

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

"A Children's Story"

ACT ONE

Better Than a Dream...

By

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"Be yourself; everyone else is already taken..."

Oscar Wilde



The dark alleyway in Lower Manhattan was no place for any child to be. But in a gritty industrial area near the Bowery, ten year old Kipper, one of the children from the underground world, was rummaging through boxes of discarded mechanical parts, behind a toy factory.

He'd already found several spare rollerskate wheels. After pocketing them, he continued his search, digging deeper into the piles. Unbelievably, his next find was a discarded skateboard.

"Look at you!" He held it up to the light. It might be battered and old, but it was now his.

He scanned his immediate surroundings for any sign of trouble. Seeing nothing, he tucked the board under his arm and hurried off, before he was seen.

Reaching the end of the alley, he dropped the board to the ground and began to propel himself slowly along with one foot on the board. He knew he had an appointment to learn to play chess with Father. But he had still had time, and there were other places to explore for treasures. After all, his friend Mouse had asked the children to bring him anything they thought could be of any interest to the tinker.

As Kipper emerged from the alley, he saw a young boy about his age dashing across a large vacant lot. In the distance, two men appeared to be pursuing him. The boy looked terror-stricken. As he raced around a corner he crossed close in front of Kipper.

Alerted to a possible bad situation, Kipper flipped up his board and caught it, tucking it under his arm as he changed course and followed the other boy. He found him hiding beneath a parked car, his face scraped and bruised.

"They're gonna find you. Come on!" Kipper encouraged him.

"Get away!" the boy panted.

Kipper ignored his command. "Follow me. Hurry!"

The boy scrambled out from under the car. He followed Kipper's lead as they rushed into another alley. They slipped behind a dumpster and found a small metal door, opening down to a coal chute. They crawled down the chute, the door dropping shut behind them.

The two men pounded around the corner, looking around for their vanished quarry. They moved slowly down the alley. They started checking the dumpsters.

"He's here, somewhere...", one of them commented, gruffly.

Kipper and the boy hid in the coal bin of the abandoned building and listened to the pursuers searching around, above in the alley.

Kipper leaned close to whisper in his companion's ear. "What's your name? And why are those guys chasing you?"

"My name's Peter. And they're from Ridley," he whispered back, wiping his nose on his sleeve.

"Ridley...?"

Peter turned to him. "The foster home, Ridley Hall. You heard of it?"

"Nope." Kipper shook his head.

"They whack you and pretend they're helping you. It's a slime pit." He pointed to the door to the coal bin. "They catch me, I'm dead meat..."

Kipper caught his arm. "What do you mean?"

Peter shrugged. "Kids even disappear."

"Disappear?"

Peter moved in agitation. "That's what they're trying to do to me." He cocked his head, listening for sounds of the men. "Think they're gone?"

Kipper frowned. "I don't know..."

Peter started to climb out of the coal bin. Kipper put out a hand to stop him. "Where're you going, now?"

Peter crawled towards the door. "As far away from Ridley as I can get."

He scurried up the chute and disappeared through the hatch. Suddenly, Kipper heard yelling and shouting, outside his hiding place.

"Hey! Let me go!" Peter tried to dodge his pursuers, who were waiting for him in the alleyway. They grabbed him the moment he reappeared.

"Shut up!" one man snarled, as they dragged Peter away, kicking and yelling.

Kipper edged up to the entrance to the coal bin, lifting the door open a crack to look out. He saw Peter being dragged away, but knew he was helpless to assist.

But he knew exactly where to go for help. He edged out of the chute and stood up. Dropping his skateboard, he set off towards the nearest entrance to the world Below.



Father and Vincent were standing at the desk in Father's study, looking over the blueprints that were spread out over its surface. Vincent showed Father a diagram he'd drawn for a new water purification system for the tunnels, and how he was going to conceal it from view.

"Our conduits then cycle the water through the filters at this point." Vincent indicated his intentions, tracing over the blueprint with one finger.

"And that would be sufficient?" Father looked skeptical.

"Our water would be more pure than New York City tap water." He moved his finger. "And here, as you can see, at this point we will construct a new wall to protect the new connections. The wall appears solid. But when the right pressure is applied here, it swings inward."

"Good, good." Father removed his glasses, swinging them in his hand. "We can't be too cautious. Now, how soon can we get this in place?"

"The stones are being cut as we speak," Vincent replied.

Kipper entered the chamber, moving slowly down the short flight of stairs. His expression was troubled. He still felt deeply disturbed by his encounter with the boy from Ridley.

Father looked up. "Ah, Kipper. You're late for your lesson." He returned his glasses to the bridge of his nose, leaning over to peer more intently at the blueprints.

Kipper shrugged. "I know... I'm sorry..."

Vincent looked up. "What's Father teaching you, now?"

Kipper sighed. "Chess."

"Training another student to beat you?" Vincent chided his parent.

Father smiled. "Hmm, no, no... to beat you."

Vincent and Father chuckled, returning their attention to the plans on the table. Kipper remained at the foot of the stairs, his troubled expression deepening.

Father looked up again. "Kipper takes the game quite seriously." He reached to pat the boy on the head before letting his hand rest on his shoulder.

Vincent noticed Kipper's solemn demeanor and moved around Father to sit in the chair in front of the boy.

"Kipper, what's troubling you?"

Kipper moved his feet. "Something that happened."

"Tell me..."

"A kid was being chased, and I helped him hide."

Vincent frowned. "Who was chasing him?"

Kipper shrugged. "Two men... from this place called Ridley."

"Ridley?"

"He said it's a foster home. He said bad things happened there, kids get whacked... kids even disappear." He stared at Vincent. "I wanted to bring him down here. I wish I could've..."

Vincent exchanged a glance with Father. "What happened to this boy?" Vincent asked.

"He tried to run, but the men grabbed him. They dragged him away."

Father frowned at him. "Do you think this boy was telling the truth?"

"Yeah..." Kipper nodded slowly. "He looked real scared. I wish I could've done more. I wish I could've brought him down here, with me." He hung his head. "But, I know the rules."

"You did your best in a bad situation, Kipper. You did the right thing by bringing it to us." Vincent took his shoulders in a firm grip, proud of the boy's compassion. "Now, tell me more about this boy, and where you found him."



Verity hummed quietly as she completed the last wedding bouquet of her large order. She was well pleased with her work. She hoped her new customer would be, too.

She glanced at her wristwatch, and sighed. Distracted by what she loved doing, she'd lost track of time, again. It was nearly ten o'clock, and she really needed to be climbing the stairs to the tiny apartment above her shop.

She stifled a yawn with the back of her hand. She'd risen before dawn to attend the busy flower markets.

But the process of creating floral beauties always seemed to carry her away, and sleep was such a waste of precious time anyway...

Of course, she knew she wouldn't have it any other way. It had taken many long hours, and a great deal of effort to make an ongoing success of *Panache Flowers*. Her shop on Duane Street in Lower Manhattan, suited her needs very well. Its only drawback, if there could be one, was its necessary distance from the home tunnels, where she had been born and raised.

She missed her family, and the other denizens of that hidden world, more than she could say. But she made the best of it. She went home as often as her work schedule permitted. She was pleased that there were also the frequent, and very welcome visitors, from her old life.

Of course, whenever flowers were needed for celebrations and parties Below, she happily supplied them. And Above, she had consistent patrons who used Verity's skills whenever they held important events.

Five years ago, one of them, a helper, had secured the lease on the shop, and generously paid the first year's rent in full. That was when Verity had first moved Above, to live and work. And to pursue her long-cherished dream of working with flowers.

Verity twined the last long, white ribbon around the blade of her scissors, drawing down the length, before allowing it to spring back into a satisfactory curl. She held the bouquet out at arm's length, considering her work.

"Okay, good..." She nodded her satisfaction, then smiled. "I sound like Mouse."

A sudden frisson of awareness travelling the length of her spine told her she was no longer alone.

"Hi, Vincent," she remarked, without turning.

A whisper of sound and a soft footfall greeted her, before a low, masculine voice remarked ruefully, "No matter how quiet I am, you always seem to know when I am here."

"Years of practice. Besides, Narcissa says I have a strong sense for knowing things right before they happen. My Irish grandmother also had the gift of second sight. Or so I've been told."

"She must have been a very interesting woman. You are fortunate to have her gift."

"I certainly got saddled with her unruly red hair." Verity grimaced, as she tossed her long mane of copper curls back over her shoulder.

She glanced at her visitor. "But then, you always found me when we played hide and seek, remember? How did you always know where I was?"

"Easy." Vincent shrugged. "I knew you loved hiding among the baskets of dried flowers in the chandlery. You said you adored the flowers, and wanted to live among them." He looked around at the flower-filled shop. "You may well have had the gift of prophecy, my friend. It did not save you from being predictable yourself, however."

"*Touché...*" Verity smiled, carefully setting aside the bouquet. "*You* are now becoming just as predicable." Her words carried no heat, just the warmth of long-familiar friendship.

Vincent knew she was correct, as they stood in the quiet, fragrance-filled shop, together. He was well aware that Verity was an only child, and that he was filling in the role of the big brother she'd never had.

"Can I not just come by to make sure my little sister is well?" he asked. "Do I need any other reason?"

Verity gave him a long look of sisterly disbelief. She tried not to chuckle at him, but couldn't quite pull it off. The copper curls danced, as she shook her head.

"I thank you for your concern, Vincent. I really do. But, I think you are here to look at my roses, again. Is it the white ones you feel drawn to? Or the red, this time?" She indicated the vases of long-stemmed roses on her shelves. "I received a shipment of lovely yellow ones, just this morning. They're very beautiful."

Her narrowed gaze became considering. "Or are you here to tell me you're finally ready to make your selection?"

Vincent's thoughtful look deepened. "I believe I have finally made up my mind," he allowed cautiously.

"Ah, good." Verity wiped her hands on her apron. "If I was to guess, I would say you are wanting a bunch of... red roses." She shrugged. "A dozen always sends a good, strong message."

Her blue eyes twinkled, but she did not ask the question that was foremost in her mind. *Red roses stand for passion and love. Just who is the lucky lady? Do I know her?*

"A single red rose is all I require." Vincent's narrowed expression warned her not to ask. "It's for a message I wish to send. It is a simple token, nothing more."

"Very well." Verity sighed. "But, it must be a very powerful message that you need to accompany it with a symbol of love."

She longed to know, but he seemed ill at ease, and disinclined to elaborate.

She decided it was well past time she went home again. She would ask her parents, or Mary and Father. Surely they would know if Vincent was seeing someone. Such a major event in her adopted brother's life could not be kept a secret for very long.

He deserved the very best of everything. And the saddest thing was, that Vincent himself could not see it. She wanted the very best for him, as well.

"This one?" She reached to withdraw a single red rose from the large vase in front of her work station, and held it up. "Do you wish me to gift-wrap it for you?"

"No, thank you." Vincent advanced to stand beside her, considering the exotic bloom. "It is the note that is important, not the flower. I do not wish..." He didn't finish.

"I understand." Verity took his large hand in hers, and placed the thorn-less stem of the rose across his open palm, before closing his fingers around it, with both of her hands. She then held him tight, looking up into his shadowed face.

"Whoever she is, she's one lucky lady," she said, softly. "You know where to find me whenever you need the next rose for her. Or maybe you'll need a whole bunch, next time. If things go well between you."

"There may never be a need for another." Vincent's boots shifted on the tiled floor of the work room. "For this time, I stand in need her help."

He lifted the rose to his nose, inhaling the exotic scent. He closed his eyes for a long moment.

"Then I am sure she will give you her help, if she can." Verity watched his expression. "And don't underestimate the power of the rose. If the lady is already your friend, then so much the better."

She nodded towards a display in the shop. "I also have a new line in essential oils, should you ever need them. I don't know, but aromatherapy is said to be the next big thing. I guess it could catch on. They say couples are really getting into it."

"We are not a... she is not my..." Vincent avowed, before breaking off to inhale deeply. "She is not *my* anything..."

"Oh, Vincent..." Verity reached her arms up to hug him. "You are being too hard on yourself. You have so much to offer, so many gifts. Any woman would be proud to say you are hers, and she, yours. Are you so sure she doesn't care for you?"

She could see a trip home was definitely needed. This mystery was just too intriguing.

"I do not know. At times, I have allowed myself to dream." Vincent stared at the rose he held. "But the realities of our situation are harder to ignore. She comes from a world far apart from ours."

"She's a Topsider?" Verity's eyes widened. "Okay..." *Curiouser and curiouser...*

There was, of course, the tunnel talk of a dying woman Vincent had rescued from the park, some months ago. But any talk of something further between them had been speculation and conjecture. The true facts of the case were frustratingly scarce.

