

Series 7 - Inspired by Season 2 (part 2)

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by *Angie*

Limits

For stony limits cannot hold love out
- William Shakespeare

"There is no life without limits."

The words rang in Vincent's mind as he returned below. When he had hugged her to him on her balcony, it was with the recognition that something had changed between them. He was still a little uncertain as to what that was – or what it meant for their future.

His life most definitely had limits, but Catherine was correct - so did that of everyone who lived below. Even her life had limits – bound as it was by her job, her responsibilities, the laws of above. He had been referring to his own particular limits, of course, and she knew that. He had always believed that his limits were far more severe than anyone else's – and not just his forced exile below, but his own physical limitations.

However, even those limits now seemed tenuous. He began to question his reasoning.

He had asked her to leave when she visited him in his chamber earlier, after Michael had kissed her. He had been in turmoil, but it wasn't just his inner guilt and, yes, envy, tearing him apart. He had been afraid of what he would reveal to her, what would happen if he let his ... passion ... become obvious. He had also been afraid of what her reaction would be.

He knew he couldn't, wouldn't, forcibly remove her from his chamber, if she didn't want to leave. Truthfully, he saw her so seldom, he couldn't bring himself to be really adamant.

So she had stayed, refusing to leave and using all the considerable power of her words to rationalize with him. She had watched him wrestle with his demons, his jealousy. Yes, jealousy! That he should feel such, he of all people, was frightening, disgusting. What right had he to feel jealous of anyone?

Catherine had correctly analyzed him and berated him for that disgust.

"Don't be afraid to want it," she'd said, meaning that kiss, and ... love.

He had been so upset that his words had welled from some deep place inside himself, just as he had feared they would. She could now have no doubts about his feelings for her. He had effectively said that he loved her, when he admitted he knew what it meant for Michael to do so.

Vincent leaned against the tunnel wall and tried to regain some of that calm he had felt from Catherine on the balcony. How could she be so serene, while he was a roiling mass of conflicting emotions? He didn't know why he had gone to her balcony, exactly, except that he had needed to see her in her world, to get away from the tunnels that now seemed to define him, confine him. Somehow, he'd had to try and reconcile their two worlds.

How could she so calmly accept those revelations in his chamber?

He felt along the bond, and realized she was awake and still projecting that calm love – love he knew was for himself. That gave him strength to continue the journey to his chamber. He took off his cloak and then sat on the bed and removed his boots and all of his clothes except his long underwear and thermal shirt, before laying back among the bolsters. He was suddenly hot, and knew it was not the temperature in his chamber, which was cool as usual. He had not lit the brazier.

Catherine had said she would happily accept a life of limits with him. What limits was she referring to, he wondered now. Did she want to spend more time below? That would put him in the position of having her close and needing her in those ways he feared most. Would she accept a limited love, one without real intimacy? Even if she was willing to, he could not impose that on her – or himself.

He realized, with a shock, that their relationship was now on the brink. If he tried to retreat now, he would have to cause both her and himself considerable grief. He might lose her if he did so. He couldn't take the risk. Certainly, he could not live without her now.

No, there was not going back now. Matters could not stay where they were, either. He had to move forward. It was all up to him.

He had no doubt that Catherine would be an equal partner in whatever intimacy he allowed. *That he allowed.* That sounded so pompous he was momentarily taken aback. How had it happened that he made decisions of this magnitude, ones that affected both of them, on his own, without consulting Catherine?

Limits. He set no limits on himself when it came to decisions about his relationship with her. Every time their love moved up a notch, he raised his barriers a little higher, made them a little thicker. What must she think of him, always trying to find new ways of preventing what other couples enjoyed? Even a kiss was dangerous, but they

had enjoyed those, carefully. The limits on himself, he realized with a shock, were self-imposed, dictatorial even. No wonder she got frustrated with him.

Oh, he had sensed that frustration, seen it in her face, as she reluctantly accepted that he was holding back. He had wanted her close, very close, so many times. Their hugs were magical to him. He relived every one of them at night. Why was he refusing to give her more of them – or other things?

The reasons were those limits. He knew, without a doubt, that if he allowed himself to get as close to her as she wished, as he wished, even with the layers of clothes between them, he would not be able to prevent matters from advancing to a kiss, a touch ... and more. The thought aroused him and he realized suddenly that he would not have the willpower to resist her, if she chose to press her case.

What should he do? He felt along the bond. She was still awake – and she was near!

Before he could react to that knowledge, he found himself suddenly pressed into the bed by a sudden weight landing on top of him.

Catherine! He reflexively put his arms around her, realized she was wearing almost nothing under her coat, just a pair of sleek pajamas, and marveled at the feel of her body. Of course, his hands had felt it before, many times, on her balcony, but never without a lot of his own layers preventing body contact. Now, with just his thermal underwear and her silky nightclothes. He could feel her heat matching his own.

She said nothing, simply shifted upward until she could touch her lips on his. He closed his eyes. It was a kiss he had ached for since Michael had kissed her. But this was not the kiss the younger man had given her. Even Vincent could tell the difference. Her lips felt wonderful on his, but what he felt along the bond was almost beyond words. He had felt her surprise and shock at Michael's kiss, but here and now, her emotions were vastly different. He could feel her delight, she was obviously enjoying the sensation of his unique mouth. She was tasting him, licking him, exploring every curve and plane.

And then she let her tongue slither into his cleft and all thought fled. Fire shot down to his groin and her scent made him dizzy and he hugged her closer, reflexively, as if she were a lifeline.

He began to kiss her back, moving to some inner music, a waltz almost, across her lips.

After what seemed like an eon, they both needed to take a full breath, and parted. Catherine moved away and came into focus as he opened his eyes, amazed that he could see. She was looking down at him with a dreamy expression. His hunger was unabated, though, and after a deep breath, he pulled her down to him again.

