

# **Nothing Less Than Blessed**

**By Cindy Rae**



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Her bare leg was slung over his equally bare waist, as they lay in bed, together. Vincent's blue eyes opened slowly, taking in the dark of the room. It was past midnight. His internal clock told him so.

*After midnight. It's April 12<sup>th</sup>, then. Thirty years. Thirty-one. Happy Anniversary, Catherine.*

He adjusted his pillow and just laid there, loving the weight of Catherine's leg on his side. Being like this was no longer just a "dream" he had; a sleeping Catherine was solid, and real, and curled against his back. It was her favorite sleeping position. Decades spent being her bed partner told him as much.

Sometimes, she'd sleep with an arm thrown over his shoulder, or a stray hand on his bicep. But in the lax deepness of dream sleep, the arm usually fell back, and lay either at her side or curled before her, between her body and his, touching his back lightly, as the back of her hand kept contact with his bare skin.

So, at night, she didn't usually hold him to her with her hands. It was the leg that "anchored" him to her, in the dark and quiet hours. The soft, sweet leg (always the right one), as he slept facing the balcony windows if he was in her apartment, or in bed, at their gated home with the rooftop garden, or in his Chamber, Below.

No matter where they slept, their positions were the same, and before the night was over he knew that she would move so that the limb rode his waist, and verified that he was close to her. She kept it there as if to say *There, I have you. I know where you are, in the night.*

It was a thought to which he could only answer: *Yes. Yes, you do.*

He knew it wasn't every year of their thirty-one years together she could have said that. Indeed, the first few were spent apart, as they each learned the path to the other one. But it seemed that once they started sleeping together, that this was her way. Time hadn't changed that, between them. Nearly every night, he'd wake up to find them thusly situated. It was as if she never tired of the "I have you" impression, never tired of the sensation.

*There. There you are. You are mine. I have you, and I'm keeping you near.* She might as well have been saying it out loud.

Vincent knew that she slept deepest in this very posture, and either lightest or not at all when he wasn't in bed with her. When circumstances called for their separation (as they sometimes still did), he knew her to toss and turn, or even abandon the idea of sleep altogether. This, too, was the way with her. Even after decades of marriage, the need to reassure herself that he was still there seemed paramount, in her mind. Even sending her his love through their bond didn't relax her enough so she could sleep, if he wasn't there.

*"There are some things,"* she'd told him, *"for which there is no substitute."*

He knew if he moved so that the leg had to, she'd shift, in her sleep, then either put the leg back, or send a searching hand out, to touch his shoulder, or his broad chest. Catherine liked to touch him, while they slept.

He adored her for that. It was one of the many things he adored her for, though he wasn't sure if he'd ever said that particular one, aloud.

They'd often begin the night's slumbers by resting with her head cradled on his shoulder, but they both knew she wouldn't pass the entire night on so hard a pillow. Age hadn't dimmed the strength in his arms and shoulders. *Or at least, it hasn't dimmed it much*, he thought, with a certain sense of pride.

He still had to climb to reach her, here, and sometimes elsewhere. Still had to travel with a combination of speed, strength, and cunning. He knew he still had all three, to some degree, even though they were both no longer young.

*There's still a Beast in me after all these years*, he mused, though he knew now that it was a very satisfied one. Gone were the days when the Dark Being inside him raged to come out, and threatened to snap his control.

To be sure, his Instinctive Self was still there, wild and fierce. He knew it always would be. Vincent had no illusions about what he was. He didn't need any. Not when Catherine loved *all* of him so well.

But he knew that Catherine's softly feminine influence had soothed the reckless savage in him, just as she'd soothed the rest of him: through her love, courage, and passion. At just past sixty years of age, he nearly considered the wild side of his nature "tamed," considering.

*Well, almost tamed*, Vincent amended, his mind turning to very specific memories of lovemaking. There were nights when Catherine was just a touch wild, herself, and on those nights, all she was begged his primal self to come out and play. Turning sixty hadn't dimmed their passion for each other. He now knew nothing ever would.

