

MY BROTHER'S KEEPER

by Catherine Edwards

(from Tunnelcon One)

Catherine shuffled the papers stacked high around her desk, looking for the one slip of paper she needed. She took a bite from her sandwich and reached for her coffee, which was perched precariously on the corner of her desk. She took a big gulp and let the hot liquid trickle down her throat. Before she could swallow, the phone rang and she chewed furiously while she dug for it.

"Catherine Chandler," she answered at last, wedging the phone in the hollow of her shoulder. "Can I help you?"

The operator's voice was tinny, hard to hear. "Collect call for Catherine from Vincent. Will you accept charges?"

Her heart stopped beating and she fumbled for the phone. "Wh--what? Operator?"

"Will you accept charges?" the operator repeated testily.

"Yes---yes! I'll accept the charges."

"Putting the call through now." There was a series of blips, beeps and whirs and the line cleared.

"Vincent?" Catherine whispered furiously, "Vincent, are you all right? Where are you?"

"You certainly sound interested." Even accounting for the bad connection, the voice was definitely not Vincent's, but it teased her mind, half-familiar. Catherine gasped, put her hand over her mouth.

"Who is this?" she demanded, her mind racing.

There was a low chuckle. "Huh! You go away for a few months and nobody even remembers your name."

Catherine inhaled sharply, placing the voice at last. "Devin! Devin - is that you?"

A full-fledged laugh came over the receiver. "Sure put a dent in your dreary day at the office, didn't I?"

"I ought to hang up this phone right this minute ..." she began, eyes narrowed.

"No - no - no! Don't hang up! Wait - I'm sorry! Please - I've only got one quarter."

"A likely story." In spite of herself, Catherine smiled. "Besides," she added smartly, "you called collect - remember?"

There was a small silence. "Oh, yeah," Devin said sheepishly. "Well, anyway - it's not too far from the truth. I just flew into town and I'm flat busted, not to mention hungry..." He trailed off hopefully.

"Where are you now?" Catherine demanded.

"I told you - I just got into town. I'm at the airport in one of those little plastic phone booths."

"Is Charles with you?" Catherine queried. Her mind's eye was conjuring all sorts of interesting images.

"No," Devin answered quietly. "Charles didn't want to come back to the city yet. He's staying with some friends of mine for a few days." His tone tightened. "Can you come pick me up?"

Catherine shook her head in disbelief. "Does Father know you're here?"

She could hear him smile. "Nah," he said casually. "I, uh, lost his phone number."

Catherine couldn't help it. She laughed.

"How 'bout it?" Devin prodded. "I made you laugh - I heard you."

"All right, all right. Yes, I'll... pick you up. Can you stay out of trouble for an hour?"

"One hour?" Devin demanded.

"Yes - ick you up in front?"

"Fine. Thanks. I'll see you then. Hey ..."

Catherine put the phone back up to her ear. "I'm listening."

"Are you, uh, still hanging around with my 'little' brother?"

Catherine smiled wryly, wondering what he knew, considering her options. "You might say that," she said mysteriously, and before he could respond, "Bye." Catherine dropped the phone back into its cradle and indulged in an all-out grin.

Joe walked by her open door, peeked inside, stopped. "Daydreaming again, Radcliffe? We *work* here, you know."

Her mouth fell open in surprised indignation, but he grinned and ducked out before she could respond, or take aim. Fuming, Catherine tackled the mess in front of her with a vengeance.

Devin was waiting for her inside the glass doors, duffel bag slung casually over his shoulder. Catherine parked and went inside, searching the sea of faces. Devin touched her arm and she started, then threw her arms around his neck and hugged him enthusiastically. Taken off guard, Devin returned her embrace, enjoying the contact.

"Hey," he began gruffly, "hey, Catherine..."

She pulled away and looked him up and down critically, eyeing the heavy sweater, the faded dungarees, the leanness in his face.

"You look good," she conceded at last.

Devin cocked an eyebrow and returned the look, lingering on the generous length of shapely legs her dress revealed. "You look great," he said simply. "I've missed being around other... people."

Catherine fixed him with a squelching look, but he only laughed and motioned her on.

"Lead the way," he said easily, and when she had turned he murmured, "please!" She spun around, eyes narrowed, trying not to smile. Devin grinned broadly, insufferable.

"One more crack like that," Catherine said with exaggerated dignity, "and you can walk - got that?"

Catherine took off almost before he could shut the car door.

"You know, this is a nice car," Devin mused, running a hand over the leather console. "I used to have one like this." He paused and grinned. "Mine was red."

She shot him a look, feigning amazement. "You have a driver's license?"

"Yes, I have a driver's license," he mimicked. "Jeez. Are you always this nasty, or are you still mad at me over that phone call?"

She was silent for so long, he began to worry.

"Well?" he prompted anxiously.

"I'm thinking." She shot him a quick look, saw his uncertainty turn to surprise, then grudging respect. He shook his head slowly while she laughed at him.

"So tell me," Devin said at last, "How's the Old Man?"

