

*Events depicted here occurred in the Episode "The Beast Within."*

*As I re-watched "The Beast Within," and saw Vincent running with an injured Catherine to the hospital, it occurred to me that in that portion of the episode, (and to some extent, what happened before and after it), all the main characters in the show (Vincent. Catherine. Mitch, even the Sweeneys) are "running." Some in more ways than one. The Sweeney family is running from the mob. Cathy runs away from Mitch before she's shot. Vincent races with Catherine to the hospital. Mitch runs to his hideout, knowing what's coming, and it isn't good. Everyone is running.*

*It's a little thing, but it led to this little vignette, this "scene between the scenes." Enjoy.*

*For the April 12<sup>th</sup> 2022 Celebration on Treasure Chambers.*



# *Long Distance Runners*

By Cindy Rae



*Sunflowers and your face fascinate me.*

*You love only the tallest trees...*

*You're the winner – long distance winner.*

~ *The Long Distance Winner*, by Stevie Nicks

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## *Scene One*

### *Catherine's Run*



Catherine was running. Running for her life, as a matter of fact. Her booted feet were dashing in a hard sprint, the splash of the puddles in the alley doing little to slow her pace. The shootout with Mitch Denton and his gang was going badly. She was outmanned and outgunned. She needed better cover.

So, she decided to run.

Whether the urge was “impulse” or “plan,” the catastrophic result was all but foretold. The distance to a better vantage point was too great.

And Mitch Denton was a better than fair shot.

Still, Catherine ran, feet flying and arms pumping.

And then, suddenly, — she couldn't. So she wasn't.

She wasn't running, with a half-spent handgun in one hand, and a tightly closed fist in the other. Wasn't running, with a soft denim jacket flapping around her slight waist. She wasn't running from Mitch Denton, or his men, or the firefight in the alley. She wasn't running at all.

She was trying to. She just... couldn't, anymore. It was a fact that presented itself to her injured body a few seconds before it presented itself to her frantic brain.

Several things seemed to happen together, and all at once, for Catherine. She was trying to make sense of all of it, or at least some of it: The hot sting of Mitch's bullet wasped its way through her clothing and into her back, her own momentum carried her forward, and Catherine had a lucid, yet panicked moment to realize what had just happened:

*Shot. I'm hit! It burns! Stings... I should have stayed put. I shouldn't have broken cover. I should have...*

But she couldn't complete the thought, as she realized that her legs were no longer working, no matter how much she bid them to. Her injured body was still propelling itself forward. But she was falling, not running.

*Shot. I'm... shot...*

The fall should have been a slow-motion affair, something from the movies, where every mistake she'd made to this point was reviewed and analyzed for how dearly it was about to cost her, right before she hit the ground.

But it wasn't. It wasn't a slow-motion affair.

It was a quick-as-a-box-of-dropped-freight affair, the kind that had killed... *Charlie... was it Charlie Something?* Her mind struggled for a name she couldn't fully remember.

The kind that had killed Charlie Something, back on the docks. Her fall was like that. It was fast, like a plunging steel box, the thing that had started this entire, desperate, disastrous affair, for her. One that had culminated... here. In the dark, damp, garbage-strewn place Mitch Denton had brought her to. The dismal street she was falling in.

*I'm hit...*

Mitch Denton was an evil man. It didn't take an ugly ride in the back of the car with him to know that. Evil, and hard. Like the pavement now under her cheek was hard.

*Mitch.... Shot me...*

Then: *Cold. The ground is so... cold.*

It contrasted sharply with the bullet that was still burning, mostly on the right side, in her back.

The concrete was pitiless against her face, and chilly, from the nighttime air. In a way, it felt almost good, considering the searing pain that was still lancing its way through her. She felt wet, and wondered if it was water from the alley or blood from her wound. Or both.

A shadow passed over her. A very large one. And Catherine, though she could still think, found she couldn't move.

*Mitch. Mitch Denton. Come to finish what he started...*

Catherine wanted to scream, and realized she couldn't do that either, for some reason. She was going into shock, as her conscious mind ebbed.

