

**BEAUTY AND THE BEAST**

**"When the Blue Bird Sings"**



**"When the Blue Bird Sings"**

## ACT ONE

### **Of Beautiful and Impossible Things...**

**By**

**C.J. La Belle**



*“Behind every beautiful thing, there's some kind of pain...”*

*Bob Dylan*



The bull-pen of the D.A.’s office was buzzing with its usual frenetic rush to get twenty different things done at once. Catherine sat at her desk trying to make sense of the testimony she was breaking down for Joe, but the words kept crawling off the page of her yellow legal pad.

“This is getting me nowhere...,” she sighed, glancing at her wristwatch.

She was scheduled to grab a working lunch with her boss, on their midday break from court. She knew he'd want to discuss the case in detail, and the break-down needed to be finished. But her usually ordered mind kept drifting away to ponder other things.

She hadn't heard from Vincent since the disastrous attack on the tunnels by the Outsiders. Every night she waited up for him, but he hadn't returned to her balcony, and there had been no messages. She was deeply worried about him, and how he was coping with the aftermath. His absence from her life had become a distraction she could ill afford. It was past time she did something about it. But she needed something special, first.

She reached for her telephone and dialed the number of her oldest friend, Jenny Aronson. "Hi Jen," she said, as soon her call was answered. "I've got a favor to ask. I want to get a present for a good friend."

Jenny giggled. "You're so sweet to think of me, and I've been the same size since college. Though I swear I'm trying to lose a little. Something charming in silk will do nicely."

Catherine laughed. "Got it. But I was actually thinking more along the lines of a book."

Jenny sighed. "And here I am, working for a publisher. Books, I got. The new Robert Ludlum is coming out soon. Should I save you a copy?"

"No, I don't want something new. Kind of the opposite. I was thinking about something old. Maybe... poetry?"

"Poetry?" Jenny puzzled. "Like in the classical sense?"

"Yes. And I need someplace easy to find between my office and the courthouse. Do you know of anywhere I can look? Like say, on my lunch break from court?"

"Okay..." Jenny tapped her pen on her desk. "Yes, as a matter of fact... there's one place. Just a little out of the way kind of thing, in Greenwich Village. Privately owned. I haven't been in the place for a while, but it should still be there. Quaint owner, like someone out of Dickens or Christie. Very proper and dignified, but he knows his stuff. If he doesn't have what you're looking for, no-one will."

Catherine smiled into the receiver. "The Village? Great. Thanks, Jen. I can make that if I'm quick."

"Got a pen? It's called 777. The name and the address are the same thing. You can't miss it."

Catherine jotted it down. "You're a lifesaver."

Jenny laughed. "Of course I am. And I still wear a size 8. Just in case. Dinner next week as my reward? You gotta tell me if the book works out."

"Sorry ..." Catherine looked up to see Joe tapping his watch, giving her the eye. "I'll have to get back to you on that one. Right now, I'm needed. Bye, and thanks!"

Jenny sighed. "Bye..."

"We'll have maybe an hour, tops, Radcliffe." Joe pulled on his coat. "We can't be late getting back to court. I pray they're not gonna go for any more continuances." He frowned at her, his face alive with suspicion. "I hope you're not planning any side trips we don't have time for."

"Oh, no, Joe." Catherine shook her head, as she grabbed her coat and bag. "Wouldn't dream of it..."



The sunny, spring day was warm and inviting. The Greenwich Village streets bustled with their own unique life. A nighttime rain shower had left the day feeling crisp and washed clean. It was a great day to be alive, or at least so it seemed to most members of the noonday crowd, as they hustled along the city streets.

Spring had its own kind of energy. The sunlight seemed brighter, and felt just a touch warmer, even down at street level. Coats were worn open, and hats weren't necessary, even if a scarf was still a good idea. Warm weather was on its way. You could see it in every smiling face.

Nestled amid the bustle of city life, the exterior of the old bookshop spoke of a by-gone time. Shadows huddled beneath its faded awning, as the persistent sunlight slanted in.

But, if you looked through the streaked windows, the musty, crammed interior invited inspection. It was a book lover's paradise. Cramped, chaotic, but with treasures amidst the junk, some of the shelves were bowed by the weight of their contents, while others were straight and true. The aisles between the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves were narrow, with old hardcovers jammed into every possible

inch of shelf space. It was a place that invited browsing. It was a space that begged to be explored, especially for bibliophiles.

Catherine stopped in the shadows of the awning. She put up a hand to shade her eyes as she peered in through the dusty window, frowning at the disarray she could see. She sighed, doubting anyone could find anything in this place in the limited time she had. Stacks of unsorted books covered the proprietor's desk and surrounded it on every side.

Joe had been walking with her, and he'd continued some way down the street, before he noticed she was no longer at his side. He turned and glared at her, raising his arms in an impatient come-on gesture.

"Radcliffe...," he groaned. His temper had been drastically shortened by ongoing continuances in the Ketter case, and he was in no mood for more delays.

"Wait a minute, Joe. This is the bookshop Jenny told me about." Catherine ignored his scowl of discontent, as she stood back to survey the shop frontage. Daylight streamed in through the closed front door, and the establishment's street address was silhouetted on the old tiled floor.

The numbers were 777. Catherine knew seven was a magic number, as was three. And with seven, three times? Something amazing was all but guaranteed to be inside. It just was.

The bell over the door jingled as she entered, with a very impatient Joe close on her heels. He looked anything but pleased, at her sudden decision to stop in.

"I said, no side trips!" He scowled at her. "How long is this going to take? We're running late already..." He checked his wristwatch.

Catherine shook her head at him. "I just want to browse for a few moments. I love old books."

Joe picked up the top book off a stack, and blew the dust from the cover, before flipping it open. He held it out. "Here. This one's old."

Catherine glanced at the title page with affectionate disdain. "'*The Collected Sermons of Cotton Mather*'...? Not quite what I had in mind."

Unseen by the both of them, the proprietor, Mr. Smythe, stepped out from an aisle behind them. "Perhaps I can be of some help?" he offered, smoothly. He was portly and bespectacled, with a trace of an accent Joe couldn't quite place.

Joe frowned at him, as he pointed to Catherine. "Yeah... um... she's looking for a book."

"Well..." Smythe arched one disapproving eyebrow, as he waved a hand at the shop's cluttered interior, stacked with volumes of every imaginable shape and size.

Catherine ignored her boss's bad humor. Jen was right about the bookstore owner. Behind his glasses, his eyes twinkled at her, as if they were sharing some great secret. He was quaint and unusual, but she liked him immediately. "Something very special... maybe a first edition... poetry...?"

Joe rolled his eyes and groaned.

Smythe observed his derision, but didn't comment. "English poetry is at the end of aisle three... toward the back. Feel free to browse for as long as you like."

Joe glanced at his wristwatch and sighed. "Radcliffe, we've only got, like, twenty-three minutes—"

Mr. Smythe intervened smoothly. "Young man, there is a video store on the next block. I understand they have *Vampire Cheerleaders* in stock."

Joe flared defensively. "Hey, I read! I'm a lawyer..."

Mr. Smythe regarded him cynically. His reply was calm. "We shan't hold that against you."

Joe gave him a put-upon look, and glanced again at his watch. "I'll be back in twenty minutes. You're on your own for lunch, Radcliffe."

As he started out the door, Smythe called after him. "We shall miss you, young man!"

Catherine laughed and Smythe beamed at her. "This way, if you please." With a possessive air, he held out one hand to escort her to the poetry section.

The doorbell jangled loudly as Joe left the shop, muttering to himself. Springtime air swept in, behind him, then was cut off, as the door fell closed. Dust rose from the shop's burdened shelves to hang in the air for a moment, before settling back into its proper place once more...



"Here we are." Smythe indicated a long row of books, stacked almost to the ceiling. "Ignore your uncouth friend. Please take as much time as you need. I shall be at the front desk, should you have further need of my services."

Despite his portly frame, he bowed easily, with courtly grace. His eyes swept over her with a strange, knowing look as he smiled, before walking back down the aisle, and disappearing around the corner.

Catherine frowned after him. He was certainly unusual. Turning to the stacks of books, she took several precious minutes to browse among the poetry on offer. The volumes were old and dusty, and this far back from the front, the aisles were dark and narrow. After a few steps, she stopped to select a heavy volume and skimmed through it, unaware that a man was peering at her from the next aisle, through the gap she'd just made between the books.

She leafed through the tattered volume, before dismissing it and returning it to its place. She was forced to stand on tiptoe to reach for a different selection on the top shelf. As she strained to reach it, a voice spoke, from behind her.

"Try this one..." a man's voice encouraged.



Catherine turned to see a boyish man of around thirty-five. He was attractive, in a sort of rumpled, unkempt way, and dressed in faded denim and sporting a Mets cap. He held out a book, offering it to her. When she didn't move, he pressed it toward her some more, and Catherine took it, almost by instinct... but when she saw what she was holding, she reacted with delight, as she turned the pages. *Look at you!* she thought happily.

It was a real antique, in excellent condition, with fine paper, gold-tipped pages, sewn signatures and color plates. Engrossed in the pages, she didn't notice the *ex-libris* which declared the book to be, '*From the Library of Kristopher Gentian.*'

“Tennyson! A first edition... Oh, this is perfect!” Catherine had no doubt this was the one. She looked up, smiling, happy with the find. “It’s wonderful! Thank—”

She stopped in mid-sentence, her smile turning to a look of puzzlement. She was alone in the aisle. Very alone. She looked behind her, then peered around a corner, but there was no sign of the young man, anywhere. Catherine shrugged, as she took the book, and walked slowly toward the checkout at the front of the store. At the end of the aisle, she looked back, again. But it was still empty. The only dust that had been disturbed seemed to be from her own passing.

Mr. Smythe was waiting for her, up near a ramshackle shelf. “I see you’ve found your book.” He took it from her, and approved her selection with a quick glance at the spine.

Catherine blinked. “My book?”

The bookseller smiled. “Well, it’s Mr. Tennyson’s book, actually. It was waiting for you, young lady.”

Catherine gave him a bemused look.

The proprietor expanded on the theme as he led her to the front desk. “All books wait. They sit patiently on their respective shelves, gathering only the most refined dust, until the day their covers are opened and their pages turned by the proper person.”

He sat behind the desk and checked the price inside the book’s front cover. Catherine rummaged in her purse and pulled out a credit card, just as Joe returned.

“Okay, Radcliffe. Lunch is over!” He glared at his wristwatch. “We’re due back in court in ten minutes.”

The shop proprietor looked up and sighed. “Oh, joy! The tit-willow is back!”

Catherine laughed happily as the old man took the card from her hand. Smythe beamed at her with approval.

Joe looked from one to the other with an ‘*okay, you got me*’ smirk on his face. He’d agree to anything if Catherine would just hurry up and buy the darned book!



