

Shades of William

By Cindy Rae



Chapter One

Phobic

"Jacob, you know I wouldn't ask if it wasn't vital," Peter Alcott looked pleadingly at his old friend, across the battered council table.

Vincent stood silently by. The three of them had been discussing the admission of a young woman for over an hour.

"Peter, it isn't her need that I question. It's her disability," Jacob argued. "You know how close we live down here, sometimes. Haphephobia is not an easily dealt with condition."

"Yes, but it's a phobia, not a communicable disease," Peter countered. "Tessa doesn't like to be touched by other people. That's not contagious. She isn't dangerous, Jacob, just the opposite. She's self-isolating. And the more I thought about it, the more I realized this might be just the place for her. If you think it's hard down here, imagine how difficult it is for her up there."

Vincent's eyes flickered between the two men he both loved and admired. His deep voice rumbled his sympathy. "There are millions of people in the city. Just the thought of walking down the street must terrify her," Vincent observed. Peter simply nodded.

"You say the condition came upon her spontaneously?" Jacob asked.

"Very," Peter replied. "She's been given a leave of absence from her job, but has barely left her apartment. She can't stand to be touched, and doesn't like touching other people. Especially sick or injured ones. That happens with haphephobia, sometimes. Not to mention a host of other symptoms, some of which she has."

"You say she was a nurse?" Jacob asked. An inability to touch the ill or injured would be a crippling thing, in that light. In many ways.

"Not a nurse. An EMT. Emergency Medical technician, and a good one. She was on the job when the building collapsed on Third. She was one of the first responders, helping the injured construction workers out of the rubble. People there say she saved lives."

"Were there fatalities?" Jacob asked.

"No, but some of the injuries were... severe." Peter didn't elaborate.

"And then the nightmares started?"

Peter nodded, again. "It's why she came to me. I've known her since the day I delivered her. Her condition worsened, and then ... this. I think she needs this place, Jacob. And I don't know for how long." Peter was honest about that.

"Perhaps her illness is temporary. And will go the way it came, with time," Vincent looked for a positive to this. It was challenging enough to accept new members on an emergency basis. Ones with special needs required even more accommodations and patience, on the part of the tunnel community.

"Or perhaps it will stay with her the rest of her life. Hopefully lessening, in time," Jacob was the realist of the three of them. Mental issues were notoriously hard to treat.

But Vincent was steady. "She will do us no harm, Father. And we may do her some good," Vincent pressed.

Jacob sighed, and Vincent sensed his nearing capitulation.

Vincent knew that sound. "My presence here is no impediment. We met years ago, though briefly. When we were helping her mother."

"Vincent, it isn't that," Jacob insisted. "Have you ever known someone with this ... ailment? It can be very difficult to treat. It sounds like Tessa needs a

psychiatrist, Peter. Not a different place to live. There are people Below, just as there are people Above. This does not remove her from what she's afraid of."

Peter understood, but he still argued his case. "Yes, but this is a different environment. A more ... peaceful one, shall we say. She hasn't always suffered from this, Jacob. That alone gives me hope. And she's refused a psychiatrist after the initial interview. She can't stand the thought of drugs, and most people with this illness are usually prescribed sedatives, to counteract the anxiety."

"Tessa's father had a history with drugs. That may have something to do with her reluctance," Vincent observed.

"She's a medical professional. She knows that medications are given for the good of the patient," Jacob countered, knowing he was losing this battle.

"She's got her mother's stubbornness," Peter allowed. "Carmen would have wanted us to help her, I think."

Jacob couldn't disagree with that.

"Father," Vincent used his most persuasive tone. "We helped Tessa's family for a while, when her father was ... difficult and her mother was ill. She even slept here, a night or two, though she never lived Below. Surely we can find a place for her. Offer her our help."

"It couldn't hurt, Jacob." Peter was ever logical. "At worst, she deteriorates some more and we check her into a hospital. At best..." Peter left the sentence unfinished, knowing the range on that was broad.

"You really think being here can help her, Peter?" Jacob rose from his chair, as did the good Dr. Alcott.

"I think being Above isn't," Peter conceded.

"I would say it will be a blessing to have another medical professional staying with us. But considering how she feels about touching the patients...." Jacob

trailed the sentence.

Peter shook his head, indicating that the young woman's use as a nurse would be nil. "I would say "doctor" and "nurse" are the two jobs she can't have, right now. Being around ill people brings on her panic attacks. It's part of the illness."

Vincent nodded. "Best to keep her out of the children's ward, then. Someone in there usually keeps a running nose, in springtime. And they may forget about her disability. Run up to her. Try to embrace her."

"Best to keep her out of a lot of places. But you mustn't isolate her," Peter advised. "That's her problem, now. Her almost total self isolation."

Jacob offered his hand to his longtime friend, in a handshake.

"For Carmen's sake, and for Tessa's, we can at least offer to help. We will try our best, Peter," Jacob promised. "We will try our best."

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Tessa Martin had the short, stocky build of a woman who had to do weight training as part of her fitness regimen for her job, and whose ancestors had lived in mountainous regions. Her thighs were powerful, her abdomen flat and well-defined. Her nose was a sharp angle in the middle of an olive complected face. She kept her hair short both out of preference and necessity, not liking to bother with things like braids or pony tails to keep it out of her way. Pretty, flyaway brows framed her dark eyes. And her mouth was almost permanently in a grim line, owing to the pressures of her illness.

The first week did not go well.

She tried being on a team of those who made supply runs when helpers indicated they had items to donate, but she hated going out into the various shops and homes, and detested any time she had to expose herself to the street traffic.

Changing her work assignment so that she could assist Rebecca in candle-making seemed no more ideal. Though the work was more solitary, the workshop Rebecca used was set up more for one person rather than for two. Unable to get used to the narrowness of the room, Tessa complained until she simply refused to walk into Rebecca's work chambers anymore. She wanted to work. She simply didn't know what she could do, given her new-found disability.

She ate at the end of the longest trestle table in the dining room, apart from others. The sensation of people walking behind her as they moved was clearly upsetting to her, and she finally began taking meals in her chambers, a thing none of them wanted for her.

Another meeting was called.

"William always needs help. Perhaps the kitchen?" Vincent suggested. It was a vain hope. Only William seemed to love the constant work that went into keeping them all fed. For many, kitchen duty was viewed as a "least favorite" job, if not a down right punishment.

"She has no problem accepting sentry duty," Jacob observed. "But that is usually done alone, and that does her ailment no good." Vincent nodded.

"She could be on one of the work crews. She's strong enough," Rebecca opined. "She was deadlifting the blocks of wax I use." Everyone in the tunnel community was trying to help their newest member.

Vincent shook his head. "The areas we are excavating right now are narrow. We are shoulder to shoulder, at times. The tunnel walls are narrow, down there."

Rebecca shrugged.

"The kitchen it is, then," Father stated, holding out only so much hope.

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Chapter 2

Kitchen Duty

"William, this is the young woman I told you about. Tessa, this is William. William, Tessa." Jacob nodded as the young woman stood in the doorway, and looked around.

William took in the pixie of a woman, before him. Brunette. Short haircut which was good, if you were going to be working in a kitchen. Angular body. One that looked uncomfortable, right now.

"So I'll ah... leave you two to get acquainted, shall I?" Jacob gave William a meaningful look that said "Just do the best you can," and hobbled off.

Her body was tense, and her brown eyes looked wary. She wasn't a kid. The crow's feet around her eyes put her age at somewhere close to 30. She'd spent a lot of time in the sun.

