

A RAY OF HOPE

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(from *A Ray of Hope*)

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"Irena, where are you going? It's only seven-thirty!"

It was Saturday morning, and Ray was halfway out the door when she heard her mother calling. She went back to the foot of the stairs.

Extra practice time at the gym," Ray called up the stairwell.

"This early?" Phoebe d'Angelo came downstairs, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

Ray shrugged. "I signed up for the uneven parallels at eight. I gotta go." She grabbed her gym bag and sprinted for the door.

"Irena, did you eat breakfast?" The words drifted after her as the door swung shut.

The exercise felt good, as it always did. Ray was less interested in the competition end of gymnastics, more in the satisfaction of improving and perfecting her own skills. It frustrated her coaches and made the other girls resent her, because she could have won any competition in her class, but entered only enough to keep her eligibility. She would have been perfectly happy to practice alone and never compete at all.

"Ray," Stell called her aside, after she'd executed a flawless routine and half-botched the landing from sheer carelessness.

"Coming," she said distractedly, watching Melissa warm up. She joined her coach in the tiny office off the main gym floor.

"Sit." Stell pointed to a chair; Ray sat. "This may be a little premature, Ray; I've only been coaching you for a few months... Your muscle structure is perfect, your technique is smooth - but you're almost fifteen, and your competition record is ... well, why don't you compete, Ray?"

She shrugged. "I don't do it to compete. I do it because I like it. I know I'll probably peak in a year or two, and this year would be my last chance to win- but I'm not interested in winning." She grinned, and Stell noticed the sharp incisors marring an otherwise perfect smile. "I started gymnastics because my second grade teacher told my mom I had the right body structure. If you don't want to coach me, I'll live. I just don't care about winning." She loosed her golden-blond hair from its rubber band and shook her head until the long, thick mane fluffed around her shoulders, then stood. "Excuse me, please? I need to shower and change."

While she dressed, she reviewed her plans for the day. Today she'd explore Central Park. She had to know why the dreams seemed to lead her there. Dreams of the park- always at night- and of closed-in spaces, corridors, tunnels, vast caverns... None of it seemed connected.

But Ray's dreams were not merely dreams. She knew the difference by now, could tell when she was seeing the world through someone else's eyes-- but whose? There had to be at least two someones, for perspectives changed, shifted frequently. Yet, awake, Ray could not visualize the faces, she could only recall a pair of bright blue eyes that matched her own.

She bought a bagel from the pushcart on the corner and munched it as she walked the six blocks from the gym

to the park. The morning was sunny and held the promise of the first really warm day of spring.

Central Park was *big*. Ray had studied it on maps, a vast green area contrasting the city blocks around it. She had awaited today's opportunity, since her stepfather had announced he was tired of commuting from Connecticut. But first the move had kept her busy, then adjusting to a new school; then the grey slushy days had kept her away from the park. At last her chance had arrived!

She traipsed through the park, up one path and down another, following the route she'd planned on the map. Some areas looked vaguely familiar as she pictured them in darkness. She kept on, avoiding other people - the park wasn't precisely a safe place to hang out, and Ray was thankful she'd developed her ability to be unnoticed when she so desired.

She got lunch from another pushcart - a savory sausage on a roll and a can of cherry soda - and kept walking. She passed the carousel, still boarded and locked this early in the season, and - on a whim - left the path and cut across the grass.

The sky had been clouding over for about an hour when Ray checked her watch. Three-thirty. It was beginning to look ominously dark. Even as that thought crossed her mind, the first spattering raindrops ricocheted off her shoulders and caught in her hair. She ran, looking for a dry place to wait out the rain.

Thunder growled, and lightning began to move in from the ocean.

Ray was momentarily blinded by a flash of lightning. She fought panic, running without missing a step. Not knowing where she was going, she headed for cover.

The round gaping mouth of a large storm drain loomed widely before her. Already soaked to the skin, she ran on into the dry darkness.

It was as if she had been here before, many times. *'In dreams, she had*. It was eerily familiar; the turn here, the small slope underfoot, the dead end that wasn't.

Ray opened the false barrier of the iron gate and unerringly tripped the latch of the secret door. Dazed, she walked into the lighted tunnels beyond.