Several hours later, Catherine and Joe pushed through a revolving door to the D.A.'s office lobby, surrounded by a crush of people. They crossed toward the elevators, talking about their latest case.

Joe was deeply annoyed. "Six continuances! At this rate, I'm gonna be drawing Social Security before we get to trial on this thing—"

He looked up, just as the elevator doors started to close. "Hey, hold the elevator!" Without thought for Catherine, he jumped forward, and made it into the crowded car, just in time.

"Wait!" Catherine, a step behind, tried to catch the elevator door.

"See you up there!" Joe grinned, as the doors slid shut in Catherine's face.

She stepped back, exasperated. She reached to press the up button to call another elevator. As she waited, a large hand reached out and tapped her shoulder.

"Excuse me...", a man's voice said.

Catherine started, turning to look behind her. "You!" she accused.

The rumpled young man she'd last seen at the 777 Booksellers, smiled at her, disarmingly.



Vincent leaned with his back against Father's desk, watching his exasperated parent rummage through precarious stacks of books and magazines. Jacob stood in a recessed area, vainly trying to sort through his possessions, searching for a particular title he just knew was here somewhere...

Father raised one in triumph. "Here we are... No, that's not right." He moved to another section of books. "I know it's here somewhere..." He picked up another book and discarded it, almost in the same motion. "One of these days I really must ask Mouse to build me some bookshelves..."

He peered at another book, before discarding it, as well. He turned and looked up as awareness dawned on him. "No, on second thought, I'd better ask Cullen..."

Vincent smiled knowingly. He was aware Father would never get around to asking Cullen for anything. The stacks of books would remain, tumbled and confused. He had his own system. They were exactly how he liked them. Except for now, of course.

Then, suddenly, Vincent experienced an intense chill, at the very moment when the young man Above touched Catherine's shoulder. Father noticed, and looked up from his search.

"Vincent? What is it?" He removed his glasses to peer at his son.

Vincent looked mystified, as the chill feeling passed. "Nothing... For a moment I felt... a coldness..."

Father frowned, as he looked around him. "Is there a draft? I hadn't noticed..."

Vincent sounded puzzled. He knew he'd never felt anything like this before. The sensation continued to ebb, until it disappeared. "It's gone, now..."

Father stared at him. "You're not feeling ill, are you?"

"No, this was... different..." Vincent paused, then said, "As if... a chill had touched my heart..." The memory of the icy touch was not easily forgotten. *Winter. The hard grip of winter*, Vincent thought, even as he knew it was early spring.

Father looked baffled, but curious, at his son's reaction. He stood with the book he'd been seeking in his hand, not knowing what else to say.



Catherine and her new companion stood staring at each other, neither knowing what to say next. Seconds ticked by, as the busy crowds of people around them ebbed and flowed. The next elevator car came and went, but Catherine didn't notice.

Finally, the young man bobbed his head awkwardly. "Boy, this sort of thing is never very easy..."

"What sort of thing?" Catherine's tone was sharp. She had a very long and trying court battle, and she was in no mood for more games.

"Are you... ah... often approached by strangers?" the young man asked. His encouraging look seemed sincerely inquisitive.

"This is New York City. I'm approached by all sorts of—" She struggled for just the right word.

"Lunatics...?" the young man supplied helpfully. "Yeah, well, I'm not a lunatic. But, ah, I'm the next best thing..." He smiled sweetly.



Catherine relaxed and smiled, despite herself. Emboldened, the young man dug around in his pocket, and finally offered her a business card. It was crumpled and creased, smudged, and much-used.

A little dubious, Catherine took the card and read it. "Kristopher Gentian..." She looked up at him. "Artist..."

The young man looked earnest. "Honest."

"Well, good for you..." Catherine looked at the card again. "Mr. Gentian. But what is it you want?"

Kristopher Gentian hurried into speech, emboldened by her air of interest. "Just you. *Ah...* call me Kristopher."

Catherine stared at him. "Excuse me?"

"Kristopher. You can call me—"

Catherine huffed her impatience. "I caught that part."

Kristopher started. "Oh. Okay. I just... well... ah... I thought maybe you could... well... model for me."

Catherine was really dubious now. "Model for you...?" she asked suspiciously.

Kristopher gave a little half-smile. "Too eccentric?"

Catherine laughed. "Weird even. Is this some kind of come on?"

Kristopher looked deeply wounded. "Oh, no! I mean... it's not like that... really... you could... well, bring your boyfriend or something... you know to... well, make sure I didn't, ah..." His smile widened. "Try anything..."

The notion of Vincent chaperoning while she sat for Kristopher brought a smile to Catherine's lovely face. "That would be... interesting..."

Kristopher seemed to think she was weakening. "I want to make you... well... immortal." He looked confident, in his claim.

Catherine regarded him with a dismissive smile. "Modest, aren't you?"

She heard the elevator chime as the next car arrived behind her. "Thanks, but... I don't think so." She shoved the card into her jacket pocket as she stepped into the elevator and turned to face the front.

Kristopher followed close behind. "Wait...!"

Catherine didn't pause. She wasn't interested in sitting for anyone, at any time.

Kristopher reached towards her. "My card..." He sounded abashed. "I only have the one..."

Catherine looked confused as she handed the card back to him, just as the elevator doors closed. But as the car moved upwards, she couldn't resist a grin, in appreciation at the audacity of the rumpled young man in the Mets cap.



She made it to her desk. She dropped her bag on the floor, beside her. She looked around. Thankfully Joe was nowhere in sight, for now.

On impulse, she reached for her telephone and dialed Jenny's number. She was the only one Catherine could think of who would understand her strange encounter. After all she'd recommended the bookshop in the first place.

"Jen, would I kid you?" she replied to her friend's skepticism. "Right down in the lobby. Yes..."

Jenny sounded disbelieving. "Then he took back his card?"

"He said he only had one."

Jenny sighed. "Sounds like an artist all right. Remember Craig?"

"Oh, God, yes. The one with the pony tail..."

Jenny hurried into speech. "Yeah, and the unheated loft. I posed for him for three weeks. In February! In a sheet! When I finally looked at the painting, I wasn't even in it!"

"What?" Catherine laughed. "No!"

Jenny huffed her disbelief and giggled. "Well, he told me he just liked to look at naked women while he worked. It helped his creative juices or something... but don't let me influence you. They can't all be like Craig. This guy might turn out to be the next Picasso or something."

Joe appeared in the bull-pen, and headed towards Catherine's desk, a stack of file folders under his arm. As he got closer, he saw she was on the phone.

Catherine lowered her voice, hunching a shoulder, to conceal her conversation. "So you think I ought to pose for him?"

Jenny laughed. "You might wind up on the wall of the Metropolitan. Then I can buy postcards of you to mail them to my friends."

Catherine chuckled delightedly. "Maybe you could publish a calendar."

Jenny joined in the game. "Sure. We'll have framed prints, wrapping paper, coffee mugs... there's no telling where it might end..."

Joe was now close enough to overhear the last few exchanges in their conversation. He dropped the file folders on Catherine's desk and stared down at her. He pointed to a file.

Catherine giggled, glancing up at him. "Well, this better end right now. The tit-willow needs me." She laughed, as Jenny probed her for details. "No, no, no. I'll tell you next week at dinner. Bye..." She hung up the receiver.

Joe scowled at her. "What was that all about?"

Catherine dismissed his grumbling, lightly. "An artist followed me back from the bookstore. Jenny thinks maybe I ought to pose for him."

Joe looked alarmed. "Pose for him? Cath, you got to watch out for these arty types. They get you alone, give you a little wine, and the next thing you know you're... well, you know... I mean, these guys, they've got a line, they like to take advantage..." He floundered into silence. He was clearly finding this more than a tad embarrassing.

Catherine, amused, played it with mock innocence, with puzzled looks and small nods, to keep him going. "How's that, Joe?"

Joe stammered. "Well, you... you know, they try and talk you into... or out of... It's not like fashion models, some of the time you pose, well, without... without any... you know... kind of... well, nude..."

Catherine grinned, both inwardly and outwardly, knowing how much the word 'nude' had cost him. She shook her well-coifed head. "Oh, is that all? Don't worry. I posed for a life study class in college." She stared at the warm flush that crept into her boss's cheeks. "Joe, are you blushing?"

Flustered, Joe looked away, turning his attention to the file folders he'd brought over. "Never mind. Hey, it's none of my business." He tapped the files with one finger. "Look, I need the Ketter testimony broken down by —"

He stared hard at her. "You sure this guy is on the up-and-up? There's a scam on every corner in this city, Radcliffe. He give you a name?"

"Mm, hm... Kristopher Gentian." She looked down at the paperwork. "Relax, Joe, he's harmless."

"Famous last words." Joe pointed at the files. "I want that stuff tomorrow morning."

"I'll take it home, do it tonight," Catherine offered, to sooth his ruffled composure.

Catherine watched with a bemused smile on her face, as Joe turned and walked away. Rita Escobar headed for Catherine's desk, crossing past Joe when he stopped and looked back.

His look was triumphant. "In college... that'd be Radcliffe, right?" He saw Catherine nod. "You had me going for a minute there, Chandler. Radcliffe's a girl's school." Immensely relieved, Joe vanished into his office.

Rita continued walking to Catherine's desk and handed her a file. "Didn't Radcliffe go co-ed?"

Catherine said in an amused voice, "Mm, hm, in 1971. But we better not tell Joe."

The two women shared a knowing laugh, before Rita walked away.





## **ACT TWO**

### **Of Things That Are Not...**

*"I thought the most beautiful thing in the world must be shadow..."*

*Sylvia Plath*

Staring up at the night sky, Catherine leaned back against the concrete culvert wall. She'd been waiting for quite some time, and there was still no sign of Vincent. She lowered her gaze and stared into the entrance of the tunnel. "Vincent, be well..." she whispered.

She sighed, raising her shoulders in defeat. She had just started to walk away, when Vincent suddenly appeared in the opening. He looked ill at ease and doubtful of his welcome. They stood apart, watching each other, without speaking.

Knowing someone had to make the first move, Catherine turned to him, her arms crossed over her gift of the book of poetry, holding it tight to her chest. "It's been so long. I was afraid..."

Vincent sighed. "That I might not come...?" He looked longingly at Catherine, then down, with a sad expression. "I was away. There's a place, miles beneath the city — a nameless river that runs through the darkness. Sometimes, I go there..."

Catherine walked slowly towards him, still hugging the book. When she was close enough, she held it out. "I wanted you to have this."

Vincent took the book and read the spine. "Tennyson... a first edition... it looks almost new..." He reverently leafed through the gold-tipped pages.

