

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

"Orphans"

ACT ONE

Something That Has Never Been...

By

C.J. La Belle



"Trust your heart if the seas catch fire, live by love though the stars walk backward..."

E.E. Cummings



The Manhattan streets were slick and glistening with the most recent rains. But the inclement weather didn't deter the teeming crowds of people from filling the streets at eight in the morning. Everyone appeared to have a purpose to their business, hurrying determinedly to every unknown destination, by the shortest route possible.

It was no different inside the D.A.'s office that morning. Catherine Chandler hurried towards her desk, still wearing her damp raincoat. She carried a foot-thick sheaf of files and papers, her bulging briefcase hooked to a crooked forefinger.

"Hey, Cath. How was your weekend?" a smiling co-worker called, as she passed.

"What weekend?" Catherine deadpanned, not missing a beat.

She sighed inwardly. She and Vincent had made such plans, but they had come to nothing, as always seemed to happen recently. The files and papers she now carried had been delivered to her door by a harassed Edie. Her friend hadn't stayed any longer than needed to deliver her load, all the while muttering about missing out on her favorite TV show. Edie had quickly gone again, in a flurry of swinging black braids and tossed gold hoop earrings. That, it seemed, was the sum total of 'social life' either woman had enjoyed that weekend.

Catherine arrived at her work station, adroitly dropping her briefcase and catching it upright with one foot against the side of the desk. She'd perfected the move a thousand times before. The top of her desk was covered with piles of assorted casework, so she was forced to find a tiny clearing on the far side for the stack of papers in her arms.

She didn't see her boss, watching her through the glass wall of his office, as she shook out her arms to restore the circulation. Consequently, she didn't wonder at the troubled look of concern on his face, or his slow reluctance to get up from his desk chair.

Catherine removed her wet raincoat, holding it away from herself, shaking off the water. She became aware of Joe's measured approach.

Anticipating his terse cross-examination, she hurried to say, "I'll have the Chang summary by noon, okay?"

Joe lifted his left shoulder. "Don't worry about it."

"Don't worry about it?" Catherine struggled with the concept.

Joe's shoulders hunched. "Listen... someone called for you a few minutes ago. From New York Hospital."

Catherine stiffened with intuition. "What about?"

Joe shook his head. "I don't know. I took the number..."

Catherine reached for the memo slip he held out, and turned to her telephone. She tapped out the number... and waited for a moment that seemed like forever.

Finally, someone answered, a woman's crisp, no-nonsense voice. "New York General Emergency Contact Line."

"Hello?" Catherine managed to gasp.



Catherine rushed along the speckled linoleum beside a thin green line and a narrow orange line. The lines diverged, and her feet followed the green without thought. She moved fast, through two sets of hydraulic doors opening inward. A suck of air. A long white corridor. She hurried forward - past green-smocked interns, white-coated doctors, and grim-faced visitors. At the far end of the corridor, she turned a quick corner, focused now entirely on her final destination, and the awful truth.

The registration nurse was less than helpful. Red lipstick, young, already cauterized to the urgencies of life and death around her, she was unhurried, in her perusal of the patient files in front of her.

She looked up at Catherine. "How do you spell the last name again?"

Catherine worried the handle of her purse. She summoned all her patience. "C-H-A-N-D-L-E-R. Charles Chandler... he was admitted this morning."

"ICU. That way. Just follow the signs. Take the first elevator." The nurse nodded to the right, down the corridor. She went back to her previous business, satisfied she had completed her role of caring health professional.

Catherine did as she was directed, too confused to think clearly. *Dad. I saw you just last week! Or was it... the week before? Jenny. I need to call Jenny. I think he played golf with Don Aronson, not that long ago. Was he okay, then? And Peter. Do I call Peter? How bad is it? Would he even know?* How she longed to have Vincent beside

her, guiding her shaky footsteps towards a future she wasn't sure she could face, alone.

The elevator doors whooshed open, and she emerged, to quickly approach a work station. A male nurse lifted his eyes.

"You'll have to check with the Duty Nurse," he told her. He gave more directions, ones that sent her deeper into the hospital's confusing interior of corridors and doors.

"Restricted Access" proclaimed red letters painted on the doors he'd indicated.

Catherine turned away from the desk, walking fast, trying to control her rising panic. The internal monologue she'd been running fell into a harsh kind of static, in her ears. She felt trapped in an endless maze of sterile hallways and plastic signs. She finally found the steel and glass doors of the Intensive Care Unit. She looked through the glass at the pain and suffering inside. She wanted to run, but she remained trapped. She swallowed her intensifying sense of extreme dread.

The duty nurse appeared behind her. She laid out the awful news baldly. "Your father's had a stroke. Why don't you have a seat in the Family Room? I'll call the doctor." She turned on her heel, not waiting for a reply. Catherine watched her pick up a phone, and begin punching out numbers. An orderly came down the hallway in a hurry, rolling a gurney. Catherine stepped out of the way.

'*Vincent...*,' Catherine's numbed mind called silently, as she digested the terrible news... as time finally slowed to a crawl. She stood there a moment, shaky on her feet... before she turned and started for the Family Room. *Vincent...*

Lonely and lost in the sanitized cheeriness of the Family Room, Catherine sat for what seemed like hours, trying to fight down her sense of panic. *Dad. Oh, Dad... what will I do without you?* The pain of her aloneness settled on her shoulders, weighing them down with grief.

Finally, the doctor arrived, but he brought confusing information and little comfort. Catherine sat across from Dr. Cherian – a kindly Indian man in his early forties. A night's beard adorned his chin, and he looked tired and like he was running on adrenalin. His language was controlled and precise, as if he was delivering a lecture instead of a sentence of life or death.

The lecture continued: "An artery gets clogged and that prevents the blood from

reaching a particular part of the vascular tree. In this case, the blood vessels that feed the brain.”

In that moment she wished Father was by her side. He would know. Or Peter Alcott. She needed their knowledge and guidance now. Another impossibility in a day littered with them. Catherine struggled to make sense of it all.

“So what does that mean?”

Cherian shrugged. “Part of the brain ... dies, from lack of nutrients.”

Catherine swallowed rawly. “Dies... permanently?”

Her father’s doctor inhaled. “There’s always permanent damage, yes. But we can't be sure how much -- enough that he’s unconscious. We’ll know more when he wakes up.”

Catherine looked away, trying to process all this, and failing. Her father had always seemed powerful, and indestructible.

Dr. Cherian continued, “At the very least, you should expect extreme weakness, partial paralysis, confusion, maybe amnesia.”

Catherine’s eyes burned with unshed tears. “When can I see him?”

The doctor shrugged. “We'll move him to his own room when he regains consciousness. We can call you at home...”

“No! I want to be here,” Catherine reacted sharply.

“It might be a while...”

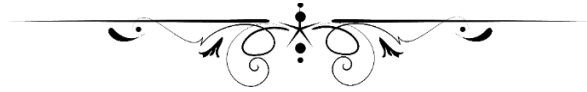
It had taken Catherine ages just to reach this awful impasse. “I understand...”

‘Vincent...,’ her heart whispered despairingly. She lowered her head, settling back into the couch, before folding her hands in her lap. All she could do now was wait...



Sunlight had found its way down through the urban forest into the hospital Family Room, firing the windows. Catherine held a magazine open on her lap, but she wasn’t reading it. Her gaze was fixed through the glass at a small courtyard of trees. Did she imagine Vincent’s unmistakable shape hallowed by the light? She rubbed her sore eyes listlessly.

Hours later, the light had fled the room. Catherine had kicked off her shoes, and her stockinged legs were pulled up underneath her on the couch. Her eyes were closed, but she wasn't asleep. On a small side-table, a green tray of hospital food sat half-finished.



Hours later, Dr. Cherian finally re-entered the room. Dazed and confused by the time lag, and the cramped way she'd been lying on the couch, Catherine struggled to her feet.

"Your father's awake now," Dr. Cherian offered cautiously.

"So I can see him?" Catherine blinked away her sleepiness.

"Yes," the doctor stated, without inflection.

Anxiously, Catherine started for the door.

"Miss Chandler..." Dr. Cherian halted her progress.

Catherine hesitated before him.

"There's a condition associated with some stroke victims. We don't why it happens... or even what it is exactly. It's called 'locked-in syndrome.'"

Catherine swallowed tightly, trying to process the horrific evocations of the medical terminology...





A door opened slowly, into a stark, private hospital room. Catherine walked past Dr. Cherian, who stepped back and closed the door behind him. In the blinding whiteness and grim florescence of this place, Catherine's beloved father lay alone. An effusion of translucent tubes sprouted from his mouth, nostrils, and arms. Catherine approached the bedside tentatively...

What she saw was devastating. No medical terms or words could have prepared her for this. A man so completely and abruptly transformed by illness - sunken, aged and completely motionless.

She moved to her father's bedside. "Daddy?"

A long moment passed, as she stood over him. She swallowed hard against the choked feeling in her throat... She bent closer, whispering, "Daddy...?"

But Charles' only response was a blink, the lids closing once over his staring eyes. Momentarily, Catherine turned away from him, not wanting to worry him with her tears. She wiped her cheeks... and pulled a chair close. She sat down beside him, determined to be strong...

Vincent... her aching heart whispered once more, helplessly knowing he could not respond...



After endless hours and no change in her father's condition, Catherine took a small amount of time to slip away. She needed to gather a few things for a longer hospital stay. And she wanted to see Vincent. She badly needed to lean on his strength.

She stood at the edge of the threshold to his world. It felt as if she was standing in neither world, somehow balanced between, and lost. She was managing to hold on, but just barely. In Vincent's loving presence, her mental toughness was beginning to give way to the truth of her fear...

She told him all she knew, and continued her tale as he stood with her. "— and the plaque above the door said 'Family Room.' And I thought about what that meant to

me. Family. And I realized that without him—" she broke off.

"Catherine..."

"I'm shaking..."

Vincent moved closer to her, drawing her deep into the security of his powerful embrace. They stood there a long time, finding strength in their embrace and solace in the physical contact.

Finally Catherine drew back. "I'm okay..." She pulled further back. "I just got scared..."

"Yes..." Vincent agreed softly.

"All day, I wanted... I needed you to hold me like that."

"I'm here. Always..."

Catherine nodded, knowing the truth of his words. "Always. That's such a father's word. Always..." She looked lost again.

"What is it? What are you thinking?"

"Something he used to do when I was a little girl..."

Vincent remained silent, his eyes imploring her to continue.

Catherine sighed. "He made me laugh, that's all. Whenever I was upset, he'd make me laugh."

Vincent watched her. "Tell me..."

Catherine grimaced sadly. "He'd come to my door... I'd be crying on the bed... And already, part of me would start to smile. I'd try not to. But I couldn't help it. He'd say in this deep voice, 'Don't laugh, don't laugh...' And then he'd come in, and I'd try not to look, but I'd look anyway – and there he was, wearing this enormous, red clown's nose..."

She laughed softly at the memory. "I don't know where he got it... but it always seemed to make things better..." Her voice trailed off.

Vincent nodded. "That's a wonderful memory to have."

"I wish we could have stayed that close..."

"You've told me before... of the growing distance between you."

"I don't know how it happened. We got in a habit. There were things I didn't want to tell him."

Vincent sighed. "And things you could not tell him."

Catherine regarded Vincent, acknowledging the truth of his words. "We just stopped sharing our lives with each other..." She stopped speaking, fighting the heaviness of her regret.

Then, she sighed. "You always assume you'll have the time to go back and make things how you want them to be."

"Catherine... there is still time..." Vincent said quietly.

"I know..." But the lowering of her head, the uncertainty of her tone, spoke to a growing pessimism and despair. Vincent observed this with concern, but he felt helpless in the face of her intense pain of impending loss.



The bright sunlight streaming through the window of the private hospital room, and belied the seriousness of the situation. Catherine sat once more beside her father, who was still attached to a tangle of life-support apparatus. His eyes seemed to focus on her, though they revealed no particular emotion.

Trapped in a state of helplessness, Catherine fought back her rising emotions. "God, I hate hospitals...", she stated bleakly.

There was no reply in the silence of the oppressive room. Catherine collected herself, wiping away her tears. The need to hear a human voice, even it was her own, pushed her into conversation with her silent father.

"I'm just trying to imagine your side of all this..."

She shook her head. "I'm not even sure you can understand me. But I hope you can, because... I want you to know that I love you, and that I'm here for you. And Daddy..." she broke off... as a sad, tender smile blossomed on her lips.

She tried again. "I want you to know that I'm okay. A lot of things have changed for me these last two years... and even if sometimes you haven't understood those changes... you always trusted me." She hitched a breath. "Remember you said what Mom

wanted was for me to have a happy life? It's a complicated thing, you know? But I am happy, Daddy. I really am. It's just that... there's a part of me that I haven't been able to show you."

She was aware this was at once a realization and a confession, and it crystallized, with the words. "You see... I haven't been alone." She paused, choosing her words with care. "There's been someone in my life..." Catherine regarded her father with a renewed urgency, seeming to expect him to respond in some way. But there was only the life-support machine's soft hiss.

Catherine gathered herself for her ultimate confession. "His name is Vincent..."



Time telescoped and became irrelevant, as Catherine struggled to convey the truth to her father. Her story was often halted by interruptions.

She sat in silence whenever the nurses came and went, going about their duties. Conversation was not sought, nor exchanged. Trays of food were delivered and only half-heartedly picked at. Catherine had no appetite. She sipped sparingly from a cup of iced water someone had provided.

Later in the afternoon, Dr. Cherian stopped in to say there was no change in Charles' condition, and Catherine should not expect any. A strong hand briefly clasped Catherine's bent shoulder, and the physician was gone again, the door closing softly behind him. There was nothing more he could say.

In the midst of a busy city hospital, Catherine felt utterly alone, in the silent room. Hours ticked inexorably by.

"Vincent..." she whispered despairingly. At the windows, the gossamer curtains became illuminated by moonlight, billowing softly with the night wind.

Still seated by the bed, she attempted again to tell her father about her new life. "His name is Vincent..." she said again. It gave her great comfort to say his name out loud.

Her heart skipped a beat. Instinct made her look up. She stared across the room to see Vincent standing against the wall, hidden in shadow, except for his tentative eyes which reflected the moonlight, watching, and waiting. Her heart leapt with joy, but she

didn't move. She didn't wish to think of how he'd managed to get into the room, let alone find the right one. She had wanted to see him, and he'd answered her call.

