

Dragon's Waltz

By Cindy Rae



For Winterfest 2017



Chapter One

What Happens in Chinatown, Stays in Chinatown

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"And remember. You're not to tell a soul about this. Especially Vincent," Catherine instructed Henry Pei, as she helped him stack a bounty of foodstuffs on the wide cart.

"So I'm just going to tell him that three glazed hams, two turkeys and eight bags of potatoes appeared in my walk-in fridge?" Henry asked, smiling, as he loaded the bounty.

"I don't care what you tell him. Just don't tell him it's from me," Catherine said, hefting a small case of canned corn onto the pile.

"Are *you* going to tell him?" Henry asked, suspecting he knew the answer.

"Of course I am...If I'm ever under oath about it," Cathy answered blithely.

He shook his head at her. "But I already donated to Winterfest. What should I say?" Henry asked.

Catherine shrugged, as she made sure the canned goods were stable. "I don't care. You over-ordered. The food company made a mistake and said you could keep it, Merry Christmas and Happy Chinese New Year. It fell off the truck. Whatever you want," Catherine said.

Henry had a feeling he was going to have a hard time explaining how a flat of out-of-season strawberries had "fallen off the truck." But he knew Catherine Chandler well enough to know she was a determined woman.

"I overheard Mary and Olivia talking," she explained. "They said William mentioned they were going to be a little short, this year," Catherine scanned the growing pile, trying to find a place to put a bag of snap peas. "So... now they're a little over."

A little? Henry shook his head at her.

"There are two more families living there," Henry stated, as he settled a bag of hard candy near the peas. "And a few others besides. Times are hard, so donations are a little down. Unfortunately, tough times tend to send more people their way, but at pretty much the worst possible time." Henry confirmed pretty much what Catherine already suspected.

She smiled as they adjusted the load. "And Father says Devin and Charles are coming, too. It's Charles' first Winterfest. I want to make sure he has a nice one," Catherine commented. She hoped Charles liked yams, as she hefted the bag. Henry added a bag of flour, and one of sugar.

"Is there a *reason* we're not telling Vincent?" Henry asked, not wanting to be caught in the middle between Catherine and Vincent, two of the more strong-minded people of his acquaintance.

Catherine blushed a little. "Well... one time I brought down a few 'old things.' I, uh, might have forgotten to remove some of the price tags on some of them," she said, adding a pair of cheery white chrysanthemums to the haphazard mix. "I get the feeling that Vincent doesn't like the idea of me spending money on them past a certain, small amount, though he's never actually *forbid* it. So this way..." Her grin was contagious, as she let the sentence hang.

"He doesn't have to know," Henry concluded, as Lin walked through the beaded curtain. She looked at the pile of food, the flowers, and at Catherine's guilty expression.

"Busted," Henry said.

"I don't even want to know," Lin replied, holding up one hand, as she scanned the abundance with dark eyes.

"We could say a farmer donated most of it," Henry tried, hefting a large bag of carrots. That was the last of it.

Catherine seemed to consider that. "We could, but the only farm they know of is the one Devin is supporting Charles on," Catherine replied, helping him steady the bag so it wouldn't fall off the potatoes.

Lin picked up three tiny jars of caviar, tucked near one of the chrysanthemums. Her voice was droll. "Things must be going *very* well for Charles and Devin."

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Chapter Two

Special Guests and Old Gambits



"Charles looked very well, the last time they were here. Is Devin certain an application for guardianship is even necessary?" Jacob asked Vincent, as Father advanced a pawn.

Vincent shrugged as he considered his next move. "He says he doesn't know if it's even possible, for certain, though he and Catherine have exchanged telephone calls about it. It's a thing he wishes to speak more to her about when he and Charles arrive later today," Vincent replied, moving his bishop to intercept Jacob's queen.

"If anyone would know how to advise him, I imagine Catherine would," Father stated, blocking the move with his knight. It was a close game.

Vincent nodded in agreement. "She says she's looked into the precedents for adoption, even, if the guardianship isn't possible. That there is other case law." Vincent's voice betrayed his pride in his ladylove. She was brilliant, and she'd applied herself hard to this task.

"Helping Charles is definitely our first consideration," Jacob agreed. "I imagine if it can be done, Catherine will find a way. Check."

Vincent contemplated the board, as he considered the task set for Catherine, and the challenge Devin faced in becoming Charles' legal guardian.

"Yes, I'm sure she will. Devin says having official guardianship of Charles will open many doors, for both of them. It will expand the kind of help Charles can receive, make it possible for Devin to pursue many different options, for him. Devin's letter implied that he is very anxious to speak with Catherine about it all." He took Jacob's knight with a rook.

"That's the third time you've used that move on me. You'd think I'd learn. Fischer-Spassky?"

"Seventh game. Again." Vincent replied. "I can lend you the book, if you want it."

Jacob moved his pawn to block Vincent's advancing rook. "I still can't believe Devin is actually coming for Winterfest, after all these years. With Charles, no less."

"Their brief visits have been successful. Devin feels it is time for Charles to broaden a few of his horizons. Check."

Jacob took the offered rook, suspecting it was a sacrifice. "Yes, but Winterfest is very... crowded, Vincent. What if Charles were to have another ... episode?" Father worried.

Vincent gave the question his due consideration. "As you say, things have gone well, the other times. The therapist Catherine knows from school visits them often, on the farm. The therapy seems to be helping Charles." Vincent shrugged his wide shoulders.

"You will not find me decrying the benefits of a doctor's intervention," Jacob said, considering the position of his king.

"Devin says Charles is indeed much better. That the country life has been good for him, but that he now has the opposite problem from before. There is too *much* privacy, too much ... isolation. Charles needs to interact with other people, more. He was always shy, but now, living as they are, Devin says they are downright... reclusive."

Jacob knew well the hazards of a hermit-like existence. And Vincent was right that the three short visits Devin and Charles had paid them had gone much smoother, now that Devin had the pair of them settled on an old farm in upstate New York.

"Mmm. Their isolation was by design, originally. But, yes, I can see how it's also a thing to be guarded against," Jacob acknowledged, wishing he'd done a little better "guarding" of his own, in the game. Vincent's deceptively passive opening gambits were precursors to a far more aggressive strategy.

"He says they're bringing apples, from their own orchard," Vincent added, advancing his one remaining bishop. He was waiting for Jacob to either take his other rook or block it with his queen.

Jacob studied the board. He'd be mated, in three moves.

Jacob laid down his king, conceding the match. "Perhaps I can get them to bring me a book about how to beat you at this infernal game," he said.

Vincent's reply was a pleased and subtle nudge. "Only if Devin can teach you to not just read it, but play by it."

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Chapter Three

By the Book



"So, even if we play this game by the book, you're saying we still need a sympathetic judge. Or two," Devin clarified later that afternoon. He was standing in Catherine's apartment, as she was looking over the file folder he'd brought her.

"Three couldn't hurt," she grimaced, checking over their paperwork. "Especially if we have to give up the notion of guardianship and proceed with an adult-to-adult adoption," Catherine replied, glancing at Charles' last check-up, courtesy of a friend of Peter Alcott's. Devin's charge was doing well.

"An adoption. That could be done?" Devin asked.

"It could," Catherine said hopefully, setting the file down as she tugged over the law books she'd borrowed on family case law. She flipped one open to the place she'd marked. "It's been done before. The court would need to determine that he's competent, and cognizant enough of the situation to make a considered decision."

Vincent's brother looked doubtful, not about Charles' competence, but about the length of time such a proceeding might imply. "Sounds like that would take a lot of time," Devin said.