She didn't know *how* she knew where she was going, which turns to take, which ways kept her from becoming hopelessly lost. She just knew. And, without thought, without volition or conscious decision, she made a beeline for that place seen most frequently in her dreams.

'Intruder!' The word was passed, quickly, and an intruder alert plan put into action.

"It's just a girl," Kacey reported to Vincent, "Not much older than me. But... she looks like she's... drugged, or something." She bit back her next thought, wondering why...

Vincent turned toward Father for advice, but Father was gone.

"He went to the Pipe chamber," Kipper supplied helpfully.

Although Vincent was nominally in charge of the intruder alert plan, he had not supervised before without Father's ever-present guidance. He turned to Catherine, wondering at the thrill of mixed fear and delight she let slip.

"Let her continue," he said finally. "Watch her. Let me know if she takes a false turn." Surely someone had given this girl directions, perhaps even a post-hypnotic suggestion; Kacey thought she might be drugged... Well. As that may be, Vincent was curious.

"Curiouser and curiouser," Catherine whispered, an undertone for Vincent's ears alone.

He couldn't shake the feeling that, on some level beyond his comprehension, she knew what was going on.

Two of the youngsters pelted in; Eric and Donny.

"She's coming here," Eric said breathlessly.

"Here," Donny emphasized.

"Thank you." Vincent waited, tautly, not understanding the sudden tension in himself. He had been beaten, captured, shot, abused - why should one young girl, an outsider, an unknown, affect him so?

Catherine came to her feet as the intruder entered, and reached for Vincent's hand. She was stunned, but knew, more or less, what was happening. Vincent didn't.

Still in a daze, Ray stepped down the three steps and walked across the chamber to stand facing Vincent.

Vincent gazed into those eyes, so nearly identical to his own, and knew.

At that moment, and with uncanny timing, Father and Emily entered the chamber from opposite doorways. Father stood and stared, his jaw hanging - but Emily took in the scene and hurried across the chamber, handing baby Jake to Mary as she went.

Emily put her arm around the girl's shoulders and turned her away from Vincent, breaking their locked gazes.

"I know you," Ray said huskily. "I've seen you in my mirror, in dreams."

Emily led her away from the stares of those assembled, leaving Catherine to take care of Vincent - as it should be.

"I know you," Ray repeated as she was seated on the edge of Emily's bed. "You're my mother, aren't you?"

Emily could only shake her head. "Tell me your name", she managed to say.

"Ray. Irena Teague." Tears welled up in those blue, blue eyes. "**Who are you?**" the girl demanded.

"Emily," she paused. "I can't be your mother, Ray. I can only be your friend."

"But you are..."

Emily shook her head again, tears streaking her own face. "Your parents are the people who raised you, who love. I'd like... to be your friend, to... earn your respect. But I'm not your mother. I can't be."

Together they wept; after a few minutes, Ray looked up. "But... he's my father, biologically..."

"Biologically...." Emily let that stand as an argument.

"What is he?" Ray whispered.

Emily shrugged. "Vincent is... Vincent." She managed to smile as she stood. "Come on; I think you ought to meet him properly."

Catherine led Vincent to his own chamber before Father could pounce. Once thought dominated her mind, threatened to burst into a shout of hope and love; that girl is Vincent's daughter - and she's perfectly normal!

Vincent turned to her, stricken. "Catherine... I didn't know..."

She flung her arms around him, held him reassuringly. "I know, Vincent."

"Emily never told me."

"I know." She looked up at him. "Emily told me, weeks ago."

"She should have told me!" He was more hurt than angry; he had, he thought, a right to know.

"She didn't want to hurt you," she said gently. "Vincent... that little girl is your daughter - and she's normal!"

Vincent turned his face away, torn between his anguish and Catherine's joy. She wanted a child, he knew. She deserved a child. And... A spark of hope, of possibility, lighted the dark clouds in his mind. 'His daughter----- normal.' Oh, there was no mistaking her parentage, not with those eyes, the fluffy golden hair, the high cheekbones and long chin. But she wasn't malformed, or even abnormal. She was small for her age - she'd be nearly fifteen - but Vincent had grown eight inches in seven months at that age... and Emily was only five feet, five inches tall.