*So... not strong enough after all,* she thought sadly, remembering a conversation she'd had with Vincent, earlier. He'd told her she had the strength to see this through, but that he was also frightened for her.

*"If I ever lost you... unbearable,"* Vincent's soft voice whispered in her mind.

It was a mind that was going dark.

*Not strong enough after all,* her brain repeated. The thought filled her with an almost ineffable sorrow. It was followed by Vincent's voice, again:

*"If I ever lost you..."* he repeated.

*Vincent! I'm so sorry!* Catherine cried, internally.

The dark shadow drew quickly closer. And the pain was going away, as she went deeper into shock. She wasn't sure if being less able to feel was a good thing or a bad thing. Or if it even mattered, considering that Mitch Denton was probably about to put a bullet in her head.

*I asked for this. I asked for this case,* she remembered. *I all but begged Joe. They all tried to warn me...*

A large hand reached beneath her, and turned her. Her eyes closed, she couldn't see. But she did hear a scream, guttural and fierce, and full of sorrow, and she only had a moment more of consciousness to realize that the cry still wasn't her own.

But she knew whose cry it was.

It was Vincent's.

## Scene Two

### Vincent's Run

*Not unlike the blue white fire,  
You burn brightly in spite of yourself.*  
Stevie Nicks – The Long Distance Winner



Bouncing. Catherine knew she was being jostled, and it was a bouncing motion, like a rough carriage ride. The kind Catherine knew that she and Vincent would probably never get a chance to take. She was being held, tightly. And Vincent's long stride was chewing up the ground. He was racing between the alleyway and... somewhere. Somewhere he was taking her, apparently.

He was running. Hard. As hard as he dared, as his precious cargo bled, in his arms.

*Bouncing. Like the carriage seat, as the horse goes around the park. Especially when it trots. I wonder if the horse will be afraid of you?* Catherine thought, both aware of her surroundings and not.

It was an idle musing, and a useless one, Catherine realized, drifting in and out of consciousness. Her life's blood was leaving her.

*No. No, don't slip down.*

It wasn't her voice, in her head. It wasn't her thought, not exactly. But of course, Catherine knew whose it was.

It was his. Vincent's. She felt his fear, inside the bond that inexorably linked them.

*Don't... follow the darkness. Don't slip away.*

The thought touched hers, in the blackness. The thought that was still not her own.

*Stay. Stay with me. Please.* He was frightened for her. Deeply.

"Okay," she answered mentally, nestling herself into his vest, as he ran. His heart was pounding. His chest was sweating. So was she. Which was odd, considering that she felt cold.

*Oh. Not sweat, then. At least, not for me,* she realized, understanding what the dampness was. She had no idea how long Vincent had been carrying her.

His booted feet made a steady, pounding sound, and Catherine realized that he was running her down a city street, not across the smooth greensward of the park, or down inside the uneven, sandy tunnels of his home.

*We're not going to the tunnels? But ... New York has eight million people in it. Vincent, you can't do this. You can't be ... exposed, this way,* she thought.

His words were sharp, and full of dread. *For you... anything. For you I can dare this.*

She felt the reply more than heard it, though had no idea if he'd actually heard her, or if it was just something Vincent himself was thinking, as he sped along.

He leaped, and cleared... something. Some puddle, or overturned garbage can, or derelict pile of boxes, or whatever it was that clogged the alleyways and streets between the docks and wherever it was they were going.

She felt his feet leave the ground, and felt him soar. It felt different than the run.

*Flying. Are we flying?* Catherine asked, loving the sensation of it.

Vincent didn't answer. He hit the other side with lithe grace, and never broke stride.

*I love you.*

She wasn't sure which one of them had thought it. Or if both of them had.

*I mean it. I love you. Thank you for what you tried to do for me. What you tried to give to me. You have no idea how much I needed you in my life. How could you? How could you know, when I didn't?*

Catherine knew it was her thinking, this time. But she also knew that the stray thoughts could have belonged to either one of them.

That was comforting, somehow.

*It doesn't hurt. Not anymore.*

Vincent made no mental reply to that. And Catherine wasn't sure if that was because he hadn't heard her, or if he was just too busy trying to save her life. Again.

