

The Radcliffe Reunion Society

A **Classic** *Beauty and the Beast* Story

By

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"All I'm saying is that you shouldn't stay with him for the wrong reasons, even if they are noble ones. No one owes it to someone else to be their girlfriend. It's a choice you remake every day..."

Aprilynne Pike

"But I've already arranged to take the weekend off. Joe wasn't at all pleased that I even asked."

Catherine tried to keep the disappointment from her tone, a difficult thing, given her current situation. She fixed her eyes on the scene below her balcony, avoiding her love's deeply concerned eyes.

"I'm sorry. If it could be any other way..." Vincent's long sigh said more than words.

Of course, he'd sensed her disappointment and was concerned by it. "But our population is growing, and new chambers are urgently needed. It has already been postponed too many times." He spread his hands eloquently. "Father is becoming more and more concerned about the potential problems of overcrowding."

'*But it just has to be this weekend...*' Catherine didn't voice her complaint, aware of how mean-spirited she would sound.

She knew how much the world Below relied heavily on Vincent. Just as she did. She sensed he was at a loss to know how to make it up to her. It made her sigh.

"There will be other weekends..." He tried valiantly to make her see his point of view.

"Of course..." Catherine turned from the darkened view of Central Park. "I'm being selfish. Please forgive me. It's just that..." She spread her hands, palms up, in a helpless gesture.

"There is nothing to forgive," Vincent answered quickly, reaching to draw her into his embrace. He rested his chin on the top of her head. "I am equally disappointed. Our time together is always so limited and measured. But we cannot wish for more."

"Yes..." Catherine burrowed deeper into his arms, and they stood locked in silent communion for some time as the moon rose overhead...



Somewhere, a clock chimed midnight as Vincent took his final farewell. He withdrew reluctantly, looking back as he climbed the railing at the end of the balcony to access the roof of the apartment block.

Let bereft and alone, Catherine remained standing on her balcony, looking out over the city. She stared at it, without really seeing it. She hugged her disappointment close and silently wished Vincent a safe journey home.

'There would be other weekends...' The words echoed hollowly in her mind. She heaved a long and troubled sigh.

Inside her apartment, the shrill sound of the telephone ringing made her jump. She retreated into her bedroom to answer it, sitting down on the side of her bed.

"Hello?" she said, into the receiver.

"Hi, Cathy. I... it's Nancy. Look, I know it's late, but I couldn't wait until morning. I hope I didn't wake you."

"Nancy, hi. How lovely to hear from you. It's been an age since I last saw you. No, you didn't wake me. I wasn't asleep. What's up?"

At the other end of the conversation, there was a long pause, before her friend said, "Paul has a work thing in New York this weekend. He's got some last-minute meetings he has to attend. He'll be tied up for most of the time. I was thinking, if you're not too busy, how about I come down and see you?"

"Oh, Nance..." Catherine stared at the billowing curtains of her balcony doors. "I... don't have any plans. And I would love to see you."

It isn't a weekend with Vincent. But at least it's something to distract her.

"Great. Thanks, Cathy. It's been nearly a year since we were last together. You came up for Rebecca's birthday, remember?"

She did. "Surely it hasn't been that long?" Catherine sighed. "I don't often get time off. My boss has a good heart, but he loves to play the slavedriver."

"Then I'm glad I phoned. We could call Jenny Aronson and see if she can come over. Make it a true reunion of the Radcliffe Society. It's beyond time we reconvened."

Catherine chuckled. "Now there's an idea worth exploring." Her sense of disappointment began to lift. "When will you be in town, Nance?"

"I should make it by late afternoon tomorrow. I'll get Paul to drop me off at your apartment building. He'll be so relieved I've found something to do. He hates me hanging around the hotel on my own. He worries about me. But his work is important to him, and he'll be in conference all weekend."

"I can understand that." Catherine nodded quickly. "I'll see you on Saturday, then. And, thanks, Nancy."

"For what?" Catherine heard her friend's confusion over the telephone line.

"For being there when I needed you. It's ah... It's been a tough week."

Nancy's tone brightened. "Hey, it's what friends are for! By the way, we still have some unfinished business from that weekend. You'll have to tell me if that extraordinary relationship of yours worked itself out. The one you told me about that night. His name was Vincent, right?"

Catherine inhaled sharply. *'Oh, no. That's right. I remember now. I did tell her some things I shouldn't have...'*

"Maybe we'll talk about it when I see you on Saturday." Catherine bit her lip. She'd forgotten she'd let Vincent's name slip past her guard, that night at Nancy's Westport home.

"You're being very mysterious." Nancy sighed. "Fair enough. See you on Saturday then. And please don't forget to call Jenny. She won't want to miss out on a catch-up."

"I won't. Bye, Nance." Catherine replaced the receiver on its cradle and sighed. *Maybe this weekend won't be such a loss, after all...*

"And so, just as I thought I was going to get a great foot massage, he asked me to walk on his back," Jenny laughed as she concluded her story of 'what happened after she took off her shoes' on a very forgettable date.

"Go on, finish the story. Did you actually do it?" Nancy asked, laughing with Jenny, as Catherine topped off her glass of wine.

"*No!* I grabbed up my shoes and ran! Or make that, *'I ran to the door, opened it, put my shoes on, and then I ran for it!'* I didn't dare look back to see if he was following me!"

"Good for you, girl!" Catherine joined in the laughter, as she refilled Jenny's glass, as well, then added a touch more to her own. This joyous reunion felt so right.

They were already a bottle of wine down, and relaxed, and getting giggly. "Well did he chase after you?" she asked.

"Yes, and all the while pleading with me to come back. He said it was all a huge mistake. That was the only bit he got right." Jenny shook her head. "But he only made it as far as the elevator before he gave up. I was in such a hurry to escape; I damn near killed myself. Never run on hardwood floors, in stocking feet!" She put down her glass before spreading her arms wide to mimic a sliding woman, flailing out of control.

They all laughed companionably, knowing of Jenny's sad attraction to the wrong kind of man for her. She had yet to find her very elusive, Mr Right.

"I bet you were mashing the heck out of that call button," Nancy said, imitating the motion of repeatedly hitting the button for the elevator, with her hand.