Catherine shrugged at the truth of his statement. "It's an unusual request, though not an unheard of one. The easier path would be the guardianship change, certainly."

"What kind of time are we talking, on the one vs. the other?" Devin asked.

"With the guardianship, six, eight weeks versus ... oh, Devin, I don't know," Catherine's frown told him all it needed to. "Adoption could take up to two years. Charles' mental history weighs against him, on this. He used to be very angry." Catherine wasn't telling Devin anything about Charles he didn't already know.

"The therapist friend of yours says he's made huge strides with that! That should count for something." Devin was defensive.

Catherine understood his distress. "It does ...and it doesn't," she said gently. "The fact that he *needs* a therapist is a question all its own, in this kind of case," Catherine elaborated. "Plus, well... adoption proceedings take a long time because of certain things. Like say, background checks for the custodial...'parent,'" she eyed him meaningfully, as she pushed the open book aside.

"I'm not sending him back to that drunk, Eddie, no matter *what*. There is *no way*," Devin's forefinger tapped on her table. He was adamant. "I'll run with him first, Chandler. You know I will."

Catherine rose from the table. "Devin, I know. And nobody is suggesting that Charles be placed back with Eddie. *Nobody*. I'm just saying that an adoption is far more in-depth and more drawn out than a guardianship change request. Legally, Charles doesn't even have a social security number, yet. He's barely a person, under those circumstances."

"Charles getting treated like barely a person is kind of the problem."

Catherine's voice gentled. "I'm on your side, remember?"

He did. "Let me rephrase, then. Gee, if only somebody competent was his legal guardian. Then they could get him everything he needs," Devin said sarcastically, knowing there were a dozen reasons why this wasn't being handled through the usual channels.

Devin rubbed his forehead, trying to get rid of the tension, there. "I don't want the court to just appoint him *somebody*, Chandler. It *has* to be me." His voice was firm.

Catherine kept her tone sympathetic. "I know. And for what it's worth, you know I agree." She put up a staying hand. "But Devin Wells hasn't been on the radar that long, either. We have to be ... careful, here. The day Eddie decides to set foot in a courtroom to challenge us, you're sunk." She was honest about their down side. "He can bring in a dozen people who know you're a carny knife thrower. With a very ... sketchy past, in terms of being able to prove where you've been, or what you've been doing, the past twenty years."

Devin leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. There were prices to pay for how he'd lived his life. He just didn't want Charles to have to pay them.

"What about you? You could be his guardian. Legally," Devin suggested, trying to offer an option. "I'd just be taking care of him."

"I can't." Catherine shook her head. "Not and be his attorney, especially if there's a fight. And if I step aside on that, who else will we get?"

Devin considered. "Could Peter Alcott be tapped as a guardian? Just on paper?" he asked, scrambling for someone more... respectable than he was.

Catherine shook her head, again. "Don't think I haven't considered something like that. But...a man he barely knows? What will Charles answer when the judge asks him to describe what living with Peter is like?" she asked rhetorically. "No. It has to be you. We just have to be smart about it, is all. And careful. The judge I want has a full docket until February. But I really think she's worth the wait. She's very sympathetic regarding adults with special needs, and we're going to need that. Maybe."

There was a stack of books on her dining room table, and a legal pad that was full of notes on prior case law. Another that had a list of names, phone numbers, and conversations on it. Catherine had been burning the midnight oil, if the mess on her table was any indication.

“So it’s either the request for guardianship goes through, or adoption,” Devin confirmed, wanting to make sure he understood her clearly.

Catherine nodded. “Which will take longer.”

Devin fought the urge to say “to hell with it all” and just stick with the plan to run, if things went south. But he couldn’t do that, to solve his problems. Their problems. Not anymore.

Catherine could see the struggle, inside him.

“It’s not easy to do things by the book, is it?” she asked, watching him.

His brown eyes met her green ones. “Let’s just say it’s never been my first instinct,” Devin answered. He frowned deeply, and he knew that this time, he’d have to stick to the invisible “book” Catherine was referring to. The one that contained New York’s legal code, among other things.

His sigh was a heavy one. “Cathy, there’s a summer camp not far from us. The state helps to fund it. Your friend Karen says it would do him a world of good. There are trained counselors there. Other people he can relate to. Special ones. Maybe even one who suffers from the same thing he does,” Devin said.

Catherine raised an interested eyebrow. Charles, like Vincent, had never seen another human being like himself. She could only imagine the huge impact that might have, for the Dragon Man. “A state sponsored camp? That sounds very... official,” she said carefully, aware that to this point, they’d managed to cobble together help for Charles based mostly on her contacts and Peter Alcott’s.

“It is,” Devin confirmed. “And the state will pay for most of it. But there’s an application process. He can only be signed up for it by his *legal* guardian. Or parent. He’s got to have documentation, shot records, and all the rest of it,” Devin said, with a sweep of his hand. “It’s more than me showing up with a phony piece of paper can accomplish. And it’s got to be all set up by April, at the latest.”

Catherine counted the weeks, mentally. "If we see Judge Fairchild by February, I've got to think we'll make it. If things go well," Catherine replied, trying to give him hope.

Devin nodded, still frustrated, but calming down. He eyed her legal pad, and the mountain of information it contained, all of which she'd had to sift through on her own.

"Thanks for helping with this," he said.

She gave him a wry smile. "If I get stuck, I can always call Jeff Radler for backup, I suppose," she teased, naming his attorney persona.

"Yeah. There's that," he said drily, both of them knowing that Devin's alter egos were now firmly packed away in the luggage he kept at home.

She straightened up the table, as he watched.

Her movements were smooth, and efficient. She had a sharp mind, and she worked hard. He was glad he knew her. He was grateful that she was doing everything she could to secure Charles' future, that she'd agreed to help them. He was also grateful that Vincent was in love with her, and that she seemed to return it. As unlikely a couple as they were, there was no doubt they made something very special, between them. There were blessings to be had, with Catherine.

"Chandler... just in case old Jeff can't pull off a miracle at the eleventh hour...If Eddie would sign the guardianship papers over, just give up all claims on Charles... that would smooth things over?" Devin asked, certain he already knew the answer.

Catherine nodded. "It would. Charles already lives with you, and you have records to show he's being cared for," she stated.

Devin thoughtfully rubbed his scarred cheek with the back of the fingers on one hand. She could tell he was thinking. He shot her a Devin-may-care-look. "Give me your car keys," he said.

"Devin--" Catherine protested.

"You can give them to me or I can palm them. Relax, Chandler. I'm just going for a drive," he replied.

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Chapter Four

Catherine "Dances," But It's Not a Waltz



"Then he told me he was 'just going for a drive.' So, he has my car keys, and that's that," Catherine told Vincent, as they both helped William put away what appeared to be a sudden and mysterious donation of foodstuffs, from Chinatown.

"You don't think he'll do something rash, do you?" Catherine asked worriedly, shelving canned corn as she sought reassurance.

"I think he is Devin. 'Doing something rash' is his usual course of action," Vincent replied, seeming unconcerned, for the moment. "And speaking of 'rash,' I wonder which helper decided we needed caviar, for our feast?" he raised a questioning eyebrow as he held up a black jar full of roe.

Catherine's expression was completely guileless. "Someone with exquisite taste, I assume," she said, realizing she probably wasn't fooling him, but not willing to admit anything to anyone.

"Someone who saw me at Brigit O'Donnell's party, and thought I might have acquired a taste for it?" he asked, matching her guile with a little of his own.

"Oh, speaking of Brigit! You do know she's coming, though she says her flight will get in late." Catherine deftly changed the subject. The famous Irish author had known about the tunnels for over a year.

