

# CATHERINE'S BARGAIN

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*For the Yule Celebration on Treasure Chambers, 2018*

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*This is a different take on the events after the cave. As such, this is a bit of a reimagined S3, where there is no baby and no Gabriel. The reader can take it from there.*

## CHAPTER ONE

### VIGIL



A day had passed. Two. Five. Vincent was unearthly still, and Peter had set up an IV drip, and a catheter. The one was necessary, the other seemed ...undignified, to Catherine. And also necessary.

She was horror struck, at the sight of him.

More so because she was becoming so accustomed to that sensation, that “punch-to-the-gut-say-it-isn’t-so” feeling.

He lay on his bed. Pale. Lifeless. Almost unmoving. The once coppery skin was nearly grey. But for the barest rise and fall of his chest, she'd have thought that they had lost him already.

*Perhaps we already did.* It was a thing she thought, but dared not say aloud.

"Never has he been so still for so long," Jacob whispered, checking the IV lines and setting his fingers to a too-cool brow. The fever that had raged inside Vincent had left him. It seemed like all signs of life were doing that. Serially.

Catherine's inward eye turned backward, even as they remained locked in the present. Vincent had apologized to them all, before he'd left for the deep places of his home; and he'd apologized tearfully and most sincerely. And he'd done that in a way that let everyone know he felt one thing, more than anything else: beaten. Vincent had felt beaten. Completely.

Summoning the remaining bits of his waning strength, he'd taken his last run through the tunnels. A loping gait had turned into a headlong sprint. Reckless. Dangerous. In a way that was absolutely deadly for him, if he slipped near the abyss, or near the deepening tower, or any other number of treacherous places.

Not all the venues of his home were welcoming ones. *Perhaps when you look for a place to die, you don't expect "welcome."* Catherine thought.

She knew she'd followed him; or at least she'd followed Mouse, who'd followed him. Jacob had been close by, but it had been she who had gone in, after him. She'd realized too late that the idea had been a bad one. She just didn't have a better one. None of them did.

The decision had had dire consequences.

*No. Not just 'dire.' Fatal.* The lawyer in her wouldn't let her get away with thinking of a kinder word for it. In Vincent's life, she came to realize that she was sometimes like the perennially bad penny: she kept turning up. And again, not every time for that was a welcome one.

Yet "turn up" she did. In the cave he'd run to. In the dank, dirty hole in the stones he'd thrown himself into, trying to keep himself away from... well, from all of them. But mostly, from her.

She'd come in. He'd seen her, and he'd charged forward, an arm raised to strike.

*Then, he screamed.*

*And then, he fell.*

It was the fall Catherine couldn't forget; not that she was forgetting any of the rest of it.

He fell. And in a way, he seemed to just *keep* falling. Not just to the ground, but... farther. The ground simply stopped his body; he could drop no farther down, physically. The gritty cave floor ceased his awful and sudden descent.

But Catherine knew that in other ways, he was falling a lot farther. She knew it because she'd *felt* it, even as she'd seen it. The feeling in their bond, the look in his eyes, both had told her more than the fall of his body ever could have. He wasn't just "collapsing." He was *leaving*. Forever. And not just physically.

But "physically" was part of this, too, and it was the sight of his descending form that she couldn't erase from her mind's eye. His big body had dropped. His mind had gone blank. Past blank. His heart had stopped.

*I felt you go.* Catherine now understood the words better than she ever could have.

*I felt you go. I felt you die. I know what that feels like, now. God help me, I know.*

He'd plunged to the sandy ground lifelessly. Like a great, lax doll, fallen from a supporting stand. His eyes had rolled back in his head, and he'd simply... vanished, from this life, his huge form dropping in a sprawling heap, in the dirt.

Almost a week later, of all the images that wouldn't fade, that was the one Catherine knew she carried longest, and hardest. Not even the sight of his still form, Father laboring over it to resuscitate his silent heart, was worse.

Because a moment before the scream, an instant before the fall, he'd stood before her, looking trapped. Trapped, and enraged. Trapped, enraged, and oddly... *pinned* was the one word that kept coming back into Catherine's sensitive mind. Feet pinned to the floor. Body pinned near the wall. Hand raised, poised to strike, but then, strangely, pinned there, as well. Frozen. Locked. Pinned.

Pinned by whatever demons had pursued him, and every regret he'd ever known. Pinned by all he couldn't have, and all he never would be. Pinned by her pursuit of him. Pinned by her love for him. Pinned by the secrets they shared, the ones which threatened everything. Pinned by all he world.

Pinned, both against his fate and by every choice they'd both ever made, together. Not just "his" choices, but hers. His life had *changed* when she'd entered it. Her. No one else.

For the first time, Catherine came to understand just what the term "mixed blessing" meant, for them. For him. And what the term "pinned" meant, now.

A greedy, pawn of a man had taken pictures of him, and was now dead. A madman, John Pater, had wielded power over him, and had tipped his sense of balance past the point where the scales could return to level. Both, in their way, had been trying to "pin" Vincent. But only she had succeeded. – If that's what you could call this.

From the invasion of the Outsiders to the sheer offensiveness of the killers-for-sport, to a thousand other cuts, both shallow and deep, he'd been pushed too far, and far too often. Sometimes, Catherine knew she wasn't the cause of all that had gone wrong for him. Other times, she knew she was at the nexus of it, at one point or another.

She knew she was a source of great strength for him. But also that she helped make him vulnerable to the very things that had consumed him. Paracelsus had known it as well, as had Bernie Spirko, right before the end.

She knew that the fault for all that had befallen them wasn't hers, even as she wondered aloud if some part of it was. Perhaps there was no "fault." That didn't matter, now. Only the fact that he wouldn't move, mattered.

Would he awaken? Would he simply... deal with all of it, in whatever way he could? He wouldn't just stay there, looking pinned, forever would he? We would wake up?

*He will... won't he?* As each day slid past, Catherine was no longer sure of the answer.

She knew that what they were sometimes had kept him exposed to dangers, which lately, seemed too loom much too large. And that for those fights, all the strength she could offer him seemed not enough.

Never had that been more apparent than this time.

Because this time, it was he, not she, who had died.

Like an avalanche that wouldn't stop crashing down a mountain, all their troubles seemed unstoppable: He was threatened with exposure. His world was at risk, hers, as well, if she was honest about that, and she knew she was. She knew he'd sensed her nightmare about what would happen to her, if all her secrets became uncovered. Knew she'd both pushed him away, for his own safety, and drawn herself back to him, trying to help him recover his strength, when his illness began to ravage him.

She'd tried. They both had. And then... he'd run. Hard.

He'd run, and he'd run. He'd run until he could run no further, to get away from her. If he could have, he would have. *I must leave you. I must.* His message was clear.

But she hadn't let him *do* that. She *couldn't*. And to her horror, an act of sheer love became an act of selfishness. She hadn't "saved" him. She'd doomed him. Her pursuit of him had brought about his death. There was no other conclusion to reach. She'd seen the look in his eyes, before he'd dropped, and in a terrible flash of clarity, she'd understood. She'd understood why, in that moment, he'd had to die. *I have to. There is no choice. If I keep fighting, I'll kill someone I love. Like you.* She all but saw him think it.

She'd understood that in his heart, he knew she was a thing he'd never truly have – even as she was what he'd always want, in his way.

*'Whom Gods destroy, they first make mad.'* She quoted Shakespeare, internally. *Shakespeare knew everything.*

She watched his still form on his bed, and knew the old line had never been more clear than now. He'd tried to get away from them, from all of them.

But mostly, he'd tried to get away from her.

*I should have let you. I should have let you. I should have let you go. Any outcome would have been better than this. I should have given you the room you told everyone you needed. I should have let you get away from me.*

But she couldn't. So, he couldn't. Internally, she replayed the scene yet again. She'd followed him into the cave. He'd turned, when he'd sensed her. Mad. Stinking. Furious and lost, he had roared his last at her, anguish in the sound. The taloned hand had come up, the way it had so often, lately.

She'd screamed his name, just his name, and he'd ... just ... fallen.

All the life had gone out of him. Suddenly. Violently. It hadn't just "left" him. He'd torn it away from himself. He'd *willed* it away. She'd known it. She'd sensed it. It was like watching someone rip their own soul out of their body, then hurl it away. *No more! No more! Just... no more.* She'd seen the words in his blue eyes, before they'd closed for the last time.

He was dead before he hit the ground. She'd known that, too. More, she'd *felt* it, along their bond. The psychic link between them, the one she'd never felt like he had... she'd felt it go; she'd felt *him* go. It was that simple. The words he'd tried to share with her when she'd drowned in a madman's trunk came back to her. *I felt you go. I felt you go. I felt you go!*

She'd wept over him, as she'd tried to help Jacob save him. When nothing seemed to work, she'd kissed him good-bye.

Almost. Which was to say she had kissed him. It just hadn't been "good-bye."

He'd struggled back to life, with Jacob jabbing a needle full of adrenaline into his heart to make sure he got there, make sure he stayed there. The once-still heart began to beat. Like a miracle, breath had returned to his lifeless lungs. They'd carried his limp form back on a litter, and put him in his bed. His vitals seemed low, but stable.

He was alive. That was all they knew.

"We'll have to wait and see," was all an exhausted Jacob could say, at the time.

Now, he said even less than that. "I just don't know," he admitted.

*Let him live.* Catherine prayed it, each and every day. And though his mighty heart still beat, she knew that one thing was still gone, for them.

She felt no bond, between them, now. None. And that terrified her a little more.

*Is that because you died? Or is it because you're trying to heal, and you know you're better off if we don't have it?* She had no answer for the question.

So she'd sat next to his bed for days, his deep set eyelids refusing to flutter open, the bright glory of his hair seeming increasingly limp, and lusterless.

*Let him live. Let him live. Let him live, and I swear ... I swear I will leave him in peace. Leave him to what is left of his life, without me. I won't endanger him anymore. I won't ... keep pushing him to reach for more... for more, which he can't have. We wanted too much. I... I know better, now. "Wanting" doesn't mean you can have a thing. "Wanting" only means you can want.*

Jacob's hard words came back to haunt her:

*"You can bring my son only unhappiness.... because part of him, is a man."*

Before, she'd not thought Jacob was much of a prophet. Now, she realized how hubristic that notion sounded. What living person knew Vincent better than the man who'd raised him? Who knew better what he wanted, and what constrained him? For this wasn't just "unhappiness," Catherine had brought him. This was utter destruction.

Father, as it turned out, was an unwitting soothsayer, even if he had changed his mind about his original conclusion. *Or perhaps he hadn't, and was just hoping against hope. The way we all did, as it turned out.*

She looked over at Jacob as he re-wound his stethoscope. *At first, you were against us. Then, you were for us, in your way. Which one was the error?* She reached over and smoothed the edge of a blanket that didn't need it, just for something to do with her hands. Asking questions she had no answer for left her nervous. It was not her lawyer's way.

She knew that Vincent had been trying to escape from all of them, and from her. From sorrow, from conflict, from violence, from danger, and hate, and harm. From longing, and from despair. From frustration, and from a dream that had kept them both wishing, and kept both of them taking chances, long after that had seemed anywhere near prudent.

*Well, we're all prudent now,* Catherine mourned. *Please. Please, let him live.* She repeated the silent prayer. *Let him open his eyes, again. Let him... be who he was, before. Before me. Before everything. At least let him have a chance at it. We didn't mean to push too far. We didn't mean to...*

She let the thought trail away. None of what was happening now had been in any way intentional. They all knew that. *The road to hell is paved with... what's that again? Oh. Of course. Good intentions.*

Their luck had run out, probably as it was always destined to do. *Every time you roll the dice, you risk snake eyes.* Well, they'd rolled, and rolled. And then... disaster. Disasters. One piling in on top of the other, it seemed.

Good fortune had deserted them. Horribly. And completely. Everyone knew it. Only a fool could not know what a mistake they'd become. Invaders has violated his home, and killed his people. Witnessing his vengeance (and being at the center of it) had shattered him.

*"How can you look at me?"*

*"There are dark places in all of us. I love you."*

Then, a reporter had followed her, and found him. Knowledge of his existence would expose his entire community to scrutiny, and destroy it, forever. His world teetered on the edge. His sanity kept it company.

The bloodbath(s) that ensued hadn't made anything better. If anything, they had made it all worse.

The Outsiders and their reign of terror, a pair of frat boys who killed for sport, Spirko's blackmail, Paracelsus' taunting... and somehow, Catherine always seemed at the center of it, in some way. It wasn't intentional. None of it was.

She'd watched him destroy a mob then kill a pair of youths.

*"When will it stop? When will it stop?"* She'd had no answer for him.

When she'd been caught between the reporter and the alchemist, Catherine knew she'd been leverage, for one man, and a pawn for the other.

Nothing was about it being anyone's "fault." She knew she wasn't to blame for the actions of unscrupulous men. But this wasn't about "blame." It was about results. It was all about the results, no matter what anyone's intentions were.

And the results were lying before her, in a coma-like state.

*We wanted so much. I... wanted so much. When did it become "too much?" When did we cross that line? Since I came back from Connecticut? Before that? Or... after?* She didn't know. Perhaps the answer didn't even matter, considering.

Vincent couldn't face all they couldn't have, all he feared they'd never be. He couldn't watch her, watching him, as he tried to protect them all. And he couldn't face the ruination of both her world and his.

Madness tugged at him. What he was was a danger to all of them. And to himself. He knew it.

And he accepted that fact because there simply was no other fact left to accept.

*I saw you think it. I saw you know it, right before...*

She'd seen it in his dying eyes more clearly than she'd seen anything else. And in that moment, the truth hit her, and hit her hard.

*I drove him to this. Others helped, but it's me who keeps him pushing him here.*

All that he was, magnificent as that was, and whatever he'd lacked, Catherine knew that the latter hadn't mattered so much to him, before, but for the fact that he loved her.

*'I never regretted what I was, until now.'* Never had the first thing he'd ever said to her after she'd seen his face for the first time seemed more terrible, and filled with more foreshadowing.

*Oh, Vincent. You didn't know what regretting what you were was, even then. Not then. That was just the first taste. It took me to show you what 'regret' was then, and it took me to show you, now. It took me to show you what regret really, really was. What regretting what you were really was. For years.*

*Did Gods destroy you? Or did I? Or did... we?*

She knew that Vincent feared the raging spirit, inside him; that it was something vicious, that came to the fore, when needed. Catherine shook her head at the notion.

A Dark Beast hadn't driven him to this horrible pass. She had. Or to be specific, she had driven him to his Dark Beast; the thing that had the sense to run from her, through the tunnels, to run from *them*, but would never hurt her, never kill her, because he, like the rest of Vincent... loved her, in his own way.

*Or perhaps it's just that you loved me, and you'd die, before you saw me hurt by anyone else. Especially you.*

A tapping sound at the door meant that Peter was coming in, to check on Vincent. He did so, replacing on IV bag with another.

"Any change?" Peter asked. Jacob shook his head. It seemed to Catherine that she was watching Father age, before her eyes. She looked back toward Vincent, still unmoving.

"I can sit with him for a while, if you want," Father offered.

Catherine shook her head. "I'd like to stay a bit more. I'll let you know when I have to go." Even in the middle of disaster, they both knew she had the world Above to contend with. She couldn't simply be "missing." Not when she still officially worked for the DA's office.

Jacob nodded, smoothed the same blanket she had, then turned to go.

"It's worse the longer he's like this... Isn't it?" Catherine asked, knowing that for coma patients that was true.



Father gave the answer he'd been giving so often, lately. "For most people, yes. For Vincent... I just don't know, Catherine." He placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder, trying to offer what comfort he could. She reached up and grabbed it, feeling the thin skin beneath the aged bones, in his fingers. His gloves covered the rest.

"We'll just have to keep praying." He said softly.

"We will. I am," she replied. *You don't blame me for any of this. How ... generous you are.*

"You said he did this when he was young... how long?"

"It wasn't like this. He'd rage, then... drop. His sleep was active. Full of nightmares. And... and his heart didn't stop, then." They both looked toward the bed, at the person they both loved most in the world.

"He seems peaceful," Peter observed.

"I read to him. I like to think it brought him comfort," Catherine replied.

Catherine touched the now-closed Dylan Thomas book on the nightstand. The first few days she'd sat with him, she'd done nothing but read it to him. Nothing but that, until her voice had grown raspy from it. It hadn't seemed to help, so she'd set the book aside.

"Perhaps I'll try that again," she said, letting loose of Jacob's hand so it could slip away. If he nodded, or gave any indication that he thought that was a good idea, she didn't see it, for staring at her love. She heard Father tap away, much like she'd heard him tap in.

Peter stared at his patient a few minutes more, having nothing to say that hadn't already been said, by all of them.

"I'll go speak with Jacob," Peter said. "Don't lose hope, Cathy."

Catherine didn't answer. She was past "hope." She was past almost everything.

Peter left the room and quiet settled into it, again. Like the dust that was settling on Vincent's possessions, it felt oppressive, and sad. It was the kind of quiet that blankets sound in every sick room in the world.

Catherine broke the deadly-seeming silence. "Let him live." She whispered to the stones of his chamber. The sound barely carried, as the words passed over his preternaturally still form.

The stained glass window now seemed to make an altar of his bed. He looked like a sacrifice, spread out beneath the quilts. A funeral sacrifice.

"Please, God, don't let him die." Her voice faltered, as she dared to speak the words aloud. It was the prayer offered up by every person who ever sat by a sickbed. One that had gone unanswered for her just a few months ago, when Charles Chandler had left this world.

Catherine made the only vow she could, the only deal she had, with the only collateral she had left to her. If this was a room of sacrifice, then she wanted it to be hers, not his.

"Let him live. And I swear I will leave him in peace, if he does."

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## CHAPTER TWO

### SACRIFICE



Five days turned into seven. Then nine. At some point, she asked for a cot to be brought in, and to her surprise, someone did it. She slept beside him, her hand on his too-still one. The fear would not stop. He was not getting better.