"Honey, I was all over it," Jenny assured. "And I had one eye on the stairwell door, just in case!" She picked up her glass and took a long sip of wine. "I could write a whole book on how to leave men wanting more!"

"Depends on your definition of 'more.'" Catherine settled back down on her dinky sofa, the other two women across from her.

'This feels so good. It's been too long since we've gotten together like this. I can't believe how much time has gone by.'

"Well, when it comes to a fast escape, a stairwell can be your best friend," Catherine added, toasting her friends, as she remembered a few times in the last couple of years she'd needed to use one of those.

Usually, someone had been trying to kill her. Thankfully, Vincent had been there to save her life.

'Vincent...'

Behind her, her multi-disc player clicked onto another piece of soft background music. She sighed, as she listened to one of Vincent's favourite melodies. If she closed her eyes, she could picture him here, sitting beside her, chatting to her friends, with his strong arm slung along the back of her couch... *'and his warm lips only a breath away from mine when I turn to smile at him...'*

She knew it was nothing more than a fantasy. All of it. But it was a good fantasy, so she indulged herself in it, just a little.

Her wistful gaze strayed toward the open balcony doors, as a gentle springtime breeze wafted the curtains. Her heart missed a beat when she thought she saw a shadow passing over the sheers. But it lacked any kind of substance.

Probably just the reflection of early evening car headlights moving in the park below...

Jenny chuckled and brought Catherine back to present concerns. "I guess that's dating in the 90's for you. Always know where the exits are!" She leaned forward to clink her glass with Catherine's. Nancy followed suit.

"I swear sometimes, I feel I was born too late," Jenny complained. "Chivalry is truly dead and buried. No one even tries to open a door for me, now." She

shook her head sadly.

"To the ladies of Radcliffe," Nancy intoned. "Long may they outrun the crazies."

"I'll drink to that," Jenny and Catherine said it practically together.

Each woman drank, leaned back, and sighed, just a little. The last two hours had been fun. They had planned to go out to dinner, then skipped that, deciding they were having too much fun right here. They'd all kicked off their shoes, admitting the wine had more than a bit to do with the sense of freedom that gave, but no-one minded. They'd talked of ordering pizza, but no-one had reached to pick up the phone. They'd just kept talking, as long-time girlfriends are wont to do.

"See, that's the thing about being married," Nancy said, the other two not sure if she was bragging or complaining. "Nobody chases you to the elevator, anymore, barefoot, or not! I have to push my own button."

"You have a gorgeous house in Westport. And you don't have an elevator," Jenny declared. "Want to swap? I'll take Paul and the kids; you can have my apartment and my running shoes. And my Rolodex of sad odd balls. Free to a good home."

"Careful about the bargains you make, Jen. Sometimes, they make you," Nancy cautioned. "Sometimes, I feel my life isn't all it's cracked up to be," she continued cryptically. "Maybe I'd like your life, working for a publisher, shooting film for pictures in a book. Dinner at *Delmonico's*, whenever the mood takes me. Trips to the museums and great shopping." She grimaced. "But, okay, let's deal. Except you get Paul, I'll take the kids, and we can let Cathy have the shoes. She always had a thing for those, anyway."

"I did not have a 'thing' for shoes!" Catherine protested.

"Oh, for Pete's sake!" Jenny shook her head, sending her brown, curly hair to dancing. "*Liar!* Tell that to somebody who *didn't* share a dorm room with you, in college! I swear you would've rather I slept in the corridor than disturb your perfect array of footwear!"

"Okay. Maybe I had a *little* bit of a thing," Catherine admitted.

"We were so sure you were going to major in fashion law." Nancy grinned as she saluted her with her glass. "Cathy, when Imelda Marcos calls for fashion advice, you know you're over the limit."

She put an imaginary telephone to her ear. "Hello, Catherine? I can't decide between ze black leather pumps and ze patent leather ones. Yes, of course, zey both have ze three-inch heels. Vat's dat? Oh. I'm wearing sequins, of course. Patent leather, you say. Thank you, Cathy. Good luck wiz your fashion law degree." She hung up the 'phone,' and the women continued to laugh.

"I don't think Imelda Marcos had that weird an accent," Catherine observed, chuckling. "But I get the picture."

"I don't think Imelda Marcos needed a separate carry-on for boots," Jenny jibed gently. Then she turned to her other friend. "But to be fair, that was nothing

compared to your camera equipment, Nance. We practically needed another ticket, when we flew to Paris that summer!”

“Hey, those lenses alone cost as much as a semester’s tuition. There was no way I was checking them through,” Nancy defended. “I was good...” Her smile faded to a brief look of regret. “I love my life and Paul. But sometimes...” She took a mouthful of wine. “In a weak moment, he promised to take me back there, someday...”

Someday...a shiver feathered along Catherine’s spine. How she longed to show Paris to Vincent. Someday. Such a simple idea, so hard to execute. I’d share it all with you. Sunrise on the Seine, seen from the top of the Eiffel Tower. The winding streets and flower boxes in the windows...

She looked up. “All those great photos you took, Nance. Of us at Radcliffe, and on our travels abroad. They were surely something. You were truly talented. I remember we got chased from a few places because you took a heap of pictures even when the signs said, ‘no cameras.’ Do you still have them?”

Jenny interrupted with a chuckle. “I remember that overweight museum guard swearing at us in very bad English because you shot a whole roll of film without his permission. He was too fat to chase us very far. I nearly wet myself as we ran, I was laughing so hard.” She frowned. “Was that where I learned how to run away from unsuitable men? Huh...”

Nancy waved a regretful hand at Catherine’s question. “I used to have all those photos stored in lots of shoe boxes in the bedroom closet of our old house. But when we finally moved up to Westport, they got scattered like a million grains of sand. But sure, I’ve still got them. Somewhere between the attic and the basement. I’ve often said I must get them organized into albums. When I get time, ya know...” She pulled a face.

Catherine nodded regretfully. “Yes, I do know...”

“Maybe I’ll take some new ones when Paul finally finds the time to take me back to Paris...”

“We should make the time to go back...” Jenny said regretfully, knowing it was a forlorn dream. “The Radcliffe Paris Reunion Society...”