The jostling run continued, and Catherine felt him swerve sharply, to avoid something. She swore she felt light passing over her, as if she were in a car travelling down the highway, travelling under a street lamp.

*A street lamp. Light. No. No, Vincent. You can't do that. You can't risk it. You have to stay to the shadows. You must!*

*Shortest way*, came the impression from him. He didn't care about the danger.

The darkness came again, and Catherine knew it was deeper, this time, not just the darkness of being clear of the street light, but something... more. Something more dangerous, and more pervasive. She was slipping further away, and the wet feeling at her back was spreading, held against her skin by a jacket that was making her colder, rather than keeping her warm, thanks to its dampness.

*Hold on*, Vincent thought frantically, not knowing whether she sensed his fear or not. He knew he felt her. And at the moment, he felt her slipping down. Her unconscious state was becoming deeper. And deadlier.

Lang General Hospital loomed large, only a block away. The revolving lights of a parked ambulance flashed before him, and he knew it was as close to suicide as he was going to get, to approach it, to leave her there.

He also knew that didn't matter. It was the ER entrance of the one place close enough to save her, and she needed what was inside. Needed it, if she was going to survive.

*If... if... she is going to survive*. Vincent tasted bile at the thought, and swallowed past it.

*If. What a world, is in that one, tiny, uncertain word. If she lives. If she survives. If we survive, this night.*

The thought filled him with a deep, rending kind of fright. The kind that made him chance the impossibly bright lights of the emergency room entrance, as he carried his injured burden as close as he dared.

*Hold on, Catherine. You have to hold on.*

Vincent gently laid her down on the unforgiving pavement, as close to the building as he could. There was no one there, but the ambulance and its flashing lights told him someone soon would be.

"Don't die," he instructed her. "Don't die, Catherine. If you die, I die."

They were the truest words he knew. His heart broke and the fear engulfed him, as he knew he had to leave her there, unable to help her any further.

*If you die because of what I am, I swear...*

But in an instant, he knew the blame for that was misdirected. If Catherine died, it wouldn't be because of what *he* was. Not this time.

It would be because of what Mitch Denton was.

*Mitch... Denton...* Vincent's mind ground out the name.

*"Who held the grate?"* Vincent's last conversation with Mitch echoed, in Vincent's head.

*Of all the things that don't matter anymore, that. That doesn't matter. Not anymore*, Vincent thought, backing away from his love as silently as he could.

Vincent stepped into the concealing shadows. Catherine lay on the concrete, looking far too pale.

*"Who held the grate?"*

*It doesn't matter.*

Then, a dark promise:

*I'm coming for you.*

Rage burned through Vincent, and it felt good, as it replaced the panic and terror he'd been feeling, with a righteous fury. Fear could often be a paralytic. Rage never was.

He slipped behind a dumpster just in time to see a man from the hospital come out of the door and spot Catherine. The man called frantically for a gurney and leaped down the steps to check her pulse.

Vincent knew she still had one. Also that it wasn't very strong. Their bond told him as much.

*Darkness. She's... becoming lost, in the darkness...*

She looked so helpless, as they picked her up and put her on the gurney. She looked small, and frail. Bloody. And savaged.

*It's like the night I met you. Only... worse. So much worse,* Vincent thought, helpless in his building rage.

They hauled her up to the glass and steel doors, and they took her away. The double doors of the emergency room swallowed the woman he adored, as Vincent watched it happen.

There was nothing more he could do here. Nothing at all. The feeling of impotence fueled his rage even further.

There was a pool of blood on the stones where he'd placed her. And Vincent felt the fury inside him grow into something else, something wilder, something stronger, and something far more interested in revenge than justice.

*"Who held the grate?"* Mitch asked, implying he was somehow owed something.

*Who held the gun?* Vincent's mind replied, knowing that Mitch was indeed "owed" something. Something as ugly as Mitch himself was.

From inside the hospital, Vincent felt Catherine slip away a little further. Their bond was growing quiet, and in that increasing silence, Vincent knew true terror.

