent replied warily.

*Okay, not too tired.* "Yeah. Complicated," Devin shot back, trying to keep his voice low for Catherine's sake. "Not perfect or storybook, like those damn legends Father had us all raised on. Join the human race, little brother. It's 'complicated.'"

Devin scooped Catherine's used bath towel up, tossed it over his shoulder and went to throw it into the bathroom hamper. Cool air had flooded the room from when Vincent had entered, and from Catherine's opening of the doors multiple times.

Devin felt cold. And angry. And beyond exhausted. He marched into the living room, leaving Vincent no choice but to follow. He hit the thermostat, turning on the heat.

"Devin?" Vincent asked. *Was Devin ill, again?*

"No, I'm not sick," Devin answered the question before Vincent could ask it. "And somebody should punch you in the mouth. Probably her," Devin said, dropping onto the sofa and leaning back. A few more hours of this were still in front of him. Two, at least. One, maybe. If he was lucky. Very.

*I am beyond tired.*

Vincent's voice came from nearby. "Devin, I don't expect you to understand...."

"Another word, and I may actually kill you." Devin snapped, lifting his head back up. "I have sat with that woman for over twenty-seven hours of this, and it has been a non-stop monologue. She loves her friends, her Dad, you, and high heels, so they cut down on the difference in your sizes. And not in that order. And considering the shoes are kind of about you, too, that means she loves you twice." Devin snorted, looking at the wall.

"Devin, this part of my life is not open to your scrutiny," Vincent warned. "Don't take advantage..."

"Don't take advantage?" Devin shot off the couch he seemed to need so much, a moment before. "Oh, of course not. And you *damn* sure won't, will you? Have you ever thought what that does to her? How... *unworthy* of you she feels?"

Vincent's tone became icy. "Catherine cannot possibly feel any such thing as that." There was a warning in the blue gaze.

"God, you don't *listen*, do you?" Devin asked. "And for the record, *we all feel that way*, Vincent."

"And I'm not sick, saying that. I'm just... tired. So damn, damn, tired."

Devin scooped a pillow off the couch and threw it at Vincent's chest. It landed squarely, then dropped to the soft carpet, soundlessly and harmlessly.

Well, almost harmlessly.

Vincent remembered with discomfort the image Devin and Catherine had presented together; Devin's brown hair bent over Catherine's fair shoulder. Her tears. Her, seeking comfort.

"I love her. I love her more than my life," Vincent said.

"Then tell her. *Show her*. You can't hide from this forever, little brother." He pulled a frustrated hand through his hair. "Or maybe, thanks to those damn tunnels, you can. Maybe that's the scary part. Paracelsus might not have known it, but maybe he was trying to do you a favor."

The words were slaps to Vincent's heart. Slaps he perhaps needed and would accept from no one other person than Devin.

"Devin—"

"I ragged on you off and on for a long time yesterday. Or the day before. I can't remember, because it's all run together. Complained about you. About what a pain in the ass you were. About Father loving you more."

Vincent made to speak, and Devin raised a hand.

"It's okay, Vincent, we both know it's true, and I swear it's blood under the bridge. You know what Catherine keeps saying about you?"

Vincent knew only the parts he had heard. The static in the bond would allow for nothing else.

"That she loves you. That's it. Hour after hour. And let me tell you, there's a lot of hours in more than a day." He shook his head ruefully at that. "Oh yeah, that, and she wishes she were somehow 'more' for you. Enough to help you overcome what you're afraid of. Not that *you* were more. That *she* was."

He indicated the louvered bedroom doors. "Isn't that a kick?"

Vincent's eyes turned toward the bedroom, willing himself to see, *to see* what lay beyond it. The bond crackled, then settled some, in his mind.

It wasn't clear yet, but it was better.

"She is... recovering. I can sense it." Vincent's relief was almost as great as Devin's. It was all the larger man would say. He met Devin's gaze with a



levelling look. Then shook his head, realizing he should feel nothing but gratitude for his brother's ministrations.

Nothing left to say, Vincent went out onto the balcony and vanished from Devin's sight.



## **Chapter 9**

### *Recovery*



--

A day passed. Then another. Devin and Catherine waited, just to make sure, before they ventured below. They were better, though each still felt a sense of fatigue.

Father even received a letter from his old enemy. The postmark was from out of the country. Pascal delivered it to him. Carefully.

Dear Jacob,

began the missive:

By now, you will have felt the effects of my little experiment. I hope it is rending your world asunder, as you have rent mine.

The postmark was from five days ago, the day when Catherine had rescued Devin. Paracelsus clearly did not know his attempt had failed and had cost only Devin and Catherine.

One son for another, old friend, and yours will be recovered enough to see the devastation. Has Vincent caught it yet? Or have you all just driven him off, in a fit of guilt and piety?

The concoction is deceptively simple, of course, and you will appreciate the irony.

Of course, John Pater could not resist the urge to boast of his brilliance to his old friend.

The old sodium pentothal, a derivative transferred by any skin contact, a truth drug, and a biological delivery system, an oxygen inhibitor, just to help the confusion along. Oh, I do hope you've medicated them all for fever, Jacob. Anti-inflammatory drugs have such a delightful, prolonging effect on the agents I have used.

"We were right to avoid medications for it, then," Jacob said to Pascal, as he continued reading.

Do you hear what they are calling you, what they are calling each other? They mean every word of it, my despotic friend. You were always such a proponent of honesty. I thought you would like this. I do hope Vincent is feeling... well, more "himself," shall we say?

The note dripped venom.

It won't last long, though it feels like an eternity. The drug will wear off, of course, and the body will overcome the biological elements. Those are so unstable, but elegant, don't you think? No matter. It will not last long, but it will be long enough. Enough time to spread. No locked doors there, to keep them contained, eh, old friend? And they've no wish to be contained, now, none at all. Did you try to restrain them? Touch them, and this gift is yours. They just need enough

time. Enough time for them to realize how much they really hate each other, how fearful they all are.

Isn't that why they're all there, Jacob? Because of their fears? Well, now they are let loose in your tunnels, those fears. And your only son was the carrier.

When he is ready, my son will come to me. When I am all that is left.

### Paracelsus

"He didn't even sign his real name," Jacob said, slipping the vellum back inside the envelope.

"Sounds like Paracelsus. Do you want me to tell Vincent?" Pascal asked.

Father considered. Vincent had been quiet since his return from Below the Pipes. Quiet even for him, and that was saying something.

"I... I'll share it with him later, Pascal. For now, it's enough for us all to know that the attempt failed."

"Thanks to Catherine." Pascal nodded, then went about his day.

Jacob Wells set the disturbing envelope down. Paracelsus would learn he had failed sometime soon. He would not be able to resist finding out. Then he would be furious at being stymied; would know Catherine was the reason.

Jacob feared for her, now. But he pushed those thoughts aside.

Paracelsus would try again, he knew, someday. But it would be something different next time. It always was.

Catherine had kept their world Below safe. Winslow and the others had stood bravely together and saved his son, both his sons.

*For now, it's enough to know that. It had to be,* Jacob thought. His musings turned to the young attorney who had very likely saved them all.

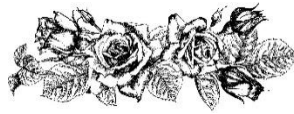
Catherine had visited the Tunnels the day Devin had come back down, but she had not stayed very long. She and Vincent had embraced, but she was still tired from her exertions, and Jacob sensed that there were pensive undercurrents between them.

Devin lay in one of the guest chambers, unconscious to the world, with strict orders not to disturb him for any reason short of an apocalypse.

It gave Father a strange sense of contentment to have both his sons under his one, cavernous roof.

*My children are here, and they're safe*, he thought. He didn't question that he included Catherine in that number when she was among them.

*Thank you, Catherine. I owe you more than I can ever repay.*



Vincent sat in his chambers, waiting for the light above to leave the world. Catherine's frantic words still haunted his memory:

*"We're not going to make it."*

The day was dying, and good riddance to it. He had checked in on Devin, as Catherine's words echoed in his sensitive mind.

*"He's going to stop coming, one day. He'll say it's for the best. Or we'll have some terrible fight about why he won't touch me or why our lives never seem to fit..."*

Catherine's most secret fears had bled through the disease that Paracelsus had given her.

Devin's advice had tried to offer comfort. *"She's going to say a lot of things she doesn't mean."*

*And ones she did, apparently.*

Vincent realized that for all of Devin's well-meaning advice, his pronouncement was not precisely true. Devin hadn't become a liar under the influence of Paracelsus' drug. Neither had Catherine. They'd just both said things they wouldn't normally have said, for whatever reason.

They'd given voice to unspoken fears or deeply held sorrows. But they hadn't *lied* about them.

Vincent, like Catherine, was canny enough to know the difference.

Vincent realized that many of Catherine's fears had never been voiced to him because she'd not wanted him to bear the burden of those.

Now, he couldn't wipe them from his mind, nor would he if he could.

*Some of the burdens you bear, I can help with. Others... you carry them because of me, because you dare to love me, do you not? Who else should help you carry this weight if not for me?*

He flipped open his journal and thought to write in it. Writing helped. It helped him to organize his thoughts and to express himself.

He stared at the blank page, but nothing came to him. Mostly thanks to the frightened voice he still heard in his inner ear.

Catherine's voice. And it was full of despair.

*"In the end, it won't matter. He's just not going to be able to love me enough to overcome what he is afraid of..."*

Vincent touched the blank page. Could he be more damned?

*"Hope hurts, Devin."*

It was the last that cut at his soul, because he knew that to be the truest statement of all, for her, and often for himself. He knew the agony of hoping, of wanting, and having it come to naught; of having what they were seem like so fragile a thing that he dared not upset any kind of balance, once it had been set.

*"Vincent, you exist... in a delicate balance,"* Father had once told him, after he'd lost that balance, back when he'd been younger.

Vincent knew that he and Catherine had been in the same place for a long time, because he was terrified to upset not just the balance in himself, but the one that existed between them.

But hope that he would make some sort of change in that balance was excruciating for Catherine.

*What is true for you is no less true for me,* he thought, taking little comfort from the notion.

The blank page stared back at him until he flipped the book closed, his thoughts not fit to memorialize.

*Hope hurts. Indeed,* he thought.

He stared at a taper candle, willing it to burn faster, willing the daylight to pass into nightfall.



## **Chapter 10**

### *Reflections*



--

She was sitting in her living room, but on the step that existed a few feet in front of the balcony doors, rather than on any of the furniture. She had lit no candles, another oddity for her, but let the light from the distant kitchen spill into the room. It just felt right to her, this night, to be peaceful; not up and trying to prepare, not fussing around waiting for the sun to set and the night to deepen. Just ... sitting there. Calm, and still a bit tired; enjoying the shift of colors through the greys.

Catherine wanted no lamp or candle. She just didn't. The night felt enveloping. She liked it.

He came, and she wasn't sure he would. They had seen each other just yesterday. Like Devin, she'd been completely exhausted.

His familiar shape darkened the window a moment before his hand tested the door. Given the still air about her apartment, he would have been unsure of her presence, except for his natural ability to sense her.

The door was unlocked. He pushed it open, gently, his night-sensitive eyes having no trouble discerning her.

"Catherine? Are you ill again?" He crossed to her, sensing she wasn't, exactly, but not quite sure what to do with the strange sense of ennui that came off her.

"No." She smiled, a barely-there smile, and reached up for his concerned hand and gave it a squeeze but didn't rise. "Just... sitting. Enjoying the quiet. It feels right." She patted the place next to her on the step. He joined her.

They sat for a long moment in soft silence.

He could feel her trying to rouse herself.

"I forgot to ask you, in all the excitement. How was your trip below the pipes?" she asked. She knew he had been gone very low and far. It was probably what had saved him, all things considered.

*Of all the things we could or should be talking about...* he mused.

"It went... well, though nothing compared to your... adventure. I found that the tunnels to the east of Narcissa's home went deeper than we knew..." He let his voice trail off, the tunnel trip being nothing he really wanted to discuss.

She heard his voice drift away. She simply couldn't marshal much of a response to try and call it back.

"Oh," she managed when she realized he would say nothing more.

He picked up her hand and began kissing the fingers, quietly. It was something that should be utterly thrilling her.

She sat and watched it with a sweet kind of detachment.

*Did I prick my finger on the rose bush again?* Her tired mind wondered it for a moment, recalling the only other time she could remember when he'd put her fingers to his lips.

"Okay. Now I know something's wrong." She leaned in and touched her forehead to his. "You're... inside. Kissing my hand, my fingertips. You almost never do that. I'm not leaping into your arms. I always do tha—"

"Everything." He finished her sentence. "You always do... everything. I have left you with many burdens to bear, my Catherine."

She didn't deny it. Mostly because she was too fatigued to. Her shoulders lifted and dropped. A shrug.

"I'm not sleepy. I slept today. Just... I don't know," she tried to explain.

She might not, but he was fairly certain he did. "Your brain just needs rest. It was very busy, the last few days."

"I sleep and it feels good. Then I wake up and I'm fine, then, too, at first. Then I get... tired. I'm sorry," she apologized.

Vincent "read" her through their bond. She was not just physically exhausted; indeed, she'd slept around the clock and then some. This was more of a mental sort of tiredness. Her mind was something of a blank hum. She processed what it received, but little more.

It was the opposite, with her illness, when thoughts crashed in on her, willy-nilly, and she couldn't direct those thoughts or turn them off.

He drew her against him. It surprised him that he almost felt her resist before she complied. He kissed the crown of her head, a familiar gesture between them. She barely stirred inside.

His brother's voice intruded on his thoughts. *"She's fighting all this, and she's tired. Not tired of you, though hell, maybe she is. Tired of the hoops you put her through."*

It was Devin's advice, up from one of his several slumbers. *"Trust me. When I finally woke up, I still felt irritated. Now, I'm better."*

*"And why is Catherine not... 'better?'"*

*"Because my problem was Paracelsus' drug. Her problems go a lot deeper."*

"You have nothing to be sorry for. You are magnificent." He kissed her crown again. "But it may bring you more rest if I go, for now." He rose to leave.

"No!" she pulled at his hands. "Vincent, I've slept. I've napped and dozed and slept full on through. I just feel... wrung out, some, that's all. Stay. It would upset me to think I had been so inhospitable you felt you had to go."

"I do not expect you to entertain me, Catherine." He said it very gently.

"Only to know I am not hurting you further."

*Hurting her further?* She knew she should respond to that, somehow. She just didn't know how.

He sat back down, closer, this time, and extended his arm, inviting her to lean in against him, which she did.



He remained where he was. Another long stretch of quiet spooled out between them. This time, Vincent was content to simply let the time go. He tried to communicate his sense of peace to her through their bond. As the deep grey of the evening turned to black night, he felt her relax against him, finally.

Her mind felt peacefully lost on a bit of a walkabout that had no purpose.

She wondered how long it had been since she'd watered the rose bush. She didn't want to get up to fix that, right then, didn't want to break contact with him. She nestled her head against his huge chest and heard his steady heartbeat. *Ah, there. That was better.*

"Is Devin all right, still?" Her muffled voice held a little more life in it.

"Yes. He sends his love. And says he has no appetite, but had a wicked headache, after the first day of real sleep."

"The appetite thing I can relate to, though William's soup tasted good to me today. I didn't have a headache, though. But then, Paracelsus loaded Devin up with sedatives and such. I just got it from Devin."

So, she had. A curse meant for him, and she had intercepted it, as surely as if she had stepped in front of a bullet. His hand rubbed her back in a soothing gesture.

"I am so grateful to you for saving him. So grateful you are still here with me." He brushed his sensitive mouth against the crown of her head, again, reflexively.

"I knew I had to. You'd be so... lost if something happened to him."

*It's nothing compared to what I'd be if I lost you,* he thought.

He felt her relaxing against him some more, felt her slow, almost infinitesimal slide down into sleep.

*Yes. Rest. Rest, my love, World enough and time, for all the rest.*

He lifted her effortlessly and carried her to her bed. She barely roused as he laid her on the soft mattress.

Moonlight streamed through the window. Had she been truly well, it would have been a fine night for a walk in the park.

*Make that another one of those.*

His voice dropped to an all but imperceptible level. "They say this... thing you had. That it makes you tell the truth. Makes you tell... all of what you are thinking. I wonder what I would have said... how much I would have revealed?" He whispered the words aloud to her sleeping form, then sat on the foot of the bed, just to be near her.

"What would I have said that I don't... dare say, now?"

He knew if he was back home, he'd have taken to his journal, again, and to writing, this time able to all but fill the page. But these weren't his chambers, these were hers. Though there was no pen in his hand, the thoughts came, anyway.

"Would I have told you how... how very beautiful you are? That every statue of every woman ever made should be pulled down, so that they all can be of you?"

He whispered it to her sleeping form, then looked away. "Would I confess that I... dream of us, together? That I see a future no other way than with you?"

The room was a testament to feminine things. Her vanity held a mirror, which he instinctively avoided, and a hairbrush, perfume, and the mystery that were female cosmetics. His crystal sat in a little dish. The bench seat wasn't perfectly centered, thanks to Devin having put it back.

*"We're not going to make it."*

"I know." He answered his own unspoken thought. "It's the thing I most fear, as well."

He stood and went to the bench, moving it so it was in its proper place. When he looked up, he caught his reflection in the mirror, and her sleeping form on the bed, behind him.

They didn't look like they belonged together.

*Yet, we do.* He knew it was true. And he knew it was true without reservation.

His blue eyes tracked back to his own visage.

*No miracle will change you into a handsome prince. No cosmetics, no artifice for this form,* he thought, giving the seat another nudge. He turned back toward the bed.

“We have to try, regardless. Don’t we?” he whispered.

Catherine, deep asleep once again, didn’t stir in either assent or protest. Moonlight limned her fair skin through the window.

“If I tell you I want you, and only you, does that help? Or does it hurt? If I tell you I... desire you, that way, every way... have I pushed us past where we can go, without breaking? Or opened a door we can pass through? I wish I knew. I wish I could... tell you, Catherine.”

He turned to her balcony doors, and pushed them open to the westering moon, its newest crescent form barely a sliver of light.

“What would I say... if I were like you had been? If I had to speak it all aloud? And it could only be what I hoped? And what I feared?” he whispered to the night.

Only their rose bush heard him.



## ***Chapter 11***

### *The Softest Reunion*



--

When Vincent returned to the Tunnels, it was only to find Devin packing.

“You’re feeling better,” Vincent observed, as the only brother he would ever claim shoved a clean pair of sweatpants into a duffel bag.

“More like myself, yeah,” Devin replied, tossing a tunnel-patched chambray work shirt into the mix. It smelled like Rebecca’s oatmeal soap.

“I need to get back.” Devin tacked on. “But I promise I’ll visit. Sooner or later.”

Vincent knew that for Devin, “sooner or later” could mean almost anything, timewise, from weeks to months, to... more.

“As you wish,” Vincent returned, no censure in the remark. He sat in the room’s only chair.

Devin’s hands slowed. “Listen, if I... If I uh, said anything I shouldn’t have, I’m sorry. It was the drugs. You know.”

Vincent did know. Both enough to accept the unnecessary apology and to question it. After a moment’s consideration, he opted for the latter.

“Did you say anything... untrue?” Vincent asked. Devin could tell by his tone that the question was a rhetorical one, or at least it nearly was.



By Lynn Wright

“Beats me,” Devin replied, determined to remain noncommittal.

“I ask because... Catherine did not.”

Devin turned and raised a dark, questioning eyebrow to his brother.

“If you’ve got a point, I’m afraid I’m missing it,” he said.

Vincent inclined his fair head and leaned forward.

“She raged. She wept. She chattered and spoke about... everything. Everything that came into her mind. Shoes. Her family. My world. Hers. I

felt it. I... experienced it, with her. I knew what she was feeling... even as she was feeling it. I felt the... chaos inside her. The struggle to control it. The... despair, when she couldn’t. The confusion, and the want.”

He passed Devin a book his brother had borrowed, so he could include it among his packed belongings. Hemmingway. *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

Devin rubbed the old leather cover with familiarity. “I guess you did. I guess you did feel what she was feeling. That must have been hard on you. I know she couldn’t shut it off, Vincent. There was no peace, there, in her head.”

Vincent nodded assent, then fixed Devin with his blue gaze.

“There was no lie, either.” He let the words sit, then inhaled deeply.

“She couldn’t have. Even if she wanted to, she couldn’t have. Lying requires more... focus, more concentration than she... than either of you possessed. She couldn’t have been false to save her life. Or mine. Or anyone’s,” Vincent explained. “Nor could you.”

Devin considered that. “I guess not,” he said, tucking the book inside. He drew the closing cord tight.

Vincent stood, reached over, and put a brotherly hand on Devin’s shoulder, aware they were about to part.

“That’s why you have no need for an apology. You may not have... wanted to say the things you did. But you didn’t lie when you said them. Come back soon, Devin. We miss you when you’re gone.”

“Maybe for Winterfest,” Devin said, fully meaning to be there. He slung the bag over his shoulder.

Then, he shook his head again. “Not being able to lie for two straight days. Must be some kind of record for me.” His grin was infectious. He was indeed returning to his old self.

“You could start a trend,” Vincent replied, returning Devin’s grin with a small one of his own.

Devin snorted as he backed out of the cavernous room. “Not for all the money in Catherine Chandler’s checking account. And considering that I went through her desk drawers three or four times, I think I know how much that is.”

And just like that, with a wave and a smile, the good fraud was gone.



Catherine was indeed better. Stronger, and feeling more back to her old self. The poison was out of her system, and sleep had done the rest. She was back to work and taking cases home, as was her usual. For all the bedlam Paracelsus had caused, the routine was entirely welcome.

Or at least it was for Catherine.

For Vincent’s part, he was not so sure.

*Is this what we do? Is this what happens after one of us is all but... laid bare? We go back to pretending that it didn't happen, that it's over, now?*

Vincent wasn't sure he liked the feel of that. Or even if he should like it.

Yes, it would be easy to just play along. To be thankful that she was now well. To tell her that there would be a Children's Recital in two weeks, and of course, he hoped she would come. That Father's knee seemed to be bothering him a bit more lately, but that Eric's runny nose was all but gone. He could simply ask about her day and share his.

They could be "normal," again. Or whatever passed for that, between two people from very different worlds.

He stood on her balcony, watching her for several long minutes, through the gauzy windows. Her work was sprawled on her rumpled bed, her briefcase tossed near the foot, a pair of case files open and awaiting the attention she was giving them, with a ballpoint pen and a yellow legal pad.

She frowned as she wrote, then looked something up in a huge book she'd brought with her. Tapping the pen, she made a few hasty notes, then pulled the next case file over.

She looked beautiful.

Beautiful, and pale, and perhaps a little underweight, still, from not having eaten properly during her illness. She hooked her hair behind one ear, and the green eyes that owned Vincent's soul scanned the writing in front of her, oblivious to his presence. She was trying to help someone. She was trying to be... Catherine. She *was* Catherine. *His* Catherine.

*The night we met, you were... someone else. Then, tragedy happened to you, Violence and pain. And out of it all... you. You made this. You made this... beauty. This amazing, fierce creature in front of me. This warrior who fights. This... goddess who weeps with frustration when justice isn't done. This angel, I see. You made this, Catherine. Thank you. If I never said that to you, I should have. A hundred times. A thousand. Thank you for growing into this... amazing woman I now see before me.*

Then...

*We cannot go back. Nor should we.*

He rapped gently on her windowpane and knew the delight of her glance. She looked up, saw him, then smiled. It was a thing she always did, as her expression changed from concentration to recognition.

It was a thing he treasured.

She clambered off the bed, scattering work in her wake.

She opened the doors and stepped into the last night of March with him.

“Vincent! I wasn’t sure I’d see you tonight. Have you been there long? Did Devin go back?”

“Not long, and yes, to Devin. He says we’ll see him at Winterfest. I’m hoping for earlier.”

“Hope is a funny thing, with Devin,” she warned, trying to keep Vincent’s expectations low.

*“Hope hurts, Devin.”*

“But a necessary one,” he replied, drawing her out into the dark night with him. A Cheshire cat smile of a moon looked down on them.

“I... brought you something from below the pipes,” he said, making no move to produce anything.

“Did you?” she asked politely, giving him another small smile.

*An... unusual stone, perhaps, or another crystal?* Catherine wondered. She had no idea what else it could be.

“I brought you... a dream,” he said, reaching inside his cape pocket.

Catherine had known that cape to contain many things, most often the latest book he was sharing with her.

“I didn’t know pockets held those,” she said, curious.

Slowly, he drew out the least dream-looking thing she could think of. It was a piece of paper. And it was folded over and badly crumpled.

“I... went low, and deep. And then... when I felt your distress... I left quickly. But I took this with me. I think I didn’t realize how important it was until now,” Vincent said, handing it to her.

He stood there patiently, bidding her to open it.

Curious, Catherine did so.

It was a simple sketch, and a better than average one. Catherine knew it was done by Vincent. She'd seen a drawing of his before, back when they were hunting for the man who had captured Eric and Ellie. It was a thing he could do, though not necessarily a thing he did often.

"This... this is where you were?" Catherine asked. The grey pencil sketch showed the stream, the calcium flow, and the rugged walls. In pencil, it looked much like any other cavern he might take her to.

"It is, but the pencil can't do it justice," Vincent explained, indicating the features of the room as they spoke.

"The walls are full of minerals, crystalline ones. Salt, or quartz, or... magic. Something. Something... enchanted. The lantern, the firelight... it makes them shimmer."

"It sounds lovely," she said, trying to see it as he described it.

"A campfire makes every wall look like a star-shot sky, come to earth, and all around you. A wish for every star, and a thousand wishes, come to you. A thousand thousand."

Catherine looked up from the drawing to him. His blue eyes were deep pools of ... something. Something she had no name for. Something he was trying to get her to understand.

"A thousand wishes," she repeated. *And what would I do with just one of those?*

"The ceiling is so high you can barely see it," he continued. "And this..." He indicated the calcium flow, "it looks like a frozen waterfall, like ice has been caught, and stayed that way, for centuries."

"That's... amazing," she said, realizing the scale of it, as she looked at the tiny image he'd drawn of himself.

"It is. And the water, so clear you can't tell how deep it goes. Cold, like ice, but soft-flowing. It makes music, as it moves over the stones."

He clearly wanted her to be impressed by it, and she was.

"Your world has... many lovely things in it," she said, meaning it.

*But you said something about a dream?*

"It does."



He stayed where he was, just where he was, but moved his thumb. It had been covering the part of the picture that had featured her.

“It has many beautiful things. Very beautiful. And in my dream... a dream I’m only now learning how to dream... You are in it, sharing it with me. The most beautiful thing of all.”

Catherine looked at the captured image in wonder.

“You... you sketched this place. Then you... drew me? With you?” she asked.



*You can't be thinking of—*

But he was.

He barely nodded. “It will take us days to get there. And to return.”

“I...” She shook her head subtly. “I already took time from work. And we’ve never...”

*We’ve never been alone for that amount of time before. Just the two of us. No one else. No other... distractions.*

He could feel her mental reticence. He realized how automatic that was for her.

*Did I do this to us? Did my... caution make us thus?* he wondered.

“A week. Perhaps a little more. For a dream I have, Catherine. A dream... for both of us. And time to make it real.” He knew he was pushing her, just a little. And that it felt good to do that.

Her lovely green eyes still looked a bit confused.

*I don't know what I said when I was sick to make you tell me this, but I really wish I could remember.*

“Vincent, I... I’m not going to pretend this isn’t like... every fantasy I’ve had for us, but—”

“And what is a dream, if not a fantasy, made real? It doesn’t have to be today. Or tomorrow. But soon. Soon, Catherine. As soon as you can.”

He nudged the paper at her again, and again, she looked down at it. The cavernous room looked plain, and grey, but lovely, still, for all of that.

But it was the two figures seated at the campsite that drew her attention.

His was the taller form, sitting almost languidly, his back resting against a bedroll, one hand holding a book, the other arm draped around her. For her part, she was seated close to him, as close as she could get, and her head had a subtle tilt to it, as they enjoyed each other’s company in a place Vincent insisted had been touched by magic.

Though hastily done, Vincent had clearly drawn them together, seated as a couple.

A loving couple.

*We’re... together. Truly together. No barriers, no walls, no... nothing between us.*

*Nothing to hold us back,* Catherine thought.

“I... our anniversary is in a couple of weeks. I already put in vacation time for it. Is that... is that all right? Does it give you enough time to prepare?” she asked.

*It gives me days of consternation and anticipation, and too many hours to count. But yes, yes, Catherine. That would be perfect. I want to be there with you... on our anniversary.*

He leaned in close.

“It will teach me patience,” he whispered, letting her know how much he was looking forward to this.

His words thrilled her, even as they filled her with a touch of trepidation.

“Vincent, we’d... we’d be alone together. For long stretches,” Catherine felt that she had to say it, just so that he understood how... intimate a trip this might be, for them.

He leaned closer still. “They might never get us back,” he whispered, delighted at the shiver of anticipation that sent down Catherine’s skin – and his own.

“Is this... because of what happened with me and Devin?” she asked, confused, again.

It was. And in a way, it wasn’t. Vincent knew he’d sketched the picture before any of the rest of it had happened. That didn’t mean that hearing Catherine tell her truths hadn’t spurred something inside him, however.

“I... heard what you fear. I understood... how much it is what I fear, as well. We can either face those fears and move through them, or... let them rule us, consume us. I think you have too much strength in you for that.”

“Mine’s nothing compared to yours,” she answered.

He simply gave her a small smile, at that, doubting it was true.

She took the drawing from him, smoothed it, and tucked it inside her own pocket, clearly meaning to keep it.

“I’m having this framed. As an Anniversary gift,” she explained, smiling up at him. The nighttime breeze toyed with his blonde hair.

He put his arm around her, and together, they beheld the glittering lights of one of the largest cities in the world.

“The picture from me, the frame from you. It’s fitting,” he said, pleased that their gift to each other would be so... mutual.

“Did you... did you really mean it when you said they might not get us back?” she nudged, liking how loving that sounded. It implied that they were having such a good time they couldn’t bother to return. What an unusual thing, for them.

Vincent felt her pleasure inside their bond, and he felt something else. Something all but unique, to him: intimacy.

*I am... intimate with you. Just in the planning of it. We’ve... we’ve done nothing yet, and yet... I feel it. I know we are changed.*

He smiled at the knowledge.

“Would it be so bad if they didn’t?” he asked. His tone sounded almost coy.

Catherine gave as good as she got.

“Maybe I’ll leave a trail of breadcrumbs... going the wrong way, just in case they decide to come looking,” she replied, happy with him.

Thanks to their bond, her thoughts flooded into his, again, much the way they had done when she'd been ill, but now completely free of anything Paracelsus, or Devin, had done to her.

Vincent breathed in deeply, enjoying her reaction to him.

*Happiness. Contentment. Joy. Fulfillment. Yes. These are the things I want you to feel, my Catherine. The things I want both of us to feel.*

"Two weeks," he said, counting up the days until they could leave. "How, after three years, can that feel like such an eternity?"

Her smile was radiant.

"In two weeks, they'll all be lucky to get us back," she replied, joyous at the prospect.

--

And in two weeks, they were.



*No matter where you are in your own fairy tale, I wish you love.*

*~ Cindy*





By Michaela Buzsaki Struchova







---

## Love Above and Below

*Drabbles by Judith Nolan*

---



### The Balcony

Catherine leaned against the railing, city lights glittering like fallen stars. Vincent's cloak brushed her arm as he joined her.

"It is beautiful," he murmured, though his gaze rested on her face, not the skyline.

She smiled knowingly. "I thought you'd say that."

He tilted his head, amused at her teasing. "I will always say it."

They stood close together, breathing in the night air, the world far below unaware of their blessed sanctuary.

Catherine slipped her hand into his, and the simple touch said everything. No words were needed. In that quiet moment, love was louder than the city.



### Chess by Candlelight

Deep in the Tunnels, Catherine bent over the chessboard, candlelight reflecting in her determined eyes. "Check!" she finally exclaimed as she pounced.

Vincent studied the pieces, lips curving in appreciation. "Your strategy improves with every match. Father will be proud."



Catherine tilted her chin proudly. “I’m learning from the best.” He countered with a smooth move, and she groaned. “Unfair! You always think ten steps ahead.”

Vincent chuckled, his deep laugh warming the chamber. Catherine leaned across the board and kissed his cheek before he could reply. The game no longer mattered. Victory was sharing these moments. Simple, playful, timeless.



## A Walk in Central Park



Catherine tugged her scarf tighter as the winter wind swept through Central Park. It was a wonderland of snow and ice. There were few travellers.

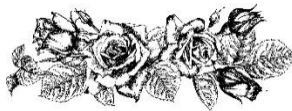
Vincent, cloaked in shadow, walked close enough to shield her. “Does anyone suspect?” he asked softly.

She shook her head, smiling. “To them, you’re only a dream.”

He raised a brow. “And to you?”

She squeezed his arm. “To me, you’re real and mine.”

Snow crunched underfoot, and laughter escaped her lips as he caught a stray snowflake in his hand. For once, the world Above felt safe enough for their love to walk freely.



## Reading Together



With many books piled high around them, Catherine sat cross-legged beside Vincent on his bed. He was reading aloud. His soft voice turned

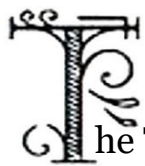


poetry into music, each word a caress. She closed her eyes, letting the rhythm of his baritone carry her places she had never been and some she had.

When he paused, she reached out to turn the page. Their hands touched, lingered, refusing to part. “Don’t stop,” she whispered and kissed his cheek. He smiled and didn’t. The story continued, but between them it was more than words. It was a promise, woven in ink and candlelight.



## A Tunnel Festival



The Tunnels glowed with lanterns, music echoing through stone halls. Children danced in circles, and Catherine laughed when one tugged her into the whirl.

Vincent watched, his heart too full for words. She moved among his people as though she belonged, her smile brighter than the lanterns.

When she finally returned to his side, he offered his hand. “Are you tired?” “Not at all. Dance with me?” she teased, kissing his fingers.

He hesitated, then let the music carry them both. Around them, the community cheered. For Vincent, joy was no longer a dream. It was here, in her arms.



## Dawn on the Rooftop



They stood on the rooftop, the city waking beneath them. They’d spent their first night together, alone. Catherine shivered in the cool air.

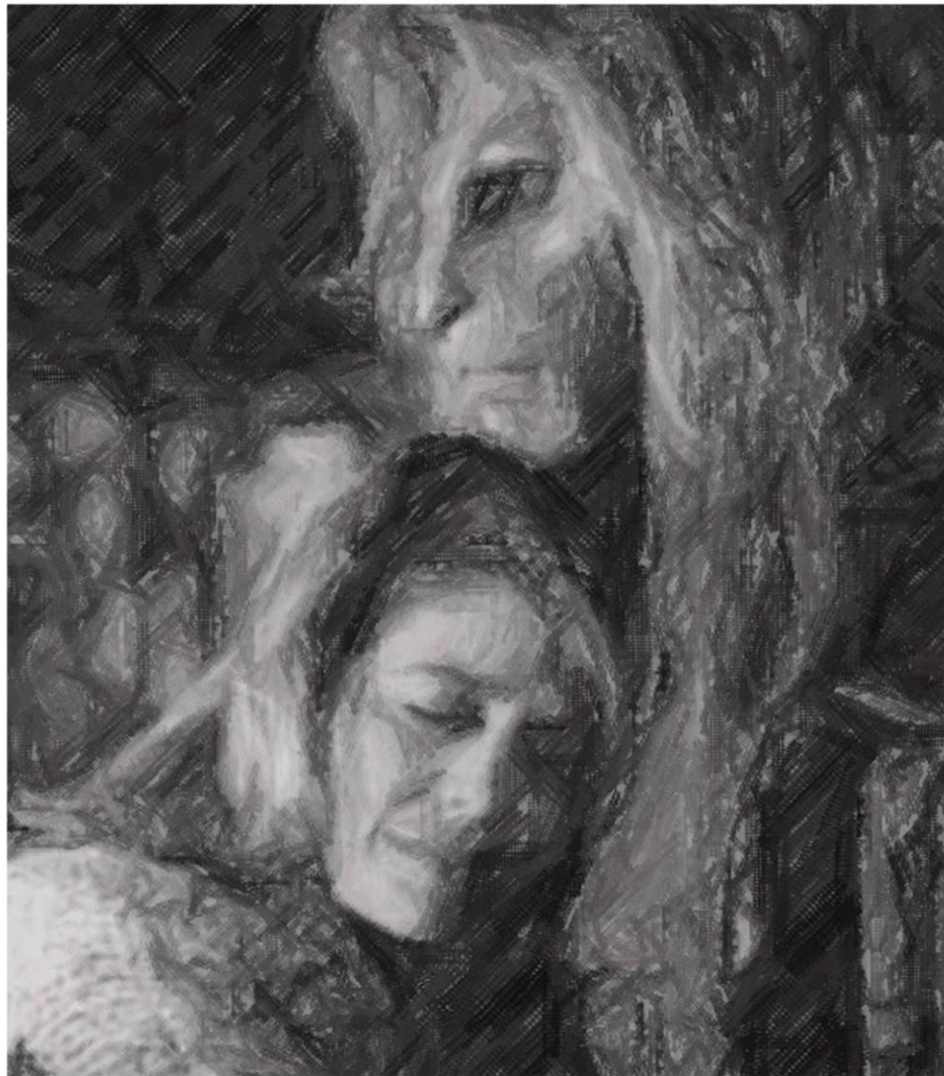
Vincent wrapped his cloak around her shoulders. “I should go,” he said reluctantly.

“Please...” She shook her head. “Just a little longer.”

The sunrise painted the sky in gold and rose, spilling light over the horizon. For Vincent, dawn had always meant retreat, but with Catherine, it felt like beginning.

She leaned against him, her warmth welcomed. “Every day with you is worth waiting for,” she whispered.

He held her close, knowing she was his forever dawn.









---

# How Curiosity Didn't Kill the Cat

*by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova*

---



The

he shrill sound of his alarm clock ripped through the quiet early Sunday morning. Isaac Stubbs groaned and groped for the clock in an attempt to kill its piercing beeping – successfully, and he turned to his back, covering his face with his arm. He sighed.

“Why do I always forget to turn you off for Sunday?” He spoke with annoyance, inwardly cursing his forgetfulness.

Sundays were the only proper resting days for the renowned self-defence teacher, and despite always being woken up at 6:45 in the morning, he always gladly went back to slumber, enjoying a lie-in. However, his brain was wide awake that morning, immediately recalling the events from the previous night.

He had no idea what he was letting himself into when Catherine Chandler called him and asked for his help. She sounded desperate, talking about a missing person she needed to find as soon as possible. He liked Catherine; she was one of his favourite students, and he would have never turned her down. Or would he? Isaac thought for a moment, pondering if he would have reacted another way had he known who the person was. Or *what...*

He glimpsed the face only for a few seconds before Catherine insisted he leave, but his head was buzzing with the image embedded in his memory.

Isaac was not a man of prejudice, considering his own descent, it would have been not only illogical but also hypocritical. And yet, he had to wonder what was hiding behind those peculiar features, and how their owner and Catherine crossed paths. Cathy obviously felt safe in his presence; that much was clear from the way she didn't hesitate to embrace him as if he were her dearest friend who had risen from the dead. And from the brief



moment Isaac saw and heard this almost otherworldly creature, he couldn't help but feel enthralled by the vision and the voice.

Isaac kicked the duvet aside and decided it was time for his morning coffee. He made it to the small kitchen and mechanically filled the kettle with water before putting it on the stove. After he put two heaped teaspoons of instant coffee into his mug (he had been thinking of getting a filter coffee machine for years but never had the time to buy one), he looked absently out of the kitchen window.

*Catherine said she owes him her life, he thought, but how? Could she have meant the day she was attacked and left to die in Central Park?*

It had to be at night, Isaac decided. Someone with such a face would surely find it difficult to walk in the streets without causing a stir at least. Where did he live? What did he do to survive? What was he to Cathy?

He shook his head. Whatever the truth, it was none of his business. His friend trusted him enough to ask for his help, so there was nothing he would do to break their friendship and mutual respect. And yet, that unfathomable face stood before his mind's eye like a stubborn question mark, a riddle waiting to be solved.

The hissing of the kettle brought him back to the present. He filled his mug with the hot liquid, stirred the coffee, the pleasant aroma of the steaming drink already reviving his spirit. He put a small pan on the stove, heated it up, and cracked two eggs into it. Grabbing two slices of bread and popping them into his ancient toaster, Isaac tried to focus on preparing his breakfast and enjoying the fact that he had a whole day for himself. He missed his twelve-year-old daughter, with whom he would usually spend every other Saturday night and Sunday. However, his daughter was on vacation in Los Angeles with her mother and her new stepfather. Isaac snorted, shaking his head in disdain.

*The furthest you ever took them was to Cape May...*

It wasn't for the lack of love, interest, or money; his self-defence centre had been a success right from its opening. However, the long hours Isaac put in to keep it running took an expensive toll. His wife realised she wanted more than just an occasional husband and filed for a divorce. It didn't take her long to find a new one either, a college teacher who not only swept her off her feet but also had way more time to spend with her and the girl. Isaac wasn't even surprised when he heard the news. At least he could spend time with Jessie fortnightly, he consoled himself.

*I bet I would score some points if I told her what I saw last night!* He chuckled, then reprimanded himself for even thinking of using someone else's misfortune for his own benefit.

"Damn!" he cursed, noticing the eggs on the pan had almost turned to charcoal. He pulled the smoking pan away from the ring and ran water over it. "Thank God I still didn't have time to fix the smoke alarm," he mumbled, imagining his grumpy neighbour upstairs banging on his front door.

Another sound caught his interest, though – the ringing of his phone. Still busy with the unsalvageable morning meal, he let it go to the answering machine.

*"Hi, Isaac, it's me, Catherine... Sorry for calling so early, I just thought I could get you some breakfast, the least I can do for you after..."*

Isaac waited with bated breath for the next words, his hands frozen over the sink. He heard a nervous sigh before Catherine's soft voice continued.

"Could you meet me at the Carousel in Central Park in about an hour? Even if you don't hear this immediately... I can't stay long, but I'll wait there until 10.30... Thanks."

Isaac barely heard the last few words, for he quickly turned off the stove and hurried back to his bedroom to get dressed.

One thought occupied his mind: Breakfast might be saved after all.



Catherine Chandler was anxiously pacing there and back, not far from the Central Park carousel. A handful of parents with their children were already there, enjoying their early morning fun.

The February morning air was crisp, biting her cheeks, as she was blowing some heat on her hands; when leaving home last night, she forgot to take her gloves. Her mind drifted to the Tunnels, deep below the bustling New York City, the city that never sleeps. She knitted her brows, doing her utmost to reach that unusual bond binding her to the man she willingly tied her fate to.

*Vincent... How are you?*

Her hands went up to her temples, and she squeezed her eyes shut.

*Argh, it's no use! I don't have the gift that Vincent has...*

Frustrated, Catherine took a deep breath, trying to focus on the reason why she was standing in the cold Above, instead of keeping watch over Vincent by his bed. She had only left it less than two hours ago, but already felt restless. What if he needed her? He had a few nightmares throughout the night, and Catherine did everything she could to chase them away, holding his hand and wiping his feverish forehead with a wet cloth. Both she and Father knew that his recovery would take time, and she was set on being present as much as possible throughout it. If it meant working in the office during the day and watching over Vincent at evenings and nights, then so be it; there was nothing she wouldn't do for him, as nothing else was more important to her. However, there was no way she could postpone or ignore the conversation with Isaac, even though she trusted him completely to remain silent about what he had witnessed the night before. Vincent agreed with her, and only one question remained: *How much* could she reveal to him?

"How did you know I've just burned my fried eggs?" a familiar, cheerful voice made her turn around.

"Isaac..." Catherine said, with a relieved smile. She wasn't sure before how their first meeting since the extraordinary events they experienced together would be, but her instinct was correct - there was no hint of awkwardness



transpiring from her former self-defence teacher, only the kind and easy-going expression on his face. It was undeniable, though, that there was something more, however hard Isaac tried to hide it – curiosity.



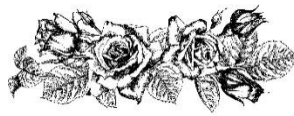
By Michaela Buzsaki Struchova

Michellz

“Cathy,” he replied and hugged her. “Please, tell me we can get some breakfast... I’m starving.”

She laughed, the constant stress, marked by the tension in her muscles, easing a little.

“Sure,” she said. “As I said, my treat.”



“Damn, this was excellent,” Isaac stated and leaned back against his chair, patting his belly.

They were sitting in a quiet café Catherine led them to after they talked things through on their walk through Central Park. She didn’t tell her friend

all the details about the world Below, only the few necessary ones, about Vincent having been found and looked after by a man living underground with him, and some other people.

While Catherine was talking (always very conscious of the environment and potential listeners), Isaac was deeply focused on her every word, silently pondering the implications of everything he had heard. All he did after Catherine finished her narrative was nod several times and then suddenly change the expression on his face and say, 'I think I need a second portion.'

"I'm glad I'm not the only one who enjoys it here," his former student remarked, laughing.

Isaac grinned. "In some strange way, it makes sense."

Catherine was nonplussed. "Meaning...?"

"Meaning you are a gorgeous, young, and successful high-society woman."

"Not exactly anymore," she corrected him, chuckling.

"Yeah, I know, but you know what I mean," her friend said. "So, something *had* to happen to you to test your real worth. And he is the outcome of your transformation."

Catherine pondered his words before speaking. "Maybe, but you have one thing wrong. He is the *reason* for my transformation. I found myself because of him."

Isaac smiled knowingly, and his eyes lingered on hers, his facial expression a deeply focused one again.

"It will take some digesting," he said finally, and his tone revealed to Catherine he wasn't talking about food. Her smile faded a little.

"I know... but I hope you can manage anyway... *quietly*. His safety... his *life* depends on it," she added, whispering.

The self-defence master briefly lowered his eyes, before looking up again – to her relief, a genuine, warm smile lit up his face.

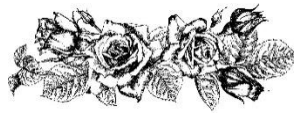
“You have put your trust in me, Cathy, and you know I would never do anything to prove I am unworthy of it.” He leaned a bit forward and whispered, “Will I ever see him again?”

Catherine watched the childlike awe on his face and couldn't suppress a little laugh. Of course, she knew he was trustworthy. She knew that right from the start when he took her under his wing with honesty, care, and encouragement, and now, she found it almost incredible she had had even the slightest doubt about his possible reaction.

“I don't know,” she said then truthfully, with a shrug. “It doesn't depend on me.”

Isaac straightened himself up on his chair again, nodding. “Well, you can be sure of one thing: if you ever need help again, you know where to look for it.”

Catherine's beaming smile and glistening eyes were her only response. For Isaac, it was more than enough.



### THREE MONTHS LATER

It was past ten in the evening as Vincent leisurely made his way through the in-darkness-obscured alleys of Manhattan, enjoying the relative freedom provided by the merciful disguise of his long, dark cloak, flailing around him like bat's wings. The streets were less busy than usual at this time of night, probably caused by the sudden, brief return of winter in the early spring city. The thermometer plummeted to numbers much more regular in January than in late March.

Vincent didn't mind the chilly bite of the air at all. The cold gave him extra protection on top of the darkness, so he could wander off deeper into the city. Always vigilant, though, he had just eyed the area around him before wanting to return to one of the hidden tunnel entrances when his sensitive

ears caught some noise coming from around the corner. He jumped deeper into the shadow, and, with gingerly, silent steps of a wild cat, he walked in that direction.

The sounds were getting louder and clearer, and Vincent recognised voices – two teenagers cornered a man in his late forties, harassing him.

“Look, guys, I told you I don't have much money on me, if that's what you want,” the man said calmly. “If you want it, it's yours, but I'm sure it would be better for you if you earned it in a more decent way than robbing an ageing man on his way back from work.”

“Of course, we want the money!” a boy of not more than eighteen years shouted, clad all in denim and black leather with a sea of silver buckles. He held his head high, his whole body oozing threat, albeit a not exactly convincing one. Vincent spotted his lifted arm, pointed against the cornered man – the hand held a small knife.

“And anything valuable!” his friend added, another teenager, looking almost identical; it appeared the boys were brothers.

“Money is all I have,” the older man replied, still surprisingly calm. It seemed he had been in a similar situation before. He raised his eyebrows, seemingly resigned. “If you want it, get it yourself.”

“Get on with *it*! Now!” the first boy exclaimed, his knife dangerously close to the man's face.

The man lifted his arms, still inviting the rascals to help themselves, but just as the boy with the knife lost his nerve and wanted to attack the man, Vincent, who just stepped out of the shadow to intervene, saw the man suddenly block his attacker, with unexpected speed and ease. He sent the boy down to the ground unconscious with two more expertly executed self-defence moves, kicking the knife out of his hand and not giving him the slightest chance to retaliate. However, right after, he felt surprisingly strong hands close around his neck as the second teenager threw himself on his back.

For the second time that night, he felt the steel-cold presence of a knife at his face. He struggled with the boy's grip for a few seconds, and just as he



was about to perform another defence move, he heard a soft growl behind them. It was barely audible, but his neck was suddenly free, and he heard a thud. He did a quick U-turn and gasped, not so much at the sight of the other teenager lying on the ground unmoving, but by the apparition standing calmly above him – a tall figure veiled in a black cloak from head to toe. His mouth went wide open as the figure stepped closer to him, the light of a streetlamp gradually revealing his face...

“It’s *you*...!” the man breathed in awe, his lips curling into an incredulous smile.

“Hello, Isaac,” Vincent’s soft, gravelly baritone made the self-defence teacher relive that brief moment from a few months ago. The magic of that sound hit him immediately.

“How... I mean... How did you know who I was?” Isaac asked, knitting his brows. The only time they fleetingly crossed paths, the maned man was practically blind.

Vincent's small smile softened his animal features. “Catherine,” he replied. “She showed me the newspaper clipping last month.”

Isaac laughed. “And to imagine I hated being photographed at that event!” he exclaimed, remembering the occasion. His club competed in a regional self-defence contest – and won. The photograph showed the team with their proud, although slightly out-of-place-looking couch. “I know it's a good promotion for my business, but I've never liked the press attention. I just wanna do my job and help people. My face wasn't made for the whole world to stare at it.”

Seeing the flash of sadness in Vincent's deep-set eyes, Isaac understood the inappropriateness of his remark. He was still stunned at this surreal encounter and transfixed by the extraordinary face before him, but he didn't wish to cause the man who helped him any discomfort. It was time to change the topic. He looked down at the boy at Vincent's feet.

“Is he...?”

“He'll wake up soon,” Vincent replied, correctly guessing Isaac's train of thought – the self-defence master was intelligent enough to realise there was extraordinary strength beneath the majestic exterior. “He's unharmed.” He glanced at the other boy lying at Isaac's feet. “Catherine was right. You are a brilliant teacher.”

Isaac chuckled. “It's kind of a necessity around here, as you see.”

“More often than I would like,” Vincent added sorrowfully.

The sound of a police car passing by on the main street interrupted the moment of pondering between them.

“You better get going,” Isaac remarked, his eyes glancing toward the main street, “before someone walks by... and before these two wake up.”



Vincent nodded, then outstretched his gloved hand. Isaac felt a wave of inexplicable thrill wash over him before he accepted it, impressed by its strong grip.

“Thank you,” Vincent said softly, with genuine gratitude. “For helping Catherine, not just while looking for me.”

“Some people are worth it,” Isaac said, with a knowing smile.

The two men released each other's hands, and Vincent, as quietly and inconspicuously as he came, disappeared in the shadows.

Isaac's eyes followed him and remained at the spot where he vanished out of sight. All the questions he would have asked Vincent – the most intriguing one being how come he happened to stroll the New York City night streets so unafraid – remained forgotten and irrelevant in his realisation of how much courage it must have cost Vincent to reveal himself like this. Now he could at least partly understand the appeal this man had on Catherine, apart from owing him her life. He sincerely hoped they would meet again sometime, preferably under more pleasant circumstances.

Isaac was quickly brought back to reality by the renewed sound of the police siren nearby. The quiet moan of one of the boys, still lying on the pavement but slowly waking up, made him realise it was time to leave this place. He pulled up the lapels on his jacket and started walking home.

As he was taking long strides, he dug his hands deep into his pockets to keep them warm. It crossed his mind that sometimes it wasn't bad to work longer hours on Fridays...





# You Can't Cook Dreams for Dinner

by Barbara Anderson



“W

hat do you dream about, William?” Samantha asked, elbow-deep in sudsy dishwater.

“I’m too old for dreams, kid,” William replied gruffly, as he prepared his kitchen for the next day’s meal prep. “Don’t have time for ‘em, even if I did.”

“I wanted to be a ballerina for a while... You know, when Lisa Campbell came here. But it’s too hard. I like to dance and all, but not *that* much.”

“Humph,” William replied, wishing the girl would work more and talk less.

“Now I think I want to be a nurse... or maybe even a doctor. Father says if I keep up my studies and work hard, that Dr. Alcott will help me.”

“You’ll have to go live Up-Top for that,” Jamie said as she dried the dishes. “I never want to live up there.” She looked up at the ceiling and shook her head for emphasis. “Never.”

“Catherine lives up there,” Samantha pointed out.

“Yeah, and look what’s happened to *her*,” Jamie shot back. “How many times has she been hurt up there? Nope, that’s not for me.”

Undeterred by her two cranky companions, Samantha kept talking. “Don’t you have any hopes or dreams, Jamie?”

Jamie thought for a moment. “I guess I dream about being the best sentry the Tunnels have ever seen. Maybe I’ll even teach self-defense someday... like Isaac.”

“Bah!” William hollered. “I’ve just about had enough of you kids and your dreams! You’ll learn soon enough that you can’t cook dreams for dinner! They won’t boil, bake, or fry! Notta one of ‘em! And they sure won’t fill an empty belly. Now off with you two and leave me in peace.”

The girls didn’t need to be told twice. They scurried out of the kitchen before William could change his mind.

And as William finished cleaning his kitchen in blessed silence, he dreamed of a world where no child would ever go to bed hungry.





By Judith Nolan







---

## Echoes in Stone

*Drabbles by Judith Nolan*

---



### Below the City



Vincent's voice rumbled low as they walked the candlelit tunnels.

Catherine's heels clicked softly against ancient stone, an incongruous rhythm in this place untouched by the world above.

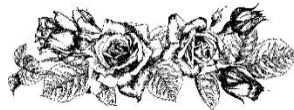
"You're quiet tonight," he said.

She smiled faintly, fingers brushing a wall worn smooth by countless hands. "I'm listening."

To him. To the drip of water, the sigh of hidden air shafts, the distant laughter of children safe in shadows. Every sound belonged here, and so, somehow, did she.

Vincent's eyes softened. "Then listen to this—" His hand found hers, warm, steady. "You are cherished."

She tightened her hold. "I know."



### The Rooftop



The skyline shimmered in the midnight fog, buildings like jagged teeth biting into the clouds.

Catherine leaned on the parapet, cold air pulling at her hair. She felt Vincent before she saw him—an unshakable sense of presence.

"You shouldn't be here," he murmured, emerging from shadow.

"And yet," she replied, "here you are."

He joined her, the city lights glinting faintly in his golden eyes.

“It’s dangerous,” he warned.

“So is love,” she countered.

Silence stretched, full of unsaid truths.

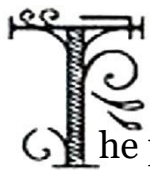
At last, he stepped closer, cloak brushing her sleeve. “Then we’ll be careful,” he whispered.

Below, the city slept.

Above, hearts stirred.



## The Letter



he paper was worn from her folding and unfolding it, the ink slightly smudged where her thumb lingered over his name.

Catherine read Vincent’s words again—careful lines, the cadence almost like poetry.

*My world was dark until you stepped into it.*

She pressed her eyes shut, the weight of his sincerity pulling tears she hadn’t expected.

They had spoken these feelings aloud before, but here, in quiet solitude, she could hold them in her hands.

She tucked the letter into her desk drawer, knowing she’d read it again tomorrow, and the next day.

Some truths never faded; they only deepened.



## Candlelight

Dinner was simple—bread, stew, and tea—but the glow of dozens of candles made the tunnels seem like a cathedral.

Catherine sat across from Vincent, fascinated by the way the light curved over his features, softening shadows.

He was speaking of the children's progress, of Father's latest debates, but her attention kept straying to the gentleness in his expression when he looked at her.

"You're not listening," he teased.

She laughed. "I'm just... grateful."

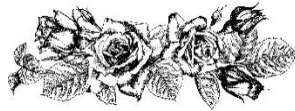
"For what?"

"For you. For this place."

His gaze warmed. "And I, for you."

Outside, the city roared.

Down here, the only sound was the quiet of belonging.



## The Chase

Catherine's breath tore in her throat as she sprinted through the alley, footsteps thundering behind her.

She turned sharply, only to find a dead end—bricks, trash, and shadows.

A shape detached from the darkness, massive and silent. Her fear vanished instantly.

Vincent.

He stepped between her and the men who'd followed, a low growl curling in his chest.

They fled at the sight of him, disappearing into the night. Catherine reached for his arm.

“You followed me?”

“Always,” he said simply.

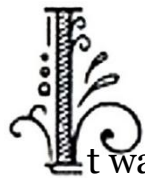
She exhaled, trembling. “I thought I could handle it.”

“You can. But you never have to alone.”

She smiled. “I know.”



## The Garden



It wasn't much—just a cluster of green beneath the grates, where stolen sunlight spilled into the tunnels.

Vincent tended the plants carefully, as though the smallest flower was a fragile secret.

Catherine crouched beside him, brushing a petal. “I didn't know this was here.”

“Few do,” he replied, voice hushed. “Life finds a way, even here.”

She considered that, watching the roots weave through cracks in the stone. “Like us,” she said.

He glanced at her, startled, then nodded slowly. “Like us.”

In the stillness, the scent of earth wrapped around them.

Somewhere above, the world spun on.

Down here, it bloomed.



## The Whisper

**C**atherine woke to the faintest sound—like fabric brushing stone. Her hand found the gun on her nightstand, but she froze at the window. A shadow lingered on the fire escape.

“Vincent?” she whispered.

The shape inclined its head. Relief flooded her, but his voice was low, urgent. “Don’t turn on the light.”

She stepped closer. “What is it?”

“Someone’s watching. Not me—*you*.”

The words hung between them, chilling the air.

He reached into the darkness, not quite touching her cheek. “Be careful.”

Then he was gone, swallowed by the night, leaving her with the pounding certainty that danger had already begun.



## The Informant

**T**he man was shaking, his voice a harsh rasp. “I can’t... I can’t go to the cops. They’ll kill me.”

Catherine leaned in. “Then tell me.”

He darted a glance over her shoulder, eyes widening.

She turned—nothing but empty shadows. When she faced him again, he had bolted. She chased him into the alley, only to skid to a halt.

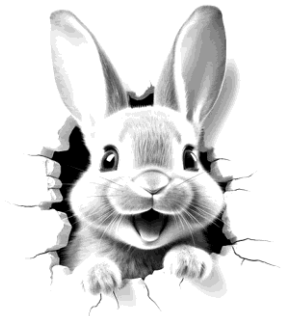
Vincent stood there, cloak billowing faintly, but his eyes weren’t on her.

He’s gone,” Vincent said.

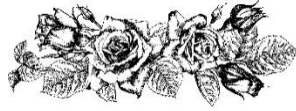
Catherine’s frustration flared. “He knew something.”

Vincent’s gaze sharpened. “Yes. And someone knew *he* knew.”

Somewhere, far above them, a door slammed like a warning.







## The Mark

**B**lood bloomed across the cracked pavement, bright under the streetlamp.

Catherine knelt beside the victim—male, mid-thirties, still breathing. His hand clutched a scrap of paper, numbers scrawled in hurried ink. She pried it loose, pocketing it before the uniforms arrived.

Later, in the tunnels, she laid it before Vincent.

“Coordinates,” he murmured. “But not of this city.”

She frowned. “Then where?”

He didn’t answer, his gaze distant. “Somewhere I hoped I’d never have to see again.”

She looked at him sharply. “You’ve been there?”

His silence was answer enough. Whatever lay at those numbers, she realized, was not meant for daylight.



## The Trap

**T**he basement stank of damp concrete and gasoline.

Catherine moved cautiously, flashlight beam cutting the dark.

Somewhere above, footsteps paced—slow, deliberate.

She glanced at her watch. Vincent should have been here by now.

A floorboard groaned.

She spun, but the figure in the shadows was human.

A man’s voice chuckled. “You came alone.”

“No,” she said.



The chuckle faltered.

Then, from the farthest corner, a low growl rolled out—deep, primal, unmistakable.

The man's eyes widened just before Vincent emerged, every inch a predator.

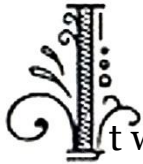
"She never comes alone," Vincent said, advancing.

Catherine allowed herself a breath.

The trap had just reversed.



## The Message



It was slipped under her apartment door—no name, no return address. Inside: a photograph of the tunnels.

Catherine's stomach clenched. She flipped it over.

*Tell him to meet me where the water runs red.*

She didn't need to ask who "him" meant.

That night, by the reservoir's rust-stained spillway, Vincent stood motionless.

"You shouldn't be here," she began, but he cut her off.

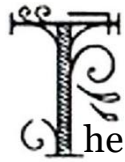
"This place..." His voice trailed into silence.

Then, from the shadows beyond, another figure stepped forward—face hidden, voice low. "You know why I called you."

The way Vincent's shoulders tensed told her this was far from over.



## The Silence



The tunnel was too quiet.

Catherine moved carefully, every step echoing too loudly. The usual hum of water and distant voices was gone. She rounded a corner and stopped. The candles were cold, unlit. Tables overturned, papers scattered. Then—movement.

Vincent appeared, but there was blood on his sleeve. “What happened?” she demanded.

“They were here,” he said. His voice was calm, but his hands trembled.

“Looking for something.”

“Did they find it?”

His gaze met hers, heavy with meaning. “No. But they will try again.”

She swallowed hard, suddenly aware that the silence wasn’t peace — it was the pause before the next attack.



## Her Voice



There are nights I walk the upper world unseen, only to hear her voice drifting from an open window or down an empty street. It steadies me. So many sounds in the city are harsh, demanding, urgent—but hers... hers carries warmth, truth. Even in anger, it does not wound. When she speaks to me, there is no fear in her tone, no shadow of what I am. Only trust. It is a gift I can never repay. I stand listening, hidden, until the city swallows her words. Then I return home, carrying the echo like a flame through the dark.



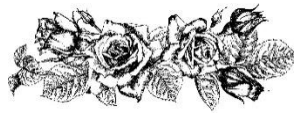
## The Threshold

**H**er apartment door is both a barrier and a promise. I stand beyond it, in shadow, listening to her movements within. The temptation to knock is almost unbearable. She would welcome me—she always has—but the world between us remains. If I cross, I risk unravelling the careful balance we have built. Still, there are moments when the distance feels like a wound. I lift my hand to the wood, feeling the faint tremor of her life on the other side. Then I let it fall. My place is not here. And yet, part of me will always be waiting.



## When She Sleeps

**I** have seen her sleep only once. The case had left her exhausted, shadows beneath her eyes, her breath uneven. I sat in the chair by her bed, cloaked in darkness, watching the rise and fall of her chest. The city noises faded into the background, as though even they respected her rest. I did not wish to wake her, though my presence was a danger in itself. She sighed once, almost my name, and I felt something within me yield completely. When she finally stirred, I was gone—but the image of her in that quiet moment will never leave me.



## The Scent of Rain

**R**ain carries her scent to me long before I see her. The tunnels smell of stone and earth, but when she is near, there is something else—clean, bright, alive. Tonight, I wait at the junction, hearing her footsteps echo through the corridor. She appears, hair damp, cheeks flushed from the weather.

“You’re here,” she says, as if it could ever be otherwise.

We walk together, her arm brushing mine.

The storm above is relentless, but here, the air is warm, lit by candlelight.

Still, I carry the rain with me, because it reminds me that even the storm belongs to her.



## The Darkness Within

I have always known the darkness in me—the wild, unrestrained force that waits beneath my skin. With her, it is both nearer and farther. Nearer, because I would do anything to keep her safe; farther, because she has shown me I can be more than my violence. But when the threat comes too close, I do not think—I *become*. Afterwards, I fear the look in her eyes, but it never comes. She sees me whole, not in fragments. She does not fear my darkness.

That is what frightens me most... for I cannot promise it will never claim me.



## Forever Below

The world above is hers—bright, endless, full of possibility. Mine is a labyrinth of stone, lit by fragile flames. Yet, when she walks these tunnels, it feels as though the sun itself has descended. I know she cannot stay. Her life demands more than these walls can give. But I am selfish enough to keep offering her this place, this quiet, this peace. If she ever asked, I would take her hand and never let it go. But I love her enough to let her walk away each time.

That is the truth of it.

That is my forever.



By Barbara Anderson \*Inspired by Mel who taught me how to do this.









# The Price of Genius

by Judith Nolan



*"It is better to remain silent at the risk of being thought a fool, than to talk and remove all doubt of it..."*

**Maurice Switzer**



The Tunnels were quiet that evening, though the city above buzzed with its usual noise. Vincent had been keeping watch at one of the drainage entrances, listening to the hum of distant traffic, when the unmistakable sound of a muffled explosion rolled through the passageways like thunder. He straightened at once, senses sharpening.

The blast came from somewhere near the storage chambers. Vincent rushed down the corridor, his cloak billowing behind him, and nearly collided with Jamie, who came running from the opposite direction.

"Vincent! Did you hear that?" she panted.

"I heard," he answered grimly. "I'm sure it came from Mouse's workshop."

They exchanged a look before they both turned and ran down the tunnel.

Inside the cluttered cavern Mouse had claimed as his workshop, a cloud of acrid smoke lingered, tickling the throat and stinging the eyes. Shelves of scavenged treasures rattled from the shockwave, some spilling their contents onto the stone floor.

Arthur, the tinker's pet racoon tottered around in the mess, blinking his eyes and wiping his face with his black paws. He chittered in a very scolding tone.

Mouse, his hair even more untamed than usual and soot smeared across his face, coughed and waved his hands. “Sorry, Arthur. Not supposed to do that! No, no, no. Supposed to work! Just little bit too much, um, powder. Easy fix.”

“*Mouse!*” Vincent’s voice filled the chamber like a tolling bell. “What have you done?”

Mouse blinked at him through the smoke, smiling nervously. “Experiment. New idea. Safer candles! Brighter light, longer lasting. No more dripping wax. Just... whoosh!”

He mimed an explosion with his hands. “Okay, maybe too much whoosh.”

Jamie stepped forward, hands balled on her hips. “You could’ve brought the whole chamber down on your head. And ours!”

Before Vincent could answer, another voice cut through the haze, cold as a blade.

“*Enough!*” Father stood in the entryway, leaning on his cane, his eyes hard with fury. Mary hovered behind him, her face pale.

Mouse shrank a little, his usual cheer evaporating. “Father... Mouse sorry. Didn’t mean trouble. Just trying to help. New light for Tunnels and—”

“Help?” Father’s tone sharpened. “By blowing up half our home? Do you realise what danger you’ve put us all in? If the supports had weakened, if the fire had spread—”

“Didn’t spread,” Mouse said quickly, shaking his head. “Put it out. Safe. Checked. Double checked.”

“*Safe?*” Father thundered. “You call this *safe?*” He swept a hand at the scorched wall, the smouldering scraps of cloth, the frightened faces gathered at the doorway as other Tunnel dwellers gathered to look in.

“Okay good... okay fine...” Mouse flinched but tried to rally. “Didn’t think it would upset you. Just wanted to make things better.” He looked around his interested audience. “For all of us.”

“You nearly destroyed *everything!*” Father’s voice cracked with the force of his anger. “This isn’t childish mischief! This is recklessness, endangering every soul who depends on these Tunnels! I will *not* tolerate it!”



Silence fell, broken only by Mouse's ragged breathing. His wide eyes shimmered with hurt, but also with the desperate stubbornness of someone who lived to invent.

"I can fix it," he whispered.

Father's expression softened only slightly, but his voice was still iron. "No, Mouse. This time you will not *'fix it.'* This time you will answer for it."



Later that evening, the Council convened in the library chamber. The great circular room, usually filled with the quiet rustle of pages or the click of moved chess pieces, now bristled with tension. Lantern light glimmered on worried faces. Mary, Pascal, Winslow, Rebecca, and many others.

Mouse stood at the centre like a guilty child called to account. He twisted his hands together, his gaze flicking from Father's stern gaze to the floor and back again. He muttered to himself, as if trying to assemble his defence.

Father spoke first. "You've all heard what happened. Mouse's... experiment caused an explosion in the lower chambers. By fortune alone, no one was hurt. But fortune may not favor us next time. Something must be done about his carelessness and careless attention to the rules. *Our* rules."

Winslow folded his arms. "The boy's a menace, for sure. I've said it before. Always tinkering, always hauling in contraptions. One day he'll bring the roof down on all our heads."

Mary shook her head, though her voice was troubled. "He means well, Winslow. Mouse has given us many useful things. He's made repairs, clever tools and even that pulley system for the well."

"Intentions don't keep us safe," Winslow retorted. "Discipline does."

Jamie leaned forward, fierce in her defence. "Mouse doesn't hurt people on purpose! He just needs guidance. Someone to oversee him."

"He needs restraint," Father said firmly. "He needs to learn that actions have consequences. I cannot allow this recklessness to continue unchecked."

Mouse lifted his head, his voice quavering. “Didn’t mean harm. Just wanted brighter light. Safer for children, safer for everyone.”

Father’s gaze was steady. “Do you even understand how close you came to disaster? These Tunnels are our lifeblood, Mouse. If one chamber collapses, it may trap or kill those within. If fire spreads, there is no escape. You gamble with lives when you act without thought.”

Mouse swallowed hard. “Didn’t think about fire spreading.”

“No,” Father said, weary now. “You rarely think past the next spark of inspiration. And it must stop.”