“Yes, we should...,” Catherine agreed, knowing it was unlikely such plans would materialize. She knew she had enough problems trying to plan a free weekend, much less an entire European vacation. And Nancy’s life revolved around Paul, her children, and the schedules of each of those employed. Jenny was a law unto herself for ‘busy,’ between her work, her extended family, and a love life that seemed to be keeping her ‘on the run.’ Literally.

The group sat silent for a long moment, each reflecting on promises made, and never kept. Slowly they began discussing springtime in Paris. Moments later, there was a sharp knock on Catherine’s front door.

“Is that our pizza? I’m starving. Please tell me that someone thought to order pizza,” Jenny said, as Catherine rose to get it.

"Considering we didn't order any, I kind of doubt it. The number's by the phone," she said, crossing to the door.

"Cathy, it's Edie!" said a familiar voice through Catherine's door. "Open up, girlfriend."

"If you're bringing me work, I'm not letting you in!" Catherine teased, feeling the effects of the alcohol, now that she'd stood up. She felt delightfully irresponsible, as she placed a hand on the doorknob, but didn't open up.

"If I lie and say I'm bringing you a tall, handsome man, will you take these files off my hands?" Edie said, through the wood. "Please, Cathy. Joe sent me over. You can blame him. I just wanna go home and put my aching feet up."

"Oh, all right..." Catherine pulled open the door. She pretended to look past her friend. "What gives? I don't see any tall, handsome man." She grimaced, motioning Edie inside.

"Fresh out of them." Edie handed her the files that couldn't wait until Monday morning, for some reason. "And isn't that just the story of my life, too?" she asked. "I tried to sneak out. But he caught me at the elevator. Told me my job was on the line, unless..."

For reasons unknown to Edie, that set off peals of laughter, from the other two women sitting on the dinky couches.

Catherine stood back and motioned Edie inside. "C'mon in. You know Jenny. And this is my friend Nancy Tucker, from Westport."

"Hiya..." Nancy waved, from the sofa.

"Looks like an exclusive party." Edie didn't move. "I should be going. Got the re-runs of my favourite TV show to watch..."

"This is an informal meeting of the Radcliffe Reunion Society." Jenny waved an airy hand. "Newcomers are welcome, as long as they bring along a great sense of humour and know how to enjoy themselves."

"Well, if you put it that way..." Edie stepped inside and set her things down. "Don't mind if I do. I take it there's wine..." She eyed the sideboard, where two bottles of a decent red were breathing.

"There is most definitely wine. But you can have a soft drink if you like," Catherine offered, as she closed the door.

"Girlfriend..." Edie scoffed. "When there's a good *Beaujolais* in the room? Perish the thought. Hi, I'm Edie." She waved back at Nancy. "I would say I work with this girl here, but truth to tell, I'm usually the only one working. I make her look good." She grinned at Catherine and tossed her dark curls.

"You wish." Catherine chuckled as she fetched Edie a glass. *What a fun night this is turning out to be*, she thought.

With her back to the balcony doors, she didn't see the moving shadow return to the edge of the billowing curtains, and her friends were too engrossed in conversation to notice the new, unseen presence at their party...

Vincent halted at the edge of the balcony doorway when he heard the feminine voices from within Catherine's apartment. He frowned, unsure of what to do now. Caution and good manners demanded he retreat, and make his escape back to the rooftop, to wait for Catherine to be alone. But time passed, and he didn't move away.

He heard her apartment door open and close as another woman entered, and then he heard Catherine dial a take-out restaurant and order pizza. The newly-arrived friend fell into easy conversation with the other two women about the decided virtues of dating a solid Capricorn over any Pisces. And her total distrust of Leos.

Vincent listened with interest, being a Capricorn himself. Her conversation kept him where he was, knowing he'd need to make a jump for the ladder to the roof, if any of them decided to come out on Catherine's balcony. But no one did. They were too deeply engrossed in deciding their zodiac preferences.

And after a few minutes more, another knock on Catherine's door meant dinner was served. The enticing smells of pepperoni, anchovies and melted mozzarella drifted through the open doors, making Vincent's mouth water. He'd neglected to eat, due to the pressing nature of the work, Below.

Meanwhile, inside Catherine's living room, they were now telling stories. Stories, and laughter, even though sometimes, it was of a rueful kind, often centred on dating, office life, how busy they all were, or some such. Sometimes, one of the women would get up from where they were seated and move to get a slice of pizza or refill a glass of wine. With the balcony doors open, it made it difficult for Vincent to move without being detected. So, he stayed where he was.

They laughed, often. It had a convivial, cheerful appeal. He felt his love relax, as she shared the company of friends who were dear to her.

My Catherine is happy. He enjoyed the sensation, as he stood nearby.

He hadn't anticipated how the events of the necessary work on new chambers would abruptly end. A water main, one that had not been on any of their maps, had been pierced by an unwary pickaxe. The resulting flood had taken some time to stem. Father's deep frustration was clear to all who came within earshot. Nothing more could be done until the water was given time to drain, and the problem properly addressed.

Consequently, for now, all work on the project had been halted, while Winslow and Mouse worked out a solution. Suddenly released from his obligation, Vincent had barely waited for darkness before hurrying Above, hoping to find Catherine waiting for him.

He had not expected her to be entertaining company. *Why should she not be,* he mused. *She has many good friends.*

Some of the women were deep in a discussion about their long-ago trip to Paris, while Edie asked questions. Vincent envied their casual acceptance of their ability to go anywhere in the world. They continued to laugh, even now.

Their laughter had a feminine sound, and it was one Vincent found wholly appealing. Even among the four of them, he could easily pick out Catherine's low chuckle. She had a wonderful laugh. And it was a thing he sometimes heard too seldom, as the seriousness of her job – and even sometimes their situation – gave her only so much to laugh about.

As he listened, their ongoing conversation allowed him to identify the different women. Catherine spoke their names occasionally, and each woman's voice quickly became distinct, to his sharp ears. He wanted to leave, but he became caught up in the unguarded tales about Catherine's various adventures and mishaps, before he knew her. This was a part of her life he did not know.

Jenny's voice wafted out. "... and the smell of fresh bread from the bakeries every morning! My God, you woke up ravenous, after dreaming of pastries. We all gained more than five pounds, and everybody had brought tight jeans, so we just suffered..."