This time, she parted his lips and slid her tongue inside his mouth, exploring, sliding over his canines. He groaned. The sound shocked him, but Catherine paid no attention, she simply caught his tongue with her own and drew him closer yet.

Once again, he had to take a breath, and she sensed it and lifted her face from his. Now she was smiling. She put her hands along his jaw and began an exploration of his face. He closed his eyes and let sensation take over. He had never been kissed and the feel of her lips on his face was heaven. She lingered on every inch, licking, kissing, nuzzling.

Although he could breathe now, he found himself short of breath. So far he had lain passive under her ministrations. It occurred to him, belatedly, that he should be taking a more active role, but couldn't make himself move. The feel of her lips on his face was a completely new sensation, and one he had never thought he would experience, and he was afraid of breaking the spell. His skin tingled under her lips. Where she touched, he felt delight, when she moved on, it was almost painful in its poignancy. Bliss, yes, that was the word for it.

She paused after completing her exploration of his face and moved away as he opened his eyes, feeling suddenly bereft. He sighed and she took her hands away from his face too and rolled off him to sit beside him. His tongue, which she had played with, seemed to belong to someone else. He found himself wordless.

Catherine seemed to sense his quandary. She captured his hand in both of hers, brought it to her lips and kissed his palm, then held it against her heart. She spoke quietly.

"Vincent ... I had to come, to show you what a kiss really is – what it can be, - between two people ... between us. Now, you know. There is no one but you who can give me such joy.

"You see, all we did is kiss – and where were the limits? There may be no limits to ... what we can do, together. But that will be for another time. We can set our own limits, Vincent. I wanted you to know that.

“Good-night – and thank-you.”

She slid off the bed, pulled her coat around herself and left as she had come, quietly.

Vincent was so relaxed he closed his eyes again and felt his sigh of contentment reach his toes. He should have escorted her to the threshold at least, but couldn't get his muscles to obey him. He felt along the bond and realized that Catherine was very happy, hopeful now too - and excited. All because of the kisses she had given him!

Her last words were intriguing, but he wanted no internal debates, nothing that would intrude upon this calm he felt. He did sense that the limits he had imposed on himself were crumbling. He couldn't bring himself to care about that either.

Vincent rolled onto his side, pulled the blanket over himself and was asleep in moments.

END

Reflections

Of wretched chance, most woeful mirrors chose

- Thomas Sackville

Catherine sat cross-legged beside the Mirror Pool. She had gone there to think, unaware that Vincent had done so many times as well. They had seen much, she guessed, those stars reflected in the still waters. What had they seen, she wondered? How many funerals had been held here, where every person was important, irreplaceable?

Vincent, she knew, was currently reading *'A Tale of Two Cities'* with Charles, distracting the big man while his back healed. When that healing had happened to Father's satisfaction, Charles and Devin would leave.

Devin! She wanted to talk to him, but had been unable to catch him alone. She had not wanted to seem too eager to do so, in case Vincent got curious. She heard a slight rustle at the tunnel entrance, and turned.

"Come out, whoever you are," she called, loudly enough to make the chamber ring.

There was a chuckle and she turned her head to see Devin, a sheepish look on his face, approaching her.

"You're getting more like Vincent all the time, Chandler," he told her as he sat down beside her. "I could never follow or sneak up on him, either. Sometimes he pretended I had, but he's a bad liar."

Catherine gathered her wits together. This man had been as close to Vincent as anyone else in the tunnels – and knew him from his early years. But would he tell her anything? There was so much she wanted to know. She smiled at him, careful to keep her face calm, and spoke quietly.

"Vincent has changed me in so many ways that my friends hardly recognize me. I don't know if my senses are more acute, but this place would encourage that, if anywhere could. It makes you want to be special – to live up to its wonders."

Devin looked across the water. "Yes. Every time I come back, it clutches at me. Leaving this, and especially Vincent, was the most difficult thing I've ever done. It's still hard. I leave my heart here, I think, no matter where I go in the world."

Catherine shook her head. "Not your heart, or you would never have helped Charles, or delivered a baby, or done any of those other things you told us about. I think you are linked to this place, just as I am now. This place gives our hearts strength, as Father has said. It isn't a place to hide."

"Except perhaps for Vincent," Devin remarked softly.

"Yes. For him there is no other place. But he's also hiding from himself."

"And you," Devin added.

Catherine sighed. "Yes. Not so much as the first time you were here, but he has built so many walls around himself. Why would he need to? Everyone loves him here. He's the soul of this community."

Devin looked at her. "He didn't have walls when I knew him. He was always quiet, but very affectionate, if carefully so. He loved to hug and be hugged."

"His hugs are still special. He puts his heart into them. They are a refuge, a balm to the weary."

"Yes, he hugged me when I returned that first time. Even though he's a lot bigger, I knew he still cared deeply. He cares deeply about everything, Cathy. And he can be hurt."

Devin touched his face. "These scars happened because I falsely accused him. I was ashamed, later. That's when I also realized I didn't belong here if I could goad my patient little brother into doing this. I'm not so conceited that I think it was my leaving which made him what he is today. Something must have happened after I left."

Catherine looked at her hands. They ached to touch Vincent, hold him, stroke him, console him if necessary. She spoke quietly.

"He's a man of few words. I think he missed you deeply when you left. If I ask him personal questions, he'll answer, but never directly. He's a master at sidetracking what he doesn't want to discuss. And he only lets me get so close and no closer. What's he afraid of? He knows I love him – will always love him, no matter what."

"So you two are not lovers yet? Sorry, none of my business," Devin corrected himself.

Catherine clasped her hands together and looked across the pool.

"No. Perhaps we never will be. But he is everything to me, Devin. If that's what it means to love him, then I will accept it."

"Chandler, that is plain stupid and Vincent is an idiot! He's a man. He has all the normal equipment, and I know

he has all the urges and needs of a man. I've seen the way his eyes follow you. The rest doesn't matter. One day he'll realize he has to follow his heart, like the rest of us. You two have something special. I can sense it."