"They tell you about me?" Tessa asked, taking only one step into the room. It was large. Huge, actually. Like the overhead pipe that ran through its center, to the stone wet sink, against one wall. She took in the tableau, before her.

The walls were lined with shelving and mismatched dishes of every size and color were cleanly stacked on an enormous gantry style set of shelves. The room seemed covered with tabletops set together to make counter space. A huge ice chest set to one side acting as a freezer, and an antique ice box was doing duty as just that, a drip pan catching the water from the melt. Two Franklin stoves dominated one wall, and metal pots and pans hung from a suspended pot rack that had been bolted into the stone ceiling and lowered on a heavy chain.

Food of all kinds covered the shelves. Baskets and canisters sat in various stages of "empty" or "full." A large bin of potatoes was overflowing, half covered by a

burlap sack. A bushel basket of onions, conversely, was nearly empty.

Still, with all that, it was still a big room. Like it's occupant.

As she took the measure of the room, William took hers. His canny eyes took her in, not unkindly.

"They told me you don't like to be touched, if that's what you mean, yes." William said.

"Haphephobia. I tried working with Rebecca, but I was no good at it."

William nodded at her. "Making candles ain't for everybody."

"The space was too cramped. I don't like 'cramped.'"

He pushed a basket of carrots her way.

"We're having stew for dinner. You feel like chopping something?"

She eyed the carrots.

"I used to be an EMT."

"Is that a 'yes,' or a 'no?'" he asked, drawing a sharp knife through several stalks of celery. He returned his eyes to the task before him. Fastest way to get cut was to look someplace else, when you were wielding a sharp knife.

"I'll earn my keep. I just don't like to be touched." She was thorny, and now had a couple of failures to add to her attempt to be down here. William tried to keep that in mind as he chopped.

He didn't look up. He simply kept working. "I won't touch you, then," he said, dropping the pile of celery into the pot. The largest stock pot Tessa had ever seen was sitting on a Franklin stove, and the water inside it was starting to steam.

"I wasn't raped, or anything. It's not because of that." Tessa felt the need to clarify. It was one of the first things the city shrink had asked her.

The hazel eyes that belonged to the chief cook of the world Below flickered her way, and held.

"Good to know." It wasn't said unsympathetically. "Wash your hands before you touch anything in here. That's a rule. There's a clean knife in the butcher's block. Don't put it back in without cleaning it and wiping it dry. Anything else you want me to know?" he asked.

She came around the table, slowly. Plucked a knife out of the block.

"This was the kind of job I was trying to avoid, by getting trained," she said wryly.

He shrugged his heavy shoulders. "You can still avoid it. Most do. Doorway back out is the same one you came in." He pulled a bowl of washed potatoes over and went to work on them.

She snorted a little. "You're not going to give me the sympathy treatment, huh?"

William made a mental calculation. Considering she'd been down here a week and sympathy hadn't helped her, he tried a different tack. "We got Mary for that. You want sympathy, go to her."

She took that in.

"So you're the tough guy," she said.

He didn't rise to her bait. "Nah. I'm the guy with the tough job. I got more than 50 people to feed breakfast lunch and dinner to, and I ain't got time for yammering. And right now, the only thing in that pot is celery." His huge hand held the sharp knife and pulled it through the potatoes, almost effortlessly. There was strength, then, to go with his girth. "Now, there's been times so lean when that was exactly all we had for dinner. Celery soup. But since present times is a bit more prosperous, and on the off-chance the folks expect a little beef in their beef stew, I got stuff to do." He continued with his chore, all but ignoring her. But he noticed she didn't move toward the door.

He kept working. After a minute, she spoke "How many carrots?" she asked.

He knew better than to smile. "The whole basket. Slice 'em on the diagonal. It looks nicer."

She eyed the knife she'd gotten out of the block. It looked beyond old. And very sharp.

"You know how to use one of those?" he asked.

"I've cut the cord on four kids, done three tracheotomies on trauma victims and had to assist in an emergency appendectomy, so yeah. I kind of got this," Tessa said, again keeping her expression guarded.

She's full of fight but doesn't know who to swing at, William realized, giving her plenty of room.

"You'll ask to leave in a couple of days," he stated, fishing the rest of the onions out of the bushel basket and setting them to one side.

She said nothing to that, at first. Nothing at all. Then, ten carrots in, she did.

"Why?" she asked.

He let the onions soak, then continued cutting potatoes into bite-sized pieces.

"My sterling personality. Plus this ain't the easy work. It starts early and runs late, and there's always cleaning to do, at least some of which gets done as a punishment, if one of the kids is acting up. Vincent and his brother Devin used to live in here, some weeks." He dropped the diced potatoes into the pot. "Sentry duty is easier. Scavenging is easier. Kitchen's like the military. KP duty." He wiped down the counter he'd been using with a cloth.

She took in his description, but continued with her chore. "Scavenging is done Above. No thanks. And I've already pulled sentry duty."

But they didn't want to stick her with that, permanently. Father said it was important she be around at least some people.

"You ever cook, before?" he asked, moderating his tone. It wouldn't do to snap at her. She was here for help, not for breaking one of Winslow's tools.

"I lived by myself," she answered, throwing the ends of the carrots into the garbage pail. The answer didn't tell him whether she did or she didn't. *Oh, well.*

"Do you know how to bake bread?"

"No." Well, that was honest, at least.

"Take that copper scoop down off the peg and get some flour out of that big canister. Fresh bread will go good with the soup, and the oven's just right for it," he said, wiping sweat from his brow. Even in the cool tunnels, the kitchen was warm. Both stoves were in use.

Tessa did as she bid him, but still kept her distance. When he showed her how to punch down the dough and let it rest, she was attentive, but well back from him. Taking down another bowl, she imitated his movements, and instructions.

"Punch it harder. Pretend it's somebody you don't like."

She shot him a look.

"Hi William! Vincent said to bring you these canned goods. Lin's grandfather says... Oh. Hello, Tessa." Jamie rumbled into the room, dragging a small wagon behind her.

She froze. Tessa did. Jamie didn't notice, as she busily carted in a case of condensed milk and a few other assorted canned items into the space. But William did. Tessa froze where she was, her hands stuck inside the bowl, her brown eyes watching Jamie.

"Jamie," Tessa answered briefly.

"I didn't know you pulled kitchen duty," Jamie sounded sympathetic.

Tessa said nothing by way of explanation. William watched her, carefully. Her

face was going pale and her eyes were just a little too large, right now. The introduction of another person, often a rambunctious one into the space had made his new helper very nervous.

"Tessa's learning how to bake bread, helping me out. Just set the case down by the pantry shelves. I'll put it away, later."

"You sure? I can carry it back."

She could. But to do that, she'd have to walk right by them, between the large butcher block table William used for mixing dough and the stove.

"Just set it down, I said." He said it more sharply than he intended. Though she'd spoken, Tessa literally hadn't moved. Her hands were still full of dough. Jamie looked up at his sharp tone, did as he bid her, then shrugged, leaving the way she came.

Tessa let go of a breath she hadn't been aware she'd been holding, but William had. He stepped away from her, well away, pretending to check on the soup. He watched the curveless lines of her body relax, after a couple of minutes.

"She made you nervous." He said it softly, putting the first loaf into a battered baking pan.

"She bumps into stuff. Moves around quick. Teenagers crash into things a lot. Gangly."

William nodded. "Yeah, most do," he simply agreed, letting her finish what she was doing to the dough. The bread would be a little tough, since she'd stopped kneading it. But it would be all right.

"How many more of these do we have to make?" Tessa asked him, though she sounded more like she was curious than complaining.