"Is he in a coma, Peter?" Catherine asked, not for the first time.

"Without the right medical equipment, it's all but impossible to tell, but I don't think so, Cathy," Peter replied wearily, checking Vincent's pulse. He'd traded places with Jacob, sending Father for some much needed sleep.

"What... what is this, then?" Catherine wasn't absolutely sure she wanted to know. Except for the part of her that did.

Peter took out a pen light and checked Vincent's eyes. "This is like when he's been badly injured, and he's healing," Peter replied. He dropped Vincent's eyelid. Catherine watched them flutter. "He's in REM sleep, for the most part," Peter elaborated.

"He's dreaming?"

"Yes, I believe so."

*Please, let them not be nightmares.*

She knew he often slept hard, after an injury. He'd rested for several days after he'd been beaten by the Silks, after he'd finally made it home. But that was sleep. This was... this was a dead kind of unconsciousness.

"But... it's never gone on this long, before." Catherine knew that was correct. She looked at his prone, blanketed form, worriedly. "Father said last time he had an out-of-control episode, it wasn't like this, and that he was conscious, from time to time, then."

Peter nodded, and set his fingertips against Vincent's still-cool forehead. "That was puberty, Cathy. Other than the fact he's had a traumatic experience, the one episode may have nothing to do with the other."

Catherine was forced to agree with him. They both... they all knew so little about Vincent really. One guess was as good as another, from anyone. It was a frustrating thing.

"He's so still," she whispered. She had sponged down his face, then wet his mouth with a cotton sponge. It was like caring for a hospice patient.

"He *is* still. His sleep is deep. Jacob said his fingers moved, yesterday."

They had. Barely. And rather than signaling his awakening, it had only signaled... nothing.

"Do you still talk to him?" Peter asked.

"Sometimes we just sit quietly, but yes," Catherine answered. "Talk to him. Read. Pray. Make deals with God. I even tried to sing, a little, but I can't." She shook her head. "I don't think it's doing any good. Sometimes I just... think to him, holding his hand. Trying to reach him. Remembering. Wishing."

Peter wasn't sure what thing she was doing might help. So far, none of them were. "Keep talking to him. He might be hearing you. He might not. Whatever this is, at least it doesn't seem to be getting worse," Peter opined.

*He's been completely unconscious for over a week. How could it be worse?*

"What should I say to him?"

"Whatever you want, Cathy. Whatever you want."

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"I wanted too much," she told Vincent, later, when no one was in the room. It was the wee hours. Jacob had looked in on Vincent a few hours ago, and allowed himself to be dragged to his chamber by Mary, for a light meal and some still-much-needed sleep.

Catherine knew it was bad when Jacob had had Cullen come in, and begin to pump Vincent's legs, so they wouldn't lose muscle tone. It was a thing you did with comatose patients, and people not expected to regain consciousness any time soon - if ever.

She supposed they would move his arms, some, as well, though they'd need to remove the IV needle for that.

"I wanted much too much, and I wanted it from you," she said softly, sitting as close as she could. "That meant you had to give it to me, or I'd be unhappy." She squeezed his hand. Like the rest of him, and in spite of the blankets, it was cool. Too cool, maybe. She could no longer tell.

She rubbed his furred hand. It was lax, between hers. "I wanted. I... pushed. Maybe that's not fair. Maybe we both wanted too much. Maybe we both did. But... I'm used to getting what I want. I'm used to thinking 'there has to be a way,' and then getting my way." She shook her head.

"You aren't. You're used to having to do without. You don't... think the way I do. You weren't raised that way. How were you to know?"

She brushed her hand along the back of his furred one. "You're so cool. It's so... unlike you. It... scares me, so much."

At first, she'd blessed that the fever that had ridden him like an animal was finally gone. Now, she realized he lacked even the normal warmth of his body. He felt half in the grave, already.

She rubbed the hand she'd once dubbed "hers" and kept talking.

"I wanted you to kiss me, more. Hold me. Touch me. Want me. Push limits. Tempt fate. Dare... anything... Everything." The ashen skin didn't warm, under her ministrations. Despair gripped her heart.

"Such demands. Such... wants. But I wanted it for *you*. I swear it wasn't just about me. But it was *because* of me that you were pushed." She dropped her head to the still coverlet. "It was because of me that they could get to you."

She knew it was true. And her heart broke a little more, as she continued her apology. No sin seemed too small or too large to take responsibility for.

"I didn't mean to. Like a spoiled teenager, I insisted, inside my heart, that you wanted me the way I wanted you. Ever since I knew about Lisa Campbell, and that you were capable of it... No, that's not fair. I wanted us before that, even."

She lifted her head and pulled up the covers, trying to send him warmth, any way she could.

"And when it didn't happen, when we didn't... happen...I pushed, and then I just ignored it, not sure of myself, or what we should do. Ashamed some, even," she admitted. "Not that wanting you was bad, I never thought that," she added on, hastily.

"But maybe letting you know we could be more than we were was? After Michael happened?" She wasn't sure. She wasn't certain of anything, right now.

"I don't know. I just don't, Vincent. I know that no matter what, wanting you near, loving you... it kept you coming to my balcony, and I was a fool to think there would be no price for that. Especially... especially when there already had been. I kept telling myself the worst was past us. But it wasn't. Was it?"

He laid there, silent and still. So still, she wasn't sure if her words were reaching him on any level.

"And we went on. I know you felt everything I was feeling. I even remember thinking that was good, that you'd sense my love for you. Sense how strong it was. That I thought we could have everything."

She took a deep breath. "Then, when the pictures appeared... It was like we'd been so foolish. Like we'd been playing a dangerous game, and finally gotten caught. Wrong place. Wrong time. Wrong man. My world was crashing down, and I couldn't stop being scared by it. For you. For me. I know you sensed how unhappy I was, how frightened. For everyone. You, me, your world..."

*Bless me, Vincent, for I have sinned. It's been years since my last confession...*

She released his hand and placed both of hers on his forearm, gripping him, feeling his latent, now useless strength.

"Maybe part of me hoped, somehow, you'd... fix it. Fix Spirko. Fix all of it. So we could go back to being what we were. Whatever that was."

She swallowed hard. "I just know that whatever we were, I wanted that. And afterwards... I couldn't give that up. I still wanted to see how far we could go, what more we could be. It seemed like such an innocent thing to want. I'd have brought you the world, if I could have." She dropped her fair head, again.

"I'd have brought you myself. You know how I mean."

There were tears on her cheeks, at her lack of foresight, of understanding. "I'd wear beautiful clothes, just wanting you to notice. Sit next to you, just listening to you read. Talk, and tell you all the places I remembered. Sit close. Sit closer. Wish..." Droplets fell on his blanket.

"I was vain, sometimes. And reckless, others. I wanted to make sure you still thought I was strong, so you would still... love me. Still... want me. I think it was my way of pressuring you. Of... asking for more. And look what it caused." She blinked, and released his arm to hold her fingertips to the corner of her green eyes.

"I swear, Vincent. I swear. Never again. Just... open your eyes, love. You *have* to live. Even if we can't live together, and you always said we had to be careful about that dream, that whatever our limits were, they were about that... and I just wouldn't listen...." Her thoughts ran into each other. She took a careful breath in, and tried to steady herself.

"You have to be all right. I don't know if I can breathe, if you aren't at least in this world, somewhere. Even if it isn't with me."

She stroked his hand, again, back and forth, her fingertips tracing the soft fur and broad bones of the back of his hand. "Paracelsus lied to you. You aren't a monster. I think I've been one, sometimes. But you never were."

He still did not move, but his breathing seemed to shift, and deepen, subtly.

"I love you. I will always love ... you." She knew she was about to make the decision she'd been moving toward all week. *I'll need to talk to Joe. If he wakes up, I have to leave. Really leave. I can't just stay in my apartment. He can reach me, there.*

"I made a bargain. I mean to keep it. I will live my life, loving you. And the moment I die, I swear the last thing I will think is, 'I love Vincent. I love Vincent so much,'" she told him, swearing it.

His breathing settled back down to what it was, before. He seemed to sigh.

Catherine watched the slow drip, of his IV bag. A few more days like this, and Peter was discussing the possibility of a feeding tube. She settled her head down on the mattress near his head, just letting herself be near him, willing him what was left of her strength. Her diamond-bright eyes drifted closed.

She knew she dozed, lightly, but not in any real or restful way.

It was near four a.m., when he first stirred, actively. The first sounds coming from his mouth sounded more like an incoherently strangled moan, than speech.

His head thrashed, as if in the nightmare she'd dreaded, and for a moment, Catherine feared the worst. That he wasn't regaining consciousness, but falling farther down into oblivion. She

shouted for Father, as she held him, trying to talk him through it, and away from wherever he was.

"Vincent. Vincent!" Her voice rose. "You're with me. It's Catherine, and you're safe." She grabbed the arm with the needle in it, even as he tried to swing. "You're here in your chambers, and you're with me. With us. Vincent. Vincent!" The IV stand, little more than a refurbished coat rack, was in danger of toppling over.

Father entered the room to see her holding his arm, trying to keep him from tearing out the tube and the needle, doing himself damage. His free arm thrashed some more. His eyes remained shut, and his breathing was labored.

*Nightmare. Nightmare or.... vision, again.* Jacob saw his son struggle, saw the tears in the eyes of the woman who was trying to hold him.

Jacob was about to summon one of the men to help her restrain him. Suddenly, Vincent's eyes simply opened. There was panic in them.

"Catherine." He panted, stricken. "Catherine," he repeated, trying to raise his hand to her face, ignoring the twinge from the IV needle as he did so.

She let go of his arm, as his blue eyes returned to some kind of lucidity. "I'm here. I'm here, Vincent," she told him. "We're all here."

"Catherine. I killed Father. You have to get away from me. I killed... Jacob."

"No. No! Father is right here." She motioned Jacob over. "Look. Father is here. Right here."

The blue eyes looked more confused than ever. Vincent shook his maned head as he stared at his erstwhile progenitor. "No. I... killed you. With my own hands," he said.

Jacob stepped closer. "Vincent, I—"

"On the table. I... ripped you apart. Fire and copper on my..." He slowly registered the haggard, much older looking face of the only parent he'd ever had.

Father's voice was steady. "It was John, Vincent. Paracelsus. Not me." Jacob put a hand on Vincent's shoulder, to reassure his son.

"I thought... I thought I..." Vincent was visibly struggling with his mind, with his memories, and their order.

Catherine spoke up. "It was Paracelsus, dressed to look like Father, Vincent. He's... gone. He won't hurt you, won't hurt anyone, anymore."

She gently took hold of his hand. The tense muscles relaxed. He stopped struggling. Jacob removed the IV needle.

"I killed ... Paracelsus." Disentangling himself from Catherine's grip, Vincent lifted his clawed hands, and looked at them.

"That's right. He's gone, Vincent," Jacob confirmed.

"With my bare hands." The tortured voice struggled for reason, struggled for memory.

"Yes." Jacob saw no good to be gained by withholding that truth.

Vincent's eyes held more memories. "There was a photographer. Pictures of me." He was remembering, now.

"Yes. He's dead. Paracelsus killed him," Catherine said.

"And I killed Paracelsus," Vincent confirmed, lifting his head from the pillow, slightly. It was as if he was trying to check the room, to make sure John Pater wasn't there.

Catherine nodded her answer, but Jacob gave the answer voice.

"Yes. Yes, you did." *These are memories, not hallucinations*, he thought.

Vincent's next monosyllable was chilling, as he laid his head back against the pillows: "Good."

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## CHAPTER THREE

### GOING HOME





A few days later, Joe Maxwell was not a happy man.

"A leave of absence? How long? Couple days? A week? I gotta tell you, on top of the vacation time you're already taking... This is coming at a bad time, Radcliffe," Joe told her.

"Indefinite. You can post the position, if you need to, Joe." Catherine was standing in his office. And for a woman who was supposed to be on vacation, Joe knew she looked like hell.

"I can clear out my desk if you want," she prompted. There were shadows under the green eyes.

His face was shocked at her pronouncement.

"You quitting on me, Cathy?" he asked.

"I don't know," she answered honestly. "I don't know what I'm doing, right now, Joe. Call it post-traumatic stress, or that I need grief therapy for my Dad, or whatever you want to call it. I can't do this right now. I'm no good for it."

He eased back from his desk. Her clothes were casual, but chic. Camel slacks, a pullover shirt, and a leather jacket. They looked fine, but she didn't. She looked like she'd lost weight, and needed the wide belt to keep her pants up. And she looked like her last decent night's sleep had been a week ago. Longer, maybe.

"This have anything to do with that guy you're always keeping under wraps?"

"No," she lied easily. *Too easily*, she thought. "My dad's estate still needs to be settled. Probate is over, now the rest is on me. His apartment's been cleared, but he had a big house outside of town. It's where I was raised until we moved into the city, and it's pretty big."

"How big we talkin'?" Joe asked, wondering if he'd ever see her again. He knew millionaires who kept big houses outside of town. They ranged from large homes to country estates. He'd just never realized Charles Chandler was one of them.

"Big enough," Cathy replied, uncomfortable with discussing the specifics about her father's - and now her wealth. "It never seemed the right time to part with it, so he didn't. The taxes on it take half my salary, and I think I need to go up and take care of it, get it ready to list. Some other things are going on, too. I just... can't be here right now, Joe," she insisted.

She looked either haunted or hunted. Joe wasn't sure which. *You're not wrong about that*, he thought. He'd seen too many people - on both sides of the law - run to the end of their respective tethers. He knew he was looking at one, now.

"I'm sorry," she tacked on. She looked down at her hands. They were past due for a manicure.

Joe Maxwell took stock of the woman he loved, but wasn't in love with, except for those days when he thought he kind of was. Something was running her, and that something had

been running her pretty much since he'd the day he'd met her. But this was more than that, more than that "usual" sense of "drive" that sometimes prompted her to do way more than just her job.

She looked exhausted, for all her eleven days of rest. She looked like it had been a long time since she'd been able to catch a break. Whatever this was, he had the feeling he wouldn't be seeing her for a while.

He knew that the last thing she needed from him was pressure about this place, her job, or when she'd return to either. She'd had a devastating year, personally, and was probably still reeling from the loss of her father. That was a feeling Joe knew too well.

When he spoke, his voice was intentionally soft. "I'll list your job if they tell me I have to. But we've always got openings, Chandler. You know that. That's how you landed in here, in the first place." He stood, and came around the desk to give her a hug.

"The day you want to come back, you just let me know." He held her close, trying to give her whatever comfort he could. She was definitely skinnier, and had lost weight. "And eat some lasagna, for God's sake. You're skin and bones!" he teased, but didn't.

Gratefully, she returned his embrace. It felt good to have a friend, even if it was one she could never be totally honest with. "You gave me a chance when I'm not sure if anyone else would have. Thank you, Joe."

He released her, and denied her assertion. "Hey. I worked you like a dog and the city paid peanuts for it." He moved back around the desk, giving her space. *Keep it light. It's the only way you'll ever see her again.* "Go take care of your tax bracket, Chandler. What to do with the mansion. Rich girl's problem." He couldn't resist nudging her about the difference in their classes, one more time.

"Okay," she said, giving him a poor excuse for an accepting smile.

"Take care of yourself, Cathy. That door is always open, for you. Job or no job. I mean it."

She looked in the door's direction, and his dartboard.

"I know you do. Maybe someday. Just not now. Okay?"

It was the best he was going to get, and he knew it.

"Okay. Whatever it is, just... okay, Cathy," he replied.

She went back to her desk and put a few personal things in a box, knowing it could join some of the other things already loaded into her car.

When the elevator doors closed over her, she wasn't sure if she felt sorrow or relief.

*Go. I have to go. Point the car toward the bridge and get out of town. I left a message for Vincent. I made a promise. Even if I probably made it too late to save everybody from heartbreak.*

--

The drive out to the place her father had always simply called "The big house" was accomplished in near silence, no radio on, no tape playing in the car's cassette player.

The hum of the wheels felt like anesthetic, and the traffic past the expressway kept her mind occupied.

There was a suitcase in the trunk, her box of belongings from work, and cash in her wallet. Phone numbers from her father's rolodex in the card holder section of a Day Runner, and a small bag of groceries.

She'd have phoned ahead, but there was really no one to call. Even before her father's death the house had had no staff. It hadn't needed one, save for the service Charles had used for lawn maintenance; no one lived there, and Charles only occasionally had visited. When he did that, a maid service came in and cleaned for him, prior to his arrival. There had been no need for one of those for months. Almost a year, maybe.

Catherine got off the expressway, remembering that they'd spent a few Christmases there after her mother's passing. She knew that sometimes Charles had talked about selling the house and land around it, but for whatever reason, he'd never really had the heart to. She also knew that he'd gone up for a weekend here or there with Peter Alcott, or the Aaronsons, and that the stately manor house had come from her mother's side of the family, that her parents had improved it, together.

It had been part of their dreams, once. Dreams where Charles and Caroline Chandler had lived to a ripe old age, surrounded by their many children and grandchildren.

*All dreams turn to dust.* Catherine hated that she thought it, as she turned left off a main road and began to make her way up a winding drive. *You don't think they're going to, but they do.*

--

If this was "dust," Catherine knew there were many who would take it, unrealized dreams, winding drive, and all. It was a beautiful house, and it had a certain sense of grandeur. Two stories tall, the neutral colored stone front was trimmed in white, with large windows. A huge chimney rose on one side, and the winding driveway lent it all a sense of casual elegance. A large, sloping lawn rolled away from the building, while huge trees shed their autumn leaves, behind it. Catherine knew that the gardens in back were impressive, and that the tennis court had been a fifth anniversary gift from Charles to Caroline, after she'd taken

up the sport and proved more than capable at it. The Chandler's and Aaronsons had played mixed doubles on its clay surface, as Jenny and Catherine had taken their turns either as ball girls or unsteady players, themselves.

