

Beauty and the Beast



"Once Upon a Time in the City of New York"

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ACT ONE

A Fairytale in New York...

By

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“The loneliest moment in someone’s life is when they are watching their whole world fall apart, and all they can do is stare blankly...”

F. Scott Fitzgerald



Catherine Chandler paid the fare before she slid quickly out of a cab, turning to grab her briefcase. She hurried across the plaza towards the General Motors building. A brief glance at her wristwatch confirmed her suspicions. She was late for work, *again*.

She sighed ruefully, as the building's doorman swung the door open for her. "I know, Robert. You don't have to tell me." She smiled disarmingly, waving off what he was about to say, as she hastened into the lobby towards the large bank of elevators.

There was a very good reason why she was late - this time. Picking out a new dress for her evening tonight had taken much longer than she'd thought possible. But she wasn't overly worried. Her father was a prominent and wealthy corporate attorney in Manhattan. She worked in his law firm.

Catherine had never had to worry too much about anything in her privileged life. Certainly being late for work wasn't even on her list of things to be concerned about...

She rode the elevator to the second floor and the doors opened. She stepped out into the sprawling offices of Chandler and Coolidge. She moved through the reception area as if she didn't have a care in the world.

Behind her desk a receptionist was speaking into a telephone receiver. "No, he's at lunch, sir..."

Catherine breezed past. "Morning...", she called cheerfully.

The older woman wasn't fooled. "Not anymore...", she replied briskly, glancing pointedly at the wall clock.

Catherine laughed. "Picky, picky..."

As Catherine passed, the receptionist shook her head in disbelief. She returned to her task, speaking once more into the telephone. "Yes sir, thank you..."

Catherine continued down a corridor filled with offices, blithely exchanging greetings. No-one questioned her tardiness. No-one would dare.

A passing female colleague admired her chic clothing with an envious stare. "Great look."

Catherine nodded. "Thanks..." She entered her own office only to drop her briefcase onto the chair just inside the door.

She returned to the corridor. A male lawyer gave her a pained look as he walked past. "Catherine, please don't forget the settlement conference at three..."

Give me a break! Catherine allowed a little exasperation to show. She was here now, wasn't she? "I'll be there."

As she walked down the twin line of offices, she shed her heavy coat, draping it over her arm. Reaching the end of the hallway, and a set of impressive doors, she opened one to poke her head into her father's outer office.

"Hi, Marilyn," she greeted her father's secretary, as she stepped inside.

"Hi." The older woman smiled, inclining her head towards the inner doors.

Catherine nodded her thanks as she crossed the vast expanse of expensive carpeting and entered her father's office. Charles Chandler, a handsome man with grey at his temples, was sitting behind a huge desk, talking on the phone. He smiled and waved his daughter in.

"Catherine...", he greeted her, curiosity alive, in his fine blue eyes.

The afternoon sunshine was streaming through the impressive windows behind him, which overlooked 52nd Street.

"Hi, Dad." Catherine draped her coat over the back of the chair before her father's desk and sat down.

Charles returned his attention briefly to the phone. "Hal, let me call you back." He hung up before returning his full attention to his daughter. "Hal Sherwood's coming up from Atlanta tonight. Will you have dinner with us?"

Catherine shook her head. "I can't. Tom's having a party for the architects of the new project. Another excuse to wine and dine the planning commission..."

In a weak moment she'd expressed this same opinion to Tom, her current lover. He'd telephoned her this morning to remind her about the party, and hadn't been at all pleased with her flippancy. Tom's harangue that morning had been clear. He needed the evening to be perfect. The venue, the ice sculpture, even how they both appeared, together, as a power couple. It all had to be flawless, right down to the drape of her dress and her choice of jewelry. He had investors he needed to impress with his ability to take care of their business.

Charles chuckled ruefully. "I used to be invited to these functions. I should've thought twice before I handed you over to our best client."

“You make it sound like a horse trade.” Catherine managed to maintain her light tone. She sighed inwardly. She was thinking of cancelling the evening.

Her father shrugged. “Uhhhh... you could do a lot worse than Tom Gunther.”

“And have,” Catherine acknowledged the truth. The subject was still painful. She’d made some poor relationship decisions in the past.

They both knew it, but they laughed, anyway. It eased the sudden tension between them. They had grown apart of late, and neither had any idea of how to bridge the widening gap.

Her father shrugged. “Well, how about dinner tomorrow night?”

Catherine rose to her feet. “Well, let me get to my desk, check my calendar.”

“You just getting in?” Her father struggled to appear surprised. He stood from his chair.

Catherine sensed his underlying criticism. “Had a late night, had some errands to run today.” She shrugged defensively. “Sue me...”



Her father hitched one hip onto the corner of his desk. “Well, it’s a little late for that. I should’ve sued you when you were five. What’s up with you? You don’t enjoy the work? You don’t find it stimulating?”

His loving daughter chose her next words with care. She had no wish to hurt him. “When I think of corporate law, *‘stimulating’* is not a word that immediately pops into mind.”

Charles looked confused. “But, when you put your mind to it, you’re a fine corporate lawyer.”

Catherine leaned close to kiss his smooth cheek. “No, Dad, I’m the daughter of a fine corporate lawyer.” She smiled apologetically at him before collecting her coat and turning away to walk out of the office, closing the door behind her.

Charles’ next words were to no one in the room. “What’s with you, Catherine?” Her father sat for some time, looking after her. His question went unanswered. “I wish I knew what to do for the best.” He glanced at the silver-framed picture of his late wife, which owned pride of place on his desk.

He sighed and shook his head, before rising to his feet. Returning to his chair, he re-engaged with the heavy workload, made all the more impossible by his daughter’s lack of drive to succeed.



Punctuality was a word Tom Gunther lived by. He demanded it of his employees and he expected nothing less from Catherine. He would arrive at her apartment sharply at eight o’clock, and assume she’d be waiting for him. Which, of course, she was.

Catherine sighed, as she walked out the front entrance of her building, into the cool of the April evening. The doorman saluted her as he held the door open. She smiled at him as she walked past, even as she battled with the rising desire to turn around and go back to her apartment and lock the door behind her.

Some strange sense of restlessness ruffled her studied composure. It was almost as if something was trying to tell her the evening would end in disaster.

She shrugged the odd sensation aside. She was no coward, and tonight was important to Tom. She would do her best to make the party a success. Their relationship appeared to have reached some kind of stalemate, which neither party seemed willing, or able, to break.

Catherine couldn’t quite put her finger on the reason for her reluctance to be with him, this evening. She knew she still wanted to go back upstairs though. Maybe her apartment was the one place where she could be herself. Tom had a habit of taking over, and reorganizing any space he inhabited before too long.

His newly-acquired townhouse in Greenwich Village was to be gutted of all its quaint charm and turned into an ultra-modern shadow of its former self. Tom had proudly shown it off to Catherine, who hadn't liked any of his plans. But she'd smiled and nodded when it was required.

They'd been lovers for the past five months, and Catherine couldn't fault Tom's attentiveness to her needs. Holiday trips and expensive gifts had been showered upon her. But they'd all come with attachments. Tom's gifts were like the riders in a corporate contract. They always seemed designed to make her do more than she wanted to, with him. She shook away the thought, and tried to focus on getting through the evening in front of her with her patience intact.

One thing at a time, Catherine, she chided herself. It's a party. It's not brain surgery...

She pasted a smile on, as Tom's limousine drew up smoothly before her. Her date sat watching her from the back seat, as the driver got out to open the door for Catherine.

"You're looking lovely tonight," Tom commented, as she slid in beside him. He reached to push open the lapels of her evening coat. "I like it. Great choice of dress."

"Thank you," Catherine acknowledged the compliment softly. But it didn't feel like a compliment. It felt like an inspection. Had he ever done that to her before, in just that way? Catherine wasn't sure if he had.

Tom nodded as he sat back, seeming well-satisfied with her. Catherine studied him through the sweep of her lowered lashes. He was a good-looking, dark-haired man, ten years her senior. In any crowd, he stood out, and enjoyed the attention. He always dressed immaculately, wearing his high-end clothes well on his tall, muscular frame. He'd made his considerable fortune in the fiery cauldron of the New York real estate market, and let no-one forget it.

And his future plans had already turned towards politics. He fully intended to be mayor of this great city, sooner rather than later. And for that plan to come to fruition, he needed just the right wife. Someone with beauty and connections in all the right places.

"Yes, very nice..." He reached to smooth the length of the maroon material draped around her neck, his fingers lingering on her soft skin. He moved closer, his whisky-scented breath warm, and heavy on her cheek. He lowered his voice. "But you'll look even better out of it..." He smiled in anticipation. "I have big plans for us, after tonight."

"What sort of plans?" Catherine carefully moved aside, placing her purse between them on the seat.

Tom leaned back and shrugged, seeming not to notice her reticence. "Let's just say that after tonight, I think we've earned a holiday. Somewhere exotic. You'll like it."

"I see..." *There it is...* Catherine sighed inwardly. His assumption that what was enjoyable for Tom, she would go along with, to keep him happy.

Their last holiday together had been nothing more than a thinly-disguised fact-finding mission, looking at expanding the Gunther empire into the warmer climes of the Caribbean's wealthy resort scene. Catherine had not enjoyed it. She'd seen little of him. His time had been spent in meetings, or running to catch a plane to assess another resort location.

"Aren't you excited about tonight?" Tom reached to grasp her hand. "You don't look excited. I need you with me. You know what I want without me having to say it. We are so good, when we're together."

"Of course, yes." Catherine brightened, summoning her best smile, one that didn't quite reach her eyes. "I know how much you value my support."

"Good. I'm pleased." Tom patted her hand. He paid no attention to the wavering of her smile, or the sudden tenseness of her slender body. "Maybe, after the party, we could go back to your place. For once...?"

"Maybe." Catherine's reply was non-committal. She removed her hand from his grasp and tucked it safely into the folds of her evening coat.

She turned her attention to the car window. The darkened cityscape flew past her eyes, but she didn't see anything, through the sudden mist of unshed tears.

I don't know why I feel like crying. I'm wearing a designer gown, riding in a limousine, going to a big party. Tom is handsome, and Dad likes him. He's rich. He

spends money on me, well, on us both. And this will all be over in a few hours. Just hang on.



The private party filled the elegant restaurant with chatter and laughter, and the perfumed *bonhomie* of the very well-heeled, determined to enjoy themselves. The wine and food were both in endless supply, the host attentive, and the spring night was still young.

On a large table in the middle of the huge room, stood a tall architectural ice model of a skyscraper and commercial complex. It was boldly displayed with presumptive authority. It fairly shouted, *'Look at me!'*

Which was the whole intention of the night. Those who were interested enough to stop and look, marveled at the centerpiece, trying to calculate the cost it represented. Its designer, who stood nearby, watched the assemblage with cool calculation, and looked well-satisfied with the turn-out of moneyed investors. As always, the party was a means to an end. For that matter, for him, most things were just that.

Attentive to the needs of his would-be partners, all while being seen to work the room, Tom took careful stock of the crowded party. He'd left nothing to chance. He didn't make a move without a plan – and a spreadsheet detailing potential risks.

Here tonight, he was in his natural environment. People seemed to swirl around him, drawn by his aura of power, and a confident smile that never quite reached his dark eyes. Many women watched him with ill-concealed avarice, trying to attract his attention.

Tom had it all, and yet... a quick frown shadowed his watchful eyes. What was it that Catherine had said when he'd phoned her about the party?

'Yet another excuse to wine and dine the planning commission.'

But this wasn't an *'excuse'* it was an opportunity. Excuses were for weak men, men without drive, or focus. Tom knew he wasn't one of those. Opportunities were for go-getters, and up-and-comers. Tom counted himself firmly in that category.

Still, her comment had rankled him. Catherine was a spoiled little rich girl, and sometimes, it showed. She had neither his drive, nor his focus. They both knew she hated her job, and did it as little as possible. But she did have a sterling pedigree, and for that, he was willing to ignore her shortcomings. Or at least, he was willing to ignore some of them.

Sometimes, her mouth's too smart for her own good. He sighed brusquely. Sometimes, her casual flippancy annoyed him. It was a habit he'd have to break her of, as they continued. Tom knew there were ways to do that. There were ways to do almost everything. Knowing that had made him a fortune. And he planned on making a lot more. *Court the winners, bury the competition, and ignore the losers.* It was a motto he lived by.

Catherine had been too quiet on the drive over, making him begin to rethink his plans for her. Maybe he *was* making a huge mistake, after all. The thought had already occurred to him.

Sometimes she showed a rebellious streak he was coming to detest. It was almost as if she was laughing at him, and all he held dear. For some reason he couldn't fathom, she appeared to be holding him at arm's length. She didn't want to share her most intimate thoughts or feelings with him. *And what's with this idea she wouldn't allow him inside her apartment? Like she has something to hide?*

But her wealthy father's connections were worth cultivating. And Catherine *was* very easy on the eye. He could overlook her faults, given the right incentives. It was beyond time he settled down. Once they were married, Catherine could be taught to mind her place, and her tongue.

But where is she now? "Not beside me, that's obvious," he muttered, through his all too perfect teeth.



As he approached the tabled construction once more, a potential investor posed a searching question and Gunther nodded quickly.

“Well, they can’t get it quite right in the sculpture, but um, it gives you a pretty good idea of the way it’s going to be. We’re very pleased. I’m sure you’ll find that the overages are money well spent.”

He shrugged quickly, moving away before the man could pose another awkward question he didn’t want to answer. His temper was threatening to get the better of him. He walked through the restaurant, his dark gaze searching for the woman he’d brought to the party. Once more, she was MIA, and he was becoming deeply irritated with her lack of attention to *his* needs.

Moments later, he found Catherine sitting at a far table, talking to a defeated-looking woman she obviously knew. Tom knew her, too. *Eve. Loser. What in hell is Catherine doing wasting time with her?* He arrived at the table in time to hear the woman’s mumbled confession.

“I really thought my life was over. I mean, he was my life. He told me just to pretend like he was dead.”

Catherine sighed. “I’m sorry, Eve. Things’ll turn around.”

Tom rolled his eyes, even as he leaned close to Catherine. “How you doing? You all right?”

Catherine glanced up at him. “Fine,” she commented evenly. “Eve and I haven’t seen each other since college.” She quickly returned her attention to her table companion.

The other woman grimaced after swallowing a mouthful of her cocktail. "We were just catching up."

Tom barely acknowledged her. He didn't remember inviting her to the party, but he knew her type, even as he knew her. Drinker. Whiner. Only so bright, and not as well connected as Catherine was. Neither Eve, nor her soon to be ex-husband, were of any use to him, with the planning commission. Or anything else.

"Good," he replied soothingly, trying to draw Catherine away from the table. He placed a possessive hand in the small of her back, and leaned closer. "I need to talk to you."

Catherine stiffened, but allowed him to direct her. She rose and nodded to the other woman. "Would you excuse us for a minute?"

Tom drew her into a nearby alcove, below the grand staircase. He moved closer, lowering his voice to demand "What's with you?" His tone brimmed with irritation.

Catherine drew back. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you've been sitting over there listening to her blubber half the night."

Catherine sighed roughly. "She's going through a rough time. She and I used to be good friends."

Tom managed to hold his rising temper. "I know her. She's a lush. She was married to a lush," he sneered. "She's a complete loser." For Tom, there was no more deeply denigrating a word than that one.

Catherine's fine green eyes darkened with displeasure. "You're very compassionate ..."

Tom completely misread her. "Come on, stick with me. There's someone I want you to meet." He looked around the room, searching for a distraction.

Catherine sighed. "Oh, Tom, I'm just not into it tonight. I'm sorry..."

Tom's thin veneer of urbanity began to slip. "I thought I could count on you." He sounded like a petulant child.

Catherine's lips tightened. "You can..."

Tom's eyes narrowed. "Maybe I expect too much."

Catherine huffed her displeasure. "This is a party. It's not... brain surgery."

Tom could feel critical eyes in the room watching them, making judgments. *If the man couldn't control his woman, what else isn't he in charge of?*

"I really don't have time for this, now...," he snarled.

He became aware of the casual attention of a young blond woman, slowly descending the staircase behind them. He wasn't in the mood for an audience.

He saw Catherine's eyes snap with displeasure. She obviously didn't care if they were being overhead or observed.

"Frankly, I don't like being told who I can talk to...," she muttered.

"Then show better judgement!"

Catherine's hold on her temper finally snapped. "*Fine!* I think I'll call it a night..."

Tom leaned closer. She was *not* going to humiliate him. Not here, not now. "*That's not an option...*" He would bring her to heel, no matter the cost.

Unintimidated, Catherine backed away. "Oh, it's not?" She returned to fetch her purse from her seat at the table, where she'd been sitting with her old friend. "Eve, I'm sorry. I'm going to have to call you tomorrow."

She turned and walked away, without a backward glance at Tom. He watched her for a long moment. *Act like she was just called away. Don't let on.* He would deal with Catherine later. All things considered, he didn't have a choice.

He schooled his features into the charming mask that had made him a small fortune, the one that had made him one of Chandler and Coolidge's biggest clients, and the one that would further his political ambitions. *Act like everything that happens is a victory. And before long, it will be.*

Eve didn't notice the ugly little scene that had just played out before her. Her head was focused on her own sorrows, and her nose was back in her cocktail glass.