Catherine passed along all the news she could remember from both worlds. She repeated a lot of what Father had written to him over the months, filling in the details Father was so reluctant to send through the mail. On the subject of her relationship with Vincent, she was purposefully evasive, not sure what to say.

Catherine unlocked the door to her apartment, pushed it open and stooped to pick up the stack of mail on the floor. "Come on in," she called over her shoulder. "I have to change clothes, so make yourself at home - fix a sandwich, whatever..." She disappeared into the bedroom.

Bemusedly, he looked the apartment over, scanning the artwork, the comfortable furniture. By the time Catherine reappeared in casual clothes, Devin was making inroads into the roast beef in the refrigerator. He looked up guiltily.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "I didn't mean to clean you out."

Easily, Catherine made him another sandwich, stacking the roast beef high. She took his cup and poured him another glass of milk.

"Nonsense," she insisted. "Do you have any idea how long it takes one person to eat a whole roast?" She opened a cabinet and got out a battered cookie tin, which she offered to him. "Or a batch of cookies? Have one - they're oatmeal raisin."

"Matter of fact, I do." He reached for a cookie and their eyes met briefly. They munched cookies in companionable silence.

"And how is Charles?" Catherine asked at last.

Devin smiled a smile that was completely free of cynicism. "Charles is good. We found him a private tutor, and he's reading on the college level already - everything he can get his hands on." Devin laughed ruefully. "I'm running out of books."

Catherine laughed. "I think I might know someone who can help you there. So, what are your plans? How long are you going to stay?"

"Just through the long weekend," Devin said quietly. "I have... promises to keep." He looked up at her suddenly, his expression rueful. "Sounds funny coming from me, huh?"

"Not at all," Catherine assured him, laying out another cookie before she put the tin away. "You've been a good friend to Charles. I think Father's very proud of you - of what you're doing."

Devin shifted uncomfortably. "Yeah, maybe," he muttered. "We still don't see eye to eye on a lot of things. Going home... It's funny, you know. All of a sudden, you're a kid again, clumsy and awkward and trying so hard to ..." He snorted and fell abruptly silent, staring at the floor.

Catherine sighed and pushed her hair back from her face. "Going home isn't easy. Up until he... died, my Dad could make me feel like a precocious 8-year-old, throwing a tantrum to get my own way."

Devin smiled, conjuring up the image in his mind. "Did it work?"

Catherine smiled back. "Sometimes." She touched his shoulder gently, and her voice was soft. "Vincent will be so glad to see you. He misses you a lot, Devin. Having you home - even for a weekend..."

"I'm not sure I'm ready to stay Below," Devin said quickly. "I was thinking I might stay with Sam, or get a cheap hotel somewhere ..."

"You'll do no such thing," Catherine said firmly, pulling on a jacket. The tunnels could be chilly until you got into the living quarters. "You can stay here." Devin's head snapped around.

"Oh, hey, I didn't mean..."

"I know you didn't." She fixed him with a stern look. "I have plenty of room, and there's even a tunnel entrance in the basement in case you change your mind."

Devin shook his head slightly. He wasn't entirely certain Vincent would like the idea of him crashing in the same apartment as his lady love. He opened his mouth to protest, but Catherine cut him off.

"I happen to be a Helper in good standing. Father would never forgive me if I let you stay in a hotel."

"But I ..."

"And Sam," she teased, "would never forgive me if I let you stay with him."

There was a moment of silence, then Devin sighed and looked away, touched and moved by her persistence.

"Thanks," he said simply. "I appreciate the offer." When he looked up at last, his eyes were shining and he grinned wickedly. "I guess I am getting too big to share a room with Vincent. Besides - he steals all the covers."

Don't I know it, Catherine thought to herself. She tugged on his arm. "Come on - I know how anxious you are to get home."

They used the tunnel entrance in the basement of Catherine's apartment building, creeping stealthily down the hanging ladder. Catherine took the final jump without looking, landing nimbly on her toes.

"Watch that last step," she cautioned.

"Hey, I grew up here - remember?" Devin released his hold on the ladder and landed squarely on his backside on the damp floor. Catherine diplomatically covered her mouth with her hand and looked away while he straightened and wiped the sand from his trousers.

"That ladder's new," he muttered, embarrassed.

"Of course," she murmured, leading him through the dark.

They stopped before one of the many secret doorways. After a moment of quiet groping, Catherine's hand found the smooth tapping stone and she beat a swift tattoo on the pipes. Catherine had only just replaced the stone when Devin's hand gripped her arm and he put a finger to her lips, motioning her back the way they had come. Surprise gave way to anticipation when she saw the mischief in his eyes, and she snuck obediently out of sight while Devin took a stand before the door. They waited. There was the unmistakable sound of footfalls on the other side, and the rusty rasp of a lever being pulled. Golden light came spilling through and Vincent stepped into the passageway, reaching for ...

"Devin!" Startled, Vincent grew still, staring at his brother in amazement. "I thought..."