*Catherine... no. Don't die. Don't die. If you die, I die. I swear it.*

But before that happened, there was someone else who needed to die. Someone in particular. Perhaps more than one someone. There had been others in the alley, when Mitch had shot her.

*If you die, I die.* The Beast inside Vincent echoed the sentiment that the man inside him had first uttered.

Vincent turned back toward the way he'd come.

*I'm coming for you,* Vincent's fiery brain repeated, knowing that there was no force in heaven or hell that was going to be able to stop him.

With a swirl of cape and a sprinter's run, he raced back toward the alleyway.



### Scene Three

#### *Mitch's Run*



*Don't try to change them. You never will.*

*Stevie Nicks – The Long Distance Winner*

"Punch it, Ned! Come on!" Mitch ordered, watching the streets go by in an increasingly speedy blur.

"Okay, okay, but which way?!" Ned asked, doing as his boss asked. Mitch had been in a state of near panic since the shootout in the alleyway, and Ned knew it wasn't just "nerves." They were in trouble. Ned just didn't know which kind.

"Any way!" Mitch shouted, checking the newly reloaded chamber of his gun – again. *Any way, and as fast as you can get there. New Jersey, maybe. Farther. Far enough to get out of reach of..*

"Ain't like she's the first one we offed this week," Ned stated, trying to calm his boss. The plan had always been to grab Catherine Chandler, pump her for information about the location of the Sweeneys, then kill her. As far as Ned was concerned, little had changed. "She was gonna be dead one way or the other, Mitch," Ned reasoned.

"Well, maybe we better hope not!" Mitch snapped, knowing full well who had been leaning over the body of Catherine Chandler.

*Vincent. How in hell did Vincent know to be there?!* Mitch thought. Vincent's scream of rage and pain was still ringing in Mitch's ears, over the sound of the hard running engine.

Ned took a hard left, squealing the tires and throwing Mitch against the passenger side door. The larger man floored the late model sedan, as they sped through the narrow, dockside streets.

Ned checked the rear view mirror. It was clear. "We gotta go back. Rado might still be—"

"We ain't goin' back!" Mitch shouted. A main street loomed in front of them. One that would take Mitch across the bridge, and if he ran fast enough and hard enough, to eventual safety.

"To the warehouse, then. We got muscle, there," Ned said, knowing that whatever it was that was spooking his boss, it all seemed to start with a caped figure: the one who had knelt over the body of the DA that Mitch had shot; the caped figure that had... screamed, like an animal, when he'd seen what Ned assumed was a dead body.

"Red light," Ned observed, as they approached the intersection.

"Run it," Mitch ordered.

Ned did as he was told. A horn blared. They both ignored it.

Mitch considered the idea of the warehouse, vs. the idea of just plain running, a thing he'd likely have to do for the rest of his life, considering who his bosses were.

"We still need to find where they stashed Sweeney," Ned reminded Mitch.

"Yeah," Mitch replied, keeping his head on a swivel. Ned got the impression that Mitch was no longer very concerned about Jack Sweeney, his family, or what he might say on the witness stand. Which was odd, considering.

Mitch checked the chamber of his gun, again. Heavy bullets gleamed. The kind that had taken down Catherine Chandler.

*A bullet can stop Vincent. And Max Avery ain't a forgiving kinda man,* Mitch reasoned.

And with that one thought, and as he almost always did, Mitch Denton made the wrong choice.

"Okay, the warehouse," Mitch agreed, after they'd cleared the next red-light intersection and a cabbie's graphic curse.

"And when we get there, tell the boys to arm up big. Rifles. Heavy ammo and good sites," Mitch directed.

Ned took another hard left and aimed the sedan toward the safety of the warehouse. It was a fortress. One with multiple floors, so you could see what was coming, and stacked equipment, which made good places to set up an ambush. It was a solid building. One anybody would be a fool to try and break into, considering who occupied it.

"Make sure every gun we got is loaded," Mitch added.

"You got it." Ned was as eager to get where there was good cover as Mitch was.

"Be ready for anything," Mitch instructed. The gun felt good in his hand. Good and solid. The barrel was still warm, from the bullet that had felled Catherine.