Loser, Tom thought again, as he kept a false smile intact, shrugging, as he turned back to his guests. He managed to smile a bit more broadly and shake his head, as he noted how many people had been watching the heated exchange. They'd kept their voices suitably low, even if the disagreement had been a biting one.

He'd have to excuse her absence, if anyone asked about it, plead that she had a headache, or something. *Of course, I could always tell an even bigger lie: that she has an early meeting at work, and she wants to be sharp for it,* he thought uncharitably, knowing better than to let his mood show on his face.

"Okay, now where were we?" he asked, with feigned heartiness, as if he didn't care that he'd just been stood up.

He approached the table laden with food and picked up a plate. From the corner of his eye, he noted the blond woman, who'd recently overheard the terse conversation as she'd descended the staircase. She was standing further along the table, watching him through her lowered lashes, like she was waiting for him to speak to her.

He turned towards her, assessing his options. She was pretty enough, and he was currently minus a date. *Maybe Catherine's leaving isn't so bad, after all...*



Vincent sat at his chamber's table with a book of Pablo Neruda's *Love Sonnets* open in his hand. Slowly, he traced the lines he softly repeated, "*I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where. I love you simply, without problems or pride: I love you in this way because I do not know any other way of loving but this, in which there is no I or you, so intimate that your hand upon my chest is my hand, so intimate that when I fall asleep your eyes close...*"

They were powerful words that numbed Vincent's soul, and brought sorrow to his lonely heart. He sighed. Only yesterday he'd taken his concerns to Father, hoping for some kind of comfort. But Jacob had only commented that such longings for what he could never have could only bring his son pain and unhappiness.

Vincent had wanted to shout back, *'If that's my only choice, then I'll be unhappy!'*

But, of course, he had not. Instead, he'd retreated to his chamber to brood once more on the cruel hand life had dealt him. He had wanted to shout that maybe Father would have been better advised to let Vincent die as a baby, than suffer as he did now. But he hadn't said that, either, knowing how much pain he would have

caused the old man, who was only trying to do his best for his unusual son under the most trying of circumstances.

He closed the book and set it aside. There was a certain Mouse he'd promised to visit with, and a few other things that demanded his attention.

Vincent sighed again. The brazier-warmed air in his chambers felt close, and cloying...



"Men...!" Catherine muttered, as she collected her evening coat. "Why do they always have to be so obstinate?"

She shook her head as she walked briskly across the restaurant's lobby and out the gated entrance into the Third Avenue evening. The April night had grown chill, and she was glad for the coat. Though the calendar insisted it was near the middle of the month, it was the kind of New York night where spring still felt very far away.

She was angry and upset, and had no real idea of where she was going. On the one hand, she could just go home to her apartment, and call it a night. On the other hand, she knew she'd turned down an invitation from Charles this evening. Her father would still be busy hosting his dinner with Hal Sherwood, comfortably talking over old times.

Their masculine banter wouldn't do anything to dispel her strange sense of disquiet. Catherine felt she'd had enough of the male ego for one night. She felt suffocated beneath the weight of male expectations.

Men... She sighed. She fell to twisting her late mother's antique ring on the middle finger of her right hand. A habit she had when she was indecisive.

She knew she didn't much care for Tom's unforgiving opinions of people like Eve, who didn't conform to his point of view on life. He had already made that plain on several occasions. Yet, still Catherine knew she stayed with him...

He might be my father's best client, but as a human being... she shrugged, assessing her options. Or the lack of them...

It was still early, but all she could think of was to go home and indulge in a long shower, and a good book. Her lips twisted as she contemplated the idea of the book her best friend, Jenny Aronson, had recently passed on to her.

Jenny had laughed, blithely declaring it would do wonder for Catherine's somewhat confused love-life. What could it hurt? *Love Sonnets* by Pablo Neruda.

Remembering the title, Catherine shook her head in despair. Reading love poetry was the last thing she wanted to do tonight. Not when for her, real love seemed so far away.

What must it like to be truly loved? she wondered. To feel like part of someone else? Like when you're sleepy, it's their eyes that close? The corners of her mouth turned down with sadness.

Lost in her musings, she paused at the curb, looking up and down the street. She'd arrived at the party in Tom's stretch limousine, another sign of his need to impress people who mattered to him. *Can't go home the same way I got here, that's for sure.*

Deciding that walking through Manhattan at this time of night was not the best idea, she hurried towards the street corner to hail a cab. Seeing one approaching, she raised her hand and waved. *"Taxi...!"*

Too late. The cab drove past, the driver not even seeing her waving furiously at him.

Catherine muttered, *"Great..."*

From behind her, a thickset man in a bomber jacket sauntered up, as if he'd been passing by and had seen her distress. She frowned at him, but he seemed harmless enough.

He smiled, flashing bad dental work, but his eyes seemed kind. "Say, you're, ah, you're not having very much luck. I'll get one for you... I'm an expert." He stepped off the curb and raised an arm towards a far-away cab. *"Yo! Taxi!"*

Catherine watched his fruitless antics with barely concealed impatience. None of the distant taxis he waved at could possibly see him. *Maybe I should just give him a tip for his trouble, and walk, after all.*

She was about to reach for her purse, as the man returned to her side, looking defeated. Before she could thank him, he circled her, crowding her from behind, seizing her elbow in a vice-like grip. Suddenly, a white van pulled around the corner, the side door sliding open as it came to a halt beside them.

Catherine's erstwhile helper shoved her roughly towards the van door. "Hey Carol, are you going home alone, tonight?"

He didn't give her any time to reply. She tried to twist away, but a pair of muscular arms reached out from within the van, grabbing her and violently yanking her forward, into the vehicle. The thickset man jumped in, and the door slammed shut as the van accelerated back into the evening traffic.

As the vehicle cruised up Third Avenue, Catherine struggled with her assailant and a heavily tattooed punk in the back of the darkened van. *This can't be happening!* She squealed and screamed, fighting to get free of the terrifying situation.

Undeterred, her assailants slammed her against the hard floor, trying to knock the fight out of her. She landed heavily on bare metal, bruising her back and ribs. But still, she fought.

The thickset man held her down, as he leaned closer, his fetid breath washing over her. "Shush, shush, shush, shush, shush, shush, shush, yeah that's a girl, that's a girl, shush, that's a girl ... you know what happens to little girls with big mouths... huh?"

The tattooed punk giggled cruelly. "You're gonna find out..."

His companion nodded. "Hey, Carol. You've got to remember to keep your mouth shut from now on."

Striving to disarm the terrifying situation with logic, the only weapon she had available, Catherine stammered, "My name... isn't Carol."

The man barked, "*Shut up!*"

Driven to defend herself physically, Catherine managed to kick the punk in the chest. She scrambled to her feet and pounded on the dirty back window of the van.

"Help!"

A car full of teenagers was driving along in the next lane, laughing and grooving to the radio – oblivious to her plight.

Catherine stared down at them as she pounded again on the glass. **“Help me!”**

Her two attackers leapt up to seize her, dragged her back down to the floor and began to beat her into submission. Finally pinning Catherine roughly to the hard, metal floor of the van, her assailant leaned even closer.

“You’re gonna remember – every time you look in the mirror.”

He pulled a straight razor from his hip pocket. Realizing his intent, Catherine began to fight with all her remaining strength. **“No! Help!”**

“Come on, Carol. Play nice...” The punk restrained her hands, holding her down easily, giggling in anticipation. He drove his knees into her sides, pinning her to the floor.

Catherine managed to gasp, “I’m not—”

“Stop talking and get done with her. Before we’re seen!” the driver yelled over his shoulder, as the van veered into the nearest entrance to Central Park.

Tree branches slapped the side of the van as it rounded another corner, driving ever deeper into the darkened green-space. But all Catherine could see was the razor, as it was raised towards her unprotected face...



“Vincent...?” Father limped into his son’s chamber, carrying his chess set beneath his arm. “Mouse said you’re going Above tonight, but I thought, perhaps we might divert ourselves with a game or two. It’s been weeks since we’ve played.”

“Weeks since you’ve had the opportunity to try and beat me...?” Vincent inclined his leonine head at his parent’s obvious disappointment. “You thought you might try and divert me from leaving the tunnels, tonight.”

The older man didn’t deny the charge. “You know how I fear for your safety, Up there.” Father sighed, placing the wooden box down on Vincent’s writing table.

“Ignorance breeds fear. You cannot deny I am right. There are so many dangers...”

"No, I cannot deny your words, Father." Vincent crossed the chamber towards the only parent he'd ever known, pulling his great cloak onto his shoulders, as he moved.

He curled one strong hand around his father's neck, drawing him close to kiss his furrowed brow. "But you cannot deny me the freedom to roam as I choose. The night is my friend. It shelters me from prying eyes. I am safe there, in the shadows."

"There is no shelter or safety up there in that city!" Father retorted heartily. "But, I do understand your need to deny me." He gripped his son's hand as he released him. "I am sorry for what I said the other day. But, if you care for me at all, take Mouse with you. Or Cullen, or Winslow. At least, that way, I will sleep easier, knowing you're not out there, all alone."

"No, Father." Vincent sighed roughly. "I believe it was L.M. Montgomery who once said, *'And if you couldn't be loved, the next best thing was to be let alone.'*"

"But you *are* loved, Vincent. Surely you know that? Why must you be constantly putting yourself in danger? For what? Some ill-conceived sense of adventure? Some dream of another life that will never come true?" Father tried to keep his voice from rising, as he said it. He even succeeded. Almost.

"Who's to say what will come true, and what won't, for any life? I know that *you* love me, Father. I've always known it, and yet..." Vincent shrugged, eloquently.

"And yet... Oh, my beloved boy..." Father grasped his arm, holding it tightly. "We've talked of this before. You know my views, for what they're worth. Some things... cannot be, no matter how much we wish them to be so."

"I know." Vincent's chin sank to his chest. "But still..."

"You crave a connection with someone of your own." Father nodded bleakly, his mouth pulled tight with despair. "The simplest, most basic human need..."

They both knew it was true. And they both knew how unlikely it was, for Vincent.

"And yet..." Vincent said again, raising his eyes to stare at the old man.

Jacob said his next words softly, a world of regret in them. "Wishing will never make it so, Vincent." *If it could it would have, long ago. For I have had that wish for you, and so many others, so many times.*

Father laid out the bare truth, as only he could. "You are loved. Respected, even. As for the rest... that is an immutable fact, however you may rail against it..."

In that moment they both remembered Lisa, but neither dared voice her name.

Vincent arranged his cloak more comfortably. "I must go Above. If only to watch others love... and to dream... just a little. Even you would not deny me that one small gift?"

Jacob took in his huge son, knowing it was useless to argue, and that no attempt at diversion would work. "Very well, I can see your mind is made up. It's getting late..." He frowned. "If you *are* going, then you'd better make a start." With one gloved finger, he pushed the chess box towards his son, in one last, vain attempt to dissuade him. "Of course, you can still change your mind, you know."

"I will return Below, before the dawn appears," Vincent whispered sadly. "You have my word on that. And please, try not to worry, Father. You will only grieve yourself. I can take care of myself."

"That is not what I'm afraid of." Jacob watched his son's broad figure leaving the chamber, his heavy boots making no sound in the tunnel beyond.

How much longer, before these... fruitless forays cost you, my son? In spirit, if not in skin? Jacob wondered. How much longer before you simply... lose all hope, and the best part of you dies? It's a cruel city, Vincent. So much crueler than even you know.

After Vincent had gone from his sight, he turned back to the chess set. "How can I not worry, when you mean so much to me, to all of us?"

He gathered the chess set, holding it cradled in his free arm. Leaning heavily on his walking stick, he went in search of company, and a game. He knew he would not sleep until the pipes told him of his son's return to the safety of the tunnels...





As it entered Central Park from the 96th Street. drive-through, the van slowed down just enough to hold a bend in the road as the side door slid open. Catherine's body and purse were flung from the still-moving vehicle, out onto a clearing beside the road. Accelerating once more, the van sped off into the dark night.

Catherine lay unconscious, nearing death. Sprawled in a heap, she was unaware of the temperature dropping even further. Soon, hypothermia and blood loss would finish off what her cruel assailants had started. When that happened, Catherine Chandler, East-side debutante, corporate lawyer, and only child of a very wealthy man, would become yet another statistic, in the life of a city that didn't care. In the dark, deserted park, where there was no one to help her...

But then, seemingly out of nowhere, a strong shadow fell across her limp body, and a patchwork-cloaked figure bent over her. Completely unaware, Catherine was scooped up as if she were a mere child, and carried into the swirling mist settling across the park's landscape.

The broadly powerful figure carried her body into a nearby drainage tunnel, and disappeared below the park. With Catherine draped over his shoulder, the cloaked figure descended a spiral staircase into a steam tunnel. With the ease of long practice, he moved to a part of the elaborate network of tunnels and caverns which ran deep below Manhattan.

He carried her down a passageway and into a lower level of connecting chambers. Steam escaped from the pipes. The stone walls ran with sweat. An occasional bare bulb threw eerie shadows down the tunnel. Somewhere overhead, a train thundered past, stirring uncounted echoes.

The cloaked figure ignored it all, as he eased his way beyond a make-shift wall that appeared to completely block a lower tunnel. He pushed it closed behind him, sealing off the outside world once more.

He was aware of concealed eyes watching him now, and the reports of his early return would run ahead of him, alerting his world. And they would also tell of the unconscious woman he carried over his broad shoulder. He moved quickly and

surely along a narrow ledge, and then down another ladder, deeper into the smothering darkness.

Catherine's blood continued to flow, staining both of them.

Live, he willed her, quickening his pace.



The room-sized underground chamber was silent, except for the faint crackle of a small fire somewhere close at hand. The chamber's dimensions and arched ceiling gave the feeling of a medieval knight's quarters, and yet it was filled with carefully selected cast-off items, the artifacts of a disposable culture. The furnishings – lamps, table, cabinets – had been found or ingeniously assembled from salvaged parts. One wall was covered with a mosaic of photos cut out from magazines – photos of the great people of the time – Einstein, Stravinsky, Ali, John Lennon.

But Catherine could neither see nor understand any of this. She could only guess at the strangeness and size of the place she now found herself in.



She awoke in terrified confusion. Nothing sounded, felt or seemed, as it had before. It was almost as if she'd fallen down a well into another, stranger dimension. Nothing she had known before had a place here. There was no traffic noise, no telephone's shrill, no sounds of the people who inhabited the city. There was only an intermittent tapping sound, like someone playing on metal pipes in the distance. But that too, died away into the deep silence.

She lay nestled in a bed that felt like nothing else she had even known. Barely aware, she sensed the bed was soft and yielding, seeming to cradle all her agonies, all her anguish, concentrating the anvil pounding of her blinding headache. The sheets were cotton, and not silk. The blanket whose patchwork of color she

couldn't see felt heavy, yet somehow comforting. It smelled clean, but not antiseptically so. *Where am I?*

When her eyes fluttered open into darkness, she became aware that her neck could barely move. *Wrapping?* She felt the constraints of it, and the soft feel of cotton gauze against her abused cheeks. Suddenly, she became aware her head and face were bandaged, her eyes covered. She came fully awake with a terrified start.

"No...! No!"

Somewhere beside her a man spoke. "You're safe. You're safe, now..." His voice sounded like rough velvet, warm and incredibly soft.

Catherine had to strain to hear him. She fought for sanity. *This isn't... this can't be happening to me... it must be a dream... a nightmare...* "Where... am I?"

"No-one will hurt you. You're safe here..."

Trapped within her pain and agony, she was aware that his was the kindest, gentlest voice she'd ever heard... mentally, she reached to touch it... and him...

"H-hospital?" She knew it was the place where she should be, right now.

"No, but you're going to be all right..."

"Why... why aren't I in a hospital?" *Nothing will ever be all right again!* She wanted to scream at the top of her lungs. But she couldn't. Her throat was too choked with scalding tears...

"There was no time, you were bleeding..."

Catherine's voice trembled in fear and alarm. "What did they do?" *Blind. Oh, God, I'm blind!* For a woman who had overcome a child's fear of the dark, it seemed to horrible to contemplate. She put a hand to the bandages over her eyes. *"My eyes...!"*

"Your eyes were not hurt. We made sure... Rest now..."

His voice was softly reassuring, and strangely beautiful, with a slight impediment she couldn't identify. In all her terror, Catherine clung to it like the lifeline it was, wrapping herself in its warmth. It bid her to sleep, and to try not to be afraid.

And though she didn't know how she could be, or do either one, she drifted away. Back to that newly-discovered place where she felt no pain, and her whole world had not fallen apart so completely...



As Catherine slept, Father bent over her, examining her, checking her pulse. "Keep a close watch. If her fever rises, let me know at once." He frowned at his son, even as he gripped his broad shoulder in sympathy.

"I will." Vincent, his face always hidden, watched over her.

He looked at the shattered remains of what had probably once been a beautiful woman, her face now riddled with stitches, beneath the bandages. Even her still-exposed lower lip bore a trace of Father's handiwork.

He knew pity for her. And yet, his sense of empathy felt the struggle, inside her. She was ... fighting. Fighting her fear. Fighting to heal. Fighting to... trust. To trust him.