She remained seated at her father's bedside, holding his hand. "What he's given me..." She broke off, unable to find the right words. Finally she says, "He gives me everything..."

Catherine tried to assemble her thoughts, feeling Vincent's sympathetic eyes watching them. "When I had the accident... it was Vincent who saved my life. And those days I was missing... they weren't lost or forgotten. I was with him... healing, learning things about myself I might never have known."

Vincent approached them silently, until he was visible to Charles Chandler's wide open eyes. The older man seemed to stiffen, and the life-support machine hissed, as he drew an unwary breath.

Catherine tried to explain this new presence. "But Vincent was a secret I couldn't share. Not even with you..."

There was a long moment between Vincent and Charles -- one of great revelation and discovery -- one that, even if Charles had been able to speak, could have only been filled by silence. And then that moment passed...

Vincent tried to ease the fraught moment of uncertainty. "I realize that to you... I am a stranger. That was our choice, not yours..."

Charles' face remained impassive, but his eyes were unmistakably filled with awe... he saw, but his expression said he could not quite believe...

Vincent said softly, "But what Catherine and I share has taken great courage, especially for Catherine."

Catherine looked up at Vincent with tears in her eyes.

Vincent watched her. "She has sacrificed so much... to preserve our secret."

Catherine hurried to reassure her father. "Whatever I've given up... had to be given up. Even part of what was between us..."

Charles was once again focused on Catherine. He blinked, as tears began to fall down his cheek. Catherine brushed them away with a gentle hand. "Don't you see, Daddy? I had to grow up. I had to change. I'm still changing. Vincent has helped me find the

strength to do that.”

Vincent interposed, “But Catherine’s strength was your gift to her, not mine.”

A long moment hung silently between them, as Charles regarded Vincent once again, the dawning knowledge eclipsing the wonder in his expression...

Vincent leaned closer. “I am grateful for the chance to have met you...” He gently placed his hand over their already-joined hands. “Even for so brief a time...”

Charles blinked, his brain trying to process all that had happened in the last few minutes. And in the silent understanding of this incredible secret finally unveiled... a secret he could never tell...



ACT TWO

Funeral Procession



“Nothing in his life became him like the leaving it...”

William Shakespeare, MacBeth

Catherine, dressed all in black, approached the church pulpit with reluctance. There was a microphone, which she pushed away and switched off – causing a squawk of feedback. She looked out at the assembled mourners, her expression tired and haunted.

In the front row Jenny and Nancy sat together with Peter Alcott. Behind them, Joe and Edie added their silent support. They all watched her closely, for any signs she could not continue. Catherine thanked them with a small nod.

After a long silence, she began to speak. “I want to thank everybody for coming. My father made strong friends, and it means a lot to me that so many of you could come today. Thank you...”

There was one glaring omission to the crowd watching her. She had to be brave, for Vincent. Because he could not be here to hold her.

She fought against the hot sting of tears. “I thought for a long time about what I could say up here. But everything I thought of seemed small and insubstantial compared to the man my father was... There was a story he used to read to me when I was a little girl... I never got tired of hearing it, and I’d like to read a part of it to you now...”

She unfolded a sheet of paper and pressed it flat on the pulpit. “It’s a story about two toys. A new toy: a rabbit. And an old worn-out toy: a Skin Horse.”

She began to read from the page. *“‘What is real?’ asked the rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side... ‘Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick out handle?’*

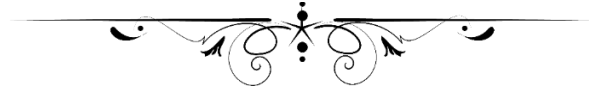
‘Real isn’t how you are made,’ said the Skin Horse. ‘It’s a thing that happens to you when a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really loves. Then you become real...’



After the memorial service had concluded, Catherine stood alone at an informal receiving line – outwardly composed, inwardly crumbling – as she accepted

condolences from friends and distant family. Some said a few small words, others simply pressed her hand or embraced her. The line seemed endless, and her feet began to ache...

All she could hear was the rest of the story she'd recited. *'Does it hurt?'* asked the rabbit. *'Sometimes,'* said the Skin Horse, *for he was always truthful. 'When you are real you don't mind being hurt...'*



To the people surrounding her, Catherine looked older than her thirty-one years. At the moment, those who knew her thought she even looked older than Caroline had, when she'd died, a woman closer to the middle of her thirties than the beginning of those. Not that anyone who knew Catherine expected her to look 'young' at her father's funeral.

They expected her to look grief-struck. And she did.

The mourners were in attendance, and the green grass and pastoral setting was meant to be a comfort to those there. The casket sat above the place where it would be lowered, the plot right next to Caroline's own. Roses were everywhere, as were other floral arrangements.

She had read a passage from *'The Velveteen Rabbit.'* Now came the hard part. Now came the burial itself.

Charles Chandler had been an important businessman in his life, and the gathered mourners were reflections of that. Most were wealthy, or at least well-heeled. And most had cared for Charles Chandler, to one degree or another, in his life.

A priest was saying something. Something comforting. Something normal. Something you were supposed to say, at such a time. Catherine dabbed her beautiful green eyes with a snowy handkerchief.

Charles Chandler, seated in a dark car parked among shady trees, couldn't hear what the priest was saying, couldn't know what it was that had just caused Catherine to dab a tear away. He adjusted his binoculars and sighed. He couldn't keep tears of his own from coming. It fogged the lens.

“She’s crying. My daughter is crying,” Charles said, his hand reflexively reaching for the handle of the black car he was sitting in. It didn’t budge.

The agent seated next to him didn’t disagree with that assessment. He did, however disagree with the wisdom of Charles being there at all. “Mr. Chandler, this was beyond bad, for an idea. You knew this was going to be difficult for her,” the hard-faced man replied. “We had to make sure it was. We don’t know who’s watching her, right now.”

“I’ve changed my mind. I want out. Unlock the door. Please...” Charles’ heart was breaking, as he watched Catherine hitch back a sob. This was too much to ask of him, to ask of Catherine. Much too much.

The lock didn’t budge, and the man beside him didn’t, either. “Do that, and your daughter’s car will probably explode, the next time she turns the key. Or the elevator in her building will drop. Or she’ll just plain have a bullet in her head, by evening. Or he’ll grab her, and hold her. Keep her as leverage. He’ll use her to hurt you, to keep you in line.” The voice was compassionless. “Look left, just past the hill. See anyone you know?”

Compassionless, yes. But the man seated to Charles’ left was not incorrect.

Charles scanned with the long lenses, through the dark window glass of the heavy vehicle. Panning to the left, he saw the gentle, sloping rise of the hill the Special Agent mentioned. And what he saw next didn’t make his heart break. It made it freeze, in terror.

A long black limousine, low, lean, and predatory looking, had pulled up, the distant engine a perfectly tuned growl, of a sound.



It exactly matched its occupant.

As the chauffer held open the door, a rapier-like man emerged. One with a scarred face and an aura of menace, within his authority. Charles knew to be afraid. Any sane man would.

A large man emerged from the other side of the vehicle, his long coat barely concealing the gun he carried, beneath it. He couldn't look more like a bodyguard if he tried.

"Vulture is on site. Repeat. Vulture is on site," the agent said into a microphone, using the codename for the shadowy under-world figure also known as Gabriel.

"Copy that," the reply came back from somewhere outside the vehicle. The cemetery was full of mourners. And a few who weren't, exactly.

"He's walking over to Cathy. She's in danger!" Charles dropped the binoculars and tugged on the door, uselessly.

Special Agent Smith (Charles had no idea whether or not that was his real name, and he rather doubted it) put a restraining hand over his. "No. He's not here to hurt her. He's here to check on her. He wants to see if her grief is real. The only danger she's in is because we're here. This can never happen again, Mr. Chandler."

Charles looked at his stone-faced companion, and for a moment, saw a flicker of empathy in his brown eyes. Smith slid a pair of dark glasses up over the bridge of his long nose, a nose which had been broken at least once, probably in a fight. The glasses hid the most human part of him, and his expression settled into the dispassionate one Charles had come to recognize.

"You could arrest him. Right now. Before he hurts anyone else," Charles pleaded.

"Going to a funeral isn't a crime, Charles," Smith replied, using his first name.

They both watched as Gabriel walked to within a few feet away from Catherine, then stopped. He studied her, hard. Charles realized that Agent Smith was correct. He wasn't here to hurt her. He was here to make sure the elaborate ruse the intelligence community had concocted to save his life – and hopefully imprison Gabriel, eventually – worked as well as they hoped it would.

Charles retrieved the binoculars so he could see, better. Gabriel's lips were moving, as Peter Alcott was escorting Catherine tentatively forward, closely shadowed by her two good friends, Nancy and Jenny. If Gabriel was speaking to Catherine, or to his

bodyguard, or even to himself, Charles wasn't sure. Cathy didn't seem to notice him, there. To her, he was just another well-dressed businessman among the many her father had counted as friends and clients.

"Vantage One, did you catch that? What's he saying?" Smith asked.

A woman's voice came back. She was dressed as one of the funeral service representatives, and trained at reading lips. Her reply was chilling. "This memory is a... precious jewel." Then she paused. "I hope she knows to polish it, like a stone."

Nodding to his man, Gabriel returned back up the hill to his waiting limo. His body language spoke volumes. He was done, here. He had made his point, loud and clear. He was secure in the knowledge he was untouchable.

The woman's voice came one more time, as Gabriel still spoke to his man. "One day, she'll mark this as the greatest one of her life."

"Good God, he actually means it..." Charles went pale. "What have I done?"

Smith, however, was satisfied. "He thinks you're dead and soon to be buried, and your secrets with you. That was the whole point of this elaborate ruse. Let's not give him any chance to change his mind. We're out of here." He tapped the bulletproof glass that divided him from the driver, and the big, dark SUV rumbled to life. "Slow. Nice and slow. Don't draw any attention," Smith instructed his team.

Charles felt the subtle motion, as the big car eased away from the sight of his own internment. "Cathy. Oh, Cathy. I'm so sorry..."

The fantastical face of the man Catherine had named as Vincent floated once again before his mind's eye. Like something out of a fairytale, or a nightmare... Charles had not yet decided. But Charles knew that he'd keep his daughter's secret, as he had kept his own counsel on dangerous matters that could have gotten them both killed.

He would remain silent, forever if needed, for her sake. He loved her more than his own life.

'But Catherine's strength was your gift to her, not mine...' Charles remembered Vincent saying that, in that incredible voice of his. He prayed that same strength would support her now, against all the odds.

In a moment of panic Charles had looked briefly for Vincent's unique face among the crowd of mourners, hoping against hope to see him again, all the while knowing it would be impossible. He wasn't there. But if the mysterious man – if he could be called that - was now the only one in Catherine's life that she could truly count on...

"Cathy...", he moaned, passing an unsteady hand over his brimming eyes.

"There's a box full of papers at a safe house in Maryland," Smith informed him brusquely, not looking at him. "Some have transactions your firm helped conduct. Others are from other places. Some are in code."

"I'm a corporate lawyer. One of his attorneys came looking for my partner's son, presenting his client as a businessman. Mark wasn't available, so I agreed to take the meeting because the man said it was a matter of some urgency. That's all I know. I am not corrupt. You must believe that!" Charles flared, scrubbing his eyes with impatient fingers.

"Mr. Chandler, if that was all you knew, we wouldn't be here. And you wouldn't now be conveniently dead." He pulled out a slim ledger, and passed it to Charles. It was a page full of ciphers. "Gabriel launders money through what looks like a thousand legitimate businesses, but really aren't. You figured that out, just looking at the contract set-ups he was trying to negotiate with your firm. Trying to fix it, or make a difference in the world of a man like Gabriel is what can get you killed. Faster than any bullet."

Smith reached over, and tapped the lone paper tucked inside the ledger. "Two good men died, getting this one page to me. Now, tell me all you know about Molloy-Davidson. Who really runs it? Who there, do you trust ...?"



The city passed by the car window in a blur, as Peter drove her home. Catherine sat silently watching, the ongoing story of the Rabbit and the Skin Horse she had recited covering the subdued chatter of the radio. *'Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,' the rabbit asked. 'Or bit by bit?'*

Catherine blinked away the inner vision of her father's graveside. She'd stared numbly

at the weathered gravestone that had marked her mother's final resting place. Now her father would be there. *Together forever. Forever is such a father's word...*

Peter braked for a traffic light. A hundred people crossed at the crosswalk. Life, for them, was going on as it always had. *I don't think I even know what real is, anymore,* Catherine mourned, envying every single one of them, for not having to bear this sorrow.

'It doesn't happen all at once,' said the Skin Horse. 'You become real. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept...'



Catherine stood on her balcony terrace, her eyes reflecting a city smothered by darkness. The story she had told continued to play in her mind.

'Generally, by the time you are real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out, and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are real, you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand. Once you are real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always...'

Always... Standing alone in the darkness, she began to cry for all she had lost...



Two days later, jostled and rocked in the back seat of a taxi, Catherine leaned towards the open window – grateful for the sting of chill morning air. She watched the streets fly past. She wanted to lose herself in the rushing scenes of the waking city; dull the headache that seemed to have taken up permanent residence behind her eyes.

Lost in introspection, she was startled when the cab veered across two lanes and stopped at the corner. The cabbie flipped the meter. Time to get out. Catherine dug into her purse for a five, paid the driver then opened her door.

She stepped out onto the curb... and started as a figure blurred past her and slid into the back seat, claiming the empty cab. Catherine didn't turn around to look, at first. Only the sound of the cab door crunching closed, and some vague, disquieting

premonition, caused her to glance back at the stranger in the cab... She looked closer. Her eyes rebelled at what she saw as the window rolled up.



It was an older man, sitting in the back seat of the cab as it pulled away from the curb, and into the blaring and chaos of rush hour. To her frowning gaze he was the very image of her father.

Catherine was left stranded on the curb, as she tried vainly to process this waking vision, this brain-induced reincarnation. *Daddy. I miss you so much.* She turned away to walk towards her father's building.

There was a very good reason she had come downtown. She had an appointment with her father's business partners at Chandler and Coolidge. Conference room 36 had been set aside for this very important purpose. She moved slowly across the pavement with leaden feet. *Did I really used to work here?* It felt like a hundred years ago...

Once inside the imposing building, she took a seat at the expansive teak conference table opposite Jay Coolidge and his son, Mark. Although Jay seemed to be experiencing some pain over all this, Mark was considerably more pragmatic... almost officious.