Adrenaline made Mitch hyper-aware. The dark streets flying past them were empty. No immediate threat loomed. For the moment... he was safe.

*I got guns. I got backup. If Vincent dies tonight... not like I'm gonna shed a tear,* Mitch thought.

"There might be trouble," he said, keeping the details of that to himself, as he considered how Vincent happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

*Vincent knew her. Somehow... he knew her,* Mitch mused. *Bet there's a story there. Have to ask the old man,* he realized, already making plans.

They were plans that had no hope of being seen to fruition. But a running Mitch didn't know that. Not yet.

"We'll handle it," Ned answered confidently, wondering where trouble would come from, right now. No cop had been in on the fight. No one yet knew they had even grabbed the pretty little DA. And if she was dead, she wasn't likely to tell anybody, or ID them. And if she wasn't, well, they'd just have to grease a few palms on the inside, maybe lay low for a week or two. Maybe even send someone in to pay her a visit in the hospital. After all, Frank DeCorsia's fiery death meant they were hardly trying to be stealthy, here.

They still had time to try and find Jack Sweeney and his family. Ned knew they were maybe playing a long game. Setbacks didn't derail him or rattle him. That's why he was good at his job.

Plus, if Mitch had suggested running for real, Ned knew he'd have had to put a bullet in his head. It's what a number two man did, when the number one man went off the rails.

"Be there in five minutes," Ned soothed, turning again. For all their driving, they had essentially travelled in a large circle.

"Just get ready," Mitch hissed.

"You expecting a fight?" the big man asked, pressing down on the gas pedal a little more. Mitch's agitation was becoming contagious.

"Not just a fight," Mitch answered, making sure the safety was off. His dark eyes looked hard, focused, and soulless.

"I'm expecting... a war."

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Scene Four

*Beast's Run*



*I come calling unto you, but you run.*

*Stevie Nicks - The Long Distance Winner*

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From the racing gurney, Catherine had the feeling of “running,” again. Bright, incandescent lights flashed overhead, as a grim-faced intern kept pressure on the needle in her arm, and a nurse kept an oxygen mask over her face. They were moving fast, toward the operating room.

“BP’s dropping. Pick up the pace.”

“Operating team is ready. We’ve got OR Five.”

She heard the voices, but didn’t know which one of her attendants they came from. They were all in surgical scrubs and a dark haired man adjusted a mask over his face.

“Make sure we’ve got whole blood ready. X-rays?”

“On the way.”

*Vincent? Where was Vincent? Was he here? He couldn’t be...* Catherine thought.

Catherine mumbled something. Something incoherent, over the sound of the rushing wheels and soft-soled feet.

Someone looked down at her. “Stay with us, ma’am. We’ve got you.”

Her arm tingled and felt warm. The speeding party burst through the operating room doors just as Catherine felt her world fade to a chemically induced kind of black. It was the kind of darkness she’d once feared, as a child.

*Dark. So Dark. Where is my candle?*

She felt lost.

*Vincent? I... where... where are you?*

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Where indeed? For in that moment, Vincent himself couldn’t have told Catherine where he was. For in that moment, “Vincent himself” wasn’t quite “Vincent himself.”

His Beast was running. Hard. And his Beast was hunting. Vincent let him hunt.

Sprinting back to the alleyway, the part of Vincent that lived by its instincts took over. He screamed again when he knelt next to the pool of Catherine’s blood, and he dipped two fingers into it, for a reason he couldn’t explain. It carried her scent, yet so much more. It smelled like the fight. It smelled like iron, and street oil and sweat.

*Blood. Catherine’s blood. I will repay.*

Blue eyes narrowed, and went unerringly to the direction the bullet had come from. Vincent realized he could still think in words, and still reason, even as he scanned the dim buildings around him. That wasn’t a thing that was always true, when his Beast was aroused. But it was true now.

Vincent wasn’t sure what he was looking for, exactly. But he knew he’d know it when he found it.

Mitch’s getaway vehicle had burned rubber when it left the alley. The direction of the tracks were easy to follow. Vincent loped after it, his acute night vision easily spotting the vehicle’s first hard turn.