*You're my heart. You're my reason*, he mused, rubbing her from calf to knee, then absently cupping where her leg bent, just for the pleasure of holding her there.

*How can I begin to tell you how much you are to me? How can I begin to tell you ... everything?*

His large arm settled on her thigh, and she scooted over, embracing him more firmly, as she planted her palm against his shoulder blade. She wasn't awake. She was still dreaming. His connection to her told him as much.

But she did move closer to him, closer to his warmth, to his powerful, hair-traced back, and he heard her sigh, a little. There were years of contentment, in the breathy, barely-there sound.

*My wife is happy. She is having a good dream, and she knows I am near.* He let his mind drift, and mingle with hers. Waves of serenity washed through her, and then, they washed through him.

He looked out at her balcony, but didn't really see it. He now looked with inward-seeing eyes. *Safe. You're safe, now.* The first words he'd ever given her remained the truest. Had she ever felt less than that, in his presence?

He remembered taking her back home, that first time. How hesitant she'd been, when they came to the great gap between her world and his. She'd need to jump over it. She'd need to have faith in him, that he wouldn't let her fall.

She had. And in a way, they'd been jumping over the gaps, ever since, large and small.

And even though that particular gap hadn't been their largest one, it had certainly been their first.

There was such a difference between that early day, and this one.

*Her soul is fed. Her body is fed. Her children are grown and safe, and her husband is near. Which one of us is more fortunate? Is it her? Or is it me?* he mused thoughtfully, realizing that this, like so many other questions between them, had no sure answer.

So, for that question, and for every other one (and there were many of those), they had lived for "finding out."

Which one of them was the more fortunate was a question he swore he knew the answer to, until Catherine pushed him to examine it more closely. Then, she

would maintain that it was she who was the lucky one; the one with gifts beyond compare.

To this day he referred to the oft-had conversation as “their only constant disagreement.”

The thing they agreed upon unshakably was this: That they were nothing less than blessed.

It was the word he’d used once, to describe how he was feeling when he was sitting near her, as she carried their child. He didn’t know she was pregnant, then, didn’t know he was going to become a father. They’d (temporarily) lost their bond, but they’d had each other, always. And the feeling of being “blessed” had over-ridden all others, so it was the word he’d given to her.

*“Can you tell me how you’re feeling?”*

*“Blessed.”*

She’d remembered it. And she used the word, still.

He blinked against his inner musings, as he watched a tracking moon cast slivers of light across her balcony. It delicately illuminated a rose bush that was a grandchild of the first. The unique plant (and its descendants) had never lost the unique ability to bring forth two different color roses, and the silver limned leaves looked almost black in the darkness. They were only green where the light touched them, as each unfurled leaf caught its share of moonlight.

The white rose was in full bloom, a night breeze causing it to gently caress its half-open red neighbor. Vincent knew there were still thorns, on every stalk. That, and there were half a dozen tightly closed buds, scattered all over the plant. It had been a cold winter, with a late spring. He knew they were lucky to have what few open blooms they did, considering. In time, there would be more. There always were.

*You barely bloomed for Easter, but you did make it*, he thought to the beautiful plant. Easter had come early, this year, already come and gone, by the first of April. *By May Day, you’ll be a riot of blossoms*, he predicted.

It would be. Though not everyone he loved would receive a token bloom, no matter how abundantly they were produced.

They'd interred Father in the catacombs, some six months ago.

The pain of the loss was still there, and still fresh, though it was steadily ameliorated by memories of the long, richly loving relationship Vincent had shared with the only man he'd ever considered his parent.

It had been a peaceful passing, at the end of a wonderful life. Jacob had reached ninety and then some. With Elizabeth's passing, only Narcissa was older, and there were times when they weren't sure about that, considering that the old black seeress wasn't entirely sure of what year she'd been born.