Catherine felt tired and drained as she tried to review the sheaf of papers she held in her hands... but the words kept crawling off the page. Her two day headache intensified.

Jay leaned forward, seeming eager to get the problem out of the way. "Your father and I drafted this after you left the firm. He wanted... we both wanted to protect your option to return." He made it sound so simple, and matter-of-fact.

Catherine didn't look up as she flipped a page, forcing her brain to concentrate.

"That's not a decision I'm prepared to make, right now."

Jay spread his hands. "Of course..." He looked pained. He glanced at his son for help.

"Whatever you decide, though, doesn't affect your entitlement..." Mark interjected smoothly.

Catherine looked up at him with forced patience. "I'm not there yet."

Mark didn't appear to hear her. "Basically, you're due continuing and uncollected fees, but only on cases in which Charles was actively involved."

Catherine nodded weakly, fighting her indifference to all this necessary business. *You have to get through this.* Her father would expect nothing less from her.

Jay tried to make amends for his son's forthrightness. "Rather than a prolonged payment schedule, Mark and I have discussed the possibility of offering you a lump sum settlement..." He paused. "Assuming that you elect not to rejoin the firm."

Mark sat forward. "The fact is, your father's participation has been pretty limited, these last few years."

"Mark..." Jay warned.

His son shrugged. "I'm just being honest, Dad."

Catherine was visibly stung. She stared at both men, incredulously.

Still uncomfortable with his son's unnecessary mention of this, Jay turned back to Catherine. "We've come up with a range of figures, which I think are quite substantial -- but it's certainly open to discussion..."

It had all become too much for Catherine. She placed the papers on the table, trying to curb her rising anger and pain. "That's fine, Jay. But right now, I'm not feeling very open to discussion. Excuse me..." She rose from her chair and headed for the door.

Almost automatically, her feet turned to the left and she walked slowly down the corridor towards her late father's office. At last, something at Chandler and Coolidge felt familiar, even if it was tinged with a nostalgic kind of pain. She remembered breezing down this very hallway, the last day she'd ever worked here. It was after noon, and she'd been late, as usual. It was the day of Tom's party: the day of the attack.

Did I ever belong here? She asked herself, knowing she hadn't. Even before her assault she hadn't. But Charles had. He very much had, and she'd loved him deeply, for that, and so much more. Once inside his office, she shut the door behind her and moved to sit behind his imposing desk.

She could smell traces of his cologne in the warm air of the closed room. The same bottle she'd bought for him every Christmas, still lingered. She inhaled sharply, drinking it in, expecting her father to come walking in at any moment, laughing and saying it had all been a big mistake...

To her left there was a gilt-framed photograph of her mother, taken in the year before she'd died. Caroline Chandler was smiling for the camera, unaware of the fate that awaited her. Catherine picked it up to study it closely, before replacing it with great care. *I miss you, too, Mom*, she thought, tracing the familiar image with a thoughtful fingertip.

All around her, there were stacks of boxes and cartons, already packed. Everything, and everyone, seemed to be moving on, eager to be done with this unfortunate business, except her.

She looked up eagerly as Marilyn Campbell, her father's long-time assistant, entered the office. At last, someone who had known her father well, and could understand what she was going through.

Catherine stood, and the two women shared a warm smile as they crossed to each other. "Marilyn...", Catherine sighed.

They embraced for a long time, connecting and commiserating, two women who loved the same man in different ways.

Marilyn stood back. "How are you?" It was meant as far more than a casual inquiry.

"I'm okay..."

Marilyn's probing look of disbelief spoke volumes.

"Really," Catherine tried again. "What about you?"

"I'm not sure yet..." The older woman sniffed. "It's hard to imagine this place without him."

"I know. Mark didn't seem to have the same problem."

Marilyn shrugged away any mention of Mark Coolidge. "Mark is a young man. He has his own ideas."

"He said... Daddy hadn't been... very active in the practice lately." Both women knew there was a question in the pronouncement.

"That's nonsense," Marilyn stated briskly. But Catherine knew she was covering.

"Marilyn, please. Be honest with me. Mark is a lot of things, but he isn't a liar."

Her father's assistant hesitated for a long moment. "Maybe Charles was slowing down a little. He had to... eventually..."

"But, when I was with the firm... I mean, it hasn't even been two years. How much could he have changed?"

"Cathy, even when you were here, your father was letting go of some of the responsibility."

The truth of this statement gave Catherine pause, arousing a guilt-laden realization. *He was letting go...* "So that I could take over," she concluded.

Marilyn shrugged. "I suppose..."

"And when I left...?"

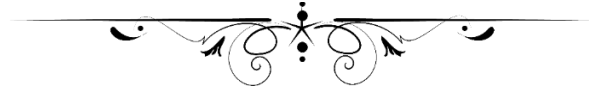
Marilyn's wan smile was meant to reassure, and it did. "When you left, I think your father's... priorities changed." Marilyn correctly read the sadness in Catherine's silence. "But he respected your decision, Cathy. I think that your honesty helped him realize that corporate law wasn't everything. God knows, I'd been trying to get him to realize that for twenty-five years."

Both women smiled a little more, at the assertion.

"He lived. He took time for the things he loved. Travel, the theatre, old friends... you..." Marilyn smiled sadly. "You really were his world..."

This last struck a sensitive chord within Catherine. She took a long look around the room, breathing it in. Smelling again the spicy cologne that always reminded her of him. It was as if her father had never left...

"When I was a girl, I used to think this office was so big... and everything in it." She sighed. "Now, it all seems so small..."



Catherine retreated to her apartment, to try and process all that had happened to her in the last few days. She was sitting on one of her dinky couches, staring at nothing, when her doorbell rang. She sighed sadly, before making the effort to rise from her couch and walk to the door. The doorbell sounded again, more impatiently, this time.

After taking a moment to compose herself, she unlocked and opened the door, surprised to see her boss standing there.

“Joe!”

Joe shrugged an uneasy apology. “I took an early lunch. Thought I’d drop by, see how you’re doing...”

An awkward silence descended as they stared at each other. Catherine remembered her manners. “Come in.” She stood back, indicating the room.

Joe stepped into her apartment, looking decidedly uncomfortable. He glanced around, trying not to look impressed with the elegance of the surroundings, and failing. He shuffled his feet awkwardly.

“You’ve never been here before...,” Catherine realized belatedly.

“No big deal.” Joe shook his head. “I’m here now, right?”

“Right.” Catherine smiled at his forthrightness. It eased her pain, just a little. She knew she could always count on Joe. “How about something to drink?”

“I’m fine, thanks.”

“At least sit down.” Catherine indicated one of her dinky couches.

He moved to sit across from her on the sofa, watching her intently. “So, how are you doing?”

“Better...,” Catherine offered awkwardly.

Joe’s look said he disbelieved her completely. “Escobar tells me you’re coming back to work tomorrow.”

Catherine nodded cautiously, not sure where this conversation was going.

Joe's steady regard narrowed. "You sure you want to do that?"

"Yes..."

"Well, I don't think it's such a good idea."

Catherine's reply was a pragmatic one. "Joe, I need to get back. I just can't sit here..."

Joe shook his head, impatient with her obstinacy.

Catherine tried again to convince him. "And I think the work will be good for me."

"Come on, Cathy." Joe huffed his disbelief.

She threw her hands wide. "What else am I supposed to do?" Her meaning was plain. *I've lost so much. What else do I have now, but the work?*

Her boss's critical brown eyes took her in. She looked like she was running on coffee and nerves, which she pretty much was.

"Give yourself a break," Joe offered softly, with empathy.

Catherine looked down into her lap, then back up at Joe, helplessly.

"Look, I'm no psychiatrist, but experience teaches you some things better than books..." Joe paused. "When I lost my father..." He trailed off, not adept at this kind of intimacy.

He tried hard to express what he was feeling. He drew a deep breath and expelled it. "It goes a lot deeper than you think. And it takes a long time to get straight in your head. Longer than three days..."

As the truth of his words seeped in, Catherine shook her head. "I don't know what I want..."

"Forget about coming back, until you're ready. Okay?"

After a long moment, Catherine nodded slowly.

Joe pressed his point. "And if you ever need to talk... or whatever, consider me on call. I mean that."

Catherine regarded Joe with deep affection and appreciation. "Thanks, Joe. You're a good friend..."

Joe grimaced. "You deserve a good friend, Radcliffe. You really do."

Catherine stared at him, trying not to cry. She nodded as she drew a shaky breath and released it slowly. *If only we all always got all that we deserved...*



Catherine stood on her balcony looking out over the darkened city. A cool night breeze teased at her troubled face. "Today... all day, I walked. Everywhere. Down to the Village... across town. I went from river to river, like I was looking for something. I don't know... I felt so disconnected from everything around me... the people, the city..."

Vincent stood close, regarding her with deepening concern. "All part of the loss you're feeling..."

Catherine turned to him, a sudden wave of helplessness rising inside her. "I feel like I'm losing myself."

Vincent moved closer, feeling the sensation just as she did. "Catherine, I promise... your pain will pass... in time."

"I just want to breathe again..."

Vincent moved to stand facing her. "Then you must allow yourself the time to mourn." His tone was both firm and compassionate.

You sound like Joe. Joe who thinks he understands, yet doesn't. "I can't. Not here. Not where there are so many memories..."

"Of your father...?"

She paced a little, taking herself away from him as she tried to explain the enormity of what she was facing. "Of a life that isn't mine anymore. A place that's completely... empty for me." She held up an open palm.

The low voice was soothing. "It may seem that way now..."

Catherine shook her head. "There's nothing here for me, Vincent. I know that..."

She took an impatient breath to gather her thoughts, trying to make Vincent understand. She stepped closer to him, once more.

"When my father saw you, I felt... this incredible release. It was as though I'd never

really understood the weight of our secret...”

“Until it was no longer a secret...” Vincent nodded his understanding.

“And now it doesn’t matter. Even if I could, there’s nobody I’d want to tell...”

“Catherine...” He reached for her hands, and took them in his own. Her small fingers gave his a determined squeeze.

“I didn’t know if this time would ever come. Or if I would feel so certain. But you know it’s something I’ve always wanted...”

Careful. Unable to deny the truth, Vincent sighed. “Yes...”

“Well, now I’m asking you. It’s not easy...”

Catherine stepped even closer to Vincent, regarding him with love, as she said, with undeniable, clear-minded conviction. “You know me, Vincent. You know what I’m feeling. So, if you can’t trust my words, trust your own heart.” She paused, staring up at him. “I want to live, Below.”

The awesome implications of her request washed over them both. “I want to live in your world,” she clarified.

Vincent’s gaze brimmed with a complex set of emotions, utterly overwhelmed. From the moment he’d met Catherine, this had been his carefully concealed secret and impossible hope. Despite his deep reservations, he found himself nodding slowly, his brimming eyes never straying from her. “Then we must try...”





ACT THREE

Don't Ever Leave Me...

"The hardest thing about the road not taken is that you never know where it might have led..."

Lisa Wingate

The syncopated sounds of an overhead subway train, and the distant tapping of the pipes, filled the small, darkened chamber. It held a simple writing desk, upon which lay a hatbox and a single leather suitcase, all settled beside a patchwork-covered bed. The bed was crowded with all manner of ribbon-wrapped gifts, and folk-art trinkets.

"I can't believe all these presents..." Catherine closed the top drawer of a dresser, before taking from the dresser top, a foot-long brass tube. Catherine smiled at it. "This is from Mouse..."

Vincent stood just inside the entrance to the chamber, watching her as Catherine moved closer to hand him the tube. "Ah... one of his famous kaleidoscopes," Vincent commented. He studied it, turning it in the candlelight.

Catherine smiled. "Tube of colors..." She held out her hand to take it back. Vincent nodded as he returned it to her.

“He was very specific about it...” She handled the gift with care.

“Mouse and the others welcome the chance to return even some of the kindness you’ve shown them. Everyone is very excited that you’ve chosen to live among us.”

Catherine noted that he did not speak of his own feelings about her decision. Vincent appeared very reticent on the matter. Almost as if he was reserving his opinion until some future date.

She sighed, as she raised the kaleidoscope to her eye, pivoting it toward him. “What about you?” she asked softly, seeing a rotating, multi-colored vision of his unique face.

The silence between them lengthened, tense and fraught with unspoken meaning. Finally, Catherine lowered the tube, suddenly seeing the enormity of her question written clearly, in his frowning blue eyes. Various emotions warred within his gaze. When he finally answered, it was from the deepest, most tender part of his soul.

“It’s something I never dared to dream...” His breath hitched. He wanted to reach for her, but held himself away. *Now is not the time, and yet...*

Catherine silently acknowledged their mutual knowledge of incomplete and unspoken feelings. Ones that hung between them like an almost tangible cloud. *I don’t think it’s something I dared dream of, either*, she mused. *Not really.*

“It’s late, you should sleep...” Vincent pulled away slowly. He turned to leave.

“Vincent...,” Catherine called softly.

He stopped to look back at her. The long moment between them was tentative, but emotionally charged. Catherine seemed poised to say more, but at the very last moment, she changed her mind.

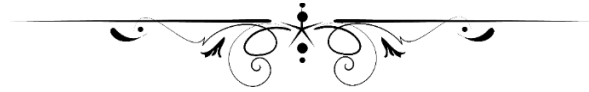
“Good night,” she whispered, far more than the simple words in her tone.

“Good night,” Vincent replied, on a breathy sigh.

Then, he was gone. Catherine stared after him, before turning to her bed. She stacked the scattering of gifts on the desk, then sat on the edge of the bed to remove her shoes. Tunnel air nipped at her toes. It was very unlike the radiator heated air of her apartment. That was all to the good, as far as Catherine concerned.

She let her feet feel the cool air, let her foot feel the uneven floor beneath the faded carpet, before swinging her legs up to lie down. She lay there, feet tucked beneath a

quilt, thinking about what had just happened. She felt strangely on edge, and disinclined to sleep. She lay staring up at the rock cut ceiling of the chamber for quite some time, before her heavy eyelids finally drifted closed. *I forgot to say 'sweet dreams'* she thought, for no reason she could name.



The flickering shadows created by the brazier in the corner of the room, moved across the ceiling of Vincent's chamber. They seemed to have taken on a life of their own, dancing entwined like two lovers, moving in their age-old concert of union.