He gently released himself from Catherine's embrace and paced, recalling his daughter's face. Learning to love her. Letting himself realize that not only was he empathically connected to her, but that she shared his empathic abilities. He was half lost in the wonder of that discovery when Emily guided the girl into his chamber.

"Vincent," she said timidly, the first time he had ever heard fear of him in her voice. "Vincent, this is Irena Teague."

"Please call me Ray," the girl said, her voice husky with emotion.

He knew it was emotion, mixed emotion such as he was feeling himself. She projected it, with as little control as he supposed he'd had at that age. Carefully, he controlled his own emotion, somehow knowing just how to handle the texture of the situation.

"Ray." He said her name, feeling love, and unwarranted pride, filling him to overflowing. "My name is Vincent." He put as much of himself into those four words, not knowing what information his daughter could gather. How sensitive would she be, this youngster who was the product of Vincent's empathy and Emily's sensible compassion - brought up in an environment of unknown? How much would she know of her own potential, how much had she developed, how much had she learned to block out?

Ray nodded, raising her head to look again into her father's eyes. So many things were reflected there, pain and sorrow, love, joy ... It was too much to absorb at once; she shunted most of it aside, to be considered later. "I'm so confused," she said softly.

For answer, Vincent hugged her, then held her at arms' length to study her features. It seemed, suddenly, so natural that he should be getting to know his daughter. But, still, Emily should have told him!

Father chose that moment to limp in, at top speed, his face contorted with an unlikely mixture of curiosity, anger, bewilderment. **"Vincent,"** he began shrilly.

"Father." Emily interposed herself bodily between them. **"Vincent didn't know."**

The intensity of her tone stopped Father in his tracks - and shook both Vincent and Ray to the bone. Emily realized what she'd done, and took Father's arm to lead him away. "Please, Father, it's my fault. I should have said something years ago." She let her feet lead them back to her own chamber, where she sat on the edge of the bed and stared at her shoes - an old, old habit.

Father leaned on his cane. **"Emily, how could you?"**

She let herself cry, not caring what he thought. "We were kids," she said, anguished. "We never thought..."

"Precisely!" Father snapped. **"You never thought! And now - and now ...! Just think what this is doing to Vincent!"** Father's cane thumped, hard.

"I know what it's doing to Vincent!" Emily retorted. **"What do you think it's doing to me?"** She sighed

heavily, brushing at stray tears, then softened her tone. "It was only once, Father. We were so young, It was... experimental. It never occurred to me that Vincent could be... fertile. I was raped, remember? I thought... well, the obvious. Not that Vincent ... And when I saw her, I knew - but I had to give her up for adoption. I had to!" she sobbed. "And not a day has gone by that I haven't thought of her, and wondered..." She broke down, then, and cried. "... and I gave her away because I was afraid of you!" It wasn't true, not entirely, and Emily regretted those words even as they left her lips. Yes, she had been anxious lest Father find out, but she had been mature enough, sensible enough, to know that she couldn't possibly hope to support an infant while finishing college.

"I'm sorry, Father," she said softly. "I'm sorry. But I can't undo the past. And I never imagined she'd find her way down here... but she has Vincent's abilities, don't you see?"

Father found his voice. "She cannot be permitted to remain here."

"Of course not," Emily agreed. "She has a home, parents who will miss her if she's away too long... but I don't think you can stop her from returning."

Father turned to go. He had never yet won a battle of words with Emily as his opponent, not since she was a small child. Someday, he hoped to figure out why.

Emily washed her face and gathered her composure before returning to Vincent's chamber.

It took Catherine several minutes to get Ray and Vincent seated, whereupon she got Ray out of her damp jacket and wrapped in a blanket.

"Thanks," Ray murmured, grateful for the warmth of the soft old wool. "Your face.... I've seen your face so often..." She reached to push aside the fall of Catherine's hair, to see the scar beside Catherine's ear, then dropped her hand and looked away. "It's too much," she said. "All my life, I've tried to understand why I'm different, what makes me different. It was easier to believe I was imagining my differences..."

"They're real," Vincent said quietly. "As real as I am... as real as you are. Catherine knows."