"Yes. Didn't he tell you? We're connected. He can feel what I feel, and I know when he's in danger. I think I can feel his other emotions to some extent too."

Devin looked at her, amazed.

"You know, I always suspected he had some kind of ... empathic ... link with those he loved. He would never talk about it. He would never talk about anything that made him seem different."

Catherine sighed. "He really cares for everyone, for me, but there's a part of his heart I can't touch, that he has put armour plate around."

"Give him time, Chandler. He'll come around. He's probably waiting to be sure – not of you, so much as himself. He's torn, I think. He wants you with him, but can't ask you to give up your life above."

"Is that really necessary, Devin? He visits me above, and I come below as often as I can. I've made some adjustments to my workload, to give us more time. I would give it up entirely to be with him, but I know he wouldn't let me. I have other ideas, but I want to be sure he won't run away if I move closer. I couldn't bear to lose him."

"You'll never lose him, Chandler. I may have been away a long time, but I know a man in love when I see one. My brother is no different from the rest of us. He dreams, he loves, he believes in love."

"But does he know what he wants, Devin? Or is he just afraid to take it?"

"Afraid? Why would he be afraid? Half the women in these tunnels would be lined up outside his chamber, waiting for their turn to share his bed, if he gave them any encouragement. Oh, Father has done his best to keep Vincent a virgin, but I'm betting he won't be much longer."

Catherine felt her face heat up. "There's something wrong, Devin. He seems afraid to touch me. Why would that be?"

"I have no idea, but I bet I can find out. I still know a few people here."

Devin rose and left swiftly. Catherine sighed again, closed her eyes and lay back on the soft sand. Suddenly, she was weary of all the subterfuge, of trying to understand Vincent, of waiting for him to make the move she wanted above all else. She must have fallen asleep because suddenly she was aware of cold and then felt it disappear and warmth surround her.

She opened her eyes and saw Vincent's cloak. Its owner was gazing down at her, his face relaxed and affectionate.

"I didn't want to awaken you, but I didn't want you to catch cold either."

Catherine sat up and leaned against him, felt his arms surround her.

"Hmmm your cloak is warm, like you. How is Charles?"

"He is doing well. Tomorrow he will be healed enough to travel. I will miss him."

"Me too. He has such a bright, loving spirit. Somehow, he has held onto that, despite a terrible, lonely life."

"Charles makes me feel blessed and ashamed at the same time. Blessed for the love I have had all my life, and ashamed for wanting more."

"What more, Vincent?"

Vincent sighed. "Catherine, I think you know."

"Then it's yours, Vincent. I'm yours. Whatever life allows us, we can have together."

"Catherine, our lives are so different."

"Yet you found me sleeping by the Mirror Pool. What do I have to do, to prove to you that this life can be mine as well? Would I be here if I didn't love this place? Vincent, I don't know what the future holds for us, but I do know that love needs nourishment. Words and airy dreams are not enough – not forever. I'm afraid."

Vincent lifted his legs and cradled her between them, hugged her closer.

"I know."

"But I don't know what I'm afraid of, Vincent. Can you tell me?"

"The same as I, Catherine. Fear of the unknown, of misunderstanding, of making assumptions, of presuming. Of having our love wither for lack of solid nourishment."

"Yes. Why is it so hard to speak of these things?"

"Because fear is our only defense against danger. It keeps us alive, aware. It doesn't discriminate between hate and love. Both are dangerous in their own way, risky - perhaps even deadly."

"Surely not deadly, Vincent. How can love be deadly? No one has ever died of love."

"No, but it can dull the edge that keeps us sharp, distract us, make us do stupid things."

Catherine turned to look at him. He seemed to have retreated from her slightly, his eyes were focused far away.

"You sound like you speak from experience, Vincent."

He sighed and looked down at her. She knew right away that he would sidetrack the comment.

"We live by our wits down here, however civilized we may appear. One lovesick sentry could be our downfall. Our world is so fragile. Brian followed you down here and found us, against all odds. We were lucky that time. Would you want to live on a knife edge like that?"

"Vincent, that's a spurious argument, and you know it. You avoided my not-so-subtle remark. You should know that a lawyer never lets herself be sidetracked. But keep your secret – for now."

"There are no secrets here, Catherine. We live in each other's pockets. Could you get used to a lack of privacy? There are no doors here, just rugs to keep out the draughts - and tunnels echo."

Catherine laughed.

"Is that what's worrying you, Vincent? That someone might hear us making love? Don't you know that even above, every child has probably heard his parents making love at some time? We learn to ignore those noises, as we ignore snoring or flatulence."

It was Vincent's turn to laugh.

"Point taken. You can hear plenty of noises here, but they're made by friends."

"So are you going to answer me, Vincent? You know what I want. I know that you want it too. Your brother tells me you have the equipment – although you hide it well, mostly."

"Mostly?"

"Well, you're a man, Vincent. Women know how to spot the signs. Let's just say you are not always aloof and cool when we hug."

"Catherine, that is an understatement. I cannot be aloof when you're in my arms. As for the signs – my body knows your shape too well and I am not made of wood."

"So then, what's the problem?"

Vincent was silent for long moments. When he spoke, it was softly, into her ear.

"Catherine, you know how I feel about you. The words are difficult for me, for many reasons. Please have patience with me. I am not going to push you away or let our love wither. I promise. But there are things you don't know about me."

"Vincent, I know everything I need to know about you. You know how I feel."

There was a sudden tapping on the pipes and Vincent stood up quickly – too quickly, Catherine thought. Blast the damn pipes and their meal signals!

Vincent helped her to her feet and took back his cloak. He kept an arm around her, though. She looked up at him.

"This conversation isn't over, Vincent."

"I know. But it is lunchtime and I'm hungry."