Catherine watched his delight in her gift. "I always loved *Idylls of the King*. I even knew some parts of it by heart. '*Some nights I dreamt of Camelot...and Lancelot...*'"

Vincent kept his eyes on the book. "Lancelot was fatally flawed, destined never to find the grail."

Catherine wasn't deterred. "Still, he was the greatest knight of all..."

Vincent looked up at her then, everything he was thinking and feeling held in the vast depths of his frowning gaze. All the pain and anguish that she would no longer accept him, not after what he had been forced to do, to save her and those he loved.

They stared into each other's eyes and suddenly the dam of their combined emotional turmoil burst asunder. They moved into a long embrace, their blended shadows embracing behind them, outlined on the culvert wall.

"I am so glad you like the book." Catherine sighed, after they'd finally pulled away from each other. She stood close by, watching him appreciate her gift, as only Vincent could. "They made books to last, then. The bookseller said this one was waiting."

"Waiting... yes..." Vincent smiled gently. He began to read a random passage from the book. '*But in her web she still delights. To weave the mirror's magic sights. For often through the silent nights. A funeral, with plumes and lights and music, went to Camelot...*'

They both jumped as an unseen male voice finished the poem. '*Or when the moon was overhead! Came two young lovers lately wed...*'

Vincent instinctively drew back toward the shadows. Catherine whirled to face the voice, blocking Vincent from view, then turned back to him, shoving him toward the entrance of the tunnel.

"Go! Go, before they see you!"

The voice was still reciting, still unseen. '*I am half sick of shadows*' said the Lady of Shalott..."

Then, there was a faint rustling of bushes, as someone approached closer. Vincent hesitated briefly... then whirled and vanished inside the tunnel, almost

simultaneous with a young man in a Mets cap stepping out of the bushes. Catherine moved between them, to make sure Kristopher couldn't see Vincent.

She shouted in exasperation, "Kristopher!"

Kristopher ignored her anger as he stared off after Vincent, his expression sorrowful. "You didn't have to send him away."

Catherine stood her ground. "Kristopher, what in hell do you think you're doing here?"

Kristopher didn't answer her. He continued to stare into the drainage tunnel. "God, he reads beautifully..."

Catherine's fury intensified. "I want you to stop following me! Do you understand that?"

Kristopher looked at her. "You think he'd sit for me?"

Catherine was fully over his weird behavior. "Who are you talking about?"

He ignored her, continuing dreamily, "What century did he walk out of, Catherine? What storybook?" The young man moved closer, varying his gaze between Catherine and the area just past her shoulder.

"This is outrageous!" Catherine tried to force him to focus on her. "I don't what you think you saw, but—" She pushed past him, heading up the hill.

Kristopher closed his eyes in concentration, and began to quote from memory, with heartfelt emotion. "... *and over our heads floats the bluebird, singing of beautiful and impossible things, of things that are lovely and...*"

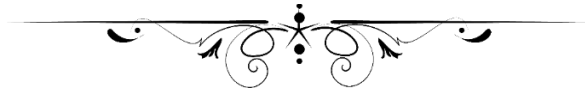
Frustrated beyond endurance, Catherine turned back to seize him by the arm, dragging him away from the tunnel entrance and up the hill. "That's it! C'mon!"

He moved with her docilely enough, but still reciting, "... *never happen, of things that are not, and that should be!*" He opened one eye. "It's Oscar Wilde! Where are we going? Are you taking me to Vincent?"

Catherine continued to tow him after her. "I'm taking you home." Her tone was intractable.

"Oh. Okay..." The artist opened both eyes wide. "Does that mean you want to pose for me?"

Catherine made a sound as if she could gladly strangle him, and yanked at him harder. They walked off across the darkened park together, Kristopher stumbling along beside her.



Vincent, restless and disturbed, paced Father's chamber, trying to make sense of a very confusing evening. He had told Jacob the disturbing news.

"Did he see you?" Jacob asked, deeply concerned.

Vincent lifted his shoulders as he looked down. "I don't know. Perhaps... a glimpse, but..."

"A glimpse... and if he thinks about what he saw... wonders... Vincent, the risk!"

Vincent turned back to face him. "I've lived with that risk all my life. Do you think I could ever forget it?"

Father huffed. "I think... sometimes... you grow careless... especially of late... you and Catherine... lose yourselves in the moment..."

Vincent chimed in sarcastically. "And the night, and the stars..."

"...and each other. Yes!" Jacob nodded. The effect love could have on a man was not unknown to him.

"No! That was not how it was," Vincent denied slowly. "I could hear all the stirrings of the city: the distant noise of traffic, the rustle of the wind through the foliage, someone skipping stones across the lagoon..."

"So how could this man possibly creep on you unawares?"

"I don't know..." Vincent's tone underscored his confusion. He didn't know. He truly didn't. Even now, it was a mystery he struggled with.

"There has to be some rational explanation." Father hunted his son's expression for any clues.

"Fine! Tell me what it is," Vincent demanded.

He looked sharply at Father, waiting for an explanation. But Jacob could only frown, as he tried to come up with a likely explanation. He looked away, his conspicuous silence saying he'd failed.

Vincent didn't give voice to the thought in his head: *It's like he wasn't even there, one moment. And then he was.*



In the yellow cast of the streetlamps, the city streets shone dark and wet. But there was still plenty of foot traffic, as Catherine and Kristopher walked through Greenwich Village, back towards the artist's usual haunts.

He walked several steps in front, and backwards, so he faced Catherine, almost skipping, and gesturing widely with his hands, as he talked. Other pedestrians had to detour to avoid him, but he was almost oblivious, as he danced around in front of her.

"You're still mad, aren't you?"

Catherine tossed him a withering look. "You could even say furious!"

She noticed they'd just passed the darkened 777 bookshop, but Kristopher seemed completely unaware of his usual hangout. Catherine felt an almost overwhelming urge to march up to the bookshop's front door and knock on it until Smythe gave in and opened up. Then she'd demand he take back the annoying artist, so she could get some much-needed peace, and a chance to repair her fragile relationship with Vincent.

But Kristopher seemed intent on dominating a far larger stage tonight. He continued to walk backwards some more, as he tried hard to make amends.

"I know, I know! I shouldn't have followed you, I shouldn't have spied on you, but if I hadn't..." He waved his hands about, smiling. "Would you be here with me now? Would I have seen him?"

Catherine denied him, vehemently. "I don't who you think you saw, but—"

Kristopher didn't hesitate. "Oh, yes you do. Yes you do. When are you going to tell me about him?"

Catherine looked as if she wished to kill him. "You are being very trying, Kristopher."

Kristopher danced around her. "I can't help it. I'm an artist!"

"An artist. Yes, I know. Since when is invasion of privacy part of the creative process?"

Kristopher looked wounded as he twirled in front of her. "I have to follow my heart..."

Catherine threw up her hands. "Next time you may follow it right past the Louvre and into city jail!"

Kristopher stopped, allowing Catherine to walk ahead of him. In that same moment, they passed in front of the Café Arpeggio, a Village coffee house. A spry old woman in a beret had just exited the front door.

Kristopher grabbed the woman by the shoulders and danced her around happily, in a circle. "Did you hear that? She said next time, next time! That means she's forgiven me! She's forgiven me!"

"No!" the old woman gasped, as she broke free and staggered away, looking back at him as if he were mad.

"It's all right, I've got artistic license. We're allowed to be peculiar...", Kristopher called after her.

"Don't worry, we'll have him committed... soon," Catherine assured her drily.

The old woman continued to back away quickly, shaking her head at both of them. Despite the intense aggravation, Catherine couldn't help smiling.

Kristopher stared at her, grinning like a fool. His mouth dropped open dramatically, and he pointed at Catherine. "She's smiling. Yes, that's definitely a smile!"

He walked towards her with his index finger still pointed at her face, and a twinkle in his eyes. He stopped right in front of her. "Yes, yes, yes! That is definitely a smile."

Catherine backed up. "I thought you were shy!"

Kristopher threw his arms wide towards the sky. "I am large, I contain multitudes!" He stopped posing to stare at her. "Do you like espresso?"

“Kristopher...,” Catherine warned in exasperation, shaking her head.

“*Cappuccino? Cafe au lait? Cannoli?* They have a *zabaglione* in here that will break your heart,” he mused dreamily.

“Kristopher...” Catherine sighed wearily. She was beyond tired of this game of cat and mouse.

“Just an hour...,” the artist wheedled. “I won’t ever say a word about Vincent, or bother you again.”

Catherine gave him a long, dubious glance, as she started to shake her head in denial. Kristopher grinned his most child-like, disarming grin. And Catherine found it was all but impossible to remain truly angry with him. She began laughing at him. He was like a large child — the enthusiasm poured out of him — and she couldn’t resist. Despite herself, she began to weaken.

He sensed her capitulation. “An hour, that’s all I want. Well, maybe two,” the artist assured her. “Please, please, please, please, please, please, please...,” he begged, persuading and charming Catherine into a genuine smile and a smothered giggle.

Kristopher giggled with her, and looked triumphant.



The Café Arpeggio was crowded. A cross-section of Greenwich Village characters sat on wrought-iron chairs at numerous, tiny, marble-topped tables. There was a case full of Italian pastries and a gigantic espresso machine; one that has seen a lot of use, over the years.

The waitresses all wore black leotards, and the walls were hung with oil paintings in heavy, ornate frames. It spoke of a by-gone era, when the pace of life was slower, and people had more time to indulge their senses.

Catherine and Kristopher found a recently vacated table in one corner. A trio of art students occupied the adjoining table, books and sketch pads piled up on an unoccupied chair, between them.

Catherine glanced around at the walls and at the general decor. She was curious, because she’d never been here before, which surprised her. But then, whenever she lunched with Joe, his favored eatery in the Village was never this interesting.

Her boss had formed a code of what he liked to call the three B's. Any establishment he frequented had to be busy, bright and bland. Joe hated fuss of any kind, and he detested frills. Just give him his food hot, and leave him alone to enjoy it.

The Café Arpeggio would go against all his preferences. It was cozy and old-world quaint, and filled to the ceiling with *bonhomie*. Rather like the 777 bookstore. It encouraged you to linger, and not care if you wasted an hour or two. Everything Joe had no time for.

Catherine liked the place on instinct. She could see her companion did, as well.

She was sorry she could never show Vincent the café. She knew he would thoroughly enjoy the whole experience, and the diverse company.

Kristopher smiled when he saw her interest, and hurried to say, "It's great, isn't it?" He sat sideways at the table, indicating the café. "I love this place. It always makes me feel like Lorenzo de Medici may walk in at any moment to discuss a commission."

Catherine looked skeptical. "With you?"

Kristopher looked smug as he turned in his chair to look at her. "Who else? But he'll have to wait till I've finished having coffee with Simonetta Vespucci." He grinned at her confused expression. "She was Sandro Botticelli's great inspiration. You can see her face in his paintings."