It was said that Father had been very insistent that the woman leave as quickly and quietly as possible. He'd been extremely angry at Vincent for bringing her into their secret world in the first place. Verity, busy with Easter at the time, hadn't been free to return home.

But when she had...

Very few of the tunnel folk had met her and no-one knew much about her. Verity had not heard mention of the woman's name, nor anything about her aside from what everyone knew. It was said that she'd recovered and returned to her life, in the world Above. As far as Verity was aware, Vincent had never seen her again. And now... *A Topsider? Really?*

"She is..." Vincent's sigh was eloquent and of things unspoken. Of things too painful to touch. Finally, he said, "She is my... everything, and yet..."

His gaze lifted to consider the wire stand full of wedding bouquets, and the look of pain in his eyes darkened.

"Perhaps the rose *is* too much. The note will suffice. It is an urgent matter that can't wait. I will deliver it tonight." He placed the rose carefully on the work bench, and stepped back. "It can never be..."

"Never is a very long time." Verity stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. "Give her the rose, *and* ask for her help. Keep her close with things she can understand. The message of flowers is universal. Give her time, and maybe she will see how much you need her."

Vincent looked with longing at the single bloom, as if even this solitary gesture of love was a thing he couldn't be a part of.

"When I see her, I am filled with a happiness sweeter than anything I've ever known. But, at the same time I am reminded of a life that can never be... and I feel great pain. We can never be together, you see. If it can be called anything at all, it is an impossible relationship."

"I'm afraid my advice on matters of the heart is rather limited," Verity admitted. "I may understand the language of the flowers, but relationships..." Her mouth thinned. "Of the few men I've dated, I can't say I've met any winners, so far. Certainly no-one I would think of taking home to meet Mom and Dad."

"And yet, you have such potential," Vincent replied slowly. "You're being too hard on yourself. You have so many gifts to offer. These men you have been with must be blind, if they do not see that."

"Stop quoting my own advice back at me," Verity grumbled, her cheeks warming with embarrassment. "I thought the role of agony sister was mine."



She picked up the rose, and closed his fingers once more around its stem. "Go on now, before you make me cry. Go to her. You know how I adore a good romance. Come and tell me how this one ends, when there *is* a happy-ever-after. And I know there will be one, I can feel it. Trust me." She leaned closer. "I have the sense of such things. Be well, Vincent. Hug your lady for me."

She pushed him gently towards the basement entrance to her shop. "Bring her to see me, one day soon. I would like that."

"You sound very sure." Vincent tucked the rose carefully within a pocket of his cloak, as he allowed himself to be moved further towards the exit.

"Like I said, I'm a confirmed romantic. I do believe love will conquer all, in time. You just gotta believe in the magic of serendipity." Verity smiled mistily. "And passion."

She pushed him harder towards the route down to the tunnels. "Now, get going. Go see her, and make sure she gets the message you wish to send."

"Thank you, Verity." Vincent bent to kiss the top of her head, before disappearing through the beaded screen leading into the back of the shop.

Verity watched him go, before pulling out her handkerchief and blowing her nose briskly. She wiped her eyes as she looked around at her work. "Now, where was I?"



"Vincent...? Are you there?" Catherine voiced her uncertain hope. An odd sense of him had rippled through her the moment she'd opened the door to her apartment. Now she was unsure of what she had felt.

She stood in the doorway, juggling her purse and a stack of legal briefs and investigation reports, as she listened to the silence. A whispered sigh of intense disappointment finally escaped her.

I thought I... felt something. Wishful thinking. Again.

Of course, Vincent wasn't there. And she had to learn not to expect him to be. She hadn't seen or heard from him, for weeks. He'd only visited her balcony once, on that first night. She had hugged him, then.

After the long, grueling day she'd just experienced, being held close in his arms was exactly the tonic she craved. The need burned within her, but he was not there to ask, and she had no way to contact him, Below.

He'd only stayed that first time because she'd begged him to do so. Then he'd remained well past the time it was safe for him to leave. She was aware he had done that solely for her, which added to her already heavy burden of concern for him. The dawn had been close to breaking, before he'd finally scaled her building to the roof and disappeared from her sight.

Her need to see Vincent again was born of the isolation she now felt because of their shared secret. She had nowhere else to turn.

I have to get used to this. I have to. It's not like it was before, the first time I left him. This is... different, somehow. This is... harder. And I can't explain why.

"Oh, Vincent, if only you knew how much I need you right now." Her shoulders slumped as she turned to engage all the locks on her front door.

She grimaced. Physical security did little to alleviate the weight of her emotional needs.

She carried the files into her bedroom, and dumped them onto her bed. They could wait, for now. She was not in the mood to concentrate on dry legal matters.

Her purse landed on her bed before she pulled off her overcoat, dropping it onto the covers. She longed to remove her shoes, but again, that nagging feeling that she was not alone made her pause.

"Vincent...?" she asked again, staring at the gauzy curtains masking her view of the balcony, beyond.

Her heart missed a beat. She took the two steps up to the balcony level, her outstretched fingers reaching to push the curtains aside. Again, some indefinable need rippled across her senses.

Leaning close to the glass pane, she looked up and down the balcony. Could she see him there, waiting for her? That was how he had been the only time she'd found him; pressed back into the corner, silent and watchful, waiting for her reaction. As if completely unsure of his welcome.

He had been about to depart again, after leaving her a book. A first edition of *Great Expectations*.

She'd picked it up, and then looked up to find him watching her. She'd been so relieved to see him again.

She'd dropped his book, and set her handgun onto the balcony table, before she'd run straight into his arms. He didn't try to avoid her. He'd sighed deeply and held her very tightly, as if he never wished to let her go.

They had stayed that way for what seemed an eternity. As if they would never willingly part again.

It was only when they'd finally drawn back from each other that he saw her face for the first time. Her repaired and unblemished face.

Vincent had stared at her. "Your face..."

Catherine had hurried to smooth the sudden awkwardness. "They fixed it."

"Yes..." Vincent had breathed, wonderingly.

Catherine bit her lower lip now, in consternation. She'd invited him inside, but he'd refused. She hadn't wanted to let him go, for fear he would vanish again. *He did say that he should never have come here.*

Catherine smoothed a tear from her cheek. Their relationship was so new and very fragile. She had no idea what to truly expect. At times, she was frightened he would disappear back into the underworld, where she could never find him again.

She frowned, turning her attention inwards. Despite her concerns, the feeling that Vincent needed, and wanted something from her, would not be banished.

"But, what?" Unlocking and pushing open the doors, she looked with forlorn hope towards the end of the balcony Vincent had occupied. But the airy space was stubbornly empty.

"Oh, Vincent..." Catherine sighed her discontent.

She stood still, waiting and watching. But the passing of the night wind was the only movement she could discern. It rustled the leaves in her small greenery. She tried to imagine the moving shadows as a large, cloaked figure.

She wrapped her arms across her body, shivering in the cold night air. Her whole being ached. But all the rest was truly silence.

It seemed like a long, hot shower and a warm bed were all the comfort she would have tonight. And the work files still demanded her attention.

She turned back towards her bedroom. It was only then that she saw the envelope, and the single red rose, on her tiny outside table.

She looked closer, seeing her name written across the corner in flowing script, above a crude map of Central Park, drawn in black ink. There was a small cross drawn in a remote corner of the park, well beyond the far end of Bow Bridge, and the lake.

She picked up the envelope, recognizing the bridge that arched over the lake, from Cherry Hill to the Ramble. She knew the area well.

Her heart lifted with anticipation, and she smiled. The elegant Victorian structure was a very romantic place for a meeting.

But the cross marked a small, narrow path that seemed to run towards a remote drainage tunnel; an out-of-the-way place she had never been.

Why does Vincent wish to meet me there? Catherine wondered. Why not on the bridge? Perhaps he is being cautious, in case we could be seen.

She lifted the red rose to her nose, inhaling the sweet fragrance. She well understood the language of flowers. Red was a potent symbol of love and commitment.

She dared to hope this unexpected gift meant something. She prayed she would see Vincent again soon. Otherwise, why had he left it for her?

She frowned, wondering where he could have found the beautiful bloom in the beginning of winter. *Perhaps a helper who sold flowers?* Another mystery to add to the rest.

Truly curious now, she slit the seal of the envelope and removed the folded note inside. What she read there banished all her tiredness and sense of deep disappointment.

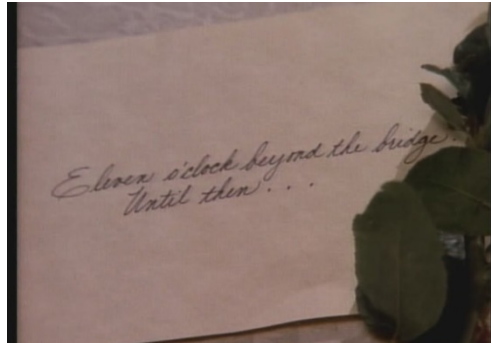
Eleven o'clock beyond the bridge

Until then...

Vincent needs me!

It was enough. There was no time to wonder why, or what for.

Catherine didn't hesitate, as adrenalin kicked in. Hurrying back into her bedroom, she dropped the note and rose on her bed. In her haste, she gave no thought to closing and locking the balcony doors again. Snatching up her coat, she headed for the door, and the planned rendezvous...



Catherine walked alone through Central Park. She moved quickly, alert to any possible danger, as Isaac's defensive training had taught her to be.

Nothing stirred. She walked across Bow Bridge, and left it behind, finally reaching the same deserted area of the park that Vincent had indicated on his map. Dark enveloped her. Being out and in the park at this time of night was foolhardy, at best; yet not for the world would she neglect this rendezvous.

The atmosphere of the park was quite menacing, but Catherine kept her wits about her, alert for any danger. She reached a deserted area of the park, and moved down a gulley end to a large drainage duct.

Without hesitation, Catherine bent into the entrance, and followed the culvert all the way, until it ended in a large, sandy-floored junction where three tunnels met. She studied them all, but they offered no clues. It looked like a dead-end.

She visualized the map, and she was sure this was the place. She walked the floor in agitation, waiting for Vincent to appear, hoping her trip here had not been in vain.

It seemed like hours before he came walking slowly down the tunnel, one that was fronted by a barred steel gate. As soon as Catherine saw him striding towards her, she moved to the gate.

She gripped the bars, peering through at him. "Vincent..." she whispered, inhaling the sight of him.

He lifted her tired spirits and slaked her thirsty soul. She longed anew for his warm embrace, but she could not find the right words to ask.

Again, he seemed wary of approaching her too closely. His expression was remote and considering.

Perhaps I misread the true meaning of the red rose he left for me?

Vincent came closer. "Are you well?" His query was low, and softly spoken.

Catherine sighed. "Yes... I've missed you so much... Are *you* well? I was thinking about you a lot today. I was so worried. I hadn't heard from you. Something's wrong? What is it?"

"I have longed to see you, also..." Vincent deflected her concern softly.

Catherine watched his expression closely. "Things have been going well at work. It seems like all I do now, but I'm... enjoying it, if that's the right word. Vincent, please tell me, what is the matter?"

He drew a long, steadying breath. He remembered the words he'd said to Verity this same evening. "I wish... I fear this is an impossible relationship. When I see you, Catherine, I'm filled with a happiness sweeter than anything I've ever known... and at the same time I am reminded of a life that can never be... and I feel great pain."

"Yes..." Catherine moved closer, blinking back tears. "I know. So do I. Vincent... what will we do?"

Vincent's great shoulders lifted. "The only thing we can do. We'll endure the pain... and savor every moment of the joy." He appeared to come to a decision as he reached to open the barred gate and stepped out next to her.

"I needed to see you." He shook his head. "We don't have much time, Catherine. I need to tell you something very important. Kipper came down with a story of a lost boy. And the children Below now speak of a place called Ridley."

Catherine's brow creased. "Ridley Hall... the foster home?"

Vincent nodded. "Yes. It's not what you think."

Catherine looked confused. "It's supposed to be a very good one."

Vincent shook his head. "No, Catherine! Children are being hurt there."

Catherine studied his worried expression. "Are you sure?"

Vincent held her gaze. "I believe they are. These children have no one to protect them. We can't let them hurt the helpless ones... they must be made to feel safe. How can this be, how can this happen?"

Catherine gripped his arm. "If children are being abused in this place, I can stop it! I'll look into it right away."

Vincent watched her closely. "Be careful, Catherine..."

Ripples of awareness flooded his inner being. She needed him, and wanted something from him. He was keenly aware of what that desire was.