Devin put his hands on his hips and snorted. "You were expecting someone else? Jeez - it's a wonder I come home at all. You'd think..." Devin's complaints were muffled by the crushing embrace of his "little brother" and Catherine stepped from the shadows into Vincent's line of sight, giggling.

"We wanted to surprise you," Catherine explained, gazing at him affectionately. He smiled and reached for her hand, pulling her between them.

"Well - you did!" He bent to kiss her, but Catherine shot him a quick warning look, aware of Devin's watchful eyes. Vincent caught the look, understanding her reluctance, and embraced her instead. He wrapped his other arm around Devin and pulled him into the hug. "I can't believe you're both here." Vincent gazed from one to the other, delighted. He motioned them through the door and reached for the switch that would shut them off from the cares of the world Above.

"Come - Father will be so pleased."

"Almost got it," Mouse insisted, his forehead beaded with perspiration. Jamie sighed and shifted positions on the mound of pillows. He was doing better, true, but ...

The apples came crashing down around Mouse again, and he made a small impatient noise and flopped down beside Jamie.

"Never going to learn," Mouse insisted miserably. Jamie scooted closer and put a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"Of course you will, Mouse, but learning to juggle takes time. You can't learn in one day."

Surprised by her touch, Mouse looked up into Jamie's brown eyes. There was a moment of electrical silence, then Jamie ducked her head and looked away. Mouse reached for her hand, covering it with his own for an instant. He stood abruptly, pulling her with him.

"Almost had it," he insisted solemnly, then his face broke into a delighted grin. "Practice later - time for supper!" he scampered down the tunnel tugging Jamie behind him.

"Vincent! Catherine!" Father began. "I was beginning to think you'd ..." He trailed off abruptly as Devin stepped up between them, gazing at his son's uncertain face.

Catherine watched Devin's predicted transformation as Devin pushed his hands in his pockets, took them out again and fought the impulse to duck his head.

"I was in town," Devin began lightly, "and I thought I'd... drop in for a visit."

Father stepped forward, forgetting his cane in his haste, and grasped Devin's shoulders firmly. Awkwardly, Devin returned the embrace while he endured Father's scrutiny.

"Well," Father said at last, and though his voice was stern, his expression was gentle. "I'd say you're long overdue for a visit home." He looked down the passageway they had come. "Where's ..."

"Charles didn't come. He's staying with friends," Devin interrupted, anticipating Father's question. "I'm just here for the holiday weekend." Slowly, Father nodded.

"I must say your timing seems to have improved," he teased. "Supper's almost ready." His gaze included Catherine and Vincent, who were beaming at them both. "Run along and wash up, or we'll all be late."

"You lucked out," Catherine informed him as they scrubbed their hands in the large earthen-ware basin. "This is their night for a common meal." She smiled up at Vincent. "I love to come down for these. After supper we read, or tell stories, or..."

"I remember," Devin said softly, gazing off at nothing. "Vincent and I... we used to do readings. Mark Twain, Arthur Conan Doyle, Dr. Suess..."

Catherine laughed. "Dr. Suess?" She shot Vincent an incredulous look and he ducked his head, the

equivalent of a blush.

"Yeah," Devin deviled. "Vincent was always Horton, from *Horton Hears---*"

"I think," Vincent said firmly, "that we had best not keep Father waiting any longer."

Out of Vincent's line of sight, Devin winked at Catherine, who stifled a giggle. Vincent whirled on them, but Devin's dark eyes were as wide and as innocent as a baby's, and Catherine had composed her face almost instantly. Guilelessly, she smiled, and reached for his hand. They walked out together, Catherine between the brothers.

The room was packed with people, by the time Jamie and Mouse arrived. Breathlessly, Jamie leaned back against the tunnel wall with him, relieved that they'd made it before the blessing. Running around with Mouse tended to make you late to a lot of things. Catherine waved at them from across the room, standing between Father and Vincent and someone whose face she couldn't see. Jamie waved back. She closed her eyes, took a deep sniff and sighed contentedly. William had been cooking all day, and the room was filled with a multitude of tempting aromas. Jamie opened her eyes and wished she hadn't.

On the table just inside the door sat a bowl of fruit, and Mouse had taken three roughly equivalent green apples and was preparing to demonstrate his prowess at juggling. Before she could do anything constructive, like tackle him and drag him back down the tunnel, the apples were – barely – airborne, with Mouse working frantically to keep them that way. There was a collective gasp, and every eye in the room turned to Mouse. Jamie covered her face with her hands, peeking through her fingers and noticed Father doing the same thing.

To her astonishment, Mouse was actually doing a fair job of keeping the apples going at an even pace, but years of close association with Mouse's escapades filled Jamie with a sense of impending doom. Sure enough, the rhythm began to falter and Mouse had to lunge for a stray throw, trying desperately to keep the apples aloft. Another toss went wild and Jamie winced as every one else gasped and stepped back, but Mouse recovered it and hefted it back into the air. The third time his aim failed him, Jamie joined in the gasping and screwed her eyes shut, waiting for the three squashy thuds that would mark the end of Mouse's juggling career. What she heard instead was another gasp and a spattering of pleased laughter from individuals scattered throughout the room.