"Very well. May I join you?"

Vincent looked down at her.

"Can you think otherwise? Catherine, every moment we spend together is a blessing I cherish and relive when we're apart."

“Good. Then you’ll be relieved to know I’m going to make sure we have a lot more of those moments.”

Vincent was speechless for a moment. “How, Catherine?”

“You have your secrets, let me have mine. All in good time, Vincent.”

“Very well.”

Lunch was a quiet affair. Devin was telling Charles about the routes to the mountains and everyone else seemed sad. Charles had given everyone in the community an awareness of blessings – and family. Father was looking very thoughtful. He had declared Charles fit to travel, so the two men would be leaving the next day.

Catherine wondered whether Devin had found out anything and how he would tell her if he had. She returned to her apartment to shower and change. There was to be a special concert in honour of their departing guests that evening.

Right now, she wanted to think about what Vincent had told her. There was sadness there, for some reason. She couldn’t imagine what would cause that. She made herself a tea and was about to sit down with it, perhaps turn on some music, when she heard a knock at her door.

“Who is it?” she called. She was not expecting anyone and didn’t want visitors.

“Devin,” came a man’s voice.

She rushed to let him in and invited him to sit.

“Would you like some tea or coffee?” she asked, when he didn’t take up her offer.

“No, thanks, Chandler. Nice place you have here. Is that the famous balcony, where you and Vincent tryst?”

Catherine laughed as Devin moved to the balcony doors.

“I wouldn’t call what we do that. We sit out there and read and relax.”

“Doesn’t he come inside?”

“Oh, he has, once or twice, in an emergency.”

“But not just to relax and read.”

“No. He seems to want to have our meetings somewhere ... neutral. My balcony is where our worlds truly meet.”

Catherine took a deep breath. Devin was looking out over the city.

“I assume you didn’t come here to see the view. What did you find out, Devin?”

Devin turned to her, his expression serious.

“Chandler, I had never thought of my tunnel family as close-mouthed, but they’re proverbial clams when it comes to Vincent – even with me. However, I’ve been around a bit and I know a little about gathering facts. I can join the dots when I have enough of them. I think I have.

“First, as we thought, something happened to Vincent after I left. I’m not exactly sure what it was, but I can guess. A romance turned sour. Sounds like it was a teenage infatuation. It turned him inside out. He was very ill, dangerously so. He almost died. I wish I had been there. I’m positive that Father over-reacted and Vincent became afraid ... of something.”

“That would explain Father’s reaction to me when Vincent first introduced us.”

“Well, there are other reasons for that. I heard about Margaret too. He thought you were too much like her – privileged – and would only hurt Vincent.”

“Yes, I guessed that. He mellowed a little after he and she spent her last days together. Now he accepts me, I think.”

“As well he should. You aren’t Margaret. Nor are you this other one. I don’t know who she was, but she went above after whatever happened between her and Vincent. She hasn’t been below since. I got the impression she’s a success story. But no one would tell me anything more.”

“Well, that’s something. It gives me hope, Devin. How bad could it be? Vincent survived and I know he loves me.”

“He does, Chandler, but there’s something preventing him from getting closer. It’s fear, but of what, I don’t know. I’m sure it dates back to that incident. Nothing else has even been hinted at. I can make a guess. Vincent wanted

her and she played him. Maybe she dumped him, insulted him even.”

“That would explain a lot. He cares deeply about everyone. Rejection would be devastating to him.”

“Well, I hope I never meet her, whoever she is. Anyone who could do that to my brother must have a heart of stone. But you’ll make it right, Cathy. Don’t give up. The big lug wants what you’re offering, he’s just afraid to accept it.”

“Thank you, Devin. I’m glad it’s nothing more serious. I think we can overcome this.”

Devin walked to the front door.

“Right. Now I’d better get back below and pack our stuff. I think we’ll need a semi if we take everything we’ve been offered. We don’t need much – just clothes. I’ll find us a furnished place. See you later.”

“Bye, Devin. And thanks.”

He smiled at her and gave her a thumbs-up. She smiled back and closed the door behind him.

It was a great relief to know that her worst fears were actually not the reason for Vincent’s reticence. She had imagined all kinds of things – physical ... anomalies ... not the least of them. So they didn’t exist. Emotional challenges she could deal with. Patience, she told herself. She must tread carefully now, but show her love openly. He must have no more doubts about her commitment. She would start making other plans as well. Yes, one day, they would have their happy life. She was determined about that.

When she went below later, Vincent met her. She snuggled up to him as she loved to do, but did not bring up their previous conversation. She sensed him gradually relax when he realized he was not to be pressed, and they had a pleasant evening. Afterwards, she said goodbye to Devin and Charles, wishing them a safe journey. Devin gave her a hug and whispered a “good luck” in her ear.

When Vincent walked her back to her threshold, she hugged him a little longer than was her wont, let her love for him fill her. She felt him relax into it, hold her just a little closer.

When they broke apart at last, she saw something deep in his eyes. Hope. That was a step forward, she thought. He usually was careful about what he let her see. The other steps would be small too, but they would walk the route together.

Someday, perhaps, they would see the Mirror Pool as the place where reflections became dreams and dreams, reality.

END

Sun Shower

*Wash what is dirty, water what is dry, heal what is wounded.
Bend what is stiff, warm what is cold, guide what goes off the road.*
- Stephen Langton (translated from the Latin)

Kanin was serving time, one month for every year lived by the child he had inadvertently killed, plus half as many again for the mother. The judge had been lenient because he had pleaded guilty. It was hard on Olivia and the community below, but everyone knew their love would be undiminished when he returned.