Vincent stared at their movements for what seemed like hours, trying to interpret their meaning, and failing. All he knew was his heart ached, and he would rather be with Catherine, than in here. But the rock walls that separated them, one from the other, might as well be made of steel bars, and him without a key. He knew he would not traverse the space, no matter how deep his longing. *What is this distance we keep between us?* he wondered. *I thought it was that she was in her world while I lived in mine. But now...*

Eventually, his eyelids grew too heavy to remain open, and they slowly drifted shut. Against the blackness of his inner sight, stark, tilting shadows separated the darkness from itself. Vincent tossed in his deepening state of sleep, as the dream images intensified.

In his troubled dreaming he saw the smooth, pale contours of a young woman's back, her laced blouse undone, exposing much of her bare skin. In the shadowy dreamscape, there were movements, heavy breathing, and the unmistakable sounds of passion.

The scene was unidentifiable, but Vincent sensed a feeling of knowledge that this impending union was taking place in his own chamber, in the very bed he was lying on. He groaned, as the sounds of passion and movement quickened.

Only a fraction of the woman's upturned face and bare neck were visible... even that visible fragment was obscured by a broad shoulder and tumbled mane of long, blonde hair... Vincent realized in the same moment that it was his own hair. In his dream, the couple rolled together, deeper into the bed...

The woman's back became even more exposed when the movements and sounds

grew louder. Vincent watched as his own hands climbed higher on her pale skin and, in the final moments of heightened intensity, pressed hard into her soft flesh...

Then he heard increased sounds, and watched as their movements became frantic, and his hands dug deeper, before they fell back to reveal blood... it squeezed up onto the woman's pale, naked skin in two sets of gruesome claw marks. The warm blood ran down her side, soaking the blankets dark red... then there was a long, frenzied scream...

Vincent snapped awake with the terrified scream dying on his parted lips. He panted, as his chest heaved. He struggled to breathe, the nightmarish dream all too real and emotionally crippling. Was this to be his new reality, now that Catherine was so close...?



Candlelight illuminated Vincent's chamber. He had lit them all in a vain attempt to banish the shadows, and the tortured remnants of his dream. He sat at his votive-covered table, writing in his journal, but his focus was not on the words.

Father walked in slowly, leaning heavily on his cane. His son's request to see him had been urgent, but gave little detail. Jacob made note of the illumination of the room, but didn't comment on it.

"How's Catherine?" he asked, leading with what he knew to be the relevant topic. He was not insensitive to Vincent's deepening quandary.

His son looked up, laying aside his pen with slow reluctance. "Sleeping..." He closed the cover of his journal and placed a large hand over the cover, guarding whatever secrets he kept within. His lack of explanation was telling. *She is sleeping. I cannot.*

Father came in and stood comfortingly near his troubled son. "Vincent, I know how difficult this is for you." Jacob reached to clasp his shoulder.

Vincent moved the broad shoulders in a heavy shrug. "To have her so close..." The low voice was soft.

"Yes..." Father sat down heavily in a chair at the table. "How long will she be staying?"

Vincent regarded him steadily, an unspoken communication passing between them.
“As long as she needs.”

“I see...,” Father mused, raising a hand to his chin. *So there’s no... definite time when she’ll be going.* This was what he was afraid of.

“Catherine knows how much her presence here affects me.” Vincent’s gaze dropped back to the cover of the journal.

Father inhaled deeply. And deeply doubted that. “Does she? What have you told her?”

“Nothing...,” Vincent admitted.

Then she doesn’t know. She can’t possibly. Father thought. *And even if she does... she doesn’t.* He knew the thought was nonsensical. Also that it was the closest thing to the truth he knew.

He rubbed his bearded chin, thoughtfully. “Perhaps you should.”

The blue eyes snapped up. “What should I tell her that won’t frighten her? She’s already in enough pain.”

At this moment, I’d say both of you are. For different reasons. “Before, there was the safety of distance between you. But now...” Father led carefully.

“She comes here in grief. Whatever she needs, whatever sacrifice I must make, I will make to be there for Catherine.”

Jacob knew that tone. He knew the proclamation was as unshakable as the unique man before him.

“Vincent, I’m afraid for you. Afraid for both of you.”

“Father...”

“I fear that, whether Catherine stays or leaves, it’s going to cause you both deep sorrow.” Jacob tried to make sense of all his son had not told him. “Surely you considered this, before bringing her to live down here?”

Vincent rose and paced the chamber, stopping only to pick up a statuette of the goddess Venus, and heft its weight. *The goddess of love and beauty...* He stared at it with tortured eyes.

Seeing his intense focus on the image, Father cleared his throat. “You remember what

happened. The darkness and the pain it brought upon all of us?" He hated to bring up the memory now, but it was necessary. He knew that dreadful time was at the heart of his son's present anguish.

"That was a long time ago..." Vincent's hand clenched white on the statuette.

"Not so long that you've forgotten..." Father replied quietly, understanding his son's pain.

"Sometimes, Father... memory is selective. Merciful." Vincent replaced the statuette with great care. "I believed the rage... all those feelings long dead. Part of another life. A life before Catherine." He prayed they were.

Father shook his head. "They are part of you, still..." Nothing had changed, the old man was sure of that. Careful management was not eradication. There was no escaping that singular fact.

"Part of me..." Vincent whispered raggedly. Accepting a truth he could do nothing but despise. He returned to his chair, and sat down heavily.

"Before, there was a balance... a safety in the distance between you. Now..." Father's words trailed off as he shook his head, fearfully uncertain. Their community surely could not go through another incident, as had happened once before, with another young woman his son had desired... It was unthinkable...

Vincent's voice sounded choked as he said, "Now I risk tipping that balance, I know, Father..."

Jacob sighed, hating his role of playing devil's advocate, but he knew he must.

"Perhaps it would be best if Catherine returns Above..." *For all our sakes...*

"No, Father..." Vincent looked pained. "Catherine needs to be here, now. And I need to be here for Catherine." *And it was only a dream... I can hide it away with all the other things I dare not look at, dare not think of...*

After a moment, he bowed his head, and Father -- seeing his shame and despair -- reached for his son, to clasp his hand and steady him.

"I'm afraid, Father..." Vincent looked up slowly, his eyes glistening. "I've never felt so afraid..."



Catherine stirred in the strange bed and awakened – at first disoriented. She glanced down at herself and frowned. She did remember rising sometime in the night and changing into the tunnel nightgown she'd found draped over the end of the bed. She assumed it was a gift from Mary. It had been deeply comforting to drift back to sleep wrapped in its warmth.

She lifted up onto an elbow, locating herself. A tea service rested on the night stand. As she swung her legs over, feet touching the floor, Geoffrey entered the chamber, hefting a large kettle of steaming water.

The boy smiled. "Good morning."

"Morning, Geoffrey."

"Vincent wanted me to ask if you needed anything. Do you need anything?"

Catherine smiled. "Some hot water, maybe."

Geoffrey crossed to the night stand. Catherine lifted open the tea pot and Geoffrey poured, using both hands.

Catherine watched him as he stepped back. "Thanks."

Geoffrey nodded as he turned to leave.

"Geoffrey... where's Vincent?"

The boy looked back at her. "Down in the lower tunnels, working on the new chambers. He said if you want him –"

Catherine raised a denying hand. "No, no. I'm fine."

Geoffrey hesitated.

"What is it?" Catherine asked.

Geoffrey's young face grew serious. "I'm sorry about your father." His tone was nothing but sincere.

"Me, too...," Catherine whispered.

"Your mom, too?" he asked. She simply nodded.

Geoffrey put a steadying hand on her shoulder. "I guess we're both orphans, then," he said sympathetically, his young face solemn, as he tried to offer what comfort he could.

Catherine squeezed the small hand on her shoulder. "I guess it does," she agreed softly, loving him for his empathy.

Shyly, Geoffrey nodded, before he turned away and left.



The heavy sledgehammer felt good in Vincent's hands. The wooden handle, the bulky head, all felt hard, and built for work. It was a good counter to what he'd been feeling, last night. Both in his dream, and after, when he'd talked to Father.

A hammer felt nothing like flesh. And work was a good antidote for fear. Work was a good antidote for... everything, Vincent found.

For passion, for a desire for love, for frustrations at a life that could never be... It was work that helped with all of that. Work, and the purpose one got from the effort. In this case, the making of a home. Even if that home was destined for someone else.

He brought the big sledge-hammer around, feeling the familiar give and pull of muscles, as a body built for hard labor did as he asked it to. On an average day, Vincent could do the work of three men, thanks to his strength and stamina. It wasn't

a thing he was proud of, nor was it something he tried to hide. It was simply a fact of his existence.

I can break a stone wall. Not exactly an erudite accomplishment, Vincent chided himself internally, as he let the big mallet hit its target boulder. It made a ringing sound, as a chunk of granite gave way, and he felt the vibration of the blow, as it travelled through the handle and up his arms. The big stone was in the way, and would have to be broken into chunks and removed, if work was to continue.

Yes, work was a good antidote for fear.

At least until the blows increased in intensity, and began to develop a certain rhythm. One that grew increasingly faster, as Vincent worked.

Faster and... recognizable, from the dream image of the night before. The tempo of "give and take" started to sound very familiar.

Blonde hair flew as the hammer came around again... and again, and Vincent grunted, a working man's sound... or one who was passion filled, and about to be passion spent.

No!

He brought the sledgehammer down with every ounce of strength he possessed, feeling sweat run into his closed eyes, as the titan's blow struck home. Granite split and broke apart, but so did the wooden handle in his hand, unable to absorb the too-hard impact, and channel it away.

Released from the weight of the hammer, Vincent staggered backward, a useless piece of shattered oak in his hand, the rough handle worn, and work stained, but the broken interior splintered, and white. Shards of granite flew past, some passing dangerously close to his face, as the beaten remains of what had once been a good sized boulder split in half, and rolled awkwardly to each side, to resettle themselves in the chamber dust.

The rhythm of passion still stuck in his mind, Vincent forced it away. *Not for me. Never for me,* Vincent panted, looking at the destruction he'd wrought. It seemed that 'in his nightmares' wasn't the only place he could do damage.

He regained his balance, and held the broken handle in his hands a moment longer, before casting it aside as useless. If it was only that easy to discard the thoughts plaguing his waking consciousness...

"Whoa, Vincent. We having a race?" Cullen asked, bringing back a pair of full canteens, as he entered the area. He handed Vincent one. "Father said he didn't figure we'd need this area for another month or more. The way you're at it, you'll have it done in a week."

"It needs doing," was all Vincent replied, as he took a grateful swallow of the cold liquid. *Cool. Cool down. Center. Find the even place.* He closed his eyes and concentrated on the rhythm of simply drinking water.

"Looks like the handle gave way on you. Glad you weren't hurt."

Cullen watched the larger man's throat work as he drained the canteen half dry. Vincent was sweating in the chill, and his shirt and vest were soaked around the neck and across his broad shoulders. Cullen knew without asking that Vincent's back would be similarly drenched.

"You work too hard," Cullen said companionably, picking up the discarded handle.

"It snapped in my hand. Must have been a... flaw in the wood. A crack in the handle."

Cullen eyed the split boulder and the shards of granite that had flown well clear of it. *Sure. Sure it was. Only I turned that handle myself, from a piece of seasoned oak that come straight from a construction site. Wasn't a thing wrong with it. And a busted handle won't send pieces of bedrock halfway across a room.*

Cullen leaned one foot against the closest wall and took a drink, carefully considering what he was about to say.

"Take a break. We can still do the pick-work." *Not that I want to be anywhere near you, swinging a pick-axe,* Cullen thought. *You're likely to bring the whole damn wall down on us...*

Vincent stood beside him, leaving space between them, as he calmed, and eyed the area he'd just gotten finished pulverizing. After a long minute, Cullen spoke again.

"I sure do miss Kanin, when the work is like this. Winslow, too."

Kanin Evans was serving a prison sentence for the accidental death of a young boy, many years ago. And Winslow was... well. Winslow was gone. Dead and buried, thanks to Paracelsus.

"As do I," Vincent replied laconically. He knew both men were gone. There was nothing to be done for it. The hard work fell to those who remained.

"Winslow for never quitting, no matter how big the job was. Kanin for the finesse work," Cullen elaborated. "That man could spot a seam in the rock twenty yards back. Tap it just right and have it split like a tear in an old shirt. Or put in niches and little alcoves in. Remember the Anniversary Chamber he made for Livy?"

Vincent closed his blue eyes, again, and held a memory. Yes, he remembered the anniversary chamber. He remembered the sight of Catherine, laying lilacs on the bed. Candlelight had flicked all around her, from the light of a hundred ivory tapers. How beautiful she'd looked that day...

And Winslow. Winslow, who confessed he'd never found love for himself, but couldn't help but admire that Vincent had. The big man had been characteristically bluff in his comments, but always caring.

"I remember," Vincent replied, since a reply was called for. Neither memory made him comfortable. For different reasons.

So... how's Catherine?" Cullen spun the cap on his canteen, and set it down.

"She is... grieving," Vincent answered, watching as Cullen tugged his work gloves back on. "She is... trying to find her way through the sorrow of it all, I think."

"That 'finding your way' part. That's something of a trick," Cullen said, picking up a shovel and moving some of the debris aside. "When I lost my wife... well. There'd be times I thought I was done with my grief, then times when it would sneak back in. Birthdays, anniversaries... you hear their favorite song... you know."

The blue eyes flickered with understanding, and with compassion. Cullen had become a widower just prior to his moving Below.

"Grief can be a... a terrible thing. For everyone who suffers from it. Catherine is grateful to have so many people near."

Cullen moved some scattered rocks to one side, then bent over to pick up one that would not move any other way. He tossed it onto a tarp that was there for that purpose. They'd haul it away when the weight dictated they had to.

"It ain't the pain. That's bad enough. Sharp, like a knife. Takes your breath away, sometimes. But for as hard as it is, it ain't the pain that gets hold of you."

Vincent knew what grief was, and had experienced it for himself. But never for a spouse, as Cullen had, or a parent, as Catherine was now doing.

"What is it that takes hold?" Vincent asked, bending to help his friend clear the rubble.

Cullen straightened, to answer the question. "The emptiness. The aloneness. The... the knowing there's a hole in you that needs filling. I'm guessing you don't need to lose somebody to know something about that."

Vincent was surprised. He'd assumed they were talking first about Kanin and Winslow, then about Catherine's loss of Charles Chandler. He had no idea Cullen was, in his way, talking about him.

