

In a Different Place (Catherine)

by Angie

(Dictated into a tape recorder)

I have a lot to think about as I lay in this hospital bed - and there is little else to do. My father brought me a tape player, which also records, he told me. The buttons are simple. I worked it out. I found a tape in it, one he had obviously used to record some information from a client and forgotten about. So I recorded over it.

My face is bandaged again, for the second time in a month.

The surgeon asked me to let him know if I needed anything. After the door closed behind him and I was sure I was alone, I said what I wished I could have said to Vincent.

“You could read me the last chapter of Great Expectations.”

This time, there was no soft voice reading to me. Thoughts of him made my face heat up under the bandages, and I was glad no one could see.

I considered how my world had changed. A month ago I'd had been a different person. Life had been good, if not exciting. Although I worked as a lawyer for my father's firm, I came and went as I pleased.

Now I'm back in my world, another world, not his. It's so very quiet and sterile-smelling in this hospital room. I can barely hear the traffic, but even the flowers can't completely mask the odour of disinfectant and that unmistakable 'hospital smell'.

How different this is to his world below ground! There I could smell candle smoke, damp rock and the chamber had been chilly. There had been that almost constant tapping during the day – and sporadically at night - which I had been told was their form of communication.

What an amazing world he must live in! I saw some of the people, the food I was given was very good, and Vincent's chamber was well-appointed, if eclectic, when I was able to see it at last. All this implied a community with organization.

His hands had been warm, but a little rough, implying he did hard labour. I have no idea what that might entail, but I imagine that clean water must be kept running, the damp kept under control and rooms – chambers he called them – must be carved out of rock, to say nothing of the more mundane aspects of everyday life.

On the way home, I was taken through several tunnels, up a spiral staircase, had to jump a the huge pipe culvert – with his help – and walked that ledge over a yawning space, like an elevator shaft without an elevator.

Good thing I'm not afraid of heights. What would he have thought of me then? Fear was something he sees in others, who see him. But I had truly felt it only very recently. I suspect fear is something his whole community knows and deals with daily. How could he understand the fears of my world, which now seem so ... trivial?

Vincent. Even his name is special. I loved his voice as he read to me, a kind of husky purr that soothed and stroked me. I was unable to see him through the bandages – they had not left even a

small opening, just as now – but I had of course imagined what he looked like. That memory was almost funny now.

What had I expected – an underground Robert Redford? That happened only in B movies. I removed the bandages while he was getting me some tea. I had to see what I looked like before he returned, but there was no mirror anywhere in that chamber.

I finally found something that gave me some reflection, but had not expected him to return behind me. He said my name – and I recognized his voice – but that stupid reflector had distorted his face, just as it had mine, and I reacted like a schoolgirl. I screamed, flung the reflector - hitting him ... and he roared and left me.

I don't know what shocked me more – his face or his roar. But I knew I had hurt him deeply too – the very last thing I had wanted to do. I saw the expression on his face – that remarkable face. He said nothing when he returned with my clothes, just that it was time for me to go home. I asked him for advice, and he told me I was strong. Those few minutes were precious. I understood so much then, wanted to know so much more, but had kept my curiosity under control.

I understood why he didn't like mirrors. The sight of my own stitched face had been a shock, and I avoided them too when I returned to my world. Nevertheless, my face was photographed and plastered all over the newspapers. I had been forced to relive that terrible incident, the last part of which I could not remember at all.

No wonder Vincent avoids being seen in my world. Here, he would be a freak attraction, a tabloid wonder. He had that cloak, which meant he was used to hiding himself. Obviously, he did roam my world at night, for he found me there, in the Park.

Vincent's appearance is not frightening – just very unusual. I looked at him closely after that embarrassing incident and saw a face that was noble, beautiful even. His hands were different too, but very gentle. And those eyes! They saw right into my soul, but did not judge me. This was a man who gave me hope, just by his existence, just by thinking about him.