After the meeting broke up, Vincent found Mouse sitting alone on the edge of the Whispering Gallery. His legs dangled over the side, his shoulders hunched. The usual restless energy had drained from him, leaving only a boy adrift in shame and remorse.

Vincent approached quietly. “Mouse.”

Mouse didn’t look up. “Everyone hates me now.”

“That isn’t true,” Vincent said gently, settling beside him.

“Father’s angry. Winslow wants me gone. Even Mary looked scared.” He dug his nails into the wooden post beside him. “Didn’t mean trouble. Just wanted to make things better. Lights without flame. Safer for all.”

Vincent regarded him with compassion. “You have a gift, Mouse. Your mind sees possibilities others cannot. But with such a gift comes responsibility. Every idea must be weighed, every risk measured. You cannot test dangerous inventions in the heart of our home.”

Mouse’s throat worked. “If I can’t try... how do I know if they work?”

Vincent sighed. “You must learn patience. Share your ideas first. Let others help you judge their safety. That is how you honour the community you love.”

For a long moment Mouse was silent. Then, in a small voice: “Father going to send me away?”

Vincent placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “No. He fears for you, and for all of us. His anger comes from love, though it is not always easy to

see. But he could never send you away. After Devin left, it would break his heart.”

Mouse sniffed, swiping at his eyes. “Wish he’d yell less.” He put his hands to both sides of his head. “Hurts my ears. Bad...”

Vincent almost smiled. “So do we all. It shows how much he loves us.”

But Father’s anger lingered. The next day he summoned Mouse to his study. The chamber smelled of parchment and candle wax, the shelves heavy with books and assorted bric-a-brac. Father sat behind his desk, cane resting at his side, eyes cool but not cruel.

“Mouse,” he began, “I’ve spoken with the Council. We have decided on your punishment.”

Mouse shifted from foot to foot uneasily. “Punishment? Why? What?”

“You will not conduct experiments alone. From now on, any invention, any device, must be approved by me, or by Vincent, if I am unavailable. And you will spend the next month assisting Winslow with repairs and maintenance. Perhaps then you will learn the importance of steady, careful work.”

Mouse grimaced. “Winslow hates me. He says I’ve only got nine lives. Used some up already, he said.”

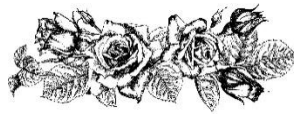
“Winslow does not hate you,” Father corrected. “But he values order and caution. Qualities you must learn.”

Mouse’s head drooped. “Okay. If that’s what you want.”

Father leaned forward, his tone softening. “It is not what I want, Mouse. It is what is necessary. I care for you deeply, as I do for every child of this community. But if you cannot temper your impulses, you may one day cause a tragedy none of us can undo. Do you understand?”

Mouse’s lip trembled, but he nodded. “Understand.”

Father’s expression eased. “Good. Then we will begin again.”



The weeks that followed were difficult. Winslow barked orders, criticizing every mistake. Mouse, unused to such constant supervision, often bit his lip

to keep from snapping back. But slowly, grudgingly, he began to learn. He measured twice before cutting rope. He tested pulleys with sandbags before trusting them with children. He wrote notes about weights, balance, and strength instead of keeping them in his head.

Vincent checked on him often, offering encouragement. Even Jamie, though she complained about Winslow's gruffness, praised Mouse's progress.

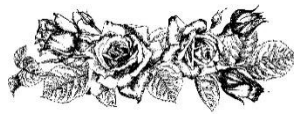
Arthur went about chattering his approval. But he kept far away from Winslow. He knew the blacksmith detested him more than Mouse.

And one evening, when Mouse carefully presented Father with a sketch of a new lantern design, one fuelled not by powder, but by a simple oil reservoir safely contained, Father studied it for a long time.

At last, he looked up, eyes warm. "This... this may work."

Mouse beamed, pride shining brighter than any flame. "Okay good... okay, fine..." he breathed.

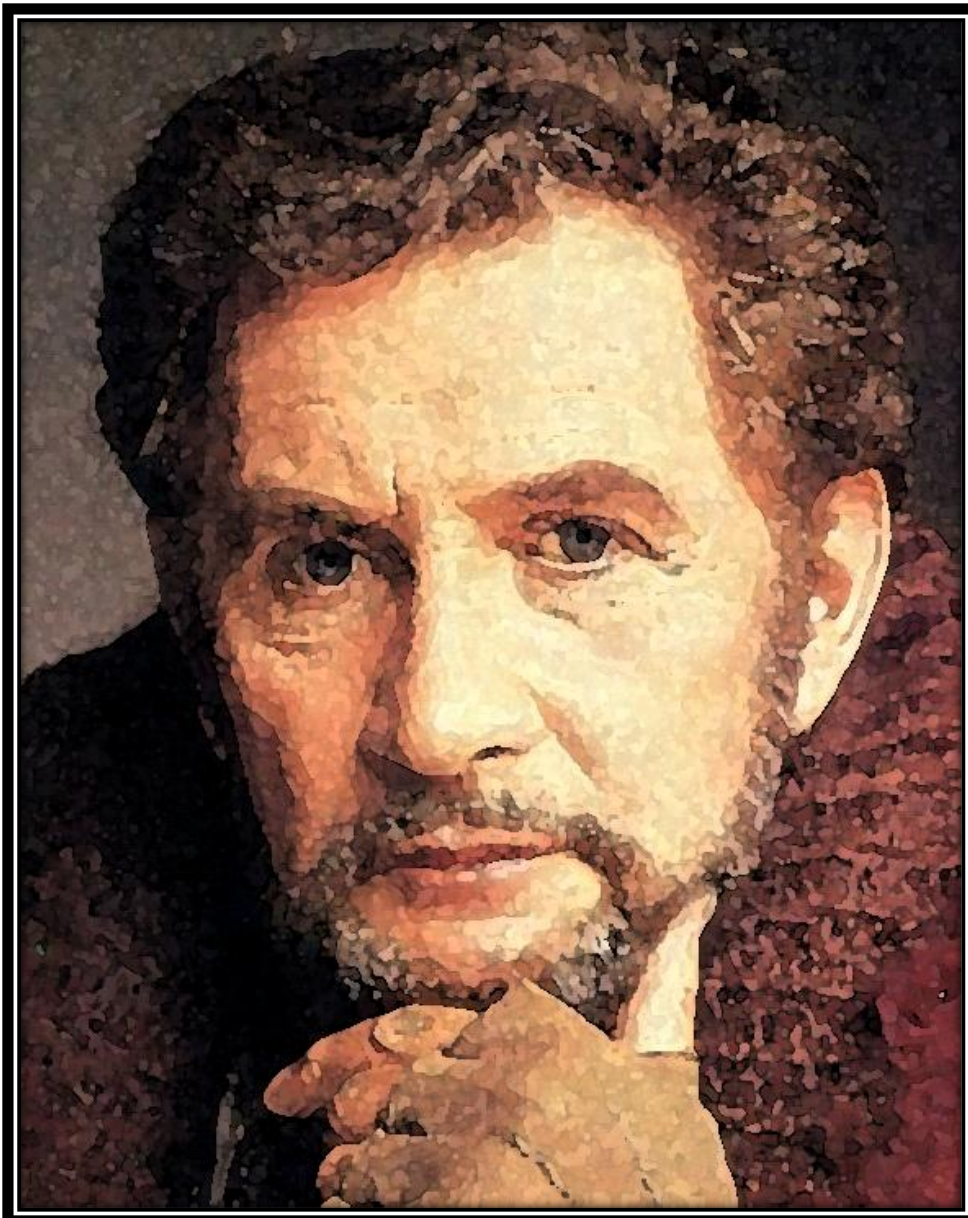
The Tunnels endured, as they always did. And though Mouse would never lose his wild spark. He carried with him now the memory of Father's anger and the knowledge that even genius must bow to the safety of the family it serves.



*"Whenever you find yourself on the side of the majority, it is time to reform (or pause and reflect)..."*

**Mark Twain**





WHEN I STAND BEFORE GOD AT THE END OF MY LIFE,  
I WOULD HOPE THAT I WOULD NOT HAVE A SINGLE  
BIT OF TALENT LEFT, AND COULD SAY,  
"I USED EVERYTHING YOU GAVE ME."

Roy Dotrice OBE 26 May 1923 – 16 October 2017

*By Judith Nolan*







# A Christmas Below

by Judith Nolan



**SND PG-17**

*“A beauty forever. Everything passes. Everything ends. Everything disappears. And I, who imagined I would live forever, what becomes of me? It is not impossible... But that I have passed over and into this world where you lived is a truth and a beauty forever and death itself can do nothing against me...”*

**Jean d’Ormesson**



The

city Above was clothed in the winter’s hush. Snow had fallen through the night, softening the harsh edges of New York, transforming even its most careworn corners into something luminous. The sun was slowly sinking into the west with flames of gold and red.

Catherine stood at her apartment window, wrapped in a woollen shawl as she drank her coffee and gazed out at the hushed streets. It was Christmas Eve, and though she had long since grown used to the elegance and wealth of her father’s world, her thoughts were not of parties, fine clothes, expensive gifts or glittering lights.

Her thoughts were Below. Far beneath the light-spangled city and the crowded subways. To a place where love and laughter mattered more than anything.

For days she’d prepared, tucking gifts into boxes or bags before writing the names in her flowing hand. She’d chosen things with care and love. In the last three years, the Tunnel world had become a second home, and its people, her family in spirit. The holiday season stirred in her an ache that had slowly become even more compelling. She wanted to give them not merely gifts, but tokens of understanding, appreciation, and hope. Things wanted rather than needed.

Tonight, she would carry the last of them down to the threshold where Vincent would be waiting. She hoped everything she'd purchased would be accepted in the spirit they would be given.

She'd finished wrapping the last purchase an hour ago and sat back on her heels to survey her hard work. Her apartment bore the air of Santa's workshop, though she laughed at the thought. Spread across her dining table were the remains of her hard work. Tapes, labels and discarded wrapping. Many shopping bags lay amongst the debris.

All the brown paper bags adorned with sprigs of evergreen had been taken Below. She'd chosen each thing with a dweller in mind, picturing their faces as she wrapped.

For Father, she had selected a pair of reading glasses in a sturdy case, the finest lenses she could find, along with a bound notebook of archival paper. She imagined him frowning over the extravagance yet secretly cherishing them as he pored over books in the dim candlelight. Or trying to beat his son at chess. Maybe they would end his losing streak of games.

For Mary, who tended the children with tireless devotion, Catherine had chosen many skeins of fine yarn in shades of forest green, cranberry, and gold. Colours she thought Mary would never dare claim for herself but would delight in transforming into scarves and mittens for others.

For Mouse, she'd assembled a collection of tools. Tiny precision screwdrivers, a set of fine pliers, and a magnifying glass on a flexible stand. She could already hear his delighted exclamations: "Good! *Good!* Better than new!"

For little Samantha, a set of coloured pencils and a sketchpad, bound in leather. Catherine remembered the girl's drawings, quick and shy, and wanted her to know her talent was seen.

Jamie was harder to shop for. Catherine had caught her bottom lip over many gifts contemplated and then discarded. In the end, it was a fine jerkin of deerskin with many pockets and places to put things that finally got the nod of approval.

For William, and the whole community, she filled a large wooden crate with tins of cocoa, bags of roasted coffee, jars of jam, and even a small wheel of cheese from a specialty shop. Such luxuries were not necessities, but Catherine knew they would bring joy on a cold winter's night.



She carried the gifts in bags a few at a time down to the sub-basement to hide them away from casual sight. She told Vincent he would need to bring one of the trolleys they used to convey the food parcels sent below by their many helpers Above.

“What are you about?” her love had queried when she’d stood with him on her balcony three nights ago. His eyes were alive with curiosity. “You know your company is the greatest gift of all.”

“I know...” Catherine rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. “But you have given me so much. I wanted to give something back.”

“Very well...” Vincent kissed her hair. “We will love anything you bring down. As long as you are there too.”

Catherine sighed as she turned from the window and put her empty coffee cup in the kitchen sink. Tomorrow would come soon enough. She was committed to spending Christmas night with her father, accompanying him on the traditional round of parties. She could not disappoint him.

She walked back to the table of gifts. “But, for tonight...” She smiled. “I’m going to be Below and I’m going to be staying the night.”

A frisson of longing and anticipation of the night ahead feathered up and down her spine. And, if everything went according to plan, she would not be sleeping alone.

“And for Vincent...” Her hands lingered on his gift.

A first addition volume of Lord Tennyson’s poetry bound in midnight-blue leather, its gilt edges gleaming. Inside, she had pressed a note, her handwriting careful, almost reverent: *“To Vincent, who teaches me every day that beauty dwells in the heart, and that every word shared is a gift.”*

She drew in a breath, steadying her heart, as she added the gift to the largest bag. The time to go Below had arrived. She picked up the bag and put it beside the front door.

She went into her bedroom and dressed warmly, slipping into boots and a heavy coat. She walked back to the front door and picked up the gifts and her shoulder bag. As she stepped into the hallway, the sounds of the city seemed distant, muffled by the snow outside and the soft sigh of the wind.

By the time she reached the sub-basement, dusk had claimed the city. The lamps glowed haloed through the mist, and the snow creaked beneath the

feet of the people outside in the streets. She paused at the bottom of the ladder from the sub-basement, the hidden threshold to another world, and felt the old thrill — of secrets, of belonging.

And then, as always, he was there.

Vincent emerged from the shadows, his cloak brushing the ground, his golden hair catching the faint light. His eyes, luminous in the dark, softened when they found her.

“You’re here,” he said, his voice low and warm.

“Yes...” Catherine replied, smiling. “Did you ever doubt?”

“Never.”

She hugged him. “I have everything ready and waiting. I’ll go back up and hand them down.”

“Hand *them* down?” Vincent’s brows rose. “I know you asked for a cart, but how many are there?”

“Not nearly enough for all you and your family have done for me.”

Catherine smiled as she left him to hurry back up the ladder.

Vincent accepted them as she handed the bags down. He carried them through the hole in the brick wall and put them on the cart. Finally loaded with Christmas cheer, together they descended, leaving behind the cold brilliance of the city for the candlelit warmth of Below.



The large dining hall had been transformed. Candles flickered in sconces along the stone walls, casting golden light on banners of red and green fabric. Pine boughs perfumed the air, mingling with the scent of baking bread. The children ran in circles, laughter echoing while their elders sat in clusters at the long settles, talking while they consumed the food that had been laid out on the tables.

When Catherine and Vincent entered, a cheer rose up. A louder noise and many exclamations of surprise and delight were made at the sight of the laden cart Vincent was pushing. A Christmas salute from mugs of William’s apple cider was proposed.

“Catherine!” young Geoffrey cried, darting forward to hug her waist. “We’ve waiting for you! Vincent said you would come tonight because tomorrow night you’ll be partying with your other family! ”

She laughed, bending to embrace him. “Yes, I will. But I wouldn’t miss it for all the parties Above.”

“Good!” the boy replied as he darted away again.

Father approached, leaning on his cane. His stern eyes warmed at the sight of her. “My dear, you are most welcome. You honour us with your presence tonight. You didn’t have to bring anything.” But his tone was not convincing.

“I only bring what little I can,” she said softly. “You do so much for me.”

Vincent’s gaze met hers, speaking what words could not: *You bring more than you know.*

Catherine’s parcels were set upon one long table that had been cleared of its plates of food. Soon the community gathered round as she began to give them out.

The moment Father lifted the notebook and glasses from their wrappings, he fell uncharacteristically silent. He adjusted the spectacles on the bridge of his nose and blinked as the world sharpened into clarity.

“Remarkable,” he murmured, then looked at Catherine. “You’ve thought of everything, haven’t you?”

Mary’s hands trembled as she touched the skeins of yarn, tears brightening her eyes. “Such colours... I haven’t seen such colours in years. They make me remember...” Tears gathered in her eyes as she hugged Catherine tightly and kissed her cheek.

Mouse tore into his package with gleeful abandon. “*Tools!* Perfect! Exactly what Mouse needed! Catherine knows! Catherine knows everything!” He dashed off immediately, muttering plans for his next invention.

Samantha opened her sketchbook reverently, her fingers tracing the smooth pages. “For me?” she whispered.

“Yes,” Catherine said. “For you, because your drawings are beautiful. Don’t ever stop.”

Samantha threw her arms around her, wordless in her gratitude.

When the children discovered the crate of treats, a chorus of gasps and cheers filled the hall. William took stern charge of the goods and ordered them to be carried into the kitchen. Cups of cocoa were soon steaming, hands warming, laughter spilling like music.

And then there was Vincent.

Catherine placed her gift in his hands with a quiet formality, as though giving him more than an object. He opened it and his long fingers stroked the leather binding, and his breath caught at the gold-embossed title. When he opened the book and saw her note, he closed it again gently, his eyes meeting hers.

“Catherine,” he said, voice hushed. “This is a treasure beyond measure.”

Her smile trembled. “It’s only a book.”

“No,” he said. “It is your heart.”

Colour warmed her cheeks as she leaned closer to her love. “There is one more gift. But it’s for later. When we can be alone... together.”

“Then I shall look forward to that,” he replied with more sensuality in his gaze than he had ever shown her before.

That same frisson of anticipation and longing for the night ahead feathered up and down her spine. She almost threw caution to the wind then, but there were too many eyes on them and people who wanted to talk and thank her for her generosity.

As the night deepened, the music rose into the hall’s shadowed ceiling. The children sang carols, their voices echoing in the stone chamber, and Father recited a passage from Dickens. Mary led the little ones in a pageant of the nativity, their costumes patched but radiant with spirit.

Catherine sat among them, her heart full. She had never felt so close to belonging, not even at the lavish holiday parties of her youth. Those rooms had been filled with wealth, but this hall brimmed with love.

Vincent read aloud from her gift, his deep voice weaving Tennyson’s words into the air. Every syllable seemed a benediction, each line alive with meaning. When he finished, silence lingered, not from emptiness but from fullness.

Snow had begun to fall again above, but Below warmth gathered like a hearth-fire.

Later, when the children were sent to their chambers to sleep and the candles burned low, Catherine and Vincent walked together along the Tunnels. She carried no more parcels, but her heart felt lighter for the giving.

“You’ve given them joy,” Vincent said.

“They’ve given me more,” she replied.

They paused where the tunnel opened into Vincent’s chamber. It was lit by a single candelabra and the flickering brazier. Here, away from the others, the hush of stone enfolded them.

Catherine looked up at Vincent, the shadows softening his leonine features, and for a moment she wished, as she always wished, that the world were different, that they could stand together beneath a Christmas tree in the light of day. They could go with her father to all the parties, and no one would look twice.

But perhaps, she thought, this was better. This was theirs.

“Merry Christmas, Vincent,” she whispered.

He bent his head, his golden hair brushing her brow. “Merry Christmas, Catherine.”

Catherine took his hand in hers. “Let’s go inside...” She drew him after her into the chamber’s warmth that radiated from the brazier in the corner. “I still have that other gift I want to give to you.”

“Other gift?” Vincent asked as Catherine untied and dropped the privacy curtain over the entrance.

No tunnel dweller would enter or think of interrupting that sign of seclusion. It was as good as a barred and locked door.

“Catherine?” Vincent reached out to draw her closer to him, but she eluded him.

Walking into the centre of the room, she stopped and turned back when she reached the wide bed. She smiled as she took off her boots. Then she unbuttoned her heavy coat and cast it aside. Beneath, she was wearing a sensible tweed skirt and woollen sweater. With her eyes locked on her love’s

wondering expression, the two garments soon joined her coat on the carpet at her feet.

Vincent's breath hissed inward between his teeth as he surveyed the glory that now met his wondering eyes. His love was wearing a black silk negligée that whispered around her thighs as she turned before him, allowing him to see her from every angle.

The light shone through the silk to outline every curve and sensual valley with loving care. His gift of the crystal pendent gleamed between her breasts. His whole body tightened, and he longed to press a kiss there.

"Merry Christmas, Vincent..." Catherine said as she watched for his reaction through her lowered lashes. "I hope you like this gift..."

She was not disappointed.

"Merry Christmas, Catherine..." he managed to reply as he stripped off his cloak and flung it to the floor.

He peeled out of his heavy shirt before his hands settled on her hips and drew her hard against him. There would be no good night this evening. And the morning was still far enough away...

"Love me..." Catherine begged.

"Always..." Vincent groaned.

Their lips met and Vincent lifted his love high against him. Her legs parted and settled around his waist as they tumbled together into the pillows and softness of the bed behind them. And though no gift could capture the bond between them, in that moment they both knew they'd already given, and received, the greatest gift of all. *Trust...*



*"All life is transitory. A Dream. We all come together in the same place at the end of time. If I don't see you again here, I will see you in a little while, in the place where no shadows fall..."*

***Ambassador Delenn: Babylon 5***



By Judith Nolan









## What's Your Story?

by JessicaRae



The

The Tunnels hummed with life. Long before the first guests from Above would arrive, Winterfest had already begun Below. Children dashed through the passageways with ribbons in hand, their laughter echoing against stone walls. Helpers carried platters heavy with roasted vegetables, plates of cookies, and steaming tureens of soup to the great chamber where the long wooden table stretched nearly the length of the hall. Candles, polished brass holders, and strings of evergreen boughs transformed the place into something almost magical, as though the stars themselves had descended underground.

Catherine Chandler walked slowly at Vincent's side, her fingers wrapped around his arm for support. The familiar hush of the Tunnels comforted her, though tonight her heart felt heavier than she wished it would. Everywhere she looked, she saw joy in preparation, yet a part of her was unready for celebration.

Vincent glanced down at her. "You are quiet, dearest Catherine." His voice, deep and warm, wrapped around her like a blanket. "Are you well?"

She tried to smile. "I was just remembering other holidays... with my father." Her eyes softened, as though seeing the playing out of a memory that hovered in the shadows just beyond the flickering torchlight. "This is the first year without him."

Vincent inclined his head. He had known this shadow still lingered, though she had been strong through the weeks since her father's passing.

"Winterfest is meant to remind us that love binds us all, in life and beyond it. Perhaps tonight's light may help you feel his nearness."

She nodded silently, and they stepped into the great chamber. The sight took her breath away.

Hundreds of candles had already been placed upon the long table, each flame a living testament to someone loved, someone remembered. The chamber walls seemed to glow with their combined warmth and dancing light.

“Oh...” Catherine whispered, her chest tightening. “It’s beautiful.”

Vincent led her to a place at the far end of the table where two chairs waited. He pulled hers out for her, a quiet courtesy that made her smile through her sadness. As they sat down, the bustle of preparation continued to move around them, yet for a moment, it felt as though the chamber belonged only to them and the candles.

Catherine folded her hands, staring into the sea of light. “I used to tease my father about candles.

He’d never let me set them at the table. He said I’d burn the house down. He was probably right.” She laughed softly. “I’d argue that the flame made everything warmer, more alive. And now here they are... hundreds of them.” Her voice caught in her throat. “He would have loved this.”

Vincent’s gaze followed hers across the table. “Each flame holds a memory, Catherine, not only of those who still walk among us, but of those who no longer can. In this way, they join us here at the table, every year, simply because our light brings them alive in our hearts.”

Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears. “It feels like if I reach out, I’ll find him in that light.”

Vincent said nothing at first, lost in thought for a moment. Then, with a gentleness reserved mostly for her, he murmured, “Love does not end, Catherine. A chapter may close, but the story remains within us. Your father’s light burns in you. Every kindness you offer, every truth you live, those are his gifts, alive still, because you choose to walk in their light.”

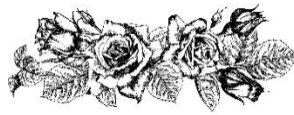
She nodded once. “Thank you, Vincent.”

At that moment, a familiar figure approached. Father, leaning on his cane, his face softened by the candlelight, smiled warmly at the sight of them together. He lowered himself into the chair on Catherine’s other side.

“My dear,” Father said, taking her hand with his own weathered one, “I could not help but overhear. This body may have limitations, but my hearing does not. Dear Catherine, this season is hardest when we miss those we love the most. But Winterfest is a promise that no one we’ve cherished is ever truly gone. These candles are the memory of lives woven together. Your father’s thread is part of that tapestry now. We are pleased to have you with us this year, and I hope that our celebration does not diminish the weight you feel but rather helps to lessen it somewhat.”

Catherine drew in a shaky breath. “But sometimes the grief feels heavier than the light.”

Father’s eyes were kind. “Grief is heavy because love was great. The weight of it is proof of what he gave you. Do not fear it, child. Carry it gently, and in time, it will warm your heart rather than wound it.”



Catherine still sat lost in thought at the far end of the long table, where the perspective made the rows of candles appear like a river of stars. Wax had begun to pearl around the bases, little white collars gathering at the brass holders. Steam rose from a covered tureen somewhere behind them, a humble incense of thyme and onion that made the stone room feel almost like a kitchen at home. She closed her eyes to the scent, surprised by how swiftly tears could come, memories of her father carving a Thanksgiving turkey flashing through her mind’s eye as a story she could see but never touch again.

Vincent noticed. He didn’t speak at once. Instead, he shifted his chair a fraction closer, a gesture so small it might have gone unseen, and folded his hands atop the table as though to show her there would be no haste, no pressure, only presence, waiting for her to feel steady enough to speak.

“When I was young,” Catherine finally said softly, “I used to sneak into my father’s study on Christmas Eve while he was out delivering a box of chocolates to the doorman. He always left the little mantel clock wound too tight and it ticked like a heartbeat from a work of Poe. He kept a single candle there, even though he never lit candles. When I asked him about it,

he said it was his mother's, and that it felt wrong to throw it away." She laughed a little. "It was silly, I suppose. A candle kept for sentiment, never used."

"Perhaps it wasn't silly," Vincent murmured. "Our Helper's candles are a token of welcome and home. Perhaps he felt the same. Everyone wants the promise of belonging."

She thought that over for a moment. "A promise," she echoed. "I suppose that's what I'm missing most. Not the ritual itself, but the promise that we'd always find our way back to each other." She looked down at her hands. "I keep thinking there's one more thing I should have said, one more visit I should have made. It's like... standing in a doorway after you've shut the light off, trying to remember if you left something behind, but knowing you can't open the door again even if you remembered."

Vincent laid a hand over hers. "There is no last word for love. It doesn't end in a sentence; it continues in the life we live because of it."

A group of children rushed past them with a giddy whispering, the soft slap of their shoes scattering across the flagstones. One boy paused, seeing Vincent and Catherine seated so quietly together. He held up a bundle of candles, and his smile was gap-toothed and proud.

"Mr. Vincent?" he asked. "Where should we put the extra ones?"

Vincent rose, smiling kindly at the boy. "Joseph," he said, gentle but formal, the way he addressed children when he wished to honor them as equals, "place them near the center of the arrangement over there, there is a little space left." He glanced to Catherine. "Would you help him choose a place?"

She nodded, grateful for having something to do. Together with Joseph and his sister, they moved a few candleholders, rearranging them so each flame had space to flicker and dance.

Catherine struck a match and touched it to each wick, and each one hissed, then gentled into a steady glow.

They placed the new candles near the center as Vincent had suggested, where the heat drifted up

toward the vaulted stone and made the air shimmer. Catherine stepped back and let her eyes unfocus until the flames became a blur of gold. If she didn't define any one light in her vision, if she simply let them all be, she could imagine a presence in them, her father's laugh somewhere inside the warmth, the weight of his hand on her shoulder when she'd needed it most. Father found them there, Catherine standing quietly, watching the flames dance, Vincent a steady strength standing at her side.

"You've placed these well," he said, mostly to the children. "Well done. I have always liked the moment before the doors open... the hush. It's like being backstage with no audience yet, but the music is already playing."

Catherine smiled softly at his worn face. "Thank you for having me."

"My dear," he answered, and the words carried as much love as any father's could. "How could I not?"

They returned to their chairs, Father settling in with that small sound older men make that is half relief and half reminder that bones are not young forever.

"Catherine," Father said, "Vincent tells me you've been thinking of your father's traditions."

She nodded. "I suppose I've been trying to decide what to do with them," she said. "Which ones to keep, which ones to let rest. It feels like if I alter anything, I'm... disloyal. But if I keep everything the same, I'm just recreating what is now an empty chair."

Father considered this. "When my mother passed," he said after a moment, his voice softened by memory, "I tried to keep every tradition exactly as she had. I cooked the soups she loved. I read the poems aloud she would have recited better than I. I even wore the scarf she'd knitted me, though it was more holes than wool." He smiled wryly at himself. "I thought by preserving everything, I would preserve her."

Catherine thought for a moment. She pictured her father's mantel with the single candle that was never lit. A promise waiting to be kept. Perhaps tonight she could keep it.

“What would you choose?” he asked softly. “If you could carry one thing forward? If there could be one thing about him that you kept alive?”

She took a breath. “Storytelling. He used to tell a story every Christmas Eve, nothing grand, just a memory from the year, or something he learned from a client, or a mistake he made and fixed.”

She smiled. “He’d always say, ‘Don’t let a day go by without a story worth telling, even if it’s a small one.’ It taught me to notice, to pay attention to the life happening around me.”

“Then we will tell stories,” Father said, pleased. “Tonight, at Winterfest, we will begin a new tradition. After the toasts, after the food has been passed around, we’ll invite anyone who wishes to speak a story of gratitude from the year gone by to share it with the table.” He glanced at Vincent. “Will you remind me, should I forget?”

“I will,” Vincent said kindly.

Catherine laughed, a genuine, heartfelt sound. “You’ll have a riot on your hands. The children will never give the floor back once they start.”

“Then God bless the riot,” Father chuckled. “There are worse rebellions than a surfeit of gratitude.”



The doors opened. The cold came in first, on cheeks and coats and woolen hats, and then the warmth of people, the clatter of greetings, the clink of basket handles, the rustle of scarves.

Helpers from Below moved smoothly among them, guiding with lanterns, taking coats, pointing to seats with practiced kindness. It never ceased to astonish Catherine how the two worlds – her world and Vincent’s - could occupy the same room without friction, each warmed by the simple grace of being welcomed.

Mary swept in with an armful of napkins, her hair pinned tight for the occasion, eyes dancing when she saw Catherine. “There you are, dear,” she said, bending to kiss Catherine’s temple with maternal love. “I’ve kept a

place for you near the center if you change your mind, but stay here at the end where you feel the most at peace, if you like.”

“Here,” Catherine said, glancing at Vincent, “is perfect.”

Mouse darted by, dramatically dusted in flour, calling over his shoulder, “William says that bread almost ready! Don’t touch the oven, it’s hot – very hot! Learned that lesson.” His admonition trailed after him as he vanished again toward the Great Hall gates.

William also emerged from the busy entrance, looking slightly frazzled. “Roast turkey to table in five!” he thundered in Father’s direction, then caught sight of Catherine and his face softened.

“Good you’re here,” he said, which in William’s dialect meant ‘I’m glad you’re safe and among family.’

Music crept in from somewhere, tentative at first, and then grew into a simple melody everyone below seemed to know by heart. It was not a hymn, nor a carol, but something older, a Tunnel tune that sounded like water moving under ice, hopeful and patient.

Vincent lifted one of the long matches from a small wooden box set near the head of the table.

Father noticed and nodded.

“We’ll light them together,” Father said. “As always.”

Catherine had seen the ritual before, but never with the particular ache and tenderness of this year.

“Friends,” Father began, warmth and scholarship braided into the timbre, “we gather once more to defy the cold and the dark, and to remember the kindnesses that have sustained us. We light these candles for those we love, those present and those absent, those we hold and those we can only hold in our hearts.” He looked to Catherine, including her in the circle more closely than words alone could. “We light them to say: love remains.”

He gestured, and Vincent struck the match. He touched it to the first wick, and Father, with his own match, took flame from Vincent’s. They passed the light down the table, person to person, as Above and Below mingled

hands to share the fire. Catherine received it from Joseph, and tipped the flame to her candle, in her mind lighting it for her father.

The room filled with the soft rustle of igniting wicks. Shadows thinned, swept back to the walls by the gathering luminance. The melody resumed, richer now, embroidered with harmonies as others joined.

When all the candles were lit, Father raised his hands, palms outward. "Let us feast," he declared, "on food and friendship. Let us tell the truth of the year and the hope of the year to come."

They sat. The room shifted to the choreography of serving, ladles dipping, plates passing, bread torn and blessed by a dozen different hands.

Catherine found herself laughing at some small catastrophe, Mouse insisting that Arthur would have been as good as gold if allowed to attend, and William daring him to try that one time and he would find out how racoon soup would taste.

Between courses, Father tapped his spoon gently against a glass. "Before we continue," he said, "we'll try something new tonight. A tradition borrowed and made our own. If you have a story of gratitude from this year, a lesson learned, a mercy given or received, share it. A few sentences will do. We will all listen."

A murmur, a ripple of surprise and approval, moved around the table. The first to stand was Mary, who cleared her throat and then confessed that she had learned to ask for help with the laundry and the sky had not fallen as a result. Laughter rose and fell.

Then Joseph's sister stood shyly and said she was grateful her cat had learned to come when called (most of the time), and that the cat had forgiven her for cutting its whiskers by mistake, a confession that first prompted gasps of surprise and then laughter.

A man from Above, one of the Helpers Catherine had seen at concerts and clinic days, spoke of a grandson finally home from a long hospital stay, and the way the boy laughed in his sleep now, instead of crying. A woman from Below told how she had mended a coat that was older than Mouse and felt as proud as if she had stitched the world back together.



Catherine listened, feeling the grief in her chest loosen with each offering. When the lull came, as it eventually does, Vincent turned his head a little, not enough to hurry her, only enough to let her know that if she wished to speak, they would listen. Bravely, Catherine stood. The movement drew immediate attention, but the warmth of those faces turning toward her meant she did not feel on display so much as she felt received by them.

"I'm grateful," she said, surprised her voice didn't break, although she felt shaky, "for a lesson my father gave me, though I didn't know it was a lesson until this year. He kept a candle on his mantel and never lit it. He said it was his mother's, and he didn't have the heart to throw it away.

I used to think that was a very un-festive way to treat a candle. Tonight, I lit one for him." She glanced down the table at the clustered flames. "I think I finally understand. He wasn't saving the candle. He was saving a memory." She looked at Vincent, at Father, at Mary, at the children who were doing their best to be still and failing adorably. "Thank you for helping me honor that memory."

The room was silent for a moment. Father's eyes were glistening with unshed tears in the candlelight. Mary's were not merely glistening; she dabbed them shamelessly. William lifted his glass in a wordless salute.

Catherine sat, the trembling in her knees fading to a humming steadiness.

Vincent leaned close enough that their shoulders touched again.

"That was beautiful," he said.

"It was true," she answered.

Later, when only crumbs were left, and when the musicians had shifted to a tune that invited the group to dance, and when children had drifted to sleep on the piles of coats like kittens finding their nests, Catherine and Vincent slipped away to a quiet corner of the hall.

"Do you ever worry," she asked, "that one day the light will not be enough? That there will be too much darkness to push back?"

"I used to," he said. "When I was young, I thought the darkness was a thing you fought like a beast. With teeth. With claws." He turned to her, and the

gentleness in his expression made her heart flutter “Now I know you fight it with other things. With bread shared. With a story told. With a chair kept for someone who couldn't come. With a candle lit for a father.”

She slipped her hand into his. “Then we'll keep lighting them.”

“We will,” he promised. “Walk with me?” he tilted his head toward the archway that led to a quieter corridor.

“Just for a minute,” she said, knowing those at Winterfest would not miss them and would welcome them back when they returned.

They moved together beneath the arch, the murmur of the party behind them and the laughing sounds softened. Here, the candles were set farther apart, and they walked in silence.

“I thought I would feel... lonelier,” she admitted. “Leaving the crowd. But I don't.”

Vincent's mouth curved in that almost-smile of his, a warmth that began in his eyes. “You carry them with you. The stories, the laughter. Your father.”

She nodded, and for one moment the ache and the solace wound so tightly she could not tell which was which. She did not need to. She leaned against the stone with her shoulder, closed her eyes, and listened to the music of the room they had left, a music made of the rise and fall of voices.

Somewhere in it, she imagined, a clock ticked like a heartbeat, not winding too tight this time, just right.

When they returned a few minutes later, they found Father holding court with three of the youngest, demonstrating how to tell a story with one's hands as well as one's voice. He saw Catherine and beckoned her closer, stage-directing with his cane.

“Catherine,” he said, “tell them how your father finished his stories. Did he have a line? A closing statement?”

She smiled, surprised by the question. “He did, he always said, ‘And that's enough of me. What's your story?’”

Father's eyes glinted. “Perfect. We shall adopt it.” He spread his hands out dramatically to finish his lesson, to the children, to the room, to Winterfest itself. “That's enough of me. What's your story?”

Catherine felt the words in her head and thought of the years to come, the Winterfests she would attend, the seasons that would pass. Some years the candles would be for persons still present, others for names spoken through tears. And always, the question would remain like a sturdy bridge across the changes: What's your story?

She reached for Vincent's hand again as William delivered a warm platter of apple and pumpkin pies and Mouse declared himself chief cutter of slices, which caused pandemonium until Mary stepped in and declared he should be the deliverer of slices instead.

The candles burned on. Above the city, a thousand windows shone for their own reasons, whether they were for parties, for sleepless nights, for bedside vigils of sick children, or for lovers sharing their first nights together.

Below, the glow embodied all of these things, all wrapped up in the joy of belonging. And love, stubborn and resilient, kept on shining, as it always had, even when one chapter closed and the next was not yet fully written.

"Happy Winterfest," she said.

"Happy Winterfest," Vincent answered.

And in memory, Charles Chandler sat watching them dance, lifting his glass in a toast beyond the veil of time. Next to him stood a lit candle, flickering warmly in the shadows of whatever comes next.



[\\*Return to Table of Contents](#)



---

# Sonnet of A Lifetime

---



*by JessicaRae*



## *I. First Meeting*

*A wounded night, her blood upon the stone,  
He bore her gently to his secret keep.  
The world above she thought she faced alone,  
Yet in his care, pain gave way to sleep.*

*She saw not a beast, but kindness in his eyes,  
A gaze that spoke of mercy, pure and true.  
She feared his form, but love cannot disguise,  
The noble soul that shone brightly through.*

*Thus fate conspired, the moment sparks were sown,  
Two broken hearts made whole by love unknown.*

## **II. Longing**

*Between the worlds, their pathways should not meet,*

*Her life in daylight, his in endless night.*

*Yet every glance, each whispered word was sweet,*

*Their bond a flame the dark could not put out.*

*He dreamed of touch but dared not cross the line,*

*For fear his presence doomed the love they made.*

*She longed to tell the world that he was mine,*

*But silence was the vow that both obeyed.*

*So longing lived, a star across the skies,*

*Unbroken love within their secret sighs.*

## **III. Devotion**

*Through peril's fire, through trials fierce and vast,*

*She stood She stood beside him, fearless, unafraid.*

*No cruelest storm, no shadow of the past,*

*Could sever what joy their sacrifice had made.*

*He, guardian fierce, with strength of lion's roar,*

*Would lay down life to shield her from despair.*

*And she, with tender grace, would give him more,*

*The gift of hope, of trust, of love laid bare.*

*No walls nor worlds could bid their hearts depart,*

*For heaven bound them with a single heart.*

#### **IV. Eternal Bond**

Though destiny may bend with cruel hand,  
And time may scatter dust upon the years,  
Their love remains, unshaken as the land,  
A melody that stills the deepest fears.

For beauty dwells not only in the face,  
Nor beast in form, but in the soul's embrace.  
Together, through the dark, they dared to prove,  
The truest beast is hate, the truest beauty, is love.  
And so their tale, though whispered, shall repeat,  
Two hearts as one, forever, the twain shall be.







By Barbara Anderson









# When Mouse Arrived: Journal Entries

*by JessicaRae*



## Mouse's Journal



Write in book. Journal. Good thing. Good for Mouse. Helps keep thoughts inside, not run wild like Arthur in pantry.

Long ago, Mouse not belong. Above world too loud. Too many rules. People say, "Quiet down. Stop touching." Mouse always touching, building, fixing, breaking. Couldn't stop. Hands always move. Brain always race. People not understand. Mouse not fit.

Then tunnels. Found by accident. Got lost. Cold, hungry. Thought maybe die down here. But Vincent find. Big, strong, kind. Took Mouse to Father. Father frown, but not angry. Just thinking. Father always thinking. Asked questions. Mouse not know how to answer. Too many words. Mouse not good with words. But Father still let Mouse stay. Said, "Give him chance."

Everyone give chance. Strange. Mouse loud. Mouse break things. Blow up things sometimes. Boom! Smoke everywhere. William yell. Pascal grumble. Winslow shake head. But... nobody push Mouse away. Nobody say "Go back Above." Instead, they laugh. Sometimes yell, but still love. Still let Mouse eat supper. Still let Mouse sleep safe.

Mouse still wonder why. Why they keep Mouse when so much trouble? Maybe because tunnels for all who don't fit Above. Maybe because love bigger here. Bigger than mistakes.

Mouse grateful. Mouse try to help. Fix pipes. Build machines. Make life easier. Sometimes not work. Sometimes works too well! But always try. Because family worth it. Because tunnels home.

Mouse happy. Mouse stay.

- Mouse

## **Vincent's Journal**

Tonight, I welcomed another wanderer into our world. His name is Mouse. I found him deep within the forgotten tunnels, huddled in the shadows like a wounded creature seeking a place to hide. His eyes darted, restless, as though accustomed to suspicion and rejection. His words tumbled out in fragments, broken and hurried, yet in those fractured syllables I heard a heart desperate for belonging.

Mouse is unlike any I have known. His mind races ahead of itself, filled with invention, with sparks of genius that burst forth without restraint. His hands are quick, forever shaping, repairing, dismantling. It is clear he has been misunderstood Above. Those who cannot see beyond the surface might call him troublesome, perhaps even dangerous. But I see in him what Father saw in me once: not a burden, but a possibility.

The others are wary, Father most of all. He weighs the risks, measures the costs. Yet even in Father's cautious gaze, I sensed compassion rising, the recognition that Mouse, too, is a child of loneliness, yearning for the sanctuary that only our community can provide.

I know the days ahead will not be without challenge. Mouse will test our patience, and perhaps even our safety, with his unbridled curiosity. But I believe he will also bring gifts, new ideas, unexpected joys, and a spirit untainted by cynicism.

As I guided him through the tunnels tonight, I watched wonder awaken in his eyes. For the first time, perhaps, he felt accepted, not for who others thought he should be, but for who he is. That is the gift of this place. The gift we have all received.

In his awkwardness, I see innocence. In his mischief, I hear laughter yet to come. And in his presence, I am reminded once more why we open our doors to those who wander lost in the dark: because all of us, once, were wanderers.

—Vincent

## **Father's Journal**

This evening Vincent brought to me a young man who calls himself Mouse.

At first sight, he is disheveled, unkempt, his words spilling out in half-phrases and incomplete

thoughts. His manner is erratic, his attention leaping from one idea to the next with the quickness of a sparrow darting through branches. He is... unusual.

My instinct was one of concern. We have worked so hard to preserve the safety and harmony of our community. Every newcomer carries with them the possibility of disruption. And Mouse, by his very nature, seems destined to disrupt. He cannot sit still, cannot hold silence. He mutters, fiddles, pulls apart anything that can be disassembled. In truth, he reminds me of a child with too much energy, and too few boundaries.

Yet even as I weighed these misgivings, I could not ignore the truth in Vincent's eyes as he pleaded for compassion. Vincent, more than any of us, understands what it means to be judged swiftly by appearances, to be denied the chance to prove one's worth. If he sees something in this young man, some spark that deserves nurture rather than rejection, I cannot turn him away.

I asked myself: what does Mouse seek? Not wealth. Not power. He seeks belonging. A place where his restless mind is not an enemy, but perhaps, if guided, a gift.

Still, I confess my worry. His inventions may be dangerous. His curiosity may strain our patience. But our purpose here, in these tunnels, has never been to create perfection. It has always been to offer refuge. And refuge, by its very nature, requires risk.

So I have agreed that Mouse may remain. I will watch him closely, as will we all. But tonight, as I observed him marveling at the warmth of our

dining chamber, wide-eyed at the sight of so many faces not turned against him, I felt a stirring of something I could not deny: hope.

Perhaps Mouse will trouble us. Perhaps he will astonish us. More likely, both. But tonight, he has found shelter. And that, above all, is what we are here to give.

—Father





---

# The Bandit of Halloween

*by JessicaRae*

---



**H**alloween Below was never quite like the celebrations Above. There were no city sidewalks lined with jack-o'-lanterns or children ringing strangers' doorbells. Instead, the tunnels made the holiday their own. Helpers sent bags of candy and baskets of apples. Children donned costumes cobbled together from scraps of fabric, bits of ribbon, and William's occasional creative contributions of food dye or flour. The great chamber hosted a little parade, and afterward there was storytelling and sweets.





For most of the children, choosing a costume was an exciting struggle. This year, little Ellie insisted on being a princess, and Kipper had decided to become a knight (mostly because Ellie needed a knight). Samantha was planning to wear wings that Mary had sewn from old netting and silver thread.

But Mouse had other ideas.



“Mouse be a raccoon,” he announced at breakfast one week before Halloween. “Arthur and Mouse match. Nobody else have raccoon. It’s fine! It’s more than fine.”

Arthur, his pet raccoon, chittered and bared his teeth as if in hearty agreement.

Mary arched her brows. “A raccoon? That’s... well, Mouse, I suppose it’s not out of character.”

“Not out of character at all,” William grumbled, shoving a tray of biscuits into the oven. “If the tunnels had a patron animal, I’d put my money on a raccoon. Always underfoot, always getting into trouble, and never where you expect them to be.”

Mouse beamed, taking it as the highest compliment.

And so, preparations began.



Mary had found a gray shirt in the storage trunks and some scraps of black cloth for patches. Catherine, while visiting that evening, offered to help stitch the patches into something resembling a raccoon’s ringed tail. Mouse wriggled with excitement as she worked, holding still only when Vincent appeared nearby and said in his quiet way, “Even raccoons as well as knights must keep still during their armor fitting.”

“Armor?” Mouse perked up. “Raccoons have armor?”

Vincent's golden eyes gleamed. "That would be their wit, Mouse. Armor of cleverness."

"Okay, good. Okay, fine!" Mouse cheered, accidentally pulling the tail out of Catherine's hand. Sheepishly he returned to his perch atop the small footstool, and she glanced at Vincent, shaking her head in mock annoyance.

By the day of Halloween, all that remained was the face paint. Mouse had begged for it. "A raccoon without the mask isn't a raccoon at all!" And so Catherine had volunteered to paint his face before the festivities.

Arthur, of course, was not to be left out.



The kitchen was warm with William's preparations for the evening feast—roasted vegetables, pumpkin pies, and steaming cider. In the corner, Mouse sat proudly on a stool, Catherine leaning close with her palette of paints. She carefully brushed black circles around his eyes, then shaded his nose to a small dark triangle.

"Perfect," she said, smiling. "You really will look like Arthur's twin."

Vincent stood nearby, watching with that faintly amused patience he reserved for Catherine's projects. "I suspect," he said, "that Arthur may not agree to be the twin."

As if summoned by his name, Arthur scampered onto the counter. His beady eyes locked on the open paint tray.

"Arthur..." Vincent warned, his voice rumbling low.

But Arthur was too quick. With one nimble leap, he planted both paws in the paint, then darted across the counter, leaving a trail of black smudges like a bandit's calling card.

"Arthur! No!" Mouse shrieked, but with laughter, not alarm.

The raccoon skittered down the counter leg and across the floor, leaving painted paw prints everywhere he touched. He bolted toward the pantry, then doubled back toward the sink, streaks of color following him.

“Oh no,” Catherine groaned, grabbing a rag too late.



That was when William stormed in. He froze in the doorway, his apron already dusted with flour, and took in the scene: Mouse half-painted, Catherine clutching a dripping brush, Vincent towering uselessly in the background, and a raccoon gleefully redecorating his kitchen in shades of black and green.

“In my kitchen?” William roared. “Of all the fool things! Face paints and raccoons? Have you lost your minds?”

Mouse nearly fell off the stool from laughing. “Arthur’s helping! He’s painting too!”



William planted his fists on his hips. “He’s painting my floor! That raccoon’s got less sense than you do, Mouse, and that’s saying something!”

Catherine bit her lip to keep from smiling. “We’ll clean it up, William. I promise.”

Vincent inclined his head solemnly. “We... take full responsibility.”

“Out!” William bellowed, though the corners of his mouth twitched. “Out of my kitchen, before I throw the whole lot of you into the soup pot. And take that painted rodent with you!”

Still laughing, Mouse hopped off the stool. Vincent shepherded him toward the door, Catherine following with the paint tray clutched like contraband.

“Sorry, William!” she called. “Really, we’ll make it right after the party!”

“You’ll be scrubbing until Christmas!” William retorted, but his voice was all bluster and no bite.



When the door swung shut, the kitchen fell into blessed silence. William sighed, shaking his head at the rainbow of paw prints across the counter and floor.

Then he noticed Arthur.

The raccoon had not left with his humans. He crouched in the corner, paint still smeared on his paws, his little eyes bright and curious.

William narrowed his eyes. “Still here, are you? Little bandit.”

Arthur tilted his head, unrepentant.

William muttered under his breath as he reached for a jar on the shelf. “Cause chaos, nearly ruin my kitchen, and now you stare at me like I owe you something.”

He pulled out a cookie, set it on the counter, and pointed at the raccoon. “Take it and go. And don’t tell a soul I gave you this, you hear?”

Arthur scrambled up, snatched the cookie, and chittered gleefully as he stuffed it into his paws.

William wagged a finger at him. “If anyone asks, you got that from raiding the pantry. Not from me. Understood?”

Arthur munched noisily, clearly making no such promise, and William chuckled despite himself.



By evening, the chaos had been forgotten. The great chamber glowed with lanterns carved from gourds and pumpkins sent down by Helpers. Children lined up for the Halloween parade, their costumes mismatched but proud: knights and princesses, clowns and pirates, and one small ghost who kept tripping over his sheet.



Mouse stood at the front, his patched gray shirt, striped tail, and painted face making him look almost respectable - at least until Arthur clambered onto his shoulder, still bearing faint streaks of color from the kitchen escapade.

“See?” Mouse proclaimed to anyone within earshot. “Perfect raccoon. Two raccoons! Best costume ever!”

The children cheered, and even Father, though shaking his head, couldn’t hide a smile. “Well, Mouse, it certainly is... original.”

Vincent watched Catherine laugh with the children, her eyes bright as she adjusted Samantha’s wings. He felt that familiar warmth in his chest, the kind that came from seeing her light the world Below with her presence.

As the parade began, with music and clapping hands, Mouse strutted proudly at the front, Arthur perched like a crown. The children followed, laughing and dancing, their shadows flickering across the stone walls.

And though William grumbled about paw prints for the rest of the night, he never mentioned the cookie.



Later, after the sweets had been eaten and the stories told, Catherine and Vincent lingered by the lanterns.

“It was a mess,” she admitted, thinking of the paint disaster.





---

# Belonging

## Classic Round Robin 2025

---



### Chapter 1

by JessicaRae

The soft flicker of candlelight danced across the pages of *Great Expectations* as Vincent's deep voice brought Dickens' words to life. Catherine sat nestled in a blanket beside him on her apartment balcony, the distant hum of New York traffic just a whisper below. The night air was crisp but comforting, and above them, stars twinkled through the city's haze.

Vincent turned the page slowly, savoring the silence between chapters. Catherine leaned her head on his shoulder, her eyes soft.

"I always liked Pip," she murmured, tucking her head deeper into his cloak. "All that hope, even when everything was uncertain."

Vincent closed the book gently, resting it on his knee. "Uncertainty is a part of all our stories, so many chapters unknown, so many things unsaid and un hoped."

"Yes," she agreed, her voice a whisper now. "But hope makes the uncertainty bearable, if one can hold onto it."

He grumbled deep in his throat, an agreement to her words, although no response actually came from his lips. They sat together, wrapped in shared warmth and something deeper, something tender and quietly sacred. For a long moment, neither spoke.

Then Vincent stirred. "There is a tunnel I haven't walked in many years. Something has been bothering me. A scent, a feeling... It's faint, but I need to see it for myself."

“How long has it been bothering you?”

“Several weeks. I have been so busy with the new pipe installations in the Pipe Chamber that I have not had the time to investigate. Tonight, I feel uneasy. That uncertainty you speak of is weighing heavily on me, and I am troubled in my heart.”

Catherine nodded, turning her head to look up into his eyes, a knowing expression on her kind face. “Do you want to go now?”

“It may not be safe.”

“For you? Or for me?”

“For you.”

“Vincent, out of the question. Where you go, I go.”



They traveled through the tunnels below Catherine’s apartment building into the tangled web of pathways Below. As they descended into the world below, their path was quickly traversed using Vincent’s memory and instinct. The Tunnels shifted subtly the deeper they went, changing from the well-maintained paths of the Tunnels to forgotten arteries that had been abandoned long before Catherine ever knew such a world existed.

Walls crumbled, dampness clung to the stone, and ancient graffiti bled through layers of grime.

Eventually, they came to a sealed iron gate twisted half-open with rust. Vincent ducked through it easily, his cloak brushing the walls. Catherine followed, careful to avoid jagged metal.

"No one's come this way in years," Vincent said, his voice low, eyes scanning every shadow. “But I can see scrapes here,” he pointed, “that show recent travel, by someone light-footed, and small.”

Then, around the next bend, they saw it - a derailed subway car, wedged sideways into the tunnel wall. Its metal shell was pitted and scarred with

time; its windows smeared with decades of dirt. The car had clearly crashed and had been forgotten, buried in bureaucratic neglect and urban decay.

But it wasn't empty.

A narrow path had been cleared to the door. Old boards were laid like steppingstones across the floor, and inside, candle stubs sat melted on ledges of wood sloppily nailed to the framing inside. A tattered rug lay across the steel floor as a sort of welcome mat. Blankets, carefully folded, rested in a corner atop worn foam padding that used to be inside the seats. A small pile of books leaned against a wall, spines cracked, and weather-worn. A small wooden box in the corner held an assortment of marbles, rocks, and colored bits of glass.

Vincent crouched near a makeshift table made from a wooden crate. Sitting on top of the rough surface was an open can, half full of beans with a bent metal spoon still resting inside. Crayon drawings were taped to the walls - smiling stick figures, suns with beams, a big creature with claws but friendly eyes. The other side of the room held more adult things: a couple coats, shirts, a flashlight that was missing its bulb, a map of the New York subway, and a red pen.

Catherine's hands trembled slightly as she rested them on Vincent's arm. "There were children down here."

Vincent touched one of the drawings reverently. "And they were here recently."

Beneath one of the blankets, Catherine found a small stuffed rabbit with one ear barely hanging on. She held it gently, the way one might hold a fragile baby. Vincent nodded stiffly at the implication of the child it represented and stepped further into the car. Catherine laid the rabbit back where she had found it and stayed one step behind him, trying to send her calming presence through the Bond. She could feel the weight of the discovery looming over them, and she could feel how torn Vincent was on how to react. "There appears to be at least one adult." She picked up a small basket that sat in the far corner, with sewing thread and a half-finished

cross-stitch project inside. “Hopefully their mother. No sign of a man. They must be hiding. Squatting. Maybe runaways?”

Vincent nodded slowly. "Or refugees from Above, afraid of being found."

They carefully left the car, the enormity of its discovery settling on their shoulders like the weight of the earth. “We have to tell Father,” Catherine said, studying Vincent with concern.

“Tonight,” Vincent agreed, bowing his cloaked head. “This cannot wait.”



The air in the council chamber was thick with tension.

Vincent stood with Catherine beside him, recounting every detail of what they found. Father sat in his wooden chair, fingers steeped beneath his chin, eyes unfocused and unreadable. Mary stood behind him, her brow creased with worry, while Pascal, William, and others filled the seats around the table.

When Vincent finished speaking, silence lingered for a long moment.

Finally, Father broke it. “Children... living alone... in an abandoned subway car. What is the world coming to?”

“It looked like they made it into a little home,” Catherine said quietly. “Not just a shelter. They’ve been there for a while. Long enough to bring books, toys, even artwork. But they were gone when we arrived. We don’t know where they are now. It looks like maybe their mother is there too, or at least a woman old enough to be looking after them.”

Pascal shook his head. “It’s too dangerous down there. That tunnel’s unstable. If they’re hiding there, they could be trapped if something goes wrong. Water has been seeping in for decades in those tunnels, that’s why we had them blocked off.”

“And what if they come further down?” William grunted nervously. “What if they find *us*?”

A chorus of murmurs erupted. The possibility of exposure was always their greatest fear.

“We have children here, too,” Mary said, her voice trembling. “Who had no home and no one to love them. These new little ones - we don’t know who they are, what they want... but they are still children.”

Vincent thought of the drawing, the creature with claws and kind eyes.

“They drew *me*. I think... I think they saw me. And they weren’t afraid. I – I don’t know when that could have been, but somehow, they know of me, at least.”

That quieted the room.

Father stood, leaning on his cane. “Then we cannot treat them as enemies, nor friends, until we know all the details. But neither can we ignore the risk. I will send a scouting party tomorrow morning. We must know more before we act and be prepared for whatever the outcome. Catherine, I trust that if we need you, a place of shelter could be provided Above if we choose not to accept them here Below?”

Catherine looked around the room at faces worn with worry, eyes darting to one another. She recognized the signs of fear, both protective and paralyzing.

“They need help,” she said softly. “Whoever they are, they’ve already been through enough to end up in a place like that. If Below cannot offer them the solace they need, I will do everything in my power to make sure they are cared for and given every chance to succeed.”

Vincent reached for her hand. “And if they are watching us now, we must show them compassion.”

Father nodded reluctantly. “Then we proceed, with caution and care. But we do not turn our backs. Not unless they give us a reason to.”

The meeting adjourned, but the chamber did not empty quickly. Whispers followed the leaving council members like shadows.



Back in Vincent's chamber, he lit a candle and sat beside Catherine.

"I fear this will change everything," he said quietly.

"It might," she answered, "but maybe that's not such a bad thing."

He looked down at her, the golden light painting her gentle face with warmth. "The world Above is creeping ever closer. Our sanctuary grows smaller."

"But your heart," she whispered, laying a hand on his cloak, "remains wide enough for them all."

Vincent's eyes glistened as his mind turned back to the crayon drawing once more. The creature in the picture was smiling.

He didn't think anyone had ever seen him smile.



## **Chapter 2**

*by Barbara Anderson*

"What are you thinking, Vincent?" Catherine asked softly, unable to discern his expression.

His piercing blue eyes searched hers until she felt as if he was looking into the deepest part of her soul.

"What is it?" she whispered in earnest, unable to tear her eyes from his gaze.

"Have *you* ever seen me smile?" he finally asked, knowing she would not lie to him.

Catherine cocked her head to one side, clearly taken aback by his question.

"Of course, I have. I love your soft laugh and the way your eyes sparkle when you're tickled by something the children do or say. I'm surprised you



didn't know that." Although she inwardly acknowledged that he hadn't smiled very much of late.

"The child's drawing of me in the subway car..." he answered. "I was smiling... It looked as if I was almost..." he paused. '*Human*' was the word that nearly escaped his lips, but he couldn't bring himself to say it. "I suppose I have never seen myself in *that* way. I see myself as more of a..." He paused again, not for a loss of words, but reluctant to say them aloud. He turned away from her with a distant, melancholy expression.

Catherine felt his reticence and his raw pain. Reaching for him, she turned his face to hers again and finished the sentence for him. "You see yourself as more of a... fearsome monster?" she suggested gently.

He inhaled loudly as if she had thrown ice water in his face. It shocked him to hear the words uttered out loud, especially from her lips.

A vision of the terrible night he'd savaged the outsiders flashed in his mind. The rage he had felt when his loved ones were threatened, *when Catherine was threatened*, still burned through him whenever the memory of that night came to mind. Although he never spoke of it, the memory still haunted not only his dreams but many of his waking moments.

This time, it was Vincent who couldn't tear himself from *her* gaze. The last thing he wanted was for Catherine to see the deepest part of his soul and the darkness that lurked there, when all he could see in her eyes was her love and her complete trust in him. A trust he felt he didn't deserve but knew he couldn't bear to live without.

The silence between them was charged with emotion.

Catherine could see the fear and pain in his eyes. *He is rarely this unguarded*, she noted. "**You are not** the monster you think you are," she insisted, with her hand still touching his face.

Leaning into her gentle touch, he closed his eyes against her assertion. *How can she believe that?* he wondered, with clenched fists. *When she has seen what I can do... what I **have** done. And yet... her faith in me never wavers.*

A tear slipped unhindered down his cheek. How desperately he wanted to believe her words.

“The children know it too,” she continued in earnest. “They look up to you, Vincent. *They love you,*” she said even more forcefully. “You’re their hero.”

Finally wrenching himself away from her hold over him, Vincent stood and began pacing the room.

Catherine watched him in silence. She had felt a deepening depression and unrest in him ever since the incident with the outsiders, not to mention other terrible things that had happened since then.

*He disappears more often these days, she realized, to his unnamed river deep beneath the city. There is a pain so deep within him that I cannot reach, that I cannot soothe.*

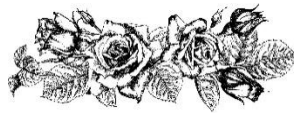
His long absences had given her plenty of time for self-reflection. *Am I the cause?* she’d begun to wonder. *Have I been reckless? Have I put myself in harm’s way, knowing that Vincent would come to rescue me?*

The prospect made her deeply ashamed. And yet, she couldn’t count the number of times she would have been killed or seriously injured if not for his intervention. Nevertheless, she now lived with a fear that he would eventually descend to that unnamed river and never return to her.

“Vincent... I—” she began.

“It is late, Catherine,” he said, interrupting her. “I will see you home.” He left no room for protest. Donning his cloak, he headed for the chamber exit.

Catherine followed him quietly.



As they walked in silence, Catherine desperately wished to discuss something... *anything*, to breach the silence. But she could feel the wall Vincent had placed between them. It was as impenetrable as the Manhattan Schist and Fordham Gneiss that formed the tunnel walls surrounding them on all sides.

As they neared the brick walls of the upper tunnels, Catherine stopped.

Vincent was so lost in his own thoughts that he didn't even notice he was now walking alone. He finally stopped and looked around, confused.

"Catherine? He turned to discover her standing several yards behind him.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm not going home, Vincent."

As Vincent approached her, he could feel her stubborn determination.

"What do you want to do then? I certainly can't leave you here."

"We need to go back... to the subway car."

Vincent was even more confused. "Why? The council has already decided to send scouts there tomorrow."

"NO!" Catherine shook her head vigorously. "NO, Vincent... The scouts will only frighten them."

"It isn't safe, Catherine. I cannot allow you to put yourself—"

"You can't allow me?" she parroted sarcastically. "Fine then... take me home. As soon as you leave, I will come back down and go there on my own," she declared defiantly.

"You will get lost, Catherine..." he replied. "You must know that."

"Maybe I will, and maybe I won't," she said stubbornly. "*I don't care*. I'll wander around until I find them."

They stood facing each other in mutually headstrong silence.

It was Vincent who finally gave in. Sighing heavily, he asked, "Why are you so determined to do this tonight when the scouts are planning to go there in the morning?"

"You were in that council meeting, Vincent. I know I'm not as empathic as you are... but even I could feel the tension in that room... I could feel their fear. The scouts are going there to find them and drive them out."

"If that is what needs to be done. That is what we do when—"

“NO!” Catherine said emphatically, stamping her foot on the ground. “That is NOT what you do!” she insisted. “At least... that’s not what you used to do.”

Vincent stopped short, surprised by Catherine’s passion. “What do you mean?”

“You used to assess the situation. You used to approach intruders with compassion and try to... to consider what their needs were. You used to do what you could to help them.”

“That *is still* what we do,” he insisted.

“No, it isn’t... not anymore.” She shook her head sadly. “When was the last time the council permitted any newcomers Below?”

“We are merely being cautious, Catherine,” he replied, trying to make her understand.

Catherine’s face showed her skepticism clearly. “It isn’t *just* caution,” she countered. “I know I don’t live down here, but even I can see that things are different now... ever since... since what happened with... *the outsiders*.”

Vincent looked as if she had slapped him across the face. No one had spoken of the outsiders since that horrible night. It was as if every Tunnel denizen had independently decided to just pretend it had never happened. The mere mention of it caused him great distress.

“That’s over and done with, Catherine,” he insisted. “They are dead. It has *nothing* to do with this situation.”

“It has ***everything*** to do with this situation! Can’t you see that?” she pleaded.

She stopped arguing momentarily to give Vincent a chance to consider her words. He didn’t reply, but she could see the question in his eyes, urging her to continue.

“You’re right, Vincent...” she said softly. “They ***are*** dead... but it *isn’t* over. They are *not* gone, and you know it! The terror they brought down here... it still lurks in all the corners and shadows of this place. It still lingers in your heart and everyone else’s.”

He stepped back from her, not wanting to hear what she was saying.

“They are haunting these tunnels, Vincent. *You know it...* and I know it! They are haunting everyone who lives here. *They are even haunting you*, aren’t they? You carry them with you wherever you go... even to your unnamed river.”

Catherine’s heart swelled with compassion as she watched the color drain from his face.

Vincent backed farther away from her until his back was against the hard rock wall. He was shocked to the core to realize that she knew.

*I’ve tried so hard to keep it from her.*

Then drained of all energy, he slid down to the floor and dropped his head to rest on his knees.

She sat across from him, waiting for him to regain his composure.

At length, he raised his head and rested it against the wall, all the while feeling Catherine’s love for him as she watched him in silence.

“How did you know?” he asked softly.

“I can see the fear in the children’s eyes. I can hear it in Mary’s voice... and others. Those terrible people might be dead, Vincent, but they have robbed you all of something very precious... they robbed you of your sense of safety and security... and your ability to trust.”

“Yes.” Vincent nodded. “Those things have not returned.”

“That night... when you sent me away, I... I’ve never felt so alone. I was afraid... that you might never come back to me... or allow me back into your life.”

Vincent closed his eyes against the vision of her walking away from him. Yes, he recalled. *That was my intention... to set you free*, he thought to himself. The horror of that night and the terrible emptiness in his soul when she was gone burned through him. *But I am too weak*, he admitted to himself. *...too weak to set you free, my love. The thought of living without you is too painful to bear.*

“I’m so grateful that you returned to me, Vincent,” she said, her voice full of love. “But you go to your river more and more these days. And even when we’re together, I... I can feel a distance between us.”

Unwilling to speak of it any longer, Vincent steered the conversation to the children. “Some of the children are still having nightmares. We have doubled... even tripled our sentries. We’ve changed many of the ways and sealed the lesser-used entrances. But people are...”

“People are still frightened,” she said.

“Yes... they are,” he whispered. “And now... even despite all our efforts...” His voice trailed off.

“Somehow someone has still found a way in,” she said, finishing his sentence.

“Yes,” he said regretfully.

“Then we must go there and find out why they are here... and how they found their way in without being detected.”

“I cannot let you put yourself in danger,” he insisted.

“It’s *my* choice, Vincent, *not yours*,” she reminded him. “The only question is: Am I going there alone, or are you coming with me?”

“Why must you be so stubborn?” he asked, knowing he was beaten.

“This *isn’t* like before. It isn’t like those outsiders.”

“How can you know that?”

“You saw their campsite. It’s neat and tidy. The neatly stacked books, the pile of folded blankets, the makeshift table... even the drawings on the wall. They are not like the outsiders. They are trying to make a comfortable home... And there are children there.”

He was silent as he considered her words. It was Catherine who finally spoke. “Tell me, what made you suspect someone was there?”

Feeling that they were on safer ground, he answered her questions. “A few weeks ago, I was just wandering through the tunnels... lost in my own thoughts... when I thought I heard children laughing. It was faint and

distant... carried on the air. I dismissed it because it was too late for any of the children to be wandering about. And then I thought I smelled something.”

“You smelled something? What was it?”

Vincent cocked his head to one side as if trying to accurately recall something important. “I smelled a campfire and... something else... the faint aroma of hot dogs cooking over a fire. I followed it and found myself near the tunnel that leads to that subway car you saw tonight. I tried to catch the scent again, but it was gone... I convinced myself that it was just my imagination... an echo of a childhood memory I thought was long forgotten.”

“A memory? Can you tell me about it?”

Vincent smiled softly. “When we were boys, Devin and I used that subway car as a secret hideout. We would go there and read books by the light of a campfire. The books you saw there tonight...Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn, Treasure Island. We would read them and make grand plans for our own adventures. If Devin could scrounge up any money, he would buy a package of hot dogs. He knew how much I enjoyed them. We would cook them over the fire and pretend we were hobos traveling across the country riding the rails.”

“And the wooden box of marbles and other treasures?” she asked.

“Yes... those were ours, too. It appears they belong to someone else now.”

Catherine smiled, watching Vincent’s face as he recalled those sweet memories. His words gave her a small glimpse of the boy he once was.

Vincent shrugged. “I attributed the scent I detected to my proximity to a place where I had pleasant memories. I convinced myself that I was needlessly worried because I have been on edge ever since what...”

He paused again, clenching his fists in frustration that the very subject he was trying to avoid had reared its ugly head once again.

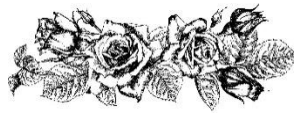
“Ever since what happened... with the outsiders,” Catherine said, finishing his sentence. “And what they did... here.”

“Yes,” He sighed. It amazed him that she could so clearly finish his thoughts.

“Then last week...” he continued. “...when I was near that section again, I had the distinct impression that I was being watched. When I turned to see who was there, Arthur jumped out of nowhere and startled me. I felt very foolish... being frightened by a raccoon. I had a good laugh at myself that night. Perhaps that is when they saw me... smiling.”

Catherine stood and held her hand out to him. “Don’t you think it’s time we go there and find out who they are?”

Finally, Vincent stood and reached for her hand.