Vincent nodded, as they continued to unload supplies. "Mouse assures me her chamber is ready, and that there is a fresh stack of paper next to her typewriter, just in case she decides to write another book," he said, not fooled by Catherine's sudden desire to discuss Brigit O'Donnell.

"Mmm. Is Charles still settling in?" Catherine asked, keeping the topic shifting.



Vincent gave her a look that told her he was well aware of what she was doing. Still, he answered her question. "He and Samantha have developed a mutual love for 'The Two Janes,' as Samantha calls them."

"The Two Janes?" Catherine asked.

"Austen and Eyre," Vincent clarified. "Samantha said she wanted to help Charles put away his things, and then take him to sit near the falls, where they will read

Jane Eyre in relative peace.” His tone let her know he was impressed both with Charles and his young charge.

“Charles is being taken care of by Samantha?” Catherine asked, a little surprised by the information.

Vincent shrugged. “Samantha is young, but she’s very bright. Small, but not overly so. Charles seems more comfortable around that, now. And he shows a marked preference for women over men. I suppose we have his brother to thank for that.” They both understood why that would be true.

“I suppose so,” Catherine replied, hiding the third jar of caviar behind the first two, as Vincent put the carrots into a huge basket. “His therapist is a woman. Karen is a marvel.”

Vincent nodded. According to Devin, Catherine’s friend had decided to escape the city for the quieter life in one of New York’s smaller, upstate towns. Catherine had contacted her on Charles’ behalf.

“Devin says much the same. That their private sessions have helped, tremendously. Also, that she drives nearly an hour to visit with him, and has waived her customary fee.” He hefted a bag of potatoes into a waiting bin.

Catherine smiled, at that. “She used to joke that she was the smallest client at Chandler and Coolidge,” she shrugged. “I ... may have helped her sort through some business contracts, then lost the billing invoice, back when she decided to move out of the city and set up her own office, upstate,” Catherine said modestly. “We knew each other from back in school. She’s very kind, Vincent. Everyone liked her.”

Vincent nodded at that, as well. Still, it was no small thing that Charles had what amounted to a private therapist, who made house calls. He wondered if Catherine was paying something for that, as well, and had told Karen to simply say her work was *pro bono*.

"Catherine, about this... largesse..." He tried to get the subject of conversation back where he wanted it.

"I'm worried for Devin. And Charles," she cut him off, still dancing around the point he kept trying to raise. "There's a lot to consider."

He was glad he didn't have to go up against her in court. But her diversion didn't mean she wasn't sincere.

"Things are very... delicate right now, in the process," she said, frowning at the corn as if it had displeased her. "If Devin gets in trouble, it will go badly for Charles." She was worried about what Devin might do.

Vincent had no cure for his brother's impetuous nature, either now, or twenty years ago. And he knew there was no sense pretending that "trouble" wasn't a possibility.

"Would the court return him to Eddie?" Vincent asked. He froze, at the thought. "They wouldn't do such a thing, would they?"

Catherine shook her head. "I doubt it. But Eddie is Charles' only living relative, near as anyone knows. That carries weight, with some judges. And of course, Eddie would lie, on the stand. And being in a carnival, as reprehensible as he was, wasn't illegal," Catherine stated wryly.

"Devin said Eddie kept Charles in a cage," Vincent's voice was firm, and firmly unforgiving. He was sensitive to the notion of being caged, having experienced it first hand, last year.

"If I'm Eddie, I say that's just part of the act. That it's how Eddie kept them both fed, and that Charles tends to get confused, sometimes," Catherine said. "Or that it's for everyone's protection, even, given Charles' strength, and temper." Her frown increased. "I can lay Eddie open on cross examination, but it's a fight I *really* want to avoid," she said.

"But Catherine, the man was a tyrant." Vincent pleaded Charles' case.

Catherine nodded, aware that Vincent felt the Dragon Man's situation, keenly, thanks to his own differences. *There but for the Grace of God...* She knew he thought it.

She reached over for Vincent's hand, and held it, then gave it a squeeze. "I agree that he was. But we don't *want* there to be a battle. Me being able to destroy Eddie in front of a judge isn't the point. Eddie would lose, but so might Devin," she clarified. "Devin won't bear a lot of scrutiny, either, all things considered. That means the court would be *more* likely to place Charles with a court-appointed guardian, rather than anyone else. Devin and I talked about it, this afternoon."

Vincent sighed, taking in her words, and realizing the keen value of her counsel. He kept her hand in his, just for the comfort of having it there.

Their bond felt "roiled," for lack of a better word, and there was a worry line between Catherine's fair brows. She was more than a little concerned, for everyone involved.

"It would... kill Charles to lose Devin," she said, certain it was true. She reached for his other hand and held it fast. "And I'm not so sure it wouldn't do great harm to Devin, as well," she added. "I know Charles is a big responsibility, but --"

"But it is one Devin has embraced, and done well with," Vincent observed. "And now that Charles is doing so much better, Devin is seeing the results of a sustained effort. For perhaps the very first time." Vincent summed up the situation more succinctly than Catherine could have.

"Yes," Catherine said simply, looking down to where his hands clasped hers. She didn't want Vincent to see the concern in her green eyes.

Vincent didn't need to see the worried look in her eyes to know how she felt. What their bond couldn't tell him, her tone and the circumstances could. "I know you are doing all that you can," he said. Vincent tugged her to him, for a soft hug. Their arms went around each other, instantly.

"It's kept us apart some nights," she acknowledged, knowing that wasn't the important thing, but also wanting to let him know she was aware of that, as well. Her research had required several meetings with colleagues, time on the phone, and no small measure of time spent among the stacks, reading relevant case law.

"It has. You do a great deal for us," he answered, wishing he could take her concerns into his huge frame and simply banish them. He knew Catherine worked very hard for them, and that she was very passionate about that. She'd helped with Eric and Ellie. She'd gotten Jacob out of jail. She'd spoken with others on Kanin's behalf. *You work so hard. Always.*

Vincent willed himself to absorb peace into this large frame and tried to send her some. *Never mind how the food got here, or that Winterfest is now just two days away. Never mind that my reckless brother is off doing God-only-knows-what. Forget even that a man's fate might hang on what happens, over the next few weeks. I can do nothing about any of that, at the moment.*

His love needed the comfort of a long embrace, and if Vincent was an honest man, he had to admit his arms had been aching for an excuse to hold her.

She stayed where she was, warm and close.

"You're a miracle, you know," Vincent said softly, resting his cheek on the top of her beloved head.

Her shampoo was rose scented. It reminded him of the bush that had bloomed riotously on her balcony, last spring and summer, but was bare, now, waiting for the sun to return to her balcony. Something about her almost always made him think of sunlight.

"It's you who are the miracle," she replied, giving his midsection a firm squeeze as she relaxed her small body against his, and rested her head against his massive chest.

Vincent closed his blue eyes, and felt their mutual contentment flow through both of them. They stood that way for a long minute.

"This feels so good," she said, as if it were some sort of confession. Her sigh was soul deep.

"It does," he answered simply, keeping her close. "Sometimes, we run very hard, and for a long time. We have to remember to take time to stop, as well," he said, feeling the tension start to drain out of her.

He didn't care if they moved from this spot for the rest of the day.

"You work too hard," he rumbled, knowing it was a fact. He knew her beautiful green eyes were vaguely shadowed.

"Mmm. So do you," she replied. She rubbed her nose against his vest, a little. He adored the gesture.