Catherine felt the nag of unfinished business in that case. She worried about Mrs Davis, the woman who had persisted in seeing Kanin brought to justice, a deed of courage which had almost cost her sanity. Catherine could not, in truth, understand how the woman had lived with the memory of a child dying in her arms, from an accident that had not been her fault and **which** she had been powerless to prevent - then to have discovered that the perpetrator of all this grief had been drunk and had disappeared. When Kanin had turned himself in, Catherine had seen that justice was done. The community Below had insisted on it, not without a lot of soul-searching. Kanin and Olivia had a baby son.

Mrs. Davis, although she had seen the murderer of her son jailed, now had to put her life back together. Catherine felt that she was the real victim in this case. Did Mrs. Davis now feel a sense of closure and peace? It bothered her that this woman might drift out of sight again, still carrying the heavy weight of despair so evident on her face.

Catherine talked this over with Vincent on her balcony, one moonlit night. He, predictably, had told her that she must ease her mind and talk to the woman. Perhaps she should be invited to join the community below, Catherine had suggested. Vincent had replied as he always did.

"Catherine, your heart will tell you whether this woman wishes to be helped, to join us and be part of us. You know how careful we are. It will not be an easy decision for her. She could be a helper, but there are challenges even in that role, as you know. You are one of us and know your world best. You must decide for us."

So, Catherine was now walking up to the building where Mrs. Davis lived, having arranged to visit her earlier in the day. Mrs. Davis had been hesitant, but Catherine had felt the woman perhaps did need to talk to someone. She probably felt very alone. No one had been in the courtroom on her side. Olivia, Luke and some of the helpers had sat in support of Kanin.

She buzzed the intercom and heard the door click, almost as if she had been seen. Perhaps she had. Catherine took the elevator up to the third floor and knocked on 320. It was opened quickly by Mrs. Davis, who gave her a miniscule smile and waved her in. Her voice was soft.

"Please come onto the veranda. It's a lovely evening and I know you don't get much fresh air and sunshine in your office."

Catherine followed her and took the chair her hostess indicated. The woman looked tired and a little cautious, but she came right to the point.

"What can I do for you, Miss Chandler?"

Catherine looked her in the eye and promptly threw away the mental script she had prepared.

"Mrs. Davis, I know this has been difficult for you. I wanted you to know something I couldn't reveal before. Something very private – a secret.

"Kanin was not unknown to me before he hit my desk in an unsolved crime folder. I've known him and his wife since I met the man I love. He is part of a unique community and they asked me to make sure justice was done, without prejudice. I couldn't say anything to my boss without endangering this community. They are very special to me, like family really."

Mrs. Davis, her voice a little unsteady, spoke before Catherine could continue.

"You mean there are other criminals hiding in this community you speak of?"

Catherine took a deep breath. The question was a fair one.

"No, Mrs. Davis. This community would not have sheltered Kanin if they had known his secret. People come to it only by invitation, and after all care is taken. They don't ask anyone to reveal their past history, but criminal activity is not condoned or protected. When Kanin confessed, I was asked to help him deal with the justice system. They are a society with rules and their living conditions can be harsh at times, but they are also a very caring community. People find solace and heart's ease there. There are orphaned and abandoned children, elderly men and women, and people who had lost their way in our too-busy world. They have found a purpose in this community. Everyone helps each other."

"And the man you love is part of this community, Miss Chandler?"

"Please call me Catherine. Yes, he is the heart and soul of this community. For him, there is no other place. He could not live in this world. He is an inspiration to everyone in the community – and he saved my life."

"I see. Why are you telling me all this?"

Catherine looked at her and smiled briefly.

"Mrs. Davis, your story touched my heart and that of others you don't know. This community has women who have lost children, husbands, brothers and sisters. They have found healing in helping others. Kanin's wife had initially been very upset with him for risking incarceration, but she has a good heart and realized she was being selfish. She would like to meet you. She saw you in the courtroom. Your pain was obvious to her.

"However, as I said, this community is secret. Anyone who meets someone from outside it puts everyone at risk. They have to be very careful. The man I love would be endangered most. No, he's not a criminal. He's just ... different. Too different. Others are fragile too. They have found meaning in their lives for the first time. If this was taken away – as it would be – they would die or go mad."

Mrs. Davis looked at her hands, folded neatly in her lap. She spoke softly, carefully.

"I think I know why you are telling me this. It's true, my life has been a disaster. I was obsessed with finding my son's killer for years. I could think of nothing else. My husband left me and I quit my job. I gave up all my friends. I couldn't stand the pity I saw in everyone's eyes. Then I decided I had to earn a living in order to continue. Time did begin to heal me and I began to make a new life for myself.

"Then I saw Kanin – in a hardware store of all places - and it all came rushing over me like a tidal wave. His face was burned into my brain. There could be no mistaking it – even 10 years later. Once again, I had to quit my job. I couldn't function knowing he was out there. What if he decided I was a threat to him? Was my life in danger because I recognized him and he knew I had? But those fears were just an excuse. I knew, deep down, that he wasn't a danger to me. He could have eliminated me much earlier, if that was the case. But I wanted revenge, Miss Chandler. Revenge for my heartache and obsession.

"I know now that Kanin is a gentle man and was guilt-ridden by what he had done. He hid from me, from his crime. But I couldn't forgive him those lost years when I was almost mad with hatred and loss. Now, I understand him a little better – but forgive? No. I can't forgive, but I can understand perhaps, a little."

Catherine's eyes were burning. She was not sure she could forgive such a deed either. Vincent would, but he never judged anyone. She tried to find strength from that thought and decided she should give Mrs. Davis time to think.

"I understand, Mrs. Davis. I'm offering you a chance to meet some very special people, but you must come with an open mind and a willing heart. They won't judge you, any more than they will now judge Kanin. All that is in the past. This community looks to the future. They educate their children to be kind and generous human beings – and work together. But you don't have to join them. You could simply be a helper, a liaison. I believe you have something to offer. You have patience and tenacity – to say nothing of great courage. Those are admirable qualities.

"But I've taken enough of your time. The decision is yours. You can call me when you've thought it over – if you wish me to introduce you. I won't bother you again."