The huge, stone architecture contained some of Catherine's earliest, fondest memories of her childhood. She remembered watching her mother tend the rose bushes, and remembered sliding down an impressive banister rail. They'd spent each spring and long summers here, until Catherine had started school. Her father's practice had required more time in the city, so they'd made the move into a luxury Manhattan apartment. The house had remained, and they'd gone back to it, often. At first.

Catherine hadn't known at the time that her mother's eventual illness had also prompted the Chandlers to stay near her doctors in Manhattan, rather than make regular car trips back out to the old manor home.

*"In Xanadu did Kublai Khan a stately pleasure dome decree,"* Catherine almost always thought of the line from Coleridge, as she pulled up to the front door. She emerged from the car with a duffel bag slung over her shoulder. The white double doors looked achingly familiar. Her key slid smoothly in the lock.

She let the door stay open, exchanging stale air for fresh. The inside was lovely, sunny, and understated. A wide foyer led to an equally wide staircase, to the upstairs bedrooms. Entering the living room, sheet-covered leather sofas and wing chairs flanked a rich, white brick fireplace, while both portraits and artwork graced the walls.

She set her bag by the couch and brought in the sack of groceries. The kitchen was modern, and larger than Catherine's own, but not ostentatiously so. The formal dining room led to a den the whole family had favored, and the number of bedrooms upstairs had once housed a maid and a gardener, people Catherine remembered fondly, from her youth. The former had still tended Charles and his apartment, until his death. The latter had been an elderly gentleman who'd passed away many years ago. His son took care of the grounds now, with whatever needed to be done.

Catherine felt time roll back, some, as she went back to the foyer and hung her jacket on the coat tree that stood sentry near the door.

"Welcome home," she said, to no one at all.

Charles hadn't been here, recently. He'd been vacationing more, but out of the country, rather than in it. His last visit to the property had probably been more than a year ago. Even then, Catherine knew she'd find his clothes in his closet, and his tennis racket in the bottom of it. Sometimes, he kept a set of golf clubs here, and would practice driving, in the back yard, if "yard" could be a word applied to the expanse of green outside her back door.

Catherine opened the nearest closet door, and found the expensive set of clubs sitting there in their leather bag. Her father's golf shoes sat next to them, and she felt like they all looked expectant, when the door opened, as if perhaps Charles had come home and was about to use them.

*Sorry about that*, Catherine thought idly.

She closed the door softly, and went into the kitchen to verify that the appliances were all working. They were. She rinsed out a kettle, filled it, and made herself a cup of instant coffee. It wasn't good, but it felt like the right thing to do.

Allowing forward motion to propel her, she grabbed a tablet near the kitchen phone, as she took up a seat at the dinette table and looked out into the back yard. She flipped open the tablet, opened the Dayrunner, and began to make a list.

*Gardener. Maid service. Garage. Paint?* She left a question by the last one.

There would be dust covers to take off the furniture and itemized lists of the house's contents to make. Realtors to contact. Accountants to call. A cleaning crew, and perhaps painters or tradesmen to have in. Getting the house ready to sell would hopefully keep her mind occupied, so she wouldn't have to think about... other things.

*Vincent...*

Her pen stopped moving. His name entered her mind, and it seemed completely out of place, here. This was no balcony-adorned apartment, sitting in a high rise that had tunnel access. No rough-hewn kingdom of stone, nor verdant park sat close by.

The closest tree line was a row of apple trees her father had requested, near a stand of pines that framed a decent sized koi pond, in the back yard. Next to it, a wide stone birdbath sat half-full of leaves and rain water. Catherine recalled that Charles had teased Caroline that they couldn't be rich, since the house didn't have a swimming pool. Caroline had replied that until Catherine learned to swim, and swim well, it never would have.

It never had.

Catherine looked out at the back yard, remembering that she had learned how to swim in the lake in Connecticut, two summers after her mother's passing. By then, she and her Father were firmly ensconced in Manhattan.

*Manhattan. Vincent.*

Unable to stop the name, she just let it come. *Vincent... Oh, Vincent. I'm so sorry.*

She thought it one more time, then closed a door over the name, just the same way she'd closed the door to the hall closet. The pen began moving, again.

One day drifted into another, and Catherine became surprised by just how much she wasn't getting done. The cleaning service had come in and done its job. The handyman from Charles' rolodex had come in and made sure the furnace was working properly. The chimney had been cleaned. Fresh wood sat in the box.

All of which to say was that if it was a thing that could be done by a tradesperson, Catherine had arranged for it to be done.

But by the time she'd been there a week, the golf clubs were still leaning against the wall inside the hall closet, Charles' clothes still hung in his bedroom, the books in the den were pretty much still on the shelves, the kitchen was looking lightly-visited, but her old bedroom was positively lived in, and every time Catherine picked up the phone to call a realtor to come out, she returned the coiled wire to its place and the receiver to its cradle. The kitchen phone was still an old one. Only the den had a cordless kind.

*Should I call someone out for that, too? Put one in like the one in my apartment?* She had no idea.

*How long do I have to stay here, if we don't have the bond, between us? A month? Forever?*

Catherine knew she wasn't seriously considering moving in here, permanently; that this was a sort of refuge, and nothing more. The house was far too large, and too full of memories, And even if those were very happy ones, they were also tinged with a certain kind of sadness.

*I ran away from home by running away to a different home,* Catherine mused, watching a bluebird splash in the birdbath. *I wonder what Dr. Grafton would have to say about that?*

She thought about Vincent, but tried not to. The grief was too much to bear, for that. She knew she was doing the right thing, the necessary thing. She was putting distance, physical distance between them, and keeping it there. *I promised. I did. Once I'm finished here... I'll have to figure out something else. Some way to... to move on.* She knew she was beginning to make a life apart from his - a life where her choices wouldn't hurt him.

She also knew that as sad as that thought was, it was also a comforting one. *Once we get used to being separate from each other, perhaps I can move back to New York.*

To a place without tunnel access, one where the sight of her empty balcony didn't make her want to burst into tears.

*I'll leave the phone like it is,* she thought, looking at the old rotary dial. *Some things should stay the same.*

Outside, the bluebird flew off. *Be well, Vincent. Please be well. I love you.*

--

## CHAPTER FOUR

### VISITATIONS



Jenny called her by the weekend and offered to come up, and did. The two women sat on the brown leather sofa and built a large fire to ward off November's chill. The forecast said there might be snow soon, and Catherine knew she'd enjoy the warmth of being not only near a large hearth, but with a good friend.

They'd opened a bottle of Charles' best merlot, and toasted to every good thing they could think of. To learning how to skate on the driveway, and dream about boys under Charles' row of apple trees. To going to college, and starting careers. They talked about Nancy Tucker and her house in Westport, and Jenny's latest boyfriend, and her grandmother's arthritis.

"She knits to this day. I'm getting a scarf, for Christmas," Jenny said.

"Even though it hurts?" Catherine asked.

"I know, I know, I've tried to tell her not to," Jenny said, holding up a hand in the posture of someone taking an oath. "She just says 'Jennifer, it is a good pain. One day, you will understand.' And then she keeps right on."

*I think I can relate,* Catherine thought, and because she'd had two glasses of wine, she gave voice to it. "I guess we can all relate to that."

"I guess we can," Jenny replied, knowing it had been a terrible year for her friend. "To the good pain?" Jenny asked, raising her glass, referring to their mutual sorrow over Charles' passing.

"To the good pain." Catherine teared up a little, clinking glasses with her friend.

--

The next morning, Catherine woke up feeling a little hung over, yet strangely better, for having had the company. Jenny left promising to give her a call by the end of the month.

*The end of the month. That would be almost December.*

Catherine bid her friend good-bye and then went to put away the old photo albums the two women had been looking at.

Rather than return them to the shelves where they'd come from, Catherine put them in a box, vowing that when she left this place, pictures of her happy past would be coming with her.

It was a start.

*Today's the first day of the rest of your life, Chandler,* Catherine told herself, blaming the slight hangover on why that thought felt like a morose one. Then: *Stop this. He's well. He's safe. And I promised. And he's awake and alive. And that's more than you had a few weeks ago.*

--

It helped that the house was big. For one thing, it kept Catherine from feeling confined. For another, each room gave her something to do. There were boxes to go through and closets to explore. She even cleaned, a little, though the small crew she'd hired had taken care of the bulk of that.

She was sorting through the contents of an antique writing desk when the doorbell rang. It was just after dinnertime. And she wasn't expecting anyone. *Did Jenny leave something behind the other night, and drive all the way back out here to get it?*

She opened the door, surprised at who she saw.

"Good evening, Cathy. Might this be the castle of a certain damsel in distress?" The smile she received was ever-charming.



Catherine couldn't be more surprised, as she looked up into the handsome face of Elliot Burch. He was wearing a long black wool overcoat over a grey Armani suit. And he was wearing both with the studied grace of someone not originally named Stanley Kasmarek, Jr. Or who'd ever been called "Stosh."

"It might be." She returned his smile. "Elliot. Come on in." She held the door wide.

He gave her foyer a subtly assessing glance, the builder in him recognizing quality, when he saw it. "Quite the place you have here. Your friend Jenny tells me you might be looking to list it." He stepped farther in and gave a low whistle at the high ceilings, the crown molding, and the Italian marble in the entryway.

Catherine knew better than to ask when he and Jenny had spoken. Elliot knew they were friends. Jenny had been with her the night they'd met, when he'd donated a fortune in art to the city.

"Is this a house, or a movie set?" Eliot asked, looking around appreciatively. "Is Scarlett O'Hara fixing to come down the stairs, somewhere?"

"We keep her in her room. She snips at the maid," Catherine said, taking his coat.

"Speaking of the maid, do you have one?" he asked, watching as she hung it on the coat tree.

"Not officially, no," Catherine admitted. "But I did have a cleaning crew in. There's a grounds keeper. He comes around once every couple of weeks. I think Dad arranged to pay for it out of the trust."

"Smart man," Elliot replied taking the nickel tour. "How many bedrooms?"

"Ten. Up to three of those are meant for staff."

He shook his head, making himself comfortable on the huge, overstuffed leather couch in her living room. She hadn't started a fire, yet, even though the weather was chilly. "That's not a house. It's a bed and breakfast," he commented. "You should consider renting it out."

He glanced around the room. Fresh polish gleamed on the tables, and the rugs had been vacuumed. The house looked clean, but felt... unlived in. Like it had too many empty rooms. Still.

"Come tax time I might agree with you," Catherine returned. "You looking to invest, Elliot?"

"Maybe," he replied deftly. "You know I always have my ear to the ground for a good business deal." He shook his head. "No. That's not what I meant to say. What I meant to say was, 'How are you, Cathy? You look wonderful.'" He squeezed her hand as she sat opposite him.

"I look wonderful?" She raised a subtle eyebrow at that. "Well, I can see your ability to lie hasn't suffered," she teased him with a gallows smile. "It's a little cold for a dip in the East River, again. However, if you're in some kind of trouble, and just looking to schmooze me..."

"Schmooze? Did the woman say 'schmooze?'" He teased her back. "So low class. So plebian. So... right where I'm from, now that you mention it," he admitted with a smile. He *was* charming. And the Devil's own version of handsome.

"I'm sorry about your Father," she said softly. "I know I said that before." She was. Very.

"And I'm sorry about yours," he returned. "Looks like we're both ... orphans." He realized they had that much in common.

She nodded at that. "Yes. But we're rich orphans. So it doesn't hurt so badly."

It was not the kind of insensitive thing Catherine Chandler would normally have said, and Elliot knew it. He also knew what that meant. Something was hurting her. And it was hurting her deeply.

"If money saved me from heartbreak, I'd never have missed you," he told her honestly.

"Elliot..." Her breathy voice held a warning.

"I know, I know." He held up his hand. "Wrong time. Or there's someone else. Or something else. The stars will never align. I *know*. I get it, Cathy." He paused, looking at her closely. She hadn't been in the sun for weeks, from the looks of her skin. Even for November, she was pale.

"So... how many bathrooms?" he asked.

"Why? Are you seriously looking to buy the place?"

"Can you think of a reason I shouldn't?" he volleyed back at her.

She looked to where the upstairs bedrooms waited. "I think the faucet in the master bath has a little bit of a leak," she offered.

"Sink or tub?"

"Does it matter?"

"Not particularly. Except to the plumber who's going to put a fifty cent washer on it, and charge you a hundred bucks to do it."

"Ah."

"Got a wrench?" he asked, raising a brown eyebrow. There was a bit of a twinkle in his blue eyes.

"You're not going to fix my plumbing, Elliot."

"Well. Since you're not going to let me fix your broken heart." He rose, making for the kitchen. "Where's the tool box?"

"I think there's something in the garage." She indicated the doorway that led to it, off the kitchen. After a few moments of searching he discovered that there was indeed. He knelt in slacks that would have bought a week's worth of groceries for a small family, and flipped the latches on it open.

"I can't believe you're doing this," she said, watching him toss what he thought he needed into a small bag.

"You're one of the only people who knows I used to work on the docks when I was a kid, Cathy. Let me impress you with my ability to turn a wrench. Point the way."

She did, and it was the sink. The slow drip was staining the porcelain. It had been going on a long time. He turned off the water by twisting a knob underneath the sink and went to work with the aforementioned wrench.

She leaned against the tile wall, watching him. His jacket was off, his white shirt sleeves pushed up to the elbows. His perpetual tan looked good against the white cloth. His hands looked capable and strong, as they wielded the tool.

"I used to love tools, when I was a kid," he said, using the small wrench to loosen a bolt. "They fix things," he continued, turning.

Catherine nodded, as she watched him loosen part of the faucet until a brass nut came off.

"You have the right one, you can do anything," he assured her. "Fix a boat. Frame a door. Stop a leak." He fished out a corroded washer, and put a new one in its place. "Build a mast. Build an ocean liner. Build a skyscraper." He eyed her as his hands deftly performed the simple task. He scraped off the calcium that coated the inner workings of the handle. "It's probably why I became a builder. All those...wonderful tools," he explained.

"I know someone you'd have a lot in common with," she stated, thinking about Mouse, and his fascination with tools, and making things.

"That strange young boy we caught, that time?" he asked. They both knew he was talking about the tinker.

"Yes," Catherine nodded. "Him. He loves tools, also." There was no sense in pretending she didn't know Mouse, considering he'd asked for her by name and Elliot knew it.

Elliot didn't push to know more about her young friend, a thing which Catherine appreciated.

"Nice to know he and I have something in common." He gave a slight smile as he said it. He spun the handle back on the faucet, then tightened it.

"I guess I always wanted to find a way to fix my Dad, and never could." He made sure it was snug. "Or my Mom, who wouldn't leave him. But I'm great with high rises."

He reached down and turned the water back on, then turned the faucet handle, and water began to flow. When he turned it off, it stopped, completely. "And sinks, apparently."

"Apparently," Catherine agreed gratefully. "How much do I owe you?"

He tossed the wrench back into the bag. "Oh, you know better than to ask me that question, Cathy. I'll bargain for your virtue." His smile was the familiar, deal-making smile of Elliot Burch, billionaire.

"I think that ship has sailed." She smiled thinly, back at him, then preceded him back down to the living room. His eyes trailed along the heavily framed doorways, and various other architectural touches, appreciating them as much as he appreciated the lovely woman in front of him. Her hand slid down a smoothly burnished railing. It was made of teak.

*I bet you slid down this bannister, when you were a little girl, he thought, charmed by the notion. It's quite the mansion you have, here. Quite the beautiful one. Like you.*

"You grew up here?" he asked, following her back to the sofa.

"Part of it," she replied, tucking a leg under her as she sat down. "Before Chandler and Coolidge needed my dad to be in the city, more. Before my mom got sick. Before... a lot of things. After she died, my dad just... couldn't. Couldn't move the two of us back in here. He kept the house, but we stayed in the city, mostly."

Elliot gestured toward the expanse of her home. "See, when I go back to where I grew up, the Martinelli's are screaming at each other so loud, you can hear it through the walls," he quipped. "But the bakery on the corner makes terrific cannoli." He propped his head on his hand, indicating he was comfortable, and wanted to listen to her.

"Life is full of compromises," she replied, beginning to relax. He didn't seem to be here for any ulterior motive other than to check up on her, and his company really was welcome. The big house felt very quiet, for the most part. And though Catherine's thoughts felt "loud" enough, it was only when someone else was here she realized how silent a place this was.

"I tried your office, first." He answered her unasked question about Jenny. "Joe Maxwell told me you'd quit. Then had the temerity to ask if I had anything to do with it."

"What did you tell him?" she asked, wondering.

"That I could only wish I had that power." He inclined his head. "Then I remembered the night I met you. You were with Jenny Aaronson. I looked her up. And she's very protective of you, by the way."

Catherine knew Jenny was. Also that Jenny had approved of her and Elliot's budding romance.

Elliot paused. "Whatever it is... can I help, Cathy? No strings, just... help?"

Of all the things he'd ever said to her, that was probably the sweetest. And the unexpected offer nearly brought tears to her green eyes. She glanced back in the direction of the main staircase.

"You can buy the house, but let me leave all my dad's clothes here, leave his golf clubs in the closet," she replied. "I can sort through some things. The less... personal things. But for the rest... I can't seem to do anything with any of it, Elliot." She rubbed a hand across her forehead and through her bangs, tousling them. "He liked Armani. Like you."

"I learned from watching the best." Elliot replied, rolling his sleeves back down and re-buttoning his cuffs. He eyed her a long moment, seemed to reach a decision, then simply rose from the couch, and collected his suit coat.

"I'll have a check cut and sent to you. Call my secretary. Or have Jenny do it."

She half-laughed, and tried to gauge if he was serious. "You don't even know how much I'm asking," she said, standing with him.

"No, *you* don't even know how much you're asking. I have a pretty good idea on the value of real estate." He was about to be poorer by a large sum if she took him up on the offer to buy. It didn't matter. He tugged on his jacket and brushed her cheek with a good-bye kiss.

"I have to be in Buenos Aires for a few months. I promise not to stage a coup," he said.