Mary was still with them, and still hearty, though she battled arthritis in her knees and fingers. Peter was retired and spending much of the year in Florida, dodging the New York winters. Others were there or gone, as life and circumstances had dictated. And the children who had cared for Catherine when she'd first found herself in the tunnels were now sturdy adults, each bearing their own share of the tunnel load.

Kipper was a strapping, broad shouldered man who worked with Pascal, in the Pipe Chamber. Samantha had finished medical school, and worked at New York General. Jamie was a mother of twin girls, and as fierce as she'd ever been. Geoffrey was a professor at NYU. Zach, like Devin, loved to travel, but came home regularly. All had their place in Vincent's life, and in his heart.

Vincent and Catherine's own children were healthy and close, and part of the ever-expanding tunnel community. Jacob was married to Lena's daughter, and was now a lawyer with Chandler and Maxwell, echoing the time when Catherine had gone to work in her father's own firm. She'd been cautious about offering him a place there, wanting to make sure it was what he wanted, more than it was what she wanted. He'd put her fears to rest. And he'd become an exceptional attorney.

Charles Vincent was completing his residency, always intending to follow in his grandfather's footsteps. Like his father, he'd had "the soul of a doctor" – and the means to do something about that, thanks to his mother's wealth.

His sister, Caroline Brigit, wrote children's books, and taught, Below, when she found the time. A clacking manual typewriter could often be heard, in her chambers. That, or the scratching sound of her drawing pen.

All were part of the Tunnel Community, just as they were part of the World Above.

Vincent was very aware that he and the Woman of Both Worlds had made children of both worlds, and he adored them all. Though all dealt with the World Above, they'd all stayed Below, too, each in their own way.

Caroline's human features even vaguely resembled his, though the striking blonde with aristocratic cheekbones was often asked about her nationality, rather than anything else. She published her books through Brigit O'Donnell, and kept her time Above to a minimum. She was more comfortable Below, and worshipped both her parents. Eric intended to be her husband, though she hadn't accepted him, yet. Vincent felt sure she would. Then there were days when he thought Geoffrey intended to give Eric a run for his money. It was all undecided.

*Some mysteries are best left as they are,* Vincent thought, knowing that like so many other things, that, too, would work itself out, in time.

Catherine nestled closer to him, and Vincent reached back for the blanket, wondering if she was getting cold. She'd lost weight since Father's passing, sorrow blunting her appetite as much as anything else had. Vincent knew without asking that it reminded her of the time she'd lost Charles Chandler. There was no need for her to explain. She was slowly gaining the weight back, but being slender made her favor a tunnel-made shawl more, or a thick comforter, at night. Especially on a cool night, like this one.

Reaching back without turning, he tugged the blanket up and over her, and felt her settle. For himself, he had scant need of covers. The apartment was warm enough, far warmer than his tunnel home usually was. And Catherine's bare leg and his own blonde (well, mostly blonde. There was now some silver mixed in there) body hair kept him warm enough.

He tugged the covers up as far as he could reach on her, and felt her relax. Another soft sigh escaped lips he never tired of kissing, and he knew she was chasing her dream, and content to do so.

*Sleep. Sleep, my angel,* he thought. Then: *More than thirty years.*

He spared a moment to remember their struggles, but then pushed those thoughts away. This was not the time to remember the hardships; it was time to remember the glories: Like the day he'd helped deliver Caroline, or the day Catherine had dropped her suitcase in his chamber, and declared that though she intended to keep her apartment Above, she was moving in.

Then there was the day she and Joe Maxwell had opened up their own law office, and the day Laura had been appointed as an Advocate for those with hearing difficulties, by the City Council; there was the day Rolley had come home, skinny, ragged, and clean of the drugs that had been ravaging him.

He taught music, now, and Mouse kept his stolen grand piano in tune.

There were other victories, large and small. Some of them belonged squarely to him and Catherine, but not all of them.

*April 12<sup>th</sup>. 31 Years. This would begin year 32.*

Moonlight continued to shine through the clear panes of glass, and Vincent knew if he put his hand to those panes, it would be cold. Winter's kiss lingered, especially once the sun was well down. The light on the balcony changed, and dimmed. A cloud was passing over the moon. Somehow, that made the outside weather seem even colder.