There is strength in you, he thought, unable to hold back of touch of admiration for it.

You'll need it for the days ahead; for what's to come.



When Catherine finally awoken again, Vincent approached her cautiously, keeping just out of her reach.

Catherine barely turned her head towards the soft rustling sound of his clothing.

"Who's here? Who are you?"

He decided it would not hurt to share his name. "Vincent..." he said hesitantly.

"Vincent...?" Catherine questioned, on a rising note of panic.

He hurried to reassure her. "My father and I treated your injuries. You have broken ribs. You need to be still..."

"Where am I?" Catherine demanded on a sob.

"Where no one can hurt you," Vincent replied to her panic rather than her pain.

"My face hurts..."

"Tell me your name," Vincent asked quietly, still trying to distract her from her pain.

"Catherine..." Her breath hitched.

Catherine. What a beautiful name.

"Catherine..." Vincent breathed. "Try to rest. If you need anything I'll be close by. Don't be afraid. Please... don't be afraid..."

He could feel it inside her, again. The struggle. The struggle to believe. The struggle to trust.

Inside, she must have weighed something, and found him trustworthy. Either that, or she surrendered to the fact that she had little choice.

"I'll try..." The brief exchange had exhausted her, once again. She drifted back to sleep.

Moving closer than he ever had before, Vincent reached to draw the covers up around her before he left the chamber, walking slowly down an adjoining tunnel.



Vincent moved with speed and agility, as he descended a ladder to a lower platform, then leapt from that platform across a steam-filled chasm to another ladder, which he climbed.

He entered a vault-like room, two-stories high. The walls were lined with books, floor to ceiling – books of every description – a vast library of the city's cast-off tomes. The room was lit by oil lamps. In a far corner, standing beside a tattered, over-stuffed chair, sat Vincent's father, studying the spine of a book.

The older man's face and features are long and finely-chiseled, bearded, and firmly molded. He had the appearance of a wise, sensitive man. One who had seen too many terrible things. He was robed in a hooded cloak against the chill of the stone walls.

As Vincent appeared in the chamber, Father looked extremely upset. "Is she awake?" He looked up from the book in his hand, pushing back his hood.

Vincent nodded. "She's very frightened," he replied quietly.

She is? Well, that makes all of us. Or at least, it should. Father, better than most, knew the danger this young woman represented. They were all in no small amount of peril.

“How could you bring a stranger down here, to where we *live*?” Father flared at him. “You ignored our most important rule.”

“I know that... but there was no other way.”

The older man gave an exasperated sigh. “Do you know what they’d do if they caught you up there?” Father continued angrily, as if his son hadn’t spoken. “Or found you down here? They’d kill you.” He answered himself. “Or put you behind bars and make you wish you were dead. You’ve endangered all of us, but the risk for you is especially great. How *could* you bring her down here to our home?”

“How could I have turned my back on her and left her there?”

Father sighed again. His son wasn’t exactly wrong. But he wasn’t exactly right, either. Father capitulated by reaching into a bag and holding out a bottle of pills. “Well, make sure she takes these – to prevent infection.”

Vincent took the bottle. “I’ll make sure...”

Father frowned. “I was saving them for an emergency, in case anything happened to either of us...”

“Father try to understand, this was an emergency – she would have died.”

“All right,” the old man agreed grudgingly. “Help her regain her strength. But the moment she’s ready to leave, you must get her *out*. And Vincent, don’t tell her anything...”

“Don’t worry – it won’t be very long. She’s already beginning to heal...” *I can feel it.*

Father’s expression softened. “You have the soul of a doctor...” He smiled. “When I studied medicine they didn’t admit minorities or women...” He chuckled. “Vincent, I wonder what they would’ve done with you. Let’s not even think about it...”





Catherine lay in Vincent's bed, propped up on pillows, her head and eyes still swathed in bandages. Vincent was seated at the end of the bed, feeding her with a spoon from a bowl of food.

"Do you like it?" he asked, watching her delicate movements.

"It's good soup," she admitted bleakly. She swallowed another mouthful. "Vincent, tell me. Where are we? I'm going to keep asking."

The sound of a train rumbled overhead. "Where do you think?" Vincent asked cautiously, as if he was stalling for time. He lowered the spoon to rest on the edge of the bowl.

Catherine cocked her head towards the rumbling sound. "Somewhere there's an elevated train. Brooklyn? Queens?"

"No, not Brooklyn or Queens." *But you are bright. Too bright to risk lying to, perhaps.*

"Am I still in New York?" Catherine asked, in a panicked tone. "Vincent, please tell me! Where are we?"

"I can't tell you." Vincent sounded agonized. *I wish I could.*

"Why not?"

"I have to keep it as a secret."

"Why is it a secret?"

"Because many good people depend on this place for safety."

"Vincent, I'll keep your secret," Catherine said sincerely.

Vincent heard more than the words she said. He heard and understood her underlying strength and knew she could never betray all that he held dear.

In the same moment, there came again the almost continuous metallic tapping sounds in distinct rhythmic patterns. They underscored the periods of dreaming silence.

"And that tapping. It never stops," Catherine complained.

"It's people talking to each other, tapping on the master pipes," Vincent said softly.

Catherine was momentarily diverted from her pain. "You mean messages?" *How is that possible?*

"Mmmmm... They are speaking in code." Vincent paused to listen. "'86th and Madison – food... 34th and Seventh... danger...' First they give location, then condition – danger, food, help or emergency. It's how we communicate."

"Please, tell me – where are we?" Catherine begged again.

Vincent sighed, finally surrendering to the inevitable. His promise to Father held no weight here.

"We're below the city – below the subways. There's a whole world of tunnels and chambers that most people don't even know exist. There are no maps to where we are – it's a forgotten place. But it's warm and it's safe – and we have all the room we need."

Catherine listened intently, her mouth half-open in disbelief. When she didn't reply, Vincent continued speaking. "So we live here. We try to live as well as we can, and we try to take care of each other. It's our city, down here."

Catherine tried to make sense of it all, and failed. "You're kidding... Aren't you?"

The low voice was steady. "No – I'm not."

Catherine fell into uncertainty. "What are you doing down here? Why are *you* here?"

Vincent took a deep breath. This was painful. "I was a baby – abandoned, left to die. Someone found me and brought me here, to the man who became my father." His beautiful voice deepened with gratitude. "He took me, he raised me – he taught me everything. He named me Vincent." He chuckled softly. "That's where I was found, near the hospital – St. Vincent's."

People... living beneath the city. Caring for each other... And no one knows. Speaking in code and I... I was saved by one of them... It's... it's too fantastic...

"I - I don't know what to believe..." Catherine sounded overwhelmed.

"It's all true," Vincent confirmed gently. The spoon he still held moved against the rim of the soup bowl with a tiny clinking sound.

Uncertain, in need of physical human contact, Catherine reached out towards the sound, and suddenly she touched his hand. Before Vincent could pull it away, her fingers settled on his.

Catherine gasped. She felt something unexpected, animal-like, and pelted in fur. She tried to cover her astonishment, as her hand jerked back of its own accord.

Vincent drew back, mortified, and feeling very much alone. But then he had always been alone.

He rose quickly from the bed, carrying the bowl of soup with him. "I'll be back..."

He moved away, the soft movements of his clothing dying away into the silence. Catherine was left listening to the small crackle of the fire, and the endless tapping on the pipes. *Messages*, Vincent had said.

She lay there in a worry, unwilling to even consider the possibilities of this strange new world she found herself trapped in.

It can't be. Even... even if it is, it ... can't be ...



ACT TWO

Finding Strength...

“Remember tonight... for it is the beginning of always...”

Dante

Catherine’s father stood behind his desk. He looked exhausted, but determined to find his missing child. Behind him, Tom Gunther hovered, looking worried and drained.

“I don’t want to think about what could’ve happened.” Charles glared at the newspaper spread across his desk. The headline fairly screamed at him.

In the same moment his intercom buzzed. He moved to answer it. “Yes? Send him in.” He turned to look at Tom. “John Herman’s here. He’s a first rate police officer – Lieutenant of Detectives. I asked him to supervise the case.”

Tom moved his shoulders. “I hear he’s a good man.”

The office door opened and a big ruddy-faced bull of a man with white hair, strode into the office.

“Jack! I’m glad to see you.” Charles reached across the desk to shake the other man’s hand. “Jack, I’d like to know who leaked the story to the papers.”

Lt Herman frowned at the spread newspaper. “Hard to keep something like this quiet. A socialite’s missing for a week, her purse is found in the park.”

Tom Gunther swept his hand at the paper. “We don’t need these kinds of headlines.”

Between them the newspaper headline declared: *NEW YORK POST: “GUNTHER’S GIRLFRIEND MISSING... EAST SIDE DEB VANISHES.”*

Charles stared hard at the detective. “Have your men come up with anything?”

“Not, yet.” He grimaced. “I just talked to the lab. I think you should know they found some blood on the purse. It does match your daughter’s.”

Catherine’s father’s face tightened. He inhaled deeply at the gravity of the situation.

Lt. Herman said, “Mr. Chandler, Mr. Gunther. I’ll do everything I can to find her – that’s a promise.”



"Should be... right here." Mouse, the tunnel world's inveterate tinker, moved his left hand slowly back and forth over the old, uneven bricks of the dark tunnel wall, then stopped. "Triple bricked. Built to last."

"I asked Catherine for her address of where she lives, Above." Vincent frowned at the brickwork. "She didn't question why I needed to know."

Mouse frowned at his companion. "You sure you still wanna do this, Vincent?"

"Yes, I'm sure." Vincent nodded. "It's our best option." He didn't question his young friend. He knew Mouse was uncanny in his knowledge of the underside of the great city, the tunnel layouts and what lay behind the walls. He needed that knowledge now.

"If you're sure, then you'd better stand back." Winslow, the tunnel's burly blacksmith set aside his oil lantern before hefting a heavy sledgehammer to his shoulder. "This could take a while."

"Mouse knows," the tinker's tone was accepting of his larger companion's skepticism. "Leads to tunnel behind the sub-basement of Catherine's building." He moved aside, making room for the two larger men to work in turns.

"All this for a woman..." Winslow shook his head, spitting on his palms before his hammer swung down onto the old brickwork, shattering several bricks at once.

"It is the safest way for her to return to her world." Vincent hung his lantern on a nearby hook, before his own hammer whistled downwards, and several more bricks shattered.

"Mouse could take her out," the tinker offered. He shrugged. "Easy. No-one sees Mouse."

"You don't understand nothin'." Winslow scowled, as his hammer flew. "She only knows about Vincent, and we want to keep it that way as much as possible. Father's right in all he says. The less she knows, the less she can tell when she gets back Above."

"Don't see why she should tell," Mouse grumbled, as he removed the loose bricks and set them aside. "Vincent said she promised him not to tell."

"That's as may be." Winslow threw another heavy strike and bricks shattered. "But ya can't always trust what women say. I know that much. Never knew one to keep any kind of secret when it truly mattered."

"I have accepted Catherine's word," Vincent said quietly, his powerful hammer making short work of the second layer of bricks.

"Can't say you're not right about this one," Winslow admitted grudgingly. "But it's still better this way. You take her out, Vincent, then we bring up some old bricks and close up this hole, like it's never been. No way back, then, if she changes her mind."

"I had thought to leave it open." Vincent avoided his good friend's questioning gaze as he attacked the last layer of bricks. "It would be impossible for Catherine to find her way back to the home tunnels. I will make sure of that."

"Oh, so that's the way the wind blows." Winslow paused, leaning on the wooden handle of his hammer. "Have you told Father?"

"He knows," Vincent admitted quietly, swinging his hammer with extra force.

"I bet he does." Winslow shook his head as he resumed his assault. "Doesn't mean he's gonna like it. He don't want her staying here. People like her don't stay missing. They get looked for hard, and we can't have that."

"What's Father not going to like?" Mouse straightened from his work of stacking piles of broken bricks into a nearby recess, leaving the floor clear to work.

"Our friend here's making a fool of himself," Winslow replied baldly. "Sorry, Vincent, but it's gotta be said. She can't be anything to you. It's way too dangerous."

My head tells me the same. But my heart... it is whispering something different. A message I'm unsure of, even as I think I understand...

"I know," Vincent sighed, as he began to pull away loosened bricks, slowly enlarging the hole they had made. "I have heard all the arguments." He turned to help Mouse clear the floor.

"Vincent's Catherine." Mouse shrugged. "Maybe she doesn't have to leave. Maybe she likes it here."

"Now *you're* being foolish," Winslow grumbled. "Woman like that's got powerful friends and family who want her back. You can't keep her like some bit of treasure you just happened to find."

"Why not?" Mouse asked innocently. "Vincent likes her."

"It cannot be," Vincent replied, before Winslow could retort. "As much as I might wish it to be so."

He continued to clear the loose bricks, enlarging the hole until it was big enough to step through. Beyond, another dark tunnel ran away in both directions. Retrieving his lantern from the wall, he crouched and moved forward into the darkness.

"Come on," Winslow encouraged the tinker. "The sooner we get this done, the faster I can get back for my dinner." He picked up his lantern before disappearing through the hole, following Vincent.

"Winslow's always eating," Mouse complained, in an aggrieved tone.

He followed both men into the next tunnel and they moved further along into the darkness, their flickering lanterns casting grotesque shadows on the walls. Finally, Mouse stopped, turning his head from right to left and then back again. He pulled a ragged map from his pocket and studied it by the light of a small flashlight strapped to his wrist.

"You lost?" Winslow demanded, watching the tinker check his bearings.

"Nope." Mouse shook his head, as he moved down the tunnel, then stopped.

Again he put his hand to the wall and moved it back and forth. Then he nodded.

"Here. It's right behind here."

"You better be right, boy. Your map could be all wrong," Winslow complained. "I'm not missing out on some of William's pot roast for anyone."

Mouse flared up. "I know what I know, and I know where it's at! Map is right, second basement is here. You'll see."

"Okay, Mouse. Geeze, I was only asking," Winslow grumbled, taking Vincent's lantern from him and setting it aside with his, on the floor of the tunnel.

"We're wasting time arguing." Vincent stood back and picked up his sledgehammer.

"Here, right, Mouse?"

"Right there." Mouse nodded vigorously.

This time the bricks were easier to remove, being newer and not as well cemented as the older bricks in the outer tunnel. They broke through the wall with relative ease.

"I can see light." Winslow pulled away several bricks before he bent down to peer through the hole. "I don't like this. We must've missed our mark."

"Map is right," Mouse avowed stoutly. "Sub-basement to Catherine's building right through there. Not in wrong place."



"The light must be coming from the basement above." Vincent removed more bricks to expose a concrete block room containing a few scattered boxes and a damp floor where water pooled on its uneven surface. It smelled damp, and musty with disuse. "I doubt anyone comes down here."

The light from above shone down through an opening in an unearthly, blue-white column that took his breath away. He stared at it for a long moment, striving not to imagine Catherine leaving him, within its mysterious glow. He could make out the shape of a ladder pinned to the wall behind the light that obviously lead up into the main basement above.

"Don't look like anyone's been down here for a long time." Winslow pushed into the hole beside him. "That's a good sign." He turned to his good friend. "Will it serve, Vincent?"

"It will serve. Father says Catherine will be ready to travel in a few days. I will bring her out, here." His breath left him on a harsh sigh.

He knew he would never set foot in this place, nor stand beside her. Or go Above by this route. It was for Catherine alone, because any marks of anonymous footprints in the dirt and debris of the floor would only arouse suspicion. He would carefully erase Catherine's footprints, once she had passed this way.

"I'm sorry, my friend." Winslow's heavy hand settled solidly on Vincent's shoulder. "I truly am. But, we both know, there just ain't any other way."

"Yes..." Vincent's voice roughened. "There is no other way."

"And it would be better to brick it up again, after she's gone." Winslow straightened. "To avoid any thoughts she might have about coming back down here."

"I... it will stay as it is, for now." Vincent moved back out of the hole they had created. "I will make sure she does not find the way back."

Winslow shrugged, knowing better than to argue. "Suit yourself. Still think it's a mistake." Winslow followed him back into the outer tunnel. "I'll get a guard station set up down there by the first hole, none the less. We don't want any... unfortunate incidents."

"No, Winslow." Vincent stopped the big man with a firm hand on his forearm. "You will leave it all exactly as it is, for now."

"Vincent." The blacksmith shook his head. "You know it cannot be."

"I know." Vincent sighed. "But it is all I can do, for Catherine."

Winslow was no fool. He knew the way the larger man said the rich woman's name spelled trouble.

"Women..." He paused, then added, "Ya know, my father used to quote this poem, when he was working with a tricky piece of metal that just wasn't going his way. He said it was all about finding eternity in an hour. Like he was saying he tried to bend time to make the piece do what he wanted."

The black man shrugged, and shuffled his feet. "I know it sounds a bit crazy, but I thought it might help you and Catherine make some time. You know that poem, Vincent?"

"Yes, I know it," Vincent nodded. "Your father was a very wise man."

"Yeah, he was..." Winslow agreed, his dark cheeks reddening.

Seeing he'd made his point, he turned away to clap Mouse on the shoulder, sending the tinker staggering into the shadows. "Come on, lead the way home, Mouse. I'm starving." He bent to pick up his guttering lantern.