"Ten." The answer clearly surprised her. "What doesn't get eaten at dinner becomes toast, in the morning. French toast, if there are enough eggs. Which

there might be."

"How do you keep things cold?" she asked. The tiny ice box looked too small for the numbers it would have to provide for.

"Mostly I don't need to. It's cool near the wall, and we eat whatever comes in fresh, first. The day's meat stays in the ice chest. Ice gets brought down every morning. It's one of the jobs that gets assigned. That, and running around all over the place for groceries." He opened the ice box. It really was an antique. He fetched out a crock of butter.

"Eggs, butter, and fresh milk stay in the ice box. When we get them. We get by."

"And when we don't get them?"

"We use what we have. We get by."

They'd both said "we." And he noticed that she'd begun asking questions about how the place worked. Good.

A huge pipe bolted to the wall gave out a staccato tap. Tessa looked up at it. "That was a message for you?" she asked.

"From Pascal. One of the work crews will be late coming back in. I'll need to hold enough dinner back to feed about ten men. Best get busy," he said, rumbling across the wide space with his big frame. He flipped open the huge lid of an industrial sized ice chest, and produced a large slab of beef.

We aren't busy, now? Tessa thought.

"It looks like a mountain of work." Tessa said, though she was chopping onions. Quickly. William nodded his approval at her effort.

"It is that," William nodded. "But it does something everybody needs. Everything that gets done in this room gets done one step at a time. The easiest way to get done is to get started."

She worked with him in near silence, the rest of the day.

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Bread of all kinds seemed to go in and out of the ovens, constantly. Bread, biscuits, dinner rolls, Irish soda bread, baguettes, sandwich rolls, and so forth. The smell was wonderful, and something about it soothed a place inside of Tessa she wasn't aware felt raw.

The big man she shared the kitchen space with wielded a knife quickly, yet moved slowly, she noticed, owing either to his size or his desire to not startle her. She didn't know which one was more true.

Other people came into the space, mostly because they'd pulled dishwashing duty. When that happened, they stayed to one side, near the sink. William barked orders and gave directions. They ate at one of the tables, usually, William not wanting to shut down the kitchen so he could take a meal.

He chatted with her, sometimes, but seemed just as content to say nothing, for long periods. She liked that. It placed no demands upon her.

As soon as one meal was over, preparations for the next one seemed to begin. He fed more than 50 people, daily, including meals that had to be sent above in baskets, to help the ill or the struggling.

Yet, William seemed tireless, through all of it. He seemed to demand nothing of her other than she do her job, and never asked her about her condition, how she felt, or if she was getting better. It was a relief, considering almost everyone else seemed to do that.

"So. Tessa. That short for something?" he asked her one day as they assembled seven huge pans of casseroles.

"Theresa. Not that it's really your business." Ah. New York thorniness. Not that she needed an excuse.

"I take it you don't like being called "Terry."

"I take it you don't like being called "Billy," she lobbed back at him, cutting broccoli into small pieces.

"Theresa Isabella Martinez," she said, complete with Spanish accent. "But if you put that on a job app, they think you're applying for the custodian job. So. Tessa Martin."

William was well aware of the prejudices that dogged many people.

He chuckled a little at her spunk. "I never was a Billy," William answered, taking handfuls of cheese out of a bowl. "Even as a kid. 'Billy the Kid' wouldn't have fit me." He wiped his hands on a dish towel.

"Why not?" she asked, curious. "Don't all boys love to play cowboys and Indians?"

He tucked the towel into the waistband of his apron, which was spotted with flour. "Most do. It wasn't my thing."

"You a pacifist or something?" Tessa jibed.

"Not even a year in 'Nam could do that," he said conversationally. "No. Cowboys ran around a lot. I didn't have the wind for it."

He pulled a huge pot of noodles off the stove, and took them over to drain. He never stopped moving, she realized. And he was rarely off his feet.

"Were you asthmatic, or something?" Tessa asked, curious.

"Or something. I was a hundred pounds overweight. When I was 12 years old, I think I was as broad as I was tall. You might have noticed that's only changed so much."

Of course she'd noticed his girth. He was the picture of a happy cook. But she also noticed that he actually ate only average amounts, and that he worked all day long, literally from before breakfast until just after dinner was served.

Dinner dishes were done by whatever group pulled that as a duty. But he'd

inspect the kitchen before he went to bed, to make sure everything was in order. Then he'd turn in, early, himself. It was a routine she was starting to share with him, as his "kitchen helper."

"I take it you've always been big," she observed, using the polite word most people preferred to being called "fat." William chuckled at the euphemism.

"That I was. Slow thyroid and a deep love for my mother's lasagna. I shot up in puberty, but yeah. I been 'big' every day of my life."

"My dad was a big man. But he was a drunk. And a user. It's why I won't take the pills." A shadow crossed her brown eyes.

William took her in. He had a very measuring gaze, she noticed. *Must be an occupational hazard, from having to measure everything else all day*, she reasoned.

"You afraid you'll lose control?" he asked. She nodded, then seemed to consider. "I'm afraid they'll change me. He was different. Stoned to sober. He was different."

"Different good or different bad?" William asked.

She shrugged. "Just different. Sloppy. Staggering. Short-tempered either way. If you're not drunk you're hung over." William nodded at that, understanding.

"Well, sloppy's the last thing we are in here," he said, setting pans of casserole in to bake. He closed the oven door with a satisfied thump. "It might look like chaos. But it's controlled chaos."

She looked around the room, then back at the man who managed it all. She realized he was right.

Chapter 3

Controlled Chaos

He was right about other things as well. The work, for instance, was endless.

Tessa discovered that he had something of a "system" in place, and that the system was built around the notion of 'waste not, want not.' All fresh food donations were consumed first, and leftovers were recycled into other meals. Sunday's roast beef dinner with potatoes and carrots became Monday's beef stew, with added vegetables and fresh rolls. William made his own bread, butter, and preserves, from whatever fruit got donated. Nothing was allowed to rot or spoil. Bruised apples were turned into applesauce or cider. Brown bananas into banana bread. Something simmered on the stove, always, and there often wasn't a 'menu' to follow, so much as there was a standing plan: Whatever got donated got used. Canned goods and bags of rice were put by for lean weeks when very little came down.

Many of the canned goods that found their way down came from stores which had to observe things like expiration dates. He was always baking, boiling, sautéing or canning something. Waste not, want not.

He began the day a couple hours before she did, needing little help with breakfast, which could be anything from a vat of oatmeal to chipped beef spread across toast, to cinnamon rolls, if he had the makings for those. He never moved quickly, unless he was cutting things up, rapid fire, and never suffered fools gladly. The kitchen was his domain.

And he hummed. Sometimes.

At first Tessa thought the sound would annoy her, but she found as she went on, that it was a soft, pleasant sound that accompanied the rattling of the pots and pans. As "William's assistant chef" she was largely responsible for doing the same things he did. Chopping, slicing, mincing, dicing, frying... but he was the baker. He admitted it was his first love. Not that he'd ever had a second one,

she supposed.

The morning Arthur wandered in, they were both surprised. Tessa a little more than William, and William a little more vocally than Tessa.

"We had an agreement, you rodent." William raised an annoyed eyebrow as Arthur filched a leftover bit of pound cake off a plate.

"I send Mouse leavings, for you. You stay out of my kitchen." He scooped up the happy bandit from the counter, and banged on the overhead pipe with the back of a ladle.

"No. It means 'no.' You get me?"

"We used to see raccoons back at the apartment. Near the dumpsters, mostly," Tessa said.