The tracks blended into others from there, but it hardly mattered. Vincent now had a trail he could follow: One made of fear.

He trotted a few blocks farther, then sent his sensitive mind out like a far flung net, trying to “sense” the fear in Mitch Denton and his companions. The Beast listened, as his sharp ears heard dozens of voices, then tuned the superfluous noises out, until he heard only a few. It sounded like the Whispering Gallery.

“...need a quart of milk.”

“You call that a ball?”

Then: The heavy man’s voice: “Mitch... yer gonna have a heart attack...”

The blue eyes narrowed further. Vincent moved toward the sound.

He only erred once, in his tracking, as one dimly lit side street turned into a dead end, a brick wall telling him he’d turned too soon. He backtracked his steps – and then realized that Mitch and his cronies must have circled back toward the docks, to the warehouse district.

He could all but smell a faint trace of Mitch Denton, on the wind. Something of expensive leather shoes and cheap cologne, overtop of hair oil, the smell of the fired gun, and the car's exhaust. And fear.

Mitch's voice reached Vincent's now hyper-sensitive ears.

"When he comes, you'll know who he is!"

*Will they? Or will it be just you. Just you who knows that?* Vincent wondered, aggression mixing with a thirst for revenge, at the thought.

The answer to that question was of no consequence, one way or the other, as far as this side of Vincent was concerned. It didn't matter who knew, or who saw, or *what* they saw, tonight. The Beast, after all, was hardly a cautious figure.

He was, however, a very effective one. And he was still rising.

*I will repay.*

Vincent moved both quickly and silently, a hooded, avenging angel, cloaked and cunning. When he saw the car parked around the side of the building, he knew he had his target. The steel building was two stories high, and there were padlocks and chains on the doors.

They didn't matter. Nothing did.

*Catherine...*

Wherever she was, if she still was, the world around her was black. It was all he knew.

*Catherine...* His mind reached out to her. And found... nothing. Nothing, in the anesthesia induced void.

Vincent trained his eyes on the building. A man's shadow moved across a small window. Then another. There was a rifle slung over the shoulder of one of them.

That didn't matter, either. Nothing did. Not now. Not without her. Not without Catherine. The blackness that was enveloping her began to envelop him, as well.

Vincent's blue eyes scanned the building until he spotted a downspout attached to one side. It ran close to one of the higher windows. There was his way in.

*I will repay,* he repeated, internally.

He started to climb.

## Scene Five

### *Beauty's Run*



*Love somebody. Save their soul.*

*Tie them to your heaven, erase their hell...*

*Stevie Nicks – The Long Distance Winner*

Catherine was running. Running still, but in bright sunlight, and this time, she was through the park, and in a dream. She was looking for someone.

Of course, she knew who.

But the day was wrong. For one thing, the day was “day.” The sun hung like a great, yellow ball in a springtime sky. She knew she shouldn’t be searching for Vincent during the daytime, not up Above, where he could be seen. But in the half-drugged state of post-operative recovery, her search made sense. Everything did.

A young woman pushing a stroller moved by her on a concrete pathway, and Catherine slowed down, and set her feet upon it. The bright sun felt warm, and dragonflies were buzzing. It was as glorious a spring day as she could ever hope to find.

The sun shone down brightly, in a crystal blue sky that reminded her so much of the color of Vincent’s eyes that she ached for him.

*Vincent...*

She fought for consciousness, and struggled upward just enough to say the word aloud:

On a pristine white pillowcase, her head turned. "Vin... cent," she said, barely above a whisper.

In a warehouse across town, the Beast heard her call; heard the call of his heart's mate.

*"Vin...cent..."*

She was calling to him. Searching for him. Trying to save him, even as she was struggling to save herself. She needed him. She just did.

There was no doubt that he would go to her. None whatsoever. No matter what the risk, there was no doubt that he would go, and be by her side. She was his life. He had to.

Vincent eyed the pitiful figure in front of him.

"There is nothing left of you," Vincent told a groveling Mitch Denton. *Nothing. But I have something... someone, to go to. Now.*

The big room smelled of blood and sweat, and urine. So did the man in front of him, crouched on a broken catwalk, back as far away from him as he could get. Mitch Denton had nowhere left to run. In almost every sense of that phrase.