Vincent smiled as he listened to the recollections. Against his better judgment, he moved closer to the doorway and leaned back against the brickwork. If he closed his eyes, he could imagine himself inside the room with them, sitting beside Catherine, and enjoying the moment.

"And then there was that crazy guy hanging out next to the main entrance of the *Louvre*..." Nancy related, telling another story of their adventures in Paris. "He had the hots for Cathy, big time!" She waved a hand in front of her face, though Vincent couldn't see the gesture.

"You need a beret! You can't tell Edie that story without a beret!" Catherine insisted. "It was too awful."

She was laughing and sharing her memories. Vincent drew a deep sigh and released it slowly, caught up in the warmth of her happiness. Their bond shimmered, with her burst of nostalgic joy. He wished he could simply walk in and sit beside her, meet her friends, enjoy a glass of wine, and the unalloyed pleasure of the evening. *If only...*

"No beret. I've never been able to look at one, without remembering. But you should have seen it, Edie..." Nancy continued to tell the story. "He said he was an artist, looking for an American girl to be his muse. He wanted her to be Cathy. He followed us for miles, begging her to pose for him! We didn't dare tell him she'd once posed for a life study class in college. We finally managed to shake him."

"And he wore a beret?" Edie's dark eyes widened.

"Along with a long, black coat that'd seen better days." Catherine shuddered. "Do you know how many beret-wearing men in black coats there are in Paris? I swear we thought we saw him on every street corner, after that. He had me jumping at shadows."

"We saw a lot of the city at high speed for days afterwards. Just as well Cathy had packed some sensible shoes. Running from unsuitable men seems to have been a theme in Paris that year," Jenny declared, frowning. "You know, it's all starting to add up."

"I would love to go see Paris," Edie said enviously, as she picked up a slice of pizza.

"If you do, avoid men in berets. Which are everywhere, there."

Edie chuckled. "I can stay in New York if I want to avoid the wrong kind of guy. Besides, my nights are occupied. Fred Astaire and I have a thing going on."

"Not Gene Kelly?" Nancy asked.

"Fred. It's just gotta be Fred. Way more class. And he's a Taurus," Edie asserted. "Gene's okay. He's just not my type. Virgos can be so demanding." She swung her braided hair saucily, and it sent her large earrings to dancing.

"When it comes to dating people who aren't my type, I could give lessons!" Jenny exclaimed. "Their star signs just complicate matters."

"Jenny Aronson, you haven't changed. You were just as bad in college. You've been running from unsuitable men, ever since," Catherine accused, and they all dissolved into laughter.

"My therapist would say that's self-sabotage," Edie exclaimed. "But he's old and married, so what does he know about dating? And for seventy bucks an hour, he should give better advice!"

"Why break the habits of a lifetime." Jenny shrugged. "Sometimes I think, I could have it all, just like Nancy. If I really wanted. A great husband, kids, and a big house. But I've decided that I like my life, just as it is."

Earlier glasses of wine had kicked in, and Nancy let a certain truth fly. "You truly think my life is so perfect?" She sobered, frowning into her glass. "You know what I said earlier, about my life not always being what it's cracked up to be?"

The other women nodded silently, knowing they were about to hear something far more serious than their previous happy conversation.

"I've wanted to tell you for so long..." Nancy's breathing hitched. "A few years ago, just after Jeremy's birth, Paul fell into a brief affair, with a co-worker. He said he didn't mean it to happen, but it just did. He complained he was lonely, and she was there for him. He said she understood him." Her lips thinned.

"When I found out, I was devastated. We were both so miserable we talked about divorce." She looked at Edie. "That's when I found out therapists in Westport go for eighty an hour."

Catherine reached for Nancy's hand. "Oh, Nance, that's so unfair. I didn't know..."

"And here's me thinking you have the perfect marriage..." Jenny leaned closer to hug her. "I'm so sorry, hon. Sometimes, staying with someone is harder than leaving them."

"Men surely know how to hurt us." Edie nodded, not knowing Nancy's husband, but understanding the pain he'd caused. "I'm convinced the perfect man doesn't exist. We just have to get by with second best. Or whatever's out there."

Do we? Catherine thought. *I know I used to think so...*

"It's okay." Nancy nodded, interrupting Catherine's thought. "It's ancient history. We worked it through in time, and we're stronger for the experience." She regarded the ruby contents of her wine glass. "But it left me feeling... confused and sad, knowing it had happened. Knowing I'd somehow not been 'enough' for him."

"Oh, Nance, you know it wasn't that!" Jenny protested.

Nancy looked up at her. "I know he doesn't like me being alone in the city. He thinks I might be tempted..." She huffed a sad laugh before she took a long sip of wine. "For some time, I considered agreeing to the divorce. But as time goes by..." She grimaced. "Better the devil you know, right?"

Jenny nodded in understanding. "Well, you all know about my luck with men has been going. I've had to flee to a lot of elevators. Paul needs to take you on that trip to Paris," she declared roundly. "He owes you that."

"Yes..." Nancy nodded. "Thanks, guys, it's a weight off being able to tell you. It must be the wine. I'm getting all maudlin. I thought this was a party." She wiped away her tears with an impatient swipe of her fingers. "But I do think Paul's idea of someday taking me on a trip back to Paris was his way of saying 'sorry.'"

"I seem to hear that word from people I date all the time," Jenny mused, glancing at her own glass. "I seem to be either taking my shoes off or trying to put them on again." She shook her head. "Remember I told you about Craig, the pony-tailed artist who lived in that awful, unheated loft? He liked to look at naked women while he painted abstracts. I spent three weeks freezing to death, in a sheet, for nothing! The things we do for love..."

"Ah, now there's an overused word if I ever heard one..." Nancy stated, leaning forward to look over the pizzas before choosing another slice.

"See, this is why I love Fred. Fred will never hurt me," Edie joined in, picking anchovies off her pizza. "He's just there for me, any time I want him..."

Their conversation quickly turned back to lighter subjects. Vincent shuffled his boots, reluctant to leave, but unsure of how long he would have to wait. He half-turned away, regretting that he was standing outside, overhearing a private conversation. Then his keen senses were arrested by the unguarded mention of his name...

"But enough about our sorry love lives. Vincent..." Nancy tossed out the name carelessly. "That's what you called him, right, Cathy? That mysterious man of yours?"