Catherine nodded.

Vincent smiled at Ray, and she smiled back, showing those exaggerated canines. "Tell me about yourself," he suggested.

"Don't you know about me?" Ray was startled. "Can't you tell things about me?"

So, she had read his unspoken message, but interpreted it too broadly.

"I only know your feelings," Vincent soothed. "Not your thoughts, or your memories. I can't read your mind."

"Then how come..." Ray stopped. Maybe that part was her imagination.

And Vincent realised; Ray could read minds.

"Not all the time," she hastened, "and not when I want to. It just happens, sometimes, when I'm not expecting it. That's why I thought you could, 'cause... maybe you'd've learned to control it." Her lower lip trembled. All sense of Vincent's thoughts had fled, and she suddenly felt very young and unsure of herself. "B -But I know..." she couldn't complete the thought aloud, 'I know I'm not the only one, I dream it.'

"Emily," Catherine said into the heavy silence.

Vincent turned to her. "What?"

"Emily," Catherine repeated. "Her dreams, her ways of knowing things - I don't think she actually reads minds, but that potential, Vincent, mixed with your gifts..." She trailed off, thinking how like a fantasy that sounded. But - with Vincent, anything was possible!

Emily returned, her face still showing signs of tears. "Vincent, I'm sorry. I should have told you. I just couldn't..."

Ray turned to the doorway. "Please don't hurt," she paused. "Emily." It was hard not to say Mother. She had never felt as if Phoebe was her mother, even though the woman had never given her reason to feel that way. Ray just didn't feel an emotional connection or bonding with her adoptive mother, especially since Phoebe's remarriage. She did feel a natural closeness to Emily, and Vincent - and, through Vincent, to Catherine. It felt odd, but wonderful.

"No," Emily said. "This hurt is nearly gone. I'm all right, Irena."

"Please," Ray begged. "I don't like to be called Irena. Please call me Ray."

"I'm sorry." Emily took her daughter's hand. "It's such a pretty name."

"My... mom... picked it," she explained. "But my dad always called me Ray... He died when I was nine. Mom got married again three years ago, and ... my stepfather doesn't think much of Ray as a girl's name. He doesn't like me, either." She shrugged. "I'm not too fond of him, either, so I guess we're even." She remembered to look at her watch, then; it was almost seven. "Oh, no! They're gonna kill me for being out this late!" She stood, alarmed, shedding her blanket.

"What is the address?" Vincent stood, too.

She gave it; the street was in a neighborhood of old homes and townhouses, an area recently '*gentrified*.'

"We can travel quickly underground," said Vincent.

Even so, it took the better part of an hour to get Ray home. Vincent pointed out a more direct route, which had been closed off years ago, as he showed Ray the way out - into a subway station two blocks from her home.

"Be careful," he warned.

"I'm careful. Jerry - my stepfather - made me take self-defense lessons when we moved here. I know how to kill muggers seven different ways," she shrugged, the picture of nonchalance, then studied her shoes intently. "Vincent... Will I be able to come back?" Before he could answer, she looked up at him again. "I know it has to be a secret, and I won't let anyone know, I promise. I can sneak around Mom and Jerry. I... I need to see you again, and Emily." Emily had had to remain behind, to nurse Jake. "You know how I feel..."

"Ray." Vincent held her face between his hands. "I can't refuse you - although Father may have his own opinions. You know, at least, some of the ways; if you become lost..." He shook his head.

"Bang on the pipes," Catherine finished for him. "And stay put. It may take a while for someone to find you - but they will."

"Thanks," Ray smiled. "I'll be back." And she climbed the ladder-like stairs and slipped out the door to the subway station.

Catherine turned to Vincent and held him for a long moment.

Ray let herself in the back door after checking the garage for Jerry's car and finding it absent. She climbed the

back stairs and found the note on the kitchen table.

4:30pm

Gone out for the evening

Microwave whatever you

Want for dinner. We'll be

Back by 11:30

Love, Mom

She heaved a sigh of relief. They'd left early enough that they wouldn't know how late she'd been out! She went to her room and changed her still-damp jeans and T-shirt for a warm fleece robe, before ransacking the freezer in search of a French bread pizza.