"Nothing," Vincent repeated, knowing it was true. Whatever was left of the boy Mitch had once been was gone, buried under greed, hate, and malice. Whatever was left of the man was reduced to fear, failure, and cowardice. Mitch Denton was nothing. They both knew it.

But Catherine was not "nothing." She was the polar opposite of that, and she was calling for him. Even as she slipped back down into slumber, Vincent felt it, felt her calm the Beast that prowled and often raged, inside him. She touched his soul, even as she gentled it.

*"Vin...cent..."*

He turned with no explanation, leaving Mitch Denton right where he was. The frightened man stayed in an almost fetal crouch, too terrified to move. His run was done.

It was just as well. He really did have no place else he could go.





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Sleep reclaimed Catherine, and she resumed her dream almost right where she'd left it. Her strolling feet carried her out of the park to 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, and its tony, window display-laden shops. The warm sun continued to beat down on her, and she felt the heat, as she admired a printed scarf, artfully tied around the neck of a mannequin. The New York crowd hurried by her.

And then, she felt him. Him. She felt Him, as he slipped up behind her, silently as he'd ever slipped beside her on her- on their balcony.

"There's an ice cream vendor a block from here," Vincent said, sliding his big hand companionably into hers. A child with a red balloon walked by, his mother holding his hand. Other people rushed past. No one looked twice.

*How can you know that?* she wondered.

"So there is," Catherine replied, inordinately pleased with her dream.

*This is... a dream, isn't it?*

They moved along with the crowd. "I'm hot," she said. "I was running. I think I was looking for you," Catherine revealed, loving the feeling of her hand in his. Neither were wearing gloves. It felt nice.

"Were you?" Vincent asked. "Strange. I was running, as well. Even when I wasn't." The statement made no sense other than dream sense. Catherine completely understood.

Vincent looked around at the daytime traffic as if he'd seen it before, and guided her across the street, his hand never leaving hers. Their goal was in sight. A street vendor with a pennant-bedecked cart was right in front of Saks, right where Catherine knew he would be.

"I'm glad you found me," she told Vincent. New York was a very large city.

"As am I. Were you afraid I wouldn't?" he asked. His other hand went into his pants pocket, and Catherine heard the jingle of coins. Which was good, she realized, because for some reason, she'd forgotten her purse.

"I was... I don't know. I felt lost, for a while. But I'm not, now." She smiled. "Vanilla, please," she told the ice cream vendor. "Will you have one?" she asked.

"Not today," he demurred, handing over his change. Catherine wondered if he didn't have enough money to buy two ice cream cones, and knew a moment of sadness for that. She should have brought her purse.

"I should have brought my purse," she said, giving voice to her concern.

He shook his great head, and the vendor handed him a few cents back, in change. "It would only weigh you down," Vincent replied, as the vendor smiled at the two of them, then turned to his next customer.

*Weigh me down. So I couldn't move as fast, if I needed to,* Catherine thought, taking a lick of her treat.

"We should go back to the park," Catherine declared.

Vincent took in the bustle of humanity around them. "We don't have to," he replied easily. He was happy to be with her. She was happy to be with him. No one was threatening them, or giving them cause for alarm. Catherine realized that all this was an odd sensation for both of them.

*No, not both of us. Just me. This is my dream. How... lovely it is.*

A paper boy walked by, his arms full of afternoon editions of the New York Times. A businessman in a sharp, three piece suit rushed past, his eyes on them, and then on his watch. He was late for something.

Catherine smiled at the paper boy, and then at the rest of humanity around them. They were benign. Friendly, even, as a few jovial souls smiled back.

"We could just... stay here. Stay on the street," Vincent said. Which again, made no sense but dream sense.

Catherine knew they were safe. But she also knew there was something she wanted to show him. Something she hadn't thought about in years. Something his earlier conversation about her bravery reminded her of.

"No, I want to. There's a big tree in the park that I want to show you. I think I can still find it. I used to climb it when I was a little girl." She tugged on his hand.