"That will be different for you," she replied. She remembered their last encounter, when they'd been chased by gunmen, thanks to him being a part of just that.

His voice gentled. "Won't it though. Be sure to deduct the price of a plumber." He reached up and settled a strand of tousled hair back in place. "I do nothing for free," he said.

The look in his blue eyes belied his words.

"I'll remember," she replied, disarmed by him. Now the tears in her eyes did come. *In another life...* She blinked the unexpected moisture away.

He tugged on his overcoat, and stood by her door. "Good-bye, Cathy. You do know I'd stay, if you asked me to?" He gave it one last shot.

"I can't have you missing out on Buenos Aires," she said, deflecting, but loving him a little for what he was doing, just the same. "Thank you, Elliot. Be well. Be happy, if you can." She opened the door for him.

"I'm trying, lady-love. I'm trying. You, too." He kissed her on the forehead, before he could convince himself she might be open to more. Then he was gone, into the late Autumn night.

"I don't think I'm trying. Not really," she whispered, into the cold, empty air.

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A few more days passed. Catherine didn't call Elliot's secretary. She knew that part of her didn't want to let go of the house, even as the rest of her insisted she should. *This was my home. It's a home my father wanted me to have, one day. My childhood is here. Happy memories are here. Daddy held onto it for my sake, as much as for his own. But what do I do with it?*

It was a problem she had no solution for, as she wondered if the tennis court needed to be resurfaced. Or torn up.

The next time someone knocked on her door, it was an equally dapper gentleman, but one far older than Elliot Burch.

"Did he ask you to come?" Catherine asked, without preamble. She'd been there for over two weeks, now. Nearly three.

"Who? Vincent, or Jacob?" Peter asked.

"Jacob?" her artfully sculpted eyebrow rose at the name. "Father asked you to come out here?"

"It's not like he can make the drive himself, Cathy." Peter entered the foyer with the ease of someone who had been in the house before. He looked warmly-dressed, and very welcome. He looked like Peter, *her* Peter. The affable doctor who had played golf with her father and tennis with her mother, from time to time. The one man left who'd known her since the day she was born. Literally.

"Your Mother loved this place," he recalled, hanging his scarf on the coat tree as he unbuttoned a dark tweed overcoat. The weather had turned very chilly. December was here. "Loved this entry way. I think she and your Father picked out the marble when they were on their honeymoon, in Europe." He tucked his gloves into his pockets and hung the coat. "He told her it was crazy to pay to ship it back, but, well. Caroline could be very single-minded." He admired the bright marble flooring that went all the way up to the first step on the red carpeted staircase.

Catherine nodded at his assertion, one she knew to be true.

"Why would Father want you to come and see me?"

"So I can report back absolutely everything, of course. I know he can be... stern, Cathy. But he does love you."

"And Vincent? Did he ask you to come?" Catherine thought she already knew the answer to that, but was surprised that she was wrong.

"No. But I'm sure he loves you as well."

She made no reply to that. What could she say? She simply looked away, instead.

"I take it you've been keeping busy, here?" he asked kindly, nodding toward the upper floors. He wore a soft blue sweater vest with his shirt and tie.

Catherine followed his gaze up the long, beautiful stairs. "I've been wandering through it. So many rooms! I have no idea what they were thinking," Catherine wondered aloud.

He gave her a soft hug. "They were thinking they'd have half a dozen children. And the first one would be named 'Catherine.'" he replied gently.

She rested her head a moment on his warm shoulder, tears prickling her eyes. *You can't cry every time company comes over*, she chided herself.

But what she said was: "Life doesn't turn out quite like you think it will, does it, Peter?"

He gave her a squeeze. "Sometimes it does. But often, no. it doesn't." *Is that what this is about? Life not turning out like you planned it?* He squeezed again, then let her go, walking with her down the hallway and into the spacious kitchen. He watched her stroll over to pull down a pair of mugs.

"Caroline had your name picked out before you were conceived. If you were a boy, you would have been Charles, Jr.," he said. "I always lobbied for 'Peter,' obviously." He gave her a smile.

"They were happy here, then?" She returned his smile, though hers was a little wan.

"Very happy. I'm surprised you don't remember."

She looked off to a distant point. "I do. And I don't. I remember that I was happy, but then, I was a kid, and I guess you could say I was a little spoiled." She smiled again, this time bigger, but by no means content.

Peter took her in, knowing she wore her sorrow like she was wearing her soft peach sweater. "They were two exceptional people, and they loved you very much, Catherine."

She took the mugs over to the coffee and toyed with the handle on the pot, turning it on the burner.

"Elliot thinks I should consider turning it into a bed and breakfast," she confided.

"Elliot Burch was here?" Peter asked, clearly surprised.

"I think Jenny told him I was considering listing it. And I am. It's just... I can't seem to put anything in a box to have it shipped out. Even Dad's things. Especially Dad's things. I just... can't, Peter. I can't give them away, and I can't leave them hanging in the closets if I'm going to sell the place."

Peter was very familiar with grief, and what it could cost a person.

She let go of the pot, a moment. "I don't understand," she confided. "I boxed up the things in his apartment, after he died. With Marilyn. Gave most of the clothes to a men's shelter that's trying to help people get back on their feet, dress them professionally. Kept some things, gave others to his friends... But this place..."

She looked around at the walls that somehow seemed museum-like, in their aspect. It was as if the entire building was somehow frozen in time, even though she was currently staying in it.

"You never lived in his apartment with him, Cathy, not more than a few nights. This place is different. It was the home all of you shared. Let yourself come to whatever decision you need to make. You will, in time."

"Is that your professional opinion, Doctor Alcott?" she asked, pouring two cups of coffee and bringing them over.

Peter eyed the kitchen. The pots and pans were hanging clean, in their overhead racks, and the only thing in the sink was the cup she'd drunk out of, this morning. She'd been living off of coffee and toast, from the looks of things. It would explain why she looked thinner. Even the sweater couldn't disguise that she'd lost a little weight, since she'd left New York.

"It is," he answered, knowing she was in no mood to be fussed at about an appetite she didn't have. She was mourning more than the loss of her father, and they both knew it.

"This is a beautiful old home, Cathy," he said smoothly. "Your mother and Charles added to that beauty. The foyer, the antiques, the apple trees out back... it all *meant* something to them. But it was Caroline's, when they married. I think that's why Charles never felt really comfortable with the idea of selling it, at least not without speaking to you first, about it."

They both knew he'd never gotten that chance. Peter sipped from his cup, then put it down. "I guess he thought there'd be time. Then it turns out... that there wasn't, sadly."

*For that, and for so many other things,* Catherine thought.

"Chandler and Coolidge was going to be *his* legacy to you. *This* place was Caroline's part of that," Peter observed, having known both her parents well.

"Funny how that turned out. And by 'funny'... that's not the word I really mean," Catherine said. They all knew her tenure at Chandler and Coolidge had been an unsuccessful one, and that aside from her early childhood and some few holidays, she'd hadn't lived here, either.



"It is, and I understand what you mean," Peter sympathized. He drained his cup, and watched her as she just toyed with hers. "If you need to give it up, well. Make sure you're ready to part with it is all I can tell you," he advised. "It's a very... permanent decision."

Catherine looked out through the large kitchen windows. "Dad taught me to play tennis on the court," she said, nodding in its general direction. "I lobbied for a horse, instead, but he said a clay tennis court was much easier to build than a barn, and it was more practical, considering Mom was taking it up."

She put a small spoonful of sugar in the cup, then added some more. "But I still wanted a horse, so he rented one, for my birthday." She stirred her drink absently, as she remembered it. "He was so scared I'd get thrown." Catherine smiled at a distant memory, then took a sip from her cup. "I don't know how long he spent hunting through the yellow pages, but I think I had quite the noble steed." She spooned a little more sugar in.

Peter realized coffee flavored glucose was probably all that was keeping her on her feet. "Every young lady should have a noble steed," he observed.

"Except for the fact that I think it had three good legs, and was about a hundred years old."

He watched her as she poured cream into the cup, then got up and refilled his, from the pot. In spite of the sad aura around her, the look on her face was relaxed. Peter knew that she was retreating into the memories from her childhood, while staying in the one place where she and her parents had all been happy.

*This was a place of safety, for her, Peter realized. The place she lived before everything began to change. Before Charles moved into the city. Before Caroline became ill.* It didn't take a man with Dr. Grafton's degrees to know why Catherine felt like she might need a place of refuge, now.

*She's in mourning, all right, and not just her father. She's mourning Vincent; mourning what they had. She got very frightened, and she lost something, and now this is where she's fled to.* Peter didn't need a minor in psychology to know "what" or "why."

"You were here. With Susan. He was grey-white and I was in love. And maybe he was even a hundred and five. In horse years." Catherine said, bringing Peter back to present concerns.

He accepted the hot drink, and chuckled at her memory of Charles Chandler, and Catherine's birthday pony. Charles had kept a hand on his daughter's back until she'd insisted he let her go, needing Caroline to intervene on her behalf.

Peter kept things light, between them, as Catherine settled herself again at the large table. "He always was protective of you, Catherine. It was Caroline who kept telling him he had to let you climb, and run, and ride, and not be afraid if you fell down a time or two."

"I remember." She took a sip from her cup and eyed him, over the rim of it. She was now ready to talk about what he came here for.

"But you didn't come all the way out here to discuss my sixth birthday party, or tell me Father loves me," she prompted.

"No." He took a sip, then set down his cup, carefully. "He's... struggling, Catherine. Not healing as well, or at least not as quickly as he should."

Catherine dropped her eyes. And neither one of them needed Peter to specify who "he" was.

"At least he's here to heal, Peter," she told him, getting up from the table to cross to the coffee pot. She didn't actually want more. But she wanted the distance.

Peter stayed where he was, not wanting her to feel like she needed to retreat farther. "I... don't get involved in this sort of thing as a rule, Cathy. But you know he's special."

"He *is* special. So special. More than anyone. When you see him... please tell him... I wish him well."

"You 'wish him well?' Is that all, Catherine?"

She set her chin stubbornly, and came back to him.

"That's all, Peter." She dumped more sugar into the cup. Two. Three. She was drinking syrup, with cream.

"Cathy..." He reached for her hand.

When her eyes rose to meet his, they were full of pain. And resolve. "I watched him die, Peter. I saw him do it." Her voice had a tough edge to it. She tugged her hand away from his, gently.

"Difficult as that was... does this solve that?" he asked, pressing.

"Yes. Actually, it does." She drank from her cup. Grimaced.

"Cathy ..."

"No." she cut him off for the second time. "I saw him die. You don't get it, Peter. *I saw him, die.*" She rose and carried her cup to the counter. "This time, I *did* get taken for a ride I couldn't control. This time... I rode a horse and it wasn't a hundred years old; it wasn't slow. This time... " She shook her head, and her hair fell forward against her cheek, when she looked down. "It all happened so fast. But... in slow motion, too, you know?"

She leaned against the counter and looked at him, her eyes full of sadness and memories. Peter could only nod.

Catherine's voice grew unsteady. "I saw the look on his face, saw him look right at me, and... I knew it was a mistake. And t-too late to take it back." She looked out the window, then back at him. "He looked so trapped, so... cornered. And I knew I'd misjudged, that I sh-shouldn't have followed him, and his back was to the wall... Literally, he couldn't run from me any farther."

She rubbed her temple with her left hand. She was getting a headache. "So he turned. Roared. Came forward with his hand raised, and he looked right at me. And he... was so... hopeless."

Her voice had a firm quality, an adamant tone that was still unsteady, somehow, underneath.

"He l-looked right at me," she repeated, "and I saw him *will* himself to die. The life left his eyes and it was like he was suspended, for a moment, right before he dropped. Life left him." Her voice rose a little, with emphasis. "*Everything* left him. I knew he was..." She looked to one side, unable to say the word. She took a deep breath and tried again. "I knew he was dead when he hit the ground."

Peter offered the only comfort he knew. "Catherine, I know that must have been... terrifying for you. But Jacob saved him. *You* saved him."

Her hand sliced the air, in denial. "No. I damned him to it." Her breathing grew rapid and shallow.

*Adrenaline rush, from the memory.* Peter knew it. He also knew words were about to pour out of her, before she did.

"Peter, for three years, all I've done is push, and push, and push, *and so did he*. I *know* that. It... defined us. It had to. We couldn't be content with what we were, before. We *had* to have more." She returned to the table but didn't sit. She nodded her head in the direction of New York.

"We wanted... so much for each other. We tried. We did. *He* tried. We both gave it everything we had. And all I could do was tell him I was... struggling, sometimes, with how things were, yet at the same time... I was happy with whatever he could give me."

"Weren't you?" Peter asked.

"I was ... but we both knew I wanted ... more. For us. For *him*. But for myself, too." Her head dropped a little, with the confession, and she pulled out the chair and sat back down at the table. She studied her folded arms on the table, for a moment, then, she looked back at Peter.

"From when I thought I was going to Providence, we knew. He knew. I told him I had to go. I told him I'd been... unhappy."

"Catherine, you were both just beginning, then. Things changed. You changed. And so did he."

"We did, but..." Catherine shook her head at the memory. Her hand shook as well, and she steadied it by grabbing hold of the sugar bowl. "And it was so ridiculous to pretend it was going to be all right. Because who knew how I was feeling, how I was really feeling, better than Vincent?"

"Cathy, you have to know that whatever it was you think you wanted, he wanted that, as well," Peter reasoned.

She let go of the crockery. "And look what it got us! What it got him!"

She stood too quickly from the chair and bumped the table, sloshing his drink. "Father tried to tell me, tried to warn me, warn us both that he had limits we couldn't just ignore. But I really wasn't going to listen. I really *was* going to convince him that he could be a man like other men, in every way that counted. That whatever he couldn't have, music, or chocolate, or even a sunny day, I could bring him that... somehow."

Her eyes begged Peter for understanding. "I could ... rent a van, take him to Connecticut, play Rachmaninoff in my apartment, wear designer gowns to concerts underneath the stage, that we could do *everything* together, be *everything*... together." She shook her head, deflated.

"Then I ... we... pushed too hard. Dared... too often. *Being* with me pushed him too hard. Between Spirko and being discovered... and it wasn't the first time for that, remember the maniac who was watching me?"

Her sentences began to jumble, but Peter didn't interrupt. He knew she needed to do this.

"Father tried, he *tried* to tell him, tell us, we had to be careful, had to accept the limits of what we were. But I wouldn't listen, wouldn't echo that warning. We got taken for one hell of a ride. And this time, it wasn't on a slow nag past its prime. It was on a runaway." She shook her head, and this time, huge tears fell, unacknowledged, and unchecked. She didn't sob. She simply... cried.

"It wasn't even a question of 'if' we crashed into a wall. It was just a question of 'when.'" She dabbed her streaming eyes with a napkin from the table.

Peter sat, watching her face, knowing better than to interject any sort of opinion.

"And he went....mad. For all that he had to be. For all he couldn't be. For all that *I wanted* that he couldn't be. Unhappy with what he was, what he lacked, what it would mean for me... *for me*, if he was discovered."

Catherine confessed her guilt. "I had a nightmare that everyone... everyone Above... found out about him... and turned away from me. I was scared. Worse, I was horrified. I know he felt it."

She shook her head, bright tears still in her eyes. "Felt all of it. My fear and his own. My worry. The weight of all our choices..." She dropped her head. "Until it destroyed him. And then he destroyed himself." She picked up her cup from the counter and took it to the sink, dumping the coffee and snatching up the nearest dishtowel. She ran water on it, and held it to her hot face, until it cooled.

When she lowered the cloth, Peter saw a warrior's resolve, in her green eyes. "He's safer when I'm here and he's there. That's the truth."

"Cathy --"

"I promised the powers that be if they spared him, that I'd step back out of his life. So it *could* be spared. We're a cautionary tale, Peter."

"He loves you, Catherine," Peter told her. "Very much."

She threw down the towel. "And just look what it cost him," she replied, folding her arms protectively over her midsection, as she leaned against the sink.

Peter rose, knowing there was little he could do, perhaps nothing he could do, to change her mind.

"Cathy, for what it's worth; though there were struggles, I never saw Vincent as happy as he was when he was with you."

"Or as dead." She was unrelenting.

"That was not your doing, I don't think."

"I had a front row seat the moment he dropped, Peter. I promise you it was." It was clear she was not going to give in.

He sighed unhappily, knowing he couldn't change her mind. Also knowing that that was, perhaps, not his task. Someone else would be needed to help her see reason.

"All right. I want to get back before I hit the afternoon traffic. Are you sure you'll be all right?"

"I am. It's for the best, Peter. I truly think that."

Peter gave her a gentle hug. "I can't say I agree with you. But... I do understand why you feel it."

"Thank you."

"I'll let myself out." He kissed her cheek, gently. "I will pray that the two of you find your way back to each other."

Catherine shook her head as she followed him into the foyer. "Peter... don't pray for that. It's like you're trying to doom him."

Peter reached for his coat and disagreed. "Cathy... In a way... Vincent had long since stopped trying to push the limits of what he could become, before he met you. He taught, and that gave him purpose. He went up into the park, yes, but for the rest of it... That was something he *did*, not something he *was*, something he was trying to become. You weren't there, before. You can't see the difference." He pursed his lips and looked out at the long, curving stairway. It reminded him a bit of the spiral one that went down to Vincent's home.

"Losing Devin, and the thing with Lisa... he'd put himself in a kind of box of his own making. Or his and Jacob's making, to be fair, and that's not saying anything against Jacob. I know he was only trying to keep Vincent safe. But you showed him something better. That *he* could be better. Be more."

"Peter..."

"I know. *I know*, Cathy. You can't bear to lose one more person. And not him. Most of all, not him." He was saddened by the pronouncement, which they both knew was true. He put on his gloves. "Take care. Eat a little better, if you can. Be well. Is it all right if I come back to check on you, again?" her old friend asked.

She looked at the man who had brought her into the world, her truest link to her parents, and to her childhood.

"Of course you can. You know you'll always be welcome where I am. I don't know how much longer I'll be here, though. Best to call, first."