Before Catherine could reply, a waitress arrived at their table with their order. She served Catherine a cup of espresso and a small sandwich, cut into quarters.

Kristopher had ordered a zabaglione and a frothy cappuccino.

He stared worriedly at Catherine's sandwich, before looking up at the waitress. "You used to cut the crusts off those sandwiches..."

"It's okay, I'm allowed to eat crusts," Catherine reassured the woman.

The waitress turned away, as Catherine tasted her sandwich. "So, did Botticelli have coffee with Simonetta on a regular basis?"

Kristopher nodded as he sipped his cappuccino, leaving a frothed milk mustache on his upper lip. He wiped it off, absently. "He was very fond of her..." He smiled shyly. "Even though she was destined for another. She married Giuliano de' Medici. Botticelli took both of them to his heart."

He took another sip of his drink before reaching over to the next table, where three young art students were deep in conversation. Kristopher snagged a big art book belonging to one of them, from the pile on the vacant chair.

The owner, an attractive blond girl, about nineteen, protested. "Hey...!"

Kristopher was unapologetic. "Oh, it's all right..."

The girls looked at each other, annoyed, but helpless. Catherine shared a look of disbelief with them.

Kristopher didn't appear to notice, as he opened the book to show to Catherine. He revealed a close shot of a full-color reproduction of Botticelli's *Venus and Mars*. Kristopher pointed to the faces. "See... Simonetta and Giuliano. They both became inspirations."

Catherine leaned forward to study the painting, before she looked up at Kristopher, while he remained lost in the image on the page. She was amused at his obsessive behavior.

"And did they all lived happily ever after?"

Kristopher gave a little shrug, with a sad half-smile. "Giuliano was killed during the Pazzi Rebellion. Simonetta was taken by a fever. Nothing is forever, Catherine."

Catherine frowned. "That's a strange thing for an artist to say. They're here..." She tapped the painting. "Forever..."

At the next table, the art students were gathering their things, getting ready to leave. The young woman stopped beside them. "Can I have my book back?"

"Yeah, sure..." Kristopher nodded, handing it over as if his actions had been perfectly normal. "Oh, hey, you using that sketch pad?"

The art student looked confused. "I just bought it."

Kristopher looked pleased. "Great!" He grabbed the pad before she could defend it. "Thanks."

Looking for help, the girl exchanged looks with her friends. One of them shrugged and gave her a warning look. The girl threw Kristopher a dirty look, before they departed, leaving Kristopher with the sketch pad.

Catherine watched all this with a wry smile. "You know, they sell those," she commented drily.

Kristopher gazed at her over his new possession. "Only to people with money." He opened the pad.

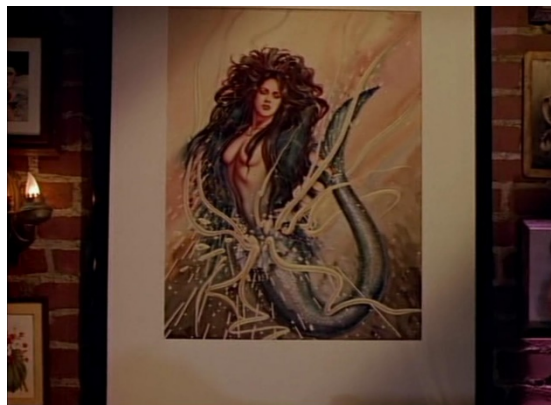
Catherine suddenly understood more than she wished to know. "What gallery do you exhibit at, Kristopher?"

He glanced up from the sketch pad and looked stricken.

Catherine sighed. "You haven't sold too many paintings, have you?"

Kristopher's expression tightened, his brown eyes sobering. "Well, maybe my stuff is a little... well... strange... they had to drag me kicking and screaming into the twentieth century. Still... look up there..."

He pointed to a nearby painting hanging on the café wall. Like the rest of the rest of the art in the Cafe Arpeggio, it was lush, romantic, and suggestive of a by-gone time.



Catherine looked up at it for some time, then back to Kristopher. "Yours?" She was impressed.

Kristopher gave the smallest and most shy nod. "I ran up quite a tab. The owner took it in payment. He was about a million years old, Cathy. You would've loved him." His voice roughened. "He's dead now..."

Catherine felt his sorrow. "I'm sorry..."

Kristopher brightened. "Still., that's a sale, right? Kind of. Do you like it?" He didn't give her time to answer. "No, no, no, no, no, no, no! Don't. I don't want to know. Don't tell me if you hate it. I'll be crushed."

Catherine smiled, ignoring his concerns. "Kristopher, it's lovely. You're very talented..."

The artist brightened. "You like it?"

"Yes." Catherine looked back to the painting.

He became more animated. "I knew you would. So you'll pose for me, right?"

Catherine sighed with embarrassment. "Oh, you don't give up, do you?"

"Does a moth give up when he sees the most beautiful flame he's ever beheld?"

She smiled in a teasing way. "That's a good way to get your wings singed."

Kristopher ignored her caution. "The hazards of my profession, Catherine. My wings are forever singed..." He opened the sketch pad. "Okay, don't pose. Just sit there, drink your espresso and let me sketch you."

Catherine looked dubious.

"What can it hurt?" Kristopher asked, softly.

"All right..." Catherine looked at him with exasperation, before she glanced back up at the painting on the wall, then returned her attention to Kristopher. "I can't believe I'm doing this..."

"Great, great. You won't be sorry, Cathy. I promise." Kristopher's joy was written all over his face. Grinning like a child at Christmas, he propped the sketchpad against the edge of the table and fumbled in his pockets.

Despite his assurances, Catherine still felt embarrassed. She wondered what Joe would make of it all. She could almost hear his disapproval, his concerns that this sort of thing could lead somewhere...

Kristopher cleared his throat, and looked thoughtful. "Ah... you wouldn't happen to have a pencil, would you?"

Catherine giggled out loud at the utter absurdity of it all.



In the darkness of his chamber, Vincent lay in bed. He stirred restlessly in his sleep, tossing and turning, caught in the grip of a dream.

*It was night, and he dreamed that he'd just entered a surreal warehouse. He imagined walking through the vast echoing interior of an old, dark space. Thick white mist covered the unseen floor, flowing around his feet, and obscuring the vague shapes of ancient furniture and wooden crates that loomed on all sides.*

*Everything was dusty, cobwebbed, and run-down. The mists were white, like some great eerie blanket, distorted and surreal.*

*Suddenly, Catherine appeared in the aisle ahead of him. She was barefoot, her hair flowing, and dressed in a pale, filmy white nightgown, sensual, yet somehow compelling in a different way. She seemed lost, frantic, and searching for someone or something. She turned her head this way or that.*

*"Where are you?" she called. Her voice echoed.*

*Confused and on edge, Vincent rushed toward her. "Catherine..."*

*But she didn't seem to see him or hear him. She called out again, and then dashed away, still crying. "Where are you? Where are you?"*

*Vincent began to move faster, pursuing her. As he raced after Catherine, they took a path that led them around and about the gloomy, otherworldly warehouse. They hurried through the ground fog, past all manner of strange cobwebbed objects: broken furniture, and old toys, and image-distorting funhouse mirrors. This dream chase was weird and scary, full of strange sights and sounds. Finally, up ahead, down an endlessly long aisle that narrowed the further along it went, Vincent saw Catherine halt and turn to face him. He flew toward her, determined to catch her.*

*But just as he reached her, she looked up and smiled, almost wistfully. "He's dead... dead," she said, in a low, sad tone.*

*Vincent wanted to demand who she was talking about, but his tongue wouldn't work. He stared, as Catherine began to disappear, fading out slowly with her sad smile still on her face.*

*Vincent found himself standing over an old trunk. There was a sound coming from inside it... a familiar sound, yet one he couldn't immediately identify. Vincent leaned forward and opened the lid.*

*Inside, with the strange logic of dreams, the trunk was much larger than it had any right to be. There was a little boy inside, no more than four or five. Vincent couldn't see his face. The boy was wearing a Mets cap and scribbling – furiously, frantically, wildly – inside a coloring book. He was completely intent on what he was doing.*

*He was surrounded by crayons, half-buried in them, and as he colored. He did not pay any attention to the lines. He colored inside and outside them. Vincent got only a glimpse of the picture the boy was coloring, but it was something mystical, mythical and magical.*

*Vincent stared at the crayon in the little boy's hand as it flew across the page. He felt cold. Very cold.*



### **ACT THREE**

#### **Spirits Seek Their Own Level ...**

*"Sometimes beautiful things come into our lives out of nowhere. We can't always understand them, but we have to trust in them. I know you want to question everything, but sometimes it pays to just have a little faith..."*

*Lauren Kate*

The pencil in Catherine's hand, moved furiously across the yellow legal pad. Seated at her desk, she looked more than a little frazzled, as she wrote on the paper. Joe's approach made her start, snapping her out of her concentration.

He leaned on her desk. "About done with the Ketter breakdown?"

Catherine looked guilty. "Oh, I'm about half way through. Give me a couple more hours..."

Joe scowled. "I thought you were going to finish it at home last night."

"Something came up..." Catherine looked contrite.

"This something didn't have anything to do with that so-called artist, did it?" Joe scowled.

Catherine nodded, trying to control her expression, but her guilty look gave her away.

Joe shook his head. "Ah, look, Cath... I don't know how to say this, but... well... I'd stay clear of that guy, if I were you. He's running some kind of scam on you, Radcliffe."

Catherine gathered herself. "I don't know what you're talking about. Kristopher's an artist."

"Con artist, you mean," Joe affirmed. "Look, he told you he was Kristopher Gentian, right?" He watched Catherine nod slowly. "Well, he can't be..."

"What does that mean?" Catherine frowned.

Joe had the grace to look more than a little embarrassed, but he plunged on. "I had Escobar run a little check on him and it—"

Catherine flared up. "You what?"

Joe tried to mitigate her concerns. "I know, I know, it's none of my business. Okay, fine, shoot me. But... well... I was worried..."

Catherine didn't know whether to be flattered, amused, or annoyed. She felt stunned by the revelation.

Joe rushed on before she could make up her mind. "You ought to be glad I made it my business." He frowned. "Kristopher Gentian died almost two years ago..."

Catherine stared up at him with a look of utter incredulity. *Kristopher... dead?* She gathered herself to dispute the outrageous statement.

"I want that in two hours." Joe pointed at the brief before he walked away.

Catherine sat staring after him, her pencil dangling uselessly in her hand.



Unable to believe Joe's outrageous story, Catherine used her lunch hour to quickly return to the Village, and the musty 777 bookshop, determined to prove her boss wrong. The bell over the door jingled as before, as she pushed through into the interior of the store.