If only everything could be so simple...

Against all his father's sound and logical reasoning, he had visited Catherine's balcony. To reassure himself she was well. And to see her again, one last time...

He had seen her true face for the first time, and the image of that moment still played, inside his mind: Her beautiful, unblemished face, save for the one lone mark of her attack which still existed, in front of her ear. And he'd been glad for her. But at the same time, he'd been awestruck into wondering silence.

"They fixed it," Catherine had said that night, never explaining exactly who 'they' were.

Until Kipper and the tunnel children had brought him their concerns over Ridley, he had determined never to see Catherine again, in spite of their words of parting. It was too painful to want her, and his feelings were raw.

But he knew he needed her help in this urgent matter of the orphaned children, so he had reached out to her.

Driven by forces beyond his control, he'd left her the note along with the red rose, a potent symbol of his growing affections. Saying with a flower, what he could not say in truth. Once more, the right words, which had always sustained his life and his entire existence, proved too difficult to express.

He could see now that it had been a mistake. There simply could not be a happy ending for them.

He knew he should walk away. Finally end it between them, before Catherine got hurt, or he suffered more. Before he said, or did, something he could not retract, or undo.

But his boots seemed rooted to the sandy floor. He could not move, he could barely even breathe. She was so near, and so very beautiful.

He wanted to appreciate this one, incredible moment of joy, just for a little while longer. He hesitated for only the length of a single heartbeat, before spreading his arms wide and inviting her inside. It was all he could do for her. It was enough. He felt her acceptance, and her gladness, as it first swept through her, and then swept through him.

On a grateful sigh, Catherine went into his embrace, and the two wings of his great cloak enveloped her. She stood there, held close, and listened to the strong beating of his great heart against her cheek.

Yes. Yes, thank you. Yes. The thought was hers, before it became his.

For a lovers' eternity, they stood there, each silently wishing they never had to part again. But that fraught moment came all too soon.

They finally drew apart slowly, and reluctantly. Standing away from each other once more, they exchanged a long, parting look. One similar to the one they had shared some weeks ago, in the tunnels below them.

Vincent was the first to move away. He stepped behind the shelter of the barred gate, dragging it shut behind him, the sound of the closing gate severing the magic of the moment. He stared back through the bars, even as he reached to pull a hidden lever to roll a large, steel door shut, behind him. It closed off his view of her with a hollow clang. Unseen by Catherine, he then turned and walked away down the tunnel, leaving her standing alone, once more.



The bull-pen of the D.A.'s office was in its usual turmoil of attempting to get a thousand things done, all in the same moment. Telephones rang, people hurried about, talking and negotiating, as they wrestled with the day's overload of work.

Catherine was arguing, as she stood beside her desk, and held her ground. She'd just returned from her lunch break, and now she was embroiled in a heated discussion with her boss, Joe Maxwell. As they argued, they moved from Catherine's cubicle through the office area towards Joe's office, still disagreeing. Loudly.

"An anonymous tip?!" he demanded to know.

Catherine hurried to keep up with his impatient stride. "Somebody reliable, with access to information."

Joe's expression soured. "Ridley's supposed to be a model place, one of the good ones."

"Supposed to be," she replied sharply. *I'm not giving up on this. No way.*

"I can't let you go snooping around some foster home, right now," Joe replied, in a harassed tone. "I'm juggling seven cases, all going to trial. Right now, I need you on the Kowalski case."

"The Kowalski case! It's all routine, you don't need me on that anymore! All that's left is the paperwork, now ."

"We go to trial next week! There's gonna be press coverage. I'm gonna need you to keep an eye on the witnesses." They entered his office.

"Joe, it's all routine. I could do it in my sleep! This is important to me."



"Yeah? In your sleep?" He smirked, as he walked behind his desk. "Your bed that big? What would you be wearing? Maybe something silky and filmy, and transparent. Naw, probably not." He reddened slightly, aware he'd overstepped.

"Knock it off." Catherine relieved him of his concern that she was offended by his flippancy. "Look, Joe, this is important. I wouldn't be asking if it wasn't. I've got good reason to believe there're serious problems at Ridley Hall. Joe, we're talking about kids. Do you hear me?" She knew she was badgering him. "It can't wait..."

Joe sat in his chair. "Radcliffe, do I hear your biological alarm ringing?" He was determined to deflect her concern and deny her.

"Come on, Joe." She refused to be baited. "I need to check it out," she continued stubbornly. "I did some research this morning, and a few things just don't add up. It's an afternoon's work, then I'm right back here, on top of the Kowalski case."

"You sure are stubborn when you're riled." He stared up at her for a long moment. "All right, all right," he finally surrendered. "I hear you. You aren't gonna let it go. Go ahead, check it out. But do it fast, huh? You know you're not working with your father's cushy law firm anymore. We got plenty of work to do right here."

Catherine looked pleased. "Okay... Thanks..." She started to turn away.

Joe put up a hand to delay her. "Hey, a buddy of mine's doing undercover on muggings in the park. He said he saw you out walking late last night. Have you lost your mind?"

He shook his head with disgust. "He said you were being followed by a couple of muggers. He was about to arrest them, when they were scared off by some big guy in a cloak and hood. My buddy couldn't get close enough to identify him before he just up and disappeared too, like he fell into some hole in the ground. My guy said he never saw him again, or where he went."

"He did?" Catherine's heart both stopped at the notion that Vincent had been spotted, even distantly, and then leapt with joy at the idea of him watching over her, even as her sharp mind hurried to find any plausible excuse. "I was just out... for some fresh air..."

"Fresh air, huh?" Joe spread his hands wide. "This is New York City. You, of all people, should know you need to be more careful than that. That big guy could've grabbed you up, and my buddy wouldn't have been in time to stop him, he vanished that quickly. I'm aware that you've been mugged once, already. I thought Isaac Stubbs would've taught you a thing or two about personal security, by now."

"It was a lovely night," she replied, lamely. She knew she needed to warn Vincent at the first opportunity that he'd been seen.

Joe shot her an incredulous look. "Lovely night, huh? Then, I'm really gonna have to have a word with Stubbs. He needs to step up your awareness training. Or buy you an attack dog for these midnight walks of yours."

"There's no need. It's okay." Catherine held up a denying hand. "I promise I'll be more careful, in future. I'll stick to looking at the night from my apartment balcony from now on."

"Good." Joe shrugged. "Okay, I know you're a big girl, and it's none of my concern what you do in your spare time." He stared at her significantly. "But I don't want to find out the hard way that I was wrong." He sighed. "I've discovered I sorta need you around here."

It was as close to a compliment as she was going to get from him, and it was a welcome one.

"I won't let you down, Joe," Catherine promised.

He grimaced. "Yeah, okay. Well, if you're going out to Ridley, you should've been there, by now." He waved a dismissive hand. "I've got a ton of work to get through."

"Thanks, Joe." Catherine smiled at his gruff concern and good intentions. "I'll let you know what I find out."



From the hurried research she'd done with Edie that morning, Catherine knew Ridley Hall was a private foster facility catering to around one hundred children, aged from six through to twelve. From its impressive exterior, it appeared to be a well-maintained facility.

Catherine opened the front door and entered a wide, brightly-lit hall. Inside, there appeared to have been a lot of money spent on the interior of the building. It was clean and orderly. *Maybe a little too orderly... don't kids normally make messes?*

She walked down the hall to the reception area. A fashionably dressed, young receptionist rose immediately to intercept her.

"Can I help you?"

Catherine held up a business card for her to see. "Yes. I'm Catherine Chandler, with the District Attorney's office."

The woman maintained her pleasant smile. "What can we do for you?"

"I would like to take a look around."

The receptionist looked thoughtful. "Do you have an appointment?"

Catherine frowned. "No, I don't."

The woman shrugged. "Well, let me see if Mr. Barnes is able to see you..."

A man suddenly appeared out of a back office. He looked jovial, and was also smiling warmly.

"That's all right, if you'd like a tour of the facilities, I'd be glad to show you around." He extended his right hand. "I'm Richard Barnes, the administrator. I'll be glad to show you around Ridley."

Catherine surveyed him closely. He appeared to be in his forties, overweight, and a typical bureaucrat. She'd met his kind before, when she worked for her father. She took his outstretched hand in a brief grip.

"Catherine Chandler..."

Barnes turned to usher her down a corridor. "This way..." He glanced at her. "Why don't we start upstairs? I believe I overheard you say you're with the District Attorney's office?"

"That's right." Catherine kept her tone pleasant.

"What brings you here, Miss Chandler?"

"Well, at the moment we're simply making a general survey of the city's foster care systems."

Barnes' genial expression didn't alter. "I know there've been some problems in various foster facilities around the city. I think you'll find Ridley's the exception. We truly try to do the best we can for the children."

"You have a good reputation," Catherine admitted.

"As I said, we try." Barnes beamed at her, seemingly well-satisfied.

He led her into a dormitory room with a dozen beds. It was clean and functional. A few kids were sitting on their beds, playing quietly. The children seem very well-behaved. And again, Catherine wasn't sure if this level of compliance was normal, for a group of same-aged children.

Barnes looked around. "This is a typical dorm room. Above all, the children who come to us just need discipline. Everything must be kept clean and in order. We stress that."

"I can see."

Catherine noticed a young boy in the room. Sitting cross-legged on his bed, he stared at her with wide, beseeching eyes, behind thick glasses. He didn't avert his gaze, even after Catherine frowned at his scrutiny. It was haunting. The boy continued to stare after her as Barnes turned to usher her out.

"Well... hm, I'd like to see a classroom." Catherine resisted his attempts to shepherd her back to the reception area.

Barnes' jovial expression tightened, but he nodded his assent. "Certainly, right this way."

They moved further down the corridor. "We're limited to ages six through to twelve. So they're out of here before they become major monsters. We get the occasional tantrum or a runaway situation, but for the most part, it's uneventful."

Children passed them, in silence. All seemed quite normal, except for the unusual hush of the place. Given the age and number of children it contained, Catherine had expected a lot more noise.

Barnes conducted her to a classroom, where a teaching session was in progress. The teacher looked up.

"Good morning, Mr. Barnes."

The classroom of what appeared to be 4th graders watched the teacher write multiplication tables on a blackboard. They all sat quietly, seeming intent on their work.

Barnes looked around the room. "I guess you could say we run a tight ship."

Catherine frowned at the total lack of noise. "It looks that way. They're remarkably well-behaved. How do you do it?"

"Structure. We give them structure. Shall we go elsewhere?" He indicated the corridor once more.

As Catherine and Barnes continued down the corridor, the young boy from the dormitory who stared at Catherine reappeared ahead of them. He was taking a drink from a nearby water fountain.

Barnes continued to expand on his theme. "I think kids need a sense of structure, you know. Especially these kids. A lot of them have nowhere else to go."

"I see." Catherine nodded, as she watched the boy pin her with his big, pleading eyes.

"Hello?" she questioned his look.

As he approached her and was about to speak, an older girl, about twelve, appeared from a room and pulled him quickly away, and up a nearby set of stairs. Catherine took in the little byplay with a thoughtful frown. The more she saw of Ridley, the less she liked the place, for all its polished gleam and fancy paintwork.

Barnes waved a hand expansively. "Let me show you the play area."

"You know, I'd like to talk to a few of the children."

Barnes looked uncomfortable, but determined to please. "All right, I'll get some together."

"No, I could just walk around for a few minutes." She stared at him. "Do you mind?"

Barnes waved her off. "Of course not. Miss Chandler, we're not perfect, but compared to the squalor and depravity these kids come from, Ridley's a positive force."

"Thank you for the tour, Mr. Barnes," Catherine said civilly.

Barnes stared at her. "No problem."

As Catherine walked off down the corridor, Barnes exchanged glances with a hard-looking young custodian who'd just passed them. Barnes nodded to him, and waved a hand at Catherine's back-view.

"Keep an eye on her, will you?"

The custodian nodded, before ambling down the corridor, following Catherine.

Catherine retraced her steps down the hall, looking for the young boy. He was nowhere in sight. She checked the dorm room, but it was empty. She began to look for where else he could be. The next room was a playroom with children engaged in various activities.

She knelt next to a young girl sitting in a chair clutching an old, second-hand doll.

"Hi. What's your dolly's name?" She remembered the fun she had with her own dolls when she was young.

"Suzie," the little girl said shyly.

"Where does Suzie live?"

The little girl shrugged, but didn't reply, continuing to play with the doll.

"Does Suzie live here with you?" Catherine asked gently.

The girl shook her head. "No. She lives with her Mommy and Daddy and sister. But she comes here to play with me, sometimes."

"Does she have fun when she comes here?"