"You're always hungry," Mouse accused, rubbing his abused shoulder.

"I've got a lot to maintain." Winslow laughed, patting his ample girth. "Be seeing you around, Vincent." His lopsided smile was deeply sympathetic as he collected the tools. "When you're ready to come home."

Pushing the protesting Mouse ahead of him down the tunnel, and carrying both sledgehammers over his broad shoulder as if they were matchsticks, Winslow was soon swallowed by the moving shadows. Vincent watched them leave without comment.

Like a moth drawn to a dancing flame, he returned to stare at the shaft of blue-white light beaming down from above. *Two more days...* They had perhaps two more days together before he must return Catherine to her own world. *Two days more of talking to her, of hearing her voice. Two days more of reading Great Expectations to her...* The last week had been soul-changing for Vincent. He knew it.

And perhaps... perhaps for her, as well? It was a question he had no answer to. And he was running out of time to entertain it.

"Finding eternity in an hour..." he said softly, picking up his discarded lantern.

As he turned from the shaft of light and returned to the chill darkness of the tunnels, his heart settled like a stone in his chest. However much he wished Catherine could stay with him, he was painfully aware that her leaving was predestined. Nothing anyone had said on that score was incorrect. But that didn't mean it wasn't painful...



"This is what I feared the most." Father stabbed a finger at the newspaper lying between him and his son. "They will not rest until they find her, or what happened to her. They have the money and resources to turn this city on its head. They would tear it down to the foundations, and expose all that we hold dear."

Between them lay a day-old newspaper with the headline declaring: *NEW YORK POST: "GUNTHER'S GIRLFRIEND MISSING... EAST SIDE DEB VANISHES."*

"Lou sent it down by the emergency route." Father exhaled sharply. "He asked if we knew anything about it." He looked up at Vincent. "It seems that word has already begun to spread."

"I will make certain that any rumors will go no further," Vincent replied firmly. "I will ask Pascal to send out word on the pipes. It will not be much longer now."

"Even a single day may be a day too far," Father declared heavily. "I know the reasons why you brought her here, Vincent. But you cannot keep her here a

moment longer than necessary.” He stared significantly at his son. “However you might wish it to be otherwise.”

“I know, Father. I understand.” Vincent shrugged. “Catherine will not remain with us for a moment longer than needed.”

“I have your word on that?” Jacob pressed the point.

“You have my word.” Vincent inclined his head slowly. “I have already begun to make preparations to take her up.”

“Excellent.” Jacob stared down at the headline. “I will make sure she sees no-one when you do take her Up Top.”



Deep below the city and far away from her father’s care, Catherine sat on the edge of Vincent’s bed, alone. Her face was still bandaged. She sighed deeply, bound by the awful bands of indecision and frustration.

Feeling on edge and useless, she stood up, feeling her way slowly around the chamber. Unfamiliar with the set-up, she bumped against a small table, and a chair, before she knocked over a stack of books. She felt her way back to the bed, and sat back down. She began to weep for all that had happened to her. Things beyond her usually firm control over her life.

Standing in the shadows of the upper chamber entrance, Vincent remained very still, watching her. He had been there for a small amount of time, undecided to move down the ladder into the chamber and make her aware of his presence, or take the easy road and retreat, leaving her to cry alone.

In the next moment, she took the decision from him. She looked up, sightlessly. “I know you’re there. You can come in.”

Vincent moved slowly, making as little noise as possible, so she could not locate him exactly. “I’ll read to you,” he offered, with compassion.

“It won’t help,” she complained bitterly.

“It might. We can finish ‘*Great Expectations*.’ Do you remember how it ends?”

“Vincent, I’m worried – I’m frightened.” Catherine sighed.

"I can feel it." Vincent sensed her deep within him, a faint stirring of unseen connection. It felt deeper than the empathy he often shared with other people. It just did.

"I can't stop thinking about what happened – what they did to me." She stirred restlessly. "I don't know what to do."

"You're getting your strength back."

"I know."

Vincent came to a swift decision. "I'll make you some tea, the herb tea you liked."

"That sounds good." Catherine nodded, not knowing what else to do or say.

She heard him turn and leave. She had become accustomed to the faint sounds of his clothing, the occasional clink of metal fastenings. She waited until he was well away – and then she started to remove the bandages covering her face and eyes.



Vincent stood at the fork of two cavernous tunnels, talking to a small, tow-headed urchin named Kipper. Vincent pointed down one of the tunnels. "Take this one three platforms down, then go right up the next tunnel to the first ladder, and start climbing."

Kipper frowned in concentration. "And that'll be Chinatown?"

Vincent smiled. "Unless you take the wrong tunnel. If you do, it might be China."

Kipper laughed, giving his mentor a pitying look. "No way, Vincent."

Vincent patted his shoulder. "Wherever you end up, hurry back with the tea."

Kipper leaned back, calculating the odds. "This one's gonna cost ya."

The boy leaned down to pick up his 'skate sled' – a wooden sled with roller skates attached. He was proud of his home-made contraption. He took a running start then jumped on and sped away, clattering down the tunnel.

Vincent watched him go, glad his family could provide Catherine with at least some of the things she needed.

Then, he felt something: a warning tingle ran its way up the back of his spine. He looked left and right, seeing no immediate danger.

No. Not danger. Not... danger, exactly. Agitation. Concern. Something more like... desperation? He closed his eyes and tried to pinpoint the source of the upset. But after a moment, the feeling passed, elusive as ether.

The tapping noise on the pipes told him there were other places he should be. But before he took two steps, the sensation came to him again, this time mixed with a host of other feelings. *Wonder. Disbelief. Anxiety, again... searching...afraid?*

Vincent knew only one thing for certain. That the feelings were not his own...



Catherine succeeded in removing her bandages. She sat on the bed, looking around at a room that frankly astonished her. Regaining her sight added nothing to the ongoing mystery of where she was. Surely she could not be beneath the city, as Vincent had told her. The explanation had seemed bizarre in the extreme, even as it seemed fundamentally correct. For how else could she now explain the room in which she found herself? Rough-hewn and rock cut, it was large, and filled with all manner of cast-offs and treasures.

The smell of the low-burning brazier, lamp oil and candle smoke all seemed familiar. The feel of the quilt, and for that matter, the very clothes she wore, did, too. So did the sound of tapping on the pipes. A book sat on a side table. Great Expectations, the one she knew Vincent had been reading to her, for days. So that, too, was 'familiar,' as far as that went. A scrap of paper marked where they'd left off. Only the last chapter remained. Catherine's eyes continued to scan the amazing room, searching for anything else that seemed familiar, or at least ... usable.

Everything else... was a wonder. It seemed like there was no flat surface not covered by... something. Some memento, book, statue, trinket or gee-gaw. On the table in the middle of the room there was several things, including a closed, leather-bound diary, with a fountain pen lying next to it. A large chair was pushed back from the table, almost as if its owner had only just got up and left.

Intense curiosity made her turn and look behind her. She was stunned to see she'd been reclining next to a huge piece of stained glass, the closest thing to a 'window' the space could claim. It glowed with an unearthly light from behind, illuminating the many colors of glass.



She turned her attention back to the room. Slowly, she got up to search the place for a mirror, something to reflect her face. For a few minutes, it proved fruitless. She couldn't seem to find anything suitable.

Come on. You've got to have one. Everybody owns a mirror. She frowned, finding it odd there were none at all, in this weirdly furnished chamber.

The candlelight hid more than it showed, and there were corners filled with shadows, where anything, or anyone, could linger, unobserved. She felt she was searching for the seemingly unattainable. She leaned down to open a crate of what appeared to be junk spare parts. There was nothing helpful, there.

In despair, she reached up onto a cluttered mantelpiece where all manner of odds and ends had been stored. Her groping fingers found an old auto headlight reflector. The metal had a concave, though mirrored finish, and she held it up to her face.

In the distorted reflection, she saw the jagged slashes which crisscrossed her face like a grotesque road map. They were held together by neat rows of black stitches. Someone had taken care to make her appear as whole as possible. *They... they sewed me. They... they sewed my face together.* Yes, it was a face. But it was a face she barely recognized, even as she knew she had to claim it. It was her face. Her own, disbelieving eyes looked back at her. But the whole effect was even more shocking, for that. *No. No!!*

She gasped in horror, and the mirror image did the same. She stared at the tragically disfigured woman mirrored in the reflector, suddenly knowing for certain that it was her.

“Oh, God..! No..!”

In the same moment, Vincent appeared behind her. “Catherine...?” His mirrored image jumped into the reflector beside hers. They were two monsters in the same clouded glass, and Catherine was terrified – first of the one, then of the other.

She spun around, completely caught up in the ongoing nightmare that had become her life. Vincent was standing in the doorway, staring at her, straight on.

Catherine saw all of him in a single moment of horrified comprehension. So much made sense now. He was a beast-like man, a true grotesque, with a snout-like nose and mouth. His long, unruly hair was blond and full, like the mane of a lion. He was powerfully built and utterly alien, and frightening. She stood frozen for a split-second. Then everything happened fast. Much too fast for either of them to control it.

“Catherine...” Vincent reached towards her.

She let out a scream and shrank back in horror. This was beyond any nightmare. As he approached her, she hurled the reflector at him. It glanced off the side of his head, drawing blood. He stood there, frozen for a moment fraught with everything they could not say to each other. He snarled, in reaction but moved no closer. His fangs were as bizarre as the rest of him, and she saw that, too, even as she saw the blood she’d drawn.

“Catherine...” wait. That voice. It is him. I KNOW that voice. If she knew nothing else of ‘Vincent,’ she knew that.

And then, she knew one thing more:

I hurt you.

She could only stare, transfixed, trying to process the whole of it all. Then, without another word, he turned, and was gone from the chamber.

Catherine shuddered with reaction. Vincent has shown her nothing but kindness and concern for her welfare, and this was how she’d repaid him. With violence and horror and fear. He’d fed her soup, tended her wounds, and read to her, while she’d healed. And she’d...

No. Oh, no. Just... no.

She moved slowly across the room, to sink back down onto the bed, shaking in shock. She looked up in vain, but he was still gone. *What have I done?* She collapsed on the bed, sobbing.



After what seemed like hours, Catherine sat again on the edge of the bed, her body bowed, and listless with despair. There was nothing to see or hear beyond the gentle crackle of the fire contained in the nearby brazier, and the constant tapping on the pipes that seem to echo from everywhere.

Do something. You have to do something. She now knew what she looked like. She didn't want a second viewing of that. It astonished her that he wasn't at least as horrified by her face as she had been by his.

Not... not horrified. Startled. Scared. She tried to find the right word. One that would make this disaster feel less pervasive.

She fiddled with her mother's antique ring on her right hand, trying to decide what to do. The smooth stone was cold to her touch, and of no help at all. It didn't bring her the comfort she sought.

Suddenly a train rushed by overhead, masking Vincent's stealthy return. He moved to stand in the chamber entrance, his hands filled with her repaired clothing. He was hidden within the concealment of his hooded cloak, but his blue eyes gleamed in the candlelight, filled with compassion and embarrassment, as he awkwardly tried to conceal his face.

"I've never regretted what I am... until now..." he said so softly she almost didn't hear him. As if drawn by an invisible string, he moved slowly towards her.

Catherine tried to see him within the confines of his hood, but he kept his face half-averted. "How? How did this happen to you?"

Vincent's wide shoulders moved in defeat. "I don't know how. I have ideas... I'll never know." There was a world of barren acceptance, in his tone. "I was born. And I survived..."

Catherine shook her head in speechless wonder.

Vincent halted in front of her. "It's time for you to go back..."

Catherine looked tragic, and broken at the very idea. "Tell me it's a nightmare. That it didn't happen, that it can't be..." Her voice hitched on a sob.

"It's not a nightmare. It happened – and you're alive," Vincent countered quietly. "Catherine, you survived. And what you endured will make you stronger, and better."

She denied his claim. "I don't have your strength... I don't know how to do it..."

Vincent came closer. He sank down to crouch at her feet. His deep-set blue eyes gazed at her, as he spoke to her soul. "You have the strength Catherine – you do. I know you..." He drew a long breath. "Are you ready to go?"

"No..." Catherine denied softly, brokenly, staring at him.

"You must..." Vincent persisted.

Catherine put a distraught hand to her disfigured face. "Not like this... How can I go up there like this?"

"You can do it. I have faith in you." Vincent replied quietly, watching her terror.

He was now right in front of her, and unable to hide his face as he would have wished. She sensed what strength of character it took for him to make himself so vulnerable, open to her renewed sense of terror.

She looked at him, profoundly touched by his kindness. By everything he had done for her in these last few days. There was only one way she could truly repay him for all his care and attention.

There is only one beast in this room. And I think it's me.

Carefully, slowly, she reached out with both hands towards the hood that concealed him. Vincent gasped, but he did not move, beyond a slight withdrawal. Then, he relaxed and allowed her to touch him, even as his blue eyes darted from side to side, as if seeking refuge.



Then he ceased all movement and simply allowed her to push back his hood fully, and expose him to her scrutiny. Catherine laid the hood back against the powerful set of his shoulders and looked at him in awed wonder. *One beast. And one... beauty?*

For he was beautiful, beyond all traditional meaning of the word. Beautiful in his soul. Beautiful in his heart. Beautiful in his care for her. Beautiful in his faith in her. Beautiful in a way that called to her, and begged her to be beautiful too.

She smiled at him tenderly. *There. That's better.* If only they could stay like this. Accepting, and trying for a deeper understanding. If only they could stay like this, forever...

But the world had other plans, and she knew it only too well. Her father was a rich man. Her being here now put him in more peril than he'd probably ever been in in his life.

You took a terrible chance in even bringing me here. A terrible chance... for me.

She watched as he eased slowly to his feet, spilling her clothing into her lap as he did so. "It's time," he said softly.

She stared up at him, knowing he was right. She was left with no ability to deny him.



Vincent led her away from the main, inhabited areas, allowing her to see little of his wider world. He knew Father had been right in this. Her knowledge could be a dangerous thing, if she inadvertently spoke of what she'd seen. He took her down several long, cavernous tunnels on their way back up to the surface. They all looked the same to the untrained eye.

Their progress was necessarily slow and careful. Many times he took her hand by necessity, to guide her along the darker areas where he could see and she could not. He couldn't allow her to stumble and fall now. Not after they had come so far together.

He felt her trust in him grow, as they walked, together. Felt the terrible revelations of the afternoon 'settle,' in her mind, and become something other than terrifying. Felt her hand in his, no trace of the startled woman who'd heaved a reflector at him

in her touch. It had been an accident. Just that. Just an unfortunate accident. Nothing more.

He felt her curiosity grow as they moved upward, felt her understanding of just how deep they were inside the earth, come to the fore. She was amazed. And... *grateful?* Was that what that was? She was grateful, that he was so well protected? He couldn't be sure.

As they moved steadily upwards, some of the other inhabitants of the 'World Below' saw them, and moved back into the shadows. Father had sent out word on the pipes that Vincent would be leading a stranger along their route, and they were not to speak to her, or acknowledge her presence.

Catherine caught a few glimpses of them. On a far platform, a family of four was cooking a meal in an open hearth. One of the children looked up in curiosity, quickly subdued by her father's sharp admonition, as they all moved quickly out of sight.

It's like walking through a dream. First you see it... then, you don't.

Catherine frowned at Vincent's back-view, wondering about the few things and people she did catch sight of. But he made no comment as they passed onwards, climbing ever higher. Beneath the weak light of an overhead lamp, in an echoing cavern, he leaped easily over a huge pipe, jumping from yet another deep cavern, filled with steam, to another wide, concrete pipe.

For the first time, Catherine's small store of confidence gave way, and she hesitated, unable to follow.

"Wait!" she pleaded.

Vincent turned back, reaching out to her across the steam-filled divide. His voice, the one that had never lied to her, nor told her so much as a bit of falsehood, spoke to her now: "You can do it. Give me your hand..."

'You can do it?' I can. I can do it.

Trusting him implicitly now, she reached to take his strong fingers. Holding his hand, she jumped across, to land in front of him. His soft smile of approval made her heart beat faster. *You knew I could do it. And I... I knew you wouldn't let me fall.* She nodded to him, and tried to return the smile, despite the stitches in her lip.

Vincent turned and went ahead of her, down a path carved in the rock, along the side of a long, echoing tunnel. He led the way through a series of high chambers, ones that housed master pipes. Trains thundered overhead and, always, they were

accompanied by the tapping sounds on the pipes. Messages and warnings ran ahead of them, and only Vincent knew what they said.

They climbed a rickety old spiral staircase that had seen better days. Holding her hand, Vincent guided her along a section of pipe that they had to 'cat-walk' as steam swirled around them. As they climbed higher, subway trains began to rattle beside and below them, now.

It is a world. An entire world, down here, she thought. One where he's safe. Safe from hate. Safe from hate and harm.

They crossed a wooden bridge over a stretch of sealed-up subway track. A group of kids, boys and girls, were playing on a homemade hand car. They looked up, heeding the warnings of the stranger in their midst, and quickly scattered into the sheltering darkness of an entrance tunnel, until Catherine had passed on. Then, they crept back out to watch her disappear down the tunnel.