"Will you come back to the city? To your apartment?" he asked, settling his scarf around his shoulders.

"I don't know about that, either." She looked at him sadly.

Nodding, he showed himself out. He had much to discuss with Jacob.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### APART



At first, when his strength returned, Vincent paced, waiting for her to return. Simply waiting, as if by embracing the only course of action open to him, something positive would happen. As if, given world enough and time, she would finally, *finally* make her way back down Below, and to him.

Each day dragged on, and each evening was a disappointment, however. The bond was lost to him. If he concentrated hard, he thought he could feel some glimmer of her, but then chided himself that that was wishful thinking. When he swore he did have some sense of her, she felt exactly what she was: distant.

She felt alive, but... lost, was the only word he knew for it. Not lost physically, so much, as emotionally. And those were the times when he fancied he could sense her at all. Mostly, when he tried to find her in their bond, it was just... blank.

It wasn't until Peter Alcott confirmed that she'd left the DA's office, shuttered her apartment, and was still living in her father's house, that he stopped hoping for her imminent arrival.

"She's miles outside the city. Outside... the reach of the tunnels," Peter confirmed.

"You will tell me when she returns?" Vincent asked Peter.

"As soon as I know. Vincent...." Peter said. "Won't you know when she returns?" the good doctor asked.

For the first time, Vincent confessed aloud how complete their separation was. "I no longer have any true sense of Catherine," Vincent confessed, the reality of it a spike in his heart. Along with all the other spikes that resided there, now. Like her note simply saying she had to go.

Peter nodded, saddened more than he could say. He gave Jacob a look that was pregnant with meaning, then departed.

Father sat alone in the room with Vincent for a long time.

Vincent regarded his only parent. "You are not going to tell me this is... somehow... for the best... are you?" Vincent asked it, without rising from the chair he now spent most of his days in.

Jacob's voice held only sorrow, for his son. "You know I'm not," Father replied. "I ... understand it." *Being abandoned is a thing I'm actually fairly familiar with.* "I do not, however, think it's 'for the best.' Nothing that hurts the two of you this badly, could be." His tone remained somber.

Vincent let a long moment pass. "Thank you for that, at least," he told the man who had sometimes been vocally opposed to his relationship with Catherine, but more often than not, had come to accept it. Even encourage it, at times.

"I love you both, Vincent, you and Catherine. But my loyalty will always be to you, first."

"Because I have no one?" Vincent asked him, remembering what had happened with Lisa, when Jacob's loyalties had been divided.

"Because you are... my son." Jacob's voice caught, then he cleared his throat. "And if you look hard," he continued, "I think you will see that it is Catherine... who has so few. Sometimes no one." With that sad comment, Jacob turned to go.

Vincent could only sit there in silence, agreeing with him.

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The list of household items Catherine had started with grew in its inventory of objects, even as little else was done. Mostly, she just catalogued the furniture. The personal items were just too numerous to try and name. There were even a few things of Sara's, her father's maid. They'd been left behind in one of the bedrooms she'd used when she and Charles had come up, some time.

Catherine made a vow to box them up and return them, along with a nice note and perhaps a bottle of good Chardonnay. At least there was one thing she could get accomplished.



The attic, remarkably, was clear. Her Father never could stand using it as a clutter catcher, and the lone cedar chest it held contained nothing more than a beautifully-preserved wedding gown, now full of wrinkles, but none-the-less lovely, for that. Catherine wondered if her mother ever wore it, or if it had been her grandmother's. She struggled to remember the details of Caroline Chandler's wedding gown, but knew the photographs in an album of Charles' she recalled couldn't do it justice. Perhaps both women had graced its satin folds. Catherine returned it carefully, to its cedar home. The gown seemed to rustle expectantly, within, as she closed the lid. She would arrange to have it removed. That would take care of the attic, and ascertain the gown was saved, properly.

She climbed down the attic ladder, feeling a bit like she always did when she went down the basement entrance to the tunnels. She wondered if short ladders would always remind her of Vincent. There were nine rungs, on the ladder to Below. She knew. She'd counted them, unintentionally.

*Stop. You have to stop. You can't keep thinking about it. It will drive you crazy.*

Making a note to check with a dry cleaner about the gown, she proceeded through the other rooms in the wing.

Some of bedrooms, except for furniture, were mostly clear. Most were even still draped by dust cloths, the fabric giving the rooms a ghostly appearance. *They meant for so much life to happen here*, she thought. Now, so little did. Or none did, when she was gone.

*Or for that matter, when I'm here*, she thought, feeling a bit like a ghost, herself.

She tried hard to remember being a little girl, scampering through these halls. The room at one end had huge windows on two sides, and had been her playroom, when she was little. The soft, ridiculously pink-colored carpet now looked faded, to her eyes, and the toys and books had been removed long ago, when they'd all first moved to the city.

*Not even a stuffed animal or a copy of The Velveteen Rabbit left behind*, Catherine thought, taking in a small white rocking chair she was now far too large to sit in. Catherine remembered rocking her dollies in it.

An image from long ago, came into her mind. One of Caroline Chandler sitting near her while Catherine rocked a doll. Green garlands festooned the playroom window, and Caroline read from a familiar book.

*"'Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house..."*

Catherine blinked, and looked again at the small, white wooden rocker.

*Was I really ever that small?* She wondered. She caressed the old wood with a sense of familiarity. *I was. I really was. What do I do with that memory? What do I do with... any of them?* she wondered, not daring to think of the times she'd spent reading with Vincent.

Carefully, she pulled the door to, having no idea what to do with the tiny chair. Should she keep it as a memento? Give it to Nancy Tucker for her little daughter, so it could see use, again? *She'd be the right size, wouldn't she?*

It was another one of the questions for which Catherine realized she had no idea. *I have to stop this. I'm not really accomplishing anything.* She slid the door gently shut.

*I have to go to the market tomorrow, to pick up some groceries. I'll mail Sara's things back, and the gown, for a cleaning. I'll ship the rocker to Nancy. There. Now I'm doing something. A little something. But it's better than nothing,* she consoled herself.

*I know I'm doing the right thing.*

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Another day slid past. Her bedroom radio was tuned to a music station, to help push aside the pervasive quiet of the house. She wasn't sure it helped. As week three slid into week four, Christmas carols were on half the stations she tried. If there was one person who was not in the mood for holiday cheer, Catherine realized that person was her.

Thanksgiving had gone absolutely unheralded. Christmas, she thought, could do the same. She loaded the things she needed into her car and ran her errands. Mailing off the items on her list made her feel productive, and shopping for food in the tiny local market gave her a sense of normalcy.

When she returned back to the house, she stumbled into the house's old Christmas tree.

She carried two bags of groceries into the house, vowing to make herself a decent dinner, as Peter requested. When she went back to shut the garage door, it was then she noticed another memory from her childhood.

A huge storage area in the garage was crammed with Christmas decorations. When she tugged on a sheet-draped figure, she realized that a ridiculously large artificial tree, still festooned with lights, stood resolutely, in one corner. There were boxes of ornaments, and a pair of matching wreaths for the front doors.

*"Twas the night before Christmas..."*

Catherine was about to simply shut the door on all of it when a particular box of ornaments caught her attention. Hand blown glass dancers laid amid white paper, each one suspended on a different color of ribbon. Catherine remembered them. They were from when she was in her "ballerina" phase, and Charles had bought her lessons. They'd gone into the city one year to see "The Nutcracker," and she'd been utterly charmed by it.

She'd been enchanted with everything that had to do with dance, for a while, Catherine recalled: ballet, tap, jazz, even modern held her young attention. Inside the box, an

elongated tap dancer shimmered as she took him from his resting place, with the ballerinas. His black shoes gleamed, complete with tiny metal taps, on his heels.

"You should be hanging someplace," she told him, remembering her delight when her parents had gifted him to her. A set of white ponies also shimmered, in hand-painted bisque.

*That must have been for the Christmas after my sixth birthday,* she recalled, wondering which one of them looked a hundred and five years old and had three good legs. Against her own mood, she actually smiled. It didn't feel forced. It felt almost... good. Almost.

The tree was there, and on wheels, to make it easy to get in and out of the house. *Why not?*

Glad for something to do that wasn't a list of things she needed to dispose of, and telling herself at least it was December, she spent the rest of the afternoon pulling out the boxes of ornaments, setting them in the living room, then dragging out the huge "Douglas fir" from its storage place. The lights still worked. At least most of them did. She had no idea where the replacement bulbs were.

She remembered it was a Douglas fir because her mother had told her that was the tree's name. Douglas. Catherine had been deeply into naming inanimate objects, at the time. Her dolls, the cars, her imaginary friends... everything had to have a name. So "Douglas" it was.

She expected to be sad as she uncovered the mementos of her past, but found that decorating the tree had the opposite effect. If anything, she was soothed, by all the familiarity: There was hand spun glass from Austria, paired with Swarovski crystal. Both shimmered, and made her smile, some more. Hummel children came out of Styrofoam boxes, along with her special dancers. A tiny wooden judge's gavel, for Charles, and a silver tennis racket for Caroline. A mini set of golf clubs. Ceramic penguins Catherine could barely remember having. The Nutcracker prince. All the characters from the Velveteen Rabbit, and some from A. A. Milne.

"How could I leave you behind?" she told Christopher Robin, and set him near Pooh.

By the time she was done, Peter Pan fluttered with Wendy, Michael and John, as Tinkerbell looked on. The crocodile with a clock for a stomach grinned a toothsome smile, while Captain Hook looked devilish. The Cheshire cat wore a half-moon smirk, and a blue-frocked Alice accepted a cup of tea. Storybook characters shimmered alongside reminders of "Baby's first Christmas" done in pink porcelain. Some were things Caroline had ordered especially for her family, while others had been odds and ends picked up on vacation, over the years.

But Catherine found more than just her childhood represented, here. Some additions to the tree had been made in the last few years. Catherine recognized a set of copper ornaments she'd given Charles as a Christmas gift, and he'd clearly brought them here. Two fishermen sat in a boat, with the names "Charles" and "Peter" written on them in marker,

commemorating a summer the two friends had spent on the lake in Connecticut, catching absolutely nothing.

Some of the ornaments Catherine had never seen, while others she knew too well. As she pulled out each new box, she realized she was doing so with a sense of happiness, wrapped inside her nostalgia.

Charles had celebrated Christmas here a few times after her mother's passing, alternating between here, the city, and the cabin in Connecticut. Catherine openly laughed at some of the selection. There was a tacky blonde in a red bikini with "Welcome to Bermuda!" stamped across her backside. Charles had vacationed here no more than two years before he'd died.

"This one's for you, Daddy." Catherine said, hanging the almost obscene ornament on the tree. She smiled. It felt good to be able to think about her father on vacation, and picture him buying the ornament in a tourist trap. Her usually reserved, well-mannered father had brought something ribald back from holiday, something out-of-character, and silly. How good that he'd done that. *How... naughty he must have felt, hanging it up.* It made her smile all the more.

*Popcorn. I think I need popcorn.* She and her mother had always tried to string some, while they watched "*It's a Wonderful Life*." Usually, half of it ended up eaten, and the other half broke off the string, but it was fun, none the less. Catherine went back into the kitchen wondering if there was any leftover popcorn, in the pantry. There was. And it was just outside the expiration date. *Oh, good.* For a reason she couldn't name, she felt cheered by the prospect of stringing a garland.

She pushed a button on the microwave, then dug out a needle and thread, as "Douglas" blinked, appropriately impressive looking.

"Well, Douglas, it looks like it's you and me, this year," she said, waiting for the microwave to ding.

It was the first day she didn't feel like she was dying, inside.

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A few hours later, a thin, popcorn garland draped gracefully around the tree, as far as it would go. Catherine had eaten some while she'd strung it, and listened along to the carols on the radio. She left the television off. Watching George Bailey realize that people in his life were better off with him, than without him, was a little more than she could take, right now, even if the story ended happily.

When she took a break from the garland, she went into the kitchen and made herself a peanut butter sandwich, realizing that if she was going to stay, she'd need to put a call in to have some firewood delivered. What she had was being consumed fairly quickly.

It wasn't "home." But it felt like she could stay here for a while, finally. At least through the holidays. Maybe more.

*Just get me through New Year's*, she thought, blinking, as she took in the kitchen. She felt like she was seeing it for the first time. The coffee cups she'd used and the knife she used to butter toast were practically the only dirty dishes in the sink. She realized how little food she'd been eating, and how much her slacks hung on her frame.

*No more of that. Whatever this is, you're done punishing yourself for it*, Catherine thought, vowing to take better care of herself.

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For whatever reason, over the next few days, the sight of Douglas, twinkling merrily, helped her make some decisions. *No matter what, the furniture should stay where it is. I have no room for it in my place, and if the house sells, it sells with the furniture in it. Daddy's clothes can be donated to the same place I gave his other things. Someone can make good use of them. Photo albums and family portraits come home with me. The artwork can be either hung at my place or put into storage. Maybe I'll sell it at auction. Maybe I'll see if Peter would like to have some of it.*

This felt good. This felt like positive motion, after weeks of being stuck in one place.

She went through the den, unsure of whether or not she wanted to leave the desk behind, but content the books and few mementos could come back to New York, with her. A silver pen set that sat on the desk would make a lovely gift for Marilyn, her father's secretary, and a reminder of the fond relationship she'd had with her father. She'd call and make sure Marilyn was home, and ask if she could drop the token by. A beautifully-carved wooden stationery box might be something Kay would like to have. A crystal bar set would suit Jenny Aaronson's father Daniel, perfectly.

Catherine got out several boxes, and put certain things in them she thought certain people in her father's life might like to have. By the time she was done, the desk in her father's den was clear, as were most of the contents of the shelves.

Again, this felt good. This felt like progress. And progress meant she knew she would have to return to New York, at least for a little while.

*I'm thinking about going home. At least temporarily*, she realized, not sure what that meant, if it meant anything at all, but certain it was the correct conclusion.

"There you go," she said aloud, loading them into the trunk of her car. The sun was setting, and the already cool temperature was starting to drop, fast. She rushed back inside. "Well, what do you think, Douglas?" she asked, aware she was talking to an artificial Christmas tree.

"Do we drive back tonight and come back for more in the morning, or just wait for morning to start out?"

Douglas blinked a cheerful answer, in Christmas light Morse code. *It's up to you.*

Catherine went into her kitchen and brewed a cup of tea, thinking. *If I go back... it means I'll be closer to the tunnels, again. Would that be so bad? Yes. Yes, it would be so bad. Because you might see him, and if that happens, you know you'll melt...*

Then: *Would it be so bad, if I melted? Yes. Yes, it would. I promised, and I know how bad it can be...*

*But I miss him so much.*

Catherine let herself feel it, and feel it for the first time, with its full impact. It was hard. But it was necessary.

*I miss him. There's a place in me that's always going to be empty.*

*But at least he's still alive. That's no small thing.*

She looked around the room, and to the huge home past it. *But I can't live here. It's too much for one person. This house was meant for a couple with children. Probably lots of those. And I'm never going to be that. Whatever I do... wherever it is my life takes me... this house isn't it. It doesn't fit who I am. And now I know it never will.* It was a sad thought. But in a way, it was also a liberating one.

*Daddy held onto this place hoping I'd use it, that I'd have a husband one day, and fill it with children. Since that isn't going to happen, it's time to make some permanent choices. I'll call Elliot, once I get back to New York. Whatever his offer is, I'll take it.*

Conflicted, yet resolute, she dialed the kitchen phone until she reached Marilyn. She knew she had some deliveries to make. Might as well start lining those up.

"Cathy? Is that you? Merry Christmas, dear. How are you holding up?" There was a world of sympathy in the older woman's voice. They both knew this was Catherine's first Christmas without Charles.

"Oh, you know how it is. I have good days and bad."

Marilyn well understood that dynamic. "I understand. I think I can say the same."

"They're treating you well, aren't they? Dad would have Jay Coolidge's head, if the answer is 'no,'" Catherine asked.

"Oh, no, they're fine," Marilyn hastened to assure her. "I filled in with Mark for a while, but you know how it is. There was no one like your dad. Truth is, I've been meaning to call you."

I'm... leaving the firm, Cathy. Retiring. I have grandchildren in the Carolinas, and I think it's time I moved closer. I think your father's passing was a bit of a wake-up call for me."

Catherine smiled into the phone. "Oh, Marilyn. If this is what you want... I'm so happy for you. I hope you'll be happy, too."

"I think I will be. You wouldn't believe the price my little apartment will fetch. I can buy a whole beach house, down south for it."

*A house by the beach. Near family. How wonderful for you.*

"That sounds marvelous."

"I'm hoping. I'm putting in my paperwork after the first of the year. Mum's the word. I haven't told anybody else, yet."

"It sounds like I've only got so much time to reach you, then. I... I was going through some things of Dad's at the big house. There are some things of his I'd like you to have, if you'll be in. A pen set, mostly. And a good bottle of port. Will you be home?"

"Oh, Cathy, you're so sweet to think of me. Of course I'd love to have them. I'll sign the contract for the new place with the pen. And I'll save the wine for the first night I move in."

Catherine smiled at the thought. "I can bring them by your place then?"

"Of course. I'm out with friends this evening, but you can leave it with the doorman, if you'd like. Or I should be in, tomorrow."

"Great, that's great. Thank you, Marilyn. You... you meant the world to him, you know. He always said he could never get along without you."

She felt Marilyn's gentle smile, across the distance. "I believe he said exactly the same thing about you, and meant it twice as much."

Cathy felt her father near. "He loved us both."

"He absolutely did." Catherine heard Marilyn's doorbell ring. "Oh, dear. I'm afraid that's my friend, come to fetch me. See you later?"

"Count on it," Catherine replied.

She hung up the phone gently, and smiled at it. *Someone is making a new life for herself. Good for you, Marilyn. I wish you the very best.*

Catherine went back to the table and looked down into her cooling tea cup, registering for the first time that she'd been drinking tea, instead of her usual coffee. Tea was Vincent's drink.