As Vincent walked Catherine home, his thoughts were strangely divided. Uppermost in his mind was a sort of paranoia: Catherine - what could she be thinking? Did she want to keep on as they had been, or... expand the scope of their relationship and unlock long-avoided emotions and reactions that he had forced aside - some more recently, in order to control himself with Catherine. He had had only a few sexual experiences in his life, and those were long ago. One had produced Ray - how wondrous! - and the others were now painful memories. But Catherine ...!

The middle layer of his thought was with Ray, her feelings, a new awareness of the empathic bond which he now knew had been there all along, dormant.

And, an undercurrent in his mind, over and over again, *'She should have told me!'*

"Vincent," Catherine broke gently into his mood. She wasn't sure how to phrase her thought. "Vincent, I stopped being afraid of you a long time ago." She could only hope he'd interpret that the way she meant it.

"I know that." He stopped walking, searching for the right words. He wanted her - how he wanted her! - but he wasn't ready. He needed time. Without that, he thought he just might lose control, be ungentle with her. And that was something he chose not to risk.

"Catherine," he began ... and paused, the sweet ache clutching at him, at the sound of his voice repeating her name.

"Vincent." She reached for him, but he couldn't let her hold him - he needed his head clear.

"No, Catherine." His voice, rough-textured silk, broke with the emotion. "Please. Try to understand, I ... I love you, I... want ... to make love to you..." He sounded hoarse, harsh, to himself and knew he was on the verge of breaking down and crying.

She waited, patiently, with infinite kindness.

He pulled himself together and went on, "I want... that experience... to be perfect, Catherine. I need time... We cannot afford to... to rush matters... We have... all the time in the world." It was the most difficult speech he'd made in his life. A part of him marveled that he could be in a position to say those things, while another fragment trembled in fear lest Catherine misunderstand him.

But Catherine only nodded, with that endearing half-smile and hesitantly reached out her hand to him.

He took it, and the contact loosed a flood of her feelings in him; love, trust, joy, the deep friendship that formed the basis of their relationship... and, for the first time, the strong positive energy flow of Catherine's sexuality, sparking a response in the darkness of his inner mind, a slow unfolding of some of the many layers of his protective shell.

Sharing that special awareness, they walked the rest of the way in silence.

At the entrance where Catherine would go out, they stopped-- and stood, for endless moments, until at last they merged in a kiss. And then, without another word, Catherine smiled and went home.

Vincent did not return home then, not for many hours. He walked, and walked, until he knew dawn was breaking over New York, a cloudy-bright Sunday morning. Weary, but at peace with himself, Vincent crept into his bed and fell asleep.

Ray's plans to return to the tunnels were thwarted for almost two weeks. One thing after another kept her too busy, and too necessarily visible, to disappear for a few hours. Yet, she accomplished patience, knowing that her biological parents were close enough to feel that a moment's concentration would bring her awareness of them to the fore.

She knew Phoebe wondered what was going on, but Jerry just annoyed her. He repeated over and over again - mostly to Phoebe, but sometimes in Ray's presence - how completely weird Irena could be, when she set her mind to it.

That still hurt, as it always had, but now the hurt was more bearable. Knowing the source of her differences, knowing that she was not only not crazy, but also not alone in her oddness, made her outlook much lighter.

In fact, as Ray began to enjoy being herself, she suddenly became better-liked and more popular at school. It was as if her talent for anonymity had begun to work in reverse!

Finally, though, she could wait no longer. When she stopped home to change out of her school uniform, she phoned Phoebe at work.

"Hi, Mom," she said, more brightly than she wanted to. She was a little upset at having to lie, but she didn't know what else to do. "I'm sorry to bother you at work, but I wanted to let you know I have a babysitting job tonight and I might be late getting home."

"All right. Just call if you need a ride."

"Okay. Bye." As Ray hung up the phone, she wondered exactly what she'd do about that. She supposed, in a pinch, she could walk from the subway again. She just wouldn't let her folks know she did it.

It was no great trick to re-enter the tunnel system from the subway station, even if it did cost her a token to get there. Ray was careful to retrace the route exactly, but even so, she lost her way - and couldn't find a pipe to bang on!