The girl looked at Catherine intensely. "You know, I'm not 'sposed to talk to strangers."

"I see..." Stymied by such determination in one so young, Catherine rose to her feet and left the room.

She continued down the corridor, aware she was being followed at some distance by a custodian who went to great lengths to not appear to be observing her movements. She hurried down the corridor and approached the corner. She was still looking for the young boy with glasses. As she rounded the corner, he was standing there, watching her with his big, frightened eyes.

Catherine approached him closely. "What? Did you want to tell me something?" She crouched down before him.

"They took Peter," the boy replied, in a flat, somber tone. "He didn't run away. They took him." He sniffed. "I don't know where..."

"Who? What do you mean?"

"They made him disappear."

"Okay, let's start over. What's your name?"

"Eric..."

Suddenly the same young girl appeared, dragging Eric back by his shoulder. "Are you crazy?! Come on!" She pulled him up the same staircase as before.

"Wait..." Catherine remained crouched at the bottom of the staircase, looking up at them.

Eric looked back. "She's my sister."

"What's your last name?" Catherine persisted.

"Shut up, Eric," the girl commanded her brother, as they disappeared.

Unseen by Catherine, the two children passed the young custodian who was taking it all in. He looked anything but pleased. The children fled before he could speak.

Easing to her feet, Catherine sighed in deep frustration. Vincent and the tunnel children had been right. There was more going on here than Barnes would admit.

She marched back down the corridor, not caring if she was being followed. One thing she could be sure of, from this initial trip, she was not, in any way, finished with Ridley Hall.



Back in the bull-pen, Catherine stood in her cubicle in the midst of a heated telephone conversation. "I don't know his last name. His first name is Eric." She

paused, listening. "That's right, I want to bring him to the District Attorney's office to ask him some questions."

Her expression darkened. "No! I can't go out there! I've been out there. That's the point. I want to talk to him *away* from Ridley." She sighed roughly. "When can I have that transfer order? Tomorrow?! Let me talk to your supervisor. When will she be back?"

Joe poked his head around the edge of her cubicle, listening to the conversation. Catherine gave him an exasperated look.

"Bureaucracy in action," Joe muttered sympathetically, knowing he was powerless to help.

"All right, tomorrow, first thing!" Catherine spoke into the phone. "I'll be there to pick it up." She hung up, turning to Joe. "The rules designed to protect the child from being moved are the same rules which prevent the child from being moved to safety."

"Sounds perfectly logical," Joe commented ironically.

"Unless you're a kid stuck in a home and being abused, he's gotta wait. It's infuriating."

Joe shrugged. "What are you gonna do? The wheels don't move any faster. Have you got the evidence files on Rockne?"

She handed him a large folder. She gathered her things, suddenly feeling weary. "Well, I'm out of here."

Joe looked alarmed. "Hey, you've only put in 12 hours today!"

Catherine laughed. "Night..." She headed for the doors.

Joe sighed. He watched her exit with grudging respect. "Listen, if there's anything I can do..."

"Actually, you can." Catherine looked back at him. "Just stay as cynical as you are. I kinda like you that way."

"Ah, okay. Anything else?"

"Plenty," Catherine dead-panned. "Let's see how that works, first."

"Where're you going?"

“Got a date.” She pushed open the bull-pen doors and walked through, repeating the good night over her shoulder, before the doors shut behind her.

Joe knew her date wasn’t with Tom Gunther. The newspapers said that the builder had suddenly decided to move his business headquarters back to his hometown of Chicago, chasing his next contract, and the easier political nominations.

Joe rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Clearly, Tom’s departure hadn’t left Catherine broken-hearted.

He stared after her. “Well, that’s okay... I was busy, anyway.” He shrugged.



Catherine’s date was meeting her at the New York Public Library. A black tie cocktail fundraiser for the public library was being held in the rotunda. A string quartet was playing and New York’s elegant and elite were in attendance. Everyone was beautiful, everything was perfectly lovely.

An opera singer had just finished singing. Catherine was standing on the mezzanine with her ‘date’, an amiable, but boring investment banker named Greg Walton. She listened to him talk about his work, and she knew her father would approve of her new choice. But his monotonous way of speaking was hard on her ears, and her soul.

Tom Gunther was now a distant, and utterly regrettable, memory. He had fought to keep her, and lost. They no longer wanted the same things.

She knew he’d recently relocated the headquarters of his vast business empire to his old home of Chicago – for the foreseeable future – her father had said, with real regret in his voice.

She sighed, long and low. Her father had approved of Tom, as well.

Catherine had dressed well for the occasion, but she was deeply preoccupied with matters more pressing than a fundraiser. She stood among a group of old acquaintances, people from her ‘previous life.’ She felt completely disconnected from a gala she used to enjoy.

She’d spent the evening thinking about the boy at Ridley. And Vincent. And how all the disparate parts of her life no longer seemed to add up.

A woman friend attracted her wandering attention. “Catherine?”

"Sorry?" Catherine turned to look at the woman blankly.

"I asked how the job was going? It's been a long time. Almost a year. We've missed you."

Catherine shook herself out of her reverie. "I'm sorry, Margaret. It's going fine. Long hours keep me away from all of this."

"As she prowls the mean streets, battling evil and corruption wherever it rears its ugly head," a male friend teased, with a smile. "All you need is a cape and a mask."

"Something like that." Catherine sighed. She looked around the group. "It's good to see everyone again. I've missed our get-togethers after work."

"We've missed you too." Margaret raised her glass. "It's so good to see you. Jenny Aronson says it's like pulling teeth to get you to come out. The D.A. seems to have you running all over the city. I guess we should feel special!"

Catherine shook her head. "Jenny was supposed to be here, but she had a last minute meeting come up, with some new hot-shot author. She promised to call me next week. I think we're going to a museum event next month. Some big donation affair, she said. You should come, Margaret. Maybe you'll meet Mr. Right."

"You go." Margaret gave the books in the library a wry look. "But I'll tell you ahead of time, there won't be anybody interesting there. Just like here..."

Catherine frowned. "How do you know?"

"The law of averages." Margaret laughed. "They never work in my favor, never." She took a long sip of her champagne.

Catherine smiled softly. "I'm good with the law. I'll let you know how it turns out."

"She's a good lawyer." Greg strolled up and put an arm around her, patting her shoulder in a proprietary manner that irritated her. "And I think what she's doing is terrific," he said, beaming at the crowd. "It's something she's really passionate about. I know all about loving what you do for a living."

"I knew I could count on Greg to come to my rescue," Catherine offered the group, trying to look like she was enjoying his closeness.

A woman raised her glass in a toast. "Well, here's to any kind of passion, wherever you find it!"

A man sighed. "Do me a favor. When you find it let me know."

The group broke into sympathetic laughter. Catherine did her best to tolerate Greg's possessive arm pulling her closer to his side.

She swallowed tightly. It was not Greg's arm she wished was around her right now...



Later in the evening, as the music played, a small boy and girl, each no more than six and both dressed in miniature formal attire, were performing a waltz.

Catherine stood on the sidelines with Margaret, watching the children perform. They were standing alone for a moment. Catherine still had her faraway look.



"What's up with you and Greg?" her friend frowned at her.

"Nothing," Catherine replied flatly.

"Nothing? Really? He seems like a really nice person."

Catherine nodded. "He is a really nice person. He must have left me over a dozen messages asking me out. And bunches of flowers keep appearing at my apartment door. I gave in and agreed to come tonight, just to get some peace."

"Okay, he's a sweet, romantic guy. So?"

"So... That's about it." Catherine raised a defensive shoulder. "There's nothing more."

"No chemistry, huh?" Margaret shook her head.

Catherine shook her head. "No chemistry."

"Then there's nothing you can do about that one. Too bad. I mean, where are all the really great guys? Before I got divorced they were everywhere. What happened? They all go underground?"

"Maybe." Catherine smiled to herself, looking down into her drink.

"So, how are you gonna let him down gently?" Margaret persisted.

"I will have to make the break sharp and clean. There's nothing more for it."

"Good luck." Her friend patted her arm. "Call me, if you need to talk. And don't let it be another year before we see you again."

"Thanks, Margaret." Catherine hugged her. "I won't."

She knew she'd made the right decision. She would face Greg at the first opportunity she had to be alone with him, and let him down gently. Spending another night in his unexciting company was simply out of the question.

He seemed pleased that she wished to be alone with him, following her closely to a secluded spot among the isles of books.

"It's been wonderful to have you come out with me." He turned to her, his eyes full of anticipation. "It's not like I haven't left you over a dozen messages on your phone, asking you out. I'm glad you finally chose tonight. I was starting to think you were avoiding me." He smiled as if he knew this could not possibly be true.

Catherine braced herself. *This is going to be harder than I thought.* "It was... lovely seeing you again, Greg. But I have work in the morning. In fact, I'm so busy with my work, it's almost impossible to get away. So please do not leave me any more messages."

"But..." His face fell, as he tried to make sense of what she'd just told him.

"Good night, Greg." She reached to kiss his cheek quickly, before turning away and hurrying down the stairs.

She worried he would not take her rejection and follow her, to ask about taking her out some other time. She left the party, and Greg, as soon as she could decently get away. A restlessness within her would not allow her to enjoy the event.

I'm still changing. She felt it in her bones.



Arriving home she opened the doors to her balcony and walked out to the edge. Leaning on the wall, she looked out at the city, and then down into the park below.

Beneath the city and far below her, Vincent sat on the edge of the bridge over the whispering gallery, lost in thought. At times, he'd heard the same music she'd been listening to. But only at times.

All around him, voices whispered and muttered, a myriad of disconnected sounds. But, within him, he heard only one voice.

You're home. You're... relieved, and you're home. Relieved and... reflective. Pensive, even. You're thinking about the children. Your thoughts are... roiling...

I know the feeling...

"Catherine...," he whispered, looking up at the shadowed roof of the gallery. He sighed deeply, and his shoulders slumped.





ACT TWO

Suffer the Little Children...

"A childhood without books – that would be no childhood. That would be like being shut out from the enchanted place where you can go and find the rarest kind of joy..."

Astrid Lindgren

The next morning, Catherine was again at the reception desk at Ridley Hall. She faced the receptionist, who greeted her with the same polite smile, looking as if nothing was amiss.

"Is Mr. Barnes in, please?" Catherine demanded without preamble.

The receptionist moved towards the back office. "Just a minute, I'll check for you."

Catherine was left standing at the desk for a few minutes. She could only guess at what Barnes was telling the woman.

He appeared from the office, looking anything but welcoming. His satisfied smile was missing today.

"Good morning," Catherine greeted him briskly.

"Good morning." Barnes frowned at her.

Catherine handed him a copy of the transfer order she had finally secured. "It's a transfer order from Social Services."

Barnes read the order. "Yes, I see" he said, in a guarded tone. "You want to move a boy named Eric, no last name. What's this about?"

"I'm not free to discuss that."

Barnes looked up. "Well, we've got a few Erics..."

"This one has a sister here."

"Ah." Barnes shook his head. "Then we've got a problem."

"What kind of problem?" Catherine demanded suspiciously.

Barnes looked her in the eye, his satisfied smirk returning. "Eric and his sister ran away last night. We can't find them anywhere."

Catherine stared at him, knowing that something strange and awful was going on here, and it was slipping through her grasp.

"Where are they?"

"Don't know." Barnes shrugged. "I've got people out looking for them, now."

"Have you notified the police?"

"I notified Child Social Services," Barnes assured her blandly.

Catherine exhaled roughly. "May I use your phone?"

"Certainly." Barnes gestured expansively towards the reception desk. Catherine kept her eye on him as she walked over, picked up the phone and punched out a number.

"Child Social Services, please," she requested. "Yes, this is Catherine Chandler with the DA's office. Have two children from Ridley Hall, a brother and a sister, been reported missing in the last twenty-four hours?"

She listened to the report Barnes had filed. "Thank you." She hung up the phone.

Barnes stood there with a knowing smirk, watching her expression.

Catherine glared at him. "I'll be back." She walked briskly from the building.



The Ridley Hall detention room was dimly lit and windowless. It was roughly the size of a broom closet. Eric sat stoically, on a mattress on the floor. He looked up as the door unlocked.

Barnes entered the small space, his satisfied smile still in place. He stood ominously over the terrified boy.

"You're being transferred."

"To where?" Eric asked nervously.

"To a home that suits you better. You don't like it here, so we'll find someplace else."

"Where's my sister?"

Barnes shrugged. "She's being transferred, too. Let's go." He grabbed the boy's shoulder, and dragged him out of the room and down the hall.