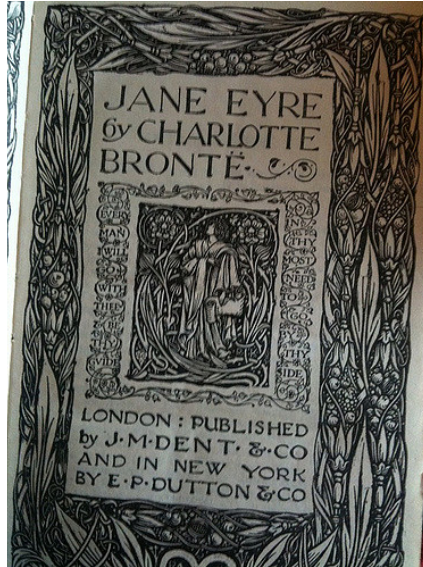
They stood that way a few seconds longer, grabbing a few more precious moments for themselves, in what had been a very hectic last few days.

It was William who broke their stolen reverie. "Hey, get a move on, you two!" William called. "I got hams that need unloading! Lots of work to do before we're ready to stir things up in the Great Hall!"

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Chapter Five

By Other Books



"A joyous stir was now audible in the hall," Samantha read aloud from Jane Eyre. She and Charles sat well back from the water, near where Vincent and Catherine usually laid out a blanket to read.

"Gentleman's deep tones and ladies' silvery accents blent harmoniously together, and distinguishable above all, though not loud, was the sonorous voice of the master of Thornfield Hall,"

Samantha looked up from the page. "That sounds like Vincent," she declared.

Charles trusted she must be correct, as the young girl continued to read. Charles thought she read excellently.

"...the master of Thornfield Hall, wel- welcoming the fair and gallant guests under its roof. Then, light steps ascended the stairs; and there was a tripping through the gallery, and soft, cheerful laughs, and the opening and closing doors, and for a time..."

Samantha set down her favorite novel.

"It sounds just like Winterfest," she opined. "All the people coming for a big party."

Charles could only nod. "Devin says... lots of people. But it's all right to not be scared."

Samantha smiled at him. "Nothing to be scared of. I'll be there. Devin and Vincent, too. And Mary," she said, listing one of the other tunnel dwellers of whom Charles had grown fond.

"Every...one's... busy. Lots of work to ... do." Charles said, in the still-halting style of speech he favored.

Samantha agreed. "Cullen is repairing one of the tables in the Great Hall, now. He says there was a bunch of food donated at the last minute, and they'll need the extra table space." She kept the book closed, as Charles contentedly took in her friendly, elfin features.

"Food is... nice," Charles said, noncommittally. Samantha often jumped from one topic to another, when they read together. It was one of the things he liked about her.

"I don't care how much there is to eat, as long as there's room in the Hall for dancing." Her young voice stated it firmly.

"You like to...dance?" Charles asked, wondering at the pretty little girl. Dancing was a thing Charles knew very little about. In carny life, "dancer" was usually a euphemism for a stripper, or a burlesque styled showgirl. Such women were seldom kind to him, though his brother had had a fascination for them. He doubted that Samantha was referring to such... entertainment. Charles knew that there was more than one kind of dancing, though he was unsure as to the particulars.

"Sure. Dancing's fun," Samantha assured him. "Mary makes everybody learn, at least how to waltz. We should read Jane Austen, next. Tons of dancing, in those. It's how people used to meet each other. Become friends," she said.

"Friends?" Charles asked, curious. "I like... friends." Devin had been stressing the importance of making those, lately.

Samantha smiled at him, again. "Maybe you should learn to dance, then," she said, as if it were as simple as that.

At first, Charles said nothing to that, but Samantha could see that he had his doubts. Even though the pictures in Jane Austen's books assured him that dancing could be a very respectable past-time, he had his misgivings about his abilities, in that direction.

"N-n-no. Maybe not... this time," Charles said.

Samantha flipped her book back to where they'd left off. "Suit yourself. We like you anyway. You know?" she asked.

Charles nodded. "Like me. Like... friends," he said.

Samantha smiled in agreement. "Yep. Like you. Like friends." She consulted Bronte. "Let's see now, where were we? Oh yeah. *"Elles changent de toilettes," said Adele who, listening attentively, had followed every movement; and she sighed..."*

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Chapter Six

Devin Buys a Brother



Devin sighed in tired relief, as he tossed Catherine's car keys onto her book-and-file-folder laden table. Between her car and the van, he felt like he'd been driving all day. Which, he realized, he pretty much had been.

"Mission accomplished," he said, rubbing a tired hand on his neck. He hoped she didn't keep track of her odometer reading. It had been a long trip. Still, in spite of his fatigue, Cathy sensed something self-satisfied about Vincent's brother.

"You were on a mission?" she asked. "I thought you said you were just out for a drive." She tucked the keys back in her purse.

"Mission ... drive," he shrugged. "It was a mission drive," he said, producing a long envelope from the inside of his leather jacket. He handed it to her. "How's Charles?" he asked.

She lifted the envelope flap. "Same as he was five hours ago, when you took off. He was with Samantha for a while. Mary made sure he had dinner, last I heard." She scanned the notarized piece of vellum, in front of her, as well as the attached paperwork.

"Devin, what is this?" she asked, flipping it over to read the next page.

"If you don't know, somebody wasted a lot of money on law school," Devin said, dropping his rangy frame on her sofa and stretching his feet out on her coffee table. "Damn, that feels good. Your car needs a little more leg room," he suggested.

Her eyes moved from the documents to him. "Devin."

"It's a change of guardianship paper. Obviously," he answered.

"Obviously. And it's signed by Eddie, and notarized by ... Ethel Cleopatra Bartoni?"

"Big Ethel Bartoni. She's legit. She's also the bearded lady. Every carny needs a notary. Sometimes, people decide to get married, or something. For reasons I

will never understand." He massaged his temple as if he were banishing a headache.

"And Eddie's signature? Is this 'legit', too?" Catherine pressed.

"Sure it is," he replied.

Sure it is, Catherine repeated mentally, in a far less charitable tone.

"Devin... don't ask me to file this with a judge, knowing it's forged. We'll both end up in jail. And one of us will lose a license to practice law. A real one."

She dropped her hands, the paper still clutched in the right one.

Devin rubbed his temple a moment longer, then dropped his own hands into his lap. "We're both using the word 'legit,' It's short for 'legitimate,'" he defined unnecessarily.

Her sardonic look told him she wasn't giving him an inch.

Devin sighed again, knowing he was going to have to explain. "The carny was set up near Philly. I promise I didn't beat the crap out of him to get him to sign. You'll notice the paper is blood free," he said pointedly.

"You drove my car to Philadelphia and back?" She asked, amazed at his audacity.

"I made all the lights," he replied, as if that were somehow the point.

Catherine reached for patience. "Devin, why would Eddie agree to sign things over to you? He hates you," she pointed out.

Devin shrugged. "Call it the 'Philadelphia influence.' It's the city of brotherly love. Do you have anything to eat? I'm famished. Leftover pizza, or something?" he asked, trying to change the subject.

Catherine was having none of it. She'd played that game herself, with Vincent, this afternoon. "Not even a Philly cheesesteak. Which you could have gotten, while you were there. And..." she eyed her sideboard. "Why is a bottle of scotch missing from my shelf? Did you steal it while I was getting the keys?"

She looked at him and knew he hadn't drunk it. But had a feeling she knew who did. Or who was, at the moment.

His silence spoke volumes.

"You didn't," she accused. But of course, he had. She tossed the papers down on her coffee table. "A drunk signature doesn't count, Devin," she scolded him. "It won't hold up."

"I didn't give it to him until he signed," Devin answered, rising from her couch. "Have a little faith that I'm smarter than that." He picked the papers back up.