Catherine rose to leave and handed her a business card with both her home and work numbers on it. Mrs. Davis politely led the way to the door, then turned to look at her, hand on the doorknob. She spoke very quietly.

"I do appreciate your coming to see me, Miss Chandler. I have been very alone. I don't know what to do next and I haven't been sleeping well. My life now seems suddenly empty. It is some consolation to know that you cared enough to come and see me. I won't forget that. I'll call you when I've thought through what you've told me."

Catherine nodded and left without another word. She had done what she could and she felt better for having made the effort.

Two days later, she returned home late to find a message on her answering machine. Mrs. Davis' soft, low voice got her attention immediately and she grabbed at a pencil and paper.

"Miss Chandler, I've thought over what you told me. I do need to do something. Your offer seems to be the only one I'm likely to get. I've alienated almost everyone I've ever known. I want to meet Kanin's family and see this community you mention. I can't promise more than that, except that I will keep the secret and be open-minded. Would tomorrow, Saturday, be convenient?"

Catherine thought quickly. Saturday. Yes, that would work. Joe had not asked her to do any overtime – and now she could refuse. She wanted to see Vincent tonight, but she knew he would stay hidden if she brought a visitor. Well, Father could be the official greeter, as usual. They would have to use her threshold entrance. She phoned back Mrs. Davis and asked her if she could come to her apartment at eleven o'clock the next day. Mrs. Davis agreed. Catherine went Below then and found Vincent approaching as she rounded the corner from

the threshold. She waited for him to reach her, then quickly told him the news. He smiled down at her and took her hands in his.

"Catherine, I never doubted that you would help this woman. Your warmth is obvious to anyone, even someone in pain."

"We'll come down via the threshold tomorrow around eleven. Maybe, after she meets Father she'll consent to stay for lunch below."

Vincent's face stilled. He knew what she was not saying. He also knew that he could not risk showing himself to Mrs. Davis immediately. He shuddered mentally at the thought. He hated meeting anyone new.

"Catherine, don't worry about me. William will send a lunch tray to my chamber. I'll know when it's safe to emerge."

Catherine moved to hug him and his arms enclosed her. She felt his love and wished with all her heart that he didn't have to see the expression that often showed on people's faces when they first looked at him. Only Eric had been different, in her memory. But children were always more resilient and the boy had known more than a little horror in his short life.

She pulled away reluctantly and Vincent looked down at her.

"You're tired, Catherine. You should get a good night's sleep. I'll escort you back to the threshold."

Catherine sighed and yawned as he took her arm and led her back to the ladder. She could not pretend with Vincent. He was attuned to her every emotion. She was tired and she did need sleep. Just once, she would like to feel less exhausted at the end of a work week. Standing at the bottom of the ladder, she wondered if she had the energy to climb it. She yawned again and stepped onto the first rung – then found herself lifted almost to the top of the ladder by a large, warm hand on her bottom. She grabbed frantically for the railing and looked down when she had it. Vincent's eyes were in shadow, but his mouth was partly open. She could feel his turmoil through the bond. Well, if the feel of her rear end could do that Catherine decided this was not the time to think about such things and thanked him, diplomatically saying nothing more, and hauled herself into the storage room and then up to her apartment. She kicked off her shoes, threw off her clothes and was under the sheets and asleep in moments.

The sun was blazing in her window when she awoke, sending her into a brief panic until she looked at the clock and then realized it was Saturday. She lay back on the pillow and looked at her big, empty bed. Her dreams had definitely not been virginal. That warm hand on her behind had seeped into her subconscious and got her thinking about its fellow – and other parts. Well, that was nothing new. It didn't take much lately. She sighed and forced herself to get ready for an unusual day.

Catherine put on what she regarded as her better tunnel wear, a pair of dark gabardine pants, a long, thick green sweater and pair of desert boots. She was on her third cup of coffee when the intercom buzzed. She signaled her welcome and opened the front door. Mrs. Davis came around the corner and saw her. Catherine smiled and beckoned her inside. The woman was wearing a stylish but comfortable-looking pantsuit and sensible shoes. Thank goodness. She had not thought to say anything about tunnel wear.

"Would you like a coffee or tea, Mrs. Davis?"

"No thank you, Miss Chandler. I'm already nervous enough."

"Very well, Mrs. Davis. Just give me a moment to collect my things and we can go. I'm glad you're wearing a coat. It can be chilly where we're going."

Mrs. Davis looked puzzled at that, but said nothing. A few minutes later Catherine, wearing her leather bomber jacket, led her down to the storage room and shifted aside the boxes to reveal the trap door and ladder.

"I'm afraid this is the safest way to where we're going, at least during the day. I'll go down first so I can help you if you need it."

Catherine clambered down the ladder, not without thinking of Vincent. He would not be here to meet her today, though. She waited while Mrs. Davis found her footing and came down the ladder. At the bottom she turned and looked around, a slight frown creasing her forehead. Still, she said nothing and Catherine had to admire her aplomb.

"Please follow me, Mrs. Davis. It's quite safe, but we have a bit of a walk ahead of us."

Catherine turned on her flashlight, grateful that it was not completely dark, and led onwards along the twisting tunnels. Finally they approached a major junction, one arm of which led to the hub. Olivia was waiting with a lantern. She approached Mrs. Davis and smiled. Mrs. Davis gave her a careful smile in return, but said nothing.

"Welcome to our home, Mrs. Davis. I'm Olivia, Kanin's wife. Father is anxious to meet you."

Olivia turned and Catherine and Mrs. Davis followed her to Father's chamber. The patriarch rose, rumbled a greeting and was echoed by a crow of delight from little Luke, who was seated on the floor, his arms around the bottom of Father's cane.

"Now you just let go of that, you little dickens," Father admonished. "He has a grip like a bench vise, Olivia."