As Barnes and Eric moved through the boiler room, the boy saw his sister, Ellie. She was being taken out of an adjacent detention room by a young custodian and an older, swarthy man in designer jeans.

"Noj!" Barnes yelled at the older man. "I told you to wait!"

"Ellie...!" Eric squirmed in Barnes' hold, trying to free himself.

Ellie called out, "They're splittin' us up!"

Eric tried to break away from Barnes, but the large man subdued him easily, picking him up and carrying him off.

Ellie struggled with the two men holding her. Both children were screaming.

"Where are you taking my brother?"

She tried to break free from the men, but they shoved her up the stairs and hustled her off.

The older man called Noj slammed a door behind them. "Hey, hey, cool down. Nobody's gonna hurt you, nobody's gonna hurt your brother okay? As long as you behave yourself..."

"No!" Ellie continued to struggle in his grip.

"But listen now. I don't want no scenes on the way over. You make it hard for me, I'm gonna give you your brother's head on a stick."

"Eric..." Ellie subsided with despair. She had lost all hope now. She knew they could not win.

Barnes entered the Ridley Hall basement, carrying the boy under his arm. He flung him into the back of a windowless van. He then climbed behind the wheel and drove out onto the street above.

Ellie was dragged down another hallway. She was frightened, but determined not to show it. "Where you takin' me? Where's he takin' my brother?"

"None of your business," her captor growled.

The custodian sneered, "Right, none of your business, anymore..."

"You just gotta do as you're told and you'll be okay," Noj assured her.

Ellie complied with a sigh. There was nothing else she could do. They soon exited Ridley through the rear service entrance. A beat-up old Cadillac was parked in the alley. The custodian remained behind, his job done. He slammed the door shut, behind them.

Ellie held back. "Where're we going?"

Noj shoved her towards the car. "It's another place for kids. You'll like it, I promise." He pushed her into the front seat of the car and slammed the door.

Ellie knew it was a lie. She also knew that she and Eric were now caught up in forces they couldn't hope to control.

Eric... It was all she could think, as the car sped away from the curb and merged into the city traffic.

She knew there was no one to help them.



"Give it up, Radcliffe." Joe sat on the edge of the desk in his office, facing Catherine. "Moreno said he wants you back, full time on the Kowalski case. Like, yesterday. No more excuses. There's too much at stake."

Catherine stood with her hands planted on her hips. "Joe, I want a search warrant."

"I'm not bargaining with you."

When she didn't budge, Joe laughed at her. "Forget it. What have you got? Where's your probable cause? Did you see any bruises? Have you got any corroborating witnesses?"

Catherine exhaled her frustration. "I've got the word of a kid."

Joe blew a frustrated breath as he stood up. "Who ran away to God knows where. You don't even have the kid. Cathy, you've got nothing. I don't want to hear any more about it. I got enough goin' on here..."

"All right, I'll go back on the Kowalski case, but I'm not giving this up!"

"Suit yourself." Joe raised his hands. He picked up a sheet of paper. "Look, here's a list of witnesses to be notified and prepped for tomorrow... please. The kid's waited this long. He can wait a couple more days. What can it hurt?"

Catherine glared at the list, before snatching it from his hand. "Fine! I'll take it home with me tonight, and contact everyone. Will that be soon enough for you?"

"Hey, don't shoot me, I'm just the messenger." Joe threw up his hands, as he backed away. "You wanna get into a fight? Take it up with Moreno. You know where his office is." He turned and walked away quickly, leaving Catherine simmering behind him.



The Bridgemont Youth House was an old, ominous-looking brick building on a dingy side street. Holding Eric by the arm, Barnes led him up the steps. A few unruly looking kids stared at them from the front windows.

"Maybe you'll learn to appreciate Ridley after a few days in this place," Barnes muttered.

Eric didn't respond. He couldn't speak. He'd withdrawn completely inside his frightened shell, knowing he was powerless to resist.

Ellie. Ellie, where are you? How will we find each other? Will I ever see you again?

He had no answer. He only knew he'd never felt more alone.



When they finally reached the area of New York known as Hell's Kitchen, Noj dragged Ellie from the car and down the steps to a large basement area. Ellie stared at her new surroundings with frightened eyes.

The place was dark and dank, and it smelled. It had been divided into makeshift rooms using plywood and blankets.

In a common area a group of tough-looking kids, ranging in age from maybe seven to about seventeen, lounged on torn furniture and watched T.V. Ellie looked around, disoriented and terrified.

Noj pushed her towards the group. "This is Ellie. She's stayin' with us."

A few perfunctory glances came from the group, but no-one seemed interested.

Noj snarled, "Hey, Deb. Help her get settled. Take care of her. Make Ellie feel at home."

Deb, a waif-like teenage girl, stood up and came forward, reluctantly. Despite her diminutive appearance, she has a husky voice.

"Come on, I'll show you where we sleep."

Ellie didn't respond. She looked around, trying to figure the place out. *This isn't a group home. This isn't ... anything.* She had the correct feeling that she'd just stepped outside 'the system' and into something else. Something bad. Very bad.

"Go with her." Noj pushed Ellie towards Deb.

Ellie didn't like the feeling of his and on her, on instinct.



Barnes led Eric down a hallway of the youth home. A slovenly older woman joined them.

"He's a problem, Matron," Barnes said to her.

The woman sneered. "Well, he'll have to do some thinking about that. He'll have to decide how he's going to act, here."

Eric suddenly found his tongue. "Leave me alone!"

They reached the door at the end of the hall. The door held two signs that warned DETENTION. KEEP OUT. The matron opened the door and Barnes shoved Eric into the tiny room. The door was slammed shut and locked.

Eric sat down on the edge of a narrow, wooden bench, and removed his glasses to wipe the back of his hand across his eyes. "Ellie..." he whispered, in a tired voice, broken by all he'd been forced to endure.



Deb showed Ellie into a partitioned area behind some blankets, which contained several cots.

"You from Ridley?"

"Yeah..." Ellie sniffed and nodded.

"We got some other kids from Ridley. You can sleep on that one." She indicated a cot by the back wall.

Ellie sank down onto the bed. "What is this place?" she asked, in a scared tone.

Deb sat beside her. "It's not so bad. If you can learn quick and don't make too many mistakes. Sometimes we have fun."

She stopped speaking as Noj entered. He stared at Ellie. "That's right. We're sort of a family here. Families hang together, look out for each other. Nobody's gonna hassle you, we won't let 'em... But you gotta look out for us," he said threateningly. "And don't even think about makin' trouble here, 'cause you don't ever want to see me get mad." He waved a hand at Deb. "Ask Deb about that."

He grabbed the girl's hair and pulled her up off the bed. Deb didn't protest, or scream. They disappeared through the blanket curtain.

Ellie was left sitting alone on the cot in this very strange place. "Eric...", she whispered brokenly. "Oh, Eric. What are we gonna do...?"



Eric sat on the wooden bench in the tiny detention closet, alone and hopeless. Hours seemed to tick by, and he lost all track of time. He was getting hungry and thirsty, but he figured it was useless to bang on the door and shout for someone to come. So he sat and waited, and prayed someone would come to his rescue... and soon...



Catherine sat at her dining table working her way slowly through the list. She had called a dozen witnesses, and she had another ten to go before she was finished. The prepping was time-consuming, but necessary. Frustration nibbled at the edges of her patience with the mundane task. She glanced at her mantle clock, noting the growing lateness of the hour, but she was forced to plough on to the end.

She'd just replaced the receiver for the final time when her phone suddenly rang. She sighed, wondering who could be calling at this late hour. She was tempted to let it go to her answering machine, but her innate sense of fairness made her snatch up the receiver.

"Catherine Chandler..." she said tersely, into the mouthpiece.

"Whoa, Cathy..." a woman's voice answered her. "Bad timing?"

"Oh... Hi, Jen." Catherine relaxed. "Sorry, no, just the pressure of work. You know how it is."

"Yeah, tell me about it." Her good friend sighed. "I'm still here, womaning my desk, near to midnight. I'm about to put in a call to London. That hot new author I told you about. Someone's gotta do it. The books don't publish themselves."

"Is this a social call, or do you need me for something?" Catherine closed the folder with the list in it.



"Just making sure you've got your invitation for that museum affair in a couple of weeks. You're not gonna leave me standing alone in a whole museum full of desirable men, are you?" Jenny's voice sharpened with suspicion.

"No, Jen, I'll make it." Catherine chuckled ruefully. "But only because you asked so nicely."

"And your guest?" Jen pressed on. "Are you thinking of taking Greg?"

"Greg and I aren't really a thing," Catherine replied quickly. "I'm thinking of taking my work colleague, Edie. She deserves a night out for all that she does for me."

"Okay, I see." Jen sighed. "Well, I had a dream last night that this could be the place to finally meet just the right man for you. Your luck hasn't been running that way, lately."

"Nor has yours." Catherine shook her head. "Besides, Margaret said all the best men seem to have gone underground." She glanced at the closed drapes of her balcony doors as she spoke.

"Just our luck. But the guy donating the art collection is said to be quite a catch. You never know when your luck's going to change." Jenny chuckled. "I mean, who gives away that kind of money on a whim?"

"Plenty of people who wish to avoid paying their taxes," Catherine surmised.

"I guess you could be right. Shame that." Jen rustled some papers. "Well, I gotta go. I have a few loose ends to tie up before I can go home. Nice talking to you, girlfriend."

"You too, Jen. See you soon." Catherine replaced the receiver and sat looking at her balcony doors for some time, wondering that Vincent was doing right now...



Catherine stood beside Edie as they worked at the computer in the Data Center. Edie was banging away on the keys, trying to dig up any dirt they could use.

"What else have you got on Richard Barnes?" Catherine demanded to know. She was getting nowhere fast, and it was really starting to bug her.

Edie pulled a face. "Nothing. The guy is Mr. Clean, Cath. Biff can't lie to me." She patted the computer monitor.

"Gotta be something else," Catherine persisted. "Are we tied into the Child Welfare files? Can we get a list of the kids at Ridley?"

"Let me try..." Edie punched some keys.

The computer screen flashed: *'Sealed Documents Entry Denied.'*

Edie shrugged at the dead end. "All those Child Welfare files are sealed. That's the way those people operate."

Catherine shook her head. "Edie, I've got to find that boy. I don't think those kids ran away. I don't know what happened to them, but I feel responsible. Will you help me on this one? There's got to be another way."

Edie glanced around, making sure they were not being overheard. "Breaking into sealed files? That's just about impossible."

Catherine raised a well-sculpted eyebrow. "Just about? We're talking about kids, Edie!"

Edie made up her mind. "But, sure, on this one... anything. Biff hasn't let me down yet."

Catherine leaned closer, lowering her voice. "Impossible is what you do best, girlfriend. I need to get into those sealed records. It's the only way to track those kids."

"Yeah, I'm that good, I should be making more money," Edie huffed, knowing she was about to court trouble, for Catherine's sake; Catherine, and the kids she was hunting for.

"I knew sooner or later you'd be the end of me, and my deep love affair with Biff, here..." She patted the computer monitor, again.



Once she was back on the street, Catherine couldn't help looking futilely for some sign of Eric. She noticed various children looking through garbage, begging, or selling newspapers. The faces of these street children were hard, hopeless and ravaged. *This is what it's like. This is what it's like when you don't have someone to care for you. Or you do, but it just isn't enough.*

It was a life she never had to lead, and she knew it. She'd never been insensitive about the plight of others before; but she'd never had to go nose to nose with it, either. *These kids... they're trying. They're trying the best they know how. But they shouldn't have to. They just shouldn't. This city has so much wealth, so much to offer... surely it could make sure they're safe, and well cared for?*

It seemed that every face she looked at was young. Too young. And too... lost.

Eric. Ellie. Hang on. I'm looking. I swear I won't stop.

She wished she could scoop them all up, and take them Below, to Vincent's compassionate care. But she knew it was impossible. His world only had limited resources, for the use of those lucky enough to live there. She could save only so few from so many.

But the sight of the street kids hardened her resolve to find Eric and his sister, no matter what the cost in time or resources. Even if it cost her own job with the D.A.'s office. As she walked on by the helpless ones, her sadness weighed heavy for these tragic young faces who seemed without hope.

She knew that the old Catherine Chandler might have given up, in the face of such overwhelming odds. That the Catherine Margaret and Greg and Tom Gunther had once known was known for trying, but only so much, and for so long; that tenacity had not been one of her virtues.

Someone's description of her came back to her. *'As she prowls the mean streets, battling evil and corruption wherever it rears its ugly head.'* As hyperboles went, it was part compliment, and part jest. It had been meant as such, and so it was. The deft joke had amused the crowd.