"Cullen, I –"

"Know what? I think I'm gonna leave the pick-work 'til tomorrow. You already did more than we planned. I'm gonna take this –" He hefted the broken pieces of the sledgehammer out of the dirt – "And go put a fresh handle on it. Just in case you want to take something else out on what's left of that boulder. Pain? That can push you, sure. Any pain can do that. But the emptiness? That's what drives you." He looked at the head of the hammer as he made his pronouncement. "See you later, Vincent."

And with that, the other man left the half-finished chamber without a backward glance.

Vincent looked back at the wall he'd been excavating, and the boulder he'd struck so hard it had split in two. It would need to be broken down further. Broken into smaller pieces, then hauled away.

The room fell silent, as Cullen's footsteps retreated down the corridors. Even the chatter of pipe-code was still, for the moment. The partially done room felt lonely, and Vincent stood in it, letting the feeling wash over him. The echoing sounds of the sledgehammer hitting the rock had kept him company, before, and kept his deeper thoughts at bay. Now, the silence bid him to let them in.

He considered Cullen's words. *The knowing there's a hole in you that needs filling. Pain? That can push you. But the emptiness? That's what drives you.*

Vincent sighed, and looked again at the shattered boulder, laying in pieces thanks to him, and his discomfort with the idea of making love with Catherine. *I think I'm fighting my passions. What if I'm fighting my own sense of aloneness?* he wondered, staring at the strength of his hands. Hands he now knew were never meant to give love... *Both when I was a boy ... and now?*



The hat box lay open on the small writing table. Three or four rubber-banded bundles of letters and an empty tea cup lay beside it. Catherine sat on a high-backed chair, reading an old letter she had once written to her father. Nostalgia held her in a soft grip, as the words evoked bygone years.

Occasionally, her lips tugged up into a wan smile, or her eyes frowned or squeezed shut in embarrassment. She finished with that letter, and broke open a new bundle, glancing at a few, before finding the one she'd been looking for. She settled back and began to read...

'Dear Dad, It's only been six hours since you left. We made my bed, put away my clothes, and then said goodbye. Was it really my idea to go away to boarding school? I miss you already...'

It was their first letter of parting. *If we all only realize how much time we have together, that it's limited... we'd never be apart from the people we love,* she thought.



Catherine walked slowly down a long, darkened tunnel toward a glowing light. She passed familiar faces, who smiled or waved to her in greeting from the shadows. Some stopped to speak with her softly. Others stayed back, respecting her grief.

Catherine smiled wanly and waved back, while in her mind, the recently read letter to her father repeated itself. *'My roommates' name is Hilary Fowler. She's okay. She's asleep now, and I'm writing by flashlight. Everything about her is pink. Her sheets are pink, her comforter is pink, and her notebooks are pink. She took down the curtains in*

our room and put up pink ones... Catherine smiled at the long-ago memory. *Was I ever that young?* She wasn't sure she ever had been, but the letter said differently.

She realized she felt old, now. *Sadder but wiser*, she mulled the words through her head, as she walked through the tunnels much the same way she'd walked through New York, the day before: with no clear intention or purpose, but needing the sense of motion, none-the-less.

More people smiled at her as she walked by. This aimless trek didn't feel quite like the one yesterday had. This felt better, and somehow had a purpose. *There's that, at least*, she mused.

She decided she would ask Vincent for some paper and a pen. She'd kept a diary in her youth, and she knew Vincent wrote in his almost every night. She felt that if she set her thoughts and feelings down on paper, things would feel even better than they did now...



Meditative, Catherine sat alone in a hushed section of the chamber of the Great Falls. The final paragraph of her letter echoing in her brain.

'After you left today, I started thinking about Mom. I know she always wanted me to come to school here, just like her. And I already signed up for the Debate Club and the Circle Voice. Field Hockey practice starts tomorrow. I don't know how she did it all. She was incredible. You told me not to feel any pressure. I'm trying not to. Right now, all I feel is scared. I love you, and can't wait to come home and see you again.

Love, Catherine.'



As the last syllables faded from Catherine's memory, she looked up to find Vincent standing over her. "Vincent..."

Vincent watched her for a long moment before he lowered himself to sit beside her. An intangible communication passed between them – a silent repairing of their hearts. Catherine shook her head. "You know, my most intense memory of him is an imagined one..."

Vincent didn't reply, his long look simply imploring her to continue.

Catherine exhaled a steady breath. "I see him sitting beside my mother when she died..."

"You were only ten years old," Vincent said compassionately.

"I dreamt about it almost every night. I was trying so hard to understand..."

"And you had this image of him in your mind?"

Catherine nodded. "Afterwards, when they'd taken her away, I went into her room. A chair was pulled up near the bed... I always imagine him sitting there, resting his head beside her on the white pillow."

Catherine interrupted her own reverie. "I hardly slept last night."

A tiny window of pain in Vincent's eyes was all that betrayed the memory of his own restless night. "Geoffrey said you were awake very early."

Catherine smiled. "He was so sweet..."

"And Mary said she saw you in the passage near the Whispering Gallery."

Catherine tilted her head on one side. "They're watching me... for you, aren't they?"

"Not just for me. You're part of all of us now. People are concerned..."

"I spent the entire morning by myself... and somehow, I didn't feel alone."

"You're never alone... here." Vincent kept his hands clasped before him.

Catherine smiled a small smile. "I'm beginning to understand how wonderful that is."

"Yes..."

"It's strange..."

Vincent frowned. "What?"

"Being here makes me realize what I've been missing all along. The chance to be with you. I wasn't sure if this time would ever come, if I would ever be so certain. But you know it's always been a dream."

Vincent looked down, lest his desire shine in his eyes. "For both of us."

Catherine leaned closer. "I want to stay..."

Vincent sighed, shaking his head. "Catherine..."

"You know me, Vincent. You know what I'm feeling. I want to live in your world. I don't want to go back."

"I don't want you to go back..." The confession escaped his control before he could prevent it.

Catherine breathed a sigh of relief that he did not fight her decision. "Vincent... my father is gone, and my life is changed. I'm grieving, but I'm not an invalid..."

Vincent's tone was understanding. "You want to give..."

"I want to help. I want to be productive here. Let me do something useful."

You came here to mourn, and yet you still want to help. You never stop being... amazing, do you? Vincent watched her closely, his expression filling with awe and admiration for her unquenchable spirit...



Joe stood behind his desk, trying to decide what to do. He'd said his piece after her dad's funeral. If Radcliffe needed him, he was here for her. He knew enough to respect her privacy. But days had passed without any contact, and his concerns only grew larger.

He wondered if she was eating right, or even leaving her apartment. From his own experience, after his father's untimely death, he knew such common, mundane things could become an effort to perform.

So he'd decided he needed to phone her up, and invite her out to lunch at their usual place in the Village. Fresh and sunshine, coupled with good food and uncomplicated company, should make her feel better. *What could it hurt?*

He breathed deep, and exhaled long and low. Braced to over-ride any objections, he picked up the phone and dialed Catherine's apartment. He listened intently as the phone rang and rang, without making a connection. When her answer-phone finally kicked in, he hung up, without leaving a message. What was the point, if she wasn't there to get it?

He glared at the telephone, before he snatched up the receiver and dialed another number. After a few moments it was answered. "Hi, Greg. Look, I need a favor. Can you spare me a couple of men for a private matter?"

"Sure. What do you need, when and where?" Greg Hughes replied instantly. He knew not to ask questions, but to trust his good friend's instincts.

Joe quickly explained his need, without having to say 'why.'

"I'll send a couple of uniforms right over," Detective Hughes stated. "They'll meet ya there. Anything else, just call. Okay?"

"Okay. Thanks, Greg. I owe you," Joe replied. He gave the address and hung up the receiver.

Thirty minutes later, the superintendent of Catherine's building opened the locks on her front door. Joe moved past him quickly, followed by two police officers.

Joe looked around the empty apartment, while the uniforms checked out both the balcony and kitchen. Finding nothing, Joe hurried to glance into the bedroom.

"Cathy?" He sagged with relief to discover it unoccupied. He passed the bed and looked into the bathroom. It too was empty.

He sighed as he turned back to the waiting policemen. "She's not here..." *Now what?*

He looked around the apartment one more time, finding nothing to indicate where Catherine had gone. He sighed heavily as he picked up her phone and dialed Rita Escobar's number.

"Rita? I want you to get on the computer right now, and pull all the records on any house or apartment owned by Charles Chandler. Cathy's an only child. What belonged to him belongs to her, now."

"Okay, sure..." Rita knew enough not to ask any questions.

There was a pause on the line, then Joe wrote down the addresses Rita supplied. "The Brownstone, yeah, I remember. Connecticut... okay. I know about that one, too. She mentioned it, once. What? The Hamptons? How long ago? It was in her mother's name, originally? Thanks, Rita. I owe you one."



He put down the receiver, indicating to the waiting uniforms they could leave. There was nothing more to be done here. He headed back out the front door, watching as the super locked up again and pocketed the keys.

Joe grimaced. He knew Catherine's father had owned the old Brownstone on the Upper East Side. He'd even been invited there once with her, for some fancy law office function. "Five'll get ya ten, she ain't there, either," he commented grimly.

But where else could she be?

His shoulders sagged. He would use the addresses and go door-knocking anyway. He owed her that much. He'd have to take uniforms with him again, but he knew Greg would step up. Breaking down doors to find a missing A.D.A., looking for some privacy after the death of her parent, was not in his brief.

If she wasn't at home in any of them then he would have to wait, and chew Radcliffe out for giving him a heart-attack, whenever she finally showed up again...



Days later, Catherine stood within a large concrete tunnel, near to the surface. Ahead of her, sunlight spilled through an open cellar door somewhere in a downtown food market, as wooden crates and cartons filled with fruits, vegetables and grains are passed from the world Above to the world Below.

The supplies moved along a bucket-brigade line of tunnel denizens. There was a lot of high energy and good feeling among the people, as they passed a large crate of fresh, green cabbages along the line. They talked and chattered happily.

Catherine shook her head. "I forgot how great it feels to do physical work." She passed the crate to William.

"Easy for you to say," the cook grouched, sounding a little breathless.

"Come on, William. It's good for you."

"Ten years and a hundred pounds ago, maybe...," he complained.

Just then, Geoffrey snagged an apple from a heavy crate held by William...

"Hey!" the cook shouted.

Geoffrey jumped back out of reach. "I'll start cutting up stuff for the soup, okay?" He started away down the tunnel.

William called after him. "Get back here! We're not done with this lot yet!"

But Geoffrey was already out of sight. William shook his head, peeved. Catherine smiled... then, suddenly, her smile vanished.

A half-dozen people ahead of her was Charles Chandler, another link on the chain, passing a crate. Catherine stared in disbelief, frozen with wonder. But her hesitation caused a momentary jam, as William impatiently held forth the next crate.

"Catherine?" He prodded her to move with the side of the crate.

Unseeing, Catherine passed several more crates, then glanced back up. It wasn't her father after all... just a white-haired man roughly his age. Confused, Catherine lost herself in the work, still spooked...



An elegant candelabra burned in Vincent's chamber, fighting back the darkness.

Vincent was seated at his desk, writing in his leather-bound diary. His agitation was reflected in his expression.

He read, even as his pen moved across the page, catching the flavor of the words. *'Our world sleeps... and she is near. I can feel her sadness. I should go to her... Why do I hesitate? Can fearful images and memory so rule my present action? And imagination create despair? As long as she is here, I must live moment by moment. I must always remind myself: I was only a boy... I was only a boy...'*



Catherine's pen moved across the paper. *'Daddy... I swear I've seen you twice, now. And I'm remembering the times I imagined you near Mom. I've read all my old letters to you and started again. You saved them. You saved them all. Marilyn said I was your world... but did I ever tell you... that for years and years... you were mine?*

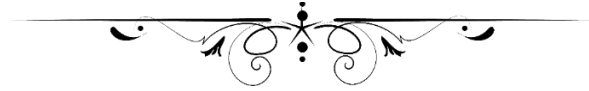
Today, I worked. It felt so good. Physical labor. Heavy lifting, and lots of that. And there you were. There you were, helping me. Like you always did. Like you did not die, and it was only a bad dream. I wanted, so desperately, to see you wearing that silly red clown's nose just one more time, and telling me not to laugh... I wanted to talk with you, so much...

How it hurts to know you'll never really do that, again...'

She lay down her pen, looking at the words she had written, as her tears dropped onto the page, smudging the ink. Her chamber was in near darkness, except for the candle at her elbow. Leaving the writing table and the high-backed chair, she passed the empty bed.

She dropped to her knees, turning to huddle on the stone floor against an alcove wall, drawing her knees up to her chest. The pain of writing letters her father would never read, had become too much to bear. The sounds of her gentle sobbing grew more and more distinct.

She sat looking straight ahead, tears dark-staining her cheeks. She made no effort to wipe them away, at last allowing her grief to convulse through her, to carry her deeper into her emotional pain...



Oblivious to her agony, in his own chamber Vincent continued to write in his diary.

'And what is my fear compared to her loss? Yet it builds in me, like a tide -- rising to drown all else out...'

His head lifted and he blinked. *'She needs me. I must go to her...'* He dropped his pen beside the open diary.

He rose from the writing table and hurried from his chamber into the tunnel beyond. He moved quickly down the dim passageway, as if some inexorable force drew him toward Catherine, no matter what the consequence. He didn't break stride as he turned into her chamber.

Catherine had crawled into her bed. As if waiting for him, she sat up, her throat tight, and the tears still coming. When she whispered his name, other suffering sounds were held back, in abeyance.

"Vincent..."

Vincent paused in the doorway, compassion swamping all other thoughts. He had no resistance to her pain... Suddenly, he was there, sitting beside her on the bed, and she was sinking into his arms, sobbing... it was as natural as breathing, and fraught with all sorts of unseen dangers... and his powerful hands closed tight on her shuddering back.

Catherine gasped, "I can't stop crying..."

"Then cry... I'm here..." Vincent pushed back feelings that had no place here, in this moment. He pulled her closer still, enveloping her fragility with his own strength.

Weep. It's all right, Catherine. I swear it is. He tightened his hold, fractionally, letting her feel his strength.

Catherine released her pain, her whole body caving in on the sorrow. Shaking, heaving, lost... Vincent could only hold onto her, as the force of it moved through her. He bent low, over her quaking body. His tumbled mane tangled with her softer tresses...