Drawn by her determination to prove him wrong, Joe trailed in after her, looking bemused by her insistence. He had presented a totally reasonable argument about Gentian's demise, and Catherine had point-blank refused to believe him. That had stung his sense of fair play, more than anything. He also thought she was far more sensible than to believe some crazy guy's patter and come-on routine. Surely she could smell a highly dubious rat in the man's impossible story?

Not that Joe had even met the guy. But Catherine seemed fascinated by him, and had blown off a deposition breakdown to indulge that. For the most part, she was much more level-headed. It made no sense at all.

"This is nuts," he tried to protest. "Radcliffe, why don't you just let me buy you lunch and forget about this..." He was hungry, and time was running out on them, as it always was.

Catherine ignored his plea, as she called out, "Hello? Anyone here?" She stopped in front of the counter.

"What's it going to take to convince you? The guy's dead!" Joe's tone was adamant.

Catherine turned to glare at him. "Well, then a dead man did a sketch of me last night!" She was over his skepticism.

Joe raised his hands defensively. "Hey, you said it, I didn't."

"Look, we went to a coffee house last night," Catherine continued. "It's right down the street from here. It's called the Cafe Arpeggio. Go check it out, if you don't believe me. I had espresso, he had zabaglione. Dead men can't even spell zabaglione."

"Five'll getcha ten he stuck you with the check, too." Joe smirked.

Catherine's expression gave away the fact that Kristopher did just that, and Joe saw it. "Ah-ha! I told you the guy is nothing but some scam. He's—"

In the same moment the proprietor of the bookshop emerged from the back, books cradled beneath his arm, interrupting their argument.

Mr. Smythe stared at them. "Oh, may I be of some..." Then his expression changed as he recognized them both. "Oh... It's you!" He turned to Catherine. "Did you enjoy Mr. Tennyson's book?" He put the pile of books down on the counter.

"Very much. Listen, there was a man in the shop yesterday when I was here..."

Mr. Smythe nodded slowly. "Of course there was."



Vindicated, Catherine shot a triumphant *see-I-told-you-so* look towards Joe, then turned back to Smythe. "I need to find him... talk to him..."

Smythe raised an eyebrow. "That should be easy. He's standing right behind you..."

Half-thinking that Kristopher might have made one of his mysterious appearances, Catherine glanced over her shoulder. Joe gave her a smug smile and an ironic waggle of his fingers. He felt better that his point had just been proven.

Catherine's frustration increased. "No, no, not Joe..." She looked back at the bookshop's owner.

Mr. Smythe's smile was thin. "I don't quite understand."

"She's looking for some guy she met back in the poetry section," Joe butted in.

Mr. Smythe's smile widened. "Well, it's definitely not you, then."

Joe ignored the slight and ploughed on. "Claims he's an artist."

The bookseller looked thoughtful. "We get quite a lot of artists. Occasionally one even purchases a book."

Catherine tried to reclaim the conversation. She held up one hand above her own head. "About so tall, kind of rumped, wearing a Mets cap... his name's Kristopher Gentian."

Smythe blinked and looked at her for a long moment. His expression became closed and strained. "I'm sure I don't recall any such person. Perhaps you saw him somewhere else..."

"No, he was here. You had to have seen him..." Catherine persisted. "Surely he would have passed you as he left the shop."

Smythe turned away and busied himself sorting the books on his desk. "I'm afraid not. Now, if there's nothing else..."

Catherine gaped at him. She couldn't believe it, and for a moment she was at a loss for words. The avuncular, charming man she'd first met had vanished as if he'd never been.

Joe took her arm, moving close to her ear. "C'mon, Cath, give it up. Can we go, now? We can still make lunch, if we hurry."

Frustrated, Catherine glared at Smythe's back for a moment, then opened her purse and pulled out one of her business card. "I don't know what's going on, but if your memory should suddenly return, give me a call..."

She dropped the card on the desk in front of the old man. She turned on her heel and left, a relieved Joe following quickly.

As the bell over the door jingled to their departure, Smythe turned to watch them go. He picked up Catherine's card and fingered it thoughtfully. He glanced up towards the ceiling of the bookshop and shook his head. Then he pocketed the card and turned back to sorting his books.



Vincent lay on his bed, pondering the curious events of the last few days. He had deliberately kept his chamber very dark, lit only by a single reading candle. Pools of shadows hung in the corners of the room. He needed the darkness to help him think.

Vincent could sense Catherine's agitation and it made him feel strangely uneasy. He picked up the Tennyson book, leafing through a few pages idly, then noticed something and stopped to stare. Inside the front cover, long ago, someone has pasted a small personal book plate with the name Kristopher Gentian written on it. Vincent stared at it, absorbed with the implication that all was not as it seemed...

*Kristopher...* Vincent frowned at the book plate. That was the name Catherine had called the intruder on their reunion. Was it just an odd coincidence?

After a long moment, he looked up. A faint prickle of awareness said he was not alone. It raised the hairs on the back of his neck. He slammed the book shut.

"Who's there?" he demanded of the silence.

He didn't truly expect an answer and received none. But the impression he was not alone heightened, and intensified. He stifled a growl as he sat up in the bed. Something that looked like a human form moved in the shadows behind the iron pillar, but the chamber was so dark it was hard to be certain.

Vincent threw his feet over the side of the bed. He took up the candle and strode forward. The shadows filled with light as he crossed the room, but again, there was no-one there. Vincent stopped, baffled, as he raised the candle and looked around, carefully. *Nothing at all.* He turned his back to the chamber entrance, as he carefully searched every corner and niche, with critical eyes.

Suddenly, there is the sound of running footsteps just behind him. Vincent whirled toward the sound and growled warningly. He raised the candle, ready to strike the unwanted intruder down.

Mouse burst into the chamber, wearing his homemade helmet with its mismatched flashlights. He was drenched, absolutely soaking wet, and was dripping everywhere.

Mouse jumped as he stopped dead in his tracks, startled by his good friend's terrifying growl. "Uh-oh. Bad time?"

Vincent stopped growling and sagged with relief. "Mouse... I thought for a moment..." He sighed. "I thought I saw an intruder, standing in the shadows..."

Mouse blinked. He didn't quite know what to make of that. "Down here? In your chamber?" He looked around, suddenly appearing a little nervous.

"It makes no sense..." Vincent's voice trailed off as he stood lost in thought.

Mouse's usually buoyant mood reasserted itself. "Finished the new aqueduct." He stated proudly, then moved slushily, wringing out his sodden shirt as he made a disgruntled face. "Little problem."

Vincent had made up his mind about something. "So I see." He stared at a very drowned-looking Mouse.

The tinker shrugged. "Need your help."

Vincent raised his eyebrows. "To stop a flood?"

"No. Fixed it," Mouse affirmed proudly. He shook off more of the moisture, looking disgusted. "Swimming lessons," he requested, in a resigned tone.

Vincent smiled and put a hand on Mouse's shoulder. "Tomorrow. We'll go to the mirror pool."

Mouse grinned and nodded. "Okay, good. Okay, fine..."

Vincent squeezed his shoulder before dropping his hand. He gave Mouse the candle before reaching to pick up his cloak. "I'm going to see Narcissa. Tell Father I'll be back by evening."

Vincent walked past him, leaving Mouse alone in the chamber. The tinker held up the candle and looked around curiously, wondering what Vincent had seen.

"Intruders..." he mused. "Don't scare Mouse," he added confidently.



But, just at that moment, he happened to drip water on the only candle in the chamber, extinguishing the flame, and plunging the space into total darkness, except for the flashlights on his helmet. Mouse gave a sudden nervous gasp of fear and scrambled for the exit.



"What does Vincent want with Narcissa that is so urgent?" Father bent over his desk, studying the headlines on the first of a pile of newspapers Geoffrey had just delivered. He frowned over a feature at the bottom of the society page.

"Didn't say." Mouse shrugged, starting to shiver in his sodden clothes. His teeth began to chatter. "Said he'd be back tonight."

Father sighed, as he looked up to peer at him over the rim of his glasses. "Why are you all wet, Mouse?"

"Leak. Fixed it." Mouse bobbed his head, and his flashlights clattered along with his teeth. He squeezed more moisture from his clothing, dripping all over Father's old, Persian rug.

"You know the message that Vincent had gone to see Narcissa could have waited until you had changed into dry clothes." Father shook his head. "Go and change, before you catch your death."

"Okay..." Mouse headed for the short set of stairs out of the chamber. He paused to look back. "Vincent said he thought he saw an intruder. Down here. Right in his chamber."

"An intruder? Down here?" Father started up from his chair, in alarm.

"Must not be." Mouse shook his damp head. "No-one gets all the way down here. We would've seen." He disappeared through the chamber entrance.

"No-one gets all the way down here..." Father repeated, as he sank back into his chair. He stared around his candle-lit chamber. "But then, Vincent never heard, or saw, the intruder that accosted him up in the park, either..."

He shook his head as he returned his concerned gaze to the headline he'd just read. *'Celebrated ballerina Lisa Campbell to return soon to the New York stage.'*

"Lisa..." He sighed brusquely, absorbing the unwelcome news with a heavy heart. "Vincent mustn't see this..." he decided, carefully removing the page, before folding it into a small square and burying it beneath the jumble of papers in the bottom drawer of his desk.



It was later afternoon in the D.A.'s office. Rita Escobar was seated at her desk, typing out a report when Catherine approached her, slowly.

She leaned both hands on the edge of the desk, trying to seem casual. "Joe tells me you ran the check on Kristopher Gentian." She watched Rita nod warily. "I need to know what you turned up... anything that might help me find him..."

Rita looked confused. "Find him? You mean – if you need to know where he was buried, I can –"

"Let's just say I've never seen a ghost with a cappuccino moustache." Catherine halted her. "Somebody was buried. I'm not so sure it was Kristopher." She paused thoughtfully. "The world has a funny way of ignoring live artists and celebrating dead ones. Kristopher wouldn't be the first painter to fake his own death to get a little attention..."

Rita frowned. "You think it's a hoax? Why would anyone pretend to be dead?"

Catherine gave a small laugh. "Let's see what you found out about our elusive Mr. Gentian." She picked up Rita's notes.

Rita searched her memory. "Well, he was a native New Yorker, went to Cooper Union... an arts scholarship. Family's all deceased. He had a small inheritance, but it must have run out... he owed money to everybody when he died."

Catherine nodded. "Sounds like Kristopher, all right. How about an address?"

"A loft in the East Village... but he'd been evicted..."

"Behind on the rent?"

Rita nodded.

"How did he die?"

Rita shrugged. "Natural causes. He'd been living on the street. That night the temperature got down to twenty below. They found the body in an alley off Bleeker."

Catherine drew a quick conclusion about the rest of the information. "Carrying all of Kristopher's ID, of course."