*I wonder what Freud would have to say about that?* she thought idly, finishing it off.

She set the cup into the sink and walked back into the living room. The tree looked brighter than ever.

She knew one place where the lights were brighter, still. Manhattan. *It's time to go home*, she thought, racing up the stairs to pack her bag.

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## CHAPTER SIX

### TOGETHER



Catherine changed into the warmest clothes she'd brought with her, a cable knit white sweater over a velvety emerald green wrap skirt. The fabric was heavy, and the length would help keep her legs warm, on the drive back. *I'm going to need to pick up some warmer clothes, get my heavy coat, to come back out here*, she thought, realizing how much the temperature had changed, as autumn had progressed. In a few days it would be winter, officially. She knew she'd need warmer boots than the fashionable ones she was sporting now.

"The car heater will keep me warm enough," she said, aware she was becoming used to talking to herself.

She went downstairs to get her jacket out of the coat closet, deciding she'd borrow one of Charles' scarves, as well. His golf clubs still sat there, leaning to the side.



"And I still have no idea what I'm going to do with you," she said to them, tugging down a dark blue scarf. It would keep her neck nice and warm. *Maybe you should stay with the house. You look like you belong here. Maybe Elliot wouldn't mind.*

The thought was barely done before she opened the front door so she could bring her car around...

And nearly walked right into Vincent.

He was huge, wrapped in his belovedly familiar cape, with the hood drawn up. And he was standing on her doorstep like it was a thing he did every day. His gloved hand was even raised to knock.

She couldn't believe he was here. And in some part of her... she almost expected him to be. Even though it was impossible.

*But we do the impossible. It's what we do. It's what we are.* She barely had time to think it, before she had to speak.

"Vincent! You can't possibly be here! In an hour, I wouldn't have been. I was just packing. I was just..."

"Coming home?" he asked, stepping inside the room.

"Yes! No, I mean I... Her eyes took him in, starved for the sight of him. "How can you possibly... It's over sixty miles."

"Forty five, from the Broad Street exit. The train swings to the north. Closer to thirty, then."

"Thirty miles! Vincent. Peter said you were still convalescing, still... How did you ever get here?"

"I ran," was all he told her, his own eyes taking in her beautiful, beloved form. He stepped more fully inside, bringing the December air with him. She closed the door, behind him.

"You ran. All the way here."

"Peter... may have mentioned the way," he replied, as if that answered her question.

"You have a tree," he said, eying Douglas. Her eyes followed his. "It is lovely," he complimented.

*You ran across open ground to reach this place, and we're going to talk about my Christmas tree? Very well.*

She put her cold weather gear back in the closet and stepped around him to turn off the living room lamp, so that the tree shone more brightly. On reflex, she checked to make sure the drapes were secure, in the room. They were.

The soft white lights covering the evergreen shimmered. "It's covered with my childhood, I think," Catherine replied.

He took a closer look, while she stirred up the fire in the fireplace, and added a log, rather than letting it die down, which had been her original intention.

"Did you need your childhood, Catherine? he asked. "Is that why you came here?"

She settled the screen back in place, and slowly, she nodded. She hadn't thought of this in those terms, but she realized that yes, that was much of what she'd been doing.

"I think I needed things to be simpler. Even if they're not. Even if they weren't, really, even back then."

"This was a happy place for you."

"Yes. Yes, it was, once. Now, it's just full of... of dreams I can't fulfill. But yes. When I think of this place, I remember it for the happy times I had, here."

"Then your mother became ill."

"She did." She looked toward New York. "And then, my Father."

"And then me," Vincent concluded. She didn't deny it.

"Did you find what you were looking for? Find your childhood?" he asked, leaning closer to the tree, touching a Lennox Santa Claus, delicately.

"I don't know. Pieces of it, I suppose." She stepped nearer to him and showed him the Velveteen Rabbit. "I used to tell him he was real. That it was part of the magic of Christmas, of being loved." She released the small figure and let it dangle.

"A Christmas miracle," he supplied, holding the Old Skin Horse in his hand, a moment, before he let it drop. Dancers, clowns, jugglers, a white rabbit with a pocket watch... The tree was a rich child's fantasy, set in glass, crystal and porcelain. And a bathing beauty who was coming out of her bikini top.

"What's this?" he asked, indicating the ornament from Bermuda.

"My Father's sense of humor, more than likely." She smiled. "It was good to know he had one. To me, he was often just... Dad. Serious. Full of work, and business, and concern for me."

The suntanned figurine winked at Catherine, as the left strap of her bra dropped down one arm. Scandalous. Tacky. Perfect. She decided it would go with her, when she returned to New York. Her smile broadened, a little, and Vincent marveled at how lovely she looked, with her face cast in the soft glow of Christmas lights.

"Sometimes it's difficult to remember the people in our lives as... something different than the way we saw usually them." His voice was deep. Honeyed. Missed.

"I missed you. Every day," she said, unable to help herself.

"I know," he whispered. "It's why I came."

"You can feel me, again?" she asked. They both knew he hadn't been able to, when he'd first woken up.

"No." He shook his great head. "I can't. It's why not ... not seeing you was killing me," he confessed.

She stepped away from him. "Please don't use that word." Her smile vanished, and it was a moment before he realized his error.

"I... I still can't believe you came all this way," she said, holding her hands out to the rising fire. She obviously felt the need for its warmth.

Vincent cursed himself internally, for his choice of words. Even if they were true ones, they were clearly not ones she needed.

*What does she need? What do we need, right now?* he wondered.

Vincent let her tree be his guide. "I need a... Christmas miracle of my own, Catherine. Or we need one."

She kept staring at the fire. "I'm trying, Vincent. It's been so hard." She turned to face him. "But I'm trying."

"Trying to let me go?" He asked it. He had to.

She acknowledged the charge, but they both knew there was more to it than that. "Trying to give you your life back." She blinked at the tears she knew were coming. *Here I go, again.*

He dropped his head, in understanding, then took a step closer to her.

"I too, have tried. And all I can tell you is... this is no life." His expression was bleak, unable to avoid the word he knew was coming. The word he knew she'd hate. "It is worse than death, sometimes."

"Don't say that." Now the tears that fell were angry, and they were hot, and her voice cracked with them. "Don't *ever* say that. It isn't true. It's *not*. *Nothing* is worse than death!" she replied, utterly positive of that fact. She should know. She'd buried enough people she'd loved. Including, almost, him.

*Is that why you're here? Because nothing is worse than watching someone you love die?* he thought.

Catherine just kept on. "Nothing is worse than that. Because then there's nothing left but the ... things you can't stand to get rid of. And the little bits of stuff and leftover pieces..." she looked at the tree, "that make you laugh or cry. But it's all... stuck, and frozen in place." She wiped her eyes, but the tree still swam before her blurry vision.

"I spent the last few days packing things up from his study. Deciding what to give away, and what to keep. It made me feel better. It made me feel like I was dealing with it. But then I look at this tree... and I love it... but I also know its truth." She stared up at the wide, laden branches.

"What truth is that?"

"My father will never buy another decoration for this tree. It looks the same right now as it did three years ago, I think."

"Catherine." Vincent pulled her into his chest, and in his warmth, she felt her heart break, anew. *Oh God. I'm going to have to start all over again*, she knew.

"They die and its things in a box, and they're the same." The words came out fast. "Old clothes no one will wear. Old Photo albums that never get more pictures. Stuck. Trapped, and they never change." She sobbed it, and he let the torrent spill out of her.

"I know," he said, because he did.

"You... left me." She knew it was an accusation. She couldn't help it.

"I know that, as well. I'm sorry. So sorry, Catherine." He accepted her censure.

She shook her head. "I drove you to it."

"No."

"I did."

"Not ever. You mustn't think it. You mustn't."

"Vincent, I saw your face." Her eyes met his, and hers were full of memory. Horrible memory. "Right before you fell. I saw. How scared you were. How trapped. How... much you needed to get away from me."

"No. No, Catherine, no." He was beyond adamant, and his soft baritone grew firm. "It was the beast inside me that I wanted to keep from you. To stop him from hurting you. From hurting anyone."

She shook her head. "You tried to run. Tried to tell us all to stay back." She sighed, deeply, a world of regret in the sound. "If only I'd done what you wanted."

He kept holding her, loosely. "I understand Father and Mouse listened about as well as you did." His voice held irony, not censure.

She couldn't laugh and cry at the same time. Not now.

He hadn't realized how much he'd scared her, how much he'd truly terrified her, until this moment. Without the bond, he felt blind in her direction. He hadn't known how badly she'd been hurt, by what had hurt him. Badly enough so she'd left him.

Badly enough so that she'd had come here, all the way back to her childhood, to the time before even her mother's illness, to feel safe, again. He held her close, letting her feel the warmth of his frame. He'd run for miles, to reach her. His heart was still pounding, in his chest. He let her hear it. Let her *feel* it, as its power, as it poured from him to her. *I got up from a chair and I began to walk, and then to run, knowing I had to, knowing I was coming to you. There is strength in me, Catherine. I swear there is. Let it be in you. Let it bear you up.*

The lights of the tree twinkled, inside the room, casting shadows in the farthest corners, illuminating the host of fantasy companions she'd chosen to keep near.

Vincent's voice surrounded her. "When I see this tree... I see the love someone poured into it. I see... how cherished you were. Are," he corrected, keeping her as near as he possibly could.

Catherine looked, and of course, she saw that too. "The ponies are from when I was six. Daddy let me ride one." She tried to laugh and stop crying at the same time. "I swear it was so old it could barely walk. But he brought it out for my birthday. And I loved it."

Vincent brushed a kiss across her silky head, and inhaled, deeply. *Ah, that smell, the Catherine smell.* The smell of the good shampoo she used, and the rose-tinged soap. The smell of her own pheromones, and the detergent she used to wash her clothes. The Catherine smell. It felt like forever since it had been in his nose.

"They're all beautiful. And so are you."

It was a simple statement, and not one meant to elicit a reply.

The fire crackled and Douglas blinked, scattered light in a random pattern looking like stars twinkled amongst his evergreen branches, while some of the white lights remained stubbornly solid. Vincent felt the room warm, and felt Catherine hold him to her, as she absorbed his strength and his essence, letting it restore her sense of self, and her sense of them.

*You're here. I can't believe you're here,* she thought. "I can't believe you're here," she whispered.

*We are here. Impossible. Undefeatable. Here. Don't be afraid to love me. Be afraid of anything you like, but that.* He brushed her crown with another kiss, then soaked in the ambience of her tree, with her.

"Tigger is looking at me," he told her, "like he has some great and wonderful secret to tell."

Catherine's body relaxed against his, as she looked where he did. "He was my favorite of the AA Milne characters. I think I wanted to be him, when I grew up." She laid her head on his chest and simply gazed at her tree.



"Didn't you do just that?" He spoke of her joyful embrace of people, and of life. But she shook her head in the negative.

"Lately I think I'm more like Piglet. I feel small, and afraid of everything."

*I know. Share it with me. Don't be afraid to.*

"Not everything," he said softly, keeping her close. "You've had to be too brave. For too long, now. For everyone. For Father. Mine and yours. For me."

"I love you," was all she could say.

*I know. If there's nothing else I know, I know that. Even leaving me was about that. It was about loving me.*

"I wasn't trying to leave you, Catherine. Just to... spare you. That's all."

"Don't. Don't do that again." She knew the request made no sense, but she needed the assurance of it, needed to know he would be there for her, no matter what. Even if it cost her. "No matter what," she added.

He breathed in a deep sigh. "I love you too much to ever leave you," he replied. "I will always find my way back. Somehow. Make a way back, if I have to." She felt his soft kiss on the top of her head.

"Vincent... I don't think I was ever really terrified in my life, until I saw you fall." Her voice did sound small. And frightened, still. He closed his eyes against the feeling of her pain. Feelings he didn't need the bond to sense.

"I don't think I was terrified until I thought you weren't coming back," he replied, knowing it was the truth.

"How did we become afraid?" She wondered it aloud. "We were never afraid, before. I swear we weren't. Cautious, yes. Worried for each other, of course. But... 'go with courage, go with care.' We were doing that." She shook her fair head.

"We were," he agreed, not quite sure where they'd gotten so ... derailed. It seemed like a process, more than an event.

"We were always... cautious, always aware. But not ... petrified of the effect we have on each other. Not like this." She said it to the fabric of his quilted vest.

"You've had to bear too much loss, Catherine. Too much. And I... Paracelsus' lies were like his other poisons, but these fell in my ear. They shouldn't have been able to affect me. I should have been str---"

"Shh." she put her fingers over his lips. "No one could have endured what you've had to. And Paracelsus was a master manipulator. It was part of his evil. Part of why Father and the others banished him in the first place."

"We've withstood evil men before."

She brushed his chin with her fingertips, loving that she was touching him. "Not... not like this. Not one who knew you from long ago. You weren't even a person to him. I don't think I was, either."

Vincent nodded, realizing she was right. "You... we... were an experiment he wanted to manipulate."

She let her hand drop and shrugged with the weight of that. "So he did. It's a miracle you survived and he didn't, rather than the other way around."

Vincent kept his voice low, speaking about unpleasant things. "He was mad. He goaded me in to killing him; it was as if he wanted me to kill Jacob to drive me mad, forgetting I would be killing him, in the bargain. It was... insanity."

"Jacob always said he had a very unstable kind of genius. Nothing to guide it. No conscience, no principles. A soulless kind of power. His own wife died from it."

"Anna was too gentle to withstand him."

"Vincent, everyone was. I'm just so grateful you managed it, somehow."

He separated them. "But I didn't," he said, getting to the heart of why she'd fled him. "I didn't ... manage it, Catherine. I broke, under the weight of it." He felt the sorrow of the assertion.

She simply stood, not letting him move too far away. There was nothing she could say to that, and no way she could refute it.

He felt her hands reach for his, and tighten, loving him. "At first, I didn't know it was him, either," she said. Her voice was still small. "I kept trying to help you, not knowing he was near. Not knowing he was... hurting you."

"None of us knew. Not until it was too late, for all of us. Even him. Especially him." Vincent's sigh was worlds deep.

The lights twinkled, and the heat from the tiny bulbs turned Catherine's dancers, gently. He drew her back into a loose embrace. They both simply stood and held each other, looking at her tree. When he spoke again, his voice was the barest whisper.

"If I promise to never die, will you promise to never leave, again?" He knew it was a ridiculous statement. One that was absurd and completely unrealistic. And somehow, "unrealistic" was just what they needed, right now. *We need to be able to dream with each other, again.* It was a thing they hadn't been able to do for what felt like forever.

He felt her hands tighten around his back. "Yes. I promise if you are immortal, I will stay near. Cling like a barnacle, all your immortal days. Do I get to live forever, too?" she asked, still keeping her cheek turned so she could hear his heart beat against his vest.

"I would have it no other way. I promise you that." He rubbed his hand in small circles, on her back.

*There. There it is. The ability to wish, again. Ridiculous. Impossible. Necessary. Make a wish with me, Catherine. I swear I'll do everything in my power to make it come true.*

His deep voice rumbled, beneath her ear. "I couldn't wait, anymore. I had to come and be near you. Even if you sent me away. I had to be... near you, again. It's felt like forever," he confessed.

"It *has* been forever," she said, knowing she'd strangely lost track of the days, even as she'd borne them. "I needed to be here. I didn't know it, at first, then after a while I did. I needed to be where my father and mother and I had all been happy, together. Needed to feel that... security, again."

"Because the tunnels stopped feeling "safe" to you."

He felt her shake her head. "Because the world stopped feeling safe, to me. The tunnels were at risk. You were at risk. I couldn't save you."

"But you did," his voice insisted.

"No," she shook her head. "I kept trying," she refuted him. "But I kept feeling you slip further away." She loosened her grip and stepped back, as she said it.



"Even before you dropped, I... I... The terrifying thing about watching you collapse was how... unsurprised I was, by it." Her beautiful eyes were full of haunted candor. "Like it was the thing you dread happening, and you pray it won't, but you know it's about to. And you keep thinking, 'Maybe it won't happen. Maybe it will be okay,'" she shrugged. "Then it gets worse, and you know you're just kidding yourself."

She stepped closer to the fire, as if she needed its warmth. "And then you start to wonder what else you've been kidding yourself about." She couldn't meet his eyes, for her sorrow.

He knew what she referred to. "Catherine... we have a future. We must have. It isn't a choice, anymore." His voice was firm.

"My parents thought that, too, once." She gestured to the huge house around them. Her eyes were full of doubt, now. A doubt like he'd never seen, before. Her honesty was coming, and it was going to be harsh. After all, it was the whip she'd beaten herself with, to drive herself here.

"Dreams... even the most important ones you ever have... sometimes... they don't quite come true."

"Your parents had you. Had this beautiful place."

"They wanted more."

"As did we?" he left it as a question. *Is that what this was about? All we wanted? All we wanted, yet didn't dare have?*

"I pushed you." Her voice was blunt. "It played right in to what Paracelsus was doing. Made you feel... unworthy. Inadequate. Like I was the steady one, while you were falling apart. I fed every insecurity you ever had. He couldn't have orchestrated a situation more perfectly to play into what he was doing."

"You helped me whenever I needed it. Both when I asked... and when I didn't. There is no fault in that, Catherine."

"Maybe. But I... I pushed, too."

It was the second time she'd used that word. *Pushed? You have no idea what pushing is, until you live a week in my skin. I am always... pushing, for us. Pushing myself. Father. You. My world. Yours.* "Perhaps. But you have never tried to take me somewhere I did not want to go," he replied.

"Perhaps. But I've tried to take you places everyone thought you couldn't go. And I didn't want to listen."

He reached for her hand and tugged her down in front of the tree, simply sitting on the raised stones of the hearth, with her near.

"Catherine. Three years ago you didn't think you would be working at the District Attorney's Office. Helping those in the World Below. Donating countless hours to crisis hot lines, women's shelters, children's programs..." He lifted her hand from the step, and kissed it.