"And that Scotch was a Winterfest present for Peter Alcott. His favorite brand," she commented, as Devin walked by her and into her kitchen.

"Yeah. Sorry about that. Oh and, uh... I'm going to need gas money to get back home. I kind of had to sweeten the deal. Of course." He handed the documents back to her. "You're going to need to file those," he stated.

"Sweeten the deal? You paid Eddie money?" Catherine asked, growing even more incredulous. *I don't know why I'm even amazed, at this point,* she scolded herself.

He opened her refrigerator door and wrinkled his nose at the contents. "You should be starving to death," he said, eyeing her selection of condiments, and little else.

Still holding the envelope of paperwork, she folded her arms across her chest and leaned against the doorway. "William fed me. How much?" she asked, watching him pretend to ignore her as he moved her water pitcher to one side, hoping to find something behind it.

"Not much. Couple hundred bucks," he said, pushing the door closed.

"Devin!" Catherine squealed, unfolding herself and throwing her hands in the air. The papers rustled. "You can't... buy a *person*, for two hundred dollars and a bottle of good Scotch!"

Devin was Devin. "See, that's the kind of thinking that's going to keep you an only child, while I get custody of another brother. Seems to me I got a notarized guardianship paper that says I can," he replied, checking the empty contents of her bread box.

"How did you even know where Eddie was?" Catherine asked.

"I always know where he is. Just in case I ever need to have him killed. Kidding!" he said, holding his hands up in a defensive posture.

Catherine tried reasoning with him. Again. "Devin, you *can't* just--"

"Cathy, look," he cut her off. "He's a bastard and I really wanted to just punch the crap out of him, again. But with Charles gone from their lousy act, he's stuck doing roustabout work and sleeping in the back of a ratty pickup that needs a ring job. I decided to press an advantage, that's all."

"Define 'press an advantage,'" Catherine instructed. "At any time, did you tell him you'd trade him cash and booze for Charles?" She was using her best courtroom voice. The one she used for cross examinations. "And did you say it in front of witnesses?" she tacked on.

"You know I know better. I just... look, he already wasn't making any more money off of Charles, and he correctly figured those days were gone, one way or another. He took the money and ran, probably figuring he got two hundred more dollars out of the deal this way, than he was ever going to, otherwise."

Catherine eyed the paper again. It was definitely the legal document they needed. There were even witnesses, complete with copies of their ID. Devin hadn't overlooked any detail.

"Little Jake Smallman?" Catherine asked, eyeing one of the signatures.

"It's his legal name. He had it changed, back in the sixties. He's four foot nine."

Catherine scanned the other signature. "And... let's see here. Arlene Sherman. She sounds... normal."

"She's Jake's wife. Five eleven. Six three, in heels, and she's never without those. Carny marriage. She runs one of the arcade games, among other things."

Catherine didn't want to ask.

He leaned back against her kitchen counter, watching her study the documents in her hand. "So. Will it hold up? In your ... professional opinion?" he asked.

"Will the documents hold up?" She scanned them, again. "They're fine. Will the circumstances hold up? You can't legally bribe someone to--"

"Bribe? What bribe? I met up with a bunch of old friends from where I used to work, and spotted one of them some cash and a decent bottle of scotch, seeing as how he was down on his luck. That's my story and I'm sticking to it, Your Honor," he said, leaving her kitchen just as they both heard Vincent rapping on the window pane.

"He must have sensed your calm, mellow mood," Devin deadpanned, going to the balcony doors and opening them, ahead of her.

"You bring it out in me, naturally," Catherine shot back.

"Come on in," Devin invited Vincent. "I'd offer you some Scotch, but we're fresh out."

Vincent entered the room, his eyes going straight to Catherine, who still had ahold of Charles' guardianship papers.

"Your story won't hold up, in a court fight." Catherine said it to Devin's back.

"I kinda doubt Eddie the Moron really wants to go up in front of a judge for any reason. Might be a couple of bench warrants out on him, here and there."

"I ran his name. There are no warrants."

"Spoken like someone who never used an alias," Devin said with confidence. He knew a thing or two about living under an assumed name.

Catherine handed the documents over to Vincent, who quickly scanned them. They looked very... official, for lack of a better word.

"This will help your case?" Vincent asked, sensing the tension between his love and his brother.

Catherine had to admit that Devin had dotted all the 'i's.' "As long as no one shows up to challenge the filing, it will all but guarantee it," Catherine replied, allowing herself a cautious amount of hope.

Devin addressed Vincent. "Sorry I had to leave, but it was kind of important. What's Charles up to?" Devin asked.

"He's had his dinner, and he's talking with Samantha and Ellie about the merits of Jane Austen. And asking for you."

Devin zipped up his jacket. "I better go down, then. Dinner's over, huh?" he asked.

"For some time," Vincent indicated the lateness of the hour, with a glance toward Catherine's mantle clock.

"Thought so," Devin said unhappily. "You wouldn't happen to have any food stashed away in that great, big, old, cape of yours, would you?" he asked.

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Chapter Seven

Dragon's Dance



Winterfest

The “great, big, old, cape” served to cut the wind, as Vincent once again lifted the beam on the Great Hall doors. An assemblage similar to the one Samantha had read about in Jane Eyre filed in, and the opening ceremony had been solemnly conducted.

Charles was uncomfortable with the notion of passing a candle flame around the table, so he stayed back near one of the walls, with Devin at his side. Charles was calm, if reticent to join in on certain things.

As the great chandelier rose to the ceiling, the huge chamber was filled with a convivial kind of light. Charles smiled along with everyone else, the look on his face one of sheer enchantment. Vast amounts of food were brought in on trays, and a middle aged Jewish man named Aaron led the tiny orchestra through various pieces of music, as he played an old violin. It was a time to celebrate, and to show appreciation for each other.

Charles circulated a bit, then seemed content to sit near Mary, as the evening’s festivities continued. Sebastian pulled coins from the ears of children. Peter Alcott chatted with Jacob. William tapped a keg of ale, and everyone agreed he’d outdone himself this year, on the food.

“How fortunate someone thought to bring down turkey, for Aaron,” Vincent nudged his luminous companion.

"It's nice when no one gets left out of the fun," Catherine agreed. "Brigit's plane should have landed by now, don't you think?"

Vincent shook his head at her dissembling, and smiled. The crowd was warm, well fed, and merry. The music was spritely, and his Catherine was happy. Vincent soaked it all in, as he stayed near his beloved.

"If I have neglected to say it, I believe you are the most beautiful woman in the room," Vincent intoned near Catherine's ear. Her soft, white dress was an invitation to smile. White was her Winterfest color. It always had been.

"Thank you. I..." She glanced just over his large shoulder and grinned.

"You know, I think right now, that title might just belong to Mary," she said, nodding toward a large area of the floor that had been cleared away for dancing.

Vincent followed the line of her gaze.

Mary was standing in the middle of the room, holding Charles' hand, lightly. Her face was turned toward him, as she stepped carefully, then bid him to do the same. Four or five couples whirled around them, but she was oblivious to them, as, it seemed, was Charles, who was watching her feet describe a pattern, on the floor. She was carefully, patiently showing him how to move, in time with the music.



When Charles nodded his understanding, she took both his hands in hers, and they began to do the same steps, facing each other, as a dancing couple.

She was teaching him to waltz.

"It looks like there is someone else being... included in a dream," Vincent observed, watching the scene with undisguised interest. He reached over to tap Devin's nearby shoulder, subtly indicating with a nod of his head where his brother should look. Devin did so.

Devin turned. And then... stared. "Well, I'll... be ... damned," Devin said, following Vincent's gaze.

"Quite possibly. But that's hardly the point, at the moment," Vincent commented, as the three of them watched Charles, as he learned.