He's an amazing man and obviously a strong one. He carried me a long way to get me to his father and help, if the route back was any indication. No ordinary man could have done that, even though I'm a small woman.

I really have no idea what Vincent's life is like, except that he's well-educated and intelligent to talk to, although he did not say a great deal. In his world, appearances truly didn't matter. He was part of a unique community, one that obviously cared about others. Vincent saved me and his father stitched up my face and treated my other injuries. That was not an act that anyone in my world would have done - without expecting something in return.

If Vincent had not found me, what would have happened? I was unconscious and bleeding. I knew I had been tossed from the van and had a vague memory of lying on the grass in pain. No one would have found me at that time of night, in the fog. Quite likely I would have died. I owe Vincent everything.

Ah, Vincent. How old is he? He seems to be at least as old as me, perhaps a little older. He did not behave like a young man. He told me he had been found as a baby, abandoned, so he had lived in the world below all his life, and survived – and grown strong.

I was abandoned to die also, discarded like a piece of trash. That was an experience I could not have predicted, not even as a nightmare. But now that it had, it made me think about my life.

What was my life worth to anyone, except perhaps Dad? I'm just an ornament to Tom, someone to help his ambition.

Well, that is over. I will not, cannot, go back to that life again. I have been given a new chance, and I need to repay that by doing something worthwhile. Vincent has made me reconsider myself and my society, made me realize the truth. I want to make him proud of me, to make his act of kindness, and my time in his world, worth something more than a memory. I have to be strong too, prove that I could be, to myself as well as to Vincent.

What is he doing now? Does he think about me? Could I visit him in his home below ground? I want to see him again.

Vincent said goodbye to me at an entrance below my building. Had that always been there, or was it created for my convenience? He had asked me where I lived. Would that entrance be sealed up again now?

He heard voices and just like that he was gone. I waited until the voices had disappeared before going up the ladder and then into the parking garage. When I went up into the lobby, I made as if I had been dropped off in the garage. There are no closed circuit televisions, thankfully, and there's a drop off area. Of course I wouldn't want to go through the front door! Also, I wanted no investigation of the storage room where the tunnel entry is hidden. I'm proud I thought this through.

The security guard took one look at me and called the police. He pressed me to sit down and even offered me a coffee, but I declined and went upstairs to my apartment with a spare key he gave me. The police came to me there, but I told them no more than I had to, pretended not to know where I had been for the previous ten days, that my face had been bandaged until they let me out in the garage. They took photographs, of course, but declined to press me further after Dad arrived. They knew he was a lawyer, of course.

What if I had not had the resources to get my face fixed? Could I have stayed with Vincent, become a part of his world? I could not imagine being part of my world, where appearances matter all too much. Would they have let me stay? Well, that would not happen now. Their world is not mine. I'll have to make a new way in mine, then perhaps earn the right to see Vincent's again.

So what can I do? I do not want to go back to my father's law office. Tom might want to continue our relationship, but I'm sure he would do so reluctantly now that I'm was damaged goods. He's part of my past. I'll never forgive him for his lack of compassion that night – which resulted in my leaving alone. I was mistaken for someone else, an escort or hooker – and I know Tom always hired one or two for such events. She was undoubtedly there. It had never bothered me overmuch, until now.

I have to do something worthwhile, something challenging. I have skills as a lawyer. Perhaps they would be useful in the public arena, perhaps the DA's office, if they're hiring. I might be recognized and probably wouldn't be taken seriously, at first. I would have to work hard to prove myself. I will.

I want Vincent to know he changed my life. Do I dare try to find him? I want to believe I will see him again – after I have found a new job and started down a new path. I must find a way.

I must be patient too. Vincent has a great deal of it, and he's my inspiration.

But, first I must heal.

Satisfied she had reached a conclusion, Catherine needed a nap. Before she dozed off, though, she removed the cassette from the player, ripped out the tape from the cassette, then dropped it on the floor for the cleaning staff. It had done its job. She knew what she was going to do.

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