"Did you?" he asked, clearly charmed by her.

Catherine nodded. "It was so big. Bigger, now, I bet. It used to scare my poor father half to death. But I knew I had to do it."

*In a way, that's what going after the mob on the docks was about, Vincent. In a way, I think I've been climbing that tree all my life,* she thought, pulling him forward.

His smile was an indulgent one, and in a way that also only made sense in dreams, Catherine knew he understood completely.

"Then we will go there," he replied.

Yet, in spite of his words, she felt resistance, on her hand. She stopped trying to walk, and simply looked up at him.

"Catherine... I am here. Not just... here, but *here*," he said, emphasizing the word.

*Here. You're here. Not here on the street. Here where I am. Where I really am,* she thought.

"Tonight... I was so afraid I had lost you. So... driven by that fear. Will you do one thing for me?" he asked.

Would she do one thing for him? Did he even have to ask? She would do a thousand things for him. More. She knew it as surely as she knew him.

"Of course," Catherine answered breathlessly, the springtime breeze teasing both her hair and his. It was such a beautiful day.

He leaned close. "Are you certain? It's not so much. But right now... right now I think I need it more than anything." She could feel his love for her, in the words.

"Then you should ask it," Catherine replied, loving him in return. The blue sky over his head framed his blonde, breeze tossed, sun kissed hair, perfectly.

"Catherine... my Catherine... if you can. And only if you can... will you... open your eyes?"

*But they're already...*

But they weren't. She knew they weren't. The soft beep of the machines and the coolness of the room and the firmness beneath her shoulder blades confirmed again for her where she was.

*Hospital. Lang General. I saw the sign.*

"I... yes," she answered, knowing that he needed it, just like he said he did.

She forced her grey-green eyes open and there he was, truly him, and not just a dream image. He was standing over her, running no more, leaning a little, with his hands braced on the hospital bed rail, simply smiling, smiling down at her, much the same way he'd done in her dream. The wind was still teasing at his hair, but this time, it was night, and the breeze was from an open window, in her hospital room. The long white curtains behind him danced, subtly. Again, it was a thing that reminded her of the balcony.



"Vincent?" she asked, her voice raspy with sleep, not to mention all she'd endured, that night.

"Shhh," he shushed her.

"You're here?"

"I'm here," he replied gently. The bond between them still held wisps of her dream. He felt it from her, even if he didn't know the particulars. She'd been happy. Very.

"I had a dream about you," she whispered.

"About me?" he asked, amazed that any dream of him would fill her with such... contentment.

"We were... walking down 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. The sky was blue..."

Her mind searched for the details, as the dream faded to nothingness.

"And then?" he prompted, wanting to help her remember.

"Then... you bought me ice cream." Her expression changed from one of memory to one of quiet pleasure, and a still kind of joy.

"No one looked twice," she added, a touch of amazement in her drowsy voice.

He let her soft joy fill him, and wash away the stain that had been set there by Mitch Denton's brutality. *Peace. Peace in the stillness. No more running. No more... struggle. Peace. Yes. This is what you are to me. This. This fulfillment. This ... beauty. And no one looked twice.*

He beheld her lovingly, as her eyes began to drift shut. There was still a soft smile, lingering and lovely, teasing the corners of her mouth.

*This peace. This consolation. This... joy, you carry inside you. This... love. Thank you, Catherine. Thank you for sharing this with me. This is the thing I was afraid to lose. This is the thing I ... treasure ... above all else.*

He felt her begin to dream again, and felt her contentment. He hoped the dream was of him. Of them.

*Sleep. Sleep, my love. No more running, now. Sleep, and dream of us. The sky is blue. The day is warm, and sunlit. You have ice cream, and you have me, there beside you. There is peace between us; between us, and everyone we meet.*

He continued to gaze at her softly, all running done, at least for the moment.

... *And no one looks twice*, he concluded.

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*No matter where you are in your own fairy tale, I wish you love. ~ Cindy*

*Love somebody. Save their soul.*

*Tie them to your heaven, erase their hell...*

*Stevie Nicks – The Long Distance Winner*