She frowned at her friend, as she tried to retrieve the elusive memory. "Back in Westport, when you came up for the weekend. I said to you, 'You've got to follow your heart. It's the only thing you can every really count on.' You said 'he' always says that."

"Did I?" Catherine blinked. "I don't remember." She frowned at the remains of their pizza meal that lay in scattered open boxes across her coffee table, hoping to avoid the obvious question.

"Men..." Jenny shook her head sadly. "Mars and Venus..." Her gaze locked on Catherine's worried expression. She sat up to pursue the new subject of the conversation, but Nancy spoke first.

"So, your Vincent..." Nancy sniffed, as she eyed Catherine's watchful expression. "Whatever became of him? Did you two ever work it out? Please tell me you did. I need to hear all about a really happy ending."

Jenny trained her dark eyes on Catherine, and her expression said it all. *Vincent who?* Edie looked equally curious.

"I... we... it's...complicated," Catherine managed lamely. She stood up to refill everyone's wine glasses, wondering how she was going to answer such a direct question, without giving too much away.

"Oh, that's right, waaaiit a minute..." Jenny added thoughtfully. "You weren't going to be alone that night... after... well, you know..." She shrugged apologetically for bringing up the subject of Catherine's abduction by the Watcher. "You shoed me out because you weren't going to be alone. That awful night!"

"It's okay, Jen," Catherine soothed her.

Edie accepted the refill as she watched Catherine closely. "Does this Vincent guy have anything to do with that gorgeous silk nightgown you bought some time ago? It was expensive enough to have some cute guy attached to it. Or were you really just fishing from the bank that day, just to see what you could reel in?"

"The New York dating pool is full of boring fish," Jenny said caustically. "I should know, I've reeled in enough of them, only to throw them back. And then had to outrun them, besides."

"Yeah." Edie shook her head. "I get by with my Fred Astaire, or some other glamorous movie star, most nights. They don't disappoint. Where is the great love we were all promised?" She scowled at her glass of wine. "Sometimes I'm so afraid of ending up alone, like my Aunt Cassie. Everyone in the family pitied her because she never married." She shook her head. "Maybe I'm cursed to live my love life vicariously, through others."

"We're all afraid of our own sense of aloneness." Catherine surveyed them, knowing each often saw themselves trapped in an endless cycle of disappointments, as she once had been.

Until Vincent rescued me, she thought. Her voice carried her convictions. "Love is real. And it's deep. And it lasts. You just have to believe. And I swear..."

sometimes, I think it only happens to you in that moment when you're really not expecting it."

"That sounds juicy. Tell me more. Is there a book in it?" Jenny wiped her hands on her napkin before reaching for another slice of pizza. "You were very mysterious that night. You couldn't get rid of me fast enough. Was it *him*, this Vincent guy, you were waiting to meet? I didn't see anyone coming up in the elevator..."

"Had to be. And I can top that," Nancy inserted. "Last year, she borrowed my car and drove all the way back to town, at four in the morning. Something couldn't wait." She raised her eyebrows. "Or someone..."

"I feel like I've been left out of something great. I hate that." Edie sat forward. "I know Elliot Burch used to buy you a florist's shop of flowers, and a catered lunch. Then he just stopped coming around the office. What gives, girlfriend? Is this 'Vincent' guy why you tear out of the office, sometimes? But you never bring anybody around..."

Catherine suddenly realized that having all of her closest girlfriends together in the same room might not be a great idea, considering that all of them knew 'pieces' about her life after the attack, but none of them knew what the others did.

Catherine hedged, by saying, "The last two years have been the most amazing of my life. But if it's a mixed bag, or even if it's lonely sometimes, well... I'd never trade them for anything."

"That's a lawyer's answer if I ever heard one," Jenny huffed. "Saying everything and nothing. You've worked for the D.A.'s office for far too long. Are you telling us we have to read between the lines and butt out? Does this guy of yours even exist?"

"As I said, it's complicated." Catherine sighed. "I wish I could tell you more. But there are secrets that are not mine to tell."

Nancy leaned over to Edie. "I get it. He's perfect. And she's keeping him under wraps, so nobody steals him away."

Catherine chuckled, neither agreeing with nor denying that.

"Oh, a *perfect* man!" Edie exclaimed, pinning Catherine with her deeply brown gaze. "But tell us Cathy... does he dance?"

Catherine couldn't hide her smile. *It surely couldn't hurt to admit it.* "As a matter of fact, he does." She remembered their Winterfest waltz. "Very well, in fact."

"Better than Fred?" Edie asked, raising a dark eyebrow.

"Nobody dances better than Fred," Jenny stuck up for her new friend's crush.

"You got that right," Edie agreed, clinking her glass to Jenny's.

Oh, I don't know about that, Catherine thought, remembering the intoxicating feeling of dancing in the Great Hall, to music only she and Vincent could hear. It

had been a magic night. She reached for another slice of pizza, keeping her head down so no one could see her blush.

"Curiouser and curiouser," Nancy opined darkly, watching her closely, and seeing her face colour. "But from all this we have to glean this Vincent of yours is still around." She frowned into the darkness of the bedroom.

"He is." Catherine opted for a small amount of truth. "But he... doesn't have a place in my world." She fought to sound matter-of-fact.

"Aw. From the wrong side of the tracks, huh?" Jenny guessed thoughtfully. "Well, we've tried out all the offerings on this side, and came up empty." She zeroed in on what Catherine didn't say. "But he *is* the reason Tom Gunther got shown the door? You were the town's hottest couple once, and then suddenly, you weren't. You're being very mysterious, Cathy."

"Says the woman who publishes those, for a living," Cathy deflected. "And Tom was no great loss. I think my dad liked him more than I did. Especially by the end."

Jenny smiled at Catherine. "We're all so proud of the way you overcame such a terrible time, and how you've managed to change your life for the better. Good for you, we all said. Gunther was a creep, anyway. I hear he finally married some vapid, blond bimbo with more hair than sense." She toasted the absent couple with her glass. "Serves him right."