"Yeah. Well, this one's got a sweet tooth. And an urge to make trouble. He's half why I tell the kids they can't take cookies out of the dining room. He can smell a cherry cobbler from the other side of the hub, can't you, varmint?" he said, nevertheless letting Arthur enjoy his prize.

Mouse came racing in, thanks to the summons.

"Arthur! You got out of your cage!" Mouse declared, running into the room. Tessa instinctively moved back, clearing a path between Mouse and his pet.

"Or never got put in it. We've talked about this, Mouse. You know the rules," William chided the young boy as he handed the raccoon over.

"Mouse knows. It's Arthur who doesn't like rules. Hi, Tessa. Arthur doesn't like little cage. Building a bigger one."

"Fine. Just keep him out of my kitchen," William scolded. "Folks won't eat what he walks through," the big man declared. Arthur finished off his treat, and looked longingly at the leftover piece on Tessa's plate. She handed it over, carefully, and the raccoon took it. She scratched his head before she stepped

away. He was clearly an indulged pet.

And William didn't miss that she'd stepped close to Mouse in order to scratch his pet between the ears. *Maybe she's getting better*, William thought.

"Arthur doesn't want to walk through food. Wants to eat it," Mouse said, watching his pet down another mouthful of cake. Tessa smiled at the sight of him, though she still stepped back a bit. *Rome wasn't built in a day*, William thought.

"Grab a couple of marshmallows out of the jar to keep him occupied. And keep him out of my kitchen!" William barked, as Mouse tucked the wayward thief inside his jacket.

"Okay, good. Okay, fine. Arthur gets Mouse in trouble. Likes marshmallows. Bye, Tessa," Mouse said, careful not to brush against her as he did as William bid him.

"Are you better, yet, Tessa?" Mouse asked, clearly watching the distance, between them. Her brown eyes came up to his face, startled.

"Better?"

"Yes. Like to be touched, now. Like Arthur. Mouse didn't like to be touched, either. Vincent had to catch. Gave Mouse food. Gave Mouse marshmallows," the youth confided, looking at one, wistfully.

"I remember that day," William said, trying to deflect Mouse's conversation. "It cost me three apples and a half a bag of marshmallows. And we got you. Still not convinced we made a good deal." He wiped down the counter in front of him. "Take a couple for yourself," William tacked on, to soften the harshness of his earlier words.

He gave the young boy a small smile. Clearly the two of them were used to each other.

And Tessa realized he'd distracted Mouse from his uncomfortable question.

Mouse grabbed a few marshmallows for himself, then left the kitchen chamber, Arthur under his arm.

"He's unusual. I don't think I ever saw him, back when you used to send us a basket," she said, watching the young boy's retreating back.

"He didn't live here, then. Not that far back. Vincent found him."

"And lured him out with food?" Tessa raised an eyebrow at that.

"Couldn't do it with conversation. He didn't talk."

Tessa looked at the now empty doorway.

"For somebody who doesn't talk, he said a mouthful." She set down her own dishcloth on the counter. "I don't think I'm not getting any better, William."

It was the first time she'd mentioned it.

"Not even a little?" he asked, discounting what he'd just seen. If she said she wasn't getting better, well, she should know.

She shrugged. "The nightmares are less. Sometimes. And I think, hey, maybe it's finally starting to pass. Then I'll walk down the hallway to come in here and I'll hear somebody coming the other way. And I try to press myself through the wall, so they don't touch me."

William nodded at her words, deciding not to mention she'd voluntarily stepped near Mouse in order to pet Arthur. If she felt no better, she felt no better.

He set the last loaf of bread in the oven and poured them both a cup of tea from the pot on the back burner of the stove. Settling them both down at the only table Tessa had ever seen him eat at, he gestured for her to take the opposite chair.

"Mouse took a while to come around. Give yourself time, Tessa. It's only been a couple of weeks." She sat down opposite from him, watching as he pulled his cup away from where hers sat, toward himself. He was giving her room,

instinctively. They all did.

"He can't leave this place, can he?" Tessa asked.

William scoffed. "Not without stirring up a bunch of trouble, he can't. And that's a thing he's done more than once."

"No, I mean it. Because of what he is. He can't leave here. Vincent, either." Her dark eyes looked haunted. She was afraid she might have to join their number.

"Vincent goes above more often than Mouse does. More often than practically anybody does, outside Stephen or Kipper, messing around on that damn skateboard of his," William said frankly. "Vincent pushes limits. He wants to go up. So he does." He stirred sugar into his tea.

"What about you? No urge to go back up?"

"None," William said, sipping from the earthenware mug.

"Mind if I ask why?"

He raised an eyebrow, then considered, a moment, before he reached a conclusion.

"I'm a draft dodger."

Her brown eyes were surprised.

"But you said you did a year in Viet Nam."

"That I did. Trouble is, they wanted me to do two." He cradled the cup. He heaved a huge sigh, as he gathered up his past. The past, for William, was clearly a heavy thing. Heavier than he was.

"If you're fat and out of shape and the draft comes, they put you on a diet and send you off," he explained. "My dad was a captain in the army. I think the only time he was proud of me was when they shipped me out. I ended up as an

army cook, once they realized I was useless for much else.”

Tessa watched his eyes follow his memories.

“That where you learned how to do this?” she said, indicating not just using the huge space around them, but organizing it. He nodded.

I just... got tired of cooking for the guys one day, then finding out somebody had died, the next. Food’s supposed to keep you on your feet, keep you going. Found out I didn’t like it when that plan didn’t work out.” He glanced her way, but she stayed still, listening.

“Or they’d come back to the mess tent after a week gone in country with pieces of them missing. Eyes. Fingers. I had a good friend of mine go off on me one day. He was holding his tray and I went to hand him a slice of bread. I didn’t realize he couldn’t take it. He was missing his hand, past the wrist. Was using the stump to balance the tray.”

Her eyes grew huge.

"So what happened?"

"To him, or me?"

"Either one. Both."

"He got out, shipped back to Saigon, then home. I finished up my tour and came back for more training. Reassignment." He looked back at a distant day.

"The day they gave me my orders to go back, I found my way down here. Found Jacob."

"And Vincent?"

"He was just a kid, then, but yeah. Found him, too."

So William, too, knew what it was to work in a dangerous environment. And what it was like to be consigned to this place.

"What about your dad?" Tessa asked.

William shrugged his heavy shoulders. "Knowing him, he referred to me not showing up for duty as the day I died. He passed a few years back."

"No wife? Nobody else to miss you?"

He chuckled at that, "Tessa, what part of a hundred pounds overweight in junior high did you not understand?" he scoffed.

She smiled, but only because he did.

"I hear you," she commiserated. "One of the girls in my gym class used to say they could build a table out of my chest, it was so flat." She shook her head, ruefully. "In a culture that prizes women with big boobs, I've got only so much value."

"Nah, don't you fall for none of that talk. You've got pretty eyes. And a nice smile, when you use it." She smiled at him, now.

"Thank you, William." They were becoming easy with each other. It was clearly a friendship she valued. As did he. "I miss being able to do what I used to."

"Mind telling me what happened?" he asked.

Her dark eyes grew solemn. "I just... couldn't, any more. I don't know why. The last thing I did was answer a call for a job down near the docks. Some building came down, some construction project. Cops there said some guy named Max Avery probably rigged it to go. Something about the protection racket. Something I didn't care about."

She turned the mug of tea around on the table, watching the condensation rings smear.

"There were guys in the rubble. Just my usual thing, you know? Pull 'em clear, bind the worst of the wounds, load 'em into the back of the ambulance. I just..." she shook her head. "I don't know what it was. I finished my shift."