Well, nobody's laughing, now.

Her resolve hardened further. Never had the city felt so impossibly huge, and more difficult to find someone in.

I'm not giving up. I'm not. Hang on. Just... wherever you are... hang on.



It was late in the evening, and she should have been in bed, asleep, by now. But Catherine sat at her dressing table, near tears, as she stared into the mirror, not seeing her own reflection. Again, she saw the faces and ravaged looks of the street kids. Her search had been fruitless. Edie had a plan, but they had to wait for the right time. Another night was passing, for Eric and Ellie, and Catherine knew it. Right then, everything seemed impossible.

She belted her dressing gown closer around her before she rose slowly, moving through the darkened bedroom towards the doors to her balcony. She unlocked and opened one, stepping out into the night.

Briefly, she remembered her promise to Joe not to go walking in the park after dark. She smiled sadly, knowing it had been for a very good reason she'd gone out that night. She glanced along the balcony, and saw a familiar shape in the shadows of her fire escape.

"Catherine..." Vincent called, softly.

"Vincent..." she welcomed him, choking back tears.

He moved to stand beside her. "Catherine, I felt your sadness. Don't lose heart..."

"Vincent..." Catherine inhaled deeply and sighed. "The children I was trying to help..." She shook her head. "I don't know what happened to them. I'm afraid I did more harm than good. I feel like I've failed them, and you."

"But you haven't... You haven't failed. You haven't given up and you won't, will you?"

"I know there are terrible things going on at Ridley. If I can find that boy, I can begin to unravel it..."

"The ones who prey on the children steal everybody's hope." Vincent's voice thickened with impotent rage.

Catherine nodded.

"Don't give up, Catherine. Remember..."

"I won't."

She stared up at him. "We also need to be more careful, Vincent. That night you left me the note, you were seen in the park, by an undercover friend of my boss. I know you were only looking out for my safety, but I worry about yours."

"I have lived with the fear of discovery for years, Catherine." Vincent was touched by her concern. "But I will be more cautious in future, I promise. There are hiding places and bolt-holes all over the park, if you know where to look. Please, don't worry."

"How can I not?" Catherine sighed.

Not knowing what else to say, Vincent hugged her close, pressing his cheek against her hair. Catherine burrowed into his shoulder, her arms going around him.

Strength. They were drawing it from each other.

They stood that way for some time, until Vincent drew back gently. "Good night, Catherine. Sleep well..."

"You, too..." She watched Vincent disappear, back into the shadows.

Then, there was nothing but the night wind that sighed around her like a lost soul. Catherine shivered, as she pulled her dressing gown closer to her chest. She would not give up on finding the children... she couldn't...



Catherine and Edie walked the corridor outside the Records office of the Child Social Services. A wall clock showed the time was 12:05. Workers were coming out of the office with their brown bags on their way to lunch.

Edie pointed to the clock. "That's one thing you can count on working for the city. Twelve o'clock comes and everyone runs to stuff their face."

Catherine looked into the front office. "Looks pretty empty. Let's do it."

Edie glanced behind her. "If this gets me fired, I'm moving in with you."

Catherine nodded. "Deal."

Edie grinned. "Indefinitely. Don't forget, I've already seen your place. It's way better, and far swankier, than mine. I could so get used to that kind of up-market living. Of course, we'd have to flip to see who gets to sleep on the fold-out couch."

She waved a hand as she hurried down the hall and entered the records room. Catherine hung back in the doorway for a moment, looking for any signs of interruption. There were none, so she joined Edie in the records room.

"I must be crazy. Tell me I'm crazy, I only think I'm doing this," Edie complained.

"You're not crazy."

"What we're doing has gotta be a felony right? What's that? Six months in the slammer, minimum?"

"A year."

Edie grimaced. "Wonderful. I don't look good in striped pajamas. There'd better be a stock of champagne and caviar in your fridge." She tossed her dark braids. "I've got expensive tastes."

"I'll make a list." Catherine nodded, as she looked through the files on the shelves. She stopped at one. "Here it is."

They both froze when they heard someone in the front office.

"I thought you said..." Catherine whispered.

"Keep looking. I'll handle it." Edie hurried out of the room, into the hallway and back into the front office. There was a clerk just coming back in, and settling himself down behind his desk.

Edie pinned on her best smile. "There you are, you handsome devil. I've been looking all over for you. I've gotta have these names verified by two this afternoon. Can you help me out?"

The clerk frowned. "After lunch." He unwrapped his sandwich.

Edie moved closer. "What've you got on that sandwich? Those sardines?"

The clerk looked confused. "Anchovies..."

"Anchovies! You know what they say about anchovies don't you?" She sounded familiar.

"No, what?"

"I'd join you for lunch, but I can't find my diet wafer." Edie began to unload her purse onto his desk. "I know I had one in my purse." She took out a pair of slippers, stared into one of them, and shook her head. "Nope..."

The clerk watched her, as fascinated as he was flummoxed.

Meanwhile, Catherine had found the file with Eric and Ellie's last name... Peterson. In examining the roster, she found the same notation beside several other names and some with an abbreviation: B.Y.H. TRANSFER. INVESTIGATION TERMINATED. RUNAWAY.

Runaways. They do something with the kids... then list them as runaways. It's a pattern...

In the front office, Edie continued to search her bag. "I've got to ask you a personal question. What kind of cologne are you wearing?"

The clerk's confusion deepened. "Cologne? No, I'm not wearing any cologne."

"Oh, come on. Nobody smells like that, naturally."

Catherine sneaked out of the records room. She managed to signal to Edie from the hallway, without being seen.

"Oh, you know what?" Edie said brightly. "I'm gonna be back in five minutes."

"You are?" the clerk queried weakly.

"Yep." Edie pushed all her stuff back into her purse and shouldered it. "I just remembered something I forgot to do. If I don't do it, I'm gonna get in trouble. I'll be right back. Okay?" She gave him her best smile, and a cheery wave, as she hurried out.

"Okay." The file clerk sat staring after her, his anchovy sandwich completely forgotten.

"Piece of cake," Edie giggled, as she caught up with Catherine. "That poor man don't know what just hit him. I still got it, girlfriend." She huffed on her highly polished nails, before rubbing them on her lapel.

Together, they hurried down the hallway and out of the building, both holding their breath, praying they would not be stopped. Edie had no intention of spending the rest of her life sleeping on Catherine's dinky, fold-out couch.

"So, you found something? Tell me you found something."

"I found something," Catherine answered, racing with Edie down the street.



Noj was keen to give Ellie her first lesson in daylight robbery. His gang of kids were about to rob an elderly couple in Times Square.

"All right look, see those two over there." He pointed to a middle-aged couple, clearly out-of-towners, who were checking a street map, trying to pinpoint their exact location in the busy thoroughfare. They both looked confused and way out of their comfort zones.

"Here it comes... Keep your eyes open, it's gonna happen fast. All right, here comes Bobby." The thief watched with satisfaction.

Four kids of varying ages approached the couple. One held a large paper sign that read *"Help us – we need food."*

Noj bent close to Ellie's ear. "See, Bobby holds up the sign, right in the guy's face..."

One of the older kids held the sign up while the other three surrounded their victim, tugging at his sleeves. They moved even closer, hassling the couple and herding them together.

Noj nodded with satisfaction. "And everybody goes to work..."

While all this was happening, one of the kids lifted the man's wallet, while another rifled the woman's purse. As the man attempted to bat the paper away from his face, the kids scattered, handing off the stolen articles to Deb, who was walking in the opposite direction.

"Okay, it's all over. Deb takes the drop, and walks away. Everybody does their job, everybody works together."

Deb sauntered across the street and walked up to Noj and Ellie. He grabbed both girls by the shoulders and walked them towards an alley.

He ducked into a stairwell. "Come on." He motioned with his hand, Deb handed over the wallet. He took it from her, then grabbed her wrist. "You sure you didn't forget nothing?"

Deb winced, fighting back tears, as she reached into her jeans with her free hand, she held out the woman's wristwatch. "I was comin' to it... It's in the other pocket."

"Just making sure." Noj glared at her. He snatched the watch from her, then pinched her chin roughly. "I see everything, nothing gets around me. I got eyes in the back of my head, remember that." He dropped his gaze to Ellie.

"I'll remember." she said quietly, in a scared tone.

"You better." Noj stared at her, looking intimidating.



Catherine stood beside Edie at the street pay phone box, reading the file they'd just liberated. Edie was concentrating on the number she was punching into the phone.

"B.Y.H..." Catherine mused. "It's some kind of abbreviation or code."

Edie nodded, as she spoke into the phone. "Hi, sorry to bother you. It's Edie again. Look, listen, I know we didn't have any luck, but I just remembered I've got some court records on those names with some initials or letters. B.Y.H.? Does that help you at all?" She looked at Catherine. "Bridgemont Youth House? What's that? A foster facility...? Well, okay, thanks again, handsome."

She hung up and turned to Catherine. She offered a low five. "Who's magic?"

"Do you have to ask?" Catherine slapped her hand and smiled widely with relief.

"I guess the need to have me sleeping on your dinky fold-out couch has been nixed." Edie grinned happily.

"There's always time for a girls' only sleep-over." Catherine shrugged. "Just name the weekend."

"You're on!" Edie pumped the air. "Just don't forget the champagne and caviar. It told you I'm an expensive date. Especially since you're payin'."

She took the file from Catherine. "But now, we gotta go find us this kid of yours. It's been long enough."

"It has, indeed." Catherine gave her a huge, grateful hug. "Let's go get him. And arrest us some bad guys."



Barnes and Noj were standing outside the Ridley Home, discussing business.

"How's she doing?" Barnes demanded to know.

"She's a tough one, doesn't talk much. But she's smart... I think."

"I thought it might work out, knowing how bright she is."

Noj handed him an envelope. Barnes took it and began to open it. "How much is here?"

Noj shrugged. "Fifteen hundred."

Barnes rounded on him. "I told you I wanted twenty five hundred for the next one."

Noj looked worried. "Twenty five?"

"And this is the last one."

"Last one? What are you talking about?" Noj demanded.

"It's getting too risky; there are too many people on my back. I got some woman from the D.A.'s office sniffing around in my business. She'll be back, I know it. Her sort don't give up."

Noj decided to sweeten the deal. "How about for the next one I give you three thousand?"

"No, no, no I want twenty five hundred for this one and then it's over and out. I got enough to retire on."

"All right, all right. I'll find another source." Noj looked anything but pleased as he got into his car and drove away.

Vincent eased back into the shadows. He'd been watching the whole transaction from a safe vantage point. He had heard everything. Now he needed to find Catherine before it was too late.



Eric stood behind the detention room door, kicking at it. It had been hours, and no-one had come to see how he was, or if he needed anything.

Suddenly, the door was flung open, throwing him off-balance. The slovenly matron entered and jabbed at him with a mop handle, knocking him against the far wall.

"We don't put up with that kind of stuff, here," she snarled at him.

A beefy older man was standing behind her.

"Let me out." Eric came forward again, his face determined.

"Let you out?!" the woman laughed hardily. "Will ya get a load of him, and his mouth?" She pointed at Eric with her broom. "Get back and we'll think about feedin' ya."

She raised her broom again, and watched Eric step backwards instinctively. This allowed her husband to put down the tray of food he held. Eric stared at the pathetic meal. The door was slammed shut and locked again.

Ellie! His mind cried. *If I ever find you again, no matter what, no matter where we are, I swear I'll never let you go.*



The Bridgemont Youth House was quiet. It was after dinner, and some of the kids were allowed to watch T.V. There didn't appear to be any adults around as Catherine entered the darkened T.V. room.

She looked around at the varied group. "I'm looking for Eric Peterson? He has glasses?"

"Eric? Hey, what's that new kid's name?" an older boy asked.

"Don't know," another answered. "Never heard of him." He turned his attention back to the screen.

Catherine held her patience. "Where is the new kid, then?"

The older boy smirked. "Upstairs, in detention."

"Locked up," another commented matter-of-factly.

Catherine hurried back into the hallway and climbed the stairs. She moved along the corridor, checking doors. The door at the end of the hall was locked. The legend on the door declared it to be the detention room.

She knocked on the door softly. "Eric..?"

Eric got off the floor where he'd been trying to sleep and went to the door.

Yeah?"

"Eric..." Catherine breathed, grateful to have finally found him.

"Are you here to let me out?" Eric asked, breathlessly.

Suddenly, a woman appeared at the far end of the corridor and saw Catherine. She came hurrying down to her.

"What's this?! What are you doing?" the matron demanded harshly, grabbing her arm in a hard grip.