As Vincent and Catherine neared the iron gate that led to the campsite, Vincent turned and put his finger to his lips, indicating that they needed to be as quiet as possible. As they came to the bend in the path, they could hear voices.

“Can I have another sandwich, Deb? Please? I’m still hungry,” a child asked.

“I’m sorry, Mikey, but we have to save some for tomorrow,” a young woman replied.

As Vincent and Catherine stepped into view, six very dirty and frightened faces looked up from a makeshift campfire. Catherine was sure she saw someone in a blue baseball cap slip into the shadows at the other end of the cave.

“Hey,” a young boy said, pointing at Vincent. “That’s the funny-looking man we saw in the tunnel... the one who was afraid of the raccoon.”

“Go inside, you guys,” the young woman said to her companions. “I’ll take care of this.” She stood up and walked toward Vincent and Catherine in an attempt to keep them from coming any further.

“What do you want?” the young woman demanded with false bravado.



“We want to know what you’re doing here,” Catherine answered. “... and how you got in.”

“We live here.” The young woman stopped a few feet from the two people she considered intruders. “Not that it’s any business of *yours*,” she said belligerently.

“It is our business,” Vincent responded. “That gate was put there for a reason. It isn’t safe here.”

The girl looked at her suspiciously. “What’s it to you, anyway?”

Catherine looked a little closer at the girl. “Do I know you?” she asked. “You look familiar.”

“I’m Deb.” The girl’s expression was hard and bitter. She came near and looked closer at Catherine’s face. “You don’t remember me, do you?”

“I’m sorry... No, I can’t place where I’ve seen you before.”

“You’re the lady who took Ellie away. You untied her and rescued her... But you left the rest of us to rot.”

Catherine started visibly at the mention of Ellie’s name, and the day she’d brought her to the Tunnels over a year before. Then she recognized the girl.

“Yes, I remember you now. I was trying to rescue you all... You’re the girl who ratted me out before I could help you.”

“Who asked for your help, anyway?” Deb demanded.

“I was trying to rescue you all...” Catherine said, defending herself. “That man was exploiting you and the other children... teaching you to be little criminals.”

“That man was teaching us how to survive on the street. He gave us a roof over our heads. He was only mean when we...” She paused momentarily, then said, “You wouldn’t understand.”

“He was only mean when you didn’t steal enough money?” Catherine asked.

Deb had no answer to that, because she knew it was true.

“What that man was doing,” Catherine explained, “...was turning you all into criminals. He was ensuring that you would move from the foster care

system, straight to the prison system. At least after he was gone, you had a chance to be put into a good foster home.”

“Ha! That’s a joke,” Deb said derisively. “There’s no such thing as a good foster home. Any kid in the system knows that. Listen lady... I get it... You’re a ‘do-gooder’... You mean well...but you live in your swanky apartment... You wear fancy clothes...” Deb leaned close to Catherine and breathed deeply. “You even smell rich... But you got no idea how it is in the real world.”

“I know more about the real world than you might think,” Catherine said patiently.

Deb huffed in response. “These kids have got nothing but a raw deal their whole life...,” she said, pointing to the train car. “Nobody’s looking for any of us... **Nobody cares**. We’re just garbage... throw-away kids.”

“That’s not true,” Catherine tried to dispute Deb’s description of their little group. “You’re *not* garbage.”

Deb clearly had nothing but disdain for anything Catherine had to say.

“Please, lady. The only thing foster parents want us for is the check that comes every month... so they can buy their cigarettes and booze. They don’t care about us. Even in the best places, when we’re lucky enough to get a regular meal, it’s usually ramen noodles or mac ‘n cheese every day or two. Trust me, this is a palace compared to some of the places I’ve lived in. At least here nobody knocks us around.”

Vincent looked on as Catherine tried to reason with the young woman. He was impressed to see such strength in a girl so young.

“DE-E-B!” a child screamed from inside the train car.

Deb turned and ran back to the hovel they were all living in. Vincent and Catherine were right behind her.

“What’s wrong?” Deb demanded as she entered the train car.

“She’s worse, Deb... Is she gonna die? What are we gonna do?”

Entering the small room, Catherine and Vincent could see a small girl, not more than six years old. She was lying atop the foam padding, clutching the

filthy stuffed rabbit they had seen earlier. Despite being under several blankets, she was shivering uncontrollably and drenched in sweat.

Catherine dropped down beside her, placing a hand on the girl's forehead. Her eyes were staring ahead without seeming to see anyone. "She's burning up, Vincent. She needs help."

The desperation and fear in the room were overwhelming. Vincent knew in an instant what he needed to do. He leaned over and gently scooped the child up into his arms.

"HEY!!! What are you doing?!?" Deb demanded.

"She needs medical attention!" he explained. "Catherine, I'm taking her to Father as fast as I can. Can you find your way back without me?"

"Yes, but—"

"Bring the rest of the children to the Dining Chamber and ask William to feed them whatever he has available."

"But what about the Council?" she asked. "Won't they—"

"There's no time to worry about the Council. These children are in urgent, dire need of help. I will take full responsibility."

With that, he turned with the girl in his arms and headed for the iron gate.

Catherine looked around. All of the children looked frightened, even Deb.

"Well, you heard him. If you will just follow me."

Deb gathered the remaining children to her protectively. "Where are you taking us? We aren't going back up there... not back to foster care and not back into the system."

"No," Catherine assured her. "I'm taking you some place safe." She could see distrust in all of their faces. "I promise, I'm taking you some place safe."

As they passed the embers of the campfire, one of the boys stopped and picked up a bread bag and a partially eaten packet of sliced meat.

"Where did you get that?" Catherine asked.

“We didn’t steal it if that’s what you’re thinking,” Deb said defensively. “It’s okay, Mikey,” she assured him.

“So, you bought it?” Catherine asked, seriously doubting they had any money.

“If you must know,” Deb replied. “We found it in a dumpster, behind a deli on 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue.”

“You’ve been eating out of a dumpster?” Catherine was appalled at the very thought.

“It sure beats goin’ hungry,” one of the other children piped up.

“And besides,” a girl of about 9 added. “The meat still smelled okay, and the bread’s only a little bit moldy.”

Fighting back tears, Catherine knelt down next to Mikey. “You can leave this here, Mikey. I promise the food where I’m taking you is better.”

The boy held the food close to him as if his very life depended on it. “Pinky promise?” he asked, holding up one small finger.

Catherine smiled and linked her little finger with his. “Pinky promise,” she said softly as she held back tears.

As they came through the rusty iron gate, Catherine turned to look at the small troop. “Is this everyone?” she asked, counting six of them.

They all looked around at each other and nodded their heads in unison.

“So, there are six of you?” Catherine asked.

“Seven counting, Suzie,” Mikey said. “She’s the girl your friend took away. She’s the youngest. She’s almost eight.”

“What about the one wearing the blue baseball cap?” Catherine asked, remembering something she had seen in the shadows when she and Vincent had first entered the cave.

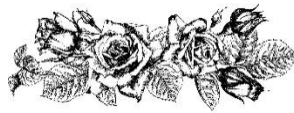
“Hahaha...” Mikey laughed. “Oh, that’s just Kristoffer, he’s not one of us... He’s just a—”

Deb punched the boy on the arm and gave him a severe look. “Don’t pay any attention to him. That’s just Mikey’s imaginary friend. He talks about him all the time, but none of us have ever seen him.”

*Kristoffer, huh?* Catherine thought. *I wonder?*

“All right then, if this is everyone... then please follow me.” With that, she turned and headed for the Home Tunnels.

As Catherine and her little entourage made their way to the deeper tunnels, she looked down and saw a filthy and forlorn stuffed bunny looking up with glassy eyes. He had been dropped inadvertently in Vincent’s rush to the Hospital Chamber.



### **Chapter 3**

*by Janet Rivenbark*

Catherine picked up the bunny, knowing that it would be missed.

“That’s Suzie’s,” Mikey told her.

“Do you want to give it to her?” Catherine asked, holding it out to him.

“Nope. She won’t let none of us touch it. Said her mama gave it to her.”

Catherine tucked the ragged bunny under her arm. “I’ll take care of it then,” she told him.

Catherine was surprised to see William waiting for them when they reached the dining chamber.

“Vincent sent a message,” he told her. “Said to expect you and six hungry kids. There’s leftover beef stew from dinner and bread and butter.”

Catherine ushered her charges to a table, then helped William serve the food. For the next twenty minutes, all they heard were the sounds of spoons in the bowls, eating, and an occasional “Pass the bread.”

William brought out a big bowl of fresh fruit and set it on the table, then joined Catherine at a table a few feet away.

“What happened to the woman you said was with them?” he asked.

She pointed at the dark-haired girl at the end of the other table.

“That’s her. Her name is Deb. She must be about fifteen now. I met her when I brought Ellie and Eric Below.” Catherine started to tell him about Naj’s band of pickpockets but stopped herself. If Deb wanted to share her history, she could do it.

By the time the children were finishing their meal, Father and Vincent joined them.

“How is Suzie?” she asked when they joined her and William.

“She’s doing remarkably well; a little malnourished. She’s only got an upper respiratory infection. She’s already responding to the acetaminophen, and her temperature is starting to come down. There’s no pneumonia, her lungs are clear,” Father told her. “Sarah is sitting with her, and Mary is preparing a chamber for the others. I want to keep them away from everyone else until we know if any of them are going to be sick. Do you know how long Suzie has been sick?”

Catherine shook her head but waved at Deb and beckoned her over.

“Can you tell us when Suzie got sick?” she asked Deb.

“Bout two days ago,” Deb told them. “Started with a snotty nose, but by that night she had a fever, and wouldn’t eat. How is she?”

“She’s going to be all right,” Father assured her. “It’s just a virus. She’s a little malnourished, so that is probably why it got as bad as it did.”

“We ain’t been eatin’ very well,” Deb admitted.

“Now that you are with us, things will be better,” Father assured her. “Mary will be here in a few minutes to show everyone where you will be sleeping.

Deb went back to tell the others the news about Suzie.

“So, you will let them stay?” Catherine asked.

“Unless any of them legitimately have homes and families Above, we will always have room for children,” Vincent answered.

Mary arrived a few minutes later. Catherine introduced her to Deb and the children.

“You can have the guest chamber,” Mary told Deb as she gathered the sleepy children.

“I’d rather stay with them,” Deb told her. “We’ve been together for a while, and I’ve been all they had.”

“I’m taking them to get baths before I put them to bed,” Mary told her.

“Maybe Catherine can show you to one of the more private bathing chambers, then bring you back.” She looked at Catherine for confirmation. At her nod, she added, “We will be in the extra chamber down the corridor from the main dormitory.”

Before they left, Vincent pulled Catherine aside.

“You’re tired,” he observed.

“Yes, but this won’t take long. I’ll head home after I get Deb settled.”

“Why don’t you stay in the guest chamber tonight? You don’t have work tomorrow and won’t have to rush back.”

“That sounds good,” she said with a smile.

“I’ll meet you at the children’s chamber, then, and walk you back to the guest chamber.”

“They got bathtubs down here?” Deb asked as she followed Catherine.

“Not exactly,” Catherine answered. “There are natural hot springs, and they are used for bathing and laundry. They are great for relaxing. People pay a lot of money to soak in them Up-Top, but down here we have that luxury all the time.”

“You live here too?”

“No, I live Above, but I’m what they call a Helper.”

They arrived at the small bathing chamber near the guest chambers. Catherine showed Deb where the soap, shampoo, and towels were.

“Enjoy it,” she said. Deb probably hadn’t had a real bath in a long time.

“How deep is it?” Deb asked.

“This one is not quite four feet in the center, where it’s deepest. I’ll go find you some clean pajamas for tonight and some clothes for tomorrow.”

Catherine went to the guest chamber she usually used and retrieved a nightgown and robe from the armoire. There were also pants, shirts, and undergarments. She made a selection and headed back to the bathing chamber.

She laughed when she found Deb floating in the middle of the pool. The sound startled Deb, and she sank like a rock and came back up sputtering.

“Ya didn’t have to sneak up on me like that,” she said, reaching for the bar of soap that was floating nearby.

“I’m sorry, but it was exactly the same thing I did the first time I bathed in that pool. The mineral content of the water here is high, making it easy to float.”

Deb quickly finished her bath, and Catherine was able to see that Deb was considerably underweight, too. More than she’d been when she was with Naj’s group.

While Deb dressed, Catherine found a comb. She gave it to Deb, and she combed her hair, then braided it.

“What happened after I left with Ellie?” Catherine asked as they walked back to where the others were.

“Naj was arrested, and we were all put in the *system*. They told me I was one of the lucky ones because they had a foster family for me. Lucky my foot. All those people wanted was a servant. They had two other kids of their own. The house was nice, and I did get a room of my own, but I also had a list of chores that didn’t leave time for much else. The woman cooked, but I had to clean up after every meal, pick up after their kids, do my own laundry, and most of the cleaning. They registered me in school, but their



chores didn't leave any time to do homework, so I stayed in trouble for not doing my homework. I finally got tired of it and left. I went to school one day and just kept walkin'."

They reached the chamber where the other children were already asleep. Mary was sitting near the door with a light, and she was doing some mending.

Deb went around the room, making sure each of the children was all right, before she went to the bed that Mary had pointed out to her.

"She's really a little mother," Mary commented a few minutes later.

"She is, but I would have never believed it when I first met her," Catherine said. Then she noticed what Mary was working on. "Oh, that's Suzie's bunny. I forgot it in the dining chamber."

"One of the other children told me," Mary said. "I thought I'd mend the worst of the damage, then wash it. I'll see that she gets it back."

"Thank you." Catherine hugged Mary and left. She hadn't walked very far before she met Vincent.

"Are they all settled?" he asked as he fell into step beside her.

"I think so. All the children are sleeping, and even Deb was out like a light almost as soon as her head hit the pillow."

"I imagine this is the first place they've felt safe in a while," he commented.

When they reached the guest chamber, Catherine invited him in, but he declined.

"You are tired. Get some rest, and we can talk in the morning."

They hugged, and she felt him drop his customary kiss on the top of her head.

Catherine changed her clothes and made her own trip to the bathing chamber. When she returned to the guest chamber, she found that her bed had been turned down, and there was a folded piece of paper on the pillow.

She unfolded it to find a pencil sketch of the children gathered around a fire with Deb reading to them. There was a note scribbled below it:

*I was hoping that Vincent would take the hint and find them.  
Don't separate them; they're a family; they belong together.*

-- KG



## **Chapter 4** *by Angie*

Catherine made a sound that her boss Joe would have recognized immediately.

“Kristopher?” she whispered. “Are you here somewhere?” There was no answer, and she hadn’t expected one really, but there was a sudden chill in the air.

“All right,” she commented, looking at the chamber entry. “Have it your way. This could have had a quite different result, given how fearful everyone here is now, you know.”

She turned away, and there he was, standing there wearing his baseball cap and cheeky grin. Seeing her frown, he got a serious expression on his face.

“Catherine, I can’t help much. I can only let someone know – and Vincent is good at picking up the hints. There are rules for... those like me. We cannot interfere. We have no power, not even to frighten. You should know that.”

The grin came back, and she knew he was thinking of their adventure with his paintings in the warehouse. She sighed.

“Thank you for finding them, Kristopher. We’ll make them a home here, if that’s what they want, give the kids schooling, friendship... But there will be things they need to learn and understand about this place. It’s dangerous.”

“Mikey likes to paint,” Kristopher said, ignoring her comment. “He did the pictures you saw on the walls.”

“I’m sure we can find some paints and paper for him here,” Catherine told him. “Now I must go to bed. Good night.”

Kristopher was gone immediately. She did wonder whether he ever spied on anyone, then discarded the thought. What would be the point – and why worry?



The next day, Catherine made her way to the dining chamber for breakfast and found it already well-peopled. Word had obviously got out about their new arrivals, whom she spotted already eating at a table near Father and Vincent. Vincent had kept a spot for her, so she sat down next to him and loaded a plate with muffins and a mug with tea.

“What’s the plan?” she asked, after she had eaten a muffin and swallowed some tea.

Vincent looked at her and gave her a small smile. “Father is arranging an orientation session in the schoolroom for them all. They must be taught the signs on the tunnels so they know which ones are not to be used, some pipe codes from Pascal, and also that they must attend school and help with the chores, as we all do.”

“That’s a lot for the first day,” Catherine commented.

“It will take several days, but we want them to feel welcome, so several people will attend and tell them what life is like here. We want to give them the safety rules today. They must not be allowed alone anywhere until they are more aware, so we’ll be teaming each with one of our children, of about the same age. Deb will also have a friend – several older children have offered.”

“Is there anything they need from the subway car?”

“I hadn’t thought to ask,” Vincent admitted.

“Mikey might want his paintings,” Catherine remarked softly. “Kristopher said he liked to paint.”

At the mention of their friendly spook, Vincent nodded but said nothing. What could he say? Kristopher didn't speak to him - but he had approached Catherine first, after all. Perhaps he liked pretty women.

There was a sudden exit of the subway car group led by Father. Catherine and Vincent rose too.

"I think I'll sit in on the orientation session," she said. "I've never attended one."

Vincent looked at her, puzzled. "Helpers are not required to, Catherine. We teach them what they wish to know, some pipe codes and tunnel routes, as you have been taught. You would not go exploring on your own, as a new child might... would you?" He looked at her sternly as he said this.

Catherine hung her head. "I did threaten to in this case, didn't I? I'm sorry, Vincent. That was stupid. Knowing you would find me if I got in trouble makes me reckless." Hadn't she had this same thought not long ago? When would she learn? She looked up at him then.

"But we did find them, didn't we?"

"Yes, your instinct was correct, Catherine. But please don't threaten like that again. What if I couldn't come to you?" He sounded exasperated, and Catherine didn't blame him.

They made their way to the schoolroom and found the group bunched at the front. Vincent walked to the front, and Catherine moved to sit at the back, just to listen.

Suddenly, there was a flurry in the front and a lot of loud voices.

"Someone's missing," she heard Father say.

"Where's Mikey?" asked a couple of higher voices.

"He was at breakfast," Deb said, obviously puzzled.

There was a sudden rush for the door. Catherine stood up and helped Vincent keep them from doing so and gently herded them back to the front.

“First lesson!” Father said sternly. “Do not rush off on a search for any reason until you know where you’re going! *Sit down!* Vincent, will you see if you can find the child? He can’t have gone far.”

There was a murmur of agreement, and the group found seats for themselves, although they were not going to settle and kept looking back at the entry.

Vincent ran out, and Catherine followed him.

“Let me help,” she begged him, as he paused in the tunnel, obviously using his senses to try and locate Mikey.

“I cannot feel him, but he can’t have gone far, as Father said. Perhaps you could check the tunnels on the way to the Chamber of the Falls and Whispering Bridge.”

“Right,” Catherine agreed and set off.

Vincent turned in the opposite direction, towards the outer tunnels, the ones they had brought the group along the day before. Mikey might be going back to the subway car to get something, but he would likely get lost. They had deliberately been brought a different way, a more complicated one, as they often did with people they didn’t know and couldn’t yet trust completely.

He walked slowly, reaching out with his senses and stopping when there was a junction to decide if it needed checking. So far, it was nothing but a hunch to tell him he was on the right track, but it was a strong one. That made him pause. *Kristopher again?* He sighed and continued.



## **Chapter 5**

*by Judith Nolan*

Kristopher Gentian stood silently in the deepest shadows and watched his irascible friend as he passed him by and walked further down the dimly lit tunnel. When he wanted to be, the sometime artist, part-time ghost, and

general meddler in the lives of those he truly cared for, could be very inconspicuous. He didn't even breathe until his friend had walked well ahead of him.

He was aware that Vincent was concentrating on finding Mikey, the wandering stray child from the group of ragged children who had inhabited the abandoned subway car. Nothing escaped Kristopher's all-seeing attention or his need to meddle.

He might have no power to interfere or to frighten. But guiding the needs of the people who inhabited the Below world was a pastime he reveled in. He was disappointed Catherine had been sent off in another direction that would prove fruitless. He decided he should call her back to add spice to their hunt.

"Vincent and I shall play a little game of hide and seek until her return." He raised two fingers to the brim of his blue baseball cap. "I have a very good idea where Mikey has gone and why. That child has all the sure instincts of a homing pigeon." He grinned as he faded away into the shadows once more.

"What?" Vincent suddenly stopped as if he'd just walked into a brick wall. He whirled to stare back the way he had come. The hairs on the back of his neck bristled with awareness. He felt something move past him in the narrowing confines of the tunnel he was following. A chill draft of air feathered through the length of his mane, stirring the heavy tendrils. Then there came the faintest echo of masculine laughter.

"Kristopher?" he queried the semi-darkness. "What game are you playing now? What do you know about the missing child?"

Of course, there was no answer. Vincent's lips thinned with chagrin. He hadn't expected any.

The mischievous spirit that was Kris Gentian loved to play games and torment those who sought to discover his whereabouts. But he would never deliberately put any child in danger for his own amusement.

“Very well...” Vincent folded his arms across his chest beneath his cloak. “If you think you know more than me about where Mikey has gone, then guide me...”

Again, his heavy mane stirred, and the tendrils floated out like fingers to point further down the tunnel. The draft of cold air lessened and was gone.

“Always, he has to do things the hard way,” Vincent grumbled as he continued on his way. “But could Mikey have gotten this far from the home tunnels?”

He shook his head. “It must be something very powerful that is driving him.”



Catherine did a quick check of the tunnels all the way down to the Chamber of the Falls and the Whispering Bridge. There was no sign of the missing child. She blew out her bangs with a dissatisfied breath as she turned back.

She remembered the way through the home tunnels and beyond into the outer tunnels. It was the way they had led the small group of children to safety the day before. If she hurried, she might even catch up with Vincent. Suddenly, she felt compelled to find him, and quickly.

*He may have found Mikey already and is bringing him back.* The notion added speed to her trainers, and she didn't stop to reply to the questions from a few startled Tunnel dwellers as she trotted past them.

She felt an almost proprietary interest in the child since she had insisted they be allowed to join the tunnel community. She also felt responsible for his disappearance when she should have been paying closer attention to the boy.

She had seen that he looked withdrawn and pensive all through breakfast. He ate little and constantly looked around. His frowning attention had definitely been elsewhere on the way to the schoolroom, and he'd hung back, dragging his feet. Then he simply was not with the group anymore.

“Blast...” Catherine muttered as she picked up her pace and began to run.

She flew down the narrowing semi-darkness of the tunnel. Around several bends and steadily upwards toward the subway tunnels below the surface. Now the abandoned car was not that far ahead of her. Surely that was as far as Mikey had gone.

She rounded another bend and ran full tilt into the solid wall of a muscular back and thighs. "Vincent?" she gasped as she staggered back.

"Catherine?" Vincent grabbed her shoulders as she teetered on the point of falling flat on her back. "Why are you running? It's dangerous."

"Sorry..." Catherine gasped as she got her feet under her again. "I didn't expect to find you this quickly. I had this odd feeling I needed to find you. Is there any sign of Mikey?"

"Nothing..." Vincent kept one hand on her shoulder as he urged her to go a little ahead of him. "The subway car is as abandoned as it was when we first saw it. The child is not there. I have no sense of him."

He pointed with his chin toward the ragged campsite. It looked quiet and deserted. The small fire had burned away to cold ashes.

"Where do you think he's gone then?" Catherine whispered. "Surely, he can't have gotten much further than this. He must have run to get here."

"It seems that Mikey is a child on a mission," Vincent replied seriously. "I cannot say how much further he has gone. But I know someone who seems to be very aware of his whereabouts."

"Kristopher..." Catherine replied with certainty in her tone. "I'm sure I saw him here when we found the children. He was back over there in the shadows." She pointed to the far side of the camp.

Vincent nodded. "As sure as I am that he is playing a game with us for his own amusement. I'm sure he impelled you to catch up with me. Two players are more fun than one."

"But he would never deliberately hurt a child," Catherine asserted. "He was looking out for them. He wanted us to find them. He said they needed to be kept together."



Vincent shrugged. “Well, now he can help us find Mikey before the child ends up somewhere we cannot extricate him.”

“Then let me try something...” Catherine stepped away from Vincent.

“Kristopher...” she called in a no-nonsense tone. “It’s time you stopped playing games and helped us find Mikey. He must be cold, lost and alone by now. The tunnels are no place for him.”

She looked back the way they had come. “Remember the note you left for me. You said they are a family and need to stay together. Well, that can’t happen until Mikey is back with us.”

“The boy is quite safe,” Kristopher’s disembodied voice replied in an injured tone. “I only wanted to spend some time with you and Vincent. I see so little of you since you cleared out my warehouse and sold all my paintings.”

“We can talk about that later,” Catherine replied in a tone of someone chastising an errant child. “Where is Mikey? Take us to him, right now.”

“All right...” Kristopher came into view some distance from them. “I’ll show you where he is. He always went there when life got too tough for him. It’s his safe place. Follow me.”

He turned and took another tunnel beyond the stranded subway car. Vincent and Catherine looked at each other before they followed him into the gloom of the tunnel. It rose steadily upwards, and the sounds of the world Above could soon be heard. Subway trains rumbled back and forth, and then snatches of conversation from the populated stations. People going about their business with no idea what hidden worlds lay beneath their feet.

“Mikey must have run flat out to get this far ahead of us,” Catherine observed worriedly. “He will be so tired. He didn’t look very strong. What could be so important?”

“He was a very determined child on a seriously important mission,” Kristopher observed softly. “It is amazing how far the spirit within can push the body beyond its conscious limits.”

“*Where* is he?” Catherine snapped.

Kristopher regarded her with sadness in his eyes. “Poor Mikey has done his best to keep a hold on what he’s always thought of as his own. It was all he had. He was sure, if he told you where he was going, you would stop him.”

“Of course,” Catherine confirmed. “He’s only a child. He would be in danger.”

Kristopher nodded. “Ah, but a child who has learned very early in his life how to survive on his wits. His only outlets were his paintings. He could shut out the whole world when he worked. And he was good.”

“You’re talking in riddles again,” Vincent accused. “Where is the child?”

“There...” Kristopher pointed with his thumb toward an old wooden door that had been set into the solidness of the surrounding brick walls. “As with your sub-basement level, Catherine. That door gives access to a place full of forgotten things that a small boy once found quite by chance. It became his castle and artist’s studio. A lost place crammed full of dreams and imaginings...” He faded out on the last words.

“Oh, I do hate it when he does that,” Catherine fumed as she looked all around her. “He loves to talk all around the point and say nothing that makes any sense.”

“It’s who he is,” Vincent replied as he stepped forward to study the old wooden door. “He cannot help himself.”

At first glance, the door appeared to be securely locked and bolted. It seemed not to have been opened in years. But, to Vincent’s expert eyes, there were tell-tale signs of it having been pushed open inwards very recently. Open enough for a small child to slip inside. There was a single child-sized footprint on the dusty sill.

“What can you see?” Catherine asked as she stopped next to him.

“Perhaps magical things...” Vincent replied cryptically as he manipulated the arrangement of locks and bolts and felt them give beneath his hands. “I can almost feel them...”

“Oh, please, Vincent,” his love pleaded. “Don’t go all Kristopher on me. Not now. One of him in our lives is more than enough.”

“Fair enough.” A soft rumble of laughter echoed through Vincent as he used his shoulder to push the door open enough for them to pass through into the cluttered sub-basement beyond.



## **Chapter 6**

*by Mel*

For a moment, Vincent would have sworn he had stepped into another world. Or through the tapestry during Winterfest, as he had dreamed as a child. All around him, the drawings seemed to have come to life, stepping off the page and into the real world. Heroic knights that wore Vincent’s ‘human’ face stood ready to fight the ugly monsters who were dressed in fancy suits, whispering false promises of safety.

“Mikey?” Catherine called quietly.

Vincent blinked; the magical spell was broken.

His eyes scanned the basement, which had returned to normal, everyday clutter topsiders stored beneath them until it was all forgotten. Forgotten... like the child they were seeking to find. Where was Mikey hiding?

He sensed Catherine bend down behind him. Surprise swam through the Bond, as she retrieved something from the ground. Perhaps one of Mikey’s drawings.

“What is that?” Vincent asked.

Catherine studied the scrap for a moment, frowning. “It seems Kristopher has a talent for lying. He told me he only had one business card.”

Vincent frowned, taking the card. It was worn, and the script was barely readable, but Vincent trusted Catherine. “He must have had other cards at some point, Catherine.”

“But what is it doing down here in the Tunnels? I don’t think ghosts get new business cards printed.”

Vincent nodded, ceding the point, and gave the card back. “Let’s discuss this later.”

“Right of course.”

Catherine made to step around him to enter the room.

Vincent moved in front of her; his eyes caught on her fancy outfit she wore. “Wait.”

Catherine’s gaze registered surprise and dismay. The need to find Mikey pulsed through the Bond like a steady flame. She had been the one from the first championing the rescue of the children, despite Vincent’s protests for caution. But now... they needed to listen to the children.

Vincent laid his hand on her arm, signaling her to remain at the threshold. Whether it was fair or not, to the child, she represented those “monsters” in the foster care system.

Catherine gave only a tiny nod as she stepped back outside.

Slowly, Vincent ventured deeper into the basement. Old chairs, dusty paint cloth, and tables had been pulled together like a child’s fort or a barricade against the harsh world. Tapped along the makeshift wall, more pictures of the same knights stared back at him.

Again, the drawn images seemed to come alive, turning to face the new threat. *How on earth was any of this happening?* It defied all reasonable thought. But then, given Kristopher’s powers, was this out of the realm of possibility that this child had some hidden abilities?

The knights in front of him were formidable in protecting their charge. It was strange to see the more “human” creature of himself stare back at him as they regarded each other. He had seen the drawing before, but now he could admire it anew. While rough, as any child’s artistic skill, Mikey had more untapped talent than they had given him credit for before. And something strangely familiar as well, though he couldn’t place his finger on it.

“I come in peace,” Vincent said, holding his palms open in surrender.

The knight seemed to study him, weighing his honesty. Somewhere within the fort, Vincent sensed Mikey was doing the same.

“We only want you to be safe, Mikey.” Vincent knelt on the ground, trying to peek inside. “Will you come out, please?”

A voice mumbled softly with a sniff.

“What was that?” Vincent leaned closer; the knight now above him seemed to step aside. How magical the boy’s art was.

“They’re gonna take my paints,” Mikey said.

“No one is going to take anything from you.”

“You did last time,” Mikey said, his voice more biting.

Vincent thought back to the hasty ‘escape’ they made earlier. “You and your friends needed medical attention. We had to leave quickly.”

Mikey merely stared at him.

Vincent offered a smile. “You have a great talent, Mikey. But why did you come here?”

Mikey brought his knees up to his chest, making himself smaller. “I... I wanted to find...”

“Find what?”

Mikey shifted.

“Come, we can go get your drawings now.” He leaned closer until he could see the child. “Would you like that?”

Mikey pouted in thought for a moment before he crawled out of the fort.

Around them, Vincent imagined the drawn knights taking a deep breath of relief as the child took his offered hand.

Catherine frowned, turning the card over. “Who is Michelle Johnson?”

Mikey’s eyes widened. “That’s my mom’s name.”

Vincent’s eyebrow rose, confused.

“What is it?” Catherine asked.

Vincent glanced over at her. “Johnson was Elizabeth’s maiden name.”



Deb paced the length of the great hall as the old woman Mary, watched from her perch. Deb gritted her teeth; the light clicking of needles gnawed at her nerves as Mary knitted. The stupid orientation had ended two hours ago, and still there was no sign or word from Mikey, the beast, or the fancy lady. Where the heck were they? And that tapping overhead never stopped. Frustrated, Deb grabbed an apple from the table and hauled it upward. The satisfying thump of the apple hitting its mark brought a brief smile to her face.

“Did that make you feel better?” Mary asked.

Deb blinked, waiting. But no reprimand or shouting came. The old woman just continued to knit, her eyes questioning.

“Do you feel better?” Mary repeated.

Deb shrugged, stuffing her hands in her pockets. “I guess.”

“Do you know what you said just now?”

Deb raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“When you throw the apple. That thump you made sent a message.”

Deb glanced up at the pipes overhead, curious.

“Teapot.”

A tiny smile came to Deb’s face as she caught Mary’s eyes lit up. “Huh. I was aiming for shut the hell up.”

Mary frowned. “We try not to use that language here. But you know you could have gone with your friends to visit Pascal. He’s the one who made the code we use.”

Deb kicked at the ground. “Ain’t ever been much for that tech stuff.”

Mary rose. “Hm... do you draw like your friend Micheal?”

“Mikey,” Deb corrected.

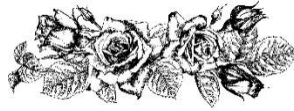
“Mikey, yes. Where did he learn to draw?”

“Kid’s just got talent. No one taught ’im anything.” She pouted in thought.

“I guess I like paint too... and history.”

“We have a historian of sorts, but her work is done through paintings. Would you like to see that?”

Deb thought for a moment. “Sure, beats hanging out here.”



“Now where is that blue...” Elizabeth mumbled before she spotted a tube of red rolling towards her. She picked it up with a frown. “Red, really? No child, this picture needs cornflower blue.”

A light breeze ruffled her hair.

Elizabeth swatted at the air as if it were a pesky youth. “I’ll give it a try, but the blue is better.”

“You won’t regret it.”

Kristopher watched with a light smile. Over the years, it had become a game of sorts to hide wrong colors and then give her the correct one. From one artist to another. Elizabeth couldn’t physically see him as Vincent or Catherine could, but she could sense his presence. Her paintings gave him access to the world of art.

It was one way he was still tied to this earth when he had watched others pass on. Like his parents, his friends. Like Michelle Johnson.

He could still picture her. How he had wanted to capture her blonde beauty in paint so he could hold onto her. Those green eyes that sparkled with that same creative light, though her dreams drew her to the stage rather than painting. Sure, in the grand scheme of life, it had been one week of passion, but he remembered it all. On the last night, she had flipped the new business card in her hands before he tucked it into her shirt pocket. She tapped it over her heart.

*“So, I can have proof and tell my friends and family I knew the great world-renowned Kristopher when.”*

*“Yeah,” Kristpher sighed. Glancing around the cramped apartment.*

*“Maybe by then I’ll have a room with space for more than a bed.”*

*“Hey, this place is nice. A hole in the wall can be great.” Michelle laughed.*

*“I know my aunt would love to see your work.”*

*“That’s just what your dad would say. Michelle won’t get married to that good-for-nothing kid in the hole in the wall.”*

*“Ah, my dad’s not that bad.”*

*“No, Daniel Johnson would love his daughter to live here.” Kristopher propped himself up on his elbows. “Though I would love to meet this aunt of yours. One artist to another, you know.”*

*Michelle’s face fell. “Oh, that would be great, but... um Aunt Lizzy moved some time ago.”*

*“Do you still get to see her?”*

*“Once or twice a year. She’s kind of a hermit, but with great stories, like a lion man... she likes myths.”*

*“Most artists then.” Kristopher threw his hands wide to encompass the room. “I’m the same.”*

*Michelle had merely laughed before looking at the clock. “Ah damn. I have rehearsal in like ten minutes.”*

*Kristopher rolled over and tossed her clothes. “When do I get to see the show?”*

*“You had one last night.” She pulled on her blue shirt, leaned over, and kissed him. “I’ll see you later.”*

There had been no ‘later’. Only hours later, his landlord tossed him out into the cold, and he retreated deeper into the shadows of the city and the cold. Michelle’s family would never accept him until he sold his work. As with all humans, he had thought there would be a ‘later’. Selfishly, he had wanted their time together to remain pure and fun, like a child.



And then sickness and cold had taken over, until time lost all meaning. He had drifted aimlessly, only catching a glimpse of his beautiful Michelle passing through. He had wanted to call out, make her stay, but something gave him pause. He could only watch as she traveled into the largest spotlight. The glow around her was similar to Catherine Chandler.

“Huh...” Elizabeth stood back from her work in progress. “Hm, seems red was the right choice.”

Kristopher smiled.

Footsteps in the distance drew the attention of the two artists.

“Elizabeth,” Mary called from one end of the tunnel. Deb was trailing behind her, observing the paintings along the wall.

“Oh, Mary. How good to see—”

“Hello Elizabeth, Mary—”

“Deb!” Mikey ran past Vincent and almost crashed into the young girl.

Regaining her footing, Deb returned the hug while scolding. “Mikey, where have you been?”

Mikey scuffed the ground with his toe. “I’m sorry. I—”

“We’re just glad you’re safe, Mikey,” Mary said.

“Excuse me, dear,” Elizabeth said, “but who are these children?”



## **Chapter 7**

*by Hope*

Elizabeth’s palette hovered in midair. Trembling slightly in her worn hand. She looked from the boy to the concerned young girl at his shoulder, then her gaze drifted past them to Mary, Catherine, and Vincent standing in the doorway.

“Mary,” Elizabeth murmured again, a look of surprise lighting up her face, “who are these dear hearts?”

“Mikey, Ana, Theo, Junie, and Ben,” Mary said, smoothing a cowlick from Ben’s brow. “And this is Deb, who has kept all these little lives together with a great deal of strength and courage. They joined our tunnels last night, after much time on their own.”

“Mikey,” Elizabeth repeated softly. “Will you come closer, child?”

Mikey sidled forward, one hand finding Deb’s sleeve as if for support. He stopped beneath Elizabeth’s latest canvas, and he looked up at it, a contemplative expression in his eyes, as if he saw things in the canvas that no one else could. The light caught his face, and something in it, some turn of the mouth, some tilt of the chin, brought a memory rushing to the surface of Elizabeth’s thoughts.

Vincent stepped forward. “We found this,” he said, holding a worn card, and placed it in Elizabeth’s open hand.

KRISTOPHER GENTIAN, ARTIST, the letters announced, faintly shining in the dim light.

Elizabeth’s fingers trembled. “Where did you get this?”

“In a sub-basement,” Catherine replied. “Through an old door. Mikey had created a little studio in there, where he was creating artwork too.

Kristopher pointed the way for us.”

Elizabeth’s laugh was a single, broken note. “He would.”

Her gaze returned to Mikey. “Child, what is your mother’s name?”

Mikey’s throat bobbed. “Michelle. Michelle Johnson.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes. When she opened them again, they were bright with tears. “My sister’s girl had that name. Wild, bright, stubborn as June. She ran after stages and songs, and one day she followed her heart instead of her father’s orders, and the world was never right again.”

Elizabeth set the brush down, hands empty for the first time since the day began. “Then I think you are my own kin, and the Tunnels have done it

again. They have given back something lost that I had thought was never to be found. It 'tis a miracle, yes, it is."

Deb's jaw twitches, and the glint in her eyes seemed to say that she did not believe in miracles at all.

"Kin," Mikey repeated, both nervous and intrigued by the concept. His small hand slipped from Deb's sleeve and reached toward Elizabeth's, his little palms callused from scavenging and chalk, a contrast to her soft, old skin. Elizabeth took his hand in hers as carefully as if it were made of glass.

"Come," she said, voice steadier, waving her free hand toward the scattered paints. "Let me see what you see."

She led him to a blank canvas board propped against the wall. The others crowded close until Mary clucked and shooed them back a step so everyone could breathe. Vincent stood in the doorway, filling it and somehow still making room for all of the emotions he could feel swirling around them. Deb stayed the furthest back, a defeated slump to her shoulders, a glint of tears in her dark eyes. Vincent gave her space to feel, glancing from her to Mikey and back again.

Mikey hesitated. "I need paints."

"Then that is what we have," Elizabeth said, handing him a brush. "Paint what you see, child. The heart will follow and give you all the details."

Vincent left the group and made his way to Deb, who had turned away and was leaning against the cold stone wall, her head down, her arms folded.

"Deb, you are all family here. Mikey is kin, yes, but there are many things more important, such as belonging. You all belong here."

"We ain't staying unless we stay together."

"We hear you," Vincent answered softly, laying a hand on her shoulder. "No one will separate any of you. You all have a home here."

"Promise?"

He nodded firmly. "You have my word."



By midday, the Council chamber held more warmth and acceptance than debate. Father listened to Mary's report, to Sarah's, and to William's booming assurance that he would gladly feed the little group as easily as he had the other members of the Tunnels. Father listened to Pascal explain, in patient tones, that each of the children had done well when he tested their knowledge of the pipe codes that he had taught them. Father also listened to Elizabeth say, simply, "He is mine," and to Deb say, fiercely, "They are all mine."

"And yet," Father said at last, rubbing the bridge of his nose, "we have learned the cost of open doors. Things have gone well this time. But often, they do go wrong."

"We have," Catherine agreed. "And the cost of closed hearts. I am sure we can have a group assembled to close off the tunnel entrances near the subway car, to ensure no one comes that way again."

Silence fell again, with a nod from several members agreeing to that plan. The sound of children laughing two corridors away brought smiles to everyone's face. It was as it should be.

Vincent stepped forward. "We have always been more than a refuge from danger. We are a place for belonging. Let us do what we do best and teach them how to be safe, to be needed, to be known. If any have family Above who will love them well, we will help them find that path one day. If not, we will be all the family they need, just as we have always done."

Father looked around the table and found no one willing to argue. He set his cane down like a gavel. "So be it. Deb, do you consent to the rules of our life? School in the mornings. Chores in the afternoons. No fire where there is gas. No wandering beyond marked ways. And all of the other things that Pascal and Vincent have taught you?"

Deb lifted her chin. "Yes, sir. You have my word, as long as there is no splitting us up."

"There will be no splitting you up," Father echoed firmly, a smile tugging his mouth from its normally serious line. "You also have my word."



Mary washed Suzie's bunny and set it in the sun to dry, ears newly mended and head held up by a new, carefully stitched seam. Suzie recovered fully, and one night she found the rabbit waiting on her pillow nearly good as new. She pressed her face into its patched fur and fell asleep again, this time to the sound of someone humming in the hallway, where Mary sat working on mending the children's ragged clothes.

William taught Junie to knead bread. "Press with the heel of your hand," he said again and again, "and think of how good it will be when it is baked. Now it won't be that good if you over-knead it, so take care."

Theo learned the pipe code for "home" and tapped it, over and over, until Pascal laughed and tapped back, "Yes. Yes, this is home."

Ben discovered the library and, within it, a book about a dog who kept finding his way back to the same place, no matter how the events on the pages tried to send him elsewhere. He tucked it under his pillow at night and read it nearly every morning, as if to convince himself that he too, had come home.

Ana shadowed Sarah in the infirmary and learned the names of herbs and medicines, and Sarah informed Father that she had a gentle way with the injured and sick, and that he should consider teaching her what he knew someday. He promised that he would.

Deb came to Elizabeth's chamber every afternoon, longing to see what she and Mikey saw in the drab room decorated with windows of beauty in the canvases she had hung around the small space. Her own heart felt like a blank canvas, white, empty, and cold, and she longed for color to bring it to life, just as Mikey's paintings did. "History," Elizabeth told her, putting a brush in her hand, "Is remembering with your whole body. Things you have seen, things you have felt, and putting them on the canvas with the colors that match them."

Deb's lines started stiff, but gradually, she drifted into the realm of creativity, humming to herself as she painted, her face only a foot away from the surface of the canvas. She wiped her cheek with the back of her hand, focused completely on the sunset she was creating, and left a streak of cornflower blue that made Elizabeth smile.

Across the room, Mikey also painted.

He painted the river chamber like a secret entrance to another world, the light low and golden and the water bright, as if it were illuminated by a sun that did not exist Below. He painted a bridge that whispered stories to those brave enough to listen. He painted Catherine's laugh as she walked beside the river in his painting, a scatter of yellow across brown stone. He painted Deb taller than she was, shoulders squared, eyes soft, kind like a mother.

Sometimes, he drew knights with tender faces who stood in the darkest of shadows and watched, relieved and at ease.

On the fifth day, he turned his board toward Vincent, who sat in the room with them, reading *Great Expectations* to Suzie, who sat at his feet with her rabbit.

"May I?" Mikey asked, his voice inquisitive, but gentle, as if he knew he was asking for something sacred.

Vincent hesitated, then nodded his cloaked head. "You may."

Mikey studied him, the shape of his eyes, the lift of his mane when he moved, the way his shoulders relaxed when Catherine brushed his sleeve in passing as she brought cookies to the small group, along with lemonade that she set on the far side of the room away from the finished art.

"Almost done," Mikey muttered, tongue peeking from the corner of his mouth.

When he stepped back at last, silence fell over the small room.

On the board, a face looked back, familiar and strong, yet also strange and tender. The eyes were steady and alive, and there was no fear in them.

Catherine's fingers curled around Vincent's, and Elizabeth stepped forward. "There you are," she whispered, as if to a dear friend.

Vincent gazed in wonder at the gift the child had made. For a moment, the old words rose to his tongue, the ones that tried to name him and failed. *Monster. Other. Alone.* In their place came the simplest word of all, the one Pascal had taught the children to tap on the pipes only days ago.

*Home.*

He felt it before he knew he was doing it. The corners of his mouth turned upward. It was not forced. It was for the boy with blue on his fingers and the girl with immense courage. It was for the woman whose hand held his,

and the old man who had learned to open doors of acceptance, again. It was for Kristopher's laughter in the far corridors, for a night where candles would be lit and songs sung and stories told of olden days.

Mikey looked up at Vincent. "I knew you could," he said softly.

"Could what?" Vincent asked softly, already knowing the answer.

"Smile," Mikey said, grinning back.



Father cleared his throat in the dining chamber that evening. "We have long been afraid of acceptance. There have been hard times and terrible times. Through them, we closed our doors. We became bitter, afraid, and forgot the real reason for these tunnels. Perhaps it is time to say, together, what we are. I propose something we have never done before at this table. We will light the candles so that this moment may never be forgotten. In front of you, there is a white candle. Please take it, and say what we are, together."

Voices rose, the others, one at a time, until the whole room was on its feet.

"Family," someone said.

"Neighbors," someone else.

"Keepers," Mary offered.

"Learners," Pascal replied.

"Loved," whispered Deb, balancing Suzie on her knee.

"Kin," Elizabeth said, and Mikey leaned against her, smiling.

Catherine lifted her candle. "Belonging," she said, as Vincent lit his candle next to her.

Vincent touched his flame to hers, then she touched hers to Mikey's, then he lit Elizabeth's, and it traveled along the friendly line of faces until the entire room was aglow with light and joy.

"This is home," Catherine said to Vincent, through the Bond, and he leaned close to her.

“Yes,” he replied, so softly she felt it more than heard it. “And where we stand, they may stand also.”

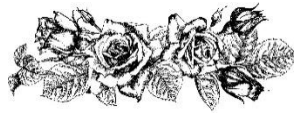
Kristopher leaned in the far dark, cap tilted, grin lopsided. He lifted two fingers to his brim in silent salute and disappeared.

Later, when the pipes gave the lullaby for sleep, and the tunnels were quiet. Deb tucked in six blankets, then climbed into bed herself. She turned on her side and whispered into the dark, “Thank you.”

Somewhere, a raccoon chattered. The laugh of the adults in the library enjoying a late-night cup of tea before bed faintly drifted down the corridor. Somewhere else, the roar of the underground river rumbled on, a song that only those empty tunnels heard.

And Above, the city that had caused all of their pain lived on, in flashing lights and subway rumblings, blissfully unaware that it had lost seven more of its prisoners.

Below, the promise of *belonging* made its quiet vows, and as long as Below lives on, that promise will be kept.



**“Feels Like Home”** Fan video by Judith Nolan

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYDjcAsHGI>





# She Never Died



By Judith Nolan





---

# Sonnet of Love

by JessicaRae

---



*Beneath the earth where shadows guard the flame,  
A noble heart of lion learns to dream.  
Though night conceals the visage none may claim,  
His soul shines brighter than the daylight's gleam.*

*She walks above where storms of sorrow fall,  
A light of justice burning through the rain.  
Yet in her heart she hears his silent call,  
A whispered truth that eases every pain.*

*Their worlds divided, fate would keep apart,  
Yet love transcends the stone, the dark, the years.  
He shields her life, she heals his wounded heart,  
Together conquering doubt, despair, and fears.*

*So hand in hand, though destiny denies,  
Their bond eternal lives where beauty lies.*



---

# The Bond of Blood and Light

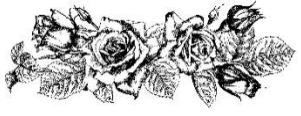
by Judith Nolan

---



*"There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle..."*

**-Albert Einstein**



**T**

he city pulsed beneath a blanket of night, its lights winking through thick fog and summer heat. Alleyways lay steeped in shadow, where few dared to tread. But he had always moved in the darkness.

Vincent's cloak rippled behind him as he ran, the desperate sound of his breath loud in his ears. Something in the wind had changed. Something in him had shattered.

She was close. He *felt* it. That fragile, silken thread that bound them had become badly frayed and almost broken. Now the final thread was dangerously thin to the point of being completely lost.

He rode the elevator car to the top of Gabriel's building. He flung himself off its roof at the last moment and took the stairs to the roof as if he had wings on his heels.

As he surfaced from the stairwell, he heard the clatter of a helicopter lifting off from the roof landing space. He roared out onto the roof, but he was too late. He glared up at Gabriel's white face framed in the window of the aircraft. Two sworn enemies glared at each other across the ever-increasing distance.

Vincent stood and watched it wing away out over the city far below. He closed his hands into tight fists. His nails dug into his palms. He had never felt so impotent and so alone.

Then he heard her. Heard his love before he saw her.

He turned, and she was there, reaching for him and failing. A small, crumpled figure clad in a white hospital gown that did nothing but accentuate the paper white pallor of her almost translucent skin.

“Vincent...”

“Catherine...” He ran forward to her.

“Vincent,” she whispered again, through cracked lips.

He dropped to his knees and cradled her carefully, pressing his face to her hair as he tried to warm her with his body heat. “I’m here. I’ve found you.”

Her breath trembled in her throat. “They... took him.”

“Him?” Vincent’s voice trembled with confusion.

“Our son...” she breathed. “Vincent... You... you have... a son.”

Time stood still. Vincent’s soul recoiled in awe and agony. “How?”

Catherine raised one hand to his cheek. “We... loved... Please... save him... Save—”

She sagged in his arms then, her last soft breath feathering past his cheek. Then the life seemed to flee from her like a thief in the night that surrounded them.

“No...” he growled, lifting her with impossible gentleness. “I will *not* let you go. While I live, you will live. Always...”

He held her close, her fragile heartbeat fluttering against his chest like a trapped bird. His legs obeyed the ancient instinct: *Below*. To Father. To sanctuary. To life...



The world Above faded behind him as Vincent disappeared into the labyrinthine tunnels. The clamour of the city gave way to dripping stone and warm torchlight.

As he ran, his love grew heavier in his arms. He did not need to look down to know that she hovered perilously close to leaving him forever.

When Vincent reached the final turn before Father's chamber, he roared, "*Father!*"

The old man appeared instantly, his face a mask of alarm and dread. "Dear God! Is that Catherine?" He hurried closer. "Where did you find her? Does she live?"

"She's alive," Vincent gasped, not trusting his own voice. "But she's dying."

Father's movements became concise and purposeful. He guided his son into the hospital chamber. Mary rushed in behind them, blankets and bandages at the ready.

Father went to the nearest bed. "Lay her down, Vincent. Gently. Mary, fetch clean water and morphine."

"Father..." Catherine's eyes fluttered. Her lips moved. "Child..." she gasped.

Father bent over her. "What did she say?"

Vincent stared at her, trembling. "She said... our child. He was taken from her."

Father looked at him, stunned. "You... have a child?"

Vincent closed his eyes. The world he thought he knew had cracked open.

And now he must rebuild it — for all their sakes.



The next hours passed like a series of eternal lifetimes. Vincent did not leave Catherine's side. He couldn't leave her.

He sat silently, watching each rise and fall of her chest with reverence and fear. Her hand was in his. Her face, even pale and broken, was more beautiful than anything Above or Below.

Mary brought fresh linens, and Father murmured instructions to Pascal and Mouse. He sent the tinker Above with a message for Peter Alcott and a plea for him to bring down more medications. The old man worked with all his medical knowledge to avert the seemingly inevitable outcome.

Time ticked by on leaden feet. Day and night changed the watches with numbing routine.



“Vincent,” Father said softly, pulling him aside at last. “I think she will live, but it will still be close. She’s been drugged and starved. God only knows what they did to her.”

Vincent’s claws clenched. “I will find them.”

“She must recover before she can tell us more.”

“No,” Vincent said, eyes glowing. “I can feel it. She knows. Even now, she holds on because of him... our son.”

Father said nothing. He only placed a hand on Vincent’s shoulder, seeing the storm behind his eyes.

That night, Vincent sat in candlelight, holding Catherine’s hand. She stirred.

“Vincent...” she murmured. “His name is Jacob.”

Vincent gasped.

“I named him after your father,” she whispered. “After *ours*.”



Catherine awoke the next morning, weak but alert.

With Father’s gentle prompting and Vincent beside her, she told her story.

“They drugged me. I’d just given birth... I heard him cry. Then—then they took him.”

“Who?” Vincent demanded.

Catherine’s eyes darkened. “Gabriel. That was the name I heard. A man with power... resources. He has Jacob. He wanted him because he is your son.”

Father shook his head. “I’ve never heard the name.”

Vincent rose. “I will find him.”

But Catherine reached for him.

“Wait,” she said. “There’s more. I memorized an address. 248 East 47th. I don’t know if he’s still there.”

Vincent bent low and kissed her forehead. “Rest. I will bring him back to you.”



The world Above recoiled from Vincent like shadows from flame. He moved through alleys and rooftops, cloaked in vengeance. He found the building — abandoned, yet still warm. Someone had fled. Recently.

Inside, he found documents — discarded medical records, a child’s bracelet engraved with the name *Jacob Chandler*.

He held the tiny object in his hand. His son. Flesh of his flesh. He could feel him in that moment. He *knew* him then, as a father knows his child.

“Jacob...” he breathed in a tortured tone.

There were no pictures. No clues to where they’d gone. But the scent — faint, soft — lingered. Vincent stored it in memory.

Then, footsteps. He turned with a snarl — but it was Joe Maxwell.

“Vincent,” Joe said, raising his hands. “She told me you’d come.”

Joe’s face was drawn with grief and rage. “I’ve been looking too. These bastards... They’re tied into everything. Government, corporations. I tried to follow the money.”

Vincent’s voice was low and hoarse. “Will you help me find him?”

Joe nodded. “To the ends of the Earth.”



But the days turned into weeks. Vincent, Joe, and the helpers traced shadows and whispers. Catherine, still healing, joined the planning Below. Her strength returned slowly, but her mind remained sharp, her memory a map.

They found other victims of Gabriel’s network: women who had vanished. Children born into silence.

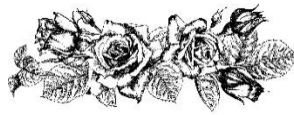
One name surfaced again and again.

**Jonathan Gabriel.** A man so rich he no longer had a face in the public world. A ghost behind steel and mirrors.

Then came the breakthrough.

A shipment. A private jet. A known associate — one who owed a favor to a helper.

The plane was bound for a private estate in upstate New York. Vincent did not wait. This was his time, his place to find his child. He would walk over any number of dead and dying to find him for Catherine and bring him home.



The estate he found was a fortress. Walls high as trees. Guards like statues. But Vincent moved through them like a myth reborn. Inside, chaos erupted. Screams echoed. Lights shattered.

He found the nursery on the top floor. And there — in a glass crib — lay a baby wrapped in blue. Vincent fell to his knees.

The child turned his head to stare at him. He had eyes like the dawn. Gentle, wide — and glowing faintly gold.

Vincent's pounding heart momentarily stopped his breath. *His son.*

He reached down. The child did not cry. He reached up, tiny fingers brushing against Vincent's mane.

Vincent wept. Then came the gunfire.

Vincent turned, shielding the baby. Bullets rang, but he was gone — out the window, into the trees, a whisper of vengeance and fire.



He returned Below with the rising dawn. The entire community waited. When Vincent entered, the world stopped. In his arms was Jacob.

Catherine stood, trembling, pale as moonlight. When she saw them, she broke.

She ran to him, tears pouring, hands trembling as she reached for their son.



“Jacob,” she whispered.

Vincent placed the child in her arms. “He is safe. He is ours.”

Catherine held her son close, breathing him in like air. Vincent wrapped his arms around them both, burying his face in her hair. A family. Broken once. Now whole.



Weeks passed.

Catherine recovered fully. Jacob grew strong — curious, bright, full of the light of both worlds.

Father watched with awe. “He will belong to both realms.”

Vincent nodded. “He will know truth, compassion... and love.”

Catherine turned to him one night as Jacob slept beside them. “We were torn apart,” she said. “But love brought us back.”

Vincent kissed her hand. “Love is stronger than fate.”

Above, the city moved on — unaware.

Below, a child laughed and grew stronger with every new day.

And in that sound was the promise of peace. The beast had found his beauty. And together, they had forged something eternal.



By Barbara Gipson



## Mama's Boy

by Barbara Anderson



Vincent looked up from his journal at the sound of a cry coming from his son's crib. Baby Jacob held up his arms, wailing as if his heart was breaking.

"What's wrong, Jacob?" Vincent asked softly as he lifted the child into his arms without hesitation. The boy's hair was damp with sweat, and his chubby cheeks were bright from the low-grade fever he had been running all day. It was clear that a nap had not helped the situation.

Vincent tucked the child's head under his chin and walked around the room, cooing softly. "It's all right, Jacob. Daddy's here."

'Daddy...' Vincent still marveled at the word. He'd never dared to imagine that 'Daddy' would ever be a word used in relation to himself. *Yet, here is the proof*, he thought.

"Mama," the boy whimpered. "Mama."

"I know you want your mama." Vincent acknowledged, sighing heavily. "I wish she were here too, Jacob," he whispered. "I want Mama too."

Sitting down next to his son on the bed, Vincent tried to distract the boy with a cherished photograph of Catherine that was perched on the shelf under his large stained-glass window. She had given it to him after his illness. On the back, she wrote, *"I won't let you forget. Love, Catherine."*

And she hadn't.

"Mama," Jacob said, patting the smiling picture affectionately with his chubby little hands.

"How are my two favorite men in the whole world?" came a cheerful voice from the chamber entrance.

Vincent's heart skipped a beat as he turned toward the voice in surprise.

"You're home early," he said, standing up with his excited son in his arms.

“We had a big win in court today,” she explained breathlessly. “So, Joe let us all go home early.” Catherine laughed. “I got out of there as fast as I could, before he had a chance to change his mind.” She dropped her briefcase and jacket onto a chair and flipped off her shoes before crossing the room to hug and kiss both of her two ‘favorite men.’ Then, pressing her cheek against Jacob’s head, she looked up with a worried look.

Before she could speak, Vincent reassured her, “Father says it’s nothing to be concerned about. Apparently... our son is teething.”



GIPSON © 92

By Barbara Gipson





---

## Jacob's Friend Mouse

Drabbles *by Judith Nolan*

---



### First Cry

**B**aby Jacob's loud wail echoed through the tunnels, startling every listener. Mouse, usually skittish, rushed forward, eyes wide with awe. "So loud! Strong lungs. Good sign!"

Vincent, cradling his son, looked down with fierce tenderness. The child's small hands curled around his father's finger. "He will need strength," Vincent whispered. "In both heart and spirit."

Catherine brushed her hand across Jacob's head. "He has that already. He has you."

Mouse leaned close, grinning. "And Mouse! Teacher of gadgets, tunnels, secrets!"

Jacob yawned, unconcerned, but Mouse vowed silently: whatever the child needed. Friend, protector, or playmate. He would always be there.



### First Steps

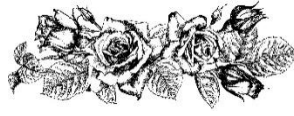
**J**acob tottered forward, unsteady but determined. Catherine clapped softly, urging him on.

Vincent held his breath as if the entire world depended on this moment.

Mouse hopped from one foot to the other, hands flapping with excitement. "Almost there! Yes, yes, yes!" Jacob fell straight into Mouse's waiting arms. Mouse laughed so hard tears slid down his nose. "See? Told you! Good balance, quick reflexes—like his father!"

Vincent's proud smile warmed the chamber. Jacob giggled, reaching back toward Mouse's wild hair.

Mouse whispered, as if sharing a secret with the child. “Don’t worry, Jacob. Falling just means more trying.”



## Midnight Lullaby

**S**ometimes Jacob cried at night, his voice carrying through stone and shadow. Catherine would rise, weary but smiling, and Vincent would follow, cloak swirling.

One evening, Mouse arrived first. He sat cross-legged by the cradle, making little squeaks and whistles from a reed flute. The sound was strange, uneven, but soothing.

Jacob quieted, blinking up at him. Vincent paused in the doorway, surprised but touched. Catherine whispered, “He trusts Mouse.”

Vincent laid a hand on Mouse’s shoulder. Mouse froze, then beamed. The lullaby faltered, yet Jacob sighed and drifted to sleep. Mouse whispered proudly, “See? Mouse works better than gears.”



## Lessons in Curiosity

**J**acob crawled toward Mouse’s latest invention. A strange spinning contraption of copper and string.

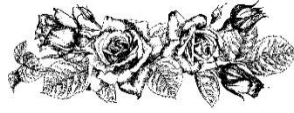
“Careful!” Catherine warned, but Mouse waved her concern aside. “Safe! Tested it three times. Maybe four.” Jacob poked the wheel; it whirred merrily. His eyes widened, delighted.

Vincent knelt, watching intently. “He is drawn to discovery.”

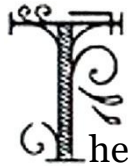
Mouse grinned. “Good thing! Tunnels full of mysteries. Need sharp eyes.” Catherine smiled, half-worried, half-proud.

Mouse leaned close to Jacob, voice soft. “Secrets everywhere—machines, pipes, even shadows. All waiting for clever hands.” Jacob laughed, clapping.

Vincent's heart stirred. Already his son was part of their world—bright, curious, unafraid.



## Storytime



The chamber glowed with candlelight. Children gathered, waiting. Tonight's tale was not from Father's library but Mouse's imagination. He spun a story about brave Jacob, prince of the tunnels, who built bridges from scraps and tamed shadows with laughter.

The older children giggled while the younger ones listened wide-eyed. Catherine sat with Jacob in her lap. Vincent leaned back against the wall, pride shining in his blue eyes. Jacob babbled, clapping as though he understood every word.

Mouse bowed dramatically. "Hero Jacob! Strong, smart, kind." Vincent chuckled, low and warm.

Catherine kissed her son's hair. "Already, the stories have begun."



## Promise



Late one night, Mouse crept to the nursery. Jacob slept soundly, tiny fists curled beneath his chin.

Mouse stared, suddenly solemn. "You'll grow fast. Maybe too fast. World above—scary, dangerous. World below—safe, but sometimes lonely." He shifted, hands fidgeting. "But not for you. Promise. Mouse will always be here. To fix broken things, to chase shadows away, to make you laugh when days are hard." He placed a trinket, a polished stone, glowing faintly, beside the crib. "For luck."

Vincent's voice came quietly from the doorway. "Thank you, my friend."

Mouse nodded, whispering, "Family takes care. Always. Always..."







By Judith Nolan









# *What You Are*

*by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova*



*(Catherine's Joining Ceremony Vow to Vincent)*



*For many years you wondered, feared what you are,  
For many years you thought you'd never touch the Evening star.  
For too many solitary years you never really knew  
What magic, what indescribable beauty encompasses the real you.*

*Then on one dark, glittering night of terror and pain  
Your path crossed mine and turned into our greatest gain.  
Since then, we have walked together, tasted joy, heartbreak and sorrow,  
Holding each other's hands, in a promise of a better tomorrow.*

*You gave me the miracles of the earth and the night sky,  
You've touched my heart, lit a fire within me that makes me want to fly.  
We've shared something no one else has ever shared before;  
It's like a bright beacon even in a moonless night on a shore.  
It brought down barriers and made the imaginable real,  
creating a new life to love and cherish, with great power to heal.*

*So, hear me out and cast your doubts and fears away,  
Listen to my words and hear the honest truth when I say:  
Your face, your hands, your pains and joys are mine  
Just as my love, my life, my heart and soul are thine.  
You are my best friend, my teacher, my shelter in the storm;  
With you by my side, I know I will never again be forlorn.*

*What you are bears no consequence to me,  
For what we are was forever meant to be...*



**By Michaela Buzsaki Struchova**

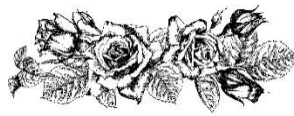


# Blessed

by Judith Nolan

*“To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment...”*

**Ralph Waldo Emerson**



The liquid strains of Mozart’s Clarinet Concerto floated out over Central Park’s Naumburg Bandshell. The large audience sat still, completely entranced. The intoxicating music drifted on the evening breeze before it sank down a nearby drainage grill and floated into the depths of the world Below.

Relaxed on a mound of pillows against the concrete block wall, Catherine sat within Vincent’s loose embrace. Their hands were linked as they listened to the music as it ebbed and swelled. They hadn’t spoken for some minutes, both lost in the notes that twined around their senses and made them soar.

Finally, Catherine turned her head against her love’s shoulder. She looked up at him. “How do you feel?” she asked softly.

Vincent inhaled, but he didn’t reply immediately. Then, he sighed as he nuzzled her soft hair. “There are no words...” he finally admitted as if the words were dragged from the depths of his being.

Catherine smiled mistily as she felt tears welling up at the backs of her eyes. She understood his hesitation, but she wanted to know more. She needed more from him in this new phase of their strained relationship.

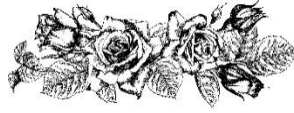


“Try one...” she begged and waited.

Vincent understood her need for him to give more of himself now. How could he refuse? “Blessed...” he said against her hair. That simple word, that said so much, hovered between them like a talisman of renewed hope and love.



Catherine's smile widened, and she nodded. She felt her love kiss her hair and gently caress her shoulder. Now she was loath to break into the sense of renewed peace that settled between them. She closed her eyes and nestled closer as the strains of music soared and floated out over the great city that sprawled above them.



The music had long since died away, and the audience was standing to leave before Catherine and Vincent could finally tear themselves away from their private haven. The musicians were packing up their instruments as the secreted lovers got to their feet.

“That was... so beautiful...” Catherine whispered as she pushed her fingers through Vincent’s. They walked side by side down the tunnel leading to her sub-basement. “I never wanted it to end.”

“Nor did I,” Vincent replied as he lifted her fingers to his lips and kissed them. “You look so wonderful tonight. There is such a light about you.”

“It’s because we’re here and we’re together.” Catherine wrapped her hands around his upper arm and hugged it. “Tell me, when can we do this again? Soon, I hope.”

Vincent stopped and smiled down at her. “If you have a taste for Handel, then there will be another concert this weekend. If you can get away from work in time.”

“I’ll make time,” Catherine responded quickly as she went up onto her toes to kiss his cheek.

They continued on in silence, each lost in their own thoughts. There were many things Catherine wished to tell her love, and questions that burned to be asked. But she bit her tongue and resolved to allow the passage of time to heal him and bring about the return of their lost connection.



They lingered for a long time outside the sub-basement level of Catherine’s apartment building. Neither wanted to be the first one to say farewell. They spoke of the concert and mundane things. Words to keep them together in that same sense of warm contentment.

Finally, Vincent sighed. “Catherine...” He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her towards the shaft of white-blue light that shone down from above. “You must go.”

Catherine nodded even as she said, “I don’t want to leave you...”

“But you must,” Vincent replied gently. “It’s already dawn Above, and you have work in a few hours. You should be trying to get some sleep.”

“I could sleep if you were with me,” Catherine begged. “Come up with me.”

Vincent understood her meaning. They had been together in Catherine’s bed when he’d been so ill and almost dying. “I remember...” It had been a bittersweet moment he cherished.

“You must go...” he encouraged again. “Before I lose all my good intentions.”

“As long as I’m there when you do...” Catherine whispered brokenly.

She accepted his gentle insistence toward the light, and she went. She did not look back. She couldn’t...

She went up the ladder and re-entered her world. She unlocked the door to her darkened apartment and walked inside. She leaned back against the door and pushed it closed.

She didn’t feel like sleeping. “Vincent...” His name feathered past her lips.

Suddenly, her telephone began to ring. The strident summons had an edge to it that made her frown.

“Now what?” she demanded to know as she stood away from the door.

After three rings, her answering phone picked up the call. Her own voice came on the machine. “You have reached 555-8291. Please leave a message after the beep...”

The beep sounded, and then Rita began to speak hurriedly. “Are you there, Cathy? Where are you? It’s about Joe. Please be there...” Her voice was filled with agitation.

Catherine crossed the room and picked up the receiver. “Hi, Rita. I’m here. What’s wrong with Joe?”

“Oh, thank *goodness!*” Rita breathed rapidly. “Joe left work yesterday to go and meet a man called Patrick Hanlon.”

Her sigh shuddered down the phone line. “The police told me that Pat was blown up by a car bomb and Joe’s seriously hurt in hospital. He’s been asking for you. No one knew where you were or how to get in touch with you.”

“Well, I’m here now. Which one?” Catherine questioned. “Which hospital?”

“St Clare’s,” Rita said. “He’s in St Clare’s. You’d better hurry.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can,” Catherine replied. “Thanks, Rita.” She hung up the telephone on the other woman’s stammered reply and hurried into her bedroom to get changed.



Catherine paid off her cab and ran into the hospital. The nurse at the reception directed her to Joe’s floor.

She took the elevator and hurried down the corridor to the nurse’s station. “Hi,” she said to the doctor who was standing there. “I’m here about Joe Maxwell. I’m a friend.”

The doctor looked solemn. “Oh, he’ll be in surgery for quite a while.”

“Could you tell me what happened?” Catherine begged. “Please...”

The doctor’s expression became more sombre. “He’s survived an explosion that should have killed him. He needs blood. That’s all you can do for him right now.”

He pointed back down the corridor, the way Catherine had arrived. “Why don’t you speak to the duty nurse? She’s at the outside station.” He walked past her, leaving her in turmoil.