"*Mm, hm.*" Rita moved her shoulders in agreement. "Driver's license, social security, draft card. It seemed pretty cut and dried. There was a friend who viewed the body and confirmed the identification. A Mr. Smith..." She frowned and shuffled some papers for the correct information. "No, Smythe... Jonathon Smythe. He owns a bookshop."

"You have an address? Is it in the Village? 777?"

"I think so..." Rita frowned as she rustled through some more papers to find it. "Yes, that's it... How did you know?"

"I've been there already..." Her expression said that she'd just figured it out. She nodded quickly to Rita and headed back to her own desk.



Narcissa's chamber was far below the home tunnels. She insisted she liked it that way, despite Father's frequent remonstrations that she was being far too obstinate for a woman of her age and infirmity. Narcissa maintained she needed to be away from all the noise, and the people, who distracted and disturbed the spirits who lived down at her level.

Of course, she'd won the argument by simply ignoring Jacob's sage advice, much to his chagrin. But she knew that Father had a soft spot for her, and often sent messengers down to check and see that she was all right, or if she needed anything. It was a necessary compromise both had to live with.

Narcissa's large chamber was always filled with the bright light of many candles. She didn't need the light to see, being nearly blind, herself. But she insisted the spirits enjoyed the brightness of the flames.

Narcissa was standing at one of her many tables, hovering over a shiny black ceramic bowl, half-full of water. Her wrinkled face reflected in the liquid. She crushed some plants, sprinkling the powder across the water, then moved the bowl in a small, circular motion. The water swirled, and the image broke up and spun in the motion of the water. Narcissa's half-blind eyes stared down into the depths of the water, finding her own truths beneath the surface.

Vincent appeared silently in the doorway behind her. He didn't speak, but then, he didn't need to. Somehow, Narcissa was aware of him.

She spoke without turning to look at him. "Come, Vincent..."

Vincent stepped slowly into Narcissa's chamber. "You heard me approach?"

"I saw you in the waters. Oh yes, child... Come and look..."

Vincent advanced to her side, casting her a questioning look before looking down into the dark water in Narcissa's bowl. "I see only ripples... reflections... the flame of the candles..."

Narcissa gave him a strange, enigmatic half-smile. "You are your father's son," she accused gently.

Vincent considered that statement with a frown. "What do you see?" he asked finally.

Narcissa shrugged, using her hands to express her story and emotions. “The past. The future. The faces of the dead... Spirits seek their own level, Vincent, like the water...” She laughed softly. “But I am crazy old lady. Ask the Father... Did he tell you ghost stories when you were young, child?”

“I fled the headless horseman... rode in Kipling’s phantom rickshaw. Yes, I remember Marley’s ghost...” Vincent reminisced, with great fondness.

Narcissa nodded, still gesturing with her hands. “Bound by the chains he forged in life. But there are other kinds of chains, Vincent. Fear. Love. Hate. Dreams...”

Vincent listened to her solemnly, his face impassive. But, while he respected the old woman’s beliefs, he remained skeptical of the things she suggested. “Your world has room for spirits, Narcissa. But Catherine lives in another world... a world where ghosts walk only in stories...”

Narcissa’s tone was gently rebuking. “Are you so sure, child? Come, then. Look again.”

The old woman picked up a handful of dried herbs and crushed them between her fingers, before sprinkling the powder over the surface of the water. She stirred the bowl so the water moved again.

“Open your eyes. Look deep.”

Vincent gave her a skeptical look, before staring down into the bowl, as the water moved round and round, then slowed. The last ripples died, and the water grew still. Vincent’s own reflection stared straight up back at him.

Narcissa asked, “Could such a being as this... walk the world your Catherine lives in?”

Reflected in the water, Vincent’s expression underwent a subtle change and he suddenly understood what the old woman was asking of him...





The journey home was always slower, and more tiring, thanks to the necessity of having to climb up, rather than down. Vincent was more than halfway to the home tunnels when he decided to simply rest, and lean his back against a nearby wall.

The torches that hung at irregular intervals along the walls cast more shadows than circles of light. There was swirling mist in the tunnels, not unusual in and of itself, but this passageway was usually clear. No steam pipes ran near it, and this far down, access to whatever weather was going on outside was all but impossible. Still, the mist, when it came was subtle, and blue, and Vincent felt himself soothed by its damp presence as it whispered around the tops of his boots.

Soothed, then chilled. *Am I dreaming this? Or simply... imagining...?* He wasn't sure. Had he fallen asleep, leaning against the wall? It seemed likely. His eyelids felt heavy, drooping halfway between waking and sleeping.

But the cold was familiar, and he almost expected to encounter the boy-man he now saw in the tunnel ahead of him. The flickering torches played over the scene, making movements where there were none. Vincent fought against the lethargy in his limbs as he advanced slowly, prepared to attack if threatened.

But Kristopher seemed much more intent on his work at hand. He was seated on a high stool before an easel, stirring a tiny dish of paint, furiously, with a long-handled brush. Without knowing how he knew, Vincent understood he was seeing the boy from the chest, the one who'd been coloring outside the lines, frantically. The boy who'd grown up to do much the same. The motions of the stirring brush reminded him of the wide, sweeping circles of the crayon.

Kristopher put aside his brush before reaching up to turn his Mets cap backward. He peered closely at his painting, and then picked up the brush and went back to stirring. After another moment, he began to dab color on his creation with a careful hand.

"Red. I need more red. Red is a beautiful color, don't you think?"

Vincent slowed his approach, the subject of the canvas not visible, to him. "I don't know. I suppose it is," he replied. He felt the cold. The sensation was, by this time, a familiar one.

"Why are you cold? Why do I ... sense it, when I'm near you?" Vincent asked.

"Maybe I'm dead," the artist shrugged, then smiled, as if it was all an excellent joke. "Or maybe it was below zero one night, and I never forgot being caught out in it. She'll never be cold. Will she?"

They both knew he was speaking about Catherine. But before Vincent could even frame a reply, the boyish presence before him continued: "There's just nothing worse than not having enough paint, not having the color you need, or the one you want. It's terrible not having what you know you need. Don't you find that's true, Vincent?" He hesitated, then said, "Or do I call you, Sir Lancelot?"

"I am not Sir Lancelot." Vincent had no idea how the impish figure before him knew his name. Or how often he considered himself fatally flawed, in ways that both did and did not have to do with his appearance. "I am not worthy to be named such," he argued.

Kristopher looked up "Oh, aren't you just?" He smiled, and the expression warmed his brown eyes. The feeling of cold began to fade, as it always did. "How many kings are you going to steal her away from?" He shook his head. "How many scabby princes will Cathy Chandler leave wondering at their own lack, because she's fallen in love with you?" He laughed at the image, and went back to his canvas.

"I am not... 'stealing Catherine.' She is—"

"Yes, you are! Like a thief making off with the Mona Lisa at the Louvre. Leonardo would've loved you. And he'd have loved her. To paint, anyway," Kristopher interrupted, wiping oil paint on a rag. It was the color of deep wine.

"Vincent, I have a very important question to ask you," Kristopher said, eyeing his creation critically, then looking up at Vincent, again.

"And what is that?"

"Do you think Guinevere ever wore red?"

*It's a dream. It has to be.* "Guinevere was a queen. She wore white. Or blue, perhaps."

Kristopher set down his brush and rose from his stool. He draped a white cloth loosely over whatever it was he'd been creating. "No, that's what proper King Arthur wanted her to wear, or her father. That's not what she wanted to wear. A woman with that much fire? Red. And just so we're clear, I do mean Catherine."

He slanted his head in thought. “*She sent the deathless passion in her eyes through him, and made him hers, and laid her mind on him, and he believed in her belief,*” he quoted softly.

“We are not here to quote Tennyson to each other.”

“Considering you have my book, I’d say one of us should be, at least!” The artist threw his arms wide. “Leodegrance did give his only daughter. Say, do you know what was on Guinevere’s standard? You’ll never guess it.”

“I have no—”

“A lion.” Kristopher leaned forward, delighted with himself. “A golden lion on a field of sable. Just one, like that was the only one in the world. It was her family’s coat of arms.”



“Why am I seeing you?” Vincent asked, cutting to the chase. He was tired of games.

“Who knows? How can Cathy Chandler be like Simonetta, and Guinevere, and yet not be? So many questions! So many people who think they have all the answers! But no one does!” His grin was huge. “Nothing ends the way you think it does. I didn’t. You won’t. She can’t. And Charles Chandler?” The grin gave way to a chuckle. “Not even close.”

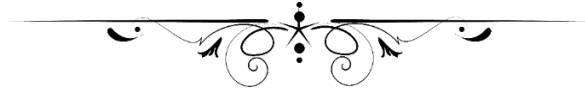
“You’re speaking in riddles.” Vincent knew Catherine’s father was dead. But his head was beginning to ache, and he wasn’t certain of anything right now.

Kristopher shrugged. “And I’d rather speak in poetry. *‘Her beauty, grace, and power, wrought as a charm upon them.’* But you never really answered my question,” he said, backing away. He lifted up the canvas, clearly meaning to take it with him.

“Which question?” Vincent asked.

“Do you think Guinevere ever wore red?”

Kristopher didn't wait for a reply as he stepped backward, his smile still radiant. “Be seeing you around, Vincent...” He raised his free hand wide, in a dramatic gesture of farewell. In the same moment, he was swallowed up by the mist.



Catherine threw open the old bookshop's door and barged in. The bell jangled loudly, alarmed at such rough treatment.

Mr. Smythe was standing at his desk. He was totaling up the cash receipts for the day's takings, on an old-fashioned manual adding machine. “Oh, I'm sorry, I'm afraid we're closed...” He looked up, and his mouth thinned. “Oh, you. You are the persistent one, aren't you?”

“Is that a compliment...?” Catherine asked pointedly, as she stepped up to the counter. “Mr. Smythe?”

Smythe appeared to realize that the game was up when she called him by his name. He sighed deeply, seeming to understand it was no use pretending, now. “Oh dear...,” he commented.

“You lied to me,” Catherine accused, without preamble.

“Well, I fibbed...” Smythe made a face, as he tried to mitigate his involvement.

Catherine wasn't buying his contrition. “How long have you known Kristopher?”

“When he was a little boy, he used to come in and sit for hours, reading book after book... folklore, mythology, poetry... Even when he grew up, he would rather read than eat. I'd have to shoo him out at night, so I could close up.”

“Then why did you pretend you'd never heard of him?” Catherine worried the point.

“It's just... such a bother. No one ever believes me anyway. You're not the first, you know...”

“Not the first what?”

“Why, to see Kristopher's ghost. He materializes for all the... more attractive... young ladies,” Smythe replied, with an air of injured innocence.

“I can't believe this!” Catherine declared in exasperation.

"See...," Smythe pointed out reasonably.

"You're still claiming he's dead?"