Cautiously, she opened her eyes to see Devin Wells juggling the apples *with* Mouse, controlling the pace so that Mouse could get his bearings. Grinning ear-to-ear, Mouse picked up the new rhythm. Just when Jamie had begun to breathe again, Devin reached for another apple.

They stopped at six. After a moment of effortlessly juggling six of the green orbs, Devin began to decrease the number, replacing the unbruised apples in the bowl until there were only three. Devin caught Mouse's eye, made his final toss, and stepped back into the crowd.

Jamie held her breath. The first of the three apples was daintily replaced in the bowl, exactly as Devin had done. Mouse was nothing if not a quick study. The second and third Mouse caught in either hand, amidst sighs and cheers from everyone in the room. He sauntered back to where Jamie waited, handing her one of the apples. Torn between pride and exasperation, Jamie accepted his peace offering gingerly, holding the warm apple between her palms.

There was an almost soundless scuttle behind her and Jamie whirled to see eight-year-old Burt pressed flat against the wall, hoping to be invisible. Since coming to them almost a year ago, Burt had proven to be quite antisocial, refusing even the most gentle and persistent attempts to get close to him. He stared up at her with frightened grey eyes and Jamie knelt quickly to his level.

"Hello Burt," she asked casually. The apple was placed precisely between them, then Jamie turned back around and studiously ignored him. When she snuck a look a few minutes later, Burt was gone, and so was the apple.

Supper was delicious. In spite of polishing off two good-sized sandwiches and three cookies since lunch, Devin found he had a hearty appetite. Wedged between Catherine and Father on one of the long benches, Devin felt himself relaxing and remembering a great many good things about the Tunnels that he'd chosen to forget. Memories, Devin had discovered, were almost as heavy to carry as regrets.

Vincent sat on the end to accommodate his southpaw tendencies, and Devin watched his younger brother watch Catherine, as she joked and teased and tried to sneak another roll onto her plate without Vincent commenting on it. There was something intimate about the way they smiled at each other and bantered playfully with the other Tunnel folk, and Devin was almost envious of their rapport. Although Devin was no stranger to women, the life he led had been appallingly free of any sort of commitment, and the ease that Vincent and Catherine felt with each other was a foreign thing to him. Devin flushed guiltily, ashamed of his thoughts.

Father caught the look, understanding the cause behind it all too well. With a sudden flash of insight, Jacob Wells read his oldest son like a book - a book with a very soft cover - and his expression softened in response. He reached to pat Devin affectionately on the back. Devin looked up quickly, surprised by the attention, and found Father regarding him tenderly. Shyly, he returned the smile.

"Here," Father said brusquely. "Have another roll."

"Put that dish down or you won't get dessert," a gruff voice insisted. Catherine whirled, her arms full of dishes.

"I was just ... helping clear...", she trailed off and obediently handed the dishes into William's huge hands. "I really don't mind," she chided him gently. "It's the least I can do."

William gave a disgusted snort. "The least you can do is sit your fanny in a chair and let these young rascals clear the table." William handed the dishes to Dustin as he passed, and wiped his hands on the durable apron around his waist.

Catherine opened her mouth to protest, but William squelched the attempt with a fierce look, and she fell silent, greatly amused. She fished under her place at the long bench for a moment and returned with a paper sack, wordlessly handing it to the brusque cook.

Catherine waited while William opened the brown paper, watching closely for his reaction. He looked up in pleased surprise.

"Real vanilla," he said slowly, turning the bottle over in his hands. "From Mexico, too." He gazed at her gratefully, shaking his head. "You didn't have to do this."

Laughing, Catherine stretched up to peek him on his bristled cheek. "I learned a long time ago - always bribe the cook," Catherine explained simply. William gave a hearty chuckle.

"My kitchen is your kitchen," he insisted. William cradled the dark bottle in his meaty hands. "Come Winterfest," he promised solemnly. "I'll remember you."

"Come Winterfest," Catherine said warmly. "I'll be here."

Under William's gruff instruction, the "young rascals" made short work of the dishes. The adults stood in small clumps, visiting, laughing, making plans for the coming week. Mouse was questioning Devin about some detail of the science of juggling, while Jamie stood shyly by, gazing from one to the other. Samantha had cornered Vincent, who squatted before her patiently, head cocked to the side in an attitude of intense concentration. The hustle and bustle of the world Above was forgotten, and Catherine leaned back against the rough stone wall and watched the miniature dramas of the Tunnel folk unfold around her, knowing there was time. Here, there was always time.

Near her, Father and Pascal were discussing some new development in the Pipe Chamber, and she smiled, bemused, "*Leave it to Pascal to talk shop at a social gathering*," Catherine reflected, watching his animated face. Her attention was drawn to a small stir near the doorway. David had seated himself on one of the long, low benches, and quite literally had children hanging all over him. While she watched, this very down-to-earth holy man threw back his head and laughed, pulling Annabelle into his lap and rustling the hair of another grinning waif.