*No matter. The warm days will come. Warm, and... lingering. They'll bring more light. More time for the children to be Above, and for me to be Below. There's a new family coming down next week. Another tunnel to carve. Another place to make welcome.*

They'd filled the Great Hall to capacity, this last Winterfest. It looked like that situation was about to continue.

*And I danced with you, my Catherine ...* he thought, loving the memory of it.

Clad in Winterfest white, the fairest rose he knew had waltzed in his arms, gracefully as she ever had. Grey tresses frosted her sandy hair, and laugh lines had etched their way around her lovely eyes, nose and mouth. She was more beautiful now than she'd been on even their first Winterfest together, and as he'd danced with her, he knew he'd secretly longed to throw out all the guests, so he could once more have her all to himself, for the last waltz of the evening.



Eventually, the great doors had indeed closed, shooing out the tunnel residents, guest, and helpers alike, and the huge doors had sealed in just a bit of magic, as they always did, even as they'd blocked out the wind. He'd squirmed his lady around the huge room once more, watching their shadows dance on the wall, looking just as youthful they always had, 30 years ago...



*Our shadows play a game with us. I think they wait all year for us to come back, and they only age a day, while we age a year. In a hundred years, in a thousand, they'll still be dancing on those walls, when the last guest leaves the room.*

The random thought made him happy, and he smiled into the darkness, and stretched out his own bent leg.

Catherine shifted too, and he took the opportunity to roll onto his back, then to his other side, so he could see her. Hand held on her thigh, he adjusted his position smoothly, trying to keep her asleep.

It almost worked. And he knew the minute he'd failed.

She smiled, before she opened her eyes. It was a thing she did so often, now, and such an odd thing, too. Catherine's mind stirred, he could feel it, in their bond.

Knowing he was there, knowing he was with her, one leg flung over his huge frame, the ghost of a smile would tease the corners of her generous mouth upward, and she'd hold that small smile, then open her eyes, to confirm whatever image she'd conjured, behind her closed eyelids.

She must always have liked what she saw, Vincent felt, because the smile would grow larger, even as it softened. Vincent knew that if there was a way to look at a man with pure love in your eyes, Catherine did it. The look never failed to humble him, nor did it fail to remind him how lucky he was.

*I need to add that look to the list of why I think I am the more fortunate one,* he thought idly, taking her in, as she roused.

Her green eyes focused and stayed steadily on him. "What time is it?" she whispered, though there was no reason to keep her voice low. There was no one in the apartment but the two of them.

"Late. Or early," he whispered back. "Go back to sleep. I was just a bit restless."

The eyes he'd sell his soul for glanced around at the mooncast darkness of the room. "Is it our anniversary?" she asked, suspecting it was.

"Yes," he said, raising a hand to gently stroke the soft fall of her hair. She lifted her head and cradled it on her bent arm, reaching a hand over to trace his beloved cheek, with the back of her fingers.

"It isn't fair. Thirty one years, and you don't look more than ten years older than when we first met," she said, smiling, noting the silver in his beard and hair, but not commenting on it. His hair was still mostly blonde, on his head and everywhere else. There were a few scant lines under this startling blue eyes, and then deeper ones, from his unique nose to the corners of his mouth. But Catherine truly didn't "see" those, and felt that like most males, Vincent only looked better with age.

"I promise you I feel it," he said, knowing that she was older just as he was, but still vigorous, and that she still worked out with Isaac Stubbs, now and then, though both of them complained about the toll that took.

Her back sometimes gave her trouble thanks to Mitch Denton's bullet, and the knee he'd sprained when he'd been hit by a car running from the Silks acted up

when it was frigid outside, but for the most part, they were managing, just as they always had.

She now wore glasses to look over case files, though Vincent realized his own visual acuity was the same as it had ever been. Still, Vincent knew when the ache in the knee became more pronounced, and the time came for him to use a cane, that it would be Jacob's he'd use. The thought did not make him sad. As long as he knew he could always reach Catherine, nothing much bothered him, these days.