Catherine was glad the topic of conversation had veered away from Vincent and into Tom Gunther. "Whatever he did, I hope it makes him happy." Catherine saluted with her own glass. She meant it. She had no desire to wish Tom Gunther ill. Or even think of him, particularly. *Not when I have so many better things to think about...*

"He stood you up!" Nancy suddenly announced. She waved a hand at the astonished glances cast her way. "No, no, not Tom. I agree, he was decidedly regrettable. You were always too good for him. And Burch wasn't much better."

She turned to Catherine. "I mean your Vincent. That's why you sounded so down when I phoned you. The pair of you had plans for this weekend. I thought it was odd that you were free. Oh, God, I'm so sorry, Cathy. I really messed up."

"I... no, please, it's all right. He had to... go away," Catherine affirmed warily, not sure where this conversation was leading. "It was... unavoidable. And it's not an issue. I love seeing you guys."

"So, he's not the world's most perfect man, after all." Jenny raised her eyes to the ceiling. "*Phew!* Thank heavens for that! I was beginning to believe you've really been holding out on us."

"Fantasy men are my life's foundation. My therapist says that's avoidance," Edie chimed in.

"Fantasies are fine, but all men stink. I can cope with rejection, knowing my whole belief system is still intact," Jenny replied.

She surveyed the box of pizza, trying to decide if she could afford to consume just one more delicious slice. "Why not..." She shrugged, dipping her hand into the box. "I can always run an extra mile or two, tomorrow."

Catherine's mantle clock showed the hour, and Edie checked her watch, indicating it was time for her to go. "Remember, Cathy, I once told you that Auntie Edie wants all the juicy details." She drained her glass. "You'd better not hold out on me, girl." She got to her feet a little unsteadily, stepping back into her abandoned shoes. "I'm afraid only the greatest dancer of the silver screen awaits me at home. It's been wonderful meeting you, ladies, but I gotta get going."

Catherine walked with her to the door and opened it. "Thanks, Edie. For your company, if not the files I'll have to work on, tomorrow." She handed her friend her belongings.

"Monday..." Edie wagged her eyebrows significantly, before hugging her close. "I want details. Don't make me come hunting you down." She grinned, as she waved an airy hand in farewell before Catherine closed the door behind her.

I have no idea what I'll tell you. But if I only tell you what I already have, that it's been the most amazing two years of my life, then that's the truth, Catherine smiled at the white wood.

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"She's nice. I hope she finds somebody," Jenny said, as Catherine returned to her friends. The pizza was getting that decidedly 'demolished' look. And the latest bottle of wine was more than half gone.

"She is nice," Catherine said, glad the subject had veered away from Vincent, again. She settled herself back down on the sofa, which now had more room. She tucked one leg up under her. "But then, I think we all deserve someone special. Or to be in love." She toasted Nancy, on the last, hoping her friend could make her marriage work, in the long run. She knew Paul. He wasn't a bad man. But he had made a terrible mistake.

"We do. We really do," Jenny agreed, pouring the last of the wine into Catherine's glass. "That makes me wonder. What's the perfect man like, for you?" she asked, setting the green glass bottle down. "I mean, what's he really like? If you could wish for one, what would he be?"

"This sounds like a conversation we used to have when we were back at school," Catherine recalled. "I remember you always wanted them 'tall, dark, and handsome. And able to ski.'"

Jenny smiled. "I think I still want that. I like to ski. But... time has maybe modified my list, a little..."

"Mine, too," Nancy chimed in. "Faithful. The perfect man has to be faithful. I used to think 'successful' was the big thing, so we'd be secure. But I'm changing my list. My perfect man is always faithful."

Both the other women now knew why Nancy had chosen the trait she had.

"Security isn't exactly a bad thing," Jenny piped up.

"If I know it's just me, he loves... he doesn't have to have a dime," Nancy stated, taking a long swallow of wine. "Oh. And it's okay if he really likes photography. I'd love to go on a shoot with somebody who was crazy about me. And could develop all our stuff!"

"I'd just like somebody who wasn't trying to squeeze me in, in between everything else he was trying to get done," Jenny said. "His career, his parents, his ex-wife, and their kids... I'd just like to be *first*, for once, you know?" she added, all of them realizing that their 'list' for the perfect man had indeed changed, over the years.

"How about you, Cathy? I know this is a bad name to bring up, but you used to love going antiquing with Stephen. Still want that big old house in the country, full of one-of-a-kinds?" Nancy asked.

Out on the balcony, Vincent stood stock still and listened. He caught his breath, closing his eyes as he waited for Catherine's answer.

Inside her apartment, Catherine smiled into her wine glass. *Vincent is definitely one of a kind*, she thought, knowing she couldn't say it, that way. *And a keeper...* She could almost feel his arms around her, and his lips against her hair. She closed her eyes for a moment, simply imagining the impossible.

"Let's just say I still value ... unique things. And uniqueness, in a person," she answered carefully, trying not to let the wine loosen her tongue too much. "And 'yes' to fidelity. It is important. Knowing someone loves you too much to ever hurt you that way... it's priceless. I'm so sorry you lost that, Nancy. I know it happens. A lot of people do work through it. But it's so much better to always have it and know it's there. But as to being first..."

Catherine rubbed her temple, trying to explain without implicating her life with Vincent. "We all have pressures. I have my work. There are nights when I'm barely in the door, before I have to go to bed and then get up, again." She gestured toward the files Edie had brought her. "I don't think I can marry you, Jenny."

She gave her friend a soulful look, and the women's soft laughter lightened the mood. "But I think it's okay to not be the only thing he's dealing with. As long as you... as long as you feel like you're so very important to him... well. There are always disappointments, in life. And in love. But if you know you're precious to him... it's okay if he has to go away on business that can't wait. It's okay to know you're the thing he's thinking about, even if he can't be with you."

The other two women exchanged a soulful glance.

"I'd say nothing can beat that. No matter how thin the two of you get stretched, and what barriers stand in the way of your ultimate happiness," Catherine concluded.

"Hear, hear," Nancy said, raising her glass.

Out on the balcony, Vincent heard the sound of clinking stemware. *Thank you, Catherine. Thank you for understanding. And accepting what we are...*

"So, that's the perfect man taken care of. What about the perfect day?" Nancy asked, settling back against the sofa cushions. "We used to talk about that, too, back in college. Cathy's was always to be spent going shopping. We just refused to go along to watch her do it!"