Catherine stood her ground. "I want to talk to this boy. I want to see Eric."

"Who are you?" the matron yelled.

"Unlock the door," Catherine demanded, low and even.

Some of the kids from the T.V. room had come upstairs to watch. They stood in the hall, watching the events unfold, with open mouths.

Catherine raised her voice. "I think you'd better unlock this door *now!*"

"I think you'd better leave," the woman snarled. "Get out now!" She lunged at Catherine and they grappled.

"Nick!" the woman shouted for her husband.

Catherine suddenly broke the matron's hold by grabbing her wrist, then stepped behind her to subdue her in a hammer lock. Some of the kids started to cheer.

Catherine held her ground. Eric started pounding on the door.

"I don't like to be pushed." Catherine reached into the matron's apron pocket and grabbed her keys. The kids in the hall watched and loved it.

"Which key?" Catherine applied more pressure to the matron's arm. The woman yelped in pain.

"The square one..."

Catherine found the key and unlocked the door. Eric rushed out, saw Catherine, and almost smiled.

"It's you!" he said, in disbelief.

"Eric," Catherine commanded. "Get in the car, out in front. Go!"

Eric didn't argue. He nodded and ran for the stairs, taking them two at a time. Catherine was still controlling the matron in the hammer lock. She pushed her into the empty detention room and locked her in.

Serves you right, she thought.

Suddenly, her husband appeared at the end of the hall. He rushed towards Catherine, trying to prevent her from leaving. She shoved him back down the stairs.

She followed his tumbling body and rushed out the door and jumped into her car. The watching kids all cheered and high-fived each other.

She started the car and they drove off, soon leaving their pursuers far behind...





ACT THREE

Is It Real?

“If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales...”

Albert Einstein

Along long lengths of steam pipe of varying diameters, a message was being tapped in code. At certain points along the way, fresh hands tapped on the pipes, relaying the message ever downwards. At the final terminal point, a young boy leaned, with his ear to the pipe. He listened carefully, then ran off.

Vincent sat in Father’s chamber, finishing a pencil drawing of Noj, based on his observation in the alley. He intended to show it to Catherine, and tell her of his discoveries about Ridley, as soon as it was complete.

The young boy ran in. “Vincent! She’s in the park. She’s waiting there...”

“Thank you, Nicholas. Got to Father and tell him I will return soon.”

He gathered up his discarded cloak and headed for the quickest route up into the park entrance. His heart lifted at the sweet thought of seeing Catherine again.



Catherine stood alone in the dimly-lit culvert entrance off the park. She looked over to check on Eric, who was sleeping nearby, wrapped in a blanket from her car. She had been waiting for some time, but she was sure Vincent had received her message. The faint tapping on the pipes had never stopped since she'd tried out the crude identity code Vincent had taught her.

She turned back to look at the barred gate and its steel companion. In the next moment the steel door rolled back, and she saw Vincent standing at the end of the tunnel, behind the bars.

"Vincent," she whispered, going to him.

He opened the gate and stepped out beside her. His eyes clung to her face, seeming to study every smooth angle and shadow.

"I've got the boy. I found him," she told him.

"I knew you would," Vincent replied softly.

"They've separated him from his sister. They'll be looking for him. If I take him back, I'm afraid I'll lose him again. I can't chance that, Vincent."

Vincent knew what that meant. He inclined his head. "He'll be safe with us."

Catherine sighed with relief. "Great! I was hoping."

Vincent started to approach the sleeping boy, but Catherine clasped his arm. "No, wait. I'm afraid he'll..."

He looked at her calmly. "That he'll be afraid?"

Catherine looked embarrassed. "He's been through a lot. I don't know how..."

Vincent was supremely confident. "It's all right... Wake him."

He stepped back into the shadows as Catherine went to wake Eric. "Eric?" She shook his small shoulder gently.

The boy stirred and opened his eyes. "What? What are we gonna do?" he asked sleepily. "Where are we?"

"We're going to a safe place, where no one can hurt you," Catherine reassured him.

What a dream that would be. Eric sat up. "You going, too?"

Catherine nodded. "We're going with a friend of mine. Someone very extraordinary. I want you to meet him. His name is Vincent."

Vincent appeared slowly from behind Catherine and knelt down beside Eric. "Eric," he said softly.

Eric stared at Vincent, at first shocked. Then, as he looked into Vincent's eyes, he realized they were smiling at him. Eric's usually sullen eyes were then filled with startled fascination.



He studied Vincent's face from all angles. "What is that? Is it real?"

"It's real," Vincent confirmed.

Eric reached out and touched Vincent's face. Catherine watched the two of them, greatly moved.

"How'd you get like that?" the boy asked.

"I don't know. I don't think I ever will. I never knew my mother or father."

"So you were born like that?"

Vincent smiled. "Well, it didn't happen because I was bad."

Eric grinned. "I bet you'd know your parents if you ever saw them."

They both chuckled. Catherine looked on in wonder.



Vincent, Catherine and Eric made their way slowly down through the tunnels, into the world Below.

"Where are we going?" Eric asked, looking around him with curiosity.

"Deep below the city, to a world of tunnels and chambers as old as New York," Vincent told him. "It's a forgotten place. But it's a place where people have always found safety."

Eric frowned. "But how will I find my way back?"

"Don't worry, you won't have to do it alone."

Eric stopped walking. "What about my sister?"

"We'll find her. I promise," Catherine was quick to reassure him.

The two adults exchanged a long glance over the boy's head, as they began to walk again. Vincent nodded. "I have an idea of where she is. I have completed a sketch of the man who took her. I was going to show it to you."

"Great," Catherine acknowledged. "It's a good place to start."



In the dank, dark realm of Noj's basement, the thief master was giving another lesson. He was standing by a manikin that was dressed in a business suit, with bells sewn all over it. He'd just lifted a wallet out of the pocket without any of the bells ringing. He was showing Ellie how to become an expert pick-pocket.

Among the group of watching children, there were a few young men whose job it was to maintain discipline among the kids. Noj exerted total control over his thieves.

"Excuse me, sir, is Lincoln Center in that direction?" He greeted the manikin smoothly. "Thanks, nice hat." He turned to the group. "You hear any bells ringing? No bells. The bells ring, it's all over, you go to jail." His voice rose to a threatening tone. "I don't want to hear those bells, you don't want to hear them."

He looked back to the manikin. "By the way sir, where did you get that hat?" He picked a watch off the manikin without ringing a bell.

He then produced a money clip, a check-book and a passport, all without making a sound. He glared at Ellie.

"He's so amazing," Deb enthused.

"I'm not gonna do this, I don't care," Ellie said, mutinously.

"You'll do it," Deb assured her. *You'll do it. We all do. You'll do it if you know what's good for you.*



Vincent and Catherine stood by and watched, as Father sat in his chair, talking to Eric.

"Vincent tells me you might want to stay with us," he said to the boy, gently probing.

Eric nodded, slowly. "Maybe..."

"Eric, we only want those here who want to be here. No-one will force you to stay, no-one will ever keep you from leaving."

Eric's sad expression tightened. "Right now, I don't have anywhere else to go."

Father shrugged. "If you want to stay Above, we have friends above who will help find some safe place for you."

Eric looked around. "Can I stay here... for a while?"

Father seemed pleased, by the request. "Yes, you can stay, for a while."

Eric's young face clouded. "And my sister, too?"

Father nodded. "Hm, hm... yes, of course. But there are some promises you have to make... and keep."

"What kind of promises?"

"To give help and support those in the community who need it, and to trust those who offer it to you."

Eric nodded quickly. "I promise that."

"It's a very important promise. It's how we exist..."

Eric cocked his head. "What about not telling anybody about this. Keep it a secret?"

He's a quick one. Father frowned. "Well, you know, Eric, suppose you were to tell the secret to anyone. Do you think they would believe it? And... even if they did believe you, do you think anyone is going to find the way down?"

Eric's expression remained solemn. "I'll keep it a secret, anyway."

"Good..." Father nodded, then smiled. "Then... welcome!" He shook the boy's hand.

Vincent walked forward to grasp the boy's shoulder. "Welcome, Eric."

Catherine smiled, her eyes welling, as Eric accepted the welcome. Then he hurried over to her, throwing his arms around her in a grateful hug.



Ellie stood beside the manikin, staring at the floor as the group watched. No-one made a sound.

Noj was losing patience with her. He wanted her to pick the wallet. "The coat pocket on the right side. Do it, Ellie, do it!"

Ellie didn't respond, or move. She kept her eyes down, close to tears now.

"Do it, Ellie! Now!" Noj ranted.

Ellie reached for the pocket, and one of the bells tinkled.

Noj smacked her with a long wooden switch. "You little idiot! We're gonna be here all night!"

Help. Oh, someone. Please help. She knew it was a useless plea.



The tunnel folk had long since gone to bed. In Vincent's chamber, but for a few oil lamps, all the lights were out. Eric was tucked up in bed, but still awake, thinking of his sister, and worrying about her. He sniffed, dolefully.

Vincent had been watching the boy from his table, as he wrote in his diary of the day's events. He put aside his pen, and got up from his chair. He moved to kneel beside the bed.

"Sleep well, now," he whispered.

The boy started to cry. Vincent put a hand on his shoulder. "Eric, we'll find your sister. Catherine will not stop, until she does. You must have faith."

"And we can both stay here?" The boy stared at him.

"For as long as you like."

Eric sighed. "Okay... good..."

"You're safe, and you're with friends. Now rest."

The boy relaxed, turning his face into the bank of pillows. His small hand crept from the covers to close over Vincent's, not seeming to mind its clawed strangeness. Vincent relaxed, settling on the rug beside the bed and maintaining the contact, until Eric's breathing lengthened, and evened out into sleep.

Then, Vincent rose quietly, taking the boy's hand from his and tucking it beneath the covers. Only then did he return to his diary, and his concerns over where Eric's sister could be now.



Ellie stood beside the manikin, clutching herself in terror as Noj harangued her. He ranted about every one of her faults and failings.

"No more... please," she begged, exhausted and crying.

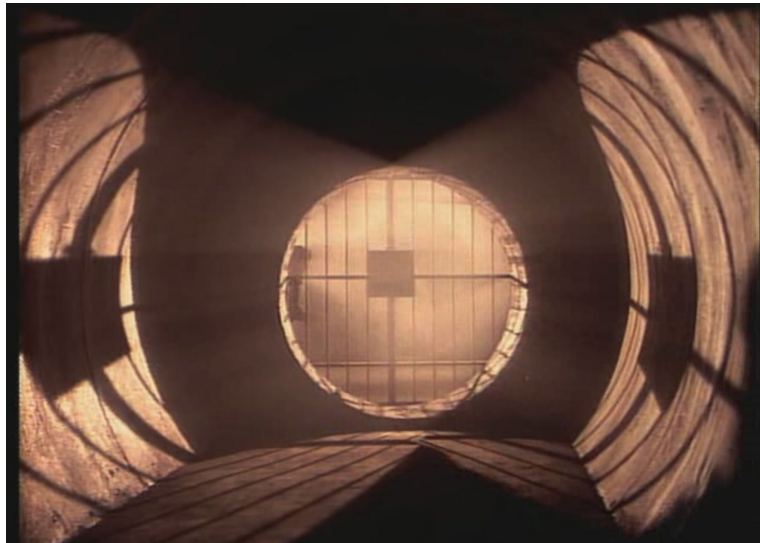
"I own you! I bought you!" Noj declared, exasperated. "Get it through your head. You're mine! And you better be glad about that. 'Cause without me you got nothin'! Without me you got the chicken-hawks on the street. You want to be selling your body? Do ya wanna end up strung out, hooked on drugs?"

Ellie shook her head. "I don't want to be here either!"

"You got nothin' else! Do it! The pocket!"

Ellie shook her head, still defiant. Noj's face contorted, as he raised the wooden switch and brought it down hard across her bowed shoulders.





ACT FOUR

“It’s sort of like a dream...”

“Children must be taught how to think, not what to think...”

Margaret Mead

Catherine sat in her cubicle. She was talking on the phone to the N.Y.P.D. Runaway Division.

“Ellie Peterson,” she said. She paused, listening to the answer. “Twelve years old, blonde hair, green eyes.” She listened again. “About five feet tall...”

Joe rounded the end of her glass partition. Catherine looked up and saw him. “Hold on, please,” she said into the phone. She covered the mouthpiece with her hand.

“That matron from the Brooklyn Youth Home caved in,” Joe said hurriedly. “She’s talkin’ a blue streak. We’ve got what we need to bring Barnes in for illegally transferring kids, and for child abuse.”

“Great!” Catherine smiled.