She blew a frustrated sigh before she turned and followed him down the corridor. She found the duty nurse and followed her directions to give blood.

Then she sat and waited in the ward's soulless waiting room. Time ticked inexorably by on a wall clock like small hammers of doom that found an echo within her aching temples.

It seemed like hours before the nurse reappeared and summoned her to Joe's bedside. "You can see him now. He's in Room Five and awake. But he's groggy. He might not make much sense until the sedative starts to wear off."

"Thanks..." Catherine nodded quickly as she gathered her things.

She left the waiting room and found Joe's room. She approached the bed slowly, wondering what she would find. Her heart jumped with compassion when she saw him.

Her irascible boss looked defenceless and helpless, lying flat in a bed and hooked up to many wires and beeping machines. His blackened eyes were closed, and his face was bruised and cut. A large white dressing covered part of his forehead.

"Oh, Joe..." Catherine murmured. "Look at you. I'm so sorry..."

Joe groaned and rolled his head toward the sound of her voice. But his eyes didn't open.

Catherine bent closer. "The doctor said you were lucky..."

Joe swallowed tightly. "Yeah..." he managed through dry lips. "Some luck..."

Catherine shook her head. "You're alive."

"You call this livin'?" Joe croaked with a wry attempt at humour.

He frowned as he stared up at her. His memory went back to his good friend and how they'd parted right before the attack. He remembered tucking the book Pat had given him into his jacket pocket as he walked away. And then his whole world had exploded into flames and excruciating pain.

"The book..." he managed to mumble through his dry lips. "Book..." He shook his head.



“Don’t try to talk,” Catherine replied as she leaned closer to soothe his agitation.

“There’s a book...” Joe tried again. “Important...”

Catherine shook her head. “What book?”

“Pat gave it...” Joe muttered. “Before...”

“Patrick Hanlon?” Catherine asked, as she leaned closer still.

“Why he... was killed...” Joe managed to tell her.

Catherine nodded quickly. “I’ll get it. In the meantime, try to get some rest. I’ll be right back.” She gave him a quick smile. “Don’t you go anywhere.”

“Won’t...” Joe nodded and relaxed. His eyes closed, and he drifted away back into fitful unconsciousness.

“Hang in there...” Catherine bit her bottom lip.

She left the room to find a security guard. She showed the man her credentials and asked for access to Joe’s belongings and clothes.

He took her into the patient property room and opened one of a bank of lockers. “Here you go...” He turned away to wait for her by the open door.

Catherine pulled out a large plastic bag full of Joe’s things. She carried it to a nearby table and opened the bag. She found his suit jacket and then the black book tucked into the inner pocket.

She opened it and began leafing through the pages. The words swam before her eyes. None of what she saw made any sense. She sighed and gave up.

She thanked the security guard and left the property room. She walked back down the corridor with the book in her hand.

As she reached the double doors, one opened, and the nurse she’d seen to give blood walked through. “Oh, Miss Chandler. Good. I’m glad I caught you.”

“I don’t understand...” Catherine stared at her in confusion. “Is something wrong with Joe?”

“Oh, no,” the nurse replied. “No, I just thought that you should know that you shouldn’t really have given blood.”

Catherine shook her head. “Why not?” Her mind wasn’t on this odd conversation.

The nurse smiled. “Well, because you’re pregnant.” She glanced down at Catherine's abdomen.

Catherine stared at her blankly. She tried to speak, but nothing came out.

The nurse was immediately contrite. “I’m sorry,” she stammered. “I just thought you should know that. Listen, if you like, I can send your test results on over to your own doctors...”

Catherine stared at her. She tried and failed to process the incredible information. She knew she couldn’t ask how or why or when. The nurse had no idea. She had simply shared the news.

“I... Thank you...” Catherine nodded quickly and went on her way with the nurse’s statement echoing and re-echoing in her mind.

Without realising where she was going, somehow her feet found their way to the maternity unit and the nursery full of newborn babies. She stopped before the viewing window and stared at the array of tiny babies in their cots. Her mind swirled with images and memories that sent a blush into her cheeks.

She frowned as she turned away and returned to Joe’s room. She found him still unconscious. His attending nurse told her there was no point in waiting. Joe had been freshly sedated and wouldn’t wake again for some hours.

“Thank you... Please, tell him I was here.” Catherine nodded and hurried to leave the hospital.

Once back at her desk in the D.A.’s office, she sat down and picked up the telephone receiver. She quickly punched in a telephone number.

She waited to be connected. “Yes... Jenny Aaronson, please?”

She was connected with Jenny's PA. "Hi, Nicole. It's Catherine Chandler. Is Jenny in?"

"I'm sorry, Miss Chandler. She's tied up with a writer's conference. She won't be free for some time. Do you wish to leave a message?"

"Oh, okay... Um, no, there's no message. She's got my numbers." She paused. "Nicole, will you tell her it's important?"

"Of course. Is there something wrong? Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Oh, no, no. There's nothing wrong. I just... Ah, I need to talk to her."

"Then, I will tell her as soon as she's available."

"Okay, thanks..." Catherine hung up and shook her head.

She sat at her desk for some time. She pulled the black book Joe had given her from her handbag. She opened it and tried to make sense of the contents once more. But it couldn't hold her wandering attention.

On impulse, she got up and went to John Moreno's office. She knocked on the closed door and opened it.

"Come in..." Moreno called as he waved her inside. He was on the phone.

"It's all right, we'll order something in. I don't care. Italian, Chinese. Italian's fine."

Catherine walked up to his desk and waited. She held the book in her hands.

Moreno ended his call. "All right..." He hung up the receiver. "Molly..." He grimaced. "So, good news about Joe, huh? That man has more lives than a cat."

"Yeah..." Catherine responded with a distracted smile. "I suppose. He looked better than I expected."

She looked down at the book in her hands. "Take a look at this..." She handed it over.

"What's this?" Moreno frowned as he pushed a pair of spectacles onto the bridge of his nose.

Catherine explained, “Hanlon gave it to Joe just before the bomb went off. I’ve cross-referenced what we have on Hanlon and—”

“And?” Moreno frowned over the book.

“Well, except for a few dates, I can’t make any sense out of it,” Catherine admitted. “It’s some kind of code.”

Moreno looked up. “Did you check the SCC records?”

Catherine shrugged. “I tried. No match there either.”

Moreno frowned as he went back to the book. He leafed through a few pages and then stopped and stared.

“What?” Catherine leaned closer.

“Nothing, really...” Moreno mused with a frown. “Except for these two sets of initials.” He looked up again as he turned the book toward her.

“MD and HT?” Catherine read them slowly.

“Yeah...” Moreno mused. “Malloy Davidson and Hanover Norton Trust...” His eyebrows rose. “Between the two, they’ve just about underwritten every major development project in the city. They are dangerous players and not to be crossed lightly.”

He removed his glasses. “Who else has seen this?”

“You’re the first,” Catherine assured him.

Moreno consulted his wristwatch. “Look, I’ve got to be downtown in about five minutes. Why don’t you let me hold onto this? I’ll take a closer look and see what I can figure out.”

Catherine straightened up. “Actually, I’d like to keep it. But I’ll run you off a copy.”

“Fine...” Her boss smiled as he stood up. “Let’s move on this,” he said as Catherine was about to leave the room.

She turned back and nodded. But again, her mind was far away from any notebook or its mysterious contents.



Catherine returned to her desk after delivering the copies to Moreno's vacant office. But she soon gave up trying to do any more work. Without Joe to oversee her every move, she felt ill at ease.

She couldn't wait for Jenny to call her back. She gathered her things, made her excuses and went home. Without any sleep, she was now bone weary and dispirited. She was working on very little sleep and not much to eat. She walked across her living room and opened the doors to her balcony. She crossed to the brick wall and stood staring down at the cityscape.

She was still there as the night fell once more. She was only too aware that her most cherished possession, her intimate contact with Vincent, had been shattered by his illness. She'd never needed that connection more than right now.

She nodded her head and returned to her darkened apartment. The truth needed to be faced and soon. To do that, she needed to see Vincent.

She changed her clothes and made her way Below through the sub-basement entrance. She walked down the tunnels toward where the people lived, and she hoped Vincent would also be there.

She walked to the entrance to his chamber and stopped to look in. She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw him seated at his desk. His head was bent, and he seemed to be staring at nothing.

Catherine walked in slowly and stopped. "Vincent..." she called to him softly.

He frowned and turned his head to her. His expression was so sad and lonely.

"What is it?" Catherine asked quickly.

Her love shook his head. He remained silent.

Catherine searched for answers. "Are you all right?"

Vincent looked down and nodded jerkily. "Yes..."

Catherine steeled herself. "I need to talk to you..."

Vincent turned to her again. "I can see that you do..."

Catherine stood still and stared at him. Worry crept into her expression. He looked as if he'd just lost his best friend.

"There was a time when I would have come to you," Vincent continued.

"What do you mean?" Catherine took a step closer. "I don't expect you to –" Vincent turned further. "Catherine, I look in your face and I can see your unrest..."

He got up and swung around. "There was a time when I could have felt it here..." He placed one hand against his lower chest. "Feel what you were feeling, *Everything!* Across the city. Across a continent. Your heartbeat was echoed within mine."

He sighed. "Now I have to wait for you to tell me."

Vincent turned away. "There was a time when I could feel you coming to me. Feel you nearing the tunnels. It was a source of great joy radiating from you, filling *me* with joy."

His look of loss returned. "Tonight, I waited. Til the sentries sent me a message that you were here."

"What's different now?" Catherine asked with tears choking her voice.

"It's gone..." Vincent paced back and forth.

Catherine frowned. "What's gone?"

Vincent turned back to her. "The connection. Our connection. Our bond..."

"It'll return," Catherine replied with more confidence than she felt.

Vincent shook his head. "No, I don't think so."

"Have *faith* that it will," Catherine insisted determinedly.

"It's lost to me, I know..." Vincent looked forlorn.

"*How* do you know? *Why* do you say that?" Catherine flared.

"Because it is the price..." Vincent shook his head. "The price I must pay for this... new peace. This contentment. But, Catherine, what have I lost?"

“I don’t think that it is lost,” Catherine countered quickly. “And even if it is, Vincent...” She walked toward him. “It was a gift. That power was a gift. It came to you in a life when it was needed and you used it, and perhaps it is no longer needed.”

“More than once it saved your life,” Vincent replied.

Catherine nodded. “Maybe the gift will return to you in another form. Something you never even dreamed of.”

She moved closer still. “Vincent, your power was extraordinary. But it has nothing to do with what we are together. What we feel for each other. That is our connection. And if one gift is lost, there are others waiting to be found. Believe me.”

Vincent shook his head. He still looked unconvinced.

“*Vincent!*” Catherine lost more of her patience. “There are so many gifts waiting for you.”



She looked at him. “All you have to do... All you need to do is open your arms to receive them.”

Vincent nodded slowly. “I believe you...”

“Just open your arms...” Catherine said again. She stopped and waited.

Vincent opened his arms, and she walked into them. They closed around her, and she rested her cheek against

his shoulder.

“Now, tell me...” Vincent rested his chin against her hair. “Tell me what’s troubling you so much.”

“Oh, Vincent...” Catherine snuggled closer. She felt reassured by his warmth and care for her.

“How do you feel now?” Vincent prompted gently. He slipped two fingers beneath her chin and lifted her face, so her eyes looked up into his.

Catherine could see herself mirrored in their azure depths. They held nothing but his deep love for her. “There are no words...” she countered softly.

“I’m sure you could find one, if you tried...” Vincent kissed the tip of her nose and waited.

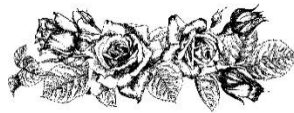
“Oh, my love...” Catherine pressed her chin down and kissed his inner wrist. “I truly feel blessed. There is so much I need to tell you. More than you could ever possibly know...”

“Then, come...” Vincent pulled away from her and took her hand in his. “You look tired. You need to rest...”

He drew her to his bed, where he lay down and encouraged her to lie with him. She did so willingly on a sigh drawn from the depths of her soul. This was truly where she belonged, and she needed to tell him that. But first, she had something else far more important that she needed to impart...

Vincent threw a nearby blanket over them before he curved her slender body tightly into the solid warmth of his. His comforting embrace said he was not going to let her go until he knew the truth.

He kissed her hair. “Now, tell me. Tell me what it is that troubles you so, my love...”



*“There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle...”*

***Albert Einstein***





By Judith Nolan



***Disclaimer:*** *Beauty and the Beast does not belong to me, unfortunately.*

***Author's Note:*** *When I originally watched Beauty and the Beast back in the 80's I never knew that I would still be involved in this beautiful fandom all these years later.*

***Summary:*** *Based around season 3's 'Though Lovers Be Lost.' I found it completely heartbreaking the first time around, and it took me a long time to rewatch this particular episode. Coming back to it now, so many years later, I found it still has the same power as it did when it first aired. This is very much an SND story and is my version of what I would have liked to have seen happen.*

*\*Thank you to Kelly for reading through for me.*



Sounds from the traffic on the roads on the street below cut through the silence of Catherine's sunlit apartment. The bright sunshine streaming in through the open windows caused her to blink at the bright rays that bathed her bedroom. She was already so tired, and her heart was caught between elation and fear. She was still reeling from the news she'd received from Joe's nurse two days ago, and she was still a little dazed. She'd found herself visiting children's clothing stores, drawn to the tiny outfits that hung along various rails. She couldn't quite believe it, even now, that she was going to be a mother. Even though the shock had merged into joy, she

felt the whole prospect a little overwhelming.

Lowering her eyes down to her flat stomach, she slid her palm over her child, who was nestled safely inside. She knew she had to tell Vincent he was going to be a father, but she was worried how he was going to react. She already loved this child who was conceived from love at a time of desperation. She only wished Vincent's memory of the event had stayed with him, showing him how beautiful their physical act of love had been.

Closing her eyes, she fought against the tears which had been ever-present since she'd learned of the life growing inside her. All she wanted was to be in Vincent's arms and for him to ease her fears. She loved him so deeply, and she knew he felt the same for her, but oh, how she missed the old Vincent who could know how she was feeling without even speaking. He would have known of her turmoil, and she had no doubts he would have already felt a connection to his child.

Catherine sighed heavily as she opened her eyes once more. Squinting at the bright sunshine, she swung her legs over the side of her bed to sit upright. Instantly, she began to feel like the whole room had tilted to the side, the feeling bringing sudden nausea along with it. She held her fingers to her mouth as she tried to quash the dizziness that caused everything around her to spin. Lifting herself onto her feet, she kept one hand against her mouth while she guided herself with the other. Her fingertips skimmed across the furniture as she passed each item in a slow movement, each step taking her closer to her bathroom.

Once she finally reached her destination, the nausea hit her full force, and she managed to get to her toilet in time. Between the dizziness and vomiting, she sobbed in anguish, wishing she were Below and not here, alone in her empty apartment. When there was nothing left in her stomach, she swiped a hand across her mouth and used the wash basin beside the toilet as leverage to pull herself upright. The dizziness was still there, but slightly muted now, and as she held onto the basin, her eyes caught sight of her own reflection in the bathroom mirror.

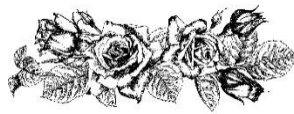
The woman looking back at her was extremely pale, but her eyes were glowing with a radiance she hadn't ever seen in herself before. No matter

how miserable her rebelling stomach was making her feel, she couldn't deny how much love she saw radiating from her own eyes. She didn't want to be here in this apartment, not now. Her heart was Below, where her unborn child's father called out to her in silent longing. At that moment, she knew exactly what she needed to do.

The dizziness was slowly easing away, enough for her to move slowly, but confidently, back towards her bedroom. Catherine could feel her heart lifting as the joy of her condition sparked its way through her body, leaving her without any doubt in what she was planning to do now. Reaching inside her closet, she took an empty overnight bag from the bottom shelf and placed it at her feet. Her eyes lingered over the open bag with only a slight feeling of trepidation before she lifted her gaze up to the many garments hanging up on a long rail.

It was a lot cooler in the tunnels, at the moment, and she knew she would need warm clothing if she was to stay Below for a few days. If things went how she hoped with Vincent, then maybe a few days would turn into weeks and then months. Once he knew about the baby, she had no doubt that he would be reluctant to let her out of his sight, and that alone filled her with hopeful joy.

Reaching out, she pulled a warm sweater off the rails and smiled as she folded it before placing it in the bag at her feet. That was followed by a loose-fitting blouse, pants and her favourite pair of soft cotton pyjamas. As she placed the pyjamas inside to join the rest of her clothing, she felt so much lighter than she had in two days. She nodded to herself when she grabbed underwear, a pair of jeans and a light sweater in her hands, before making her way back towards her bathroom to shower and dress.



Vincent was seated at his desk with his head resting on his joined hands when she stopped at the entrance to his chamber. For a moment, she watched him, her eyes drinking in the very sight of him. He was such a

beautiful man, and her heart swelled with love as she stepped over the threshold and into his room.

“Vincent,” she spoke softly, waiting for any signs that he’d sensed her presence. She placed her bag onto the ground just inside the entrance and slowly moved towards him.

When he turned to her, his eyes held so many emotions that she was suddenly struck with a need to protect him. But before she could open her mouth to ask him how he was feeling, he stood to his feet to offer her a small smile, sadness etched in his watery gaze.

“I need to talk to you about something,” she told him, her voice shaking slightly as she spoke. “But you look troubled. What’s wrong?”

“There was a time when I would have come to meet you and feel joy as you approached, but the bond, the connection we shared, has gone.” He lowered his eyes down to his hands before lifting his gaze up to her face. “Now I have to wait for the sentries to send a message that you’re here.”

“Oh, Vincent,” she whispered sadly as she moved closer towards him.

“Don’t you see that none of that matters as long as we are together.”

“How can I accept that I can no longer feel you? Our bond, our—”

“Our bond was a gift,” she told him, cutting through his words when she laid a hand on his arm. “Maybe it is no longer needed now. It doesn't mean that we love each other any less now than we did before.”

“Catherine...”

“Maybe the gift will be returned to you in another form,” she told him with a soft smile. “We still have each other. We still love each other fiercely, and maybe that is all we need now... and maybe that is our gift.”

Vincent watched her as she stepped a little closer, her smile lifting his heart from the loss he’d been feeling.

“Open your arms.”

Her voice was like soft velvet soothing his senses, and without any other thought, he opened his arms wide and welcomed her into his embrace. His

eyes closed when she wound her arms around his body and dipped his head to rest atop hers. In that moment, he felt a peaceful love wash over him, and he couldn't think of any other gift better than having her in his arms.

They stayed wrapped together for a long time, both content to feel their warmth seeping into one another. Catherine inhaled the scent that was uniquely his and tightened her hold around him. She didn't ever want to let him go.

"What troubles you?" he asked, his voice disappearing into her hair. "Tell me."

Catherine closed her eyes as she listened to the steady thrum of his heartbeat beneath her ear. She had no idea how she was going to tell him of their child that she carried, or how he would react to the news, but as she slowly lifted her head to look up into his eyes, she felt the familiar feelings of unbalance surrounding her again and tightened her grip on his waist.

"*Catherine...*" he gasped in alarm as she suddenly started to sway as if her knees were disconnected from the rest of her body. Within seconds, he pulled her arms away from his waist to bend and scoop her up effortlessly, holding her tightly against him.

"I'm okay," she told him in a wavering voice, doing her best to reassure him while trying to fend off the dizziness overtaking her body.

"No, you are not," Vincent's voice was etched with worry as he moved towards his large bed and lay her gently onto the soft mattress. "I'll fetch Father."

Catherine shook her head and reached for him, catching his hand in hers before he could leave. "No...it's okay."

"Catherine, you're sick. I'll fetch Father and..."

"No, Vincent, not yet," she kept her hold on his hand, her fingers squeezing his as she implored him to listen. "Sit with me."

Vincent looked down at her small hand, marvelling how it fit neatly in his own. With a heavy sigh, he did as she asked and sat down beside her on the

edge of the mattress and reached out with his free hand to lay his palm over her forehead.

“I’m not sick,” she told him softly, swallowing hard. The room was still spinning slightly, causing her to tighten her hold on his hand until the worst of it had passed.

“Catherine,” he implored softly, fighting with his feelings of whether to fetch Father or stay by her side. He removed his hand from her forehead and sat back a little, allowing his gaze to meet hers.

Catherine could feel the dizziness pass and carefully pushed herself back to sit up against his pillows, without letting go of his hand.

“Vincent,” she started, her voice wavering slightly as she tried to think of how she was going to tell him. “We...” she stopped again as she fought with the welling tears which threatened to spill over onto her cheeks. “What do you remember of the cave?”

Her question caused Vincent to tighten his hold on her hand as he shook his head. “I remember nothing, Catherine. It is as if my memory of that time has been erased beyond a point that I cannot reach. When I try to think of that time, I am greeted with nothing but darkness.”

Catherine lifted herself up a little higher and leaned closer to his side, bringing her free hand up to lay her palm on his face.

“I couldn’t bear to leave you there,” she told him in an almost whisper. “You were in so much pain and I...”

When her voice faltered, Vincent lifted his hand to close over hers on his face. “Tell me... please, Catherine... I... need to know... did I... *hurt* you?”

“No, my love,” she told him, her soft voice reaching somewhere deep inside him to ease his fears. “No...”

Vincent watched her in wonder as she eased herself even closer towards him until he could feel her warm breath against his skin. He was mesmerised as she inched even closer and felt his whole body spark into life when she pressed her lips to his in a gentle touch. His eyes slipped closed when she broke free of his hand that still held hers tightly within his own.



He allowed her touch to soothe the small fires she was creating throughout his body, and when she untangled their joined hands still clasped together on his knee, he was powerless to stop her. Catherine smoothed her fingertips over his arms and shoulders until she reached behind his head, pulling him in towards her. She shuffled even closer to press her lips to his, delighting in the slight shiver from his body. Opening her mouth against his, she ran her tongue over his lower lip, thrilled by the instant recognition their closeness instilled in each other.

Vincent was lost in her as she deepened their kiss. His tongue brushed against hers, the contact sparking a flash of memory to burst into his mind. Images came to him in a sudden rush, and he pulled back from her so suddenly that she cried out with the loss of him.

“*Catherine*,” he gasped out her name with such wonder when the memories of her body reached out to him. He remembered it all now; the feel of her hands gliding over his torso, pushing at clothes as they both sought out one another's touch. He remembered how they had loved, their bodies joining in perfect sync as if they had always been destined to join. And he remembered the pure joy of tumbling over the edge with her and the feeling of total completeness.

His mouth found hers again, capturing her in a deep, drugging kiss as he slowly eased her backwards to lie against the pillows once more. His hands seemed to move all on their own, skimming over her body with the recognition of a lover's touch. He sank into their kiss, overjoyed with the way her eager fingers tugged his head closer as if she needed to be held tightly against his body. The need for breath finally pulled them apart, leaving them both panting and gazing at one another with heated wonder.

“Oh, my love,” he whispered, his breath fanning her lips. “I remember...”

“You remember?” she asked with a breathless smile. “You remember how we loved?”

“Yes,” he chuckled, feeling lighter than he had in weeks. Lowering his head to hers, he pressed soft kisses over her face to continue a path over her chin

and her throat before coming back up again to recapture her lips in another searing kiss.

Catherine couldn't keep her body still. Every nerve ending called for him, needing his touch as much as she needed to breathe. She could feel the ache of arousal igniting the flames as she grasped handfuls of his woollen tunic, desperate to feel his heated skin beneath her fingers.

A loud gasp and a hurried apology broke their way through the fog of passion to abruptly pull them apart. Foreheads touching, they both gasped for breath, panting heavily, both reluctant to pull away from each other.

"I'm so sorry," Father's voice sounded strangely high as he turned his head away from the couple who were still wrapped around one another.

"I...um..."

Vincent reluctantly released his hold on Catherine and sat up to watch his father with a wry smile. "What is it, Father?"

"What?" Father turned back towards the couple, his cheeks flaming red.

"Oh... I... uh..."

Catherine couldn't help the soft chuckle that escaped her lips as she sat herself up and shuffled to the edge of the bed to sit beside her lover. She eyed her forgotten bag that was still in the same place on the floor near the entrance of Vincent's chamber. She wondered if Father had seen it as he'd entered, and what he must think of her now. She moved to stand, but a sudden wave of dizziness forced her to sit back down abruptly again.

"*Catherine?*" Both Vincent's and Father's worried cries sounded at the same time, worry stretched through that one word.

Catherine shook her head and lowered her hand from her mouth as she reached across to take one of Vincent's hands in hers. She knew the time had come to tell him, and maybe having Father here too would be a blessing, but before she could speak, Vincent was looking towards his father with frantic eyes.

"Father, Catherine is sick," Vincent spoke urgently, his voice tinged with worry as the older man moved closer.

“Vincent,” shaking her head once more, Catherine urged the man she loved to turn back to her. She offered him a watery smile as she lifted their joined hands to place his open palm on her still flat stomach. She met his gaze, hoping he would understand what she was trying to tell him. “I’m not sick.”

For a moment, Vincent’s eyes slipped down to his hand on her stomach, watching as her thumb stroked over his fingers in a tender touch. His mouth slipped open, stunned and then total shock scoured through him to be finally soothed into wondrous joy. Lifting his gaze back to the woman he loved, he met her eyes with complete awe. Neither spoke when he slipped off the bed and onto his knees, kneeling before her to bring his other hand up to meet their joined ones on her abdomen. His fingers began to move over her flat stomach, gliding his thumbs over the material covering her, marvelling how her heat seeped into his fingers.

Catherine’s eyes filled with tears as she watched this beautiful man slowly lean in closer to her stomach to press a soft kiss over their joined hands. She moved her hand that was covering his, so he had better access to their unborn child, and instead threaded her fingers through his hair. For a moment, she allowed herself to indulge in the feelings he was invoking in her, but when she lifted her gaze up to the other, forgotten man in the room, she sobered quickly. Her fingers tightened in Vincent’s hair, causing him to pull his head away from her. Tilting his head upwards to see what had startled her, he followed her gaze and turned to see Father standing motionless, watching them with his mouth agape.

“Father,” Vincent’s voice broke through the silence, his joy filtering through his eyes. “A *child... My child...*”

Jacob watched these two wondrous people with so much love. They had come through so much heartache, and so many uphill struggles... and now, when so much had befallen them, they had held strong and become... remarkable. A few months ago, he would have reacted to this news with absolute horror. Another child with the same features as his beloved son, Vincent, should fill him with dread, but somehow, it didn't. Catherine had proved her devotion to his son time and time again, and no matter how much this new child and Catherine's pregnancy worried him, he couldn't

not share the joy with this young couple. Tears flooded his eyes as he tried to keep his voice from breaking as he spoke. He couldn't help the slight catch in his voice when he finally could speak, emotion seeping into his words.

"Catherine," he spoke, his voice wavering. "You are truly amazing."

Catherine offered him a watery smile when Vincent's hand found hers once more. She hadn't expected this from him. She'd expected anger, maybe a lecture, but not the man close to tears and struggling to speak. She opened her mouth to respond, but before she could say anything, he had surged forward to engulf his son in a tight embrace, before turning his attention onto her.

"My dear Catherine... there are no words." Reaching down for her free hand, he pulled her to her feet and wrapped her into a tight embrace. He was overcome with so many emotions, ranging from fear and worry to complete joy. He rocked her slowly from side to side, only pulling away when she groaned.

"Sorry," she told him weakly, placing her fingers over her mouth. If she hadn't felt so nauseated, she probably would have found Vincent's and Father's expressions almost comical, but she could only focus on her queasy stomach.

"Nausea?" Father asked her, already knowing the answer. "One of the unpleasantities of early pregnancies."

Vincent looked at the woman beside him with worry as he helped her to sit back down onto the bed. Within moments, he was kneeling beside her, desperate to ease her suffering in any way he could.

"I'm okay," Catherine told him, reassuring him with her touch, even though she was trying to ignore the rolling nausea hitting her.

"Tell me what I can do," he urged, worry etched in his gaze as he turned towards the older man beside them. "*Father*, what can I do?"

Jacob saw how Catherine's features had become increasingly pale and knew the only thing she needed right now was plenty of rest. Turning to his son,

he placed a comforting hand on his shoulder and smiled tenderly. “I think Catherine needs you to stay calm.”

“Vincent,” Catherine’s soft voice urged him to look at her. “Could you maybe bring me some water, and something close by if I need to throw up?”

Vincent smoothed his thumb over Catherine’s fingers and slowly got up from the bed, reluctant to leave her side. Her reassuring smile eased his worry, albeit only slightly, and he stood up from the bed. “Of course...I will fetch anything you need.”

Catherine’s hand tightened in his before allowing him to step away from her. “I’ll be alright.”

Vincent slowly released her hand, his fingers gliding over hers before fully releasing her. He looked towards his father, knowing without asking that he would stay with her until he returned. Nodding, Vincent turned and made his way to the doorway, only stopping when he heard his father’s voice.

“While you’re fetching those things, pay a visit to William and ask if he has any of that ginger ale left over from last week. I’ll stay with Catherine,” Father called out when he was already nearly at his doorway. Vincent nodded quickly, giving one last look at the woman he loved, before heading out of the door.

Once they were alone, Father held the palm of his hand over Catherine’s forehead before removing it just as quickly when she wasn’t overheated. Reaching down for her hand, he placed his fingers over her pulse point, quietly counting her heartbeats. When he was satisfied there were no outward signs of anything wrong, he lowered her hand back to the mattress, patting her fingers affectionately. “Do you know how far along you are?”

“No,” Catherine shook her head slowly as she moved her hand to her abdomen. She tried to calculate how much time had passed since the cave, but sighed when her brain wouldn’t cooperate. “Maybe five weeks... six...”

Jacob nodded, noting that her conception was in line or very close to Vincent’s breakdown and the horror of Paracelsus. He didn’t want to push

her, so he started thinking like a doctor instead of a father. “Have you had an examination?”

“No...” her voice was almost a whisper, and she suddenly felt very emotional. “I found out from a nurse who was treating Joe after the accident. I'd given blood, and she caught me when I was on my way out... I didn't know how to tell Vincent, especially when he didn't remember anything.”

“Oh, Catherine,” he sighed sadly, knowing that she had been dealing with this news alone. “Well, you're not alone in this. You are with your family, and we will support you in every way. I'll also send for Peter, and between us, we'll manage your care and the baby's.”

Catherine's eyes seemed to fill with tears without warning. Delicate droplets spilled from her eyes to carve wet tracks over her pale face. She hadn't realised just how much she needed to hear that from him. Reaching out for his hand, she sniffed and laughed at the same time, until she crumbled into soft sobs when he sat beside her on the bed and put his hand on her shoulder.

“Everything will be alright, I promise you,” Father told her, his own eyes glistening with unshed tears as he spoke. “You are going to be in good hands.”

That's how Vincent found them when he returned carrying a large jug in one hand and a basin in the other. At first, he felt a surge of anger towards his father, but when the older man looked up at him helplessly, he placed both items on his desk and moved swiftly towards them. Father shifted from the bed so Vincent could take his place before he left the couple alone. On his way out of the chamber, his eyes caught sight of the overnight bag that was unmistakably Catherine's and smiled. Seeing the bag filled him with a small amount of relief; this meant that she was hopefully going to stay Below for a while. Glancing behind him one last time, he saw his son lovingly remove Catherine's shoes one at a time and climb onto the bed to sit beside her against the pillows and pull her into his arms. Jacob left them then, knowing that they both needed each other. He smiled even though worry tugged at him. This pregnancy was one that had never been, and he

would be lying if he wasn't afraid for Catherine. So, with determination flowing through him, he made his way to Pascal with an urgent task: to get a message to Peter.

Once they were alone, Vincent tugged the woman he loved close to his body and wrapped his arms around her. Her soft sobs had already subsided, giving way to contented silence. Catherine swallowed heavily and shifted to lay her head on his chest, content to be beside him for the rest of her life. Her stomach had stopped rolling, the nausea quickly easing away with the heat of his body. She felt like she was in a dream, living a life she had always wanted to live. Lifting one of her hands, she smoothed her fingers over the woollen tunic covering his chest.

"Do you think we're dreaming?" she asked in a whisper as she snuggled in closer to his body.

"Hmm..." his words rumbled, vibrating through his chest. "If we are, then I never want to wake up."

Catherine smiled and closed her eyes. So many emotions were floating through her, sending her from blissful happiness one moment to a blubbering mess, the next. She hadn't expected to feel this happy, ever. She was finally here with the man she loved so desperately, and she couldn't quite believe it. Tilting her head so she could see his face, she felt her whole body come alive.

"Do you remember the night we met?" she asked as she lifted her fingers to stroke his grizzled chin. "Have all of your memories returned to you?"

Vincent inclined his head so he could look into her eyes. Grasping her hand at his chin, he curled his fingers around hers and planted a soft kiss over her knuckles

"Not all, but some," he told her honestly. "I remember feelings mostly and the way my heart recognised you, even if my memory did not... I remember opening my eyes in that darkness to see you looking down at me with so much love in your eyes, and I knew..."

When his voice trailed away, Catherine looked up at him and squeezed his fingers, urging him to continue. "What?"

Vincent sighed in contentment, relishing the peace which had overtaken his body since he'd returned from the darkness. Lowering his head slightly, he nuzzled her hair, his lips pressing kisses into her silken strands.

"I knew... I loved you," he told her in a whisper as he pulled her tighter into his body. "There is no other feeling as powerful to me except the one you gave me today."

Catherine smiled as she turned her face so her cheek was resting against the soft wool covering his firm chest. She knew what he was referring to and tightened her arms around him. "The baby?"

Vincent's heart soared with that one word, which held his dreams inside the infinite possibilities. For so many years, he'd thought that dreams were never meant for him, but this beautiful woman had broken down every single barrier standing in their way and crumbled them into dust. Her love had healed all of those places he didn't know were broken, and she had turned all of those denied dreams into something far more beautiful than he could have ever imagined.

"There are no words," he whispered, elation filtering through his words. "I never knew I could feel like this."

Catherine moved, enough to break free from his arms so she could sit up and turn her body fully towards him. The nausea had gone to be replaced by the overwhelming need to love him like they had started to before Father had interrupted them.

"I love you so much," she told him softly, lifting one of her hands to stroke his face with her fingertips. "That day in the cave... you were so *still*, and I thought I'd lost you."

Vincent listened intently, leaning his cheek into her hand. He wanted to tell her nothing mattered except their love, but he knew she needed to say to him something that he already knew. He brought a hand up to cover hers on his stubbled cheek and turned his face to press his lips into the centre of her palm. Clasp her fingers, he lowered their joined hands into his lap and looked into her watery eyes, waiting for her to continue.



"I kissed you," she told him as she shifted up onto her knees, still grasping his hand within hers. "... And you *responded*."

Their eyes held as they slowly moved towards one another as if they were drawn together by an invisible string. Their lips met in a tender kiss, which quickly merged into a desperate passion. Catherine lifted higher on her knees and increased the pressure. Her hands roamed up his chest and over his shoulders to bury her fingers into his hair. She moulded her body against his, needing to be as close to him as possible. One smouldering kiss followed another, as they touched and caressed, expressing their love for each other with fervent strokes.

His lips left hers to trail soft kisses down her throat, sparking passionate fires everywhere they touched. Catherine angled her head to give him better access and closed her eyes as waves of desire crashed over her body. Her breath seemed to leave her in soft, desirous gasps when he began kissing his way back towards her chin, every kiss a testament of his love for her.

"*Catherine*," he whispered when he moved to her ear, his breath fanning against her skin when he continued his mantra. "*Catherine...*"

Vincent tugged her closer. He loved this woman so much; no words could ever describe what he felt for her. He was totally lost in her, and when her fingers came down and raked over his chest, he knew he would give anything in his power to make her happy. No one, no *woman*, had ever made him feel so completely loved.

He delighted in the tiny gasps she made when he kissed his way back up her throat. She angled her neck to accommodate him, her soft gasps spurring him onwards until he couldn't bear to be parted from her any longer. He grazed his lips up towards her chin, placing open-mouthed kisses along the way, until his lips met hers again for another scorching kiss. Her body surrendered to him when he gently pushed her backward down onto the mattress.

His mouth left hers briefly so he could lift himself up and look down into sparkling eyes. Her lips were slightly swollen, and her breathing was coming in deep, shuddering gasps, and he didn't know if there would come

a time when he could possibly love her more than he already did. Her passion-filled gaze called out to him and he slowed his movements. Leaning over her he kissed her gently, moving his lips to caress every part of her face before pulling back to gaze down at her. He still couldn't quite believe he was about to make love to her a second time, or how his body knew exactly what to do. For a moment he hesitated, worried he was going to crush her with his weight, but before he could vocalise his concerns, she reached for him.

"I need you," she whispered, pulling his head down to kiss him again. His long mane fell forward, covering their faces like a curtain, shielding them from the outside. In the back of their minds, they both knew they could be interrupted at any moment, and they should stop and wait until they could guarantee some privacy, but passion banished those thoughts from their minds. She opened her mouth beneath his once more, eagerly stroking her tongue against his, surrendering herself to him in every possible way. Making love with him their first time had been spurred on by sheer desperation... but their joining had been so powerful. She had never felt anything quite like it before, not with anyone.

Catherine parted her thighs and eagerly pulled him down to lie on top of her, closing the distance between them. A small groan of frustration left her lips when he held himself above her, resting on his elbows. She could see the desire as he gazed down at her, but she could also see something else too... *fear*.

"You won't hurt us," she whispered reassuringly, knowing he was concerned for their child. "Our baby will be fine."

He still hesitated, but when she threaded her fingers through his hair, urging him closer, he surrendered and relaxed against her body. When his mouth covered hers in another heated kiss, he felt every nerve in his body spark into life, spurring him onwards. He gasped into her mouth when she reached for his hand to guide him up to her breast, squeezing his fingers over her soft mound. He followed blindly as she showed him what she needed, and within a few moments, his passion-filled mind caught up with

the rest of him. His mouth left hers for a brief moment to help her off with the sweater, leaving only her bra between his hand and her bare skin.

They kissed again, like lovers who had known each other for all of their lives. A soft moan escaped from her when he started to explore; his thumbs gliding over her breast to bring her nipple to a peak beneath the material barrier. He could feel Catherine's restless fingers gathering at his waist and pulling at his sweater as she sought out his skin beneath. With a groan, Vincent tore his mouth from hers as he gasped for breath. Lifting himself up, he manoeuvred his body, allowing her to reach her fingers beneath his tunic. Their eyes met and held when it rose higher, her nimble fingers gathering the material higher until he had to sit upright so he could cross his arms over his torso to lift the heavy garment from his body. He shivered when her hands instantly landed on his chest. She opened her fingers wide as she moved her palms over the fur covering his skin, marvelling with the feel of him.

Dipping his head, Vincent placed his lips over hers, drawing them into another intoxicating kiss. He groaned into her mouth when her wandering hands explored his back only to slip lower until she came to the waistband of his jeans. Their lips parted with an audible groan and their eyes met, holding one another in a passion-filled gaze.

Eyes still joined, Vincent laid his hand onto her stomach, sliding his palm over the silken skin before hooking his thumb over the waistband of her pants, pushing at the material until they were halfway down her thigh. The heady scent of her arousal assaulted his senses, and for a moment he wanted nothing more than to kiss down her body until he came to the apex between her thighs. In the back of his mind, he knew there wouldn't be time to prolong their lovemaking, not with the hour and the possibility of being discovered at any moment. So instead, he teased her with his fingers, delighting in the low moan that escaped from her parted lips.

Catherine's body was on fire from his touch, and she suddenly leaned up to kiss the underside of his chin as she desperately pushed at the cloth barrier, manoeuvring her pants and underwear down past her calves until she had one leg completely free. A gasp escaped her lips when the hardness of his

arousal nestled against her bare centre. He gasped when her fingers found his erection, stroking him through the material covering him. He hissed when a thunderbolt of pleasure shot through him and he removed his fingers from her aching core. Catherine groaned with disappointment, but he knew from his limited experience that he wouldn't last very long if they didn't hurry things along.

He could feel himself trembling when her nimble fingers closed over the belt at his waist. He watched her in wonder when she expertly pulled at the buckle until it came unfastened in her small hand. Within moments she had pulled at his zipper and pulled his member free of the cloth barrier keeping them apart. Widening her thighs, Catherine lifted both legs to ease his jeans over his backside and thighs with her feet, until they were seated just above his knees. Both of them knew their joining this time would only be one of pure need, and there would be time for slow lovemaking the next time. With the tunnels still awash with the residents Below, they were both aware of the lack of privacy, but their need for one another overruled any other thought.

Their eyes met again when she grasped the very essence of him and guided him closer to her entrance. Vincent felt dizzy with passion, gasping breathlessly when he slowly inched into her. The feel of her was better than he remembered and he fought to keep himself from moving inside her too quickly. He remembered how his body sought hers their first time back in the cave, and how she took him to unfathomably intoxicating highs. He kept his eyes on her when they merged together, watching for any signs of discomfort when he slowly began to move inside her. The sensations she was evoking in him as she welcomed him into her body were almost too much, and when he was fully sheathed within her, her eyelids fluttered closed as a contented sigh escaped from her lips.

She gasped out his name when they started to move, slow at first. Gentle quickly dissolved into heady lust as they moved faster, meeting each other thrust to thrust. Soft gasps and groans filled the chamber, and the heady smell of arousal filled the air...but they both sought completion with one another and when she groaned out his name as he took her over the edge of

passion, she was lost in the powerful shocks that erupted inside her whole body. With grasping fingers, she clutched him tighter, riding out his powerful thrusts as he half roared, half groaned when he buried himself deeply inside her as he chanted her name, whispering it one last time as she pulled him in. With one final thrust, he felt the powerful surge of love erupt when he tumbled over the edge, spilling his seed deep inside her.

They held each other until their ragged breathing became more controlled, and their shaking began to subside. Vincent leaned up on his elbows so he could look down into her eyes and smiled when she lifted her thumb to trace over his rough chin.

“I love you,” she told him in a whisper, and he couldn’t stop himself from lowering his mouth to hers to gather another soft kiss before he withdrew from her body. Their lips parted and they both proceeded to readjust their clothing, sharing almost bashful smiles as they redressed. Afterward, Vincent pulled back the bedcovers and waited for her to climb inside before he followed, tugging the covers over them. They settled back against the pillows, arms wrapped tightly around each other, content to bask in the afterglow of their love. Catherine’s soft sigh caused him to tug her closer and nuzzle her hair with soft kisses.

“Love you,” she mumbled with a content smile as she closed her eyes. “So much...”

Vincent smiled into her hair and marvelled at this total feeling of completion washing over him. His arms tightened around her shoulders and his fingers fanned wide over her back as he too closed his eyes when tiredness tugged at him.

“I love you,” he whispered softly, fighting the pull of sleep, but he couldn’t win this battle. With her body heat seeping into him, he allowed it to lull him into slumber beside the woman he loved

**End**



## You And Me

by Judith Nolan

“Y

ou and me - all that lights upon us though, brings us together like a fiddle bow, drawing one voice from two strings, it glides along. Across what instrument have we been spanned? And what violinist holds us in his hand? O sweetest song...”

“I love Rilke...” Catherine sighed against Vincent’s shoulder. “Thank you for introducing me to him.” She wrapped her hands around his upper arm.

“My pleasure...” Vincent closed the book of poetry. “Are you tired? Do you want to go inside?”

“No...” Catherine snuggled closer. “Not yet. It’s such a beautiful night. The moon is full and all the stars are out. Please, read me some more...”

She settled deeper into the pile of cushions set against the wall of her balcony. “Then we can go to bed.”

“All right...” Vincent laid his hand over the rounded swell of his beloved’s abdomen as he drew her closer. “How about a little E.E. Cummings...”

He rested his cheek against her hair as he quoted from memory, “*I do not know what it is about you that closes and opens. Only something in me understands the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses. Nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands...*”



“**Pretty Woman**” Fan Video by Judith

<https://youtu.be/B5qejdj20PU?si=46iJzgYwDJeSWXuX>

[\\*Return to Table of Contents](#)



By Judith Nolan









## Cotton Candy

*by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova*



otton candy, Radcliffe? Really?”

“Huh...? What do you mean, Joe?”

“How much cotton candy did you have to eat to throw up in Sleeping Beauty’s castle?”

“Way more than it would take you with your chocolate cheese nuggets in a room full of reporters.”

“Ha-ha, very funny.”

“I wasn’t trying to be.”

“Sure. I see that naughty sparkle that you have in your eyes every time you’re messing with me.”

“Sorry, Joe.”

“You’re so not, Cathy, but you’re forgiven.”

“Thanks.”

“So... Is Vincent still up for that chess game tonight?”

“Of course, he is. He took Jake and Charlie swimming in the Mirror Pool for the afternoon, but I bet he can’t wait to beat the life out of you across the board again.”

“You’re doing it again, Radcliffe.”

“Messing with you? It would never even cross my mind.”

“Of course, it wouldn’t... Well, he said I’m getting better with every next game.”

“Vincent’s always been very... diplomatic.”

“Is *that* supposed to lift my confidence?”

“You don’t need any lifting, Joe. You’re the most confident man I’ve ever met.”

“Was that a compliment?”

“Would I ever lie to you?”

“Let me think... I’m trying to count all the times you hid something important from me.”

“That was not lying. That was... withholding important information to protect Vincent and the Tunnels.”

“All right, point taken. But I bet there were other times you went behind my back despite my orders.”

“Well... I admit I’ve always liked a good challenge.”

“A challenge, right? Okay, Radcliffe. I’m challenging you to a game of chess right now, in this cosy and spacious kitchen of your new, lovely family home. We’ll see who’s the loser here. It’s Saturday, and we have all afternoon to have fun with it. And stop smirking!”

“OK, calm down, Joe... It’s a deal. But there’s something I need first before we start, to get me into the mood properly.”

“Can I be of any help? Shall I get any snacks? Fruit gushers? Dorritos?... Chocolate cheese nuggets?”

“Urgh! Wipe that smirk off your face, Maxwell. Well... There is a new stand in Central Park about ten minutes away from our house.”

“Yes...?”

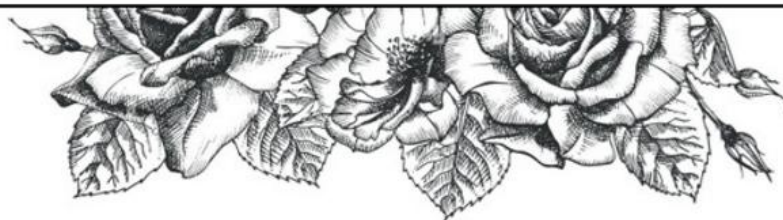
“Could you be so kind, saving me the time while I set up the board and put the kettle on for another round of coffee for us, and...”

“Yes...?”

“Bring me some cotton candy, please?”



**By Michaela Buzsaki Struchova**







---

# Severed Bonds

---

*by Janet Rivenbark*

---



## Vincent & Catherine Alternate Ending PG



### PROLOGUE – early July 1989

“**B**ut Vincent... please listen to me. This is important.” Catherine was frustrated and almost to the point of tears. He’d never been like this before. He was refusing to listen to a word she said.

“No! I told you, the Bond is gone, and I’ve found that it was the Bond that was compelling me to protect you, to go to you when you were in danger. Not feeling everything you feel has liberated me. I’m at peace for the first time in over two years. And I know now that the love I thought I felt for you wasn’t mine at all. The Bond was projecting your feelings to me so strongly that I couldn’t tell them from my own. I am very fond of you, Catherine, but I don’t love you... Not like that. It would be better for both of us if you left... and found someone Above. I’m sure that won’t be difficult.”

With those last words, he turned and walked out of the chamber, leaving Catherine in stunned silence. A few minutes later, Jamie came in.

“Catherine? Ah... Vincent said you needed an escort back to your threshold?” Jamie was uncertain just what was going on, but she knew it wasn’t normal.

Catherine looked at Jamie and tried to smile.

“Yes. Thanks, Jamie.”

Jamie left Catherine at her threshold with a hug, as if she knew that she might not be seeing the other woman again.



**October 1989**

“This will almost be like being roommates and sharing a house like we did in college,” Jenny said as she looked around the living room of her half of the duplex that she was renting from Catherine. Catherine had bought the building and moved in the month before.

“Until there is a baby on my side crying at all hours,” Catherine reminded her with a smile as she rubbed her large baby bump.

Jenny patted Catherine’s belly. “I still think you look like you are more than four months. You sure it’s not twins?”

“Peter has checked. There is only one heartbeat, but he does say that the baby is going to be big. That’s why he’s advising a C-section.”

“Do you have a date yet?” Jenny asked.

“No. He’s thinking sometime in mid-February. We will have a better idea in a month or two. You will be the first to know.”

The two women walked through Jenny’s side of the duplex as movers carried furniture to the rooms Jenny directed them to.

“OK, this moving from a 600 square foot studio into a 2300 square foot two-story house is going to be interesting,” Jenny observed with a laugh. “I have enough furniture to fill part of a bedroom and one corner of the living room. I’m going to have to do some shopping. You up for that?”

“Whenever you are ready. I still need to furnish a nursery.”

The two women spent the entire following Saturday shopping. By the time they chose a restaurant for dinner, Catherine was exhausted, but had found everything she needed for the nursery, and Jenny had finished furnishing her bedroom, living room, and kitchen, along with a table, several chairs, and a desk.

“It’s going to be nice to have a place to put a computer so I can work at home,” Jenny said as they were leaving the restaurant later.

“I enjoy having a home office too,” Catherine agreed. “I don’t have to spread the files out on my bed or the floor anymore when I bring work home.”



The next few months were quiet. Both women were settling in and enjoyed having the other close for a change. And in December, Nancy came and stayed with Catherine so the three of them could do their Christmas shopping over the weekend.

“So, your doctor has advised you to have a C-Section,” Nancy said as they were eating dinner on Saturday night. “Do you know when they are going to do it?”

“Peter estimated my due date to be the end of February, so he scheduled it for Monday, February 19<sup>th</sup>,” Catherine said.

“Is Jenny going to be with you?” Nancy asked. “If she can’t, I’ll come down.”

“I’ve got that whole week off,” Jenny assured her. “But if you want to come down, you can stay at my place. I finally got one of the other bedrooms furnished.”

“Since Jenny will be with you, I can plan to be here for a while when you get home.” Nancy laughed. “Neither of you knows the first thing about babies; a C-section is major surgery and can take a lot out of you. You can probably use a little help for a while.”

“That’s not necessary, Nancy,” Catherine protested. “I don’t want to inconvenience you.”

“It’s no inconvenience,” Nancy told her. “We are all only children, and you have lost both your parents. We depend on each other... we’re sisters!”



**February 13, 1990**

Catherine had been restless all day, puttering around the house, putting finishing touches on the nursery. It was almost midnight when she felt like she might be tired enough to sleep.

She was drying off after her shower when she felt a gush of warm liquid run down her legs.

She stood stunned for a moment. Then she wrapped the towel around herself and headed to the phone next to her bed.

She dialed Jenny's number.

"Hello?" answered a sleepy voice.

"Jenny, it's Cathy... my water just broke."

"What? But it's not Monday yet..." After a pause while she gathered her wits, she continued. "Sorry... just a little foggy. Are you in labor?"

"I haven't felt any cramping, just the gush. Peter said to call him if anything happened. He will probably tell me to meet him at the hospital."

"OK, you call him, and I'll get dressed and be right there."

Not long after, at 2:54AM on February 14<sup>th</sup>, 1990, Charlotte Elise Chandler was born.



**November 25, 1999**

"Mom, when is everyone supposed to be here?"

Catherine looked at her daughter and smiled.

"Don't be impatient. Dinner isn't until 2:00. Aunt Jenny, Uncle Joe, and Joey will be here in a few minutes, and Uncle Peter should be here around 1:00."



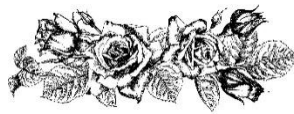
Almost as soon as the words were out of her mouth, a 5-year-old whirlwind who was the image of his father blew into the kitchen.

“Mama and Daddy are coming in a minute,” he announced.

“See,” Catherine said to her daughter. “Why don’t you and Joey go watch TV. Listen for the bell and let Uncle Peter in when he arrives.”

“Uncle Peter is already here. Jenny let me in,” Peter said as he walked into the kitchen with Jenny and Joe right behind him.

“The gang’s all here,” Joe said.



Thanksgiving dinner had gone well. Catherine and Jenny had been taking turns hosting it for the last few years.

Peter had been alternating his time between New York and his daughter’s family in Santa Fe since he retired. He would stay in New York until after Winterfest, then head to Santa Fe, for Christmas and spend the winter there before heading back to New York sometime in May.

Catherine was checking on Charley before heading off to bed herself.

“Don’t stay up too late,” Catherine said from the door of Charley’s room. Charley was sitting in bed with a book.

“I won’t, I’m tired,” Charley told her.

“What are you reading?” Catherine asked as she crossed the room and sat on the side of the bed.

“Little Women,” she answered. “I just got to the sad part.” She put a bookmark in the book and put it on the table next to her bed. “Uncle Joe was funny today.”

“Uncle Joe always has something funny to say,” Catherine agreed, “although there are times at work, even in court, when I want to shush him.”

Charley looked thoughtful for a moment. “Do I have a real grandfather?” she asked, looking up at her mother. “I mean, one who is alive. I know your Daddy died before I was born.”

The question took Catherine by surprise. There had been a few questions over the years, but never anything about Charley’s father’s side of her family.

“Well, yes, you do. Uncle Peter knows him well.”

“What’s his name? Is he old?”

Catherine had to chuckle. She suspected that the dam had broken, and she would be answering a lot of questions in the future.

“His name is Jacob Wells, and I guess he’s about 75 or 76 now. He’s just a little bit older than Uncle Peter.”

“So, my father’s name is Vincent Wells, and Uncle Peter knows him? Why isn’t my name Charley Wells instead of Chandler?”

“Yes, Peter knows your father. And your father was adopted by Jacob,” Catherine explained. “He’s never really used the last name Wells, although if he ever needed it, I guess he could. And you are Charlotte Chandler because your father and I never got married.”

Charley’s brow furrowed. “Why not?”

“That is a long story, Charley. But the simplified version is that we had a disagreement and didn’t see each other afterward. I told you I was never able to tell him about you.”

“But you said that Uncle Peter knows him. Why didn’t Uncle Peter tell him?”

“Because I asked him not to,” Catherine said, hating to admit it, but not wanting to lie to her daughter.

“Why?”

“It’s hard to explain, Honey, especially since I never completely understood the whole situation myself...” Catherine paused, wondering where to begin and how much to share with Charley. “It was just that your father and I

were very different. I was the daughter of a wealthy, successful lawyer, and Vincent grew up with very little. There were times when he felt that we just didn't have enough in common. He tried to send me away more than once, but he finally succeeded that last time. To be truthful, I was tired of fighting. I was pregnant with you, and you became my priority."

"Will I ever meet him?" Charley asked, sadly.

"I don't know, Honey. I'll talk to Peter. He sees Jacob and your father fairly often. He might have some insight."

She tucked Charley in and kissed her. "Sweet dreams, Honey."

The next day, Catherine called Peter and arranged to meet him for lunch. She left Charley with Jenny and went to the restaurant to meet Peter.

"You didn't get enough of me yesterday?" he asked when they were both settled at their table.

"Never!" Catherine said with a laugh. "And I need some *fatherly* advice."

"Hm. That sounds serious. What is it?"

"The questions have started," Catherine told him, then went on to relate the conversation with Charley the night before.

"You knew it was going to happen eventually," he said.

"Yes, I did, but she's only nine, and I just don't know how much detail to include."

"You said that you told her that you and Vincent are different. You didn't go into any of the real differences?"

"No, I stuck with the financial and class aspect of it. I didn't go anywhere near the rest of it."

"Well, she is nine, almost ten. Lin and Henry have one about that age and another who is younger, and both of them have been entrusted with the secret. I'm sure that once Charley understood, she could keep the secret."

"You don't think that Vincent's differences would upset her?"

“You know her better than anyone, and you also know how most kids react to him. She might be over the moon to have him as her father.”

“You are right about that. She loves fairy tales and fantasy stories; *The Chronicles of Narnia* is one of her favorites. Do you think I should spring it all on her at once, or give it to her in small doses?”

“I would start at the beginning of your story, and gauge it as you go. Stop if she starts to glaze over, then pick it up again later.”

As soon as Peter returned to his house, he went down to his basement threshold and sent a message on the pipes asking for someone to guide him to Father’s study. He had an idea.

After greeting Father and accepting a cup of tea, Peter asked his question.

“What would you think of me bringing Catherine Below to Winterfest this year?”

He and Jacob had discussed this more than once, how they might reunite Catherine and Vincent. Father was always saying how sullen and sulky Vincent had gotten after he’d sent Catherine away, and Peter would add that Catherine didn’t seem as happy as she’d been when she and Vincent were still together. He’d never told anyone Below about Charley, because Catherine had requested that he keep it to himself.

“Have you invited her?” Jacob asked.

“No, I wanted to discuss it with you first. What do you think Vincent’s reaction would be?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. Not long after he sent Catherine away, Devin visited, and he told Vincent that he was an idiot for sending her away. And he repeats that sentiment every time he visits. The last time Vincent even admitted that he was probably right but added that what was done was done. When Devin said he was going to visit Catherine, Vincent threatened to throw him in the Abyss.”

Both men laughed at that.

“Seriously...” Peter finally said. “What do you think of the idea?”

“It’s been ten years. At least they might take the opportunity to talk. They might not reconcile, but they might be able to at least come to terms and part friends,” Jacob suggested.

Catherine had spent a good bit of time composing the story she planned to tell Charley. She’d even made notes, then went to the cedar chest where she kept keepsakes. She put several things into a box, and the next morning, she took the box and her notes with her to the kitchen. She was sitting at the table, drinking coffee and reading the newspaper, when Charley came down.

“You ready for breakfast?” she asked as Charley yawned and took the seat across the table from her.

“Uh-uh, not yet. Can I have some coffee?”

“You are definitely my daughter,” Catherine said with a laugh. She kept a jar of instant decaf coffee in the cabinet. She put some milk in a saucepan to heat, then mixed the instant coffee with some hot water. She poured that into the saucepan with the milk and heated it all. Lastly, she added sugar. She poured it into a big mug and set it in front of Charley. It was really nothing more than sweet coffee-flavored milk, but Charley loved it.

Catherine let Charley enjoy her *coffee* before she spoke again.

“I was thinking about what we talked about the other night, and I think it’s about time I told you more of the story.”

“About my father?” Charley asked excitedly.

“About how we met and some of his story,” Catherine agreed.

“Please don’t start with *Once upon a time*,” Charley warned, wrinkling her nose at her mother.

“Well, it does have a little bit of a fairy tale feel,” Catherine told her with a grin. “I met your father in April of 1987. I was dating another man and had attended a party he was hosting. I got a little angry at him, so I left early. I was mistaken for another woman and kidnapped. A man slashed my face...” Catherine opened the box and took out a copy of the police photo of the cuts on her face and the newspapers that her father had saved.



Charley looked at the picture, then looked at her mother.

“There aren’t any scars,” she commented.

“I had them fixed,” she explained. “My father found a very good plastic surgeon.”

Charley looked at the newspaper and read part of the story.

“It says you were working at your father’s law firm. How did you wind up at the District Attorney’s office?”

“That came about partly due to meeting your father. I’d been rather bored and dissatisfied working in corporate law. And while I was recovering from the assault, he and I talked a lot... but let me backtrack a little...

“The men who kidnapped me slashed my face and beat me up pretty badly. I had a lot of bruises and some cracked ribs. Then they dumped me in the park in the middle of the night. Your father found me there. I had lost a lot of blood and possibly had a concussion. He was afraid I was too critically injured for him to get me to a hospital, so he took me to his father, Jacob. Jacob is a doctor, and they took care of me for almost two weeks before I was healed enough to make the trip back to my home.”

“Where were they?” Charley asked.

“Ah, that is the interesting part,” Catherine said with a slight smile. “There are people in this city who don’t have homes. They sleep in shelters or on the sidewalks, and they eat what they can find or what people give them. But some of those people have found a refuge, a community below the city.”

“Below the city?” Charley questioned, her eyes getting big.

Catherine tried to remember the way Vincent had explained it to her that first time.

“They’re below the city... below the subways. They have been there for at least forty years. There’s a whole world of tunnels and chambers that most people don’t even know exist. There are no maps to it... It’s mostly forgotten. But it’s warm and safe... and they have plenty of room... so they live there, and they try to live as well as they can. They take care of each other. It’s their city,” she paraphrased. “They have people here Above who help them. People like Uncle Peter and me, although they don’t know that I still help. Their home is a secret place, because the people who run the city wouldn’t be happy if they knew they were there. So, you mustn’t ever tell anyone about it.”

Charley nodded. “But you said that my grandfather is a doctor, why does he live there?”

“A long time ago, he stood up for what was right, but there were people who didn’t like it, so he lost his license to practice medicine, his family, and his home. He met someone who took him to the tunnels.”

“And my father?”

Catherine knew that this would be the most delicate part.

“Your father is there because he is *different*. He was found as a baby. Jacob and Peter say that he was probably less than a day old, but because of his differences, he was *thrown away*. Someone had put him in the trash behind St. Vincent’s Hospital, and one of the women from the tunnels found him and took him to Jacob. He was sick and they didn’t think that he would live, but he did, and eventually he got better, and he started to grow and thrive. Everyone loved him, and he grew up Below where everyone took care of him. When he grew up, he started to take care of them.”

“Like he took care of you?” Charley asked.

“Yes. His father said he would have made an excellent doctor. He is brilliant. He speaks several languages and has read just about everything worth reading. He even helped me with some of my cases after I left my

father's law firm and began working for the DA. There are children Below, and he is one of their teachers."

"And you've told me I got my blue eyes from him?"

"Yes, and your blond hair, and you will be tall like him, much taller than me. And you are smart like him."

"You're smart," Charley pointed out, loyally.

"But not the same way," Catherine said with a laugh. "But thank you."

"But why is my father living down there? He doesn't sound like one of those street people?" Charley pointed out.

"Do you remember that I said he is *different*?" When Charley nodded, she continued. This was where she had debated with herself. "He looks different. Some people find him frightening, but I always thought he was beautiful. But because of how he looks, he seldom comes Above, except at night when he can stay in the shadows. Mostly, he stays in the park when he's not Below."

"Frightening?" Charley asked. Catherine could tell that a multitude of thoughts were racing through her mind. "But he doesn't scare you?"

"No." Catherine reached into the box again and found a small dark blue velvet gift box, the kind that usually held a necklace or some other jewelry. She had put the crystal pendant necklace in it, and a small pencil sketch of Vincent was inside the top. She opened it and handed it to Charley. "That is a necklace that he gave me on the first anniversary of when we met. And that drawing is one that one of the children Below drew of him and gave to me for Christmas one year."

Charley studied the small drawing for several minutes before looking at her mother.

"He is beautiful!" she exclaimed. "I can't believe he's *my* father."

Catherine breathed a sigh of relief; she was hoping that Charley would have that reaction.



Catherine had an arrangement with Peter. She had a housekeeper who worked Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. On those days, Charley would go home after school, and the housekeeper would stay until Catherine arrived. But on Tuesdays and Thursdays, the van from Charley's school dropped her off at Peter's, and Catherine would pick her up there.

When Catherine arrived to pick Charley up on Tuesday, following their talk, she was in the kitchen finishing her homework.

"Let me finish this," Charley said when Catherine arrived.

"You go ahead," Catherine told her. "I want to talk to Uncle Peter."

They went into the living room, and Catherine took off her coat.

"Were you bombarded with questions?" Catherine asked when they were seated.

"I was," Peter said with a chuckle. "I assume that your talk went well."

"Amazingly well," Catherine told him. "I had some things that I'd kept, and I let her keep them. I think she read every word of the newspaper accounts of what happened. And I gave her a drawing of Vincent that Samantha gave me. She's been full of questions ever since."

"She asked me a lot of questions, too. But they were more about Jacob than Vincent."

"She's found family that she didn't know she had. I'm surprised she wasn't upset with me for keeping it from her for so long."

"I asked her about that; she was quite logical and mature about it," Peter told her. "She said that if you'd told her when she was much younger, she might not have understood the need to keep the secret. But she also said that if she'd told anyone about her father, they probably wouldn't have believed her anyway," he added with a laugh.

"I'm sure she didn't get that maturity from me. I don't think I was that *old* when I was her age."

"Oh, and I saw Jacob a few days ago, and he's suggested that I invite you Below for Winterfest this year," Peter told her.

“You didn’t say anything about Charley, did you?”

“No. Jacob and I were just talking about Vincent, and he said that his son has been downright sullen and sulky since you left. He thinks, and I kind of agree with him, that maybe you two might like to sit down and talk about it. Even if there isn’t a reconciliation, maybe you can at least part friends.”

Catherine was silent for several moments. Did she really want to see Vincent again? She wasn’t sure.

“What about Charley?” she asked.

“If you think that she might like to meet her father, and that you want him to know about her, I’d say take her. If not, or if you’d like to wait and see how your meeting with him goes before telling him about her, then let her spend the evening with Jenny and Joe.”

“I think that if I decide to go, I really should take her,” Catherine said after some thought. “If he and I can’t be friends, she at least deserves to know her father. I’ve kept them apart for too long.”

“Don’t blame yourself for that,” Peter admonished. “It was Vincent’s decision to send you away.”

“But I could have found a way to tell him. I could have talked to Father, or Mary, or I could have even let you talk to him. But I was being just as stubborn as he was.”

“Who was stubborn?” asked Charley as she came into the living room with a stack of books under her arm.

“Your parents,” Catherine told her honestly. “Both of us.” Catherine patted the couch next to her, and Charley put her books on the coffee table and joined her.

“How would you like to go to a party with Uncle Peter and me?”

Charley lit up. “Sure. Where? What kind of party? Do I get to dress up?”

“Well, it’s kind of a Christmas Party, but it’s a few days before Christmas. The people where your father lives have a celebration every year; they invite all their Helpers, and Uncle Peter has invited us to go with him.”

“And I’ll get to meet my father?” Charley whispered hopefully.

“Yes, you will, but you will have to keep that to yourself until I have a chance to talk to him. Do you think you can do that?”

Charley nodded eagerly.

On Friday afternoon, Catherine looked up from the file on her desk to see Bennie standing at her office door, grinning at her.

“Long time no see, Beautiful!” he said as he crossed the room to stand in front of her desk. He handed her a narrow box that was almost a foot long.

“I’ve seen you,” she said with an answering smile. “But you were always going in the other direction at the speed of light on that bicycle.”

“I’ve recently upgraded to a scooter,” he informed her. “You know, places to go, things to deliver.” He nodded at the package. “That is from Father. Be seeing you.” He turned and was gone as quickly as he’d come.

Catherine put the box on her desk and opened it. It contained the signature orange, yellow, and white Winterfest candle. She had been officially added to the guest list.



Winterfest was on the Tuesday before Christmas. Charley was on Christmas break from school, and Catherine always took the last two weeks of December off from work so she could be with Charley. They had planned a lot, but Catherine was sure that Charley was looking forward to Winterfest more than anything else.

She and Charley had matching dresses this year. They were both velvet, calf-length, full-skirted dresses with fitted bodices and high necklines. The only difference was that Charley’s was royal blue and Catherine’s was dark forest green.

When they were both ready, they walked the two short blocks to Peter’s.

Vincent leaned against the wall beneath Peter's threshold, deep in thought. When Father had told him a few days before that Catherine would be at Winterfest this year, his first question had been "Why?"

"Because Peter wants to bring her, I would suppose," Father had answered. "Despite how you treated her, she has remained a Helper for the last ten years. She doesn't know that I know that she has continued to be as generous as she ever was. I sent her a candle when Peter suggested that he might invite her to come down with him."

Vincent hadn't been pleased, but he didn't feel like arguing with Father at the time. There was no use in it; it was too late to rescind the invitation.

Now, as he leaned on the wall, he found himself almost looking forward to seeing her and wondering what she was like now. He was sure she hadn't changed. He knew she was still working at the DA's office; he'd seen her mentioned in the papers from time to time. There were even a few pictures in the papers. He'd saved most of it, but hadn't told anyone.

His acute hearing alerted him to people descending the stairs from Peter's basement. It sounded like there were three people. That was odd. Father hadn't said anything about another guest.

Peter emerged from the door at the bottom of the stairs first. He greeted Vincent, then turned to offer his hand to Catherine as she stepped down from the raised area. Then another woman joined them.

*No, not a woman, a young girl. She is almost as tall as Catherine, but is just a girl.*

He nodded at Catherine.

"Catherine. How have you been?"

"I'm well," she replied. "It's good to see you again." She put her arm around the girl and pulled her forward. "And this is my daughter, Charlotte. We call her Charley."

Vincent was surprised to hear that Catherine had a daughter. She had Catherine's facial features.

Charley held out her hand as she'd been taught, and when Vincent took it, he was hit with instant recognition. He looked closer at the girl. She had blue eyes and blond hair, rather than Catherine's gray-green eyes and dark honey colored hair.

When Catherine looked at Vincent, she could see the anger and confusion in his eyes.

*How could he possibly know?*

"You didn't tell me!" he growled accusingly.

"But you didn't..." Catherine began.

Vincent held up his hand.

"Not now. There isn't time. We need to get to the Great Hall. We will talk after the opening ceremony."

He turned and started to walk away. Peter came up and put his arm around Catherine as Catherine did the same with Charley, while Charley looked up at her in uncertainty.

Catherine tried to smile reassuringly at her daughter.

They hurried to catch up with Vincent. No one said anything as they descended to the Great Hall.

The door was opened, and everyone filed into the dimly lit chamber. Catherine was surprised when Vincent took Charley's hand and led her to the head of the table to a chair next to his. Peter looked at her and raised his eyebrows before he followed and took the chair on Charley's other side. Catherine found a chair near the end of the table. Some people recognized her and greeted her, but to most, she was a stranger.