"Can't sleep?" she asked, still caressing his beloved, unusual face. He loved her touch. And he had good reason to be restless, though she didn't know about that.

"Too happy for dreams," he explained, taking her hand and planting a kiss on her fingers.

Sometimes, when they woke up in the middle of the night together, it caused the passion between them to flare. He'd then love her again like he could never get enough of her, or like they hadn't been with each other that way for weeks, rather than the scant hours they both knew it to be. Other times, a middle-of-the-night lovemaking session would be almost excruciatingly tender, and slow, as if there was no real "goal" other than to keep touching each other, intimately, for as long as they both could.

Vincent reveled in all the ways passion with her could be. But he wanted none of those, now.

For now, he was simply content to lie in bed with her and look at her, both of them smiling at each other like a pair of love-struck teenagers, gently touching each other, and speaking in whispers.

*This is enough. It is more than I ever thought to have. So much more.*

"You never told me what you want for our anniversary, this year," she prompted, knowing she had only the day to get him whatever he asked for. They almost always exchanged gifts on her balcony in the evening. It was a tradition.

"You know you don't need to give me a gift. What else could I possibly ask for?" he asked, brushing back her hair until her scar was revealed. *Didn't you already give me this, when you refused to be rid of it? Didn't you already give me... everything?*

"There isn't a book you want? Or some bit of music? You're sure?" she nudged. Her shelves were positively crammed with music CD's. And though he loved them as a way to listen to the music he adored, they both agreed that nothing could beat sitting on the floor of the Concert Chamber, taking in a live performance, from just beneath the front row.

"Nothing," he assured her, smug in the knowledge that a pair of earrings that matched her crystal necklace right now sat wrapped in a swatch of blue velvet, inside his cape pocket.

"Nothing from the bakery on Third? A new belt? Boots?" she continued down her list. This had become a regular conversation, between them. It happened every birthday, Christmas, and anniversary.

"It's not like I can just go out and buy you a set of golf clubs, Vincent," she giggled at the thought of him with such a thing.

He tugged her in even closer than she already was. "There is a gift. But it's for both of us. I... I know a great secret. A great and wonderful secret," he said. "I'm not supposed to tell you." He wasn't, but he knew he was about to. "I'm supposed to leave it for Jacob to do. It was to be your anniversary gift... from them."

His voice was full of emotion, and Catherine kept her lithe form still.

"Jacob and Katie are pregnant, Catherine. We're going to be grandparents."

Her eyes flew open wide and her body stiffened, as she looked over at him. "Vincent..." her voice was full of wonder. "They're having a baby?" Her mind caught up. *Grandparents. They were going to be grandparents.* The word echoed on her, and he could feel her internalizing something he'd found out quite by accident, just the other day.

"How far along?" she asked.

"Just a few weeks. Barely."

"And how do you know before I do?" she interrogated, her voice just a touch louder.

Vincent gave her a loving smile. "I bumped into them near the kitchen. It seems Katie doesn't quite favor the smell of boiling cabbage."

"Why that little... Oh, Vincent. Oh, this is marvelous!" Joy shone in her eyes, and it exploded through their bond.

"You have to act surprised," he begged. "They swore me to secrecy. I just... I just couldn't wait any longer to tell you."

"I will. Oh, love!" She threw her arms around him and held him tightly to her. He could feel the dampness of happy tears on her cheeks. "Grandparents," she whispered it. The word felt unique, in her mouth.

*Yes. Grandparents. The thing you get to be after "parents," if you are very lucky. Or very good. I wonder which one we were?*

He didn't let her go, couldn't let her go, as he whispered back. "These past thirty years. Catherine... My life, no *our* life ... a *miracle*. All of it... so full of... blessings. Magnificent blessings... Thanks to you. Thanks to *you*, Catherine." He let his own tears fall, ones of gratitude, and exultation. Outside, the cloud that had crossed the moon began sending raindrops down. A late night shower was giving everything it touched a drink. It was going to be a glorious spring.