"A story? What kind of story?" David queried.

"A good one," Eric said simply, pushing his glasses back onto his nose.

David feigned surprise. "A good one?" he demanded. "What makes you think I know a good story?"

Samantha joined the crowd with a weary sigh and fixed him with a stern look. "You *always* have a good story," she informed him bluntly. "Tell me one."

David laughed heartily, greatly amused by her tactless ness. "Well," he began briskly, "in that case, I'll have to defend my reputation. Let's see..." He looked intently into every young face, deep in thought, and finally rested his gaze on Timothy and Simon. In typical fashion, Simon had glued himself to his older sibling's leg, peeping timidly around to listen to David's story. David took a deep breath while Catherine edged closer, wanting to listen in. "There was a man who had two sons-," David began.

"You didn't say, 'Once upon a time,' " Samantha offered helpfully.

David smiled. "No, I didn't," he answered promptly. "But not all good stories begin that way, Samantha. Most of them - but not all. Just to make it simple, however... Once upon a time, a man had two sons. One of them was full of himself, eager to test himself in the world."

"You mean Above?" Eric asked, squinting at David thoughtfully.

David took this new interruption without a blink. "Perhaps," he said slowly, "but not necessarily. This son wanted to go out by himself and make his way in the world. He was certain that he knew what was best for him, and although his leaving made the father very lonely, he let him go anyway."

"What about the other son?" That was Zach, sitting of the floor at David's feet.

"Oh, he didn't go. He stayed behind with the father, to work in the father's ... household. This made the father happy, for he loved both of his sons, but he missed the one who had gone away."

"Was he sad?"

"I believe he was very sad, Dustin. Every day, for a very long time, he would watch for his other son to return."

All the children went "Oh" and grew quiet.

"Did he ever come back?" Timothy asked at last.

David sighed and scratched his bushy white hair. "Yes, he did," David admitted, "but only after a very long time. You see, the son who had gone away was very proud, and he had done some foolish things since leaving his father's house. All of his money was gone, and he found himself hungry and

alone in a strange city."

Samantha looked stricken. "Didn't anyone care?"

Gravely, David nodded. "Someone cared," he assured them, "but the father didn't know, and the son was too embarrassed to come home."

"But you said he *did* come home," Eric reminded him.

"Yes I did, didn't I? Well, one day, for no particular reason, the son began to think about all the things he'd done since leaving home, and all the good things he'd left behind - his father, his brother, his home. He began to remember the way his father cared for him, and he became very sad. He didn't know if his father would even want to see him, but he gathered up his courage and started home."

"I'll bet his dad still wanted him," Timothy announced.

David reached out to touch his cheek. "You bet he did. In fact, while the son was still a long ways off - just a speck on the horizon - the father recognized him as the son who had been gone."

"What did he do when he got home?"

"He didn't even wait that long. He ran to meet him while he was still a speck in the distance, and hugged him and kissed him and welcomed him home. In fact, they had a huge party."

"Neat!" Zach insisted.

Dustin looked up thoughtfully, pondering this last. "Did he have to do the dishes when he got home?"

David threw his head back and laughed until tears came to his dark eyes. "Eventually, Dustin. I'm sure he did."

Catherine actually started when Vincent touched her arm, so deeply engrossed in the story was she. They exchanged long looks, and she slipped her arm around his waist, hugging him quickly before they joined the trail of adults meandering to the common room, where coffee and cookies and other stories awaited. Thinking himself alone in the huge room, Devin watched them go, the last words of the story echoing in his ear. His face worked for several minutes while he stared at the pointed toes of his boots. Quiet footfalls sounded behind him and he whirled around.

Father regarded him earnestly, with no trace of rancor on his face. "It's a very old story," Father reminded him.

Devin flushed and looked away. "I guess," he mumbled.

Hesitantly, Father touched his arm, steering him down the dimly lit tunnel. "Well, at least," Father said carefully. "I didn't make you do dishes."

Shakespeare was always delightful, more so when Pascal read. He closed the book of sonnets with a snap, glanced shyly all around and sat back down on the long bench.

Vincent and Devin exchanged looks, reading each other's thoughts. As one, they leaped from the couch and sprang to the center of the room, cradling a worn book between them.

"To Sherlock Holmes," Vincent began gravely, "she is always The Woman. I have seldom heard him mention her under any other name."

With those solemn words, the famous apartment on Baker Street sprang up in the Tunnels. Catherine listened in rapt fascination as Devin and Vincent retold the tale of "A Scandal in Bohemia." As the

quick-witted and often arrogant Holmes, Devin was utterly inspired, and Vincent was enchanting as the good-natured and dependable Dr. Watson. The scenes unfolded like the petals of a particularly well-grown rose, and the room was filled with shining eyes and eager faces, all turned toward the duo holding center stage.

"By the way, Doctor, I shall want your cooperation," Devin said casually.