Olivia laughed, captured Luke and swung him around to sit on the table atop of a pile of books. He looked around and crowed again. Father chuckled and, cane restored, hobbled over to his guests.

"You must be Mrs. Davis. Welcome. Catherine has told us about you."

"Thank you, ... um ... Father."

"Please call me Jacob," Father smiled.

"Jacob. Catherine convinced me I needed a change. I don't know what that means down here. Wherever 'here' is."

She looked around, taking in the massive piles of books and numerous candles. Father led her to a chair and beckoned her to sit. Catherine pulled up another chair and sat next to her.

"Ah, well that's quite a story, and one you probably don't want to waste time hearing today," he said. "My guess is you'd like to know what makes us tick, so to speak. I'm sure Catherine has told you just enough to make you curious. That's our way."

"We are a secret community, Mrs. Davis. All of us are here by choice, and we seldom go above. We have a network of helpers who send us food and other supplies we need, in exchange for products we make down here. Everyone here works at something – from caring for the babies to cooking, to carving new chambers."

"Is there anything you'd particularly like to know, Mrs. Davis?"

Mrs. Davis looked at Olivia who had moved to sit on the library steps and was playing patty cake with Luke on her knee. Then she glanced at Catherine.

"I ... I don't know where to begin. Where are we?"

Father chuckled. "A very reasonable question. We're below New York, in a system of old steam pipe maintenance tunnels, long fallen into disuse and forgotten, for the most part. This community has existed for over 30 years. I was one of the founding members."

"So long! But how can you live underground permanently?"

"We have adapted, Mrs. Davis. We have used what skills we have and shaped our world. It really isn't as peculiar or as challenging as it might seem to you. We have places where daylight reaches us, rivers, lakes, warm springs, even a waterfall. There are also winds, which we channel to keep the damp at bay."

"But most of all, Mrs. Davis, we have many talented, caring people. We're like a big family."

"We could give you the busman's tour, but that would take some time. Is there something you'd particularly like to see?"

Mrs. Davis smiled over at Olivia. "You're all very kind. If it wouldn't be an imposition, I'd like to see where Olivia and Luke live."

"Of course you may," Olivia said, rising and walking over to her immediately. Mrs. Davis rose from her chair. Luke reached for her and Mrs. Davis put out her arms.

"May I?"

Olivia handed Luke to her, who immediately stopped squirming and raised a small hand to this new face. Mrs. Davis held him and rocked him a little. Tears began to roll down her face. Luke was fascinated by this new development and stroked her wet cheek, making small whiffing noises.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "It's been such a long time since I've held a child. I'd forgotten how wonderful it is."

Olivia captured her and Luke in a hug and stroked Mrs. Davis' back. She looked over the other woman's shoulder at Father. Catherine looked at him too and he nodded and smiled. Both women relaxed a little. When Mrs. Davis regained her control Olivia stepped back a little. The older woman planted a kiss on Luke's soft hair and handed him back. Olivia smiled.

"Come Mrs. Davis. Catherine and I will show you our chamber."

She led the way, carrying a lantern, with the two women following, Catherine in the rear, for the passages were not wide enough for two people to walk side by side. They entered the chamber, a kind of living room, and Olivia immediately took a taper and lit several candles, then she moved into the adjoining room and did the same.

Mrs. Davis looked around, clearly astounded at the carefully carved planes and ledges which held the many candles, some now lit.

"It's so beautiful. A work of art. Thank you for allowing me to see it."

Olivia returned and her mouth twitched ruefully. "Kanin did this, as a kind of late wedding present. He kept it secret until just before he left."

"Kanin is our master stonemason," Catherine said quietly.

Mrs. Davis looked at Catherine quickly then, and spoke quickly to change the subject, clearly a bit uncomfortable.

"I'd like to meet your friend, if I may."

Catherine started. She sent a quick frisson of love, with a question, along their bond and felt Vincent's cautious approval. She looked at Mrs. Davis and then at Olivia, who nodded.

"Of course. He'll be waiting for us in his chamber. Please follow me."

They left Olivia and Catherine led the way along more tunnels. She stopped suddenly and turned to Mrs. Davis.

"I feel I have to give you some warning, Mrs. Davis. Vincent's appearance is ... unusual."

"Is he deformed?" Mrs. Davis asked.

"NO." Catherine said that louder than she intended. "He's beautiful, Mrs. Davis. But some may not see him that way at first glance. He's unlike anyone you've ever seen – even in the movies."

She moved onwards and led the older woman through the opening and into Vincent's chamber. The first impression was of golden light. Vincent had lit every light and candle. He obviously wanted to be seen. The stained glass window was glowing a rich yellow.

He was sitting in his chair, a book in his hands, but stood as they entered. Catherine immediately went to his side.

"Welcome, Mrs. Davis. My name is Vincent."

His voice was the same as always, silken and soft, with that undertone of deep bass Catherine loved. Mrs. Davis, she noticed, relaxed as she heard it. Her face was not so much shocked as surprised. Catherine realized belatedly that the other woman had not been expecting Vincent to be able to speak. Mrs. Davis approached Vincent and held out a hand that shook only a little. He took it in one of his and she stared at it, but said nothing. She looked up at him, seeing something in his eyes that made her mouth quirk.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Vincent. This is a marvelous world you live in. I've seen very little of it, but I can feel its harmony. I'm so glad Catherine invited me."

There was a sudden tapping on the pipes and Vincent looked sideways at Catherine.

"That's the lunch signal. Would you care to join us, Mrs. Davis? Lunch is casual, a kind of buffet scramble, but you'd be most welcome."

Mrs. Davis smiled up at him. "I'd like that very much, Vincent. I'd like to see the others who live here."

"Well, you may not see all of them. Some have duties. But our cook is the finest in New York. Come."