'Don't panic.' she told herself firmly as she backtracked, but she was more frightened than she wanted to admit. How could she bang on a pipe when she couldn't find one? She knew she was panicking, not thinking rationally, but she couldn't stop. All the turns looked alike - and unfamiliar. Desperately, she tried to recapture the dazed rapport with Vincent that gave her access to his memories of the tunnel routes, but she couldn't relax enough to do it. Grimly, close to tears, she gave up trying to find her way and instead searched for a pipe.

She found one, finally, and a rock to strike it with. Failing to remember Morse code for a message, she

signalled 'SOS' and hoped someone would hear it.

Vincent heard the first 'SOS' when he was only a few hundred feet away. He came up behind his daughter, closing his gloved hand over her cold fingers and the rock she was holding.

"Come," he said softly, "I'll show you how to read the signs so that you won't get lost again."

He showed her the concealed symbols that served as road signs, the codes for 'down', 'exit', 'dead end', and 'way clear ahead'. Ray copied the dozen or so glyphs onto a scrap of paper she found in her pocket, and noted mentally where messages of this nature were most likely to be hidden.

Vincent let Ray lead him onward, following the signs. One stretch of tunnel was dark, even though the route seemed to point that way. Ray hesitated, looking to Vincent for guidance.

He held himself expressionless.

"Is this the right way?" Ray asked.

"I won't let you get lost," he said neutrally. As with any child or new resident, if Ray was to find her way alone, she should learn the dark ways too.

Hesitantly she proceeded, coming to the apparent dead end. In the dark, she could barely see Vincent at all, though she knew, empathically, precisely where he was. Knowing he could see her - for his night vision far surpassed hers - she favored him with a wry look.

"Well?" she prodded.

"Look for the signs," was all he said.

"Next time, I'll bring a flashlight," she said, annoyed, as she felt for the carving she knew must be there. She found it, a triangular symbol, one Vincent hadn't explained. "It's a triangle," she reported. "What does that mean?"

"The triangle indicates a secret door," he told her. "Somewhere on or beside that wall is a latch to open it. Learn each door's latch by touch, until you can find them in your sleep. Someday, you may need to pass through quickly."

She probed the brick wall, feeling with both hands, until she found the secret. A seemingly loose brick, when pressed on one end, caused the section of wall to swing aside. She could see, then, that the brick wall was built onto a hinged metal frame.

The tunnel beyond was lighted - and inhabited by a family who had made their home in several small side chambers. The suddenly wide tunnel served as a living room, workshop and playground.

"This isn't the way we came when you took me home," Rayh muttered.

"From where you'd lost yourself, this route is shorter," Vincent explained before he was attacked by two exuberant small children.

"Vincent! Tell us a story!"

He set them down gently. "Not today, James. Dori, where are your shoes? You could get sick, going barefoot." He favored their mother with a smile. "Sandra. How is George?"

"Looking for work," she replied cheerfully. "Tell Father I'll bring the children to be examined tomorrow, if that's all right."

"They had been living in their car," Vincent told Ray as they went on. "They went to a shelter for a meal and a bath; while they were inside, the car was stolen. They lost everything."

"So they came here?" Ray asked.

"A Helper brought them to us. If they had stayed on the street, the children might have frozen in that last big snowstorm."

"But you can't take in all the homeless people in New York," Ray picked up on his thought, then continued with her own; "You can only take in people you can trust. And not too many for your resources." She frowned to herself. "In a way, it's almost a Utopian society," she mused aloud.

"Not quite," Vincent said, amused by teen philosophy.

They crossed the Pipe chamber; Pascal, intent on incoming messages, was oblivious to Vincent's wave of greeting.

At the threshold of Father's chamber, Ray stopped and looked up at Vincent. "How did you find me so quickly?" she asked. "I'd barely hit that pipe, and you were right there."

"I felt your fear when you became lost," he admitted. "I hurried to find you then, before you began to signal."

Ray was embarrassed. Could he feel her every emotion? All the time? She had grown accustomed, over the years, to her own stepped-up, hypersensitive perceptions of other people's feelings, but no one had ever read her before. In the midst of her confused embarrassment, she felt an arm around her shoulders and a warm outpouring of love and concern.