Thought about the guys. All of 'em were young. My age. Younger, some. And that night, I just... had nightmares about 'em. Next morning, it started. I didn't want to be around anybody. Then I didn't want to be touched."

"You're not the first person to have a stress disorder bite you in the ass. Sure you wouldn't do better in a hospital?" he asked.

She shook her head, firmly. "Trying to get rid of me?"

"You're the only assistant cook I've had that's lasted longer than a few days. And the bread's ready," he said, rising from the table. His nose, if not his "internal timer" told him it was. Another minute and the delicate loaves would start to burn.

"And you can stay as long as you want," he tacked on. She could tell he meant it. She didn't have to change, to suit him. Or to remain his friend.

Chapter 4

Setback

--

"My god. What is that amazing smell?" Tessa asked, as she came into the kitchen chamber the next morning.

"Apple Brown Betty. Thought I'd cut up the last of those McIntoshes and put 'em to good use." William approved of her enthusiasm as she reached for her apron. He'd set her up her own hook for it, on the wall.

"I remember that smell! When I was a teenager! Mary came to our apartment with a basket, and you could follow that smell down the hall."

She sniffed appreciatively, placing her nose over the row of pastries.

"This is amazing. I haven't thought about this smell, in years."

"Never knew you were a fan," William chuffed, gently pulling the latest pan out of the oven. The smell of cinnamon, butter and apples combined with the smell of flaky pastry.

"You came in early to make the crust," Tessa realized. Several rows of loaf pans were already cool. The bread would be late, this morning.

"It was either that or throw out the apples. It never rains, but it pours," he said, indicating the barrel full they still had.

"Must be a sale," she observed.

"End of the season. It's a rare month we don't get apples in some form or other. Winterfest is merry because of my hard cider. But we don't usually get this much."

"We could make cobbler. Again." Tessa offered.

Nah. Apple cake is easier, and I can substitute the applesauce for oil, when I bake. Send some muffins down to Narcissa, maybe."

"Narcissa?"

"You don't know her. She lives way down low, far from the rest of us. More of a hermit than you are."

"Does she have Haphephobia, too? Tessa asked.

William shrugged. "She's just her own person, and likes her own company. Been down here longer than probably just about anybody. Maybe even longer than Father. I never asked."

William was scooping up a mound of apple peelings for the trash when the morning changed from 'busy' to 'bloody.'

Tessa heard the footsteps running down the hall. Footsteps that always

preceded one of the kids barreling into the space. Footsteps that meant she, Tessa, was going to reflexively move away from the counter and allow whatever 50 to 70 pound bundle of humanity it was this time to race in, deliver a message or drop off a bag of goods, and be on their way.

He never made it.

A crash and a scream of pain alerted William and froze Tessa. William hurried into the hallway, only to find Stephen laying on his back, clutching his knee.

His broken knee. Very broken.

"AAAAAahhhh!" his scream was long and loud. A bag of tangerines rolled around the young boy's form, and his dark jeans were turning darker. Bone was showing, through the slit of his pants.

"Stephen!" William called, kneeling beside the stricken boy.

"It hurts! It hurts! William!" Stephen called out, tears coming down a face that was far too pale, all of a sudden.

"Tessa! Get help!" William said, taking the dish towel from around his neck and applying pressure to the wound.

"It hurts! I was coming down and the bag broke. I tripped!"

"You were running, and the bag split. I got you. I got you, Stephen." The rag was soaked in no time, and there was no one else in the tunnel at the moment.

The closest pipe was the one in the kitchen. And William knew that Tessa had not gone around him. He and Stephen were effectively blocking the doorway.

He turned around to see where she was, and caught sight of her. Behind him. By a good several feet, but able to see the disaster in the doorway. She was whiter than Stephen was, and that was saying something.

"Hurts! It hurt!" Stephen rocked his young body back and forth, trying to absorb the throbbing pain into his young frame.

William kept his face to her. "He's fractured his leg. We need help, Tessa." William forced his voice to stay calm, for Stephen's sake.

But Tessa couldn't help. She couldn't even move.

"Tessa!" William barked. But it did no good.

William took off his apron, and used it to wrap the severely wounded leg.

"He's bleeding. We need help, Tessa. Bang on the pipes, if you can't bear to get by me."

Tessa tried to move. When he dared to look back he could see in her eyes that she wanted to. But she simply stood in dumb fascination taking in the scene before her.

"So much blood. There's so much blood," she whispered. "You can't control it."

"Damn it, Tessa. I need you! Theresa Martinez! Bang on the pipes! Now!"

William turned back to his young charge. "Easy, Stephen. Easy. I've got you." It was a bipolar conversation, between the two woman at his back and the boy at his feet. He kept trying to appear calm, for Stephen's sake. "Looks like you did a number on your leg. We'll get you to the hospital chamber. Father will..."

He paused, listening. No tapping. She still hadn't moved.

He didn't want to leave the young boy, didn't want to stop holding the cloth over the wound. But he knew if he didn't, help would only come by chance, or not at all. Could be any minute. Could be more than thirty of those. Breakfast was over, and lunch wasn't for a while.

"Damn it." William swore again, "Hold the apron on it, Stephen. I'll call for help." But the boy was scared, and still in the throes of rocking himself back and forth. The break was bad. He'd come down hard, on the stones. And at an angle. Tangerines were scattered around them.

"I... I can't remember tunnel code." She was finding her voice. "I can't

remember how." Tessa's scared voice, finally trying to help, behind him.

"Just grab the big ladle and hit the overhead pipe. SOS. Help will come."

"SOS?" She sounded as shocked as Stephen was going into.

"Three short, three long, three short. Over and over. Pascal will pick it up in the pipe chamber." He was binding the leg tighter. Stephen had also hit his head, and done no small amount of damage to his elbow. The stone floor was becoming blood soaked, and William was past trying to depend on an ill woman for help.

Hesitantly at first, but then stronger, he heard it. The tapping sound of his favorite metal soup ladle, hitting the metal pipe over his head. Thank God. He didn't know how bad Stephen's injuries were, but they clearly weren't minor. SOS. SOS. SOS.

Vincent was the first one there, followed by Kanin and Cullen.

"I need a litter. Bad," William explained unnecessarily. Cullen went into the kitchen and began to bang out the message, while Vincent cradled the boy.

"Stephen? Stephen, look at me. Let me see your eyes."

"It hurts, Vincent. It hurts." He was starting to sweat, and his skin was growing clammy.

"He's going into shock. William, a blanket?" Vincent asked.

William gave over care of Stephen to Vincent, and went back into the kitchen, grabbing the burlap sack that he used to keep the bin of potatoes covered. He handed it to Vincent. It wasn't the cleanest thing in the room. But they needed to keep Stephen warm, and it would do.

"Winslow's bringing the stretcher. Father's headed for the hospital chamber. What happened?" Cullen's question was directed at Tessa, but she couldn't speak, again. She was looking at William's shirtfront, and the towel he'd started

with. Both were red.

"He was bringing me a bag of tangerines when the bag broke. They fell on the floor and took his feet out from under him," William explained. Vincent simply nodded, covering his young charge with the burlap.

The litter was brought.

"Stephen, I am going to lift you. I will try not to hurt your leg. Ready?" Vincent asked. The teenage boy nodded, putting his bloody hands around Vincent's neck. Cullen held the leg while Winslow and Kanin kept hold of the litter.

Stephen screamed in pain when Vincent lifted him, and Tessa's hand covered her mouth. "Nooooo," she moaned.