Among his friends, Kipper shook his head, sorry to see the pretty lady leaving them. He had enjoyed the privilege of being one of the very few tunnel folk allowed to help Vincent look after her.

Catherine looked wistfully after the vanished children. *Vincent's accepted, here. Maybe even loved. Here... where I can never return.* She knew she could never find her way back down to him, that the way was perilously serpentine. To try would be to risk getting lost, down there. Lost, alone in the dark.

As if on command, the tunnel narrowed, and became dark. They hurried along, crouched over. Further down the tunnel there was a faint light. As they approached it, the tunnel ended at an iron grillwork vent. Vincent put his shoulder to the grill and in an incredible exertion of force, moved it out of its cement casing.

Easing back upright he took Catherine down the tunnel to the first hole he'd helped make in the tunnel wall. Taking her hand once more, he helped her through, and then led her down the tunnel to the second opening.

Placing one hand on the brickwork, he leaned forward to look into the musty room beyond. All was it had been before, there was no sign of any recent activity.

His next words were full of resignation, and tinged with sorrow. "This is where you go out..."

"Where are we?" Catherine looked around, completely mystified.

"The basement of your apartment building."

Catherine laughed uncertainly. "We are?" She paused, unsure of what she should do now. *You mean... right beneath where I live...* the thought gave her an almost indescribable sense of comfort. She knew she'd never come back here, never violate the faith he was showing in her, now. But it felt good to know that in some way, they were still connected, and always would be.

But for now, she had to put any fears he had to rest. He'd risked so much, some would say too much, just to help her.

"Vincent... Your secret is safe with me." She looked up into his eyes; a man's blue eyes. Perhaps they were the most human thing about his face. "I would never betray your trust," she added.

The beautiful voice was calm, as he assured her of his faith. "I know... I knew that from the beginning, when you trusted me." He leaned back against the wall beside the hole, trying to stretch out the limited time that was left to them.

She reached out to him, placing her hand on his chest and, resting her head on his shoulder, she buried her face in his mane.

"What can I say to you..?" she whispered.

The tenderness of her embrace took his breath away. He felt time stretching and transforming into that fabled eternity he craved. *Eternity in an hour*. He knew he should draw away, put some distance between them. And yet... his hand rose behind her, and his fingers spread wide against the small of her back, drawing her closer to his pounding heart. *Yes. Oh, yes. Thank you. Thank you, Catherine. Thank you for this moment, for this gift.*

The simple intimacy of the moment held them both spellbound. Neither had the desire to break the tenuous bond that was developing between them.

I wish there was a way, she thought.

I know you do, he replied mentally, knowing she couldn't sense him as deeply as he sensed her, but knowing she felt something deep, just the same.

Just as the words trembled on Vincent's lips; the very moment he found the courage to beg her to stay with him, just for a while longer, no matter the cost, Fate intervened, as she must.

Voices sounded, and footsteps echoed through the vent in the ceiling of the sub-basement. Catherine started, turning away to look into the room and up at the vent.

That's my life calling. I have to go to it. A thousand emotions passed through her, some of which she couldn't name, and some of which she could. *It's going to be so hard.* She knew that much.

She didn't see Vincent brush past her and vanish into the darkness.

Moments later, the sounds of people faded, and she turned back to Vincent's reassuring presence, but he was no longer there.

"*Vincent...!*" she called out, her eyes searching the shadows where his name echoed in vain.

She remained, watching for any sign of him, but knew it was useless. *Gone.* He was gone. Gone back to the safety of his home, a home he could never leave. Gone, and she was alone.

Without any hope of ever seeing him again, she raised the hood of her coat over her hair, before turning and walking slowly towards the shaft of light. And then she disappeared, back to her own life...



Tony was almost at the end of his shift, as the desk clerk in Catherine's apartment building. Getting close to retirement now, he didn't mind the long hours, or the people. Most of them were good to him, giving him tips and treats for any extra services he might provide. Since his wife had died, it gave him somewhere else to go, beyond the four walls of his tiny apartment.

He was tidying the desk, making it ready for the next shift, when the doorway to the basement across from him opened slowly, cautiously, almost as if the person behind the door didn't want to be seen.

Ever vigilant for the possibility of a tip for services rendered (or a kid playing a prank), Tony dropped his paperwork and hurried across the marble tiled floor to

the door. He took the handle and opened the door fully outwards, shocked as he pulled the figure of a young woman into the lobby.

He recognized the coat before he figured out just who the woman was, hovering half in and half out of the basement stairwell. "Miss Chandler...? Good God, is it really you? Where've ya been? I mean, it's been all over the papers. Everyone's been frantic, looking for you. What's happened to you?"

The jumbled questions tumbled out of him, full of relief and confusion. He saw her cringe, as if she'd been assaulted by the barrage of words.

He eased backwards, giving her room to breathe. He couldn't see anything of her face beyond her wide, staring eyes, shrouded as they were by a maroon scarf.

"Are you all right?" He frowned. "You don't look all right..."

"Oh, Tony..." Catherine's breath hitched, and tears filled her eyes. "I seem to have lost my purse, and my keys, somewhere..."

Yeah. You did. Over a week ago. Oh, Miss Chandler. What has happened to you?

"Come along and sit down..." He extended an arm, putting it carefully around her shoulders as he guided her to a chair beside the front desk. "You look about done in. Tell me what happened. Who did this? Is there anything I can get you?"

"Call my father..." Catherine slumped into the chair, still very careful to keep most of her face hidden behind her scarf. "Please, Tony, just call my father..."



Catherine lay still on the operating table. Her ruined face had been prepped for plastic surgery – marked with lines and notations. Her father's deep concern, and his even deeper pockets, had been the swiftest way to ensure she didn't suffer any longer than necessary. She was going to be fixed, and returned to her old life, as if nothing had ever happened to her. Catherine moved slightly, reaching out in her mind for the man who could never be there, beside her... *Vincent...*

A man's voice asked, "What's her pressure?"

"120 over 80, doctor," a nurse replied.

"How's that IV running?"

"Fine..."

"Is the bogey connected?"

"Yes, doctor."

"Shall we begin?"

An oxygen mask was placed over Catherine's face and the doctor said, "Catherine, I want you to start counting from ten, backwards..."

Dutifully, she counted through the mask. "10... 9... 8..."

Around her, the doctors and nurses prepared to begin surgery. Everything was getting fuzzy. "7... 6..."

She never made it to "5," as she slipped the bonds of consciousness.

In the confusion of her dreaming state, Catherine hurried into her father's office, her face horribly scarred and her expensive party dress filthy and ragged. Mr. Chandler smiled happily at her, seeming to think everything was wonderful, and as it should be.

He beamed at her, not seeming to see her sorry state. "Catherine! We were all guessing where you went. Was it Jamaica? Nassau?"

Catherine tried to tell him, but failed. "I – I..."

Her father looked her up and down. "Let's get some people together, have a party at the club, tonight. Who shall we invite? Make a list..."

"No – Dad – I..."

Her father ignored her protest. "Have to run, I have a board meeting..." He held out a thick wad of cash. "Buy yourself a new dress..." He held out more money. "Will this be enough? Here, take some more..." He reached into a desk drawer and started slapping down bundles of bills.

Then he hurried from his office. "See you later..."

He left her standing alone. Not knowing what else to do, Catherine exited the office, hurrying down the corridor.

A male colleague paused to stare at her. "Cathy, you have a nice vacation? You look... um, you look wonderful..."

A woman smiled as she passed. "We missed you..."

Another woman was not so kind. "Well, Miss Chandler... now you've done it."

Catherine backed up against the paneled wall, caught between the urge to run back to her father's office, or hurry on into the reception area. Her father was nowhere in sight.

Suddenly, she was rushing up Third Avenue at night, trying to get a taxi. A cab pulled up but she couldn't open the door, because it was locked. She pounded on the window but the cab driver didn't seem to notice. He just sat there behind the wheel.

Suddenly someone tapped her on the shoulder. She turned to find the stocky man in the bomber jacket standing behind her. She wanted to scream, but her mouth would not obey her.

He smirked at her. "Not having much luck..."

She pounded furiously on the cab window. But it drove off, leaving her stranded.

"Need some help?" her assailant asked.

Terrified, Catherine started to run – straight into the arms of the punk. "You aren't having much luck," he commented, with a grim chuckle.

She managed to break away and ran – straight up Third Avenue, again. Her attackers came after her, closing in. Nobody on the street seemed to notice or care about her plight.

As the punk reached out to grab her from behind, Catherine ducked aside and dashed through the open doors of a restaurant. There was a party in progress.

The moment Catherine entered, everything stopped. The place was filled with beautiful people. All turned to gape at her, at her scars, at her rags – in icy silence. As if her unexpected presence somehow offended them all.

In the center of the room, standing next to a towering architectural model, was Tom Gunther. Beside him stood a beautiful woman. They were surrounded by admirers.

As Catherine tried to approach Tom, someone put out a foot and she fell to the floor, landing painfully. That was when the snickering started. At first very softly, then open laughter began to break out.

Catherine turned her head to look up at Tom, but he refused to acknowledge her presence. He was talking to the woman beside him.

"I feel sorry for her. But what can I do? Life goes on." He raised his glass of wine mockingly.

The woman smirked as she nodded, in agreement.

"She was an interesting girl," Tom continued, in the same conversational tone. "I thought she had a lot of promise. But she turned out to be a complete loser." He turned to the crowd of admirers behind him. "And you know how I feel about losers..."

The snickering laughter grew louder. Many of them raised their wine glasses in acknowledgement.

Catherine tried to speak, but failed. The laughter grew louder, until it became a chorus of derisive amusement. Glasses clinked and people chattered, but no-one made any attempt to reach down and help Catherine to her feet.

Money and social position. Fools and the conceited. Is this all I was? Is this all I was worth to them? Is this all I made myself worth?

She lay at their feet, looking around, feeling desperate and trapped. Then, at her wits end, she saw something beyond the crowd clustered around her.

Standing above her, framed in the upper tunnel opening, there appeared to be the figure of a tall, powerful man. He was standing with one hand braced against the tunnel wall, peering down into the restaurant, staring at Catherine, lying helpless on the expensive carpeting. His blue eyes were filled with feeling, and support. They shone with deep with empathy for her. It was Vincent.

As their eyes locked, Catherine felt his strength flowing into her. His unshakable belief in the power of her own ability to survive, to rise from the floor and not become a victim of circumstances beyond her control.

Catherine smiled, as Vincent nodded to her, and her whole body relaxed. *It was going to be all right... She was going to be all right...*



Catherine came out of the anesthetic slowly. Her face, once again, was heavily bandaged. Her surgeon, Dr. Sanderly, a handsome older man, was seated at the end of her bed.

Catherine turned her head on her pillow, reaching out in her mind for the one person she could rely upon. "Vincent..?"

A reassuring male hand patted hers. "Catherine, it's Dr. Sanderly... It's all over."

"I'm in the... hospital?" Catherine asked groggily. *Yes. No smells of candle smoke, stone, and old books here.*

"Yes, and you're going to be fine," the doctor told her firmly. "You must have been through something terrible, but whatever it was, is behind you. I think you'll be pleased. If there's anything you want to tell me, or talk about, anything I can do, just let me know." He rose from the bed before she could reply, and left the room.

Catherine didn't hear the soft hiss of the door closing behind him. She lay in her bed, enclosed by the almost overwhelming scents of a room filled with flowers, and jarred by the usual clatter of a busy hospital going about its business. This wasn't the tunnels. It just wasn't.

In her mind she could still hear what for ten days had been the constants in her life. The soft hiss of the small brazier in Vincent's chamber, the swift passage of the overhead trains, and the constant tapping on the pipes which had so often lulled her to sleep...

Her reply was forlorn. "You could read me the last chapter of Great Expectations..." she whispered, to the empty hospital room.



Hidden by the almost total darkness of a moonless night, Vincent climbed swiftly, on top of a convenient elevator car. He waited for it to ascend, grasping the cables, gazing up the shaft as he braced himself. He shook his mane from his eyes, feeling

people moving beneath his booted feet, as they entered the car. It began to ascend and he rode the car to the highest level.

In a matter of minutes the elevator stopped to disgorge its passengers on the top floor. Before it descended again, Vincent scrambled lightly off, dropping down to slip, unseen, into the darkness of the roof. He straightened into the broad shadow of the elevator housing, before walking the ridgeline. Then, he began to climb. He moved cautiously now, rising ever higher into the nightscape of the city, far below.

Finally, he reached his favored perch. He sat down, to inch forward until his legs dangled over the edge of a dizzying drop. But he didn't look down. Instead he looked out over a city he knew so well, by night.

A city that now contained Catherine. *Will I ever see you again?*

Vincent sighed, as he whispered her name. "Catherine... Be well..."

He stared into the darkness, and at the grand city lights that reflected in the tears staining his cheeks. Tears he neglected to wipe away...

Be well. Please, be well, my... my Catherine.

He hoped he was sitting close enough to heaven that the silent prayer might be heard.



A few months later, Catherine stood in the restaurant powder room, making repairs to her make-up. She faced the mirror without flinching because the expert repairs to her features had returned her to flawless beauty. *Well, almost...*

As she combed her hair, she turned her head to study the one scar that could not be repaired. *Yet*. It ran down the left side of her face, just in front of her ear. With her hair down, it was almost completely hidden. Standing back, she took one final look at herself, before exiting the powder room.

She moved through the elegant dining room of the Four Seasons restaurant, to the table where she and her father were having lunch. Several men turned their heads to watch her progress, admiring her chic appearance, and fresh style.

Her father stood, as she seated herself at their table. "You look terrific. I know it's early days yet, but I was just wondering, when do you think you'll be coming back to work?" He sat down again to study her.

Catherine took time picking up her discarded napkin and spreading it across her lap. She finally looked up at him.

"Dad, I'm not coming back. I've decided it's time for me to leave the firm."

Her father looked alarmed. "What are you talking about?" The prawn he'd just speared hovered halfway to his mouth.

He had been her constant companion for the last few months, hovering attentively. Catherine had convalesced at his brownstone on the Upper East Side. Her every need or want had been attended to, until she felt like screaming. She did not blame him - he had done his best in very difficult circumstances, and she could never hurt him. But the need to break away and make her own way in the world had grown stronger within her with every new day.

Whatever she did now, whatever path she chose to pursue, she knew she could do it. Vincent had given her that belief in herself. *Vincent*, her heart whispered.

Catherine raised her shoulders apologetically. "I was never very good at corporate law; in fact, I was a disaster."

"Nonsense!" her father declared roundly, a wave of the prawn on his fork underscoring his point.

"Dad, things have changed..."

"I don't see how. What's changed? I don't understand, Cathy."

"What happened to me, changed me," Catherine picked her words with care.

"You've got to accept that."

Charles reared back. "How can I? You refuse to tell anybody what happened those days you were missing. Where were you? Why won't you tell me?"

Catherine hedged, the lie she'd finally decided on, was one she was familiar with telling, by now.

"I'm not even sure myself, but that's not the point." She took a deep breath. "Once you become a victim, it changes you. You see things differently. You see all the people being hurt and the lives being destroyed. I've got the skills to help. I want to be more involved. Maybe I could do some community law for a while. Or even go to work in the D.A.'s office."

She was only musing, voicing her thoughts. She had no real idea, yet, had made no firm decision. Charles picked up on it, immediately.

Her father's laden fork clattered against the side of his plate. "Prosecuting criminals?! Catherine, that's ridiculous! You cannot be serious!"

Catherine grimaced. "Either help me or don't – but please don't call me ridiculous."

Charles thought he recognized the rigidity, in her spine. It was the same pose she'd struck when he'd declared Stephen Bass – or any other number of young men – bad choices for her. She was about to become stubborn. That had never boded well, in the past.

"Sorry, bad choice of words." Her father shrugged in apology. "You're just having some kind of reaction to what happened. Everyone goes through it. You just need more time."

"I know what I need. I know what I'm doing."

"I'm not so sure, anymore." He father studied her. "Maybe we should call Dr. Sanderly. I'm sure he'd give us a good referral to the right people."

Catherine shook her head. "Dad, I don't need any medical advice, and I don't need a therapist. I simply can't go back to the way it was. Pretend like nothing happened. I need your encouragement." Her voice was steady, and level. If this was a bout of pig-headedness, it wasn't following its usual pattern.

"If only Peter were here, right now, to talk some sense into you! Heaven knows why he's still away in Africa, saving humanity, when I need him. It's been months." Her father moved his food around his plate. "I don't understand. You were always going to work with me. You were *always* going to work at the firm. You were going to take over, one day. That wasn't a fantasy, was it?"

Catherine shook her head as she let her father down as gently as she could. “No, Dad, it wasn’t a fantasy. Things are different now, for me as well. I’m different. I need to do this. Just as Peter needs the space to get over the death of his wife. He’ll come back in his own time.”

She remembered Dr. Peter Alcott with great fondness. He’d been their family doctor for as long as she’d been alive, because Peter had delivered her on the night she was born.

“Very well.” Her father sighed heavily. “I will make some calls.” He picked up his fork, still loaded with the hapless prawn. “But I won’t hear of you going to work for the D.A. That’s out, right now. It’s far too dangerous for any young woman. There’s too much risk involved.”

He went back to his meal as if his pronouncement settled it. In a way, it did.