"He's... he's getting it. Isn't he?" Catherine smiled, trying not to stare, but all but unable to help herself.

"He is." Vincent squeezed her shoulder, and kept her near. "There is no reason to think this is a thing he couldn't do."

Charles was unsure, and he was stiff-legged. Struggling to catch on, and learning the movements of a simple box pattern, and loudly counting "*one-two-three, one-two-three*" with Mary, as she nodded her approval. She kept Charles near the center of the room, out of the way of the more experienced, flowing dancers who circled around them. He was making a square out of two triangles, with his feet, and still keeping a watchful eye on those feet, as he moved with his dance instructor.

Mary gently lifted his chin with her finger. "Eyes up, Charles. You want to let the lovely lady you're dancing with know what a good time you're having. I promise you your feet are still there."

But Charles persisted in leaning down, watching his feet move where they were supposed to, and counting, for a while longer. Mary said nothing more on the subject, and simply raised one of his hands in a waltz position, and gently settled his other hand on her small waist, keeping space between them, so he could move.

Devin, Vincent and Catherine drew as close as they could.

"Good... time," Charles mumbled, watching how close his toes were to Mary's. "Make friends."

"Did you ever think...?" Catherine whispered, still trying not to stare at the amazing scene, before her.

"Mary taught all of us." Vincent stated. "I wouldn't know why she can't teach Charles, as well." Vincent watched the look of concentration on the big man's face change from one of intense study to one of careful happiness. He was indeed catching on to the steps of the dance.

"He's... dancing. With a woman, in the middle of a dance floor." Devin's brain still hadn't quite caught up with this new reality, and seemed to need to articulate it.

"That he is," Catherine's smile was as lovely as the rest of her. Vincent felt her warmth, and her delight.

After a few moments more, when Charles lifted his head, his face was wreathed in smiles.

"One-two-three, One-two-thr--ee," he said, his tongue softly rolling the "r" as it was wont to do. Mary simply nodded, and smiled back at him. "You're doing wonderfully," she encouraged.

A few seconds later, the dance ended, and the audience applauded, politely. Devin moved to where the string quartet had set up, and tapped Aaron on the shoulder. "Another waltz. Please," he requested.

"Way ahead of you," Aaron replied, setting his bow back on the strings. Devin stepped back near Vincent and Catherine, as several couples left the floor, while others came on. The dancers settled into position, waiting for the down beat.

Catherine stepped away from Vincent. "If you'll pardon me, a moment," Catherine said, noticing that a slightly flushed Mary was mopping her forehead

with her handkerchief. The older woman looked a bit winded. Charles was a very... athletic partner, for lack of a better description.

"Where are you going?" Vincent asked Catherine, as she sidled her way through the crowd.

The smile she sent his way was electric. "You must excuse me. I think I'm going to ask Charles if he'd like to dance with me," Catherine replied.

Both Vincent and Devin returned her grin. Catherine snagged Rebecca's elbow, whispered something brief, then made her way onto the floor, where Charles stood with Mary.

Vincent and Devin watched as Catherine politely approached Charles, and respectfully asked him if she might have this dance. She curtsied prettily to him, as Mary gratefully stepped aside. Less than a minute later, he was dancing with Catherine the same way he'd danced with Mary, unsure and concentrating, at first, then happy, and content, looking terribly pleased with himself as he gained more experience.

Catherine was a willing tutor. "We can try to change things up a little. Dance with the flow of the crowd if you like," Catherine offered, not minding standing in the same small "box" with him a bit. A box that was growing larger, as his feet grew more sure.

"N-no," Charles said, not wanting to take on too much at once. The center of the dance floor was the perfect place for this. He wasn't crowded by the other dancers circling around him, and he very much felt a part of things. "I'm not... g-good, yet," he informed her.

"I think you're doing just fine," Catherine encouraged, keeping her steps long, so she could keep up with him.

Charles, learning to master the placement of his feet, had yet to master the subtleties of dancing with a woman who was a good bit shorter than he was. The length of his step generally exceeded hers.

It was all right. Everything was.

"We're...making friends?" Charles asked her, barely touching her waist.

"Of course we're friends," Catherine nodded, not quite understanding his reference.

"Are you... having a good... time?" he asked.

Her answering smile was brilliant. "Of course I am."

"Samantha says... it's just like... Jane Austen."

Catherine chuckled a little. "Samantha is very wise," she replied.

"Hey, Charles! Save me a dance?" Olivia asked him as she spun by with Kanin. On the sidelines, Catherine saw Rebecca whisper something to Samantha, who looked their way, then smiled. The two of them moved toward Brooke and Jamie.

Charles turned to answer Olivia. "We are... making friends. Y-yes," Charles replied, momentarily missing a step when he lost count.

"...Two-three, One-two-three," Catherine prompted, helping him get right back into the rhythm. He nodded, and followed her gentle lead, completely unaware it was him who should be leading. That too, was all right. More than.

Meanwhile, Charles' astonished brother continued to watch the dance as Mary snagged a glass of punch off a nearby table. She stood near Devin, Vincent, and some others who had gathered.

"If I didn't see it with my own eyes," Peter Alcott said, giving Mary's shoulder a brief squeeze. "However did you talk him into it?" he asked.

"He asked me," she said. "We've been practicing in our chairs by the wall for the last thirty minutes," Mary explained, after she took a much-needed drink.

"Practicing in your..."

"She used to do it with us," Devin explained. "Taught us how to move our feet from a chair, before we stood up and stepped all over the girls."

"I think Rebecca still has the bruise on her instep, you gave her," Vincent jested.

"Shut up. You weren't exactly..."

"Er... Gentlemen, I think we may find it difficult to acquire our dance partners, this evening," Peter said, nodding toward one wall.

Many of the tunnel women were beginning to form a beautiful, waiting line. Rebecca, hands clasped before her, stood in front of Samantha, who stood in front of Jamie, who was standing in front of Brooke, who was fanning herself with a paper fan, clearly waiting for her turn. Lin Pei was next, and Ellie stood waiting behind her, talking to Lena, who was obviously clearly in line, even as she held her daughter, waiting for an opportunity to dance with Charles.

When the waltz ended, Rebecca stepped up to take Catherine's place.

"I hope you're not getting tired," Rebecca smiled her sunniest smile at Charles.

"Tired? N-no! Not tired!" Charles said enthusiastically, taking her hands in his, as Aaron set his bow to the strings, again.

Devin watched the ladies around the room whispering to each other, and they all nodded toward the wall. Olivia asked Lena to save her a spot, and Catherine told Olivia that she'd like another turn, if Charles was willing, when they were done.

Devin took them all in. The line of them. Young and not so young, Topsider and tunnel born. Unexpected tears sprang to his dark eyes. He could have kissed every one of them, soundly and chastely. "God, I love these women," Devin said, overtaken with emotion. "They're all...just... being... so... perfectly... themselves." He swallowed hard, as Jacob set a fatherly hand on his son's shoulder.

"They are that," the tunnel patriarch declared.

"I swear if I was to search the whole world over, I'd never find a more... incredible group of women than the ones right here," he said, giving Mary a hard hug as Catherine returned to their number.

"They are rather ... exceptional, as a group, aren't they?" Jacob grinned broadly.

On the dance floor, Rebecca laughed. Then astonishingly, Charles did, too. Devin's eyes widened enough to let everyone there know it was a seldom-to-never heard sound.

"He's laughing. Dear God, he's laughing with her," Devin said.

"And he's even keeping the beat," Catherine complimented, fanning herself as she accepted a glass of punch.