“Good instincts, Radcliffe,” Joe acknowledged her tireless work.

“Thanks. But it’s more than just instincts.”

"Yeah, I guess. Cockroaches have good instincts, too. That doesn't necessarily make 'em great prosecutors." He grimaced. "But, just don't go looking for any gold stars. I'm fresh out of 'em."

He turned and walked out, before she could reply. Catherine stared after him, knowing he'd just paid her one of his rare compliments.

"Yes, sorry... I'm still here..." *And Eric is safe. I'm looking for you, Ellie. And I'm going to find you.* She smiled, as she went back to her phone-call.



Vincent showed the drawing of Noj to Kipper, Eric and some of the other tunnel kids. They were his trustworthy network of spies, and his main connection to the world Above.

"Have you ever seen this man?"

"I think I have..." Kipper studied it closely.

"Around Times Square, maybe," Nicholas chimed in.

Eric stared at the drawing, incredulously. "He took my sister. That's the guy who took my sister from Ridley."

Vincent looked at each child in turn. "See if you can find him. If you do, find out where he lives. You know how."

Kipper and the others gave their acknowledgements. They carried various forms of transport, from scooters to skateboards, to hand-made bikes.

"Can I go, too?" Eric asked hopefully.

Vincent shook his head regretfully. "Not yet. First, you have to learn the way." He indicated the other boys and girls. "They'll be our eyes and ears."

"We'll find her. We know all the places to look," Kipper said to him.

Nicholas grinned. "And we can get anywhere at top-speed. We know all the shortcuts."

Kipper moved off, waving to his ragged crew. "Okay! Let's go get 'im!"

Vincent watched them hurry down the tunnel. "Take great care up there."

It was the regular caution, given either by Vincent or Father. Or both. The kids waved back, as they hurried up towards the surface. Their body language said it all: *You can count on us.*

Vincent knew they could.

At a point where several tunnels converged, the kids headed off in different directions: Kipper emerged onto the street from a hole in a broken brick wall. Nicholas climbed up from a grating next to an abandoned building. Nancy appeared from behind a dumpster in an alley.

The group of kids converged around Clarence, an old, black, street corner saxophonist. He was one of the tunnel community's oldest helpers, and he often conveyed their messages, in both directions.

Kipper showed him the drawing, and the saxophonist nodded knowingly. "Seen him around just yesterday, with his tough gang of little thieves. They hang out around Times Square, harassing the tourists." He grimaced sourly. "Gives us honest, working folk a bad name." He looked up from the sketch. "What ya want 'im for?"

"He's got the sister of one of our new kids. We need to get her back."

"Okay, I'll alert the others and move spots. I'll try and get closer to his main hunting ground. Come back around in half an hour, if you don't spot him, by then. I'll play our alert tune, if I see him before you." Clarence heaved himself to his feet and gathered his things, before limping off down the sidewalk.

"Okay, we need to plan our next move." Kipper got the kids into a group around him.

After they conferred, Kipper hit the sidewalk near Broadway and 42nd St., looking for Noj. Nicholas stationed himself near a donut stand, scanning the passersby. Meanwhile, Nancy moved through a video arcade, checking out the crowd for any signs of furtive pickpockets. She'd once been one of them, so she knew what to look for.



Noj came out of a record store and headed down the street. As he walked, Deb and a few of the other kids in the gang fell in alongside him. They all headed off, walking past Nicholas, who appeared to be busy swiping a half-eaten donut left on the

donut stand counter. After Noj and his band of toughs had passed, Nicholas turned and signaled across the street.

Kipper saw the signal and moved slowly, tracking Noj from the other side of the street. Further along the sidewalk, Clarence sat and watched the thief king and his ragged crew. He began to play the signal tune on his sax, his dark eyes following the group along the crowded street. The tune was taken up by several of the other street performers stationed along the street, each keeping their eyes on the group.

Noj and his kids didn't appear to notice that they were being tracked, as they ambled down towards a dark alley and disappeared down the basement steps. Kipper watched from his position across the street, before he hurried on to report his findings.

The signal tune was still being played along the street. Kipper turned to give Clarence the thumbs-up signal that all was well. The old man grinned, and played a cheeky note on his sax, looking well-satisfied with the morning's work.



Catherine was exiting the D.A.'s office building, about to make her way home. As she moved down the sidewalk, one of the tunnel kids dashed up alongside her, pressing a message into her palm. He then ran around a corner. Catherine stopped at the corner, and unfolded the message to read it.

The moment she understood the contents, she rushed home. Arriving at her apartment, she hurried to change into clothing more appropriate for the tunnels. She made her way quickly down to meet Vincent, at the threshold entrance.

Dressed in jeans and boots, and carrying a flashlight, she pushed aside a stack of boxes to reveal a floor grate. She lifted the grate and lowered herself into the sub-basement.

She moved through the concrete sub-basement, then stepped through a jagged hole in the wall and into the old brickwork tunnel beyond. She walked down the passage to a threshold point between the cold grey of the world Above and the warm earth tones of the world Below. She peered into a steam filled tunnel. Soon, Vincent appeared, walking out of the mist.

"Vincent..." She welcomed the sight of him.

He walked right up to her. They were growing easier with each other. "Catherine, we've made progress."

She nodded. "The supervisor of Ridley is about to be arrested."

"Hm..." Vincent unfolded the drawing he'd made of Noj. "The children have confirmed to me that this is the man who took Eric's sister."

"You showed me this when I brought Eric down." Catherine nodded at it. "Who is he?"

Vincent grimaced. "A thief, a man who uses children, the worst kind. He's connected with the supervisor of Ridley. I saw them talking together, arguing about money."

"He's selling kids!" Catherine looked horrified. "Barnes is selling kids out of Ridley!"

"Only the ones with no known relatives, the ones who are all alone." Vincent nodded.

Catherine pointed to the drawing. "And he has Eric's sister?"

Vincent nodded again.

"Where is he? Do you know? Take me there, Vincent..."

Vincent shook his head. "It's too great a risk."

"It's the only way I can move on them," Catherine countered passionately.

"Vincent, you can't testify against them. The only way I can get an arrest warrant is to see it with my own eyes. I'll take the risk."

He looked at her with admiration. *I knew there was strength in you. Do you feel it, Catherine? Do you feel how... beautiful it makes you?* Unable to refute her words, he pocketed the drawing before taking her hand, and leading her down the tunnel into the all-enveloping mist.



The dank, dark basement in Hell's Kitchen was quiet and still. Except for a few kids in the common area, no one appeared to be around.

Unseen, a cover was quietly removed from an air vent, and placed to one side.

Vincent sat back to allow Catherine to crawl from the vent and into the basement.

He hovered in the darkness of the wall cavity, awaiting any developments.

Catherine remained unseen by the few kids around, as she began to make her way through the crazy maze of blankets and curtains on clotheslines, which served as room dividers. She looked around cautiously, seeking some sign of Ellie, and looking for any other evidence she could use. She moved into an area that appeared to be the girls' living quarters. Suddenly, she heard the sounds of several people entering the basement.

Noj was raging. "You try that again and I'll cut your feet off! You don't run away from me! You wanna spend a few months tied to a bed?"

"Let go!" Ellie tried to escape his grasp. "Don't! I won't do that again!"

As the voices got nearer, Catherine disappeared into an adjoining curtained-off area. Noj stormed in, and tied Ellie to a chair, her hands bound behind her back.

Ellie struggled, weeping. "I promise I won't try to run away, again."

"You're stayin' right here. I can't trust you." Noj snarled. "Deb, where are you? You're supposed to be keeping an eye on her." He stormed off, looking for Deb. He disappeared down the corridor of curtains and blankets.

Catherine waited until Noj was safely away, then she came through the curtains and entered the girls' quarters. She approached the bound girl.

"Ellie..." she whispered.

Ellie looked confused, knowing she'd seen Catherine's face somewhere before.

"Ellie, it's okay. I'm taking you out of here. To Eric." Catherine went to work on her bonds.

"Who are you?"

"Shhh, we don't have much time. I'm the one Eric talked to at Ridley. Do you remember?"

"You found him?"

"Yes. Let's go." The ropes slipped loose.

Catherine took her hand and started to lead her out. But they saw Deb standing in their way.

"Deb, don't say anything, please," Ellie pleaded.

"Come with us," Catherine offered quickly. "You can all come."

There was a tense moment as Deb grappled with what to do. At first she looked as if she was about to cry, but then, she turned tough again.

“Noj! Noj!” she began yelling.

Deb ran out. Before Catherine and Ellie could escape, Noj was there, blocking their way.

“What’s this?” He glared at Ellie. “You know this woman?”

Catherine stood her ground. “I’m taking Ellie out of here. Don’t try to stop me!”

The thief laughed harshly. “Wouldn’t think of it.”

He grabbed Catherine by the wrist. Catherine quickly broke the hold and kicked him in the shins. Then she drove the flat of her hand into Noj’s face, shattering his nose. Noj collapsed to his knees, reeling in pain. Deb hid a smile, as she watched in silent approval.

Catherine grabbed Ellie by the hand and they ran through the walls of curtains.

Behind them, Noj started screaming, “Freddie! Freddie...!”

One of Noj’s big young thugs came running. As he rounded a corner, Vincent’s arm reached out from the air vent and snared him by the leg, upending him, before sweeping him through the vent with frightening force.

Noj, with his nose bleeding, charged after Catherine. As he barreled through the blankets, he pulled a small revolver from his jeans. Catherine and her charge darted through the curtains, just ahead of Noj, trying to escape to the vent.

Noj whipped aside a curtain and suddenly faced a nightmare. Vincent, with his fangs bared, poised to strike. He let out a blood-curdling snarl as he used both hands to swat Noj, and crush him against the wall beside the open vent.

Deb and the other kids reacted to the strange snarling from behind the blankets with stunned disbelief, not yet realizing that the awful sound finally heralded their own freedom. They clung together, unable to function without being told what to do.

Vincent snarled, as he dragged Noj’s crumpled body back through the vent. As quickly as he disappeared, the grill work was replaced, and all fell silent, again.



That night, Ridley Hall swarmed with police. Children watched solemnly as Barnes, the custodian, and the receptionist, were all led out in handcuffs.

“Let’s go, this way, watch your step,” a police officer commanded them, as he marched them to a waiting van.

All the files were wheeled out and confiscated. The children whispered among themselves about what would happen to them now.

Meanwhile, the children of the pickpocketing ring were being loaded into vans by social workers from the Department of Special Services for Children. They went quietly enough. Not one of them spoke of what they had previously seen and heard. Not one of them would say what had happened to their former master, because they simply didn’t know. They maintained a stubborn silence, ignoring the constant questioning, as they headed to an unknown, new life.



Eric was sitting in Father’s chamber with Kipper, and a few of the tunnel kids, playing a board game of their own invention. It resembled Chinese checkers. But Eric’s mind wasn’t on the game. He seemed preoccupied, and worried.

Suddenly, he looked up and broke into a thankful smile. “Ellie!” He jumped up.

Father, Vincent, Catherine and Ellie were standing at the head of the stairs.

“Eric...!” Ellie jumped down the stairs to him.

They hugged each other tightly, both crying and laughing at the same time.

“It’s sort of like a dream, isn’t it?” Ellie whispered, pulling back to stare at her little brother.

Eric grinned for ear to ear. “No. Better!”

Catherine, Vincent and Father watched them together, all deeply moved by the tableau of happy reunion.

“Ah, what it is to be young...” Jacob sighed deeply. “And with your whole future ahead of you...”

Catherine and Vincent didn’t answer. They exchanged long glances that spoke for them.



Vincent and Catherine stood at the threshold point leading to Catherine's sub-basement. Vincent, standing at the mouth of the tunnel, was bathed in a warm, golden light.

Catherine looked at him lovingly. "Vincent, I've been all over the world, met people, done things. I've lived in luxury that most people could never imagine, but I can't remember a time when I've felt as good, or complete, as I do right here, right now."

Vincent lifted his head, half-closing his eyes. "Hmmm, I can feel it, in you... through you..."

Catherine regarded him with wonder. "You really can?"

Vincent nodded. "It's very beautiful..."

She smiled at him. "Sort of, like a dream?" She embraced him, tenderly, gratefully.

"Better," Vincent avowed softly, pressing a kiss into her hair.

They both pulled back slowly, to gaze at each other for a long, final moment before they silently parted — each returning to their own world. Catherine walked away into the beam of blue-white light that led up to her apartment. Vincent started to leave, then hesitated. He turned back to stare at the light, before he walked away, into the sheltering darkness of the tunnel world...



“The soul is healed by being with children...”

Fyodor Dostoevsky