"Probably for more shoes," Jenny added. "A nice, big house in the country can fit in a lot of shoes."

"I guess just like 'the perfect man,' the 'perfect day' also went through some changes, since the college days," Catherine replied, chuckling at their description of 'the old Cathy.'

Nancy ran her fingers through her soft fall of hair. "I used to think the perfect day was getting up and shooting ten rolls of film, before lunch," she said, picking up her glass and contemplating her wine. *And now I'd give anything to be able to do that, still. I guess I really haven't changed much.*

"But now, I just think it would be great to be able to sleep in, without having to get up and tend to everybody else and their breakfast, before I even have a chance to think!" she smoothed.

"It sounds like you and Paul could use some time for a vacation. Maybe not Paris, just... a break? Just the two of you? Leave the kids with your mom? Or their favourite Aunt Jenny?" Jenny advised. She knew the sound of a stressed-out friend when she heard one.

"We took one not so long ago. I don't think I was ready for it. I just... missed the kids and wanted to come home. They're a ... distraction, sometimes. You don't have to deal with the stuff you don't want to, when there's always a load of laundry to fold or a new pair of kid's sneakers to buy. We both... use that, sometimes," Nancy confessed.

"Maybe you should try again?" Catherine nudged. "Maybe you're... more ready, now?"

"Maybe," Nancy replied, honestly thinking it over. "On my perfect day... I think I know Paul loves me, again. Really loves me. In spite of what happened in the past. And he can make me believe it, before he kisses me beneath the Eiffel Tower." Her expression grew wistful, for a moment, and held longing for her marriage the way it had once been.

"I hope you get that, Nance. With all my heart," Jenny said.

Nancy smiled mistily. She knew Jenny spoke nothing but the truth. "But what about you, Jen? What's your perfect day? Still writing the Great American Novel, then publishing it?"

"I think I figured out it's way easier to read them than it is to write them," Jenny chuckled, glad to be able to admit it. "Perfect day. Hmmm. It would have to start with us eating a whole plateful of my grandmother's latkes. There's no perfect day for me, without them!"

"Then what?" Catherine prompted. "Latkes, and...?"

"Nothing but bottles of the best champagne." Jenny waved a dismissive hand. "Fried foods and sparkling wines echo each other in texture, creating a satisfying effect that's hard to beat. You know what I'm saying?"

"You read that somewhere!" Nancy threw a cushion at her.

"Yeah, okay, I did. But you have to admit I'm right." Jenny threw the cushion back at her. "And then I would invite both of you to my lavish dinner at the Tavern on the Green. And when we'd eaten so much, we felt like bursting, we would all go back to my apartment for more drinks, and we would dance the night away to the old music. We would cry and hug each other, and swear to do it all again, next year."

Catherine chuckled. "Bursting sounds a bit dangerous, but I like the whole idea. Your *Bubbe's* latkes are the best I've ever had."

"Best in New York," Jenny avowed with simple pride. "I can't cook worth a damn, much to my *Bubbe's* dismay." She grinned suddenly. "Guess my perfect man will have to know how to cook *kosher* Jewish food."

"Okay, so it's your turn." She eyed Catherine speculatively. "What would your perfect day look like?"

We were walking on 5th Avenue... The sky was so blue... you bought me ice cream. And no one looked twice. The ghost of a dream-memory flashed across Catherine's consciousness. One she couldn't tell.

"Well, for one thing, there would be no files." She frowned at the pile Edie had delivered. "I would sleep late, and then have breakfast in bed, and read all the newspapers." She stretched her arms above her head, linking her fingers. The wine she'd consumed was making her feel delightfully irresponsible. "Then I would put on my most comfortable clothes, walk down into the park, and just hang out with all the cool people of this city."

"That mean us, of course." Jenny nudged Catherine's upraised knee with her stockinged foot. "Aren't we somewhere in this wonderful, pastoral dream?"

"Oh, are you there, too?" Catherine arched her brows at her friend.

"Why do I get the distinct feeling that she'd rather walk in the park with someone other than us?" Nancy laughed, tilting her head at her good friend. "By chance, is he tall, dark, and handsome, and able to ski? You never did describe your Vincent to us."

Catherine let the words go, staying purposefully vague. "He's tall, not dark, incredibly romantic, and the most beautiful man I have ever seen..." Catherine admitted dreamily, her eyes straying towards the open doorway to her balcony. "And, on my perfect day we would walk hand in hand down Fifth Avenue, and buy ice cream..." The frank admission slipped past her usually well-guarded tongue before she could stop it.

She bit her bottom lip, worrying about what her good friends would make of such an incredible statement. She needn't have worried.

"Aw, come on. I'm sorry, Cathy, but no one's that perfect," Jenny complained. "What have we been saying all evening? It's impossible. No such man exists."

"Yes, that tears it." Nancy shook her head, throwing the cushion at her. "You've never wanted us to meet this dream man of yours. And now I know why. Your Vincent is just too unbelievable to be real... you made him up. It's fine, I can understand that. Real life can get so lonely at times, you know?" Her frowning look of suspicion said she wasn't convinced, but she was prepared to play along, for now.

"I guess so..." Catherine cast her eyes down, trying to look sad about some of her choices in life.

"There you go..." Jenny sat forward to hold her hand. "It's okay, we get it. Being alone sucks. Forget men. Who needs them, anyway? The Radcliffe girls will have each other, always..."

Catherine pushed through the filmy drapes covering the open balcony doors and stepped out into the night. It was after one o'clock in the morning, and she was finally alone.

Nancy and Jenny had been reluctant to leave, loath to break up the Radcliffe Reunion party. But, finally, when the last bottle of wine had been emptied and the remains of the pizzas consumed, her good friends had both left in the same taxi, vowing to do it all again, *soon*...

Catherine hugged her silk dressing gown closer across her chest. The combination of the wine she'd drunk, and the cool night air, made her head swim a little. She walked unsteadily to her balcony wall, and leaned on it, looking down into the park below.

She needed to grab a few hours' sleep, but she was feeling too restless to go to bed, yet. She'd said more than she planned, tonight, but thankfully, her friends didn't believe she could have such a perfect love. It was for the best to leave them believing that.