She watched as Vincent leaned down and said something to Charley as he handed her a candle. Charley nodded, then looked around the chamber for Catherine. When she found her, Catherine smiled and nodded. Charley looked relieved at that and sat down.

Catherine watched as Charley marveled at the story that was told and how the chamber lit up as the flame passed from candle to candle, and the enormous chandeliers were raised. She knew the feeling.

As soon as the ceremony was over, Vincent spoke to Father, who looked toward Catherine, smiled, and nodded. Then Vincent introduced Charley to Father, who first looked surprised, then looked back at Catherine. She watched as Peter took Charley's hand and headed toward the buffet tables. Then Vincent crossed the chamber to her.

"Come with me," he said shortly. They went up the stairs inside the Great Hall, which Catherine knew was a shorter route to the main level, but since it was narrow and dark, it was seldom used. The route led them to the back of the kitchen, and Catherine followed Vincent to his chamber. The tunnels felt empty with everyone in the Great Hall.

Vincent's chamber was warm. Vincent wasn't wearing his cloak, and he invited Catherine to take her coat off and sit.

Catherine complied, and when she was seated on a couch where Vincent's bed used to be, she studied him as he paced back and forth across the chamber in front of her. She didn't think she'd ever seen him this angry, at least not at her.

He finally stopped in front of her and fired one word at her.

"Why?"

She was stunned at its vehemence.

"Why?" she began. "You sent me away..."

But before she could finish, he was speaking again.

"Did you not tell me to *punish* me?" he asked.

"No, I..."

"Or was it just out of spite?" he interrupted again. "I have a child... a daughter? And you never saw fit to tell me? You kept her from me for what? Ten years?..." He went on for several minutes, but Catherine more or less

tuned him out. When he finally stopped talking and sat in his chair, she looked at him.

“Are you done?” she asked, a hint of sarcasm in her voice. “May I speak now?”

It was Vincent’s turn to shut up. He even looked contrite.

“I didn’t tell you because you wouldn’t let me. You did exactly what you were doing just now. You didn’t let me speak; I couldn’t get a word in edgewise. I came Below that night to tell you. I’d only just found out a short time before. I waited a little while to gauge your recovery and well-being. I wondered if it was the right time to add more stress to your life. I considered talking to Father, but I wanted you to be the first to know. But when I got here that night, you had your own agenda. You didn’t allow me to say more than a few words, and I doubt that you even heard the little I did say.

“Yes, I was hurt and angry when I left here, but I honestly thought you would have second thoughts and come to me or contact me. Or that you might remember what happened and come to me to ask for clarification. Or that maybe the Bond would return, and with it some semblance of sanity. I stayed in my apartment for a while before I concluded that you weren’t coming. That was when I decided that I had to start thinking of my baby and make a life for the two of us. I bought a house, and I moved.”

Vincent had watched her as she spoke. She could almost see his questions, and so she decided to answer them before he had a chance to ask.

“The pregnancy was completely normal. She was a big baby, so I had a C-section. And she was and is perfect. I named her Charlotte after my father, and her middle name is Elise, my mother’s middle name. She’s always been healthy as a horse. She does take after you in many ways. She has never been sick, and she’s already almost as tall as I am. She is in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, but was reading at about the 9<sup>th</sup>-grade level when she was tested a few months ago. They also had IQ testing in September, and her IQ was 139.” When he didn’t say anything, she asked her question. “How did you know?”

“When I took her hand,” he said, looking down at his own hands. “There was an immediate connection, and I just *knew*.”

“I should have thought of that possibility. It might have been better if I’d left her home tonight and not brought her down until I’d talked to you.”

“No. Don’t second-guess yourself.” He started sounding more like the Vincent she knew, and she relaxed a bit. “How long has she known?”

“She has known your name since she was old enough to grasp the idea of a father. But I always told her that you didn’t live near us. However, she became more curious after Thanksgiving dinner. Peter has always been like a surrogate grandfather, but suddenly she asked if she had a real grandfather. She knew that my father had died, but I’d never told her a lot about you. So, I told her a little about Father. I suspected that the conversation was only the beginning, so I got some advice from Peter. He suggested that I tell her the whole story, that she was old enough to understand the need to keep the secret. So, a few days later, I told her the whole story, or at least most of it.”

The conversation had gotten more reasonable, and the anger had dissipated.

“Can you forgive me, Catherine?” Vincent asked suddenly.

“For how you acted tonight or ten years ago?” she asked.

“Both. I really would like to start over.”

Catherine felt like someone had just punched her in the stomach. Surprised at her own reaction, she shook her head and held up both hands as if to fend something off.

“No! Absolutely not. I can’t do that again,” she said vehemently. “My life has been quiet and very nice for the last ten years. I can’t go back; I won’t. You hurt me, Vincent, and I won’t let you do it again. I can’t trust you like that again.”

“No, Catherine. I didn’t mean it that way. I meant I wanted to start tonight over. I could have handled all of it much better, tonight and ten years ago, but just now I meant tonight.” He looked at the clock on the cabinet. “And



we really should get back to the Great Hall. I want to spend time with Charlotte and get to know her.”

They rose, and Vincent helped Catherine with her coat. She was more than a little embarrassed at her outburst, but at least he knew how she felt.

“Let me warn you about one thing,” she told him as they left the chamber.

“Don’t call her Charlotte. I know you prefer to use proper names, but she prefers Charley. She hates Charlotte; she thinks it’s too old-fashioned, and the only reason she accepts it is because she knows that it is the feminine version of my father’s name, Charles.”

Back in the Great Hall, Catherine was pleased to see that Charley seemed to be fitting right in. She was with a group of children gathered around Sebastian, who was doing his magic tricks.

Mary hugged her as soon as she reached the bottom of the stairs.

“Come and get something to eat,” she urged, “before it’s all gone.”

When she and Mary were seated at one of the tables with their plates, her eyes kept straying back to Charley. Vincent had joined the group and stood behind Charley with his hands on her shoulders. Charley was leaning back against him, obviously enjoying the fatherly attention.

Mary saw where Catherine was looking.

“She was a surprise,” she commented.

Catherine looked at Mary and laughed. “She was to me, too,” she said.

“And Vincent knew nothing?”

“Not when he sent me away. His memory hadn’t filled in all the blanks yet; I don’t know about after that, but he obviously didn’t know until he met her. There’s a Bond.”

“Did you get a chance to talk?”

“Only a little. We needed to clear the air about why I didn’t tell him.”

After they ate, Mary took her around the chamber, introducing her to some people and reintroducing her to others. She found out that two of the children with Charley were Lena's daughter, Cathy, and Olivia and Kanin's son Luke. Most of the children who had been below ten years before were now Helpers, living Above.

Eric was 19 and in his sophomore year at NYU. Kipper and Samantha were both 22. Samantha was in her last year of nursing school; Kipper was working on a construction crew. Geoffrey was 21 and studying engineering at NYU. Brooke went above to study nursing, but after she got her degree, she came back Below to work with Father and Mary. She also learned that Luke had a brother and a sister, as Kanin had been released from prison five years ago.

It was getting late, and Catherine was considering leaving when Charley found her.

"Mom!" She hugged her mother. "Thank you for bringing me. This is so great, and I've made a bunch of new friends. Can we ask Daddy to come and help us put up our Christmas tree tomorrow?"

"I don't know, Honey." She looked up as Vincent joined them. "I don't know if it would be safe for him to join us."

"What time do you plan to start?" he asked. Charley had obviously taken the matter into her own hands.

"Well... We already have the tree. It's in water in the living room. We need some new garland and tinsel, and I want to get a wreath for the door. We probably won't get an early start tomorrow since we'll be up late tonight. So, I guess it will likely be after dinner."

"Charley said that you live near Peter. If you give me the address, I'll check Father's maps and see if there's access close to your house. If not, I can go up through Peter's threshold once it gets dark. That is, if it is all right with you."

“By all means, please check to see if there is a threshold nearby or even in our basement; the house is over a hundred years old.” She had carried a small purse down with her. She opened it and took one of her cards and a pen from her wallet. She wrote their address on the back, and after a moment of thought, she added their home phone number. She handed the card to Vincent.

He glanced at it and tucked it into a pocket.

At that moment, Father called for everyone’s attention, and everybody started to form a circle. Charley looked pleased to be between her parents... just like the other children and their parents... a real family.

Vincent escorted Peter, Catherine, and Charley back to Peter’s threshold. A little while later, Father found him in the study with several maps spread out on the table.

“Looking for something?” Father asked.

“Catherine gave me her address. She’s not far from Peter, and I was looking to see if any of the tunnels run close to her.”

“Any luck?”

“I think so.” Father went over to look, and Vincent pointed to something on the map. “This is her house. There is a tunnel that runs under the alley behind it. It’s the same tunnel that gives access to Peter’s. There is a closed access here,” he pointed to where the tunnel under the alley passed Catherine’s house. “If it’s showing a closed access, then I’m assuming there is something beyond that wall. I will check it first thing in the morning. The only issue might be that the house is a duplex. According to Charley, Catherine’s friend Jenny and her husband live in the other side. If there is access into the basement of that building, I just hope it’s Catherine’s side. Charley said they live in the corner side of it. It’s hard to tell from this map where the tunnel might lead.”

When Catherine and Charley walked home from Peter's, it had started to snow.

"Do you think it will stick?" Charley asked as they let themselves into the house.

"I don't know. The weather hasn't been able to make up its mind for the last couple of weeks, but the weather forecast on TV said that it's not likely we will have a white Christmas this year." They went inside and hung up their coats and took off their boots.

"Do you want some hot cocoa?" Catherine asked.

"Yes, please! It's cold outside."

They were seated at the table a little while later, sipping their cocoa.

"So, did you have fun tonight?" Catherine asked.

"I had a great time. All the people are so nice! And I finally got to meet my father. I hope he's able to come tomorrow."

"From what I know of him, he will do his best to keep his word. If there is a possible way to get here, I'm sure he will."

"It's exciting to think there might be a threshold in our basement. Can we go look?"

"Not right now," Catherine said with a laugh. "I don't think I would have any idea where to start looking. It will be easier for Vincent to do the looking from his side. They have some very detailed maps of the Tunnels Below."

Catherine and Charley left the house and had lunch before they started their errands. It was starting to get dark when the taxi pulled up in front of the house. Catherine was juggling packages as she tried to dig a key out of her purse when the door opened in front of them. Catherine was concerned at first, but Charley wasn't. She charged past Catherine into the house and disappeared around the back of the door. Catherine went inside and pushed

the door closed with her foot. She was greeted by the sight of her daughter hugging Vincent.

“How did you know we were there?” Charley asked.

“That is something I want to explain to you tonight,” he looked at Catherine, “if it’s all right with your mother.”

Catherine knew what he was referring to and nodded.

Vincent and Charley picked up the packages that Charley had dropped and followed Catherine into the kitchen. They piled everything onto the table, and Catherine took off her coat, handing it to Charley.

“Would you put this on the rack with yours?” she said. When Charley left, she turned to Vincent.

“I take it you found a threshold,” she said.

“Yes, and I hope you don’t mind me coming in. I’ve only been here for a few minutes and only came in because I knew you were almost here.” He looked a little uncomfortable. “I wanted to surprise Charley.”

That made Catherine laugh. She turned to the packages on the table.

“There are three bags of food from Henry’s restaurant somewhere in this.”

“I got Sweet and Sour Chicken, and Mom got General Tso’s Chicken. She said you like the Mongolian Beef.”

They sorted the bags of food from the other shopping, and Catherine went to make tea while Charley set the table and took everything out of the bags.

When they were all seated, Charley looked at her mom and then at Vincent and smiled. Catherine knew that she was thinking that she finally had what she’d always dreamed of.

“Was the threshold hard to find?” Charley asked.

“Not really. I looked at Father’s maps and found that the tunnel that goes to Peter’s extends all the way to the Hudson River, and there are several closed thresholds along it. This was one of them.”

“Where is it? In the basement, I mean?” Catherine asked.

“The tunnel is under the alley behind you,” he said. And there is a side tunnel that goes from it to the back wall of your basement. The door is hidden behind some shelves behind the furnace and the water heater. It wasn’t locked, and the shelf is hinged on the tunnel side. There’s a handle, and it opens out, since the furnace doesn’t leave room for it to open into the basement. It was very well-built and planned, so it was likely used extensively in the past. But it made an awful racket when I opened it. I’ll bring some oil the next time I come.”

“No lock?” Catherine looked concerned.

“The side tunnel was sealed at the main tunnel,” he assured her. “And I’ll talk to Mouse about finding a way to lock it so it can be opened from either side. No one would ever know it was there from your basement side, but if someone were to happen upon it from the other side, it’s obvious there is a door there because of the handle.”

After dinner, they put away the leftovers and cleaned up, then went to the living room to start on the tree.

It turned into a rather long evening because Charley had to tell Vincent the stories that went with each of the ornaments they put on the tree. It was after 11:00 when they finally finished, and Charley went upstairs to wash up and get ready for bed.

“Will you come and tuck me in?” Charley anxiously asked Vincent before she left.

Vincent was surprised at the request but agreed.

“Call me and I’ll come up when you are ready,” he told her.

“I hope you don’t mind,” he said to Catherine after Charley left. “I don’t want to encroach on your routine.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Catherine said as she stacked the storage boxes to be taken to storage in the basement. “She hasn’t wanted me to tuck her in for bed for at least a couple of years.”

Vincent took the boxes to the basement for her, and when he came back, Charley was ready to be tucked in.

“You said that there was something you wanted to explain to me,” Charley prompted when Vincent arrived.

“Yes, and we were having so much fun, I almost forgot. Thank you for reminding me.” He sat on the side of her bed. “Did your mother ever tell you about the Bond?”

At Charley’s look of confusion, he knew that Catherine hadn’t mentioned it.

“Your mother and I had a special connection. Do you know what the word empathic means?”

“Is it like sympathetic?” she asked.

“A little. Sympathy involves feeling sorrow or pity *for* someone else's misfortune, while empathy can actually mean sharing the feelings of another person. Empathy requires a deeper connection. The main difference is in the depth of the connection,” he explained.

“Some people are more empathic than others. Some people are even referred to as empaths because they have a natural ability to connect with others. I seem to be more empathic than the average person. When I’m with certain people, I can sense that they are upset, or perhaps in physical pain or not feeling well, but most of the time, I have to be in the same room with that person to *tune in* to them. But it wasn’t like that with your mother. I could feel her feelings, emotions, and sometimes physical sensations at a distance. One time, she was in Los Angeles, and I could tell when something frightened her. I called our connection a Bond.”

“Is that how you knew to open the door for us?” Charley asked.

“No, I no longer have that Bond with her. Just before we separated ten years ago, I was sick for a while, and when I recovered, I found that the Bond had disappeared. It never came back.”

When Charley looked confused, he quickly explained. “It seems to have transferred to you. When you offered to shake hands last night and I took your hand, it hit me. I knew immediately who you are; that you are my daughter.”

“But you were angry,” she pointed out in a quiet voice.

“It was only an initial reaction. I wasn’t angry because you were my daughter; I was angry because I hadn’t been told. But that was as much my fault as it was your mother’s. Probably more my fault when I think of it. We had a disagreement, and I sent her away before she had a chance to tell me about you. I was stubborn and refused to listen to her.”

That made Charley laugh. “When I’m being stubborn, she sometimes says that I’m just like you.”

“Don’t let her fool you,” Vincent said with a chuckle. “She can be just as stubborn sometimes.”

“So, if I stubbed my toe or cut myself, you would feel it?” she asked after a moment’s thought.

“No, I don’t think so; it seems different from the Bond I had with your mother,” he told her. “It’s strong, but I don’t know if I could connect with you over a great distance. It might change over time, but right now, it’s more of an awareness of you and that we are connected.” He reached out and took her hand. “But if I touch you, I can tell that you are sleepy, so I should tuck you in and let you go to sleep.”

“When can you come again?” she asked as she snuggled down, and he stood and pulled the covers up over her.

“I’m going to go talk to your mother,” he promised her.

Catherine had made a pot of tea and put out some cookies, and was sitting at the kitchen table when he came back down.

“She reminded me that I’d said there was something I wanted to tell her,” he explained as he took a seat across the table from her.

Catherine poured tea into a mug and pushed it across the table to him.

“How you knew who she was?” she asked.

“Yes. I briefly explained the Bond and how it seems to have transferred to her.”



“I can’t believe that I never considered that something like that might happen,” Catherine said with a shake of her head. “But I’m surprised that it wasn’t there from the start. That you didn’t know that I was pregnant that last time. Olivia said that you’ve always known when one of the women Below is pregnant, sometimes before they know.”

Vincent shrugged. “All my empathic abilities seemed to have disappeared for quite a while after I recovered. It was months before I had any sense of anyone, and then I had to touch them to establish the connection. I think that is what happened with Charley. I touched her hand.”

They were both quiet, sipping tea for a while.

Vincent pointed to his mug. “I see that you still like that herbal blend from Dr. Wong’s shop.”

“I did develop a taste for it, and it’s a good soothing blend in the evening. Charley likes it too.” She looked across the table at him. “How are we going to do this?” she finally asked.

“However you would like,” he told her.

“Did Peter say anything about our arrangement?” Catherine asked after some thought.

“No, what kind of arrangement?”

“My housekeeper is only here when Charley gets home from school three days a week. The other two days, the van drops Charley off at Peter’s house. But Peter left for Santa Fe today and won’t be back until May. Charley could stay with you on those days. Or would it interfere with your schedule?”

“I’ll rearrange my schedule,” he declared. “Where does she usually go?”

“Home with a friend, and I pick her up.”

“What days are they, and what time does she get home?”

“It’s Tuesday and Thursday, and she’s usually home between 3:30 and 3:45. And I’m usually home by 6:00.”

“No more overtime?” he asked.

“Not very often,” she told him. “When I told Joe that I was pregnant, I told him no more late nights, or I’d quit and become a full-time mom. I still bring work home, but since I was promoted to Deputy, I haven’t had to do it often.”

“When does she go back to school?” Vincent asked.

“Tuesday after New Year’s.”

“I’ll be here,” he promised.

“You aren’t going to wait until then to see her again, are you?” she asked.

“That’s up to you. What would you like to do?”

“Friday is Christmas Eve, and Saturday is Christmas. Would you like to spend one of them with her?” Catherine asked.

“Why don’t you come Below on Christmas Eve? Father, Mary and I usually have a small family gathering and exchange gifts then. Or you could come for Brunch on Christmas Day... either or both.”

“Charley and I do our Christmas, on Christmas day, in the morning, then have dinner that evening. We could join you on Christmas Eve.”

They agreed and set a time for Vincent to meet them, and Vincent left for the evening.

Catherine immediately began making a list. She hated shopping this late for gifts, but she wasn’t going to show up on Christmas Eve without anything, at least for Mary and Father.

The next day, Catherine and Charley were back in the stores. Father was easy. She’d given him bottles of her father’s favorite brandy in the past, so she got another bottle of that. She’d also given Mary perfume in the past. She found a bottle of Chanel and a silk shawl.

“But Mom. I want to give them something too... and Daddy.”

Every time Catherine heard Charley call Vincent “Daddy,” it tugged at her heartstrings. It stopped her in her tracks for a moment. But she recovered quickly.

“Well, Father wears scarves. How about a nice wool scarf?”

“And Mary?”

“What do you think?”

“Something warm? It’s kinda chilly down there.”

“A sweater?” Catherine suggested.

When the items were agreed on, it didn’t take long to find something suitable. But it took a while longer to figure out something for Vincent.

“What did you use to give him?” Charley asked.

“It was hard to get him to accept gifts,” Catherine told her, truthfully. “But he keeps a journal, or he used to. Maybe a nicely bound journal, or a set of pens. He prefers a fountain pen. He teaches, so maybe something for his desk?”

They wandered around Macy’s for almost an hour looking at things when Charley found what she considered to be the perfect thing.

“What did you find?” Catherine asked her.

Charley held up a heavy silver frame that could hold an 8x10 photo.

“That is perfect,” Catherine said with a smile. “You can give him one of the pictures that we had taken of you last month. I’m sure he will love it.”

When they got home, Charley wanted to wrap her gifts herself.

“That’s fine, the pictures are in the top drawer on the right side of my desk,” Catherine told her.

She was in the dining room, wrapping her gifts, when Charley joined her.

“Did you get the picture in the frame?” Catherine asked.

“Yep.” Charley reached across the table for the blue wrapping paper and began wrapping the box, which contained the frame.

They put the wrapped packages in a bag and set them next to the door to the basement.



On Christmas Eve, Vincent appeared in the doorway at the top of the basement stairs just as Catherine was finishing cleaning up after dinner.

“You’re early,” Catherine said as she finished wiping the counter.

Vincent glanced at the clock on the wall. “Only a few minutes. I hope you don’t mind me just coming into the kitchen unannounced.”

“No problem. We hardly ever close the door. The laundry room is down there, and so is Charley’s playroom. She has a TV and all her favorite shows on tape or DVDs. We are both up and down all the stairs in this house umpteen times a day. That’s how I get my cardio these days,” she told him with a laugh.

At that moment, Charley came into the room and threw herself at Vincent for a hug. Catherine felt a moment of nostalgic envy before she spoke.

“I hope this isn’t a dress-up affair,” she said. Charley was wearing a nice pair of charcoal gray corduroy pants and a red turtleneck sweater.

Catherine had a dark green coat dress and boots with low heels.

“You both look lovely,” Vincent said.

“Please, go get our coats,” Catherine told Charley. “And check to make sure that the front door is locked.”

“I like that you give her responsibility,” Vincent commented after Charley had left.

“A child won’t learn responsibility unless they are given something to be responsible for... At least that is what all the books say.” Catherine said.

“Believe me, I read a lot of those books when she was little. But most of the advice was just common sense, so I quit reading them and went with my gut. She checks the doors every night before she goes to bed; it’s her job.”

“Sometime before I start coming up to stay with her after school, I want to talk to you and find out what the rules are,” he told her just before Charley came back with the coats.

“Don’t forget the bag, Mom,” Charley said as she went down the stairs.

“Got it,” Catherine said as she followed Charley down.

Vincent looked at the bag, then looked at Catherine.

“Just a few things for Father and Mary,” she explained. “And something from Charley.”

He took the bag from her hand, which had gotten pretty heavy after Charley had insisted on adding some goodies that she had helped Catherine make, including a whole cheesecake.

Father was very pleased with his bottle of brandy, and Mary loved her perfume, and she put on the colorful cardigan Charley had picked out right away.

Vincent was silent for a moment after he opened his gift from Charley, then He smiled and thanked her.

“This is lovely, Charley,” he told her. “It’s the perfect thing for my desk.”

“What is it, Vincent?” Mary asked, prompting him to turn the frame so everyone could see.

Catherine was shocked, then she saw that Charley hadn’t used the picture of just herself, but the one that had been taken of the two of them.

“I thought you were going to use one of just you,” Catherine whispered to Charley.

“That one was on the top, and it’s good, so I used it. Is it OK? Did you want it for something else?”

“No, there is another one just like it, so it’s fine.”

Later, she spoke to Vincent. “I thought Charley was going to use a different photo; one of just her, if you like, I can give you that one,” she suggested.

“No, this one is fine,” he said with a smile. “Mother and daughter; it’s very well done.”

When Mary saw the whole cheesecake, she was in raptures over it and had everyone laughing.

“Don’t make fun of me,” she said, lightly slapping Vincent on the arm when she handed him a piece of the cheesecake. “I love cheesecake, but it’s just not something that William has the time for.”

“It is a bit labor-intensive,” Catherine agreed. “One thing I haven’t really mastered is how to keep it from cracking.”

“You made this?” Mary asked, incredulously.

“The whole seven eggs and two and a half pounds of cream cheese,” Catherine answered with a grin.

“Mom let me do the eggs. I cracked them into a bowl, separated two of them, and then beat them before she put them in the cake,” Charley added proudly. “And I added the chocolate chips.”

“And you scraped all the cream cheese off the wrappers and ate it,” Catherine reminded her. “We make a good team.”

Vincent looked at his piece of cake. He hadn’t taken a bite yet. “This has chocolate chips in it?”

Catherine looked at him. “Yes. Is that all right?”

“That sounds wonderful!” he said, then took a bite. “Oh my... That is delicious!”

Catherine was surprised at everyone’s reaction to the cheesecake. Even Father commented that it had been years since he’d had cheesecake. “I think the last time I had it was at Katz’s Delicatessen.”

Later, when Vincent walked them back to their threshold, Vincent joined Catherine in the kitchen, while Charley went upstairs to get ready for bed.

Catherine took a second cheesecake out of the freezer and put it in the refrigerator to thaw.

“I always make at least three,” she told him. “One for us; I take one to work and one just in case.”

“It was very appreciated,” Vincent told her. “And if I’m not careful, between Father and Mary, I might not get another piece of it.”

“Join us for dinner tomorrow, and I can promise you another piece of cheesecake,” Catherine invited, on the spur of the moment.

“I’d love to,” he accepted. “What time?”

“Dinner is at 4:00 on holidays.”

“Your friend Jenny doesn’t join you?” he asked.

“No, not on Christmas. We do Thanksgiving together, but she and Joe go to Joe’s mom’s for Christmas.”

“Joe? Is that your boss, Joe Maxwell?”

“It is. They met about ten years ago and have been married for almost eight years. But he’s not my boss anymore. We are both deputy DAs. He’s in charge of the Trials division, and I have his old job in Investigations.”

Charley came downstairs to say good night, and after she went back up, Vincent took a package out of a hidden pocket in his cloak.

“Does she still believe in Santa Claus?” he asked.

“She hasn’t given up on it entirely,” Catherine told him.

“May I put this under your tree?” he asked.

“Of course. Why didn’t you give it to her earlier?”

He shrugged. “I just wanted to surprise her,”

He took the package, a square box wrapped in brown paper and tied with red yarn and tucked it under the tree behind a larger box.

“Mom, are you going to get up today?”

Catherine cracked an eye to see Charley standing next to her bed.

“Umm... What time is it?” she asked.

“It’s almost 7:30,” Charley answered.

*I guess that’s better than the 5:30, 6:00 she used to wake me on Christmas,* Catherine thought as she sat up and stretched.

“Give me a minute,” she said as she got out of bed. “I set the coffee pot last night before I went to bed. Please go push the button for me and wait for me in the kitchen.”

When Catherine got to the kitchen, not only did she smell coffee, but Charley was at the stove, carefully stirring something in a small saucepan. Before she could ask, Charley gave an explanation.

“I wanted some of my coffee, I’m being careful.”

“You’re almost ten, so I guess it’s OK,” Catherine said with a smile. “But I don’t want you attempting anything more complicated until I tell you it’s OK.”

A few minutes later, they were in the living room with their cups, and Charley was dragging wrapped packages out from under the tree. She looked at her stack, then at the much smaller one on the coffee table in front of her mother.

“Why do I have so many more?” she asked.

“Because you’re the kid, and everyone gives you something. I get something from you, Jenny and Joe, Aunt Lydia in Florida, and Peter.”

“But they are the only ones, besides you, who give stuff to me.” She picked up the last box from under the tree. It was the one wrapped in brown paper. “Only I don’t know where this one came from, there’s no tag. Is it for you or me?”

“What do you think?” Catherine asked.

“It’s from Daddy?” she started tearing at the paper.

*So much for saving the paper like they do Below*, Catherine thought as she watched Charley.

“It’s a book,” Charley said, lifting it out of the box. She opened it. “A blank book?”

“A journal,” Catherine said with a smile. “Remember, I told you that your father keeps a journal? He writes in it almost every day.”

Charley held up a pencil. “There are three of these,” she said.



“He uses a fountain pen. But he probably thought that you’d rather have a pencil in case you make a mistake and have to erase it.”

They opened the rest of their gifts, then Catherine went into the kitchen to make breakfast and get their Christmas dinner into the oven.

Charley was at the table writing in her new journal when Catherine served breakfast.

“I didn’t tell you, but Vincent... your father will be here for dinner today.”

The way Charley lit up at that made Catherine glad that she’d invited him.

Dinner was almost ready, when Charley was getting ready to set the table.

“Will we eat in the kitchen or the dining room?” she asked.

“The dining room,” Catherine told her. “I put the tablecloth on earlier. Set three places at the end closest to the kitchen.”

The dining room table seated six without a leaf, eight with one leaf, and ten when the second leaf was in. But the only time they ever used the dining room was when the Maxwells ate with them. Catherine left one leaf in the table because without it the table was just too small for the room. But the only time she’d ever used the second leaf was for Charley’s birthday parties when Charley wanted to invite her whole class from school. Catherine had always considered it lucky that the class sizes at her school were small, usually no more than about a dozen students.

Vincent arrived a few minutes later and was again subjected to Charley’s exuberant greeting.

Later, while they were eating dessert — cheesecake — they told Charley about the plan they’d come up with for her after school on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

“I won’t have to go to the Holden’s house anymore?” Charley asked, hopefully.

“No, but I thought you and Mandy were best friends,” Catherine said.

“We are, but we have to be so quiet there. We can’t stay in the kitchen, because their cook doesn’t want us in there. The dining room is off limits because the table is set for dinner. We can’t use the living room because Mrs. Holden doesn’t want us to mess it up. We always have to go to Mandy’s room, and it’s right across from Mrs. Holden’s room, and she’s always in there lying down because she has a headache. We can hardly speak to each other in more than a whisper while we do our homework.”

“I didn’t know. Has Mrs. Holden been sick?”

“I don’t think so. I asked Mandy, but she said that she thought her mom was just sick of her dad. She hears them arguing a lot.”

Catherine looked at Vincent. “Then it’s probably better that you aren’t over there bothering them,” she said.

Charley was in her room reading, while Catherine and Vincent relaxed in the living room.

“You said you wanted to know the rules?” she said, remembering a previous conversation.

“Yes. I don’t want to contradict anything you’ve set.”

“There aren’t a lot,” she admitted. “I’ve never had to have a lot of rules, since she’s such a reasonable child. Most of it is for safety. She’s never home alone, but she does have a key to the front door. We keep the door locked, day and night, so even if I’m here or Mrs. Ratliff, the housekeeper, is here, it’s locked. She also knows to lock it behind her when she comes in. And her job is to check it before she goes to bed at night, and then she will also lock the deadbolt and put the chain on.

“If someone comes to the door, she is not to answer it. We had a peephole installed at a lower level so she could look out and see who was there, but she can now almost reach the upper one. She’s not allowed to open the door if it’s someone she knows. Joe and Jenny can come in through the door in the front hall that connects the two houses, and Peter has a key. She’s not

even allowed to answer the door if it's a police officer. She is supposed to wait until an adult joins her at the door.

"She's not to leave the house once she gets home unless she is with me, Jenny, Joe, Peter, Mrs. Ratliff, and now you. She is allowed to go next door to Jenny and Joe's if someone is home.

"And if a door inside the house is closed, that means the person inside wants privacy, so we knock and wait to be invited to enter. That goes for bedrooms, bathrooms, my office, and even the kitchen. And I make sure to extend the same courtesy to Charley that I'm asking of her. If her bedroom door is closed, I knock and wait for her to invite me in."

Vincent nodded his approval. "If we could only teach that rule to Mouse," he said with a smile.

"Still?" she asked with a grin.

"Still. I even had a sliding door installed on my chamber, and that didn't stop him until Kanin came up with a way to secure it, allowing me to have privacy when I'm inside. I moved my bed chamber to the chamber behind the original one, and I had to have a door installed on it too, with the same kind of locking mechanism."

"Your own Peter Pan," Catherine said with a laugh. "Is Jamie still his Wendy?"

"I never thought of Jamie like that, but she does fill that role for him," he agreed.

### **January, 2000**

Vincent had told Father about the arrangement he'd made with Catherine for his Tuesdays and Thursdays with Charley.

"Will you be bringing Charley down here?" Father asked.

"Maybe sometimes. It depends on how much homework she has," Vincent told him.

"Will you be back in time for dinner on those nights?"

“Most likely. Catherine says that she is usually home by 6:00.”

He was in the kitchen on Charley’s first day back to school when he heard her come in.

She came straight into the kitchen and grinned when she saw him. “Mom said you’d be here.”

When Catherine got home from work later, she could hear Charley and Vincent talking in the kitchen.

“But Daddy, Bilbo is a lot more complex than that. He goes through a lot of changes in the book. He started as an ordinary Hobbit, and Hobbits aren’t very adventurous. But his mother was a Took, and the Tookes weren’t ordinary Hobbits. They liked adventure. He fights a dragon and outsmarts a lot of other creatures, including Gollum. And through it all, he manages to stay good.”

“Oh, my goodness,” Catherine said as she entered the kitchen. “She sounds just like you.”

Although Catherine had meant it as a joke, neither of them took it that way, but they both seemed to be rather pleased with the comparison.

“Just wait until you read the other books in the series,” Vincent told Charley. “Bilbo’s nephew, Frodo, is all that and more, but I think that Frodo’s friend Sam is the real hero of that story.”

“I can’t wait. We read those next year, but I might go ahead and read them before then.” Charley looked up at her mom.

“Can Daddy stay for dinner?”

Before Catherine could say anything, Vincent answered. “I can’t tonight,” he told her. “Tuesday is my night to play chess with Father, and we usually eat dinner early. Father doesn’t stay up very late these days.”

“Maybe some other time?” Catherine suggested.

“You know, your father has a birthday this month,” Catherine said as they were clearing the table after dinner.

“He does. How old will he be?” Charley asked.

“I think this one is 45, and there is usually a party.”

“Can we go?”

“I’ll check with Father,” Catherine promised. “In the meantime, you can come up with a gift for him. It’s traditional Below that birthday gifts be something handmade, recycled, or refurbished.”

“But I don’t know how to make anything,” Charley said with a worried frown.

“You know how to bake,” Catherine pointed out.

“Could I bake him a cake?” she asked.

“William will most likely make a cake, but I do know that he likes blueberry muffins and chocolate chip cookies.”

“Can I make those blueberry muffins that you made? The ones with the butter and cinnamon in the stuff on top?” she asked excitedly.

“I’ll have to see if I can find fresh blueberries this time of year, but if I can, you can make them.”

“You made them with frozen blueberries once, and they were just as good,” Charley reminded her.

The next day, on her way home from work, Catherine stopped and bought a bag of frozen blueberries, and she sent a note to Father via the shop owner, who was a Helper.

After dinner, when she and Charley were cleaning the kitchen, they heard someone on the stairs leading to the basement. It was Mouse.

“Father says, ‘Yes, please come.’” He said, holding out a rather crumpled piece of folded paper.

“Thank you, Mouse,” Catherine said, taking the note. She unfolded it and saw several dirty fingerprints. “Did you read the note?”

“Father says, it’s good to read... so does Vincent; improves the mind... Need to send answer?”

Catherine skimmed the note. “Just tell him ‘Thank you, and Charley and I will be there.’ Thanks for delivering this, Mouse.”

“Welcome... oh... and welcome back.” He turned and was gone as quickly as he’d appeared.

“Who was that?” Charley asked.

“His name is Mouse. I’m surprised you didn’t meet him at Winterfest.”

“I saw him, but no one introduced me,” Charley told her. “What does the note say?”

“Father invited us to join them for dinner at 6:00 on Wednesday the 12<sup>th</sup>. I’ll leave work a little early, and we will leave as soon as I get here.”

“Mrs. Ratliff will be here,” Charley observed.

“I’ll leave her a note telling her not to start dinner and that we need to go somewhere as soon as I get home. That might keep her from getting too chatty that night.”

On the Monday before Vincent’s birthday, Mrs. Ratliff delivered bad news.

“Miss Cathy, can we talk for a minute?” she asked that evening before she left.

“Of course, what is it?” They were in the hall, and Catherine led Mrs. Ratliff into her office.

“I’m going to have to give my notice. I’m sorry, I don’t want to, but my sisters and I have concluded that our mother needs someone with her all the time. She’s had a few mishaps. She wasn’t hurt, but that was just luck. I’m the only one with the room to take her.”

“Will you be OK?” Catherine asked. She knew that Mrs. Ratliff’s husband worked, but that her income was still essential.

“Mom has her social security, and my sisters will help out. We’ll be all right.”

“That’s good to hear, but if you ever need any help, please let me know,” Catherine offered. “How much longer will you be here?”

“My last day will be the 14<sup>th</sup>. We will be moving Mom and cleaning her apartment after that.”

Catherine hugged the older woman. She’d been with them since Charley started school.

“I hope I’m not leaving you in the lurch,” Mrs. Ratliff said as they went back to the door.

“No, don’t worry. We have reconnected with Charley’s father, and he’s been a big help. He might be able to help with this, too.”

Charley was disappointed to hear that their housekeeper was leaving, but she perked up when Catherine told her that she would talk to Vincent about helping take up the slack at least until she could find a new housekeeper.

Catherine knew she had to talk to Vincent about the extra days; she hoped he wouldn’t think she was taking advantage of him.

“Of course I can be with her the extra days,” he told her when she asked. “In fact, I look forward to it. I might have to take her Below a little more often. I hope that won’t be a problem.”

“No, none at all. I’m just grateful that I won’t have to rush to find someone. I’ll be able to find someone who is a good fit.”

“If it’s not too much to ask... I’d really like to do it all the time. I realize that you might need a housekeeper to help you around the house, but I’d love to spend more time with Charley. Maybe you could have the new housekeeper leave early.”

“Are you sure?” Catherine asked.

“I have almost ten years to make up for. If I can’t be here, as soon as she gets here, there is always someone Below who would be willing to meet her and bring her to me. Once she’s a little older, she can just come down on her own. You are only a ten-minute walk from the main chambers.”

After a few minutes thought, Catherine had to admit that it was a good plan, and she knew that Charley would love the idea.



Catherine walked into the DA's main office and headed across the bullpen, hoping no one would see her.

She made it to her office and closed the door behind her. She put her purse and briefcase on the cabinet against the wall, then took off her coat and hung it up. She managed all that without removing the cold pack from her face.

She'd just sat down behind her desk when Joe walked in.

*Will he ever learn to knock?* she wondered. *I wonder if he's related to Mouse.*

Hey Cath, do you still have the file on Daley?" He looked up from the paper in his hand and stopped dead in his tracks. "What the hell happened to you?"

"That bad, huh?" she asked, moving the cold pack so he could see her lip.

"Have you seen yourself in a mirror?" he asked.

"Not yet, but I knew it must be pretty bad from the way the cab driver looked at me."

"What happened?" he asked, sitting on the chair in front of her desk.

"Claudia Trent," she stated flatly. "Remember, we talked about offering her that deal for her cooperation? I went down to the jail this afternoon to make the offer. The female guard was telling me that the other prisoners have been giving Claudia a hard time, picking on her because she's so short."

"I was afraid of that," Joe said. "She is tiny."



“She may be 4’10” and tip the scale at only 93 pounds, but she sure can pack a punch,” Catherine said, shifting the cold pack from her jaw to her eye.

“Looks like it. Didn’t she like the deal?”

“I didn’t get that far. She was already in the conference room when I walked in. I introduced myself and told her I was from the DA’s office, and that I was there to discuss a potential deal with her. Before I could blink, she flew across that table, both fists flying. One caught me in the right eye, and the other got my left jaw. It happened so fast, even the guard was taken by surprise.”

“She wasn’t cuffed to the table?” Joe asked.

“They don’t do that with the female prisoners, unless they are proven to be violent. She’s there for a white-collar crime.”

“What did they do with her?”

“The guard grabbed her and called another guard, and they took her back to her cell.”

“She doesn’t seem the type,” Joe mused. “No priors. She’s learned a lot in the two weeks she’s been there.”

“I don’t get it either. The only thing I could think of was that she’s had a rough time and has had to defend herself. Something just snapped... Anyway, we have another problem.”

“What’s that?” Joe asked.

“I’m supposed to be in court first thing tomorrow morning. I can’t show up with a fat lip and a black eye.” She removed the cold pack and squinted at him. “Is it black? I know it’s swollen; I can barely open it.”

“Yep, it’s a pretty impressive shiner, and there is a good-sized bruise on your jaw. You sure you don’t want to have it checked out?”

“No. I can see out of my eye when I can get it open. All my teeth seem to be intact, and my jaw is working.”

Okay, then don’t worry about tomorrow. I’ll get Stan to take care of it.”

Catherine reached into the tray on her desk and took out several file folders and a sheet of paper and handed them to Joe.

“Give those to Stan.”

Joe took the files and stood. “Now you go home and put some ice on that. Just don’t let Jenny see you. She’ll start to mother-hen you, then Joey and I won’t get dinner.”

That made Catherine laugh, despite her split lip. She stood and stuffed a pile of files into her briefcase.

“I may not be in tomorrow; depends on how swollen this gets,” she said, gesturing at her eye. “I can work from home.”

Catherine left the office a few minutes later. She received another strange look from the cab driver.

It was still early; only a little after 3:00, and she wasn’t expecting anyone to be at the house. She left her things in the hall and went to the kitchen for an ice pack.

Vincent’s cloak was draped over the back of a chair, but he wasn’t in the kitchen.

“Vincent?” she called, realizing he’d probably gone to hide when he’d heard her come in, not knowing it was her. “It’s just me.”

The pantry door opened, and he stepped out. But as soon as he saw her, he crossed the room, reaching for her face.

“What happened?”

Catherine dodged out of reach and went to a cabinet where she kept first aid supplies. She pulled out an ice bag and went to the freezer to fill it.

“I tangled with an enraged prisoner,” she said, then winced when she pressed the ice pack on her eye a bit too hard.

Vincent pulled out a chair and pointed to it.

“Sit!” he ordered.

She did, then he went to a drawer and pulled out a clean dish towel. He took the ice pack from her and wrapped it in the towel, then handed it back to her.

“That will keep you from getting frostbite. Alternate between your eye and jaw,” he told her. “And I’ll ask again, what happened?”

She explained while he made a pot of tea.

“I thought that your new position didn’t put you in danger,” he said, joining her at the table.

“It doesn’t normally, and Claudia Trent isn’t considered dangerous. She was working for a company that was dealing in stolen goods. It was a large-scale fencing operation. She was running the office for the cover business and keeping the books. She said she didn’t know what was going on when she first started working there. But she figured it out after a few months. She was afraid to say anything to her boss about it, for fear that she’d be in danger. But she couldn’t afford to quit. Somehow, her boss caught on that she knew; instead of threatening her, he offered her a substantial raise to keep her mouth shut.”

“And she attacked you?” he asked.

“Yeah, I don’t get it either. When I met her the first time, she was very soft spoken and even a little timid.”

“What will you tell Charley?”

“The truth. She’s seen the pictures of me after my face was slashed. This is nothing compared to that. This is all superficial. The bruises will fade in a few days



Vincent’s birthday arrived, and Catherine managed to leave work about an hour early. She had plenty of time to change out of her suit into more comfortable jeans and a sweater. The bruises from the previous week had almost all faded, and she’d been able to cover the remnants with light makeup.

She had considered giving Vincent a gift, but had decided against it. They weren't 'together,' after all, except when it came to Charley. It was enough that Charley was taking a big bakery box full of bite-sized blueberry muffins.

Jamie met them to guide them.

"Vincent said to take you to Father's study," she told them. "The children are gathered there to give Vincent his gifts. And wait till you see the cake! It's devil's food cake, with milk chocolate icing, dark chocolate decorations, and white chocolate roses."

"That sounds positively decadent," Catherine said with a laugh. "Did William make it?"

"No, we have a Helper who owns a bakery. She has been sending goodies down to Vincent ever since she met him. Mary says that she's *set her cap for him*; whatever that means."

Catherine was surprised at the sudden pang of... jealousy? *No, it can't be.*

When they reached Father's study, it was crowded.

"Looks like standing room only," Catherine whispered to Jamie.

"Gets more crowded every year," Jamie said with a laugh.

Catherine pointed out the table where all the gifts were stacked to Charley. Charley shed her coat and went to add her box to the pile, then she went to hug Vincent.

Vincent was talking to a tall, slender woman, who was maybe 30 years old. She had long, dark hair and dark brown eyes. Catherine had joined Father and Mary when she heard Vincent introducing Charley to the woman.

"Denise, this is my daughter Charley. Charley, this is one of our Helpers, Denise."

Catherine watched the exchange and almost laughed at the look of shock on Denise's face when she learned that Vincent had a daughter. Vincent looked over at Catherine, nodded, and smiled. Denise saw that, too.

*I should probably be careful around her,* Catherine thought in amusement.

“Is she adopted?” Catherine heard Denise ask.

“No, she’s my daughter. She lives Above with her mother.”

Vincent turned to speak to someone else, and Denise looked over at Catherine with an open challenge in her eyes. Catherine just smiled and nodded, then turned to speak to Mary.

Later, when the gifts were being opened, Vincent made a big deal out of Charley’s muffins; much more so than he did over Denise’s cake.

The cake was transferred to the dining chamber to be cut after dinner, but Vincent spirited the muffins off to his chamber. After dinner, when the cake was cut, Catherine had to admit that it was delicious, and there was none left, but Catherine had the satisfaction of knowing that Vincent had saved all of Charley’s muffins for himself.

“Who is that lady who was talking to Daddy and hanging all over him?” Charley asked later when they got home.

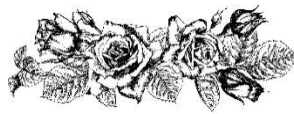
“Didn’t he introduce you?” Catherine asked innocently.

“Well, yeah. He said she was a Helper. Someone said she made the cake. I didn’t like it. It was too much chocolate.”

“Your Daddy likes chocolate; someone must have told her.”

“Even he said that it was a little too rich for his taste. He only had a little piece. He said he was saving room for a cup of tea and my muffins later.”

Catherine didn’t really understand why that revelation pleased her so much; she chalked it up to pride that her daughter had done more to please Vincent than that woman had.



Vincent knew that Charley’s birthday was in February, but he wasn’t sure of the date. When he asked Charley, she grinned and said that she was born on Valentine’s Day; that her mom had told her that she was the best Valentine’s gift she’d ever received.

That evening, before he left, he asked Catherine if she had any plans for Charley's birthday.

"Her birthday is next Monday, so she's having her birthday party on the Saturday before. She always invites her whole class from school, and Joe, Jenny, and little Joey will be here. But on her actual birthday, I let her decide what we will have for dinner, and we can either order and have it delivered, or I can cook. Most of the time, we order. Would you like to join us next Monday? I'm sure she will love it. I'm surprised she hasn't already asked you."

"I would love to join you," he told her. "Is there any special gift she might like?"

"I think you just being here will be the perfect gift," she told him honestly.

When Peter was in Santa Fe, he always called on Sunday afternoon to check in.

"So, you two are spending a lot of time together?" he asked, referring to her and Vincent.

"He's spending a lot of time with Charley, and she's loving it. He occasionally stays and has dinner with us. He will be here tomorrow for Charley's birthday dinner."

"What is she ordering this year?" he asked.

"She wants a large pepperoni pizza with extra cheese, breadsticks and sauce, and a salad with tomatoes and mozzarella from Lombardi's," Catherine told him.

"You have to admit that the kid's got good taste," Peter said with a laugh. "Santa Fe is nice, but the pizza here just doesn't measure up."

Charley was Below with Vincent when Catherine got home from work on Monday. She had time to change clothes and order dinner before they got back.

She was at the door collecting dinner when she heard them come into the kitchen.

There was a lot of laughter, and it made her smile.

“What did you call this again?” Charley asked.

“It’s a plasma globe; Mouse calls it a lightning ball,” she heard Vincent say.

“And he made it?”

“Yes, he learned how to a few years ago. It’s a clear glass sphere filled with a mixture of neon, krypton, and xenon gases, with a high-voltage electrode in the center. When you plug it in, the electrode creates a high-frequency, high-voltage field, which ionizes the gases and produces what appears to be lightning. He’s been fascinated with them ever since he found one years ago.”

When Catherine walked into the kitchen, Vincent rushed over to help her with the packages.

“My goodness, that is the biggest plasma globe I’ve ever seen. It has to be at least a foot across,” she said. “Even the museum doesn’t have one that big. Where are you going to put it?”

“On top of my chest of drawers, I think. It might make a cool night light.”



It had been a long week, but the late nights and early mornings of the last few days had been worth it. The case had been won, and another bad guy was going away for a very long time.

Joe wanted to celebrate. He’d called Jenny and told her the good news and Jenny had immediately started planning a celebration dinner. But Catherine had declined the invitation to dinner at Joe and Jenny’s and had headed home, wondering what she had on hand in the pantry and refrigerator that was quick and easy, but still healthy enough for a ten-year-old.

Charley came flying through the front door after school, excited about something.

“Daddy!” she shouted as she threw off her coat and dropped everything in the front hall. “Turn on the TV!”

“Why?” he asked even as he picked up the remote and turned the TV on.

“The verdict is in on that big case Mom and Uncle Joe have been working on. They won. The van driver just told me on the way home.”

Vincent used the remote and changed the channel until he found one with an early news program.

They both listened intently as the reporter related what he’d seen and heard in the courtroom.

“... and the judge denied bail until sentencing. He says that, in his opinion, Mr. Donaldson poses a flight risk since he owns an aircraft. Donaldson will remain in jail until sentencing next month.”

“Mom’s going to be over the moon!” Charley said. “We need to celebrate! Can we cook her dinner?”

Vincent looked at the clock; there was plenty of time.

“I think we can do that,” he said. “Let’s go see what there is.”

It was a little after 6:00 when Catherine unlocked the front door.

She set down her briefcase, toed off her shoes, removed her coat and hung it up before turning to lock the front door.

As she padded down the hall in her stocking feet, she noticed the delicious smell coming from the kitchen.

When she entered the room Charley and Vincent had just finished setting the kitchen table. Vincent was putting the serving dishes on the table.

“Oh, that smells delightful. What have you two been up to?”

“It was Charley’s idea,” Vincent told her as he held her chair for her.



“It’s a recipe I saw in a magazine,” Charlie told her mother. “But Daddy did most of the cooking.”

“And Charlie is an excellent sous chef,” Vincent added as he and Charley took seats.

The dishes were passed around, and both Vincent and Charley waited for Catherine to try the food.

“That chicken is delicious,” she told Charley. “What’s in it?”

“The chicken breast is pounded thin, then dipped in flour, then egg and then crushed potato chips, and fried,” Charley told her.

“I’m going to have to remember that so I can make it,” Catherine told her.

“And I’m going to tell William,” Vincent said.

“We’re celebrating that you won the case,” Charley told her.

“I think I figured that out. And I’m very grateful. I was trying to think of something to fix for dinner. I don’t think I would have come up with anything this good.”

After dinner, Charley had some reading to finish, so she went up to her room, and Catherine and Vincent cleaned up the kitchen.

“Did William teach you how to cook?” she asked as they put away leftovers.

“All the children take turns helping in the kitchen, and those who are interested learn to cook. I was interested. And since there has been a *certain helper*, who has made sure that there is plenty of food below, William has been able to be a little more creative.” He looked at her with a slight smile.

“I wouldn’t have any idea who that might be,” she said with a laugh.

### **March, 2000**

Vincent was playing chess with Father after dinner but was having a hard time concentrating. After he made two very un-Vincent-like moves, Father spoke up.

“Either you are trying your utmost to allow me to win this game, or something is bothering you. I rather think it’s the latter. What is it, Vincent?”

“I’m really not sure.” Vincent sat back and shook his head. “I think it’s Charley. The connection I have with her is different from the one I had with Catherine. It’s harder to interpret what I’m feeling from her.”

“What are you feeling?” Father asked.

“It’s just a vague sense of unease, and I feel cold.”

“Maybe she’s worried about something at school,” Father suggested.

“Perhaps she’s ill-prepared for a test or an assignment.”

“No, I doubt that. She just isn’t like that. She always seems to be several steps ahead of the other students. She told me that one of her teachers gave them the book list for the whole year back in September when school started. She’s already read all the books and written the book reports.”

Father could tell that Vincent was more worried than he was letting on. “It’s still early. Why don’t you go check on her?” he suggested.

He didn’t have to make the suggestion twice; Vincent was on his feet, reaching for his cloak.

“Let me know what you find out,” Father called after him as he left the study.

Once away from the main tunnels, he broke into a run and covered the remaining distance in a few minutes.

When he reached the kitchen, the lights were on, but no one was there. He could tell that they’d finished dinner, but the leftovers hadn’t been put away, and the kitchen hadn’t been cleaned up. Knowing how meticulous Catherine was about things like that, it served to alarm him even more.

He dropped his cloak on a chair and headed upstairs. He found them both in Charley’s room. Charley was in bed, sleeping fitfully, and Catherine was sitting on the side of the bed looking worried.

“What is it, Catherine?” he asked as he entered.

Catherine looked up, and there was an expression of relief on her face.

“Vincent! Am I glad to see you! She’s got a fever. She has never had a fever before; she has never been sick. I know I sound like a terrible mother, but I’m not sure what to do. Peter’s out of town, and I’m hesitant to take her to an ER or another doctor.”

“Do you know what her temperature is?” Vincent asked, leaning over and putting his hand on Charley’s forehead.

“No, I didn’t think to take it. God, I’m worthless.” She got up, left the room, and returned with a thermometer.

Vincent took it and sat on the side of the bed.

“Charley,” he said. Her sleep must have been very light because her eyes popped open, and she smiled wanly.

“Hi, Daddy.”

“Hello, Sweetheart. I need to take your temperature. Is that all right?” At her nod, he looked at the thermometer in his hand. “How does this work?” he asked, looking up at Catherine.

“Just hold the button until it beeps. Put it in her mouth, and when it beeps twice, it’s done. It shows a digital readout on the little screen.”

Vincent followed her instructions.

“It says 101.2,” he announced. “Do you have any acetaminophen?”

Catherine left again and came back with a bottle of pills and a glass of water. She handed the bottle to Vincent.

Vincent took one pill out of the bottle, then took the glass.

“Charley, will you take this for me?”

Charley nodded and opened her mouth. He placed the pill on her tongue, then helped her sit up and held the glass so she could drink. She lay back down, and he tucked her in, then turned to Catherine.

“I’m such a rotten mother,” Catherine said. “I didn’t even think to give her something for the fever.”

“It’s not your fault. You said she’s never been sick before; you haven’t had any experience in this. I think that will be good for now, but just to be safe, I’m going to ask Father to come and take a look at her.”

He left, and a few hundred feet down the tunnel, there were some pipes. He put his ear to them and listened to make sure that they were part of the network. When he was sure they were, he sent his message to Father. He waited for an acknowledgement before he went back.

“I’ve got your bag,” Mary said as Father gathered a few things. She opened the old-fashioned medical bag, and he dropped in the additions.

“What is it?” she asked. “I only caught the end of it.”

“Charley is sick; she has a fever of 101.”

“That’s not too bad, for a child,” she commented as they left the study.

“I agree. Normally, I would suggest some acetaminophen and plenty of liquids. But Vincent said that Charley is very lethargic, but she is responsive. And Catherine told me that Charley has never been sick; not so much as a cold or an upset stomach.”

He looked at Mary, who was walking next to him. “You don’t have to go.” He stopped and tapped out a message on a pipe outside the study.

“Maybe, maybe not, but you or Catherine might need my help. I’m going.”

Father didn’t have time to argue before Mouse skidded to a stop in front of them.

“Father needs Mouse’s help?” he asked.

“Yes, I need a guide to Catherine’s threshold. Do you know the way?”

“Yes, Mouse knows. Mouse knows all the ways and thresholds.” He took off at a trot.

“Slower, Mouse!” Father called after him. “I can’t move as fast as you.”

Mouse obligingly stopped and allowed them to catch up, then started walking again, this time at a slower pace. Even at that slower pace, Father still had to stop and catch his breath once they reached the kitchen.

When he climbed the stairs to the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, Vincent was waiting for him.

“Can I speak to you downstairs, Catherine?” Father asked after he examined Charley.

Catherine was reluctant to leave Charley, but Vincent assured her that he would be right there.

“When did this start?” he asked once they were seated at the kitchen table.

“She complained of a headache this morning. She occasionally has a tension headache. She has a test scheduled at school tomorrow, and although she always does well, she puts a lot of pressure on herself; she always worries about the tests.

“But later, she said the headache was gone and she looked fine at dinner. I asked her about the test, and she said that she’d studied and was sure she’d do OK. She went upstairs to read while I cleared up after dinner. She called me, and I went up. She said she was dizzy when she stood up, and she looked flushed and felt hot to the touch. She just seemed a little *out of it*, if you know what I mean. I helped her put on her pajamas, and I put her to bed. Vincent showed up about thirty minutes later. He took her temperature, and it was 101.2. He gave her some acetaminophen.”

She looked up when Mary put a cup of tea in front of her.

“Thank you, Mary.” Then she looked around the kitchen. “Did you clean up? Thank you, you didn’t have to do that.”

“No, but I’m here to help. Now drink your tea and go back and sit with Charley. I’ll be up in a while to give you a break.”

“When I took Charley’s temperature, it was a little over 102, in spite of the acetaminophen Vincent gave her, but it’s only been a little while. Do you have the number where Peter is?” he added.

“It’s on the pad next to the phone. Why?”

“I thought I’d call and consult with him. He’s been Charley’s doctor since she was born and might have an idea. But Catherine, please don’t worry. Children often experience unexplained fevers. They will spike high, then are gone as suddenly as they appeared.”

When Catherine went back upstairs, Vincent joined Father in the kitchen. Father was on the phone talking to Peter.

Vincent accepted a cup of tea from Mary and took a seat across the table from Father.

When Father hung up, his brow was furrowed, and he looked worried.

“What is it, Father?”

“Peter has a theory,” he said. “He never discussed it with me before, but now that he’s told me about it, it really does make sense.”

“Is it about Charley?” Vincent asked.

“And you; it starts with you...”

“Tell me.”

“When you were brought Below, you were only a few hours old. The umbilical cord was still pliable, and you hadn’t been bathed. You appeared to be ill. You cried almost constantly for three days. You were keeping very little down. Then all of a sudden, one day, you stopped crying. I feared the worst, but when I got to your cradle, you were just lying there looking around. After that, you were fine. You were still a little colicky, and it took some time to find a formula you could tolerate.

“Then, when you were fourteen, there was the incident with Lisa, and your subsequent illness. Then again, ten years ago, you were ill again.”

“What has any of that to do with Charley?”

“I’m getting to that. Peter’s theory is that your illnesses were all hormonal. When you were sick the last time, he drew blood and conducted tests and found no viruses, bacteria, or pathogens; there was no trace of poison or any toxic substances. But you know that a baby is flooded with hormones

from the pregnancy and birth process. Then the second time, at 14, you were entering puberty. And, the last time you were in love, and dare I say, sexually frustrated. Peter thinks that the only thing that kept you from getting worse that last time was that you had sex with Catherine.”

“I made love with her, Father,” Vincent corrected.

“You remember?”

“There are bits and pieces,” he said. “But I still don’t see what this has to do with Charley.”

“She’s your daughter; she shares at least part of your DNA. Peter said that she was a bit colicky and fussy from the start. She cried a lot. The nursery in the hospital put her on every two hour feeding schedule for a while, then they found a formula that worked. None of that lasted long, about the same as you. In fact, Peter even recommended the formula we used for you, and it worked for Charley too.

“He thinks that what Charley is going through now might equate with what happened to me when I was fourteen? But she’s only ten.”

“But puberty in girls is usually earlier than in boys,” Father pointed out.

“On average, the age of puberty for boys is about 12 to 14 years, but for girls it starts more often between 9 and 13. The average age for the first period is usually 11 or 12. Peter said that Catherine started when she was 11.”

Vincent looked stunned at the information but didn’t argue.

“So, how long was I sick when I was 14?” he asked.

“About three days, once the fever started, and it was about the same length of time the last time.”

“So, if Peter’s theory is correct, we can expect Charley’s fever to break sometime Wednesday evening?”

“If the way things went right after she was born is any indication.” He looked up at the clock on the wall. “It’s Sunday. Catherine noticed the fever after dinner. I think Wednesday is a good guess. Until then, I suggest that we support her and treat the symptoms. Acetaminophen every four hours,

plenty of liquids. Something light to eat, if she'll eat. Unless something drastic happens, I think that will be all that will be needed."

Vincent digested that as he finished his tea.

"Are you staying?" Father asked as he and Mary were leaving a little while later.

"Yes. I think Catherine will feel better if there is someone here with her."

"If you need anything, send a message," Father told him.

"Do you need anything from your chamber?" ever practical Mary asked,

"If you could send someone back with a change of clothes, I would be grateful," he answered. "Tell them to just leave it here in the kitchen. I'll get it later."

When he went back upstairs, he explained Peter's theory to Catherine.

"Peter never mentioned it to you?" he asked.

"The only thing he did was tell me that the formula that he suggested that they try for Charley was the same thing that had worked for you, but I don't remember him saying anything about hormones."

"I know it does sound... *unusual*... but then nothing about my life has ever been *usual*," Vincent pointed out.

"So that's all Father said, 'Take two aspirin and call me in the morning.'" Catherine knew she was sounding a bit petulant, but the situation was getting to her. She hated to think about the state she'd be in by Wednesday.

"One acetaminophen every four hours, plenty of liquids and light meals, if she will eat," Vincent corrected.

Catherine shook her head. "I'm sorry," she quickly apologized.

"And don't worry, I will be here. Father has taught me a lot, and he can be here quickly if we need him. And I wouldn't be surprised if Mary was here first thing in the morning."



“You can use the guest room down the hall,” Catherine told him.

“I doubt that I will need it. I’m going to be right here with you,” he promised.

And he was for the next three days. Mary was back the next morning. She made sure that there was always something to eat ready for them, and she heated broth and tea for Charley, keeping the pitcher of ice water on the nightstand full.

Catherine barely left Charley’s bedside, sitting in the chair Charley used at her desk the whole time. Vincent was there with her, except when he went down to the kitchen to get them something to eat or drink. Catherine barely ate; he swore she was living on caffeine and air.

At one point, Catherine stood to stretch, and when she sat back down, she was shifting uncomfortably. Vincent could tell she was feeling the effects of sitting in the same hard chair for hours on end.

He got up and went into the bathroom. He returned with a warm cloth and stood behind Catherine’s chair. He remembered how tight her shoulders and neck would get when she was upset or worried. He put the cloth on her neck then moved his hands down to her upper arms. He gently massaged them until he felt the muscles loosen up a little. Then he moved to her shoulders and massaged them through the sweatshirt she was wearing until they started to relax.

The cloth had cooled, he removed and moved his hands to the bare skin on her neck, and suddenly it was there. The Bond... it was back. He could feel every ache and pain in her body and every bit of her anxiety.

He stood in stunned silence for a moment before he lifted his hands off her skin, but the Bond remained.

Catherine stiffened, and he could tell she was wondering what was going on, so he replaced his hands and started kneading the knotted muscles in her neck then up into her hair on the back of her head. After a few minutes, he felt her relax.

“I’ll go down and get us a snack,” he said, then fled to the hall, where he leaned against the wall, trying to take it all in. Catherine’s feelings were tumultuous to say the least. She was worried, scared, and most of all, she felt guilty.

He pushed off the wall and went downstairs. Mary was making sandwiches.

“Are you hungry?” she asked, then looked up at Vincent. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. Hungry... yes. I came down to get us something.”

“Good. Give me a minute and I’ll make some tea.” She put the plates with the sandwiches on a tray.

“I think Catherine would prefer a glass of the iced tea that is in the refrigerator,” he told her. He could tell that Catherine was thirsty, and the iced tea he’d seen in the refrigerator just sounded good to him. He went to the freezer and got ice while Mary got glasses. He filled the glasses with ice, and Mary poured the tea, then placed the glasses on the tray.

“Any change?” she asked. They were all waiting to see if Peter’s theory would prove true.

“No. It’s almost time for another dose of acetaminophen,” he picked up the tray and went back upstairs.

He put the tray on Charley’s desk and took the glass and the sandwich to Catherine. She absently took them and then took a drink of the tea.

“Oh... you must have read my mind,” she said. “I think I’ve about had my fill of coffee. The iced tea is just the thing.” She took a bite of the sandwich.

“Peanut butter and jelly?” she asked after she chewed and swallowed.

“One of Mary’s comfort foods,” he told her. “Crunchy peanut butter and raspberry jam.”

“Umm, sounds good,” came a voice from the bed.

Catherine almost dropped everything in her haste to get to Charley.

Vincent took the glass and plate from Catherine and set them back on the tray before moving to the other side of the bed.

“How do you feel?” Catherine asked, putting her hand to Charley’s forehead, which didn’t feel feverish any longer.

“I’m tired. I feel like I’ve been out playing in the hot sun for school field day all day, and I’m thirsty and hungry.”

Catherine picked up the glass of water, and this time, Charley took it from her and almost drained it.

“That was good. What’s for dinner?” Charley asked.

Catherine was having a hard time holding back tears, but she managed a smile. “How about some scrambled eggs and toast?” she asked.

“Can I have some of that raspberry jam on the toast?”

“Anything you want.” Catherine was on her feet and heading out the door. Charley looked up at Vincent.

“What’s up with mom?” she asked.

“You’ve been sick. She was worried. I think she’s just a little giddy with relief, right now.”

By the time Catherine reached the kitchen, the tears were flowing freely. When Mary saw that she was on her feet.

“What is it?” she asked.

“She’s hungry. The fever is gone, and she is hungry.” The two women hugged, and Catherine went to the refrigerator for eggs. Before long, she was on her way back upstairs with another tray. Mary was right behind her.

Charley ate her meal and complained that she was still hungry, but all three adults in the room promised her that she could have more when she woke up, if she took a nap. Charley agreed and lay down and went back to sleep.

Catherine was ready to sit back down in her chair and stay but both Mary and Vincent talked her out of it.

“Come back to the kitchen and get something to eat, then go get some rest,” said Mary, looking back and forth between them. “Both of you.”

In the kitchen, Mary cooked the same meal that Catherine had just taken to Charley, and they both ate.

“Now go get some rest!” ordered Mary. “I don’t think either of you has done more than doze in those chairs for the last three days.”

“What day is it, anyway?” Catherine asked. “I’ve lost track.”

“It’s Wednesday, late afternoon,” Vincent supplied.

Catherine was thoughtful for a moment. “Then it seems like Peter’s theory may be correct,” she said, looking at Vincent.

“And that would likely mean that she will be fine after this. I’ll go send a message to Father; he will want to come and check her.”

“And I’ll sit with her,” Mary said, after Vincent left to send the message.

“You can go shower and sleep as long as you need to.”

“Are you sure. Who is taking care of everyone Below? You’ve been here the whole time.”

“Not the whole time. I’ve been going home at night. Sarah was here one night, then Samantha, and Brooke was here last night. I’ll stay tonight, and then you can take over tomorrow after you’ve had some rest. Although I doubt, she will need round-the-clock nursing. After she gets a good night’s sleep, she will probably be back to normal. Children bounce back so much quicker than adults.”

Catherine was in a fog, and when she went into her bedroom, her bed looked so inviting that she almost skipped the shower. But she forced herself into the bathroom and turned on the water. Once in the shower, she just stood there and let the hot water beat on her head and shoulders for several minutes.

*That feels so good.*

She reached for the shampoo and started with her head. Once that was rinsed, she started scrubbing her body. The shower actually woke her up a

bit, and she was able to dry her hair. She put on pajamas and went to check on Charley one more time. Father and Vincent were there, and Father was just finishing.

“Now I want you to take it easy for a couple of days,” Father was telling Charley. “No school until Monday.”

“But I’m going to be so far behind,” Charley moaned.

“I’ll call them tomorrow and have them send over all your assignments,” Catherine promised. “You can catch up over the weekend.”

That seemed to make Charley feel better, and everyone left the room so she could sleep.

“Keep an eye on her,” Father told them. “But if this goes like it did for Vincent. She will likely sleep for most of the next 24 hours or so. She will wake up hungry a few times. Then she will likely be back to her normal self by Friday. Just don’t let her overdo it, although I doubt it will make much difference.” He looked at the two exhausted people in front of him. “Now, I prescribe a good night’s sleep for both of you. Will you walk back with me, Vincent?”

“If you need a guide, I’ll go with you,” Vincent told him, “But if it’s all right with Catherine, I think I’ll stay just in case I’m needed.”

“You are always welcome,” Catherine told him. “Now, I’m going to take the doctor’s advice and go to bed, before I fall asleep on my feet.” She kissed Father on the cheek and hugged him. “Thank you.”

Vincent walked downstairs with Father. “Do you need a guide?” Vincent asked.

“No, I know the way now,” he patted Vincent’s shoulder. “Good night, and sleep well. I’ll just have a cup of tea with Mary, then I’ll be off.”

Upstairs, Catherine crawled into her bed and was asleep almost before her head hit the pillow.

After Father left, Vincent went to the guest room that Catherine had told him to use. He was grateful for the private bath and the large shower stall. He unwittingly followed the same routine as Catherine, starting at his head and working his way down. The hot water felt so good, he didn't want to get out but eventually made himself move. It took three of the large bath towels on the shelf, along with some time using the handheld dryer, to get reasonably dry. Once he got out of the bathroom, he dug his pajamas out of the bag.

*Mouse must have packed this*, he said to himself when he couldn't find anything but the pajama bottoms. His robe was in the bag, and he put it on and went to check on Charley one more time.

"Will you be all right?" Vincent asked Mary.

"I'll be fine. I brought my knitting and a book. I'll go home once you are up in the morning. If you need any help, I'll send Samantha back."

Once he was sure that Charley was sleeping peacefully, he went back to his room. He'd just taken off his robe when he felt a sudden surge of intense fear from Catherine's side of the Bond. Without thought, he was rushing down the hall toward her room. The door was standing slightly ajar, and he pushed it open.

Catherine was sitting up in bed, looking around the room, her eyes wide, she was trembling, and her breathing was rapid. She kept putting her hand to her throat.

Vincent approached her slowly, sitting down on the side of the bed. When she saw him and recognized him, she threw herself into his arms. He was able to check her pulse, which was very elevated. He recognized the symptoms of a panic attack.

"Catherine. It will be all right. I'm here. I'll take care of you. Breathe with me. In... out..."

He lost count of the number of times he repeated that, before Catherine's breathing slowed and she started breathing with him. His voice was low,

and he kept assuring her that she was safe. Her heartbeat slowed back to normal, and she finally relaxed in his arms.