Catherine pleaded, "Don't leave me... Don't ever leave me..."

Vincent held her closer. "I'm not leaving..." *I could never leave you... never...*

Her slight body shook harder, as dread and sorrow rode her small frame. His great arms kept her wrapped within them, absorbing her agony, and channeling it away. She gripped his arms as the feeling of loss swept through her, and by extension, through them.

"Cry. Just cry," he instructed gently.

She did. They held onto one another as if neither could ever let go again...



Hours passed and the tunnel world slept. Vincent and Catherine reclined, asleep in each other's arms, facing each other. A long moment passed before Catherine stirred, dreaming. Vincent's eyes sprung open, uneasy, as Catherine stretched her length against him. He tensed... but she turned away onto her side – her back to him. Vincent remained motionless, his breath caught somewhere deep in his throat.

Time ticked inexorably by. Catherine remained asleep, but Vincent was now wide awake. Gently, noiselessly, he pulled his arm from beneath her and stood up from the bed. He looked down at her sleeping form for a long, regretful moment... before he bowed his head, and walked softly from the chamber.

Every fiber of his emotional being urged him to stay, fighting against the rationality of his brain that said he could not. He forced his boots to keep going out of the chamber and down the tunnel towards his own.

Left alone, Catherine tossed once, a questing hand reaching out to feel Vincent's

absence. She was groping blindly, and then she was suddenly awake.

“Vincent? Vincent...?”

She fumbled on the night table for a wooden match, striking it to light a candle. Vincent was gone, but the warm candle-glow soothed her, and she settled back onto her mountain of pillows.

It was only then that she noticed him...

Across the chamber, the apparition of her father sat in the shadows, cross-legged in an old armchair. A golden halo appeared about him. On his nose, he was wearing the large red clown’s ball she’d longed to see one last time.

Catherine sat forward, incredulous... “Dad...?”

“Don’t laugh....” Charles intoned in a rough voice.

“What?!”

Charles tried again. “Don’t laugh, don’t laugh...”

“Dad, would you take that ridiculous nose off? What are you doing here?”

Charles replied in his normal voice, “I’m trying to make you laugh.”

“Well, I’m not laughing,” Catherine huffed.

Charles looked hurt by his lack of success.

Catherine felt contrite. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean – ”

Charles sighed as he removed the red nose. “That’s all right. It never worked much after you were about thirteen, anyway.”

Catherine stared at him, still having trouble believing this. *This isn’t like before. He’s talking to me.*

“Dad... are you okay?”

Charles looked startled. “Me? Sure, I’m fine. Why?”

“Well, for one thing, you’re dead. We buried you six days ago.”

Charles shrugged. “Oh, that. I wouldn’t worry about that. I’m fine. I’ve seen your mother. She says ‘hello.’”

"Mom? How is she?"

"Fine, fine... Young, I'm afraid. Tell you the truth, things are a little bit awkward between us."

Catherine smiled at his honesty. "Dad... I've missed you so much."

"I've missed you too."

"These last few days... I've felt your presence so strongly..."

Charles nodded. "I've been near. That's what grief is. Soon, I'll move farther away."

"No....," Catherine protested.

"Don't worry. It's all right. It's necessary. And I understand so much more about you now. What you have is a rare thing..."

"You mean, with Vincent?"

"Yes..." He let the word stand where it was, without elaboration.

"I wish I could have told you about him sooner."

"In the hospital, that was soon enough," Charles said firmly.

"So you did see him... and understand him?"

Charles gave her a kind look. And a very familiar one. "I was moved that you brought him."

Catherine was overcome by this news, and carried into a deeper sadness. "Dad... sometimes it's so painful, I can hardly bear it," she confessed.

Charles sighed. "I know..."

"Do you think I've done the right thing?"

Charles frowned. "By giving up your life Above? Moving Below?"

Catherine nodded.

Her father was thoughtful for a long moment. "Do you remember, after we lost your mother, you always wanted to go to the Park?"

"I wanted to climb trees..." Catherine remembered with a soft smile.

"Almost every Saturday. And I would watch you. Sometimes you would be very bold

and climb very high... and then you'd look down at me."

Catherine laughed. "You were always smiling..."

Her father sat forward. "I'll tell you a secret. Inside my heart was pounding with the two words I wanted to call out but did not... don't fall... I was so worried about you and so proud at the same time." He smiled. "You wanted to climb trees, and somehow I knew I had to let you."

Just then, a grandfather clock in a passageway outside began to chime four times. Four o'clock. Charles checked his watch to make sure. He rose to his feet. "I've stayed too long..."

Catherine reached for him. "Dad, please..."

Charles looked back at her. "I can't... Goodbye, Cathy..."

As he started out, a strong wind suddenly extinguished the candle, leaving Catherine in complete darkness.

Catherine called after him, "Dad...? Dad...?"



ACT FOUR

Thank You, Vincent...

"You can't make decisions based on fear and the possibility of what might happen..."

Michelle Obama

Catherine got slowly out of bed, still in her sleeping garments. She pushed her bare feet into her shoes before she left the chamber, moving along the tunnels, working her way ever upwards towards the city high above.

Arriving at the drainage tunnel entrance, she opened the portal, rolling back the steel door before pushing open the barred gate. She moved into the sectional tunnel and down the drainage tunnel, towards the broad beam of dawn light that reflected an orange glow. She stepped out into the light of the world beyond...

The distant sounds of a waking city were reflected back to her. She stood there for a long time, listening and observing with renewed wonder the world she had left behind.

I loved to climb trees. I haven't thought about that in years. I loved to climb trees. I just wanted to see. I wanted to see everything. I wanted to see it all. And I could never fall, Daddy... never...

She remained in her current vantage point, able to see remarkably little.

Then, she turned and descended back into the earth...



Catherine sat alone on the ledge of the Great Falls. Deep in thought, she stared, unseeing, at the cascading flow of water. The decision she had made weighed heavy

on her heart.

Vincent appeared in the cavern opening. He stopped to watch her for several minutes, before finally approaching her.

"It's a cold morning..."

Catherine turned to look up at him, as he removed his cloak and draped it around her shoulders. "Thank you..." she acknowledged softly.

He sat down beside her, and together they looked out over the magnificent cataract.

"I came to your chamber to wake you..." Vincent remarked, after a long silence.

"I was walking..." Catherine replied. "I watched the dawn come up over the Park."

"As a boy, I did the same. Nearly every day. To remind me..."

"Of what?"

"That there was a sun... that there was a color called green. That there was a life and an energy beyond these tunnels and chambers." He paused, and then said, "To remind me of how beautiful another world could be..."

"It's beautiful here too, Vincent. More beautiful..."

"For me... this was all I would ever know. I had to learn how to see the beauty here..."

Catherine nodded. "Because you had no choice..."

"Even the moan of a distant subway car became the voice of what I could never have... of what I could never be..."

"But you learned."

"Yes." *I learned what I was. And are you learning what you are, Catherine?*

Catherine looked up, gathering her scattered thoughts. "When I... woke up... after you'd left me this morning, I saw my father. He was sitting in the chair at the end of my bed." She caught her bottom lip between her teeth, then said, "But it wasn't like a dream. He was there, talking to me..."

Vincent watched her closely. "Giving you his blessing."

"Yes! He... he understood about our secret. He understood... everything. I could feel his trust. Whatever I do now, it's okay."

"You found peace with him," Vincent commented softly.

"Yes."

"But not yet with yourself."

"I'm... I'm not sure..."

"Don't ever be afraid of the truth." *You mustn't be. It will rule us, unacknowledged or no.*

Catherine dropped her gaze, struggling to know what to do for the best. "I don't know, Vincent. I don't know what to do..."

"You do know," Vincent told her.

She raised her eyes back to his steady gaze, his certainty. A pure communication passed between them. All that was left was the great difficulty of putting her decision into words.

Catherine pulled in a long breath, then exhaled. "I'm sorry..."

"Don't be sorry. We both knew. We've always known... your life is Above."

"I don't want to hurt you. I don't ever want to disappoint you. I feel like I've failed..."

Failed, in being who you are? How can that be? How can that ever be, my love?

Vincent sighed deeply. "Catherine... every moment that we share is a triumph and a gift. And every one of those moments is a lifetime. Complete. There is no failure. It doesn't mean our dream can never be. It just means that now is not the right time. You came here to grieve and to begin to heal. But, now, your destiny is to be in both worlds. You are a woman of both worlds. That is who you are."

"But, my heart is here." That too, was true.

"And my heart is with you. Wherever you are, wherever you go, you take me. You stand for me. For us. For our dream. You carry our light. That, too, is your destiny."

That only left one thorny question unanswered. "Do you think that someday... Will we ever be together? Truly together?"

In every dream I've ever had, for us. Ah, but then there are the nightmares...

Vincent looked away. "Only if and when we understand how great the sacrifice and how large the fears, and are able to move through them."

The vision of his nightmare dream rose between them, and again, he clearly saw his own hands marking the fair skin of her back, drawing blood in the very moment of true joining.

He blinked, and willed the image away. He pictured her on her balcony, standing the way she had a week ago, looking up at him, as the wind teased her hair. That, too, was waiting for him, if she returned.

Still, the memory of the nightmare tried to intrude. He kept his face averted, valiantly pushing the terrifying vision down once more, while trying not to allow his sudden agitation to appear in his eyes. Her returning Above cemented the need for true distance between them.

The restless darkness within him stirred into sibilant life, urging him to reach for her, demanding he mark her soft flesh as his own, for all to see. It whispered and cajoled, seeking an outlet to satiate its own dark needs. He forced it back into silence, smothering it beneath the control of his iron will.

We cannot have more until I know more than I do now, he decided. For now, what we have... it must continue to be enough. It must. It is.

Unaware of his concerns, Catherine reached to clasp his chin, turning his face to look at her. "I'm not scared."

Vincent drew a steadying breath as he mastered his inner turmoil, before he took her hand from his chin and held it. "Catherine, we are something that has never been, and our journey is one that none have ever taken. We are just now setting out. We must go with courage and we must go with care."

He paused and then said, "We haven't failed. What you needed here was the time and chance to heal. What you needed most was—"

Catherine overrode him. "What I needed most was you!"

For a long moment Vincent regarded her with a deepening look of love. "I will... miss being so close." *I will miss being able to see you every morning and every evening...*

Catherine leaned closer to him. "Vincent... do you think, someday...?"

Vincent inclined his head. "Someday, perhaps... Come. I'll help you prepare for your journey Above."

He made to stand up when Catherine stopped him. "Can't we stay? Just for a little while..."

Vincent relaxed with the knowledge that there was no hurry. He could be here for her, like this... He settled back at Catherine's side to enjoy a few more stolen moments...



They spent time together, packing Catherine's few possessions and saying goodbye to the tunnel folk, who had welcomed her so wholeheartedly. Catherine dressed once more in her topside clothes, before carefully folding Mary's gift of the nightgown, and leaving it on the end of the bed.

She slipped her hand into Vincent's strong clasp as they left the home tunnels behind, and they walked that way for some miles. She did not say it, but she felt she was leaving a part of herself behind. More than once, she wanted to say she'd changed her mind. But the most recent events of her life, and Vincent's strange air of thoughtful disquiet, dissuaded her from voicing her nagging concerns.

They eventually arrived at the entrance to her sub-basement. Vincent set down her suitcase and hat box as they stopped in front of the jagged brick threshold.

Catherine turned to face her love. "I'm a little scared..."

"I know..." *I feel what you feel.*

"Isn't that strange..."

“No... but I think your coming home would have made your father very happy.”

Catherine smiled softly. “I think so, too.”

They embraced each other fully... and as they parted, they both looked at each other with a lingering sense of incompleteness. But whatever it was Vincent had been thinking on the journey to the surface, it kept them from saying what was uppermost in both their minds. Left with no choice, Catherine picked up her suitcase and hat box and stepped through the hole, leaving Vincent alone, longing, but unable to follow.

Vincent watched her with a heavy heart. He wanted to ask her to stay, be with him, be his... but he could not. The decision was not his to make.

Just as Catherine was about to disappear into the dusty shaft of blue-white light of her world, she stopped, and turned. She set down her burdens and walked back towards him.

She stepped through the jagged hole, and walked right up to Vincent, all the time regarding him closely... and with certainty... as she moved closer to him. Her hands lifted, almost framing his face... as she reached up to kiss him. It was not a sexual kiss, rather one of ineffable gratitude. It lasted only for a matter of two or three heartbeats before Catherine stood back, her hands dropping away from his face, her eyes fixed on him for any sign of reaction.

Vincent accepted her kiss without moving, his initial surprise overcome by an instant understanding of this precious gift. But, even as they parted, his face a mask of wonder, his usually poetic tongue remained stubbornly silent...

In that moment of fraught reticence, his large hand reached for hers where it rested, curled loosely against her thigh. His long fingers entangled with hers, his thumb moving to caress the softness of her palm in small circles. Then, of its own volition, his gentle touch moved to encounter the pulse beating erratically in her inner wrist. Its swift pass an acknowledgement of the tenuous connection between them. The movement captured him, and the tiniest of sighs feathered beyond his lips, even as he broke the contact, releasing her hand from his grasp.

Catherine looked up at his silent bemusement through her lashes. She shivered at his swift caressing of her palm. She knew she'd rocked him, which had been her intention.

“Thank you, Vincent...”

Now is the time for you to speak. Ask me to stay... she urged silently. No... don't! Tell me I have to go. But tell me you want me to return... God, I don't know what I want. I only know that whatever it is, it includes you. Always you, Vincent...

They stared at each other, transfixed by the aftermath, with a feeling of tremendous release and residual awe... and all the unexplored possibilities of their impossible relationship.

Vincent remained silent. He could barely breathe. He could only watch her, as she watched him. He ran the very tip of his tongue along inside the seal of his lips, savoring the memory. The taste and flavor of her mouth lingered on his. Sweet and salty, and ineffably Catherine.

She had kissed him, and he hadn't been prompted by his darker self to respond in any way that could hurt her... his great hands still hung at his sides, his emotional state entranced, watchful and appreciative of the gift. There was nothing here of his recent nightmare dream, of his paralyzing fear about hurting her with the sheer force of his overwhelming passion, once it was released...