Maybe risks are what I’ve taken far too few of, Catherine mused. And there’s the chance to do good. Maybe even great good.



John Moreno, New York’s streetwise D.A., sat in his office conferring with one of his deputy D.A.s. Moreno’s desk was piled high with legal briefs and transcripts. His deputy paced the office, talking and laying out the case for employing a new recruit, all the while rolling a rubber-band around his hands; his way of coping with the stress of the job.

The atmosphere in the group of offices was harried. Through a glass window, Moreno could keep watch over the central work area of the District Attorney’s office – a beehive of glass partitioned cubicles, buzzing with deputy prosecutors and clerks, all moving at a frantic pace. Just outside this same window, Catherine Chandler sat waiting for her job interview, trying in vain not to look as nervous as she felt.

Moreno pulled off his reading glasses after thumbing through Catherine’s resume. “Her credentials are excellent. Radcliffe, Columbia Law School.” He looked up at the other man. “She really wants a job?”

His deputy, Joe Maxwell, shrugged. “She says so. Who knows?” he said, snidely. “She’s a rich guy’s daughter, looking for something ‘meaningful.’ You remember, the one who disappeared for ten days – Gunther’s girlfriend.”

Moreno surrendered. "Look, it's a pair of hands... it's a brain. We could use the help." *And she's not likely to stick around.*

His deputy nodded. "Where do you want to put her?"

"Out in the field – research, investigation, give her all the legwork. Throw everything at her. If she's any good, we'll find out."

"Right." Maxwell walked to the office door, opened it and leaned out. He grinned at Catherine. "Ms. Chandler – District Attorney Moreno will see you, now. Come on in."



As had become his habit through the ensuing months, Vincent swiftly and gracefully climbed the tower of a tall building. He made his way slowly ever upwards, higher and higher into the starry night, until he finally reached his destination. Once again he sat, perched high above it all, gazing out at the lights of the city surrounding him, the city he could never be a part of – the city of the woman he could never truly know.

She walked in daylight, while he must, by necessity, keep always to the darker places and the night. The thought gave him no comfort and little peace. He bowed his head and appeared utterly isolated, forlorn.

You're growing. Reaching. Testing limits, and pushing through. The work is hard. I can feel it. I can feel... something.

Impressions he'd thought would fade had done anything but. *At first, I thought it was just my imagination. Just... wishful thinking, that I could still... hold you, in my mind.*

He looked out at a neon cityscape. *But it isn't. I sense you, Catherine. I sense you... out there. Your life is... evolving.*

He blinked against the incandescent glare, and for a moment, the lights blurred, and blended into one another. It was a kaleidoscopic effect. One Mouse would have very much enjoyed.

Mouse. Mouse, who had helped him find the pathway to Catherine's basement. A place where dust motes danced in the lonely gloom. A place he dared not visit, for the heartbreak that awaited him there.

Vincent inhaled, deeply, and let his awareness of Catherine spin out. *You're growing. Transforming. Your life... changing.*

He dropped his head, saddened by a desperate kind of knowledge. *Your life is changing. But mine... is not. It never truly can. No matter how high I climb, I am still... an outcast.*



ACT THREE

Great Expectations...

"I loved her against reason, against promise, against peace, against hope, against happiness, against all discouragement that could be..."

Charles Dickens, Great Expectations

It was a sunny morning. The light filtered through the still bare trees and the city awakened to an inviting Saturday. This was the time for meeting friends, visiting parks and walking, and going out for a long lunch.

Catherine was doing none of those things. She'd taken a cab to a shabby loft in a rundown old building on the Lower East Side. The sign beside the door declared it to be ISAAC STUBBS' ACADEMY OF STREETFIGHTING.

She walked into the silent lobby and looked around. There was no-one in sight.

It had taken a lot of courage to even get this far. When she'd pressed the issue back at the D.A.'s office the previous morning, her new boss, Joe Maxwell, had grudgingly recommended Isaac Stubbs as the best fight trainer he knew.

"You wanna get some basic moves under your belt, Chandler. Some of the people we deal with ain't the greatest, y'know?"

Catherine was fairly sure the advice, well-meaning as it had sounded at the time, had been meant to scare her off.

"It's like this. You're an ivy league girl." Maxwell had leaned against the edge of her desk, spinning the same rubber-band around his hands. "No offense, but five'll get ya ten, you won't last the week." His dark eyes had assessed her closely. "Sorry, Radcliffe, but them's the facts. Look in the mirror, sometime. You're not cut out to be tough."

Catherine well knew what her mirror told her. And if that was bait, she wasn't rising to it.

He'd taken to calling her by the pet name, as a kind of derisive nod to her expensive schooling. She knew he'd also taken bets on her lasting no more than a week in the D.A.'s office.

After a month he'd lost that bet, which seemed to needle him, more than a little.

"I can take care of myself," Catherine had responded, raising her chin at him. "Despite all the work you're throwing my way."

"You gotta earn your keep around here, Radcliffe." Joe straightened. "Daddy's not keeping an eye on you from his big corner office. And you can't just show up at midday, after you've spent all morning shopping." He'd sauntered away, looking well pleased with himself.

"When have I ever done that to you?" Catherine had demanded of his retreating back. "I'm not that woman, anymore."

She was well aware someone had been talking to her new boss. Someone from her father's offices. Someone who'd known the old Catherine, and her terrible sense of timekeeping. That needled her sense of fair play, more than anything.

She'd made a mental note to see Stubbs as soon as she could. She now had even more to prove.

She looked around the lobby of Stubbs' academy. The floor was covered with mats. Various punching bags and practice dummies hung from the ceiling on chains.

She decided to call out. "Hello... Mr. Stubbs?"

Her only answer was her own echo. She tried again. "Anybody here?"

From behind her, a soft voice said, "We know you're here." A light flickered on.

Catherine jumped, spinning around to find a man standing inches behind her. He was a black man in his fifties, built like a fireplug, with arms of coiled steel and a loveable smile. "Always know what's comin' up behind you. This time it's good news." He held out his large hand. "I'm Isaac, Isaac Stubbs..."

"Catherine Chandler..." She accepted his hand.

"So... you wanna learn to take care of yourself." It was an easy assumption to make. There were only so many reasons to come here, after all.

Catherine nodded sharply. "That's right."

Isaac watched her closely. "Because something bad happened to you."

She nodded again.

"And you don't want anything like that to ever happen again."

Catherine's expression hardened. "Never."

He saw the fire in her expression, and the determination. "I believe you. But you still have to prove it to me."

"I will." They both understood that a promise had just been made, between them.

"Okay. Now, I don't teach none of that oriental stuff – no Kung Foo, no egg foo yung. I'm from New York City, and what I teach is New York City street-fighting, mean and dirty. Only philosophy around here is, do whatever you have to come out alive. You use what ya got. Let me see your shoe."

He reached out and Catherine balanced on one foot as she took off her shoe, handing it to him.

He whipped her shoe back across the head of a dummy, then drove the heel into its temple, spilling sawdust. "You can kill a man with a shoe. It's not fancy, but it works. If you got the stomach."

Catherine took back her shoe. "When do we start?" she asked with determination. Isaac laughed. "What do you think we're doin'?"



Catherine moved through the N.Y.P.D. Data Center. She stopped at a computer terminal where Edie, a stylish young black operator, was 'interfacing' with the master data bank.

Catherine watched her work for a moment. "Edie – do you have those addresses, yet?"

"Yeah, yeah, I got 'em," Edie replied, in an irritated tone. She held up a printout. "Here, take 'em."

"Thanks, I appreciate it." Catherine nodded.

Edie frowned at her. "You should appreciate it. I'm doin' all your work."

"Sorry, but the D.A.'s really got me running. They're testing me –"

"Who you kidding?!" Edie flared. "I know the way you uptown girls operate. You swing in here, you shed a few tears for humanity, and then you go shopping."

Catherine looked stunned. It was painfully close to what Joe Maxwell had said to her. Word had obviously spread. She tried to deny the rumors.

"That's not true."

"It's not, huh?" Edie read Catherine's security pass. "Catherine Chandler... let's check you out..."

"Most people call me Cathy."

Edie ignored her as she started punching computer keys. Catherine's name and vital statistics flashed up on the computer monitor. Edie leaned forward to read them. Next, there was a summary of a police report under the heading, VICTIM –

AGGRAVATED ASSAULT. And then, the screen displayed a gruesome, full face photo of Catherine, and her scars. One taken before surgery.

“Oh God... I’m sorry, Cathy...” Edie stared at the screen in stunned disbelief.

Catherine shook her head, gracious in her acceptance of the apology. “Don’t be...” She smiled. “It’s an old picture.”

She picked up the paperwork she’d requested and moved away towards the front door. Edie stared after her, her face filled with frowning curiosity.

Catherine grabbed her things and hit the elevator, the information Edie had given her tucked inside her briefcase. *Places to go. People to see. Witnesses to interview. If I’m lucky, a lead.* She took the elevator down, already planning the rest of her day, mentally. If this one was like the others had been, she’d stay late, and be making phone calls well past what she used to consider “dinnertime.”

She exited the building and moved quickly down the street, knowing her boss would be watching for her return. She was determined not to be late in getting back to her desk. It would only make her stay there that much later, if she was.

She crossed over a side street and approached a heavy metal grate, set in the sidewalk. Tendrils of steam floated on the cool air. She hesitated for a moment, looking down into it, and smiled. Then she walked over it and hurried on.



Vincent sat alone, in a corner of his chamber, illuminated by the light of a single candle. Everything else was hidden within shadows and gloom. He looked tormented as he stared into the darkness. Against the blackness, her image floated before him.

He glanced at his bed. He could not sleep there without sensing her, feeling what she was feeling. Her scent lingered, trapped in the bank of pillows he laid his head upon each night. If he turned his head and burrowed deep, he could still find her, her soft femininity comforting him, in the long reaches of the night. He knew that the night would find him lying awake, neither with her nor apart from her, unable to find the rest his body craved.

Stop it. I must. Her world... it is apart from mine.

After a long contemplation of what could never be, he looked down at the book in his hands. It was Great Expectations. The book he’d been reading to Catherine

before she went back Above. He glanced at the scrap of paper which still held their place. They hadn't finished the last chapter.

We didn't finish it. I asked her... what did I ask...? Ah. 'Do you remember how it ends?'

I don't think she ever told me, one way or the other...



Catherine sat hunched at her desk, her hand travelling furiously back and forth across the yellow legal pad, as she wrote copious notes. The deadline for the breakdown of the Tidwell case was looming, and she determined not to be late in handing it in. Even if she worked through the night.

She was unaware that she was the last one left in the bull-pen. All the rest of the deputy prosecutors and clerks had long since gone home. Bent over her work, she didn't see or hear her boss approach.

Joe stood beside her desk for some time, watching her work, unobserved. *Admit it, Maxwell. You rode her hard. Threw the kitchen sink at her, like Moreno asked. And maybe... misjudged her? There's real grit here that I never saw those first few days...*

Catherine, oblivious to his regard, copied something from a legal tome onto the pad.

Finally, Joe shrugged his shoulders, then reached up to further loosen his tie. "This can wait until Monday, you know."

She glanced his way. "Better now. While I still have a train of thought I can claim as 'reasonable.'" She went right back to the law book.

"Give yourself a break, Radcliffe, and go home. Take the weekend off." He hitched one hip onto the corner of her desk. "You work yourself too hard."

Catherine looked up at him, and set down her pen. "I thought that was your job," she countered, with a ghost of a smile.

"Okay, I'll admit it was tough on you," Joe confessed frankly. "I wasn't convinced you were up to it. But I'm allowed to change my mind."

Her smile couldn't fade. She had the look of someone who'd just proven a theory.

"Given evidence to the contrary," Joe added, knowing the compliment was past due. He stared at her. "By the way, great work on the Burns case. I'd never thought of it from that point of view. Moreno noticed. I think he was actually... pleased."

"You're welcome, Joe." Catherine closed the book and piled up her work, before pushing back her chair. She stood, trying to stretch her tired and cramped muscles. "Maybe I've learned a trick or two from you." One honest compliment deserved another.



"Go home." Joe straightened. "Have a lie-in, go see ya boyfriend, take a walk in the park. Do whatever you need to do to be sharp and ready for work on Monday." His dark eyes assessed her closely. "You know how much I detest slackers and lightweights."

"Yes, Joe." Catherine grinned at him, as she collected her coat and handbag. "I won't let you down."

Yeah. I kinda get that feelin'...

She hurried towards the doors to the bull-pen before he changed his mind. She pushed through them and they slapped shut, behind her.

Joe watched her hazy image retreat, through the opaque blocks of glass.

"Radcliffe..." Joe sighed, running a hand up and around the back of his neck. "God help me, I must be getting old..." He shook his head as he sauntered back to his office. He still had a ton of work to complete before he could go home.



Catherine hurried home to her apartment. The work had often seemed endless and frustrating, but her months at the D.A.'s office had taught her much. She had never before thought of her work as being worthwhile and useful.

After consuming leftovers from takeout, she showered and changed into her night clothes. She sat at her dressing table, her hair pulled back and her face washed clean. She stared into the mirror, but didn't truly see her own reflection. Seeing with her inner eye, she looked very far away. *Where are you, right now. Are you happy? Are you well?*

She was doing as she often did, almost reflexively wondering about Vincent.

I did well on a case. I'm learning, and I'm getting better. The work is endless, but... my boss paid me a compliment, today. I know it sounds like such a small thing. But it isn't. You know it isn't...

She blinked, and her reflection blinked back at her.

You'd understand. I know you would.

How she longed to share her small triumphs and successes with the one person who would truly understand how far she'd come in such a short time. She knew it was impossible, and yet...

She turned her head to study the scar that ran down in front of her left ear. She raised one finger to trace it. Her doctors had said that the infection-prone mark was too deep to remove, for the time being. Now, it seemed almost like a familiar companion. It served as a reminder of all she had gained, and lost.

She dropped her hand and sighed. Her greatest loss of all still lay across her heart like an open wound. She ached to see him again, knowing it was impossible. He had to stay where he was safe. And she... she had to stay where she belonged. Anything else was a risk to him. And that, she would never allow.

I miss you. She allowed herself to think it. After all, it was only the truth, and this version of Catherine Chandler was growing fierce in her insistence on facing that. *I miss you. I'm learning. I'm trying. Some days... I'm not as sure as I'd like to be. I guess I'm still a work in progress. But I do miss you. That, I know.*

The exhaustion of the long day – or maybe it was something else- caught up with her.

"Vincent... Be well," she whispered brokenly.



Sitting in his chamber, Vincent looked up sharply. Softly spoken words of benediction echoed through the darkness. He'd heard and felt Catherine's wish for him. His back straightened, and he came alive.

Catherine. My Catherine. You be well. Please, you be well.

He knew she couldn't hear him. That the thought was an all but futile one.

His hand closed firmly on the book he held. There was one chapter still left to read.

What I wouldn't give... He sighed, knowing the thought was useless. There was no price he would pay that would make him able to walk in her world.



Catherine watched Isaac warily as they moved about the loft. In the short time she'd been attending her sessions, she had learned much. She waited for his next move, which could come from nowhere. She balanced on the balls of her feet, and watched.

Isaac moved to a dangling dummy. "You do whatever you have to do. You kick, you bite and you gouge. You want to discourage a man? Bite his ear off, or his nose. Use what you got."

He moved to a table, picking up various articles as he demonstrated. "If you don't have a knife, use a bottle, or a glass. A rolled-up magazine, anything." He moved towards her. "Go ahead! What you gonna do? Huh? What you gonna do?" He crouched menacingly, watching her movements closely.

Catherine dashed around to the opposite side of the table, using it as a barrier between them. Then, as Isaac leapt over the table, Catherine tipped it on its side, momentarily tripping him.

"Gotcha!" she declared excitedly.

"All right!" Isaac approved, getting to his feet. In a flash he had her by the throat, dumping her on the floor. "But don't be standing around patting yourself on the back. Finish the job or pump foot out of there..."

"You got a point there, Isaac." She looked up at him, disappointed in herself.

Isaac leaned down to help her up. "Nice move, though."

"Thanks." Catherine smiled, pleased with his praise. She watched him closely, unsure if the lesson was finally over.



Vincent sat in his father's book-lined chamber, worrying the book he held between his hands. He had come seeking advice, knowing he wouldn't gain the approval he sought.

Seated at his desk, Father frowned at him. "She's in her world, now."

"And I'm in mine." Vincent grimaced at the obvious.

"And now, you must forget her."

"No! I won't forget her!" Vincent declared angrily.

Father sat forward in his chair, his expression disapproving. "Every time you go Above, you risk our world being taken from us. One glimpse of you and they'll stop at nothing to find you - and destroy all of us."

"I would never endanger the rest."

"Vincent, nothing I've taught you could prepare you for the world 'up there' – the cruelty, the inhumanity, all the petty outrages."

Vincent sighed heavily. "That is, perhaps, the world. Or part of it. But none of that is Catherine..."

"She can only bring you unhappiness."

Vincent rose to pace the chamber. "Then I'll be unhappy! But I can't forget her. We're still connected."

"Vincent..." Father shook his head sadly.