Within a minute, the four men were moving quickly down the hallway, taking Stephen to the hospital chamber.

When William turned back to the kitchen, it was to see Tessa, vomiting into the sink.

--

"I couldn't help," she said, nine hours later. She was in her chamber, sitting on the edge of the bed, unmoving. Her hands were clasped before her, and her head was bent over them.

"No one expected you to. We understand, Tessa." Vincent's voice was gentle, from her doorway.

"William did. He needed my help. Needed me to help Stephen. It's what I was supposed to do. What anyone would have done, Vincent."

Vincent entered the sparse room. In the month she'd been here, it showed none of her personality. The bed was covered with one of Mary's quilts. Whatever belongings Tessa Martin had brought down with her, they were all stowed in the dresser, wardrobe, and end table drawers. No pictures graced

the dresser top. No trinket boxes or mementos lay scattered on the small writing table that sat to one side. Vincent pulled out the chair.

"Stephen's accident was unfortunate. But he will be fine. There is a cast on his leg, and stitches to close a wound in his elbow."

"He was going into shock. He could have died, without all of you."

"William said you called for help."

"I was frozen and he screamed me into taking a couple of steps. I couldn't even remember tunnel code."

"You are still learning. Tessa, what happened today... it was not your fault. It was an accident. Those happen, down here. Sometimes."

She nodded. "I'm supposed to help when things like that happen. Supposed to ... respond to exactly what happened. Apply pressure to the wound, take vital signs, get the patient ready to transport. Make order out of the chaos. This is what I need to do, what I trained for. And exactly what I..." she looked away. "Can't seem to do anymore."

She rubbed her forehead with the fingers of one hand. It looked like she was fighting a headache.

"God, Vincent, I feel so lost..."

Vincent exhaled, slowly. Her young body was a mass of tension, every line of it saying 'do not touch.' Her pupils were dilated, and she pulled her fingers down to lace over one knee. The same knee that Stephen had broken. Her fingers tightened, in sympathetic pressure. She pulled on the knee. It didn't help.

"Do you remember the day we met, Tessa? You were very frightened then, too."

Her brown eyes shot him a look. "I was a tomboy and you were bringing food to our house. With Mary."

"Your father was home," Vincent nudged. "He wasn't supposed to be."

"He was hitting my mom. High. Mad. Supposed to be at work, but wasn't. She was crying, and I was scared. He'd laid open her nose with the back of his hand."

"And you were a teenager. And trying to step between them," he said. "Trying to get control of the situation."

Tessa smiled. "But you did, instead. How old were you?"

"Nineteen, twenty, perhaps, no more. You were younger. And small, for your age." The deep voice rumbled, with memory.

"You weren't. And my dad swore he was trippin' on acid. And you shoved him out of the house. Took us down that night," she smiled at the memory, though it was a sad one.

"It was the last day you saw him?" Vincent asked. Tessa nodded.

"He might still be around somewhere. Don't know. Don't care. I really don't." Her tone brooked no naysaying.

"I was sorry about your mother's passing," Vincent said, sympathetically.

"She was in Florida with her sister. It was better than this place." She indicated "New York" with "this place," not the tunnels. "It was fast," she tacked on. Vincent knew it had been.

"Do you ever think of going there? Of leaving the city?" Vincent asked.

"Vincent. What I'm gonna do a thousand miles down south and no home to call my own? I'm from Spanish Harlem. That don't wash off of you."

Vincent gave her a sardonic smile, well aware of being unable to travel because of things that "didn't wash off of you."

"Perhaps not," was all he said to that.

She gave him a wry look. "I know what you're going to say."

"And what is that?" he asked, curious. Even he didn't know that.

"You're going to tell me that William forgives me, and that Stephen will be fine, and I should go back into the kitchen tomorrow like nothing happened."

"Is that what you think is right?"

Tessa gave a deep sigh. "It's what I think is possible. I'm not sure what's 'right,' anymore." She scratched her fingers through her short, dark hair, sending it askew.

"Your... condition. Do you think it's because of your job? Because of all the... hurt that you've seen? The lack of control you've felt?" he asked, trying to help her.

She shrugged. "I took the training so I could help people when they were hurting. Now I can't even stand to touch them. Vincent, what I'm gonna do?" she repeated. "Go be a waitress, somewhere, keeping a foot between me and my customers? Work behind a booth in a movie theater? Sell tickets from behind glass, so I don't have to touch nobody?" She stood, frustrated.

"If those are things you choose to do," he said, patiently. "You know you can stay here, Tessa. We care about you. We always have."

"I let down that boy today. And nobody is saying it."

"Would it help you to be accused?" he asked gently, commiserating with her. She shook her head at that, but didn't reply.

"Might be better than being called a hero," she said.

Ah. Peter had said they'd called her actions at the construction site heroic, though the wounded men were gravely so. He didn't know what she'd seen, but he could guess.

"You did the best you could," Vincent kept his voice gentle. "Then... at the

construction site ... and 12 years ago." He inclined his head to one side. "And I've no doubt that you've done that every day, since."

She swallowed. "My Mom used to say sometimes the effort counted more than the results. I'm not sure I ever understood that."

He rose also, keeping the distance between them. "They say that when defeat is certain, it is then we must truly strive to do our best. Not in assurance of victory. But in the assurance that our lack of effort did not contribute to any failure."

"Are you saying 'fail gloriously?'" she asked.

He smiled a little. "More like 'When the effort is what matters... it is good to try hard.' Good night, Tessa. I will see you, tomorrow." He inclined his head politely and headed for her doorway.

"When the effort is all that matters, try hard," she repeated. If anyone would know about that, Vincent would, Tessa reasoned. She went to sleep with his advice repeating in her head.

Chapter 5

Shades of Tessa

--

A few days passed, and Stephen was on the mend, with the help of a plaster cast, a pair of crutches and antibiotics sent down by Peter Alcott. William demanded no apologies, and made it clear he didn't expect any. They all knew her situation, knew what had brought her down here. Tessa still felt guilty, but found herself soothed by what was now a familiar routine of cooking, cleaning, and putting away supplies. The routine of the job allowed her mind to work on other things. She regularly repeated the conversation she'd had with Vincent in

her head.

Three days after Stephen's accident, they were all having a quiet morning, though an upsetting one, for the tunnel citizenry. Mouse had done something. Taken things from up top, and most of the tunnel family was meeting to decide what to do about that. William had looked somber, when he'd left for it.

Tessa didn't attend their meeting, both not feeling like she'd been there long enough to participate in something so heavy as the punishment of another human being, and because she didn't like the thought of being in the overcrowded room.

William came back, quietly distracted. "If you see Mouse, you can't speak to him," was all the big man said, and Tessa could see he was bothered by something. Something he didn't want to talk about. She simply nodded her head and let him be.

Breakfast was done with, the dishes cleaned, and gallons of chicken noodle soup were on the stove for lunch. The bread was baked. Yeast rolls, brushed with butter. William seemed to want the distraction of making dozens and dozens of rolls, rather than simply baking the customary loaves of bread.

And then, disaster.

She felt a huge vibration in her feet, and the pans on the rack swung, a little, the serving spoons rattling against the ladles. The pipes came alive, over Tessa's head. Alive and alarmed. The banging on those was hard, and at one point, and panicked sounding. Messages began clattering in over top of each other.

William shoved the soup to the back of the stove, and smothered the flames in the oven, below. He was yanking off his apron as he walked.

"What was that? What's happening?" Tessa asked, pacing him. "I heard SOS. Emergency. But what was the other word?" Tessa asked, keeping up with him as he walked.