"It works in more ways than one," Vincent said softly.

Ray had no words. After a few uncomfortable moments, she changed the subject.

"Where does everything come from?" she asked. "Furniture, clothes, food..."

"Many things are cast off by the world Above," Vincent explained. "Other things we need, such as medicines, are given to us by our Helpers Above. We live simply, and we have everything we need."

"When I'm an adult," Ray selected her words carefully. "Can I come here to live?"

Vincent looked at her earnestly as he spoke. "Ray, you have a life in the world Above. Those who join our community as residents do so because they must, because they have no viable alternatives. But," he continued, "you can become a Helper, if you wish."

She followed his thought, that Helpers were not only necessary but also appreciated and loved, as members of an extended community.

Again, she changed the subject. "Vincent... does it bother you to be my father?"

"No!" he exclaimed, then went on more calmly. "It... disturbs me, that I never knew you existed, all these years." He held her shoulders. "Ray, you're my daughter. I love you. Now that I have the chance to know you, I can't imagine a world without you."

The silence that followed was cut short by the tap-tapping of metal-shod wood on stone. Father stood a few feet away, wearing an expression of displeasure.

"Vincent," he said in the shrill tone that told his anger, **"I told you, you were not to bring her back down here! This girl does not belong in our world."**

Vincent took a deep breath and did his best to sound calm and reasonable. "Father, I... respect your opinion, but I cannot obey your wishes. Ray is my daughter. We have the right to know each other."

"She has been adopted," Father argued, ignoring Ray as if she were not present. "In their world, that makes her someone else's child. Even if you were... different ... if you lived up there... you would have no claim. Must you make a young girl's life more difficult, more complex than it must already be?"

At that, Ray jumped to her own defense. **"You don't know what my life is like,"** she snapped. **"My dad died when I was nine. My stepfather resents me, and my mother has been in and out of drug treatment four**

times - and she's doing coke again now. No, I don't want to live in a fantasy world," she read Father's thought and contradicted him before he could speak. "But I need... something I haven't been getting, I don't know what; and If I can get it here, ***There's no way you can keep me out!***"

If Vincent was taken aback by the maturity of Ray's assessment of her needs, Father was positively stunned. He took two involuntary steps backwards and leaned against the wall.

Jacob Wells was not a hard man, nor a cruel one. He did what he saw as necessary, not to hurt anyone, but because he believed in the inherent rightness of his actions. Yet, he had a certain difficulty in reversing his decisions, once made. On an emotional level somewhere below consciousness, his leadership suffered when he changed his mind.

To Jacob Wells, his responsibility as community leader was a grave one. He hated to be weak-seeming; it would reflect poorly on the entire community - but, in this case.....

The girl standing before him - half child, half woman - was, for all practical purposes, his grandchild. He had fostered both Vincent and Emily ... and, against his will and better judgement, he felt something for their daughter.

At length, he held out his hand. His voice caught in his throat as he pronounced, "Ray... you are... welcome among us."

He couldn't face Vincent just then, with both their emotions running high and higher. He turned, slouching slightly, and returned to his chamber.

Vincent took his daughter's hand. "Ray, what did you do to Father?"

"I only wanted him to know how I feel," she said shakily.

"He does, now."

Ray bit her lip. "I'm sorry... Vincent." She wanted to say 'dad' but forced herself not to. In a way, Father was right - she belonged, legally, to Phoebe and Jerry. And she might not be getting along with them right now, but they continued to provide for her in a way that her biological parents could not. Vincent and Emily could not send her to private school, to gymnastics and riding lessons, to expensive summer camps or winter ski weekends upstate and in Vermont with the school ski club.

For a long moment, Ray thought about those things - then decided she'd gladly give them up if it meant she could spend more time walking and conversing with Vincent!

She looked up at him directly, and he returned her gaze, seeing the question in those ice-blue eyes.

"Yes," Vincent replied.

Ray hugged him, knowing without seeing that his eyes were full and tears escaped down his cheeks. She cried, too, and said the words as if they constituted a rite of passage, a secret ritual between daughter and father; "I love you, Dad."

END