"Be well..." she whispered. She hoped Vincent had completed his work on the new chambers, and she would see him the following evening. As much as she knew she needed to go inside, she was reluctant to break the spell of a very enjoyable get-together.

The files Edie had brought hovered in the back of her mind, like a shadow that wouldn't be banished. "Tomorrow..." she said, with a sigh. "No, make that today." She shook her head, taking one final glance at the moon, before turning from the balcony.

"Catherine..." The sound of Vincent's voice drifted to her on the night wind.

"Vincent...?" She turned towards the mention of her name, unsure if she had truly heard it.

But he was there, hidden in the shadows at the end of her balcony, looking as unsure of his welcome as the very first time he'd stood there. He wasn't a dream, he was very real, and she needed him, right now.

She took a step towards him. "I... how long have you been there, waiting?"

"I... have been here for some time. The work Below was suspended, hours ago. A water main burst." He moved towards her, slowly. "I didn't know you had company. I should have left long ago, but..." His wide shoulders lifted in apology.

"They were my friends, Nancy, and Jenny. From my days at Radcliffe. And Edie, from work. I... it was a last-minute thing."

"There's no need to explain." Vincent came to stand beside her. "I... overheard some of your conversation. It was... enlightening to hear you speak of your life before we met."

"You heard that?" Catherine reached to grasp his forearm. "Oh, Vincent, I wish you could've come inside and sat with us. I know it's impossible, but..."

"I also wished for that. More than anything." Vincent nodded. "I loved hearing your stories. I'm sorry I listened in on your private conversation. But I could not leave."

"Don't apologize! Don't you *dare!*" Catherine shook his arm. "You have every right to know about my life before you found me. I want you to know all of it. There is so much I want to show you." *In a house in Westport, there are boxes full of almost every memory I have, from that time. And probably dozens more, that I've forgotten.*

Vincent released his breath with a long sigh. "You said that the last two years have been the most amazing of your life. That even if it's lonely sometimes, you wouldn't trade them for anything. It was enough to hear you say those words."

"I meant every word." Catherine raised her hand to grasp his chin, bringing his gaze around to hers. "I meant all of them and more. Despite some of the things that have happened in those two years. You *are* beautiful, Vincent. And you are my life. Believe that."

"I do..." Vincent nodded. "But to see all you have seen... all you spoke about tonight..." He shook his head, before drawing her close to his side, his strong arm going around her shoulders, resting lightly on her slim frame. "*To see a world in a grain of sand...*" he quoted William Blake reflectively. "I would give all I have..."

"I know. So would I..." Catherine leaned into him, nestling against his solid warmth. "But, right now, I would not trade this moment, for anything..."

"There are eternities in our hours, Catherine," he whispered near her ear. *Eternities. In our stolen hours. And I'll live every one of them, with you... my beloved Catherine...*

They stood in companionable silence for some time. The spell that bound them seemed unbreakable. The tracking moon cast soft shadows, and a soft breeze intertwined the soft tresses of her hair with his.

Finally, Catherine moved against him. "You need to know that I may have to travel, someday soon, for my work. Joe's been hinting that I'm next up on the list, if there's a need for it." She lifted her shoulders. "It may be that I could be asked to travel across the country. But I will still be with you. I carry you with me, always..."

"As I take you with me, wherever I go." Vincent listened to all she said and left unspoken. "Perhaps you will travel to a far distant shore..." he whispered against her hair. "But that is for another time. It's late, and you have work you must complete in the morning. You should be in bed." He brushed his lips across her temple in a gentle farewell. "Go..."

"Mmmm... I know," Catherine murmured reluctantly, rubbing her cheek against his shoulder. She moved slowly out of his grasp, then stopped. "Vincent..." She stood still, staring up at him. "What you said before, about seeing a world in a grain of sand..."

"What about it?" he asked, frowning.

Catherine smiled. *Blake is wrong. Eternity isn't just in an hour. It's in a picture. A frozen piece of 'eternity.' An infinity in your hand... and I can show you. I know who has a whole bunch of those, full of places you've only dreamed about, but never imagined seeing... "I've just had the most wonderful idea..."*

"You want to sort all our old photos into albums?" Nancy marvelled down the telephone line the following afternoon. "You're a glutton for punishment. It will take forever. I know. I've tried."

Seated at her small dining table, Catherine fiddled with the phone cord. "Last night, you got me thinking about old times..." She shrugged apologetically. "I would like to do it. It's important to me, Nance. More important than anything."

She stared with relief at the stack of files in front of her. She'd risen early and completed them in record time, so she could make this very important phone call. Anticipation made her heart sing.

Nancy sighed. "Well, if you're really sure, I can get Paul to collect them together and drop them off to you when he's in town on Monday. Don't say I didn't warn you. There must be more than twenty boxes."

"I'm looking forward to it. Thanks, Nance, I owe you one."

"You owe me a lot more than that," Nancy avowed. "You're being very mysterious about all of this. Why now, after all this time?"

"Just a whim. Humour me."

"Ah-ha, the last time we did that we got into all sorts of trouble." Nancy laughed. "Let me know when you're done. Maybe I'll want to relive some old times, too."

She sighed and Catherine could hear her good friend thinking. "Does this have anything to do with that mysterious man of yours you've been keeping away from us?" She paused, and then said, "Of course, we all know he isn't real. Right, Cathy?"

The doubt in her tone said she hadn't been convinced and still wanted answers. "I mean, you wouldn't want to keep something as wonderful as a great romance from your two best friends, now, would you?" The question hung, unanswered, between them.

"Sorry, but I plead the Fifth. Bye, Nance, and thank you." Catherine hung up the receiver before Nancy could ask more questions she couldn't answer.

I love you. And I love him. And maybe one day, you'll both get to meet..

She sat back in her chair, looking out through her balcony doors. It would soon be dark. She knew Vincent would arrive just after the last rays of the sun had vanished below the horizon. She knew her keen sense of anticipation would reach out to him.

"To see a world..." She smiled as she got to her feet to prepare.

At Vincent's request, their shared evening meal would consist of wine and pizza. Catherine sighed happily as she hurried into her bedroom to change from her old grey sweats. She had so much to tell him, and she could barely wait until he arrived...

*"To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour..."*

William Blake - Auguries of Innocence