“What happened, Catherine?” he asked.

“A dream, I think.” She shook her head, “I woke up and just knew that everything had gone wrong, that Charley wasn’t all right... she was alone and needed me, and I should be with her, but I couldn’t move to go check on her.”

“I can assure you that she is fine, she’s sleeping, and Mary is with her, but if you need to see that for yourself...”

“I think I do.”

Vincent stood and helped Catherine get up, and they both went down the hall.

Mary was sitting next to Charley’s desk, using the desk lamp to light her knitting. She looked up and smiled.

Catherine didn’t go in; she didn’t want to disturb Charley. She just returned Mary’s smile and turned to go back to her room.

Vincent walked with her and then followed her in. He saw that she was comfortably back in bed.

“Good night, Catherine,” he said, turning to go. Catherine reached out and grabbed his wrist.

“Will you stay, Vincent?” she asked. “Hold me until I go to sleep.”

Vincent hesitated a moment, then nodded. She let go of his wrist, and he went back and pushed the door partially closed, as it had been when he arrived. Then he went back and lay down beside Catherine, on top of the covers. He held out his arms, and she moved into them with a sigh.

Catherine was asleep in only a few minutes, and he contemplated leaving. She had asked him to hold her until she went to sleep. But it felt so good to hold her again after so long that he decided to stay a little longer.

Catherine woke during the night and was surprised to find herself not alone, but then she smiled. Vincent. Her head was pillowed on his chest, and his arm was around her. She vaguely noticed that his chest was bare. She yawned and cuddled closer.

*He stayed... Or he was as tired as me and just fell asleep once he got comfortable,* a little voice in her head added.

When Vincent woke, it was just starting to get light. He lifted his head so he could see the clock on Catherine's night table. Almost 6:00. He did a quick calculation. He'd been asleep for over 9 hours. He never slept that long. He must have been more tired than he thought.

He carefully moved away from Catherine and got up. He crossed the room quietly and left.

He glanced into Charley's room on his way back to the guest room. She was asleep, but Mary wasn't there. But he could tell she, or someone was in the kitchen cooking.

Back in the guest room, he changed his clothes and then went downstairs.

Mary looked up from the book she was reading. "Tea or coffee?" she asked.

"I think I'll have coffee this morning. I slept so long, I feel groggy." He crossed the kitchen to the coffee pot and poured some into one of the cups on the counter. He added sugar and then went to the refrigerator for milk.

When he joined Mary at the table, she pushed the newspaper across to him.

"You're done?" he asked.

"I am, and I think it's time I left. Charley slept well last night. She woke up around 10:00, and I helped her bathe, then put clean sheets on her bed. She ate a bowl of soup and went right back to sleep. Do you think you'll need Samantha?"

"What do you think?" he asked.

"I don't think so. Charley was still tired after her bath last night, and I think she will sleep a little longer, then probably take a nap today. But she is



recovering very quickly. I imagine Jacob will be here sometime this evening, or tomorrow morning, to check on her.”

“Thank you, Mary,” he said when he walked to the threshold with her.

Mary reached up and patted his cheek. “I love her too. She’s the closest I’ll ever have to a grandchild.”

Vincent closed the threshold door behind her and went back to the kitchen.

About an hour later, he was at the stove fixing scrambled eggs when Charley startled him by speaking.

“That smells good. Is it for me?” she asked.

He turned and smiled at her. “It is now. Sit down.” He put the eggs on a plate next to some toast and put them in front of her. He went to the refrigerator for butter and juice. Then he went back to the stove and made some more for himself and joined her at the table.

Catherine rolled over and looked at the clock. It was after 9:00.

*I don’t even remember what time it was when I went to bed,* she thought, then she remembered the panic attack and Vincent. She smiled when she remembered waking sometime in the night and finding that Vincent hadn’t left. She wondered what time he had left.

She got up, put on her robe, and headed downstairs. She was surprised to find Vincent and Charley there. They were at the stove, and it looked like Charley was showing Vincent how to make something.

“Good morning,” she said as she headed for the coffee pot.

Vincent looked over his shoulder at her and smiled.

“I’m teaching Daddy how to make my coffee,” Charley told her.

“I was a little taken aback when I found out that you allow her to drink coffee, but then she told me what it was,” he told her.

“It’s not much more than sweet coffee-flavored milk,” Catherine said as she took a seat at the table.

A few minutes later, they were all seated around the table.

“We’ve eaten,” Vincent told her. “Would you like me to fix something for you?”

“No, thank you. Not right now. I’ll get something later.” She looked over at Charley. “How are you feeling?”

“Better. I woke up hungry, but now I’m sleepy again. Last night, after Mary helped me take a bath and I went back to bed, she told me that I would probably be sleepy a lot. I was worried about catching up on my schoolwork, but she said I could do it between my naps.”

“Thanks for reminding me,” Catherine said. “I need to call your school and get them to send your work over, so you can be ready to go back to school on Monday.”

“What day is it?” Charley asked.

“Thursday,” Vincent supplied.

Charley’s eyes got big. “Was I really sick for over three days? The last thing I remember, it was Sunday.”

“You were. But you are well now,” Vincent said.

A little while later, Charley went back up to her room, and Catherine went to her office to call the school, then the DAs office.

Vincent cleaned up the kitchen.

Charley was back up for lunch, and she took off her pajamas, put on jeans and a sweater, and stayed up all afternoon. Her school faxed her assignments, and she was eager to get started on them. She spent a couple of hours on it before dinner. But by the time dinner was over, she was tired and ready for bed again.

Vincent tucked her in and came back downstairs about the time Catherine was finishing up in the kitchen.

“I should be getting back Below,” he said to her after she turned on the dishwasher.

“If you really want to, but can we talk first?” Catherine asked.

He wondered what she wanted to talk about, even what he was feeling from her didn’t give it away. He nodded, and she led the way into the living room and seated herself on the far end of the big leather sofa. She tucked her feet up under her and turned to face Vincent, who sat on the other end, turning slightly so he could face her.

“First, I owe you an apology,” she started.

“Catherine, you owe...”

Catherine held up her hand. “Please, let me talk, then you can say whatever you want.”

Vincent nodded, and she continued.

“What you said at Winterfest might have had a grain of truth in it... I’ve been thinking about it, and I don’t think I ever made a conscious decision to keep Charley from you out of anger or hurt, and surely not out of spite, but regardless of why, I did keep her from you, and it wasn’t right, for you or her.

“I kept justifying it, telling myself that it was you who sent me away, because you didn’t love me or want me, and since that was the way you felt, then what I was doing wasn’t wrong. I went so far as to convince myself that since you remembered nothing about what happened between us, you might even think I was lying; that you weren’t her father, especially since, on the surface, she doesn’t look a lot like you.

“But in spite of that, I’ve always known you were an honorable man, and that you wouldn’t do that. If I told you she was your daughter, you would accept it, even without a Bond, and you would want to know her and be part of her life... But then the selfish little imp on my shoulder started whispering, *Do you really want him in your life just because he wants to be near Charley?*

“I’m sorry, Vincent. It didn’t matter that you’d decided to send me away. I didn’t have to go along as easily as I did. I was selfish. I had no right to keep the pregnancy from you. I was wrong and both you and Charley have suffered for it.”

Vincent had listened patiently, and when she hesitated, he spoke up.

“Catherine, Charley has told me what you’ve told her about me. You could have demonized me, blamed me for everything, but you didn’t. You never once told her that our separation was my doing.”

“But I could have made more of an effort. I could have made sure that you knew about her at any point over the last ten years. I could have asked Peter to talk to you or Father, I could have contacted Father or even Mary, but I didn’t. I even went so far as to avoid allowing any Helper to know that I had a daughter. I’m in Dr. Wong’s shop at least once a month, and I’ve never taken Charley with me. Our favorite Chinese restaurant is Henry’s. But not even his delivery boy has seen her.”

Catherine had stretched her right arm along the back of the couch, and now Vincent reached out and put his hand over hers.

“I think that we can probably agree that we share that blame equally,” he said.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“What I told you... When I told you that the Bond had been responsible for what I was feeling; that it was projecting your feelings to me, and I couldn’t tell them from my own... I lied. With or without the Bond, I loved you, but I saw the loss of the Bond as a way to set you free.”

“But I didn’t want to be free. I wanted to be with you, I loved you...” She took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh. “And I guess it’s pretty obvious that even after all this time, I still do.”

Vincent had felt it, but he hadn’t expected the admission.

“There were so many times, through the years, when I almost came to you,” he admitted.

“Why didn’t you?”

“I didn’t know where you were. I mean, I still knew you were in the city, and I knew that I could have found out. I could have asked Peter, but I didn’t because I was still determined that you needed to be free to live your life. I made a point of never reading beyond the first few sentences if a story in the paper mentioned you.

“I wanted to know that you were well and happy, but nothing beyond that. But I’m surprised that there was never anything in the papers about you having a child.”

“That was deliberate on my part,” Catherine admitted. “I’m a Deputy DA. I’ve made enemies in the thirteen or so years I’ve been there. I didn’t want Charley to become a target; I needed to protect her. Very few people know about her.”

They were both quiet for a time.

“We really have made a mess of things, haven’t we?” she said.

“Is it too late to fix it?” he asked.

She had been looking at their joined hands on the back of the couch, now she shifted her gaze to him.

He shifted on the couch to face her more and held his other arm out to her, and she moved swiftly into his arms the same way she always used to.

*I never realized just how much I missed this*, she admitted to herself as his arms closed around her. She breathed deep, pulling in the scent of woodsmoke and sandalwood that she’d always found so comforting. She didn’t want to move; she could spend the whole night like this.

It wasn’t late, but the house was quiet. Conversation... explanations had stopped; there was only the distant hum of traffic that was always present in New York City. They were comfortable with each other, communicating on a deeper level like they used to. It was the comfort they used to take in each other. She felt him kiss the top of her head, a familiar gesture. She tipped her head back to look up at him. He looked down at her, his gaze asking a question without words.

She answered with a smile. They both held their breath as he reached out, fingertips brushing her cheek. Her eyelids drifted closed, anticipating, and when their lips finally met, it was as if everything around them came stopped.

The kiss was soft—tentative at first—then, as his confidence grew, it deepened, becoming a promise and a revelation at the same time. The world around them faded, leaving only the warmth of their closeness and

the thrill of shared love. When they finally parted, the room felt different, as if wrapped in magic, and their hearts beat almost in sync.

“I have a confession to make,” Vincent began after several minutes.

Catherine tilted her head back against his arm again and looked up at him.

“What?”

“The Bond... It’s returned,” he admitted after a slight hesitation.

“You didn’t tell me?” she asked, not accusingly, but maybe a little hurt.

“It only happened last night,” he explained. “We were sitting with Charley, and you looked so uncomfortable. You’d been sitting in that hard wooden chair for days. I remembered how stiff and sore your shoulders and neck would get when you were tired and stressed. That was when I got up, got the warm cloth, and then started massaging your neck. As soon as I touched the skin on your neck, it was back. You were there! I pulled my hands away for a moment to see if it remained, and it did.”

“That’s funny,” she said thoughtfully. “I felt something, almost a tingle, but I attributed it to being the first time you’d touched me in over ten years.”

“I don’t think that I was trying to avoid touching you,” he admitted. “I wonder, if I had touched you that day I sent you away, if it would have come back then.”

“Probably not. Maybe it went into hiding for your protection. You were in no condition to try to help me had I needed it at that time, and come to think of it, maybe it was to protect you from all the discomfort and pain of pregnancy and childbirth.”

“That does make sense,” he admitted.

They were quiet for several minutes, just enjoying the closeness.

“Can you feel what I’m feeling now?” Catherine finally asked.

Vincent closed his eyes for a moment. When he looked down at her, the look would have melted an iceberg.

“You are enjoying being in my arms... and I think you want me to stay.”

“Yes, to both. I do want you to stay. Don’t go home tonight; stay with me. We can stay here on the couch, or we can go upstairs, as long as you keep holding me.”

Vincent hesitated before speaking. “Maybe we shouldn’t rush things,” he suggested. “I’ll stay tonight, but in the guest room.”

Catherine was disappointed; he could feel it, but even though disappointed, she accepted his decision.

“Then I think I will go up. I’m still recovering from Charley being sick, and I’m tired.” She stretched up and planted a quick kiss on his lips, then got up and headed upstairs.

She went to her room and headed for the bathroom, where she undressed, pinned up her hair, and took a quick shower. She was doing her best not to think, not to *feel*, but it was hard. She was out of practice at blocking the Bond.

Out of the shower, she dried and put on her nightgown, then brushed her teeth and put on moisturizer. She turned out the bathroom light but didn’t bother to turn on the light in the room. There was a light in the hall that she left on at night, and since her door wasn’t closed all the way, it and the streetlight outside her window gave enough light for her to see her way to bed.

She got into bed and made herself comfortable. She really must have been tired because she did go right to sleep.

Vincent stayed in the living room for a while. When he felt that Catherine was in the shower, he got up. He turned off the lights and checked all the doors to make sure they were locked. He didn’t know if Charley had done it, since she’d gone to bed so early.

He climbed the stairs. He stopped at the top of the stairs; Catherine was already out of the shower. He turned and went to the guest room, where he undressed and put on the pajama bottoms that he’d worn the night before. He washed up, brushed his teeth, and then went to bed.

He lay in bed, staring at the patterns of light on the ceiling from the window.

*Was I right not to rush things?* He wondered. As soon as he'd said that, he'd felt that she hadn't agreed with him, but that she'd been willing to go along. *Is that because that was the way our relationship always was? Me dictating the terms; how far we would go at any given time. What was it I said to her when she was Below after her father died? She'd asked me if I thought that we'd ever truly be together. I told her "Only if and when we understand how great the sacrifice and how large the fears, and are able to move through them." She said she wasn't afraid. And she was right, the fears were mine, not hers.*

*And Catherine has already put my fears to rest. We made love, and she wasn't hurt, and the child that resulted from that union isn't like me except in a few small ways. She's NORMAL. In having Charley, Catherine not only proved her love for me, but also that I am a **man**.*

Vincent was surprised that the last revelation hadn't dawned on him or Catherine sooner. He sat up and sat on the side of the bed.

*Should I go to her?* he wondered. *She all but invited me.*

Before he could overthink it, he was on his feet and heading down the hall to Catherine's room. The door was standing ajar, so she wasn't asking for privacy. He pushed it open and stepped inside. She was asleep and stayed asleep as he closed the door, crossed the room, and climbed into bed behind her. He spooned his body around her and put his left arm around her waist. She sighed and leaned back against him, all without waking.

Wrapped in the quiet of the night, Vincent held Catherine close, his breath mingling with the soft warmth of her hair. The world beyond the closed door faded, leaving only the quiet rhythm of their hearts. He felt her relax against him, her body molding to his as if they were two long-lost pieces of a puzzle, found at last.

He pressed his lips to her shoulder, a feather-light touch, tentative yet filled with devotion. Catherine stirred, her eyes fluttering open, a sleepy smile curving her lips as she realized who held her. She turned toward him, their eyes meeting in the faint golden glow of the street light outside her window.

For a moment, they simply gazed at one another, the years of longing and sacrifice shimmering between them like fireflies. Vincent reached up, brushing a strand of hair from Catherine's cheek, his fingers lingering on



her skin. She caught his hand, pressing a kiss into his palm—a silent reassurance, a promise that she was his, and he was hers.

Their lips met at last, softly at first, a gentle exploration that deepened as Catherine's arms drew him closer. Vincent's doubts dissolved in the warmth of her embrace. The certainty of her love anchored him. Their kiss spoke of every hardship and every hope, the struggles they'd endured, and the dreams they dared to share.

The silence of the room was filled with quiet laughter and murmured words, secrets they had not spoken of in years; now woven into the fabric of their togetherness. Wrapped in each other, they let the night cradle them, surrendering to a tenderness that needed no explanation.

By the time sleep reclaimed them, they were tangled together, at peace in a way neither had known for years. The past and its shadows receded, leaving only the soft glow of love, steadfast and true, to carry them through the rest of their lives.

Light was slipping through the sheer curtains and painting gentle patterns across the room. The city outside was humming. Vincent woke to the warmth of Catherine's back pressed against his chest, her hair spread across the pillow in a silken halo. He watched as she breathed, slow and steady, her face serene in sleep. Wondering what time it was, he raised his head slightly to see the clock on Catherine's nightstand. After 9:00, it surprised him. He seldom slept past 5:00. But they had been awake pretty late the night before. The memory brought a smile.

For a long moment, he simply held her, letting the peace fill him. The weight he had carried on his shoulders for so long seemed lighter now, shifted by the night before. In the light of morning, the fears and doubts that once seemed insurmountable had faded, leaving only hope—and the steady pulse of love, quiet but unyielding.

Catherine stirred, a contented sound slipping from her as she shifted in his arms. Her eyes fluttered open, and she found him smiling at her, eyes soft with wonder. She reached up, her fingers tracing along his jaw.

“Good morning,” she whispered, her voice husky with sleep and happiness.

Vincent brushed his lips across her forehead, a smile blooming on his lips. "Good morning," he echoed, his voice barely more than a breath.

He had just moved his kiss to her lips when there was a knock on the door.

"Mom, are you awake?" Charley called.

"I am now," Catherine answered. "Just a minute."

It was more than a minute while she scrambled to find her nightgown. She found it under the covers, down by her feet, and both she and Vincent were laughing by the time she found it and slipped it over her head. Together, they straightened the disheveled bed, and Vincent pulled the covers up to his chin, while Catherine pulled her pillow up behind her and leaned back.

"Come in, Charley," she called out, then, in an aside to Vincent, "Thank goodness for the rules and that you closed the door last night."

Charley came bounding in but stopped short, and her eyes went wide when she saw both her parents in the same bed.

"Good morning, Daddy," she said with a grin, then turned to her mother. "I slept in," she announced.

"It looks like we all did," Catherine agreed. "I guess we are all still recuperating from you being sick. Why don't you run downstairs and turn on the coffee pot for me? I'll be down in a few minutes."

Charley left, and Catherine got up. She went to close the door again, and when she turned back, Vincent had found his pajamas and put them on. He crossed the room to her, pulled her into his arms and kissed her soundly.

"I think I forgot to tell you last night how much I love you," he said when they parted. "I'll see you downstairs after I get dressed."

When Catherine entered the kitchen, the scent of coffee greeted her. As she waited for the pot to finish, she put water on to boil and prepared a teapot for Vincent. When she turned to the table with a cup of black coffee and an empty mug in one hand and the teapot in the other, Charley was staring at her.

"What?" Catherine asked.

"Nothing. I was surprised to find that Daddy was with you this morning. Is he going to stay with us?"

Vincent entered the kitchen just in time to hear that last question. Catherine and Charley both looked at him. He didn't know if he was expected to answer, but he did anyway.

"We haven't talked about that yet," he answered Charley's question, but was looking at Catherine.

"Charley, why don't you run upstairs and get dressed while I fix breakfast?" Catherine suggested.

Charley looked from one parent to the other. It was obvious, even to her ten-year-old self, that the grown-ups wanted to talk about something in private. She nodded and quickly left the kitchen.

"We didn't talk about much last night, at least not after we left the living room," Catherine said. "But she has a good question. How will we work this? Will you stay?"

"Do you want me to?" he asked. "I can easily treat my responsibilities Below like a job and *commute* daily. The threshold in your basement makes that possible. I can maintain my chamber Below for times when I have to stay, or when we want to get away."

"Yes! I want you to stay. The very idea of waking with you every morning like we did this morning, and of more nights like last night... Yes, please stay. I love you; I want you here as much as you can be here!"

"On one condition," Vincent said as he took the chair next to hers.

She looked a little worried, but answered, "What?"

"Marry me," he said, taking her hand. "I love you, and we have ten years to make up for."

The proposal took her by surprise, but her answer was a definitive "yes."

Charley found them in what could have been construed as another compromising position when she came back to the kitchen.

The sight of her mother sitting on her father's lap, locked in a kiss, only made her smile. She was pretty sure she knew the answer to her question.

THE END

## Blueberry Muffins

This blueberry muffin recipe makes eight large breakfast muffins with a sugary-cinnamon crumb topping. Double the recipe and overfill the muffin cups just to the top for extra-generously-sized, deli-style muffins, or use the small-sized cups to make bite-sized muffins.

**Prep Time:** 15 mins **Cook Time:** 20 mins **Total Time:** 35 mins

### ***Ingredients***

#### **Muffins:**

1 1/2 cups all-purpose flour  
3/4 cup white sugar  
2 teaspoons baking powder  
1/2 teaspoon salt  
1/3 cup vegetable oil  
1 large egg  
1/3 cup milk, or more as needed  
1 cup fresh or thawed frozen blueberries

#### **Crumb Topping:**

1/2 cup white sugar  
1/3 cup all-purpose flour  
1/4 cup butter, cubed  
1 1/2 teaspoons ground cinnamon

### ***Directions***

1. Gather all ingredients.
2. Preheat the oven to 400 degrees F (200 degrees C). Grease muffin pan cups or line with paper liners.
3. To make the muffins: Whisk flour, sugar, baking powder, and salt together in a large bowl.
4. Pour oil into a small liquid measuring cup. Add egg and enough milk to reach the 1-cup mark; stir until combined.
5. Pour into flour mixture and mix just until batter is combined. Fold in blueberries; set batter aside.
6. To make the crumb topping: Combine sugar, flour, butter, and cinnamon in a small bowl. Mix with a fork until crumbly.
7. Spoon batter into the prepared muffin cups, filling about 3/4 full for regular-size muffins or right to the top for large muffins, for bite-sized muffins, use a smaller-sized muffin pan. Sprinkle with crumb topping.
8. Bake in the preheated oven until a toothpick inserted in the center of a muffin comes out clean, 20 to 25 minutes (more time for larger muffins, less time for the bite-sized).





By Judith Nolan







## Going To the Falls

by Judith Nolan



*"We believe in ordinary acts of bravery, in the courage that drives one person to stand up for another..."*

**Veronica Roth**



The

The Great Falls Chamber had always been a place of refuge and renewal for Vincent. The cascading water, echoing endlessly through the chamber's vaulted expanse, spoke to something deep within him. Something timeless, both wild and serene.

As he guided his three-year-old son along the lantern-lit passage, his heart stirred with memories of his own youth, when Father had first allowed him to explore this wondrous cavern under the old man's guidance. He could still remember the thrill of the first time.

Jacob's small hand, warm in his, was steady but full of energy. The boy's steps quickened at the sound of rushing water ahead.

"Papa, is it true the water goes on forever?" Jacob asked, eyes wide beneath his tumble of dark-gold hair.

Vincent smiled, the expression softening the strong, leonine planes of his face. "Not forever, my son. But it does travel far down. It drops through tunnels and streams, feeding the world Above and Below. These waters have touched mountains and valleys, and now they grace our home."

Jacob tilted his head, as though listening for echoes of that journey. "Do you think the water remembers?"

A low chuckle rumbled in Vincent's chest. "Perhaps. Every drop has a story."

The chamber opened before them in sudden majesty. Torches set in alcoves glowed against the slick stone walls, and the air was cool with mist. The great waterfall thundered down into a wide pool, its surface rippling with silver light. Catherine often said it was one of the most beautiful places in the world, and Vincent, though he had seen little of the world Above, believed her.

Jacob gasped, squeezing Vincent's hand. "It's even bigger than you said!"

Vincent knelt, bringing himself closer to his son's eye level. "And today, you and I will share something important here. You will learn how to swim in the big people's pools now."

"Me?" Jacob's eyes widened. "Swim? Really?"

"Really," Vincent assured him. "The water may seem strong, but in truth it is a gentle friend when you learn to move with it."

The boy's excitement trembled into hesitation. "But what if I sink?"

Vincent rested a reassuring hand on Jacob's shoulder. "I will be beside you. Always. You will not be alone."

That promise seemed to steady Jacob. He nodded, though his small fingers fidgeted at the hem of his tunic.

Vincent began to unlace his own heavy shirt, folding it neatly on a nearby rock. His son imitated him, tugging off his little boots and tunic, until he stood in simple shorts, pale toes curling against the damp stone. The sight made Vincent's heart swell. His child looked so small, so fragile, and yet brimming with courage.

Together they stepped toward the water's edge. The spray kissed their faces, cool and refreshing. Vincent led Jacob down a natural slope until their feet met the very edge of the pool.

Jacob squealed at the chill. "It's cold!"



Vincent laughed softly. “The first touch always surprises. But soon you will find it soothing.”

He waded deeper, holding Jacob securely against him. The boy clung to his father’s neck, eyes darting nervously as the water rose to Vincent’s waist.

“Feel how it lifts us,” Vincent said gently. “The water wants to carry you. Trust it.”

Jacob loosened his grip slightly, peering down at the rippling surface. His reflection shimmered there, golden and uncertain.

Vincent guided him further in, until the pool cradled Jacob’s body. “Stretch out your arms... like this.” Vincent demonstrated, his own hands gliding through the water. “Let the water hold you.”

Tentatively, Jacob copied him, though his legs kicked anxiously. Vincent supported him beneath the arms, steady as stone.

“You’re floating,” Vincent murmured. “Do you feel it?”

Jacob’s eyes widened again. But this time with delight. “*Papa!* I’m *not* sinking!”

“No,” Vincent agreed, his voice full of pride. “You are learning to trust.”

For a moment, boy and father drifted together, the sound of the falls a hymn around them. Vincent thought of Catherine, and how she would have smiled to see their child discovering the wonder of the water.

Jacob’s wondering laughter rang against the cavern walls, surprising both of them. He splashed a little with his hands, sending tiny arcs of water up into Vincent’s mane of golden hair.

“You see?” Vincent said with a rare grin. “The water welcomes you. But you must always treat it with respect. Water is life in another form and deserves to be honoured.”

Jacob grinned back, his small teeth flashing. “I’m like a fish!”

“Then swim as a fish would,” Vincent encouraged. “Reach forward and pull yourself along.”

Vincent shifted his hands, no longer cradling Jacob fully but steadying him from beneath. The boy's arms waved awkwardly through the water, more like windmills than strokes. His legs kicked at odd angles, splashing furiously without rhythm.

He sputtered when a wavelet reached his mouth. "*Papa!* It wants to drown me!"

"No, my son." Vincent chuckled, brushing the wet hair back from his son's forehead. "The water is playful. It tests you. But you are stronger than you think."

Jacob pouted for a moment, then squared his shoulders in imitation of his father's steady posture. "I'll try again."

"That is the spirit," Vincent said warmly. "Do not fight the water. Work with it. Let your body be light."

Together they practiced, Vincent keeping his powerful hands just beneath Jacob's chest. Slowly, the boy began to find a rhythm. His kicks grew steadier, his strokes less frantic. Each small success shone in his eyes.

"Papa! I'm moving!"

"Yes," Vincent said, pride swelling in his voice. "You are swimming."

Jacob's laughter bubbled up again, mingling with the thunder of the falls. For several moments, he propelled himself forward in a straight line before rolling to cling to his father once more.

"Did you see? I went so far!"

Vincent brushed a kiss against the crown of his son's wet hair. "I saw. And I will always see. Every triumph, every step you take."

Jacob hugged him tightly, then pulled back, eager for another try. "Can I go farther?"

"You may. But remember, swimming is not only strength. It is listening."

"Listening to what?"

“To the water. To your own heartbeat. To the quiet inside you.” Vincent placed a gentle hand over his son’s chest. “When you are calm, you will glide.”

Jacob grew serious, nodding as though receiving a secret. He took a breath, let it out slowly, and pushed forward again. This time, he moved more smoothly, arms cutting through the water with a hint of his growing grace.

Vincent followed close, a silent guardian. His eyes never left his son.

After a few passes, Jacob dog-paddled back to him, cheeks flushed with pride. “Did you swim when you were little, Papa?”

Vincent hesitated. “I... learned differently. The water frightened me once. It made me feel so small.”

“Frightened you?” Jacob blinked in astonishment. To him, his father was fearless. An impressive tower of strength who could face anything and anyone.

“Yes,” Vincent admitted softly. “I thought I was too heavy, too different. I believed the water would not accept me. But Father taught me patience. And then I discovered that even someone like me can find peace here.”

Jacob studied him, eyes wide with new understanding. “But the water loves you, Papa. Just like I do.”

Vincent’s throat tightened. He gathered Jacob close, pressing his cheek against the boy’s damp curls. “And I love you, my son. More than words will ever tell.”

For a long moment they held each other, surrounded by mist and echo. Then Jacob wriggled free with renewed determination. “Come on! I want to swim all the way to the rocks!”

Vincent laughed, a sound rare and beautiful in the cavern. “Very well. Let us see how far you can go.”

Jacob darted forward with all the energy of a young colt, his arms and legs churning the water in bold, uneven strokes. Vincent stayed close, his longer strides matching the boy’s smaller efforts with ease.

The rocks Jacob had chosen jutted up near the far side of the pool, slick with moss and spray. They gleamed like emeralds beneath the torchlight.

“Almost there!” Jacob cried, splashing harder.

“You are swift,” Vincent praised, “but remember—speed without rhythm tires you quickly.”

Sure enough, Jacob’s arms faltered, and he sputtered with a gulp of water. At once Vincent’s arm was there, strong as a pillar, lifting him into security.

“Easy,” Vincent soothed, brushing the wet hair from his son’s eyes. “The water gives and the water takes. We must respect it.”

Jacob coughed once, then giggled sheepishly. “I thought I was winning.”

Vincent smiled. “You were. But swimming is not a race against the water. It is a dance with it.”

Jacob’s eyes shone, intrigued. “A dance?”

“Yes. Step by step, breath by breath. The water leads, and you follow.”

The boy pondered this as they floated together, Vincent’s steadying hand beneath him. Then he wriggled free with a burst of laughter. “Then I’ll dance better than anyone!”

His next attempt was slower, more thoughtful. He tried to match the rhythm of the ripples, pausing between strokes, gliding a little. Though clumsy, there was promise in the effort.

Vincent’s chest filled with quiet pride. *Catherine, if only you could see him now...*

His love was Above, working with her father to make a difference in the great city that covered the Below world. She would be home tonight. Vincent could not wait to hold her again.

When Jacob reached the mossy rocks, he slapped his hand upon one triumphantly. “I did it, Papa!”

“Yes,” Vincent said, his voice rich with warmth. “You did.”

Jacob clambered up, dripping and triumphant. From his perch, he looked around the cavern with a conqueror's gaze. "This is our kingdom, isn't it?"

Vincent tilted his head. "In a way. These tunnels, these chambers, they are our refuge, our home. But a kingdom? A kingdom belongs to its people. And we belong to this place as much as it belongs to us."

Jacob leaned forward, chin on his knees. "Did you come here when you were my age?"

Vincent waded closer, resting a clawed hand on the slick rock. "I did. I was smaller than the others, but stronger in some ways. I felt apart from them, different. The Great Falls frightened me at first. The noise, the endless water. But over time, I learned it was not a monster. It was a friend."

Jacob listened, wide-eyed. "Did Grandfather teach you?"

"Yes. Father held me as I hold you now. His patience gave me courage."

Jacob considered this, then said softly, "Then when I'm big, I'll teach someone too."

Vincent's heart ached with tenderness. "You will. And you will teach with kindness."

The boy slid from the rock and splashed into the water again, sending droplets flying like crystal sparks. "Catch me if you can, Papa!"

He kicked off with a squeal, striking out across the pool with bold, unsteady strokes. Vincent gave chase, though he held back, letting the boy feel the thrill of being just beyond reach. Jacob laughed so hard he nearly lost his rhythm.

At last Vincent scooped him up in powerful arms, spinning him through the water. Jacob shrieked with glee, clutching at his father's mane.

"You are quick," Vincent teased. "But not quicker than me."

"I almost got away!"

"Almost," Vincent agreed, his eyes shining with mirth.

The game continued, chase and laughter echoing through the cavern. But as the boy's energy began to flag, Vincent guided him gently to the shallows.

“You are brave,” Vincent said, lifting him to sit upon a smooth rock at the edge. “But even the strongest swimmer must learn when to rest.”

Jacob leaned against him, shivering a little, though his grin remained bright. “I don’t want to stop.”

Vincent wrapped his cloak around the boy’s damp shoulders, drawing him close. “There will be many days. The water will always be here, waiting for us.”

Jacob snuggled into the warmth, eyelids heavy but content. “Papa. The Falls are my favourite place now.”

Vincent’s gaze lifted to the rushing cascade, mist curling like breath in the torchlight. His heart swelled with a love so vast it was almost painful.

“Mine too, my son,” he whispered.

Jacob moved into his father’s embrace and became bundled in Vincent’s heavy cloak. The fabric nearly swallowed him whole. His damp curls clung to his forehead, his cheeks flushed from exertion. He leaned against his father’s side, lulled by the waterfall’s thunder.

“Papa?” he murmured drowsily.

“Yes, my son.”

“Does Mama ever come here?”

The question was so soft it nearly disappeared in the spray. Vincent’s breath caught, but he welcomed the ache that always came with Catherine’s name.

“Yes,” he said at last. “She has come here many times. She loves the Falls. She said they reminded her of strength and beauty combined.”

Jacob tilted his head, blinking sleepily. “Does she swim too?”

Vincent smiled faintly. “She does. And she was graceful, like the river itself. I remember watching her the first time we came here to swim after you were born. How the water seemed to embrace her and welcome her as its own.”

Jacob closed his eyes, imagining it. “I wish I could’ve seen that.”

Vincent tightened his arm around the boy. “You will see her soon enough. In your courage, in your kindness. She lives in you, Jacob. And as soon as she knows you have been here, she will not be able to keep away.”

For a while, they listened together to the endless roar. Then Jacob sat up suddenly, energized again by a thought. “Papa, do you think Mama would be proud of me for swimming today?”

Vincent’s golden head bowed, his voice husky. “She would be more proud than words could say. Every step you take in learning, in growing, fills her soul with joy.”

Jacob’s small hand slipped into his father’s. “Then I’ll swim better. I’ll swim for Mama too.”

The boy scrambled from the cloak, determined once more. Vincent followed, watching with quiet awe as Jacob waded into the pool. The chill no longer daunted him. His shoulders straightened, his strokes more confident.

Vincent stayed near, but Jacob no longer clung so tightly. Instead, he sought the water itself, testing its depths. He swam a short distance, then rolled onto his back as Vincent had shown him, floating with arms spread wide.

“Look, Papa!” he called. “I’m flying on the water!”

Vincent’s chest swelled with pride. “Yes, Jacob. You are.”

The boy drifted for a moment, then flipped forward again, splashing toward the deeper centre. Vincent shadowed him, ready to intervene at any sign of struggle. But Jacob pushed on, determination etched in every stroke.

Halfway across, the current tugged at him, playful yet insistent. Jacob gasped, faltering. Panic flared in his eyes.

“I can’t—!”

Before the fear could root itself, Vincent’s hand was there, steady against his back. “Breathe,” he urged calmly. “Slowly. Feel the water lift you. You are not its prisoner, you are its partner.”

Jacob clutched his father's arm, trembling, but gradually his breathing eased. Vincent held him lightly, giving support without stealing the challenge away.

"There," Vincent murmured. "The water asks for trust. Give it, and it will carry you."

Jacob nodded shakily, then tried again. Stroke by stroke, he found his rhythm once more. With Vincent's quiet presence beside him, he reached the far side of the pool.

When they climbed onto the rocks, Jacob collapsed in laughter and relief. "I thought it was going to win!"

Vincent gathered him close, water streaming from both of them. "And yet, you prevailed. Not because you fought harder, but because you listened. That is true courage, not to conquer, but to trust."

Jacob nestled against him, panting happily. "Like trusting you."

Vincent's throat tightened. He brushed a kiss against his son's wet temple. "Yes. Exactly so."

The boy's small voice rose above the roar of the falls, certain and clear. "Then I'll always be brave, Papa. For you. For Mama. For me."

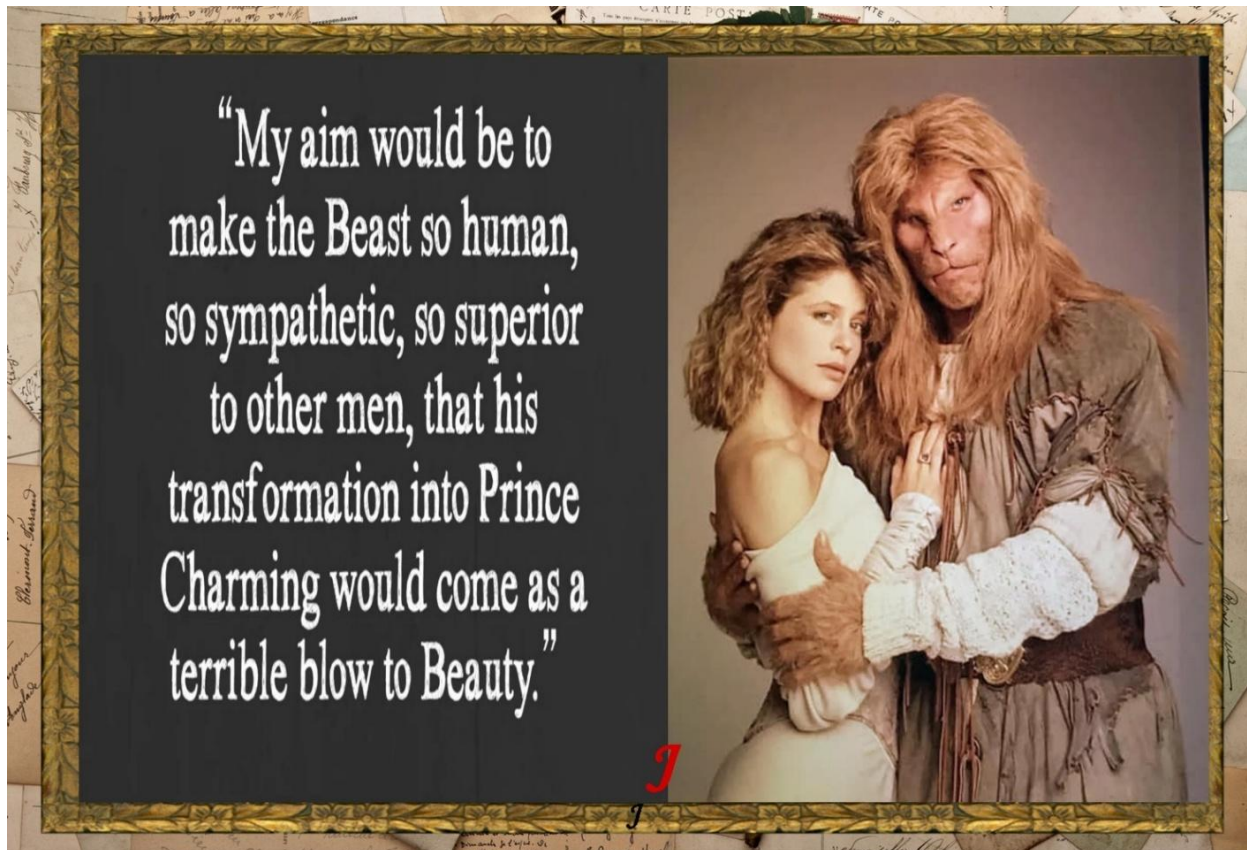
Vincent closed his eyes, the mist cooling his face, and whispered into the roar: "And I will always be here to guide you."



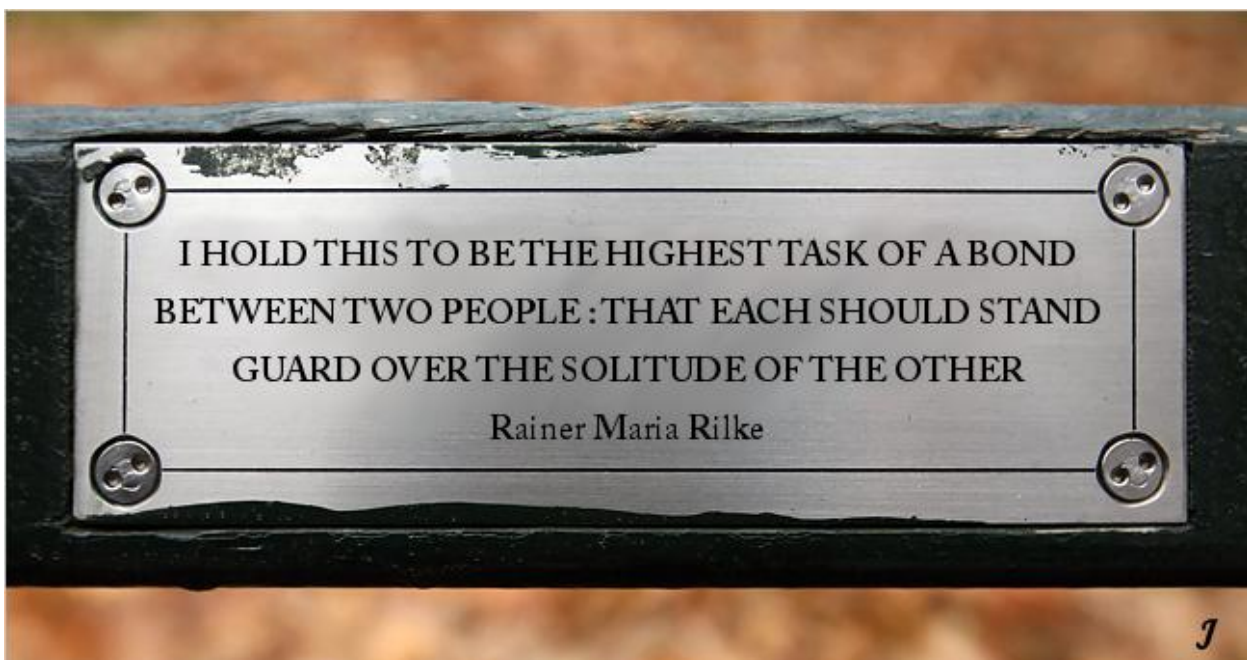
*"Instead of worrying about what you cannot control, shift your energy to what you can create..."*

**Roy T. Bennett**





**By Judith Nolan**



**By Judith Nolan**





---

# A Light in the Depths

---

by Judith Nolan

---



*“Be the reason someone smiles. Be the reason someone feels loved and believes in the goodness in people...”*

**Roy T. Bennett**



**T**

he leaves had begun their golden descent over Central Park, carpeting the world above with rustling memories. Below, deep in the Tunnels where the air always felt cool and faintly ancient, Catherine walked hand-in-hand with Vincent.

“Ten years...” she whispered and sighed.

It was ten years since they’d stood hand-in-hand beneath the stone archways of the Great Hall, vows spoken in trembling voices that somehow made the world still and right, if only for a time. Ten years of life lived between two worlds — one of shadow and silence, one of light and noise. Ten years of stolen mornings, secret evenings, and building a life that defied reason but thrived on love.

And today was their anniversary. It seemed incredible they had come this far.

“You’ve been quiet,” Catherine said, brushing her thumb across the back of his gloved hand.

Vincent’s face softened, the way it always did when she looked at him like that. Not with fear or pity, but with trust.

“I’ve been... preparing something for you,” he said. “I wanted it to be a surprise.”

Catherine arched a brow. “Another midnight poetry recital? Mozart in the park? Or Shakespeare?”

Vincent chuckled — that low, rolling sound that rumbled more in his chest than in his throat. “No. Though there may be poetry. But this gift is not made up of words.”

“Oh?” Catherine’s curiosity sparked instantly. “What is it?”

But her husband didn’t answer. Instead, he gently pulled her forward. “Come. It’s time.”

“Where are we going?” Catherine asked as she followed his lead.

“You’ll see...” Vincent replied as he took her down a tunnel that was unfamiliar. They moved deeper into the maze-like network of tunnels, past corridors even she, after years living between the two worlds, had never explored.

“There are parts of this world even I have never shown you,” Vincent said, sensing her unease.

“I know.” Catherine nodded.

She trusted him implicitly, but even so, the descent into the clustering shadows that hung between the flaming torches set in walls’ niches felt like a metaphor for something deeper — an unveiling, a step beyond the known.

After nearly half an hour of walking, they reached a tall, ancient wooden door. Dust and cobwebs clung to its edges, but someone had recently cleared its centre. Etched into the wood was a symbol Catherine didn’t recognize. She guessed Vincent had already been here. She watched as he lifted a thick iron latch and pushed the door open with a low groan.

Inside, candlelight flickered against walls of polished stone. Stalactites hung like chandeliers while stalagmites poked up from the floor. And at the centre, something astonishing.

Catherine looked all around in astonishment. “It’s a garden,” she whispered. But she could see it was not just any garden.

Underground, fed by glowing crystals and a subterranean stream, a grove of pale trees and soft grasses bloomed in defiance of logic. Bioluminescent moss

cast a gentle glow, mingling with the shimmer of delicate petals. Flowers she couldn't name — some perhaps extinct above — swayed gently in the unseen breeze.

Vincent said softly, "This place is one of Father's oldest secrets. He discovered it decades ago, but it was long thought to be too fragile to visit often. We've protected it, preserved it. But I've come here whenever I have missed you. But that was before our union. Before our life together began."

Catherine was speechless. It was like stepping into a forgotten fairy tale. She felt if she spoke too loudly or moved too hastily, all these magic things would crumble to dust.

Vincent watched her expression with satisfaction. "I wanted to give you a place that was ours. Somewhere unclaimed by the world Above or Below. A space between. Just like us."

His love reached up, cupping his cheek. "Vincent, it's... it's more than I ever imagined."

He took her other hand and led her to a stone bench near the stream. "There's more," he said, a twinkle of mischief lighting his deep-set eyes.

From beneath his cloak, Vincent withdrew a small box. Catherine saw it was hand-carved from dark wood, wrapped with a plaited golden cord that had clearly once belonged to something more mundane. Perhaps a curtain tieback from Above.

Vincent held the gift while Catherine untied the cord. The box had a lid hinged with brass. She lifted it with her eyes alight with curiosity. Inside, she saw there was a book.

Catherine opened it slowly, reverently. Each page was filled with words in Vincent's distinctive, poetic script. But it wasn't just poetry. It wasn't even just their story.

She knew immediately it was a memoir. It was all there, every word about their shared life, told through Vincent's eyes.

The first page read: *"To the one who saw not the beast, but the man. To the woman whose heart built a bridge between two worlds. For you, and the years yet to come."*

Catherine blinked fast against sudden tears. “Vincent... this is our life.”

“Our first ten years,” he said. “Every moment that defined us. Every quiet hour. Every challenge. Every pain and every joy. It’s all here.”

Catherine flipped to a passage, stopping at a familiar phrase. It was the night after they’d first kissed — their true first kiss — beneath the moonlit arches of the old bridge. His words painted the memory with such tender clarity that she could almost feel that moment again.

“I wrote it over months,” Vincent said. “Every night you fell asleep beside me, I would write by candlelight. Sometimes just a few lines. Sometimes pages.”

Catherine laid a hand over her heart. “I don’t know how to thank you.”

“You already have,” he said. “By loving me.”

Catherine nodded. “I always will...”

They sat in the quiet for some time. The only sounds were the trickle of the stream and the whisper of moss shifting beneath their feet.

“I used to believe,” Vincent began, “that my life would always be... solitary. A creature in the dark. The shadows were a comfort, a place where I didn’t have to question what I was or who might see and judge me as dangerous.”

“I’m so sorry...” Catherine looked at him, listening to everything he left unsaid.

“And then I found you,” he continued. “Or rather, you found me. Wounded, in that alley. I never imagined that moment would be the beginning of everything.”

“It was the moment that saved us both,” Catherine said. “You gave me something to believe in when I was lost. You made the world beautiful again.”

He turned toward her. “When you came Below... when we made our life here, I thought I understood love. But I didn’t know it could grow deeper still.”

She smiled softly. “You’re still a poet.”

“I only speak truth,” he replied.

Their hands met again, fingers entwining as naturally as breathing.



Later, as evening gave way to deeper night, Vincent led Catherine to another part of the hidden chamber. A stone platform jutted near the back wall, and there, sitting atop a velvet cloth, was an old, hand-carved music box.

He wound it gently, and a delicate melody filled the chamber — haunting, beautiful, timeless. Not a tune she recognized from any classical composer.

“I wrote it,” Vincent said quietly. “With Mouse’s help.”

Catherine laughed in surprise. “Mouse helped compose this?”

“He helped craft the mechanics,” Vincent said, smiling. “The music... came from dreams I’ve had. Dreams of you.”

As the melody played, Catherine closed her eyes, leaning against his chest. The notes echoed like memories across the chamber.

When the song ended, she whispered, “Promise me we’ll never lose this.”

Vincent’s arms wrapped around her. “We will always have this. This love. This moment. This world we’ve built.”

She looked up at him. “Then I have something for you, too.”

From her pocket, she pulled a small, delicate pendant — a crystalline rose, carved from pink quartz, its edges polished by hand.

“I found the stone months ago,” she said. “I asked Pascal if he knew someone who could help me carve it.”

Vincent accepted the gift with quiet reverence.

“It’s beautiful,” he said.

“It’s us,” she said. “Strong, delicate, impossible — and very, very real.”

The hours passed like minutes in the secret garden. Eventually, Catherine lay back on the moss, gazing up at the faint, glowing ceiling above — a sky made of stone and shimmer.

Vincent reclined beside her, fingers brushing hers in silence.

“When we are old,” she said, “I hope we’ll still come here. Maybe bring our grandchildren.”

Vincent smiled. “Do you think they’ll believe this place is real?”



“They’ll believe because we do,” she said.

Vincent turned his head toward her. “Do you ever miss the world Above?”

She considered it. “Sometimes. The noise. The lights. The rush of the city. But then I remember what I’ve built down here — what we’ve built. And I know that home is not where the world expects you to be. It’s where your soul is known.”

Vincent reached over and placed a kiss on her forehead. “Then we are home.”

Before they left the garden, Vincent closed the book of their life and placed it back into its wooden box. He tied off the golden cord before he handed it to her.

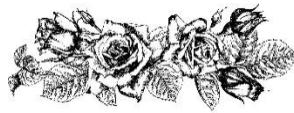
“Keep this,” he said. “So that, if you ever doubt what we are, you’ll remember every step that brought us here.”

She nodded, cradling the precious gift to her chest.

As they walked back toward the tunnels that would return them to their chamber — to their world — the candles slowly flickered out behind them, but the warmth lingered.

In a life of shadows and secrets, they had carved out something true. Something eternal.

And in that eternal space between light and darkness, Vincent and Catherine thrived — two souls whose love defied the boundaries of the world.



*“You only live once, but if you do it right, once is enough...”*

**Mae West**



**“Lady In Red”** Fan Video by Judith Nolan

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xScbaoiGAdo>





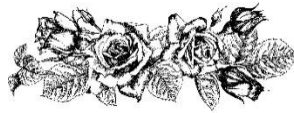
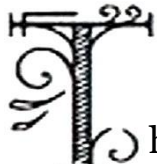
## Mouse's Mischief

by Judith Nolan



*"The saddest aspect of life right now is that science gathers knowledge faster than society gathers wisdom..."*

**Isaac Asimov**



he home Tunnels were unusually noisy. Even some of Pascal's staccato messages on the pipes were drowned out now and then. People had to tap a request to repeat the message before leaning close to the pipe to hear the answer.

Somewhere deep below the city, Mouse was hammering away at what sounded like a clunky contraption made of pipes, gears, and — if the distinct smell was to be believed — peanut butter. The sounds of his industry bounded and rebounded off the stone walls, driving everyone to distraction.

Father straightened from being bent over his chess board as he tried to find a way out of his son's carefully crafted entrapment of the old man's queen. "I cannot *think* in all this noise!" he growled as he clapped his hands over his ears. "*Vincent!* Go and see what Mouse is up to. Tell him to cease immediately! He will listen to you!"

His son smiled. "Shall I say checkmate now? Or would you prefer to stew on your next move while I am away?"

"All right! I capitulate!" Father swept his hand over his king, laying the piece down. "Now, for the love of God! *Go!*"

Vincent stood up and swept his cloak off the back of his chair. He pulled it onto his broad shoulders as he took the staircase up to the tunnel level two steps at a time. Tunnel dwellers thanked him or thumbed up his passing. They were all relieved *someone* was doing *something* about the tinker's confounded noise.

"*Mouse!*" Vincent's low-toned call echoed in the Mousehole entrance, carrying a weight of both authority and patience tested too many times before. "*What* are you building now?"

"*Vincent!*" Mouse poked his head out from behind a pile of what looked suspiciously like spare subway parts. They were all interconnected into a small machine with wires and tubes everywhere.

The tinker's goggles were smudged with soot, and his hair was sticking out in about eight different directions. "Nothing dangerous! Probably. Maybe. Unless wires cross. Then, *boom!*"

He grinned. "Best you not here for that. Go away while you can. Mouse needs to concentrate. Big part coming up."

Vincent sighed brusquely as he entered the danger zone. "*Boom* is precisely what we wish to avoid. Father, and everyone, is concerned about what you are up to, in here."

Mouse's grin widened. "Not *boom* like explosion. Boom like big idea!" He tapped his temple proudly. "Mouse's Invention Number Forty-Seven. Rat Relocator 3000. No more rats stealing Father's biscuits or raiding William's stores. Rats go *poof!* Relocated uptown."

Before Vincent could respond, Catherine appeared in the entrance to the chamber. She was carrying a brown paper bag that smelled faintly of cinnamon. "I just missed you as I came down. Father said you were here, Vincent. I brought pastries," she announced cheerfully.

"Pastries?" Mouse zipped forward so fast he nearly tripped over a coil of tubing. "For me?!"

Arthur chitted his attention from the safety of the work bench. He held out two black paws together like a begging bowl. He sniffed the air and chitted more loudly.

"For everyone," Catherine corrected, smiling at the racoon. "But if you've been skipping meals again, Mouse, you can have the first one."

Vincent's blue eyes softened as Catherine handed Mouse a sticky bun. His world was full of shadows and burdens, but Catherine's presence always brought light. Even sticky-bun light.

"At least, we will have a moment or two of peace," he murmured as Catherine turned to feed the waiting racoon.

Arthur accepted his sticky treat with a wondering expression of avarice. He cuddled it to his chest and vanished into the mess as he went in search of his water bowl to wash his food first.

"It might dissolve by the time you're done." Catherine chuckled as she watched the racoon hurry away.

"Arthur knows," Mouse assured her quickly with his mouth full of sugary treat. "If does, he'll just drink the water."

"Fair enough." Catherine smiled as she offered her love a sweet treat from her bag.

He accepted it with an answering smile. But he was prevented from consuming it. Unfortunately, their blessed peace lasted barely a minute.

A booming voice echoed from the tunnel entrance. "HELLOOO?! Where'd you go, Catherine?"

Catherine looked at Vincent with apology in her eyes. They both knew it was Elliot Burch.

Vincent's eyes on a groan. "*Why...* is he here again?" he muttered.

"I'm sorry." Catherine gave him an apologetic look. "But ever since you saved his life from Gabriel's gunman, he's been doing everything he can to make amends."

She put a hand on his forearm. "He insisted on holding a tunnel community fundraiser for you and the helpers Above. I couldn't exactly say no. He's given us so much already."

Vincent looked pained. "Fundraiser? Do you think such an event is a good idea?"

"Yes, if it's held in secret," Catherine said brightly. "We'll hold it Below in an old walled-up subway station that Elliot now owns. We'll invite all the helpers. Just like you do at Winterfest. It will raise money for supplies down here. Medicine, books, tools. Elliot's agreed to... well, sponsor it."

Mouse perked up. "Sponsor? Means money. Lots of money?!"

Elliot walked in, dressed in an expensive suit that was at odds with his surroundings. "That's right, Mouse! Where there's Elliot Burch, there's money. And also charm." He winked at Catherine, who shook her head at him.

Vincent growled softly, low enough that only Catherine noticed.

"Now," Elliot continued, clapping his hands. "We're going to put on an excellent auction. I'll host, Catherine will co-chair, and... well, Vincent..."

He looked at the towering lion-man thoughtfully. "I'm not sure what to do with you."

"I am *not* a sideshow," Vincent growled at him.

"Of course, you're not," Elliot backpedalled quickly. "I was just having a bit of fun with you. You do whatever you need to do to get as much for the things as we can. Everyone goes away a winner. Peter Allcott and Lady May have both confirmed they'll attend and bring their check books."

"In your world, this may be a good idea," Vincent replied grimly. "But this is my world, and money is of little use to us. Now we could use some of your heavy boring equipment to make more tunnels and chambers."

"Any time," Elliot faced his good friend. "You just gotta ask me."

Catherine stepped quickly between them. "That is why we'll use what we raise to buy things you really need down here. Let's focus on the auction items. What do we have?"

Mouse raised a finger proudly. "Rat Relocator 3000!"

Elliot stared at the jumble of pipes and wires. "What does it do?"

"Relocates rats. Safely." The tinker shrugged. "Probably. Not tested yet." He frowned at his audience. "Got interrupted."

"Terrific," Elliot said, clearly lying. "Every Upper East Side penthouse needs one."

Vincent exhaled slowly, the sound resembling a distant growl of thunder.

"Has Father agreed to any of this?"

"Ah, yes he has," Catherine replied. "I saw him on the way down and gave him a sugar bun. He agreed, after I agreed to his rules."

Vincent looked at all three of them. If Father had approved then he would leave it alone. But he was still not happy about the whole idea.



The fundraising event was held in an abandoned subway station that had been closed up and forgotten decades before Elliot bought the whole section of the lost underground. It had been cleaned, decorated, and lit with strings of

glowing bulbs. Tapestries hung on the walls, tables overflowed with food and donated items. Father had been persuaded to give a welcoming speech.

Catherine looked radiant in a midnight-blue gown, Vincent imposing yet elegant in his best cloak and white shirt. Mouse buzzed with nervous excitement. Elliot watched them all with deep amusement in his blue eyes.

Ever since Vincent had saved his life, after Gabriel's sniper had shot him in the back, he'd been doing everything he could for his adopted world. And he prided himself on his ability to do very good indeed.

And he was still hoping to impress Catherine enough to get her to go out with him again. He longed for things to go back to the way they were between them. Before he ruined everything. Of course, he was aware of the large and powerful reason she kept refusing his advances. The man was standing right next to him, and looking less than pleased with their plans.

He turned away from temptation and hurried to the podium that Father had just vacated. He clapped his hands for attention.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" he declared into a microphone that Mouse had rigged out of an old police scanner. "Welcome to the very first Tunnel Treasures Charity Auction!"

Applause filled the old station. The audience was, by now, well liquored up with William's delicious apple cider and they were looking forward to an enjoyable evening. Lady May had provided baskets full of delicious edibles that were also appreciated. The air was very festive.

"Now, our first item up for bid," Elliot said, "Three hand-knitted scarves made by Mary, one of our community's most talented residents. Who'll start the bidding?"

The scarves went for \$200. Not bad.

Next came a stack of old books Father had donated, which fetched \$500 thanks to a heated bidding war between two collectors who may, or may not, have been tipsy. Father hid a smile and tried not to look too pleased.

Then came the Rat Relocator 3000. Everyone had looked it over with awe tinged with wariness when they were told the identity of its creator.

"*Behold!*" Mouse shouted dramatically, wheeling out the contraption on a squeaky cart. "Solution to New York's rat problem! Also doubles as popcorn maker if turned to wrong setting."

The audience gasped. Several took a few steps away from the danger.

One storeowner raised his hand. "I could use it. But does it actually work?"

"Work-ish," Mouse replied honestly. "Needs testing to be sure. Mouse can install."

Before Elliot could begin the bidding, the machine sputtered, hissed, and shot a puff of smoke. The crowd panicked. Someone screamed, "It's a bomb!" and ducked under a table.

Vincent jumped forward, grabbed the machine, and yanked out a wire with a decisive *snap*. The smoke cleared. Silence followed then everyone started talking again.

"See?" Mouse beamed. "Totally safe now."

Elliot rubbed his temple. "We're never going to sell that thing."

But then, to everyone's shock, a man in the back raised his hand. "One hundred dollars! If Mouse fixes it for nothing!"

Another shouted, "Two hundred!"

Within minutes, the Rat Relocator 3000 had sold for \$1,000 to an apartment owner who was desperate to rid his building of pests.

Mouse was ecstatic. Elliot was stunned. Vincent was still frowning, but slightly less so. Father looked unconvinced.

The auction continued smoothly until the "mystery lot" came up. Mouse had insisted on including it without telling anyone what it was.

"Item number twelve," Elliot read from his card. "Uh... unidentified?"

Mouse rolled out a crate. "Special! One-of-a-kind! Very rare!"

He whipped off the tarp, revealing... Vincent's rather tattered work cloak.

Vincent froze. Catherine's eyes widened.

Elliot nearly dropped the microphone laughing. "A used cape?" he said incredulously. "What is this? Dracula's garage sale?"

Mouse protested. "Not just cape! Hero cape! Belonged to tunnel protector! Legendary item! No other like it! *Priceless!*"

The audience erupted into whispers. Someone shouted, "Is he serious?"

Another murmured, "I'd pay anything for a piece of urban legend..."

Bidding began. Several bids were to push up the price.

Vincent stepped forward quickly, mortified. "This is... not for sale."

But it was too late. The cloak sold for \$500.

Vincent sighed his chagrin. Catherine hid a smile behind her hand.

Elliot leaned toward her and whispered, "I should've brought one of my old tuxedos. Probably could've cleared ten grand."

Catherine whispered back, "Vincent's cloak has more dignity than all your tuxedos combined."

Elliot shook his head slowly. "You wound me, Cathy. And to think, I did all of this, for you."

"No, you didn't," she replied. "You know who it was for, and you can thank yourself at any time."

"You are a hard woman to please," Elliot teased with a regretful look in his blue eyes.

He walked back to his podium. Catherine looked after him. She knew they all owed Elliot Burch so much. But he also owed them for the air he was still able to breathe. He had to be satisfied with that because she had nothing else for him.

At the end, the auction raised an astonishing amount, and spirits were high. Until Mouse accidentally activated the Rat Relocator during the closing speech.

Suddenly, rats from every corner of the station were sucked into the machine, squeaking indignantly. The contraption shuddered, sparked, and then spat them back out in a glittering shower of popcorn.

The crowd screamed, scattered, and fled. Rats scurried everywhere, some wearing popped kernels of popcorn like crowns.

Elliot grabbed Mouse's shoulder. "*Do* something!"

"*Trying!*" Mouse shot back. "Must be a fault somewhere. Need tools to fix!"

"I'll deal with it!" Vincent scooped up the machine and carried it away into the tunnels. Mouse scampered after him, yelling, "Don't break it! *Works!* Still needs fine-tuning!"

By the end of the night, the station held overturned tables, trampled pastries, and a few remaining rats celebrating like they'd won the lottery. But the fundraiser had raised over \$10,000.

Father sighed heavily, rubbing his temples. "Was it worth it? I'm not sure. I certainly will *not* consent to doing this again in the near future. Or any future."

Catherine smiled. "The community will have everything it needs. That's what matters. We can think of other ways to raise the funds you need."

"Dear, sweet Catherine..." Father kissed her cheek. "You must learn our mantra. We repair, recycle and reuse. Ours is not a throwaway society. That is why we must live apart from Topsiders."

"I know..." Catherine wrapped her hands around his upper arm. "I just wanted to help. I love helping and being a helper. It's all in a good cause."

"I suppose..." Father's sigh was ragged. "I am for my bed. Goodnight, everyone."

Vincent looked at his love, his blue eyes softening. "The best thing is we survived Elliot Burch's involvement. That, too, is remarkable. He is too rich in many ways and thinks money cures all ills and problems."

"Of course, I do." Elliot, brushing popcorn out of his hair, grinned. "Admit it, Vincent. I did make the night unforgettable. No one can top it."

"I can think of another word for it," Vincent growled. "And I will discourage anyone from trying to do so."

"Okay good, okay fine!" Mouse popped up with a grin. "Wait until you see Invention Number Forty-Eight! It's a winner for sure!"

Everyone groaned in unison.



*"If we knew what it was we were doing, it  
would not be called research, would it?"*

**Albert Einstein**



# Season 3 and Beyond



*By Raygan Rains*





---

## Episode Epistles

*by Angie*  
*(in production order)*

---



### ***Season Three***

***Though Lovers be Lost*** *their love is true*  
*Catherine captured, their child is born*  
*A lonely rooftop is their due*  
*Then Vincent leaves his love, forlorn*

***Walk Slowly*** *is sad Vincent's test*  
*The agony he cannot hide*  
*As Catherine is put to rest*  
*He finds new purpose in their child.*

***Nevermore***, *is dark with plots*  
*Vincent, Joe and Elliot are caught*  
*Diana's search a little yields*  
*The Carousel's a killing field.*

*In **Snow** we meet Gabriel's kin*  
*He stalks below for Vincent's life*  
*In the end, he can't begin*  
*Our hero doesn't bargain twice*

*In **Beggar's Comet** Gabriel tries*  
*To lure Vincent with Elliot's plea*  
*The Compass Rose blows up sky high*  
*Vincent's hurt, now sad for three*

***A Time to Heal*** is Diana's tale  
She finds Vincent and takes him home  
He recovers there, but still has failed  
To find his son, so's still alone.

***In the Forests of the Night***  
Rolley's found and Vincent vows  
Revenge on drug labs, fiery fights  
Diana tells him it's enow

***Chimes at Midnight***, nightmares haunt  
Vincent knows his child is ill  
He lets Gabriel catch him, Diana wants  
To locate the place where both are still

***Invictus***, now our Vincent's caged  
Gabriel lets him hold his son  
Diana and law are soon engaged  
Vincent rescues child and Gabriel's done

***The Reckoning***'s a tale of need  
An old disaster builds new pain  
Jessica gives Father love indeed  
Plot thickens for Diana again

***Legacies*** is love and worry  
Father and Jessica can't decide  
He starts home, but's caught and buried  
Vincent rescues him but Gregory flies

***Epilogue***  
That was all, our series gone  
Drama, hugs, tales that shone  
*Beauty and the Beast* was not revived  
Since then it's ours to keep alive!





By Judith Nolan







## **Blessed**

*by Anne Alden-France*



*It didn't go the way I thought.*

*It didn't "go" at all.*

*I thought we'd never, ever end,*

*That I'd always hear you call.*

*I thought I'd feel you in my mind*

*Until I drew last breath.*

*Now I'm the one who's left behind,*

*And you went first, in Death.*

*I say this near our Waterfall,*

*Your threshold, and on the stairs*

*I carried you when we came down.*

*Love caught me unawares.*

*For I found love, and I found hope,*

*I found -- so many things,*

*That now I sit and wonder*

*That Fate gave such... offerings.*



*The Concert Chamber, on your knees,  
Your balcony so high,  
“No shadow of a parting”  
Said the book – That was a lie.*

*But for all of that, and much more still,  
And more I've not confessed,  
I swear, my Love, I still think that  
We are forever BLESSED.*







# A Comparison of Epic Proportions

by Mel



## Season 4

The

he small blue velvet box felt cool in Vincent's hands as he retrieved it from the back of his closet. His heart swelled with a mixture of anticipated joy and fear.

Out of the corner of his eye, Vincent saw his nine-year-old son slip into the chamber, absorbed in a new book.

"What are you reading?" Vincent asked, gesturing to the book.

Jacob started and then glanced at his father. With a sheepish grin, he looked down at the green tome with its golden title. "Oh, sorry, Dad. It's The Adventures of Sher... Sher... Sherlock Holmes by Arthur Co... Co—"

"Conan Doyle," Vincent said. Sliding the small box into his cloak, he moved to his son's side with an amused smile. His son's appetite for stories seemed to know no bounds.

By the age of six, it seemed little Jacob had devoured the works of all the great authors, and his appetite for stories only seemed to increase with each year. Though while multiple volumes of Shakespeare, Dickens, and other classic authors (even Brontë) lined the shelves of the library Below, the eccentric English detective didn't seem to be counted among their ranks to the patriarch of the tunnels.

"*Sir* Arthur Conan Doyle, actually," Vincent said, eying the book.

"Sir?" Jacob looked at the cover again. His fingers skimmed under the author's name. His blue eyes, so much like his birth mother Catherine, widened as he looked up. "Was he a knight, Dad?"

"He was knighted, yes, but he wasn't what you would picture a knight to be. He was a physician, a doctor—"

“Like grandpa,” Jacob said, grinning.

Vincent nodded. “He served his country with his hands as a doctor and also as a great writer.”

“Could I be knighted, Dad? Grandpa and Mary say I write great stories.”

“We don’t have knights in America, Jacob.”

The child pouted as his father guided him over to the bed, as the clock on the table struck nine o’clock.

“Time for bed now. But now, where did you get that book?”

“Uncle Devin gave it to me,” Jacob said, climbing under the covers. “He said it reminded him of, Diana.”

Vincent’s amusement and sympathy for his older brother grew. The fiery red-haired detective would certainly have opinions of such a comparison and would let Vincent’s wild “untamed” older brother know it.

Still, his own curiosity made him question his son. “Why does Uncle Devin say that?”

Jacob grinned, mimicking his uncle. “Both are crazy, insane detectives who help people. That’s why Diana is a Helper.”

Vincent nodded thoughtfully. “I can see why he would think that. No one else can solve a case like Diana can. That is true.”

“Or me,” Jacob grinned with pride.

For fun sometimes, Diana would take her mild cases and redo them so Jacob could help solve the crimes. While sugarcoated for his age, Diana’s stories of her cases were something his son enjoyed.

“You are becoming quite the little detective indeed,” Vincent said.

“Like Diana, or my mom?”

“Like Diana, yes. Your mother wasn’t a detective. She only worked as a DA.”

“Like Uncle Joe?”

“Yes,” Vincent said. It still amazed him how much the D.A., Joe Maxwell, had become such a big part of their community. He only wished Catherine had been alive to see her friend embrace the Tunnel family. “Your mother and Uncle Joe actually worked together. You know that.”

“How many have you read, Jacob?”

“None. Uncle Devin just gave it to me the other day.” Jacob flipped through the cover open and then handed it to his father. “I was gonna start with A Scandal in Bo... Bohim—”

“Bohemia,” Vincent corrected gently. “It’s a kingdom in Europe.”