"Cave-in." William's face was grim. "Father and Vincent."

Tessa's face went utterly pale. She ripped off her apron, too. "My God. They're not... dead?" she asked.

"Nobody knows. It's an all call for every able pair of hands and strong back." He was moving down the hallway faster than she'd ever seen him move. "You can go back to the kitchen," he advised. "It's going to be crowded."

She could. She could go back. And not help, when her friends needed her.

Tessa swallowed past a lump in her throat. "I'll come. I know it will be tight. I'll just... stay in the back. Maybe I can do good, William."

She was a little pale, but she sounded determined. And he had no time to argue with her, one way or the other. She kept her stride up to his, as they both moved quickly down the tunnel hall.

--

"Crowded" wasn't the word for it. But dire was.

Winslow was at the head of a brigade of stone movers, smashing rocks as fast as he could with a pickaxe. The tunnel passageway itself had been re-arranged. What had once been wider was now more narrow, a ceiling of rock having crashed through the damp area past the maze.

"They're in there?" Tessa asked Rebecca, who was at the end of the line, throwing down stones into a pile. William had shouldered forward, offering his great strength to help move the larger rocks.

Rebecca nodded, passing Tessa a stone. It was nowhere near the size of what they needed to move.

"Just beyond the wall. Maybe." Rebecca said. "There's a crawl space. We don't know how long, now. Eric got hurt and Vincent and Father went in after him. Eric says Vincent shoved him out of the passage just as the ceiling caved in." There were tears in the young woman's eyes, and she was trying to be brave. Tessa took the rock from her without thinking about it, and tossed it

away.

"Do we even know if they're alive?" Tessa asked, scared for her friends, one of whom she counted as the dearest kind of friend.

Rebecca shook her head. "We don't know anything, right now. Eric says he saw the rocks fall, and he's sure Father was hit. Vincent was sheltering him. We just don't know, Tessa."

Tessa stayed at the end of the line, tossing rocks behind her. She had plenty of room, compared to those in the front or middle. But that wasn't the real problem, and Tessa knew it. Slow. They were too slow. By far.

"They're going to run out of air." Tessa remembered the construction site. It was the fear every cave-in type accident dealt with.

"That's what we're all afraid of. Mouse has some idea about some kind of other way around, or some contraption, or something. Winslow is trying to just dig through."

Winslow was a big man. But there was no room in the passageway to get a full work crew at the rubble. And there was no way Winslow would be able to get them out in time, with just muscle.

It's hopeless, Tessa thought, piling more stones behind her. And the familiar feelings threatened to rise up and overwhelm her. *Panic. Get away. Get away from here. You can't help.*

Vincent's words rang in her ears. *"When the effort is what matters... it is good to try hard."*

William's echoed it. *"Everything that gets done around here gets done one step at a time. The easiest way to get done is to get started."*

William took Winslow's place up front, and swung the huge pickaxe for a while, while Winslow stepped back and leaned over, hands on his knees, taking in air. Mary was keeping the youngest of the children back, and bringing water. Tessa

realized that she was about to be no longer at the end of the brigade line, was about to be closed in, unable to retreat cleanly.

She took in a deep breath. *One step at a time. Just one. Vincent is in there. Father is in there. Take a rock and throw it. It's not brain surgery.*

Wiping her brow, Tessa put her hands out, asking for the next stone. If this was a futile attempt, she'd go down swinging, futilely.

When the effort is all that matters, it is good to try hard.

William swung mightily at the collapsed wall, but still, the progress was painfully slow. Jamie pushed forward as Winslow took over again, and even from the back, Tessa could hear them all arguing. Something about a different way in. Something about Mouse. Mouse who only this morning had been given the Silence.

Tessa didn't know what was going on. She only knew the line of stones had stopped, and that was bad.

As the adults and teenager argued, she felt her adrenaline begin to rush. But it wasn't the adrenaline of panic. It was the adrenaline of impatience. *Why had they stopped? Why were they not still moving the stones? Did they want Vincent and Father to die?*

Winslow could be abrupt, and William was no one's monument to social graces. Jamie wasn't backing down, and time was ticking away, on them.

Tessa pushed her way forward before she could remember any reason why she shouldn't. She shouldered by Zach to where a sweat soaked William was standing, listening to the exchange between Winslow and Jamie.

"If I thought he could do something I'd sing him a hymn. Words don't break rock, girl. Sweat does. Now git back."

Winslow began swinging the pickaxe again, and stones began to move. Jamie pushed through the ring of adults, fear in her eyes. Pushed right through and

bumped into Tessa. Hard. Tessa barely noticed, and Jamie didn't stop to apologize.

Moving. The stones were moving again. Tessa wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad one, all options considered. She still felt like they'd be too late. On the other hand, some progress was better than no progress. She didn't even stop to take in the fact that Jamie had bumped her or that Zach was now crowding her, a little. Those things weren't important. Other things were.

Tessa resumed her place in the back of the line, moving stones. After a while, William accompanied her, leaving room for Winslow to take broader swings with the axe. Kanin brought up several shovels, and some of the men tried to push away the stones at the sides.

"You okay?" William asked, heaving a large stone out of the way.

"We're not going to make it. We're not going to make it. It's all I can keep thinking." Tessa was sweating right along with him.

"Maybe. Don't say that. We're not giving up. But... you okay?" Her face was dust streaked and sweat streaked. But if there was a sign of impending panic, he couldn't see it.

More helpers piled into the tunnels, trying to help. If they didn't move back, they'd actually do more harm than good. The air in the passageway was getting close.

"I'm okay." Tessa said, feeling tense, but not overwhelmed. "Vincent is in there. I can freeze up and puke later." Tessa was blunt in her grimness. And whatever illness had gripped her seemed utterly gone. Whatever this was, the strange phobia that had utterly dominated her seemed there no more, gone without warning, just as it had come.

"One step at a time, right? What did Jamie have to say?" she asked.

"Something about Mouse. Mouse and a machine. His contraptions don't work, mostly, and we can't spare the time," William said, as aware as Tessa was that

they were running against a foe they couldn't beat.

They kept moving stones, William having no time to ask her further questions, and Tessa seeming to not need to share. They were grunting, sweating, and moving rock. It was all any of them knew to do, for most of the next hour.

A beautiful young woman came in, with Jamie. Catherine. Catherine was her name, and Tessa knew who she was by reputation, if not by face. This was the woman Vincent loved. This was his Catherine.

Polished and smooth, she was a fighter of a woman, all five and a half feet of her. Tessa liked her immediately. When she came back again and begged them to go help Mouse try to break through from the other side, Tessa was one of the first to go.

"You want me with you?" William asked, as she made to follow Mouse, Catherine, Jamie, Winslow and some others.

"This might not work. If Winslow's way is best, you stay here. I'll tell you about whatever else happens. Keep digging, William. It's important that we don't quit on them. When the effort is all that matters, it is good to try hard."

"Sounds like Vincent."

"It is. I've got one of your sayings up here, too." She tapped the side of her temple after she heaved away a huge stone.

William nodded. "Tessa... if you need me. You know I'm right here for you. Yeah?"

She smiled a beautiful smile. "I do. I'm not by myself anymore. Don't have to be. And sometimes, trying is all you can do. I can do this. You?"

"Get going," he shoed her, realizing that Kanin was tiring and it was his turn with the pickaxe.

Tessa turned and raced down the hallway, to catch up with Mouse and his

friends.

--

When the wall blew and the pieces of rock flew, she was crouched in a narrow passageway, Winslow covering her short, stocky body. It felt good to be touched. Good to be sheltered. Good to realize you could be that, still. Still, even when you were 30. Still, even when you didn't have it that much, growing up.