She tugged his head back, even as their tears continued to fall. "It's me who was blessed. Every day. Me. It's my life that changed from whatever it was before to 'miraculous.' I swear."

She sniffed a bit, and he brushed her tears away, kissing her forehead as he did so.

*Our lives are a miracle. Perhaps every life is. Perhaps everyone gets some share of those. Of magnificent blessings. I don't know.*

"When... when is she due?" Catherine asked, when they had recovered themselves a bit. She laid back with her head propped on her arm, again, and he did the same. *A baby. The next generation, on its way.* He could see the thought, in her beautiful, glimmering eyes.

"Who can say, with us?" he replied. "You were pregnant only six months with ours, but Peter swore they all seemed full term."

She did some mental math. "So... September, maybe? Late in the month?" She had no idea if Vincent's grandchildren would come sooner rather than later, as his children had.

"Around the 25<sup>th</sup> is their best guess, yes, if they are like we were. Maybe. But who knows? Katie may carry it for much longer."

"September 25<sup>th</sup>. It sounds like a wonderful day for something amazing to happen," Catherine declared.

He smiled back at her in full agreement. "Yes. Yes it does."

He rose on one elbow and leaned over her a bit, caressing her cheek and neck with the back of his large, furred hand. She scooted under him, on reflex. The night might just end with another bout of lovemaking after all. To his back, the faint sound of raindrops began throwing themselves against the windowpanes, as the late night rain shower picked up in earnest. If it was colder, it would be snow.

But as it was, he knew it was just a chilly rain, watering the plants on her balcony, giving their beautiful rose bush an unexpected drenching. The thought of a cold rain made him hitch up the covers some more, even as he felt her move expectantly, beneath him.

"You still haven't told me what you want for our anniversary," she said suggestively. The dim light of the room turned back the clock on her features, and he swore they were just starting out, again.

"I can think of only one thing," he answered, his eyes studying every nuance of her loving expression.

"What's that?" she asked, twining her arms around his great neck. She had a feeling she already knew.

He dropped his head close to hers, and with a look so earnest she could only know he wasn't teasing back, he said, "Thirty more years with you."

*Thirty years from now, we'll both be in our nineties.* They both thought it.

“Just thirty?” she teased. “I was thinking forty. We’ll both be just over a hundred.”

*How I love the way you think.*

“Forty, then,” he smiled at the notion that they were just youngsters, then; and indeed just now setting out.

In forty years, he wanted to do as they had once done, stiff knee or no. He wanted to take her over the gap from his world to hers, and back again, the leap a one of faith, as much as anything else. He wanted to do that, and tell her that together, they could make the jump across the distance, that it wasn’t so far, after all. He wanted to tell her they could do anything. That they could do anything, forever.

*You can do it. Give me your hand.* Hadn’t he told her that, that first time? In a way, hadn’t they been telling each other that every day, since? *You can do it. Give me your hand. Don’t be afraid. I’ll help you...*



He knew they had, and he pictured her leaping across the chasm in her dotage, and doing so fearlessly, just as she’d done everything else.

The thought made him smile, and he kept his secret musings to himself, and his deep voice rumbled his delight. “The baby will be quite grown,” he reasoned,

“And having children of its own, perhaps. We’ll be great-grandparents, then.”  
He kissed her nose, thinking of grandchildren and great-grandchildren,  
scampering after them, as they traversed the space between his world and  
hers. “Forty it is. You’ve convinced me. I want forty more years, with you.”

“I think we can arrange that,” she said, reaching up to seal her promise with a  
kiss. He returned it, with a lover’s steadfast devotion.

*What a year it’s going to be for us. What an incredible, amazing year, he  
thought. For all our losses... for all our gains... We are nothing less than Blessed.*



***No matter where you are when the urge to live to over a  
hundred takes you, I wish you love. ~ Cindy***

Happy Anniversary, Vincent and Catherine.

Pacem Muros