Vincent turned back to stare at him. "She's a part of me. I can feel what she's feeling. I know what she's thinking – when she's frightened, when she's happy or sad." His huge hand cut the air, for emphasis.

Father tried again to make his son understand the dangers. "Vincent, your senses – your empathic powers... are extraordinary. It's your gift. And these powers have been ignited by the concern, the love you feel. But don't let your act of kindness... destroy you..."

Vincent stopped to stare at the book in his hand, feeling just as caught as the pages were, between the two covers. "Maybe I have no choice."



Catherine walked slowly down Madison Avenue in the early evening. The night was lovely, and she'd just enjoyed a delightful dinner with her father. He had telephoned to complain he hadn't seen anything of her lately. They had talked of many things, but Catherine had been careful not to share with him the grimmer aspects of her work for the D.A. She knew it would only worry him.

She was aware he didn't understand the determined woman his beautiful daughter had become. To his chagrin, she'd turned down his offer to share a cab, saying she preferred to walk. She'd kissed his cheek and left him standing on the sidewalk, looking after her in troubled confusion. *Who wanted to walk the city streets at night, by choice?*

As she waited to cross the street, she sensed a presence, behind her. She turned to look around, feeling as if someone was watching her. But no-one was there. She frowned at the odd sensation, before shrugging and moving across the street.

Maybe Isaac's training has me being a touch paranoid, she thought, picking up her pace as she stayed in well-lit areas. *Or maybe I've just got a guardian angel.* The latter thought made her smile, and she reached her apartment building before long.

Larry, the night doorman, leaned to open the door for her, as she walked up the front steps. "No cab, Miss Chandler?" he asked, noting her soft smile and the color in her cheeks.

"I didn't need one. It's a beautiful night, don't you think? Great for walking." She headed toward the elevators.

"Sure, Miss Chandler, sure," Larry agreed, just for the sake of doing so. "Maybe a little cold, though." He remembered Tony, the desk clerk, telling him the incredible story about a very different Catherine Chandler coming into the building several months ago. One with her face wrapped in a scarf.

But her transformation had been more than physical. Charles Chandler wasn't the only one who had noticed the changes in Catherine. The old Cathy Chandler often didn't leave for her work until after eleven, and she was rarely in before midnight.

She'd often rolled up in a taxi, or even a limo, if that fella Tom Gunther had taken her out. And aside from "Hello" and "Good-bye," she'd rarely made small talk with the ordinary people who looked after the building she'd lived in for years.

"You stay buttoned up, then," Catherine gave Larry a winning smile. Her hair swung as she turned her head, and for a moment, he caught sight of the snaking mark that sat just before her ear. If it bothered her that it was still there, she gave no hint of it.

"Can't have you catching cold," she added, as the elevator doors slid open. She'd always been a polite, pleasant tenant, and one who tipped well. But there was a friendliness, an openness to her now, that hadn't been there before her attack.

"I'll take care. You, too," he said, as the doors began to close over her.

He saw her nod in agreement, before the elevator swallowed her whole, and took her up to her apartment.

Nice lady, he thought, aware that it wasn't something he'd ever thought about her, before.



Catherine walked to Edie's computer terminal. She pulled up a chair and sat down beside her.

Edie looked up. "What are you doin' here at six a.m.? You should be just gittin' home from the discos."

Catherine smiled. "Sorry to disappoint you, Edie. I can't remember the last time I was in a disco."

Edie grimaced. "Tell me about it." She patted her terminal. "You know Biff here is the longest relationship I've had since sixth grade. Biff understands me."

Catherine chuckled. "It could be the way of the future. Listen, I need some help. It's a little tricky. A woman was attacked by mistake – by three men. I want to find out if these men ever went after their intended victim, the woman they were out to get."

Edie stared at her. "You got the date of the mistaken attack?"

"Last April 12th..." Catherine replied, without hesitation.

Edie stared at her, knowing this was something special, something personal.

"Aggravated Assault?"

Catherine nodded. "Aggravated Assault..."

Edie set to work on her keyboard. "I'll punch in for a list of all aggravated assaults against a woman, by three men, after April 12."

A long list of pending cases started to appear on the screen – well over a hundred.

"A lotta guys hittin' on a lotta women out there..." Edie grimaced. She turned back to Catherine. "Got anything that could narrow it down. The make of a car. The intended victim's name..."

"Some kind of van. I don't know..." Catherine stiffened. She remembered when the stocky man and the tattooed punk had her pinned down. *'Hey Carol, you gotta remember to keep your mouth shut from now on...'*

She sensed Edie's close gaze as she struggled with the memory. "Try Carol..." she said shakily.

Edie nodded and punched in the additional data. The computer searched the list of cases and locates three cases of aggravated assault with victims named Carol.

"Okay, here are the 'Carols'..." Edie punched some keys. "Now I'll dig into the files..."

The statistics of the first case appeared on the screen. Catherine leaned closer. "No, this Carol's 63. It's got to be a woman in her 20's or 30's..."

"Okay..." Edie brought up the next case file. The vital statistics appear -- and then a picture of the victim: a young black woman with a swollen jaw...

"Nope..." Catherine shook her head. "Mmm mm, let's try the next..."

The statistics of the next case appeared: VICTIM - AGGRAVATED ASSAULT: CAROL STABLER. "Close – right age, right location."

Then Carol Stabler's picture appeared on the screen. She'd been badly beaten about the face. Despite her bruises and lacerations the resemblance to Catherine was striking.

"She could be your sister." Edie looked from the picture on the screen to Catherine. Catherine sat up, suddenly energized. "This could be it. Let's pull the file."



It was evening by the time Catherine walked into the rundown Chelsea apartment house. She climbed the stairs and found Carol Stabler's shabby apartment at the end of long, musty hallway. She knocked on the door and waited. After several seconds she knocked again, harder.

A woman's voice called through the door. "Who is it?"

"Carol...?" Catherine questioned.

"What do you want?" the woman demanded sharply.

"My name's Catherine Chandler. I'd like to talk to you."

After a long hesitation, the door partially opened, still chain locked. Two frightened eyes stared out at Catherine. Through the space in the door she could see the young woman's face. She strongly resembled Catherine.

Carol, apparently, had not been slashed, but one side of her face seemed dead, as if she'd suffered nerve damage from her beating. "What's this about? You a cop?"

Catherine shook her head. "I'm with the District Attorney's office." She handed Carol a card, through the gap in the door.

"I told you people to leave me alone!" The other woman flared. "You caused me enough trouble."

"This isn't official business."

"Whatever it is, I got nothin' to say. You can put me in jail, I don't care."

Catherine drew a deep breath. "Please... Can I come in?"

"No!"

"Carol, you're not the only one they hurt."

Carol glared at her. "What are you talkin' about?"

"They got you and me mixed up." Catherine pulled back her hair, showing the scar along the side of her face. She waved her hand at the damage. "Carol, I think this was meant for you."

Carol stood in the doorway, trembling and speechless. Then she shook her head as she started to cry. "Go away."

She closed the door and locked it. Catherine could hear her sobbing on the other side. "If you want to talk to somebody who knows how you feel – call me. My home number's on the back of the card."

Catherine stood there at the door, hearing the other woman weep, and fighting back her own tears.



Isaac had Catherine in a hold from behind. "Can't do nothin', can you?"

Catherine kicked him, determined to prove him wrong.

"That's good. You better bite me though, you better do somethin'."

"Really!" Catherine panted, searching for new leverage.

She turned on him and they began to grapple with each other – kicking and clawing their way over the mats, and careening off the walls. Isaac was wearing heavy pads and headgear. His objective was to subdue Catherine.

She was free to use all available means to stop him from doing so. She kicked and punched, using an assortment of impromptu weapons to prevent Isaac from getting a death grip on her. Isaac kept coming at her, taunting her, pushing her to her limits and then beyond – to the point where it became pure animal survival.

She swept his legs out from under him and reached for a bat, ready to use it as the weapon it now was. Rather than just let him lay, she advanced on him like the aggressor she now was.

"All right! That's it!" Isaac surrendered, lying on the floor with Catherine standing over him, a baseball bat held high, ready to do serious damage to him. He held up an arm to fend her off.

She stopped with the bat held high over one shoulder. She stood there, panting, with a startled look, shocked that she was capable of going that far over the edge, with such ferocity.

Isaac grinned at her. “Was that you? Did you do that? Uh, is that you?”

“Yeah!” Catherine gasped for breath. And then she started to laugh in exhilaration.

“Yeah, I guess it is!”



Catherine climbed out of the limo in front of her apartment building. Tom Gunther followed close behind her.

He reached to take her arm as she began to walk away from him. “I’ll walk you up.”

“No, that’s all right.” He’d already taken too much of her time, insisting on dinner and a catch-up, refusing to take no for an answer. She had work waiting for her, briefs to complete.

Tom’s grip tightened. “No, no, no. I’ll walk you up.”

Catherine knew the offer was code for something else. Something he wanted from her, despite her constant denials. She didn’t feel like dealing with it, right now. She turned to him.

“You haven’t hear anything I’ve said tonight.”

Tom stared at her. “What? That your work’s important to you? I can understand that. My work’s important to me. That doesn’t mean we can’t see each other.” He was playing to what he saw as her mysterious side, her womanly contrariness. All he had to do was talk her around to his point of view. It had always worked, in the past.

“Tom, things change.” She sighed.

“I think you’re carrying this new seriousness a little too far,” he complained. If he could make the time for her, why couldn’t she do the same? “We could sleep late,

order breakfast, and eat it out on your terrace. We could make a day of it if we wanted to.”

Catherine smiled sadly. “You miss the old Cathy.” The one who always did as he asked.

Tom took her arm. “Listen, we’re not going to just be friends. That won’t work, it’s not enough. I want more than that and you know it.”

“It’ll have to be enough. I still have work to do, tonight. And I’m up early tomorrow. I have a whole day in court.”

“Catherine, knock it off,” he flared at her. “You’re working too hard. Let’s go to Paris this weekend – on the Concord. You’ve always said you want to go back. Well, now we can.”

He still wasn’t listening to her. She had no spare time to take a trip anywhere, let alone Paris. That was the old Catherine.

“Good night, Tom.” She kissed him quickly, hoping he’d take the hint that their night was now over.

He tried to hang onto her. “I’m not going to let you slip away. I won’t let that happen.”

Why does that sound like a threat, when you say it? she thought. His tone reminded her of one of the last things he’d said her before she’d left him at his party, back in April: *‘Then show better judgement!’*

You’re right, Tom. I should. I should show better judgement. But you’re not going to like it, when I do. And I don’t care.

He leaned down and kissed her back. Her body stiffened. They both felt it.

“Good *night*, Tom.” She backed away. They both knew she’d just said “good-bye” to him, and not “good night.” And that the good-bye wasn’t just of the temporary variety.

She turned and headed towards the building entrance, not looking back to see if he followed. Tom Gunther had just been dismissed. Thoroughly. And in a way that only a former debutante could do.

He stood watching her for a brief time, then grimaced his displeasure. He turned on his heel and climbed back into the limo. He sat staring out the window as it pulled away.

Just as the doorman opened the door for Catherine, she suddenly stopped and turned to look around. She felt a strange but familiar presence nearby, but nothing moved. She shook the feeling off and thanked Larry with a nod and a smile, as she walked into the building.



In the park across the street, Vincent moved carefully into an area of dense foliage. Hidden among the leaves, he watched Catherine and Tom, his heart in his throat. He saw them kiss and then part, but he could not hear what they said to each other. But he could see the man she was with did not look happy, as he strode back to the limo and got in, slamming the door behind him. That fact alone spurred him on.

He turned and crept away. Leaving the park, he moved into a low, narrow passageway. At the end of the passage was a small steel door. Vincent put his shoulder to the door and shoved it open. He scrambled through into a larger space strung with cables and wires. He looked up. Above him an elevator car came hurtling down the 20-story shaft – stopping four feet from Vincent’s head.

Vincent climbed quickly up a cable to a spot above the elevator car. As the car began to rise, Vincent leapt onto its roof and ascended with it. He looked upwards as the car took him to the roof.

He emerged from the elevator shed. The lights of Manhattan twinkled below. He walked along the parapet, at the edge of the roof. Then, reaching a spot, he leapt over the edge, disappearing into the darkness.



Catherine walked into her bedroom, dressed for bed in a nightgown and silk dressing gown. She was carrying a large leather hand bag full of legal briefs. She sat on the bed, opened the bag, and picked out a trial transcript. Knowing there were hours of work ahead of her, she pulled out a pencil to make notes, and began to read.

In the next moment, she heard a strange sound. A soft 'clunk' as if something had fallen. She looked up around the room, trying to identify it – then, after a few moments of silence, returned to her reading. Then she heard the sound again – a creaking just outside the bedroom doors that led to her balcony.

She turned and leaned from the bed, reaching into the nightstand for the gun she always kept there. Slipping silently from the bed, she moved cautiously across the room towards the closed glass doors. She hadn't closed the drapes, and reflections of the city outside gleamed through the panes.

Just as she reached the doors, she thought she saw a shadow moving outside. She caught her breath, raising the gun, as she opened the right-hand door with her free hand, and moved cautiously out onto the balcony.

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the darkness. She huffed a sigh, knowing she should have turned the bedroom lights off. She was back-lit and open to attack. Isaac wouldn't be happy with her lack of cautious preparation.

In the next instant the door hit unexpectedly against something heavy lying on the tiles. Clutching her gun, she leaned down to pick it up. It was an old book – it was Great Expectations.

She stared at the heavy, leather-bound book in her small hands, trying to balance both it and her gun. *What is a book doing here? It makes no sense, at all...*

'You could read me the last chapter...' Disbelieving realization dawned.

She looked up towards the fire escape at the far end of her balcony. Among the many shadows that hung there, was a larger, more discernible one. And a pair of deep-set eyes that reflected the city lights, even as they watched her every movement with great caution.

"Vincent...!"

She tossed the book and the gun onto her outside table as she passed it, rushing to embrace him. The silky robe she wore billowed out behind her as she threw her arms around his neck with whole-hearted delight.

"It's really you...!" She felt like weeping for joy.

Vincent held her close. "I didn't mean to frighten you. I'm sorry..."

"No, no, I'm so happy to see you..." She pulled back to look up at him, keeping her hands on his upper arms.

Vincent stared at her as if he'd never seen her before. "Your face..." No view of her had been this close, or this clear. Not since the day he'd released her to return to her world, from his.

Catherine moved awkwardly. "They fixed it."

"Yes," Vincent breathed, in wonder.

She leaned back and took his hands in hers. "Come inside." She pulled at him gently.

He couldn't. He knew he couldn't. "No, I have to go, now." Vincent held back from her, half-turning away.

"No, not yet." She tried to detain him.

"I shouldn't have come here," Vincent said, vehemently. *Fool*, he castigated himself, internally.

Catherine was determined. "I'm glad you did. Come here, sit down." She drew him down to sit beside her on the last step of the fire escape.

He looked back at her. "I wanted to see you. There are so many things I wanted to tell you..."

Catherine moved closer to him. "Me too. I have so many things I wanted to tell you." The months between them seemed to both coalesce, and fall away.

"I know." His breath left him in a painful rush.

Catherine looked away. "It's been hard, Vincent."

"Yes." Vincent nodded.

"I'm learning to be strong."

He couldn't help but give a small smile, at that. He'd felt it the minute she'd had Isaac Stubbs on his back, the sensation of victory coursing through her. It had been a wild, heady thing. One he'd enjoyed almost as much as she had.

"I know – Catherine. I feel the things you're feeling, when you do."

She frowned at him, unsure. "How do you mean?"

"Just know it's true – and that your pain is my pain. Sometimes almost as if we're one."

She looked at him in wonder.

Vincent continued, painfully. "I came here because... because I wanted to see that you were well — and because I wanted to see you... one last time."

"I'll never see you again?" Catherine wanted to cry.

Vincent stared into the darkness beyond the balcony wall. "I've seen your world. There's no place for me in it. I know what I am. Your world is filled with frightened people. And I remind them of what they're most afraid of..."

Catherine nodded slowly. "Their own ignorance..."

"Their aloneness," he replied softly.

After a long moment of silence, Catherine nodded. "Yes."

"So... now I have to begin to forget."

"Forget me?" She sounded stricken, at the thought.

"No... I'll never forget you..." He stared at her. "The man who brought you home, tonight..." He picked his words with care. "Your friend."

Catherine hesitated, then asked, "Tom?"

Vincent watched her closely. "Do you love him?"

Had he been watching her? How else did he know about Tom? Rather than feeling intrusive the idea gave her a renewed sense of comfort. "No – I don't love him..."

How could I?

"I can't forget you. But... I have to forget the dream of being a part of you." Vincent sighed. "Find someone to be part of, Catherine. Someone to be a part of... Be happy..." He rose slowly to his feet. "Good-bye..." He turned to go before he said more than he intended.

Catherine forestalled him, reached to clutch at his clothing. "Wait... Not yet..." The lawyer in her struck a bargain. "There's still time, it's still dark... Don't leave..."

He stopped moving and looked down at her, his eyes shining with tears. Almost of its own volition his hand moved to take hers in a firm grip. Catherine looked at the

physical connection and sighed with relief. Her own eyes were filled with tears of gratitude.