"I didn't think I would be climbing to a balcony, like Romeo to Juliet. Daring to fall in love. Pushing the... the limits I've always felt, ever outward. I'm part of someone's dreams again, like when I was when I was a child, with Devin. But they aren't dreams about carousels, or climbing the falls." He brushed the back of his fingers down her soft cheek. "They are part of *your* dreams. The dreams for a life a man and woman make together. Never. *Never* did I think to have that. If there is any measure of grace in my life, it's you."

She dropped her head, a gesture of confession.

"I wanted... too much. The life I envision for us, the one I dream about... I wasn't ready to accept where its limits were."

"A beautiful woman once told me 'we don't know where the limits are.'" He settled just the tips of his fingers to her cheek.

She put her forehead against his. "Okay. You get points for remembering what I said. And calling me beautiful." She sniffed, a little.

"You are beautiful. So beautiful it frightens me, sometimes. I think, 'How could someone so ... glorious, so lovely... how could she possibly care this much about me? Doesn't she know the life that is waiting for her? Elsewhere? A life I can... never be a part of?'"

"And you become afraid all over again," she told him. This, she was familiar with. This insecurity, this uncertainty. It had dogged them both, from the first.

"I did become afraid, yes. It took me a long time to trust it, Catherine. I kept thinking that I trusted in our love because I wanted it, so badly. And that wasn't a reason. I didn't mean to doubt you. I didn't doubt you. It was the future I had so little faith in. The limits I bring you... the ones I live with myself. They are not small. It's hard to have faith in some things."

"The world hasn't given you much reason to have faith in it, I don't think," she replied.

"The world is not in love with me. You are. Deeply. Even without the bond... I know it."

"I am." The tears still threatened. *You know I love you. With or without our bond, you still know. Thank you.*

She tried to explain her abandonment of him, feeling as if she had to. "I had to come here. Had to be here. I forgot how to have a dream for us." She confessed it raggedly. Her hand came up around his neck, and she pressed his cheek to hers. He knew there were tears on her face.

"Borrow mine, then," he said, in his lowest tones. "Borrow my dreams. Just until you remember your own." He kissed her forehead. "I love you."

"Even without our bond?" A soft tear slid down her cheek.

"More, if that's possible. I have to have faith in it, when I can't feel you. And if there is one thing I know I have... It's faith in you."

She tried not to cry, harder. *Deep breaths*. Her hand stayed against his neck, as she settled.

"So in your dream, we're immortal, and I'm always close," she clarified, slipping her hands to the front of his vest, simply... holding the fabric.

He reached a decision. One that had been too long coming, perhaps. She'd confessed her fears. Perhaps it was time he confessed his, out loud.

"In my dream ...I am ... your husband." The words were foreign in his mouth. "And I am so, so gentle, with you."

A soft explosion happened inside her. Catherine never realized those words, 'a soft explosion' could occupy the same sentence, before, but she felt their results. It was a soft explosion, as the words "your husband" burst between them, and spread out, like a mushroom cloud, or a sonic blast.

"Gentle." She used the word she knew she could still speak.

"Very gentle. I never hurt you." The words were whispered. Longingly.

Eyes shut, she kept her head down. *Gentle. This had to be gentle. For him. It could not be any other way.* Thoughts of infernos and being out of control terrified him, and naturally, she understood why.

*Of course he would picture "gentle" for this.* For all the times she'd imagined something blazing, something heated and fiery, she knew she'd been a fool. If he'd picked up on those imaginings, no wonder he'd kept himself at arm's length from her.

She reached up to cup either side of his face, brushing her thumbs, lightly across his cheeks.

"I love 'gentle,'" she told him, wishing for it. Feeling it. Wishing he still had the bond so he could feel what she was feeling, right now.

His hand broadened, and flattened, on the small of her back, bringing her infinitesimally closer. Her thumbs simply continued to caress his face. Her body warmed, and he felt it, beneath his palm. She simply dropped her head, and began nuzzling the small area of his neck she could reach, above his fully buttoned collar. His hair fell in a curtain, around her, making a soft, secret burrowing place. She felt his life blood, against her mouth. Felt him enfold her, and cradle her head where it was, wanting it.

Drawing herself closer, she simply climbed into his lap as he moved his hands up and down along the length of her back. When he reached the bottom hem of her sweater, he touched bare skin, where it had ridden up. She nuzzled his neck, approving.

Words did not pass between them, other than the one word, 'gentle,' brushing again, and again, across their forms. His palm flattened again, across the bare small of her back, as she reached up to undo only the buttons of his collar, opening more of his throat to the touch of her mouth. She felt his temperature rising, felt the uncomfortable shifting, of his legs as his body's inevitable reaction to her warmth, her nearness, began.

He reached brush his cheek against her crown, then to nestle her head closer into his neck. When she wanted to undo another button, he simply caught her hand, kissed her fingertips, and put the hand around his neck. It was his way of saying 'no,' without having to use the word. He wasn't ready to be exposed to her, not yet, not in ways she could see. It was all right. She understood.

Keeping her mouth against his throat, she nonetheless kissed all she had exposed, down to the soft vee of his collar bone, and back up again. His hands crept up her back, exploring. He would not undress her. But he wanted to touch her. Gently. Nail-tipped fingers traced the line of her spine. She shivered with delight, and he felt her response, in his fingertips.

Yes.

She straddled him lightly, keeping her weight off him as she slowly brushed her mouth under his jaw, along his chin, and up to his waiting mouth. She didn't want to tease. When she settled her mouth across his, the kiss was almost chaste, until it wasn't. The tip of her tongue came out slowly, gently still, so he could feel her every intention before she acted on it. From the soft corner of his mouth to its full, lower lip center, from side to side, her mouth explored his.

He opened his lips on a sigh, to be so touched. She felt the soft tensing of his frame, as he moved his hand, almost unbidden, up to where the line of her bra bisected her back. Felt his fingertips brush the skin where the line made a barrier. Felt his hand slide under it, for the sheer pleasure of holding her bare back between her shoulder blades. His tongue came out to meet hers, and they danced.

Tentative at first, then deeper, his mouth learned hers as hers learned his. The cleft was sensitive, and she avoided it, at first, afraid it would remind him too much of their differences. But a stray touch too close to its center made him moan, and the hand at her back pressed her forward, wanting.

"Husband to me," she said, bringing her sex gently down on his, feeling.

Both his arms came around her then, and his kiss deepened, asking. He unfastened the bra, just to feel the pleasure of her bare back, without impediment. Her own hands slipped up

under his untucked shirt, so that she too, could feel the bare skin of his back, before his vest blocked her progress.

Now, she thought. *If this is going to happen, it is going to happen now.* While he was aroused, yet unafraid.

She rocked against him subtly, feeling the steel of an erection he couldn't disguise and wouldn't deny. "Husband to me," she approved, letting him feel her want.

Hugging him close, she felt his arms wrap around her waist, holding. She drew her right hand down, slowly, brushing along his chest, to his waistband, letting him feel her intention. If he wanted to stop her, he could, as he'd done, before.

He didn't.

Her skirt was bunched around them, concealing, and he seemed to need that, now. The parts of him he did not want her to see, he seemed to want her to feel, and that was all right, even understandable, to her.

"Gentle." She repeated the mantra, unbuttoning his dark pants, then easing the zipper down. She felt his fingers tighten, so she simply stopped, and settled herself against him, again. They both groaned, from the pleasure of the contact.

Large. He was large, here, in keeping with the rest of his size. Not too big, but considerable. She moved against him, instinctively, loving the sensation, feeling him open his mouth against her neck, as she had done, feeling his tongue lick her skin there, with approval. Good. This felt good. Beyond good. Gentle. *Please, God, let it stay like this,* she wished it for herself. Wished it for him.

She felt the need in him, for it. She felt her panties against the ridge of his steel, as they dampened. She moaned softly. Drew herself up to the head of his sex, caressing, then had to simply settle her weight down upon him, when that was too much.

Her underthings between them, the two of them were stuck, suspended in the place between wanting and having.

She was afraid to break the contact between them, afraid he would call a halt. But the heat she was feeling was growing, and becoming uncomfortable, inside her.

Remarkably, it was Vincent who pushed for the next step, and she blessed him for it.

Reaching beneath the voluminous folds of green fabric, he found her knee, caressed it, then trailed his hand up her thigh until he found the offending barrier. Bikinis. White, if she remembered, though he couldn't see their color.

Kissing her neck, he turned his fingers until he simply caught the side seam with his nails, and pulled against the fabric. *Rrrrip.* The wisp of lace gave easily away, and the tension that

held the fabric to her body was gone, on one leg. He had no need to cut the other. She simply lifted a little, and it fell away to one side, now useless, on her other leg.

Skin to skin, and he shuddered from it, before he could think whether or not he should help her brush her underthings down, brush them off. *Warm. So warm.* He felt her press against him, wet, and strong and smooth. He felt the brush of her hair, along his sex. Damp. Wiry, a little. *She has a pelt, too, right there.*

He knew it, of course. But the difference between empirical knowledge and sensation coursed through him, and he rejoiced that here, at least, she was similar to him. Perhaps that meant something. Perhaps it didn't. He was beyond trying to reason about it.

He tried to kiss her mouth, but couldn't stop the need to breathe, and head back, his nostrils opened as his mouth did, taking in air. His heart pounded with hot blood. It felt so good, so good, all along his veins. He was feeling Catherine. And she was feeling him.

The last moment he was a virgin, he knew he never wanted anything more than her in his life. Though aroused by the press of her breasts through her top, aroused by her scent, the brush of her soft, sandy, hair, the feel of her mouth as it nestled against his jugular, this, this glorious, heavy feeling all along his sex, this was what he wanted. This press of intimate flesh. This simple bliss.

*'Gentle. Husband to me.'* the words whispered in his brain as he felt her touch her opening to the head of his sex. Willing himself not to push upward, he felt her slide down, enfolding him, simply taking him fully inside. She whimpered her pleasure, at the touch. They both did. He was inside her. And it was exquisite.

*You are... everything,* he thought. *And everything is everything.*

Now. Now and for the first time, he wanted her nude, and if there was one apology he had for her, it was that one. That he wanted her bare, while he could not offer her the same. It was a wrap skirt. Two buttons and a tie, and all he had to do was pull the voluminous wealth of fabric to the side.

He tugged, and she allowed. *There.* Her thighs exposed, now, most of the cloth was wadded behind her, in a useless heap. The scrap of her underwear still rode one thigh. He brushed it down, loving the sight of her bare legs.

He lifted her sweater (Or was she lifting it for him?), taking the unfastened bra away, up her arms. The lights from the tree and the fireplace caressed her skin, and his night vision bared what only seemed to her like places in shadow.

*God.* It hurt his eyes to look. Like staring at the beauty of a winter star.

He kissed her again, and cupped a peach-tipped breast, which rose subtly as she locked her arms around his neck. It was a gift fit for a sultan, and he knew it wasn't just him who didn't deserve her. *No man does. No man can. Thank you.*

He wanted to move, even as he wanted to stay nothing but still. The dichotomy persisted, as he accustomed himself to it, and to the fact that she was the one who was in control here.

He found he could do neither, very well, and simply wanted the feel of her fully against him. He stayed deep, barely moving, feeling her hips rock against him, subtly. She had handfuls of his vest and shirt, and he felt her build. The moment she came, he felt the beauty of it, with his hands on her bare back.

*Yes. I love you. I love you.*

She whimpered her completion into the skin at his throat, resting her head against his still-clad shoulder.

*Damn my reluctance and damn you for letting me get away with it,* he castigated, internally. Her hands should have been on his chest, on his back, when that happened, sending him the sensation through her fingertips. His breath was deepening. He knew his need was growing. But he wanted what had just happened again, from her.

His hands yanked at the lacings on his vest, and opened it, and unbuttoned the shirt until he could simply lift the whole mess over his head, and be rid of it.

"Close your eyes," he told her, though he wasn't sure if she'd even opened them, since they'd started. He nestled her against his bare torso, loving the feel of her. *There. There.* He'd been making love to her with his penis. Now he was learning to do that with the rest of him.

If anything, the feel of his bare chest, the hair that was thick in spots, and thin in others, the expanse of skin at the top of his shoulders and the soft down against his belly seemed to excite her all over again, and she purred a new arousal, rubbing her chest against his. He lifted her, toeing awkwardly out of his boots, aware that this was as bare as he was going to get, for now. Her hands were on his bare chest, and her mouth was following what her fingers touched.

As natural as breathing, he lifted, turned, and laid her on her back, on the hearthrug, keeping himself inside her. She pushed his slacks down, unable to reach far, but enough. Her hands slid around to caress the sweep of his lower back, the rise of his buttocks.

She lay beneath him, and he planted his forearms on either side of her, staring down at her beautiful face, eyes closed as he'd bid her, her fair skin blushed with passion. Her hands were moving on his back, caressing, exploring. The dampness of her orgasm was all over the hair of his sex, rivered along his testicles. He felt glorious.

"Catherine." He wanted to see her eyes. Wanted to see them, badly. Even though it meant she would see him. "Open your eyes, now. Please. Look at me. Look at me, my love."

She did, and the love that shone in the emerald green of their depths took the rest of his breath away.

The blue in his glimmered like rich sapphires, in the half-dark, and Catherine adjusted her position instinctively, to his.

"My gentle love." She half mouthed it, half breathed it, drawing her legs up, enfolding him.

He was lost, and he needed to move. It didn't take much, and he knew it wouldn't. She was with him, just the same, though, and he felt the tension in her belly, as he felt her thighs tighten. *There. There. I have you. I have you, my love.* It was a second climax, for her, and a first one, for him.

Heat washed through her, as it shot through him, emptying him. Even in this, he knew he had not been rough. Indeed, he had barely moved.

Images of what he thought this moment would be, thought he knew what it had to be like, shattered. They were replaced with the reality of what they made, together. All the words he thought he knew for it were useless. He hadn't just assumed sex to be a primal thing, he'd thought a certain primitive roughness -- '*Animal. Animal roughness*' his mind whispered, was a necessity.

He hadn't known how wrong he was, until he knew how wrong he was. Cyclical argument. He felt the pleasure of her arms tightening around his back, as she... after-shocked? Is that what this was, he wondered? - with him inside her. *Bliss.*

Words didn't come for a long time. He simply held her, cradling. He refused to change his position, and kept his weight off her, on his arms, his mighty back bearing the load, easily.

When he could speak: "I ... thought it would be..." he kissed her bare shoulder. "Something else." He kept his hair down, hiding his expression, a little.

"Disappointed?" she asked.

At the mention of that, his head came up, sharply.

"Don't even use that word in a sentence. Not for this," he roughly whispered. He kissed her forehead, repeatedly, assuring her of his completion, his satisfaction. He was her lover. *Lover.* The very word itself shimmered itself across his consciousness.

"I was teasing. I didn't mean to."

"I just thought... something rougher. Apt to hurt you. I didn't realize it could be so..." words were failing him.



"Soft?" she asked.

"Soft," he agreed. "And perfect." He kissed her gently. "You are perfect, Catherine." His body slipped outside hers, and he gave a soft sound of disappointment, as did she. He settled beside her, facing the tree, and drew her into the crook of his shoulder, feeling her length. He kicked his slacks the rest of the way down, and reached for his socks, tossing them anywhere. When he was as nude as she was, he settled back down, beside her. On instinct, he drew her velvet skirt over them both, a little.

"It isn't always soft," she told him, pillowing her head on an amazing bicep. "Just so you know."

"So modern literature and stray conversation assures me," he replied, sparing a kiss for her beautiful shoulder. A shoulder he would like to explore more thoroughly, when his stamina returned. She smiled at his words, if not his intentions.

"It's all right if it isn't," she said. "Like everything else, there's more than one... way." She brushed her hands across the soft pelt of his chest, discovering him, now that he allowed it. One of her fingers curled around a lock of coppery down.

"Is it all right if we keep it... gentle, for a while?" he asked, still concerned about the other, but sensing its coming.

"I think we should. Until we both agree we shouldn't," she reassured him, kissing his shoulder in the same gesture he'd just given her.

He was so content he could pass into unconsciousness from it; the languor of lovemaking. *The afterglow*. This too, he understood as a concept, but was just now experiencing, for his own.

"You called me 'husband.'"

His voice was just above a whisper.

"You are my husband," she returned. She knew she'd never have another.

The tears that came to his eyes were immediate. "Not yet. Don't let me cheat you out of a wedding, Catherine."

She kissed him then, softly. "This is different than that. That is putting our lives together. This is... something else."

He understood her. Marriage wasn't sex, though the two were supposed to go together.

Wanting her, needing her hit him again, and this time his erection felt engorged, not restrained by half-fears he needed to overcome. He turned her on her back, again, and this time, took things more slowly. He discovered the pleasure of the thrust of his hips, the sensuousness of moving away from her, then returning. He manipulated her, once, teasing,

staying away until she dug her fingers into his backside, asking. Her orgasm was thunderous. His was searing.

"We will be married. Say 'when,'" he said, when speech returned.

"Vincent. I would love to marry you. But it's two different things. We've only just started to..."

"No." His voice was adamant. "Catherine, no. If you will not marry me, then... then this can no longer continue."

She raised an interested eyebrow at him, almost amused. "Using sex to get what you want? That's a woman's trick, Vincent."

Rebuked, he held his hand out to her, cupping her cheek. "Is it that you do not wish your life tied to mine? I understand, if this is so."

She shook her head, and his hand moved with it. "No. That isn't it. That isn't it at all. I just wanted you to understand... this is so new, and it's so overwhelming, when it's new. You don't have to offer me marriage, because you offered me this. Finally." She kissed his cheek, at the gentle jibe, then put her cheek to his.

"In every dream I have worth claiming, I'm your wife," she whispered, holding him, feeling the comfort the words gave him.

"But pushing for that... trying to put our lives together when you can't see how they'll fit, when you think I'm doing all the sacrificing... You have an almost ferocious pride, Vincent. Even more than the fear of what might happen if we... made love together, that has driven your choices."