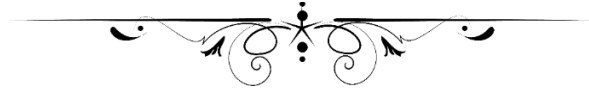
But what would she make of his muteness, his inability to say what was foremost in his bemused mind... *Catherine, I love you. Stay with me... live with me... love with me... be mine, always...*

After waiting for him to say something, *anything*, Catherine's look became wistful. She was the first to break the tenuous contact. She looked down and away from him, not sure what else she could say or do, now.

She waited fractionally for Vincent to ask her, to voice whatever it was that he was thinking or feeling. She'd seen it in his gaze, an intense look of longing that nearly made her cry. But he remained mute, and watchful.

Woman of both worlds. I love you. Vincent inhaled deeply. He swore he thought it loud enough for it to be speech.

Understanding his reticence, Catherine turned away, and stepped back through the jagged hole in the brickwork. She picked up her bag and hat box once more, and walked away towards the dusty downplay of blue-white light. Perhaps there was nothing more they could say to each other...



Joe stood behind his office desk, frowning as he looked through a file of paperwork on the O'Neill case. It was an impossible mess. He was talking to himself beneath his breath, as his finger travelled jerkily across the lines of transcript. Trouble was brewing for someone, by the depth of his scowl.

He didn't see Catherine, walking right into his office as if she'd never been away. Not until she spoke. "Hi, Joe..."

"Cathy!" He jumped as if he'd just been shot. He looked overjoyed, then his scowl returned. "Where were you? I mean, where the hell have you been?" He dumped the open file onto his desk, before setting his hands on his hips.

Catherine smiled at his obvious concern. "Thanks for worrying."

"I went to your apartment, you know. But you weren't there." Joe sighed, not really angry, just immensely relieved. "You weren't anywhere."

He wanted to shout, *I searched for you, everywhere! I rummaged through the Brownstone, and drove all the way out to the Hamptons. I even took a wasted trip up to your place in Connecticut! You owe me big, Radcliffe...*

Catherine saw his deep frustration, and she wanted to hug him. "I'm ready to come back to work."

"You don't have to do this, you know..." Joe scrutinized her thoroughly, as she stood calmly before his desk. She seemed refreshed and at peace with her loss, but he was still wary.



"I know," Catherine replied.

"Escobar's been handling things just fine. Gave her a chance to flex some muscle, for a change." He didn't mention the file he'd just been studying. It was shot full of holes, but he would make it work, if he had to.

Catherine nodded. "Good for Escobar. What about me? Joe, I truly want to come back to work."

Joe considered this, as he scrutinized her even more closely. "You sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Really?"

"Really."

After a long pause, he nodded. "Okay."

Catherine beamed her appreciation. "Great."

Joe couldn't help smiling either, as he shook his head. "Can I be honest with you?"

"Always..."

"Escobar's been sinking... fast. Why don't you go save her before she drowns? The O'Neill case is a real —"

"Can it wait 'til after lunch?" Catherine overrode him, her eyes pleading for his understanding.

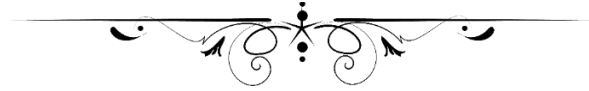
Joe blinked. "What...?"

"If it's all the same to you, there's something I have to do, first."

Joe didn't know what to make of her odd request, but he was too glad that she was back to question it any further. *What could another few more hours hurt...? Right?*

"Sure...", he agreed cautiously. He prayed she wouldn't just up and disappear on him again, if he let her out of his sight. He doubted his heart could handle a new defection.

"Thank you, Joe..." Catherine smiled once again, warming his heart, before she turned to leave.



Catherine stopped her car before a tall, imposing brownstone on a quiet tree-lined street on the Upper East Side. She opened her door, and got out slowly to look around. The house was now hers, along with everything else, since her father's death. It gave her no comfort.

She stared into every window in turn, as if seeking something, before she walked up the steep front steps and, using her father's key, entered the building. She made her way through the silent, shrouded house towards the basement door. Opening it, she flipped a light switch and a bare bulb flickered on, revealing a steep staircase.

She descended the stairs into a large, musty room jammed with stuff. Stacks and stacks of magazines, old furniture, and paintings covered with dust, a bag of golf clubs. A naval uniform in a clear plastic bag, hung from a hook in the concrete wall, above a deflated basketball. The true remains of what Charles Chandler called his life. Catherine stood in reverence for a moment, her eyes scanning this shrine to the past. It was almost as if her father stood beside her, encouraging her to search...

Finally, she crossed to a cluster of cardboard boxes in one corner. She started with one on the floor, opening it and searching its contents -- a collection of old blazers and coats. She moved onto another box, seeking something precious that she was determined to find, even if it took her all day...



Central Park on a clear day was one of the loveliest places on earth. Catherine smiled, as she crossed the green lawns. Maybe she was prejudiced, having been born not too far from the vast green expanse. The same green Vincent loved to see...

The sky above was singing, it was so clear. The wind was gentle and cold, and the birds were twittering in the trees. In a long coat and scarf, her heart on the rise, Catherine breezed along the flagstone path. She knew exactly where she was going...

Veering off the path, and up a grassy slope, she arrived at the base of a tall and powerful oak tree. She tilted her head back and looked up through the branches, newly budding with spring leaves. She shrugged her coat off, letting it fall to the

ground, and unwound her scarf. And raising her hand to the first branch, she began to climb...

Vincent arrived at the drainage entrance to the world Above. He couldn't see Catherine, but he can feel the exhilaration in her spirit... He wanted to be as close as he dared to the beauty of her warmth, singing too clearly to him across their bond...

Catherine climbed high through the branches... and finally found a safe perch...

Vincent moved from out of the shadows, taking one step into the sunlight. He looked up, as if sensing her presence, high above the Park. He reached for her, across the divide between them.

Catherine smiled as she eased to sit in the branches, breathing hard from exertion. She gazed around her in wonder. She hadn't done this since she was a kid. She tilted her head to look way down at the ground.

"Don't worry, Dad. I won't fall. I won't fall..."

Then, she reached into her pocket, and in a closed fist revealed the clown's nose. She regarded it in her open palm... and finally placed it on her own nose. It sat there for a moment – before a glorious smile blossomed on her lips.

Far below her and some distance away, Vincent also smiled, as he imagined Catherine, as she opened her arms wide, heavenward... She threw her head back and began, ever so gently, to laugh – a gift to her father. Her laughter quickly deepened with joy and hope, reaffirming life and enduring love...





ACT FIVE

I Am Yours, Always...

“For life and death are one, even as the river and the sea are one...”

Khalil Gibran

Catherine elbowed open her apartment’s front door and stumbled inside. Pushing it shut with her shoulder, she leaned back against the white painted surface. She was tired, weary to the bone. And it wasn’t the good tired feeling of a job well done.

“Continuances!” she spat out the word as if she hated it. The whole week had been wasted on the O’Neill case, which appeared to have no end...

She’d returned Above four weeks ago, after seeking refuge Below. Now, she heartily wished she was back there, in the candle-lit silences and the unalloyed pleasure of Vincent’s daily company. She missed that more than anything: knowing that when she got out of bed in the morning and before she retired for the night, she would see him. Below, he had always hovered at the edge of her vision, like a protective angel. Even when he was busy he was ‘near.’ But now...

Since she had returned to her own world, she’d hardly seen him. There had been notes pushed under her door, or delivered in her wrapped sandwich at work, and one even

lying on her balcony table, placed beneath an apologetic rose. They'd been full of excuses made about work that needed to be done, or obligations that needed to be fulfilled; Chambers that needed to be excavated, ill helpers who required some form of care. His usual life, in other words, when things became hectic.

To Catherine, it seemed as if the whole world was getting on with its own affairs, while she either juggled continuances or stood on the sidelines.

She spared a glance toward her empty balcony. Not even a note was waiting for her, there, though considering it was barely dusk, that was unsurprising.

Still, it was disheartening.

"I truly wish I knew what I've done..." She pushed away from the door, moving to the couch to dump the load of files in her arms. Her purse and coat followed.

She eased her back, wearily. It was Friday night, and she didn't have anything in the fridge worth eating. On impulse, she stopped beside the phone to order a pizza.

Outside, rain started to fall, exactly matching her mood. She listened to the soft drumming of the downpour as she paid for her pizza. She tipped the delivery guy, before locking up behind him and turning out all the lights.

The darkness crept into her apartment as she sat at her small dining table consuming her food, adding a glass or two of red wine. She didn't switch on any lights, remaining watchful for any moving shadows cast across the filmy curtains, leading to her balcony.

Her full briefcase and the files barely shouted at her for attention, but she steadily ignored it. *No. Not now. Not now. Too much of you.*

She found that Charles Chandler had been right. Her grief had moved off, a tick. She hadn't 'seen' him again, either waking or sleeping, and she was growing more accustomed to his absence, in her life. She'd had one more crying jag since she'd returned home, but this one had been softer, more poignant than agonizing. She'd shared it with Marilyn, one day, when the two women had met for a drink.

The world was moving on.

Lost in a wandering kind of reverie, she moved from the table to the couch and just relaxed, the second glass of wine in hand. *Bygone days*, she thought, remembering

some with her father, and some with Vincent. Everything seemed tinged with a kind of bittersweet nostalgia, even her week spend Below. Time was moving everything away, as time always did.

Her mantle clock chimed the hour of midnight, before she finally got up and padded into her bathroom to shower and change for bed. She pushed down beneath the covers, trying to keep her eyes open, still looking and listening for movement on her balcony, but the minutes ticked by and there was still nothing to see or hear.

Eventually her eyelids became far too heavy to remain open, and they slowly drifted shut. Against the blackness of her inner sight, warm candlelight danced lightly against deeper velvet shadows. Somewhere close, a fire crackled, cheerily. Sighing deeply, Catherine curled into her deepening state of sleep, as her dream intensified. *This is where I long to be...*

She saw a large, rock-cut chamber and knew it to be Vincent's. On the long, quilt-covered bed a couple lay entwined together beneath the blankets. There were subtle movements, heavy breathing, and the entrancing sounds of increasing passion.

Catherine's limbs straightened and flexed as she whispered, "Vincent..."

She groaned on a sigh, as the sounds of passion and movement quickened. In her mind, a broad, naked shoulder rose into the light half-covered with a tumbled mane of long, blonde hair... In her dream, the couple rolled together deeper into the bed...

"I am yours, always..." Vincent whispered against the side of the woman's neck, his hands moved everywhere, on her arching body.

"Always..." Catherine agreed throatily, seeing her own fingers push through the strands of his hair, sweeping down over his chest, before grasping his strong forearms, encouraging him to further, and even more intimate exploration.

The movements and sounds of their love-making grew louder. Catherine saw Vincent's strong hands appear from beneath the covers and played across the woman's pale back. They pressed against her soft flesh, but there was immense care in the subtle movements, an unconscious knowing that any pressure from the fearsome fingertips could wound, dreadfully...

Those hands, which Catherine loved, caressed and encouraged, as the increased sounds and movements became frantic, then there was a long, blended cry of

intoxicating release...

Catherine snapped awake with the wanton cry dying on her parted lips. She inhaled, as she finally managed to regain some jumbled sense of her place, and of her aloneness. She struggled to breathe, the dream all too real and impossibly erotic. Her heart hammered against the cage of her ribs.

"Vincent... oh, Vincent, where are you?" she finally breathed, rolling onto her side, as she began to cry.

It hurts. It hurts to feel lonely, again.

She pulled the sheet up, and let the soft tears drift into her pillow. Wiping them aside, she willed her body to relax. *A dream. It was only a dream...*



"Catherine..." Vincent tapped a fingernail on a window pane of her bedroom.

The room beyond stayed dark and shrouded. Through their shared bond he knew she was sleeping now. But before that, he had felt the full extent of her emotional turmoil and shuddering release. And how she'd cried for him in the aftermath, when he hadn't appeared on her balcony for some weeks now.

Vincent sighed long and low, as he tapped on the glass again. Behind his shoulder the first streaks of daylight began to pierce the sullen sky that had only recently stopped raining.

"Catherine... I need to see you..." He rattled the door handle.

"Vincent...?"

He felt her awaken, and scramble from the bed. Her bedside light flicked on. In the next moment she had thrown on a robe, and opened both the curtains and doors. She was standing in front of him, warmly sleep-tousled and very inviting. And looking extremely cross with him.

"Catherine..." He took a step back, allowing her to slip past him onto the wet balcony.

"You shouldn't be here. The dawn is too near." She turned to chastise him. "Someone could see you. You must go!"

"I needed to see you..." Vincent moved closer to her, but still keeping a distance between them.

"And you didn't think that I've needed to see you these last weeks...?" Catherine pulled her silk dressing gown closer across her chest. "I have longed to see you, Vincent. But you stayed away. Why?"

"I was... afraid..." Vincent's great head lowered. "When you were Below, and so close to me... I began to dream... about things I should not..."

"About me?" Catherine came back to him, curious now about what he wanted to confess.

"About you... And about being... with you..." Vincent's eyes strayed towards her bedroom, and the wide bed dimly visible within. "And about how easily I could hurt you..."

"And that frightened you..." Catherine breathed, laying her hand on his tense forearm. "Oh, Vincent..."

"I... you seemed so happy Below, with me. But your closeness awakened in me hopes and expectations I had no right to impose on you. I know that now."

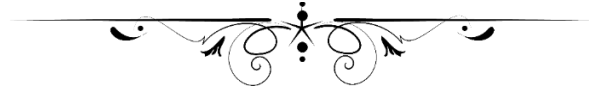
"And what you wanted to say to me, at the threshold... after I kissed you..." Catherine slid her hand down his forearm and clasped her fingers through his. "You can tell me, Vincent. I won't be afraid."

"Another time..." Vincent's breath left him in a great rush as he glanced up at the lightening sky. "It is early and I must go." He dropped his gaze from the rising sun to her upturned face. "I will return tonight, and we will talk. I promise..."

"Very well. I will be waiting for you..." Catherine lifted her arms to enclose his neck, going up on bare tiptoe to kiss his cheek.

Without thinking Vincent turned his head in that same moment and his unique mouth connected with hers. He didn't hesitate or pull back, allowing the intimacy that seemed now to be as simple and as necessary as breathing.

"Tonight, then..." Catherine whispered, before releasing him. "Now go, please, before you're seen..."