Dust settled around them. And in the end, there they were, on the other side of the wall. Vincent. Father. With Catherine all but throwing herself at the former, and Winslow all but throwing himself at Mouse. The people around her cheered. But Tessa knew there was still work to do. Serious work.

Best way to get done is to get started. She smiled at William's wisdom.

Tessa's training kicked in. "Bring up the litter and get me two strong backs," Tessa ordered, stepping near a fallen Jacob. He was conscious, but bleeding. Talking to Vincent and Catherine, weakly.

"Will I do?" William asked. The other tunnel members were coming down the hallway.

"Wouldn't have a party without you," Tessa answered, moving Catherine aside, gently, so she could crouch near Jacob. She checked Jacob's eyes. He was fading in and out of consciousness.

"Concussion," she said, before Vincent could even confirm it. "Move him to the stretcher. On three. Mind his head and watch that arm. One... two... three!" she lifted Jacob to the stretcher along with William. With Kanin carrying the foot and William at the head, the three of them headed to the hospital chamber.

"I want to see you there in ten minutes, Vincent," she ordered, trotting along with her charges. She kept her hand on Jacob's arm. Nothing about her indicated she was ill.

"As you wish, Tessa." Vincent followed the brunette woman with his eyes before they drank in the blonde one, in front of him.

"Is she a doctor also?" Catherine asked.

Vincent shook his head, sending dust and chips of granite flying from his mane.

"No. Something far more heroic, at the moment."

"What's that?"

"Someone who has learned to face her fears, and move through them."

--

Chapter 6

Helper

"Wash your hands before you touch anything." Tessa instructed. "It's like the kitchen, only with people in it."

William did as she bid him. She was the one in charge, here.

"What are you doing?" William asked, watching her pour a capful of alcohol into the IV bag.

"I'm giving him a saline solution combined with a five percent mixture of denatured alcohol," Tessa responded, hanging the bag on an IV stand that had once been a metal coatrack.

"Is that to stop infection?" he asked, curiously.

"Nope. I'm getting him drunk. A little." She tapped the tube that went from

the bag to Father's still arm.

William's eyebrow rose.

"The swelling is down on the head wound. It's a bad bump, but it's fine. He's got a lot of bruises and strains. The alcohol will relax his muscles and help with the discomfort. There's a reason they say drunk people feel no pain."

William nodded, watching her work. She looked... very unlike his kitchen helper. And very much like she was in her element.

"It's also great for stopping labor contractions, if the baby is coming too early. Not that that's his problem," Tessa checked the needle in Jacob's arm, and added another piece of tape to keep it steady.

"How's Vincent?" she asked.

"He'll be along later. He's with Catherine. He's all right. He's tough. I think he's walking her back up."

"You all got lucky not to be having a funeral, today," she said, taking Jacob's pulse.

You all. Not 'we.' William knew what she was about to say before she said it.

"I'm going back up, William. Once he's back on his feet."

William looked at her. She'd donned a loose coat she'd scrounged from somewhere, using it as a lab coat. Jacob's stethoscope was around her neck, and a penlight was in her pocket. She looked in her element. She looked like she belonged this way. Not in his kitchen. Not anywhere else.

"I'm happy for you, Tessa. If that's what you want."

"It is. Funny. And stupid. It took a full blown crisis to land me down here. And another one to get me out."

"You do good, Tessa. That's needed, everywhere."

She gave him a smile. "I'm going back up. But I'm going to be a helper. A good one. I know what you need the most of. And I'll still come down. Still visit. If I have a tough day, I want an open invitation to punch down the dough on that bread."

He smiled a little smile. "Done. I... You know I wish you well. Terry."

"I know you do. Billy."

He chuckled at that. She straightened Jacob's coverlet.

"I'm going to miss you." She said it looking at Jacob, but William knew she was talking to him.

"No you aren't. You're going to come and see me." His gruff tone belied that he felt exactly the same way as she did.

"Every week. I will," she replied.

"Once a month, maybe. It's time to get back to your life, Tessa. Get back to what you're good at."

"I thought I was good at cooking," she arched an eyebrow his way.

"You are," he acknowledged. "Always good to have a fallback career. Just in case saving people's lives doesn't work out for you." He chuckled a little at his own humor, and looked at her fondly.

She smiled back at him.

"I owe you, you know."

"Nah." He waved his huge paw of a hand in a dismissive gesture.

"You gave me a safe place to be," Tessa pressed. "Looked out for me while I was there. Didn't demand I be anything more than I was. In this case, a scared, stupid kid. I guess I needed to be that, for a while. For all the times I couldn't be, before."

He was quiet, for a moment. "Somebody gave me that, too, once upon a time. Gave a scared kid a place to be. It's what this place is here for, sometimes." His voice was uncharacteristically soft. He looked at Jacob, bandaged up and still pale, against the clean sheet. He looked peaceful. William hoped Father was having a good dream. And that the high Tessa was giving him was at least as good as the one they usually got off the cider.

"Mouse come in?" William asked.

Tessa nodded. "Winslow dragged him in here by the collar and wouldn't let him go until I checked him out." She chuckled a little at the memory. "Like Winslow said. He's a Mouse with nine lives. And one hell of a bruise on his shoulder. He'll be okay. More days like this and I'm recommending blood pressure medication, for Winslow, though."

She tapped the tubing that led to Jacob's IV, again. "I think Eric got hurt worse. That really is one hell of a nasty sprain. He'll be down for a few days, but you know kids. They bounce right back."

"He and Stephen can share the crutches," William joked, too late remembering why it might be a bad idea to do that. She hadn't been able to help Stephen. But for some reason, Vincent's need had banished her fear. Vincent and Father's.

"That they can," she said easily, maintaining her smile. His jibe had not offended her. And she looked very... happy to be doing what she was doing.

William shook his head. She'd done a lot, today. Maybe even saved Jacob. They hadn't been able to reach Peter. Tessa had been tending everyone since it happened. With professional efficiency.

"And I still owe you," she insisted.

"You really don't." He couldn't tell her how much it meant that she'd helped Vincent and Jacob. And Mouse. And Eric.

She walked over to him, getting wonderfully close. Close enough so he could

smell the soap she'd used to clean up with, and the alcohol on her fingers. "No. I really think I do." She reached up, cupping his huge cheek in her small hand. Standing on tiptoe, she planted a grateful kiss on his left cheek.

"Can I return that?" he asked, his voice a little choked.

"I'd be hurt if you didn't," she replied, offering her own cheek, which he promptly kissed.

"So. When you coming back down?" he asked, as if they were already saying good-bye. Which in a way, they were.

"I figured I'd sit with my patient here until I get ahold of Vincent, then go pack up my things. Might take me a couple weeks up top to get settled, again."

"It might."

"Of course, apple brown Betty is a surefire way to get me back in that dining room."

"Dining room, hell," he scoffed. "You eat in the kitchen with the rest of the staff."

"Two weeks from Sunday?" she asked, the smile in her eyes as well as on her mouth.

"Two weeks from Sunday," William confirmed. "You can tell me all about how it's going for you up there." He let her know he would always be there for her. Always there, if she needed a friend.

"Can I bring anything?" she asked.

"Decent bottle of wine and two glasses," he instructed. "And same rules as always. You wash your hands any time you set foot in my kitchen."

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And she did.

--fin--

For Ritch Brinkley, and William.

Your steady presence still warms the tunnels, and it always will.



No matter where you are in your own fairy tale, I wish you love. ~Cindy