"I shall be delighted," Vincent answered at once.

"You don't mind breaking the law?"

"Not in the least."

"Nor running a chance of arrest?"

"Not in a good cause."

"Oh, the cause is excellent."

"Then I am your man."

"I was sure that I might rely on you."

"What is it you wish?"

Completely bemused, Catherine giggled and sank further into the ancient couch. Someone touched her arm.

"Would you mind not encouraging him so much?" Father said sternly, but his blue eyes were twinkling and he patted her arm affectionately.

"I've never seen him like this," Catherine whispered, and Father sighed and looked sad and content at the same time.

"They've missed each other - even more, I think, since Devin came home the first time. Each one feels responsible for the other's absence." He was silent for a moment, then rolled his eyes toward heaven. "And, God help me, I feel responsible for both of them."

Beaming, Catherine squeezed his arm. "Under incredible circumstances," she said solemnly, "I think you've done a wonderful job."

There was a spattering of applause, and the irrepressible brothers were acknowledged with chuckles and pats and praise. While Watson resumed his seat, Sherlock went in search of a hot mug of coffee.

Slowly, Father stood, and took the floor. "Once upon a time," Father began, "a world lived in darkness. There was light, to be sure, but the fears and doubts of the people overwhelmed it, and the light was very faint. Although there were many, each person was alone in the darkness..."

Father was an excellent storyteller. Young and old alike crowded in to listen as he spun the fable before them- a fable about a world that grew up in the darkness and became a light to others. Elizabeth herself could not have painted a better picture.

Catherine felt, more than heard, a child standing near-by. She turned slowly and found Burt at her elbow- still clutching the apple- listening so intently that his whole body was pitched forward, and he had forgotten his reticence about being close to others. Slowly, Catherine shifted her legs so that he might scoot closer, but it was still no good. Short as he was, it was impossible for Burt to see Father from where he stood. After a moment of mental dialogue, Catherine's instinct won out, she leaned forward.

"Would you like to sit on my lap, Burt?" she offered.

Burt turned and regarded her with the superior stare of an independent eight-year-old. "I'm too big to sit on your lap," he informed her woodenly, and began to withdraw. Catherine's heart sank. In trying to be helpful, she'd driven him away.

"You're absolutely right," Catherine began, but Burt was moving - not away, but up! Vincent lifted him easily onto his lap and looked solemnly into Burt's huge grey eyes.

"But you're never too big to sit on my lap," Vincent insisted. There was a moment of intense silence, while Burt waged some private war with his personal demons, the battle showing clearly on his young face. Vincent sat perfectly still, not holding him, and let Burt make the next move. Without a word, Burt turned back to Father and the story, still seated on Vincent's knees.

Catherine realized with a start that she was holding her breath, and exhaled slowly, moved by the scene that had just unfolded before her. She looked at Vincent, her eyes very bright, and all the love and respect and affection she felt for him shone clearly on her face. Vincent returned the look, reaching for her hand. With a deep sigh of contentment, Catherine sank against the couch back, letting her head fall onto Vincent's shoulder. Vincent nuzzled the burnished top of her head, basking in the light of her love.

Devin saw the whole thing. He leaned in the chamber doorway and watched with a lump growing in his throat, mourning for all the things his brother could never have. The bitterness of it rose in his chest, threatening to suffocate him.

"I've spent my life throwing good things away with both hands," Devin thought fiercely, *"and he can't even..."* David's words returned to haunt him, and he closed his eyes and pressed back into the shadows. It was so damned unfair.

"Devin? Don't you feel well?" Mary touched his arm.

"No, I'm fine," Devin mumbled, shaken by her sudden appearance. The honest life had stripped away his edge, and he hadn't even heard her approach. Mary regarded him kindly and touched his forehead.

"Are you sure you won't let me call Father?"

"No! I mean, no, I'm fine - really. It's just a touch of... jet lag. I'll get a good night's sleep and be fit as a fiddle tomorrow."

The thought of sleep made him blanch. What was he thinking? How could he even sleep in her apartment? Vincent should be the one to share that time with her, to eat the cookies she baked and rummage in her fridge. These things, so matter-of-fact to him, were luxuries Vincent had never allowed himself because, because... He fingered the welts on his cheek, remembering. For a fleeting moment, Devin wished desperately to be fourteen again, completely oblivious to the limitations life so cruelly dished out. He wanted to protect Vincent, just like he protected Charles, from the disappointment that came so often. For the space of a moment, Devin wished for one more chance to be his brother's keeper.

"Any others?" Father advertised gamely.

"I can quote '*Hiawatha*'," Samantha volunteered, stepping forward.

Father turned and regarded her fondly over the tops of his glasses. "All right, Samantha. Why don't you do a little for us?"

"Oh, I can do the whole thing," she hastily assured him. "I memorized it."

Father went pale. "You ... memorized it?" he repeated faintly.

"Uh huh. You always say it's good to ..."

"Yes, yes," Father said quickly. "I know what I always say. Perhaps if you - ?"