"You were magnificent," Vincent complimented, as she drained the little cup and set it back on the table. Keeping up with Charles was a work out.

"Thank you," she said. "But it was really Mary's ide-"

Devin grabbed her for a fierce hug. "Idea. Mary's idea. But you were the one who got them all started on making a line for him. Thank you. Thank you, Chandler."

His breath caught on a hitch of tears, and he kept his face buried in the sweep of her hair a moment, while he composed himself.

Catherine returned his embrace with a happy squeeze. Over Devin's shoulder, Vincent's eyes shone with love.

"You're welcome, Devin. It was my pleasure," she replied.

He disengaged from her, knowing her words weren't entirely true. Charles was hardly an experienced dancer, and his steps were sometimes difficult to either follow, or keep up with.

"'Pleasure' is the last thing it was. He has a tough time with his balance on his best day, and I know it. He can barely walk straight, much less dance. And now...

look at him," Devin rasped, watching as Rebecca got Charles to bend his knees a little, making it easier for him to move with the music. The big man nodded, as he continued to grin, realizing how much easier it was, this way.

"Perhaps when we forget the things we're not supposed to be able to do... that is when we truly start to live," Vincent said, watching Charles enjoy himself. Several couples remained on the floor, keeping him company. But it was clear that the floor now belonged to Charles, and his joyful discovery of Strauss. "Sometimes... we must do things we're unsure of... and trust in the outcome." His blue eyes remained on Catherine as he said it.

One after the other, almost every tunnel lady danced with Charles the Dragon man, until he swore his feet could take no more, and he needed a well-deserved rest. Once he got his wind back, though, he was right back at it, and the tunnel women all made sure he always had a dance partner, if he wanted one.

At one point in the evening, he was even dancing with Mouse, just to show him how. When Brigit entered, it was that scene which greeted her wondering eyes, as she joined the dwindling line of Charles' dance partners, and heard the story.

"And it's sure it's been a while since I've had me a fine waltz," she commented, smiling at Catherine as she did so.

They all danced. Waltzes, mostly, but Charles was game to learn more. Cullen showed him how to fox trot. Jaimie pointed out that you were allowed to free style, as long as you didn't knock anyone over, but Charles seemed disinclined to try that.

As the moon sank low on Winterfest Eve, Charles the Dragon Man saved his last dance for Samantha, who couldn't quite resist the urge to say she'd told him so.

As the exhausted musicians begged to be able to put away their instruments, as the large crowd began filing out of the Great Hall doors, Charles immediately began to harangue Devin over when they might return.

"There's usually a children's recital in the spring. I take it you want to come back when there might be dancing?" Devin asked.

"Y-yes. Making friends, Dev. You should've danced. I can show you... how. Back home." Charles had not stopped smiling all evening.

"Perhaps we could arrange something sooner than the Spring Recital?" Father put forth, as he walked toward the big double doors, with Mary. "Valentine's Day isn't so far off."

"A Valentine's Day Dance. What a lovely idea," Catherine said, lingering near the back of the crowd, with her love. They'd stay for one more dance, when everyone else was gone from the room. It was their tradition.

"Should be just in time to file some very important papers," Devin sent Catherine a knowing look.

"Should be," she agreed, happily returning his smile.

"I'm sensing your bonny lass is up to something," Brigit said to Vincent, as the windy entryway lifted her brown hair.

"From since, like, the day before yesterday," Lin Pei tattled, giving Catherine a wink.

"Longer," Catherine replied cheerfully, standing near the doors with Vincent, as the couple waved to the rest of the departing community.

"Much longer," Vincent agreed, keeping a hand on one of the doors. He intended to pull them to, both to block the wind, and to afford them some privacy. And he very much intended to kiss his Catherine, not to mention dance with her, once he managed to get her alone.

As the long line of tunnel folk and Helpers wound up the stairs, Vincent gently closed the doors, then turned to his beloved.

His Catherine was decidedly ruffled, from having danced so much, and just as decidedly beautiful. She'd danced with Peter Alcott, with Devin, with baby

Catherine, with Charles twice, and him, more than that. A stray curl had fallen from her ornate barrette, and it lovingly caressed her cheek. The same one which held her scar.

He tucked the honey colored strand of hair gently behind her ear.

"You don't mind that I've been... up to a few things, do you?" she asked, speaking specifically about the food, but also about how much time she'd been devoting to Charles' situation, not to mention her normal job.

"As I said... sometimes we must do things we're unsure of, and trust to the outcome," he observed, loving her all the more.

The tables were bare, the platters having been cleaned away an hour ago. The chandelier was dark again, but several fat pillars burned on the tables, and a glowing lantern illuminated one of the tapestries.

The room looked like it was resting. The room looked like it was theirs. Again.

"I agree," Catherine replied, loving him. "I know sometimes it's hard for us. For everyone," she said, including Devin and Charles in her estimation.

"On a miracle night when I saw a Dragon man teach a Mouse to waltz, I should hardly complain," Vincent concluded, drawing his amazing woman into the middle of the room, and then into his arms. A faint sound eased in through the crack between the doors. Leftover music tinkled around them, on an almost nonexistent breeze.

"I admit I didn't see Charles learning to dance as something that was coming," Catherine said, moving her feet to keep time with his. They both heard the music. They always heard the music. Their shadows kept them company, as they waltzed. They needed no other companions.

The barest smile tilted the corners of Vincent's mouth. "It was a wonderful thing to behold," he replied.

Catherine stayed close to him, and felt him move her along to a scarcely-there melody.

"I think we're going to pull it off, Vincent," Catherine said. "I think we're going to get Devin custody, get Charles well taken care of, get him a chance at a happy life, all of it," she clarified, giving him a luminous smile.

She believed what she was saying, and the bond was humming with her faith. She believed in everything, right now. That sensation was there, too, shimmering within the link that bound them. It felt... wonderful, was the only word Vincent could think of to describe it.

Vincent bent his head low, so that his unusual mouth was just a fraction away from hers.

"I think you are going to succeed at anything you set your mind to," he replied as he hovered, his breath whispering softly across her lips. "Do you know what I've wanted to do all evening, Catherine?" he asked.

A softly smiling Catherine thought she did, as she waited for his kiss.

"I think it's the same thing I've wanted to do," she replied, giving him the breathy whisper back.

And they did. Sweetly.

"Do you know what else I'd like to do?" he asked, keeping his soft mouth near, for another kiss.

"I have no idea," she replied, teasing. "But I trust your judgement."

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Epilogue

Three Janes



“...And so it is the judgment of this court that guardianship be transferred to Mr. Devin Wells. So ordered, from this day forward.” The small gavel came down with a satisfying whack, and it caused Charles to jump, a little, even as it caused him to smile.

Even though they were in Judge Fairchild’s private chambers, rather than the courtroom, Catherine, Charles and Devin were all standing at attention, behind a table, while the judge sat at a wide desk. Scattered papers rustled on her desktop. “Miss Chandler, you’ll see the clerk on your way out? Make sure these things are filed?” Judge Fairchild asked, though it was really an instruction.

“Of course, Your Honor. Thank you for seeing us privately,” Catherine said, not quite able to contain her smile.

Judge Fairchild understood the necessity for a private audience, though she left that up to her petitioners. Charles had concealed his features beneath a wide-brimmed hat and an upturned raincoat collar, for the trip to her chambers. Both were now hanging on a hook. They were things she hoped he wouldn’t need, some day.

“I expect a follow-up report from you in, oh, let’s say three weeks, Miss Chandler. Let me know how the application for that summer camp is progressing. And if you need a little help in that direction, I expect you to call me, for a reference. Think you can manage that?” she gave Catherine a subtle wink.