“Oh... yeah. Will you read?”

Vincent paused thoughtfully. His son had certainly read more difficult books than the ones penned by Sir Doyle, but the stories within these pages were more adult in nature.

“I think it’s time for bed.”

Jacob pointed to the book. “Just one story, Dad.”

Vincent sighed, unable to deny his son. “One story and then bed.”

Jacob nodded, scrambling under the covers.

Vincent settled into reading the story of a king seeking the detective’s help in getting a socially disastrous (or an embarrassing one for a child’s ears) photograph back and how it could be the ruin him.

Vincent swallowed a chuckle, as he recalled when he had first met Diana Bennett. He had declared the photos hung on her bulletin board as she hunted Catherine’s killer to be dangerous to those his beloved held dear.

But Diana had challenged him. “How? How can I hurt them? Only I can see this wall.”

Unlike the king in the story, Vincent couldn’t go to a detective and ask for the potential danger to be retrieved and dealt with. In the story of his life, he simply had to trust the stranger who was both the potential danger and the smartest detective perhaps the world had known since Sherlock.

And just as Irene kept the photo safe from prying eyes, Diana had kept the secret of Vincent and the world Below close to her heart for close to a decade.

“Dad, read.” Jacob paused at the look his father gave and cleared his throat. “I mean, please read.”

Vincent smiled and resumed the story.

As the Sherlock story unfolded, Vincent imagined his brother Devin taking on the disguise of a man of the cloth in order to obtain the whereabouts of coveted photo. In a bid worthy of luck and scheme of his older brother, a fire broke out, forcing Irene to reveal the hiding place. But then, when he and Dr.

Watson went to retrieve the desired photo, they only found a letter written by Irene and a different photo; one of herself. It seemed both she, the coveted photo, and her new husband had taken off to begin a new life in America.

“So, she beat Sherlock?” Jacob asked.

“You sound surprised, why couldn’t Ms. Alder figure him out?”

“But she’s the bad guy, right?”

Vincent glanced over at his son, resting the book on his knee. “She didn’t do anything to the king though, so how is she the bad guy?”

Jacob opened his mouth and then paused in thought. His young mind, while mature beyond his years, was still trying to comprehend matters of ‘fairness’ in the adult world.

“Maybe that should be all for ton—”

“No, Dad...” Jacob fought a yawn and pointed at the page. “You’re almost done. What did the king say?”

Vincent continued, “*‘What a woman—oh, what a woman!’ cried the King of Bohemia, when we had all three read this epistle. ‘Did I not tell you how quick and resolute she was? Would she not have made an admirable queen? Is it not a pity that she was not on my level?’*

*‘From what I have seen of the lady, she seems indeed to be on a very different level to your Majesty,’ said Holmes coldly. ‘I am sorry that I have not been able to bring your Majesty’s business to a more successful conclusion.’... ‘And that was how a great scandal threatened to affect the kingdom of Bohemia, and how the best plans of Mr. Sherlock Holmes were beaten by a woman’s wit. He used to make merry over the cleverness of women, but I have not heard him do it of late. And when he speaks of Irene Adler, or when he refers to her photograph, it is always under the honorable title of the woman.’<sup>3</sup>*”

“You know, Dad,” Jacob said through a yawn. “I changed my mind. Irene was clever... and I think Uncle Devin’s wrong.”

“Oh, why do you say that?”

the

“Diana’s not like Sherlock... she’s Irene Alder.”

---

<sup>3</sup> The Scandal in Bohemia by Sir Author Cannon Doyle.

Vincent smiled, pulling the covers up. “Hm... Now time for sleep, Jacob.”

Jacob fought for only few moments, before he let his mind slip off into dreams.

“So, do you think he’ll want a Sherlock hat and pipe for his birthday?” a voice asked.

Vincent’s lips lifted as he answered. “Perhaps, though, I think Father will not wish for a real pipe.”

He heard the humor in her response. “I think they have bubble ones now.”

Vincent chuckled to himself as he turned to see Diana hovering in the threshold of his chamber. It still amazed him, how she, at times just seemed to appear without him sensing her. Unlike his beloved Catherine, who dressed in more elegant clothing, Diana favored comfort over everything. And yet still there was a style to her jeans and purple shirt that matched more with the tunnels.

“Is everything all right, Vincent?” Diana asked. “You left pretty quickly after dinner.”

Vincent bowed his head. “I apologize, I was coming to see you when Jacon wanted me to read a story.”

Diana smiled. She had already seen that age with her niece Alex who had begun to pull away from her parents as well believing bedtime stories were for children. So, when asked, it was impossible for a parent to refuse.

“I didn’t realize Jake read those stories.”

“Devin apparently introduced him.”

“Ah should have seen that coming.” Diana grinned. “But now, do I need to figure out your mystery as to why you left dinner early. Was it a bout of food poisoning? Or maybe Arthur got loose? Am I getting warm?”

“For once, Diana, you have missed the mark.”

Diana gave a mock offended look at him, questioning her detection skills.

The look was so cute, unexpected, and fun, it made his heart leap.

The box tucked within his cloak suddenly felt heavy. “I’ll have Mary come sit with Jacob. Would you like to go for a walk?”

“Sure.”



“Is something wrong, Diana?” Vincent asked a while later.

“Ugh, no, just letting my head get back on straight. You know how I get after a tough case.” Dana forced a smile. “So, what adventure of Sherlock’s were you reading?”

Vincent glanced over at her. “A Scandal in Bohemia.”

Diana’s eyebrows rose.

“You know that one?”

“Isn’t that a little... mature?”

“No more than Shakespeare or one of your cases.”

Diana blew a stray piece of red hair out of her eyes, irritated. “Yes, I think to Jimmy Faber and most people in my line of work I meet, I end up known as ‘*that woman*.’”

Vincent studied her for a moment. He knew that the last case that had taken Diana Above for six months had taken its toll, as most others wouldn’t believe her lines of thought. Each one thinking that the ‘old methods’ were better. He had thought, and indeed, hoped that Jimmy, over the years, would have grown to respect Diana’s insane skills of deduction and ability to solve the cases others deemed impossible. But it seemed most were like the king of Bohemia, stuck in their ways and certain that they were above Diana in professional rank and privilege.

“And...” Diana continued, “...something tells me they don’t mean it as complementary as Sherlock does with Irene Adler.”

*Except Joe Maxwell. He respects you so much, Diana. Perhaps he is the Sherlock in Jacob’s story.* Vincent swallowed a laugh as he guided Diana around a corner. *If Joe is Sherlock, and Diana is Irene, then who am I in this story? I think Pascal or Father fits Dr. Watson better... but then who am I...?*

Diana took a breath. “So, where are we... wow!”

Vincent smiled as he watched Diana’s frustration melt into awe at the sight of the crystal caverns. The darkness of the Tunnels had faded into a myriad of glowing gems like a mirror of pearl and rainbow necklaces as the nighttime light reflected the beauty

“What is this place?” Diana asked.

“The Crystal Caverns. I’ve never shown anyone this place.”

He saw the recognition in her eyes. Most places they traveled had once been shared with Catherine Chandler, his Bonded love before the tragedy that had brought Diana into Vincent's world. And he had chosen this place... untouched by the painful memories to show her.

This would be *their* place.

"This is amaz... Vincent, what are you doing?" Diana asked, uncertain.

"Diana," Vincent began pulling out the small box and getting down on one knee. He opened it to reveal a simple golden band with a crafted heart-shaped blue jewel (the same shade as Diana's eyes) lay cushioned within a white base.

"From the moment we met, you were never a mere Helper, or just *that* woman to me. You were... are an amazing, bright, courageous, creative, and beautiful woman who helped bring me back from the edge of death and despair. You brought me and my son home. You brought life back into me."

Diana stared at him, taking in the words and scene before her.

"And I don't want to be like that king of Bohemia missing out on a woman who is both my equal, but also in a completely different class of her own, that makes her the most unique woman I know. So, Diana Bennett, will you do me the honor of... becoming my wife... my queen?"

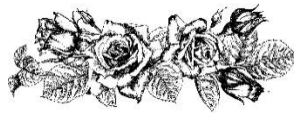
Diana smiled before a spot of joyful laughter escaped.

Vincent held the box, confused. "Is that a... yes?"

"Oh, that's elementary, my dear Vincent," Diana said, taking Vincent's hands in hers.

Vincent rose, removing the ring from its perch and slid it on Diana's finger. "A perfect fit."

Diana leaned up, wrapping her arms around him, and the two shared a kiss.





## Season 3 Drabbles

*by Mel*



### Flowers

*by Mel*



Diana glanced at the rosebush. Only that week Mark deemed it a lost cause. But Diana could still feel the fragile life clinging to the odd dual colored bush.

“So, how do you know all this? Madmen send you flowers or what?” Joe asked. “I don’t recall learning any of that.”

“Uh no, nothing like that. My aunt Helen and uncle Bill run a florist shop in town. I asked them about it,” Diana said.

“So, what made them pick this type?”

Diana held up her red hair against her pale porcelain skin, chuckling.

“Wanted a family flower I guess.”



### Practice

*by Mel*



“Sh jeez, Vincent,” Diana cried, spinning around. “Don’t sneak up on-”

“I apologize, Diana.” Vincent pointed to the skylight. “I did knock.”

“Oh, sorry.” Diana shifted to shield something on her desk.

Vincent peered at the now familiar blue workboard usually filled with gruesome images. Tonight, it was blank.

“What had you so absorbed, Diana? You just closed a case, right?”

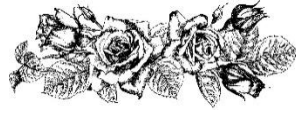
“Ah I did.” At his curious look, Diana sighed and sidestepped to reveal a book.



Vincent frowned, looking closer. "Chess?"

"I'm practicing so I can finally give Father a good game."

Vincent grinned, picturing it. "Would you like help?"



## Gift of Coffee

*by Mel*



Vincent? un, banging his head against the pots hung overhead. Carefully, he stepped around the island with a fresh steaming mug.

Diana, setting her bags aside, raised her eyebrows.

"Well...you've had a hard week, so I wanted to surprise you."

Diana smiled. "Thanks, Babe...it's just weird seeing you making coffee."

"I was going to try it first..."

"Give it to me." Diana took a sip and grimaced.

Vincent sighed. "I tried-"

"I know. Let me can teach you." Diana smiled. "It's not as hard as playing chess."

Vincent laughed.



## Surprise

*by Mel*



Diana leaned against the rough tunnel walls. That ham sandwich appeared to not be agreeing with her. She was going to be late for Vincent's surprise party. It amazed her that anyone could keep a secret from her husband, but somehow it had been done.

But now ...

“Diana? What’s wrong?” Mary asked, coming to her.

“I’m fine, Mary,” Diana said, but her stomach protested. “Maybe I’m not.”

Mary listened as Diana explained her symptoms over the past weeks.

“I think you’ll be giving Vincent quite the birthday surprise, my dear. It sounds like you’re...”

Diana smiled at the idea.



## Birthday

*by Mel*



“Open mine next, Mom,” eight-year-old Jacob said, holding out a present.

“No, mine,” little four-year-old Cathy said.

“Mine’s better,” Jake said.

Vincent held up his hands, halting the argument. “Let your mother open her gifts.”

The two children quieted.

Diana smiled. The larger birthday celebration had ended and now only the immediate family of four remained.

She opened the box to see a white mug with painted pictures on it. “Thank—”

“For your tea,” Jake said.

“Mom likes coffee,” Cathy said.

“No-”

“Yes-”

“No-”

“I like both. Like you two,” Dian laughed, grabbing her children up in a big hug.





*"No matter how much suffering you went through,  
you never wanted to let go of those memories..."*

*Haruki Murakami*



By Judith Nolan





Please note:  
**I Had Thee as a Dream**  
Is our theme  
And I thought *Alternate Universe*  
Why not?

This is another life/incarnation that takes place in the 1960's. Not a true back story.



### **Vincent & Catherine AU Beginning Story**

**C**atherine was excited to see Peter. She walked up the stairs to the front door of his townhome.

She knocked, and the door opened.

“Cathy, come on in.”

Catherine walked in. Peter led her to the living room. A handsome young man was standing next to the bookcase on the side wall.

“Devin, this is Catherine Chandler.”

Devin walked over to her. Devin and Catherine shook hands.

Devin smiled. “Good to meet you, but Mom and Father are waiting for me.”

Peter spoke up, “Let Jacob and Grace know I’ll see them shortly.”

Devin nodded. “Mom and Father would like that.” Devin looked at Catherine.

“So nice meeting you, and sorry for this quick goodbye.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” Catherine replied.

*Who is this guy, and why the rush?*

“Devin, I’ll escort you out. Cathy, I’ll be right back.”

Devin and Peter walked out of the room. Catherine shook her head and decided to sit in the comfortable chair by the unlit fireplace.

A few minutes later, Peter came back and sat in the chair next to her. “Now, what did you want to talk to me about?”

She grinned. “Who is Devin?”

“Oh, he’s the son of someone I’m friends with. He’s studying to be a doctor at the Cornell University Medical School. I helped him with getting into that school. He’s been there for a year.” Peter shook his head. “He’s going to be twenty-five soon. Ever since he had to register for the draft, he’s been going through one set of studies after another. First, he wanted to be a philosophy teacher, then a nurse, and then a teacher of the fine arts. And now a doctor.”

“You seemed to be concerned about him. Is this to avoid being drafted?”

“Maybe. You know, I’m not really sure. He does odd jobs to pay back the loans he took out for the classes. If only he put his mind to one thing.” Peter looked at her. “But you’re here to ask my opinion about choosing a college. What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know. I might take some classes at Radcliffe. Maybe get into law.”

“Like Charles?”

“Dad is doing well at corporate law, but it seems so...boring to me.”

“Time is moving so fast. Can’t believe it’s August.”

“I know. I was talking with my friend Nancy Tucker. She wants to go into art. We wondered if we could go to the same college. With my choice, I have to take pre-law classes first, then on to law classes. After that, I’ll have to decide where to practice.”

“If you want to get into the classes for the fall semester, you’re going to have to make a quick decision.”

“I know.” Catherine paused. “I’m still deciding on what I should do. I want to help people, but...”



“Let me guess, you feel that Charles would like you to work for him in his firm. What does Caroline think?”

“Mom, she tells me to trust myself and do what I want to do.”

“She’s right.” Peter sighed. “I know these last nine years have been touch and go for her.”

“I feel as if Dad and I got lucky with you and the doctor you recommended. But each year feels as if she will relapse and...”

He placed his hand on top of hers. “I’m glad that Charles had that talk with you.”

“I was just ten when Mom got sick. I thought it wouldn’t be long until she felt better. As the years passed by, Mom wasn’t getting back to her old energetic self. I was seventeen when I found out the truth: That she had cancer. Two years later, she’s still here, but I worry. I worry about Mom needing me and I’m not there. Should I even plan what I want to do in life and do it? Should I even be going out with friends?”

“Cathy, none of us knows when we are going to leave this Earth. Caroline wouldn’t want you to stay with her and wait for her death. I know she has told you this. You must go out and live your life. You must do this not only for her, but for yourself. She wants you to pursue your dreams.”

“I know,” Catherine whispered.



In a chamber not too far away from the community, Vincent and Devin were looking at a flyer.

“Why are they saying Woodstock Festival when it’s actually in Bethel, New York?” Vincent asked.

Devin smiled, “Because it would have been there, but I guess they finally settled on this dairy farm.”

“Maybe because they’re afraid too many people will show up?”

Devin looked at him. “Yeah, like us. I managed to get some tickets.”

“How? Whatever odd jobs you do Above barely pays for the loans you took out to go to college.”

Devin grinned. “Not all the money I earned goes to my loans and to help out here Below.”

“Why couldn’t we discuss this in our chamber?”

“Because Vin, you know how easy it is for someone to listen in. If someone told the old battle-axe about our plans, well, it won’t go well. Mom, well, she may be cool about it, but she’ll still take his side. She always believed parents should be united in decisions regarding their children.”

“He already guessed that you’re going through college to avoid being sent to Vietnam.” Vincent shook his head. “You could have stayed down here. Then you wouldn’t have to register for the draft. No one would have found you here.”

“Vin, our parents are lucky I didn’t leave years ago at fourteen.”

“I’m glad you didn’t.”

“Point is,” Devin continued, “I’m a bit of an oddity anyway. A rolling stone. I like Elvis, but most hippies don’t, as he’s now ‘establishment.’ I love the hippie idea of protesting for freedom and happiness, but not the drugs. I’m not supposed to like Elvis and hippies at the same time. But when did I ever follow the rules?”

Vincent chuckled. “Rarely.”

“Right, rarely. Now you’re twenty-one and you can come with me.”

Vincent’s eyes got wide. “You know what Father...”

“Hell with that, remember last year, Halloween, we went Above, and no one even bothered to look at us.”

“This is August.”

“These are hippies. Long hair and hairiness goes. Look, Vin, I talked things over with Peter today.”

“Father’s friend?”

“Yes, and he can help me find a van.”

“You have a license to drive?”



Devin took a strand of Vincent's hair and played with it. "Another thing I did Above. A Helper helped me get it."

"But getting there? We could be stopped by the police."

"The pigs won't bother us."

"Pigs?"

"Got to teach you hippie talk." Devin stopped playing with Vincent's hair. "I can paint a few peace signs and flowers on the van if it doesn't have them. We can spend three days listening to good music."

"Loud music. You know I like the classics."

"Yeah, but Vin, I know you heard Arlo Guthrie's version of Amazing Grace and liked it. I liked it, too. He'll be there. And you can also stay in the van most of the time, if you want to do so."

"Devin, there will also be psychedelics. The air will be filled with the smells of marijuana and..."

"So, if it drives you nuts again, stay in the van. I can get sardines and crackers, snacks, and water. We can sleep in the van. I've got this planned out."

"Father will be upset, he'll say that as an adult I should..."

"Blah, blah, blah."

"And Mom..."

"Mom will be more understanding than Father. Listen, are you going to let an overbearing, stuffy man with issues dictate your life?"

Vincent was shocked. "Devin, that is..."

"I'm calling it as I see it, OK?"

"But the community needs me."

"Yeah, but you are a being that needs to have your moments in the sun. You are different and special, and I know about the gov wanting to do experiments, etc., etc. Are you going to live your whole life in fear? Are you going to let others dictate the risks you want to take?"

Vincent looked at him. "What if I don't want to take this risk?"

Devin threw his hands up in the air. "OK, OK, but say nothing to Father about it. I'll go alone."

"Is that safe?"

Devin reached into his pocket and drew out a small knife. "I know how to use this. I also learned to fight from Mitch."

"Mitch is now Above, in jail for robbing a store."

"But I won't ever get in trouble." Devin grinned. "I know how far to push things. I only use my skills for self-defense." He winked.

"Devin."

"I'm going to leave on a Thursday. I have a feeling there will be a traffic jam from New York, no matter what they say. So, I'll check out the area, find a place to camp, and get into the Festival the next day way before the crowd." Devin put his hands on his shoulders. "Keep this a secret, OK?"

"I'll miss you when you go. Just come back safe."

"The pipes are asking for us."

"We have chores to do."

"And I'm already sick at the fact that they use you for most of the hard work. Plus, if there are any dangerous people causing trouble, they want you to take care of them. I'm worried about what will happen if you hurt someone, or you, yourself, get hurt. You're a pussycat."

"I...can protect those that I love."

"But you never have fought anyone."

"Yet..."

"I'll tell you that the first time is the hardest, but that you will then realize you did what you had to do. I know this because I had to fight once." Devin paused, then continued. "By the way, I won. I want you to be aware that if someone attacks you and dies it's not your fault. I just hope that will never happen to you."

"So do I."

Vincent turned and started down the passageway.

"Where are you going?" Devin started to follow him.

“We are needed.”

Devin rubbed his face. “Ever the dutiful cat on duty.” He sighed. “Vin, wait up. I’m coming.”



Days later, on an early Thursday morning, Vincent was awakened by Devin. Bleary-eyed and puzzled, he noticed Devin was already dressed.

“Wake up, Vin, I need some help.”

“What?”

“Get dressed, OK?”

Devin placed some clothes on the bed. Vincent looked up at him.

“To help you get dressed.” Devin grinned.

Vincent sighed. He noticed that Devin was taking a backpack out of the chamber.

Devin popped back in and put a finger to his lips. Vincent nodded. Devin walked over to a suitcase, grabbed it, and walked out with it.

Vincent looked at the clothes on the bed and decided he wanted to wear something else. He got up and went to the dresser drawer. He noticed that some of his clothes were missing, including the one brown shirt he wanted to wear.

He remembered that yesterday, Mom and Mary were doing laundry. Devin advised them that he had already done his laundry as well as Vincent’s.

*Was it still drying by the laundry chamber?*

Vincent sighed. He walked over to the bed and picked up the beige shirt and brown pants Devin had tossed on the bed.

*Fine.*

He noticed some sneakers next to the bed. He sat down and picked them up.

*Why not? It looks like they’ll fit.*

He put on the sneakers. He got up and walked over to a chair that had his cloak draped over it. He put on the cloak and walked out.

“All this...” Vincent started to say, but Devin shook his head.

*Right, be quiet.*

Devin took a letter out of his jacket pocket. Vincent watched him as he went into his chamber and came back out. He wondered where Devin had put the letter. Maybe he put it on the bed?

Devin picked up the backpack and motioned to Vincent that he should pick up the suitcase. When Vincent did, Devin reached for the lantern that was on the ground next to him.

They quickly and quietly made their way down the passageways. The pipes were occasionally tapping. Messages from the sentries on duty saying that it was all clear.

Vincent noticed that they were taking an unused route to Above. He said nothing as he followed Devin.

About an hour or two later, they had made their way to a rarely used entrance. It was located in a brownstone building, where some Helpers lived.

Vincent realized that he didn't get a chance to go to the bathroom.

“Devin, I have to wash up and...”

Devin nodded and led Vincent to the laundry room's bathroom, as they both kept an eye out for anyone around.

“I'll wait out here,” Devin whispered, watching as Vincent put the suitcase down. “But, seriously? I don't think at three am, or is it four? Anyway, no one is going to come down to use the laundry room at this time.”

“Never know,” Vincent said as he entered the bathroom.

A few minutes later, he walked out and looked at Devin.

“You?” Vincent inquired.

Devin smiled. “Nope, good. Now, let's get to the back alley, and hopefully, it will still be there.”

“What?”

“You’ll see.”

Vincent picked up the suitcase and followed Devin. They made their way out of the building into the dark alley. Parked next to the door was a white VW van with flowers and peace signs painted on the sides and front.

“More flowers and peace signs on the other side.” Devin smiled.

“So, the letter...”

“Was to let Father know that there is a trip to Bethel, NY, for the Woodstock Festival. But, come, help me load up.”

Devin walked to the side panel and opened it up. Inside were two sleeping bags.

“Go on, get in.”

Vincent noticed that Devin was acting strange, but he shrugged. He got in and pushed one of the sleeping bags with his foot. He turned and lifted his hand, which held the suitcase.

“Put the suitcase by the back of the van. I’m going to close the van panel and get into the driver’s seat,” Devin whispered.

Vincent placed the suitcase in the back, next to three Coca-Cola portable coolers. He heard the panel door close. Something didn’t feel right.

Devin got into the driver’s seat and turned to toss the backpack behind him.

“Place that by the suitcases and hang on.”

Vincent was puzzled. He heard Devin start the van.

“Devin, what?”

The van backed up.

“Look, Vin, I wanted to show you New York City in the early morning hours before I left for Bethel and the Woodstock Art and Music Festival. Is that all right?”

“I...OK, sure.”

Vincent carefully walked over and picked up the backpack. He sat down as Devin backed the van out of the alley and onto the street. He looked at the backpack.

*This is my backpack!*

“Oh, by the way, in the letter I wrote, I told Father and Mom that we both are attending the Festival. Please, don’t try to jump out.”

“Devin, I told you...”

“Come on, Vin,” Devin patted the seat next to him, “let’s talk.”

Vincent was getting angry. How dare he? He put the backpack down, and moved to the passenger seat, and sat down.

“Seat belt, please. Just want to make sure you’re settled in.”

Devin stopped the van. He quickly put on his seatbelt and watched as Vincent buckled his. He turned around and continued driving.

“I’m never going to trust you again.”

“Temper, temper, Vin.”

“Father will be worried and upset, and the community...”

“Listen, I explained everything in the letter. I even mentioned that if they needed to contact us, Peter would be our go-between.”

“And how will he get a message to us?”

“He told me he’ll personally drive down to Bethel and get us.”

“Mom’s going to be upset, too.”

“Sure, she’ll worry about her sons, but look, how else can I get you to come with me?”

Vincent seriously thought about finding the right time to jump out of the van but decided against it.

“It’s going to be a two-hour drive, so sit back and relax.”

Vincent laid his head back.

“You know how I got this van?”

“How?”

“When I asked Peter about my need for a van, he said he would help me look around. He found a Helper who had a son who owned this van. It seems the guy was going to spend two weeks with his girlfriend in San Francisco.”

Devin chuckled. "Talk about perfect timing. Even better, when I met up with the guy, he was a hippie, too. He showed me this van already hippied."

"Hippied?"

"Yeah. Hippied! I promised the guy I would take good care of her."

"Her?"

"The van. I promised she'll be returned cleaned and gassed up."

Devin was excited. "Vin, I found this place next to the Festival area. We'll hang out there for the night. It's safe, and the next day we'll head out to the three-day fun Festival. We should be back on Monday. Maybe Tuesday. The Festival is on a dairy farm. We are going to have so much fun!

Vincent wasn't sure about that.



After a few hours, Devin pulled into a campground by a beautiful lake. Vincent noticed that there were people having picnics on the grass. Others were sitting on the park benches.

"Still mad?" Devin inquired.

Vincent shook his head. "Maybe for the first hour."

Devin smiled. "Amazing, ain't it?"

"That is not the..."

Devin put up his hand. "Let's break some rules."

"Devin," Vincent whispered, "I shouldn't leave the van."

"Well, I brought a bedpan just in case."

Vincent looked at him as if he had lost his mind. He just laughed.

"I'm going to drive to a spot next to some trees and bushes. Maybe you can do the wild thing?"

"That's not funny."

Devin chuckled. "Look, I'll keep an eye out, but I can get close to the Campground's bathroom area in case it's needed."

“And what is going to happen once people see me?”

“Nothing, worrywart. Keep your head down. You do look like a hippie. And in your backpack are some gloves. No worries.”

Vincent just shook his head.

“Let’s get settled in, Vin. Most people disappear into their cabins or their tents when it starts getting dark. There might be no one around. We can then take a nice walk at night.”

Vincent sighed.

“You’re safe with me.” Devin put an arm around his shoulders.

“Am I?”



By the time the sun was setting, Vincent was eager to get out of the van. He was also scared. Luckily, no one bothered Devin and him. He looked out at the lake. Above, when he could see the moon, he noted it was in the waxing crescent phase. Rain was in the air.

“Come on, Vin, let’s take that walk.” Devin got out and stretched.

Vincent looked around before getting out. During the afternoon, they sat on the sleeping bags that were in the back. They had the windows open, but it was still hot. Devin was excited about the Festival. They sat and made plans. Vincent felt relieved that there was a chill in the air. He liked that. He preferred it much more than the heat. He heard some insects nearby. He also heard some voices, but that was in the distance. Animal noises, too.

*Was that an owl?*

Devin tapped his shoulder and motioned with his head to follow him. Vincent did, all the while taking in the sights and sounds. Vincent felt his fear fading as amazement took over.

“You should see your face,” Devin said. “You look as if you’re Dorothy in Oz.”

“Thank you.”

“Now, wasn’t it worth it?”



“If we make it out of here without being...”

“Captured?” Devin crossed his arms. “Your big brother is here to make sure that is never going to happen.”

Vincent chuckled.

“Come on, Vin, this will be a small, quick walk.”

“You should put on a jacket, you’re shivering.”

“I’ll adjust. Besides, I have a walking fur coat next to me.”

Vincent glared at Devin, who put a hand over his mouth, trying to keep his laughter from being too loud.

“I read about places like this, but I never...”

Devin smiled. “I know. Books can help your imagination picture things. But they can’t actually take you there. It’s going to rain, so let’s see some things, take care of others, and have a good night’s sleep. And if anyone is going to sneak up to our van, and you wake up and hear them? Roar.”



The next day, they arrived at the Festival. There were just a few vehicles waiting in line.

“Looks like they’re just waving people in,” Devin mentioned.

“Still, I have the tickets in my hand.” Vincent smiled. “I’m excited.”

“There aren’t a lot of folks here. Wonder where the others are?”

“I’m happy there aren’t a lot of people.”

“I cased this area and figured we could park closer to the farm, on the grassy hill. Easier to get out. Plus, I figured most would park closer to the stage area. Or the marketplace.”



“A fast escape. I like that.”

Devin looked at Vincent. “Vin, you will be safe.”

“You keep saying that.”

“‘Cause you keep going from amazement to fear.”

“Not fear, just a sense of unease.”

Devin touched his shoulder as Vincent lowered the cloak’s hood over his head.

A few minutes later, they arrived at the entrance, and the person waved them in.

Devin rolled down the window. “Not too many here, when’s the start?”

“Man, take a look behind you,” the person said.

Devin and Vincent both turned around and were surprised to see a caravan of vehicles behind them.

“Wow, one minute it’s...” Devin paused, then continued, “Sorry, Vin, it’s going to be packed.”

Devin slowly and carefully made his way to the top of the hill by the farm. He found a place to park, next to some trees and bushes.

“We’re going to get stuck,” Vincent said, looking around. “Everything is so wet and muddy.”

Devin placed a hand on his arm. “Chill, bro. We’ll be OK.”

Devin turned off the engine. They heard the sound of a vehicle pulling up next to them.

Vincent tensed up.

Devin looked out his window.

“Stay here, Vin.”

Vincent moved to the back of the driver’s seat, carefully peeking out the window. Devin was walking up to a black van.

“Hello, I’m...”

“Devin?”

A beautiful woman got out of the van. Brown hair shining in the sun. She was dressed in blue bell-bottom pants and a long-sleeved beige blouse with bell sleeves. She wore a yellow headband. Vincent felt something he had never felt before.

“Cathy, right?”

Catherine shook her head yes. “So, you are here at Woodstock?”

Three more women climbed out. Beautiful women.

One of the women approached Devin. She was dressed in blue jeans with hand-painted flowers all over. Her blouse had flowers all over it on a white background. “Hi, I’m Jenny Aronson.” She pointed to a woman with dark brown hair. She was wearing a blue shirt with long sleeves and blue bell-bottoms. “Nancy Tucker.” Jenny pointed to the third woman, dressed in a lacy blue blouse and blue jeans. “Rebecca Craven.”

“Vin, come on out!” Devin shouted.

Vincent was shocked. What was he going to do now?

Devin walked over to their van and opened the driver’s door. He motioned with his head.

Vincent took a deep breath, put on his gloves, moved over to the driver’s side, and stepped out.

“Vincent is my brother.” Devin proudly said. He walked over to Vincent and pushed the hood down.

The women stood there, eyes wide open.

The woman named Catherine approached him carefully. “Hi, I’m Catherine Chandler, but you can call me Cathy.”

Vincent looked deeply into her eyes. “Catherine is such a beautiful name.”

Catherine smiled. “You have a gentle voice.”

Devin spoke up, “He’s also gentle at heart.”

The other women looked at each other.

Jenny shrugged and walked up to Vincent. She placed her hand on Vincent’s arm. “You are one groovy, strong man. Just call me Jenny.”

Nancy smiled as she strolled over. “Nancy Tucker.”

Rebecca came up to him. “Gloves?”

“Vincent’s sensitive...” Devin started to speak.

“It’s all right. I dig it.” Jenny smiled. “Ready for the Festival?”

Vincent whispered, “In a way.”

Catherine gently pushed Jenny aside and took Vincent’s hand into hers. “I was reluctant to go with my friends, but they convinced me to come. I’m more of a classical music lover. There is some modern music that I like, Elvis...”

Jenny groaned, “So establishment.”

Devin grinned, “I like Elvis, too.”

Catherine continued, “The Fab Four, Joan Baez.”

Vincent gently said, “I like classical music, too. Elvis’ ‘Love Me Tender’.”

“That song is so romantic!” Catherine smiled.

Jenny poked Nancy, who then poked Rebecca.

“Ladies, let’s leave these two alone, apparently they might want to have a nice quiet talk,” Devin said with a grin on his face.

Vincent looked at Devin, who winked at him. Devin started chatting with the other women, as Vincent looked back at Catherine.

“I was told Arlo Guthrie was here. I liked his version of Amazing Grace.” Vincent was nervous. He couldn’t believe he was talking to someone so beautiful. He smiled.

Catherine smiled back. "That's a beautiful song. I would love to hear his version of it."

It started to drizzle.

Vincent noticed that Devin got into the black van with the other women.

"Would you like to come into Devin's van?" Vincent asked.

"Sure, but isn't it your van, too?"

"I suppose in a way it is."

Vincent opened the driver's side and let Catherine climb into the van. She sat in the passenger seat. He got into the driver's seat.

Keeping his eyes straight ahead, he said, "I believe it's going to be a wet weekend."

"Yes, it is. I'm glad Nancy insisted we use her boyfriend Paul's van. It's roomy and not too uncomfortable. It's going to be a good place to stay when it rains."

"Is Paul with you?"

"No." She paused, then continued. "He had things to do, so he told us to enjoy our time. My friends and I decided this would be the perfect outing before our college semesters."

"What are you going to study?"

"Pre-law, then maybe try things out at my dad's firm, then, who knows? Perhaps I might work for New York City's Family Court. I'm looking for a place where I can do the most good. What about you?"

"Me?" Vincent paused. He didn't know what to say.

There were a few minutes of silence.

"I'm staying...home. I won't be going to college. I'll be helping children in our community who need help with lessons. I also assist others with any repairs that need to be done."

They both looked at each other for a moment.

She spoke softly, "I think I understand. You aren't ready to leave your safe place. I can imagine why. Here, all are welcomed, but out in the harshness

of the city, not so much. There are lots of people in the city, but not everyone is as friendly as the people are here.”

Gently, she placed her hand on his. “You’re very special.”

He gulped. “I’ve accepted what I am. Devin wants me to share in so much of what is out there. But...”

“Sometimes it’s dangerous to do so.” She reached over and softly touched his face. She was blushing as she placed her hands back into her lap. “You probably would scare those who are closed-minded. You can also have people who want to do you harm. I think, though, that you are strong enough to protect yourself.”

“Not always. And I don’t want to be upset about how the world is.” He sighed. “I want to accept there is beauty in the world and that sometimes, like now, I can see it.”

She lowered her head. In a gentle voice, she asked, “Are you wearing gloves for a special reason?”

“Yes.”

She placed her hand over his.

He looked at her hand, resting on top of his. He took his free hand and placed it atop hers. “You’re not afraid of me?”

“You haven’t acted in a way that feels dangerous to me. Besides, I feel, inside, as if I know you’re safe.”

He removed his hand, and she removed hers. He took off his gloves. He heard a gasp, and when he went to put the gloves back on, she stopped him.

Tenderly, she took both of his hands into hers.

“My claws are sharp.”

“I’ll be careful.” The way she tenderly stroked his hand, looking at him without fear, was almost too much. He knew he would never forget her. Especially since he could feel what she was feeling. She wasn’t disgusted. She was in awe of him as well as amazed. Also, he felt as if she trusted him.

“You’re brave, Vincent. Know that you can trust me.”

He smiled. “I realize that, Catherine.”

She placed her hands on her lap. “Are you ready for the opening ceremonies coming up?”

“One moment.”

He carefully turned around and went over to the spot behind the passenger side. He reached for his backpack and took out the flyer and tickets.

She moved over toward him. When she accidentally bumped into him, he felt as if he were on fire. Taking a deep breath, he showed her the flyer.

“I know the others might want to check out the first group and Ravi. Yet, I noticed that Arlo Guthrie is on late tonight.” She looked at him. “I wouldn’t mind staying here and talking.”

He grinned and reached into his backpack. “I have a book of poetry. Do you like poetry?”

She gave him a wide-eyed look and whispered, “Yes. Let me see.”

He looked out. “It stopped drizzling. Do you need to go out? There’s a marketplace.”

“Hey, lovebirds!” Devin’s voice was by the driver’s side. Devin climbed in and grinned. “Say, aren’t you glad I packed that poetry book for you?”

“Thanks, Devin.” Vincent and Catherine both said at the same time.

Devin looked between the two of them. The side panel door opened, and Nancy, Jenny, and Rebecca got in.

“This is going to be a very muddy, rainy, and messy Festival,” Rebecca said. “You two seem to be having fun. What’s with the book?”

Devin spoke up, “I brought along Vincent’s poetry book.”

Jenny rolled her eyes. “Cathy found her guy.”

“Jenny!” Catherine blushed.

“Oooh, tell us all later. I need to use one of those outdoor bathrooms,” Nancy moaned.

“Later?” Catherine looked at Vincent.

All Vincent could do was nod. He watched as the ladies got out.

Devin moved next to him and gave him a hug. "Way to go, bro." He picked up one of his hands. "No gloves." He let him go. "Like her?"

Vincent nodded yes. "Catherine is so intelligent and..."

"Beauty and the Beast!" Devin chuckled.

Vincent looked at him.

"So, Prince Beast, any plans?" Devin winked.

"Devin, we both like poetry and classical music. She wants to be a lawyer to help people. And she accepts me for who I am!"

"He found a girlfriend. Vin has a girlfriend," Devin teased. "Maybe you two can write letters, and when you both have free time..."

Vincent raised his hand. "Father won't approve, maybe Mom..."

"Mom will love her. Father will claim she is dangerous, but who knows?"

"Father is going to tell me that I can't have girlfriends."

"Yeah, well, what happened with Lisa happened."

"What if..."

"It was a teenage crush that got a bit out of hand. Besides, she teased you. You know that, don't you?"

"I realized that."

"My sweet lord," Devin raised his eyes to the sky. "A young adult and still insecure." He looked at Vincent as he grabbed both of his shoulders.

"SHE...LIKES...YOU..." He grinned. "Really, I can tell. Don't forget I'm your older brother, and I know things. I know when a girl likes a guy. Devin started to sing an Elvis song, "Love me tender, love me true..."

Vincent shoved him. "Stop that. We just met."

"You know, the ladies are correct. How about we check things out? Take care of business and stay a bit for the opening ceremonies. By the way, did you know that the women have four sleeping bags in that huge van? And Jenny! Wow, she's wild. Rebecca, in a way, sort of. Nancy and Cathy seem to be the rational ones."

Vincent put the flyer and poetry book back into the backpack.



“Devin, should we lock up?”

“I guess so. Nancy locked her van up.” Devin spread his arms. “But this is Woodstock, peace and love.”

“It’s Bethel, NY,” Vincent firmly said. “And people are still people.”

“You have the extra set of keys?”

“Yes, in my pocket.”

Devin had a wicked look on his face. “Then you and Cathy can go back to the van later on and K I S S.”

Devin quickly got out of the van laughing.

Vincent got out of the van and locked the panel and doors. He felt raindrops and a chill in the air. He looked at Devin, who was dancing in the mud. Devin motioned for Vincent to follow him. Vincent shrugged and raised the hood of his cloak.



The next day, around 11am, Vincent woke up smiling. He looked over at Devin, who was still snoring. Carefully, he made his way to the front, got his cloak from the passenger seat, and stepped out of the van.

He made his way to one of the Port-O-Sans. Keeping his head down, he found one that was empty.

After a few minutes, he stepped out, shaking his head.

“That bad?”

“Catherine!”

She smiled. “I saw you stepping out of your van, just as I was stepping out of mine. My friends are still sleeping.”

“Devin is, too.”

“Can you wait for me?”

“Yes.”

She opened the door. Before she stepped in, she turned and said, “Thanks, I won’t be long.”

“Take as long as you need.”

She closed the door.

He turned around, looking at the crowds. Everyone, even he, himself, was muddy, but happy. He smelled the hallucinogens that were in the air. Reminding himself not to take deep breaths, he looked up at the sky. It started to drizzle.

He turned around as she got out of the Port-O-Sans.

She made a face. Sighing, she moaned, “Not again.”

He chuckled.

“Not funny.” She took him by the arm. “I’ve never been to a place like this, that had such bad weather.”

“Neither have I, but it was fun to see Arlo Guthrie and Joan Baez.”

She nodded. “Yes, they were amazing. Joan Baez went from the small stage to the main stage effortlessly. I was concerned about her moving so much. I don’t know if I was that pregnant if I would come out to a crowd like this.”

“She seems like a person who would know what she’s capable of doing and not doing. Her belief in the causes dear to her is strong.”

Catherine took a look around and asked, “Need to check out the marketplace?”

He was surprised at her request.

“Shouldn’t we get back to the others?”

“Oh, they’ll know we’re somewhere around here. Besides, our friends are just as eager to explore this place. Jenny wants to explore what’s available at the Art Show. Nancy and Rebecca want to do some trading at the Marketplace. There are so many things to take advantage of.”

Her stomach growled. Embarrassed, she said, “Guess I’m hungry.” She rubbed her stomach. “Should we first go check out the kitchen?”

“After we eat and check out the marketplace, what would you like to do?”

She gave him a hopeful look. “What do you suggest?”

“It might be a bit warm, but we could stay in my van...”

“Will you read to me from your poetry book?”

“Yes.”

“Well, in that case, we can always open a window if it gets too hot. I’m curious to see what poems are in there.”

He couldn’t explain if it was his feelings or hers. Maybe both of theirs. The sensation of being unsure, yet hopeful, as well as extreme happiness.

He motioned toward the kitchen area. “Let’s see what they have and then go back.”

“Great idea.”

He took off his cloak and laid it gently on her shoulders.

She looked up at him. “Thank you, but what about you?”

“I’ll be fine.”



The sun finally showed its face around 4:30 pm. Vincent and Catherine carefully walked over to the Filipino Pond. A group of naked people were diving into and playing in the pond.

He looked at her. “I’m not sure about this.”

She was blushing. “Neither am I. I see a waterspout next to it.”

“BANZAI!” Devin shouted.

Vincent and Catherine looked toward the pond. Devin was only wearing his shorts.

“BANZAI!” Jenny yelled.

Jenny followed Devin in her bra and undies.

“Oh my...” Catherine started to speak.

Vincent was speechless.

“Those two hit it off.”

Catherine and Vincent turned to see Rebecca behind them.

“I think we’ll head to the waterspout,” Rebecca said. “I see Nancy made it there. I need to do a little washup.”

“Vincent and I will join you,” Catherine said as she grabbed Vincent’s hand.

“You know, out of all of us, Cathy, Nancy is the one more...” Rebecca paused.

“Uncomfortable?” Catherine grinned. She looked at Vincent. “Well, we did promise to go with the people we love to this great event.”

“Yes,” Vincent said with his head down.

“Catherine, Vincent, Rebecca,” Nancy called out. She motioned to them to join her by the waterspout.

“Shall we leave Tarzan and Jane to the pond as we try to wash up the best we can?” Rebecca laughed. “This has got to be the craziest thing I have ever done.”

“I’ll agree,” Catherine said. “I have to admit, though, it’s fun.” She looked up at Vincent.

“Are both of you going to hold hands while washing up?” Rebecca teased.

Vincent and Catherine looked at her, then back at each other.

“Oh, never mind,” Rebecca laughed. “Summer affair?”

Vincent lowered his head.

Catherine let go of his hand, then looked at Rebecca. “More like I found a really good friend.”

“Yes,” Vincent quickly agreed.

Vincent, Catherine, and Rebecca walked up to the waterspout. Nancy moved so they could take turns washing up.



Monday afternoon, Vincent and Devin sat in the back of their van. Catherine was there too, sitting by the driver’s seat. Vincent was to her right. Devin was to the right of Vincent. Love beads were hanging from the rear-view mirror. They were eating sardines and crackers and drinking water from canteens.

“Coming in,” Nancy called out. She opened the door on the driver’s side and sat in the driver’s seat. “I enjoyed myself, but I can’t wait to get back.”

Devin looked sad.

“Devin?” Vincent inquired.

“I enjoyed Janis, and Jimi, and Creedence, and Canned Heat and Grateful Dead and...” Devin paused.

Nancy laughed. “You and Jenny. My God, are you siblings or something?”

“You know, despite the rain, the thunderstorm with toads coming from the sky, and all the wacky weather, I had fun.” Devin looked out of the front window.

“Me, too,” Catherine said. She looked at Vincent.

“Oh, don’t worry, Cathy,” Devin smirked, “just send any letters to Peter and he’ll get them to Vincent.”

Cathy grinned.

“And I,” Vincent softly spoke. “...will have Peter mail my letters to you.”

“Oh, oh,” Devin spoke up. “I sense a relationship here.”

“Devin!” Vincent glared at him. “We are...”

“Friends,” Catherine said quickly. “Just...friends.”

“For now,” Nancy whispered.

There was a knock, and the panel doors opened. Jenny and Rebecca looked at the group.

“We had our snacks,” Jenny said. She looked at Devin and grinned.

Devin grinned back.

Vincent and Catherine looked at Rebecca and Nancy.

Suddenly, all of them started laughing.

“To new friends,” Devin raised his hand and made a peace sign. He winked at Jenny, who winked back.

“Well,” Catherine said sadly, “we really do have to leave.”

“Look, Ladies, it’s muddy, and we might get stuck now and then.” Devin looked at each of the women, then at Vincent. “I think Vincent and I will follow you ladies, as we inch our way out of the muddy fields.”

The women all nodded their heads in agreement. Nancy and Devin got out of the van from the driver’s side.

Jenny and Rebecca closed the side panel door and walked over to their van.

Catherine stood up at the same time as Vincent. She went toward the passenger side and got out, Vincent following her.

She turned toward him. “I hope we keep in touch.”

“I will.” He felt so happy he could burst. She liked him!

She was about to go around the front of the van when she paused. She turned around, walked up to him, grabbed him, and gave him a gentle hug. Timidly, he returned the hug.

She looked up at him. “Know this, I may get busy with exams, but I will try to write.”

He smiled. “I will too.”

“Yoo hoo, lovebirds, kiss and go time,” Devin called out.

Catherine blushed. She gave Vincent a kiss on the cheek and headed toward her van. Devin motioned to Vincent to get into their van. Devin jumped into the driver’s seat. Vincent slowly made his way to the passenger seat.

*She kissed me on the cheek!*

Vincent put his seat belt on.

Devin laughed. “Oh, man, you look like someone who lost their puppy.”

Vincent looked at him, then looked away.

“She will write,” Devin said as he patted Vincent on the shoulder.

“And she might also find a boyfriend.” Vincent sighed.

Devin grinned. “I doubt it.”

Vincent looked at him. Devin started the engine. The other van moved from its spot next to them.

“Here we go. Get ready to use those muscles, bro.”



In the black van, Catherine sat in the back, next to Nancy. Rebecca was driving. Jenny was in the passenger seat. With Vincent and Devin's help, they had finally made their way out of Woodstock onto the main highway. It was slow going, especially since the men insisted on pushing both vans when stuck.

Jenny chuckled. "I think those guys are going to stop somewhere and catch their breath."

Rebecca nodded. "Right, especially since they didn't let us get out of the van at all. Not even when they were stuck."

Jenny turned toward Nancy and Catherine. "Sooooo, wasn't that a trip?"

Catherine looked at Jenny. "It was nice."

Nancy looked at Catherine, then giggled. "Someone's got a boyfriend."

"Yeah," Jenny grinned. "So, still thinking of going to college, Cathy?"

Catherine nodded. She turned her head, closed her eyes, and sighed. "It's time to go back to reality. There is so much to do."

Nancy looked at her. "I know you are determined to become a lawyer, but what about Vincent?"

"I don't know Nancy. I really didn't want to get involved in any relationship. I have college and years of learning who I am. Yet, I just...don't know."

"Well," Jenny piped up, "it really will be complicated. I mean, he's nice and all. But he's not the type who will enjoy publicity."

"That's because we accept his differences, but others won't," Rebecca said softly. "But that's OK. He's ours."

"I know what Jenny means. I'm not even sure my father will accept him." Catherine sighed. "I accept him. He's kind, a rare gentleman..."

"Yeah, from the eighteenth century," Jenny chuckled. "Your type, Cathy. Devin is more my kind of guy."

"We know." Catherine, Rebecca, and Nancy said.

Nancy rolled her eyes. "I won't be able to get that skinny-dipping in the pond image out of my head. What were you two thinking?"

Jenny called out, "BANZAI!"

Rebecca jumped. "You almost had me stop the van."

Jenny grinned, then broke out laughing.

"You, Jenny, are our wild child. Woodstock, Devin, and you fit," Catherine said.

"Only a summer thing." Jenny giggled. "Nothing serious. He's fun. I like fun."

"Well, this was a great pre-college vacation." Nancy smiled. "Interesting people. Sad about that girl, though."

"The one that miscarried?" Catherine inquired.

"Yes," Jenny replied. "I didn't know that Vincent and Devin had some medical training. So glad they could help that poor girl."

"Vincent told me that when someone had gotten hold of an actual doctor, they let the doctor take over. It's just so sad she lost her baby." Catherine paused.

There was a quiet moment before Nancy spoke up, "Still, it was interesting. But I'm not going to develop a sudden taste for rock and roll. Although the folk singers like Joan Baez were cool."

"I'll stick to my classics and a few modern tunes for now." Catherine smiled. "I think Vincent feels the same."

"OOOOOOH!" Nancy, Rebecca, and Jenny called out.

"So much for 'I'm not going to get serious,'" Jenny chuckled. "Look, it's OK to go to college, have a nice guy, and see where it goes."

"But going out is going to be hard for them," Rebecca said.

"Maybe..." Catherine pondered.

*He is someone special. Someone I want to keep for some reason.*

"Well, I know when we get to Cathy's place, we are all going to have a good bath. Then, we have muddy clothes to wash." Nancy yawned.

"Don't do that, Nancy, I'm driving," Rebecca put a hand to her mouth.

"Oh, oh, maybe I should drive?" Jenny inquired.



“Oh, no, we might wind up somewhere we have never been before,” Rebecca quickly responded. “I’m fine. Only about an hour or so away from New York City.”

Catherine closed her eyes. Rest would be good for all of them. Then, she can start to figure out what to do about Vincent. She had classes and social events to attend, mostly with her father. She was going to be very busy. They would write letters to each other, but would this relationship be just a summer thing? Or last a long time?

After a few moments, Nancy spoke up, “Say, ladies, we all know how the world is out there. Vincent is cool, but I think we should not mention him at all. And if we do, be very vague about his appearance.”

Catherine looked at her. “Nancy, that’s a great idea.”

“I second,” Jenny replied. “He’s too nice to be in the real world out there. Hippies are cool. But others out there? Well, we know how most people will react.”

“Then it’s agreed.” Nancy paused, then continued, “It’s just like telling your father you’re dating a black man. He might understand, but I don’t think the social circles that you and your family are in will be as accepting. It might ruin some of your father’s business dealings.”

Catherine looked astonished. “Nancy...”

“You know I’m right. We, in this van, and others at Woodstock, are way ahead of others who like to judge and keep things as is.” Nancy sighed.

“Woodstock was great, an idea, but the real world...”

“It’s a vicious, mean place at times.” Jenny got quiet.

“Well.” Rebecca paused before continuing, “It was a grand time. I wish we could stay, but I like clean clothes and a good bath.”

“Let us know if Vincent replied to your letters, OK?” Jenny turned to look at Catherine. “This is so much like a Fae and human love story.”

“I’ll let you all know. Thanks, though, for...”

Catherine didn’t get to finish as Jenny interrupted her. “Heck, can you imagine a rich society girl telling her daddy, ‘I met a cat Fae and I’m going to marry him?’ I mean, how do you think society will react to that? Considering how they reacted to Uhura and Kirk’s kiss.”

“Who?” Catherine asked.

Jenny rolled her eyes. “Look, I’m more into artworks of long ago and not too much TV. I’m talking about a show named Star Trek. Takes place in space. You guys remember my friend Nimrod?”

“Oh man, the science fiction lover,” Rebecca groaned.

“Well, there’s this show that was on called Star Trek. And Kirk was a white Starship Captain and Uhura was a black woman under his command...”

Jenny continued to explain what Nimrod told her about the show.

Catherine closed her eyes. It wasn’t long before she fell asleep



Months later, Catherine was in Peter’s townhome, setting up the living room. She was dressed in a white gown. Happily, she lit up the candles on the table next to a comfortable chair. She looked around. Walking to the bookcase, she reached for a book. She took the book and placed it on a small tray that was next to another chair. Looking at the fireplace, she wondered if she should light it or not.

She blew out the wick she used to light the candles. Placing the wick next to the candles, she turned and walked towards a door. At that same time, she heard someone knocking.

Smiling, she opened the door. “Vincent.”

He stood there, wearing his cloak. Underneath the cloak, he wore a white blouse, dark brown pants, and thigh-high black boots. He held a single red rose in his hand.

“Catherine.”

“Vincent.”

He hesitated when she motioned for him to come into the room.

“It’s all right. Peter said he will be out of town for a few days.”

Vincent walked into the room. He looked at her. “You look like an Angel.”

She blushed. “Thank you. I wanted to dress up for our first date.”

Vincent nodded. "I'm so glad you wrote to me."

Catherine gently took the rose from his hand. "As I was glad you wrote back."

"I...wasn't sure about your request."

"I'm glad you accepted."

"We are so...busy in our community. And there were always emergencies that came up."

"But you're here now." She gave him a hopeful look. "You're going to stay awhile?"

He nodded. "Yes. I let someone know I would be coming back late at night."

"I have food warming up in the kitchen for our dinner. Let me find something to keep this beautiful rose in. I'll only be a few minutes. Please, sit down."

He moved toward the chair, which was by the tray. Catherine watched him sit down, then left the room. She went into the kitchen and found a glass tumbler.

"That will do for now." She put water in the tumbler and placed the rose in it.

Feeling a bit nervous, she took a deep breath. Taking the tumbler with the rose, she walked back into the living room.

He looked up at her with a look of uncertainty.

She grinned. "It's all right, Vincent." She walked over and placed the tumbler, with the rose in it, on the tray. "I thought we could talk and catch up a bit." Walking over to the chair next to him, she sat down.

"It's good to see you again."

"And I'm so glad to see you. I'm not going to forget this day."

"April 12th."

She nodded. "Our first date."

"I didn't think you would have time..."

"With all my classes?" She chuckled. "It's spring break, Vincent."

“You could have gone out with your friends.”

“True, but I missed you.”

“We kept in touch.”

“Not...physically.”

She noticed the startled look on Vincent’s face as she placed her hand on his.

“This is our time. Before our different worlds get crazy again.”

“Catherine. I have so much I want to tell you, yet so much I have to... keep secret.”

“Well, tell me what you can. Your first letter mentioned how much Devin and you got in trouble for going out to Woodstock.”

“And you replied back and mentioned how worried your father was.”

She laughed. “Peter had (has? Author’s choice) explained some things to me about your special community.”

“There is so much more to tell you.”

“I will never reveal your secret to anyone. Not even my special friends.”

He took her hand and gently kissed the top of it.

She shook her head. “This is not the eighteenth century.”

Reaching over, she kissed him lightly on the lips. As she leaned back, the shocked look he had was quickly replaced by sheer bliss.

“No one...”

“First kiss?”

“Yes”

She sat back in the chair, putting her hands on her lap. “Well, at times I can be bold.”

He blushed and lowered his head. “I...loved it.”

She laughed. “I got a bit of Jenny in me. And you got a bit of Devin in you. I could say a certain word.”

They looked at each other and, laughing, said, “BANZAI!



Michelle

**By Michaela Buzsaki Struchova**







---

# Scars of the Past

## Season 3 Round Robin 2025

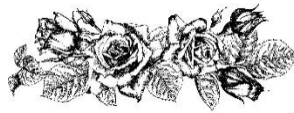
---



### S3 R Violent Content

#### Prologue:

Two weeks have passed since Diana was rescued from being kidnapped while she was working on a case. Now safe, Below, she and Vincent must navigate the process of healing.



#### Chapter One

*by Mel*

Vincent paced outside the hospital chamber. *She has already been examined Above. What was taking so long?* He paused as the two doctors exited, talking when Father spotted him.

“Diana is fine, Vincent,” Father began. “Nothing life-threatening.”

Vincent swallowed. *Reassurance before terrible news?*

“However, it would seem the scars she sustained... will be permanent.”

Vincent glanced at Dr. Alcott. Surely there was more to it. The man next to Father simply nodded in agreement. A sigh of relief escaped him. Scars could never tarnish his Diana’s beauty or her quick, imaginative mind.

Still a question, and the image of another woman’s scared face nagged at him.

“But Catherine-?”

“Her scars were more surface-level, and you saved her before the damage could fully set in,” Father explained.



Vincent's sensitive feline nose twitched; the odd rich scent drawing him out of his memories. He sniffed the air again to confirm the new smell coming from the chamber up ahead and to the right. The aroma was one he associated with Diana's loft Above, not in the tunnels. And certainly not in William's kitchen.

"Since when do you make coffee, William?" Vincent asked as he entered.

The portly cook glanced over before turning back to the machine with a mild frown. "Just thought I would try something new."

"I'm certain Diana will appreciate it."

William shook his head. "Not just for her. In my old age, I need more caffeine than is in tea."

Vincent smiled in gratitude. In all his years, Vincent had only seen the tunnel's chef reach for whisky if he desired something stronger than tea. Only in the last two years, out of the ten Diana had been a part of their world, had William admitted a coffee maker into his domain. And even then, the pot had mostly sat undisturbed except for the occasional dusting.

"Well, it smells correct," Vincent said.

William laughed. "Maybe you should try it first."

Vincent obliged, allowing the hot beverage to wash away the lingering memories. His lips twisted in a grimace before he could try for a smile.

William threw up his hands. "Bah, one day I'll get this blasted thing to work and make a good cup of the stuff. For now, Diana gets tea."

Vincent let William get the tea ready and then followed him, heading toward the guest chambers of the tunnels.

"Father's birthday is coming up soon. Do you think he preferred the meatloaf or the stew I made? Maybe..."

Vincent allowed William to chatter beside him as they walked toward the guest chamber Diana had taken for herself. For once, the cook didn't seem to mind Vincent's noncommittal responses as he continued the



conversation on which dish the patriarch of the tunnels would enjoy the most.

All the chef's recommendations let Vincent's mind wander to more pleasant thoughts as he pondered what he could give his father. *Maybe Cullen could make a new chess-*

"Thank you for coming, Mr. Maxwell," Father's voice floated down the corridor.

Vincent shook the daydreams from his mind and watched what only a decade ago would have been an unbelievable sight: DA Joe Maxwell and his father, the elder Jacob Wells, walking in companionable company.

Though the normally pristine suit Joe wore seemed to lie askew on the man as if he had donned it hurriedly.

Joe nodded to Father. "Yes, I was trying-oh... Hi Vincent. William."

"Hello, Mr. Maxwell," William said.

An awkward, tense silence fell over the group.

"I'll take this to Diana then," William said, shuffling around the two other men. "She hates when it gets cold."

"Thank you, William," Vincent called; at once grateful for the man's discretion, but also uneasy to be facing whatever news the DA and his father might give him alone.

He took a deep breath, forcing himself to meet his father's gaze. "What is it, Father?"

"Mr. Maxwell was just delivering the case files Diana requested," Father said.

Vincent glanced over at the District Attorney. Fairly or not, angry.

To Joe's credit, he simply swallowed and continued to hold Vincent's gaze. "Diana wanted to make certain all the loose ends were tied up. And she looks... good."

Vincent nodded. Though ...

*Is that the reason she requested the guest chamber?* Vincent pondered. *A compromise?*

Though their shared empathy allowed for greater understanding between him and Diana, it wasn't the same as the Bond he once shared with Catherine, and now his son.

As if reading his thoughts, Father said, "Yes, we certainly don't want little Jacob to see those pictures."

"Is he into art now?" Joe asked.

A look of pride warmed Father's face. "Yes, and he has quite a talent, or so my friend Jessica has told me. She gave him a camera for his last birthday."

"Ten years," Joe said; his wistful smile shifted into one of sorrow.

Vincent's heart swelled with a fresh ache it hadn't felt in the last six years after Diana had officially become his wife. But the past few weeks, for all of them, had held an eerie sense of history repeating itself. His beloved, beautiful Catherine, the birth mother of little Jacob, had been taken from them by the madman Gabriel.

Vincent took a breath. "Yes, he has grown quite a lot. He looks so much like Catherine."

Joe nodded. "Can I see him?"

"I believe he's on his way up to see Jessica," Father said. "Isn't that right, Vincent?"

"Yes." Vincent offered a tight smile. "Excuse me, I do have duties to attend to."

"Yeah, ah sure. See you soon," Joe offered.

Vincent gave a tight nod before he slipped past the two men and continued down the tunnel, trying to quell his thoughts. As with Catherine, Joe had handed the woman he loved a case that had ended in pain.

*It isn't Joe Maxwell's fault. Diana is her own woman,* he reminded himself.

Despite the logic and truth of his thoughts, his emotions weren't so easily swayed. Unlike Catherine, who routinely put herself in harm's way for her

job, Diana's work was meant to be in the shadows. Safe, away from the physical criminals that her sharp mind hunted. She even refused to have her name in the papers to give herself both privacy and a measure of security.

*How had this happened again?*

Images of Diana's scarred face merged with those of his Catherine. Both women had such strength and resilience. The battle scars of life wouldn't keep them down. And indeed, it seemed Diana had already gotten back to work, and she preferred to work in solitude.

A spark of joy suddenly flowed through him, a balm to his dark thoughts.

*Jacob*, Vincent asked himself, turning in the direction he felt the Bond coming from. *What are you up to?*



"Hey, Cullen, Mouse, smile," young Jacob Wells said, clicking the button of his new camera. The ten-year-old beamed as he took three pictures in quick succession while he moved around the chamber trying to capture the best angle.

"Kid, we'll do...," Cullen huffed, adjusting the broken chair in his arms, "...pictures later. We're busy. Hold it steady, Mouse... Mouse? Mo-?"

The head of the chair banged against the floor as the blonde man stepped over to inspect the new camera.

"That's nice, Jacob," Mouse said, smiling. "Bet I look good."

"You would look better if you helped me here," Cullen mumbled.

He bent down to examine the chair. Despite his clumsiness and haste, Mouse seemed to have been careful when setting Father's favorite chair down. The wobbly legs had finally given out and needed to be replaced.

*Why didn't I just bring tools to fix the damned thing in Father's study?* Cullen wondered.

"I see pictures now, right?" Mouse asked, excited.

Jacob looked down at the camera. “Not this one, Mouse. Jessica’s gonna take me to make them.”

“Develop them,” Cullen said.

“Right.” The boy grinned, his blue eyes alight with excitement. “Jessica says I can have my own photo show soon.”

“Oh!” Mouse clapped excitedly. “Mouse and Arthur come.”

Cullen listened with half an ear as the kid went on to explain how he would showcase everyone in his own art. He couldn't begrudge little Jacob for his enthusiasm, especially not after the last month.

“Aren’t you meeting Jessica at 3:00 at the park?”

“Yeah, what-?”

“It’s 2:15 now.”

Jacob let out a little squeak, turned, and dashed down the tunnel. Over his shoulder, he called back. “Sorry. I gotta go.”

Cullen chuckled softly to himself before he bent to pick up the discarded chair.



Diana leaned over the makeshift desk, looking through the files Joe had given her. Everyone still insisted that she rest and recover, but that had never been her style. Photos of the case hung pinned on an old corkboard Mouse had found. In contrast to her usual cases of death, the graphics displayed were fairly tame—mostly scenes of random warehouses that had been broken into.

A tiny smile came to her as she pondered how her stepson would view these pictures.

“Amateur!” he would likely declare, before showing his own. It warmed Diana’s heart that Jessica’s gift last year had given little Jake a passion outside of Shakespeare or chess. He was growing into his own little man.

And if it helped distract him from the recent happenings going on, that was a bonus.

The two scoundrels who had ambushed her had been taken into custody and had frustratingly been silent. They were clearly the little minnows of the bigger fish; Diana and the 210 office had been trying to catch them for the past month. Quite literally, as at least one of the goons had had a blue tattoo of a fish on his wrist, it was the last thing she remembered before the pain overtook her senses.

She was normally the silent secret weapon for the DA and the 210. Working from the shadows to crack into the minds of the most crazed, evil minds humanity knew, to understand their patterns of behavior and find some weak spot to pin them down. But the universe had flipped the script on her this time.

Diana flipped through a couple of pages of her notes with increasing frustration. A piece of crimson hair fell in front of her eyes.

Absentmindedly, she began to pull her hair back into a ponytail; her eyes shifting from the page in search of a hair elastic.

*Where are the damned...*

Her hand stilled as it brushed against her cheek. As if of their own accord, her fingers gingerly traced the scar across her cheek, only to be reminded of the others. With no mirrors in the room, it was easy to forget at times, though her body didn't need any reminders; each scar across her face from the one across her forehead to the one at her lip seemed to burn.

Her eyes darted to the curtain strung across the entrance to give her privacy while she worked. Though none of her tunnel family would say anything aloud to her face, she saw the looks they shared when she walked past or at meals. Glances of pity, uneasy, and concern; all of them not wishing to say the wrong thing.

The great Diana of legend, who had brought Vincent, little Jacob, and then Father back from the grave, was a mere human after all.

Joe could barely hide his shock, discomfort, and mild guilt. But as she reminded him, it had been her choice to take on the case. Like other

members of the police and those in their field, she knew there was a risk in her work. But the guilt remained for her friend.

*Even Vincent...*

Memories began to surface of a time two weeks ago.

*Diana lay in the hospital chamber. Doctors Above had already given their opinions on the damage she had received, and it seemed Father and Dr. Alcott concurred.*

*“However, it would seem the scars she sustained... will be permanent.”*

*Diana heard the confusion and pain in Vincent’s voice, though the words seemed to be spoken without thought. “But Catherine-?”*

*“Her scars were more surface-level, and you saved her before the damage could fully set in,” Father explained.*

*“I see.”*

*She shook her head. Vincent and the others don’t care about how I look. I’m not Catherine.*

Despite the logic and truthful statement, her emotions told another story. While he didn’t blame her at all and comforted her, Diana’s empathic nature knew his unsaid thoughts: recalling the beginning and end of his life with Catherine. The scars, a reminder of when he had first found Catherine left to die in Central Park, and Diana’s own kidnapping (though a happier outcome), a cruel reminder of his beloved’s murderer.

Though Vincent never said anything, those emotions hurt Diana as well.

*He just needs time*, Diana said to herself, finally finding the stupid hair elastic. She quickly pulled her hair back into a hasty ponytail. Returning to the open folder, she absentmindedly picked up a blue paperweight her niece Alex had made for her from the corner of the desk

“Diana?”

Diana spun, startled, sending the paperweight smashing against the far wall as William ducked.

Diana stood. “Oh, William, I’m so sorry.”

For a moment, the two merely stood watching each other to the point she expected him to make a simple retreat. *I must look like a madwoman.*

But William took a beat, glancing between the paperweight, Diana, and then down at the cup in his hands. “So, um, I guess no tea then.”



## **Chapter Two** *by Allison*

Joe returned Above to try and wring some answers out of the two thugs who attacked Diana. When he reached the Tombs, he arranged for one of them to be brought to the interrogation room. Joe was pacing back and forth when the door opened, and two guards dragged the man inside.

“What the...?” Joe started.

Grimes, a big black man with arms the size of trees and Adams, a man of similar size, half-carried, half-dragged the man into the room.

“I said ‘NO’! I ain’t talking to no damned DA.” The man repeatedly tried to pull out of the grips of the two men. “You’re wasting your time. Take me back to my cell. I’ve got nothin’ to say to you.” The man glared at Joe.

“Well, too bad,” Adams said. “Now, sit here ‘till Mr. Maxwell tells us to let you go back to your cell.”

The man begrudgingly allowed Adams and Grimes to lead him to the table, where he sat down, and the one guard removed one cuff so that it could be reattached through the bar attached to the table, and then the other one. Joe nodded to both guards, and they left Joe and the suspect alone. Joe sat across from him, a heavy, thick manila folder in front of him.

“So, Charlie. This is the first time you’ve been charged with attempted murder. Most of your busts have been for assault, robbery, and breaking and entering. Whoever you’re working for must have offered a pretty penny for you to take out Diana Bennett.”

Charlie scoffed. “Yeah.” He looked from Joe to the folder. “The contract on Bennett is \$250,000. Me and Eddie thought it would be easy money, what with all the information offered on Bennett’s movements and schedule. Damn, I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Contract? Someone put a contract out on Diana Bennett?”

Charlie tried to remain silent. “I want my lawyer.”

Joe tried to coax Charlie into revealing more information about the contract. “I’ll tell your lawyer you cooperated with me. I’ll put in a word with the judge, too.”

Charlie glared at Joe but still remained silent.

“Come on, Charlie. You already admitted there’s a contract out on Diana Bennett. You might as well come clean with the rest of it. What do you mean by her movements and schedule?” Joe asked.

“Don’t you get it? Someone’s been watching your girl, recording her movements and adding the details to the contract information. Eddie and I just lucked out when we found her in Central Park. We knew she was a cop, but that didn’t stop us from going after her.”

“Who put up the contract?” Joe demanded.

“Don’t know and don’t care.” Charlie pulled at the cuffs holding him to the table. “Word on the street is someone wants your girl bad.”

There was a knock at the door. Grimes stuck his head in and announced that the other prisoner, Eddie, was in the other interrogation room.

“Eddie’s not gonna tell you anything more than I have.” Charlie challenged.

“We’ll see. Take him back to his cell.” Joe nodded to Grimes, who in turn uncuffed Charlie and pulled him to his feet.

“Come on, scumbag. Let’s get you back to your cell.”



“You promised to put a word in with my lawyer and the judge,” Charlie reminded Joe.

Joe silently nodded.

Grimes and Charlie walked out of the room, and Joe headed to the other interrogation room to meet with Eddie.