Smythe stared at her. "My dear young lady. Of course he's dead. I identified the body myself. Such a waste. He had so much talent..."

Smythe sounded utterly sincere, utterly convincing. Catherine just stared at him, and he stared right back, unwavering. Finally, she threw up her hands in helpless exaggeration.

"That's it! I give up!" She turned to leave, but halfway to the door, something occurred to her and she turned back. "His paintings..." She frowned. "There was no family, no will... none of the paintings had ever been sold... what happened to them?"

Mr. Smythe looked pained. "His landlord took everything. A dreadful man."

"For the back rent..." Catherine walked back towards him.

The bookseller nodded. "His books too, but I bought those from him. It seemed only right... old friends coming home, again. Kristopher would have been pleased."

"The landlord must have tried to sell the paintings, too..." Catherine mused.

"Undoubtedly. The only portraits he valued were the ones on dollar bills. But I don't imagine he had much success. Kristopher's work is probably off in storage somewhere... presuming it still exists..."

Catherine looked at him directly, tired of the performance. "It still exists. Otherwise what's the point of this charade?"

"My dear, young lady, so young and so cynical," Smythe sneered. "You should not be so certain. This world devours our certainties... and all our beauties, as well..."

Catherine stared at him, not at all sure of what, or who, he was referring to, anymore...





## **ACT FOUR**

### **All the Boundaries...**

*"I love you as certain dark things are to be loved,  
in secret, between the shadow and the soul..."*

*Pablo Neruda*

The old warehouse stood stark against the night sky, brooding and silent, with age and regrets. It sat solidly within its own carpark, set back from a dark, lonely street.

The building's interior was guarded by an old, rusted padlock, a very formidable one, which secured several heavy chains across a set of old wooden doors. Painted on the doors, in faded, gilt, turn-of-the-century lettering, was: *Corrigan Moving and Storage*. But a bright yellow printed notice has been slapped across the name, advising of a BANKRUPTCY SALE, JULY 18, 1987.

Catherine had driven all the way out here. She stopped her car at the curb and opened the door to get out, staring hard at the ancient structure that seemed to mock her.

She walked slowly up to the main doors and touched the lock, tugging at it in helpless frustration. The chains rattled, but nothing gave way. The building's sense of solid impassivity made her even more determined.

She turned to look behind her at the deserted street in front of the warehouse. Nothing moved, and nobody walked by, except for the swift passage of a yellow cab.

She turned back to the warehouse. The windows were broken and boarded up. Catherine looked up and down, searching for a way inside the warehouse. There was nothing. No way in. Frustrated, she tried the chains once again, for want of anything better to do, but the padlock showed no sign of budging. At her wit's end, Catherine returned to her car. *This was a bad idea.* She knew it was born of her insistence to know the truth.

Smythe had reluctantly given her the address, after she'd refused to leave the bookshop. Her assertion that she could wait all night had irritated the old man. He'd glared at the backstairs that obviously led to the apartment above the shop, before he'd acquiesced to her stubbornness, and scribbled down an address, on a crumpled piece of paper. He had thrust it out to her, and then demanded she leave him alone.

"Another wild goose chase..." Catherine commented brusquely, as she opened her car door and slide into the driver's seat. Just as she was turning the key in the ignition, there was a metallic click of the padlock opening. Catherine froze and looked up.

The padlock was wide open. As she stared at it, the heavy metal object slid off the chain and hit the ground. The chains followed with a rusty clatter. As she watched, the doors swung open a few inches, in dead silence, and hung ajar. Within, there was nothing to see beyond darkness and dust.

Catherine turned off her car, and after leaning to grab a flashlight from her glove compartment, she got out. Slowly, warily, she moved across the pavement and up the steps. She pushed at the door. It swung all the way open, revealing only more dust, and a deeper darkness.

Catherine stopped on the threshold and called out. "Hello...?" There was no answer. Unsure that it was a good idea, but unable to resist, she stepped inside.

The interior was very dark. A sea of dark gray, its corners lost in huge pools of pitch black shadow. Vague shapes of rooms and stacks of furniture greeted her eyes, some areas more suggested than seen. The only illumination was from her flashlight, and the dim glow from the streetlamps outside, which barely reached beyond the first couple of feet.

All the while, she had the uneasy sensation of being watched. But everywhere she looked appeared to contain nothing beyond shadows and cobwebs. The human shapes she thought she saw could have been anything in the jumble of collected detritus.

Grateful for the slim cone of light from her flashlight, she edged forward. Her footsteps echoed into the cobwebbed rafters that hung overhead like great, black bats.

She moved cautiously through the dark, dusty emptiness, trying to pierce the gloom and failing. Again the sensation of being watched feathered uneasily up and down her spine.

"Who's there?" she called, hoarsely. Her words echoed, but there was no other sound.

Suddenly, the front door slammed shut behind her, with a clanging echo. Catherine whirled, startled. In the same moment, her flashlight died, leaving her once more in total darkness.

"Damn it, damn it!" Desperate, Catherine banged on the side of her flashlight. It blinked back on again and she raised it, only to be startled for an instant, when she discovered a grim, silent Vincent, standing right in front of her.

"Vincent... for a moment I thought... Thank God it's you. I tell you, I'm —"

Vincent interrupted her in a slow, serious tone. "Half-sick of shadows..."

"Yes..." Catherine turned to play her flashlight over their immediate surroundings.

The thick darkness pushed back. The huge, cavernous storage warehouse was crammed with piles of cobwebbed furniture and sheet-draped artifacts from who-knew-where. Old trunks, and other forgotten and cast-off junk loomed all around them. The detritus of modern life, many piles were covered with old canvas tarpaulins.

"I was about to give up and go home before you unlocked the door." Catherine looked around her.

Vincent looked at her curiously. "Catherine... I didn't unlock any doors..."

Catherine stared at him, dumbfounded. "Then... who...?"

Vincent suddenly turned and growled. Somebody was standing in the distance, holding up a lantern. *Enough of this!* Vincent gave chase, running among the

strange, stored items. He ran up to a mirror and saw his reflection. He paused, then turned again, running and leaping over a pile of boxes, to quickly grab the intruder by the shoulder as he tried to duck aside and escape capture.

His captive turned towards Vincent in amazement. "Hi..."

Kristopher Gentian and Vincent stared at each other, both lost for words.



The floor of the warehouse was a maze of crooked aisles winding between piles of abandoned goods. Holding up his lantern, Kristopher led Catherine and Vincent through the labyrinth, but he seemed vague, almost confused.

"How long have you been here?" Catherine demanded to know.

"Here?" The artist looked confused. "I... I don't know... it seems... that's funny, you know, I can't seem to... to remember..." He stopped to look around. He seemed lost for a moment. "I don't... this way, I think..."

They resumed their rambling walk, seeming to go around in circles. Catherine was sure she had seen that same piles of old furniture twice before. They were getting nowhere, and she was tired and sore.

"Kristopher, I want some answers. How did you open that padlock without my seeing you?"

Kristopher looked at her with his sad, dark eyes. "I just did. I didn't want you to go away..."

Catherine wanted to shake him. "Are you living here, now? Is that it?"

The artist looked pained, as he stopped and turned to stare at her. "So many questions. Watch out, you might get answers. You'll explain all the wonders and mysteries in life. Then the wonders and mysteries..." He inhaled. "... die. I hate questions. At least sometimes."

He turned away and continued walking. Then he stopped, suddenly. "Wait! Here!"

He was standing in front of a faded canvas tarp, covering a rather forlorn pile of possessions. An old steamer trunk was half-revealed beneath one corner.

Kristopher tugged at it ineffectually, until Vincent stepped forward and pulled it out from under the tarp.

Kristopher seemed surprised to recognize it. "That's my stuff!"

He tried to pull the heavy trunk into the open aisle, but couldn't manage it. Vincent grabbed the handle on the exposed end and easily dragged it out. Kristopher looked at him, then glanced at Catherine, in amazement, before he grinned and blew off a thick covering of dust on the trunk. He threw open the lid. It was filled with coloring books and crayons.

He picked one up and flipped eagerly through the pages. Vincent and Catherine exchanged a fulminating look.

Vincent stared at the truck's contents. "Coloring books..."

Kristopher nodded happily. "I couldn't get enough of these, when I was little."

Vincent leaned down to pick one off the top and opened it. He gazed at the colored picture for a long moment. Standing beside him, Catherine looked over his arm at the collection. The drawing was vividly, wildly colored, but the young artist has resolutely colored everywhere, inside and outside the lines, ignoring all the necessary boundaries.

Catherine smiled as she looked at his 'art work.' "You went outside the lines," she accused softly, expecting nothing more from the curious young man in the Mets cap.

"I like going outside the lines," he defended his younger self.

"Some men ignore boundaries," Vincent commented drily. He shook his head.

"Hmm, all the boundaries..." He stared at her with deep meaning.

Vincent and Catherine exchanged looks. She frowned. "Coloring books are one thing. Pretending to be dead is something else."

Kristopher moved around them and started to wrestle with the heaviness of a nearby tarp as he replied nonchalantly, "Dead? What do you mean dead? Who's dead?"

Catherine huffed a laugh. "Good question. Look, I don't think you planned it."

"I never plan anything, if I can help it." The artist grinned.

Catherine persisted in her quest for answers. "You'd hit bottom... your work was gone, you were on the streets, no-one cared... Then you stumbled on a dead man... roughly the same build and age..." She was building her case. One she was fairly sure of.

Kristopher was still struggling with the heavy tarp. He realized what Catherine was trying to say. "Maybe I am dead... good as dead, anyway... an artist is only as alive as his work, right? Botticelli will live forever, but me..."

He dropped the tarp and tried to remove a heavy case from in front of a cloth-covered pile of things. Vincent reached past him and easily pulled the case out of the way and set it aside. Kristopher grinned at him in thanks before he removed the dusty cloth, revealing the meager pile of Kristopher Gentian's final worldly possessions.

Kristopher backed silently away as Catherine and Vincent moved forward to look at them. There were a few beat-up pieces of furniture, some records and magazines, and dozens of paintings. Dozens. Large, small, and every size in between, they were stacked up against each other, propped on the couch and chairs, leaning up against the sides of the furniture.

Catherine and Vincent fell silent, regarding the artwork. They were all very different, but all recognizably the work of the same artist. Lush, romantic, erotic, sensual, each of them evoked the feel of by-gone ages. They were full of myth and magic, of lost yesterdays and impossible tomorrows. The technique was superb, the passion undeniable. In their own way, Kristopher's unsaleable paintings were gorgeous.



Catherine was amazed by the beauty of the paintings. She was moved, and impressed. "Oh, Kristopher... they're wonderful, you must..."

As she spoke, she turned to where Kristopher had been standing only a moment ago. Her smile faded, when she realized that he was gone, vanished as mysteriously as he had appeared.