"There's still time," she insisted. Time enough. Time to show you how often I've been thinking of you. How much I've been... missing you.

"Sometimes... there's eternity in an hour," she urged.

An hour. Eternity in an hour. What I wouldn't give to have either one, with you. The luxury of a stolen hour felt like forever, even though he knew it wasn't.

"Then we'll steal an hour. Or two..." he replied, settling himself down on her fire escape.



As night began to fade and the sky turned purple, two figures huddled in the shelter of the balcony wall. Catherine continued to read the final chapter of Great Expectations in the cold dawn air.

"... And as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first left the forge, so the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed me, I saw no shadow of another parting from her..."



ACT FOUR

Wherever You Go...

*“Life, wherever it leads, will always be the same...
It begs for the best of you...”*

Scott Hastie

Late on the following morning, Catherine entered the central work area of the District Attorney’s office. As she moved towards her desk, she was intercepted by a clerk.

“Somebody’s waiting for you.” Larry jerked his head in the direction of Catherine’s cubicle.

Catherine frowned. “Who?”

The clerk shrugged. “Wouldn’t give her name.” He hurried on his way.

Catherine approached her cubicle and saw Carol Stabler through the glass partition.

Catherine stepped into the closed area. Carol looked haggard and uneasy. She was standing nervously beside the desk.

“Carol... Hi, I didn’t expect to see you here.” Catherine slung her bag onto the back of her chair, as Carol sat down.

The other woman moved awkwardly. “Yeah, well I didn’t expect to be here either. I couldn’t stop thinking about what they did to you. I couldn’t sleep. I think maybe... I think maybe I can help.”

Catherine sat at her desk. “You want to tell me what happened?”

Carol plucked nervously at the sleeve of her baggy white sweater. “I was working for this escort service. It’s called Mayfair. They had a pretty good clientele. You know, businessmen from out of town...”

Catherine nodded. “And you’d go out with them?”

Carol shrugged. “Yeah, to dinner or a play. Whatever happened after that is between you and him.”

Catherine could see she was uncomfortable. “Right...,” she said, slowly, waiting for more information.

Carol smoothed the loose sleeve of her sweater. "But Mayfair is run by this guy, Marty Belmont, a real bad character. He started using the service to shake down the businessmen. Sometimes the girls would carry tape recorders... sometimes he'd get 'em on film..."

"So it was blackmail, extortion..."

Carol nodded nervously. "That's what it was."

"And... how did you get into trouble?"

Carol shook her head. "They wanted me to set this guy up. I wouldn't go for it. He was a sweet guy. I wouldn't play along. Belmont got it into his head that I was going to spill everything to the cops. So he sent his men to get me, make me see sense. I know he's still worried... I'm just trying to get enough money to split New York."

"So the men who attacked you, and me – they were Belmont's men?"

"Had to be."

"Would you be willing to testify against them, with me?"

Carol grimaced. "Yeah, I'll testify."

"Good." Catherine removed her coat and hung it on the back of her chair. "Let's go through the mug shots. We'll see if we can pool what we remember and pick out the guys who attacked us."



Catherine and Carol sat together going through pages of black and white mug shots. Finally Carol leaned over one, and pointed to the man in the picture. He was a dark wiry man in his late thirties.

"That's Belmont. He's a real sleaze..."

"All right. Known associates of Martin Belmont. Let's start looking for the stocky guy who attacked me." Catherine picked up another pile of mug shots. "He wasn't bald..." She began to discard some.

Carol leaned closer. "He had sort of short, fine hair."

Catherine picked up some of the mug shots and sorted through them. Suddenly the stocky man's face appeared. She caught her breath. "That's him!" She stared at the

man who had cut her face and left her for dead in the park. A shiver passed through her, thinking of how close to death she'd come.

Carol tapped the picture. "Yeah, it is. That's him..."

Catherine reached to pick up her telephone receiver and dialed a number. Carol stood up and moved into the reception area, looking pensive. Catherine watched her through the glass partition, hoping the younger woman had not changed her mind about testifying.

Her phone-call was answered. "I want to set wheels in motion for an arrest and search warrant to be issued tomorrow morning." She listened to the person on the other end of the line. "Martin Belmont – Mayfair Escort Service, 232 West 52nd. Fraud, extortion, aggravated assault – for starters..." She listened again. "I've got the affidavit of a witness. Thanks, Joel." She hung up.

She got to her feet and pulled her coat on. She walked out to Carol in the reception area. "It's all set. You're not going back to your apartment."

"I'm not?" Carol looked confused. "Where am I going?"

Catherine handed her a slip of paper. "A friend of mine is renovating a brownstone in the Village. There's not much in it, but it'll be a lot safer. Someone'll meet you with a key."

"What about all my stuff?"

"We'll pick up your things, tomorrow. I'll bring whatever you need for tonight."

Carol sighed. "Okay."

Catherine indicated the male clerk hovering nearby. "Larry'll give you a ride over. Call me as soon as you get there."

"I guess there's no turning back, huh?"

Catherine frowned. "Carol, you're sure you understand what the risks are? Don't do it for me. Don't do anything that doesn't feel right."

Carol squared her shoulders. "I'm doing it for me. I can't live like this anymore. It's the first time I've felt good about myself in a long time."

"Okay." Catherine embraced her and watched as the clerk escorted Carol to the elevator.

As Carol and Larry moved through the lobby of the Justice Building towards the entrance, a tall man stood casually around the news-stand, trying to blend in with

the crowd. His arms and hands were heavily tattooed. The moment Carol passed him, he tossed away his heavy metal magazine, and followed Carol and her escort out of the building.



It was late afternoon by the time Catherine made it to the Village. She climbed out of a cab, her arms full of groceries. She hurried up the front steps of the townhouse, which was indeed under renovation. She rang the bell, but received no answer. Balancing a bag of groceries in one arm, she used her key to unlock the door.

Catherine entered the dark, empty townhouse. Upstairs, she could hear the sound of the television, on high volume.

"Carol?" she called out.

Everything was very still – it didn't feel right. She put aside her bag of groceries on the bottom step and began to climb the stairs.

"Carol? Carol?"

She reached the second floor landing and moved toward the bedroom, where she could hear the television playing. She entered the room cautiously. Carol Stabler's body was sprawled on the floor. Catherine hurried to kneel beside her. She leaned over to touch Carol's cooling cheek.

Behind her, the stocky man who'd attacked her after Tom's party, walked into the room, flicking a switchblade open and shut.

"Don't bother. She's dead," he said grimly.

Another man entered the bedroom behind him. He was well dressed in a suit and tie. Marty Belmont looked like he was attending a meeting, not a killing.

'Find a weapon. Now!' She could all but hear Isaac Stubbs telling her she couldn't afford to stay still and stare. Not now.

Catherine looked around, trying to gauge the odds of her survival.

"She's dead, and so are you," Belmont sneered.

As they moved on her, Catherine, still in a crouch, grabbed the base of a pole lamp, then charged both of them with it, and knocked them over. She dived between them and ran out the bedroom door.



Vincent, sitting in Father's chamber and playing chess with him, checked his next move. Suddenly, his whole body stiffened. A deep sense of fear and alarm rushed through him, on wings of fire. He could feel everything Catherine was experiencing in the same moment, and he knew she was in grave danger. But could he make it in time to save her?

Move! Now!

He sprang from his chair, snatching up his cloak and pulling it on before Father could frame a question. The chessmen went tumbling across the board and Jacob was left staring after him in horrified confusion, unable to process just what had happened.



Catherine dashed down the stairs with the stocky guy and Belmont in close pursuit. The tattooed punk and another man appeared at the bottom of the staircase, making their way up. They both looked up and saw her.

"Get her!" the punk shouted, charging up the steps two at a time.



Vincent ran headlong down a tunnel with incredible speed. He was running on pure instinct, knowing Catherine needed him desperately. Nothing and no-one was going to stand in the way of him reaching her.



Hemmed in both above and below her, Catherine turned and fled into an empty room on the second floor. She locked the solid wood door, hoping it would hold.

She knew her attackers had her trapped, cut off from the stairs. She could hear their voices and footsteps in the hallway just outside the door, as they searched for her.

All the weeks of Isaac's intensive training kicked in. She assessed her options without thinking, knowing she was fighting for her life. She vowed she would not go quietly. She scanned the room for a weapon, picking up a heavy hanging plate only to put it down.

Suddenly Vincent's voice echoed in her mind. *'You have the strength Catherine – you do. I know you...'*

I will make you proud of me, Catherine replied silently. She longed for his help, but she knew he could not get to her. She was on her own, but armed with his conviction and faith in her new-found abilities to cope. The men outside would pay dearly for what they had done to her, and Carol.

"Where'd she go?" she heard a man's harsh voice demand.

"Try in there... she's gotta be in one of these," the punk directed.

Belmont shouted at the fourth man. "Steve, block the stairs! Don't let her get past you, or else!"

The stocky man and Belmont moved from room to room, opening and closing all the doors as they searched for Catherine. She knew each click of the tumblers meant she was closer to being discovered.

"Nothin' in here." The stocky man slammed a door in disgust.

"Go check the other door," his boss directed. "She's here somewhere, and I intend to find her."

Catherine listened intently as she picked up a chair, assessing it as a weapon. But as she did so, she stumbled on something on the floor. The noise alerted the men to her whereabouts. Her nearest assailant broke through the door with a shoulder charge. Belmont and the punk followed him into the room.

But Catherine was no longer there. She'd already fled through a nearby door into yet another room. Shouting their chagrin, the men smashed their way into the next room.

"Get her!" they screamed in unison.



Vincent lay on his stomach, gripping the roof edge of a subway car as it hurtled through the darkness. The tunnel cold, and heat from the engine, whipped at him viciously in turns, if he dared raise his head. But he had no choice but to rise onto one elbow, judging the moment he must get off his wild ride without killing himself, and dooming Catherine.



Catherine looked behind her as she dashed down the hallway, searching for a fresh hiding place. But it was too late, the distance too small. She'd been spotted.

"There she is!" Belmont shouted, charging at her.

In desperation, Catherine ran for the stairs, knocking the man trying to block the steps backwards into a heap. As she passed him near the bottom, he reached out and grabbed her ankle, tripping her up. She kicked out at him with her feet, hoping to catch him with the heel of her shoe and inflict some real damage. *'You can kill a man with a shoe.'* Catherine could only hope Isaac's words were true, even as she knew she didn't have the right leverage for that, this time.

In the same moment, she reached into the grocery bag and grabbed a bottle of wine from it. *'There is strength in you.'* Vincent's voice came to her, as she hefted it from the bag by the neck. She knew there was. She just prayed it would be enough.

She was just about to hit the man with it when Belmont and his henchman came down the stairs.

Belmont pulled out his gun. "Uh, uh, ah..." He bent over Catherine, pointing the gun in her face and half-cocking the trigger. "Say goodnight."

Vincent!! Catherine's mind screamed, knowing it was the last thing she would ever think.



Vincent dropped off the far side of the train as it slowed for the station ahead. He paused at a fork in the tunnels. He stood listening to the inner voice marking Catherine's location. Fixing on it, he turned down one of the tunnels and reached a

place where it dead ended in a barricade of wood and concrete blocks. He began to madly tear into the barricade with the strength of ten men...



Beyond Catherine's position at the bottom of the stairs, a short hallway led to the door into the basement. As Belmont pushed his gun into her face and began to squeeze the trigger, there was a crashing sound from the basement. Suddenly, the door burst open in a shower of splinters, and Vincent came crashing through, a wild, snarling, terrifying beast, bent on helping the woman who, even now, was screaming his name, internally.



Belmont and his henchmen turned towards a living nightmare, as something exploded down the hall and fell upon them like a creature straight from hell. Catherine gasped in shock as Vincent ripped the gun from Belmont's hand, sending it and its owner, crashing into the wall with a sickening thud and the sound of breaking bones. Vincent then fell on the four of them, tearing them to shreds, mauling them as if they were no more substantial than limp rag dolls.

His ferocity was relentless, and it was a thing that was awesome and frightening, in its power and savagery. He didn't stop until there was no life left in any of the sprawling bodies.

When it was finally over, he pulled back, seeming shocked at the chaos he had wrought. He dragged himself backwards, coming to rest on the bottom step of the staircase behind him. Blood dripped from his hands and clothing. The adrenaline surge always made his ears ring. The adrenaline crash, when it came, hit him hard, and left him feeling dazed. He looked up at Catherine with exquisite vulnerability, and almost a look of shame, in his blue eyes. *You know. You saw. This is me, too.*

She didn't stop to think as she hurried over to him, grabbing his blood-stained hands. "We can't stay here." She pulled him to his feet.

She knew the authorities would have already been alerted and the police would be on their way, given the sounds of terrified screams and the commotion. Isaac's training had been thorough. *'You gotta get ready to fight, or pump leather outta there...'*

Vincent hesitated fractionally, staring at her with awe. *My hands. She's... holding my... my hands...*

"Vincent. We have to move." She was steady, and protective of him. He could feel it inside her, and it helped him to find his center.

"Come with me... Hurry..." He led her towards the basement's shattered door. They hurried down to the lower level. Catherine stared at the brick wall that appeared to have been broken through as if by a battering ram. Tugging her hand, Vincent led her through the hole in the wall into a passageway, and they quickly disappeared into the smothering darkness.



Lt. John Herman stood beside several of his patrolmen, surveying the devastation in the townhouse. Blood and shattered bodies were strewn all around like a slaughterhouse.

They'd managed to identify Belmont because his face was largely intact, despite the savage mauling of his body. He had a rap sheet longer than Herman's arm, and was no loss to the world. But the identities of the other three men were still a mystery. Of course, they would be some of Belmont's enforcers. The Medical Examiner would have to sort them out. Or at least he'd have to sort out what was left of them.

And then there was the matter of the dead woman whose broken body had been discovered in one of the upper rooms. Who was she?

Herman stared at the abandoned bag of groceries, and the bottle of wine beside it. Inside the bag there was a supper for only two people, with cheese and bread along with a bagged salad, a bottle of mayonaise, and some cold cuts. Herman had five bodies on his hands and no answers.

Someone had not been expecting whatever had followed their arrival. And was the owner of the bag of groceries among the dead, or had they somehow escaped the awful carnage? None of it made any sense, at all.

“Got any ideas, Boss?” one of the uniforms asked, pushing back his cap.

Herman shook his head. “No.” He stared down at remains of Belmont and his henchman. “These two look like they were mauled... by a lion...” He stared around the room, assessing each dark doorway in turn. “Maybe we should contact the zoo. See if they’re missing any big cats.”

“That’s crazy.” The patrolman grimaced, edging away from the shadows. But he had no better answers.

Herman shrugged as he moved through the splintered basement door and down the stairs. “There are some pretty strange things going on in this city.” He turned back to his reluctant crew. No-one looked as if they wanted to be here any longer than necessary.

Herman shook his head as he moved along the wall and discovered the ragged hole in the basement wall and the passageway beyond. “And, I hear, even stranger things going on underneath it.” He examined the hole in the wall before leaning through and looking from right to left.

“I don’t know what happened here, but I’m gonna find out.” He pulled back into the basement.

Behind him, his patrolmen moved uneasily. They were not keen on finding out anything more about these strange killings and the even stranger aftermath. Guys with mob connections were always fighting over territory, or cash, or both. They regularly got into it with each other. The city was better place without the likes of Marty Belmont.



Vincent followed Catherine as they moved slowly along a narrow pathway. He had given her careful directions on how to return to the surface, undetected. They stopped on the side of a cavernous chamber, at the foot of a long ladder. Light streamed in from above. He had brought her as far as he dared go in daylight.

Catherine turned to stand before him, looking up at him. “I owe you everything – everything.”

Vincent stared at her. "You owe me nothing. I'm part of you, Catherine. Just as you're part of me... Wherever you go, wherever I am... I'm with you..."

He looked down into her loving, caring eyes. He did not wish this moment to end, but knew it must, for both their sakes. But the word of farewell stuck in his throat and he had to force it out. There was so much more to say than a simple, "Good-bye..."

It gusted out of him on a long breath of regret. She had seen him for what he was, what he could do when roused to terrible anger. *How can she love me? How?*

Catherine didn't hesitate. She reached for him, throwing her arms around his powerful frame, hugging him close to her with all her might.

"For now..."

She had seen his pain, his hesitation. She'd witnessed what he was capable of when his fearsome anger was aroused, but it didn't frighten her. It only made her feel more protective of him, of all that he stood for, and all he shielded: His life, Below. His secret world, far beneath the city streets...

Again, Vincent heaved that long, sorrowful sigh, almost one of disbelief that his love did not shun him, that she could bear to touch him, even now. Behind her back his clawed hand rose to splay across her upper spine, softening their imminent separation. He hugged her against him, everything he could not say evident in his touch.

Slowly, infinitely slowly, they finally drew apart. Turning, they both began to go their separate ways. She to return Above once more, to the light and the open air, while he sank back into the bowels of the earth, where he would be safe from hate and harm.

Walking slowly in opposite directions, suddenly they each turned back at the same moment... a held look of infinite longing passed between them, before they both looked away, continuing on their respective paths.

She reached up and started to climb the ladder. He disappeared down the tunnel, back into the darkness, as she continued her ascent, up into the light...





“There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in...”

Leonard Cohen