"Would you do something for me?" That was Devin, kneeling behind her and murmuring into her ear. Samantha's eyes went as wide as saucers, and she flushed and whirled around. Father watched with interest. Devin smiled his most disarming smile.

"Would you read a poem I picked out instead?"

Numbly, Samantha nodded, beyond words for the first time in her young life. Devin whispered something in her ear and she nodded hastily and scampered off.

"Well," Father said briskly. "What was that all about?"

Devin held up six fingers. "Don't worry," he assured Father solemnly. " 'Fog' by Carl Sandburg. It only has six lines."

It was well past midnight before the adults scattered and Devin found himself wandering the familiar pathway to Vincent's room. Vincent led the way, holding a torch in one hand and leading Catherine with the other. The torch was a concession to the two of them, for Vincent's night vision was excellent. Catherine's tiny fingers made a marked contrast twined with his and, once again, Devin cursed the fate that kept them apart. His grim musings were cut off as they stepped into the candlelight.

The stained glass window made the room vaguely cathedral-like, but the furniture and the furnishings were solid, masculine and down-to-earth. Catherine began replacing books in the tall bookshelf, humming a little half-tune, and Vincent stretched out on the bed with Conan Doyle.

It was always eerie, coming back to this room where he'd slept as a child. The room was full of ghosts, and voices, and half-forgotten memories that hid in the nooks and crannies. His lie to Mary was catching up with him, and he felt almost light-headed with fatigue. Despite his weariness, Devin felt restless, and paced the perimeters of the chamber guiltily. Still, guilt would not prevent the inevitable.

Devin edged closer to Catherine as she stood before the packed bookcase. "I'm going to turn in," he murmured quietly. Catherine turned and smiled at him with genuine fondness.

"Do you have your key?" she asked. Devin winced, keenly aware of Vincent's sensitive hearing. He cast a furtive glance in Vincent's direction.

"Yes - right here. Are you..?"

She was turning away, walking towards the bed where Vincent was browsing through the well-worn pages of Holmes' adventures.

"Anything in the fridge is fair game, and you're welcome to play the stereo or the VCR," Catherine called, flopping down next to Vincent. Vincent curved a proprietary arm around her without looking up. While Devin watched in open-mouthed astonishment, Catherine turned her face into his open hand and kissed the soft, leathery palm.

"Oh," Catherine added, "and there are extra covers on the second shelf of the hall closet." She snuggled up against Vincent in a decidedly familiar way and closed her eyes. Vincent put the book down, wrapped his other arm firmly about Catherine and looked straight up into his brother's astonished face.

"Third shelf," he corrected gently. For the space of a heartbeat, Vincent's eyes were intense, and Devin felt for any poor soul who might attempt to come between this man and the woman he loved. Devin's expression changed from outright surprise, to pleased embarrassment, to wonder, and he gazed at the drowsing woman in his brother's arms with something akin to reverence. When he looked back to Vincent, Devin's eyes were full of pride and blessing and an overwhelming sense of satisfaction with the world. He grinned from ear to ear.

"We'll see you tomorrow, Devin," Vincent said pointedly.

"I guess I'll ... see you two tomorrow," Devin repeated.

"Good night, Devin," Catherine murmured sleepily. "Sleep well." Devin walked out into the night.

Tenderly, Vincent regarded the woman cradled in his arms. The steady rise and fall of her rib-cage convinced him that she was sleeping, and he sighed and settled back, content to hold her thus until the morning. Completely at peace, he closed his eyes.

"Is he gone?"

Startled, Vincent opened his eyes and nodded, gazing with wonder at her smiling face.

"Good!" Catherine insisted, and proceeded to tackle him enthusiastically amidst the pillows. Caught off guard, Vincent found himself on the losing end of this wrestling match, unsuccessfully trying to fend off her teasing attacks to his ribcage. Size and brute strength afforded him some advantages, but she was small and quick and full of playful energy.

"Energy," Vincent thought wryly, "that might be better spent ..."

Giggling, Catherine caught him in a rolling tumble that sent them both spinning across the bed. Whether by accident or design, the maneuver landed him beneath her in a tangle of arms and legs. Thankful for the brief respite, Vincent caught her firmly, trapping her in his embrace. Incredulous, he gazed at her radiant face.

"You amaze me," he murmured, watching her expression. Catherine snuggled up to him and feathered kisses across his brow and down the strong line of his jaw, always just missing his mouth. Impatient with her teasing, Vincent tangled a hand in her silky hair and bent his mouth to hers. With a small sigh of satisfaction, Catherine twined her arms around his neck and kissed him with refreshing thoroughness.

Her lips were incredibly sweet and responsive beneath his and Vincent shifted his hold on her to mold her closer along his length. All thought of sleep fled, as he curved her enticing form next to his and the fatigue of the day was replaced with delightful anticipation.