"Kristopher? Kristopher, where..." She turned around, looking for him, but there was no-one there. Only she and Vincent, dust and darkness... and the art. "I hate it when he does this."

Vincent looked around, puzzled. *He is not simply gone. He is ... gone.* There was no trace of chill in the air. No trace, at all. "He's gone, Catherine... I have no sense of him."

"That's impossible..."

Vincent continued to look around. "Is it?"

Catherine wasn't buying it. "He's hiding somewhere... maybe there's a secret door..." She looked from shadow to shadow, searching for Kristopher's recognizable human shape.

Vincent smiled. "Or perhaps a magical one."

"I don't believe in magic," Catherine scoffed, as she turned back to stare at him.

Vincent lifted his arms wide, making a sweeping gesture, to indicate the legacy that Kristopher had left them. "Then, Catherine, what is all this?"

She looked at the paintings once again, then back up at Vincent, and her expression softened. Suddenly she realized that it didn't matter whether Kristopher Gentian was dead or alive, a ghost or a fake. The art was all that mattered and it was all here, right in front of them.

Catherine had an idea of what could be done with the canvases. But she would need her good friend's help. She would telephone Jenny in the morning...



Holding a sheath of papers in her hand, Jenny Aronson stood beside her cluttered desk. It was covered with manuscripts, and galley proofs of books in progress. A mug of coffee sat on top of one manuscript while Jenny talked on her phone.

"If he doesn't get the revisions in this week, we won't make the fall list. You tell him..."

Her telephone buzzed. "I've got another call. You just tell him, okay? Later." She leaned to push a button to change lines. "Jenny Aronson..."

"Hi, Jen. It's me," Catherine answered.

Jenny looked pleased, but curious, as she moved to sit behind her desk. "Oh Cathy, hi. Does, um, this mean we're finally going to make dinner?"

"Oh, I wish. Maybe next week," Catherine apologized.

"Where have I heard that before?" Jenny asked, unperturbed.

"Listen, Jen, I need a favor. All those art books you've edited... you must know a few gallery owners."

Jenny laughed sardonically. "Some of them a lot better than I ever wanted to."

"I want to arrange a show. Can you help set it up?"

"Well, easier said than done. When?"

"Soon...a week, two weeks. Is that possible?"

"Absolutely no way." Jenny shook her head. Then she relented. "Well... let me work on it. I've got a couple people who owe me favors..." she mused, then her voice sharpened with curiosity. "Is this for that guy? The one who wanted you to pose?"

"Yes, Kristopher Gentian..." Catherine allowed cautiously.

"Did you do it?" Jenny asked excitedly. "My God, you did! You have to tell me everything... Is he any good? And how's his painting? What should I tell the galleries?"

Catherine replied wryly, "Tell them he's better than good. He's dead..." She hung up.

Jenny stared at her phone, looking baffled. She wasn't sure her good friend was making any sense at all.



Three weeks later, Catherine had put the arm on a lot of friends, both from her old life and her new, and Kristopher's opening was a huge success. A fashionable uptown crowd sipped champagne as they moved from room to room in the trendy, upmarket gallery, discussing the fascinating paintings on the walls.

Joe Maxwell, looking a little uncomfortable in his rented tux, stood in one corner of the gallery, studying one of Kristopher's paintings: a fantastic, extravagant, romantic semi-nude, featuring an especially striking woman in a strange flared skirt. He was very impressed.

He moved closer to the painting, and began examining the frame, looking for a price tag. He was engrossed in his search when Catherine, looking stunning and sexy in a silk evening gown, came up behind him.

She smiled at him. "I don't think you'll find the model's phone number, there."

Joe stood back. "How much you figure they'd want for something like this?"

"You're thinking of buying it?" she asked, in a surprised tone.

"Hey, why not? The guy's dead, it'd be a good investment." Joe gave the woman in the painting another long, admiring look, before grinning at Catherine. "I think I could stand looking at her for a long time. What do you think? I could put it over the couch..."

"Then what would you do with your black velvet Elvis?" she teased.

Joe gave her an exasperated scowl, but before the conversation could continue, Catherine happened to glance past Joe, through the crowd, and into the next room. She saw a waiter offer a glass of champagne to Jenny Aronson and her male companion. The waiter seemed to feel Catherine's gaze. He glanced up and smiled. It was Kristopher.

Catherine apologized to Joe. "Excuse me..."

She moved quickly through the milling art lovers towards Kristopher. But by the time she reached Jenny's side, Kristopher had vanished, again. Catherine stood beside Jenny, frustrated, looking around.

"Where is he?"

Jenny looked around. "Who?"

"The waiter... with the champagne..."

A different waiter passed them, carrying a tray. Jenny snagged a glass of champagne and held it out to Catherine. "Here you go."

"I'm not thirsty..."

Jenny looked completely lost as Catherine turned around, still looking for Kristopher. Instead she found Mr. Smythe standing directly behind her.

"Mr. Smythe. Did you come with Kristopher?"

Smythe chuckled. "From his family crypt?"

Catherine smiled, and her look was a knowing one. "I knew he wasn't going to be able to resist his own opening."

Smythe shrugged. "I'm sure he's here in spirit." He pursed his lips. "When I think how close we came to losing all this..." His bespectacled gaze travelled back to Catherine. "You've done a marvelous thing."

"All I contributed was a setting. The marvels belong to Kristopher." She stared hard at the bookseller. "They've sold a half-dozen pieces already. The rest will be gone before the show is over. The gallery takes a commission off the top. I told them to send the rest to you."



Mr. Smythe looked very surprised. "To me? My dear young lady, whatever for?" He stared at her suspiciously.

"For Kristopher, of course... he'll need money for paints... canvas... rent." Catherine was tired of his games.

"But Kristopher is ah, dead," the bookseller reminded her, in a bemused tone. He smiled slightly.

Catherine looked him over. "So you don't want the money?"

Smythe backed up, looking wounded. "You mustn't put words in my mouth now. There's always... um... cemetery up-keep." He cleared his throat, and he smiled slightly. "Oh, and um, as long as I'm here... I wonder if you would mind terribly introducing me to the proprietor of this establishment..."

Catherine cocked her head, and gave him an inquiring look. "Just in case, say, some more work by Kristopher Gentian should happen to turn up?"

Smythe was absolutely unflappable, but there was perhaps the tiniest hint of a twinkle in his eye as he replied, "Well, I daresay... you can never tell..."

They looked at each other for a long moment, both knowing the other had secrets that they couldn't share. Then Catherine smiled broadly, now fully won over by the

old man's charm and oddly sweet behavior. She linked arms with the bookseller, and led him through the crowd to make the necessary introductions.



The hour was late by the time the party wound up. Jenny and Catherine were the last to leave. They said their goodbyes on the sidewalk in front of the gallery, as the lights began to go off, behind them.

"It went great," Jenny acknowledged. "Don't you think it went great?"

"Yeah, I'm happy," Catherine replied, realizing she absolutely was.

Jenny sighed. "You know, I didn't know they made artists like Kristopher anymore."

"They don't..."

Jenny hailed a taxi and it braked to a stop beside her. "Want to share?" She opened the rear door.

Catherine shook her head. "No. I feel like walking. The night's so lovely..." She hugged her friend goodbye. "Thanks for everything."

"My pleasure, okay? And dinner?" The two women hugged and Jenny kissed her cheek.

"Tuesday," Catherine promised.

"Good. You take care of you, now." Jenny turned away to climb into the cab.

Catherine watched her friend being driven off, then started down the street with a dreamy smile on her face. But she hadn't gotten more than a few feet away when the gallery owner popped out of the front door, carrying a large painting, carefully wrapped in cloth.

He called after her. "Oh, Catherine darling, I was so afraid you'd gone... here..." He hurried down the sidewalk to thrust the painting at her.

Catherine was baffled. "What's this?"

The gallery owner shrugged. "Well, I couldn't say for certain, but whatever it is, it's yours. It turned up when we were rooting about in that dreadful warehouse... way in back, all sealed up. But it has your name on it, see?" He showed her a cardboard tag. "I put it aside for you. Did you know the artist when he was alive? Oh, well, you must have, of course, never mind. Enjoy."

He hurried back inside the gallery, leaving Catherine standing under a streetlight, holding the large canvas. *A painting? With my name on it? There... must be some mistake?*

But the door had locked behind her, and the last light went out. She had no idea what she was going to do with her new possession...



Vincent's chamber was lit by several candles, holding back the darkness that hovered in the corners. Catherine and Vincent stood side-by-side, regarding Kristopher's gift, now unwrapped.

"He had his sketch of me to work from, I suppose...," Catherine mused, frowning. "But he must have painted you from memory. Astonishing, isn't it?"

Vincent regarded the painting. "You might even say... magical..."

Catherine smiled at him. "Now you're starting to sound like Kristopher."

Vincent raised his eyebrows at her. "Am I?"

He looked back to the painting. He reached out gently to touch the edge. He smiled a strange, enigmatic half-smile. "Hmmm..."

Catherine noticed. "Why are you smiling?"

"Kristopher... worked only in oils..."

"Yes..." Catherine looked at the painting.

"Oils take months to dry completely, Catherine... sometimes even years..." He sighed. "This canvas..."

Catherine put a finger to his lips to quiet him. “Don’t say it... I have to hold on to some of my certainties. Don’t I?”

She recalled Smythe’s words to her, in the bookshop. *The world takes away our certainties. And our beauties...* She eyed the incredible painting. *And sometimes... sometimes it gives them back*, she concluded.

She smiled and leaned back against her love, the most beautiful, most certain thing she knew. Vincent put an arm around her, and rested his cheek against her hair. They lost themselves in the painting.

It was a portrait of Catherine and Vincent, standing together, as breathtakingly romantic as the rest of Kristopher’s work. Catherine wore a red velvet gown, as Vincent stood behind her, his arms wrapped possessively around her. The look in Catherine’s eyes was telling. Vincent recalled Kristopher’s quote, from *Idylls*. ‘*She sent the deathless passion in her eyes through him, and made him hers, and laid her mind on him, and he believed in her belief.*’ His own expression, in the portrait, left no doubt of it.

*Be well, Kristopher. Be well, wherever you are.*

As they stared at the creation, Catherine fancied she could hear Kristopher softly quoting the same Oscar Wilde poem from their meeting in the park...

*‘We shall lay our hands upon the basilisk, and see the jewel in the toad’s head. Champing his gilded oats, the hippogriff will stand in our stalls, and over our heads will float the blue bird, singing of beautiful and impossible things. Of things that are lovely and that never happen. Of things that are not and that should be...’*





*“Painting is poetry that is seen rather than felt, and poetry is painting that is felt rather than seen...”*

*Leonardo da Vinci*