Peter Alcott sat back in a metal office chair, trying to let the stresses of the day drain out of him. The clinic had been standing-room-only for a while; one of the consequences of setting up shop in a part of the city where many didn't have access to insurance, or good health care. He helped where he could.

He eyed the industrial clock on the wall, watching the black second hand sweep up past the twelve. It was after 7:45 at night. Well past quitting time, in the medical facility where he donated his talents, every Tuesday and Thursday.

"I'm getting too old for this," he remarked to no one. Even the receptionist and the cleaning staff had left some time ago.

On nights like this, Peter would have been inclined to ring up his old friend Charles, and see if he could coax the other man out for a drink, or even a late supper. If Hal Sherwood happened to be in town, the three of them would spend a long evening at the Tavern on the Green, and lie about their respective golf scores. At least a little.

In other times... Peter sighed.



He wanted a glass of decent malt whiskey, and he knew who he was going to raise a toast to. *To absent friends*, he thought, knowing sitting here wasn't getting him any closer to going home to an empty house. He missed his late wife so very much, on nights like this. There would be no-one waiting for him. No hot meal prepared and no easy conversation about his hectic day, as they shared a bottle of wine.

Peter passed a tired hand over his lined face. Nothing was as it used to be.

He rose from the chair and collected his coat, making his way through the dimly lit rooms to the back door of the building. It was a misty night, the kind that made him tug the belt that much tighter, as he prepared to take on the New York weather. His car was parked in the alley, right near the exit. He flipped open the door lock as he fished his car keys out of his coat pocket.

And nearly dropped them on the floor.

When he opened the door, a man in a coat and hat quickly detached himself from the deeper shadows of the building, and shoved his way inside. "Close the door, Peter. It's me."

Peter knew who it was. Which was to say he didn't know, because it was impossible to know, yet he did. He'd been friends with Charles Chandler for too many years not to recognize his voice, and his form, even deep within a London Fog, with a tan hat pulled low over his eyes.

"Charles? Charles... Chandler? Oh my God! It... it can't be! I went to your funeral!"

But clearly, it was. Charles pushed the door shut behind him and made sure the shade was pulled, since Peter seemed incapable of moving, for the moment.

"I... I know. And it's a lot to explain. I don't mean to... to spring it on you like this, it's just... I had no choice. I counted on where you'd be. It is Tuesday, after all."

Tuesday. Yes, it was Tuesday. And Peter had no idea why he was struggling with what day of the week it was, right now. *Charles? Is it... is it really you?* He bent to recover his car keys from the scuffed tile floor. *You... you knew where I'd be. And when I'd be away from people, how often I work late. You counted on it. Charles?*

Charles removed his hat and set it on the nearest table. Familiar, salt and pepper hair greeted Peter's amazed eyes. He looked the same as he usually did, minus a couple of pounds, perhaps. It was hard to tell, under the belted coat.

"Peter, listen to me. In twenty minutes I'm supposed to meet with some... brilliant cryptographer. If I'm not there on time, the FBI will tear apart the city, looking for me. The only reason they let me go this far is because he won't come to them, he won't let the Feds anywhere near his place, and he'll search to see if I'm wearing a wire. He doesn't trust the Federal Government. Imagine that."

"The FBI? Charles I... I still can't believe--"

"I know," Charles interrupted uncharacteristically. "This isn't exactly how I thought my retirement years were going to go, either."

Peter studied the worried features of one of his dearest friends. Even in the dim light, Charles Chandler looked older than the two months since he'd been interred in the cemetery. The soft lines around his eyes had deepened, and his face was a mask of grim concern.

"How is Cathy? Please tell me you've seen her," Charles begged.

"Cathy...?" Peter collected himself. Years of dealing with medical crises came to the fore, as he gathered his wits. "She... she's fine, Charles, fine. Dealing with it all, of course, but... doing well, under the circumstances." *She has a lot of loving help.*

"Good, great..." Charles nodded jerkily. "You have to understand. I can't contact her. They're watching her."

"Who? The FBI?"

Charles shrugged his broad shoulders. "The FBI and... someone else. Maybe. It's why I had to do this, Peter. Four months ago, a man came into Chandler and Coolidge. An attorney. His name was Patrick Hanlon. He... he needed certain contracts ratified... said he was a friend of Mark's."

"Mark Coolidge?"

"They're about the same age. He was casual and charming. There was nothing to suspect in his presentation. How was I to know?"

Peter pulled out a stool and sat on it. Charles, for all his apparent agitation, did the same. "Charles... know what?" Peter asked, knowing time was of the essence, and trying to keep up.

Charles checked his wristwatch. He was a man keeping close track of the time. "The companies listed on the contracts were empty shells. I did the search myself. None has been open longer than two years, and four have offshore addresses that don't even exist, on a map."

"You mean they're dummy corporations?"

"The kind... illegal people use, when they want to launder their money. The amounts they were discussing were... staggering."

Peter gave a low whistle. "Why didn't Mark deal with him? Surely you went to the police with your concerns?" He was still trying to process the fact that Charles Chandler was sitting in front of him, alive. And that he'd somehow become involved with an undercover investigation.

"Mark was away in Africa, on that trip of a lifetime he'd always talked about taking. So I contacted an old friend I knew at the Attorney General's office, right away." Charles nodded, clearly not wanting to spend time on this part of the tale. "And before I knew it men in long coats with badges were in my home, searching it for listening devices, and telling me my life... and Cathy's life... was in serious danger. Simply because of what I suspected. Of... who the whole sorry mess was leading to."

"It was that serious...?" Peter couldn't believe all he was hearing. "So you... you faked your own death."

"It wasn't my idea." Charles grimaced. "They faked it. I promise you I'm not that clever. But Peter... what Cathy is suffering... no child should have to endure that. And... and I'm afraid there's more..." Peter didn't think it was possible for Charles' grim expression to look any more concerned. But the worry in his good friend's eyes told him otherwise.

Peter's heavy eyebrows shot skyward. "More? You mean, more than 'you're alive after I was at your funeral, and you're in hiding, now?' Tell me where you're staying. I'll send Cathy to you. She'll be so relieved—" He pulled out his prescription pad, ready to write down an address. Or at least a phone number.

"No! You don't understand. I have to stay... completely hidden. If you knew all the rules I was breaking right now..." Charles looked to the side. "The man I... uncovered... he'd kill Cathy as soon as look at her. He was also at my funeral, watching my girl like a vulture. She's in danger if she tries to contact me, Peter. I'm sorry, old friend. But this is the only way. I just need her to know I'm doing okay."

Charles checked his watch again. "I'm running out of time and there are things I need to tell you. Things about Cathy. Things you don't know. Things no-one knows." He was agitated.

Peter realized it was something he almost never saw the normally collected Charles Chandler be. He rose from the stool, pressing one hand to the other man's bent

shoulder, trying to calm his agitated friend. "Charles, for whatever it's worth, I promise you I—"

Charles rose, as well. "Promise. Yes," he interrupted again. "You must promise never to reveal what I'm going to tell you. When I was in the hospital... when she thought it was near the end... Cathy did something. Something... extraordinary. She... confided in me. She... gave up a very important... a-a secret." Peter could tell that Charles was struggling with what he was saying. The erudite attorney in him never stammered, or hesitated, when he spoke. *All this has taken one hell of a toll on you, my friend. Yet here you are, talking about Cathy. And a secret...*

Peter's blue eyes flickered, at the realization. *And isn't it just a night for those? A secret?* "Cathy... told you a secret?" Peter asked carefully.

"Yes," Charles' tone became guarded. "A secret. There was a ... a man with her. But not a man." Charles clenched his fists, in consternation. "I have no true idea of what he was..." He shrugged helplessly. "A monster, or some kind of medieval knight errant..."

"Maybe it was just a fevered dream..." Peter frowned. It was then that he realized that Charles was no longer wearing his wedding ring. *Because they took it off in the funeral home. Gave it to Cathy. When did they—?*

"Oh, Peter, I was drugged, but I was very aware of what I saw. It was no dream. I have no time to explain and I'm not even sure how much I understand, myself." Charles paced a few steps, then turned. "But... Catherine is in love with someone who lives... outside... how we do. He's... incredibly unique. Physically. And he says he loves her. And I believe him. But he can't stay near her, can't keep her safe, and I need you to check in on her, often. I need to know she's—"

Peter sagged with relief. He shook his head in amazement. "Let me save you some time," he cut Charles off, with a wave of a well-manicured hand. "Vincent. His name is Vincent," he finished for his friend. "And yes, I know about them. I've known him since he was an infant, Charles. Cathy never told me she told you."

"You knew...?" Charles took a step back, stunned. *A night for revelations, indeed.*

"You... you knew about all of this? About him? For how long?" Charles wasn't sure if he felt relieved, outright confused, or even betrayed, by his friend. He was going with 'relieved.' But it was close, and all so unbelievable.

Peter huffed a small laugh of disbelief. "Not long after they met. I was away at Susan's at the time. I... he's a good man, my friend. The very best. You can count on Vincent to take care of Cathy, no matter what comes."

They had no time for the particulars. Not now. "And this... this Vincent. You think he can... protect my daughter?" Charles demanded heavily. It was the only important thing, as far as he was concerned, right now.

Peter nodded, and there was authority in his tone. "I think he already has. He'd lay down his life for her, Charles. Give her anything he has. He saved her, back when she was attacked, then missing. Nursed her back to health. And then... well. Their love... It's special. Truly something to behold."

Charles blinked. "You... you knew... everything? Did everyone else know about this but me?" He was having trouble processing. "I mean, I'm her father. Surely she could have told me..." He stopped and stared. "She didn't feel she could trust me..."

"It's more than a simple matter of trust. I'm sorry I couldn't tell you. None of us could. Their secret is not ours to share. Too many lives depend—"

"I am still her father..." Charles picked up his hat, and waved Peter's explanation aside. "When I think how much time I spent rehearsing what to tell you..."

Peter gave him a small smile. "No one else knows. You're right that as far as the Above world is concerned, Cathy is largely alone, in this. Her boss doesn't know. Her friends, either."

The Above world. The Below world. Charles realized he was going to have to start thinking about New York in different terms than the ones he was used to.

"I don't like how alone this makes her. How vulnerable she will seem."

"There are many who live in Vincent's world who would tell you she isn't. That she's more alone Above, than she is with them, Below. And by a good deal. I take care of her as far as I am able."

"Thank you, Peter." Charles nodded.

He had to trust his friend. His friend who seemed to know far more about the world Catherine had stumbled into than he did. He had no other choice *but* to trust him. "I want her kept safe. That is all that matters."

He frowned. "I dreamed about her, one night, not long after my... fake funeral. I... she was in bed, in some strange place, some kind of rock cavern, and all dressed in white. I thought it was just a crazy dream born of stress and my inability to reach her..."

His lawyer's mind gnawed at the issue. "She'd been crying, she looked so sad. I tried to cheer her up, as I always had when she was a child. She didn't buy it. So... we talked, about many things. At some point Caroline was in the dream too. She looked so young and alive..."

Charles sighed as he held out a piece of paper with a red circle tucked inside its folds. "This is a letter, explaining as much as I dare. And my poor attempt at drawing a clown nose. She'll know what it means. Please give it to Cathy as soon as you can."

Peter accepted it and tucked it into his coat pocket. "I will. How much longer?"

Charles checked his watch. "Seven minutes. I'll make it."

"No, I mean, how much time until you can come home? Can be with Cathy, again?"

"I wish I knew..." Charles looked pained. "I don't know, Peter. I just don't know. This is very big. Molloy Davidson is involved. And if that wasn't big enough, Hanover Norton Trust. Many heads would have to roll before I can contemplate any kind of a future."

It seemed this was Peter's night to look amazed. As Elliot Burch had once told Catherine, there was almost no business in the city that hadn't had dealings with one of the two firms. Or both of them.

"The international brokerage firm? Good God, they're huge!" Peter was beginning to grasp how large a mess Charles had unwittingly stumbled into. Kings, Presidents and Arab sheiks used such institutions. And hardline gangsters, apparently. "Really huge," he finished.

"And open on every continent except Antarctica. *Everyone* uses them. Governments use them. Even Chandler and Coolidge uses them. I think that's why they approached Mark. And he had to be out of the country at the wrong time..."

Charles settled his hat on his head, and tugged the forward brim down low over his eyes. "I don't know how much longer. Weeks, months. A year, maybe. It all depends on people other than me, as well as what little I can contribute. Like now."

He moved toward the door, and Peter watched him go. "Good luck, Charles. Stay safe. Stay careful."

Charles turned. "I will. And you know to tell Cathy I love her. Well out of earshot of anyone else."

Peter nodded, patting his breast pocket. "I will." He crossed to the door before Charles could open it, and hugged his friend, hard. "One day, you and I are going to sit with our grandchildren, and tell this story."

Grandchildren... is it even possible? Charles had a feeling he knew who his grandchild's father would be, if that were possible. He pictured, once more, the incredible face of the strange man who had stood over his hospital bed, promising to love and protect all that Charles held most dear...

Catherine... He returned Peter's hug, pressure for pressure. It felt good to be embraced by a friend, again. He had none of those, where he currently stayed. But that didn't matter, now. Nothing but making sure Cathy was safe and looked after, did. That, and figuring out what a certain page on a certain book said, so he could get clear of this mess and come home.

"Maybe we'll even laugh about it, someday. A long time from now," Peter added, not really believing it.

Laughing didn't sound likely to Charles either, but he had no time to argue. "For our grandchildren's sake, I hope so, Peter, I well and truly hope so."

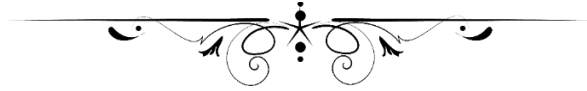
And with that, Charles released his friend, opened the clinic door and disappeared, into the misty New York night. He was soon gone, almost as if he'd never been.

Somewhere out in the night, a clock chimed the hour.

"Be well, my friend..." Peter stared into the darkness for some time, before stepping over the threshold, locking the door behind him, and walking slowly towards his car.

I think I'm going to get to have a drink with someone after all, Peter mused, a small smile teasing at the corner of his lips, as he patted the pocket Charles' letter was in.

Hang on, Cathy. Charles has one more clown nose to send you. I don't know what will happen next. And I don't even know 'when.' But I know that Vincent will be with you, whatever comes...



*"The hardest thing about the road not taken is that you never know where it
might have led..."*

Lisa Wingate