“I think I’d be pleased to, Your Honor,” Catherine replied.

Charles looked from Catherine to Devin. “Three weeks? We’re coming... back?” Charles asked.

“Not unless you wish to, Mr. Charles. I’d just like to know how you’re doing, is all,” the judge clarified, as she signed a pair of documents, then added them to the file folder.

Devin’s grin was huge. He knew they’d just won, and won big. “Thank you Judge. We’ll send you letters. With pictures. Charles likes to draw.”

“Does he?” Judge Fairchild asked conversationally, clearly liking her job, at the moment. Charles beamed, taking Devin’s cue.

“Yes. I like to ... draw. And dance. We should... go dancing... some time,” he invited cordially.

Catherine and Devin exchanged a look, at his informality. The judge simply smiled.

“That would be delightful, Mr. ... Charles. I very much like to dance,” she replied, handing Catherine the necessary paperwork. “Where do you dance?” she asked him. “Valentine’s Day is tomorrow. Will you go dancing, then?”

Uh-oh. Devin and Catherine both thought it at the same time.

But Charles knew there were secrets he must continue to keep. Samantha had told him so, as well as Devin, Vincent, and others.

“Y-yes. W-with friends,” he smiled, answering only the second question, as he skipped the first. “Jane Austen says dancing is... for making friends. I can teach you w-waltzing. If you ... want.”

The judge stood, carefully. “I would be charmed to waltz with you, some day, Mr. Charles. And I love to dance almost as much as I love Jane Austen. But it won’t be today, alas. I have a full docket the rest of the day and... well. I’m afraid you’d have to account for a bit of slowness, on my part, when we take our lessons.”

The middle aged woman eased carefully around the large redwood desk which dominated her chamber. When she was clear of the furniture, she carefully lifted

her robe, and the hem of the long skirt she wore, beneath it. A pair of sensible shoes covered her feet, and thick stockings hid her legs.

Which was to say they hid her leg. For the first time, Catherine realized that Judge Fairchild wore a prosthetic device. The metal hinge shone, near the knee.

"I had a skiing accident when I was young. It's why I skipped lawyering and ran straight for judge," she quipped. "Too much standing, when you're a lawyer." Her canny grey eyes glanced at Catherine, as she said it, then back over to Charles.

Charles was fascinated, and came close. Curious fingers reached out, then drew back. He knew it was impolite to touch unless you'd been invited. It was something Dr. Karen had taught him, about why the people who had reached to touch his face uninvited had been unintentionally rude.

"Charles..." Devin's voice held a touch of a warning.

"It's all right Mr. Wells. And you're sworn to secrecy, Miss Chandler. My bailiff knows, of course, and those close to me. But I don't want votes because of it. Even if it does tend to show up in how I see certain cases," she confided, as Charles continued to study the sturdy steel hinge and straps that attached her prosthetic leg to her thigh.

"Of course Your Honor," Catherine said, as surprised as anyone else in the room, at the moment.

"Does it... hurt?" Charles asked.

Judge Fairchild's soft smile at his concern was genuine. "No. No, Mr. Charles, it doesn't hurt. Not unless I've had a very long day. And speaking of calling you 'Mr. Charles,' it seems we need to fix that, as well, doesn't it? Can't have you going around by the last name 'Dragon man.' Unless that's what you want to be called legally, of course." She dropped her hem and reached back to open a desk drawer.

"This is an application for a name change," she said, producing one. "You might want to file that while you're doing the other," she instructed Catherine.

It was a thing Devin hadn't even thought of. Nor, apparently, had Catherine.

"We wouldn't have to go through an adoption, or anything like that?" Devin asked.

Judge Fairchild blew a brown curl from her forehead. It was mixed with grey.

"Mr. Wells, I consider Mr. Charles a capable, and cognizant, if special needs adult. If he wants to give himself a proper last name, he's within his legal rights to do so. Considering his circumstances, it might be time."

The fact that Charles the Dragon Man had shown up on her door absent any documentation prior to Devin's care of him spoke volumes, with her. Judge Fairchild was no fool as to what Charles' earlier life was like. Her interview with him had been fairly extensive.

"I... I didn't bring any extra money with me, judge. If there's a fee," Devin said. There was one. It was not inconsiderable, considering Devin's current financial circumstances.

Catherine was about to speak up, when the older woman cut her off. "I'd be delighted if you'd allow me to waive it. Consider it a gift," she said, signing the bottom of the form. She handed it to Catherine.

Charles glanced over at the white piece of paper, as Catherine added to the stack.

"Your name is... Jane," he said, reading her precise penmanship.

The judge smiled at him, "So it is. Like Jane Austen. Does that mean something to you, Mr. Charles?"

Charles grinned shyly. "I like Janes," he said, as if that explained it.

"They tell me it's a plain name for plain women, though none of them dare say it to my face, when I'm on the bench," she smiled. "Now if you folks will excuse

me, I really do have a full afternoon.” She made her way out of the room with a slightly deliberate, yet steady gait. “And I fully expect to waltz with you, Mr. Charles, some day. If my husband and my schedule can spare me.”

“Y-yes Judge J-Jane. Your Honor,” Charles tacked on, as Devin gave him a subtle bump. She disappeared through a heavy paneled door.

“We did it!” Catherine exulted, hugging both Charles and Devin, together. “Wait until we tell the others!” She knew Vincent could already feel her joy, and guess its source. This day had been circled on her calendar since right after Winterfest.

“We did,” Devin was elated. “So... what now. We just... go to the clerk?” Devin asked.

“Yes. The judgment is made, we just have to file it. And the name change. How about it, Charles? Is there a name you’d like to use? We never found a formal birth certificate for you, I’m afraid, but your brother’s last name was—”

“W-Wells,” Charles said, before Catherine could even finish. “Ch-Charles Wells. I want that to be my n-name. Okay, Dev? Like... brothers?”

Devin’s eyes, already a bit misty, became moreso. “Like brothers. Sure. Sure, Charles.” Devin gave Charles a hard hug. “Wait until we tell Vincent.”

“Vincent would be my... brother, too?” Charles asked, making the connection.

“Yeah. But I’m the oldest. You’d be the middle one. So you can still boss him around.”

Catherine smiled at the image of that, as she filled out the paper with a fountain pen.

“There’s room for a middle name,” she remarked.

Charles shook his head. “Just... Charles ... Wells. Okay?”

“Okay,” she said, capping her pen as she smiled.

They readied themselves to leave the room where Charles had been given a family, as well as his freedom. And a new name. Charles had a custom made suit to go with his new life, though he clearly didn't favor the necktie. He tugged it down, as Devin buttoned his own coat. One that had come straight from the wardrobe of Jeff Radler.

Charles donned his hat. "Catherine... after we ... get done. We can go... dancing? Soon?" Charles' impatience was showing. Devin helped him put on his raincoat.

"Of course we can," Catherine said, tucking the file under her arm. She knew that a new name, a social security number and a grey suit wouldn't re-make Charles' life, and that the "Dragon Man" would always be with him, in some form or other. That no amount of judicial decrees could cure the things which physically set him apart from other men. But she also knew that this was a good start, and that Devin could now get him all the help he was due.

Catherine smiled, aware that a small orchestra Below was tentatively tuning up, and waiting for them. William was baking a cake, and Samantha was making a paper banner, but it was all being done with quiet hope, since no one knew for certain how this day would go.

Charles stood expectantly, awaiting her answer.

"Charles, I would consider it an honor to dance with you. And my privilege to be the first person to be allowed to waltz with Mr. Charles Wells," she said kindly.

An hour later, they did.

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No matter where you are when someone dances with you, I wish you love. ~ Cindy