“So, Eddie, Charlie tells me that there’s a contract out on Diana Bennett,” Joe stated as he walked into the room.

Eddie looked up at Joe with a glare. “Yeah, so what. She pissed someone off big time. She’s lucky she got away with just a couple a scars on her pretty face. She’s in for a world of hurt.”

“Do you know who offered the contract?” Joe pressed.

“Nah. The arrangements were all handled anonymously. You think just because you caught us, she’s safe. The contract continues until she’s dead, no matter how long it takes. The payout requires proof of death; the manner of her death is discretionary.”

“Proof? What kind of proof?” Joe asked.

“Picture of her body and confirmation aired on the news,” Eddie responded.

Joe stood there in shock. Contracts like these were rare, but way more difficult to protect the intended victim. They can never be safe. Joe remembered that a similar contract had been issued on one of his law professors. He remembered the FBI coming to Westfield College to bring Professor Williams to a safe house. He heard a few years later that Professor Williams was killed by a bomb planted in his car. He always wondered how the killers had found Mr. Williams. He thought the FBI had all the bases covered.

“How did you hear about this contract?” Joe inquired.

“Little mice whispering in the dark, word travels fast when that amount of money is offered.” Eddie grinned.

“How were you supposed to contact the buyer, and where were you supposed to show proof of death?”

“Any 6 o’clock news report would have been enough. You know how these reporters are. Whenever any pig gets it, it’s all over the news, and word travels fast,” Eddie crowed.

“You shut your mouth!” Joe rubbed his forehead and face with his hand. *My God, Diana will never be safe up here. And if she’s confined Below for any length of time, she’s gonna go stir crazy.* Joe thought as he paced the small confines of the interrogation room.

“I ain’t sayin’ nothin’ else. I know my rights. I want my fucking lawyer. Now!” Eddie tried folding his arms in defiance, but the cuffs prevented it.

Joe knocked on the glass window of the room, and Adams came in. “Please escort *Mister* Archer back to his cell along with *Mister* Crockett. There’s nothing more I can find out right now.”

Adams nodded to the DA and went to uncuff Eddie and pulled him to his feet. “Did you give him what he wanted, scumbag?” He growled with contempt.

“Nah! I ain’t sayin’ nothin’ to no stinkin’ DA.” Eddie sneered.

“Well, we’ll see about that,” Adams commented with a tight smile. “What about the other one?”

“Tell Grimes to take Crockett back to his cell. I might have more questions for both of them.”

“You better tell that little bitch not to show her face anywhere, or she will get a lot worse than a couple a cuts on her face.” Eddie was trying to get Joe’s goat, and it looked like he was succeeding.

“Get him the hell out of here!” Joe yelled. As Adams pulled Eddie out of the interrogation room, Joe knew he had to get Below and warn Diana and Vincent.

*At least down Below, I’ll be able to see her once in a while. If I tell the Feds, she’ll be whisked into Witness Protection and no one will know where she is. Can I do that to Vincent after what he went through with Catherine?* Joe pondered these thoughts as he made his way back to his office, the weight of the world on his shoulders.



## Chapter Three

*by Jess*

The tunnels hummed low with the life of evening—the kind of quiet only found deep in the earth, when Above had long ago fallen silent. Jacob was still Above with Jessica, and William sat mumbling in the kitchen over Father’s birthday plans, as he tried yet another cup of coffee from the machine that he was still at war with.

Diana sat at the makeshift desk, her fingers picking at the edge of the file that lay on it. The curtain behind her shifted with the faintest motion. She had pulled it closed hours ago, needing separation from the Tunnel world more than she cared to admit.

Vincent’s footsteps were nearly silent, but she felt him before she heard the curtain. That was always the way with him, in her heart like a gentle ocean tide arriving before it could be seen.

“I’m fine,” she said softly, before he could speak. “Really, Vincent. I just needed some quiet to... regroup.”

She turned, offering a half-smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

His gaze met hers gently, and he stepped closer. “You don’t have to wear your courage like armor with me, Diana. I feel...” He did not elaborate, but she knew what he meant.

*You cannot hide everything from me.*

She looked away, embarrassed by the lump of emotion rising in her throat. “I don’t want people worrying. I don’t want *him* worrying.” She meant Jacob, of course. “If I just keep moving forward, if I stay focused, then maybe I won’t feel so...”

“Damaged?” he finished, his voice low, rumbling. “As if the world turned sharp and deadly when you weren’t looking?”

Her eyes darted to his face. But there was no judgment there.

He continued, his words like a balm, laced with grief but also a gentle wisdom. "There is no shame in the breaking, Diana. Some things are too heavy to carry on your own. We all love you, and we are all holding you up."

Her jaw clenched. "I'm not broken."

"No," he whispered, brushing his fingers lightly across the desk beside her, careful not to touch too harshly. "You are only human. And even stars shatter before they shine. Jacob and I were reading in the library about the birth of stars. Great explosions of light and energy, then they shine for eternity."

The silence stretched, but it wasn't empty. She nodded, as if hearing what he said but still drifting in her own emotions.

He looked at her then, truly looked past the red lines across her cheek and face, past the controlled expression that only Diana could have perfected after years of working with the volatile underworld of Above. And though he said nothing about them, the memories stirred: the night air of Central Park, the trickling of another woman's blood, the tremble of another voice saying "I'm okay" when she wasn't.

Diana's shoulders sank as if the air had gone out of her. "Do you think they'll always see this first?" She gestured toward her face. "The damage?"

Vincent sat down across from her, his voice quieter now, nearly prayerful. "Scars are not signs of defeat. They are the places where the fight decided to let you live. Somewhere in that fight, you were given life. And here you are, still living."

She swallowed hard, blinking back the uncharacteristic tears.

"You can be afraid, Diana. You can be angry. You can even fall apart here. No mask, no hiding."

"I don't want to be a burden," she whispered.

He almost smiled. "The ones who love you would carry you through fire if they had to. That's not being a burden. That's belonging. This is home for you, Diana. It always will be."

Tears welled again in her tired, troubled eyes, pushing the makeshift desk to the side in frustration, and she finally let one fall.

Vincent reached then, gingerly pushing the workstation Dian had tried to hide behind further to the side, and brushed it from her cheek with the back of his hand.

And for the first time since the attack, Diana leaned into him, allowing his strong arms to encircle her as he stood, pulling her close.

“Will it get better?” she asked, her voice muffled against his chest.

He paused then, contemplating. “Yes.”



The grass in the park shimmered with evening light, and Jacob skipped two steps ahead of Jessica, his camera bouncing against his chest with every stride.

“Slow down, Jacob,” she called, half laughing. “You’re not going to miss out on the sunset.”

“I want to catch it just right! If I stand on the bench near the fountain, the light hits the trees just like in the picture book you showed me, and I can photograph it right between the buildings. It will be super cool.”

Jessica smiled as she caught up. “I think you may be right, but don’t trip because you are looking at the sky and not your feet.”

They reached the spot that Jacob had his eye on, an old wooden bench with peeling paint that had once been a royal blue. Now it was mostly wood, chewing gum traces, and splinters. Jacob climbed up onto it, one foot resting on the edge so he could tilt his lens toward the clouds beginning to catch fire above them.

He snapped a few shots in quick bursts, his tongue poking out in concentration. Then, without lowering the camera, he asked, “Do you think scars ruin pictures?”

Jessica blinked. “What do you mean?”

He shrugged one shoulder. “Just thinking. Sometimes I take pictures of old things. Rusty bikes, cracks in sidewalks. They look cooler than the new stuff. But...people aren’t the same, are they?”

Jessica sat beside him on the bench. “You’d be surprised. A photograph doesn’t care about perfection. It captures truth. And sometimes, the scars are the most honest part. With people, scars are proof they survived, and there’s nothing more powerful than survival.”

Jacob was quiet for a moment. “I think Diana’s sad.”

“She’s had a hard few weeks, honey.”

“I know. But I don’t think it’s just the hurting part.” He finally lowered the camera, his young face furrowed with thought. “I think it’s the quiet part after, where everyone expects you to be okay again.” He stepped down from the bench and sat down, resting his elbows on his knees, turning the camera in his hands thoughtfully.

Jessica wrapped an arm gently around his shoulder. “Those are heavy thoughts for a ten-year-old.”

He looked up at her with sincerity. “Dad says I’m an old soul.”

She chuckled. “He’s not wrong.”

A light breeze stirred the leaves as Jacob lifted his camera again, turning it slightly toward the playground, where a swing moved on its own. Empty. The shutter clicked, and he frowned.

Jessica followed his gaze. “You want a picture of that?”

“No,” Jacob said, lowering the camera again. “I just thought I saw someone. Over there by the trees.”

She squinted. “I don’t see anyone.”

He shook his head. “Probably nothing. Maybe just a bird.”

But something about the way he said it made Jessica glance one more time—uneasy now, though she wouldn’t show it.

“Come on,” she said, standing. “Let’s go develop those shots. You still owe me a portrait.”

“Okay,” Jacob replied, though he looked over his shoulder once before they left the bench behind.

The swing still rocked gently, though the wind had stilled.



The curtain to Diana’s chamber flew open with the unmistakable sound of William huffing and puffing his way inside, a chipped tunnel tray balanced precariously in his arms, and a look of formidable determination on his face.

“I have done it!” he announced with the fervor of a man who had just discovered fire.

Diana startled, sitting upright at her makeshift desk, catching her file as it nearly fell to the floor from her lap. “William? Are you okay?”

“I am *not*, Diana,” he declared dramatically, setting the tray down with a rattle. “I have ruined my kettle, my sense of dignity, and possibly half the kitchen. But I have finally brewed a cup of coffee that does not taste like scorched mud water filtered through a sock.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Congratulations, I think?”

He thrust the mismatched mug and saucer toward her with both hands. “Drink this. If it doesn’t peel the lining off your throat or send you into cardiac arrest, we are officially calling it a success.”

She hesitated. “That’s...comforting.”

William placed a hand over his heart. “I did this for you, you know. Tea may be the soul of the tunnels, but coffee is the blood of warriors. And what are you, if not that?”

Diana bit back a laugh as she reached for the mug, a warmth flowing through her at the kind words. “All right, brave man. Let’s see what victory tastes like.”

She took a cautious sip, then immediately tried not to spit it back out.

William watched her face with both the hope of a puppy and the anxiety of a man waiting on bomb defusal.

“Well?” he asked eagerly. “Be honest. I can take it. My spirit’s already been crushed twice this week, once by the bean grinder and once by Mouse stealing my china gravy boat for a science experiment.”

Diana cleared her throat, her eyes watering. “It’s quite bold.”

“Bold?! Did you hear that, world?” he called toward the ceiling with exaggerated flair. “She said it was bold! I knew I was a culinary genius!”

“Bold like it might grow legs and walk off,” Diana muttered behind her mug. “That is liquid regret right there.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing! It’s great.”

Just then, the curtain was flung open again, this time with the sheer force of panic.

Joe Maxwell burst into the room, his face pale and breath ragged. His coat flapped behind him, his tie crooked and dangling over his shoulder, and an 8 by 11 photograph was clenched in his hand.

“Diana,” he gasped, not even sparing William a glance. “We have a problem. A big one. We need everyone, Vincent, just – get everyone!”

All traces of levity vanished. “What happened?” Diana stood instantly, her hand still wrapped around the steaming mug of disgrace. “Joe, what is that?”

Joe thrust the picture toward her. “This came into the DA’s office not even an hour ago. No return address and was hand delivered to my receptionist by someone in a hooded coat. She said he smelled like bleach and walked with a limp. It was sealed in a plastic bag, and the original was inside, but I photographed it and ran here as fast as I could.”

He held out the photo with uncharacteristically trembling hands. The writing on the photographed note was jagged and crimson as blood.



**“Tell me where the red-haired bitch is. Or the boy dies. You have 24 hours.”**

Diana’s stomach dropped. Her fingers gripped the mug tighter, and the world around her fell silent except for the roar of blood in her ears.

Joe’s voice cracked. “They’re claiming they have Jacob.”

William dropped the tray with a crash.

“No,” Diana whispered, breath catching in her throat.

A growl from Vincent echoed behind them, firm and primal, as he emerged from the tunnel doorway in a rush, in answer to the Bond. “Diana, what happened?”



## **Chapter Four**

*by Cindy*

"Do you know where he is? Can you tell?" Diana asked, trying to quell the panic. The clock was ticking. Once a child was grabbed, they only had so much time. No one knew that better than Diana Bennet.

Vincent looked up and to the left. "If it were Catherine, there was a time when I could tell you the room she stood in. With Jacob..." He scanned his sensitive mind, astonished that he hadn't felt Jacob's terror, the moment he'd been grabbed. "He's... the warehouse district. I... can't tell which building, but I'm certain he's there."

"That's where they took me. Down by the docks. They could be fixing to put him on a ship, or... Jessica. He was with Jessica. Taking pictures."

"I can't tell if she's with him. But I know where I'm going." Vincent sprinted towards the curtained doorway.

"I'm coming, too. It's me they want. Not Jacob." *But he's collateral damage. A killer won't care. They can't burn you twice. Oh... Jacob!* Diana thought, running right behind her husband. Joe Maxwell followed apace.

"Vincent, if this guy has Jacob, he'll be safe for a while. They'll want to trade him for Diana."

*Bold of you to assume we're dealing with someone sane, Joe,* Diana thought.

Tunnel chatter above them rattled to a clambering crescendo and then fell silent. William was already helping. Pascal had just put out an 'all quiet' on the pipes, in case Jacob managed to call for help.

"What just happened?" Joe asked, as the three of them slowed for a turn.

"All quiet on the pipes. If Jacob can get to one, he can tap out a message. We'll hear it. Pascal will tell us where it's from," Diana explained.

Vincent stopped. "Diana. You should stay here. It's safer. None of us knows what we're-"

"No. Not on your life. He's my son too, Vincent," Diana pushed past him and kept going. She might not know the particulars, but ten years of tunnel travelling gave her a terrific sense of direction, even underground. She was heading for the warehouse district. And short of tying her down, none of them were going to be able to stop her.

Still, Joe felt he had to try. He reached for her arm, and for a moment, even managed to stop her forward progress. "Diana... I hate to say this, but he's right. This isn't the smart play. We don't have a plan. At best, we're going straight into a trap, and you never do that with the bait unless you're controlling some of the variables. Before you walk into a room with this guy, I want a sniper on the roof and a dozen undercover guys posing as dock workers. I want an area cordoned off, in case there's a firefight, and the bomb squad on hand in case they decide to strap the kid to a bunch of explosives."

Diana's temper - with all of them - snapped. "We don't have TIME for that. They have my son, Joe!"

Vincent took her other arm. "Diana... the note said we have 24 hours. I don't like this. But I... I understand the wisdom Joe is offering. What... what should we do?" Vincent asked, turning to the DA.



Dinner in the Tombs came on a cardboard tray, if you were on lockdown, and a plastic one if you were in the mess hall. That was so you couldn't hit anybody over the head in your cell, if you got pissed off at them.

Charlie Crocket thought it should come with antacids, as well. He was on lockdown, this evening, courtesy of Officer Grimes. Grimes had taken exception to his demeanor with DA Maxwell, this afternoon, it seemed. Charlie shrugged. It wasn't the first time he'd been on lockdown for ticking off one of the guards.

He had no way of knowing it would be his last.

His dinner was shoved through the slot. It was a frozen chicken patty fried to unrecognizable, then smothered in wallpaper paste gravy. The mashed potatoes looked equally bombarded. There was a paper cup for water and no other utensils. Charlie knew better than to complain about needing a fork. Even the plastic kind were forbidden, this deep.

He ate with the manners of a man accustomed to not having access to a fork, using his fingers to scoop the potatoes in, picking the chicken up and just chewing through it. He was hungry. Maxwell's interrogation meant he'd missed lunch, something neither Adams nor Grimes seemed willing to rectify.

*\$250,000. Man I get out of here I'm gonna get that. Gonna get me all the forks I want. Maybe Eddie and me can get 40 or 50 just for wrecking her face. The guy who put the hit out owes us, after all. Eddie said.*

He set aside the tray, downed the water and leaned back on his bunk, at least a little surprised to hear footsteps, outside his cell door.

"You bringing dessert?" he asked sarcastically. Tray cleanup often waited until morning, when they were busy. And Charlie knew they were very busy.

The short, Hispanic man on the other side of the door said nothing, as he set aside a mop and stared in. He was dressed in prison garb, just like Charlie was.

"Hey, beaner! I said, 'you bringin' me some dessert?'" Charlie repeated. Prison trustees often helped with things like mopping floors or tray cleanup, in exchange for a lighter sentence.

Dark brown eyes met Charlie's hazel ones. They were sharp. And pitiless. A metal key rattled in the lock. The door swung open, then closed with a clang. Trustees weren't supposed to be able to open the cell doors. Eddie grew immediately wary.

"They say you had a visitor today. They say you gonna sing for Joe Maxwell," the Hispanic man said. His voice was heavily accented.

Charlie's body came on instant alert. This man wasn't here for his leavings. He was here for... something else. Charlie, the taller of the two of them and glad of it, stood up. "I didn't give Maxwell nothin'. And I don't know you, *wetback*," he insulted, balling up his fists, ready to fight.

The other man didn't bother to close the short distance between them.

"Yeah, that's funny except that somebody said you needed Maxwell to call your lawyer and talk about a break, because, well, you know. Cooperation and all."

Charlie had the good sense to look horrified, for a moment. He held up his hands. "Look, that don't mean nothin'. And I don't owe you-"

The shank was clear of the Hispanic man's shirt and in Charlie's abdomen before he had time to finish the sentence.

*Fast. He's so fast.* Charlie had no idea why that was one of the last thoughts he would ever have. It was then that the Hispanic man revealed that he was strong, as well.

He covered Charlie's scream with one hand, then shoved Charlie against the wall and cut him again, deeper this time, and fatally. He whispered harshly into Charlie's ear.

"I get 20 large for your sorry ass. And I ain't a *wetback*. That's a Mexican. I look like a Mexican to you?"

Charlie tried to struggle, tried to hit. It was useless. His strength was ebbing as his life was. The blows were increasingly faint, and ineffective.

"See, I'm from Puerto Rico," the other man continued, as Charlie flailed. "We're born citizens, just like you, squealer."

Charlie's flailing arms grew heavy. He was getting cold. Tragically, he knew why.

"You want to say something smart to me now?" The killer asked. He lifted his hand just enough to allow Charlie to speak. Charlie's voice was already growing weak.

"I... I... Eddie. It was Eddie's idea to grab her. Eddie said..." The hazel eyes began to glaze. Blood was everywhere.

"Eddie's probably next," the Puerto Rican man said, as he watched Charlie's head slump forward. His body slid down the wall.



The tall man moved like a long shadow, around the old warehouse. It was full of rats. He didn't mind.

Rats, after all, were great survivors. Just like him.

"She will come to me. She *will* come," he purred. His voice was like honey over broken glass. "She will come, and she will do whatever I want. *Anything* I want," he mused.

He stopped to wash his hands at a huge wet sink, the kind importers often rinsed off hundreds of pounds of fruit in, before it was loaded onto trucks. Tepid water pounded out on the backs of his scarred hands. The scars didn't hurt. But the memory of how he'd gotten them tended to sting, some. He shrugged his thin shoulders. Like the rats, scars were of no consequence. Not when vengeance was so close at hand.

Jacob and Jessica were both in the next room, bound and sleeping off chloroform. He didn't want to have to deal with a child and considered the little boy as nothing more than useful currency. Jessica, he considered worth less than that. He'd considered killing her when she'd first been brought to him, then changed his mind. Keeping her as a hostage might yet

prove useful. And it had been smart to grab her, rather than let her run to alert the authorities.

After all, he could always kill her later. Sooner, if she bored him.

*You won't tell the authorities where you go, will you, Diana?* he mused silently. "Not when you know what it will cost you."

He shut off the hard taps and dried his scarred hands on a ragged towel, remembering a time when the towels had been from the Hilton and the sink had been sparkling porcelain and the fixtures trimmed with gold accents, rather than the concrete and rusting steel he now was forced to contend with. He dismissed the thought. Like other things, it didn't matter. Nothing did. Nothing, except...

*She will come. She won't be able to stop herself. And when she does come...*

Excitement coursed through his veins. *Finally. After all these years... I will have it. Revenge. Revenge, served sweet and cold. Oh, Diana. The gift you bring me!*

Adrenaline pounded through him, the feeling the closest thing to sex that he knew. The riotous sensation caused an intrusive thought to rear its ugly head.

*But... but what if she didn't? What if she simply... didn't? What if she didn't come?*

The thought made him furious, and he twisted the ragged towel until it could twist no more, choking imaginary life out of the worthless cotton.

*If she doesn't come, I'll start mailing pieces of that little boy back to her. A finger, a few toes. She'll come then.*

He liked that thought. He liked the thought of Diana Bennett's face as he sent her horrors. The thought calmed him, and at least some of his former contentment was restored.

*She'll come. You know she'll come. Diana Bennett always comes, for the helpless ones. For the little ones. For the ones she... loves.*

The last word left a strange taste in his mouth. "Love" was a thing this person had no truck with.

He wondered if Charlie Crocket was dead yet, and figured he probably was. He knew it would cost him, but like so many other things, money didn't matter.

He took out a pocket watch and checked the time. It was quarter past seven.

*Soon. She'll come soon. Everything is ready for her. Everything is... prepared.*

Thin lips lifted in an evil shape that almost, *almost* resembled a smile. His heart felt the dark joy of anticipation.

*And of course... when she comes... she won't be coming alone...*



## **Chapter Five**

*by Angie*

Diana watched Vincent and Joe go into a mid-tunnel huddle, and suddenly she couldn't accept that.

"STOP!" she yelled and was gratified when they were immediately silent and turned to look at her.

"Just wait. We need to think this through," she said at last, as quietly as she could manage. "Where did he say he wanted me to go?" she asked Joe.

"Um, it's close to that warehouse, in a huge parking lot for trucks."

"So, he doesn't want to be far from his hostages," Diana surmised.

"Something else. We don't know who this guy is, but we know he's a psychopath with a grudge against me personally. That means he's someone I put away, and now he's out and wants revenge. That limits the possibilities a little. But it doesn't matter. Assume he's armed, very dangerous, obsessed with me - and insane. Whatever we do, we have to distract him enough to keep him from killing the hostages.

“Only one way to do that – let me be bait. He won’t ignore me if I’m dropped off where he said. Joe can drop me off, and we’ll make a production of it, so he’ll think I’m giving in, against orders.

“Meanwhile, you two do what you have to do to get the hostages away from him while I talk to him. We have the advantage that he doesn’t know Vincent can locate his son. He won’t kill me outright - he wants a special kind of revenge. The two that cut me botched the job. He won’t.”

Joe and Vincent looked at each other, and though neither obviously liked the prospect, both nodded.

“I’ll get a couple of snipers up on the roof of nearby buildings, quietly and have them in place before I drop you off,” Joe said.

“I will be there too,” Vincent said. “I know this place. There is a tunnel entrance below the building – we once used this place for deliveries. The tunnel entry is hidden but not blocked. I will take Kanin and a team to wait for me and the hostages, in case I need more help. I cannot risk Jacob seeing me, but he will know I am close. While Diana is distracting him, I will find them.”

Vincent went to the nearest pipe and tapped out a message.

Joe left as quickly as he could to set up his part of the plan, and Diana went with him. Vincent watched her go, his heart sinking, hoping desperately that this time nothing would go wrong and everyone would be safe.

A few minutes later, Kanin, Cullen, and Jamie arrived, the two men carrying long staffs with metal tips and Jamie her crossbow and arrows. Vincent was going to say something to the latter, but she stared at him, and he merely nodded. Her skill with the crossbow might be very useful, as she had proven before, so long ago. And she was as agile as he was – and harder to spot, being so much smaller and in dark clothing. A gun was not going to help them this time.

They set off almost immediately and made the long walk to the warehouse entry in record time, all of them fit enough to keep up with Vincent’s long strides and runs and hardened enough to ignore the rats they disturbed in the little-used tunnels.



At the entry, they all stopped, and Vincent carefully shifted the panel sideways, inch by inch. It was supposed to go into the wall, but it was very stiff and obviously unused. When he had enough space to get his head in, he did so and looked around. It was dark, but there was just enough light to see that the freight elevator was on the other side of the wall, its door open to the basement of the warehouse. He moved the panel some more, as slowly as he could, but it was now making far too much noise in the hollow elevator shaft, so he crammed his cloak under the leading edge to muffle the sound. If anyone heard it, they would likely think it was rats. If someone was living in the building above, the rats would know it.

Finally, the door was open enough to let Vincent and Jamie in. Vincent told Kanin and Cullen to keep opening the door, as they might have to make a fast exit. He left his cloak. He didn't want it getting in his way, in any case. He was wearing dark clothing and a hoodie, the latter something Diana had introduced him to. He pulled his hair into the back of the sweater and pulled up the hood.

He and Jamie made their way slowly and silently around the nearest wall of the warehouse. This appeared to be unused, mostly empty, except for rats, which they could hear near the stacks of old garbage bins. They took no chances. At a set of metal stairs, Vincent reached for Jacob, and knew he was some way above them, and not near the stairs. He sensed another person, not Jessica, probably their opponent, but only one level above, closer to the front of the building. He was waiting for Diana, probably. Good.

Vincent crept up the stairway until he could see the next floor. It was almost entirely open, just a framework of metal girders, with lots of chains and several conveyor rollers and belt lines. But above that, there was a small office, suspended over the area, likely the control booth, or perhaps the supervisor's office. He sensed Jacob was there, so Jessica would be too.

How were they to get to that without alerting the man? Vincent looked around and knew he would have to reach the stairway that led to the room, but there didn't seem to be a way except by climbing. The floor near the walls was cluttered with heavy machinery and piles of huge chains.

Jamie had joined him and immediately saw the man they assumed was their suspect. He was a long way away, but not so far, he might not spot any movement if he turned. She tapped Vincent on the shoulder and pointed at the man, then at her bow and arrow, and signaled that she would move behind some machinery and watch, while he climbed.

Vincent nodded, but signaled to wait, because the distraction outdoors was now more important than ever.

The wait seemed interminable, but at last they saw the man move quickly to the warehouse door. He was carrying a long gun but seemed oblivious to anything but what he could see outside. He didn't shut the door, so Jamie and Vincent could hear Joe and Diana shouting. The man raised his rifle, as if to fire, then dropped it down again. Diana had been correct – this man didn't want her to die quickly.

They had their signal. Jamie moved into place, notching an arrow. Vincent slowly climbed towards the ceiling, using the huge loops of chain to mask his progress along the metal framework as often as he could. He had almost reached the top of the stairs to the booth when a sudden series of loud pings echoed around the warehouse, with several loud reports of guns. He couldn't tell where the shooting was coming from because of the echoes. He didn't wait to find out and ran swiftly up the stairs to the door, which opened inwards when he put pressure on it. He fell inside gratefully and shut the door behind him as well as he could.

Jessica and Jacob were hunched up in a corner. He joined them, spending a short time cutting off their ropes with his boot knife. All he could do was hope that Jamie was all right and Joe had done what he promised – and that Diana was still alive. He could not risk looking out.

There was a sudden silence. Then he heard footsteps on the bottom of the stairway. He quietly took a hand of Jessica's and one of Jacob's and led them silently to the door and pushed them behind him, out of sight, into a nearby corner.

They waited.



## **Chapter 6**

*by Amanda*

Minutes passed, and everything was quiet, only their breathing breaking into the silence. Vincent gripped his son's hand tighter, trying not to think of how his touch was so much like his mother's. He couldn't afford the distraction, not right now. He had to get his son and Jessica to safety.

Glancing down to his son's blue eyes, he squeezed his hand reassuringly before releasing his hold. Looking across to Jessica, Vincent slipped his hand from hers and nodded in understanding as his gaze returned to his son again.

"I need to see if it is safe for us," Vincent told him softly. "I need you to stay here with Jessica and keep holding her hand for me."

"But—"

"Please Jacob," Vincent whispered, imploring him to listen. "Promise me."

The young boy looked upon his father with wide, fearful eyes, but he nodded in agreement and reached out towards the woman who stepped closer towards him. His fingers wrapped around hers while he watched his father move towards the closed door and slowly pull it open. The creak of the timber caused all three of them to hold their breaths, listening intently, hoping that the sound hadn't alerted the kidnapper.

Vincent moved slowly, his sharp eyes searching for any movement or any signs that they weren't alone. He leaned out a little further forward, but when a sudden shot rang out from the darkness, Vincent felt himself falling backwards into the room to tumble at his son's feet.

Jacob's soft cry startled him when he tried to get up, but the pain in his shoulder blossomed, causing his body to shake and beads of sweat to pepper his forehead. He barely heard his son's soft sobs or Jessica's frantic words as she pressed down on his shoulder to try to stem the blood that oozed through her fingers.

Vincent could feel himself sinking unconsciously, his mind taking him to a time when everything filled his heart with love and adoration. To a time when his heart sang with happiness at the mere thought of her...

*This year's winter fest was one of pure wonder for Catherine and Vincent. This was their second time attending together, but their first as an intimate couple. No one knew officially of course, not even Father. While Catherine couldn't keep the not-so-secret smile from her face, Vincent couldn't keep his eyes off her at all.*

*He couldn't even describe the feeling of completeness that encompassed him since they had consummated their relationship. It was all so new to him, but he felt a strange kind of smug pride come over him since he had lost his virginity to this beautiful woman. Last Winterfest, they had kept a respectable distance between them, even though they were very much romantically together...but now, Vincent wondered if those around them could sense that their relationship had changed into something far deeper.*

*"What?" Catherine asked him with a bashful smile when she caught his eyes on her. "If you keep looking at me like that, you'll give us away."*

*"I like looking at you," he told her with a smile as he slipped his arm around her shoulders to pull her tightly into his side. "Maybe it is time we stopped hiding."*

*His words caused her to turn sharply and look up at him, her mouth dropping open. "What happened to change your mind?"*

*"You did," he chuckled softly, bringing her close to his side again. "You told me everyone probably assumed we were already intimate anyway, and I should stop worrying about what everyone thought."*

*"You're right," she grinned. "I did say that...but that can't be the only reason."*

*Vincent smiled down at her, his blue eyes sparkling with mirth. "No, that is not the only reason."*

*When he didn't enlighten any further, Catherine lightly elbowed his ribs, delighting in the mock shock he bestowed on her. "Vincent...you're not going to tell me?"*

*Vincent watched her for a few moments, his gaze dancing with delight as he chuckled softly, marveling at how comfortable they were with each other. Here they stood, him with one arm draped over her shoulders while she folded her arms with mock annoyance. Oh, how he loved her.*

*"I was humbled by a child," he told her in a conspiring whisper as he lowered his head to press his lips into her hair. The touch was brief, but they both felt the warmth flowing through one another because of it. He was about to continue telling her what had changed his mind, but before he could even formulate the words, Samantha practically skipped over to stop in front of them, rocking back and forth on her heels.*

*"Did you ask her yet, Vincent?"*

*Catherine looked to Samantha questioningly before returning her gaze back to the man beside her. "Asked me what?"*

*Vincent could feel his face growing hot, and he wondered if his skin would echo the rosy flush he could feel rising over his cheeks. Before he could answer, however, the young girl bounced with excitement.*

*"I asked Vincent if you were going to come and live with us below when you're married, and if I could be a flower girl at your wedding," she gushed. "But he said he couldn't make those decisions because it's the bride's decision who she picks."*

*"Oh, he did?" Catherine asked incredulously, her gaze lifting to the man beside her as she slipped her arm around his waist. She wanted so much to kiss him and tell him that she would say yes to any proposal he might offer, but instead, she offered him a bright smile and turned her attention back to the child watching them excitedly. "Well, traditionally it would be the bride, but here I think that decision is a little different. But I would definitely want you to be my flower girl."*

*"Really?" Samantha squealed happily as she jumped forward to engulf both of them in a waist-high hug. When she pulled back, Samantha gave*

Vincent a serious look, then tilted her head to the side. "Hurry up and ask her, Vincent..."

Vincent was speechless when the young girl turned on her heel and skipped off back to the party. He was slightly flustered, and for a moment, he didn't know what to say to the woman beside him, but once again, she responded with the wisdom he had always felt in her.

"We've already proved to ourselves that our dream is full of possibilities," she told him, smiling as she spoke. "We're already fulfilled so many aspects of it...so who's to say we can't have it all one day?"

Vincent felt the music and the chatter filter away into the background around them and turned to face her. His eyes met hers in a smouldering gaze that sent sparks all the way down to her toes. Catherine held her breath when he lifted his fingers to her face, to tenderly stroke her chin with his thumb. She watched him with a quiet expectation as her eyes slowly closed when he lowered his mouth to hers in a soft, tender kiss that warmed her from the inside out. When he pulled away, parting their lips, Catherine's eyes fluttered open to gaze up at him adoringly. Slowly the sounds filtered back around them, and when Vincent lifted his eyes from hers, he found that no one was watching them. No one was judging their closeness or looking upon them with shock or scorn, and he realised that Catherine had been right all this time.

Vincent's eyes sparkled with delight when he slowly released her and stepped back. Reaching down, he took her hand in his and led her towards the other couples dancing in the middle of the hall.

"I thought maybe this year we could dance to actual music," he told her as he bent close to her ear.

"I heard music," Catherine beamed happily when he drew her close to his body again. "But I'll never miss a chance to do this with you."

As they started to sway, the music swirled around them and they both lost themselves in the moment and each other, both oblivious to Father and Mary who were watching them with only love and acceptance in their eyes.

Catherine...her presence filled his senses as he slowly blinked his eyes open to be met by the terrified eyes of his son...*Their son*...her strength, even now after all these years gave him everything.

Taking a deep breath, Vincent ignored the pain and pushed himself upwards until he was once again upright. With renewed strength, he reached out to once again squeeze Jacob's hand in reassurance before he turned towards the door again.



## **Chapter 7**

*by Anon E. Mouse*

It was no small feat, getting snipers up on the roofs of the nearby buildings without being detected, but somehow the SWAT Team leader managed it.

Now, all Joe and Diana had to do was put on a convincing show for the psycho who had kidnapped Jessica and Vincent's son. They were hoping to draw the man out into the open, to give Vincent time to find Jacob and get his son to safety. If the snipers could get a clear shot at the perpetrator, it would be a huge bonus.

"You sure you still want to do this?" Joe asked, still unsure himself, that this was the best course of action.

"I'm absolutely sure..." Diana said unequivocally. "That's my kid in there, Joe... and now my husband is in there too. Of course, I still want to do this."

"Okay then... let's go." Joe opened the passenger side door and held it as Diana climbed in. It was nearly dark by the time they pulled up near the warehouse. Joe made as much noise as possible as he brought the car to a screeching stop.

Getting out of the car, Joe slammed his door and ran around as Diana began walking to her fate. "I'm begging you, Diana, DON'T DO THIS! DON'T GO IN THERE."

She swung around with her braid flying out when he grabbed her arm. “LET GO OF ME, JOE!” she demanded loudly. “What choice do I have? He’s got Jacob...”

“YOU DON’T KNOW THAT! NOT FOR SURE. HE MIGHT BE BLUFFING TO LURE YOU HERE.”

“I CAN’T TAKE THAT CHANCE! Don’t you get it? If Jacob *is* in there, I have to try to save him. And if he isn’t, this psycho will eventually snatch him just to make me suffer. No one I care about is safe as long as he doesn’t get what he wants... AND WHAT HE WANTS IS ME!”

The heart of the kidnapper skipped a beat when he heard her voice. *She came!* he thought excitedly. *At last, I have my chance. I’ve waited so long.*

Moving quickly to the door, he peeked out at the scene outside. He couldn’t help but chuckle softly as he carefully lifted his rifle and looked through the scope. “Well, well, well,” he whispered, instantly recognizing Diana’s signature red hair.

“Welcome to my parlor, said the spider to the fly,” he quoted softly, with a sinister smile on his face. “Have you missed me, Diana... as much as I’ve missed you? You once trapped me. Now I’m returning the favor. Although I must say, I’m a little disappointed that you aren’t as brilliant as I thought you were.”

“There has to be another way,” Joe continued arguing with her, hoping that they were giving Vincent enough time to rescue his son. “You know he’s going to kill you, don’t you?”

“Do you think I could ever live with myself if something happens to him?”

*It would be so easy to kill you right now,* the psycho thought. *But where’s the fun in that?* he asked himself. *It will be so much more satisfying to watch you suffer... to kill you slowly.*



The very idea of watching her suffer gave him a thrill he could almost taste. *Besides, I want to get a good look at your scars,* he thought. *Do they still hurt you, Diana? Do your loved ones turn away in disgust when they see you?*

He lowered the gun but continued to watch and listen. He wouldn't make his move until her friend drove away.

He had long imagined how this meeting would be. His delusions of sweet revenge had given him strength during the long years of confinement. But he was a patient man and had waited for the perfect opportunity to escape the maximum-security psychiatric hospital for the criminally insane.

He smiled again, recalling how he had slowly gained the trust of the hospital staff. Convincing them over the last twelve years, he was not insane, but rather, the victim of malicious prosecution. So much so that they had given him privileges and access that had eventually aided his escape. His money had helped, too. The staff had often benefited from his 'generosity' when he had bribed them into complacency through his contacts on the outside.

"Here we are at long last, my Diana," he whispered so softly that only he could hear. His hate was as intense as the sick kind of love he felt for her. "...where we have always been destined to be; You and me together for all eternity."

"Even if Jacob is here..." Joe continued. "Do you seriously believe he'll just let the kid go? Think about it, Diana! HE'S A PSYCHO! You said so yourself. He's probably going to make you watch him torture the kid, before he kills you both. *That is...* if he hasn't killed him already."

"SHUT UP!" Diana slapped Joe hard across the face. "DON'T SAY THAT!" *Wow!* Joe thought, as his hand went to his jaw. *She's really getting into this.* "Why not?" he replied. "It's true and you know it!"

"I have to try, Joe! I have to believe he's still alive and that I can save him." Just then they heard the sound of gunfire coming from inside the building.



When the shots rang out, the psycho's goons betrayed their presence. It only took moments for Kanin to sneak up on one of them from behind. He snapped the gunman's neck before the man even knew what had happened.

The man slumped to the floor. Shaking from head to foot, Kanin backed into the shadows where he had left his staff. The training Kanin had received from Isaac over the years had come in handy more than once. But this was the first time since the terrible car accident that had taken the life of an innocent young boy that he had ever actually killed someone.

As he hid in the shadows, Kanin waited for the other gunman. It wasn't long before he heard him coming.

"Frank?" someone whispered. "*Frank?*" he whispered more desperately. "Where'd ya go?"

It was only a few moments before Frank's friend discovered the lifeless body on the floor. "Very funny, Frank. Quit messin' with me, ya jerk."

As he knelt to the floor to nudge Frank with the end of his gun, Kanin emerged from the shadows and took him in a chokehold. It was only moments before the second gunman lay unconscious next to the first.

Jamie continued to keep her crossbow aimed and ready at the monster who was responsible for the horrific attack on Diana and had now kidnapped Jacob and Jessica.



When the psycho heard the gunfire from his guards, he turned his attention from Diana to what was happening inside the warehouse. All he heard was silence. "Frank? Myron? What's going on?"

When he received no answer in return, his eyes darted around the large room. *There is no way anyone has entered this building*, he thought. *I've covered every possible entrance.*

It was then that he heard the floor above him creak. Looking up the stairs, he knew that someone was moving.

Shadows were lengthening in the room as he raised his gun to the ready as he approached the bottom of the stairs. Halfway up, he stood still as the door to the office began to open. As soon as he saw Vincent dressed in black from head to toe, he didn't hesitate to pull the trigger.

At the moment he heard the unknown intruder hit the floor, a searing pain ripped through his side and chest. He fell, dropping his rifle. He grabbed the railing in an attempt to keep himself from falling down the stairs. Then slowly sank to his knees then slid like a ragdoll down the stairs.

Jamie's aim had been true. It had found its mark and struck what would prove to be a fatal blow.



At the sounds of the gunshots, Diana turned toward the warehouse with a look of terror in her eyes. Two people she loved more than her own life were in there. She stood frozen until only a few moments later a rifle shot rang out.

"No, Diana!" Joe yelled as she ran toward the warehouse.

She stopped and turned back toward him. "Joe! Don't follow me!" Then pointing to the nearby roof, she yelled, "And tell them to hold their fire until I give you some signal."

"But Diana..."

"JUST DO IT!!!" she screamed and ran into the building before he could respond.

The argument was over.

Diana threw caution to the wind and entered the building, frantically looking around for any sign of Vincent or Jacob. She spotted a body lying in an awkward and contorted position on the stairs. Approaching the man, her first reaction was relief that it was not her husband or her son.

“My Diana,” a weak, raspy voice whispered. “I knew you would come to me.” He reached out a scarred hand to her. He coughed weakly, as blood filled his lungs and dripped from the side of his mouth.

Diana gasped, when she realized the man was still breathing, if only barely. She focused on his face and saw that one side was badly scarred. The entire right side, and one eyelid drooped badly, giving him the appearance of a melting waxwork. But she didn’t recognize him. Then she observed that he had been impaled through the side by one of Jamie’s arrows.

Ignoring his unspoken plea, she turned her attention to the top of the stairs. “Vincent? Jacob? Jessica?” she called. “Are you here?”

The office door opened slowly. “Diana?” Jacob called out.

Breathing a huge sigh of relief, Diana fleetingly wondered how long she had been holding her breath. Jumping over the unknown man, she took the remaining steps two at a time as Jacob threw himself into her arms.

“Oh, Jacob!” she said grabbing him and holding him tight. “Are you hurt?” she asked, quickly looking him over.

“No, I’m not hurt,” Jacob responded, pointing to the door. “But Dad is... he’s bleeding.”

By this time, the door was open, and Vincent stood leaning on Jessica.

“There’s no time,” Diana said frantically. “We have to get all of you out of here.” She stood and slipped her body under Vincent’s other arm and gingerly guided them down the stairs. “Joe is holding off the SWAT Team until I give him a signal, but I don’t know how long he can keep them at bay.”

As they stepped over the dying man who had caused so much damage, she asked, “Where did you come in?”

“Over there,” Vincent said, wincing at the searing pain in his shoulder.

Jamie met them at the bottom of the stairs and switched places with Diana. “I’ll get them out.” Just then, Kanin appeared, holding his staff, and took over for Jessica.

Jessica turned and headed back up the stairs.

“Where are you going?” Diana asked. “You have to leave... NOW!”

“I have to get the camera,” she said, turning and heading back up the stairs. She ran into the office, stepping over the puddle of blood that Vincent had left behind. It only took seconds for her to snag Jacob’s camera from the desk and turn toward the door.

As Jessica descended the stairs, Psycho made a feeble attempt to reach for her.

“Help me,” he gasped before his hands went limp. It was clear that the monster was dead.

Jessica looked at him in disgust and rushed to catch up with the others.

“Hurry, Jessica,” Diana said as she ushered the woman through the heavy panel doors leading back to the Tunnels.

Once she was through the door, Cullen and Kanin began pushing it closed, leaving Diana behind to make up a plausible story for the police.



Joe stood outside waiting for some sign from Diana that she was still alive.

“Com’on Diana...” he said, desperately hoping she was still alive.

“We need to go in there, Joe,” the detective in charge said.

“Listen Greg, *this* is a highly irregular situation,” Joe tried to explain.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Greg asked.

“Listen, Greg, there might be a little kid in there. Diana thinks she can save him. If you go charging in there, that psycho might kill him. Do you really want to be the one to explain to his parents why their kid is dead?”

Greg chewed his lip, as he considered Joe’s point of view. “Five minutes... That’s all you got. If she doesn’t come outta there in five minutes... I gotta send these guys in.”

“Thanks, Greg.”

Joe could feel his blood pressure rising. He could feel his heart beating in his throat. Each minute felt like an eternity. “C’mon Bennett... where are you?” he muttered desperately as he clasped both hands on his head to keep it from exploding.

Just then she emerged holding both hands in the air. As soon as Joe spotted her, she waved for them to come in.

As they entered with guns raised, they could see that whatever had gone on there, was clearly over.

“Tell me what we’ve got here, Bennett,” Greg asked.

“The man on the stairs is dead... impaled by what looks like an... arrow.”

“And two are back there,” she said, pointing in the direction of the door to the basement.”

Two officers went to check on the gunman. “Hey,” he hollered to those by the stairs. “One of these guys is still breathing.” In moments they had him in handcuffs as he was slowly coming to.

Greg, Joe and Diana walked closer to the man on the stairs.

“He’s the one who planned all this,” Diana said.

“What makes you think that?” Joe asked.

Diana looked at the dead man, still wondering why she didn’t recognize him. “He was still alive when I came in... barely breathing... but alive... he said something like... ‘I knew you would come to me.’ He called me ‘*My Diana*.’... like he...” she paused, at the horrific thought of what he might have done.

“Like he knew you? Like he... *loved you?*” Joe suggested.

“Yeah... something like that.” She shivered, sickened by the very thought.

“Did you see any sign of a kid in here?” Greg asked.

Diana looked Greg straight in the face and lied. Shaking her head, she said, “No... all I found was what you see. He must have been bluffing, like Joe said.”

“Hey, Boss,” one of the officers interrupted them. “We got a big problem over here.”

Turning their attention to the officer, they listened as he pointed to the wall.

“What is it?” Greg asked.

“You see those wires coming out of the light switch over there?”

“Yeah?”

“That’s not right. They don’t belong there. If you follow those wires...” He shown a strong flashlight on the wall and followed the wires. “You’ll see this whole place—”

“Is wired to blow,” Joe said in horror, recognizing the network of wires that crisscrossed the ceiling finally ending at a very large wooden crate on the other side of the room.

“Yeah... wired to blow,” the officer said.

Trying to sound calm, Greg said, “Okay, everyone... stay calm... we have to get out of here... *right now!*”

Exiting the warehouse, they all sought protection behind the squad cars. As the last two officers reached the squad cars with the one remaining gunman in handcuffs, there was a huge explosion that lit up the sky and surrounding area, raining metal, wood, and shrapnel in every direction.



As Vincent, with one arm in a sling, sat next to the Mirror Pool looking up at the stars, he caught sight of Diana out of the corner of his eye. She was watching him from the chamber entrance.

Turning her way for only a moment, he closed his eyes and turned away from her, too ashamed to even look at her.

“You know, Babe, it’s been days, and it’s like you can’t even look at me anymore. Do I really look so awful?” she asked. “Are you so repulsed by me now?”

Vincent was standing in an instant, shocked and dismayed that she would even think such a thing. “No!” He held his good arm out in frustration. “I would *never*... Diana... you are beautiful. Your scars make no difference to me... they are evidence of your courage and strength.”

She walked toward him slowly until she stood only a foot or two away from him. “Then why are you avoiding me? Why do you shrink from my touch? Please tell me, Vincent.”

He looked so forlorn and broken as he hung his head and dropped his hand to his side. Sighing deeply, he finally spoke. “Because... I don’t deserve you, Diana. Because I have betrayed you and everything we have... together.”

“Betrayed me? What do you mean?”

“With Catherine,” he admitted.



By Barbara Gipson



## **Chapter 8**

*by cb mcwhorter*

Diana stared at her husband with considerable confusion. “Babe?” she asked calmly. He still could not meet her eyes, so she sank down to sit cross-legged by the pool. “You might want to clarify that.”

He sat next to her and sighed. But he still couldn’t speak.



“Tell me,” she said gently.

He rolled his healing shoulder. “After I was shot, I think I was going into shock. I know I lost consciousness for a while. And... and suddenly, I was with Catherine at her third Winterfest, standing by the dance floor.”

Unaware of his wife’s raised eyebrows, he told her of his conversation with Catherine, and of kissing her. And he stuttered to a stop, waiting for her anger. She said nothing.

He dared to meet her gaze and found, not a hurting lover, but Dr. Bennett, the Forensic Psychologist and founder of the Tunnel community’s treatment program for PTSD. The program that Father scoffed at until a dozen community members started working with her within the first month. Now, an evaluation with her was required for nearly every new resident. Apparently, this vision wasn’t to do with infidelity, then. It was probably something embarrassing. So, he thought about it.

“It was a dream,” he mumbled. “Of course, it never happened.” He shifted to dangle his feet over the water. “I could have thought of anything, Diana. Jacob – any memory of him. The first time you and I kissed. Our wedding day. But I did that.” He shook his head in shame.

“Shoulda, coulda, woulda,” she said softly.

He frowned at her.

Dr. Bennett went on: “A study of hospice patients reviewed their thoughts about their lives. Of course, no one can take a poll of the dying thoughts of people who have already expired, so this was the closest approximation available.

“As it turns out, terminal patients’ thoughts fell into those three categories. Guilt over things they *should* have done, far more than over things they shouldn’t have. Mourning over things they *could* have done, given the chance. And chagrin over things they *would* have done, if they’d just known...” She made a gesture that conveyed “fill in the blank”.

He thought that over. “So, this was a ‘shoulda’?” He cast her a sardonic glance.

“Or a ‘woulda’. It really isn’t a surprise, is it?” she asked.

“No. I’ve always felt guilty about denying her that intimacy, you know that. About believing...”

“Father’s propaganda?” she asked, not hiding her sarcasm. She scooted over to dangle her feet over the water next to him, resting her head on his shoulder. She smiled as she felt his whole body relax. “I can only hope he won’t mind that I tell you that he regrets that mistake a lot. It was a confidential conversation. He hasn’t summoned the courage to apologize to you for that yet, has he?”

Vincent scoffed.

“I predict another confidential conversation, then,” she said crossly.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said.

She looked up at him in surprise. “Seriously?”

“Not so much.”

They watched the water ripple. He put his arm around her and pulled her closer. “I apologize for brooding,” he said.

She kissed his cheek. “I apologize for letting it go on so long.”

He chuckled. They enjoyed their closeness for several minutes until she said, “You know, I think Catherine was wrong.”

”She was?”

“About no one looking twice.”

“How so?”

“What happens when we kiss at Winterfest?”

He laughed, not without some embarrassment. “Everyone cheers.”

“Yeah, I wonder when they’re gonna stop that.”

“I think that came from a dream Catherine herself had. She dreamed we walked together down 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. No one looked twice.”

“This is New York. It’s entirely possible.”

He kissed the top of her head and said, “How was your meeting?”

She groaned. “Long. But informative. The FBI came in, which meant there had to be the proper thirty minutes of territorial posturing to start out. But we did figure out who our mystery man was and were able to cobble together data from multiple files.”

“Why were the FBI involved?”

“Correlation of fingerprint files linked him to a defunct gun-running operation more than 20 years ago. No real indication of how he was involved. Basically, the enterprise failed.”

“You can fail at gun running?”

“Happens more often than you think.”

“So, who was he?”

“Augustus Meriweather Abbot.”

They shared an amused look. “We can’t tell Jacob,” he said.

“No?”

“He’ll say the man went insane because of that name.”

She laughed. “I know! Can you imagine trying to get through school with that name? Except a guy like him wouldn’t have gone to any ordinary public school, anyway.”

“How did you meet him?”

“So to speak?” she smirked.

He smirked back. “So to speak.”

“Back when I was a homicide detective. I’d just finished up my Master’s and was about to take a leave of absence for the PhD. He was a serial rapist, or, um, sexual assaulter who had graduated to serial rape and murder. He flew under the radar by concentrating on prostitutes and homeless girls. And boys. The weird thing was, we never found semen at the scene. His victims were beaten, burned, electrocuted, and violated with objects, but not with, well... This isn’t the nicest story.”

“I didn’t expect it to be. What is a ‘sexual assaulter’ as opposed to a ‘rapist’?”

“Turns out he’d had measles as a teenager, and it targeted his brain. He was never the same after that. Started torturing animals and even castrated himself.”

Vincent winced, either for the animals or the other thing.

“His family tried multiple Psychiatrists and Psychiatric centers to help, but apparently, his aberrancy didn’t fall into any category and didn’t respond predictably to any medication or therapy approach. He felt their efforts to

protect him were oppressive and ran away to New York. And he graduated from animals to humans.

“He finally made a mistake. On impulse, he targeted a family that owned a small grocery in Washington Heights. Locked them into the back room, tied them up, and probably starting with the young daughters, turned the place into an abattoir. It was bad, even for me.

“But, he failed to notice a video camera. They were rare, then. And he left fingerprints. Now that we had a photo, we were able to confirm his presence at other crime scenes. And the fingerprints matched a gun permit. It was easy after that. Handsome young man. Arrogant as hell. Rich kid from California, and his family moved heaven and earth to protect him.

“They hired a very good lawyer, who tried to get him sentenced to psychiatric care, but that failed. No surprise, considering the awful things he’d done.”

“Isn’t there a vaccine for measles?” Vincent asked.

“Sure, there is. But there are some people who don’t ‘believe’ in them, and he was not vaccinated.”

“Believe?” he said. “Like it’s Santa Claus?”

“Don’t get me started. There are more than two dozen victims who would have loved him to be vaccinated. As well as the NYPD and the FBI.

“Anyway, he didn’t do well in prison. Someone finally got sick of him and soaked him with something flammable and burned him. That’s why his face was such a mess. Once he got out of the burn unit, his family was able to appeal his sentence, and he was sent to a psychiatric center for the criminally insane and other hopeless cases. He got out, somehow. And somehow, the whole thing was my fault, according to him.”

He hugged her tight. “I’m sorry.”

“Family wants his remains. But, the bomb was centered in that suspended room, and there was nothing recognizable for 20 feet each way.”

Vincent shuddered.

“I shouldn’t have told you that. I apologize.”

“We are all at home and safe. That’s all that matters. And it’s time for dinner.”

“I’m actually hungry again,” she said. “Took a while.”

“You’ve been through so much. No wonder you weren’t hungry.”

“And nauseated. The other thing I did was go to see a doctor about all that this afternoon.”

“You did? Don’t tell Father,” he teased.

“Eventually, we’ll have to.”

“Are you well?”

“Pretty much. My age works against me, but we’ll see.”

“Diana. You’re worrying me.”

She reached up to caress his cheek, her face glowing with love. “I’m pregnant.”



## **Chapter 9**

*by Janet Rivenbark*

Vincent just stared for a moment.

“But how?” he began, then hesitated.

“In the usual way, I would suspect,” she said with a surprising girlish giggle.

“No, I mean, I thought you were doing something to prevent pregnancy.”

“I was, but it seems that birth control isn’t 100% effective... then I got a lecture from the OB about taking birth control at my *advanced age*.”

“But you’re only 45; that’s not old,” Vincent argued.

“But as far as the doctor is concerned, being 45 and pregnant for the first time is not a good thing. There are all kinds of chances of a myriad of things going wrong. There is a higher risk of gestational diabetes, preeclampsia, placenta previa, and all kinds of chromosomal abnormalities.”

“But you are in good health and good physical condition, and there is probably just as good a chance of none of nothing going wrong,” he quickly pointed out.

“So, this is all right?” she asked. “We will go through with it?”

“Of course we are,” he said, pulling her into a hug. “I was remiss in not making that clear right from the beginning.

This time when he looked down at her he was smiling, but then his expression changed.

“But of course, it’s all up to you. You will be the one taking all the risks.”

Diana took a deep breath and looked relieved.

“I want to have your baby!” She declared. “But I was always way too immersed in my career to want to take the time. Now it looks like my hand has been forced, and I think it’s time I thought about a career change. I got my master’s at Columbia, and they have asked me to teach a few times. They seem to think that my experience will be beneficial. I’ll check into that.”

Vincent hugged her again before asking, “How far along are you?”

“Not very far. Almost three months. The doctor said that these first two or three months are crucial in a *geriatric pregnancy*.”

“GERIATRIC? Good God, you’re only 45.”

Diana had to laugh at his reaction. “But that is what they call it when a 45-year-old woman gets pregnant, especially for the first time.”

“And you took a huge risk,” he pointed out.

“For Jake. He’s my son, too. Catherine gave him to you, and you trusted me. I love him and I couldn’t do it any differently. Besides, I made it through the assault. I have a feeling this is going to be one tough kid.”

Vincent pulled her into his arms and kissed her soundly.

“Like her mother,” he whispered.

“And Jake will be there to take all the baby pictures,” Diana said.

Vincent agreed with a smile.





# Beauty and the Beast Plot Bunnies Story Garden



By Judith Nolan





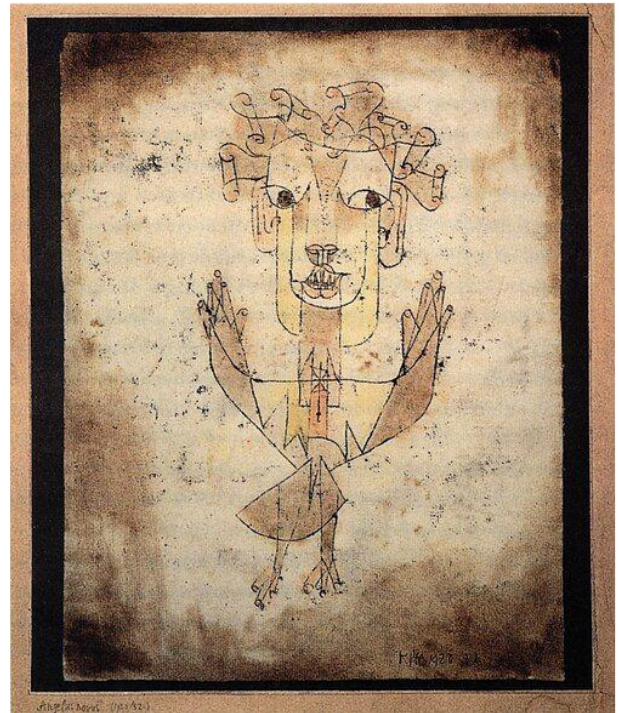
## Plot Bunny #1: Angels

*Submitted by Angie*

Angelus Novus - by Paul Klee,  
1920,monoprint

21.8 cm × 24.2 cm (12.5 in × 9.5 in)

*(yes, this is supposed to represent an angel, or so it is surmised. To me, this image looks like Vincent - note the split lip and feline nose, V-brow, not to mention the hair. The arms could be part of an artistic rendition of a cloak with the bottom triangle. The feet could just be large sewn boots of the type Vincent wore.)*



*Further to this thought, is the poetry of Wallace Stevens, such as:*

*“I am the angel of reality,  
seen for a moment standing in the door.  
I am the necessary angel of earth,  
Since, in my sight, you see the earth again,  
Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set,  
And, in my hearing, you hear its tragic drone  
Rise liquidly in liquid lingerings,  
Like watery words awash;*



## Plot Bunny #2:



*"Many people will walk in and out of your life, but  
only true friends will leave footprints in your heart..."*

***Eleanor Roosevelt***

"What do you have, Manning?" Elliot threw down his pen, rising behind his desk. "I pay for results."

"She's careful, Mr. Burch. I'll give her that." Cleon Manning scratched his chin. "Never uses the same route through the park twice. Looks behind more than she looks where she's going most of the time. Almost like she's expecting to be followed."

Cleon shrugged. "I've have seen her vanish through a solid brick wall. We got close, and she was there one minute and gone the next. Some secret door, or something. Never found out how she did it, and she never went that way again. You sure you're not ghost-hunting just for kicks?"

Elliot blew a discontented breath. "Get to the point, if there is one. I only want the facts. I don't have time to waste on fairy stories!"

"I guess not." Manning frowned at him. "I don't get it, boss. Why are you so interested in the comings and goings of this woman?" He spread his hands. "She's no threat to you and she's so far down the food chain, I doubt she even registers on anyone's radar."

## Beauty and the Beast Plot Bunnies Story Garden

“Just a favour... for someone I owe.” Elliot scowled, keeping his tone neutral.

He thought of the note the musician down on the corner had pushed into his hand over a month ago. The extent of the old man’s invisible network never ceased to amaze him. “Someone asked me to look into her. Find out where she goes; who she knows. Friends, family, you know, all the relevant details. Routine stuff.”

“Friends, I doubt she has a single one.” Manning shrugged. “Family she does not have anyone that we could find. As for where she goes, it’s a track from that old, abandoned building you’ve earmarked for demolition next month, to Central Park and back again. Every night, regular as clockwork and she never misses, rain or snow. She’s been doing this for the last five months. It’s like she’s looking for something... or someone. But she’s getting more desperate, as if she’s running out of time. In the last couple of weeks, she’s started coming out earlier and earlier, before it’s fully dark and staying until after dawn. But she looks really scared, as if she doesn’t want to be seen, but can’t avoid it. She’s got me really baffled. What do you want to do now, boss? I mean, there’s very little meat in this case and while I’m happy to take your money...”

“I guess I’ll have to take it from here.” Elliot compressed his lips, pushing down the sleeves of his shirt and buttoning the cuffs. He turned to snatch his suit jacket from the back of his chair. “Leave the file with me and get back onto to the details of the Martin case. The old man knows more than he’s telling. Go and shake his tree some more and see what you can get out of him. I want results, Cleon.”

“Thanks, boss.” Cleon held out the file. “But maybe you’ll tell me about this one when you’re done with it. Why you’re so interested in a homeless woman. You know how I hate loose ends...”

“No more than me, no more than me. Like I have time for this...” Elliot threw the file into his briefcase.

He frowned at his chief investigator, quickly deciding that creating a little blind alley wouldn’t hurt. Manning saw and thought too much. He went for the easiest option to distract him from the scent. “You know, sometimes I think I’m working for the city. Maybe I should get a job as an investigator for the D.A.’s office.”

## Beauty and the Beast Plot Bunnies Story Garden

“I’d pay good money to see you working for old man Moreno!” Cleon laughed as he followed Elliot from the office, waiting as he spoke to his secretary before they headed towards the bank of elevators. “I doubt they could afford your fees!”

“Mandy...” Catherine edged deeper into the abandoned building. “My name is Catherine Chandler... I’m with the District Attorney’s office. I just want to talk to you.”

Silence... except the huge, echoing storeroom she was standing in was creaking and groaning around her in the wind, as if the old building was about to collapse at any moment. “Please, Mandy. I just need a few moments of your time. If you’re hungry, maybe we could go and get something to eat...”

The silence lengthened painfully. She had almost given up when soft footfalls sounded from somewhere behind her. She turned swiftly. Isaac’s rigorous training had automatically kicked in. She assumed a defensive stance, scanning the clustering shadows closely. The weight of her hand gun in her handbag was a welcome reassurance, even if she had yet to use it.

A woman’s disembodied voice spoke from the shadows. “You can’t help me. No one can help me... no one except —” she stopped speaking abruptly, then said, “Go *away!*”

“Look, I know you’re in serious trouble.” Catherine held her hands before her, palms uppermost. “But I’m not here to harm you. I can help you, if you will allow me.”

“Please, go away...” The voice and the footsteps retreated. “If he finds me, he’ll kill me. And you wouldn’t be able to do anything about that. I don’t go anywhere in daylight. It’s not safe out there.”

“But you can’t stay here, Mandy.” Catherine advanced a few steps. “It’s not safe in here either. The whole place is due to be demolished in a couple of weeks and it looks like it will collapse at any moment. Where will you go then?”

The footsteps stopped. There was the sound of a harshly indrawn breath as if the speaker had just received a terrible shock. “I... When? When is it being pulled down?”

“Two weeks from Saturday...” Catherine advanced a few more careful steps. “They’re going to erect an office building on this site. Surely you knew that?”

“So... I have two more weeks...” the unseen owner of the voice mused. “Not much time left then.”

“You’re not alone.” Catherine moved slowly closer. “I am here to help. You can trust me...”

“There’s only one person I trust, and he —” Again the voice stilled. “I have no one.”

---

### Plot Bunny #3: Pincushions

*Submitted by Barbara Anderson*

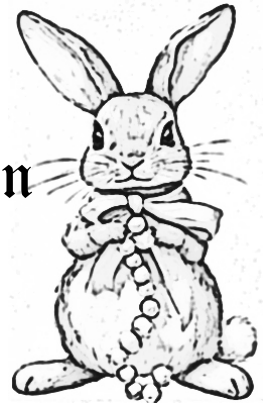


-A pincushion is a utilitarian, seemingly unimportant little thing... But is it, *really*? Can you imagine how important a pincushion and a jar of old buttons might be to those who live Below?

## Plot Bunny #4

### Catherine's Glass Egg Collection

*Submitted by Barbara Anderson*



Although eggs are widely thought to be fragile, one interesting aspect to eggs is that they are deceptively strong. Unlike most foods that become softer when they are boiled... eggs become harder.

In the Passover Seder this is compared to the fact that the Hebrew Nation was made strong in adversity when they were slaves in Egypt. The harder their taskmaster's made their lives, the stronger they became. A boiled egg eventually became a symbolic and integral part of the Passover tradition for that reason.

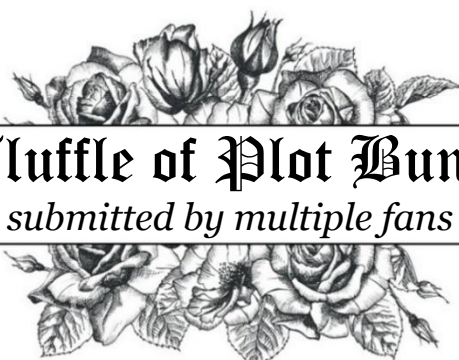
Eggs are also widely thought of as a symbol of hope and a renewal of life.

So, there could be several comparisons made to the symbolism of the eggs in Catherine's collection.

Why did she collect them?

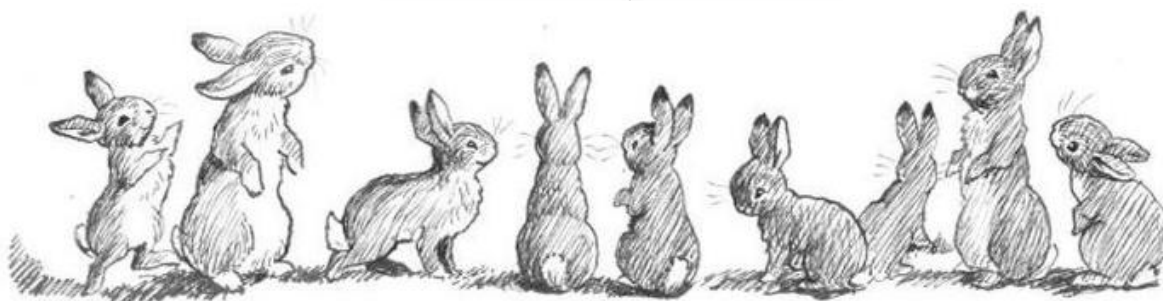
Some possible parallels in the show could be that....

- Catherine began a new life when she was saved by Vincent, as did Vincent.
- Catherine discovered through her adversity that she was stronger than she ever imagined.
- Catherine was able to break through Vincent's hard outer shell to find that he had a heart of gold.
- Even the act of Vincent breaking the eggs can be seen as a symbol of the end or breaking of the fragile dream he shared with Catherine.



## A Fluffle of Plot Bunnies

*submitted by multiple fans*



**What ever happened to Mitch Denton after ‘The Beast Within?’  
Did he come back and try to blackmail Vincent and Catherine?**

\*\*\*\*\*

**Where do the Tunnel people get all of the wax they need for the  
many candles they must burn, and have on hand?**

\*\*\*\*\*

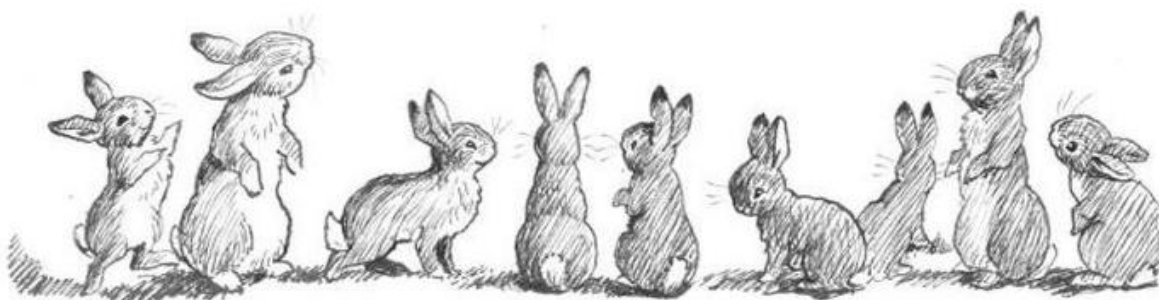
**What are the origins of Catherine’s rosebush?**

\*\*\*\*\*

**S3 What ever happened to the Black Book that Joe gave to  
Catherine after he was nearly blown to smithereens? Where did  
it end up?**

\*\*\*\*\*

**S3 How did Diana learn sign language?**





# *I Had Thee As A Dream – Farewell!*

*by Anon E. Mouse*



*I had thee as a dream - Farewell!  
For dreaming-time must surely end.  
We threw coins in a wishing well  
And carelessly played “Let’s pretend.”*

*But sure as childhood passes by  
And fantasy is trumped by fact,  
We all must stop our dreaming now,  
For everything we had... or lacked.*

*I had thee as a dream – Farewell!  
It’s time for Mouse to stow his tools.  
And bid you this soft, sad good-bye,  
You kind, romantic fools.*

*For every dream’s a borrowed dream.  
You had one. So did I.  
And every wish on every star  
Is just a borrowed dream gone by.*

*We sampled “this.” We took from “that.”  
We held True Love as sweet and yearning.  
Yet, “real life” raps upon our doors  
And bids us our returning.*

*But... on the off chance this won’t do,  
And you liked those dreams we’ve held in store,  
Just turn back to the cover, friend,  
And dream those borrowed dreams once more*

# *The End*

by Barbara Anderson



*Alas... we now have reached the end.  
The candles have burned low.  
And though we'd love to linger here,  
The time has come to go.*

*We thank you all for dropping by  
to read a tale or two,  
and hope that ere much time has passed,  
again we'll welcome you.*

*May health and wellness follow you.  
May sunshine fill your days.  
And if the clouds should ever form,  
to our Tunnels make your way.*

*We'll share our stories once again,  
and have a cup of tea.  
For you are always welcome here,  
Wherever you may be.*