Catherine found feel the heat from his body even through the heavy cotton vest. With a final impatient tug, the quilted vest fell open beneath her eager fingers, and she began trying to loosen the leather lacings that held his shirt closed. It seemed impossible to do without the use of her sight, and Catherine made a small, frustrated sound and dragged herself away from Vincent's insistent kisses.

"Exactly how many layers do you have on?" Catherine demanded, worrying the knotted leather, her cheeks were flushed, her lips still wet with his kisses and her long hair fell over them both, making a golden halo around the exquisite planes of her face. She was the most beautiful, appealing sight Vincent had ever seen.

"Too many," he teased, pulling the shirt over his head. It followed the vest heaven-knows-where, for Catherine was not discriminating about where the clothes landed. Her sweater joined the growing heap of accouterments on the throw rug.

"I'll say," she asserted with mock irritation. Chuckling, he tangled one hand in her tousled mane of

hair and kissed her, effectively cutting off any further complaints. His other arm slipped down her back, molding her slender frame against him while their mouths worked together. Vincent's kisses were intoxicating, and Catherine sagged against his bare chest, reveling in his touch and the velvety softness of his skin next to hers. Against his mouth, Catherine said "Vincent" and he opened his eyes.

Tenderly, Catherine ran her finger across the delicately furred eyebrows, down the curve of his cheek to trace the shape of his mouth, so very different from her own. Deeply moved, Vincent caught her hand, twining their fingers together. She lifted their clasped hands to her lips and kissed the sensitive palm of his hand with lips as soft as the petals of a rose.

"Just in case I didn't say it today - I love you, Vincent." She bent and nuzzled his neck with aching tenderness. Completely overwhelmed, Vincent cradled her next to him, awed and amazed by the treasure in his arms. He reached across her shoulder to snuff the candles but she caught his arm. Her voice was husky and low.

"Leave them."

Vincent did.

"I can't believe you're still hungry," Vincent admonished. He had re-dressed, sans the quilted vest which had not reappeared, but Catherine scuffed along beside him swathed from head to toe in flannel and lace. She turned and fixed him with a patient look.

"If you expend calories, you get to replace them," she insisted.

Vincent opened his mouth to reply, thought better of it, and let the subject drop. Vincent touched his torch to the torches inside the doorway, bathing the common room in pale golden light. Catherine tripped lightly down the stairs, looking for the tray of shortbread cookies that she knew had been carefully wrapped and left behind.

"Aha!" she cried at last. She bit into one of the pale yellow cookies, trying unsuccessfully to catch the crumbs before they hit the carpet. Vincent lifted a cookie in one huge hand and plopped back in the overstuffed armchair, that had been a gift from a Helper some fifteen years past. Catherine picked up two more cookies, carefully rewrapped the remaining treats and perched impudently on Vincent's knees, pulling her feet up under the voluminous folds of the gown. She munched quietly until the last bite was gone, licking the crumbs off of her hand. Vincent watched her, not quite believing that this childlike waif in flannel robes with cookie crumbs on her face was the same woman who had returned his ardent kisses with abandon. He pulled her back against him, tucking the folds of the nightgown over her feet.

"I have a witness," Catherine teased him. "Devin says you steal the covers, too." Vincent denied it immediately.

"I do not steal ..."

There was a small sound from the doorway, and they both whirled. Catherine's first instinct was to leap up, but Vincent held her firmly, gazing at their small visitor.

"Forgot my apple," he informed them. They watched while he retrieved it, taking a cookie as well. Crumbs on his chin, Burt regarded them solemnly for a long moment, then his face broke into a huge smile.

"I guess you *don't* ever get too big to sit on your lap." Without another word, he was gone, leaving them alone in the quiet room.

Devin sighed and leaned back in the aisle seat of the huge plane, rolling the events of the past few days over in his head. "I guess things change," Devin thought wryly, restlessly slumping down in the soft cushions. It did not help. With a sigh, Devin sat up.

A sudden inspiration took him, and he fished hastily in the worn duffel, pulling a brown-wrapped package from the depths. Eagerly, Devin peeled the paper back, wondering what Catherine and Vincent would have packed. What he found made him smile.

The Holmes book sat on top. Devin opened the cover, knowing there would be an inscription inside.

"For Devin, who has always been my brother, and will ever be my friend." Vincent had written, and underneath, "I was sure that I might rely on you." Devin smiled, hefting the book. Charles certainly would enjoy these tales.

Beneath Conan Doyle was a worn collection of poetry, which included the poem by Sandburg that Samantha had read, and beneath that, a sandwich bag full of cookies - oatmeal raisin to be precise. Devin rolled his eyes and bit into one of them. It was good - better than good, as Mouse would say. Devin took another bite and let the sweetness melt on his tongue before chewing. That Catherine ... Devin sighed and allowed himself a pout - no one baked him cookies...

"I guess," Devin mused to himself, "my little brother doesn't need a keeper anymore."

"Can I get you something?" the stewardess asked brightly, startling Devin from his reverie. He thought about it for a long moment, then smiled at the young woman wryly.

"No, thank you," Devin said slowly. "I think I'm doing okay on my own."

END