*No. It hadn't.*

*Had it?*

Blinking, he looked back over the long years that had both joined and divided them. She'd stayed Below when she'd mourned for Charles, and then returned to her world, uncertain of what it all meant. He'd sent her back, knowing he had to, certain that had been the right choice, for the both of them. He'd understood her to be a woman of both worlds, knowing that she was giving up much, much too much, to be with him.

While other tunnel dwellers had given up a life of poverty, or of violence, or want, to come below, she would give up a beautiful apartment, electricity, hot and cold running water, the opera, the ballet, silk blouses and cashmere sweaters, like the one that now lay in a wad, at their feet.

His pride would not allow her to do that. Would not allow her to make that sacrifice, knowing the only reason she'd done it, was for him.

"If I was poor. Or a prostitute, like Lena, or deaf like Laura. It would be an easier choice for you, wouldn't it?" she asked him, knowing the answer. Lawyer's trick. Know the answer before you ask the question. Her next words were full of sorrow, and hit him hard.

"I can't stop being what I am, Vincent, so it makes you comfortable. And I never asked you to stop being what you are, for me."

The reality of her charge hit him.

He held her close. "I'm so sorry." He'd been guilty of the worst kind of reverse snobbery. Bad as Jacob. Worse, maybe. Margaret had never offered to share Jacob's burdens. Catherine had. "So miserably sorry. I didn't mean to imply you had to be desperate, to want to live with me."

"I've been lonely, sometimes. And scared, others. Isn't that desperate enough?"

He nodded, pulling her close, pulling her tight.

"Be my wife, Catherine. Live Below. Live Above, or any place in between. Set me a task. Bid me build you a house, where you are part of the world Above and the world Below, as you wish. I'll find a way. Or make one. Or just... come into my chambers, with every box and blouse you possess. Or keep a drawer for my things in your apartment, and I'll just come to you. We'll find a way to make it work. We have to. We can't... live, divided, and dividing. Somehow, it has to *our* world. Not pieces of it yours, and pieces of mine."

Finally. Finally the words she'd been feeling, all along. *We'll find a way to make it work. We have to. Not separated by what's yours and what's mine.* No mention of owing her life to the world Above, or how that was the only path truly open to her. No mention of potential wasted, or unfulfilled. Of all she wouldn't do, or couldn't have. No mention of fault, nor blame, for either of them. Acceptance. Just simple acceptance of what they were. Acceptance, and a vow for unity.

*We're impossible. And we're going to happen.*

"Maybe... we can even come here, sometimes?" she asked.

"I would... dearly love that. You don't want to sell it?"

The decision crystalized, in her mind. *This house. Ours. Full of children, like Daddy always wanted. Our children. Sometimes. Some day.*

"No. No, I don't want to sell it. I want to bring... children here, sometimes. My children. *Our* children, if we're blessed with them. I want to give them a pony ride for their sixth birthday and teach them to play tennis. I want to not scold them for sliding down the banister and watch you read to them, by this fireplace."

"And if... if they look like me?" It was a thing he had to ask.

She gave him all her love, in her look. "Then I want it that much more."

He closed his eyes over her loving pronouncement. *I said I wanted a dream. There's one. Thank you. Thank you, my love.*

"You're sure?" He could barely get the words out.

She brushed a kiss against his blonde cheek, feeling the dream, together. "Very sure." She hugged him close, and laid her head on his chest a moment, watching the fire. "I was considering selling the place, I admit. But there's a set of golf clubs in the closet I just can't decide what to do with." She lifted her head. There was a wealth of mischief in her smile.

"You should keep them right where they are, then," he answered, stretching out beneath her. "One should always have a place for one's... golf clubs."

She giggled. "I love you." She kissed his chin and smiled down at him.

"Good. Marry me."

"When?"

"Five minutes from now, if I could get you to Father fast enough." The look in his blue eyes couldn't be more sincere.

She thought for a long moment. "Okay," she answered simply.

He caressed her face with his fingers, and traced her jawline with his thumbs. For her scar, he turned his fingers so their backs brushed the raised skin. "I'll do everything in my power to make sure you're happy," he said, caressing the mark that had brought her to him.

There were tears clinging to her lashes, and this time, it was she who made love to him, straddling him again, slowly, drenchingly. He laid on his back and held her hands in his, as she loved him. It lasted well past their five minute mark he'd set for their wedding. He almost didn't want to climax. Until he did, desperately.

"We're going to kill each other, before we make it to the ceremony." He laid next to her, exhausted, as the fire died down.

"Mm. Making up for lost time. Wait until the next time we're on that balcony," she told him, deliciously confident.

His head came up. "The balcony. Catherine. The stars all above us, and the moon. The park below. The part of your world that is ours. Marry me there."

Passion slowed her ability to think. "I thought we'd get married in the tunnels?" she asked, trying to raise her exhausted head.

"Our friends and family will receive us there, yes, if that is what you wish. But for the marriage..."

Vincent had an image in his mind, and it was crystal clear. *My wish is like a shimmering ornament*, he thought, eying one of her glass ballerinas.

"Please. I want a full moon on your veil, and the rose bush beside us. Father saying the words, with his back to the city, and your apartment full to bursting with our friends. Marry me in the doorway. The one between your world and the one we made, together."

"The next full moon is Christmas Eve, according to my kitchen calendar."

"Three days from now. A wedding in your apartment, the reception in the Great Hall. Will you do it?" He rolled and pinned her, his eyes conveying a depth of sincerity, of purpose.

"You can't pull a wedding together in three days!" she admonished.

"The world was built in seven," he replied, quoting Genesis.

"The world had God."

"And we have everyone in the tunnels." His smile was beatific.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

### A BARGAIN FULFILLED



Three nights later, the brightest moon Catherine had ever remembered seeing rose over the New York skyline, and Jacob Wells stood on her balcony, a heavy brown velvet cape keeping the December chill from his frame.

There were flowers of every shape, color and kind, around him, and scattered all through her apartment. She'd emptied out *Panache Flowers* and had it all brought here. Where there weren't flowers, there were candles. In globes, in tapers, in pillars, behind bits of stained glass... Her apartment and balcony shimmered like an odd kind of cathedral, as her dark-clad groom waited, impatiently.

Half the women were in her bedroom with her, barred from male eyes, as they settled the train of her wedding gown in place. Samantha held a basket of rose petals, mixed red and white. Olivia and Mary labored, sewing satin roses and crystal beads on the train of a dress that had been in a trunk in her Father's house, three days before. She had to wear higher heels than normal. Her mother had been a little taller, and there had been no time for a hem. Other than that, they'd obviously been the same size. The higher shoes suited Catherine just fine. After all, her groom towered over her.

Cullen had turned a pair of huge oak candle holders on a lathe, crowning them with fat wedding pillars made by Rebecca. The white wax was set with crystals and roses, again. The theme was everywhere.

Guests stood in every available space, as the string quartet stood on her dinky sofa, Jamie even perched on the back, tuning up for the wedding march. Devin, the last guest to arrive, and only an hour before, stood in a suit Mary had had an iron on, twenty minutes ago.

Mary stood as Catherine's matron of honor, and Peter Alcott came forward to escort the bride, looking dapper, and misty eyed. Then the wedding march began, and "misty eyed" took on a new meaning. The double doors to her bedroom opened, and Catherine stood framed in their flowered and beribboned entrance.

Vincent couldn't breathe. For a moment, he truly couldn't breathe, she was so beautiful. His bride. His Catherine.

Samantha proudly cast rose petals down on the path Catherine would have to walk to get to him. His bride stood in the doorway, looking at him, waiting for some invisible cue.

Vincent drank her in. The dress was a schoolgirl fantasy of Battenberg lace and satin, with a sweetheart neckline Mary had attached Catherine's red and white roses to. His crystal nestled between her breasts on a silver chain. Her waist looked impossibly small, and the sleeves hugged her arms down to points on the backs of her hands. A white rose on each point, a red one on the wrist. Her bouquet was two roses, wrapped with red and white ribbon, and a book of Shakespeare that had 'Shakespeare knew everything' inscribed on the inside. She looked impossibly fair, and a little nervous.

Vincent only knew no queen from history or legend had ever looked lovelier. No queen but his.

She looked at him through the soft veil of her something borrowed, the veil all tunnel brides wore, if they wore nothing else bridal. Olivia had caressed it fondly, with remembrance, and Brooke had straightened it down the back, thinking, *One day, it will be for me.*

It was a tradition Catherine barely had time to observe, until Mary produced it from its white box. It was simple and elegant, and added to, a little, by each tunnel bride. Mary had stitched a delicate leaf work pattern along the bottom. Olivia had added a bottom layer of lace. Other tunnel brides had set a piece of ribbon to it, or seed pearls. Catherine's contribution had been to place four tiny satin roses on the sides near the temple; two red, two white.

Waiting for her in the balcony doorway, Vincent stood proudly towering over all the other guests. *I could find you in any room, anywhere, any time,* she thought. There was simply no one more regal.

Mary's Christmas gift to him, of a midnight blue velvet vest, had come early, and his black knee-high boots shone with polish. His shirt gleamed of white linen, and he'd needed Devin's steadier hands to tie it at the throat. His coat was the one he wore to Winterfest. Her rose hung as it always did, in the pouch around his neck. He looked so in love, she almost missed her cue to walk to him, and had to catch up half a step.

They all seemed there to help her, to help them: Peter's steadying hand. Father's soft, strong voice. Mary, helping to lift her blusher, so he could see her face fully, at last.

When it came time to present and bless the rings, it was Mouse who did the honors, as he came forward with a book, this one a familiar, white leather-bound copy of 'Great Expectations.' He handed it to Devin, who opened the page to where it naturally fell: to the beginning of the last chapter.

There, tied around the ribbon book mark, were their rings. Two plain gold bands, as Catherine had insisted she wanted nothing more. "I do not want to be engaged to you. I want to be married to you," she'd said, simply.

With a gentle tug on the bow, they fell freely into Vincent's large hand, and he held the circles of gold, expectantly.

Words. Vows. Promises of a lifetime, for a lifetime. She'd thought they might each choose something to read or say, but realized there was so little time, and she was now far too nervous.

So was he.

His hand trembled, a little, as he slid the simple band home, on her finger. Moonlight flooded the terrace, and all but framed them, as Father declared he could kiss the bride.

Every onlooker cheered, as Vincent Wells kissed Catherine Chandler Wells, and she felt herself lifted off her feet and spun, her train making a circle around them that tangled at their feet. She felt his smile, before she saw it.

"I love you," he whispered for her ear alone, though of course everyone knew he'd said it.

The crowd cheered, hugged, kissed, cried, and drank a toast to the bride and groom with the best champagne Catherine's trust fund could buy. They moved down to the Great Hall for the reception, blockading the path between the elevator and the sub-basement. It was Christmas Eve. Apartments were either quiet or buzzing, with parties. So many people were in the halls that forty more were assumed to simply be part of 'this' party, or 'that' one. Many of the guests cut across the park, while others snuck down through the basement. Getting the cases of Champagne down was almost as much a challenge as getting the groom down. In the end, he decided to go by way of the rooftops, and the park, as Catherine's many attendants spirited her down through the tunnels.

If Catherine's apartment was decorated, the Great Hall was laden. Roses, crystals, a beribboned and draped chandelier, wine fountains, tables heavy with every delicacy and necessity Henry, Lin, Saul, and others could provide. Music filled the room, as William's three tier wedding cake occupied a place of honor, at the center of a long table. Crystals from the caverns and red and white roses adorned it.

A very tall groom paced the area in front of the cake table, waiting impatiently.

"You look nervous, little brother." Devin straightened Vincent's cravat. "Afraid she's changed her mind and run off with Mouse?"

"She should be here, by now," the bridegroom complained. "I've been here ten minutes!"

"Clearly, you've never tried to run in a train," Devin chuckled, loving the look on Vincent's face. He was in love. And his eyes stayed on the door she would enter through, the wind flickering the torchlight, casting shadows.

"I think I hear her coming," Devin soothed, grateful he was right. Happy chatter preceded her, even over the sound of the wind. Vincent rushed to meet her.

She'd barely gotten halfway down the stairs, laughing with her many attendants, when Vincent simply scooped her up and carried her down the rest of the way, dress, veil, and all.

"And *that*, is the last time we will be separated, tonight. This month. Possibly this year," he tacked on, walking forward with her to the Great Doors, which were already open to receive the guests.

Devin stood near the entrance as the last of the wedding party filed in. "Um, Vincent, it's traditional to let the bride walk into the room, at the introduction. You want to set her down?" Catherine tucked her head into her new husband's neck, and he felt her smile.



"No," he replied simply. "Introduce us, Devin. My wife," (how he loved that word), "wishes to dance."

"Rebel. And they said it was me." He left them in the doorway, and went off to gather the attention of the raucous guests.

"We could sneak away," Catherine told her groom. "Down past the Great Falls. Down to the Crystal Caves, to the Nameless River. Sneak away and never be seen again."

"After waiting for you for three days, don't tempt me," he replied, kissing her soundly, as the musicians stopped playing, and Devin tapped the side of a champagne flute with a knife.

"You had to wait longer than that," she said, referring to their time apart.

"And years before that. Thirty of them. I think that's enough." He dropped his voice to a low, intimate level. "Don't you not agree?"

She did. And the tone in his voice sent shivers down her spine.

"I do." She echoed her wedding vows. "It was clever to have the reception here." She complimented his planning skills.

"It was only so I wouldn't have to worry about throwing people out of your apartment to have the wedding night," he replied. *Cleverer than you think.* He looked positively smug.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, your attention, please," Devin called.

"*Our* apartment. *Our* wedding night," she corrected. It was a pronoun they'd both vowed to use more often.

"Our wedding reception. Our dreams. Our Great Hall," he answered, as Devin called for quiet.

"Our tunnels. Our New York." Catherine grinned at him.

"Our world." They both said it together, smiling broadly.

*I love you. I can't wait to be alone with you. You look so handsome,* she thought.

"And I will count every minute until I can be alone with you," he said aloud. It took them both a moment to realize what had just happened.

"You just felt what I was feeling... didn't you?" she asked.

He nodded, accepting it, just as he'd done so long ago, the first time it had ever happened.

"Yes," he said simply.

"Our Bond...?" she asked, feeling it just as he did.

"Is returned. It seems it didn't want to miss the wedding."

"... Mr. and Mrs. Vincent Wells!" Devin called out. The applause was thunderous, and helpers and friends who couldn't fit into Catherine's apartment saw the married couple for the first time.

He didn't let her down. He didn't even let her down when they began to dance, not at first, and it was only when she absolutely insisted, he set her on her feet at all.

They waltzed a good while, and Catherine changed partners to dance with Peter, and Vincent with Mary. After a while, Kanin, Olivia, Cullen, Brooke, Mouse, Jaime, Devin, Samantha, even Geoffrey were on the floor. Henry slow danced with Lin, no matter what the tempo of the music. Vincent checked a pocket watch lent to him by Father, keeping Catherine to her promise that they could leave the reception "after an hour or so."

He carried her out the same way he'd carried her in. Samantha had caught the bouquet, and a flustered Mouse had caught the garter. Jacob, Peter and Mary all cried more than a little, when they left.

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"I love you," she told her husband, two hours later, wrapped in the soft glow of Christmas lights. Douglas had been set up in her bedroom, since there was no room for him in the living room, thanks to the wedding decorations.

"What feat of engineering managed to get that tree in here?" he asked, taking in the spun glass angels as they twirled.

"The virtue of an artificial tree. It folds up like an umbrella. I just had to throw it in the car and redecorate it, here. The children put most of the ornaments on for me. It just didn't seem right to have a wedding night without it, considering..." She turned over on her now destroyed bed and planted a kiss on the small of his back, as he lay sprawled.

"I love you, Wife," he told her.

"And I love you, Husband," she replied.

"Devin introduced us as Mr. and Mrs. Wells."

"So he did."

"Does it bother you that it isn't legal in your world?" he asked, the one blight on his happiness, for her.

"Considering a certain attorney named Jeff Radler assured me he would file all the necessary paperwork, I'm not sure that's the issue it could have been," she replied, giving him a sassy grin.

"Jeff Radler?" he asked.

"Devin Wells," she answered. "It's the alias he uses when he's being an attorney."

Vincent chuckled. "Can he do that?"

"Can he swear he witnessed my marriage to a man named Vincent Wells?" Catherine asked. "Considering he was standing right behind you, I'd consider it a lie if he said he *didn't* see it, at this point," she reasoned. Then she shrugged.

"Catherine..."

"You know Devin, Vincent. The paperwork might say we got married in Tahiti, or that you're a hundred years old, or be filed a year from now and back-dated, or God knows what all, but it can be done."

"But no one you know will know about it."

Her smile grew. "Don't confuse a legal matter with a social one. They're two different things."

"I'm starting to understand the intricacies of having a lawyer in the family," he replied indulgently.

"Two lawyers. Devin and me," she giggled, feeling him turn her over on her back, as he settled his weight on top of her.

He was laughing. Smiling at her, and at them. Teasing her. Happy. In bed without a stitch to cover him, and guiding her hand so it threaded with his, keeping them palm to palm. *There are miracles yet, in this world. Be one with me. Live one with me.*

"I love you, Wife," he repeated sincerely, unable to contain either his happiness, or his ardor. His appetite for his bride seemed unquenchable. As was hers for him.

"No more than I love you," She reached up to lock both her hands in his, over her head.

Her mother's pearls shimmered in her ears, and her fingers entwined with his. Her wedding band felt warm and solid, against his fingers.

"Married." He was still getting used to the word. "Have you thought about where you want to live?" he asked. It had long been a question between them.

"I want to go to sleep only where you are," she declared. "Whether that's Above, Below, in your chambers, or this room, or in the house where you found me, or in a house we both haven't found yet, that's where I want to be. That's where I'm home, Vincent. That's where I'm home. It's where *we're* home."

And they were.



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*No matter where you are in your own fairy tale, I wish you love. ~ Cindy*

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