He led the way to the dining chamber, where chaos seemed to reign supreme. It was noisy, with a lot of chair shuffling and plate rattling. Vincent plowed through the crowd, Catherine and Mrs. Davis in his wake. He handed them both a plate and began to load one of his own. William had prepared a rich-smelling beef soup, loaded with vegetables and barley. Catherine took a bowl onto her plate and two grainy rolls, then a brownie that smelled of maple and looked loaded with walnuts.

Vincent led the way to a table, put his plate down, then pulled out a chair for Mrs. Davis. She thanked him as she sat down. Vincent sat beside her with Catherine on his other side. He poured them both a mug from the teapot doing the rounds. It smelled like jasmine. Catherine guessed it had been a gift from Henry and Lin. Their restaurant was doing well and they liked to show their appreciation in small ways.

They said no more for some time, each concentrating on their meal. Vincent upended his soup bowl to get the last drop of liquid and leaned back with a sigh.

"I swear, if William ever left us, we'd starve before we could duplicate his soups."

"I heard that, Vincent," came Williams base rumble from behind them. Catherine looked up and laughed.

"I bet you've never missed hearing a compliment, even if you were a mile away, William," she chided him.

"That's true, Catherine. I like 'em, but I seldom get 'em. I came over to meet our guest, then heard my name spoken. However, Vincent's sigh of contentment can be heard across the hall. It doesn't rate as a compliment, though. He'll eat anything."

Vincent looked up at the big cook, whose generous belly looked impressive under its enormous white apron.

"William, everyone knows you're the biggest fan of your cooking. Every year, we have to get Annabelle

– she’s our talented seamstress, Mrs. Davis - to make you a bigger apron. Pretty soon, it’ll be a bed sheet with rope ties.”

There was a hoot of maniacal laughter from a table over and Catherine spotted Annabelle, her auburn hair piled high and tamed with multiple combs and ribbons. The dwarf was sitting in the special chair Vincent had made for her. It was higher and had a pair of short steps which folded underneath the seat. She smiled at them all.

“The real challenge is keeping that ample frontage from getting burned on the stove,” Annabelle laughed. “His arms can hardly reach the pots now.”

William flushed, but his smile stayed in place as he looked over at the diminutive woman.

“Annabelle, appearance matters. A skinny cook wouldn’t be much of a recommendation. Each to his – or her – own specialty. Look at you. You’re wearing enough hair gewgaws and folderols for an entire chorus line!”

There was a roar of laughter around the hall as this exchange registered on the diners. Annabelle’s hoot rose above them all. Father, sitting next to her, dropped his head to prevent himself from choking.

Mrs. Davis, who had been watching this exchange and smiling, turned to William as the noise returned to its normal level.

“William, your soup is wonderful – as is your bread and these brownies. I’ve never had better. If you need an extra long pair of arms at any time, I’d happily volunteer.”

William looked at her. “Well now, that’s an offer I don’t get every day. Most around here are content to be ignorant of what transpires in my kitchen.”

Vincent chuckled. “William, you know very well that you hate people underfoot in your kitchen.”

“Wrong, Vincent. I hate people in my kitchen – yourself included - who are more interested in sampling the final product than assisting with its production. Mrs. Davis is obviously a woman of discernment, and would therefore be welcome - anytime.”

He ambled away to the sounds of laughter.

Vincent turned to Mrs. Davis and sighed. “Well, now you’ve seen us as we are. Father is gesturing. I think he wants us all to meet him in his chamber. Are you ready?”

Mrs. Davis nodded and they all rose to leave. Father was a little way ahead of them and they followed him to his chamber. He turned to smile at them and then approached Mrs. Davis.

“Thank you for visiting us, Mrs. Davis. As William said, you’d be welcome to visit us anytime. You probably have a lot to think about. We do have a process for accepting those who wish to live with us, but it’s not onerous. You have proven yourself a friend already. We ask only that you do not mention this place to anyone who is not a helper.”

Mrs. Davis moved to Father and held out her hand.

“Jacob, I want to thank you for introducing me to your world. I’m sure I’ve not seen a fraction of it and I look forward to seeing more. But not today. I do feel a little overwhelmed. I hadn’t expected ... all this.”

She looked back at Catherine, who stood hand in hand with Vincent.

“And I want to thank both of you too, and Olivia, for accepting me so graciously.”

“It was our pleasure,” Vincent said softly. “Kanin will be happy to know you’ve met us. He feels he owes a debt to you that can never be paid.”

Mrs. Davis looked down for a moment. “I told Catherine that I could never forgive Kanin for the lost years, the heartache.” She looked up at Vincent and then Father. “I was wrong. I have to learn to forgive, or my heart will remain the numb thing it has become. You’ve showed me there’s hope and love and laughter. That means a great deal to me. I feel as if I’m beginning to live again, to feel again. I don’t know what I will do now, whether I’ll join you, but just having the option is a great blessing. Thank you.

“I’d like to leave now, to think all this through.”

“Certainly, Mrs. Davis. I’ll escort you out,” Catherine said.

They left Father’s chamber and she took Mrs. Davis back via her threshold. Catherine led her directly to the lobby, sensing she did not want to **stay** any longer. They said goodbye with a wordless hug.

After Mrs. Davis left, Catherine returned below. She found Vincent waiting at the bottom of the ladder and ran into his arms. She could say nothing. Her eyes burned with unshed happy tears. She snuggled deeper into his embrace and felt his love surround her, like his cloak. He spoke finally, a whisper into her hair.

“You did a wonderful thing, Catherine. You have saved that woman from herself. She’ll begin to heal now.”

“Yes she will. But I did nothing, Vincent. Your family here Below helped her see herself. You especially.”

Vincent said nothing to this, merely held his Catherine close, basking in the love he felt from her. He was not what had changed Mrs. Davis. She had been empty, desolate, waiting. A barren field waiting for the rain. Love was what she needed, more than anything else. She now knew it existed. That was a big revelation for her. The next step, the acceptance of it, would be easier.

END